The Rigour and the Letting Go of the Swallow's Flight

Michael Glover

The first response to a painting by Monique Frydman is one of shock and delight. That we are in the grip of such a powerful, no-holds-barred lyricism, a lyricism which looks and feels buoyed along by … music, perhaps? Debussy, say? Or the music of the spheres? Questions hang in the air. Could this really be a painter of the present day? Could this really be a painter who is alive in our age of cynicism and pragmatic self-regard, and one, moreover, who grew up during the 1960s in a world which seemed to set such limits to what painting could do?

In France during the 1960s, there was a taboo surrounding the word painting. This was a period of deconstruction, when questions of ideology were of the utmost importance. The personal was forbidden. Sensuality was not permitted. I had to fight to use colour. I needed to find myself through the language of painting. I stopped painting for many years because I had assimilated all that. The question seemed to hang in the air: 'A quoi sert la peinture?' *What is painting good for? It was all so boring. I felt closed up. Lacan helped me.*[1] *He posed the question of the subject. When I began to paint again – not in a studio, but in my own bedroom – the paintings were small and very violent.*

She fought – and she won through. There is nothing tentative and cautiously incremental about any of the works in this show, nothing that could be construed as conceptual or ideas-determined. They do not fiddle-faddle with minutiae. They throw themselves at us in all their monumentality. They seem to be an embodiment of raw human feeling. The embrace of the sensual power of colour is so bold and so emphatic. They seem to have been brought to birth as a result of a struggle with the materials from which they were created. If they were to be found guilty of anything in a court of law, the charge would be a simple one: guilty by reason of a kind of excessive extravagance, an unswervable devotion to the matter at hand. This is not colour of the surface. It is not colour which describes or ornaments or counterpoints the graphic element. It is a deep-rootedness of colour, a seeking after everything that colour seems to be, everything that the idea of colour seems to embody, of and for itself. There is an almost mystical charge about these paintings too. They seem to be inviting us to look through and beyond. To a state of ecstasy? Towards a paradisal mood? Is that to put it too grandiosely?

Monique Frydman shows a particular devotion to the colour red. For her, it is the ground of everything, a source of beginnings, almost a myth of origins. Culturally, in literature and art, red is of profound significance. Red is the colour of sacrifice. Red is the colour of spilled blood. Does that resonate for her?

For me, no, red does not evoke blood. That idea frightens me. For me, red embodies somptuosité, *sumptuousness, and profundity. That is my preferred interpretation. More the dignity of what it is to be human than the divine presence.*

Long before Dante Alighieri (c.1265–1321) embarked upon writing the *Divine Comedy*, years before he was cast into exile from his native Florence, he wrote a work called *La Vita Nuova*, an intertwining of prose narrative with verse, in which he describes his encounters with the actual Beatrice Portinari. She was a nine-year-old girl when he saw her for the first time, and through the passage of time, after her marriage – not to Dante, alas – and her tragically early death, she became transfigured, exalted, in the mind and the imagination of the banished poet until she became for him the epitome of all bodily and earthly perfection – rather as Botticelli depicted her in his later suite of etchings.[2] One of the most interesting details Dante shares with us about this intoxicating child is the colour of her dress. The account of that first meeting, quite close to the beginning of the text, is, as so often with Dante, a great, slow building of atmosphere. I will quote from the celebrated translation by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti,[3] published in 1861:

'Nine times already since my birth had the heaven of light returned to the self-same point almost, as concerns its own revolution, when first the glorious Lady of my mind was made manifest to mine eyes; even she who was called Beatrice by many who knew not wherefore. She had already been in this life for as long as that, within her time, the starry heaven had moved towards the Eastern quarter one of the twelve parts of a degree; so that she appeared to me at the beginning of her ninth year almost and I saw her almost at the end of my ninth year. Her dress, on that day, as of a most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned in such sort as best suited with her very tender age. At that moment, I say most truly that the spirit of life, which hath its dwelling in the secretest chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that the least pulses of my body shook therewith; and in trembling it said these words: *Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi*. At that moment the animate spirit, which dwelleth in the lofty chamber whither all the senses carry their perceptions, was filled with wonder, and speaking more especially unto the spirits of the eyes, said these words: *Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra*.'

