

## Ils habitent au choc

### Tentative de portrait spectral de Jean Benoît et de Mimi Parent

## They Live in Choc

### An Attempt at a Spectral Portrait of Jean benoit and Mimi Parent

José Pierre

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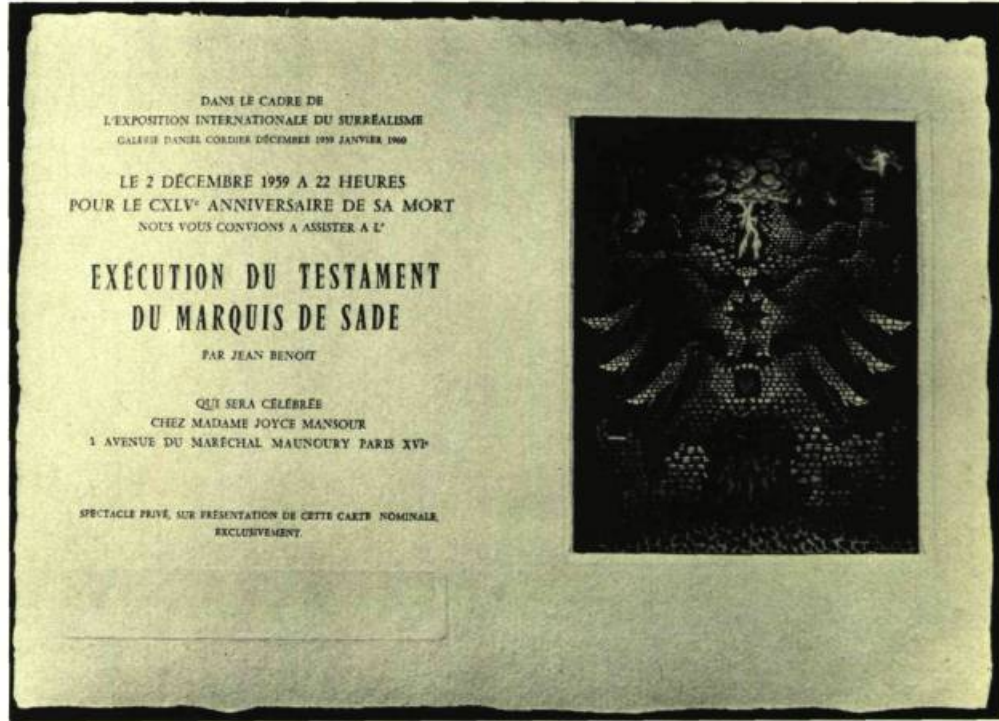
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# Ils habitent au choc

## Tentative de portrait spectral de Jean Benoît et de Mimi Parent

### Jean BENOÎT et Mimi PARENT

Les noms de Jean Benoît (Québec, 1922) et de Mimi Parent (Montréal, 1924) sont doublement unis par le mariage et par l'évolution parallèle de leur œuvre. Après avoir été élèves de Pellan, ils s'établissent à Paris, en 1947, et travaillent dans l'ombre durant une décennie: lui abandonne peu à peu le support traditionnel du tableau et s'oriente vers la fabrication de costumes et d'accessoires imprégnés de significations mythiques; elle exécute des broderies, des objets et des assemblages d'où surgissent le merveilleux, le rêve et le ténébreux. En décembre 1959, avec la fulgurance d'une comète, Jean Benoît fait irruption dans le ciel du Surréalisme: c'est l'*Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade*, somptueuse et sombre cérémonie préparée depuis dix ans et qui consacre son entrée dans le mouvement. Ils habitent Paris.



1. Jean BENOÎT  
*Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade*,  
1949-1950.  
(Phot. Gilles Ehrmann)

*J'habite au choc*, c'est le titre d'un célèbre tableau de Mimi Parent. Pour la commodité, je me suis permis de loger à la même enseigne, au moins provisoirement, deux artistes aussi singuliers, aussi irréductibles à qui que ce soit d'autre, que Jean Benoît et Mimi Parent. Certes, la rumeur publique n'allait pas sans leur prêter une commune résidence. Mais de quoi suis-je sûr après tout, sinon, jusqu'à un certain point, de ce que je vois et, absolument, de ce que je rêve?

### Spectre de Jean Benoît

Ce qui se donne ici pour réflexion se limite à prendre pour objet deux, voire trois, manifestations que je dirai artistiques, faute d'un terme plus adéquat, par lesquelles Jean Benoît m'a paru à la fois se distinguer et se définir. Je préviens très honnêtement que je mentirais en déclarant que les considérations qui vont suivre ont l'imprimatur de l'artiste. Elles ont le mien, c'est déjà beaucoup!

