

In Black and White

June 25 – September 5, 2021

First let's consider two paintings by Molinari from the mid 1950s, produced a few months apart: *Juxtaposition*, in 1954, and *Untitled*, in 1955. In them, we are far from the "window to the world" so dear to the Surrealists (and to the Automatists). Better to speak of a "wall of paint," as did François-Marc Gagnon,¹ evoking old Frenhofer's painting in Honoré de Balzac's renowned story *The Unknown Masterpiece*. No reference to the external world, then, and a lot of ground covered between the two works. In fact, from one painting to the next, geometry has taken charge of the pictorial surface, and the material is thinner, less tactile. Still, both canvases are relatively *sober*, considering the radicality of Molinari's gestures and texts in previous years.

In the months that followed, things changed, with the result visible at the artist's first solo exhibition of paintings at *his* gallery, L'Actuelle. There, Molinari showed ten austere geometric paintings in black and white, as if to set the record straight and resurrect the rebellious artist well-known since his works painted "in darkness" in 1951. Again, it's the critic Rodolphe de Repentigny who responds with utmost perspicacity, in *La Presse* on May 15, 1956: "The black and white surfaces attain a real monumentality. To get something from looking at them, you have to forget that they are "paintings" and silence any preconceived ideas you may have about what painting is. In them, anything that contributes to localized tensions is virtually annihilated. All that is left are masses held in balance by extreme contrasts: light and absence of light."

Of course, both the public and the art milieu were reticent at first, and even Molinari had his doubts at times regarding the merits of this work. But as time passed, it was generally held that this 1956 series truly incarnated the principles of the *Plasticiens Manifesto*. Major art historians like Serge Lemoine and Bernard Teyssède, both connoisseurs of American abstract art, soon recognized the absolute originality of Molinari's enterprise. Lemoine: "His approach was unparalleled in North American art at the time. When, later on, I discovered the black and white paintings he'd painted in the fifties, I realized they were foundational creations, in their use of absolute contrasts, their total reversibility, and in the extreme simplification of the means employed: the search for pure rhythm."² And Teyssède: "No one knew whether the black-and-white works he exhibited at age twenty-three, in a show at L'Actuelle Gallery, were actually "paintings," as their significance only became apparent ten years later with the development of Minimalism in New York."³ It's not surprising, then, that in 1967 Molinari decided to exhibit these iconic works in New York City, at the East Hampton Gallery, under the (somewhat ironic) title *Minimal Paintings of 1956*, and that they reappeared *as needed* until 1994.

The famed minimalist paintings of 1956 are accompanied here by a few later works by Molinari that bear witness, in part, to an exclusive presence of black in certain productions, with special attention to drawings from the same period, opening up another facet of the artist's work. Molinari produced nearly 1,000 works on paper during the 1950s; his work in drawing was the subject of a major touring exhibition in Canada in 1981.⁴ True, these very free and inspiring graphic pieces at first indicate an expressionist Molinari, closer to the poetry that he practised throughout his life; but drawing was also a key part of

his construction of a two-dimensional universe and held a prominent place in all his major exhibitions. Its discourse was not distinct from that of painting, as indicated by art historian David Burnett at the start of his penetrating analysis of the corpus of drawings: "What is presented is a limited structure of optical ambiguity, a reversibility between the black and white in which neither gains final dominance. There is no division between figure and ground for the whole is both figure and ground."⁵

— Gilles Daigneault

1 François-Marc Gagnon, "Le silence dans la peinture contemporaine" in *Théologiques*, Vol. 7(2), 1999, p. 53–77.

2 Serge Lemoine, "Guido Molinari, de Montréal à Grenoble," in the exhibition catalogue *reConnaitre Guido Molinari*, Musée de Grenoble, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998, p. 2.

3 Bernard Teyssède, "Guido Molinari: The Outer Limit of Colour Field Painting," in *Guido Molinari*, ed. Gilles Daigneault and Margarida Mafra, Guido Molinari Foundation, 2018, p. 20.

4 Guido Molinari. *Works on Paper*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1981. Curators: David Burnett, assisted by Marilyn Schiff.

5 Op. cit., p.64.

It seems that the lesson to be gleaned from Molinari's black-and-white paintings is that setting colour aside—even if only for a limited time—often allows the painter to reflect on the structure of the painting and, more particularly, on the type of pictorial space that the artist wishes to valorize. Molinari's *Noirs et blancs* allowed him to better define the type of pictorial space in which all his subsequent paintings would evolve. He renounced the "object" standing against a ground, thus definitively breaking any links with traditional painting (up to Borduas, in any case), which had never been able to sacrifice the idea of creating the illusion of depth. In his later paintings, in the 1960s, when he focused on producing vertical bands of the same width, he would liberate colour as pure energy. All reference to anything outside the painting was then eliminated. The painting took on an autonomy never before seen, and Molinari definitively abandoned the long-established ambition of "imitating" nature or giving the illusion of doing so.

— François-Marc Gagnon¹

1 "The Black-and-White Paintings" in *Guido Molinari*, op. cit., p. 85.