

# Suzan Frecon

## Suspension

### Anonymity

Suzan Frecon's statements are characteristically concise, her phrasing as direct as the forms she paints. "I like it that art is anonymous," she says; "I think all art could be anonymous so that you just look at the art, there's no story."<sup>1</sup> Anonymity with respect to authorship is a historical fact, but subject to change according to the politics of research and the social organization of data. The identity of a nameless artist can become known. Or invented: art historians sometimes assign a group of anonymous works to the authorship of a putative figure; they follow with a human story, speculating on the psychology of the assembled oeuvre. One inference leads to a second, solidifying the first and channeling the view. But anonymity is a two-way proposition. As an observational *attitude*, it stands clear of history and its findings. Names can be ignored. The mode of perceptual anonymity is subject only to the will of the individual who chooses to adopt it. Even when established facts abound, we can assume an anonymous attitude and project it onto works of art, negating the historical process.

"You just look at the art": this attitude does not come easily.<sup>2</sup> Critical observers—even many artists themselves—consider creative work comparatively, developmentally, and politically. With so many angles of interpretation, we freely select among them, turning our attention in one direction while abandoning other possibilities. The more we question, speculating and theorizing over what we have seen, the less we may be looking. This is Frecon's concern—to look outside a context rather than allow the context to truncate looking: "I love it when you see artwork like the anonymous tantra paintings, or a Mimbres pot, and you don't know if a man or a woman did it, you don't know when it was made, you just feel the art, the presence of the art, and you know that artist built that into the work. There is no explanation."<sup>3</sup>

Frecon looks. She offers little explanation for what she sees. Recounting her visit to a fellow artist, she notes that her attention turned from their

conversation and passed, as if involuntarily, to looking. Her “consciousness was taken over” by the compelling appearance of a painting in the natural light of the studio.<sup>4</sup> I venture that Frecon’s psychic turn occurred *as if* involuntarily, because I can only imagine my own responses in an analogous situation. My desire to look at objects of aesthetic interest may well be inherent, and I need only indulge it. Yet objects of extraordinary attraction seem to induce the desire that I experience. Does my attention to a work of art stem from my disposition? Or do visual qualities cause me to look, even when my purpose directs me elsewhere—the will of the art, so to speak, having imposed itself on mine? This division in the experience of visual attraction may exist only in the realm of conceptual language, which articulates an exchange between a subject and an object of an action—subject and object remaining distinct dialectical entities. In an anonymous experience of art, subject and object are one. Perceptual anonymity eliminates dualistic barriers.

I hardly feel directed by Frecon’s art, yet at some level it controls me, paradoxically leaving my senses free to do as they wish. For what they wish is to experience Frecon’s art. Several weeks ago, walking toward the entrance to David Zwirner gallery, I unexpectedly encountered *noh* (2017), viewing it peripherally through a window. Despite the skewed perspective, this striking array of vermilion and green earth immediately altered my purpose. I felt a need to enter the gravitational field of the work, to move forward and back, left and right, in the space that its scale projected. The painting induced in me an anonymous attitude. I was looking without seeking to analyze, compare, or explain. As Frecon notes: “They are paintings that you experience. There is no ‘story.’”<sup>5</sup>

### History without a story

Gervase of Canterbury, a writer active around 1200, expressed a principle that resonates with Frecon’s attitude of anonymity: “A work of art can only be comprehended by looking at it [and] no description is a substitute for this.”<sup>6</sup> This notion, perhaps unusual in the age of illuminated manuscripts, seems fitting now, given our chronological and cultural remove from so much art that nevertheless affects us. Like the tantric and Mimbres art that Frecon admires, examples of medieval art impress her by the direct address of their projection of color and light. Her experience benefits from her being unaware of (or unconcerned with) the religious, mystical, and cultish significance of the aesthetic configurations. She has no desire to colonize

another culture or age by explaining it to itself.

Recently, Frecon commented on the early Sieneese artist Duccio di Buoninsegna (in a video produced for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). “I’m a painter,” she says, establishing the orientation of what will follow. She could be any painter. Her response to Duccio reflects no gender, racial, or ethnic position, nothing more than her experience as an artist. She responds to his *Madonna and Child* (c. 1290–1300) without mention of comparatives (no first, no best), development (no anticipation, no breakthrough, no influence), or ideology (no theology, no politics). In contrast, such auxiliary issues become central to interpretations by art historians. Frecon’s reference to the representational theme of Madonna and Child establishes no more than that the emotionally charged subject is “something that we all relate to,” as if its temporal remoteness and theological specificity were irrelevant. She distinguishes Duccio’s effort solely by its aesthetic excellence: not only is he a “great colorist” but also an expert craftsman; his small panel has survived the centuries intact, its various colors and application of gold continuing to generate an “explosion of light.” “It takes me out of myself,” Frecon says: “I get lost in it.” The painting is “always in a state of suspension [as] orchestrated by Duccio.”<sup>7</sup>

“State of suspension” is an odd characterization for a work of the early Italian Renaissance, a period glorified in our histories for producing painters and sculptors who returned classical harmony and proportion to the pictorial arts, affording their imagery a sense of completion and perfection. What, to the contrary, would generate a condition of suspension? The term refers to the cessation or deferment of a process. What process? “Duccio knew how to compose” is among Frecon’s initial statements in her video commentary. If only subliminally, the remarkable play of asymmetrical ellipsoidal shapes in *Madonna and Child* must hold a special attraction for her; the ovoid heads and the curving drape and edging of the Madonna’s robe recall her own forms. The shapes in Sieneese painting have long interested her—visual elements regarded in their anonymity, often extracted from reproductions in books.<sup>8</sup> By a curious historical inversion, Frecon has become Duccio’s future. A work such as *ultra terre verte* (2016) explores the potential of ovoid abstraction—an extension of what the Sieneese painter developed in service to representation.

Suspension may be their shared quality, Duccio and Frecon. She recalls having “noticed that [good paintings] were always strongly composed so as to be ineluctably suspended.” True to her implied distinction between visual interest and discursive reason, she adds: “I don’t want to overexplain it.”<sup>9</sup>

Perfection of a process follows a logic; perfection can be explained. But a state of perceptual suspension defers its perfection and explanation to a future moment. The present time of looking belongs to a viewer sensitive to the suspension of a work. When Frecon views Duccio, her process of looking is suspended by his composition, to which she feels compelled to return. It suspends *her* within her own vision.<sup>10</sup> Despite Duccio's identity as a giant of Western aesthetic achievement, Frecon's attitude of anonymity sets this history aside. She encounters the mirror image of her anonymity in the Sienese painter. His art offers her the anonymity she seeks; and in the process of encountering Duccio, she encounters herself. The state of compositional suspension—the organized play of Duccio's colors that Frecon notes: blue, pink, earth green, gold—holds timelessly. I experience an analogous suspension when I view Frecon's *book of paint, version 3* (2017; images 23, 24). Her five colors—two distinct reds (an ochre and an iron oxide), a blue (lapis lazuli), a muted yellowish tone (raw umber), and a green (a mix of malachite and green earths)—have been expertly harmonized within a composition of assonance and irregularity. As so often in Frecon's art, the various visual features seem perfectly balanced yet still in the process of falling into a proper order. Her order has a not-quite quality, a lure to continued looking.

Gervase of Canterbury, by his words circa 1200, and Duccio di Buoninsegna, by his pictorial composition circa 1300, demonstrate that the so-called modernist attitude toward abstracted looking has a long history in human perception. Abstracted looking is distracted looking; as intense as it is, it turns from common, pragmatic concerns. Oblivious to political contingencies, this attitude toward visual experience nevertheless became associated, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with cultural revolution and resistance to traditional sources of societal authority; many critics now dismiss the attitude as either “formalism” (socially detached) or “avant-gardism” (pretentious and politically ineffectual).<sup>11</sup> Before the modern era, anonymity of a sort existed, albeit tacitly. This, at least, is what a contemporary artist, looking to the past, is inclined to notice. “I'm a painter,” Frecon says, without qualifying the term by “modern” or “American” or “woman.” Her aesthetic orientation eliminates the historical markers.