Pour ceux qui croient qu'il existe aujourd'hui cette chose qui se désigne elle-même, l'imprudent! comme étant l'avant-garde, et s'il est vrai que la dite avant-garde se rallie toujours à ce fanion, le titre-programme d'une exposition à la Kunsthalle de Berne en 1969 qui fit quelque bruit dans le Landernau du marché de l'art: «Quand les attitudes deviennent for-

mes», eh bien! j'ai à dire que de cela Jean Benoît avait apporté la démonstration depuis dix ou vingt ans, et d'une façon beaucoup plus saisissante...

Mais ce n'est pas d'avant-garde que j'ai l'intention de parler aujourd'hui. Plutôt de choses infiniment plus intéressantes. J'ai à parler de possession, j'ai à dire que l'activité de Jean Benoît, je la veux considérer exclusivement sous l'angle des rites de possession.

Il me paraît, en effet, que lorsque Benoît se réfère au marquis de Sade ou à ce moindre seigneur, le sergent Bertrand, la référence ou, plus exactement, la révérence est la même que celle qui fait du *criseur* haitien le porte-parole d'un des *loa* du vaudou. Dans l'un comme dans l'autre cas, la possession revêt une double signification: 1° elle révèle de la part de celui qui se propose d'être le véhicule de tel ou tel *esprit* une affinité profonde avec celui-ci, moins peut-être une identité avec lui qu'une complémentarité à son égard; 2° le *possédé* ne parle pas seulement pour lui le message de son possesseur, il le propose à une collectivité et, le plus souvent, à une collectivité en état de crise (crise de croissance, crise de direction, crise de survivance), la possession apparaissant par définition comme la solution, cherchée dans la transe, dans un en-dehors de l'histoire, à une situation bel et bien inscrite,

elle, dans l'histoire.

Dans un ouvrage fertile en aperçus révélateurs bien que d'un style assez approximatif, *Les trois voix de l'imaginaire* (Paris, Éditions Universitaires, 1974), François Laplantine montre que ces phénomènes de possession se produisent tout particulièrement dans des groupes humains minoritaires placés en position d'acculturation douloureuse et difficilement praticable. Là, «les possédés réorganisent leur quête d'échapper à la menace que fait peser la dislocation ethnique, en inscrivant leurs discours généralement tapageurs dans les cadres de représentations traditionnelles résolument tournées vers le passé tribal».

Dans l'hypothèse que j'ai envisagée, si je m'interroge sur la ou les collectivité(s) concernée(s) par le discours de possession, assez tapageur en vérité, tenu par Jean Benoît, il y en a deux qui se présentent simultanément à mon esprit: la minorité canadienne-française et la minorité surréaliste. J'abandonnerai la première, comme n'étant pas trop de mon ressort (quoique...), pour ne m'occuper que de la seconde.

L'*exécution du testament du marquis de Sade*, bien qu'élaborée en 1949-1950, soit une dizaine d'années avant l'adhésion effective au Mouvement surréaliste (mais réalisée symboliquement peu après cette adhésion, à la veille



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de l'ouverture, en décembre 1959, de l'Exposition internationale du Surréalisme dédiée à Éros), s'adresse de toute évidence à la totalité de l'égrégore surréaliste. Le *passé tribal*, ici érigé en modèle et en modèle susceptible d'arracher les surréalistes, sinon le Surréalisme, au doute, aux divergences et aux luttes intestines, c'est, mot pour mot, l'exécution du testament du marquis de Sade, mais non pas les clauses jamais exécutées du testament réel, celles, au contraire, du testament fictif de Sade aux surréalistes, ses légitimes héritiers aux yeux de Jean Benoît: vivez sadiennement, vivez dans l'outrance et le refus de toute autre loi que celle du *désir!*

Ce faisant, Benoît dénonce implicitement comme cause de division entre surréalistes aussi bien certains facteurs rationalistes (adhésion à des mots d'ordre politiques, par exemple, ou même à des notions structurantes, seraient-elles aussi peu académiques que celle d'*automatisme*) que ce qui demeure à ses yeux dans le Surréalisme d'attachement à une morale traditionnelle et répressive. De ce point de vue, il n'est pas sans intérêt de rappeler qu'au cours de la fameuse soirée du 2 décembre 1959, chez Joyce Mansour, où s'accomplit effectivement cette possession, l'un des invités, Matta, réagit spontanément au message de Jean Benoît en lui reprenant des mains le fer chauffé au rouge avec lequel il venait de se marquer le sein gauche et en s'en marquant à son tour. Matta qui, justement, avait été exclu du groupe surréaliste, une dizaine d'années auparavant, pour conduite délibérément sadienne... Pour que l'on apprécie à sa juste mesure l'efficacité du langage de la possession chez Benoît, je dois préciser que, par ailleurs, il n'y a pour ainsi dire aucune affinité réelle entre celui-ci et le peintre chilien.

