



Harold Ancart
purple MAGAZINE, Spring 2020
(interview by Emilien Crespo and Olivier Zahm)
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purple MAGAZINE — *The Brain Issue #33*

ART

interview by EMILIEN CRESPO and OLIVIER ZAHM
portrait by OLIVIER ZAHM

painting almost died in the '90s and came back
as a powerful, fresh medium for a new generation of artists.
we asked a successful young belgian painter based
in new york about this explosive rebirth
and if there's such a thing as a painter's brain

OLIVIER ZAHM — *There's been a massive comeback of painting over
the past decade. There are paintings everywhere today. For a
moment there, it was dying...*

HAROLD ANCART — *Considered dead, even.*

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Exactly. And artists were deconstructing
painting, using painting as a reference, but not actually
painting as such.*

HAROLD ANCART — *Yeah. Like Daniel Buren with BMPT [a Paris-based
art group made up of Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel
Parmentier, and Niele Toroni].*

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Voilà. That was some serious deconstruction,
using the instrument of the painter as the final stage of
painting. Whatever happened?*

HAROLD ANCART — *I'm not a historian, but I guess that compared
with the history of painting, from the caveman till today, this
little death of painting is not significant at all. There's
always been a massive fascination with painting. And this death
of painting lasted for maybe 10 to 15 years, at most. If we want
to talk about the history of painting — or the history of art in
general — painters have dealt with the same challenges from the
very beginning until today. There are a lot of classifications,
but that's the job of the historian. The historian cannot be a
historian if they don't make classifications — basically
inventing drawers in which to put things.*

OLIVIER ZAHM — *So, for you, the conditions haven't changed for
the painter...*

HAROLD ANCART — *The conditions have changed, of course, and the
medium has changed a little. But people are dealing with the
exact same problems.*



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OLIVIER ZAHM – *Painting hasn't changed much, technically speaking.*

HAROLD ANCART – I don't think so. What happened – and this is my personal point of view – is that very few things can be considered as significant shifts within the entire history of painting. There are actually two significant developments. One is the understanding of perspective and the capacity for painters to create the illusion of depth, though this is not primarily a painter's discovery. It's linked to mathematics, geometry, and a natural evolution of the understanding of the world that surrounded mankind at that time. So perspective has nothing to do with painting itself. Painting itself was always the same thing. The other change was that at some point painting became abstract... The deconstruction of painting happened after abstraction – as a consequence, probably, of breaking it down to its most elementary stage. BMPT members did not consider themselves painters. I believe they wanted to demystify painting. They were not interested in the illusion that a painting can be, which is interesting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Or that it can produce...*

HAROLD ANCART – Exactly. You can't sit on the image of a chair, even though the image of the chair carries all the elements that could make you think that you could sit on it. You can't throw yourself out of a painted window. This ambiguity has fascinated the viewer since the beginning of painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, when you say that painting didn't really change, apart from these two historical breaks or disruptions – perspective and abstraction – you mean that the painter's mind today is not that different from Van Gogh's time...*

HAROLD ANCART – I don't think so. If you look at a painting by Rembrandt, for example, you see people, figures, backgrounds in the painting – there are underlying stories, plots, and so on. But when you look at the paint that composes that painting, you realize that the paint is the paint and will never be anything else. And when you look, for example, at a detail of a painting – be it a finger or leg or even a detail in the background – you realize that the mud you're seeing is paint. And it becomes completely abstract.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And it could be something painted today.*

HAROLD ANCART – Absolutely, 100%. You know, one could say that Abstract Expressionism comes from a detail by Monet, for example. That's obvious to me. I guess the reason why people were painting certain things at some point, and started painting different things at another, is that painters – during the Renaissance, for example – were working for the church or the royal family, basically making commissioned work. But all of this was always an alibi for the painter to paint. The painter likes color, and the painter likes movement.



