

ETC



Montreal Galleries at International Fairs

Lawrence Sabbath

Volume 1, numéro 3, printemps 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36257ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Sabbath, L. (1988). Compte rendu de [Montreal Galleries at International Fairs]. *ETC*, 1(3), 72-73.

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Now in its third year of operation, the Quebec government program *Mise en marché de l'art : Volet 2 — Exportation* would appear to have a useful and bright future. The program to assist Quebec art galleries to participate in international art fairs is run by the Direction des arts visuels des musées et des bibliothèques du ministère des Affaires culturelles. It came into effect three years after Volet 1, the juried program of government aid to commercial galleries for exhibitions of Quebec artists within Quebec.

Quite simply, the objectives of Volet 2 are to favor and support commercial exchanges in works of art and to stimulate the marketing outside Quebec of work by living Quebec artists. The criteria require Quebec galleries, or one of the directors, to possess three years' experience in art. The government will match one-half of the gallery's submitted budget for participation at one or more international fairs outside Quebec up to a maximum of \$10,000 annually.

Concerning Volet 2, the non-juried program which he initiated and runs for the government, Yvon Bergeron states: "We began with a \$50,000 budget — now \$75,000 — and for a while gallery response was below that amount... We recognize that some galleries want to exhibit a portion of non-Quebec artists, but the large majority must be Quebecers... This export program is more important and our help is even more justified than Volet 1. It's sharing the risk, as government does with other types of business, and so why not with art galleries."

As might be expected, the experiences and conclusions formed by each of the six gallery representatives interviewed are sometimes as diverse as the works of the artists they represent and exhibit, though all find the program valuable. Yet relatively few have taken advantage of Volet 2. Those director-owners who have taken part are determined to continue. This despite the fact none have made a profit from sales thus far and many have lost varying amounts of money. Still, they remain optimistic about the long-term possibilities, confident they will break through into the international bigtime for their galleries and their artists.

Michel Tétrault went to Art Cologne in 1986, to FIAC (Paris) in 1986 and 1987, and to Art L.A. (Los Angeles) in 1987. He hopes to add Basel (Switzerland) and the Chicago International Art Exposition as venues this year. "It improves our reputation and puts artists and galleries on an international level," says Tétrault. "Yes, I'm breaking my back, but there's a new generation of artists, dealers and critics we have to reach."

According to Antoine Blanchette of Galerie 13, who has been to FIAC twice, "we lose money, but it's an excellent promotion... We represent Canada and it's important to be seen by Canadian collectors who come to the fairs and for them to know our marketing is international. I focus my energies on one fair only, to do

it well." Madeleine Forcier of Galerie Graff, who has been at Basel since 1984 and last year added FIAC and Art L.A., views participation as "a moral commitment by us to our artists."

Annie Molin Vasseur (Aubes 3935) believes strongly in the fairs: "They enable me to follow and adjust to the international market, to realize our artists are on the same plateau as artists elsewhere, to make contacts with important galleries and to send my catalogues to museums, dealers and collectors abroad. It's like having a branch office." Last year was a busy one, with attendance at Basel, FIAC, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Gérard Gorce (Waddington & Gorce) goes to Chicago only: "You really hit a big American and European market. At this point of time Quebec artists are pretty low on the international ladder, so we need international names in our booth to attract buyers. We have to persist and to maintain our image before the world." Elena Lee (Elena Lee Verre d'Art) has been twice to Chicago New International Art Forms and observes that "one-time craft media such as glass, ceramics, wood and other sculptural media have become a legitimate art form and this fair has opened a huge market to my artists."

Gallery budgets for each of these fairs range generally from \$20,000 to \$30,000, with Quebec giving up to \$10,000 towards one or more fairs. Ottawa's Department of External Affairs has entered the picture by funding a few enterprising galleries which had the initiative to apply. It would seem clear from the views of galleries that Quebec ought to consider increasing the annual grant, or have grants directed to each fair involved, especially in light of galleries which are literally pioneering world market participation and bringing contemporary Quebec art into the international mainstream and limelight.

