

The Final Ritual

An examination of Labrosse's art

Pierre Lévy, 2011

Translated by Christelle Morelli

According to Isaac Louria, Creation was preceded by a period of divine retreat – *Tzimtzum* – during which the Infinite Being created a space within himself to make room for time, space, the world and humankind. The Absolute Being was only able to accomplish his work of art by concealing his presence. That is why the created will never know their creator other than through his absence. However, this absence calls out to them and sets them on their path. Labrosse often says that painting is, for her, “the final ritual” and I have often wondered what she meant. Over the years, I’ve come to understand. The ritual is a whirlwind of sincere actions that build a bridge between the absence or abyss that is felt throughout creation, and the presence of the infinite. The ritual opens a line of communication to the invisible.

We can imagine that the first rituals were either seasonal gatherings or performed on the occasion of life's important milestones such as births, initiations, marriages or deaths. A tribe's members lit a fire, exchanged gifts, offered a sacrifice. Painted, tattooed, plumed, masked, scarified, wearing ceremonial vestments, they would chant together; improvised couplets and refrains would bounce back and forth. There would be dancing to loud and rhythmic music until late at night. Intoxicating drinks and plants would be ingested. The earthly world would be breached. Supernatural beings would then manifest themselves through trances or possessions and have a lasting effect on memories and dreams.

Further to this primordial celebration practices and officiants became specialized: rituals for shamans, priests, oracles, warriors . . . Among all the descendants of the ancestral ritual, painting was one of the first to acquire its own identity without however, breaking the chain linking it to the original quest for that divine presence. Several thousand years ago, deep inside torch-lit crypts, painters applied pigments to a wall and the presence born there touches us to this day.

Labrosse doesn't make “art.” She practices a specific ritual which, in effect, every society needs: that of allowing a presence, a power, the invisible depth of human existence to shine through an image. The ritual is effective if the resulting image establishes a *live contact* with the spirit world. The painting welcomes the invisible vibration of the soul to the visible world. Labrosse practices this ritual with total honesty. She doesn't just go through the motions, she uses her mastery of mediums and techniques to effectively capture and transmit the presence's impact.

I can not put into words the effect Labrosse's images have on her audience. Her “transfigured bodies”, “charred cloaks” or “X-rayed souls” are hard to describe. We can project what inhabits our being onto their ever-shifting form, as onto a Rorschach test or clouds scurrying across the sky. However, beyond this failed attempt at identification – and precisely because of this mysterious blockage of automatic recognition – we are overcome by the energy of a human presence. One must courageously dive into

these electrified icons in order to receive the gift offered by Labrosse to those with the eyes to see it. The sight of these images produces upheaval, like the confusion born of an encounter that reveals our deepest pain and desires. A repercussion to these thoughts is then to wonder who or what appeared to the painter. Hidden in the spectators' subconscious are ripples, similar to the aftershocks echoing an earthquake, which allow the observer to make out - without actually seeing them – the agitated souls that appeared in the painter's trance.

Labrosse does everything but conceptual art, although that is the initial technical protocol of the process. Technical mastery of the ritual's execution is the *sine qua non* condition of its effectiveness. She trained in the processes of painting, engraving, illustration, photography and film. Based on her multiform experimentation, she perfected a wholly original technique consisting of shooting powdered pigments out of an electric pistol onto a large electrified metal plaque. An industrial paint called electrostatic paint or powder coating, widely used in architectural siding. The plaque is then fired in a kiln to set the image. The pigments are not bonded together by water, oil, resin or egg. It is probably the first paint to use an electromagnetic field as a binding agent: one could just as easily say that there is no "real" binding agent, making near impossible conscious or complete control of the image. One sees just what kind of difficulties this technique forces Labrosse to overcome when one considers that she wears a kind of spacesuit topped with a helmet while working in a room filled with the throbbing of a large industrial vacuum, in a factory setting that resonates with the roar of machines. However, the mechanical apparatus is only mastered to then be dismantled like temporary scaffolding. In this suffocating hell where the fires of the alchemist blacksmiths still burn, the painter in ritual has to overcome one by one all physical, then emotional obstacles. Despite the stress-inducing environment and the sounds of factory life, despite the weight of her spacesuit and the lack of control of the pigment deposits on the metal, Labrosse paints from an unreal sphere of silence and calm from which she absents herself to make way for the upcoming presence. And this is where she thrives.

In order to pierce through the known and recognized view of the world, to go beyond visual coding and decoding reflexes, Labrosse abandons all preconceptions, all agendas, all desire for *self*-expression, any idea of representing this or that. She wants to open herself to invasion, and therefore wants nothing. Labrosse's creative trance depends on this discipline of withdrawal and renunciation. It is only then that she invites into her intimate experience something or someone *other*, for which she becomes the medium. In this instance, the ritual of painting is well and truly one of possession. Labrosse paints to break the silence between bodies seen and felt as cages, armours, archetypes, energetic phantoms, mesh and interstice. Her work does not inhabit the three-dimensional world of perspective but rather the creative void which makes room for the disturbing, violent, terrifying or marvelous presence of the other. Labrosse's energized bodies emerge from the echo of *Tzimtzum*, they surge from the existential area that expands with an opening up.

Since she performs the ritual with absolute honesty, Labrosse, like all great painters, expresses a singular way of being. Her images communicate precisely "the shock of a presence," better than any other painter's work. Though she is tributary of art history's inheritance, she walks a solitary path. Great painters don't imitate but inspire each other because they mutually and intrinsically understand one another. Labrosse is inspired by Rembrandt, Bacon, as well as other Abstract Expressionist painters and

Lucien Freud. She belongs to a long line of painters who have shown the suffering and glory of the human body. She continues the tradition of icon-painting.

In the darkroom of retreat, a trembling image is revealed though it is unclear whether it is a negative or a positive. One can catch a glimpse of femurs, pelvises, ribs, skulls, hearts, genitals in mysterious lights. A human presence emerges from the depths of the darkness. All of this seemingly captured by a machine that can photograph souls using improbable silver salts. Yet upon closer inspection of the painted metal, is this the image of one soul or that of a swarming multitude? Each of these corporal beings houses worrisome doubles, more bodies are revealed in the depths, an entire universe of passion, bewitched destinies, lives within lives. The analogy to the observer's own life is troublesome, as if the painter has laid bare our most shameful secret: the terrifying abyss of the subjective identity that dogs our bodies.

Everything happens as though, at the moment of death, souls still entwined with their earthly bodies and their ancestors, illuminated by the passions and mercies that buoyed them in life, pierced by the existence of their loved ones and ancestors, these souls draw near to be weighed by the scales of judgment. This is where Labrosse captures them, in the interval, in this instant already outside the time continuum that sums up their existence, on the threshold to eternity where their earthly life energies fuse. Labrosse saves these souls from oblivion by projecting their body's cry onto her sheet of aluminium.

In her fireproof costume, to the deafening rhythm of machines, in the glow of the forge's fire, Labrosse dances in the depths of a crypt, abandoning herself to the unknown. She performs the ancient ritual of painting. Here are the buried shrouds, transfigured bodies, and glorious icons bursting with suffering and desire that bear witness to her travels. May we all carry out our own solitary rituals of creation as she does. As though each and every time was the final ritual.

PIERRE LEVY, July 2011

"The work of art leaves the domain of representation in order to become 'experience', transcendental empiricism, science of the sensible."

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, 1968