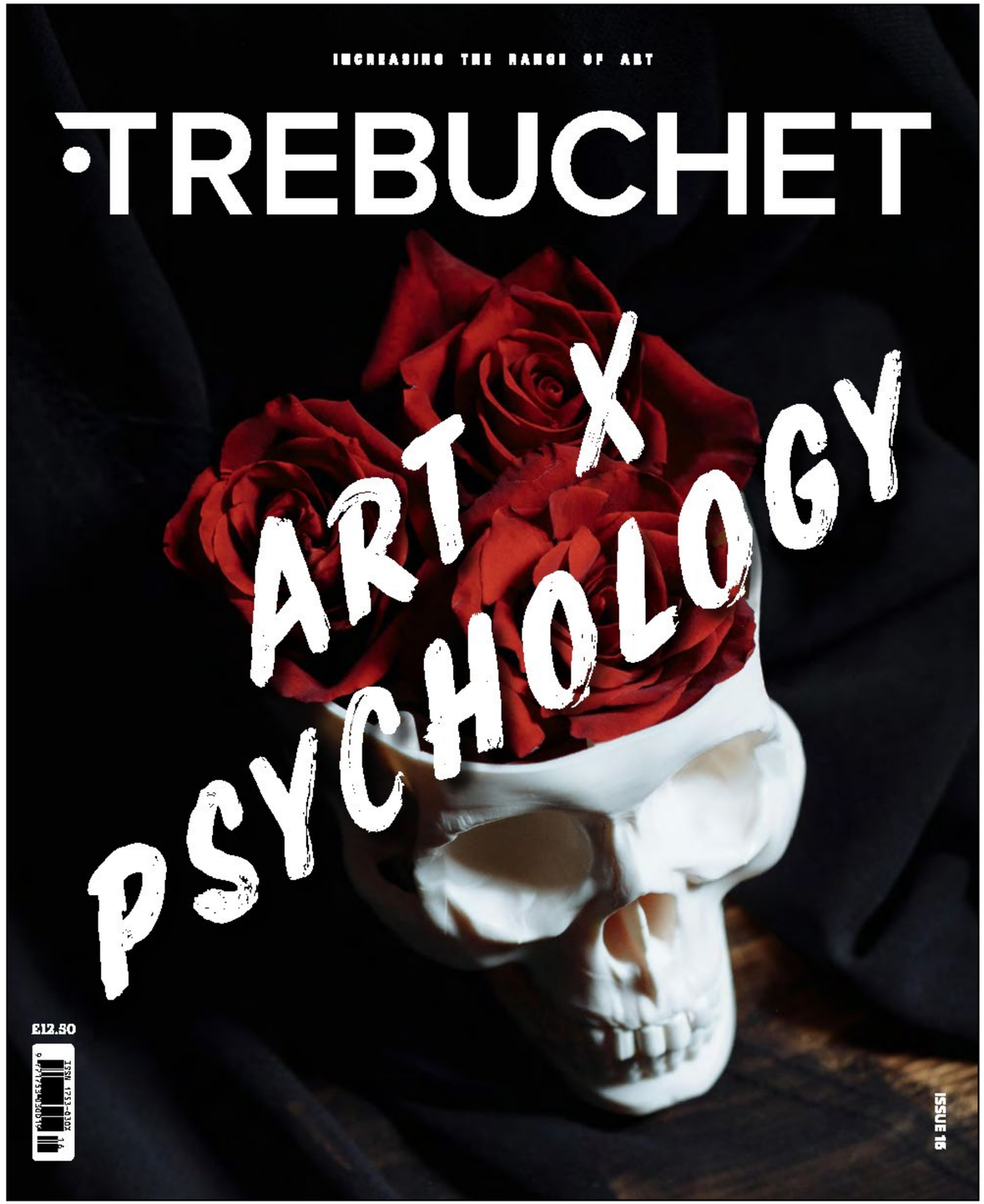

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COLOURS IN MOTION, THE MIND IN ACTION

PLAN AND PARADOX IN THE WORK OF BERNARD FRIZE

WORDS: LOUIS GARTAGENA

The paintings of Bernard Frize (b. 1949) are a luminous place where viewers see what appear to be certain rules and processes made manifest. With his work emerging during the 1980s when conceptual art was in its ascendency, the obvious temptation is to include it as a painted example of conceptual art. For instance, he often paints within action-based limitations (for example, all lines are made in a regular fashion, with grids, parallels and right angles) where the process of painting stands in for representation or narrative.

