

Une autre saison de Léon Bellefleur Léon Bellefleur

Gilles Daigneault

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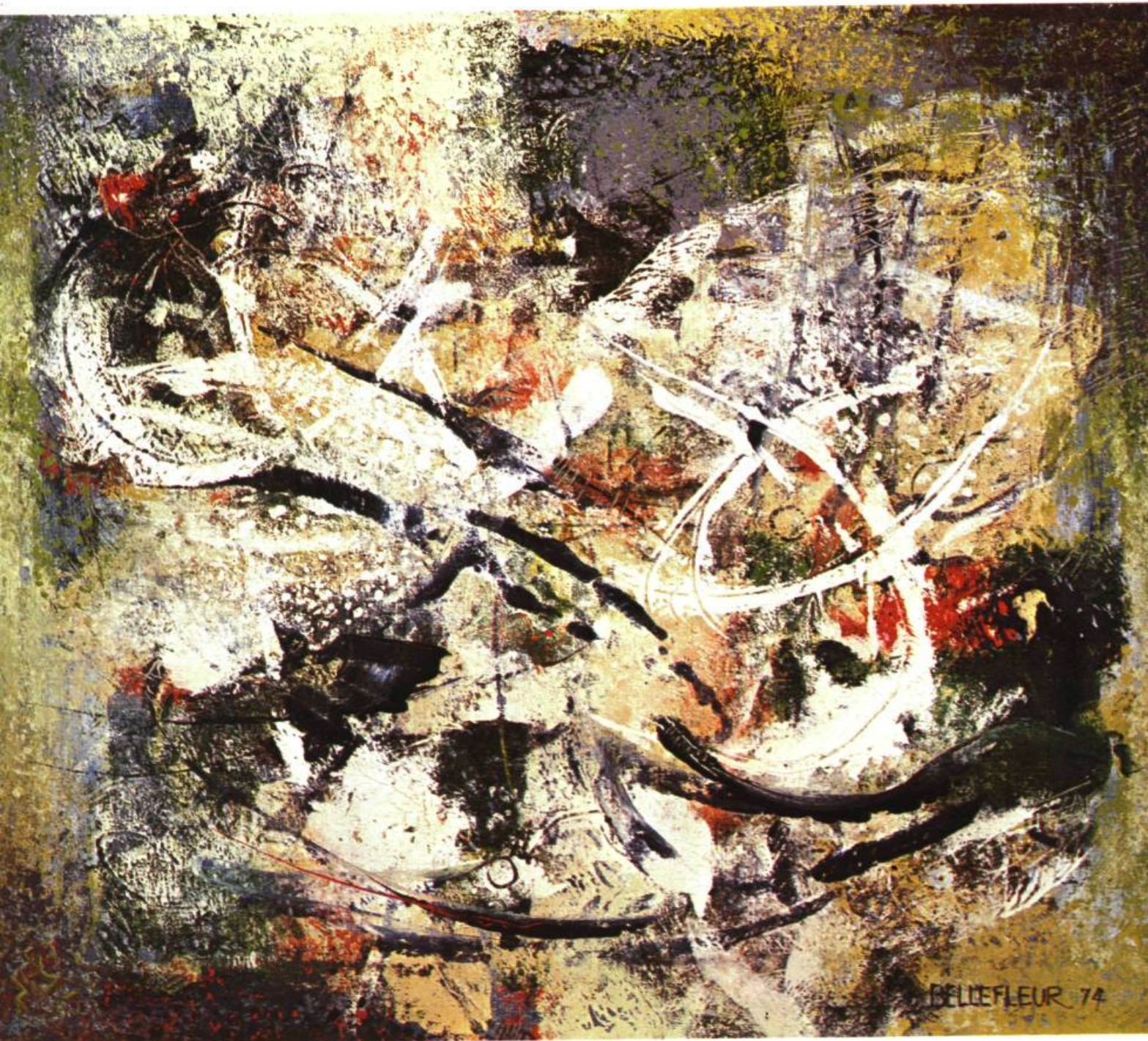
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Gilles Daigneault

Une autre saison de
LÉON BELLEFLEUR



1. *Aquarium*, 1974.
Huile sur toile; 50 cm x 61.

