

## Interview Philippe Hortalà

### Alain Mousseigne

On the occasion of the solo exhibition PHILIPPE HORTALÀ, PEINTURES ET DESSINS, 1987-1988, Musée d'Art Moderne, Toulouse, 1988

**Alain Mousseigne:** The last paintings we knew of before this impressive series of “cakes” depicted more or less inhabited “interiors”. Why such a radical change of subject in your painting?

**Philippe Hortalà:** Several factors led me to bring my painting to where it is today. Above all, the change corresponds to my move to Paris. Although I'm still a Toulouse man at heart, it called into question the work I'd been doing in the south, in much the same way as in 1983 when I set up my studio in Barcelona. Once again, I decided to set off with my hands in my pockets and tackle an empty studio. At the same time, I took the opportunity to paint as an observer, and to feed off the best that was on offer.

I went on a real painting cure. I took great pleasure in discovering the great museums like the Louvre, Orsay, Beaubourg... which is natural when you love painting.

**A.M.:** Where do the cakes come from? you don't see many of them in museums! So could they be “imagery” or symbols of your obsessive love of painting?

**P.H.:** I wouldn't surprise anyone if I said that painting is also cooking.

**A.M.:** Let's get back to your museum visits and the enthusiasm they arouse. Which painters have held your interest?

**P.H.:** Up until now, what fascinated me in museums was the “clumping” of works. Until then, what fascinated me about museums was the “clutter” of paintings, or rather, simply, the images that were plastered all over the walls. In fact, it's the very first vision one can have of painting. But after this sensation of scrolling images, my wandering was punctuated by stops and I began to take a closer look. I was, of course, interested in the masters, admiration being a generous wine for noble spirits, as Rodin asserted in his will: the Fontainebleau school, Mantegna, Michelangelo, Rubens, Chardin, Monet... in fact the great painting, that which is no secret to anyone but which I set out to discover in my turn and which gave me great pleasure for the retina and the mind. There are also exciting interactions within painting itself: for example, Ingres' Roger Delivering Angelica led me to turn my attention to Ucello's Saint George and the Dragon, and then back to him, to Ingres again. So there's this essential game of looking at painting, appreciating it and, if it's good, being led to go and see others.

**A. M.:** So much enthusiasm, so much bulimia, the words you choose to express them are not without analogy with a gourmand's greed and curiosity. Hence the cakes, I repeat, which are somewhat emblematic of your pleasure, your enjoyment of knowledge and painting...

**P.H.:** Yes. What's more, artists shouldn't try to be useful. If he's modern, his mission is much stronger; the artist can't be useful for anything. On the contrary, he must approach freedom, since it's obvious that only the useless and the futile can aspire to the pretension of being free. The artist is first and foremost one who takes pleasure in toiling over the futile.

**A. M.:** This pleasure and enjoyment you feel in seeing other people's paintings helps you to situate yourself...

**P.H.:** Absolutely: people have often tried to make us believe that painting is a natural process, that the painter's very gesture is in his nature, an instinct or a more or less conditioned reflex. It's an easy shortcut to swallow a few dubious pellets. Some artists once claimed to be terrorists for spray-painting: of course, a good joke, even excellent, but just a joke! It was also often said that you had to paint with your "balls"; we used to say that when I was a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts; but this claim only made young artists compete with the Boronali donkey: another good joke and yet another admission by some that they were in the realm of aliboron. At this point, painting no longer has anything, but owns everyone. Of course, one has the right to be a moron, but not to ignore it; that's the difference between a true artist and an ass. The artist is also a worker. He works, leaves a work, but he has the privilege of choosing his mode. Fashion can also choose him. He also expresses himself through this choice: he can work on the assembly line like Warhol, as a dilettante like Hains, as an intelligent artist like Garouste, as a joker like Picabia... to each his own.

**A. M.:** Your choice?

**P.H.:** Perhaps a gourmand, a bulimic, but not a starver.

**A. M.:** Where's the pleasure in your own painting?

**P. H.:** For me, pleasure also lies where we can't see it, elsewhere than in the retina. We could also talk about work: for me, there's also pleasure in the painter's craft. It's above all what seems to differentiate good painting from bad. Bad painting is simply the result of reflexes dictated by necessity, and nothing more. Good painting, on the other hand, is the fruit of reflection, of the senses and the mind. Nor is it a problem of modernity, as some would have us believe, given that there have always been good painters and bad painters, and that there will always be bad and good painting.

**A. M.:** Does the way you look at art determine part of your approach?

**P.H.:** Yes, when an artist sets to work, he knows in advance that he's boarding a moving train. There's no waiting for him, and the seats are already taken. We know that. Of course, there are stories of break-ups and ruptures that some people invent, thinking they can get into a reserved seat. Some people mutilate or invalidate themselves to get a seat. The criterion of novelty is also invoked: "Look at me, I too paint without hands, without brushes, without meaning... it's not a new thing! there's no room in this Noah's Ark: one of each! The honest, true artist must not fall into this trap: he would only be imitating those beggars who mutilate themselves to obtain charity in front of temples.

There's nothing revolutionary about the mutilation of art and the succession of different artistic movements chasing each other. Nothing to do with terror. Nor is self-punishment a solution, unless you're crazy and not a painter. Van Gogh was very close to death when he cut off his ear, and he didn't claim it as a work of art. No, he went back to work and painted gardens and fields of wheat.

**A.M.:** So how do you situate yourself in all these stories, how do you avoid the pitfalls you mentioned? Shouldn't "the true artist make fun of art", as Rodin said in the testament you quoted earlier?

**P.H.:** Of course, just as "true eloquence laughs at eloquence", true art laughs at art and, above all, at what people try to make us believe is art. The artist must not give a damn about agreeing with the prevailing discourse. He doesn't care about being "trendy" or "cutting-edge"... The new firefighters are already recognizable.

Leonardo da Vinci didn't paint Indians - which he could have done - nor the portrait of Columbus or Amerigo, no, he painted the Mona Lisa: for the pleasure of taste, the senses, beauty and "rockets" for fun.

In the nineteenth century, still so close, firemen painted in Greek and Latin: a veritable gogo trap in which many a simpleton got lost. The masters, on the other hand, left us with pleasure, color and meaning, and what remains are water lilies, guinguettes, apples and a few pretty asses, but always a taste for the senses. We are inevitably caught between our past and our future.

Let's know how to avoid the new traps.

**A. M.:** What are they at the end of the century?

**P.H.:** It's already ridiculous to have painted man's first steps on the moon. We have the Paris-Match photos! If you want to be an artist, you have to avoid relying on science. Don't mix with the so-called nec plus ultra of your time. Science will come naturally to artists if it proves not to be a new deception, any more than antiquity was interested in the nascent modernity.

Civilizations have always looked to the West, but never found their

Grail. It seems that the notion of modernity is based on this kind of failure: back to square one! Today, our west is space, up there, in the air, where we can escape thanks to rockets and shuttles. That's the real miracle of our society: looking elsewhere for the best. We come back, or we don't! the unattainable Grail! that's not the artist's problem.

**A. M.:** Where is the artist's problem?

**P.H.:** Artists have always been rooted in their heads, eyes, mouths and ears, and they find meaning...

**A. M.:** Be that as it may, today you paint monstrous cakes because they are grandiose slices, majestic details of the material world and envy... basically, of the taste for the things of life and the senses.

And the cake, a veritable metaphor, refers to painting... another space really?

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**P.H.:** Of course we can invoke symbolism and metaphor, but you're also talking about space, and I think that's the right word. Talking about "genre" in relation to my work is tricky: my work is very close to still life, but when I paint a canvas it's more a landscape that I'm dealing with, often French gardens, spaces for sure.

**A.M.:** Beyond or below the subject, your cakes build up an overturned space, similar to the fragmented one you developed in your series of more or less inhabited

series of more or less inhabited, more or less externalized "interiors". Does this mean that the subject is of little importance? if not that it allows you to focus a point of view, of time, of space, in order to taste it better in the painting?

**P.H.:** Raising the issue of the subject, and more specifically whether it's important or not, brings us back to Manet's Olympia and the first scandal recognized as modern. The big mistake, I think, is to treat modernity in terms of a break or linearity in history; it should be seen as a state of mind, not a fashion or a made. Nor should it be an irony to be adopted in the face of classicism, as false avant-gardes would have us believe; there is also often a confusion that has arisen between the notion of revolution and that of modernity. Indeed, modern history can be traced back to the storming of the Bastille or the storming of Constantinople... The revolutionary act has nothing to do with modernity. There's nothing modern about people rising up to demand bread. What could be considered modern at the same time would be Marie-Antoinette's (the Austrian) response: "If the people have no bread, let them have Viennese pastries. In fact, that's what we've been fighting for and will continue to fight for: the superfluous (the mistake is to see it as ironic). As long as we're modern, we'll make it our duty to defend our trivia, a bit like a regiment that, before being attacked by the enemy, makes it its goal and duty to save the mascot. We continue to fight every day: not for bread, but for brioche!