ABSTRACT Painting Peinture ABSTRAITE

With Refus global now fifty years old, the rich legacy of Montreal abstraction was the fitting centre of this summer's "Peinture Peinture."
Roald 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 From the perspective of historical determinism, painting was outdated.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, transcendentental 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
artists who made them claimed, but rather as unwitting supports of abstract bureaucratic power. And if painting did rear its unrepentant head, as it did in the German and Italian invasions of the New York galleries in 1979 and 1980 and with the re-emergence of Neo-Expressionism, this could be explained away as pandering to the marketplace and its hunger for luxury objects. Throughout, though, some of our best friends continued to be painters, even abstract painters.

LAST JUNE, MONTREAL STAGED a celebration of abstract painting that was both retrospective and topical. The occasion: the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Paul-Emile Borduas' Refus global. The event: "Peinture Peinture." Organized by l'Association des galeries d'art contemporain (AGAC) in Montreal, and termed "a major manifestation of abstract painting," the show took place in the Belgo Building, 372, rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest, and in various galleries, public exhibition centres and museums throughout Quebec and in Ottawa. In effect became an umbrella sheltering not only the various dealers' shows but also supportive events and permanent-collection hangings in institutions. It encompassed works by more than 275 artists, marking the history of abstract art in Quebec since Borduas.

Although it was an initiative of AGAC, The Globe and Mail's accusation that the exhibition was a really a product of "struggling dealers [who] desperately want the market for painting, their only saleable medium, to heat up" seems more knee-jerk than insightful. René Blouin, of Galerie René Blouin, a much-respected private dealer in Canada with a previous life in the Canadian public-art sector and a principal organizer of the first Cent jours d'art contemporain in 1985, took professional pains to explain that "Peinture Peinture" was indeed a dealer event and not a curated exhibition. At the same time, however, Blouin's motivation for initiating the project seemed genuinely driven by a critical curiosity of the legacy of Montreal's deep traditions of abstract painting, many of whose practitioners were, and continue to be, prominent teachers there.

Post-Second World War Montreal, it must be remembered, was, after New York, and because of Borduas and the Automatistes, one of the few cities on the international map that produced a genuinely original response to previous European traditions of abstract painting. And Borduas' authoritative stature as a founding father of abstract painting in Montreal was inescapable in the city in June, with special exhibitions devoted to him at both the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.

Although Borduas' work rarely attains the heroic size of the Abstract Expressionists, it is hard to imagine a European painter of the same generation with a comparable sense of scale, material substantiality and audacity. Revisited after four decades, Borduas' engagement with abstraction shows no diminishing vigour, whether in his struggle with the figure/ground problem, his interrogation of the cubic grid or his challenge to illusionism through the literal materiality of paint. Sometimes the results are too pictorial, sometimes gestures become manneristic, but the work, always anchored in the matter of paint and in paint's resistance to handling, never ceases to explore new ground.

Take sans titre (N°61), ca. 1958: small, only 60.8 x 50.1 cm, but handled on a scale far beyond its size; a tough little painting that hung at the entrance to Borduas et l'épopée automatiste at the Musée d'art contemporain. An exercise in restraint: a light-absorbent pallid red, a surface completely covered; no illusionism, painting as a fact concrete in the world, its shallow relief catching real light. "It is almost too 'literal' for Borduas," wrote François-Marc Gagnon in 1988. "One has the impression simply of masonry and trowel work." The painting is workmanlike rather than willful, and if the grid still operates as a compositional principle, it seems a residue of process rather than simply a pre-given. All in all, there is a powerful sense of the artist having deferred to paint's viscosity, letting it determine how gesture, texture and light must emerge. One could classify sans titre (N°61), as a material-based painting that anticipated a family of similarly literal, if disparately motivated and differently articulated, paintings by such artists as Ron Martin, Garry Kennedy, Jerry Ferguson or Eric Cameron.

Then there are the Montreal painters, the generation of Molinari, Tousignant, Gaucher, Gagnon and others, who, rather than being consigned to post-painterly purgatory, have continued to be vigorous players, attended to with keen critical interest across Canada. Their on-going production is evidence that post-painterly abstraction, as it was formulated and prescribed by Greenberg and his followers, was not a prescribed outcome of pre-war Modernism. Instead, other readings of the history of painting could pose alternative routes. Witness how Molinari, whose structuralist approach to colour and form could arouse the admiration of a younger generation, be it a painter like Ron Martin or a sculptor like David Raboinowitch.

Molinari was a Canadian artist who could speak to his younger peers about ways of working that embraced precisely the principles of 'theatricality' that Michael Fried so deplored in Minimal Art, alternative approaches that rejected the atemporal quality of 'presentness' as a state of 'grace' that Fried championed in the work of Caro and the colour-field painters. In his "Stripe Paintings," Molinari opened up a dynamic space of infinite, successive perceptual possibilities. Molinari's paintings were thus early constructions of that active symbiotic relationship between the see-er and the seen, a condition of art that would become increasingly significant in the latter part of the twentieth century.

With so distinguished a past, what of the present in Montreal and "Peinture Peinture" in the
Belgo Building? Artists and works were well served by sensitive curatorial handling. The works were grouped thematically in each space under such titles as “Surfaces sensibles,” “Hors cadre,” “Calligraphies,” “Architectures angulaires,” “Les Paradis terrestres,” “Champs colorés,” “Trompe-l’œil,” “Matières premières,” etc.—slippery categories, somewhat arbitrary, obviously overlapping, but nevertheless fair clues for organizing visitors’ thoughts. One inevitable bane of large group shows, a problem this one did not evade, was the difficulty of evaluating an artist’s representation given only one or two works. How could a visitor gauge the nature of its interrogation of the multifaceted language of abstract painting, judge to what degree the work spoke innocently, or with knowledgeable self-awareness? Such questions sometimes were answered by supporting exhibitions or extended presentations elsewhere in the city. The final results of “Peinture Peinture,” however, were decidedly mixed.

Most exhilarating were the presentations by artists already long in the art-history books, and still, professionally, very alive. Françoise Sullivan, one of the signers of the Refus global (and represented by her contributions as a dancer in the Musée d’art contemporain exhibition), showed a glowing series of nuanced red fields imposed on by invasive shapes of a more orangy red from the edges and corners. This engagement with the monochrome was supplemented by her exhibition at Galerie de l’Uquam, in which red fields were overlaid with a minimalist grid—organized gestures that are perhaps rooted in her dance experience but are also a residual trace of original Automatiste methods.

The monochrome, a kind of talisman since the critic Nikolai Tarabukin, in 1921, called a small red monochrome by Rodchenko the “last painting,” ran like a leitmotif throughout “Peinture Peinture.” Fernand Leduc (also a signatory to the Refus global), Claude Tousignant and Jean-Marie Delavalle proved brilliantly that rather than being a dead end, the monochrome, as historian Briony Fer recently noted, “remains one of abstract painting’s most resilient and repeated strategies.” Each one succeeded in making single planes of uniform colour strange again—Fernand Leduc with a suite of six glorious and intensely luminous panels of colour, Mobilité première, 1995, acrylic on board; and Tousignant, with Céphide, 10 juin, 1997 and Céphide, 30 mai 1997, two large canvases of amorphous colour modulated in a
range somewhere from pink to puce, depending on the light of day.

The latter were installed some distance from the wall, adding to their aura of indeterminateness. Bernard Lamarch in Le Devoir felicitously compared them to the light constructions of James Turrell: “plages de couleur sans fond, sans aucune nuance de tonalités” (expanses of colour without end, without any nuance of tone). In contrast to these realms of contemplativeness—in Leduc, tinged with the mystical, in Tousignant, immersed in the mystery of pure phenomena—Jean-Marie Delavalle, with his Peinture jaune and Peinture rouge (both 1998), showed himself, through his materials (anti-rust paint on aluminum), his hard industrial finish, the internal inertness of his object/paintings (their dull mirror-like surfaces casting back reflections of the fleeting and the ephemeral), to be of a younger generation.

One of the most felicitous installations in the exhibition was the juxtaposition in Room 520, Galerie Trois Points, of Delavalle’s paintings and Yves Gaucher’s magisterial triptych, Jaune, bleu et rouge III (1998). They were measures of the unpredictable possibilities of the monochromatic painted surfaces, the entirely different resonances that colour-fields may have—the former outwardly directed, the latter absorbing one into its almost palpable internal light. The other charmed space was Room 501, Galerie René Blouin, which was orchestrated with another multipanelled Gaucher, two Tousignant monochromes, a remarkable Jean McEwen and two smaller Charles Gagnons. Gaucher is, of course, not a monochrome painter (although the Grey Paintings from the late nineteen-sixties may count as such), but one concerned with the interrelation of abutted colour planes—their resolution perfect but their equilibrium won as if at a great effort, its stability of egg-shell fragility, in Jaune, bleu et rouge III, and an accompanying work on paper, Gaucher re-engages what seems the inexhaustible problem of the
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ON THE EVIDENCE of "Peinture Peinture," it is as if the generation of the nineteen-sixties was the heroic generation of Montreal abstract painting and that the torch has not been passed on. With later generations, the notion of abstraction as a unified practice becomes diffuse. There are artists here with respectable careers: mark makers like Hurtubise, Richard Lecroix, Serge Lemoyne and Juan Schneider, of which only the last, with Double Suggestion, gives evidence of some gestural energy. There are also several artists engaged in a deconstructionist dialogue with painting, but this seems tiredly didactic, with the exception of Martin Bourdeau upping the ante with a certain conceptual wit. Lucio de Heusch, Leopold Plotek and Denis Juneau work with figure/ground imagery and Carol Wainio and Michael Smith, narrative and landscape. One might also note the elegant monochromatic reliefs by Christian Kiopini and Mario Côté's eye-catching interplay of painting and photography, but, finally, there remains little of the panache and urgency of the generation of the sixties. Indeed, on the evidence of the exhibition, if their torch was passed on, it seems to have been to a practice of anti-painting, to the performance, installation and media-based works of artists like Jana Sterbak, Geneviève Cadieux or Barbara Steinman, or, alternatively, to individuals like Roland Poulin and Betty Goodwin.

