

YELLOW AND BLACK.

When people talk of *black and white*, with regard to photography and cinema, they are using a very inaccurate term – painting showed better judgement in coining the term *grisaille*: in reality, films or photographs in black and white are always images in variations of grey (without which we would be able to distinguish very little: absolute blacks and whites are rare in reality – an observation that also holds true in those cases where “black” or “white” refer to values of good or evil, truth or untruth, etc.). Yet despite this sin of original inaccuracy the expression has entered common usage and we must reconcile ourselves to using it. The first thing that strikes the viewer about Emmanuel Bornstein’s paintings is his distinctive process: he uses a tinted black and white – tinted mainly with yellow, although other colours from the spectrum have recently made a timid appearance in his theatre of memory. This black and white appeared in his work around three years ago, before he completed his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and this voluntary restriction of his palette is worthy of closer consideration. The first explanation that offers itself is at once factual and symbolic in nature: black and white emerged in Bornstein’s work at the moment when he took on board – counter to the prevailing trend that encourages young artists to liberate themselves from their elders an early stage – his profound fascination with Goya’s *Caprichos*. This moment of acceptance coincided with another bold choice – of confronting in painting the essential history of the century he was born in, the 20th century with its camps and mass deportations of Jews in Europe (this history of the century is also the history of his own family). The coincidence of these two decisions, though certainly not pre-meditated on Bornstein’s part, is anything but fortuitous: modernity and the Aufklärung (Enlightenment) promised better tomorrows, the triumph of reason and moderation over obscurantism, the domestication of nature by technology; artists (*Los Caprichos* appeared in 1799, ten years after the French Revolution, a year before the golden century of industry) were alone in quickly understanding that reason would one day fall drowsy from the excessive demands placed upon it and give birth to monsters. From the Napoleonic wars through to the two World Wars, the modern age would reveal itself – true to Goya’s instincts – as an era of nightmares, too ... Yet we must be wary of over-hasty interpretations, in particular the interpretation based on a quasi-natural connection between black and white and the *past*, justified no doubt by the assumption that colour came after black and white in the history of photography, film and television (in reality, processes for producing mechanical images in colour were invented more or less from the start – it was only their relative costliness and complexity that delayed their wider take-up). This is the argument Spielberg once gave to justify his decision to film *Schindler’s List* in black and white: the past, and the past of the deportations – so difficult to depict – would be grey in the cinema. Yet we only need to see the long sequence of the Falkenau camp liberation at the end of *The Big Red One*, by Samuel Fuller, which is filmed in colour, to understand that the choice of black and white is purely a matter of convention, not of actual necessity: Fuller’s vision – and as a member of the US First Infantry Division he had actually taken part in the camp liberation re-created in the film – instantly eclipses Spielberg’s. (Coppola very astutely mocked the naive association of the past with black and white in his film *Tetro*, filming only the flashbacks in colour.) It wasn’t that one day Emmanuel Bornstein posed the banal equation “black and white = respect = memory” in his painting. This is not the way he proceeds. He created a vacuum in his work and let the images emerge, pallid, from the darkness they were buried in – in the kind of light that is so perfectly described in the French phrase for twilight, “*entre chien et loup*” (literally, between dog and wolf – a hybrid that is one of the artist’s favourite figures, too), a light in which everything is, always, more or less grey. These images appeared in this form in his paintings during his first stay in Berlin, in 2009. Gradually the images became coloured with a yellow-ish light which gives them the striking, dream-like aura that now characterises Bornstein’s paintings. Here again it is important not to rush into over-hasty symbolic interpretation, and certainly not to make yellow’s symbolic value the primary

reason for the artist's choice of this particular colour. From the perspective of light and optics, yellow is first and foremost white that has lost its purity. It is a strange colour, its ambivalence well described by Goethe in his famous treatise. As a colour of light (when the sun's rays pass through yellow glass, for example) yellow delights the soul: "This impression of warmth," says Goethe, "may be experienced in a very lively manner if we look at a landscape through a yellow glass, particularly on a grey winter's day. The eye is gladdened, the heart expanded and cheered, a glow seems at once to breathe towards us." Yet as a shade applied to an impure surface, yellow instantly aligns itself with melancholy, despair and shame: "by a slight and scarcely perceptible change, the beautiful impression of fire and gold is transformed into one not undeserving the epithet foul; and the colour of honour and joy reversed to that of ignominy and aversion. To this impression the yellow hats of bankrupts and the yellow circles on the mantles of Jews may have owed their origin."

