

## Stéphane La Rue : *Flâner et faire surface*

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### The Eloquence of Silence

I watched carefully the most intimate and modest things, while the sky seemed to rise upwards and tilt deeply downwards. Robert Walser, *The walk*, 1917.

To wander. To stroll as in taking your time, moving slowly, aimlessly, following your instincts and desires, going where your steps take you, even stopping. To roam, to let your gaze linger on one detail, then another, to step back to grasp the whole, jump aside, come back, change angle, approach again, wait. The painting can serve as your guide. Your approach is similar to the discreet presence of the artist you will come across. Roaming, a time outside of time, a moment for a decisive encounter.

Stéphane La Rue invites you on a journey and, to do this, he slows the tempo, uses subtleties, plans the details and the differences in order to intrigue and amuse you, to welcome you to a space designed for a leisurely pace. The sound of silence. At first glance, there is little to see. The layout of the *Flâneur* suite consists of six similar panels coupled three times. Each single painting is joined to its double. The combinations appear as melodious variations. Each plane is of pure white, as if everything had been erased or nothing written down. Yet you are invited to probe the immaculate surfaces.

Each painting is reversed and overturned, with the whole taking the form of six identical but very different works in a project that invites infinite exploration. The apparent asymmetry created by what you see conceals the pleasure of painting, punctuates the pictorial research which is based on harmony. The mirror effect invites you to study the whole like an open labyrinth, a network of forms that seduces and deceives your senses and affects the ambiguity of this wandering. The mirror or perfect double, both model and reflection, reality and imagination combined, captures the essence of its subject and declares what painting is.

As well as handling paint, La Rue handles woodworking tools since it is important to him to give shape to painting. Wood, an age-old substrate, is one of the mediums he maneuvers, in addition to canvas, paper and, recently, metal. The properties of each material are exploited so that the application of pigments is highlighted. The grain of the surface or its smooth appearance, its shine and its texture provide the original *colour* to the work, a basic feature of La Rue's oeuvre. Here, colour will discretely fluctuate, at first intensified then restrained, similar to the pendulum which asserts and negates time.

The geometry effected by the painting's presentation reorients the structure of the frame in line with the composition and becomes an intrinsic part of the work. The scale replicates that of the human body at rest, its final rest, supported, in turn waiting for the *flâneur*. Would it be your grave, your resting place? The regular but modified template comes from the offset of one of the angles of the oblique rectangle.

It is worth dwelling on this form as a figure seen leaning, defined by its way of presenting itself diagonally. The simplicity of a truncated parallelogram takes up the inclined surface. At first, all you see is the calmness of a plane supported by the wall. The missing part of each panel is transposed, enlarged by the gaping space between each pair. This absent triangle becomes the prototype of what separates the two while uniting them. Each pair is connected by this void which ensures association and cohesion between the double. The cut off part, the void, arises such as a call to another space. It energizes the surfaces, invites you to fill them, to extend them.

The panels in pairs are presented, one suspended a few centimeters from the ground and the other slightly raised. They show two systems, fulcrum and surface. Their size thwarts their flotation. They are dense and delicate bodies that attest to their belonging to the wall.

These are two flat volumes, two slight reliefs, part of the visible edges of which, hollow and protruding, suggest that they can be united together to form one. They are two forms which are separate but inseparable. Are the permutations only a diversion or are they a step before the elements join in a continuous movement, a means of prolonging the walk of the gaze in what could only be a single whole? It is however an affirmation of the double. Painting as a double, doubling of the form, of its thickness, of the hanging, of oneself. Each panel summons its different double, states the lack, the need to be completed, such as the projection of oneself towards an object of desire.

The device of penetration, of inserting one motif into another, is also evident in a set of red-coloured drawings (*Faire surface*, 2022). These entanglements were noticeable in the photographs of marble floors observed during a residence in Rome (*Sols inapparents*, 2018). The chevrons, triangles and rectangles constitute so many planes cut out of a monochrome gradation which form fragmented but compact units. The more or less intense red takes up the shine and the matte of the surface which reacts to the light as much as to the dark or light mass of the material, without letting the volume appear. The saturated, floating pastel imposes itself, like the colour of the painting. The blue drawings, for their part, are based less on an effect of interlocking forms than on an assertion of edges, the edge that imposes itself in the middle of the page creating lively lines that streak the shimmer of blue. By scraping the pastel, the white of the paper is partially uncovered. A velvety light of variable intensity settles in, moment of equilibrium that invites you to rest and dream in the elusiveness of a pale sky.

The suspension effect is increased tenfold by the paint itself, its application and its stripping. The cloudy white both covers and reveals. Again, what is there to see? This white is both barren and hospitable, it stops and allows itself to be penetrated. As you land on it, your gaze skids and digs as if the surface were an opening conducive to evaluating the questions and decisions that gave birth to these simple forms.

By the relative brilliance or matte quality of the surface, you are able to grasp the regular brush work which gently rocks the surface. You contemplate its intangible light and become lost in the large expanse of white which diverts and returns to its subject. A vertigo, an exaltation in this play that brings you back to the starting point, to the beginning of the journey, to the original state of painting, that of light embodied in the surface, when "The poem brushes silence with the tip of the words — rewritten in the blank of the page, between the verses<sup>1</sup>. »

On blank screens, projections are repeatedly displayed. From an impulse comes a detail, a detail containing the entire momentum of the gesture and the passion of the painter for his art. A form evokes depth; the polish of the surface gives rise to light thus modifying the perception of touch; the obliques generate a dynamic which invites you to continue the act of contemplating an uneasy balance.

Clearly, La Rue's quest continues the path traced by the *Plasticiens* as it has developed in Montreal since the 1950s from Jauran to Charles Gagnon and Claude Tousignant. He uses some of the codes, vocabulary and writing in his own way. The artist combines the format (human scale), the cutting of the canvas (sequence), the application of paint (surface), in a monochrome palette (onset). It is as though he is repainting history, repainting painting, and dwelling on it so that you recognize yourself as proponent of this story and its singular statements.

Edmund Alleyn wrote twenty-five years ago: "If painting today seems to have exhausted itself as the driving force of the visual arts, and has done so for nearly thirty years, it is not certain that it is exhausted as means of expression for some individuals. Its specificity and uniqueness seem to guarantee longevity. [...] Art exists above all for the pleasure of those who favour a language whose content and syntax are always fascinating and mysterious<sup>2</sup>. »

Specificity and the uniqueness of his art: these are qualities to which La Rue is attached and to which he contributes. What moves and interests you in front of his work is precisely the perception and the feeling of living an experience that only painting can provide. The experience is renewed insofar as it takes into account its origin and considers the paths to be surveyed. Stéphane La Rue's commitment to his art and its history is part of an apprenticeship that leads to such captivating and subtle encounters provided in the silence of loitering.

Laurier Lacroix, May 2023

Translation: Nancy Retallack-Lambert

<sup>1</sup> Antoni Clapes, *Entre nature et rêve*, Paris, Éditions de la Coopérative, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Alleyn, "Peindre comme je l'entends", speech given at the Musée du Québec on August 20, 1997.

Reproduced in *De jour, de nuit, Écrits sur l'art*, Jennifer Alleyn, Gilles Lapointe, dir., Montréal, éditions du passage, 2013, p. 38.