

# JORDAN DERRIEN PAINTING AS MATERIAL

## Marie de Bruggerolle

In life, we enter a space through the door, in cinema, through the frame, in Jordan Derrien's work, through the painting.

1—INSIDE, FROM OUTSIDE: the airlock.

A building in Conduit Street, London. A corporate façade. The revolving glass doors make us once again experience transparency in the city, as in Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), or a Dan Graham pavilion. First mirroring effect, in the movement-ritornello when passing from the street to the foyer.

Lift. Metal doors, buttons, opening, sideways sliding.

Upstairs, metal panels spaced apart, green marble floor, glossy beige marble walls punctuated with black horizontal bars, like the frame lines on a strip of film. Shiny effect of the surfaces on which electric lights are reflected.

Interior: day.

WHAT IF?

What if part of the wall had been removed to make a window?

The embrasure establishes a gap/rupture, a natural source of light, a view. Here, *veduta*, on an interior courtyard: a beyond. It is a projecting element, an appetiser that makes a breach in the walls, a breakthrough of reality. The latter is inaccessible. Uprights divide the view into four panes of glass without handles, fixed, frozen. Outside, the horizontal yellow lines of the parking spaces on the asphalt are bordered by the black verticals of the gate. Nothing to see. Everything brings us back inside.

We are in the first airlock, before the entrance. A vestibule.

2—FAKE DOOR, second threshold.

Another door, white ceiling, office interior, neon lights. L-shaped exhibition room, angled white cube, like two long perpendicular corridors. The ceiling is low, the neon lights in regular rows form interrupted white lines, like a Morse code without a dot. Beneath our feet, the square metal slabs evoke Carl Andre's modules. A sculpture expanded to the room in its entirety?

## PAINTING AS MATERIAL

The rough, matt and sometimes rusted effect of this floor of an office transformed into a gallery. At an angle opposite the entrance, there is a reception desk also made of metal, in front of a bay window, the view blocked again.

Within this functionalist framework, Jordan Derrien's proposal, *Bushels of Goodness and Warmth*, initially acts as a reiteration of a decorative aesthetic. This is not the case at all. Or rather, the support, the ornament, the accessory, make and break the established structures. The floor is a decoy, the works are on the wall, hung in a classical, regular manner.

*My relationship to painting is more a relationship to the surface, hence the painting-sculpture ambiguity. A masked, hidden or obstructed surface. Recently, the focus has been on the door, the window, the drawer, the mirror, with a repetition effect, as in Alain Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy.<sup>1</sup> These are surfaces that contain, encompass and protect, hence the title of the exhibition, Bushel referring to a unit of measurement based on the standard of a wicker basket,<sup>2</sup> the artist reminds us.*

## PAINTING AS... FAKE WINDOW

From the entrance, on the left side wall, *The neck is bent diagonally* (2022) presents the appearance of a wooden cabinet coated with black lacquer. Composed of two blocks, the upper one divided by a vertical median bar, has a frame separating it from the lower one. The lower horizontal bar is flanked by two flat metal plates, like drawer handles. Or it could be a sash window with a shutter. We think of Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920–64), which plays on the English phrase 'French window', but also on its scale. Transformed into an object-model, it becomes a portable accessory. What is common to both is that an architectural element, which is supposed to allow us to see, has been rendered blind.

## PAINTING AS MATTER... MATERIAL

Derrien's piece is formed by wooden boards covered with a thick syrupy paint, with an enamelled finish. An enamel paint. Here again one thinks of Duchamp and his *Apolinère Enameled* (1916–17), which is a doctored version of an advertisement for Sapolin Enamel industrial paint. In contrast to the art of lacquer, which is applied in thin layers, the surface shows accidents. Drippings, *impasto* and marks draw a story in the black material. They become visual events. Each element has a thickness, a depth, like coffered panels. The surface is not uniform.

