

The Flesh of the World

Pascal Pesez's oeuvre is establishing itself – and being revealed, one might say, – as a junction and a crossing point. His first paintings, from the mid-1990s until 2003–2004, were relatively impastoed, darkish, painted to the edges and structured around a central, flesh-colored figure verging on the non-figurative. The more recent series, between 2012–2016, were clear indicators of an evolution towards something *almost* diametrically opposed: a reduction, a rarefaction, a clarification. An increased emphasis on drawing during the same period was further evidence of a search for a certain delicacy. Similarly the approach initially marked by an intense exploration of the body, of living beings, even of the flesh in its tragic dimension, became much more formal and seemed to be distancing itself from any metaphysical implications.

Pieced together like this, the oeuvre can be read, visually and thematically, as an advance towards lightness. However, the most recent pictures—the *Chemin faisant* ("Along the Way") series of the last two years—upset this comfortable linearity. Without resorting to the fleshy impasto directly indebted to Rubens, Rembrandt, Soutine, Bacon and others, they show a return to such relatively enclosed forms as pouches, knots and blocks. Meanwhile a *partition* has taken shape in a horizontal division of the canvas that sees the forms become affixed to what looks like a horizon line.

This compositional structuring grew steadily more pronounced in the course of the 2010s. Where the early phases of the oeuvre

offered a non-aligned space with, at its center, a kind of dropped-in or free-floating form, over the years this form gradually broke apart until, ultimately, its outline structured the entire space. Initially, in the *Noyau, Marges et trophées* ("Nucleus, Margins, and Trophies") series, the central shape resembled—with an ambiguity varying from picture to picture—a quarter of meat. *Suspension*, the 1988 performance which in several respects was the seminal act of the Pesez oeuvre, contained a condensed expression of what has been at stake in the painting for a quarter of a century. Hunched up—in the fetal position—inside a clear plastic pouch, the artist was suspended over a floor littered with scraps of meat. The fit, not to say the equivalence, between his body and the meat was a blunt demonstration of an organic analogy. Not so much a matter, however, of underscoring the basely material nature of a body reduced to a sack of organs as, contrariwise, of glorifying the flesh. The dialectic implemented here consisted in reversing the traditional perception by treating offal as something potentially precious—by seeking in all flesh, even dead, the memory, trace, and promise of life. By rendering the vulnerable venerable.

This kind of turnaround leads to a consideration of flesh in all its phases and possibilities: what it is, what it has been, what it can become. Finitude and rebirth, suffering and pleasure, nourishment and excretion, taste and disgust—everything is part of a cyclical, non-binary process of assimilation. Decay itself is no longer perceived as the ultimate stage of abjection and stigma. The most intimate—and intimidating—recesses of the flesh are home to disturbing

allurements. *Morbidezza* and the ruin of beauty expose the luxury of materiality. Decomposition sometimes stands revealed as fresh, changing, shifting composition. Plaster aggregates break down into runs, impasto, and transparency, chromatic coagulations spread as ligamentous cauls, expanding patterns, and layers of haze, as dark clots diffract into light blues, pinks, and yellows... The dissolving of shapes does not lead to their disappearance, rather it lays bare their embryonic, seminal nature. From the originary nodules of the paintings of the 1990s to the series of "abstract" landscapes—*Délices* ("Delights") 2004–2006, *Crossing* 2009–2011, *Artres Summer* 2009–2012—there is mutating continuity: not rupture, but transformation and outpouring.

When the paint is diluted (more fluid, more transparent textures) and is broken up (more open, disseminated forms, erratic lines on the canvas), the entire picture space is embodied. Flesh is no longer circumscribed—but not abolished either in the interest of supposedly more subtle states; it is *extension*¹ to totality. In something resembling a process of decay it pours forth, spreads, turns limitless. So in Pascal Pesez's painting there is no disappearance, only extension: the body is not shown but this is because it is omnipresent: in gesture, voice, color, etc. The horizontal partition is at once a line of writing and an electroencephalogram, a contour line and the horizon of an indeterminate landscape. An increasing presence in his work over the

1 Cf. Pascal Pesez, *Figurer l'étendue* ("Picturing Extent"), solo exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Valenciennes, France, 2017.

last decade, landscape is not to be taken as a representation of part of some territory or other.

The presence of light blues, touches of green, and vague outlines can indeed conjure up certain images of northern France—Eugène Boudin's skies, for instance, or René Xavier Prinet's chilly beaches, but this is not the crux of the matter. Extent as painted by Pesez is to be seen in several non-contradictory ways: no question, it is the extent of the landscape that first seizes the stroller's attention at a turn in the path,² however striking the *veduta* may be. These paintings are transpositions of a train of thought:³ we follow the unfolding of a horizontal system of organization, encountering en route inflections and caprices of line, dazzling shortcuts, and ramblings. We stumble at difficult points, linger over more or less massive knots, traverse bleached-out fogs. The painting is always there, on the fringe of

2 As the epigraph to his *Figurer l'étendue* exhibition, Pesez cites Edgar Allan Poe: "He who from the top of Ætna casts his eyes leisurely around is affected chiefly by the *extent* and *diversity* of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness*. But as on the summit of Ætna, *no* man has thought of whirling on his heel, so no man has ever taken into his brain the full uniqueness of the prospect." (Edgar Allan Poe, "Eureka".) For Poe, possessed of an acutely Romantic sensibility, the diversity of the perceived and the limitations of perception enabled only a fragmentary vision that masked the profound unity of the landscape as a whole.

