

## Of flowers and cats



Apparently, painting, which we thought moribund, whose death, in any case, had been long announced, has not yet reached the stage of rigor mortis. It seems, quite the contrary to be quivering on all sides with tremors that have nothing to do with agony. Drawing, to this end, exclusively from its own constituents : pigment, canvas, flat pictorial surface. Reinventing a sense of its specificity from the most elementary of its materials. Carole Benzaken, herself, makes no bones about it. ( She "has no shame", Yves Michaud would even exclaim quite justly.) She produces large, representational, highly coloured paintings of tulips in Majesty No staging, no narrative, no other representational elements, just flowers with a morphology that is both robust and straightforward, more or less tightly "centred", alone or in groups, never bouquets, always aligned. The pictorial space is divided into contiguous sections each centres in its own way Thus, at the dawn of the 20th century after Picasso, Duchamp, Ernst, Pollock, Warhol, Carole Benzaken paints flowers. There is no hint of provocation, her investment far transcends that. She has not undertaken an exercise in serialisation for the purpose of excoriating her practice in the service of a broader scheme (almost all the above-named masters have grappled at some time or other with flowers...), she has for the time being chosen the tulip as the unitary iconic vehicle for the ambitious purpose of "repositioning" painting in all its expectations : its own physiognomy as well as the relationships one (the painter; the viewer) may have with it.



Benzaken's painting places itself independently of the deliberate inertia of the frontal arrangement of large figures, at a permanent point of equilibrium, that brash, minute, unspeakable point at which everything can topple over to become a mere daub. Getting back to flowers, Van Gogh's Sunflowers are a fabulous example of the incredible force that can radiate from a painting perched on that pinnacle. The parallel between the two, complacent though it may seem, has the merit of showing that Carole Benzaken, in her choice of weapons, has not made things easy for herself. She knows this is a minefield, but she doesn't care, So convinced is she that this adventure has not reached the end of its tale. Nourished by the great currents that have appeared in the history of art; as well as the things of the spirit, she challenges painting, first in its relationship to the image, then in its relationship to the object. Clearly in line with the modernist vision according to which the model will replace the motif from which it was "modelled" (the referent, its reference), leaving reality aside - in this case, the reality of the starting photographic image - she determines it pictorially in order to explore it to the hilt in a pursuit that is less phenomenological than epistemological. At any rate, she tries above all to reconstruct the primitive instance of seeing and painting, in spite of "excess" culture. The tulip is the means for achieving this. The choice of subject is of no special interest except for the intentionally incurred risk of an interpretive digression - that spherical bulb planted on its rigid stem may somehow be too anthropomorphic - a danger totally neutralised in the end. Has not much of what is most powerful in painting been undertaken on the basis of the freedom that may arise from the constraints of repeatedly self-imposed subjects : cathedrals, bridges, trees, targets ?



To hell with decorative obsolescence. Carole Benzaken's paintings are not "beautiful", there is no nuance in their colours or subtlety in the subjects (we are far from the irises of Georgia O'Keeffe) and the composition is non-existent, except perhaps in the dividing up into sections. They are nonetheless utterly delectable, truly a joy to the eye and spirit. Happiness thus lies elsewhere. It is likely due to the state of imminence they offer as given, the state of visual and perceptual tension they project: the play of scales between the disproportionate size and treatment of the flowers and the format of these paintings, the opposition/fusion of the illusionist treatment of the figures and that of the background, flat and abstract, or conversely the syncopated juxtaposition of different "planes" that, at the same time as it reflects categorically the whole of its status of the image, imposes as in a spiral of reading the literal refinement of the layer of pigments and the materiality represented (the dense velvety texture of some colours of flowers or frozen stems recalls Edward Hopper), the incessant play of the image that dissolves into the painting, or else emerges from it according to the viewer's proximity. There again, the possibility of garnering the secondary benefit of an academic optical effect is swept away by the insertion of the Frieze, made up of a number determined by the exhibition space -of small rectangles of paper that, like so many miniatures, present at the very top of the cymae the "individualised" portraits of so many tulips. Through the distance imposed, the format and the unitary frontal proposition, the viewer is referred back to the posters from which the artist draws a large part of her inspiration. But the loaded silence exuded by great paintings immediately reminds us that we are still in the order of what is virtually self-referential painting. The relationship between pictorial image and original image is so totally mastered, the former is in no danger of being precipitated into another register solely through a drastic change in format. Carole Benzaken likes images, she surrounds herself with them, she hoards them, so as to be able to draw from them endlessly. She herself produces many of them through photography which she practises assiduously. What she wants to create with her canvases is not other images, it's painting. It is virtually and visibly impregnated by the great breakthroughs of the modernist era : open edge-to-edge, like so many coextensive fields in real space, not shut up within themselves in the representation of otherworldly objects. Her paintings have drawn their lessons from the "all-over" of abstract expressionism (averred overall planarity and, sometimes, organised repetition of the stylised motif reduced to a triangle of colour, still echoing the preoccupation of certain young American abstract painters, such as Richmond Burton), the perceptive play of large-scale concentrating of "maximalised" images. Jim Rosenquist granted himself, while it remains clear the shows affinities, from afar and in her own manner, with Jasper John's intellectual pictoriality, semantic and expressive without being self-expressive. The artist begins her paintings flat on the ground-such a reminiscence of Pollock is not superfluous to the extent there is also a specific implication here of the artist through her entire body that can actually be materialised only if placed so as to dominate physically the entire field to be painted and beyond. She then places them vertically when she feels the gaps remaining to be filled must be so by "tightening up" the whole. All these steps occur in succession, according to a spontaneously emerging arrangement. "To surprise oneself in painting" being the only line of conduct she professes to want to follow, thereby perpetuating Greenberg's idea that painting resolves itself (or does not) on the way, according to the precision of the inspirational choices that alone determine the result. All in all, she very well illustrates, to quote Greenberg once again, the qualitative difference he makes between the "good" and "good taste".



Carole Benzaken, for her in-depth exploration of the potentialities of pigment and canvas, will keep on drawing from her collection of images. Carole Benzaken likes cats. She has cats and often photographs them. They are part of her vast imagery, likely subjects for her paintings. I am personally quite indifferent to cats and thoroughly detest them as subjects for any representation. I must say, however, that the cats in Carole Benzaken's painting, if cats there must be, are something I await with the utmost impatience.

Ann Hindry, Paris, February 1995

From the Villa Arson's Catalogue, Nice