

## Pierre André Ferrand

*About white pictures, and the introduction of colour. Some reference points.*<sup>1</sup>

La Chaux-de-Fonds, January 1996.

When an artist directly expresses his motives and aims, he is doubtless performing a useful, even essential, task. In revealing the origin of his work, he reminds us that artistic form has first and foremost an expressive significance, that we must be capable of recognizing. This explanation, however, also carries a risk, which is that of transforming the immediate, *unique* presence of the visible form into an empirical and debatable construction. Thus, the artist understands that, in explaining his work, he is making a choice. The form he tries to envisage is something that deep down he can neither recognize nor describe. He can only create it.

In order to understand this, it has to be remembered that the artist acts out of necessity. Reason has little influence on his work, in other words reason does not serve as a useful guide. Only *inspiration* is of use to the artist. Without the power of interior vision he can create nothing, because he can *identify* nothing. Thus, the artist soon comes to realize that conditions imposed by external circumstances are irrelevant. At times, this fact may seem difficult to grasp. The form he visualizes seems so simple. Nevertheless, experience shows that if this form is beyond his reach, neither willpower nor reason are of any use to him.

For this reason, during periods of dejection, it is the duty of the artist to stay calm. For the same reason, he must not project his emotions or his opinions onto his work. He must concentrate on original intuition. He must follow the logic imposed by intuition, come what may. It is the work itself that will guide the way. If the form is *inspired*, it will always show the artist what he must do.

To those who wonder why painter deprives himself of colour, I would answer : because mastery of form depends on it. The reply encompasses an eventuality that cannot be ignored, namely the possibility that the development of the work has reached its conclusion.

Recently, I have been working with so few resources that it sometimes seemed restrictive. Notwithstanding, renunciation is an integral part of artistic activity. Firstly, because the artist cannot *do everything*, but secondly, and more importantly, he must make an effort to think about the resources available to him in an abstract and detached way. When one considers things

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<sup>1</sup> This text was written for the exhibition at the Galerie Patrick Roy Lausanne in February 1996. English translation was edited for the presentation of works in Art'Basel in June the same year.

without any feeling of possessiveness, their potential becomes more apparent. Thus, in art, poverty is more productive than eclecticism.

If anyone had asked me the reason for my choice, my reply might well have been unconvincing. What was clear, however, was the path I should take. Also the certainty that I should follow it with perseverance.

The white pictures taught me to see inside myself. This is, I believe, the prime motivation for their creation. They helped me to familiarize myself with my own vision of art. Strange as it may seem, I looked at them a great deal. Sometimes these pictures filled me with intense joy. First and foremost, they allowed me to reevaluate the resources at my disposal, including the paint itself. But at the same time, they enabled me to assess my own strength. To direct my inner life. To learn to visualize things in my mind.

Of course that way of looking at these works changed according to situation. At times, these pictures simply caused embarrassment and disappointment. At times, I was truly discouraged to see how unreal they were.

It is worth remembering that I never envisaged my work as a commentary on art. Even less was it a critique of painting. On the contrary, my attitude to art throughout that period remained one of great respect and reflectiveness. I understood that, in order to be capable of *seeing* in painting, the artist must ceaselessly strive to achieve genuine *abstraction*. To recoup the strength necessary to paint, he must be able to conceive painting *without images*. Starting from an impoverished standpoint. The form dictated itself, an empty form. A form *without qualities*.

One of the first white pictures<sup>2</sup> is a rectangle the height of a man. It is a simple form. Its long format allows it to stand vertically against the wall. This object has a surface turned towards the light. The surface is covered with white paint, applied evenly with a brush, to reflect the intensity of the light which illuminates it. It is a *painting*. This painting is placed on the ground, leaning against the wall.

