

## A conversation between Carole Benzaken and Jacqueline Lichtenstein

**Jacqueline Lichtenstein:** Why do you paint tulips?

**Carole Benzaken:** I can't answer your question directly. I'd have to explain how I came to this type of work, and what preoccupied me before. What interested me before, but in a different way, was already the question of the image and how it is put into form, that is, how it can be figuratively transposed through a dissociative relation between figurative elements that strike a balance with the elements of painting proper. This type of painting had a kind of materiality and a gestual quality. The image was juxtaposed into different planes within a single surface.

**J.L.:** You distinguish between image and painting?

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, there is a struggle between the motif, or the image, and painting. Painting should win out over the subject, banish it from the attention while pictorially restoring it. The image is what can kill painting. But the problem I set myself is how to come closest to the image with painting.

**J.L.:** What do you mean by image? Is it the figure, that which I can identify in the picture, that which I can put a name on - the name of tulip, for example? Is it that which refers to something outside the picture? But in your case, the referent is already an image. You paint from photographs.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes. The images I work on are drawn from horticultural catalogues or from photographs which I take myself. Where the image is concerned, one never really knows what the terms designates. Nor what it "shows", for that matter. What's interesting in the photographic image is to try to see what happens with it visually: there is a schematization of reality that brings a visual culture into play, and then there are the accidents, which one doesn't initially see in the image. My fundamental point of departure is to see the photographic image as a visual reality, an abstract reality... which means not starting with the attempt to identify or recognize its conventional signs and forms, but taking it from another angle, forgetting the subject to see the visual apparatus: not "tulips", but "violet", "white", "green", etc.

**J.L.:** Which means that for you, the image is not a representation referring to something absent, to an original; on the contrary, it's the primary reality from which you work.

**C.B.Z.:** Exactly... And painting is a means to work on the codes that these images propose, while transforming them at the same time. But that's only a departure point. To return to the question of flowers, I would never have painted tulips from nature. If I painted from nature, my gaze would have been filtered by a cultural code, a tradition if you like. For example, I immediately see tulips as they were painted by the Dutch in the seventeenth century.



**J.L.:** But why these photographs taken from catalogues?

**C.B.Z.:** What is interesting in the catalogue is that one no longer sees the subject, the catalogue-object is what manifests itself most forcefully: an object whose pages we flip through as a consumer of images, images we don't really look at. But myself, I do look at these images, and what interests me are the visual codes of the apparatus which are surprising. Soon all I see is this process of relating elements, which is the way the image offers a pictorial potential, the way it gives me the chance to surprise myself in painting. That's it, to surprise myself in painting. That's where I experiment my freedom with respect to the motif. I look at these images and all at once I see totally new visual codes. That is what's given- and yet it isn't sufficient either, everything is yet to be done, this visual apparatus must be completed in a new

pictorial code. The photographic image is banal, and for me, its banality is a chance to put my way of seeing back into the question.

**J.L.:** But this manner - which I call formal, and not formalist - of perceiving the photographic image in such a way that it allows you to make it the motif for your painting, itself obeys pictorial models. Though your catalogue images do not refer to any pictorial images, your eye has been educated by a certain kind of painting, which has taught it, in particular, to unlearn tradition, to seek a more immediate, more violent relation to the surface and thus to painting. You see these photographs every bit as much through the prism of a pictorial tradition as you do when you look at natural flowers. It is simply a question of another tradition, that of modern painting.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes and no. I have a multi-leveled vision that also refers me to a certain pictorial language- American abstract expressionism, notably Pollock - but with an "all-over figurative" dimension that particularly interests me because it leads to the annulling of the subject, and at the same time poses the question of the subject with respect to the motif, in this case a motif that is no longer freighted with any metaphorical meaning. But there are dangers. In a certain way it would be better not to speak of the catalogue, because that lends itself to a pop art or hyperrealist interpretation, which is far from what I want to do. Let's say that it is the visual set-up of the catalogue that interests me, but that I want to transform it into a pictorial vision. Otherwise I would remain in the photograph after all.

**J.L.:** Yes, but I'll return to my question. Why tulips? I know that from the viewpoint of painting all flowers are equal, they're just pure motifs. But in point of fact, it seems to me that in your work this choice of motif is not entirely arbitrary.



**C.B.Z.:** I chose it because it allows for very strong intensities of color and a certain abstraction, because it is a legitimate pretext for repetition, but also because it isn't a serious motif. In fact, when I began painting my first tulips, which were in very small formats, I said to myself: " but... this is figurative Vierrat". And that was immediately something funny, because it was a detournement or rerouting- but a perfectly respectful one- of Vierrat, a painter I'm quite fond of.

