

## TRANSPORTED LANDSCAPES

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1. Just as Molière's Mr. Jourdain used to do with prose, so for a long time has Yves Chaudouët been unwittingly producing monotypes, carrying on unaware that this has not changed very much at all, to such a degree does the issue of technical nomenclature seem to him to be neither here nor there. It might even have been better had he never known anything about it. But the matter is a well known one, once a word gets wind of a thing concerning it, it gets involved and from that moment on all meaning is set in stone. So one fine day Yves Chaudouët realized that ever since the age of seventeen he had been making monotypes, like the illustrious Degas, a century earlier. It was on slivers of plexiglas that the teenager produced one or two paintings with gouache (or oils), which he then printed, simply by applying pressure, on sheets of paper which featured the writings of an uncle who was a poet. Not long afterwards, he acquired a small zinc plate (6 x 9 cm) on which – this time around with black ink – he started to paint (if the term is apt...). Similarly, by means of precise and progressive pressures, and with the help of a teaspoon, for example, he printed the surface obtained on a sheet of paper. At a later date, he would use a press and when possible, in the best printshops. Anything could be used for spreading the ink and drawing the forms, provided that the instrument was not blunt. It was not a matter of toppling over into engraving. The interest of the term "monotype" is that it puts the stress on uniqueness : one at a time. So to move on to the next one, the plate had once again to be smooth and virgin. It has not changed since 1974. It is a technical surface, but possibly also a talisman, a magic object. Where lies the magic of this object ? In its quality as bond and oneness, and in its synthetic power, as we shall see. This way of going about things by deferment is nothing if not strange. So what the hand does in a direct way, what seems to be the core of the act, the convocation of the world, is actually not the act itself, at least it is not what is left over. What is involved here is just the first stage, and it is only after transfer that the visual object exists in all its reality. This is not without consequence with regard to the position of the painting subject. It is done without being done and this obtains a tremendous freedom, a freedom which calls to mind the freedom experienced by someone writing a letter, knowing that he or she is under no obligation to mail it. But it can also be said that once the painting (or the drawing if you will, or any other term that will suit each and everyone) is printed on the paper, the fact is that, in addition to the uniqueness of the passage (the act of printing), the object obtained asserts its uniqueness once and for all. This second

reality (yet it is this one which remains) results from the transport of an experience. It is the living memory thereof, as close as a memory can get to the experience which it issues from. What poses a problem is that, probably because of this definitive term, "monotype", this praxis is reduced to a mere technique. Because this way of doing things is infinitely more than a technique, it is a way of being.

To date, Yves Chaudouët has produced some 500 images of this type. But in addition to the fact that he often shrinks from actually printing them, it is not because they have negotiated this step that they are totally home and dry. Apart from those belonging to collectors, he keeps them in three groups, split into three different and hierarchized boxes. Over time, some move from one box to another, usually working backwards. It is also often quite common that those in the "bottom" box end up in the wastepaper basket. As Silvia Bächli does with her drawings, which are also made without any possibility of being retouched, this is a radical way of using the eraser.

2. These paint prints – they might also be thus described – involved the representation of a work with thoroughly identifiable signs, landmarks and references : characters, objects, and landscapes, everything here seems to refer to a world which may not always be directly familiar to us, but does, in many respects, remind us of our world. And yet Yves Chaudouët never paints from life ; what is nevertheless traditionally called a representation never hails directly from a direct referent. What is usually involved is mental images, reminiscences near and far, and innermost photographs which an outstanding memory reveals at every turn. But what constitutes even more precisely the unusualness of Yves Chaudouët's monotypes is a specific tension between the processes of memory and the most burning topicality.

Topicality of a surrounding world on the one hand (subjects of modern life, we might say), but also the performative topicality of their realization (the affirmation of the here and now of the act). If, as we shall see, the spirit of film can be quite fairly applied to this work, there is another field which we cannot avoid mentioning here, which is the field of literature. Not only because certain images are inspired directly from readings (Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Herman Melville, Arthur Machen and Stéphane Mallarmé, among others), but above all because the process whereby the subjects make their appearance is strangely akin to that at work among writers. Yves Chaudouët endlessly repeats that he cannot paint an image on his zinc plate unless he is really and totally "in it". When he paints this (black) airplane moving across the white immensity of the sky, it is really that eye which, from below, is watching it pass, using a hand as a shield against the sun. When the silhouette of a possible Van Gogh moves forward, bent over, as if dragging its shadow, in the corn field whose grey blondness acts as a counterpart to the blackness without calling on the sky, it is, if not Van

Gogh, then at least someone thinking sufficiently strongly about him to bring him forth. And these little silhouettes of witches making a circle around the fire come straight, not from Arthur Machen's "Gaelic" novel *The Shining Pyramid*, but from Chaudouët's reading thereof. Otherwise put, it is not a question here of illustrating the book but of relating an experience of reading. Similarly, this zodiac outline that crosses the image does not represent the young Chaudouët going off to fetch the morning bread for the family, at that time renting a house on a small Mediterranean isle off Toulon, but the actual crux of his memory, that is, a truly re-enacted scene (p. 49). And when a vision tends to abstraction, albeit of the most seductive sort, he interrupts the seesaw by an additional intervention. So on this skyline fading into a magnificent grey haze he adds the old dead tree trunk on which is perched a sinister bird of prey, as we sometimes see, like a desert signal, in illustrations of *Lucky Luke*. This well of images which he keeps within him and which he thus reincarnates on his plate is not probably not that far removed from the great mnemonic endeavours with whose literature we are familiar. And Yves Chaudouët lives his plastic transcriptions not only the way Proust lived his childhood, for a second time, but also like Melville who, through the intercession of Captain Ahab, lived the approach of the white whale. It is the aptness and the carnal intensity of this experience which makes the quality of the page like the quality of the painting, which Peter Handke called "the time of true sensation". And if torpedoes and missiles recur so frequently, it is probably because this tallies with a (sad) reality of the world and its on-going topicality, but above all because there is this precise sensation of menace, a gust of air, a violent splash. The sensation of self also produces images, images of self which, in spite of their precision, sidestep becoming bogged down in autobiographical anecdote. It is the visual result alone which counts and not the triggering pretext. Here, for example, we see a see-through human profile which shows the design of the spinal column. The fact is that one day, after his Tai Chi lesson, the artist had the clear physical sensation of this indispensable pivot and this was conveyed by a powerfully structured image. And these frequent dunce's caps on vague self-portraits, as droll as they are pitilessly lucid..

But, as we have suggested, this well of images also stems from a kind of magic lantern regularly projecting outside those undoubtedly internalized but oh-so-live visions. And Peter Kubelka is quite right to remind us that, basically, the cinema is not that art of movement we might think it to be, but rather the emphatic projection of an infinity of still images. It is in this sense that we must understand the title of the present work, *Film*. What is also highly cinematographic in Yves Chaudouët's images, in addition to the recurrent motif of the screens, is the interplay of light and shadow, and

black and white. Not one of them, either obviously or more discreetly, does not conjure up the almost horizontal halo of light which goes from projector to screen in dark auditoria. And this image transport is also what in a way the artist plays at with his zinc plate towards the printed sheet of paper. This also reminds me of that edition of photographs which he made in 1994 and which was programmatically titled *Je ne fais que passer/I'm just passing*. As if handwritten, the title figured on the front cover and, in reverse, on the back cover : the experience of the print was thus only achieved from the source to the surface, the source itself being nurtured by the fire of memory, and sometimes of thought.

