

## Alain Clément - Painting between Renaissance and Renewal

*„Il n’y a pas de peinture abstraite ou figurative que cette présence physique dans l’aura de la peinture comme un être réel.”<sup>1</sup> (Alain Clément)*

"There is no abstract or figurative painting except this physical presence, mediated by the aura of painting, which makes it seem like a real being." With these words from 2022, which seem like a résumé of his artistic experiences and his view of the world, the French painter and graphic artist Alain Clément (born 1941) also ties in with an initial artistic experience of his childhood in Paris, which he reported on the occasion of an exhibition ten years earlier at the Hôtel des arts in Toulon in France. As a young boy, he went with his mother to the Jardin des Tuileries and saw the installation of the monumental paintings "Nymphéas" (French for white water lilies) by Claude Monet (1840-1926) in the Orangerie there. He describes this as a "bath" in the Impressionist's paintings and the physical presence of the artworks, which he perceived really intense. From this day on he linked his artistic perception to his mother, to the universe of the feminine, the opposite of which he was not.<sup>2</sup> His art draws from the musical, from free inspiration; in this it is committed to *l'art pour l'art*, to art for its own sake, and to the connection with modernism's own tradition. Nevertheless, the modernist works elude the complaisance of the traditional *peinture* cultivated in France. They produce cultivated and untamed, sometimes abstract and sometimes abstracted-figurative works that can appear accomplished and fragmentary, sensual as well as formalist. They speak of the freedom of art, of its own means and of a liberated expression in which human nature, culture and history and the essence of painting are reflected.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Clément in an email to the author dated July 20, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Clément states in a video for the 2012 exhibition in Toulon: "Ce qui fait que pour moi la peinture, c'est toujours le féminin. C'est pour moi l'univers de la mature et laquelle de féminin, enfin de ce qui je ne suis pas." ("This means for me that painting is always the feminine. This is for me the universe of the mature and the feminine, ultimately what I am not.")

## I. "Painting has gone into a tailspin, [...]. Everything is effusion." (Alain Clément)

Clément's paintings, gouaches, prints and, since 1998, sculptures are characterized by abstract color structures, sometimes rhythmic-dynamic color bands, sometimes edged built color bars, which conceive form and color, surface and space, painting and drawing as a unity. They are moving color forms or conceptual-minimalist color movement traces. Painting occurs in the surface and yet evokes indeterminate spatiality and volume. The bands of color are often oriented to an imaginary center and remain related to the traditional picture frame, but also oscillate in space like free pictorial signs seemingly detached from the painting in the form of steel sculptures and reliefs.

Alain Clément began to pursue the reason for his "love of painting" in 1970.<sup>3</sup> He created monochrome paintings, painted with an emphasis on action with large gestures, sometimes expressive like the "New Wild Ones" and appreciated the color field painting of the Americans. Previously, in the 1960s, he had been involved in the publishing of art and poetry and was in contact with a number of contemporary French artists who, in the late 1960s, wanted to conceive painting in a new way and in departure of the lasting "École de Paris". In 1969 he co-founded the artist group "ABC productions", which was more moderate than the following avant-garde group "Supports/Surface", which finally radically deconstructed painting back to its foundations.<sup>4</sup> Painting, burdened with tradition, had lost its primacy due to changed artistic media and practices that transcended the genres of art and it receded so far into the background of public and theoretical discussion that people at the time thought they were at the "end of painting." But there was a continuity of the medium of the image, which was continued through conceptual and analytical painting in the course of the 1970s and experienced a renewed renaissance through New Expressionism after 1980.

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<sup>3</sup> Alain Clément quoted from: "Interview Karin Wilkin mit Alain Clément", in: *Alain Clément. Bilder*, exhibition-cat. Galerie Wentzel Köln, Cologne 1989, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> In 1967 Alain Clément exhibited for the first time with André-Pierre Arnal, Vincent Bioulès, Daniel Dezeuze and Claude Viallat. Cf. *Alain Clément. Rückblicke – Ausblicke. Bilder und Skulpturen. 1993 - 2008*, exhibition-cat. Gallery Orangerie-Reinz Cologne, Cologne 2008, p. 60.

## II. "Painting is for me the place of transition from its own reality to illusion." (Alain Clément, 1989)

The artist works without a prior formal concept and is guided by experiences and memories, in which he lets the art viewers participate in the reenactment of his works. Alain Clément's artworks often seem non-objective, but they refer to nature, art and the human body. In the 1970s, French art critics placed them in a context with psychoanalysis and linguistics.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the perception of his painting by third parties plays a significant role. One wonders what meaning may lie behind the pictorial action in the form of bands and brushstrokes. The abstract color formations in Clément's paintings appear like traces of the human, the natural, the pictorial, are sometimes arabesque, sometimes a body form and sometimes an abstract sign. The artist speaks of "disorganization" of space and sensations. Clément's approach can be described as structuralism in the sense of analytical, opening up the conditions of painting. His works come from painting and lead back to it. Clément reduces it to the conditions given to it, the effect and application of color, its spatial effects, and the artist's sweeping, bodily execution. The analytical character of his art is indicated by the fact that since the early 1990s Clément has dispensed with specific picture titles, instead applying a formal system of letters and numbers that reflect the year and month of creation as well as the technique. In addition, the artist also produces his own color substances and pigments.

Clément is present as a creator in the image and at the same time refuses to be. He adapts, deconstructs and reconstructs again. At times, one can perceive reminiscences of important French artists since the 19th century, yet his painting ultimately remains undetermined. Clément works with the "languages of the image"<sup>6</sup>. With the paraphrase "analogy system" as a "dictionary of expressive effects" he moreover concisely and concretely formulates his intentions to connect the lines of tradition of art and in this he can also be characterized as modernist, and at the same time to create painting for its own sake.<sup>7</sup> Clément speaks of the "'painterly' effect" as the "blood of the picture"<sup>8</sup>. The free and gestural way of working shows a closeness to the Abstract Expressionists in the USA since the 1950s. The painterly-

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<sup>5</sup> Nabakowski, Gisind: "Alain Clément," in: *Kunstforum International*, vol. 77/78, 9-10/85, Jan./Feb., Cologne 1985, p. 330.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Clément quoted from: *Alain Clément. Bilder 1989* (as note 3), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Clément quoted from: *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Clément quoted from: *Ibid*, p. 36.

expressive style sometimes coincides with color field painting or what the art critic Clement Greenberg called "Post-Painterly Abstraction" in 1964, by which a conceptual painting of color traces and fields was meant, moving away from the gestural-lyrical artistic way. In Clément's work, one can find points of contact in the multi-layered field of tension between action and color field and a modernist-reduced attitude. One can find parallels in the work of Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), a representative of precisely this "Post-Painterly Abstraction". Clément himself mentions Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) as well as Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) and Philip Guston (1913-1980) as inspirations, in whose works the figurative also emerges from the abstract and the lyrical-existential merges into the factual-painterly. The painterly as a quality and stylistic feature of its own, detached from the medium of the picture, can be identified in the art of the Baroque, whose spatial-symbiotic sensibility Clément appreciates and which the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), in his formalist approach at the beginning of the 20th century, regarded as a defining characteristic of that epoch. In Clément's works one perceives a simultaneity and presence of color, form, surface, space and light - design and execution coincide, as do past, present and future.

In its appearance, the dimensions of the image and its nature, Clément's art has proven to be diverse over several decades up to the present. Yet his attitude as an artist is recognizable and follows an individualistic style. At cyclical intervals of one or more years, he devotes himself to different formal pictorial expressions, sometimes involving more angular-geometric and sometimes more lyrical-open forms. The early works from the 1970s are action-oriented and appear abstract-expressive. Energetic rhythmic brushstrokes evoke physicality and anthropomorphic forms. Bands of color applied from gestural brushstrokes circumscribe hints of figurality and nudes that radiate lightness and freedom, as if in a round dance. The titles of paintings from the 1980s, such as "Bernini Roma," "Aurélie," and "La nymphe des eaux," already suggest a metaphor committed to the sensual and corporeal, which is also supported by the pictorial impressions. Clément admires the founders of modern art, besides Claude Monet (1840-1926), also Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Édouard Manet (1832-1883). In their works, it is primarily the formal qualities, the transparency of color and the free artistic attitude that Clément appreciates.

Particularly in the art of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), the pictorial approaches that are significant for Clément and which he has internalized as a reservoir of pictorial impressions

and which he makes use of through borrowings, are condensed. The appeal of the arabesque-ornamental and the dance-like lightness, which he understands as a symbiosis of surface, space, color and form and which flows smoothly into sculpture, derives from Matisse's understanding of the image. Clément likewise continues the primacy of color and drawing that has characterized French painting for centuries. For Clément, painting is a system of reference, a model of thought that simultaneously includes sensations and individual impressions. Texts about his art, written for exhibitions by various authors, draw on ideological similarities to works of modernist literature, philosophy, poetry, and art theory that are expressive, poetic, and existentialist. Clément's painting stimulates reflections on the nature of the work of art and human existence in terms of art philosophy. Painting seems to be fathomed anew in each picture, so that the works seem to be inscribed in a continuum, or similar to a kaleidoscope, in which pictorial patterns or aesthetic views of modern artists appear as pictorial references and distant quotations. In the following words of Matisse, a post-modern attitude already appears, which Clément takes up: "The artist only sees old truths in a new light, because there are no new truths."<sup>9</sup> Clément's works also, when viewed together, as a series or in groups of works, give the impression of a perpetual motion machine: as a metaphorical representation of the principle of permanent movement and perpetual change. The painterly works have an intrinsically pictorial character, radiating a vitalism, an *élan vital* of the image.

The artist sometimes alternates between monumental canvases that fill more than two meters and small paintings half a meter in size. In these, Clément scales painting, exploring it for its own sake. In the 1990s and beyond the year 2000, his paintings seem more built, more self-referential and more formally closed. He creates a pictorial system of architecturally joined color bars, with color tones of primary colors. In the following years, the pictorial action takes place more in one plane, and the swaths of color, which seem compressed, are grouped closely together like seismographic recordings or electrically charged conductors against a diffusely shaded background ("09 JU 2P," 2009) In this analyzing attitude, Clément corresponds to the contemporary approaches of Raimund Girke (1930-2002) or Günter Förg (1952-2013) with color-reduced self-referential works. The bar formations, balanced in a lyrical-abstract manner in the 1990s, evoke echoes of non-

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Matisse quoted from: Ruhrberg, Karl et al *Art of the 20th Century. Part I. Paintings of Karl Ruhrberg*, ed. by Ingo F. Walther, Cologne 2000, p. 44.

representational pictorial inventions by the previous generation of Pierre Soulages (born 1919) and Hans Hartung (1904-1989).

### III "*Painting is feminine.*" (Alain Clément, 1989)

In the works since 2020, Clément performs an abstract-form aesthetic reimagining of classical modernism with echoes of Fauvism and Expressionism as well as Cubism and Futurism in the dynamism of the color-form surfaces, their complex dissection and transparency, their concentration on primary colors and chiaroscuro contrasts. The works again take up the oscillation between pictorial color form and emerging and translucent borrowings from modernism by means of anthropomorphic female body forms. In this, Clément conceptually ties in with his painting before 1980, when he developed a direct pictorial language comparable to action painting, using his own body as a means of proportion and expression. In some works, one perceives head-like bulging forms in interplay with elongated bands of color, reminiscent of abstracted limbs, that oscillate between geometric and anthropomorphic ("17 A 7P," 2017). The physical is equally understood by the artist as existential experience and pictorial experience. In the medium of aquatint, he sometimes also dealt with eroticizing depictions and nudes, as in 2016 with "Les éros gravés d'Alain Clément".

In art, the female body was for centuries a symbol of the natural beauty, its representation reflected the mostly male admiration and desire, Eros as a symbol of aesthetic-sensual attraction and the, often degrading, status of women as models and muses for the male artist and his cult of genius. In Clément's work, the female nude, sometimes very strongly and in gradations, could likewise stand for the creation of art and the creative par excellence. In 1866, the great realist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) called a - inevitably extremely scandalous - view of an exposed female lower body with a direct line of sight to the pubic "L'origine du monde" and may have intended to illustrate the origin of being human and of life. Clément's painting is still nourished by this ambivalent antagonism of the sexes and the tradition that has persisted. Clément's work plays with perceptions of the body and the image. Is the "feminine", understood abstractly-symbolically, thus an appropriation and identification with painting? In his work, a perpetual renaissance and renewal of the same takes place against the background of its own history and its liberation

from it.<sup>10</sup> It is as if painting is embodied by himself as a medium and his color form inventions, whereby the artist is able to reconcile both spheres of the human creature, understood as inspiration, occasion and creation myth, as well as - not least - symbolically the conflict of art and nature.

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Translation by Anna Bode

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<sup>10</sup> "Je pense qu'un bon tableau a l'ambition d'embraser, d'illuminer le monde et d'éblouir notre regard. C'est à chaque fois un bain de jouvence, une nouvelle naissance et un espoir." ("I think that a good painting has the ambition to stir up, to illuminate the world and to dazzle our gaze. It is every time a fountain of youth, a new birth and a hope.") Alain Clément on his art in an email to the author, July 20, 2022.