

Introduction pour le catalogue de l'exposition de Robert Ferri
Là où le voile se lève
Galerie Felli

Where the unveiling takes place

According to philosopher C. Merleau Ponty Art makes us learn « how to see the visible » And this is how paintings teach us landscapes. A few days ago, while cruising in the Netherlands on a narrow boat at the slow speed that canals require, I stood contemplating immense skies, the more so as the land there is definitely flat. In a succession came to my mind the numerous pictures that Dutch painters had been elaborating over and over again since the XVIIth century, leading us to discover what would not have come up to us naturally. Human geography is not only the result of men's agricultural or industrial activity, it is also made by painters who represent what they see or what they want us to see. So it was with Van Gogh at work on the plateau at Auvers and so it is with Robert Ferri painting these same landscapes and inviting us to see them in a different way.

Portolan Charts

Navigational maps are both an invitation to travelling and an invitation to the dreams that travelling convey. Some people experience as much pleasure reading a travel guide and planning in their fancy the trip they might or would do, as they would carrying out the trip itself. While overlaying on the prints the drawings that these objective data of the maps inspire him, Robert Ferri has played with this mainspring of dreaming which navigational maps induce.

In his essay *Espèces d'Espaces*, Georges Perec alludes to these old navigational maps called portolan charts where the superimposed names manage to inhabit the picture too. “Space starts that way: mainly with words, signs drawn on white paper. Describing space, naming it, tracing it like these makers of portolan charts who used to saturate coasts with names of harbours/ capes/ coves, until lands ended up being separated from the sea only through a continuous strip of words.

Through the drawings he adds on top of the original lines of coasts, reefs and maritime data, Robert Ferri leads us into a meditation on this veil which is laid to coat the original document. The idea is not to mask it, but on the contrary to bring us to watch it in a different way, more carefully, to interpret it through a constant swap between the first appearance it suggests and the background upon which it makes sense. This process repeats the very movement of truth as an unveiling when the veil is lifted to allow us to see the crux of the matter. Only, if there is no veil the crux of the matter is not visible, for it is the unveiling that is essential. The artist is the one who makes us see the visible we thought we had seen with no veil , but that paradoxically only becomes obvious when unveiled.

To leave a furrow

“I wish steady, still, intangible, unspoiled and nearly untouchable, unchanging, rooted

places existed ; such places that would be references, starting points, sources (...) space melts away like sand flowing through our fingers.

Time carries it away and I am left with unshaped tatters of it. Writing, painstakingly trying to hold something back, to make something survive in order to snatch a few accurate snaps from the void which grows wider, somewhere to leave a furrow, a token or a few signs.”

Georges Perec, in *Espèces d'Espace* evokes this ideal of his which does not apply to writing only, but is as well the challenge of painting, for the idea is to fix in the most permanent way what the look has perceived while the memory is going to wipe it away and lose it.

Robert Ferri attempts to fix this fragility, which is like a physical form of vulnerability, by means of his landscapes. To me, the figure of a furrow seems to be very central in the picture ; a furrow is bound to collapse and yet the geometry of the canvas takes its structure from it. Most of Robert Ferri's paintings bear this blue or sandy transversal which marks out the transition from one element to another, which traverses the landscape horizontally, thus giving it its foundation.

The furrow appears as a hyphen between the field and the sea, the ploughman and the fisherman. I know the Furrow of Talbert in Brittany, a strange moor of land that stands firm against high tides and hoards little shells which children collect to make necklaces. Between land and sea, the furrow is what remains.

Elevation

Numerous paintings by Robert Ferri obviously show three different levels terraced from bottom to top.

On the lowest level lies a river, the sea or a field. It is the essential foundation, the *raison d'être* of this place. It represents the fundamental dimension, the one on which what will rise afterwards rests. It is most often downsized on the canvas because the fundamental element is a must in itself : insisting on it is needless. When he describes the tree of knowledge, Descartes considers metaphysics as fundamental roots :

“philosophy as a whole is like a tree, its roots make metaphysics, its trunk is physics, and the branches that come out of it represent all the various sciences.”

In Robert Ferri's paintings the fundamental basis is not taken up by metaphysics, but by seas, fields, rivers, those yellow, green and blue masses which locate us. Trees grow on these masses, rocks, reefs, a few protruding elements stand there to break gently the horizontability of the stroke.

But at times, between the tree-line and the mass underneath there may be this thin, mysterious and captivating space-between . The space-between is a favourite of the river Garonne, and Robert Ferri has already had a try at it with his work on estuaries. As for me, I love that bank of a river, beyond the gos in the swampy foreground, which emphasizes the idea that we step the ground again, but in a sort of soft way, as if this

mixture of water and soil remained still uncertain.

I also love these seascapes in which a sandbank perfectly stripes the horizon. For the crazy shellfish-picker I am these views act as a reminder of the incredible landscapes that are disclosed when the sea flows back at low tide.

Then the foreshore lets its infinite variety of dwellers appear, but above all it opens the way for an immediate experience of memories as, what is now visible will not be any more in a few hours' time.

As we glance a little higher there come the objects of the second line, especially trees. In Robert Ferri's paintings, trees are seen from afar, they are mere landmarks, as trees very often will be in a landscape . On our plateaux in le Vexin, we are used to such trees, they may outlive a human's life and their existence leaves its mark in the place where they grow. There used to be one of that type on the plateau above Valmondois, it stood alone, isolated, almost odd in the middle of a field; viewing it, anybody could imagine it was no help to the ploughman in his work, but its presence was an obvious fact that all our glances reinforced . It died and yet remained in the middle of the field for a very long time like an indispensable coordinate, a ghostly landmark of the skyline.

Then, on the third level is the sky, a huge sky covering even two thirds of the canvas . Robert Ferri's skies are mostly cloudy, they are not laden with terrible, disturbing clouds which forecast storms, but quite the opposite they are rather soothed clouds and appear as inhabiting skies. They echo in the sky the trees or plants rooted in the ground.

At times there might be a last level, the highest one, it is most often situated in the scarcely visible windings of the marouflage. This space is located high above the clouds, above the last cloud, the one at the very top of the painting: it is a borderline situation as if it dealt with stepping out of the picture, being beyond depiction, reaching the metaphysical area there. Christian terminology owns a mysterious and beautiful word to name this area where what can be pictured and what can't be join together : it is called limbo.

Robert Ferri's painting immerses us in a blurry vision which is in no way unorganized . Descartes used to praise clear and distinct ideas and set a final blame on unclear thoughts ; but mistaking what is blurry for what is unclear would fail to stick to Cartesian clarity, the velvety effect which plunges elements into a permeable atmosphere does not induce confusion . Quite the opposite it teaches us to discern plainly the blurry vision.

From Bruno Huisman