

A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions

For several years now, Nicolas Delprat has been doing paintings (sometimes along with installations) that mainly seem to probe the bearing of light on painting, by drawing on a heritage that spans 19th and 20th century art history, the invention of photography, all the way to Dan Flavin's neons and James Turrell's environments. Much earlier on, Rembrandt, Vermeer, de La Tour, Le Lorrain and Turner had grappled with the underlying properties of light. However, the technological surge triggered by photography, followed by film and video and reaching its peak with the hi-tech scope of computers, has broadened the field of inquiry for artists and steered painting to new paradigms.

In a similar vein, Nicolas Delprat's paintings rely on piracy and pillage, as he devises images that are systematically rooted in preexistent images, whether alluding to work by other artists or explicitly citing films. At first glance, Nicolas Delprat's paintings would thus boil down to a vast archive-catalogue, wildly appropriating whatever handles a certain type of light with physical traits such as diffused aura, halation, immateriality, and cinematographic illusion. From this viewpoint, which is misleading and restrictive as we are about see, Nicolas Delprat's painting method would merely be an exercise in enthrallment and technical prowess, and its recurrent references to James Turrell, Dan Flavin, Stanley Kubrick, David Lynch, and – less directly – to Ed Ruscha, would merely consist of admiring citation. As a matter of fact, everything about this downright pillaging enterprise is based on the notion of image-falsification and on the question of the inevitable fragmentary remembering of what we see, of what we believe we can precisely recall. Light, in Nicolas Delprat's paintings, is bent on asserting a principle of memory-uncertainty.

The uncertainty principle

En 1927, the physicist Heisenberg lay the foundations for the uncertainty principle in quantum physics. These foundations are relatively simple. Heisenberg starts out from the principle that to observe a particle, you have to shine light on it, which means colliding it with photons. On a subatomic scale, this entails a significant perturbation to the particle, modifying its position or its velocity. Heisenberg demonstrates that the inevitable collision due to the contingencies of the act of observation causes the particle to always undergo an uncertainty principle, so that one can determine either the particle's exact velocity or its exact position, but never both at the same time. Beyond the complex scientific implications of such a discovery, perhaps out of reach for outsiders to quantum physics, Heisenberg's theory has a certain poetics that can shed light on Nicolas Delprat's artwork. By spraying tiny paint-particles onto an acrylic canvas without the slightest trace of a paintbrush, the paintings display vast photonic and immaterial nebulas, generally set against a very dark and matte background which absorbs the light like a black hole. It is impossible to tell whether these gaseous aureoles are in expansion or contraction; one can imagine them static as well as set in motion at an astonishing and immeasurable speed. In the series *Zone*, the radiant lights glimpsed through fences do not disclose whether they are explosions or fixed lights with atmospheric properties of a climactic nature. The uncertainty principle probably forms the core of Nicolas Delprat's artwork. His paintings incessantly question our ability to see with exactness, and even more so, to precisely recall things we've seen.

Memory as impure mosaic (memory of works of art)

Can one accurately remember even a single image?

How does one recall a painting, an installation, a photograph? Does one ever truly recall a single work?

The body of works done over the past few years tackles these questions with at least three distinct tracks.

The first applies to paintings with close references to preexistent works by other artists that use light as material. Dan Flavin, James Turrell, and John Armleder thus figure in titles of paintings that have been inspired by their work. For instance, one of Dan Flavin's minimal neon sculptures ends up in a painting, thus rematerializing – on a flat surface – a luminescent and impalpable aura that was initially spread out in three dimensions. Or the reproduction of an environment by James Turrell, based on the creation of an infinite space by way of diffuse luminosity, raises the question of illusionist reproduction of an immaterial work. The paintings all have a totally smooth surface with no trace of brushstroke, achieved by spraying acrylic droplets. The surface is gaseous, giving an atmospheric feel. But once the initial effect wears off, i.e. the undeniable fascination from a purely luminescent stance, one can't help wondering what the point is in reproducing works by other artists, especially as these works are impoverished by being flattened out into a painting. One must discern the sources used by Nicolas Deprat in order to figure out what is really taking place in this process. Two examples offer some insight.

Dan Flavin, painted in 2006, does not reproduce a random work by Dan Flavin. The painting transposes a specific work seen at a show in New York. Nicolas Delprat decided on this particular work because there was a glitch in one of the six neon lights, setting this sculpture apart from the rest. The neon's erratic vibration and the conspicuous sound caused by the oscillating intensity thrust this minimalist luminous sculpture into an entirely different

register. It has more in common with certain cinematic ambiances, calling to mind various scenes in films by David Lynch (*Eraserhead*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire*), where intimate intensities with neon vibrations

take on an industrial and distressing guise. There are thus two principles at play in the act of reproducing Dan Flavin's work: the memory of the single imperfection in the retrospective, ultimately turning this work into the most dazzling of the lot, and the transformation of this work (that had aimed to be radical and clean-cut) into a totally different key, clashing with its initial grammar. It is a painting that takes shape in a tainted memory – virtually an anti-memory – of the Dan Flavin show, and this memory stems from the uncertain and erratic vibration of the sole defective neon in the retrospective.

