

# The Substance of Painting Is Light<sup>1</sup>

A conversation between Florian & Michael Quistrebart  
and Mara Hoberman

Mara Hoberman — Your exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo is an extension of your *Overlight* paintings, made with iridescent car paints and embedded LEDs. When I first saw works from this series I was struck by how much the surfaces changed depending on my position, the ambient light, and the quality of that light (sunlight vs. fluorescent bulbs vs. darkness.) Your latest paintings, made specifically for the Palais de Tokyo, take this idea of mutability and fleeting effects even further—can you explain how you work with light to create these kinds of unstable surfaces?

Florian & Michael Quistrebart — Light? It's more like light and matter at the same time. We choose subjects which are quite "generic," or abstract, rather basic things. We then create paintings which have enough physical matter and relief so as to optimize the reflection of light. The idea is that a thick, heavy material will define or highlight something slight and immaterial, like light. There is a sort of contradiction, or irony...

MH — The effect you've just described makes me think of stained glass windows in a church. When sun shines through the colored glass it appears to dematerialize solid architecture.

F & MQ — We use automotive coatings so as to reflect light as much as possible and intensify its sparkling. And we go even further in this direction by using iridescent paint, with the result that the light is never the same. A direct, intrusive light source, coming from LEDs, is then added to the surrounding light, reflected on the surface of the paint. All of these different light sources end up dematerializing the paint. The reason why we plugged our first LED into a painting was because of a lack of light. It was a good painting, but we found it a bit dull.

MH — At the entrance to the exhibition you play with the quality of the light illuminating the paintings. How exactly does the light function in this first room and does it serve as an introduction to the rest of the exhibition?

F & MQ — We're going to plunge the first room into darkness, but there will still be a specific kind of lighting to reveal the whiteness of the paintings' material. In this UV light, large, ghostly, floating paintings will emerge. This illumination is called "the light of the light."

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to André Derain.

MH — “The Light of the Light” is also the title of the exhibition, so indeed this first room serves as a literal introduction to your light experiments. Something that sets this exhibition apart from your other recent shows is the fact that you are able to direct and precisely control the light that shines on your paintings. Why is this important?

F & MQ — There will be no natural light sources in this exhibition. And so we’ll be able to control the ambient light. We’ll adjust certain zones and orchestrate a general mood. It is often hard to create a totality when you need to work with external factors, such as the light coming in through bay windows and settling haphazardly on our paintings. This new “season” of *Overlights* won’t be very different from the one at the DCA in Dundee, or at Galerie Crève-cœur. However, it will be completely optimized. Some of the paintings are going to be activated by UV neon lights.

MH — So, it’s the environment in which we confront the paintings that is different, not so much the works themselves. Another new element in “The Light of the Light” is the fact that the paintings rotate.

F & MQ — That’s right, we wanted quite literally to introduce motion... and stop the spectators from fixing their gazes on the paintings. This leads to a rather comic situation in which the eye cannot completely make out what it is looking at. We didn’t want to limit ourselves to showing motionless paintings on walls. And still less to compartmentalizing the space with partitions. We needed the paintings

to fill the whole space and create a strong impression that is both fleeting and imposing. So the idea came to us to mount them on vertical poles, then to rotate them, so that something will always elude and escape the viewer. We are trying to get to the borders of contemplation.

MH — It’s interesting that you are introducing an aspect of performance: this idea that paintings can have a duration and that they are not fixed. The viewer can’t spend just a few seconds in front of the painting and “get it” because “it” is constantly changing thanks to the shifting light, reflections, and so on. To me the installation resembles a theatrical staging. Do you see this as an immersive installation or as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*?

F & MQ — We don’t know exactly what effect we’re going to produce. Maybe it will be monstrous. Definitely so in fact. We want to push painting towards a state of crisis, by messing with materials, reflections and dimensions, and also by bringing in movement. It is all about saturation and excess, or gigantism, in order to show the opposite—something more subtle and invisible. It both is and isn’t painting. Maybe it’s more like hyper-painting, because we’re trying to saturate its basics, in other words to force ideas of light, matter, format, movement and perception to overflow. It’s neither a total installation nor a performance. It’s a delicate monster.

MH — Contemporary art can have a spectacular side—I’m thinking of flashy digital effects, shiny

large-scale sculptures, and room-filling installations. Do you see painting as having to compete by becoming more spectacular?

F & MQ— Being spectacular isn't our objective. What we're looking for is violence and brutality.

An up-surgings. The right phrase to describe this exhibition would probably be "physically mental." Something physical provoking something optical, which in turn has mental, psychological, or spiritual implications. And yet we still keep a close relationship with *low tech*.

The means are still the same: little LEDs, small batteries. The video projected in the exhibition space will be spectacular, but we produced it using what we had to hand.

We don't want to over-egg. This double video was made very simply, using a catalogue of extremely basic patterns. The screens will be large enough to amplify the physical experience of the imagery. So why is geometry so appealing? Why is it so spectacular? Why is it magnetically attractive? These are some of the questions we've been asking. People should wonder why they are attracted by it. Or else, on the contrary, why they run from it. In the 1970s, optical artists used geometric forms, and set them up in the street, because they knew that they'd have an immediate effect. Because the golden ratio fascinates and dominates. In this respect, the spectacular is part of our explorations.

MH — Your idea of mounting paintings on rotating poles makes me think of advertisements in the metro,

airport, or on the street. And I'm also reminded of luxury items like flashy sports cars on revolving platforms in showrooms. Does your work comment on the ever-narrowing gap between art and commerce?

