Eugène Leroy
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Eugène Leroy,

MUSÉE D’ART MODERNE DE PARIS
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The Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris is devoting a major retrospective to Eugène Leroy. This exhibition will bring together about one hundred and fifty works (paintings and graphic), representative of the evolution of the artist’s career.

Although his oeuvre has long remained under the radar, Eugène Leroy is counted among the greatest artists of the twentieth century. It was only in 1988 that his first major Parisian exhibition was held right here at the Musée d’Art Moderne in these same ARC spaces. Spanning over sixty years, the output of this painter – who was born in Tourcoing in 1910 and died in 2000 – was equally based on the perception of the real and an ideal vision of painting.

Partial to the old masters and willingly anachronistic, Eugène Leroy revisited traditional iconographic subjects such as nudes, self-portraits, still lifes, or landscapes throughout his lifetime. More than a retrospective, the exhibition layout, organized thematically, highlights the complexity of a lengthy creative process and pictorial experimentation.

For years Eugène Leroy juggled his painting activity with a career as a Latin and Greek teacher. Since his first solo show, held in Lille in 1937, he has made his mark as an artist in a category of his own. He exhibited his canvases in Paris in 1943, then participated in several iterations of the Salon de Mai in the 1950s. He travelled often in Europe, then to the United States and Russia, where he visited museum collections, seeking to associate his painting with that of the great masters and hone the pictorial knowledge essential to his work. In 1958, he moved into a small home-studio in Wasquehal, in northern France.
The Parisian gallery Claude Bernard exhibited his work in 1961. It was on that occasion that the German painter Georg Baselitz and the dealer Michael Werner discovered his work. "I found in it images, as brown as fields, as stone, as wood, as mass, as scent. A simple Dutch composition with an unheard-of accumulation of colors. [...] A heap of splattered sheet metal from a dovecote that enlightened me," wrote Baselitz. In 1978, his eldest son opened the Jean Leroy gallery in Paris, where he regularly presented his father's work. In 1982, Jan Hoet, then director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Gand, Belgium, whom Leroy had met during a trip to the United States, devoted a major exhibition to his work and included him in Documenta 9 in Kassel. At the same time, the establishment of a fruitful collaboration with Michael Werner allowed Eugène Leroy's oeuvre to gain European and international recognition.

As Bernard Marcadé has pointed out, "the contribution of Eugène Leroy's oeuvre to twentieth-century art is decisive because it bears witness to an incessantly reiterated combat of painting and image." Beyond its thickness - but also thanks to it - this painting creates a new pictorial language that is deeply rooted in the real without any concern for its legibility.

Eugène Leroy sought to capture a truth about perception while preserving the emotion that makes it possible. "All I have ever tried to do in painting is reach [...] a kind of absence almost, so that painting is totally itself," he stated in 1979. He reworked his canvases, sometimes over the course of several years, until the quasi-disappearance of the subject. The difficulty of discerning at first glance the painted motif allows the viewer to linger over the physical presence of the work. His painting was "an act of memory, a projection forward across the present darkness of history," to borrow the poet Yves Bonnefoy's well-turned phrase about Rimbaud.

Partial to the old masters and willingly anachronistic, Eugène Leroy revisited traditional iconographic subjects such as nudes, self-portraits, still lifes, or landscapes throughout his lifetime. More than a retrospective, the exhibition layout, organized thematically, highlights the complexity of a lengthy creative process and pictorial experimentation.

Eugène Leroy's works are held in major public and private collections in France and abroad. With around forty paintings and drawing, acquired thanks to purchases and regular donations since 1988, the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is now considered a reference place for the artist.

Other news about Eugène Leroy: the exhibition Eugène Leroy. À contre-jour will be presented from 28 April to 2 October 2022 at the MUba Eugène Leroy in Tourcoing.
Up until the birth of modern art, pictorial matter had always been in the service of the image. It was meant to make possible an imitation or re-production of the real from the painter's tools. Yet, for Eugène Leroy, resemblance consisted of painting a reality that is not the representation of an image but its essence instead. Since the artist was not seeking mimesis, figuration and abstraction went hand-in-hand. This explains why Eugène Leroy never felt like he belonged to either one of these two currents.
“Painting, I’d really like to touch it one day. Just simply touch it,” said Eugène Leroy. This statement can be taken both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense through the simple process of painting: although vision is elicited in the first place — as is the case with a painter — the artist nonetheless elicits all the senses. Touch, especially, plays a fundamental role for him. Then, in the figurative sense, with relation to his conception of painting: Eugène Leroy always asserted his choice not to approach painting through each separate canvas, but instead to form an entity, a whole: “When it comes right down to it, I don’t make canvases, I make painting.” For him, each canvas merely constitutes one step in a vaster project. In this way, each of his works stems from a long and complex process made up of superimposed layers requiring a large quantity of paint. This accumulation of material brings about the gradual disappearance of a recognizable image, while also allowing the painter to make it even more present.
It was with the subject of landscape, and especially trees, that Eugène Leroy progressively experienced the “immanent energy” of backlighting: “Backlighting has been at work in my painting ever since my youth, but without my knowing it.” In his studio in Wasquehal, where he settled permanently in 1958, Leroy created this backlighting system by having a north-facing skylight and a south-facing window installed. Owing to the reflection from a mirror, he added another source of indirect light as well. The subject is thus lit from the front (in the regular way) but also from behind: “[Matter] does not exist if it is not permeated with light! I would really like to make a painting that has its own muted light,” he confided.

When Eugène Leroy speaks of “muted light,” he is evoking a light source that would be found within the material. He often mentions the aesthetic shock he experienced before a Russian icon encountered at the Tretyakov Gallery during a trip to Moscow in 1974. The image painted on gold leaf had tarnished with age and lost its initial shine. For Leroy, “respecting the gold leaf does not mean making it gilded, it’s simply doing what the gold leaf does. It reflects the light but in a way that is thick, luminous, and buried at the same time.”
At age fifteen Eugène Leroy discovered a small book about Rembrandt that determined his vocation as a painter. Since then, he said, “I’ve looked at painting a lot.” From the 1930s on, Leroy always traveled around Europe to engage with the paintings of the great masters he admired (Van der Goes, Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Poussin, etc.) He forged a strong bond with the painting of the past and drew inspiration from it. His approach, however, whether it be historical, analytical, pictorial, or emotional, is always with regard to his own painting. As if he conveyed the art of his predecessors through his own works. This complex process is particularly obvious in his relation to Giorgione’s *Pastoral Concert*, a painting that Leroy so often and so obsessively started all over again during the 1990s. If we spend a moment with Leroy’s variations on the Italian painting (the exhibition includes five different versions of this subject), what is striking first of all is the dissimilitude between both the source work and its “copies” and the so-called copies themselves. Admittedly, the composition of Giorgione’s painting can be found in Leroy’s canvases, or rather the two female nudes and the musician dressed in red can be figured out, but the effect of resemblance ends there. Beyond the way the pictures are painted, it is Leroy’s painting that one notices above all. An evocation all the more significant in that from one painting to another the artist varies his approach and his palette, seeming to care more about enlisting his own pictorial means than about mere imitation.
Self-portraits

Eugène Leroy produced countless self-portraits at different points in his life. The self-portrait reinforces his ongoing quest for the most profound depths of the self and allows him to merge exterior reality (his physical appearance) with inner reality (his emotions, memories, etc.). Although his facial features are still recognizable in the early self-portraits, they become progressively more complex. In this way, the eyes, clearly identifiable at first, become increasingly akin to dark spots that can also be perceived as cavities before finally disappearing into the backlit blackness covering the face. The portrait then dissolves into a formless mass that only allows the possibility of discerning the presence of a head. However, Eugène Leroy points out, “these are not self-portraits. They are heads.” And he adds, “Not being much of an architect, it isn’t the structure of the head that interests me. God knows that I drew skulls, nevertheless — for the structure! But the tension of the temple, the baroque of the ear, the eye socket… the mouth...! This black hole is an extraordinary thing for me.”

Eugène Leroy
Autoportrait, vers 1958
huile sur bois
73 x 58 cm
Collection particulière, Roubaix, France
© Photo Alain Leprince
Eugène Leroy © ADAGP, Paris, 2022
Biography

1910
Birth of Eugène Jean Joseph Leroy in Tourcoing on August 8. He is raised by his uncle after the death of his father when he is only a year old.

1915
At age fifteen, he begins to paint and takes his first drawing classes.

1927
He makes his first self-portrait, which he signs and dates: The Young Man at the Window. Discovers the Old Masters at the Palace of Fine Arts in Lille and becomes enthralled with Italian, Spanish, and Flemish art.

1928
Meets Valentine Thirant, his future partner and wife, who becomes his main model from then on. They will have two sons together: Eugène-Jean, nicknamed Géno, and Jean-Jacques.

1929
Contracts pleurisy upon returning from a school trip to Rome. Painting will aid greatly in his recovery.

1931-1932
Attends the School of Fine Arts in Lille for several months. Then moves to Paris to study art but quickly steers clear of academic instruction.

1935
Appointed to a teaching position at his former middle school in Roubaix, where he teaches French, Latin, and Greek for twenty-five years.

1948
Becomes friends with the Lille bookseller and dealer Marcel Evrard, who regularly exhibits his works.

1953
Through Pierre Langlois, he develops a great interest in African and Oceanic objects and sculptures.

1958
Moves with his family to Wasquehal, near Lille, where he sets up a studio in the attic of his house.

1961
First exhibition at the Claude Bernard gallery in Paris.

1964
Beginning of his graphic work, which he pursues until 1972, when he primarily employs the technique of etching on copper.
1977
Opening of the Jean Leroy gallery, on rue Quincampoix in Paris, where his eldest son will represent and support his work for four years.

1979
Death in December of his spouse Valentine.

1982
Beginning of a long collaboration with the German dealer Michael Werner, who will give the artist international visibility.

1986
His second partner, Marina Bourdoncle, a musician and photographer, becomes a regular model for the painter and will continue to be so until the end of his life.

2000
Death of Eugène Leroy on May 10, at his home in Wasquehal.
Catalog

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Edited by Paris Musées, 511 pages, 65 €
“Great art is first and foremost that which compels us,” wrote Marcelin Pleynet in 1993 with regard to Eugène Leroy's paintings, adding that his painting “[could] only disappoint the fans of immediate consumption.” It would indeed take time for Leroy's oeuvre to be fully seen. Although his work has always been appreciated by a small circle of admirers, his first exhibition in a parisiann institution took place only in 1988, when the artist was approaching eighty. It was at the Musée d'Art Moderne, already, in the ARC galleries. Suzanne Pagé, who was then the director, had initiated that show, co-organised with Rudi Fuchs and the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It was a visionary choice, to say the least, in support of a body of work that was clearly original but whose future significance was not yet fully grasped.

Today, nearly thirty-five years later, the Eugène Leroy retrospective is being held in the same spaces, but in an entirely different context. The oeuvre, which has since been the subject of several exhibitions in France as well as abroad, is now widely recognised. In a category of its own, strong, sometimes admired, sometimes misunderstood, it is deeply rooted in the current artistic landscape. Presenting it in the same galleries, the only ones in the museum bathed in natural light from overhead sources, once again provides the ideal conditions for the work. Heavily loaded with pictorial matter, to an extant unprecedented in the history of painting, Eugène Leroy's pictures offer the viewer an experience that may be unsettling. They do not engage without resistance. It requires a concentrated effort and takes time to overcome the initial impression of confusion and dizziness for the eye to find an equilibrium. And this adjustment does not occur in a mere instance.

