

**Multi noirs, 1997–2014**

February 12–April 26, 2015

**Black**

Death and mourning, the devil and the plague, black magic and superstition, the habits of Benedictine monks and the strict puritanical moral code, the black flag of the anarchist, la grande noirceur; the associations are immediate and largely unquestioned. Along with its companion white, black was considered a non-colour from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, in the wake of the invention of the printing press to Isaac Newton's discovery of the colour spectrum. It was only fully rehabilitated in the early twentieth century by Modern painters and most recently declared the summum of elegance by fashion designers.

From the wall paintings at Lascaux, and the frescos at Pompei, to the paintings of Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Goya, Velasquez, and Manet black is the colour with which all others must compose. For Soulages, Motherwell, Reinhardt, Nevelson, Bourgeois, and Borduas, it has offered a wealth of material and metaphorical possibilities. While for Adorno: "Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background colour is black"<sup>1</sup>.

As Ad Reinhardt so remarkably demonstrated in his "black" monochrome paintings (1954–1967)—barely perceptible grids which over time reveal themselves to include nuances of grey, red, green and blue—black has the particular ability, when impregnated with other colours, to challenge the very limits of visibility and force a veritable slowing down of perception. A lesson that was of course not lost on Guido Molinari, amongst a host of contemporary painters who have continued to explore the radical potential of black.

Black is not a colour one readily associates with Francine Savard, whose own, primarily monochromatic paintings, tend to express thought through carefully deliberated colour and meticulously constructed shape. That Gutenberg's printing press contributed so emphatically to the history of the colour black does however resonate, not without a certain irony, with Savard's practice, grounded so markedly as it is in the printed word.

The black (and white) works by Francine Savard exhibited here alongside Guido Molinari's *Triblanc* (1961) afford the range of "materials" from which the artist draws in order to create her works. The two large *Volumes noirs* (2000–2008) unequivocally evoke the bound book through the exposed layers of canvas on three sides and a painted "spine"; the printed page and the structural analysis of the text form the basis of *Et, Ou, Si, Mais*, and *Partitions* (2007); while *Le Musée imaginaire* (1997) refers quite literally to the bookshelf or the library.

The *Suites* series (2008) is more elusively based on photographs of cardboard boxes with variously opened flaps. Upon close perusal one realizes that none of these canvases are in fact pure black: the hues of brown, blue, green and violet declare their uniqueness and require a viewing that notes both their individual tonalities and the role each painting plays within the series. Likewise in *Et, Ou, Si* and *Mais*, nuances of black are employed to delineate the contours of each word on the "page," at once inciting and frustrating the possibility of "reading" the text.

The restricted palette of the works presented in the exhibition increases the resonance of the forms, forcing the viewer to ponder the meaning or origin of the shapes, and effectively provoking this desired slowing down of perception. Further, the white walls of the gallery take

on an active role, serving as the negative space that activates the works within the room, as though each becomes a marking on a white page.

*Multi-noir* (2014), which was created specifically for the exhibition in the premises of the Guido Molinari Foundation, and refers to Molinari's *Multi-blanc* of 1958, anchors all the works in this specific space and time, transforming the exhibition into a mental mapping, an open book, an imaginary space infused with desire, longing and a certain melancholy.

Tellingly, the two large-scale black and white photographs, presented in the vault, remind us that Savard's focus, as always, remains the history and materiality of paint, and obliquely, the role that photography has played in the history of the colour black. And then *Volumes noirs* take on the semblance of oversized photo albums, and once again we note the conceptual, self-referential nature of Francine Savard's practice.

— Lesley Johnstone

**Francine Savard** lives and works in Montreal. She studied graphic design at the Royal College of Art in London, England (1978–1979) and received a master's degree in visual arts from the Université du Québec à Montréal (1994). The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal presented a retrospective exhibition of her work in 2009–2010. In 2013, the Art Gallery of the Université du Québec à Montréal invited her to participate in *The Painting Project*, an attempt at describing the current state of painting in Canada. Francine Savard is represented by the Galerie René Blouin in Montreal and by Diaz Contemporary in Toronto. Her works form part of the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée des beaux-arts du Québec, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. "Black as an Ideal", in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. C. Lenhardt, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 58.