Its fragmented frontality recalls Robert Rauschenberg's notion of *Combines*, which involve not only assembly, but impure amalgamation. Combination rather than composition. These are three-dimensional forms, planks of wood from a cupboard, prosaic. We can think of the early *pale d'altare*, those free-standing stone altarpieces, or icons on wood panels, which presented a screen effect and whose purpose was

religious and sacred: Acheiropoieta, not made by [human] hands. Here they are profane elements. For Jordan Derrien, being a painter does not necessarily mean making paintings in the sense of a canvas stretched on a frame, which would be the restricted definition of modernism. Surpassing the question of the medium reduced to its support, he reaches beyond pop or postmodernist practices by considering the painting as an object. The ambivalence lies in the fact that his forms have backs and sides and that these can be interchangeable, without hierarchy.

They are there as objects-observed, objects for pondering the question of the subject-observer. In the same year as *Jealousy* (1957), Jasper Johns painted *Drawer*. An encaustic painting, mounted on a stretcher and in an American box frame, the work depicts a drawer in its centre, whose contours are a rectangle and whose knobs are handles. Highlighted by their shadows, the elements have been re-painted, with an impressionistic touch that is seen as such. The bottom of the canvas is left unpainted, revealing itself as a clue. It is the material-painting that is depicted here. Grey-matter, which is not neutral but presents itself as material. Derrien responds to Johns, for whom paintings were enigmas and viewers sleuths, by gluing real handles or knobs directly onto the wooden plane, like in *Every Cup* (2021). The drawer itself has become the medium/support of the painting. In Derrien's works, the enigma does not come from the feigned shadows of the representation but from those of the reality of the presentation. Thus they are not decoys in the sense of a deceptive copy of what exists, but a presentation of fragments of the world, as they are, simply exformed from its surface.

The anti-matter here is not the absence or abstraction of it, but the revelation, by reversal, of what we do not want to see. That is to say, the slag, remains, grunge, not forgetting that the *materia* is the heart of the tree, of wood. Matter: matrix. It is also the faecal substance. This anti-*materia* is the other side, just as present, gleaming in the shadow. Just as the frame has slipped from the periphery to the entire surface, the coating has become the soul of the painting. But what kind of glossy?

#### PAINTING AS... FURNITURE

*Defined more by its qualities than by its content, enamel paint means any solvent-based paint that dries to a hard, vitreous-like (or glass-like) shell, in contrast with water-based paints. Enamel paint springs off root words that refer to smelting or melting. True enamel is a glass coating that is melted...<sup>3</sup>*

The visual components recall the materiality of a domestic provenance. That of the workshop of a tinker or carpenter, of an artisanal craft that retains the traces of a 'manner/style' not of serial production. That of textures which are integrated into a milieu, a context. Jordan Derrien carries out a series of transpositions, threshold crossings, states.

He applies a 'furniture' treatment to works whose purpose is the painting. It is a question of variation in scale, in format. A door the size of a painting. Instead of a minimalist *finish fetish*, the artist prefers the patina, the effect of wear and tear, of a rustic utilisation. There is a double betrayal here, that of the painter's 'profession' and that of the myth of painting reduced to a definition by its support/medium.

Do you shine or do you glow? Glossy is not necessarily shiny. You shine from outside; you glow from inside. Glow is a question of soul. In French we speak of the soul of wood.

BLACK MIRROR, Black series...

The same raw treatment is found in the three works placed at the back of the second room. They are constructed in a similar way: horizontal slats about ten centimetres high spaced one centimetre apart. The cut-outs in each board are visible from the side, forming a saw-tooth edge. One of them, *The Oblique Light* (2022), describes the shiny effect of raking light on a surface. The partial reflections are *glossy* but not smooth.

The opacity here is a matter of obliteration: to block the view to the outside in order to send the gaze back to the inside. The black quadrangles bring to mind Malevich's first *Black Square* (1915). Here the opaque black indicates that there is nothing to see and that we are being shown it. Although there is nothing to see through or beyond, there is in return a reflective luminosity to see reflecting and reflected. What does it cover?

The dark side? Another story, imagined, projected?

In Derrien's work, the decor has a use that surpasses its original function. *The window becomes the door and the door the painting*, the artist says. *I don't see any distinction*. It is therefore a threshold. A passage to what? A story. Function becomes fiction.

