Texts in English
Textes originaux et traductions


URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58854ac

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Publisher(s)
La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN
0042-5435 (print)
1923-3183 (digital)

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Cite this article
LOCAL ART IN RESURGENCE

By Andrée PARADIS

One of the most positive currents presently taking shape and perceived everywhere with the help of signs that are very often unobtrusive at the very time when fatigue of the avant-garde and even crisis are being discussed, is the development of a keen interest in local art in many countries, especially in the privileged areas where criticism conscientiously plays its rôle. At Dublin at the end of August 1980, the theme of the International Association of Art Critics conference, International Influence on Local Art, gave rise to contradictory debates, naturally, where it was necessary to painfully redefine everything in order to better find the trend. But these exchanges took place in an ideal setting, since there exists in Ireland a particularly vigorous local contemporary art, mirror of a modernity assimilated without loss of its own peculiar characteristics — an art that has been developing for some forty years in a manner somewhat similar to that of Canadian art.

First evidence of a kind of return to the common sense in depth and of the interest in the production of works. IAAC, conscious of its responsibilities and the authenticity of the process: posterization in half-tones and transformation of a thought have been substituted for pictures of genius and whose reading, consequently, demands greater attention than do most landscape paintings.

Landscape is a recent genre. Three centuries are very little. Painting itself is recent, but landscape is even more so. From decor of mythological scenes it became the support of the bourgeois sentiment of nature, later imposed pretensions, tried to be sometimes objective, sometimes subjective, finally claimed kinships with physical, optical, chromatic and other sciences, when it became impressionist. Under these conditions, it is trite to say that landscape has evolved a great deal since Poussin. Art, too, has changed, at the same time as society and our knowledge of the world.

More recently, images intended to be the expression, not the illustration, of a thought or an intention of descriptive purpose, were the message. One might say that the image in itself often counts very little and that no first reading can encompass the richness of a work whose scope or possibilities of development the artist does not always measure.

Leslie Reid's present work on certain aspects of nature in the Var — we should say certain points of view even if they are the most neutral, in order not to say the most insignificant possible — is, in the strict meaning of the word, solely mechanical.

The recent Leslie Reid Exhibition at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris could have been titled An Ingenious Look at Nature in the South of France, taking the word ingenius in the sense of sincere, pure, innocent, but not naive. This exhibition could have been the one case where the work displayed and can be regarded as a simulation of current art by most observers, but we rightly wonder if this was so. Visitors offend by hurrying and most often feel satisfied if they have been able to identify the subject of a current painting. Leslie Reid showed a series of recent landscapes produced at the end of 1979 and the beginning of 1980 from photographic documents taken in the Var during preceding summer. The first reflex may be to see in the paintings the image, recognizing the terrain's relief, the vegetation, the site on an extremely pale surface, and whose reading, consequently, demands greater attention than do most landscape paintings.

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The major interest of Leslie Reid's work, beyond the immediate charm of the image offered, lies in the number of questions it inspires. If we eliminate directly (and we can do this without risk of misunderstanding) the ambition to landscape, many possibilities may be contemplated: concept of landscape — surface treatment (colour field in English) — pure painting — projection of a subjectivity attached to a vision — or any other attitude that we do not imagine in the immediate circumstances and which would certainly be closer to the Reid reality than all our preconceived concepts.

Some commentators have gone so far as to conjure up the name of Rothko in connection with Reid's work.

The method used has been precisely described by Anne Babinska in Artmagazine of September 1979. Leslie Reid confirms the authenticity of the process: posterization in half-tones and transfer to canvases with a series of stencils in polythene or resist gum. In only five colours — tones would be more exact — a blue-gray, a yellowish ochre, a yellow, a light rose, an ochre — they are applied by the spray-gun or by the aerograph. The accurancy of the image — its similarity to the photographic document is astonishing, almost total. It is the result of a long and patient work of transfer, decoupage with a blade or with a solvent that permits the production of a kind of stencil, therefore a perfect evenness of tone, a stencil not used to multiply, as usual, but which is used only once before being destroyed, partly by the solvent and partly by the work of the artist with a single image and the lapce between nature and the painting increases. But does the charm of the image not arise partly at least from the time its creation required?

At the end of this long labour Leslie Reid arrived at the totally flat, impersonal image displaying no trace of the paint-brush (she uses it only for the stencils after the spray-gun or the aerograph). The photographic image acquires another dimension. It does not seem to be located on the plane of the canvas that bears it, which
is strange, at least, but at a certain distance which seems to grow as one approaches it. Thus the use of sophisticated technical procedures results in creating an illusion of distance, of remoteness. The landscape becomes a fugitive mirage, it flees from us, we cannot penetrate it, it will always be far away, in terms of the optical phenomena peculiar to Leslie Reid's talent.

Now let us consider the subject. These photographs enlarged through the techniques which are familiar were taken during the summer of 1979 at Flagnosc, near Draguignan in the Var when Leslie Reid was staying with Robert Filliou, a French artist. They faithfully record typical scenes of this region, pleasant but often austere, with fortifed villages, not the most attractive to tourists but the wildest, nature in the pure state, vegetation, particularly forest, where fire has scared it, because fires are frequent and burning the forest in the last season. Personally, I find these places agreeable for spending a few hours or days, but without special attractions. Why did Leslie Reid devote so much of her time and energy to them? We cannot believe that it was only by chance, the hospitality of a colleague who owned a home in that area.

It seems that Leslie Reid wished to give us the key to this mystery by introducing into this series one canvas only from another suite entitled Durham I, of diagonals, actually furrows filled with snow, a neutral image if there ever was one, cold, hostile, even trite, since it exists seasonally in most zones known as temperate. If we go back still further in time, we realize that Leslie Reid has always chosen as her subjects motifs the most lacking in picturesque quality, as if she wanted precisely to produce a "Caravaggio" at four-hour intervals, the Gulf Lake or the Great Shining Water series. In the catalogue of the exhibition titled Quelques artistes canadiens, we can examine the photographs used as references for the paintings of the period. Leslie Reid demonstrates a great visual masochism, if she will pardon the expression. Nothing or almost nothing. What is left? The line of the horizon? The colours? Leslie Reid is expert in this, but it seems that this is not her major objective. And so? Nothing? Emptiness? Neither space nor light, two realities recognized but intangible to the point of becoming conceptual, always caressed but never grasped.

The closeness between the works of the Canadian period and those of the Var period seems informative to me. At first, we face the image of large desert spaces where nothing visible is happening. The landscape becomes a fugitive mirage, it flees from us, we can grow as one approaches it. Thus the use of sophisticated technical and in which, in the form of scarcely-perceptible bands of colour, those of the Var period seems informative to me. At first, we face the wide-open spaces of her native land to a surface and that the thin, cold, light, air, mist, atmosphere, something intangible and yet sensitive, like a dream that is interrupted too soon.

The mild, thickly-wooded proliferation of Mediterranean vegetation should be set against the rigours of the Great North. On the contrary, we see that Leslie Reid brings the images back to a constant "nothing", consisted of reducing them while increasing them without consideration for the scenery that serves her as base. As she schematizes, one might say that she reduces the wide-open spaces of her native land to a surface and that the thickly-wooded vegetation of the Var is also reduced to a surface. The cutting up of the forms, the vibration born of the thickly-wooded vegetation of the Var is also reduced to a surface. The intervention of an atmospheric space, matter for painting, taken in Leslie Reid's implacable technique, where each was entitled to await the opposition between a linear and a baroque space. Any other thought on the non-Euclidian nature of the space described, the intervention of an atmospheric mist or any attempt at justification of the same nature would be pure literature.

As it is impossible from another point of view to consider Leslie Reid a conceptual artist, we have no alternative but to question the existence of a representative art. Recently, and in reference to a totally different art, Bernard Noel remarked in single and double parentheses: "(Here, as if to emphasize the triteness of this last point, I feel it important to say that the figurative always causes a passage between figure and painting, so that the one is the aibi of the other as long as the eye does not go from recognition to resemblance. [(What one recognizes is an image reproducing something or someone and drawing from this fact a space that guarantees reality; on the other hand, in the resemblance trembles the movement from the real to the mental and from what was seen to what has been created.) The subject of the painting risks each time, being the end of the painting; figuration consists of running this risk.]"

Leslie Reid runs this risk and, like the artist who inspired these thoughts in Bernard Noel, she brings about a reduction on the facts of the real "until it remains no more than the truly essential character of the reference, in the shape of the formal elements of the picture".

On the other hand, I read recently that "in order that a new culture may be born, it must properly disconnect spaces to connect them in another way, and space is perceived in the experiences of place and nature. So, from the time of Romanticism our relationship with the natural environment has been expressed by absence, an evolution dedicated to technology having torn man from nature and his sight of the landscape having translated this lack by nostalgia; his eyes have wandered from the land towards memory and dreams". This article that aims to locate a current problem seems to describe Leslie Reid's paintings when it imagines "eyes dimmed by distance and the memory of the dream". There remains the dialectic involved by the confrontation between the painted image and the seen image, and if the painted image is the photographic one, in which the subject of the work is "ocean", in which one finds a Reid's pictures twice more and more often than that, and lose all hope of resolving the major ambiguity of this transposition of the real in two dimensions.


(Translation by Mildred Grand)

HELEN GREGOR, OR THE AESTHETICS OF HARMONY

By Helen DUFFY

The door to her office at the college is wide open, her studio at home needs no door. Helen Frances Gregor, head of the textile department at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto and internationally-known tapestry artist doesn't believe in barriers. She would also find it difficult to separate her professional life from her personal interests because one invariably interlocks with the other.

Her timing, her capacity to organize her activities has to be both disciplined and flexible. It hinges, she feels, on two important points: a harmonious approach to living, being at ease with herself and people close to her; and, secondly, on the understanding of the mechanisms of professionalism. To be accessible to faculty members and students is as important to Gregor as being accessible to architects and clients and to her family and friends. "I never lived in an illusionary world," she says, "I'm too much of a realist. I'm also an extrovert who enjoys communicating; without this communication I couldn't be as productive as I am."

To young and aspiring textile artists she is the mother superior whose wisdom and faith are the object of admiration and envy. In a tough and competitive field such as tapestry and fibre art, local exhibitions and touring shows abroad may come and go. To be invited twice (1969 and 1977) to exhibit at the Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne, and to be included with two other Canadians, Mariette Rousseau-Vermette and Charlotte Lindgren, in the newly-formed Council of World Tapestry's Permanent Collection at the Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne (CITAM), is something else. Elected to the Royal Canadian Academy in 1970, she became three years later the first woman invited to join the Ontario Society of Artists.

Her tapestries embody her attitude to life, a striving for simplicity and aesthetically-satisfying harmony. A concern for order as antidote to embellishment leads from strength, rather than from conservative restraint.

The circle, her main theme until recently, symbolically expresses a unification of all things seen, felt and experienced. Vertically-incorporated linear rhythm effects of thin wooden rods are elements which, over the years, have become her trademark. She has no set colour preferences.

Among other contemporary Canadian fibre works, between freely borrowed ideas from every culture and trendy gimmicks with exotic fibres, the Gregor tapestry appears to recede in the background. And yet, the nature of a tapestry as a form of expression to which a contemporary weaver is exposed. The consistency of her sensitive approach to clear composition has stood the test of time and changing trends.

Helen Gregor's historical knowledge and tastes are rooted in her Slavic background and a liberal education. She came from a highly-industrialized society where the production of textiles is part of daily life. Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in the city where everything is concentrated in a small space — history, architecture,
To toss out the looms, this evidence of middle class culture, break with the past. Wasn't it up to the craft sector of community colleges to teach weaving? Gregor stood firm. What her department needed was more support, more scope, more space. She had visited art colleges and studios overseas, had met the great international textile artists and seen their work go up in museums and public buildings. The Canadian orientation in fibre art was lagging behind the new and powerful forces developing in Europe and the United States. This wasn't the moment to break up her department, she argued. On the contrary, the art college had to assume responsibility for guiding the future professionals by giving them access to a broadly-structured education. The looms stayed.

In textile art there are no short cuts to quick success and the mature age of the avant-garde artists in Europe and the United States confirms Helen Gregor's own experience that "it takes a lifetime to build a career". She moved slowly to the forefront of her profession, relying on her own pace and on the support from the private, rather than the public sector: "Right from the beginning I wanted to be in charge of my fate as an artist. I never had an agent or a gallery to represent or promote my work. It was tough going at first, but isn't it the same situation for an architect or a lawyer? Expertise and personal relationships lead to recommendations. In the private sector you find the decision makers. They rely on their professional business sense to get what they want. If they are not in sympathy with my work they won't approach me."

"Horizontal strength and vertical power": Helen Gregor thinks of tapestry in terms of enduring quality and craftsmanship. In her words: "Craft is a highly abused word. To me it represents something solid and substantial. Basic like a good piece of stone, of marble or a well-made brick. A structural component. Inspiration, design, colour, general knowledge, feel for the tactile quality of the fibre — these are all elements which come into play and one has to know how to mould and pull them together to form a harmonious unity."

Among her important commissions are a 12 by 16-foot tapestry, woven recently in Switzerland under her supervision, for a hotel in Saudi Arabia; and the Dr. J. J. Deutsch memorial tapestry at Queen's University, Kingston, dedicated in 1977. According to the Secrétariat d'Etat à la Culture, Mobilier National in Paris, this may be the only "tapisserie faite en l'honneur et pour célébrer la mémoire d'une célébrité contemporaine" at the present time.