

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSLATION OF  
"LA COULEUR AU CARRÉ, LES RIDES, LE DESSEIN"  
BY MARCELIN PLEYNET

With James Bishop's current exhibition at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, perhaps there is no better time to reassess the impact the American artist, who lived in France most of his life, had on a small community of artists and intellectuals on the Paris art scene of the 1970s, and to discover the translation in English of Marcelin Pleynet's major essay on Bishop's work first published on the occasion of a one-person show in 1971 Galerie Jean-Fournier. That essay was then re-published in 1972 in the # 2-3 issue of PEINTURE Cahiers Théoriques, the periodical of the remaining members of the Supports/Surfaces group at the time. An extended version of it was also included in a collection of Pleynet's writing published in 1977 by Le Seuil under the title "Art et Littérature".

The present translation is based on the 1977 version of that text with the exclusion of its first five pages of poetic and general consideration on painting. It focuses on the part more specifically concerned with Bishop's work. "With and Elsewhere", the final section of the 1977 version, was not originally included in the 1972 edition.

Besides being an important historical document, the text is interesting and relevant to this particular exhibition because, among many other works, it describes and analyses at length "Hours" (1963), one of Bishop's early paintings included in the show.

At the time, Pleynet was a highly respected art critic and a major presence in the Paris art world, as well as the Managing Editor of *Tel Quel*, Philippe Sollers' journal of avant-garde cultural criticism. Early on in his stay in France, Bishop became associated with the circle of intellectuals around *Tel Quel* and Pleynet was soon part of his own inner circle. As an American expat in Paris, in seeming rupture with the New York art scene, Bishop's work was also closely followed by a generation of young French painters in the early stages of articulating a critical response to Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and the monochrome.

Pleynet's style is characterized by long-winded sentences with multiple sub-propositions full of italics and parenthesis, a style perhaps sometimes overly convoluted in its quest for a surplus of clarity. If in many ways the text shows its age (perhaps no more so than in its style), in many

others it still comes across as surprisingly fresh and relevant, especially in its open, interdisciplinary approach (the influence of one field of the social sciences over another, such as anthropology over linguistics, or vice versa, for example.) The translator's double challenge in this case is to make the flow of Pleynet's dense, complex, highly stratified train of thought more approachable to an English-speaking readership while staying true to the stylistic spirit of the original.



Pleynet and Bishop (at left of column in back) at an opening of Daniel Dezeuze, photo André Morain.  
Published in "Textes, entretiens, poèmes, 1967-2008, Daniel Dezeuze", Beaux-arts de Paris les éditions, 2008

The first part of the essay is a detailed, chronological formal analysis of Bishop's work until 1971. The second part, starting with "With and Elsewhere", is more concerned with methodology and general issues of contemporary art criticism.

In terms of critical discourse, it offers a good example of the difference between the French and American approaches to modern art. Pleynet is the rare art critic willing to look at the big picture, and it may come as a surprise to many American readers to discover here a critical voice on par with Clement Greenberg's. The big difference between them being philosophical (and, of course, ideological): Pleynet approached modernity in Marxist and Freudian terms as a dynamic

field of unresolved contradictions, where Greenberg articulated American modernism in Kantian terms as a formally reductive program aiming for an ideally self-reflective endgame.

The gap between the interpretations of “Modernism” and “Modernity” has never been made clearer.

## COLOR SQUARED, RIPPLES, INTENT

James Bishop’s work can be approached from the angle of a theory of painting which would logically imply surpassing its conventional applications in its own development. What Bishop presents today sets the stages for, among other things, a complex and stratified historical field that we need to approach from the standpoint of its own productive logic. This logic, similar to the structural organization of the significant moments of modernity, differs from most contemporary painters’ practices, in that it depends on the organization of historical elements outside of any linear, teleological chronology. In this instance, we are placed in a position to think that his work neither precedes nor proceeds from any particular historically significant painter (Matisse or Giotto, for example), but that it exists along with them elsewhere.

### **JAMES BISHOP**

Born in the USA in 1937, after initially studying modern history, James Bishop approached painting at the most intense moment of American artistic production. Around 1950, Pollock was developing his drippings (Lucifer, 1947 – Autumn Rhythm, 1950), De Kooning, Rothko and especially Newman, were each beginning to establish the autonomy of their own practices. It is this radical core of the American avant-garde and what it represents around that time in terms of historical developments and will be used as a frame of reference by several generations of painters, which will allow Bishop’s critical investigations to develop. But what sets Bishop apart from most of his contemporaries is that instead of thinking of himself as a painter within the formal legacy of his direct predecessors, very early on he takes a critical distance from them, which has nothing to do with either a surplus or deficit of modernity, but implies a historical distance singularly capable of revealing, in its productive contradictions, the asperities of the contemporary fabric. This is

underscored by a journey around 1957, which will keep Bishop in Europe for about twelve years, a period of time divided between his art historical studies and his work as a painter.

This geographical as well as historical distance is at the very basis of the paintings that Bishop exhibits now in Paris and New York, and sheds light on the impact of the radically new work he is presenting today. We still need to qualify that “distance”, that his previous exhibitions have never ceased to comment on. Let’s just say that his art historical studies have somehow allowed Bishop to understand modernity in a much broader time sequence than the one taking shape in the US at that time with the famous “Modernist Reduction”. It is these art historical studies, as much as his specific interest in paintings from the Quattrocento, for example, which have allowed Bishop to keep, by investing them actively with their historical logic, the productive “irrational” elements of the decisive moments of modernity such as the dualism of gesture-color. With its stratified contradictions, its repetitions and repressions, this historical vision (as opposed to a contemplative vision) is what allows the painter to avoid the “avant-gardist” temptations with their array of technical tricks such as the flattening of color or the optical illusion. What Bishop notices, throughout the history of Western painting, is this material background of the colors, which he excavates in all its repression and bewitching power, at the exact site of its strongest resistance. Bishop connects his reading of the most formally rigorous works of Painting’s avant-garde to a commentary, the historical background of which negates the philosophical posture of the avant-garde’s negation and brings Painting to the edge of the empty locus which produces it, always elsewhere, and which Painting is finally able to identify.

## THE SQUARE

The series of large square canvases that Bishop exhibits today, while at first sight giving it a very enigmatic turn, continues to develop the basic formal work that he has presented so far and which could be summed up with the philosophical precept: One divides itself in two. As early as 1965, on the occasion of an exhibition Galerie Lawrence in Paris, Philippe Sollers remarked: “James Bishop’s tableaux are made with surface unity in mind, which means the square.” (Tel Quel # 20), and it is in fact on this unity, not just formal, that the painter has been working the last several years. Bishop’s work first developed as a formal investigation of the square which produces it, with an increasingly obvious command within this “other” logic that it stages. This started with the

figure/ground, ground/form problematic, inherited from Matisse's large final cut-outs and from post-cubist painting. If in fact the history of modern painting aims to resolve the theological problem of the representation of a figure against a ground, this implies logically that in this field of inquiry, the question of its support is bound to come up, which is to say the question of the surface onto which the representational phantasm has been projecting itself for centuries. I think that in the logic of an enterprise meant to resolve historically the order of its staging, this initial impulse toward the surface is unavoidable. This is why we will see the surface, the third entity of pictorial metaphysics, being systemically emphasized, especially in the United States. Bishop approached the issue around 1961, when he chose to inscribe, to square, his work about space, which modern painting was trying to define at that time. By means of the square, his paintings from 1960-61, close by a few stylistic aspects to what is usually qualified as "Action Painting", begin to take in consideration the dualism of form versus ground that the painter inherited from his predecessors. These paintings will provide the proposed conventional solution (the transcendent surface) with a definition (the square) denying the painter any possible idealist (decorative) investment of a transcendent object (support). But, paradoxically, wouldn't we find ourselves in front of the following contradiction: The problem that Modern painting articulates (which is to avoid representing a figure on a ground) would come to be actualized, not with a third term, but precisely where it questions it, in a figure; that of the square. What needs to be remembered here, as displacement from the initial order (figure/ground/surface), is the way in which the square functions both as figure and surface. As the painter mentioned, the square, an *impersonal* figure, as ordinary a figure as possible, itself a product of a numeral, *de-individualizes* the surface by reducing it to the *anonymity* of an emblematic figure open to repetition and division of the unique line (the side) which constitutes it. From the simplest to the most complex, Bishop's paintings will rigorously follow the logical implications of this pictural emblem empty of itself. Circumventing the implications of a metaphysical ground, which produces the formal problematic (form/ground), Bishop again seizes the order of that discourse into a knowledge unit, the formal character of which is only conceivable in the dialectics of the division which constitute it (one in two). The duo figure/ground, transcending the surface, collapses here into the dialectical relationship of the square unit (surface/ground), into the background of knowledge it produces. Bishop's second move consists in the articulation of this empty square with the help of what precipitates here, the

