

The Medium and the Methodology: What the Drawing of Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher Reveals.

By Jessica Veevers

Two Quebec hard-edge painters of iconic proportions, Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher betray their convictions and contradictions most tellingly through their drawing. These two painters, who are both associated with the post-plasticien movement, could not be more different. A cursory experience of their paintings could erringly lead one to assume that they came from a “school” that wants to communicate the formal and structural properties of colour and colour alone. Simplistically, this is true on some fronts. Close analysis of their paintings will likely cause doubt, but it is their drawing that most evidently discloses their differences. If we look at Molinari’s early drawing with pen or pencil there is a frenetic creation and following of line – a filling of space wherein a searching is manually evident. This larger-than-life man was from a young age trying to break away from the Automatiste legacy and find the aesthetic relations of space to plane on his own terms. For Gaucher, it was a different process. He came to monochrome painting through printmaking. Undeniably their foundational and educational beginnings influenced their art making but their personalities equally drove their relationship with their materials and their methodology. Molinari’s drawing reveals his instinctual nature, whereas Gaucher’s drawing reveals his methodical nature. Moreover, their relationship with their respective mediums and materials define both who they are and what their painting became.

What is similar about both of these artists is that they utilize mediums on paper to research their expression. The formal requirements of these mediums help them to physically work through ideas within the processes of their methodologies, material limits, and spatial and surface characteristics. They are neither of them ‘renaissance’ in their approach: drawings are not disegno for their paintings. They do not serve as prototypes or maquettes. They are intrinsic to each artist’s creative process. Danielle Blouin, Yves Gaucher’s printmaker for the 1998 series ‘Traces,’ remarks of the artist’s work that “[n]othing is ever finished; only the act of creation is fixed forever in time. Because they formed part of his ongoing process, Yves Gaucher’s prints each remind us of the intensity with which he sought to push the medium to the absolute.”¹

¹ Danielle Blouin, “An Unusual Printmaker,” in *Yves Gaucher*, (Montreal: Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal, 2004). 190.

Blouin's statement is in fact true of Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher in two respects. First, through the exploration of the unique materiality of their creative tools they each expand the expressive capacity of their medium. Second, each artist was primarily concerned with perceptual experience and as such their artworks are never finished because with each experience the artworks continue becoming. James Campbell explains that Molinari was concerned with inciting a confrontation between anthropomorphic time and existential space: "...cet espace n'étant pas euclidien mais bien existentiel, et ce temps n'étant plus celui de l'horloge mais bien celui qu'on peut qualifier d'anthropomorphique. C'est ce qu'il faut comprendre lorsque Molinari parle de la confrontation existentielle entre l'œuvre et l'observateur."²

Given that the paintings of Molinari and Gaucher are both associated with the Post-Plasticiens and large-scale, hard-edge, monochrome painting in Montreal, it is surprising how divergent their approach to drawing is. If we look at Gaucher's drawing in *Des lignes du temps, P-Gau-5-63* from 1966 (Figure 1), there is ready formal comparison with his acrylic painting of the following year, such as *Blue Raga* (<http://macm.org/collections/oeuvre/blue-raga/>). In contrast, when we look at Molinari's drawing from 1954, *Sans Titre* (Figure 2), and his paintings *Untitled*, 1953-54 (Figure 3) and *Abstraction*, 1955 (Figure 4), the painter's 'hand' is not as readily apparent across the two mediums. However, with closer attention to the artists' use of line, space, and relation of form, the respective relationship between their drawing and their painting can be seen. Moreover, looking closely at the drawings of these two artists reveals how divergent their methodology was. The scale, flatness, and material of their paintings may have superficially drawn them together, but their drawing reveals precisely how different these artists were. The unique 'hand' of Molinari and Gaucher is not only in the final outward aesthetic of their art, it is also in the intra-relationship between the methodology, the attention to material, and the intention.

Gaucher, coming from a background as a printmaker, was trained to build colours additively and in separate layers. His paintings are built in a similar manner. He called the additive layers of his acrylic paint 'veils' and they were intended to slip behind one another and build nuance with and between colourfields. "J'appelle ça des voiles parce qu'il y a une rythmique latérale qui

² James D. Campbell, "Guido Molinari : le peintre-paradigme," *Vie des Arts*, vol. 33, n 131, 1988, p. 44-48. (48)

passee dans les couches alors tu as des espaces à des niveaux différents et des couleurs qui vont se chercher derrière, d'autres en avant."³ The material interworkings of this delicate process of layering would have come naturally to Gaucher because it is a necessary component of printmaking in colour. With printmaking, different plates deliver different colours individually. The order and design of the plates has to be carefully determined from the outset. The printmaker will be well-aware that any overlap of the colour plates will affect both the base colour and the colour on top. This additive effect, with the experienced printmaker, will be planned for and exploited to its full effect through using this layered colour as an additional colour in the composition.

Furthermore, the discipline of printmaking is fastidious and methodical and Yves Gaucher's approach was no different. Gaucher's relationship with his materials of making could best be described as rigorous. The artist Marc Garneau, a former student of Gaucher's, reveals that he would research the material properties of all of his tools prior to deploying them, even his masking tape.⁴ "He would invite representatives from Talens and Grumbacher and have them in his studio for hours... he would sample all of the different papers to feel their quality. He did this from the beginning with the etching and dry point – the technique had to be equal with the mind."⁵ This approach to making stayed with Garneau. With great knowledge of his materials' properties and characteristics, Gaucher would push them to their outside capabilities. He found profoundly unique material expression between his drawing, printmaking, and painting, while at the same time achieving cohesive formal expression. This is the effect of his methodology and training encountering and interpolating his intention. Always interested in line, this formal element ties together Gaucher's entire oeuvre.

Molinari, on the other hand, was far more interested in relations: relations between people, students, the world and formal space. Molinari has three distinct "hands" which correspond to three different mediums: those executed in pen/pencil, ink/gouache, and paint. What could be argued here is a form of medium specificity, however that would be formalist oversimplification and undermine not only the intent of the maker, but also the process of making. Rather, what these material differentiations reveal is how Molinari liked to get

³ Claire Gravel, "Yves Gaucher, Peintre De L'Abstraction," *Le Devoir*, 24 Mars 1990, 17.

⁴ Marc Garneau, Personal Correspondence, Concordia University, Montreal, August 24, 2017.

⁵ Marc Garneau, Personal Correspondence, Concordia University, Montreal, September 27, 2017.

into the psychology of making. What Molinari's drawings betray are his ability to use a medium's own character to find relationships between and within the line and space of the paper. His former student, Marc Seguin, relates that he taught in a similar manner; that he would try to get into the psychology of his students' painting to help them through their formal problems.⁶ "He would make students feel as though they were understood and help with their direction a little bit"⁷ Seguin explains in response to whether Molinari ever commented on the content of his painting. Molinari did not need to be in control of the process, or the material, but he was searching for a form of objectivity. With his pen drawings there is the continuous finding of organic shapes crossing and crawling into each other. The drawings, although very fluid, are meditatively repetitive. His paper becomes populated with line and shape patterning. There is a materializing by way of mechanical searching evidenced in them. It can be seen that he was working in two dimensions within the parameters of the thin line and contouring that pen is uniquely capable of. When he needed to search space differently, he switched mediums.

His gouache drawings, on the other hand, have thick spontaneous lines that evidence a fast stroke, and a wide, well-loaded brush. With these drawings, it is clear that he is far more interested in spatial relations than he is with line. These drawings evidence the working relationship between the low surface tension and viscosity of gouache, the smooth paper, and the physical motion of the artist. It is said that these drawings constitute the moment when Molinari found what he was looking for.⁸ This medium gave him insight into how he wanted to make paintings. He was not interested in the material properties of gouache per se, but he was interested in how it could help him explore the representation of objectivity. David Burnett explains that Molinari's primary struggle was between his subjectivity and his objectivity: he "...worked for a type of painting which in defining its own spatial terms, defined its objective reality but whose existence could only be grasped subjectively, that is by colour."⁹

Each artist, while being associated with the Post-Plasticiens in Montreal and hard-edge abstraction in Canada, had extremely different methodologies. Their

⁶ Marc Seguin, Personal Correspondence, Artist's Studio, Griffintown, Montreal, September 28, 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Burnett, *Guido Molinari: Works on Paper*, (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1981), 7.

