

# Christophe Avella-Bagur *Floating Soul*

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## Wavering and Decay

Looking at these latest pictures by Christophe Avella-Bagur, I believe I can truthfully say that never has his painting been so disturbing. For all the headless (*I had a dream*, 1994) or truncated bodies (*Constitution rouge*, 1996) and cloned mutants (*Doppelgänger*, 1998) seen in his earlier work, things seem to have stepped up drastically in this new series called "Fake, Fall and Flesh". For a start take the titles of these works: *Drowning by Fire*, *Wounded Girls in Bed*, *Young Floating Souls on Moving Target* – wording that all suggests violence and war. A look at the pictures themselves confirms this rise on the scale of horror, first in the ubiquitous glabrous, perfectly molded human figures that conjure up a range of cinematic styles, those of cyborgs and Terminator, as well as in their reflection of current anxiety about cloning. Take the figure of a man wandering through a landscape on fire (*Drop into Dog's Time*), which recurs in other pictures. Then there is his treatment of bodies stretched, quartered, torn in different directions, looking as though they had been overheated and begun to melt, artificial, synthetic bodies, like Barbie dolls left too long on a stove top. Faced with such violence perpetrated on human bodies, how could one not be tempted to link these pictures to the horrifying images seen in current international news?

The impassive woman, with her almost sad but resigned expression, falling head-first apparently for all eternity in *Floating Soul Disabled Project 2*, recalls other falling bodies – those that vainly sought to save themselves from the flames engulfing the upper stories of the World Trade Center by hurling themselves into the void, or that image of an Israeli soldier dropped head-first from a building in Palestine. Likewise, the uniform and the assault rifle pointed at the young woman's head in *Wounded Girls in Bed* reflects an image that we see almost daily on TV news programs and the front pages of our newspapers. The presence of these figures in Avella-Bagur's work undoubtedly reflects a personal anxiety about where the world is going. However these images of violence are only a part of the pictures, as are other recollections from quite different fields. These may be drawn from the world of art (see the woman giving birth in *Nightingale's Dusk*, which is a pastiche of a hyperrealist sculpture by the English artist Ron Muek), from pornography (as in the figures in *Wounded Girls in Bed*, or the young woman urinating between spread thighs in *Silver Panic*), or, more commonly, just from the torrent of exotic images to which we are increasingly exposed (for instance the young Japanese woman wearing traditional dress in *Mother Nature's Melted Party*). To these the artist adds snapshots that he takes using friends who occasionally act as models.

These juxtapositions say a lot about the way in which Christophe Avella-Bagur works. He selects images that have impressed him, then, using various software programs, alters, deforms and transforms them and uses all sorts of computer-generated collages to obtain a digital sketch; this then serves as a model on which to base the painting stage and the final picture format. This transposition involves various accidents and changes according to the more or less fluid or solid consistency of the medium used. This jumbling process, involving an incongruous clash of different elements, may in some ways reproduce the manner in which dreams – or in this case nightmares – are formed. However here the process is quite deliberate, which is why it can be said that Christophe Avella-Bagur's pictures express inner visions worked out through a series of exchanges between the artist and his computer. *Floating Soul Collar of Memory* seems to be a particularly good illustration of this way of working. A man sits, stripped to the waist. A whole string of tiny figures hang around his neck like so many visions or memories assailing him. These asexual, characterless figures could be soldiers, corpses, lascivious figures of naked women; they represent obsessions, in other words anything that might be going through a person's head at a given moment, all the subjects that preoccupy his mind. This "collar of memory" does not seem to bring any joy to this man who sits in the vortex of his own thoughts. On the contrary, enclosing his neck as they do, these thoughts almost seem to be strangling him. Memories and images, especially ones of horror, stifle us.

Then the question has to be: how do we live with them? In other words, what is the artist's personal and mental investment in these images? Are they a condemnation? Avella-Bagur is no fool, he has no intention of playing the white knight, of pretending to be the socially aware artist condemning remote iniquities from the comfortable shelter of his institution. His distance is that of the picture, for what must be avoided at all cost is literalness, and what must be retained is the mystery of images, their uncertainty and wavering nature. Far from claiming that the picture shows a scene from the war in Iraq, it instills doubt, and if it reminds us of something, it is by creating an atmosphere, which is achieved by the formal and pictorial treatment, especially the tortured stretching of the twisted bodies. The aim is above all to create a picture, an image with an immediate impact and able to communicate content through form. That is why the artist's empathy for the events that may be portrayed is scarcely discernible, and his subtle identification with dramatic situations awakens our own, not through what we can read on the label on in the press pack, but through what we see in the picture. While this new series is the most disturbing and violent work yet produced by this artist, it is without doubt also the most religious. By this I mean that it makes the most use of religious iconography. To be sure, earlier work included such pictures as *Pietà* (1999), *l'Anneau de la foi* ("The Ring of faith") (2002) and *Pray to the System* (2002); however the references in these works were more to do with a pictorial culture imported mainly for the purpose of creating a formal play using naked bodies. Thereafter it seems to me that the religious approach is more aggressive and more focused on ideological matters. In the smiling yet terrifying figures of *Floating Souls* we are confronted with sorts of specters that appear here and there in the bodies, and that seem to have occupied them like evil spirits that can only be expelled by ruthless exorcism. For the record, the artist found these painfully joyful faces were found on the internet. They are the faces of marines killed in the first few days of the American offensive in Iraq – private pictures made public, turned into memorials to serve as propaganda and foster national unity. Another religious metaphor is that of the contrast between floating souls and falling bodies, between those promised paradise and those falling to eternal hell. Then again, in *Nightingale's Dusk*, God is the hard-faced surgeon delivering a levitating woman of a monstrous baby, an image every bit as terrifying as the future aspired to by fanatics of the three Judeo-Christian Religions. Much good it would do Christophe Avella-Bagur's floating souls to pray for salvation; as things are, the only way out is to focus on the individual, in other words on oneself. That is why the artist invents a new trinity for these lost souls awaiting transcendence, a new evil trinity of our times - *Fake, Fall and Flesh* – alluding to the lies perpetrated by images and propaganda, wounded flesh and the flesh of desire, and the fall, or apocalypse. The large canvas standing over this title sums up all that has just been said. The artist stands in the center. A young naked woman squats before him, apparently felling him, only her head is just a bare skull. All around them bodies tumble past, bodies twisted and stretched almost to the point of rupturing. The artist's face is calm, as though he were indifferent, or rather as though all this were merely part of his imagination, a waking dream occurring simultaneously with the private moment (the sexual fantasy) and his questions about our common destiny. This is what this new series of paintings by Christophe Avella-Bagur is all about: a fleeting, wavering moment between two images or two thoughts with, ever in the background, chaos, and the slow, inescapable decay of the world.

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