Léon Bellefleur a encore pris le large. La première fois, c'était en 1954, et dans les deux sens du mot: il se détachait de ses influences en peinture et partait réaliser un rêve «un peu délirant», vieux de trente ans: connaître Paris et vivre en Provence. Cette fois-ci, ce sont ses toiles qui partent lui gagner une reconnaissance internationale, un autre rêve majeur du peintre; les Anglais, en effet, et, tout récemment, les Danois ont été envoûtés par les huiles de notre vieil alchimiste.

Bellefleur, lui, demeure dans sa vieille maison canadienne, près du Richelieu (encore un rêve réalisé!), où je l'ai rencontré. La veille, une très violente tempête avait fait rage dans la région et failli projeter son voisin — un colosse — dans la rivière; il me dira au cours de l'entretien: «Le retour de Pellan en 40, c'était pire que l'ouragan d'hier pour les arts plastiques!» Il est resté le même homme sympathique, drôle et sensible (cette précieuse sensibilité à laquelle son œuvre est fidèle depuis près de quarante ans). A peine a-t-il pris un peu d'assurance. Pas autant que ses toiles, toutefois, dont il parle volontiers, simplement, posément. Il n'en est pas moins convaincu que ses commentaires n'aident en rien (... ou si peu) les gens à pénétrer son œuvre. «Je sais qu'il y a des artistes qui parlent très bien de leur peinture mais, même dans ces cas-là, l'explication qu'ils donnent apporte une dimension rationnelle qui ... que ...; bref, le peintre a tout dit quand il a fait sa toile. Après coup, c'est aux critiques de jouer.» Ces remarques n'empêcheront cependant pas Bellefleur d'adopter un ton très critique concernant l'attitude de certains commentateurs qui ne voient pas assez combien son œuvre est d'inspiration surréaliste.

Il relevait de trois mois de gravure à l'eau-forte (il faut l'avoir vu lutter avec sa vieille presse pour comprendre que le mot n'est pas trop fort). Pourtant la cuisine complexe, délicate et exténuante de ce médium l'enchantait. «Je tiens à maîtriser tout cela et je crois que je suis dans la bonne voie. Par certains côtés, c'est de l'alchimie. En outre, l'eau-forte me repose de la couleur et me permet de dessiner; j'aime toujours le dessin mais, paradoxalement, je n'ai plus envie d'en refaire comme avant. En gravure, je peux faire des dessins avec des teintes, une gamme de gris, des noirs, ...»

Si une période de gravures suit les huiles de 75, une assez longue période de gouaches les précède. Ces changements de médium coïncident-ils avec des impasses? «Ce serait beaucoup dire, mais viennent des moments où on se lasse d'utiliser toujours les mêmes moyens ... et puis on trouve parfois autre chose avec un autre médium. Après coup, on revient à l'huile plus vivant, avec plus de ferveur. Pour ce qui concerne les gouaches, je voulais lier parfaitement graphisme et couleur, ce que l'huile me permettait moins; je voulais qu'un dessin qui se défend comme dessin fasse avec la couleur, l'intensité des lignes, un vrai bloc coloré. L'expérience, je crois, a été réussie: tout cela était frais, léger, parfois plus lumineux mais moins sensuel que les huiles. J'ai fait deux expositions et mon aventure me suffit»

Abordons les huiles. J'ai eu la chance de voir celles de 73 et de 75 avant qu'elles ne partent pour l'Angleterre et le Danemark. Ces admirables compositions dégageaient plus que jamais une impression de chaleur, de sérénité, de bien-être; sans doute, la peinture d'un homme profondément heureux ... «Attention! ce qu'un

peintre met dans une toile, ce n'est pas forcément ce qui l'habite, ce qu'il possède en lui-même. Cette sérénité que tu découvres dans les derniers tableaux, je la vois aussi et elle m'aide à vivre. Si je mets passablement de joie dans mes toiles — il y a du reste quelques exceptions —, c'est que mon aventure est aussi une quête de la sérénité et de la joie. Cela dit, je ne pense pas qu'un homme profondément malheureux arriverait à peindre comme moi, mais je sais que je suis bien plus vulnérable qu'il n'y paraît dans les huiles récentes. L'art est une magie ...» D'accord. Mais on a beau le savoir, on se laisse toujours prendre. Combien parmi nous croient encore, sur la foi de sa statuaire, que la Grèce antique n'était peuplée que d'êtres magnifiques? Nul doute pourtant que la réalité grecque offrait moins de sérénité et d'équilibre que son art ne le suggère.

Quoi qu'il en soit, les tableaux récents de Bellefleur ont beau refléter davantage un rêve qu'une situation réelle, ils n'en atteignent pas moins, sur le plan plastique, une plénitude, une richesse, un équilibre indéniables. «C'est toi qui le dis, mais j'hésite à te contredire ... Disons plus justement que je connais maintenant mon métier, qu'il y a de moins en moins de failles à ce niveau-là, que j'arrive de plus en plus facilement à résoudre les problèmes, que désormais mes limites sont à peu près celles de mon fonds intérieur ...» A ce stade, il y a danger ... «d'embourgeoisement, je sais, de préciosité, de décoration; personne n'est à l'abri de cela (je ne parle pas seulement des peintres) et j'en suis conscient. Je me méfie en quelque sorte de mon métier qui rend les choses trop faciles, qui me permettrait de peindre mécaniquement, avec les yeux seulement, des toiles, jolies sans doute mais sans âme, où ce que j'aurais dit serait tellement mince qu'elles n'apporteraient plus rien ni à moi ni aux autres. Je préfère cependant penser qu'il y a surtout dans cette maîtrise des moyens un énorme avantage pour qui sait conserver sa ferveur. Le besoin que j'ai d'être exigeant et honnête, la nature même de mon cheminement profondément surréaliste arriveront à me préserver de l'embourgeoisement. Cette importance aussi de l'enfance ...» J'y arrivais. La phrase de Baudelaire me revient à l'esprit: «Le génie est l'enfance retrouvée à volonté.» Bellefleur sourcille: «Retrouvée? Non, je ne l'ai jamais perdue, heureusement. J'ai toujours essayé de protéger en moi le meilleur de l'enfance, ce sens de la poésie et du rêve, cette spontanéité, cette fraîcheur dont aucune maturité ne saurait se passer.» En l'écoutant parler de l'enfance, je comprends que ce n'est pas uniquement par mégalomanie qu'il vit entouré de plusieurs de ses plus belles toiles ...

Depuis 1910, l'art moderne a évolué avec une incroyable rapidité. Bellefleur accepte-t-il d'être classé parmi les peintres traditionnels? «Pourquoi pas? Je n'ai rien bouleversé. Sur le plan plastique, mon œuvre n'est pas révolutionnaire ... mais j'ai tellement fouillé l'inconscient qu'il n'est pas impossible que des jeunes s'accrochent un jour à moi pour pousser plus loin quelque chose ...»

Pour le moment, il n'est pas besoin de rechercher des jeunes pour pousser plus loin certains aspects de l'œuvre de Bellefleur ... Il s'en charge très bien lui-même.

J'ai hâte à sa prochaine saison.

English Translation, p. 92



2. *Volutes*, 1976.
Eau-forte; 20 cm x 25.

Gilles Daigneault est né à Montréal en 1943. Titulaire d'un doctorat de troisième cycle de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines d'Aix-en-Provence, il rédige actuellement une monographie sur Léon Bellefleur.



boardroom, and, on account of its large size, is never in the travelling exhibitions of the collection.

Among the entries from the Maritimes, we should note *St. John Harbour* by Bruno Bobak, artist in residence in New Brunswick famous for his panoramas of cities in the Kokoschka manner, in which we find his delightful colourist's verve. As for his wife Molly Lamb Bobak's *English Beach*, we see in it a lilliputian swarming comparable to that of the early To-beys, but we do not rediscover in it her usual exuberance.

