

Between marginal and mainstream

Sylvain Bouthillette's punk past hasn't been entirely left behind in his new career as an artist. Some of the energy and violence of the musical style are in his painting.

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Special to The Gazette

At 36 years of age, Sylvain Bouthillette stands at that interesting juncture for an artist, midway between over-assured youth and serene old age, when artists have presumably transcended the craving for fame. At the same time, Bouthillette, who had his first show at 19 in a friend's apartment and has since had a string of exhibitions in mainly experimental galleries, finds himself, in a sense, midway between two art scenes — the avant-garde, largely supported by grants, and the spiffy commercial scene into which, with his current show, he has just moved.

Bouthillette's latest paintings, titled *Doux* — roughly translatable as mild — look anything but mild in Galerie Dugazon-Couture, the brave commercial gallery that opened over a year ago on staid Sherbrooke St. W.

Bouthillette is surprisingly composed when discussing his recent crossover into the open art market, a place numerous academic critics, art editors and painters studiously eschew. Though purportedly much concerned about the "the plight of the common person," the avant-garde art world prefers to avoid people — even artists — not armed with a graduate degree and an art resumé a mile long.

For Bouthillette, seeing his paintings, raw and ugly, yet oddly refined and intelligent, in the small, pristine space of the Dugazon-Couture presents a special opportunity. Youthful in green work shirt, one ear festooned with multiple rings, the artist calmly explained that now he can "learn the power of my work in a small room." He sees the current show as "a kind of laboratory."

Bouthillette's latest paintings, great churning whirlpools of images and icons, some of the pop variety, are at once figurative — they refer to recognizable things — and abstract in that they exploit freely the poetry of line and texture, the give-and-take of rough and smooth.

A work such as *Veneno* — Spanish for venomous — combines art-for-art's sake with the artist's need to send us a message.

Included in this work, a constellation of bright dots and lines roughly scratched into the painting's masonite backing, are an upside-down Mickey Mouse head, possibly guillotined in some revolution of the future. There's also a clown head and an igloo with a zippered-up entrance.

Bouthillette, a musician and bass guitarist into punk rock in the early 1980s — his band was called *Bliss* — is now a practicing Buddhist, and believes that art has a mission, "to counterbalance the effects of Disney." For Bouthillette, Disney is a symbol for the commercialism colonizing our souls, even as we smile.

"We have to get control of our psyches," said Bouthillette, for whom painting is both a process of self-discovery, an act of exorcism and simply a pleasurable activity; not entirely unlike the artist's other work as a contractor. "I like seeing things come together," Bouthillette said, referring to his occasional employment as builder of walls and ceilings using Gyproc.

The fascinating thing about Bouthillette's paintings is precisely that they don't just come together; in fact, they also seem to be flying apart in all directions. In one painting, titled *Deceleration*, a star-spangled party hat is at the epicentre of a universe on the eve of destruction. Like most of the paintings, the assorted images seem to float and seem mysteriously uncomfortable in their sites.

The intentionally unstable components in Bouthillette's images seem to move at varying speeds. In fact, the strength of this artist's work is not so much in the message, but in the way the medium itself seems subject to dual forces, gravity straining against mighty centrifugal explosion. The intriguing sense of insecurity, as much a result of the compositions as of the actual subject matter, is what makes these pictures poignant, even violent.

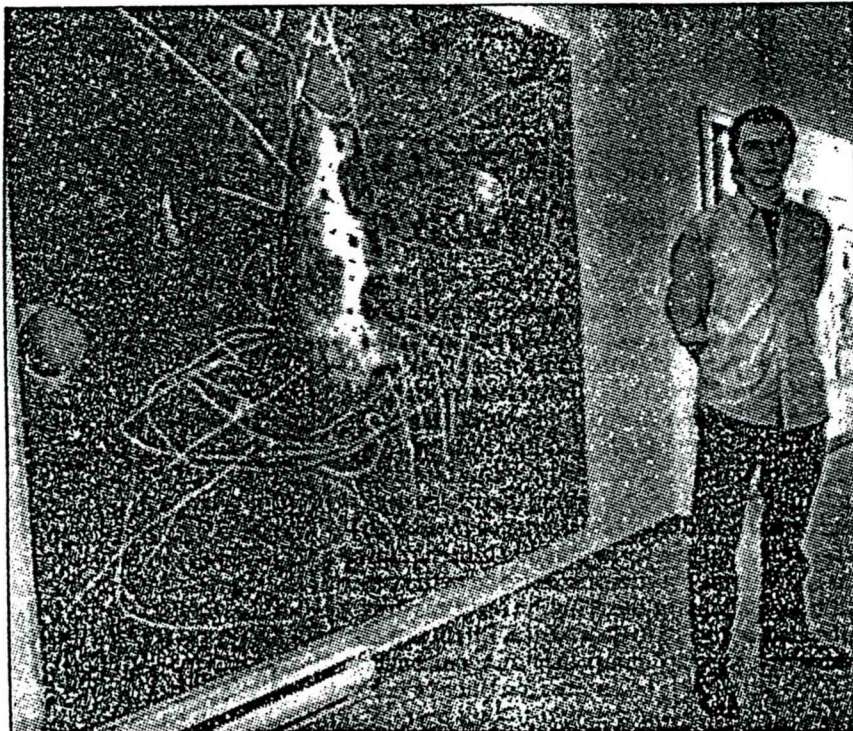
Finally, what we get in some quite exciting — and interestingly eccentric — art is pure stream-of-consciousness. Perhaps his work functions partly because, unlike commercials, it was not done with a vast audience in mind. "I do it because I can't help it. I do it for myself," Bouthillette said.

Let's hope that an open art market of ten more in love with magic realism and autumn leaves reflected in water will pick up on Bouthillette's exciting pop/graffiti trail.

✦ *Doux*, by Sylvain Bouthillette, is on view at Galerie Dugazon-Couture, 1460 Sherbrooke St. W., till Oct. 30. Information: (514) 286-4224.

From punk to paint

Some of the animation of Sylvain Bouthillette's punk-musician past has found its way into the artist's rough-and-tumble paintings.



JOHN KENNEY, GAZETTE

Sylvain Bouthillette with his painting *Deceleration*.