

Robert Estermann, *Blue Rider*

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1910? 1913? Specialists have long failed to agree. For anyone wishing to ascribe paternity to the invention of abstraction, it's between those two crucial dates that Wassily Kandinsky produced a curious kind of watercolour. You can see it, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, under the name of *Sans Titre, 1913*, along with the note: "First abstract watercolour. Watercolour, India ink and pencil on paper."

It's a maelstrom, leading the eye towards a central core, formed out of a modest number of shapeless patches of colour, repeated or underlined by a thin line of ink. Black filaments connect, scratching or scoring the white of the paper, bristling like hairs, slipping like protective colours around the random coloured dabs. Established today as a work of art, this watercolour consisting of paper sullied by ink, pencil and colour, retains, when we take the time to look at it, its status as an event, as is, according to the art theorist Rosalind Krauss, any work of plastic "flinging" whose violence is kept overt.¹

Why does the date pose such a problem? Because it poses a genuine question: according to whether the watercolour dates from 1910 or 1913, Kandinsky postponed things a little, a lot or a very long time; as though waiting for another event, or rather two events which coincide in time: a painted abstract composition and a long written text, entitled *Regards sur le Passé* – a painting and a theorisation, in other words – to define and draw conclusions from what then becomes an originating event, a "primal scene". So, in this "first abstract watercolour", what was at stake, what would lead Kandinsky to defer its implementation? Was it because he recognised nothing in it? Or was it because in that nothing Kandinsky recognised something of his urges, his desire, as if expressed directly by those patches of colour and those black lines springing from the silence of the paper? Let's return to the past, or rather the artist's fantastical horse-ride, a real *Mazeppa*, upside down on his mount, as sung by Romantic poetry, music and painting, wandering around in the depths of his memories: "When I was very young," Kandinsky writes, "I painted a piebald horse in gouache. It was all finished but the hooves. My aunt, who was helping me to paint, had to go out and recommended that I wait until she came back before adding the hoofs; I sat there alone with the unfinished painting: I was tormented by the impossibility of putting the last patches of colour on the paper. That last task seemed so easy. I thought: 'if I make the hooves really black, they're sure to be in harmony with nature'. I put as much black as I could on my brush. A moment passed . . . And I saw four horrible black marks on the horse's feet, disgusting and completely alien to the

paper. I felt utterly despondent and cruelly punished. Later, I came to understand very well the fear that the Impressionists had of black and, even later, it caused me genuine inner anguish to put pure black on the canvas. Such a childhood misfortune casts a long, long shadow over many years of later life.”²

It is certainly not by chance that the horse pursues its ghostly path, lyrical and atomised, through Kandinsky’s abstract work. Before him, in Turin, at the end of the 19th century, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche hurled himself at a horse’s head, to seize and embrace it, to wet it with his tears, a performance that remains unexplained to this day. And then, in Vienna, at the very beginning of the 20th century, a little boy who refused to leave the house for fear of horses became “little Hans”. He has passed into posterity as the study of a case of phobia, whose object, a horse pencil-drawn in a few lines – eye, bit, reins – which Freud reproduces in his essay.³ And the philosopher Mathieu Potte-Bonneville pursues the idea from this lofty perspective: “At the point when the iron horse was about to supplant the other one, empty the stables, letting the bit and the reins of which Hans was so afraid drop on the creature’s useless flanks, just as he was about to invent new pack-saddles, new whips, Turin, Vienna, Munich, Prague, one last animal seems to have crossed its pen, escaped the stable and slipped into the street. Less than a horse, perhaps: the hypothesis of a horse.”⁴

The hypothesis of a horse. You might be able to see where I’m headed with this long introductory digression. Precisely, to Robert Estermann. To that other Blue Rider – and not only in reference to the collective, the exhibition, the almanac (*Der Blaue Reiter*, 1911–1912), in which Kandinsky and his friends celebrated the drawings “of savages” as well as those of children, primitives and innocents, chosen pieces of a possible redemption for an art spoiled by conventions, academicism, corrupted by materialism . . . And blue, too, in the contemporary sense of the word *blue* in English, the colour of eroticism: blue movie, another term for an X-rated film. *Blue Movie*, by Andy Warhol, filmed in 1968, originally bore the title *Fuck*. “I’d always wanted to do a film that was ‘pure fucking’, nothing else, the way *Eat* had been just eating and *Sleep* had been just sleeping.” It was renamed *Blue Movie*, before being seized by the police. The blue of pornography is also the blue of the cinema screen before the image appears, Derek Jarman’s *Blue*, an hour and seventeen minutes of blue screen and sound. Robert Estermann is also a “blue rider”.

