

## Vicky Colombet: On Not Knowing Where to Stand

*“Sometimes I have fear of falling”*

■ Francois Villon

The question we ask before any painting, which solicits us, like nature, with the proposal of a world anterior to our being: where do we stand? Bodies in space, we are thrust into a relation with something material and full of traces. In what relation do we stand with them? Are we just looking? Are we falling?

With Vicky Colombet's revolutionary paintings, the answer is complicated by the lingering shadow of the photographic image. This shadow (surely the most overused metaphor) falls between the artist and the landscape, and between us and the experience of the painting's presence. Suddenly everything that might have been so personal seems so distant. Constructed as they are solely of light and dark, the contours of the paintings suggest the minimum data of photography, how a so-called black and white image renders and abstracts, transforming the subject into an optical occasion.

This is the intermedia territory mapped by Gerhard Richter, where painting cedes the direct representation of reality to photography and engages the second order as a new nature, a wilderness of attenuated codes and commonplace imagery, an atlas of the already seen rather than a panorama of the newly known. So he travels easily between pure abstract painting and indistinct representation because painting embodies no

privileged relation with the experience of things or emotions. It is a copy of a copy – for the painter, an atavism; for the viewer, pure visuality.

Colombet surveys a different realm, where the traveling is less certain and more rewarding. Where are we? In a place of double experience, double remembrance. The photographic resemblance sustains the experience of a place, commits it *to* memory, we might say. The painting recreates it, evokes it *from* memory. So these unusual objects are something and nothing at once; the mountains and ravines they depict are almost mountains, almost depicted.

The technique that has given birth to this double vision deepens its ambiguity. Colombet uses a mix of crushed pigment, oil and wax over a white ground. This medium allows her to use gesture but wipes out its evident traces. Her technique subverts rather than asserts selfhood. Like a photograph, it is self-effacing. The painting process itself suggests the deposition of silver grains on photographic paper after exposure to light. At the same time, it also mimics the natural sedimentary process that produces a landscape. The photograph is subject to light and chemistry, the landscape to physical forces and time. All these meet in the painting.

If these paintings suggest landscapes (they might provoke other associations), they seem at first glance to mimic a photographic gaze, distant, static, directed from a stable point on high. But what happens when we look down is what happened to the poet bandit Villon when he dreamt: vertigo, and a fear of falling. These landscapes have no optical

center. Our gaze travels over them, unrolls through their valleys and over their ridges, makes us travelers across the topography of the painting. From a distance, the forms of the landscape are comprehensible, but as we get closer, as we fall toward them and adopt an itinerary within the painting's rectangle, the forms begin to dissolve. Details that might spring into view in a photograph here disperse. We quickly arrive at the limit of opticality, only to find a new wilderness, where we have to travel on among the deposits of pigment, through the fragments of light and dark. Our maps are no good here, our photographs useless, their analogies blasted. We are by ourselves in unfamiliar territory.

Just where Colombet wants us to be, so our journeys can truly begin.