

**Jacques Hurtubise**  
**Un magicien**  
**Jacques Hurtubise, a Magician**

Gilles Hénault

Volume 26, Number 104, Fall 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/54504ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hénault, G. (1981). Jacques Hurtubise : un magicien / Jacques Hurtubise, a Magician. *Vie des arts*, 26(104), 38–94.

# Jacques Hurtubise

## UN MAGICIEN

Gilles Hénault

Devant les grandes toiles mouvementées que Jacques Hurtubise peint depuis quelques années, on aurait envie d'adopter son ton véhément, de parler le langage des bouleversements telluriques, des séismes, de répondre à ses vibrations chromatiques par de grands élans d'un lyrisme électrique!

Ce serait mal comprendre la leçon picturale que nous donne son œuvre depuis plus de vingt ans; car, si ses toiles sont pleines de dynamisme et d'éclairs, si la couleur et le mouvement sont toujours les éléments primordiaux de sa peinture, il faut bien voir que ce gestuel est un minutieux, que ses explosions sont contrôlées, qu'il ne jette pas au hasard des pigments sur une toile blanche. C'est un magicien qui organise ses effets.

Ce travail d'organisation deviendra très évident dans toute la série de ses tableaux op ou hard edge, faits au pochoir et d'une luminosité toute électrique. Hurtubise va pousser très loin cette recherche sur la lumière contrastante des pigments colorés, dans des formes géométriques qui peuvent paraître sérielles, mais qui sont la plupart du temps subtilement décalées, surtout dans les compositions obliques, de sorte que l'œil qui cherche une sécurité dans le mouvement répétitif est pris de vertige devant chacune des minimes variations. L'ultime aboutissement de cette recherche, ce sera la fabrication de tableaux en tubes de néon, parce que, dirait-il, «je ne pouvais avoir de la peinture électrique en pot».

Par la suite, ses tableaux se sont disloqués, se sont organisés d'une manière beaucoup plus aléatoire: il peignait



1. Jacques HURTUBISE à l'œuvre dans son atelier. (Phot. Vancouver Art Gallery)

Dans ses toiles, ce qui ressemble à des accidents ou à des débordements dionysiaques est le plus souvent le résultat d'une stratégie qu'il élabore par étapes.

On savait déjà, depuis ses tableaux de 1965, que ses éclaboussures étaient concertées, qu'il faisait ses taches au papier-cache! Cela produisait un effet saisissant. On était sidéré de constater que ses dégoûlinades n'avaient pas vraiment d'épaisseur. En somme, il récusait l'abstraction gestuelle en arrêtant le mouvement, pour n'en produire que l'illusion. Cette peinture lyrique était donc pensée, réfléchie, ordonnée, d'où l'impression d'un dynamitage produisant une implosion. Toute l'énergie du tableau venait de l'intérieur, et non pas d'un brassage de la surface dans une gestualité débridée.

même sur des carrés interchangeables dont il pouvait constituer un assemblage au gré de sa fantaisie.

Puis ce fut le lent retour, depuis 1974-1975, vers une expression lyrique plus organique, et qui pourrait même faire penser à certaines sérigraphies de 1961. Pourtant, Hurtubise ne se répète pas. Il utilise, dans ses récentes créations, toute la virtuosité, toute la force, toute la connaissance accumulées au cours d'une des carrières les plus prolifiques chez les peintres de sa génération, car Hurtubise est un travailleur acharné. Avec la peinture, il entretient un rapport passionné. Il me confiait: «Je peins de dix à douze heures par jour... souvent de quatre heures du matin à quatre heures de l'après-midi, et sept jours par semaine.»

D'ailleurs, les grandes toiles accumulées dans son immense atelier de Terrebonne sont là pour en témoigner. A Vancouver, il a exposé, du 29 mai au 15 juillet, 67 tableaux récents, dont la plupart sont des grands formats, et que nous aurons éventuellement le plaisir de voir au Musée d'Art Contemporain, après un périple dans plusieurs musées canadiens. Cela fait suite à une autre exposition regroupant quatorze tableaux et deux sérigraphies qui eut lieu à Long Beach, à l'Université de Californie, du 9 février au 15 mars 1981, exposition qui se poursuivra dans les centres culturels du Canada, à Paris, à Londres et à Bruxelles, pour se terminer au Musée de la Nouvelle-Écosse, à Halifax, au début de 1982.