Woman at a Dresser by Christopher Pratt, the magic realist of Newfoundland, is one of his most popular and bewitching canvases, in which we enjoy the delicacy of the drawing and the mellowness of the tints.

Milk Truck and *Children in a Tree* are two typical paintings, although of average quality, by Alexander Colville, the neo-Scottish head of the Canadian hyperrealist school.

Ontario is represented by some twenty painters, several of whom are hyperrealists: Ken Danby, D. P. Brown, Willis Romanow, Wim Blom and David Mayrs. The stars, Kazuo Nakamura (*Three plants*), Graham Coughtry (*Dark Room*), Tony Urquhart (*Near Wickham, Side Road*), Michael Snow (*Black and White*), Kenneth Lochhead (*Root Pile*), and John Chambers (*Three Sisters, Waiting*), offer us specimens characteristic, if not exceptional, of their talent. William Kurelek's *Hauling Sheaves*, all imbued with the special artlessness of this visionary artist, makes us deeply feel, by the boldness of its eccentric composition, the immensity and monotony of the prairie. Among the Ontario painters, we prefer Harold Town, the talented and versatile Toronto painter, who appears at his best in *Homage to Cubism*, of great finesse of texture, and particularly in his superb *Sky Panel*, where his gifts as colourist and his feeling for the picture are displayed; we also admire greatly Jock Macdonald's lovely blue harmony and the precious and delicate tracery of Ralph and Brian Taylor.

The most remarkable works of the painters of the West are, in our opinion, Christine Pflug's *Interior at Night* with its mysterious vista of the night, Marion Nicoll's *Prairie Farm*, whose extreme geometrical simplicity recalls some of Georgia O'Keefe's studies of barns, and the two Ronald Bloores, *Homage to Matisse* and especially *Triple Sun Panel*, of an infinite delicacy and artistry.

If we note in British Columbia's share the presence of a few "hard edge painters" like Gordon Smith and Bodo Pfeiffer, laurels are due, in our opinion, to Tony Onley (*Winter Landscape*), to Brian Fisher for his exquisite *Window*, a clever creation and a genuine masterpiece of symmetry, to Donald Jarvis for his flamboyant *Winter Figure*, and to Jack Shadbolt for his *Islamic Memory*, in which hieroglyphics seem to lie buoyantly in the shimmering atmosphere of an oriental miniature.

To conclude this brief evaluation, it is interesting to observe the reactions of the Canadian public to this collection. Its preference goes to the hyperrealists and to well-known names like Jean-Paul Lemieux, Alfred Pellán, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Harold Town and Jack Shadbolt, and among the most popular canvases, ten are the work of hyperrealists, with Alex Colville in the lead; and we find the two Lemieux, the two naïve painters Arthur Villeneuve and Miyuki Tanobe and two pictures that illustrate, one about games, Louise Scott's *Série des Jeux No 1* and the other the holiday atmosphere Myfanwy Phillips' *Adam & Eve & Pinch Me*. If we

were to believe the old adage, "Vox populi, vox Dei", such a verdict would be painful for those critics who accept in art only the unusual or the subliminal.

Within its purposely limited framework, the Canadian painting collection graciously put at the disposition of the public of Canada by C.I.L. has served the cause of art well in our milieu, on the one hand by encouraging our painters, on the other by causing them to be better known, not only by art lovers but also by the uninitiated. This is an auspicious venture that we cannot praise too much, and of which we would like to see many imitators.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

LÉON BELLEFLEUR

By Gilles DAIGNEAULT

Léon Bellefleur has taken off again. The first time, it was in 1954, and he departed in the two meanings of the word: he freed himself of his influences in painting and left to accomplish a dream that was "a bit delirious", at the age of thirty: to know Paris and live in Provence. This time, it is his canvases that are leaving to earn international recognition for him, another major dream of the painter; indeed, the English, and very recently the Danes, have been enchanted by our old alchemist's oils.

