

Camille Morineau, commissaire de l'exposition

Françoise Pétrovitch, dessiner pour voir





Vue de l'exposition *Incertitudes des figures*, 2018, Le Transpalette, Centre d'art contemporain, Bourges

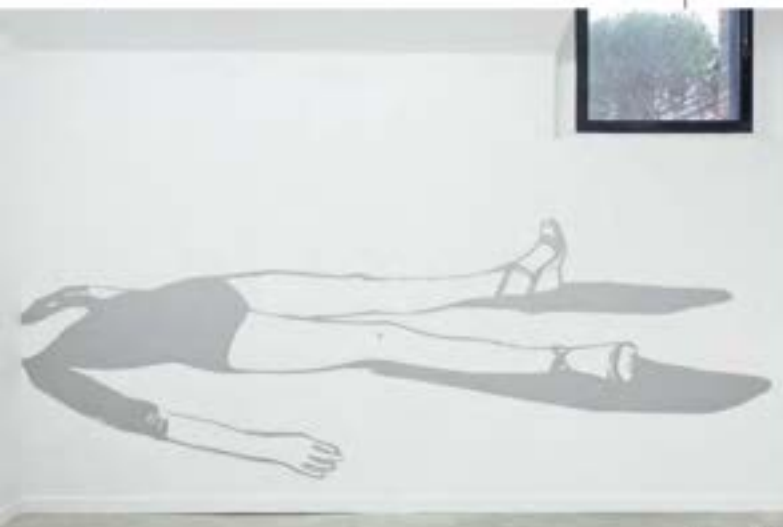
I : DRAWING: AS DOING AN EXPRESSIVE GESTURE WITH THE ADVANTAGE OF PERMANENCY.

Francoise Petrovitch received the Guerlain Prize just a few months before her first retrospective in France, her native country, where she has been consistently exhibiting her work for 25 years. She is the first French woman to receive this prestigious award, since 2007 to “an artist working mainly on drawing, or for whom drawing is a primary practice.” Primordial is the right term for someone who decides at the age of six to be a “draftsman”. Although it was at this point, because she didn’t know the term “artist”. She retains a form of modesty both in her culture and in her technical virtuosity that this retrospective should underline.

Her extensive training allowed her to become an artist without jumping through the *Beaux-Arts* hoop. After studying at the École Normale Supérieure de Cachan, Petrovitch received a Master’s degree in Aesthetics from the Sorbonne and received her aggregation in plastic arts at the age of 23. By the time Petrovitch was a young professor at the prestigious École Estienne, her students were almost the same age as her. Petrovitch has created artist’s books and drawing portfolios as her work became recognized around the world, and expanded to new formats: from sculpture to ceramics to glass, to bronze. Yet she remains remarkably modest about her accomplishments and her remarkable technical skill. This retrospective should flip that notion on its head.

The texts in this catalogue correspond to the richness of the themes and the techniques that Petrovitch has used since the beginning of her career, and to the fluidity of the patterns that, with remarkable recurrence, pass from small to large: from drawing, to engraving, and lastly to sculpture—and vice-versa. This particular detail of her work—which she calls line-patterns, or *motifs-trait*—appears from the earliest years of her career. To name just a few: hands (alone, holding other hands, or animals); closed eyes (or blindfolded, covered by masks or by standing or lying bodies); and the association of man and animal to the point of confusion. They are worked at all different scales and in all available techniques.

Vue de l'exposition *État d'esprit* au sein de 2014, Nelson Ativan, Le Béguin



La virtuosité technique de l'artiste donne le vertige. Petrovitch a fait des livres d'artiste¹, des portfolios de gravures — une exposition à la BnF témoignera dans quelques mois de son travail d'édition² — parallèlement au déploiement progressif de son dessin dans l'univers et le format pictural, alors même qu'elle explorait tous les matériaux de la sculpture (la céramique, le verre, puis le bronze). À partir des années 2000, elle augmente considérablement son trait au format architectural et anime ses dessins lorsqu'elle les assemble par grappes, les associe au son et les projette sous forme de films. Elle « danse » littéralement — enfin, son dessin — lorsqu'elle le met au centre de chorégraphies dont elle écrit les scénarii³ et répond à la commande d'un immense dessin-décor: un rideau de scène⁴. Entre-temps, elle a inventé un dessin-installation en trois dimensions, « ouvert » à la déambulation d'enfants⁵. Elle parle encore de dessin lorsqu'elle sculpte, autre technique devenue récurrente. « Le croquis est la structure de la sculpture. Il traverse toujours mon travail, je n'abandonne jamais le dessin, même dans la sculpture, il est partout⁶. »



Françoise Pétrovitch au travail, Bozell, 2020
Lavis d'encre sur papier, 320 x 540 cm

Ce talent multidimensionnel est le propre de quelques grands artistes : Thomas Schütte ou Kiki Smith récemment ont été des exemples de dessinateurs, trices-graveurs, euses-peintres-sculpteurs, trices auxquels rien ne semblait résister. Pablo Picasso l'avait mis en pratique, mais c'est à un autre moderne que Pétrovitch se réfère volontiers, Henri Matisse, dont les *Écrits et propos sur l'art* l'ont marquée et n'ont cessé de la guider depuis ses vingt ans : « J'aime modeler autant que peindre — je n'ai pas de préférence. Si la recherche est la même quand je me fatigue d'un moyen, alors je me tourne vers l'autre... J'ai fait de la sculpture quand j'étais fatiguée de la peinture. Pour changer de moyen. Mais j'ai fait de la sculpture comme un peintre. Je n'ai pas fait de la sculpture comme un sculpteur¹⁰. » Matisse a su, à l'entendre, « porter à son extrême la synthèse du trait et de la couleur, du dessin et de la peinture¹⁰ », synthèse à laquelle elle aspire aussi. Enfin elle admire chez Matisse ce qu'elle met en œuvre : « Il n'y a pas de hiérarchie avec lui. L'art décoratif, la ligne, l'arabesque, le motif font vraiment partie de la peinture au même titre que le réel¹¹. » Parmi ses citations préférées de Matisse : « Dessiner est comme de faire un geste expressif avec l'avantage de la permanence¹². »

II. DRAWING IN ABYSM, FROM THE AGES OF LIFE TO “DOUBLES”

La force du dessin de Pétrovitch, son expressivité résultent d'une

The force of Petrovitch's drawing, and particularly its expressiveness, results in a multitude of complex gestures. She works in every technique to determine its outline, every motif to **saisir l'ascèse**, all of which combines to give rise to seemingly simple works that are easy to look at. This is, of course, all on purpose: the goal is to make us forget its underlying complexity. Petrovitch has inveted a sort of “augmented drawing,” where the graphic support, the subject matter, or scale no longer matters. Instead, her drawing is about attitude. *From drawing on the sidelines of a schoolbook to choreography, from sculpture to theatre curtains, to traveling in a city, its the same risktaking.* Her exhibition at the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc, one of France's most prestigious private collections, reveals the extent of it.

The major themes follow one another as they appear in the work, each including a focus that comes to “balance” the thematic: sometimes specifying it, other times contradicting it, and others still to develop it in a different technique. This focus was seen as the focal point of the theme: as an element that orients it, and orients our gaze in a particular point of view, just as the pupil in the center of the cornea transforms the eye into a gaze, an expression. The contrast, for example, between two recently painted giant birds and the first drawings, of modest size and pasted-

un dispositif organique, en une expression,

Le contraste par exemple entre deux oiseaux géants peints récemment et les premiers dessins, de taille modeste et apposés



La grève, 1996, 22 x 35 cm, crayon de couleur et collage sur papier, l'Artothèque, Repasée d'art contemporain de Caen

on already printed papers, frames the first chapter. Draw in the Margins Birds are one of her "motifs traits" (defining traits), like other pets she grew up with on the farm, as well as those found in storytelling, such as the wolf.

The coexistence of the very large with the very small is important and recurring theme in Petrovitch's work. Being able to play with scale is also one of the reasons that Petrovitch chose drawing and has flourished in that medium. It allows a panoramic of scales: its passage from the margin to the center, or from the tiny to the massive, sums up the work. The central motif is "drawn" by the blank paper motif by the color: a white face behind colored hands, or white smoking hands over a face with a skeleton embossed on the T-Shirt of a child.

blanc derrière des mains colorées, des mains blanches de fumeur par-dessus un visage, encore le squelette dessiné en retrait sur le tee-shirt d'enfant).

