

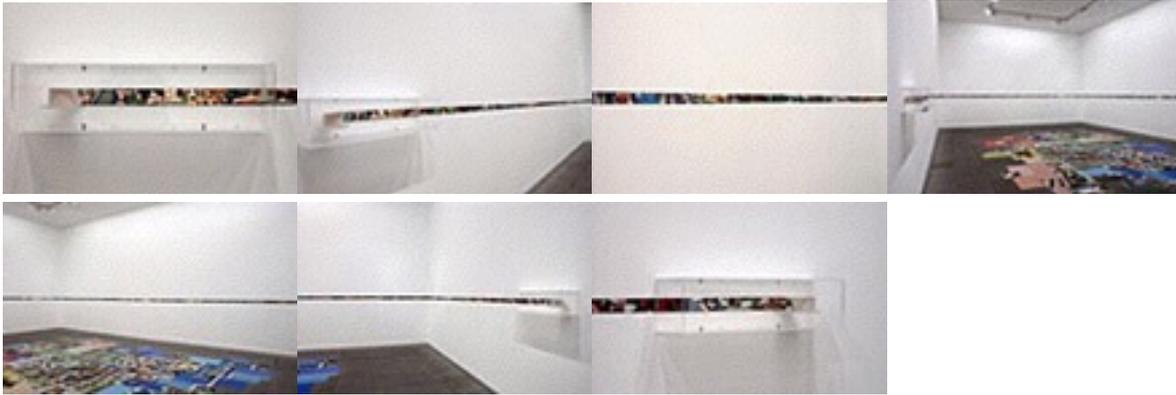
Carole Benzaken

Carole Benzaken approaches figurative painting through the fragmented and fast-moving lens of the camera. Even in her early still life series, *Tulips*, the image was abstracted into a fleeting impression. These paintings showed an engagement with the tradition of abstraction, but more recent works are preoccupied almost entirely with the tools of the mass media-magazine and news-paper imagery, photography, film and video footage. In her major body of work, *Diana's Funeral* (2000), Benzaken uses a technique of fragmentation and distortion which recalls Raymond Hains' "hypnagogic" works. She depicted the entourage of the Princess's funeral procession through a painted montage of images taken from the vast number of international television cameras which beamed the event across the world. Despite her obvious love of rich color and loose brushwork, Benzaken's real interest lay in recreating a sense of the mass media spectacle: black and white clips of the crowd of mourners or color snapshots of red-coated soldiers were placed together in haphazard layers, reminiscent of the visual effects of channel surfing or flipping through the daily newspaper. These works draw attention to the apparatus of image consumption, and by creating this flattening effect, she demonstrates the non-judgmental and non-hierarchical nature of mass media.

In 1989 Benzaken began to translate her personal archive of images-the images which she selects daily from snapshots, found photographs, newspapers and magazines-into a painted roll, or *rouleau*, of images. Constructed in the physical form of a cinematic "reel"; one image follows another in a sequence of small-format works which are painted directly onto a roll of paper. Each image has been painted with the intimacy and care of a traditional miniature painting. Her *Rouleau à peintures* ("Roll of Paintings") has become a kind of personal diary, showing her changing interests and styles over the years. She mixes personal photographs with images from the mass media, creating an archive which places events of both individual and collective importance on the same plane. The iconic image of the demonstration in Tianamen Square sits alongside an unidentifiable photograph of swimmers, while other images seem familiar but are not-such as a photograph of Afghan horsemen that could easily be mistaken for the cowboys of Marlboro cigarette advertising. The images tease our desire to recognize, to find icons, and demonstrate that as a result of the global media industry a personal stream-of-consciousness has also become a collective stream-of-consciousness. Despite the emphasis Benzaken places on her instinctive choice of images, the subjective process of selecting, editing and painting her *rouleau*, the completed works have a generic or universal quality that robs them of her subjective lens. Benzaken's *Rouleau à peintures* is a physical manifestation of collective memory, a reel of images which are already frozen in the minds of visually-sensitized media consumers.

