



EVERYTHING REMAINS TO BE INVENTED

An interview with Raphael Barontini

Chronic: You could work anywhere in the world. Yet you choose Saint Denis, a banlieue on the outskirts of Paris. Why is that?

Raphael Barontini: Yes, I make a deliberate choice to work in Saint Denis. I was born here and I have a very strong connection to this place; in a sense, it is my laboratory. As I see it, Saint Denis is a kind of assemblage, in constant movement – a city anchored in history, yet simultaneously forging ahead into a future that it elaborates anew every day.

Saint Denis is many things at once: a royal necropolis, a working class city and a multi-ethnic capital. In a sense it is what France could be tomorrow: alive, diverse and creolised. As a young French artist, for now I can't see myself going anywhere else. Given my practice, this type of territory is very exciting. In this sub-urbanity, I find the vitality and the "swing" that carries my pictorial work.

These days, it's not in centres like Paris, New York or London, but in the peripheries, that artistic experience remains relevant. For economic reasons, artists can find a place in urban interstices such as this and, most importantly, they can find, here, spaces where everything has not yet been policed or turned into some kind of normative mush. Here, everything remains to be invented.

Chronic: You talk about creativity. What does the word mean to you?

RB: On a personal level, through family ties, I have links to the Antilles and to creole cultures. More than that, however, it's the concept of creolisation that touches me. I am deeply invested in Édouard Glissant's vision of creolisation. He shows us that, today, each and every territory worldwide is the locus of a rich and unpredictable creativity born of the meeting of multiple cultures. As a result of this, it is the bearer of a cultural originality that is both unique and, because it stems from multiple origins,

is, or can be, in link with multiple territories elsewhere in the world.

Glissant refers to this phenomenon as a "poetics of relation". And he replaces the notion of globalisation (mondialisation) – based, far too exclusively, on economic precepts – with the notion of globality (mondialité), in which he sees possibilities for a positive collective cultural civility.

Chronic: How do you relate these concepts to your work as an artist?

RB: I build the concept of creativity into my painting in several ways. The first, I would say, is addition. The superimposition of heterogeneous elements – the act of bringing together images, forms, references that have not been thought in tandem before – is a building block of my work. I draw from very diverse iconographic sources. I mix and match famous portraits of the 16th and 17th centuries with images of unknown women and men gleaned from anonymous sources – visages whose force draws me. These I link up with objects, sacred and secular, whose origins lie in African, Caribbean and Latin American cultures, with textile motifs that I pick up here and there, with graffiti tags. Composing and painting, for me, is all about collage or assemblage. I create by way of accumulation: layer upon layer, sign upon sign.

In a similar accumulative vein, I use a wide variety of tools, which allows me to access many pictorial vocabularies: acrylic paint and ink, silk-screening, aerosol paint, stencils. All of these are associated with a certain immediacy, a way of working that is rhythmical and dense. There's a sense of creative urgency to what I do and, through this, an attempt to arrive at equilibrium, a point at which the swirl of it all coalesces in and around the piece on which I am working. In this process, improvisation is key. I let the painting take me where it will. The resulting overlay of one image, one colour plane, onto another makes for a moment of intense joy; for it is in this instant that the painting comes into being.



Overlays of ideas and symbolic references too are intrinsic to my work. In the banner series, to which the works shown here belong, this is particularly the case. That too, for me, relates to notions of creativity. The overall form of the pieces is borrowed from religious and carnival processions and is intended to prompt questions – questions about the status of the object. What exactly is this painting, made in such a way that it can be brandished and born aloft in the street? How does its hybrid form relate to the mix of images that appears on its surface?

None of this is meant to be easily comprehensible – not at first glance. I mean to mix things up. With those who view the objects, I seek to explore new, or alternative, ways of thinking about what this object I have made might be. Colours, stencils, finsel, fringes; I call on all of these elements to bring to life figures, bodies, faces that might speak of a vibrant, urban métissage in which worlds collide, giving rise to something new and essential. – Dominique Malaquais

Raphael Barontini lives and works in Saint-Denis, France. He holds MFA from Paris 8 (Sorbonne) and Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Paris) and a BA from the University of California, San Diego. His work has been exhibited widely in Europe and the Americas. Recent shows include Mori Waite (Galerie Christophe Faur, Paris, 2012) and Éternelles (at other with Mike Ladd) at St. Denis (Paris) and 100 Painting, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011).