Bellefleur lives in his old Canadian house near the Richelieu River (another dream that came true!), where I met him. The day before, a very violent storm had raged in the area and had nearly thrown his neighbour — a giant — into the river; Bellefleur would say during the interview, "Pellán's return in 1940 was worse than yesterday's hurricane for the plastic arts!" He has remained the same likeable man, funny and sensitive (this precious sensitivity to which his work has been faithful for almost forty years). He has taken on very little self-assurance. Not as much as his canvases, however, of which he speaks easily, simply, calmly. He is no less convinced that his commentaries are of no help (... or so little) to people in understanding his work. "I know that there are artists who talk very well about their painting but, even in those cases, the explanation they give carries a rational dimension that... that...; in short, the painter has said everything when he has created his canvas. After that, it is the turn of the critics." However, these remarks would not prevent Bellefleur from adopting a very critical tone concerning the attitude of some commentators who do not see clearly enough how much his work is inspired by surrealism.

He recovered from three months of etching (one had to see him struggle with his old press to understand that the word is not too strong). And yet the complex, delicate and exhausting "cooking" of this medium enchanted him. "I am anxious to master all this and I believe I am on the right track. In certain aspects it is alchemy. Besides, etching rests me from colour and gives me the opportunity to draw; I always like drawing but, paradoxically, I no longer wish to do it as before. In engraving I can produce drawings with shades, a range of grays, blacks..."

If a period of engravings follows the oils of '75, a rather long period of gouaches precedes them. Do these changes of medium coincide

with dead ends? "This would be saying a lot, but there come moments when one tires of always using the same materials... and then one sometimes finds something else with another medium. Afterward, one returns to oil more alive, with more enthusiasm. As for gouaches, I wanted to link graphism perfectly with colour, a thing that oil allowed me to a lesser degree; I wanted a drawing that holds its own as a drawing to form with colour and the intensity of its lines a true coloured whole. I believe the experiment was successful: it was all fresh, light, sometimes more luminous but less sensual than oils. I had two exhibitions and my adventure is enough for me."

Let us consider the oils. I was fortunate enough to see the '73 and '75 ones before they were sent to England and Denmark. These admirable compositions created more than ever an impression of warmth, serenity and well-being; doubtless the painting of a profoundly happy man... "Attention: what a painter puts into a canvas is not necessarily what possesses him, what he has within himself. I also see this serenity that you discover in the latest pictures, and it helps me to live. If I put a fair amount of joy into my canvases — and there are a few exceptions — it is because my adventure is also a search for serenity and joy. This being said, I do not think a profoundly unhappy man would manage to paint as I do, but I know that I am much more vulnerable than appears in the recent oils. Art is magic..." Agreed. But it is in vain that we know this, we are always deceived. How many of us still believe from the evidence of its statuary that ancient Greece was populated only by magnificent beings? There is no doubt, however, that the Greek reality offered less serenity and balance than its art suggests.

Be that as it may, it is of no avail that Bellefleur's recent pictures reflect a dream rather than a real situation, they reach no less, on the plastic plan, undeniable fullness, wealth, and balance. "You are the one who is saying it, but I hesitate to contradict you... Let us say more exactly that I now know my craft, that there are fewer and fewer failures at that level, that I am succeeding more and more easily in resolving the problems, that henceforth my limits are approximately those of my inner resources..." At this stage, there is danger "of middle-class respectability, I know, of affectation, of decoration; no one is immune from it (I am speaking not only of painters) and I am aware of it. To some degree I mistrust my mastery which makes things too easy, which would allow me to paint mechanically, with only my eyes, canvases that doubtless would be pretty but without soul, in which what I had said was so thin that the canvases would bring nothing more either to me or to others. I prefer to think, however, that there are, particularly in this mastery, means of enormous advantage for anyone who knows how to conserve his ardour. My need to be exacting and honest, the very nature of my profoundly surrealistic development will succeed in preserving me from middle-class respectability. Also this importance of childhood..." I was getting there. Baudelaire's sentence came to mind: "Genius is childhood rediscovered at will." Bellefleur frowned: "Rediscovered? No, I never lost it, fortunately. I have always tried to protect within myself the best of childhood, the sense of poetry and dreams, the spontaneity, the freshness that no maturity can do without." Listening to Bellefleur speak of childhood, I understood that it was not only by reason of megalomania that he lives surrounded by sev-

eral of his most beautiful canvases . . .