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OLIVIER ZAHM – *You're suggesting that all the history of painting is already inside painting. Everything is there.*

HAROLD ANCART – I think everything has been there since the very beginning, and it doesn't only concern painting. The world that surrounds us is composed of elements that were ever-present. Take Mendeleev's periodic table: a few of the elements may have been discovered later, but they weren't new. They had always been there – we just never had the capacity to isolate them. But everything's been there since the very beginning. And I guess the work of the painter is to distill elements from reality and reassemble them in a way that is somehow unique. It's all about extracting elements of the visual field and recombining them in an often more poetic way.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, does this mean that painting's sudden, massive comeback today is because it connects us to a sort of resistance to time?*

HAROLD ANCART – Maybe. But it's antagonistic: even though nothing is happening, painting is changing all the time. A painting is never another painting. Every single painting is unique, for reasons that are simple but also extremely mysterious. And a good painting is something that is extremely mysterious. Even from the same painter. You can't make the same painting twice. It's complicated. I think if you really look into it, it's going to be difficult – unless it's printed – but that's not painting!

OLIVIER ZAHM – *In a digitalized world where everything can be captured and reproduced, painting is a stand against duplication and reproduction. That even artists can't reproduce their own work is also part of the attraction... Painting's seeing a comeback because it's unique.*

HAROLD ANCART – Definitely, when something is painted, it's unique in essence – you know there's only one of each. And this, I guess, is also what gives it its commercial value. Then, you know, you have people who make copies. And you have people who make excellent copies.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, even if you have motifs in your work, each painting is unique to you.*

HAROLD ANCART – Yeah, each painting is unique. When you don't know what to paint, you can always paint flowers, for example, and then if you still don't know what to do, you can make another painting of flowers, and then another one, and another one, and another one. And they will never be the same.



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OLIVIER ZAHM – *And why? Is it the mood of the painter?*

HAROLD ANCART – I think there's a tension that resides between the precision of what one can have in mind and the poetry of the accomplishment of what you have in mind, which is mediated through the hand, right? So, you can project in your mind a perfect square or a perfect circle, but your hand cannot draw it. There's that thing on YouTube, "The Perfect Circle Contest" or something, where people stand in front of a blackboard trying to draw a perfect circle. It's nearly perfect, you know? And it's great. And I'm sure that an extremely skilled person can nearly do it. One can try to draw a straight line without having a ruler or anything. But it will never be straight, and it hardly matters. I think the genius of painting doesn't lie in the painter's skills or in their ability to portray or draw something. But it's very much in the freedom with which you allow yourself to paint things. I think that's very important. And I think what makes a painting great resides in this very tension: the tension between what you project or what you have in mind, and how nonchalant and careless you can be when you do it. Often, great paintings are paintings that address the world in a very democratic way, and whether you're a kid from the ghetto or from a township in Africa, or a super-intellectual who teaches art history at university, you're standing at the same level when you're facing it. Because you're facing an archetype or a common ground. And it happens. You see that in Joan Mitchell, you see that in Philip Guston, you see that in Wayne Thiebaud.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You can see the power of a painting in the way kids react to it.*

HAROLD ANCART – Of course! I mean, you know, kids are a very good crash test. You know, if the kids like the painting... And if the kids and the grown-ups like the painting equally, you're probably doing something that's interesting and generous.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *[Laughs] Do you try all your paintings out on kids?*

HAROLD ANCART – Ah, kids like my paintings. I'm very lucky since I'm a kid myself, you know? [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You have something in common! So, it seems painting is a psychological medium?*

HAROLD ANCART – [Sighs] Or not. I think it's very important to be able to leave your brain aside while you paint. It's very ambiguous. When it comes to painting, and when you're looking at a painting that's "finished" – and I'll put that in quotes because it's probably never really finished – it's always a promise for another painting to come, or at least I like to see it that way. But when it comes to painting, the only thing that really matters, I guess, is the outcome – what it looks like. But this outcome is also something you should never think of while you're making the painting. Otherwise, you're going to fuck it up. Because of vanity. And that is not generosity.



