



Night ways: on Caroline Bachmann's landscape paintings

By Yann Chateigné

Has any art historian already had the idea to write about the wind? While looking at *Bise noire* (2017), a recent painting by Caroline Bachmann representing Lake Geneva at night, I can't help but ask myself this question: how would a genealogy of works of arts (of landscape paintings for example) look like, drawn from the perspective of the wind, a most often unnoticed element? I can already imagine so many films, videos, photographs, or even music compositions in which the wind plays such an important and dramatic role. It could be the animation of a scene, bringing life, and emotion into it, a specific pressure of time, or the signature of silence, of an existential void. The wind certainly represents an ambiguous element that invisibly connects beings and natural elements, puts the cosmos in movement. While ordering it, while pollinizing the world, both literally and metaphorically, the wind also announces the future, a change: be it a bright or a darker one.

Yet, in *Bise noire* everything seems still. The wind does not produce any movement over the black surface of the lake, nor within dark grey clouds above it. The only element that looks animated in the painting is the moon, placed near the upper corner of the composition; it's light radiates the sky that occupies more than half of the picture. The three zones that structure the painting (the lake, the sky, and the clouds), are treated as if

they were solid components of a construction. Their simplified shapes, even if calm and silent, seem to be alive, ordered by some architect who would have organized the composition. The only role of the North wind ("*bise*" in French), is to *color* the lake. The wind acts as an agent, not of romantic dramatization of the landscape, but of an almost scientific index of the water temperature. *Bise noire* is literally and discreetly fueled by a "dark wind" that brings the whole atmosphere of the painting from within – from within the paint itself, as if it was born out of a process of formulating a weather report.

The method is always the same. The artist observes the lake at night, each time during the same period (between 2 and 8 AM) and from the same point of view. Using carbon pencils, Caroline Bachmann sketches the composition, taking notes on the various elements (water, mountains, stars), and waiting for the different constituents of the landscape to align, she prepares the scene, waiting for the composition to appear. The latter is considered valuable when the "constellation" of elements *stands* and suddenly produces something like a visual theorem, a sort of cosmic poem that is in the meantime finally balanced and that connects, for a moment, the ever-elusive natural elements. Then the painting can start to be processed from memory. This singular system combines something like a conceptual method, one that is almost scientific, and an approach to nature that is based on an individual's intimate or meditative experience. The connection of the different parts of the paintings relies, as well, upon a double take on nature, that on the one hand celebrates repetition, in the form of a series, that repeats similar formats, viewpoints, recurring motifs, and on the other allows pure subjectivity through the supposedly infinite possibilities of associations, relations and orders.

Caroline Bachmann's landscapes are, in fact, the products of an experience in *reading* the lake. Here, the recording of time is paradoxical. It articulates visions of timelessness, through a static, balanced and almost silent composition that is addressed to the artist from the observed landscape, and the experience of timeliness that is condensed into

the pictures that is produced, via the practice of painting itself, during a *longue durée* process, in a certain sense, towards the landscape. They seem rooted into the lifelong stratification, accumulation of visions, experiences in seeing a specific territory, by a person who lived by this specific landscape lake, who stared at these skies, who looked at these elements from the same window, from when she was a child until she became an artist, and decided to install her studio right behind the same window from which she saw the Lake Geneva for the first time.

In *Loupe* (2018), another very literal title, as in every landscape painted by the artist, Caroline Bachmann payed attention to a specific visual effect that is produced over the lake when the atmosphere is particularly wet: the sun becomes round, its light swells, and reveals the sensuality of its celestial body softly emerging from the dark waters of the sleepy lake. Once again, the artist associates oppositions: the dry, conceptual literality of a technical oriented title with the bodily, almost magic visual effect of a cosmic connection; the physical description of a natural phenomenon with the almost spiritual implications of a magnifying lens produced by the elements. The different components of the painting become body parts, organic elements that compose a living totality, an interconnected body which the painting becomes the portrait. This holistic approach, though, is immediately contradicted by the formal treatment: to the celebration of a mystic immersion into the elements responds the simplification of shapes, to the fascination for total connection with nature as a whole the underlying irony of a design that evokes the artist's passion for comics, to the grandiloquent sublime the modesty of an almost monochromatic and passive tonality. And finally, the frame: by adding a painted frame into the painting, Caroline Bachmann puts the very subject of the picture at distance, affirming in the meantime the power of painting and the fact that all of this is solely re-presentation, the love for her subject and her consciousness of the accumulation of history.

The beauty of the artist's work certainly also lies within this subtle distance, this assumed fragility. Its importance relies on its conscious impotence, sometimes, to produce "classical" beauty, or sublime, towards such imposing and often-frightening *grandeur* of the Swiss landscape. But, in relation with the opening of this text that started with a take on the unnoticed in landscape painting, I might read this step-aside frontal confrontation with the sublime as a refusal, more

than an incapacity. I remember stepping in the artist's studio she also has in Berlin, and immediately falling for a small format painting representing a rainbow over the lake. At the time, I have to say, I did not know at all why I loved this painting so much, nor why it remained so present in my mind, and until now, so active, though unconsciously, inwardly and constantly in dialogue with some theoretical obsessions that I might have. This crystalline painting, entitled *Arc-en-ciel*, dated 2017, simply presents a skinny rainbow, that jumps over the lake, with the Alps behind, and a strange stain, or a shadow, that marks the green water right below the middle of the composition. Now that I think of it, it reminds me that for another text I wrote on painting, I thought of color and time, and that Walter Benjamin, in some of his early writings, once wrote that rainbows are pure connections. They link earth, and skies, and clouds. They connect elements with time, and experience, as they are so ephemeral. They also put territories in relation, on geographical, historical and emotional levels. In this sense, rainbows could very simply bring us back to the artist's method as symbols of her approach to painting,

Arc-en-ciel becoming something like Caroline Bachmann's discreet, silent and poetic manifesto. Let us freely follow Benjamin who also added: rainbows connect the inside and the outside, the emotional zones, the territories of our memories and the landscape like a text, the clouds like words, the colors like vehicles that allow us to navigate them. They are also bridges that allow time travels, that lead us to very immemorial times, reminding us that prophecies were made in ancient civilizations staring at them, meaning they can also announce a future to come. The experience of color, in Benjamin's writings, leads to the color of experience: according to him, color is not only a substance, but also a property, something one can look at and look through at the same time, such as in rainbows. The philosopher goes further: seers look through colors. It might not be by chance that Caroline Bachmann's *Arc-en-ciel* has been made at dawn, at this precise moment of the arrival of light after darkness. The function of seeing becomes the organ through which one sees. As portals, the artist's paintings are one of these.

CB 2017 / BISE NOIRE
Oil on canvas, 30 × 24 cm



CB 2016 / LUNE REFLET JAUNE
Oil on canvas, 30 × 24 cm



CB 2018 / LOUPE
Oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm



CB 2017 / ARC-EN-CIEL
Oil on canvas, 40 × 30 cm