

# Yves Bélorgey



## RUE DES PYRÉNÉES

The drawings and photographic tableaux of Yves Bélorgey (Sens, 1960) stretch the basic principles that have traditionally separated painting and photography, problematising the notions of document, mimesis and representation. The street then expresses its nature as a social panopticon, the buildings are records of how urban homogeneity is configured and distorted.

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[LA VIRREINA]  
CENTRE  
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de  
Barcelona



*Pont Ramus; près du 195, rue des Pyrénées*  
Ramus bridge, near number 195, Rue des Pyrénées

*Rue des Pyrénées*

Yves Bélorgey interviewed by Anne Giffon-Selle

2017

*When did this Rue des Pyrénées project come about and how? Can you reconstruct its genesis?*

Some years ago, I was on my way home from a party in Rue des Pyrénées and, walking down towards Rue Avron to get to Montreuil, I kept seeing, as though it were a hallucination, a series of flashes, buildings which in fact could also be the object of my work: the centre of Paris, then, could also be incorporated into my corpus!

The first picture was of the chemist's on the ground floor of the Anticonforme building, in June 2013. That picture followed the one of another chemist's shop window in Rue Roquette, which I had presented at the MAMCO. Without doubt I already wanted to do a kind of continuation of the book on Ulm (*Ulmer Zeichnungen*), which was also a book of drawings. In fact, beginning another series of drawings was beginning the next book.

The modern residential buildings seemed to me well integrated and they fit in well with what's left of an older world. That link with time is what acted as a trigger. And since I've been working on these drawings a lot of the things I've seen have already changed or even disappeared.

Rue des Pyrénées is a street in eastern Paris, a ring road they used to call it, connecting the Belleville neighbourhood with the Vincennes gate. It was built in the 19th century, at the time of the large public works undertaken by Haussman (1877) to renovate Paris. It's a wide street with trees planted on either side. It's located beyond the suburbs. It's where Rue Puebla used to be, which joined Belleville to the Saint-Blaise neighbourhood in the area of the church of Saint-Germain de Charonne. Rue Sant-Blaise and the neighbourhood have kept the scale of what at that time was not yet called the outskirts of a city, the scale of a French village. It became more and more obvious to me that Rue des Pyrénées is the boulevard of a 19th-century neighbourhood and that I'm in the

suburb, an established suburb, an old suburb. The image of future suburbs. The violence of Haussman's public works made it possible to build the ring road, but it was also the varied urban fabric, perhaps of a poor architectural and patrimonial quality, that allowed the construction of so many 'modernist' buildings. Building over demolitions. What will the suburb of tomorrow be; 150 years from now?

*You told me not long ago that for you contemporary art is tied to the suburb. Is that because of the peripheral, even marginal nature of these two 'territories'? Can you explain yourself in this respect?*

That's something I understood very recently. I reread Robert Smithson's text *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, which is quite clearly a visit to the suburbs from the centre of the city, for Smithson from the centre of Manhattan where he takes the subway... The pioneering nature of that text and of the pictures that go with it, and that pioneering nature of the contemporary art that became the avant-garde after conceptual art, indicates that we've arrived in a new region.

Influential works of modernity like *Nadja*, the classic conceptual works, Becher's photographs, Gordon Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* and others, the critical mass of modernity, don't tackle the urban periphery in itself. Dan Graham is one of the few artists to have dealt with urbanised suburbs, and of course we mustn't forget people like Ed Ruscha, but being in Los Angeles the question of suburbs is approached differently.

I think the suburb has represented novelty, the new city, and it's related to industrial and capitalist progress. The historical and patrimonial town centre simply takes advantage of it. The impressionists and neo-impressionists were in the suburbs. The suburb embodied novelty, but now that novelty is in crisis. To Robert Smithson, Passaic's monuments are what's left of a suburb of New York, Paterson's village, which William Carlos Williams wrote a great epic poem about. Passaic's monuments are small ecological and social fractures.

First of all, the suburb is a territory in which there are still open, accessible spaces, like wastelands, and at the same time these spaces are in crisis, the deindustrialisation crisis. The public space everywhere is ruined, worn out, sometimes devastated and out of proportion, the same as the present human and social crisis. With the suburb, you've got the site of the modern, progressive space, but since the end of the 70s it's a space that's criticised and in crisis. The appearance of conceptual art is contemporary to the criticism by architects of the modern movement and the *doxa* of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM).<sup>1</sup> This was the time of Team X, of Jean Renaudie and Renée Gailhoustet in France, and of others like Kazuo Shinohara in Japan, Lucien Kroll, etc., who are so important to me.