Six ans après, mineure par rapport à celle qui avait appelé l'intervention de l'auteur des *120 journées de Sodome* mais significative cependant, la possession de Jean Benoît par le sergent Bertrand, célèbre nécrophile du XIXe siècle, est complétée par la réalisation simultanée, ou peu s'en faut, du *Boulevard de Maldoror*. Ce dernier monstre, violeur de jeunes filles déjà profanées par son maître, fait en effet figure de compagnon idéal pour le Nécrophile. L'un et l'autre ne portent-ils pas à l'extrême la loi du désir sans contrainte? Je serais cependant porté à lire dans ces outrances mêmes un indication plus secrète: de même qu'il ne faut pas craindre de violer les lois déjà bafouées par Maldoror, c'est-à-dire par Lautréamont (dont l'ensemble vient ainsi relayer, sans l'annuler, celui de Sade), il ne faut pas non plus redouter de faire l'amour avec les mortes, c'est-à-dire avec «le cadavre exquis» du Surréalisme, en d'autres termes avec la tradition scandaleuse de celui-ci, soit très exactement ce que tout le monde (ou presque) tient pour irrémédiablement démodé dans le Surréalisme...!

Dans une large mesure, la signification de ses possessions déborde les intentions conscientes de Jean Benoît. Mais ceci est dans l'ordre des choses...

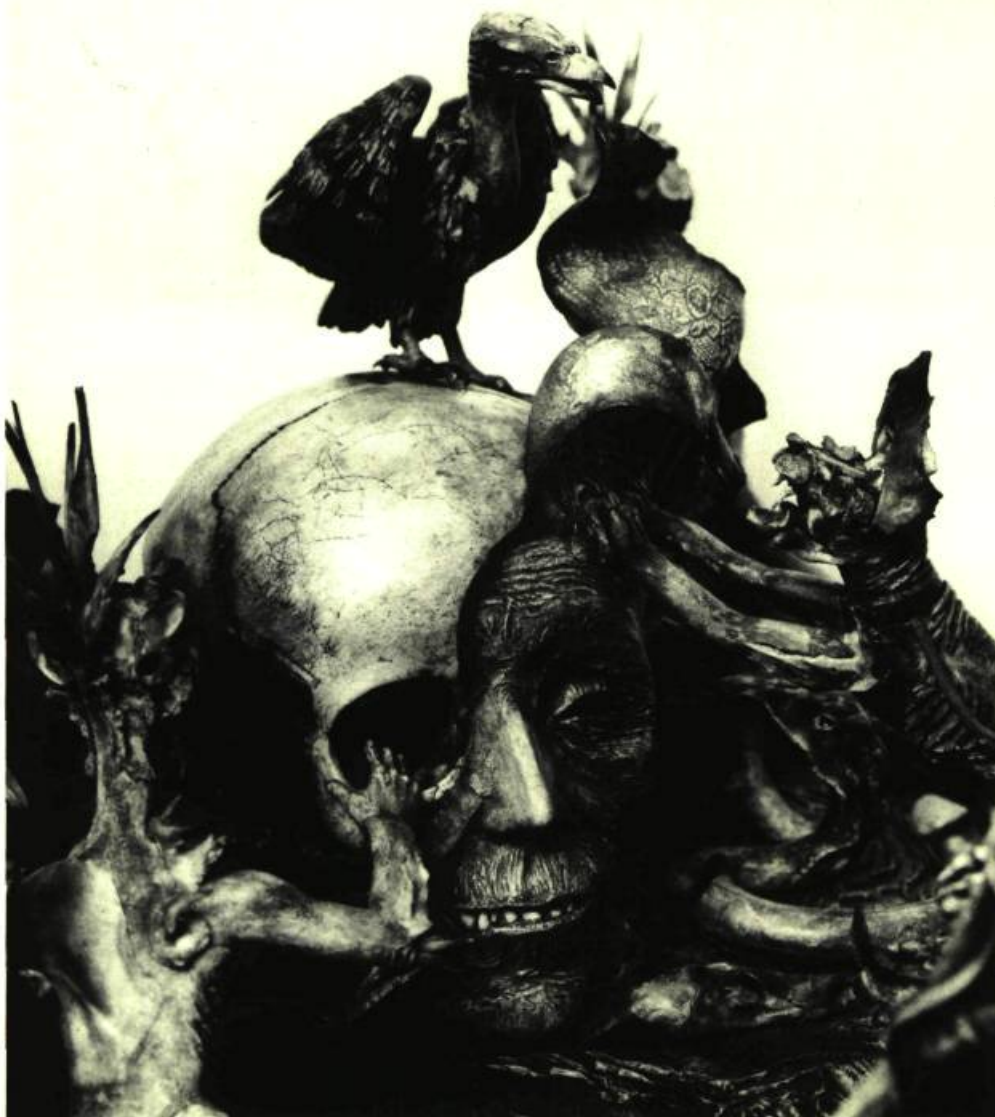
2. Coffret pour une tête momifiée Muduruku (Amazonie). (Phot. Marcel Lannoy)

