

Conversation

Claire Le Restif: Why put the theme of seduction at the heart of artistic matters and, more particularly, painting?

Emmanuelle Villard: Seduction has become one of the most important motives behind my work. It's not by chance. As an artist, I produce eye-traps. Objects that are meant to hold one's attention. What's more, as a woman, I have always been keenly aware of the seduction game. What one shows others has always fascinated me: appearances, the principal link with the outside world. This connection encourages me to look differently at the question of abstract painting.

C.L: Do you acknowledge the fact that there is a link between your artistic propositions and your personality? A reflection of yourself?

E.V: There's no doubt about it and I do accept this now. When I'm trying to impress, I increase my femininity. Like a form of etiquette. I produce an image for myself that I compare to my work. Even though it seems obvious to me, I continue to ask myself the unresolved question of identification with the painting.

I use the same strategies: eye-catching colours, fluorescence, iridescence, glitter, netting, ribbons, which are just as much make-up as they are masks and masquerades. The fact that my work may sometimes be qualified as decorative is not, for me, the end of the world.

C.L: So you don't avoid the subject of seduction. On the contrary, you seem attached to it.

E.V: It's complex. Seduction is there, from the outset, even before the paintings have been produced. From the very beginning, the materials exert a strong power of seduction over me. I try to master it, to tame it, so as not to be too overwhelmed.

C.L: Can one say that desire is an important lever in your work?

E.V: Quite. It's the stories taking place on the surface that set me to work. Even before the paintings exist.

The phenomenon of seduction is always a little dark. For my part, I try to establish an ambivalence in my paintings. Tension between what is seductive and what isn't.

C.L: For example?

E.V: Well, for example, all the series involve allusions to sensuality, but at the same time, they refer to one's personal universe, to the deterioration of tissues, to flesh, indigestion even, guts.

C.L: Through your choice of colours, you evoke things carnal and artificial. You establish a relationship between the surface and what it covers.

E.V: The surface attracts, attracts the eye, its somewhat indigestible, vinyl aspect produces an impact. It reveals what happens deep down, referring to both body and skin.

C.L: This ambivalence reveals itself on the surface. You use materials which attract, reject, interfere with one another, characteristics, well, shall we say, inappropriate to painting. Even if one ignores their nature, the conjunction of the different elements causes trembling, accidents on the surface. To my mind, this is an essential point of your work: intimacy, the skin as a living film, a sort of «cosmetic» painting. How do you bring about these «wounds»? This anthology of textures? These mutations? This «puckered» painting?

E.V: I work with acrylic materials, which have a chemical base and smell. It has absolutely nothing to do with oil painting for example, which is organic. «Cooking» this base in a pragmatic fashion is an important moment in my work. For me, the handling of the material, the paint itself, means a lot. I am effectively referring to skin when I evoke deterioration: organic tissue deteriorates, like the medium here. As if this material (like flesh) could be contagious, I decided to paint using containers, which keep me at a distance. I decant, dilute, stir. I'm playing at chemists, alchemists, chefs, nurses. What's more, to this role-playing I'm talking about, which is unconscious for the most part, you can add the role of viewer. Because tissue takes time to deteriorate, to dry out. This time is fundamental for me for I watch the paintings «come into being», without me. From the moment the paint is deposited, with no overpainting possible, the painting becomes an autonomous body.

C.L: Is the paint alone responsible for what it is? Why do you put so much distance between yourself and the materials?

E.V: Once I had set the rules of creation for myself by enclosing the creative act within a rigid process, more and more complex, I decided to enclose the material (literally) in containers.

C.L.: Is it linked to a sort of ritual?

E.V: It takes time to get the paint into the pipettes I use. So there is a certain amount of thought, concentration and attention given, essentially to the preparation of the mixtures, to their dilution. This is where I distance myself from anything resembling impulse. I fix myself constraints, limits, which have consequences in my work. This enables me to concentrate. It's a slightly obsessional quest for self-control, so as not to be overwhelmed: distance, self-control, taming: for fear of being overpowered.

C.L: You put yourself and the painting under some incredible strains? Can these stages be qualified as sophisticated?

E.V: No. Complex rather than sophisticated. It's a quest for self-control. All the freedom belongs to the material.

C.L: Do you maintain a degree of experimentation in your work?

E.V: I try to keep experimentation constant in my work. As soon as a series works well, I produce its counterpoint. Experimentation is a source of learning. I keep a close watch on developments.

C.L: Can the body language involved be defined as strictly feminine?

