

Active Paintings

by Jean Guiraud

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Meurant works with colour contrasts (contrasts of shade, intensity and value), the surface of the shapes, their vertical or horizontal orientation, and line that moves the eye around the picture or brings it to a halt. Thus he uses only factors that act on us physically. The colours are flat, so they are free to come together or remain separate. His paintings always consist of different-sized rectangles (including squares), with horizontal base and vertical sides. Some of these rectangles overlap their neighbours, others are in alignment. As our eye scans the work, groups of squares coalesce briefly into a larger block, which then fades to be replaced by another block, and so on : if we allow them time, these permutations can continue indefinitely. Each rectangle has a single colour, so the permutations produced are discontinuous (discrete) and abrupt (sudden). Thus the painting's 'time' also has distinct phases. There is no transition, no sliding ; no graduation, no fusion. Everything rearranges itself into separate subsets and moments. All the factors at work are continuous, yet they create separate shapes and moments in time.

Meurant bases his work on mechanisms, processes and factors that operate 'beyond consciousness', like the factors governing the formation of shapes and the relationships between them : attraction and repulsion, assimilation and contrast, factors determined without our consent because they constitute – or involve – only degrees of strength. Every shape is a combination of factors, which include size, outline, direction and position, to which must be added shade, intensity and brightness in the case of coloured shapes. For shapes, compatibility is what counts; contrast is what divides and separates.

Like Mondrian's, Meurant's rectangles have compatibility, cohesion, internal symmetry and regularity; so to transcend them, very strong forces are required. This painter acts more on the factors that constitute the shapes than on the shapes themselves, prompting endless rearrangements and permutations : there is a very clear distinction between what the artist applies, draws or paints – the coloured puzzle – and what the work itself brings about, the virtually unending succession of redistributions or regroupings that occur spontaneously. He gets us to separate mentally his activity as painter and the way the works act upon us; and this is all the more inescapable because he uses only 'stable' shapes – squares and rectangles.

So what is a successful work by Meurant? It is one that produces the strongest rearrangements, the most numerous and most varied – most unexpected or unlikely – most sudden or spontaneous regroupings. It is a work in which all the constituent parts keep surprising us with new arrangements. A work in which the changes have a stronger effect on us than the shapes themselves – though these are also powerful – a work in which the opaque, massive, static form of the painted rectangle gives way to transparencies, shifts or encroachments that are endlessly renewed, in which the substitutions modify the outlines, the line being constantly redrawn by the painting's own activity. These works combine the spatial and temporal information in a single structure, a single operation, a single 'space-time'. Has art ever been anything but the establishment of a wave field, a force field and hence a space-time (even though the term is unsatisfactory). And can it be anything than this if we consider not particular kinds of art but what is common to all art, what underlies art and determines what makes something a work of art – provided we differentiate the work from an artefact? In a Meurant painting, there is a very powerful disjunction between space and its commutations. Faced with the painting we cannot help seeing that a work – any work of art – implies space and time, not because it stems from the act that produced it and bears the trace of that act, but because it triggers its own activity.

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Cézanne spoke of "painting with crude means". If not crude, at least basic. No fussiness, no painterly effects. Only the action of contrast on the outlines of shapes. In Meurant's work there is no complaisant refinement, no facile 'passage'. Hence he succeeds in bringing together and separating space and time, his time, our time and that of the painting, so the changes continue of themselves : painter and viewer alike observe them objectively as if they had no hand in them. No representation, no signification, no personal expression. From the beginning, a strategy or combinational arrangement (more calculated than one might imagine) that implies and generates its own reshuffle effect. Everything resides in the multiplicity, sharpness and suddenness of the rearrangements that follow and continue without end.

But if every work – assuming that it is a work of art – is a space-time, or spatio-temporal field, its time cannot be ordinary time that flows and passes. It is on the contrary a source-time, an original time, an inaugural time that is not subject to entropy. After the painter has stopped his work, this work continues, perception keeps it going, provided it is based on the reflex mechanism [action-reaction, stimulus-response, attraction-repulsion, assimilation-contrast] that is the mainspring or dynamo of the work – as of anything else – since it is what instigates and perpetuates reciprocity in it. If the painter bases his work not on shapes but on the vital connections that occur 'unawares', by which I mean 'in us but without our intervention', and that govern the acts of perception, he goes beyond the order of shapes to reach that of functions. It is then that the work achieves its transmutation, whether this be striking and emblematic – as in Meurant's paintings – or whether it can achieve in more discreet fashion the reordering that is the *raison d'être* of all art.