

HOLLIS TAGGART

Painted and paint-decolor at Thomas Agrinier
May 21, 2024

-

Léon Mychkine

There are painters (as I've written elsewhere on this site) who try to make us forget the painting, that is, who do everything they can to get us to go straight to the subject, as with Ingres, for example. And then there are painters who "let" the paint show, as with Monet. And then there are painters who do both at the same time, allowing for the perceptual-mental intervention of what art philosopher Richard Wollheim calls 'twofoldness', which I translate as 'doubleness', or, let's say, seeing-as, and seeing-in [The curious reader will find further references on this subject by searching Article.fr]. Agrinier's practice is double but, I'd say, to the point of overkill; overkill that often spills over, go figure, into a co(s)mical effect. Immediately, without further ado, an image:

Thomas Agrinier, "Pied de Nez", 2022, oil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm, image Courtesy of the artist
I'll tell you right now: Agrinier's work strikes a kind of balance between comedy and drama, but a comedy and drama that is both formally and tacitly split - but not exclusively, and we'll come back to this - in the way he depicts (+ on this verb here) and makes - at the same time - the painting appear and disappear, dissolve. Dissolve? In what way? Example:

Where does the leg "go"? It continues as a palimpsest of ground:

Jambe transparente? (You'll note that, even if it's unusually painted, but obviously Agrinier isn't the first, we seek to "connect the dots", so as not to interpret reality as an amorphous lump of reality, as the great philosopher Michael Dummett put it in the register of language. For this is exactly what awaits the viewer of a contemporary painting (since Bacon, at least, isn't it?): To understand the story (Alberti), what's going on, in the painting. If the viewer fails, through laziness or lack of time or inclination, to connect the dots of the proposed reality, what has been constructed collapses, unbeknownst to the artist but who knew the risk - in contrast, the art-trists who sell wallpaper as paintings never run this risk, having their brushes far too close to their bank accounts, and, moreover, devoid of the slightest imagination; but that's another subject...).

I'll give you the short version (I abhor this favorite expression of a former shrink of my cognoissance, i.e. "la cognoissance avoit beaucoup de difficulté en elle", obstructa difficultatibus cognitio, as Cicero used to say, every time he went to see his psychoanalyst, Titus Lapsus. CQFD): Three soccer players are interrupted, hijacked by a hooligan who, as it happens, also throws them a curve ball, accompanied by a fawn - a recurring character in Agrinier's work.

In a way, in Agrinier's work, the painting is made and unmade, and almost never begins, or seems to cancel itself out as it is being constructed, or as we try to construct the already "defeated" story as usually delivered by the artist. It's all about fighting the threat of reality as amorphous lump, cosmic collapse, black dwarf. What Agrinier does in painting would be very difficult, if not impossible, to transpose to literature; namely, sentences that begin and destroy themselves in equal measure. Perhaps there is such a thing, but alas (if ever) I don't know about it.

There's also an urgency, a tension, that you feel in painting. A painter, when he paints, often finds himself in this tension, and Agrinier transcribes it visually. We see this in Pollock, and it's rare. Mind you, I'm not trying to subsume Agrinier under Pollock, it's just the idea, made visible, of this urgency in the studio that, it seems to me, drives Agrinier (although urgency doesn't mean "do it quickly"). At the same time, as a little wink, we can read the phrase "Consume less", i.e., consume less; while conversely, energy is being consumed abundantly in the scene...

HOLLIS TAGGART

I really like the way Agrinier manages the scenography, for example this fawn - which almost serves as a repulsor - see how it jumps from one space into another, both so resolutely heterogeneous and, I must point out, non-ecotonic (I also make the word "ecotonic" an adjective). So, in fact, the fawn is jumping into a set, and it's going to get its snout stuck in the wall. But can we be sure? How do we know? Who lives in Seahaven?