Toute cette production récente s'inscrit dans la grande trajectoire néo-lyrique de Hurtubise. Excellent coloriste, il utilise dans certains tableaux des gammes chromatiques variées, où dominant souvent le rose, le vert et le jaune, où circulent aussi de grandes traînées de noir. Dans certains cas, le fusain et le pastel précisent les formes ou bien soulignent des mouvements. Ailleurs, le noir éclate sur fond rouge dans une espèce d'envol; mais la forme, c'est le fond que l'artiste dégage en masses déchiquetées, en lignes fulgurantes, grâce à un procédé qui inverse celui de pochoir.

Pourtant, on croirait être enfin en présence d'une réalisation purement gestuelle, orgasmique, d'une écriture spontanée, bref, de signes qui résultent d'une trépidation de

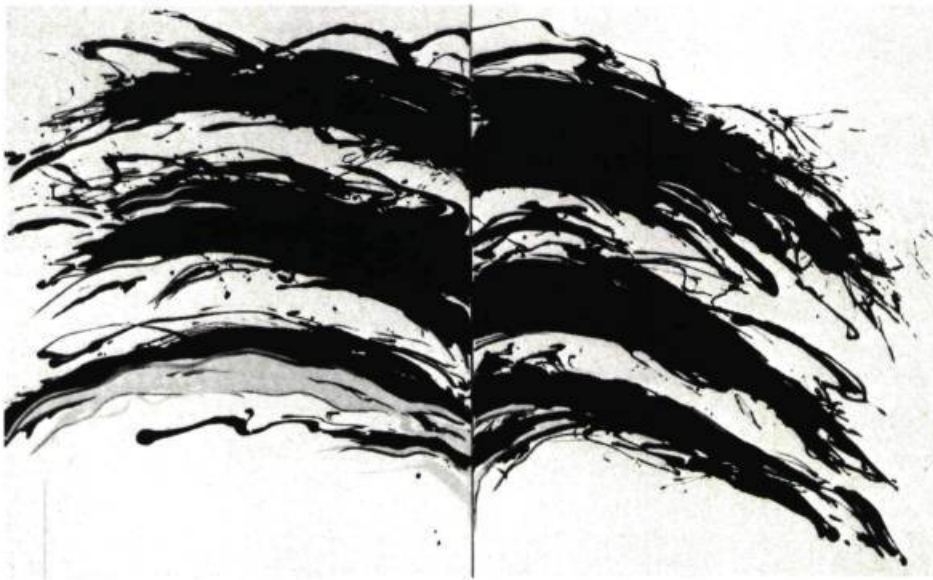
l'artiste devant sa toile. On pourrait l'imaginer l'œil dilaté, le pinceau protubérant, faisant gicler au hasard les lignes et les éclaboussures de son expressionnisme abstrait, dans une agitation semblable à une danse d'exorcisme. Or, ce n'est pas du tout cela. Encore une fois, si ce lyrisme naît d'une passion, c'est celle de l'ordonnance ou d'un aléatoire qui surgit d'une technique obligeant l'artiste à composer son tableau, à le corriger au besoin, à l'exécuter selon des pulsions plus profondes.

Ainsi, pour réaliser un tableau binaire, disons noir et rouge, il commence par peindre un fond entièrement noir. Puis il pose une couche de colle de caoutchouc et, dans cette peau, il découpe une forme déchiquetée. S'il recouvre ensuite le tout d'une couche d'acrylique rouge, en arrachant la colle qui masquait le fond noir, il obtiendra une surface noire, un dessin, un graphisme, un effet de gestualité, et même ce qui pourra ressembler à des dégoulinades. Ses tableaux multicolores sont évidemment d'une réalisation plus complexe. Au besoin, il accentuera certains contours au fusain, au pastel et, même, à l'acrylique. C'est un peu la technique de la sérigraphie, avec ses caches, l'utilisation de la colle et les passages multiples. D'ailleurs, Hurtubise excelle dans cet art: son œuvre sérigraphique est importante et remarquable. Pourtant, devant ses grands tableaux, on a plutôt l'impression que les effets furent obtenus par une intervention directe de l'artiste, comme s'il dessinait sur une feuille de papier.

