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Painting Stripped Bare by the Photographer

For the contemplative man the back is of more interest than the front.

Pierre Reverdy, *Le Livre de mon bord*

Façades

Since the late 1980s, Philippe Gronon has been developing a body of work whose principal instrument is the view camera. From shutter release to print, he has combined the specific resources of gelatin silver and digital processes in accordance with the planned result. His formal repertoire is generally chosen from the spheres of advanced technology (rocket engines, satellite dishes, X-ray plates, etc.), instruments of trade (safes, freight scales, quotation boards, etc.), objects and apparatuses used for movement (elevator doors and panels), or the transmission of knowledge or light (X-ray plates, developing trays, amplifiers, blackboards, printing carriages, lithographic stones, etc.). In the main, the objects that interest him thus have a function of physical or mental transition, of exchange, passage or communication.

Most of these series are done in black and white. Colour only came into his work in the early 2000s. The objects are photographed frontally and fill the whole surface of the image. This framing totally eliminates context, anecdote or picturesqueness (which is usually what makes a traditional photograph interesting, or rather, what viewers usually respond to).

This way of taking photographs also changes the relation to the real generally associated with photography. Not that it makes the object unreal, since the work, done on a view camera with impeccable precision, shows us each and every detail actual size, but because the subject thus photographed, outside any identifiable situation, shown frontally and therefore without perspective or cast shadow, appears as an ambiguous subject that asserts both the realism of the format and the exactitude of its details and, at the same time, its flatness as a two-dimensional photographic image.

In everyday life these objects, which are transitional, generally go unnoticed. They are insignificant. Turned into photographic images in such a way, they suddenly assert themselves and acquire a powerful, hieratic presence. Adhesion to the objects’ actual format and the graphic power that results produce an over-objectification that compels the viewer’s gaze, inciting them to scan the slightest detail and, at the same time, to consider what the façade hides and shows, what is being played out there, the meaning of these objects, what they say about human activity and thought.

Philippe Gronon’s photography is never unequivocal. It cannot be summed up in the capture of an active or a decisive moment, nor is it coterminous with its visual effects: like any work of art, it offers several levels of interpretation and interpretation.

When he presents us with the image of these objects bearing the marks of their use – the pinches from the clips in the developing trays, the scratches on the metal or leather of the desks at the BNF (1992), the Vatican Library (1995) or the Bibliothèque Mazarine (1996) – he is showing us what are like pictures of surfaces alive with signs, visually interesting in their own right. But, at the same time, by a kind of mental ellipsis, the viewer is impelled to think about the activity attested by these surfaces, that is to say, about the work of thought and creation.

This operation, a form of metonymy, is at its most developed in the series of *Chariots de composition* (Printing Carriages) from the Imprimerie Nationale (2000): while we cannot read Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in these images, materially they do give us the contents of the entire book, a book of lead containing all the letters set out page by page their cases. A work of the mind presented in the form of a solid, massive object by the intermediary of its photographic image. Endowing a mental perspective with prosaic, tangible form: that is what happens when On Kawara uses big printed volumes to materialise an idea that eludes mental representation: *A Million Years*.

The *tableau*

With most of the objects chosen by the artist, we are confronted with facades. Surfaces that give a glimpse of a subjacent apparatus (*Amplis*, 2003–5) or a powerful effect of matter (*Ascenseur* [Elevator] *nº 1, 526 West 26th Street, New York*, 2004). If the instruments he uses are those of the photographer, the artist’s activity is underpinned by the question of the *tableau*, or picture object. It is in this light that he chooses his subjects, that he perceives them and goes about elaborating their image.

The series of *Tableaux noirs* (Blackboards, 1996–2004) is exemplary of this fusion of the didactic, transitional object and painting. In terms of didactic process, it brings into play the palimpsest; pictorially, it is founded on the evocative power of line standing out against a flat surface. What we see evokes with variable intensities a rough surface, a monochrome, gestural abstraction, even landscape painting.

This relation sometimes becomes even more explicit when the title plays on words, as in the *Tableaux de cotation*, *Tableaux noirs*, *Tableaux de mouvements*, or *Tableaux électriques*. That is why he titled his exhibition at Galerie Barnoud, held in February-May 2012 and exhibiting two of his pieces in counterpoint to exhibitions at the Musée Magnin and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, *Jouer sur les deux tableaux* – meaning, hedging one’s bets, or having it both ways).

When we take Gronon’s work as a whole, it becomes clear that this orientation is perceptible in nearly all his pieces, and that it has become increasingly manifest with each new series. Apart from the analogy-seeking reflex triggered by the nature of the surface shown to us by the photographs in their every last detail (the big doors of the lift in black and white have this strikingly pictorial quality), the polarisation towards painting is revealed, too, in the choice of forms. The horizontal forms make us see landscapes. The series of *Hublots* (Portholes, 1994), *Moteurs* *de fusées* (Rocket Engines, 1998), and *Antennes satellites* (Satellite Dishes, 1998) can be read as tondos. The *Pierres lithographiques* (Lithographic Stones, 2000–1) can, by the same effect of synecdoche, be identified with engravings. Most of the series that emphasise surface effects feature objects that are powerfully framed (safes, portholes, lift doors, amplifiers, cutting mats, photographic basins).

