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By Andrée 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 logics, or is it manipulated by the users who seek to maximize its possibilities by diffusing 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 section 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 a idea, a movement, a transitory stage, an beginning of another historic period or else simply a parody or a pastiche; it sees here especially a North-American preoccupation. Certainly modernity has lost some of its impetus, and Jurgen Habermas is right in declaring it dead, but dominant. This will surely entail a period of settlements of account but will 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 Culture, 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 post-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 structures.

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 treasured 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 social criticism, and he emphasizes that promiscuity, saturation, extremist cretery 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 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 which 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 love, to believe, to sacrifice oneself, all of these are tendencies which can carry much weight in the scale of our society enamoured 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 we must 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-breath, sighs of suffocation and posthumous cries: "I have represented only one of the facets of evil". The works disclose to us a long interior progress; this is a denunciation, a commentary and a social criticism, a fragment of an atomic future. Kaddish means a sanctification of the innocent, victims of Nazism barbarism. It is also a prayer for the dead, "a cry of hope, of unimpaired faith in present and future life, hurled toward heaven by us mortals". Kaddish is a series of extraordinary drawings and pictures.

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 works. 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 trees 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 imprisoned 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, robotized persons who are sometimes even exposed to radiation; alone in reciprocal action, they are divided, 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, progressivve breach materializes under our eyes: an appearance of transformation watches the viewer.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

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 recent, the canvases of Jan Menses invite all views, from the meditative to the ecstatic. The artist's 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 the painting time and imparts a Hebraic message. This black in clack in black European in manner, differs from his Quebec contemporaries, is conspicuous and travels alone. A divine light shines through the whole of his œuvre.

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, Tikkoun reference, in cabalistic language, to dehumanization, to the destruction of man by man, to repentance and to atonement.

Menses remains equal to himself. The many surfaces of lines of different tonality and size are occupied by miniature spheres, comparable to baleful visitors. 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, serene and spiritual approach... The viewer must grasp these blacks, go through his own fears and meet this liberating light on the second plane. In its complexity the Tikkoun series well represents this optimistic path for a monastic elite, by itself alone.
During this exhibition the heedful visitor could thrill to this light of repentence. The continuity and the flow of each theme blend; it is at the sight of this ensemble and through Menses that the shadow of this darkened out with us. "Each time that man purifies himself, he brings back to its true place an atom of uncreated light and advances the messianic time when the divine person will be fully revealed.'

Tikkoune is the explosion of life of the black, a spark of transformation of metaphysical matter. This ensemble of the lines of the ruler has completely disappeared. For the second reading, this time on observing the whites, is a luminous cluster. The gestures of the painter, the brush strokes and the lines of the ruler have completely disappeared. It is as though the artist twists up each hair in the grain of the paper and penetrates it. The surface of the maté blacks offers the moment of repose for the eye. "All these reflections of silhouettes draw human prototypes in the image of God", says Jan Menses.

The expression of his work is a delight for the eye, a light of concentration nurtured in the ethereal fire of poetry, the quivering reality of a cellular memory, traced in the meaning of black. The gestures of the artist, the brush strokes and the lines of the ruler have completely disappeared. It is as though the artist twists up each hair in the grain of the paper and penetrates it. The surface of the maté blacks offers the moment of repose for the eye. "All these reflections of silhouettes draw human prototypes in the image of God", says Jan Menses.

Robert Motherwell was twenty-seven when he abandoned university studies (and his doctoral thesis on Delacroix’s journals) in favour of painting. Two years later, in 1944, he had his first mature 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 Charm 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 principal series such as Spanish Elegies; Open; In Plato’s Cave; The Blue Painting Lesson; Je t’aime, and A la Pintura.

1. Robert MOTHERWELL
   Acrylic on canvas; 121 cm x 121.9.
   Coll. Douglas S. Cramer, Los Angeles, California.
   (Phot. Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

To Motherwell, subject matter has always been crucial, and creating in open-ended series is a ritualized experience that cannot be confused with so-called "serial painting." A particular preoccupation is an expression of a recapitulation of key motifs over an indefinite period, imitating a lifetime. Rather like a literary work that builds a network of incidental tales around a central plot, Motherwell’s series appear to be cyclic, while moving through endless levels of meaning and inter-connection. The artist offers clues in the titles he chooses, trusting the viewer to see the point.

