

Bernard Piffaretti by Joe Fyfe



Untitled, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 59 x 39 3/8".
Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

As the following interview was under-going final edit, I came across this statement: “To experience the same thing twice puts the first under erasure and makes the second redundant. It creates a preclusion of hierarchy.” It is from an essay by Meg O’Rourke on Roni Horn, but it also succinctly expresses the phenomenon at work in the paintings of Bernard Piffaretti. For nearly two decades, Piffaretti has been dividing his canvas with a vertical line, painting an abstract image on one half and then copying it onto the other. The left half does not necessarily constitute the original; he might just as well begin on the right. Piffaretti started working with this highly recognizable method in the heyday of simulationism, but his duplication involves not the painting as copy but the copy as painting.

I had seen a number of Piffaretti’s paintings in Paris, where I had detected a congruity between the French conception of the building facade and the contemporary French painters’ conception of the picture plane. As I met more artists there, I was introduced to the term *tableau*: the character or complexion of a given time. The word carried historical and political meaning and simultaneously indicated the resolved picture. The idea of the “fully achieved painting” goes back to the pre-Revolution Academy and is associated with authoritarianism. The contemporary French painters aimed to disrupt this convention: the Support/Surface group of artists from the late ’60s and early

'70s, for example, dismantled paintings, burned holes in them, and rolled them up to indicate political resistance to authority as much as to whimsically advance certain Greenbergian ideas about the integrity of the picture plane. This interview, a conversation complemented by a subsequent email exchange, reflects on the tableau as a site of transition and continuity.

I find Piffaretti to be our most important contemporary painter. The work manages to retain the full-body experience, both physical and retinal, of standing in front of a painting, while it demonstrates the ways in which the force of history provides an entrance for the seemingly infinite replication of itself. Piffaretti's work unites those great opposites of twentieth-century French modernism, Duchamp and Matisse: it is decorative painting in the service of the mind.

Joe Fyfe I have observed that in French painting the plane is where a transition takes place, where the tableau is porous and the viewer's point of entry is broken up.

Bernard Piffaretti French painting has always had a relation to simplicity; it is about fact, not effect. This is not because of nationality, but part of the traditional attitude is about continuity. Matisse's *Red Studio* is simple—it's an attitude, what Eric de Chassey called a "decorative violence."

JF In the Matisse/Picasso exhibition [on view in Paris at the time], I was surprised to see that expressionism in Picasso's hands felt like a cabinet drama, while Matisse's breaking of the larger, decorative language of painting and his awareness of the breadth of light and color on a surface seemed very modern. Speaking of languages, I am wondering about the title of your 2000 exhibition at the Cartier Foundation, *Va-et-vient* (Come and Go). I am told this is French sexual slang, which led me to think that your work examined the mechanistic aspect of making a painting, as if the act of painting drew from a set of responses, like sex does to a certain extent.

BP *Va-et-vient* refers to a short play of the same name by Samuel Beckett. Three people in similar dress share a bench. One leaves and another arrives; the permutations and combinations continue for a prescribed period. This pertains to my work inasmuch as the difference between the painting and the viewer is that the painting always has an active attitude, it is always unfinished: a quality of the practice of painting itself. This daily attitude is banal; it's the opposite of contemplation. The critical moment in making my paintings is the first mark down the middle, which declares, THE SURFACE IS HERE. It is produced very calmly, but it is violent and immediately negates the authority of the tableau, making all the aesthetic decisions unimportant by becoming a simple fact that the first situation will be redone. The quality of subjectivity breaks down. Redoing is a negation of series, of origin. This central mark refers to the emblematic situation of Matisse when he said, "It's not a woman; it's a painting." The image an artist paints begins to have the attitude of image painting; it's not just the expression of the artist. My definition of the tableau goes back to the origin of the word, *tabula*, table in Latin. You move things around on a table arbitrarily, without necessity. The stuff is just there, ready to be acted on.

JF Your paintings remind me of two pages of an open book, like Jasper Johns's 1976 painting *End Paper*. The repeated image literalizes the painting. Another instance is Johns's painting *Fool's House* [1962], which has BROOM written on it and a broom attached. In many of your paintings, the patterns seem to nod toward the harlequin, an early modernist theme. This clownlike element is in some Beckett characters, too.

BP Yes, the paintings are lyrical, comic and human.

JF This idea of the daily attitude reminds me of James Schuyler, who made everyday moments into poems.

BP Georges Perec, the deceased French writer and member of Oulipo, wrote a novel, *La Disparition*, without using the letter e—it's a negation. This "disparition" [disappearance] creates a very dynamic reading.

JF To negate one thing is an odd but very plastic way of working with a given material.

BP Negation is an affirmation of what is there. I negate to reaffirm the fact of the painting.



Untitled, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 72 1/2 x 50". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

E-mail exchanges from the summer of 2004

BP Obviously to stand in front of a painting and observe the work is to come face to face with an image. Our memory urges us fundamentally to reconstruct the time and duration of its making. The painting does not hide anything. It shows us its composition, its implementation and its rhythm.

We are “in the painting” at the wrong moment: we are always situated “after” the history of the painting itself. But this “after” is continually replayed and repeated. This image is produced in the memory toward a future that is always open and always different. The image of the painting thus becomes a question of vital importance; it forms part of a jostled and unfinished genealogy.

So the workplace is a canvas surface; the visual unity of the canvas is attacked by the central marking. This limit, this zone, marks the passing from one state to another. Without this banal and very physical marking, nothing can begin; it is the observer who makes possible and triggers the arrival of the image of painting.

Each canvas is approached in reaction to the previous one. The ways of painting and the situations are consequently different. The first half of the painting is worked on until it attains a sufficient pictorial content. It is already the memory of what will be produced on the other half of the canvas. Subjectivity has already been strangled.

Duplication is not an end. The movement becomes a matrix. The creativity is frustrated. Some canvases retain an unpainted side—the canvas, the painting, is finished but the process unfinished. Complexity and too many actions have made total duplication impossible. This state of abandonment, by its weakness, showcases the usual “method” by putting it at fault.

JF But your method attempts to explain the painting.

BP The image does not owe its impact to a state of perfect resemblance, but it draws its strength from the situation. In front of my paintings, the past continually puts itself back in place. There is no *recent painting*. The state of difference and repetition in my painting inevitably conjures a thought about time. That is really where the image is born. The paintings are literally created *afterward*. The central marking, this neuralgic axis, is the kingpin, a dialectic line. History always starts twice.

Every painting crystallizes a survival and a rupture. It clearly says that the image is not imitation. The image is the difference made visible. The painting blows apart its own modes of creation and this telescoping creates an assemblage that produces images.

Duplication creates other conditions of observation and plunges the viewer into a productive, and sometimes jubilant, malaise. That is the intention of the image.

JF Looking at the work in your show at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in March [2004], I noticed how the paintings managed to change my perception of them. I had an encounter with them that was distinct from what I previously experienced at your studio or your New York show at Cheim & Read: there was a point where I began to look at the work as pure topography; the optical quality of the color seemed to disappear, and the separation of the two sides became irrelevant. I looked at the paintings as a continuous network of marks. What was unexpected was this moment where all of my attention was focused on one elemental aspect: the continuity of the substance of paint on a canvas. Even the color differences disappeared.

BP If the colors of the pictures at Nathalie Obadia seemed to disappear, it is perhaps because those pictures are visually simpler. The process of these paintings is more visible because each action is strongly pronounced. Two or three pictures play with the central mark, which the typology of the pictorial situations tended to camouflage. This approach should not be seen as an evolution; there are many other paintings from previous years created with the same compositional element.

JF We discussed Samuel Beckett earlier; I am thinking about your paintings in relation to Beckett's method (in the bulk of his mature work) of writing in French and translating his text into English afterward, so that his language was less precious or artistic, more directly functional. The effect was to make the English texts unfamiliar. In the case of your work, you are, in a sense, supplying both the original text and the translation, and therefore the viewer confronts a painting that is at once both familiar and unfamiliarly fresh.

BP Samuel Beckett and Herman Melville are emblematic figures of the artist face to face with the act of creation. You know, "I can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on." With Mallarmé, Beckett and Melville are part of the "standard ideal," and I have often made reference to them myself. I love standards. Your remark about Beckett's writing method elaborates on the principle that creation is born of constraint. My protocol makes the painting function. The viewer reactivates all the actions that have taken place. The two moments of the painting (to the left and right of the central mark) resist, assimilate and complete each other. We don't have two paintings like *Factum I* and *Factum II*. Rauschenberg showed that expressionism can be imitated. It then became an aesthetic tool that was no longer viable.

JF I am intrigued by your mention of Melville. He was admired by the Abstract Expressionists, but how is he important to contemporary French painters?

