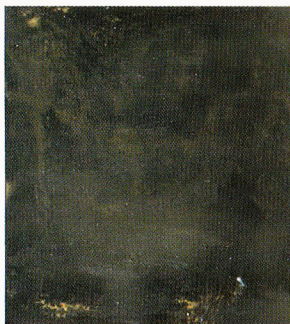


Blurred Boundaries

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(Studio) ghost I

*"Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present...Without this survival of the past into the present, there would be no duration, but only instantaneity."*¹

—Henri Bergson

Amidst the increasing pixelization of our modern visual culture, Raphaëlle Goethals' paintings compel the viewer to stop and pay attention; they address the issue of temporality in our visual perception, the temporality involved in our engaging with densely layered surfaces. It is an optical density. Each piece sustains the appearance of long and calculated efforts of layering which suggests the dense complexity of our 'momentary' perception. The 'instant' of perception, in other words, is extended.

The artist begins with the clean blank surface of wood panels onto which marks—glyphs—are drawn. She spreads layers of wax onto the wood, then wax mixed with pigment and applied to the surface while hot. At that time more marks—signifiers not yet signifieds—are incised into the encaustic, more pigment applied, rubbed off, applied again, so that color remains within the lines. Building up to twenty layers to each piece, Goethals works in a process of layering, pouring, rubbing, scraping off, scratching into the surface, effacing, leaving traces of earlier information, all of this eliciting from the viewer a continuous shifting in the perception of forms, a build-up and overlap of successive stages which demands that his or her attention continually adjusts in order to consider the various perceptual possibilities within the subject. It is all about perception, and perception here is a matter of continuous adjusting, remembering, shifting attention, calling back into focus. The painted surface, however, remains remarkably smooth; from first layer to last, translucence is sustained, light continues to pass through the membrane.

The process of painting itself evokes a gradual or emergent appearance of features—features at first left unnoticed and so, in one sense, absent from our 'momentary' view—absent in the sense that their temporary non-occurrence lay outside (unnoticed), but always included within the background of the

specious present of our 'momentary' view. And this state of being momentarily unnoticed is part of our experience; part of the object's appearing.

This sense of gradual apprehension is precisely what symbolist poets at the turn of the century referred to as the realm of 'suggestion' where the listener is called upon by the very self-conscious opacity of language to engage with the object of description in such a way that, unlike with ordinary prose, its content is less immediately and concretely available to perception and only more gradually and evocatively suggested. Stéphane Mallarmé argued: *"I think that there should be only allusion... To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which is created by the pleasures of gradually apprehending it...That is the perfect use of mystery which constitutes symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to derive from it a state of mind, by a series of decipherments."*²

The business of poetry, for Mallarmé and other early modernist writers, went beyond the mere description of objects in the world, the mere conveying of information in the clearest and most unobtrusive manner possible; poetry had the distinctive feature of using language in such a way as to draw the hearer's attention back onto it, forcing the hearer to engage with what is being depicted by placing attention onto the language itself—a 'thickening' of the verbal medium through the manipulation of words and phrases, the distortion of syntax.

The analogy with language has often been drawn in accounts of Goethals' painting. Critics have referred to the calligraphic quality of her work; drawn, incised and gestured marks of some sort of pre-linguistic writing floating up to the surface, then receding, embryonically reaching the point of meaning before fading away—linguistic gestures that refuse our habitual orientation to language. One critic has described it this way: *"...calligraphic lines that languidly form a phrase or a clause whose meaning is not a fixed reality..."*³

The French theorist Julia Kristeva has referred to this rupture of conventional linguistic signification in modernist writing as the "semiotic", a sort of unarticulated, uncoded flow of "pulsions" within the unconscious, a pre-language not yet meaningful (in the

sense of communicable 'meaning' in stable terms and syntactic constructions). Kristeva's "semiotic", in its "pre-linguistic immediacy" is, she argues, "a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral...unstable...and non-signifying;" it "precedes and underlies figuration...verisimilitude...and spatiality," thus rendering meaning mobile, unstable, fluid and prompting multiple and unfixed reader positions. She continues: "This space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation." ⁴

This is precisely what we find going on in Goethals' painterly language. The sensuously layered, successively painted and reworked surfaces sustain the visual effect of extended perception, both temporally and spatially. Early stages of configuration are just as present to our awareness as the final surface marks. At the same time, the viewer is made to take a disengaging and vertiginous look down into/onto the surface of representation, which pushes beyond the conventional limits of the frame and subverts it for a new paradigm, an all-over, non-hierarchical expanse of visual attention, thereby disallowing any lingering sense of the single, unified and momentary view.

The extended and dense complexity of visual perception evoked by these paintings may be thought of as the philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of *la durée*—conscious like states understood not as a sequence of successive yet separate, isolated and discreet moments, but as a multiplicity continually unfolding in "duration"—a ceaseless and seamless flow of thoughts, feelings and perceptions. In Goethals' paintings "There is a continuous flux...a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it...I could not have said where any one of them finished or where another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other...consciousness means memory." ⁵

Memory, in this sense, is not the simple remembering of past experiences but rather the past living on in the present in our perception, affecting our present (visual and mental) behavior. The successive and interpenetrative states of consciousness merge into one another, each retaining something of what has just passed and each giving intimation of what is to come — a blurring of the boundaries of past, present and anticipated future.

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¹Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), New York, 19112, p38

²Stéphane Mallarmé in J. Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, Paris 1891, p.60 (my translation)

³Diane Armitage, 'Critical Reflections,' *THE Magazine*, December 1995

⁴Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, New York (1986), pp. 89-136.

⁵Henri Bergson, (1903), pp.9-10.