Although Benzaken's *Rouleau à peintures* has not been exhibited before, she has already used many of these images for subsequent works, repainting and modifying the small individual paintings into large canvases or groups of works. This laborious practice of imitation and translation reveals Benzaken's interest in the physical process of painting itself, a process she deliberately contrasts with the transitory and immediate nature of her source imagery. Benzaken's luxuriant handling of paint, intense use of color and elaborate working practice all work against the deliberate photographic references inherent in the images themselves-the camera's bird's eye view, cropped images, unusual angles, the grainy texture of the close-up or the blurred edges of the video still. Benzaken's attachment to the history of the painted image has developed into groups of works which mix together abstract-plain color-field canvases-with figurative painting. She has recently translated these images into ceramics, carefully learning the subtleties of producing line and color through this traditional craft technique. Both of these methods engage with the problems posed by mixing together images from so-called high and low culture: mass media or personal

photographic imagery mixes with references to high Modernism, and all craft techniques are mixed with traditional painting.



This confusion of different frames of reference relates back to Benzaken's interest in flattening out the hierarchies inherent to different media, styles and subjects. By doing this she creates imagery which does not belong to one single history. Benzaken currently lives in Los Angeles where she has found that her daily integration with the African-American community in Inglewood led to a reluctance to use the traditional medium of painting. She preferred to use video as a more immediate and open means of engaging with a culture so different from her own, particularly when loaded with the socio-cultural issues of being a European woman making "art" about African-American culture. These videos have subsequently acted as source material for paintings, but Benzaken needed the distance and detachment of the translation between media, from video and photography to painting, to offer her the space to work freely. Decontextualized, these source images become just like any of the other in her archive. They become free-floating signs belonging not to Benzaken's own personal experience, but to a collective consciousness.



Jemima Montagu: Can you describe the process of making your Rouleau à peintures?

Carole Benzaken: My rouleau is very personal and non-rational. I use both an individual and universal way of telling stories. But it's not something that I can decide to do everyday. It's really a whim. It was to be done at a specific moment. It's very privileged personal time.

J.M.: You have been accumulating these images everyday, over time. There is already an archive, or rather two archives; one is an archive of information and imagery, and the other is this filtered presentation, in paint, of a personal collection of images and ideas. But it seems that although you emphasize this whim, this personal choice of images, nevertheless, these images resonate for all of us. Are you trying to take out the detail from the images so that you transform what might be a specific image into something more generic?

C.B.: Yes, I am conscious of making my imagery and I like to create a style that is on the edge, between the personal and generic. I also like the way an image can be used as what it is, as a surface made of colors and shapes and also in a metaphoric way. It is open. You can use your own personal imagery and you can still touch the world. And the opposite is true too. You can use political or local-political images, such as a story in the States about a child that killed his teacher, but this can take on very personal meanings. That's what I like, all these ramifications. Nobody knows exactly what the images are or mean. I don't care about my own particular story, it's about me as part of a bigger history.

J.M.: You have been living in Inglewood, California since 1998. After finishing an earlier series, you bought a camera and started to make films about your local environment. You didn't make paintings immediately, apart from your rouleau. Does this suggest that some images are still too weighted culturally? Although you and I have just been talking about how images can take on personal as well as collective dimension-it means something to me and something to you-in fact some images are so problematic that we cannot approach them immediately.

C.B.: That's both true and untrue in my experience. I know that some things are forbidden. When you know America and these communities, the issues in these neighborhoods, it feels weird to deal with such subjects. You can-and I do-because I ask people if I can film and paint them. It's not about whether it is politically correct or not. The question was how to deal with this subject. I needed time and distance. It's not an appropriation of the culture. There is this danger, but I want to engage with this. There are traps of projection, of looking at my neighborhood in a touristic way but there is an exoticism in painting that I like. Exoticism is a genre in painting, for example the Orientalist desert paintings of the nineteenth century. Delacroix went to Morocco, and Matisse after him. My exoticism is to be in LA today, in a very poor urban environment, a culture that I do not belong to but to which I feel deeply connected.



J.M.: You work simultaneously on two levels-you collect images, paint them onto the rouleau and then later paint larger works based on these small images. It seems to me that these large works are very different. It is not this continuous portrait of your perception, as the rouleau is, it's a much more deliberate, constructed image. And a more conventional format. The image is changed and manipulated, it becomes more exaggerated.

