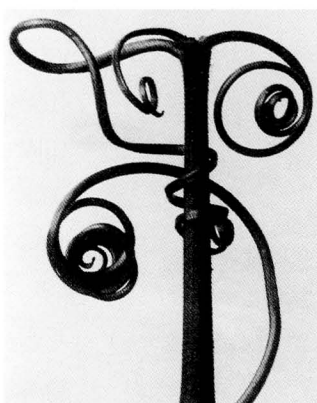


ABSTRACTION REINVENTED

The Virtual Sex of Painting

In 1993 David Reed painted a huge picture in cinemaScope format, entitled *#318 (Hermaphrodite)*. Against a pink screen-background, a ribbon of swirls and superimpositions unfolds from the center and culminates in an abstract floral blossoming. Pink on pink, a Tiepolo flesh pink revisited by a garish Warhol pink, this picture displays the theater of painting itself. For not only is Hermaphrodite the symbol of androgyny and bisexuality, or even of a third, virtual sex, the myth also offers us the full set of doubles and doublings that haunts the work of David Reed. The doubling of the pictorial act between the infinity of the smooth backgrounds with their "abstracts" of ribbons, knots, and arabesques, and then here and there, from top to bottom, these light, whitened traces, tiny veils scattered over the surface like the faraway and henceforth impossible memory of the brushstroke. Artifice is elevated to an art of inhabiting the surface, bringing into play paradoxical forces which are compressed and superimposed by an entire Baroque topology of volumes. But any expressiveness is held back at a distance, in the indifference of a curiously cool erotics, without subversion or carnation. In the large vertical painting *#444*, the swirls and aqua-green ribbons are like seaweed trimmed in pink. This green vegetal flesh, also found in *#442*, twines together and interlaces against a black background where it is "hermaphroditically" doubled by the gestural veils of pink transparencies. Painting acts as a fascination, where abstraction reinvents its language. Thus, from paintings to video, David Reed explores in his own manner – and in a variety of different manners – the culture of flows and interfaces that surrounds us, with its virtual doubles and *doublures*.

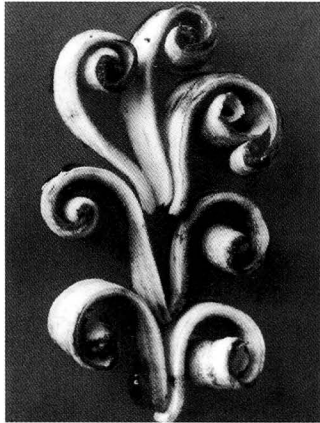


Karl Blossfeldt,
Cucurbita pepo

Indeed, this screen abstraction – all body-folds and unfoldings, all interlacing swirls, expansions and envelopings – has nothing to do with the pure and "subtractive" abstraction of modernism. It is impure and rejects all heroism and sublime elevation, like the rest of American "post-abstraction," which is developed on the basis of new models: maps, diagrams, networks, fractals, and inflections (1). A second abstraction, which extracts its "abstracts" from the world, and refers us back to it. Fold on fold, bodies folded into inflections and spirals, venomous artificial lights and colors, opaque transparencies: in the paintings of David Reed, the fold is never a projection of the self. It comes from outside and is inhabited by a veritable wave-effect, like Japanese prints, or art nouveau with its floral eye and abstract stylistics. But this wave- or ribbon-effect is curiously ambivalent: fluid and rigid, "projectile" and "subjectile", open and enclosed, dynamic and frozen.

David Reed plays topology against Euclidian geometry, keeping us near the surface. He makes me think irresistibly of the flowers photographed in extreme closeup by Karl Blossfeldt, in his "Alphabet of Plants" (2). There, the organic is stylized and life is abstract, to the point where the flowers become prototypes of flowers, ornaments and

abstracts, letting archaic and disquieting forces appear. The enlargement and the gigantic proportions assumed by the minutiae of the plant kingdom – leaf, seed, or calyx – engenders a violence, a visual sadism, which did not escape that great



Karl Blossfeldt,
Clematis heracleifolia

lover of the “Language of Flowers,” Walter Benjamin: “We stroll like Lilliputians beneath these gigantic flowers, on which we gaze” (3). Would this be the way we look at the paintings of David Reed? A new, post-Warholian language of flowers, or topologies of virtual bodies, or still more: the abstract body and incarnate artifice of painting?

I come back to the initial fascination, which is a fascination with the motif in the strongest sense of the word, the motifs of Monet or of any pictorial machine that functions on repetitions and variations. For David Reed paints nothing other than “ribbons.” And this infinite ribbon, close to the infinite spiral of Robert Smithson, engenders a space of doublings, an art of multiplicities, where color seems to peel away from itself in an endless vortex. Phantom works, all in color, superimpositions and liquid proliferations, violently technological lights, the volumes opening up from the middle like flowers or bodies. And yet a kind of visibility without gaze slowly settles in.