3. Les Champs magnétiques, 1974. Coffret-objet pour manuscrit original des *Champs magnétiques* de Philippe Soupault et André Breton. (Phot. Marcel Lannoy)



4. Une seule marotte en tête.  
(Phot. Marcel Lannoy)

5. Les Champs magnétiques, 1974.  
Coffret-objet (détail).  
(Phot. Marcel Lannoy)



#### Spectre de Mimi Parent

Le point où se recourent l'activité artistique de Jean Benoît et celle de Mimi Parent, c'est dans une identique *lecture*, me semble-t-il, de l'œuvre d'Alfred Pellán. Là où, pour ma part, je serais porté à ne considérer que des peintures ornementales, ils décèlent, eux, des peintures rituelles dont le réseau insère dans une même continuité lyrique l'être humain et le cosmos. De telle sorte que, par rapport à eux, je me trouve dans la même situation qu'un observateur non averti de telle ou telle fête rituelle africaine, amérindienne ou océanienne qui, des peintures corporelles, n'apprécierait que les seuls mérites esthétiques et décoratifs, par rapport aux initiés parfaitement informés, eux, des implications mythiques de chacun des éléments ornementaux mis à contribution.

C'est ainsi, par exemple, qu'un dessin très pellanien de Jean Benoît, publié dans le numéro 10-11 de *Bief, Jonction surréaliste*, donne de l'être humain et plus particulièrement de la femme une vision que je dirais feuilletée et analogue, sur le plan végétal, à la structure bien connue de l'artichaut, voire à celle de l'oignon. Or, une telle superposition d'enveloppes évoque irrésistiblement l'effeuillage, au premier chef celui de l'artichaut ou de l'oignon, mais tout autant celui des strip-teaseuses, processus sur lequel se calque le *grand cérémonial* de l'*Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade*. Le système analogique mis en place par Pellán entre, notamment, le règne végétal et l'être humain, aura de la sorte permis à Jean Benoît de nous inviter à un voyage dans les profondeurs, au terme duquel se dresse, dans une érection éperdue, l'Homme du Désir Absolu.

Mimi Parent me paraît retenir davantage, et c'est bien naturel, le côté Pénélope de l'industrie pellanienne (si je parle d'industrie, c'est parce que je songe tout à coup aux abeilles). Dans nombre de ses peintures et de ses dessins, tout s'ordonne selon la même régularité rythmique qu'une somptueuse toile d'araignée dont le centre serait l'étoile de Vénus, tel regard de fée ou de sorcière, ou encore l'*anus solaire*. Mais cette toile d'araignée se montre tissée de fibres suffisamment sensibles pour emprisonner dans ses rets, outre les *apparences ordinaires*, les créatures des songes les moins palpables et les moins décelables, celles qui passeraient entre les mailles de tout autre filet.

Il y a, en effet, du trappeur chez Mimi Parent, mais un trappeur soucieux de traquer de singulières bêtes qui ne se promènent que la nuit et encore! pas n'importe où... Rien qui en rende mieux compte sans doute que le fameux aphorisme que lui dédia Breton: «Dans les yeux chardon de Mimi luisent les jardins d'Armide à Minuit.» La peinture-objet qui m'a inspiré le titre de cet article, *J'habite au choc*



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1. Mimi PARENT  
*J'habite au choc*, 1955.  
 Huile sur panneau; 61 cm. x 85 x 10  
 (avec trois fenêtres en profondeur).  
 Bruxelles, Coll. Margo et Yannock Bruynoghe.

2. *Échec et mat*, 1974.  
 Peinture-objet; bois; 90 cm. x 60.  
 (Phot. Marcel Lannoy)



(1956), me paraît répondre beaucoup plus justement à la définition d'un *tableau-piège* que les œuvres de Daniel Spoerri, inventeur de cette appellation. *J'habite au choc* nous présente, en effet, quelque chose d'intermédiaire entre la maison hantée et la maison de passe, de telle sorte que le merveilleux y demeure profondément imprégné de convoitises charnelles. En outre, le fait que portes et fenêtres peuvent s'ouvrir effectivement pour nous dévoiler ce qui se passe derrière elles évoque irrésistiblement les *neuf portes* que la galante imagination des poètes s'est toujours plu à dénombrer chez la femme...