3. In Yves Chaudouët's work, the production of monotypes has gone on more or less uninterruptedly for some 25 years, but it has not clocked up any conspicuous development, either, possibly apart from a greater care given to the printing. So we are dealing with a constant factor in the *œuvre*, a kind of basso continuo which, as he suggested earlier, acts as a bond for the entirety of a body of production which is in other respects extremely multi-faceted. In addition to the monotype exercise, Yves Chaudouët is also a musician (classical percussion instruments), painter, photographer, performer, video-maker, and the like. In the 1980's, he came to notice in southwest France as a restorer of Romanesque frescoes, and then as an inveterate traveller, here, there and everywhere in the world. To the painter we owe large landscape pictures with minimal aesthetic content both in the use of colours (one for the ground, one for the motif, and that is it) and in what is depicted (the odd sign, on the borderline of abstraction). With great precision, his photographs show the tiniest details of nature (a piece of lichen, a mushroom, a peony shoot), and other details which have to do, for example, with examples of poor handymanship found in a piece of hand made furniture. *Transports*, a video made in 1995, shows various vehicles (a bike, a car, a bus, a truck...) crossing Tolbiac bridge – near the new French National Library – by night. The soundtrack is designed in such a way that the noises do not tally with the types of vehicles. This phenomenon of transport, in every sense of the term, is possibly the very foundation of the work. We come across an additional application of it in the *Sonoguidées* which he devised in collaboration with Anne de Sterk. Various recordings (texts written for the occasion, snippets of radio broadcasts, etc.) are distributed on various sound tracks which end up in headphones. Volunteers in the audience are asked to put on these headphones and repeat what they hear in them. The result is unexpected and, paradoxically, musical. In the apparent heterogeneity of these all-over-the-place activities, the monotypes thus have a place in the time frame and probably also as guarantees of a certain spirit. And the fact that the artist does not manage to find a definitive form for their display proves to what point this

practice, in his work, is quasi-organic, and matrix-like. It is actually possible to look at them in their primary form, with the small sheet of paper in your hand ; it is also possible to present them in a book, as we see here ; or, alternatively, in the guise of transfers enlarged on tarpaulin and – why not ? – in the form of a projection. Whatever the solution adopted, it is the undecidability itself which remains the hallmark of their volatile and tremendously living nature.

4. With regard to his photographs of details of nature, Chaudouët often conjures up the "roadside". This is what Stendhal, in his day, made reference to when he was striving to define the activity of novel-writing, and quote Saint-Réal : "A novel is a mirror which take along a path". This attention paid to tiny presences, on the limit of the visible, and at the heart of the praxis of monotypes, is part and parcel of a more general perspective, which we might sum up by the admittedly problematic and imperfect, but nevertheless essential term : landscape. If we define landscape as the surrounding authority which lends its measure and its situation to the body, the set of points which permit the gaze, the, Yves Chaudouët's work is decidedly landscape-oriented in essence. Thus understood, the landscape is much more than a genre, a manner of representation, and a physical entity of geography ; it is a relation, or, put another way, an attitude. And it is a tense position, made of enjoyment and anxiety, that of the lookout or watchman to which André Breton laid claim, but a fragile lookout or watchman, always a hair's breadth away from missing his subject, which characterizes the relation to landscape which is here at issue. When, in the on-going reference to Poussin, the artist talks of immersion (being "in it"), and not only in relation to what concerns what is immediately visible but also the staggered constructions, those of memory lived and those of the ever revisited imaginary, he asserts the continuum of his experience of the world, and the way of realizing it matters not a lot. It does not go as far, in fact, as the tangible gardening activity which cannot act as a an approach. One motif often recurs in the monotypes. It is the figure of the abyssal fish, those amazing creatures which live in the depths of the oceans, out of reach of human beings, where there is no light, in icy temperatures and under phenomenal pressure. In such conditions, which are among the most extreme known in the living world, they develop incredible ways of surviving. Chaudouët is haunted by the idea of this – the close experience of this idea. Here, the abyssal fish represents the figure of the unattainable, that ternary conception of reality included between what is, what you see, and what is that you do not see, but which encompasses both scopic impossibility and the illusion of an overly trusting eye. This is why the haptic, tactile blank which separates the

act of painting from the act of printing is indeed the place of suspense, which we might also call a floating consciousness. For what we, the onlookers and beholders, see in Yves Chaudouët's monotypes are not the flattened signs of something conventionally visible, but rather the actual nature – concrete and materialized – of the perforce unsatisfied eye of the artist.

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Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance.