

Notes on the Exhibition

Karine Fréchette, Nicolas Grenier,
Luce Meunier, Ianick Raymond, Julie Trudel
with the assistance of Nancy Bussières

March 2–May 28, 2023

For better or worse, the legacy of 20th century abstraction will remain both burden and catalyst for contemporary painters who maintain a non-figurative practice. Late Modernist abstractionists like Guido Molinari are admired for the confrontational directness of their enterprise. Eschewing outside references, they propose a head-to-head encounter between the spectator and the canvas, with flatly painted colours creating endless dynamic rhythms. The nakedness and existential drama of this kind of painting remains powerful to those capable of surrendering themselves to the experience. However easy it may seem to imitate, it's a way of painting that is impossible to truly duplicate today. Even in its time, the purity of such an aesthetic was hard to sustain. Frank Stella, who famously quipped, "What you see is what you see" would eventually introduce subject matter, developing paintings inspired by photos of Polish synagogues or Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

This exhibition is part of a residency in which five Montreal artists (Karine Fréchette, Nicolas Grenier, Luce Meunier, Ianick Raymond, Julie Trudel) work together, exchanging ideas in the context of the Molinari archives, with a particular focus on colour. Hardly pure abstractionists, the artists freely admit to outside influences from what they call "the current chromatic landscape", which includes nature, the manufactured world and increasingly the digital screen. Their practices and use of colour vary considerably, but what they have in common is a tendency towards

experimentation, hybridity and the questioning of the distinctions between painting and sculpture. There is a quality of the laboratory here and at times, even the sense of a group of mad scientists at work, their pieces hypothetical models for a 21st century world.

In some ways, Julie Trudel seems closest to the Modernist canon. Her glowing sculptures and wall reliefs in coloured Plexiglas recall both Constructivism and the cool aesthetic of sixties Minimalism. Her new, large vertical piece, made in collaboration with Nancy Bussières, introduces a more immersive, digital aspect, with computer-controlled LED lights creating complex changes of light intensity, colouration and transparency. Installed in the Foundation's dark, prison-like bank vault, its constantly shifting luminosity suggests movement and like reflections in the rain, should provide an unsettling, spectral aspect to the exhibition.

By contrast, Luce Meunier's work embraces the world of nature, appearing to mimic certain natural processes. Using sponges or even balls of snow saturated with colour, Meunier allows stains and blooms to develop on paper or cotton duck, leaving radiant, organic residue, embodying Jackson Pollock's famous remark, "I am nature". There are some obvious art historical links with Meunier's practice and other painters like Helen Frankenthaler, Sam Gilliam and Katarina Grosse but her scale and mark making are less operatic, more modest. Affinities seem to be closer to the ethos of Arte Povera.

Karine Fréchette is the most intense colourist of the group. More Hurler than Molinari, her paint passages curl and lick the edges of her supports undulating like flames or waves. While the paintings are executed with considerable finesse, there is a punk aspect to Fréchette's work and willingness to embrace the

frowned-upon imagery of Op Art and psychedelia. Not afraid of using ovals or folding her paintings origami style, the results are unabashedly trippy and celebratory, evoking lava lamps, rave lighting and closed-eye hallucinations.

This may sound weird, but there is a solemnity and gravity to Ianick Raymond's shaped wall reliefs that makes me think of the Shroud of Turin. Although they are probably the most technologically complex works in the show, with an elaborate mix of digital printing and paint, they also manage to look ancient, like something extracted from an archeological dig. Moiré fringes create interference that scramble our reading of the surface and seem to emit radioactive flashes of colours. Like advanced physics, they exist at the intersection of mysticism and science.

Nicolas Grenier likes the idea of what he calls "unspeakable colours", ones that cannot be named, that have perhaps never existed before. He lays his complex gradients of oil paint into

fantastic architectonic spaces, peppered with cryptic texts, fusing the sublime of German Romanticism with a more hard-boiled social inquiry. Within the context of a series of stacked words like *Friends & Family, Strangers, Vigilantes, Institutions, Unknown Entities, Anonymous Crowds* his colour scales suggest a barometer, a sliding measure of things, underlining the on-going question of "who exactly are we?"

At the time of this writing, it is unknown how Fréchette, Grenier, Meunier, Raymond and Trudel will make use of the Molinari archives during their residency. What is certain is that their generation has a very different take on the pictorial heritage of abstraction and its use of colour. The simplicity and hard plastic authority of Molinari and his peers has been replaced by an aesthetic of shifting definitions. Like all of us, they operate in a society with an overabundance of influences and options and an uncertainty of relative value.

— David Elliott