The painting entitled *James Turrell*, done the same year, applies a similar principle. Nicolas Delprat has not quite painted a work by James Turrell seen at a show, but rather a view from the dark hallway leading to the luminous environment, i.e. a doorway bathed in the atmospheric light emitted from the space containing Turrell's installation. Once again, the aim is not to faithfully reproduce a preexistent work of art, but rather to summon the memory of this work at a precise point in time, right when Nicolas Delprat has exited the show and veered into the hallway, with only this memory in mind to the detriment of the actual work. As such, the painting *James Turrell* posits the principle we have all experienced: a memory that selects images in an odd fashion, mostly retaining snatches of secondary events to the detriment of what we would consider to be the major images of the key-moment or artwork at hand. The indelible images we unintentionally archive by natural selection – memories that can remain lifelong – are not usually the memories we would have chosen. With *James Turrell*, Nicolas Delprat is raising the issue of remembering in general, and our memory of artwork in specific. What memory do we retain of works we've seen? How do we remember a Giotto painting, Paolo Ucello's battle of San Romano, an Yves Klein blue monochrome, a black painting by Ad Reinhardt, an installation by Claude Lévêque...? We really just hang onto a fragmented modified memory, interweaving specks of the work, sensations and ambiances; an approximate memory infused with figments of our imagination.

Memory as impure mosaic (memory of film)

How does one remember a film?

How does one remember a moving image from a film? How should one isolate a frame, its light and its fleetingness?

What film-images do we unintentionally select in order to remember the film?

How do our personal archives of the most outstanding films take shape? Through which images? With what sort of precision?

Do the mental images that remind us of films truly exist in those films, or are they merely an arrangement, a fantasy-memory, a form of residual memory that is affected and inaccurate? Is there a single image from the film that we can truly remember?

A second track pursued by Nicolas Delprat regards the paintings that openly cite films by reworking highlights from the greats: the warning messages and orange-red diodes of the computer HAL (Stanley Kubrick – *2001: A Space Odyssey*), the apocalyptic light of a Martian landscape (Paul Verhoeven – *Total Recall*), a mountain haloed in unearthly light (Steven Spielberg – *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), the backlit twilight façade of a Californian mansion (Curtis Hanson – *L.A. Confidential*), the club "Silencio" where irreversible changes take place (David Lynch – *Mulholland Drive*), the messianic phrase "The sleeper must awake" (David Lynch – *Dune*)...

Painting has been known to cite film before, but Nicolas Delprat's choices display two interesting features.

First is the fact that all of these films – with one exception – have a particular link with literature. *2001: A Space Odyssey* is an adaptation of the short story *The Sentinel* by Arthur C. Clarke, *Total Recall* is based on the novelette *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* by Philip K. Dick, *L.A. Confidential* was initially a novel by James Ellroy, and *Dune* a novel by Frank Herbert. These films are thus more or less successful attempts (*Dune* doesn't quite pull it off) to adapt short stories or novels for the screen, by reshaping their script-like and literary traits through the filmmaker's subjectivity.

The exception, *Mulholland Drive*, is based on David Lynch's original script. Inside the club *Silencio*, the two heroines listen to the voice of Rebekah Del Rio, which turns out to be in playback. At another point in the film, there is a close-up of a road sign that says *Sunset Boulevard*, evoking Billy Wilder's film about a former silent film star who is cast into oblivion by the onset of talkies. The playback and the Wilder reference hint at the passage from silent to talking pictures. Once again, we are dealing with a shift, in this case not from literature to film-image, but rather from silent films (and their title cards) to talking films.

The paintings that refer to cinema have not been done at random or to satisfy the whims of a film buff: they underscore the passage from one state to another, from one medium to another, from literature to cinema, from silent films to talkies. The paintings produce a further shift – from film to painting – by applying a brushstroke that should not be considered hyperrealist, but rather an allusion to Calicot frescoes. Even more so, they evoke matte paintings, which were done on glass and used for special effects and sets before the switch to synthetic imaging, and actors against blue screens (the matte paintings of *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* were the most famous examples at the time).