2. *Tapéribonka*, 1977.

Acrylique et fusain sur toile; 121 cm 9 x 162,6.

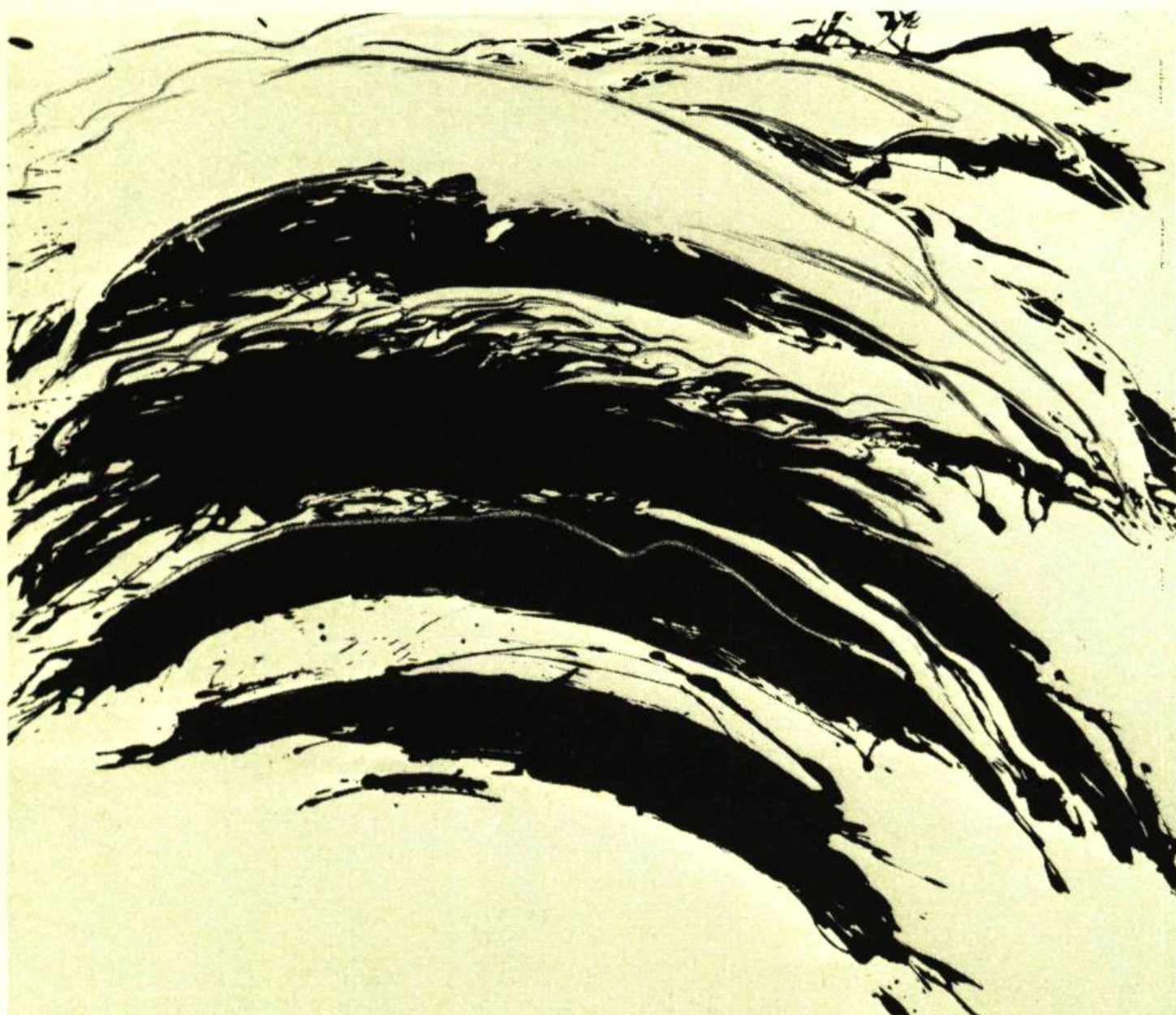




3. Tazuni, 1980.  
Acrylique, fusain et pastel sur toile; 152 cm 4 x 152,4.

4. Long Beach, 1980.





5. *Splash, sept, sept, deux*, 1980.  
Acrylique, fusain et pastel sur toile; 152 cm 4 x 177,8.

