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Martin Barré

Press Packet

Kerlidou, Gwenaël. "Extreme Abstraction: A Brief Introduction to Martin Barré's Cosmogony." *Hyperallergic*, October 25, 2015.

Bois, Yve-Alain. "Close-Up: Leap Year." *Artforum* 50, no. 1, September 2011, pp. 318–21.

"Martin Barré." *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, p. 24.

Hudson, Suzanne. "Martin Barré." *Artforum* 49, no. 7, March 2011, p. 265.

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

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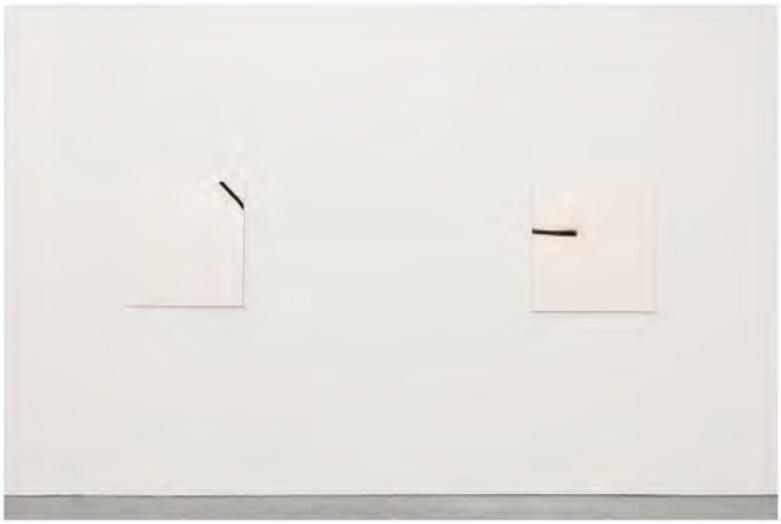

Installation view, 'Enigmas: Martin Barre, David Ostrowski, Julian Schnabel, Reena Spaulings' (2015) (photo by Lance Brewer, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York). Left: Martin Barre, "65-S-9" (1965), acrylic on canvas, 31-1/2 x 29 inches (© Martin Barre); right: Martin Barre, "65-S-11" (1965), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 28-3/8 inches (© Martin Barre).

ESSAYS + WEEKEND

Extreme Abstraction: A Brief Introduction to Martin Barré's Cosmogony

Gwenaël Kerlidou October 25, 2015

Some abstract painters are harder to fathom than others. In fact a few of them seem quite hopelessly indecipherable. A case in point is French painter Martin Barré (1924–1996), who has been receiving increasing and well-deserved attention in New York these past 10 years. Last March and April, *Enigmas*, a group show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery paired him with Berlin based painter David Ostrowski, largely based on their shared use of spray paint. Ironically, Ostrowski's pared down, Arte Povera style elegance is just the kind of smart and sensitive brio that Barré has spent his life laboring very hard to avoid.

The Barré paintings at Andrea Rosen belonged to a group of works developed between the years 1963 and 1967, whose most prominent features are black lines spray-painted across the white canvas background. These early spray and *Zebra* paintings, which were first exhibited in New York

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in 2008 at the Andrew Kreps Gallery, clearly anticipate his later development as an artist, but they are hardly the easiest entryway into his work. But was there ever an easy way into Barré's work?

In 1976, an art history professor in Lille, France, showed his university class a slide of a recent painting by Martin Barré, who was then having a gallery show in Paris. The work was so non-referential and hermetically folded into itself that it was impossible to project any of the usual modernist readings upon it. After a few minutes of stunned silence, he proposed his own reading, which went right over his student's heads. Unbeknownst to them, the professor, Marc- André Stalter, was a close friend of Martin Barré's, and much later, he curated the first major retrospective of Barré's work to travel in France in 1989-90, to Nantes, Tourcoing, and Nice.

I mention this episode only to emphasize that Martin Barré has proven to be a long-lasting enigma (the title of the group show at Andrea Rosen was quite appropriate in that regard) even for many of his compatriots. His allegiance to the stretched canvas was so unlike anything else shown in France at that time — an era dominated, in terms of avant-garde painting, by the Supports/Surfaces dogma of the loose canvas (*la toile libre*, literally the "free" canvas, freed from the stretcher) — that he exerted a powerful fascination on younger painters even though they could barely figure out his work.

Now, with a wink and a nod to the historically dated French art-critical approach of the '70s, it might be interesting to seek pathway into his work by examining the range of "psychoanalytic" interpretations prompted by the painter's last name.

This concept reflects the line of thinking followed by Marcelin Pleynet in his catalogue introduction, "*La méthode de Robert Motherwell* (Robert Motherwell's method)," to Motherwell's first museum retrospective in Paris in 1977, in which he pondered the role of the painter's surname in the psychoanalytical foundations of his creative idiom.

Based on the recurring W-shape in a few pivotal early paintings (from "Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive,"1943, to "Viva," 1946), which could also be seen as an upside-down M, the surname's initial. With his limited English Pleynet tentatively proposed to break the painter's name in two parts; Mother and Well ("mère-bien" in French) and developed a provocative reading of the work from there. In an interesting exchange, Motherwell responded to Pleynet's hypothesis by pointing out the other English meaning of the word *well* (as in water supply, "puit" in French) and acknowledged that his remark might only reinforce Pleynet's own psychoanalytic reading of his work. (Coincidentally, the same Andrea Rosen Gallery that held the *Enigmas* show with Barré also assembled in May and June a remarkable exhibition of Motherwell's *Open* series).

Kerlidou, Gwenaël. "Extreme Abstraction: A Brief Introduction to Martin Barré's Cosmogony." *Hyperallergic,* October 25, 2015.

Martin Barre, "67-Z-21" (1967), glycerophtalic and acrylic paint on canvas, 20-3/4 x 19-1/4 inches (© Martin Barre ADAGP 2015, courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels)

In Barré's case, to my knowledge no French writer to date has ventured to explore the too obvious connotations of his surname, perhaps because such a flat-footed observation would make any French-speaker cringe. Barré is the masculine past participle of the French verb "barrer" (to cross out, to deny access), as in, for example, "route barrée" (road closed), a road sign that usually goes together with another sign, "Déviation" (detour). It is this particular metaphor, of a closing of a way of thinking and of the intellectual detour that inevitably accompanies it, that will help us ease into Barré's hermetic body of work.

Let's start with the *Zebra* series from early 1967. With their evenly spaced diagonal lines of spray paint covering the whole surface, these paintings are the equivalent of the route barrée sign; the paint prevents the eye from diving to a depth that doesn't exist beyond the pictorial surface, thereby barring access to illusionistic space. The later crosshatch paintings from 1972 to 1977 will further reinforce that reading.

Kerlidou, Gwenaël. "Extreme Abstraction: A Brief Introduction to Martin Barré's Cosmogony." *Hyperallergic,* October 25, 2015.

Martin Barre, "62-5" (1962), oil on canvas, 4 parts, clockwise from top left, 23-5/8 x 31-7/8, 21-1/4 x 31-7/8, 23-5/8 x 36-1/4, 21-1/4 x 31-7/8 inches (courtesy the Estate of Martin Barre and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York)

Directly following the *Zebra* paintings, the *Arrow* series of late 1967 oddly seems to confirm this interpretation. They are the detour signs, now rerouting the viewer's gaze to the surface of the tableau, where it would circulate within the picture plane, reiterating the directional paths found in earlier paintings from 1962–63, such as in "62-5" (1962), where a single line meanders capriciously among multiple panels of different sizes.

Barré stopped painting for about three years (1968–71), right after the *Arrow* series, but he continued exhibiting. A short conceptual intermezzo ensued in which he turned his attention to mapping time and space. With the calendar photos shown at the Daniel Templon Galerie in Paris in 1970, he developed his own version of mapping akin to what On Kawara or Hanne Darboven were concurrently doing, approaching time as a very tangible, measurable but also infinite quantity. A subsequent exhibition is described by Ann Hindry in her essay "Space and Time of Painting, 1960-77," included in the Nantes, Tourcoing and Nice retrospective catalogue, in this way: "In Monschau (Germany), [Barré] showed a metal rod, coming out of the ground and tilted in such a way as to be parallel to Berlin's vertical axis, 550 km away."

Kerlidou, Gwenaël. "Extreme Abstraction: A Brief Introduction to Martin Barré's Cosmogony." *Hyperallergic,* October 25, 2015.

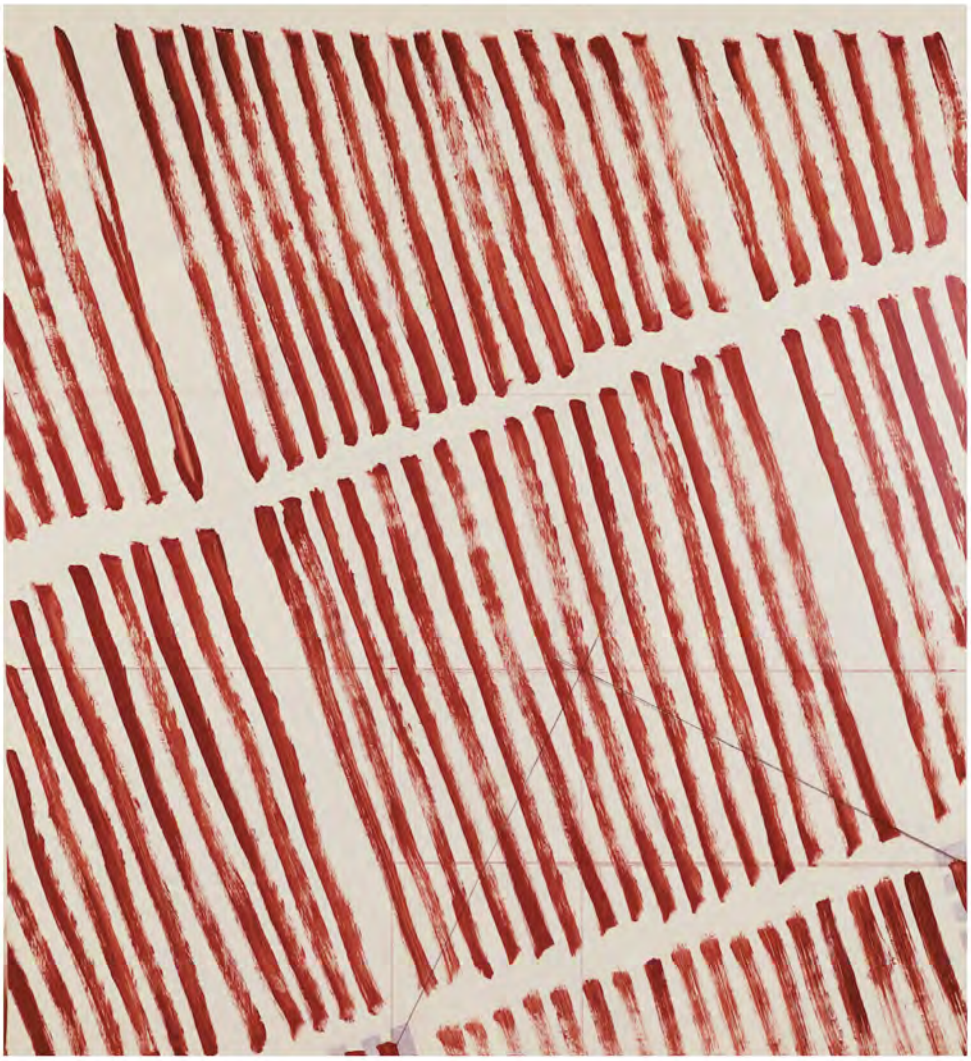
Martin Barre, "67-F-5- 113x105" (1967), acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 44-1/2 x 41-3/8 inches (courtesy the Estate of Martin Barre and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York)

These two often overlooked conceptual forays by Barré — the calendar show and the Monschau project — are critically important to establishing the planetary scale of Barré's approach to perceptual categories: mapping time as a model for mapping space, and mapping the space of the picture plane as fragment of a continuum. In that sense, Barré's conception of space is very close to Yves Klein's own version of the blue monochrome as fragment of the infinite. In fact, it could arguably be understood as an attempt to map Yves Klein's undefined and borderless cosmos and to ground it in the categories of the tableau.

First with the *Zebra* series, then with the *Arrow* paintings, and finally with that short conceptual intermezzo, which allowed him to define his concerns as one of mapping, Barré laid out the three critical steps necessary for his breakthrough 1972 series, the beginning of the rest of his oeuvre.

As Stalter points out, Barré's work can be divided in two parts: from 1954 to 1968 and then 1972 to 1994. The first half is dedicated to extricating himself from the esthetics of the School of Paris and establishing the step-by-step foundations of the second half, the work for which he is now best

known. The second period itself can be divided again into two parts: the crosshatched paintings from 1972 to 1977 and the color paintings from 1977 to 1994. From 1972 to 1977, each series follows very similar guidelines: a system of tilted grids with hatched areas simultaneously reinforcing and obfuscating each painting's individual relationship to the others in the series. From 1977 to 1994, the formats change and the hatchings disappear, replaced with bars and planes of pastel colors that continue to thwart obvious relationships of parts to the whole.



Martin Barre, "75-76-D-157×145" (1975–76), acrylic on canvas, 61-7/8 x 57 inches (courtesy the Estate of Martin Barre and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York)

Painter-critic Joe Fyfe has done the more than anyone to establish Martin Barré's critical foothold in the American scene. He has sometimes suggested that the position of Barré's hermetic paintings in his Parisian milieu might be best understood by comparing it to that of Robert Ryman's in New York, but I would propose a comparison to Frank Stella's. Very few painters have focused so intently on the specificities and limits of painting's new literal space as Stella and Barré have (though Al Held might be another example).

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Indeed, Stella and Barré both reject illusionism and its implications of space deeper than the surface of the painting. Both also reject the seduction of the expressionist touch, advocating instead a neutral, workmanlike brush mark, at least through the '70s for Stella. Finally, both organize the progression of their work in a series of series. For them, space is both painting's primary subject and their primary subject, but they approach it from diametrically opposite angles, diverging on how to define the limits of "literal" space. Where Stella begins with the assumption that a painting is first and foremost an object, Barré assumes that a painting is first and foremost a conceptual and historical construct, a tableau, as Fyfe has so pertinently pointed out.

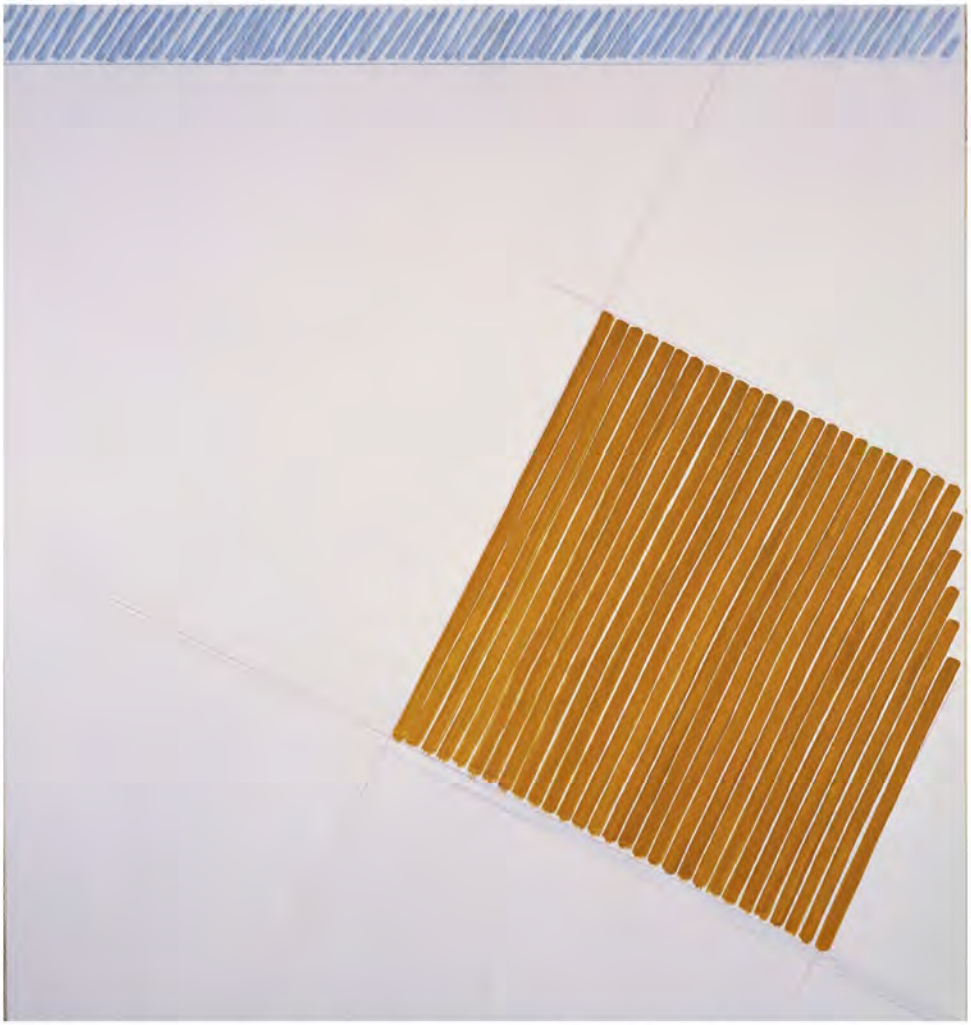
From there, Stella's "painting as object" can develop only into literal, "theatrical" space, as Michael Fried labeled it, or the space of the spectacle, as Guy Debord would have called it. To make that point clear, Stella's only option is to occupy more and more of that space, to project his paintings more and more off the wall, perpendicularly, turning them into wall sculptures and increasingly invasive props in the ever more spectacular presentation of their own space. That is why the notion of scale is so central to Stella's work, and why it is so irrelevant to Barré's. Let's note in passing that the publication of Fried's "Art and Objecthood," in *Art in America* in the summer of 1967, and Debord's *Society of the spectacle*, in Paris by Buchet-Castel in November 1967, occurred within a few months of each other, quite a telling coincidence, if one were to consider the simultaneous development of critical thought on both sides of the Atlantic.

