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[See table of contents](#)

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"NEIGHBOURS' NEIGHBOURS": INTIMACY AND PLENUM IN THE PAINTINGS OF NATHALIE THIBAUT

"The whole of matter is interconnected. Each body is affected by its neighbours, and in one way or another it registers everything which happens to them. But in a plenum, every motion has some effect on distant bodies in proportion to its distance. So each body also registers what happens to its neighbours' neighbours, through their mediation."

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,
Monadology

"The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside."

Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*

The outsized paintings Nathalie Thibault exhibited at Usine C defied gravity and buoyed us up, even as they demonstrated rare *gravitas*. Their dark grounds read as deep space rather than heavy mass, and the marks so deftly poised within them seemed less fixed upon those grounds than finger-painted on transparent panes of glass. Thibault is an ingenious dauber and her interest in graffiti lends her work a street smart sensibility that conceals an inordinate delicacy in calibrating various microstructures at the core of her paintings.

These diptychs are formed from two upended 'radius top' window-like panels, abutting on the horizontal plane. Her point of origin, painting stratagems and choice of an unusual shape all redeem her work from the archaic discourse surrounding shaped abstracts from an earlier era. (I am referring to critic Clement Greenberg's attempt in the mid-1960s to name and taxonomize a tendency in American abstraction that developed in reaction to Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg held that the most recent painting followed a teleological impulse towards ever greater linear clarity and openness of design.) Arguably, Thibault's choice of a maverick format heightens the enigmatic quality of the work, reads as folded container more than open field and resists taxonomy.

Inside her overwhelmingly supple and expansive containers, lissome forms and gestural markings hold sway in a way that is purely relational—and altogether seductive. They are all about mediation. The three large works, titled *Superstes 1*, *Superstes 2* and *Superstes 3* respectively, acted like supple housings for the incubation of

phantasmatic signs. Interestingly, Thibault borrowed the titles from *Phasmes* by George Didi-Huberman. (She was attracted to the 'sonority' of this word and its meaning akin to that, as she says, of 'Survivances.') But container here is not synonymous with containment—because the panels interact with one another in arresting ways. Rather, there is a transference dialectic at work between panels and sets of signs. Each is a neighbour of the other—and affects the Other accordingly. In fact, the continuing interplay here is amazingly refined.

In these paintings, as Hippocrates said, "Everything breathes together." Beyond the panel interaction, each and every mark inflects the disposition of its neighbouring marks, striving towards a sense of holistic balance and contrapuntal grace. However, Thibault possesses far more than just a deft touch. She is able to marshal and command her mark-making regime in such a way as to make it perform rare pirouettes in the painting space while harmonizing the whole—and keeping the observer off balance, as it were, on our toes as we are drawn ever deeper into the space of painting.

Monadic thought is implicitly tied to displacement, of course, so it is no surprise that Thibault keeps us guessing as our optic sinks into her supple field structures. The panels exercise less Cartesian schism than self/Other interplay and constituting intersubjectivity. Think of these paintings as fractal folds unfurling continuously and their signs as nomadic. Her coloured forms and gestural markings are often vaporous here, and smoke-like tendrils coil around and through the deep space less as evocative delineation of shape contour than activation of the overall field(s). In one painting, they read as spectral vertebrae where the panels meet. This metaphorical spine of the painting helps the artist fold space into a sort of infinity loop, with no beginning or end. And hers' is a subtle activation regime, in which colour as well as gesture signals both the ignition of meaning and the emotional temperament of a painting. Her agility in so doing is like that of a high-wire artist who knows that the smallest misstep means a fall, and in painting, after all, there is no safety net in sight.

Poised tremulously on the threshold where the hegemony of the intentional mark meets chance and wholesale indeterminacy, her ghostlike shapes and iconic markers are wed to an overwhelmingly delicate palette. The fields of her paintings generate a remarkable



sense of intimacy. Her iconography, consummately ambiguous, never collapses into representational stasis and her inventory of nomadic signs seems capable of endless renewal. The panels, like veiled sisters, sign or better signal to one another in uncanny concert.

