
ART ABOUT

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With much of the Toronto art world still stumbling about bleary-eyed, working slowly toward shows starting this weekend or next week, the Mercer Union got the year off to an early and strong start last night with the opening of an exhibition of work by two artists interested in the meaning of painting.

In his abstract works, Michel Daigneault, a Montrealer living in New York, combines two seemingly contradictory approaches to painting. The first is that of the Renaissance in which the painted surface is like a window that reveals a three-dimensional world to the viewer. The second is that of modernist abstraction which, acknowledging the flatness of the canvas, sought to impose that — rather than the illusion of depth — on the viewer.

So what do these paintings, straddling as they do opposing approaches, look like? The principal images are rectangles and circles (es-

pecially the bullseye pattern) painted in faded colours and leaving large areas of buff canvas exposed. Daigneault plays continually with the edges of these works, breaking down traditional notions of the framed square. In one, unpainted canvas extends up from the bottom well into the work, as though pushing the painting off the canvas. In others, Daigneault has added smaller, extra squares of unpainted canvas at the top or side of the main rectangle, breaking lines on the painting where the extra pieces join it.

It is no criticism to say these works are difficult to look at. Stopping and starting, breaking and pausing, they make for hard reading, never allowing the viewer to peg them comfortably within accepted notions of what it is painting depicts.

The second artist, Enn Erisalu of Vancouver, is similarly concerned with questioning what and how painting depicts its subject. These bold works feature words, spelled out in black or brown capitals on backgrounds of dripped paint, that you sense you should be able to read. But the letters, even when you invert those which are upside-down or backwards, do not make up instantly recognizable words. Work on it a while and meaning — or an approximation thereof — slowly emerges, as you come to discern words much the same way you pick out the answers hidden in word-search puzzles. Thus a large work featuring a top line that reads

BRRWT and a bottom line BUONN, reads BROWN and BURNT if you pick out the right letters from each line. (As a clue, the letters from one word are painted brown, the others black.)

But the exercise is a highly subjective; different words, different meanings may emerge for different people. In the end, what the painting depicts is up to the viewer.

Until Feb. 1