

The Power of Language in Painting: Risk, Creation or Recreation?

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We know of Flaubert's passion for colours, and his extreme sensitivity to the colour of things we see in the world, not to mention his sensitivity to the written word. He wrote "I devour colours, like a donkey devours oats". A man of feelings, he understood and perceived things acutely. Thus he was able to admire and portray in his own language, major paintings. However, he would never venture to discuss the technique of painting, its processes, or its skills : he could not conceive that such an art, *the technique of which one ignores*, could be commented on. So, I share at least this with Flaubert: I don't know anything about the technique of painting. But when I see the works of Gauthier Hubert, what *strikes the eye* – and this is the only certainty about his paintings – is the perfection of his execution. This is a painter who masters perfectly his technique. Figuration is his language, the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of which he knows inside out. And yet, his paintings are not just there to *dazzle the eye* : the artist does not seek to impress with the excellence of his art. On the contrary, he carefully avoids stunning the observer with his pictorial mastery. In painting pictures of a repulsive nature, he imposes on us two stages of observation : first we see the picture, then the pictorial substance – as long as we move on from the first to linger over the latter. The ugliness of the picture is used as a ruse : at first sight, it hides the beauty of the painting. In fact, the artist's true intention is not necessarily to paint beautifully : his art is to make *figuration* and *narration* inseparable. In the traditional iconography of classical painting, all of his portraits provide media to tell a story. The fluidity of oil gives rise to the figure painted which in turn provides us with its verbal statement. The painter creates a picture with pigments, just as the writer forms a phrase with words. But can one paint what one says ? And can one say what one paints ? Gauthier Hubert is determined to constantly try to do so. His work indeed consists of a joyous duality : painting via language and language via painting. Coming and going between matters of painting and words of language, each picture is a trip for the eyes. The vehicle used is the painted figure. The title gives it a direction. And art history is its engine. It is up to us, the audience, to go that way but, as long as we are willing to play the game, we will find in each painting an enigma to solve, and a story to read. Well, in any case, a challenge to decipher the world represented therein. So, each piece of Hubert's

work is cut into a fabric of words, each representation sampled from a text, each picture borrowed from the world around, the imagination, some knowledge, or a story – one of many small stories which, once put together, make up the *sensibility* in his painting. These may often show on the surface of the canvas and accumulate in a title, such as numerous tributes he pays to influential masters. For example, we see the recurring appearance of Vincent Van Gogh, not only in hidden portraits but in paintings derived from the work of Van Gogh. Or this peculiar homage paid to this famous letter writer : *Ciel étoilé ...15 juin 1888... vers 23h40...aux Saintes Maries de la Mer*. This watercolour says a lot about the painter's style, as well as how influenced he is by language and pictorial technique. It answers Vincent Van Gogh's question to his brother Théo, in a letter dated the very next day : "How to technically paint the light of a starry sky ?".

Thus this piece of contemporary artwork reveals a lot about the predisposition of painting for language. What's more, the very first page that the artist chose for his monograph, is a list of the titles of his paintings – some of which to date, still only exist as titles. "The title makes it all !" claims the artist. At the very least, the title is always key to the enigma of his work : usually in coded language, it translates the painter's intention and gives the inquisitive observer the direction to follow and the way to *interpret* the painting. With Gauthier Hubert, the word precedes the picture and generates it. It arises from the act of painting and links into the common thread that binds his paintings. A mere technical act can give rise to the title of a new painting: in the jumble of words the image can find its form – for example *Portrait d'un jeune homme préhistorique esquivant un coup de poing lancé de façon inattendue alors qu'il tentait de régler un problème technique*. Essentially and meticulously descriptive, the title is voluntarily long, which serves as pictorial material. *Portrait d'un homme retenant sa respiration après deux minutes cinquante six secondes et tachant d'atteindre trois minutes* is first a performance in itself, executed in the intimacy of the studio : the number of details to paint forced the painter to constantly hold his breath. It is also a *performative* painting, in that the picture painted is the exact creation and representation of its title. At the same time, the observer needs a long breath to express it in one stretch : the portrait of this man holding his breath therefore requires us to regain ours. Each painting in this way opens the arena for the ongoing artistic battle between the image and the language. In *Peinture infinie, étoiles*, the artist takes the infinite greatness of the sky literally, as far as never finishing the

painting itself. While in *Infinie peinture, peau*, he explores the infinitely small. The title is not always written on the canvas, but, whenever it is, its position is carefully chosen to draw the observer's eye to a precise point of the picture. Indicated with a pink arrow, *Portrait d'une jeune fille entièrement nue* is placed right at the bottom of the canvas, at the level of her nipple. The observer is compelled to bend down and lower his gaze so as to see what could be hidden under this supposedly generous breast, the fullness of which was deliberately cut. *Sur le bord de la mer noire* is written on the *edge* of the white paper, at the very place where it was taped to the artist's table during its creation. In using the same term for the subject painted and the reality, thereby allowing the picture to be reclaimed by language via a process called metonymy, the painter exults in playing tricks on the observer. And so it goes for each of his paintings : follow the title – and watch the margin ! If you want to see what he means, you have to learn to read what he paints.

A painting by Gauthier Hubert therefore never stands alone. Just like with words, it is from putting together his pictorial propositions that the long sentence arises and develops meaning : that long sentence with which he has conjugated the verb *to paint* over the last thirty years. As much for him as for us, painting is a dual act of *seeing* and *saying* : the power of language generates his works of art. Hubert is to painting what Flaubert is to writing.

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(Translation: Nathalie Creplet)