

## Isolate And Propagate

Interview with Corinne Laroche

Christiane Vollaire

### **Your work is clearly rooted in the field of abstraction. But is it not also permeated by a connection to figuration?**

Let's just say that since my exhibition "Motherland I" at the Saint-Ouen castle in 2009, and particularly since the work *Motherland Mar(i)ée*, my relationship to figuration has slightly changed.

My "abstract" work is research on gesture: the writing that stems from it and the relationship between this writing and the space into which it is inscribed.

For me, "figurative" representation is an attachment to resemblance and to a rather illustrative, if not anecdotic, part of the present. I am not interested in this aspect of art. With the work *Motherland Mar(i)ée* however, I slightly adjusted my position.

The source image is of my mother at her wedding. The word *Motherland* evokes geography and territory. That's what it is: my personal geography, all of my drawings.

Every one of us as an individual has a unique geography; *Motherland* allowed me to both allude to the notion of cartography and make a tribute to my mother, underlying and visible only by me.

Territory is the motherland. To say "mother" rather than "homeland" is to talk about roots, something that spreads out from a centre: you also have to be well-rooted to practice tai-chi.

Oddly, the creation of this piece came to me really late during the preparation of the exhibition. I started by choosing an unrecognisable section of the original image for the invitation, a small element that would correspond with the final drawing. And it was only when I did the drawing that I chose to incorporate the rest of the image and accepted that the work would contain this element of representation.

Initially the drawing with crosses was just meant to be a point of reference to after fill the squares, but I ended up stopping at the crosses.

Do I consider this as figuration? The presence of this "portrait" in the work is largely imperceptible, yet it does have a real meaning: it becomes a shadow, a ghost.

### **What about your other works?**

There is another set of drawings called *Point de vue*: based on another portrait of my mother. In this work I focused on detail until it appeared as something that was both abstract and in a state of becoming; it was a way of considering the point of perception of a child when in her/his mother's arms. The child can only see her/his mother through details: hence the fragmented appearance of the work which triggers an alternative understanding. There is also a small drawing that depicts the image of a shrub bending under the weight of snow. It was while visualising the shrub that I thought about the day when my mother would pass, well before it happened. Unlike my abstract drawings created on the base of a grid that inscribe the passing of time into the work, for this small drawing, I placed some blotting paper on the screen and drew the dots free-hand, without any preliminary construction, guided by the transparency of the paper. It is a more spontaneous work, with a more relaxed form and a certain lightness to it. There is no image at the origin of *Mes très Riches Heures*, since it is only the gesture of writing that fills the squared paper. This process of production is therefore abstract, calm, rhythmic and slow.

In *Fouilles*, form comes out of movement; the drawing develops a sudden energy within very little time: a slightly mad and spontaneous scribbling.

The drawings from *Time to Time* establish a relationship between these two types of works, from one time to another and from one temperament to another. They are completely abstract. *Rectus-Inversus* is a series of diptychs. The pattern of each diptych comes from the detail of a photographic image and is made by drawing in positive and then negative. In 2010 I drew the first four diptychs and then I became interested in experimenting with alternative disorganised combinations of the drawings. I then realised that I could create new sets with these drawings. I then created new “transcriptions” for these new sets.

#### Did you create something combinatorial?

Absolutely. I then carried on with the diptychs in order to create other sets such as *Extension I*. I also redid these drawings with pencil on black paper. I am always multiplying these drawings while developing new sets; the modular side of things takes over. This merging of different works is recurrent in my work. These are not retrospective resumptions but genuine rebounds for me. For some of my drawings on blotting paper (especially the more recent ones), I also used the combinatorial characteristic through merging. First I randomly pile up the sheets and then start improvising with dots and spaces; it's spontaneous and intuitive, just as if I was playing an instrument to a rhythm in my head. Then, I spread the sheets out and look at them before considering potential juxtapositions; this is the second stage of my work.

#### Is there a connection with musical counterpoint?

Indeed, the title *Rectus-Inversus* comes from the counterpoint in Bach's *The Art of Fugue* which was the basis of an artist book I made in 1998: *L'Art de la fugue, dessin livré (The Art of Fugue, Delivered Drawing)*. The rhythm of this music is imperturbable and perfectly controlled; it creates perfect conditions for incredible mental concentration. Its composition is a game of melodic writing superimposing back and forth, form and counter form. *Rectus-Inversus I, II, III...* are the names given to each counterpoint. In the *Fouilles* drawings, there is no combining or merging of elements; there are sequences. I use a process of fast writing where I am not in control of form. My movement is so fast that the entanglements of writing progress on their own. The drawing gradually drives itself. It spreads out and propagates from one sheet to another.

**This form of propagation strongly evokes René Girard's interpretation of Clausewitz's work in military strategy in *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*<sup>1</sup>. It also brings to mind the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>2</sup>: “War machines”, “dissemination”.**

*Fouilles* is a war report. When I started these drawings, I had just arrived in a new studio that I needed to tame and appropriate. I was also very angry. This translated into the way the progression of my sketching invaded the blank page; I had images of war strategies in mind. I imagined marching troops taking over a territory like an ink drop touching a page and spreading. At this time, I was unaware of this underlying notion of filling/emptying in my work process. For this series, I was actively looking to not control the drawing. I chose a writing style which, because of its speed, came from a non-control of progress and therefore of the final form. The drawings follow each other from one page to the next. To keep my bearings in this succession, I wrote the date on the back of each sheet along with arrows indicating the link between each drawing. After having started a sketch that came from the first drawing, I would then start the second sheet without looking at the first. It is a fragmented process that builds up in a flow and spreads without me knowing where it will lead me. Since this series, I almost systematically write the place, date and time on the back of my drawings.

**In *Fouilles*, one also encounters a tactile sensation, a fur-like texture.**

Yes and the result scared me. It was like an animal figuration or hairy monsters. In fact in the beginning, I banned people from coming to my studio for six months because these works were so completely different from the geometric work that had up until then, been my point of reference. Also, the writing's density made the drawings particularly ubiquitous. The title *Fouilles* also recalls a sensation related to matter, more specifically to earth. It came to me during an inverted perception of one of the first drawings of the series: an inversion of the density of the blackness of the drawing and the white emptiness of the paper. I interpreted the white as a solid form, a rock, and the

blackness as a hole. The word “fouille” (*excavation*) came to me, not in a well thought-out way, it just emerged. Afterwards, I thought about archaeologists who scrape the earth to extract a form. Drawing makes a form appear through sketching. I performed the gesture within a work process but I didn't pre-establish the form: the gesture is creator. The density of writing is associated with the notion of the profusion of sketches superimposed in the shape of a fan, tufts of hair or hairs sharing the same root.

#### You mentioned anger. What was its cause?

There was no visibility for my work, which was in part the reason for my relocation to Berlin in 2005. There was a kind of rage inside me, brought on by the fact that I wasn't able to show my drawings. In 2003 I moved into my new studio in Paris after months of renovations, which meant my normal work rhythm was disrupted. As always, the change of location made different needs surface and anger emerged through the *Fouilles* series. This rage also came from the lack of time I was able to spend on studio work during this period. When I arrived in Berlin in late 2005, there was a period of time where I was able to wholly dedicate myself to my work. I continued *Fouilles* and also started sketching squares on squared paper. At night, I would leave the house to go for walks to explore Berlin. Simultaneously and without being aware of it, the sketching on squared paper became a game of going from one square to another. There was this will to create continuity; the flow of *Fouilles* was progressing through squares. I ended up filling the entire sheet of squared paper with sketches of squares, without any specific route, but in a systematic left to right, top to bottom progression, like writing on a page. This systematic gesture of filling squares allowed me to empty my head of all intrusive questions that occupied my thoughts. Finally my rage subdued and was diluted through this writing process. Berlin is a city that combines something energetically powerful and rigorous, a calming rigour... at least for me. Alongside this work on squared paper, I discovered the possibilities of the digital processing of images, the tools available on a computer that allow one to modify images by “emptying or filling” the pixels of an image.

