

Claude Tétot: Affinities and Dissimilarity

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Because I am an American, because I have lived in New York City for many years, I come to Claude Tétot's paintings differently than, say, a Parisian would. This does not mean that there are no similarities, no shared references, between the New York conception of painting and the Parisian view of the medium—obviously the history of art has long ignored national borders, and today more than ever. It just means that we can't help being influenced by the art we have seen (and that we will fail to be influenced by the art we haven't seen). So when I look at one of Tétot's paintings and try to think about their antecedents, I might reference painters such as Ray Parker and Kimber Smith while a Parisian might be reminded of altogether different artists (perhaps Martin Barré or Jean Degottex). Even though the paintings of Parker and Smith may have had no influence on Tétot's work, they inevitably affect my response. From the first moment, I have begun to appropriate the work into my own perspective.

Let's stay with this question of affinities for a little longer: Before I encountered Tétot's paintings it was inconceivable to me that a painter could be simultaneously indebted to Cy Twombly and Shirley Jaffe. Yet Tétot has somehow found a way to deploy Twomblyesque drift and Jaffeian clarity, apparently random doodles and exquisite precision, on a single canvas. In the end though, for all his love of concentrated scribbling and empty spaces, I think his sensibility is closer to Jaffe's. Chez Tétot, there's no trace of romanticism, no "homeless representation," no diaristic accumulation, no attempts to escape relational, hierarchic compositions. Instead, as with Jaffe, there is an austerity (which doesn't preclude intense doses of color), an attitude of precision, and, above all, a sense of prolonged self-reflection: everything in a painting by Tétot has earned its place; the artist invites us to think through the painting with him, to pay close attention to every contour, every interval.

The diversity of registers in Tétot's work, from hard-edge geometry to gestural mark-making to, in Eric Suchère's apt phrase "the grammar of surfaces," places him in the line of hybrid postmodern painting pioneered by artists such as Lydia Dona and Jonathan Lasker. At the beginning of the 1980s, Lasker, Dona and others rejected the notion of stylistic purity. Like them, Tétot has no time for doctrinaire modernism, but his paintings aren't offered as critiques of modernism in the manner way that Lasker's and Dona's early work. Perhaps it is because the motifs in Tétot's work seem scrubbed of whatever historical associations that might have had (you can ignore my citations of Ray Parker and Kimber Smith), which gives them a lightness, a buoyancy, that is similar in spirit to recent work by artists such as Charline Von Heyl, Mary Weatherford and Peter Soriano.

Although they belong to categories familiar to us from the history of modernism, all the elements in Tétot's work seem newly minted, whether it is the sets of parallel lines, the flurries of fuzzy gestures, the delimited fields of scratches, the blocks of bold color or any of his other favored components. This means that we are able to enter into the paintings not as commentaries on the course of abstraction or anthologies of painterly moves, but as exercises in visual discourse. They are like mathematical equations or philosophical propositions or rock gardens or the graphic notation for a musical composition by Penderecki or Cornelius Cardew or a photograph capturing a set of objects in relation to one another. In other words, they are invitations to let our minds and eyes rove freely within a particular set of parameters.

But these parameters are, by design, loose. We are not in the realm of systemic art, which would include everything from a permutational composition by Sol LeWitt to diagrammatic paintings by Peter Halley or Julie Mehretu. An artist who seems to enjoy arguing with himself, Tétot escapes any universal law, any consistent approach. Rather than being closed systems, his paintings are beautifully open. One of the ways in which he conveys this openness is through a sense of incompleteness. Everything in his paintings stops short of completion: a set of perfectly drawn parallel lines suddenly halts in the middle of the canvas, as if they had been cut with scissors; a concatenation of watery shapes comes to the end after extending for a foot or two; a cloud of color intrudes in a few inches from the edge of a painting but no further; a richly colored pattern blossoms in the middle of a painting, but only briefly. (I am making a distinction here between the incomplete, which connotes the fragmentary, and the unfinished, which suggest the abandonment of a project.)

