

DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION IN THE WORK OF NIELE TORONI  
OR PAINTING AS CRIME

René Denizot



'L'outil du peintre.' Image: Giovanni Varini, 1986.

Since 1966, Toroni defines his work as follows: 'Imprints of a number 50 pain-brush repeats at regular intervals of 30cm.'

According to this definition, to paint is to apply a flat paintbrush, 50mm wide, impregnated with paint, on a given support—linen, cotton, paper, oil-cloth, wall, floor, etc., generally white grounds—in such a way that it leaves an imprint.

An imprint is left by the pressure of the brush on the support where it has been applied. There is an imprint where the support is impressed with paint. An imprint is never alone. It does not exist by itself. It has no existence prior to it's production. It is a physical effect of the painter's tools of trade. It is not the artistic touch of an impressionist or an expressionist gesture. It is not the acknowledgment of an aesthetic genre. It is not the reproduction of a paradigm. It is an actual experiment in the act of painting. Here and now, each imprint is like a crime incriminating and discriminating its perpetration. The word crime comes from the Latin crimen, meaning to separate, divide, distinguish, accuse. As crime, the imprint is a critical sign and a crucial scene. It is the clue from which painting is suspended, the repeated sign of its exhibition and the obvious

## M A R I A N   G O O D M A N   G A L L E R Y

scene of its repetition. It is the suspense of an act which is manifested only as surface effect. Only surfacing affects painting. Where an imprint is left, painting is also left to the sole decision of a surface effect. An imprint is a piece of evidence in which painting is exposed to appear or to disappear. Such is the crime, such is the imprint. If painting is at play, it always has to be played all over again- on the scene and within the signs of a decisive repetition. Repetition is differentiation. Each imprint, left on a given support, both covers and uncovers the very ground of painting. Painting grounds where an imprint is left and its ground grows, unpainted, from the point where the location of painting is imprinted with paint. There is no foreground. There is no background. There is the opening of painting on the ground of an inner differentiation and an outer repetition of the painted and the unpainted. Each imprint is each time the present repetition of this difference and the present difference of a repetition which is the opening of painting to the present. Painting surfaces as its ground spaces out through the repetition of imprints. This repetition, at regular intervals, punctuated and actuated a field of appearance and disappearance for painting. It is an open field. A field of action, not a field of contemplation. Painting is being tried, exposed to be or not to be, with equal liberty and necessity. Its field is never filled. It's a present field of painting, not a field of representation. It's a field of experiment, not a field of acknowledgment. If it bears the marks of a history of painting, these marks limit and sign a definition of painting which is here and now exposed to the repletion by which a painting proceeds. The process is methodical, not mechanical. None of the elements involved in the process of painting can prefigure what an imprint will be. An imprint is or is not. It is and it is not. It is only a sign. It is significant only in as much as it signs and repeats the actual difference of a painting, which is yet to be seen and exhibited in the material evidence of that which is painted and that which is not. There are imprints. No one is predictable. No one is a predicate of painting. Painting is not the subject of imprints. Imprints are not the motive of painting. Where imprints are left, painting is to be. When imprints are within sight, painting remains to be seen. From given imprints to paintings exhibition, a visual difference is at play. Its process on the ground of painting tends to work out a field of exhibition which is that of visual experience. If painting is at work in this process, it is repeatedly troubled, worked up by what matters to the visual world – the difference of the visible and the invisible.

Where an imprint is left, a colored patch of paint stands on a white ground. Here and now, repeatedly stands out a standpoint. It stands for nothing. But it stands up again and points out the ground of its own repetition as a visible sign. On this ground, becoming visible and/or invisible is the visual experience that imprints the painterly sign. There stands the outstanding differentiation of painting as a visual field of appearance and disappearance. There located in time and opened in space, is the condition of an outrageous exhibition of painting, because it is not the repetition of a preconceived visual aesthetics, but the renewed experiment of the visible and the invisible through which plays and is to be played again the visual destiny of the Western world.

Since Plato's philosophy of being as a quest of essence interpreted as idea or eidos – that is, as the visual form of the evidence, thru clarity of perception and understanding, in which being becomes true, which means visible or invisible by itself, in the light of its own exhibition – since Plato, the sense of vision has been privileged. Following the metaphors of vision, the history of the Western world develops in an essentially visual field of representation. To experiment with this field- with its limits or cultural artifacts, its opening or historical choices of symbolic artifices, it's critical reality or repeated fiction—is what Toroni's work brings us methodically to do, on the measured ground of painting as a specific visual experience of the world.

N E W   Y O R K   P A R I S   L O N D O N

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The interest of Toroni's work does not belong to Art. Not exclusively. If it is, in reference to history and culture, a work of Art as well, it brings Art to a critical point where painting—here and now—is no longer justified as mimesis. It is not relevant to the ritual commemoration of retrospective aesthetics. It does not frame and is not framed within an exclusive field of representation. Toroni's painting is worked upon by its inscription in the world. First of all, it is a work of inscription in the visual world. Such is the material evidence of imprints. Their inscription exposes painting to assume the visible, to exhibit the time and space of visual destination of the world, to manifest the present outburst of vision in a world which is subjected today to the uniform format and the instant replay of technical images. The sense of life and death is lost. Things can no longer appear nor disappear. Their event is even lost for representation. Images represent themselves alone. They fade out as fictions, as pieces of visual art. There is nothing to be seen. There is a blind diversion entertained by the fascination of the ritual and fetishist power of the media. It is a permanent and indifferent power to recycle representations. It only saves the illusion of the world by maintaining the empty frame and the even screen of a total but tautological vision. Representation has become identically transparent and blind to the visual world.

Toroni's painting breaks into this crisis of representation. Like a crime, it incriminates our transparent and blind, aesthetic but unethical vision of the world. Let's examine, by contrast, the situation of painting in reference to Art as a blind experience of the visual world.

When it is identified and represented under the sole determination of Art—as a concept, as a genre, as style—painting needs no trace of its material existence, gives no evidence of its effective production, shows no sign of its life and death. It does not appear or disappear. It has no proper time and place. It remains, in figurative and abstract ways, a pictorial illustration of Art survives all works and surveys what their aesthetic should be. Art leaves no work to be done and to be seen. Any “work of art” as such is a ready-made.

On this particular point, Duchamp's critique of aesthetics is relevant. All is art, nothing is art. There is no work to actually be seen, if all art objects are the aesthetic response to an image already registered on the retina. Like in Plato's Cave, the so-called “work of art” is nothing but a said-work: a statement made on the world “Art”, in the name of Art. There is nothing of the striking utterance of a work incriminating a visual exposure to the world in a single time and place. Art as a dead end is what conceptual art exemplifies at its best by stating “no object”, hence, presenting art as idea. In its awareness of the fictitious nature of the art object, conceptual art becomes art criticism and gets involved in the socio-historical analysis of contemporary ideology. It encompasses the field of art history and points out the lack of objects on which modern art history was built. Art as a tale of a lie is the subject of its own logic. Recycling a tautology for art's sake is all that is left to art history. As a concept, art is a void. As a being, it is vacant. Their reference to a “work of art” is the syntactic effect of a grammatical illusion. On his ground art history should acknowledge its fiction. Consequently, conceptual art relies on rhetoric and is devoted to play on words.

This is the culmination of the situation that struck Cezanne's eyes, at the turn of the century, and engages modernist painting in self-criticism. To Cezanne's eyes, painting is confronted to the loss of things, compulsively reduced to invisibility by the advanced process of technology. To quote Rilke's ‘Letters on Cezanne’, written after he has seen the memorial exhibition of 56 paintings at

## M A R I A N   G O O D M A N   G A L L E R Y

the ‘Salon d’Automne’ in Paris – in 1907, the year that followed the painter’s death—Cezanne’s painting “is strangely supported and urged on by the increasingly rapid disappearance of so much that is visible and that will never be replaced.” The paintings of Cezanne appear to be a personal response to the loss of things that become invisible. It is a visual response to the world that calls on paintings to become the visual touch of the invisible. It is a visual response to the world that calls on painting to become the visible touch of the invisible. To paint again and again the faceless enigma from which rises the mountain of ‘Sainte Victoire’ means that there is no issue for painting other than becoming here and now present and openly visible, standing in its own evidence as the mountain foes. Then each painting is to be painted as the very first one. It has to stand its own ground as if it were the last one before the earthquake. The work of painting strikes its limits. To be modern is to strive with time for a present that is never given as such. To be present is to stand at the edge of appearance and disappearance. It leads painting either to enclose itself in a thoughtful look and a mirrored image turned towards the end of art, or to burst out as a fragment of the visible breaking into the world. Giving rise to the visible, at the time when the invisible seizes the visual world, is painting’s vital and lethal decision.

Cezanne’s paintings are worked up by a break. The experience of this break is decisive for painting’s own language. Alongside the fellow structure in which art history perpetuated Art, painting is assigned to the limits of a work of unlimited differentiation and repetition.

In the endlessly ending end of Art, to be or not to be a: work of art” is no longer the question. Tornioli’s painting decisively assume the indetermination of such an idling situation. If a work is to be done, nothing predetermines its time and place, its matter and shape, its picture and frame. There is not being whatsoever, no essence that would dictate what a painting should be. Painting does not have to be, unless it is the painterly praxis of a. productive question, bringing up painting to be seen as a radical sign of appearance and disappearance in the world.

Painting is not, except as a mere artifact. Namely, an imprint. Left by the confidence of given artifices—brush, paint, support—the encounter with an imprint is highly incidental. Yet, there are imprints. They are left to be seen or to be missed. There is evidence of which imprints are the pieces. Given these pieces what evidence is worth notice? The answer to that question is imprinted with paint. But it’s a colorful answer that becomes visible when the occurrence of imprints signs the recurrent outburst of painting. The exposure to painting is what repeatedly works up the imprints. Imprints are not just left. No imprint is left behind. Painting is the visual evidence to which each imprint is left- as a sign of the visible and the invisible, as a sign that beast and unlimited inner differentiation between paint and painting.