It was similar to the process of filling squares and I became aware of the oscillation that often occurred in my work between emptying and filling. The work preceding *Fouilles* was called *Calques et reports* and already involved these notions. I would create a drawing on tracing paper using a set of geometric shapes that I would align and superimpose following the same principle as writing on a page. Then, I would turn the sheet of tracing paper over and place a white sheet underneath. By tracing over certain lines on the tracing paper, I would “empty” the pencil line onto the white sheet. I would thus get a *report*. I wrote a text about it called *Variations*.

**What is this gesture of “emptying / filling” about for you more generally?**

“Emptying / filling” recalls the fundamental elements of tai-chi. Amongst other things, it is an awareness of the act of breathing that allows for the regulation of flow. The repeated gesture of filling squares regulates ones breathing. In this repetition, I am seized by the act of sketching and my mind empties itself. Herein lies the process of “emptying / filling”. My work isn't the result of the development of a concept that then goes on to produce the work of art. Rather, it is first and foremost an intuitive impetus that continues because it is in coherence with an idea. It is above all because its creation seems to me to be the answer to a vital demand.

**Is it therefore, as you mentioned earlier, gesture that brings your work into being?**

It's true. I don't feel like I'm developing a theory, contrary to some artists of my generation or of previous generations. A filiation with conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt has sometimes been mentioned in relation to my work. The possible similarities would be the economy of means and the exploration through squares, which is the basis of his work as a sculptor. However, the definitions that generate his drawings give great importance to the idea rather than to the act that produces the drawing. In my work on the contrary, my attention is focused on the gesture as the act that brings together body and mind. The gesture has to be insignificant, simple and “meagre”

as a friend once defined it. It must be void of technical prowess because it is through this simplicity that my mind and body find the rhythm that allows me to focus on the present. This mode of attention perceives a texture and matter in time.

*Esse est interesse* is a Latin quote used by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*<sup>3</sup>; it means that being is being in the world. He translates it as “essence is interest”. This formula gave me the opportunity to try to bring writing and drawing together. I attempted to write things based on this text whose rhythm and language I really like, or rather whose rhythm of language I like. I tried to work on the essential significance of the text but at the same time, what really had to come through the most was the rhythm and the drawing of writing. I ended up cumulating and almost superimposing writings that could hardly be read and that covered the whole surface of a sheet of blotting paper; as a result, a different space actually came through. Next, I combined this drawing with another one made up only of dots, spaced according to my usual grid. Space is my primary ground. Whether it be for writing or dots, it's the same. It's a relationship to white and emptiness: to what comes out of the sheet, to the perimeter, to what it produces for the viewer; the perceived space, the suspension of regard. It is a new coming together.

#### Did you intend to turn the blurring of writing into form, like organised chaos?

In this writing on blotting paper, the paper absorbs and the trace of what is written is less dry. What comes out remains writing—a gesture familiar to us—but in this case it is oversized. There is an attempt to inscribe the letter into space, to blur and mix up the text, which, just like in writing allows us to see flaws. Form comes from here, from a random place of the legible and the illegible. In other drawings on blotting paper, with dots aligned compactly together, the dots come together revealing only flaws, which is what the reader perceives first: a sort of hemstitch effect, before understanding that what they are looking at is a juxtaposition of dots. Upon first perception of the transcribed text, one notices the chaotic nature of the writing. Next one begins to decipher the text. I write a text and I know what I am writing. I write again and superimposition occurs. I let myself be drawn into the randomness. The person who looks at the

work will see something that they don't understand; then they will try to decipher the words. The process of reception is therefore an inversion of the process of production. It is a bit like figuration: I use images, but I am not interested in the viewer being able to immediately identify what is represented, for this to be what draws his or her attention. I want people to have a connection with what I make that is beyond their usual deciphering codes. I want them to be physically captivated at first glimpse without wanting to immediately look for familiar points of reference. It is first and foremost a kind of physical contact, an opening up to something akin to a “vibration”: “I don't know why I'm looking, but there is something happening to me physically”. The work speaks to the viewer on different levels, some conscious and others not; “the work marks me and when I leave, something has been transmitted to me, not only via language and vision but also via other modes of perception”.

