

What Painting Can Still Do

Christophe Avella Bagur - Thought in Act

Voice: Richard Hale - English edition - 2025

I remember the first painting by Christophe Avella Bagur that stopped me short, the way one stumbles on a step one had not seen. What struck me was not simply the image but its bearing: the exactness of the edges, the density of matter, the authority of a gesture that seemed to say, without grandiloquence, that painting does not illustrate thought but thinks through its own means. That conviction has remained with me throughout a body of work that, since 1989, has continually shifted its own center of gravity in order to hold flesh and idea together, tradition and contemporary shock, memory and becoming.

From the Early Works onward, the program is already there, quietly but firmly: to make the word work inside the painting, not as literary crutch but as a full sign; to look at the body not as heroic pretext but as political datum, counted, aligned, manipulated, exposed. The structure is drawn in graphite and lead pencil. The line is exact, the edge is held, the planes are ranked with care. Supports are prepared in a classical way, with gesso and toned grounds, before the slow, patient painted white that will become decisive after 2003. This increasingly exact drawing is not a fetish. It is the condition that allows several surface regimes to coexist without confusion and that permits figuration to aim at exactitude rather than emphasis.

In the early paintings, words do not explain the image; they confront it. A phrase laid over the ordinary creates a friction that persists after looking. One reads the picture and the picture reads the sentence back. The work already refuses easy rhetorical closure. Then oil arrives with its thickness of time, its depth of skin. In the paintings of the 1990s, the body is neither glorified nor martyred. It is grasped inside a grid of forces. Red is not there as confession or affect; it is modulation, field, strategy.

Between 1999 and 2003, a decisive bridge is built, one too often passed over too quickly. The return from Japan matters here, but not because it brings exotic motifs. What it brings is method. In Bunraku and Kabuki, metamorphosis is shown in plain sight. Transformation does not need trickery; it can be staged, measured, made visible. The New(s) Paintings translate that lesson into

painting. Graphite underdrawing, normative greys that first receive and then resist flesh, slight displacements that move the face away from its own center: the face is no longer a stable identity but a site of operations. Persistence becomes a visible time painted into the surface rather than narrated from outside it.

This is the ground on which the Face works emerge. Face FS4 The Monk is exemplary not because it shouts manifesto, but because it proves a protocol. A grey under-face, almost standard, receives a flesh face in slight disagreement. Floating is not an effect here. It is method. The double is not decorative. It is a way of making doubt active inside the image. One does not look at a stable face plus a disturbance; one looks at the negotiation between two surface logics, two temporalities, two states of presence.

From 2003 onward, a major studio change becomes visible. Painted white, applied in thin layers with a small brush, ceases to be background or reserve and becomes an active plane. It governs the circulation of light and stabilizes the coexistence of differentiated surfaces. Smoothed, almost standardized zones can live next to more incarnated zones without neutralizing each other. The drawing, still held in graphite, secures the armature. Colour, built from pigments chosen for transparency and edge control, regulates legibility at every distance.

This is why the Face series cannot be reduced to deforming portraiture. The slight displacement has to be measured with great discipline. Too much, and the work collapses into gimmick. Too little, and it becomes forgettable. The titles help, but they do not carry the painting. They constrain it. Short statements, often in English, do not deliver a key; they act as operating pressure. The face is not explained. It is put under condition. Persistence is painted, not stated.

When scale increases, another problem appears: how to inhabit space rather than dominate it. The large Face works answer not by theatrical enlargement but by atmosphere. White recedes as pure field; skies, climates, social air enter the work. These are not landscapes. They are conditions of existence. The crowd does not become anecdotal. It becomes compositional weather. Invisible diagonals, held reds, basins of calm, passages of pressure across the surface: the collective is neither chaos nor message. It is administered by painting.

Here the comparison with Bruegel is useful only if one resists quotation. What matters is not motif but method: how to organize multiple tensions without dissolving singularities. The same can be said of Goya, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Durer, Bacon, Reinhardt, Rauschenberg, Johns, On

Kawara. These references are not ornaments placed around the work. They are tools. Bruegel teaches how forces can be mounted without losing the local event. Goya keeps darkness at the threshold. Caravaggio reminds us that light is a decision. Vermeer grants sovereignty to light without rhetoric. Durer insists that a line must commit. Bacon proves that deformation may be a path to exactitude. Reinhardt teaches distinction inside apparent sameness. Johns and Rauschenberg reopen the relation between sign and surface. On Kawara recalls that time can be stated without killing painting.

New Apostles, produced between 2014 and 2016, reactivate the logic of the icon without nostalgia. The format remains controlled. Gold, when it appears, does not sanctify the figure. It reflects the room, includes the viewer, returns presence as exchange rather than hierarchy. A crack, a projected shadow, a slight overflow at the contour are enough to govern distance. Frontality here is not authoritarian. It is a disciplined support for attention. The work does not call for worship. It asks for steadiness.

This is why the gold matters only when governed. Without discipline, gold becomes proclamation. With modulation, it becomes a way of setting distance softly. The figure does not float above us; it enters into relation with the room. A head is held by values close to one another. An ear can almost dissolve into the ground to avoid decorative cut-out. The viewer is returned to his or her own position before the work. Iconicity is reactivated as a contemporary discipline of looking, not as pious recovery.