Ces détails techniques n'ajoutent sans doute rien à la valeur proprement picturale des tableaux de Jacques Hurtubise. Pourtant, ils aident à comprendre pourquoi ils nous donnent cette impression de grande liberté alliée à une grande maîtrise. Même si son travail récent établit une rupture dans l'ensemble de son œuvre, il est aussi le résultat de tout ce qui précède, notamment de sa lente traversée des périodes *op* et *hard edge*, ainsi que des grands tableaux noirs basés sur l'éclatement d'une série de carrés, ce qui produisait des interstices lumineux. D'ailleurs, le carré est un format qu'Hurtubise affectionne particulièrement, même dans ses toiles récentes qui peuvent être composées d'une juxtaposition de cette forme géométrique, ce qui donne parfois l'impression d'une certaine symétrie, dans une composition

asymétrique. Le carré accentue également le dynamisme du mouvement dans les toiles au graphisme plus éclaté.

Avec cet art où se mêle la stridulation chromatique à l'écriture volontaire et réfléchie, on revient à des valeurs d'espace, de masses et de volumes, mais aussi à des fulgurances qui font éclater la lumière comme dans tant de phénomènes naturels (branches dénudées ou feuillues, frissons sur l'eau, racines à découvert, embâcles) dont la contemplation provoque une espèce de joie délirante.

Cependant, la peinture de Jacques Hurtubise n'est pas descriptive, mais évocatrice; elle demeure, comme toute son œuvre, une manifestation purement plastique.

surprise and most attract the contemporary viewer during the big exhibition devoted by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to Nicolas de Largillierre?

The priority that Largillierre gives to colour in his art, the liberty he takes in the dislocation of planes and the skill with which he treats space and light in order to use all parts of the canvas surely make him a painter who will touch our sensivity. Pierre-Jean Mariette, collector, engraver and merchant, did not hesitate to declare that "never has a painter been more universal than M. de Largillierre". If Mariette showed a less sharp critical sense toward his contemporaries, we must nonetheless try to understand the meaning of so important an expression from so knowledgeable a connoisseur. The universality that Mariette claims for Largillierre rests chiefly on two reasons: his skill in handling the appropriately pictorial elements of the work: "He composed with the greatest facility and never has there been a greater expert"; his capacity for treating a wide variety of subjects: "He gave proofs of skill in all genres". This double mastery came to him "by dint of having seen and examined nature, of having copied it exactly for many years . . . all existed in his mind".

This familiarity with the first source of inspiration, nature, served him essentially in developing his skill as a colourist capable of treating tones in exact harmonies and of manipulating space at will. Only a few historical scenes, still lifes and landscapes have come to us to bear witness of his talent in all genres. It is the portrait that occupies the major place in his career, the portrait that must be considered beyond the lines of the composition and the colouring if we wish to understand the fascination that this social milieu had for him.

Largillierre occasionally obtained his clientele among the members of the royal family, but he was never, like Rigaud, Ranc or Nattier, an official painter of royalty. On the contrary, and like other artists, he found his clientele in the lesser nobility: members of the clergy and finance, and the intellectual and military elite. As his biographer, Dazellier d'Argenville, writes, "He preferred, as he told me many times, to work for the public, the concerns were less and the payment more prompt." Does this mean that his talent was appreciated by only a part of the population, on the periphery of power, which used his portrait as a means of social recognition? If this is the case, it must be noticed that Largillierre did not imitate the models that his clients might have had in mind, but that he succeeded in finding a balance between the official portrait, the allegorical portrait and the private portrait, less prevalent at the time.

