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Interview with Michel Platnic

'Live paintings' and a lot of Francis Bacon

Michel Platnic worked in telecoms for thirteen years before deciding to fully immerse himself in the art world. In 2010, he graduated with honors from 'Hamidrasha' School of Arts in Beit Berl College, Israel and received an award for excellence in Art. His work incorporates his past in telecoms and an academic interest in the work of Francis Bacon. On 22 January 2015, *Michel Platnic: After* opens at Art Plural Gallery in Singapore. On the eve of the show we spoke with the artist about the construction of photographed space and 'live paintings'.

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Text by Grace Banks

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Your new show features 'live paintings', can you tell us about these —how do they come into fruition?

When I was a student in my twenties, I was backpacking a lot all over the world on my own. I lived one year in the Far East and during that time I made a trip to Irian Jaya, the Indonesian part of Papua New Guinea. Walking from village to village, I ended up in a village where the people from two villages organized a ceremony to welcome us. They covered their usually nearly naked bodies with what nature allowed them to find, leaves, earth and grass, and painted on their bodies and faces with the pigments from minerals. Finally, they simulated a fight between them. I don't think I was very aware of this memory when I first painted on my face more than 10 years after this experience but this genuine encounter with this village changed my perception of men for sure. I had basic questions regarding the influence of the environment on men and my own freedom in relation to the culture I was raised. I think the 'living paintings' series started from my questioning of my own identity and slowly dealt with the human and his environment.

Can you describe your process in creating these pieces?

The new exhibition features works inspired by several paintings of Francis Bacon. For each of the paintings, I built a life-size installation and placed a model or character that took the position of the figure in the corresponding painting; the models then lived in their newly constructed world.

The construction of the space and the default perspective are very dominant in the paintings of the Bacon period I chose to work with. My photographs and videos capture the movements of the model and unveil the details of the set made up of paintings, sculptures and human models. In order to plan and think about the works, I usually draw sketches which include references like theoretical texts, forms, colors and mathematical calculations to better understand the real sizes of each of its elements. Sometimes, when the sets are too complex to use traditional methods of modeling, I use a three-dimensional software to simulate the space.

Once everything is planned, the construction starts. Concurrent to the building of the set, the costumes for the models are designed, lighting is modeled for the specific set and sculptures serving as body prostheses or props are built if needed. 10 to 15 people are usually involved in both the building of the sets and later on during filming. The set often remains inaccessible until the very last moment of the filming day when the décor, models and camera come together simultaneously. Most of the filming days go on for nearly 24 hours straight because filming has to continue once the model is painted; stopping a filming day before the filming is finished means having to start everything from scratch the next time.

Is this the first time you've worked in the 'live paint' medium before?

I started painting on people in 2009. In this first work named 'Self-portrait', I started from a photograph of myself from which I made an oil painting. Then I painted on myself to resemble the oil painting. Finally, I filmed and photographed myself painted. Somehow, I painted a representation of me on my own body. While this work dealt with the body as a platform, my next step was to create not only my representation but moreover deal with my surrounding as well. In 'Self-portrait in a Pool', I painted the room and created my own shadow on the walls and on myself. This work was created only for the camera in trompe-l'oeil. The space was photographed in such a way that the formal space would disappear. The next work 'Self-portrait in Red' focused more on conceptual questions regarding the relation between space and photography. I wanted to create a space in such a way that the abilities of the photographic process to document and reproduce a three dimensional space should fail. Till today, the 'living paintings' have been a tool for me to explore the relation between bodies and space and their representation across mediums.

How do you deal with the human form in your work?

Bodies in my work are a sort of platform, a canvas on which I paint. It may seem that the bodies are treated as objects, especially in 'Self-portrait in Red', 2010 where the body painted in red is hardly distinguishable from the wall, also painted in red. But looking deeper into the video work, these forms that look inanimate at first glance are in fact alive. They are perhaps incomplete and inconsistent, shared between dimensions, but they are alive. The body is a possible representation for the human form; it reflects a possible reference for a living structure. I guess my wish is to change the context of experience to discover a new essence for the human form.

You claim to merge 'technology with tradition', how does this play out in the pieces in this show?

Today, technology is for me a tool. I have a vision, a work I want to create, and I look for the ways to do it. This often involves technology as well as any possible medium that's needed. To film and photograph the 'living paintings' series of works, I built life-size installations and placed up to three models into them. Each set usually takes 2 to 3 months to build. It combines most of the traditional mediums such as painting on canvas, metal and wood sculptures with materials like concrete and PVC. In this sense, the building of the works combines traditional skills with technology. From a more conceptual perspective, I do take a painting as a reference and I build a set that will then be photographed and filmed. Looking at the final work, which is either a photograph or a video, the spectator may ask himself what he actually sees; it looks like a painting but it is obviously not a traditional painting. The traditional term of 'painting' usually refers to both the act and the result of the action. In my works, the act includes traditional methods but the result cannot be defined by the tradition.

You reference Bacon a lot, how has his influence on your work manifested in your pieces?

The paintings that inspired me were painted by Bacon in the late 1960s to the 1990s. My references to Bacon are very clear. My aim in this project was to reproduce in my studio life-size sets that once filmed or photographed would look precisely like the Bacon paintings I chose. Each video or photograph recreates the subtle movements of the characters, changes of light, interpretation of perspective, optical organizations of the planes to render the depth of the scene, and the treatment of the colors. Bacon inspired me but it was mostly his vision of man that was my main topic when dealing with his works. By recreating Bacon's environment and changing the essence of the character, I had a chance to change this past I inherited and create a new reality.

Is it fair to say you're finishing up what Bacon left off?

I would not say that I am finishing up what Bacon left off but more that I am opening a dialogue with him centered mainly on the condition of men. Bacon was a post-war artist with a post-war conception of men; he believed that man 'is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason'. His characters are enclosed in space, they are waiting or in constant tension and the faces of his sitters are blurred. I belong to the second generation after the war and my vision of men is different. In my works, my characters are living, they go out of the frame, they build their own set and they have a face. This face allows them to communicate and interact with the environment; they are no longer isolated. The Other is now an opportunity to go out of themselves and grow.

In 1974 Francis Bacon said "I would like [...] to make the painting itself very much more sculptural" (Sylvester D., *Interview with Francis Bacon*, 1974, p114). In another interview he said that he would have liked to try being a film director. Somehow, from a medium perspective, maybe I fulfilled some of his wishes.

Michel Platnic: After by Michel Platnic runs from 22 - 25 January 2015 at Art Plural Gallery.