

PRESSBOOK

Bernard FRIZE

Elephant

March 2016



Elephant
Spring 2016
Jurriaan Benschop

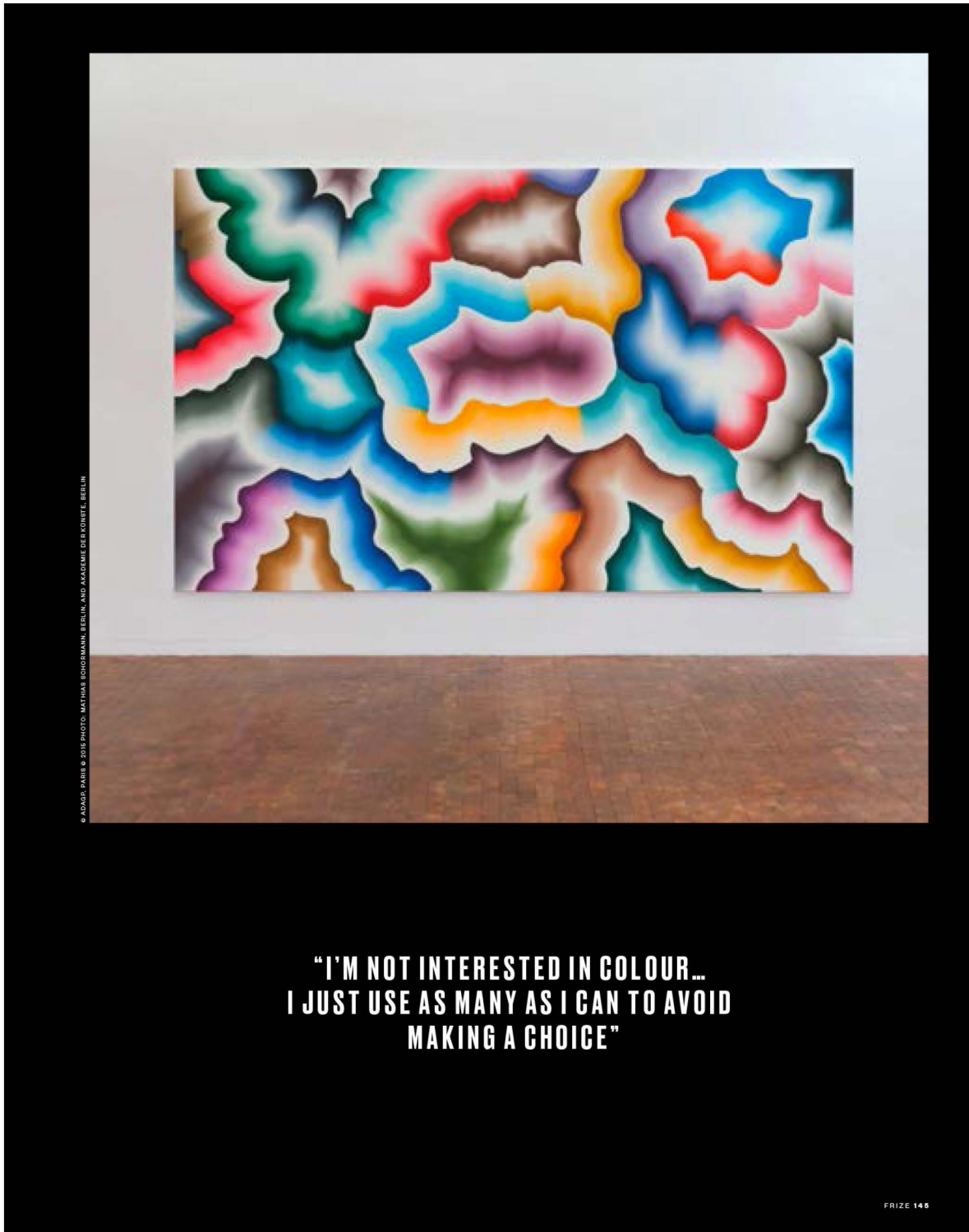
THE EXPRESSION

MYTHA

142 ENCOUNTERS



Elephant
Spring 2016
Jurriaan Benschop



**"I'M NOT INTERESTED IN COLOUR...
I JUST USE AS MANY AS I CAN TO AVOID
MAKING A CHOICE"**



Elephant
Spring 2016
Jurriaan Benschop



Previous pages, right
Balairé 2014
Acrylic and resin on canvas
200 x 320cm
Installation view, Bernard Frize,
Käthe-Kollwitz-Preis 2015,
Akademie der Künste Berlin,
11 Sept. – 25 Oct. 2015



