



Walking into shape

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In barely a decade, Orsten Groom's painted work has gone beyond the artist's studio confines, to be featured in several prestigious collections and museums.

Surprising? Not really if one sticks to the power of the work they underlie, in addition to the vital energy that the paintings of this prolific painter, who recent awards bear witness to.

Nor is it surprising either, judging by the attraction that this art prodigy produces, with high colors and forms, which tells without skewing the grandeur of painting, its strong potential impact, its very intelligence.

Expressionist, they say

The numerous studies already devoted to Orsten Groom, reflecting the creative prolixity of this young artist, willingly insist on the wild, brutal and intense character - in one word, expressionist - of his work.

A hurried glance, no doubt, can support the thesis of a violent artist, who paints as one carries out a Blitzkrieg, in a state of urgency.

Is this accurate, though?

Expressionism, then. At first glance, so be it.

Each of Orsten Groom's paintings, most often of medium or large size, imply a substantial physical mobilization, and spontaneously seem like a heterogeneous bombardment of forms, an explosion of intermingled figures, a tapestry of colors and patterns trails, all without any preordained logic.

The «all over» nature of the compositions and the horror vacui that presides over them make of Orsten Groom's paintings as so many shields that confiscate the visible and pulses us towards the universe of Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, and advocates of the full pictorial coverage such as Jean Dubuffet.

In addition to this apparently rough and eruptive character, let us add another characteristic that will also push to legitimize the thesis of a brazenly expressionist art: the painting according to Orsten Groom would have everything of a doodle, the proliferation of forms reinforces the delirium and «let it all go » aspect. An indecisive quotation from the calligraphy of the first street art, in a way, that of the time of Basquiat, whose manes would prowl around - one should believe.

Rumour will then eventually make a mad painter out of Orsten Groom, whose legend of mixed origins (Slavic world, Germanophilia, Jewishness, classical culture) does not fail to support. It is said that our hero, still a student at the Artschool, woke up amnesiac from a cerebral accident, not far from being deranged, like a Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise, right after the Cornfield with crows and just before the fateful pistol shot...

The fact is, biographically. Orsten Groom did suffer from an aneurysm as a young adult. Epilepsy? Yes, like Dostoyevsky. But insanity, none. No history of seizures in sight. Always beware of personal myth-builders. Even more so in view of the very personality of Orsten Groom, an artist who actually is a friend of precise knowledge, encyclopaedias and erudition, in terms of cognitive construction. Familiar and cousin of Antonin Artaud, yes, Orsten Groom is undeniably so. But then more in the Theatre and it's double way (Artaud theorist) than Rodez («Artaud le Momo», the drawings and writings of madness, shortly before his death).

From one point of culture to another

It is wisely argued that one should be wary of appearances. This advice is not irrelevant if one takes the time to consider Orsten Groom's paintings for what they are - in nucleo, in their practical and profound truth, and not for what one would like them to be. The expressionist artist thesis? Let's sweep it away. For this sagacious reason, that this paintings give a good account as soon as one considers them with a minimum of attention: there is nothing draft about them, but, quite the opposite way, extreme rigor predominates.

Extreme rigor, indeed.

An Orsten Groom painting is never the result of a disordered ejaculation, a raging gush of materials, colors and vague shapes drawn in haste.

Nor is it, to quote Dubuffet's term, a randomly carried out «trituration». Concerted elaboration, geometry to the point of chromatism, rationalisation, these are more appropriate terms.

Practical example with the painting *NACHSPRECHEN* (literally, « to speak after » - « to repeat »):

1. The artist starts to work after observing a medieval engraving that appeals to him, that of swaddled children sticking out their tongues. He carries this literally tongue-tied figures over with his paint wet finger on a blank canvas, so as to better understand them: this is the starting point of the painting.

2. The resulting play of forms reminds the artist, by analogy, Picasso's *Massgrave* composition, made in black, white and grey. He then casts its inverted lower part in the upper part of his own painting, so as to counterbalance the initially drawn drawing effect.

3. The Massgrave summons and indicate the Shoah, he then begins an investigation into its potential ethical and formal issues, taking up Adorno's famous question,

« how to do aesthetics after Auschwitz? » How to talk afterwards, then. How to untie these tongues that suddenly appear as medieval prior symptoms through History, through painting ?