question of this always already presence of color: even if it is the white where all colors both originate and disappear. As Julia Kristeva wrote about Philippe Sollers' "Numbers"<sup>1</sup>: "The square is the closed figure of an infinite without origin which produces itself by growing and shrinking and implies the reiteration meaning an a-theological production, an evolution without extrinsic aim, a germination in a controllable stability" ("Recherches pour une sémanalyse", Editions du Seuil, Paris). One cannot better define the way the productive structure of Bishop's unique impact on color introduces itself with "Hours" (exhibited at Lucien Durand in 1963). Again, rather than illustrating some anecdotal transformations of a painting method, the painter starts from the convention that commercially available canvases are industrially prepared with a white primer. Reversing the proposition which assumes that the canvas is prepared to receive form and color, Bishop will consider that the form (the perimeter of his square canvas) is available to him already pre-colored and that it is white: which implies that the germination of all colors is already at work.



Bathing and fading, 1963, oil on canvas, 77" x 77", courtesy Annemarie Verna Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland

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<sup>1</sup> An experimental novel by Philippe Sollers, published in 1968 by Editions du Seuil, Paris.

## 1963

From his 1963 exhibition up to what he proposes to us today, Bishop has constantly worked to produce within the square the always-already “hors-cadre”<sup>2</sup> of color. First, the paintings from 1963-64-65, in as rational and didactic a way as possible and in the complexity of their coming into play, will repeat and produce the “hors-cadre” of the square, and this, once again, under the guise of the affirmation/negation typical of his enterprise (that is to say with the help of color stripes of different widths, repeating the square format of the canvas). The skillful determination of the two term unit, ground-color (the square) giving this demonstration the opening, or “false bottom”, which renews the didactic staging (or limited multiplicity of formal variations) and opens it up on the infinite of his productive powers (color). In “Hours”, for example, with a narrow stripe the white of the canvas frames a deep blue stripe six times wider, itself framing a white square inside which four irregular squares, three light blue and a green one, suggest an endless “*en abyme*” functioning of the model then unlocked. In “Bathing and Fading, 1964” (2m x 2m), the same narrow band, extracted from the white of the canvas, frames and cuts almost in its center the wide blue field covering the entire surface in such a way that what could be construed at first sight to be a simple generic application is shifted (the primer color being used both as ground and color). In “Bathing and Fading”, the white of the primed canvas performs on the stripe as any white would and is no more of a ground than the wide blue field that it interrupts. Emphasizing the implications and the limits through which his work is historically intended to be understood, Bishop highlights the order of specific displacements constituting the productive structures of the pictorial field: Such as displacement of the dualities surface/ground and form/color onto the dialectical operation of the division of the empty square (surface/form) where color is invested, always there without ever constituting a proper ground. It must be noted that what I describe now in chronological order could just as well be demonstrated with the paintings Bishop is showing today. If I opted for this kind of chronological approach, it is because that mode of organization is better suited to reveal the theoretical process, almost repressed today, at the heart of the latest paintings’ complex

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<sup>2</sup> I have opted to keep the nimbler French expression “hors-cadre”, for this concept which could roughly be translated as “outside the frame of reference”. (Translator’s note)

organization. The strict rules followed by Bishop, with the intelligent understanding of the transformations they require, have allowed for the splendid success of these recent paintings, where mastery of the “theoretical method” seems to originate beyond any method. Indeed, the painter has not abandoned the square which first offered itself as “closure”, he actually doubles down on it, but while justifying every step of his work, he outflanks every possible limit. Thus, if we are to understand the theoretical accumulation producing such a qualitative leap, we necessarily need to return to the different stages of his approach.

