Worlds of Their Own

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There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law. I love music passionately. And because I love it, I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art gushing forth, an open-air art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea. It must never be shut in and become an academic art. Claude Debussy[1]

The very first time I visited Monique Frydman's studio and viewed some of her works in the flesh, I readily became aware that there were some parallels to be drawn between her paintings and the music of Claude Debussy, parallels which are perfectly illuminated above in the words of the composer. Indeed, observing Frydman's abstract paintings equally awakens in us strong feelings of scale, expanse, and vastness, but also of a certain freedom, maybe of infinite possibilities and finally of *'an open-air art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky and the sea'*. Their often vibrant, if not intense and deep, colours add to the artist's desire to go beyond, to push through her ideas of how her paintings should be, without her adhering to any theories – she applies no strict rules, no dictum, no composition. There is simply a painter at the helm and what we see is her belief and artistic tenets.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Debussy's words were very much in my mind during the roughly hour-long train ride I recently took with Frydman and her assistant, Sophie Rivière, from Paris to her studio. The day was cold and foggy and as the train accelerated, forging its way with dizzying rhythm through the winter landscape, it gradually became difficult to distinguish the leafless trees as anything other than shadowy traces of some broken, darker lines drawn into a white blanket of fog. The beauty and power of the winter landscape was such that just like the feelings emanating from Debussy's words, it seemed there was simply nothing to hold onto. Perhaps those faintly defined traces could be my only points of reference and I, indeed, had no choice but to surrender to this powerful image. At this very instant my thoughts connected once more with Frydman's paintings. Aside from their initially recognisable vibrant colours, they too had startled me with their intriguing traces of structural elements, and the rapport they commanded among themselves as well as with the entire surface or patches of colour on the canvas. Both Debussy's quote and Frydman's paintings were now preoccupying me. Wasn't Debussy thought to have structured part of his music mathematically? Wasn't he, in composing his music, profoundly inspired by the paintings of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)? Whistler, too, was acutely aware of the importance of structure in his own work. Certainly, colour in Frydman's paintings is so prominent that one might easily overlook the importance of structure or the traces of it that are present within her works.

Looking at her paintings shown in this exhibition, one also notices important differences in their concept, technique and possibly Frydman's frame of mind. Albeit remaining abstract and to a certain degree formal, the artist's hand is nonetheless acutely present. Frydman belongs to the group of artists who personally undertake their works from start to finish. The selection of works in this exhibition provides an overview of Frydman's works from 1987 to 2013, so roughly 25 years. Two of the earliest works in the exhibition, *L'Absinthe* and *Le Dais blanc*, both from 1989, [pp. 24, 23] demonstrate remarkable luminosity and light saturation almost to the point of being blinding. Her large triptych painting, *L'Absinthe*, is executed predominantly in various tones of light green and intense yellow, as if one were looking at a glass of absinthe internally lit by rays of sunlight. The work emanates the joy and happiness of a moment, or it could be seen as a reflection of the pleasure one gets from seeing the vivid greens of young grass shoots or the fresh leaves on trees translucent with new life on a sunny spring morning. But, equally, it could describe the heady state of drunkenness induced by the consumption of absinthe, a light-green alcoholic drink popular among the bohemian circles of Paris during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Then came a period of several years, between the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, of predominantly working with the colour red, as in the series *L'Ombre du rouge* in which Frydman indulges in some fabulous hues of red along with various combinations with other colours, as for example in *L'Ombre du rouge No. 7*, 1990, [p. 33]. For most of the 1990s, though, Frydman worked mainly in dark hues of green, brown and grey, from which two examples of *Les Dames de Nages* series [pp. 37, 39] are included in this exhibition. Utterly beautiful and requiring reflection, these intriguing works recall the murky depths of a swamp and are among some of the rare works by Frydman that command possible associative meanings. Of particular interest are the painterly and well blended colour surfaces of these works. Incidentally, Nages is the name of a town in southern France, where during World War II, Frydman and her Jewish family spent a life of survival, hidden and protected by some brave local people.

Starting in 2000, Frydman's palette becomes much lighter and she actively experiments with colour and structure, as can be seen in the *Calcaire* series, an example of which is *Le Triptyque Calcaire*, 2007, [p. 49] included in this exhibition. Then there are two remarkably interesting series, entitled *Witness* [pp. 77–83] and *Des saisons avec Bonnard* [pp. 63–75], which I consider more fully later in this essay, and finally the glorious *Polyptyque Sassetta* [pp. 92–109], an outstanding work discussed in more depth by Farah Nayeri elsewhere in this publication.

To realise her paintings Frydman makes use of frottage, a technique which she often completes by adding pigments. To begin a work, she lays an unstretched linen or cotton canvas directly onto the floor of her studio and places under it, according to her needs, some cord or string of varying thickness and arrangements. The latter allows her to achieve the desired frottage effect she is after in the final work. It seems to me that the act of rubbing on large surfaces of canvas with bulky chunks of colour pastel, which barely fit into the palm of her hand, must require considerable focus and concentration from the artist. The hand, which in this process performs almost like an act of writing, connects the mind with what is being executed. It functions not only as a bodily engagement, but also intellectually, that is, how to blend, to layer and to scumble the material to achieve the desired effect of structure or traces, while at the same time letting colours speak for themselves? How far should she continue with the process? When should she stop? And, finally, how does she know when a work is finished? These are all questions that preoccupy the mind of the artist, and for Frydman *'the intelligence of the hand'*, and must be decided upon. Maybe all this is logical, since Frydman's paintings from the year 2000 onwards do have a great visual affinity with a page of handwriting. For Frydman, receptivity plays a central role in her creative process and occurs even before the artist's knowledge of it. In the following quote, the twentieth-century Irish writer Oscar Wilde writes of receptivity and how it needs to occur in the mind of anyone viewing a work of art.

