

Text for Olivier Catté's exhibition in Japan / May 2021

A journey for the mind

Gesture, energy, movement. Since Olivier Catté's encounter with the Orient three years ago, his artistic work has been profoundly transformed, and is now based on these three points. He has freed himself from the weight of the intellect to taste what seems essential. From an exclusive face-to-face encounter with his cardboard panels - his preferred medium in the past - the painter now explores the range of possibilities offered by drawing, and has integrated a third element inseparable from the history of painting and calligraphy in Asia: the vital breath, the Qi that circulates in nature, in the studio, between the sheet of paper and himself, to the point of passing through it in equal measure. He is no longer master alone, but lets go and lets himself be carried by an energy that governs the universe. The result in his work is a greater emphasis on what might be considered the Western notion of chance, but that term is far too restrictive. It's true that Olivier Catté doesn't make any preparatory drawings, and launches himself into the arena without any premeditation as to the form he will produce. But more than juggling chance, he comes into contact with the invisible and the sensitive to react to what is offered to him. He could make Cézanne's words his own: "What I'm trying to translate for you is more mysterious, entangled at the very roots of being, at the impalpable source of sensations."

Each drawing expresses the fulgurance of the moment, and to achieve this, he structures volumes by multiplying techniques: broad brushstrokes, spray strokes, rubbed charcoal, sprayed pigment... And once the frame is erected, he tears away the surface of the paper here and there, revealing an altered geometry - like archaeological surveys of a forgotten ancient city - or an indefinite form, thus completing the painter's palette. He plays with different whites, creating overlapping spaces and cohabiting dimensions. "Multiple points of view suggest displacement, as when you're out for a walk and things move depending on where you look," he explains. He represents the atmosphere and materializes the interstices between voids. A mountain, a waterfall, clouds, the breath of the wind, the theme of a piece of music, a whirlwind, a city, charred wood dust, a floating dragon... In this game of pareidolia, to which our imagination cannot help but succumb, we gravitate around the same notions: water, fire, air and earth, the four elements that make up the universe, as much for the Greeks since Empedocles in the 5th century BC, as for the millennia-old Orient, which completes the list with the void. It's also the starting point for alchemy, where everything is in perpetual transformation and movement: from water to air, from earth to fire. The energy of the brushstrokes, from which the gesture emerges, reinforces this dynamic. However, contrary to popular belief, the alchemical quest is not to transform lead into gold, but to extricate oneself from earthly materiality and ascend to a nobler substance. The true quest is transcendental, as betrayed by the fluidity and transparency of the materials, the introduction of an ethereal blue and gold, a color that does not exist in nature and is traditionally associated with the spiritual space where the medieval artist places the Virgin,

projecting her out of the human world.

Notions of time and space no longer have boundaries. The drawing is transmuted into a cartography of the artist's mind or a landscape destined for an inner journey, a veritable delight for the eye and the spirit, to the point of vibrating in unison with the words of Umberto Eco, who wrote in *L'œuvre ouverte*: "Everything that escapes comprehension favors the enjoyment of the work."

Stéphanie Pioda