

**Bernard FRIZE**

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Choices And Not Expressing Himself*

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## For French Artist Bernard Frize, Painting Is All About Not Making Choices And Not Expressing Himself

Bernard Frize is drawn to things that are ridiculous, useless, powerless, derisory and absurd. Early in his career, the Berlin-based artist produced a simple painting of a sombrero-wearing Mexican seen from above frying two eggs, his take on a well-known children's doodle where he had nothing to invent. His first seminal series in 1977 entirely filled with innumerable, overlapping fine vertical and horizontal lines in as many colors as possible – like a meditative act repeated over and over by a monk with painstaking patience and diligence – was imagined as something even a manual laborer could accomplish with no need for expertise. But while performing this mindless activity, he could examine the reason why he was doing it and depict a world whose reason we are searching for. Over the past 42 years, he has questioned the practice and profession of painting, viewing the painter as someone who tries to understand existence and conveys his analysis onto canvas.



LedZ, 2018, acrylic and resin on canvas, 280.5 × 522.5 cm

Photo Claire Dorn. Courtesy of Perrotin & Bernard Frize © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

For Frize, the act of creation is based on a multitude of predetermined protocols and systems that define what must be done, without relying on retouching. These constraints don't restrain him, but liberate him and force him to be creative. Take for example his collective work *Rassemblement*, where five people painting at the same time with no hierarchy synchronized their gestures and passed paintbrushes between them from hand to hand without lifting them from the canvas. Or *Spitz* where he fills the surface of

a canvas with a single stroke made using a bouquet of 15 paintbrushes, following the movements of a composition from a geometry manual tracing all possible maneuvers of a knight on a chessboard. "The subject of my work is not to create processes and rules – they are just ways of doing my work or fueling my desire to work," he notes. "Painting is a way of exploring ideas and embodying them, so that they can be seen and shared."



Spitz, 1991, acrylic and resin on canvas, 254.5 × 361.5 cm

Photo Tate, London 2019 © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

Despite his best efforts to use protocols, Frize's experiments sometimes lead to unpredictable results, when chance intervenes. In the *Suite Segond* self-made series, he sliced the crusts that had formed on the surface of unsealed tins of industrial paint accidentally left out in the open and placed those dried circular skins on canvas, as if the painting had generated by itself, with the fewest possible interventions – a type of autonomous artwork. In *Emir*, he tried to separate an emulsion of two colors of paint that he had applied with the same brushstroke in horizontal lines to the canvas by tilting it, and suddenly the illusion of a traditional Chinese landscape appeared through vertical streaks. Created randomly, the image depended on the liquidity and quantity of paint and the pull of gravity. He's fond of the idea of "generation and corruption" when something occurs above a system that ruins it. For instance, *Oude*, where the movement from stains of liquid paint on a polychrome background creates and destroys simultaneously.



Suite Segond 120F, 1980, urethane alkyd lacquer on canvas, 130 × 195 cm

Photo Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

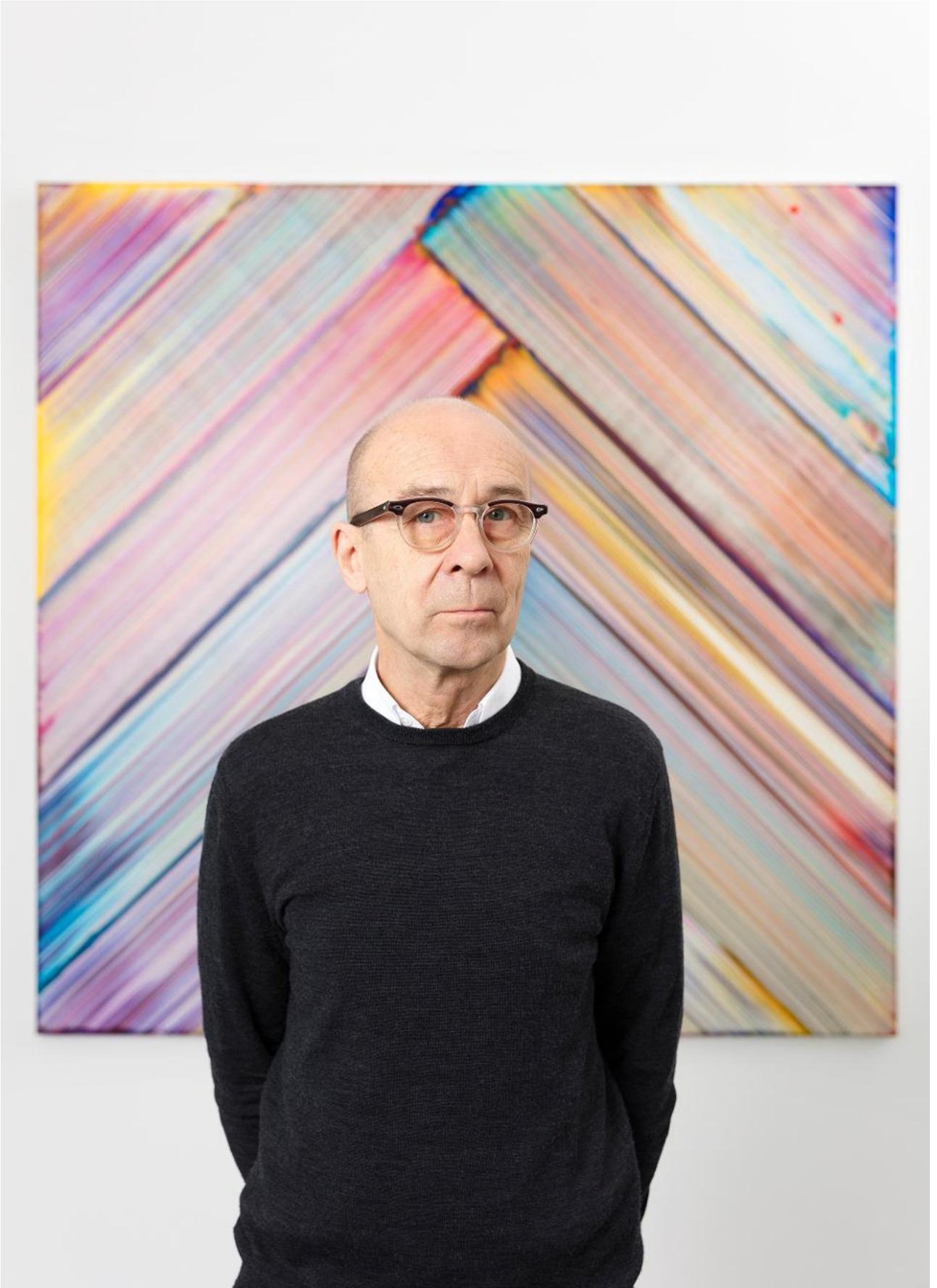
"I don't know why one comes to art," he confesses. "In my family, there was nothing leading me to art." Born in 1949 in Saint-Mandé, France, Frize's father was a serviceman who fought in WWII and all the French colonial wars and his mother a housewife. After dropping out of arts school in Aix-en-Provence and Montpellier, he took a break from painting, as he failed to reconcile his political engagement with his artistic approach. Arriving in Paris in the early '70s, he set up his own silkscreen printing shop, where he printed for other artists like Pierre Soulages, and was a ski instructor in the wintertime to supplement his income. He resumed painting again in 1976 in his spare time before his first exhibition a year later, at a period when the medium of painting had fallen from grace, particularly in France, and post-modern art and photography were on the rise. He explains how he finally found a way to express himself, "First of all, by being less ambitious, not thinking that I would change the world, which I did not understand, and that my action would be more limited. Before being political, a work of art has to be a work of art. It's more that this piece of art has to be in conformity with your thoughts, so I found a way that was much humbler and that I could be satisfied with."