Barré's space, in contrast to Stella's, develops on a plane parallel to the wall, where the thickness of a painting as an object does not come into play. The paintings are always presented on their traditional vertical/horizontal axis, never tilted at an angle or into a diamond shape, which would emphasize their objecthood. In Barré's stubborn insistence on a quasi-traditional presentation, one can only infer that a very salient point is being made about the nature of painting. Barré is offering a clear resistance to objectification, a rejection of the support and a focus on the surface. This is where Barré's approach departed emphatically from the Supports/Surfaces school of thought as well as American Minimalism, and why his lone wolf position was and still is so difficult to understand. Shying away from excessive physicality, his space dwells and expands in the mental categories offered by the concept of the tableau as articulated by Roland Barthes in his essay, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" (1973):

> The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view.

Let's now examine their use of the grid. Stella's black stripe paintings confined the painted space to the limits of the stretcher. The shaped stretcher simultaneously generated the painted space and established its limits. Taking this literalist credo to an extreme, the American grid and gesture

painters from the '70s would also reduce the role of the grid to that of affirming and reinforcing the literal surface of the canvas, developing a prison-like space that a "free" gesture would counteract, simultaneously underscoring and subverting the role of the grid.



Martin Barre, "76-77-D-170×160" (1976–77), acrylic on canvas, 67 x 63 inches (© Martin Barre ADAGP 2015, courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels)

This is where the main difference lies between Barré' and his American counterparts. Between 1972 and 1979, the all-important pencil grid in Barré's work is almost always laid out at a diagonal, while the paintings themselves are never tilted, emphasizing the fact that his grid, in contrast to Stella's, is never limited by the format of the stretcher. Barré's grid is in fact a master grid that defines the space of a series of paintings, not just of one. Mostly invisible, the grid is only hinted at in each painting, acting like an invisible net holding all the paintings of a specific series together. No painting is closed onto itself; it is always a fragment of a larger whole, inferred only through an arduous deciphering of each painting's composition with a given series. Even so, as Yve-Alain Bois remarked, Barré will at the same time make every effort to ensure that each individual painting also thwarts the viewer's expectations about its most obvious connection to the whole. (For those wishing to pursue the system principles deployed in each series, the best explication of it might

still be a diagram first published in 1977 by Jean Clay in Macula # 2 and later reproduced in 2001 by Stephen Melville in the catalogue of the landmark exhibition *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2001, page 195.)

Stella's own spatial credo is brilliantly laid out in his Norton lectures published in 1986 under the title *Working Space*. But, by summoning the illusionism of Caravaggio and Rubens to the rescue, Stella not only shows how blind his formalist allegiance was to what makes painting tick, its metaphysics, but also how it reduced space to a device disconnected from its context. His brilliant one-two punch is to call on Baroque painting and its illusionistic space to simultaneously extend the logic of literal space and circumvent its limits. But this strategic about-face only underlined the failings of his previous reductivist approach to painting as an object and to space as its main mechanism. By the way, French objections to Minimalism in the '70s were not about its literalism, serialism or physical/theatrical presence. They were about its reductivism, the same reductivism that Stella was now trying to shed by calling on representational painting, which he had been placating for so long, to get him out of an embarrassing dead end. But as Barré's work shows, painting is neither just an object nor is its space just one element whose primary purpose is to validate a kind of modernist fundamentalism. Both painting and its space are complex historical and cultural constructs, in continual need of being acknowledged as such, contextualized, deconstructed and re-articulated.

Stella's analysis of what space needs to be in painting is flawed in the sense that, as the evolution of his career demonstrates, it does not leave any other option open for painting going forward, other than embracing the three dimensionality of sculptural space, and ultimately merge with sculpture. Paradoxically, it seems that Martin's work could have provided some of the answers to Frank's dilemma and to some of the questions he was asking himself in *Working Space* while looking at Kandinsky's late work.

What Stella seems to be telling young painters is that the future of painting can only lie in three-dimensional space, or in some kind of interaction with it, by way of acknowledging and accentuating its status as an object. What Barré tells them instead is that the future of painting should be excavated from painting's own categories, primarily from its surface rather than from its support, and that there is certainly enough complexity to be found there to sustain another round of generational investigation.

Another American painter who comes to mind, especially with regards to crosshatching, is Jasper Johns; as John Yau remarked in his book, *A Thing among Things* (2008), Johns found in the crosshatch "a form that [...] is as meaningless as one can get," a definition that would certainly agree with Barré's own choice. But beyond the crosshatch, both Barré and Johns seem to share a common need for a literal, down-to-earth, presentation of their subject — only to later insist on carefully concealing their thought process, toying with and foiling the most legitimate viewer's expectations. In final analysis, a shared compulsion to cover their tracks, a cultivated ambiguity,

soon replaces the initial and illusory claim of straightforwardness in both their works.

Barré is certainly the least literary of any painter one could imagine, the dryness of his titles attests to his commitment to firmly remain within the realm of self-referentiality, but there is no denying a kind of Borgesian dimension to his entire painting enterprise, if one thinks of Jose Luis Borges' late short story titled "The Book of Sand" (1975), about an infinite book, a bible, where the reader cannot find the same page twice. If Klein's approach to space in painting is mystical and Barré's is Borgesian, then — ironically for such an outspoken advocate of literal space — Stella's is that of an illusionist working hard to convince his audience of the primacy of his viewpoint and of his spatial tricks.

Martin Barre, "82-84-104×101" (1982–84), acrylic on canvas, 41 inches x 39 3/4 inches (© Martin Barre ADAGP 2015, courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels)

Any study of Barré's work can barely scratch the multilayered surface of a subject which opens itself up only through a slow process of "surfacing" — to use Stephen Melville's term for Barré's favorite metaphor of "*affleurement*" to best describe how subtly his work reveals itself to the viewer. The palimpsest quality of Barré's surface, his layering of thin, semi-transparent veils of white paint, certainly give new meaning to the term "*repentir*" (pentimento), most often

associated with a thick buildup of paint. Instead, Barré manages to keep his surface lean and mean but still pregnant with its own history. One might be tempted to take a look at some of Brice Marden's scraped calligraphic surfaces next to Barré's in that same light.

This double process of "*affleurement*" (a-flower-ment/surfacing) and "*effeuillement*" (removing one leaf after another) and their delicate botanical connotations provide the perfect approach to an opus whose meaning can only be patiently leafed through one strata at a time. Similar to a guide on how to eat the French pastry called a *mille-feuille* (literaly: a thousand layers) — a more appetizing image than an onion — this text's ambition has been to help lift a corner of the veil on Barré's work and expose the layers beneath, all patiently waiting to be peeled away one at a time.

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ARTFORUM

CLOSE-UP

Leap Year

YVE-ALAIN BOIS ON MARTIN BARRÉ'S *GREENWICH*, 1957, AND *60-T-44*, 1960

TEMPORAL GAPS in cultural transmission can be quite puzzling. For various reasons—the market's perennial thirst for new figures, the glut of academic research on American postwar art, the recognition of concordant aesthetic concerns by a younger generation of practitioners—interest in European art from the 1950s and '60s has grown over the course of the past decade on this side of the Atlantic. Until very recently, however, only a few French artists active in those years had received much attention here. (Yves Klein has long been an exception, as has Daniel Buren, though his remarkable early, pre-Conceptual works were not exhibited in New York until 2007.) Perhaps this neglect was a hangover from the backlash against the old, prewar domination of the art world by the École de Paris: New York had "stole[n] the idea of modern art," as Serge Guilbaut provocatively put it, so there was little urge to go look at what was left behind in the depleted land of the vanquished. The case of Simon Hantaï, who has long been considered a major artist in France but whose recognition in the US is only now emerging, or that of André Cadere, who died in 1978 but whose multicolored staffs have lately been seen leaning against the walls of several American museums, might be an indication that the tide has turned. The recent exhibition in New York (at Andrew Kreps Gallery) of a series of canvases painted by Martin Barré in 1991, a show favorably reviewed in the pages of this journal by Suzanne Hudson (who noted the devotion to his work by young artists such as Cheyney Thompson, Blake Rayne, Wade Guyton, and R. H. Quaytman), is perhaps an even more propitious sign of this evolution, for his art is supremely difficult to export.

For one thing, Barré is an artist who constantly disobeyed—at least from 1960 until his death in 1993—one of the cardinal rules for those in quest of art-world recognition: He assiduously avoided a signature style. Although he worked in series (the titles of his paintings typically consist of the work's date followed by its dimensions), unlike other "serial painters" he made sure that each new series (one per year on average) was formally different, sometimes

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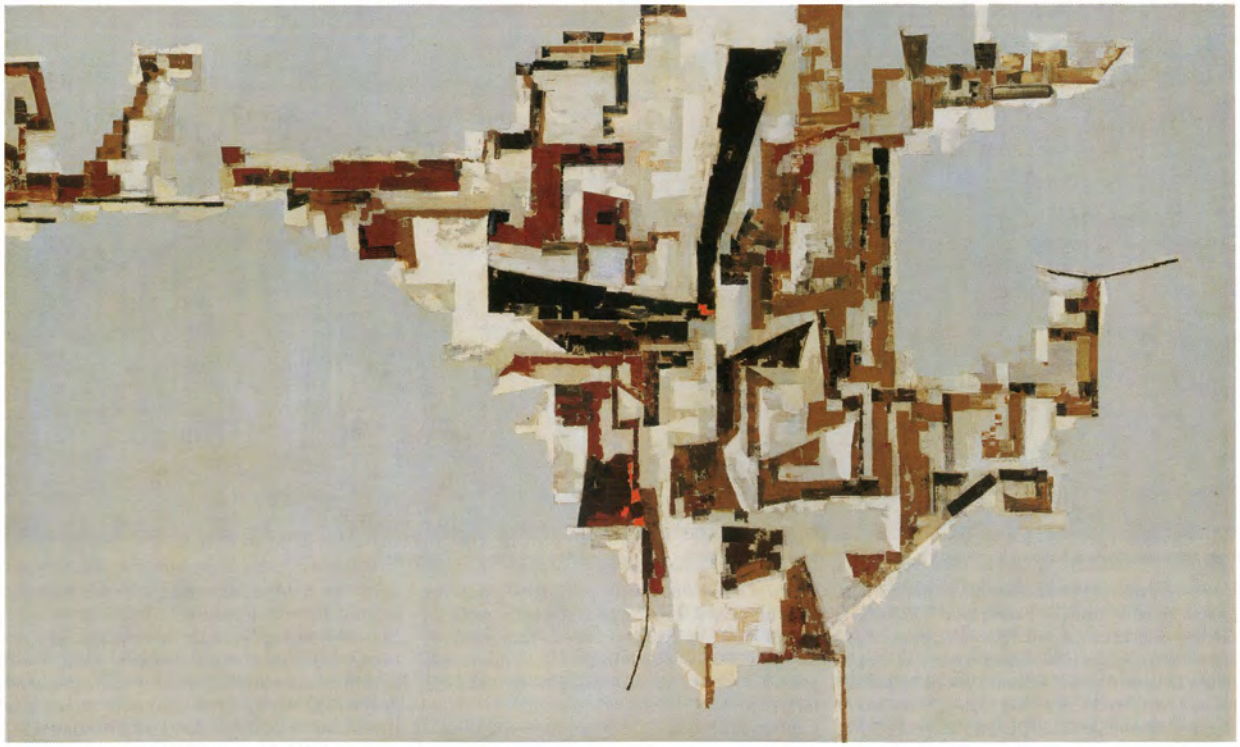

Martin Barré, *Greenwich*, 1957, oil on canvas, 47¼ x 78¾".

radically different, from the preceding one. At each of his exhibitions, Barré aficionados had to brace for the kind of shock that Brice Marden's (or Philip Guston's) admirers experienced when the painter famously made a (onetime) sudden stylistic swerve. This is not to say that there is anything illogical in the jump from one series to the next—on the contrary, Barré's rigor has always been exemplary—but the logic is never immediately apparent (or, to say it another way, the series are extremely variable at the formal level but remarkably consistent structurally—though it takes some attention and care to perceive that continuity). As a result, Barré has always been what we would call a painter's painter, held by many younger artists as a model of probity and his work cherished by art lovers who have no patience for the flashy and the fashionable. But though his reluctance to do anything that might enhance his career was at times confounding (one had to cajole him into even agreeing to meet a curator or a collector, especially if he was deep into work), word of mouth kept buzzing. He had died by the time Yasmina Reza made a triumph in 1994 with her populist play *Art*, in which she attempted to lambaste the "snobbism in contemporary art," as she put it, by positing an artist whose masterpiece was a white monochrome, but Barré would not have been surprised to read that the playwright pointed to him as her model for this fictitious painter. He would have been somewhat chagrined by the misconception, though, for unlike Robert Ryman, an artist he greatly admired, he had never painted anything of the sort: As the critic Pierre Restany wrote in 1961, in a favorable review of Barré's one-man show at Galerie Arnaud in Paris the previous year, "I will rule out the objection that there is nothing left to see: for me there is still too much."

It is not by chance that I mention Barré's sea-change exhibition of 1960. Almost two decades ago I

This page: Martin Barré, *Greenwich* (details), 1957, oil on canvas, 47¼ x 78¾".

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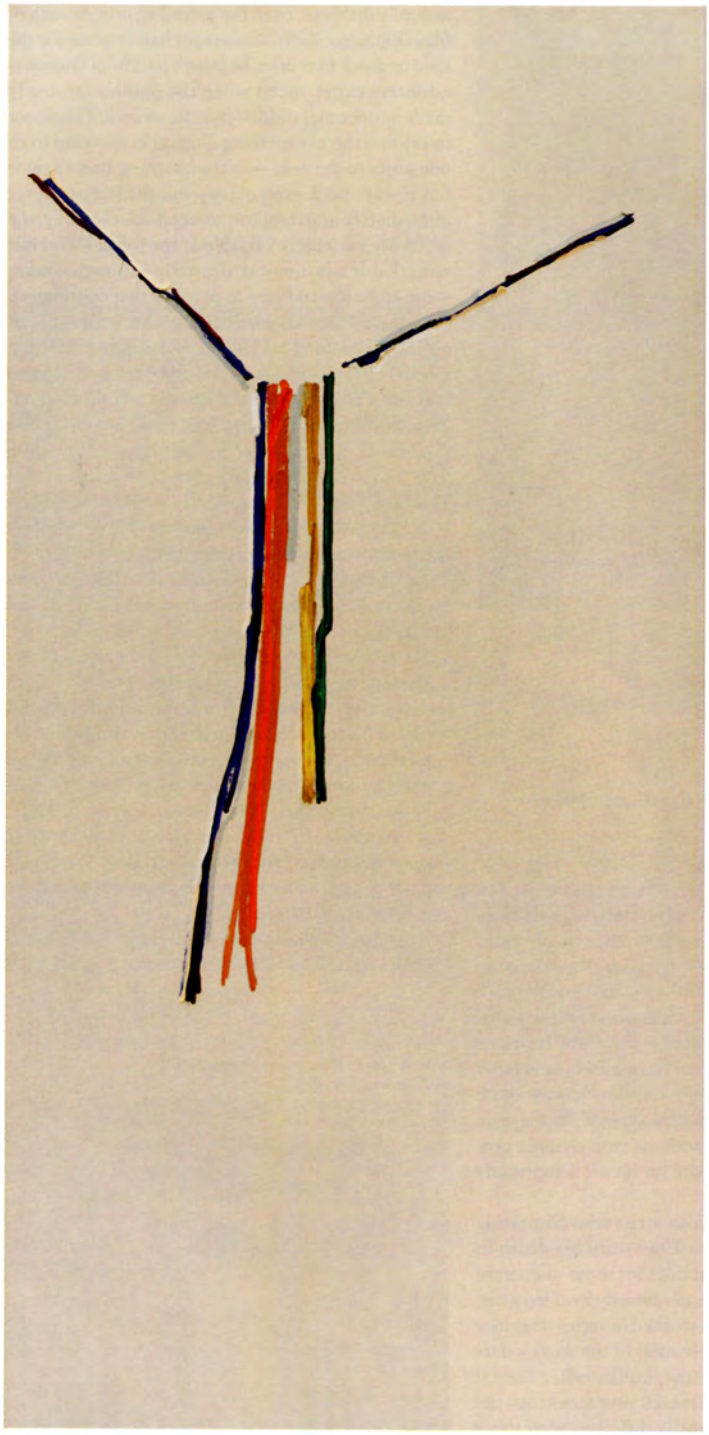

Martin Barré, *60-T-44*, 1960, oil on canvas, 76½ x 38⅛".

wrote a monograph on his work (*Martin Barré*, 1993), in which I argued that the aesthetic breakthrough and semiotic shift represented by that show might be said to be the artist's road to Damascus. But this is not the place to rehearse the fine points of that argument. Instead, I wish to look closely at two of Barré's paintings, which I recently stumbled upon in the collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and which, I immediately recognized, offer a perfect point of entry for a discussion of the artist's achievement in that annus mirabilis (and beyond).

