

PIERRE LOUAVÉR: “ARRET SUR IMAGE”, OR ABSTRACT PAINTING AS FREEZE FRAME

In 2002, on the occasion of his one-person show at the Exhibit A Gallery in New York, I presumptuously hinted to Pierre Louaver (Brest, France, 1955 – Berlin, Germany, 2019), whom I had known since art school in France, that I might write a review of his exhibition. Unfortunately, I quickly realized that I had spoken too early, that I had bitten more than I could chew and that I would not have enough time to organize my scattered thoughts about his complex and challenging work into something that could make sense for anyone else¹. Might the present text be a belated attempt to make final amends.

When Pierre and I met in 1975, as students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France, his first question was to ask me what I thought of Claude Viallat’s work. At that point, I knew neither the name nor the work, and would soon discover the Supports/Surfaces group thanks to him. Pierre had come to see me in a show of support as echoes of my esthetic conflicts with a narrow-minded Painting Studio professor were spreading throughout the school. Having just recently discovered the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, my painting was making a fast transition from a School of Paris, Tal Coat inspired style, to a not well received (at least in the art school) and somewhat muddled synthesis of Abstract Expressionism. Countless visits together to galleries and museums across Europe would ensue as a lifetime of discussions began, compounded by the fact that each of us decided to relocate from France to New York a few years later. Our constant exchanges ranged from comparing the state of abstract painting in Europe and in the US, to international politics and everything in between. I sometimes fancied us, with a great deal of delusion, as new iterations of the Braque and Picasso Cubist tandem, and perhaps on less delusional days of Imi Knoebel and Imi Giese’s in Düsseldorf.

Louaver would elect to finish Art School in the Cinema Studies studio, where the acting professor happened to be more intellectually open. From the experience of these early years working around filmmakers, and based on the many discussions we had over the years about cultural cross-pollination, it is my theory that Pierre would come to see experimental cinema, particularly that of Michael Snow and

¹ This exhibition was reviewed by James Graham’s “More subtle than you thought: Pierre Louaver’s paintings”. The Brooklyn Rail, 08/2002.

Stan Brakhage, as an indirect model for experimental painting, in an inversion of Painting as the predictable referential model.²

In 1994, as his painting career in New York was well under way, he felt the need to return to experimental cinema and complete the editing, at the Anthology Film Archives, of a movie he had originally begun in 1981. In *Ahel* (1981-94), a 16mm film shot inside the Clocktower building in Lower Manhattan during a studio residency in 1981, montage is central and so is the structuring of the movie around the irruptions of the windows. Louaver's cinematic style is closer to that of Stan Brakhage's than to Michael Snow's. In his own words: "Ahel is a metaphorical spatial exploration around a spiral staircase leading to the antechambers of a square tower ringed with window openings. The visual space is organized around these openings and is progressively destabilized, before collapsing in a chaotic fall"³. The final cut was presented in 2000 at the Florence Lynch Gallery in Chelsea, NYC.

This return to experimental cinema is significant because it underlines how inter-related filmmaking and abstract painting are in Louaver's work or rather how the space of abstract painting is closely informed by the viewpoint of experimental cinema. Perhaps the best shortcut to get to the bottom of this idea is with the operative concept of the freeze frame, of the photographic still frame, the basic unit of filmmaking, being turned into an abstract image and vice versa. I would like to propose that we enter Louaver's work through that same frame (as *porte-fenêtre*, as we will see below) to better examine how his interpretation travels back and forth between the cinematic and the pictorial.

² cf. Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, Boston 1993

³ Translation from the French by the author.



Threshold # 23, 1994-96, oil paint on polyester, 103" x 83", © the artist's estate.

Louaver was one of the rare abstract painters I know of who did not dismiss Marcel Duchamp outright. As Daniel Naegele points out about Duchamp's "Fresh Widow" from 1920, the French Window in that work functions as a painting. But more pointedly, its ambiguity derives from the fact that it is both a window and a door (*une porte-fenêtre*, as it is called in French), a window to be looked through as well as a door to be walked through. In this case the idea of the frame is not just self-referential, it is also the agent of choice to articulate the re-presentation of representation⁴. This is specifically what Louaver points to in his Threshold series.

