

Fifty years of abstract art Ottawa galleries join Quebecers to celebrate anti-elite movement

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Abstract art became an in-your-face, undeniable force in Canadian cultural life 50 years ago this summer when a group of Quebec artists produced a manifesto called *Le Refus Global*.

Paul Emile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcelle Ferron and 13 others issued a bitter condemnation – *A Total Rejection* – of the claustrophobic, tradition-bound, elitist Duplessis-era Quebec in favour of an idealistic society ruled by artistic free expression. The result was a whole new generation of non-figurative art characterized by swirls, splotches and splats that, 50 years later, often tends to be most appreciated by the elites and still tends to leave many art consumers longing for a recognizable landscape or a compelling portrait.

Just ask Shirley Thomson, former director of the National Gallery of Canada and the battle-scarred survivor of the three-stripe *Voice of Fire* controversy. Thomson summed up the situation perfectly in the foreword to the catalogue for the National Gallery's 1992 show, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada*: "Abstraction, though not always well-received, even today, allowed Canadian artists to be heard, and, above all, afforded them the opportunity to add

their voices to a larger discourse, that of the major international trends."

But just what were those voices saying back in 1948? Were they commenting on the world around them or were they being self-indulgently autobiographical? Were they fashioning a whole, new cerebral experience for the masses? Or were they creating simply for art's sake?

Those questions still bedevil many just as the experts continue to produce conflicting headlines as to whether abstract art has run its course or is being reborn. What is certain is that it is still here and, thanks to the 50th anniversary of *Le Refus Global*, it will be here this month, in Ottawa and throughout Quebec, with a vengeance Borduas and his contemporaries would have savoured.

The anniversary has spawned a giant multi-gallery series of exhibitions of early and contemporary abstract art co-ordinated by the Quebec Association of Contemporary Art Galleries. Dozens of galleries are participating from Montreal to Val d'Or and Rimouski for the series of shows which are mainly built around June dates. Three Ottawa galleries have also signed on – the National Gallery, the Ottawa Art Gallery and Galerie St-Laurent and Hill (*L'autre Equivoque*).

The series of exhibitions is entitled *Peinture-Peinture* and is to be officially launched this week in Montreal. There is talk of organized bus tours for those wishing to feast all day on the works of Borduas and his successors.

One of the main purposes of *Peinture-Peinture*, says Charles Hill, chief curator

of Canadian art at the National Gallery, is to show abstract art "is a continuing force." Thus, the exhibitions will show contemporary abstract artists as well as their antecedents and influences. Galerie St-Laurent and Hill opens two contemporary shows June 12 in conjunction with *Peinture-Peinture*. One, *After-Image*, is a solo show by prominent Ottawa artist Leslie Reid. The other is a group show called *Espace* involving 12 Quebec and Ontario artists, including Pat Durr, John Barkley and Daniel Butcher.

Anyone who thinks abstract art is dead has never seen the energetic works of Barkley, a 33-year-old Aylmer artist working out of the Enriched Bread Studios in Ottawa. Barkley has increasingly been commanding attention in the Ottawa area and so impressed the organizers of *Peinture-Peinture* that he was also invited to exhibit one of his works, *Talitha Cumi*, in their main show covering two floors and 18 galleries in the Belgo Building in downtown Montreal.

The National Gallery is on the *Peinture-Peinture* tour, not because of any special exhibition, but because of the splendid works in its permanent collection from the Automatists and others who gave birth to Canadian abstraction. One room, for example, focuses on Montreal abstract artists during the 1940s. All the big names are there: Paul-Emile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Pierre Gauvreau, Alfred Pellon, Marcelle Ferron and many others. Just a few blocks away, the Ottawa Art Gallery's long-running show, *Approaching Abstraction*, echoes the National Gallery's 1940s line-up with many of the same names but with works

mainly from the 1950s and 1960s from the Ottawa Art Gallery's Firestone Collection. The exhibition concentrates on the work of Quebec artist Edmund Alleyn and was designed to complement a solo show of Alleyn's contemporary works recently held at the gallery. Alleyn never joined the ranks of pure abstraction. Hence the title of the show. Today, Alleyn is into figurative art dominated by a mauve palette. Reid, a University of Ottawa art professor, has moved in a similar direction. In the 1960s, Reid produced white-on-white landscape-based abstracts. Today she is into the same mauve palette as Alleyn and, through hyper-realism, is exploring the links between painting and photography. Her show is included in *Peinture-Peinture* to show how some abstract artists have evolved into completely different genres.

While Reid is no longer an abstract artist, she believes "absolutely" that abstract art is alive, well and here to stay. She notes that some of her students, including Barkley, are young and producing impressive abstract works. Barkley's paintings are not pure abstraction. They tend to be landscape-based but make you work to find images and meaning emerging from the complex interplay of mainly dark, earth tones.

Barkley talks of a "revival" in abstract art. "Abstract art is spiritual," he says. "People crave that." Sandra Dyck curated *Approaching Abstraction* for the Ottawa Art Gallery. The buzz in the art world, she says, is that abstract art is regaining favour but that painting itself is still passé for many young contemporary artists.

They are far more interested in video, installations, performance art and whiz-bang, high-tech gadgetry. They believe everything that can be said by painting has been said. As well, says Dyck, there is a tendency in this so-called post-modern world to seek relevance in art and abstract art just doesn't cut it.

"Certainly, a contemporary cultural studies person would not be into abstract art at all," says Dyck, who now hangs her shingle at the Carleton University Art Gallery. "Race identity, gender and politics, that's what's on right now in literature and art." The organizers of *Peinture-Peinture* beg to differ. A publicity poster proclaims that abstract art is not static but vital, constantly breaking new ground and, very definitely, relevant.

"Ironic or studious, geometric or gestural, quoting art history or using concepts developed in new sciences, painting now multiplies and refines its questioning of reality. At times meditative, ascetic or obsessive, at times hedonistic or even chaotic, the current creation in the field of abstract painting reflects with great accuracy the complexity of contemporary thinking and the new territories where it leads us."

Thus, we see, 50 years later, abstract art no longer wants to be known as *Le Refus Global* – *A Total Rejection*. Instead of rejecting society, it wants to embrace society and, in turn, it wants respect, not just from the Establishment but from all the young, rebellious artists who think abstract art is just so much out-dated claptrap.