The first canvas, titled *Greenwich*, dates from 1957, and, but for its size (much larger than usual for that period) and orientation (Barré's canvases were rarely horizontal), it is quite typical of the work of Barré's early career. At the time, he was considered one of the most promising of the young artists then labeled the Jeune École de Paris. (In my book, I reduced the so-called school to its initials, JEP, to Barré's amusement.) In *Greenwich*, a vast irregular shape made up mostly of thick, rectangular planes of brown, black, white, and orange color applied in gridlike formation with a palette knife is anchored to three of the canvas's borders (and looks something like an aerial view of a landmass all but surrounded by water); it is centered in a vast field of a slightly bluish-white hue evenly painted with a brush. The limit between the central configuration and the rest of the canvas is uncertain: Sometimes the bluish-white field eats at the brown-black-orange shape, while elsewhere the reverse is true; the ground of white gesso is visible here and there within the abstract form and at its immediate periphery. As Annette Michelson would write in 1958 of some of Barré's works done in the same vein, this canvas "demonstrate[s] the possibilities of dynamic relationships between active and residual space." But even though a tension is played out between figure and ground (for example in the upper right, where the growth of tiny color planes that make up the large central shape seems in the process of enclosing a larger area of the surrounding bluish field, and thus transforming this kind of lagoon into a figure), things are kept in check: The traditional mode of composition as a hierarchical structure—the convention that defined the post-Cubist tradition dominating painting in France at the time, particularly that of the JEP—is momentarily challenged, but in the end it is reinstated. In short, the canvas is a quintessential specimen of what Frank Stella would in 1966 debunk as "relational painting" ("You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner"), a paragon of good taste, with a particular attention both to individual strokes as building blocks of the whole, and to the chromatic effects of wet-on-wet paint layering (white or black on brown, brown on black, etc.). It is not

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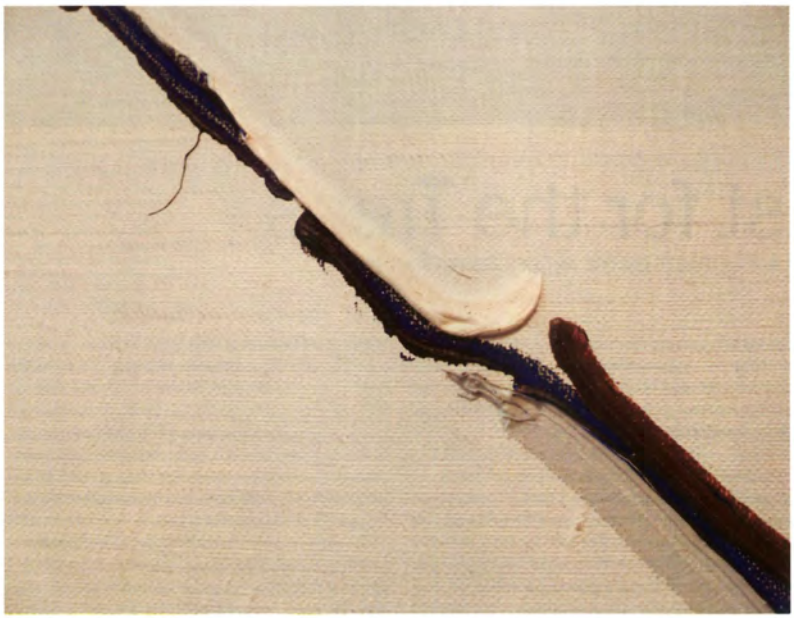
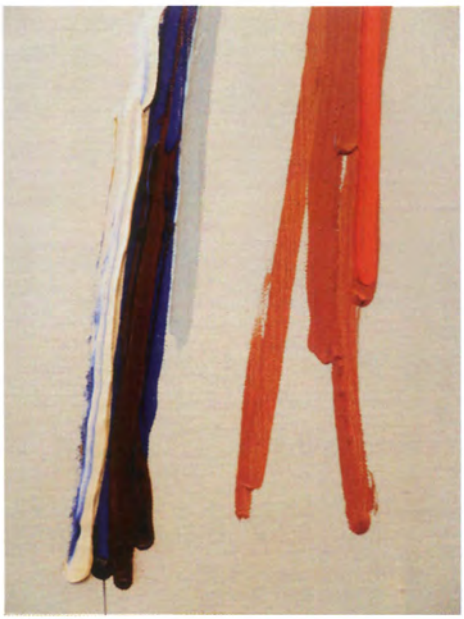


This page: Martin Barré, *60-T-44* (details), 1960, oil on canvas, 76½ x 38⅛".



difficult to trace the genealogy that links such a work back to Braque and, beyond him, to Cézanne.

In the second canvas, *60–T–44*, dating from 1960, all this elaborate painterly cuisine so vaunted by the critical establishment that championed the JEP has disappeared. Any spatial ambiguity is gone. The white ground is plain, untextured, the paint almost mechanically applied. On this whitewashed surface, Barré has drawn colored lines using the tube of paint as his stylus: Two oblique lines (made of juxtaposed blue, white, and reddish-brown tracks) descend toward the center left of the canvas, from which hangs a thick rainbow of paratactic lines in clashing vibrant chromas—as if the canvas from one of Morris Louis's Unfurleds had been gathered like striped drapery, regaining in the process enough matter to weigh down a clothesline. Here there's no subtle mediation via the brush: The gesture is direct, prosaic. No play of underlayers, either, and very little color mixing. The only variation is in the speed of inscription: Sometimes the squeezed tube moved very fast over the white ground, and in these passages its track is thin; sometimes it went slowly, and the impasto built up. Line becomes a mere index of process. No transcendence, no illusion, what you see is what you see: With this work, and others of the same series—which he nicknamed his "Tubes"—Barré left post-Cubism and entered the '60s.

At the time there were few artists among his Parisian group (the JEP) to make such a leap—in fact, Barré instantly lost his support system, the critics who had defended him now accusing him of treason. One could ascribe many causes to this radical turn in his art, but the most important catalyst is probably the great interest Barré took in Yves Klein, though Klein was deemed a thorough charlatan by Barré's circle—and note that it is Restany, Klein's champion, who came to Barré's defense. The position may seem utterly banal now, but rare then was the artist who could *at the same time* maintain that painting was still a viable medium *and* admire Klein's work, which had seemed in those days yet another celebration of the death of painting. One had to be able to look beyond Klein's histrionics and consider Yves-le-Monochrome's anticompositional stance as being more than a mere conceptual gesture. For his early admirers both in France (Restany, the Nouveaux Réalistes group) and in the US (Donald Judd, among others), Klein represented a fundamental rupture with the (necessarily illusionistic) tradition of painting. "Sure, sure," we can hear Barré saying, "but yet he *still* paints." How to highlight the fragility of painting as medium while keeping it alive would remain Barré's challenge in all the years to come. □

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Bois, Yve-Alain. "Close-Up: Leap Year." *Artforum* 50, no. 1, September 2011, pp. 318–21.

THE NEW YORKER

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

MARTIN BARRÉ
French abstract painting from the seventies through the nineties has a reputation for being austere (think of Daniel Buren's drygoods stripes), and these spare works by Barré (who died in 1993) are no exception. Mid-size rectangular canvases hung well above eye level sport truncated triangles that conjure high-desert mesas. The soft coral and aqua hues of these shapes, which are on a wheat-colored background, heighten the vague (if inadvertent) Southwestern flavor. Stare at these paintings long enough and figure and ground shift places as in a desert mirage. Through Feb. 12. (Kreps, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849.)

"Martin Barré." *The New Yorker,* February 14, 2011, p. 24.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

Martin Barré

ANDREW KREPS

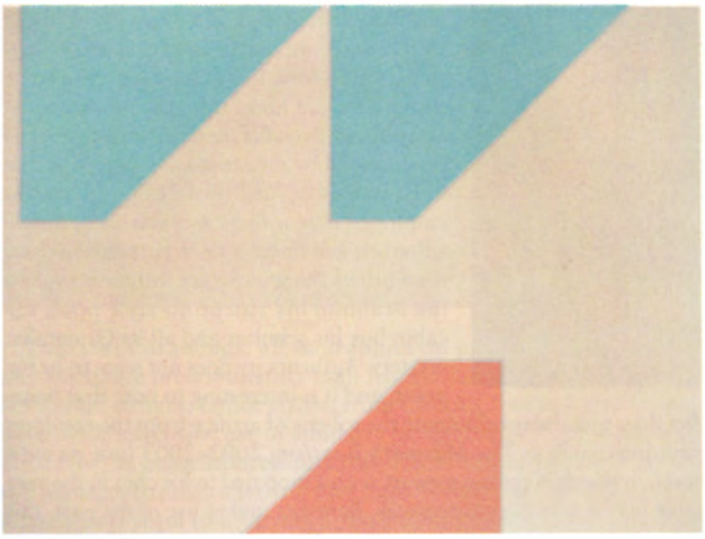
Given that he has achieved a near cultish following, and that his influence resonates so decisively across contemporary abstract painting (from the work of Cheyney Thompson and Blake Rayne to that of Wade Guyton and Rebecca Quaytman, among others), it comes as a surprise to learn that Martin Barré had only one US solo exhibition in his lifetime. In fact, it was not until roughly a decade after his death, in 1993, that his work began regularly appearing in group shows in the States, a shift accompanied, more broadly, by a groundswell of interest in his singular experiment with anticompositional strategies and the nature of mark-making, the latter distinguished by his systematic deployment of the paint tube and the spray gun, and his eventual return to the customary implement of the brush. Since his practice is obliquely positioned relative to that of his peers—whether the lyrical gesturalism of Hans Hartung, the performative monochromy of Yves Klein, or the ludic astringency of BMPT (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni)—Barré's role in a history of postwar art is at once foundational and perversely, perhaps purposefully, slight.

Enter Andrew Kreps: Following the installation of a kind of Barré mini-retrospective in 2008—a crucial first platform—the gallery has here presented the artist's submission for the first Bienniale de Lyon in 1991. Composed of ten acrylic paintings subdivided into three formats, albeit conceived (like many of his works executed from the 1970s on) as a single series, "91" is titled after the year in which it was completed. Its restaging in the present context abides by its initial protocols, wherein the friezelike panels hang close to the ceiling. The specificity of the installation accords with the systematic rigor of the tableaux themselves. Painted in a uniform palette, the works feature rows of irregularly placed trapezoids, with the color of each shape corresponding to its orientation: Those facing right are a coral-inflected red; those facing left a turquoise blue. Barré seems to counter the inherent arbitrariness of such codes and decisions while simultaneously relishing them. Color thus generates and affirms its object in one fell swoop.

The constancy of Barré's structures admits a logic of repetition, an obligatory precondition for the articulation of the interactions that he fashions between and among the structures and their components. These interactions involve color (sometimes the two or three trapezoids in a given painting are red; in others they are all blue; while still other works feature both hues) and they also involve space. Stationed at the top or bottom edges, the forms protrude into the monochromatic voids, never managing to stretch far enough across to touch the shapes on the opposite side. On a horizontal axis, the trapezoids sometimes just barely abut, though they most often remain tantalizingly close (which likewise means they remain forever apart).

Outlined in a dove gray, which Barré apparently applied freehand, the trapezoids necessarily engender questions of their relation to the support. Outlines might flatten the pictorial surface or they might articulate it; here, they at once suggest and disable primacy by introducing a third term to the constitutive binary of figure and ground. Consequently, Barré can exploit this figure/ground relationship without the attendant conjuring of illusionistic play, and without recourse to depth—either the pictorial effect or the metaphysics routinely assumed to subtend it. Barré spoke of trying "to get rid of the 'above-below' thing," which is to say associative painting, and here he succeeded. If the punishingly Sisyphean labor of stymieing referentiality and representation-derived content is a given, Barré works even harder, giving the work's precise attempt at becoming itself and nothing else extraordinarily rapt attention. "91" looks inevitable, even as one knows it is anything but. "In front of a picture by Martin Barré," wrote the critic Hervé Gauville, "one has the impression to recognize it, while being forced to admit that it is the first time one sees it." Too bad it took us so long to have the chance.

—*Suzanne Hudson*



Martin Barré, 91—120 x 160—D, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 47¼ x 63". From the series "91," 1991.

Hudson, Suzanne. "Martin Barré." *Artforum* 49, no. 7, March 2011, p. 265.

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KALEIDOSCOPE

PIONEERS

PAINTING SPACES

MARTIN BARRÉ'S RADICAL ABSTRACTIONS

words by SIMONE MENEGOI

He was one of the most rigorous painters of the postwar period, faithful to the spirit of the masters of modernism. This isolated artist has now become a cult figure for the more demanding critics and for the young exponents of the new abstract painting.

On the background:

87-89-108x108-C, 1987-89
Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

"Ignored by histories of art and by the major official events in France, little known to the critics and the public: such is Martin Barré, a 55-year-old Parisian painter whose work both arouses the loyal enthusiasm of a few great international collectors and attracts the demanding attention of young artists drawn by the austere ambition of his discourse." This is how Suzanne Pagé presented the retrospective of Martin Barré's work staged in 1979 at the ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, of which she was director. Exactly 30 years later, the situation described by Pagé has only partly changed. Barré's reputation has grown in his own country, where the painter is now a point of reference, and has begun to make inroads into "histories of art": for example, he is included in the authoritative *Art Since 1900*, one of whose authors, Yve-Alain Bois, is a great admirer of the artist. However, Barré still remains the object of a small cult of admirers in which, just as in 1979, young artists play a primary role. An exhibition held in Poitiers last summer ("Collatéral," Le Confort Moderne), for example, brought together a group of artists from New York—Eileen Quinlan, Nora Schultz and Cheyney Thompson among them—united by their interest in abstraction and their high regard for Barré.

The source of this admiration can be traced principally to a group of around 100 canvases painted by the artist between 1963 and 1968—extremely radical pictures, whose syntax has been pared to the bone, executed with matt black spray paint on white canvases. Barré had arrived at this extreme reduction of pictorial means, which earned him the indifference and even the outright rejection of many critics at the time, over a relatively short period. His earliest known works date from 1954 and bear traces of the dominant style in Paris in those years, that of the painters of the so-called JEP (Jeune École de Paris): a kind of lyrical abstractionism that harked back to some of Klee and Kandinsky's formal intuitions, but presented them in a toned-down and academic form. In comparison with those of his contemporaries, however, Barré's works from the second half of the 1950s display a more austere and rigorous taste. Moreover, the artist claimed for himself a different lineage from that of his colleagues: one in which a prominent place was held by Malevich and Mondrian, whom Barré saw as champions of painting as "construction" as opposed to self-expression, painting faithful to its own two-dimensional nature as opposed to painting still defined by the illusion "depth," in both the spatial and psychological sense.

