Amélie Bertrand
Hyper Nuit

Landscaping   Mara Hoberman

"My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece."[1]
Claude Monet

"Ideal landscapes inspired by nature are of
 no interest to me."[2]
Amélie Bertrand

Counterpoints abound when considering the work of Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Amélie Bertrand (b. 1985). Whereas Monet famously painted *en plein air*, Bertrand composes in Photoshop before ever putting brush to canvas. To document variable weather and light conditions, Monet visited various land-, city-, and water-scapes—from London's Houses of Parliament and Venice's Grand Canal to his own pond in Giverny. Bertrand prefers to confront her source material virtually—combing the internet for images of chain-link fences, daisies, stone walls, art deco columns and palm fronds (a few of the motifs that reappear across her oeuvre). She then treats these landscape elements with Photoshop filters that mimic different light sources. Whereas Monet represented natural atmospheric effects like sunlight, shadow, rain and haze using daubs of thick paint, Bertrand's depictions of artificially lit volumes and spaces bear no visible brushwork. If the former's impasto accents underscore his paintings' materiality and often add a chromatic shock, the latter's paintings are characterized by smooth, screen-like surfaces and seamless color gradients. But despite such obvious stylistic and technical differences, profound affinities exist between these two modern landscape painters focused on how landscapes feel, not just how they look.

Monet's and Bertrand's paintings result from long, labor-intensive creative processes involving conceptual and physical work that goes well-beyond the act of painting. Before starting to paint, both artists perfect their subject by other means—Bertrand on the computer ("The computer is my studio"[3]) and Monet in his Giverny garden (his "open-air studio"[4]). Notably, Monet's most famous waterscape subject wasn't one he found in nature, but rather one he constructed based on labor-intensive landscaping that included the cultivation of non-native plant species. There was no naturally-occurring body of water on the Giverny property when the artist first settled there in 1883. In 1893 he oversaw an initial excavation to create a small pond, fed by the nearby Ru stream. And between 1901 and 1906, he expanded the pond and installed sluice gates to protect his prized water lilies, which included exotic and hybrid varietals. In addition to composing flora according to his preferences for color and form, Monet made sure the pond was also maintained to meet his aesthetic ideal: crystal clear surface with circular clusters of lily pads. With similar authorial intent and different means, Bertrand likewise exerts

1   Jean-Pierre Hoschedé, *Claude Monet, ce mal connu, intimité familiale d'un demi-siècle à Giverny de 1883 à 1926*, P. Cailler, Geneva, 1960, p. 70.

2   An interview with Violaine Boutet de Montvel, *Pleased To Meet You Amélie Bertrand*, n°2, Semiose, Paris, November 2016, p. 8.

3   Brice Matthieussent, "I'll Put Red Roses On Your Grave" in *Amélie Bertrand*, Semiose, Paris, 2023, p. 12.

4   Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet : Les Nymphéas*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1928, p. 49–50.

control over the landscapes she intends to paint. No less fanatical when it comes to refining her subject matter, she collages and redraws internet-sourced imagery in Photoshop before adding striking colors and lighting effects by means of the program's digital palette and filter tools. Both artists' landscaped subjects are thus "real" by some measures and "artificial" by others.

(Detail) Claude Monet, *Le Matin*, 1914–1926 Oil on canvas, 200 × 1275 cm, Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

To prepare his garden and pond for painting, Monet collaborated with botanists and gardeners. In Bertrand's practice, she partners with her father, a professional graphic designer, who helps develop her Photoshop sketches into the digital templates needed to print stencil-stickers on an industrial-scale cutting plotter. The stencils (each painting requires hundreds) allow her to transfer a composition from her computer screen onto a much larger canvas. Mapping out compositional elements and blocking off areas for different colors, the stencils make it possible for the artist to lay down a single layer of paint across an entire canvas without any overlaps. Not unlike the clippers, shovels, nets and sluices that produced Monet's pond and garden, Bertrand's toolkit (Photoshop, a cutting plotter and stencils) is part of a similarly expanded practice of landscape painting.

Color is primordial to the experience of landscape for both artists and each used combinations of hues to create a strong sense of place. Monet was obsessed with how to best represent the variable colors of sky, land, water, and other landscape elements resulting from constantly changing light conditions and atmospheric elements. Across his eight-panel "Water Lilies" series (Nymphéas, 1914–1926) installed at the Musée de l'Orangerie, imagery and palette change both subtly and drastically from one painting to the next—evoking different seasons, times of day and weather events. *Tree Reflections* [*Reflets d'arbres*], the darkest of the octet, is characterized by moody blue water with smokey purple highlights that suggest shadows from wisteria and weeping willows. *Morning* [*Matin*], by contrast, is a brighter and crisper painting of the pond wherein sun-kissed blades of grass and individual lily pads stand out against rippling lilac and turquoise water.