With the *Tableaux de mouvements du Chrysler Building* (Control Panels, Chrysler Building, 2004), the introduction of colour, the marble, gilt and brass and the red dots of the diodes blurred slightly by the vibrations of their light, and engraved copper framing, all affirm this assimilation.

The series of *Grattoirs* (Matchbox Strips, 2007), resulting from an unusual practice wherein the objects are simply scanned, comes even closer to painting: the trace of the artist’s gesture has a graphic quality and the edges of coloured paper surrounding the field give the overall images a quality reminiscent of early modernist compositions.

This process of scanning was also used for the *Martyrs* (Cutting Mats) series (2015) and the recent reprise of the *Cuvettes de développement* (2016). But then this relation between photography and painting was already stated quite unambiguously in the *Vitrines* (Sélestat, 2003).

The *Versos*

The *Versos*, begun in 2005, therefore constitute a logical sequel to the series that preceded it. At the same time, however, they effect a kind of reversal of perspective. By choosing paintings, Gronon was taking an object whose value lies, precisely, in its façade. And yet here what he shows is not the front, as with his other objects, but the back, and, because these are paintings, colour is *de rigueur*, as is the way he surrounds the image with white, as in traditional photography. Suddenly, instead of showing us the obverse, he takes us behind the scenes. He approaches the masterpiece via the scullery, the wings, the nuts and bolts, as he did with the printing carriages at the Imprimerie Nationale for Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. For the visitor, the same perceptual and mental mechanism comes into play here, except that this time we are really in the field of painting. As with any realistic photograph, our interest focuses on the object represented but, since it is a painting, we examine and attempt to interpret the object in relation to pictoriality.

As is often the case in creative undertakings, the idea was sparked by a banal, random gesture, by the reflex on the part of the photographer with no further sense of immediate consequences: Gronon followed his habitual protocol in photographing, frontally and full-frame, the back of an anonymous old photo that had been mounted on yellow canvas and fixed to a stretcher. Maybe it was just because he found the colour and texture of this surface interesting.

This first piece plays tricks on us. By making us shift from the photograph on the front to the canvas that is its verso, it takes us back, thematically, into the world of painting. In order to brooch the theme of painting, the obvious thing for an artist whose medium is photography was to start with the back of a photograph! The interpretation we then make of it is shaped in part by a century’s frequentation of “poor” abstraction, by an interest in the materiality to which modern and contemporary works have accustomed our gaze and towards which they have guided our attention.

For the second and subsequent pieces in the *Versos* series, Gronon photographed works in a private collection, that of Yves Rouart, the great grandson of Berthe Morisot. Some of these paintings are by unidentified artists (nos. 1, 9 and 11). Again, the work focuses on the choice of object: an old canvas, hung on a stretcher, without considering the recto.

The decision to take identifiable works was taken only later, but this aspect has come increasingly to the fore as he has systematically explored museum collections. Rather than the plastic qualities of an unidentified object, the interest shifts to well-known cultural treasures and the result gains in complexity as it integrates other signs and markers.

This approach is more risky because, when the identity of the recto becomes known and is accompanied by more, and more noteworthy information, the documentary interest also grows and threatens to overwhelm. The greater this interest, the longer it takes us to really look at the photographic work. This predominance of the anecdotal is necessarily heightened by the fame and popularity of the referent. Gronon now began to include this new parameter in his project, choosing painters whose works are genuine milestones in the history of art, from Raphael to On Kawara via Courbet and, more recently, Picasso.

In terms of quality, the first photo in the series is no less interesting than all the others in the series that have followed. It is a good photograph, a work as worthy in itself as the next one Where things get complicated is when Gronon points us towards a reference familiar to us all. When he calls on more than our simple contemplation of its presence and its visual qualities. When we know from memory, more or less clearly, the work that is on the front, as well as its historical position, the artist behind it and the commonplaces associated with it, there is a new interplay between the image of the back and the clues it affords regarding the painting. In this way, the series evolves gradually towards a play of concealing/revealing that gains amplitude in proportion to the references. Gronon’s choice of painting is thus guided not only by the particular appearance of the verso, that is, its intrinsic visual interest, but also by what it says about the history of the painting and the artist.

Back and front are equal

As I have said, the way we look at these *Versos* today is conditioned by our knowledge of history, but also by over a century of habituation to abstract painting. Over the years, Tachisme, Art Informel, gestural art, Arte Povera and matterism have taught our eye how to enjoy the contemplation of such objects. With the help of photography, now it is the turn of the verso to “make an image.”