## 1965-66

We have seen how, with different framing suggestion, Bishop established the “hors-cadre” (void/color) from the recognition of the limits he imposed on himself: the square. Recognition which first led the painter to practice (to theorize) for the first time in the sphere of modernity, the figure/ground/surface relationship, as structure of an empty unit where “écriture”<sup>3</sup> is invested: meaning color. “*Ecriture*”, thus, emerges from the plane of inscription because it constitutes itself from a non-viewable withdrawal and difference (not face to face, not initially calling for the sense of sight, but for the act of tracing) dividing the support in corridors as if to recall the plural void where it accomplishes itself - it is not only detached on a surface, it weaves itself into a surface, it is dispatched up from the ground (which is not a ground) towards the surface (which is not a surface).” (In Philippe Sollers, “On Materialism”, 1969, quoted by Roland Barthes in “Empire of the Signs”, Editions Skira). In this working perspective, where the rule of *écriture* imposes itself, the return of the inevitably divided dimension of color over the form that it erases remains. The first steps of this return in 1965 and 1966 produced the final configuration of the square, which signified the suggestion of its constitution in two equal units. This can be observed with “*Peinture*” (1965), a 2m x 2m painting exhibited in 1966, Galerie Jean Fournier, and in 1968 at the Maeght Foundation, and then with “*Flood*” (1966), 2m x 2m. With the 1965 painting, while maintaining the infinite play of the color fields, which may come to define the critique of the metaphysical space of the ground/surface dualism, Bishop points to the foundations of the specular system that his work subverts. This division of the square unit into two merging rectangles (the repetition of the

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<sup>3</sup> I chose to keep the French term because of the conceptual baggage that it carries in French. Its closest equivalent in this context would be “inscription”. (Translator’s note)

same in the dualism that creates it), once again, is critiqued here in the complex staging which exposes it. The lower part of the square consists of a blue rectangular field framed with a wide red stripe, as another stripe of the same color and same width divides the white of the upper half in three triangles. Thus, what might be understood as the red frame of a blue plane functioning as a ground or surface loses its purpose as a frame when it crosses the white rectangle twice, introducing itself as potential constituent of the square with the blue and the white. This precise measure of the square comprised of the overflowing of the colors, renders the setting of a double specular impossible, the totality of which would then produce a theological unit. From that standpoint, "*Peinture*" (1965) is emblematic of Bishop's work of the previous years and of the logical concerns towards which it pulled the paintings that followed: Emblem of the red roof of the sky in the white soil and of the blue square of the earth in the red sky. "*Peinture*" (1965) is, in my opinion, theoretically inseparable from "*Flood*" (1966), 2m x 2m ("The intelligent man enjoys being on the water's edge"), which is its extended commentary. In "*Flood*", the wide red stripe follows the edges of the square and repeats it, when in the lower half, a dark green stripe frames a white rectangle on three sides, as the fourth side is enclosed by, or open to, a lighter green stripe. If one were to attempt a formal description of this painting, one would have to say that it consists of a white square framed in red, within which a green stripe surrounds a white rectangle on three sides, open or closed, on a lighter green stripe. As a result, we will retain here the multiple constitutive possibilities of the productive sign of the square (red, blue, dark green, white, light green), according to the theoretical order that we have seen taking place in the previous paintings and which gets reinforced by the division of the same color in two, according to the role it is meant to play and the internal relationships it keeps with its surrounding. It is clear that, as far as *Flood* is concerned, the white framed with red is not the same white as the one framed with green. The sum of all the colors divides itself in two, and then again in two ad infinitum, and in some way dialectically forces the square of reference to produce in each of its operations the theoretical and philosophical ground that belongs to it: One divides itself in two.

## 1968-71

The paintings exhibited in 1968 and 1970 at the Fishbach Gallery in New York will formally re-adopt the division of the initial square in two, the same way that the paintings from the previous

years had organized it, but instigating this time the order of investment in colors with the rigor of the formal organization. As we've seen with *Flood*, the white, which can divide itself in two, will constitute, in the paintings from 1968 and 1970, half of the 2m x 2m square, while the other half, in turn divided in two (a rectangle divided in two equal squares of 1m x 1m) will produce two other colors (one for each of the squares constituting the divided rectangle), which will add - or subtract - to the white and also be divided again into four squares, the monochrome intensity of which will, on its own, signal the borders. Between 1967 and 1970, the organization and execution of the color-square dialectic (or squared color), following the principle of the one dividing itself in two, and on the basis of Bishop's former work, will allow him to develop all the consequences of the theoretical field he is defining. In the logic of that evolution, what one has to notice first is the extreme formal simplicity achieved by the painter when he approaches the most complex aspects of his practice. When they reach the most complex developments of their demonstration, Bishop's paintings borrow their dramatic intensity from this quasi-invisible fact where the smallest inattention causes them to disappear and where nonsense and popularization wouldn't be able to find them.