Another crucial aspect in Nicolas Delprat's various cinematographic adaptations concerns misrepresentation. HAL, Confidential, Close Encounters, Silencio naturally hark back to films by Stanley Kubrick, Curtis Hanson, Paul Verhoeven, Steven Spielberg and David Lynch. And yet, none of these images appears in the films they seemingly reference. At no point does Stanley Kubrick do a close-up of HAL's red diodes; at no point does this Californian house appear in L.A. Confidential; the Martian landscapes in Total Recall do not contain the painted expanse of Close Encounters and Silencio does not appear in David Lynch's film the way Nicolas Delprat depicts it. As a matter of fact, the procedure adopted in all of these painting is the opposite of the process used for the paintings that refer to other works of art. The paintings no longer use a real, albeit selective, memory of something that was seen. Rather, they draw on a residual memory of films, the traces of what one thinks one has remembered from these films. The outcome is a fusion between a degree of exactitude (the diodes in HAL really exist in Kubrick's film, there are really incandescent Martian landscapes in Total Recall...) and the fantasized memory spawned by the films: HAL's diodes fill up the entire frame, the mountain in Rencontre du Troisième Type merges into the Martian landscapes of Paul Verhoeven's film.

This is taken a step further: the football stadium floodlights in Sans titre and Sans titre 2 are the same that light up the black monolith embedded in a lunar crater in 2001, the spotlights of a nightclub or concert in Live 11 and Live 13 are a motley evocation of all possible night club or concert scenes, without targeting any single instance (Basic Instinct, Miami Vice, Heat, Al Pacino carrying a gun as he goes through a dense dancing crowd, B films with Steven Seagal, Westley Snipes...?).

From this angle, the paintings come across as a way of reconstituting, of gauging the residual memory of things, of violating authentic memory by time and subjectivity. Their full significance emerges in how they pursue the historical continuum of what painting has always been: temporal stratification that divulges an idea in progress, even an idea of inexactitude.

Dave... My mind is going... I can feel it...

In 2001: A Space Odyssey, the autocratic supercomputer HAL takes over the spaceship. One of the two astronauts aboard, Dave, ends up putting HAL to an artificial death, not by disconnecting him but by removing the modules that contain and organize HAL's memory. By extracting these vital luminous elements one by one, Dave progressively sends HAL back to an elementary form of memory. HAL becomes in a way "HAL-zheimer", just managing to sing the folk song Au clair de la lune, which is buried within the primitive memory of its circuits, before totally shutting down.

This scene, as painted by Nicolas Delprat in HAL, only shows the glowing red diodes of this memory terminal, as if to highlight the gist of this painting in particular, and of all artwork in general. For beyond the paintings that strictly refer to preexistent works, beyond the true- false depiction of film-images, there is a third thrust to Nicolas Delprat's work: to elicit faraway reminiscences that have been flushed through a picture library, and we no longer know whether the images really existed or whether they result from an unconscious brew of images that overlap like a mille-feuille pastry. The subject matter is no longer specific images, but rather cinematic image-stereotypes. These paintings – the series Zone, Light, Lost Control, Compte à rebours, Derrick, Divine, Fire, Inside, Blackout... – employ movie- language by producing images that, while not referring to a particular film, clearly belong to the genre's syntax. The paintings in the series Zone are pure film-images that might just as well be out of David Cronenberg's Dead Zone, Steven Soderbergh's Traffic, Steven Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind... They don't belong to any of these films and yet they belong to all of these films. They fabricate stereotypes, image-types, fantasy film clichés, thriller clichés, film clichés of wetback immigrants caught in surveillance floodlights as they try to sneak across the Mexican border. The same holds for the paintings that depict intense contrasts of window-shadows cast onto the ground, calling to mind Fritz Lang's expressionist films and Max Reinhardt's architectural settings for his Kammerspiel, as well as all sorts of crime scenes, critical moments before the attack, the rape, the fusillade, the arrival of zombies... Compte à Rebours and its digitized zero conjures catastrophe movies, the hero dismantling a bomb in extremis, Mission Impossible, Die Hard, 24... Blackout and its aerial night-view of American territory evokes the invisible threat, extraterrestrials, post-Sept 11 terrorism... Derrick, a generic image par excellence, evokes There Will Be Blood as well as Dallas. All of these works propel the image to its potential universality. They use a film-based syntax in order to defragment it the way one defragments a hard drive by joining similar files into single pieces.

The three simultaneous directions of Nicolas Delprat's artwork follow a well-ordered logic. Depicting works by other artists raises the issue of fragmentary and inexact remembering; crafting mock film-images pursues this issue through the irruption of fantasy in how we remember images; creating stereotypes of film photo-stills asserts our propensity to weave false memories. In other words, Nicolas Delprat's artwork contends that we do not retain what we think is most important, that we transform whatever we retain, and that what we call memories are really something else.

Each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. Cormac McCarthy, The Road¹

¹ The title of this text is also a quote from *The Road*.