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Saturday, September 2nd, 2017

From Mao to Matisse: Claude Viallat in New York

by David Carrier

Claude Viallat. Major Works: 1967-2017 at Ceysson & Bénétière, New York

May 6 to July 15, 2017

956 Madison Avenue, between 75th and 76th streets

New York City, ceyssonbenetiere.com



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, with 2016/050, 2016 center. Courtesy of Ceysson & Bénétière

In the 1960s, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, his follower, identified American color field painting as the wave of the future, citing Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland as the inevitable successors of the Abstract Expressionists. And so when Claude Viallat and the other Support/Surface French artists were shown in New York, they offered a serious challenge to this art historical genealogy. In his then renowned treatise on aesthetics, *Art and Its Objects* (1968), Richard Wollheim argued that “art and its objects come indissolubly linked.” We need, he said, “to understand this envelope in which works of art invariably arrive.” To borrow his useful language, the painting of Viallat arrived in a very different envelope from the Americans championed by our formalist critics. In a provocative rhetoric redolent of the 1960s Viallat’s French champions argued that he represented a synthesis of Henri Matisse’s decorative impulse and Mao’s political radicalism. This is an obviously paradoxical synthesis, for while Matisse’s pictures of odalisques are often said to be escapist apolitical art, Mao’s favorite style of painting was Socialist Realism. What was at stake, I think, is the old equation between aesthetic and political radicalism. Matisse’s art was aesthetically radical in its day, and so Viallat thought that the next ‘great leap forward’ should be abstraction building upon his achievement, painting that uses his intense color while deconstructing the traditional stretcher.

This varied exhibition offers twenty works over a span of fifty years Using intensely saturated acrylic paints, with reds, yellows, pinks and greens, Viallat works with varied shapes: sometimes rectangles, but as often irregular shapes, including spheres 2016/344, on a striking black background for instance) and the triangular (1991/129). 2016/070 (his titles are consistently numerical, preceded by the year) is painted on a vertically hung mat. Eliminating the traditional stretcher, Viallat hangs his dyed fabrics loosely on the wall. Taking this structure to an extreme, 2016/050 attaches two horizontal strips, painted in green and blue, to a loosely hanging yellow fabric frame. Occasionally, as in 2016/025, he paints on fabrics. His signature device is a reclined wavy lozenge, a squished trapezoid, which runs across the surface in all of the pictures. Sometimes, as in the rectangular 1993/138, it is relatively large; but usually it’s relatively small. Some of these oddly for example. Others, however, have richly vibrant color contrasts. In 1077/042, greens and reds vibrate against a pale red background.

Viallat’s works are decorative in the best sense of that word—viewing them can be compared to looking at a display of Islamic carpets. There is no obvious pattern of development here. For all the talk of Matisse, his art does not display that master’s stringent self-criticality, as evident in the late cutouts. The exhibition crowds its twenty paintings, some of them large, into two relatively small galleries, a mistake, as such essentially decorative works need room to breathe. And it would be good to have a full catalogue, offering English-language audiences some perspective on the theorizing behind these paintings. Right now we are much concerned with revising our received picture



Claude Viallat, 2016/025, 2016. Acrylic on fabric, 46.5 x 25.6 inches. Courtesy of Ceysson & Bénétière



Claude Viallat, 1974/032, 1974. Dye on fabric, 77.2 x 86.6 inches. Courtesy of Ceysson & Bénétière

of 1960s art. MoMA's large, revisionist exhibition, "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction," bringing together well known women like Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and to a lesser extent Jo Baer with many relatively obscure names from outside the US and Western Europe, represents a significant shift in the canon. To have also included Support/Surface painters (they all seem to have been men) in a MoMA survey would be an equally dramatic change, though not of course with the same political implications of the women's show. But Support/Surface painting needs a more sustained educational effort from its gallery support system if it is to secure a place in the late modernist canon. I would be the last person to scorn analysis of an alliance between radical leftist politics and radical art, which was very much a part of its period style. Not, after all, when a quotation from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is the sole epigraph for Michael Fried's *Morris Louis* (1971). That said, I would like to understand, in a little more useful detail, the envelope in which these paintings arrived in the American art world. As it stands, the idea that these handsome pictures are aesthetically or politically radical has not been established by this exhibition.

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