3 Pascal Pesez's latest series is *Chemin faisant* ("Along the Way"), which provided the title for his 2018 exhibition *Unterwegs*, at MMIII-Kunstverein, Mönchengladbach, Germany.

representation, advancing humbly close to ground level, picking up sensory inflections and micro-events as it goes.

But it's also the recumbent figure, spread horizontally and offering itself like a landscape to be traversed. Once again a matter of change and transit: change of gaze, change of state, transit from the vertical to the horizontal, from movement to the inanimate (and vice versa). The stretched-out body has become an extent that can be examined, paced out, measured. This kind of painting is heir to a composite tradition that brings together such idealized or realistic representations of landscape as the *cartes du tendre*, hidden images and anatomy plates. In the *Song of Songs* the lover tastes his fiancée's body in all the beauties of nature:

"Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices. You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon."⁴

Country and countryside, nature and culture intermingle in desire. The dreamed-of union is that of the corporeal, the natural and the cultural, the fusion through which the pleasures of the flesh and the

4 *Song of Songs*, IV, 13-15, consulted on <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Songs+4&version=NIV>

delights of the mind become one. The extended body—extended to *everything*—is both the recumbent body of the deceased (who is going to be lost) and the languid body of the loved one (who is going to be touched), "for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave."⁵ In Pesez's painting there's a subtle love-death dialectic at work, an Eros-Thanatos Bifrons, a desire-disgust lability.

Lastly, the bodily extension is the picture itself. The paradigm of the picture-object, described, analyzed, and studied like a body, has been a driving force in art history since the 15th century, functioning via a network of analogies that establish fits in viscosity between oil paint and flesh, the rigid structure of the stretcher and the skeleton, the vibrant membrane of the canvas and the skin. With the series *Opening* (2007–2009), Pesez gave the corporeality of the picture what it had been lacking: articulation and movement. In these articulated polyptychs surfaces are alternately displayed and hidden, one behind the other, like bodies that turn, open out, then close again. The picture is neither a monad totally impermeable to the world around it (as modernist theory had it), nor a space stripped of all autonomy (as the ornamentalist and functionalist conceptions urged). Fundamentally it is an interspace: a thing in itself related to something external.

The extension, then, is that which, starting with the flesh, extends to everything. From the phenomenological point of view, there's no

5 Ibid. VIII, 6, consulted on

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Songs+8&version=NIV>

watertight boundary between subjective perception and the outside world. The senses mark out the body's limitations, but also its capacity to project and integrate—and even ingest—what is perceived. This same porousness of forms and spaces governs the different *places* Pesez works in: painting, performance, drawing and poetry. There's always this "little body"⁶ that moves, breathes, walks, draws, talks and so on. A body that's undeniably an assemblage of different meats, but is also, and above all, an organism capable of interacting with its environment.

With their own laws and references, these different fields of activity are, in fact, only places for the effectuation of the same impulses/pulsations. The drawing stroke, the broader painting gesture, the written line (on some canvases or in the sovereignty of the poem), the music score⁷ and the edges of the picture (articulated as polyptychs or not)—all these modes are part of the same unfolding process. These lines aren't straight in the sense that geometry defines a straight line as the shortest distance between two points, but nor are they Heidegger's *Holzwege*, "paths that lead nowhere".⁸ Tied to no

6 Title of a poem by Pascal Pesez, read to music by Esteban Fernandez in 2015 and released on a CD in collaboration with 8008 by Sunart Éditions, 2016.

7 Regular collaboration with composer Esteban Fernandez speaks eloquently of the scope of Pascal Pesez's work. The voice, the music and even the painting are part of the same "harmonic line" that transcends media.

8 Heidegger's ideas in *Holzwege* are diametrically opposed to those of Pascal Pesez's *Chemin faisant*. Despite Pesez's references to landscape and personal progression, the painting contains no hint of mysticism, no fascination with the

mythology—neither that of pragmatic efficiency nor pseudo-poetic aimless wandering—Pascal Pesez's progression is one of self-exploration to the fullest extent of his potential: of lived experience and of encountering the Other.

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— *English translation: John Tittensor.*

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soil and the sacred, no pretensions to ontology or Truth. The German word *Holzweg* designates forest paths used by lumberjacks, which go not exactly "nowhere", but from one place of work to another. In this they are the opposite of walking tracks and are more evocative of work, exploration, processing—and, maybe, blundering, if we remember that the expression *auf dem Holzweg sein* means to have gone off course.