

ABSTRACT NARRATIVE

ESSAY BY SILVÈRE JARROSSON

VERBAL ASSAULTS

Every youthful trip on which I embarked, to whatever remote destinations still left in this world, led my mind to experience the same cognitive process: initially I was enthralled, from the very moment I started planning my travels, while they unfolded, and yet again when completing them. Once at my destination the initial, overwhelming awe would give way to a seeping lethargy that nothing I encountered, however gorgeous, could dispel. On the contrary, the exoticism into which I was thrust seemed to slowly water down my dreams as the days and weeks went by. This leisurely, museful state provided tangible proof of the success of the change of scene I had sought: I had been disconnected from my daily routine, with serenity duly coming in its wake.

Faulty wireless coverage meant that any intellectual nourishment sourced from my smartphone largely dried up, but this was hardly an issue for the lightweight books I had taken care to pack. I could still, just about, employ my device to write, at least whenever I was able to charge my battery. On a train meant to ferry me from Mumbai to Kolkata in an unspecified lapse of time which, one hoped, would not exceed a couple of days, I would start drafting something on my phone in front of my fellow passengers—including cows, as well as an assortment of astonished families. A while later, on the island of Mindanao, penmanship again provided intellectual solace. The Bolivian Altiplano, the Kazakh Steppe, among other unlikely ports of call, followed. This is what set in motion all the developments set out below, through the conjunction of a traveller's peace of mind and of a phone writing app.

My worldwide travels, amounting as they did to the gradual exploration of a work of art called Earth, turned a geographic journey into an artistic one—one to which my artwork would in due course respond. Indeed, had the ambiguity gone no further than *obiter dicta* about the trip, I would have declined to set these in writing. Few artists describe the digressions at the root of their work. Art critics alone are confronted by the difficulty of that exercise—one which I had ruled out from the outset, fearful as I was of committing infanticide by confining a statement meant to lie beyond the bounds of language within a straightjacket of categorical thoughts. Walking in the darkest,

facing page: Santiago Jose Sanchez, UNTITLED, photograph.

62 | SPUNK



above: Viviane Sassen, VICTORIA 2005, from the series Flamboya, c-print.

64 | SPUNK

as difficult as it is essential, to give abstraction its eloquence and its status as a work of art.

IMAGINATION AND FLUIDS MECHANICS

Could imagination be an answer? Just like my friend did, to imagine is to give meaning. Because the unknown unsettles, to imagine a galaxy, abstract work. Allowing imagination to develop is allowing the abstract subject to become meaningful. "The power of imagination is immediate: I do not look for the image, it comes to me instantly." Like sea shells grabbing and if it gets a sustaining support. Abstract can be rich of meaning and interpretation, if it becomes the support.

But what is the imagination's support?

Probably the most uncertain abstract works (blurred, complex, messy) that would be the hardest to interpret and subjected to multiple readings. Our brain interprets what we see, to give a meaning to signals received from the optic nerve, in order to react in a proper way. But that brain's natural capacity is disrupted by the appearance of abstract works in our surroundings. Those works, escaping immediate recognition, put the brain in an anxiety-producing and leads it to create hypothesis. They are what we imagine. The reflex of recognizing dragons and jellyfishes into a painting comes from the brain's attempt to "figure" abstraction. The more we look at something uncertain, the more we are led to imagine, in order to fill uncertainty. Abstract narrative would then be what it is possible to imagine, and the best supports of abstraction are the ones where some kind of uncertainty allows, among confusion, to imagine a figurative world. Placed outside of the actual world, abstraction still touches us while referring to it. However, paradoxically, once imagination is set free, once the galaxy or the jellyfish recognized, the work is "figured" and its narrative does not remain abstract. The "great flow of imagination," when its embellished from what we already know, bypasses the notion of abstraction to go back to reality. The actual abstract narrative remains to be looked for elsewhere.

1 Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Éditions Le Seuil, 1977

facing page: Benoit Paillé, UNTITLED, photograph.

66 | SPUNK

the artist reaches the psychoanalyst's position, to create manifestations of the unconscious in the visitor's spirit. The eloquence of abstraction comes from revealing an eloquence already present in us. The abstract narrative is nothing but the inner narrative in each of us, and the interpretation is that of our unconscious.



unmapped and mostly unknown parts of the human spirit, any kind of daylight would not reveal the surroundings but probably burn it. Trying to replace the night by any kind of daylight would not only lead to a complete visual illusion but also to a blurring screen set in front of our eyes, erasing every detail to keep only the ridiculously simplified shapes of our thoughts. Any explanation or devising of an intelligible theory would amount to a verbal assault against the perceptible world, mitigating its potential impact. I was unwilling to engage in such a battle against the ineffable.

