LUCID CAMERA
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Translated from French by Ann Cremin

Hugues Decointet's work since the middle of the nineties is rooted in an active memory of painting, perceived as a crucial component in photographs and movie images. After absorbing the 20th century's lessons, those of Cézanne and Gehardt Richter, he designed devices to open up the image to a new temporal form. The concept of blanks and fragments belongs to an iconic history, which can be seen as a spatial layout of expectancy. From Cézannian breadth to photographic distancing, there occurred an alteration of the image as truth, evidence or representation . Alternating the opacity and transparency of a film, leads to the founding of a practice which captures light as movement, and uses it "to throw shadows" over what seemsobvious. Hughes Decointet turns around the game of
appearance and illusion to set up spaces which provide the viewer with a new role: that of editor.

"I remember" is the leitmotif of one of his first note-books. Through a collection of remembered paintings, from the museums he visited as a child, as well as old postcards, sketches and photographs, this "data base" examined an intimate history of painting and sent it back to what it really is: a legend caught randomly, through its details. The procedure is dual: from focussing and enlarging, from the elementary to the assembling. There is no nostalgia of a bygone era, nor an unfruitful attempt at making a movie, but a luminous production: that of an operative time. This takes place through the use of syncopation, of back lighting, using two images in the same frame. Thus in *Bleu, Pasolini peut-être* (2000) Hugues Decointet picked out a detail from a scene in Pasolini's *Decameron* (1971), showing a hand painting the blue ground of a picture. The shoulder and the arm's shadow is projected onto this coloured ground, in which a lighter square, the sunny reflection of a window probably, becomes a screen on the canvas. Technically, it is a sequence of 62 ektachromes, a sort of "cross fading" of those "re-photographs" which interfere with the usual chronology of 24 images/second (there are always 2 or 3 superimposed images, projected simultaneously), and leads to a sundering when unwound.

The painting and/or its image is "trapped" by light. This is clear in the photographs of details of paintings, mostly from the Renaissance (15-16th centuries) taken in museums or inside monuments. The focussing removes fragments of landscapes, scraps of faces, eyes. It is in no way a macabre study, chosen extracts for an anatomical lesson like in Géricault, nor a way of destroying painting. On the contrary, this "autopsy" should be seen here in the full meaning of the word: "the act of seeing by oneself". These photographs, "in freehand" , occurring haphazardly, without any special
objective and in normal visiting conditions, are "subjective manifestations" of painting. In the book *Maîtres Anciens, A main levée* [1], the foliage adds a rhythm to these photographs that splinters the surface to release something from its intimate depths. This intimacy, which can only be shared, belongs to each of us with our memories of paintings, an effort at remembrance. "An image is always timeless, the mental operation needed to capture an images is what takes time." [2] This temporality is a series of "lapses", suspended moments, that introduce a breathing space into the narrative
sequence. We come back to the concept of movie editing, counterpointed in this work with light drawings, midway between erasing and covering up. Varnish and its brilliance, caught and reflected in the photograph, make up ghostly haloes which reveal the canvas. That woman's face, part of the series *Faces (Galerie des Offices, Nov. 98)* (1999), looks like a real person made spectral through the frozen effects of Cibachrome. The dual motion of revealing and covering up is played out here between the first illusion of the photographic capture (the "it used to be": the clue) and doubting it: as
proof "that used to be a painting". "I remember", "Je remembre", once more embodying those scraps of painting, meant continuously reactivating a memory which can only exist in the present.

Hugues Decointet, taking as his starting point these distances, the revelation of painting as separateness, imagines and produces scenic scenarios which lead to the viewer's mobility. This happened with *Réserve, Manifestation 5* [3] or *Non Lieu n°1 (terrain vague)* [4].In the first instance, a group of slide-projections [5] defined a space (5,50m x 9,50m x 2,50m) created by the visitor's movements though visual clusters. The projectors, arranged on different levels and angled in various positions, as well as the heap of blank canvases, immediately placed us outside the performance. Being behind the scenes is not a simple doubling back, we have not gone "through the looking glass". Hugues Decointet separates the image from the canvas and discloses specific details "unseen by the naked eye". Indeed, acquainted with photographs of masterpieces, our eye is not naked, but active. This implies a process of interactive vision in the sense that Plato thought that the pupil was not only a receptor of light, but also projected it. "Particolare": to detail, to cut into the pictorial stock

and edit it, precise actions recalling the laboratory work in the cinema as well as in the operating theatre. The process used and amplified in this installation is the "fondu au blanc". A transitional technique, it entails the progressive lightening of the image through a luminous halo from which a new image emerges. Concretely, to go from one image to another, one introduces an ove - rexposure which creates a "blank".("In the cinema, a white space also becomes a colour of presence", says

