

CANADIAN ART TODAY



A STUDIO INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION

Les Plasticiens

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In February of 1955 four young Montreal painters exhibiting together issued a manifesto which they simply signed: *Les Plasticiens*. In it, Louis Belzile, Fernand Toupin, Jean-Paul Jérôme, and Jauran (pseudonym of the art-critic Rodolphe de Repentigny) stated their general aims: 'The significance of the work of the plasticiens lies with the purifying of the plastic elements and of their order; their destiny lies typically in the revelation of perfect forms in a perfect order.' The adoption of such purist formal preoccupations implied for the Plasticiens a denial of any conscious symbolic significance to their paintings: 'The plasticiens are totally indifferent, at least consciously so, to any possible meanings to their paintings.' The manifesto also included aphorisms on the truth and integrity of art. Although they did not specifically say so, the Plasticiens sought to express themselves in an abstract-geometric vocabulary and saw Mondrian's neoplasticism as its main source.

To understand what such a programme meant in Montreal in 1955 one has to remember that automatist painting had been the prevalent style of a group of artists around Paul-Emile Borduas (1905-60) roughly between 1945 and 1954. Borduas, influenced by the surrealist writings of André Breton, had experimented with what he called 'surrealist abstraction' in 1942 and through his teaching at l'Ecole du Meuble in Montreal had influenced a number of young artists among which were Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcel Barbeau, and Fernand Leduc, into experiments in automatic abstractions.

The Automatistes group held its first exhibition in 1946. In 1948, Borduas published *Refus global* (total refusal), an artistic and political manifesto which called for total freedom of expression in art and for an end to the stifling social and political atmosphere of Quebec. *Refus global* was signed by fifteen other artists. It had wide repercussion and resulted in Borduas' eviction from his teaching post.

Automatism had of course been defined, much before the publishing of the manifesto, in the paintings of Borduas, Riopelle, Leduc, Barbeau and others as a form of gestural painting free from formal considerations while being executed and to which were associated various symbolic meanings (Marcel Barbeau: *Le tumulte à la mâchoire crispée*, 1946). Automatism was not confined to painting only but also extended to poetry and theatre. By 1954-5 the automatist movement which had been tremendously important as a liberating force had practically

run out of breath and some of the younger artists were looking for other solutions. Borduas had left for New York in 1953, Riopelle for Paris in 1946 and Fernand Leduc lived in Paris between 1947 and 1953. The Plasticiens' manifesto thus appears as a desire to fill a void and to propose a new formula, geometric abstraction.

What is surprising today is that the first Plasticiens did not persist very long in geometric abstraction and by 1960, they had adopted an 'informal' style. De Repentigny who had been the ideological force of the group, died in 1959, and Fernand Toupin, who had perhaps produced the group's most interesting work by adapting Mondrian's grid to odd-shaped canvases in 1956, later characterized his plasticien period as a 'transitory step'.

Fernand Leduc joined the Plasticiens in 1956 and he quickly came to exert a strong influence on it, being more mature and having had a much longer career. Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant never joined the group although their aims at that time were somewhat related to the others'. Both, with others who appeared slightly later, Denis Juneau and Jean Goguen, formed a loose second plasticien group, without a defined programme.

Fernand Leduc remains the only one of the first group to have persisted to this day. After his hard-edge paintings were exhibited in 1956, he was to explain in the following terms his transition from automatism to abstract geometry: 'I was disillusioned. There was too much literature in the painting. I'm attracted by order rather than the fluid appearance of form. It's more important to discover order. This is what I'm trying to do.'

In Paris Leduc's painting had undergone considerable change from his early automatist style with his coming into contact with a more formal European art. His preoccupation with internal structural relationships in the interplay of forms, prevalent in his first plasticien period (*Nœud papillon*, 1956), has more recently been followed by freer hard-edge painting using quasi organic forms, (*Chromatisme binaire-vert* 1964). Leduc returned to Paris in 1959 where he still works. He is now a remote and, unjustly so, almost forgotten figure, and his retrospective at the Musée du Québec and the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal in 1966 unfortunately failed to arouse much interest in artistic and critical circles.

Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant revealed themselves to be more independent and more original than the Plasticiens of 1955 when they exhibited in 1956. Molinari showed a series of black and white hard-edge paintings

which went beyond notions of compositional order, clarity and equilibrium, (*Uninoir* 1956). Tousignant was even more radical in exhibiting hard-edge canvases consisting of two sharply defined areas of colour done with shiny industrial paints, forcefully asserting the two-dimensional character of the surface (*Schizophrenie* 1956).

These paintings met with little success and much incomprehension, even on the part of the first Plasticiens, as they seemed totally abstract and much less reliant upon a Mondrian-like image, although a well assimilated influence of Mondrian was to be present in Tousignant's and Molinari's paintings of the late fifties and early sixties (*La ligne jaune*, 1960 by Tousignant; Molinari, *Equilibre* 1960).

In 1959 both tendencies of placticism were represented in an exhibition of abstract art which included Leduc, Belzile and Toupin of the first wave, and Tousignant, Molinari, Goguen (*Chromatique no 6* 1966) and Juneau of the second. The exhibition thus came about at a point where the first group was about to disappear from the forefront and the second one to assert itself more strongly and to go beyond geometric abstraction into colour painting. In the sixties, Barbeau, Gaucher and Hurtubise were also to go into colour painting.

Marcel Barbeau's career has been extremely agitated both physically with stays in Paris, New York and Montreal, and stylistically with abrupt changes in rapid succession. Having been with the automatistes from the earliest, his interest in a more structured abstraction came rather late with a series of 'minimal' two colour canvases done in Paris in 1962. From 1964 to 1967 he did extremely vibrant optical canvases (*Bas de fleuve* 1964), followed by more 'geometric' abstractions. His latest works consisted of a series of similarly shaped monochrome canvases. Yves Gaucher started rather late as a painter in 1964 with optical canvases after a very successful career as a printmaker. Jacques Hurtubise's career has been equally prolific since he adopted colour painting in 1965.

Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant appear to me as the more original and inventive of the painters who started exhibiting in the middle fifties. Their early careers follow parallel lines of development from an interest in gestural painting into hard-edge with their paths sharply diverging after around 1960-2. Tousignant's art is now strictly optical with colour vibrations in concentric circles (*Gong 88* 1966).

After exhibiting his black and white paintings in 1956,

Guido Molinari stopped painting for a while and opened a gallery in Montreal although he still experimented in gouaches, watercolours and inks. He came back to painting in 1958 with hard-edge canvases using both horizontal and vertical axis composition (*Equilibre* 1960). In 1961 he experimented with a strictly vertical composition, with *Hommage à Jauran*, but it was not until 1963-4, (*Espace rouge-vert* 1964) that he started using parallel vertical bands of colour exclusively, thus getting rid of compositional preoccupations with finding an 'interesting image' in order to concentrate on the creating of a visual space in an open structure. As he has himself said: 'The evolution of my work is based on the complete serialization of the elements. I have chosen to work with elements that are strictly analogous in their quantity of form-colour and which acquire a completely different quality, through the process of their different positions. Once the naturalistic factor of quantity is eliminated it is uniquely through the perception of the various positional functions of the colour-planes that is established a space-time continuum submitted to a constant change.'

Molinari's use of simultaneous contrasts of colour in his serial elements introduces a complex series of ever changing visual relationships which lead to 'the continuous perceptive restructuration of the painting'.

Molinari has also done some sculpture as an extension of the discovery in his paintings that 'space was something created by the spectator . . . for me space is neither interior nor exterior, but in the fourth dimension of perception. Space to me is a continuum in the mind and exists only in the mind.'

Molinari and Tousignant went beyond the canons of neo-plasticism and their current production links them with American preoccupations rather than European ones. Their generation is the first one not to attempt to link itself to the European mainstream. Along with Gaucher, Hurtubise, Barbeau and others, they share an awareness of the North American character of their milieu. Montreal's proximity to New York allows them to exhibit there and to have a first hand knowledge of New York painting. Yet this proximity has not led to imitation, partly because the 'Montreal school' has been active and aware of itself since the forties; their art has not appeared overnight. Also one has to take into account the French-speaking character of their milieu which allows a difference in outlook and temperament, which may be difficult to define or explain but which is part of their reality.

Manifeste des Plasticiens

Février 1955

... an extract

Les Plasticiens sont des peintres qui se sont réunis quand ils ont constaté que la similitude d'apparence de leurs peintures relevait d'une concordance dans leur conduite de peintre, dans leur démarche picturale et dans leurs attitudes envers la peinture, per se et dans la société humaine.

Comme le nom qu'ils ont choisi pour leur groupe l'indique, les Plasticiens s'attachent avant tout, dans leur travail, aux faits plastiques: ton, texture, formes, lignes, unité finale qu'est le tableau, et les rapports entre ces éléments. Éléments assumés comme fins.