#### Could it be said that the relationship between colours must disrupt the vision of form?

If we are talking about coloured drawings such as *BB-Red on deep blue* or *BB-White on gold yellow*, the idea is to choose colours that when juxtaposed, create a kind of play from the point of view of perception, not a complementary one, but rather a sort of dissonance within proximity. The relationship between the two colours then produces a difference in light, a lack of contrast that disrupts perception and makes one's eyes flutter, form becomes perceptible but isn't instantly readable. Visitors often ask what the *Motherland Mar(i)ée* drawing represents. I am really pleased by this confusion, that the image cannot be immediately understood in terms of representation. This absence creates space for a more sensitive perception or reading of the work, without reference points. The image and the picture have a power of transmission that is broader and less restrictive than a mere set of codes.

Elements of this power within images can be found in Marie-José Mondzain's book *Image, Icon, Economy*<sup>4</sup>. For me, a picture is superior to the moving image: the still image has a much greater capacity. This book allowed me to understand the origin of my attachment to the still image. A sketched square is enough for me to see a universe. To me, a picture is a window. Independently of Marie-José Mondzain's work, icons are connected to my personal

history, my religious education on the one hand and my practice of tai chi on the other.

The icon is relevant to the question of the transmission of presence. An image offers more than a relationship between form and colour. It carries something else that we can name as we wish and that will be transmitted to the other. “Aura” is one possible name, “chi” is another. The repeated gesture, within a certain type of “presence”, produces a series of vibrations that carry on and are transmitted to viewers: a crossing of time. The gesture exists only when I perform it, but it continues to live on beyond the moment of production.

This is how Marie-José Mondzain talks about the shifting of the power of images, of the representation of energy that they carry. The viewer of the work of art receives something of this.

#### To you, is a work of art more about the gesture itself than it is about the result?

Small everyday gestures can generate positive effects that are already results in themselves. I think that the gestures themselves and what they generate are an inseparable pair. The sketched square or dot that through repetition and accumulation is perceived by others as a set, is part of a continuity.

The gesture that I perform is in the here and now, the sketched square is there on the page. Whether there are squares that are “better filled” than others is not the point. This gesture isn't theatrical; nor is it grandiloquent or heroic. I simply decide to perform an act on time itself; this act exists and in itself, produces something.

Through these gestures, there is a gradual “appearance” of something that offers itself up to perception. Back when I painted, I would cumulate layers and successively scrape them back until the painting sent a message back to me. I didn't know what I was looking for, but when it called out to me, I would stop.

In my recent dot work, one sheet of paper does not necessarily equal another in the process of bringing things together; it is a spatial relationship. It comes down to formal evaluation; what works is what I recognise as right; what works is a coming-together that seems accurate to me. There are, as I said earlier, recurrences. Something circulates; something that is spatial.

In my work *Les Points et le carré*, I implement writing

processes. I start by filling a page with a rhythm; sometimes nothing comes out of it, nothing is “revealed” to me; sometimes I abandon the work in the middle of the process. The relationship between the artist and the work is one of exchange, which is why I use the word “revelation”. Sometimes something that wasn't planned appears and it takes you by surprise. Therefore, I cannot be in the theorisation of my work too much: drifting is necessary and welcome.

#### How important is discipline in your work?

Because I perform the same gesture over and over again, it is necessary to wait before repeating it. But automatic reflexes free the mind in a way. There is great reverie in this ritual, a great opening up, thanks to this framework and repetition. I would talk about a process that provides a framework rather than discipline.

I am interested in the ability to be present and feel the passing of time. There is a relationship to the subject or even the physicality of time. I don't know which word to use: time or duration. You have to be doing something to be attentive to time. If you aren't doing anything, your mind wanders between present and past. By doing something, I am reminded of my presence in the act and it is through this that presence takes effect. In talking to you, I am not in the present. The present is much broader than letting yourself be swallowed by the projection towards the future or the past. When I draw *Mes très Riches Heures*, I am inside it; I have an eternity that lasts for forty minutes. I would rather always be in the present.

#### Is it because of the intensity?

This is what life is about: being alive and being aware that you are alive; consciousness creates intensity. When I mention drifting, it is related to this whole process and its rigour. I stick to the process that is only there to help me be in the present. If the process locks me in too much, then I want to liberate myself, to leave it: this is when something different happens; something new, the “creative” moment occurs.

