Une autre saison de Léon Bellefleur
Léon Bellefleur
Gilles Daigneault

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Huile sur toile; 50 cm x 61.

Bellefleur, lui, demeure dans sa vieille maison canadienne, près de Richeleau (encore un rêve réaliste), où je l'ai rencontré. La veille, une très violente tempête avait fait rage dans la région et fallait projeter soi-même: un dessin — dans la rivière; il me dira au cours de l'entretien: «Le retour de Pellan en 40, c'était pire que l'ouragan d'hier pour les arts plastiques!» Il est resté le même homme sympathique, drôle et sensible (ce précieuse sensibilité à laquelle son œuvre est fidèle depuis près de quarante ans). A peine a-t-il pris un peu d'assurance, sur le plan plastique, une peinture qui ne paraît pas moins richesse, un équilibre indéniable. «C'est toi qui le dis, mais j'hésite à te contredire ... Disons plus justement que je connais maintenant mon métier, qu'il y a de moins en moins de failles à ce niveau-là, que j'arrive de plus en plus facilement à résoudre les problèmes, que désormais mes limites sont à peu près celles de mon fonds intérieur ...» A ce stade, il y a danger ... d'emboîture, je sais, de préciosité, de décoration; personne n'est à l'abri de cela (je ne parle pas seulement des peintres) et j'en suis conscient. Je me méfie en quelque sorte de mon métier qui rend les choses trop faciles, qui me permettrait de ne pas m'épuiser mécaniquement, avec les yeux seulement, des toiles, jolies sans doute mais sans âme, où ce que j'aurais dit serait tellement mince qu'elles n'apporteraient plus rien ni à moi ni aux autres. Je préfère cependant penser qu'il y a surtout dans cette maîtrise des moyens un énorme avantage pour qui sait conserver sa ferveur. Le besoin que j'ai d'être exigeant et honnête, la nature même de mon cheminement profondément surréaliste arriveront à me préserver de l'emboîture. Cette importance aussi de l'enfance ...» J'y arrivais. La phrase de Baudelaire me revient à l'esprit: «Le génie est l'enfance retrouvée à volonté.» Bellefleur sourit: «Retrouvée? Non, je ne l'ai jamais perdue, heureusement. J'ai toujours essayé de protéger en moi le meilleur de l'enfance, ce sens de la poésie et du rêve, cette spontanéité, cette fraîcheur dont aucune maturité ne saurait se passer.» En l'écoutant parler de l'enfance, je comprends que ce n'est pas uniquement par mégalomanie qu'il n'édia de plusieurs de ses plus belles toiles ...

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Eau-forte; 20 cm x 25.

Abordons les huiles. J'ai eu la chance de voir celles de 73 et de 75 avant qu'elles ne partent pour l'Angleterre et le Danemark. Ces admirables compositions dégageaient plus que jamais une impression de charme, de sérénité, de bien-être, sans doute, la peinture d'un homme profondément heureux ... «Attention! ce qu'un peintre met dans une toile, ce n'est pas forcément ce qui l'habite, ce qui le possède en lui-même. Cette sérénité que tu découvres dans les derniers tableaux, je la vois aussi et elle m'aide à vivre. Si je mets passablement de joie dans mes toiles — il y a du reste quelques exceptions —, c'est que mon aventure est aussi une quête de la sérénité et de la joie. Cela dit, je ne pense pas qu'un homme profondément malheureux arriverait à peindre comme moi, mais je sais que je suis bien plus vulnérable qu'il n'y paraît dans les huiles récentes. L'art est une magie ...» D'accord. Mais on a beau le savoir, on se laisse toujours prendre. Comme parmi nous croient encore, sur la foi de sa statuaire, que la Grèce antique n'était peut-être qu'une scène de drames magnifiques? Nul doute pourtant que la réalité grecque offrait moins de sérénité et d'équilibre qu'un art ne le suggère.

Quoi qu'il en soit, les tableaux récents de Bellefleur ont beau refléter davantage un rêve qu'une situation réelle,'ils n'en attaquent pas moins, sur le plan plastique, une plénitude, une équilibre, une richesse, un équilibre indéniables. «C'est toi qui le dis, mais j'hésite à te contredire ... Disons plus justement que je connais maintenant mon métier, qu'il y a de moins en moins de failles à ce niveau-là, que j'arrive de plus en plus facilement à résoudre les problèmes, que désormais mes limites sont à peu près celles de mon fonds intérieur ...» A ce stade, il y a danger ... d'emboîtement, je sais, de préciosité, de décoration; personne n'est à l'abri de cela (je ne parle pas seulement des peintres) et j'en suis conscient. Je me méfie en quelque sorte de mon métier qui rend les choses trop faciles, qui me permettrait de ne pas m'épuiser mécaniquement, avec les yeux seulement, des toiles, jolies sans doute mais sans âme, où ce que j'aurais dit serait tellement mince qu'elles n'apporteraient plus rien ni à moi ni aux autres. Je préfère cependant penser qu'il y a surtout dans cette maîtrise des moyens un énorme avantage pour qui sait conserver sa ferveur. Le besoin que j'ai d'être exigeant et honnête, la nature même de mon cheminement profondément surréaliste arriveront à me préserver de l'emboîtement. Cette importance aussi de l'enfance ...» J'y arrivais. La phrase de Baudelaire me revient à l'esprit: «Le génie est l'enfance retrouvée à volonté.» Bellefleur sourit: «Retrouvée? Non, je ne l'ai jamais perdue, heureusement. J'ai toujours essayé de protéger en moi le meilleur de l'enfance, ce sens de la poésie et du rêve, cette spontanéité, cette fraîcheur dont aucune maturité ne saurait se passer.» En l'écoutant parler de l'enfance, je comprends que ce n'est pas uniquement par mégalomanie qu'il n'édia de plusieurs de ses plus belles toiles ...

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Gilles Daigneault est né à Montréal en 1943. Titulaire d'un doctorat de troisième cycle de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines d'Aix-en-Provence, il rédige actuellement une monographie sur Léon Bellefleur.
boardroom, and, on account of its large size, is never in the travelling exhibitions of the collection.

Among the entries from the Maritimes, we should note St. John Harbour by Bruno Bobak, artist in residence in New Brunswick famous for his panoramas of cities in the Kokoschka manner, in which we find his delightful colourist's verve. As for his wife Molly Lamb Bobak's English Beach, we see in it a liliputian swirling comparable to that of the early To-Blom and David Mayrs. The stars, Kazuo Nakato (Three Sisters, Waiting), offer us specimens of texture, and particularly in his superb Sky Panel, where his gifts as colourist and his acuity and artistry.

Léon Bellefleur lives in his old Canadian house near the Richelieu River (another dream that came true), where I met him. The day before, a very violent storm had raged in the area and had nearly thrown his neighbour—a giant—into the river; Bellefleur would say during the interview, "Pellan's return in 1940 was worse than yesterday's hurricane for the plastic arts! He has remained the same likeable man, funny and sensitive (this precious sensitivity to which his work has been faithful for almost forty ears). He has taken on very little self-assurance, and the manner in which he speaks, simply, calmly. He is no less convinced that his commentaries are of no help (... or so little) to people in understanding his work. "I know that there are artists who talk very well about their painting but, even in those cases, the explanation they give carries a rational dimension that... that... in short, the painter has said everything when he has created his canvas. After that, it is the turn of the critics." However, these remarks would not prevent Bellefleur from adopting a very critical tone concerning the attitude of some commentators who do not see clearly enough how to resolve the problems, that henceforth my limits are approximately those of my inner resources..." At this stage, there is danger of middle-class respectability, I know, of affection, of decoration; no one is immune from it (I am speaking not only of painters) and I am much more vulnerable than appears in the recent oils. Art is magic..." Agreed. But it is in vain that we know this, we are always deceived by appearances. In the case of evidence of its statutory that ancient Greece was populated only by magnificent beings? There is no doubt, however, that the Greek reality offered less serenity and balance than our art suggests.

Be that as it may, it is of no avail that Bellefleur's work reflects a dream rather than a real situation, they reach no less, on the plastic plan, undeniable fullness, wealth, and balance. "You are the one who is saying it, but I hesitate to contradict you..." Let us say more exactly that I now know my craft, that there are fewer and fewer failures at that level, that I feel certain, and as a reference point, my work has nearly thrown his neighbour... As a result, I am much more vulnerable than appears..."

Léon Bellefleur has taken off again. The first time, it was in 1954, and he departed in the two meanings of the word: he freed himself of his influences in painting and left to accomplish a dream that was "a bit delirious", at the age of thirty: to know Paris and live in Provence. This time, it is his canvases that are leaving to earn international recognition for him, another major dream. His work is inspired by surrealism, his promise of symmetry, to Donald Jarvis for his exquisite Window, a clever creation and a genuine masterpiece of symmetry, to Donald Jarvis for his impeccable oils.

If we note in British Columbia's share the presence of a few "hard edge painters" like George Smith and Bobo Pfeiffer, laurels are due, in our opinion, to Tony Onley (Winter Landscape), to Brian Fisher for his exquisite Window, a clever creation and a genuine masterpiece of symmetry, to Donald Jarvis for his impeccable oils. We note, too, that Tony Onley (Winter Landscape) is a great draftsman, and that his works are by the boldness of his eccentric composition, the immensity and monotonous of the prairie. Among the Ontario painters, we prefer Harold Town, the talented and versatile Toronto painter, who appears at his best in Homage to Cubism, of great finesse of texture, and particularly in his superb Sky Panel, where his gifts as colourist and his acuity and artistry.