However, recalling Verwoert's essay (Verwoert 2005), the role of the immanent in contemporary art is rarely appreciated in critique as, not being amenable to reductive commentary, it either smacks of gushing approval or knee-jerk ambivalence. Often the best we can hope for is a descriptive explanation of elements, as if listing the ingredients of experience (perhaps even using the idea of 'concept' as an oven-ready methodology). It's a designation that Frize has long refuted, as he did during a recent interview with *Trebuchet*, in which he reminds us that this is an "old discussion", referring to Jan Verwoert's 2005 essay 'Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea.' Of particular relevance here is this passage from Verwoert's argument:

"The medium-specific approach to painting is still possible in artistic practice and in critique. All it has lost is its status as self-evident. Since painting is realised today within the horizon of conceptual practice, it must be grounded in a context that is no longer its own. That means, on the one hand, that an appeal to the specifics of the medium as its sole justification is no longer possible. Painting can no longer just be painting. Today it is also necessarily a form of conceptual art, and as such it must be judged in relation to conceptual practices in other media, and in turn it must hold its own in this comparison." (Verwoert 2005, selection by *Trebuchet*)

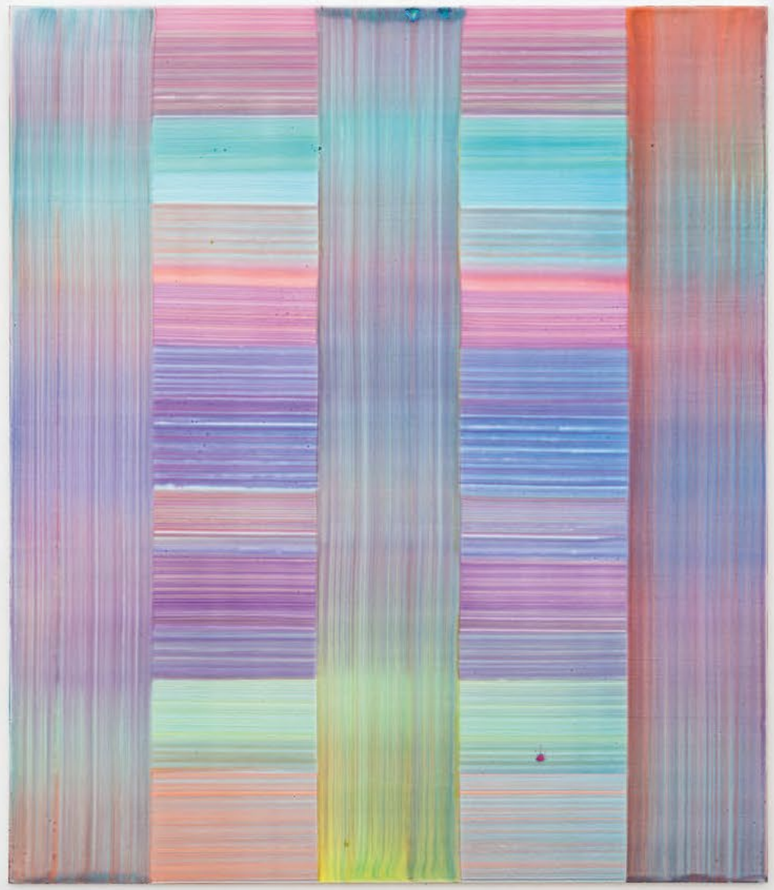
In the same interview, Frize takes this further:

"But that is not enough as an answer! Any surrealist painter today is called conceptual. The very term 'conceptual' has lost a lot of its value and is ready for revision: concept is akin to all sorts of ingenious inventions that transform art into a system of references, enigmatic signs and learned representations.

Painting is a non-verbal language which dialogues historically with the medium of painting. Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1557) dialogues with the medium of painting as much as with the history of representing figures. But he invents a new relation to painting. It is not to be named conceptual.

I TRY, I FAIL AND START AGAIN UNTIL I AM SATISFIED

Brush photo: Lorena Martinez (CC0). All images courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery © Bernard Frize. Photos: Claire Dorn.



Title Graphic: Trebuchet/Lorena Martinez
Right: *Kosi*, 2024
Next: *Irfon* (detail), 2024



There are no equivalences between painting and language; otherwise what a painting represents could be verbalised. I'm not interested in representations where nothing happens. I like to see paradoxes, issues, things that are embodied in paint, and they are difficult to describe."

How do you see the current movement towards figurative painting?

Hard to look at. Hard to see if anything is renewed. I want to enter a world where I can spend time, have pleasure to look, and to think. For me, the rest is just aesthetic variations and mortal satisfaction.

Do you consider yourself an artist who works from a plan, or one who uses randomness?

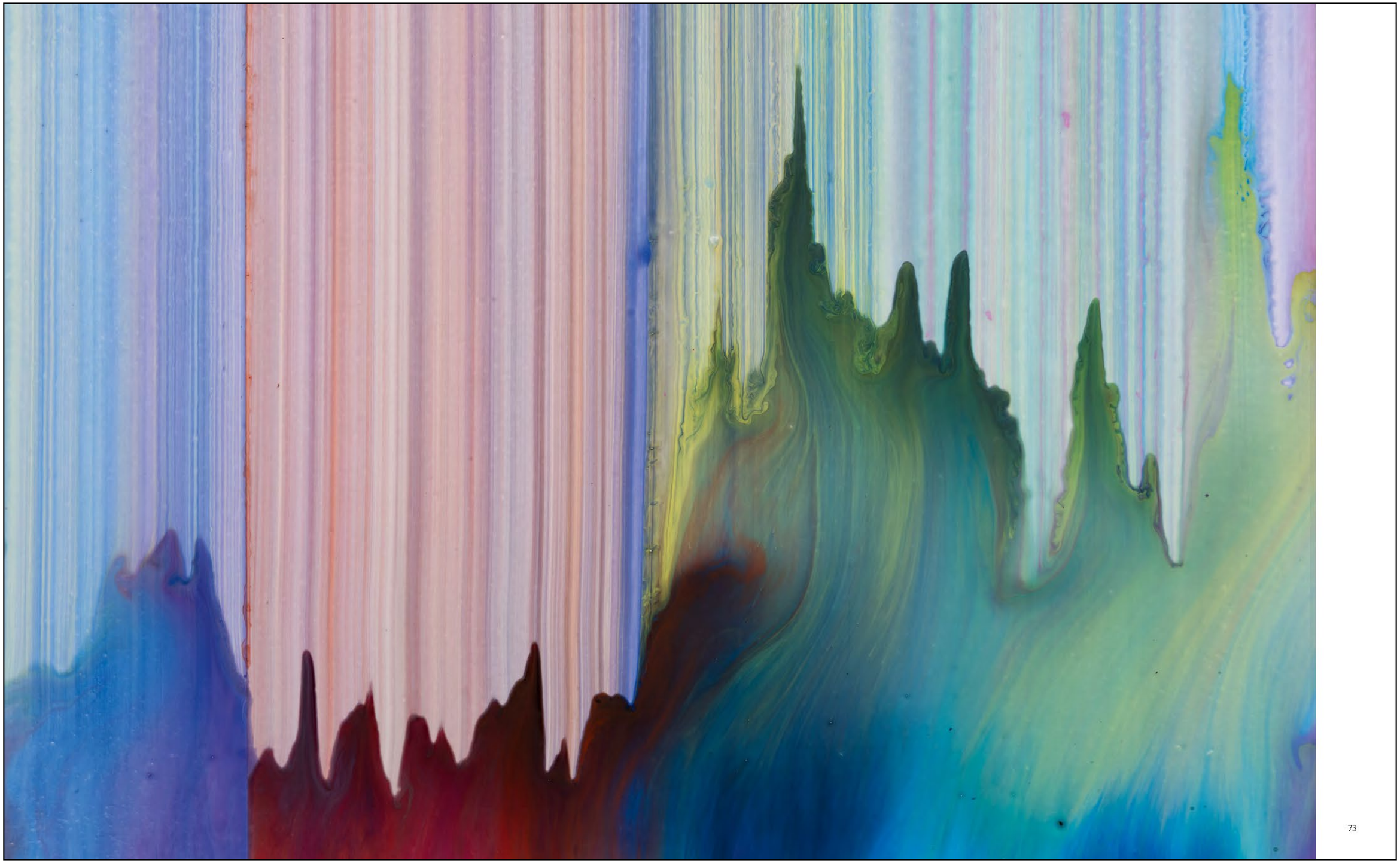
Both, not necessarily at the same time. I am not dogmatic. I am searching. When I make a painting, I have to make choices all the time; it is not that different in everyday life, is it? How do I use my experience? An experience that I can call mine compared to the mass of information the day gives us? The world appears as an obstinate, invading whole, and I always have to measure and figure out the thread of scepticism.

How do you approach art making?

I like to make visible what happens during the painting story. I like a clear execution which makes the story visible. Painting is for me a field of operation. Nothing heroic, but a reflection about efficiency and distribution of decisions. I understand painting as a way to explore ideas and to give them a body to live, to be seen and to be shared. I think we have to stop ourselves from having a genre, and to always test the limits of the rules we've promulgated.

Are you more concerned with your mind as the creator or the effect the finished work has on the audience?