With the suburb, with the periphery of the centre of the city, the new region being tackled is young, sometimes built up from scratch, it's the heir to modernity, but it overwhelms it, it exhausts it with its heterogeneity. The suburb... it's difficult to talk about it. Obviously, there's not just one suburb, there are rich suburbs, poor suburbs, older or younger ones, closer to or farther from the centre, more or less closely related to it, more or less disinherited... In it there are languages, cultures, it's the future. There's a drawing I've called *View of Greater Paris*. This Greater Paris idea... is it a euphemism to avoid the suburbs, to dodge them or to make them disappear?

*What you say about the suburb, the periphery, seems precisely to be a metaphor of the route your pictures have followed between inheriting from modernity and overwhelming it, overcoming it. In our conversations, what's more, you've mentioned several times the importance of the subject denied by modernity with whom you think the new generations have a certain difficulty. Would reconnecting with the subject also form part of that 'new region'?*

<sup>1</sup> Meetings between 1928 and 1959, when Team X, another younger association that proposed other forms of dialogue, forced their dissolution.

I more or less consciously overcame this question of the subject when I began what I now call my building pictures. At first I worked on isolated objects, modern apartment blocks, that is the ones you find on the outskirts of cities. Although I began with the suburbs of Marseilles, Lyon and Paris, I immediately went on to Moscow, Berlin, the cities of eastern Europe and beyond. That's how the 'subject' came to me. But I didn't realise until later that I had a subject identified by the apartment block. In fact, at first, with the buildings, I recovered in another way a certain treatment of the 'local'. The set of drawings in *Rue des Pyrénées* is the best result of this so far.

*Is this series in Rue des Pyrénées a project to exhaust a topic or a project of immersion in that topic? And – the two questions may be related –, perhaps, in spite of some of the interior views, is drawing the street, the public space, a way of dealing with collective history like the collective apartment blocks did?*

Yes, of course. You could say that. It's an attempt at that. The street is like a building. Certainly, the street is less an object than the building, and I can't represent the whole street, in the same way that I couldn't represent an isolated building entirely. And it isn't just not all the street – there's no reference to Ed Ruscha here –, it isn't just that street either.

Investigating or imagining the street also means understanding its impacts, its angles, its kinships, its vicinity, its borders, its history.

A street, even a ring road, isn't an infrastructure disconnected from everything, it's more the expression of a social condition – what neighbourhood do I live in, how do I relate to the locals. A street is where we have our address, our own address – and I address the inhabitants. The street is where shops and businesses are, but also public buildings, post offices, schools... A special – very special –, rather organic or archaic kind of building. A kind of building on account of its social or public dimension, rather than its architectural dimension: a street has a kind of unity, rather like a building



*Petite ceinture, vue du 104, rue de Bagnolet*  
Small ring road, near number 104, Rue de Bagnolet





*Dispensaire pour maladies de poitrine (ancien dispensaire Jouye-Rouve-Taniès)  
à la pointe de la rue des Pyrénées et de la rue Stendhal  
Clinic for chest ailments (former Jouye-Rouve-Taniès clinic)  
at the end of Rue des Pyrénées and Rue Stendhal*



*Porte; 50, rue des Envierges*  
Door; number 50, Rue des Envierges

has. I've often imagined myself moulding a street, and then it would be a building, wouldn't it? In short, with this set of drawings, what I want to draw is an apartment block as a utopian project.

*Whether they're more frontal drawings of building entrances and shop windows, or broader views of a street or a group of buildings, even the few drawings of interiors, you tend to introduce an element that disturbs the plane of the drawing, its homogeneity, that pierces it, perforates it, or else projects the subject or a space in front of the observer: either a play of reflections, or a perspective, or a view through a window. This was sometimes suggested by some detail in your earlier drawings, but more timidly, I think, and your drawings were more frontal, more like architect's drawings, in fact. But on the other hand there's one drawing that intrigues me because it's a bit of an exception: the one of the Bar Le Ménil, which doesn't seem to contain any of these views. The eye comes up against the wall at the back, covered in photographs of famous people. Even the opening is blocked, it only seems to give onto another wall. What motivated this drawing? Perhaps those portraits – photographs! – lodged there take on precisely that role of leading the eye beyond the enclosed space?*

From the interiors, the openings or windows give onto the exterior, usually the street and the light. It's exactly the opposite, or the negative, of dark shapes, and also of windows seen from the exterior that structured the earlier drawings of façades or entrances.

The drawing of the bar, though it doesn't contain a view, includes a mirror and indeed those portraits of 20th-century celebrities. From the moment I started to include drawings by night, this bar pretty soon forced itself on me. Because of the design of the décor, the artists represented, that drawing evokes a relatively recent period, or at least one I knew, and this bar represents, more than neighbourhood life, the extension of public space towards the interior. I hope the bar isn't going to disappear too! It's a minor monument.