Since 1910 modern art has evolved with incredible speed. Does Bellefleur accept being classified among the traditional painters? "Why not? I haven't overthrown anything. On the plastic plan my work is not revolutionary . . . but I have searched the unconscious so thoroughly that it is not impossible that young people will some day follow my lead to go further than I have done . . ."

For now, there is no need to seek young people to carry further certain aspects of Bellefleur's work . . . He is attending to it very well himself. I am eagerly awaiting his next production.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

CLAES OLDENBURG IN TORONTO

By Roger MESLEY

In April and May 1976 the exhibition *Oldenburg: Six Themes* was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The evolution of the geometric mouse, three-way plug, fag ends, clothes-pin, typewriter eraser, and standing mitt with ball themes was documented by the 317 items exhibited. Oldenburg came to Toronto for six days to oversee the exhibition's installation, to give a lecture on his work, and to attend the AGO opening. This was his first visit to Toronto since the 1967 Dine-Oldenburg-Segal exhibition. At that time, he had proposed a colossal drain-pipe monument for Toronto's water-front.

Roger Mesley — When did you first realize that the CN tower had become Toronto's colossal monument, and what was your first reaction?

Claes Oldenburg — I felt quite surprised. Sometimes I have the feeling that I'm tuned in to certain things that are going to happen, which may not be very difficult to be tuned in to, but I didn't really know there was going to be a tower. I think I saw it first in an airline's magazine, or advertisement of some kind for Toronto, and I said, "My God! There it is!", you know. Actually I felt left out. I felt as if I hadn't been consulted — as if I hadn't had a chance to submit my bid.

R.M. — You were in Montreal in 1967 to install your *Giant Soft Fan* for Expo; was there ever a proposed colossal monument for Montreal?

C.O. — . . . The fan was my version of a colossal monument . . . I never got into Montreal very much — I was on the island there and kept pretty occupied. It was a terrific time because it was before the opening. Everything was fresh and you could go into all the exhibits just by yourself, without having to stand in line. You could ride those trains all by yourself. I think that one of the most unforgettable days of my life was the opening. It was a very brilliant day, very clear, and the Canadian planes were stunt flying. It was really exciting.

R.M. — How did the concept of *Oldenburg: Six Themes* originate? (Oldenburg explained that he viewed the 1969 New York retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the 1971 Pasadena Art Museum exhibition, and the present show as "a continuous retrospective . . . one show, but different concepts".)

C.O. — . . . but I think the show, or shows, have been getting better, clearer. The Modern's show was just a sort of collection of things without much thought behind it . . . The Pasa-

dena show had a point of view, showing how the object developed into the monument, and then came this show. Martin Friedman, who organized it, is quite an intellectual. He wanted to do a thinking show about process, and I did too. That's what I've always wanted to do. The subjects have become more limited and the focus has been more and more on the thinking process. I think this is the best of the shows, the clearest.

R.M. — The A.G.O.'s Henry Moore Centre likewise documents his creative process. How struck by the similarities are you?

C.O. — I've always heard about these rocks that he collects and I've always felt that that's what sculptors do — they have a museum of things which attract them in nature which become the source of their imagery. I pick mine up on the streets and in the stores — very urban sources. He is in the countryside, but it is basically, I should think, the same kind of process. You get fond of something — he's claimed, hasn't he, that he really has derived everything from those pebbles and rocks that he's so fond of — and I could claim the same. My Mouse Museum contains almost every original object and variations of it.

R.M. — Of what significance has Moore's work been to you as a sculptor?

C.O. — I've always been aware of Moore . . . He's been the big sculptor, along with Calder and Picasso, and we've been aware of this man for so long; he's part of the landscape, almost. I do a lot of references to other artists and very often I feel that I make references to him — sort of unconsciously, because you've been so aware of his particular type of mass.

R.M. — Would you like an Oldenburg centre like the Moore centre in order to perpetuate the concept of process of the present show?