Thibault has said that she is interested in the relationships between painting, drawing and graffiti, and the quality they have of being at once spontaneous and factual. Her paintings, she says, often reach the limit between intentional gesture and chance incident. It is a perilous threshold, of course, for any painter, but in Thibault's able hands she makes being there seem effortless. Her activation regime is as mutable as contemporary ideas of identity—and has a theoretical neuroscience all its own—the inside of her paintings (their exposed forebrains) often seem purely cortical. She has said: "*At issue in my works—the result of unforeseen, constantly changing systems—is the possibility of grasping and thus revealing the reality of a disconcerting exchange between the subjectivity of the gesture and the objectivity of material colour.*" But the materiality is immanent here, and seldom extrusive, never baroque. A bevy of gestural markings and strange chromatic interrelationships make for paintings that reward our contemplation with sundry secrets disclosed only in the seeing. Subtle, unusual chromatic relationships characterize Thibault's works. She uses instances of pure chroma to activate expansive fields of otherwise governing tonal and tactual values, setting the night on fire, as it were, and captivating the gaze.

Her remarks apropos of the constantly changing systems alert us to the Deleuzian thrust of her paintings. The symmetry of the radius-top panels of a diptych allows for a reading of both their physical division and semiotic divide in terms of *le pli* or 'fold' as developed in Gilles Deleuze's books on philosophers Foucault and Leibniz. I am not referring to the 'fold' as a technical device of hers, but as a felt metaphor for the way she uses the diptych situation as a means of differentiating her fields while, at the same time, irremediably wedding them, and

folding in painting's extravagant outsides at the same time.

When we recognize inside and outside, and vice versa, we are prey to an enlivening vertigo. She builds her labyrinths with stealth: what at first seems the center of the labyrinth multiplies towards all edges, drawing the viewer inside the painting, and displacing us throughout all quadrants as we are pulled through its staggered prismatic array, and from thence back towards the seam/spine/fold.

As Deleuze said: *"Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but*

the recesses of a world. Yet a simple metric change would not account for the difference between the organic and the inorganic, the machine and its motive force. It would fail to show that movement does not simply go from one greater or smaller part to another, but from fold to fold. When a part of a machine is still a machine, the smaller unit is not the same as the whole."² His remarks are resonant in the works of Nathalie Thibault. If the diptych implies a folding of the painted space as though it were a whole bolt of cloth, it also implicates an idea of 'doubling'—of Thibault's own thought 'into' the thought of another, and the importation of the contents of one panel into and through its neighbour.

like sketchiness out of the void or rather inscribes upon it, which is, however, no longer void but plenum, and her intimate sketchings on the face of the painting's deep space parse out not only a host of iconic epiphanies but speak of their dialogical necessity in everyday life. Every part of the painting space is full of pungent matter even when that space seems emptiest and its markings most fugitive, most frugal. Here is the opposite of vacuum. Here is a phantasmatic superabundance, which dovetails with the understanding that constituting alterity, in life as in art, is simply everything.

As we spend time with Thibault's eloquent



resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surrounding... A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern. The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point which is never a part, but a simple extremity of the line."¹ Hence, the fold itself in her singular labyrinths is never a singularity, but simply one explicit seizure of the overall plenum. Thus, what at first is appraised as the 'ultimate' fold—I mean, that one located in the physical separation of the panels—is simply a prelude to proliferation in the microstructures and sheer plenum. Again, Deleuze: *"Folding-unfolding no longer simply means tension-release, contraction-dilation, but enveloping-developing, involution-evolution... The simplest way of stating the point is by saying that to unfold is to increase, to grow; whereas to fold is to diminish, to reduce, to withdraw into*

In this reading, the interpenetration of thought itself implies its own folding and unfolding. Thibault the painter, in folding her painted space, imports and inverts, as in a mirror, all the many 'forces of the outside.' Thibault plays with notions of self and other, appearance and essence, surface and depth, inside and outside. Certainly, the seam in a painting, understood as a fold, names the essential relationship one has with one's self, the painting with its microstructures and, above all, the relationship of self and Other. This painter alerts us to the harmony between the two panels in unfolding the fold between them, and between the upper and lower floors of our subjectivity as well as the empathic compact between self and Other. In other words, she invokes the name of empathy in demonstrating the phenomenal interconnectedness of her paintings. Chiasm here invokes dialogue. She nudges a graffiti-

paintings, it is as though we are peering into a dark immensity similar to that of thought itself. It is as though what we are seeing represents but the semaphoric tips of enormous icebergs lurking just beneath their umbrageous surfaces: suggestive, massive and unseen.

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James D. Campbell lives and works in Montreal, and is a writer and independent curator. He is the author of over one hundred books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art*. His most recent publication is *Channeling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure* for the Plattsburg State Museum.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold-Leibniz and the Baroque: The Pleats of Matter," in *Architectural Design Profile* No. 102: *Folding in Architecture* (1993): p. 18.

² *Ibid* p. 19.