Elise Aspord

FREDERIK DE WILDE
Beyond the Liminal: Ultra Black Art in Dark Times

As a preamble to this exhibition, a shortcut through history reveals rather unexpectedly the existence of a link between the parietal black and the ultracontemporary nanoblack of the Belgian artist Frederik De Wilde (here presented). Made up of a vertical alignment of nanotubes of carbon,¹ the “nano painting” is like a relative at the artistic level of the carbon that one finds in charcoal pens or in pencils. This makes Frederik De Wilde’s contemporary proposition of colour a direct link with the ancient practice of drawing.² From the first human beings (Cave of Lascaux, France) to the beginning of the 21st century, even if several hundred thousand years have passed, it still seems that the evocative power of this “burnt” colour remains. Black is a constant reinvention.

1. Retina art

“(Colours) are the reflection of the abstraction prevalent in Nature, what is artificial vs. what is natural, i.e. what belongs to shapes .... In fact, the domain of colour covers an area split between art and sciences, between physics and psychology. It lays on a ground which measures the limits of the two cultures blurring the clarity of their ideas, a ground easy to reach but a ground that is never reached by analytical and experimental methods.”³

¹ A nanometre is a metre divided by one billion, or to use another image, “is 1/100,000 the size of a hair”. Artist’s text, email, September 20, 2010.
² Email, September 25, 2010.
Black, as “any representation of colour, is a change of reality.” Artists themselves particularly like to play with reality and make full use of it to mock reality itself. One can name Mark Rothko⁵ (1903–1970), Hans Hartung⁶ (1904–1989), Ad Reinhardt⁷ (1913–1967) and, of course, Pierre Soulages⁸ and his “outre-noir” (“beyond black”). Within science, “Hostage” enters the physicist’s mystical quest for the absolute black, or hyperblack.

Within the arts, De Wilde’s painting is fully in line with the tradition of the last century of monochrome black. There is something of Malevich, of Rothko, of Hartung, of Reinhardt... in this chromatic radicality. There is also the same will to question the world of painting, to push its limits back: here, we go, therefore, from the pigment domain to the infinitely small and mysterious atom thanks to scientific progress.⁹

“As the atomic clock is a reference for Time, so is this painting a new reference for Black,”⁰ wrote the artist.

The material used has the particularity of absorbing “almost all the rays of light,”¹¹ this one becomes hostage of the painting (...).¹² Frank Lebas¹³ stresses that “blacker than black” is necessarily something which exceeds the luminous phenomenon. The question then arises whether darkness

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⁴ “By comparison, our ear is a more reliable tool: it is able to distinguish very close wavelength sounds. Where our eyes see only three different colours (and their mixture), our ear distinguishes thousands of different sounds (“colours”). Alain Riazuelo, email, September 21, 2010.
⁵ Name given by Frederik De Wilde.
⁶ “His first works consist of swirls of black ink drawn with closed eyes and intended to satisfy his anxiety.” http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Hartung (from French version)
⁷ Name given by Frederik De Wilde.
⁹ This term is, of course, a reassessment here. Cf. Science and technical philosophers’ works.
¹¹ Visible light and infrared. In comparison, this material “is 30 times darker than carbon, which allows it to absorb 99.9% of the light that it receives.”
¹³ A linguist researcher, University of Clermont-Ferrand.
becomes visible. At that stage, a funny paradox comes to life. You can’t produce nothing from nothing. The artist is bound to add something to darken black. “It becomes compulsory to put something to see nothing”. “Isn’t it peculiar?” wonders an amused Stéphane Troiscarré.

2. Nano Art
This work comes from the close collaboration between scientists and an artist; of science (and art) in the making. This work is close to the one inaugurated by French artist Yves Klein with chemists to create his IKB Blue (International Klein Blue) in the 1950s and 1960s.

