Re aesthetic and dialectic in intertextual analysis of painting

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Abstract

Natee Utarit opposes two groups of paintings in the same exhibition called *Reason and Monsters Project* (2002). The first one concerns figurative paintings which represent the post modern appropriation – what I name *the re aesthetic* - of the very well known Western old masters. Showing only some details from originals, details covered later by enamel, these works raise a problem of cultural and visual perception. In contrast, the second group is abstract paintings which represent a frame in a frame, a kind of *mise en abyme*. The article discusses how the two groups completely different can be significatively related by means of intertextual analysis and dialectical thinking which help to overcome a visual gap of the two different aspects. The *re* aesthetic as represented by figurative paintings and the tendency to nothingness in abstract group cannot be, in this show, separately considered as their meanings depend on a dialectical and intertextual construction by the beholder.

Key Words: appropriation; intertextuality; dialectic; aesthetic

Thai artist of the young generation, Natee Utarit pursues and confirms, with his exhibition titled "*Reason and Monsters Project*" (2002), one of the themes of his predilection, that of the reflections on contemporary paintings with reference to Western paintings of the past : Caravaggio, Guercino, Raphael etc. The "*Project*" comprises, on the whole two sets of works, abstract paintings subtitled "*Painting with pure reason*" and figurative paintings called "*Silent laughing of monsters*"[1]. For these last ones (fig. 1), the painter recycles the famous classic works so as to appropriate them in his own style, but instead of retaking them in their full forms, he focuses only on one detail delicately taken from the originals. The enterprise tends to provoke a question on reception : the reference being not a cultural model of which

Fig. 1 Natee Utarit, *Judith*, oil, enamel and wood stain on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm, 2001.

[1] *Reason and Monsters Project* was divided into three individual exhibitions : *Silent laughing of monsters* (4-30 May 2002, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok), *Painting with pure reason* (5-31 October 2002, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok), and *Silent laughing of monsters / Large scale* (7-22 November 2002, The Gallery of Art and Design, Silpakorn University, Bangkok).

the public is familiarized, how could the work and its dialectic between the *déjà-vu* and the seeing provoke such oscillation at the beholder? Can one see better without a cultural basis, without theorical background related to the work of citation which implies the presented work and its reference? How to renew our eyes before the repetition without pretension to emphasize their originality? But since in "original" (word and work), there's "origin", originality is tautologically the meeting with the source, and that complicates the case of Utarit whose cultural originality is not the one of the cited works. This intercultural dialogue highlights as well the dialectical mode of intertextual analysis[2] in regard to the specificity of contemporary painting.

Laughing and nothing

The work affirms in a way its aesthetic autonomy (or vanity of representation?) by keeping a distance from the audience, distance that closes itself, makes it unreachable. It's as if it didn't concern the existence of the beholder, according to the famous theory of Michael Fried on the negation of the beholder, that achieves aesthetically the painting[3]. Or, more locally and restrictively speaking, the work negates its immediate global and absolute perception by the audience. The painter denies the original by fragmenting and tarnishing it of enamel. He rejects every acknowledgment that implies its visibility and its original aura, so as to find his own originality. He retakes in order to dismantle. It's not in the brush strokes where the beholder will

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[2] For a historical account of the notion of intertextuality, see Nathalie Limat-Letellier, "Historique du concept d'intertextualité", in *L'intertextualité*, études réunies et présentées par Nathalie Limat-Letellier et Marie Miguet-Ollagnier, Paris, Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Franche-Comté, n° 637, 1998, pp. 17-64.

[3] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago & London, University of California Press, 1980.

find the traces of the hand, but the gestures without brush, pouring the color of enamel. The opacity of representation is so strong that the use of enamel covering the final surface makes the visibility problematic : the beholder sees that he cannot see, although the quite important dimensions of some paintings (fig. 3 : 220 x 190 cm). By the reuses of very well-known models, the work seems reserved for cultivated public, defying his memory : it doesn't suffice to recognize the origin from which the represented details come. But, the beholder is exhorted not only to iconographic identification that will be significant just for a restraint audience, but also to see clearly. The enamel democratizes then the reception as it represents the place of conjunction of every gaze, a screen where the gaze is blocked.