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OLIVIER ZAHM — *Why vanity?*

HAROLD ANCART — Because it becomes pure formalism. Great painters are explorers. They're great wanderers. And if you only go to places you know, then you're missing out on a lot of things. And that's not exploration, actually. Exploration is to go where you haven't already been: to the unknown.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Okay. But is it a cerebral or physical exploration?*

HAROLD ANCART — It's both.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And psychological.*

HAROLD ANCART — Probably. But that, I think, is something that comes after. It's very complicated to describe. And, I mean, I could talk to you about what runs through my mind while I paint. Ahh... A lot of things run through my mind while I paint. I don't know if it's comparable to meditation. I don't think so. I think when you meditate, you only focus on your breathing or something like that. But what happens to me — since I was a child, since I started making drawings — is that time vanishes. You're a writer, maybe you have the same thing when you're writing: time vanishes, and you realize that it's the activity itself that forces you to do certain things that you would never do, if you were not lost within this precise activity.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The process takes over.*

HAROLD ANCART — Definitely. If you *knew* what you were going to paint before you painted it, painting would be of no interest at all. Absolutely no interest. The same goes for writing. It's because you're going to lose yourself doing things you would never think of that the activity is interesting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And you allow yourself to surrender.*

HAROLD ANCART — Yeah, I think you must understand that getting lost is the price to pay. Of course, you're scared — you know, you're always scared. People often talk about the fear of the white canvas in front of you. What I know is that if you follow your arm, you're going to end up somewhere, whether it's good or bad. And then, according to your expectations and also your experience, you always end up doing things a certain way because that's who you are.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *But you need a starting point.*

HAROLD ANCART — Anything can be a starting point — start nonchalantly, trace a line, make a stain or two, and then you start filling things up, and in any possible way you will always end up somewhere.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *But how do you choose your subjects? Like flowers, matches...*

HAROLD ANCART — So, sometimes I have intelligent ideas, but most of the time, I don't have very intelligent ideas. [Laughs] As far as subject matter is concerned, there are things that people are naturally drawn to in terms of contemplation. People like to look at the sky, the stars, the moon, the landscape, the horizon, flowers, plants, fire — fire is a very good example because all the stories take shape in the flames, it's the ancestor of television... If you paint something that people tend naturally to look at, then you can't go wrong, you know?

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OLIVIER ZAHM – *[Laughs]* Fire, for sure, because we were all once around the fire. But matches less so.

HAROLD ANCART – Matches not so much. But that's something different. Maybe it was the first time that I painted something that is extremely banal. Because the rest was mostly extraordinary. But the extraordinary is so over-present that maybe the extraordinary became banal, and maybe the banal can become the extraordinary. It depends on how you deconstruct the reality that you live in – and your capacity to reassemble everything within the frame of the painting. The way I work is that I walk around, and then I look at things everywhere, and you realize soon enough that the world is a giant shopping mall for painters. And that there's no bad subject for painting. The corner of the wall behind you or the stains on the floor could end up being a good painting, as long as you frame it right. Abstraction comes from reality – all one has to do is to isolate parts of it.



OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, painting is already in the world?*

HAROLD ANCART – Yeah, it's everywhere. Like the atoms that compose the universe, it's there.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The painter's mind sees paintings everywhere?*

HAROLD ANCART – I suppose so. I don't know about the painter's mind in general, because I can only know for myself.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Yes. There's also some element of abstraction in your work.*

HAROLD ANCART – Things mostly sit in between something that is figurative or – when you separate elements of your visual surrounding into fields of color, in the same way, I guess, as with Rembrandt and the detail of the leg – everything is abstract. Then if you organize it a certain way and outline it a certain way, it can become an image of a horse or a car or a sandwich. So, things when painted consistently switch from abstract to figurative, depending on how you choose to look at them.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *It's the circulation of the gaze inside the frame of the painting, and inside the painting itself?*

HAROLD ANCART – A painting is framed by its physical limits, but at the same time, the painting expands indefinitely because it borrows somehow from everything that surrounds it.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Everywhere, like meditation.*

HAROLD ANCART – I suppose so. When you look at clouds, or when you look at dirt, or when you look at dead leaves on the floor, or when you look at stains on the pilaster that's right behind you, and let's say that if you take a picture of these stains, the clouds, or the dead leaves, it will always be perfectly distributed within the frame of your picture. And the reason why is that there's no reason for those stains to be one way or another. It can be a million different ways – it doesn't matter. Because it's absolutely inadvertent. It's not formalism. There is no vanity behind it.

