

JOSEPH BENOIT
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Joseph Benoit: painting with pixels

Abstract photography. That would be the easiest way to describe the work of Joseph Benoit. The term 'abstract photography' usually calls to mind images of water droplets, sand dunes, flowers and various geometric-looking constructions, ideally looming in from a shadowy background. Or the use of long exposures to photograph passing cars, producing the effect of ribbons of light.

None of this is to be found in the work of Joseph Benoit.

The artist presents his recent work for the first time in this exhibition, a rather late début. He is showing eight photos in total, each presented in the same format: 45 by 65 cm.

Joseph Benoit takes his photos with his smartphone. The images are printed completely unedited.

Benoit's photos attest to a deep-seated drive for experimentation. A drive almost as old as photography itself. In the 1840s, the British scientist Henry Fox Talbot invented the so-called 'calotype' process, a procedure that creates photos that are less sharp but greater in contrast, such that the structure of the paper remains clearly visible. Around 1894, the Swedish writer August Strindberg went some steps further. As a fervent painter whose work straddled the border between the figurative and the abstract, he took his unique approach into the realm of photography. He created photographs without the use of a lens or even a camera, instead exposing photographic plates to the night sky for hours at a time. The result was his so-called 'celestographs': abstract, splotchy compositions cut with blurry wisps of colour.

Then there are the photos of constructivists such as László Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Rodchenko and, in Belgium, Willy Kessels. They often shot from daring camera angles, playing with contrasting shadows or zooming in closely on architectural elements to capture clean patterns of lines. Not entirely 'abstract', then.

Joseph Benoit stands somewhat apart in his approach to photography, though there are some parallels to be drawn between his work and the so-called subjective photography of the Belgian Julien Coulomnier – they both have that lack of crisp focus, they both feature unique camera angles and blown-up details – and the photos of the North American painter Cy Twombly. Twombly, who worked with Polaroids, playing with extreme close-ups and overexposure, only came out with his photographic work late in his career. This led to semi-abstract images of, for example, flowers swallowed by the camera's flash or a setting sun that appears to drip out of the sky like a drop of red-hot blood.

In the work of Coulomnier and Twombly, however, the subjects usually remain identifiable, while in that of Benoit they do not. Furthermore, Twombly gives his photos titles that refer to reality (Sunset, Gaeta 2009, for example), while Benoit severs any ties to recognisable reality by simply giving his photos numbers as titles.

Joseph Benoit has his own unique way of working. Without giving too much away, he has found a way to outsmart the autofocus of his phone's camera. He shoots so fast that the device can't keep up. The result is a composition of colour, form, light, texture and shadow. Colour becomes form and texture. Waves, stripes and dots are captured in a moment that is both fleeting and definitive. Shadow provides depth.

Our gaze moves back and forth over the surface of the photos, continuously in search of something to latch onto, an order or focal point that has been deliberately left absent. The effect is often one of peering into a distant, unreachable, dreamworld through a pane of frosted glass. Or into some kind of spraypaint world.

Benoit himself is often astonished by the camera's revelations, the remarkable colours of the photos and the spectrum of nuanced detail in them. Look closely and you might see a haze of varied purples with a core of black. The richness of the often saturated colours is one of the most surprising elements in Benoit's photos.

Printed on Hahnemühle paper (Photo Rag 310 gsm, 100 pct cotton), the works are extremely tactile, assuming an extraordinary, painterly quality. Benoit himself says that the paper contributes a lot to the work: it imparts a certain sensuality and, in spite of (or indeed because of) the lack of focus, the paper responds interestingly to the colours and depth of the images. What we're seeing are abstract patterns. And yet in them our brain is always trying to see reality and the familiar. Is that not a plume of water (à la William Turner)? Close-up ripples on a plane of water, a detail of an umbilical cord, car headlights in the mist or light filtering through closed blinds?

In fact Benoit's work leans most in the direction of the abstract painters and the so-called 'colorfield painters'. There's always an interplay of colours and forms, geometric and organic patterns. Here lashing waves, there a red line like a supporting strut amid a cloud of grey grain. There are references to the 'squeegee paintings' of Gerhard Richter (although they often have a more tightly bound composition) and the work of the British painter Howard Hodgkin, with its sweeping, bright colours. Of course, Raoul De Keyser also comes to mind, as well as the American painters who were influenced by him, such as John Zurier. There are hints of the work of Jeff Erickson and Sandrine Kern and, closer to home, Ilse D'Hollander, certainly.

'In the visual arts the photographer now has the same expressive possibilities as a painter at his disposal', wrote Maartje van den Heuvel in 2008. The latest technology offers the photographer the possibility to create the image completely by him- or herself. Which leads him or her back to painting.

That's what Joseph Benoit is doing here: painting with pixels.

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