At the end of the 1980s, visiting Leroy in his home studio in Wasquehal in the suburbs of Lille, was like an initiation. There only painting mattered. eager to welcome you from the start, the artist launched into a lively, joyful monologue that was hard to interrupt. The questions that could be slipped in between his pauses for breath allowed him to redirect a train of thought peppered with quotes and examples borrowed from his readings and visits to museums. He only talked about painters and painting. Listening to him was enthralling.

Once in the studio, his comments related only to the paintings that were there, leaning one against another along the limited wall space in the garret fitted with a skylight looking out at the treetops beyond the bend in the road bordering the house. In seeking the optimal viewing distance from the painting that Leroy set up in the studio’s best light, you always had to watch where you stepped to avoid being smeared by wet paint. The painter would bodily move those heavy canvases, picking them up with his huge hands before shooting you an interrogatory glance over his shoulder. He was hoping to have made “maybe a little progress.” Then he would show even more paintings, moving quickly and silently with unexpected agility before sitting down in his armchair. It was hard to see in them what he was seeing. It was as if your eyes were muddled up, unable to capture what they were trying to perceive. Leroy would continue his monologue, pointing at the trees, the light in “that corner over there”, the sky, Marina. After an hour, you had to catch the train in a kind of visual dizziness and steeped in the smell of turpentine that would take hours to dissipate. Sentences and paintings kept coming to mind, bumping up against each other over and over.

Although he lived in a remote place, not far from Roubaix, Eugène Leroy was never a cursed artist. If his oeuvre took a long time to be seen, it is because it remained, and still is to this day, difficult to look at. It needed this time no doubt to be understood. Above all, doesn't the gaze expect the work itself to convey an image, an effect that reinforces its visual desire? Yet Leroy's painting offers the curious paradox of being at once very physical, heavy and light, cerebral, like a breath of air, once the eyes begin to adjust. “For me, making it heavy means wanting it to look light,” confides the artist Olivier Cena.

His entire body of work forms a block. His paintings and drawings, of course, but also his interviews and writings, most often letters, which should be included. Due to anachronism, to an inner necessity to remain free from any reliance, Leroy fled trends and currents. Nothing is further from him than a school, whether that of Paris, or the north. It would be hard to speak of figuration or abstraction, or even a third direction. His work belongs in a category all its own.
The most figurative paintings, the early ones, cannot be associated with a movement. They relate less to an overall vision of a face, a body or a landscape, than to accumulated sensations that build up the work by blending intimate memories and recollections of older paintings. As with Cézanne, Leroy's painting is concerned with sensation and memory, which are reconfigured in the colourful matter through successive and complimentary layers. His paintings always begin with an impulse stemming from an attempt to reproduce the real, to surpass the mere rendering of light and space. They are at once a distillation of a presence — hours of work and observation of something that is as fleeting as it is permanent, an atmosphere of light and shadow — and memories already suggested, endlessly reorganised by the brushstrokes and gestures that come together on the surface of the work. But the word “surface” itself is not accurate. It is instead a space the painting projects around the material, where nothing is left to chance; the word “chance”, like the word “surface”, is also too limited to account for this attempt to convey a truth about life from observation and memory, a challenge the painter has managed to tackle. His voluntary isolation is the necessary condition for this undertaking, and essential, too, for the success that gave Leroy joy, the profound bliss of having succeeded, which permeated those visits. A “perhaps”, which only time will prove right or wrong, should no doubt be added. The isolation, the tight space of the studio, and the face-off between the painting and the painter all ensure a long process of unfolding into the future, like the action of a spring releasing far forward, all the more so since it is firmly fixed in the memory of an artist who delves deeply into both his own life and the history of painting. Each painting is therefore a distillation of idealism based on an intense observation of reality — lights, forms, colours — and the incessantly invoked memory of the preceding painting as well as all the pictures he had already painted. When he would speak of Giorgione or Rembrandt, staring into space, Leroy projected himself into both the past and the future, a still distant future when his paintings would finally be seen in their bareness, as he had painted them — often over the course of several years and sometimes several decades, unlike his drawings, which took him no more than ten minutes.

Contrary to the widespread assertion about current painting, which posits that directly experiencing the format and the material is requisite to assessing it, Leroy's paintings reproduce well both in colour and black and white. As confusing as what they show might seem, photographing the works often has the favourable effect of leading the eye to the work's inner structure.

If Eugène Leroy's oeuvre appears so significant today, it is because he transformed the relationship to painting. With his work, we are not faced with images of art, unlike the majority of current artworks that are simply a version of the photographic image. Leroy's painting introduces a new paradigm: paintings that are not images, are not abstract as long as they are present and physical, loaded with sensations, observations and memory, and yet, do not represent anything that is representable. They are a presence of presence, something conveyed through visibility while avoiding the system of images — those of mass consumption that are imposed on art in spite of itself.

Leroy's oeuvre is one of the few that announces the failure of the utopian notion of a mass media culture that has not allowed for the creation of this intimate space so crucial to the gaze and the indispensable guarantee of our profound and personal freedom. This is also the reason no doubt that Leroy's work is becoming a myth. Its greatest strength lies in its resistance to the eye, which it manages to free from the seductive power of the image. This retrospective extends from the early decades, where the figures are still easily discernible, to the very last years when the question of painting seems to prevail. Both thematic and chronological, the exhibition's layout could not have been conceived without sometimes jumping ahead and going back.

