

## Françoise Sullivan—*Hommages*

February 28–April 21, 2019

Curators:

Gilles Daigneault, Margarida Mafra

**November 1981** It's the opening of the Françoise Sullivan retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, an exhibition still known as "the first and greatest" today. The artist confided back then to the critic from *La Presse*:

"A retrospective is a once-in-a-lifetime event. It's sad, in a way, but on the other hand, it's my trampoline for a new departure." Sullivan erred on the first count, we now know, but she was very much right in her second assertion. Forty years later, her work will have been the subject of three or four museum retrospectives, and she will have become a celebrated painter.

**Autumn 1987** The Paul-Émile Borduas Prize is awarded (at last!) to Françoise Sullivan. Her admirers felt that the jury had wished to crown a resolutely multidisciplinary artist, as they'd done the previous year, to Betty Goodwin. Somewhat paradoxically, however, this most multifaceted of all the signatories of *Refus global* never ceases to emphasize that all she's done since 1941 has come from painting. "Painting inhabits me. It always has. My first works were paintings. My curiosity, of course, drove me to examine every art form and new trend that showed up in the present. In the sixties and seventies, the apocalyptic tone of all those who declared that painting was at an impasse upended the premises of my beliefs. Yet, with the whole twentieth century being one of repeated upsets, that impasse can be simply seen as one of many debates that peppered our history."<sup>1</sup>

**Winter 2019** Françoise Sullivan is now a lauded painter with decades of adventures behind her, all as unexpected as were

her multidisciplinary years. Partly out of temperament, and partly out of fidelity to her Automatist origins, the artist would simply move on from a style of painting as soon as she felt it had become "cerebral." Although her first painting series from the early 1980s, such as the *Tondos* and the *Cretan Cycle*, are tributaries of her forays in dance, sculpture, and performance, she considerably simplified things over time, always wanting to eliminate the superfluous from her work: "I began to dream of a painting about nothing, a painting dependent on nothing, held together only by its own inner force. A painting without image, that would hold the attention. This negation is not necessarily an anarchic position, nor is it easy; it insinuates an opening, a precision, a light."<sup>2</sup>

Since the millennium, Quebec has mourned the loss of so many major artists; the paintings that Sullivan undertook to produce in homage to these departed friends are some of her most stunning works. Our exhibition includes four such paintings, created between 2002 and 2004, and dedicated to Edmund Alleyne, Ulysse Comtois, Marcelle Ferron, and Guido Molinari. To these works, we add two *Hommages* painted for this occasion, in memory of Fernand Leduc and John Heward—the second painting was still in process when these words were written. Fifteen years after her first *Hommages*, it will be interesting to see how the artist's pictorial writing has evolved. And upstairs, we've hung eight new paintings by Sullivan that began as preparatory studies for her large painting in homage to Fernand Leduc.

Each of Sullivan's large canvases will be accompanied by a major work by the artist to which hers is dedicated, in further homage to these superb artists

<sup>1</sup> "Ma peinture est... ma peinture Est," from the exhibition catalogue *Françoise Sullivan*, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 2003, Parachute Editions.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

now gone. Finally, for good measure, the vault of the “bank” will be enriched by a selection of photographs of all those who participated in the project, taken by Louise Descoteaux, Alicia Lorente, Gabor Szilasi, and Richard-Max Tremblay.

— Gilles Daigneault

“I’ve never seen my life in terms of career but rather as a destiny. Ever since childhood, I’ve been fascinated by the arts. Destiny led me to recognize Borduas as an exemplary master, the artist whose oeuvre is the synonym of pure knowledge, truth, and courage. I aspired to be such an artist and have spent my life inventing my art at the limits of what is possible for me.”

— Françoise Sullivan, 1998