



Abstract Painting in Canada

Roald Nasgaard

Chapter 7

Montreal: The Plasticiens, 1950s and 1960s

The years 1955 and 1956 turned out to be watershed years for abstract art in Montreal. In 1955 the exhibition *Espace 55* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) became the cause of hostility when Paul-Émile Borduas, now deeply immersed in the New York scene, expressed his misgivings about what he detected as regressive directions. Among these was, or at least so it seemed to him, a return to the sort of European geometric abstraction to which the Automatistes had stood in opposition, and which in any case had been supplanted by the work of Jackson Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists.

Also in 1955, in a room at L'Échourie, a bar-restaurant where the young Guido Molinari was director of exhibitions,¹ four young artists in their twenties — Jauran, Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jérôme and Fernand Toupin — who called themselves Plasticiens, launched their own exhibition, accompanied by their *Manifeste des Plasticiens*. They proclaimed an alternative to the Automatistes, one based not on chance but on the more rigorous traditions of geometric abstraction, citing Mondrian as a forerunner. The group's first exhibitions, in which the members confirmed their new preoccupation with the formal attributes of painting, had already taken place in the summer and fall of 1954 at the Librairie Tranquille. This first Plasticien movement was short-lived, however, more important for signalling a shift in aesthetic perspectives than for the actual work it produced.

Jauran, whose real name was Rodolphe de Repentigny (1926–1959), was something of a polymath in his interests. After studying mathematics at the Université de Montréal, he lived in Paris from 1949 to 1952, studying philosophy at the Sorbonne and generally throwing himself into the culture of the city. He was thus able to report

on European abstraction, not only on Lyrical Abstraction then gathering force but also on the postwar attempts to give renewed legitimacy to geometric abstraction. This was evident in the works of Richard Mortensen, Alberto Magnelli, Olle Baertling and Auguste Herbin, to name a few of those who showed in the annual forum for geometric abstraction, the Salon des réalités nouvelles, whose first manifesto, published in 1949, in some essential aspects foreshadowed that of the first Plasticiens. The parallels are not surprising because, as Marie Carani noted,² when Repentigny returned to Montreal, he continued to display a significant interest in these developments, especially in the group Espace, founded in 1951, in which Michel Seuphor participated along with Léon Degand, both passionate defenders of geometric abstraction and whose motto was "*plastique d'abord*" (plastic values first). The Espace group published its ideas in the Parisian review *Art d'aujourd'hui*, stressing the importance of integrating art into the fabric of urban life through architecture, expressing social and utopian ideas that, while only implicit in their manifesto, made headway among the Plasticiens, as well as with other artists like Jean-Paul Mousseau in his Post-Automatiste years, and Denis Juneau and Jean Goguen.³

Although the *Manifeste des Plasticiens* was signed by all four artists, its principal author was no doubt Rodolphe de Repentigny, who, as well as being Jauran the painter, was a photographer and an art critic and a theoretician. From his position as art critic (as Repentigny) for the Montreal newspaper *La Presse* from 1952 to 1959, as well as in his other writings (under the name François Bourgogne) in the weekly *L'Autorité* and in the magazine *Vie des arts*, Repentigny developed an analytically structured body of criticism of considerable importance to modern Quebec culture. His critical methodology was rooted in a careful observation and description of the formal and material qualities of the individual work of art, in ways that, as Marie Carani observed, have parallels to Clement Greenberg's formalist criticism in New York at the same time.⁴ However, the work that Repentigny principally championed, which was defined largely by his own work and that of his Plasticien colleagues, had little of the aesthetic heft of New York painting.

The *Manifeste des Plasticiens*⁵ is a curiously unsatisfactory document that stands uneasily wedged between the Automatiste world that it purported to put behind itself and the new geometric one that it embraced. Its program was an unqualified

rejection of representational space and of any reference to things in the world, stated in language that largely seems borrowed from Europe. To the question "What is non-figurative and non-objective abstract art?" the artists of the Salon des réalités nouvelles replied that "Painting, without ties to the exterior world of appearance, is a plane or space animated by lines, forms, surfaces, colours in reciprocal relationships."⁶ The Plasticiens in turn testified to their attachment above all "to [painting's] plastic elements: tone, texture, form, line, the overall effect of the painting and the relation among its elements... These elements have become ends in themselves."⁷

The Plasticien manifesto named only Mondrian but spoke throughout in the idealist language of the European geometric painting tradition: painting is a search for "purification," for "true objectivity," for "perfect form in a perfect order." But something of automatism lingered. They rejected the romanticism of the Automatistes but insisted on the intuitive nature of the creative act. They decried premeditation and claimed to "work in love with the present moment." If, they argued, their work ended up looking alike, then that had nothing to do with a shared theoretical program "but of ultimate necessity, of inevitable obsessions, of transcendent reductions." They echoed the Automatistes' commitment to *matière*, and so seemed not only to follow Borduas's expulsion of reason from the creative process but also his belief in the transformation of knowledge through sensibility inscribed in painted matter. Their paintings should be a "revelation of perfect forms in a perfect order," but, as the manifesto modestly tempered this ambition, perfection would be "their destiny and not their end."⁸

Neither Claude Tousignant nor Guido Molinari was much impressed by the manifesto. Tousignant thought what the Plasticiens had to say was largely puerile and reactionary, and found their work overly influenced by French geometric abstraction.⁹ Molinari, as reported by Bernard Teyssède, was fresh from New York and also reproached the Plasticiens for staying too close to the European tradition; he found the work in the exhibition at L'Échourie timorous, the colours muffled and the compositions hardly freed from Cubism.¹⁰

And it was true. If the first Plasticiens were interested in the aesthetic theories of European geometric abstraction, they had none of the European flair for high-keyed colours or bold geometries. Instead, the Plasticiens favoured small formats, both in the size of their canvases and in their internal formal



72. Jean-Paul Jérôme, *Untitled*, 1955, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 76.2 cm
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec, 90.290, purchase