

Don't ask Marlon Red what her paintings are about. Could they be abstracted retinal memory, like of the shimmering surfaces of the Bistritz river in a sunny day? Maybe. Or maybe it's the Broadway Boogie Woogie of big city life in Düsseldorf? Possibly. Or rather, a diary of engaging with the history of modern art, since Hilma af Klint and the Albers to contemporary dance. It most likely is that, to some extent. But how about just random perceptions and feelings, maybe reveries and dream states? I am certainly reminded of writers who woke up from their dreams with an audio recorder next to their bed, to (barely coherently) document what they remembered. Well, probably a bit of all – it doesn't matter. Or rather, I think it matters, but in a different way.

You'll know she loves the music of Claude Debussy. It's not just that she finds delectation in listening to it like you and me, but she engages with it as with a source material for her own process. He, well, just truly didn't like hearing his music described as such *reflections* of things. Impressions. He hated it. Impressionism! He took offence at that classification... all while paradoxically titling his music so that it would set its audiences in the direction of notions of nature: afternoon, nocturne, moonlight, reflections in water... And called it "musique en plein air". When in a good mood, he would play abstract piano improvisations to his guests to see if they could truly "feel" the rain falling on forest leaves and then the movement of sea waves that he told them they are supposed to hear... only to later tell them it had been the same music for both.

If there is to be value in concrete associations for abstract art, I think it has to reside in the process of remembrance rather than the memories themselves. As audiences, we should acknowledge the hints left by the artist, but then leave them behind. Like feeling the sound and texture of a place, and then having it disappear from our conscience. Feeling the volume and the quality of a space, and then letting it turn dark. A bit like the helpless theologians who would resort to defining divinity by patiently enumerating all the things it is *not* – in the hope that this would circumscribe somehow its unspeakable, undefinable greatness and maybe even make it present. Similarly, I think, the imprints these concrete associations leave on us after they are gone is what makes the experience of abstract art. A composition of certain *absences*.

Nobody put it better than Debussy himself: "Who knows the secret of musical composition? The sound of the sea, the curve of a horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird leave in us multiple impressions. And, suddenly, one of these memories breaks away out of us and expresses itself in musical language. It carries within itself its own harmony. Whatever we try, we'll never be able to find something more right or more sincere. [...] I want to write down my musical dream with the most complete detachment from myself. I want to sing my inner landscape with the naïve innocence of a child."¹ Or, like his friend Mallarmé more succinctly put it: "la poésie sans les mots"² (poetry without the words).

The metaphors of transgression of language and of cross-translation come off rather evidently in the materials one can revise about the emergence of modern art. The Renaissance vision was of *disegno interno* which meant the artists, scrutinizers and contemplators of the Ideas (eternal forms) imprinted in him, used their *inventio* to translate them by the craft of their hand into concrete forms and recognizable representations. The moderns took the opposing path, starting from tangible cues on their linguistic³ / mediumistic way to Reason or, respectively, to "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."⁴

The trouble, then, with the art of Marlon Red is that it refrains from either pointing you where to

1 Conversation with Henri Malherbe, published 1911.

2 "Plaisir sacré", published 1897.

3 "Transcoding" was the word used by composer Gérard Pesson in an 1988 text on Mahler and Debussy.

4 The famous philosopher who wrote this shall remain uncredited.

start at and also from suggesting where you could possibly arrive with it. It is up to you to anchor her rectangular patterns to a forest you remember as a child, or the misty darkness of her most recent series of graphic works to a certain dream you once had. It is up to you to assign the ultimate signification of some paintings or installations as being about the beauty of abstract forms or maybe a disguised political manifesto on the liberation of the bodily self. Or even to reject these all. She will not approve or disprove of any of the ways you will approach her work. A language with neither a written vocabulary nor a set of semantic rules feels like a pure game, but then, a game can be the most serious of things – Claude Debussy certainly thought so. By projecting it onto her own body and performing it, the game of abstraction as a form of translation of the indefinables comes to life, vibrant or eerie like an electronic soundscape or a piano *rêverie*. If writing about music is, proverbially, like dancing about architecture, then that's exactly what Marlon Red, too, is doing. A most worthwhile of endeavours if you ask me.

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