Tétrault notes that he lost around \$14,000 in 1986 because of a catalogue he made, "but we avoided that in 1987 and broke even. We sold enough paintings to make that possible and I also arranged for paintings by Pierre-Léon Tétrault to be shown in Paris and elsewhere." Blanchette points out that Air Canada helped him with free transport of his collection and he was able to keep his losses to about \$5,000. Sales for Graff enabled them to break even. Lee says it took her "months to pay off losses in 1986. Now, as with Blanchette, she is applying to Ottawa for funds to boost Quebec support.

"Sales never cover expenses," states Vasseur. "Ottawa has helped us since 1986... Quebec ought to raise its grant total by \$5,000 each year to cover rising costs."

To further help them meet costs, some galleries request aid from their artists. Tétrault, for instance, asks and sometimes receives "a painting free of charge, others offer 60 percent sales commission instead of the



Pierre-Léon Tétreault, *Mes amis Haïti chérie*. Techniques mixtes sur toile; 184x403,5 cm.
Photo: Daniel Roussel, Centre de documentation Yvan Boulerice

usual 50." Blanchette explains that "artists participate up to about a \$1,000 equivalent and I will keep \$1,000 in addition to regular commission and the works can be sold here or at the fair." Vasseur notes that artists give her "a \$300 work, but I may get a \$1,000 work from artists whose pieces stay permanently on booth walls during a fair."

On the other hand, Gorce "asks nothing of artists" and Forcier says "we're against artists paying for any expenses. We put on one-man shows and members take turns, whether they sell or not. They already share 50-50 commission with us and we don't believe they should pay more."

When it comes to the selling prices of works of art at these fairs there's also a divergence of approaches. Elena Lee says she "gets big prices in Chicago because Canadian prices are considered cheap there and it's true. Canadian art glass is undervalued. A François Houdé horse, for example, was bought by an American couple who had purchased one of his pieces the previous year, for \$8,000 US. A sculpture by Lisette Lemieux went for \$3,500 US. Those two sales helped me to break even last year."

Montreal prices are raised "30 percent higher at fairs," points out Vasseur "because collectors buy three and four at a time and ask up to a 25 percent discount." Forcier revises "prices to meet exchange differences because Canadian collectors come to fairs, though a few European collectors think the prices of our young unknowns are a little high. They buy one artist at a time and some seek a discount, as they do here."

Blanchette has found that "Europeans are impressed by high prices. They think our Quebec prices are too cheap and even American prices are higher than ours. So we triple our prices and no one bargains. Collectors buy two and three at a time." Tétreault

doesn't go quite as far: "We add 20 percent in Europe and 30 percent in Los Angeles. The export business is tough and I believe it will take us 10 years to succeed."

The picture for Gorce is different: "We have yet to make a sale of a Quebec work, but the time will come."

The element of publicity is the one weak link in the entire operation. It's a lacuna that threatens the very structure and long-term function of this essential and richly promising program. What publicity exists for these Quebec galleries is so trifling as to be of no value whatever. There appears to be no attempt to coordinate a publicity campaign among the galleries and government makes no allowance for publicity or advertising. Obviously, a concerted effort is called for, one that will attract media attention long before these fairs open.

"We need advance publicity to bring in collectors, museums and the public," note Tétreault. "We get no radio or television interviews, there are no magazine articles about us and to advertise in the right art magazines is so expensive as to be prohibitive and so it's not surprising that large collectors don't come to our booth. To create the proper kind of publicity would mean a budget of \$15,000 and therefore a separate government grant of \$15,000 for this."

Although Forcier thinks that a "minimum of \$5,000 would be an enormous help, what is really vital to our cause is not to take the attitude that success will come over a five-year period, but to make one great push now." That attitude is supported by Blanchette and Vasseur and by Elena Lee who voices the view that "we have none of the advantages that a publicity campaign would provide. Without it we are like David faced with the challenges of European and American Goliaths."

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