

Christiane Pooley

TRAPPED IN THE UNKNOWN

Review by Laurent Boudier

Translated from the French by Erin Lawlor.

It is interesting to re-read the conceptual definition of Cubism as given by Picasso in an interview with Marius de Zayas in 1923: "Cubism, he revealed, is no different than any other school of painting. The same principles and the same elements are common to all of them. Cubism stayed within the limits and limitations of painting, without ever aspiring to go beyond that. Cubism comprehends and uses drawing, composition and color in the same spirit and in the same way as all the other schools. Our subject matter is perhaps different, for we have introduced objects and forms previously unused in painting. We have kept our eyes – and minds – open to our surroundings. We give both color and form all their individual signification, as far as we can see it.; in our subject-matter, we retain the joy of discovery, the pleasure of the unexpected ; the subject itself must be a source of interest. » Barely forty years later, Marcel Duchamp, in a speech given at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1961, on the occasion of the *Art of assemblage* exhibition, in turn reassessed the use of the object as a pictorial form through his own use of ready-mades. With this incontestable argument « As all the tubes of paint used by artists are manufactured and ready-made products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are *assisted ready-mades* and works of assemblage. » Thus, with its wilfully absurd humour, the ready-made validates the use of the object, or its drawn representation, in the eyes of the artist. From « *Nude descending a staircase* » up until « *Etant donnés 1946-66* » conserved in the Philadelphia museum, his objects were to cast a brilliant and benevolent shadow over the generations of artists who followed. The question is not one of professing affiliation to or scepticism of the Duchampian school of thought; but of recognizing the facts as they are in rhizomes – like a river branches out in a delta - in aesthetic schools, with chosen camps, however brief or divided these might be post-War. Far from putting an end to the artistic thought-process, Duchamp's art of assemblage hence remains within the so-called « limits and limitations of painting » of the cubism of a Picasso. The art historian is often reminded that the world of ideas is but an eternal recommencement of a desire to break away. And I do not believe that the works presented in this exhibition by Christiane Pooley in any way belie her engagement in her own time. At the age of twenty-seven, after exhibitions in Paris and in Europe, she above all engages in a form of conciliation: if her paintings on the surface like to bring often intriguing stories to seed, through subjects here and there that seem to be posed and placed by the invisible hand of a puppeteer, or seem almost directed in the manner of a film-maker fond of Godard and Persian miniatures (indeed!), her painting also like to show the strings: she takes pleasure in interrogating painting methods and constructing a space that is made up of the relationships between perspectives, of distant links between the subjects, of a very particular play between the glances exchanged – or absent, situating so much silence between the landscape and the action and the motivation of the actions. « I like, she says, to show as much the physical and temporal aspects of the painting as I do revealing it as an object. The painting is for me as much a physical place as an imaged one, between illusion and again offering its real and tangible nature ». We will have understood that Christiane Pooley's art is inscribed in the filiation of the themes of cubism as it is in those of the ready-made. But as a young woman of her time -

and Picasso's words have their importance: « Our subjects are perhaps different, etc.... » - she uses, without dogma, and usefully so, all the practical science of photography, cutting out, as Poussin did in his day, her miniature subjects, shot with a digital camera or registered in the Google Images galaxy, printed on glossy paper and placed in a cardboard theatre. The studio is the stage of these manipulations. The canvas too: just as the seamstress leaves the thread visible between hem and border, we see there the very traces of the small ballet of possibilities. Here, in a Lilliputian world, the toys of Pooley's game make play in a pale green place, a crowd stops net on a sort of abstract land-mass, a character seen from behind, minuscule, appears in front of the curtain of an actor overhead: will he uncover it, or cover it up? Or again, men, children, women, so many subjects of today's world, abstract and recognizable, portraits and individuals, shown from behind, fixed in front of a painting or installed almost comically, extra-terrestrials, cut-out in a fragment of washed-out nature, or again embroiled in a strange montage that has something of the kaleidoscopic image or a Rorschach test. Neither really real nor really fantasized, the combining world of Christiane Pooley seems to be that of openness whose eye attracts the magnet of an agitated compass. Our own, of course; but also that of the interior of this trick world of the paintings, inside the pictures, glances that are hidden, veiled, bleached, fleeting, elsewhere. The horizon line of the movements is that of time. It looks like a Sassetta installed in the desert, hero of a chaos of milk-white ice, fascinated by the black cloud made from a rough brush-stroke, or fragile observer of a danger, in thrall to the slow white drip that spreads out like a jelly-fish at the top of the painting. Christiane Pooley shifts time, her subjects, and painting techniques, in an avowed and complicitous suite that goes from small catastrophes to pictorial « contretemps », better still, by the use of « entre-temps » or « between-times ». It is the word that comes to mind, a word that I looked out in my bookshelves, from the preface by philosopher Gilles Deleuze for a book by cinema-critic Serge Daney (« Ciné-Journal », éditions des Cahiers du Cinéma, 1986) : « One shouldn't limit a life to the single moment when an individual life confronts universal death. A life is everywhere, in all the movements that traverse whatever living being and measured by the objects experienced: immanent life carries off events or particularities that only become real in subjects and objects. This undefined life doesn't itself have moments, however close to each other, but only between-times. They don't come about nor succeed each other but present the immensity of empty time in which we see the event still-to-come and already taken place in the absoluteness of an immediate consciousness. »