

A fiction –

Marseille, 2010, conversation with Angela Freres.

Main studio, indoor, daytime.

AF: All these paintings around us look like a polyptych. The recurrence, the relations that appear between the patterns leading the eye to switch from one another as if they were some kind of a huge altarpiece.

MM: Precisely, I took a real interest in the relations between painting and narration and particularly in predella. They are smaller images that can be found in the lower edge of an altarpiece and which form a kind of strip, just like a comic strip that narrates episodes of secondary importance. We can read them successively as the different parts of a story. The recurrence of elements from one predella to another enables the understanding of the sequence of the events. And it is true that put side by side, my paintings can be read as a kind of polyptych or a sequence of predella. They offer similar recurrences, they invite the eye to such a reading and encourage it to circulate in a particular way.

AF: It seems to me that the way the objects create an accumulation on the painting surface, the way they touch one another and how they criss-cross definitely recall a narration. But a narration closer to the idea of interaction, by association, in the “cadavre exquis” manner, in which a form leads to another form, and then to another one, etc.

MM: Yes, you can always find this associative mechanism in my paintings. It’s a way I have to build a remembrance chain between objects that enables me to create what I would call a drift. Each object is permanently sliding towards another one, it’s becoming another one. The interpretations of the images one could make by giving a name to these objects would come up against their ambivalent nature. They look very concrete but are at the same time impossible to characterize or define. It’s something I like, it makes them look almost threatening, in a way.

AF: I don’t really agree with you: the objects are well defined, it’s more their function that is not precise, or not realistic. To me, what defines them is the way they are associated one another.

MM: That’s it...I think that these associations create chimeras and narrative links that interlace and criss-cross.

AF: How do you start painting and how do you know when you have finished?

MM: First of all I create space, I then try to create a movement, a stream the eye could follow. The first lines I draw form the sketch of a path that will subsequently often be transformed and contradicted. The huge paintings require physical movement in front of the painted surface, they always imply multiple points of view depending on the distance from which we look at them, 20 inches or... 3 feet, if we look from the right or from the left side. All related details, paintings in the painting. Art history, my memories...they all give me the pieces I fiddle with, among which I try to create a link, a precarious, centrifugal coherence.

I then come closer to the painting and focus on each object, giving it more consistency, more palpability so that it can attract the eye. And as each object acquires concreteness I add new objects, and I keep moving in the image. But there always is a tipping point: I paint, and I discover that things have taken a new pace, that I have found the right gesture. The painting is finished when the image has a real body, a consistency and that the whole hasn’t collapsed.

Main studio, indoor, daytime, in the corner, street side.

AF: Aside from oil paintings you are also engaged in watercolor paintings. They are characterized by their simplicity and sharpness. In your oil paintings the paths look more tangled. Nonetheless your watercolors do not give the impression to be a preparatory work.

MM: To me each technique is a way of experimenting. I never realize a preparatory work. In the oil paintings the objects accumulate on the same surface. There are superposition and repentance principles whereas the watercolor works scatter and move away one from another. The watercolors can also act as a warming-up exercise, I paint rapidly and try to keep the pace with the oil paintings. But in the huge paintings, the thickness of time is held by a same surface, in fact, I cannot paint the left and right side at the same time. I associate the sequence of these moments to the narration and to the predella. There is a progression not only in the image but also in the way I paint that can be very different from one point to another. It is another way to dissect time, to create duration. To me, the issue is more important in the oil paintings: the aim is to enable different moments of painting to coexist, it is to create a stream in the image but in time as well.

AF: In a watercolor work you cannot superpose paintings, the materiality of the painting is less present, maybe to the benefit the patterns?

MM: It's true painting matters are easier with the watercolors, everything is definitive, the paint dries quickly and one need to reach the essential. To me, it's a way of skimming through the images, whereas in the oil paintings has to give them a body, a palpability.

AF: Why do you choose, for the huge paintings, large strokes and drips?

MM: To paint a certain amount of square feet, it's better to use large brushes. And as for drips, they are easier to avoid on the small sizes than on the big ones. The paints does not react in the same way at different scales. But I like to keep them because they form veils that envelop and create links. I need speed at certain moments of the creation in order not to lose track, I therefore use large strokes and sometimes they generate drips. To me it's a matter of stains. A stain is an ambiguous thing: it conceals, covers, but it is also in the stain that the image appears. It's an old idea that comes from the origins of painting, the *macula*. The stain enables the image to appear without needing an idea. All of a sudden, it's the thing and not the preconceived idea that appears in the stain.

AF: If we stand far enough, we perceive your painting as a whole but we can be deceived by coming closer for the matter is very present and we cannot enter it. Does this deceptive aspect have an interest to you in your approach of a painted image?

MM: Yes, if you stay close to the image, the illusion disappears: it's only painting. It's the same for classical paintings. I'm thinking about the Spanish paintings of the XVIII century in particular, I feel close to that painting. But my *way* is more rough, more disjointed.

Outdoor, daytime, end of the day light, September, at the terrace of a café. One table, four chairs.

AF: You often talk about fiction and novels in relation to your paintings. Could you clarify these ideas and their roles in your artwork?

MM: They are central matters to me that I find interesting to replace and rethink in painting. When I create a painting, in front of a flat surface I need to find a depth, a fictive space I can sink into and in which I can circulate with my imagination. The experience of the represented space double the physical and concrete one of the said paintings, especially in the big sizes. In this order of the representation, the details I talked about earlier act as narrative moments, articulated thanks to a plot of bridges, canals, planks, stays and knots.

AF: One could say that you *narrate* paintings and often paintings *of* paintings. This progression accentuate even more the narrative dimension in your painting. But, when you evoke your artwork, you refer to novels in particular. Could you develop this idea?

MM: The novel matter is vast and René Girard's ideas were food for thoughts. In fact, compared to other kinds of narration, the novel is specifically critical. It enables to see critical contradictions, as the ones opposing the characters' space, the narrator's space and the novelist's space, in the perspective. Those spaces keep confronting one another and it's impossible to bring them back to a plain meaning, to an univocal meaning. If you look at my paintings it's as if they were

hosting contradictory spaces. For example, if you take the paintings with the tables, there is the landscape space, fictitious, put on the table and on the other hand, a more prosaic space, the one of the table itself that could be the one of a narrator. I think that the relations between those spaces are quite close to the ones described by Girard when he talks about the novel.

Plus, after an exhibition in Marseille, a friend left me a note with his impressions. He was quite critical, and from his own words, not involved in "a world that doesn't exist anymore". I was amazed, I didn't expect the Specter of Death to come out of those paintings. And, then, I thought about Don Quixote. That character living in dreams, those dreams already out of date in 1600, the ones of the chivalry novels. But Cervantes did not live that waking dream, his position was critical and even moralizing. Nonetheless it is evident that Cervantes himself tasted with a partly sincere pleasure his character's adventures and that he wouldn't have written such a book without a definite nostalgic feeling for the medieval chivalry novels. The critic and comic system he devised enabled him to avoid that nostalgia and to integrate it to that new original invention. Relatively speaking, I'm trying to paint from a similar amused, fascinated and critical point of view.

AF: You don't paint figures. And, if we develop the parallel with the novel as you do, at first sight, there aren't characters. Do you aim to create with your paintings the frame, the settling of a story that would be built and acted, at the same time, by the people looking at it?

MM: I'm thinking about K. Dick describing his work as a novelist. He said something like this: "To be true, I like creating chaotic universes in which I throw my characters. I then observe their reactions, their evolutions, their efforts to get out of them". That's the way I see these paintings. They are devices activated when one goes through them, and the path is always beset by contradictions and conflicts. I think these paintings often end up in trapping you or on the contrary in kicking you out.

AF: Hence the name of one of your exhibitions, *Comment construire un monde qui ne s'écroule pas en deux jours?* (How to build a world that doesn't fall apart in two days ?)

MM : Yes, I borrowed the concept to K.Dick: *How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later*, and took a few liberties in the translation. That was the name of one of his conferences in which he described his work as a novelist. It seems to me that for him the characters are not very important. They are mostly vague, they don't have qualms, they are just media used to plunge the reader in a dislocated world. I would say that the true character of the novel is the said world. In my paintings there are no characters, no figures. But there are many objects and they play the role of media in K. Dick's manner. For example, the trees or some of the architectural elements give clues of the scale and enable us to picture ourselves in the paintings.

AF: When you talk about fiction, you mention a lot: the viewer. Could you explain what does that involve in your decisions as a painter?

MM: I'm the first viewer. And the essential part of my work, most of my time, is spent in watching. I think that there are no figures in my paintings because the viewer is already in the painting. I want the viewer to be caught up in the painting and I place devices that enable this viewer to enter the painting. Some elements like the holes or the hollow surfaces act as the figure of the *the caller* we can find in the paintings from the XVI and XVII centuries; that character that looks at the viewers, straight in the eyes and invite them. Many objects are evocations of the absent figures, as furniture elements, or some elements of the landscape. They form, actually, a kind of metaphorical lexicon of the body: feet, torsos, mouths, canals, entrails. Everything suggests the presence of a figure, but it's evident absence creates a kind of depression in the painting in which I want the viewer to be sucked up.