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OLIVIER ZAHM – *Quantum theory, perhaps?* [Laughs]

HAROLD ANCART – There's no problem with painting unless you have too much of a predetermined idea of what you want the painting to be.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Scientists call that a "singularity." If you put ink into water, the way the ink falls into the water will be different each time. And, at the same time, totally logical. But each time different and super logical. So, there's a reason, but there's also no reason at all.* [Laughs] *Each time it's totally different, but there's a reason – a combination of explanations.*
HAROLD ANCART – Yeah, I suppose so.

EMILIEN CRESPO – *On that note, recently you painted a handball court in a Brooklyn park, with inspiration from the painters working for the local parks in New York...*

HAROLD ANCART – That's a good example. Like I said, I walk around, I look at stains on the floor, I look at how cities are constantly being repainted or patched because of how the infrastructure decays, looking at good material for painting. And in New York, you have the handball courts. Handball courts are freestanding concrete walls. You see them everywhere. So, what happens is that people graffiti them, and then the Department of Parks and Recreation appoints people to cover the graffiti. What's interesting is that it's as if they were putting a point of honor on using a paint that has a slightly different color than the original paint to cover the graffiti. And all they do is to cover the graffiti. They don't repaint the whole thing. And then, they repaint the stripe that forms the limit of the thing. And this process is repeated over the years.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, they layer a painting on the graffiti...*

HAROLD ANCART – Yeah. There's this very interesting movie by Matt McCormick called *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* [2001].

OLIVIER ZAHM – [Laughs] *Great title!*

HAROLD ANCART – A very good one... The painters from the Department of Parks and Recreation have no artistic intention at all. So, one comes to repaint, then there's another graffiti, then they repaint, then there's another graffiti, then they repaint, and so on and so on and so on. But when you look at it, it's as if the entire history of abstraction presented itself in a totally inadvertent way. That allows those guys to be so successful. And the handball court is a very good example because it's already framed. So, perhaps one of the most important parts of the job of the painter is to let go – to let go of what you know and of where you want to go. And this way, things can only be the way they are – which is great. You know, I think the great disaster of humanity lies therein: in projection. You're here, you want to be there, but you can only step on your own reality, right? If we could project ourselves, we would all be president of the world.



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OLIVIER ZAHM – *Or Elon Musk!*

HAROLD ANCART – So, yeah, I think nonchalance is a key aspect of the painter's mind. But this, as you say, also means that somehow you have to be very confident. But confident in what? What's going to happen? Nothing. No one's gonna die, nobody's gonna lose their job. And you can always change the painting, cover over what you don't want to appear on it, endlessly. So, in a sense, if you work with all those things in mind, I would say that there's hardly any issue with painting. And that it's, like, very complicated for me to do a bad painting – there's only great paintings unless you want it a certain way.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But once a painting is finished, or when you stop working on it, you told me yesterday that you abandon it for a while. Forget it for a while. And then you look at it again, one year later, which means that you become your own critic?*

HAROLD ANCART – Yeah. But it's very rare, after having forgotten about the painting and looking at it again, that I'm disappointed. And if I am, very often I don't change it. I put it back again for a year or two, and then when I take it out of storage to look again, it has everything I need – maybe I wasn't ready for that yet, maybe I didn't know that things were going to change and that these strange shapes that looked like UFOs and with which I wasn't comfortable could actually become exactly what I needed in the way they appear today. And if you distill the work in time, you realize that everything starts making sense again. It's very strange. There's that thing with meaning: a lot of artists want their work to be meaningful. I find that quest for meaning to be a bit silly. Because meaning is something that will always catch up on you. You cannot escape the shell of meaning – it's impossible. Absolutely impossible because you can't escape your geographical situation, the time in which you live. You cannot escape what has been written before, you cannot escape what has been painted before, and there is a lot of precedence because there's been a lot of painting – so your painting will always, somehow, inscribe itself within the history that surrounds it. So, you don't have to deal with that.

