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Georges Noël (Béziers, 1924 – Paris, 2010)

Palimpseste impérial n° 1

1960

Polyvinyl acetate, silica and pigments on canvas

FGA-BA-NOEL-0005

Provenance

Private collection, Belgium

Piasa, Paris, September 26, 2019, lot n° 71

Palimpseste impérial **The Memory of a Gesture and of Signs**

The artist Georges Noël Bédard (1924-2010), commonly called Georges Noël, a little-known figure of the Informal Art movement, nonetheless became, after the war, one of the main renovators of abstract painting in France. His art, based on the exploration of matter and the transformation of gestures into pictorial signs, invented a personal language of which the series of "Palimpsestes" makes up its most accomplished expression.

From the maquis to the factory

Georges Noël Bédard is twenty years old when the war ends. It was difficult for the young man from the French department Hérault, born in Béziers in 1924, to return to civilian life after four years spent in the Resistance alongside his father, a maquisard, who died a hero only a few weeks before the German surrender. Once peace was restored, one had to work. Devoid of motivation, the young maquis retiree joined the design office of the Turboméca factory in 1945, where he conceptualized gas turbine engines. His engineering studies in Pau provided Georges Noël with solid skills in industrial design, which predestined him for a brilliant career in the aeronautics sector. Yet this was without taking into account his secret passion for painting. "For nine years, I painted in secret. Only my wife knew about it"¹, he would later confide to Michel Butor. In an interview with the poet-novelist, Georges Noël expressed the urgency, at the age of thirty-one, to fully live his life as an artist. This radical decision led him, in 1955, to resign from his job as an engineer and to establish himself in Paris the following year.

In the broth of Informal Art

Once settled in the capital in 1956, Georges Noël moved without transition from a figurative style inspired by Cézanne to a typically informal abstract painting style. For the author of *Magma*, one of the few surviving canvases² from this period, the painting practice he was experimenting with at the time was a real "cultural broth,"³ as it is to be seen in the amoebic forms of *Évanescence* (fig. 1), conceived nearly ten years earlier by Georges Mathieu, alongside Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet, the pioneers of Informal Art in France. Following the

1 BUTOR, Michel, « Alchimie du silence ou l'athanor nomade. Conversation avec Georges Noël », in FABRE, Gladys (dir.), *Georges Noël*, Paris, E.L.A. / La Différence, 1997, p. 14.

2 Georges Noël, *Magma*, oil on canvas, diameter 40 cm, private collection. Work reproduced in color in FABRE, Gladys, op. cit. p. 81.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

example of these precursors, Georges Noël also made "a tabula rasa of its artistic training to be born again within *an Art Autre*"⁴, following Michel Tapié's expression.

In 1957, the artist met the gallery owner Paul Facchetti (1912-2010), a figure who would encourage Noël's new occupation. As a test, the dealer invited his future recruit to several group shows⁵, confronting him to works by Wols, Fautrier, Dubuffet, Bryen, Michaux, Mathieu, Sam Francis and Jackson Pollock.

A new medium for a new gesture

Amongst the regulars close to the Paul Fachetti gallery, Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) was the one whose work had the strongest influence on Georges Noël. The latter manifested the same attraction as his elder for the use of paste, accumulating thick layers on the surface, as is to be seen on his first informal works. Like the father of Art Brut (French for "raw art"), Noël didn't hesitate to introduce heterogeneous elements to his works, such as rags, which he drowned in paint. The paint in question, made of such scraps and rich in flaxseed oil, was so fat and heavy that it quickly turned out to be an obvious constraint to the painter's body language. In order to free his work from its matrix-like coating and to allow it to become bolder, the artist invented his own painting substance composed of a mixture of resin (polyvinyl acetate), sand (crushed flint) and natural pigments. This new blend provided greater hold to the pictorial material. Used in the work *Palimpseste impérial* which dates from 1960, his mixture compelled the painter to use sharper tools: brush handles, knives, nails or spatulas with which he incised the surface. As the latter hardened, it took on both the texture and colour of the kind of plaster used by construction painters. It also had the advantage to dry quickly, thus requiring the artist to work at a similar, quickened pace. Under the combined action of matter and speed, Georges Noël painted in a more free and spontaneous manner. This new feeling of ease modified the graphic elements of his works, which still maintained formal links with the ones practiced by Dubuffet at the end of the 1950s. The "striking similarities"⁶, noted by Gladys Fabre, between *Rose Inouïe* (1960) - a work painted the same year as *Palimpseste impérial* - and *Villa et Jardin* (1957), a Dubuffet painting that belonged to Paul Facchetti, exemplify these associations. The stylistic comparison also functions with another contemporary painting by Dubuffet: *L'organe tragique* (fig.2). The latter is hasty and sketchy, even clumsy, and its features evoke, like those of *Palimpseste impérial*, the candour of a child's drawing. On the other hand, Gladys Fabre points out that "Georges Noël eradicates all figuration, be it houses or people, which are part of Dubuffet's gestural capharnaum"⁷. Noël's 'disorder' is dug into the material instead of being painted on the surface. It occupies

4 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

5 Galerie Paul Facchetti, Paris, 1957 and 1958 (without catalogue) ; *Neues aus der Neuen Malerei*, Leverkusen, Städtliches Museum Leverkusen, 1959 (Kemeny, Jaffé, Lataster, Laubies, Sima, etc) ; *10 ans d'activité*, Galerie Paul Facchetti, Paris, 1959 (Dubuffet, Bryen, Pollock, Francis, Riopelle, Mathieu, Michaux, Wols, Fautrier et Kemeny).