Le troisième serait l'« indéfinition » de ses fonds: ils font l'économie du lieu, de la présence d'autres personnes, de la nature et donc de leur époque. Décontextualisées, ses figures flottent aussi dans une non-narration volontaire. « Je lutte contre la narration, contre ce qui donnerait des limites aux figures que je montre. Je propose des blocs d'images, je ne

There is also the "indeterminacy" of its content: they save space, minimizing the presence of others, of nature. Decontextualized, these figures float within a non-narrative. "I fight against narration, against anything that limits the figures I show," says Petrovitch. "I instead offer 'blocks' of images. I do not want a story that begins and ends. If we say everything, there is nothing to think about."

Beyond childhood or adolescence, these works speak of the indeterminacy of adulthood in the 21st Century, a time that the world wants to remain in a perpetual youth. There is also a reflection on gender: the figures are left vague, at light of a time where the categories of masculine and feminine are no longer apposite. Girls and boys are displayed as fragile, disappearing behind their cigarettes, their masks, the motifs on their T-Shirts. "When I evoke childhood, it's not about nostalgia for a specific time. It's a mix of things that are seen, lived, imagined, transformed," says Petrovitch. The technique she uses--ink-wash--contributes to the understanding she hopes to impart to these figures: indecisive and gender-fluid, eminently open to interpretation.

le travail de Petrovitch s'offre généreusement au regard de ses spectateurs. D'autant qu'elle s'amuse à dédoubler chacun de ses « motifs-traits », qu'il s'agisse de la main (liée à une autre), du visage (coexistant avec un masque, un casque), du personnage (avec son ombre). Elle leur ajoute en effet d'étranges alter ego sous la forme d'appendices (pour les *Poupées*), de reflets singuliers avec la série des *Ombres* portées, indécises ou incohérentes, focus du chapitre sur le « Double ». *Échos* est placé volontairement au centre de l'exposition, comme une charnière, qui met en scène ce dessin dédoublé à l'infini, par le mouvement, le son et le reflet de ce dernier, agité par un moteur caché qui trouble le bassin. Cette mise en abyme du geste inaugural, « dessiner », résume l'œuvre en son entier.

III UN DESSIN « AUGMENTÉ »



Entrée libre, 2003, vidéo (numérique soustrée), 6m24s, en collaboration avec Hervé Plumet.
Vue de l'exposition d'Abbeville, 2005, FRAC
Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Marseille

La seconde moitié de l'exposition met en lumière l'orientation de plus en plus picturale de Pétrovitch, qui se développe parallèlement à sa multitechnicité. Les œuvres du chapitre des *Gestes* relèvent en partie aussi d'un travail photographique qu'elle assumera comme tel : des images prises « à la volée » des positions et gestes quotidiens, « une manière de dire "j'ai vu" pour l'un, "j'ai entendu" pour l'autre », comme elle le résume joliment. S'y ajoutent les photographies réalisées avec Hervé Plumet, posées, de ses enfants et amis portant ses sculptures pour la série des *Présentations*. Dans ce pictural qui s'affirme, le trait reste présent, souvent émancipé de blocs de couleur qui le dédoublent ou le contredisent, dans une filiation moderne qui remonte aux toiles de Marquet des années 1920 et aux *Transparents* de Picabia des mêmes années, deux artistes dans la lignée desquels Pétrovitch se situe volontiers. En même temps on est frappé par le caractère sculptural des jambes, des pieds et des mains sur lesquels elle « zoome » dans ses tableaux — alors qu'elle les représente à

At the same time, we are struck by the sculptural nature of the legs, feet and hands on which she zooms in her paintings - whereas she represents them life-size in sculpture (series *Dans mes mains*). Monumental and painted, those parts of the body are as expressive as the faces. Furthermore, they often hide faces whose absence, silence, refusal to communicate, shyness and even non-narration, according to the spectator's interpretation. Inviting self-reflection, these images are not meant to avoid chaos.

The artist assumes "continuity and voluntary confusion." They are at once similar and completely distinct; something of a mix. They are not two distinct characters but are in fact together, contiguous and confused; they make people uncomfortable. It is at the moment that design extends into the realm of painting and sculpture, where animal characters are developed, their mask-faces, its presentation game, where hands and objects touch one another and merge, its erasing game where hands, underlined in red, hide faces. Flowing naturally from her work on "doubles", the human-animal hybridization of techniques. It is at the moment where her vocabulary of "pattern strokes" comes out to play: where painting, sculpture, video, and *mise-en-scène* develop and coexist naturally in the 2000s.

développent et coexistent naturellement dans les années 2000.

La dernière extension — chorégraphique — évoque sa manière de travailler le dessin à plat : elle « danse », dit-elle, autour du papier, intensément concentrée dans une œuvre qui doit être faite vite pour suivre le séchage rapide du lavis, dont elle travaille à la fois les coulées — la vivacité — et la solidification — le séchage. À y bien réfléchir et à l'entendre, c'est dans le faire aussi que son geste dessiné, ou son « dessin augmenté », donne lieu naturellement à d'autres techniques. Le travail sur l'humide est commun à son lavis d'encre et à son travail de modelage — la pâte humide repose plusieurs fois sous un tissu trempé d'eau avant d'être retravaillée quelques jours plus tard. On peut en dire autant de son travail de céramiste — elle y serait venue par la couleur émaillée de ses peintures —

Les cablia, 2018, deux dessins superposés, dragon de couleur et lavie sur papier japon, 40 x 38 cm



où l'émail chauffé coule et change de couleur. Son dialogue incessant entre le blanc et la couleur, le contrôle et l'abandon, la coulure et son séchage, est commun à tous les supports.

This “design augmenté”, of all Petrovitch’s techniques, is the operating principle of a work wherein the matching stroke of the color, in an absolute synthesis, is also a component. Drawing as a way of living, as a way of seeing, as a way of interpreting the world: that is the thread that runs through the retrospective. Room after room, the retrospective invites us to reflect on the “focal point” of this work: it is an exercise in learning how to look. Stand, and then engage--or hold something. Or disappear--in its shadow, behind its mask, its eyelids, its hands: all these verbs speak of the gaze.

derrière son masque, ses paupières, ses mains: tous ces verbes parlent du regard.

Le regard, fil rouge de son œuvre, fait partie de ces « motifs-traités ». Y compris dans son absence qu'elle décline. Ouverts, ses *Regards d'Ingres* sont une exception à la règle des yeux fermés, des regards cachés, des têtes coupées de ses œuvres. Le regard absent est en réalité un principe de composition: l'artiste explique volontiers qu'un regard central et ouvert invite à s'y focaliser, alors que des yeux fermés ou absents invitent le regardeur à glisser plus également sur la surface.

IV. DRAWING AND THE HISTORY OF ART: “ALWAYS THE QUESTION OF THE GAZE”

Without the focus of the open eye, the viewer lingers on the margins of the painting or the drawing, plunging into the details of the modeling of the faceless sculpture; sometimes even forgetting the figure and seeing only the interplay of different shapes and depths, the balance between lines and colors, the composition, the abstraction. The world of composition is left apparent, voluntarily so; in such a way that it becomes a subject of its own: “always the question of the gaze: what do you choose/How do you cut? How do you compose?” resumed that echoes the favorite quotes of Matisse: “*Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.*”

Petrovitch’s stylized “motifs-traités” are perhaps less important than the abstraction which has yet to be seen: the framing, the game of chance played with colors and the transparencies of ink that are masterfully controlled and, finally the light, at works on the blank paper in the drawing, by the transparency of the ink washes, by the bursts of bright colors in the half-light of her *Nocturnes*.
dans ses sursis d'entre, par les éclats de couleurs vives dans la pénombre de ses *Nocturnes*.