Cette conception de la peinture se passe de justification, ou plutôt elle la trouve dans ce fait en apparence banal: les Plasticiens font de la peinture parce qu'ils aiment ce qui est particulier à la peinture. C'est, en outre, une conception qui correspond à la liberté isolée du peintre dans le monde contemporain.

En étant arrivés à renoncer à peu près entièrement à toute attitude romantique de la peinture comme moyen d'expression conscient, les Plasticiens peuvent retrouver cette naïveté artisanale que caractérise l'absence de tout l'orgueil généralement associé avec une prise de conscience partielle de soi.

Les peintures des plasticiens ne sont pas les visages de choix, mais ceux d'ultimes nécessités, d'inévitables obsessions, de réductions transcendantales. Le niveau de connaissance auquel ces peintures font appel, dans leur genèse et dans leur unité est en définitive celui de l'intuition, et non pas de la science. Si leur nécessité apparaît plus logique qu'intuitive, c'est que la simplification des moyens conduit à un résultat épuré conventionnellement admis comme excluant la personnalité.

La portée du travail des Plasticiens est dans l'épure incessante des éléments plastiques et de leur ordre; leur destin est typiquement la révélation de formes parfaites dans un ordre parfait.

Leur destin et non pas leur but, étant donné qu'ils travaillent dans l'amour du moment présent.

Les Plasticiens n'admettent pas la postulation a priori de ce qui est élémentaire et de ce qui est parfait. Pour eux, ce ne sont pas là des données, mais des acquisitions que seul le travail individuel dans la plus entière liberté peut permettre de faire. Leurs découvertes peuvent coïncider mais ils n'en croient pas pour autant avoir touché à une vérité objective.

Les Plasticiens ne se préoccupent en rien, du moins consciemment, des significations possibles de leurs peintures. Mais comme en ne cherchant pas à lui donner une valeur littérale, ils n'excluent aucune des significations inconscientes possibles, elle devient de ce chef le reflet de leur propre humanité.

En somme, les Plasticiens obéissent à la nature, et c'est pourquoi leurs peintures tendent vers une complète autonomie en tant qu'objets.

Les Plasticiens ne prétendent pas apporter des apparences tout à fait nouvelles, ni immuables. Malraux a écrit que les tableaux naissent des tableaux. L'intuition même la plus pure s'exprime toujours à un certain degré par le truchement de souvenirs.

Le travail des Plasticiens s'inscrit également dans l'histoire de la peinture au Canada et plus spécifiquement à Montréal. La peinture non-figurative a acquis à Montréal ses droits de cité depuis les premières expositions automatistes. Elle a pu naître ailleurs avant, mais elle est véritablement née ici alors. Dans la solution qu'apportent les Plasticiens au problème posé par leur désir de peindre, la révolution automatiste amorcée par Borduas apparaît comme germinale.

La renaissance avait libéré les arts de la servitude à un rituel spirituel. Les divers grands mouvements du XIXe siècle et finalement le Dadaïsme, le Surréalisme et l'Automatisme les ont libérés de la servitude à un rituel matérialiste. Mondrian a permis de réduire l'ultime aliénation de l'oeuvre peinte, l'extériorisation de la concentration sur soi-même.

Le véritable rôle de l'artiste est d'engendrer la soif de la vérité. Le sens des oeuvres est toujours faussé par leur publication. Aussi la mise-au-monde doit-elle le plus possible coïncider avec la création.

Il faut travailler à engendrer un climat d'inquiétude vis-à-vis des arts de la part du public, et non pas simplement une familiarité qui tourne facilement au mépris.

Il ne reste de spirituel que l'angoisse.

Il n'y a pas en 1955 d'art sacré: l'art est sacré.

La création qui est aussi intuition est l'unique forme de la vérité.

Est respectable dans son intégrité tout art vrai.

Est respectable dans son intégrité toute oeuvre dont j'ai l'intuition qu'elle est vraie pour son créateur.

C'est là qu'on appelle l'amour du prochain, l'existence de l'autre.

Une oeuvre peut n'être pas la création de celui qui l'exécute, mais de celui qui la regarde ou d'une collectivité, plus simplement.

Ce mode d'existence d'une oeuvre aussi la rend respectable.

Une oeuvre peut être le moment de vérité d'un peuple, d'une civilisation.

Mais le goût, la propension, l'acceptation ne peuvent pas être critères de vérité: seule l'intuition intuitionnée l'est.

LES PLASTICIENS

Jauran, Toupin, Belzile, Jérôme