It is, then, possible to approach some of these versos with the criteria we use to appreciate a painting. For example, on the back of the *Vision of Ezekiel* by Raphael (*Verso no. 34*, Musée du Louvre), the effects of colour and surface are, pictorially speaking, quite remarkable. The analogical gaze that we bring to bear from the perspective of abstraction is the same as that which guided artists such as Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé to their practice of *décollage* [tearing down posters] and sampling. With *Verso no 20* (*Sans titre*, *Raymond Hains*, collection Mamac, Nice), the work verges on reversibility. The observation of this equivalence among the artists who practised *décollage* would lead François Dufrêne to take the experience a little further and approach the *décollages* from behind or, to use his term, from the *underside* (*Dessous d’affiches* [Undersides of Posters], 1973).

In the case of *Verso no 34* and that of *Verso no 20*, the particular aspect of a metal object facilitates this analogical reading. It is close to the effect of surface that creates the visual interest of *Ascenseur no. 1*, as mentioned above. Thus, the photography/painting relation is an endless loop. Bear in mind, too, that Hains came to his practice of sampling torn posters via photography.

This relation is all the more obvious in that for certain works, conceived at a time of analytical reflection on the picture objects (the Supports/Surfaces group being one example), the pictorial process has been substituted for the subject of traditional painting. Because the canvas has been worked using the techniques of soaking, steeping, capillarity and transfer, the pictorial qualities of the work’s verso are just as convincing as those of its front. That is the case with no. 39 (*Croix* [Cross],Noël Dolla, collection of the Musée d’Art Moderne de Saint-Étienne), even if this work is, rather exceptionally, fixed on a stretcher and done with a brush.

The further we get in the modern period, the more artists have tended to relegate the signature (and sometimes even the title) to the back of the painting so as not to affect the integrity of the pictorial surface. (Over the years, the signature on the front of the canvas has thus become the preserve of Sunday painters.)

For any viewer au fait with contemporary art, the sight of On Kawara’s signature in the centre of the canvas is enough to identify his famous *Date Paintings*. And the holes combined with the drips on the wood of no. 22 will remind them of the equally famous shooting paintings by Niki de Saint Phalle.

On a more documentary level, observing the back of modern and contemporary paintings (that is, when the stretcher and back of the canvas are not completely blocked from view by the conservation apparatus) may sometimes inform us about the state of mind presiding over the work’s creation.

The care or negligence in the treatment of the support (the nature and quality of the stretcher, of the canvas, the tension, the precision of the nailing) give an idea of the importance accorded by the artist to the picture-object in question, or, on the contrary, of his prioritisation of the subject, of the gesture, of the idea, in his activity as a painter.

On the biographical level, this may also gives us some clues as to his economic circumstances. Finally, light may be shed on the context of the work by another graphic or handwritten intervention by the artist. (*Verso nº 32, Victor Brauner, Amour propulsateur*, collection of the Musée d’Art Moderne de Saint-Étienne).

Seeing what it’s all about (-face)

But the interest of the *Versos* goes further than that: they can be considered with the eye of the aesthete, the historian or even the biographer on the lookout for intriguing anecdotes. There are certainly plenty of labels, commentaries, dedications, inscriptions and notes on the back of each canvas. Usually, the details marked on these versos were written by historians, collectors or curators. They may concern the painter’s life, and in the process tell us about the prejudices of a given period. For example, Michelangelo’s homosexuality is divulged by this euphemistic turn of phrase: “[…] died in Rome in 1564 and never married” (*Verso no 35, Portrait de Michel-Ange,* Bugiardini Giuliano, Musée du Louvre) and the same verso reveals doubts about the person represented (*Autoporrait?*).

Sometimes the involuntary absurdity has to do with the advice of the conservation specialists. On the back of *The Origin of the World* is a label which reads: “Recommendations: this frame has been arranged in a special way to ensure the work’s physical protection and temporise variations in relative humidity” [*sic*.].

Investigations and X-rays

In the field of collecting and museography, the interest in the painting gives considerable weight to investigation and examination. Its details are examined under a magnifying glass, by X-ray, front and back, and any indicator is examined that might provide information about its implementation, the exchanges and the transformations it may have undergone, its changes of ownership, its movements. Before considering the work’s timeless beauty, or rather, its trans-temporal beauty, one can, on the verso, track its life, rediscover the ins and outs of a traversal of time, its trans-generational path, the “traceability” of a work and the way it has traversed the vicissitudes of History.

On the back of a triptych at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon (*Verso nº 45, L’Adoration des Mages* [The Adoration of the Magi], unidentified artist from Antwerp), we can read the name “Goering,” reminding us that this was one of the works “borrowed” by the German marshal. On the back of *Printemps* [Spring] *(Verso nº 14)*, we also learn that, in the midst of the Occupation, French museums were still buying works by Francis Picabia.