« Mon travail est classique », précise-t-elle lorsque je l'interroge sur ses rapports à l'histoire de l'art. Je comprends qu'il s'agit autant de la technique que des sujets. À mesure que Petrovitch se saisit du pictural et l'assume, elle regarde la peinture et son histoire et s'y réfère



Océan, 2004, céramique émaillée.
150 x 120 x 120 cm

Deux, 2002, huile sur toile, 120 x 160 cm
Vue de l'exposition À bruta secrets, 2005, Château de Gruyères, Suisse





Françoise Pétrivitch peignant un grand format dans son atelier, sans titre, 2010, huile sur toile, 340 x 240 cm.

frontalement. Ses portraits d'enfants graves sont un leitmotiv de la peinture classique, de Velázquez à Picasso, car le sujet résume l'humain paradoxe de l'enfance. Elle l'analyse sobrement en parlant de la sienne : de la solitude au sein d'une appartenance forcée à un groupe, de la rage rentrée derrière une sagesse apparente, la souffrance d'être réduite à un attribut / une différence, enfin la dure loi des genres qui violente filles et garçons indifféremment. « Les âges de la vie » sont un des plus anciens sujets de la peinture, et Pétrivitch a travaillé en réalité sur tous les âges, en commençant par la vieillesse avec *J'ai travaillé mon comptant*¹⁰. Nous avons choisi de clore l'exposition avec un chapitre intitulé *Dialogues entre peinture et dessin* afin d'inviter le visiteur à refaire le parcours en sens inverse pour relire l'ensemble à l'aune d'une histoire immémoriale de la peinture et/ou des représentations.

Her masks follow a long lineage, of representations of carnivals, particularly in the Venetian tradition. In so doing, she reconnects with a fantastic, at times quite comical history of illustration in fiction and theatre. At the same time, her hybrid characters--animals, people, or human-animals--are left unencumbered by the thick history of mythological representations, illustrations, tales, and fables.

Dans la série des *Présentations*, Pétrivitch assume la parenté des animaux blottis avec les nouveau-nés des Vierges à l'Enfant. Ses *Étendus* rappellent les gisants gothiques sculptés ou les dépositions du Christ de la peinture, d'autant que l'oiseau à moitié caché au-dessus d'eux dans les coulures du lavis se réfère sans ambiguïté au symbole du Saint-Esprit de la peinture chrétienne. Ce dialogue avec la peinture ancienne s'affermirait dans les *Nocturnes*, qui travaillent frontalement le genre de la nature morte. Leurs tonalités mates et denses, la préparation rouge du fond comme aux temps anciens, l'éclairage à la fois faible et précis comme dans les caravagesques font de cette série un hommage clair à la peinture que Pétrivitch embrasse enfin comme une technique à elle.

Son extraordinaire variation sur les *Saint Sébastien* place l'histoire de la peinture « au centre » de ses grands papiers, où le dessin revient par l'intermédiaire de la réduction au noir et blanc de l'interprétation assez méthodique du sujet chez les grands maîtres. L'artiste leur applique l'épure stylistique et iconographique habituelle : excluant le sexe et la tête, elle en gomme à la fois la souffrance et l'extase et se concentre sur le buste criblé de flèches. Elle rentre dans la stylistique de chaque artiste et semble intarissable : « Mantegna a peint plusieurs figures du saint, qui sont à chaque fois des démonstrations de perspective : chaque flèche re-fabrique les points de fuite. Le *Saint Sébastien* et l'*Ange* de Van Dyck est précieux, comme une danse. Zurbarán a réalisé un saint Sébastien très expressif, voire expressionniste, très loin de son style géométrique : était-ce un motif qui lui permettait de se lâcher, d'expérimenter ? Celui de Georges de La Tour est au sol, ce qui est rarissime, comme un gisant¹¹. »

V COMMENT L'OGRESSE A MANGÉ L'OGRE



Rougir, série de aérographes débutée en 2008
Vue de l'exposition *Frangotea Pétrovitch*, 2012, Centre d'art contemporain
de Portmah

Tout le monde, 2004, série d'encre et crayon sur
papier, 250 x 120 cm



« La jeunesse, la beauté, la souffrance, la mort. »
Ainsi résume-t-elle son travail sur « l'essentiel » de ces
saint Sébastien, en ajoutant malicieusement : « J'aime
bien l'idée qu'une femme traite ce sujet : une icône
gay. » On aurait tort de ne voir que de la douceur dans
le travail de Pétrovitch, de le réduire à son caractère
faussement apaisé et champêtre, à l'enfance et
en particulier à un travail de femme sur les fillettes.
Le contraire est plus vrai. Le genre y est présent,
mais indéfini, informe, malmené. La violence sourd,
la tristesse affleure, la menace plane : sans résolution,
le mal-être est perceptible. J'aime particulièrement,
quant à moi, l'inquiétante étrangeté du travail
dans son ensemble, sa gravité souvent, ses détails

et moments de terreur, jusqu'au renversement des stéréotypes
qu'elle esquisse régulièrement sans jamais l'imposer. Cette
coexistence du solaire et du spectral, de l'enfance souriante et
terrifiante, est à l'œuvre dans la série *Rougir* : sorte de journal
intime gravé où s'accumulent depuis 2005 aussi bien des
gravures d'Épinal que des pendus, autant d'enfants sages que
de corps découpés, de sourires que de grimaces. Sans chercher
l'exhaustivité de cette face sombre de Pétrovitch, je citerais
le malaise ressenti devant la série des *Ombres*, où la personne
est le plus souvent dépassée par son double déréalisé, la menace
latente et l'évocation déguisée du viol dans le film *Le Loup
et le Loup*, la violence qui explose dans la série des *Poupées*, où
les démembrements, têtes carbonisées et blessures multiples
se diffusent comme l'encre sombre dans les corps de ces
femmes-objets martyrisées, le caractère morbide enfin des
obscur bouquets *Nocturnes*, dont l'artiste remplace l'origine à la
mort de son père.

L'Ogresse, une œuvre produite pour l'exposition, résume
cette entreprise de déconstruction des stéréotypes de genre,
commencée discrètement par Pétrovitch il y a trente ans.
Partie d'un petit dessin gravé au creux d'une assiette en 2011,
qui pourrait de loin ressembler à une variation sur le garçon
à la flûte de Pan mâtiné de l'enfant sauvage²⁰ mais se révèle
de près plus proche du meurtrier de *Sa Majesté des mouches*²¹,
l'artiste le féminise et le marie au conte de *Barbe Bleue*.
Ainsi naît l'ogresse, version féminine et féministe où l'une des
petites filles aurait choisi, plutôt que d'être victime de l'inceste
collectif, de tuer puis de manger l'ogre dans une sorte de rite
monstrueux et serait ensuite montée sur un rocher comme sur
un piédestal, pour afficher sa victoire sanglante.

C'est le moment d'évoquer une autre lignée où s'inscrit le
travail de Pétrovitch, celle de deux ou trois générations d'artistes
femmes qui depuis les années 1960 ont trouvé dans le dessin
« augmenté » un véritable univers plastique, un terrain de
liberté. Après la photographie et au même titre que la fibre
textile, la vidéo et la performance, elles pouvaient s'y exprimer
sans souffrir d'une compétition alors très inégale avec les
hommes. L'œuvre de Pétrovitch fait le lien avec un aujourd'hui
où les deux genres — masculin et féminin — se croisent



Tineke, 2011, Jeune femme en robe rouge, sur papier, 100 x 80 cm.