And so a mere stripling of a girl in a crimson dress, glimpsed by chance on a Florentine street towards the end of the thirteenth century, has been transformed by Dante into a manifestation of Beatitude – such is the potency, the symbolic reach, of colour. How can we not fail to recall when we read those words that the Virgin Mary was similarly colour-wrapped by Titian in his great *Assumption of the Virgin*, which is displayed above the high altar of the Frari church in Venice?[4]

Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516–1518
Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice
Oil on panel
690 × 360 cm (271¾ × 141¾ in)
Photograph from The Yorck Project

It would not be quite right though to speak too readily or too glibly of religion when considering the work of Monique Frydman. Though tempting, nothing easily encompassed by that word will quite do because Monique Frydman is not a religious woman. What is more, the appeal of her paintings is too evasive, too generously encompassing, for dogma. Let us pose another question then. How does all this sensuality, all this ready giving, square with the idea of the creation of an abstract painting? Are the two goals at odds with each other at all?

To what extent is an abstract painting a species of reverie? Reverie suggests a ceding of control, a loosening, a letting in and a letting go, until the spirit breathes. But that is only part of the story. Art is a constant negotiation between the forces of reason and the forces of unreason, control and an abandonment of control, the strictly bounded and the recklessly unbounded, the intuitive creep and the prematurely defined. The great English poets of the eighteenth century were the supreme exemplars of control. Alexander Pope poured sentiment into regulated formal patterns. Everything turned brilliantly aphoristic. The whole world seemed to be summarisable in a dazzling turn of phrase. Romanticism and all that it was heir to, felt, by comparison, like a great letting in of chaos – which includes the chaos of the inner self. That chaos included the possibility that literature and art were malleable, slippery things, never quite done, never quite complete in and for themselves. Were Turner's last paintings incomplete or abandoned?[5] Did Monet,[6] in his final late great flowering, acquiesce in 'the dying of the light', to quote a phrase from the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914–1953),[7] because it opened up to him new ways of apprehending the seductive vagaries of the natural world, the way in which colour can seem to swim before our gaze, for example? Vagaries can be very important. They represent a capturing of all that is fleeting. They demonstrate to us that art is often about seizing the moment, a seizing of, and a giving credit to, the momentary.

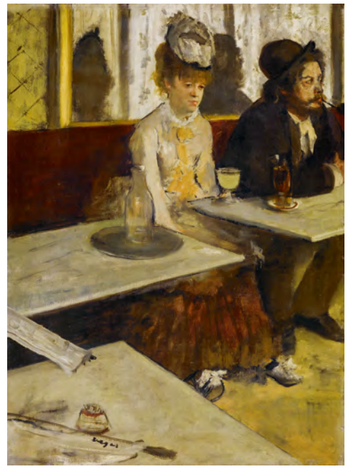
Deftly negotiating her way between these various dualities comes Monique Frydman, the French painter who in the last three decades of her practice, has looked forward in anticipation and backward in repeated homage to everything that made Monet and Bonnard and Rothko and Twombly the supreme masters of their craft.[8] The period with which this three-decade-long survey show at Parasol unit deals, begins with a great opening out – into painting on a grand scale, and painting in series. Is there a contest in the work between what the mind might wish to predetermine and what the hand takes it upon itself to do? To what extent does the hand dictate what the painting's magical trajectory will prove to be in the end? To what extent has the mind dictated to the hand the direction of travel? Of course a conversation with the materials (pastel, pigment, the ghostly presence of rope at the back of the canvas which the artist presses on, and whose presence there will suggest – or even dictate – the possibility of arabesques of mark-making) makes the painting what it is in the end. But at the beginning …? Frydman puts in place systems that regulate her possible outcomes. A canvas of such and such a shape. Ropes of such and such dimensions. Materials are self-sufficient. They are also biddable. But in order for the painting to be an act of exploration, in order for it not to be a foregone conclusion you could say, it is very important to lay oneself open to elements of unknowing, elements of risk-taking. Otherwise, why paint at all? In the *Paul Klee Notebooks*,[9] it is the line which is encouraged to go for a walk, which takes itself off in a spirit of eager venturesomeness. In Frydman's, it is the hand that leads the way, the hand which both represents and enacts the authority of the body. The hand is bold and controlling. It has the power to unleash its own energies.

