

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

CAROLE BENZAKEN

Pas à pas

Thursday 3 September – Saturday 10 October, 2020



Carole Benzaken in her workshop, Paris, June 2020 ©David Bordes.

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is very pleased to present *Pas à pas*, French artist Carole Benzaken's ninth exhibition, after *Là-bas... Toi*, in 2019, which took place at both parisian galleries.

Winner of the Marcel Duchamp prize in 2004, Carole Benzaken has developed, over the last thirty or so years, a pictorial practice that expands beyond its own limits, in different directions, encompassing drawing, architecture, works on glass or video. The image, as it is perceived, assimilated and represented, is at the heart of her approach, which is, above all else, that of a painter fascinated by the resourcefulness of her medium and by its incredible flexibility. The exhibition *Pas à pas* presents a group of recent works from her series *Au réveil, il était midi*, *Magnolias* and a new one, *Skin Screen*, each articulated around a common syntax, which grows richer by the year. Between figuration and abstraction, freedom and control, exploration of matter and imagination, painting deploys itself with deliberate porousness.

Following *Portées d'ombres*, the series *Skin Screen* refers to the body and to drawing through abstraction and painting. Carole Benzaken treats the surface of the painting as a skin: the consistency of the canvas, to which she bestows substance by using oil stick, suggests a tactile pleasure, while the combination of deep black and this granular texture recalls charcoal. For the artist, it is about two things: "a desire to give substance" and a wish to reassert, through painting, her love of drawing, a practice that she considers a place of "perfect incompleteness."

Heavily inspired by Georges Seurat's pointillism and luminous vibrations, Carole Benzaken couples this quasi graphic treatment of painting with an ink underpainting that resembles a body of water whose palette is limitless. From all these layers and painting methods emerge anthropomorphic or animalistic silhouettes—some of the small formats resemble details of these beings. This discreet resurgence of figuration brings to mind the idea of membrane, leather, tannery. But the skin also incarnates a protection, a screen. Playing on contrasts and polysemy, Carole Benzaken turns to a sort of mosaic that rationalizes the interlocking layers that melt into each other—a motif common to all her latest research and that refers to numerical interfaces.

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Moreover, several recent paintings continue a series begun in 2018, *Au réveil, il était midi*, where optical illusions and pictorial deconstruction go hand in hand. Enchanting visions of Florentine gardens, fields of olive trees, sun-soaked Italian villages: these works offer a veritable myriad of hues, each in its own chromatic “season.” This opalescence is clearly a nod to the Impressionists or to Cézanne, especially since the desire to fix an evanescent sensation, that of an awakening, mystified by the summer heat, is at the heart of this pictorial project.

The artist manages to translate this numbness by multiplying the strata of paint, so as to create a sort of mineral sedimentation. After a first layer in ink, she opacifies the watery surface by working in acrylic, then dabs white paint to mask a few of the painted zones, while letting a few areas “perspire” color. In the midst of a somewhat controlled space, Carole Benzaken creates the conditions for a fortuitous and playful meeting of elements: the ink that spreads at random into puddles or narrow rivulets; the mysterious chemistry of colors that repel or unify, becoming infinite nuances; the air trapped in the paint and materialized in the shape of fine bubbles; the white that never stays purely white except when there is an excess of it. Careful to avoid slipping into pure visual seduction, the artist again counterbalances this sheer abandon with a black frame that defines and divides these blurry, crumpled landscapes. The frame operates a real distancing: it also represents contemporary screens that filter and make unattainable the desired image—and, in a certain way, the representation that abuts against itself.



Carole Benzaken, *Magnolias 30, 2020*
Indian ink and pencils, laminated on glass, 118 × 100 cm (46 15/32 × 39 3/8 in.)

