

EXTREME PAINTING

Painting Under Siege

June 17th – September 25th 2010

Guest curator: Nicolas Mavrikakis

Mathieu Beauséjour, Sarah Bertrand-Hamel, Simon Bilodeau, Amélie Guérin, Victor Hacala, Benjamin Klein, Céline B. La Terreur, Mathieu Lefevre, Savannah Lou, Adrian Norvid, Brittany Pratt and Alana Riley.

This is not, formally speaking, a painting exhibition. As guest curator, I am instead interested in showing how the representation of painting – its image, its mythology – still to this day makes artists dream and reflect. In fact, by the strictest meaning of the term, there is here but one single painter (with reference to what we conventionally call easel painting) and he himself is as haunted by the idea of painting as he is by the very materiality of the medium. For this exhibition titled *Extreme Painting* – regrouping 16 Montreal galleries – I wanted to bring together unusual approaches to pigment and pictoriality. This exhibition is therefore about the idea of painting and the imagination sparked by this mode of expression, transposed in so many other mediums.

Of course, painting nowadays, in the West, is no longer a dangerous activity. Gone are the years where Malevich was forbidden to paint non-figurative works. Gone is the era where Borduas was losing his job for his ideas on surrealist-inspired abstract painting, against dominating images. Current painting is no longer, as it was during the modern period and even since the Renaissance, the dominant form of expression. It has been overtaken and even dethroned by photography, performance, video, installation... Nonetheless, both ancient and especially modern painting continues to be referential; a starting point for the collective imagination, but also for the more restrained milieu of contemporary art.

I wanted to show painting outside of its historical boundaries; to surprise it in its postmodern rapport with the end of the medium's specificity. It must be said that pigment makes us dream in its usual context, as much as outside of it.

Mathieu Lefevre and Mathieu Beauséjour have painting in their blood... This is definitely the case given that they both got tattooed. They didn't use pigment on canvas, but rather made it enter between the dermis and the epidermis of their skin.

The former didn't get his girlfriend's name tattooed, nor a Polynesian or even Celtic inspired motif. He pushed his love for art and for painting so far as to get Malevich, Matisse and Picasso paintings inscribed on his body. He also had his forearms marked with the names of Watteau and Manet. These artists thus become heroes for postmodernists... In this way, Lefevre ridicules a certain superficial glorification of artists in our societies.

The latter had already been branded with many tattoos, including one on his back that consists of the word "Persistence". And persist he does in his approach. Specifically for this exhibition, he got two new tattoos: "Ubu" and "L'Acéphale". The first, a character developed by Alfred Jarry, symbolizes a critique of human folly. The second deals with a world where irrationality takes over and binds us to this very condition. It references the title of the journal founded by George Bataille in the 1930s that André Masson had personified as a headless God with a skull in the place of genitals, holding a dagger in

one hand and a Dionysian heart in the other. This video work questions the notion of citation in the field of art history.

In his painting and drawing installation Victor Hacala, young artist and DJ (he's 19 years old), stages his (fake) room. There, amidst the disorder, we find drawings, paintings, porno magazines, love letters, scribbled-on school notebooks... Earlier in his life, Hacala would draw stencils for his friends' tattoos. Evidently, his recent drawings keep traces of those influences. His work is also inspired by graffiti on city walls. He speaks about his obsession with painting and drawing.

In her videos, Alana Riley rereads abstract art. In *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Grey*, she revisits paintings composed of stripes or "zippers". Within an aerial-view travelling shot, we see the artist cleaning the floor of a room for artist residencies. Through her humorist approach, which I would allow myself to call feminist, Riley shows us how the abstract adventure, first and foremost a masculine one, is nonetheless supported by the work of women who still, to this day, mostly occupy the archiving and conservation positions in museum institutions... In another video, *White monochrome on the Factory floor*, the artist deconstructs monochrome white into a tautological structure.

Céline B. La Terreur takes on the notion of Barnett Newman's formerly shocking pictorial "zipper" literally. With her work, she renews its vigor by transforming it into a hardcore zipper, composed of a real vinyl-mounted zipper evoking a sadomasochistic universe. She pursues her reappropriation of painting in rather feminist collages composed of false nails to recreate works by Mondrian and Buren.

Amélie Guérin also uses humor to deal with the notion of painting. In retouched prints of an old photograph, she shows seagulls painted in bright colors with spray paints. This aged image documenting an outdated bird vaccination and marking technique seems to show us a pictorial obsession having succumbed to insanity: painting birds. This doesn't fail to evoke the last works of Riopelle, who used dead birds as stencils placed on the canvas in order to create negative images of these sprayed creatures.

In the gallery, Simon Bilodeau installed a studio wall usually used to execute the paintings he arranges in various installations. This wall and a few examples of his paintings covered in "Pollockian" splashes are framed here with mirrors and fluorescent lights, giving a magical aura to the ensemble. Of course, this context serves to demonstrate a certain romantic vision of the painter's studio. Moreover, the lights emblazing the back of this wall speak ironically about the medium's power of transcendence.

In the photograph *Tout est un mouvement géant; Christophe Jordache (sous-sol Belgo)*, Sarah Bertrand-Hamel also cites Pollock's pictorial splashing. Her version is enlarged, however, magnified in design-like fashion. This immense « splash » seems printed on strips of wallpaper ready to be glued to a wall. Bertrand-Hamel tells us that the abstract art that once shocked us so has become an accepted and almost ornamental aesthetic form. By placing this image in a dingier, more deconstructed context, (that of the Belgo building basement), she confronts two temporalities. On the one hand, there is the unappetizing decrepitude of the unmaintained walls with chipping paint, on the other, a sacralizing of art by the museum and especially by popular culture that slowly washes away the repulsive and dissenting aspects of troubling artworks.

In the large drawing *Mr. Colorfull*, Adrian Norvid depicts a Pinocchio in the aftermath of splashing bright colors all over the place. Norvid thus explains how painting can be a stimulating, sometimes arousing and invasive activity.

In his three paintings, Benjamin Klein reflects upon the meaning we have lent to this medium. With *Little Sphinx*, he reveals painting as an enigma waiting to be deciphered. In *Sleepwalker*, an almost expressionist, or at the very least modernist piece, painting is seen as monstrous, like a creature ready to devour the viewer in an overflow of aggressive colors. In *Land's End*, the pigment resembles luminously colorful magma, ready to explode and invade the world's empty space.

In her drawings, Savannah Lou attempts to find the impulse expressed in the drawings and paintings of the children she works with. She takes literally Picasso's words (and the spirit of many modernists) that state that one must unlearn the teachings of adult life and regain childhood's spontaneity.

With her video piece, Brittany Pratt shows how the activities of certain petrol companies are a cross between Pollock's splashes and Robert Smithson's Land Art. With caustic humor, she explains that a land artist would never have been granted the right to take over the Gulf coast of the United States, nor would have had a budget like BP's to make such a monumental work...

I wish to thank all the artists that have made this exhibition possible as well as the Joyce Yahouda Gallery coordinators, Gentiane Barbin, Sarah Bertrand-Hamel and Claire Moeder.

I also wish to thank gallery Director Joyce Yahouda for this extraordinary opportunity and for the enriching dialogue we have had throughout the production process of this event.

Nicolas Mavrikakis

Translation by Annie Briard