

The Revival of painting in the contemporary era

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Jean Fournier, an art dealer in Paris from 1954 to 2006, played an important role in France in the diffusion of abstract art. For sixty years, his gallery was a haven for painting contested by the emergence of new art forms. It was he who identified a family of artists who, over the generations, shared his convictions for the fundamental role of colour, the keynote being Matisse. This continuity, as unobtrusive as it was fundamental, allowed the French scene to retain its creative ability and to enter into a transatlantic dialogue through the presence in the gallery of North American artists working in France. The work – and generosity – of Jean Fournier (fig.1) have left their mark on the Musée Fabre and indeed on many public collections in France. On the occasion of its reopening in 2006, the Musée Fabre paid tribute to him with an exhibition.

Room Jean Fournier

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The post-war years,
between figuration
and abstraction

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Simon Hantaï

After studying at the Budapest School of Fine Arts and travelling in Italy, Simon Hantaï settled in France in 1949 where he came to the attention of André Breton, who exhibited his work in his gallery L'Etoile scellée in 1950. The young painter quickly shook off this tutelage to develop a novel approach to the painter's practice, seeking to reintroduce automatic processes and to strip the work of the notions of talent and savoir-faire.

He first created the writing series (*Untitled**, 1958) in which the artist's gesture reveals a layer of colour underlying the black expanse that covers the canvas. Then he set about perfecting a method based on folding : the canvas was tied up, painted, then untied to reveal an unrestrained composition in which what was unpainted was just as important as what was painted. The composition, the relationship between fullness and emptiness and the harmonization of colours therefore happened independently of the painter, who worked blindly as in the series *Panses* (MM III* 1964). The motif is cut like a diamond by the way that the canvas is folded and the colours applied to each facet appear in the centre of a canvas left blank of all intervention.

Simon Hantaï's complete oeuvre lies at the crux between what is and is not painted ; in *White** 1974, the "unpainted" has taken over the entire surface. Yet just as all matter contains more void than atoms, the "unpainted" is the active element that holds the painting together. Whiteness, absence and silence appear as facets of one artist whose life and work are closely merged (fig.2).

Simon Hantaï has played a key role in post-war French painting and occupied a central position in Jean Fournier's gallery. By putting forward what is at stake in the pictorial act, the time of creation, the artist's place and the questions raised by painting, he has brought about the much-needed regeneration of a tradition that had been handled extremely roughly. This approach, which has proved central to the generations that followed (*Supports/Surfaces*, Parmentier and subsequently Piffaretti, Bordarier...), was paradoxically acquired from a marginal position, which from 1982 was to become a definitive retreat. Ever since, Simon Hantaï's oeuvre has been a complete corpus revisited by the artist – food for thought whose historical importance is forever growing.

Supports / Surfaces

The prehistory of the group *Supports/Surfaces* goes back to the late 1960s. Most of the artists here came from the South of France and met at art school – notably at Montpellier's Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Bioulès, Dezeuze, Grand, Viallat) and Paris's Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. On the initiative of Claude Viallat, they organised many events in the provinces, often in public spaces. *Impact I* was organised in 1966 at the Céret museum (Pyrénées Orientales) and was followed by a host of others such as at Coaraze in 1969 (Alpes Maritimes). The year 1970 gave the group its big break : twelve events were held successively during the

summer culminating in the first nationwide exhibition of the artists termed “Support-Surface” at the ARC (Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris) and featuring Vincent Bioulès, Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Claude Viallat. Other artists – André-Pierre Arnal, Louis Cane, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Bernard Pagès and Jean-Pierre Pincemin – consequently joined the group, and regular exhibitions ensued until 1972 when dissension of an ideological nature caused it to split.

In the spring of 1971, the Galerie Jean Fournier presented a “Display of works from the *Été 70* series and photographic résumés”, featuring some of the group’s main figures (Dezeuze, Saytour, Valensi, Viallat). The gallery subsequently devoted several monographic exhibitions to Claude Viallat up until 1995.

Issues at stake

The historical context in which Supports/Surfaces originated in the late 1960s was one of a unique ideological climate coloured by a radical desire for emancipation in all areas of human activity. The members of the group Supports/Surfaces sought to move away from the romantic and marginal stance of the artist and instead to underscore his social involvement. The painter is unable to escape from the demands of history imposed upon him and is therefore duty bound to bring a critical approach to art history. Supports/Surfaces drew its influences from European art (Matisse’s gouache on paper cut-outs) and post-war American art, as glimpsed in some rare Parisian galleries, such as that of Jean Fournier.

The group was also concerned with the status of painting and artworks as material objects, seeking to expose their economic and ideological exploitation. Yet they wanted to show that it is still possible to paint, although this calls for an overhaul of pictorial means based on pictorial practice being laid bare. Their works are therefore presented as products of a violent and radical break with traditional art – easel painting and all it entails – as the picture no longer has to deliver a message or to represent anything other than its own material reality, namely the canvas, pigment and form. This is how they saw the return to abstract art – the only response to allow works to be non-illusionist, with a new sense of abstraction free from subjective and stylistic effects. Only then may the viewer finally come close to the work’s reality which is simply “the image of the work that produced it” as Claude Viallat put it.

Deconstructing painting

The members of the Supports/Surfaces group wanted their works to be “objects of knowledge” at the audience’s disposal. They sought to reveal everything that had lain hidden until then by individualizing each element that made up a work and making the creative process apparent. The group’s members took on the kind of innocence of a cottage industry in their rediscovery of tools and materials. They no longer worked with canvas and stretcher, the principal constituent elements of conventional painting, but used rather wooden rods and squares of fabric. This elementary process amounts to a kind of return to the origins of painting, a “degree zero” of painting that in fact covers a great variety of practices : canvas, for instance, may be folded, crumpled, rolled or used in collage and sewing. Likewise, the artist has recourse to many rudimentary actions : burning, dyeing and buffering. The work is often exposed to the elements, rain or shine, and aged prematurely.

This material approach, which became the actual purport of the works in the concern for truth towards the viewers, enabled the members of Supports/Surfaces to put painting and sculpture back into the field of art and thus to find the freedom they aspired to as artists. While their experience may not convey complete group cohesion, their output does mark a moment in French art. Moreover, going beyond the strict label of Supports/Surfaces, the plastic art movement crystallized via the theoretical work of the artists and their direct influence as teachers in art schools to new generations of artists. This explains why the movement grew into a national phenomenon.