

Painting, Tulips, and Video

What has to be recognized in Carole Benzaken's painting is that, as they say, it's got nerve.

I use this every day expression because the more formal variants are not quite right. Any way you look at it, there is nothing daring or courageous about painting tulips today. Nor is there anything transgressive or radical, with all due respect to those who would like to have been born just before 1913. In short, Benzaken's painting demonstrates a brazenness, a vitality, an off handedness that are joyously delightful. That's what it means to have nerve.



In terms of color, the eye gets its share: everything cries out, vibrates, dazzles, but calmly.

In terms of gesture, likewise: however modest or disproportionate it may be, the painter enjoys herself, wielding the brush with all her strength. She also enjoys herself by being obsessive.

In terms of painting, the pleasure is more complex and refined. That comes out in a kind of subtlety that holds on to us through the harshness of the color and the simplicity of the image.



The immediate pleasure is that of a dynamic, piercing color. In a less immediate way, the pleasure is that of a none-too-respectful slalom through a tradition that includes Dutch still lifes with tulips, the corollas of Kelly or O'Keeffe, Warhol's Pop flower, Mitchell's landscapes, Viallat's repetitions-the entire gamut of reiteration that has been so exploited in the twentieth century. Benzaken amuses herself by avoiding the obstacles along the way. She does it without even pretending to show us that she's the champion: she'd rather whiz through the course before anyone has the time to worry that she'll slip up.

She really goes at it.

In the beginning, then, was the tulip. This is obviously a pretext, but one that is hardly indifferent. It could be something else, but not anything else, and not for the same kind of painting, because the model imposes its constraints on the approach. Furthermore, these tulips do not come from the earth, the field, what used to be called nature, any more than they come from the earth, the field, or nature for those who buy them from the florist or grow them on their suburban balconies. They fall out of the sky of commerce, genetic engineering and banality.

On a more down-to-earth note, the initial image comes from mail-order catalogues or photographs taken by the painter going straight to the motif, not with her easel but with her lens. The colors are alive, boisterous, like offset printing or Eastman-Kodak and Fuji. The framing is that of the most commonplace photography- advertising or snapshots. The banality of this framing would become that of the painting if it were not used in juxtapositions of multiple images. The same painting thus lets you see a tulip of one kind very close up, a fragment of a field of tulips of another kind, and yet another kind framed in a different way. The best analogy-and the painter's actual reference-is a video or a computer screen compartmentalized into windows, or a mosaic of monitors each showing a different view of the same thing. Today these are

common ways for us to relate to the image, whereby it can simultaneously present itself as banal, recognizable, and unrecognizable.

It would be wrong to think that the model has been destroyed because it is taken from a catalogue: today, the mail-order catalogue is real life.

The painter makes do. Paradoxically, she would have more difficulty with real authentic nature, if she ever manage to encounter it, because she would be approaching it with even more cultural conditioning and references.



Immediacy now comes to us in bags of pre-washed bulbs, on film or on the screen. We see it and feel it like that. Which makes for a certain joyousness in seeing reality directly incorporated into a painting in its most sophisticated but also its most banal form.

This has been a long detour to analyse the meaning of such trivial proposition: Carole Benzaken paints tulips.

Within the time (more properly, the number of lines) allowed to me, I would like to add a few remarks in no particular order:

-Benzaken paints white like a color, not a light. She doesn't have to worry about tradition, even the modern one. So much the better for her, and for us as well. Her painting is based on photography and video. A supposedly medium is measuring itself without complexes against its supposed competitors, which have already gone elsewhere- via sound.

-Each point of view, photographic or pictorial, has its own kind of abstraction.

-In seeking a dissociated relationship with the image, Benzaken has in fact found an immediate relationship with the painting of the present.

-She has something of a tropical Douanier Rousseau who has seen the films of Godard, Lynch, and Cronenberg.

-When it's yellow, it's yellow.

-The model allows for variation, but its very banality comes back to feeling. This still doesn't mean that you know whether there is a subject, objectively or subjectively. Which is the spirit of our time.

In short, it's got nerve.

Yves Michaud

Translated by Myriam Rose