This play on chance and control, delight and frustration also exists in the *Magnolias series*, on which Carole Benzaken has been working since 2013, where the glass plays the role of frame, window and separation. Several sheets of tracing paper, drawn in China ink and colored pencils, are superimposed between two panes of glass. The whole is then submitted to the uncertainties of baking, which occasionally brings out unexpected hues. These floral trees with their multiple ramifications are thus literally trapped in the glass, frozen. A natural extension of tracing paper, whose opalescent effect it increases tenfold, glass contrasts with the warm colors and the sensuality of ink that naturally dilutes itself. Transparency welcomes light—the very subject and matter of these works—underlined by black branches that evoke calligraphy. This alchemy of glass and color connects the different series presented in this exhibition: as vectors of fusion, the *Magnolias* punctuate the space with all their radiance.

Each of Carole Benzaken’s works, characterized by its unique temperament, makes the pure pleasure of painting tangible: a phenomenon of the formless that takes form, the intimate life of color, the sudden emergence of light, accidents of drawing, the sensation of texture. But this visual complexity, wisely thought out, also comes from a will to capture the innumerable and ambiguous solicitations that determine our relationship with today’s images and, in a certain way, our presence in the world: “*The world, current events, politics, the great upheavals of perception, the accelerating flows of time make me react. Paint is a link; it is a binding agent. It links me to the world and to the other media, forcing me to always imagine the possibility of a new image...*”

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Born in 1964, in Grenoble, Carole Benzaken lives and works in Paris.

Having graduated in 1990 from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Carole Benzaken made a much-noticed debut on the artistic scene by exhibiting at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in 1994.

Winner of the Marcel Duchamp prize in 2004, she presented the exhibition *Search for the New Land* at the Centre Pompidou's Espace 315. Carole Benzaken's work was the object of numerous solo exhibitions, including the monographic exhibition at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in Paris in 2011, at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nancy in the spring of 2014, and at the BWA Contemporary Art Gallery in Katowice, Poland, in the fall of 2015. More recently, she was also given a solo show at the prestigious Carré Saint-Anne in Montpellier and at the Museum Slaskie in Katowice, Poland in 2016. The Musée de Louviers made her the subject of an important solo show in 2017. In 2019, her work was the object of two solo exhibitions: in the spring at the Abbaye de Cluny—at the invitation of the Centre des Monuments Nationaux—and in the summer at the Château de Tournon in Tournon-sur-Rhône.

She was recently included in important exhibitions held at prestigious institutions, including *Invitation au Voyage - 15 ans du Prix Marcel Duchamp* in 2015 at La Centrale (Belgium); *Miss Dior* in 2015 (Beijing, China); *Une spiritualité au féminin* in 2013 at the Musée d'Art Sacré (Dijon, Musée du Hiéron, Paray-le Monial, France); *Palmiers, palmes et palmettes* in 2013 at the Musée Masséna (Nice, France); *Elles@centrepompidou* in 2009 at the Centre Pompidou (Paris, France); *Cris et Chuchotements* in 2008 at the Centre de la Gravure et de l'Image imprimée (La Louvière, Belgium), *Contemporary Cool and Collected* in 2007 at the Mint Museum of Art (Charlotte, NC, USA); *Eye on Europe: Prints, books and multiples, 1960 to now* in 2007 at the MoMA (New York, NY, USA).

Carole Benzaken's work is held by prestigious public and private collections, such as the Royal Academy of Arts (London, United Kingdom), the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY, USA), the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val de Marne (MAC VAL-Vitry, France), the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (Alsace, France), the Musée national d'art moderne (Paris, France), the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (France), the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (Midi-Pyrénées, France), the Fondation Cartier (Paris, France), the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain d'Ile de France (France), the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (Auvergne, France), the collection of the LVMH Foundation (Paris, France).

Her work has also been the subject of several public commissions, such as the tapestry she realized for the Mobilier National in 1998, stained-glass windows produced for the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Varennes-Jarcy in 1997-2001, and a monumental, backlit, programmed glass poliptych made for the hallway of 32, rue Blanche in Paris in 2009-2012.

Carole Benzaken has received many prizes and distinctions. She won the Albert Rocheron prize in 1991 and was made a Knight of the French order of Arts and Letters in 1998, Officer of Arts and Letters in 2008, and Knight of the Legion of Honor in 2011.

Carole Benzaken has been represented by Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels, since 1993.

For any further information, please contact :
valerie@nathalieobadia.com / + 32 (0)2 648 14 05

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