We hope that this show, so very important for the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, will find its audience since the 1988 exhibition, the museum has continued to expand its holdings of paintings by Eugène Leroy, to such an extent that, after the Musée des beaux-arts in Tourcoing , renamed MUba Eugène Leroy in 2010, it has become a foremost public institution for his oeuvre, owing to several gifts from the family and various enthusiasts — the most recent being Claude Bernard , thereby coming full circle since he was the first dealer to show the artist in Paris. It was during one of the exhibitions at his gallery, in 1961, that something happened that has become legendary, because of the effect it had on their vision of art: the discovery of Leroy's work by Georg Baselitz and Michael Werner. Many thanks are due to the latter, a major donor to the Musée d'Art Moderne, for supporting our exhibition project and contributing his incredibly sharp eye and vast experience. Not to mention Gina Kehayoff, who tirelessly oversaw the perfect communication between all those involved in this project. My gratitude extends of course to the artist's family, with special acknowledgement of his son Jean-Jacques Leroy, who, in the footsteps of his brother Géno, whom I owe an amicable and profound tribute here, has given his full support to the work of his father with the attentive and respectful help of his niece Anne-Charlotte Leroy-Caulliez. Many thanks to Marina Bourdoncle, too, for her luminous presence during all of my visits to the home-studio in Wasquehal. I am also grateful to Julia Garimorth, curator of the exhibition, who has masterfully brought this project to fruition, along with Sylvie Moreau-Soteras. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the Paris Musées staff in the exhibition and publications departments, all of the teams at the Musée d'Art Moderne, as well as the authors of this catalogue.
Referring to Eugène Leroy, one could easily revamp this statement by André Gide: “[painting] led the way along a path so odd that I have never in any country seen its like.” The narrator is indeed astounded before a landscape, just as one can be unsettled before a canvas by Eugène Leroy. The text anticipates, in written expression, the painter’s own experience: “I walked on in a sort of ecstasy, of silent joy, of an elation of the senses and the flesh.”

“All I have ever tried to do in painting is reach … a kind of absence almost, so that painting is totally itself,” declared Eugène Leroy in 1979. What exactly does this undertaking — to which the artist committed himself and which aims to make painting totally itself — entail?

Eugène Leroy always insisted on his choice to approach painting not through each individual work but as an entity, a whole: “In the end I don’t make canvases, I make paintings.” Based on this statement, each canvas would merely constitute a step in the much larger project that is painting. In considering such an endeavour, The book by Stéphane Mallarmé comes to mind; The book that according to the wishes of the poet would include all books, the book that would have been total. So would Eugène Leroy’s painting as a whole aspire to encompass both what is done and what remains to be done?

Eugène Leroy clearly embraced a radical approach. For him painting was a surface to be explored in depth, and conversely, a depth to be explored on the surface(s). He aimed for an essential touch, so to speak, which he wanted to bring back to painting. “Well, I would like to touch painting one day. Just touch it.” Eugène Leroy thus strove to touch painting, to reach it, at last. This statement expresses a radicality fuelled by the hope that painting will reveal itself more completely, more immediately.

Eugène Leroy wanted to “touch painting” in a figurative sense, in other words, to find its synthesis. To do so, he did not settle for gradually eliminating the various layers or impressions related to instantaneity or the immediate perception of an object, and go in search of a core; it is not a subtractive operation. Eugène Leroy proceeded in the opposite direction. He compiled, he added. “I don’t have a technique because I accumulate to reach … painting… this began as a rather thin canvas, a bit like a watercolour… and then, afterwards we can speak of the crown, if you like, of polychromy—and next, this kind of matter.” Thus each of his works is the result of a long and complex process, made up of superimpositions involving a large quantity of paint, applied layer upon layer in order to add the array of fleeting impressions arising from the model, and attain a synthetic, integral and universal representation.

This approach could be compared to superimposing all of the still frames from a film. Leroy himself offered this cinematic analogy: “From my perspective I do not perceive an image that I fix, but a film shot from every angle whose dynamic fixes an unforgettable sensorial totality in the eyes and the heart together.”

In general, artists who strive for synthesis (Gauguin, for instance) work largely from memory. Yet Eugène Leroy always painted from nature or from a model. Nonetheless, by applying layer after layer of material, paint, he distanced the painted motif from its legibility, thereby rendering it completely unrecognizable. The accumulation of material always ends up with the visible eclipsing the legible in his work, so that the painting seems to veer into abstraction. Yet, the progressive disappearance of a recognizable image is, according to Leroy, a way to make it even more present.

Is the object of this painting then, the meandering itself that the painting endlessly makes the eye undertake, and that would refer to an object only ever letting itself be approached by its promise alone — like the premonition of a divinity that is impossible to grasp because the feebleness of our representations eternally pushes it back into obscurity, yet remains no less present behind the veils we wrap around it incessantly in order to grasp it?

In an interview with Irmeline Lebeer, Leroy shared how important reading Proust was for him, referring in particular to the fifth volume of in search of lost time: the prisoner. In this story, the narrator, madly in love with the protagonist Albertine, is jealous and becomes even more so when she disappears.
He observes how Albertine's absence heightens her presence for him. So coming back to Leroy, it is tempting to expand on such an observation in order to state that absence always becomes necessary when it is a question of stimulating our imagination. Because it naturally elicits memories, which are all the more compelling in that they make up for a lack, a void. That's why the impossibility of recognizing Eugène Leroy's motifs does not mean they have disappeared. On the contrary, they are there, but they find themselves buried under the material, or mixed in with it, which for them constitutes the reality of their presence.

