Monique Frydman: an itinerary in colour

Monique Frydman's exhibitions have always been narratives where, at times working closely with a curator, she gives a certain rhythm to the transition from one gallery or one atmosphere to another. In Kanazawa, she has responded to a powerful architecture which is a work of art in itself, and to the history of a museum which has always been devoted to the most radical explorations of perception.[1] For this reason, I have chosen to follow the exhibition sequence defined by the artist and not to organise this essay chronologically, but to trace the narrative, both visual and spiritual, of these galleries, as they reveal themselves to the senses.

First gallery: *Murmure*, Japanese paper and Japan itself

In 1966, like many politically committed artists in Europe, Frydman stopped painting, a practice seen as bourgeois, in order to devote herself to political activism.[2] When she took it up again in 1978-1979, her work created a scandal. The most striking aspect was undoubtedly her use of representation – which she then abandoned rather quickly. Just as shocking for that period was her return to a classic technique of gestural, expressionist painting on canvas, and this at a time when everyone – Conceptual artists, heirs of Fluxus, feminists, performance and video artists – had abandoned canvas, brush, paper and drawing. Indeed, the reason painting was still tolerated in France in the 1970s was to deconstruct it that much better. The artists of the Support/Surface movement, for example, broke up the painting by exhibiting frames, canvases, glass, cords and brushstrokes separately.[3] Within this radical scene, even if it seems conservative in retrospect, Frydman took the risk of doing work which was different, or even openly against the tide. Because what today seems even more surprising than her return to representation and her use of the painter's gesture and materials was her use of tissue paper,

[1] . Unless otherwise noted, Monique Frydman's comments are taken from the conversations we had in spring 2011 in order to develop this essay.

[2] . For the chronological references, see 'Monique Frydman en filigrane', a biography/interview established by Émilie Ovaere in the catalogue *Monique Frydman, la couleur tissée* (Le Cateau-Cambrésis: Musée Matisse, 2006), pp. 20-31.

[3] . In the United States as well, this challenging of pictorial practices was common to the defenders of Minimal Art and artistic production was dominated by restricted gestures, reduced colours, geometric forms and serial objects.

which in France is also known as 'Japanese paper'. Associated with another continent and other traditions, it can take on a precious, decorative connotation because it is used in France to wrap valuable, fragile gifts of small size, often jewellery. Frydman first pasted Japanese paper onto the canvas, to separate the drawing from the colour, and then, from 1979 to 1983, used it as the main material for her work. Like her love of painting, Japanese paper is a leitmotif in her work, as demonstrated by the gallery/artwork *Murmure* which opens her exhibition in Kanazawa: eight hundred sheets of Japanese paper (*washi*) which cover the wall surfaces and are delicately set in motion as visitors walk by.[4]

The choice of Japanese paper combines several features of her work. First of all, the courage to ignore norms and movements. Second, the importance of a 'medium-as-content' which creates a strong relationship with the public. In the third place, the love of transparency, which generates a space within the space, a gap, a void which will be full – unlike the Western void. Fourth, the attraction to monumentality: the accumulation of Japanese paper creates a grid which, once multipled, assumes an architectural scale. And last of all, there is something exotic in this technical choice – Japanese paper, paper from elsewhere.

In fact, this technical choice is characteristic of a body of work marked by a search for distance (whether chronological or geographical), a desire for displacement (mental or real). Among the breakthrough encounters, Frydman readily cites her discovery of the Lascaux caves in 1979, her journey to India in 1982 and her stay in Australia in 1986-1987. But also, and above all, her long history with Japan. Indeed, it is Japan which set off one of her first imaginary journeys: in 1978, the year she began painting again, Frydman saw an exhibition conceived by architect Isozaki Arata on the *ma*.[5] She was immediately fascinated by this concept designating the interval which exists naturally between two objects or actions and which ultimately unites space and time. In this gap between Japanese and European artistic expressions, Frydman stands closer to the Eastern side. In her art as well, the void is not an absence but a living space; she

[4] . This installation transposes to a round structure –a spiritual, sacred form for Eastern architecture – a similar but rectangular installation presented at the Fondation Hermès in Brussels in 2008.

