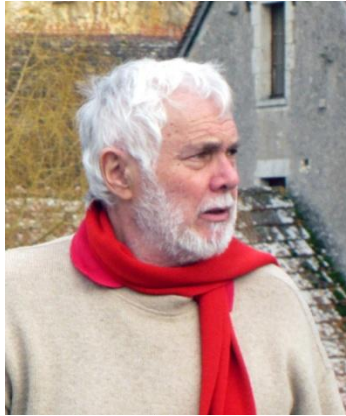


AN INTERVIEW WITH FRENCH PAINTER JOËL BARBEDETTE

Gwenaël Kerlidou



Joël Barbedette, winter 2012

Gwenaël Kerlidou: Let's start with a biographical question, to help situate you. When were you born?

Joël Barbedette : In 1943

GK : You studied at the beaux-arts school in Rennes.

JB : And in Paris

GK : When was that?

JB : Between 1962 and 68

GK : And when you got to Paris, you had already obtained your degree in painting from Rennes.

JB : Yes, but it was a national diploma.

GK : At that time, you were still making figurative paintings. What did you discover in Paris that you couldn't see in Rennes?

JB : I'd had a few visual shocks before I moved to Paris, through art magazines, and abstract art had affected me deeply already in Brittany. It was a painting by Poliakoff that turned me to abstraction, but I had to wait a while until I was ready for that change.

GK : This epiphany with Poliakoff's painting happened while you were still a student in Rennes?

JB : Actually, I was still in high-school, it was before the beaux-arts, in 1962.

GK : I have never seen any of your figurative paintings.

JB : They were of streets in the snow with red skies, clowns, the world of the circus, industrial landscapes, canals in the north, slightly sad banlieues...

GK : Do you still have any of those paintings?

JB : Almost none.



Joel Barbedette, ca. 1968, Jeune fille pensive, 14 » x 11 ».

GK : Were you still doing that kind of work when you arrived in Paris?

JB : Yes, when I got to Paris, I left the ocean and began a series of ink paintings on paper showing the ocean, without ships or shore; with waves, only the movement of the waves. I needed to have the ocean next to me so I had to reproduce it (laughter). I still have that series.

GK : How did your transition to abstraction take place then?

JB : In Paris I was originally very interested by old walls still showing vertical black soot flue marks. I took lots of photos, and at some point, when I met Poliakoff, that's all I had to show him, unfortunately. They were paintings based on the rhythm of these long black verticals, but also always a piece of sky in a corner. I was attracted by these rythms but the paintings were not yet completely abstract. I was still in a sort of landscape mode. Poliakoff gave me some galleries to go to with his recommendation, such as Dina Vierny, but I didn't use them. I wasn't ready at all, I felt quite unable to present my work.

GK : I didn't know that you'd met Poliakoff.

JB : He used to hang around St Germain and I had asked him if I could show him my work. We met at the Deux Magotsi.

GK : After you met Poliakoff, did you continue evolving toward abstraction ?

JB : I hadn't painted for two years, while I was doing my military service, and suddenly I turned abstract. During those years, I gave a lot of thought to the relationship between painting and the wall, the way painting could negate the wall. In the end, it had to do with light; painting as a chance for the wall to be abolished and let light through. This was the kind of thought I was entertaining: the relationship between painting and the wall.

GK : To return to our biographical thread: You spent two years in Lunéville during your military service, then you came back to Paris and started painting again.

JB : And the first abstract painting I did was at the Cité Universitaire. A friend told me I should stop working on a painting in progress and I never regretted having followed his advice.

GK : So, since your work hasn't changed very much over the last forty years, when did you reach the esthetic approach you still use today? Did it happen suddenly or more slowly?

JB : Very slowly and with a minimum of activity. I painted all the time, but I did not produce that much and it felt like I was painting even when I didn't have a brush in my hand.

GK : Painting can also happen in your head between paintings.

JB : Yes, it has to do with a certain way of looking at things. Sometimes one can feel that one is painting, just by looking at things, I think.

