



Florian
& Michael
Quistrebort

PALAIS DE TOKYO ●

les presses du réel

Turbulent Infinities

by Hugo Vitrani

The Quistrebert brothers (Florian and Michael) paint using four hands, twenty fingers, two heads, four eyes and the same number of legs. And they do not like going into too much detail about their little family business, or revealing who does what. They readily present themselves as being the “Brothers of the Shadow,” or kind of “Anti-Lumière brothers,” tinged with masonic symbolism. They manipulate paint and light mysteriously. This is an obsession that has gripped art history for ages, from the chiaroscuro of the Renaissance to the kinetic experiences of the previous century. It also concerns the study of light by the Impressionists, and the extremely ancient Egyptian technique of capturing shadows on walls by tracing out their contours.

Between two stools

In California, the scandalous 1970s engendered “Lowbrow” art, a movement acting in reaction against the elitist artistic milieu, which looked down on graffiti, tattoos, comics, skateboards, surfing, punk and the other countercultures which were shaking up society, like a group of lost heirs on the road already traced out by the Beat Generation. Unreservedly associating learned references to art history with the sorts of techniques and allusions it had excluded for so long, the Quistreberts cultivate a posture of being Low bro’ (*low brothers*). They dance like headbangers on the borderline between the prestigious and the banal, the mainstream and the occult, abstraction and figuration, the material and the immaterial, with the thudding of a heavy metal track.

They work in series. People have taken them to be figurative, occultist, abstract or else post-optic. With “The Light of the Light”—a punch-line title placing their show at the Palais de Tokyo midway between an epiphany and a power cut—the Quistreberts are settling some scores: they are none of these and all of them at once. Always on the look-out for schools, movements or ideals to pervert or annihilate, they superimpose styles, postures and eras which they (mis)treat using corrosive, toxic techniques so as to set off interferences. They navigate an art history which is compressed and web-digested: via links or unranked stacks, with the sudden arrival of pop-ups, bugs, spam and viruses. As hacker painters, the Quistreberts are the genuine *enfants terribles* of a twenty-first century marked by presentism and the digital revolution. It is a time of (re)mixing, sampling, plagiarising, volatile main memories and the gloomy underground reaches of the

dark net, that new virtual territory for criminal networks and resistance movements. The artists of the 2000s are DJs, or search engines, according to Nicolas Bourriaud who, in *Postproduction*, calls them “semionauts,” or navigators of an ocean of signs.¹ The Quistrebets cross the Bauhaus paintings of the wanderer Lyonel Feininger, sacred geometry, the occultism of abstraction, science-fiction, the vitaminized graphics of energy drinks, or the naïveté of the smileys which inhabit social networks, that new empire of 2.0 signs.

Disfigurations

“Good artists copy, great artists steal,” Picasso declared. Like gangsters stringing together hold-ups, the Quistrebets are past masters in dressing up art history. On emerging from their residency in Manhattan in 2009, they turned their backs on their early figurative pieces, which were intentionally faulty, clumsy kitsch revamps of nineteenth century American romantic landscape painting. Their work then entered into resonance with the architect Rem Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York*, when the city was in the throes of the sub-prime crisis, and they had no hesitation about dissolving its symbols of power into black paint. Since then, their pieces have explored the luminous transparency of darkness, decrepit materials, and the more or less opaque, mystical or spiritual symbols that accompany them. Here can be found the sombre Gotham City of the artist and architect Hugh Ferriss, the avant-garde films and photograms of Hans Richter and László Moholy-Nagy, the esoteric string geometries of Harry Smith (a precursor of Psychedelia) leading up to the virtually dematerialised, absolute (old) new worlds of František Kupka or Kasimir Malevitch. All of these appropriations are then treated in a series of disenchanting variations.