When specialists in aesthetics, critics and popularisers have covered every aspect of an artwork, exploration is still possible in and under the surface: new things can be found to say. Beyond (or before) purely aesthetic questions, we are always looking for revelations, whether scientific or historical, or on the level of the market and media scoops. The vocabulary, tools and, sometimes, the methods involved come from the fields of forensics and police investigation. We go hunting for “corrections.” This brings into a play a kind of inquisitive gaze that tracks down the human reality behind the masterpiece. The desire is to know “how it’s done.” This is close to the very contemporary interest in “the making of.” No doubt there is a certain pleasure to be had in revealing the little secrets that enabled something sublime to come about, in putting the magic back in its place, its material contingency. Most likely, there is a kind of iconoclastic drive at work here. It is true, indeed, that behind the perfect façade, the back reveals the mundanity of material circumstances. We discover, for example, that the masterpiece came into being on a makeshift support, on coarse canvas, more or less properly fixed to its impromptu stretcher. Sometimes, even, the verso reveals something in the order of the intimate: a wiping of the brush, the testing of a colour, a drawing, a note recording the artist’s state of mind when he made the painting. This unveiling takes us into the work’s more intimate reaches, into the artist’s inner world. (To be even more intimate, the residents at the sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain* exchanged, not their portraits, but X-rays of their lungs).

Incidentally, the image of the verso also deprives us of the splendour of the framing. On the front, the frame highlights and embellishes, adds emphasis. At the back, it emphasises the prosaic aspect of the apparatus. The back tells us about the history of the work’s transformations and restorations. Stitches inform us that the format of the work has been altered. That the work is sometimes the result of manipulations and operations that took it out of its context.

On the back are placed the indices of the picture’s postings, of its movements and the exhibitions in which it has featured, like medals, like the stamps on a globetrotter’s or adventurer’s passport, their prestige proportional to that of the name of the institutions then or now. But looking on the back also tells us about how the work (and its maker) are treated by those into whose hands it passes, and how it has been considered: incomprehension, cupidity, assertions of authority, speculation, etc.) On the back we read all the practical details, the artifices used to conserve and clean, all those “anti-ageing” operations designed to preserve the freshness of the image. Generally dark, darkened by time, full of what antique dealers call “authenticity,” the verso is the truthful side of the painting.

On the back we can see the disparities between techniques and theories, the policies of conservation: this goes from a simple round piece of cork that helps fit the stretcher under the frame, to the most incredible apparatuses inspired by the work’s market value. Fitted with iron, clad in metal, imprisoned behind bars, some backs look more like fortresses. That is because the concern is both to offer access and to defend: to offer to sight (recto) while providing protection (verso).

These devices tell us a great deal about what is hidden behind art’s cultural, artistic and aesthetic values. They are indicators that make evident what is at stake in the work of art. The protection of what one offers to sight is carefully concealed round the back. Here, Philippe Gronon is prolonging, if from a reverse perspective, the point he was making with his series of safes, *Coffres-forts* (1991), those purely technical objects designed to hide and protect financial value. And this inversion is even more noteworthy in the case of *The Origin of the World*, especially if we consider its eventful history, which long excited the chronicles of art: kept secretively by a famous psychoanalyst, who hid it under another work specially commissioned for this function (a recollection of Goya’s *Maja*?), this mythical painting was finally put on display, for all to see, in a major French museum. It was now the verso that was hidden by an opaque screen with a involuntarily smutty label. A naked vagina on the recto, and a double or triple protection, like armour, on the verso!

The picture of the picture

(a short history of the verso)

On a less anecdotal level, Gronon’s work reminds us of an important tradition. The verso appears regularly in the history of Western painting with varying purposes and meanings. When, in 1670, the Flemish artist Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts painted the verso of a canvas with impeccable realism (oil on canvas, 66.6 x 86.5 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), the recto passed itself off as a verso, the front as the back, in what was exemplary fashion for a trompe l’oeil. Here we have both the pleasure of optical trickery and the celebration of virtuosity, but also a very Baroque reflection on illusion. For this, the mimicry needs to be perfect.

In the historical trompe l’oeil, the illusion is founded, among other factors, on the fact that the representation concerns a prosaic objet, one not worthy of attaining the eminence of great art, or again, a trivial detail, like the fly on the edge of the frame in the *Portrait of a Carthusian* by Petrus Christus (Metropolitan Museum). Of course, this reflection on the conditions of pictorial perception and illusion has been part of painting since its origins. Witness the famous anecdote about Zeuxis and his grapes. Mimetic skill is thus applied to the secondary. For viewers, it therefore seems more likely that the object before them is real rather than an image that has taken the trouble to imitate it with exactitude. The subterfuge is therefore expected to provoke an uncertainty as to its identification. It is in this sense that the picture is a device, a trick. The beholder believes he is seeing a verso when in fact he is looking at a recto, but he is nevertheless facing a real painting (which in turn engenders a hidden verso).

Traditionally, the purpose of a painting was to achieve the most perfect imitation for symbolic purposes, in order to edify, moralise and convey religious doctrine, or simply to offer the pleasure of representation and contemplation. Here, this mimesis is suddenly diverted from its subject. In Gijsbrechts’ painting realism is suddenly diverted from its subject and focused on its purported reverse. It thus escapes its usual purpose and comes across as a game. A gratuitous game? A simple demonstration of know-how? What is the meaning of this demonstration, beyond the obvious complicity between artist and viewer? To question the workings of illusion in a *mise-en-abyme* characteristic of the Baroque and masterfully demonstrate that the essential is hidden, that is, to arouse a desire to see what we know does not exist. The viewer’s pleasure resides in this dizziness. While demonstrating his mastery, the artist reveals his true nature: that of an illusionist, a conjuror.