There's always dramatization, action, in Agrinier's paintings, and always movement, if necessary over-emphasized in strokes of pure paint, in oils, if you please. As here:

Thomas Agrinier, "Hum", 2022, oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm, image Courtesy of the artist

You might say, it's a good thing you're quick with oil paint! So, what do we see? At first glance, it seems to be a scene of panic caused by the unexpected arrival of a bird of the Twitter fire type, now X, as everyone knows, which is less poetic. This chirping little bird ("tweet") provokes an effect that we (Elon) try to capture by looking at the image. Agrinier's work is certainly well-crafted, but he can be credited with taking the constant risk of having the picture play several registers - imagine several octaves on the same keyboard, something like that, for which you don't know the criteria for the chance of playing out of tune. This is the risk Agrinier takes. It could be reminiscent of ancient postmodern painting, a Salle or a Rosenquist, but then we'd be referring to heterogeneous, allotropic elements within the same topology, that of the space of the canvas. Here, it's different: the actants are integral to the background, and vice versa. No, it's the registers of the painting that twist our understanding, as in this case:

See, like a break-in, all of a sudden we have this form that I'd call "signaling". (Important: The Register can contain "signage", but not only). Signage of what? Normally, signage is what makes it possible to specify, to warn. But I want to take this term to mean an "empty event", empty of signifier, but not empty as a signal. Do you follow? You could say: "this detail is nothing more than a garment, a skirt". Well, no, I don't think so. That would be too simple. In the past, since Ferdinand de Saussure, we've talked at length about the difference between signifier and signified. Remember: the signified is the concept, i.e. the mental representation of a thing. The signifier is the acoustic image of a word. Well, at Agrinier, signage is a signifier without an acoustic image. That's why I call it an empty event. Normative signage shows an image, which refers to something real - a stencil of a cow, a locomotive, etc. - but in Agrinier's work, signage refers to nothing, that is, to nothing other than itself, it's a pure actant. What is an actant? It's a syntactic sign that means nothing in semantic terms, like, if you like, the word "gavagai" illustrated by the philosopher W.O. Quine. Let me explain.

In his book *Word and Object* (1960), Quine discusses, among other things, what he calls the "inscrutability or indeterminacy of reference." What does this mean? Quine gives an example. He imagines a linguist facing a member of an ethnic group, whom he calls a "native". Having made sufficient contact, he believes he can come up with certain translation proposals. Given that the native often responds with "Evet" and "Yok", he concludes that the former means "yes", and the latter "no". Similarly, whenever the native speaker sees a rabbit in his field of perception, he says "Gavagai". The linguist concludes that "gavagai" means "rabbit". The problem is, he'll never know for sure. Does the word "gavagai" refer to the rabbit as a whole, to a specific part, or to a set of parts? If, for convenience's sake, we go with the proposed meaning, there will always remain an uncertainty in the process of interpretation and translation. Perhaps, after all, the word "gavagai" has nothing to do with seeing a rabbit. Perhaps the native utters the word to ward off the vision of a rabbit as a sign of misfortune, necessitating the propitiatory invocation of "gavagai" (Quine doesn't envisage this hypothesis, but it's quite possible). In short, and finally, perhaps the word "gavagai" means nothing at all, while it does exist.

Conclusion. Even if the word "gavagai" doesn't mean anything, there are instantiations of it (the same could be said of many other words). So, all this philosophical detour to explain Agrinier's signaling. But we don't just find non-semantic signaling, we also find signaling that makes sense, as here:

HOLLIS TAGGART

We read “Hum”, the title of the painting. “Hum”: an interjection generally expressing doubt and reticence. Agrinier likes to produce titles or insert terms that contradict what he's showing. For there's not much doubt on the scene, everyone seems frightened by the twittering bird. And we wonder why.

Another thing we like at Agrinié is elision. Reminder:

Elision occurs when, in the body of a verse, the last syllable of a word ends with a silent e, and the word that follows begins with a vowel or an unaspirated h (Banville, *Pt Traité poés. fr.*, 1881, p. 21): 1. ... he [Malherbe] was right to order the elision of the final silent e preceded by a vowel, as in the words “vie, joie”, which before him could be made of two syllables (CNRTL).

Extract from the (tree-like) definition on this recently “discovered”, crazy site, if you more than love the French language, here. Ridiculously shameful for us, the site is based in Chicago! Anyway. So, I postulate that elision, in painting, consists in erasing what should be seen, for example:

It's not clear what the trunk-woman is doing or how she's popping up, and where this hand-glove is grafted on (there are hands and hand-gloves in Agrinier, that's how it is.) And then below the trunk, a quantum leap, and a left arm with an extravagant hand-wrist emerges from who knows where. But then, we should stop being surprised, as if Hieronymus Van Aken or Pieter Bruegel den Aauwe had never existed, and as if they'd left us an instruction manual...

