

BERNARD FRIZE

DE PONT, TILBURG

DANIEL BIRNBAUM

Several years ago, I came across a rather blunt exhortation in a Finnish magazine: "Hey, all you abstract painters. What you're doing isn't interesting. So just stop!" These words have been ringing in my ears ever since, and most of the time they seem pretty judicious. But occasionally something turns up that makes me think twice—like Bernard Frize's recent "herringbone" paintings. What intrigues me isn't so much Frize's detached, industrial approach or his attempt to reduce "creation" to chance and mechanics, but rather the transparency of his method: Once one gets the process, one also appreciates the struggle the artist has been through.

In *Type*, 1998, tributaries of bright color from the left side of the canvas lead to a central axis, where they converge in a diagonal river from which new "polluted" brushstrokes take off toward the right. The resulting flow chart is simple enough, but at the same time it's apparent that the artist has been kept very busy directing these currents of paint. In fact, he must have felt one arm short throughout the procedure. To paint *Type*, one would really need three arms, since all the rivulets—the "spine" as well as the "ribs"—seem to be flowing simultaneously. And to produce its logical extension, *Quelle*, 1998 (which melds two such herringbones, creating an even more complex structure), one



would—if I understand the procedure correctly—need five hands or, as is actually the case, several assistants to help out. When I look at these bright and beautiful canvases, I cannot help but visualize the frenetic activity of the artist trying not to lose control. First I see him as a spider; then, as an octopus; and, finally, as Edward Scissorhands. In any case, he can't be fully human.

The eye, the hand, and the canvas have often been presented as the Holy Trinity of painting. In this vein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in his essay "Eye and Mind," 1961) cites Paul Klee's remark on the fire of creation: "Working its way along the hand as conductor, it reaches the support and engulfs it; then a leaping spark closes the circle it was to trace, coming back to the eye, and beyond." Everything would thus take place within this perfectly defined circle: eye-hand-canvas-eye-hand-canvas. Here the hand, of course, is thought of in the singular. It's the unique organ that lets the vision of the artist materialize in a unified work of art. Frize's canvases, with their multiplicity of currents—seemingly directed by a half-dozen hands simultaneously—do not fit this traditional humanist model at all.

His experimental, almost playful approach is one of the attractions of his work. For example, it occurred to Frize that he might make a painting by connecting dozens of fine brushes to one another, thus creating one big heterogeneous brush that could cover an entire canvas with many colors in a single stroke. As it turned out, the painting born of this procedure looked quite spectacular—it brings to mind rockets or falling stars speeding through the sky—so he produced an entire series using this technique and named the individual paintings after famous comets: *Horst*, 1997; *Swift*, *Dublago*, *Lexell* (all 1998); and so on. In another work, the massive *Lime*, 1998, he repeatedly passed a roller over the rough linen with so light a touch that hardly any paint adhered to the canvas. The surface takes on an indescribable, mutating, overall color, and at the same time various distinct hues shimmer within it. In speaking of this work, the show's catalogue notes the influence exerted on Frize, who is French, by Impressionism in general and Monet's "Water Lilies" in particular.

And that's where the problems start. An easy way out for today's abstract painters is to produce work that comments ironically on the tradition of painting, poking fun at the ambitions and dreams of earlier periods and their heroes. This kind of work—allegedly "dismantling"



Opposite page: **Bernard Frize, *Dublago* (detail), 1998**, acrylic and resin on linen, ca. 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
 This page, left to right: **Bernard Frize, *Type*, 1998**, acrylic and resin on linen, ca. 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". **Bernard Frize, 44% *Juste 18% Faux* (44% right 18% wrong/fake), 1985–98**, acrylic and resin on linen, ca. 63 x 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

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or “deconstructing” the techniques and strategies of abstraction—is always bad, and it’s worse when it tries to be clever. The best pieces in this exhibition don’t succumb to that tendency but instead experiment with various, often surprising means of attaching paint to canvas. The less interesting works try to be smart, like *Suite Segond SF N5*, 1980, a kind of ready-made painting produced with the circular layers of hardened paint from cans that have been left opened. Small, ugly, and pretentious, it’s the kind of work that art

school students produce immediately upon discovering Thierry de Duve. Since the piece is eighteen years old, we may conclude that Frize is only getting better.

In fact, Frize produced a number of fascinating images in the '90s, and he employed some very odd techniques in making them. Given the widespread influence of “techno” culture on abstract painting (at least in Europe), his *Eixen*, 1992, perhaps cannot be said to be truly original. But the multicolored square, with its glazed surface (*Eixen* looks more like opaque, kaleidoscopically patterned glass than a painting on linen) is the most effective psychedelic image I’ve come across in quite some time. While one may quite legitimately read this work as a self-reflective display of the brushstroke as an artistic convention, it simultaneously creates a new kind of visual labyrinth with 3-D effects. Here, the eye—like the artist’s indefatigable hands—gets no rest. □

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