1. Expositions parmi lesquelles : François Petrositch (2008), cabinet d'art graphique, musée d'Art moderne de Saint-Étienne ; François Petrositch (2008), musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris ; Ehler (2008), Institut d'Art et d'Architecture Bernard Saget, Bordeaux ; De l'Art aux apparences (2008), LAAC Dunkerque ; L'Abstrait (2008), Petit PACT, Marseille ; Nocturnes (2007), Campendon Centre d'Art, L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue ; Tineke (2008), Pavillon de verre du Louvre-Lens ; Sans réserves (2008), MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine ; Habiter la ville (2008), ville de Voisy, Poissy.
2. Signée par Lantitis Charvin.
3. Parmi ses nombreux types d'artiste : Radio Petrositch (2010) ; Mes fusillères (2008) ; Périphéries (2008) ; De la réduction (2008) ; publiées aux éditions Humano, galerie qui la représente actuellement.
4. Exposition Derrière les paupières, l'œuvre imprimée, à la BiFi à l'automne 2008, commissariat de Claude Pigeon-Lesteven.
5. Des performances dansées conçues par la chorégraphe Julie Despaire et interprétées par Elise Ladoù ; puis de laisser pousser des arbustes avec la

chorégraphe Sylvain Pennequin et Hervé Plument au son, montage et éclairage ; plus récemment, les scènes et costumes pour la pièce Adolescent coécrite avec le chorégraphe Sylvain Ocaui pour le Centre chorégraphique de Roubaix.
6. Pour l'ouvrage L'Abstrait des surréalistes de Marco Polo, d'Artiste Lavandier.
7. Passer à travers (2009-2010), réalisée pour la galerie des Enfants du Centre Pompidou puis itinérant au West Bund Museum de Shanghai.
8. Critiques avec Pascal Nèveux, Valérie Pugin, Paul Riposte et René-Joëlle Mayer dans François Petrositch, Monographie, Paris, Semiose éditions, 2004, p. 81.
9. Henri Matias, Écrits et propos sur l'art, Hermann édition (collection Savoir), p. 70.
10. Entretien de l'artiste avec M.R. et moi-même réalisé le 6 avril 2011.
11. Ibidem.
12. Henri Matias, Écrits et propos sur l'art, op. cit., p. 67.
13. Entrée Libre, à Trévise, associée des dessins dans des vitrines de commerces fermés et un film qui engage la réaction des passants à ces dessins.
14. Entretien avec P. Nèveux, V. Pugin,

P. Riposte et R.-J. Mayer dans François Petrositch, op. cit., p. 16.
15. Ibidem.
16. Extrait de nombreux entretiens réalisés avec l'artiste au cours du premier trimestre 2010 et qui ont nourri considérablement ce texte, et le l'en remercie lui.
17. Henri Matias, Écrits et propos sur l'art, op. cit., p. 48.
18. Entre 2005 et 2006, elle interroge des entrées sur leur vie professionnelle, qu'elle résume et traduit en dessin : J'ai travaillé mon compte, Paris, 2004, Éditions Un couple de toi et j'écoute ma mère, 2006.
19. Extrait d'entretiens avec l'artiste.
20. Le Mougi du Livre de la jungle, de Xiping (1994), et L'Exilant sauvage, film de Truffaut (1970).
21. La Majesté des échecs, roman de William Golding publié en 1964 et qui inspire le film homonyme de Peter Brook en 1965.
22. À partir du milieu des années 80, de fait, beaucoup de grandes artistes femmes s'expriment uniquement à partir du dessin vont constituer un univers visuel singulier : Silvia Sassi, Anna-Marie Schmidt, Sandra Vasego de la Horta, Frédérique Loutz, pour n'en citer que quelques-unes par ordre chronologique (années de naissance).

également dans l'univers d'un dessin contemporain très officiel, qui a désormais ses salons, ses foires, ses prix, ses collections publiques et privées dédiés²¹. Je fais remonter cette tendance très précisément à 1964, année où, de retour aux USA après un séjour parisien où elle avait pratiqué la peinture dominée par la figure humaine, Nancy Spero, horrifiée par la guerre du Vietnam, abandonne ce médium. Elle décide de remplacer la toile, selon elle trop liée au monde masculin, aux stéréotypes et à la violence, par du papier fin et bon marché et de la gouache. De 1966 à 1970, les *War Series*, où textes et dessins s'entremêlent, lancent une épopée féministe qui s'écrit dans les deux continents, et où le dessin tient une place à redécouvrir. À la fin des années 1980, Marlene Dumas, dont le dessin reste le mode d'expression privilégié à côté de la peinture, réfléchit sur l'identité, la race, la force des images. Louise Bourgeois reprend la gravure puis le dessin avec une liberté radicale de ton et de contenu, et même une rage étrange pour une femme de quatre-vingts ans. Dans les années 1990, Kiki Smith travaille la gravure et la sérigraphie, puis de grands dessins dans un papier nervuré et bosselé qui les apparente à de la sculpture, domaine où elle excelle par ailleurs. C'est aussi dans les années 1990 que Tracey Emin réalise des aquarelles de son avortement qu'elle ne montrera à la Biennale de Venise que dix-sept ans plus tard.

This exhibition concludes two years of work and happiness, spent in conversation with great work and its creator. I would like to leave the last word to Francoise, because the conversation with her was the highlight of this period of time.

"Time is very singular in the visual arts: the further I go, the more I think that this concept is the most interesting. I at once think of the time that we perceive; the sense of shock as a work being created; of persistence in time—what is said of a work after it has been completed; and then the time long after its creation. All this accumulated by a single work. Our time on earth is not long."

Camille Morineau

Interview

Michel-Séverin Leclercq.

When Françoise Pérovitch took over the Halle des Capucins to set up her work, it was a world that revealed itself, and that is there to be discovered. It has been complicated seeing one another these last few months, so I am all the more delighted that we have succeeded in meeting again, in Françoise's brightly-lit studio in Cachan, to talk about her work, our project and collaboration. An exhibition is always a very special narrative we build together, an adventure we share before sharing it with a public, and gathering an audience more widely around it.

Françoise Pérovitch.

I wanted Camille to look at my work, I wanted to see what it might look like once exhibited. The opportunity for a new confrontation, that's what's great.

Camille Morineau.

I've been following Françoise's work for a long time now. I received the invitation to organise her exhibition at the Fonds as wonderful news, and I said yes straightaway, without hesitation!

MEL. I first became acquainted with the work too, before I met the artist. It was in the store room of the gallery owner Éric Dereumaux that I saw your drawings for the first time, and I purchased three, without knowing where I was going with that. After, Benoît Porcher, at Galerie Semiose, showed me other works of yours, and above all, organised a meeting with you.

FP. I remember: you came to the studio and you were quite curious, but at the same time, reserved. It left an impression on me.

MEL. I was impressed, for you don't correspond to the idea one has of certain artists. When I came to your place, you didn't hide behind your work. It was that meeting, those easy exchanges, and of course the interest in your work that brought us very quickly to set your name down in the Programming of the Fonds, and also to plan and commit ourselves to other forms of collaboration. For both of us are also close because of our fondness for paper, for prints, the pleasure we experience in studios....

FP. Yes, there was all that work we did together at Idem, at René Tazé, and at the studio À fleur de pierre, for Les éditions de MEL publisher.

MEL. In your practise, it represents an important part of your work, alongside painting. And

since the very beginning, you've sent a copy of each of your prints to the BnF. We were in the process of creating, in parallel, a partnership between the FHél and that institution, and together to bring out and promote contemporary print and the artists working to make it come alive. The presentation of your work could be a beautiful opportunity to inaugurate that partnership: the BnF would present your printed work and we, at Landerneau, would organise a more thematic exhibition of your work. It is a wonderful project from which the exhibition at Landerneau takes its support. Camille, as curator of the exhibition at the Fonds, how did you decide to apprehend Françoise's work? What was your journey like?

CM. I feel it is more the result of a dialogue with Françoise about her work, the important themes of it; I like to be attentive to the artist, because one has to respect her vision. I felt there was not a very strong chronology in her work, except perhaps the moment when she took up painting. And Françoise was generous enough to let me have my own take on her work, she trusted me. The presence of a co-curator provided an additional dimension to the dialogue, because I've been working with Lucia Pesapane in a relation of trust for quite a while now.

FP. And that's what's interesting in that collaboration, that mutual trust.

CM. For example, one of the themes is called *Les âges de la vie*. There are many people who have somehow reduced Françoise's work to childhood and adolescence, to something mild... With Lucia, we wanted to show that all ages are in fact present, that it is that notion of age which is questioned. And to show also that, on the opposite, there is violence in her work. On the one hand, that violence intrigues me, and on the other, there is also something that pertains to the daily gesture, the relationship with life - I'm thinking of Paul Valéry's quote on Berthe Morisot, that "natural and necessary function" of "living her painting and painting her life" - that touches me a lot. I wanted to talk about those two things, both the hidden, dark, hard aspect but also the proximity with things and beings. For me, those two poles represent the singularity of her work. I wanted them to be present in the retrospective exhibition. We worked with Lucia and Françoise at chapters that are made of a theme, but also a focus, which enables us, each time, to say something, but

also a little of its opposite. It's a way to open up toward something else.

FP. Yes, we shift the gaze, in a way.

MEL. We start the journey with *Dessiner dans les marges*; what does that mean?