Every painting, even an abstract painting, transcends itself; it is as much transparent as opaque. The viewer has to adapt constantly, his focus moves according to the definitions and priorities he gives to the painting. To think is to represent; it is a production of signs. The movement of signs makes them appear or disappear. It is about how they work, both ways. Paint is the slow medium into which signs can be 'dipped'. As it dries, ideas get set.



My purpose is to create a unified ground of differences, a striking paradox where all the elements are exposed.

Can you talk about what goes through your mind when you're painting? I'm curious because you talk about 'not making any decisions'.

Painting is for me a field of operation. Nothing heroic, but a reflection of efficiency and a distribution of decisions. I have experimented at different stages, sometimes withdrawing myself and following rules I set up beforehand, sometimes not at all. I am not dogmatic and I don't care about style. What interests me is the adventure of painting and what I can do with it.

Unlike other artists, your canvases seem to have a definite completion point set out at the beginning. Is that how you see it? Is this important to you?

I have a plan which is more a desire, let's say, nothing else. Otherwise, I would not be able to start. I try, I fail and start again until I am satisfied. I throw away many canvases until I reach the possibility I am looking for, or where painting drives me. In general, what I am looking for is to preserve the tensions and the evidence of the paradoxes that can be seen.

You've spoken about collapse and corruption in connection with your work. In one instance the context was about colours, but I get the sense you mean something wider. Can you explain more?

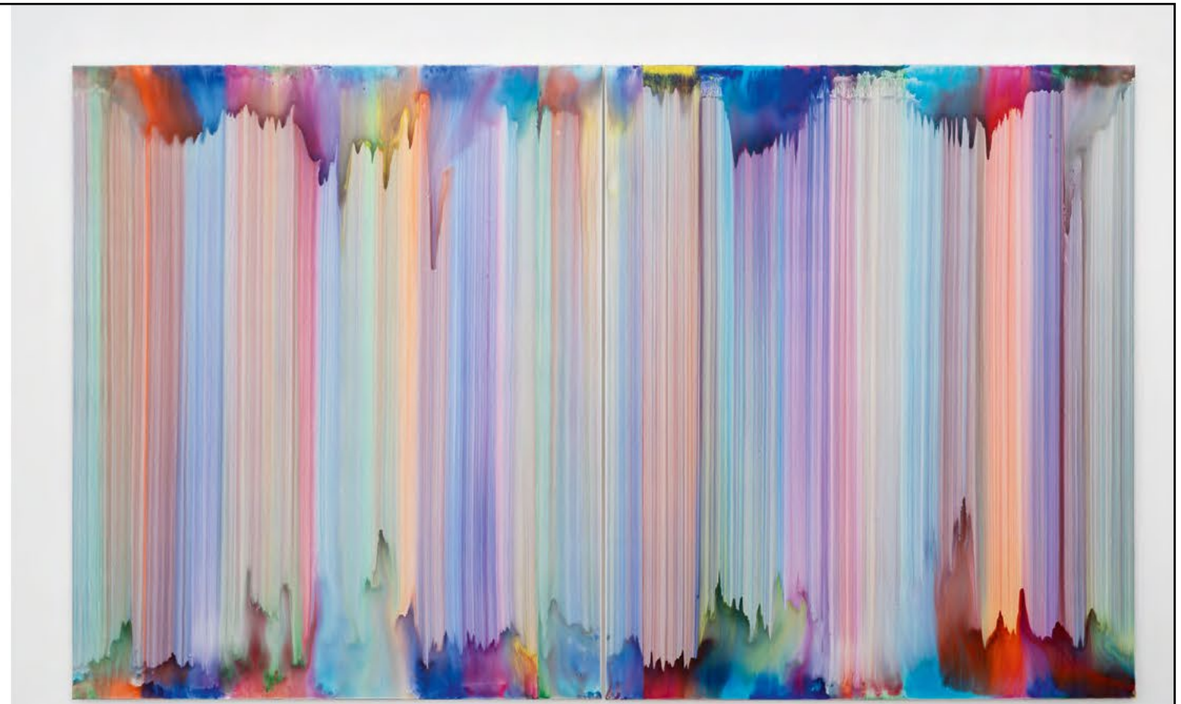
It was a moment where I was making paintings which destroyed themselves, as they were painted in a very liquid complexion, and I enjoyed the resolution they had: half emerging, half destroyed, fragile and non-assertive.

A work of art gives a form to chaos. Or to paraphrase Giambattista Vico, the forest is less or more dense for all of us, and each one is looking for a path through it...."

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Previous: *Geller* (detail), 2024
Right: *Geller*, 2024

Bernard Frize is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery.
Bernard Frize, 'Shadows, Spirits and Clouds', 16 Nov 2024–18 Jan 2025, MGG, Los Angeles, USA.