

Guy Montpetit
Les murales récentes
Guy Montpetit's Recent Murals

Guy Robert

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Guy Montpetit

Les murales récentes

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Où en est Guy Montpetit?

En pleine forme, dans la sérénité de la vie familiale et campagnarde qu'il mène en sa demeure-atelier de Val-David, où j'ai passé une fort agréable journée avec lui au milieu de septembre 1977.

Ce village des Laurentides, à un peu plus d'une heure de voiture de Montréal par l'autoroute du Nord, n'offre pas qu'une fameuse boîte à spectacles, La Butte-à-Mathieu, ou un hôtel réputé, La Sapinière, puisqu'on trouve aussi à Val-David plus d'une cinquantaine d'artistes et d'artisans qui y vivent et travaillent. À l'écart du village, sur l'île du Moulin, deux maisons conçues en collaboration avec l'architecte Pierre Mercier sont séparées par une petite pinède, sorte de jardin naturel de méditation, comme à la japonaise, avec ses pierres dégagées entre les troncs minces sur tapis d'aiguilles; la rivière du Nord y déroule son cours capricieux sur l'écran sonore de son bourdonnement, et les écureuils font la navette entre la maison-atelier du céramiste Alain Tremblay et celle du peintre Guy Montpetit.

Au milieu de septembre, les jeunes érables flamboient déjà dans la sauvagerie originelle de la végétation et d'étonnantes bousculades de roc, le long de la rivière, sous les fenêtres de la maison de Montpetit, pendant que de tout jeunes jumeaux gazouillent et grignotent implacablement les loisirs de leur maman Danièle.

Dans l'atelier de l'artiste, trois nouveaux tableaux, d'une intense lumière, d'une imposante maturité; sur des tables et d'autres pièces de mobilier, le sympathique fouillis des travaux en cours, dont se détache la maquette d'une chapelle qui sera terminée quand paraîtra le présent article.

Un imagier du vécu actuel

Guy Montpetit est décidément en pleine forme, et il serait fort intéressant d'examiner en détail les étapes de son cheminement, depuis une quinzaine d'années. Il a réussi cette chose rare, dans le brouhaha de l'art actuel: développer un style plastique cohérent et personnel, immédiatement identifiable, mais dont la syntaxe demeure ouverte à de multiples conjugaisons et

transformations, parfaitement capable en conséquence, d'écarter la monotonie et la sécheresse qui sclérosent tant de carrières d'artiste.

Montpetit avance, méthodiquement et résolument, et ses explorations semblent le conduire de découverte en découverte, pendant que son langage affirme sa maîtrise sans pour autant abdiquer sa spontanéité ni son ressort inventif. Il y aurait beaucoup à dire des séries qui regroupent une grande partie de ses œuvres, comme celle du *Temps de vivre*, exposée, à Paris, en 1974 et, à Toronto, en 1975, ou celles de *Sex Machine* et de *Où êtes-vous donc* exposées à Montréal et à Québec en 1970, ou encore celles intitulées *Deux cultures, une nation*, *Il ne faut pas mourir pour ça* et *All you need is love*; c'est, toutefois, une autre dimension de l'œuvre plastique de Guy Montpetit que j'aimerais ici souligner brièvement, celle de ses murales où se retrouvent de semblables jeux complexes à ceux qui animent ses tableaux de chevalet, jeux de l'esprit permettant à l'artiste de *figurer*, dans une traduction symbolique à la fois critique et humoristique, sa vision de certaines pulsions profondes de la civilisation actuelle; les principales de ces pulsions pourraient approximativement se ramener (en ne perdant pas de vue le coefficient humoriste, voire ironique de l'artiste) à celle du rapport hésitant entre la quincaillerie mécanique (bielles, engrenages, etc.) et le *logiciel* de l'électronique, et aussi à celle du rapport ambigu entre l'homme ancien (celui de la sexualité organique) et l'homme futur (robot cybernétique); à travers ce couple de pulsions profondes (*Éros*³, pourrions-nous dire, en parodiant le triptyque *Amour*³ de Montpetit), l'artiste semble toujours principalement préoccupé par les voies de communication entre l'homme et l'univers, entre l'individu et la société, entre le vécu et le cogité, entre le conscient de chacun et l'inconscient collectif dans lequel il baigne — mais ce n'est pas ici le lieu de scruter les composantes sémiotiques et dialectiques de l'esthétique qui donne à l'œuvre de Montpetit toute sa complexe substance, méticuleusement conjuguée dans les épousailles de la plastique et de la symbolique, selon une singulière intelligence de la forme artistique épanouie dans la volupté chiffrée. Montpetit s'affirme de plus en plus comme un somptueux imagier du vécu actuel, des temps présents, un peu dans le sens de la *Messe pour le temps présent* de Pierre Henry: n'y a-t-il pas d'ailleurs une sorte de liturgie plastique dans l'œuvre de Montpetit, grâce à quoi la pulsion sexuelle instinctive s'érotise et s'esthétise, se *civilise* et se code, bref se symbolise selon une reverbissante métamorphose formelle dont la syntaxe féconde et ouverte ne saurait se réduire à la simple question de l'intégration de l'art dans le décor urbain?