FP. At the beginning, I was always drawing on printed paper. Like in the margins of school exercise books, you know, with a comment or an annotation. Something had to exist in the first place for me to be able to draw.

MEL. Did you react to it, or was it just a support?

FP. I reacted to it. Because I worked on young girls' school books, for example. I used to go to the old papers fair which no longer exists, but which at the time took place twice a year, and one could find a treasure trove of printed material. I found quite a few exercise books from the 1930s and 1940s on which the pupils had to write lines in ink, with sentences like "Be gentle and discreet". One had to copy that twenty times. But of course I took the opposite stance. I also cut chapters from a book, a pulp novel, for example - with overwritten formulations - and the writing, the title of the chapter, became the title of the drawing. You see, I was doing things the other way around: the title existed *before* the drawing.

MEL. But there's also the symbolism of the margins. You're interested in asperities, in fragilities, aren't you?

FP. Yes, everything is in the margin, really. What is represented are often things on the edge, in the margin, or forgotten, or less to the fore. What I call less "domineering". What is interesting - and I go back on the question of the double Camille mentioned - is that these are often things in the margin but that are presented isolated and unique, at the centre of things. Visually they take back their original place.

CM. They are characters with a certain fragility, who are withdrawn, who are hesitant... I find that very beautiful because it talks as much about childhood as about young adults, and why not, old age. Those characters are both very present, and at the same time, in a kind of inwardness.

MEL. You came up with a certain expression earlier: "It is not what is domineering that interests me, it is what is on the edge". Do you feel that the personalities we want to express are "forced", that is not our true nature...

FP. I don't know, but "the domineering" are those who have the floor, in reality, those who talk. They are the "experts", those who yield power, and it is not those whom I represent.

MEL. Mask, shadow, double. That's interesting: all of that is the same person. On an individual level, one makes oneself up, one puts on a mask. One hides behind powders and blusher, behind artifice, behind clothes, and the shadows betray us or say things about us. In your approach, you examine a subject from all angles, is it you whom you examine? Is it a way to look?

FP. It is a little like that, with different tones.

CM. What you told me once, Françoise - and which for me connects with everything you've just said, Michel - is that the fact of having a mask covering the face enables us to hide our gaze. And there are many pieces in your work where the characters don't look or have their eyes closed. It is something that is very present. "We don't look in the same way at an artwork showing a character with closed eyes as at one showing a character with open eyes, because we are attracted to the eyes, and we don't look at what's happening around. When the characters have their eyes closed, we look at the painting. Otherwise, we are attracted to the gaze that polarises and we lose much of the pictorial aspect", you explained to me.

FP. Because our eyes lock onto the characters' gaze, inevitably, and we search for something. Try it, in a portrait gallery, at the Louvre or elsewhere: we only seek the painted eyes. And if you have closed eyes in front of you, suddenly you have no way of entering, not that way anyway, which is a human way of entering into a dialogue that we all share, which belongs to the living. But you also know that you have a painting in front of you, and your gaze changes, it becomes more attentive to the quality of the painting.

MEL. Is that the decision of the painter, or the choice of the model?

FP. Of the painter, clearly.

MEL. And what are you looking for, then? To go to the essence, to another communion, by other means, with your subjects?

FP. No, those subjects no longer exist. For me it is painting.

CM. Those figures which put a mask on.... I could go further and say that it is a way for you to make abstract paintings. We forget the figure and we look at painting, that we see as abstract painting, even more when those works are very big. There are coloured flat tints and we can finally have a slightly more contemplative vision of an abstract form.

MEL. And what are you trying to extract yourself from?

FP. From telling a story, I guess.

MEL. There is no narrative? There is no narrative purpose?

CM. I even think that your work constructs non-narrative in a very deliberate way. As if you especially didn't want it to be a narrative.

FP. There are never any scenes where there are a few characters, perspectives, one who arrives, one who is there, something that is said between them, a flight; they are decontextualised. You don't know if it's today, yesterday, tomorrow.... You don't know.

CM. We are very free in front of your works; there is much space to look at them, to interpret them. It is very open.

MEL. There is room for *our* narrative.

FP. Exactly! I'm very bad at telling stories. At home, for example, when we have to tell someone an adventure the four of us had, it is certainly not me who recounts, because I'm going to say the end before the beginning.

CM. Is it also relevant with regard to your video works?

FP. In the videos, there is no story-board, no script to start with. Hervé always tries to bring a little narrative sense at some point - because when we have to do the editing, it cannot be a shapeless thing, there is inevitably a thread one has to find because we need a beginning and an end. We take big blocks, like big fragments, and we organise them. And it is for the viewer to find a meaning. But nothing is scripted.

MEL. I saw some of your works, *Twins*, for example, that are perhaps not morbid, but let's say, disturbing.

FP. My work is never morbid, but in those pieces, it is disturbing because the figures are confused. One talks about hybrids here, and confusion is always disturbing, I've noticed. You don't know where one finishes and the other begins, the body of one and the body of the other, the hold of one and the hold of the other. It's true that I work on that. I say that I make *one*, but the *one* is made of multiple, and sometimes it creates unease.

MEL. It is a mystery that surrounds you too...

CM. I see the representation of her thinking process. Françoise is obviously radiant, but she is also and, above all, a woman possessed. When I see her paintings, I also see what's happening inside her. And what's happening inside many people, who on the outside seem very serene but inside are stirred by very powerful emotions.

FP. Sometimes, we look at works in which we perceive that it's all "sorted out": all is there all the time, wholly, all is on display, all the "feelings" are brought to a paroxysm. It's even a pictorial paroxysm, with a lot of contrast, vigorous strokes. I have difficulties with that because I feel that I am in something that doesn't leave me any room, where a kind of anger, the turbulence of the world, a super-meaning is imposed on me. But what I need is space, it is "*Let me think! Let me be free!*" And it is similar with literature: I have problems with works that say too much, that are too baroque, with too many things entering my head.

MEL. That refusal of the super-meaning brought on by the subjects, you also have it with the materials. Because your materials are very sober, diluted, at times even translucent - I'm not sure these are the right words. It's obvious it is a commitment on your part. It is also one of the characteristics of your work. And in the series of *Étendus*, those diptychs representing bodies stretched out - to go back on what you said earlier - it is not morbid, the characters even look appeased. But the choice of colours for the background, watery greens, browns, blacks, though they heighten on the one hand, the main colour, on the other they create a rather disturbing setting, whether it is the texture, the matter, the drips... Is it a formal exercise of revelation of character or does the background draw you in too? And does the character navigate in a mysterious universe?

FP. It takes place at the same time. When you talk about colour, it's true there are some "non-colours" in my work. I love non-colours in sculpture, for example for enamels. I enjoy finding colours like those of the linings of garments, the sateen: a colour that doesn't really exist, a kind of grey green, something like that. Colours that are bizarre, worn, faded or which are shiny but not entirely. What is very linked to colour is the inversion colour-value. Those imprecisions, that's what creates the unease. And it is a shape that eludes the viewer. There is no immediate recognition, and that's what confuses us, I believe.

MEL. But when you create your background, what do you think about?

FP. About nothing. And I think that the thing to do is actually to think about nothing.

CM. So when we look at those backgrounds, we can project plenty of things on them.

MEL. And you used those same "colours" for the

bodies of your *Saint Sebastien*.

FF. What I wanted was almost a non-colour. I didn't want the colour of the body, which is often that of the flesh. And I wanted to distance myself from the model - the relation to the model here is very close - but that's what interests me - and it was out of question to make people think about a reproduction. When you copy, you always try to find the same colour, it is the big technical challenge, to try to find out how that green was made, to reflect on how many percent... Here it was a distancing, too. And that slightly greyed colour - it has a base of grey that verges on dark purple blue, or various greys - I think it brings me back to the mineral aspect of sculpture. And I quite liked the idea of starting from a painting, making a drawing that alluded to sculpture: it is like a loop.

CM. What is surprising in Françoise's work is that her drawing quickly becomes three-dimensional: the motifs are extracted, become sculptures, take place on the wall, in architecture, and become theatre backdrops, then films. There is a kind of flexibility. We experience that in the exhibition, the action of animating the drawing, for example in those animated drawings that are not exactly that either. It seems to me that you think about that a lot in your paintings: you imagine that we will be in front of it, that we will be taken over.