*Tableaux-pièges* également les dernières peintures-objets de Mimi Parent, comme *Échec et mat*, sorte d'écho funèbre aux *Jardins gobavions* de Max Ernst (là devant, il me semble que je contemple le Waterloo de la phallocratie, le sol des cimetières dérisoirement troué par les érections dernières des maîtres déposés de la vie) ou, dans une œuvre sans titre, cette belle fille à sa fenêtre vers qui montent les rats blancs de la concupiscence que lui délègue un mystérieux visiteur (si l'on regarde attentivement, on découvre que les propres jambes de la fille constituent les montants de l'échelle qui permet d'accéder à sa fenêtre). Si je dis, au moins en partie, le fond de ma pensée, je dois avouer que je considère la plupart des œuvres récentes de Mimi Parent comme une sorte de *chemin de croix* de Jean Benoît. Mais je ne prétends pas avoir raison...

#### Conclusion

Je me suis bien gardé de vouloir faire le tour de ces deux œuvres si rebelles, comme on sait, à l'approche critique comme, plus généralement, à celle du grand public. J'ai seulement voulu les soumettre à un éclairage partiel et partial, aussi subjectif que possible. Si j'ai tenu à le faire, c'est qu'il me paraissait important, à une époque où les fausses valeurs font parler d'elles dans les cinq minutes qui suivent leur sortie d'usine, de rappeler que c'est dans l'ombre que mûrissent les fruits les plus savoureux.

1. Une œuvre plus récente semble confirmer cette hypothèse. Il s'agit du coffret-objet fabriqué par Jean Benoît, en 1974, pour abriter le manuscrit original des *Champs magnétiques* (1919) d'André Breton et Philippe Soupault, le premier livre surréaliste, comme on sait. Sous une tête de mort se révèle la tête d'un vieux sage, ridée mais souriante... tandis qu'un autre petit squelette se masturbe en éclatant de rire. Le Surréalisme, dès son acte de naissance, est un défi lancé à la mort.

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English Translation, p. 89

3. *Sans titre*.  
(Phot. Marcel Lannoy)

4. *La Mémoire*, 1974.  
Peinture-objet; bois et matériaux divers; 90 cm. x 60.  
(Phot. Marcel Lannoy)

Perhaps he had just been called up and had to wear the uniform. It is true that in France one does not trifle with these matters of military service. They keep a close watch on you.

During the war Breton was in New York and was working as a speaker at the radio station, The Voice of America, that broadcast to Europe. He came here in 1944 and we met again at Percé. We were both interested in agates and we went looking for them on the beaches of l'Anse-à-Beaufils and elsewhere. This was also the occasion of a small incident that shows one facet of Breton's character: he, comedian François Rozet and I were supposed to go together to hunt for agates, but for reasons I don't know Breton was not at the meeting-place. When I got back I showed him the result of my searching and I saw my Breton very distant and on edge. He was annoyed because we had not taken him with us and he believed it had been my doing. For several days, our relations were cool. Then Breton fell ill and Rozet told me that he wanted to see me; he was in bed, we talked, and I was able to explain to him that I had had nothing to do with this incident, that I was no sneaky plotter, and it was all straightened out. And yet, behind what is only an anecdote, a side of his personality is revealed: Breton concerned with the respect and the attentions that must be accorded to him.

At that time Breton was accompanied by a pretty young woman, and both of them seemed like love-birds. Breton divided his time between writing and walks on the beach. This was relaxation!

**VdA** - At the same time as you show your admiration for Picasso and are on friendly terms with Breton and some surrealists, it seems that surrealism does not arouse your entire approval, and that you have some reservations about it. What are they?

**A.P.** - Art is freedom. I exhibited in London with the surrealists; I am to be found with them in 1939 in Christian Zervos' *Cahiers d'art*. But I remained free not to participate in the movement. And my admiration for Breton remains the same. I believe that in literature Breton showed a very great judgment, while I regret that in painting surrealism favoured automatism and accepted works that I find too facile. Automatism, with its inner roads, has also opened the way to an ease of which I disapprove. That produced the daubers. Even Pollock ejaculates paint on huge canvases and then signs the pictures. Riopelle is a member of the group. I am absolutely against action painting.

