

Robbin Deyo : Life's Little Upsets

[Exhibition by Robbin Deyo at Plein sud, centre d'exposition en art actuel in Longueuil, from November 11th to December 21st 2008]

Looking at Robbin Deyo's drawings, first of all I find great technical rigour. The accumulation of small lines suggests labour and time spent on each sheet of paper, and tells me I am in the presence of someone who loves detail and precision. It's impressive but my enthusiasm wanes slightly at the austerity of the compositions, the regularity of the pattern, and their machine like execution.

Then, my enthusiasm returns when these same coloured patterns evokes memories. Childhood memories, vague yet comforting, of my mother putting together bands of knitting to make a chevron-patterned quilt. Also, I remember afternoon walks in unfamiliar cities, sun hitting the walls and washing them in soft colours, like rosy peach.

There very well could be a connection between my first impressions and the creative process of the artist. The drawings signal solitude, and obsessive activity, suggesting a child trying to defeat boredom: by cutting paper snowflakes, shaking sand through a sieve, throwing stones to make circles in the water. The drawings shown here have taken form, after all, thanks to a toy and a bit of tenacity. I can imagine the artist, as a child, thinking out loud: I want flowers like on the box!

This is how Robbin Deyo's "Super Spirograph" found itself abandoned under the living room couch and later in the coat closet, after spending time on basement shelves. Spirograph was the popular 1970s toy that used plastic instruments, pre-formatted wheels, and other gadgets to create round flower like patterns with a Bic pen. These drawings never quite equaled the graphic precision of the examples in the booklet that came with the game. Goodbye, game!

But the ten-year-old girl who maniacally produced flowery figures on the kitchen table has resurfaced, box under her arm. A taste for childhood nostalgia probably compelled the artist to buy a Spirograph on E-bay; then again it may also have been that this tool imposed itself for the creation of her project. The graphic possibilities afforded by the toy are rich in invention and surprise. In previous work, Robbin Deyo used cookie cutters to incise patterns in wax. Moons, hearts, stars: those reassuring archetypal forms. For these new drawings, she has changed the rules of the Spirograph game, using it as a tracing tool like the cookie mold, which was never meant to leave its mark on a painting, either. The undulating, coloured lines are produced by a horizontal tracing system adapted to a conventional drawing table. An assemblage of small, notched rulers slide progressively down the page from top to bottom. The preparations and construction of each image progress slowly.

The lines of coloured pencil are dense and hypnotic. They are finely articulated with much economy of method. The various undulating movements are achieved by slight modifications in the tracing system, and by subtle adjustments. The drawings can seem interchangeable but are extremely precise. All the

same, one never falls under the illusion that they are lines made by a machine. One focuses on them to the point of becoming breathless at the resulting graphic precision. Such exactness of image is often achieved by means of a software program or other sophisticated equipment which enable clarity to be maintained in enlargements of microscopic elements. When an image which is invisible to the naked eye is projected on a large scale, we want to know what we are seeing, and we search for a meaning, a truth. The large-scale effect in Robbin Deyo's drawings triggers a similar response. We find ourselves in the centre of a woven strand of something, a compact structure which we attempt to comprehend, and the astonishing thing is the graphic precision accomplished despite the obsolescence of the tools used to produce the image. The hand-made quality is also evident in the choice of very thick water-colour paper, all the more present because it's unframed. The technique behind the textures created here reminds me of those obtained using drypoint (mezzotint) in historical engraving. A comb-like instrument resulted in black and white lines resembling of stripes. Also, the longer the teeth of the combs, the more intense the blacks while the whites were achieved by the shorter teeth scratching the surface of the paper as deeply as possible. The de-saturation of colour in the lines adds an element of subjectivity, the artist's touch. The hand, when it is tired, no longer has energy to maintain constant pressure. This colour sometime dissolves in the surface and its brightness is thereby decreased. The arrangement of white spaces contained between the lines creates voluntary pauses, the structured whites suggesting time, like the silences between musical variations.

The drawings are neither more nor less systems of footprints designed to create small revolutions. These small "sabotages" echo, for me, the title of the exposition: Life's little upsets/ Les petits bouleversements de la vie. The intensity of the traits, and their irregularities, are not really linked to the artist's emotional state. The pencil traveling across the paper is not a seismograph measuring and recording every emotional disturbance in her life. Therefore it would be too simple to establish a direct line between the bare strips of paper and an absence of emotion. No, this is not obviously introspective work. It is controlled by predetermined markers. The use of the Spirograph tracing tool allows the artist to release herself mentally from the world around her while accumulating content through repetitive tracing. Across their long trajectories, the lines pile one on the other and the mind of the artist may wander. The construction of each drawing oscillates between taking a formal decision (to organize the elements themselves on the paper) and meditation (a state of being available). These large drawings may suggest varying images like that of waves, or cardiac pulses viewed on a monitor; they are the schematization of a movement. But they define themselves above all as abstract work. The undulating lines unfurling before our eyes are sensitive signs.

The square formats of the pieces echo the work of Bridget Riley or Agnes Martin, in particular her floating abstractions, contemplative paintings on which coloured lines are nearly imperceptible. If one may connect the works in this show to minimal art, or Op art with its optical tremours, colour enters Robbin Deyo's work through intuition. In her previous works with wax, colours harkened back to another era, 1960s and 70s kitsch, bright candy colours, and summer skies. The surfaces were composed of elegant, contrasting colours such as blue and orange. If they were monochrome surfaces, the tones were also saturated. In the series presented here, each work rests on one colour and its nuances. The mauves, pinks, blues, oranges, or grey-greens change appearance according to their consistency, and through reduction of the spaces between them. Whether they expand, contract or intersect, the

coloured pencil lines blend into the cream-white of the paper and produce soft but luminous colours. There is neither narrative nor chronological order in these works. Hung on the gallery walls, these painstaking monochrome squares slowly distill their individuality. It's as if the air of the gallery had been tinted or even perfumed by them. The artist has even freed one of them from the substantiality of paper, by drawing directly on the wall. Thus stripped of its material constraints, the piece provides an even more direct experience of colour. It becomes a luminous map where colour appears to have no depth, to the point of producing a floating effect in spite of the obsessive and masterful graphic repetition. The works operate subtly on our perception, and on the act of viewing. Each drawing is a work of accumulated light-matter which transmits a kind of luminous emotion. The sensation does not need to be clearly identified but we recognize it, somewhere in ourselves.

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translation by Ann Diamond