C.O. — Who can deny that it would be pleasant to have a place to put all your things? You'd have more room than at home. I think that's a problem with a sculptor, especially. He gets crowded at home. You don't take proper care of your things . . . I think the (one-artist) museum is a funny old tradition that they have. Many artists have had museums. Sometimes they've been kept up well and sometimes they've disintegrated. . . . I wouldn't object to (such an Oldenburg Centre). It's really the way I would like to approach art. I love drawing shows, because you can see the thinking process.

R.M. — The human figures as such rarely appears in your work, save in the "pornographic" drawings. Why is that?

C.O. — I use the object because it's a nice free way of bridging the gap between representation and non-representation . . . It's a shame that those tendencies are separate and run parallel. I'm always thinking of some sort of unifying principle. If I was to devote myself to the figure, I feel that one has to represent the figure rather precisely for it to be significant . . . There have been so many attempts to combine the figure with abstraction, which I find offensive — even when Moore does it. I like it much better when he sticks to his pebbles. When he goes into figures it bothers me a little bit. With objects I don't feel that, I don't have that problem, because objects are so open — at least the way I treat them. They're so generalized that somehow that bridges the gap. If I'm able to draw the figure — which I can now and then — I like to do it, I exercise that ability. So, I have a separate category, where I just draw figures when I want to please myself.

R.M. — But why are the realistic figures drawings almost invariably erotic?

C.O. — Well, they tend to be charged with emotion . . . In my mind, figure drawing has always been figure drawing, rather than portrait. It's always been associated with the nude, and I've always accepted the nude literally. In art schools, instead of saying that this is like a statue, I've always said that this is a living person who has taken his or her clothes off and is standing in front of us. It means something: you can't ignore this. The reality of it is there, so I've always felt positively or negatively about this creature standing there naked. So my figures have never really been formalistic. They've been involved with the humanity, or the eroticism of the person . . . When I do figure drawings, I do them to please myself and I draw what I like to see. That's tended to be slightly erotic, or very erotic, or however I feel. But again, it's like words: since it's not my main occupation, I don't feel I have to feel responsible for what I produce. I do whatever I feel like, you see — it's not my "official" art. It's kind of backroom stuff . . . Last summer, I started to draw in hotel rooms. I was travelling a lot, and I would be in a strange town, and rather than go out and sit in a bar, I would find it more productive to sit in a room and draw. And I started to draw figures because I was lonely. So that became a whole activity. I started to draw a lot of figures in a lot of hotel rooms, and finally I had a whole show and I showed it in London last November. They were extremely erotic, or at least I thought so — a lot of people gave me an argument about that, because eroticism is so personal. Nevertheless, they were figures with sexual parts doing things to one another . . . I think it's good that people argue about what's erotic. It's especially sensitive from a woman's point of view. Several female critics said they were not erotic, that they had nothing whatsoever to do with eroticism. It's very much in your own head.

R.M. — Yet both your work and your comments seem much more formal and analytical than they were at the time of the 1967 Toronto show . . .

C.O. — Well, I finally admitted that publicly. They certainly are. My tendency is, of course, to do a revisionist history — to read back into your own work and say "I was really thinking of this and that," you know; and then, you need someone to straighten you out by remembering some of your earlier statements . . . It's true that that (formal and analytical) development occurred, and it probably occurs for most artists, the more they look at their work and think about it.

R.M. — There are references to Mondrian in your drawings and writings. Is your search for the ultimate basic form a spiritual quest like his?

C.O. — I'm really very interested in that basic form. I have a metaphysical streak and would like to reduce things to very simple forms. It's in my thinking . . . I feel very happy when I go to Holland, because it's a country where everything really is reduced to vertical and horizontal. It's a very peaceful sensation. Chicago's that way too — the vertical-horizontal. I feel an affinity with that kind of thinking.

R.M. — Which is not, however, to admit that you're a Theosophist?

C.O. — Not in any formal way. It's a kind of informalized metaphysical feeling about things. I have a feeling, a sort of Platonic notion, about the form underlying appearances, and that may be because I was at one point influenced by being raised as a Christian Scientist, and their thinking runs along that line — that appearances are just a mask.