

Double Game

Some mornings Claude Tétot plumps down in the old leather armchair in the middle of his studio, four or five metres from the big blank canvas propped against the wall, and starts painting. Not that he's adding the slightest touch of colour at that distance – especially as he's not holding paints, brushes or any of the other tools he'll use when he actually comes to grips with the picture in a day or two. He doesn't move, doesn't touch; and yet the work has begun, the real work that will soon result in the picture. He refers to this mental, meditative practice as a kind of "inner visualisation": "I spend a lot of time looking at what I'm going to do: looking at it mentally."¹ What are we to understand by this?

Since Leonardo da Vinci we have known that painting is *cosa mentale*, an art even more of the mind than of the hand. In Tétot's case, though, there is no subordination of one to the other, no precedence of idea over practice; there is, rather, a double game going on, mental then physical, with each stage in this two-step process a test of the artist's ability to make a painting. The visualisation referred to is not a vision of a result – of what the picture to come might be, once painted – but the initial, inward, intimate experimenting with an action. For the artist – with the canvas functioning as a kind of pristine screen, or vacant, available space on which he is free to project colours and forms

¹ All the quotations from Claude Tétot are taken from "I'm My Picture's First Target", the interview I carried out with him in October 2017, which is published in this catalogue, p.61

– this means "mentally" testing a given mix or match or dissonance of forms. To do this, he says, he "puts in", say, two colours and mixes them as he simultaneously endows them with form and energy. We must remember that, in this opening phase of work with paint, all this is taking place solely in his mind. Astonishing and in many respects disconcerting, this approach nonetheless speaks eloquently of both the painter and his art; for this strictly mental exercise, which precedes the physical test of actually painting, proceeds from an incredible feat of memorisation – of all the pictures painted over so many years – which is the fundamental prerequisite of such a practice. How many times must he actually have mixed colours on a canvas, and how many times must he have sought out forms and tracked down contrasts in his sketchbooks to be able, one day, to generate an as yet unpainted painting via pure inner visualisation? To paint this way, abstractly, one has to have a world within oneself, a living, painterly world that one calls up and puts to work like a toolbox of which one is both the creator and the sole proprietor. Claude Tétot possesses such a world, revisiting it from moment to moment and exploring, with or without brushes, the unknown nooks and crannies and the untested effects hidden behind forms already seen.

We realise that some of the key qualities of his work, and some of the characteristics of his painterly syntax, are intimately related to this mental manner of readying himself for painting. The white of the canvas which, with the passing of the years, has steadily asserted its active force in Tétot's work, offers a concrete echo, a kind of memory trace, to the unpainted canvas *in front of which* he spends a day or two

in meditation. It is at once within and in front of himself – in this physical-psychical space which links him, there in his armchair, to the waiting canvas – that he projects colours and forms. The blank canvas, the one of which the painted picture is a partial covering, is very much a screen. One projects, erases, starts over. Everything can be erased, but everything leaves a trace in this memory space which is the locus of Tétot's painting. Each of his pictures contains in a latent state the recollection of all the mental endeavours preceding the final decision, the one taken concretely, brush in hand: the ultimate testing-out of what has been seen by what will be made.

The economy of means in his works, and his way of organising his practice according to a principle of variation, are likewise much indebted to this two-step method. If we look at pictures painted within the same time frame – those produced over one or two years, the average duration of a Tétot "period" – and presented in a way faithful to their creative continuum, we can deduce the various forms, matches or dissonances, i.e., the various painterly tools, that were on his mind; we can deduce, too, that from one picture to another he has set about combining those tools in as many ways as the aforesaid mind, experimental both by nature and inclination, has suggested. Just as the artist mentally tries out several ways of combining elements of his chosen syntax, the pictures that follow each other chronologically are like implementations in different registers of the solutions envisaged during the time devoted to what could be called inner painting.

As we can imagine, in this kind of mental striving it is not so much the arrival as the journey that counts. Trying to put images to a

practice as private and mysterious as this one, we think of those fliers rehearsing with their eyes closed the aerial choreography they will soon have to perform in reality; doing this the better to visually anticipate the path to be taken. Like the painter, the flier must literally possess his world if he is not to founder in it. Except that while the flier repeats every day the same acts required by success and survival, with his mental visualisation the culmination of a long, laborious internalisation of the manoeuvres to be executed, the artist must constantly discover, experiment and invent. There lies his true goal: the one that leads him to initiate his painting sessions by the long period of inner exploration he sees as the necessary precondition for this potent experience of painting.

"I'm my picture's first target," he says. He could add that in order to be fully a painter, he must fully become a target, capable of letting himself be deeply affected by what he does and so feeling its effects acutely. The dual temporality of his practice – inward then outward – is precisely a way of being fully a target, beginning by experiencing mentally what he is soon going to experience a second time, optically, as the picture's first viewer; I refer here to the real picture, the one we will see after him, the one whose effect he is the first to submit to in the long course of its emergence. What the artist is searching for, sitting in his armchair with his gaze drifting between the blank canvas in the distance and his inner memory, is less the mixes, combinations and variations than their effect within him, which he listens to with his whole body so as to feel its rightness and necessity. But it's not enough just to have a world within oneself, and a memory: the painter must

also have the kind of inner ear with which he can listen to what he is experiencing; with which he can know, through the memory of so many other past and now revived sensations, if what he feels is or is not the sign of the discovery of some unknown territory.

But ultimately, why paint? By which I mean, why really paint, standing up, day after day, glued to a canvas soon to be no longer white as it gradually evolves from erasable screen to irremediable picture? Why abandon the armchair where painting yields itself as dream, if not to ensure that in the transition from dream to reality, from foreseeing to seeing, something comes about? Something unforeseen. The transit from dream painting to painted painting is tough and bumpy. And that's the true painting experience: thwarting oneself by confronting the bumps and accidents thrown up by the picture in its splendid resistance to its supposed master. As Tétot puts it, "You have to know – I learned this while painting – how to let the accident live on." Through the act of painting one learns the true freedom that consists in receptiveness to the unknown, the unforeseen. Claude Tétot continues: "I really have to stay on the alert and break down any barriers that shut me in. That's what I call searching: searching for what will free me from what I've found." And so he moves ahead, a painter endlessly searching, freer with each day that passes and always surprised to find in his pictures what he had failed to foresee when he was still in his armchair in the middle of the studio.

English translation: John Tittensor

