TEXTS IN ENGLISH

CRITICISM ON GUARD
By André PARADIS

In the face of the scope of the questions raised by the development of technology, we cannot remain indifferent to the changes taking place in the domain of communication. Art, particularly, is affected by its relationships with all new forms of technology. Does this dictate means of expression while relying on repetitive mechanical logic or is it manipulated by the users who seek to maximize its possibilities of profit by difusing aesthetic values? In other terms, is technology servant or master in a period when art, aided by additional supports, is rushing toward other conquests? The debate is an open one; it is the fight for content which, until now, has received little consideration, so much has the economic, financial and political part dominated the cultural sector in the establishment of new technologies. This is also the most important change of direction in art since the appearance of modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. How then shall we discuss content without taking into account the important transition that has been going on for some years between modernism and post-modernism?

In the United States criticism has not definitively established what it understands by post-modernism. It attempts to define its nature: is it an idea, a movement, a transitory stage, the beginning of another historic period or else simply a myth? Europe is not convinced that this involves anything but a paroxysm or a pastiche: it sees here especially a North-American preoccupation. Certainly modernity has lost some of its impetus, and Jürgen Habermas is right in declaring that it dead, but dominant. This will surely entail a period of settlements of account but will also make it possible to establish the evaluation of all the excellence that modernism was able to represent.

A recent publication, The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture1, seeks to focus on all these matters that deeply interest post-modernist culture. Hal Foster, originator of the publication, assembled ten essayists in a spirit of debate, in order to bring out certain strong points of a post-modernism of resistance. In his preface he establishes that a post-modernism of opposition is a counter-current which questions not only the official modernist culture that we find protected by our institutions, on the walls of our museums or encumbering the storage rooms, but which is particularly opposed to whatever of modernist lags behind in post-modernism; that is, a way of accepting the promoting of everything new as excellent in itself.

And so it must be understood that there are many kinds of modernism; and that the type which the Foster group supports almost unanimously, in spite of the different points of view of the authors, stresses interrogation rather than exploitation of cultural codes and exploration rather than non-consideration of political and social issues.

Among these authors, Jean Baudrillard is not optimistic when he speaks of the rapture of communication that condemns modern man to the fascination of the screen and the loss of a critical distance. He is particularly troubled about the transfer of the human scale to a system of nuclear matrices, of miniaturization that limits the person to his intellect and a genetic code and that also revolutionizes the notion of a treat useless time: "the instantaneousness of communication has miniaturized our exchanges in a sequence of moments". He states that all functions have been abolished in one single dimension, that of communication; all secrets, spaces, fields of action destroyed to the benefit of a new ineffable obsession, and he emphasizes that promiscuity, saturation, extremist creareay create a climate of obscenity that fascinates and which must be endured. Doubtless, we must look for a more comforting view of "what can be a part in technologism, at least contain it, perhaps even reduce it", according to René Berger, who is also concerned about the effect of technological changes and about the importance of content; he does not wish to make of this a topic of conflict but of "attachment to the value of what art is one of the manifestations and which can help us to put technology in its place and technologism at a distance".

"Whether aesthetic or ethical by nature, value reverts to the fact that action is not the only modality of our existence. Contemplation, dreaming, meditation, interior research, the need to decide, to sacrifice oneself, all of these are tendencies in the self that cannot carry much weight in the scale of our society enwrapped of competition and profit... At the time when humanity and our planet are threatened by the nuclear revolution, the ultimate triumph of technology, nothing is more urgent than to save our imagination from total surrender by breathing into it the sense of respect and wonder. Still more must we learn to look clearly". And we must hope to make it possible for art to play its part to the full.

Whether it be in an engraving, a painting or a drawing, this message is conveyed in an impressive production. If one lines up the four hundred paintings and drawings of large size (55,6 cm by 76,2 cm) in the Kaddish series, the world of the concentration camp is revealed to our eyes. Each of these works is complete in itself. They record half-breaths, sighs of suffocation and posthumous cries: "I have represented only the imprisoned, paralyzed being splits, is reflected, is extended and takes more room under the pressure of a diabolical obsession, sustained by an impeccable technique, in a purified interior world, Jan Menses painted, drew and outlined the paper of the Klippoth series comprising five hundred new works2. These are a continuation of the death theme and are caught in the abyss of agony, a strange atmosphere. This research into the transformation of matter extracts white from blackened leaves and gives the executioner and the victim. This moral conflict is without outcome: the elements of evil are the rulers. Klippoth also signifies envelopes, peel, bark or refuse, debris. The spiritual practice consists of working on the destruction of its wrappings. In order to allow the flashing forth of the Divine Light impressed within each human being. This is the work done by the Tsadikim. It is by means of this information that drawings of very complex architecture strip away the elements of evil. These places harbour futurist, frantic, roboticized persons who are sometimes even exposed to radiation; alone or in reciprocal action, they are decided, abandoned to themselves, bound hand and foot in the face of death. The imprisoned, paralyzed being splits, is reflected, is extended and takes more room under a stylized and geometrized light. A flashing, progressive breach materializes under our eyes: an appearance of transformation watches the viewer.

Mensen remains equal to himself. The many surfaces of lines of different tonality and size are occupied by miniature spheres, comparable to leafless visors. Apparitions of regular form, like counterbalancing agents of pollution or flying objects like knives cross the parts and the persons. "Each work has a scent of obsessive strangeness" (Jan Menses). The fascination of a formal, sensitive and spiritual approach... The viewer must grasp these black, go through his own fears and meet this liberating light on the second plane. In its complexity the Tikkoune series well represents this optimistic path for a monastic elite, by itself alone.