Some of her finest works are triptychs or polyptychs – *L'Absinthe* [p.24] or the multi-part homage to Sassetta,[10] *Polyptyque Sassetta*, 2013, [pp.92–109] which was first exhibited in the Salon Carré at the Louvre in Paris. All these works blaze with colour. *L'Absinthe*, her triptych of 1989, sends us on labyrinthine journeys. We think of the literary and artistic associations of its title, which immediately brings to mind both Degas's once vilified masterpiece *Dans un café,* also known as *L'Absinthe*, 1875–1876,[11] and a poem by Charles Baudelaire from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (published just five years earlier) called 'Le Poison', in which the poet seems to both wallow in his description of the seductive appeal of opiates and to regard them with some horror. There is both a celebration of the possibility of paradisal states, and a horror of drowning in that greenish liquor. The poem circles around the theme of intoxication – by wine, by hashish. Is this triptych of paintings then a hymn to the intoxications of colour? The surface is both furiously worked and driftingly aqueous. Colour illuminates, surface and self; it also seems to be an expression of, a giving forth of, light.

It was very difficult for me, moving towards colour, at the beginning. Colour expresses, and seems to embody, such joy. The experience of ecstasy can be so dangerous. Le moi se dissout. *The self dissolves in its presence, you might say.*

And what of Frydman's great series in homage to Bonnard, *Des saisons avec Bonnard*, 2009–2010, [pp.63–75] a series which feels as if it could potentially consist of an infinite number of variations?

I did not know how many I would paint when I began. You never know how many. What you do know is when it is finished.



Edgar Degas, *Dans un café*, also known as *L'Absinthe*, 1875–1876
Oil on canvas, 92 × 68 cm (36¼ × 26¾ in)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Photograph by Martine Beck-Coppola courtesy of RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)

Monique Frydman has in the past made reference to the nature of Bonnard's painting, its fragility, its fleetingness, perhaps even its furtiveness. Her series seems to be both an interrogation of Bonnard's relationship with light, a multi-part re-presentation of a particular kind of essential Bonnard luminescence of the Mediterranean, and a way of questioning, analysing, segmenting his use of colour in order to better see it and know it for what it is. There are panels, grids, overlayerings of a kind which remind you, repeatedly, of woven fabric. Monique Frydman, when she describes Bonnard's paintings, speaks of a particular Bonnard *bonheur*, happiness, which seems to suggest a contentment conjured into being by the giving warmth of that light.

There is a similar conjunction of feeling and crafted intellectual play in Frydman's Bonnard series. In her case, that element of intellectual play also seems to waft us westward, and a long way beyond the shores of Ireland. Has not postwar American painting had an impact upon these works? These coming-and-going grids, for example, are they not more than a little reminiscent of the work of Agnes Martin?[12] There is a kind of colour-softened severity here, a severity whose inclination towards regulation and a degree of cerebral control is thrown wildly out of kilter by the welter of human feeling trapped within the extraordinary warmth of all these humming tones. The two seem to be held in tension then, the rigour and the animal warmth.

My Bonnard paintings, they are all the same size, the same materials and, of course, have the same source of inspiration. He was in no way a naïve painter. He captured the fugace*, the fleeting, and the fragile. What he did was very close to perception. He had a very particular view of nature, not at all descriptive. There is a joyousness about the work, but also a melancholy. His work was very constructed, in the* cadrage*, the way that he framed. My painting too has similar formal limitations. There is an element of letting go, but my painting is not all over.*

But Frydman's response to the idea of Bonnard, and his use of colour, seems to go further and deeper still. Surely this is a kind of other-worldly fabric, albeit a kind of secular otherworldliness, that she is weaving. Perhaps the kind of otherworldly fabric to which the Irish poet W.B. Yeats was referring when he wrote the following in a volume of poetry called *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published in 1899:

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Monique Frydman's paintings look and feel like woven panels of light which in turn, by the way they work on us, quite slowly, seem to suggest woven panels of cloth – hence the link with this poem, written in a period when Yeats was still deeply involved in Irish myth and legend. Poet and painter, it seems, have felt on their imaginative pulses a similarity between the fact of woven cloth and the nature of light as it flares 'golden and silver', dims to a crepuscular half-light, and then on to the deeper, thicker blues of night. Remark how Yeats himself, having used the idea of woven cloth as his central metaphor, deftly stitches together all that he apprehends in nature and all that he feels as an acutely sensitive lover.

