

Goguen / Molinari—Drawings 1954–1959

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In the world of visual arts, the post-Borduas period in Montreal did not lack vitality. A first event occurred in May 1953, a few days after the departure for New York of the “father of ‘automatism’”, in the form of the spectacular exhibition *La Place des artistes*, organized by Marcelle Ferron, Fernand Leduc and Robert Roussil. This new type of “Spring Show” marked the first participation by Molinari, then not quite 20 years old, in a public art exhibition. Thereafter, followed in rapid succession, *La matière chante*, considered as the “swan song of the automatiste movement”; memorable group shows at the Tranquille bookstore; the *Espace 55* exhibition which gave rise to angry exchanges between Leduc and Borduas and provoked the first major piece of writing by Molinari, who sided with Borduas; an impressive list of exhibitions coordinated by Molinari in the basement of the L'Échourie restaurant-café, where he will have his first solo exhibition before opening its doors to the quartet formed by Belzile, Jauran, Jérôme and Toupin who will launch the *Manifeste des plasticiens*; followed by the opening of the L'Actuelle gallery, which will be the focus of further attention this year at the Foundation, and the creation of the Association of Non-Figurative Artists of Montreal. In other terms, some rather buoyant years.

In May 1955, Molinari and Fernande Saint-Martin indeed opened L'Actuelle. The space was reserved exclusively for the showing of non-figurative art, often unappreciated at the time, both by society as a whole and by the museums. (This exclusivity contrasts vividly with the absolute pluralism of the *La Place des artistes* show mentioned above). The opening show presented the work of some twenty painters, in order, as stated on the invitation, “to support the public

presentation of theatrical works by Claude Gauvreau”. Another misunderstood artist! That being said, the list of exhibitors would cause any present day gallery director to salivate: Borduas, Leduc and Riopelle; Ulysse Comtois, Rita Letendre and Jean McEwen; Paterson Ewen, Jean-Paul Mousseau and Claude Tousignant; Molinari and Jean Goguen, who was then exhibiting for the very first time. And these two latter artists are those whom, sixty years later, the Guido Molinari Foundation will be showing together in its upstairs galleries, whose lay-out is reminiscent of the art galleries of the period of *L'Actuelle*. These two former fellow travellers are together again, around large black signs on paper, which denote a strong relationship between two painters otherwise primarily known as top-level colourists.

Such a meeting could not have taken place while the two artists were alive, and for good reason. Molinari and Goguen had strongly opposed views regarding their works on paper. The first never omitted to exhibit them: the very first solo exhibition by Molinari, in 1954, included only drawings, as did his participation in *Espace 55*, the following year; in 1958, he presented his *Calligraphies* at the Artek Gallery and an imposing retrospective of his “works on paper” followed in 1981 at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, before circulating throughout Canada. Even Molinari’s major museum retrospectives (at the National Gallery of Canada, in 1976 and at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, in 1995) each set aside room for approximately thirty drawings; and so on. By way of contrast, Goguen never agreed to show his graphic experiments from the 1950s, to which he had nonetheless devoted over two hundred sheets (as evidenced by a very attractive posthumous exhibition organised in 1991 by La Promotion des arts Lavalin at the Maison de la culture Frontenac).

While Molinari never ceased considering his drawings as accompaniments, if not a *modus operandi*, for his paintings, all signs suggest that Goguen had decided to repudiate his calligraphic adventures immediately upon affirming his status as a “*plasticien*” of the “dynamic space” school. He was apparently not able to see that these signs, traced energetically with the modest medium of leather dye, perfectly met the definition that he himself had given of abstract art in 1959, in the catalogue of the well-known exhibition at the École des beaux-arts: “An organized form endowed with its own life, which has no reference to nature and with thrives as a dynamic pulse”. While never agreeing to show his work, fortunately Goguen did not go so far as to destroy it (as he declared having done for several other older works). This inaction is perhaps important in understanding Goguen's state of mind.

— Gilles Daigneault

Without a doubt, **Jean Goguen** (1927–1989) remains today the least well-known of those artists who played a determining role in the development of Quebec painting in the 1950 and 1960 decades. He was one of the founders of the Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal in 1956, along with Denis Juneau, Fernand Leduc, Molinari and Claude Tousignant. These artists, along with two of the original “*plasticien*” painters, Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin, met up with Goguen three years later in the iconic *Art abstrait* exhibition at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. whose catalogue, prefaced by Fernande Saint-Martin, contains a text by each of the seven exhibitors and was perceived at the time as a manifesto in favour of the importance of abstract art. At the time of the demise of this overly discrete painter, the heartfelt praise given by other major players on the art scene—including Pierre Thériège, Yves Gaucher and, of course, Molinari—confirmed his generous contributions over twenty-five years as a teacher, and the relevance of his artistic legacy.