

Eric Jégat and the Human Figure: a Portrait of the Artist in his Studio



Melisande Fitzsimons
BA Fine Art (Part time)
3rd Year MAR 284

"I declare that all material that is not my own has been identified"

Eric Jégat has always been fascinated by the human figure throughout his career as a painter, sculptor and engraver. He studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1983 and 1986, and subsequently enrolled at the Académie Virgile Nevjestic in Paris in 1986 for three years to study different techniques of engraving and etching. Over the years I have noticed how the human form has been simplified in his paintings. Figures have turned into stiff and motionless sentinels, while bodies have become truncated, with legs melting like snow and the human form being gradually reduced to an abstract silhouette.

I went to see his latest exhibition "Lignes de Vie" (Life Lines) in Paris in January 2006, and this new series could not have been more different in its technique and tones. He then invited me in March for an exclusive interview in his studio. This essay is a selection of our conversations about his career and new work.

Melisande Fitzsimons: What artists have influenced you over the years?

Eric Jégat: When I was at the Beaux-Arts, painters like Nicolas de Stael and Nicolas Poussin made a very strong impression on me, and most of my paintings were abstract, like Stael's. I am now very fond of people like Barcelo and Soulages, as well as the Italian transvanguard with Paladino and Clemente. But that doesn't mean that they necessarily influence me. In the same way, I am interested in German neoexpressionism, represented by artists like Baselitz and Kiefer, for example, because they are close to what I would have liked to paint. Because there is a big difference between what you want to paint and what you actually paint, you never really achieve what you set out to do, do you? Interestingly enough, I go to the theatre a lot, and I find that images are very

important to me. The show "Iphigenie en Tauride", by Pina Baush, has strongly influenced me, with its movements and symbols.

These influences are never conscious or immediate, but they somehow trickle down to my paintings, perhaps six months to a year later. With time, what remains in my memory are not images but colours and impressions. I'll give you an example: in 2000, I made a series of prints called "Transparences", about the life of insects. (*Not only is the series beautiful, but the text that goes with it is also very funny. MF*)

I wondered for a while why I was suddenly interested in entomology, when I realized that, twelve months before, I had seen an exhibition of Cesar's first sculptures at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. He had made insects out of bolts, nuts and screws. But it took me a year to understand that it had influenced me in the first place.

MF: You said in one of your catalogues (Cahier d'Atelier, 1999) that you get lighter with each painting. Do you mean that you get a sense of relief when you finish a painting?

EJ: We talked about a person's projections of his or her fears on the canvas and for me, to a certain extent, there is also a form of subconscious exorcism going on when I finish a painting. It can be a painful one, too, a sensation I would compare to having my teeth pulled out. You see, once you are an adult and you have had your teeth removed, they do not grow back, do they? It is the same with paintings for me.

I have a limited amount of stock in me, I know that the paintings will not grow again and it is a painful reality that I need to acknowledge. Something is being yanked from me and the sensation is very powerful. But I do not think that it is as bad as giving birth, though! When I am about to finish a piece, I get this painful, wrenching feeling. Then, once the piece is done, I feel content and I am able to put things in perspective. I usually find the painting rather good, because it is often as close to my artistic intentions as I could hope to achieve. I get a sense of physical satisfaction because I am like an artisan; I am someone who has, very painstakingly, made an object.

I then realize that the number of paintings left in me is slowly declining, like the numbers on a meter. But unlike what you are suggesting, there is no sense of relief, no sense of getting rid of something heavy. I am lighter, but not in a physical way. It is just that there is one less painting in my imaginary cellar. There will come a day when there will only be 3 or 4 paintings left in that cellar, and I will know it.

Once out of the studio the painting starts a life of its own, with its new owners. They keep growing without me, but I like to stay in touch, to keep a trace of my work. I think about them, I take photographs of them. For me, it is a way of keeping track of what I have achieved, and the photographs are like a giant calendar of my progress. (*Eric Jégat always remembers whom he sold all his*

paintings, prints and engravings to, which is no mean feat when you realize that he has been painting full time for 16 years now. MF)

MF: Do you ever know when your painting is finished?

EJ: When I think that my work is completed, I prop the painting on the wall, away from the window, in a very specific place (*He shows me the spot. MF*). I have been painting for 20 years now and it has taken me 15 years to understand how I function on an artistic level. With printing and painting there are so many things that we do not know and that we have to create and discover on our own. It is the same with our senses. We are so limited in our perceptions! There is a big gap between what we see and what is going on around us, on a microscopic or acoustic level, for example. In my paintings I want to show that there is an infinite number of worlds around us that we can't see because our awareness is so imperfect.

Anyway, I have worked on this painting for an average of 6 months. I know I need to stop before I start "damaging" it. I hang it on the wall, and sit in my chair across the room and look at it. If I don't have the physical impulse to get up and start working on it again, then I know I have done it. It is like an animal feeling. I do nothing else for a month, and then one day, I stop looking at the painting. I then decide to sign it, and maybe touch it up, but that does not happen very often. Since I am always working on 4 or 5 paintings at the same time, I end up with a series of paintings propped against the wall!

MF: Could you talk about your techniques in relation to the support and media you use?

EJ: When I started painting full time in 1990, I used to keep a lot of sketchbooks, and I used to draw directly on the canvas with charcoal. My work was much more "symboliste" than now and, in a way, it was easier to describe what I was doing. I started with a specific drawing in mind, whereas now I try to paint what I can not show, there is always an element of a secret involved in my work. When I start painting I do not know what the outcome will be, I just have a general idea that will run through a series of paintings. The result could be 10, 15 or 20 paintings over 1, 2, 3 or 4 years. When I was younger, I wanted to cram meaning and symbol in every single painting, but the result was far too convoluted and obscure. Now I take my time and plan my work over several years. After spending four years painting human footprints in dark tones, I decided to go back to the human figure with "Lignes de Vie".

I also enjoy printing, because it is like a different type of breathing for me. I always know what support will go with the idea I want to develop, and what

theme is suitable for printing or painting. The idea is always linked to a specific medium in my mind. But I cannot say whether the media I use influence my ideas, or if it is the other way round. But then Pierre Soulages does not know either!

With "Transparences", I knew I wanted to work on insects, but since I was using wax in my work at the time, the medium influenced the outcome, from the point of view of form.

Wax has been a very important medium for me over the years. I have used it to symbolize the paradox of time and space, because when light hits wax, it slows down and as a result, time slows down as well. Time is frozen in wax, because there are layers of it, and the light is refracted on it. You have to slow down your gaze and take your time to see what is hidden under these layers. There is always something hidden in my work because I want people to stop and look carefully at what I have done. I have spent 6 months on a painting, so I expect more than a few seconds of your attention!

MF: Finally, could you talk us through "Lignes de Vie", your latest series?

EJ: Lignes de Vie has been a kind of renaissance for me. That is why I have used white to underline the importance of this new direction. It was like learning to paint again by removing layers of colours. I wanted to find the innocence of beginnings again, a bit like a writer in front of his white page. It also triggers memories of virginity, like a wedding dress, perhaps.

The lines of the title refer to the East Africa fault line where life started three million years ago. So in a way we are all Africans! In my new paintings all the figures come out of this line, as they would from a vagina. Life comes out of a line for me.

The line might also represent a crack, like the cracks in the soil. The core of the earth is made of red, melting lava and in a way it mirrors the way we are made too, with our red insides. The lines are also a way of dividing the painting, with a top and bottom part, which can act as a mirror to each other. The top part of the painting is often the reflection of the bottom part.

MF: What reactions did you get when you first showed the paintings?

EJ: Only a few people, including you and my wife, did not find the new series disturbing. Most people are uncomfortable with the paleness of the paintings, even though they are full of subdued colours.

MF: Maybe the fact that there is always a distance between the figures, or that the figures have no recognizable features, or no features at all is unsettling for them.

EJ: Maybe... I can feel the influence of expressionism in this series. I think I have more in common with Picasso in terms of tones and themes than with Matisse and his use of warm, happy colours. But again, aren't people's reactions a reflection of their own fears and dreams? People have seen decapitations, public executions and hangings in those paintings. In "La Vie", some thought that the bird on the canvas was saving the human figure, while others were convinced that it was trying to kill him. The lack of expression on the figures is important in my work because it leaves people free to imagine what they want to see in my work. Anyway, whatever their interpretation of "Lignes de Vie", I feel that, as an artist, I have opened new doors and widened my horizons. I am not constricted anymore, I am breathing again...

Eric Jegat, an Interview with the Artist in his Studio,
17th March, 2006, Paris (Melisande Fitzsimons)
Ericjogat.com, internet website of the artist

Eric Jegat, la peinture en mouvement, 1990, exhibition catalogue Eric Jegat, 1995, exhibition catalogue
Les Corps Essentiels, 1997, exhibition catalogue Cahier d'Atelier, 1999, exhibition catalogue Transparences, 2000, exhibition catalogue Ombre et Lumiere, 2000, exhibition catalogue Sur les Traces de..., 2001-2003, exhibition
Eric Jegat, Un vitrail, des vitraux, 2003, exhibition