When we talk about painting, what are we talking about?

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- 1 In the often generous current raft of publications about painting, the season's contributions help us to raise questions about the stuff of topical arguments on the subject, over and above the petition of principle in the mode of "it's painting because it's painting", which puts at risk the very historicist pigeonholing by medium. When we talk about painting, what are we talking about?
- 2 The proposed response offered by Barry Schabsky in the opening essay in *Vitamine P*—a kind of "best of" overview with a collegiate selection, which is quite customary for Phaidon— is clearly formulated, based on the prudent if not pertinent initial question: "Is painting art or an art?" The post-phenomenological theme in the relation nurtured by the viewer with the painting of "involvement [with regard to painting], not with the eye as is often thought, but with the body (p.6)", wisely left in mid-air, is conveyed by a line of thinking on the modernist heritage and challenge. "Today's painters are not *more* conscious than modernist painters were, they are conscious of different things (p. 7)". Despite any abstraction-figuration dialectic, encumbered by comparisons between abstract and figurative pictures by Mondrian, Guston, Malevich and Richter, the author

sketches one or two persuasive historical hypotheses, which lead him to identify the contemporary period as mannerist, in so much as painting has “accepted the conditions of its gratuitousness”, deliberate, assumed and happy—a liberating answer to the modernist injunction to do with the questioning of identity and the definition of painting by itself, ontological auto-reflexivity turned inhibitive, which makes room for an exercise of painting experienced in a more existential and dynamic mode. The prospect is undoubtedly “liberal”, but it manages to cut to the commodity of a revanchist revisionism at times set up like a (desperate) attempt to save painting, as it does to comprehensive relativism, which is more elegant in appearance but extremely irresponsible. The 114 notices which follow, penned by 35 different authors, echo the formal outpouring of contemporary production, but they are only similar in terms of their monographic requirement. So the legitimacy of the works thus always proceeds broadly by way of the oeuvre (by way of “Life”, if thereby, after Vasari, we may understand a genre). Moreover, very few artists, with notable exceptions such as the case of Rob Pruitt, seem to have experimented with other media, as if herein lay an answer to B. Schabsky’s question: painting comes across here more as *an art* than as art, period.

- 3 The catalogues mentioned here, which are monographic by definition, thus merge into a “Life” unity, but by making varied use of the requisites of the genre. As far as the paradox with Bernard Frize when, in the catalogue, Katy Siegel and Paul Mattick, co-authoring, venture into the proposal about the artist through the idea of style soon surpassed to bring out a Frize method, to be practiced alone or with two or more. Further on they afford the finished work an autonomy, beyond the artist, therefore: “It is not painting that disappears, it is the artist who goes away”; wherein, in fact, may lurk an ultimate heroism. If the authors map out a trail of American references, the artist, in an interview, reveals idleness as the driving force behind this method, and mentions as the sole reference, indirectly and quite nonchalantly, Rubens!
- 4 Like Bernard Frize, Yan Pei Ming is among the 114. And he is also at the centre of the book published by Les Presses du réel, dealing with five recent shows. His painting is seen through the working method and as writing, more expressive than expressionist, point out Bernard Marcadé and Hou Hanru. The book’s illustrative material may offer plenty of pictures of the paintings in the studio or in venues, but this is necessary not only to record their scale, but also to play with another dimension of the work: the relation to the portrait, to identity, in the on-going shift between the western heroism of the subject-king and a diffuse conception of identity somewhere between anonymity and deification or starification. Whence does the artist, more figural than figurative, appear here as one of the media of his painting. It is colour which is at work rather than the artist in the catalogue devoted to François Perrodin. Jean Lauxerois reminds us of as much by suddenly tugging this work, for want of any hero, towards a reference to Blanchot’s idea of disaster. As an author himself, too, in the catalogue, F. Perrodin refers obliquely to the artist at work by raising such questions as: “What’s to be done?”, and: “How are we to go about it?”, but without coming across like the hero of these impersonal questionings. And tracing the outlines of those “generic objects” which, for him, is what paintings are, the pictures which do without any demonstrative and subjective intent so as to work at being offered to an attention, included in the simple immanence, without reference, without history, and without any ontological angst.

- 5 On the other hand, on reading Jean-Charles Vergne, Bruno Perramant's painting is a matter of reference, and of combinations of borrowings from various media (film and TV) and works. What a collection! In his contribution, the artist in turn records his references, getting Hölderlin and Dante to converse merrily with one another. But painting hardly enters the picture, so to speak, directly at least, because, in the words of the artist: "An appearance cannot be conceptualized". The fact is that this particular art, as Cyril Jarton points out, is offered not to mere attention, any less than it is to perpetual enjoyment, earmarked by the delights of the signifier. Whence the artist returns: this time through his name. Perr-amant = *père-amant* = father-lover. But fast: of painting, nothing more will be said. Whereas, on the contrary, here we are in the thick of questions, with an historical outlook, when Mathieu Pinette introduces the presence of Valérie Favre's painting into his museum and his preface, by the question: "Has painting said it all?" The answer will comfort the artist and onlooker alike with: "No, it has not said it all." V. Favre does the talking in an interview about her life as an artist which links up with a happily buffeted-artist's "life", punctuated with often literary references, but which also proceed by way of Bosch and Stephen King. Here, painting once again has to do with personal legendariness, private myths and symbolic narratives. But she relies on herself far more than on any discourse, imagination and image. This is what she would believe, anyway.
- 6 So from historical problematization to works-Oeuvre dialectic, and from the illumination of studio and experiential protocol to referential effusion-be it remote or internalized, it is above all the uniqueness of the painting object which is challenged-and so much the better.