There is a ritualistic, shamanistic side to the Quistrebets, who sometimes flirt with profanation. In their series *Beer Splash* (2013), they poured beer onto their paintings, in a boozy, punk wake after the funeral of modern art history, while also reviving Pollock’s drippings and the *Piss Paintings* of Warhol, an artist who also had his dark side (the 1978 series of *Shadows*). As vandal painters—set between the sublime and the disgraceful, reflection and dissymmetry, the now and the afterlife—the Quistrebets (dis)figure the aesthetics and ideals of abstraction and modernism. At the Palais de Tokyo, they are unearthing the zombies of Tàpies, Staël or Picasso: so many “big wigs” from art history whose manners they synthesise in their compositions. They are going for the essential, seizing the power of the one-shot: a permanent preoccupation which can already be seen in their paintings made with sprays or bleach, which leave no room for second chances. By simplifying lines, like a cartoonist, the Quistrebets have elaborated a *comic painting* with precisely crude forms. They are thus confirming Warhol’s view that Walt Disney was the greatest artist of the twentieth century. It all brings to mind the series *Walt Disney Productions* (begun in 1984), in which Bertrand Lavier reproduced the paintings and sculptures of the 1977 comic *Traits Très Abstraits* [The Artistic Thief], in which Mickey and Minnie stroll through a museum. As for the abundance of references in their work, the point is never to pay an overly respectful homage

to the denizens of the past. The brothers may seem like a rock band using riffs to produce new, rather downbeat compositions, but they certainly are not groupies.

Picasso Baby

The long knife-fight conducted by Nicolas de Staël with matter and colour (thickened, diluted or dissolved) was reduced by the Quistreberts to the state of a sublime crust, in a clinical close-up, just as it is possible to dive into details of HD digitised works on the Google Art Project. Antoni Tàpies, his tragic relationship to reality, and the way he mixed paint and precarious materials, are subjected to the same treatment. As for Picasso, it is not just the matador genius who is being convoked, but also his name as a vestige of art and a spin-off. It recalls the insolent performance of Maurizio Cattelan who, in 1998, dressed up as a “big-headed” Picasso, invited visitors to take selfies in front of the entrance to the MoMA. What he had in his sights was the drift of museums towards becoming amusement parks. The same sort of criticism was also made by Banksy in his attraction museum Dismaland, established in an English coastal resort in 2015, following his film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010), a biting satire of the art market. Today, Picasso is a Citroën car.² And it is also Pablo who is the subject of the rapper Jay-Z in his track *Picasso Baby*, which completes the transformation of the artist into a luxury product for the nouveaux riches: “I just want a Picasso, in my casa / No, my castle / I’m a hassa, no I’m an asshole / I’m never satisfied, can’t knock my hustle / I wanna Rothko, no I wanna brothel / No, I want a wife that fuck me like a prostitute / Let’s make love on a million, in a dirty hotel / With the fan on the ceiling, all for the love of drug dealing / Marble Floors, gold Ceilings / Oh what a feeling—fuck it I want a billion / Jeff Koons balloons, I just wanna blow up / Condos in my condos, I wanna row of / Christie’s with my missy, live at the MoMA / Bacons and turkey bacons, smell the aroma.” This title was played in a loop lasting six hours on 10 July 2013 at the Pace Gallery (New York), in front of a large number of personalities from the New York art world, including Marina Abramović. In its own way, the rapper’s performance revisited the recent piece by Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*.