**J.L.:** Isn't there another reason as well? In the classical tradition flowers belong to a genre, the still life, which occupied the bottom rung of a hierarchy with history painting at the summit. Now, this status was essentially due to two things: on one hand, to the fact that the still life lent itself poorly to a descriptive or interpretative commentary ( except of course in the genre of the vanitas, that is, a still life imbued with symbolic and religious significance); and on the other hand, to the fact that since the subject in itself was of no interest, unlike that of the history painting or the portrait, the pleasure and interest of the viewer could only spring from the qualities of the painting alone- the talent of execution, the richness of the colors- without any concern for the value of the subject being represented. These are the same reasons that Diderot invokes, a contrario, when he praises Chardin. Indifference to the subject, triumph of color, resistance to discourse... These are very "modern" qualities.

**C.B.Z.:** I had not thought of that. Yes... resistance to discourse, but also resistance to anecdote, to the anecdote of the still life. Because fundamentally, even today, you can still be engaged in discursivity or narrativity even with abstract painting: an abstract painting can project an "image", it can be the image of an abstract painting. There is a kind of abstract painting which is abstract in name alone, which refers only to the procedures of modernity, to its "tics" if you will, where no risk is run, but which remains "good" abstract painting, just as one could paint "good" historical subjects in the nineteenth century or "good" still lifes in the seventeenth century, for example. It is thought that figurative art more readily refers to discourse or anecdote. It's true

that you can try to be "politically correct" by painting images for their meaning. You can even paint flowers through political militancy, if you're a woman. Georgia O'Keefe, for example, is in a symbolic and literal relation to the floral motif. That is very different from what I do. Where I'm concerned, there is absolutely no sexual metaphor.

**J.L.:** Let me reassure you immediately, that much is clear: your tulips don't speak, except to "say" something with painting and with painting alone. In his text on Degas, Valéry quotes a phrase by Mallarmé who says that the ballerina is not a dancing woman, because she is not a woman, and she does not dance. It's the same thing for your tulips. They aren't flowers.

**C.B.Z.:** The subject actually matters very little. What is most important is finding the adequate relation between the subject and one's intentions.

**J.L.:** When I look at your paintings, what strikes me is clearly their serial character, the differential repetition of the same motif, with these stalks that act as so many scansion, vertical widths that give the composition rhythm. But also and above all, what strikes me is the work with color, the difference introduced by color itself. At one moment the color will produce an effect of opacity in the forms, as though the figure had closed in on itself, by itself; at another moment the color seems to explode toward us at the surface of the painting, with an extraordinary violence that makes the form implode in a way, where before it was maintained.

**C.B.Z.:** That is why the motif is interesting: it groups together both form and color. There are explosions of colors, as you say, and restraints, tighter densities. Indeed, that's where the problems come up on the level of composition: how to tauter a painting by the play of composite formal relations.



**J.L.:** The square or rectangular cutouts that structure your canvases so strongly and break up the repetition by dividing it, by isolating "pieces", contribute to the production of these effects of tension.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, it is a taut repetition, almost contrary to the idea of repetition, because repetition is generally more of a surface. At the same time there is a tightening in the frame. It is an all-over reframed. The reframing works on the juxtaposition of the planes, in such a way that the tension springs from the fact that the forms are, all at once, both very firmly installed and yet also let go, each piece preserving its own violence, its own attack. I want a certain attack in the canvas, a total spontaneity, but one that is counterbalanced by the apparatus of the painting. As to the apparatus, I also seek to counterbalance it with the planes, pitting a resistance against its dimension of abstract structuring.

**J.L.:** There is also a plane/ground, form/ground relation.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes. One can in fact speak of a double structure, or at least of a way of structuring that serves me on two levels. The first level is formal in the most ordinary sense of the term: the surfaces, where I allow a relative spontaneity, are structured by an orthogonal system. The structure serves as a grid that abstracts the subject. Thus it permits me to break up the process of figuration, in its classical sense. But it also permits me - and this is the second level - to contradict that effect, since it reintroduces depth. The treatment of the motif also answers this problematic of the planes, of form and ground. Sometimes the ground will come to flatten the motif, or, on the contrary, it will reintroduce a dimension of depth by the translation of the photograph's fuzziness - because this is a pictorial transposition which is totally linked to the work of the brush stroke. The white grounds, for example, bring the tulips back to a two-dimensional plane, but sometimes an adjacent plane recreates a sense of volume. That illustrates quite well what I said a moment ago about the visual

apparatus of the catalogue. In catalogues, the juxtaposition of images creates visual accidents that contradict the subject, or rather the motif, because I see a motif more than a subject. These juxtapositions produce a visual complexity that creates a perspectival blurring. I try to play out this blurring once again on my canvases.

