

ILHA

Praça das Flores 48-A, 1200-192 Lisbon
@ilhalisboa

Louis Cane: Works from 1966-68

Opening day May 28, 6-8 pm

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In a repeated stating of an artist's name and occupation to generate an image for a painting, which for some viewers may register as an affront, there is actually a modest affirmation: I am an artist, a painter. As simple as that. And yet the fact of these lines, in their repetition, serving as an image can also be seen as a negation, similar to how a monochrome denies picture-making. A monochrome may not be a picture, but it is a painting. Of this there is no doubt. Most viewers, however, expect a painting, in the usual sense, even an abstraction, to offer a pictorial experience; this line, echoing itself, is closer to writing than to painting. On close inspection, these works are not truly painted. There is no sign of a brush. The line repeatedly imprinted on the canvases—toiles tamponnées—may appear to be more a matter of bureaucracy than of art. Think of a passport stamped when a border was crossed. (Now we look into a screen; our eyes are scanned.) Painting as a frontier? Consider the period in which Louis Cane, artiste, peintre, created his literally signature works: between 1966 and 1970. This was a time when art was questioned, when some would assert that "Art is to change what you expect of it." And what of painting, that most reliable of forms? How was painting in this environment meant to shift expectations? Many of Cane's canvases were un-stretched, simply hung loosely on the wall, without the implicit authority of a framed painting, something more provisional, which can be related to arte povera, its modesty, its materiality. Walking through the Louvre at that time—and still today—one passed paintings in elaborate gilt frames, the names of the artists and dates of creation etched on small plaques affixed discretely below. In this heightened period of the '60s, when some artists left the studio behind entirely, working in situ or in the land, past and present would collide. With these works of Cane's, the signature was the image, applied with a rubber stamp. In the proverbial sense, to rubber stamp something means to approve it without proper consideration. For Cane in a moment when art would assert its conception, this was not at all the case. The repeatedly stamped line, often overlapping, created an all-over pattern, a field which was pictorial, at times vibrational, particularly seen against the era's minimalism and opticality, with their reliance on grids and repetition. In this we readily recall Warhol's early Pop, his S & H Green Stamps (1962) specifically, which might as well have been stamped (they were silkscreened), overlaying images serially and in near-monochrome. Painting as an assisted readymade. This is true for these iconic, conceptual works of Louis Cane as well.

Cane's "signature" paintings may be thought to descend from the heady permission of a gesture made in 1961 by Robert Rauschenberg, who, invited to participate in a portrait show at the gallery of Iris Clert in Paris—traveling at the time, far from his studio—sent a telegram at the last minute: THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO. With it, an assertion by an artist would stand as a work's legitimate guarantor, its irrefutable proof. (Surely the telegram delivered would have been placed in the hands of the astonished gallerist. History can at least hold this image in mind.) The Rauschenberg telegram is not only the work and its certificate of authenticity, it diverts the subject from whoever would have posed for a painting to its viewer (who may reject it as art, rejection in a sense not entirely undesirable), to anyone who encounters the telegram: the viewer-as-reader. While Cane may not have seen this exhibition (he was only 18 at the time, though at school in Paris, not far from the gallery, and would likely have become aware of it later), something similar occurs when viewers come upon a painting of his which states Louis Cane: Artiste, Peintre. Some may wonder: "But where is he? Where is the art?" Well, of course, he's right there before us. We're looking at him, if only by indirection, a surrogate, a gesture neither gestural nor painterly yet fully occupying the space of painting—color, composition, pattern—works boldly "signed" over and again, both of and ahead of their time. These are signs of painting, well before that term came into fashion in the mid-1980s. Today, when we consider Louis Cane's paintings of the '60s, there are any number of artists, following twenty and thirty years later, whose works inevitably come to mind: there are Josh Smith's name paintings, Christopher Wool's stenciled pattern paintings, imprinted works by Wade Guyton, and Cady Noland's brick wall imagery screened on aluminum, and, as we are about to see, her sculpture with chainlink fencing.

In parallel to the works featuring the artist's name as a motif are Louis Cane's X paintings, also imprinted and un-stretched (with the exception of some red canvases), which, in their reductive appearance, are even less traditionally pictorial. And yet the image they create with stacked rows of Xs can be associated with latticework, architectural screens, braiding, grillwork, embroidered cross-stitching, and industrial chainlink fences—where vertical diamond patterns appear in the negative space of multiple intersections, and smaller squarish diamonds occur within the endpoints of every diagonal line. Aside from Cane's bright red paintings, boldly crimson, some of which were painted, or stamped and then overpainted, Cane's color is subtle: pale shades of blue, brown green, and gray. Paintings with a pair of alternating colors create horizontal bands or wavering columns amplifying their rhythm and movement. A large vertically-oriented painting from 1967, composed of soft gray and green Xs that interweave foreground and background, recalls the structure of Brâncuși's *Endless Columns*. (That the row of Xs at the far right of the canvas are "broken," split in half, suggests that these elongated columns continue beyond the edge of the canvas, are not entirely contained within its frame.) Having produced numerous X paintings, this sign was soon established as designating a work by no one but Louis Cane. Although signed on the reverse, the X becomes its own signature. The repeated X also suggests that painting may be a matter of marking time, which we can relate to the daily meditation of On Kawara's *Today* series, his well-known "Date" paintings. One from Jan. 18, 1966 with the subtitle "I am painting this painting," may be thought to align, and in the very same moment, with Louis Cane: Artiste, Peintre, an act of consciousness and self-reflexivity. There is a reference to calendars as well, specifically, no less poignantly, to the crossing out of the boxes that represents days elapsed, or to be put behind us. If painting is a sign, does a repeated X signal a refusal or regret? And yet, there they are.