Eugène Leroy's painting is thus both individual and universal. In order to render this universality, the painter sought to seize the subject (in every sense) by including with it all the physical aspects that may envelop the model at various moments, seen from a variety of angles and several viewpoints, even in movement. This approach may recall that of the cubists, the difference being however that with Leroy it is not analytical but intuitive — it marshals, as the painter himself described it, “a prism that comprises all of the hues colour can have, from the most basic, more or less brutal and material, spot to the tones and muds that you are familiar with.” Although vision is solicited in the first place — as befits a painter — the artist nonetheless appeals to all of the senses. Touch in particular plays a fundamental role for Leroy. The artist would ask his models to touch themselves, to caress themselves during sittings, in order to be able to transcribe directly into pictorial material the tactile sensation that skin registers. He appealed to hearing or audition in the same way. Marina Bourdoncle, the painter's second companion, would sit for him regularly while reading Joyce, Rimbaud or Proust, as well as playing the guitar or the flute. For the painter, it entailed trying to transpose the sounds to painting — to see the music through colour — by relying on the effects of synaesthesia (or correspondence, to quote Baudelaire).

With this type of approach, which strives to seize the motif by summoning up every instant, as far as possible, in a single one, light plays a crucial role. Eugène Leroy created a circular lighting system in his studio: “I set myself up in the attic by inserting a north-facing skylight and a south-facing window. I paint there, between this dual light streaming in.” The model was therefore illuminated from the front (the standard way) but also from behind in order to fulfill the artist's wish: “[matter] does not exist if it is not permeated with light! I would really like to make a painting that has its own muted light.” When Eugène Leroy speaks of “muted light” he is referring to a light source that would be found inside the material. He often mentions the aesthetic shock he felt before a Russian icon at the Tretyakov gallery during a trip to Moscow in 1974. The image painted on gold leaf had tarnished with age and lost its initial shine. This is what Leroy said about it: “in fact, it all comes from the Tretyakov and the gold leaf. Respecting the gold leaf does not mean making it gilded, it's simply doing what the gold leaf does.

C’t reflects the light, but in a way that is thick, luminous and buried at the same time.” What interested Eugène Leroy above all was that “thick” and submerged aspect, of a presence that does not show itself but that we get an inkling of thanks to a glimmer emanating from the interior, and which, with regard to his painting, emerges at certain moments and in certain places on the canvas.

While at this stage we are relying on a kantian type of interpretive framework, we could say that Eugène Leroy's paintings are the product of an encounter between subjectivity and the real or raw world (which could be called noumenal, to simplify the kantian viewpoint). Yet, the raw world is never perceived as such by a subject. It can only be surmised by always relying on what our spontaneous perception has itself already introduced into the world. Thus before the majority of Leroy's canvases would at once be faced with chaos, in other words, schemas our perception offers us right away by anticipating for us, and at the same time, a more profound (noumenal) truth, that is a recovered motif that our attention and our patience alone can recognize.

The artist's interest in thickness, or even opacity, is also related to an introspective quest, which was relentless for him. Having lost his father during the first year of his life, Eugène Leroy had an extremely tough childhood and adolescence. He admits to having been “haunted... by catastrophes, anxious to get away from [his] milieu, somnambulant from being long deprived of maternal affection; excessively emotional, painfully shy.” Although “all of these scars remained on the skin of adolescence" it was painting that “cured [his] suicidal tendencies, of doing pretty much anything, of fleeing anywhere whatsoever, of hitting rock bottom.” Gradually having become his ally, painting turned out to be, he confirmed, “[his] only reason to live.”

It was through his art that Eugène Leroy sought to recover, to get a grip on, to make known this inner reality, this thick and complex world lying dormant beneath his visible skin and which he himself referred to as a muddy and slippery terrain. Amongst other readings, it was with Montaigne — whose approach informed that of Leroy — that he grasped how painting had built him up. Painting had become, in a certain way, the mirror of his existence, and felt inextricably tied to his life.

Leroy's introspection was also nurtured by proustian inner reality. The painter says he was deeply affected by reading the second part of Time regained, where Proust states that it is “through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves.” And we can observe how through painting Leroy undeniably achieved the exteriorization of a heavy and complex inner burden. In a letter addressed to Louis Deledicq in 1973 he confided: “What to say about myself? I am now practically an old man. More than ever I mix up my life with my painting with perhaps more abandon and less distraction. But does one know oneself?”
It is therefore not surprising that Eugène Leroy produced countless self-portraits throughout his life, this genre undoubtedly being the best suited to merging the exterior and interior realities of one and the same individual. Leroy worked in front of the mirror a lot. To make drawings of himself, he did not even look at the sheet of paper anymore but only at the image reflected back at him in an old, tarnished mirror. Noteworthy in this regard is the premonitory aspect of his first self-portrait, created in 1927 when he was seventeen, showing his own reflection in a windowpane — a work that signalled the inaugural act of his existence as an artist since it was the first time he signed a work (following the advice of his professor). We can see that all of Eugène Leroy's self-portraits demonstrate this same relationship to identity, a permanent quest for the deepest part of the self. It seems obvious that this quest intensified with age for the painter. And whereas the early self-portraits still displayed the recognizable facial features of their creator, over time they become progressively more complex, thereby gradually losing any possibility of not only recognizing a mimetic morphological identity, but also of reading the specific content of interiority. If the eyes are the window to the soul, it should be elucidated that the pupils are what allow us to pass from an externally identifiable figure to an inner reality. Yet, the pupils which are clearly legible in some of the early self-portraits then become akin to dark spots which could also be perceived as cavities before finally disappearing into the backlit blackness covering half the face or all of it. The portrait dissolves into a formless mass that no longer allows for the possibility of discerning the presence of a head. However, Eugène Leroy points out, “These are not self-portraits. They are heads”. And he adds, “not being much of an architect, it isn't the structure of the head that interests me. God knows that I drew skulls, nevertheless — for the structure! But the tension of the temple, the baroque of the ear, the eye socket ... the mouth ...! This black hole is an extraordinary thing for me.”

