

CLAIRE GASTAUD

MC MITOUT

Texts

Marie-Claire Mitout or the need to read images

Each of Marie-Claire Mitout's paintings is something of an act of resistance. Begun in 1990, the Plus Belles Heures series seeks to hold back against the flow of time a conversation, a scene, a landscape or an idea; the crystallisation in an image of a moment fully lived. The artist, who studied in Christian Boltanski's studio at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, is developing a multi-faceted autobiographical project over time. The protocol or introspective ritual is always the same: the artist composes her memories and dreams on a standard A4 sheet of paper. Sometimes she superimposes the images, as in *Séraphine de Senlis offre au ciel des brassées de fleurs* (Seraphine of Senlis offers armfuls of flowers to the sky), making the real and the inner world coexist in the same shot. On the other hand, she doesn't hesitate to plunge us into the heart of a conversation, including the subtitles, as if we were freeze-framing a film in progress. Marie-Claire Mitout deploys a philosophy of time that rejects the modern injunction to intensity. Using the bold colours of gouache, the artist brings renewed attention to everyday life and the passing of the seasons. Her figures lose themselves in landscapes that are rich in detail but never intimidating. Her skilful compositions, which take note of the complexity of the contemporary world, take a contemplative approach and seek to extract the image from the flux, to give it back its ability to make connections. By generously displaying her references, whether to medieval miniatures such as *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, or to the framing of Japanese prints, particularly those by Hiroshige, Marie-Claire Mitout opens windows onto other ways of seeing the world. In this sense, her mantra-like murals, the *Self Controls*, invite the viewer, as much by their cheerful colours as by the words, to stop and take the time to really read an image.

Henri Guette

Marie-Claire Mitout, in the back alleys of painting

It's a book that goes back in time, like her work. Marie-Claire Mitout is a painter, but she has always walked "the back alleys of painting" ¹. The series *Les plus belles heures*, which she began some thirty years ago, is a way of surveying time as she surveys her art, with a Chinese abacus. Painting to untie the knots of the world, to salute life and rewrite it, that is her undertaking. She does this by drawing inspiration from stories, moments or simple events, overheard words, the taste of an apple or an encounter with a cat. When she started out in 1990, she produced 300 paintings, all from memory. She set herself the goal of doing one painting a day for a year, every five years. After the second series, she decided to do the same number of paintings, but over five years. The paintings are organised into families, with varying numbers of members, around themes such as Greek tragedy, an imagined Japan, magic shirts or, quite simply, landscapes... For her, it all starts with words, written in a notebook every day: the weather, things seen, the detail of an illumination, a visit from a relative, a scene from a library... Before painting, these words are translated into drawings, which she does not show any more than her writings. Her finest hours were spent on A4 gouaches and a few large oil canvases. Basically, everything was said from the first image, a figure lying on a bed with a red blanket, surrounded by books, a place of dreams and retreat (03 September 1990, gouache subtitled *Autobiographical series "Les Plus Belles Heures" Trace of the best moment of the past day*). Marie-Claire Mitout grew up in the Limousin region - where she recently returned to paint. After studying at the Arts Déco school in Limoges, she went on to study at the Beaux-Arts in Lyon, then in Paris, in the studio of Christian Boltanski, who was just starting to teach. But life in Paris seemed too hectic for her, and she moved back to Lyon - where she now teaches at the School of Architecture - to set up her studio in a secluded spot in a forest. From Robert Filliou, she has retained the "principle of equivalence: well done, badly done, not done", according to which art is a subject open to all. She invites us to look at the world differently. And images from the history of art sit side by side with those from everyday life. Her paintings also have something of the feel of ex-votos, like images to be deciphered, almost like the paintings of clairvoyants. If you delve into his gouaches, you discover various states of consciousness. Marcel Proust kept her company for a long time," she says, "constructing a narrative allows you to go back and forth between the gains and losses of the world, and art is a way of learning to love it. Marie-Claire Mitout speaks of her work as an eternal restart, because it addresses the succession of days and the most beautiful hours that make them up. Until very recently, she never wanted to sell her paintings. A proposal to publish a book with Roven finally persuaded her to sell some of them. One of the injunctions she received from her 'Good Council', who appears from time to time alongside her in her paintings, was to go through with the book. In her paintings, she also inscribes words as dialogues, or sometimes as images. "Let's go", "Go ahead", "Don't care"... can be read on a T-shirt or at the centre of a composition. And then there's *Le songe*, a kind of landscape in words, a life and work project for the next twenty years. In the course of a labyrinth, we read in interconnected cartouches: "Everything will disappear", "Perhaps not", "Poetry is not in poetry"... It's a landscape of the soul, like the Chinese painters, where we wander through forests and waterfalls. It might sound like naïve art or art brut, but Marie-Claire Mitout's art is meticulous, erudite and precise. She recounts her life like a dream, from encounters to events: rehearsals for a play, a trip to Japan cancelled by Covid... Instead of this distant expedition, she visited Bonnard near Le Cannet. In her drawings of unreal hospital scenes experienced during Covid, the floor of a car park resembles a David Hockney swimming pool, even if the composition is more reminiscent of Fra Angelico's *Visitation*. Today, she would like to pursue the work on vision and blindness she began with *Œdipe* and *Semimaru*, and the question of the third eye, which will certainly take her to India. While the figures of Niki de Saint Phalle and the *Facteur Cheval* make their appearance... How to find one's place in a burning world, she seems to ask herself at every moment. By creating joy, as a form of resistance.

