

GUY de LUSSIGNY
or
THE ART OF DECOMPOSED HARLEQUINADES

Nothing is less improvised than the work of Guy de Lussigny. And yet a general impression, borne out by his work on paper, brings to mind the *Commedia dell'arte*. Lussigny loved the theatre and he loved Italy; it was there he shopped for his colours.

His portfolios, carefully sorted before his death, contain gouaches and watercolours that you leaf through as if turning the pages of precious books. The varied compositions range from near monochromes to alliances of colour elaborated with an art that echoes the art of the illuminators, at times mixing golds and silvers. Clouds of squares placed side by side, overlapping or fitted inside each other join in a sort of suspended juggling. Somersaults that partake of a subdued theatricality around the Harlequin that is the world, and whose apparel Guy de Lussigny decomposes with care into its elementary motifs, devoting to each of them one or several gouaches or, more rarely, watercolours.

His work is born of a discreet and dogged ambition, that of contemplating the multiple facets of light. For someone like Guy de Lussigny, the impossible patiently sets about achieving its assigned task. When Lussigny's work is encountered otherwise than by the immediacy of its aesthetic vibrations, it reveals a thought that is familiar with Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.

It is during his apprenticeship that Lussigny reaches a tipping point, feeling the need to quit the figurative for abstraction. Landscapes, portraits, faces, however fascinating they may be, because of their signifying capacity, can distract the mind from the invisible object of art and trouble the pictorial experience, such as Lussigny conceived it. Beyond the subjects, the motifs, the scenes, it is a matter of choosing the right frame to offer the body of painting: he will opt for a square monstrosity. He thus radicalizes his vocation, as celebrant of colour, when the latter opens the way to contemplation. One of the acknowledged aims of the artist.

Following the path taken by his precursors, Lussigny limits his field of exploration to the square, and all through his life, seeks to grasp the multiplicity of the world through this elementary *templum*, unfolding on screens with innumerable possible combinations the language of colour.

In his albums of gouaches, the suites and the solos follow each other closely and the spirit is guided by the minimalism of the forms and their apparent uniformity of structure towards a space where a sort of game of backgammon is developed with colour. There are somersaults and acrobatics, bold moves and dramatic turns of events; or, on the contrary, areas of meditation and calm.

Though he detaches himself from figuration, Lussigny does not give up on life; if he chooses a single geometric figure, he untiringly combines it in different sizes and arrangements.

A sensation of haziness often emanates from the compositions despite their very strict rigour. The colours themselves, tightly hemmed in in their impeccable frames, seem to disseminate and to move out towards us, as though distending the limits that contain them.

Playlets that bring to life the complicity between the eye, hesitant and not really trustworthy, and light, the works of Lussigny offer something of the fleeting emotion that certain rosy dawns, stormy grey evenings or the green almond of spring leaves, the autumnal ochres, the yellows and browns of cultivated plants and all the colours that haunt the town, the streets, the facades, bring into being. Such works render visible and palpable this presence in the universe, without representing the signs that run through it and unsettle our understanding of it. They beckon to us to read this peculiar Word, colour, whose servant it is.

Let's have a closer look. Lussigny sets his closed spaces in movement. The mechanism unfolds according to a syntax that is random and precise. The space created by the colour takes shape according to a game that could be called illusory, if it wasn't entirely a game of logic – a logic freed from architectural calculations.

The heaviness becomes weightless thanks to the flowering of these monads, squares that swarm or congregate through a pole-less magnetic attraction, that carry you away to a vibrant and silent conference. Scenes with no plot, wordless pantomimes of the emotions, they convey a mystery which is not hidden. Lussigny unveils no secret through his contemplation—everything is staring you in the face, you just have to look—there is only the revelation of another space, where you can abandon yourself to the elusive.

When confronted with these gouaches, one wonders whether what one sees has been incised in or stuck on the paper, or simply painted. Yet there is no question of deception for Lussigny. What is at work remains a mystery. This spatial presentation of a non-space and this putting into relief of a plan point up an enigmatic transformation.

Working with gouache and acrylic is for him a deliberate choice, a preference for unpolished matter over the glossy. This dullness does not claim to lead to depth and a priori promises nothing, it says what it is: inert, opaque to emotion, but which can unexpectedly become a living space. It is one of Lussigny's challenges: that of making perceptible an inhabited depth while employing only a surface, and without having recourse to the possibilities of geometrical illusion or the properties of a material that is more luminous.

Sometimes Lussigny listens to the sirens. He sticks to his method, arranges the squares, a line, and navigates in what he considers to be a dangerous sea. Pushing back its limits, he draws close to the monochrome all the while remaining wary of it. He knows that colour can best be grasped by the play of forms; he also knows that you shouldn't go too far or you risk being disturbed and decentred. The squares trace the boundaries he needs to steer clear of the extinction of the veiled vision of the monochrome. And a sensual art is required to introduce slight discontinuities that enable you to feel better, in the same way one feels the softness of a skin when there is a scar or

one of those very human impurities which become perceptible under the sliding fingers' touch.

He returns, however, to the shores of an inexpressible country. Lussigny uses this screen made up of fragments of squares or of a line, which appear like the vestiges of exploded constellations, in order to offer his visionless vision, drawing to the brink of this dazzling light where all the research on the colour white, pursued in the course of his life, is at risk, a quest which is the thread of his work.

And yet it is an *œuvre* that does not yield to the absolute. He didn't hide the feeling of perplexity provoked by certain artists whom he admired, but whose radicalism he was critical of: Malevitch, Calderara or Nemours.

If Lussigny loves the almost nothing, he neither neglects the presence of the artist nor that of matter: he constantly works on paper, with gouache, sometimes with watercolour or coloured pencil; he also chooses, during the last period of his work with acrylic, to paint on an unprimed canvas, in order to give new life to a mastery that risked becoming set in its ways. These works render an astonishing effect where the light seizes the limits of the colour, and the canvas itself, and frays the perfection of the forms in creating a halo around it.

The art of capturing light to serve inner illumination.

People have often evoked the spirituality of Guy de Lussigny's work.

The term spiritual would refer to that quality of presence that a neutral matter and with no particular vocation can acquire.

Spiritual would designate that which, in the seizing of a moment, the frozen playlet of a canvas or a gouache can release by its power to open up an instant, this space without space – the infinite – and this time beyond time – eternity – which are perhaps only words to signify the sudden emergence, at the heart of a contemplative subjectivity, of a dimension of consciousness, where the latter would catch a glimpse of its elusive substance.

That which out of absence creates real presence.

This implies muddying one's hands and making out of opaqueness, out of the mat aspect of faint pigments, out of this unpromising material – though beautiful too with its passive qualities – a matter that can be transubstantiated.

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translated by John Baker