



Carole Benzaken

Is it possible to reconcile the question of abstraction versus representation in painting? Modern art's principal dichotomy remains relevant to contemporary artists even as they move freely between the two modes, combining the tropes of both at will without necessarily subscribing to a philosophical or ideological position as demanded by the historic avant-garde. Whatever boundaries that may exist between abstract and figural modes, as well as between painting and other artistic mediums, are established by the artists themselves, to be tested or not. French painter Carole Benzaken skillfully integrates the abstract and the figurative in a process that also addresses painting's relationship to video and photography. Benzaken combines formal elegance with innovation. Her early series of tulips still lifes offers an unexpected treatment of a traditional genre subject. Based on botanical photographs she found or took herself, the paintings contain several different images within the borders of a single work, including horizontal segments or an irregular grid of perhaps four varieties of flower, and as many modes of representation, from sketchy to smooth and realistic. This simultaneous application of different styles and the use of photographic imagery as a starting point continues to undergrid her practice. Benzaken often takes public or collective events as a subject matter. One group of works focuses on the crowds at soccer matches, juxtaposing fragments of advertising signs with impressionistically rendered crowds of spectators. Recently, she has been making paintings based on scenes of urban life in Los Angeles, where she has been living since 1997. A recent work, *La Brea Night* (2002), evokes the atmosphere of one of L.A.'s broad boulevards alive with the ever-present glow of traffic lights and cars that so characterize the city's life. At the same time, she began an ambitious and highly affecting series of pastels and a number of large-scale paintings based on images from the funeral of Princess Diana. Benzaken's gently blurred representations stemmed from photographs she took of the televised procession-fitting technique for a celebrity whose images was disseminated so widely via broadcast and photographic mediums.



As Benzaken filters events and people through photography and television, mediation becomes another, implicit subject of her works. Inserting multiple layers of experience between herself and the object (and hence the viewer and the work) underscores the intermediate status of the image and extends the journey of that image as it travels towards its final, painted "destination". The combination of distorted and blurred effects with more precisely rendered passages in a given painting acts as something of a metaphor for the ways in which people experience "real" events, focusing on certain details while perhaps only peripherally glimpsing others, and how those moments are shaped by their means of delivery. Although she uses video and photography, Benzaken remains preoccupied with issues specific to painting. Her work is not about those mediums or new technologies; rather, it addresses the acts of looking and seeing, and considers the ways in which painting can stake a claim for itself amid the proliferation of contemporary visual formats.

Meghan Dailey

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