

Jeu de Paume



Patrick ^{films}
Bokanowski

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Patrick Bokanowski

First there was the thunderclap of *La Femme qui se poudre* (1970-1972). This charming woman appears well, but exists in a whirlwind of strange black and white images, overwhelmed by abstract forms and the stuttering movements of living-dead figures. You can see her in the warmly horrific interior, in which nearly static Marivaux-ian figures suddenly break into *Justine* or the *Chants de Maldoror*. (Else, we should even mention Goya—late Goya, of the black paintings). The music by Michèle Bokanowski contributes outstandingly, and *physically*, to this nightmare, in which one of the simplest yet strongest images depicts someone interminably pouring coffee into a cup, soon to overflow everywhere.

Then came (perhaps after the flood) *Déjeuner du matin* (1972-1974), now in color, featuring this same uncanny, to get Freudian about it—this something, as Schelling says, “that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”

There was *L'Ange* (completed in 1982), a masterpiece of the complexity of a *Divine* (and very human) *Comedy*: a succession of haunting sketches at once marked by anxiety (with the doll-stabber or the broken pitcher), and still flirting with comedy (as in the library or the bath). Yet throughout the ascent toward the final splendor there remains this element of mystery that is, without a doubt, the Angel's part. The film—shown continuously in one Tokyo cinema for almost a decade (like Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* was in New York in the 50s)—has become a cult hit, as they say, for lovers of dazzling cinema, those films that bewitch and jolt us to the very core.

Then there was *La Part du hasard* (1984). More than just a documentary on Henri Dimier—the artist with whom Patrick Bokanowski worked over three years—it is a genuine and enthralling display of poetics, illuminating at once the master and his disciple.

For, as his colored pencil drawings (on exhibit in Japan now for some time) affirm, Bokanowski is just as much a visual artist as he is a filmmaker—never having ceased to be the former—even if only for the originality and variety of his techniques. Almost never settling for a shot with direct, normative perspective, he rather seeks, through the use of new lenses (*objectifs*—or, as he calls them, “*subjectifs*”) and animation—stand retouches, to offer surprises and loop-the-loops to the eye.

And now there are also films such as *La Plage* (1991-1992) and perhaps the most recent, *Au bord du lac* (though nothing's yet been seen of it), that are more classically aligned (that is, closer tied to painting and, as always, music, thanks once more to Michèle Bokanowski) within the grand lineage of experimental film (an arbitrary term, meant to indicate that the formal element holds at least equal importance to any sense or story being conveyed). With *La Plage*, our minds no longer jump to Ducasse or Kafka, and instead we feel ourselves to be in the luminous territory of Hugo (the drawer), Seurat, Tanguy and Miro.

It's as if we'd passed through the nightmare and toward a possible calm. Even in the tormented period of his early films, Patrick Bokanowski possessed the courtesy and modesty, so rare among great artists, that prevents storming. “It's a wonderful thing,” wrote Jaurès, “that only gentle thoughts are capable of enduring long journeys.” The phrase can be adapted to Bokanowski: he is a great, gentle artist, and it's a wonderful thing that only gentle works (or, in this case, works that mix sweetness with anxiety) are fit for the long journey.

The journey, I'm sure, has only just begun.