

Interview by Alain Berland with Farah Atassi

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Alain Berland : It is rare to see painters, who, in their canvases, recreate so many works by other artists. From Malevich to Picasso, via Mondrian, Pevsner or Héliou, references to the historical avant-garde abound in your work. What is their meaning?

Farah Atassi : Although they are not the only source of inspiration, I readily admit that there are numerous modernist references in my paintings (notably Cubist and Suprematist). There are two reasons for this.

The first one is strictly formal, or even compositional. I have always felt the need to organize my paintings. That is why I construct a grid on the surface of my canvases with the help of adhesive tape, which allows me to create my motifs according to a repeatable procedure. Initially, I was not aware that this was borrowed from the grammar of modernism. In short, by putting lines and geometry at the centre of my work, I touch on the modernist style.

Furthermore, I highly appreciate the direct and efficient painting style of the artists of the avant-garde, the economy of means that governs all of their compositions. I am often inspired by their synthetic vocabulary, by these simplified forms that vacillate between sign and figure, as in the works of Malevich, Léger or Herbin. Similarly, when I paint geometric elements, I want there to be a figurative dimension to my painting. Indeed, the modernist references often have this role in my compositions: they allow me to create a type of figurative painting, but one that contains abstractions.

In addition to these formal concerns, there is a properly aesthetic reason. I am a painter of my time, and like many other artists, I bring into play and question previous artistic forms. Thus, in essence, your question could be rephrased in the following manner: why does contemporary art almost systematically function like a metalanguage?

My modernist references and allusions have a meaning that is resolutely outmoded: they are about reviving the ambition of the avant-garde, which at the beginning of the 20th century wanted painting to create a "total work of art". Modern art asks the question as to what constitutes an art (painting, for example) – the question of the medium is central here – whereas contemporary art asks the more general question: what is art?

Alain Berland : This "outmodedness" and this will to formal exploration were pertinent in the 20th century as a way to achieve a clean break with the past, but today, don't they lead to a self-centredness that reproduces forms of domination?

Farah Atassi : Your question refers to the tension that exists between art and culture. Culture unfolds through a particular language; art, on the other hand, in its claim to universality, works against the dominant forms of its age.

I don't believe in the end of painting, in the sense that – say from Giotto to modernism – it has exhausted all its potential and, from now on, can only persevere by reviving previous formal repertoires or through a meta- discursive game for the informed observer. Therein lies the danger of academicism and of the self-centredness that you evoke. The references and allusions in my paintings are not hints for the educated observer: they are formal propositions that need to be understood in their claim to universality.

For me, these references are therefore the exact opposite of self-centredness. Through them, I strive to create a dialogue, a continuity with other artists, in the need to re-establish and renew links and connections.

Besides, the universal language of modernism was created against any form of domination; its aim was to reach everyone: simple forms, pure colours, themes that represented everyday life. I'm thinking specifically of Malevich's farmers and Fernand Léger's construction workers. Figurative painting is about the world. That is the reason why I don't want to fall into abstraction. When I started to paint, I was locked within a closed system. And it was only later, when I became interested in photos of Russian communal houses, that the subject matter became central. I subsequently started to reflect on the ideological and formal questions that were explored by the European avant-garde. This focus on history, and on the history of art, enabled me to leave behind the closed field of purely formal painting.

Moreover, I am convinced that through painting I am actually liberating myself from all the forms of domination that you evoke. In an age of speed and productivity, painting is a refuge, an act of resistance, because it involves slowness and sometimes failure. From this perspective, you could certainly call my approach "outmoded", but I ask myself if, in that respect, contemporary art is not facing the wrong direction: no one ever asks a pianist or a cellist if their work still has meaning in our age!

Alain Berland : It is increasingly difficult to differentiate between background and subject in your work. All the levels merge and the gaze is confronted with Moiré patterns and relationships of colour, a bit like those used by the Op Art artists. Is there a desire on your part to disrupt vision?

Farah Atassi : Yes, absolutely. My backgrounds are more and more present, visually speaking. Ever since my first paintings, I have often played with this hesitation between flatness and depth. My paintings are always arranged like this: a deep, three-dimensional space is covered all over with motifs that disrupt perspective and propel the background back to the surface.

As you rightly noted, my recent series emphasises this effect of indeterminacy between levels. My backgrounds increasingly tend to push to the surface of the canvas. Undoubtedly, their present purpose is less to suggest three-dimensional spaces – designed to be filled with such and such a figure – but to provide a base for the abstract composition. This is particularly true in the series "Psychedelic Setting", where this indistinction of levels is reinforced by the hybridization of different aesthetic styles, from Oskar Fischinger to 1970s New Age. Having said that, even in these paintings, the tension between flatness and depth remains, since my background patterns– constructed with the help of a grid – follow the perspectival lines of the painting that break their symmetry by deforming and distending them.

My backgrounds push towards the surface, but, conversely, my objects have the tendency to melt into the background, in the same way that Oskar Schlemmer, in *Triadic Ballet*, turned his extravagantly costumed dancers into full-blown elements of the stage décor.

Alain Berland : To what extent would you agree that your paintings are decorative?

Farah Atassi : Painting always has a decorative dimension. In my paintings, I settle the question of decoration by pushing the ornament to the point of madness: the patterns are saturated, distended and immersive. There is a guilty pleasure in the decorative ornament that I always liked exploring. In 2015, I worked on the question of ornamentation in relation to, amongst other things, rug illustrations. I realised that at the basis of abstraction, there is always decoration and ornamentation, and thus flatness. Abstraction is not only about withdrawing from the world of representation, it is also about working with shapes, geometric or not, that the artist gathers and then forms and deforms.