Travis, 2006, oil on canvas, 285 × 240 cm  
Photo André Morin © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

Rather than expressing a creative ego, Frize erases all subjectivity from his paintings to portray the artistic process as impersonal and anti-expressionist, eschewing art that is immersive. The painter is less important than the painting, as he tries to efface himself from his works. "It's not my personal life that I'm exposing in the painting," he states. "Nobody is interested in my ego, so I don't think a painting has to do with that. I'm not at all an expressionist; I always thought that expressionism was staged, so I don't feel I have to provide this." Refusing to show the hard work that has gone into a piece's execution, making it look easy, in reality he possesses great technical mastery and efficiency of

painting. He limits the number of decisions to make, while accepting the consequences, so the painting is the plainest and most banal possible. What has interested him from the beginning is to paint like a worker following instructions step by step to distance himself from all choices. "I'm trying to make a painting with the least decisions possible or to find a good reason to make a painting," he remarks. "In general, my paintings are very simple and everyone could do them. There's nothing special about them."



Bernard Frize at Galerie Perrotin in Paris  
Photo Claire Dorn

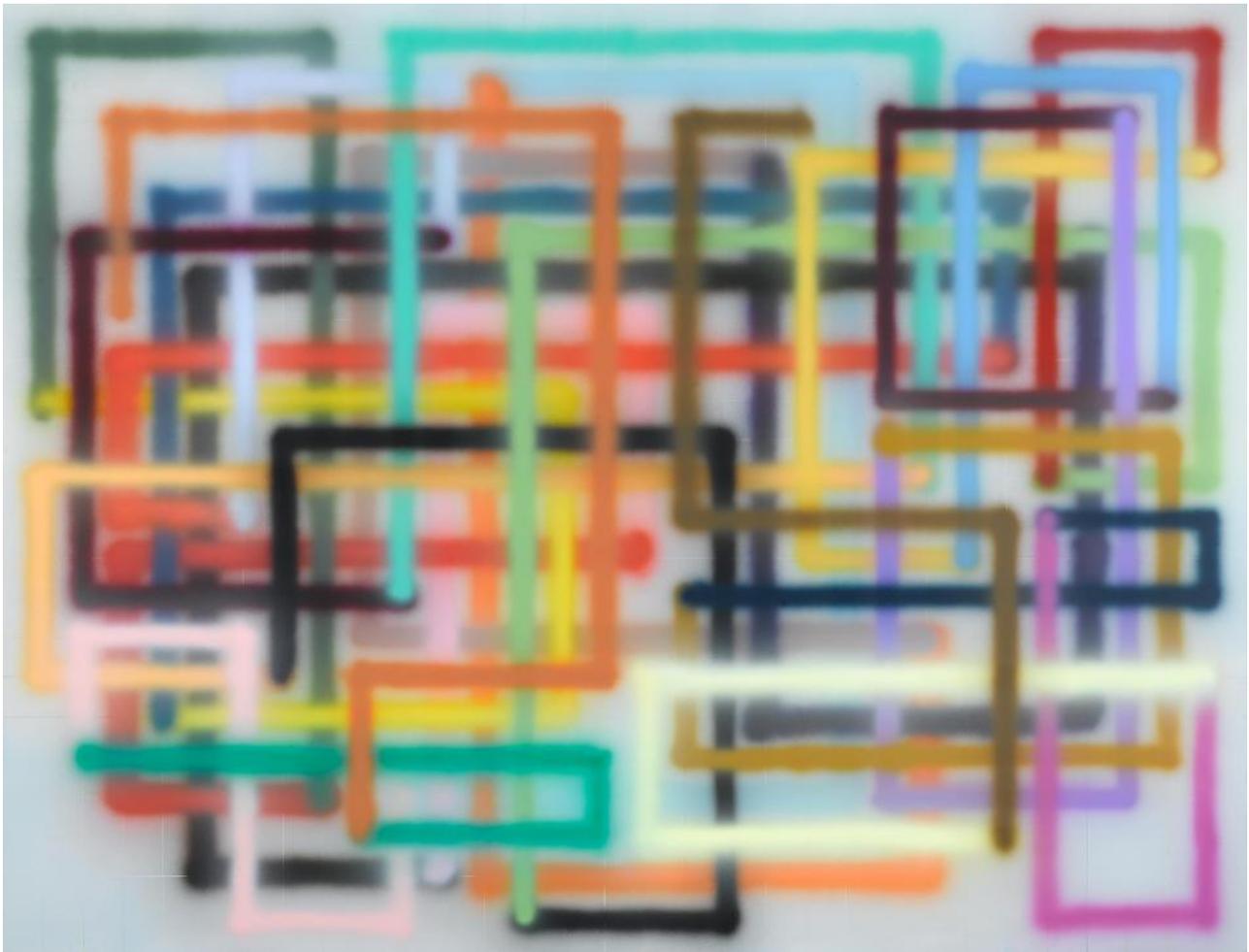
This past year, Frize had a major solo exhibition, *Bernard Frize, Without Remorse*, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, with some 60 artworks presenting the multiple facets of his work, from his beginnings in 1977 up until his most recent creations, and a trilogy of shows at Galerie Perrotin in Tokyo, Paris and New York, which marks 25 years of collaboration with the gallery. He recalls meeting Emmanuel Perrotin when the gallerist was just 19 years old; they have since built up a relationship based on trust: "He was sleeping in his small gallery space. The gallery has developed so much that now I hardly see him. But I feel comfortable here because I know that my work is appreciated and supported." However, he always feels awkward at exhibition openings, saying, "What I like the most is making paintings for myself, so each exhibition for me is very painful. The painting is the easy part of the artist's job, the part you could do at home, or speak to your friends about your work. But each time you have to engage with another type of public and bring the work outside of your world into their world, that's a bit difficult for me, like opening up my kimono and showing my belly."