The turning point came in 1960, with a controversial exhibition at the Galerie Arnaud in Paris. Barré's already spare geometrical structures of the preceding years had become simple lines created by squirting the tube of paint directly onto the canvas. Lines that ran all the way across the white ground of the canvas (or of several canvases, as in the four-part polyptych *60-T-45*, 1960) or turned back on themselves, forming tangles at the corners of the paintings, most of which were left blank. In his

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

highly detailed monograph on Barré (published in 1993, the year of the artist's death), Yve-Alain Bois underlines the significance of the choice to replace the brush and spatula with the tube. As a result of this choice, the action of the painter, no longer mediated by the implement, no longer "theatricalized," tended to coincide exactly with the trace he produced on the canvas; symmetrically, the trace referred directly to the action. Thus Barré's painting fell, to use a term made popular by Rosalind Krauss, within the semiotic category of the "index," a kind of sign that is materially contiguous with its referent. (The standard example is that of the print in the sand and the foot that has made it). In the narrow space of this tie between sign and referent, between pictorial gesture and pictorial trace, there is no longer room for an idea of painting as the projection of a "state of mind": the color on the canvas is, before and above all else, the physical result of a physical action.

So with the 1960 exhibition Barré turned his back on the affected aesthetics of the JEP and moved instead closer to the immediacy of action painting. But it is hard to find, even in this milieu, artists that can be compared to him. To the "allover" approach of American painting, the Parisian painter opposed an emptying out of the surface; to the monumental dimensions of the canvases on the other side of the Atlantic, Barré worked in relatively modest formats. (In an interview given many years later, he pointed out that the entire known output of Vermeer, in terms of painted surface, can fit into a square of less than four meters to a side). As for Georges Mathieu, the French virtuoso of action painting, his large, agitated and ornate canvases are to those of Barré as a fireworks display is to the light of a single candle; or perhaps we ought to say, to a blowtorch, given the piercing intensity that the reduction of the expressive means had attained in Barré.

Barré's next step was to replace the tube with a simpler, even banal dispenser of paint: the spray can. ("As banal as an insecticide," he used to say). A step not without political implications—these were the years, recalls Yve-Alain Bois, in which the walls of Paris were covered with graffiti opposing the war in Algeria—but it was above all a move of a technical and linguistic nature. With the spray can, the gap between the action and its physical trace was reduced to its absolute minimum, both on the plane of *ductus* (the spray registers every hesitation, every uncertainty of the hand, like a seismogram) and on the fundamental plane of time. The shaky lines of his works from 1963 to 1967 reflect the time required to trace them with a precision that perhaps no other medium, except film, can equal: looking at them, you have the impression of being able to say with reasonable accuracy how many breaths each one took (and it is rare for it to be more than one). As for the syntax of these works, it was then on the verge of disappearing: a line that crosses the canvas from one side to another, or that marks its upper left-hand corner, or traces a right angle in the middle; "notches" that run along the edges; a small irregular circle at the center of the picture. In 1967, in an attempt to impose order on the cadence of his monosyllabic language (and render it even more impersonal), Barré allowed himself only oblique stripes,

in varying numbers. In 1968, he gave up stripes and the freehand line in favor of a stencil, with which he traced one or more arrows on the canvases, all the same shape and size, and always with the habitual matt black spray paint. The use of the stencil attenuated the temporal immediacy of the process, but reinforced its impersonality and its indexical quality. In fact, Barré's original idea for the series of arrows had been to make the pointed outlines appear on a sheet of photosensitive paper using the technique of the photogram.

Barré's aim was not the extinction of painting, but its refoundation. He pushed the field of painting to its limits not to emerge from it, but to define its boundary. His black line cutting the canvas horizontally in two (*65-A*, 1965) is not Manzoni's line which, rolled up and tucked into a wooden cylinder, conceals itself from sight to become an idea. (And this, in spite of the fact that in both cases the dimension of time—the time of execution—is fundamental). Barré's line is still painting, even though stripped to the very core. With hindsight, and taking into account subsequent developments in the artist's career, some "infringements" of the apparently inflexible rules of the spray-painted canvases take on particular importance: for example, lines or arrows traced and then erased with turpentine as if he had changed his mind, leaving traces on the canvas which seem to be located on another plane with respect to the clearly marked lines. These traces were not a way of returning to the illusion of spatial depth, but of creating a form of depth in time (a "perspective-time," the painter called it) by showing two different moments in the process of painting. It was a hint of articulation, a way of opening up again, almost imperceptibly, to the combinatorial possibilities of painting.

Barré started to explore these possibilities again in 1972. After two exhibitions of conceptual photographic works, pioneering for the French scene of the time, he went back to the canvas, this time using a brush. The formal scheme of the canvases from 1972 to 1976 is apparently simple: a square grid drawn in pencil, not necessarily at right angles to the edges of the picture, in which one or more boxes are filled with slanting brushstrokes. In reality, the motif offered the painter, notwithstanding its strictness, a considerable range of variations (dimension and orientation of the grid, width and color of the hatching, the number of boxes filled). To these he added the technique of "erasures" (in this case consisting of coats of white paint, laid over one or more earlier versions of the grid), now exploited to its full extent, creating out-and-out palimpsests. The result was canvases where the gesture of the hand counterbalanced the geometry, and where the rule grew more complicated from work to work, as if in a process of exploration carried out under the viewer's eyes.

Very different from iconoclasts like Manzoni, Barré also diverged with artists like the BMPT group (formed in 1966 by Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni) through his fidelity, despite everything, to an idea of painting that did not repudiate the tradition and its longstanding questions. From 1972 onward, he worked on the series as a means of attaining maximum individuality in every work without losing coherence. He conceived a series of 14 works (1977–78, commissioned by Renault) as a unitary and

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

"Works," exhibition views, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2008
Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

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92-B-124x128-D, 1992
Courtesy: Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris
Photo: André Morain
© Martin Barré ADAGP, Paris 2009

67-F-8, 1967
Courtesy: Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris
© Martin Barré ADAGP,
Paris 2009

indivisible whole, governed by a series of geometric and mathematical relationships that even extended to the the formats of the canvases and their arrangement. In another case, he put together a posteriori a set of canvases (executed between 1979 and 1980) under the title "Indissocié" (Undissociated), with the intention that they henceforth remain united. With these two series he went back to making extensive use of color (including bright shades of red, yellow, blue and green), and with those of the 1980s, of the figure: triangles, trapeziums and squares with a corner cut off, laid out on the empty ground in relationships that are at once simple and complex, and that constantly evade symmetry.

Despite its extent and development, Barré's work remained coherent. Each step prepared the ground for the next, each series bore in it a trace of the earlier ones. The exhibition held in 2008 at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, which compared the two extremes of this wor—the monastic spray-painted canvases of the 1960s and the ones with colored geometric figures of the 1980s—only served to confirm this. In the force of a process of development that had never lost its consistency, yet did not repeat itself, we can also find one of the reasons for Martin Barré's significance for artists of later generations. In another part of her 1979 essay on Barré, Suzanne Pagé wrote: "This work [...] attains the timeless avant-garde of the great classics who, from Poussin to Cézanne, have sought that moment of mutable and harmonious equilibrium in which painting is *revealed*."

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

Now that abstraction has come back into fashion among young painters (Bob Nickas has just published *Painting Abstraction* with Phaidon, a mark of international recognition for the new nonrepresentational painting), it is perhaps the right moment to rediscover one of their sources, whose influence vastly overstrips its renown.

Simone Menegoi is a Contributing Editor of* Kaleidoscope. *A critic and independent curator, he's a member of the Curatorial Committee of "Present Future" at this year's Artissima, the International Fair of Contemporary Art in Turin.

Menegoi, Simone. "Painting Spaces: Martin Barré." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 4, November 2009, pp. 141–45.

Art in America

MARTIN BARRÉ
A FRENCH ALTERNATIVE

Celebrated in Europe but little known in the U.S., the painter created abstract works that challenge received histories of modern art.

BY JOE FYFE

Martin Barré: *62-5*, 1962, oil on canvas, four parts, clockwise from top left, 23⅛ by 31⅞ inches, 21¼ by 31⅞ inches, 23¾ by 36¼ inches and 21¼ by 31⅞ inches. All photos this article courtesy Estate of Martin Barré and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

MARTIN BARRÉ, ARGUABLY ONE of the most important French painters of the second half of the 20th century, had only one U.S. solo show in his lifetime, but he exhibited widely during his years of professional production from 1955 until his death in 1993 at age 68. He may have a more unsettled reputation than most French painters of his generation, but Barré's paintings have nonetheless appeared with increasing regularity in museums, galleries, art fairs and alternative spaces across Europe, both in solo exhibitions and alongside the work of his contemporaries as well as—most importantly—younger artists. For example, a work by Barré was included in the 2003 exhibition "Voir en Peinture" at the Paris gallery Le Plateau.

At Le Plateau, paintings by an emerging pack of Belgian and French artists were interspersed with works by an earlier generation that included Barré, Philip Guston, Tal Coat and Eugène Leroy. Later, in "La Force de l'Art," a survey exhibition of contemporary French art held at the Grand Palais in 2006, several Barrés were hung in a specially constructed reading room, a kind of pavilion meant to provide an outlet for a curatorial statement independent of the surrounding spaces. The implication seemed to be that further study of the artist was overdue. On these shores, Barré's works were included in "As Painting: Division and Displacement," a largely unheeded Wexner Center exhibition of 2001 that attempted to place mostly unknown French abstraction from the 1960s and '70s in the context of American Minimalist and post-Minimalist work.

A recent Barré exhibition, which amounted to a slender retrospective, was held at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York. The show was prompted, in part, by the interest of young New York painters such as gallery artist Cheyney Thompson. Barré clearly left something for contemporary painters to build on, and a diverse array of American

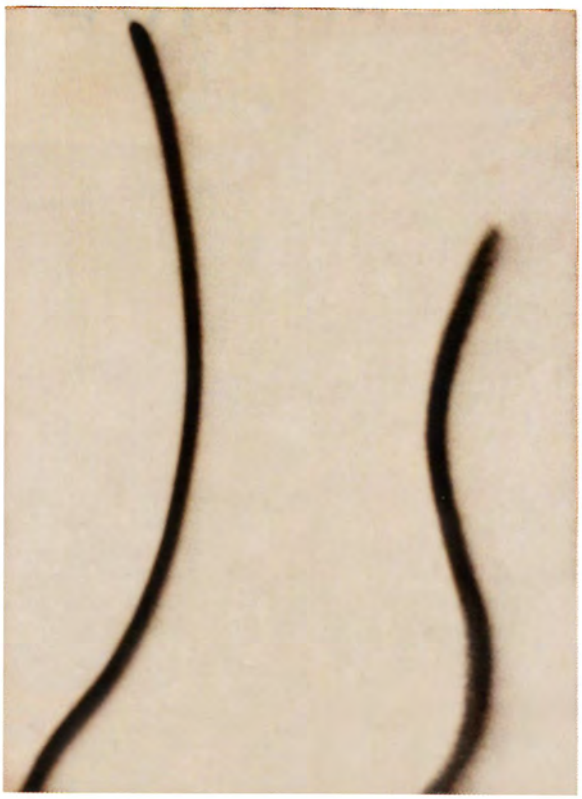
Fyfe, Joe. "Martin Barré: A French Alternative." *Art in America* 97, no. 1, January 2009, pp. 82–87.

abstractionists including Dan Walsh, Marjorie Welish and Blake Rayne, as well as Europeans such as Ernst Caramelle and Miquel Mont, among others, have taken up some of the challenges his work presents.

Barré offers something different from American late modernism's formulation of painting in terms of flatness and opticality. He gives us an extremely articulate introduction to the French alternative, the concept of the *tableau*—roughly, that the painting's key property is the paradoxical "space" of its flat surface. Barré conducts an ongoing excavation of surface that allows it to retain a steadfastly nonassociative identity.

The catalogue that accompanied the Kreps exhibition contains over 90 reproductions of Barré's richly oblique work as well as several interviews with the artist and a landmark essay by Yve-Alain Bois. Paging though the book, one might easily mistake Barré for a doctrinaire reductivist, but though he acknowledged the influences of both Malevich and Mondrian, his work always possessed its own peculiar resonance. Barré's paintings of the 1950s were included in surveys of French lyrical abstraction alongside those of Hans Hartung and Jean-Paul Riopelle, and later with work by New Realists such as Yves Klein. Barré has been cited by members of such French movements as BMPT (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni) and Support/Surface, but he ultimately eludes categorization. Even during the 1950s, as he related to French critic Catherine Millet, he consciously tried to place himself "elsewhere."[1]

Barré helped articulate the idea of the tableau—roughly, that painting's key property is the paradoxical "space" of its flat surface.



63-N-2, 1963, spray paint on canvas, 39¾ by 28¾ inches.

67-Z-16, 1967, spray paint on canvas, 33⅞ by 27½ inches.

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Catherine Millet, he consciously tried to place himself "elsewhere."[1]

Curiously, the Centre Georges Pompidou, which owns many examples of Barré's work from various periods, recently installed several paintings from his 1992 series "92B" alongside works by Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Carl Andre, artists with whom he had no sustained dialogue. In interviews, he showed himself to be acutely aware of what was going on in American painting, but he was born in Nantes on the north coast of France and spent his life working in Paris. One might suppose that his works were installed with these artists' because they have superficial stylistic congruencies, but on close examination the installation pointed out more differences than similarities. Barré's polychromatic work is not as schematic as theirs, revealing evidence of underpainting and revision. And as one becomes more familiar with his oeuvre, one realizes that Barré is never about delimitation but rather *compression*. In contrast to the aforementioned American trio, or to French peers such as Simon Hantaï or Pierre Soulages, he rejected fixed material or conceptual constraints, always trying for the most direct solution to particular problems of size and context. As Bois observes, Barré was "a true painter, working without any simplistic system."[2]

75-76-A—157x145, 1975-76, acrylic on canvas, 61⅞ by 57 inches.

Barré's concerns—the objective reality of the picture, the mark's contextual relation to the field and, above all, the exposure of the painting's support—began to crystallize in his work of 1955-60. His color in this period has a limited tonal range that serves the interest of planar modulation: red oxide, gray and ultramarine blue, on—or, better, *in*—grounds of dove white, cream and light gray. A desire to limit the expressiveness of the painted mark led Barré to apply paint with a palette knife. In pursuing this technique, he often subtracted almost as much color as he added, leaving behind a network of scraped opaque and semi-transparent fields that expose the weave of the canvas, lifting it into the foreground.

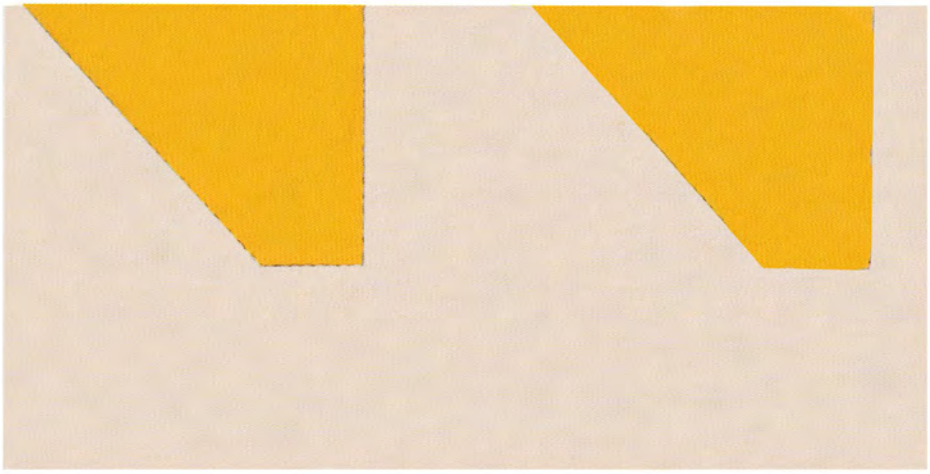
In these early paintings, the accretions of paint patches are predominately rectilinear, echoing the shape of the stretcher, but within a few years diagonal strokes take over. Next come paintings on tilted supports—not rhombuses like Mondrian's, but truly asymmetrical pictures that were quite without precedent. Subsequently returning to the upright rectangle, Barré executed several paintings on raw linen. *59-120x110-C* (1959, 47¼ by 43⅜ inches), pictures a diagonally oriented rectangle within an uneven border of scraped pale yellow. In a sense, the artist has produced a directly experienced entity within the artificial space of painting. Certain of his later works, particularly those from the 1970s, also trace aspects of the physical world in this way.

During the early 1960s, Barré continued his systematic exploration of mark-making by squeezing lines directly onto the canvas from paint tubes filled with color that he had previously mixed, regarding the results purely as indices of physical action. This period also sees the beginning of the painter's understanding of the picture object as a fragment in relation to the exhibition space (and in fact, all spaces), which led to works painted and exhibited as ensembles. The earliest piece in the Kreps exhibition, *62-5* (1962) is one such work, comprising four canvases hung in an irregular cluster. Featuring a dark line that seems to snake from one panel to the next across the empty wall space between them, it is also a late example of a "paint tube" picture.

