

A&E VISUAL ARTS

Polluted canvas

The messy state of painting in the 90s.

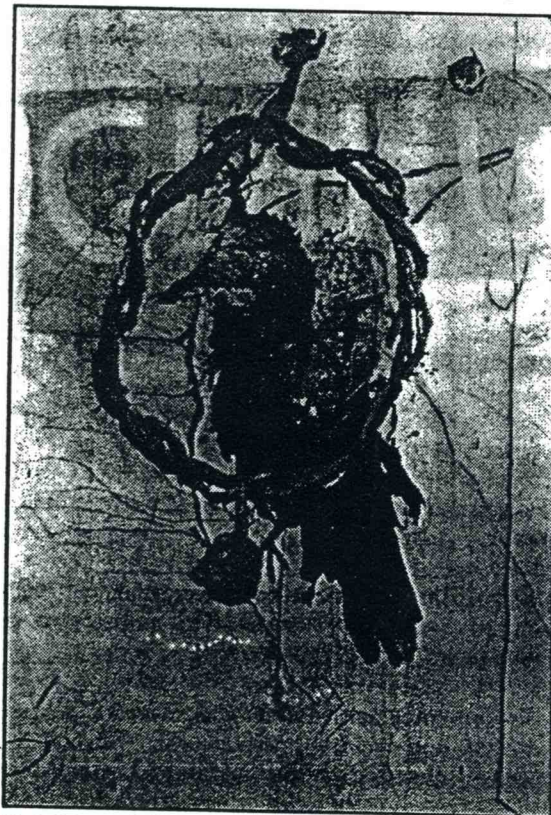
Lucinda Catchlove

Reclaiming Paradise: Survival of Montreal Painting in the 90s at the Saidye Bronfman Gallery showcases four Montreal painters whose work is nothing if not disparate in both its aesthetics and its methodology. What these artists have in common is their plundering and twisting of modernist styles and movements that is manifested in a polluted aesthetic.

Carmen Ruschiensky takes abstraction and messes it all up. There is an element of "badness" that contradicts her sophisticated use of colours, a certain banality to the forms that questions the assumed beauty associated with abstract art. Far from subtle, it is displeasing yet unified in its crudity of form and assertive palette. It is almost as if the purity of abstraction is unobtainable in our present environment.

Sylvain Bouthillette's paintings are infinitely more sensitive, the vein of Modernism from which he draws blood is Neo-Expressionism. His three large canvases contain crows, rabbits, and fish who inhabit an ethereal and complex world. In his two later works *Oz* (1994-96) and *La Perte de l'innocence* (1996), the animals have evolved into totemic figures from their previously symbolic and representative form in *Léon* (1993). In his recent paintings, Bouthillette manipulates the balance between masses of dense paint, delicate spindly charcoal lines, and the

surface of the canvas with a subtlety that brings to mind Francis Bacon. His creatures inhabit an abstract world of luminous, floating, soul-like entities and rock-like masses in reds and blacks that seem to contain the pulsing energy of a beating heart. Needless to say, Bouthillette's paintings seem to indicate pollution not only on the physi-



Detail from Sylvain Bouthillette's *Oz*.

cal/environmental and symbolic levels, but also offer a certain insight into a concurrent spiritual malaise.

Allan Switzer uses a computer to plot out his canvases and then employs a meticulous methodology that is anything but modern and high speed.

Switzer's paintings, with their meticulously clean Op Art lines, would seem to contradict the idea of pollution; but we forget that Switzer is dealing with technology, not nature. Technological/informational pollution is not messy in the same way environmental pollution is; it is, rather a sensory overload, a surplus of stimuli. His is

a shallow space composed of layers rather than depth, a barrage of patterns that accumulate into a larger pattern that is devoid of meaning. In some ways it is this antiseptic quality that removes his aesthetic so far from nature that it is almost anti-biological. It is the agent of pollution that leaks out of its sealed barrels into the subsoil.

Richard Deschênes' paintings are awash in a polluted, dirty aesthetic – organic forms floating in industrial greys and murky collages. They depict a tired and out-moded mechanical and industrial world at odds with nature, almost a tarnishing of Futurism's obsession with the speed and efficiency of technology. These paintings contain an aftertaste, the sludgy results of industry, like fish suspended in a murky pond in a polluted quarry.

These painters don't so much reclaim paradise as depict the state of paradise at the end of the industrial revolution. Such is the state of paradise and painting at the end of this millennium: Out of cultural and environmental pollution, a new life emerges, and it will survive. ♦

