

The contrasting melodie of order and chaos

Ode Bertrand's works belong to the most rigorous trend in abstraction that, following Theo Van Doesburg, has come to be called "concrete art", even though its origins really go back to Mondrian, Kupka and Vantongerloo. They are like a response to those who would argue that concrete art has exhausted its potentialities, brilliantly demonstrating that when a certain asceticism in the means of expression is assumed, it will not only not harm creation but, on the contrary, can reveal new horizons.

The works presented here offer a felicitous combination of the rationality of geometry's formal language with the austere values of white and black. The harmony achieved is such that we immediately think of endowing it with metaphysical significance. And yet it would be a mistake to see in it the sign of a Parmenidian sort of inspiration indifferent to the dynamics of contradictions that constructivist art sometimes likes to defend. Ode Bertrand's art does not have this Olympian character. It feeds on the violence of chromatic and formal antagonisms that by their very radicality invite examination.

The first surprise will probably come from the exclusive use of black and white. There is no doubt about it, this is the result of an urgent inner necessity to celebrate light in its initial outburst and immaculate brilliance. And it is obvious that Ode Bertrand's works are devoted to this, as they stage the formidable battle between light and darkness that begins afresh each day. With a project such as this, the choice of black and white is fully justified. And yet it leaves space for the artist to express her deliberate resistance to the colours of the world, inasmuch as the traditional contrast between light and dark, driven here to its highest degree of intensity, is reduced to the extreme values. This approach, consisting in persistently cultivating borderline states is a rare occurrence in the history of painting, including its contemporary manifestations. In the XXth century it can be found with Malevitch, Reinhardt and Soulages, where it always has a profound significance. Most of the time, even when an artist turns to abstraction and is sustained by a mystical feeling of unity

with the creative forces of nature, he does not forego the earthly and sensual pleasure coming from the dialectic of coloured areas where light can become attached to the material substance of things ; at the very most he will compel himself to use only pure colours. In the works we are analysing, Ode Bertrand dares transgress this rule. And her transgression does not take the discreet shape of an omission, as would be the case in drawing ; it is obvious, positive and active, since the negation of colours is manifest in the abyssal and homogeneous black that absorbs them all, becoming their tomb. It is difficult in this case not to take note of the symbolic and ideological dimension of the place occupied by the artist's works in the field of geometrical art unless, as perfect positivists, we were to consider that a work of art does not say what it shows. But this is contradicted by the irreducible power of meaning in painting, even when limited to its most elementary means of expression. Thus it could be argued that these works, where black inhabits white in meshing with more or less broad strokes or in massive forms, take this negation of colours as their principle and thrive on it, becoming hymns of victory over colour and its quasi-charnel power of seduction. This, perhaps, is where the secret resides of the cold, mysterious beauty of black that Ode Bertrand loves to work with so much. Kandinsky once said, in speaking of black, that it is "the silence of the body after death", "something extinct". Black arouses a yearning that vibrates in the human soul, a longing for a life liberated from the intoxication of the senses and the violence of impulses ; it is the temptation of an everlasting night saying how to annihilate the forces that by their action plunge the spirit into confusion and suffering. One could even come to dream of an existence permanently freed from subjectivity and its desires. In black, that noncolour, there is an ethical injunction that culminates in the will to negate the instinct of self-preservation. It is this ethical injunction, perhaps manifesting a certain affinity with Cistercian art, that animates Ode Bertrand 's works, marking them with an asceticism that is both disturbing and fascinating.

But for Ode Bertrand the full symbolic value of black is only attained when it is used in opposition to the dazzling white of the

painted surface. Light reigns supreme here, and colours seem to come into their own again. And yet, this antagonism does not rule out their coming together to abolish the principle of reality, for if colours triumph, they do so at the cost of being blended, and this is the negation of their material uniqueness and thus of their specific action on the senses. Struck by light, they become powerless. But light does not act at all like black, it does not destroy colours. It sheds a form of grace endowing them with a new dignity : they become as it were dematerialised, sublimated or, in other words, redeemed. We can now understand the meaning Ode Bertrand gives to white, the other noncolour, that she places in a dialectical relationship with black : if black is the negative phase of the ethical injunction, the phase of refusal, white could be its positive phase, the spiritual quest. This quest is called upon, at least in the Western and Platonic tradition, to exalt the splendour of beginnings, point to the invisible presence of the absolute or a hereafter, and give innocence, which nostalgia places at the dawn of the world, the appearance of eternity. But in this confrontation neither black nor white, with the resonances they find in the depths of the soul, can bring peace ; only an unqualified acceptance of what Nietzsche would have called the “meaning of the earth”, could do that. Between the ambiguous sirens of nonbeing on the one hand and the appeals of a brilliant infinity on the other, there is a gaping abyss containing the source of the tragedy sustaining these works and that they attempt to overcome.

