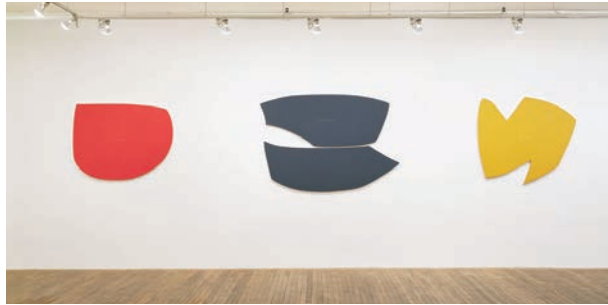


The New Old Abstraction: Contemporary Canadian Painters Look Back To Earlier Examples [extrait]

BY ADAM LAUDER

CANADIAN ART, SUMMER 2013, P.103-107



Reports of the “return of painting” have circulated for so long, it’s hard to escape the suspicion that the end of painting was never more than a convenient alibi.

The story goes like this. In the mid-1960s, performance, site-specific installation and other “dematerialized” actions began to challenge the dominant format and medium of late modernism: the problematically styled “man-size” painting celebrated by formalist critics. But despite faltering vital signs, the early 1980s witnessed an irrepressible revival of painting. The conceptually savvy neo-Geo movement articulated new critical positions through strategies of parody and pastiche. Meanwhile, neo-Expressionism was seen by some as an unwelcome reassertion of *Ab Ex* machismo, or a “neo-Avant Garde” fatally compromised by its easy assimilation to an insatiable market. Since the collapse of the '80s art market, returns of painting have played out between the Gog and Magog of neo-conceptualism and neo-Expressionism as a seemingly infinite cycle of endgames.

In recent years, one trend to emerge that does not map neatly onto this pattern is the work of new formalist painters such as Tomma Abts and Thomas Scheibitz, whose spiky or biomorphic forms look with a newfound sincerity and modesty of gesture beyond the late-modernist citations of neo-Geo to earlier referents in the history of abstraction like Constructivism and Vorticism. In much of this work, the vocabulary of early modernism is refracted through the lens of moderne graphic design or retro home decor as a commercial phantasmagoria of mediated surfaces and preselected colour harmonies, but without succumbing to the irony associated with postmodern precedents. Often it seems as though these painters are arranging the fragments of modernist abstraction to compose a memento mori to modernism itself: a still-life meditation on the inescapable mortality of art and its styles.

In keeping with this trend, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that a growing number of contemporary artists in this country seek inspiration from specifically Canadian histories of modernist abstraction. It is surprising because, with the conservative modernism of the Group of Seven remaining our collective point of reference for early

20th-century Canadian art, the very concept of “Canadian modernism” can only strike many as a contradiction in terms. Yet, in looking to the products of history with fresh eyes, artists Jay Isaac, Morley Shayuk, Lauren Hall, Patrick Howlett and Francine Savard challenge us to rethink our relationship to our recent past as well as to the contemporary trajectories of abstraction.

[...]

The paradoxical temporality of the image in Bergson’s writings is also an ongoing point of reference for the iconic abstractions of the Quebec painter Fernand Leduc—whose hard-edge canvases inspired a dazzling 2001–02 series by conceptual painter Francine Savard. Like Howlett’s work, Savard’s *Un plein un vide* paintings deliberately confound clear-cut associations between language and image. An accomplished monochrome painter herself, Savard deliberately avoided Leduc’s more recent monochrome production for this series, looking instead to earlier biomorphic abstractions in search of abstract figures that could be decontextualized from their fields and appropriated as “artifacts” in their own right. This process was inspired by a chance encounter with a text on Leduc’s work by critic Jean-Pierre Duquette: “I thought: this is an inspiring vocabulary,” recalls Savard. “It tries to tell us what the paintings are all about.” Using Duquette’s lexicon as a guide for selecting readymade forms from Leduc’s crisp compositions became a way to “discuss with myself which form and which colour to apply,” says Savard. “I did not want to apply the formulation of the author, but to decide for myself. In the process, I discovered how difficult it is to make a form.” Savard insists she “could never do that myself,” underlining the distance separating her work from the spontaneity of Leduc’s constructions, despite their shared formal identity.

When asked about her fraught relationship to the *Plasticien* tradition in which her practice is rooted, Savard emphasizes that “The conceptual dimension of my work makes it very different from the *Plasticiens*, not only in terms of style (palette, et cetera), but also philosophy.” An encounter with Leduc—who has exhibited alongside the younger artist, while also expressing reservations about her unauthorized appropriations of his work—further clarified Savard’s thoughts on the divide separating her paintings from their historical referent: “He quite rightly called them ‘quasi-objects’—I like that a lot.”

As with Isaac, Shayuk, Hall and Howlett, abstraction returns in Savard’s practice as the uncanny object of fresh techniques of manipulation. These artists are representative of new trends in painting that treat abstraction and its stylistic discontents as artifacts that—like the elements of a traditional still life—express the paradoxical temporalities of art and memory.