FF. There are openings, yes. The idea of the format is great. Like last year, when I was given the opportunity to work for the opera in Rouen, the canvas being thirty metres by seven: to see suddenly that the painting is everywhere, it's huge!

REL. You have a special bodily gesture that you've always expressed when you talk about Rouen.

FF. Imagine it, I arrived in a warehouse where they create the backdrops for the opera: the canvas was placed on the ground, two hundred metres in one piece, all white. So you have to go and do it. So you remove your shoes, and you walk on it, you throw buckets of water; it was crazy! So what's interesting is that in that decor, you have a piece. You are quite close to the canvas, and so to the painting, because you have an out-of-frame perspective too. So you deal with that out-of-frame perspective, but you are *in* that out-of-frame perspective. You are *outside* and *inside*. And it's even more present, it's almost a cinema frame.

REL. It's true that you are someone who has always

expressed a need for space. At home, you are always tidy, but it's also to gain space.

FF. Space is essential for me, otherwise I suffocate...

CM. I have one last little question, Françoise. I remember my experience with Thomas Schütte - I noticed you have a catalogue of his. Walking around his retrospective exhibition at la Monnaie in 2019, he didn't want to talk to journalists. Feeling he was anxious, I told him: "Thomas, really, you don't want to say something?" He let me do the tour and then, at the end, he gave a speech to the journalists. And he said: "In fact, you have to understand that for an artist, a retrospective is extremely stressful, because everything one has done is there, gathered. So the question is: *what's next?* - What am I going to do now?" I wanted to know how you feel having suddenly all your work gathered in this exhibition! Does it affect what you are doing for the moment? Does it touch you?

FF. Yes, it affects it. Because suddenly I find threads in the first things I made, which were obviously there but which I didn't want to see - I always look *after* what is going to happen. When you have done all that work, the first time you came to my studio with Lucia, and you said to me: "I want to see everything", Isabelle, my assistant, and I tried to find again... even though we had prepared... It is at that moment that physically, I understood things. When the first drawings came out of the store, you told me "that thing, that thing, that thing". That's when you see a density. You know it because it's your life, but suddenly, physically, you perceive it. It is a little bit the luck of the artist to be able to perceive the density of a life, because it is all punctuated with drawings, with something physical. A life's work is physical. And it's very interesting. At the same time, I told you I had a backache - because you take charge of things, it is physiological. Regarding the future, I haven't been that anxious because I am quite versatile, in my head, in my way of working with various mediums, and they are things very light, very quick, that don't demand huge organisations. There has been no pause in my work. It was and it still is on its way...

hold of us, disappears and comes back. It is what gives her works the very particular charm of a close, almost enduring relation between an artistic ideal and the intimacy of existence."

1 "The singularity of Berthe Morisot was to live her painting and to paint her life, as if it was a natural and necessary function linked to her vital way of life, this exchange of observation against action, this creative purpose against light. She took, left, took up the brush again, like a thought taken

Françoise Pétrovitch, drawing in order to see

I

"DRAWING: LIKE MAKING
AN EXPRESSIVE GESTURE WITH THE
BENEFIT OF PERMANENCE"

Françoise Pétrovitch was awarded the Prix Guerlain a few months before the opening of her first retrospective in her own country, where she has exhibited regularly since she was 25¹. She is also the first French artist to be given that prestigious prize which, since 2007, awards "the work of an artist working mainly in drawing, or for whom drawing is an essential practice". Essential is the right word, for the artist who decided, aged 6, to be a 'draughtsman', even if it was at the time for want of knowing the word 'artist'. From her long training described in the remarkable biography at the end of this catalogue², which enabled her to become an artist without attending a Fine Arts school, a kind of modesty remains about both her culture and her technical virtuosity, that this retrospective should overturn. One should mention, if possible without her noticing, that having joined the École normale supérieure in Cachan, Françoise Pétrovitch also received an MA in Aesthetics from the Sorbonne, became a teacher in visual arts at the age of 23, and when that young professor started to teach at Estienne, it was to students almost the same age as her.

The number of texts commissioned for this catalogue corresponds to the richness of themes and techniques the artist has been using almost from the very start, as well as the fluidity of her motifs which, with a remarkable recurrence, go from small to big, from drawing to etching then to sculpture, and vice-versa. This particularity of her work, for which she found a term - she calls these recurrent images 'motif-lines' - already appears in her first years of practice. To list just a few: the hands (alone, holding other hands or animals, etc.), eyes closed (or blindfolded, concealed behind a mask, or a body lying or standing), the association of man and animal brought to the point of confusion. They are worked in all scales and in all techniques.

The artist's technical virtuosity makes one's head spin. Pétrovitch has made artists' books³, portfolios of etchings - an exhibition at the BnF will show in a few months' time her work with publishers⁴ - parallel to the progressive expanding of her drawing in space and pictorial format, while she explored the various materials of sculpture (ceramics, glass, then bronze). From the year 2000, she has increased considerably her line drawing to an architectural format, and has produced 3D animations of her drawings that she gathers by groups, adding to them sound to be projected as films. She literally 'dances' - well, her drawings do - when she places them at the centre of choreographies whose scripts⁵ she writes, and she responded to a commission for a huge decor-drawing: a stage curtain⁶. In the meantime, she has invented a 3D installation-drawing, 'open' for the children to wander through⁷. She still talks about drawing when she sculpts, another technique that she frequently uses. "The drawing is the structure of the sculpture. It is always present in my work, I never leave drawing aside, even in sculpture it is everywhere"⁸.

This multi-dimensional talent is unique to a few great artists: Thomas Schütte and Kiki Smith are recent examples of artists who draw, make prints, paint and sculpt, and to whom nothing resists. Pablo Picasso had put that into practice, but it is another modern that Pétrovitch likes to refer to, Henri Matisse, whose *Écrits et propos sur l'art* made a lasting impression on her, and have never stopped providing her with guidance since her twenties: "I like to model as much as to paint - I have no preference. Though the research is the same, when I tire of one medium, I turn to the other... I made sculpture when I was tired of painting. To change medium. But I made sculpture like a painter. I didn't make sculpture like a sculptor"⁹. Matisse was able, according to her, "to carry to its limit the synthesis of line and colour, of drawing and painting"¹⁰, a synthesis to which she also aspires. Finally she admires in Matisse what she herself practises: "There is no hierarchy in his art. Decorative art, the line, the arabesque, the motif are part of painting, just like real life"¹¹. Among her favourite quotes by Matisse, this one: "Drawing is like making an expressive gesture with the benefit of permanence"¹².

II

DRAWING 'EN ABYME', FROM
THE 'AGES OF LIFE' TO THE 'DOUBLES'

The energy of Pétrovitch's drawing, its expressivity, result from a multitude of complex gestures. She works each technique to determine

its essential features, each motif to seize its pared-down quality, all combined to create works simple in appearance, easy on the eye, while everything is done to make us forget its complexity. Françoise Pétrovitch has invented an 'augmented drawing' where the visual support no longer is of any importance, nor is the typology of the theme or the scale of their representation: it is an attitude. From drawing in the margins of an exercise book to choreography, from sculpture to a stage curtain and a trail in town¹³, it is the same risk taking that is at work in Pétrovitch's art, and whose breadth the exhibition at FHEL intends to unveil.

We are proposing a thematic and chronological approach. Big themes will follow one another as they appear in the oeuvre, each of them including a 'focus' that comes to 'balance' the thematic: at times to specify it, at other times to contradict it, or to develop it in a different technique. This focus has been considered as the focal point of the theme: an element that guides it, as it guides our eyes to one point of view. Like the pupil in the centre of the cornea transforms the eye's mechanism into a gaze, and an organic device into an expression.

