

## **"I'm My Picture's First Target"**

Claude Tétot in conversation with Pierre Wat

*Let's talk about your timetable. What's a day in the studio like?*

As a rule I start early. The morning's pretty sacred. If I get a good start I'll be able to keep going for a whole day. It depends on whether I have pictures on the go or not. When this is the case – often there are two underway at the same time – I'll spend at least an hour looking at them. I do mental gymnastics, I compose them. I make them in my head, visualising them without touching them, sitting there in my armchair.

I end up choosing the least comfortable ones – because they're the least comfortable they let me work. At the moment I'm working on drawings. I begin by cutting paper to size. That's my way of getting into the work, getting inside it. I do very small sketches, 2 x 3 cm, on offcuts. I'm searching as I draw. I keep what interests me. Actually it's the searching that interests me. I start with a line drawing, always in black and white, and that lets me move on to a series. That's the way the day goes: I search for an idea, I develop it, I search, I develop.

What I call developing an idea is making different arrangements of the same elements. I start out with an idea of interaction, or ambience, then I experiment by playing with the spaces, which for me are like the silences in music: their variations bring different stories.

*How does a picture come to you?*

It's kind of the same process, but working on my sketchbooks. Here the drawings are bigger, around 20 x 30 cm, and they feed into the big paintings. These sketches aren't works on paper that I could exhibit as such; they're quick and less elaborate. I'm looking for what could make a picture straight away. I'm more focused on construction than in the works on paper, which are freer. In actual fact the sketchbooks are used for what I call setting up the canvas. If a sketch is convincing I transfer it onto a canvas, keeping the same proportions.

*When are you convinced?*

It's not a matter of aesthetics. It's the potential I see that interests me: the capacity to relate something, to *provoke*. What I'm after is the moment when I know there's enough force and fragility in a drawing for me to make something of it.

*You talk of these drawings as experiences to be undergone.*

Some sketches pose a real problem. That's when it gets interesting. There's a pleasure, a real exhilaration, in getting involved. After a day of that I'm worn out, literally drained. If the morning's been good I try to pace myself differently in the afternoon.

*Apart from the sketchbooks, what are the other sources for your work?*

First of all, of course, there are the pictures already done. They fuel the work to come and at the same time allow me a certain detachment. Basically dissatisfaction is one of my driving forces. When I haven't really found what I want, I use what I've already done to go looking

somewhere else. Sometimes when I'm short of ideas I pull out finished pictures and look at them.

And then there's the endless input from the outside world. One result being the urban overtones in the recent canvases. These forms that you find in the city interest me because they're geometrical, effective and intransigent. Another interesting thing about them is that they tickle the imagination: the viewer has a reference stored away, something he knows that's going to be awakened like a familiar feeling. In my case, though, I'm trying to rid painting of this effect associated with forms and colours; this is a way of deconditioning the viewer, of breaking his habits. I want to put people on the razor's edge; this is an assertion of freedom.

*You almost never mention art history as a resource – some picture or other you might have seen and been marked by.*

I take an interest in things very different from what I do myself. That's my way of resisting influences so as to understand myself better. If I had to name an artist and a body of work that have really interested me, it would be Tony Cragg and his opaque bottles, which already go back a long way. That work with form has inspired me, but left me free at the same time. He's a sculptor, I do painting.

*I'd like us to talk about the time framework in what you do. Your pictures often give rise to what I would call a speed effect. Do you work fast or slowly?*

I work slowly, because I spend a lot of time looking at what I'm going to do: looking at it mentally. It's a matter of inner visualisation. Sometimes I go two days without touching the canvas. Then I start my first glazes. This is a crucial moment, because I use white reserve areas a lot. I mustn't clog things up, otherwise the picture is dead. My painting comes out of a practice that's extremely mental and meditative. I'm in search of a particular kind of state, and I need solitude as long as the first glaze hasn't been laid in. Afterwards it's different.

*Could you describe this state?*

It's a way of cutting yourself off from the outside world, and that can involve paradoxical stuff: cooking, going out into the garden – everything can be part of a kind of preparation.

As for the dynamic effect you mentioned – which is there in a lot of my pictures – it's built up by accumulating layers. I rework a lot and if I have the feeling the picture isn't right, I stop. I like it to look impromptu, off the cuff, whereas in fact it's very, very constructed. You mustn't show the process, otherwise you don't get the viewer on board.

*When do you know that a picture is finished?*

You feel it. Now I know better than I used to when to stop. I look for a certain vibration, a feeling of aliveness, that means knowing how to stop in time, when things are still open-ended. You have to know – I learned this from painting – how to let the accident live on.

*Would you call your painting abstract?*

Yes, but it's also very narrative. You have to bring people along by giving them little bits and pieces, but no more than that. You can intimate things, but just enough to sow the seeds of doubt. So yes, my work is abstract, but I like to inject something human. That's what really counts.

*So can we say your pictures have a subject?*

I almost always start with the same subject: our relationship with the world. You exist and I exist in the midst of something. It's this relationship that interests me. That's what generates my work and gets it started. Basically all my painting is focused on our situation in the world. I'm not trying to recreate it, though, I'm out to make use of it. My aim is to alert the viewer to some part of his own existence. The canvas has to set him thinking about his physical situation in the world. That's why I turn our habits of seeing against themselves. It's about learning to see rather than foreseeing.

*You often refer to the spectators, the people your painting is literally addressed to; but where are you in your pictures?*

No idea. I'm my picture's first target. I use what I feel as a means of self-renewal. I know a painting is finished when it gets me asking myself new questions. When I haven't clogged things up everything is okay.

I really work for myself. A good painting is one that makes me move ahead. If it gets me moving, it ought to get someone else moving as well. I don't paint to woo people. I have my own world and that's very important, but it doesn't exclude self-renewal. Anyway, my painting's not autobiographical; it's beyond me. And that's just as it should be.

*And the body? What part does it play in your experience of painting?*

I've always loved big pictures. If I could, I'd work bigger. Looking at a big painting you're completely dominated by space: there's a physical exhilaration; there's something generous about it.

My work has freed up. For a long time I needed things to be done well. That reassured me. Now I'm freer, and so my painting's more human. I don't want to feel shut in, whatever the circumstances. And that's the thing that drives me. Painting means being in world of freedom. The straitjacket is of your own making, which means 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.

— *Paris, 17 October 2017*

English translation: John Tittensor