The frame in all its different shapes and forms permeates Louaver's entire output⁵. In the Threshold series (1991-97), the frame-as-stretcher is used to contextualize the abstract image within the space of a window/door "repurposed" as a painting. In the Screensavers series (1999-2002), the still frame, the frame-as-still image, within a stretcher frame, is being used as the model for an abstract image repeated ad infinitum in various scales to reinforce its iconic function and create the illusion of depth. In

⁴ Daniel Naegele, *Duchamp's doors and windows*, 2006, Iowa State University

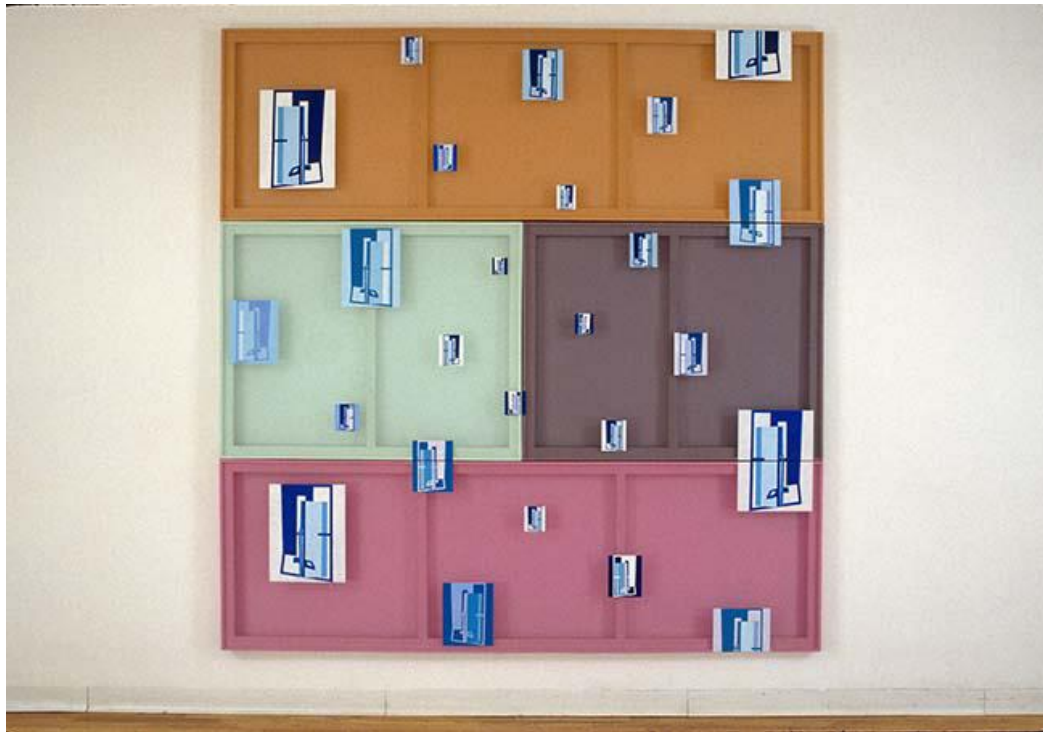
⁵ "I realized recently that the relationship to the frame has always been present somewhere behind my paintings, under the guise of the stretcher always present and more or less visible from one piece to the other" Email from the artist (11/12/20). Translation from the French by the author.

the later Topoi paintings (2016-18) it is the introduction of a painted plexiglass frame which contributes to spatialize paintings now deliberately installed below eye level⁶.

With the “Threshold” paintings, Louaver’s understanding of the reassignment of the Door/Window as stretcher/Frame seems to be bending Duchamp’s interpretation towards Supports/surfaces’ approach. Daniel Dezeuze’s 1967 iconic Supports/Surfaces stretcher covered in clear plastic, and resting on the floor against the wall, becomes a window frame. The exposed stretcher becomes the figure: a stretcher figuring painting as a window frame. It is through this displacement of the stretcher from its literal function to its iconic/symbolic level that painting can be equated to a window. Albeit not a window opening up on a distant illusionistic beyond, but rather a window framing itself, a self-referential window. What Louaver suggests is to consider the tableau as a window into painting rather than into the world. He is interested in the visual and conceptual limitations of Literalism and especially in the Modernist oxymoron of literal depth, as opposed to literal flatness.

