

STEPHEN FELTON

« It's a whale »

Exhibition from March 1st to April 5th , 2014

Opening on Saturday, March 1st , 2 - 9 pm



From Moby Dick, that monument of American literature (published in 1851), Stephen Felton took the title "It's a Whale", and drew images from it: a whale, waves, currents, a sail and hull, a harpoon (arrows recur in his work), a seagull, a blade. Hung together, the paintings colour each other in order to recreate a story reduced to its simplest components: characters, a spatial framework, and whatever is needed to perform the simplest actions, that is to say tools. The series offers a summary of the 135 chapters + 1 epilogue: a character named Ishmael tells the story of Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of a large white whale, Moby Dick, which—apologies to those who haven't read it—ends up killing him.

This series also offers another, much more abstract reading of Melville's novel. It encourages us to reread it along a formal common thread, that of a quest that organises the visual relationships of a great white mass, straight lines, large swatches of blues, reds, sinusoidal shapes, and spirals. "And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lancepole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight" Melville wrote at the very end of his novel.

"Painting is a lot like whaling in fact," Felton explains. But there are different ways of looking at this hunt, in the novel as well as in life. The analogy reaches its limits here. Felton, like Ishmael, is one of those people who "realise somewhere along the way it's the journey that matters, not so much the end result as you once thought as a younger man".¹ Assembling colours in a certain order on the flat surface of a prepared canvas (usually in Felton's work, as in this case, it is a single colour on a white background) is not the way to produce an artefact fit for decorating an interior or filling the free space in an art centre; it is a total activity, one that organises all of life. "Going to the studio, opening a pot of paint, stretching a canvas, painting it, cleaning your brushes, going home, doing the dishes, reading mail, seeing friends, family: all of these things should be placed on the same level," wrote another painter on this subject, Hugo Pernet²

There is certainly a kind of romanticism in this belief in the ability of painting to penetrate the most minute strata of everyday life, but in this case it is—if such a thing exists—a cool romanticism. Rounded lines, soft colours, extremely simplified shapes—their playful relationship sits somewhere between Matisse and Keith Haring: in place of Melville's heroic, serious tone, Felton substitutes a tranquility, even a relaxation. If painting organises all of life, then it is no longer a question of success or failure, nor even of surpassing yourself, as in the glorious history of expressionist art. It is no longer a question of presenting risky feats, dangerous confrontations or metaphysical problems, as in the novel. It is only a question of stretching the canvas over the frame, preparing it, painting it quickly, observing it, and starting over if the result is unsatisfying.

Perhaps it is because Moby Dick also makes a good allegory of all of the monuments of the history of the arts that Felton seizes upon it, as if to mark his distance with these glorious models. In his work, spontaneity is a method that aims not only to actively remove the obligation to produce masterpieces, but to unload the weight of culture.

Text from Jill Gasparina

¹ « Painting is a lot like whaling in fact. You realize somewhere along the way it's the journey that matters not as much the end result as you once would think as a younger man »-entretien par mail avec l'auteur, non publié, janvier 2014

² See Hugo Pernet, « Facile Difficile », <http://www.zerodeux.fr/guests/facile-difficile-lart-de-stephen-felton/>