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Five Painters

Galerie Didactart, *Exposition 4710 St-Ambroise*, Complexe du Canal Lachine, Montréal. March 13-31, 1996

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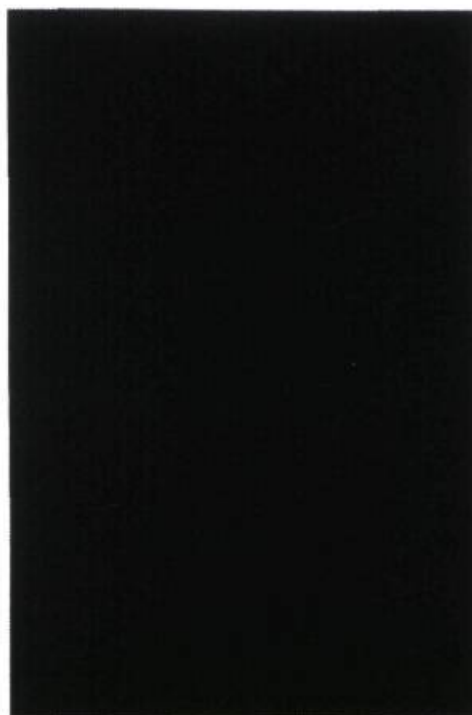
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MONTREAL FIVE PAINTERS

Galerie Didactart, Exposition 4710 St-Ambroise, Complexe du Canal Lachine,
Montréal. March 13 - 31, 1996



Jean-Marie Delavalle, *Grand format vert*, 1995. Peinture anti-rouille sur aluminium; 1'1/2 x 2' x 3'.

The exhibition *4710 St-Ambroise* is a consideration of the work of five contemporary Montréal artists. The ties that bind Jean-Marie Delavalle, John Fox, Joe Lima, Louise Masson and Jean McEwen are two-fold. The first is that painting is the primary vehicle of their artistic practice and their commitment to both its traditions and its future is fundamental. The second thread which weaves their work together is the site where it is produced. Each maintains a studio in the Complexe du Canal Lachine building in the historic *quartier* of St-Henri.

The work in this exhibition demonstrates that we are not witnessing a renewal of painting for its own sake as is occurring in other art centers. Rather we are addressing an understanding of the past, its revision within the contemporary Québec context and the possibilities of painting in today's cultural climate. The differences between the painters' approach to their medium can be understood also as a

metaphor of the multiplicity of meaning integral to contemporary art and by extension, to the socio-political context in which that art is produced.

These five painters work in the isolation of their own individual spaces in one building but because of its location and the effect that it has upon their daily existence, the artists can be seen as members of a collectivity. But that collectivity is not an official association nor one representative of a single dominant ideological position. Rather it is a small community where the working environment provides a shared experience for the diversity of expressions within the framework of painting. The interaction of the painter and the place provides a context for the process of painting; and it establishes the conditions under which those procedures are questioned and explored. That the artists work in similar structural surroundings, are conditioned by the same architectural environment and geographical location,



PHOTO : DANIEL ROUSSEL

Louise Masson, *Hêtres de Soignes*, 1995. Oil on canvas; 256 x 290 cm.

adds a new dimension to the concept of the collectivity. But the collective ideal here is inclusive, cognizant of a heterogeneity of style and attitude; a melding of generations and experience. Furthermore, that a collectivity will arise from an “unofficial” gathering of artists is inherent to the structure and identity of any art community. Artists themselves serve as the first audience to new tendencies and reassessments of art production. They are also its first critics and its first supporters (or detractors) because of the communal understanding of the preoccupations and priorities of their own milieu.

The five artists work in a sector of Montreal which is exemplary of the contemporary condition of urban life. While century-old housing remains as testament to the intense communal life of the inhabitants of St-Henri, the abandoned factories, like the Canal Complex building, are witness to the economic changes that have readdressed life in the post-industrial age. A major component of “the city below the hill” in the late 19th century, St-Henri was among the earliest industrialized Montreal municipalities because of its proximity to the strategic Lachine Canal. Its densely populated working-class community was subjected to inexorable material poverty and a weak urban infrastructure; but its inhabitants created the cohesive and unique society that it is so tellingly recorded in Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’ocassion* (*The Tin Flute*). A different sector of the community was created within St-Henri in the late 1980’s with the conversion of abandoned factories to working spaces for artists, designers, photographers and craftspeople. Similar to the revival of warehouse spaces as artists’ studios on Boulevard Saint-Laurent in the 1960’s (which itself was as an alternative to the cramped domestic rooms used by artists in the 1950’s), buildings like the Complexe du Canal offered affordable work sites that ironically derived from Montreal’s continuing faltering economy. That art should be produced in deserted manu-

facturing buildings, however, is not simply a matter of the post-industrial economic condition. It is a peculiarly North American attitude to equate the production of painting with labour and light industry, perhaps as a strategy to gain acceptance of art within a society which has been traditionally suspicious of the artist. Like the community of St-Henri itself, the artists reflect the rhetoric of the past, the actuality of the present and the obscurity of the future. As has also occurred with the citizens of St-Henri, a community exists and will continue to do so solely because of its loyalties.

An essential element of this project is the presentation of the work at the Complexe du Canal itself and it signifies the unusual experience of viewing art in the one-hundred year old industrial site where it is made¹. While the work is not intended to be regarded as “site specific”, the specificity of the work to the Canal Complex is the essential element of the exhibition. The paintings in the exhibition have been both conceived and produced on the “site” and thus possess an inherent relation to the site. Each of the studio spaces inhabited by the five painters is slightly different in size, configuration and location within this six-part building. Two of the artists are on the “canal side” and Masson and Fox witness both the silence of the Lachine Canal and the white noise of the highways beyond it. McEwen faces the jumbled residential areas of St-Henri and the serene imposition of Mount Royal in the near distance. The peculiar reflective light and expansive skies of the area imbue their studios with a constantly changing atmosphere that emphasizes their participation in and separation from the immediate environment. Lima and Delavalle inhabit spaces well within the maze-like configuration of the building, where the architectural realities of the structure reinforce the industrial nature of the location, both within and beyond their own work space. By exhibiting the paintings in its own context of the converted Simmons Bedding factory, the work reveals the history of its process

