

Compte rendu

"John Heward"

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John HEWARD

James D. CAMPBELL

I.

John Heward of Montréal (b. 1934) has been making consummately strange sculptures, abstractions and self-portraits since the mid-1960s. The last comprehensive institutional survey of his work was mounted by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal over thirty years ago. The present exhibition, sorely overdue and truly revelatory for even seasoned observers, is remarkable on several counts.

First of all, it is a full survey while being by no means replete. Works from most series executed over more than four decades are included. Still, the show evinces a reductive spirit native to the work itself. It is installed in such a way as to demonstrate just how cohesive the whole body of work is, and the suture marks (I mean, evidence of earlier or later) can only be found in the dates on labels for the works themselves, for they convincingly reinforce one another—and thus achieve a phenomenal contiguity and grace.

I have discussed John Heward's entire career elsewhere¹ on more than one occasion so it would be redundant to reprise that biographical information here. However, it might be useful to recap some of the works in *A Trajectory* that represent specific stellar series in the body of work.

II.

Interestingly, the first work in the exhibition is an epiphany by any standard and it is figurative: *Mask of Mingus* (1966), executed in oil on board. This portrait of jazz savant Charles Mingus, one of Heward's avatars, sets the stage for the show: overwhelmingly penumbral, it establishes the aspect of concealment and chiaroscuro that runs like the silkiest and most chameleon-like of threads throughout Heward's corpus. If it signals the inception of the theme of the mask in the artist's work, one that has been carried through to the present day, it also demonstrates the artist's great love of jazz and is at once death mask and living ontic ligature.

Soon after the execution of *Mask of Mingus*, Heward liberated his work from the stretcher, never to return. (Actually, that's not quite the truth, he has worked on stretchers since, but very infrequently.) Then he reduced the iconography, and soon even canvas seemed too loaded with normative meanings so he experimented with other materials, and made rayon his own signature material (until the supply ran out).

By the late 1960s, Heward was establishing his *bona fides* as one of the most daring and reductive painters around. In a series of works characterized by the use of polyurethane sheets that completely covered large pieces of folded canvas, he was reticulating an aesthetic of concealment, even as a wealth of

meanings were hidden in plain sight. Here there is a second, if not secondary, surface, because the mark making itself always appears, ghost-like, on the underlying layer. While transparent, the plastic covering is a sort of perceptual camouflage that implicates the quasi-reflection of the viewer.

Heward then went on to execute his 'mask' series proper. This particular series was marked by all-over dark, densely stratified, scarified and often torn surfaces. The surface builds up a sense of internal attrition. That anecdotal, labour-filled and unusually rich surface is activated by myriad incidents/accidents of facture, and always subtly nuanced by a mark-making that borders on high drama and the unknowable. Sedimented strata of black and dark brown paint, uniformly and not so uniformly applied, give these works a Milton Resnick-like sense of mass. Remarkably eloquent for being so muted in palette, each layer becomes a mask for the layer that underlies it, and they build towards a surfeit somehow redeemed by monochrome. These works fulfil the latent intentional meaning of an earlier work like *Mask of Mingus*, but without the figurative element.

In the succeeding 'triangle' series (there is one in the museum's collection but it was not included in the show), Heward executed works in which problematic triangles (never hard-edge) leave the painting plane

prior to their completion. The viewer is left with the strong suggestion of the triangular form but the complete geometric motif is never actually present, except, that is, in the observer's imagination.

In the 'sign' series, Heward attempts to use a sign-signifying function as a 'mask' for the mark-making itself. Diagrammatic, graffiti-like dashes, striations and drippings of paint—which emphasize the physiology of the painting, and the simple physicality of pigment—bear unusually resonant expressive meanings. The colours in these works—whether blue squiggles, yellow taches or red loops—are radiant.

The field of a given painting is sparsely used, sparsely populated by what seem like a host of wildly animated votive signs. The markings are parsed out with a delicious penury; a discrete, syntactic iconography more like punctuation than language trembles on the cusp of meaning. The work then evolved into implement-and-stick-like but still largely gnomic hieroglyphics that were more expressive than ever. Later still, the 'sign' series took on a genuinely gestural intensity. Indeed, the primacy of gesture would from this point forward predominate as perhaps the most explicit component of Heward's formal language. When these works were first exhibited in the early 1980s in Montréal, they heralded for many the triumph of painting.

As the 'sign' series came to an end

Exhibition view of John Heward. *A Trajectory / A Collection* at Galerie de l'UQAM from October 14 to November 22, 2008. Exhibition organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay, Galerie de l'UQAM.



in the early 1980s, Heward started his acclaimed 'forming' series. Highlighted by ambiguous single, compact forms, usually positioned at the centre of the rayon sheet, and painted in bright colours, these paintings still count amongst the most reduced work in Heward's repertoire (at least in so far as iconography goes). The Forming series was started in late 1985 and ended in mid-1987. All the forming works were executed on unused but irregular sheets of rayon painted in declarative acrylic colours. (An important distinction, since Heward has often used old rayon or canvas sheets and even, as noted earlier, salvaged material from destroyed works of his. Indeed, this ongoing auto-cannibalism is a hallmark of his practice.) Because there is only one declarative colour and one form per work, the work enjoys a peculiar sort of formal gravity. Each rayon demonstrates an unusual restraint and minimalist ethos; a remarkable quality of Zen-like 'isness' and strange particularity. The rayons — as is the case with most of his paintings — are simply stapled unstretched at the top corners onto the wall plane. Endlessly manipulable, they invite touch and discovery.