His cinema, or at least the cinema he represents, here assumes the appearance of a carousel of horsewomen. *Distant Riders* (figs. pp. 89–103), is the fabrication of a phantasmagoric apparatus. The carousel actually takes as its model the zoetrope, invented in 1834 by the American William George Horner, an optical machine creating the illusion of moving images. A strip of drawings, arranged around a drum pierced with slits, becomes animated when the cylinder is rotated around its axis. Here, the toy is enlarged to human scale, or slightly larger, to constitute one of the main installations on show in the

Lucerne exhibition. The strip of images, shows some girls on horseback. Each one is the poster of a girl on horseback, in an image bank selected from Estermann's photographs, taken in Thailand, and by the artist's own account they have something of the aesthetic of 1970s glamour magazines.

In a landscape, a coastal dune without any particular attraction for tourists, girls, naked or clothed, ride horses, some bareback some saddled, and not ⁷⁴ without some incongruity: some are barefoot, but wear spurs. The intimacy of each woman with her mount is increased by her disregard for the practices of classical horse-riding as displayed, for example, in the spectacle of horse trials. They are simply indifferent. None of these amazons looks towards the lens, or attempts to reach out to the spectator. They are not complicit. Moreover, none of them faces the camera directly. They are seen in profile or even turned to face the background, showing part of their backs to the camera. They remain detached, whether naked or clothed. They are leaving, and the carousel is there so that they can "move", in their collective motion from right to left, in an anti-clockwise direction. "It's a sort of *Fight Club*, but with horses," explains Robert Estermann, "it's as raw as that." This carousel that surrounds us, once we've entered it through the 48 cm gaps that permit access, almost like a burglar, offers the image of a community of girls living freely, just themselves and the horses. In this huge-scale magic lantern the girls dominate the viewer in mute communication with the horses, unaffected centaurs, with no mythology but the ultimate fusion. A single whole . . . The centaur is the wild and brutal incarnation of the dream of a union, "like a sexual force", Estermann explains. "When you see a man on horseback, you redistribute the maps of the anatomy, considering, for example, the neck as a penis."

Making only one. On the one hand, fusion. On the other, a monster. On the one hand, the ability to transform, the indefinite. On the other hand, the spectacle, the *obvious*. *Elephant Man* recurs so often in Robert Estermann's drawings that he has turned them into a series (figs. pp. 54–56). *Elephant Man* has no physical appearance, he is there almost in a mathematical form, the shape of a box, a coffin, a closed space, a stage or a starting-block. The monster is without physical form and yet a monster is precisely what is on display, a man who is pointed at, a man expelled.

Robert Estermann combats this expulsion by throwing it back at the viewer like a mirror or a slap: the silhouette of a child drawn in marker-pen turns away and leaves (*Walking Boy*) (fig. p. 59), giving tangible form to the tension between hermeticism and desire. A series of doors behind the door, one in front of the other, leads finally to the only visible surface, a small marker-pen drawing: the character *Towelie* (fig. p. 60), which the artist has borrowed from the series *South Park*, a towel with feet, and no eyes. *Porte-serviette?* It's clear how, in French, you can play with the polysemy of the word "porte" to reconstruct the piece, which also turns its back on you, a sort of blank stack. The sexual polyptic of pictures of adolescents forming the work *4 Spaces* (figs. pp. 106/107), in its first manifestation, blurs into a vague realisation on a glass panel, a literally

troubled version. *Two Boys* (figs. pp. 82/83): A pair of children, one standing, a phoney face, white trousers, one arm dangling along the body, the other penetrating the space horizontally while the second boy, supine, raising his legs vertically, becomes, thanks to multiple retouching, a kind of sublimated flag, almost four metres long and three metres high. An emblem of an art of childhood, passing beyond the childhood of art.