Myra Nan Rosenfeld, curator of the exhibition, sets up two essential groups from their formal organization: works produced before 1710, in which the planes go in a fashion parallel to the space of the picture. Colour serves as main unifying agent between the different parts. Largillierre abandons the front object and introduces the foreground by draperies that seem to be animated by their own movement; on the middle ground, the gesticulatory expressivity of the head and the hands, the only visible parts of the body, and, finally, the hazy landscape suggested in the background. The supposed double portrait of *Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet and Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, duc du Maine* of 1685 (National Gallery, Washington) is an excellent example of this type of composition. The duke is leaning against a pedestal placed in front of a construction of which we see two columns opening directly on the grove. The monumental figure of Bossuet physically dominates the duc du Maine, but, turning aside his face, the latter takes on a psychological importance reduced in the composition. The hand resting on the duke's shoulder is the only physical link between the two persons placed at a slight angle. This relationship between the two persons in the same area of the picture is particularly daring, just as is the foreshortening of the dog in the foreground. The theatrical connection set up by the scenography brings out the bonds of authority and independence between the two personages at the same time. As in the group portrait representing *Gérard Edelinck dans son atelier* (The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia), each of the protagonists, by a clever positioning, retains his individuality at the same time as the complexity of the relationships that unite the group is revealed.

The portraits following 1710 try to integrate further the different planes by a more dynamic arrangement of the subject. The *Autoportrait* of 1711 (Versailles) would be a good example of the way in which Largillierre creates this movement in the foreground, where the artist has his hand on a folder of drawing paper overflowing to an easel upon which stands a sketch of an Annunciation. The outstanding head in the upper third of the composition is the central element of this movement that makes the view travel from the foreground to the background. This *Autoportrait* is equally significant

in that it insists on the superiority of drawing and of the historical painting. Largillierre, portcrayon in hand, points to the preparatory drawing for a religious composition. Correcting in a certain fashion his reputation as a colourist and portrait-painter, he indicates to the viewer the importance of the line in a composition of the most exalted kind in the academic hierarchy.

In any portrait, costume plays an important rôle, and Largillierre emphasizes and uses the fashion of his time. Jean-Baptiste Oudry relates the meticulous care his master applied in executing the draperies and in achieving the preparation of colours to obtain the most beautiful velvets and the most shimmering silks. "The portrait," he declared, "requires that all the tissues we paint should look new, otherwise the portrait always looks poor." And he recommended studying the materials on a life-size mannequin in order to be closer to reality in the movement of the fabrics at the same time as the colouring revealed by a special lighting. The way in which he displays the materials in the space and clothes the body in such a manner as to accentuate the hands and the head serves the composition and the subject. Largillierre does not satin the fabrics in the fashion of miniaturists; his treatment remains pictorial, and he animates by stripes or enhances the many folds of the garments with a misty finish. The abundance of fabrics, the display of the clothing, like the importance of the still lifes in his portraits, give his works the symbol of vanity.

The quality of Largillierre's production and the oblivion in which he was held for more than half a century — the last exhibition of his works goes back to 1928 in Paris — bestow the status of a great artistic event on the exhibition at Montreal. The assembly of more than ninety pictures and prints will allow us to comprehend Largillierre's evolution, and to place him in the context of the portrait in France at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Rapprochements have been numerous (Goubau, Lely, Hondius), the whole Gueidan family has travelled, works of other contemporary portraitists have been collected (Mignard, Coytel, De Troy, Rigaud, Le Brun, Arnulphy, Oudry, Nattier, De Leyen, Tournières, Aved, Tocqué), which will offer the opportunity of grasping the varied manners of these painters and comparing them with the craft of Largillierre.

Examining these at the time when the portrait was one of the dominant genres among imported works and in the artistic production of New France, it will be interesting to study some of the models that the active artists in the French colony could have had as guides, example and subjects of admiration.

(Translated by Mildred Grand)

1. *Essai sur le beau où l'on examine en quoi consiste précisément le beau dans la physique, dans le moral, dans les ouvrages de l'esprit et dans la musique.* Paris, 1741.

2. From September 19 to November 15, 1981. I wish to thank the Museum staff for having given me access to a part of the collected documentation. The quotation on fabrics was taken from a text published by Hal Opperman in the catalogue.

