

## “UT PICTURA POESIS”

Denis Castellas at Ceysson-Bénétière Gallery

12/11/19 – 01/18/20

Even in mid-career, with each of their exhibitions, some painters insist on putting everything back on the table. Unconcerned with the idea of settling down on formulas that have served them well earlier in their careers, they keep taking what seems to their audience like uncalled-for risks and to thrive on living on the edge.

Some other painters insist, against all odds and formal dogmas, on the primacy of poetry over everything else in painting. They are viewed with polite suspicion these days, as this position seems to privilege content over form and who is to say what content or form “poetry” might ever take in painting? These artists’ primary intent seems to be to keep us on our toes and to remind us that nothing can ever fully taken for granted in art, especially in the present moment.

Denis Castellas’s show currently on view at the Ceysson-Bénétière Gallery presents us with a unique combination of the two species of artists described above. Ceysson-Bénétière have developed a reputation in New York, and internationally, for championing a number of underrecognized artists associated with Supports/Surfaces, the deconstructionist group of the 60s and 70s in France. The hallmark of Supports/Surfaces back then was the unstretched canvas, as best illustrated in the work of Claude Viallat or Louis Cane, for example.

While the Supports/Surfaces artists never gained wide international recognition until very recently, in France they did manage to land influential teaching positions in the Beaux-Arts system fairly early in their careers. From that platform they ended up, perhaps not quite intentionally, “indoctrinating” a generation of students, who promptly doubled back on their ideas and in turn proceeded to deconstruct Supports/Surfaces’ system of formalist precepts.

Castellas’ work came out of the context of that saturation to the Supports/Surfaces discourse in France and of the general international dissatisfaction with formalist abstraction in the late seventies, signaled by the emergence of the Transavanguardia in Italy and Neo Expressionism in Germany. It is with that general context in mind that Castellas’ work should be approached.

Since the very idea of a narrative, as well as any reference to the image, were anathema to Supports/Surfaces as well as to formalist abstraction, these two lines of inquiry came back in full force with the following generation. But the idea of deconstruction itself was never really questioned. Instead of the formal components of painting, what was being deconstructed was the role and place of a narrative previously evacuated from the Deconstructionist approach. The narrative was then being reconfigured as fragments or rebus, as best exemplified in the work of German painter Sigmar Polke.

The exhibition installation combines stretched and unstretched paintings, side by side, with no hierarchy between the two modes of presentation. The incomplete image of a walking silhouette recurs throughout most of the paintings in the show, whether small or large, stretched or unstretched. In the

unstretched paintings, a not so oblique reference to Supports/Surfaces preferred mode of presentation, it seems that it is the canvas itself which is walking away from its stretcher.

That particular silhouette appears to be based on a well-known 1877 photograph of Paul Cézanne on his way to one of his favorite views of Mount St Victoire, as we may imagine. Showing the artist carrying the typical equipment of the plein-air painter, paint box, palette, folding easel and all, similar to the one carried by Auguste Courbet in his 1854 painting “La rencontre”, also known as “Bonjour Monsieur Courbet”. As an aside, Courbet’s painted cast shadow in “La rencontre” eerily echoes Cézanne’s cast shadows in Castellás paintings.