In the exhibition Bishop is presenting today, "*Being and Having*", 1968, 2m x 2m, is the reference to which all the paintings from the last three years return to. A square divided in its lower half by a white rectangular field and in its upper half by two equal squares, one red, the other brown, "*Being and Having*", in its rigor, shows the thin displacement constitutive of the color drive. The division of the square unit in its half, a white rectangle, and in the half of this rectangle (two equal squares), produces from the simple (a white rectangle) to the complex (two squares-one red, the other brown) an event constituting in each of the squares of the upper rectangle, a repetition at each *differential* step of the whole. In such a manner, I may say, that arrived at the fourth stage of the operation, it is color itself which suggests its own division. To state it differently: In the dialectical connection to the formal operation, we are reaching here another more subtle step than what was being put in place with the white surrounded in red and the white surrounded in green of "*Flood*": The squared color produces its intent<sup>4</sup> in its division (where according to Matisse's wish, color finally draws into color).

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<sup>4</sup> Word play between dessin (drawing) and dessein (intent), which are pronounced the same way in French.

The separation of a color from another indicates a border of superposition, as one color inevitably covers others, and inevitably divides itself into other colors. With “*Being and Having*”, borders, divisions and encounters between the white rectangle, the brown square and the red square, also demonstration of the division of the color units by the formal order which produces them: Therefore, each square, the brown as well as the red, will find itself divided as much as the initial square, and in its colored unity and will answer to the multiplication of the operation (of the theoretical intent of the painter). This, of course, not automatically in reproducing four similar squares in the brown and in the red squares, but, within a single color, in displacing the borders (the ripples)<sup>5</sup> mapping the line, the unique trace, separating the colors from each other. Starting from the outer edge on the upper half, to the left and right of the painting, the brown and the red will get divided, will put themselves through the ringer<sup>6</sup> (the square) increasing the opacity of their respective pigments, to their meeting point in the middle of the painting’s upper half.

## 1971

Going back to 1968 for the painting representing it here, this squaring of color is what programs, in its theoretical foundations, the series of paintings Bishop is showing today, at Galerie Jean Fournier. First, we will notice that this series, commenting on the operation of color division, only suggests the monochrome to better produce its critique. Two paintings make a return, here, to the possibilities offered by the division of the white in the square. Keeping the “one in two” structure, Bishop first intervenes on a square divided in two, whose lower rectangle is white and whose upper rectangle, also divided in two, will produce two equal squares of different whites themselves divided. The analytical function exemplified here, bears on the necessarily didactic aspect of the two duos *apparition-disappearance*, *covering-transparence*, and on the manner in which they function within the dialectical unit of the square. In the first of these paintings, the two upper squares and the four smaller squares dividing each of them fade and let a blue tint show through, which becomes a constitutive element of it, when covered up with white: In such a way

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Context is the only way to differentiate between the two meanings. (Translator’s note)

<sup>5</sup> Here Pleynet uses the word “rides” in French and gives its etymology from the high-German word “ridam”. (Translator’s note)

<sup>6</sup> Another play of words on the French expression “se mettre -ou se plier- en quatre”, literally, to cut oneself into four parts, used for circumstances when one person usually has to make an extra effort for another. (Translator’s note)

that, in contrast, the entire bottom half of the painting is subtly invested by it. At that point it is impossible to decide what inscribes itself, whether white or blue, on the edge of the upper eight squares, if not the qualification towards the blue, that the dividing structure of the painting in squares was led to produce. One only needs to look at the other example of this structural situation of the white to see, in the interplay of the “cadre/hors-cadre”<sup>7</sup> of the two upper squares and of the four squares which constitute them, how a color commands its division in a subtle analytical mode where apparition and disappearance, covering and transparency, compete for the progressive and uneven developments of knowledge. White and yellow are here unequally joined (unequally ahead of each other) in a complex where the framed square established in the square of the frame (which ceases to function as a frame in its division, when it is considered as a square and ceases to refer to a square unit, when it is included in the frame) formally responds to the infinite field of the unit’s division, of the law of structural inequality of the development of the parts at work in the constitution of a language operating at the exact site of the dialectic of contradictions constituting it in a constant analysis. The fact that, at the lower edge of the upper rectangle separating the painting in two, the yellow ochre emerging in light dribbles is only the sign that the yellow backside of the upper white is equally operative and that the mode of investigation *apparition-disappearance, covering-transparency*, is bound to leave traces behind.