Une suite de murales

Depuis le grand diptyque peint, en 1971, sur des murs de maisons, de chaque côté de la rue Notre-Dame, près de la rue Saint-Remi, dans le quartier montréalais de Saint-Henri, Guy Montpetit poursuit le développement de son œuvre *publique* en se préoccupant à la fois de la fonction de l'œuvre d'art dans le tissu urbain et de la recherche technique pertinente, sans rien réduire pour autant de son autonomie inventive ni de son profil stylistique.

En 1972, Montpetit dresse, dans le hall ouest du nouvel édifice montréalais de Radio-Canada, une importante murale en relief, employant tout le budget accordé à la fabrication matérielle et à l'installation



1. Guy MONTPETIT
Sculpture dans Corridart,
1976.
(Phot. Charlotte Rosshandler)

2. Murale de Radio-Canada,
1972.
(Phot. Jean Mercier)

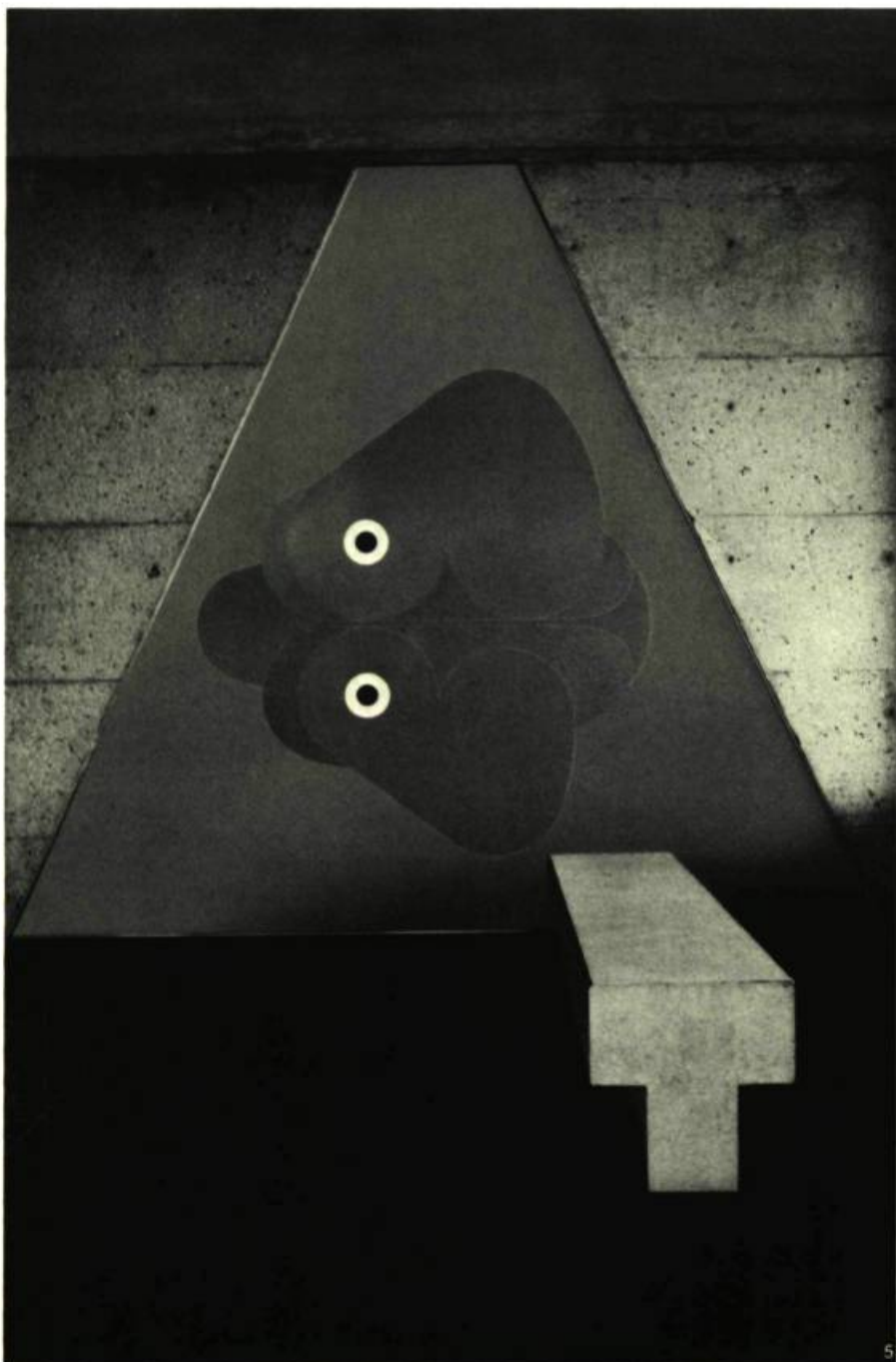




3



4



3. Murale de l'édifice de contrôle de l'Autoroute Ville-Marie, 1973-1975.
(Phot. Lavalin International, Jean Mercier)

4 et 5. Murale de la station de métro L'Assomption.
(Phot. Domtar Construction Materials Ltd., Div. Arborite)

de l'œuvre; selon sa conception originelle, cette murale devait s'animer grâce à un éclairage programmé, que le budget alloué interdisait, et ce n'est que cinq ans plus tard, à l'été de 1977, que la composition sera modifiée et que l'artiste pourra enfin lui donner les pulsations lumineuses primitivement prévues.

