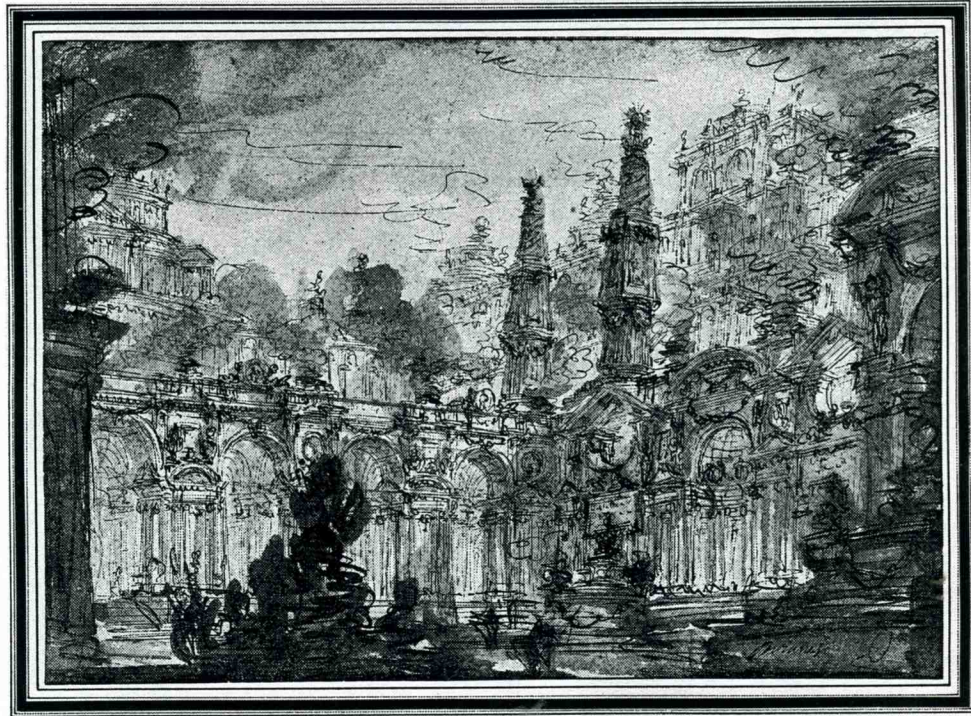


## PERSPECTIVES ON SPACE-MAKING

*Exploring Rome: Piranesi and His Contemporaries*, Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), Montreal. August 17 1993 - January 4, 1994. Michel Daigneault, *Abstraire l'Abstrait*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montreal. August 21 - September 12, 1993



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Fantastic Monuments*, 1747-1750. Pen, brown ink, brown wash over graphite underdrawing on cream laid paper; 19,8 x 27,7 cm. Collection: Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

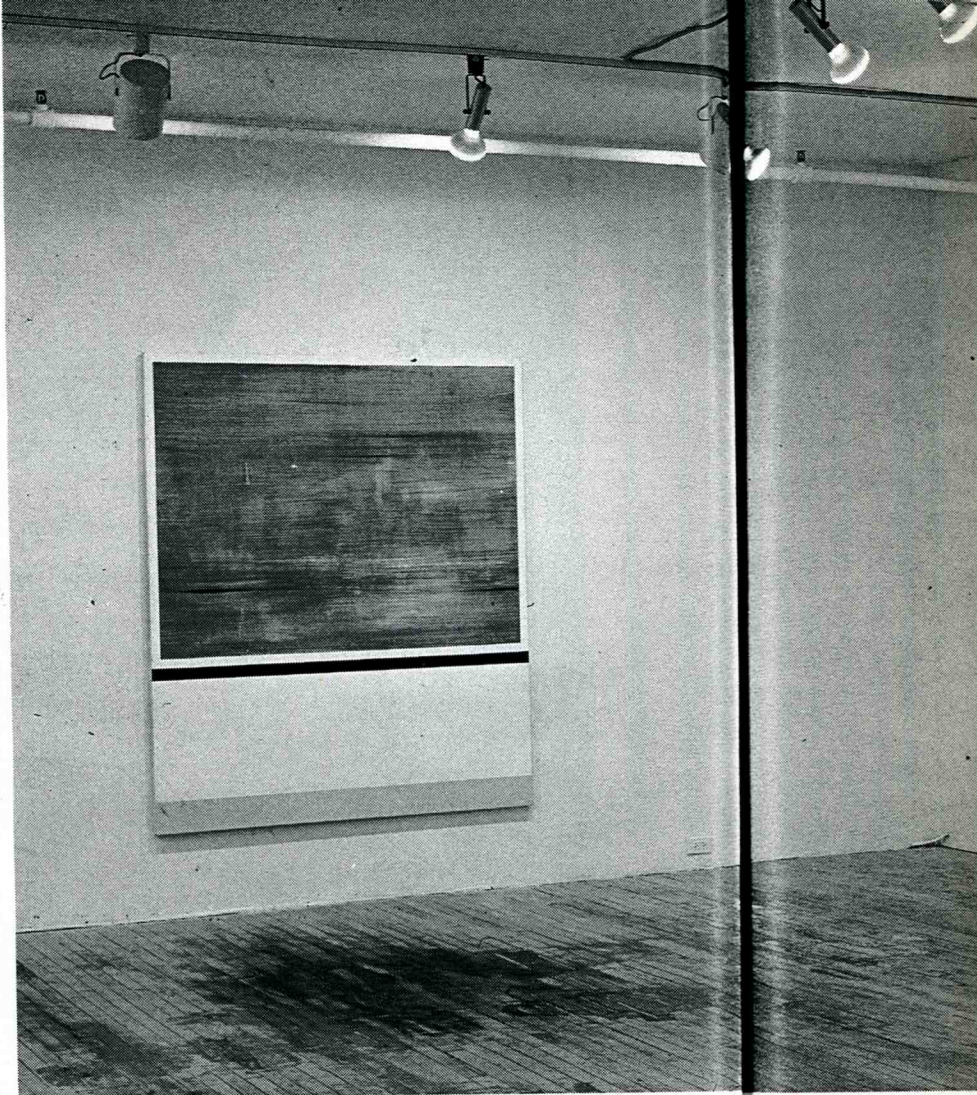
Representing space in two dimensions is one of the fundamental challenges of the visual arts and while the scope of contemporary art is rapidly expanding, reflecting on such a basic issue can help give greater meaning to the current artistic debate.

