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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 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 in 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 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 the continuity of a tradition, sincere, pure, innocent, but not naive. This exhibition could have been the object of elaborate reflections on the work itself and on digestion and orientation. Two decades from the year 2000, one can neither deny nor dispute the fundamental influences in motion in the world, and not only those of successive avant-garde trends.

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 Circis: 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 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 influence 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 has no value if it has not been able to identify the subject of a current painting.

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 ingenious in the sense of sincre, pure, innocent, but not naive. This exhibition could have been the object of an extensive work described and could have been the subject of current art by most observers, but we rightly wonder if this was so. Visitors offened 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 reflection on eye contact with 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 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 linkships 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. A contemporary art of decorative purposes, at least. 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 insignifiant 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 subjectively 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 major objective 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.

Matterially and concretely, a painting by Leslie Reid, for instance *Var II: Sauvage*, is the artist's reproduction of 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 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, decoupage with a blade or with a solvent that permits the production of a kind of stencil, therefore a perfect eveness of tone, a stencil not used to multiply, as is usual, but which is used only once before being destroyed, pasted flat with another one, then cut through with 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 microscope or the telescope, are familiar were taken during the summer of 1979 at Flagones, 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, sometimes decorating the land with a last 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, the fossil, the unnamed rock, the hilly loneliness, the shores of a lake, the Gulf Lake or the Great Shining Water series. In the catalogue of the exhibition titled Quelques artistes canadiens, 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. 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.

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 became able to understand from a certain distance, maps 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 the points of the Var "surfeit"? In any case, 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 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 discipline and flexibility. 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 woman 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 serious statements of the contemporary weaver can only be understood by the weaver 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,
mythology — 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, 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.

"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'État à la Culture, Mobilier National in Paris, this may be the only "tapisserie faite en l'honneur et pour célébrer la mémoire d'une célebrité contemporaine" at the present time.