

Bernard Piffaretti

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By **Raphael Rubinstein**



Bernard Piffaretti, Untitled, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 31 7/8 x 25 1/2 x 7/8 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Until this current show at Lisson, French painter Bernard Piffaretti hadn't had a solo exhibition in New York since 2002 (at Cheim and Read). That's 17 years ago. Far, far too long a time to pass without seeing the work of an artist who is one of the great painters of his generation (born in 1955). The reasons for this protracted absence probably have something to do with the curious prejudice against contemporary

French art, especially painting, that prevailed in New York for many decades. Happily, this bias seems to be fading as several galleries have begun helping New Yorkers catch up with decades of artistic developments in France. I'm thinking of recent shows devoted to Pierre Buraglio and Claude Viallat (at Ceysson-Bénétière), Bernard Frize (at Perrotin) and numerous participants of the Supports/Surfaces movement (at Canada).

The procedure that has dominated Piffaretti's work since the early 1980s is simple to describe, but the paintings that result from it, and the lines of thought they inspire, are anything but simple. Each painting begins with the artist using a single vertical line to divide the canvas into two equal parts. Using thin acrylic paint, Piffaretti then builds an abstract composition of flat loose shapes on one side of the line, left or right as the mood strikes him. He then re-creates the same composition on the other side of the dividing line. Of course, it's not the same composition. For one thing, although Piffaretti attempts to follow the first composition as closely as possible, his intentionally casual manner makes it hard to create a perfect copy (sometimes he finds himself totally unable to remake a composition and leaves half of the canvas blank). Secondly, even if he could make a perfect copy, that's not his chief concern. Thirdly, and most importantly, because the second version inevitably must share a canvas with the first version, it is now a question of looking at a doubled image, not a single one. In other words, all three components—the central line, the first composition, and the second—must be taken in as a single painting.

It's here that things begin to get complicated. Sometimes the vertical line, what Piffaretti has called "the central mark," establishes a stark division between left and right, but often it seems to attach itself to one side or the other, and as it does so it throws off the symmetry of the painting. Seeking stability, the viewer tries to hold onto the idea of a repeated image, while the painter, more interested in instability, seeks to thwart such readings. Usually, chez Piffaretti, instability wins.



Bernard Piffaretti, *Untitled*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 66 7/8 x 66 7/8 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Because we can't know which side came first, a chronological approach is of no use. This is one reason why, despite initial similarities, Piffaretti's project has almost nothing to do with appropriation art. Instead of a tussle between original and copy, we get something much more eye-bending and mind-bending. As Piffaretti has noted, one effect of redoing a composition is to "cut off any subjective efforts due to the painting's form, style or color." The doubling process demystifies painting and renders it useless as an emblem of selfhood. Of course, Piffaretti is not the first painter to deconstruct his medium, but what makes his work so fundamentally different from other critique-driven painters from Martin Barré to Peter Halley is that he pursues an exhilarating formal freedom, which he achieves, unexpectedly, with standard colors and no-nonsense paint handling.



Bernard Piffaretti, Untitled, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 25 1/2 x 36 1/8 x 7/8 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.

The discourse of doubleness and repetition is vast: Borges's Pierre Menard, Artaud's *Theater and its Double*, Poe's William Wilson, Rauschenberg's *Factum 1* and 2 (often cited in relation to Piffaretti, but actually not very relevant), Marx's notion of historical repetition as tragedy and farce, Nietzsche's Eternal Return, all those Warhol silkscreens, the film *Groundhog Day*. For his part, Piffaretti professes affinities with constraint-driven Oulipo writers like Georges Perec and with Samuel Beckett and the Melville of *Bartleby the Scrivener* (both exemplars of what Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas calls "writers of the No.") Piffaretti likes to describe his painting as driven by negation.

My first exposure to Piffaretti's work was in the 1980s at the Parisian gallery Jean Fournier on Rue Quincampoix. There his work was often shown alongside gallery artists who included, among others, Shirley Jaffe, Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis. For all their conceptual density, Piffaretti's compositions easily held their own among such high-powered retinalists. I thought then and still think now how wonderfully paradoxical it is that a strict procedure and a spirit of negation should result in some of the most visually buoyant paintings I have ever seen.