At this stage, as Éric de Chassey so accurately observed, “it is no longer a self-identity where the self would remain exterior to the painting (like a pre-existing referent living elsewhere), but a new self-identity where the self has become all of the painting (that is, the totality of painted works by Leroy): from the artist's particular nature we thus move to a general nature of painting as all living things. According to de Chassey, this is a process of “incorporation” that translates to the fusion of life lived and painting itself.

The complexity of Eugène Leroy's relationship to reality could be compared to the one that characterizes Robert Musil's the man without qualities (1930). In effect, the novel's protagonist uses operations of indeterminacy (in the sense of stratagems) to avoid the real world, which is deemed unsatisfactory, giving way to other spaces of life, spaces of unforeseeable magic instants, of diurnal mystique. Eugène Leroy's painting, like Musil's novel, is an open work, lending itself to indefinitely renewed readings over the course of time and according to who is looking at it.
Standing in front of a Eugène Leroy painting is a disconcerting experience, not just because of what it presents for us to see but more particularly, as any viewer is immediately made aware, because of the great difficulty in putting into words what has been seen. Let's start with this observation: Eugène Leroy puts our desire into reverse, our expectation to be able to identify what we see, and hence, to name it: an expectation that's surely shared by most observers of painting in the west. Here, then, is a painter who is clearly working on what we have to call a disidentification of the theme. So many commentators have said and written that they see nothing in a painting by Leroy, but surely what one comes across in his work is something other than nothing: rather, something substantial — because with Leroy, a prodigious painter, there is to say the least, a great deal to see — but maybe something that we find difficulty in identifying or giving words to. It is there. It is present. We experience its materiality, while remaining mute in the face of what we cannot speak of, deprived as we are, of our capacity to accept.

This way of silencing the viewer, which is also the expression of a desire to remain silent in painting — Leroy told Eddy Devolder that “we talk too much, we are wrong to talk” — is therefore the result of a disruption sought by an artist who blurs the normal relationship between seeing and knowing at leisure. Here too, the painter toys with our habitual behaviour. Thus, seeing never feeds knowledge, so to speak. When I look at a painting by Leroy, I cannot say that I understand by looking, when I already have trouble saying that I see. Nor, in the same way, does knowledge — such as that provided by the titles given by the artist for example — come to the aid of that seeing. I am told (by the artist) that I am standing in front of a nude, a crucifixion or a landscape, but this assertion, rather than making the painting more easily visible to me, makes me measure the gap between what is said and what I think I am guessing, without ever being sure of identifying it as such. Yet, it cannot be said either that Leroy completely cuts the links between the visible and the legible to the point, for example, of giving rise, like so many others before him, to an abstract painting accompanied by titles that refer to something identifiable, and the disturbance thus created is all the stronger.

As Éric de Chassey writes, "what is visible goes beyond what is legible without extinguishing it." Everything is therefore a matter of excess, but also of measure: of an excess that generates disturbance, not destruction. Presented with such an observation, we must critically rethink the comparison, so often made by commentators, between Eugène Leroy and Frenhofer, the painter imagined by Balzac in The unknown masterpiece, who has since become a kind of allegory for tragic creation. In this 1831 novella, a painter, Frenhofer, finally agrees to show his life's work — which he has worked on to absolute perfection — to two other artists who urge him so to do: François Porbus and the young Nicolas Poussin. Faced finally with the painting's unveiling, it's as if it didn't exist, rather like a power that blind. “Do you see anything?” Poussin whispered to Porbus. “No. Do you?” “Nothing.”

After having tried in vain to recognise something, Poussin finally realises that he saw “colours daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint.” Balzac continues: coming closer they discerned, in one corner of the canvas, the tip of a bare foot emerging from this chaos of colours, shapes, and vague shadings, a kind of incoherent mist; but a delightful foot, a living foot! The stood stock-still with admiration before this fragment which had escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction that foot appeared there like the torso of some parian marble venus rising out of the ruins of a city burned to ashes.”

Admittedly, the comparison is tempting, as images such as “wall of paint” and “chaos of colours” can, on the face of it, bear witness not to Leroy's painting but, and this is not the same thing, to the disorientation Produced by his systematic tendency to what we might call disidentification. Not being able to name what I see, I say that I see nothing.

[...]
AGAINST THE LIGHT

ÉRIC DARRAGON

[...]

His experience with painting, on the other hand, began at a very early age and continued uninterrupted throughout his lifetime — Rembrandt, Van der Goes, Van der Weyden, Memling, Bruegel, Dürer, Giorgione, Bellini, Poussin, Velázquez, Corot, Cézanne, Mondrian, Rothko, up to Francis Bacon, whose van Gogh series he admired while deploring the sleek aspect of his backgrounds. A series of discoveries that intermingled and penetrated his painting so that it would be revealed to itself. While his regular visits to the cabinet of drawings at the museum in Lille heightened that awareness, the extent to which those encounters allowed him to discover what a traditional interpretive framework tended to hide must also be stressed. It was through learning to see Giotto that he understood Rembrandt, because he no longer viewed him “with the theatre props, the north, the chiaroscuro, the light, the shadow, the staircase.” As for Mondrian, it was the revelation of landscapes and a light that eludes atmospheric mood, as can be seen in a small 1906 canvas, Pignon de ferme à Oele (Gable of farm in Oele), acquired by the musée Sainte-Croix in Poitiers. In 1991 Leroy cited it to distance himself from “any academic vocabulary” with regard to a modernist interpretation. Untangling the ties that exist between innate attraction and the variety of sources that inform his work seems especially arduous. From the Louvre’s Pastoral concert (1508-1509) to the Dresden Venus (c. 1510) that Leroy saw late in life, in 1990, Giorgione embodies the history of a meditation buried in the works but also conveyed in specific comparisons to Giovanni Bellini or Palma il Vecchio. His travels, especially those to Castelfranco in 1952 and Washington to see the Adoration of the shepherds (1505-1510) in 1972, contributed to a way of thinking that undoubtedly evolved, but to affirm or reinforce an intuition present from the beginning. At the age of fifteen he had discovered Rembrandt, who was allegedly free of dramaturgy, in black and white in a little book by Louis Hourticq. Eleven years later, in 1936, Leroy would travel by bicycle to Amsterdam to see the Jewish bride (1667) at a moment when art, after some tough years, made him love life and conflate the eyes of Hendrickje Stoffels with those of his own wife. It was not until much later, in 1974, that he would see the remarkable Return of the prodigal son (c.1668) at the Hermitage Museum. Those encounters were integral to and cannot be dissociated from a slow, persistent painting process, murky like a swamp, through which he ventured without landmarks; they offer a clue to understanding the significance of a sentence he uttered during a conversation:

“You’re speaking to me about history; it doesn’t exist!” because of that scepticism, everything proceeded by a revelation, whose secret is contained in painting. In thrall to that firm conviction, Leroy was a sceptic his whole life. “People speak too much, it’s wrong to speak,” right away adding: “If I am so wary of speech, it is to let painting have complete freedom.” A freedom he strove to capture in defiance of time and the persistence of the visible, destined to become the trace of lived experience. A freedom to which he bore witness by taking up a canvas, like Cézanne had done before him, to prove that language is one thing and painting another: “when I say ‘mystery’ or when I say ‘painting’, the language must manage to convey. But painting doesn’t communicate like a speech, it isn’t theology, it isn’t an explanation, it isn’t ‘huma science’ — it is ...poetry. It is inner reality.” During his trip to Paris in 1961, Georg Baselitz, who was not yet the author of Die grosse Nacht im Eimer (1962-1963), had already perceived this reality that is not the real. Observing another reality, which only pigeon droppings or tree bark could suggest, in 1987 he described a kind of sensation tied to nature, related to the mythology of Balzac’s the unknown masterpiece. Leroy would remain rather unconvinced of such a judgement’s purview, harbouring an instinctual distrust of the notion of a “representation of painting.” An astonishing moment when the intelligence of one of the painters best able to understand it meets the pure and simple presence of painting, its dissonance, its resistance, its alleged innocence.

[...]

ÉRIC DARRAGON
“BURYING THE ANECDOTE”
RAIMUND STECKER

[...]

The phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, spoke of the complexity of perception when contemplating the “extent of speculative material,” where the perception of what may be perceived is not exhausted. Since what is perceived is a “mix of true representation, in which that which is represented is made visible in the form of an original representation, and empty signs that point to potential new perceptions.” In adhering to this dictum, the primary task is to grasp what Leroy’s pictorial constructions offer us phenomenologically in visual terms. Then to ask which internal images he recognised in them and, in recognising them, what he induced from them. And as a final step, to examine which images permit us to deduce things by looking at them as productive viewers. What do we see? The paint is evidently visible in three dimensions. Each structure poses the question as to whether the material engenders the experience of colour, or vice versa. Leroy’s works preclude the possibility of speaking of images solely in spatial, illusionistic terms or in terms of their two-dimensional facture. They are illusionistic spatially, and their facture is two-dimensional. One can read them in spatial terms alone, whilst also recognising them as illusionistic, two-dimensional constructs. We perceive them as created objects, at times lacking in colour, but generally as dominated by a morass of brownish-green paint. Equally, patches of colours, such as white, red, yellow, blue and green stand out from the ground or are applied to the canvas in a dramatic fashion. These passages seldom seem to have been deliberately placed by the artist, but instead they emerge from disregarded areas of paint; areas that occurred by chance; or apparently existed as a matter of course. The coloration of the structure of the material enters into a never-ending dialogue with the way in which the materiality of the paint is built up. They nullify any potential, ideal viewpoint before the image. We have to look for a lateral vantage point, to view them from above and below, to gain a better idea of the recesses and peaks and hidden elements within them. In searching for details, it becomes apparent, when one gazes intently, that there are also pictorial values to be found under the paint surface. It is almost as if subcutaneous elements are penetrating the surface! Peter Handke’s “again and again” — Leroy’s pictorial constructs the societal state of the outsider and the bohemian loss of self in Leroy’s painting are not merely derived from the fundamental characteristics of his life outside the art scene and city life, they are integral to his work.

The foundational materiality of paint in his images was antagonistic to the academic avant-garde; it was anticontemporaine, decidedly anachronistic. Thus, even today his oeuvre can be seen as visionary. It is reminiscent of the lack of reliance on fashions of the poetic. It invokes Peter Handke’s timeless again and again as the incontrovertible essential nature of art and poetry, something that was always beyond the purview of the objectives, always external to the artwork, that lay behind socially charged avant-garde movements. Back to Leroy’s works and their making. Anyone who devotes themselves to the study of the old masters — especially the Flemish ones — will end up adopting mannerisms and techniques that do not derive from the teachings of the academic canon. They will acquire knowledge based on continuous looking — on contemplating these works again and again, studying them, reflecting on them: considering them in hindsight and returning to them to look once more. In accordance with his constant interrogation of the old masters’ use of colour, Leroy applied paint thickly, colour against colour, colour overlaying colour, colour bleeding into adjacent colour. This massing of paint would become ever more significant, year after year, for the genuine contribution made by Leroy’s oeuvre. This profoundly unusual, idiosyncratic method of working singled out Leroy’s works from the generality of paintings produced by other artists. His canvases became more evidently material supports in their own right — they were no longer simply windows, or cross-sections through our monocularly constructed pyramids of vision, nor were they surfaces onto which spatial illusions were projected or stage sets for dramatic performances. Leroy delegated one sole function to the canvases: to be a support for his pictorial constructions.

