

THANKS TO BOXING MY MUG IS AN ICON

KO

“Thanks to boxing my mug is an icon,” is the title of one of Claude Guénard’s works, the only one in this series to incorporate words in the painting. We can also read: “love,” of course, on the part of this emotive artist, “help,” perhaps a distress signal, aren’t we always alone in life’s combats? And especially, with insistence: “icon” and “icono,” a play on words that refers to “icon” and “iconography” in order to clearly communicate that this picture is an icon, a symbolic image whose link of resemblance with the reference (here, the painter) is ensured. The tone is set, and it is for the entire series of paintings presented.

The assimilation of the two: of the painter and the boxer, of the pugilistic art with the symbolic image and imagery with pictorial art is the key to the singular world that Claude Guénard’s painting proposes. But, a key that is ultimately useless for the spectator in untangling what it’s all about between the thousand and one tricks that the real and the imaginary play. A stunned, defeated, speechless spectator, finding himself in a situation of not being able to grasp the slightest meaning faced with this festival of unusual images, but only of letting himself be seduced by the colored shimmering of strange scenes. In this sense, this painting is clearly of its time, rebelling against being reduced to the anecdotal level of a story, although it is paradoxically talkative. In short, *painting to see and not painting to read*.

Claude Guénard actually boxed – and who knows what else? – during an adventurous life lived in various exotic places. His artist’s behavior remains inseparable from a certain way of living and confronting reality in a direct, and rather forceful mode, approaching life like a fight. The energy of the gesture of recording on the canvas, the strength of the color, the solidity of the square format he prefers to use, express in a bracing if not brutalist way, a disconcerting world offered as journeys through the unknown. The spectator can’t help being struck by the power of this “effect-image”: this in front of which, even before any possibility of identification, he is dispossessed, deprived of the reference points of ordinary rationality, delivered to the shimmering of the color and entirely grasped by an always striking staging.

How can we take in this narrative without being destabilized for a moment? It isn’t that simple to enter the world of the other, torn as we are between the doubt and dread that this unknown land provokes. But let us recall, especially as it is a matter of art: painting – like any other creative work – when we discover it – must always be a stranger. Next comes “a long job of taming the unknown” and “a new familiarity replaces the dread provoked in us by the eruption of this *absolute other*.”

This is how Claude presents himself, as a painter of images. He asserts this claim to the point of wanting to appropriate this specific territory of the imagination by committing a criminal act, a “Hold-up on the image” (the title of one of the paintings). This territory however today is a bit deserted. Contemporary painting as a whole has become sparing of visions to propose to the public. It offers little to look at, if not to make the spectator observe an exhaustion of creativity through the feeling of déjà vu or, in a kind of asceticism of the visible, to make the spectator take note of barren devices whose artistic intention is not to arouse the slightest contemplation or aesthetic feeling. Inversely with Claude Guénard, the system of expression is not that of repressing the visible as each of his paintings is presented as an overflowing manifestation of the imagination. The “pleasure principle,” so dear to Freud, is at work and leads the dance in the same way as our nocturnal dreams. The expression of color, an irrational element par excellence, is a clue, but also the exuberance of the stagings in which the diverse, sometimes numerous characters are placed. We have no idea where these characters, actors of unusual activities or those that we usually call “private,” come from. For the spectator, there are no psychological or sociological explanations to attempt, in vain, to bring this world back to that of reason. It is recommended, if we can, to *make the leap*, to enter this narrative, which we know, as in any narrative, is an experience of what is possible, one of the ways to escape alienation, the sad and pitiful confinement that is the self’s sole

concern.

Claude Guénard is a painter of images, and proclaiming it is an event that already constitutes an originality in painting today. There are not many who happily cultivate this terrain. We could perhaps say that Claude Guénard is a painter of images, but above all he is a painter. It would be inadequate and restrictive to only see the imagery-laden aspect of his representations.

Representing, painting a picture never consists in transferring a mental image, which would be fully formed “in the artist’s mind,” into a painted image (as the naïve public thinks). The image takes shape, in an uncertain manner, between the intention of representing and what happens in an undertaking that is the conduct of an artistic approach. A genuine fight with the fluid element, the painting, a material that is never submissive, and a fight that is played out between the color and the drawing, the eternal question. The idea of the painting in the process of being executed is lost, is found again and is transformed. The image to come is always fighting in a moment of searching whose outcome is never ensured. How many fights lost that the spectator will never know! Yet, observing Claude Guénard in the process of painting is precisely to experience this approach of inventing an image that is being invented during the process itself. His studio contains an enormous amount of documentation: art history, folk arts, the contemporary art scene... It comprises a catalyst, he dips into it to tell stories that he stages in a type of improvisation, borne by an idea, an image, a fragment of an image, a sentence, a word. It is clearly here, in the setting of his studio, where documentation shares space with a punching ball, that we better understand the relationship he maintains between the pugilistic art and pictorial practice. A moment of action, the vision of a real corporeal confrontation with the canvas on its easel is then offered. Standing, holding a sponge, with lightning-quick gestures, he confronts the surface in a kind of mute rage. He spatters it with juices to position the principal elements of the image he is seeking in the space. Unsatisfied, he erases by wiping just as rapidly, starts again and again. He can give up, vanquished... This first attempt is continued by successive interventions during which the color becomes increasingly intense. Little by little, the composition takes form, is enriched, and the space is enlivened as much by the bursts of color as by the peopling of the various characters... This spectacle in which we see the picture take form and in which the artist symbolically risks his life, communicates an additional meaning to the painting, to such a degree that we could imagine the finished work accompanied by a video that shows its genesis. The work’s buyer could therefore take delight in seeing, and seeing over and over again, a great match whose outcome is what he can contemplate: the final trace of a hand-to-hand combat.

This is clearly what is perceived, pictorially, as a singular mark of this painting. Beyond the overflowing of the imaginary dimension, it is the gesture of recording on the canvas, unpremeditated, never imitative. Like a signature, the gesture precedes its meaning, without laying claim to the accuracy of the form it solely means, but allusively, without any academic preoccupation; the “well-done” does not have any meaning. The only thing that counts is expressiveness, what moves, what is suggestive. This is why these painted images cannot be illustrations, they are not dependent on a model, even a mental one, no more than they are tame simplistic images. No one will doubt it. They have no connection with a conventional aesthetic of the “proper form,” they have to be received as they were done, according to a certain gesture and in a particular tempo. Outside this tempo, once the painting is finished, Claude Guénard, after the fight, is incapable of retouching. He is no longer in the action, he is no longer in the movement, nor in the specific emotive situation that each creation of a painting requires. If he retouches, as he himself says, the painting is demolished

So, it’s take it or leave it, he only wins through a KO.

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