If a period of engravings follows the oils of '73, a rather long period of gougaches precedes them. Do these changes of medium coincide with dead ends? This would be saying a lot, but there come moments when one tires of always using the same materials... and then one sometimes finds something else. In other words, my return to oil is all the more alive with more enthusiasm. As for gougaches, I wanted to link graphism perfectly with colour, a thing that allowed me to lose a lesser degree; I wanted a drawing that holds its own as a drawing to form with colour and the intensity of its lines a true coloured whole. I believe it is because my adventure is not all fresh, light, sometimes more luminous but less sensual than oils. I had two exhibitions and my adventure is enough for me..."

Let us consider the oils. I was fortunate enough to see the '73 and '75 ones before they were sent to England and Denmark. These admirable creations composed more than ever an impetus of war, the sense of an end being; doubtless the painting of a profoundly happy man... "Attention: what a painter puts into a canvas is not necessarily what possesses him, what he has within himself. I also see the serenity that you discover in the latest pictures, and it helps me to live. If I put a fair amount of oil on a canvas, and it is simple, and it is an exception — it is because my adventure is also a search for serenity and joy. This being said, I do not think a profoundly unhappy man would manage to paint as I do, but I know that I am much more vulnerable than appears in the recent oils. Art is magic..." Agreed. But it is in vain that we know this, we are always deceived by appearances. In the case of evidence of its statutory that ancient Greece was populated only by magnificent beings? There is no doubt, however, that the Greek reality offered less serenity and balance than our art suggests.

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CLAES OLDENBURG IN TORONTO

By Roger MESLEY

In April and May 1976 the exhibition Oldenburg: Six Themes was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The evolution of the geometric mouse, three-way plug, flag ends, clothes-pin, typewriter eraser, and standing mahl with ball point pen was documented by the 317 items exhibited. Oldenburg came to Toronto for six days to oversee the exhibition’s installation, to give a lecture on his work, and to attend the AGO opening. This was his first visit to Toronto since the 1967 Dine-Oldenburg-Segal exhibition. At that time, he had proposed a colossal drainpipe monument for Toronto’s waterfront.

Roger Mesley - When did you first realize that the CN tower had become Toronto’s colossal monument, and what was your first reaction?

Claes Oldenburg - I felt quite surprised. Sometimes I have the feeling that I’m tuned in to certain things that are going to happen, which may not be very difficult to be tuned in to, but I didn’t really know there was going to be a tower. I think I saw it first in an airline’s magazine, or advertisement of some kind for Toronto, and I said, “My God! There it is!” You know, actually I felt sort of happy; it felt as I hadn’t been consulted - as if I hadn’t had a chance to think and create my own concept.

R.M. - You were in Montreal in 1967 to install your Giant Soft Fan for Expo; was there ever a proposed colossal monument for Montreal?

C.O. - The fan was my version of a colossal monument... I never got into Montreal very much - I was on the island there and kept pretty occupied. It was a terrific time because it was Expo, but even from the top of the mountain you could go into all the exhibits just by yourself, without having to stand in line. You could ride those trains all by yourself, I think that one of the most unforgettable days of my life was the opening. It was a very brilliant day... very clear, and the Canadian planes were flying over the CN tower.

R.M. - How did the concept of Oldenburg: Six Themes originate? (Oldenburg explained that he viewed the 1969 New York retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the 1971 Pasadena Art Museum exhibition, and the present show as “a continuous retrospective... one show, two shows.”)

C.O. - But I think the show, or shows, have been getting better, clearer. The Modern’s show was just a sort of collection of things without much thought behind it... The Pasadena show had a point of view, showing how the object developed into the monument, and the Modern’s, although they organized it, is quite an intellectual. He wanted to do a thinking show about process, and I did too. That’s what I’ve always wanted to do. The subjects have become more limited and the focus has been more and more on the thinking process. I think this is the best of the shows.

R.M. - The A.G.O.’s Henry Moore Centre likewise documents his creative process. How struck by the similarities are you?

C.O. - I’ve always heard about these rocks that he collects and I’ve always felt that’s what sculptors do - they have a museum of things which attract them in nature which become the subject matter and different concepts. Everything was fresh streets and in the stores - very urban sources. He is in the countryside, but it is basically, I should think, the same kind of process. You get fond of something - he’s claimed, hasn’t he, that he really has derived everything from those pebbles and rocks that he’s so fond of - and I seem in the same, the My Mouse Museum contains almost every original object and variations of it.

R.M. - Of what significance has Moore’s work been to you as a sculptor?

C.O. - I’ve always been aware of Moore... He’s been the big sculptor, along with Calder and Picasso, and we’ve been aware of this man for so long; he’s part of the last part of the century. I do a lot of references to other artists and very often I feel that I make references to him - sort of unconsciously, because you’ve been so aware of his particular type of mass.

R.M. - Would you like an Oldenburg centre like the Henry Moore centre in order to perpetuate the concept of process?

C.O. - Who can deny that it would be pleasant to have a place to put all your things? You’d have more room than at home. I think that’s a problem with a sculptor, especially. He gets crowded at home. You don’t take proper care of your things... I think the (one-artist) museum idea is the clearest, and we’ve been aware of this man for so long; He’s part of the last part of the century. Many artists have had museums. Sometimes they’ve been kept up well and sometimes they’ve disintegrated... I wouldn’t object to (such an Oldenburg Centre). It’s really the way I would like to approach art. I love drawing shows, because you can see the thinking behind the work, as if you were creating your own world.

R.M. - The human figures as such rarely appear in your work, save in the “pornographic” drawings. Why is that?

C.O. - I use the object because it’s a nice free way of bridging the gap between representation and non-representation... It’s a shame that those tendencies are separate and run parallel. When I was thinking of some sort of unifying principle, if I wanted to devote myself to the figure, I feel that one has to represent the figure rather precisely for it to be significant. There have been so many attempts to combine the figure with abstraction, which I find offensive - even when Moore does it, I like it much better when he sticks to his pebbles. When he goes into the figure I feel it’s a little bit. With objects I don’t feel that, I don’t have that problem, because objects are so open - at least the way I treat them. They’re so generalized that somehow that bridges the gap. If I’m able to draw the figure - which I can now and then - I like to do it. I exercise that ability. So, I have a separate category, which I just draw figures when I want to please myself.

R.M. - But why are the realistic figures drawings almost invariably erotic?

C.O. - Well, they tend to be charged with emotion... In my mind, figure drawing has always been associated with the nude, and I’ve always accepted the nude literally. In art schools, instead of saying that this is like a statue, I’ve always said that this is a living person that has taken his or her clothes off and is standing in front of us. It means something; you can’t ignore this. The reality of it is there. When I do figure drawings, I do them to please myself and I draw what I like to see. That’s tended to be slightly erotic, a little bit dirty or however I feel. But again, it’s like words: since it’s not my main occupation, I don’t feel I have to feel responsible for what I produce. I do whatever I feel like, you see - it’s not my “official” art. It’s kind of backroom stuff... Last summer, I started to draw in hotel rooms. I was travelling a lot, and I would be in a strange town, and rather than think of it as a very stupid thing to do, I thought it more productive to sit in a room and draw. And I started to draw figures because I was lonely. So that became a whole activity. I started to draw a lot of figures in a lot of hotel rooms, and finally I had a whole show and I showed it in London last November. They were realistic, and I thought the most number of people gave me an argument about that, because eroticism is so personal. Nevertheless, they were figures with sexual parts doing things to one another... I think it’s good that people argue about what’s erotic. It’s especially sensitive from a woman’s point of view. Several female artists said they were not erotic, that they had nothing whatsoever to do with eroticism. It’s very much in your own head.

R.M. - Yet both your work and your comments seem much more formal and analytical than they were at the time of the 1967 Toronto show...

C.O. - Well, I finally admitted that publicly. They certainly are. My tendency is, of course, to do a revisionist history - to read back into your own work and say “I was really thinking of this and that,” you know, and then, you need someone to straighten you out by remembering some of your earlier statements... It’s true that formal and analytical development occurred, and it probably occurs for most artists, the more they look at their work and think about it.

R.M. - There are references to Mondrian in your drawings and writings. Is your search for the ultimate basic form a spiritual quest like his?

C.O. - I’m really very interested in that basic form. I have a metaphysical streak and would like to reduce things to very simple forms. It’s in my thinking... I feel very happy when I go to Holland, because it’s a country where everything really is reduced to vertical and horizontal, it’s a very peaceful sensation. Chicago’s that way too — the vertical-horizontal. I feel an affinity with that kind of thinking.

R.M. - Which is not, however, to admit that you’re a Theosophist?

C.O. - Not in any formal way. It’s a kind of informalized metaphysical feeling about things. I have a feeling, a sort of Platonic notion, about the form underlying appearances, and that may be because I was at one point influenced by being raised as a Christian Scientist, and their thinking runs along that line — that appearances are just a mask.