In the subsequent “Screensavers” series both definitions are offered coincidentally: the frame/stretcher is now visible through translucent colored screens, delimiting the space of a still/frame, repeated throughout the space of the painting, setting the stage for the main argument: Painted space versus the space of painting, the space of thoughts and contemplation in dialogue with the physical space of painting. The abstract image of his previous Threshold series is turned into different size stills scattered onto a physical screen instead of an electronic one, clearly abiding by the rules of painting, of its physical presence, with its infinite variations of color and ambiguous intimation of depth.

⁶ Email from the artist (11/12/18). Translation from the French by the author.



Screensaver # 6 (4 panels), 2000-01, acrylic on polyester, 97" x 95", © the artist's estate, photo Oote Boe.

Louaver's work is layered with multiple conceptual strata, emerging differently in each series as so many leitmotifs: The movie still as an abstract image, the stretcher as door/window, the space of painting as a screen, the tableau versus the space of painting the painted space, camouflage as a stratagem for the position of the artist toward his work, etc.

But the most compelling aspect of his work resides in the clear separation of the painted space from the space of painting, with the fortuitous end result of a new literal ambiguity. From a French window opening up on a wall to a semi-transparent screen set against a wall, the space of painting is contained between two literal instances: The plane of the tableau and the plane of the wall. The painted space belongs to the plane of the tableau and is superimposed over the visible literal depth of the space of painting. The result is an improbable coexistence of two opposite orders: The space of representation (the painted space of the tableau, where the geometric abstract motif evolves) and the space of presentation (the semi-translucent space of painting).

The use of semi-transparent colored polyester screens instead of canvas, allowing the viewer to see through the picture plane, emphasizes the issue of the paint thickness, or rather its lack thereof, in favor of a film-like, pellicular, thinness. This brings to mind not only the gossamer, immaterial quality of the projected moving image, but also Duchamp's notion of the infrathin, of the minimal but essential

difference between two similar situations. In Louaver's case the minimal but essential difference between representation and presentation.

To be sure, the question of the thickness of painting is also central to the work of Christian Bonnefoi, a French painter whom Louaver had a strong interest in, but with an emphasis in Bonnefoi's work on the generating of the painted space and the space of painting in one reconciled gesture, while Louaver intently keeps them separate.

Louaver's painted motif integrates the geometry of the stretcher into the painted abstract figure, while redirecting the deductive structure of Frank Stella's stripe paintings towards inklings of depth by introducing diagonal lines and sfumato effects. All the while keeping a constant interplay between the painted/opaque parts and the semi-transparent parts, between the painted representation, the illusion of depth, and the presentation of literal depth⁷.

It is by remaining firmly within the confines of a literal esthetic, and questioning as well as deconstructing its expectations, that Louaver ends up reconstructing it piece by piece.

And, to circle back to the idea of film making, the shift from the repeated still image in the Screensaver Series to different images in different paintings in the subsequent Composite and Topoi Series, is akin to introducing the idea of a moving image in painting; the movement being contained in the displacement from one formal variation to the next, with no clear endgame in sight to these infinite variations. And thus, perhaps could one be tempted to look at the recent single image series of the Composite and Topoi paintings -each painting a slight variation on the precedent- as stills of a potential film before its projection?

What is rearticulated here is a criticism of the modernist need for a clear narrative, with a defined beginning and end. What Louaver proposes instead is an approach to the practice of painting as an endless film loop of infinite variations and geometric permutations. The painted series as potential movie: each painting a film still finding its ultimate justification in the series as movie: Abstraction as a projected self-referential and non-recognizable image on a semi-transparent screen.

⁷ Between "le plein et le vide", as we say in French: the filled and the empty. Note of the author.

