

Gaël Davrinche

Fathers to sons

Richard Leydier

Incipit

These days, anyone planning to embark on a career as a painter needs to begin by realising the difficulty of the task that lies ahead. He must know that, because of a history going back several thousand years, painting makes special demands: because everything seems to have been already invented, it is especially hard to make a lasting mark in its already overcrowded annals. Unlike his confreres who do photography, installation or video, whose paths are less amply signposted, the painter must strive that much harder to explore and imagine if his voice is to be heard; he must really strive for originality. This is no doubt why painting is at once so decried and adored: because of the difficulty of the project, which daunts a fair few, but also because of its death, repeatedly foretold (and by some ardently desired) and yet invariably belied by its phoenix-like permanence.

And so, the path of painting is long and all-consuming. Its scale is the whole life of a man or woman: it follows their life line. From this point of view, the work of Gaël Davrinche maintains a curious analogy with the way in which an individual constructs his life: from childhood to adulthood, via the fragile phase of adolescence, his painting has grown, gaining in maturity over time in a constant dialogue between the history of art and his own history. The pictorial practice becomes fortified as a result of this hybridisation. General History and personal history dialogue, intertwine like a DNA helix, making the occasional detour via the mysteries of the unconscious.

(Re)Visitations

Painting, indeed, has its Fathers just as the Church had, towering figures who revolutionised and established the foundations of the art of painting of their day. Each one of us writes our own history of art, following intuitive preferences and principles that we spend our life trying to grasp and raise up as theory. Gaël Davrinche's personal pantheon occupies mainly the domain of the portrait, if we judge by the *Revisités* series, from 2006 to 2010, in which he revisits on canvas the composition of famous paintings, resuscitating some emblematic faces from the history of art. Davrinche's painterly beacons go by the names of Velasquez, Rembrandt, Ingres and Van Eyck. Mainly painters from the Renaissance and modern periods, but there also some incursions into the 20th century, notably with Soutine and Kahlo.

Masterpieces by these artists are "remixed," filtered through a child-like gaze. One could say that this acts like a deforming kaleidoscope, or that the models seem to have been re-sculpted in modelling clay. Davrinche works to distil the potential innocence contained in these pictures, their marrow and their pith. Here, Picasso's famous dictum comes to mind: "It took me a lifetime to paint like a child."

It all begins with the colour pencil, that childlike tool par excellence, applied in energetic eddies in order to sketch out a structure, a skeleton, the outline of a body, or in order to underscore an atypical detail (for example, the teeth of a young girl painted by Vermeer). Then painting comes into play, putting flesh onto the bones, clothing the figures, giving them magnitude, sometimes a little too much. For the artist also works with the exaggeration of the child's gaze, which tends to heighten details that it finds especially important. Hence the huge man's hat in the *Portrait des époux Arnolfini* (*The Arnolfini Wedding*) by Van Eyck, or the disproportionate ruff in *L'Homme à la fraise* (Man with a Ruff). This seizure of power by objects

anticipates a later tendency in Davrinche's work: his taste for accessories and utensils. These become the main characters of the *Revisités*, so much so that the figure regularly takes a backseat: Margaret of Austria's dresses really do overshadow their royal owner.

In keeping with the pictorial approach, it seems coherent that children, especially those of the Habsburg dynasty (more specifically, the children of Philip IV of Spain) should be particularly prominent. One thinks of the equestrian portraits of Margaret of Austria, again, or of her younger brother Balthazar, whose rearing mount is so terribly toy-like (for example, the horse Bullseye in the film *Toy Story*). The childlike imagination thus contaminates several motifs.

Some compositions are distinguished by a striving for equilibrium and plainness—once again in agreement, no doubt, with the subject. One thinks in particular of the suite devoted to the religious reformers Luther and Erasmus. However, the most “minimal” treatment of all is meted out to a Raphael painting that was long thought to be a self-portrait (reprised on a grey ground, with the two eyes shown in the same profile, as in children's drawings, Egyptian painting and certain works by Picasso).

But the *Revisités* series ends in excess with the *Joconde* (Mona Lisa) series. Here, Davrinche plays with the image of the most famous painting in the world. He subjects this emblem of sweetness and western canons of beauty to all kinds of outrages. Gaudy as a butterfly, Mona Lisa appears coiffed with Marcel Duchamp's urinal (*Fountain*). As we may recall, Duchamp rigged out the venerable Milanese lady with a moustache and a comical inscription, LHOOQ (phonetically, “she's hot to trot”). Davrinche follows up and imagines other phonetic games: LCKCIR (= “elle s'est cassée hier” = “she buggered off yesterday”: no doubt to explain to the peeved visitors who came halfway across the planet to see the Italian woman's smile why the picture and the landscape have disappeared); or again, more scatologically: LAPT (= “elle a pété” = “she farted”). The beautiful lady is pulled down from her pedestal. Davrinche exhausts and tortures Mona Lisa, and by the same occasion puts to death the series of *Revisités* by bringing this adventure to an end.

