

Painting. Painting kids at bath time. Kids having an after-school snack. Painting faces of men, women, children. Young girls in the woods. Painting hands or, often, depicting them. Painting a boy blowing bubbles, as Edouard Manet and Chardin have done. Painting human gazes even more often than hands. Nothing fortuitous here, though, nothing anodyne or innocent. From my visit to Joëlle Delhovren's atelier, I keep the physical sensation of a few uppercuts that I did not even try to evade.

Without a doubt, the visual violence exerted by the painter's prying eyes finds its own reflection in the art lover's curious gaze. Was it not Martin Kippenberger who advised "not to do any work that might please dentists"? "Above all, he said, don't mistake me for someone whose paintings are meant to hang above the sofa"<sup>1</sup>.

This lesson has obviously been learned, absorbed, digested by the artist. Joëlle Delhovren produces nothing likely to please dentists or those who shudder even at the thought of the anaesthetic before the tooth is pulled out. She works in the now and makes no compromises, because her time is short - as life itself - and there is a compulsion to express. To express the air that we breathe, that which our hands are powerless to hold; to paint that which cannot be named or represented and make it present through the very act of representation.

I remember her pigs, the ones I discovered in her studio. And some others she had painted earlier, like the three she captured in a burlesque steeple chase as they hop over a trough containing a bathing boy, or the two pigs and their frisky snouts in a children's playground. 'Cochon qui s'en dédit' (Pig if you chicken out): from Félicien Rops to Wim Delvoeye or Thierry Zéno, not to mention Hieronymus Bosch, artists have often nurtured a taste for pigs with a certain relish. Pigs evoke multiple symbols, from gluttony to lust, from obscenity to ultimate sensuality, bordering on perversity, filth, muck, wallowing in the mire.

Her three pigs are uproarious and slobbery. More crudely still than their predecessors, leaning against a balcony under a prop sky, they personify all that is abject, vile and despicable in humans, conjuring up the disgrace so often represented in the porcine bestiary of 19th century lampoons on politics, war, society and anticlericalism. Pigs will not hesitate to eat their own progeny, recalled Buffon. As for the boy in the trough with the three obstreperous and anthropomorphic pigs above his head, his face is simian, his smile convulsively frozen in all its frailty. Facing us, under his fountain of hair, he seems to recoil as if to protect himself against the blinding flash that devours his face. The trouble with being born. "As it leaves dawn and treads into the day", says Emil Cioran, "light prostitutes itself and is only redeemed - the ethics of twilight - at the moment it disappears"<sup>2</sup>.

In these paintings, light has the dreary, drab, raw and soiled quality of a white porcelain trough. It vaguely reminds me of "Two Japanese Wrestlers by a Sink", the washbasin painted by Lucian Freud between 1983 and 1987. However, in Joëlle Delhovren's painting, there is no clear water running. It is a picture of "a world without gravity", she says. Or the impossibility of any lightness. The painting presents itself as an uncanny stage for all human comedy or tragedy. The artist displays a

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Kippenberger goes on: "I must however confess that I do paint small pieces that indeed look like 'above the couch' paintings. I only do it to pay the rent though. It has to remain an exception. Those paintings represent 2% of what I do. It is my luxury. And I hope those paintings will be thoroughly misunderstood". Martin Kippenberger in "Kippenberger sans peine" (Kippenberger for Dummies) MAMCO Editions, Geneva, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Cioran, "De l'inconvénient d'être né" (The Trouble with Being Born), Paris, Gallimard, 1973

perfect mastery of the gap between reality and its representation with deliberately varying degrees of veracity, thus making our perception of the piece even more dynamic.

How are we then to approach her other paintings?

Take the triptych of a boy with puffed cheeks blowing up a balloon. While the piece seems aptly entitled 'Balloon', we see not one, but two and even three balloons, since they are close together in a triptych. The boy, breathless, clutches the balloon in a firm grip. The balloon becomes reminiscent of a mother's breast or a pig's bladder: the vessel of all illusions.

Or take this painting of a girl in a bathtub called "Toys". The child has no age. She looks like an abstract figure, a simple presence captured in a fleeting moment, yet marked by the passage of time. Presumed innocent, she plays with her favourite toy shark. The yellow duck that tattoos the canvas next to her is meant for Mommy.

Move on to the "Miam" (Yummies) - the after-school snacks, all "Untitled" – and therefore undefined. You eat like a pig, you swine; grotesque kids, so un-angelic with their eyes bigger than their bellies. There it is, the scale of voracity. The "Miam" series is like cinema, with close-ups of a woman's face, her eyes, nose and mouth bloodied by red berry jam. Eyes rolled back in ecstasy, the meaty, almost obscene tongue – a naked feast of unrestrained flesh, unbridled senses, the world of full blown sensations where being means living it up.

"When sensation is related to the body in this way, it ceases to be representative and becomes real; and *cruelty* will be linked less and less to the representation of something horrible, and will become only the action of forces upon the body, or sensation, the opposite of the sensational"<sup>3</sup>, writes Gilles Deleuze about Francis Bacon's work.

Nor should we ignore this remark by Francis Bacon himself, about the zone of indistinctness between man and animal:

"When I go into a butcher's shop, I always find it surprising that it's not me hanging there instead of the animal"<sup>4</sup>.

Lucian Freud, during a joint exhibition with Francis Bacon in Venice in 1954, declared that "the purpose of painting is to move the senses by an intensification of reality"<sup>5</sup>. All the "Yummies" are as intense and sensual as they are un-sensational.

Finally, we come to a panoramic painting of girls strolling in the woods "Tant que le loup..." says the title: so long as the wolf - or perhaps the pig? – doesn't turn up. The canopy, nearly as abstract as a watercolour - I must not forget to point out the mastery of her brush stroke – invites us for a stroll. It opens up like an abyss yawning at the sky above wherefrom the girls' faces suddenly appear... There is only one face actually, for it is twice the same, that of a red-haired gobbler, gluttonous and greedy, defying the viewer with her piggishness, in ecstasy over her own filth.

Why do I think of Lars Von Trier's film 'The Idiots' and its characters, acting without any inhibition whatsoever as they pretend to be mentally retarded people? The figure of the girl imposes itself between the Abyss and the viewer's gaze. No, Joëlle Delhovren's work has nothing to do with psychological interpretation. It is about capturing reality in order to relentlessly probe the animal in man. From canvas to canvas unfolds a chronicle of mankind grappling with its inhumanity.

For human identity is defined by flesh, not the abstract idea of the soul.

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation" (Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation), Paris, La Différence, 1996

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *ibidem*

<sup>5</sup> "Lucian Freud, L'atelier" (Lucian Freud, The Studio), edited by curator Cécile Debray, Centre Pompidou, 2010

"I am body through and through", says Friedrich Nietzsche, "nothing more; and the soul is just a word for something in the body. The body is great wisdom, a plurality with just one sense..."<sup>6</sup>

Painting and de-picting. The canvasses are mostly in brown, white or gray hues. The cloth is unbleached - I almost said "raw" - merely coated with casein or rabbit skin glue.

Raspy to the touch is her rebellious brush. The artist exhausts the human figure with a sparing stroke. "Less is more", she says. Even the space she deliberately leaves empty is filled with humanity. With human individuals, yes, and even humanity as a whole. The artist enters into a singular relationship with her models, an intimate rapport with each subject she studies, even when it is only a photograph - it is etched into her memory and only then onto canvas. It is always human identity she is searching for. Some subjects are named: thus we have Rosalie, and Arié, just as we had Isa, Phil, Anna and Philip before them<sup>7</sup>; yet the unnamed ones feel as close. Or as distant. Or present. They are all bodies inhabited by the painter, like the picture of the old man standing by the entrance door to the studio. He, too, is "Without gravity", and still, his body exhausted and worn out by the artist gravitates in our mind with formidable force.

Grace has not deserted him; it is where we least expected it.

In all of them, it is about the truth of the figures represented, their human reality, not personal identity; it is about capturing what is real, beyond what the eye can see.

There are all these eyes - worn out, rolled back, wrinkled, turned away, inquisitive, fixed or surprised, wide open or void of psyche. One can safely say they are all different views on the world much more than they are windows into the soul. The same is true of the look of the painter.

Joëlle Delhovren's painting may well be called Vertigo.

Jean-Michel Botquin  
Liège, November 2010

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra" (Thus Spoke Zarathustra), NRF Gallimard, Oeuvres Complètes, partie I, Des contempteurs du corps

<sup>7</sup> It is surprising and intriguing to find portraits of Roth, Beigbeider or Houellebecq among her 'next of kin'. Ironically, Joëlle Delhovren painted Michel Houellebecq five years before Jed Martin's project. "The result is that, while I've been photographed thousands of times, if there's an image of me, just one, that will last through the centuries to come, it will be your painting." Houellebecq, "La carte et le territoire" (The Map and the Territory), Paris, Flammarion, 2010