The role of this object, I think, is to bring light to the interior of the house. Natural light allows us to see the physical dimension of the picture. At the same time, the picture endeavours to *show* us the light in its absolute dimension. At rare moments, in certain situations, this object *truly* succeeds in doing this, and is then illuminated by radiant beauty. The form is effective. Admittedly, however, most of the time one walks past it without even noticing it. As soon as one ceases to consider this object with radiant eyes, in a reciprocal relationship, the form loses what might be termed its quality. It becomes just another object among many. In this sense, this form is indeed what it seems to be, namely an impoverished form. One must accept that.

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<sup>2</sup> *D'anciennes et de nouvelles Tables*, 1983

When one confines oneself to working with such limited material, one may wonder if it is not better purely and simply to abandon paint and to replace it with a medium which offers other possibilities or, with this in mind, to introduce uncharacteristic elements.

In reality, one does not ask such questions, and I will tell you why. Once a painter realizes that he no longer stands in awe of his work, he also realizes that he alone is responsible for his condition. He cannot foist the responsibility onto the painting. If he justifies his condition by saying that painting has exhausted its possibilities, he thereby confirms that his own vision has become impoverished. He is prone to doubt. His attitude has become critical. His understanding then becomes materialistic, he perceives art only as a listing of possibilities, and he comes to the painful realization that everything has already been done. Such false vision, such reduction of language, is extremely widespread these days. However, they only occur when, through a process of distortion, art is considered as an end in itself and no longer what it truly is – a *means to an end*. The rationalist approach to painting is deceptive, in that it arbitrarily reduces its field of application to no more than manufacturing process. It takes into account only part of the experience, the visible part, the one which is obvious.

The artist knows that he must set himself permanently on another level. This is the entire reason for his art, and he battles with all his strength against such a reduction. He opposes the critical sense with the sense of the *sacred*,<sup>3</sup> and the imperative of reason with his faith in his vocation.

A repertoire of shapes and colours which might seem limited to others is no obstacle to the artist's freedom of action. Quite the contrary. In fact, he has chosen this dearth of means, common to all painters, precisely because he realizes that it is not a limitation, but a liberation. If he starts with the restrictions imposed by the language of painting, he assumes that from then on he can concentrate on the essential. The essential is an *idea*.<sup>4</sup> Absolute in nature. He cannot name it. He cannot even see it. Notwithstanding, it is the entire justification for his enterprise.

This must be clearly understood. What a painter is attempting to envisage through the medium of paint, he cannot see *directly*. This is why he needs a form or even an image. This assertion that the painter cannot see directly whatever it is he seeks to visualize is of tremendous importance to our understanding of what we mean when we speak of painting. It enables us to understand why a painting has to be the way it is, to comprehend its singularity and uniqueness. Such understanding allows us to see the strange correspondence between things that are invisible and difficult to grasp intellectually, and simple things within our reach. Art reveals this correspondence. Once it appears, artistic form can function. However, it should be stressed that it happens unexpectedly.

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<sup>3</sup> In other words the *sense of real*, which necessarily implies devotion.

<sup>4</sup> The word *Idea* is to be understood here in its original sense: IDEA, the *eternal sense reflected* or the *Image of God* (Pavel Florensky). In this context *Idea* can be replaced by *Presence*.

Disappointment is unavoidable. It cannot be eliminated, it can only be analysed. When the white paintings were completed, they had for me a powerful appeal greater than what I could have achieved through the use of colour, not only because of their outward appearance, but also due to the meaning that I saw invested in them. Nevertheless, I was not satisfied. This seems paradoxical, and it is a paradox that is hard to explain. The object now aroused misunderstanding; instead of making a statement, it appeared more than anything as a negation. I was disturbed by the voluntarist, radical nature of the choice of form. I could clearly see the arbitrariness of such an image, once it was removed from the *specific* context in which it could *be seen*. When displayed as a work of art, for example, such a form would become dependent on the *aesthetic* appreciation brought by the viewer, and that, in my view, was a weakness.

To achieve autonomy, the form would have to undergo a metamorphosis. In other words, it was necessary that the material shape be informed by the image that I was projecting onto it. In order not to rely on external conditions, it should depend on an internal image. This turnaround went totally against recent developments in paintings, and such a backward step raised a number of questions.