For example, Riverrun, 1972, connects like River Liffey, 1975, with the Irish world of James Joyce: the Liffey runs through his native Dublin, and "riverrun" happens to be the first word in the first sentence of "Finnegan’s Wake", the never-ending story whose conclusion -- the last paragraph -- is its beginning, closing the cycle.

The monumental Elegies to the Spanish Republic are free from the painful nostalgia of an exile remembering the vanished past. According to Motherwell, they are, unlike the rest of his work, "public." The Elegies reflect the internationalist in me, interested in the historical forces of the 20th century, with strong feelings about the conflicting forces in it." They originated in a small illustration the artist did for a poem by Harold Rosenberg in 1948, not anticonvictional, but in the form of a comet, that would come in every thirty years and result in over 140 paintings. The basic shapes that dominate the Elegies -- brooding arrays of black, rough-edged oval forms enossed by ragged vertical beams -- attracted more attention than most of his other seminal images.

Motherwell was twenty-one in 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began, and the tragedy of this conflict and its aftermath affected him deeply. In the Elegies we recognize the essence of Federico García Lorca’s "Lament", death At Five in the Afternoon (title of a 1949 painting): an embracing metaphor for human afflication and suffering whatever its source and form, beyond the contrast between life and death, and their interrelation. The last of the Elegies, begun in 1975 (the year Generalissimo Franco died and parliamentary democracy was restored in Spain) was finished, almost simultaneously with a free-floating, shattered shadow figure entitled Spanish King, in 1976.

Motherwell travelled and studied extensively throughout his life. In his œuvre we discover the aesthetic consistency of his emotional and intellectual links with the Hispanic, Latin and Celtic cultures that are the wellsprings of his art. His so-called Francophilia or Mediterraneanism has never been an acquired taste: "My father had a vineyard in the Napa Valley (California). I grew up in a landscape not at all dissimilar to Provence, or to the central plateau of Spain, or to parts of Italy and the Mediterranean basin. In such landscapes, the colours are local, intense, and depict ages where drawing and black are black. The hills of California are ochre half the year".

His largeness of vision, his preoccupation with polarities -- being and void; black and white; nightmare and daydream, Jour la maison, nuit la rue (title of a 1957 canvas) strives passionately to connect the present with a past and a future and "to put into image the effect it produces" (peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit) in the spirit of Mallarmé. The distinctive rhetoric and the counteridiolic concepts of 19th century modernism as expressed by Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Delacroix continue to resonate in Motherwell’s art and thought.

Matisse chose Mallarmé as his first subject when he began to illustrate poetry in the early 1930s. One of Motherwell’s first superb collages

Translation by Mildred Grand

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 periodic 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 of an Abstract Expressionist movement that included fellow artists such as (in alphabetical order) William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith and Clyfford Still, all no longer living. He stands at the center of a circle that has not closed and his art today springs from the same inexhaustible resources of feeling and sensitivity, kept alive by his ideology and attitude.

1. Presented at the Michel Tétreault gallery, Montreal, October, 1983.
2. David Benssebahb, in an article Tribuno juive, July 1983.

(Phot. Albright-Knox Art Gallery)
Thé Voyage, 1940, 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 realistically 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, vermillion, scarlet, and, less frequently, a cool ultramarine or ultramarine green.

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 painting problem when I return to it.”

The collages counter-balance the epic scale of his recent works, such as the magical Face of the Night (for Octavio Paz) 1981, and The Hollow Men 1983 (title of a poem by T.S. Eliot). Both paintings evoke Octavio Paz’s words, restating Mallarmé’s: “What the work of art says is not to be found in its manifest content, but rather in what it says without actually saying it: what is behind the forms, the colours, the words…?”. Motherwell’s œuvre is as masterly a demonstration of this concept as any living painter could set forth.