The temperament to which Art appeals… is the temperament of receptivity. That is all. If a man approaches a work of art with any desire to exercise authority over it and the artist, he approaches it in such a spirit that he cannot receive any artistic impression from it at all. The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play.[2]

We have been talking about the importance of structure in Frydman's work. Sometimes this structure is achieved physically by placing a quantity of cord or string beneath the canvas before she starts her process of frottage, such as that seen in the paintings *Le Triptyque Calcaire*, 2007, and *Le Triptyque Noir*, 2004, [pp. 49, 40], and in other cases, as for example the series *Des saisons avec Bonnard*, 2009–2010, [pp. 63–75], where structure is an integral part of the work and therefore may not be easily detectable as such. However, establishing structure within the work in this instance is more than setting up a frame of reference within the painting. To me, it seems the presence of structure in Frydman's work could be associated with the absence of presence, a certain need to keep the past alive or possibly to keep a connection with the past, albeit in a formal way. As such, these structures could be referred to as traces or marks, and they prompt the questions: Who are these traces meant for? Who do these traces serve, the viewer or the artist?

There is a ritual in Frydman's daily life which I believe could contribute, intentionally or not, to her oeuvre. The act of leaving Paris every morning for her studio in Senantes is in a way an act of *s'éloigner*, of distancing oneself or moving away from one place to another, from one condition to another, from one activity to another. It seems to me that this ritual, this action of distancing oneself could be a prerequisite to forming objective thoughts in order to create something new, and yet, can one ever leave behind traces of the past? That something which remains forever a part of us?

The arrangements of brick and canvas in the series of works *Witness 1* to *15*, 2010–2011, [pp. 77–83] is quite revealing. These small works, less than one metre high or wide are organised in right angles, perhaps according to some geometric grid, and are all quite formal in appearance. The intriguing issue is not only the juxtaposition of two unlikely materials – canvas and brick – but also the reason for using very small cuts of canvas worked with coloured pastel in these arrangements. It is as if these pieces of canvas are the remains of or traces from the past, from an archaeological site, now restored and put together as is customary when using materials such as bricks. In their present metamorphosis, they occupy a new and fresh identity, but they also bear witness to something that has previously existed.

Pierre Bonnard, *The Red-checked Tablecloth* or *The Dog's Dinner*, 1910
Oil on canvas
83 × 85 cm (32¾ × 33½ in)
Private collection
Photograph by akg-images

The series of works entitled *Des saisons avec Bonnard* [pp. 63–75], executed in 2009 and a couple of them slightly later, were clearly made in homage to the painter Pierre Bonnard, but are also a reminder of how intelligently Frydman goes about integrating structure into her work. These fifteen paintings are all done on the same size of canvas, 130 × 97 cm (51¼ × 38¼ in), but are painted in different colours and hues that suggest the seasons. Abstract rather than the figurative that defines the work of Bonnard, they are created by overlapping bands or surfaces of colour which clearly define different planes. As Frydman told me towards the end of my visit: *Bonnard, albeit working figuratively, always worked in planes. From the decorative designs of the floor tiles of a room and checked tablecloths to the depiction of door frames and open windows in his interiors, they all served to achieve his ideas of working in various planes.*[3]

Frydman is remarkably objective in her oeuvre, very much like the American Abstract Expressionist artists of the mid-twentieth century, such as Barnett Newman (1905–1970) or Frydman's friend, the artist Joan Mitchell (1925–1992), who lived and worked for many years in the French countryside not far from Paris. Frydman's work does not allow for sentimentality or iconography. How could we not recall Newman's quote here:
We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. […] The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.[4]

Frydman's work could be considered within the lineage of Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, her paintings are abstract, but gesture is quite contained and meditative rather than spontaneous, balanced rather than predetermined, and objective rather than lyrical or melancholic. Much of the rationalism present in her paintings endows them with a certain Kantian attitude, which ultimately makes the oeuvre of this quintessentially European artist her very own. Frydman's work is modern and her paintings are the intellectual expression of an artist who goes about her work with objectivity and resolve. Her friendship with Joan Mitchell, a renowned second-generation Abstract Expressionist, might be a beautiful reminder of her thinking and artistic tenets. Knowing Frydman's chilling life story of survival as a child in Nages, France, during World War II, her oeuvre could have justifiably been tinted with painful and melancholic sentiment. It is therefore a paradox and of great credit to her intelligence and generosity that she sees the bigger picture in life, and her works are primarily known for their objectivity and rationalism.

1
Achille-Claude Debussy (1862–1918), French composer, in an interview by Georges Delaquys, *Excelsior*, 18 Jan. 1911, Debussy on Music, p. 245. Anonymous translation.

2
Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, Linda Dowling (ed.), Penguin Classics, London, 2001.

3
Monique Frydman in conversation with Ziba Ardalan, 23 January 2017.

4
Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Tiger's Eye*, New York, 1948, Vol. 1, No. 6, pp. 51–53.