

A Certain Idea of White: Scott Lyall, Hugo Pernet and Bertrand Planes

by Aude Launay

While the vogue veered towards colours, one brighter than the last, summer seemed to announce itself under the auspices of a certain idea of white, as we did the Paris galleries. At Triple V, the tone was set straight away: the billed *Peintures blanches* (*White Paintings*) turned out to be black. Needless to say, literalness might have been a tad easier, whereas there, once the pirouette had been digested, regular customers are confronted by a disturbing experience of thought. What actually is the negative of a painting? Passing from expected white pictures to dark rectangles coldly hung without further ado, is all the same a little rough, it has to be admitted. The idea is there, though, involving a brush's backhand of pictorial history and producing negatives, in the photographic sense, of illustrious pictures. But what else? Well, in addition to the delightful impression that abstraction is painting with lots of wit, something we sometimes tended to forget in recent years, what is also involved is a demystifying praxis which gives the painting back its object status, twice over. First by cultivating its objectivity, neutrality and flatness, through the "motifs" chosen in the tradition of those of Olivier Mosset, Barnett Newman and other advocates of a minimal painting, then by the use of seriality and the double, which reiterate the objecthood of the thing painted by ridding it of that aura we might have been tempted to attribute to it. So Hugo Pernet's *Peintures blanches* are presented as the opposite of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, but like the work of the Hegelian negative, they are not posited as a definitive response to those ultimate paintings, white monochromes.



Hugo Pernet Vue de l'exposition , galerie Triple V, Paris.

Since the end of the 20th century, abstract painting has paradoxically become a repertory of "forms", of classics to be re-interpreted or, to use the artist's own words, "a 'genre' painting"¹. So what we are dealing with here is images of abstractions and no longer with literal abstractions. "As for the monochrome, we might regard it as part of the still life, or more broadly the vanitas, genre: while remaining something literal, a monochrome painting is also a vanitas of painting, a canvas's canvas, a trompe-l'oeil of botched painting, or painting not made at all."²

No Signal, Bertrand Planes's show at the New Galerie, invited us to a sort of game of hide-and-seek with images. Here again, the painting/photography connection is central and destabilizes the pictorial expectation. We are looking at a "classic" hanging of pictures which all look like daubs which have been too long in a flooded cellar. Faded and blurred landscapes appear on canvases which look as if they are studded with mould and mildew. Yet we are in no way in the presence of some process whereby the works are naturally deteriorating. This is a technique which



Bertrand Planes *The place we've been 3 Sans titre #2*, 2011.

Bertrand Planes himself describes as “high low tech”, and applies in his different works. Coming to art by way of computer science, he plays with his DIY technologies to reveal their absurdity through repetitive applications. The series *The Place We've Been 3* (2011) originates in amateur pictures bought in secondhand markets and then subjected to a photographic procedure so arranged as to bring out the shadow of the images they once contained. The method is well tried and tested, but nevertheless permits accidents. Bertrand Planes starts by photographing his acquisitions before repainting them white, and then exposing them, covered with photo-sensitive emulsion, to the projection of their own image—the one prior to the shift to white. Chemistry acts and thus produces objects which tend to blend in an absence of differentiation awakening ideas about the author's death and Benjamin-like anxieties about the crisis in painting. Disguised beneath their own image—with reproduction altering their precision—the original images are cancelled in a poetic-*cum*-chemical equation. The landscapes appear in shades of grey and seem to boast a romanticism with regard to their past splendour, while the technique of reproducibility has its effectiveness denied because, in the end of the day, it merely thwarts the uniqueness of the basic picture, while paradoxically leading it to a certain standardization with its companions on the walls.



Scott Lyall, *Nudes*, vue de l'exposition à la galerie Sutton Lane (Campoli Presti)

From the fictitious white of Hugo Pernet's canvases by way of the adulterated white of Bertrand Planes, we come to the artificial white explored by Scott Lyall in his series of *Nudes*, at Sutton Lane. They could actually be false white monochromes, because they are neither absolutely monochrome nor really white, even if, at first glance, this is the

closest description of them. More explicitly, they are in fact unprepared printed canvases with a whole host of colours which, in the end, form a kind of non-colour. Nor are they really paintings, rather 'unpainted paintings',³ as Bob Nickas has described Wade Guyton's printings, because the canvases have known neither brushes, nor rollers, nor even paint, even if, on their stretchers, they look as if they have. Nor are there just canvases, but adhesive panels, too, similar in format to that of the canvases, which respond to them with the rhythm of a hanging which makes them alternate. Let us say that nudes are in effect involved, because the cotton weave presents no extra thickness, it seems dyed in the mass, and the pastel ink appears to have been blown to simulate the colour of the sky. Painting stripped bare by its painters, even.⁴ Except that Scott Lyall is not even a painter... well, not for the most part. He programmes his impressions digitally, nothing else, without any image intervening; knowing this further intensifies this sensation of nebulous void. The calculation is precise, the colours applied one by one; each file contains several hundred. There is no colour, strictly speaking, rather the idea of a diffuse and opaque luminosity. "Light is colourless. If it is, it is so in the sense that numbers are colourless."⁵ This series is beyond abstraction, we are looking at anti-Rothkos: a light emanates from the wall the better to push us back, explode in our faces, and block any tempt to run away. The canvases and vinyls refer neither to what lies beyond the wall nor to the down-to-earth side of the wall presenting them, but to the edge, in the manner of a more than illusory window, a closed window. "If all colours were to become whiter, then the image would lose more and more depth",⁶ which bolsters the use of adhesive which takes all autonomy away from the object. (What is more, if the said object is not brought into play after its exposition by a purchase or a curatorial request, it will not be re-made). Conversely, this also permits the colour almost to become autonomous. Released from the image, it is also partly freed from the surface, once it no longer exists in digital form, stored on a hard drive.

From Hugo Pernet's negative images, Bertrand Planes's dissolved images and Scott Lyall's inexistent images comes a simple idea: in this day and age when everything is, creates, or becomes imagery, this latter paradoxically loses its priority in favour of a discourse about it. While some of the forerunners of contemporary abstraction already mentioned in these pages⁷ (Cheyney Thompson and R. H. Quaytman among others) make use of painting to describe what David Joselit calls "the social life of images", by using the gesture of abstraction for the purposes of a transfer—and no longer a production—of information⁸, others play on the materiality of images (quality of definition, production process: is it made of lines or signs?, digitization and manual alteration...) to demonstrate its fragility.

¹ Hugo Pernet in the catalogue for *Une exposition de peinture*, Zoo galerie, 2009, p. 12.

² Ibid.

³ Bob Nickas, "Wade Guyton" in *Painting Abstraction : New Elements in Abstract Painting*, Phaidon, 2009, p. 292.

⁴ An allusion to Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarques sur les couleurs*, T.E.R., 1997, p. 13.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarques sur les couleurs*, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

⁷ Cheyney Thompson, *O2* issue 56, winter 2010, pp. 19-22 et R.H. Quaytman, *O2* issue 52, winter 2009-10, pp. 32-37.

⁸ David Joselit, « *Signal Processing* », *Artforum*, Summer 2011, pp. 360-361.

Hugo Pernet, *Peintures blanches*, galerie Triple V, Paris, from 30 June to 23 July.

Bertrand Planes, *No Signal*, New Galerie, Paris, from 23 June to 23 July.

Scott Lyall, *Nudes*, galerie Sutton Lane, Paris, from 19 May to 18 June.

<http://www.zerodeux.fr/>