

## BES: *CONFLICT AND POLARISATION PAINTINGS*:

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF COLOUR

Boy & Erik Stappaerts (BES) creates *Conflict* and *Polarisation Paintings* without the conventional act of painting. A painter hasn't needed a canvas, oil or acrylic paint, or a palette for a long time, much less a brush. Why can't a painter simply be someone who wants to become sensible of the maximum potential of colours, which no doubt are best suited to 'paint' themselves? The painter then plays the part of 'colour developer', a person that helps colour – be it a digital creation on a computer or, still, a material mixture of pigments – approximate its optimal 'fullness'. Colours in their most optimal saturation are given the opportunity in BES' *Conflict Paintings* to engage in relationships with each other in orchestrated horizontal colour areas and groupings.

Conflict painting is about the creation of rhythms of dissonant optical colour effects, of collisions between forest greens and cosmetic pinks, between petroleum blues, fluorescent yellows and bordeaux reds, between cobalt blues and vermilion reds, etc. *Conflict Paintings* are a clamour of saturated colours, and looking at them is a matter of subjecting oneself to the aggressive possibilities of those colours. The irrational dynamics generated by this prismatic and conflictual game can be as much a sample sheet of universal human feelings – colour and emotion having always been steady bedfellows in the art of painting – as they are an externalised inner reflection on (power) structures and relations within the contemporary societal order or urban landscape. For, in BES' work, colour realises its full 'political' potential as a vehicle for social contemplation, beyond the bare colouristic experience. But more on that later; let us start from the beginning.

Colours in their ultimate 'fullness' ostensibly have very little to do with organic pigments and the classic 'feel' of an oil painting. Oil paint, or any other traditional artist's paint, as a rule, is contaminated by impurities, by gradations of grey and transparency. The synthetic – almost chemical – appearance of BES' precision paintings matches up with their industrial component: cover-all automotive lacquer. Using high-tech sprayers, craftsmen patinate pre-milled aluminium sheets to produce varnished lacquer-paintings, hard and smooth as a mirror, unadulterated by reading direction, protrusion or stroke. It is not difficult to imagine how much BES' final artistic execution – which, as noted, he largely

relinquishes from his hands – has become ever more refined and improved over the last decades, in tandem with the massive leaps taken by the computerised world. BES himself talks about his third generation of *Paintings*, which are cleaner and more structured, but also more elegant than ever. The colour areas have become *too* perfect, both in their physical and their virtual form.

This '*too* ideal perfection' elicits in the observer the magnetic process of attraction and rejection. On the one hand, the colours of BES appear to invite plunging into, to absorb or to be consumed by them, yet on the other hand the reflective high gloss repels you to look for a safe distance. This synchronicity ignites powers we cannot but call passions. Frontal confrontations with *Paintings* are perhaps more radical than the emotional perplexity brought about by the most exquisite colour fields of the historical Colour Field Painters. In any case, the borders between the colour zones in *Conflict Paintings* are more cutting than the sharpest transitions between *Hard Edge* colour fields, and the isolated colour areas are more *in your face* than the clearest computer-generated colour configurations by the Dutch artist Peter Struycken – even if some points of contact do exist between the systematic colour studies by both artists. Both play their home-made 'keyboards' in the virtual computer world in different, virtuoso ways.

As important as formal-technical analyses such as these may be in terms of translating the first experience of an observer, the iconology of *Conflict Paintings* goes a ways beyond a purely formalistic reading. In her reflections on the work of BES, Silvia Fagarasan has managed to connect *Conflict Paintings* with classic history painting in an interesting manner. More than a stylised formal exercise, both *Conflict Paintings* and history painting are concerned with capturing a dramatic moment, with conveying the passions of man that turn paintings into a theatrical scene, where every 'character' plays its part. BES' colour groupings can also be situated within the tradition of pictorial theatricality, as every grouping is connected with what the artist himself calls 'ethnic and ideological' factions that proclaim different 'personalities'. Within a colour grouping there are militant leaders and acolytes, and a power structure reigns which itself is determined by variegated gradations within one and the same colour group.

The turning points where one colour group meets another are the executioners in the trial of integration and conflict. In the mind of the artist, the presence of certain colour groupings is co-determined by experiences from current affairs, as are the widths of the colour areas, Mind-sets provoked by private incidents as well as societal, political and socio-economic news kick-start mental processes that are emotionally connected to colours. You could call this the perception theatre of the colour artist.

As such, *Conflict Paintings* are also an emotional codification of BES' intuitive socio-cultural frame of mind, which evidently bears close resemblance to the philosophy surrounding multiculturalism and the ever-more polarised society. The twentieth century model of the New York 'melting pot' in which ethnic groups of diverse nationalities, races, creeds and colours would 'blend' in the dominant local ethno-cultural structure is assumed to be outdated. Increasingly, societies these days appear to be 'salad bowls' in which ethnic groups and their authentic colours are more than ever apparent. Such stubborn 'us vs. them' mind-set can be a sign of failing multiculturalism but also of ever present racism. In any case, it fans the flames of divisive populists and reactionary nationalists.

These are societal representations that further deepen the meaning of the radical anti-*flou artistique* in *Conflict Paintings*. They are a window to the world like no other abstract painting has been. More than that, they are a realigning mirror to the world because the reflective surface forces you to perceive the space in which the *Painting* is situated through the conflict of colours. You play a part in the perception theatre, searching for a steady surface.

If *Conflict Paintings* generate a sharp effect of tragic dramatics – the catharsis – then *Polarisation Paintings*, BES' second grouping of varnished lacquer-paintings, come across as a much more sensitive exercise of thought and stability. Their gradually expanding horizontality breathes coordination and balance in the same way a Tai chi exercise aims for control and introspection. Garish conflicts make room for visual colour fields that ebb away in waves and which, as such, also represent sociological polarisation, characterised as it is by an ever-increasing gap between classes until midfield completely fades away

into absolute zero. *Polarisation Paintings* cause a perceptively more subtle realisation of tension fields, but like *Conflict Paintings* they also look for a new order.

The conviction that the world is changeable and malleable is apparent from the multitude of blueprints for the typical colour imagery that populate BES' studio. I call it the architecture of colour, for BES' mode of operation and ambitions to a large extent echo the image theories of International Constructivism. Abstract painting, like architecture, is in essence about rearrangement in the service of a higher objective. To say it with the words of the Hungarian activist constructivist Lajos Kassak: 'The only scale of values to the artist is his concept of the world. The artist with a concept of the world can create anything. Creation is the constructive good deed. Construction is architecture. The absolute picture is 'Bildarchitektur'. [...] The artist is one who does not command us to do anything but who makes us able to do the greatest things. Art transforms us, and we become capable of transforming our surroundings.'

The idea of art as a means of individual *and* environmental actualisation not only applies to *Paintings* but equally to BES' millimetred structure drawings that, built in layers, suggest building plans for monuments or urbanised 'crop circles'. As digital files both the drawings and the *Paintings* can be physically reproduced in a precise outward form – for example, a *Painting* can also become a sculpture in a space in the form of a post or a battery. The art of BES is capable of thoroughly accentuating and enriching a surroundings as well as an individual life. Constructivists called this 'bringing art into everyday life', not as an empty slogan, but with a mission to achieve a revolutionary society.

The avant-garde is timeless, and BES' *Paintings* refer to the art of painting of the avant-garde by being the avant-garde of contemporary painting.