Groupings of recent sculptures were also exhibited. These metal works, made mostly in the foundry from forms roughly hacked out of styrofoam with a blunt knife, have highly problematic shapes perhaps more akin to the detritus of the object world — or ancient geological formations — than to other sculpture. While laid out mostly flat on the floor, they can be placed in other orientations.

One of the strong epiphanies in the show is the grouping of the artist's post-Forming works — the aptly-termed 'abstractions,' — and which are perhaps his oddest and most openly anthropomorphized forms. Layered rayon or canvas sheets — often salvaged from discarded works from earlier series, repainted and then used together with newer sheets — were joined together loosely and hung at the top from a steel link from ceiling or wall. The resultant cowl-like configuration enjoyed an ambiguous and extremely arbitrary disposition in space. They become sculptural entities. They were always meant to be manipulated, yet few viewers at the exhibition opening seemed inclined to do so. One 'abstraction' was folded over the rear wall of the exhibition space in a lovely, languid fashion, the work, no doubt, of a fine valet.

Since the year 2000, Heward has been working feverishly on several new series. The Self-Portraits, unusually expressive portraits, had their counterpart in his Edgeworks, which represent the artist at his most hard-edged.

Another strong component of the exhibition was a wall of his "clampworks" — mostly small-scale lengths of stained and coloured rayon or canvas with small steel clamps that make them somehow iconic, as though Heward was airing his abstracts like clothes drying on the line. The subtle harmonics of that wall provide lasting nourishment for the eye. They, too, have a sculptural persona.

If *Mask of Mingus* is a figurative epiphany that marks the beginning of the exhibition, one of the vast canvases from the last year (2007), almost 23 feet long, and more sculptural gesture in space than painting *per se*, was added by curator Michel Martin, and marks its closure (at least chronologically). But talk of 'beginning' and 'end' is entirely specious in one very real sense which many visitors to the exhibition made a point of mentioning to me at the opening: that it comes full circle while still seeming very fresh.

III.

What remains so arresting about this artist's work is its stubborn resistance to taxonomy. Our continuing inability to reference a given tradition, school or leaning within abstraction opens out onto the unknown and perhaps the unknowable. Should we sense an oblique reference to something antecedent in art history, it is soon obviated by the sheer strangeness and particularity of Heward's project. One might suggest that this is the necessary consequence of his ongoing critique of late Modernism. His thought has always been a thinking from Outside. Furthermore, this work effectively brackets out much of the self-conscious myth-making mania and sheer fury of the ego with which the history of Modernism is so fraught. Heward eschews such redundant displays of brute force, self and frenzy. He wants to evince a sense of simply 'being there' in spare and eloquent gestures that nonetheless speak to painting's origins — the caves at Altamira or Lascaux — from the standpoint of his own psychology.

Arguably, as early as 1970, Heward has been in a state of continually paring-down. This teleological reduction and progressive withdrawal from the techniques, trappings and theoretical discourse of a specifically High Modernist practice is one of his greatest strengths. Paradoxically, this process parallels a deeper process of progressively closer engagement with painting itself as an activity that might directly confront the verities of exis-

tence. Because his painting and sculpture have become an open-ended meditation on what painting and sculpture as an integrated practice might mean, they evince or practise what I have called elsewhere a certain "ethics of making." Central to this ethics is the auto-interrogation of the object, its reflexive scepticism, and an effective vanquishing of the hollow demands of the ego.

In all the works exhibited, one prevailing characteristic becomes very clear — the process dimension of this work. Fracture reigns supreme. The sculpture in particular resonates with a strange particularity. The art is in the making here as much as the made thing is art. John Heward's sculptures and paintings may be the furthest things we can imagine from conventional artworks, yet they are replete

moving effect. Indeed, it is one of the most memorable installations that the undersigned curator and writer on art has experienced in long years. Goodbye Michel, and thanks for this most eloquent punctuation to an exemplary career at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. ←

John Heward. A Trajectory / A Collection

•Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec

March 13 to August 24, 2008

•Galerie de l'UQAM

October 24 to November 22, 2008

•MOCCA (Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art), Toronto

November 14, 2009 to January 4, 2010

James D. CAMPBELL is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He has authored over one hundred books and catalogues on art, and

From left to right: *Untitled (shaft)*, 2003; *Untitled no. 38 (sign)*, 1984; *Untitled (shaft)*, 2003 and *Untitled no.87 (being formed)*, 1987. Collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay, Galerie de l'UQAM.

The Murray Street Band with John HEWARD in concert at Galerie de l'UQAM, November 21, 2008. Photo: Louis-Philippe Côté, Galerie de l'UQAM.



with specifically human meanings. He has always sought to persuade us, his viewers, that perception itself is an interpretive act. And the communication of that thought is no small thing.

Kudos to retiring Curator of Contemporary Art Michel Martin for an exemplary installation of the artist's work from all periods, which brought out its underlying themes, preoccupations, cohesiveness and formal strengths to laudable and

contributes regularly to *Espace*, *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art*, *Contemporary Magazine*, *Modern Painters*, *ETC*, *C Magazine*, and *Ciel Variable*, among others. His most recent publications include monographs on painters Janet Werner, Marc Seguin and Leopold Potek.

NOTE

1. James D. Campbell, *The Thought from Outside: The Art and Artefacts of John Heward* (Montréal: ECW Press, 1996).