Two recent exhibitions in Montreal dealing with subject matter from different disciplines and separated widely in historical time were nonetheless remarkable for their similarity of approach to the problem of pictorial space-making. At the Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montreal painter Michel Daigneault showed sixteen new abstract paintings and at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the exhibition *Exploring Rome: Piranesi and His Contemporaries* presented an impressive collection of drawings, etchings and watercolours by eighteenth century artists and architects.

The idea that a display of contemporary art might have a lot in common with an exhibition drawn from a period of art history raises some interesting questions about the terms avant-garde and contemporary. Montreal critic Ricardo Castro underlined his appreciation of this idea by opening a review of the Piranesi exhibit with a citation by Benedetto Croce: All history is contemporary history<sup>1</sup>.

Ironically, it is arguable that the Daigneault exhibit was the less avant-garde of the two shows: while formalist abstraction remains marginal, it has nonetheless developed a distinguished history over nearly a hundred years. Those choosing abstraction today must assume a position relative to these traditions and, in this sense, Daigneault's work can be read as an attempt to revitalize an established artistic territory left somewhat neglected by the recent preoccupations of contemporary art. By contrast, much of the work of the eighteenth century artists represented in the Piranesi exhibit, including among others Hubert Robert, Richard Wilson, Fragonard and Robert Adam, was genuinely innovative. The eighteenth century was an era of profound social change in the Western World: a series of dramatic events that radically transformed art, economics, politics, and science took place within a condensed period.

The CCA exhibit, organized with the cooperation of New York's Pierpont Morgan Library and private collectors, was an ambitious undertaking that allowed for complex readings on many levels. Using Rome and Venetian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) as points of reference, the display celebrated the exchange of ideas and influences between different artistic disciplines during the



Michel Daigneault, *Abstraire l'Abstrait*, 1993. Acrylique sur toile. À gauche

eighteenth century. The main galleries of the museum were set up as a series of visual sequences that can generally be described in three groups. The first group concentrated on the work of Piranesi teachers and predecessors; the second included a large body of Piranesi etchings, drawings and watercolours; and a third grouping formed a survey of contributions by artists and architects directly influenced by the genius of the Venetian architect.

Rather than built commissions, Piranesi favoured vehicle of expression was the perspective view. His contributions to this medium remain among the most important in modern art history, and in this sense he is as significant a point of reference for formal abstraction as the Cubist painters, Wassily Kandinsky, or Barnett Newman. An invention of the Renaissance, perspective is a method of representing space in two dimensions derived from optical principles and thus depends largely on visual criteria to interpret three-dimensional reality - often at the expense of spatial or tactile considerations. Such a visual bias was typical of the early applications of perspective from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, which favoured the communication of static object-oriented information. In the humanist tradition of man at the center, a single view point was located in the middle of the image to focus symmetrically on a fixed subject. These subjects were typically at some distance from the picture

plane and the net result was a feeling of scientific detachment.

By engaging objects in a more dynamic relationship with the picture plane and using multiple view points to suggest the experience of movement, Piranesi introduced spatial complexity and the dimension of time to his images - and thus created a more comprehensive rendering of the experience of real space. This is what marks his work as distinctly modern and ties it directly to many of the explorations of the twentieth century.

In the portion of the exhibit dealing with teachers and predecessors, the invention by the Bibiena family of *Scena per Angolo*, a method of rendering stage designs by the use of multiple view points, is clearly established as an important influence on the future work of Piranesi. The loose, atmospheric sketches of father and son Ferdinando Galli Bibiena and Guiseppe Galli Bibiena create an illusion of dramatic spatial movement by focusing obliquely on cavernous interiors. Whereas the inventors of *Scena per Angolo* employed it as a presentation technique for an allied art, Piranesi used the method as an end in itself, thus lending it true artistic purpose. The *Carceri* plates, a series of etchings of imaginary prison interiors, are probably the greatest achievement of this aspect of Piranesi oeuvre. Unfortunately absent from the CCA exhibit, the *Carceri* were nonetheless well represented by Jean-Louis Desprez pen

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