What is offered to the eyes doesn't concern the mimetic demonstration, annulled in the second phase by intervention of enamel. The literal repetition passes to the second plan, behind the layers of enamel. The copy by synecdoche - detail that sends back to its totality as well known cultural reference - doesn't have a separate meaning. The beholder must establish a relation between the top and the underside so as to find out a new system of

Fig. 2 Left : Caravaggio, *Judith,* oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm, 1598, Rome, Palazzo Corsini.

Fig. 3 Right : Natee Utarit, *Judith and monster smile*, oil, enamel and wood stain on linen, 220 x 190 cm, 2002.

meanings : a blurred and mobile sense from his own view. In other words, one sees clearly only the déjà-vu without meanings which one has to accommodate physically or mentally his eyes in every moment of the perception of object. The painting obliterates every transparence relative to the mimesis, to the work of contour. It resists descriptive discourse by neutralizing the original narrative discourse[4].

The work by cutting out and reframing implies the idea of violence imposed by the original. But some fragments seem preserving their original meaning, pursuing it. As in "*Judith and monster smile*" (fig. 3), from "*Judith beheading Holofernes*" (fig. 2) by Caravaggio, the heroine is now decapitated in her turn, selected to become only a head and a gaze that sanguineous enamel waters. The repetition reverses the fate. It can be also a *mise en abyme* (=placing into infinity or a representation of itself) of violence as a decapitated head of Medusa, put – after the myth – on Athena's shield, painted by Caravaggio on the canvas stretched on the shield (fig. 5), and repainted by Utarit on the canvas covered with enamel that confers, as a subsequent title, a "*Second death*" (fig. 4). Instead of losing its original meaning, the recycling by taking one detail pushes the violence to paroxysm where the last layer of enamel is spread out, destroying all of the previously visible contours. The image remaking by Utarit re-presents a sentence to death.

If the *doxa*, doctrine or current opinion, is, according to Roland Barthes, represented by Medusa who "petrifies whoever sees her"[5],

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[4] Some ideas of this paper were first presented in my article, "Stain and Reason from the Three-Headed-Monster : Mimesis-Medusa-Monsters", translated from Thai by Michael Crabtree, catalogue of the exhibition *Silent laughing of monsters / Large scale*, 7-22 November 2002, The Gallery of Art and Design, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, pp. 17-27.

[5] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 126.

Fig. 4 Left : Natee Utarit, *The Second Death*, oil, enamel and
wood stain on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm, 2001.

Fig. 5 Right : Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 60 x 55 cm, 1598, Florence,
Galleria Uffizi.

the horrible head as symbol of mimetic subjugation is here
submitted to veiling, to a paradoxical and personal negation of the
author vacillating between "I like" and "I don't like", between his
own desire, refusal and repression. Caravaggio, one of the icons of
the 17th century art, becomes here an iconic reference for Utarit
who reduces it consequently, and following a semiotic language,
into a status of index : the art of Caravaggio remains a trace of
fascination it exercises over an artist of different culture. The
citation is a consecration in extremis because it defies all
readability - or scriptibility - of the image : a defy launched as
much to cultural knowledge of the public as to physical capacity
of his eyes.

   According to Félibien, Poussin said about Caravaggio that he
"came to the world in order to destroy the painting"[6]. That means,
by his characteristic tenebrism, the work of the Italian master

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[6] Félibien, "Sixième Entretien", in *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*
des plus excellens et modernes, Londres, David Mortier, 1705, t. III, p. 152.

denies the clarity that characterizes Poussin's paintings. "It's an imitation made of lines and colors on some surfaces of what is seen beneath the sun" : that's, after Poussin, a definition of the painting[7] to which the caravaggism, by its absence of diurnal clarity, is opposed. In his own manner, Utarit takes over the destructive act in caravaggesque style by resorting to the darkness of enamel where what is imitated is unclearly seen. He quotes so as not to imitate any more. The contemporary work doesn't take into account a solar lighting.

The meanings are superposed. Caravaggio interprets the myth by giving it a pictorial representation. On the contrary, Utarit doesn't refer directly to the text for its interpretation into visual image. He contents with refiguring what was painted, with reinterpreting the work of classic masters. By metaphor, the layer of enamel, that signs lastly the original meaning of the work, represents an over-interpretation, i.e. the last word of the artist - who doesn't sign his name - on the details, a plus that remains above, a surplus of meaning, an excess of meaning that *kills*...

