

A spiritual path?

Should we not begin by recalling the distinction between “religious” and “spiritual”?

Religion is a form of human expression which – in the best of cases – makes concrete something of the “revealed” that connects us with God who is, Himself, spiritual and manifests Himself to our spirit if we hear His Word.

Francis Pellerin said “All art is sacred.” There is no doubt he made religious art, but this art was never a simple illustration of dogma or belief. And the religious art of the past is sacred if, and only if, it engenders a work of art.

“All art is sacred” in that it disposes us to embrace a reality to which we are not directly sensible, which is not accessible to our senses or our sensibility. Perhaps because it is not from outside itself that this reality signals to us?

Art gives us the experience – the aesthetic experience – of an entirely different means of access and also of a reality that is invisible to us: not “not visible” to our eyes or to our senses, but that they cannot reach because they will inevitably approach it as a “sight”, or an object cast before them. They may be assisted by our imagination, our capacity to “put into words”, to apprehend reality. Here, reason takes the prerogative.

Francis Pellerin had his own experience of this in Rome when working on *La Joie*. It was an episode that underpinned the entirety of his research and his life as an artist.

The narrative of this formative adventure unfolded, later on, through expressions he adopted – “the interior profile” (when speaking of a plastic work), “an abstract schematic sketch from the first glance” (describing a drawing) or a “profile reading” (relating to a written work) – and to an even greater extent through his research into *structures déployées*, kinetic sculpture and emptiness (or rather “hollowing out”). Ultimately, it was his conception of the creative act that says everything about what guided the exploration he embarked upon as a result of his Roman discovery.

La Joie

Winner of the Grand Prix de Rome (first prize for sculpture, 1944) Pellerin took up his residency at the Villa Medici. It was here – working on a piece of wood – that he observed how something that did not come from him, the light falling on his work, brought out the very form he was seeking better than he himself could. He experienced with certainty that nothing needed adding (or removing) to “achieve” his creation and his work. It was not enough to be receptive: the full skill of the artist was called upon, and yet did not suffice. It nourished and served the work that was “at work”, that was in the process of creating itself. It was an experience of being guided to “do” so that what could not be conceived came into being: conceived beforehand, according to a reflection on reality or what it brings to mind. It was an experience of being confronted with the work as one could not have hoped for it to be. The “hoped-for unhoped-for” work.

*You can see them come
but where should you seek
these forms that you dare
and that arise out of the craft.*

Pellerin liked to quote Lao Tzu: “Pots are fashioned from clay, but it is the empty space within that gives the essence of the pot”.

An initial, literal reading assumes that the emptiness inside the pot makes it a possible receptacle, even a very effective container.

But let us go further. A second reading raises us to the level of what Pellerin referred to as “the interior profile” of a sculpture, enabling us to understand what made his aesthetic experience in Rome so decisive for his work.

This second reading shows us how the form of the pot implies what is not perceptible, but which nonetheless constitutes its “backbone”. It corresponds (it “responds”) to that which allows it or holds it up from the inside. Nothing more (or nothing less). The work arises from, occurs as a result of, an interior profile that somehow induces or underpins it, conferring existence and form. Not that this profile “expresses” – the way a profile normally would – what gives it its singularity. Our sensibility would then be invited to grasp hold of this expression. In fact, this profile supports the work which, in turn, manifests it in a reality that validates it: its truth resides therein.

*What I perceive
passes into me
I see it,
if I validate it.*

At a later stage, hollowing out would become Francis Pellerin’s preferred route to accessing this backbone.¹

His work on “*les boules*” (spherical forms) helps us to understand this. Looking at them, one might believe that the many versions are merely the result of creative whim. For Pellerin, however, they were the result of an explorative process that sought to get nearer to what carried the form from the inside. It was not only a question of extracting the structure, the inner scaffolding, but about accessing what held it up, what constituted the essential or ultimate support, and in this way determined it. Structure and interior profile are very different things. The former can be abstract (extracted) and falls within the scope of the conceivable; the latter establishes its utter uniqueness. It cannot be the subject of reflexion or universalizable understanding but is experienced as an individual singularity.

Light was the path that led to the form of *La Joie* and revealed it. At the same time as its “large planes” were brought to light, it called on us to cross them, rendering them “living”.

¹ It is surely in this way that he created “accolages” (juxtapositions) – and not simple collages (superpositions) – that revealed the “random”, not the “arbitrary”.

What is a *structure déployée*?

The designation could lead to misinterpretation. The “unfolding” could be a simple opening out; the work could be the consequence of the conjunction of a given surface area of uniform colour and the extension of one its elements – a trick of volume being broken down into its constituent parts. Yet this would be to neglect the eye that is called upon to engage. It is precisely this type of work that, in the same way as kinetic sculpture, denies all completion or definitive grasp of the reality that can be seen. The “seen” object is not the accessible work. It is a question of apprehending “these large living planes” which invite us to cross them. Because it is in the crossing that they begin to suggest, undivided, the form they reveal. It is why a mobile construction, as displayed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, a bas-relief such as the one at the Le Triangle cultural centre in Rennes, and a plural piece, like Anascope, also in Rennes, offer themselves to the eye as a route to take, or an expectation.

A similar misunderstanding could arise from the expression “an abstract schematic sketch from the first glance”. A drawing does not result from an operation aiming to extract a few schematic lines from reality. The “abstract” here relates to the global perception of the eye: it retains the lines that elevate the viewer to reality.

This helps us to understand why an artist like Francis Pellerin could never paint sketches (even those of an excellent standard) that were the work of another artist.

Certainly, a text has a meaning, but does the reader not extend – across its surface – a network of understanding which, for him or her, reveals the sense that they take in with their eyes? True reading, rather than being a pure interpretation of what presents itself to the reader, does it not create a profile within the text which, uniquely, shapes it? Thus, “profile reading”.

Clearly then, for Francis Pellerin, art (or the artist) makes accessible to us a reality approached or experienced differently. It gives us the opportunity to consider another existence, another mode of existence, that is entirely different to the one with which we are familiar. It helps us move away from a mode of material existence that presents itself to our senses and presupposes the visible, to a mode of existence that can only be approached from within, because it is experienced not as a feeling, but as spiritual, i.e. appealing to the life of the spirit.

Capable of moving from sculpture to paintings to quatrains, Pellerin was equally likely to collect everything that might inform his research and bring to light what was unique to him. It fed a process of rumination and assimilation.

This Christian, this man of Catholic faith,² was above all an artist open to questioning and exploration: it nourished the audacity within him. His combative nature knew tradition, could even subscribe to it (he belonged to certain movements that

² He had a number of exchanges with Cardinal Roques who understood his work for the church of Saint Yves in Rennes (including a crucifixion without a cross, but where a spear bears witness to the fact that man has sacrificed his God, and also a 15th Station of the Cross).

characterised his era), but for him there is no question of conforming, or worse, submitting! He was loyal to his spirit. It was for this reason, for example, that the architectural context of a monumental sculpture was an inescapable part of its creation. It became his opportunity to rethink what constituted the scale of a work, not just the proportions – even if these were absolutely correct – but what determined its readability and therefore its truth (from whichever angle it is viewed).

*There are small large things,
And large small things.*

Francis Pellerin, as a man, delved deep into his audacity and found pleasure in reading that, like him and for their own reasons, others – with proven credentials – saints, contemplatives, poets (even plastic artists!)³ had dared to break away. They had had the courage to undertake free research, safe in the knowledge that absolute fidelity to what moved them guaranteed the authenticity of their creation.

You do not deceive God. (based on Epistle to the Galatians)

Play as if the greatest musician in the world were listening.

Anchored by such injunctions, it was possible for Pellerin to risk ploughing his own furrow.

In fact, it appears – in his view – to be at the very moment of the creative act that the authentic artist becomes the medium by which what escapes him is revealed and thus instils in our reality an “inconceivable” reality, a reality that reveals itself, feeds the spiritual tension.

*Little nest in the world
simply relinquish your pride
to the not knowing that the
knowing does not know.*

The work is not dictated by this reality. It is not the result of entirely subjective inspiration, nor is it the expression of some feeling that seeks to be spoken of or shown.

*So make the work
instead of speaking it
because it alone
can speak of itself.*

Rather, the work is a product of an impulse and “something encountered” that fertilises it, of an activity or passivity of the artist from which emerges something nobody could have thought of or even imagined, where the artist’s craft discerns what is ultimately imposing itself, making its presence known. It is not so much the (essential) mastery of a skill as “what we miss” that relinquishes reason, opens the hand, and paves the way for the coming of the unhoped-for.

³ Lao Tzu, Saint Jean de la Croix, Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Pierre Emmanuel, Jean Sullivan, Henri Michaux, Paul Valéry, Maurice Blanchot. Sentiments expressed by artists featured in *Art d’aujourd’hui, etc.*

Pure audacity!

Francis Pellerin's life (1915 – 1998) allowed the expansion of what became the quintessence of himself.

*Go! Do not seek me
as if you could reach me
you could not see me
as I can look at you.*

Monique Merly, June 2014

Poems by Francis Pellerin