

Un besoin de couleur et de passion A Need for Colour and Passion

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UN BESOIN DE COULEUR ET DE PASSION

Le retour à la peinture de plusieurs artistes postconceptuels peut étonner. De même que le retour à la figuration de plusieurs peintres abstraits. Est-ce la photographie comme forme d'art qui provoque une telle commotion comme suite logique à une multitude de démarches qui ont épuisé nombre de solutions, ou bien est-ce le besoin de faire un travail sur la mémoire à l'aide d'images et d'objets qui véhiculent un acquis qui nous concerne tous? Est-ce plus simplement la nostalgie de la forme humaine à laquelle on désire donner une nouvelle image? On n'y voit pas encore très clair, mais la situation existe assurément et invite à la réflexion.

L'évolution se fait en ce moment entre le modernisme et le postmodernisme, générateur de courants qui perturbent la critique, mais qui annonce un renouveau sans nier la continuité. Quatre grandes expositions au cours de 1982: Attitudes – Concepts – Images, à Amsterdam, du 9 avril au 11 juillet; Avantgardia et Transavantgardia, à Rome, du 25 avril au 25 juillet; Biennale de Venise, du 13 juin au 12 septembre; Documenta 7, à Cassel, du 19 juin au 28 septembre, ont chacune à leur façon, avec de nombreux recoupements, fait le point de la situation complexe de la création artistique actuelle. En fin de septembre, la Biennale de Paris bouclera le tout et apportera une autre importante synthèse des tendances d'aujourd'hui.

Le néo-expressionnisme qui nous occupe dans le présent numéro rejoint lentement l'Amérique et provoque, à droite et à gauche, l'explosion d'un art figuratif qu'il ne faut pas confondre d'emblée avec le néo-expressionnisme, un phénomène d'art particulier qui a resurgi d'abord en Allemagne où il avait été actif dans les deux premières décennies du 20e siècle et qui a également enflammé l'Italie, où de très jeunes peintres lui donnent de multiples visages. Un peu partout, il suscite un art du graffiti qui voisine avec un art d'une perfection classique qu'on aurait traité facilement de pompier, il y a quelques années.

Le débat qu'il provoque porte sur des contenus (besoin d'exprimer une angoisse), aussi bien que sur des transformations de l'espace pictural. Information-support, réflexion-surface, une nouvelle partie se joue qui donne lieu à des propositions souvent délirantes. Les peintres, les vrais, les grands, auront, seuls, la chance de s'en sortir indemnes. Mais il faut comprendre les efforts qu'ils font pour tenter de retrouver la langue universelle. Ce que Rudi Fuchs, a admirablement perçu en réalisant Documenta 7, à Cassel: «Nous ne devons pas abandonner le grand désir de l'humanité qui est de construire le paradis, bien que nous n'ayons que des bribes à rapporter et des fables à écrire à ce sujet.»

Verrons-nous d'ici peu un ou deux peintres incarner l'essence du nouvel expressionnisme? Déjà, plusieurs d'entre eux poursuivent, à l'aide du langage de la couleur, parfois aussi virulente que celle des fauves, et à un rythme aussi mouvementé que celui des futuristes, de nouvelles définitions de l'espace pictural. Un style et une logique s'élaborent sous nos yeux, mais il faudra attendre l'étape où l'on oubliera le postmodernisme comme doctrine historique pour mieux reconnaître la richesse des dialectes qui s'établissent aujourd'hui.

Andrée PARADIS

TEXTS IN ENGLISH

A NEED FOR COLOUR AND PASSION

By Andrée PARADIS

The return to painting by many postconceptual artists can give rise to astonishment, just as does the return to figuration by many abstract painters. Is it photography as art form that causes such a commotion as logical sequence to a multitude of experiences that have put an end to numerous solutions, or else is it the need to do work on the memory with the aid of images and objects that convey a background that concerns all of us? Is it more simply nostalgia for the human form to which we wish to give a new image? We do not yet see this very clearly, but the situation certainly exists and invites our consideration.

At present, evolution is taking place between modernism and postmodernism, producing trends that disturb criticism, but which foretells a revival without denying continuity. There were four big exhibitions in 1982: *Attitudes—Concepts—Images* at Amsterdam from April 9 to July 11; *Avantgardia et Transavantgardia* at Rome from April 25 to July 25; *Venice Biennial* from June 13 to September 12; *Documenta 7* at Kassel from June 19 to September 28. Each in its own way, with much deduction, emphasizes the complex situation of current artistic creation. At the end of September, the Paris Biennial will sum up the whole and will provide another important synthesis of to-day's trends.

The neo-expressionism under consideration in this issue is slowly coming to America and is causing on both sides of the Atlantic a burst of figurative art that must not too quickly be confused with neo-expressionism, a particular phenomenon of art that has surged back again, first in Germany where it had been active during the first two decades of the twentieth century and which also inflamed Italy, where very young painters give it various expressions. In many places it inspired an art of graffiti very close to one of classical perfection that would easily have been called conventional a few years ago.

