

SILENCE IS SEXY

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If we had to state what we have remembered from Evelyne de Behr's work, what caught our attention, we would first mention its brevity and economy, a certain reservedness that opens up the field of action for looking. It is a short novella rather than a hefty novel. Or even less. Take the notebook from 5th January 2009 (its title). In the centre of each page, in capital letters traced with a fine line, a word is recomposed: SOT D'HOMME (stupid man / phonetically Sodome), OR Y FILS (gold and son / orifice, J'OUÏS SENS (I hear meaning / pleasure), JEUX TES ME (games your me / I love you), etc. A thoughtful femininity unravels the language, opening up the words to speak of desire and spell out its instruments; malicious, mischievous and concise.

We find these qualities condensed in the selection of drawings which earned Evelyne de Behr an award at this year's Prix Médiatine, as well as in the selection that will shortly be exhibited in the Office d'Art Contemporain (Brussels) alongside a small-scale work in plaster: the cast of a pair of hands clasped around an egg. Femininity once again, this time in its gestatory expression and the images this tends to project: the shelter, enclosure, recess and shell. In short, it is the demarcation of an enclave, its inscription in space. Delimiting, circumscribing a presence, a form or a territory by tracing a line, this is the keystone to Evelyne de Behr's work, be it in her 3D installations or her graphic production¹.

By detours

But let us focus on her drawings. Extremely simple, white: a fine, clear, precise furrow uninterruptedly traces the contour of one or two figures. She uses black pencil, with here and there a red accentuation, or its inversion in blue. Sometimes the density of the hatching or the continuity of solid colour fills a shape. Elsewhere, a motif has preserved the illusion of its relief in chiaroscuro. As if to better highlight what is essential, there is the pale line, the perimeter, the shell. The thing that makes a shape, confirming its existence, is the border, the boundary line on the white background, on the continuity of an indescribable substance.

What we are: self-contained condensations surfacing in the world through the ramparts of our skins. The limit is the border. It is also the encounter. It is an impassable zone, it is the zone to be crossed.

But the skin of Evelyne de Behr's static, stiff, "fixed" silhouettes is not the hide, not living flesh. It is the principle of skin, the word "skin", the writing of the word "skin" designated by the line (designate, design, the Latin root is the same: designare).

Hence the short leap from drawing to language, like that on this page, where we read the word HEAR and where we see it, on the line above, spelled out in sign language by a choreography of hands. Elsewhere, the word PERCEIVE and its translation into Braille, presented

in the manner of alphabetic language, i.e. without any relief, in black and white circles instead of raised points.

There is certainly a convergence between different registers of expression, but also the deficit, impotence and secrecy of languages. What does “hear” mean to a deaf person? What does visual perception mean to a blind person? Silence, whiteness and emptiness speak to us also of incommunicability, of what is indescribable, ineffable and unnameable. Of what eludes words, gestures, images and speech.

White gold

Inevitable incommunicability and necessary incommunicability are proposed as a salutary contrempe to the narcotic illusions of “overcommunication”. This is where Evelyne de Behr has rooted her intentions, where her sights are directed: on the web, in the mass of “artificial, virtual, undifferentiated images, circulated in floods on our digital and physical territories in order to reach, by intrusion, into our inner territories”². “Worn down by the repetition of hyper-mediatization,” the artist goes on to say, “or denied by our inner censors,” the images we remember have marked us through their “invisibility”³.

They are empty, hollow. In order to fill them and hope to make them meaningful, Evelyne de Behr has harnessed and represented them on paper. She has eviscerated and reshaped them. In order to rescue them from the emptiness of saturation, she has turned them into virgin receptacles, open to view and to thought, as well as to a game of associations. Only then can the shapes open up and the shell dream of being released. When the figures are associated, juxtaposed and interpenetrate. When there is penetration...

This way of hijacking media images with an intimate significance is not dissimilar to the appropriationist practices of such female artists as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Krüger or Cindy Sherman, who refused fancywork in favour of an analysis of image and language. There is just one exception here, a hot spot of inexpressiveness which speaks to us “with the glacial ineloquence of the truth”⁴.

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1 For an overview of Evelyne de Behr’s production, see <http://www.evelynedebehr.com/>

2 Evelyne de Behr, on <http://www.evelynedebehr.com>

3 Ibid.

4 Norge, “Galène”, in *Plusieurs malentendus*, Éditions du Disque Vert, Brussels, 1926. *Œuvres poétiques 1923-1973*, Seghers, Paris, 1978, pp. 29-30