Ernst practised automatism, but he pursued and developed the problem to the point where he arrived at an adequate plastic solution. I have never rejected automatism, since I worked in automatism conducted from a few improvised blobs that I made from experiments with chance. The series of pictures titled *Jardins* was made in this way. There are many things that can emerge, germinate, grow and develop from a little spot of colour. At this moment, I am finishing a series of *Bestiaires* whose starting point was given to me by spots of colour that I am completing and outlining in India ink; it is interesting to see this become fish, algae and all kinds of unknown beasts.

I advised my pupils to go into automatism: "Blindfold your eyes, throw paint and then make a choice; start from this to do something else, but do not sign it right away." Abstraction for the sake of abstraction makes us go

round in a circle. If one is working with abstract blobs, one must humanize them; it is only in this way that a universal dimension can be attained.

**VdA** - In brief, you feel little affinity with this zone of surrealism founded on pure automatism, unless the latter is only the first stage of it, unless it changes into something else and unless it is not recognizable as itself. So, in your opinion, what is surrealism?

**A.P.** - Surrealism aims at the creation of a poetic, boundless, never-seen world. It is necessary to invent something, a different world. Ernst and Dali did it. I like surrealism on condition that it is healthy. I have an innate fear of morbid surrealism or surrealism based on psychosis. It is true that Dali created a different world, but I am not sure that it is sane. When Chagall dealt with the subject of the Eiffel Tower, I think he did it in a very dream-like and very surrealistic manner. Painting must combine with the human side. I believe that true surrealism is in this direction.

**VdA** - This beginning of definition suits a part of your work, chiefly the one which extends from the end of the Forties and continues during the Fifties. This is also the period when you, Dumouchel, Bellefleur, Jean Benoit, Mimi Parent and others devoted yourselves to a specifically surrealist game, the *Cadavre exquis*. Your painting seems then to be organized in a rather similar fashion: we see in it the abrupt meeting of two different forms; a stroke lengthens and becomes another figure; unseemly combinations are created in the picture; space loses its unity to break up and give rise to many ambiguities or contradictions. Finally, your painting would become more particularly surrealist after you had left Paris and the surrealists.

**A.P.** - It is a continuation, no doubt... Yes, indeed, perhaps I devoted myself further to a painting closer to surrealism's, but I had begun quite a long time before, I think! It is odd, but it seems that those who are interested in my painting see more things in it and discover in it more than I believed I saw myself.

**VdA** - Would that not be a sign for recognizing good painting?

**A.P.** - I am so busy painting that I don't have time to examine everything behind me!

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

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### THEY LIVE IN CHOC — AN ATTEMPT AT A SPECTRAL PORTRAIT OF JEAN BENOIT AND MIMI PARENT

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By José Pierre

I live in choc - that is the title of a famous picture by Mimi Parent. For the sake of convenience, I took the liberty of housing in the same boat, at least temporarily, two artists as unusual, as incomparable to any other, as Jean Benoit and Mimi Parent. Certainly, public report did place them in the same boat. But what am I sure of after all, if not, up to a certain point, of what I see and, absolutely, of what I dream?

### The Spectre of Jean Benoit

What is offered here for reflection is limited to taking for object two, even three, manifestations that I shall call artistic for want of a more adequate term, through which Jean Benoit appeared to me to be different and to be defined. I forewarn you very honestly that I would be lying if I said that the statements which will follow have the *imprimatur* of the artist. They have mine, and that is already a great deal!

For those who believe that there exists to-day this thing that indicates itself, rashly, as being the avant-garde, and if it is true that the aforesaid avant-garde always rallies around this banner, the programme title of an exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Berne in 1969 which caused a stir in the Landernau of the art market: "When attitudes become forms", well, I must say that Jean Benoit had demonstrated this ten or twenty years before, and in a much more striking way...

But it is not about avant-garde that I intend to speak to-day. Rather of infinitely more interesting matters. I am going to speak of *possession*; I have to say that I wish to consider the activity of Jean Benoit exclusively from the angle of the rites of possession.

It seems to me, in fact, that when Benoit refers to the Marquis de Sade or to this lesser seigneur, Sergeant Bertrand, the reference, or more exactly, the reverence, is the same as the one that makes of the Haitian *criseur* the spokesman of one of the *loa* of voodoo. In each case, possession carries a double meaning: 1) it reveals in the one who intends to be the vehicle of such or such a *spirit* a profound affinity with the latter, perhaps less an identity with it than a complement to it; 2) the *possessed* expresses the message of the possessor not only for himself, but offers it to a group and, most often, to a group in a state of crisis (a crisis of growth, a crisis of direction, a crisis of survival), possession seeming by definition to be the solution, sought in the trance, in something outside history, to a situation well and truly located in history.