*Holding a wide, shallow platter in both hands* (2022)

*The smallest of the three birds* (2022)

The works' titles construct a narrative, a scenario. In fact, one could approach the entire exhibition at V.O as a scenario. Or, as with Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, a form of cine-novel ahead of its time. This is how the author subtitled the book that was published after *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). A film written by Robbe-Grillet and co-directed, as it were, with Alain Resnais, it is an attempt at persuasion. A man tries to persuade a woman that they met one year earlier in Marienbad. The film starts during the opening credits' sequence, and the voice-over guides us through a garden, a chateau, whose ornamentation becomes the characters. In the painting *What it boiled down to was that Disney wanted to work with us again, and we had to find another*

*mutually acceptable project* (2020), a motif of flowers in relief recalls this film's leitmotiv phrase:

*Once again, I walk on, once again down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure – of another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel – where corridors succeed endless corridors – silent, deserted corridors overloaded with a dim, cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, mouldings, black mirrors, dark paintings, columns, heavy hangings – sculptured door frames, series of doorways, galleries – transverse corridors that open in turn on empty salons, rooms overloaded with an ornamentation of another century. Silent rooms...<sup>4</sup>*

Repetition, ritornello, a litany spoken in a loop, evoke the very principle of cinema: the possibility of an eternal return. That which is not the 'same' because the variations, the transition from black to white, the displacements, deviations mean: 'the same, but another'. It is a progressive modification.

In contrast to a permanent present, the time of the film is that of a displaced, voyeuristic gaze. In *Jealousy*, a narrator spies on a woman, A..., and her presumed lover, Franck, through louvered shutters. The slats of so-called Venetian blinds can be turned to see from the inside to the outside, or vice versa. In the novel, the jealous man looks from the house to the outside. There are notably scenes that take place in the veranda, this space-threshold between inside and outside.

### 3—INTIMATE EXTIMATE

We, in turn, are readers-voyeurs, witnesses spying on the characters. We are caught rereading the same passages, as if in a rehearsal. In fact, the fragments of text are treated as montage elements, 'story frames' if not 'film frames'. Similarly, Derrien proceeds by amalgamating fragments mounted together. The wooden slats are assembled like sections of a wall. They could simply be cut out and transposed. He proceeds by transposition, from one dimension to another. The titles are elements of language like a subtitle, a translation. It is also a way of showing a voice-over. V.O: *version originale* or voice over? And like the narrator of *Jealousy*, this voice is perhaps that of a ghost, a spectre that haunts the walls.

What haunts *Jealousy* is the voyeuristic vision of the fantasist, it is also the desire to see or know everything, the longing for transparency. The louvered shutter/blind is the interstice through which the scopic impulse would like to see 'everything'. But here 'everything' is hidden, and the view is obstructed. The window that should allow us to see outside sends us bouncing back inside.

Ghosts have no shadow or reflection. The matte surface of the aluminium sculptures offers a coarseness that provides no mirror. Rough, marked by cracks, striations, amalgams, slag... its appearance is like a skin that recounts the story of the making-of of these pieces.

*In the Hollow of the Valley* (2022) is a piece that shows excavations, recesses, hollows. Moulded from wooden structures reminiscent of panels-paintings, from the back the piece resembles a Jasper Johns' *Target* (1961), minus the painted elements. No body parts, no coloured targets, just an empty mould form. Robbe-Grillet wrote a book about the *Targets*. The question of the target may be a common feature, not only as a motif but in the idea of being the one who aims. The jealous husband looks via the interstices, his gaze is that of the hunter on the lookout for prey.

The sand-casting technique has been used. The pieces are made from blinds' slats.

There is no plaster mould. Moreover, sand is another state of glass, which is found in the glaze. *Between the Clods of the Spaded Earth* (2022) again plays with inversion, beneath, above, inside, outside, hollow, solid. The small aluminium pieces exhibited here are masks and matrices for casting shadows. They are false holes, traps for the eye. They are a form of facadism, which retains only the hollowed-out structure of an architecture.