⁹ Ibid, 8.

drawings reveal this more readily than their paintings, however, moving from drawing back to painting, the greater difference between these two painters is more evident. Gaucher is far more interested in line, whereas Molinari is focused on relations. Concerned with searching for expressions of a concept of objective space, Molinari was less attached to the physical making of his paintings than was Gaucher. At one point, later in Molinari's career, Garneau recalls asking him something about the execution of his paintings, to which Molinari exclaimed "are you serious?!" as though the action of making them was the last of his concerns.¹⁰ "The paintings were all in his head," Garneau explains, "He didn't need to paint them."¹¹ Molinari was not interested in the fastidious details of the materials he used; it did not concern him if the tapeline between two colour fields was visible or if the gloss of his mediums were consistent because this was not what his painting was about. Once he had figured out a problem, he moved on like he did from pen to gouache in the 1950s. It is here that the consistency between his drawing and his painting is found.

Looking closely at these two artist's drawings and speaking with their students, I am convinced by how much their drawing says about them as painters and as people. Marc Seguin was a student of Molinari's in the 1990s; he describes that there was a definitive move away from hard-edge painting at the time but that this did not mean that the more formalist criticism offered by Molinari and Gaucher was not incredibly insightful.¹² He describes Gaucher as being a Hawk, "...he would notice a flaw from across the room right away." It was difficult to accept sometimes, Seguin confides, but Gaucher's observations were always right. In a 1990 interview for *Le Devoir*, Gaucher commented:

"À Concordia, si un de mes étudiants veut sur le plan du discours du tableau aller vers le narratif, c'est sa façon de voir les choses et je n'ai pas à en discuter. Le problème de la peinture reste le même, à la base: c'est un problème de lecture, de perception, de questionnement."¹³

¹⁰ Marc Garneau, Personal Correspondence, Concordia University, Montreal, August XX, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Seguin, 2017.

¹³ Claire Gravel, "Yves Gaucher, Peintre de l'Abstraction," *Le Devoir*, 24 March 1990, 17. At Concordia if one of my students wants to talk about the narrative, it is his way of seeing things and I don't have to discuss it. The problem of painting remains the same at the base: it is a problem of reading, perception, questioning.

Gaucher encouraged his students to have a goal and would share “kitchen recipes” with them for how to prepare materials.¹⁴ Both Seguin and Garneau commented on how Gaucher was invested in preparing his students to be professional artists.

Molinari did not have an agenda for his lessons, nor did he encourage his students to have one – instead he would get into the work they were doing on the spot and coach instinct into the objectivity of the painting’s space. As Seguin notes: “He wrote theoretically, but he taught instinctively.”¹⁵

Both Molinari and Gaucher would return to paper when they needed to solve a problem and it is here, in their drawing, gouaches, and/or prints – where they are working through different formulae – that we can most readily witness how divergently they approached materials and methodology. This difference can also be seen in their hard edge painting, but it is all the more prescient after studying their works on paper. Furthermore, their methodological approach to making carried through to their teaching, with Gaucher’s attention to detail making his formal criticism hawk-like, and Molinari’s concern with relations allowing him to get inside the psychology of his students’ process. The impact of having two of the greatest hard edge painters in Quebec teaching in one department was monumental for their students, including Marc Seguin: “they were icons – students would take their advice like gospel.”¹⁶

Authors biography:

Jessica Veevers is a professional painting conservator and currently a PhD Candidate and Part-Time Faculty at Concordia University. Her research is focussed on the role of acrylic paint on the unique artistic methodology and visual effect of hard-edge painting in Quebec. Three painters who adopted and deployed acrylic paint to its utmost material limitation are the hard-edge painters Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, and Yves Gaucher. The inter-dependence between materiality and mattering in art is something her research endeavours to privilege.