Reviewed and corrected, Caravaggio's work undergoes the violence of the gaze and of the artist's gestures that make it unrecognizable. The negation of the originals by taking and disguising one detail, makes it clear that original imitation is not a literal giving-to-see, but a critical view. The monster of mimetic representation is transformed into phantoms screaming silently behind the veil of enamel : will one hear an easy reply from the beholder? The invention takes into account the choice (of subject and of its detail), the reframing and the coating of enamel. It depends neither on narrative, nor on descriptive, and in the same time the reframing cuts the link with original narration (fig. 6).

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[7] Letter of the 1st March 1665. See Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, Paris, Hermann, 1989, p. 174.

Fig. 6   Natee Utarit, *Madonna*, oil, enamel and wood stain on
        canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm, 2001.

The focalization and enlargement don't contribute to the clarity
because of enamel that interposes between the selected detail and
the beholder's eyes. One sees that one has a trouble to perceive.
And even when one tries to review, one will see only indistinctly.
Because, as we understand now, Utarit's painting doesn't aim to
reconstitute the conditions of the eyes according to the convention
of mimetic representation. The postmodern fascination for the work
of the past is here a destructive appropriation that makes violence
to its own piece.

The aesthetics of *re* in Utarit's paintings tends significantly
to the aesthetics of *nothing* – repeating traditional opposition
figuration-abstraction – since in the same project, there's another
category of works titled "*Painting with pure reason*" (fig. 7, 8)
where no figure is present. This disturbing mere-nothing defies all
act of naming. It restores a bygone mode of abstraction, hence the
problematic originality that arouses the question of a conceptual
kind. What's new in this questioning – the déjà-vu – of the gaze
and of discourse? What to say and to see? Rather, how to say about

what contradicts the figurative visibility? How to renew the critical discourse and gaze? If not, by fundamental gap that sends back to the other at the expense of its own autonomy, but isn't it a way to preserve the mode of its existence that functions *in relation to*?

Utarit doesn't paint white on white, nor a monochrome painting, but a colored rectangle, or a frame within a frame. Repeating literally the idea of double dimension of transitivity and reflexivity, the painting represents itself. The medium gives itself to see. The represented canvas represents nothing. The *mise en abyme* of representation pushes the *re* inside and to nothing. No dissembling enamel, but the beholder sees nothing more than a colored rectangle or a copy of a frame on which he sees nothing. Evidently the negation of mimesis is not radical since the canvas doesn't represent a mere-nothing, but a virginal canvas that shows an abstract nothingness, another sacred monsters of Western representation. From copy by fragment to image covered with enamel, from represented frame to the representation of nothing, one passes effectively from *re* to mere-nothing, and to nothing, and this within the *re* itself – *in re* – that is recomposed into a nothingness.
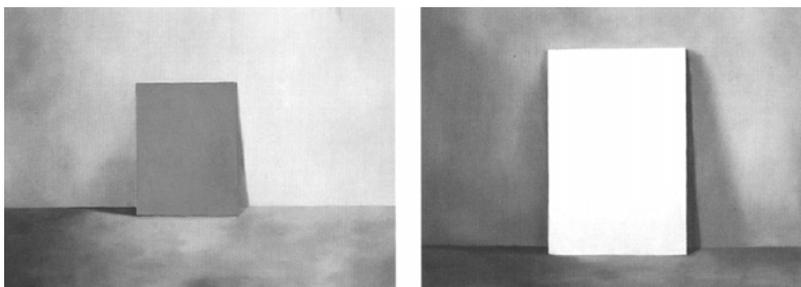

Fig. 7, 8 Natee Utarit, *Jerry's painting*, oil on canvas, 71 x 100 cm.
    (each), 2002.