I float though this filmic parade, I return to the surface effects, where the forms take their flight. I attempt to unfold the folds and I tumble into the ambivalence of violet, of purple, into the incandescent reddening of the veils and twists. I evoke all the figures of Venus: Giorgione, Titian, Velázquez, with their undulating lines and the sensual-haptic aspect of their flesh. I bring all the life of flowers into play, Baudelaire, Odilon Redon, without forgetting the cattleyas and orchids of Proust, or the vagina-flowers of O’Keefe. For in these incredible volutes, it is finally a matter of flower-bodies. Or rather, of real-false bodies, of Baudelairean hyperbodies, always highly neutralized. Pictorial bodies then, open to that “experience of the outside” of which Foucault spoke, in reference to the irresistible attraction of the Sirens (4). Now, fascination, ever since the explicitly sexual *fascinatus* of the Latins, has always been linked to desire, dangerous and deadly as it may be. In the painting of David Reed, the effects engender desiring affects which are always ambiguous, as a result of a permanently double syntax. Vegetal and corporeal life is seemingly projected into artificial forms and technological colors which wreak violence upon it and lend it the deep purple fascination of an abstract carnation. A biomorphic fascination, which has to do with neither Eros nor Thanatos, but with this floral in-between, organic and artificial, composed of virtual proximities and star-struck fantasmatics. The surface creates the volume, which folds back into surface. The outside is inside and the inside outside, as in Moebius strips, or in the curved and spiraling spaces of the Baroque.

Such a willful duality of surface and curve, of manner and abstraction, works its way into the pictorial practice itself. At the studio located in Manhattan where I always have such interesting discussions, the paintings are carried out in several stages. First the backgrounds: divided into two or three strips, most often in bright colors, they are sanded, becoming mirror-screens without the slightest roughness or trace. Then come the wave-motifs, ribbons, and flowers of abstraction. The potentially infinite effect of these flat and curved spaces is cut off, cut out and folded in by the violent effect of the colors and by a play of framing-unframing, piercing the immense horizontal or vertical panoramas with paintings inside the painting, and with

pictorial windows à la Magritte, as in #442. Two paintings in one, an abyssal flatness, a lateral or Icarian gaze, landscaped spaces that double, multiply, and paradoxically connect – David Reed paints “like” a film, a Hitchcock film... For if every painting is already a “fragment of an installation,” as Arthur Danto has written, the installation will unveil the painter’s secret and ironic desire: to be a “bedroom painter” (5). In his installations on the basis of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, the “real”, reconstructed bedroom of Madeleine is doubled by Hitchcock’s bedroom, re-projected on the monitor. A double Madeleine just like in the film, and a Madeleine doubled between the real true-false of her images. But above the bed, there is a painting by none other than David Reed, which itself redoubles the pictorial scene of fascination in *Vertigo*. For it is precisely in a museum, before the painting of Carlotta Valdés, that Madeleine feigns depression; and it is while contemplating this painting with its ultrasignificant details – the bouquet of flowers, the pendent, and the intensely staring face – that Scottie falls in love with the duplicitous heroine. As though the fixed image of the picture could become a fascinating model for the moving images. And we know that the medallion later worn by Madeleine will permit appearances to mingle, and the truth finally to be known.

So it is only a painted fiction that is loved, an artifice that speaks the truth. To paint is to de-pict, in a “Vertigo” without end. Such is the power of this reinvented abstraction, which has drawn all the lessons from Duchamp and Warhol. The image-abstract is a power of images, and painting confronts our screens, our black boxes, to show their fascination and lure. The flesh of painting then becomes only its artifact and its virtual sex, by the very play of its multiples. Hermaphrodite was born from the spray of the waves, and the criminal object of all the artificial flesh in this “Los Angeles Baroque” may well involve the undulating infinity, rolled and folded, that Rilke evoked: “Here is what we desire: to live amidst the waves.”

Christine Buci Glucksmann

Translated from the french by Brian Holmes.

Notes

- 1) On this question see my articles: “Vers une post-abstraction”, *Pratiques abstraites*, Rue Descartes N° 16, PUF/Collège international de la philosophie, and “De l’abstraction aux abstracts”, *Abstrakt*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg-Paris.
- 2) Karl Blossfeldt, “The Alphabet of Plants”, ShimerArt Book, 1997.
- 3) Walter Benjamin, “Le langage des fleurs”, *Sur l’art et la photographie*, introduction by Christophe Jouanlanne, p. 73, Arts&esthétique, Editions Carré.
- 4) Michel Foucault, “La pensée du dehors”, Fata Morgana, Paris, 1986
- 5) Arthur C. Danto, “Between the Bed and the Brushstroke, Reading the Painting of David Reed”, *David Reed*, Cantz, as well as the article published in *Artforum*, Summer 1999, “Bedside Manner: David Reed”. These articles refer to the installation *Two bedrooms in San Francisco*.