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MAC

PAINTING NATURE WITH A MIRROR

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This selective portrait of 1980s painting in Canada showcases twenty or so paintings and drawings from the collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, some on display here for the first time since they were acquired.

While the preceding decade was dominated by conceptual art, the eighties saw the return of a style of painting that, rather than attempting to follow the course of modernist abstraction inherited from the mid-century avant-gardes, adopted a sometimes disconcerting heterogeneity, simultaneously deploying figuration and abstraction. Between the immediacy of the application of paint seen in the work of Lynne Hughes, Wanda Koop and Harold Klunder, and the cinematic compositions of Joanne Tod and Susan G. Scott, not to mention Sandra Meigs's nod to naïve painting and Medrie MacPhee's evocation of a Mediterranean historicism, we can say it was a decade marked by a great diversity of aesthetic explorations, but above all by a desire to be free of the previous generation of artists' conceptual rigour. For example, Ron Moppett, from whom we've borrowed the title of this exhibition, spoke eloquently of his reticence to apply discourse to his works: "When we use words, we have correspondences so firmly lodged in our brains but images have to be much more open. Not meaningless or arbitrary but generous."[1]

In a manner typical of postmodernism, 1980s painting drew on both pop culture and a vaguely historical, archetypal or mythological narrative, while preserving an evocative ambivalence. Consequently, even though abstraction remains present, it steps away somewhat from concerns specific to painting as a medium and replaces them with hybrid approaches in which the pictorial space, freed of the obligation to maintain its surfaceness, becomes more descriptive and/or closer to collage. The use of repetitive motifs and the insertion of textual elements are also characteristics of the time. For example, we observe the former strategy in the works of Carol Wainio (*Plural Possibilities*, 1982) and François Morelli (*Untitled*, 1987), while in Robert Houle's works it takes on a more striking meaning. The repeated hatching in his *Untitled*, 1981, goes beyond a mode of

1 Ron Moppett, "Letter to Mayo Graham," in Katherine Ylitalo, *Ron Moppett. Painting Nature with a Mirror 1974-1979* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1990), p. 28.

Carol Wainio
Plural Possibilities, 1982
Acrylic on fibreboard
122 × 244 cm
Collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Photo: Denis Farley

Ron Moppett
Painting Nature with a Mirror, 1985
Oil on canvas
182.5 × 162 cm (each)
Lavalin Collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Photo: M. N. Hutchinson, courtesy the Art Gallery of Alberta

composition: it replicates the quillwork ornamentation found in some First Nations cultures.

Looking back at this period today, we are able to establish a number of parallels with recent developments in painting. Beyond stylistic references, however, we should ask ourselves why the pictorial aesthetics developed in the 1980s resonate with a younger generation of Canadian artists, such as Amberra Wellmann, Dominique Pétrin, Darby Milbrath or Sojourner Truth Parsons.

What is there in the climate of this second decade of the twenty-first century that draws us back to the works gathered here? Despite the diversity of styles adopted at the time, we can nonetheless identify points of convergence that may form a basis for an answer to that question. On the one hand, the centrality of the issues surrounding the rhetorical properties of images shaded all forms of political and social engagement, which was so present in the art of the 1970s. The revolutionary potential previously ascribed to art thus seems to have been re-examined from a desire to imbue practices with an ambivalence that can veer between irony and lyricism, depending on the artist. Furthermore, this elasticity of images is put to the test in our current socio-political context, which is henceforth more sensitive to power dynamics and the place that is, or is not, given over to artists from racialized and/or marginalized groups. And so, how are we to reconcile the universalist claims of an "art for art's sake" with the need to overhaul the canons of the history of recent art from an identity-based perspective? What lessons could we learn by examining the way this question has been explored in painting by some of the artists in this exhibition, such as Robert Houle, Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, and Joanne Tod?

Exhibition presented as part of the series *Pictures for an Exhibition.*

Artists: Sylvie Bouchard, Joseph Branco, Gathie Falk, Betty Goodwin, Kathleen Graham, John Heward, Robert Houle, Lynn Hughes, Harold Klunder, Wanda Koop, Medrie MacPhee, Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, Sandra Meigs, Ron Moppett, François Morelli, Leopold Plotek, Leslie Reid, Susan G. Scott, Joanne Tod, Carol Wainio, Shirley Wiitasalo.