

Il reviendra, le Temps des cerises

(Janette Laverriere)

In European context, watercolor painting has been historically considered a minor genre. Suitable for preliminary sketches, allowing improvisation and quickness of execution, it also has something liberating in it, allowing artists who use it a freedom from responsibility for completion of the work, while its inherent imperfections are often to its advantage rather than considered as flaws. The disarming transparency of watercolor speaks of honesty and vulnerability, its near-immaterial film of color pigment particles allows the paper to shine through and illuminate the work from within. Deceptively easy to handle, watercolor remains a medium of choice for Sunday painters, leaving the working days to serious artists. Boris Rebetez employed watercolor wash and drawing for some of his works, such as the *L'année des treize mois* (2013), a calendar consisting of thirteen views of a garden city in Belgium, with its lawns and stairs, porches and roofs—titled quite arbitrarily or associatively with names of months, each name painted by hand under the picture, including January appearing twice, as the opening and ending month of that particularly weatherless and eventless “year”. The iconography of months may have a rich tradition, but the months as portrayed by Rebetez do not appear in costume of allegorical representation, nor they seem to correspond to colors and moods of seasons or else hint at individual character expected from a January, March or September as codified in popular proverbs. Mild, pleasant and saturated with even light, without weather and without time, that year seems to be measured exclusively by evocative names of months that once used to point to Roman deities, rulers of Rome and natural phenomena – March for Mars, April for flower buds opening, July for Julius Caesar. Lacking any recognizable referents in views depicted, the names feel similarly interchangeable, opaque, and cease to denote any specific emotional or cultural content. The year appears as artificial space of the garden city and not as time of nature. Here, the time stopped still, or experienced a cardiac arrest, like in Edgar Allan Poe’s 1839 story “The Devil in the Belfry”. In Poe’s fictional town of Vondervotteimittiss (sounding a bit Austrian, Swiss or Dutch, and spelled in English as “wonder-what-time-it-is”), the devil – a stranger who came to town – climbs the belfry and makes the bell strike thirteen hour at noon. The result of this rupture is chaos, the sudden and complete momentary collapse of the social structure, no longer kept in check by predictable succession of hours.

Something of the peaceful atmosphere of Vondervotteimittiss before the fall can be felt in depopulated vistas of passages between the buildings, paved pathways, charming yards

and arranged greenery of the garden city painted by Rebetez. While looking at its silent and motionless settings we can nearly hear the fading sound of fiddle, *le violon poche* from Claude Debussy's unfinished opera "Le Diable dans le beffroi" (1903), based on Poe's story. And then silence. This space can be and is examined, measured and exposed, no mystery lurks from behind the corner, and the pale, watery colors hold no surprise for the absent dwellers and us, onlookers, alike. The world is suspended—the excess-in-stasis of perfectly balanced eternal present, and there is no history palpable or suspected in the architecture and landscape. Even though the cooperative housing project of Le Logis-Floréal designed by landscape architect and urban planner Louis Van der Swaelmen in the municipality Watermael-Boitsfort south-east of Brussels might have responded to social circumstances in Belgium at the time of its construction in 1922-1925, its revolutionary premise of offering affordable housing and dignified living to working class is no longer felt there today. And yet, there is another disconcerting relationship that can be established between the time and place Rebetez is gesturing towards in his odd calendar: Floréal is also the "month of flowers"—the eighth month of the French Republican Calendar that was introduced during the French Revolution and remained in use between 1792 and 1805, to briefly resurrect during the Paris Commune (18 March to 28 May, 1871), for eighteen days from 16 Floréal to 3 Prairial, year LXXIX. That was the transformed secular time of the new Republic, the decimal order of twelve months divided into three decades each, replacing the idiosyncrasies of the calendar of *ancien régime*. Not coincidentally the housing project built with clear progressive-socialist agenda was called Floréal. Floréal is not only an ideal place in space, but also a utopian unit of time, a time-space existing somewhat outside the vagaries of everyday, outside any history or actual topography. The name invokes the time of blossoming, and thus remains connected to seasons—at least it did until the climate change made us forget what to expect in months originally called after the phenomena occurring in their course. Today, Floréal is dead, both politically and in terms of its designation as immutable, controlled nature. But there was once another time, as in the song written by Jean Baptiste Clément in 1866, and according to Louise Michel, dedicated after the events of the Commune's ending in "Bloody Week" to a nameless "nurse of the last barricade and the last hour". That time may return:

Mais il est bien court le temps des cerises

Où l'on s'en va deux cueillir en rêvant

Des pendants d'oreilles

Cerises d'amour aux robes pareilles
Tombant sous la feuille en gouttes de sang
Mais il est bien court le temps des cerises
Pendants de corail qu'on cueille en rêvant

The works of Boris Rebetez make us aware of existence of time, one could say the time is their medium proper—in that they look at structures and bygone ideological projects that were once conceived to reinvent and control time and space: houses and institutional buildings separated by intervals of infrastructure. If history is conventionally measured along the axis of time, time itself has its history, too, and it is a nonlinear one. It is marked by sudden compressions, explosions and standstills, when “times are changing” or “time is now” as a result of revolutionary fervor or reactionary countermeasures. A series of untitled collages of 1998/2001 illustrate this collapse of time into space. Each collage is made of photographs of different landscapes or interiors, connected along roughly horizontal cut lines, straight or slightly curved to form a near perfect illusion of representing one location. Our habits of making sense out of pictures make us search for the whole, compensating the incoherence of several spatial orders that do not belong together. In our perception, the space remains a unity, even when it is made of different sites collaged in one rectangular frame, the picture.

Though not a painter by trade, save for some aquarelles and other works on paper done with pencil, gouache and ink, Rebetez is a painter—of modern time. Not of specific circumstances, historical or political, but of the time itself, as it connects and separates places and people who inhabit them or pass by. While looking at his slideshow *Columnist* (2014), composed of some 80 black-and-white photographs of interior details of the Palace of Justice in Brussels (1866-1883, architect Joseph Poelaert), we are immediately thrown into the vortex of time contained in this institution, carved in its stones, inscribed in its sculptures of lions, symbols of justice, allegorical paintings that adorn the architecture of this once largest building in the world. This largesse seems to connect with the immense realm of time. Depopulated, lifeless interior is the cadaver of colonial, imperialist century, one of many monuments immortalizing Europe’s voracity, unstoppable drive to subjugation of the entire world as a unified theatre of operations. This palace of injustice serves as metonymical image of the current state of world’s affairs, when there is nothing left to discover and exploit and the global empire turns to devouring its own children, its people, and in the end, its own

entrails, until no life is left on this planet and the architecture may rule supreme. This might sound like a somewhat exaggerated conclusion drawn from a series of innocent pictures of architecture, yet the “shy Swiss artist” (as Felix Burrichter referred to Rebetz interviewing him at the artist’s Brussels studio for PIN-UP, Magazine for architectural entertainment, in 2007) made the following remark on architecture—a vitriolic understatement, so typically his:

I do not really have a very strong interest in architecture itself. It's more the idea of space of situations, or what I call an idea of place, which is interesting to me. It's more the things between the architecture - not the object itself. If I did, I would try to be an architect. I don't have the intention to build a building. I think as a citizen we use architecture and we are influenced by architecture - but I don't have any visions for a better architecture for the future. I'm more concerned with things of the past, things that have already been lived in, that have a life. New architecture is less interesting to me because it feels too fresh, but not yet alive.

The “things between architecture” are of interest; the buildings *per se* aren’t. New architecture is “not yet alive”—and will it ever be? No “visions for a better architecture for the future” are in sight of *citoyen* Rebetz. This does not sound at all like a manifesto of a wannabe-architect, or “columnist” of the old era. On the contrary, we are far from the hubris that drove and continues to drive the rulers and their architects to erecting “the largest buildings of the world” to enact sovereign power. Instead, Rebetz offers de-escalation, downscaling; his aims are consciously modest, his means—reasonably limited, and his sharp focus is always on the hiatus, suture, things in-between, “space of situations”. This “science of situations” (as per Guy Debord) offers a certain way out of the impasse of built environment—towards various “unreal states”, such as those envisaged in “Fake Estates”, the 1975 work by Gordon Matta-Clark, who acquired “useless” slivers of residual land in New York to expose the delusionary and predatory nature of the real estate business. Boris Rebetz locates his work in the cracks and fissures of built environment and his work constitutes a form of production of space: making spaces by denouncing the total appropriation of space by the necro-capitalist regime and its attendant architects. He reminds us that even the mightiest of columns could be toppled by the people. Remember Place Vendôme?

Adam Szymczyk, Zürich and Champfèr, February 2020