

Bilal Chahal

There is a technical accomplishment and maturity of vision in the work of the Dutch artist Bilal Chahal which is strangely at odds with the profile of his life and the precocity of his early development. The various twistings of fate have brought him through a premature fame, to a vision, guided by his belief in the need for solitary and careful work, that is clearly out of sink with the complex and overwhelming dispersal of the image in contemporary culture. Chahal has chosen for painting; away from the blitz of image production, and the speed of much technical reproduction of images. He has taken a relatively ascetic path, one could say a movement towards emptiness and renunciation, which has brought his work to a concentration and resolve that already bespeaks a resolution of two very independent tendencies which were part of his early teaching. Already his commitment is to a uniting of values and facts in painting, a bringing together of highly registered sensation, and the aesthetic values of a slow and patient craftsman that tends towards self effacement; a murmur of independence which allows the work the silent reserve in which it acts on the feelings of others. Not only does Chahal try to collapse the fork of difference between fact and value, surrendering painting neither to the brute facticity of self productive gesture, nor, to an improbable doctrine of minimalism which eliminates action in favour of overwhelming aesthetic considerations, but, he has in a measured way brought to the work of painting an exquisite rhythmical and decorative line that has balanced his highly charged and penetrating absorption in the emotion of pure colour, in some recent work, it is as if the resonance of the profound colourism has been put in harness to an organising and delicate calligraphy which literally allows the colour field become vivid and animated in values of pure tones that seems released into a lyrical and highly pleasing organisation of the surface.

In outlining his development it is important to emphasise that his achievement has been won both through, and against, his specific pedagogic inheritance. The first conflict is intimately caught in his own report on the relation to the teachers who were active in recognising his early and highly precocious talent, which manifested itself without the cushioned level of support that is now so often available to young artists, with subsidies

or direct family contribution. Acknowledging the impact of his first teacher he suggests that the emphasis was on rules, a teacher to whom he went after his removal to Curaçao at the age of twelve, after a childhood spent in Tripoli without any formal artistic training. Luigi Pinedo was a strict disciplinarian, a martinet of the palette, insisting that students learn the mixing of colours by numbers, and from the account of Chahal, a man given to temperament and histrionic display. The relationship between teacher and pupil was short-lived. Another influence entered, again the first crossroads or fork in the life of Chahal, in the person of Raed Selman, with whom he studied for the next three years, that is 1992-1995.

The figure of Selman belongs to the novel of the picaro, entering and leaving, and re-entering the young artist's life at different times, and evoking a debt of gratitude, and a kind of supernumerary role as guide and challenge to Chahal. At an age when one might read Hamlet for the first time, and be all the parts, and even strongly identify with Hamlet without even understanding the language or what it means to "put an antic disposition on", Chahal was to dramatically experience the vertigo of freedom with the tutelage of Selman, who, as a friend of the artist's father and with his insistence of a *vers libre* approach to the finding of one's emotional and artistic expression, acted as a strong counterpoint to the more rigid conformism of Pinedo. Later, in a kind of dialectical figure, Chahal would come under an altogether different influence. With Selman he moved to the much more fluid and rapid medium of acrylic and a more fluent pathos in relation to colour. Selman had studied at the Art Academy in Beirut in the 1970's, from a Lebanese background. Part of his early teaching was to request the student to make large marks and traces with charcoal on sheets of white paper. He also insisted on an enrichment of the palette of colours, not confining initial work to primaries, but encouraging direct emotional response and one might say capriciousness. Above all, and Chahal has insisted on this in interview, not to be concerned with the rules. Chahal pays generous tribute to this anti-academic teacher: "He set me on the road. He was important when I was fifteen, and then comes back at twenty-one." The bright fluency of technique acquired at this time would become more refined but retain something of that freshness of discovery that comes with the early mastering of a medium. One thinks of the Spanish composer Arriga at a similar age, and the playful precocity of his compositions.

But the tempering and tuning of his work still required another influence which came with his contact and being taken under the wing of Ria Houwen. If later he would characterise this as a sentimental education he also is sufficiently astute to realise that it was another process of awakening, this time to the sensitive part of his own feelings. One can say, in retrospect, that the musing which followed on the storm and stress of breaking free of the initial pedagogical restraints, were subtly modified so that the *pathos* of feeling was directed towards another insight and a strengthening of Chahal's vocation as a painter. In colour it was the discovery of blue, and the working out of feelings from the rapture of actions into a form of coloured emotion, and not descriptive rendering. There was also the introduction of more studies of drawing; all of this resulted in his Muse figure guiding him towards making exhibitions, and arranging for his work to become better known, especially through contact with Gallery 86 where with another artist he exhibited and had a 'sell-out' show. He would exhibit every year thereafter, until his removal to Holland, where he now lives and works. As the head of the art section of Radulphus College Curaçao (Dutch Antillies) Houwen had done much to bring the talented pupil to public attention, but the consequences of being a Wunderkind, and the sudden attention, finally led to confusion and distress, creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia, and after two and a half years of the circuit, Chahal literally fled to start another life, study at University, go to Holland, where he could begin again. It should be mentioned that there is a hiatus of almost two years in his production (18-19-20/21) and that this was broken by the visit of Selman to Amsterdam.

However splayed and complex the various directions his life took, Chahal slowly matured his vision of his own route. This became less dependent on personal artistic contacts and was more in the nature of private study, taking courses in the University of Amsterdam in art history, and finding his true artistic loadstone, which in his case was the experience of the Rothkos in the Tate Gallery in London, and his own response to the Dutch artistic scene. In one sense he did not look to the work of living contemporaries, Debitts, Schouten, Verhoven, Sandfliet, Hoekstra, Hofstede, or other artists exhibiting in Amsterdam in the late nineties, nor did he subscribe to the canonical line of Mondriaan, to the work of the Ateliers, rather, he looked back, in what seems at first a conservative reflex, to the late abstract expressionists of America, and to the work of Armando and

Van Boehemen; his response to minimalism was via works of Zen artists he admired and Zero Art. It was the 'Informal Group' which inspired his working methods, and led him to announce that he would like to revive their ideas and attitude. In a sense he was immensely contemporary in that he subscribed to a 'retro style', and the results of this could be seen in an exhibition in Amersfoort of 2002. Given the complexity of his cultural and geographical experiences, it was also a form of *enracinement* to identify with elements of the Dutch painterly and artistic tradition which he found congenial. His own re-invention and retro celebration belongs wilfully to the very pop culture from which his aesthetic refinement would also transmute into a search for spiritual values, for painting which he wants to wrench from the ambient fetish of luxury commodification and restore as the pathos of the image which crystallises vital and transvital existence; for this he introduced the concept of the ground and the support as the *relax* of the picture.

Perhaps here also something of the *genius locii* of Amsterdam with its odd conspiracies of pleasures and the threaded tolerance needed for the complex multiplicities of entangled lives along worn out routes. The reserve towards others becomes the permission to oneself. For obvious reasons no one shouts from the roof tops. A certain quietness and stealth is required by the socius, and the place that Arie Graafland thinks of as a perfect example of the rhizome city, is seen not so much through sharp lenses but often along the contours of drifting clouds and in the experimental *remontre* of its shifting stage scenery, or under the rings of weighted smoke and silent withdrawal, with the lolling façades mirrored in stank waters; a reluctant baroque made up of *tromperie* and a curiously plangent rhetoric that borders on the melancholy of a deserted beauty. Relax is an easy discretion, a letting go of what Burke would call the "solids of the system". The city rarely confronts one with masses or volumes, the bell-topped houses and the volutes snail into an easy lullaby, civic life dislikes displays of aggression or emphatic egoism, it disturbs business, and the manners of the old merchant city trundle on in the most unexpected way. Chahal finds in this an aesthetic principle, declaring, that the first action of the painting is towards a letting be and release, his terms were more direct, he is happy to be building on what Armando and Van Boehemen have been doing, and when approaching the canvas grasps the problem as the emptiness, the question of the space, or the contrast between full and void, of largeness or smallness. It is initially a

work of meditation and a complete letting go, into the space as an experience of being, a situation of locus in which feeling becomes a bridging event, the place that lets space be. Perhaps only in the depths of sleep could one understand such an encounter, it recalls an old text from the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad:

*“suṣupta-sthānah prājño makāras trīyā mātrā mīter apīter vā minoti ha vā idam sarvam
apītiś ca bhavati ya evam veda”*

“Prajña whose sphere (of activity) is the state of deep sleep is the letter m, the third element, either from the root mi, to measure or because of merging. He who knows this measures (knows) all this and merges also
(all this in himself)”

The concept of relax is the search which wants to go beyond the merging and the merged; the unity before duality. In this place the artist encounters the being of space personally.

But the relax is still a mode of intellection. Referring to a large scale canvas, by his standards, as he still inherits from the Dutch tradition the scale of bourgeois easel painting, which it is argued suits the more intimate small scale of Dutch domestic interiors and thus many of the collectors of contemporary art: he emphasises the creating of the cinnabar dark red, and his need to create a clean smooth background ‘to relax the body’ the requirement to make it as clean as possible to give this relaxed feeling, a smoothness without interruptions or contours, as weightless as a dream and with the vectors of skin that is touched. Only in this merging, in the ground, can one see the genuine *complicatio* or can the event occur; the event of the red in this case. In the highest and most relaxed emotion everything relational can occur, the *dilemma* of Hume’s fork disappears. The red becomes alive.

Merleau-Ponty’s long meditation seems apposite:

“We must first understand that this red under my eyes is not as is always said, a quale, a pellicle of being without thickness, a message at the same time indecipherable and evident, which one has or has not received, but of which, if one has received it, one knows all there is to know, and of which in the end there is nothing to say. It requires a focusing however brief; it emerges from a less precise more general redness, in which my gaze was caught, into which it sank, before – as we put it so aptly – fixing it... Claudel has a phrase saying that a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red. The colour is yet a variant in another dimension of variation, that of its relation with its surroundings: this red is what it is, only connecting up from its place with other reds

about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or that dominate it, that attract it, or it attracts, that it repels, or, that repel it... Between the alleged colours and visibles, we should find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things.”¹

Not only does the red come alive but it is relationally palpable. This is the unity of fact and value.

The question that confronts the painter then is the saturation of such relationality as image. Thinking of this problem takes one to the heart of a debate that has been conducted for centuries. In *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin made the pithy observation “Good colouring does not necessarily convey the image of anything but itself”, and focused on what in the theory of colour would spread out into the kind of irresolution of the fact and value in another direction. Ruskin tries to offer a kind of balance between an objectless painting and the mediated intelligence of seeing: “Now the noblest art is an exact unison of the abstract value, with the imitative power, of forms and colours. It is the noblest composition, used to express the noblest facts. But the human mind cannot in general unite the two perfections: it either pursues the fact to neglect of composition, or pursues the composition to neglect of the fact.”² The split can be shown to occupy theoretical reflection on the relation also between line and colour from the programmatic declaration of Varesi who emphasised the “*si può conchiudere che esso disegno altro non sia che una apparente aspressione e dichiarazione del concetto che si ha nell’animo...*”³ which in Le Brun’s classic formulation for the French Academy was the further sundering, that colour was something which satisfied the eye whereas drawing satisfied the spirit: “*Tout l’apanage de la couleur est de satisfaire les yeux, au lieu que le dessin*

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, trans. By Alphonso Lingis, Evanston Northwestern Press, 1969, pp. 131-133.

² For this see Max Imdahl, *Farbe*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987 and the works of John Ruskin, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wederdorn, 1903-1913, vol. 15, p.27: “Very few people have any idea that sunlighted grass is yellow.”

³ J. Vasari, *Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, ed. Milanese, Florence, 1906, vol. 1, p. 168ff. Quoted in Imdahl, *Farbe*, ut supra, p. 32, 160.

*satisfait l'esprit*⁴. Le Brun would extend the implications of this split by stressing that colour was essentially an accidental phenomenon whilst line showed things as they are.

