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See table of contents

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Explore this journal

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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 ingenuous in the sense of sincere, pure, innocent, but not naive. This exhibition could have been the one dream needed away by hand. This work lasts weeks for a single 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.

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, often look more like those of decorative poster than a painting. 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 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.

Moreover, if the analysis is the attempt to separate what is seen from what is thought. Indeed, the attribute of every work of art is to suggest a thousand things other than those which is on a material level.

Materially, concretely, a painting by Leslie Reid, for instance Var II: Sauveclare, is the artist's reproduction on a very large canvas of a photograph taken by herself of a landscape that is not particularly picturesque in the sense generally understood during the last century.

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 canvas with a series of stencils in polystyrene or resist gum. In only five colours - tones would be more exact - a blue-gray, a yellow, a brown, a green, a lavender, opalescent by the play of the image, pure white, by luminous paleness. The accuracy 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 is usual, but which is used only once before being destroyed, partially isolated by a pair of scissors, with a single image and the overlap 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 no longer seems to be located on the plane of the canvas that bears it, which...
is strange, at the 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 use of technical procedures are familiar were taken
during the summer of 1979 at Flagraos, near Draguignan in the Var
when Leslie was staying with Robert Filliou, a French artist.
They faithfully record typical scenes of this region, pleasant but
often austere, with fortified 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 unpredictable, changing the landscape from one season to
another.

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 titled 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
look further in time, we realize that Leslie Reid has always
chosen as her subjects motifs the most lacking in picturability
and in which, in the form of scarcely-perceptible bands of colour,
are unfurled cold, light, air, mist, atmosphere, something intangible
and yet sensitive, like a dream that is interrupted too soon.

The cutting up of the forms, the vibration born of the
constant level, as if her action 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 Van is also reduced to a surface.
The cutting up of the forms, the vibration born of the découpage
into many tiny flecks changes nothing. These cathedrals of greenery
where each was entitled to await the opposition between a
phenomena peculiar to Leslie Reid's talent.

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 allie 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
really; on the other hand, in the resemblance trembles the move-
ment 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 escape would not be without a sense of melancholy." 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 way can it be different from an image? One could say that
Leslie 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 inter-
nationally-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
mechanics of professionalism. To be accessible to faculty members
and students is as important to Gregor as being accessible to ar-
ditects and clients and to her family and friends. "I never lived in
an illusion 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 in 1969 and 1977 to exhibit at the Biennale
Internationale 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 weaver invited to join the Ontario Society of Artists.

Her tapestries embody her attitude to life, a striving for sim-
plicity 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 ex-
presses a unification of all things seen, felt and experienced. Ver-
tically-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 reiterate in the back-
ground of the consciousness of the artist the space to which a modern 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

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.

Married, with two small children, she was happy to accept a part-time teaching job at the Ontario College of Art. It was to take her close to thirty years to build the textile department from its tentative and negligible beginnings into one of the finest educational faculties for contemporary fibre art in Canada. If recognition was slow to catch up, it certainly is firmly established now. The barriers have come down which separated the textile studios from other departments at the college. Gregor strongly advocates a total involvement in the arts for her students. “Sticking your nose in the loom restricts your vision,” she says, “One cannot teach perception and awareness, but I can encourage and develop it in a student.”

Her graduates will branch out into a variety of professional careers and their learning has to be guided towards practical application of knowledge and acquired skills. “It is important to recognize individual talent.” At the college’s annual Open Day exhibitions her students’ work underlines this point. The individuality of each approach to a chosen theme is striking.

Helen Gregor’s perseverance and stamina navigated her crew of co-teachers through many stormy moments when the row of set-up looms was threatened like old-fashioned machinery in an updated manufacturing plant. This threat became an issue in the early seventies when the college was hit by its worst identity crisis. During this difficult period, the future of the textile department was in question.

“When put on the block,” she recalls, “incited me to pioneering.” To toss out the looms, this evidence of middle-class culture, appeared to a progressively-oriented fine arts faculty as a timely 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 contemporain” at the present time.