**J.L.:** So these divisions and reframings within the painting help you both to carry out the structuring you have spoken of and, at the same time, to "reproduce", or to replay, as you put it, the visual effect of the works reproduced in a catalogue?

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, completely. And this is extremely precise: something is given and at the same time withheld by a perfect placement. Because when the placement isn't just right, it falls on its face. It sinks very quickly into very bad painting.

**J.L.:** What exactly is "very bad painting"?



**C.B.Z.:** Painting as "pure pleasure", with virtuosity as its sole aim, the medium for the medium. And, for me, a kind of painting that would either proceed by way of a certain naturalism, or entirely forget painting in a kind of fixation stuck fast on the image: hyperrealism, for example.

**J.L.:** In the classical tradition, this distinction between image and painting has often been linked to another problematic, that of the viewer's place with respect to the picture. Close up, far away. From afar, the viewer sees an image, an apple, fruits, flowers, a woman's body. When he comes closer the forms dissipate: "everything blurs, flattens out, disappears", wrote Diderot. Close up, the form metamorphoses into formlessness, the figure dissolves into the splotches, contour into color, the viewer no longer sees anything but a material surface: paint. Traditionally then, let's say until the advent of modern painting, the tension between image and painting only found its real meaning as a function of the viewer's eye, in the mobility of the gaze where the painting gives way to ceaseless metamorphosis, with the pure materiality of the painting appearing through the dissipation of the image and the image reappearing through the magical evaporation of the material aspect (the idea of vapor is Diderot's). The balance point at which one sees both image and painting is necessarily unstable. Now in your work, it is precisely such a tension that is given forth to be seen in the painting. Except that you cause the succession of the different moments of the viewer's perception to coincide by fragmenting the homogeneous space of the painting, making visible both the clarity and the blurring effects that result from this tension.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, exactly. I work on that problem, on that relation of fragmented visions, but with the givens of the contemporary visibility, not in a fragmentation that would refer us back to the aesthetics of the German romantics. What interests me is a fragmentation that reconstitutes a coherent whole from a viewpoint which is not narrative, but absolutely visual in some way.

**J.L.:** You are now painting lots of very large formats. And you have told me that you paint them on the ground.

**C.B.Z.:** I paint on the ground, for technical reasons among others, to avoid drips; and this tightening is done on the vertical. That is even more necessary for the large formats.

**J.L.:** Your distance from the canvas is not the same when you paint on the ground and when you paint against the wall. On the ground you are above the canvas and the maximum distance is that of your height, of your own body. And you need to no longer be immersed in the painting in order to tighten toward the image, as you put it. That is interesting with respect to the problematic I just mentioned

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, it's true. Above all for the large formats. When I paint on the ground it kills the relation to the image in a certain way: on the ground I paint, I don't make

images. But I don't tighten up over the whole surface, only on parts of the picture. It's a matter of getting the tensions between the surfaces just right: I keep the spontaneous elements that interest me, and then I take away everything that could make me backslide into what I spoke a moment ago, into naturalism or imagery. Generally the danger is on the side of excess, of too much expression, too much of the brush stroke that exists for itself but isn't just right. And therefore I tighten toward the image. But there is an effect of focal points, a relation between the blurry and the clear, a problem of convergence. How to make the eye converge despite the incoherence between the different planes. And yet I don't think there exists any system of fabrication that would explain the paintings.

**J.L.:** Perhaps that is what produces the effect of tension we were talking about. The color totally invades the surface, and at the same time you tighten as though it were necessary to hold on, not to maintain this violence, this excess inherent in color, but just to hold on to it. You immerse yourself totally in pictorial materiality, in the sensual qualities of painting, while constantly outwitting the traps of sensibility.

**C.B.Z.:** Sensibility in painting... Sensual painting... Something bothers me terribly in all that. Because it's already an immanent quality of painting: painting is of the senses. But that opens every door, and above all, it justifies any compromise. I prefer to speak of aptness, of what's just right. It's the same thing for people doing installations: the key word is "conceptual". That term also fits every recipe and permits every weakness. Where it should be a historical category, a moment of art history, it is used instead to designate everything on the order of the object and its staging, or its occupation of space. In the same way, the sensible is a convention. It's the conceptual category which allows you to pass judgment on painting. And therefore, which above all does not allow you to judge it. For me, neither of these two categories can account for the objects they claim to describe.

