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The Necessity of Impassioned Arguments, René Pierre Allain, Julian Pretto Gallery, New York and Gallery Moos, Toronto, 1991; Laurence Breton, Workscene Gallery, Toronto, 1991

Ihor Holubizky

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QUÉBEC

Richard Mill et la Figure
Galerie Madeleine Lacerte, Québec, du 27 novembre au 21 décembre 1991

Richard Mill présentait huit œuvres à la Galerie Madeleine Lacerte. Sept tableaux de format horizontal, dont deux intégrant des éléments tridimensionnels, et une estampe réalisée quelque mois plus tôt.

On retrouve encore dans les tableaux de Mill la couleur de la toile, du support qui par l'adjonction de tonalités harmoniquement liées renvoie la réflexion du spectateur au processus créatif. Cette préoccupation qui, chez le peintre, avait pris des proportions exclusives vers la fin des années soixante-dix situant sa production dans le courant minimaliste, américain surtout, de cette époque, est doublée aujourd'hui de la notion de figure. Alors qu'antérieurement le champ pictural n'était autre que lui-même – champ purement abstrait ou renvoyant à des mondes de formes non visibles à l'œil nu, on ne peut s'empêcher de voir à l'heure actuelle un premier plan herbeux ou sablonneux, selon le cas, derrière lequel se dessinent des traces de ciel ou de mur. Bien que lesdits champs font sentir la planéité de la surface picturale, l'effet de la couleur appliquée par contraste agit définitivement.

Malgré l'absence de titre (ce sont des numéros), les peintures renvoient maintenant à de la figuration. On peut percevoir un nu féminin dans une des œuvres, une barque fendant la vague dans une autre, un mur dans une troisième mais, il ne faut pas pour autant croire que l'artiste a abandonné la transcription des sèmes plastiques. L'ambiguïté entre le représenté et le représentant est effectivement constante. C'est par la touche large et plate de matière acrylique mate que le tableau est constitué principalement et par des espaces dans lesquels il y a plus de matière, surtout dans les hauts de tableaux. Et, lorsqu'il y a des traces de pinceaux qui dessinent davantage comme dans l'œuvre où on peut voir un nu, des sortes de colonnes en bois nous sortent du tableau et font dévier notre vision sur l'espace environnant. Des éléments sculpturaux viennent d'apparaître donc, dans le travail de Richard Mill ce qui, lié à la figure, a pour heureux effet d'apporter une note d'humour et de même un peu de poésie (RM 1353 1989). Il se passe plus de choses ainsi maintenant et la volonté de définition des éléments constitutifs de la peinture si chère aux minimalistes est conservée.

Un des tableaux (RM 1359 1991) qui a sensiblement la même problématique que l'estampe exposée, comprend dans le haut, des touches larges et horizonta-



Richard Mill, Sans titre 1352 no 2. Acrylique sur toile ; 193 cm x 213 cm.

les « derrière un champ ». C'est un mur qui est connoté. Au bas, des lettres forment le mot « sourd ». Ainsi les figures qui apparaissent pourraient être interprétées comme étant des symboles mais ce qu'elles nous apprennent par leur matérialité, n'est pas étranger à la signification ; le mur qu'on perçoit est peint en deux tons distincts ce qui montre un dédoublement. La division en deux est celle projetée de l'artiste. Suite à la lecture de cette « forme de fond » qu'on pourrait appeler l'impuissance, le spectateur est invité à sortir du tableau à l'aide du mot sourd situé au bas qui, dans un autre registre – celui du langage, signifie. Ici le mot peint peut-être lu comme un symbole (il l'est au sens sémiotique intrinsèquement) du langage et, par ce qu'il énonce, « sourd » redétermine le mur en y ajoutant des idées de non-entendement, de blocage, de stase et par son pouvoir arbitraire renvoie à la sensation auditive en rapport à la peinture.

Les lettres sont colorées cependant... Si le fait de mettre telles touches colorées dans le sens horizontal au-dessus de plusieurs traits minces verticaux nous fait voir une plage de sable, ce n'est pas de ma faute, semble nous dire l'artiste qui par son besoin d'expression et de définition des moyens de la peinture n'en crée pas moins des illusions très expressives. Un expressionnisme certes étudié qui s'agit parmi certaines règles du monde visualiste et laisse, toutefois, transparaître des éléments de son inconscient. Cela ne nous empêche pas, nous spectateurs, de rêver à ces espaces suggérés de rivage, d'océan, d'amour...

