ABSTRACT Painting Peinture

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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 From the perspective of historical determinism, painting was outdated.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, transcendental or utopian values, as the...
"With later generations, the notion of abstraction as a unified practice became diffuse"

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 Gagnon's 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 Alika's Cool 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 Brigitte 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

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primaries, proposing re-statements that challenge all the earlier solutions, whether by Mondrian, Newman or Kelly.

Finally it was Molinari who offered a real surprise. After an almost twenty-year engagement with the slow and contemplative Quantificateurs, operating often at the very edge of visibility, he delivered a dazzling, in-your-eye, large-scale, no-holds-barred red, yellow and blue revisit of Mondrian’s Boogie Woogie paintings, whose heterotopian dispersals and destructions of form have previously been a Molinari touchstone. (If one doesn’t quite know what to do with these new paintings, it should be remembered that Molinari has periodically returned to sources as a point of departure for new directions.)

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 Lemoine and Juan Schneider, of which only the last, with Double Suffocation, 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 Côte'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,”