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LOCAL ART IN RESURGENCE

By Georges BOUDAILLE

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: a kind of return to the common sense *in depth* loved by Stendhal and which appears in the effort to comprehend the real dimensions of to-day's local art which expresses much more than an identity or a rooting in sources. This localized art obviously represents a will to participate in the art of the twentieth century — but according to its own means and with its capacity for assimilation, digestion and orientation. Two decades from the year 2000, one can neither deny nor dispute the fundamental influences in motion across the world, and not only those of successive avant-garde trends.

René Berger, for one, attributes the phenomenon of international influence to the expansion of the means of communication and transport and to the development of the power of the art market, doubtless one of the strongest present influences acting on the production of works. IAAC, conscious of its responsibilities and strong in its international ramifications, could initiate, in the near future, an analysis in depth of the problems of art production in a techno-culture in order to determine the centres of power and the way in which a fashion is set as well as all the means that enable the artist to be recognized locally and internationally.

The geographical problem having been raised (a matter of the remoteness of the centres of influence, at New York, Paris, etc.), another aspect was alluded to by president Alexandre Cirici: the socio-economic dimension; the problem of cultures in contact and of the passing action of currents. Japan, for example, where for almost a hundred years two schools bitterly opposed each other — the adherents of international practice and the supporters of the continuity of a tradition — finally found within itself the necessary resources to enable it to smoothe out the difficulties and to transform the new situation. It was in architecture, however, that the best solutions were able to be verified later.

As for the established facts of influence, this is perhaps not of prime importance. In the opinion of Dan Haulica, it is necessary rather to try to see how these influences have acted on the *influenced* and how the latter actively use them to find solutions to their own problems. Let us avoid seeing a poverty of imagination or a taste for imitation in the one who comes under influence. Influence is inescapable; sooner or later it must be faced, a meaning must be given to it and it must be transformed.

For his part, Guy Weelen unhesitatingly defines influence transmitted by information as pollution. In its name and in the name of confrontation, competition is set, and the artist, like countries that encourage participation "have no other means than to present abroad an art of deceit created ten years previously, seen and seen again in the device of great international demonstrations". He believes that salvation will come from artists who are not lured by lark-mirrors and are capable of being independent enough to get out of the magic circle. This is equally true of criticism.

Rather than consolidating in the rigidity of dogma, Pierre Restany has chosen a series of positions — limits whose impact had ensured the breach in the rampart of established order — and assumed to the end of his critical activity the total identification of art with language.

Art nevertheless demands an effort of reduction in order to attain an abundance of expression. It establishes the link of an artistic activity in constant relationship with the world.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

The recent Leslie Reid Exhibition at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris could have been titled *An Ingenuous 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 object of elaborate reflections on the work itself and on the situation 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 of the eye consists of deciphering 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.

Landscape is a recent genre. Three centuries are very little. Painting itself is recent, but landscape is even more so. From décor 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 have been substituted for pictures of decorative purpose. 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!

The most sensitive point of 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 it is on a material level.

Materially and 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 polythene or resist gum. In only five colours — tones would be more exact — a blue-gray, a yellow, a light rose, a blue-green, an ochre, characterized by their 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, *découpage* 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, patiently peeled away by hand. This work lasts weeks for a single image and the lapse 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 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 mechanisms with which we are familiar were taken during the summer of 1979 at Flagosc, 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 fortified villages, not the most attractive to tourists but the wildest, nature in the pure state, vegetation, particularly forest, where fire has spared it, because fires are frequent and numerous in this area during the tourist 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 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 go back still further in time, we realize that Leslie Reid has always chosen as her subjects motifs the most lacking in picturesque quality, for example the series of four views of *Iles Calumet* recorded at four-hour intervals, the *Gull Lake* or the *Great Shining Water* series. In the catalogue of the exhibition titled *Quelques artistes canadiennes*¹, 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 colour? 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 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 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 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 Var 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 created by trees arching toward each other are only indefinite 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 alibi 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.)"²

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"³.

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 were clouded by the distance from memory and dreams"⁴.

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 what does it differ from the seen image? One must see 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.

1. Held at Ottawa in 1975.

2. Bernard Noel, *Klaphek - Derrière le miroir*, 1980.

3. Leslie Reid, Catalogue of the Xth Paris Biennale, 1977.

4. Jean-Luc Daval, *Skira Annual*, 1979.

(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 mechanics 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 illusory 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 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 weaver 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: the understatement of the artist in control of the influences 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,

mysticism — she felt drawn towards art and architecture at an early age. "It takes a childhood of a certain kind," she will answer, when asked about the main stabilizing factor in her life. Her family encouraged her and she went to England to study painting first, reluctantly abandoning her hopes to become an architect. Instead she entered the Applied Arts and Design department of the Royal College of Art in London.

When Helen Gregor reached Canada in 1951 she brought, as she is fond of saying, "my inheritance along with me and then applied it to this open landscape". This 'inheritance' includes the cultural influence of the Vienna Secession and the Bauhaus, and her degree from the Royal College of Art.

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. "Being 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 contemporaine" at the present time.



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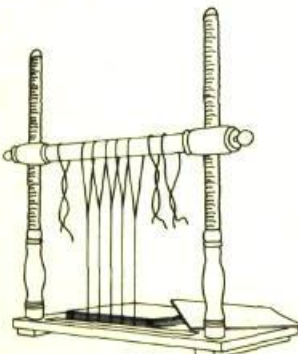
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