### Visual reasons

Frecon often employs the classical proportion of the golden mean (1:1.618). She comments: “I only use measurements for visual reasons. . . . They are visual measurements—not philosophical or theoretical or metaphorical or

symbolic or anything. All my decisions are made for visual reasons.”<sup>12</sup> Generally, we regard reasons as conceptual and hence logical; *visual* reasons, deriving from sensory experience, ought to constitute an alternative logic. They find support in mathematics and geometry, evident in the elaborate working drawings that Frecon constructs. But each painting at full scale—for example, *lantern* (2017; image 25), with its corresponding geometrical calculations on paper—introduces subtle irregularities, which counteract the rigor of the initial plan.<sup>13</sup> Because the halved ellipsoid of *lantern* has two sets of foci rather than one, the vaguely recognizable geometry of this form appears disjunctively unique. Frecon also relishes the unpredictable variation in surface quality that results from her manual application of viscous paint and oil; her edges are hand rendered, retaining an organic feel that diminishes any potential for conceptual order otherwise advanced by the measured geometry. Color, reflectivity, organic handling: these qualities establish “visual reasons.” They place the logic of concepts in suspension. A visual reason falls short of a *rational* one: “There is no explanation.”<sup>14</sup>

Gold leaf applied to panel in medieval and early Renaissance art fascinates Frecon for visual reasons, regardless of the economic and political significance of the material. Because of its sheen, it appears both dark and light: “a negative or a positive depending on the way the natural light was hitting it.”<sup>15</sup> As a pictorial background, gold offsets a foreground figure dynamically, encouraging sustained viewing from various positions. By suspending a viewer in the act of looking, it acquires its special value for perception. Frecon produces an analogous effect by applying various amounts of oil to her pigments, contrasting the sheen of a highly reflective area of color to the matte quality of an adjacent color. From one angle the shiny area will seem to advance; from another, it recedes. In *vermilion* (2017), a matte red ochre surrounds a glossy ellipsoid of vermilion; the spatial implications of the two areas of color are reversible, as is so often the case in Frecon's paintings. The situation of *f.r.s.p.o.* (2016) may seem more complicated, for an ellipsoidal form in raw sienna as well as a surrounding area of purple ochre have mottled surfaces (a factor of the inherent density of the pigment, the number of layers applied, and the amount of oil added). Here, glossy mottling faces matte mottling in a contrast of two warm hues, both of which verge on cool. The composition of colors is at once stable and unstable: this is color in suspension. The appearance of *f.r.s.p.o.* changes not only with the viewer's movement but also with fluctuation in natural illumination, to which Frecon is extraordinarily sensitive. Temporal duration becomes a visual reason.

### A tacit tradition

When political issues are pressing, visual subtlety may seem a luxury or simply irrelevant. Expressing frustration with the cultural sidelining of aesthetic expertise, the New York painter Michael Goldberg lodged a familiar complaint: “To move a line an inch this way or this way. Who cares? . . . [I] saw [Barnett Newman] sit in front of a painting, a big painting, and agonize about whether a stripe should be moved a sixteenth of an inch this way or that way. It would make no difference to me whether it was moved a foot!”<sup>16</sup>

Goldberg probably cared about the nuances more than he admitted. Frustration arises when others fail to care despite an artist’s best efforts. When Newman was asked to explain *Uriel* (1955), an abstract painting eighteen feet in width, he referred to the great expanse of greenish blue occupying about three-quarters of the surface and seeming to terminate in no-man’s-land. He offered a Frecon-like visual reason: “I wanted to see how far I could stretch it before it broke.”<sup>17</sup> Newman’s justification came only as an afterthought. The desire expressed in his verb “want” could be recognized and acknowledged only after the painter had exercised his pictorial judgment, which had no external purpose to guide it. On another occasion, he stated that paintings should always proceed “without any strict plans.”<sup>18</sup> Art must be experiential—a learning process more than an application of acquired knowledge. Art should remain a step ahead of its artist, offering no explanation. Given Frecon’s attitude, Newman might represent a modern-day Duccio; he, too, knew how to compose. Composition extends beyond balancing left, right, up, down. Newman’s *Uriel* is radically asymmetrical, yet we would be loath to adjust the areas of blue and brown or shift any of the vertical edges. Likewise, in assessing Frecon’s paintings. She often alludes to her concern for composition—an odd quality for her to emphasize, as opposed to, say, chromatic harmony. Many of her recent works involve a single ellipsoidal form contained within a surround of a clearly differentiated color. What constitutes the composition?

Frecon’s various applications of the golden mean give her a start. In *terrenum* (2016; image 26), for instance, each of the two vertical panels of stretched linen are golden rectangles (proportion of height to width: 1.618 to 1).<sup>19</sup> Axial divisions that determine the curvature of the ellipsoidal segments also derive from the golden mean. So Frecon’s art is modular, but subliminally. Moreover, she constructs her ellipsoids so that the area occupied on either side of the central divider is equivalent. This left-right

balance works its magic without appearing to be what it is—a secret symmetry within an asymmetrical composition.

Within a fantasia of color, Frecon suspends the force of her structure. Offsetting the unseen mathematical foundation, her visible surface is organic and irregular, as if she were working against herself. Before she completes the exterior contour of an ellipsoidal figure, she will have employed four sets of foci to draw the continuous but disjointed edge. To this quirky geometry, she adds the active vibrations of hand rendering. Her paint, especially along ellipsoidal contours, develops an uneven appearance due to the distribution of the pigment and its oil binder as she works the material against the resist of the linen.<sup>20</sup> Add to this the transient effects of ambient light from which Frecon’s surfaces are designed to benefit, and what began as a logical geometrical structure has become suspended in a web of living sensation. Her composition, like Newman’s, may well be experienced as anticomposition. It is and is not.

A generation or two before Newman, Paul Cezanne occupied a place in the Duccio-to-Frecon tradition. His characteristic arrays of short parallel strokes lacked the expressive handwork of most of his peers, operating as direct, no-nonsense conveyors of color. Paul Gauguin praised Cezanne for creating “the wonders of an art essentially pure.”<sup>21</sup> For Gauguin’s notion of visual and emotional purity, substitute Frecon’s sense of anonymity. A viewer of the time claimed that Cezanne’s art undermined the division of subject and object: “We think only of painting; neither the object represented nor the subjectivity of the artist holds our attention.”<sup>22</sup> Cezanne’s art was “pure” because its effect seemed independent of both the cultural significance of the representation (the object) and the projection of an expressive personality (the subjectivity). Just as Frecon identifies her interest without equivocation (“I’m a painter”), the Cezanne of Gauguin’s imagination held the exploration of sensory experience as his paramount concern. “His blues are extra intense and his red gives off an astonishing vibration”: this was Gauguin’s account—by no means an explanation—of the still life of apples by Cezanne that he owned (*Still Life with Fruit Dish*, 1879–1880).<sup>23</sup>

I suspect that Gauguin perceived Cezanne’s anonymity—a release from subject-object duality—when he gazed at those apples. Frecon felt something of the same during her repeated visits to Duccio’s *Madonna and Child* (“It takes me out of myself”). When I engage Frecon’s ellipsoidal forms and the absorbing chromatic play of her color, I too feel the release. Her art affords me anonymity; looking, I suspend my identity and purpose.

As neither subject nor object, I experience the color and the light. Frecon implies that art, like nature, returns us to the nature that we are. The thought challenges our dualisms and their divisiveness. “It’s impossible to say we aren’t from nature,” Frecon states: “The experience of looking . . . is just so much a part of the soul of humanity.”<sup>24</sup> The name of the soul of humanity is anonymous.

#### NOTES

I thank Suzan Frecon for generously sharing her thoughts and illuminating her studio process. I am grateful to Gilles Heno-Coe for essential aid in research. All translations are my own.

- 1 Suzan Frecon, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau” (2015), in *Tell Me Something Good: Artist Interviews from The Brooklyn Rail*, ed. Jarrett Earnest and Lucas Zwirner (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2017), p. 141.
- 2 Lawrence Rinder characterizes Frecon’s practice as “deep seeing,” applied to both art and life. Rinder, “Deep Seeing: The Art of Suzan Frecon,” in *form, color, illumination: Suzan Frecon painting*, ed. Josef Helfenstein and Matthias Fehner. Exh. cat. (Houston: The Menil Collection; Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, 2008), pp. 98–101.
- 3 Frecon, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau,” p. 142.
- 4 Frecon, “Traveling in Louise Fishman Terrain,” *Turps Banana* (January 2017), p. 45.
- 5 Frecon, “text and related work,” in *Suzan Frecon: oil paintings and sun*. Exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2015), p. 63. Accordingly, Frecon’s titles are lowercase, to diminish their rhetorical significance; most merely identify the pigments used, contributing no supplemental concepts to the work.
- 6 Frecon reproduced the page of a book in which Gervase’s statement appears (more paraphrase than direct translation); see *Suzan Frecon: paper*. Exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner; Santa Fe: Radius Books; San Antonio, Texas: Lawrence Markey, 2013), n.p. She also quoted the statement in “text and related work,” p. 66. For the source in

Latin, see *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. William Stubbs (London: Longman & Co., 1879–1880), p. 28.

- 7 Frecon, in “Suzan Frecon on Duccio di Buoninsegna’s *Madonna and Child*” (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), video, accessed online at [artistproject.metmuseum.org](http://artistproject.metmuseum.org).
- 8 Frecon, conversation with the author, August 3, 2017.
- 9 Frecon, “Interview with Suzan Frecon” (2007), by Josef Helfenstein, in *form, color, illumination: Suzan Frecon painting*, p. 88.
- 10 When Frecon visited Trinity College, Dublin, to see the Book of Kells, she could not fathom the effect of its color within the time allotted to viewing; she reentered the admission line several times in succession, attempting to satisfy her aesthetic involvement with the work. Frecon, conversation with the author, August 3, 2017. “You can’t understand or begin to grasp its orchestration of colors and dimensions.” Frecon, “text and related work,” p. 68.
- 11 For aspects of this history, see Richard Shiff, “Dream of Abstraction,” in *Paths to Abstraction 1867–1917*, ed. Terence Maloon. Exh. cat. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2010), pp. 52–69.
- 12 Frecon, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau,” p. 137. See also Frecon, “Interview with Suzan Frecon,” pp. 87, 97: “Every decision I make in my work is a visual decision. . . . They are not based on symbolism, story, or metaphor.”
- 13 Some inscriptions in the drawing for *lantern* appear inverted. Frecon considered using this configuration the other way around, with the curved contour at top rather than bottom.

- 14 Frecon, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau,” p. 142.
- 15 Frecon, “Interview with Suzan Frecon,” p. 91.
- 16 Michael Goldberg, interviewed by Jeanne Siegel (1996), quoted in Jeanne Siegel, *Painting After Pollock: Structures of Influence* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1999), p. 75.
- 17 Barnett Newman, quoted in Harold Cohen, introduction to “Barnett Newman Talks to David Sylvester” (November 17, 1965), BBC radio broadcast, typescript, The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York.
- 18 Newman, “A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess” (1966), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 274.
- 19 Frecon also enjoys painting on sheets of paper from ledgers that have a vertical fold, generating an analogous, subtly divided ground.
- 20 This effect is accentuated in Frecon’s work on paper, which allows watery paint to flow and puddle, as in *distressed cathedral series study* (2015–2016).
- 21 Paul Gauguin, letter to Camille Pissarro, July 10, 1884, in *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: 1873–1888*, ed. Victor Merlhès (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), p. 65.
- 22 Maurice Denis, “Cézanne” (1907), in *Théories, 1890–1910: Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1920), p. 247.
- 23 Gauguin, letter to Émile Schuffenecker, January 14, 1885, in Merlhès, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, p. 88.
- 24 Frecon, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau,” p. 140.