F & MQ— No, the forms you see in the paintings are like caricatures of paintings, or a figuration of abstract art. They're rather like abstract canvases drawn by the authors of comics for scenes set in museums... or like lyrical French abstract art from the 1950s: Staël, Fautrier... here, there is a *mise en abyme* of abstract painting. As if it were being seen from a different dimension. Presenting pictures in an un-museum-like way goes in the same direction. The reference to communication and luxury is above all a vocabulary counterbalancing these forms which are so... emo. For example, there are sad faces emerging, with expressions of doubt, or else sulking... Here, "bling" is more associated with something poor, sensitive or naked. It's a middle ground. Advertising devoid of any positive messages.

MH — It's interesting that you take stylistic cues from the commercial world—rotating displays, LED lights, fluorescent colors, sparkles, shiny surfaces, and all of these elements that naturally attract our eye—but that you contrast this "bling," as you call it, with content that is subtle and abstract. This duality affects how we approach your work.

F & MQ— We make use of every means of seduction. We overdo the makeup. But there's also a psychological factor.

For example, one of our paintings depicts a kind of hug.

MH — I absolutely agree that there's a psychological component. I didn't see the faces or figures before you pointed them out, but in any case, while looking at the paintings embedded with LED lights, I always have the impression that they are looking back at me. This creates a profoundly troubling situation for the viewer.

F & MQ — This is no longer about "the viewer making the work." It's the artist who makes the work! Don't forget that when a painting, or more generally a piece of work, is imposing, when it dominates because it is huge or total, then it can fascinate, hypnotize and thus exercise authority over the viewer. In a sense, it looks at them. In some cases, it watches them.

MH — Adding movement will surely augment this experience. The rotating paintings do suggest a kind of surveillance—a painting that follows us, watches us, might even record us. This type of association will impact the viewer's behavior in the space, I would think.

F & MQ — We also had the idea of creating paintings that move along with the visitors. But for the Palais de Tokyo exhibition, the opposite will happen: paintings will flee the visitors.

MH — You were included in the exhibition "Dynamo" at the Grand Palais, which featured artists who founded Perceptual Art in Paris, in the 1950s and 1960s. Did showing your work in this context inspire you to

make kinetic works and/or experiment with optical illusions?

F & MQ — No, optical experiences are no longer an aim, but, rather, a means. We no longer have any need for the Op art discourse, concerning an art aimed at people outside museums. All we are taking from that artistic movement is the idea of fascination, manipulation of the gaze, and its relationship to hypnosis, ecstasy and trance states. The experience of optical limits. What we're trying to do is make connections between contradictory things, which are then crossed together, so as to amplify a complex idea at some point. The show at the Palais de Tokyo will focus on common points between our recent work and our older pieces. In other words, a conceptual link. The presentation of a geometric video piece in association with these paintings will "illuminate" certain points, in particular the fact that we aren't formalist optical artists. We have a studio practice, but we also work on exhibitions and contexts. Our shows are like "concept albums," they're progressive.

MH — To offer another art historical reference, I see a link between your paintings and the Impressionists. Like Monet or Pissarro's thick impasto surfaces, yours also capture the fleeting nature of light and shadow effects. Your paintings are responses to an environment that is always in flux.

F & MQ — Light is a phenomenon. The Impressionists made portraits of light. It's an interesting comparison. An art of impression, perhaps?

MH — There is also a certain affinity with the way the Impressionists dematerialized the picture plane. The modeling paste you use is incredibly thick, almost sculptural, in fact, but when it is coated with iridescent paint it appears thin and almost transparent like water. The LEDs penetrate the surface, making us wonder what is on the other side. As the paintings turn on the poles, will we see the versos?

F & MQ — The backs of the paintings will not be visible. They will be “double-faced,” recto-verso.

What there is to be seen is not behind, but in front, or rather between your eyes and what you’re looking at again and again.

MH — The final piece of the exhibition is the video installation you mentioned previously. What is the link between the paintings and the video?

F & MQ — The video is in black and white, while the rest of the show is quite colorful. So there will be a rather clear contrast. During this double projection, there will be a very quick, fluid succession of extremely simple forms, a visual maelstrom measuring fifteen meters across. It will be the most violent piece, placed at the edge of the exhibition space. With this huge video installation, our intention is to ask questions precisely about what we talked about earlier: the spectacular. Why is it that we’re so docile in front of geometry, or a geometry set in motion? How far can we bear it? When do visual effects become genuinely physical and disturbing? After standing in front of this projection, the viewer will have to backtrack and pass

once more in front of the paintings, so as to leave the exhibition. We hope that the paintings will be seen differently on the way out.

MH — I was actually nauseated when I watched the extract of the video, even just on my laptop. I’m afraid of the large installation on two screens!

F & MQ — Great! We’re going to bring in even more syncopated movements, with shapes coming and going. And we’ll also be dwelling on an organic, breathing in and out, or a beating heart. The heart will be depicted, as the modern symbol of a heart full of compassion, a powerless weapon... The two screens will answer and contradict each other. Our intention is really to destabilize the brain, to make use of it. From these two images, the visitors’ minds may then construct another image, in three dimensions. What’s more, the paintings nearest to the video will be lit up by the light coming from the two screens. When going back to look at the paintings, the viewer will still be blinded by the flashes from the video projection. To produce our films, we make ample use of everything that might be termed “visual drugs.” The kind of things that circulate on YouTube... You’re supposed to feel the effects of a drug just by staring at a fixed point in the middle of a spiral. This is quite widespread in the world of Goa psychedelic trance music. The relationship between our video propositions and our paintings lies in these kinds of questions about fascination. The looked-at object which ends up looking at us. The other relationship is compositional.

During the visit to the exhibition,  
the moment spent in the video  
installation's space will be decisive  
for the second view of the paintings.  
Everything's connected.

Translated by Ian Monk

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