

The notion of cerebral landscape In Micheline LO work

Micheline LO said, “I paint the cerebral landscape,” “I have no imagination,” “I only pick up indicia [clues],” “Everything has to be moving forward and backward at the same time”. In a few words, she was proposing the guiding thread of her approach.

Overview

A landscape is first and foremost an expanse, a geographical territory, that can be observed. But, by extension, this territory can also be media-based, biological, scientific, audiovisual, cerebral, etc. Cerebral landscapes are particularly numerous. Our brains are organized into areas and layers. The first layers deal with raw perceptions, visual, olfactory, etc., and the last layers are home to thought, imagination, organization, or composition. Micheline LO, as painter, was primarily interested in the landscapes that emerge in the first layers of the brain. Those that perceive gaps, singularities, distinct elements, without yet being the seat of compositions, forms, or plastic cells. Her paintings and drawings propose neither forms, nor structures, nor images, but rather perceived elements. These elements are never finished. They are always in formation, like those of living organisms. Contemplation “in front of” is replaced by the effervescence “among”. The “perceived” signs prevail over the “intended” signs. Her pictorial approach seems to be without equivalent. A brief overview is provided below.

Notion of landscape

A landscape is an expanse, a land (land-scape), which can be observed visually. But it can also be observed in a sonic, olfactory, tactile way (wind, fog, heat), or even in a sentimental, emotional, social way. It encompasses its inhabitants, as explained in German, where “*Landschaft*” is broken down into *land* and *schaft*. This notion goes far beyond geography. It encompasses a multitude of territories. We talk about the political, economic, social, cultural, media, audiovisual, industrial, technological, literary landscape, etc. In the case of LO, it is primarily a question of territories of perception.

The expression “Cerebral Landscape” sheds light on her pictorial work. From her very first paintings, she drew inspiration from the cerebral landscapes of others (painters, writers, peoples). Later, she drew inspiration from her own cerebral landscape, or more precisely from singular cerebral landscapes of Universe.

Let us precise that a landscape can be natural or artificial, perceived or dreamed. That everything flows in it: contours, light, and the passage of time. That the conscious and the unconscious intertwine in it. That a landscape is not an image, nor a set of images. It is never formed, fixed, reducible

to moments. It is always in the process of formation. Life, water, wind and light cause it to evolve slowly or suddenly.

Notion of cerebral landscape

What we see, science tells us, is not what our retinas see. It is what our brain “sees”. And it sees what it has “learned” to see. An adult cat, raised during its “critical learning period” in an environment with only horizontal lines, cannot recognize vertical lines. It bumps into the legs of a table. Its brain did not learn to see vertical contours. It does not see them. A human whose vision in one eye suffered impairment during the “critical period” of vision development retains monocular vision (amblyopia) for the rest of its life. The optical illusions that make us see different colors where they are identical confirm that what we see is constructed by our brains.

Today, we also know that the information captured by our retinas travels, from the optic nerve, along separate pathways. Contrasts, colors, and movements activate different neurons. In individual cases, when these neurons suffer from disease, the patients affected are unable to distinguish shapes, they see colors only in certain parts of their visual field, or perceive movement as a succession of still images, spaced several seconds apart. Their cerebral work is incomplete. Their cerebral landscapes are incomplete.

More specifically, we know that the brain works layer by layer. When it comes to shapes, for example, the first layer reacts to contour elements (small lines and their orientation), the second layer combines these lines into more complex elements (corners, intersections, triangles, stars, etc.). Layer by layer, mapping by mapping, objects, faces and concepts emerge. These concepts are abstract. The number three, for example, is identified as such, whatever its visual representation is “3”, “III”, “three”, “THREE”. The brain is then able to associate these abstract representations, for example the face of Napoleon, with events, sounds, texts, and a multitude of other resources of the brain accessible to the conscious and the unconscious.

Thus, the cerebral landscape is constructed according to specialized areas and layers. And there are as many “cerebral landscapes” as there are areas and layers of the brain. The rods in our retinas see contrasts. The cones, concentrated in the center of the retina, see three types of colors. The incessant scanning of our eyes (several times per second), combined with the unconscious computational work of our brain, makes it possible to correct defects, erase the blind spot of the optic nerve, expand the very precise vision of the center of the retina (fovea, macula), and see color in the periphery of the eye, which however is not sensitive to color.

Let us add that our cerebral landscape is frankly different from what artificial vision systems construct. Today, it is firmly established, for reasons still unknown, that our human brains have ten times more connections going down from the upper layers of the brain than connections going up from the retina to the upper layers. It is the brain that “decides” what we see.