## ONE OF THE SCREENS HAS FALLEN

It seems that, in its mode *apparition-disappearance, covering-transparency*, the working problematic of the unity and division of the edges of color which the painter encountered in the large blue painting divided in sixteen equal squares and in the small brown painting, 1.75m x 1.75m, divided in one rectangle and then twice in four equal squares, it seems that he wished to move forward with it while radicalizing it. With its square screen, the small brown painting plays with the *apparition-disappearance* of the color drive as division from glossy to mat. It is the same muted color which divides itself there, in tonalities barely distinguishable from each other, and magnifies in its articulation a cubic volume, each time emerging and colliding with the deep flat screen which it constitutes. The unity of the painting’s lower half and its divided repetition in the

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<sup>7</sup> My quotation marks. (translator’s note)

upper part, produce this forward-backward movement of the color where transparency would only be the covering of itself in the infinite mapping reconduction of its volume.

I think that the large blue painting accompanies and repeats the small brown painting in developing a new element. In the blue painting we find, again, the same volumetric screen effect, the division of which in sixteen equal squares may seem to transform the original order of the “one in two”. One has to understand that what Bishop presents us with is both an ambush and a commentary on his previous work. In fact, if we agreed with the adequation of color-form, dividing his other paintings in two, and if we followed the cultural programming which makes us privilege form over color, in this blue painting we would primarily notice its constitution in sixteen squares. Which is to say that we would miss our chance to recognize that the stronger intensity of the blue, of the eight squares of the lower part constitute the structure and the division through color, “one in two”, that Bishop theorized in his other paintings. This is how the formal ambush is laid out and circumvented: What first qualifies the structure here is the quality of its impact on what proposes itself as language and as “écriture”, which is to say, color. Once again, one can clearly see how Bishop’s system functions with maximum efficiency and, while multiplying shapes, thanks to this blue painting, makes us understand that it is color which endows them with their intent and their organization.

This, as a first step of approach to this large square of the division of the blue and in the perspective where this initial commentary invites a deeper attention to what the painter is representing. Then the difficulty of explaining in a linear way the qualitative accumulation of problems that Bishop’s latest paintings resolve, becomes proportional to the stratified complexity of the development of this kind of intelligent treatise on painting that the painter’s whole enterprise constitutes in its chronology. The more Bishop advances in his work, the more the organization of each painting implies the positioning of a larger number of increasingly stratified theoretical resolutions. In such a way that with this latest exhibition, and on the basis of what is developed above, it should be understood that I am restraining myself to highlight only the main elements of the evolution which justifies the painter’s enterprise from one painting to another.

The passage from the large blue painting (2m x 2m) to the large brown painting (2m x 2m) seems to be determined by what is already suggested in the two white canvases, that is to say by

the demarcation lines (or borders) of the colored squares. The division of the blue, and the transparency of the red shade in the blue, are defined here, each time, beyond an undetermined area of reddish blue or of blueish red, with a kind of impact, of frontal affirmation enforced by the grid pattern of the color. Let's also note that where the edges, where the blue squares do not meet any other squares, on the outer edges of the painting, the blue is denser and almost completely loses its transparency. But, what I want to retain here, beyond the obvious and now seemingly natural confirmation of the productive dialectical phenomenon of the line, in and through color, is the way in which color, with its transparent apparition-disappearance, holds an *additional* discourse on its edges, which could formally point to itself in the way in which, precisely at the moment of this greatest transparency, color becomes dusty, crumples and ripples imperceptibly.

This supplement of the color over itself, at the time of its disappearance and transparency, these ripples, the large brown canvas (square of golden ochre earth tone) wonderfully initiates their analytical development. With that painting, the one in two structure is first apparently underlined by the meeting of the brown rectangle on the lower half and the two brown squares on the upper half. It is only after a moment of attention that one perceives the thin, barely there, conflagration line which establishes the meeting and separation of the two upper squares into four. And it is difficult to establish this because the meeting of the two upper squares in the center of the painting, beyond the line functioning as their border, produced a colorful deflagration, a ripple, a luminous crispation, which radiates in "underground" waves, could we say, (in color waves of variable length in the golden ochre) across the entire painting, chiming and illuminating itself in its own depth.

## WITH AND ELSEWHERE

In the very flow of the formal demonstration, what the mandatory limits of formal analysis clarify are the lacks<sup>8</sup> weighted with some kind of metaphysical "esthetical pleasure" or resorting to notions seemingly *alien* to art criticism's terminology. More than any other, James Bishop's work places the critic in front of an alternative, no terms of which, it seems, is fully satisfying. I want to retain here the decisive symptom, in my opinion, of a modern painting, whose transformative

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<sup>8</sup> "Manques" in French, used here in all the connotations of the word in psychoanalytic literature. (Translator's note)

powers of the field where it produces itself either sends the critic back to the limits of a historically (metaphysical) closed off knowledge, or to the investigation of the excesses proposed by the painter. In this second perspective, where the critic accepts the challenge of the conflict of the new versus the old, one will certainly find concepts more or less adapted to the object they intend to comprehend and which may appear at first excentric, even exotic. What remains to be done is to reduce these differences, something which cannot be accomplished in one single instance, to give them a workable order of coherence susceptible to be developed. In the realm of art criticism, the most acceptable rational basis is historical and it is from there that we need to proceed. We have seen how James Bishop equipped himself, in a fortunate way, in this respect (art historical studies and teaching.) Does knowing this bring anything new to the way we look at his paintings ? Does knowing that he is particularly interested in the study of Italian Quattrocento painting help us in any way to understand his project ?

We will only be able to make use of this if we step out of the strict formal analysis, only if, for a moment, we consider the historical structure that such a type of relationship questions. Without criticizing art history, I would like to clarify what I mean in emphasizing the possibilities that such an enterprise, in its erudite formal and ideologic stratifications, is able to examine the complexity of the specific history of its practice. Thus, James Bishop operates on modernity (painting since Cézanne) the theoretical return of which only the historical totality, in rupture to which modernity positioned itself, gives him the means. This is why he occupies a particularly important place in contemporary avant-garde, outside of any noisy anachronism. I don't have the space to do it here, but one could very well demonstrate how Bishop developed his work with each of his exhibitions, never forgetting to position it as a critique of the different experiences of the most important painters of the previous generation: How, for example, this most recent exhibition also presents a constructive and productive critique of Rothko's work. Thus, a critique of modernity can be implemented through historical investigations of the productive forces at work, in rupture with the historical sequence of the constitution of these forces. It is this double referential background which initially allows Bishop to point with increased clarity to the stakes of this new historical burden at work in the field of contradictions where modern painting constitutes itself. If one had to propose another example of a similar type of enterprise where rational critique is constitutive of an oeuvre objectively questioning the logical order authorizing it, it would be

Matisse's. This kind of systematic mode of operation can only be found with Matisse and Bishop. Except for the fact that from one to the other, a decisive reversal has happened: the question of the figure's rationality. The scandal of modern painting at the beginning of the twentieth century (with Matisse and others) has everything to do with the painters' treatment of the figure. A treatment and a scandal which will be so *traumatizing* that many generations of painters (and great painters as well) will not be examining it any more closely, and one way or another, will not be able to distance themselves from it (Pollock is a perfect example of this.) The importance attached to the figure in the Western cultural and ideological world, importance exemplified by the French painters' treatment of the figure at the beginning of the twentieth century, this obscure and poorly understood importance, the most interesting part of modern painting, if I may say, to the point where it leads them to believe that the resolution of the figure's issues simply consists in the disappearance both of the figure and of the space constituting it. Hence this repetition of provocative gestures, all symptomatic, but all equally idealist and metaphysical in the negative repetition of the terms of the contradiction (the modernist reduction) producing them. Bishop intervenes in this field (that of the disappearance of the figure in its metaphysical space, disappearance of depth, disappearance of the tableau) to reintroduce a dialectics of opposites in the order of a new historical effect of inscription (see the paragraph on the square, above). It is not by chance, in my view, if Bishop's intervention produces its ideological subversion quasi secretly with the conviction that the foundations of historical knowledge provide him with (history of painting) in the contemporary fabric that it is intended to transform. The question today is not of illustrating yet another provocative gesture (an attitude which has become an academic pitfall for painting), but to elaborate its new basis through a logical effort going back over the operational grounds of modern painting. From this standpoint we cannot forget the two socio-historical contexts within which Matisse and Bishop are immersed as painter-subjects: For Matisse, the rise of the petite bourgeoisie, then practically uplifted by history (with the Russian revolution as antithesis), for Bishop the scale of the ideological supremacy of the petite bourgeoisie (the American Dream), with the revolutionary entry of eight hundred millions of Chinese people on the historic scene as antithesis. To articulate it differently, if Matisse inevitably points to a cultural exteriority, he does so with the typical Western hegemonic casualness of appropriating new colonies, or any other intellectual trinkets, for that matter. On the other hand, the exteriority

marked by Bishop's "internal" subversion emerges today in the massive reality of contradictions and antagonisms that Western culture can no longer resolve all by itself. Hence these two modes of intervention, connected to a constitutive social reality, logically chronological, which also means related to each other in multiple ways.

From this rational basis of formal organization of elements, one can then clearly see the many ways in which, in its order of operation, the painter's work involves the input of notions and concepts which make a return to it in the interdisciplinarity that it claims, while it claims its objective (historical) place in the social corpus. How could one hope that the reconversion of the problem posed to the figure by specularity would ever be possible without examining the constitution and the place of the subject in the ideology underpinning this specular mode, without resorting to the ideological analysis provided by Marxist and Freudian studies ?

Some of the concepts I have used in the formal analysis of Bishop's work have been borrowed from, or suggested by, among many others, different Chinese cultural models and by treatises about Chinese painting (Shi Tao's "Remarks on Painting" and "The Painting Teaching of the Kie Tzeu Garden".) The way these quotations work is directly related to the shortcomings of the traditional critical apparatus confronted to Bishop's work. If, for example, in the course of this text, I have given the etymology of the word<sup>9</sup> as sole explanation of the operative function of the ripples (concept borrowed from Shi Tao), it is also with the aim of demonstrating that the *appropriation of a concept should be grafted on the history of the language receiving it*, if it is to take its full effect in the new perspective within which one places it (for it to be anything else than an exotic intellectual trinket.) The frontal ripples that I noticed in Bishop's painting are intended to be understood in the movement which, at the beginning of Shi-Tao's treatise, represents the division of the brush stroke: "as soon as simplicity is divided, the rule is established". A proposition which, in a very relevant commentary, Pierre Ryckmans precisely connects to the Tao tō king, frg. 28: "When simplicity is divided, it becomes a tool and whoever uses it rules people" (in "Arts asiatiques", volume XIV, 1966.) All of this, which could seem to come out of the wildest exotic fantasies, still presents the advantage to rely on the constitution of a *tool* (which allows one to govern), through the transformation (the division) of a raw material. Pierre Ryckmans further

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<sup>9</sup> The word Pleynet refers to here is "rides" in French. (Translator's note)

clarifies: “the tangible image suggested by Lao Zi words is a block of wood, as raw material, the integrity of which is violated by carving it into a particular utensil”, and he adds that if, through Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi texts, what we know of Taoist thinking represents in large parts the application of this thinking to political problems, Shi Tao’s essay could be considered as another type of application of similar fundamental philosophical precepts, but to the realm of art.

The itinerary which leads, in this hasty roundtrip, to that vast historical sequence, outlines the transformational order of the concepts that Bishop’s work refers to. It is not possible here to go beyond suggesting its general function. I hope that this itinerary demonstrates with enough clarity both the tool that painting can be and the theoretical project that a painter’s enterprise can initiate, in its own discrete way (since, there as much as elsewhere, “ the universal exists in the particular”), so that we may insist on it and grant it the full importance it deserves: Importance for the critic, no doubt, emphasized today in the order of the theoretical production, and which Bishop’s work actualizes here in a way that can only be qualified as to be continued.

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Published in Arts International, “Peinture, Cahiers Théoriques, # 2-3”, January 1972, and in « Art et Littérature » under the original title “La couleur au carré, les rides, le dessin”, © Les éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1977.

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