In this respect the geometrical expression of the tensions generated by the dialectic of the two noncolours is essential. Tragedy sounds its continuous melody in ever new modulations and dissonant chords never achieving harmony. And black leads the dance, either gliding into primary Euclidean forms where the reference to the triangle is dominant, or submitting to the discipline of strokes in a more or less tight mesh. On entering the as yet blank space of the painting still to be constructed, black offers dormant white the chance to concentrate its energy until signs and meaning arise from it. Mallarmé comes to mind : “white, a moment ago undecided, certain now...”. In the completed work, white is no longer a mere

background, a chromatic foil for forms laid down on it. Once an open field of possibilities, with the threatening irruption or even the aggressiveness of the angular and dissymmetrical black form or the tyranny of the grid, it becomes an active, magnetic medium endowed with spirituality in which can be seen the artist's attempt to respond to the vertigo of despair. Occasionally this confrontation takes a critical turn as in certain works in the Tourah or Thule series where the black form sometimes loses its homogeneity and the obviousness of its formal identity. Pierced, cut up and broken by white acting as a beam or ray of light, it gives way to spatial instability and becomes even more strange and disturbing, thus adding to the distress of the tragic conscience.

In the exploration of the forms of this tragic conscience that, for Ode Bertrand, apparently might suffice to define man, the arrangement of the grid remains an essential geometrical tool. Without being its slave she grants it a privilege since it has frequently appeared in her work over a period of thirty years. This choice should not come as a surprise. It is in keeping with the tradition of Mondrian, Albers and constructivist art in the XXth century and is easy to justify : the grid at times verges on the labyrinth (unless it is the other way around) and is a very simple structure. As such it fully satisfies modern art's insistence on autonomy. It is bidimensional and geometrical, hence rational, orderly and antinatural. As it is radically opposed to empirical reality, nothing in it could allow its use in a mimetic or narrative manner. On the other hand, its potential for expressivity, continuously exploited by modern art, seems inexhaustible. Ode Bertrand gives further proof of this.

The use the artist makes of the grid will surprise the spectator of Mondrian's paintings and those who followed him. Whereas Mondrian's work develops a vision of the universal through balanced relationships in complete continuity with the orthogonal character of the grid, Ode Bertrand's works are structured with and against the grid, to disrupt it. This begins with a crisscross of straight lines blending its severity and perfection with the white surface of the canvas. Black has only a graphic function here, that of giving space a

regular structure. For Alberti and the Italians of the Renaissance this was only the prelude to a work yet to be produced, and once it was finished it very properly hid its traces. But for Ode Bertrand on the contrary, the grid is not a mere outline meant to disappear ; along with white, accompanying its resonances, it is the first pictorial sign, the one that will remain present, at least as a horizon might do, whatever the adventures of creation might be : reminiscence of a world governed by the law of infinite repetition of the same, with the square and its unconditional stability as its representation ; or perhaps celebration of a purely intelligible world where there is neither time nor death.

Tragedy only enters the work with the structural operations on and out of the grid that disturb its luminous order. In a spirit constantly inspired by geometry, this means eliminating or displacing segments, playing on the thickness of strokes, effecting disconnections or introducing oblique lines ; all of these operations evoking the work of style. Some of the titles given these compositions by Ode Bertrand are eloquent : Dreve, Clinamen, Obliques ; they point to the importance the artist attributes to a subversive treatment of the grid. The creative gesture introduces imbalance and endangers the grid's orderliness. This is why, even more than the diagonal already rejected by Mondrian because of its irrationality, it is the oblique that is preferable, since its irrationality is more profound. The diagonal linking two opposing angles in a square keeps too sympathetic a relationship with the grid's orthogonal character and may even underline it, thereby compromising the expression of tragedy. This is also why no programme should determine the contents of a work of art in advance, but only the subtle combination of intuition and calculation. In this way intertwinings, cobweb-like lattice-work or labyrinthian paths are invented along which there will be no progress towards a privileged destination, contrary to what the initiatory labyrinth would require. Furthermore, the artist's interventions, of whatever nature, tend to tear black away from its graphic function and restore its symbolic function. Death seals an alliance here with disorder that has become

classic in Western culture since Hesiod. These are works where in differing degrees, chaos and night, to speak like the poet, always threaten to invade space and force the conscience to seek nothing except its own complete annihilation. But chaos and night cannot prevail for this would mean the grid would be totally covered over and all light would disappear. The work of art would cease to exist along with the tragic balancing from which it arises.

For the work of art is not only the means whereby a tragedy with Pascalian undertones is presented in a symbolic intuition. It is also, with the means of art, a universal justification of this tragedy : over and above the abyss, the seat of despair, which ontologically separates order and disorder, white and black, they begin to sing. Even if there is a powerful impression of chaos and uneasiness is close at hand, provided one becomes immersed in the qualitatively differentiated space of the work, attentive observation will always reveal the existence of contractions or expansions, pulsations or undulations ; and the labyrinth will no longer represent the loss of self in compossible worlds but, reduced to its greatest abstraction, will become pure movements, relationships and rhythms, in other words dance. Fundamentally, in the works structured on the principle of the grid, tragedy itself, in a music of forms or lines, brings about its own transfiguration, and can then – must this be added ?– definitively settle in the heart of man.

Mondrian is far away now, he who aimed for “the abolition of tragedy” as the purpose of life and sought to express this in plastic constructions governed by the idea of equilibrium. For the days of the major utopias are gone and Ode Bertrand’s compositions take note of this change of period. They are icons for a world agitated by contradiction and lack of balance.

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