The artist extends his reflection to the German language. The word «Nachsprechen» then comes to him as a consequence of this repetition of this drawing gesture he has just accomplished, and from the literality the issues it triggered invite in the process.

Nachsprechen, «to repeat»: also in the sense of a theatre scene, an orchestra rehearsal, or, the sinister dances of deportees set up by the Nazis in the extermination camps. A series of characters rehearsing music in an orchestra pit, pit that fills the foreground lower part of the composition, left vacant, are drawn.

4. The combination of music and the German language brings to Orsten Groom's mind a the famous Pied Piper of Hamelin tale, which also deals with sacrifice and, in its initial version, of epilepsy inoculation.

5. Orsten Groom, who uses in priority the primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and counterbalances the use of these by their complementary and secondary tones (orange, purple, green), distributes various strokes on his canvas, around or on the figures, charges the Pied Piper so as to ensure its visual calibration, and give what he calls the Feldgrau of each of his paintings (a saturated grey « average », or spectral synthesis of all colors).



Grey is the artist's fetish tonality, in the name of this cathartic logic: color of indistinction, of leveling of everything. As are at the same level, in the intellect of this creator, each of the references or summoned sets of colored issues : neutralized in a saturated apotheosis.

Concatenation

This invoicing detail of NACHSPRECHEN's invoicing modus operandi is certainly incomplete - it forgets in particular what «works» also the painting being made: leaps of thought, repentance, resumptions..., knowing that the path is never straight and that time sometimes makes loops. The «manner» here identified for the occasion, however, is worth the method, under the species of concatenation.

The astonishing pictorial richness of Orsten Groom's manner works in a continuous «stop and go » chaining. An image, I stop. An image that calls for a second image, I start again and so on. This process is declined for each of the artist's pictorial realizations, as a program of research, of investigation - that is to say, of History.

Expressionism ? No, certainly not, and now we understand it much better: creation here elects mental allusion and advanced dotted lines as driving elements and pledge of its true dynamics. Consciousness in action is constantly solicited by many and many references, including those that swirl from the most archaic or even the most buried of memories, sometimes unconscious, before this sorting takes place, which inscription on the canvas is the rhythmic trace. I select so I paint. I weigh and I counterweigh and I study and I evaluate so I paint.

The unconscious is «structured like a language », said the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. What is repressed, hidden, perverse, twisted in each one of us, is also what is best organized and set up.

When does the unconscious frees itself? In our imaginary moments. In our dreams. Let's add, concerning Orsten Groom, when he paints. Such is the «grammar» that serves here as a vade mecum for the elaboration of each canvas, a grammar which lightens the artist's use of numerous types of writing in the same painting: whether medium, acrylic to go fast, oil to work slowly and thickly, enamel to cover. Or gesture: covering with a roller, prints by diaper coat, fine lines by brush or syringe, coarse tracing with a finger.

Orsten Groom, in truth, does not intend to please his spectator by generating the raw images he would like to see and taste (to enjoy them, to be afraid of them, indifferently), images of inner suffering, doubts, existential wanderings, in a cathartic perspective.

Above all, Orsten Groom offers himself its own images. He paints with this firm intention of learning from the act of painting, to learn from what this act reveals, step by step, painting after painting, according to how images come and the intimate revelation load they carry. Painting instructs the painter through the picture it offers him to investigate about.

The careful examination of Orsten Groom's own method, makes his paintings as many exercises, as many trials.