Chahal explores the line without any reference to figuration, or indeed, to place himself in the dualistic choices that for the most part refuse the concrete inscription in sensation of the making of art works, which is a mutually reflexive activity from the artist to the work and vice versa, and from there its ability to continue to resonate and vibrate in its animation for any others who are involved in its reception which is itself a productive act. What he proposes for the painting is that it be a site of holding, a holding which shelters and maintains the creative act, and is launched as something which oscillates and creates in turn complex responses for the sensation. In some sense this is the most clearly articulated aim which he has announced, that the painting would hold the 'beholder' that the looking is indeed a 'beholding' and the viewer is the beholder, which is the mutual response-ability to the experience of the work, this too is a kind of overwhelming, a getting lost in the space of the painting, an overcoming in the sense of a loving surrender in which getting lost is the experience of letting pride go before the experience and gift which is present. A good example is the work with its ground in a Prussian blue, with its intense inky shadow which it carries like a skin, and the muted but warm mustard yellow in which a modulated exchange takes the form of a *basso profundo cantus firmus* against the soaring lines that move and cut into the surface, as clean as the flight of swallows. It seems that this causes the layer upon layer of colour to resonate in depth, so that the lines are themselves an exploration which like mysterious rivulets flow into the surface and find in the dense and weighty ground nourishment to return to the surface and meander outwards and inwards, creating a rhythmic and ornamental movement which has itself a power of oneness with the composition.

It is becoming clearer in the later work of Chahal that his formal interest in the creating of a resonant and welcoming ground extends a hospitality to the stranger of the line, which unites in another dimension than either that of aggregation or subsumption. It is clear also that the problem of the ornamental is directly responded to, especially in its broad relational activity, as in the *arabesque*, there is a searching for the infinite rapport.

⁴ A full discussion in Max Imdahl, *Farbe*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 1987, especially chapter two, pp. 35-45.

With his relax and holding, and intertwining rapport, he achieves a vital decorative embodiment, which in his own words he hopes will allow people to feel tranquillity, even to provoke a sublime feeling, but not either through the pedantry of his earlier teaching from Pinedo, or as a simple explosion of wildness, but in an analogy of a strength and delicacy that he sees in the Bonsai tree. Indeed if there is anything which now gathers his sense of resolve and intention as an artist it is his personal response to the Bonsai.

Yoshimura and Halford claim that in judging a Bonsai there are two essential characteristics, it must be in good condition and it must be beautiful. Beauty is judged with respect to a shape being suitable to the species, a form and balance pleasing to the eye, an elegance of shape is paramount, and more important than age is the requirement of a healthy plant, an exquisite shape, and a feeling of harmony between tree, form and setting.⁵

It is the “Literati” style that Chahal most admires, with its thick branch and little leaf; the combination of strength and delicacy which he sees as the requisite spiritual disposition before any action, which includes for him the mixing of colours, the creating of his own pigments, even ideal colours, and with the sounds of music playing, and relaxed, he begins his explorations of the space which becomes a moment of trust not only in the self, but the experience itself as experiment, inspired by the feelings for the tree, on its own, “something so small, elegant, and still so strong”, in painting Chahal has found his own place too in which he entrusts the discoveries of his growth as an artist.

Patrick Healy, Amsterdam, 19th July MMIV

⁵ Yuji Yoshimura and Giovanna M Halford, The Japanese Art of Miniature Trees and Landscapes, their creation, care and enjoyment, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland Vermont, Tokyo, Japan, 1957, especially pp. 63-66, and 165-167.

Patrick Healy

Patrick Healy is currently professor for Inter-disciplinary research, FIU Amsterdam (Free International University) and also teaching at the faculty of Architecture, theory section, TU Delft. His recent publications include, Beauty and the Sublime, Sun, Amsterdam, 2003; Virgil Grotfeld, Wienand Verlag, Köln, 2003; the editing of Paleo Psycho Pop, nrs. 28, 29, 30; and the Catalogue of Polynesian Instant Geography, Musée Royale Brussels, 2003.