The painting within the painting

But the most famous verso of the 17th century is the one that occupies part of the foreground in a painting by Velázquez: *Las Meniñas*. Although research carried out after Michel Foucault’s analysis indicate that the work’s initial conception and purpose were quite different, it is of course the last version of this painting that the painter’s transformations bequeathed to posterity which is of interest to us here.

This play of mirrors characteristic of Baroque thought contains everything: what is behind, what is in front, secondary figures – watching the painter at work, occupying the centre of the painting and giving the work its title –, monarchs – the hidden subject of the work being executed before us –, the artist at work and his spectators – implicated in the scene by this verso and by the gaze directed upon them by one of the retinue –, but also invisible, facing the back of the painting that they cannot see. The verso is one of the major elements making it possible to institute as the true subject what escapes the gaze. That is to say, to hide the circumstantial image of painting, the recto, in favour of the true subject: the act of painting and its meaning, the play of illusion that it engenders. But also – which is what Gronon replays in this series — the point is to withhold from sight the image of the subject of the painting in order to create another image out of that absence.

That is indeed the role of the verso: to escape the image as pretext, to free itself from the subject’s fascination with what lies beyond. By making a screen with the verso, and by putting in place a verso/mirror apparatus, Vélazquez installs a complex network of circulations, of inversions and reversals and correspondences, in which the positions of pre-eminence are constantly being interchanged, revealing the true depth of the painting, as act, function and meaning. In this way, as Foucault wrote, “representation […] can offer itself as representation in its pure form.” Here, we are at the heart of the Baroque, but this representation of representation also touches on a very modern conception of art: the distance and analytical thought implied in the act of painting and its interpretation.

Over the centuries there have been many reprises of this painting, a good number of which have been only genre scenes. (If we take, for example, the case of *L’Atelier du peintre Abel de Pujol* by Adrienne Marie Grandpierre-Deverzy (1798–1869, Musée Marmottan), the distancing is lost; we are no longer in a way of thinking that institutes and dismantles a mechanism but in a banal academic painting. The picturesque has swept away all depth of thought.)

The painting of *Las Meniñas* interests our modern sensibility because it is analytical, in the sense that it offers the gaze a path that goes well beyond simple compositional cleverness, and speaks to us of its own process. The questions that it opens have been posed with increasing acuity in modern and contemporary painting that questions the raison d’être of painting in and through painting.

By raising the question of its meaning, of its role and nature, we activate and perpetuate the pictorial function. Painting questions itself about itself and, at the same time, the artist takes a dominant role in the work. If he already appears in a strategic position in the system of *Las Meniñas*, the contemporary gaze now places him at the centre of the artwork of which he may become – as is the case in performance – at once the subject, object and instrument.

The tradition of *Vanitas* painting, of still lifes and trompe-l’oeil, directly inspired by the Flemish minor masters of the 15th century, was reprised at the end of the 19th by a generation of American painters. Their work therefore included versos, notably in the case of *John Haberle* (1856–1933) (*Imitation*, 1887, *Torn in Transit*, 1888–89), William Michael Harnett (1851–92), John Frederick Peto (1854–1907) (*The Great Orator*, 1904) and a few of their successors.

*Mise en abyme* of the trompe-l’oeil

The interest of these paintings derives from the cleverness in producing illusion. The work of these artists, described as “hyperillusionistic painting,” is part of the heritage of several American painters working in the second half of the 20th century who sought to break with then dominant current of abstraction. They analysed questions of perception and were interested in the process of constructing the painting, and used images featuring everyday, unsung objects in the tradition of still lifes. The historical still life and trompe l’oeil are echoed in the banal objects that Pop Art and Junk Art use to construct their paintings.

To this heritage can added, mainly, that of Cubism and the work of Stuart Davis who, as of the 1920s (*Electric Bubble* and *Odol* date from 1924), opened the way to Pop Art. Following this line we find the verso in several works by Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Philip Guston. With Jasper Johns, painting is constructed in the process of being deconstructed. It brings together pigments, words, real objects and their representation, it splits, divides and develops in three dimensions and reveals its subterfuges. The aberrations of perception and the traps of illusion accumulate in the form of quotations (cf. the famous duck-rabbit analysed by E. H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* [1956] or again the profile cups). The artist integrates milestones from art history into the work, mixing the reference to matter, the enigma of perception with the most literal realism. The verso, the back at the front, appears here both represented (*Souvenir II*, 1964) and sometimes as reality, integrated into the collage. Symptomatically, in *According to What* (1964) it is a reversed canvas – a verso, therefore– that bears the title of the work and the signature.