“Inspiration” is the moment when a new desire appears. Everything falls into place and my mind is relaxed and present. Then something new happens and I can let myself glide: this is the drifting that I mentioned earlier. If we want to use the term “inspiration”, this is what happens:

a desire arrives and it is distinct from the moment you are in, it is a time of complete relaxation and complete availability to the present. Something happens between movement, gesture, mood, space and light. . . Everything counts!

#### Who are the other artists that have influenced you?

In Martin Barré's work, I encounter and find material that feeds my practice today, even if my processes are not directly related to what he develops in his work. I am interested in the way he thinks about his work in terms of the continuity of the history of art, from the cave paintings and Italian frescoes up until his own period.

In the construction of his work, painting is not a closed form: he has developed groups of works that remain open and therefore lead the gaze outside.

There are aspects that really feed me creatively and intellectually.

Barré's exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in 1993 had a great impact on me because it corresponded with what I was looking for at the time. It was one single "painting" through which visitors could wander. The elements of this series were hung at various heights within the gallery, giving the visitor moving through the space a never-ending and renewed encounter with a new composition.

This relationship or game between the wall and picture hung on it also exists in the work of Ellsworth Kelly. A unique and single picture that plays outside of its frame: the form has an impact on the wall it is hung on.

It is a work of art, made up of several elements that convoke the wall.

What I like in Francisco de Zurbarán's work is the form-matter, created by the density of light. It is the relationship with light and space; an almost Cistercian sobriety that interests me. There is a certain rigour, something implacable and yet not without delight.

My interest in Gerhard Richter is more recent and came on gradually. I was able to better understand his work thanks to the recent retrospectives on him; amongst others the Tate Modern's chronologically organised retrospective. There is a technical prowess to his work and a freedom in his movement between figuration and abstraction that enables a refocusing on perception. There are questions about vision (the out of focus) and the image. I was interested in how he articulated things. For example, I hadn't always understood

the connection between Richter's glass panels and the rest. Thanks to the exhibition, I was able to understand this connection. I'm interested in his journey and the intelligence he put in it, the relationship to the image and to its symbolism, as well as his use of matter-form. He combines a *savoir-faire* (he says he wanted to paint like Vermeer) with questions on the symbolism of the image.

It is the texture of his painting, his subjects, his work on the opacity of the surface, his reflection on society, but also on the "craftsmanship" of painting that interests me. I'm thinking of his astonishing abstract paintings of landscapes. He never denied himself of anything. His work recalls both the Italian Primitives as well as German painting. In this regard, I really feel like I come from Latin culture, I feel closer to the Italian Primitives.

In Berlin when visiting collections, the difference in the treatment of human figures between the German school and the Italian school is easily perceived. The filiation of Italian Primitives lies in the use of the angelic figure, the hieratic Byzantine idol, whereas Nordic and German representation uses a realism that is often more grotesque.

My entire pictorial culture comes from these Latin and Italian schools rather than the Nordic ones: my education was through visiting churches and seeing stained-glass windows. Nonetheless, I am attracted to these Northern schools. Van Gogh also; I rediscovered him through the drawings that accompanied his letters. They contained such spirited handwriting that would have seemed quite rough at the time, but now transmits energy and personality.

I would also mention Clouet and his wonderful drawings, as well as some of his paintings; Ingres and his lines, his *pentimento*, his superimpositions of lines and light; Mondrian too, Albers, Malevich. Paul Cézanne is, like Martin Barré, a rather central reference.

#### Does the work of Cézanne provide a way of making the space more geometric?

One experiences great pleasure in seeing the construction that comes together through the multiplication of lines (as with his brush strokes), the relationship between Cézanne's lines and use of colour (as in his watercolours). They look a bit like sketches or *pentimento* or the very first makings on a page and they produce a repetitive effect that is kind of the opposite of Matisse's use of colour. There is also an obstinacy about coming back to the subject, this reiteration: the Sainte-

Victoire mountain. This work has really remained with me. With Claude Monet and the *Water Lilies* for example, one is in a physical relationship with the painting due to its size; it is an anthropological relationship to the work that subsumes you. Véronique Giroux wrote about the anthropological dimension of my work in the Gennevilliers exhibition catalogue, published in 2000. When I exhibit large formats or mural installations, I like the physical connection with the work of art that comes into play: the relationship of the body to a compartment that subsumes it.

