

## **Meditating in the chaos and labyrinth of life**

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“I paint things that move forward and backward in the space of the painting. I try to find the spaces and surfaces that are as coherent as possible in order to experience calm and silence of a possible harmonious unity...”

“I start from the chaos of the canvas and of myself and I move towards order.”

This is how the French painter Rémy Aron (born in 1952), graduate of the Beaux-Arts de Paris, Research-Member of the National Academy of Painting of China and President of the French Association of Arts, instigator of the artistic movement entitled *Spacism*, describes his artistic work.

By opening the doors of this exhibition, you have just entered what I would like to call *the labyrinth of life* that, in his own modest ways, the artist invites us to explore.

In this exhibition introduction, I propose a guide to reading the exhibition through the motif and metaphor of *the labyrinth*.

A labyrinth is a closed and sinuous architectural ensemble (square or spiral-like), composed of rooms and corridors, with symmetrical and regular shapes, junctions, dead ends and false tracks, which are difficult for us to follow and grasp in its entirety. Figuratively, the word *labyrinth* is often used to refer to a complex situation or tortuous reasoning in many languages. The etymology of the labyrinth could refer to a (double) axe used for the sacrifice of the bull. The labyrinth is also said to come from Latin for labor (*labor intus*) and indicates a arduous task. Similarly, we notice that it is not easy to circulate in Rémy Aron’s tortuous labyrinth, despite a misleading impression of familiarity (presence of everyday objects) and repetition (recurring forms) in his painting. It is necessary to *work* to circulate through his art.

The aesthetic motif and metaphor of the labyrinth have often been used across eras and continents to help people question their existence, identities, relationships with others. The labyrinth symbolises detours, deceptions, wanderings but also dangers. And the more I look at each of Aron’s works, the more I see his art as a call to take small moments of pause in the complexity of our existence. Aron seems to be asking us to stop in front of each work and to contemplate the world around us through things, shapes, sculptures, landscapes – and some silent human figures, as we will see later. All the works presented in this exhibition evoke, compose and problematize both chaos and this labyrinth of life. Aron serves as our guide, without pretending to be omniscient.

For the poet and art critic Jean-Clarence Lambert: “the labyrinthine form has always accompanied Man and in all parts of the world. It is probably as necessary to him as the circle, the straight line, the ellipse or the square as soon as he tries to order a conception of the world, and of his destiny in the world.” To add to what Lambert says, let me remind you that there are at least two forms of labyrinth: *unicursal* (a labyrinth with a single path, a tortuous path but without dead end where you cannot get lost) and *multicursal* (a complex labyrinth with loops, dead ends; we cannot but get lost). Aron accompanies us in a labyrinth of the multicursal type, each painting representing a loop and/or a dead end. Aron does not suggest one single path to take.

Let me justify now the use of the metaphor of the labyrinth to talk about Aron's work. To begin with, it is important to remember that we can already find many uses of this metaphor in the arts, literature, the art of gardens (from the Renaissance) but also mathematics and even computer science. What is more, many civilizations have made use of labyrinthine shapes since prehistoric times, having engraved them for example on a tomb or organized them in stone paths. The Egyptians turned labyrinths into religious buildings thus representing an image of the world. In Greek mythology, the labyrinth was a palace built by Daedalus to enclose and hide the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull creature. The hero Theseus killed the Minotaur in this labyrinth and escaped thanks to the so-called Ariane's Thread that allowed him to trace his path back to the exit. In the Middle Ages, churches housed labyrinths, drawn on the floor, in order to trap demons because it was thought at the time that they only knew how to move forward by following a straight line. The labyrinth also symbolized the difficulty of accessing salvation for Christians. In India, the geometric diagram centered around an axis, the mandala (a Sanskrit term for circle) which serves as a meditation tool, also has a labyrinthine shape that recalls (among other things) the 'map' of the human body, the house, but also the floor plan of a royal palace. China also invented different forms of labyrinth long before Western influence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Jesuits built a labyrinth for the Emperor Qianlong, which the Chinese called a 'garden' because it reminded them of the shapes of Chinese gardens, inspired by celestial landscapes (*xianjing*). Labyrinthine forms are also present in other Chinese architectural elements such as imperial palaces and mausoleums (in Chinese, *migong*, the word for labyrinth, means 'a perplexing palace'). The remote depth that these elements represent in China – which is reminiscent of Rémy Aron's works – served to promote *joy* (see *ecstasy*) and *spiritual greatness*, while associating *life* and *death* with *the cosmos*. Moreover, the labyrinth in these Chinese elements evokes the Confucian concepts of *you* (wander) and *le* (joy), in relation to aesthetics, but also the concepts of *bian* (change) and *tong* (deep awakening). It is perhaps not by chance that, seen from above, the multicursal labyrinth (with its dead ends and false roads), which Aron's works urge us to question, forms a kind of nod to the symbolic forms of Chinese *fu*, *lu* and *shou* (blessings, prosperity, longevity).

In its different forms, through the ages and spaces, the myth of the labyrinth seems to symbolize Man who questions the ambiguity of his human condition but also the tensions between order and chaos. Depending on its position in space and time, the labyrinth reflects for Man infinity, but also confinement, disorientation and frustration. The labyrinth also has an initiatory dimension. It encourages us to take risks, and to explore, observe, move forward, walk around, choose, hesitate... Just like Sisyphus in Western thought or Wugang in China, and even if these tasks may seem monotonous and pointless, we have no choice: *we must continue to live our labyrinthine condition*. As such Camus (1913-1960) asks us to imagine Sisyphus 'happy' despite the disproportionate punishment inflicted upon him. Finally, James Joyce (1882-1941) also sees in the labyrinth a strong symbol of the artist's condition...