[5] . 'MA – Espace/Temps au Japon' (MA – Space/Time in Japan), Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 12 October-11 December 1978, as part of the Festival d'Automne.

too constructs a form of painting which is not an event but a space for meditation. And she thus lays claim to a longstanding affinity with Japan, which has not only been a source of inspiration for her but also a country where her work was immediately understood, recognised and purchased.[6]

When Frydman participated in a group exhibition at the French Embassy in Tokyo in 2009, she had already been contacted by the Kanazawa Museum.[7] She is even Japanese without knowing it: while we were speaking of her use of mauve for *Murmure* – a colour she had chosen because it is soft and silent, 'neutral', indeterminate in the sense of having neither symbolic nor natural references – we leaked through one of those beautiful books of colour samples punctuated with photographs which are found only in Japan and were astonished to discover that in Japan, mauve is in fact quite clearly identified with . . . cherry blossoms and Japan's national colour!

Garden of light, Kaleidoscope: Woman's identity and the painting-body in movement

Frydman is all the more honoured to have been invited into the prestigious Kanazawa Museum because she is the first woman to exhibit there. In fact, she is one of the rare artists who readily speaks of her situation as a woman. She addresses the gender issue just as freely as the difficulties she has encountered on that score – albeit without complaining about them – or the ways certain works by women artists have inspired her. Her decision to stop painting was made, among other reasons, in order engage with feminism at a time when women faced many obstacles in French society and the rare women artists were frequently mocked. Frydman often cites the discussion she organised at her studio when she reopened it in 1978: for an entire

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[6] . In the year 2000, when she was invited to give a lecture at design schools in Osaka, Nakoya and Tokyo, she requested access to the studios of the great masters of painting on cloth and was struck by the refinement of the techniques using stencils made from delicate paper cut-outs or tie-dying.
The same year, during her first solo exhibition in Tokyo, the architect of Yamanashi Gakuin University acquired four of her paintings for the institution, and the university then commissioned six large-format works. She speaks of the 'taste for the minimal, for what is transparent, shaded and translucent, which moved me so deeply in Japan'.

[7] . 'No Man's Land', French Embassy in Tokyo, 2009-2010.

day, artists, art critics and philosophers (including Philippe Sollers) debated the question 'Do women have a right to the symbolic?'

Her return to painting was due in part to the discovery of major women figures on the New York art scene such as Dorothea Rockburne, but also Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse. They had real studios, assistants, powerful galleries, genuine careers. And they encouraged Frydman to become an artist. In France, meanwhile, she looked at the work of Judith Riegl and was encouraged by Joan Mitchell.

What all of these women had in common was the fact of working outside of movements while remaining radical, and being belatedly recognised as great artists. They invented an abstract language where the body was still present, a language which was infused with nature and their biographies without being limited to them; they used new materials and/or colour with great freedom. And Frydman recognised herself in their 'eccentric abstraction' (the title of the chapter devoted to them in the exhibition 'elles@centrepompidou' where her work *Rouge Cardée* [2004] was presented alongside those of Marthe Wéry, Vera Molnar and Ana Mendieta).[8]

As is the case with the issue of gender, the artist addresses her biography candidly, although her work is never limited to, or even directly influenced by one or the other. Nonetheless, she does not forget who she is and where she comes from, as succinctly stated in a moving text which indirectly recalls her parents' ties with Jewish history and the Holocaust.[9] Colour, she writes, 'rescued me from suffering, from the tragic dimension of art'; it constituted an 'ethical decision' which, precisely, was not to absolve her from history but to return to it. Between her mother's sewing and her father's textile factory, the daughter invented her own relationship to cloth and colour which has to do with both genders.[10]

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[8] . See the exhibition *catalogue elles@centrepompidou, Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre de création industrielle* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2009), and in particular, the chapter 'Eccentric Abstraction', pp. 118-155.

[9] . Letter to Dominique Szymusiak, head curator at the Musée Matisse, in *La couleur tissée*, pp. 6-9.

[10] . As she indicates in the same letter: 'From the masculine to the feminine to the third tone, painting. Painting, the language of the most subtle perception, the language of the secret tongues of childhood (from Yiddish to Russian to French), it interlaces the territories of father and mother. It weaves from masculine to feminine and braids its own identity of a different Other'.

It is, however, because she is a woman that she first had to establish her legitimacy as a painter and that during the first ten years of her career she limited her technique to traditional painting or drawing materials. Only later did she use tarlatan and other fabrics, embroideries and lace, as materials associated with women, the female body, the traditional dress and gestures of her own gender. Today, as a recognised painter in full control of her career, she can finally choose to refer to Sonia Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber Arp by openly taking on the decorative and working with industrial materials like brick (as seen in her 2011 exhibition at the Passage de Retz in Paris) and the coloured Plexiglas filtering the light along the corridor of the Kanazawa Museum with the installation *Kaleidoscope*. She had earlier worked with glass, for the 2007 public commission *La Sauleraie* at the Saouzelong metro station in Toulouse, and it was after visiting this station that Emiko Yoshioka asked her to conceive a work for the corridor at the museum.

When we look at these lively, luminous grids, made to be walked through in cutting across the interior courtyard (Frydman has carefully left some squares transparent, in order to preserve the relationship with the garden of light), where the light is reflected on the floor and the opposite wall as much as on the body, we think of the grids, simultaneously modernist and decorative, made by the women who were, no less than their husbands, the inventors of abstraction. Sonia Delaunay embroidering a chequered quilt for her son in 1910 and inventing Suprematist dresses; Sophie Taeuber Arp redecorating the Aubette in Strasbourg with Jean Arp; Annie Albers taking inspiration from the Bauhaus to embroider abstract hangings.

But we also think of the grids of Mondrian, of Klee, and of light artists such as James Turrell and John Irwin who reinvented the body's relationship to space. Following in the line of these prominent male figures, Frydman's work has been questioning the vision of colour in three dimensions and the disorientations it entails for more than twenty years. Or, like Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, exploring the body's movement in space. Like this generation, she investigates the ways the body's passage through the space modifies the architecture; like these artists, she takes an interest in echoes, transparency and reflections.

Mural Jaune (2005) and *Red Room* (2011): colour, the history of colour and the history of art

Perhaps because Frydman has a particular connection with writing – through a kind of diary of her feelings which she keeps on a daily basis, but also through the masterful literary texts which comment more sporadically on her work – or with those who write (the philosophers, poets and literary critics invited to write about her), the fact remains that the essays about her work are often, first and foremost, very beautiful texts. For the most part literary, if not poetic or psychoanalytical, they leave aside the history of art in order to get to what is essential: describing an approach to the essence of things, close to that of the artist when she paints.[11] To avoid repeating what has already been done quite well, especially by the artist herself, I prefer to put the history of art back in the centre, by attempting to describe her singular position – as she has characterised it herself in our conversations and earlier published interviews – between two historical currents.

According to Frydman, she stands almost exactly in the middle of two great traditions – her knowledge of which is both erudite and personal, textual and visual – to which she pays tribute with a humility rare among contemporary artists. On the one hand, there is a French/European painting from before the School of Paris, where Matisse, Cézanne, Degas, Miró and Masson all dialogue, and with them, a certain idea of happiness and the experience of drawing close to the body, of a fluid, sensual line. On the other, there is an American painting where Newman, Rothko and Pollock, not to mention Gorky and the drawings of de Kooning, are in resonance, with the shared impact of a 'catastrophe of the subject', an idea of the urgency of painting and an absolute risk-taking. What is involved is not reconciling two different positions but drawing equal inspiration from them, which is made possible by a way of living painting personally, like something which is, precisely, *personal*. Frydman's syncretic painting, where Brice Marden's line dialogues with that of Picasso, where Agnes Martin's experience of nature in New Mexico feeds on that of Joan Mitchell in the countryside outside of Paris. French painting, American

[11] . See, for example, Jean-Louis Schefer's essay 'Une poétique de la manière' in *Monique Frydman, les dames de nage* (Caen: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1996), or, by contrast, Xavier Girard's many references to American painting in the untitled essay published on the occasion of the exhibition 'Monique Frydman' at the Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain, Midi-Pyrénées, in 1989, pp. 10-18.

painting and personal experience are three poles which converge, as demonstrated by the two favourite colours, red and yellow, and the way they are used in *Mural Jaune* and *Red Room*. In *Red Room,* which echoes one of the *Fabriques* created at the Musée Matisse in Cateau Cambresis in 2005, Frydman once again presents what is for her a key colour: 'The colour I've most worked on, the one I feel closest to, is red, scarlet. For me, it's a fundamental colour'.[12] '. . . To my mind, red goes very far back in the history of painting and is the *primal site* of every possible colour. We're in the presence of a colour which goes beyond abstraction and representation. I'm convinced of the inherent qualities of red, which I see as the basis of the painting, even if it's covered over'.[13] But in Frydman's work, this colour is also a recurring tribute to Matisse and his *Atelier rouge* (1911, now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York) which she discovered at the 1992 Matisse retrospective in New York.[14] The tarlatan of the *Aires*, soaked with colour and initially attached to the wall with pins (and thus mobile) follows the path of Matisse's cut-outs: '. . . the whole visibly explicit process of the assemblages owes that freedom to Matisse's way of doing'. Or again: 'It's Matisse who initiated me to that fragmentary monumental scale'. And the same red, she indicates, 'led me from Matisse to Rothko', whom she discovered on her first visit to New York in 1979 and again at his 1987 retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London and the 'Abstract Expressionism' exhibition at the Albright-Knox Museum in Buffalo. Her interest in Rothko's red is multiple: at once for the colour, the impregnation technique and what he said about his non-formal relationship to abstraction.[15] But also for the critics' interpretations, and in particular that of Clement Greenberg: 'A new kind of

[12] . Interview with Catherine Francblin published on the occasion of Frydman's 1988 exhibition at the Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris, p. 33.
[13]. 'L'ombre du rouge ou la quête de la lumière, interview avec Monique Frydman', in the catalogue of Frydman's 1990 exhibition at the Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne.
[14] . See, for example, her three series *Ombre du rouge, Violet* and *Senantes* from the 1990s, or *Rouge Cardée* (2004) in the Centre Pompidou's collection.
[15] . Here, she quotes Rothko's well-known remark: 'I am interested only in expressing basic human motions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on, and if you, as you say, are moved only by the colour relationship, then you miss the point' (interview cited in note 12, p. 25).

flatness, one that breathes and pulsates, is the product of the darkened, value-muffling warmth of colour . . . '.[16]

The same tripolar construction applies to the colour yellow as Frydman uses it in a number of works: in Kanazawa with *L'Absinthe* (1989) and *Mural Jaune* (2005), and earlier, with other pastels from the late 1980s such as *Jaunes Majeurs* and *Jaunes d'Or*, and also *Or* from the *Éclats* series (2004). She associates yellow with Impressionist painting and with Klee, but also with her dialogue with Ellsworth Kelly and once again, a personal experience, her voyage to Australia in 1986-1987 and the 'wonder' it set off in her: 'The space there is really endless, abstract, with an extremely strong light. What's more, in this space, and light, every shape stands out as if it were outlined or drawn. It's a little like El Greco's acid yellow, going towards green, a yellow which has always fascinated me'.

The end of the itinerary (Gallery 11): historical overview, constants and chronology

Once Frydman's place in the history of art has been established, it is interesting, by way of conclusion, to compare the constants and the changing elements in her work. The former appear from the outset and recur; the latter very over time and define a kind of 'material' chronology.

Among the constants: – Her attachment to painting as a complex symbolic practice where the knowledge of history vies with personal risk. – Her relationship to the process and the material, with techniques/materials to which she has been faithful from the outset. – A dose of chance which she injects depending on the period. – A rejection of the brush, and therefore the various techniques she uses for the gradual impregnation of the colour onto different surfaces. – The pastel blocks which she rubs and, as she says herself, subjects to 'multiple transgressions'. – Tissue paper. Spalters (large paintbrushes), glue. – A strategy 'for getting around the effect of the material and arriving at what constitutes it, its minimal reduction'.[17] – A desire for physical

[16] . *La Couleur tissée*, op.cit., p. 23. See Clement Greenberg, 'American-style painting' in *Art and Culture, Critical Essays* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 226.
[17] . *La couleur tissée*, p. 26.

immersion in colour which leads her to favour monumental formats. – A very particular balance between painting and drawing/works on paper, well described by Éric de Chassey.[18] – And a fusion between colour and drawing made possible by a traced line, a scriptural colour infused with a tension she traces back to Lascaux: 'What overwhelmed me was the line which opens itself out, a nervous line, charged with energy, monumental . . . it's because the line is charged with affect that we're moved'.[19] Chance. Letting the visible emerge. 'My paintings are in no way anthropomorphic or organic . . . . I try to make visible the origin of the visible'. A form of jubilation: 'If that last element doesn't exist, the painting is a failure'.[20] And of a kind of happiness, a word she cites readily and which she associates with Cézanne's pictorial practice.[21]

Among the elements which change and define a chronology: In 1984, the end of the work on tissue paper and the beginning of large-format paintings on linen. Initially, the combination of charcoal drawing and coloured shapes, followed by an immersion in colour, which goes from sepia/brown to light tones and soon after, vivid hues – tied to her travels and several visits to memorable exhibitions. The background gets lighter, the black signs disappear, the pastel is interwoven and the colour, in the end, is dazzling (*L'absinthe*, 1989). In 1989, the creation of a third 'tactile' work protocol, where the canvas, placed on the floor and moistened with glue, is soaked with pigment and rubbed with pastel. The series *L'Ombre du Rouge*, *Violet* and *Senantes* mark a gradual shift towards monochrome work.