(Translation by Mildred Grandi)

JAN MENSES
BLACK TO AN INFINITE DEGREE
By Stella SASSEVILLE

An intense obsession and a flawless technique create in Menses' work an unusual atmosphere, strongly marked by the haunting thought of death and a profound desire for messianic freedom.

Whether it be the series of works from the sixties or those more recent1, the canvases of Jan Menses invite all views, from the meditative to the ecstatic. The death theme runs throughout, and the production carries us into a slow, progressive series, continuous in geometric and lyrical forms, organized in expressionist figurative, in tones of black. Imbued with the past, Menses' gaze reflects an indelible image; still and always present, this image breathes on fleeting time and imparts a Hebraic message. This work clads in black, European in manner, differs from his Quebec contemporaries, is conspicuous and travels alone. A divine light shines through the whole of his oeuvre.

One must refer to the Bible in order to understand the spirit of the œuvre. The titles are Hebraic terms; therefore the parabolic meaning can signify many things. Kaddish, Klippoth, Tikkoune make reference, in cabalistic language, to dehumanization, to the destruction of man by man, to repentance and to atonement.

JAN MENSES. Kaddath Series 636. 61 cm x 81,3. Oil/linen on canvas. (Phot. S. Brott).
Motherwell (born 1915 in Aberdeen, Washington), painter, collagist, printmaker, art historian and editor, is well known in Canada where his influence on younger artists was particularly strong during the 1950’s. With its unique fusion of refined lyricism, acute form-sense and calligraphic ease of line, Motherwell’s abstract imagery lent itself to imitation more readily than is commonly supposed. It is our loss that this exceptional show will not cross the border to provide the kind of perspective that is difficult to gain from textbooks.

The artist’s vocation as a writer and critic, his facility in communicating the central concerns of modernism with clarity and conviction, was part of his early success. An outspoken internationalist with a thorough knowledge of Western history and culture, he formed the vital link between European expatriate painters in New York and a small circle of American sympathizers during the war years, when such a rapprochement was of crucial importance. In his words: “When I started out, all but a few were against abstraction painting. The art world, as it then, hated it. But the university world was very interested in it. Since I knew how to talk about it (I had originally been trained in philosophy) I was, by default, the office of spokesman for the Abstract Expressionists, especially in the university world.”

Motherwell was twenty-seven when he abandoned university studies (and his doctoral thesis on Deleuze’s journals) in favour of painting. Two years later, in 1944, he had his first major solo exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in New York, and was appointed first director, then general editor of “The Documents of 20th Century Art” series. In this capacity, he introduced writings by outstanding figures in art and literature (Apollinaire, Mondrian, Hans Arp, Max Ernst and others) often translated into English from European texts. The slim, sparsely illustrated paperbacks reached a wide public long before New American Painting and the New York style par excellence began to attract world attention.

This retrospective exhibition concentrates on major works selected to “reveal the origins, nuances and stylistic changes with which the artist has dealt in his substantial and long career”. Included are paintings from the principal series such as Spanish Elegies; Open; In Plato’s Cave; The Blue Painting Lesson; Jo t’ame, and A la Pintura.

Robert Motherwell: Art Charged with Feeling

By Helen Duffy

A major Robert Motherwell retrospective exhibition, arranged by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, opened in Buffalo, N.Y. on October 1, 1983. It will travel to four American museums before ending its tour at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, from December 7, 1984 to February 3, 1985. This is the artist’s tenth retrospective in twenty-four years, and it brings together ninety-two oil and acrylic paintings and collages on canvas, board and paper, created between 1941 and 1982. The conventional scalfolding of such presentations has become perhaps the most suitable framework for assessing the broad repertory of his oeuvre, which calls for periodical summing up on a grand scale.

Once the youngest member of the group whose name he coined, The New York School, Motherwell is— with Lee Krasner and Willem De Kooning—one of the few still active key figures from the 1950’s. One of Motherwell’s first superb collages...
The Voyage, 1949, followed by The Voyage Ten Years after, 1951, inspired by Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau ivre” suggests the artist’s own spiritual voyage through troubled seas of emotion (“J’ai vu quelquefois ce que l’homme a cru voir”). The luminosity of the canvases in the Blue Painting Lesson seems to capture the perfect moment when “l’azur et l’onde communient”, or, put more specifically by Motherwell when he says, “if there is a blue that I might call mine, it is simply a blue that feels warm, something that cannot be accounted for chemically or technically, but only as a state of mind”.

Colour for him is never abstract, always used symbolically and associatively, ranging from the mysteries of black to the rich ochres, gritty yellows, vermilion, scarlet, and, less frequently, a cool turquoise and ultramarine blue.

In this exhibition, the intimate and often autobiographical aspect of his collages plays an important part. Built up in flat planes with torn, rather than scissors-cut paper, they suggest drawing by tearing”. He first began to experiment – with Jackson Pollock – in 1942, and soon “collage somehow became a joy, and has been ever since. Also, it has another function: sometimes I get stuck in painting, as everybody does, and often, after shifting to collage for a time, I may resolve the problem painting I return to it”. The collages counter-balance the epic scale of his recent works, such as the magical Face of Man (1944-55); In His Own Words. Brochure publ. on the occasion of the exhibition by the Albright Knox Art Gallery, 1983.