In *62-5*, the thick, squeezed-out line has been reduced with a palette knife, and there are moments throughout Barré's production when he scuffed the entire surface with a blade. This recurrent visceral action closely bonds surface incident to ground, and is congruent with his stated aim to "make paintings in two dimensions,"[3] which the French critic and curator Ann Hindry compares to Mallarmé's desire to embed the text of a poem in the paper page, like a watermark.[4]

Hung in the rear gallery at Kreps were six works from the

Fyfe, Joe. "Martin Barré: A French Alternative." *Art in America* 97, no. 1, January 2009, pp. 82–87.



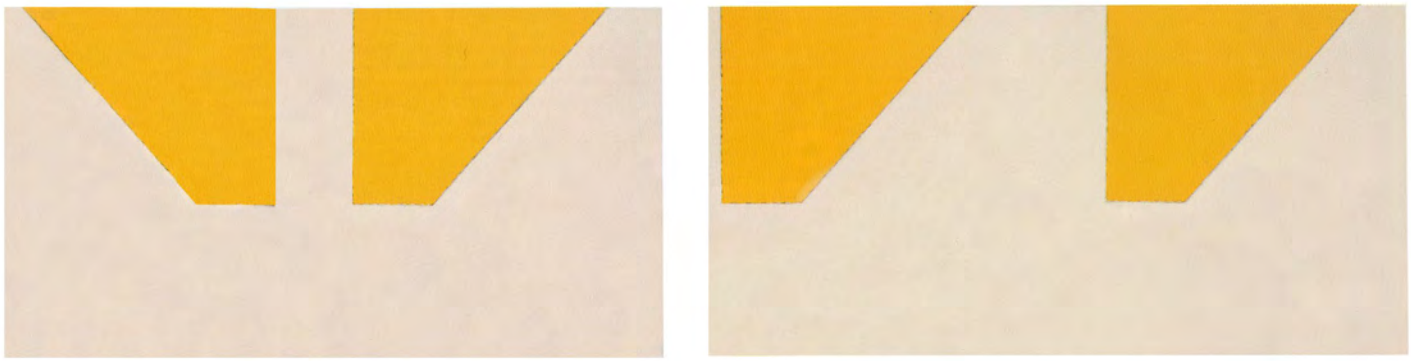
1960s, when Barré chose to paint in matte black, using a spray can. "This common contraption was at the same time the brush, the paint and its container,"[5] he noted to Bois. Though some of the small works (which measure from approximately 2½ by 3½ feet down to about 13 by 15 inches) were executed directly on store-bought primed canvases, most of the paintings were somewhat reworked. Close scrutiny of *67-Z-16* (1967, 33⅞ by 27½ inches), for example, reveals that wide diagonal bands of dark paint were applied first. These were followed by a layer of white gesso before the six diagonal lines that dominate the finished composition were sprayed on. The atomized texture of the brushstrokes seems to embed the bands in the facture.

With *63-N-2* (1963, 39⅜ by 28¾ inches), the white ground was reapplied, presumably atop underpainting, with a thick roller. Two vertical lines—one on the left curving from top to bottom, another on the right snaking three-quarters of the way up—were then sprayed on. And again, Barré seems to have wielded a blade in order to pare down the textural element of the gesso, further enmeshing figure and ground.

In 1967, after a series of stenciled spray paintings titled "67F," Barré turned briefly to Conceptual art. He told Millet in 1974 that he thought that painting was finished "as a technique."[6] One exhibition from this phase, at Galerie Daniel Templon in May 1969, consisted of life-size photographs of portions of the gallery's empty interior; another, at the same space the following year, featured large-scale photographs of calendar pages that corresponded to the dates of the show. In such cases, it was as if the artist were collapsing or conflating physical environment and photographic representation, time and event, perhaps en route to a reinvigorated concept of painterly space.

When he returned to painting in the early 1970s, Barré seemed to be attempting to laminate, as it were, actuality and representation by use of diagrammatical notation, comparatively unfettered brushwork and repainting with a light ground color in such a way that early decisions were preserved within a semitransparent scrim of pigment. Also relevant was his experience of isolating portions of

87-89—81x144-B, 1987-89, oil on canvas, 31⅛ by 44⅞ inches.



90-91—72x144-B, C and D, 1990-91, oil on canvas, 28⅜ by 56⅝ inches each.

the gallery space within the rectangles of his photographs: here again physical space is returned to painting, in this case via a grid that frames or crops abstract space.

These works, which the artist developed through the largest portion of the decade, are distinguished by elements that relate to a notional grid larger than the rectangular support and most often at an angle to it. The grid was thus only evidenced in fragments and was often indicated with hard, mechanical lines. One or more of its squares were filled in with hand-painted, soft-edged, closely aligned stripes.

As quickly as this vocabulary was established, Barré began to complicate it and seek variation. Ground colors shift from pure white to light gray or cream, and color returns: powdery blue gray, red oxide and yellow ochre. The progression represented by series "72-73 A" through "76-77 D" is Barré's most labyrinthine and allusive, and the paintings are the most illusionistic in their imagining of the rectangle's perimeter as a real spatial boundary.

Only one example from this central, cumulative period was included in the Kreps exhibition. Better represented was Barré's subsequent move toward a more direct contrast of planar mark and ground, and his increasing tendency to work in closely variant series. He also uses more vivid color and treats the perimeters of the canvas as permeable but active boundaries. Two examples of the series "87-89" (*B* and *C*) were shown. *87-89—81x144-B* (1987-89, 31⅝ by 56¾ inches), is a horizontally oriented rectangle containing four flat shapes—squares with one cropped corner each. Each of these shapes, which are equidistant from one another, abuts either the top or bottom edge of the canvas. The two shapes on the left are butter yellow, their cropped corners facing up, the two on the right are a light forest green, and their cropped corners face downward. The shapes are knitted into the painting's surface by a slightly serrated edge that reveals color changes; in one instance, traces of light ultramarine blue and orange bleed from beneath.

The paintings have an odd, static energy, like a slow blink, and manage to be baldly frontal, elusive, schematic and atmospheric all at once. This has everything to do with Barré's complex, fine-tuned color mixes working in conjunction with the cool gray-white ground he prefers. The juxtaposition functions to ensure that even though chromatic contrasts predominate, figure and ground retain a striking planar congruence.

There were also, hung high on the wall in the gallery's main room, four paintings from the series "90-91–72x144": *A*, *B*, *C* and *D*. All of these have a ground color of pale pink and a pair of yellow four-sided shapes aligned along their top edges. Each shape has one diagonal edge, tapering off toward the center of the painting, which seems to neutralize its perspectival illusionism and pin it to the frontal plane. It is another refined painterly trick, the kind of maneuver available only to an artist of Barré's long experience and intense concentration.

But of course, refinement was hardly the point. Over a remarkable 40-year period, Barré's varied but consistently distinctive output destabilized the very foundations of modernist abstraction, pulling it apart in such a way that it became unfamiliar all over again. ○

1 "Interview with Catherine Millet, 1985," in *Martin Barré*, Cologne, Galerie Daniel Buchholz et al., 2008, p. 272. **2** Yve-Alain Bois, "Martin Barré and the Logic of Deviations," in *Martin Barré*, p. 15. **3** "Interview with Catherine Millet, 1974," in *Martin Barré*, p. 260. **4** Ann Hindry, "Painting Out of Subject," in *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Columbus, Wexner Center for the Arts and Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2001, p. 64. **5** Bois, p. 27. **6** "Interview with Catherine Millet, 1974," p. 266.

"Works by Martin Barré" was on view at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York [May 3-June 7, 2008].

JOE FYFE is a Brooklyn-based painter.

Fyfe, Joe. "Martin Barré: A French Alternative." *Art in America* 97, no. 1, January 2009, pp. 82–87.

ARTFORUM

62-5, 1962, oil on canvas, four parts clockwise from top left: 23 5/8 x 31 7/8", 21 1/4 x 31 7/8", 23 5/8 x 36 1/4", 21 1/4 x 31 7/8".

COLOGNE

Martin Barré

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ | COLOGNE
Neven-DuMont-Strasse 17
June 29 - August 25

The searching quality of poetry is in Martin Barré's paintings: They are slow, aleatory, considered, distilled. Four of Barré's early works, from the 1960s, display a preoccupation with line as the prime index tracking the artist's ephemeral meandering over canvas. The four-panel painting *62-5*, 1962, is exemplary: Like a raw nerve, line shudders, alternately diminished and swollen. Paint's residue evidences the solitary incursions of a brush; elsewhere, the atomized emission of spray paint is isolated in a single line crossing the top left corner of *65-A 81 x 54*, 1965. Barré (1924–1993) preserves the promise of futurity in large areas of blank canvas. White and off-white activate. Restraint is an organizing principle. Visual terseness drives the isolation of lyric details: irregularity whispers sensitivity and compositional syncopation values lilting off-center-ness, off-ness. There is space to breathe. A minimal gathering of marks defines the canvas's vacancy as the essential clearing where painting happens. *72–73D 130 x 120*, 1972–73, is the transitional work of the selection on view: open and unmeasured space begins to be mapped geometrically, here by a barely there graphite underdrawing of a diagonally oriented grid. Proceeding from a more rectilinear ordering of the picture plane, five paintings from the end of Barré's life systematically organize colored repetitions of a flat trapezoidal shape—light blue, yellow, pinkish red, and green—in a bright white field. (One thinks of the contemporaneous sensibility of Richard Tuttle or, executed only a few city blocks away, the more fluid variations by the Cologne-based painter Frances Scholz.) Throughout, Barré uses paint as an exception to white's primacy, like the accent marking the end of his name. A punctuation to emptiness, paint's minimal presence is a foil for absence.

— *Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer*

Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. "Critics' Picks: Martin Barré." *Artforum*, July 30, 2007.

ARTFORUM

PARIS

"Hommage à Martin Barré"

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

"*Idées de la peinture: Hommage à Martin Barré*" (Ideas of Painting: An Homage to Martin Barré), curated by Jean-Pierre Criqui, allows us to revisit a painter whose work is displayed all too infrequently relative to its importance. From one series to another, in ten paintings made by Barré between 1960 and 1991, the tools employed change (the paint tube itself, the spray gun, then a return to the brush), as do the forms (lines, bands or stripes, arrows, and truncated triangles or rectangles), but these variations only confirm the rigor and continuity of the artist's tireless investigation into the fundamental givens of painting. Throughout his experiments, one constant emerges immediately: the importance of blank space, which cannot be described as a void, since it is active, or as background, insofar as Barré gives it the same status as forms and color. In the radicalism of black and white, his will to limit the usual contradictions, starting with the dichotomy between background and form, is clearly affirmed: the sometimes crisp, sometimes nebulous edges, achieved with spray paint and a piece of cardboard (*67-F-2-113 x 105*, 1967), the erasures and overpainting, the interplay of positive and negative (*87-89-81 x 144-C*, 1987–89)—all these are so many ways of avoiding hierarchies while holding together the components of the work.

Juxtaposing Barré's works with nine others by painters of different generations and viewpoints, from Raoul De Keyser to Pascal Pinaud, indicates the parameters offered by this exploration and, as the title of the exhibition states, points toward certain ideas of painting. It is a question of format and presentation and the different relationships (focusing or immersion) they imply, but also of motifs—their repetition and alteration—and especially the use of this space, at once concrete and imaginary, that in the last analysis constitutes painting. Painting is envisaged here in the complexity of its relationship to the

Maldonado, Guitemie. "Hommage à Martin Barré." *Artforum* 45, no. 2, October 2006, p. 277.
Translated by Jeanine Herman.

wall and in the subversion of its limits: beginnings or ends of lines placed at the edges suggest an unseen surround, just as the saturation of the space opens onto possible overflowings, and the de-centering of forms calls for other configurations. The plane of the canvas is detached from the wall but participates in its frontality and materiality, as exemplified by the effects of texture employed by Peter Halley (*Privilege Level*, 2000) as well as by the stratifications by means of which Albert Oehlen's *Untitled*, 1992–2005, turns the support into a surface for the inscription of traces, such as the accidents suggested by Pascal Pinaud (*Hennarot BMW*, 2002). All sorts of hatchings, stripes, and grids, in an amused rereading of the modernist emblem, work toward the (de)definition of pictorial space: It is incomplete or discontinuous in Barré's *79-A-100 x 200*, 1979, symmetrical through repetition to the point of displacement in Bernard Piffaretti's *Sans titre (BP 188)*, 2003, reduced to an intersection in Robert Mangold's *Aqua/Green/Orange + Painting*, 1983, or freely crumpled and tangled by Christian Bonnefoi in *Beatus VIII*, 2004. These works represent so many approaches to (abstract) painting that, in effect, they demonstrate its infinite variety, so many invitations to focus on and think about looking.

Martin Barré, *90-91-96 x 112-C*, 1990–91, acrylic on canvas, 37 x 44".

—Guitemie Maldonado

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

Maldonado, Guitemie. "Hommage à Martin Barré." *Artforum* 45, no. 2, October 2006, p. 277. Translated by Jeanine Herman.

ARTFORUM

"LA PEINTURE APRÈS L'ABSTRACTION"

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS

YVE-ALAIN BOIS

Above: **Jacques de la Villeglé, *42, rue Turbigo*, 1968,** lacerated billboards mounted on canvas, ca. 56 x 94½". Opposite page, left to right: **Simon Hantaï, *Mariale M.D.2*, 1962,** oil on folded canvas, ca. 105¼ x 82¼". **Martin Barré, *63_Z*, 1963,** spray paint on canvas, ca. 31¼ x 21¼".

Sometimes a silly idea can lead to a fascinating exhibition—even as the silliness still shows through. When I first heard about "*La peinture après l'abstraction*," documenting work done in Paris between 1955 and 1975 by five artists as unlike as Simon Hantaï, Jean Degottex, Martin Barré, Raymond Hains, and Jacques de la Villeglé, I thought the project utterly crackpot. I still think so; Degottex's inclusion shows how little thought went into the mix. But the beauty is that Degottex's oeuvre inadvertently serves as a repoussoir: The contrast his work provides helps demonstrate what the four others had in common, something the hanging of the exhibition often seemed designed to obscure.

So what did Hains, Villeglé, Hantaï, and Barré have in common? Call it an attitude, or a peculiar, even eerie encounter with Historical Necessity: All four share a desire to change the terms of what we might refer to as artistic agency. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, it comes as little surprise that young painters would ask: What does it mean to be an artistic subject, an author, at the very moment when the humanity of any individual has been cast in doubt by the massive demonstration of our species's inhumanity? Hains, Villeglé, Hantaï, and Barré were not alone in thinking about this issue in Paris, but the common goal of our four musketeers was to overthrow the model of agency enacted by the most powerful new artistic tradition of postwar France, a tradition supported both by the state and by the belletristic intelligentsia as a whole—that of what I like to call the JEP.

JEP: The acronym stands for "*Jeune École de Paris*," an umbrella concept invoked in the '50s to designate the type of abstraction (indifferently labeled "*tachisme*," "*informel*," or "*abstraction lyrique*") initiated by the likes of Pierre Soulages, Jean Bazaine, Alfred Manessier, Viera da Silva, Bram van Velde, and Hans Hartung immediately after the war and later emulated by an army of imitators. The phenomenon is comparable to the mass production of de Kooning epigones on this side of the Atlantic, each dutifully heralded by Tom Hess's *Art News* and now long forgotten. It may be unfair to lump together the first and the second JEP wave, but it will do as shorthand, with the quintessential JEP painter being Georges Mathieu, whose theatrics of gesturalism and subjectivist pretense represent the apogee of what Hains, Villeglé, Hantaï, and Barré abhorred.

JEP theory and practice are modeled on that of early Kandinsky, who ponderously made elaborate sketches of so-called improvisations that the spectator was asked to view as faithful portraits of the painter's "inner being." Poseur and composer, the JEP guy is a Cartesian subject who feels secure as the master of his pictorial universe. ("Guy" is appropriate; though less macho than the average AbEx painter, the JEP artist rarely admitted women into the club.) Even if he wears an expressionist cloak, he is a pure product of an artistic education governed by late, classicizing, highly compositional cubism—here, think André Lhote rather than Picasso.

Thanks mostly to Benjamin Buchloh's efforts (see his essay in *October* 56), the work of the *décollagistes* Hains and Villeglé is beginning to register in this country (as is that of François Dufrêne, who was oddly absent from the exhibition). And while in France their names are intimately linked with *Nouveau Réalisme* (a "group" into which they were momentarily lured by the ebullient critic Pierre Restany when he coined the label in 1960), their recent appearance on the US radar screen has offered them a clean slate. Buchloh has convincingly dissociated Hains and Villeglé

Bois, Yve-Alain. "La peinture après l'abstraction." *Artforum* 38, no. 4, December 1999, pp. 144–45.

from Restany's hodgepodge and situated them in the wider sociopolitical context of postwar France (though in close contact with the Internationale Situationiste, they refused to join, a refusal related to an anarchist reluctance with regard to a form of political militancy they had rightfully diagnosed as imitating the Surrealist model, despite Guy Debord's ranting against André Breton's stale officialdom).

This exhibition continues the art-historically healthy dissociation, and Buchloh's catalogue essay, dealing in this case with the pictorial rather than the sociopolitical context, helps map an entirely new genealogy for the anti-JEP camp by finding a counterintuitive common ground between the *décollagistes* and Hantaï. Though virtually unknown in the US, Hantaï has been considered, at least since the '70s, as the heir to Matisse on the Parisian scene, and it is indeed this unusual evocation that allows Buchloh to show how determinant the issue of the Matisse legacy was in the stance of the *décollagistes* vis-à-vis color and drawing. If *Nouveau Réalisme* has long been considered in the US as the only force that had effectively, though ephemerally, opposed JEP in postwar France until Daniel Buren and his acolytes seized the torch in the late '60s, a clearer grasp of the historical situation is now emerging.

As the first room of the show reminds us, Hains and Villeglé began their *décollages*, which were frequently joint efforts, in 1949—ripping thick layers of posters lacerated by passersby from billboards and street walls and exhibiting the finds, most often mounted on canvas, as works of art. An excellent selection testified against the standard interpretation of the *décollagiste* activity: If their art represented a "return of the real," it was due less to the fragments of political or commercial advertising one could decipher here and there than to the shrieking condemnation, by the tearing gesture itself, of any authorial posturing. It is not by chance that Hains and Villeglé each titled one of their lacerated surfaces "*Nymphéas*," or that from a distance so many of these works resemble JEP compositions: Stating a kinship between the entropic waste of mass culture and "high art," the *décollagistes* intended to debunk the latter as a product of false consciousness. And it is here that Degottex's pseudo-Zen black-and-white calligraphy—wide brush, dribbles, and all—looks most like the oddball of the show: Hains's and

DEGOTTEX'S PSEUDO-ZEN CALLIGRAPHY IS THE ODDBALL: HAINS'S AND VILLEGLÉ'S SHARDS PRICK THE BALLOON OF HIS SUBJECTIVE SPIRITUALISM.

Villeglé's shards prick the balloon of his subjective spiritualism and send him back to Mathieu's music-hall stage.

Both Hantaï and Barré are JEP defectors. Though Hantaï's beginnings were generally placed under the aegis of Surrealism (with the blessings of Breton), his work of the early '50s definitively partakes of the same genre as Degottex's *japonisme* (the main difference being that Hantaï writes with white on black, or more precisely grayish-pink on black). By 1959, his large allover

paintings—oddly resembling Dubuffet's strictly contemporary "*Matériologies*," but with more luscious effects—mark a turning point. While the allover mode represents an exception in Dubuffet's output, it became a springboard for Hantaï, who has never parted with it: Through Pollock, he understood that to escape the JEP aesthetic, he had to invent a new method for marking his canvases and dividing their surfaces. The solution he arrived at the following year is the *pliage* (though the effect is less of folding than of crumpling). Thereafter Hantaï folded his canvases before coating them with color. At first he would paint in those tongue/flame/leaf-shaped creases that the liquid color had not reached, giving his surface the reticular and hardened feel of a reptile's skin; but soon, using a more fluid paint and working on a larger scale, he began leaving the reserved spaces untouched, their whiteness luminously contrasting with the monochrome, decorative, and aleatory pattern of the painted areas. Whatever the variations, Hantaï's pictorial practice always toys with automatism and the possibility of uncontrol, and his most successful works convey what one imagines to be the sheer pleasure of his surprise at the moment of unfolding. There is a deliberate childishness in such a pleasure, and Hantaï often charms because he dares to flaunt it.

Martin Barré's case is more complex, in part because his oeuvre is exceptionally varied in comparison to that of the others. A painter's painter whose production was relatively sparse, Barré, who died in 1993, is even less known in the US than Hantaï, although he was the basis for the creator of the canvas in Yasmina Reza's *Art*, the populist satire of abstract painting that so regaled Broadway theatergoers. Unlike Reza's caricature, Barré never produced a white monochrome—but it is true that the combined discovery of Malevich and Yves Klein represented a wake-up call (his enthusiasm for the latter's monochromes, in 1960, cost him his early supporters). What the double shock of Malevich and Klein revealed to him was that JEP's art consisted more in the representation of gestures than in gestures themselves.

His first reaction was to lay this issue bare: In his canvases of 1960–62, using the tube of paint as if it were a brush, he literally depicts gestures on white canvases (bringing to mind Lichtenstein's enlarged brushstrokes of a few years later). In 1963, continually asking himself how to avoid the return of the compositional, Cartesian ethos of picture making, he takes his cue from the political graffiti that had been proliferating on the walls of Paris during the Algerian war and begins to use a spray can. This involves not only distance (as in Pollock's drip, there is no physical contact between the artist and the surfaces he marks), but also speed (Barré avoids runoffs and puddles, features that might be read as a sign of expressivity); the fuzzy black lines are devoid of texture, and they travel fast, almost always rushing off the canvas—the mark retaining something of its virtuality even after it has been traced. The most stunning canvas of this group (though not in the show, despite its availability) is a 1963 precursor of the 1967 series nicknamed "Zebra": Eight roughly parallel oblique lines pass across the canvas from edge to edge. Like Hantaï, Barré will espouse blindness: After the "Zebra"

Bois, Yve-Alain. "La peinture après l'abstraction." *Artforum* 38, no. 4, December 1999, pp. 144–45.

works, he began to employ a stencil that is larger than the surface of his canvas, and through which he sprayed (without knowing for sure where the mist would land) the multiple silhouettes of a single arrow.

It is fitting, in retrospect, that having come so close to transforming the act of painting into that of cameraless photography, Barré would devote time to the photographic medium: This activity, which led to one of the first exhibitions of Conceptual art in France, in May–June 1969, was followed by a period of doubt, after which, in 1972, he resumed his practice as a painter. As reluctant as ever to endorse an authorial position, Barré now appropriated a strategy familiar from the tradition of geometric abstraction—that of deductive systems of proportions that the beholder is invited to induce—in order to pervert it, a trump card always disobeying the rule just as one thought that the system had been figured out. Working in distinct series, usually one per year, of ten to twenty canvases, each looking as if it were the fragment of a larger, unfathomable whole, Barré took up painting as he had left it, that is, as a spatialization of time. But now, and throughout the '70s, it is not speed but slowness that he would investigate, his works conceived as palimpsests of ambiguous grids imbedded in multiple layers of thin white paint, each canvas attesting to the fact that no matter how simple the system that governs its production, the more one looks, the less one knows.

Hains and Villeglé, Hantaï and Barré, each in their own way, strove to undermine certainty, both on the producer's behalf as well as on the viewer's. Despite its multiple drawbacks, "*La peinture après l'abstraction*" makes this much, at least, certain. □

Bois, Yve-Alain. "La peinture après l'abstraction." *Artforum* 38, no. 4, December 1999, pp. 144–45.

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VOGUE

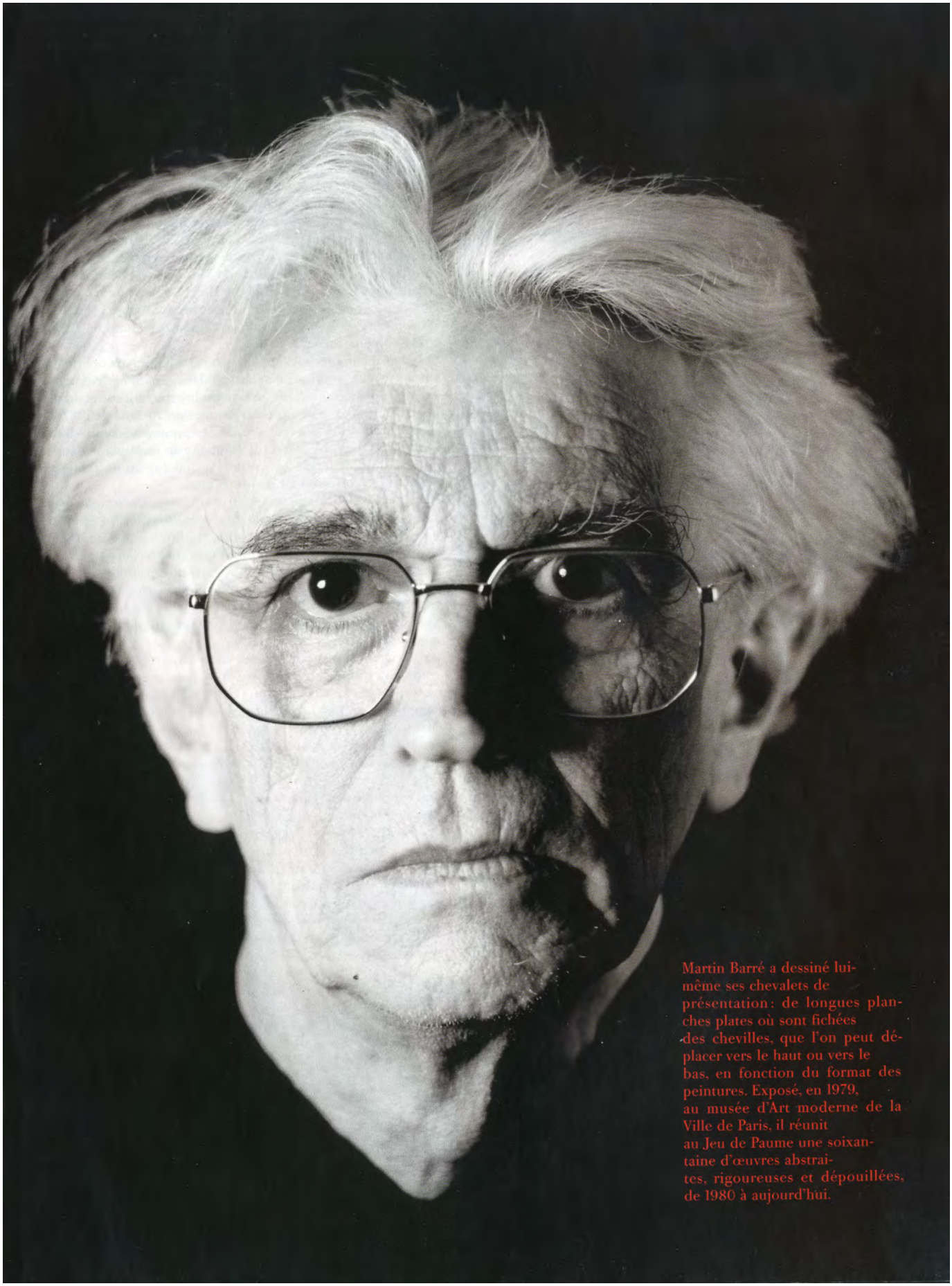
QUADRATURE

TOUT DANS SON ATELIER EST DE SA CONCEPTION : ÉCLAIRAGES, ÉVIERS, TABLES ET TABOURETS. UN MANIFESTE ESTHÉTIQUE EN FAVEUR DE LA RIGUEUR ET DU PRÉCEPTE MODERNE "MOINS C'EST PLUS". VISITE GUIDÉE À LA VEILLE D'UNE EXPOSITION AU JEU DE PAUME.

Martin Barré peintre au carré

PAR DAVID SEIDNER

Seidner, David. "Martin Barré: Peintre au carré." *Vogue* (France), February 1993, pp. 180–83.



Martin Barré a dessiné lui-même ses chevalets de présentation : de longues planches plates où sont fichées des chevilles, que l'on peut déplacer vers le haut ou vers le bas, en fonction du format des peintures. Exposé, en 1979, au musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, il réunit au Jeu de Paume une soixantaine d'œuvres abstraites, rigoureuses et dépouillées, de 1980 à aujourd'hui.

Seidner, David. "Martin Barré: Peintre au carré." *Vogue* (France), February 1993, pp. 180–83.

Depuis plus de trente ans, Martin Barré reste fidèle à l'abstraction postcubiste, peinture rigoureusement dépouillée. Ainsi, rend-il hommage, indirectement à des maîtres tels que Mondrian et Malevitch. Or, contrairement à Mondrian, dont on connaît l'emprise qu'eut le mysticisme de l'enseignante et spirite Mme Blavatsky sur son œuvre, ou à Malevitch, dont les textes sur le suprématisme assimilaient des formes géométriques à des états spirituels, Martin Barré se veut absolument matérialiste. Ses formes géométriques, dont les variations infimes flottent sur des toiles blanches de dimensions moyennes renvoient exactement à ce à quoi elles ressemblent : des abstractions. Dans ces œuvres, proclame Barré, il n'est question que de l'amour de la peinture et de rien d'autre. Reste qu'on ne peut le comparer à un grand sensuel comme Matisse, dont l'amour pour la peinture éclate sur la toile. L'œuvre de Martin Barré est austère et rationnelle. Pour citer Alfred Pacquement, directeur des galeries du Jeu de Paume, "elle n'est pas romantique, ce n'est pas non plus de l'abstraction géométrique pure ; elle entre dans une catégorie à part". Après plus de trente ans, cette œuvre fait l'objet d'une réévaluation et d'une confrontation avec celles de ses contemporains nord-américains beaucoup plus connus que lui : des peintres comme Robert Mangold et Robert Ryman. Une nouvelle génération de jeunes artistes français, tels Bonnefois et Dunoyer a subi l'influence de Barré et de son immuable credo abstrait.

Né à Nantes en 1924, fils d'architecte, Martin Barré aura sans doute été marqué par les dessins de son père. Une fois ses études à l'École des beaux-arts achevées, il monte à Paris où il lui arrive de repeindre des appartements, pour nourrir sa famille. Sa première exposition a lieu à Paris, en 1955. Il présente alors des tableaux exécutés avec un couteau à palette (ce qu'il appelle l'"héritage de Cézanne"). Les peintres abstraits en vogue à l'époque ont nom Poliakoff et Soulages, mais on perçoit déjà dans l'œuvre de Barré une sobriété bien différente des effusions gestuelles de ses contemporains.

L'importance du carré, considéré comme l'un des principes fondamentaux de l'art moderne, s'est affirmée dès le début. Des petits volumes de peinture à l'huile, plus ou moins carrés, créaient des formes et des lignes qui finissaient par donner naissance à des peintures dont le centre restait vide. Un tableau de 1959, intitulé *59 - 120 X 110 - C*, (d'après ses dimensions, comme la plupart des toiles de Martin Barré, qui ne veut "pas de titres, mais des désignations"), n'est peint, en fait, que sur les bords, laissant visible la toile nue sur toute la partie centrale. Il en résulte un effet de blanc sur blanc, comme dans le célèbre chef-d'œuvre de la modernité réalisé par Malevitch en 1917, mais les bords du trapézoïde sont sommaires, hésitants, truffés d'empâtements tandis que le blanc du milieu fait défaut : presque un Malevitch en négatif. Dans cet ensemble de peintures des années cinquante, dont beaucoup de pièces ont été détruites par l'artiste insatisfait, on discerne aussi l'influence évidente de Mondrian. Toutefois, les verticales et horizontales vigoureuses qui fixent les blocs de couleur de Mondrian et délimitent l'espace sont absentes de l'œuvre de Barré. Chez lui, les volumes bougent et engendrent ce qui est devenu un aspect important de son œuvre : le désir d'unir le statique et le mobile sur une seule et même surface.

On peut distinguer plusieurs périodes dans la carrière de Martin Barré : les peintures au couteau dans les années cinquante ; les tableaux exécutés avec la couleur directement sortie du tube en 1960, les toiles peintes à la bombe entre 1963 et 1967 ; les lignes, grilles et diagonales dans les années soixante-dix ; et enfin les triangles et carrés flottant sur un fond blanc dans les années quatre-vingt. Ce dernier groupe constitue la majeure partie de l'exposition au Jeu de Paume.

