

Charlotte Beaudry's barbed images

Eva Wittcox

How is it that in this world in which media coverage plays an excessive part, we can still be touched by images ? Images on billboards, television, commercials, want to tempt or inform us, or urge us to consume some product. Images, slogans, colour and shape are used to stimulate a certain behaviour or make us think. In their works of art, visual artists confront us with a personal view of the world we live in. They isolate fragments of reality, fragments of experiences and appropriate them. The result provides the viewer with a critical, but also open view of our surroundings and thus sharpens the mind.

In her paintings and drawings, Charlotte Beaudry introduces a variety of subjects. Her art is figurative, but not realistic. Beaudry selects scraps of reality and isolates these in her simple compositions. She departs from photographs she makes herself or downloads from the internet. Usually Beaudry focuses on a certain idea she explores from the perspective of the painter in a series of works. She translates certain shapes and images in a personal style, highlighting particular aspects, revealing specific features and linking these with a certain atmosphere or emotion. Beaudry invariably depicts her subjects frontally, almost filling the entire composition. She never pays attention to situating the scene or the object — there is no room for the context. It is as if she zooms in on the meticulously chosen objects and presents a close-up of situations we never experience that close or from this perspective. By isolating the subjects and as it were portraying them, the artist raises questions about the status of images. It is as if she seeks to tell us something about the abstract character of images. By entirely eliminating the context, the message or the story about or behind the images, Beaudry apparently wants to emphasize their significance. Some of the images are reminiscent of Michelangelo Antonioni's famous film *Blow-up*, in which a photographer becomes obsessed with a photograph. Seeking to find out what it is exactly that can be seen on the photograph, he blows up the image to such a scale that it no longer relates to reality. Similarly, Beaudry depicts reality on the canvas, recognizable and strange at the same time. Because of the isolation of the subjects, some of the images breathe a certain melancholy. A helmet, a megaphone, a bracelet or a catapult—their isolation lends them a certain sadness. Though Beaudry's paintings are all

autonomous, their meaning is often enhanced by relating them to other works that belong to the same series or period. The combination of images such as the catapult and the megaphone emphasize their connotation with aggression. They turn into metaphors of the human condition that refer to a sentiment of oppression, the longing to communicate or cry out. Still another series of smaller works zooms in on aspects of identity and the urge to be distinguish the self from the other. Six cups, of the sort awarded for winning a sports event, are portrayed in close-up. But unlike in the news, the winner is absent, and so is any reference to the meritorious act that is symbolized by the trivial metal cup. Yet another series zooms in on the ribbons awarded to the winners of beauty pageants. Beaudry's paintings feature a fragment of a ribbon with a reference to the contestant's country of origin, but the ribbon is depicted anonymously, against an abstract background. Five paintings of identical Buddhas, apart for the size, are arranged from large to small, like a series of interchangeable russian dolls that have lost their identity. Through the subjects depicted, the various paintings provide food for thought about news events, sporting achievements, top models, film stars, etc.

Charlotte Beaudry avoids to insert a narrative element in her work. She seeks to confront us with powerful images that have a direct impact, without telling a story. Landscapes, architectural elements and objects are therefore rarely combined with people. This prevents the public from seeking links between the elements depicted on the canvas and delving too deep "into" the subject. Beaudry wants people to approach her works as a direct impulse that represents a powerful statement about the icon-like image and about the painting itself as the pictorial translation of this impulse. Images of human figures play an important part throughout the oeuvre. For several years, the same figure of an androgynous young girl has recurred in the paintings, both in close-up and as a full-length, almost life-size portrait. But not only references to a context lack in these paintings, also direct references to the girl's face and hence her identity are avoided. She turns her head away from us, or her long hairs, her hands or her sweater cover her face. Because of the anonymous character of the painting, we tend to look at the image rather than at the character depicted. The attitude of the teenage girl is alternately shy and defiant. We see her moving about ; sometimes she falls or screams — poses or attitudes that seem a metaphor for the unstable emotional world of adolescents. This one character, an acquaintance of long standing who poses regularly for the artist, is like a leitmotif that links numerous works. The young, thin, androgynous model represents the prevailing ideal of female beauty, but she combines this with an evocative aggression. The girl

is like a model who represents the act of looking itself. She subjects herself to the gaze of others, without for that matter disclosing anything about herself. She combines contradictory feelings : longing and frustration. The struggle with her own identity in which the girl engages through her various poses and bearings is translated into a pictorial struggle, as if she seeks to escape the frame of the painting. She wriggles her arms in her sweater to stretch them and hide her body, which points to a tension that is present in the canvas itself. When she turns away or seems about to leave the canvas, the artist is raising questions about the boundary of the image. The hand with which she covers her face or sprays it with paint, also protects her from the eyes of the public.

In most of her works, Beaudry focuses on a single subject which she depicts frontally, but in some she seeks to achieve the opposite effect — maybe something we should call an “ all over ” effect. In these works there is a multitude of similar shapes that are presented without much of a hierarchic order or context. A sky full of birds, a web of branches, a display of firework, etc. The subjects fill the image and there is the suggestion that they continue beyond the frame of the painting. The multitude evokes both a certain tension and a certain tedium. It makes us think of a non-subject, with an ornamental touch. In many of these works, pale shades of grey dominate the palette. The colours are rarely bright and lively. This enhances the sense of loss that characterizes some of the works. Asked about the appeal of shades of grey, Beaudry related that usually she sets out on a composition with greys and then adds colour. But often it turns out that in the first stage the image reaches such an intensity that the use of colour becomes redundant.

Charlotte Beaudry's works can be interpreted at two levels : as a reflection on the (im)possibilities of both the image and the painting. This is particularly obvious in the recent paintings of carnival masks. With regard to their content, the masks refer to the concepts of identity and hiding. But formally, the artist paints only the inside of the plastic masks. She shows us the empty, monochrome inside. From a pictorial perspective, she takes up the gauntlet and seeks to depict this inside full-scale, with the appropriate depth effect. The canvas with the mask turns into a sort of mould, which the viewer can hook to his or her face and gaze — as if it were a masked window on reality. Also the paintings with garage doors, abandoned car parks or empty cardboard boxes seem to hide themselves from our eyes, at various levels — literally and figuratively. Paradoxically, by painting the

objects in close-up, the artist seems to increase the distance between them and the public. They are so close to the canvas, to the surface of the image, that it is impossible to identify ourselves with them. The inherent aggression they embody, creates a distance between them and ourselves. Beaudry's objects are both present and absent. We cannot relate to them "normally", like we do with the images that we are used to seeing around us and that invite us to enter them.

Charlotte Beaudry not only enquires into the peculiarities of the image as such, but she also confronts the painting. In doing so, she plays with the codes used in the world of advertising : close-ups, sensual poses, frontal views, vague backgrounds. A fascinating dialogue ensues, in the course of which our glance alternates between the canvas as image and as the material support of the paint that seeks to evoke an illusory space.

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More info about Charlotte Beaudry : <http://www.charlottebeaudry.net/>

More info about the book : <http://www.charlottebeaudry.net/book.htm>

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