

Savard's painted shapes play with perception

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Francine Savard is one of those artists whose work is always delicately positioned at the threshold of perceptual change: Just when you think you see what the work is about, it shifts into another, and always less-expected realm of meaning.

There's a beautiful word for this fluidity: liminality. That which is "liminal" (that which possesses "liminality") operates at a place of perceptual transition, where the usual boundaries of thought and understanding now become porous and imprecise. The Montreal-based artist's stunningly forceful wall of eight small, black, shaped canvases—the centrepiece of her new exhibition at Diaz Contemporary—is a good example of Savard's liminal thinking.

This work, which bears the overall title *Suites*, consists of two horizontal rows of canvases, one above the other. At first, the eight paintings (which are made with acrylic on canvas, mounted on sheets of laminated plywood) look like little more than pleasing but unremarkable shapes. Stay with them a bit longer, however, and they'll begin to reveal more of themselves.

First of all, they're not all black—or not equally black, anyhow. Some of the eight plaque-like pictures are black-grey, black-blue, black-green, black-brown. And, of course, black-black. These shifts of colour are hard to see at first. They occur at what might be thought of as a low-threshold level of colouristic experience—where colour is a factor of time, not just an immediate assault on the old optical rods and cones.

Even more absorbing than their chromatic instability, however, is the way their shapes flicker from obvious flatness to a kind of virtual three-dimensionality. How does this work? It seems that what Savard did was to use cardboard boxes to generate the shapes of her paintings. Apparently she pulled open the boxes' flaps or even totally flattened them, and then, rather than simply using the deconstructed boxes as templates to provide her with new shapes, she actually photographed the altered boxes from various angles. This meant she could now use the overall shape of the photographed box as way of presenting (reflattened, as it were) an entirely new configuration: a shape that seems both two-dimensional and yet which can also be construed as a shape with perspective. So Savard's dark shapes are now simultaneously flat and dimensional—which lends them a great deal of visual energy.

This new flat/volumetric aspect of her box-paintings also calls into question the way we actually see things - the ways in which we organize space for ourselves, employing



Savard's *Suite* #89, #48, #80, #65, #53, #58, #54, #57: Calling into question the way we see things.

not only the immediate optical information we encounter, but also bringing to that information contributions from our own tactile, bodily experiences, as well as the promptings of memory and analytical understanding. Any object or shape is a composite, the layered summary of many kinds of knowledge.

As if in witty and eloquent contrast to her dark, shape-shifter paintings, Savard also offers a couple of wall-mounted sculptural works (*Element 17D* and *Element 19B*) made of unpainted plywood which, rather than sometimes appearing to be three-dimensional, really are three-dimensional. So which works are more dimensionally "real"? The paintings you merely posit as having depth and inhabiting space—or the ones which actually do?