

Édouard Prulhière: An introduction to Painting to Affect

Neither “the painting” as a thing nor the act of painting is Édouard Prulhière’s subject. His body of work simultaneously constitutes an assemblage of materials, an aggregate of processes, an accumulation of structures and effects, rather than an integrated whole arranged in accord with a Subject. In other words, what Prulhière calls painting is still unfixed—never complete or determined. In this, he differentiates between those characteristics that are painting’s, and those formats that are initially derived from painting. None of this comes easy — his inventory comes into being by trial and error—discovering their principle often comes long after uncovering their form. I have observed this process over the last 20 plus years.

I first met Prulhière in NYC in the early 1990s. I’m not sure what the circumstances were — at that time given I was one of the few independent curators interested in abstract painting and he was a young French abstract painter who had just arrived from Paris. Despite the fact that abstract painting was supposedly moribund, Prulhière found himself amidst a vibrant community of artists committed to proving painting was not dead. The best thing about this situation was that everything about abstract painting was open to question and repurposing. Many of these painters trying to negotiate post-modernism’s focus on narrative and representation were making paintings that diagrammed concepts and painting’s history in the manner of David Diaó, Philip Taaffe, and Peter Halley, or were interested in painting abstract pictures *à la* Gerhard Richter and Helmut Federle. Other approaches contended with these — painters such as David Reed, David Row and Steve Ellis sought to re-deploy such iconic abstract imagery as grids, hardedge stripes, brushstrokes, while Shirley Kaneda, and Jonathan Lasker morphed these indexical motifs into irregular forms. Meanwhile, Thomas Nozkowski, Gary Stephan, and Lydia Dona investigated pictorial approaches to abstraction and others like Russell Maltz, Fabian Marcaccio, Carl Ostendarp, James Hyde, and Polly Apfelbaum produced works using non-traditional formats and materials.

When he first arrived in NY, Prulhière was making big colorful somewhat Baroque — process-oriented works full of powdered pigment and glitter. These works were not engaged with issues of appropriation and semiotics, or even those of painting’s resurrection. Though he came to be influenced by the critical discourse that emerged around abstract painting, Prulhière’s historical references remained different. Consequently, he began to exploit the spaces that exist between Arte Informale and AbEx, Concrete Art and Minimalism, and that of Supports/Surface and post-Minimalism. These pairings represented significantly different visions and ideologies concerning

art and painting per se. Through a process of synthesis and negation, he came to focus on the idea that a “painting” is literally an object whose surfaces are ordered by a broad range of aesthetic, formal and conceptual considerations.

He began his investigation of painting’s potentiality by assaulting his own paintings, by disrupting the continuity of the picture plane and exposing its role as a support. Rather than optically fracturing the surface, he did this by physically tearing his paintings apart and reassembling the pieces. At first, he cut the canvas into strips, which he would then weave back together and stretch, but soon he would come to make free stand structures of wood and canvas that he would cover in paint. Unlike his counterparts who thought they were inventing new approaches and formats, Prulhière’s “bundles” drew on a tradition that included Gérard Deschamps, François Dufrêne, César as well as the French collagist Raymond Hains, and Jacques de la Villeglé. Prulhière’s other resources would be the singularly important figure Simon Hantaï, along with Claude Viallat, a founding member of the influential 70s group Supports/Surfaces. Most of these artists to this day remain little known in the States.

Abstract painting’s status today is not significantly different than it was during its revival days of the 90s. The same doubts are repeated over and over as are the same criticisms, expectations and desires. The challenge of making an abstract painting is still very much with us. The problem now is that many believe the field of painting is defined, known and all that is left of it is a variety of endgame strategies whose values are derived from the ability of artists to employ them as a means of cultural affirmation or devaluation. For instance, the principle underlying the success of Gerhard Richter’s pictures of abstract paintings of the 90s and more recently those of Christopher Wool is that in both these cases what is abstract about such pictures is their imagery — not their content, nor the relationships they construct. In this manner, abstract painting has been reduced to a category of imagery — giving expression to its own surrogacy.

Among the faithful in the States as elsewhere, the true believers have attempted to give a positive spin to abstract painters’ melancholic and anemic production. Ostensibly, the results of these endeavors might be thought of as producing the artistic equivalent of Zombies (mindless repetition), Vampires (the living dead), and Specters (mere appearances). Yet, following the example of the curator/critic Jan Verwoert, critics and artists in both Europe and the States have attempted to conceptualize abstract painting’s poverty, and conservatism. In the States, the writer Raphael Rubinstein has identified a category of artistic practice he calls “provisional painting.” In his article by that name, he recuperates the indifferent and effortless works

presently being produced (which have a close affinity to the slacker art in the 90s) by sympathetically identifying them as an expression of the painter's self-assertion in the face of their self-doubt. As such, they give expression to the uncertainty of our present era. The painter Richard Kalina in turn, in his article "The Four Corners of Painting" likewise asserts, "...Painting has now essentially marked off its boundaries and is engaged in the task of elaborating and infilling." Subsequently, this type of thinking in recent years has led to painters stylistically retreating into abstract painting's conventions, reducing painting to a mere residue of its former self. Other artists and critics have "expanded" painting's means to the point that what is produced is no longer painting per se but merely its derivatives.

Prulhière does not paint against history or convention but seeks to uncover what the syntactical relationships between painting's varied structures, processes and forms might express. Prulhière paints to manifest painting's performativity, the 'else-ness' of painting: those qualities that are taken as givens or considered normative — in this case the embodied acts of speech, vision, cognition, presence, labor, etc. — inherent to his practices of making "painting." By locating each of these within the space of the other, Prulhière avoids merely indexing them one to the other or reducing them to the conditions of their emergence. His paintings instead emphasize the functionality of these elements. This leads not to the resolution of what has traditionally been presented as a conflict between the thing and its contents but its liquidation. As such, his paintings become machines assembled from a multiplicity of modes of expression and signification whose product is the actualization of ideas. By these means, he self-reflexively addresses those habits — those epistemes that order our aesthetics as well as our ability to make sense of such experiences. Within this framework of Prulhière's paintings, they become informative rather than didactic.

Prulhière returns modernism's repressed: the experiential — those things that were systematized/standardized and now return because they remain unresolved. Prulhière, in acting out the entire range of mark making and their conflicting implications (expressionistic outbursts, the mark as cliché, etc.), sets into motion conflicting notions of "feeling," aesthetic judgment, and the nature of the cultural constructions of subjectivity. Indeed, in their complex engagement with corporeal experience, memory, and imagination — Prulhière's practice would seem to correspond closely to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of painting as an allegory of perception: as an interrogation of the genesis of things through our bodies. In this, due to its human scale (that being a height of an egg-like form or a wall with a door) — the body that the work references always comes across as some-one's body.

This returns both to the body, and materiality becomes integral components of Prulhière's work as he moves toward and away from the semiotization of the painterly mark, composition, image, etc. This return is not so much a reaction, but an effect of the Post-Modernism of the 80-90s insistence on the objectifying narratives and conceptualization, which, in hindsight, rather than creating new trajectories and identities, ultimately reflected the logic of late capitalism's drive to reify all cultural and social relationships. In making this objectification inoperative, Prulhière demonstrates that painting can reflect and resist its integration into mere display. Consequently, his paintings actualize the idea of painting as a means of extraction and representation by becoming machines that are assembled from a multiplicity of modes of expression and signification that remain rooted in real world events. The effect of this is that Prulhière's production makes the question of the end of painting obsolete by giving us access to the contradictions and contingencies that are the pre-conditions of painting's production and reception. The paradox of this is that in the end he renders painting as being both living and dead.

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