Any of these "ideas" could plausibly be the basis for an entire painting but it is evidently impossible for Tétot to conceive of creating a work from only one motif, one idea. Nor can he limit himself to two. I suspect that Tétot is as adverse to binary compositions as he is to single-motif structures. His rule seems to be that there must always be at least three things happening in every painting or drawing. In a few cases it might look as if there are only two shapes or marks or lines, but a third always turns up, even if we don't notice it immediately. For instance, there is a recent work involving a rectangle of black and yellow diagonal bands next to an irregular patch of red-and-blue patterning. At first glance those two forms seem to be the only elements on the white ground, thus disproving my "minimum of three" theory. Then, barely noticeable, a skein of pale lines emerges into view, acting almost as a shadow of the irregular shape. In another work, two stacked shapes (one red, one blue) so dominate the center so that one doesn't immediately perceive a narrow orange band running along the right edge.

It's not only the presence and proximity of dissimilar elements that gives Tétot's works their sense of openness, his techniques also contribute to the effect. Often Tétot will partially brush color into an area of a painting the way an artist might do in a sketch, as a reminder for what to do in the finished painting or as a way to try out an idea. This conveys to the viewer the notion that the painting could have

developed in a different way; it gives us a glimpse into the artist's thinking, into his self-questioning, into the contingency of the work. This is an approach to painting that I have described as "provisional" in a pair of essays in *Art in America*, "Provisional Painting" (2009) and "To Rest Lightly on the Earth" (2012). A passage from the latter text could be applied to Tétot's work:

Provisional paintings can show signs of struggle and can also look "too easy." In the case of easy-looking provisionality, we encounter a paradox: the struggle with the problematics of painting results in a painting that shows no signs of struggle in the sense that the finished piece displays a minimum amount of work. . . . But in other cases we can see the record of the artist's struggles. . . . But whether it looks easy or arduous, the provisional work is always opposed to the monumental, the official, the permanent . . . It wants to hover at the edge of nonexistence. It wants to rest lightly on the earth.¹

But what is it that paintings do, if anything, as they hover in this marginal zone? That is, what affect do they have on the world? Is it the case that, to paraphrase a line from W.H. Auden's elegy for Yeats, "paintings makes nothing happen"? Or do they perform some function (apart from their role in the art market and the chronicle of art history)? These are not easy questions, and maybe I shouldn't even be asking them. Better simply to look at paintings for themselves, describe their appearance, talk about how they were made, the circumstances of the person who made them, maybe quote things their maker said about them, or quote what other critics have said about them in the past, then maybe, after description and biography have given up all that they can, attempt to convey, via metaphors and analogies and other kinds of rhetorical devices, something of how they make their viewers feel.

I am well aware that trying to describe the feelings of viewers, or of critics, about a work of art entails the kind of subjectivity that has long been seen as the enemy of serious criticism. But maybe it is time to rehabilitate subjective experience, to say things about works of art that are not verifiable. One option would be to turn to poetry, the medium that supposedly makes nothing happen, to describe what painting does. Certainly poetry is better suited than conventional art writing (by historians or by critics) to offer an account of how viewers actually experience works of art. In may be a heretical suggestion, but what if the only thing that words can accurately convey about an artwork are the feelings it arouses rather than its physical facts?²

Provoking an emotional response in the viewer is an example of "doing something," of having an affect, but one that is hard to describe and harder to verify. The problem is an inescapable dichotomy: the sheer visibility of the painting and the total invisibility of the response. Incompatible languages. But are painting and our responses to it both languages? As Roland Barthes long ago asked, "Is painting a language?" Sometimes I think that the most effective commentary about a painting would be to attempt to make a copy of it. Whether the copy was a good one or a terrible one, the copyist's knowledge of the work would be increased—apparently without recourse to language.

When I look at the work of Claude Tétot I find myself asking such fundamental, and difficult, questions about the medium of painting, about the experience of the viewer, about the language of criticism. This might seem a surprising response to work that appears to revel in the interactions of shape and color and surface, rather than interrogate the ideological or ontological conditions of painting. But isn't this precisely the domain of painting, to offer us an object that reflects on itself in its very solicitation of our attention? Certainly, this is what Tétot's work, in all its irreducible beauty, provides in abundance.

¹ Raphael Rubinstein, "To Rest Lightly on the Earth," *Art in America*, February, 2012.

² Cf. "It is quite difficult to describe a landscape in words, of course. Even in a small field, there is infinitely too much to render in anything like the completeness that even the swiftest watercolor can. But words can render the feeling." Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, London, Faber and Faber, 1967, p. 78