TORONTO

The Necessity of Impassioned Arguments

René Pierre Allain, Julian Preto Gallery, New York and Gallery Moos, Toronto, 1991; Laurence Breton, Workscene Gallery, Toronto, 1991



René-Pierre Allain, *Donjon number 2*, 1990. Plaster compound, burlap and steel; 52 in x 54 in x 6 in. Gallery Moos.

René Pierre Allain and Laurence Breton have, in their respective work, traversed visual disciplines to locate some truths about the nature of art and the necessity for making objects, and they have, in due course, offered impassioned arguments. These concerns, within the context of modernist and social credos, are not unique in themselves – nor is the attempt to keep art potent at the end of this century. But Allain and Breton approach the “task” with an understanding of the pitfalls of high style, irony and rhetoric. A secondary issue, which I will deal with as a postscript, considers the effect of physical dislocation from a home base (for both artists, this is Montreal), and the consequences of cultural displacement.

Allain’s critical journey began with architectural-archaeological installation work, in partnership with Spanish-born artist Miguel Berlanga, from 1980 to 1984. Berlanga’s background in painting and Allain’s in photography was an unlikely combination for their endeavours, known collectively as A & B Associates, when both were based in Ottawa. While the appearance of architecture within the vocabulary of art by French architect-artists Anne and Patrick Poirier constructs an idyllic condition of classicism and the metropolis, A & B Associates proposed another perspective and speculation. This work culminated in *The Core Island Project* (exhibited at the London Regional Art Gallery in 1984), a ruined finale and complex of barely identifiable mega-

structures seen at the end of their function (or history). Possible meanings lay between the nostalgia of historical painting – the depiction of ruins – and the unspeakable in Modernist architecture – its demise. The counterpoint to the Poirier's idealized sentiment, a "virginal" utopia, is the eyesore used to describe the wreckage of Modernism. For A & B Associates, it was the enlightenment of decay.

Allain moved to New York in 1984 to complete his M. F. A. and he continues to live and work there. His "constructed" paintings, beginning in 1988, pose an indexing paradox. They are "painterly" in their invocation of colour and geometry (that aspect of geometry which has been ascribed to reductivist painting and its successors), but refer to painting through other sources – architecture and diagrammatic views. They are delivered as object-signs, framed literally and figuratively, in massed and constructed steel.

At this point Allain departs from the non-referential proposition, admired and propounded by mid-century modernist painting. The inserts are "constructed" with plaster and pigment on burlap, and have specific sources that are, as Allain describes, "anchored in the social world" – based on banners, flags, patches or military insignia – a shorthand sign system within the profession to denote rank, service, etc. In other works Allain refers to military architecture, such as the *Keep* or *Donjon*, which is the main tower or stronghold of a medieval castle. Unlike the patch or insignia, which can operate within the recognized signs of abstraction, the simplicity of the floor plate or ground plan suggests function-charged with history, the architecture of control... and power.

The frames do not necessarily function as logical extensions of the insert. Neither are they complex in terms of engineering, but evoke a physical and metaphorical closure. The scrutiny of both suggests the next proposition – one that leads further away from the mystique of painting. The fresco inserts have no evidence of brushwork (being laid in with a knife) or the obvious dependency of paint to surface, or figure to ground. Despite the delicate surfaces, they are as resolute as the steel frames. As the physicality of these works is revealed to the viewer, the assumptions we may have held about their nature collapses, and we start looking again.

Allain has stated that "constructing a painting is way to engage the tradition of painting while staying outside of it. I am not trying to defend or reinvent

painting... but rather to come to terms with it."

Laurence Breton, also born in Montreal, studied at the University of Quebec. She has lived and worked in Toronto for the past five years. Her career has been shorter than Allain's, but nonetheless provides some convergences, in the struggle with convention and the relationship of painting to sculpture. Her two-dimensional works, from 1987-88, were as much surveys of material as painting – a way of transcribing a real image onto the ideal space of painting. Her method has been to apply tar onto canvas. Working on the floor of her studio, the tar follows the line and grain of the wood planks – taking on its character as imprint. In many of these pieces, Breton added structural elements with pressure-treated wood. (A chemical process gives it a distinctive green patina, not unlike oxidized copper.) Unlike Allain, whose frames become overt signs, Breton's introduction of "real materials" serves as a punctuation or spatial interval – here again, within the vocabulary of architecture.

