

**Thoughts on the painting of Pascal Pesez,
helped along by a fragrance of hawthorn blossom**

The moment we discover Pascal Pesez's series *si peu sans cesse selon des géographies variables* ("so little over and over according to variable geographies", 2013–2015) we enter a physical relationship with his painting that first has to do with the works' considerable size; but while the body is yielding to the sensation of colour, the eye is picking up a singular connection with the history of art and, more generally, with a notion of painting as embedded in history and in a temporal stratum. Then there is the repetitive aspect, signalled by the title and the similarity of the formats, but above all apparent in the unity of a pictorial endeavour that sets these pictures apart from their predecessors. These features are not incidental: they point to a stance, to a conception of the artwork for which the issue is painting and, more precisely, what painting can achieve today.

What do we see? Firstly big, luminously white areas. With all the creaminess of oils, this white is spread on the canvas in successive layers, and from its vibrant interior there emanates a light that diffuses beyond the picture itself. Colour ribbons the surface with green, yellow, red and blue, sometimes in vivid bursts, sometimes disappearing beneath the overlays and lingering only as iridescent tinges and shimmerings in the whiteness. Thus the act of painting is partially obliterated, leaving only elusive traces in the sedimented layering: now you see it, now you don't.

Pesez's paint explodes the gestural spontaneity of the instant, diffracting it into duration, into a tangible temporality in the physical immediacy of the surface. This is what assimilates this embedding of colour to – even as it differentiates it from – the act of writing; pertinently, the artist is also a practising poet. Writing, of course, is necessarily subordinated to duration by the sequencing of words. These coloured trails may resemble a meaningless script, but they play their part in the paint's inherent visual simultaneity.

What we have, then, is a time frame set in a space. A space evocative of landscape not only in its format, but also in the tinted whites, whose luminosity conjures up the limpid, irradiant light of northern climes and makes us think, too, of Eugène Boudin at his most free and easy. If we take landscape as our point of reference, the next step is to ask what the subject or motif is, since we are clearly not dealing with an abstraction of a landscape. This being so, we note that colour here also corresponds to a dissolution of forms; it seems to break free of the picture's boundaries and sometimes appears as no more than an outlier. In this way it gives rise to an undefined place, a fundamentally changeable landscape of the kind indicated by the title's *variable geographies*.

Interestingly, *opening*, an earlier series by Pascal Pesez,¹ is made up of polyptychs whose folding end panels are painted on both sides, making it impossible to see all the images at once. Thus eluding any

¹ Regarding this series, see Karim Ghaddab's essay *Ouvrantes*, downloadable from <http://pascalpesez.net/textes/>

overall view, these works literally reference the image as mobile and circulating. This series also has to do with the obliteration, in Pesez's painting, of a flesh-pink shape more or less directly suggestive of the body. In this it marks a gradual evolution from the pictures of pieces of meat of the late 1990s to the pink paintings, and then to those in which pink limns an organic shape merging with the white. This particular intermingling of skin tone and paint during the 2000s is also an act of integration into art's long history: we may think, for example, of the rosy flesh Rubens uses to eroticise his nymphs' bodies, in defiance of an idealised, ethereal whiteness. This carnal, sexual chromatic presence was an enduring aspect of Pesez's work; might his abandoning of it accord with a movement of the body towards landscape that finds expression in the lateral expansion of his formats? Not at all; or, rather, it is not a matter of abandonment of the body, but of its dissolution into landscape - as the trails of pink bleeding through the white tell us.

The paint, the act of embedding colour, this form of writing regressing into pre-meaning - all these things connect Pesez's painting with the body. This link has to do not only with the image, but with the relation between the body of the subject and the body of the painting. The painting becomes corporeal, and in doing so brings meaning to this corporeality. In this way visual sensation, traditionally considered the most direct link to the intellect, is augmented by touch - by a haptic relation with paint. Thus paint not only calls on the sense of sight; it also triggers a perceptual receptiveness and a summons to the senses that

involve embodiment of reality: when we speak of language the question is one not of representation, but of recreation of the union between the body of the observing subject and the world around it: a recollective mechanism whose colour-induced synaesthesia is splendidly brought into play and explained in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*:

“For a moment, from the clear echo of its warbling in some distant spring, we can extract, as from the little tubes which we use in painting, the exact, forgotten, mysterious, fresh tint of the days which we had believed ourselves to be recalling . . . And the name Guermantes of those days is also like one of those little balloons which have been filled with oxygen, or some such gas; when I come to explode it, to make it emit what it contains, I breathe the air of the Combray of that year, of that day, mingled with a fragrance of hawthorn blossom blown by the wind from the corner of the square, harbinger of rain, which now sent the sun packing, now let him spread himself over the red woollen carpet to the sacristy, steeping it in a bright geranium scarlet, with that, so to speak, Wagnerian harmony in its gaiety which makes the wedding service always impressive².”

These lines encapsulate perfectly the relationship between time and a place – or what in painting is called a landscape – that we instinctively sense in the work of Pascal Pesez.

This coming-together of sensations which brings memory into

² Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, vol. 1: The Guermantes Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 841

being also corresponds to recollection of a fusion of the subject with the world: to the incorporation of the world which in turn forms the subject. For the artist a photograph of a performance dating from 1988 represents a founding narrative: we see him hunched up, naked, in a transparent plastic sling suspended in a doorway above a pile of meat and offal, his body no more than a formless shadow inside a sack shot through with light. As Célia Charvet has put it,³ he is occupying an interspace between earth and sky, in a metaphor of his explorations as a painter. The body and space, the formless and form, flesh and diffuse light: aspects to be considered not separately but together. To fully occupy this interspace is to grasp the reversibility of the subject and its surroundings, to see individuation as taking place in organic unity with the world.

The act of painting, including the gestural dimension observable in this recent series, has nothing to do with projection; rather it preserves the trace of a process of reciprocation between the subject and the world. With its shifting or mobile surfaces Pascal Pesez's painting preserves the trace of this movement, capturing on canvas something like the content of those little balloons described by Marcel Proust: the sole issue, down through time, is our being in the world. In painting the traces are the speed of a setting-down, of a gesture caught in a stratum of the surface. They are, too, what the landscape painter gathers in from the ceaseless

³ Célia Charvet, *la peinture comme trajet* in *Pascal Pesez – délices*, Lille: Centre d'Arts plastiques et visuels, Amiens: Maison de la Culture, 2006, p. 5

transformation of nature and the fugitive effects of the elements. In this interconnection between painting and landscape and in the tenuousness of the trace we find the profound oneness of subject and world, of a subject shaped by the world and mentally shaping it in return; in brief, what we could call a cosmology.

A landscape painter, then? No question, if we take as our definition what John Constable, surely one of the greatest of them all, said of his own oeuvre: "To give to one brief moment caught from fleeting time a lasting existence." Another way of saying that painting is a matter of time.

Romain Mathieu, décembre 2015

English translation: John Tittensor