¹⁴ Seguin, 2017.

¹⁵ Seguin, 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

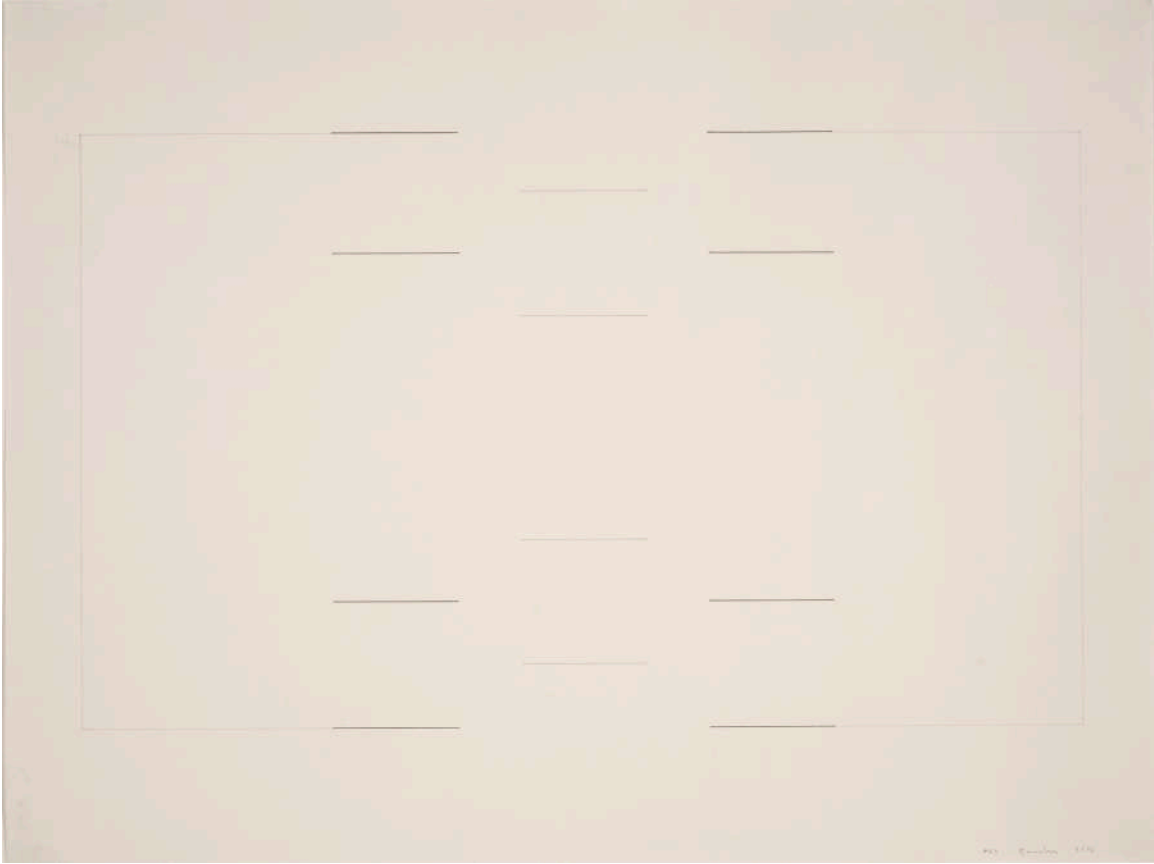


Figure 1:

Yves Gaucher

P-Gau-5-63, 1966, pencil on paper, 43,2 x 58,5 cm

Collection of the Leonard and Bina Elen Art Gallery / Gift of Blema and Arnold Steinberg, 2001

Copyright: Estate of Yves Gaucher / SODRAC (2017)



