

# ABSTRACT Painting Peinture

A B S T R A I T E

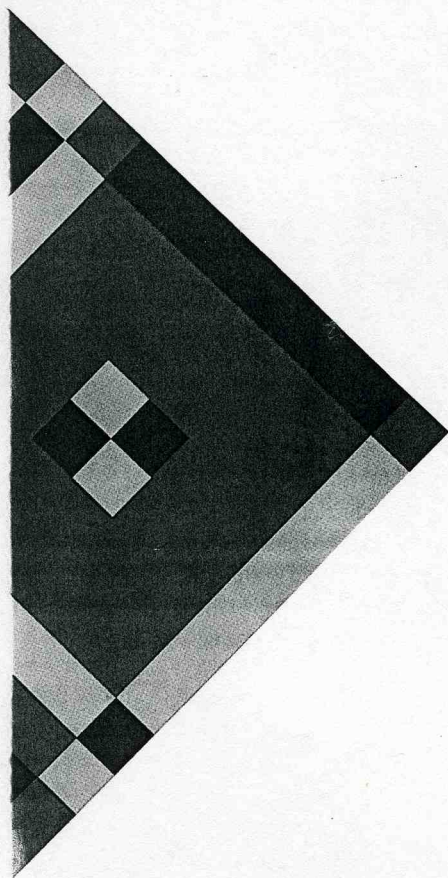
With *Refus global* now fifty years old,  
the rich legacy of Montreal abstraction was the fitting  
centre of this summer's "Peinture Peinture."

Road Nasgaard considers the exhibition and  
its roots in abstract traditions

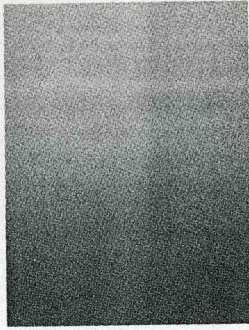
**Painting-bashing** has been a popular critical sport since the glory days of colour-field painting nearly a quarter century ago. Back then, however, it was still with genuine optimism that a critic like John Elderfield could project a brilliant future for painting: "Post-Pollock modernism has already 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 From the perspective of historical determinism, painting was outdated.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



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-Émile 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. It 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 cubist 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.

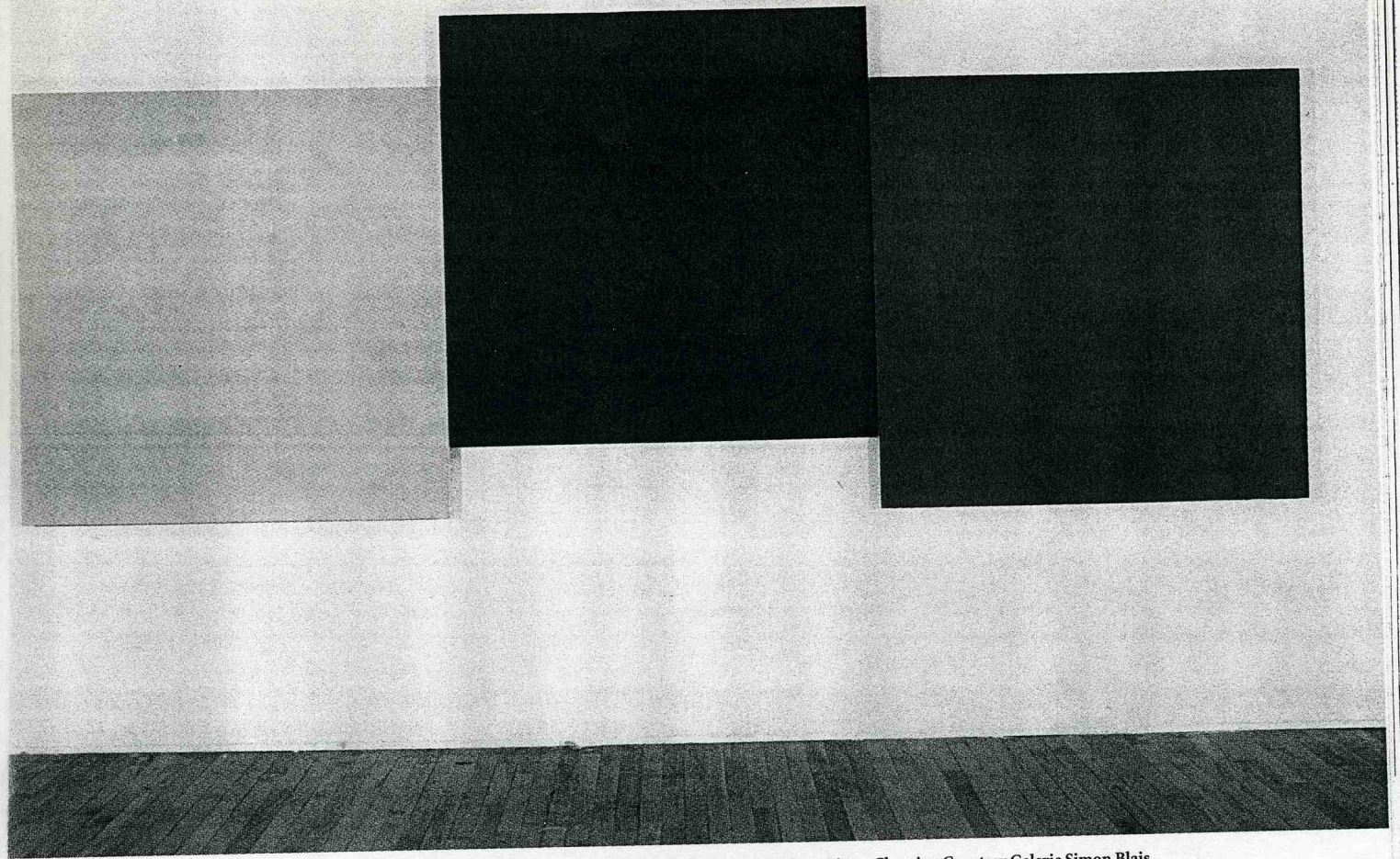
Then there are the Montreal painters, the generation of Molinari, Tousignant, Gaucher, Gagnon and others, who, rather than being consigned to post-painterly purgatory, have continued to be vigorous players, attended to with keen critical interest across Canada. Their on-going production is evidence that 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 Rabinowitch.

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





Yves Gaucher *Jaune, bleu et rouge III* 1998 Acrylic on canvas 142.2 x 365.8 cm Photo Pierre Charrier Courtesy Galerie Simon Blais

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’oeil,” “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 *Cépheide, 10 juin, 1997* and *Cépheide, 30 mai 1997*, two large canvases of amorphous colour modulated in a

OPPOSITE TOP: Jean-Marie Delavalle  
*Peinture jaune* 1998  
 Anti-rust paint on aluminum 121.9 x 91.4 x 3.8 cm  
 Photo the artist  
 Courtesy Galerie Christopher Cutts

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Jean-Marie Delavalle  
*Peinture orange* 1998  
 Anti-rust paint on aluminum 121.9 x 91.4 x 3.8 cm  
 Photo the artist  
 Courtesy Galerie Christopher Cutts