Her approach to painting (like Allain's) is not so much invention as a topological reclamation. In a spatial reorientation, Breton takes the floor impression and transports its reading as *wall* or *portal*. A group of wall pieces in her recent Workscene Gallery exhibition (1991), entitled *Structuring Self*, were reduced in area to the point where the painterly aspect threatened to completely disappear. These works come to rest as objects – determined by their constructed appearance, but mediated by the subtle monochrome of unpainterly materials. The shapes are not manufactured, or even distinguishable as some version of a larger, real world counterpart. They establish a determined presence out of a transformation of material properties. (I emphasize the transformation because tar and pressure treated wood has little intrinsic value or beauty. They are, fundamentally, cheap and graceless.) Breton sometimes introduces a minute portion of colour (red) which, again, serves as a spatial punctuation and not necessarily as a painterly reference.

Breton's elusive object appeared in a series of works on paper titled *Father's Secret* (1986). In the centre of each, flanked by a veil of tar and oil stick, she drew a built-object containing a secret – a secret in the sense that its function was not evident, but significant in its appearance at the brink of recognition.

This show was dominated, in contrast, by a large, untitled structural work. Where the wall pieces rest

between illusory space and objecthood, this sculpture is unquestionably real. Constructed of regular sections of unfinished plywood, the immediate reference is the minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd and Ronald Bladen. Breton's work, however, is not an "empty vessel" and has an ulterior purpose that, like Allain's chromatic schemata, is grounded in the social world. It is a wheel, unfunctional for transport, possibly a water wheel, which also describes the transfer of movement into energy.

This reality, of material and geometry, also carries with it a mystic aura. There is a Biblical reference – Ezekiel's wheel, and the appearance of the divine sign – or a Sisyphaean condition that cannot be cancelled. Sited between the columns and scraping the ceiling of the gallery, it appears to be connected to some other unseen object – a vast metaphorical machine, in which the wall pieces become a schematic counterpart.

Postscript

Several years ago, I co-curated a travelling exhibition of work by Franco-Ontarian artists, *Les Temps*. In the catalogue introduction I suggested a dilemma in giving a cultural-political reading to any of the selected work. Political art (in the broadest sense of the word) can only arise out of the belief that a society, culture (or segment thereof) was under siege – the conditions of war. It may have been possible to find such rhetorical work, at the time, but in an open-call, juried exhibition, no such proposition was in evidence. Consequently, no conclusion could be reached about a Franco-Ontarian sensibility. More recently, in a conversation with expatriate Russian artist Alex Melamid, he recounted a story of cultural bonding. After years of self-imposed exile in New York, he had the opportunity to view contemporary art that had just arrived from the Soviet Union. Walking into the room, he saw the paintings stacked and facing the wall. Melamid said there was no need to go farther. He knew they were Russian by the smell.

Taking into account embellishment, through senti-



Laurence Breton, *Untitled (Wheel)*, 1991. Plywood; 10 in x 6 ft diameter. Workscene Gallery.

ment, it is possible to propose that art has an ingrained cultural identity. Having visited studios in Moscow (see *ETC*, no. 5, *Myths and Misses: Making Art in Moscow*) and having seen the Soviet-American exhibition *10 + 10* at the Albright-Knox Gallery, I became aware of the diminishing evidence of such an imprint. The works (a few of which I had seen in the artists' studios in Moscow) had entered the international forum and were what one could expect from this discourse – illustrated in monthly magazines and displayed on dealers' walls.

It is equally unclear what effect living outside Quebec has had on the work of Allain and Breton. Allain's relationship to the tradition of geometric abstraction, of Molinari, Tousignant and Gaucher, for example, is cursory. His concerns can be compared to those of the late Louis Comtois, but Comtois' "radical" move came when he lived in New York. Breton appears to have less of a connection. One that comes to mind is Ontario artist Paul Collins, and the work he was doing at the same time I first saw Breton. But Collins does, as he did then, live and work in Paris.

Stalemate. The battle lines may not, in fact, be drawn along the borders of a distinct society, but are, perhaps, to be found in the indistinct international fields of ideas.

IHOR HOLUBIZKY