The discussion that it provokes turns on contents (the need to express an anguish), as well as on changes in pictorial space. *Information—Support, Reflection—Surface*, a new game is being played that gives place to often-delirious proposals. The real, great painters alone will be fortunate enough to come out of this unharmed. But the efforts they make to try to rediscover the universal language must be understood. This is what Rudi Fuchs admirably perceived while producing *Documenta 7*, at Kassel: "We must not abandon the great desire of humanity, which is to build a paradise, although we have only fragments to record and fables to write about this subject."

Shall we soon see one or two painters embody the essence of the new expressionism? Already many of them are following new definitions of pictorial space, with the help of the language of colour, sometimes as violent as that of the Fauves, and in a rhythm as animated as that of the Futurists. A style and a logic are developing under our eyes, but we must wait for the time when postmodernism as historical doctrine will be forgotten, in order that we may better recognize the richness of the dialects being established to-day.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

F.H. VARLEY: BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW

By Bente Roed COCHRAN

A massive exhibition both in depth and breath, which celebrates the centenary of Frederick Horsman Varley's birth, this retrospective exhibition of over 150 works in various media (sponsored by The National Museums of Canada and Canada Development Corporation) was organized by Christopher Varley, head curator and curator of Canadian art at the Edmonton Art Gallery. During 1981 and 1982 gallery spectators in Edmonton, Victoria, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto will have the opportunity of studying "the most extensive collection of the artist's works ever mounted", as the press release correctly states.¹

The exhibition by this gifted artist is important, as is the catalogue written by Christopher Varley. The exhibition, which includes letters, memorabilia along with pencil sketches, drawings, watercolours and oils on board or canvas, allows viewers to assess the oeuvre of F.H. Varley, who, along with Lawren Harris, is an elusive member of the Group of Seven. The exhibited works expose Varley as being the creator of both major and minor images; certainly the early watercolours from 1900 to 1909 are quite traditional and not very inspired.

Every undergraduate will recall from Canadian art history courses that, apart from Varley's war paintings and his *Stormy Weather*, *Georgian Bay*, he was hailed as the portrait artist of the Group of Seven. This exhibition incorporates many of his formal and informal portraits but also a significant percentage of pure landscapes. In time to come one of the show's main contributions undoubtedly will be this focus on Varley's landscapes as it is through this subject matter depicted in various media that he convincingly demonstrates his sensitivity and remarkable lyricism. Yet, it is also in the landscape scenes that Varley displays his least satisfying works, where the composition is fragmented, space unresolved, and colours mushy or lifeless. Such flaws in the artist's production have not been glossed over or left out of this exhibition, but one is apt to forgive and forget when viewing the remarkable Arctic watercolours or works inspired by the Lynn Valley environment.

Although I, an Edmontonian, am not a disciple of Clement Greenberg, I do agree with his 1963 assessment that

It is not so surprising... to find that what makes a visit to Canadian art in the present as well as the past, most generally rewarding is its landscape painting... Landscape painting is, where Canadian art continues, I feel

(allowing for Borduas, Bush, McKay), to make its most distinctive contribution. Even the landscapes of Varley, who devotes more attention to the figure and portrait, seem to me to surpass by far the rest of his work (two or three landscapes of his that I came on in the permanent collection of the Calgary Art Centre struck me as being among the very best things I have ever seen in Canadian art). Nothing in Canadian landscape painting contributes to the 'main stream' exactly; nothing in it amounts, that is, to major art. But this hardly dilutes my pleasure in its freshness and authenticity, or makes it less valuable. Least of all does it justify condescension. In praising it I make no allowance whatsoever.²



1. F.H. VARLEY
For What, 1919.
Oil on canvas; 147 cm x 182,8.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Several of Varley's landscape interpretations may be characterized as having 'glowing' colors (*Howe Sound*, c. 1927, *Autumn Haze*, 1940, *Cornfield at Sunset*, c. 1943) which link them to some nineteenth century realist painting but Varley's have a wider and more innovative range of colours. In other works Varley has selected hues much akin to those that we associate with Louis Comfort Tiffany's 'Favrile' glass such as rose, turquoise, blue-green, and silver (*Mist over Lynn, B.C.*, c. 1936-37, *Indians, Rice Lake*, 1936, *Lynn Valley—Mist*, c. 1941, and the two *Kootenay Lake* works from c. 1958 and c. 1959). These landscapes disclose Varley's colour explorations and his interest in creating a sense of the mystical, of something beyond the surface of mundaneness. This 'other-worldliness' is also carried into several more intimate and personal scenes such as the well known *Dhârâna*, 1932 and the charming window series with its sophisticatedly cropped composition. The catalogue includes a good description of Varley's emphasis on and belief in colour, acknowledging his Buddhist interests and his intuitive decisions for use of colour. He is quoted as believing that the "colours of the earth" are "lusty" and that "pale violet" is "aesthetic".³

Some of the British Columbia landscapes, although painted in the oil medium, appear more akin to pastels because of the overall quality of surface and hues, such as *Coast Mountain Forms*, 1929 and *Dawn*, 1929 which are also characterized by soft lighting and little contrast in their formal definition.

The watercolours painted in 1938, including sketches from the Arctic, stand out because of their unified composition, their correct amount of movement appropriate to the subject matter, and their stimulating combination of sombre and fresh colours; *Arctic Sketch No. 1*, 1938 is an excellent exponent of this group.