I then launched into the creation of a series of three-dimensional objects,<sup>5</sup> which still had a front and a back. Realizing that in this way I was firmly distancing myself from painting, I decided to revert to strict levelness, which for me remains an absolute imperative.

So gradually a new form took over. I shall try to describe the transformation of this object.

The thickness of a painting is determined by two curves. These curves, placed opposite each other horizontally and vertically, are ideally arc sections of very large circles extending *forwards* and *backwards* beyond the picture-plane. With the aid of a specially designed stretcher it is possible, by exerting tension on the canvas, to create, almost imperceptibly, a *picture-plane* that is both *concave* in its vertical dimension and *convex* in its horizontal dimension. The result is that the picture will have one *vanishing point* in front of its vertical plane and another behind it, while the picture itself remains parallel with the wall.

Such a choice of form was not without repercussions. The viewer does not experience the same visual sensation in looking at a level surface as in looking at a *curved* one. In this case, if the surface is convex, the focal point is *behind* the vertical plane, towards the object being viewed. On the other hand, if the surface is concave, the focal point is *in front of* the picture, towards the viewer. Thus, standing in front of the picture, the viewer perceives that the picture-plane is positioned at the intersection of two entities, one visible, the other invisible. *Between* the two, but also *participating* in both.

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<sup>5</sup> *Utopie de la vie exacte*, 1987

To create an image, the painting had to undergo a transformation, similar to that undergone by a plant when it reaches out towards the light. This image is not fortuitous. Light is the lifeblood of both plants and paintings. To catch the light, the leaf extends vertically and then horizontally on a level plane. When we observe the leaf, we notice that its thickness is insignificant compared to its surface. It is a *plane* in the truest senses of the word. We can also see that the upper surface of the leaf, in other words its internal surface, is always concave. We then notice that the shape encloses a kind of luminous void. Then, attracted by the sun, suspended, as it were, between earth and sky, the shape quite naturally becomes more and more convex. Similarly, although this image came to me later,<sup>6</sup> ), in transforming the vertical plane of canvas as described, I greatly increased the spherical space surrounding the shape of the picture. Thus it became possible to discern the dual presence of different parts of the picture-plane, objective and non-objective, visible and invisible.

The idea that, in order to give the painting autonomy, I had to place it in the context of a totality, by which I mean a *quality* beyond its material existence, forced me to reconsider my way of looking at a painting, especially when looking *beyond* a picture.

In order to understand this, one has to understand space in painting.

Space in painting is an *abstract* space, although a specific picture can be measured. However, in the context of modernism, we can also say that space in painting is a *concrete* space, which can be qualified. There is therefore in painting a concrete space which can be measured in terms of quantity, and an abstract space which can be measured in terms of quality. This is true for all painting.

So, in all painting, there is, *quantitatively*, height, length and thickness,<sup>7</sup> and, *qualitatively*, there is what might be termed a centre and a periphery, that is to say something that extends upwards and downwards, from right to left, and also forwards and backwards. So we observe that the *objective* dimension of height suggests a *subjective* opposition between what is above and what is below, as, for example, between the sky and the earth. Similarly, the objective dimension of width suggests an opposition between right and left, and consequently between, for example, the active and passive elements in a composition. Likewise, the dimension of depth which, in painting, is exclusively subjective, counterposes foreground and background, what is here and what is there. Of course, when looking at a picture, our vision does not have to be influenced by intellectual considerations.

Thus, a painting is both a concrete *and* an abstract image when material form and the shape projected onto the painting by intellect coincide in that single work. The instant appearance of form, in other words, its appearance in the form of an *image*, depends on the superimposition

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<sup>6</sup> While staying in the Engadine where some of these works were executed, I was suddenly struck by this analogy, confirming the validity of the initial form.

<sup>7</sup> The lateral surface of paintings often reveals the entire creative process, unless it is covered by a frame.

of these two elements. Cézanne claimed: *one sees a painting immediately or not at all*. There is no better way of summing up this idea. And in this respect, there is no progress.

