

An Extravagant Simplicity

Jean L rin's arrival onto the visual arts scene definitely is an extravagant one. And not because of too much weirdness either, quite the opposite: because of too much simplicity! It is the kind of arrival one is afraid to talk about actually, for fear of being accused of romanticizing it and creating a legend.

If memory serves me right, here is how it all happened: After a number of phone calls and, through my own fault I fear, a number of months, I met Jean L rin on a fine July day at Marseilles' central station. Heading for his studio in his car and as I was marveling at his speedy driving in such a big and busy town, he replied that it was not that surprising given that he lives in Marseilles and knows it rather well; also, he had been a race course driver for a number of years. I was amazed. A race course driver turned painter! Questioned on the subject, he explained that he had rather successfully driven one-seaters, but that he would have needed more money than he had gathered to make it all the way to stardom. Since then, he had devoted himself entirely to painting and drawing. I gathered from all this that he was self-taught, which he confirmed.

By the time we reached his studio I did not really have that much more information about him and his life. With the benefit of hindsight I now assume his discretion was by choice: he did not want any interference between his paintings and my eye, nothing be it a biography or any psychology. It was all very simple, really, very intriguing too.

Calmly and almost silently, L rin showed me one painting after the next, as comfortably as the smallness of the studio allowed. This was not a real problem actually, and looking back, what I remember most is not the exiguity of the place but the powerful light, both intense and slack. And it is in this beautiful light that the nudes appeared.

I seem to recall I did not hesitate long; I understood rather quickly that those nudes and full length or seated portraits were exactly where they were meant to be, that it would be absurd to imagine changing anything; and that they were amazingly coherent. It was obvious that this painting stood by itself without the least bit of need for any explanations or theoretical justifications; that the chromatic abstinence was in perfect keeping with the immobility of the poses; that the lightness of the stroke matched the isolation of the bodies; and that it had to be so in order for this painting to be neither demonstrative nor pathetic or cruel, least of all not reduced to a stereotyped figurative imagery either, one that is so very fashionable these days.

That painting exhibits nudes and close shots of faces, an ironical photo-realism inspired by Richter, and pushes them forward with insistence whereas L rin does not display his nudes and portraits. He holds them back at that very moment when they start pulling away and becoming out of focus. Derision, pastiche or

misappropriation do not interest him. Following a more internal necessity his painting has better things to do, be it trace keeping or print inscribing. Seeing those heads and body parts, I happened to think of the wax masks and castings which, in former days, used to preserve a corpse from total disappearance. Of course this is nothing but a personal thought, and a dangerous one to take any further as it could lead to believe that L erin cultivates a spectral or ghostly genre, which would be most untrue.

According to a personal method coupling slowness to swiftness, he stands close to the model, studies it, observes it, and then paints it. From one same nude model he sees different details each and every time. One painting will emphasize breasts, another one a bent knee and a black pubis, another still the shoulder blade. None of them makes the mistake of wanting to be complete by the adding on of too many descriptive elements. Rather, the peculiarity of each and one of them is a few strokes and a few sensations inscribed in grays and rare traces of red, white and blue.

The rhythm is never forced and what is painted today is what the eye is sure of today for having seen it properly, not because it trusts some pre-established knowledge. In other words, one paints only when one is moved by the sensitive experience; which produces a painting fighting a memory saturated by screens full of overflowing images, a painting executed at a slow pace rather than high speed. One might even venture that L erin's painting reintroduces a phenomenology of perception that we do not have any notion of these days, having now substituted an immediate and universal recognition to individual visual perception.

In his last works L erin juxtaposes many of those fragmentary views; not because he is hoping to reconstitute a « complete » nude but because he follows obscure indications, inexplicable ones probably; such as the one that advised him to gather the headless bust, hips and elbow of a squatting woman seen from behind in blue lined rectangles along with a skinned rabbit. A vanitas ? Or metaphysical symbolism? This "bringing together" more likely obeys a less literary necessity: a woman's body, seen from a certain angle and under a certain light, has simply made the presence of the skinned rabbit mandatory. Not in order to scare off or create a meditative effect, but because it was just so and could not be any other way in the painter's eyes. The word that comes to mind is fate. Just like the big naked bodies before, these visions scattered in different separated bits are heavy with it. Again, a work full of a stunning simplicity.

Philippe Dagen