---

## JACQUES HURTUBISE, A MAGICIAN

---

By Gilles HÉNAULT

In the presence of the big animated canvases that Jacques Hurtubise has been painting for some years, we would be inclined to adopt his vehement tone, to speak the language of earthy upheaval and earthquakes, to answer his chromatic vibrations by great outbursts of electric lyricism!

This would be to understand badly the pictorial lesson given by Hurtubise's work for more than twenty years; because, if his canvases are filled with dynamism and flashes, if colour and movement are always the fundamental elements of his painting, it must certainly be observed that this "action" is detailed, that his explosions are controlled, that this artist does not haphazardly throw pigments onto a white canvas. This is a magician who organizes his effects.

In Hurtubise's pictures, what looks like accidents or dionysian overflowing is most often the result of a plan that he develops in stages.

It was already known, from his 1965 pictures, that his "spatters" were deliberate, that he made his "blobs" with masking tape! This

produced a striking effect. People were flabbergasted to realize that his "drips" really had no thickness. In short, he challenged action painting by stopping movement, to produce only the illusion of it. This lyrical painting was therefore thoughtful, deliberate, ordered, whence arises the impression of a powerful force producing an implosion. All the energy of the picture came from the interior, and not from a stirring of the surface in an unbridled motion.

This work of organization would become very obvious in the whole series of his op or hardedge pictures, made with a stencil and showing a wholly electrical luminosity. Hurtubise would pursue this research very far on the contrasting light of coloured pigments, in geometrical forms that can appear serial, but which are most of the time subtly awry, especially in oblique compositions, so that the eye that seeks a security in the repetitive movement is overcome by vertigo before each of the tiny variations. The ultimate outcome of this research would be the production of *pictures* of neon tubes because, the artist would say, "I was not able to have electric paint in a pot."

Later, his pictures broke up and were organized in a much more problematical manner: he painted even on interchangeable squares with which he could set up an arrangement according to his fancy.

Then took place the slow return in 1974-1975 to a more organic lyrical expression, and which could even recall of some serigraphs of 1961. However, Hurtubise does not repeat himself. In his recent creations he uses all the virtuosity, all the strength, all the knowledge accumulated during the course of one of the most prolific careers among the painters of his generation, because Hurtubise is a relentless worker. He has an ardent relationship with painting. He told me, "I paint ten or twelve hours a day . . . often from four o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon, seven days a week."

Furthermore, the large canvases accumulated in his immense studio at Terrebonne bear witness to this. From May 29 to July 15 he exhibited in Vancouver sixty-seven recent pictures, most of which are of large size, and which we shall eventually have the pleasure of seeing at the Musée d'Art Contemporain after they have been shown at several Canadian museums. This follows another exhibition comprising fourteen pictures and two serigraphs that took place at Long Beach, at the University of California, from February 9 to March 15, 1981, an exhibition that will be continued in the cultural centres of Canada at Paris, London and Brussels, to end at the Nova Scotia Art Museum in Halifax at the beginning of 1982.

All of this recent production is to be found in Hurtubise's great neo-lyrical trajectory. An excellent colourist, in some paintings he uses varied chromatic scales, in which pink, green and yellow predominate, in which also big trails of black move. In some cases, charcoal and pastel delineate the forms or else emphasize the movements. Elsewhere, black explodes on a red background in a kind of flight; but form is the background that the artist brings out in jagged masses and flashing lines, thanks to a process that reverses that of the stencil.

Nevertheless, one would believe one is finally in the presence of a purely action, orgasmic production, of a spontaneous writing; briefly, of signs that result from a trepidation of the artist in front of his canvas. One could imagine him with dilated eye, paintbrush extended, haphazardly squirting the lines and splashes of his action painting in an agitation similar to a dance of exorcism. But this is not at all what it is. Once again, if this lyricism is born of a passion, it is that of order or of a risk that arises from a technique forcing the artist to *compose* his picture, to correct it at need, to produce it according to more profound impulses.