**J.L.:** You insist on a kind of rigor and bearing which testify to a great mastery of your pictorial means, something that is quite surprising and no longer entirely customary today. But I think you don't like to talk about that.

**C.B.Z.:** Yes, it's true that everything having to do with the trade is rather uninteresting.

**J.L.:** Yet doesn't this also testify to another kind of mastery, a desire to master the object? But perhaps this term of mastery troubles you or seems inadequate...

**C.B.Z.:** Yes and no. perhaps I find it a bit naive, but fundamentally it doesn't bother me. That's a provocation. We have been so browbeaten by the discourse of non-mastery in painting, by this entire metaphysics of loss, the loss of the subject, the loss of the object... How to play at losing the object, and take pleasure in its loss... The image facing the peril of its absence... The absence of presence... the presence of absence... Come on! I've had enough of metaphysics in painting. All that takes place in a context where painting is so poorly perceived. It can be understood at the level of a strategy; but it is a strategy which is of no use for painting. It is even dangerous, I believe.

**J.L.:** Why?

**C.B.Z.:** Dangerous in its will to do away with the painting as a phenomenal object. It allows people to pass themselves off as painters, because they are involved in a pseudo "process" approach that legitimizes any painting. A painting can be taken for what it is not. There is said to be a "realm outside the painting" and this "outside" is said to be charged with meaning, steeped in discourse! Myself, I don't want anything to do with such an "outside". I want to remain as close as possible to things. I'm thinking of a line from a Godard film, Detective : "things not words". What's funny is that on top of it all, it's a subtitle. That doesn't mean I refuse all thinking; No. But the visual, in its pictorial sense, is so deeply devalorized today that people tend much more to do a kind of painting that tells stories, or a painting that embodies metaphysics.



**J.L.:** Beyond Pollock and Viallat, whom you've mentioned, is there a painter who has particularly marked your way of seeing?

**C.B.Z.:** Many of the painters who have left the deepest mark on me are American, perhaps because of their capacity to dare the affirmation of a totally individual freedom. Edward Hopper greatly impressed me when I went to New York in 1989; Shirley Jaffe's painting completely shook up my way of seeing. Then there's also Frank Stella. But obviously they dialogue in my mind with many other painters of different nationalities and epochs: Piero della Francesca, the Master of the Observance and El Greco, to name only a few.

**J.L.:** Do you believe in the autonomy of the painting-object?

**C.B.Z.:** Yes and no, of course. Its self-referentiality can only be conceived as an intention, but it always remains articulated in an artistic context that allows it to unfold.

**J.L.:** What you say runs counter to many things we have read, and above all seen, these last few years. We have witnessed and are still witnessing a great wave of discourse, an inflation of commentary which is integrated to the work conceived as process, if it doesn't simply replace the work altogether. What you say seems diametrically opposed to conceptual art in particular; but you also recognize a depth to conceptualism.

**C.B.Z.:** If conceptual art means "no work on form", as people would have us believe today, then yes, what I do is anti-conceptual. But I don't have any desire to situate my work in relation to that of the conceptuels, or to say what it has or does not have to do with theirs. I think that people's approaches can be contrary and they can recognize each other nonetheless. Perhaps we're not yet at that point for the moment. We have a poor understanding of the conceptuels, just as we have a dim vision of painting, even an absence of vision; painting just isn't looked at anymore.

**J.L.:** If you mean that we have a rather monolithic view of art, constructed around a few summary contrasts, and that the diversity is infinitely greater than it appears to be, then I share your opinion. But it seems to me that you're raising another question at the same time, that of the place one occupies, the place an artist occupies, , yourself for instance, with respect to that diversity. Does the fact that trends positioned as being contradictory do not appear mutually exclusive to you, that you can relate to both sides, mean that there are no more clear-cut oppositions, nothing to defend or fight against, no more enemies, no more struggles, that everything comes down to the same?

**C.B.Z.:** The refusal of the linear conception that led people to imagine art history solely according to its breakthroughs has produced an eclecticism which is problematic, because it mixes everything; So yes, I would tend to say that I am of my time, that I have come out of this eclecticism, which in itself is neither good nor bad, and that I think one can dialogue even with contradictory currents. But at the same time you have to retain a certain formal and theoretical rigorousness. As far as painting is concerned, the question, of "seeing", is a question that is always up for renewal. It is an inexhaustible question that painting poses in a specific way. One must find the limits within which painting can take on its full meaning today. And there, you're on a razor's edge.

Translated by Brian Holmes