Rami, 1993, acrylic, mother-of-pearl, ink and resin on canvas, 205 × 194 cm

Photo André Morin © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

While aspiring to an ordinary type of painting, Frize creates beautiful, colorful art without meaning to. He has a complicated relationship with color: his canvases are saturated with multiple shades, but he can hardly be labeled a colorist. Swearing by an indifference to color, he refutes it as a vehicle for expression, yet it has become his trademark and he paints with as many colors as possible to avoid having to make a choice “because I don’t think painting is a matter of taste. I noticed that a collector was just matching his curtains with the color of my painting. I wasn’t interested by this type of decoration. People buy blue if they like blue or red if they like red, but I’m not interested in that. It’s not what I think painting is about.”



Oma, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 240.5 × 310 cm

Photo courtesy of Centre Pompidou, MNAMCCI / Philippe Migeat / Dist. RMN-GP © Bernard Frize/Adagp, Paris 2019

Full of paradoxes, there's a certain restlessness and insatiable curiosity about Frize. Has he seen an evolution in his ideas over the decades? "No," he replies candidly. "Sometimes I look at my work and I think I'm always doing the same thing and it doesn't make me happy. I've the feeling it's always the same preoccupation even if the images are very different, but maybe one is always trapped in the same thing our whole lives long." Nevertheless, he'll continue to paint in his quest to find a meaning for his practice and as long as he's having fun, like a child at play, for painting was the only discipline that ever interested him. "I found pleasure in painting and pleasure looking at paintings," he says. "What intrigued me also was that this flat surface with not very many possibilities had been the place for so many paintings before me and probably so many paintings after me that it's just amazing because the number of decisions are very reduced. It's like a game: there are rules and you can't bypass the rules, but still you can continue to play. I find that really interesting."