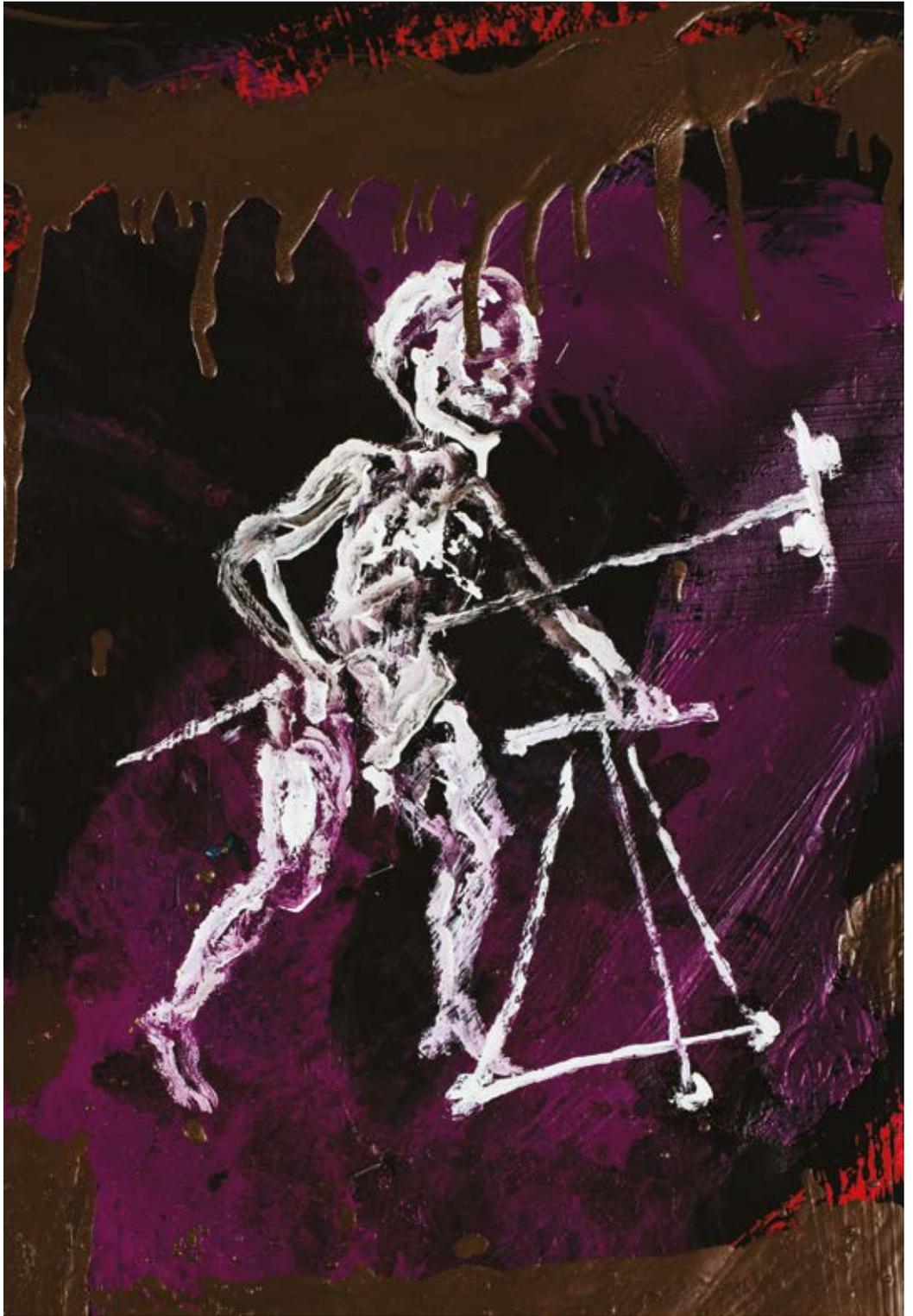
So many colorful and imaginative essays in which the artist would endlessly debate, for himself, this very question: « What is to exist, what form does it take, how can it be explained? »

Each painting, in this light, is a set of dated answers, a diary, a logbook.

The recurrence of the method, the artist's repetitive use of iconographic standards - the inverted perspective, inspired by the art of icons, the absence of shadows of ancient art, the anamorphosis from the Vexier-bilden - shows it over and over again: art is determined as a process, above all, as an analytic.

A mathesis, the equivalent of a science.

For the artist, an archaeology of the self.



Et in historia ego

It is the art historian's responsibility, beyond the spectacle, to consider a work not only with the eyes of the amateur but also with the cold brain of the scientist.

This task calls for an examination that is both formal and panoramic, questioning in the first instance the art work's position in history.

How can Orsten Groom paintings be «situated» ?

How to define the painting of this fertile artist of the young 21st century in relation to the mainstream, if there is one, as well as in relation to the currents that preceded it?

Convergence, divergence, indifference, homage, a will to claim a trend or a school..., so many data which inscribe the artwork in his time, or dissociate him from it.

First point, in terms of art history: the work of Orsten Groom, understood in its entirety, is a «learned» painting. A painting is said to be «learned» when, putting aside spontaneity, instinct and relaxation, it focuses on a panel of pictorial and intellectual references.

Even to the novice or hurried viewer, Orsten Groom's paintings offer a memory activation. Many forms emerge from them, already seen, that we remember more or less consciously, from an improbable but certainly productive «optical unconscious» [Rosalind Krauss].

In such a canvas, one will recognize the curious oculus-shaped bulb overlooking Picasso's Guernica. And there, a pharaoh or other ancient Egypt deity. On the other hand, throughout the paintings, fragments of crucifixions are displayed, images of torments bringing back to the classical, mythological repertoire, figures sketched in the medieval style, a line borrowed from Mondrian or Malevitch.

In the intertwining of forms and colors - his «Fatrasia», to use the artist's terms - emerge fragments, remains, rubbish or clues of a dense art history memory that the artist claims without ever underestimating its importance.

This choice of reasoned and documented writing of the work, to this day, is rather rare. It tends to classify Orsten Groom in the cast of the «singulars of art» [Jean-Louis Ferrier] - a cohort that is currently under-supplied, that does not cross with consensual or conventional plastic trends.

Second point, the idea of a continuum: the artist does not in any way tend to invent a universe of forms (being new) but rather expresses the desire to be part of the very history of this universe, in its becoming (being inside, walking with).

Watching an Orsten Groom painting is never to be confronted with a virgin universe but, rather, a world nourished by the principle of convocation.

Convocation, in this case, of our collective cultural memory and its multiple figures or obsessions, which the artist likes to spout out with an uncommon energy and resurrection force.

The underlying idea is that painting in itself, as a genre, is renewed, continues to be enriched, constructed and elaborated on a base that cannot be concealed. Orsten Groom's paintings are rightly referred to as palimpsests, an accumulation by superimposition of differentiated pictorial forms. The methodical, tactical choice of concatenation, in which a figure or a color calls out to others, which in turn call out some others and so on, asserts, nourishes and activates the thesis of creation as a continuum and not, for example, as a rupture.

This recourse to «walking into shape» (one of the artist's paintings bears this title : *MARSZ AD FORMAM*) indicates that there is no strict program for each painting but, on the contrary, for all of them, a maieutic: one must give birth to something, a form, an idea, and it is the painting that informs the artist once the impulse that delivers the initial form has been given, the first subject thrown onto the canvas.

Revelations and vital gestures

Orsten Groom's painting intends to «continue» the history of painting that pre-exists in history (some painters' figures are like ghosts : Picasso, Jordaens, the Flemish Primitives, Goya). It participates in this history without ever denying it, taking its place in the queue. As if painting, in short, was a power whose full forces had not yet been revealed. As if the painter Orsten Groom, in this history of revelations, had the rank of an exegete among others, after others, before others yet to come.

Orsten Groom is neither a revolutionary nor an iconoclast, but rather a Talmudist artist, a medieval monk who practices the apparatus, this infinite examination of the world order, of our lives order in it. An artist of accumulations against syntheses; of sedimentations against rapid and gaseous flows.

To paint? That is also the occasion, day after day, as the paintings inscribe and delimit the concerns of the body, its questions and choices, which becomes not teaching but rather, learning.
What are you going to say about me, Painting?

Let's forget, in this union of the words «mistress» and «painting», the sadomasochistic connotation to support the pedagogical function, the *Paedeia*. Painting - the activity of painting, the result of this activity - are in the strict sense, concerning Orsten Groom, a permanent apprenticeship: learning, groping but lucid, of life itself, of what one does with its life, what one puts into it and what one would like to see disappear from it.

The painting, what it contains of shapes and colors that only seem to be telescoped? Let's see it then as this clue of deeply personal decisions, as an instant of an intimate liberation, touch by touch, gesture after gesture, a two-dimensional ship forging ahead on an ocean of erratic paths - to be discovered, retraced, pursued and conquered.

