

Ben Young

interviewed by Christine de Schaetzen
at Locuslux Gallery, Brussels
on 18 September 2009

Christine :

Why did you call your show “The irrational subject”?

Ben Young :

I think art should be “the irrational subject”. There is too much rationality in art. Irrationality is where the *new* can come from. I wanted to make a Freudian reference - some elements are mine, obviously - the Freudian subject is irrational. The subject called “art” is irrational. I wanted to keep a space of freedom, for anything new to come into being. The idea of “the irrational subject” was growing for the last two years. Somehow, at least at the moment, one *strand* of the truth came up... In a psychological sense, humans are irrational, but forced to live in a rational way. As a reaction there is a large amount of alienation that comes from too many images, through television, advertising, computer games, etc... This is my response to the profusion of images. I am responding in a same kind of field. I am using the thing that I am reacting against.

C : You say these are metaphysical paintings?

Ben Young :

Well... I mean in the sense they offer an idea of transcendence. Truth is real because it's that from which you can not escape. Depicting reality. Maybe I should have written “existential” paintings rather than “metaphysical” paintings. (*about the painting CRITICAL DIVIDE*) People can not escape, they are stuck behind the Berlin wall. I love Berlin... Berlin is a city on the edge, on the edge of Eastern and Western Europe. Why is Berlin so shizo?

C : Why your attraction for Berlin?

Ben Young :

In 1988, I went on a schooltrip, we went to Alexanderplatz. I am so glad I witnessed this alternative reality. Later, in 2000-2001, I lived in Berlin for 8 months. This year, I did an artist residence for 3 months, at Milchhof, Prenzlauerberg (from April to July 2009, residence organised by Acava).

C : In your paintings, the surface is being scratched away, stripped away...! Sometimes I don't know which layer comes first.

Ben Young :

It is the irrational subject trying to find their way out of their reality. It is a gesture. I feel I am making European art. CRITICAL DIVIDE looks like a German painting... because of the "forboding"...

C : You talk about search for truth.. what is it?

Ben Young:

Yes, my paintings are a search for some kind of truth. Truth is that from which you can not escape. Individual and universal.

C : You wrote a sentence which visualise this, it says "The truth of a lonely, mixed up individual sitting by the side of a canal at midnight in the middle of winter in London"... (Ben Young, Berkeley, 16 March 2009)

Ben Young :

Yes, it is a powerful sentence. Postmodernism is dangerous. I am not against it, but postmodernists try to deconstruct the opposition between black & white, between male & female,... The good thing is that it shakes our realities, our ideas, our conceptions... On the other hand, truth doesn't mean that there have to be lies. It is the "différance" of Derrida. About philosophy, knowledge is not everything. But it is a method. These paintings are a searching field, in order to acquire knowledge, and to understand the human race.

C : Your paintings are a combination of graffiti (spraypaint) and brushstrokes (oil painting).

Ben Young :

I use oil and spraypaint on canvas or linnen. The deeper reason for using these materials is to combine a contemporary image with a traditional technique. I want to bring oil up today with spray. I want to make oil contemporary, to give a weight to spray paint. Spraypaint doesn't like to be on a canvas. I want to make spray more elegant, because it is brutal, savage.

C : In NIGHT ANGEL, the figure disappears, is this something intentional?

Ben Young :

This is not too much of a profound idea. It is the split between dream and reality. I am trying to depict the borderline between dream and reality, between day and night... I am on the edge.

C : Who are your masters?

Ben Young:

Ow... the question! ... I want to make something contemporary that hits in the face. For me, Andy Warhol held up the mirror to society. Andy Warhol is another kind of truth. He had a way of showing us to ourselves. Basquiat, I like his unbridled (*déchaîné, effréné, débridé*) and sophisticated way to depict a black experience. I like Basquiat for his expressionist immediacy. I like Vermeer, he wasn't afraid to paint "ugly" (day-to-day) subjects in a beautiful way. I like Rembrandt... and also De Kooning, in terms of technique, he is the biggest influence. He is the master of the truth.

C : TRACES OF NIGHT is mysterious to me...What is behind?

Ben Young :

Well, it is quite recent. I did it in Berlin. It stands on its own terms, just by being mysterious. It is the next step in my work... maybe the direction of my new show. Duality: appearing and disappearing, presence and absence... I am referring to Derrida. We should be as aware as possible of presence and absence. That is the "différance" of Derrida. Good versus evil, is there in the language. Truth and love are metaphysical ideas; If you stay in here, you miss the absence.

C : Could you tell me something about SELF PORTRAIT?

Ben Young :

It has the elements in it... Truth, is that of which you can not escape. I see a miserable looking person...

C : Here and there, words are visible in some of your paintings, for example "Ready to head from the front" in BROKEN PROMISE...? Are words important?

Ben Young :

They are little notes... In BROKEN PROMISE, it is ironic, it is a kind of black humor. The man is broken, promises have been broken. My words are a bit dada.

C: I notice the colour white as being very present in your paintings. Many years ago, I couldn't stand white in paintings. The painter who made me like white is De Kooning. What sense does it have in your work, Ben? Do you find pleasure in paint?

Ben Young :

Yes, my white may have a link with De Kooning's.

I would like people to take it seriously. I want to have elements of doubt. Painting is pleasure. I want to find the 21st century painting. Yes, I have pleasure in self-expression, in handling paint!

C : Are there personal stories in your paintings? Does it matter after all?

Ben Young :

The self becomes less important. This is the means (*intention, vouloir dire*) of painting. The loss of self through painting.

Ben Young (born in 1973) started to paint seriously at the age of 24. Pollock was his instigator, his source of inspiration, because of his black and white compositions. Ben Young is working as a painter for twelve years now. "The irrational subject" is his first solo exhibition.