

## Agnès Thurnauer

In Thurnauer's practice as a painter, written language is often incorporated into the picture plane, but even when it is not, the frequent allusiveness of subject matter and style and the foregrounding of generic conventions make it clear that the work is situated within the language of art history and that it engages with the methods of *reading* a painting that this entails. Thurnauer is fascinated by the ways art reads the social and cultural reality in which it is produced, and her constant insistence is on making the viewer aware of the complicated mixture of liberties and restrictions that the available languages of art allow us to use.

In the two canvases *Biotope (etre un artiste)* (2008) and *Territoire #1* (2010) the painter sets the image of a woman caught in the middle of a gymnastic manoeuvre against an unbroken background of text forming a kind of wrap-around environment. The mise-en-page of this textual material gives it a journalistic provenance, projecting the image and idea of woman into a series of connections that produce and relay current and fashionable assumptions about gender roles and self-expression. But if journalism's fascination with novelty and exposure is channelled through reportage and commentary, Thurnauer's painting opens itself up to the resources of art and poetry. The language visible in *Biotope* is dominated by the phrase 'etre un artiste' and indeed this provides a subtitle for the work, while *Territoire #1* is dominated by the word 'poesie', prefaced (reading from left to right) by the phrase 'est s'ouvrir au'. Both works invite the viewer to an 'opening up' of their conception of woman, through an expansion and extension of the work of the imagination. The physical versatility of the female figures in both paintings provides a correlative image for the necessity of shape-shifting, mobility, the stretching of potential, and the attainment of a condition that exceeds normal limits. The animal print leotards of both figures may seem to reflect male stereotypes of woman as feline and instinctual but they also contradict them through association with an intellectual and creative transcendence of categories.

Thurnauer can be seen merging language and art to propose the inaccuracy, the unreliability of our existing conceptual grids, while making readable a set of conditions that are always changing shape, always changing the relationship between stereotype and potential, and above all, always challenging our sense of being in control of the media of art, always testing our ability to grasp and manipulate its elements. The relationship between language, in its condition of constant organic change, and its rules, which also change but at a much slower rate, provides a dynamic parallel to Thurnauer's understanding of how the activity of painting relates to the institutional and discursive contexts that frame it.

In *4 Cartel No.1, No.2, No.3, No.4* (2006), Thurnauer includes a partial version of Courbet's painting 'L'Origine du Monde'. She has made this image the basis of several of her own works, including this example which bears the title 'Autoportrait' in the centre of the painted surface. Courbet's imagery is centred on the female genitalia and excludes the face of the individual woman who served as a model for his 1866 work. This depersonalising of the female body has led to charges of voyeurism, yet Thurnauer has expropriated Courbet's decision in order to take possession of the imagery and exert a specifically female control over the way it is seen and used. The genre of 'self-portrait' is diverted from the portrayal of

a specific individual to consider the most generic aspects of the individual's existence: aspects which are seen as central rather than peripheral, with the words 'the artist' rather than the artist's name located at the focal point of the work. Female sexuality is here identified with women's art, the two are made interdependent and together they originate a new version of the world, one in which women are central and active in the unfolding of its representations.

Thurnauer's own *Origine du Monde* painting included in the present collection takes a reproduction of one section of Courbet's painting and magnifies it until the original image has become completely unrecognisable. Thurnauer has painted a fraction of this magnified image onto a large canvas (300c, x 240cm) to reveal the microscopic complexity of Courbet's representation. Or rather, her painting is the deliberate uncovering of a complexity achieved unintentionally by Courbet, making her work an intervention in art history that re-configures and re-directs our understanding of a legacy of images of modernity defined largely by male artists. Courbet's work does not underestimate the role of women, indeed it draws attention to it, but still it leaves unrecognized the investigative scope of an artistic practice undertaken by women themselves.

Thurnauer's 2010 painting *The Passager # 3* is part of a series that captures iconic images of women within a representation of the limited frame of a car's rear-view mirror. As Thurnauer directs her work towards the future—towards the journey ahead—she takes stock of several seemingly-definitive images of women that lie in the past. Perhaps the most recent of these, in historical terms, is borrowed from Andy Warhol whose poster-paint versions of well-known photographs of Marilyn Monroe emphasize the apparent two-dimensionality of the typecast celebrity. For Fredric Jameson, it was this imagery that exemplified the arrival of postmodernist subjectivity in all its affectless superficiality, in contrast to the neurotic depth of modernist subjectivity exemplified by the figure in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. But Thurnauer has complicated this distinction by rendering the Warhol image as a reflection of Monroe imagined as a passenger in the vehicle of women's art. The viewer of Thurnauer's work sees with the painter's eyes the reflection of a woman who returns the gaze of both with a steady inscrutability. In place of an image reproduced so many times that we no longer pause to examine it, we are faced with the strange sensation that the subject of representation is now examining us and challenging our own assumptions.

There are many such women in Thurnauer's oeuvre. Perhaps a majority of the figures in her paintings who fix us with their gaze have been borrowed from the work of Manet, the artist who organized so many of his most important paintings around this face-to-face confrontation of viewer and work. Although Thurnauer herself speaks of the need to 'take the canvas by surprise' while in the throes of composition, the viewer meeting the finished work is likely to be taken unawares by this unwavering regard. The sense of disadvantage the viewer experiences forestalls their capacity—perhaps readiness—to eye these female figures with the expectancy of a customer or consumer. The painting returns the viewer's gaze with total impartiality, making us see our own motives and investments more than the illusion that the figure in the painting will accommodate them.

The intensity with which Thurnauer insists on the reciprocal gaze in her work, and the passion with which it has been sustained, reflect a deep and resourceful critical awareness of the social politics within which contemporary painting operates; but it also has deep roots in her own experience. As a child, her earliest awareness of the obligations that come with reciprocity, together with a realization of how relationships are mediated by language, took form in the company of an autistic brother who did not speak. The lack of verbal response, the silence of the interlocutor, places a responsibility on the one with language to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the one for whom language does not do its work in the open. The language of the first person is therefore always implicated with language that is stored in the second person. In Homeric Greek, it was possible to speak with a 'dual voice', but this grammatical possibility has not survived in fossilized form in modern Indo-European languages, except in Slovene. There is a profound sense in which all of Thurnauer's painting communicates itself with a 'dual voice', but it does so most dramatically in the series of paintings entitled 'Big-Big and Bang-Bang'.

The two enigmatic figures that cross from one canvas to another in this series of works can be found crossing the whole of Thurnauer's oeuvre. As the one with language, she now addresses her work as if it were the silent but eloquent interlocutor in a relationship of intimacy that she conducts in public. Thurnauer's innovative representations argue that the world can only be rendered through a dialogue, an interlocution of different forms, genres, media. When we approach her work, it is not as viewers whose function is predicated through a gaze regulated according to the distorting demands of consumption or control, but as readers engaged in a critical activity that sees around the edges of historically produced versions of the self. While we look for the subjects of Thurnauer's paintings, we are the subjects that they construe.

Text written by Rod Mengham