En 1972-1973, Montpetit signe une imposante murale en triptyque dans la tour de ventilation de l'autoroute Ville-Marie, à Montréal; cette œuvre donne à l'artiste l'occasion de travailler en étroite relation avec les laboratoires de la Compagnie Domtar, section Arborite, ce qui lui permet d'intégrer les éléments de son langage chromatique dans une gamme de matériaux laminés colorés dans la masse; le peintre devient ainsi véritablement concepteur de formes plastiques, architecte d'œuvres qui sont ensuite réalisées, suivant ses plans et devis, grâce à des techniques de très haute précision et selon un vaste clavier de possibilités, ouvertes aussi bien à des surfaces de petit format éventuellement produites en séries numérotées comme des estampes qu'à des reliefs partiellement modulaires de 10 pieds sur 70, comme celui de la tour de ventilation de la rue Vitré, dans le centre métropolitain, exécuté pour le Groupe Lavalin.

En 1974-1975, dans l'environnement qu'il conçoit pour la station de métro L'Assomption, à Montréal, Guy Montpetit recourt de nouveau à la technique de l'arborite coloré dans la masse, mais cette fois en de grandes fresques en aplat, astucieusement adaptées à leur emploi puisque ces surfaces, sans rien perdre de leur éclat chromatique et de leur vigueur rythmique, sont, à toutes fins pratiques, inaltérables et d'un entretien on ne peut plus simple.

À l'été de 1976, Montpetit participe au programme Corridart, de triste et bien courte mémoire, avec des formes sculpturales démontables; il esquisse aussi un projet de discothèque, mais son attention se concentre surtout sur la réalisation d'une chapelle dans la paroisse Sainte-Clotilde du quartier montréalais de Saint-Henri; il s'agit là d'une œuvre globale exaltante, puisque l'artiste-concepteur en détermine toute la plastique: formes et couleurs, rythmes et proportions, planchers et plafonds, murs et mobilier, et jusqu'aux objets liturgiques.

Au moment où j'écris ces lignes, au milieu de septembre 1977, la chapelle de Sainte-Clotilde est presque terminée, et Montpetit collabore étroitement avec les architectes Mercier à l'établissement du programme chromatique de l'ensemble scolaire pour handicapés Victor-Doré, qui sera bientôt érigé dans un quartier de l'Est montréalais; naturellement, c'est de cette œuvre en cours que l'artiste parle le plus spontanément, de cette «petite ville», comme il dit, où la psychologie de la couleur affiche ses droits jusque dans la signalisation et les systèmes mécaniques, en les traduisant en corridors et en pistes chromatiques; et l'artiste nous prévient que s'il est transporté par l'enthousiasme et provoque des débordements de couleurs, le surplus en sera efficacement absorbé par les masses architecturales, sobres et fonctionnelles.

Voilà donc où en est Guy Montpetit, en quelques paragraphes qu'il faudrait développer bien davantage pour rendre justice à l'évolution singulièrement dynamique et inventive de son œuvre, aussi bien sur son chevalet de Val-David qu'au fil d'une suite de murales qui comptent déjà parmi les meilleures de l'école de Montréal.

TEXTS IN ENGLISH

ARTS AND CULTURE

By Andrée PARADIS

It is good strategy in the art world to divide the camps in two: the traditionalists and the modernists. On the one side as on the other, we blithely fight for the *good* against the *bad*. On the one side the task can appear easy; it is a matter of better informing those who are almost converted, continually filling inventories, applying other clarifications to the works, being aware of the implications of History and "placing the faithful in a state of grace"; on the other, the living side of creation, we must have the understanding of risk as much as a clear mind, be thoroughly well-informed and be concerned with the notion of progress that creeps in everywhere and which blinds. This involves an idea of the *new which, curiously, goes more toward the uniform, the average and the anonymous*. We see this in the centres of contemporary expression of different countries which offer almost everywhere the same experiments in creativity. A phenomenon attributable not only to mimesis, but much more to information which is easily dispensed. In our civilization of the image, it is a question of an attempt at the destruction of this image and of its usual supports, and also the process of the return to nature. In opposition to this stand the protagonists of a return to the real by way of the imaginary and of the maintenance of techniques. This is a dispute that has lasted since the beginning of the century, famous through many manifestations and providing its controversies and its uncertainties to criticism. A dispute which takes place, it goes without saying, at the heart of different cultures whose characteristics it conveys.

On Quebec's very limited territory, the dispute is located in a culture which is subjected, just as are all world-wide cultures, to the most violent attack in its history. Anti-culture is not a simple, imaginary and passing adventure: it could clean and purify; it paralyzes, particularly. With the result that we are groping in orientations, that we wrongly assign all responsibilities to the State, that the generous ideas of good society and of mass culture take the wrong road, "the masses laugh at lights"¹. The masses, perhaps, but not man as a component cell of these masses: it is he at whom we must aim, it is toward him and for him that we must unceasingly take up our thoughts again.

The warning of Bernard-Henri Lévy², a young French philosopher thirty years of age, makes us particularly aware of the gravity of the situation. Following the case he makes of the events of May 1968, letting us foresee the forms of barbarism that are brewing in the world, he invites us to fight with weapons that are appropriately cultural: "The weapon of our museums and the bond of our solitude." Considering art as one of the roads of survival he makes a fraternal appeal to our vigilance in order that, failing our remaking the world, we make sure that it does not destroy itself.

We forget too much that art in culture is an active, regulating principle, a creator of order out of disorder itself, a vital force. We can never repeat this too much and, in this spirit, it is important to emphasize an intelligent article that impresses by its new tone, *Dépayser la culture* by Michel Morin and Claude Bertrand³. In this text we find important distinctions between culture and nationalism, exactly the place where the crux of the problem is located. The authors recall the sources, our introduction into French culture, our North American dynamism, so many fundamental questions upon which the future force of creative expression depends.

Criticism finally takes up its rights and begins to better distinguish between controversy and personal attack; it moves away from complaisance and pleads for the imaginary territory, the internal demands of creation and adherence to the culture from whence we came. This position

separates us from the jargon and frustrations of alarmists who see only alienation everywhere. On account of their negative attitude, they are largely responsible for this *ineffective aesthetics* that has been blowing like an evil wind for some years. It is not by imitating the frog that wants to make himself bigger than the ox that we shall achieve the acceptance of a whole people to a stimulating cultural adventure. What will to-morrow be a source of pride will be such through quality and the vigour of contents, not otherwise. We have great need at present of intellectuals who finally place culture above politics; intellectuals who are, according to Bernard-Henri Lévy's wish, metaphysicians, artists and moralists.

This may be exaggerated idealism, but there should be many of us to fight in this sense and to exile ourselves from everything that distracts us from what is essential.

One of our colleagues perhaps put the real question at the last International Association of Art Critics conference at Cologne: "If we were to disappear to-morrow, would art vanish? And if art vanished to-morrow, would we be called upon to disappear too?"

1. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La Barbarie à visage humain*. Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1977. 233 pages.

2. Idem.

3. *Le Devoir*, October 15, 1977, p. 29.

4. Bernard Denvir, *Les nouveaux théologiens*.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

GUY MONTPETIT'S RECENT MURALS

By Guy ROBERT

What point has Guy Montpetit reached?

He is in fine shape, in the serenity of the family and country life he leads in his studio-home at Val-David, where I spent a very pleasant day with him in mid-September, 1977.

This Laurentian village, a little more than an hour's car ride from Montreal by the Laurentian autoroute, presents not only a famous show-place, La Butte-à-Mathieu, or La Sapinière, a famous hotel, but there are also to be found at Val-David more than fifty artists and craftsmen who live and work there. Apart from the village on Windmill Island, two houses designed in co-operation with architect Pierre Mercier stand separated by a little pine-grove, a kind of natural meditation garden in the Japanese style, with its bare rocks among slim trunks on a carpet of pine needles; the North River wends its wayward course upon the sonorous screen of its humming, and the squirrels scamper back and forth between ceramist Alain Tremblay's studio-home and painter Guy Montpetit's.

In mid-September, the young maples were already flaming amid the primeval flamboyance of the vegetation and amazing scurrings of rocks along the river under Montpetit's windows, while the infant twins prattled and nibbled relentlessly at maman Danièle's leisure.

In the artist's studio I saw three new pictures, of an intense light and an impressive maturity; on tables and other furniture, the pleasant jumble of works on hand, among which stood out the scale model of a chapel which will be completed by the time the present article appears.

An image-maker of actual experiences

Decidedly, Guy Montpetit is in top form, and it would be very interesting to examine in detail the stages of his development during the last fifteen years. He has accomplished this rarity in the hubbub of present-day art: developing a coherent and personal plastic style, immediately identifiable, but whose syntax remains open to numerous inflections and transformations, thoroughly capable, consequently, of eliminating the monotony and the barrenness that stultify the careers of so many other artists.

Montpetit goes forward, methodically and resolutely, and his explorations seem to lead him from discovery to discovery, while his language affirms his mastery without, nonetheless, surrendering either his spontaneity or his inventive resilience. Much might be said of the series that regroup a large part of his works, like that of the *Temps de vivre*, exhibited at Paris in 1974 and at Toronto in 1975, or those of *Sex Machine* and of *Où êtes-vous donc*, shown at Montreal and Quebec in 1970, or yet again those titled *Deux cultures, une nation, il ne faut pas mourir pour ça* and *All you need is love*; however, I would like to emphasize briefly here another dimension of Guy Montpetit's plastic

work, that of his murals, in which are to be found complex plays similar to those that animate his easel paintings, plays of the mind allowing the artist to *represent*, in a symbolic translation at once critical and humorous, his vision of certain profound impulses of modern civilization; the chief of these impulses could approximately (while not losing sight of the artist's humorous, even ironical characteristic) amount to that of the reluctant relationship between mechanical hardware (tie-rods, gears, etc.) and the software of electronics, and also that of the ambiguous connection between ancient man (the man of organic sexuality) and future man (cybernetic robot); through this pair of deep impulses (*Eros*³, we could say, parodying Montpetit's triptych *Amour*³), the artist always seems mainly preoccupied by the lines of communication between man and the universe, between the individual and society, between the actual and the imagined, between the awareness of the individual and the collective unawareness in which he is bathing — but this is not the place to examine closely the semiotic and dialectical components of the aesthetics that gives Montpetit's work all its complex substance, meticulously combined in the wedding of the plastic and the symbolic, according to a curious comprehension of artistic form blossoming into planned delight. Montpetit proves himself more and more a lavish image-maker of present-day experience, of the present time, rather in the sense of Pierre Henry's *Messe pour le temps présent*. Is there not also a sort of plastic liturgy in Montpetit's work, thanks to which the instinctive sexual impulse becomes erotic and aesthetic, civilized and coded, in short becomes symbolized according to a formal regenerating transformation whose fruitful and open syntax would not be capable of reducing itself to the simple question of the integration of art into urban décor?

A series of murals

Since the large diptych painted in 1971 on the walls of houses on each side of Notre-Dame St. near Saint-Remi St. in the Saint-Henri ward of Montreal, Guy Montpetit has been pursuing the development of his public work while giving his attention to the function of the work of art in the urban fabric at the same time as to relevant technical research, without, however, reducing any part of his inventive independence or of his stylistic profile.

In 1972 Montpetit set up an important mural in relief in the west hall of Radio-Canada's new Montreal building, using all the funds allotted to the material creation and the installation of the work; in accordance with his original conception, this mural was to be animated by programmed lighting, which the allocated budget forbade, and it was only five years later, in the summer of 1977, that the composition would be modified and the artist would finally be able to give it the luminous throbbings initially planned.

In 1972-1973 Montpetit signed an impressive mural in triptych in the ventilation shaft of the Ville-Marie autoroute at Montreal; this production gave the artist the opportunity of working closely with the Domtar Company's laboratories, arborite department, which allowed him to integrate the elements of his chromatic language into a range of laminated materials coloured in the mass; the painter thus became truly a conceiver of plastic forms, an architect of works which were then produced following his plans and specifications, thanks to techniques of very great precision and according to a vast gamut of possibilities, open as much to surfaces of small size eventually made in series numbered like prints as to partially modular reliefs of 10 by 70 feet, like the one in the ventilation shaft in Vitré St., in the metropolitan centre, executed for the Lavalin Group.

In 1974-1975, in the environment that he planned for the L'Assomption subway station in Montreal, Guy Montpetit again resorted to the technique of arborite coloured in the mass, but this time in large flat *frescoes* artfully adapted to their use since these surfaces, without losing anything of their chromatic brilliance and their rhythmic vigour are, for all practical purposes, unalterable and of the simplest possible maintenance.

In the summer of 1976 Montpetit participated in the Corridart programme of sad and very short memory, with collapsible sculptural forms; he also sketched a discothèque project, but he concentrated mainly on the building of a chapel in Sainte-Clotilde parish in the Saint-Henri ward in Montreal; there he was involved in an exciting global work, since the artist-conceiver decided all its plastic: forms and colours, rhythms and proportions, floors and ceilings, walls and furnishings, and even liturgical objects.

As I write these lines, in mid-September 1977, the Sainte-Clotilde chapel is almost finished and Montpetit is collaborating closely with the Mercier architects on the establishing of the chromatic programme of the Victor-Doré institute for the handicapped, which will soon be built in Montreal East; naturally, it is of this work on hand that the artist speaks most spontaneously, of this "little city", as he says, where the psychology of colour asserts its rights even into signs and mechan-

ical systems, presenting them in corridors and in chromatic ramps; and Montpetit forewarns us that if he is excited by enthusiasm and instigates floods of colour, the surplus will be effectively absorbed by the restrained, functional architectural masses.

So this is the point at which Guy Montpetit has arrived, in a few paragraphs that would have to be much more developed to do justice to the singularly dynamic and inventive evolution of his work, as much on his easel at Val-David as along the thread of a series of murals which are already important among the best of the Montreal school.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

ALAN WOOD: A HYBRID VIEW OF THE PACIFIC LANDSCAPE

By Arthur PERRY

*L'art est une harmonie parallèle à la nature.*¹
(Paul Cézanne)

It can be argued, and with much validity, that Cézanne was our last truly great landscape artist. The twentieth-century has done little to promote a continuance of the landscape concerns of art in any major manner, and Cézanne can be seen as the last step before Cubism's more internal concerns that lead directly into the even more internally hermetic art of the present post-war period of our history. What this has meant, in effect, is the avoidance of landscape in contemporary art.

Post-war art has been for the most part an incestuous game of self-definition that has ended within the sterile vacuum of Minimalism. Artists such as Donald Judd, Carl André or Sol Lewitt cornered themselves into the four walled dictates of gallery space and consciously shut out any reference to the natural world. To compound the problem, even Minimal Art's antithesis, Pop Art, was a strictly urban-based expression which in no way helped to generate any landscape-based creativity.

Yet recently the landscape has again re-entered the forum of mainstream art. Artists have allowed the associative natural image to once more become their statement. In Canada, this renewed sensibility has been accurately assessed by Roald Nasgaard, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario: "It would almost appear that the changing methodology of art and its considerably broadened scope of operations have allowed the revitalization of interest in the natural environment"².

It seems only logical that Canada would foster a renewed interest in landscape art. For where else but in a country with one of the largest expanses of untained natural landscape in the world could one hope to see artists turning back to nature? In Canada, where the landscape is indeed becoming a major art expression, artists on the West Coast are most susceptible to their imposing surroundings. The arching Douglas firs; the looming hulk of the encircling mountains; the open breadth of the Pacific Ocean — is this not the ideal imagery for any landscape artist?

As West Coast artists grapple with Pacific grandeur, one figure among them stands apart: Alan Wood. Wood, who originally hailed from Widnes, England, appears to be the leading exponent of the so-called Coastal Constructivists (a group of British Columbian artists who interpret the Western landscape into sculptural statements, Richard Prince being the most recognized of the others in this group³).

Alan Wood, born in 1935, has seniority over many of the younger Coastal Constructivists. His travelling has also given him a feed-back of personal experience from art centres such as New York and London (both England and Ontario), not encountered by other West Coast artists. What this has done for Wood is to formulate an intensely diverse, but complex, artistic sensibility. Wood's aesthetic is as pell-mell as his canvas collages. Anthony Caro, Richard Smith, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet all have a trail through Wood's art. This is not to say Wood has made a conscious effort to retrace the steps of these artists, but elements of each artist's personal style has been fused into Wood's own aesthetic.

Anthony Caro is perhaps the clearest example of an artist whom Wood scrutinizes and digests in an attempt to find the inner workings of that artist's singular greatness. Caro is the master of sculptural tension. Within the best Caro works lies an animation of form and space which