What is painting? Painting is to be painted. We know what paint is. But a wall covered in paint is a painted wall, it is not a painting. A canvas also can just be a painted object. When and where does painting take place, if it is not a painted object? How does painting rise and recover a place of exposure from that which is covered in paint?

This is the question that imprints sharply imprint, inscribe, incisively expose in the repeated difference of that which is painted and that which is not.

Repetition, here, is not accumulation. Imprints do not add. They do not merge. They space out. Repetition is implied in the repetition for space that each imprint signs and claims, impresses and

N E W   Y O R K   P A R I S   L O N D O N

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM



## M A R I A N   G O O D M A N   G A L L E R Y

expresses, imposes and exposes, occupies and frees, limits and opens, punctuated and actuates. To repeat is to revoke the time and the pace, the rhythm of painting. Color paces painting. It's a step from the ground of a painted inscription to the surface of a painting exhibition. Color stands on a white ground. It is never alone. It is the interface between paint and painting. It is the difference that repeatedly works out painting as a visible process of visual experience, working against the resolution of a paint covered object into a blind and transparent monochrome. In itself, color is arbitrary. On a white ground, here and now materialized by the difference of the painted and the unpainted, color is the light and shade under which painting is at play, appearing and disappearing both on a ground of literal inscription and a surface of visual exhibition.

At regular intervals, painting is referred to given imprints on a given support. It is given a place of visible evidence and literal definition throughout a given space of textual and readable structure spotted with paint these givens the limits to which painting is assigned, the material conditions of its inscription in the world. They are codified by trade, dignified by fame, exemplified by history. If these givens pertain to art history, they also actuate and indicate a method of work. The reference to art history is indexed on a set of artifacts that here and now repeat the scene and rehearse the act of a visible and readable definition of painting. the definition of paintings is given to be seen its physical inscription and given to be read with a definite process of methodical experiment. Seeing and reading obviously belong to each other along with writing and painting, in the same field of experience, at the edge of a ground that inscription and exhibition equally broach, as the double edge of their mutual difference.

Toroni's work is given to be read as it is given to be seen. This doubleness is painting. Such is the material evidence and the historical source of the present work. But it is given only as a method of work. The method gives no access to a permanent object for an identical subject.

This does not mean "a lack of referent". Despite Buchloh's statement on the matter, Toroni's work does not refer to the image of modernist painting, not even as a lack. Toroni's work lacks nothing. It breaks with the frame of modernist painting. It needs no frame, no hollow structure to be nested in, as if painting were only possible as an endless repetition, through various figures and colors, of the same immutable "compositional grid". In fact, Toroni's work does not look like a painting. No painting is given. There is no reference to the image - to be modernist or not - of a definite painting. There is not a painting. There are imprints. They are not what is left of a painting. There are not the historical relics and the ritual signs on which a painting would be indexed, following the vacant image or the hollow structure of an outmoded ceremony. What is left vacant is the reference to Art as aesthetics. It is not a lack. It is the present assumption and the historical decision of a work that no longer needs a reference to Art for its sole justification.

The work does not need to be justified. It needs no reference to any outside object, nor to any frame or inside system of representation. The work needs to be seen and to be read. It needs to be worked out. Painting works and becomes and outstanding visual experience when seeing and reading respectively work out the sensible and intelligible act of a vision responding and corresponding to the incriminating play of the visible and the invisible that imprints painterly show and sign, methodically written and read as the field and the scale of a possible view.

Painting is an open field of experience. It is the opening of a view. It opens to the experience of the visual world. It does not refer to it. It is not the mirror and the frame of a backward look at the

## M A R I A N   G O O D M A N   G A L L E R Y

world. There is painting. It is not a speculation on the essence and the existence of a piece of visual art. If painting works, there it is, in the world, at play. A choice is given, presently given and visibly present through the play of imprints. It is engaged in painting. Painting is an engagement, a productive or a poetic one, in the sense of the Greek “poiesis”. It is engaged in sorting the visual out of a visible or invisible things.

Painting exposes and is exposed to the visual structure of the world. Painting itself is exposed to appear and to disappear. it shows that being visible or invisible is neither natural nor essential to being. It is choice. It is significant only if it shows the signs and reveals the methods through which an experience of the world is at play. It is a choice of artifices. It is the critical choice of a fiction that requires painting and writing, seeing and reading, as a specific practice of word play. It is decisive only when the fiction of the play incriminates the play of the world and, like a crime, becomes an irreducible but unpredictable behavior of the world.

To behave this way, in the world, is a vital and lethal decision. Toroni’s work of painting is relevant to this decision. It is a decision of the present, a decisive work of the present, a work of repetition and differentiation of the present, assigned to the present and signing the present without representation. It is not the representative of the present, it is present or it is not.

It breaks in as the present breaks out. It is a fragment of the world. Today, when the world breaks out the frames of its geographical and historical representation, Toroni’s work of painting gives time and place for an ethics of fragmentation.

(Text of a lecture given by René Denizot in Yamaguchi on December 8, 1992)

N E W   Y O R K   P A R I S   L O N D O N

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM