

Montréal

## A "DANGEROUS" PAINTING

Michel Daigneault, *Michel Daigneault*, Galerie Trois Points,  
Montréal. April 28 - May 26, 2007

his exhibition demonstrated that Michel Daigneault is quickly becoming one of the leading abstract painters of his generation. His work is at once inviting and interrogatory, and quietly proceeds from strength to strength, gathering greater credibility and momentum all the while. His last several exhibitions have been exemplary in their critical tenor, widening scope – and overwhelmingly seductive facades.

While they do not govern interpretation, his titles for these works inject a playful measure of whimsy and referential undecidability into their reading. They play simultaneously different riffs on content (iconographic and semiotic) issues and reading strategies. Such is certainly the case with *Through the Looking Glass [Mur de Verre]* (2006), which suggests a hectic transit through the wonderland mirror on our part and subsequent emergence on the other side of abstraction in a state of bemused wonder, now several light years removed from the Modernist home planet. Rife with metaphors that lurk restively somewhere just beneath our surface reading of them – like hungry sharks beneath the surface of ocean water – his recent paintings are capacious, daunting, and even, in a sense, dangerous. They continue to question, as several commentators have pointed out over the last few years, just what constitutes abstraction today amidst a conflation of heterogenous practices. It must be said that these works are the furthest things from hermetically closed abstracts. Daigneault has nimbly side-stepped the cul-de-sac of late Modernism and its pieties and emerged on abstraction's flipside – rather than being stranded in its flatlands, as has been the fate of some of his less-nimble confreres – with all his faculties intact. Radically open to the life-world and the horizon of inter-subjectivity we all live and work within, his paintings stake a luminous claim not only on the present tense of painting but on the organic, shifting template of the social world.

If Daigneault's restless paintings continue to question the verities of Modernism, they are also inordinately elegant and invigorating things. He is one of a new generation of important abstract painters in Québec and Canada, including Carmen Ruschensky (Montréal) and David Blatherwick (Windsor, Ont.), who have renovated the house of abstraction with state-of-the-art plumbing, wiring and a funky and winning order of arrestingly eclectic domestic architecture. He has the licks, after all, and his paintings are rife with unlikely and unforeseen pictorial feints and parries. This painter has always flirted with figurative mischief and the fact that metaphor rules in his work enables him to construct paintings that are pleasurable arenas to play and think within.

His painting contents morph and change incessantly in the viewing. Their varied iconographies are always on the move. Cavalcades of structured marks inform the space of painting, and these lively processions are like optical magnets. His mark making, with its innate aesthetic of ambiguity, is mutant and anamorphic, never mute, staid or static. It is as though the works are undergoing analeptic shocks within their field structures – epileptic seizures inside the painting Mind. The painter invites us to project in and through their tiered interiors, and to be party to the play of metaphor there. They resist easy codification, and they are replete with a host of analogical possibilities that slow

perception down and draw it out over repeated viewings before any conclusions can be drawn as to what constitutes the nature of the painting as a "formal" whole. They hook thought and assumptive contexts, lock, stock, and barrel.

I said "dangerous" earlier and what I meant is that Daigneault never plays it safe. Instead, he encourages the making of category mistakes on our part – I mean our subsuming the interior "content" of his paintings under a different family tree: abstraction for figuration and vice versa. This is subversive, and sets the benchmark for provocation and a still higher order of assimilation. In so doing, the painter escapes all our erstwhile attempts at tidily pigeonholing his work, and thus evades taxonomy.

Daigneault's work subversively underscores Modernist histories with awkward truths traditionally outside its ken and is, finally, anti-genealogical. Our measured appraisal of his paintings reveals that they upset, rather than trade upon or shore up, the older and more brittle Modernist paradigms. His loaded inscriptions on the plane are wildly polymorphous. Yet content always gels – and each painting, if replete with ways and means of mark-making unknown to his forebears, is always, formally speaking, complete.

Michel Daigneault's brilliance has been his seemingly unstoppable ability to breathe new life into the iconographic possibilities of abstract painting. A painting like *Jaune [Yellow]* (2006) seems like a proverbial optical smorgasbord, but is finally a snare for thought. The full array of his iconographic markers is really tentacles and sounding boards for our assumptions and presuppositions, and, invariably, in the process of looking, our safest assumptions all come tumbling down. As noted above, Daigneault addresses the optic as well as our gray matter. But make no mistake: under the prettiest and most diverting facade, a steel trap lies in waiting in the microstructures. This is certainly true of other paintings in the exhibition as well: *À ciel ouvert [Open Skies]* (2006), *Ligne d'arrivée [Finish Line]* (2006), and the resplendent *La couleur qui tombe [Colour Falling]* (2006, acrylic on canvas, 137 x 147, 5 cm).

While Daigneault is mentioned in passing towards the end of Roald Nasgaard's brave new book *Abstract Painting in Canada*, he (and his like-minded colleagues in new abstraction like Carmen Ruschensky and David Blatherwick who sadly receive no mention there at all) clearly deserves more expansive, sympathetic and in-depth treatment – and, of course, a few repros.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

**James D. Campbell** lives and works in Montréal, and is a writer and independent curator. He is the author of over one hundred books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art*. His most recent publication is *Channeling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure for the Plattsburg State Museum*.