A return to state of before-figure, or pre-figure, that figures already the frame as preliminary image of all figuration. State of figure that figures nothing. Representation of the pre-figuration : this alleged *nothing* is indeed a *re* - a common frame that comes into representation – that makes sense only in relation to the enameled *monsters*. Dialectic of meaning, of vice versa, between figuration and abstraction. And it's this dialectical meaning that brings in fine to the whole achievement of the work. By dint of looking in the works of the past, by dint of repeating them for his own sake, the painter demonstrates, in dialectic of figure-formless, *re*-nothing, an issue of nihilism that characterizes a great part of the so-called contemporary art. Renewal, repetition, reiteration, every gyratory gesture risks the déjà-vu, the insignificant, the formal and semantic void, unless a new concept engenders new *monsters* by tarnishing the old references, unless it enamels the painting so as to renew it or make it more monstrous…

Revision

When the nearly linear explanation finished in a mere-nothing that characterizes abstract art, there will be nothing to say? Return anyway to the beginning, to its identity, by referring to two Western masters that will allow to reconsider Utarit's work :
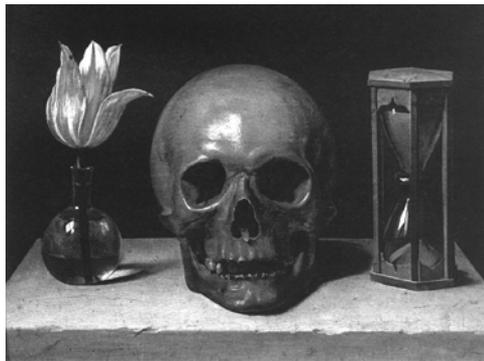
Fig. 9   Philippe de Champaigne, *Vanity*, middle of XVII° c., oil
         on panel, 28.4 x 37.4 cm, Le Mans, Musée de Tessé.

Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674) and Renée Magritte (1889-1967). How to articulate, from the works of the past, the discourse that will illuminate the problematic of the present works, and also how to revise, from these last ones, and from different points of view, the classic sources?

On the still life by Philippe de Champaigne (fig. 9), Louis Marin put a question of how to name the background where the objects of the foreground come off[8]. The beholder sharpens his eyes by scrutinizing the surface of the canvas. But that scanning comes against the dark area that obstructs any effort of naming : the back names itself, or represents itself as such, i.e. in its mimetic and representative system. The back shows its name in this displaying of the black, identifying itself by the painterly properties : it colors itself and, by its fundamentally tautological status, incites consequently the beholder to find out in his verbal resources in order to convey a name. That's to say, the name of the background that the eyes grasp and identify at the first moment. Fake enigma that contains sense.

Return to Utarit and recycle the same question as the one raised by Louis Marin, but the questions should concern both the surface and the background. How to name, in figurative set of "*Silent laughing of monsters*", this surface of stain, in relation to stained figures, without using its technical name of enamel? How to integrate and rebaptize enamel in the network of the representation, to convert it into pictorial signifier that signifies? How to make sense with thing that obstructs the sensible perception? That's by merging it with the figured body as if it was a part of. With a view to homogenizing a visual course, it could be necessary to reread it not as a singularity, an element

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[8] Louis Marin, "Mimésis et description", *Word and Image*, 4(1) January-March 1988, pp. 25-36. See also Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992, pp. 183-184.

different from the figures, but as a body that marks out these ones. Then, instead of jarring on the figures, it raises them, and because of this dialectic of conversion-inversion, it pushes them to the surface by merging with them.

On surface, enamel that veils this surface doesn't have a proper name. It represents nothing of coherent in relation to the represented figures. It represents itself as pure sign, without name but not insignificant. The enamel disturbs the contemplation in accordance with its quality of non-deictic[9] that, nevertheless, points out negatively what it hides. It tears the opaque screen of the representation by denouncing all effect of illusion. But as it obstructs a deciphering of the image, it contributes consequently to slowing down the reading of the picture, that is to temporize its reception. Even if it has no precise characteristics – maybe the one of hiding-showing -, it functions as brake remodeling the accessibility of the image. Enamel as brake contributes to problematizing the work of reference.

While in the figurative set (fig. 10), the surface and figures of the back tend to mix up (one could say, by mental gymnastic, that the background is underlined by the stained surface...), the distinction takes place clearly, in a set of abstract works (fig. 7, 8), between transparent surface and the back. This last one is named "wall" against which an rectangular object is inclined, object that

Fig. 10 Natee Utarit, *Angel*, oil, enamel and wood stain on linen, 200 x 93 cm, 2002.

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[9] In this context, it means element that designates nothing precisely.