Thus, to produce a binary picture, let us say black and red, Hurtubise begins by painting an entirely black background. Then he adds a coat of rubber glue, and in this skin he carves a jagged shape. If he next covers the whole with a layer of red acrylic, upon tearing away the glue that masked the black background, he will obtain a black *surface*, a drawing, a graphic, an effect of action painting, and even what could resemble drippings. His multicoloured pictures are evidently of a more complex production. At need, he will accentuate some contours with charcoal, pastel or even acrylic. This is somewhat the technique of serigraphy, with its masking, use of glue and multiple layers. Moreover, Hurtubise excels in this art: his silk-screen art is important and noteworthy. And yet, in front of his big pictures one has rather the impression that the effects were obtained by a direct intervention by the artist, as if he were drawing on a sheet of paper.

Doubtless these technical details add nothing to the strictly pictorial value of Jacques Hurtubise's works. However, they help to understand why they give us this impression of great freedom allied to great mastery. Even if his recent production establishes a break

in the ensemble of his work, it is also the result of all that went before, particularly of his slow passage from the op and hardedge periods, as also large black pictures based on the explosion of a series of squares, which produced luminous chinks. As well, the square is a shape of which Hurtubise is especially fond, even in his recent canvases which can be made up of a juxtaposition of this geometrical form, which sometimes gives the impression of a certain symmetry in an asymmetrical composition. The square also accentuates the dynamism of the movement in the canvases of the more explosive graphism.

With this art where chromatic stridulation is blended with spontaneous and thoughtful writing, we come back to values of space, masses and volumes, but also to fulgurations that make light burst as in so many natural phenomena (bare or leafy branches, ripples on the water, exposed roots, ice jams) the contemplation of which inspires a kind of delirious joy.

Yet Jacques Hurtubise's painting is not descriptive but evocative; it remains, like all his work, a purely plastic manifestation.

(Translated by Mildred Grand)

---

## VINCENT VAN GOGH AND PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

---

By Richard WATTENMAKER

In 1975, the exhibition *Puvis de Chavannes and the Modern Tradition* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (See *Vie des Arts*, XX, 81, Winter 1975/76) explored the relationship of Vincent van Gogh to Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and sought to identify the role Puvis played in Vincent's art. Although the tendency is almost irresistible to overstress such relationships because Vincent's letters refer (repeatedly and in great detail) to Puvis, this fact does not correlate with the extent of influence exerted which is isolated rather than pervasive. Nevertheless, pertinent new documentation has come to light since 1975, hence an update of this little-known aspect of Vincent's art at the very end of his remarkable career.

Two months before his death on July 29, 1890, van Gogh wrote: I believe in the possibility that a later generation will be, and will go on being, concerned with the interesting research on the subject of colours and modern sentiment along the same lines as, and of equal value to, those of Delacroix, of Puvis de Chavannes — and that impressionism will be their source.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, which we shall later place in its actual chronological context, accurately predicts the future path along which modern art developed — a profound and prophetic insight. Puvis and Delacroix: a recurring theme in Vincent's consciousness. To grasp the significance of this equation we might point out that Delacroix was an idol among the impressionist and post-impressionist painters and for Vincent to equate Puvis with Delacroix in his thoughts about the future of painting compels scrutiny. Puvis, like Delacroix, successfully sought in the past means of opening new directions. He simplified, he flattened, he discarded unessentials without losing sight of the classical shoreline of the French tradition. He redeemed the classical which had become discredited by the academics. Puvis thus provided the young intellectually-independent artists of the 1880s with access to the old masters — Poussin, the Florentines, Greece — by showing them a method of absorbing them.

In the midst of this ferment Vincent arrived in Paris in 1886. The younger generation — Gauguin, Seurat, Lautrec, Signac, Denis, Bernard, Sérusier, *et al* — were making a heroic attempt to integrate the discoveries of impressionism, color and light as they affect color relationships, into a renewed vision. This concentrated empirical and quasi-scientific research was an important revolution in the history of art. Fundamental to their comprehension of the great impressionist achievement was the awareness and acceptance by Vincent's generation of the decorative aspect of impressionism and its means. Vincent discerned the principles accepted by these men, that is, that the direction in which the art of painting was moving was toward simplification, a simplification which meant many things: brightness and intensity of color, prominently sinuous linear rhythms as an underlying structural motif, the two-dimensional compositional bonding of the picture surface. The concomitant of this was the