Irene F. Whittome's Saffron Braille (1998) suggests another avenue of vitality. One of the highlights of "Peinture Peinture," it is a cryptic work, both poetically and literally—it is constructed of a grid of Braille pages overlaid with a saffron-coloured oil glaze. "Food for thought" was purportedly artist Charles Gagnons' response to it, upon learning that the pages came from a braille cookbook. By now, it is evident that the inclusive understanding of abstraction in "Peinture Peinture" has become uselessly porous. To my taste, the best rewards of the exhibition came from either the wing of abstraction that strives for pure autonomous visibility, in the tradition of Malevich and Mondrian, or the one that flirts with extrapainting content, provoking an ambiguous interplay between imagery and a provocative or teasing title, on the model, say, of Paul Klee.

Michel Daigneault's essentially monochrome grounds, for instance, are loosely covered with quirky drawing and islands of surface adhesions connected by plastic strands, perhaps fishing line. Their formal wit and narrative innuendo is charged by such long quirky titles as Cette journée-là, j'ai eu le sentiment que quelque chose était pour me tomber sur la tête (1998) or Ne me regarde pas comme ça (1997). Barry Allik's Ronin War in the Age of Intelligent Machines (1998), in contrast, turns hard-edge geometry—an interwoven pattern of white and black and grey with a high-strung shift between black and grey inscribed on the vertical centre of the painting—into an enigmatic science-fiction illustration. Francine Savard's very popular Promenade en 56 tableaux (1993), an abstracted multi-panelled tableau (uniformly grey except for one strategically placed lighter panel) of what looks like an urban street map, belongs in the same category. But the most subtle and poetic balance of title and image was achieved by Briguite Radeckie in But she continued to embroider her wedding dress (1995) and She wrote for many years without making a sound (1997). Paintings in which she paraphrases a range of manners from the annals of abstract art—white semi-mechanical interlaced brushstrokes like Robert Ryman's, Twombly-like swirls of simulated writing, the monochrome—as visual metaphors for her evocative texts.

IF "PEINTURE PEINTURE" does not convince us that abstraction is thriving in Montreal, what does it teach? Certainly that...
abstraction is a useful designation only if used precisely and that abstract painting, like painting in general, is not a unified practice as it was considered by its critics, who focused on what they saw as the dead end of Greengbergian prescription in the late sixties and early seventies. As much as the various critical readings of Pollock’s painting—as action painting, as expressionist, formalist or literalist—proved the basis not only for post-painterly abstraction, but happenings and minimalism, subsequently painting had been able, as Roberta Smith observed as early as 1979, “to be perversely resilient, able to absorb from every quarter, even those which seemed—or claimed—to threaten its very existence...and from conceptual and performance art’s emphasis on subject matter, autobiography, narrative and allusive imagery.”

If Gerhard Richter can confound the difference between realist and abstract painting (and construct objects that pose comparable perceptual problems), if we can mention Tousignant in the same breath as James Turrell, Molinari with David Rabinowitch, or, in the realm of narrative art, Eric Fischl with Jeff Wall, then what? Rather than continue to subsume painting into its craft traditions, perhaps its many individual undertakings ought to be appraised alongside other artistic enterprises, not on the basis of technical practice alone but in terms of their respective programs. As Allan Kaprow put it some time ago: “The young artist of today need no longer say ‘I am a painter.’ He is simply an artist.”

If the designation “abstract painting” is to remain useful, perhaps it is best confined to a unified body of work—work such as that which addresses the space of pure visuality (or perhaps we should rather say pure perceptually, remembering how much the whole body is bound up in visual experience), the tradition that Montreal artists so significantly contributed to beginning in the nineteen-sixties, painting that has stripped itself of outside references, that sets out to establish, in autonomous terms, a reflective tempo, a contemplative delay, a duration, where the enigma of each individual painting opens itself immediately to human perception. Think of Canadian artists like Molinari, Gaucher, Ron Martin and Chris Cran, and of international artists like Richter and Helmut Federle, or of Joseph Marioni, who speaks of his own paintings as “intimately involved with the perceptual sharing of a sustained state of seeing. The painting itself is the visual place of that state of being. The perceptual identity of the painting at its radical source does not stand for some other place, it is not a metaphor, a sign of, or symbolic of something else. The painting is the place and we know we have arrived at that place when it appears that nothing is taking place but the place itself.”

This is painting that may partake of the idealist traditions of Modernist abstraction. Yet the place it constructs is not a place of meaning or resolution, but a space of conflict, undecidenedness and pulsating instability. Here form makes chaos visible; or, here it is through form that chaos can just be “conditionally and beautifully held at bay,” to apply Richard Ford’s description of the precarious nature of a literary construction.

Painting at the close of the nineteen-nineties is a complex business and, evidently, also an unfinished one.