

Christiane Pooley

I ALSO ASK MYSELF

Text by Corentin Hamel

Christiane Pooley paints on canvas, wood, paper, copper and is into collage, photography and video. She was born in 1983 in Chile. She still works and lives there, and it is her very first solo show ever.

When her protagonists occupy an important part of the painting, you see essentially but their backs. The narrative process therefore takes a recognizable seat. An audience, standing in front of paintings always ever more abstract, sketched out aggressively with a large brush. In counterpoint a heteroclit audience is sitting on sofas. The postures show a mix of relaxation and tension that quite rapidly reminds you of contemporary art. The source of this “painted audience” has great importance. If many of the pictures come from the world of arts, others come from the “congregation” of churches, removed from their context. The common point being the tension in the gaze, the respect. Most of the faces were turned anonymous in a stroke of brush. The predominance of the painting asserts itself as a coup d'état in other works, where the characters are brought to minuscule, as if incrustated in the forefront of great pictorial abstract gestures. They are actually, with no distinction whatsoever, painted or just glued and cut out from photographs. All the paintings therefore become great representations of possible exhibitions. Each pictorial gesture of Christiane Pooley is over-determined by the omnipresence of this included audience. One could flip through a History of Art, within this personal micro universe, going from abstract canvases still in a frame to environments that are complete, wild.

A few characters in a tiny painting representing a football ground seem to be contemplating a gigantic “all over.” Rather than inhabiting space in the way European portraits do, Pooley's characters seem to be devoted to an endless migration, and for which it is hard to know if it comes from the American landscape or abstraction.

The videos *Formicidae* (“Ants”) sum up these themes. A flow, a line of ants sees itself interrupted by a brush falling over it, streaks of painting running from it, diverting the ants and forcing them to react, to draw. The action of painting presents itself as lesson of the everyday life and asserts the communication between the micro and the macroscopic. Christiane Pooley plays with scales, and this, within a constituted universe, almost alive. When asked about her influences, Christiane Pooley evokes Sigmar Polke just as well as Guy Bourdin. Polke for his ability of having the public feel the painting for what it is, a bi-dimensional sphere, an object; and from whom she takes that way of leaving the canvas blank for what is white. Guy Bourdin, well known for his fashion photographs, for his sceneries, the existential immediacy in the representation of those times, the modesty of the medium.

Christiane Pooley's game must be played with two. She sometimes shows herself, huge, dominating her personal universe, painting it and structuring it. But the visitor, when facing the object-painting, is on a scale level at least its equal, and sees himself being asked to demystify continuously what lays before him, to be another authority giving sense to the painting.

Interview between Christiane Pooley and Corentin Hamel.

The human figure occupies a great room in your work.

I work from photographs. The figures depicted in my paintings come from a personal observation of people looking at something, which they are supposed to respect, something other than the ordinary. Especially in galleries. I started painting visitors looking at my own works. It usually only took them three seconds... Other characters come from churches. At the end of it all you do not distinguish those two categories anymore. If there is some kind of irony regarding the bluff of power, there is also a will to place oneself searching for the mysterious, the inexpressible. Once those pictures on the canvas, I add layers. I print the photographs, stick, paint over. Each painting uses a different technique. I hardly ever draw for a canvas. Every time I draw, the result is not sufficiently loose. I love all the cracks, the errors brought by the fact of bringing something figurative on a piece of canvas. I am not respectful of the initial image. I like being active, not contenting myself in doing things just the way they should be done. Being experimental.

A “human” perspective is always brought in.

It's the reception, the environment; all of what is around you that enables you being an artist. On your very own, painting would be like clapping your hands during the whole day. One needs to feel himself personally, to feel you have a role. The act of painting itself interacts with a certain power. I often represent coloured stones in my paintings that correspond to a social reality in Chile. These stones acquire the status of signs, for car parks for instance. They were not painted by the government but by simple individuals. They acquire a meaning. When you do a painting, you are a kind of God for it. That's why I started throwing painting on my canvases. I create a first illusionist game and then break it. The strokes of painting, large and fast, can in this regard seem very aggressive for the characters, especially if they are small scale.

The videos *Formicidae* (“Ants”) seem to illustrate this demiurgic power.

Yes and no. Of course you see a brush in close shot, crashing into a wall and forcing the ants to reorganize them. But this work was also born from a simple pictorial feeling. Each version varies according to the colour and the reaction of the ants, the lines they draw. I started thinking it was fun breaking this flow of ants in my studio; and by association, feeling I had, thanks to a purely aesthetic gesture, the power of beholding a “real” social impact. Sometimes you look at tiny little things, a shadow on a wall, a leaf on a tree. And for a few seconds you perceive the meaning of life. Then you forget it, lose it. I like seizing those moments and working with them.

For me, the fact of being an artist is associated to a melancholic search. Just as longing for staying “on your very own” when you’re a child. I try staying close to the existential feelings that make me want to be an artist. I appeal working with my own uncertainties and doubts regarding the way I experience life. If these things are important to me, they will also be to many other people. I start with all what I keep turning over day-by-day, abstract questions. I attempt gathering them. As an artist, you can just show the things that are truly simple for you and that are not for the others. What happens within the studio is very important to me. I try transcribing it. I change studios quite often, even if they are in the same town, as to experiment variations. When you paint, you work from a fluid material. You create images from it. What is weird is that this fluid and coloured material is going to settle, fix it and show a reality.

How do your photographs fit into your work?

Painting is, for me, as much a subject as a material. It is not direct or innocent. I am often tempted with painting things that appeal to me. But I still haven’t managed to overcome the question: what am I still doing in 2008, painting this? I would like for the visitor, each time, to see and feel that it is a representation made using painting, and that looks, for instance, like a landscape. I like the artists that make you feel what it is to represent something. A simple object destined to be hung on a wall. I find the acknowledgement of where you are very moving. In the photographs you can distinguish the elements that constitute my work, and most of all, how one includes the other. The studio is also a scenery or a medium for the cut out characters. The paintings come in the background, laid as monuments or simple objects. The mirror effects complicate the scales and include my own image within the frame. The final result unveils at the same time what goes on behind the scenes, as well as creating a universe of its own, made of illusions. What I’m looking for is that the viewer gets on each of my works this multidimensional gaze. Taking into account his own presence facing my works. Including him.