Paintings, representing themselves, clearly, directly, related to those which arose from their particular milieu along with many that were to follow long after. Paintings which relate to the room, to its architecture, to furniture, furniture implying the human form, are part of the world we inhabit, our daily lived environment.² Painting, Cane might have proposed, is a fact and a fact of life.

Cane's X paintings can be seen contemporaneously with the work of BMPT, the brief but influential affiliation of Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, active over 1966-67, each of whom based their work on a repeated motif, motifs they proposed anyone could reproduce—a stripe, a circle, a broad band, the imprints of a no. 50 brush at regular intervals of 30 cm. Collectively asserting that they were not painters “since to paint is to paint for the purpose of aestheticism, of flowers ... of eroticism ... of the everyday environment ... of the war in Vietnam ...” BMPT took a decidedly political, social stance in their various manifestations and provocations (“We advise you to become intelligent,” they once declared to the public). They and the artists of Support/Surface shared, to a certain degree, common ground, Cane in particular. His X paintings, as their works, have an undeniable graphic quality. They might have been made by anyone. And yet they are immediately attributed to him, as the stripe is to Buren, the circle to Mosset, the broad band of color to Parmentier, the imprint of the paintbrush to Toroni. Was painting a game to be played, but with a seriousness of purpose? Painting as a critical enterprise? (Dispensing with critics, the gate-keepers and their authority.³) Painting as provocation. While a dismissal of the everyday implicated well-worn genres, art as illusion, that fiction we believe: the still life, the landscape, the nude—all of which are in no short supply today—more critically minded artists the '60s advanced the notion that painting could be in the world rather than function as its mirror—painting reflecting itself would be autonomous. Painting would reveal, and often dispense with, the stretcher that usually held a canvas taut, or reveal the wall on which it had been hung. Once an artist implicates the wall, is the rest of the building, and what it represents—the gallery or the museum—questioned as well? To ask at that time, “What are the structures of painting, what props it up?,” one implied: “What are those of society?” Such questions suggested that what was structural could be understood as a matter of strictures within everyday life as well as in art. Art's autonomy was not unrelated to that of the individual, to the desire for a greater measure of freedom, beyond what was previously permissible. Against this shifting backdrop, painting was no longer obliged to represent the world, but would represent itself.

Louis Cane, along with other artists who rose to prominence in the mid-to-late '60s in France, in parallel with many writers and philosophers, can be considered to have been lucky in their timing, even if birth is an accident, since we arrive in the world when we do, pursuing our respective areas of interest as we come of age. For some, a time of change awaits, although not all who pass through it are destined to become its agents. If pursuits born out of restless dissatisfaction and desire—desire at the heart of the matter—coincide within a heightened milieu, when turbulent and uplifting currents arise, the chance for engagements to resonate beyond their time is amplified. That period, socially, politically and culturally, was charged with regard to an upending of structures that had long been in place, not least entrenched authority and, if only briefly, seismically so. (Every revolution, it's been proposed, is a roll of the dice.⁴) Within this upheaval, many questioned authority, as well as authorship. Roland Barthes' essay, “The Death of the Author,” which appeared in 1967, in proximity to the events of May '68, acknowledged “the birth of the reader,” echoing Duchamp's belief that a work of art is always completed by the viewer.⁵

This may also suggest “the rebirth of the artist”—artists no longer obliged to explain themselves. Here we can picture Ad Reinhardt’s 1947 art comic in which a viewer laughs as the points to an abstract painting and, facing away from it, asks us, What does this represent? Then the painting points right back at the startled viewer to demand, What do you represent? For engaged artists and critics in the mid-to-late ‘60s, art would require nothing less than an accounting of itself, painting in particular, since it had always stood for Art with a capital A, a monument unto itself, seemingly unshakeable. Cane, as one of the founding figures of Supports/Surface,⁶ believed that art was its own legitimate subject. Some sixty years later, it remains so, the radicality of that time made even more resonant by many subsequent returns to conservative picture-making, countered by an art of persistent curiosity, criticality and confrontation, confronting itself most directly. In mathematics, X represents an unknown quantity. The same, as in the past and possibly in a time to come, may be true of painting as well.

-Bob Nickas

Notes:

1. Louis Cane attended the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris in 1961, earning his degree in interior architecture. This training surely informed his sensitivity to spatial relationships, quite literally the interplay between support and surface, finding its direct correlation in painting with his Sol/Mur works, un-stretched canvases that occupy and architecturally animate the space between the floor and the wall.
2. Cane began to make furniture and functional objects in the late ‘70s, continuing for some forty years, a return to his early passion and training.
3. Here it’s worth noting that in 1970-71, he was co-founder of the review *Peinture-Cahiers Théoriques*, along with Marc Devade and Daniel Dezeuze.
4. Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huilliet’s film, *Every Revolution Is a Roll of the Dice*, 1977, is based on Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (‘A roll of the dice will never abolish chance’), 1897. The reading of his poem was filmed alongside the wall of Père Lachaise cemetery, where the last members of the Paris Commune were lined up and shot in 1871.
5. “The Death of the Author,” interestingly enough, was first published in English in the United States, in *Aspen*, no. 5/6, Fall/Winter 1967, edited and designed by the artist and critic Brian O’Doherty. The essay appeared the following year in French in the literary journal *Manteia*, no. 5, “La mort de l’auteur.”
6. A fluctuating group that included Vincent Bioulès (who coined their name), Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Bernard Pagès, Patrick Saytour and Claude Viallat.