The contrast, for example, between two giant birds painted recently and the first drawings of modest size and placed on papers already printed, structure the first chapter "Drawing in the margins". The birds are part of her 'motif-lines', with other familiar animals, those with which she grew up on a farm, as well as those one comes across in fairy tales, like the wolf. Co-existence of the very big with the very small is an important theme in Pétrovitch's work: the issue of scale is one of the reasons why she chose drawing and blossoms in that medium. It accommodates any change of size: its migrating from the margin to the centre, from the minute to the monumental, could epitomise her work. The presence of the blank paper as a central motif 'drawn' by the colour around it is a second important formal principle (a white face behind coloured hands, the white hands of the smokers covering a face, a skeleton drawn in the background on a child's t-shirt). The third would be the lack of definition of her backgrounds: they dispense with location, the presence of other people, nature, and therefore, time. Decontextualized, her figures float in a deliberate absence of narrative. "I struggle against the idea of a narrative, fighting against what would restrain or limit the figures I show. What I propose are blocks of images, I don't want a story with a beginning and an end. If we tell everything, there would be nothing else to imagine"¹⁴.

Beyond childhood and adolescence, those works speak of the increasingly blurred idea around adulthood in the 21st century, where people would like to remain forever young. A reflection on genres takes place too: they are not determined, at the beginning of a century when the concept of male and female is no longer desirable. Boys and girls appear fragile, disappearing behind their cigarettes, their masks, the motifs on their t-shirts. "When I portray childhood, it's not out of nostalgia for a chronologically precise era. It's a mixture of things seen, experienced, imagined, transformed"¹⁶. The technique used - ink wash drawing - participates in the apprehension of those figures - vague, gender-fluid - while leaving a door wide open to their interpretation.

It is therefore with a mixture of simple outline and obfuscation that Pétrovitch's work generously offers itself to the spectator's eyes. All the more for she enjoys splitting each of her 'motif-lines', whether the hand (connected to another), the face (co-existing with a mask, a helmet), the character (with its shadow). Indeed she adds unfamiliar alter egos in the shape of appendages (*Poupées*), strange reflections with the series of projected shadows (*Ombres*), hesitant or incoherent, focus on the chapter on the 'Double'. *Échos* is voluntarily placed at the centre of the exhibition, like a turning point: she stages that drawing endlessly divided by movement, sound, the reflection and the movement of the latter, animated by a concealed engine that clouds the water in the pool. This 'mise en abyme' of the initial 'drawing' gesture epitomises the whole oeuvre.

III

AN "AUGMENTED" DRAWING

The second half of the exhibition sheds light on the more and more visual direction of the artist that develops parallel to her multi-technical abilities. The works of the chapter "Gestes" relate also partly to a photographic work that she accepts for what it is: images shot "on the move" of daily postures and gestures, "a way to say I saw for one, and I heard for another", as she nicely summarises. Posed photographs of her children and friends carrying her sculptures for the series of *Présentations*, taken by Hervé Plumet are added. In that visual universe that asserts itself, the line remains present, often liberated from the blocks of colour that split it or contradict it, in a modern take that goes back to Marquet's paintings in the 1920s and Picabia's *Transparents* from the same years, two artists in whose lineage Pétrovitch happily sees herself. At the same time, one is struck by the sculptural

character of the legs, the feet and the hands, on which she 'zooms in' in her paintings - while she represents them true to size in her sculptures (series *Dans mes mains*). Monumental and painted, those elements of the body are as expressive as the faces. They often conceal the faces of which they reveal - according to the interpretation of the spectator - the absence, the silence, the refusal to communicate, the shyness or the absence of narrative. Inviting introspection, those images do not try to avoid confusion.

The artist accepts "the continuity and the voluntary confusion: they are a little the same things and not the same things, a little bit of a mix, they are not two distinct characters but in reality, they are together, adjacent and confused: they disturb"¹⁷. It is when the drawing is extended into a painting or a sculpture that her character-animals develop, as well as her masked faces, her take on presentation in which hands and objects touch and fuse, her play on erasing in which the hands, underlined in red, conceal the faces. Naturally coming from her work on 'doubles', the hybridisation man/animal coincides with the hybridisation of her techniques. In the 2000s, when her vocabulary of 'motif-lines' established itself, painting, sculpture, video and performances naturally developed and co-existed happily.

The last extension - choreography - evokes the way she works in flat drawing: she 'dances' as she says, around the paper, intensely concentrating on a work that has to be done quickly to supervise the quick drying of the wash drawing, whose drips - the vivacity - and solidification - the drying process - she works on. Thinking about it and listening to her, it appears it is also in the making that her drawing gesture, or her 'augmented drawing' naturally generates other techniques. The work on the wet is common to her wash drawing and her work on modelling - the wet clay lies several times under a cloth dipped in water before being reworked a few days later. The same can be said of her work as a ceramist - she allegedly came to it via the enamelled colour of her paintings - where the heated enamel flows and changes colour. Her constant dialogue between white and colour, control and abandon, drip and dry, are common to all supports.

This 'augmented drawing' of all techniques is the operating principle of a work in which the line coupled with the colour, in an absolute synthesis, also represents the seeing. The drawing as a way to live, as a way to look, to interpret the world, is the thread of the retrospective's trail which, room after room, invites us to reflect on

the 'focal point' of her work: it is truly an exercise in learning how to look. Presenting - an object, an animal - or hiding it - with a hand, a mask. Holding oneself and therefore asserting oneself - standing, alone or in pairs - or holding something. Or disappearing - in one's shadow, behind one's mask, eyelids, hands: all those verbs talk about the gaze.

The gaze, red thread of the oeuvre, belongs to the 'motif-lines', including in its absence, which she also presents. Open, her *Regards d'Ingres* are an exception to the rule of closed eyes, hidden gazes, or heads cut off in her compositions. The absent gaze is in reality a principle of composition: the artist willingly explains that a central and open gaze invites focus, while closed or absent eyes invite the viewer to move more evenly over the surface.

IV

DRAWING AND ART HISTORY: "THE QUESTION OF THE GAZE STILL"

Without the focus on the open gaze, the viewer lingers in the margins of the painting or the drawing, immerses himself in the details of the modelling of a faceless sculpture, even forgets the figure and only sees the play on forms and volumes, the balance between line and colour, the composition, in other words, the abstraction. The work of composition is left voluntarily apparent, so that it becomes a subject in itself, "the question of the gaze still: what you choose, how you remove and how you compose", a summary that echoes another of her favourite quotes by Matisse: "For me, expression doesn't lie in the passion that will break out on a face or will be asserted by a violent gesture. It is in the whole disposition of my painting: the place occupied by the body, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, all that participates in it"¹⁸. Her stylised 'motif-lines' perhaps are less important than the abstraction that remains to be seen: the framing, the chance nature of the drips and the transparency of the ink masterfully controlled, the light finally, rendered either by the blank paper in the drawing, by the transparency in her ink wash, or by the bursts of bright colours in the darkness of her *Nocturnes*.

"My work is classical", she specifies when I question her on her relations with art history. I understand she means as much the technique as the subjects. As Pétrovitch takes hold of the pictorial and fully assumes it, she looks at painting and its history, and relates to it head-on. Her portraits of serious children are a leitmotiv in classical painting, from Velazquez to Picasso, because that theme reiterates the human paradox

of childhood. She summarises it soberly while talking about hers: her solitude in the forced sense of belonging to a group, the rage hidden behind the outward worldliness, the pain of being reduced to an attribute/a difference, finally the hard law of genres that is abusive to boys and girls indiscriminately. "Les âges de la vie" are one of the oldest themes in painting and Pétrovitch worked in fact on all ages, starting with the elderly with *J'ai travaillé mon comptant*²⁰. We decided to close the exhibition with a chapter called 'Dialogue between painting and drawing', to invite the visitor to redo the trail the other way around, to revisit the whole exhibition in the light of an immemorial history of painting and/or representations.

Her masks are a continuation of the representations of carnival, in particular in Venetian painting, while going back on a history of fantastic and tragicomic illustration, of fiction and theatre. Her hybrid characters, men-animals or animal-men, also fit smoothly in the mythological representations, illustrations of fairy tales and fables. In the series *Présentations*, Pétrovitch takes on the kinship with animals snuggled with the new-born babies of the Virgins with child. Her *Étendus* are reminiscent of the sculpted Gothic recumbents or the depositions of Christ in painting, all the more for the bird half-hidden above them in the drips of the wash paint, relates unambiguously to the symbol of the Holy Spirit in Christian iconography. This dialogue with old painting is confirmed in *Nocturnes*, which take on the genre of still life head-on. Their matte and dense tones, the red mix for the background, as in former times, the lighting, both faint and precise, caravaggesque-style, make of this series an obvious tribute to the painting Pétrovitch finally adopts as her own technique.