Hugues Decointet). Here the blank white space is the detail of a painted surface, crackled, white, photographed, enlarged. The surround made up of projected and framed images is created through layering. The operator-artist does not dissect the painting to show us its artifice, he does not strip the canvas from its stretcher to decode its signs, nor does he sully its smooth pallor, his gesture is not that of an impotent rage at not painting any more. The space between the pigment and the canvas provided by these crevasses outlines a fine network, like a weave. Here we come across a fundamental notion in Hugues Decointet's work: extending the canvas as far as the screen and beyond. This visual stretching is close to what happens in his approach to time: an overflow beyond the frame, off camera. Every limit is stretched as far as the warp in a multitude of fibrils.

In this coming and going on the surface we can distinguish eccentricity at work: that of the peripheral viewpoint. Off centre, the focal point is no longer that of the picture in the making. The "outside" (exo) of painting becomes exotic. "To set aside monotony, world tourism", as Segalen advised [6], such is the project in *Découvertes*. The word borrowed from the cinema's technical vocabulary means a trompe l'oeil element, a view, photographed and/or painted, placed in the background of the set. Printed on a woven canvas, this image is often highlighted with splashes of paint. Placed on stretchers in Hugues Decointet's installations [7], the photograph on canvas plays with the screen's motion-filled imaginary, as well as with the studio sets. The sight of fine squaring off with dots recalls the background of Lichtenstein's paintings, when he enlarged comic strip vignettes, as well as Warhol's silk-screens. The link with the serial methods of reproduction in Pop aesthetics confirms the awareness of a history which investigated narration. It also means placing oneself in an "after photography", which never forgets to be painting also (since Warhol remained a painter). From that point of view, the scale models he carried out for the scene setting s, in which panels, uprights, and fake windows enlivened the stage, are once again an echo of the "macula", the little blind spot in the eye's depths. The word also means a sketch, and here one goes back to the tradition of the "bozzetti", sort of little theatres that classical painters (like Poussin) made to explore their compositions [8]. In the undergrowth of illusionary games, of passages and projections, we can identify a successful attempt to open the window and take part in the image. The latter is shown in all its truthfulness: a mental and temporal construct. The "graffiti" of the enlarged sketches of Renaissance arcades (*Graffito*, 2000)[9]

are once more a technical and receptive doubling back. They look like enlarged sketches traced on architects' scraperboards, but they are in fact, grey inks on large scale films. The use of neutral colours leads us back to the cinema and its essence: luminous movement. "What it already is by itself (light) is motion, pure extended motion which exists through grey… The famous luminous grey of the French school is already like a colour-motion. (…) Grey or light as motion, is the alternative movement".[10]

Hugues Decointet's work is undertaken via a series of visual games and strategies which disturb our perception and send us back to a history of viewing as a crosshatching between two strokes, line for line, beyond reflection or embedded in the matter: *tratteggio*, in grisaille .

Notes

[1] Hugues Decointet, *Maîtres anciens, A main levée*, published by Disegnodiverso, 1997.

[2] Giorgio Agamben, private conversation , 1999.

[3] *Réserve, Manifestation 5*, Emmy de Martelaere, Paris, 1998.

[4] Curated by Emmy de Martelaere, Paris, 2000.

[5] 8 x 24 images in fade-out, 4 frozen images, blank canvases.

[6] Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, collection Biblio essais, le livre de poche.

[7] *Au fond, de Loin (Découvertes)*, for *Intime Nature*, exhibition 2001-2002, France, Scotland. *Découverte*, Prato, Déc.99, 2000 : novajet print on canvas (133 x 200cm)

[8] cf dictionnaire historique de la langue, Le Robert, tome 2, 1999.

[9] Ink on acetate film , 200x100 cm.

[10] Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinéma I : L'image-mouvement*, Editions de Minuit, 1983, p 67.