Anaël Pigeat

Marie-Claire Mitout's *Plus Belles Heures* are simple scenes, moments in time, places or situations observed and rendered in a long and impressive catalogue of small gouaches on paper.⁽¹⁾ The subjects are varied but recurrent: landscapes, groups of figures in outdoor or indoor spaces, intimate moments in life such as meals, baths or naps, but also visits to cultural sites. However, not all the motifs that punctuate this vast body of work are approached in the same way; apart from the fact that the temporal span of this work, which began in 1990, naturally testifies to a stylistic evolution, this diversity manifests itself above all in the variety of points of view adopted and their plastic manifestations. Sometimes, in a single shot, it expresses a moment of contemplation in front of a chosen site, or recaptures the emotion of a particular moment; sometimes, through a series of interlocking windows, it combines the different elements that help to revive the memories that gave rise to the desire for this image. In all cases, however, the representations are deferred. While some of them, through the precision of their details, seem to be based on a mechanical medium (a photograph, for example), others are undoubtedly mental reconstructions, pure compositions seeking less to recreate a realistic aspect than the atmosphere of a context, an encounter and the associated sensations. In this way, from image to image, we are confronted with this permanent gap between objectivity and subjectivity of the gaze, or rather, we are invited to participate in it. A similar question underlies the use of graphic and pictorial means. From the choice of a neutral solid colour - which can be applied to floors, partitions, fabrics, objects and their shadows - to the use of myriad signs - cursive lines, dots, drops, alveoli... depicting shadows or light, reflections or decorative shapes - to the ways in which space is represented - scales of planes, cavalier or sensitive perspective... - all the means are mobilised to take note of this discrepancy and to express the variations in memory. The quivering of a body of water or the foam of a wave evokes Japanese prints as well as studies by Georges Seurat or Alex Katz, while the frolicking of bathers evokes Lucas Cranach's *The Fountain of Youth* and Alex Colville's *The Swimmer*, or the many interpretations of David Hockney. The gardens, and more specifically the plants in them, owe as much to Paul Gauguin as they do to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese paintings. We could attempt to draw up a list of Marie-Claire Mitout's references - or, rather, acquaintances - if she hadn't already done so explicitly herself, which would only confirm what we already know: painting feeds on painting. "I love everything", she writes, and if this statement sounds amusing in relation to her name, we can only believe her about her intentions. "Everything" is by no means an absolute, and so does not mean totality, but rather diversity and, above all, curiosity. On the other hand, it is important to note that these references are not intended to be scholarly demonstrations; on the contrary, they reflect a sense of humility. They allow us to delineate part of the artist's territory, and perhaps also to understand the ongoing interaction between the real and the imaginary, and the subtle way in which the artist's reality - and occasionally our own - is established. In this way, in association with an initial real-life situation, direct quotations from works of art and small phrases exchanged, read or heard are combined in the space of these representations, which, crossing each other, weave the fabric, seeking to translate as closely as possible the emotion of the past moment or the present of the image. The swarming of signs, whether purely plastic or more narrative (the interplay of vignettes, the *mise en abyme* of subjects, costumes, furnishings, textual content, etc.), constitutes the density of this complex pictorial device, which bears witness to a dual intention: that of taking note of the times in one's own history, and that of joining, at these figurative stations, the procession of images on which it is based.

Witness to time

Les Plus Belles Heures - a title that undeniably evokes the books of hours of the Middle Ages and assumes their graphic filiation - appears to be an astonishing project of pictorial retranscription of the high points in the artist's daily life. From this point of view, the almost permanent presence of a figure sporting his features seems unambiguous. From behind, in profile or in front, standing or sitting, the representations of the author and those close to her invite us to share in her chosen moments, or even to relive them. The person who paints the image, or depicts the situation, is simultaneously a person and a character. She sees, sees herself, is seen, being both the one who lives what we see and the one who gives us to see. This project could be seen as an exhaustive compendium of her doings and, in a way, suggest that the author gives herself over completely, or at least sufficiently, for us to be able to establish a faithful portrait, not from a physical point of view (the signs of recognition are often reduced to a minimum of figuration), but from a mental one. Seemingly conceived as a fragmentary, additive series whose depicted times essentially convey feelings of quietude or insouciance - marked nonetheless by more serious preoccupations - should we consider the term "painted diary", sometimes used to define this work, to be adequate? Although a "diary" is a record of events that have taken place, we all know that this transcription is a matter of language and, even in the most analytical situation (a logbook), it cannot be an exact rendition, but rather a partial transcription of notable or remarkable events. In the case of these works, and given that they are also painted images, this means that each painting is a condensation of real time, the exact temporality of which is impossible to say, from which we can deduce that it in no way reproduces the event but invents an iconic equivalent of it. What's more, the different strata of time that make up *Les Plus Belles Heures*, from the internal unity of each image to their overall chronological succession, via their subtle diachronic interferences, are those of a complex narrative.

Taken together, the paintings form a narrative fabric in which the successive times depicted do not tell the story of the artist's life, but perhaps rather that of his witness. While the use of such devices does exist in the Western pictorial tradition⁽²⁾, it seems to have developed more in the modern period. ⁽³⁾ In contrast to the simple self-portrait, the painter as subject-witness is one of the characters in the scene depicted, in which he or she plays a full part: the artist included in the space of his or her painting as a stakeholder in the action depicted - not unlike the symbolic function of the donor in religious or votive painting - thus becomes his or her own patron, embodying a role, real or fanciful, with seriousness, humour or gravity. Marie-Claire Mitout, as a figure-witness (extra or main actress), authenticates by her presence what has taken place, has taken place or could take place in the present of her time. What's more, the recurring appearances of her painted double introduce us to the familiarity (rather than intimacy) of the world she is creating. As in all fiction, lived reality is never far away, but it is given a sublimated form. Would it be an exaggeration to say that *Les Plus Belles Heures*⁽⁴⁾ is first and foremost a parallel story, albeit an accurate one, an indispensable fiction whose plot and sequencing are less about telling her own story than about telling us about the joys of living and painting, and even of living by painting. "Yes, art gives height to your life" or "It's painting that breathes life into you", for example, in two of her compositions.

Fortunes of the Most Beautiful Hours

In December 2017, in response to a commission from the Centre d'Art Contemporain de Meymac for a monumental Advent calendar, Marie-Claire Mitout proposed a set of images displayed on the main façade of St André Abbey. The gouaches produced for this purpose, enlarged by reproduction on canvas and visible from the outside, obscured the windows: 24 for 24 hours of an idealised day, or 24 consecutive days, thus blurring the line between fiction and reality.⁽⁵⁾ Beyond the festive effect of the period, the countdown to the Dream, a night and a day, offered an anthology of the finest hours of its protagonist. Offering the ordinary recorded in pictures (and words) of those happy days (real or dreamt), recapitulating or reviewing the key moments that marked a period, reliving and bringing to life through these freeze-frames the different stations along a path that, however particular it may be, in many ways resembles that of many other people, means doing more than simply looking back on oneself: it means reviving the ways in which human beings relate to the world. In a mental map⁽⁶⁾ drawn up in 2017 by Marie-Claire Mitout, we can follow her associations of ideas which, from paths to crossroads, bear witness to both words of mood and references that form roots or bridges. This cartography of the ego can be read both as a flattening of the synapses that produce the complex ramifications of a work and as an ideal programme of work and days to come. ⁽⁷⁾ This series of paintings, produced at the same time as *Les Plus Belles Heures*, is the result of a combination of sketches taken on the spot and selective shots that introduce a certain nuance to the graphic approach. While the backgrounds, made up of vivid flat tints, remain similar to the other works, the rendering of the actors' postures and the precision of their features place greater emphasis on their respective identities, thus emphasising the people who embody the characters in the play. From this experience of looking at the world was born the desire to travel to Sophocles' land, to take stock of what had become of the place. Travelling around Colonus - now metamorphosed, swallowed up by Athens - returning to the physical traces of a distant past, the artist sought to find the signs that would give substance to the place dreamt of in the ancient text. These gouaches take note of the situations, with a sense of humour and off-beatness. If the paintings in *Le Songe* contained the beginnings of an interest in Japanese culture (prints, ballets of kites⁽⁸⁾ and even a shirt adorned with flora and fauna), in one of the gouaches in the set of views of Greece, *Oedipus in Japan*, the parallel is drawn in a rather unexpected way: Passing in front of a plaque commemorating Sophocles⁽⁹⁾ the witness reads, to a dog following him, a passage from William Marx's *Tomb of Oedipus*: "If Colone had been a suburb of Kyoto, there would have been a Shinto shrine there, dedicated to Oedipus, for there is a blind and fallen prince in Kyoto, a famous Noh called Semimaru." So, as we set off in search of one landscape, we sometimes come across another; the same is true here for the characters, an objective chance undoubtedly offering an opportunity to project ourselves onto another journey. Perhaps it's not just a twist of fate that the 24 paintings blinding the windows of this place of images simultaneously illuminate it with happy and/or premonitory visions, as if in the blink of an eyelid, or if this multi-layered narrative, in which some of the artist's tutelary figures rub shoulders, conceals the destiny of the work. Sometimes, as the saying goes, dreams do come true. Taking her witness on a journey through *Les Plus Belles Heures*, Marie-Claire Mitout attempts to retrace in paint the trajectory of a life that resembles, or bears some resemblance to, her own. But if the work she creates is nourished by what affects her as a person and as an artist, if it bears partial witness to her existence without duplicating it, it also happens that the work, as if animated by an internal force, ends up generating events or directions that lead its creator to consider them in order to take the next step. Marie-Claire Mitout is betting that it is from the work and through the work that the next steps will be taken. She wants to believe in the reality of the dreams that painting offers her.