

Roger-Edgar Gillet

Une figuration Autre

May 29 - July 27, 2024

91, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré 8^e



Le Club Méditerranée à Marrakech, 1976-1977
Oil on canvas, 202,5 x 303 x 5 cm (79 11/16 x 119 1/4 in.)

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to present the second exhibition of Roger-Edgar Gillet (1924-2004), a painter from the Second School of Paris, whose prolific career ranged from lyrical abstraction in the 1950s to an expressionist figuration close to Jean Fautrier, Zoran Mušič, Eugène Leroy and Paul Rebeyrolle. In collaboration with the artist's estate, *Une Figuration Autre* sheds light on a body of work that is emblematic of his oeuvre, spanning the early 1960s to the more mature paintings of the late 1990s.

When we look at Gillet's paintings, the first thing we notice is their materiality. This sensation, which "*penetrates the body by way of the eyes,*" as the painter said, echoes the sensations he experienced in his youth. As a child, he watched the baker knead the dough, the poster paster smears the sheet, and the worker laboriously crushing the tar onto the ground with his spatula—fascinating sights. He transferred these emotions, which were correlated with material, to painting, a medium that gradually became central to his artistic practice. While retaining these early impressions of an intense relationship with matter, the works on display also offer a profound reflection on the possibilities of a new figuration.

For half a century, R.-E. Gillet devoted himself to painting. The artist began his studies at the École Boule, then went on to the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where he acquired "*a taste for things well done, technique and means of expression,*" he declared. In 1950, the young painter had a decisive encounter with Charles Estienne and Michel Tapié, critics and theoreticians of art informel. In those years, he participated in the then booming movement of lyrical abstraction, while also maintaining a certain distance from it, in his need to confront reality: faces and other silhouettes emerge from the lively brushwork of his early paintings. It was also at this time that the artist developed a chromatic palette of ochres and browns, which he would continue to favor throughout his 50-year career. The "rough" aspect of his canvases—due to the use of sand, pebbles, and rabbit-skin glue—is also very much in evidence. It brings to mind the work of Jean Dubuffet, whose "*radical rejection of accepted notions of 'ugly' and 'beautiful' Gillet shared at the time.*"¹

During a trip to the United States in 1955, after having received the Fénéon Prize and the Catherwood Prize, the artist experienced a genuine aesthetic shock. He was overwhelmed by El Greco's work, *Cardinal Fernando Niño de Guevara*, in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Faced with the maliciousness of the cardinal's bespectacled gaze, Gillet felt like he had lost something of abstract painting. This new way of seeing enabled him, at the turn of the 1960s, to direct his painting toward a free-spirited and assertive figuration, in which portraiture played a central role. After exhibiting with Georges Mathieu and being under contract with the Galerie de France, alongside the likes of Hartung, Soulages and other younger artists like Alechinsky and Maryan, Galerie Ariel, founded by Jean Pollak, followed him wholeheartedly in this new evolution.

The paintings in this exhibition, dated between 1966 and 1997, are at the heart of this change of approach. A slight tension between figuration and abstraction persists, however. The deformed human silhouettes stand out against a dark background; the cities, in parallel with his work on portraits, are composed of rounded architectures, like *Villes Brunes* (1975) or *Le Club Méditerranée à Marrakech* (1976-77), inspired by a trip to Tunisia that the artist

¹Raphaël Rubinstein, *Roger-Edgar Gillet: the figure disfigured*, Petzel, 2022

took in 1972. Although faces are essential in his paintings—the artist regularly refers to their importance in art history—they are almost always blurred. His silhouettes are barely outlined as is evidenced in *Le Modèle* (1966). This “*tyranny of the face*”, described by Alexis Pelletier in an interview, is explained by the primacy of gesture over representation: according to R.-E. Gillet, it is first and foremost an expressionistic treatment in which paint looks like a paste to be worked, kneaded, crushed and ground. The deformation is there to “*achieve a maximum of expression*,” confided the artist. After all, Gillet declared that, in the end, “*the subject of the work is of no importance*,” before adding that “*this assertion is undoubtedly false, but a certain modesty forbids me from speaking of it. I prefer to see it only as a pretext for the enormous desire to paint, and to do the opposite of this fashion of anti-painting, as if the painter is denying himself the joy of crushing paint on canvas.*”

His love of the essence and materiality of paint also extends to its history. In his search for a different figuration, the artist is inspired by old masters, like Francisco de Goya, and particularly his nightmarish *Black Paintings*, which are echoed in *L'Orchestre* (1979). Crowds gather in the foreground and middle ground, like misshapen masses of stretched flesh, seemingly in continuous expansion. Honoré Daumier inspired him with his caricatures and his *scènes de moeurs*, as did James Ensor, whose work *L'Intrigue* (1890) recalls Gillet's painting *Les Binches* (1968), illustrating his affinity for his spirit of derision. Numerous works from the exhibition touch on the same theme: music. They feature musicians, alone or in groups, and most refer to the preparatory drawings he made for a large-scale mural commissioned by SACEM in 1978. R.-E. Gillet was probably influenced by the musicians of the Free Jazz festival, “Sens Music Meeting”, which took place every year in Sens, whom the artist used to invite to his home.

The exhibition showcases a series of paintings that, in addition to highlighting matter as a subject, probe the mysteries of the very medium of painting, which Gillet spoke of with a certain modesty. For in evoking material, the artist declared that “*painting is not just painting, of course, but if the viewer—in addition to the plastic pleasure I am providing him with—sees it like a reflection of the absurdity, the baroque, the society circus in which we evolve, my role as a painter will have been fulfilled.*” The artist's gestural virtuosity harmonizes and simultaneously unbalances the images of an absurd world, and is always tinged with humor and derision. In this way, R.-E. Gillet's paintings give palpable meaning to Lionel Bourg's statement on Paul Rebeyrolle's painting: here, “*nothing is too beautiful, nor too repulsive, everything is there, everything cries out, everything begins: painting ignores satiety.*”²

²Lionel Bourg, *L'œuvre de chair*, Éditions Fario, 2021

Born in Paris in 1924, Roger-Edgar Gillet lived between Paris, Sens and the Saint-Malo region, where he died in 2004.

Gillet has been the subject of major institutional exhibitions in France and abroad: *Gillet-Dodeigne* at the Palais Galliera (1971, Paris), *Rétrospective* at the CNAP (1987, Paris), *La Marche des oubliés* at the Centre d'art contemporain de Saint-Priest (1989), *March of the forgotten* at the University of Oklahoma Museum and *Stéphane Janssen Collection* at the Scottsdale Arts Center (1990), Roger-Edgar Gillet, *Cinquante ans de peinture* at the Musée du Palais Synodal (1999, Sens), *Je Garderai un Excellent Souvenir de vous!* at Musée Estrine (2005, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence), *Un Regard* at Centre d'art contemporain du Parc Caillebotte (2009, Yerres), *Exercices de survie, œuvres graphiques* at Musée du Mont de Piété (2017, Bergues), *Guignol's Band* at Espace Paul Rebeyrolle (2023, Eymoutiers).

The artist was also part of important group exhibitions such as: *10 ans d'art français* at the Musée de Grenoble (1956), *Painting and sculptures* from the collection of Mr & Mrs Ted Weiner at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1964), *Promesses tenues* at the Palais Galliera (Paris, 1965), *Les Uns par les autres* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille (1979), *Aspect de la peinture contemporaine 1945-1983* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Troyes (1983), *Les Nouveaux expressionnistes* at the Louisiana Museum (Humblebaek, 1985), *Face à face, tête à tête* at the Musée Ingres (Montauban, 2004), the touring exhibition *La Peau du chat : Carlotta Charmet et les collectionneurs* at the Centre d'Art de l'Yonne (Château de Tanlay, 2004), at the Arthotèque de Caen (2004), at the Musée de l'Abbaye de Sainte Croix (Les Sables d'Olonne, 2005), *L'Envolée Lyrique, Paris 1945-1956* at the Musée du Luxembourg (Paris, 2006), *Le corps, apparitions et métamorphoses* at the Musée Estrine (Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 2008), *Salah Stétié et les peintres* at the Musée Paul Valéry (Sète, 2012), *Retour de Mer* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Dunkerque, 2013).

More recently, Roger-Edgar Gillet's work has been featured in the exhibitions *Construire une collection* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, *De Tiépolo à Richter* at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Bruxelles, *Acquisitions récentes du cabinet d'art graphique* in 2018, *Galleries du XXe siècle* at the Centre Pompidou in 2019, *Nouvelles Perspectives-Collections XXe/XXIe siècles* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon in 2021.

His work can be found in major public collections: in France, the Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Centre National des Arts Plastiques (Paris), the Musées des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Rennes, Rouen and the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, the Musée de Sens, the Musée Estrine (Saint-Rémy-de-Provence), the Musée Paul Valéry (Sète), LAAC Musées de Dunkerque ; in Denmark, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Humblebaek); in Norway, the Oslo Museum (Oslo); in Belgium, the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (Brussels), the SMAK Musée municipal pour l'art actuel (Ghent), the Fondation du roi Baudouin, Collection Neyrinck (Mons); and in Brazil, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo.

Paris Saint-Honoré

Carole Benzaken
Eclats
March 16 - May 18, 2024

Roger-Edgar Gillet
Une figuration autre
May 27 - July 29, 2024

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri

Laura Henno
Grande Terre
April 6 - June 1, 2024

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri - Espace II

Valérie Belin
Lady Stardust
April 11 - June 1, 2024

Brussels

Romana Londi
What is your substance, whereof are you made (that millions of strange shadows on you tend)
April 13 - May 25, 2024

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