Her extraordinary variation on *Saint Sébastien* places the history of painting 'in the centre' of her big sheets, on which the medium of drawing returns via the reduction to black and white from the rather methodical interpretation of the theme by the great masters. The artist applies to them her usual stylistic and iconographic approach: excluding the sex and the head, she erases both the agony and the ecstasy and concentrates on the bust pierced with arrows. She takes on fully the style of each artist and proves to be loquacious on the topic: "Mantegna painted several figures of the saint, which are each time demonstrations in perspective: each arrow re-invents the vanishing points. Van Dyck's *Saint Sebastian and the angel* is hyper affected, like a dance. Zurbaran made a very expressive, if not expressionist Saint

Sebastian, very far from his geometric style: was it a theme that enabled him to let go, to experiment? The one painted by Georges de la Tour is on the ground, which is very rare, he is like a recumbent"²¹.

V HOW THE OGRESS DEVOURED THE OGRE

"Youth, beauty, suffering, death", that's how she summarises her work on 'the essence' of those Saint Sebastian(s), adding mischievously "I like the idea of a woman approaching that topic: a gay icon". But we would be wrong to see only sweetness in Pétrovitch's work, and reduce it to its falsely soothed and bucolic character, to childhood and in particular to the work of a woman artist on girls. The opposite is more exact. The genre is present, but vague, shapeless, abused. Violence erupts, sadness comes to the surface, threat lingers: without resolution, the malaise is perceptible. I particularly appreciate the disturbing strangeness of her work in its entirety, its occasional gravity, its details and moments of terror, and the reversal of stereotypes, which she expresses regularly without ever imposing it. That co-existence of the solar and the spectral, of childhood smiling and terrifying, is at work in the series *Roughie*: a kind of etched private diary in which are gathered, since 2005, Epinal prints as well as hanged men, well-behaved children as well as cut-up bodies, smiles as much as grimaces. Without looking for the exhaustivity of Pétrovitch's dark side, I would cite the unease experienced in front of the series *Ombres*, in which the person is most often overtaken by her de-materialised double, the latent threat and the disguised evocation of rape in the film *Le Loup*, the violence that explodes in the series *Poupées*, where dismembering, carbonised heads and multiple wounds spread like dark ink in the bodies of those abused women-objects, the morbid character finally of those dark bunches of flowers in *Nocturnes*, whose origin the artist located at the time of her father's death.

L'Ogresse, a piece created for the exhibition, epitomises that project of deconstruction of genre stereotypes, discreetly initiated by Pétrovitch some thirty years ago. Starting from a small drawing etched on a plate in 2011, that could from a distance resemble a variation on the Faun holding Pan pipes crossed with the Wild Child²², proved to be from close up, nearer to the murderer in *Lord of the Flies*²³, that the artist feminises and marries to the tale of Bluebeard. So the ogress was born, a female and feminist

version in which one of the little girls would have chosen, instead of being a victim of collective incest, to kill then eat the ogre in some kind of monstrous ritual, then would have climbed on a rock as on a pedestal to display her bloodied victory.

Let's evoke now another lineage in which Pétrovitch's work fits, that of two or three generations of female artists who, since the 1960s, have found in 'augmented' drawing a real visual universe, a field to explore freely. After photography and just as with textile, video and performance art, they could express themselves without being affected by a competition with men, totally unequal at the time. Pétrovitch's work provides the connection with our current times, when both genres - male and female - also cross paths in the very official world of contemporary drawing, which now has its salons, fairs, prizes, as well as public and private permanent collections²⁴. I am tracing that tendency back to 1964 precisely, when, returning to the US after a visit to Paris, where she had practised painting, mainly of the human figure, Nancy Spero, horrified by the Vietnam war, abandoned that medium. She decided to replace the canvas, according to her too tied to the male world, to stereotypes and violence, with thin and cheap paper and gouache. From 1966 to 1970, the *War Series*, in which texts and drawings are mixed, launched a feminist epic that was to take place in both continents, and where drawing takes on a place to be rediscovered. At the end of the 1980s, Marlene Dumas, whose drawing remains a preferred mode of expression alongside painting, reflected on identity, race, and the power of images. Louise Bourgeois went back to etching then drawing with a radical freedom of tone and content, and even a rage remarkable for a woman in her eighties. In the 1990s, Kiki Smith worked in etching and silkscreen printing, then in big drawings on ribbed and embossed paper that brought them closer to sculpture, a domain in which she excels, incidentally. In the 1990s also Tracey Emin made watercolours of her abortion that she finally exhibited at the Venice Biennial seventeen years later.

This exhibition brings to a conclusion two years of work and pleasure spent conversing with a great oeuvre and its maker. I would like to leave the last word to Françoise, for dialoguing with her was the gem of this suspended time: "Time is a singular thing in visual arts: the more I move forward the more I find it is the most interesting notion. I think about the time as we perceive it, taking time, the time for a work to be constructed, the persistence in time - what is said of a work after - and then the special time of its

creation. The whole accumulation of an oeuvre. Our lifetime on earth is not long".

Camille Morineau

1 Among them : Françoise Petrovitch (2008), Cabinet d'art graphique, Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Étienne ; Françoise Petrovitch (2011), Musée de la Chasse et de la nature, Paris ; Schos (2013), Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez, Bordeaux ; *Se fier sur apparences* (2015), LAAD Dunkerque ; *S'absenter* (2016), FRAC PACA, Marseille ; *Nocturnes* (2017), Campredon centre d'art, L'Isle sur la Sorgue ; *Tenir* (2018), Pavillon de verre du Louvre Lens ; *Sans réserves* (2018), MAC VAL, Vitry sur Seine ; *Habiter la sille* (2020), Villa Savoye, Poissy.

2 Written by Lætitia Cheurin.

3 Among her numerous artists' books, *Radio Petrovitch* (2010), *Mes familiers* (2006), *Périphéries* (2003) ; *De la séduction* (2002), published by Serpense editions, the gallery that represents her today.

4 Exhibition *Derrière les paupières, l'oeuvre repriée*, at BnF in autumn 2022, curated by Céline Pocheux-Lesteven.

5 Danced performances conceived by the choreographer Julie Desprez and interpreted by Elise Lédoué ; then *Se laisser passer des oiseaux* with the choreographer Sylvain Pruneeu and Hervé Dumet for soundtrack, editing and lighting ; more recently, the decors and costumes for the play *Adolescent* co-realised with the choreographer Sylvain Goud for the Centre Chorégraphique de Roubaix.

6 For the oratorio *L'Abrégé des merveilles de Marco Polo* by Arthur Lavandier.

7 *Passer & travers* (2019-2020), created for the children's gallery at the Pompidou Centre then travelling to West Bund Museum in Shanghai.

8 Conversation with Pascal Neveux, Valérie Pagin, Paul Ripoché and René-Jacques Mayer in Françoise Petrovitch, *Monographie* (2004), Serpense editions, p. 21.

9 Henri Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Collection savoir, Hermann édition, p. 70.

10 Conversation of the artist with MEL and myself, that took place on 8th April 2021.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Henri Matisse, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

13 *Entrée libre*, in *Touare*, associated drawings in the windows of closed shops with a film recording the reactions of the passers-by as they look at the drawings.

14 Conversation with Pascal Neveux, Valérie Pagin, Paul Ripoché and René-Jacques Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Extract from numerous conversations with the artist during the first trimester 2020, and which have fed this text considerably, for which I thank her.

17 Henri Matisse, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

18 Between 2003 and 2005, she questioned retired people on their professional life, which she then summarised and represented in drawings : *J'ai travaillé mon concept* (2006, Éditions Un Sourire de toi et j'écoute ma mère).

19 Extract of conversations with the artist, *op. cit.*

20 Kowgli from Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Truffaut's *L'Enfant Sauvage* (1970).

21 *Lord of the Flies*, a novel by William Golding published in 1954, which inspired Peter Brook's eponymous film in 1963.

22 From the middle of the 1990s, many big female artists uniquely using drawing as a means of expression have been building a singular visual universe : Sylvia Böhle, Anne-Marie Schneider, Sandra Vaquez de la Horra, Frédérique Loutz, to list only a few by chronological order (year of their birth).