GK : And you arrived at the shapes you are still using today and to your color choice of black, white and red.

JB : Yes, it's de La Tour and Rembrandt, the seventeenth century painters, who gave me that specific palette and I found it to be enough, because it's as powerful a combination as one can take on.

GK : And how much time did this transition take?

JB : Right after I came back from the army. I started using it when I lived rue de Varennes. I found it quite sufficient and when I tried to introduce other colors, blue for example, I didn't know what to do, and finally, it could be that black replaces blue, or possibly even white. In my view, these three colors are quite sufficient.

GK : If memory serves, I spent a month in your apartment rue de Varennes in the summer of 71 or 72. Your work was already all red, white and black. But I'd like to move on now to the question of influence. Outside of your relationship to art history, how did you view your relationship to contemporary abstraction? Who were the painters you were looking at?

JB : I had an emotional shock with Fautrier, I liked Soulages but later I preferred Franz Kline, who in my mind remained closer to Rembrandt. Kline paints the white parts too, which Soulages doesn't do, but Soulages remains a very impressive figure to me anyway. I always liked Nicolas de Stael and Tal Coat among others, and I met Hosiasson by accident, we had a short exchange of letters. He was a splendid artist.

GK : I don't know his work that well.

JB : Yet he's well known in the States. I met him by chance. I had sold a drawing to some of his friends in Belgium and they told me to go see him. He was most welcoming, very sweet. It's an unusual oeuvre.

GK : When did you come across Rothko's work?

JB : I discovered Rothko in a small exhibition catalog at the La Hune bookstoreⁱⁱ. I discuss this in "Une correspondance"ⁱⁱⁱ as a major event, a huge discovery.

GK : Around what time ?

JB : Around 70-72, I forget. Rothko died in 1970, I think. No, it must have been before. I already knew his work when I left for the army. I discovered Bram [van Velde] and Rothko at La Hune through exhibition catalogs.

GK : Since you mention Bram van Velde, when did you discover him? Before the army?

JB : Probably. In Paris, at the beginning, from 1966 to 1968, I used to browse quite a bit in galleries and bookstores. I've always loved books. I also used to spend a lot of time in the library when I was at the beaux-arts.

GK : Do you think that Bram and Rothko had the same importance as Rembrandt and La Tour in the way you articulated your esthetic project?

JB : Hard to tell. Can I mix things up? I move from one to the other without trying to make sense of it, without analyzing it too much, I go from one shock to another. I function on moments of high intensity. With any of these painters, I wouldn't cling to the whole oeuvre, only to a few paintings. With De la Tour, I need just five or six paintings, all nocturnes. With Rembrandt, there are between ten and twenty that I visit quite regularly. They are a very necessary background. There is great wealth in these painters' work. I'm not saying that things get a bit poorer with modernism, but they do become drastically simplified. The definition of abstraction that I would remember, the one I understand best, is what was articulated by Spinoza with the common notions: we are in life, in a succession of phenomena, and we grab everything we are involved with. The common notions express our power to be affected and can be explained by our ability to understand. An abstract concept comes in when we choose one element over others. The abstract concept is a choice to withdraw from the totality of all phenomena, to isolate just one, which becomes the basic idea of the work, and I think this is a good definition of abstract painters' enterprise. They pick one thing: the orthogonal or the rectangle for Mondrian, or those V shaped drips for Bram van Velde, or those angular shapes for Poliakoff. That's how I understand it.

GK : By introducing Rothko into our discussion, I wanted to ask what your relationship to the American Abstract Expressionists was because, in your work, one can see enough affinities with them, even if indirectly, to wonder about your exposure to their work and, more specifically, to the idea of the sublime as expressed by Rothko, Gottlieb, or Newman. One has the feeling that there is something close to the sublime in the esthetic apparatus you put together for your own work. I later understood you didn't know their work when you started painting or, rather, that your own work developed at the same time as you discovered them. Was this discovery important for you?

JB : Yes, enormously, because the Ab. Ex. helped us get out of bourgeois framed painting, meant to decorate apartments. They broke with the tradition of the bourgeois object, and with small formats. I was completely seduced by their ambition. It was a liberation; being attracted by something bigger than yourself. In another way, Zen tells us that we will never reach our goal, we will forever be seekers, and that is also quite liberating. I love this quote from the poet Maurice Carême: "Passing by, I just walked by, not asking for more, as would the sky with its clouds..." I think this may fit with Rothko, the passing clouds, and painting hiding and holding its part of sublime.

GK : I'm asking this because we are now sitting in front of one of your paintings, an enormous canvas, what in France we could call an "American" size, and which reminds me somewhat of Clyfford Still, not necessarily because of its touch, but because of its spirit. Let me describe the painting: it is about thirty feet long by nine feet high and it is eighty percent black, fifteen percent red, and five percent white. The surface is completely varnished and looks like it is made of one solid block, so that it feels like an "American" large format that would have been filtered through seventeenth-century classical painting.

JB : I don't really feel that close to Clyfford Still, since you mention him, because this particular painting of mine is very constructed, a bit like the façade of a Greek temple--there are three columns--, or like a face. The black shape is in the form of the letter H. It is very constructed.

GK : I was pondering the question of the format because, while browsing through your studio, I realized that you have a lot of small paintings and that there is a frequent move in your work from small to large. You don't seem to be as opposed to the idea of the small as the American Ab. Ex. were, when they rejected the small Parisian formats. In your work, everything begins small and then grows in size. Could you tell me how you transition from small to large, how an image that started as big as your hand grows to be wall size?



Joël Barbedette, 2012, ink on paper mounted on canvas, 20x20cm

JB : You have to respect a certain limit if you want to retain presence. Some forms will work better in large formats, with others you have to stop at a certain size. I can't imagine a large Paul Klee, for example, as large as what Matisse could do with "the dance" for example. It's not conceived in the

same way. There's a discretion in Klee that makes him stay away from the large format; same for Fautrier. There's a limit not to exceed. Fautrier was well aware that he was excellent in small format. On the other hand, it's quite interesting that Sam Francis can expand into a large size, because his work allows it. Yet I think Rothko remains proportionate to the body. He surrounds the body but stays in proportion to it. It's hard to imagine a Rothko spreading out to the size of a wall. I might see that happening more with de Kooning, for example, but absolutely not with Bram. With Bram, at a certain point, he's got to stop.

GK : When you start a small painting, do you already know if it will develop into a large one, or does the final size become clearer and clearer as you progress? Sometimes we already have a sense of the monumental in some of your small formats.

JB : No, I don't have a plan. It is something that is handed to me somehow. I like to work in a small size, in the palm of my hand, because that way it seems to me you reach deeper into the unconscious. I would have trouble starting large right away. For example, the space that needs to be covered when drawing a diagonal line with a paintbrush, I feel that I would be losing too much energy moving from corner to corner, whereas in a very small format, the energy is concentrated in a few square inches. Then there's a density that harmonizes all the gestures and that doesn't exist in the large format. But, to begin with, it all depends on the composition. There are some compositions that lend themselves to being enlarged and some that don't. It is not something you can control, it is handed to you somehow.



Joël Barbedette, watercolor on paper, 2011

GK : What's interesting in your work, in relation to Action Painting, is that the gesture of the action is very intimate. When you move to the large format, and that's what we were discussing yesterday about your transition from lavis to oil painting, it is not a matter of action anymore, it becomes a matter of meditation. Oil painting, which is a very slow technique, ends up slowing down the gesture...

JB : ...and lends itself to meditation, absolutely...

GK: ...and these paintings that you develop into large formats, they take years to reach maturation...

JB: ...and to find their balance. But the form is pre-defined, it is established right from the beginning. It needs to settle in space and that's where there's a relation to the body, and to the space separating me from the painting, which is truly a living space. Life [in a painting] greatly depends on the space given to it. Something can be alive in a very small dimension and if you enlarge it too much, you lose life and energy. In many ways, the large formats need to be re-interpreted [by the painter], they cannot be literal blow-ups. Presence has to return to the larger space and that's what you have to aim for, like a musician interpreting a musical score.

GK : And that's what takes time.

JB : Yes, it takes time, but these are the conditions of my work. One plays with time. But when you work in a very small size you are in the moment, it always happens in less than a minute.

GK : Can we talk a bit about color again? For the last forty years or so, you have been working with only three colors: red, white, and black. My own impression, after discussing this with you for years, is that white and black are given colors as light and shadow, and that the real color is red. You don't need any other colors. Red represents all the colors.

JB : Yes, but white and black are also colors. Let's say that red is an unusual color, more so than white and black, which refer to extreme light or darkness. Red is the choice of fire, blood, and of a lot of energy. It's a color you see from afar, a very powerful color.

GK : And you don't prefer one red to another. I noticed that you use rusty, almost orange reds, and others from red-purple to sienna, red ochre, the entire spectrum in between.

JB : About six different reds.

GK : If we are talking so much about red, it's because of the way you look at painting and art history. In a way, you are looking at art history for its reds.

JB : Let's just say that they attract me.

GK : Rembrandt's reds, George de La Tour's, Soutine's, Nicolas de Stael's...we could do a complete tour of art history through its reds.



Joël Barbedette, oil on paper mounted on canvas.

JB : Yes, and when I was painting banlieue street scenes in the snow, their skies were red. One time back in Brittany, a gallery owner came over to look at these paintings and asked me: "Why do you paint your skies red?" I didn't know what to say, and he continued: "because red is beautiful." It was already in a pretty strong relationship with the white of the snow, since the streets were covered in snow. But white is what attracted me and red was there only because it created the most powerful drama.

GK : So, we are talking about a triad of color whose real purpose is to support the idea of drama.

JB : I love the number three. In my mind one plus one always equals three. There are two elements, and between them there is a space which is also active. I really think in threes. Saying two always seems incomplete to me.

GK : The last part of my question was about the idea of drama. Is it something that comes into play?

JB : Yes, of course, as an internal tension. It dominates any composition. How does that work? : By means of an internal tension. There can't be any presence without that, in my opinion.

GK : Do you expect the same response from the viewer as Rothko, for example, who offered very precise guidelines about how we should come close to look at his paintings, so close that we might be moved to tears? Do you want the viewer to relate to your painting the same way?

JB : The viewer is completely free. Once a painting is finished, it doesn't belong to me anymore. It belongs to the viewer. Here we enter into a big game where we're not in control anymore. Each and every new interpretation of my work will always surprise me, of course. It is the privilege of an image to remain open to re-interpretation.

GK : Let's move to something we were discussing right before this interview, and which seems to be taking more and more importance in my mind as we keep talking: your strong resistance to dating your paintings or giving them titles.

JB : There is no resistance on my part. I simply don't think it's important. I am like a hole in History. This is not completely true, though, because history accompanies and surrounds us. But I try to get as close to the moment as possible and that is something really hard to attain. We always live between past and future, between memory and intention. We are rarely free in the moment. That's something I am very interested in. One goes over to the other side of reality as it is given to us every day, toward the center of space, beyond all the qualities we use to express ourselves. Forms and colors are qualities of space, divisions of light, and I am trying to eliminate these

divisions, to be un-separated. One lives separately from the world, in a state of division. Through painting, I am trying to get closer to that moment when we are subjected to the wide space. I don't like to use quotes too much, but there's one from René Char that I like: "when we disappear, we return to what was before the earth and the stars were formed, and that is space; the space that we are, in all its expanse. We meet with the infinite day and its dark joy..." This sums up the locus of my work: the wide space. I was quite happy to find this in Char's writing. I mention the great light but it's not a light of the kind we see under the stars or sun. It's a light that lies at the core, at the foundations of all that we are allowed to see.

GK : I raise the question because, looking through the paintings in your studio, I realized that there are themes you return to regularly over long periods of time, in painting after painting, and I was wondering how one could follow the evolution of a theme, since the paintings are not dated. For example, the one over there, which is based on the fragment of a coat in a Russian icon at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, and which is a kind of leitmotiv in your oeuvre, or like this other one, which I could describe as a sort of exclamation point...



Joël Barbedette, oil on paper mounted on canvas (motif based on the detail of a Russian Icon)

JB : And which is more like the façade of a temple for me, or like a face looking at me, a place where I can live.

GK : So, these themes that developed quite early were worked and reworked over dozens of years; we can follow their evolution painting after painting, and you still go back to them regularly. But still in

your opinion, it's not that important if the viewer may or may not be able to follow this evolution and organize the paintings chronologically.

JB : Exactly. As I mention in « Correspondance », I don't want to have the problems of a historian. I am receptive to the lightning in the storm, to a succession of moments, rather than to the need to polish the links of a chain, which is the historian's work. Instead of a slow progress, I prefer the leap that connects me with lightnings, the thunderstorm and its outbursts.

GK : Let's continue in that vein; we can't organize your paintings chronologically, and as a result you are opposed to the idea of an evolution in your work. But "opposed" may not be the right word.

JB : No, it's right on target.

GK : When one tries to follow your career, one is somewhat taken aback by the fact that you thwart any reading based on an oeuvre's evolution.

JB : I prefer the word involution. I think it is coming from Deleuze. Someone asked Bunuel: "how do you identify, how do you determine yourself?" and he said: "I un-determine myself". This is something I share with him. We are always pressured by a need for unity.

GK : Returning to square one; the more we dig into your work, the more we realize that all the elements of your esthetic approach were set in place quite early in your work, once and for all.

JB : Yes, that's true. But by the same token, I am always into endless variations. I try to facilitate the interplay of shapes, their melding together. I am doing them this favor (laughter). They're in a state of total mess, chaos, and I try to calm them down. Sometimes I feel they are like wild horses in need of breaking, taming. I need to slow their movement down.

GK : Since we've eliminated evolution as a possible entryway into your work, whether we look at all your work in the proper order or not, we end up with the feeling that for the last forty years, the paintings have been of equal quality, that they all came out with the same level of quality and that there is no before or after.

JB : Yes, but there is. I am now doing things I could not have done ten years ago.

GK : For example, in the small red canvases...



Joël Barbedette, 3 paintings on paper, 2011

JB : There is a sharpness of gesture. If I aim for a specific indetermination, the road to reach it is already traced. It needs precision. It helps to find the form. It has to be very precise both in time and space.

GK : What I wanted to say-and please let me know your thoughts- was that in front of your work, I feel that your relationship to painting, your esthetics, your working means are more a question of revelation than evolution, since we eliminated it as something worth considering. Can the question be framed that way?

JB : I accept your choice of the term « revelation ». It is not too strong. Because we are in a paradoxical situation with time: we need time in order to let instants show through from time to time. We can only find the instant in linear time and the paradox is located between linear time and the instantaneous ruptures in its continuum.

GK : Are we getting closer to an idea of revelation that would have provided you, right from the start when you began painting abstractly, enough directions for you to explore for the rest of your life? It may be oddly formulated, but can we connect this approach to painting as revelation to your Christian, Catholic education and culture, since you come from a very religious family?

JB : We all depend on the reign of the image in Western Christian civilization. It surrounds us. We don't have a choice. We have seen religious imagery and we are certainly marked by it. So, there is a connection, most probably. But I prefer the word "sacred". Our challenge is to meet the "sacred". It's something we can't create ourselves, it's given to us, it happens to us. The only thing we can do is to receive it. We can't transform it or manipulate it. So, obviously I am very receptive to that. Now, a slightly simpler word, a bit less emphatic than revelation, is the word surprise or wonder. When it boils down to it, the paintings that I keep are those that surprised me, those that I don't quite understand. If I understand too clearly how a composition works, I throw it out. It's something important to note, I believe.

GK : So, to frame it a bit differently, maybe it's the idea of the mystery...

JB : Absolutely...

GK : That brings us back to Catholic esthetic and values, in the way they maintain and emphasize mystery...

JB : The power of Christian iconography comes out of an incarnation giving birth to the image. At the same time, the image keeps its own mystery and its own transcendence. I am very interested in this. I don't think I would paint if that stake was not there.

GK : So, a kind of spirituality...

JB : Yes, absolutely... I am not afraid of the word, of course, but it is about the spirit in a very wide sense, as every civilization uses it, the spirit as fabric of reality. Well, that's how the East formulates it.

GK : You were telling me you were reading a lot on Buddhism...

JB : ...and Islam, actually about the four Judaic traditions. I like Hasidism a lot; in their stories, I find mobile things, like in jazz, syncopation, moments of rupture, of surprise, which can leave you speechless in a certain way, a kind of dispossession. Sufi tradition is also extremely interesting and

the Middle Way in India, of course, the Advaita Vedanta, and Zen, which is a version of Advaita Vedanta.

GK : Let's return to painting and to your work; since your formal themes take a few years to develop, how do you know when a painting is finished?

JB : I'll end up knowing it one sooner or later, but only after having labored on the same painting for a long time, sometimes years. Vieira da Silva worked on a painting for seven years and titled it "impossible work" or "mission impossible", and I completely understand that kind of approach.

GK : Since your studio is in your home, you look at your paintings for a very long time. We were looking at some of them together yesterday and you said you still wanted to rework a few. So you have a need to live with the painting and to continue working on it for quite some time?

JB : There's a doubt that defines the relationship one has with one's own paintings. When doubt disappears, we are freed, we are finally liberated, the paintings don't belong to us anymore, we don't have to take care of them. Otherwise, they're always calling for your attention.

GK : I read somewhere that Bonnard came to his museum shows with his palette and his brushes, to give the finishing touches to his paintings.

JB : I can really understand that... hiding from the guard, it was at the Grenoble Museum.

GK : Painting is never finished... But we are going to finish this interview with a lighter question, let's speak about Bram van Velde, since you met him and he is someone who interests me a lot. Could you say a few words on how he influenced your work. How important is he for you?

JB : It's his experience as an artist, his connection to the tragic, when he says: "to go as nothing towards nothing". I think that it is a mystical statement, which Master Eckhard could have articulated himself. It's this spiritual link I am interested in. I discovered rather late that beneath Bram van Velde, there lay a kind of self-destructive Cubism...

GK : ...That's right...

JB : ...an approach to image destruction as a way to find its truth, a voluntary destruction, product of a will. In Bram's work, there was a kind of "I prefer not to", which moves me a lot. I'm quite attached to it. He is a model, as Beckett is in his own field, or Mondrian, an impressive model of rigor. They are absolute models. And Rothko too, of course, but we're more receptive to Rothko, because of his vibration, this kind of presence/absence, which sets up a back and forth movement between our gaze and his painting, a vibration creating emotion right away. But, with all these painters that we like so much, Bram or Rothko, we care most about the unnameable, don't you think? It may be what is dearest to us, isn't it?

GK : Yes, absolutely.

JB : Just as I think that freedom, the greatest quality, can't be experienced. We are never totally free. We are conditioned from all sides. If you want to paint for example, well, there is the whole art history to deal with. I think that one paints because one has seen paintings, not because a landscape is beautiful, or a figure interesting. We are completely conditioned.

GK : Don't we paint precisely to see what we can't see, to see what no one else gave us to see?

JB : Exactly.



Joël Barbedette, oil on paper mounted on canvas.

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Joël Barbedette is a French abstract painter living in Touraine, France

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Special thanks to Alyson Waters.

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ⁱ Café des Deux Magots on the boulevard St Germain was a favorite hang-out of artists and intellectuals at that time.

ⁱⁱ Librairie La Hune, a legendary bookstore founded in 1944 boulevard St Germain, next door to Les Deux Magots.

ⁱⁱⁱ Une correspondance, epistolary dialog with Catherine baker, Paris 2001.