BP Melville is a standard. He was very influential on American Abstract Expressionists—for them Moby Dick was "Sublimis." That generation, for me, was "Heroicus" and "Sublimis." But I was on the way to flat virtuosity. I'm thinking of Gilles Deleuze's essay "Bartleby, or The Formula." Deleuze writes that Bartleby's repeated response in Melville's short story *Bartleby the Scrivener*, "I would prefer not to," "disconnects not only words and things, words and actions but also actions and words. The formula cuts off the language from all references, that which appears and disappears without reference to itself or anything else." My central mark disconnects and cuts off all painting situations from all references.

The simple act of redoing almost identically everything (every *think*) that was painted the first time around has the effect of cutting off any subjective effects due to the painting's form, style or color, so that it is now just painting. It is not a copy, because a copy is made in relation to a final state. It really is a matter of displacement, of a wholly repeated time. A "theft," to quote Deleuze once again.



Untitled (BP 282), 2004, acrylic on canvas, 63 × 44". Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

JF I am also thinking about montage, and the two images within a single rectangle. There is an implication that this image, this visual situation, is simply one fragment of many. Edward Hopper thought of his work as a single frame from a narrative, a film. You might be supplying frames from a film in order to negate the finality of the boundaries of the rectangle.

BP This notion of editing and the implications of two images in one rectangle could be rooted emblematically in the work of Manet. Michael Fried says that Manet displaces the viewer from his habitual position in front of the painting, that it is nearly impossible for the viewer to position himself at the center of the picture. This constraint of displacement reinforces Michel Foucault's analysis, and it is perhaps there that the two meet. They both make the possibility of the viewer an absolute priority. In my paintings the divided composition leads the spectator into a come and go. The movement is directed off course by the central mark that will always bring the line of sight back to where it should be: facing the picture. It is only because of this mobility that the spectator can play the starring role in the film of painting, which takes place from picture to picture. This film annuls, as you say, the limits of the rectangle, which is the canvas and stretchers.

JF It occurs to me that your relationship to French painting at this moment is similar to that of Martin Barre. He had a very particular problem, because of a fortunate enmeshment of intelligence and sensibility; to put it bluntly, he was trying to enmesh the painted figure with the tableau. But although his concerns were part of a larger dialogue in painting that was going on in France at that time, he was something of a unique figure unto himself, similar to Robert

Ryman here, a painter with concerns rather too idiosyncratic to really provide a direction, more simply marking a point where a number of problems cluster and are addressed in an interesting way.

BP It's true that my relationship with the work of Martin Barre includes an attitude similar to Robert Ryman's. For them and for me the question of tableau is fundamental. When I really started working at the beginning of the '80s, I had in mind two principal statements. The first by Matisse: "It's not a woman, it's a painting." The second by Barnett Newman: "There is a difference between making paintings and making images." Also, some major answers had been provided by the paintings of the Mannerists at the end of the sixteenth century, then by Poussin and after them, the long and beautiful "brochette": Manet, Seurat, Cézanne

Paradoxically, I was a long way from the heroic painters. I situate my painting in the practice of the painting as embodying a disenchanted attitude and activity. Like On Kawara, but in a very different way, I belong to the family of procedural artists. Year after year, the paintings are all totally different and yet profoundly similar.

JF Deleuze goes on to say that "the formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred," and that "Bartleby has won the right to survive, to remain immobile and upright before a blind wall." Then he uses a beautiful comment from Blanchot: "Pure patient passivity." All these comments, particularly the last one, seem to me good descriptions of what it is like to make a painting. It makes me think that there are a number of points in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature that provide "devastating formulas." I am thinking of stories that contain not so much narratives as situations that seem to exist in the immediate present, like a kind of problem that never works out but continues—Poe's "Pit and the Pendulum" or Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where the knot of the story is so strong that it arrests any narrative conclusion. The stories end, of course, but they also exist in a kind of perpetual present, affirming the power of narrative. These "formulas" remind me of your paintings. I was uptown the other day and I saw an exhibition of the first upside-down paintings that Georg Baselitz exhibited, and I thought of the similarities between your paintings and his, the way you both created a formula for transgressing how the viewer looks at the painting. In both cases you created a kind of knot that affirms painting and disables it at the same time.