In a work replete with revealing glimpses although of a rather rough style, *Les trois voix de l'imaginaire* (Paris, Éditions Universitaires, 1974), François Laplantine shows that these phenomena of possession occur very specially in human minority groups placed in a painful and barely acceptable uncultural position. There, «the possessed reorganize their quest for an escape from the threat posed by ethnic dislocation, by placing their usually noisy speeches within the framework of traditional representations resolutely turned toward the tribal past».

In the hypothesis I have contemplated, if I question myself on the group or groups involved in the discourse on possession, rather rowdy in truth, held by Jean Benoit, there are two which come to mind simultaneously: the French-Canadian minority, and the surrealist minority. I shall leave the first, as not being much within my province (although...) to concern myself only with the second.

*L'Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade*, although carried out in 1949-1950, about ten years before actual membership in the surrealist movement (but *effected* symbolically soon after this enrolment on the eve of the opening in December 1959 of the International Exhibition of Surrealism dedicated to Eros), applies by all evidence to the whole of the *egregious* surrealist group. The *tribal past* here erected in model form and in a model capable of snatching surrealists, if not Surrealism, away



from doubt, from differences and from internal quarrels is, word for word, the fulfilment of the Marquis de Sade's will; but not the never-executed clauses of the real will, those clauses, on the contrary, of the fictitious testament of Sade to the surrealists, his legitimate heirs in the eyes of Jean Benoît: Live in the manner of Sade, live to the utmost and defy any other law than that of *desire!*

By doing this, Benoît also implicitly denounces as the cause of division among surrealists certain nationalist factors (adherence to political watchwords, for example, or even to structuring ideas, even if they were as little academic as the notion of *automatism*) as well as what, in his eyes, remains in Surrealism of attachment to traditional and repressive ethics. From this point of view, it is not without interest to recall that during the famous party of December 2, 1959, at Joyce Mansour's, where this possession actually took place, one of the guests, Matta, reacted spontaneously to Jean Benoît's message by taking from the latter's hand the red-hot iron with which he had just marked his left breast and branding himself with it. Matta, who had rightly been excluded from the surrealist group ten years before for deliberately conducting himself in a Sadian manner... In order to properly appreciate the effectiveness of the language of possession in Benoît, I must explain that, in another connection, there is really not the slightest affinity between the latter and the Chilean painter.

Six years later, minor in comparison to that which had called upon the intervention of the author of *120 journées de Sodome*, but still significant, the possession of Jean Benoît by Sergeant Bertrand, the famous necrophile of the 19th century, was completed by the simultaneous, or almost, production of the *Bouledogue de Maldoror*. This last monster, violator of girls already degraded by his master, became indeed the ideal companion for the necrophile. Did not both of them carry to the extreme the law of desire without restraint? I would, however, read in these same excesses a more secret clue: just as one must not fear violating the laws already flouted by Maldoror, that is, by Lautréamont (whose example thus came to take turns with Sade's, without annulling it), neither must one fear any longer to make love with the dead, that is to say, with the *Exquisite Corpse of Surrealism*; or, in other terms, with its disgraceful tradition, that, very exactly, is what everyone (or almost everyone) holds as incurably obsolete in Surrealism...<sup>1</sup>

In large measure the significance of Jean Benoît's possessions goes beyond his conscious intentions. But this is in the nature of things...

#### The Spectre of Mimi Parent

The point where Jean Benoît's artistic activity and Mimi Parent's blend is in an identical *reading*, it seems to me, of Alfred Pellán's work. Where I would be led to consider only ornamental paintings, they discern ritual paintings whose network introduces the human being and the cosmos in a same lyrical continuity. In such a way that, in comparison to them, I find myself in the same situation as an uninformed observer at some African, Amerindian or Oceanic ritual festival, who would appreciate of the body paintings only the single aesthetic and decorative merits, compared with the *initiated* who are thoroughly informed about the mythical implications of each of the ornamental elements used.

It is in this way, for example, that a very Pellanian drawing by Jean Benoît, published

in Number 10-11 of *Bief*, «Surrealist Junction», gives a vision of the human being and more particularly of woman, that I would call leafed through and similar, on the vegetable kingdom plan, to the well-known structure of an artichoke, or even an onion. Now, such a superposition of coverings irresistibly reminds us of defoliation, at first that of the artichoke or the onion, but just as much that of strip-tease artists, a process from which the *big ceremony* of the *Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade* is copied. The similar system set up by Pellán, notably between the vegetable kingdom and the human being, will in this way have permitted Jean Benoît to invite us to a voyage into the depths, at the end of which rises, in a desperate erection, the Man of Absolute Desire.