In the conception of contemporary paintings, ever since American Abstract Expressionists, painting has borne within its very material and in its touch its raison d’être, outside representation. And when representation is reintroduced, this is done in order to bring it into play analytically, to evaluate its role in perception and in relation to language.

In their efforts to break with the heroism and sublimity of Abstract Expressionism, the Pop artists, chose their subjects from among everyday objects of American life – away from “high culture.” They used the techniques of comic books and advertising, radically depriving themselves of mimetic virtuosity and effects of the sublime.

But the banal is not so insignificant, so devoid of symbolism as it may seem. Every time a stretcher is represented – and they appear frequently in Roy Lichtenstein – it is the whole phenomenon of Painting that is being invoked. To do this, one can only empty it of its images, or turn it round (*Stretcher Frame with Cross Bars III*, 1968, oil and magna on canvas, Metropolitan Museum).

The handling of the painting, from which its mimetic subject has been voided, can also be found in another recurring image in his work, the mirror. Unlike the ones in the Vélazquez painting, Lichtenstein’s mirrors are vacant. This stratagem is at its height when two mirrors facing each other vehicle only infinite emptiness (*Mirror in Front of a Mirror #2*). Likewise, there is a total distancing when he reprises the themes of “hyperillusionistic painting” in canvases that he continues to call trompe-l’oeils (*Trompe-l’oeil with Léger Head and Paintbrush*, 1973). Illusionism here is the effect not of any kind of virtuosity but of a theme that can be played on reflexively. That is what happens when a canvas supposedly representing a verso is torn and reveals the image of its own stretcher (*Stretcher Frame Revealed Beneath Painting of a Stretcher Frame*, 1968).

The endless and unendable recycling of the subject frees painting. The figure refers to the nature of the phenomenon confronting the beholder. It can be read immediately, like a pictograph, and is no longer an obstacle to painting. In Lichtenstein, as in Philip Guston, modernity affirms itself by undercutting illusion. When, leaving abstraction for imagery inspired by funnies, Guston chose as the subject of his paintings a canvas turned towards and leaning against his studio wall (*Painting on the Floor*, 1978, *Reverse*, 1979), the meticulous precision of the representation, which was vital to the working of Gijsbrechts’s illusionism, was no longer needed. However, in spite of the distance instituted by the manner – that of underground cartoonists – the work clearly positions itself on the side of realism, and even a kind of naturalism.

The painting turned away from us is a familiar image that recalls traditional studio scenes. If, in the case of Lichtenstein, the verso speaks to us of painting, in Guston’s case it speaks more about the artist, not only about his activity but no doubt also about his condition and the position he takes in society. This was already the case with the young Cézanne (*The Stove in the Studio*, 1865, National Gallery, London). This way of painting tends to reintroduce an idiosyncratic, emotional dimension into the work.

And since– to paraphrase Clement Greenberg’s famous remark – a canvas on a stretcher is (already or still) a painting, the verso has become a frequent sight in contemporary painting. Here we need only mention one of the most famous examples, the blue verso by the explorer that is Jean-Michel Sanejouand (*Monochrome bleu derrière, toile de bâche, châssis en bois*, [Monochrome Blue Behind, Canvas Sheet, Wooden Stretcher] 1964, Galerie Art : Concept, Paris). Or again, the way Sigmar Polke treats some of his works in order to make the structure of the stretcher appear through the canvas, fusing recto and verso.

Fool’s game

*As he was casually going through a batch of old canvases, the heart of bric-brac merchant Albert Moindre skipped a beat. He rubbed his eyes, pinched himself, but there was no doubting it: in front of him was something thought to have been lost forever: Mona Lisa’s back!*

Éric Chevillard, note dated 8 January 2011, in “L’autofictif prend un coach,” Ed. Acte Vengeur.

For going on half a century, painting has been seen as both the repressed of modernity and a referent for nearly all other artistic mediums. The collective memory now accommodates a certain number of referential works whose image, free of any contingent materiality (format, materials, etc.), is transmitted by a great variety of mediums. Vic Muniz has set about reinterpreting these popular works using surprising materials such as chocolate, sauces, caviar and modelling clay. He then exhibits enlarged photos of his recreations.

By a surprising coincidence, on 6 September 2008, the day Philippe Gronon exhibited his first *Versos* in Paris (Galerie Dominique Fiat), Muniz was inaugurating an exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co in New York titled *Verso* and featuring the versos of famous works of art, including *Starry Night* by Van Gogh, *Woman with a Parrot* by Courbet, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* by Picasso, *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by Seurat, *Red Room* by Matisse, as well as the verso of several very well-known pictures by photojournalists.

Rather than photographs, this show consisted of an installation of three-dimensional objects in a carefully designed display. Set askew, on chocks and supports, against the gallery walls, the backs of twenty-three masterpieces ready to be hung were laid out before visitors who, if their very understandable curiosity impelled them to look at the recto, would have discovered that there was none. That they had “lost face.” That these were pieces of trickery, meticulously crafted facsimiles reconstituted with perfect precision, right down to the smallest detail, made by a team of highly skilled craftsmen to whom the artist had entrusted the photographs he had taken with the agreement of the museums in question. The result was doubly frustrating: viewers had to accept the fact of seeing nothing, of seeing only the back of what never existed.

