

Christophe Verfaille

Exhibition curated by Yve-Alain Bois

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When Lacquer Screen meets Blotting Paper

I am staring at a small painting on plywood that Christophe Verfaille gave me long ago. Every time I look at it, which happens daily as I pass by it on the way to my desk, I am bewildered, captivated. “How did he do it? How did he obtain such a surface, so smooth and yet so matte? Where do these strange colors come from? And from where, these faint ghost shapes?” Anyone who sees this work at my place inevitably asks such questions. I know some of the answers. That is: I know how he did it, materially speaking. But being in the know does not in any way lessen the bewilderment nor decrease the captivation. I am forever captive, drawn to this surface that is so hard and yet so soft, so gentle, so inviting.¹

The first striking thing about Verfaille’s best paintings is the total absence of texture. Smooth is an understatement: their surface is polished. One thinks of formica, and the artist did not mind the comparison when I submitted it to him (the whitish web that emerges here and there, particularly in the smallest pieces on ultra-thin plywood, reminds me of cheap kitchen tables and countertops from the late fifties or early sixties). Another immediate association, in a nobler vein, is that to lacquer. Neither formica nor lacquer are convincing descriptors, however, since they are almost inevitably (albeit in various degrees) linked to sheen in our minds. Most of Verfaille’s paintings are *intensely* dull--though a glossy color plane could occasionally land on the top paint layer, contrasting with everything else on the panel (even more rarely he substituted glitter dust to mere paint gloss on such top layer intruders). Matteness is antithetical to smoothness in our everyday perception. Language is poor in combining the

¹ A note of my personal acquaintance with Christophe Verfaille. We met in 1967, at a summer camp in the Collège Cévenol of Chambon-sur-Lignon. We were both teenagers and adamant to become *artistes-peintres*, as one used to say at the time. He was the student of a pupil of André Lhote, called J.P. Maillot (Lhote himself was a mediocre artist but a very interesting critic who directed his own art school). Verfaille’s professor had him copy Romanesque frescoes. As for my own (soon aborted) pictorial practice: I thought of myself then as a “geometric abstract painter” (ridiculously pretentious, but true!). Needless to say, we had fierce discussions about the future of painting during this month-long vacation--we could not but disagree on about everything, but we became very dear friends, each convinced that the other would soon come to his senses and switch sides. Since then we saw each other irregularly, sometime losing contact for long periods but sooner or later renewing our connection with excitement and joy. I often visited him in the various extremely modest studios he occupied (the first time he was still living with his mother in her cramped apartment, in a dreadful high-rise building in one of Paris’s “satellite” cities hastily created in the sixties). By then I had given up painting and it was he who had become a “geometric abstract painter” (he had “come to his senses,” after all--as I had in my own way!). My visits became necessarily less frequent when I moved to the United States, in 1983, but I was always delighted, whenever I could, to spend a day with him looking at his newest batch of paintings and debating as ever about the possible future of that medium. In 1996, I wrote the text of the leaflet accompanying his exhibition at the Galerie Alessandro Vivas, in Paris (which, alas, did not bring him the recognition he deserved). I had not seen him for a couple of years, for reasons that have nothing to do with any lack of fidelity in my friendship, nor with any lessening of my interest in his work, when he contacted me out of the blue, in January 2010, sending me an email (the first I received from him--he had long been a luddite of sorts) to which was attached, by way of a greeting card for the New Year, the scan of a small drawing in color crayons that reminded me of those made by Barnett Newman before *Onement I*. We resumed our correspondence and I soon learned that his life had taken a tragic turn. Not only had his mother died from complications after a surgery, but his diabetic condition had dramatically worsened. He was now spending three long exhausting days a week in a hospital for his dialyses, and was desperately waiting for a kidney transplant. Despite all his miseries, he remained passionate about his work (he was still at his studio when neither at the hospital nor teaching art in a non-profit organization dealing with disturbed kids from the Paris suburbs). Our conversations never stopped for long from then on, and I visited him every time I came to Paris. His end was particularly tragic: he had finally received the kidney transplant he had so long awaited (the last time I saw him was just after the operation, around Christmas 2010), but even though the graft had been successful, his whole organism was so feeble after years of illness that it collapsed after a few months of steady decline. He died on July 18, 2011. He was 58 years old.

two semes: is there even an adjective that could mean both polished (or burnished, or buffed) and dull? Sleekness is always mirror-like in our mind.²

But though far from perfect, the formica and lacquer associations have some truth to them. In fact, even though this does not conform to the concept one has of lacquer (as glossy), Verfaillle did use industrial lacquer paint, among other kinds (he preferred acrylic for his small format), and despite the matting agent he must have added to it in order to obtain the desired effect, he used it in a traditional manner.³ One quickly senses that the color planes that populate Verfaillle's paintings, even if of a light hue, owe their peculiar elusiveness to the numerous underlayers that activate them from beneath. In other words, he embraced lacquer for its enigmatic chromatic quality that is a function of the number of superimposed layers involved in its making. The accretion of razor-thin strata coalesces in a color-matter effect. One cannot, either visually or intellectually, dissociate the material support from the color that seems frozen within it--and the best quality formica could give this impression of an indivisible slab, all of a piece, colored in its thin mass. The indefinable colors and absorptive effect of certain very opaque planes come from what one could call a depth without substance. The absorptive appearance is paradoxical, for these surfaces are anything but sponge-like (they are fragile and vulnerable to scratches but would not soak up liquid): what they soak up is our gaze. A comparison with another medium, perhaps, could get us closer to pin-pointing the specificity of Verfaillle's almost immaterial materiality: photography--and indeed, formally at least (minus the color), some of his paintings look a bit like the abstract photograms (or camera-less photographs) that Lazlo Moholy-Nagy produced in the Dessau Bauhaus during the twenties. As in those, perfectly clear-cut geometric planes are interrupted by others, blurred, wraithlike, that seem to be approaching from far away or receding in the distance; and as in photography in general, the image is without material substance: it never appears to be *on the top* of the material support but imbedded *within* its skin.⁴

But if this last comparison is useful, even though it is just as approximative as the others, it is for what it reveals by contrast. If anything is blurry in a photograph while everything else is in focus, it is usually because it moved during the exposure. And this connection of blur and movement is so ingrained in our visual culture that we are prompted to mentally infer motion in a photogram, even if we know that any lack of focus, in such images, is due to objects that were not evenly flattened on the photographic paper as it was exposed. But for the rare exceptions of long takes (something that fascinated Moholy-Nagy as well), photography implies speed--while even the most casual glance at a Verfaillle painting is enough to assess that it was not born in a flash.

The artist was not secretive about his process: he would gesso his plywood panel, then paint a geometric colored plane over it, let it dry, paint another, overlapping the first or not, let it dry again, repeating this operation multiple times until he had forgotten whatever shapes and colors were buried beyond the surface of his top paint layer, sandwiched between all the independent coats he had applied. Then he would sand the whole thing, letting some vestigial traces of well buried strata come forth. If dissatisfied with the outlook, he would embark in a new campaign of paint applications--this could go on ad infinitum. In any event it took him a very long time to finish a painting, or rather to accept it as finished, to let it go--up to ten years, as the dates that he stamped on the back of his panels attest.

² I wonder what Verfaillle would have thought of Gerhard Richter's recent super-slick "paintings" (in fact digital prints under a layer of glossy lucite). Would he have approved of Richter's labeling them paintings? Savored the irony? Would he have seen them as a last attack on painting (an assault against which, then, he would have seen his own work as a protest)? Or would he on the contrary have interpreted them as one more strategy invented by Richter to delay the demise, announced so many times, of painting as a medium? I am certain that, on account of several conversations we had about Richter's work in general, these "paintings" would not have left him indifferent. On these works, see Benjamin Buchloh's essay in the catalogue of their exhibition in Paris at the Galerie Marian Goodman (September 23-November 3, 2011) and Paul Galvez's review in *Artforum* (January 2012).

³ My thanks to Jean-Paul Douthe for this technical information, which Verfaillle never disclosed to me. In fact, he never corrected me when I implied, in the 1996 essay mentioned above (note 1) that his paintings were not made with lacquer paint.

⁴ I should note that this color-matter effect (and the coalescence of painterly layers into an indivisible concretion) is an attribute of Verfaillle's paintings alone. Perhaps as a kind of personal antidote (just as Barnett Newman made very skinny paintings to ward himself off the seduction of large color planes) Verfaillle made numerous small collages (in which, by their very nature, materiality is underscored). In the last decade of his life, he also produced flimsy sculptural assemblages of very light refuse material (plastic yoghurt jar, medicine packet, etc). He started making them around 2000 (the letter he sent me along with a photograph of one of them dates from Christmas of 2004 yet Jean-Paul Douthe, who witnessed Verfaillle's development much more assiduously than I, thinks that some might date from 1999). Alas, he packed them disassembled during the move to his last studio, after which he found himself too sick to configure them again. Fortunately some had been photographed and might possibly be reassembled.

(On the verso of the painting I own, stamps indicate that it was started in April 1991 and thought completed in July of that year--an exceptionally short span; but then it was taken up again and last stamped in March 1995).⁵

I imagine that quite a lot of painters have used sanding during the past fifty years or so--more precisely since the invention of acrylic, whose inert surface many felt they had to scourge in order to squeeze some liveliness out of it (little did they suspect, alas, the degree to which this practice was a health hazard). Verfaillie was introduced to the technique by Martin Barré, whom he greatly admired and saw as a role model (as did so many young French artists of his generation). Barré took to sanding when searching for means to obtain a fresco-like, almost rupestrian look. Verfaillie did not have such muralist desire: sanding for him was a way to recover past strata but also to compress temporality, to bring back an ancient layer up to the surface and thus perturb the last one applied, from underneath. But there is another way in which he learned from Barré: as with the varied systems used by the older artist in his work, Verfaillie's anamnestic method introduced a voluntary relinquishment of control, given that there is no way, even if he had wanted to, that he could have memorized the formal configuration of each geological strata that he had piled up on his wooden support.

This voluntary loss of mastery, combined in Verfaillie's work with an urge to erase any autographic gesture through mechanical sanding, is part and parcel of what I have often labelled the non-compositional impulse in twentieth-century art. This impulse is coeval with the recurrent myth of the last painting--they appeared at the same time (with Malevich), and periodically returned in tandem. It is not the place here to inventory the artists who tried to obliterate any trace of their presence by avoiding all subjective compositional strategy, eliminating the hierarchical opposition between figure and ground, or letting chance, set systems, material processes and other objective factors supersede their own agency. Even a thick volume would not suffice.

Let us just point to one paradox: though Verfaillie was determined to efface his own self (not only all traces of his handicraft, but also a good part of his own authority over his material), his non-composed works are often very similar, morphologically speaking, to highly composed ones--one thinks of Liubov Popova's *Painterly Architectonic* series of around 1918, for example (a few years before she enlisted, along Rodchenko, loganson, the Sternberg brothers, Medunetzky and other Soviet Constructivists, in a die-hard combat against composition). In fact, this resemblance of something that was deliberately conceived as assault against composition with historical exemplars of...compositions, narrows the genealogical search. The family tree is no longer that extensive.

There are no doubt other branches, but the one that seems to be the most pertinent is called Elsworth Kelly's French years. From the mid-eighties to the last year of his life--when between long and depressing sojourns in hospitals he was too weak to paint and sand, and devoted himself to drawing⁶--Verfaillie faced in painting the very issue that had puzzled Kelly around 1950 when he broke up with the post-cubist rhetoric of abstraction of the time by merely transferring onto his canvases found patterns copied from flat items on which he had zoomed in the world at large (the repetitive motif of a Japanese stencil for a textile design, the shadow of a balustrade on a metallic stair, the rhythm of open and closed windows on the façade of an apartment building, etc.). Kelly's problem, which must have to a point confronted any abstract painter in search of non-compositional means besides the modular grid or the monochrome, was to prevent his non-compositional transfers from looking like abstract compositions pure and simple; to make sure, for example, that a relief minutely replicating the disposition of flagstones in the courtyard of the American Hospital in Neuilly would not be seen as a poor imitation of a Georges Vantongerloo painting from the early twenties.⁷

⁵ In parallel to his panel paintings, Verfaillie made a lot of small drawings (on paper but also on black, opaque portions of X-rays that he scratched, or on dark fabric). These drawings consist of white lines that divide the whole field into irregular, loosely geometric parcels. They seem to have been made very quickly (as rapidly as the painted panels are made slowly), almost in an automatic fashion. Perhaps did they function for the artist as a starting point, as a sketch for the first paint layer of his panels, or for several consecutive layers? They are usually grouped by size and material support (taped together on boards, stapled in sketchbooks).

⁶ Among his last works are diary-like small sketches in color crayons or pastel, which he mounted, grid-like, on large sheets of cardboard. Some of them are clearly landscapes and were done at Mont Saint Père, close to Chateau-Thierry (his last residence). In a letter he wrote to me, in the fall 2010, he describes the sessions of "plein air painting" he finally allowed himself to have during the summer between long stays at the hospital, regretting to have for so long refused to himself that "innocent" pleasure (he writes "peindre sur nature" but the works in question are all on paper). This letter is handwritten, barely decipherable.

⁷ On this particular anecdote, and on Kelly's early work in general, see my essays, "Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in Its Many Guises" in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954* (Washington, D.C., National

But if Verfaillé's work reopens the long modernist tradition of the non-compositional (and in doing so signals that the obstacles blocking the road to the advent of the mythical "last painting" might not be removed any time soon, if removable at all), it is not the main reason why I find it so compelling. Another genealogical search that it calls for is far more specific, since it relates to the peculiar color-matter effect mentioned above as a direct consequence of his sanding technique. I have not yet found a name for this effect, and it is easier to say what it is not (purely optical) than what it is. All I can venture about this effect is that it is due to a perturbation in our sensory input. It is present when the color-matter titillates our sense of touch (inducing in us a caressing desire), our sense of taste (we want to lick), or of smell. Those senses are not summoned *in place of* that of sight but *along* with it, upsetting our visual mastery by a synesthetic overflow of sensory data.

This color-matter that Verfaillé's work resuscitates, I find it--going backwards in the chronology--in Brice Marden's wax paintings of the sixties, that were similarly produced by an accumulation of underlayers (let us note in passing that most commentators insisted at the time on the indeterminable character of their color, and that one of them spoke of his desire to smell such paintings.)⁸ I also locate it in Ad Reinhardt's so called "black" paintings, as little textured and as matte as Verfaillé's; in thirty or so canvases that Georges Braque painted shortly after World War I, when he felt free at last from Picasso breathing down his neck and allowed himself to take advantage, without guilt, of his formidable painterly skills (the composition in these still-lives is not particularly noteworthy, but the color-matter effect, generated by a strange mixture of oil paint, water-based paint, turpentine and other still unidentified liquids, the whole sauce occasionally applied on a sandy ground, looks as delicious as that produced by chocolate icing); I detect it even more in the small interior scenes that Vuillard painted in tempera during the 1890s, and of which André Gide used to say that they made him think of murmur because they force the beholder to come very close and decelerate his or her gaze; finally (and I doubt it would be possible to go back much further in history, since this color-matter effect is incompatible with the glazes and varnishes that were constitutive of studio practice up to that time), I catch it in several of Courbet's pictures of waves, walls of water foaming under a thunderous yet stony sky.

In all these examples (at least if some idiotic, market-motivated application of varnish has not irremediably disfigured the paintings), we are dealing with a superlative matteness, a deep, dense, matteness--but whose depth and density is not accessible to eyesight alone.

Each time the work of a painter forces me as a historian to summon an unusual ancestry, I feel grateful. In impelling me to explore anew the whole pictorial tradition from which it sprung and to map within it a territory that had up to then gone unnoticed, such works suggest that there might be many other overlooked fields of the kind, still fallow but waiting to be tilled. I am thus grateful to Verfaillé's painting for having spurred this invocation of artists of the past, uncovering for me what their extremely diverse production have in common. Combining matteness and smoothness, he invented unlikely objects: paintings that are at once thick and thin, deep and flat, at once lacquer screen and blotting paper.

Yve-Alain Bois

Gallery of Art), pp.9-36, and "Kelly's *Trouvailles*: Findings in France," in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings, 1948-1955* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Art Museums, 1999), pp. 10-35.

⁸ See Douglas Crimp, "New York Letter," *Art International*, Summer 1973, p. 89. I should add that Verfaillé was particularly interested in Marden's as well as Reinhardt's art and that we had several discussions about their work. Needless to say, as for Marden's wax canvases or Reinhardt's "ultimate paintings," photography is incapable of capturing the peculiar matteness of his sanded panels.