Robert Estermann's gallop actually resists definition, style, the hold of all those words that propel a society of ageing or regressive children. The words "Beruf", "Veranlagung", "Tatsache", "Schöpfung", "Tätigkeit", "Motivierung" are written in capital letters on a sheet of paper. Underneath, in smaller letters: "Freizeit". Leisure, free time. But is this demand for freedom of time or space more plausible when the words on the drawing *are* the drawing and thus become part of the fiction of the drawing? "It's a choice, I've got nothing left to loose", the artist explains. "I've abandoned all useless baggage. I take liberties. It's so important, art can be so provocative, with no need for complicated illusions, no narration or complex settings: a really simple drawing has the chance of being effective. I don't want to let it be an illusion: I still believe, as an artist, that the artist's freedom still remains." His freedom of expression.

A penguin looks at a window or a picture. "What is spontaneous about a man is his culture", Roland Barthes wrote on the subject of drawing.⁵ The drawings of Robert Estermann, whether they are strokes, lines or writing, are not so much gestures as journeys: a route across the page; a flattened script running horizontally in a kind of ribbon [*Flat Signature (Signature without End)* (fig. p. 32)]; a left-hand corner decentred towards the middle of the paper [*Untitled (Left Hand Corner)* (fig. p. 32)]; a sketch for a leaning construction (*Construction for an Acute Plane*) (fig. p.79), the sequence of three superimposed lines [*Untitled (How a Single Horizon Line . . .)* (fig. p. 27)].

The drawing *Moving through Space (The Great Divide)* (fig. p. 53) expresses both a displacement and its result: two strokes, one descending, the other rising, are separated by a white gap, a rift in which a grey scumbling intrudes into the curve. The path, the journey taken, what we are separated from, still connects. Robert Estermann draws, then looks at what he has done, his starting-point, even if he has to turn round. "Since I was young, my desire was towards things getting round" is written in ballpoint pen, in capital letters, beside a circle, also drawn, not quite turning round, because it is interrupted [*Untitled (Making Small Circles)* (fig. p. 78)]: no full stop. It's clearly the "I", the subject of the drawing, that is decentred here. Not the circle.

"It's something that preoccupies me", says the artist. "In society, we define ourselves by what we know and also by what we don't know: good and bad, healthy and sick, boy and girl; I'm not trying to represent a beyond or another side, in this binary representation of difference, just a range of grey."

The circulation within the drawing does not really lead towards a precise identification of the landscape, even if that landscape is the stock market (*Price of Wheat at Chicago*) (fig. p. 16) or *Chart (Whiteboard Series)* (fig. p. 29): it reads like an almost cinematic projection, the unreeling of a story, begun by the “two” of the cloud, and its shadow [*Two (Clouds and Shadow)*] (fig. p. 25), by the passage of the wind, by the traffic at a crossroads or a pedestrian crossing. A few patches are outlined of a space escaping, transforming itself, no doubt subject to relativity, the space that so struck Kandinsky. But let’s not go backwards . . . The movement of the drawing, here, really inscribes its own journey. Two diagonals cross, two double lines divide into three similar and superimposed levels on which are written, respectively, the words “Snakes”, “Girls”, “Boys” [*Untitled (Shelf: Snakes Girls Boys)*] (fig. p. 81). Absolute realism? Robert Estermann finds a way of undoing – through drawing, thanks to drawing – definitions. It’s contrary to the very definition of drawing, it’s drawing against the grain.

¹ Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1993, chapitre 6.

² Wassily Kandinsky, *Regards sur le passé et autres textes 1912 – 1922*, trad. J.-P. Bouillon, Paris: Hermann, 1974, p. 101.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Cinq psychanalyses (1909)*, trad. fr. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 126, fig. 4.

⁴ Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, «Un cheval», *Vacarme*, n° 15, printemps 2001, éditorial.

⁵ Roland Barthes, «Cy Twombly. Non multa sed multum», in: *L’obvie et l’obtus, Essais Critiques III*, Paris: Seuil, 1982, p. 145.

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