Leroy’s productions can be read in the same manner as those of farmers who plough and cultivate their fields, tending them — again and again, permitting seed to sprout from them. Leroy squeezed paint from its tubes onto the canvas, mixing it using a brush or a palette knife, forming it, and smearing the mass thus created into vaguely contoured inner forms, into disappearing and reappearing figural passages, even sometimes into grotesques, or scenes of a kind. He scraped away the work of months and began again. Summarising his practice, he said to Lebeer, “I’m sure you’ll understand that I was compelled to scrape it away, to struggle, to overdo things, just so that I could say, ‘that’s not right!’” He did so in order to reconnect, for instance, with a particular memory of seeing a door, which, nonetheless, did not reveal itself to him as a door to be depicted as such, but rather more as a black hole.

[...]
An infinite amount of time is required to make a Leroy painting. Time then, and above all, for the eye to fully register this process of brushwork advancing and deepening instantaneously, and its disputed spread across the surface it saturates. Looking at a Leroy painting requires an equally infinite amount of time for the figure to emerge beyond the image it presents. If I speak of an infinite amount of time to make a Leroy painting, it is because this painting, conceived this way from the start, is not finished during its actual execution, but rather in the liberation of the gaze its very existence demands. A liberation that presupposes the painting not be viewed under the artificial lighting of any conventional hangs (Leroy's painting requires natural light and empty space around it, which are usually hard to come by.) Although the accumulated brushstrokes and thick layers of a Leroy painting serve to blur the vision of the image, they are meant to make of the figure — which appears to the eye over time and depending on where the viewer is situated in front the picture — an excess that would miraculously escape pictorial disfiguration/transfiguration. Escape in the case of the object, liberation with regards to the subject: these are the two pillars of the Leroy experience. The figure is not the visible, but the presence of the visible. The painter moves towards this presence, as it were, by bringing his body to it, as Paul Valéry said. The painter devoted himself to preserving this presence of the visible, which envelops the visible, despite its inevitable evanescence. Therefore his subject is never the reproduction of reality, mimesis. His subject is not to repeat the presence of being, but to make being emerge as presence. Hence the "representation", if we really must cling to this word, represents nothing of what would have already been there before it was produced itself. It is not even adequate to state that the painting presents more than it represents. Since instead of presenting, painting must disrupt sight. Not seduce, not comfort in the perceptual sense. Leroy’s primitivity begins with this counter - requirement. And it draws from the foremost lesson of Rembrandt, whose Slaughtered Ox (1655, Musée du Louvre, Paris) I see as a perfect allegory of Leroy's paintings: indeed it is as if each of the canvases he paints were a reminder, or even a carved-off piece, of a Pound of Flesh, quartered and extracted from the crucified meat, removed from the flayed beast, torn asunder and sovereign at once, appearing before a humanity that no longer knows, and has not known for a very long time, which saint to venerate. All of Leroy's works could have for motto, the epigraph of Rousseau's confessions: intus et in cute, that is, under the skin. “I always say that it was Rembrandt who saved me.”

Such a major statement calls forth another quote, lending even more weight and texture to Leroy's highly significant phrase — Jean Genet's incomparable text on Rembrandt, and especially this passage: “[Rembrandt] seeks both to represent the world (which is after all the aim of painting) and to render it unrecognizable at the same time... this double requirement leads him to consider the material aspects of painting to be equally as important as its representational aspects, then little by little, this exaltation of painting, as it cannot be conducted abstractly... leads him to exalt everything represented in his painting , which he nevertheless seeks to render unidentifiable. / this effort causes him to get rid of everything in himself which could bring him back to a differentiated, discontinuous, hierarchical vision of the world: a hand is as worthy as a face, a face is just as good as a corner of a table, a corner of a table as worthy as a stick, a stick as good as a hand, a hand every bit as good as a sleeve... all this is perhaps true of other painters as well — but which painter has, to this degree, destroyed matter's identity, in order to better exalt it? — all this, it seems to me , brings us back to the hand, to the sleeve , then undoubtedly to painting , but from that moment on , unceasingly going from one to the other in a breathtaking chase , towards nothing.” Unbeknownst to the author, and as if in anticipation, might this text describe a painting by Leroy? To be honest, viewed from another perspective, genet's whole argument describes him. More than any other painter, Leroy has made the material lose its identity to exalt it more. More than anybody else he endeavoured to give painting as material the same significance as that which it must represent. We can also fully recognize him in his perseverance and enhancement of this constant endeavour, with the aim of making the visible both absolutely unrecognizable, on the one hand, and a total resemblance, on the other.
**BIOGRAPHIES OF THE AUTHORS OF THE CATALOG**

**Paul Audi**, philosopher and writer, has published numerous books on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the West.

**Éric Darragon** is Professor Emeritus in contemporary art history at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

**Julia Garimorth**, chief curator at the Musée d'Art moderne de Paris, is the curator of the exhibition Eugène Leroy.

**Marguerite Pilven**, trained in philosophy and art history, is an art critic and curator.

**Raimund Stecker** is professor of Art History at the University of Fine Arts, HBK Essen in Wuppertal, Germany.

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Visitor informations

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