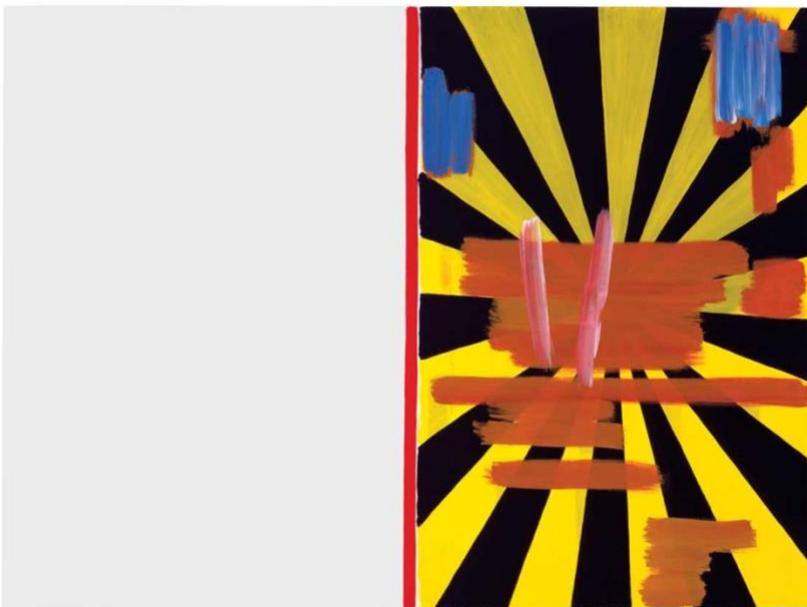
BP In fact every painting is a renunciation, and every time I make one I have this experience. Concerning the "pure patient passivity" of Blanchot—when I am reacting on the second side of the painting, the duplication is really a patient passivity. Doing all the acts of the first time is pure painting. The first time is a memory of the second—it freezes the expression.

JF It devalues it of its originality, its momentousness.

BP It is as if painting started trouble over the “it speaks for itself” of any formal principle exhausted by years of faithful service. As you say, there is a knot that affirms the tableau and arrests it at the same time. The questions of painting are exhibited under the spotlight of the systematic procedure. In my case the duplication affirms the narrative power of expression and arrests it at the same time. In twentieth-century literature, my family is Oulipo. There is a fundamental friendship between my work and the group of twentieth-century experimental writers associated with Oulipo: Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Harry Mathews and Georges Perec. There the text is a physical activity. There is a distinction between the constraint and the form. It’s not exactly the same. The arbitrary character of constraint is the functionality itself. This process makes a form. It’s the most important point. Now, it seems to me that Baselitz’s upside-down painting isn’t producing, year after year, any form. He is not arresting the narrative power of expression. I remember my first time in Chicago in 1982. I had come from Paris. I had also visited several private collections in New York, Los Angeles and Houston on this trip. In Chicago, I spent the night in a collector’s house. In my bedroom was a large Lupertz and a big image of an eagle, painted by Baselitz. It was a sleepless night for me, and not because of the jet lag. The power of Expressionism was so present. These forms of expression only acquired value from personal or historical mythologies.

JF You mean the power of Expressionism was so strong you couldn’t sleep?

BP The power of Expressionism, or its comeback. It’s so easy to “splash” an expression. Or now, when so many artists are creating images or work about the misery of the world or of today’s reality. The exhibition space becomes a medium in itself, in a misinterpretation of Debord’s “society of the spectacle.” For me it’s a pornographic attitude.



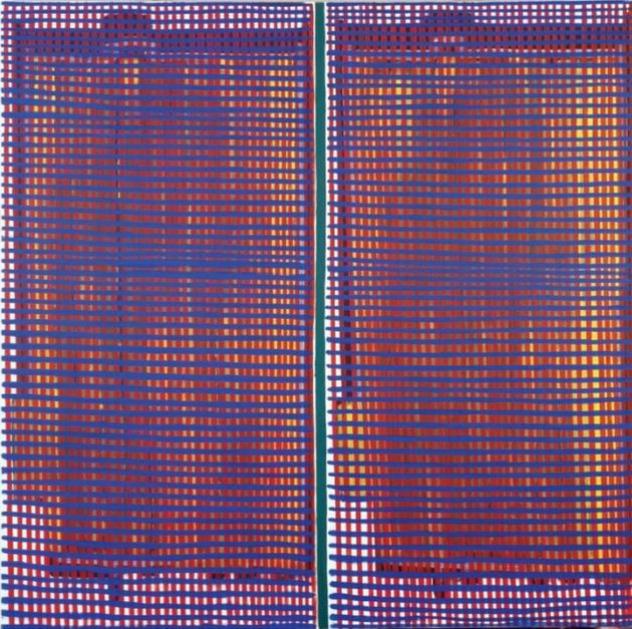
Untitled, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 59 × 78 3/4". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

JF We were having lunch in the Japanese restaurant near your studio and talking about the Barnett Newman show that I had seen in Philadelphia and you had seen in London. I mentioned that the work made me think of a jazz musician, in that Newman would anticipate himself; he might handle a particular color or format and change it slightly so it would be unexpected. He also seemed conscious of making a “Newman” painting and played with how to put a stripe down in a new way, etc.

BP As you know, the context and the questions of Barnett Newman were very different when he was working. In the mid-'40s he was preoccupied with Jewish myths concerning the Creation. For him the light was this symbol that was translated by the vertical stripe. Newman later referred to the series *Onement* as the beginning of his present life of generating emotions. He said, and this is paraphrased: The self, terrible and constant, is the subject matter of my painting. Newman takes the place of the first man: the first man was an artist, the creation is the beginning, the beginning was creation. The painting was both physical and metaphysical. Whereas for me, the central mark is just the starting act of the painting. It's a sign (a design), a very basic action that shows the surface of the canvas and presents the practice of the painting. For Newman, for example, the red tones were associated with the human presence, and it was one of the colors he used most often. About *Anna's Light* (1968) Newman remarked that he wanted to see how far he could push red. The challenge for him was to make the colors expressive rather than didactic. For me the colors are more (flat) didactic acts than expressive resolutions. Each situation uses a color. The work of the painting exhibits how to have a red after a black.

JF What about other American painting? Any interest in contemporary American painting?

BP I understand the attitude of Peter Halley's statements, but one of my first interests in contemporary American painting concerns the most Swiss of American artists, or rather the most American of Swiss artists, Olivier Mosset, and his painting: banal without aura. He drives with a very serious attitude along the imperturbable road of desacralization of the “chromo-zone” and art in general, looking at the painting with “no regrets and no progress.” Katharina Grosse's painting has no drawing. The work itself produces signs of activities. The density of the color becomes very important. The essential questions don't have any borderline.



Untitled, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

JF Your wife told me that she is learning Japanese. What is your particular interest in Japan?

BP It's a very visual civilization. In the language, for example, the word *color* is the same as *passion*. And the translation of the adjective *varied* uses the repetition in its ideogram of the twin figure color/color. As in Noh theater, my central mark is like the Waki, who dresses in a simple costume in dark colors. The Waki is the first to appear; he is the mediator between actors and spectators. The Waki is very neutral and static, but without him nothing can go on. The Shite wears colorful costumes and is the player. The painting that occurs two times in my work is like the very active Shite, who produces the movement and attracts the viewer. But this comparison is not a formula for my work. The painting will, in the end, never represent anything. It will present painting, representing itself in its intimacy and its difference. It's a realistic abstraction.

JF What about the unfinished paintings? There's a formal decision going on there.

BP The principle of duplication includes some "variations" like the *inaderives* (unfinished process; finished painting). These consist of painting one side of the canvas and not duplicating it. I don't decide in advance to just paint one side. The complexity of painting the image in this case makes the duplication impossible. This state of abandonment, by its weakness, displays the usual method as a fault. This blankness also means that the origin is in the moment. The original is not the making of the first part, but its opposite, whose visible mark remains the vertical line. Then there are the paintings that I have done since 1990, where a verbal or an equivalent sign, such as a percent symbol or the word *bis* ["until" in German] or *alias* attempts to explain the doubling painting.

JF You told me that the drawings are in an outside realm, that they always come after the paintings and they are done from finished paintings, as if from a model.

BP Yes, they are made after the paintings, on regular paper. They are an archival tool, a way of reproducing the visual difference from their context and the duplication of the painting. I remake the entirety of the image of the painting. These variations with little canvases and drawings are sub-products or even by-products. They are for personal use, though I do sometimes exhibit them. I have been making a new by-product recently; the title of the series is *Poncif*, the old technical term for a second reproduction of a drawing, by which little holes would be pierced in the paper along the lines of a reproduction and black powder sifted through to indicate the lines on a second surface. But here the little holes are represented by black dots on the image. If you remember, *Poncif* refers back to my practice of presenting the chronicle of the tableau where banality becomes the ideal standard in painting.