

Mehr Licht. The Luminous Painting of Nicolas Delprat.

According to tradition, Goethe's last words were "Mehr Licht" ("More Light"). These two words came back to me as I looked for the first time at Nicolas Delprat's recent paintings in an exhibition in Lyon. These works are of and about light. As such, they belong to a long and fruitful tradition in Western painting. There is no need to underscore the importance of light in this history: the Western art of painting is inextricably tied to the question of representing light. Everybody will have his own examples, depending on his or her personal experiences. Here are a few of the names that come to my mind as I write. I'm listing them as they pop up, randomly and without any desire to organize them: Caravaggio, Bonnard, Friedrich, De la Tour, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hopper, Turner and Monet. The brainstorming continues, and reaching into the second half of the twentieth century, I add the following to my list: Richter, Rothko, Ruscha and Warhol (I'm thinking in particular of the hallucinatory Shadows series of 1978-1979 on view at Dia Beacon). Let me not forget Ryman or Soulages for whom light is the very essence of their work. Luminosity seems to me particularly relevant to their paintings: completely porous to surrounding light, they assert in this manner their perfect indifference and resistance to ideology and any attempt to restrict them to an autotelic dimension.

Of course, the concern for light extends beyond painting and has sustained a very diverse range of artistic practices. From Jan Dibbets to Walter de Maria and from Paul Sharits to James Turrell, many are the artists associated with conceptual or environmental art as well as with experimental film to have deconstructed luminous "matter" not only through its representation but also, and more importantly, its presentation. The same can be said of the artists from that same generation such as Flavin, Merz, Morellet and Nauman who have used neon tubes to create artistic propositions. Countless contemporary figures have elaborated on this fascination for light.

Delprat overtly claims this genealogy for himself. But at the same time, he likes to play with anachronisms to cover up his tracks. For, if Delprat has produced pieces with neon tubes which assert the presentness of light, he is mainly interested in a representational approach that endows his luminous material with a mnemonic and pictorial aspect. Most of his paintings evoke not actual light but memories of lights: lights either forgotten, remembered or imagined. Lights, in any case, reinterpreted through painting. At first sight his compositions seem to pay homage to Minimalism. The deceitfully monochromatic surface of the paintings, the repeated use of primary shapes and symmetrical formulas, all these stylistic traits point to Minimalist art. Were it not for the important fact that Delprat's paintings refer to a de facto external luminous reality. His works therefore do not obey the self-reflexive mantra of Minimalism and are not tied down to tautology. Not only do they seek to express realities that exist beyond them but, using as their source elements that have been filtered through memory, they feed on the aspect of temporality proscribed by the Minimalist aesthetic. Hence, the sense of anachronism tinged with irony of a return to painting by way of representing Dan Flavin's neon tubes or James Turrell's environmental pieces, and thus substituting for the immanence and immediacy sought by these artists a pictorial representation of change through time in which time and space are harmoniously united.

This is not to say that the oeuvre of Nicolas Delprat can be defined alone by references to preexisting art works. The lights remembered and retranscribed in his paintings also call back to sources found in film (for instance, the computer Hal in 2001), the environment, architecture or domestic life. Some of the paintings are as well the transcription of lights (re)invented by the artist. All the same, this last category is just as much as the others the product of a shuffling back and forth between memory and oblivion. At times ethereal, or opaque (screened by their "hard-edge" casing), the luminous paintings of Nicolas Delprat distill their haunting atmosphere without ever divulging their secret. A secret which it would be pointless to try and uncover. Mehr Licht !

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