

Inner Landscapes

Interview conducted in French on March 13, 2013 by Jean-Daniel Mohier

Translation: Jean-Daniel Mohier

Jean-Daniel Mohier – *Tell me about Morandi.*

Marion Tivital – Morandi is one of my masters, along with Vermeer. I admire everything in him. I admire the man, his simplicity, his asceticism, his relentless work and the depth of it, as well as his inner quest and the spirituality he gives to it. I admire the power of his drawing skills, something I will never achieve, unfortunately, because I am more sensitive to light and color than to the line itself. If you look at the drawings Morandi was making at the end of his life, there is almost nothing there, a few lines to give contrast and that's it. The sobriety and the poetry of his work touch me deeply. He really is a master, yes, a lover of light and inner landscapes.

JDM – *For me there is a very strong relation between you two. When you look, for instance, at the numerous paintings by Morandi that represent a few objects he had found in his studio that he endlessly keeps rearranging. You seem to work in the same vein with your Plastics series.*

MT – What a compliment! Morandi worked with the most common everyday objects of his time. I am, as he was, sensitive to the poetry of ordinary things. If he were alive today, I think he would paint plastic objects. I don't mind referencing a painter and walking on his path, because, in the end, the subject is not very important for me. The way I work on a subject, on the contrary, is very important. And Morandi's introspective way is the one that I agree the most with. I think there is not much left to be invented when it comes to painting, but this doesn't mean that you don't have anything to say or that you don't have your own very personal way to say it.

I'm often asked why I paint such and such a subject, but I never wonder why I chose those subjects. I do what I have to do. I started painting still lifes, the *Plastics*, because I work a lot from photographs when I work on my industrial site series and when I wasn't doing that, I missed being just there with my subject. I didn't really feel like painting the human figure, so I looked around me and I found these quite trivial plastic containers that, I think, are very beautiful and very pure. They also carry something with them. They are the result of engineering and you can make them your own and simplify them, interpret them, even enter into empathy with them. Everything I look for when I paint, I was able to do it with these.

This is probably what Morandi was looking for as well,. Every canvas is a little challenge. In order to render what makes this presence in front of me somehow beautiful I need to find its harmony all over again. And this visual beauty is not simple to find because, precisely, it is not intellectual. I live in the 21st Century, I wanted to paint the objects around me and plastic is part of my daily life. For me, the same idea is at play when I paint industrial sites.

JDM – *And why do you paint industrial sites?*

MT – At first I did landscapes. But what I'm interested in with landscapes or plastics, is the coat of light that envelops the volumes and what I found very beautiful in a landscape is the light on warehouses, on silos, or the geometric masses of a factory. And these things, like plastic containers, carry a story Man is apart from. I'm often told that the human element is absent from my works but I do not represent pure nature, I paint manmade things, things that are the result of a thought process, choices, things that are or were used. In the case of factories, these are places where people work. That's why I thought these industrial sites were more interesting than empty landscapes.

JDM – *There are also a lot of diving boards and gas stations among your subjects, which is quite uncommon.*

MT – The fact that they seem to have very little significance or the way they look might be why I looked

at them. But, once more, the fact that the subject is common or not has little importance for me, I could paint a garbage can or a pile of dirt if the light on it looks great! (*Laughter*) In fact, it is the relationship between these geometrical forms and their environment, the slow and unstoppable integration of these masses in the landscape that I want to study. I want to find beauty where nobody expects to find it.

JDM – *When you talked earlier about plastics, you already said that they were the result of a thought process, that they were engineered. You just said the same thing about industrial sites. It seems to me that we often tend to forget that all the non-natural objects of the world have been manufactured somewhere and are the result of some sort of craft or industrial process. You apparently never forget this fact.*

MT – That’s right. This is why empty landscapes or natural objects are less interesting for me. In fact, I track down humanity through the traces it leaves.

JDM – *So you need human transformation of raw material in order to make it a subject of yours?*

MT – Yes. This is what interests me.

JDM – *And do you know why?*

MT – I don’t really know. Who can understand the human soul? The absurdity of life? There’s this quote by Beckett about Bram Van Velde that I like a lot: “It is to say *that* without knowing what *that* is, i.e. without knowing what is the mysterious *that*.” That says it all. I don’t know what *that* is, nor its origin.

JDM – *Let’s go back to the human figure. Aside from a few nudes, it seems that you’re not very interested in the subject.*

MT – It is true that this is not what I’m the most interested in. I think that it is much more mysterious to show humanity through its creations than through its appearance. Human creations seem to me like the tangible proof of what men and women really are deep inside. Why did men build warehouses in the middle of nowhere, or make bleach bottles that are so beautiful? These are the questions I’m the most interested in. Landscapes can also have this quality, they are places one can daydream in and where I like walking aimlessly. But it might be as simple for me to paint landscapes or objects. I like what is immobile and I like silence. When I work on a nude I really feel empathy for my model, even if in general I feel empathy as well for my plastic containers or the industrial sites I paint. I love them all. Thus I really love the person I’ll be seeing every day in the studio for a week in order to paint a nude. But I’m intimidated by her beauty. And it seems to me that it is more complicated to be able to simplify and to show what’s essential in a person than in a manufactured object. A lot of moving things are at play. The state of mind and the thoughts of the model often change her.

I fight against time. And we look at the people who surround us, (unless you’re a bear hidden in a cage... a cave), while we don’t necessarily look at warehouses or plastic bottles. I’m more interested in what’s in the dark, what we usually don’t notice. When I paint, I do things at my own pace and it feels like I’ve slowed time down a little bit. We live in a frenetic world where one thing, word, or image takes the place of another in no time. To me, painting an object or a landscape makes me feel at peace, in a suspended time, in a world that is mine.

JDM – *You said cage instead of cave, which if you ask me sounds like a very nice Freudian slip. When one looks at the forms you paint, one could actually see the simplified outline of a cage or a shed. Even your bears seem to live in a non-natural environment.*

MT – Yes, this must be it! (*Laughter*).

JDM – *The idea of simplification seems to be really important for you.*

MT – It comes with the way I work. I try to give the idea of the essence of things, and I noticed that the more I simplify, the more room there is for the interpretation of the works, not only my interpretation, but the onlookers' as well. I would hate my paintings to be anecdotal or superfluous. To me, simplification is one of the ways that allow me to paint precisely what I see. I try to put myself in a floating state, to empty my mind, to act like a sponge for sensations, to feel what is happening as fully as possible.

JDM – *We're very far from, let's say Pop Art, that would give a faithful image of a bleach bottle like you see at the supermarket. In your case, your approach is almost platonic. With your bleach bottles, we're not very far from the idea of a bottle, stripped from all its accidental properties. The fact that there is still some visual element to it disqualifies the possibility of a metaphysical approach to your work, but you could say that it is not possible to take away anything from your bottles as long as one wants to remain in the field of figurative painting.*

MT – Yes, that's exactly right. I am really on an inner quest. I'm not looking for anything decorative, striking or tacky. In the end, I'm not looking for much aside from agreeing with myself.

JDM – *You said you were like a sponge for sensations.*

MT – Yes. This is really what I feel I am. Moreover I feel that I can't always answer your questions because I am not intellectualizing my work. I try to empty my mind, to feel the essence of things and to show what they feel like to me. I'm looking for this beautiful moment when there is no distance between my subject and me.

JDM – *You just talked about factories and plastics as human traces that remain even when all human presence is gone. I can't help thinking that you produce as well, with your paintings, human traces that will remain here for a long time after you died. Do you paint as a way to testify to your own existence?*

MT – Honestly, I don't think so. Actually, I discovered what pleasure it could be to show my work to others only recently. I've painted for a very long time without showing anything to anyone. I didn't think it was interesting, or at least I didn't think anyone would be interested. So, what the onlookers tell me has been added to my life. The thought that my paintings might become extremely famous seems very unlikely to me.

However, if I can go back to what you said about the almost a-temporal side of some landscapes, what fascinates me is that we tend to consider them exactly like a setting. We don't look at them, we pass in front of them on the road, in a car, on a train, and we forget completely about them. But all that is there: the electric poles, the water tanks, the factories and the nuclear plants are not a setting. We will not stay for long while these things will remain there like witnesses of the past. In fact, *we* are the setting. I'm not interested in what will happen to my paintings in a hundred years from now; I won't be there to see it. But I'm interested in giving a place to these landscapes that will be different from a useless setting, because these places are a presence that will outlive us all and are important.

JDM – *You seem to have a tendency to paint what many people find ugly, things that people say denature the landscape. The verb denature being particularly revealing here.*

MT – Personally, I think there is great beauty in these silos and these warehouses. I didn't choose to put them there, but there they are and I look at them. They catch the light wonderfully; they're almost like *Land Art*; they interact with the surrounding vegetation; they take place inside the landscape. This is somehow quite mysterious. It's true that, at first, the persons who look at my work tell me that I paint ugly places, but they often tell me after a while that what I paint reminds them of a factory they use to pass by when they were children. I think that the fact that anyone can recognize the warehouse that was

close to their house or on the road to their parent's house is very touching. This is what people tell me at the openings of my shows.

JDM – *Don't you think that the way you simplify helps this kind of identification?*

MT – Of course! By simplifying, I leave all the room to identification. This is also why I just give a number to my paintings. In the end, these landscapes and these still lives have to be universal things we all know even if we don't pay attention to them.

JDM – *I would like to come back one last time on this idea of simplification that you like so much. Have you ever been tempted to paint abstract forms, for instance geometric forms.*

MT – I might get there one day. But for me, today, abstraction would be a gesture, and I want to stay as far as possible from any kind of gesture.

JDM – *One could draw a comparison of your works alongside those of Mondrian when one looks at them from up close. I think for instance of the very transparent and luminous quality of the paint that you seem to have in common not only in his abstract works, but also in his early landscapes.*

MT – Mondrian is also a master who has opened a lot of possibilities. But if I can go back to the idea of abstraction, I think it should be a lifelong path like Rothko's, like Matisse's with his cutout papers.

JDM – *There is also the recurrence of sensibly identical motives with Rothko.*

MT – That's true, but I see beyond that, I think this should correspond to an inner landscape. One of the great artistic shocks of my life took place at the Tate Modern. It was the Rothko room that looks like a chapel with six dark red canvases that he painted at the end of his life. This place, as well as the Rothko chapel in Houston, are my favorite places. They are places of meditative quality that are greatly emotional to me.

JDM – *Once more, these are very geometric places.*

MT – Yes, it is close to perfection.

JDM – *What do you think then of some minimalist artists such as Donald Judd or Carl Andre?*

MT – I like Carl Andre a lot, as well as Donald Judd's sculptures.

JDM – *And what do you think of artists who painted monochromes or works close to monochromes, Robert Ryman for instance, or Barnett Newman.*

MT – Nothing. These works don't do anything for me.

JDM – *There is however a form of simplification that gets as close as possible to nothing.*

MT – Yes, but it is too intellectual. This simplification exists because these artists decided to simplify to the extreme.

JDM – *Your simplification doesn't aim at this then. What is its foundation?*

MT – I want to show the essence of things, I want to show things one can recognize and like. I want to put forward what makes them beautiful and their unity, the harmony that emerges from them and the

balance in their contrasts. For me, one of the most sensual pleasures when I paint is to make cubes with one side in the dark and another in the light. I can't get enough of it. It is this exact balance between darkness and light that I try to find. I also try not to intellectualize what I do, especially when I'm doing it.

JDM – *We are in front of a painting that you've barely started, it looks like a greenish freight container on a sand square with a few naked trees and a grayish sky.*

MT – Is it a freight container or a building, a warehouse?

JDM – *I tend to see a freight container because you've made a number of them, but it might turn out to be something else in the end.*

MT – I like the monolithic quality of it, but what it is or will be is really not important.

JDM – *However, you are a figurative artist.*

MT – That's right, but it is a suggestive kind of figuration that tends to be universal. I would love my paintings to be like open doors that would make people want to travel. This might be a reflection about the right distance one has to keep in front of the "real" world.

JDM – *But when you say that what it will be is not very important is it because you want to leave some room to some sort of ambiguity or simply because you want to paint something that you're satisfied with visually?*

MT – This is part of it, but one has to remember that the look on the canvas belongs not only to the painter but also to the onlooker and that one can see something different in the painting that what I put in it. A collector of mine once told me she loved a painting I had done that represented inkwells. Actually, they were small cisterns.

JDM – *It's a question of scale.*

MT – Exactly! (*Laughter*) And a question of feeling as well.

JDM – *You often paint landscapes, I mean, that you represent the outside world and the modifications people have made to it, but you only paint what's inside when you represent a shelf with plastic containers on it.*

MT – I painted some interior scenes a few years ago. I painted parking lots, the inside of factories, abandoned armchairs with the trace of a human body still imprinted in the soft seat. All of this is a little bit about absence and a certain melancholy.

JDM – *One could say that there is a silent quality to your works.*

MT – I think too, people often talk to me about silence and serenity when it comes to my work. I try to take shelter from the world that is too bustling and noisy and to paint things that will remain after us. Maybe this can only happen with silence and serenity.

JDM – *Hopper is discussed a lot as the painter of silence but he represented the human figure.*

MT – It is true that I hear about Hopper quite a lot, but I don't especially feel close to him. His

compositions are perfect and very effective, but I think his figures are anecdotal. And I really don't want to go there, on the contrary. To me, Hopper is more the painter of loneliness than silence. But I don't want to compare myself to Hopper.

JDM – *Come to think about it, I said silent quality but it was not exactly what I had in mind. What I meant to say was probably that your paintings were an invitation to introspection.*

MT – This is probably the nicest compliment one could give me.

JDM – *The trailers and the containers are subjects that come back quite often. Is this because you think about what it is to travel, or about migration? Do you feel like leaving for a while?*

MT - Perhaps, but for me, when a trailer is immobile in the middle of a field, it is contrary to its destiny, and one has to ask what it's doing there. I've never painted boats, but on one side of a highway I know a small boat that's in the middle of a field and that intrigues me very much. I paint what I feel is mysterious or somehow melancholic. In an immobile trailer, melancholy and mystery are particularly obvious.

JDM – *And the road?*

MT – It's the same thing with the road, we don't know where it's going.

JDM – *Since I first saw your works I sometimes feel, when I'm on a train, stopped at a country station for instance, that I am in front of one of your landscapes.*

MT – We had talked about that a while ago. I like this idea of backwash. This movement from the real object to the image I make of it and from that image to the real object is I think quite fascinating.

JDM – *Let's talk about light. Your use of white is particularly luminous with a milky quality, almost translucent.*

MT – To me, light is the light of Brittany where I'm from, or in general the light of the North. These ever-changing lights mysteriously piercing through the clouds have left a mark on me. I try to paint with a luminous white, which is why I make my own white paint, a mixed white with Dutch emulsion, pigments and oil.

JDM – *The word mystery is very present in your discourse. However a trailer does not seem particularly mysterious.*

MT – It's all about the context. There is of course no mystery in a trailer parked on a camping lot near the sea. But with a trailer alone in a flooded field for instance, everything becomes possible.

JDM – *One might also think of the works of Bernd and Hilla Bescher when confronted with your paintings. Do you like their work?*

MT – I have a lot of respect for their work but, to me, it is too scientific and it completely lacks emotion. My approach to my work is completely opposite to theirs. I like the obsessive quality of their work but to me it is extremely cold and calculated. I prefer something more human.

JDM - *However, what you paint has been calculated. A building, a plastic container have been thought about and engineered before they were made.*

MT – Yes, but time as passed on these things, they have been used and then they have been more or less discarded. They now have a history; they have become something different from what the engineer had designed. Moreover, plastic bottles shapes echo each other and create these unpredictable harmonies. I try to discover hidden beauties. When beauty is obvious, you can only damage it.

JDM – *Do you think the evocative power that resides in your work comes from this?*

MT – I don't know. I would like to unveil things. I would like to show another way to look at things that are present, beautiful and belong to our history.

JDM – *Indeed it seems that history is something important for you.*

MT – I think abandoned factories in the North are vey poignant. That kind of history is at the core of what I do. Even the bleach bottles are in a way part of our history, even if it is not History with a capital H or my own history. Although my own history is there somewhere in a rather obvious way but is not the main subject.

JDM – *Why is it rather obvious?*

MT – Because when all these canvases are hung for an exhibition I really feel naked, like I'm showing my bare soul. Just imagine when I'm asked to talk about it...