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A Winter of Discontent for Painting

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Le Cénacle, Belgo Building, Montreal. February 24 - March 20, 1993

Gavin Affleck

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MONTREAL

A WINTER OF DISCONTENT FOR PAINTING

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Loraine Simms, *Duo-Conaylar Knee Prosthesis*, 1992. Oil on canvas; 142 x 196 cm.

The media enjoys playing with catch phrases and the visual arts milieu operates within the limits of its own internal logic, so understanding why the statement "painting is dead" took up so much air space in Montreal last winter remains a speculative activity. One cannot ignore the favouritism accorded recently to installation work by the art journals, but whether such attention is a valid criterion for determining the vitality of an art-form is open to debate. Critics have migrated towards installation art in the hope it represents a continuum of the avant-garde, and quite rightly they sense that something is dying. The irony of the situation lies in confusion regarding the identity of the body: while painting is in fact alive and well, it is the concept of the avant-garde that is in serious trouble. In any event, tracing the origin of the rumours is less interesting than examining the reaction of Montreal's painting community to such a provocation. By responding positively with a series of collective activities including group exhibitions and symposia, they chose to expose the rhetoric as somewhat ridiculous rather than confirm it by assigning blame.

The Département d'Arts Plastiques of the Université de Québec à Montréal held a symposium entitled *Parti Pris de Peindre* on March 4, followed by a group exhibition of individual work by 26 artists at the UQAM Gallery entitled *Parti Pris Peinture*. At the Belgo Building, a group of painters associated with Concordia University exhibited under the banner of *Le Cénacle*, a title which roughly

translates as "The Club". Due to the constraints of this review format, I will limit my discussion to the 7 members of *Le Cénacle*, but would like to make the following observations regarding both exhibitions.

While the content and presentation of the two shows varied greatly, there were some marked similarities. Both were rooted in one of Montreal's university fine arts faculties and both presented collective testaments to the vitality of painting in this city. The university connection is a significant one: it reminds us that painters require social support and the nourishment of colleagues in order to aspire to success in their endeavours. The exhibitions affirmed that our fine arts faculties continue to generate both consensus and individual achievement and remain important centers of artistic debate. A commitment to painting in this context becomes an on-going education rather than a process of production.

The numerous participants, the uniformly large canvases, and the generally expressive tone of the work shown in the spatially dynamic UQAM Gallery gave *Parti Pris Peinture* a boldness that contrasted sharply with *Le Cénacle's* somewhat intimate approach. If *Parti Pris Peinture* sought approval by a display of strength in numbers, *Le Cénacle* turned inwards to tap hidden resources. This difference may be partly explained with reference to Montreal's cultural map and the current mood of its communities by locating *Parti Pris Peinture* in Franco-phone territory and *Le Cénacle* on the Anglophone side. To

labour this point would be dangerous, however, as serious art addresses universal human values and relies on ethnic sources only as a means and never as an end.



Michael Smith, *Daylight Series #7*, 1993. Oil on canvas; 52 x 62 cm.

boldness of these canvases was reminiscent of the work at *Parti Pris Peinture* but their introspective mood tied them back clearly to *Le Cénacle*. In other parts of the display,

If “painting is dead” is a provocation, then *Le Cénacle* chose an equally provocative location to make their response. The Belgo Building has become the hub of contemporary art in Montreal: its 5 floors house many of the city’s most renowned galleries, and artists of both national and international calibre show regularly there. The central corridor, adjacency of gallery spaces and flimsy partitions make contemporary art as accessible as merchandise in a shopping center. Installations, video, and performance art vie for attention, leaving painting marginalized. By planting themselves decisively in a mid-floor location of the Belgo, *Le Cénacle* reclaimed some lost territory for painting. A loose organization of friends with common ground at Concordia University’s Fine Arts Faculty, the group consisted of John Fox, Yvonne Lammerich, Sylvie Lanctôt, Leopold Plotek, Lorraine Simms, Michael Smith and Marian Wagschall. While certain group members are currently Concordia faculty, others are either graduates, master’s degree candidates or part-time instructors.

In reviewing a group show, the tendency is to look for relationships between the work of the participants, particularly if the intent of the show is to create some type of “common front”. This can compromise a clear understanding of individual work, especially when dealing with paintings by mature, established artists. Nonetheless, the disposition of paintings in small clusters across two open, continuous spaces suggested that *Le Cénacle* felt such groupings would reinforce the impact of the show. The coldly antiseptic *Air Driven T.A.H. (Total Artificial Heart)* by Lorraine Simms and Marian Wagschall’s ambitious *Atelier*, hung beside each other, shared a common concern with symbols of death and abandonment. One might think that *Atelier*’s hanged skeleton and resurrection imagery would complement a picture of Lazarus, but instead the painting of this name by John Fox was installed beside Sophie Lanctôt’s *Toile Bleue* on the opposite side of the gallery. This relationship was one of empathy rather than content: Fox and Lanctôt’s pictures describe an intimacy not found in the more forthright paintings by Simms and Wagschall. Perhaps the most powerful juxtaposition was created by two large format abstract works by Leopold Plotek and Michael Smith installed at the back of the second space and observable at some distance. The scale and

series were created by grouping works by a single artist: a triptych by Yvonne Lammerich took up one wall, a pair of small paintings by Wagschall animated the entry and two dramatically lit landscape studies by Michael Smith were located in the gallery’s brightest corner-window area.

The technical excellence of the two pictures submitted by John Fox were evidence of many years of dedication to the art of painting. Built up with thin and carefully applied layers of pigment, his representational images achieve a subtle tonal balance. Fox’s work described an inner searching that, intentionally or not, was a recurring theme of *Le Cénacle*. *Interior*, located near the entry, became an emblem for the exhibition by using perspectival space to elicit a strong sense of psychological introspection. Even without the presence of human figures, the painting gives us a convincing feeling of an inhabited interior. In *Lazarus*, Fox brought the same attitude of intimacy to a picture of a symbolic figure from popular mythology. Rather than treating Lazarus as an icon, the image is domesticated to make it more accessible.

Sophie’s Lanctôt’s three pictures of young women shared many allegiances with Fox, although Lanctôt’s imagery was more quixotic. *Quelqu’un qui écoute la Terre* describes the often tenuous relationship between humans and their planet by rendering the head and torso of a twisted figure engaged in a seemingly ridiculous effort to understand the earth’s vibrations. In *Les Cages de Kowloon*, a young woman contemplating two empty bird cages ruminates on her own sense of imprisonment. *Toile Bleue*, Lanctôt’s most impressive painting, assumed a more traditional approach to the idea of portraiture by using hands and face as the expressive forms and surrounding them with the great pictorial depth created by a dark, transparent blue.

Yvonne Lammerich’s work added a balance and coherence to the overall effect of the exhibition by elegantly bridging the gap between formal abstraction and painterly painting in a series of quiet but powerful pictures. While the triptych *Modular Self-Organization of Consciousness* provided ample opportunity to examine her technique, the single panel of *Modular Self-Organization of Consciousness no. 12*, installed around the corner, was the most convincing of her works. Layering gestural marks in a cool steel blue over a rigidly defined grid, the painting achieved a strong emotional presence without sacrificing

any of its formal integrity. This was something Jack Bush knew how to do, although Lammerich's pictures, quite in keeping with the tone of the show, were moody as opposed to the joyousness of Bush.

Akedah, Leopold Plotek's lone submission to the show, was a striking vertical picture structured with dark calligraphic marks over dense earth tones. As opposed to the impasto used in many pictures, *Akedah's* watery

paint flowed freely across the canvas, suggesting an environment of heavy and shifting shadows. As is typical of much of Plotek's work, the imagery derived its strength by balancing itself carefully in the ambiguous territory between figuration and abstraction.

With her disturbing pictures of artificial organs and medical apparatus, Lorraine Simms brought an important dimension to *Le Cénacle* by venturing into a type of objective symbolism that the more personal representations of Fox, Lanctôt, and Wagschall could not address. Her concern for the human body and its transformation by mechanical means was skillfully translated into two images of artificial hearts and a series of coloured ellipses representing blood platelets left adrift on a gallery wall. The apparent detachment of the artist from her subject gave these pictures an "objet trouvé" feeling that contrasted sharply with the subjective approach of the six other participants. Nonetheless, Simms' brown and ochre palette and thick impasto created surfaces similar to those of her colleagues.

Michael Smith has been exploring the relationship between landscape and abstract painting for many years and his contributions to *Le Cénacle* reflected these preoccupations. One usually associates autobiographical expression with traditionally narrative art forms like literature, but Smith managed to communicate a personal story of geographic displacement by creating a tension between pictures inspired by English landscape painting and images that pay homage to American abstract expressionism. The challenge he has set for himself is to bridge this gap, bringing the ability to construct space through light evidenced by *Daylight 1 and 2* to bear on his large-scale abstract works. While Smith's best energies are devoted to addressing this duality, one senses that he has chosen to leave it somewhat unresolved and that his work gains strength through the pull of these different forces.

Like John Fox, Marian Wagschall takes great



Sophie Lanctôt, *Les cages de Kowloon*. Huile sur toile.

pleasure in exploring the time-honoured traditions of painting, and her ability to synthesize technical and aesthetic concerns in the impressively scaled *Atelier* made this picture amongst the most remarkable in the show. The rich application of paint in semi-transparent films was complemented by a complex interweaving of evocative symbols. One had to wonder whether this picture, with its skeleton of a

long-departed artist hanged in his studio, was intended as a metaphor for the end of painting. While *Parti Pris Peinture* did not hesitate to use the "painting is dead" slogan in their communiqués, *Le Cénacle* avoided the written word and provided a visual interpretation instead.

If painting managed to survive the advent of photography and film over the last two centuries, then the present sibling rivalry with installation art is trivial by comparison. *Parti Pris Peinture* and *Le Cénacle* did great service to Montreal by reaffirming the scope and expressive potential of painting in today's context. By molding symbolism, formalism, abstraction and figuration into a coherent whole, *Le Cénacle* made these categories irrelevant labels and the only significant common ground became excellence in the art of painting. Once we understand painting as a territory of many dimensions, *Le Cénacle* reads clearly as a celebration of the diversity of artistic practices rather than defensive or reactionary posturing.

Although painting is alive and well, its present state of insecurity can be attributed to radical transformations in the visual arts over the last few years. Our present questioning of conventional notions of progress and linear development has led to a disintegration of the idea of the avant-garde and has left many of the traditional structures of the art world in a similar disarray. Painting no longer has a central position in the visual arts, but nor does any other discipline. The era of such hierarchies has given way to what one critic has described as "all styles by all means at all times". Processing the vast amounts of information at our disposal is our next challenge, and we will need open minds to do so.

GAVIN AFFLECK