

God and Buddha meet the cosmic tiger head

Art By
Numbers

PETER GODDARD

A Love Supreme (2004), by Sylvain Bouthillette

A while back, Sylvain Bouthillette, a one-time rocker (with Montreal's Bliss) turned painter/sculptor was asked why he, a Buddhist, created such aggressive, sometimes menacing imagery.

"Buddhists don't always smile," he said.

This explanation may go some way to explaining why there's such a natural harmony emerging from the clash of so many opposing, often dazzlingly different factors in the Montreal artist's work at Clint Roenisch Gallery today and tomorrow.

"I like the idea that my work makes me vulnerable and stronger at the same time," he says.

The paintings say much the same thing about strength and vulnerability, only in a different way. One has what appears to be a clown's cone-shaped party hat, with rosy red dots on it, floating across a galaxy in the deepest of deep space. Here and there you come across neatly printed mottos like "Tout est parfait," which seem to simultaneously explain the situation and confuse it. Perfect? Like, just which "everything" is "perfect"?

A Love Supreme, a title borrowed from jazzier John Coltrane's sublime, profoundly religious 1964 recording, manages to terrify — the head of a snarling cartoon tiger seems to pop right out of the large-scale painting — while retaining a child-like wonder with its painted blackboard. Circling through this solar abyss are toy planes with bright red stars.



Coltrane dedicated *A Love Supreme* to God in his liner notes to the album, as a "humble offering." Even pieces without a specifically spiritual subtext could seem cosmic. Johnny Hodges called Coltrane's recording of Duke Ellington's distinctly secular *In A Sentimental Mood* "the most beautiful interpretation I've ever heard."

Yet there was a fury that ran through all Coltrane's work, as there is in Bouthillette's.

1 Roaring Tiger: "A lot of my work is intended to be explosive, to force its presence on you. With Coltrane, and other artists like him, the aggression was there to create a spiritual tension that keeps you up there and really focused. There's a quality of presence you can't ignore and I want my work to have that quality. Not to blast you in the head, but to tell you, 'Hey, look at me and let's see what can happen.'"

2 Chaotic swirls: "One has

to explore the disorder that lives within. This disorder is mainly due to the ideas and desires we long for, and the cleft between them and our reality."

3 Blackboards: "It is partly from Sylvain's interest in (German artist) Joseph Beuys," says gallery owner Roenisch, who has championed Bouthillette for years, "and the chalkboard drawings/diagrams Beuys did during his lecture/performance" — like Beuys's "cosmic" blackboard drawing, *Untitled (Sun State)*, 1974 — "and partly because (they) were what was at hand when Sylvain began making (the) series in 1998. He also likes the rough-hewn look of it because he finds it 'grounds' his otherwise airborne spiritual message."

Sylvain Bouthillette's "Everything Is Perfect" is at Clint Roenisch Gallery, 944 Queen St. W., noon to 6 p.m. today and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. tomorrow.
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