C.B.: At first the tininess of the rouleau helped me to tame this huge issue of scale. LA to me is a city that makes you understand the whole world's problems and contradictions. In the rouleau I was able to deal with these issues via a bunch of images and to locate myself as part of them. The story in this work is a bit like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. It's a transcription of "orality" (images) into "textuality" (the roll of painting). The paintings are about me in the city, in a part of town that nobody wants to see. The emphasis, if there is one, is on scale. Big and non-linear. The paintings are more about broadcasting the city itself, using clichés, billboards, portraits of people I've met and filmed, self-portraits. The street scenes are not in the rouleau.

J.M.: In the big paintings you are evoking the simultaneity of cinema, video-through a montage of recognizable but random images. The images are very disparate, but at the same time, there is that script you speak of.

C.B.: In the rouleau the images are placed in succession, like a film, a cinematic reel. But the way you see them is horizontal, the opposite of cinema, because the band of a film and the way it is projected on the screen is vertical. In cinema, when these images are projected, you don't see the editing but a succession of scenes fused together. I want to make the montage of film, the editing process, which we don't usually see, come to the surface of my paintings.

J.M.: You are trying to expose the montage-of life, of cinema.

C.B.: When I first came to LA I imagined that I was going to deal with the reality of images, I thought I was going to be more "Pop" on the surface. Then with my last series I went behind the image; under the screen; inside the TV. Now, I'm living it. In Inglewood, where I live, I can hear gunshots or see helicopters everyday from the

roof, and hear people screaming. Or I can go into the street and the landscape looks like TV. You feel like you are on TV. But you realize that these images are in fact telling a terrible truth. What I knew about LA before going to LA was nowhere near the reality. I had idealized the images and believed that they were stronger than reality. But now the opposite is true.

J.M.: So how did this affect your work as a painter?

C.B.: At first it paralyzed me. I couldn't paint at all for a year. Now I feel freer to paint, and think deeply about the subject, to meditate on my personal use of cliché through the reality I explore. I realized that the so-called ghetto was a part of me too. It is no longer a problem because nobody owns the imagery. Plus, I'm here everyday, I'm a part of it and I really need to paint my environment.



J.M.: I like the idea that you discovered that real images, or real experiences, in LA were better than the images or clichés, and so somehow you realized that figurative painting doesn't own reality. You realized that you can use painting because it doesn't equal reality but is just another tool.

C.B.: Yes and no. I feel that real experience is constantly toppled over by cliché, and vice-versa. I use painting to deal with this-this is the power of painting in my opinion. You don't just have the pressure of time, as the "now" time, you have a digestion of time. You can feel different times operating, and cliché can also be used as the spatialization of time. It can be as real as paint is real.



J.M.: Do you think there is a tension between the way you evoke many different times in one painting, the layers of time, and the sense of "now" that you also create. You evoke a fractured "now-ness" of everything happening all at once but in different places. On another level the history of painting suggests a kind of eternality, that the work will last forever. So you have these three ideas of time going on in a single work. Can you comment your relationship to time, and the way time functions in your recent ceramic "painting"?

C.B.: The unlimited ceramic floor painting brings in another set of issues. I want to put the viewer physically into this visual question of time and space. The painting has been made on ceramic tiles where, like in the rouleau, all kinds of images are represented and added in succession. So when you walk on it you won't be able to see the whole as a painting because it is huge. In this way the question of scale giving space to time will be emphasized all the more, and it continues the proposition of the rouleau. The floor is unlimited, like the rouleau, and I can continue to add as many tiles as I want. Painting is decoration, just like photographic or video imagery today. All images have been flattened. How can you bring back meaning? if not the original one, then at least a structural or symbolic one? I am very interested in the "now" culture which is impossible to pin down in one time or place. LA is a very interesting place for these issues to understand the impossibility of understanding, to see the impossibility of seeing-of seeing the whole.



J.M.: You could say this is the condition of painting. Why have you chosen to use the decorative arts?

C.B.: LA is great because of the decorative tradition. The decorative is high art as well as low art. Everything is accepted, there are no boundaries. This gave me the idea of making this ornamental piece. Any imagery can be decorative-dramatic or violent images can be as decorative as an image of a flower. On one level, I want to be a decorator, dealing with this contradiction. Sometimes a flower can, in fact, be more violent or can affect you more than dramatic news imagery because this has become so banal.

Jemima Montagu

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