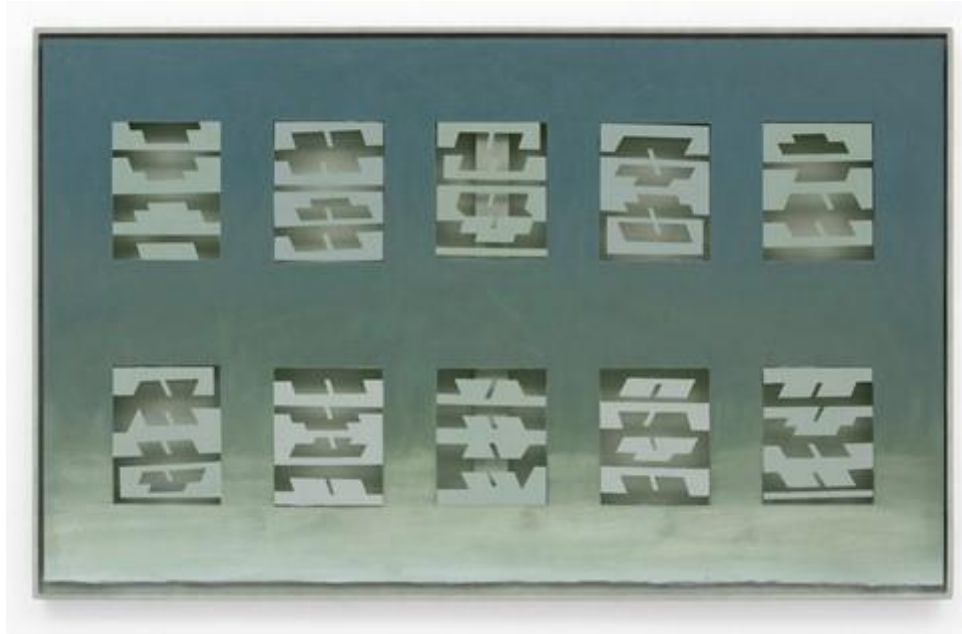


Composite # 58, 2014, acrylic on polyester, 10" x 9", © the artist's estate, photo Bernd Hiepe, Berlin.

The idea of using netting material might possibly have been prompted by Bonnefoi's use of tarlatan in his early work. If I remember correctly the first netting paintings were made on camouflage netting. (Louaver had previously incorporated found fabric of camouflage patterns in some of his paintings in the eighties). They were quickly substituted by brightly colored polyester screens in the screen-savers series.

Significantly, the idea of camouflage re-emerges later in his work, after 9/11 -which he witnessed from the front line⁸- in the Composite (2013-16) and Topoi paintings, under the guise of the myriad nuances of the Feld Grau color that pervades these series and connects them to the idea of landscape rather than to that of a figure. And perhaps it is in this paradoxical insistence on the hiding, on the vanishing act of the individual/author in the landscape, perhaps it is in this very resistance to exposure, a posture that mirrors Louaver's own unassuming position towards his work, that -as André Gide hinted, the individual may find completeness.

⁸ "...My experience of the events of 9/11 precipitated this latent questioning and hastened the necessary rupture to refocus my painting toward more sobriety in my fabric color choices, toward a simplification of my palette and last but not least, the abandonment of the repetitive motif in favor of a composition unique to each work. All these changes ... are meant to eliminate decorative connotations and to give each painting a singular visual presence." Pierre Louaver in *AlleRetour* No. 2-3, Paris, 2017. Translation from the French by the author.



Panopticon, 2016-17, acrylic and oil on polyester, 42" x 68", © the artist's estate, photo Bernd Hiepe, Berlin.

In terms of lineage, I would place Louaver's work directly behind Supports/Surfaces, Martin Barré and Christian Bonnefoi's, for the French part, but in New York he was also following closely the evolution of Frank Stella, Robert Mangold, Gary Stephan or Jonathan Lasker's work, for example, among many others. And what could we possibly say to those who insist on seeing him as a French painter, even though he lived in New York for 33 years, even though his work matured there within the abstract painting community, before moving to Berlin, Germany, in 2013, where his career promptly flourished? Perhaps we could admit that, indeed, who else than a French painter would have been able to articulate the connection between the stretcher and a French Window (and to take Duchamp seriously from the vantage point of abstraction)? But in the end, can a cosmopolitan life count for so much less than deep seated cultural atavism? Only the future will tell if that question has any relevance.

So long Pierre, you left us abruptly, bestowing upon us the task of unravelling your demanding and remarkably coherent body of work. May this text be only a first attempt to offer a few points of entry into your work, with a lot more left to explore. You were a rare one-of-a-kind painter. You knew it and had no qualms about it.



Blitz, 2018, acrylic on polyester and oil on plexiglass, 14-1/2" x 10-1/2",
© the artist's estate, photo Bernd Hiepe, Berlin.

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