

Francine Savard

Suites, Diaz Contemporary, Toronto, February 22 to March 22, 2008

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On late-winter afternoons, daylight casts a shadowy industrial grid across the white walls and mottled cement floor of Diaz Contemporary's main space. As it inched across the installation of Francine Savard's exhibition of monochrome paintings, "Suite," this shadow play gently underlined the phenomenological presence of the shaped canvases. They radiate stillness and density but inspire continual change in the viewer's impression of time, space and colour.

Savard's models are cardboard boxes that have been opened up (a flap or two on either end) and photographed from a particular angle. The resulting forms are further flattened—as drawings—before becoming canvases that subtly and strangely embody their previous states. In music, a suite is a series of dances, but Savard has given each work in the group of black canvases that dominates the show the title *Suite*. Careful observation allows the harmonic variations between the canvases (red-black, green-black, deep violet-black) to emerge slowly. In these works, colour leads you into perceptual play, or, like the black ceiling in the reading room of the architect Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House, presses you into a state of high concentration.

A series of five small brown canvases, *Je déballe ma bibliothèque*, takes its title from an essay written by the early-20th-century German-Jewish critic Walter Benjamin amid "the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open..." Modelled after cardboard boxes that have been emptied of books, these works seem, in their plain objectness, to be emptied of colour, and in a beautiful shift of perception can be read as the empty rooms outlined in architectural plans—rooms, one imagines, in which libraries once existed. The library, Benjamin says, is a place where the natural chaos of objects is catalogued. Savard's work, like the life of the book collector in Benjamin's essay, "manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order."

While Savard's aesthetic—rooted in the austere Montreal tradition of Fernand Leduc and Yves Gaucher—seems to bear little relationship to the worn, 19th-century object-world that Benjamin held so dear, her work is unmistakably handmade. By immaculately affixing two canvas layers to laminated plywood, the second layer cut precisely to cover the sides of the deep, irregularly shaped support, Savard seems to be practising an outmoded craft like bookbinding or garment-making—activities that take us back to Benjamin and his concern with making the quotidian life of the past new.