Golgoth'Art does something equally important from another angle: it brings the operator into the field of responsibility. The studio is no longer a retreat from the world; it becomes the site where answerability is exposed. In Red House Painter, red is distributed across distinct planes so that affect never becomes confusion. In The Last Dinner, the table is not a symbol but a working plane of projection. The red bowl does not collapse into one meaning. Shame, blood, soup, sharing remain in suspension. The adult distance is maintained: close enough to feel, far enough to judge.

One might object that I return too often to edges. I do so because edges are the grammar of this painting. They are not a fetish. They are the practical name of drawing: the line that seizes form, governs figuration, and, as the work develops, reaches an almost photographic exactitude without falling into mimetic vanity. This precision offers the viewer something closer to what

Greek statuary once knew how to offer: not an image to admire, but a form structured enough to become available as a model of attention.

What finally emerges across Opus 1 to 4 are three structural lines. The first is standardization: the human reduced by social systems to data, series, module, type. The second is iconization: the face seized by social imaging and requalified by floating and displacement into negotiation rather than identity. The third is mass: the collective as pressure field in which the individual persists but never alone. Large formats bring these operations to the scale of the body. New Apostles recalibrate distance. Golgoth'Art assumes the public response of the operator.

If one wished to name the political force of this work, one should do so carefully. It does not impose slogans or messages. It installs conditions of attention. It slows perception in a time organized by acceleration. It fabricates duration instead of yielding to spectacle. The doubt at work in the Face paintings is not relativism. It is active doubt. It prevents quick resolution and obliges perception to reorganize itself. The reward is not certainty. It is a sharpened habit of looking.

That is why restraint must not be mistaken for coldness. Retention here is not emotional absence; it is the condition for durable emotion. Cried emotion exhausts itself. Held emotion continues to radiate. The silence of these surfaces is not a lack of statement but a productive suspension. Painting does not raise its voice because it is weak. It remains measured because intensity can be made to endure only if it is not consumed in the first second.

The question of format clarifies much. Medium formats impose a frontal tension that the larger works then aerate. At bust scale, the face holds the viewer at equal distance. At larger scale, air enters and walking begins. Painting becomes scene without becoming theater. There is no curtain, no backstage, only a field where bodies and climates condition one another. This is why one must learn to see the work at several distances: close enough to understand transitions, far enough to read the composition, obliquely enough to verify whether a face follows or whether a sky begins to govern.

A practical lexicon follows from this. 'Bearing' is the capacity of a surface to maintain its decisions under variable light and variable distance. 'Breathing edge' is the edge that prevents rigidity while keeping separation alive. 'Transition edge' is the place where one density changes regime without collapsing. 'Held red' is a red that calculates instead of crying. 'Calm basin' is a

compositional zone that gathers attention rather than dispersing it. None of these terms is mystical. They name operations visible to anyone willing to spend time before the work.

The importance of technique should be stated, but soberly. Before 2003, supports are classically prepared, drawing is held in graphite and lead pencil, oils are governed by binders and pigments chosen for transparency and edge control. After 2003, painted white becomes active, not passive. Smoothed and incarnated zones are made to coexist. Edges take on distinct types and functions. Nothing esoteric is at stake, only a chain of decisions that can be verified close up as well as from a distance. Technical honesty here is not modesty. It is the condition of legibility.

This also explains why restoration, framing, wall colour, and photographic reproduction matter. A heavy varnish would drown the value structure. Poor framing would suffocate the breathing edge. Cold wall whites harden the greys; overly warm walls flatten the calculated reds. Photographic reproduction, useful as it is, cannot fully carry the micro-vibration of a skin or the pressure of a negative space. Presence does not travel whole. The original insists on its material decisions.

One can teach people to look at these paintings without impoverishing them. Recognize three kinds of edge. Practice three distances: near, withdrawn, oblique. Compare what a title promises with what the surface actually does. Ask first not 'what does it mean?' but 'what does it do?' Because what the surface does - slow, connect, differentiate, suspend - is already the beginning of meaning. Interpretation comes after the eye has learned its work.

For all these reasons, the continuity from Opus 1 to Opus 4 is not narrative but operative. Opus 1 lays the foundations: edge, pigment, text, refusal of spectacle. Opus 2 intensifies the hypothesis of the double and active doubt. Opus 3 extends painting into climate, atmosphere, and collective pressure. Opus 4 assumes the icon, the operator, and the public responsibility of the studio. This is not four separate worlds. It is one painting intelligence moving through distinct problems without losing its center.

A final word on AI and contemporary image culture may be useful. Artificial intelligence can explore, combine, proliferate. The hand must still decide, weigh, cut, and hold. In Avella Bagur's work, this is less a debate than a continuity. The Face paintings already stage doubling, persistence, and layered operations. Digital tools may extend that logic, but they do not replace

the final responsibility of the pictorial decision. The work remains answerable where the hand has judged.

What, then, can painting still do? It can still fabricate duration against acceleration. It can still make the face unstable without destroying it. It can still reactivate iconicity without nostalgia. It can still expose responsibility without sermon. It can still teach the eye that precision is not coldness, that deformation may be a path to truth, that history is useful as a toolbox rather than as a shrine, and that matter, when governed, can think.

I do not end with praise but with a proposition open to verification. This corpus does not impose messages. It installs conditions of attention. One may debate it, resist it, even dislike it. But only after having looked. And looked again. For this is painting that asks of us not agreement but duration, not devotion but discipline, not submission but presence. In a time saturated with approximate images and noisy promises, such painting remains rare. It remains necessary.