Mortuary flowers

There comes a moment when a child grasps the impermanence of all things, and of human beings in particular, especially those he loves. Curiously enough, death irrupts in the artist's work with a series of paintings representing flowers. And while none of them particularly suggests a cemetery decoration, they did bloom after the tsunami that devastated the east coast of Japan in 2011 and, in considerably damaging the reactor at Fukushima, plunged the world into a state of anxiety. For this nuclear suspense reawakened the old feeling, dating from the Cold War, that life on earth could come to an end at any moment, simply by pressing a red button. And that there was an urgent need to live life to the full.

In these paintings lilies, tulips, dahlias, daisies, and anemones appear in the final phase of their life, just before the petals fall. Over the months, as the series progresses, a kind of black rain rinses the ground of the paintings, while a wind (the radioactive blast from the bomb?) gets up and carries away the umbels, but also, perhaps, the pollen needed for a hypothetical rebirth, elsewhere, under more clement skies.

These flowers are an allegory of passing time, *vanitas* which exhort us to live the present moment intensely, before the beauty fades. In his *Ode to Leuconoe*, The Latin poet Horace celebrates this twofold movement, at once morbid and vitalist, of the *memento mori* and *carpe diem*: “Tremble, Leuconoe, to know what end the Gods will give, Leuconoe, do not attempt Babylonian calculations. The better course is to bear whatever will be. Whether Jove allots more winters or this is the last which exhausts the Tuscan sea with pumice rocks opposed. Be wise, fill your cellar, and from such a short path, remove the long hope. I talk, and sudden time flees. Seize the day, without believing in tomorrow.”

Instruments of torture

Indeed, a painting from the next series is titled *Carpe Diem*. It is a self-portrait in which the artist appears with a black shoe balancing on the top of his head. After revisiting Old Master paintings and painting the decay of flowers, Davrinche has at last come to his contemporaries. But to do so, he has had to proceed via the evocation of a dead man. Two paintings, executed *à deux* with his confrere Nicolas Ledoux, create a link between the art of the past, peopled with Dutch and Italian ghosts, and the living of the present time. The two works in question represent the artist Gérard Gasiowski (1930-1986), made after a photograph showing the painter sitting at a table in front of a pot of flowers and war toys (tanks, fighter planes).

Gasiowski opens the door wide, and the living now flood into Davrinche's studio. In these portraits, family and friends strike classical poses, but the seriousness of their posture is offset by the presence of incongruous objects which the artist calls "accessories." Indeed, he stresses the paradoxical dimension of this term: if the accessory is by definition something optional and subsidiary, it often comes to define to a large extent the person it accompanies. Come to think of it, there are also lots of accessories in the *Revisités*: the blue turban, the necklace in *L'Oriental*, the charlotte in *Le Petit pâtissier*, etc.

At first, the artist takes the ridiculous side of the situation uniquely upon himself, for example by wearing pig's ears or boxing gloves. Gradually, though, the models too join in. A young woman veils her hair like Raphael's *Fornarina*, but does so with a transparent plastic bag. Another agrees to bare her breast and turn her bra into a kind of Dutch coiffe. Another slips on an animal bone as a necklace. Several men and women, finally, put the polystyrene padding used to protect domestic appliances around their necks, like so many shackles, medieval iron collars, instruments of torture instilling the idea of strangulation and decapitation.

Some paintings bear witness to significant developments and allow us to measure the distance travelled. *Demeter*, *l'Autoportrait au homard* (Self-portrait with Lobster) and *Octopus* are very much mature works, synthesising many of the directions explored by the artist up to that point. They have the rigour and realism of the Netherlandish portraits pastiched in the *Revisités*, the botanical precision of the dying flowers and the Dadaist inclinations glimpsed in the *Joconde*, which here is twisted towards surrealism. No doubt, these extremely diverse phases were all necessary steps on the way to this pared-down form of eccentric hieratism.

Excipit

By way of a conclusion, let us return to Gasiowski, who really comes across as a spiritual father here—first of all, inasmuch as, just like Davrinche, he never limited himself to a single pictorial style, but explored both hyperrealism and primitivism. But above all, Gasiowski acts as a double trigger: for one thing, as we have seen, he initiates the accessorised portraits. But also because he leads the artist to a strange awareness: that photograph of Gasiowski – his posture, the shape of his face, his beard, his glasses – exhume some very personal memories, which happen to be embodied in another photo taken at around the same time, in the early 1970s: one of the only surviving photos of the artist's father, who died when he was a young child. He is shown in half-profile, wearing a polo-neck sweater and smoking a cigar. The pride of this pose seeming somewhat forced, Davrinche seems almost to be revisiting a famous photographic portrait of Che Guevara.

Following analogies and coincidences, from the *Revisités* to the flowers, via the *Accessoires*, Davrinche's development can be read in terms of filiation and mourning. The artist himself once made this very resonant Freudian slip: "I am going to make self-portraits of my father." This portrait of the absent father may be a key to understanding what dries Davrinche's painting. The painting we already know, and the painting still to come.

Richard Leydier is an art critic and curator. From 1998 to 2011 he worked at *art press* magazine, where he was editor in chief. He has organised a number of exhibitions, notably *Visions - Peinture en France* (as part of the first “Force de l’art” at the Grand Palais, Paris, 2006); *Signs of the Times* (Le Carré Sainte Anne, Montpellier, 2013) and *La Dernière Vague - Surf, skate et custom cultures dans l’art contemporain* (La Friche Belle de Mai, Marseille, 2013).