

Joëlle Delhovren's mastery in representing the hand, face and body and integrating them into the world allows her to recompose photographic images, with added meaning.

After choosing the photographic material, she focuses on the posture of the subjects and the treatment of the painted image.

From the Individual to the General

Family portraits have one thing in common: the people in them look straight at the camera (and are usually smiling). It's rare that a child makes a gesture or strikes an unusual pose, especially in older photos when the slightest movement would blur the picture.

If it is true that family photos only interest us when we know someone in them, it is equally true that group photos all look alike. The French artist Christian Boltanski understood this. In his work on memory he mixed group photos of different families and presented them to the viewer as mementoes of just one.

Amateur full-length portraits are not much more inventive. The model takes up one of six positions, not more. This is true both in classical painting and in modern images of pin-ups, for instance.

It is precisely these recurring patterns that take us from the individual to the universal. While several paintings usually titled "Patrimoine" represent the painter's family members, it is not so sure with the "Portraits souvenirs". In any event, no matter how tightly woven some of the subjects are into Joëlle Delhovren's life, the general dimension is both personal and universal.

Even though the artist sometimes shares her feelings, the subject of the painting calls forth our own memories and shows us that our own family photos could easily have been the starting point for one of her canvasses.

That is precisely when faces grow less identifiable and distinct bodies give way to barely outlined silhouettes.

Seeing and Looking

In paintings of family photos, it is obvious to understand that the people in them are looking at the camera. However, when the subjects are all looking in one and the same direction, outside the character-camera axis, the focus of their common gaze, if not shown, is not necessarily identifiable to us viewers.

The people in family photos are strangers to us and they are just posing. Their anonymity and immobility make them uninteresting to us. However, the fact that they invariably look straight ahead creates a certain emotional connection. They are looking into our eyes!

Those looking at something we cannot see can be regarded as "witnesses", but witnesses to what?

We know they were photographed while they were gazing. We do not know what attracted their attention, but we know it was interesting enough to make the whole group lift their gaze.

Holy images often depict saints or other biblical characters looking up to the skies. Not only do we not look for what they are looking at (if it is not shown), but we are almost certain that their eyes are raised to heaven (with all that may be there).

In the Ancient Orient statuettes of orants (worshippers) have very large eyes filled with tar. Orants do not look. They receive the 'image' and anything that may be 'sent from above' enters through their eye sockets.

In one case, however, we see the focus of the gaze. It is a large canvas showing seated children watching will-o'-the-wisps dance just above their heads. We know that such 'wonders' can generally be observed

above swamps or even in graveyards, being, as they are, a physical phenomenon caused by methane.

Will-o'-the-wisps cannot be seen in the conditions shown in the painting. They are symbols that inevitably evoke the tongues of flame we see above the heads of the apostles at Pentecost.

Back to our 'witnesses': they symbolize the world of humans and, more simply, ourselves. They are looking at whatever we, the viewers, want them to see.

Besides, what ought to be shown may be impossible to represent...

Mysteries and Ellipses

From 2011 on, a lot of the works become more and more enigmatic. The protagonists look not only at the sky, but appear to be drawn to more earthly objects of interest.

Six people are leaning over an empty table; their eyes cannot be seen, and only their hands appear busy with something. A group of people in their Sunday best is standing "piously" on what looks like a balcony. Three children are scrutinizing the bare floor...

In these scenes, the setting is pared to the bone. The lighting provides the only clue to the mood of the story we are left to imagine ourselves.

Body Language

Very early on, the artist developed a particular interest in hands. This is all the easier to discern as bodies tend to fade to silhouettes and faces become less and less identifiable before disappearing altogether.

Be it children doing physical exercises, or young teenagers running, or demonstrations of hula hoop dancing, the choice of the moment captured of the body in action becomes more and more precise. Nevertheless, we can still find ourselves face to face with mystery: seven people dressed in early 19th century fashion making puzzling moves as if trying to grab a piece of sky.

These physical attitudes pass from the familiar to the symbolical as if to remind us of the importance of reflection and, indeed, spirituality in painting.

Old-world

Family photos immediately recall the passage of time. The past can be recent or distant, but it is always far enough to put a distance between the viewer and the work. Some pieces depict characters in 19th century garb, an effect reinforced by the palette in "grisaille". In addition to the symbolist markers, the atmosphere could also transport us to a different era. However, the freedom of the framing, the technique and some touches of very bright colour take us back to the present day.

This This distancing allows us to take in the work as a whole, inclining us to the reflection it seeks to inspire.

Genesis and Completion

The drawings seem to be a necessary stage, a testing ground. Some of them will become paintings while others will be displayed alongside.

They are made on blank pages, recycled paper or pages from magazines. The original image might appear, more or less present, by transparency or more clearly. There is no doubt the support was not chosen haphazardly and the underlying photo or text or their age will deliberately interfere with or complement the artist's intent.

Although the work is and remains figurative, the manner in which the artist treats and, some would say, mistreats the codes, makes her point perfectly clear.

Settings are reduced to the minimum, the subject steps out of the frame, one part of a body may be barely outlined while another is executed in finicky detail. Certain objects that are opaque in reality become transparent. All appears normal and reasonable, yet on closer scrutiny the intent is clearly in the foreground, with style and technique at its service.

Some "Happy" Anomalies

Forbidden Food

In one painting we see a seated man, framed from the waist up. He is feeding pigeons. All is normal but for some grey paint running on the cobblestones that seem to dissolve into the ground rather than the canvas, thus creating the illusion of emptiness.

This trompe l'oeil effect is created solely by the incursion of the reality of painting in the illusionist world of images.

Low Angle Shot

Nine individuals in their Sunday best are perched high up behind a whitish we-know-not-what that conceals their bodies from the waist down.

The characters with their heads bent down and their eyes half-closed inevitably make us think of the spiritual. Only one woman who seems to be whispering into the ear of the woman next to her breaks the monotony and silence of the scene. The lighting from below lends a hint of drama to a scene from which we expect only tranquillity.

White is very present in this scene and echoes the solemnity of the group.

Against all expectations, the colour white is dominant. The work of this 'non-colour' becomes the principal subject. The individuals who occupy only one third of the painting are formally linked by the colour of their blouses.

The magic of this painting connects the abstract and geometrical bottom band and the utterly figurative set above it. Yet the two parts do not collide.

The treatment of light and shadows gives body to a large space, contextualised certainly, but without any figures at all.

A composition to think about...

The Fall

This painting shows people standing up. An older man has his hands on the shoulders of two young men, with two other people flanking the threesome. They are all looking at the sky.

The subject, or more exactly, the object of their gaze is not shown, but it is told.

Unlike the system of illustration in which the caption under the picture refers to the main text, the perfectly legible phrases in this painting bring no redundancy at all. The subject is expressed and the painting is to be read as much as it is to be contemplated.

This is a masterful example of a composition for reading and for viewing.

The text (an extract from the work of Louis Owens) describes the feelings and experience of a man pushed out of an airplane whose sensations are described by a third person (the narrator).

Emotions can be suggested but not represented. Choosing the most effective way was of the essence - what better way than words to convey the power and intensity of free fall?

The 'thing' described only speaks of speed, terror and bliss combined, giving way to sadness.

The spectators see what is described but they all harbour mixed feelings of unease, pleasure, skepticism, observation or fear.

The challenge in this painting was to put word and image on the same plane.

The reason why the image can be perceived as a whole without experiencing a flying illusion is that all the steps taken to merge word and image into one and the same 'world' are so apt.

Text becomes patterns and expressions are read on faces.

'The Coat'

This onirical and evanescent painting depicts a young girl in a coat as she walks away.

The subject is simple, but not without ambiguity. Her proportions show that she is a child, we see from her legs the direction and movement. Her long hair underlines her femininity. The red coat takes the form of the subject.

The character is taking leave and it is obvious that this is a metaphor.

Aside from arousing some shared nostalgia, this painting is also interesting on another plane in that matter and thought meet. Indeed, the girl goes in colour.

Proper Upbringing

Disappearance, apparition, persistence of vision, blindness, short-sightedness and colour blindness can be individual or combined, short- or long-term eye conditions.

Whatever image we see, it must first pass the admissibility test before being accepted by the brain. Better still, if the image has to be transformed to fit reality, it will be, and if an element is missing, it will be added.

In this spirit, would it be crazy to move from want to excess and from excess to want, and then from want of excess to an excess of want?

In her piece called 'Proper Upbringing', Joëlle Delhovren opted to show both want and excess.

We see: "A woman is touching the face of a young girl at eye level under a man's good-natured gaze."

In this scene, perfectly legible and classical, two questions arise: 'What is the woman doing?' and 'Why does the wallpaper pattern spill over onto the dress?'

To talk about painting in its pragmatic and intellectual aspects: the wallpaper pattern continues onto the canvas and the woman's fingers brush against the young girl's face...

Conclusion

This brief look at just a few of her paintings reveals how rich Joëlle Delhovren's experience is. Substance and form are approached in so many ways that these few words do not suffice to describe her work. The sole purpose was to provide some clues without giving a "spoiler".

Once again, figurative painting surprises and the lessons of René Magritte, Willem de Kooning, Gerhard Richter or Jasper Johns have all been taken in.

It remains to be seen what boundaries Joëlle Delhovren will next push - it is in any event very likely to be an exciting journey.