The first steps of this project, which are disclosed here, are just the beginning of an artistic movement that the artist thinks will become promising. One outcome could be the execution of a huge piece of art (for instance, a 4x4 meter-sized object) floating in the air like Yves Klein’s “aerostatic sculpture made up of one thousand and one blue balloons” in 1957. Any object or sculpture covered by “such material will just reveal its shape, whatever light would be used. Such a visual enigma on display would without a doubt remind the visitor of Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey’s black and smooth monolith, “of which we don’t know if it really is an artefact left there

16 Rice University Houston, Texas, USA (first university and major institution in research studies on nanotechnologies) and Belgium’s Hasselt University.
18 Artist’s text, email, op. cit.
19 There exist scales lower than the nanometer: pico, femto, atto. Interview, op. cit.
22 Named by Frederik De Wilde.
by a forgotten civilization or a divine creation.”

Frederik De Wilde also takes part in the phenomenon of an aesthetic of the void as an opposition to the full media coverage and the fascination of our modern societies for multi-screens, multi-sensors installations... A void which is paradoxically full of invisible matter to the naked eye and therefore mysterious.

3. Post-sublime

Nanotechnologies (nanotech), which represent in the beginning of this 21st century the “sixth technological wave”, reach the inherent foundations of all artistic practices as they change our perception of reality: What is reality? What is art? What is matter?

As in Anish Kapoor’s works – often quoted by Frederik De Wilde – “it’s the public perception which contributes to creating the final work.” One finds the concept of “non-object” (2008) – as developed by the Indian artist – intervening in one’s life only from the moment when one sees their reflection in the inside. That’s the “new sublime” which takes into account all the non-palpable events (physical and physical/psychological) in the making between the spectator and the painting. All of this defines the artistic object. “The work of art is a tool which generates a perception process inside yourself and forces you to ask yourself about your perceptible capacity (...) there’s a reality beyond the materiality of things.”

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25  Fifth is computer science. “Nanotechnology entails the application of fields of science as diverse as surface science, organic chemistry, semiconductor physics, microfabrication, molecular biology...” (Cf. lecture by Valérie Hoffard, lecturer in Biopharmacy at the University of Clermont-Ferrand, September 21, 2011, at the ADASTA scientific association). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanotechnology
27  Ibid.
28  Ibid.
4. **Black: a slippery colour**

Although it is correlated, there exists a main phenomenological difference between the idea of colour and the impression of colour (according to one’s culture).\(^\text{29}\) The word “black” always refers to something which escapes us, which slips away when we come near, for instance, the biggest physics enigmas, such as the black hole or black energy. This sort of inverted gravity, which pushes back all elements that come close and that would make up three quarters of the Universe, was recently on the front pages of many newspapers. It appears in the work of three astrophysicists, Saul Perlmutter, Brian Schmidt and Adam Riess, on “the acceleration and expansion of the Universe” (October 4, 2011), which obtained the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2011. One again finds the theme in *Star Wars* in “the dark side of the force”, where man, in his infinite power, wants to control the world. Black in this painting sometimes echoes the sombre issues of technosciences: black science, black magic...\(^\text{30}\)

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\(^{29}\) Troiscarré, op. cit, 2011.

5. Conclusion

Frederik De Wilde and his mysterious nanoblack invites the spectator to feel once again the “black shock” described by psycho-diagnosticians.\textsuperscript{31} This salutary shock, presented in this exhibition, has various consequences. On the one hand, the artist opens up an unexplored side of the painting; on the other hand, the process allows laboratory assistants to communicate about their researches (often causing controversial discussions). This exhibition, through what is shown, tries to tackle this world of science – a parallel and overwhelming world. “We are all becoming epistemologists,”\textsuperscript{32} says French philosopher Michel Serres. We are able to ask ourselves about the arrival and consequences of technical disciplines and sciences. “To materialize is to socialize,” writes French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour. Let us hope that this entry into the nanoblack matter will become a fact of life and will get to the heart of the debate on “scientific humanities”.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Rorschach’s test.
\textsuperscript{32} Radio report, France Info, May 8, 2011.
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