It is in this second guise that yellow is held as having been the colour of Judas's cloak in the Western iconographic tradition, is regarded as the colour of traitors to their class in French working-class tradition (where "yellow" is the term used for a strikebreaker), and was of course the colour used by the Nazis for the Star of David Jews were ordered to wear as a badge of shame. This might prompt the hasty assumption that the artist has made a literary choice of using yellow for images of shame. I know, notably through having witnessed the evolution of these initial works, that we should see the situation precisely the other way round: in reality it is because yellow started to colour Bornstein's images that they were able to develop such direct references to the Holocaust. Emmanuel Bornstein is a painter, in other words someone who thinks first and foremost in shapes and colours, lines, lights, and tonal values, and whose intuitions suddenly crystallise into clear form. In the paintings of 2009, in black and white, the bodies represented can in most cases be directly linked to pictorial models, deriving in particular from the Depositions, Pietàs and Entombments that have given so many masterpieces to the history of painting. As they become infused with yellow light in 2010 and 2011, the bodies transfigured in death become inert, disjointed, grotesque, transported to the nightmare of the camps, along the iron tracks of which John Ruskin so rightly intuited from their first appearance that they would turn people into objects. If Bornstein had used yellow in a literary way, moreover, it would not possess the ambivalent power which it retains. Because this is the crux of the matter: what is painting, fundamentally? It is base materials, mud, ground earths, burnt bone, corroded metals, oxides of lead or iron, decoctions of plants, a magma combined in some inscrutable way with oily, foul-smelling liquids – but materials that artists elevate to the dignity of a mystery through work that can scarcely be explained in rational terms: conductors of coloured muds, capable of creating spirited miracles with the hairs of dead animals fitted onto the end of a stick and dipped in grime, that's what painters are. Fundamentally painting delights us above all when it redeems a reality that is monstrous, horrible or simply trivial – Goya's *Tres de Mayo* or *Saturn*, Manet's *Le Torero mort*, the tainted flesh of Lovis Corinth, Chardin's old pots, Bacon's popes, etc. – or even, for the last century, when it does no more than redeem the base material it is made of, without pretence or representation: Pollock's drip paintings, Shiraga's canvases painted using his own body, the textures – like congealed lava – of Eugène Leroy, etc. And Emmanuel Bornstein's yellows, mixed with his deep blacks and the washes and squirts of white, magnificently embody this *material intelligence* we call *painting*: they are at once yellows of shame and yellows of gold, making sumptuous tableaux of the worst images, without us ever being able to decide if they are solar or urinal, redemptive or toxic, quite simply because they are, inextricably, both at once. After all, for a long time the most beautiful yellow in painting was also a violent poison derived from arsenic: orpiment (a pigment Sigmar Polke is supposed to have used – but did he really? – in some of his paintings).

The alchemy of painting which Bornstein intuitively masters needs no alibis: his use, for example, of images borrowed from Goya or other old masters bears no relation to that critical distance, that slightly disdainful and worldly-wise step backwards, that we have become accustomed to calling postmodern. Postmodernism was born in the field of architecture, in the rejection, by a generation eager to supplant its predecessors, of the modernist aesthetic of figures such as Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe: at a time when progress seemed

to be coming unstuck they devised the notion that art history was a department store with shelves that could be freely ransacked to cobble together patchwork, disenchanting assemblages. Painting, or what passes as painting in society, has at times been seduced by this model. Yet it is a model for which it is very poorly suited. Painters don't paint with their tongue in cheek and a dictionary by their side any more than orchestras are conducted with a teaspoon: painting calls for an unthinking commitment incompatible with cautious detachment, a thinking body and not a hand serving an agenda. If we can easily recognise sources, sometimes even emphatic references, in Bornstein's carnival – for example when he echoes the composition of Goya's *Straw Manikin*, replacing the "femmes fatales" of the original painting with the asses of the *Caprichos*, and setting the scene against the backdrop of a dark beech forest – this is not that the artist is deciding to read history through Goya. It is quite simply that he sees, always, through what he has already seen, and that his nightmares cannot *not* borrow from Goya – or equally from Velasquez, Otto Dix or numerous other image sources, some much more trivial: I suspect a cinematic origin for his bears and wolves, for example, and that his bowlers derive very directly from the Cohen brothers' hilarious *Big Lebowski*. Bornstein embodies in painting, without having to demonstrate it, the self-evident truth that vision is not conjured from nothing, that it is always memory and re-creation, a matter of optics and recollection. No doubt he has been fortunate to come at a time when the prestige of art theory is beginning to fade. Are we aware of the extent to which, in recent decades, art criticism has become, in the media and as its primary function, an exercise in explanation rather than admiration (or indeed execration)? Music, regarded by Kant and his many followers as an inferior art form (one that speaks directly to the emotions and disturbs the neighbours) has escaped this misconception: even today, the soprano who slips up or the rock musician who botches a solo won't be spared – the idea of "ironically" botching a solo has yet to catch on. Bornstein's painting is offered to our judgement without the bullet-proof glass of a programme or a protocol. Conversations in his studio rarely touch upon history or ideas, not because he lacks knowledge in these areas but because he has the courage to operate without a safety net, observing colour areas, lights and depths, judging how successful they are, approving harmonies, rejecting superficial effects – in short, practising the love of painting. Bornstein's painting speaks directly to the emotions and disturbs the neighbours, and this is an incredibly good thing. Let the devotees cook up their *antinomies of taste* in the back-kitchens of Königsberg – it doesn't harm anyone and it may bring some pleasure – but let's also pay homage to those who, like Emmanuel Bornstein, boldly address that primary and original ambition of painters, of turning mud into light.

Didier Semin, June 2012