

## OF THIS EARTH

Ben Readman's recent paintings have a timeless quality; it is as if they could have been painted one hundred years ago or in the next century. These paintings, however, place you firmly in the present.

At first sight, we notice the main subject in each painting, we find a word for what we recognise, and then other painted elements appear suddenly from the works in an immediate updating process as vital elements, without using a definite message or a story. There is always a sort of questioning ambiguity which remains.

In 'Cave', a human-monkey seems motionless with a distant gaze. It is not necessarily a look of melancholy, perhaps more searching, confused, lost even. They are very much human eyes. It is as though this being has been placed in our world, a world and time far from her own. Just as when we are born, we arrive in this current point in the world's history. Aren't many humans just as lost or confused? The blue light suggests dusk, what awaits in the darkness, and what could the new day bring?

The rhythm that is imposed to us in the exhibition space is different from the one outside ; it is more internal, invisible and unpredictable ; it seems slower, but composed by variations and accelerations. For a moment, (the duration of which will depend on the time that we give to the paintings), a temporality unique to painting stops our daily rhythm and takes us far away from advertising images, machines, and technology ; a kind of calm is established. A stillness and a certain quietness emanates from the paintings, but one which is about to cease or to turn into a sort of started movement set off by a perturbation or disruption. We have the impression that the painter has caught in the painting something which is just at the critical point of change.

The relative rapidity of execution in Ben Readman's way to paint reinforces that feeling of tilting change from a phenomenon to its effect. Sometimes gestures are undefined, even sketched ; they are worked just enough to give volume to what is painted, just what is needed to attract the eye and push it to enter into those incertain spaces. The painter decides to use in his way some pictorial effects which provide the impression of depth, shadow and light, giving an illusion of thickness, weight and space. He makes use of them in order to form places in which, for each painting, an element from outside comes to perturb the rest or to interact with an element present in the painting. It is the case in the one where the bare trees seem suddenly invaded by birds flapping wings and streaming from the top downwards, towards us, in that unsettling low angle point of view chosen by the painter. We are forced to stare directly at the sun from a position that seems to imply being on one's back, or falling perhaps. The birds are falling from the sky, or maybe they are trying to elevate themselves beyond the network of branches, towards this sun emanating a light which is both shrill and soiled at the same time. It is as if all of a sudden everything is shedding layers and being transformed. We can almost smell the birds, their feathers in our nostrils, and the sound of quick wings rustling in our ears. Initially it seems an attractive painting, however the longer we look the more complex it becomes. The uncoordinated flock taking flight or maybe coming together in confrontation is the opposite of the flight pattern that birds normally employ. There could be an optimistic sense of change or a feeling of panic and either one is heightened by this strange mist or fog in the background.

So as soon as we enter into each of these paintings, taking time to observe them, it is as if they set off illusions of some little movements, some imperceptible noises and vague smells. At one

moment we can see that strange woman-monkey smiling or slightly turning her head, or the woman in 'Circle' emerging from the water when we look at it a second time. It is a little bit disconcerting to be able to smell and hear what a painting contains and even to see some movement in it. The same sensations can be set off by 'Senses' where there is that top body from which the head and the hand are passing through a wall, a mirror or a waterfall. The face and the extremities of the fingers have already passed as if they are being engulfed by the reflection of self. Only the trunk of that naked body remains, temporarily disabled, since it is separated from its two extremities ; without eyesight, a sense of smell, taste, speech or touch, only an emphasised ear remains. These two paintings bring Immanuel Kant to mind when he wrote;

*If a man is born without one of his senses (sight, for example), he cultivates another sense, as far as possible, to serve as a substitute for it, and uses his productive imagination to a great extent. So he tries to make the shapes of external bodies apprehensible by touch, and when touch fails because the body is too large (a house), he tries to grasp extension by still another sense - perhaps by listening to the echo of voices in a room. 1*

But the figure in the painting appears to be entering this surface by choice, 'grasping' to the sense of hearing, but for what purpose?. In 'Circle' the woman is left without the (*more subjective than objective* 2) senses of taste and smell. Emotion and individuality are hidden under the surface; she seems to be deciding whether to fully immerse or to rise from this mysterious water to open up all of the senses. Again ambiguity emerges, just as our own head, hands and senses suddenly irrupt in our consciousness, our mortality and physicality.

Ben Readman always paints a moment out of any kind of narration, a piece of time stuck in between two states which he has caught in his layers of paint. This calm, this stillness, which proceeds from what it is painted on the surface, form inside us a first impression that collapses little by little from the moment that we start to give more attention to what the painting can give to us. For example in 'Civiltation' this full moon in front of which some clouds are passing is from the first sight quite splendid, then after a moment it looks enormous because of its framing and seems ready to explode. Then we become aware of its modified craters and the colours that tint the clouds, close to red and green giving an impression of urbanity, the artificial and industrial ; so we think of gas emanations, fumes, city lights, machines, factories. At that point we are brought back to earth, our feet firmly on the ground.

An exchange is established between the viewer and the paintings ; at the beginning we are giving our attention, concentration and imagination to the paintings, then in a short moment the situation reverses and it is each painting which reflects its content, as we have just granted it our senses and our capacities to feel, to think, to question. Ben Readman works on the canvas in a singular manner in order to make us be conscious in the present, here, in front of the paintings, of those elements and at the same time of their fragility, their ephemeral nature and moreover of their importance as well as the way we manhandle them. When we return outside, we feel a bit different towards what surrounds us. We will not use our eyes with the same way than before entering the exhibition.

*'Sometimes you can feel frozen like a rabbit in headlights, except it is not a car which is coming, but something much more obscure and you are not sure if it is a positive or negative thing that is happening. It could be something which deals with nature, not manmade or set on by a machine, but we can not be sure of that'* explains Ben Readman. 'It is not voyeuristic, I think there is more subtlety involved in each one of my paintings. I hope that I create work which is engaging without there being an obvious narrative or something simply optimistic or pessimistic'. Here is the ambiguity that reigns in Ben Readman's paintings, it is surely one of their forces ; if we avoid the

questions layed down by his work we pass aside its magnitude and depth. But the stake is certainly this one : whether to ignore and to not be interested, or whether to decide to linger and enter the artworks, in order to come back loaded by the sensitive complex that the painter has set up. Ben Readman's work seems to be attempting to arouse our attention, our views and our concerns in a silent, personal and intimate way, with a simplicity and universality contained in each painting.

Lili Heller

1. Kant, Immanuel, 'Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view', pg 49 Springer, 1974
1. 2.Kant Immanuel, Zoller Gunter, Louden Robert B, 'Anthropology, History, and Education Ibid 'On The Senses' pg 266, Cambridge University Press, 2008
3. 3.In conversation with Ben Readman.