As young man, Vic Muniz’s only access to masterpieces was through reproductions in books and magazines. The works he had chosen were ones that made the deepest impression, essential parts of his cultural and emotional repertoire, whose title alone is enough to conjure up an image in his memory.

This piece of work by Muniz raises multiple questions regarding the status of a masterpiece. In the first instance, it questions the place of art in the universal psyche, probing the difference between creation, the reality of the work, and culture, but also the status of the work of art perceived as an immaterial entity, as well as the links between myth and culture and the troubling issue of fetishism once the myth has been constituted. Facing these backs of masterpieces, we have the momentary illusion that we are seeing mythical, even mystical objects.

The emotion felt at first glance is followed by disappointment. The myth is abruptly called into question. Masterpieces are like famous people. The feeling of familiarity assumed by a person under the sway of the myth drives them to total indiscretion. They probe the verso of a masterpiece the way they open a tabloid to pore over the private life of celebrities.

In a comment on his work, Muniz also mentioned his desire to confront detractors of modern painters who claim that “my seven year-old daughter could have done that” (the recto) by depriving them of what gives the painting its artistic impact and reducing the work to its artisanal input. The back is in effect much more complicated to reproduce than the work itself. Here, the viewer’s uncertainty has to do not with identification, for the piece is a perfect replica of an object, but with the nature of that object, which turns out to be factitious insofar as it has no recto.

Truth is on the verso

In Internet sales of paintings we are often given two images of equal size and importance: the “noble” side and the verso, which is shown in order to authenticate the work. And we know, by the same token, that forgers sometimes used old supports, keeping the verso. The verso draws us toward the object, the prosaic, the heterogeneous. Labels, the wood of the stretcher, wedges, the texture and colour of the raw canvas, nails and hooks, signatures and written annotations, sometimes colour tests and bits of paint where the brush was wiped and stitches, etc.: if we value the illusionist character of pictorial figuration, then the verso represents the material part of the painting, giving it real volume and depth, while the illusion of depth is to be found on the recto. With Muniz, the forgery bears on what, precisely, is supposed to attest the work’s veracity.

There is thus a point of articulation that is shared by Gronon’s *Versos* and Muniz’s *Verso* series: that of the mythical presence of a work in the collective consciousness and, consequently, the interest of approaching this myth by its most concrete and most neglected side. In this sense, the choices made in this or that collection and in the chronological sequence of a museum have a certain importance. Art, as we understand it today, goes back no further than the late 18th century. The way we commonly conceive of it is linked to the coming of the museum, which shifted the painting’s destination from the patron (under the ancien régime) to all citizens, from the private sphere to the general public.

With Gronon, however, the question of masterpiece status arises only once the series has been started. And although this dimension was integrated into it, it is not a key parameter in his choice of canvases to photograph. If a work can be selected for its popularity, it brings only an additional meaning which undeniably plays a role in the series as a whole. For Gronon, including *The Origin of the World* or Leonardo’s *Saint Anne* was the obvious thing to do. Nevertheless, his choices continue to operate beyond myth, at a point where Muniz’s work would lose its meaning. Gronon bases his choice of verso on several criteria: a selective exploration of a museum or a collection, chronology, the medium used for the work, etc. The most decisive, ultimately, is the visual interest of its photographic transfer, which becomes an artwork in its own right. For, as we have seen, whether the verso belongs to a famous work or an anonymous one changes nothing in the quality of the resulting photograph.

Turnabout

Continuing his research at the turn of 2016, Gronon decided to photograph a few works at the Musée Picasso in Paris. He was interested in the visual quality of certain backs, and in particular the works in which the paint went through the canvas, leaving large marks on the verso – *Mandoline sur une table* [Mandolin on a Table] 1924, oil and sand on canvas (*Verso nº 61*) – in which white forms repeat and reverse, while reducing them to their essence, the most resonant figures in a luxuriant painting: *Femmes à la toilette* [Women at their Toilette], 4 January 1956 (*Verso no. 59*). In the case of the still life *Verre et pipe* [Glass and Pipe], 1918 (*Verso nº 60*), we can make out nearly the entire picture on the back of the canvas. Picasso outlines his subject, which is constructed like a geometrical architectural structure, with a wide white margin that appears on the verso like a cast shadow of the stretcher, distorts a composition that is only just paler than on the recto. The photograph thus reveals ghosts. But these images which appear through the canvas also take on the appearance of negatives, confronting the photographer with his own practice.