A partir de 1967, Martin Barré travaille systématiquement par séries. Il espère, dit-il, que chaque peinture recèle le souvenir des autres. Ensemble, elles produisent une sorte d'impression musicale, presque à la manière d'une sonate ou d'une fugue. Les formes géométriques colorées sont entourées de blanc. Parfois il y a des lignes ou des points noirs, parfois non. Les carrés se trouvent souvent privés d'un de leurs angles, ce qui suggère une idée de triangularité et crée une sensation de formes mouvantes, au lieu de suggérer un agencement par opposition au rythme. Dans les toiles de Barré, la soustraction compte autant que l'addition. Quand il prépare une série, Barré travaille plusieurs tableaux à la fois, en préméditant la juxtaposition des œuvres achevées. Parce que, dit-il, ses peintures sont destinées à des espaces d'exposition et qu'elles sont quasiment conçues comme des installations. Il a souvent fait accrocher les toiles à des hauteurs différentes, "chahutées", dit-il, amplifiant ainsi la variation de la ligne et de la forme au sein de chaque série. A présent, il utilise l'acrylique, appliquée sur des toiles posées à plat sur une table. Tout dans l'atelier de l'artiste est de sa conception. Considéré globalement, cet atelier transporte le visiteur dans la Hollande des années vingt. On dirait un tableau du groupe De Stijl en trois dimensions, sans le rouge, le bleu et le jaune. On sent l'intelligence et la sobriété jusque dans le moindre détail où ne manque pas, épinglée au mur, la maxime moderne par excellence : *moins c'est plus.*

L'importance du carré, considéré comme l'un des principes fondamentaux de l'art moderne, s'est affirmée dès le début. Des petits volumes de peinture à l'huile, plus ou moins carrés, créent des formes et des lignes qui finissent par donner naissance à des peintures dont le centre reste vide. Du blanc, quelques couleurs, un format carré ou rectangulaire, voilà les principaux ingrédients de l'artiste dans l'atelier du Marais, aux murs immaculés de blanc cassé.

Martin Barré est un artiste pour les artistes, sans prétention, qui ne se trompe pas dans ses priorités. Il a adopté un code complexe faisant appel aux moyens les plus simples pour véhiculer un seul message fort et direct : l'amour de la peinture.

(Traduit de l'anglais par Jeanne Bouniort)

Seidner, David. "Martin Barré: Peintre au carré." *Vogue* (France), February 1993, pp. 180–83.

Seidner, David. "Martin Barré: Peintre au carré." *Vogue* (France), February 1993, pp. 180–83.

ARTNEWS

REVIEWS

Paris

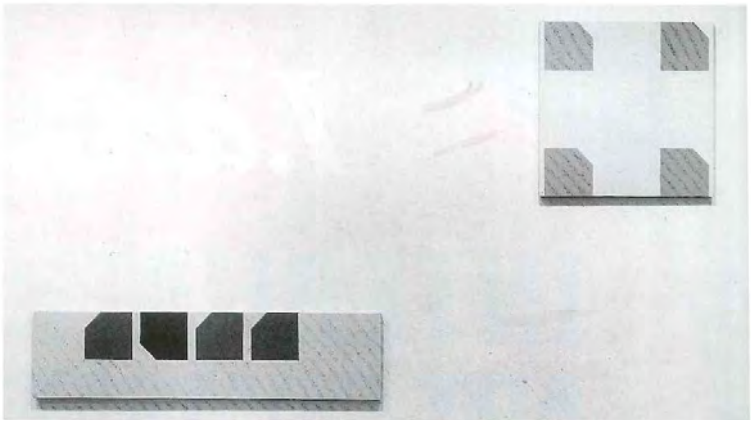
MARTIN BARRE

Galerie Laage-Salomon

Martin Barré follows the tradition of abstract painters who focused on a single visual theme in order to explore or exhaust its optical possibilities.

Of Malevich one remembers a square against a white background, and of Mondrian contour lines punctuated by color; others, such as Albers, favored squares, while Daniel Buren claimed stripes. In Barré's latest series—14 canvases worked on concurrently between 1987 and 1989—he adopts the square as a base from which to explore relationships through a variety of configurations and colors.

Each painting presents four shapes, in sun yellow, sky blue, red, and turquoise. The shapes are disfigured squares, with one angle truncated, as if folded over like step A in an origami exercise. In lieu of boats and birds, Barré's shapes remain almost squares. Against a blank background, the compositions differ only according to the shape of the canvas, which ranges from square to oblong.



ABOVE Martin Barré, installation view at Galerie Laage-Salomon.

Hung at different heights, the canvases formed a collective tableau that was described in the gallery as a single installation. Indeed, from a distance they shared sufficient uniformity to create a cohesive work—the mark of this artist who works only in series. Barré's previous series include "Flèches," sketchy paintings of arrows aimed beyond their frame, and "Zèbres," where zebra stripes are arranged in geometric partitions.

Born in 1924, Barré has never been as fashionable as his far-flung colleagues in this century's abstractionist movement. This year, however, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Barré's native Nantes presented a retrospective that continued on to Nice. Three Paris galleries chose the occasion for their own homage, with Laage-Salomon showing recent work. The strategy and the product were reminders of Barré's special, if small, place in a major current of 20th-century art. **—Ginger Danto**

Danto, Ginger. "Martin Barré." *ArtNews,* March 1990, p. 200.

art press

CATHERINE MILLET

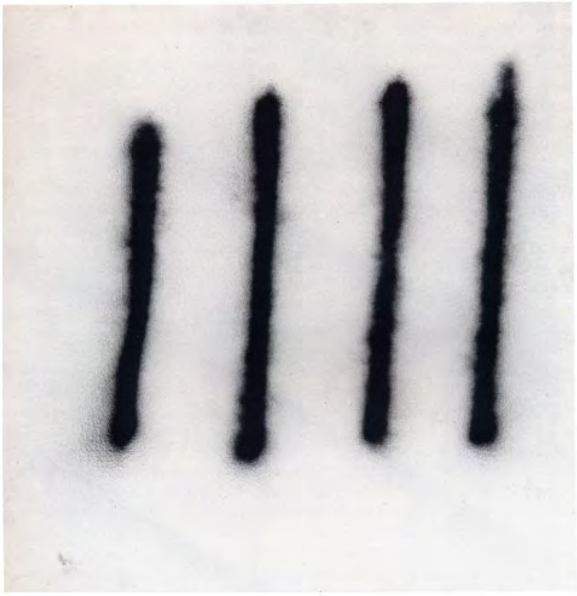
MARTIN BARRÉ

67-Z-7

Si cette œuvre de Martin Barré peut être regardée comme un chef-d'œuvre c'est à la façon d'une clef de voûte qui susciterait notre admiration pour la légèreté dans laquelle elle convertirait la rencontre de forces pourtant puissantes et antagonistes. La grande simplicité avec laquelle les quatre lignes parallèles et à peu près pareilles occupent, sans s'y perdre ni l'obstruer, l'espace d'une toile presque carrée aux proportions facilement appréhensibles, absorbe magnifiquement des contradictions qu'on nous a trop souvent exposées dans des convulsions.

Au tournant des années cinquante/soixante, Martin Barré pratique une abstraction gestuelle déjà épurée mais encore nerveuse en appliquant la couleur directement du tube sur la toile. Son problème est alors celui général à toute la tendance dans laquelle il s'inscrit, comment éviter qu'un procédé émancipateur n'engendre son envers, une rhétorique ? Déjà, en faisant l'économie du pinceau, Barré évite l'élégance plus ou moins orientaliste dans laquelle tourniquote un certain nombre de ses confrères parisiens. D'autres, les exigeants, ont trouvé des issues qui consistent souvent à préserver la liberté du geste en reconduisant sa portée aléatoire (Hantaï qui dépose «aveuglément» la couleur sur la toile froissée ou pliée, Morris Louis qui la laisse s'épandre dans la toile crue) ; plus tard, une autre génération, peut-être plus radicale qu'exigeante, optera au contraire pour un geste à la fois minimum et volontariste (BMPT, Support-Surface). Martin Barré, lui, a remarqué sur les murs de Paris les graffitis faits à la bombe. Il décide d'utiliser cet outil (en 1963) pour ménager entre sa main et la surface de la toile une distance ressentie désormais comme nécessaire. Mais cette distance n'est pas une démission. La solution originale qu'il trouve pour sauver le geste de la stylisation fait que si elle retire à ce geste de la «personnalité», elle ne retire au peintre aucun pouvoir de décision ; elle lui en redonnerait plutôt.

Le tableau dont la référence est 67 - Z - 7 appartient à l'ensemble dit des «zèbres» (1967). Avant les «zèbres», les bombages sont sur la toile souvent moins nombreux et en tout cas moins systématiques. Avec la bombe aérosol, Barré exécutera encore les «flèches» (1967) en s'aidant d'un pochoir. Comparé aux autres «zèbres», le 67 - Z - 7 présente un caractère singulier : aucune des parallèles ne déborde l'espace de la toile ; elles commencent et finissent à l'intérieur de cet espace (pure affirmation, le geste ni ne divise ni n'occulte par remplissage). Sans doute est-ce là une des raisons de mon choix.



«67 - Z- 7». 1967. 70 x 65 cm. Peinture glycérophtalique et acrylique sur toile. Collection particulière.

Millet, Catherine. "Martin Barré." *Art Press*, September 1988, pp. 88–89.

Dans cette suite d'œuvres, Barré réalise un bel équilibre entre l'incontrôlable et le contrôlé. Au contraire d'autres peintres gestuels dont l'apparente spontanéité s'est d'abord exercée dans des dessins (ainsi travaillait Franz Kline), l'art de Barré ignore l'étape du croquis préparatoire. Et au contraire d'autres encore (par exemple de Kooning) qui ne craignent pas reprises et surcharges, la chance d'un tableau de Barré se joue en un nombre très limité de gestes (1), quatre ici, quelquefois un seul, un coup de dé. Mais le coup de dé d'un joueur expert. Moins maniable qu'un pinceau, la bombe aérosol se maîtrise toutefois. Selon la vitesse à laquelle il agissait, la distance à laquelle il se tenait de la toile, selon que la bombe était neuve ou non, le peintre savait qu'il n'obtiendrait pas le même tracé. Les quatre que nous avons sous les yeux ont des existences grossières, courtes, et leurs bords sont mal définis à cause des éclaboussures du jet. Le premier à gauche est-il légèrement tordu à cause d'une rectification vite décidée par le peintre, ou au contraire à cause d'une hésitation, ou simplement d'une maladresse ? Les deux du milieu ont plus d'assurance. Celui de droite encore plus, sauf dans l'appendice qui le termine en haut, encore que celui-ci puisse être vu autant comme la dernière aspiration du mouvement ascensionnel qui étire légèrement la mise en place générale quasi symétrique, que comme un raté. Mais ces existences ont été clairement voulues, avec insistance même comme le prouve la répétition, par quatre fois et par quatre fois suspendues, huit décisions en tout, huit moments d'intense concentration du peintre sur son acte, et que symbolise presque, du moins matérialise, le iéger renflement qui constitue parfois l'extrémité des barres. Huit décisions d'autant plus souveraines qu'elles sont indépendantes les unes des autres. A ma connaissance, il n'y a que deux peintres gestuels dont les gestes ne s'entraînent pas les uns les autres comme dans une calligraphie mais nécessitent pour chaque reprise une pleine réévaluation de l'espace, Lucio Fontana et Martin Barré. Pour eux, la liberté du geste n'a pas rabaissé l'autorité du regard.

Sans doute est-ce en raison de cette dialectique que Barré n'a jamais éprouvé le besoin (comme Fontana) de lancer son geste dans un «champ» (selon Greenberg, le grand format all over) ou une «arène» (selon l'image de Rosenberg). Certes son espace présente cette qualité d'ouverture qui justement préoccupait les américains : le noir mat des tracés — qui dans cette série, à une ou deux exceptions près, ne se referment pas en formes définies, et le blanc légèrement cassé sont sur le même plan, le halo de la vaporisation apparaissant comme une zone d'interpénétration des valeurs (2) ; l'organisation de l'espace est non-hiérarchisée ; le carré, format de prédilection de Martin Barré, est peu contraignant ; souvent, c'est même le cas le plus fréquent, des tracés débordent du tableau, certains n'étant que des amorces de geste et livrant au blanc la presque totalité de la surface. Mais cet espace ouvert n'en est pas pour autant indifférencié. Barré choisit scrupuleusement ses formats et n'a par exemple jamais pratiqué, comme cela s'est fait, le «recadrage» en taillant le tableau dans une toile plus grande déjà peinte. Les dimensions sont moyennes, ni le geste ni le regard ne s'y perdent, et la convention du tableau comme espace arbitrairement défini demeure présente à l'esprit de l'observateur. Autrement dit, Martin Barré réussit à établir un espace à la fois ouvert et parfaitement désigné.

Parlant aujourd'hui des peintures à la bombe, Barré qui les considéra comme moins audacieuses que les peintures au tube (on peut s'en étonner mais il est vrai qu'elles confèrent un équilibre presque «classique» à un espace qui était déjà celui des peintures au tube), dit bien sûr qu'il s'agissait d'approcher la limite de la peinture. Mais cette limite, là est le génie du peintre, n'est mesurée ni dans un excès, ni dans l'ampleur d'une négation. L'espace pictural n'est pas débordé jusu'à provoquer le vertige d'un geste éperdu, une perte de soi qui est aussi une perte des autres (ce fut peut-être le drame personnel de Pollock). Pas plus qu'il n'est effacé dans un geste iconoclaste qui au bout du compte fera resurgir de vieux fantômes cachés derrière l'écran (ce fut l'étourderie de Klein) (3). La limite mise au jour par Barré est celle qui se dessine entre une liberté, qu'un souffle suffit à suggérer, et la maintenance d'une convention claire. Carla liberté n'est pas dans un geste en extension continue ou de pure décharge mais dans un geste qui sait garder une part de virtualité ; elle est de l'ordre de savoir, une idée qui se transmet aux autres à travers un langage. ▨

(1) Chez Barré, certains fonds blancs laissent voir en transparence des lignes recouvertes. Mais il ne s'agit pas tant de repentirs que de recommencements de la surface. En tous cas, ce que je dis de l'exécution des tracés est aussi valable pour ceux qui sont sous-jacents.
(2) Il serait amusant de rapprocher l'effet de la vaporisation et le bord tremblé des zips de Newman et de comparer leur fonction.
(3) Pollock, Klein ont accompli des œuvres. Mais il faudrait se demander pourquoi la reprise et la radicalisation de leur geste a ensuite produit des attitudes si archaïques, nihilistes, parfois autistiques.

Millet, Catherine. "Martin Barré." *Art Press*, September 1988, pp. 88–89.

Art in America

Martin Barré: Strategies of Concealment

Seen recently in two interrelated Paris exhibitions, Martin Barré's enigmatic abstractions tempt the viewer with the promise of conceptual discovery, only to frustrate all attempts to decipher the systemic logic according to which his serial canvases are produced.

BY YVE-ALAIN BOIS

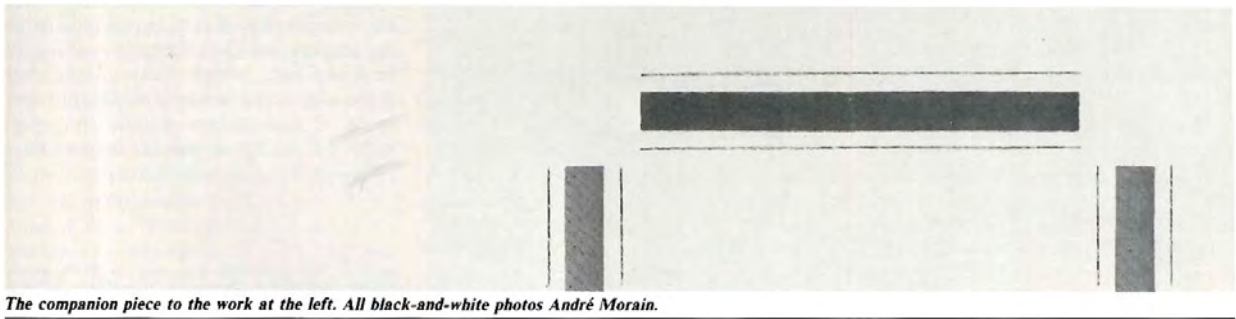
Martin Barré is one of the few postwar French painters (his first one-man show was in 1955) whose development was not arrested by his exposure to the work of the American Abstract Expressionists. Most French artists responded to the shock of action painting either by emphasizing the prettiness of their post-Cubist abstractions or by trying to imitate "American-type" painting; both strategies, however, led to catastrophe. The internal logic of Barré's work was so strong, however, that he was able to integrate this new phenomenon into his work without being affected by it. Barré's fundamental individualism was demonstrated in his 1979 retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where the consistency of his work over 25 years was revealed, as well as in two recent gallery exhibitions in Paris (at Jean Chauvelin and Gillespie/Laage/Salomon), in which practically all of his subsequent work was exhibited.

Barré is a cryptic painter. He paints little (roughly 15 canvases a year) and exhibits infrequently (these two interrelated gallery shows were a rather exceptional event). What is more, he has remained silent: he could never write a manifesto (indeed, his work proceeds according to a strategy of concealment); nor does he belong to any movement. Unclassifiable, not concerned with fashion, outside the mainstream, he remains a loner. This is not only his strength, but also the reason for his relative lack of recognition.