In 1994-1995, a new protocol frees the gesture from existing habits: by chance, pieces of rope lying on the floor provide her with the solution of a blind imprint – under the canvas – through

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[18] . 'If Frydman's work has in large part led the painting to become a fragile, malleable, crumpable surface (metaphorically at least), the rectangular sheet of paper represents the solid, even monumental pole in her work.' Éric de Chassy, 'D'une nature instable… quelques réflexions sur l'oeuvre sur papier de Monique Frydman', in *Monique Frydman, L'oeuvre sur papier* (2002).

[19] . Interview with Catherine Francblin cited above in note 12, p. 29.

[20] . *L'ombre du rouge*, p. 6.

[21]. In a lecture on 'The pursuit of happiness in Cézanne's painting', presented in writer and art critic Marcelin Pleynet's aesthetics course at the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris on 30 January 1992, subsequently published in the catalogue *Les Dames de nage* (Caen: Musée des Beaux Arts, 1995), pp.40-47.

the rubbing of elements previously laid out in a random way. This line 'outside the painting'[22] allows her to replace one form of spontaneity (the arabesque of the gesture) by another (the arabesque of the rope revealed by the rubbing) 'as if, by holding back the first burst of an overly spontaneous creativity, this detour permitted the emergence of a more subtle, more secretive creation'.[23] Begun with *Les dames de nage* (1994-1995), this path takes her through shadows (*Les Sombres*, 1998) to dazzling colour which reaches its high point with the monochrome *Éclats* (2004) recently echoed in white with the *Calcaire* series (2008). A fifth family of works comes together in 2005, at the time of the Musée Matisse exhibition and the artist's collaboration with the Seydoux silkscreen workshop, on the one hand, and her visits to lace factories, on the other. With *La Fabrique* and *Les Jours*, a canvas is no longer laid out on the floor to receive colour and gesture; rather, sheets of wallpaper and strips of cloth are mechanically inked through the silkscreen process, while with *Les Aires*, the colour is soaked into tarlatan. In both cases, the format becomes overtly architectural and the use of industrial materials and gestures is asserted, along with the reflection on the decorative and the wide range of techiques. Here, we can cite, for example, the return to tissue paper (*Whisper*, Fondation Hermès, Brussels, 2008) and the excursions into the architectural (*Witness*, 2011) and the sculptural (*Inside/Out* [2011], which gave its title to the exhibition at the Passage de Retz). And the last stage to date, a form of return to the brush with *Des saisons avec Bonnard* (2009-2011). This magnificent series deserves a long essay of its own, but for now it will have to be appreciated in light of what the artist herself has said about it: 'Why *Des saisons avec Bonnard*? Because Bonnard's work touches me immensely. There's happiness with Bonnard, but it's a fragile, fleeting happiness, in the moving way he looks at himself and what's around him . . . . For me, [the series] is also a dialogue with his work on chequer patterns (tablecloths,

[22] . *La couleur tissée*, p. 26, taken from a lecture on 'Chance in the elaboration of the painting', Japan, 2000. Dans une conférence sur « La poursuite du bonheur dans la peinture de Cezanne », donnée le 30 janvier 1992 dans le cadre du cours d'esthétique de Marcelin Pleynet à l'Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts de Paris, et publiée dans le catalogue Les Dames de nages, Musée des Beaux Arts de Caen, 1995 pp.40-47

[23] . This procedure is described in detail in the artist's interview with Monique Canto Sperber in *Inside/Out, Frydman, Peintures/Installations* (Paris: Passage de Retz, 2011), p. 11.

mosaics, etc.) in the construction of his paintings through passages of colour. Every morning, Bonnard made a very simple, very modest entry in his notebook about the colour of the sky and what envelops it: one day he jots down: “This morning, the sky is blue, there are a few clouds”; the next day, “The grey of the sky”. With Bonnard, we’re moving through time.’[24]

Camille Morineau

Translated from French by Miriam Rosen

[24] . Interview with Monique Canto Sperber cited in the previous note, p. 13.