#### Apart from the influences of other painters, there is also a connection with photography in your work: what is the nature of this connection?

I think that the digital image was an important element in linking photography to my work.

The traditional camera had long been a tool for the notation of reality alongside my studio work, without any connection ever being made between the two.

In the winter of 2005, I was given a small digital camera as a gift, but my first steps with it were a bit laborious. While downloading the first images onto my computer, I came across an altered image that really surprised me. Part of the image was pixelated and appeared only in black and white, while the rest of it was as to be expected. From then on, I started using details of the images that I had taken, as drawing patterns. I then became interested in the possibility of "seeing" the image while holding on to an abstract pattern.

In this work, which remains abstract, in the act of drawing (filling squares), there is a gradual unfolding of the drawing process through the lines of the drawn squares. The image only appears at the end.

The breaking up through squares is a visitation, a way of incorporating and filling my body with repetition and of appropriating the representation. It is a carnivorous process: I appropriate the image, the representation, in a slow and continuous flow.

#### Can you tell us about your early work?

When I left art school, I was painting nudes that were a form of self-portrait that I had shown at my graduation exhibition. I became interested in drawing via anatomical drawing.

In 1987, I made a series of paintings, *Torses* where little by little, a kind of spirited writing started to appear in my work. I ended up leaving out the *Torses* (torsos), keeping only the writing; a set of horizontal lines made with very wide brushstrokes on canvases the size of my arm span and related to my breathing. The horizontal lines generated vertical lines and a set of basic outlines and entanglements that were always related to breathing and my arm span. During this period of my work, some visitors who came to my studio talked to me about the relationship between the place where I was working and the structures appearing in my paintings. I found this very intriguing and started to reflect on the relationship between the paintings and the space around them.

By changing studio, I was able to experiment with a type of work where the walls became part of the painting: a painting with several panels and a continuity between the painting and the walls. All this work was made up of non-figurative geometric constructions. Squares became ubiquitous. I had three exhibitions to show this work: one at the Corinne Caminade gallery in Paris (1998), the second one at the Édouard Manet gallery in Gennevilliers (2000) and the third one at the gallery of the Toulouse School of Art (2002). The latter was an exhibition solely dedicated to drawing, which was becoming my primary practice.

In my work, there is a permanent link between grids, squares and outlines. It was only later when working on my mother's portrait that I accepted to incorporate readable representation. Sometimes the starting image is only an outline, a rhythm that offers a visually interesting composition as in *Grossgörschen left and right*. For other works, such as *Spree* or *Sombra BB*, it is not the starting image that is symbolic as such, but its outline and the role I give to this outline.

*Sombra BB*: a shadow in Berlin was symbolic for me. There is a "shadow in Berlin", you cannot escape this thought when you live there.

This is where Richter's work interests me. He works on an image that is at once personal, symbolic of its time and connected to others. Here, the work of an artist becomes something significant: what looks at us and what we see.

#### 19. Is that an implicit reference to Georges Didi-Huberman's book<sup>5</sup>?

Yes it is. This book really made an impression on me. What is looking at us when we are looking at something?

What is the mirror? When I look at recumbent statues, I am looking at something with a human history. Therefore, works of art take us back to something within us. It is something archaic and primitive that links every human being to the world. There is a connection with the continuity of my vision; time is a matter of duration and the instant. The sequence of one instant to another, the instant becomes duration: it is about feeling continuity in what we do. Filling/emptying is like the hourglass where something continuously permeates. This diffusion is not an explosion but rather a type of propagation: it is slow and continuous.

- 
- (1) *René Girard and Benoît Chantre*. *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).
  - (2) *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari*. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
  - (3) *Emmanuel Levinas*. *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998).
  - (4) *Marie-José Mondzain*. *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).
  - (5) *Georges Didi-Huberman*. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris, les éditions de minuit, 1992).