The drawings from the start are a variation on the threshold: nearby entrances, windows and balconies... I was thinking about a threshold effect, a symbolic form. And then there are those reflections in the glass, the display cases, the arch of a bridge... In those reflections, those diurnal depths, which are also an image of transparency, I also state the photographic drawing dimension.

*What do you understand by 'photographic drawing'?*

Because of its infinite shades of grey, the drawing also lets you record the photographic view. Contrasts that escape everyday perception. My paintings and my drawings are based on a photographic *reportage*. The information captured is broken down, put back together again and interpreted in the studio.

When I'm drawing, I often get the feeling I'm taking a photograph. But unlike Gerhard Richter's photographic paintings, for example, my drawings don't result from the effect of a surface and screen that homogenise the plane.

From the start, it's important to me that the image isn't mechanically enlarged on the medium to draw or paint it. My method is more like the grid that was once used to enlarge images, or with the transfer of the sketch to the scale of the picture. But from the start I felt the need to draw or construct the image, to see what choices I make, what I keep, what's going to disappear. Gradually, I tried to introduce more and more varied details into the picture, things I couldn't have painted at any other time because they would have seemed anecdotal or sentimental. Hence the activity of the inhabitants, which is, as it were, induced in the paintings or drawings. This answers the question about the lack of a figure, which often worries observers.

They often also feel a twofold worry faced with the drawing based on photography, as though that made it less genuine and meant it was appropriating photography's powers of illusion and at the same time betraying the convenience of that illusion. Or else people imagine choices are made according to photogenic criteria, which isn't my case.

The drawing always brings with it an aspect of uncertainty or of improvisation.

*You haven't done many paintings for this series. How has drawing come to dominate in this tour of the city?*

Due to the wish to produce a book, which arose very soon. The economy of work in drawing means there can be a lot of them and speeds up execution and rhythm.

What's more, some subjects make for other image scales. At first I used two sizes: big, 240 × 240 cm, and small, 80 × 80 cm, and I added another in between, 150 × 150 cm. Some subjects require such and such a scale, which needs to be enclosed – above all for technical reasons –, while the 'artist's view' needs no other scale than the body.

The first painting in colour in *Rue des Pyrénées* – Karcher Square – is due to a sort of error on my part, an error of scale. An error I corrected, because once the picture was finished I included the view in a larger drawing. So the picture acted as a sketch for the drawing. For the pictures, I think the choice of working in colour also has something to do with a question of scale. I mean going from the drawing to the painting would be to change the scale.

*In referring to this series, you tend to quote Barnett Newman, who said: 'Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting off space, my drawing declares the space. Instead of working with the remnants of space, I work with the whole space'. Does drawing, being reduced to infinite shades of grey, let you reach a sort of essence of space, of fundamental structure?*

Yes. For me, colour is perhaps more the challenge in painting, and in drawing it's more the space and clarity. That's how the drawing can 'declare the space' and not 'the volume identified by its outline', to continue quoting Barnett Newman, who clearly relates questions of space with those of drawing. But they are also the same challenges we find in the spatial continuity of Georges Seurat's drawings, for example.

And since space – to continue with Newman – is ‘common property’<sup>2</sup> par excellence, drawing is a privileged instrument for representing a public space as a common asset, at the same time restoring a certain privacy to it. Or shall we say, to try and be a bit clearer, drawing, black and white, synthesises perception, establishes a relationship of value and conceptually is more closely related to architectural drawing and ultimately to what architects call ‘the project’. The element of failure, of clumsiness and of uncertainty that is inherent to drawing also allows another kind of synthesis between a kind of objective public sphere and the more private world of the imaginary.

The practice of drawing is an archaic practice; it is, after all, an activity man has practised since prehistory. Is that what makes it a minor art?

Well, with ‘photographic drawing’, the photographic reportage is interpreted as a manual procedure... The values, the contrasts, the greys, everything that makes up the spatial continuity between the objects, between the interior and exterior and us the inhabitants is integrated in a necessary description of the street as a common space. The more the work progresses, the more sensitive I am to optical questions or problems of perception, for example intensifying the blacks and whites in the same way as the simultaneous contrast of the colours. But I don’t try to resolve these questions for their own sake, I want to reply to real impressions, redraw these rediscovered corners as something familiar, these fragments of everyday life to describe them. In a sense, these drawings from photographs are ‘descriptions of a description’.

<sup>2</sup> ‘What is all the clamor over space? ... The love of space is there, and painting functions in space like everything else because it is a communal fact – it can be held in common... Only time can be felt in private. Space is common property. Only time is personal, a private experience. That’s what makes it ... so important.  
– Barnett Newman.



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