Fig. 11 René Magritte, *The Treachery of images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe),* oil on canvas, 62.2 x 81 cm, Los Angeles, County Museum.

one gives a name of *canvas*, *frame*, *picture*, so *painting*. The background called as "wall" and the rectangle named as "canvas" point out another support : the ground. Against the so-called wall, and on the so-called ground, the blank canvas is put. But, the doubt subsists : visually, is this really a canvas, a picture? Because, by naming it as such, one implies its function as a support of painting, while it could be a simple rectangle, apparently blank, that's to say a represented object, configured according to its geometric characteristics, but that the eyes tend to reconfigure as a canvas, the copy of the real canvas. Effectively it's this last one that structures a priori our perception and the act of naming what could not have a prior name.

Like a still life of Champaigne, the painting of Utarit represents an object that stands out from the surface as well as from the background. On contrary, this represented background has effectively a name – wall and ground point out reciprocally – while the rectangle that comes off is deprived of a precise name, but not unnamable. Even though it represents nothing, it remains there like a figure in accordance with its contour that shapes it. Wall, ground, rectangle constitute together a place where the still life in Utarit's style is installed. Vanity of the world, made explicit by the names at the front by the 17th century painter is opposed to the vanity of representation, a meditation on the death of image and on the memory that such image arouses : the work of visual bereavement.

"This is not a pipe" (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) (fig. 11) by Magritte is a matter for some ambiguities issued from the confrontation between iconic signs and linguistic signs that denounce the icon. The inscription aims to deny images it accompanies, rejecting the simple statement "This is a pipe" that the image of the represented pipe contains. This's to say a difference between represented icon and its referent. But the negation clarifies what is there : "a pipe", by naming it. "A pipe" is thus expressed twice, by writing and by figures. More, "a pipe" is effectively a painted writing, combining in one name two signifiers, linguistic one and iconic one. "This is not a pipe" is, in a way, an overdetermination, an overinterpretation, because of one name in excess. A simple and naïve sentence that provokes a fissure or a crack between what one sees and what one knows since Saussure that a linguistic sign, "pipe" for example, does an arbitrary relation with the concept "pipe", and underlines in the same time and contradictorily the similarity between the painted figure (visual assertion) and its legend (visually verbal negation).

The pictorial utterance in Utarit's works is an iconic sign as the negation is not absolute, not verbal but eloquent (fig. 7, 8). The painting denies itself, gives itself to read as a negation of the figuration, without avoiding obviously the figures. Utarit's canvas seems to say the opposite of Magritte's work : "this's a painting", an assertion implied by the negation of Magritte and painted by Utarit. But it's a painting without any confirmation of its status as canvas because a represented rectangle says nothing more than a rectangular frame in spite of its materiality as underlined by the shadow on the ground and on the wall. Nevertheless, like the case of Magritte, the assertive form implies its negation represented in the figurative set. In other words, the real negation is situated in the dialectical relation between two genres, each contains already the negative germs (enamel in the figuration and the blank in abstraction).

Time and meaning

This dialectic tells us of our desire to see. Then, it brings us to see again and to revise our problematic. Because, instead of questioning the visible, could it be also pertinent and legitimate to reformulate the question on the invisible? What doesn't one see in the paintings that represent only stained details? What does the set of abstract works eliminate from the eyes? How to talk about ellipsis that subtends the monsters project all together?

On the one hand, one doesn't see the story of which selected detail is not representative (fig. 13). On the other hand, a wall, a ground and one rectangle don't relate anything (fig. 12). The figures leave aside their original story, just as the three abstract protagonists don't represent any narrative development. Nevertheless, *I* am not supposed to know the precondition of the figures, even if this cultural precedence could instruct me of what, by its absence, completes quietly its aesthetic reception. Utarit's monsters don't cry out, but they laugh in silence, far away, behind the veil of enamel. Neither am I supposed to narrate on the blank screen inclined against the wall, before my eyes, as an geometric eye looking at me. An eye without body, and that doesn't presuppose any anterior body, except the one of the painter and the one of the beholder. Somewhere between the two, a disappointment stands out, related to the game the work plays with the non-informed *I*, and to the fact that *I* cannot assume a role of an educated beholder.