Unconsciously, our brains reconstruct stable, precise, three-dimensional, and colorful images, where our retinas perceive only incomplete, imperfect, and heterogeneous elements.

What did Micheline LO mean by cerebral landscape ?

Ultimately, all we perceive are “cerebral landscapes”. And, for as long as painting has existed, all painters have materialized cerebral landscapes.

To be more precise, Micheline LO was interested in the first layers of the cerebral landscape. When she said “I have no imagination”, “I only see clues”, or “All over it has to be moving forward and backward at the same time”, she was expressing in her own way that her painting was not the result of an intention, a composition, an abstraction, originating from the higher layers of the brain, or even from a global space of consciousness, but that it was the result of a pictorial work, activating perceptual gaps on the canvas, identified right from the first layers of the visual cortex.

Traditionally, imagination and intentionality have dominated painting and images in the West. At least until photography, which appeared in the middle of the 19th century. At first, photography was simply considered a new medium, capable, like its predecessors, of framing, capturing and intentionally revealing images. But gradually, photographic grains revealed what they fundamentally were: witnesses to moments of the Universe, expected or unexpected, like ancient traces of galaxies, reconstructed images of neurons, random video surveillance footage, captures of fleeting emotions, etc. Philosophically, photographic images then appeared to her as essentially unintentional images. However, this unintentionality of photography will remain the only aspect that she will keep from it.

Thus, in the 1980s, when photographic codes seemed to have been gradually invading all artistic activities for a century, she did not seek to be part of that movement. Photographic grains, fixed, motionless, instantaneous, imaging a past, did not inspire her. She was rather inspired by the incessant activity of neurons, and the flows that animate them. Nothing in her paintings was to be motionless. The gaze was to move from perception to perception, without stopping on anything, as in a landscape.

What Micheline LO meant by cerebral landscape clearly escaped any field of intentionality. It was not the fruit of an imagination, but of a perception. She did not seek to paint “signifying” elements, indexing elements, but rather indicial “traces”. She did not seek to position forms on planes, but rather to paint distinct elements, independent of one another, to the point of being able to move forward and backward individually, perceptively and constantly, in front of and behind the canvas.

What did she do?

Concretely, Micheline LO first became interested in gaps, thematically and pictorially. In this, she was following the cerebral way of working, which only deals with gaps. The synapses of our brains only encode gaps: gaps in contour orientation, gaps in direction of movement, gaps in relative depth, gaps in spatial frequencies, gaps in chromatic contrasts.

In each of her series of paintings, of which there are about thirty, Micheline LO focused on one or more types of gap. Like many other painters, she explored thematic gaps:

- Natural / supernatural * reason / delirium * life / death
- Magnificence / derision * emptiness / brilliance * light / dark
- Acceleration / deceleration * line / color
- Negative / positive volumes * evanescence / apparition
- Figurative / non-figurative * analog / digital
- Peace / hostility * nostalgia / modernity
- Apparition / disappearance * form / substance

But, pictorially too, she was interested in gaps:

- Gaps in depth: so, she said “from everywhere it has to be moving forward and backward at the same time”, each element becoming susceptible of being perceived in front of or behind the canvas.
- Gaps in color: the colors had to interact through their differences, not through their composition, thus allowing all colors to appear on the same canvas, without restriction of assembly or compatibilization.
- Stroke difference: each stroke remained partial, free to transform and assemble.
- Empty/full difference: each black can be seen as empty or full, each white too, as well as all the other colors.

Whenever possible, she rejoined the perceptive work of the first layers of the brain.

A cosmogonic painting

In the 1980s, when Micheline LO began to paint, considerable progress was being made in brain imaging. Gradually, many of the speculative theories about the brain, developed in the first half of the 20th century, were validated or invalidated. At the same time, Henri VAN LIER, his lifelong companion and the father of her four children, was writing the second chapter of his book *Anthropogénie*, devoted to the human brain. In 1982, he had also just completed his book *Philosophie de la photographie*, of which he considered Micheline LO to be the co-author. These two books highlighted the very indicial character (bearing witness to imprints and traces) of primordial human signs, as well as of photographic images. And, clearly, neither the primordial signs nor the photographic grains had the indexing (intentional) character of the images traced by classical painters.

Micheline LO, a philosopher and teacher at a school of fine arts, was sensitive to these developments. These had given her material to take an interest in the cerebral landscape, its layers, its virtualities. And, where her lifelong companion, Henri VAN LIER, evolved in abstractions, she chose to take a concrete, material, pictorial, “basal” interest in the first layers of perception.

Thus, Micheline LO's painting “reasoned” and “resonated” with the scientific concepts of her time. The hodgepodge of elementary signs that she links / unlinks in her series *Les chemins des écritures* (The paths of writings) was inspired by both the formation of texts in a human brain and that of amino acid chains in living organisms. In the 1990s, the theme of “living formations” animated many conversations around her.

A very comprehensive text on Micheline LO and the living formations is available at the following address: https://anthropogenie.com/anthropogeny/lo_en.htm.

A plural painting

Populated by millions or billions of unconscious, a cerebral landscape is plural. As a result, Micheline LO's painting was also plural. It was organized into territories, into series, the mysteries of which she said she explored to the point of exhaustion. She thus painted some thirty series, first inspired by the cerebral territories of others (writers, peoples, communities). Then inspired by her own cerebral landscape, down to the traces and reconnections of her own memory.

Expressing the cerebral landscape of others

Many of Micheline LO's paintings are inspired by the virtualities of literature. Thus, FLAUBERT, DANTE, Carlos FUENTES, Jean GENET, and Saint-John PERSE nourished her first series. Never to "illustrate" their works. But to try to enter their brains, or rather their mode of perception and construction. Thus, she painted the cerebral hallucinations of FLAUBERT's *Saint Anthony*, the cerebral transcendence of DANTE's *Paradise*, the cultural entanglements of Garcia MARQUES's *Terra Nostra*, the darkness and cerebral meanderings of GENET's *Hell*, the spiritual sweeps of *Winds* by Saint-John PERSE.

For a dozen years (1982-1995), she was inspired by the cerebral landscapes of others. At the time, she would simply pin her canvases to the wall or sometimes spread them out on the floor. So, without a frame, without edges, with no contours other than the filaments escaping from the canvas.

With a few exceptions, it was the brains of writers who inspired her. She herself had written a novel, FLEXTE, a kind of text flow. She had also written illustrated stories for children. It is true that literature is probably the artistic domain that most stimulates brain work. More than music, cinema, sculpture, or painting, it awakens inner landscapes. A text listened to with eyes closed is transformed into cerebral flow. Music, on the other hand, more rhythmic, awakens movement: fingers, feet, shoulders, the whole body, sometimes going as far as dance, to which Micheline LO had devoted a graduating thesis.

These cerebral flows, stimulated by texts, can activate all the layers of the brain, from the vaguest memories to the most structured thoughts. The layers of our brains constantly link perception, analogy, abstractions, simulations and reasoning. But, of all these layers, it was the first ones that interested Micheline LO.

Symptomatically, faced with DANTE's paradise, she will proceed with the same decomposition work as that accomplished by our brains. She will paint separately (1985-1986) a series of faces without colors, a series of colors without faces, and a series of faces with color. There is no evidence that she was aware of this cerebral mechanism, which has now been demonstrated. We now know that our brain detects shapes and colors in different areas of the brain before assembling them. But, never mind, consciously or intuitively, this is the path that Micheline LO had taken.



Micheline LO, Paradise of Dante, Series 3, Song 12, The sky of the Sun 3, 1986

Expressing her own cerebral landscape

Having explored the cerebral landscape of others for a dozen years, Micheline LO has given free rein to her own. This personal work began with a series entitled *Les Chemins des Ecritures* (The Paths of Writings). The canvases are covered with elementary motifs and symbols like those that the brain identifies from its earliest layers. These motifs are not yet organized, composed, assembled, or made compatible as in the upper layers. They are simply distinct. Distinct enough to exist and participate in cerebral flows.

Pictorially, the challenge was to remain at the level of perception. The work on “gaps” undertaken by Micheline LO, from her first series, has taken on its full meaning here. The elementary motifs painted on the canvas exist only through their differences, their contours, their chromatic contrasts. And as in a brain nothing is fixed, the cerebral gaze cannot stop on anything. It circulates among the elements of the canvas, as it would circulate in a landscape. It goes from sequence to sequence.



Micheline LO, Paths of writings #50, December 29, 1997

Here, it is not a question of linear sequences of letters, words and sentences, but of an abundance of sequences, with several dimensions, which she will call “*The Paths of Writings*”, and not “*The Path of Writing*”. The cerebral gaze is not linear. It can circulate from left to right, from top to bottom, from front to back, in curves, loops or meanders. The corners of the canvas are as active as the center. The edges are not framing edges, but ebb edges. All paths are possible. The elements are only there for their differences. Each brain is free to explore them, reconstruct them, enrich them in its own way.

Other series will follow, including *The Astronomer*, *Peace treaties*, *Bestiary*, *Hands*, *Chameleon*, *Migrations*. Each one redeploys the basic codes of the previous series. For example:

- The shift between knowing and seeing, in the series ***The Astronomer***.
- The bipolarity between conflicts and pacts, in the series ***Peace Treaties***.
- The existential singularities of the animal, in the series ***Bestiary***.
- The variabilities of the painting hand, in the series ***Hands***.
- Transformations/confusions, in the series ***Chameleons***.
- The beyonds and within, in the series ***Migrations***.
- The inter-perceptions of the cerebral landscape, in the series ***Spirits of Wine***.

Micheline LO did not seek to lay down, capture, freeze, depict or illustrate a concept, an idea, a feeling, a memory, an event or a journey “on” the canvas, but to bring out a cerebral landscape “of”, “in”, “among”, “since” the weave of the canvas.

Seeing only indicia [clues] and formations

A trace of wild boar in the mud, a feverish redness on a cheek, a broken stone, an oasis in the desert are indicia [clues]. They make links. They are the trace, the witness, the imprint of something. And each brain is free to interpret them in its own way. They do not result from an intention, emitted by another brain. They are there, susceptible to identification and links in a brain. And when Micheline LO says “I only see indicia [clues]”, she is telling us that her work is devoid of intentionality. What interests her in the cerebral landscape of others, as in her own, is not their textures, as in primitive art, nor their structures, as in classical art, but rather their “formations”, as in the biological growths of life: vegetable, animal, cerebral, cellular, etc.



Micheline LO, Chameleon #12, September 28, 2000

Everything has to move forward and backward at the same time

In a brain, nothing is stable. There is no portrait, no image, no landscape, fixed motionless on a wall or on a plane. There are only perceived elements that float and assemble from moment to moment to the rhythm of consciousness and neuronal work. Micheline LO explored this phenomenon from her earliest works. She said, "It has to move forward and backward at the same time, from all over the place," sometimes adding, "Like a sea upright on a wall." The fluidity of the cerebral landscape required that everything would be able to move forward or backward on the canvas, constantly escaping the constraints of a fixed plane. In many of Micheline LO's paintings and drawings, most of the elements seem to be "suspended", detached from the canvas. Sometimes in front of the canvas, sometimes behind it, often in front and then behind it, alternately, in motion. A black can be empty or full. So can a white. As can any other color.

Let's listen to Micheline LO: *"The canvas has a rhythm in advance. Preserved and served, this rhythm creates enchantment, as do kaleidoscopes, mosaics, stained glass, carpets and Persian gardens. The form does not stand out against the background, but is absorbed in it. This third relationship is the most important for me. What I am mainly looking for in my painting is this vibration, the elasticity of a pulsating spectacle. It is much more fundamental, more basic than the declared directional movements (straight lines, diagonals, verticals, breaks). I expect an overall apparitional, almost hallucinatory effect. The essence is in this pulsation, a kind of wave motion. Like a sea that would stand upright."*

This backward-forward movement gives the painting a third dimension. But this is not a third geometric dimension, calculated in the last layers of the brain, as in classical paintings. It is about cerebral connections/disconnections, in a cerebral landscape.

No images

If "to be the image of" means "to be analogous to", we are all surrounded by images today. Photographic images are everywhere. They bear witness to moments that no longer exist, or never existed. They are reworked by algorithms, graphic designers, or artists. Other images, simulated by engineers or created by special effects, represent objects that do not yet exist or will never exist. None of these images interested Micheline LO. Cerebral landscapes are not images. They arise from the activity of neurons in the different layers of the brain. They arise from the functioning of the mind. No painting by Micheline LO is an image, a representation or an illustration of something. Each of her paintings, whether abstract or figurative, is intended to bear witness to the workings of the brain. The brainwork of others, her own, or both.

Conclusion

The notion of cerebral landscape covers an original field of research, distinct from the composition, decomposition and recomposition of classical and modern paintings. It also covers a field of research away from photographic codes, with their fixed grains and motionless planes. The cerebral landscape is about perception, cerebral construction and living formations.

Micheline LO has focused on this perception right from the earliest layers of the brain. Where only differences, singularities and disparities matter. Unlike photographs, which only memorize still grains, the brain only memorizes links. The activity of these links reflects three types of gaps: gaps in contrast, color, and movement. Working from there, the brain reconstructs shapes, colored, immobile or in motion. This is how cerebral landscapes appear, the first layers of which are the subject of Micheline LO's pictorial work.

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