In this close-up, we find part of the quintessential agrarian form. Legitimately, we can find it quite crazy, in the good sense of the word (Marjorie Taylor Green is crazy, but not in the good sense of the word). There's a facial register to Agrinier. Just look. Can you see? No ?

So there's also, in our painter, a rather assertive propensity for the grotesque → Borrowed from ital. *grottesca*, which designates a very rich and fanciful wall decoration born in Italy around the middle of the 15th century, properly “grotto fresco”, der. from *grotta* (*grotto**) because it was inspired by the decorations of Nero's *Domus Aurea*, which was discovered by archaeological excavations at the time of the Italian Renaissance (CNRTL). It's amazing to see how words are born. Nero's *Maison Dorée* was not built in a cave, it's just that this gigantic palace (this 80-hectare complex with over 150 rooms and a 35-metre-high statue of Nero) was partly destroyed after his suicide, because the memories left behind were not very kind, and so it was rebuilt on top of it... And looking at the pictures (here), you don't get the impression that the paintings are grotesque at all. So, what to make of the word? Cellini would have written: “These grotesques have received this name from moderns, because they were found in certain caves in the ground in Rome by scholars”. Vasari spoke of “licentious and ridiculous painting”. Florimond Robertet, in 1532, proposed the word *crotesque*, “capricious ornament”. (These quotations come from the fabulous CNRTL website). Are we going to say that a painter paints *crotesques*? It's too reminiscent of “crotte”. Perhaps Pernety can help. Starting with the adjective “capricieux” in Robertet, I look in Pernety (*Dictionnaire portatif de peinture*) for the register in which he would use the term “caprice”, and by indexing it I come across the word “caprice”.

The face inlaid above, and by instant decree, is therefore baroque; it's made according to the rules of caprice. But what does caprice mean? I'm resisting its call, or else I'll resume with the spirit of the staircase, but that's enough for today. Baroque then, where, as Pernety says, we find the singular & the extraordinary. Here we are, better stocked than with *crotesque*. Here again, in the Register, the faces are always Agrinier's *peinturlurés*, or *paint-leurrés*. For what exactly do we see? Hence, perhaps, the aptness of “Hum”... The painter's game, sabotaging depiction, or is it, or is it? In any case, like signage, the *peint-leurré* is part of a Regime; that's how it works (as the faces of Bacon, Giacometti or Eric Fischl (here) work in other Registres, for example).

HOLLIS TAGGART

But it's not just the face that's painted, and therefore baroque (we understand that the term is not taken here in its usually pejorative sense); clothes are no exception to the register, as in this detail, coupled with an elision :

But also: comic hands, elided arms, action painting T-shirts. Agrinier's painting is rich. It's polynarrative, it's questioning, but it's also funny, alert, energetic, e tutti quanti. And that's all for this article, which I'm sure you'll agree is also quite rich.

PS. On the contrary, I've tried - and this is a long-term project I've already started - to draw concepts out of semantics, even though they may derive from it, in order to give them other horizons, to open them up to the non-verbal, and more to expression, certainly from the concept. It's a difficult task, but a fascinating and, let's face it, necessary one, for the vocabulary of ekphrasis and other theorizing aesthetics is lagging far behind, and not only in France. In recent literature, for example, we find such examples:

To begin with, it may be useful to examine the adjectives that aestheticians themselves consider relevant. Frank Sibley drew up a kind of list of what he called "aesthetic concepts" (1959, 421), among which we find the following adjectives: unifié, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, banal, sentimental, tragic, graceful, delicate, cute, beautiful, seductive, elegant, gaudy, plump, and superb (McNally and Stojanovic, 2017).

It doesn't take a great connoisseur to notice that this suite of adjectives, which one would think came straight out of the eighteenth century, is truly obsolete, even more so if, as Sibley did, they are mistaken for concepts.

Refs/Michael Dummett, Frege. Philosophy of Language, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973 /// Willard Van Orman Quine, Word and Object, The MIT Press, 1960 (New edition 2013) /// Louise McNally and Isidora Stojanovic, "Aesthetic adjectives", In Semantics of aesthetics judgments, (Ed.) James O. Young, Oxford UP, 2017 /// On "empty event", here /// On "actant", here

Leon Myshkin

Translated with DeepL.com (free version)