I am therefore bearing witness to a paradox, insofar as I am attempting to apply words to things that words cannot fully depict. I have chosen to risk an experiment: appending unequivocal words to the equivocal statement that arises out of a blurred, blended coat of paint. In resolving to do this, my purpose is not to provide keys to understanding my artwork. Even less to provide justification for it. Rather my conviction is that the unfolding of an intelligible meaning does not necessarily hinder the emergence of sensitive meaning. Indeed, it may well bring it about.

It is because expression beyond language does not precede speech; it succeeds it. One needs to have uttered many words before dispensing with them. Here is how I attempted to talk about my abstract world.

DRAGONS AND JELLYFISHES

April 2016, in a gallery, *Le Marais, Paris*—The night of the opening of my exhibition, a friend comes to see me and starts to comment one of the artworks. "This one is not bad, he says, but I cannot like it, because I have not found what it represents yet. According to you, is it a submerged galaxy or a dragon fighting jellyfish?" I am amused and smile politely. Since the paintings are abstract, why seek in them such surprising scenes? It is a very well-known cognitive reflex to seek for figurative details in an abstract painting. For my friend, the figuration of abstraction is even necessary to understand and appreciate the exhibition.

Figuration necessarily makes sense, since it figures. Shapes and forms are looked at through the prism of what they mean, offering a defined frame of comprehension and interpretation. Abstract art, frameless, is threatened by nonsense, not saying more than the pre-existing void on its canvas. Confronted with that risk, the abstract artist wonders how to reach, through abstraction, an equally intense narrative—though essentially different—to what figuration embodies through its representation. To create an abstract narrative seems

If we admit that imagination can develop *ex nihilo*, without any reference to our past, the abstract narrative is then only not a projection of what life has let us know, but a pure invention of our mind, out of any reference. If the stains used by Herman Rorschach from 1921 stimulate our imagination, it is not only because they always vaguely look like familiar things, but also because they are always different from them. The interest of the test is then to know what the always different from them. The interest of the test is then to know what the always different from them. The interest of the test is then to know what the always different from them. The interest of the test is then to know what the always different from them. The interest of the test is then to know what the always different from them.



DAY FOR NIGHT | 67

THE STONE BROUGHT FROM THE MOON

But here again, abstract art becomes the baton of something pre-existent—our unconscious. Could not we cross another level of abstraction and conceive an abstraction out of any known reference? If we consider it this way, abstract art becomes the messenger of an Elsewhere that could be the dark part in each of us. To discover an abstract work could be like observing a curiosity, or discovering an enigma. Like a stone brought from the Moon, those testimonies of an unknown Elsewhere fascinate and question our ability to perceive reality as a whole. The world we know is bordered, and everything coming from the outside is prone to question it, softening and broadening our mental borders. What we see of the world could only be a fragment from a deeper and more complex reality. The rising of consciousness, claimed by abstract art, would then be efficient, while bringing back to our field of vision testimonies of that unknown space.

That abstract conception of abstract art would make a preference for avoiding this reflex of the imagination, always taking abstract art back into the comfort of the well-known and well-understood. *De facto*, mystery is obliterated. On the contrary, it is when abstraction does not evoke anything familiar that it becomes interesting, since it then deals with an Elsewhere. It also requests from the spectator an act of creation of a world that does not exist. The abstract narrative does not exist as an explicit message, but more as a group of stimuli created by the work, situated at the border of what we can understand.

The most enigmatic artists are often the ones speaking with the loudest voice, since what interest them is incomprehension. Let's think of that gallery owner, devaluing his works while wanting to rationally explain their meaning—absurd explanations, removing any power of reading and creation from the visitors, any mystery from the works.

Instead of desiring to understand abstraction, let's seek to access "knowledge of the unknown." One has to understand that the abstract is not meant to be understood. That paradox underlines the difficulty to explain abstraction. Indeed, some artists have been able to give their abstract works the eloquence of a narrative, but it escapes from any attempt of rational explanation. What gives strength and opens the way for a communication out of language.

facing page: Monsieur Gris, UNTITLED, photograph. overleaf: Richard Stuart Perkins, FIGURE STUDY, BACK AND HANDS, archival digital print.

DAY FOR NIGHT | 69