For "Contrepoint Contemporain" Bertrand installed her series "Hyper Nuit" (2024) in the pronaos just before Monet's "Water Lilies." These new works, painted with the Impressionist master in mind, measure almost two-meters tall (the same height as the neighboring "Water Lilies") and likewise convey a variety of moods, seasons and qualities of light. Whereas Monet was fascinated by natural light, Bertrand is inspired by the (no less complex) visual impacts of artificial lighting—from the heated glow inside a discotheque to the cold luminosity of a backlit screen. Across the suite of five paintings (which Bertrand aptly describes as her "prairies"), slightly different configurations of flattened cartoonish daisies hover over thick blades of grass and mysterious chains dangle from above. A fiery light in *Hyper Nuit, yellow* makes for orange, pink, and purple flowers that really pop against chartreuse grass and a mustard backdrop. Cool by contrast, *Hyper Nuit, pink* suggests an eerie
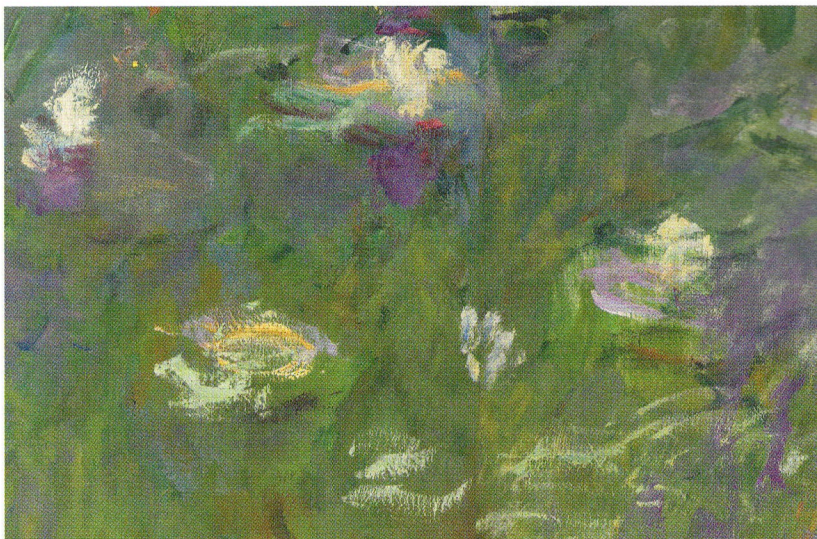
glow of ultraviolet light through neon green and magenta highlights along the thin edges of the flower petals. All five works are united in that they seem to radiate light from within.

Describing the challenge of finally translating what she creates on a backlit screen into oil on canvas, Bertrand begins to sound like Monet reflecting on his experience of "rendering my impressions in the face of the most fugitive effects."[5] Updating this sentiment, she explains her relationship to atmosphere and landscape using twenty-first century references: "I'm stuck in front of my screen, experiencing a cultural atmosphere filtered through the social networks. […] I'm moved by atmosphere, the feelings of certain landscapes."[6] Indeed, Bertrand's paintings reveal the impact of screens, social media, and filters on our contemporary understanding of ambiance as it relates to our own emotional and sensorial relationship to landscape. The screen may be static, but translating a digital color spectrum that appears on an LED monitor into oil on canvas is every bit as challenging as Monet's struggle with the "fugitive effects" of sunlight and atmosphere.

One of the most obvious connections between the two painters would appear to be the lily pad motif. Bertrand, however, has never been to Giverny and was not necessarily thinking about Monet when she painted her first "Swamp Invaders" (2021–ongoing). She initially developed the motif—a flat circular disc with a small wedge missing—as an abstraction based on simple geometric shapes to help her explore volume and dimensionality in visually interesting ways. Both familiar and strange, the sliver-thin notched circle that appears across the "Swamp Invaders" paintings can function as a kind of *Rorschach* test. Whatever association the viewer attaches to the form (Pacman, flying saucer, lily pads, pie chart) ultimately says more about his own set of references than it does about the artist's intentions. In Bertrand's paintings reality exists only to the extent that we, the viewer, impose it with our own real-world associations.

In the context of "Contrepoint Contemporain" Bertrand's "Swamp Invaders" can't not be seen as lily pad paintings. In addition to their subject matter, these three tondi (the first time the artist has worked in this format) conceived for the museum's lower-level gallery reveal another connection to Monet: The Impressionist painter likewise experimented with circular canvases as part of his extensive study of lily pads, which includes approximately 250 paintings in total. The round supports used by both artists emphasizes the curvaceous aspect of their shared subject matter and reinforces the idea of expanse—an essential challenge for all landscape painters and one that Monet most famously addressed with the eight mural-style panels (some of which are more than eight-meter long) now installed in the sky-lit oval galleries of the Orangerie. With no clear beginning, end, top or bottom, Bertrand's circular supports allude to a landscape that extends well beyond the confines of a canvas.