They are coherent with the site, vertically aligned with the metal paving: they negotiate their own space. It is as though a technical plate had been turned over from horizontal to vertical. In other words, they create a proximity, like a mask, face to face. The false reflections and differences in surfaces initially attract. We wonder how this was done, what it is, and then approach. We want to see. But one must pay to see. The price is the loss of illusion. Just as in a book we keep returning to the previous page to check that we have *déjà lu* (already read), here we keep looking and re-looking to verify if it is a *déjà vu*. The very act of reading corrupts us, makes us jealous, on the lookout. Robbe-Grillet shares with Jasper Johns a writing 'from the outside', a thing among things, raw material: observed. For all that, it is not without affect, on the contrary, it is full of desire. Raw. Without plot.

#### PAINTINGS–ARROWSLITS

A series of paintings on canvas, purple and black, convey this tension of a desire stretched by the gaze, which stumbles on a narrow passage. Their colour comes from crushed shells, recalling the ancient use of cochineal to obtain red. Here the process is organic. In contrast to the overproduced layers of lacquer, or the aluminium imprint, it is a matter of subtraction. The repetitive motif is similar: modulation on an elongated grid. The rounded contours of the tiles could be related to

cropping. So many framing processes borrowed from the fields of the image to make painting. In this, Derrien, like Robbe-Grillet, corrupts the conventions of his medium from within. Like the embrasures of fortified castles, the arrowslit allows for discreet observation and the possible firing of projectiles. A thick black border forms a frame within the frame. Smearred tiles form a soft grid offset to the right. One is reminded of so-called 'cathedral glass' blocks which are opaque, frosted. The titles seem to be direct allusions to *Jealousy*:

*The Western Side of the Veranda (2022)*

*The Apertures of the palisade were too narrow (2022)*

*It's all in the mind, things like that (2022)*

Thus the series does not so much show what is there, in front of us, but what is 'in between'. The interstice, the infra-thin, which makes a detail a clue. The canvases function like vignettes in a storyboard or notes in a score. Perhaps our movement from one wall to another, searching and bouncing from a plane to a depth, from an excavation to a *frottis*, produces this variation, this modification in us, from viewer to voyeur, spy or guardian of a desire.

The painting as a film strip, *pellicule* in French which literally means 'skin flake', a membrane of a film whose movement we set in motion. It is up to us to choose our position: guardian-rearguard gazer (the observer, on guard, who keeps double watch) or invisible spy? In front of or behind the painting?

*The spy must be ready to 'move', must be aware of his entrances and exits. The watchman leaves his job and takes away no information. The spy must remember and must remember himself and his remembering. The spy designs himself to be overlooked. The watchman 'serves' as a warning. Will the spy and the watchman ever meet?*<sup>5</sup>  
Jasper Johns noted.

## NOTES

- 1 Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jalousie*, a Nouveau Roman work, was published in 1957 by Les Éditions de Minuit. Derrien refers here to the English translation: *Jealousy*, trad. Richard Howard (Richmond, UK: Calder Publications, 2017).
- 2 Jordan Derrien in conversation with Marie de Brugerolle, August 2022.
- 3 Jordan Derrien in conversation with Marie de Brugerolle, October 2022. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Last Year at Marienbad*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 18.
- 4 Text for the film directed by Alain Resnais in 1961, with cinematography by Sacha Vierny, starring Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff.
- 5 Jasper Johns, *Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: MoMA, 1996), 60.

Marie de Brugerolle (b.1967) is an art historian, curator and author. Her work focuses on the history of performance art and post-minimalism, from the 1960s to its current state of dematerialization and absorption by the society of the spectacle. This focus complements her concept 'Post Performance Future'. She has been introducing Californian conceptual art to European art viewers, including the first retrospectives of Allen Ruppensberg (1996), Guy de Cointet (2004), John Baldessari (2005), Larry Bell (2010). She also curated *RIDEAUX:Blinds* (2015), *HOSPITALITY* (2018) and *C'BARET* (2019) a response to temptations of closure. She is now working on the extensions of performativity upon visual arts. Her new project *Polysphères*®, considers the entanglement of theory and practice in an expanding vision.