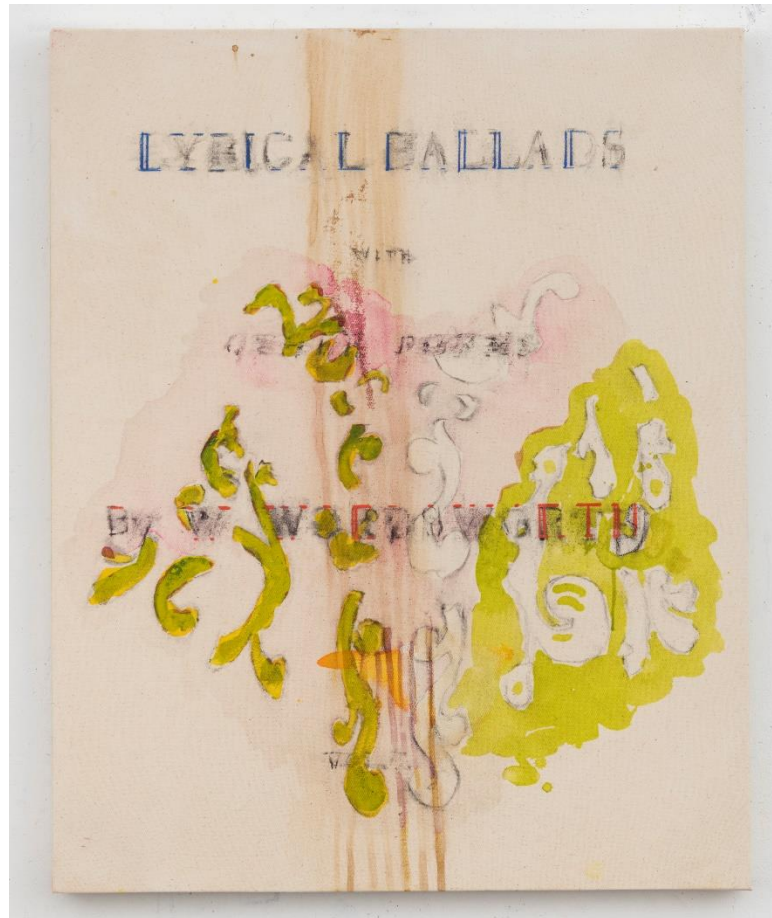


Series of dreams, 2019, ink on unstretched canvas, 60" x 71", © Adam Reich, courtesy of Ceysson-Bénétière.

All this portable “plein-air” painting gear had recently been made possible by the invention of the tube of paint around 1830-1840, roughly contemporary of the invention of photography, as Thierry de Duve reminds us in his pivotal text from 1989, “The readymade and the tube of paint”. We are here sent back in time to seminal period of the foundation of Modernism: To the Pre- and Post-Impressionist context, to the emergence of photography and of the gestation of the concept of the Ready-Made.

But the key to our reading of the exhibition might possibly be contained in a small painting representing the cover of an edition of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge 1798 book of

poems entitled Lyrical Ballads. As part of a previous series of paintings by Castellás from 2015, that painting is the only one that does not include Cézanne's silhouette. Its function is to introduce the phonetic consonance between the words "ballads" in English and "balade" (a short pleasurable stroll) in French, and in my view, to establish the show's main argument. The central operative metaphor here is that of the painter as a lyrical wanderer, a "baladeur", and of Cézanne's image as a surrogate for any painter (and more specifically for Castellás' own) wanderings through his/her work, painting after painting.



Sugar Mama, 2019, ink on stretched canvas, 29" x 36", © Adam Reich, courtesy of Ceysson-Bénétière.

In some paintings, as in "The Queen and I", Cézanne's silhouette is also combined with what seems like an abstract motif, which on closer inspection turns out to be a pattern of Victorian style lace. Here again, reinforcing the play on words of the two bal(l)ad(e)s, one finds, buried in the painting another sly shift of meaning in translation, this time between Victoria, the Queen, and Mount St Victoire.

To continue in our game of finding clues and hidden references; In the unstretched painting "The song is you" a large red circle made of handprints/fingerprints hovers above Cézanne's shadow, recalling Richard Long's walks and circles of footprints, another professional wanderer whose work was predicated

on photography as testimony to Land Art pieces executed in remote places such as the Andes or Alaska, typically hard to find or visit.



The song is you, 2019, ink on unstretched canvas, 97" x 97", © Adam Reich, courtesy of Ceysson-Bénétière.

And in the next room, the also unstretched "Series of dreams", displays tiny X shaped incisions in the canvas, organized in a grid pattern inside a large brown dot, which Cézanne's silhouette seems to be running away from. These incisions appear like they may be channeling some of Christian Jaccard or André Valensi's (two lesser known members of Supports/Surfaces) various deconstructive manipulations of the canvas: a nod to the preceding generation, and a connection also acknowledged through his constant back and forth between stretched and unstretched canvas.

There is a lot more to be said about how these games of ping-pong between signs and referents operate in Castellás paintings. In a 2015 interview with French critic Thierry Davila, the artist pointed out the fact that doing and undoing played equivalent parts his work.

Umberto Eco made the argument for the unfinished, incomplete, improvisational qualities of Art Informel, In his 1962 book "Opera Aperta" (the open work), some aspects of which Raphaël Rubinstein recontextualized in 2009 under the guise of Provisional Painting. But, if Castellás' work does borrow from these two approaches, it doesn't belong to either one; Eco and Rubinstein both focused on Abstract

Painting. The focus here is on the incomplete, unfinished or rather unstable side of images as disconnected signs; improvisational perception, memory compensation, fragmented visual experience, recontextualized visual material, etc. and more generally, on how Figuration or Representation constantly play with and off Abstraction in painting, and vice-versa. It is in these undecided interstices between the signifier and the signified, the stable and the unstable, that poetry sometimes slips in a painting behind our back, and Castellás is quite adept at keeping that interval open just as much as it needs to be for it to happen.

In the same interview, Castellás insisted on the search for visual Poetry as the driving factor behind his work. He makes the case once more that “Ut Pictura Poesis” (Poetry is like Painting), the famous saying about the terms of the relationship between painting and poetry by Latin Roman poet Horace, incidentally a confirmed influence on Wordsworth, should possibly once again be read in reverse as “Painting is like Poetry”.



Untitled, 2019, ink and pastel on paper, 9.5" x 6.8", © Adam Reich, courtesy of Ceysson-Bénétière.

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