Maurice Brianchon, Bal Masqué, 1948. Oil on canvas, 33 x 55 cm

The title of this exhibition – which introduces two accomplished painters to the American public – has been aptly chosen. The works of this husband-and-wife team reflect not only formal aspects of early 20th-century French art, but also points towards the philosophies and concepts that were, and largely remain, cornerstones of French culture: a striving for radical innovation tempered by rational thinking and regard for traditional notions of balance. For artists like Maurice Brianchon and Marguerite Louppe this dichotomy is rendered subtly through the recording of domestic interiors, the tranquility of the surrounding landscape, the pleasures of middle class life. These sensations are captured in repeated scenes drawn from opera, theater or horse races. The work of both artists spans the majority of the 20th Century, from late 1920s until the end of the 1970s, and reflects their reevaluation of Post-Impressionism and various phases of Cubism, employed through well-established genres of still life and landscape painting.

Maurice Brianchon (1898-1979) frequently chose to depict scenes from the opera and the lives of its patrons and performers. While his painterly forays onstage, backstage and into audience life paid homage to Edgar Degas whom he greatly admired, he was also establishing a personal and independent voice. In Bal Masqué (1948), the way he accentuates the richness of black hues acknowledging masters such as Velasquez, whose works he studied at the Prado during an earlier trip from his student days, as well as Degas. But Brianchon also interjects a drama among the figures that is distinctly his own. Matisse was a friend and colleague of Brianchon and also influenced his palette of color and pattern, as can be seen in the Nu Assise (1946), the most arresting work of his in the exhibition. In this canvas, one can see the germination of future developments in the division of the picture plane and the interplay of the foreground, middle, and the background of the painting. Conversation a la Plage (1951) illuminates that development. Two seated women in the foreground constitute fields of a pattern separated from the rest of the picture by a strong orange vertical of what appears to be a cabana wall. The eye is led toward the shore with two more casually outlined figures. Whereas orange is, it might seem, employed casually at several points, its use is astutely calculated to balance the composition. Two verticals – a large orange field and a thin but strategically placed yellow line – intersected by a strong black horizontal create an almost independent composition within the painting. This tendency points towards upcoming developments in the work of 1960s. In Nature Morte aux Brioche (1963), for instance, a painting characterized by large areas of near monochrome, gray, off-white and black, interrupted by small areas of light blue, these chromatic elements are pivoted by a letter seemingly casually laid down on the table top to one side and counterbalanced by a single brioche separated from the rest arranged on the compote. Nevertheless, all these elements seem to be incidental, as if to belie the artist’s true interest in creating a fully abstract composition of intersecting geometric picture planes. This development can be further traced in the later still lives such as the Nature Morte aux Pommes (1970).

The predilection for geometry was certainly enhanced by Brianchon’s trip to New York City for his exhibition at the David Finlay Gallery in 1959. He sketched profusely in the city and painted numerous works where he celebrated the strong geometry of the architecture, which had a strong impact on him. Since the 1940s Brianchon designed sets and...
costumes for numerous ballets by composer friends such as Leo Delibes, Maurice Ravel and Francis Poulenc with whom he was a close friend. Later, he would also work on Pierre de Marivaux’s *Fausse Confidences*, and he illustrated numerous books, including the complete edition of André Gide for the celebrated Mourlot Press.

While Brianchon’s work was well acknowledged in France early on, that of his wife Marguerite Louppe, an accomplished painter of inquisitive and daring imagination, remained under-recognized and undervalued throughout her career—very much the fate, of course, of European women artists mid-century. She studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and Académie Julian (where Louise Bourgeois was a fellow student). When the couple acquired a large house in Truffières in the Dordogne, Marguerite was able to have ample studio space, equal in size to her husband’s, and her work flourished. This sense of liberation is well documented in her beautiful canvas, *Les Trois Chevalets* (all works are undated unless otherwise specified) that depicts no less than three easels in spacious light-filled rooms with an interestingly developed perspective. Although both artists retained tight connection with Parisian cultural life, time spent at Truffières that produced much of the significant work in both artists’ careers.

Working adjacent and sketching together out of doors, their constant artistic dialogue freed their imagination to pursue divergent paths. It is Brianchon who gives us a more tranquil view of the surroundings, depicted in *Les bles avant l’orange* (1969). Here he opens the space and lets the eye roam freely over the fields into the distance while Louppe, in *View of the Basin, Truffiers*, confronts us with the walls of the pool in the foreground and the strong iron gate in the middle ground. Both artists “offer” a clearly delineated road leading through the composition toward the rolling hills on the horizon, one that encloses the whole composition with a strong horizontal finale.

As the less prominent of the two artists, Louppe enjoyed more freedom to experiment. Her frequent still lives are filled with tools of the artist’s trade, as in *Tabletop Still-Life*; in other works, floor, table and easel arrangements are studies in geometry that recall late cubism, often verging on abstraction. The painter’s tools seem to be employed almost as realistic precautions against full immersion in such territory. A hand-carved chair features in numerous paintings; whole, as in *Rustic Chair*, or segmented and obscured by other objects, in *Still Life with Fan*. It is a frequent prop for Louppe, adding another stop along the visual history of commonplace chairs from Vincent van Gogh to Joseph Kosuth. Other utilitarian objects, such as flasks and bottles, are also profusely employed, as Louppe valued domesticity and the intimacy of the everyday, all the while reaching way beyond the quotidian.

In the present climate of attempting to reverse the wrongs of the past gender discrimination, I was struck by discovering the beauty and penetrating vision of Louppe’s work and by the fact that she never gained larger recognition. This is not to belittle the work of her husband, but to point out the balanced approach to the selections for this exhibition where the curators, William Corwin and David Hirsh, managed to highlight the individual strengths of each artist with equanimity. That this strength grew out of mutual respect and support between husband and wife. Through dedication to each other and their work, Louppe and Brianchon became masters of their métier, exemplars of the tradition of French painting.

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