Fake

The Quistreberts’ paintings are snares. *F for Fake* was the title given by Orson Welles to his 1973 movie devoted to Elmyr de Hory, the British forger and specialist in the work of Braque, Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani. The apparent thickness of the paint in the Quistreberts’ recent series *Overlight* is deceptive. Covered by a vaporously thin layer of bodywork lacquer, their matter is blown up into a form of

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

² It should be recalled that, in 2000, Bertrand Lavier reproduced the logo of the Citroën Xsara “Picasso” on a new year’s card for the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and, in 2010, produced *Oriental Blue Picasso* by repainting a wing of a Citroën Picasso.

heightened reality, made up of impasto and sub-layers of modeling paste, a medium which can freeze the energy of this very different form of action painting. The Quistreberts want to make their pictures as bright as the bodywork of cars. They lie between celestial radiation, shaded Californian mirages and headlights, in a merger between the sparkling of stained glass and that of car-tuning. Illuminating or blinding LEDs pierce the paintings: Barthes's punctum here becomes a low-tension antibody. It is a form of artifice between the "halo" effect of Photoshop and the sacred haloes of religious icons; or a mottling of electrical dots, as in the exaggerated scintillating effects used to make the teeth of models glitter in adverts for toothpaste.

The Quistreberts' paintings really do have the effect of pools of petrol on concrete. During the months of preparation for their show at the Palais de Tokyo, their studio in Aubervilliers looked like a garage in a slum neighbourhood of Los Angeles for the pimping of lowriders, collectors' cars in kitsch battle paint, mounted on hydraulic suspension and driven by members of Chicano gangs. Suddenly the colours radiate and refract, multiplying the false chromed reflections and the perceptions. Painting and light are stolen away. Nothing is stable, and certainly not appearances. This posture is highlighted by the rotating of the paintings on the columns of a pole dance: a theatre of baroque illusions which plunges the show into the dark middle-ground between a strip club, the drifting of cars spinning out of control and the occult trance of whirling Dervishes. These Sufi dancers were alluded to by the Quistreberts in their video *Dots* (2012), a mystical geometric and cosmic explosion which tries to give a fake answer to the question of the world's origin.

O.D. (overdose)

We sometimes see double with the Quistreberts. They repeat forms which are mirrored vertically or horizontally, and superimposed using layering. At the Palais de Tokyo, their show offers a twofold experience of painting: the film *Stripes 4* (2016) springs up like an ambush. The loss of reference points is total (and totalitarian). An agitated succession of geometric shapes commonly used by Op Artists of the 1960-1970s and the sorcerer's apprentices who post self-hypnosis videos on YouTube: a series of forms hitting the retina at the rhythm of an accelerated heartbeat. The pulsations of a heart attack, the hearts of "likes" on Instagram, the hearts engraved on the ecstasy swallowed during the long nocturnal dances of the ultra-living dead.

Henri Michaux, who sought out knowledge through the abysses, declared in the introduction to his film *Images du monde visionnaire* (1964), about the cinematic transposition of his experiences with mescaline: "It's about undertaking the impossible. Whatever you do, this drug transcends it. Even with a superior movie, made using far greater means, and everything needed for an exceptional production, I would say that the images would be insufficient. They should be even more stunning, more unstable, more subtle, more labile, more ungraspable, more wavering, more trembling, more martyrizing, more teeming, infinitely more loaded, more intensely beautiful, more appallingly colourful, more aggressive,

more idiotic, more weird.”³

For the visitors’ eyes, ravaged by the stroboscopic effects of the video *Stripes 4*, the Quistreberts’ paintings become monstrous, cannibalistic, animated substances. The bling bling recovers its dark spirituality. Metamorphosed matter drifts, spills, aspires and breaks down the doors of perception. Here we are plunged, with no possible escape, into turbulent infinities, between mystical ecstasy and a bad trip.

Translated by Ian Monk

Hugo Vitrani contributes to *Mediapart* and *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, and is the co-author, with Cokney, of the book *Chiaro Scuro* (Paris: Classic Paris, 2015). Since 2012, he has been the curator of the Lasco Project, the Palais de Tokyo’s urban art programme. He also sits on the consultative committee for public commissions of the CNAP (2015-2018). He cocurated Florian and Michael Quistrebert’s solo show at the Palais de Tokyo.

³ Extract from the text spoken by Henri Michaux as an introduction to his film *Images du monde visionnaire* (1964) directed by Éric Duvivier.