

THOMAS FOUGEIROL UNTITLED

Lyles & King

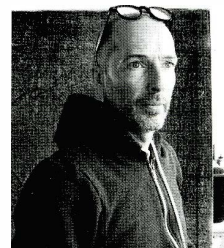
The paintings of Thomas Fougéirol—a French painter based in Harlem for several years now—are full of transfers and transpositions and convey the harshness of the contemporary world.

Untitled is not even a year old. I don't even know if the painting has left the artist's studio where I saw it, barely a few months ago. It is part of a suite of big paintings, all in the same horizontal format, that the artist proceeds with on a regular basis. The piece before this, dated 2010, was acquired by a big private foundation in France. One of the first in the series, *Emmaüs Bride*, dating from 2008, is shown often at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Each work can in a way be seen as a culmination—if not the master-work—of the pictorial experiments that Fougéirol has been carrying out, indeed, since 2008.

STARTING PAINTING ANEW

2007 was a decisive year for this artist. After more than ten years totally and constantly dedicated to painting—one of his first major exhibitions was at the Cloître des Arts, Avignon, in 1997—he decided that he would go and stay in New York. He had no particular plans, no place or goal in mind. The city was not unknown territory for him, and as for American art, he had long been a self-confessed admirer of Pollock, Rauschenberg, Twombly, Warhol and Stella, but in a way this was not so much a trip to New York as a “withdrawal” from his work and his environment, achieved by going to a place of extreme otherness, a place where neither the language, the atmosphere nor everyday life would echo his Parisian world. “I keep going to where I am, I'm not there yet,” said Claude Cahun: rather than looking for America he was trying to escape a role and a persona, leaving his painter's cap on the peg so as to be truer to himself, if not to actually find out who that self was. Stripping off his costume the better to shake off his habits. This “retirement” did not last long, though. Soon, he was moving into a studio on 141st Street in Harlem, a neutral kind of place dotted with soulless industrial spaces. The perfect non-place. There he really did start painting again, quite literally, in that he made a fresh beginning in his own work and went back to the origins of painting. The book *Harlem 141* attests to this—on its own it could easily have been the masterpiece celebrated by this article—as a book by an artist without an oeuvre, a book of paintings that contains mainly photographs, a book about the present moment that paradoxically produces only reminiscences: the American neuroses manifested in its history, religion and media, the artist's own obsessions expressed by recurring motifs such as houses, trees, grilles, crosses, candelabras, and skeletons and skulls. In other words, a fabric of impressions in which the event triggers the memory of the words, things and places.

This America of positive/negative contrasts and Harlem of dark and dust, naturally called for photography, its black and white, and above all its principles of blindness and dazzlement, deflagration and appearance. But Thomas Fougéirol nevertheless remained a painter. His concern was not to get to work on new motifs, still less to inaugurate a new language, but to question the emergence and materiality of the image inscribed deep within painting, to generate at the heart of the picture the biting light that runs through photography and the post-photographic world, and to consider the mark or trace as the very principle of pictorial action. Nor was it a matter of abandoning the earlier figuration in favor of a new abstraction. The point was to confront, with all his determination as a painter, painting in and for itself. As a jotting in a notebook from the time reproduced on the cover flap of *Harlem 141* emphasizes, this was an attempt to “recover the construction of meaning [in painting] in the [painter's] action.” One of the tutelary figures of this experiment, naturally, was the American Christopher Wool, and for his photographs as well as his paintings, and in particular that almost Proustian image co-signed with Robert Gober showing a woman's dress hanging from a tree, like a light fabric of pure sensations and painful memory of past events. Dresses are another of Fougéirol's favorite subjects. In his recent paintings, rather than reproducing them, he applied a coat of fresh paint to the dress. Likewise, his mountains interrogated folded/unfolded forms and spaces, his waves the dematerialization of elements, his beds the idea of spraying red pigment to reveal light in the darkness of night, his confessionals the idea of a closed space traversed by successive grilles, and his death's heads the black that gapes in white, the emptiness in fullness. “The motif produces the form that should emerge from it,” says the artist.



Thomas Fougéirol, born 1965 in France, lives and works in Paris and New York. Recent solo shows: Paris. 2008 Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris. 2009 Praz-Delavallade Gallery, Berlin.
Ph. DR

Thomas Fougeirol then threw himself into a series of transfers in which we find all the hardness and harshness of the outside world, this feeling of urgency and immediacy one senses in Harlem. This intuition that the being-there of the image is only the ghost of other subjacent images that need to be quarried from it, brought into being, from the inside of painting towards our outside. He therefore does not consider the canvas as either a frame or a window, or as a sensitive surface on which the image is imprinted, as on photographic paper. In it he searches for that image contained in the layers and grain of paint, as in solarization in photography, when the light eats into its own light, and the image burns what it has just generated—witness Man Ray and Uzac's experiments. He therefore tends towards a production of counter-images, of counter-prints, like a monotype on carbon paper. "I have always wanted to put myself in a space between radiography, photographic negatives and marks. Like a kind of sensitivity machine that goes against expectations," he said at the exhibition featuring these works. In what way is this decisive? Because the process does not simply aim to test painting in relation to the reproducibility of the world, or the reproduction of its motifs or appearances, but to enable it to develop a genesis, a revelation, an appearance of the image specific to it. For it is within this interval, this place between the trial proof and the reproduction proof, that painting can take form, be identified and individualized, speak to itself and about itself.

Untitled (2011) is thus the transfer to canvas of a piece of paper bearing the mark made by a hospital sheet itself loaded with paint. "The result sketches out a lunar, organic, explosive geography. The last series, which is totally black, is a kind of culmination. All that remains are a few folds, which seem to be facing electrical fields." What we have before us is above all the unfolded, deployed space of a painting that was previously folded in on itself, veiled, opaque to the gaze, with all the tension and violence that this implies, all the randomness and sudden intensity. Here it is not so much American painters who come to mind as Simon Hantai—to whom, in spite of a couple of shows at the Pierre Matisse gallery in New York, the Americans never really warmed. *Untitled* (2011) constitutes a fine tribute to Hantai's *Tabula* and, above all, *Blancs*, in that Fougeirol's almost painfully dazzling whites are like holes, almost scars, scarifications or burns on the skin of *Blacks*. Already, *Untitled* (2010) made these supple whites dance like wills-'o'-the-wisp against gradated light and dark, thus making perceptible different depths within a surface that was paradoxically infra-thin.

HERE AND NOW

Having been immersed in painting, letting himself be absorbed by it, after having thrown, sprayed and vaporized it, Thomas Fougeirol has started over from the here and now of painting, its pure presence and existence, using what was previously its support: canvas, folded, providing form and materiality—a trace. He is prepared to disappear, almost to abandon his own action and to disappear as an author. In his voluntary exile—Harlem before, Brooklyn now—he never asked himself the question "What should I do?" or even, "How should I do it?" The question was, "What is it saying and what does it want from me?" In other words, "What can painting say and what does it want to say today?" No more narrative, no more discourse, just the reality of the painted object, and that search within it for the source of its appearance, the matrix and proofs of its being-there. It as if he now needed to inscribe his pictures in the flux and not in the form of painting, the better to make it vibrate and glow as part of life itself.

Charles-Arthur Boyer. Translation, C. Penwarden