

English text

Double trouble

By Éric Troncy

To counter the myth of the solitary genius, **Ida Tursic** and **Wilfried Mille** began producing double-hander canvases. Together they've developed a very contemporary take on painting, which highlights the pertinence of such a slow medium in an age when images circulate at the speed of light.

2015 looks set to be their year – their time has come at last. After dazzling the audience with a lecture they gave in Paris last autumn, they've now thrown themselves into the production of their latest series, working day and night on two new shows in the vast and only vaguely heated studio they occupy in a village somewhere in the depths of Burgundy. In June, the Alfonso Artiaco Gallery in Naples will exhibit a number of their paintings, which are still works in progress, while in September it will be the turn of the Max Hetzler Gallery in Berlin. This couple of 40-somethings has waited 15 years for the recognition they now so justly deserve. The fact that they never expected things to move too fast places them in an artistic tradition belonging to the last century. But their pictorial practice clearly positions them in the realm of contemporary art, and has set the world echoing with their twinned names: Ida Tursic and Wilfried Mille.

On 31 October 2014, at the terribly august Collège de France (to give you an idea of how hallowed the place is, I can tell you that not a single fashion show has ever been staged there), they gave an astonishing lecture as part of an international symposium entitled "La Fabrique de la Peinture" [The Making of Painting], an event at which Jeff Koons was also present. He may be the most famous artist in the world, but he's one with whom Tursic and Mille have almost

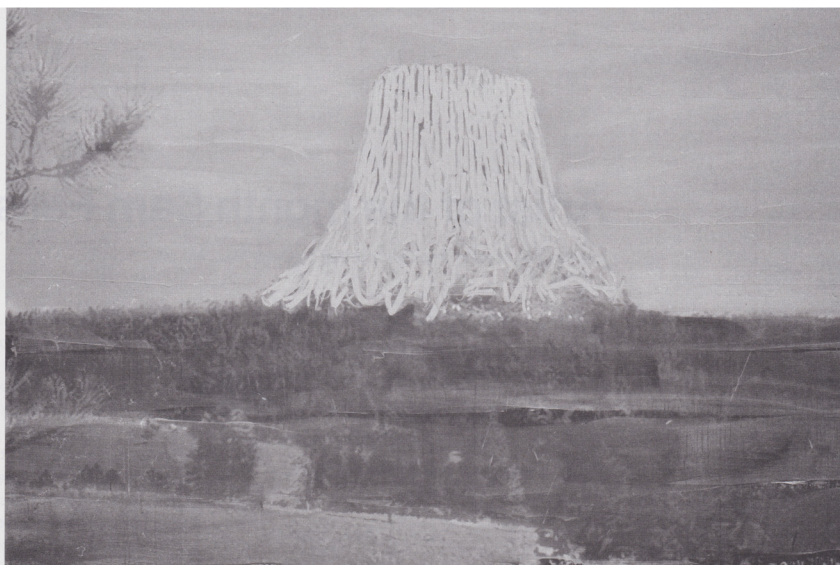
nothing in common, least of all his methods, since they have never ever had one of their canvases painted by an assistant (Koons, on the other hand, is famous for employing dozens of them). During their lecture, the duo came across as passionate and earnest, and had clearly spent considerable time preparing their presentation. Born in Belgrade, Tursic has kept a very strong accent, but one quickly gets used to it; born and bred in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Mille never wavers from his habitual grumpy tone which he uses to express both the total seriousness of his commitment to painting, and his conviction that you absolutely have to find the right interlocutor to avoid speaking pointlessly.

Nonetheless, Tursic and Mille love to talk about their shared practice of painting – and it was a strange decision indeed to go about it as a duo. They haven't always worked in tandem, but the idea quickly took hold. "Two people on one painting, it's silly, and at the beginning your ego takes rather a beating. That first brush stroke, and I mean stroke in both senses, made by the other person on a painting you've been working on for a week or two, that's hard to stomach... We have no pre-determined concept or programme; we try to stay aware, each in our own way, of the internal development of the painting during its making. The fact that we work as a pair allows us to accept things we

probably never would have were we working alone." An interesting idea, the couple as a vector for tolerance...

