

Essay by Gavin Francis for the catalogue of « For other Eyes » ArtSpace Gallery ,2015
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Painting is stronger than I am. It makes me do what it wants.

Pablo Picasso

In Yves Berger's home, high in the mountains of Haute Savoie, there's a pinned-up chart that unscrolls around two walls of one room. The upper edge of the chart has years marked off in regular intervals, from 1300 to the present day, and within the body of the scroll are the names and lifespans of some of the greatest artists who have ever lived. They are colour-coded by nationality, and so the viewer recognises with an unaccustomed immediacy that Hieronymous Bosch and Leonardo da Vinci were almost exact contemporaries; that Goya was 34 when Ingres was born; that Turner was born three years before Gainsborough died. 'If you continue the same scale', Berger told me, 'the Faiyum portraits would be past the walls of the house and ten metres down into the garden. The cave-paintings of Chauvet would be a kilometre and a half across the valley.'

Along the other walls of the room are shelves containing hundreds of art books: monographs, catalogues and criticism gathered for over half a century by Berger, his father and mother – a family for whom art, and thinking about art, has always occupied a central position in life. In terms of road access the house is remote, but from the map it can be seen to occupy a central position in Europe – Berger's hayloft studio looks out over the knot of Alps where Italy meets France and Switzerland. At that altitude the seasons present inexorable challenges, as does the farm where Berger works when not in the studio. But I'd argue that it's not the cadence of remote, rural life that has the greatest influence of Berger's paintings, rather it's his ongoing, intimate awareness, from an age before he knew how to write, of the nobility, traditions and progress of Western art.

Many of his extraordinary paintings start out in a similar way: one of Berger's friends or his family marks a canvas with his or her own painted body and leaves an imprint. The canvas is then stretched on a frame, and Berger gauges whether it presents an idea, or impulse, straining to be expressed. If it does, he begins to paint; there are many false starts, and articulating that impulse may take years of work and rework. The process is led not so much by Berger's conscious intention, but by suggestion, trial and experimentation. Distortions evolve with each successive layer of paint: heads shrink in size then turn to skulls; knees and elbows turn in at unexpected angles; the wing of a nostril broadens, the glow on a supine figure becomes a sunrise over a plain.

Many of these paintings celebrate the human body: its strength and vitality; how we begin and how some of us may end. Some feel like meditations on birth and death, while others are revenants from a world beyond death. When he speaks of the success of a painting Berger talks about the critical moment when he becomes aware of 'apparition', or the painting becomes a 'presence'; 'They come towards me, these figures,' he explains, 'showing me how they want to be.'

There's an angel painting by Paul Klee, called Angelus Novus, of which Walter Benjamin wrote: The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned. When I first saw Berger's 'Moonlight Figure', Benjamin's sentiment had resonance: his great contoured wings curve under like the clinkered hull of a boat, and the darkness behind him is the liminal space that surrounds all of our lives. Like all the paintings in this exhibition 'Moonlight Figure' has been painted not from life, but from marks and signs on a canvas that cried out to be expressed – the figure gazes from a realm not of the past, or of the future, but from the place in which dreams and ideas arise. It's a cry that Berger attends to with diligence and skill, and one that the Faiyum portraitists and Goya, Bosch and Turner, would have recognised.