

L'Actuelle, a gallery for non-figurative art (1955–1957)

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L'Actuelle, a gallery for young painters

– FERNANDE SAINT-MARTIN

A new gallery for painting, "L'Actuelle", devoted to non-figurative art, will open in Montreal today. It is not in the nature of a financial venture, but rather of a cultural adventure. Animated by a belief that the evolution of our society will be strengthened through the growth of certain practices which eschew denying their own individuality, the gallery will seek to assist painters in making their work known, which is essential for the development of art.

The originality conveyed by Canadian painting comes from a group of young painters who have attempted, within the constraints of what is recognized as art, to go beyond traditional spatial structures.

Solitary fighters against a threatened all-consuming inertia, some of them have succeeded in imposing, in the face of the world, their own sensitive reality.

Others, after years of patient waiting, have gained entrance to our Museum and been given sporadic exhibitions in local galleries. The greater number must however make do with exhibiting here and there, in deplorable conditions, a very few paintings.

The danger is always present that the only works of art shown to the public will be those which conform to certain aesthetic values which have gained acceptance through the evolution of both contemporary painting and the painters themselves.

To combat the tyranny of any new academism and to provide each new artistic adventure with the opening it

requires, "L'Actuelle" has been established at 278 Sherbrooke Street West, under the direction of Montreal painter Guido Molinari.

While ardently supporting artistic integrity and the limitless scope of aesthetic experimentation, this new gallery will attempt to create a link between all artistic fields in which a new sensitivity finds its expression.

For this reason, the gallery opening will coincide with a group show of 20 young painters, for the benefit of a public performance of a theatrical work by Claude Gauvreau. This initiative is intended both to honour the work of this writer as an art critic, and to express the urgent desire to see authentic Canadian avant-garde theatre in performance.

"L'Actuelle, a gallery for young painters", *La Presse*, May 28, 1955, p. 76. The same communiqué also appeared in *Le Devoir* (May 31, 1955) under the title "A new gallery for painting".

In the spring of 1955, Molinari and the indispensable Fernande Saint-Martin opened a non-figurative art gallery called L'Actuelle. The gallery followed the "automatiste" tradition whereby artists used available apartments [...] Five years after the opening of the Agnès Lefort Gallery, L'Actuelle, whose objective was to gather together the various currents of non-figurative art in Montreal, opened its doors. The initial exhibitors, whose works were shown in the opening show, provided an eloquent demonstration of collegiality, since works by certain signatories of the *Refus global* [1948] were shown alongside the geometric works of artists who, in February 1955, had just recently signed the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*. Other artists of various tendencies also found a place, grouped together under the vague designation of post-automatist. The importance afforded to non-figuration would be the connecting thread of many individual and group shows during the

short history of L'Actuelle, while certain artists related to Pellan and having signed the *Prisme d'yeux* manifesto, including Roland Giguère and Albert Dumouchel. [...]

The operating principles at L'Actuelle resembled in many ways those of a self-managed art centre, or more specifically, a coop: Molinari was the artistic director, with the close assistance of Fernande Saint-Martin; friends contributed cash or their time. There was, however, no public funding or rigid administrative structure. But there is no mistaking L'Actuelle as anything other than a private business: this in part explains its ephemeral nature (24 months in all). [...]

The gallery was, however, one of the agencies in a complex network that was beginning to crystallizing in Montreal. Certain individuals, occasionally playing several roles simultaneously, also participated in the creation of a network for the exhibition of visual art. Thus, art collector Gilles Corbeil was also an artist, a lender of certain works he had acquired, as well as an intermediary between artists and the gallery. Robert Millet took photographs of both the works on view and the openings, and organized an exhibition of photographs in the summer of 1955, at which his own works were shown. Jauran was also a key player in this network, as an artist, an art critic in several newspapers and magazines, and as an active member of the Non-Figurative Artists Association of Montreal. Noël Lajoie, a dominant figure as an art critic, also showed his paintings at L'Actuelle in 1955.

Excerpts from the essay by L. Lamarche, "L'Actuelle, a Brief but Intense Lifespan" which appears at the same time as the exhibition at the Guido Molinari Foundation in a monograph devoted to L'Actuelle.

Thirty exhibitions were presented at **L'Actuelle** in its premises at 278 Sherbrooke Street West. They received exceptionally broad media coverage for the very good reason that they included solo exhibitions of Borduas, Mousseau, Letendre, Comtois, McEwen, the Plasticiens, Bellefleur, Blair, Claude Tousignant and Molinari, alongside some memorable group shows, including one devoted to photography.

Curated by Lisa Bouraly, Gilles Daigneault and Lise Lamarche, the exhibition at the Guido Molinari Foundation presents a perspective on this adventure with a selection of over 50 works exhibited by L'Actuelle gallery. This retrospective view is accompanied by a bilingual monograph abundantly illustrated with works of art and historical documents, published jointly with les éditions du passage and providing detailed information on this major showplace for contemporary art.

Various events will add to the resonance of this exhibition, including a round table on the art galleries of today and yesterday, an encounter with journalist Francoise de Repentigny and a concert by the Molinari Quartet.