It's true that Tursic and Mille's paintings must accommodate a great number of perhaps rather contradictory things. Firstly, the ambition of aligning themselves within a tradition. How many young artists are still fascinated by the way Monet painted a haystack or Cézanne rendered an apple? Tursic and Mille are, and it's because they share the same goal: confronting the realities of a world where the first obstacle that faces those who choose to paint something is the fight against all the other images so readily available of that same thing. "We're putting together a giant data base, ordered as best as we can manage, which currently contains some 140,000 images classed under the most diverse categories: dogs, news, NASA, spanking, flowers, Marilyn Monroe... In any case, today there's no need to go the market anymore to get an apple to paint, you just type 'apple' into Google and you instantly get 2,310,000 of them."

Their painting also has to accept the crushing paternity of all the work by the artists in whose wake it is conceived, and the influence of multiple masters as diverse as Sigmar Polke, Christopher Wool, Niele Toroni, Ed Ruscha or Richard Prince.



Prince's spirit is perhaps the most perceptible throughout their work, but one never gets the feeling that their canvases are copies. Rather one senses that their oeuvre is the guarantee of a living history, one that is continuing along its path quite naturally. This is a particularity of their painting: instead of positioning itself in the precise lineage of a certain work, or a certain style (figurative, abstract, whatever), it appears to want to embrace them all and to consider them collectively as a single subject matter. When adopting such a position, one must be entirely ready to assume the full weight of one's responsibilities each time one picks up a paintbrush...

But this is the road Tursic and Mille have committed themselves to – a road which preserves the memory of a time when avant-gardes reigned supreme, as if they never ceased to be a viable option. "We tried to categorize certain periods of Picasso's work according to the women he lived with. When it comes to us, it's a bit less sexy. Major developments are often engendered by a change of studio, or by just a sheet of paper on the ground. It's really a question of a succession of walls, frozen pipes, dreadful weather and organizational necessities due to a lack of space," they explain, constantly and deliberately reducing painting to a simple job, with all its trivial, mundane, everyday circumstances.

In the age of an art that is labelled "contemporary," and which, although made to be controversial, now seems to satisfy just about everyone, Tursic and Mille add little to the cynical view of things. Their commitment runs deep and adapts to these circumstances. They are no longer wrestling with the gaze and preconceptions of others, but more with these circumstances themselves, and how they affect their painting. While their supposedly unseemly subjects were well received, even the "pornographic" paintings which they produced for a while (with titles like *Grande éjac à la mouette* [Big Ejaculation with Seagull] or *La Pipe* [The Blowjob]...), they've now given up on all that to concentrate on the most innocuous of subjects, like bouquets of flowers, landscapes or even pure abstraction, shifting the field of conflict from the subject matter to the manner of execution itself.

This isn't a bad strategy when you've set yourself the goal of painting in a world where images circulate so fast and in ever greater quantities, because it's precisely painting, through the slowness of its execution, that opposes the rapid circulation of images with a special sort of resistance. Instinctively you perceive this slowness, which is painting's very essence, as your eye travels across their canvases, breaking down the successive layers which make up their works,

looking for patterns, searching for a path through the superimposed glazes, the conscious corrections, the scratches, the whole thickness and depth. Tursic and Mille excel in complex, patient, stubborn paintings, in which it seems that the gestures had to be allowed to settle for the image to appear in exactly that way and no other.

This alchemy takes place in a tiny Côte d'Or village of fewer than 300 inhabitants.

The converted factory containing their studio is flanked by a stream, and houses only a sofa and a handful of canvases waiting for another layer to disrupt their surface. Ten of them sit there patiently, slowly coming to life simultaneously. You don't just decide to become a painter one fine morning, and Tursic and Mille had the intuition that it would be their fate, once and for all, a long time ago. In choosing to study painting at art school, at a time when installations, dodgy special effects and audience participation ruled supreme, they asserted an exotic choice, all rather old hat for the young artists they were then. But they always knew which history they wanted to contribute to. They've never changed tack and never will, no matter which way the fickle winds of fashion may blow.

Ida Tursic and Wilfried Mille are represented by the Almine Rech Gallery, www.alminerech.com.