6 FABRE, Gladys, *op. cit.*, p. 40

7 *Ibid.*

all the canvas's surface until reaching saturation. Crosshatchings and small circles (perhaps another borrowing from Dubuffet?) fill the roughly parallelepiped shapes which, scattered in a helical fashion, seem to push back the edges of the painting. A date (1960), to be seen in the upper left corner, and two signatures "georges NOËL" (the N being reversed), inscribed in cartridges that are placed in the lower corners, stabilize the composition. Their size, as well as their deep inscription in the material, places them on a level of equality in regards to the other graphic elements of the painting.

Blind painting

Georges Noël, in full possession of his medium, could then invent other stratagems that matched his aim at spontaneity. The most constitutive element of his pictorial approach is "blind work" ("le travail à l'aveugle")⁸, a technique he developed between 1959 and 1961. The method used for *Palimpseste impérial* was the following: the blank canvas laid on the ground was first brushed with a white coating on which the artist inscribed his first traces. Before the primer dried completely, it was covered with a second layer of very greasy black paint, on which Georges Noël added new painted signs, this time around, black on black. The last step consisted of removing the blackened top layer with a water-jet. After which, this new cleaned (washed out) pictorial field, explains Gladys Fabre, made "superimpositions of writings appear, those made directly on the coating and those inscribed blindly. Thus, the graphics executed secondly, on top, seem to come from below and be first." The process could be carried out several times, thus multiplying the reading layers. Throughout his career, Georges Noël never ceased to perfect this technique which favoured notions of randomness, chance and accident, making each work an unprecedented field of experimentation.

Palimpsest

Most of the blind paintings are named "Palimpsest". The term comes from the ancient Greek word that means "scratched again". It makes reference to a manuscript whose text has been removed in order for a new one to be written over it. The method was used in the Middle Ages by monastic scribes who, in order to save up parchment (a rare and expensive material), erased the previous inscriptions with a pumice stone, later covering them with their own writing. "What this story suggests in the first place," writes Emmanuel Guigon, "is that paint might only be the suspended moment of overlaps and erasures within a same painting, a time pertaining to a sense of order in a permanent process of construction and deconstruction."⁹ Like medieval palimpsests, those of Georges Noël preserve, between the edges of their material, the memory of the traces that compose them. Their superimpositions

8 FABRE, Gladys, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

9 GUIGON, Emmanuel, *Georges Noël. Chemins d'approche*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Galerie Thessa Herold, 10.04 - 17.05.2008], Paris, Galerie Thessa Herold, 2008, p. 12.

represent the "time of artistic experience", the time necessary for the artist to mark the work with their indelible imprint.

The primitive and instinctive drawings of *Palimpseste impérial* will quickly gave way to more schematic tracings. The latter, done under the influence of automatic writing, were composed of irregular sticks, dots, circles and squares. *Palimpseste blanc*, from 1962 (fig. 3), is one of the first manifestations of this "pseudo-writing" whose constituent signs wouldn't be bearers of meaning but would only be apprehended as pure rhythmic elements. This method of painting, or rather of composing, is a reminder of how the artist doesn't consider the image of the palimpsest for its meaning, but exclusively "in its material configuration, as a phenomenon of complex leafing, of displaced overlaps"¹⁰. In this rejection of the signified, all is concentrated on the direct sensation provoked by the trace. The gesture becomes a sign, the latter embodying, more than any other element of the painting, the moving thinking of the artist. As in the works by Olivier Debré painted a few years earlier, "the grouping of signs on the same surface functions like a sedimentation whose deposit is key to perceive its meaning"¹¹.

Bertrand Dumas
Curator of the Fine Arts collection
Geneva, June 2023

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10 MICHAUD, Alain, « Bird Walker », in FABRE, Gladys, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

11 HARAMBOURG, Lydia, *Olivier Debré*, Neuchâtel, Éditions Ides & Calendes, 1997, p. 24.



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Fig. 1 - Georges Mathieu, *Évanescence*, 1945, oil on canvas, 97 x 80 cm, FGA-BA-MATHI-0028



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Fig. 2 - Jean Dubuffet, *L'organe tragique*, 1957, oil on canvas, 89 x 166,3 cm, FGA-BA-DUBUF-0009



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Fig. 3 - Georges Noël, *Palimpseste blanc*, 1962, oil, graphite and pasted paper on canvas, 97,3 x 146,3 cm, FGA-BA-NOEL-0001