It seems to me that Mimi Parent retains more, and this is very natural, the Penelope side of the Pellanian industry (if I speak of industry it is because I am thinking suddenly of bees). In many of her paintings and drawings, everything is arranged according to the same rhythmic regularity as a rich spider's web whose centre is the Star of Venus, or the look of a fairy or a witch, or else the *solar anus*. But this spider's web appears woven of sufficiently sensitive fibres to enmesh in its toils, beyond ordinary appearances, the creatures of the least tangible and least perceptible dreams, those that would slip through the mesh of any other net.

There is, indeed, something of the trapper in Mimi Parent, but a trapper anxious to track strange beasts that wander about only at night, and further! not anywhere at all... Nothing sums her up better, doubtless, than Breton's famous aphorism: «In Mimi's thistle-like eyes shine the gardens of Armid at midnight». The object-painting that inspired the title for this article, *J'habite au choc* (1956), seems to me to answer much more exactly the definition of a *trap-picture* than the works of Daniel Spoerri, the inventor of this term. *J'habite au choc* presents to us, indeed, something intermediate between the haunted house and the bordello, so that the marvel remains deeply impregnated with carnal covetousness. Moreover, the fact that doors and windows can actually open to reveal to us what is going on behind them irresistibly evokes the *nine doors* that the gallant imagination of poets has always taken pleasure in enumerating in woman...

Trap-pictures, and also Mimi Parent's last object-paintings, like *Échec et mat*, a sort of funereal echo to Max Ernst's *Jardins gobeavions* (facing this, it seems to me that I am looking at the Waterloo of phallocracy, the ground of cemeteries mockingly dug up by the latest erections of masters dispossessed of life) or, in an untitled work, this lovely young girl at her window toward whom mount the white rats of lust that a mysterious visitor sends her (if one looks carefully, one discovers that the very legs of the girl form the steps of the ladder giving access to her window). If I tell, at least in part, the base of my thought, I must confess that I consider most of Mimi Parent's recent works a sort of Jean Benoît's *stations of the Cross*. But I do not claim to be right...

#### Conclusion

I have been very careful not to examine these two works so-rebellious, as is known, to the critical approach as, more usually, to that of the general public. I wanted only to submit them to a partial and prejudiced illumination, as subjective as possible. If I was bent on doing it, it is because this seemed important to me, at a time when false values

are causing them to be discussed in the five minutes following their leaving the factory, to remember that the most delicious fruits ripen in the shade.

1. A more recent work seems to confirm this assumption. It concerns the object-chest made by Jean Benoît in 1974 to hold the original manuscript of *Champs magnétiques* (1919) by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, the first surrealist book, as we know. Under a death's head is revealed the head of a sage, wrinkled but smiling... as another little skeleton masturbates while bursting out in a laugh. Surrealism, from its birth, is a challenge thrown at death.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

## MAGRITTE REVISITED — OR HOW THE WEST WAS WON

By Virgil G. HAMMOCK

If you were to judge painting in the Prairies from the recent exhibition *The Canadian Canvas*, you might very well come away with the idea that the west was full of loyal 'Greenbergians' trying their damndest to paint 'Major' art, whatever that might be, and if you read Karen Wilkin's foreword to the Prairie section in the exhibition catalogue, the idea would be reinforced. It just isn't so. To be sure there is no shortage of artists in this part of Canada who paint in what might be called a New York-inspired lyrical colour method, especially those in the Edmonton area. All that aside, let me add that the artists Ms. Wilkin picked are very good, but plainly not representative of the region. It is what was left out of the Prairie section of *The Canadian Canvas* that concerns me. Many people, Ms. Wilkin included, seem anxious to prove that all us prairie folks aren't provincials (i.e., Hayseeds). I, on the other hand, believe that our provincialism is one of our strongest qualities. Certainly many of us keep up with the latest trends in Europe and the U.S.A. either through the literature or by trips to the world's art centres, but there are very few working artists in the Prairies that I know who are able to afford such luxuries and, heaven forbid, some are not even interested in what is going on in New York. I believe that it is patent nonsense to deny the importance, as is done in Ms. Wilkin's essay, of the prairie environment to our art, be it 'Major' or minor (minor is, in this case, I assume, all that is not in Ms. Wilkin's considered opinion 'Major'). I fail to understand any exhibition which reports to be about the state of painting in the Prairies that excludes the likes of Ivan Eyre<sup>2</sup>, Esther Warkov, Ernest Linder, Eli Bornstein, or John Hall, artists whose work run the gambit from Surrealism to Structuralism to Photo Realism, unless it is due to the fact that they fail to fit into the tight structure of High art that the Edmonton Art Gallery and Ms. Wilkin seem to favour.

A case in point is Arthur Horsfall — artist and subject of this article. For a lack of a better definition he might be called a Prairie Surrealist, but that is for me to prove. Arthur is a native of Winnipeg and, except for short