E.V: I don't wish to express myself on behalf of all women, but neither do I choose to overlook the history of women in art. To my mind, my way of apprehending painting is radically different from that of a man's. There is effectively a very, very different body language. Many women artists and painters adopt it. It's difficult not to.

C.L: You have chosen to make paintings, «visual objects». Are they surfaces for synthesis and projection?

E.V: At the outset, I tried to refuse the premise of the painting as a surface for projection. I didn't want it to serve as a «receptacle». My own premise was precisely «how to make an abstract painting that is not a surface for projection?». I asked myself, there again, why I kept my distance. A whole series of observations of what happens within the intimacy of the studio and the final sense of the paintings has led, today, to a violent, «in your face» come-back: the meaning lies at the heart of the connection I mentioned earlier. I bow to the evidence: it's a sort of synthesis. It has nothing to do with constructed painting. It takes on another dimension.

C.L: On the one hand, there's a serious question: time and deterioration, on the other, a mask, masquerade even?

E.V: Both are extremely important to me. They make up an identity. At the end of the day, it's what happens in the interval between the two that interests me.

C.L: In the «little pie» series, everything seems to overflow.

E.V: That's right. Surely because it's the most food-like. Also, the formats are small, sensual. They work because they overflow. Otherwise, there's no point.

C.L: They are very small formats. Are they some sort of covered fragments?

E.V: It is very meticulous work and yet it's in this series that the material has the freest reign. On the other hand, my gestures are particularly controlled. I was bent over, mindful of the slightest mark, the slightest trace. Less is left to chance. The procedure established is both experimental and constructive for elements of plastic vocabularies.

C.L: Do you give your paintings titles?

E.V: No. The series have generic titles. For example: «the nettings», «the ribbons», «the little pies», «the goosepimple paintings». Because they're abstract paintings and, to quote Noël Dolla, refer only «to the state of mind that existed at the time of their birth», I name them afterwards. When I succeed in creating a form that carries its birth within it, it's a very pleasant surprise.

C.L: Is there both «*jeu*» (game) and «*je*» (I) in your work?

E.V: It's a strange «*je/jeu*». I use all «*jeux*» (*je*). Today, without being dogmatic, I admit that my approach is fairly egoistic and self-centred.

C.L: Is this where questions of intimacy and seduction come in?

E.V: I feel that paint carries within it all this history of fear and assertion. There is a form of equivalence with existence itself: doubts, assertions, very intense moments of self-control. Whatever it is, it's always a question of research. For me, artistic work is a path. My decision is to make my way along it, in the middle, through, amongst other things, seduction and its opposite: glorification of the body, appearances, pleasure, ageing, illness, fear and the final stage, death.

C.L: I believe that in «the confetti» series you didn't use the same process?

E.V: At the time when I made that series, I was reading Bret Easton Ellis' novel, «Glamorama», (the author of «American Psycho»). In this book, confetti, usually associated with parties and pleasure, is a worrying presence. It seemed hostile to me. In fact, whereas, usually, motives are born out of my work-processes, this series, on the contrary, exists because I wanted to make confetti and tried to find out how to make it.

C.L: In this novel, which has to do with show, in the widest sense of the word: fashion, seduction, appearances, masks, cosmetics, consumption (including that of the other), confetti is a sort of omnipresent punctuation from one chapter to another. It's also, for me, a metaphor for our world contaminated by viruses.

E.V: It is the ambivalence that interests me. I try to make it coexist in my paintings: an «easy painting» aspect, on the one hand, easy to look at and, on the other, a strange, unknown element, and sometimes suffering even. What's important is the reference to the surface universe and the extent to which we become diluted when we devote ourselves entirely to this particular entity.

C.L: Elements that question the surface, but also their role in a common universe?

E.V: Quite. Like snowballs one throws. It's a part of my heritage. Just as one can't ignore Pop art. My generation of artists owes its lack of complexes to the path travelled by artists before us. I am free to use glitter, fluorescent colours, even though they damage the paint and seem corrosive. Like a sort of acid on the flesh of the paint. I use certain painting concepts like so many different materials. In the same way as some artists use acrylic painting «as it comes out of the tube», I work with paint-runs, monochrome, the grid, all of them important elements in the history of painting.

C.L: Do you also subject your paintings to particular modes of exhibition?

E.V: The setting up of an exhibition is a sensual moment. When I make a selection of paintings, I take into account, on the one hand, the space they will be placed in and, on the other, the fact that several, formally different series will confront one another. By establishing viewing conditions between the paintings, then by introducing the question of seduction in terms of the viewer's movements within the exhibition, I play with distance and proximity, confrontation and detour, intimacy and remoteness.

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