At the Musée de l'Orangerie, Bertrand's trio of "Swamp Invaders" are installed on three abutting walls in a windowless
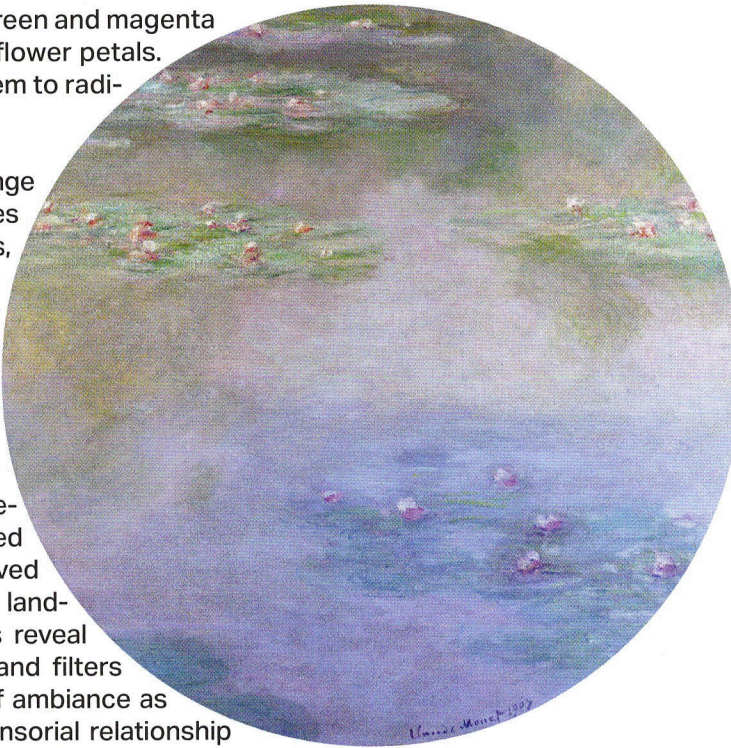
Claude Monet, *Nymphéas*, 1907, Oil on canvas, diameter 80 cm, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Étienne

5   Evan Charteris, *John Sargent*, Scribner's, New York, 1927, p. 131.
6   "I know when a painting is finished," conversation between Amélie Bertrand and Sophie Eloy, in *Amélie Bertrand, op. cit.*, p. 109.

rectangular room on the museum's subterranean level. On the benches, the artist has painted a chain-link fence motif in color gradient, evoking the kind of barrier one might expect to find enclosing private property. The impulse to create an environment, as it were, also relates to Monet, as the "Water Lilies" installation at the Musée de l'Orangerie was designed to provide an immersive experience of water, trees, lily pads and light. Presented just one level below, Bertrand's much smaller paintings appear window-like—suggestive specifically of round portholes. Instead of dematerializing the walls of the gallery as Monet hoped to do, Bertrand acknowledges the architecture of the exhibition space.

Claude Monet painting the "Nymphéas," ca. 1922

In addition to experimenting with the tondo format, her latest "Swamp Invaders" explore a new perspective within the compositions themselves. Previous works in this series offered a bird's eye view over throngs of lily pads hovering mysteriously within tiled interiors. In the works at the Musée de l'Orangerie, by contrast, the thin disc-like forms are represented from above, below, and at eye-level in the same painting, appearing next to and even passing through gated circular windows. Placing the viewer somewhere amidst these magical floating lily pads, Bertrand suggests a disorienting underwater dream. Monet also enjoyed creating intentional confusion within his compositions. His "Water Lilies" have no discernable horizon line by which viewers might hope to orient themselves. And in these paintings, it is nearly impossible to distinguish reflections on the surface of the pond from what is actually sitting on top of the water. Intended to ensconce the viewer, both Monet's and Bertrand's presentations at the Musée de l'Orangerie articulate landscape in strikingly similar terms: a sensorial experience that is endless, all-encompassing, and even vertiginous.

With nearly a century separating their artistic practices, both artists confront the same essential painterly challenge: how to capture landscape in such a way that we, the viewers, understand not only what a place looks like, but also—and most importantly—how it feels to be there. As much as Bertrand represents a contemporary counterpoint to Monet, she has also contemporized his conceptualized approach to landscape painting. The "Hyper Nuit" and "Swamp Invaders" paintings that she created for her "Contrepoint Contemporain" at the Musée de l'Orangerie are, in many ways, continuations of the Impressionist master's exploration into making pictures that transform one's overall relationship to landscape.

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FR   Pour son Contrepoint contemporain au musée de l'Orangerie, Amélie Bertrand a installé dans le pronaos juste avant les « Nymphéas » de Claude Monet, sa propre série de paysages. Ces œuvres, peintes en pensant au maître impressionniste, traduisent, elles aussi, une variété d'humeurs, de saisons et de qualités de lumière. Alors que près d'un siècle sépare leurs pratiques respectives, les deux artistes sont confrontés au même défi pictural fondamental : comment capturer le paysage de manière à ce que nous, spectateurs, comprenions non seulement à quoi ressemble un lieu, mais aussi – et surtout – ce que l'on ressent en s'y trouvant.

EN   For her Contrepoint Contemporain at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Amélie Bertrand installed, in the pronaos just before Claude Monet's "Water Lilies," her own series of landscapes. These artworks, painted with the Impressionist master in mind, likewise convey a variety of moods, seasons and qualities of light.
With nearly a century separating their respective practices, both artists confront the same essential painterly challenge: how to capture landscape in such a way that we, the viewers, understand not only what a place looks like, but also—and most importantly—how it feels to be there.