At first, Barré appears to be working in the Constructivist tradition. Despite the painterliness of their delicately brushed white grounds and Barré's subtle palette, his canvases are composed of straight lines and geometric colorplanes deployed orthogonally according to a grid. Figures seem to detach themselves from a ground of spatial coordinates (a technique which functions, in the Constructivist tradition, as a metaphor for the future reconstruction of the world). But this interpretation cannot be sustained for long: Barré works in series, and each painting works to deconstruct the figure through the relationships which link the painting to other works in the same series. Exit the supposed Constructivist, and with him, the work of art conceived as an image of an ideal world.

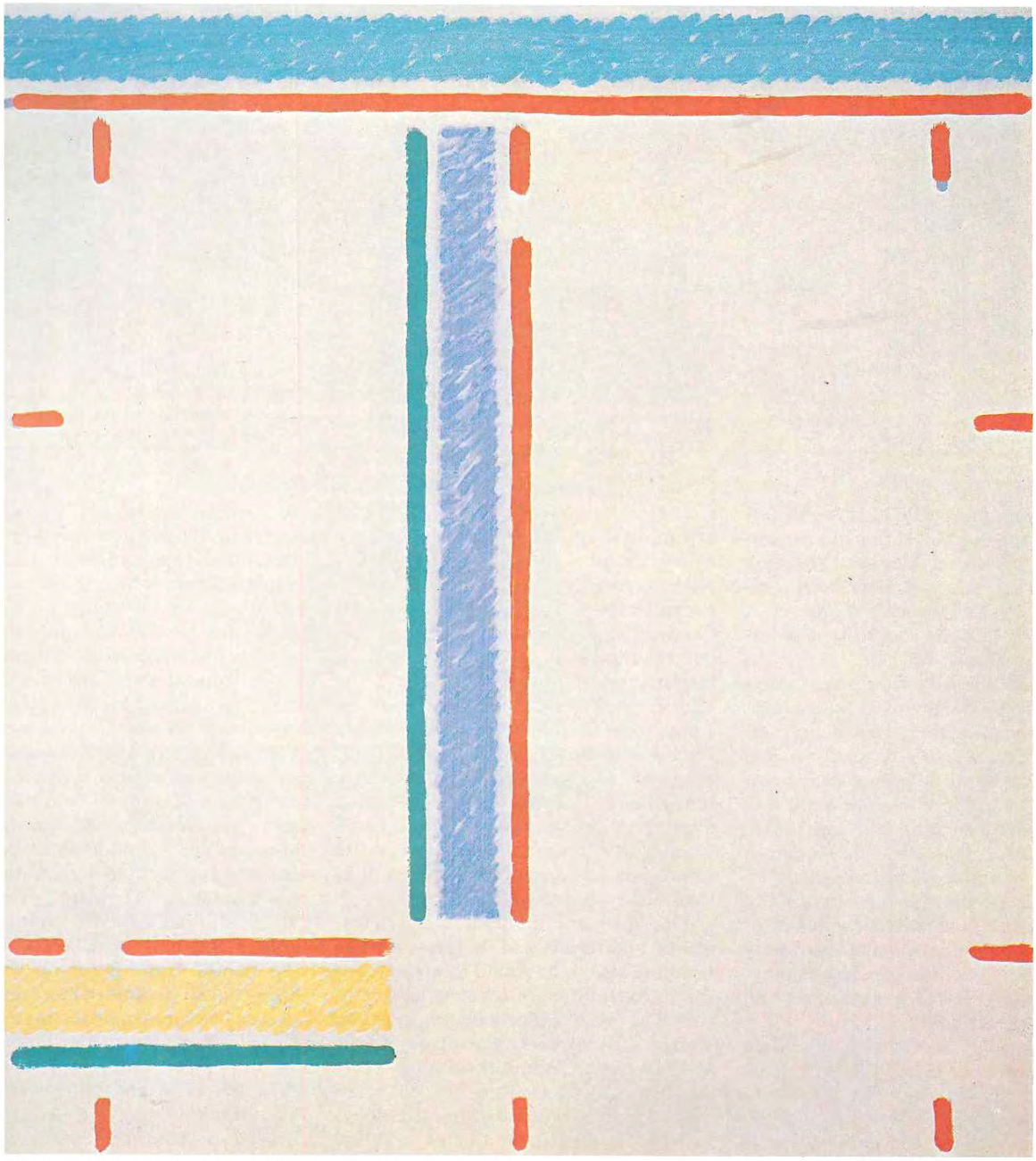
So you set out to investigate the relationships between painting and series—and everything immediately becomes extremely complicated. First, you take inventory of what is on exhibit: five series—or maybe four (one series of eight canvases bifurcated in the course of its production). Or maybe only three (the ten small paintings which constitute another series have been fused into a single work, a polyptych of inseparable fragments, which cannot therefore properly be viewed as a series). The two galleries divided the works between them in chronological order; each "series" was exhibited in its own room—five rooms altogether.

Barré's series are governed by two interrelated systems: a *proportional* system, which determines the paintings' formats (which are often highly unconventional) and compositions; and an *arithmetic* system, which specifies

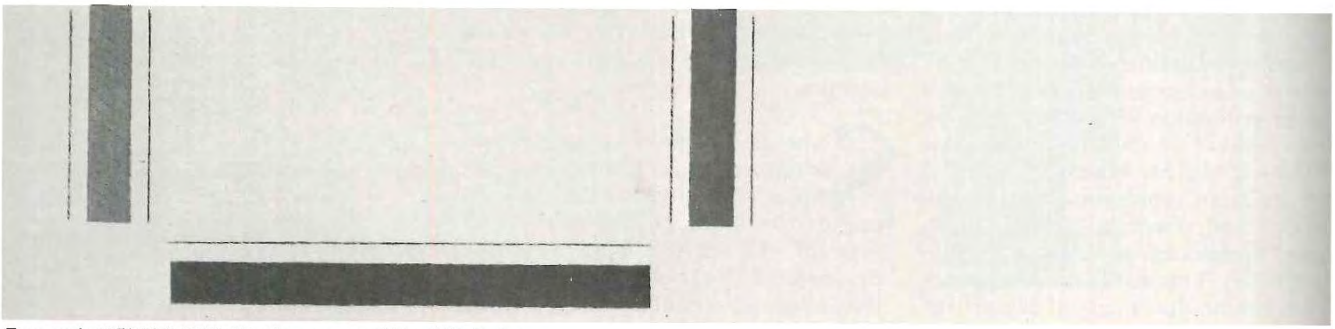


The companion piece to the work at the left. All black-and-white photos André Morain.

Bois, Yve-Alain. "Martin Barré: Strategies of Concealment." *Art in America* 70, April 1982, pp. 126–28.

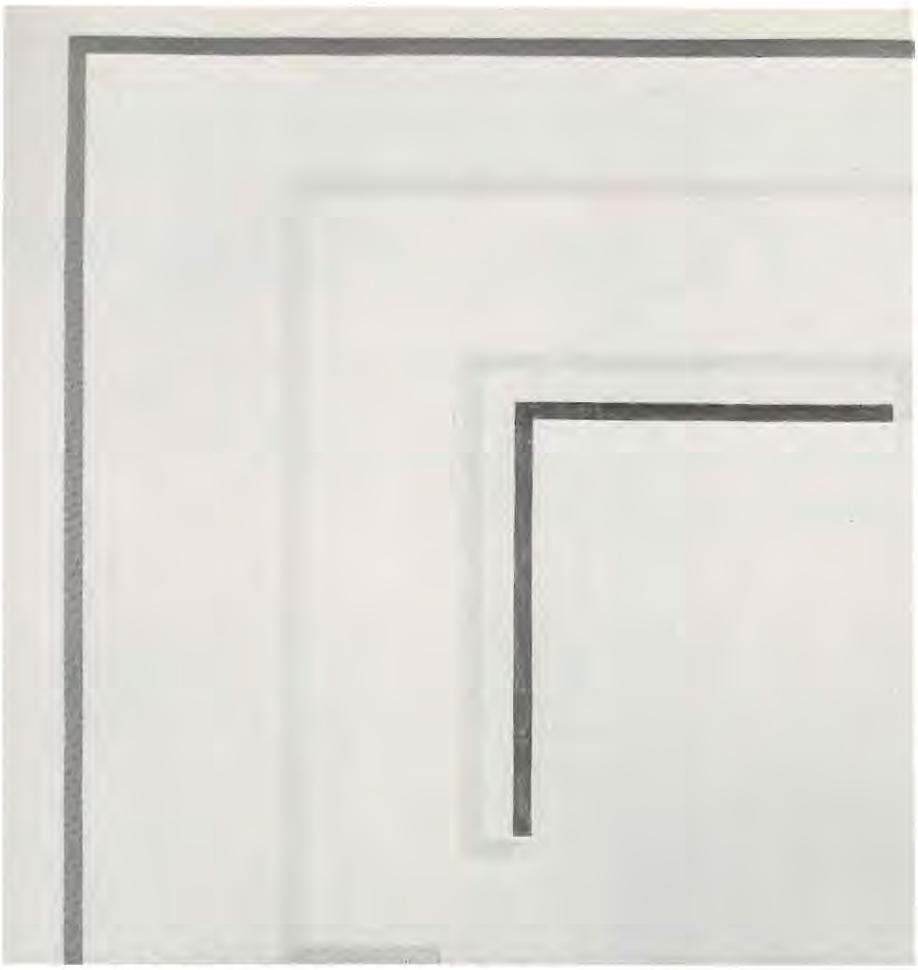


Martin Barré: 80A.110×100—B, *1980, oil on canvas, 43 5/16 by 39 3/8 inches.*

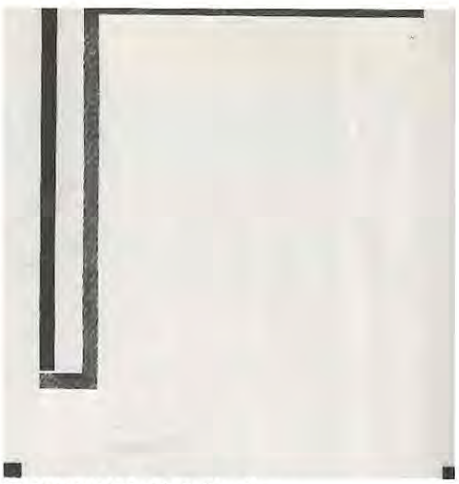


From series "79.80," 1979–80, oil on canvas, 15 by 63 3/4 inches.

Bois, Yve-Alain. "Martin Barré: Strategies of Concealment." *Art in America* 70, April 1982, pp. 126–28.



80.81.180×168, *1980–81, oil on canvas, 70 7/8 by 66 1/8 inches.*



80.81.108×102, *1980–81, oil on canvas, 42 1/2 by 40 3/16 inches.*

the number of paintings in each series as well as the number of color-planes on each surface. Thus, you are tempted to treat each series as a rebus to be deciphered. Here, you are both right and wrong: wrong, because you will never succeed (Barré's canvases hide so much that no amount of induction will enable you to master them conceptually); right, because it is your deception that is essential here, for it allows you to avoid yet another misinterpretation of Barré's work.

Despite appearances, these paintings are not related to the serial or "systemic" art of the late '60s. Unlike, for example, Sol LeWitt, Barré does not establish a finite system and then elaborate for the viewer the permutations of that system. In Barré's work, it is not the system that matters, but the fact that a system once existed and that in the final work it is indecipherable. Having served the artist as a device which eliminates the problem of compositiional choice (which Barré has always tried to avoid), the system then is effaced; its very indecipherability first disabuses you of the Constructivist illusion and then, by its obscurity, of the serial illusion as well.

You finally conclude that your own lack of conceptual mastery is the subject of Barré's art, and that this subject exists primarily in your own memory. Innumerable echoes bounce from canvas to canvas, from series to series, weaving a hallucinatory web in which your memory is trapped and, with it, your illusion of mastery. You constantly scan each surface for some—unconscious—reminiscence of another: each painting is a memory-screen which conceals yet another memory-screen.

Two series demonstrate that you will never know the the end of the story, even when you think you've discovered it. In the first—the polyptych—you immediately perceive symmetries and asymmetries and the regularities of the canvases' compositions, since this work is composed of five pairs of canvases, each pair being of identical proportions. You then proceed mentally to juggle the disposition of colors. But sooner or later your discover that all of these paintings depict the same square, only cropped differently each time. This moment of discovery is a celebratory one: you believe that you've found the figure in the carpet and shout "Eureka!" But this moment soon passes, for when you discover the figure, you lose the carpet itself and must start all over again: your awareness of the virtual square contradicts your initial perceptions of symmetries, asymmetries, etc., since the relations among the canvases themselves have no bearing on the manner in which the partially absent square is cut into.

In another series (the last to be executed), you immediately discover that all six canvases present the same square spiral, but this sense of immediacy, too, is soon frustrated. For here, color is deployed in a much more complex manner than in the earlier series, where there are only so many colors per series, so many color-planes per surface. Color now works to multiply the single figure which you recognized so easily into a plurality of different figures. In this series it is color that subverts the system: the painter tempts you with the pleasure of immediate discovery only to demonstrate how futile that illusion really is. Finally, Barré leaves you with the impression that there is nothing to be found here, which doesn't mean that there is nothing to look for. Despite the sense of extraordinary logic that pervades his works, no painter is more paradoxical than Martin Barré. □

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Bois, Yve-Alain. "Martin Barré: Strategies of Concealment." *Art in America* 70, April 1982, pp. 126–28.

ARTFORUM

Paris

MARTIN BARRE, Galerie Jean Chauvelin and Galerie Gillespie, Laage, Salomon:

Two joint exhibits presented the recent work of Martin Barré. In fact, these two exhibitions formed a whole; Barré considers each stage of his work to be a coherent, autonomous, foreclosed unity, even if this unity comprises only a moment in the general history of his art.

Barré's canvases are linked organically within each series. One could say that they form a "system," if using that word did not run the risk of implying a mechanical or serial conception of his work; but it is true that for Barré all the paintings of a group constitute a single opus. In this regard Jean Clay speaks of the "myth of the primary wall," and he adds: "The painting, according to this myth, is a fragment of a whole which persists *in absentia* . . . which carries with it the properties of a symbolic 'murality.' " The interdependence of the canvases is related to another given which Barré sums up in the formula, "One painting produces another." This general principle explains why Barré's works are defined by a precise spatial formation. His canvases are of varying dimension, but they address the same problems through a number of formal or chromatic variations.

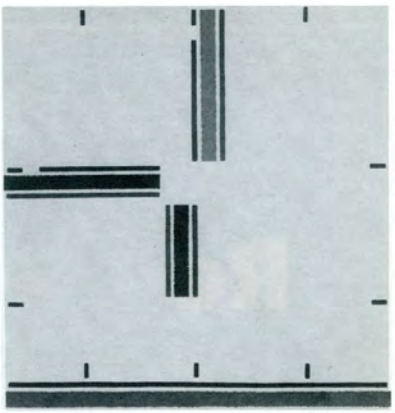
The pieces shown at Galerie Jean Chauvelin testify to Barré's concerns during the years 1979 and 1980. They demonstrate clear correlations between fragmentary vertical and horizontal bands; balancing the extreme rigor of these formations are, on the one hand, the sensitivity of their application, and on the other, the palette of colors. Here, a quasi-mathematical conception (having Piet Mondrian as its model) involves the introduction of a contradiction in its pictorial execution: Barré has said, "Does there not exist, here and there, an entire marvelous game of possibilities between a very controlled gesture and a geometry that tries to make us forget its own rigor? . . . Without contradictions, without paradoxes, would there be an evolution of painting, and without evolution would there be a painting?"

In the canvases at Galerie Gillespie, Laage, Salomon, Barré pushes paradox and contradiction even further. He purifies his formal content by eliminating the crayon tracings, the points of reference, and the gray strips that underline the colored bands, but he complicates his syntax. The chromatic scale is broader and the bands adopt extremely diverse configurations. The resultant effect is itself paradoxical: economy of means, stylistic sobriety, and renunciation of any metaphoric or symbolic allusion (the works are not even titled) are accompanied by an enlargement of pictorial intrigue. The apparent coldness of these geometric compositions is contradicted by the tension they establish and by the emotional charge they contain and condense, not without a certain violence.

If there is something excessively secret, excessively discreet and self-effacing, in Barré's approach, his recent canvases demonstrate that these qualities aid the painter in penetrating even further into the mental territory where language fails and where rules invented during the "perpetual retreat of all images in the world" (in Jean Louis Schefer's phrase) triumph. These rules are made in order to recover the contour, tint, value, meaning, and intensity of these afigural figures.

—GERARD GEORGES LEMAIRE

Translated from the French by Jamey Gambrell



Martin Barré, *Untitled*, 1981, oil on canvas, 150 × 140".

Lemaire, Gérard Georges. "Martin Barré." *Artforum* 20, no. 6, February 1982, p. 93. Translated by Jamey Gambrell.