Headline

Colors will do what shapes will not

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A person observing the works of Amos Roger cannot help but notice their exploding vitality, the celebration of life they present. This is evident first and foremost in the use of color: the pieces are flooded with strong colors, unapologetic of their suggestive power and announcing their presence loudly and clearly. This is not a monochromatic – and therefore subtle – color scheme. The opposite is correct: it is the blunt chromaticism of primary colors – red, blue, yellow and green – laid side by side and on top of one another on the wooden panels which serve as a ground, creating together a festival of color reminiscent of Matisse's pieces.

The works are not only a celebration of color but of shape as well. Here too, the artist uses primal and natural forms. This means an abundance of oval shapes, concave or convex, circles, ellipses, and spirals. These entwine through the pieces and create a living space for the colors of which they are made, even as they are contrasted almost to the point of suggesting a struggle. This serpentine formal attitude is present in the objects populating the piece as well as in the pieces' backgrounds. Sometimes it leaks from the object to the background and sometimes the other way around, until reaching a state where the divisions dissolve: the object is swallowed in the background and the background takes over the object. Moreover, in some pieces it is not clear whether an object remains at all. This comes to a point where the object is made extinct, leaving room for a colorful weave of forms saturating the painted surface to its edges. In this way Roger creates painted surfaces which are flat and devoid of any aspiration to describe perspective, characterized by formal repetition which constitutes visual testimony to the artist's restless motoric activity.

The material itself is also part of the celebration: Roger eschews the use of the cold and alienated materials of the current age, like buildings, pieces of furniture, appliances and so on. Instead he prefers to use natural matter, living matter, and this comes into expression mainly in his use of wood as a substrate for his pieces. It is likely that the wood panels on which Roger creates his celebration of color and form are taken from his immediate environment. Such pieces are often thrown away as useless trash after the valuable goods packed in them have been removed. Roger grabs these panels as if they were prized possessions, turning the waste of a consumerist culture to a goldmine from which he digs up his art.

His technique also remains close to the natural and primal. In this show, Roger chose not to make use of the new techniques opened to art in the current era, like computer processing. Some pieces are painted by hand, and in others, like Pollock, he sprays paint in wide gestures directly over the surface. In some pieces he makes use of a traditional carving technique, leaving a trace of the singular vitality of the artist's body on the piece. Roger goes only half the distance with his carving, however. Because the surface he toils to carve does not then serve as the basis for repeated printing of woodcuts. Instead, he paints the carved surface itself, thus making it – and not the prints that are supposed to be birthed from it – the location where his art takes shape.

The thematic content developed in the pieces remains close to the primal and primordial. Roger abandons the urban and artificial world behind, clearing the space for images taken from the world of animals and plants, especially flowers and fish. Flowers appear in two main forms: the solo appearance of a flower overwhelming the frame with its sharp colors, and the group appearance of several flowers bound together in a vase. Roger here draws from the years-long tradition of using the image of a flower in art. As it was used by painters such as Van Gogh, Warhol or O'Keefe, Roger sees flowers as symbols of vitality and life, and in his case also an implied eroticism jumping between male and female images.

The image of a fish is also strongly represented. Roger's fish is a kind of genesis fish, at least in two aspects: first of all, the drawing of the fish itself is sloppy and deliberately made as an afterthought. Roger takes the primal, simple form of a fish, one that can be drawn by any child, and imports this into his surfaces while imbuing it with a certain aura of hollow opacity, mainly seen in the eyes. Secondly, the fish with ornamental fins which can be find in aquariums in homes do not interest him. He is interested in the fish as an archaic form, the fish that is at the lowest level of evolutionary development and hidden in the dark abysses of the ocean. In some of the pieces the fish even blows up to the mythical dimensions of leviathan – the father of all fishes – threatening to flow outside the frame with its clumsy, fat shape. In other pieces there is an interesting crossover from the image of a fish to that of a bird. Thus, in some of the pieces the whale fishes appear hovering over an orb, which could be interpreted as Planet Earth. In another piece two blue fishes are seen on the ground, outside the water. Roger may be hinting here at the linkage between birds and fishes, since from an evolutionary perspective, birds evolved from fishes.

The human form is not a main subject in the pieces but is still present in one form or another. This can be seen in a piece where the main star is a vase of flowers, but its edges are decorated with the figures of Greek warriors. The human form becomes alienated in Roger's hands: human forms are deliberately distorted, whether by distorting their shapes or by making them as narrow as anorectics. This alienation enables them to be absorbed by the general thematicism, dealing with plants and animals. Thus, for example, in a portrait of two women, carved on a black background in the same serpentine form characterizing the flower paintings; or in another piece echoing the clumsy portraits of Baselitz, where two figures seem to merge in a gesture of a kiss: those who look closely will see that each of the figures is populated by miniature images that occupy the space between the piscine and the avian. Man, one might say, does not control nature but seems to meld with it into one entity.

All of these, the color and the form, the technique and thematicism – lead Roger to a critical position against the hyper-capitalist existence of our time, where the world in which we live is undergoing increasing automation and virtualization, leading to estrangement from the primal and the natural. This critical position is seen most strongly in the piece of sculpture called "Silence," made from leftovers of consumerist culture wrapped in iron netting that is sculpted to the shape of a fish. It seems like everything that was left out of the painted pieces now appears in the body of the statue: all the materials alien to Roger's world – tin, cardboard, plastic etc. – are enveloped in the stomach of the whale-fish, and the latter becomes a sort of landfill or place where these materials can be left and forgotten. In this manner Roger creates the opposite of the despised: it is not identified with the natural materials from which life is made, as asserts French philosopher Julia Kristeva, but rather with the artificial materials that have no affinity with nature, and are therefore also lifeless.

One can conclude, therefore, that it is not only pure aesthetics and visual poetry that occupy Roger's mind. From the celebration of colors and shapes populating his pieces one can elicit also his concern for the world in which we live. This is true especially in the face of the unending threat to the world from companies and corporations that see only the bottom line, and while doing so turning their backs on what is most precious to us.