Figure 2:
Guido Molinari
Sans titre, 1954
48 x 64 cm
Ink on paper
Fondation Guido Molinari



Figure 3:
Guido Molinari,
Sans titre, 1953-54
40,4 x 50,3 cm
Oil on canvas
Fondation Guido Molinari

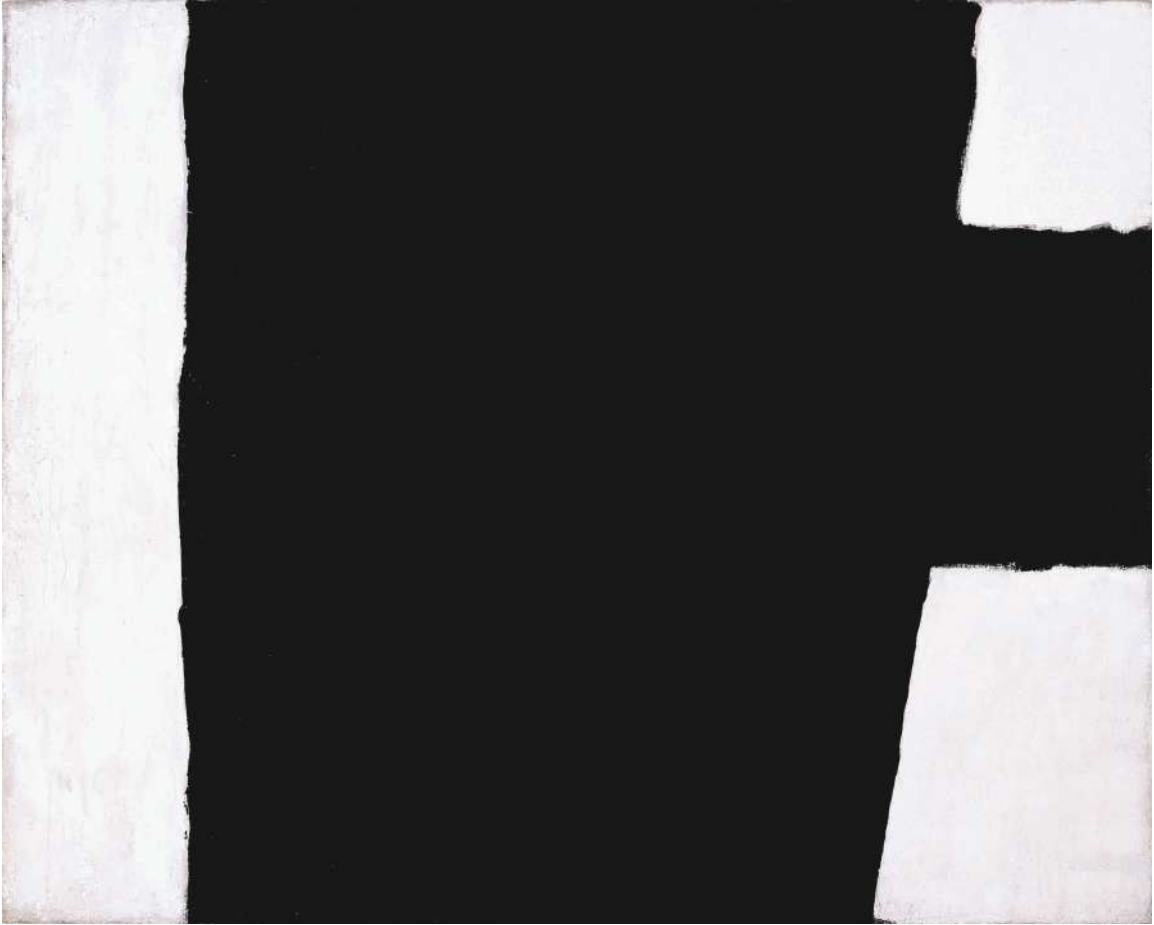


Figure 4:
Guido Molinari
Abstraction, 1955
120,1 x 151,1 cm
Oil and enamel on canvas
Fondation Guido Molinari