Let's go back to Aron now. In the paintings gathered here, the artist zooms in for us in the nooks and crannies of the labyrinth of life. We do not really know that we are in a labyrinth because each art work only reveals a tiny corner of the complexity of our existence. Aron does not show us the labyrinth from above, in its entirety, but in detail by offering moments of chaos, confusion, wandering but also tranquillity and meditation. Each painting also represents a kind of parenthesis in the labyrinth of life. Aron asks us to take a break, to observe the paths around us. He projects us forward while reminding us of the influence of the past and (perhaps) of what is coming. The labyrinth has no beginning, no end – only one entrance: *existence*. Aron shows us walls, corridors, doors, nooks and crannies... *But no way*

out. We remain in the labyrinth. The labyrinth is within us, between us and between the world and us.

Let's listen to Rémy Aron talk more about his work:

(It is about) self-discovery, an adventure and a discovery of the unexpected... As if my dictionary was nature for a very long time, I work on the motif and love of space and the spectacle of the world. But today I work on this show, starting from the chaos of the self. When I am working, I need to resonate with myself and space and light, forgetting all kinds of learning, but seeking unity. The writing between nature and composition, which is done by simultaneous reactions of colors and values, in relation to each other, comes from deep experimentation on nature. Still lifes, characters, landscapes.

One could almost imagine that the artist is describing here for us a 'piece' of the labyrinth of life through his own philosophy of existence: 'spectacle of the world', 'chaos', 'space and light', 'unity'. We find in his words the contradictory characteristics and tensions that the labyrinth forces us to explore. But just as the labyrinth does not impose anything on the one who tries to cross it, Aron lets us browse his painting and sharpen our own imagination. The titles of the works contain only one or two words, referring for example to an object ('A Chinese lamp'), a concept ('Constructions'), or describing in a few words, like a Japanese Haiku, the essence of a artwork ('Expectations in a landscape', 'Morning sun').

When we look at a work by Aron, we are both inside and outside our own existence – and that of others. One wonders where to go, which direction to take, which corner to explore, among all the forms, landscapes, things, small characters, contained in each painting. Color combinations (sometimes darker, sometimes more colorful) also contribute to these questions. A common point between most of the artworks is noticeable in the omnipresence of the ground, the sky and the horizon, which, even if they are sometimes 'hidden' by the encounters and dialogues of e.g. things, they remind us of *where* we are and *who* we are. By their (changing) presence in the works, these three elements (as in the labyrinth), reassure us and become forms of temporary escape when the rest turns out to be too chaotic and confused. Similarly, the impression of repetition that we could (falsely) experience when looking at all the artworks ('same' landscapes, 'same' forms), can reassure us in this chaos of forms and objects. Here, Aron thinks of us too. He leaves us traces, threads to guide us. He also plays with our senses, leading us to both confusion and comfort. Each of Aron's artworks asks us to concentrate, starting from the familiar to de-familiarize ourselves and vice versa.

We thus find hints of familiarity here and there in the paintings: *specific places* (a beach (?), a house, mountains, a wall, a window that opens onto the world); *elements from nature* (trees, plants, still life, bouquet, clouds); *some recurring shapes* (triangles, arrows, lines, air movements, spirals, which change colors), *things* (a trophy, a Chinese lamp, a curtain that flies in the wind, the plumb line that reminds us a little of Ariane's Thread that can be used to orient oneself in the labyrinth). The appearance of these elements brings us back to the concrete in this universe always in motion and transformation. But what about the human in all this? Human figures are scarce in Aron's paintings. Sprinkled here and there, humans are passive. They seem to be just part of the décor. *They are waiting. They meditate. They dream. They doubt. They are hiding.* While things, structures and landscapes are very animated in his works (they become 'human'), human figures are transformed somehow into abandoned objects in the recesses of the labyrinth of life. We are therefore thrown into universes beyond the human – anthropomorphic universes where the non-human dominates. For

example, two pieces entitled 'Conversations' seem to represent what I perceive as two architect lamps interacting with each other. These things then become our mirror. They allow us to observe ourselves caught up in the chaos and labyrinth of life. We are moving away from our anthropocentric obsessions to better deal with chaos. Aron's work is universal in this sense. He speaks to all of us, Chinese, Europeans and others. He strengthens our bonds in an era of widespread separation.

Generous, Aron gives us other keys to face our labyrinthine existence. The movements of things, forms, constructions, landscapes evoke the need to accept the in-/visible transformations of our existence. It seems interesting to me that, despite the solidity of most of the things that populate the paintings ('hard' objects, rocks, walls, tables ...), the movement and elasticity of life are fully felt. In a liquid world like ours, where everything seems disposable (data, 'trash' culture...), Aron reframes us in solid forms – but solids that adapt, transform, evaporate. We oscillate between joy, happiness, peace but also loneliness, doubt, anguish and (perhaps) disappointment. In these pieces of labyrinth, we question our truths and certainties again.

To finish, consider each of Aron's artworks to be telling a short story without any story, with inanimate characters (things, structures, trees) and animated characters (some human figures). The more you look at Rémy Aron's painting, the more the boundary between these characters will disappear. In the movements of things, forms and structures in the space of the works (see the notion of 'spacism' used by the artist), the inanimate becomes the animate and vice versa. Put together, Rémy Aron's works will give you some clues to move forward and/or backward in the labyrinths of life that you have to cross day after day. Aron then becomes your multidirectional guide and your philosopher of life who asks questions but imposes no answers.

Then lose yourself in your own maze. Enter into dialogue with the things, constructions, spaces and forms that Rémy Aron offers us. Move forward, backward, hesitate, look to the sky. Meditate in front of each painting. Accept chaos. Find a path to better get lost ...