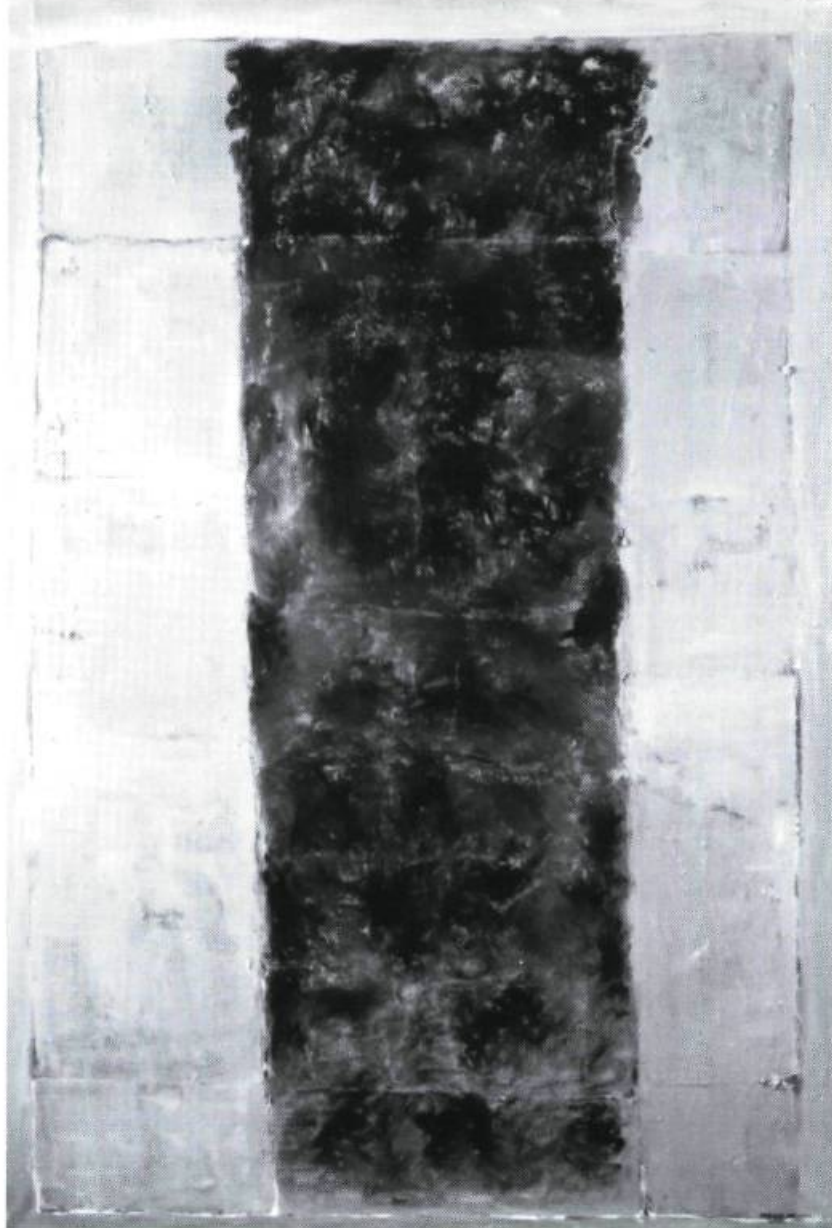


PHOTO : DANIEL ROUSSEL.

Jean McEwen, *Cantate des colonnes*, 1996; 193 x 127 cm.

and production. It thereby retains an aspect of its "biography" which is otherwise lost when the work is presented in the usual art gallery space. Just as important, the interrelationship between object, viewer and context has greater intimacy than that which can be experienced within the more familiar gallery environment. Because the exhibition space is essentially another version of a typical studio in this building, it becomes a natural extension of that space. Furthermore, because of the building's location, which is bordered on one side by the Lachine Canal and by residential housing and industrial sites on the other, the exhibition space can be seen as a part of the community of St-Henri.

Yet like the *quartier* itself, the art work maintains its independence within the spirit of a collectivity. Similarly, while the artists can be "categorized" by the painting tendencies which they practise, this is imprecise and does not necessarily reveal the breadth of their considerations. The body is a major consideration in the work of John Fox and Joe Lima. Lima concentrates on readdressing the nature of portraiture by contemplating isolated parts of the body but by using the oldest painting process—the fresco. Fox positions the figure within a context that suggests a narrative but without presupposing a definition of its condition; the reality of the imagined connects the image to the

material world. The work of Jean-Maire Delavalle relates to the Montréal traditions of geometric abstraction within the construct of conceptualism. The plane and surface become arenas for metaphorical transformation of the allusionary and the paradox that the distillation of reason creates. Louise Masson imbues geometric abstraction with a lyrical resonance that does not deny the gesture or the sensuality of the surface. Her references to the landscape are also an aspect of non-objective painting's inherent ability to be concerned with nature. The melding of an evasive internal structure of the grid with the materiality of movement in McEwen's painting divulges abstraction's innate order which is directly discoverable through the immediacy of the paint. Within the practice of painting, these five artists disclose the heterogeneity of contemporary painting. At the same time, their work has a communal coherence through the acknowledgement that the painter is both within the world and spectator to it.

SANDRA PAIKOWSKY

NOTE

¹ In the late 19th century, the *Clendinning Foundry* was the first business located on the site. This was followed by the *Alaska Feather Company* and then by *Simmonds Bedding*.