We come now to a third set of works, all created in a very short period, which literally reverse the situation. These are the eight *Tableaux reliefs* created at the Villa Bachlyk in Juan-les-Pins between 14 and 27 August 1930: *Composition au gant* [Compsition with Glove], *Baigneuse debout* [Standing Bather], *Baigneuse et profil* [Bather in Profile], *Visage aux deux profils* [Face with Two Profiles], *Baigneuse couchée* [Reclining Bather], *Composition*, *Objet à la feuille de palmier* [Object with Palm Leaf], and *Paysage aux bateaux* [Landscape with Boats] (*Versos nos 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57* and *58*). These pictures were made by sticking and sewing together diverse objects (plants, wood, gloves, string), all covered with sand. On the other side of the fabric the thread of the stitching forms random networks that are perceived as so many graphic signs that are indeed, perfectly expressive. Picasso worked with ready-primed commercial canvas (5 Figure Standard) but, with the exception of the *Composition* dated 21 August (*Verso nº 56*), which has sewing on the front of the canvas, he made his compositions on the verso, using the stretcher as a frame that is part of the work and highlights the relief. The entire surface, with the objects, canvas and stretcher, is covered with a mixture of glue and sand, sometimes lightly tinted, which renders and unifies the whole.

Once again, the painter’s freedom and invention overturn all the codes: Picasso painted versos and Gronon, in setting out to photograph the back, finds himself having to photograph the back of these canvases. The graphic effect of the stitching is drawn on a white coating that has yellowed somewhat and is spattered with traces from the work. To this are added small reliefs in the sandy mixture that came through the hole of the stitches. These recto-versos thus display a very busy surface. A face as pictorial as those of the *Tableaux noirs* [Blackboards] or *Écritoires* [Writing Tables].

Photography and painting

The *Versos* series is perfectly in line with Gronon’s earlier photographic work. Once again we are dealing with an object of transmission with tells us about creation by means of its material interface. We are in the same register as for the *Écritoires*, the *Tableaux noirs*, the *Pierres lithographiques* and the *Cuvettes de développement*. By photographing the back of the painting, he offers us the image of a technological device that enables the creation of the masterpiece. By switching the view from front to back, he goes beyond metonymy. As with the carriages at the Imprimerie Nationale carrying Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, he substitutes the work of art with an image of the impedimenta from which the sublime may come about. By the virtue of the photographic medium, which will in turn freeze the object as an image, the back of the object becomes the icon.

Never in his work does Gronon strain for effects, or seek to provoke emotion. He strives to grasp the object, which is meticulously chosen and meticulously framed, with the greatest legibility or – in photographic terms – with the best possible definition. There is, for this, no privileged moment, as there is in the photography of events. The meaning of what the photograph conveys is never either betrayed or hidden. But it is, although fixed in its literal obviousness, disconnected from its context and from the function that is its raison d’être. In this way, the versos are like the *Moteurs de fusées Ariane* (Ariane Rocket Engines, 1998), or again like the *Lampes scialytiques* [Scialytic Lamps] or *Projecteurs de l’Opéra de Paris éteints* [Spotlights at the Paris Opera, Out] (2015), at once obvious and enigmatic.

This clinical objectivity allows us to read, above all, the subject in its physical reality. In other words: visually. It is only after this literal observation that we will consider its function or, for the verso, the image it carries on the recto. The painting is, in this sense, a subject like any other. I will not go back over the equivocal exchanges and relations between painting and photography that have existed ever since the invention of the latter. By choosing the back of the painting, Gronon adds yet a little more complexity to the incestuous relations between these two artistic mediums. From the back of a photograph transferred onto the stretcher of a painting, he goes to the back of paintings as a way of creating photographic works.

And since the last few years have witnessed an unprecedented revolution in photographic technologies and their mixing, photography has, in practical terms, entered the field of the graphic arts. While photographs are still taken using view cameras, digital now prevails over analogue and techniques for rendering – or rather, reconstituting – the image are increasingly close to the field of painting (work on the full range of colour, the printing of the image on matt, pure cotton paper using pigment inks, etc.).

Scanner and brush

Eighty years after the publication of Walter Benjamin’s famous text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which is being flogged to death today, we are seeing a new phenomenon, a historical shift which has occurred in all creative fields: the latest generation of creators, whether musicians, artists or actors and performers, have started working directly with already-made works (sampling, mixing, collage, inkjet aggregation of details sampled in various places), but also by using instruments of reproduction, as DJs do with their turntables and vinyl discs. Today, artists, whether painters or photographers, increasingly use scanners to make their works.

In Gronon’s case, this began with the series of *Grattoirs* (2007) and continued with the *Martyrs* (2015). But the most remarkable aspect is when the technology changes with a given series. Starting on the *Cuvettes de développement*, Gronon began by using gelatin silver technique (2001). When he returned to the series in 2016, he made the pictures by placing the objects directly on the scanner, thereby blurring the borders.

If Gronon’s *Versos* have an undeniable documentary interest, this should not be allowed to mask the profundity of the reflection articulated here, which considers our relation to the image, to painting, and the way we look at it. In the same way, the interest of the pictorial subjects addressed in this series cannot overshadow the aesthetic experience we have when we see these photographic works and register their inherent visual qualities.