

Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

Everywhere and Nowhere: Christian Bonnefoi

Christian Bonnefoi and Philip Armstrong in conversation

Philip Armstrong: Your exhibition at Campoli Presti in London includes the most recent series of *Babels*, which is also the title of a series that dates back to 1978. Could you address the relation between these two series, separated by nearly forty years?

Christian Bonnefoi: The reason for this movement back in time is an effect of memory which, at a certain moment in the way I work, involuntarily brings to light certain formal aspects of my previous work. Initially, I find myself in the position of the viewer who is obliged to respond to this evocation, to localize or circumscribe it, in the sense that its sudden and unpredictable emergence arises like an irresistible appeal to the past that demands to be taken into account and expanded. I use the term “evocation” intentionally, according to its Latin roots—an appeal to the gods of the vanquished city so that the gods abandon it and their *penates*, the household gods, are transferred to Rome, where they will be received with honor. After this initial moment, I become the painter again, responsible for his own heritage and accountable for reintroducing this unrealized and vacillating part of the past and giving it body within the most recent conditions of my work. In this sense, it’s about a restoration of the past, a retrieval of what is being pointed out, and a new material reinscription—three movements which, situated in light of the past, serve to reorient the current way in which I work.

PA: In part, the decision to both title and exhibit the most recent series of *Babels* is already “inscribed” in your well-known diagram, which has undergone permanent transformation since the beginning and continues today.[i] Most notably, the *Babels* form the central “spine” of your work (I recall that it was a *Babel* that Yve-Alain Bois addressed back in 1979 in terms of the displaced “logic” of the “future anterior” in his remarkable early essay on your work).[ii] In what sense is it right to say that the recent work at Campoli Presti is at once new and yet predetermined, at once an innovation in the series and yet destined in advance, at once a conversion within a series of acknowledged pictorial conditions and yet informed and inscribed—prescribed—by previous series? In other words, a paradox seems to emerge in which each of the works exhibited is simultaneously autonomous and serial, both self-sufficient and displaced from itself, where the movement of the different series of *Babels* over time is at once the origin of each work and its temporal outcome. A paradox is thus exposed in each of the works shown—that each painting is, in essence, seriate.

CB: This modification of the present by the past has nothing to do with the chronological movement of an evolution. Rather it concerns the confrontation of heterogeneous durations—a chronological and continuous duration exposed to the sudden appearance (“irrepressible,” Henri Bergson suggests) of autonomous and anarchic micro-durations, as if, instead of having been definitively fixed at the moment of their initial appearance, they

continue to develop independently from information, stories, conceptual propositions, but also above all from technical propositions. This is why these paintings are dated “in reverse”: 2016–1984 (1984 is the date of the earlier *Babel IV* series). The first paintings that “evoke” the past date from 2015. They allowed me to open a new section in my diagram—*Remake*—that is added to *Collage* and *Tableau*. This new section seems to me programmatic, a way of tying more tightly together reflection and result. It is in this way that the *Machine* column in early versions of the diagram (in which I place the experiments that accompany my pictorial work) become “Machina Memorialis” in reference to Mary Carruthers’s book on the art of memory in medieval culture.[iii] The subject and object of the *Remakes* is memory, in which time is freed from chronology, a memory that acts. To Carruthers’s book on memory I would add Marcel Proust’s “involuntary memory” and Benjamin’s “posthumous maturation.”

PA: References to Proust appear in the title of a recent series, *Le baiser de Mme. Proust* (2016–17), that was in your Campoli Presti exhibition in London, part of a series titled *Compositions*. Many of your works’ titles reference literary history or philosophical sources. Could you say something about how to situate such references in relation to the work? How exactly is the viewer expected to move from the work to the title and back again?

CB: The *Compositions* represent a mode of exhibition that is opposed to the way the paintings are exhibited; they are elaborated through delimitation and condensation. The *Compositions* are developed through an extension without thickness, in the manner of ancient manuscript scrolls (*rotuli*) or a film reel; their format depends on what wall is available. The collages out of which they are composed are heterogeneous in nature. Some are figures in themselves, unique pieces, that I call *Ludos*. Others are elements of articulations or ligatures that fill in the intervals of one *Ludo* to another; they assure a kind of syntactic function, like asemic elements or punctuation in writing. In their difference from writing, these elements do not have a stable or definitive function. They must be invented on each occasion, which accounts for their sense of proliferation or the general appearance of a puzzle, or, technically speaking, the intarsia in Renaissance paving. The instability of the ensemble stems from the way in which, from one *Composition* to another, one of the elements is redeployed, or a *Ludo* is redeployed, which completely modifies the reserve space in the collages, which assures their syntactic function. I call these “unstable” forms “migratory bodies” in order to insist on the infinite availability suggested by their displacement. I’m thinking here of Pablo Picasso’s pin collages—pull out one pin and each section of the collage is dispersed like a kaleidoscope of butterflies. The puzzle takes the form of an anagram, of migratory morphemes. It is in this way that the unfolding of the *récit* or *historia* becomes possible, to which I am strongly attached (it is a literary attraction), no doubt through nostalgia for Renaissance frescos, and that my involvement in a history strongly tied to Piet Mondrian and American Abstract Expressionism also makes possible. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, it is important to consider that the “figuration” comes from the internal components of painting—in other words, an abstract dimension. I attribute this point of encounter between abstraction and figuration—one could say an equal encounter—to the effects of these “migratory bodies.” For example, the fact that after a while I realized that *recto* and *verso* are the abstract names for back and face, and that in a certain way the difference between abstraction and figuration depends on a point of view that, if modified, cancels all of these oppositions—this is the action of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which is the principle of every *récit*. Some time ago I noted that painting, like all practice, produces not only forms but knowledge. However, once it appears, this

