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 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, 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.

Rene Berger, for one, attributes the phenomenon of international influence to the expansion of the means of communication and transport 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 naturalistic and the artistic — finally found within itself the necessary resources to enable it to smooth 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.

Rafael Regueiro and Pierre Restany have 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 Grandi)

LESLIE REID'S INGENUOUS LOOK

By Georges BOUDAILLE

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 that's needed away by hand. This work lasts weeks for a single image and the leap between nature and 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, unpersuasive 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 microscope, are familiar were taken
during the summer of 1979 at Flagosc, 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, partic­
ularly forest, where fire has scared it, because fires are frequent and
constant level, as if her action consisted of reducing them while
baking in the sun. Thus we can see 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 concep­
tual, 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.
In which, in the form of scarcely-perceptible bands of colour,
nothing is concentrated in a small space. 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
qualities, the emptiness, the large spaces, the absence of objects,
the void, 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 concep­
tual, always caressed but never grasped.

The cutting up of the forms, the vibration born of the
mechanics with which we are familiar were taken
in Leslie Reid's implacable technical procedures results in creating an illusion of distance, of remoteness. When Leslie Reid was staying with Robert Filliou, a French artist.

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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 resem­
blance. (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 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 evocation dedicated to technology having torn man from nature and
his sight of the landscape having translated this lack by nostalgia;
his eye was dazzled by the distance from which came the
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 art for art’s sake is the scale of measurement, 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
chitects and clients and to her family and friends. "I have never
lived in an illusory world," she says, "I am 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 Lind­
gren, 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 ex­
presses a unification of all things seen, felt and experienced. Ver­
ically-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 back­
ground, the artist using her materials for what they are. To Gregor, 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,
“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 approach to a chosen theme is striking.

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 private 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.