The poetry of Yeats means a lot to Monique Frydman, as does the work of several other poets: Coleridge, Hopkins, Rilke, Celan.[13] There is another poem by Yeats of which she is particularly fond, 'Coole Park, 1929', and especially its first line: 'I meditate upon a swallow's flight'. The poem itself is a kind of tableau. The poet's preoccupations seem so similar to that of the painter: the idea of a piece of work, whether created by language or painted image, as a species of meditation, which offers a certain freedom to fly, and then to fly over. That movement in the direction of the sublime, beauty. Another poet whose soaring trajectory seems to rhyme with that of Monique Frydman is Gerard Manley Hopkins, and how he succeeded in describing light.

Poetry has legitimatised what I do, she tells me.

'And Coleridge?' I press her. It was Coleridge she had cited first in her list of most favoured English poets.

Le son, she says*, the rhythms, the endless fascination of his carnets.*

Then there is all that seems to be happening other than at the level of the painting surface. In a painting by Frydman, our attention tends to be drawn, almost simultaneously, to two characteristic aspects of her practice.

Monique Frydman is an artist of attack. She punishes her surfaces. She wrings them out. This prolonged forcing of the painting through to a conclusion is an act of discovery and self-discovery – of her own most profound impulses as a painter, and as a way of putting her materials to the ultimate test. Leon Kossoff does something similar.[14] He has remarked on how, when he returns to the studio each morning, he has to rediscover his own talents; he has to claw his way back to the beginning in order to prove to himself that he still has that which he must have to make his life worth living: the gift of drawing. The monumental paintings by Monique Frydman feel similarly driven, urged along. They feel drawn from the depths of herself, the consequence of a fight with materials, a daily discovery that she continues to be what she has always striven to be – a painter wholly committed to her task. The relationship between mind and hand is of crucial importance to her.

There is an intelligence of the hand, a tactile intelligence, which is quite different from le regard, *the gaze, or even from intelligence itself. I saw it once at Lascaux especially, almost overwhelmingly. I felt it in the arcing of the line, and what we must remember is that they were not drawing animals that they could see. It was all in the dark [...] They could see nothing. It was the affect that they were drawing. They were inspired by a feeling.*

And yet, in another respect, Monique Frydman's paintings seem to occupy quite a different existential space to those by Leon Kossoff. His works are hard won out of a profound pessimism. They are great victories in the end, but not joyous victories. They do not feel celebratory. Whereas, Monique Frydman seems to have carved out for herself an ability to rejoice in the tactility of the materials at her disposal, in the glorious rainbow of opportunities that her favourite colours seem to offer up to her as a kind of supreme gift. Now both these painters are Jewish, and their paintings are perhaps rooted in their Jewishness. But their trajectories have been quite different. Monique Frydman's paintings, and all that being a painter has represented to her, have helped to lift her towards a cast of mind which both heals and celebrates. Leon Kossoff's are dogged by the shadow of the past. Frydman makes hers one painting at a time, never several simultaneously.

'Monique,' I ask her towards the close of our conversation, 'what is painting good for? What does it do?' It is the second time I have referred to this. 'Poets too should be asked that question,' I tell her. When I put it to Seamus Heaney in 1991, he said, 'Poetry rinses the language.' I tell her that. 'And painting, Monique?'

She smiles at me, and hesitates for no more than a moment. *It creates the real*, she replies.

Notes

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Throughout this essay, the paragraphs printed in italics are Monique Frydman's words, quoted from her conversation with Michael Glover at Parasol unit, London, on 14 December 2016.

1
Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), French psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, philosopher.

2
Sandro Botticelli (c.1445–1510), Italian painter of the early Renaissance.

3
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), English poet, painter, translator, co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

4
Titian (Tiziano Vecelli, c.1488–1576), Italian Renaissance painter, Venetian school. 'The Frari', in common usage, refers to the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.

5
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), English Romantic landscape painter.

6
Claude Monet (1840–1926), French Impressionist.

7
Dylan Thomas (1914–1953), from his poem 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night'.

8
Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), French Post-Impressionist; Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Russian-American Abstract Expressionist and Colour Field painter; Edwin Parker 'Cy' Twombly (1928–2011), American artist.

9
Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss-German artist, colour theorist, Bauhaus lecturer.

10
Stefano di Giovanni di Consolo (c.1392–1450), known as Il Sassetta, Sienese Renaissance painter.

11
Edgar Degas (1834–1917), French painter, sculptor, particularly of dancers.

12
Agnes Martin (1912–2004), Canadian-American Abstract Expressionist.

13
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) English; Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) English; Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) Bohemian-Austrian; Paul Celan (b. Antschel) (1920–1970), Romanian-born German language poet.

14
Leon Kossof (1926–), British Expressionist.