In the two cases, every detail is excluded. Utarit's works don't unveil any pornographic obsession related to the excess of the real, to the attachment to the concrete. The game of hiding-showing cancels all vulgarity of an exact representation, all provocation that subsists only in an extreme contrast between two genres conceived from the same project. It's as if narrative ellipsis took place in the *space between* : something miss in one as in the other, while both autonomize themselves, dialogue with each other. Figures and abstract frames refer to each other, constitutes an

alter-ego, exchange the language that one hardly hears. The abstract works without origin or reference (neither narrative nor figurative) have an original and autonomous meaning by referring to the figures issued from different cultural and artistic references. Reciprocally, the aesthetic of *re* in figurative representation completes its original and autonomous meaning only by returning to the contrary pole. This relation is conceivable by taking into consideration both the formal gap and the conceptual proximity that founds together an invisible bridge, a dilatation.

By mimetic and reiterated gestures, raise again for our two categories of works, the same question as the one Mieke Bal put concerning the relation between the contemporary art and the art of the past (The Baroque precisely) : "Who illuminates – helps us understand – whom?"[10] The problematic doesn't follow the historical and linear chronology, but turns back. The question is, in the case of Utarit, enriched by an apparently ethnical aspect : of the two culture, which one illuminates the other?
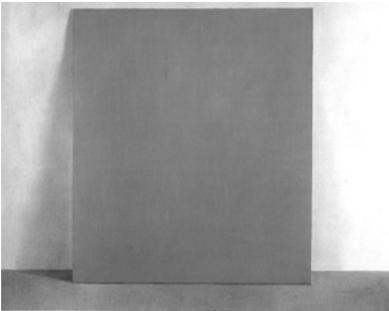

Fig. 12 Left : Natee Utarit, *Cadmium yellow painting*, oil on linen,
        100 x 130 cm, 2001.
Fig. 13 Right : Natee Utarit, *The Young Cardsharp*, oil, enamel
        and wood stain on linen, 240 x 200 cm, 2002.

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[10] Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History,* The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 3.

For the first question, it's clear that it doesn't concern the common dualism or linear binarism that would be resumed into the contradiction between figuration-monsters and abstraction-reasons, present and past, full and empty. But it concerns a dialectic within and beyond itself, where each integrates and possess the other : the figures tend to the non figures because of enamels, and the colored rectangle to figuration of an object – frame or other thing – situated in relation to two namable elements, wall and ground.

To find the names in these images where figures and things blend, is to obey to an obsession – quite semiotic – of making sense : from top to bottom, everything in the work could stand as a sign, even if nothing or mere nothing does signify to me, i.e. does glorify my gaze by a namable and stable sign. Nothing seems definitive. All is a future : enamel that veils, unveils in the same time and vice versa ; the white of the rectangle is put against the wall and on a supposed ground, in waiting for the figures or gestures which, by taking it, identifying it, naming it as well as its two supports, the wall and the ground.

And if the first question haunts us from another point of view, temporal precisely : which one, between the two, is the first to see? (fig. 12, 13) From figuration to abstraction? That will be a progression to the effacing. Or from the non-figure to the figures? That will be from nothing or mere nothing to the figurative emergence. The visual course, that materializes the temporal one, modifies the making of sense. Times before and after are changeable, flexible according to the initial time : that's to say, the question of *where to begin?* installs and anticipates the issue. The time *during* as an imaginary area, invisible, the course drawn by the mobility of imaginary, is so constituent of the loss on one side (figure $\rightarrow$ abstract) and the gain in another side (blank $\rightarrow$ full). Impossible to *see* them simultaneously, each is a point – or *punctum* after Roland Barthes – that one can visualize only separately, and analytically. The final point can reverse to an

initial point and vice versa : each genre obliges to see again, to revise. The *monsters* can change into *reason*, and this one can become monster, even monstrous.

Then, the second and the last question can be reformulated according to the device of the time : can the present change the past, the past that's different from the one of the painter, if one leaves aside the cultural gap? Audacious question. But at least, the citation incites to return to its origin, to rediscover it, to connect at first the present with the past. It brings the gaze to trace back so as to see how the present is articulated in comparison to the past, how it reworks the past in the same time that the past helps to reorganize, to refigure the meaning of the present. No nostalgia, no sentimentalism. Simply and contradictorily, a reconciliation by keeping a distance, since artist does a quotation so as not to unveil its reference. The source reappears only as a background and a remote foundation, as a "*Silent laughing of monsters*" suffocated by enamel. The present and the past, oneself and the other, integrate each other without distinction, partake the same time, that of the gaze which makes the two cultures coexist in the same level, i.e. the one of the painting that condenses time and culture.

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