Following on the transformation of the vertical plane, a strange thing occurred. Even as it turned in upon itself, the object now opened up towards the viewer. Confronted with large canvases, it was no longer possible for the eye to focus on the picture plane, the whole of which seemed indistinct. Having become almost immaterial, the form itself seemed to advance towards the onlooker. A new relationship between picture and viewer appeared to have been established, with each relying upon the other in a hitherto unfamiliar way.

However, it is important to point out that this phenomenon could only be observed when the picture was lit by diffuse, fairly bright *natural light*. Without these ideal, daylight conditions, (such as those in certain exhibition spaces benefitting from zenithal light), the painting just blended into the wall. Thus the painting once more became a concrete form, namely an empty surface extending to the outer edges of the picture. Placed against the wall, the form continued to project outwards, whereas in a weaker or more direct light, no more echo could be heard from it. As a result it remained a painting which, for better or worse, depended on the manner in which it was exhibited.

To avoid the worst it was necessary to go one step further. From now on, this painting should possess its own space, in other words its own light.

I immediately started to apply a far more liquid colour to the surface of the canvas. This liquidity enabled me to vary the intensity of the white as I applied it. The ground began to show through, displaying new colour, warm and plant-like, a bit grey because of the linen canvas. The white surface began to come to life as it does when you paint a very watery colour on a sheet of paper. The idea was to start with a fairly intense white in the centre of the picture and then gradually darken it towards the edge, all the time paying attention to the painterly quality of such treatment, in other words not working simply mechanically. This process was like a liberation. The use of darkening white enabled me to integrate some of the shadow that had previously been excluded.

I first used this method of treating the surface on small paintings. These rectangular or rounded pictures, seemed to me to achieve an important symbolic value. It took time to find a technique to transfer this way of working to larger canvases. This is because, in executing a painting of a specific format, the size of the brush is crucial, and I could not achieve such a satisfactory painterly quality in large-format works. I had to perfect a technique, making the paint more liquid so that it did not dry too quickly, using brushes capable of absorbing much more colour, working more quickly, etc., etc. The work had become highly physical and I suddenly had the feeling of having made a particularly long detour.

It is interesting to note that as the space opened up towards the interior of the picture, the external form became proportionally less important. I am again stating the obvious, but I do so deliberately to make it easier to understand. So a unique format seemed to be about to emerge.

A square format. As the most fixed, most clearly defined shape, it is also the most stable. Consequently, that format would provide the strongest possible counterbalance to the new spherical nature of the vertical plane.

Working in parallel, I began a series of preparatory drawings for new square format paintings. Based on these drawings, I created a series of thirteen black and white paintings,<sup>8</sup> which are on show at the exhibition. These compositions make use of the double sphericity of the picture-plane in a right-angled arrangement, and prepare the ground for the introduction of colour.

These compositions gave birth to the large dark white paintings. I regard these *white on white* paintings as very important. I believe that, taken together, they are an amalgam of the potential of all the previous works. This is probably the reason I am sometimes filled with wonder as I look at them.

I now come to the introduction of *colour*. The duality of the convex and concave values now provokes the more or less natural response of the duality of light and darkness. The fundamental opposition between dark and light colours, but also between cold and warm colours, enables me to plunge straight into pure painting in its traditional sense. With these colours, the image has achieved greater complexity. Since warm or bright colours tend to advance towards, whereas cold or dark colours retreat away from the viewer, there is now a complex dialogue between the subjective qualities of colour and the objective qualities of the picture, according to whether the image is constructed vertically or horizontally.

Having reached this *threshold*, the silence of painting reasserts itself. On the wall is a painting still glistening with colour. In the centre of the canvas two dark colours meet in a seemingly brighter area.

In the memory the *dream* of an absolute image recurs. An image preceding images. A simple, concrete image, but illuminated from within, and nonetheless unknowable.

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<sup>8</sup> *Partitions*, 1993-94