knowledge is named—that is, it turns into language, whether theoretical or poetic, and in doing so no longer has any importance within the pictorial operation itself. I find a permeability with the *Compositions* between language and painting, which are in a way transparent to one another, not in meaning but in sensation, as in the Proustian récit where the visible and the music animates the rhythm of sentences. Theory is incorporated; absorbed by the general movement of the phrasing, it becomes a constituent element in the same manner as technique, grammar, or the rhetorical figures that traverse it. As another example, in Jean-Luc Godard's work, the play on words, aphorisms, and rapid and effective slogans are not based on language but cinematic techniques of montage and insert. Cinema is an idiolect.

Le baiser de Mme. Proust recalls a short paragraph from Proust's *The Fugitive* (1927) where the author sees a kiss from afar, a kiss that comes into being on the edge of his mother's lips, then rises up from the mouth to take flight toward the son's forehead, traverses Venice's "crystalline" air by leaning drop by drop on the light's corpuscles, up to attaining its goal. This episode is preceded by a visit to the Arena Chapel, where Proust expands upon Giotto's angels, which, according to him, are "veritable birds" that in the frescos traverse the sky just as the kiss traverses the air of Venice. I won't enter into the details, since I have offered a reading of this scene elsewhere.[iv] But to conclude, I want to hold onto the idea of "migratory bodies" from this Proustian sequence, which function in the same way as my *Compositions*—transmuted bodies in movement coming from different horizons (pictorial, literary, theological, et cetera) receptive to future transformations. They are like the midrashes that come from the outside, in other words from the side of the reader or viewer, embellishing the biblical text by inserting itself in the text. Here lies the reader and viewer's back and forth between the title and image, a coming and going that they share with the painter-author, one and the other assuring in its own manner the "survival" of an original text by accompanying it in its mutations. Benjamin writes: "For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change." [v]

PA: I am struck by the way in which *Eureka 8* (2016–17)—a freestanding panel exhibited in London that can be seen from both sides—is made from painting on a synthetic transparent canvas rather than the tarlatan you usually employ, which suggests different degrees of transparency in the surface, different ways in which light passes through a surface. The reference here also evokes stained glass windows. How do these different surfaces suggest other ways to think of the play of visibility and invisibility, transparency and opacity, gesture and temporality?

CB: My supports—tarlatan, silk, or tissue—have always been chosen in relation to their greatest possible permeability. The medium placed on the surface traverses the support. The mark inscribed from the exterior is developed through impregnation into the support's thickness. Thus, recto and verso are painted "at the same time"; they are indissociably tied into a unity that in French I call the *plan*. It delimits—in other words, withdraws from space—a place that is the field of expansion specific to what I call the *tableau*. My first *Babels* experimented with the infinite possibilities opened up by this relation between recto and verso—their opposition, confrontation, association. The *Babel IV* paintings, which I took up under the *Remakes* at the exhibition at Campoli-Presti, are subtitled "An Equation under God Janus" (after Stéphane Mallarmé's phrase) in order to clarify that if the recto and verso are indissociably tied in the *plan*, they are so "successively," conserving a part of their autonomy. In Mallarmé's terms: "It is only thanks to the repetition of two texts that one can

play with part of the whole, or thanks to reversing the same text, a second way of rereading, which allows for having the whole successively.”[vi] With the “two-sided” structure of *Eureka 8*, the transversal movement passes from liquid to light—in other words, the cause of the transparency is displaced from the pictorial process internal to an exterior intervention. “Successivity” is abolished, and there is no longer either recto or verso. “There is no place” (Saint Augustin), to the extent that painting is above all else the constitution of place and the exclusion of space. Far from contradicting myself in relation to my position regarding painting, I would say that this coming into appearance of space in and across the two faces relativizes it the more it becomes at once center and circumference, as in Pascal’s proposition “everywhere and nowhere.” The extreme thinness of the thread, which is only revealed through the sensation of fragility, paradoxically attains its most extreme thickness here since, by positing the forms specific to what aligns itself with the tableau, painting embodies through negation everything that is irrelevant—that is, its environment and what Proust calls the “obscure region,” the world peripheral to sensation. The most exterior part of the *plan* is not the surface but language or light. Its deepest part is not the ground but the unfathomable or light.

Christian Bonnefoi (1948, Salindres, France) is an artist living and working between Paris and Changy.

Notes:

[i] For the diagram up to 2008, see <http://www.christian-bonnefoi.com/diagramme-2008/>.

[ii] Yve-Alain Bois, *Le futur antérieur: Sur une toile de Christian Bonnefoi*,” reprinted in Christian Bonnefoi, *Écrits sur l’art, 1974–1981* (Brussels: Éditions La Part de l’Œil, 1997), 257–65.

[iii] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[iv] Christian Bonnefoi, *L’envol du baiser de Mme Proust, Ou: Comment faire une composition en forme de récit* (Marseille: Presse Universitaire de Marseille, 2017).

[v] Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 256.

[vi] Jacques Scherer, *Le “Livre” de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 189.