Elephant
Spring 2016
Jurriaan Benschop



Opposite
Aprupt 2015
Acrylic and resin on canvas
135 x 80cm

Above
Algra 2015
Acrylic and resin on canvas
135 x 80cm



Elephant Spring 2016 Jurriaan Benschop

‘The brush paints,’ **BERNARD FRIZE** once joked, as if his personal presence—and the physical movements of his hand—weren’t essential to the creation of his works. But out of such denials of traditional ways of thinking a new language for painting emerged. **JURRIAN BENSCHOP** meets the French artist to talk about (non-)choice and (non-)expression.

Portrait by Anja Schaffner



IMAGES & LOGOS: PARIS & PHOTOS: MARCUS WOLFGÄNGLER, COURTESY GALLERY MACHINE BY STEPHAN DOSTER; GALLERY BOMMAZSCHALLER, VIENNA; UNLES, OYERENWE STATED

FRIZE 149



Elephant Spring 2016 Jurriaan Benschop

B

ernard Frize divides his time between Paris and Berlin. In Paris he has a 600-square metre studio near Père-Lachaise. In recent years, though, he has spent most of his time in Berlin, where he has a modest studio in the neighbourhood of Charlottenburg. Usually there isn't a lot to see there, since, once finished, the works go out quickly to exhibitions. But when I go to meet him he has just started a few new paintings and is preparing a new exhibition in Vienna.

'I need to paint,' says Frize, stretching another canvas. All the same, he is not the kind of artist you will find in his studio every day. He needs to charge himself before starting and, above all, he needs a plan. Only then does it make sense for him to paint. First a plan, then the action. Frize usually works in series in which he explores a certain pattern or principle, continuing until he is done with the motif. For each series he makes

a set of rules, directions or limitations that will define how the painting will be executed, such as pouring the paint without the use of a brush, or taking the round crusts that are formed when a can of paint is left open and using them to fill a canvas. In a series on glass (*April*, 2013), multiple works were executed following the same method: repeating a rectangular form, similar to the shape of the letter U, and changing colour after every U-turn.

Frize is not a painter who likes the notion of being present himself inside his paintings. You could say that the subjective expressionist painting gesture is alien to him. Yet, while looking at his works, I am struck by their colourful expression; a painter's hand is definitely visible. The gestures are very explicit. In fact, they have become the protagonists of the work—there is no narrative or other subject matter that draws

attention. 'The brush paints,' Frize once joked, as if he was not there while it happened, and that, in short, is what we are looking at in his paintings. When I ask Frize about expression, he is resolute. 'It is just a myth,' he says. 'It is not about expression at all. It is all about thoughts. Expressionism is just a label. For branding, it is well chosen. But for recovering the reality of painting, it is not. There is always speculation involved. Fortunately we are not animals, so what we do comes from thinking.' But isn't there always some kind of expression involved, even if it is not your focus? 'It is something random—there is chance, and this is always underestimated. They call it expression but expression does not exist. Painting comes from ideas and conscious decisions.'

A conversation with Bernard Frize often turns around the question what his painting is *not*. The artist is keen on peeling away labels that



Elephant Spring 2016 Jurriaan Benschop



Pulino 2015
Acrylic and resin on canvas
66 x 66cm

have been glued to his work. Since the work is not really 'about something' a lot of the words that have been used to describe his practice, over the last 40 years, are not, in his view, adequate. Expression is one of those words, process another. Since the act of painting can be traced in many of Frize's works, commentators have identified the process as the actual meaning of the work. But 'process is just like cooking,' Frize says. 'It is regressive to focus on that.'

Of course, there is a process involved in making a work, but this is not content as such. And the same goes for colour and concept. They play a role, but this does not mean that Frize is a colourist, or a conceptual painter. His reluctance to accept such labels could be regarded as being true to his attitude as a painter. He wants to keep the work free from all kinds of meanings and suggestions that are outside the actual realm of painting. What is important is the act of making, and

to make paintings that need to be seen more than once, without leaning on external references.

Why does Frize make different variations of a similar motif? Is there not the danger of repeating himself? 'The repetition in my work takes place within a series, and this is to exhaust the possibilities. I do a similar painting to find out what the end of it is. How could a new idea come out of it? If you see artists doing the same kind of painting over the years, then repetition becomes a way of branding yourself as an artist. That is not interesting. During the working or process time, the aim is to put in motion a little motor, or to find another type of gas, to keep the engine running. In the end you can say this painting or that one is better, but that is a matter of taste. I only disqualify paintings if they have mistakes, if a line is not straight, or because colours are mixed in a way they should not be.'

How did Frize come to this approach, which

seems so focused on the 'how' and execution of the painting and less concerned with visual results? To understand this, we have to look back at the circumstances in which he started to paint in the mid-1970s. Back then Frize felt a gap between the post-1968 political reality that surrounded him in Paris, and the individual activity of an artist in the studio, in his private world. What would be a relevant painting? How could he participate in society, embody a critical view, understand himself as a political being, without making a kind of actionist image that he did not believe in? He stopped painting altogether for some time and then started again from scratch, developing his approach to working in series, each time with a set of rules that defines what is to be done. The early works were simple and minimal in approach: they consisted of endless, very thin brushstrokes, both vertical and horizontal, overlapping each other until they filled the



Elephant Spring 2016 Jurriaan Benschop



Brome 2015
Acrylic and resin on canvas
66 x 66cm

whole canvas. Frize wrote about these very early works: "These were my first paintings in which the materials, the technique (however minimal it may have been), and the content (the "what was thought") showed solidarity." The coherence was to be found in a credible way of making a painting.

It would not make sense in Frize's approach to try to influence the mood of a painting, to retouch it after making it or to correct it visually. Ideally, the paintings are made in one session. Once done, either they work or they do not. This points to a performative attitude towards painting, more than a compositional one. It is more about the action that can be trusted than about a visual construction that should be pursued.

'I'm not interested in colour,' Frize says, standing in front of one of the colourful paintings in his studio. It seems a strange statement. The joy of looking at the work certainly comes

from the colours, and from seeing the different methods of their application, which lead to very different moods. The character is firm and monumental in works such as *Aprè* (2015) and *Reche* (2015), where colour appears to descend like a waterfall against a black background (or is it a foreground?). Frize seems to have a happy knack in handling colour, but for the artist colour isn't really an issue to think about. 'I just use as many as I can to avoid making a choice,' he says. And not choosing is, of course, also a way of not expressing himself and staying out of the painting as an author.

Does Frize feel that his view on painting, as he developed it in the '70s, is still valid in today's world? The political map has changed—we meet a few weeks after the November terrorist attacks in Paris. 'My generation grew up with the idea that after the Second World War there would be no such big conflict, and now we are in the middle

of a mess, but it is a different kind of mess. It is difficult to grasp a world picture of that. It is really ruining my days.'

Doesn't he think that as an artist he should just keep focusing on his work and continue to do that, especially in circumstances where artistic freedom is at stake? 'I used to have the feeling that I was coherent in my work, in my action, in my thoughts, in my political beliefs. But now I don't think that anymore. I don't think that it is enough to just keep doing what you are doing. But I also don't have a solution. Some artists, although not many, are able to embody political reflection in their work. Some do it in a relevant way. Denunciation does not work, but reflection could be a contribution.'

Bernard Frize's show Turn the Pieces into a Place runs at Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Vienna, until 19 March.