EMILIEN CRESPO – *It's almost like never being able to do the perfect circle. You'll never be able to completely remove yourself from your brain, from the meaning, even from the emotional attachment you have to paintings when you look at them two years later. It's a bit like the endless pursuit of removing yourself from the gesture.*

HAROLD ANCART – Yeah, or having the distance, which means that you don't have to take things too seriously.

I don't think painting is very serious – it is serious, in a way, but at the same time, it's absolutely not serious. Famine is something that's very serious. Ecology, pollution – those are things that are very serious. Painting's not serious.



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OLIVIER ZAHM — *This links back to the connection between children and paintings.*

HAROLD ANCART — That's an excellent example, and kids are all excellent painters until they start wanting to make drawings of My Little Pony, Barbie, and so on. You take a small kid, you give them a pencil and a piece of paper, and they're just gonna go wild around things — they all do it perfectly. There's no problem, you know? And you give them two minutes, they're going to do it for two minutes, and it's going to be great. You leave them for an hour, and they're going to fill up the whole thing, and it's going to be equally great. That's very interesting because they have no perspective on what they're doing, or they're not aiming at something in particular.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *We could see that as a sort of innocence or predisposition for art, which is basically following your point of view — a refusal of, or a distance from, predetermined meaning?*

HAROLD ANCART — Well, paintings that have one meaning, that have one sense of reading, one instruction, most of the time, I think, are bad paintings. Paintings, when great, carry constellations of meaning.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *That's beautiful.*

HAROLD ANCART — And also, great paintings change every day. Maybe you have paintings in your living room that you very much like. And every time you look at them, they're different. They shift, and it's extremely mysterious — you don't know where it comes from. You don't understand where it comes from. But I think it's a quality — this capacity of certain paintings to constantly transform and to hold mystery.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *We were speaking about Francis Bacon yesterday — it's a good example. How you can look at his paintings again and again, and still you're lost. [Laughs]*

HAROLD ANCART — Yeah, completely lost, but only if you look at the physical thing. Not when you look at images in a catalogue. Certain paintings work well in catalogues, but Francis Bacon doesn't. You really have to see it in the flesh, and it's always better to see a painting in the flesh.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Maybe it's on another dimension, this private dialogue or connection that you can have when you're in front of a painting..*

HAROLD ANCART — Paintings address themselves differently to every single viewer who is looking at them. It's a very intimate channel, between the painting and the person who looks at it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Yes. The painting and the painter, maybe?*

HAROLD ANCART — I don't know where the painter is once the painting is done and out in the world. I think the energy of the painter radiates constantly, like a sun that never dies. It radiates from the painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The artist's energy, mind, and emotions, right?*

HAROLD ANCART — Yeah, most probably. Of course, I suppose, I don't know — it's complicated for me: the mind, the spirit, the ghost, the shell.



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OLIVIER ZAHM – *Because there's something intimate – there's a private dialogue there, maybe?*

HAROLD ANCART – Extremely private. It's the same as when you taste something – when you put something in your mouth. You know, we're sitting in front of the same piece of *uni* [sea urchin], we cut it in two, you eat half, I eat half... You describe how it tastes, I will try to describe how it tastes – we're not going to have the same description. And that's the beauty of it. That's the beauty of taste, and that's the beauty of what happens when you look at something, when you gaze. You mentioned gazing – gazing is when the sight gets lost into light, texture, reflection, colors. It becomes abstract.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, each painting speaks differently to each person.*

HAROLD ANCART – I think so, yes. It's a quality that's inherent to painting, I believe.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, for you, the art critic serves no purpose.*

[Laughs]

HAROLD ANCART – Not necessarily, because there are so many things to write, to say. There are so many expressions to translate, you know? There are so many things you can capture from what you look at. That's where the writer's mind enters, or the art critic, who likes to look and who likes to write about what he or she is looking at. And some people do it in a very analytical way. Others do it more poetically. And, I guess, both are acceptable or interesting. As long as it doesn't become political or ideological.

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