

Jens Asthoff

The Way Colours Go

Paintings by Agathe de Bailliencourt

These paintings can be imagined as expressions of gravity and gesture. “In the studio, I work with experimental methods,” says Agathe de Bailliencourt. In her painting, as well as in her work as a whole, the artist is interested in the tipping points at which things are literally thrown out of balance – thus leading to something new and unexpected.¹ From this perspective, she develops her artistic processes and formal concepts. In her painting, gravity – that idea of falling and literally falling towards (in German “Zu-Fall,” also meaning “chance”) – manifests itself as a flow, generally independent of complete control by the artist's hand.

And yet, it is not arbitrary: de Bailliencourt conceptually opens up a clearly defined scope for the free flow (of colour) in her painting. Her large-scale works (six of which are exhibited here), are situated in the resonant space of autonomous abstract colour field painting. However, the paintings owe their creation to a rather open-ended process. Certain boundary conditions are fixed and apply consistently to all works in the series – for example, the precise pre-selection of the colours and the characteristic recurring linear division of the canvas. The artist then conceptualises the act of painting itself within a tension between control and loss of control. In conversation², de Bailliencourt describes this as an intense artistic struggle, almost a battle; on the one hand, she brings her creative and formal will to the painting process, but, on the other hand, surrenders this will to an internal dynamic arising from the interaction of liquid, pigment and canvas.

For the painting process, de Bailliencourt deliberately unbalances the canvas from the outset: the painting is done on the floor, and the artist intentionally places the canvas in a physically precarious position, resting one corner on two randomly chosen fieldstones stacked on top of each other. She reuses these stones repeatedly, and, covered in paint marks, they document the ongoing process. In this way, de Bailliencourt constructs the setting for her painting practice as a fragile structure reminiscent of the *Equilibres* by Fischli/Weiss, translating it into painterly action. The tilt of the surface influences the flow of the paint, but the canvas becomes increasingly destabilised as it absorbs more water and paint during the process.

Painting takes place within this experimental setup, intensely and in a single wet-on-wet session over a relatively short period: each painting is completed on the same day. The concise titles reflect this, with each work—such as *40 – 31.05.22* or *63 – 02.11.22* (all 2022)—being named according to the series number and the date of its creation. For the painting itself, there is a brief window of time that de Bailliencourt fills with full concentration, as “gesture and gravity are directly and irrevocably inscribed into the fabric and the finished work,” as she explains. She deliberately leaves the linen and cotton unprimed, so every decision, every painterly move, is manifested in the flow of the paint—nothing can be undone.

A large part of de Bailliencourt's work on a painting is dedicated to selecting and mixing the colours. She prepares samples of finely nuanced colour mixtures in advance, compares them once dried on the intended canvas, and makes decisions based on this process. In this way, she develops a sophisticated, custom-made recipe for each painting. This is interesting from a painterly perspective because, while a colour scheme is determined before painting begins, it emerges in surprising ways during the unpredictable painting process. The image arises from the interplay between the planned and the unforeseen.

The exhibition title is borrowed from a cinematic term: “Smash Cut” refers to a sharp, abrupt transition from one scene to the next. In her selection of these six paintings from the more than 80-piece series, the artist deliberately emphasises colouristic differences and formal contrasts. One striking aspect, even at first glance, is the radical reduction in colour in *works 59 – 06.10.22*, *61 – 24.10.22*, and *63 – 02.11.22* compared to the three earlier pieces *40 – 31.05.22*, *53 – 15.09.22*, and *54 – 17.09.22*. While the dynamic in the first three works is characterised by increasing colour complexity, the later three are dominated by grey tones, sometimes with a metallic blue shimmer, which dissolve into painterly soft fluidity and contrast with large areas of minimal pigment concentration. Here, de Bailliencourt also experiments with new methods of applying colour: she defines large unpainted areas by wetting them in advance and working with grey-toned brushstrokes around

¹ De Bailliencourt cites the film *The Way Things Go* (1987) by the artist duo Fischli/Weiss and their extensive series *Equilibres* (1984-87) as a conceptual point of reference for this potential for instability.

² The artist in conversation with the author on 5 October 2024 in her studio in Berlin.

them, allowing the paint to flow into the wet areas, as everything is done wet-on-wet. This creates grisailles of calligraphic quality and beauty.

The three works with complex colouration, namely titles *40*, *53*, and *54*, are themselves heterogeneous and characterised by different painting techniques. A key formal decision by the artist—to mask the canvas with three narrow strips of tape before working on it, dividing it into four vertical fields—applies to all the works in the series. This proves important not only for the formal rhythm of the paintings but also for the painting process, especially in the case of the coloured paintings on raw linen. The tape creates semi-permeable boundaries within the pictorial space: at times, they are softly overstepped by the spread of colours, as in *40 – 31.05.22*, which arranges individual tones into predominantly horizontal wave forms. At other times, the relationship between boundary and colour field becomes more complex, as in *54 – 17.09.22*, where the colour segments sometimes remain within the boundaries, flow slightly over them, or often diffuse as delicate colour radiations into the adjacent field. De Baillencourt herself describes her use of lines as a compositional device that "reveals the painting's own protocol of creation,"³ functioning in a clearly concept- and process-based way.

The heterogeneity of these six paintings, which de Baillencourt brings together in *Smash Cut*, exemplifies that her artistic thinking in series does not formalise or limit the form of the works, but rather that her painting is driven by the serial impulse, constantly evolving and capable of surprising at any moment.

³ Marcel Duchamp's work *3 Stoppages étalon* (1913/14) inspired de Baillencourt—a piece that explicitly materialises "the fragile, fleeting, and unpredictable moment of falling" (de Baillencourt, see above). Regarding the conditions of contemporary art production, the work of the legendary conceptual artist and inventor of the Readymade can be understood to suggest that artists are no longer merely creators of images but also see themselves as inventors of experimental arrangements, producing new image techniques and functions. This also describes the spirit of de Baillencourt's work.