

# ABSTRACT Painting Peinture

A B S T R A I T E

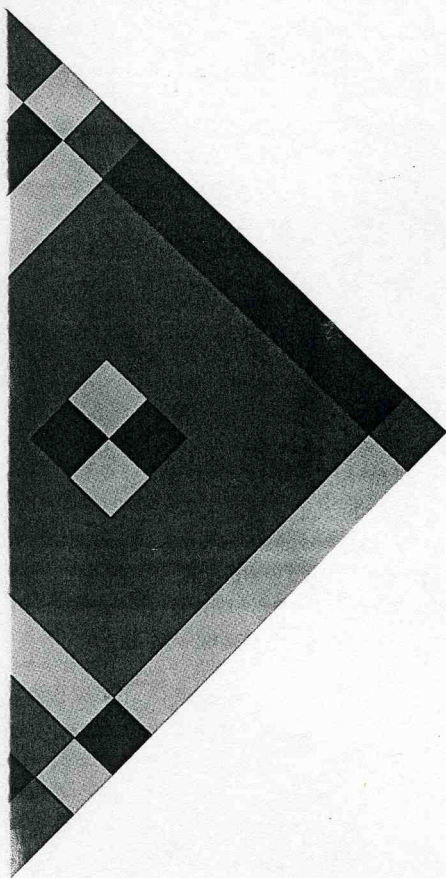
With *Refus global* now fifty years old,  
the rich legacy of Montreal abstraction was the fitting  
centre of this summer's "Peinture Peinture."

Road Nasgaard considers the exhibition and  
its roots in abstract traditions

**Painting-bashing** has been a popular critical sport since the glory days of colour-field painting nearly a quarter century ago. Back then, however, it was still with genuine optimism that a critic like John Elderfield could project a brilliant future for painting: "Post-Pollock modernism has already produced paintings of outstanding quality. It may well be, however, that its full benefits have yet to be gained." That was 1974. At the same time the critical language could be ominous. In those days we would also speak about how painting had once again "been saved" by yet another masterful formal reduction coming from Jack Bush or Jules Olitski.

By 1974, the editorial direction of *Artforum*, a magazine that once championed Greenbergian criticism, had already rejected formalist analysis in favour of a sociological approach to art. And, in 1976, *October* was founded. In its pages painting would be relentlessly and systematically devalourized by writers, who, with post-structuralist thinking, undermined painting's claims to timelessness and universality—because, as it were, all artistic utterances were the outcome of specific temporal, topical, social and political conditions. In a post-industrial informational society, paintings remained hand-crafted. Painters were makers of stuff rather than processors and analysts of information. From the perspective of historical determinism, painting was outdated. As a consequence, for those who assigned art the task, painting was unable to fight the good fight for social progress or help hasten the overthrow of capitalism.

The target of the several agendas to disparage painting was, of course, abstraction. Painting's other modes—figuration, narrative, expressionism—were already consigned to invisibility by the high modernist quest for "painting's autonomy." Abstract painting would be further deconstructed (with the help of Foucault and Baudrillard) by Peter Halley, who reinterpreted its underlying geometric structures in terms, not of existential, transcendental or utopian values, as the



Guido Molinari  
*Yellow, red, blue continuum* 1998  
Acrylic on canvas 198.1 cm each side  
Photo Daniel Roussel  
Courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery

