

## EXHIBITION

# THE PLASTICIENS AND BEYOND MONTREAL 1955-1970

7 FEBRUARY TO 12 MAY 2013



**Québec City, February 6, 2013** □ In the mid-1950s, a group of young artists in Montreal got together under the name “Plasticiens”, laying the foundations for a new avant-garde movement which saw geometrical abstraction as the true art of the future. They developed a visual language in which coloured planes formed autonomous plastic constructions, and their work made brought recognition to Montreal in international art circles. Throughout the 1960s, artists in the Plastiqueien orbit among whom Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, Yves Gaucher and Charles Gagnon, came up with particularly innovative approaches, founded on a dynamic use of colour, in very large-format works which pulled the viewer into a perceptive experience.

With more than 70 works – primarily paintings, but also works on paper and sculptures – this exhibition is the first devoted to the Plastiqueien movement and the issues it raised in Montreal between 1955 and 1970. In addition to looking back on the first and second generation of Plasticiens, the exhibition examines the decisive contribution of artists such as Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, Yves Gaucher and Charles Gagnon, especially in the 1960s, when their aesthetic concerns linked them with the geometric abstraction practised in Paris and New York.

**The exhibition *The Plasticiens and Beyond. Montréal 1955-1970*, co-produced and circulated by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and the Varley Art Gallery of Markham, was conceived by Roald Nasgaard and curated by Roald Nasgaard, head curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario from 1978 to 1992, and Michel Martin, curator of contemporary art at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec from 1978 to 2008. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication including texts by the two co-curators and others by Lise Lamarche and Denise Leclerc.**

### CONTACT DE PRESSE

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## PRESENTATION

By the early 1950s, abstract art had come to dominate the international scene. But at the same time, abstraction was undergoing internal divisions. Would its future continue to foster the personal, free hand styles that had emerged in the 1940s? Or would it embrace a younger generation's preference for impersonal geometries?

Amid these post-World War II debates, Montreal was remarkable for giving rise to not one but two true avant-garde movements. The first was the Automatistes, followers of Paul-Émile Borduas made famous by their *Refus global* manifesto published in 1948. The second movement was the Plasticiens, who by the mid-1950s decisively rejected Automatiste spontaneity in favour of geometric abstraction.

This exhibition examines the evolution of this Plasticien aesthetic through three distinct but nevertheless overlapping groups. They are the Plasticiens—the so-called *first Plasticiens*—the second Plasticiens, and the post-Plasticiens. Only the original Plasticiens, Jauran (Rodolphe de Repentigny), Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jérôme and Fernand Toupin, saw themselves as a coherent group. They exhibited together and published a manifesto in 1955.

The term *second Plasticiens* was first applied to Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant who, in 1956, introduced a more severe geometry than that of the first Plasticiens. The term also encompasses the work of other geometric painters whose style is related and who, along with Molinari and Tousignant, would take part in the *Art abstrait* exhibition in 1959. The second Plasticiens include Belzile and Toupin, as well as Fernand Leduc, Denis Juneau and Jean Goguen.

We use the term *post-Plasticien* to designate the groundbreaking work that emerged in the 1960s, when Molinari and Tousignant abandoned their balanced compositions of the 1950s to pursue new dynamic colour-based ways of engaging the viewer's perceptive experience. Yves Gaucher and Charles Gagnon would soon launch similar pursuits. During the 1960s, the four post-Plasticiens honed their respective pictorial vocabularies, which sustained long, fruitful careers that extend into the new millennium. During the same decade, other Montreal painters also practiced *hard-edge* geometry, as it was known internationally, but for the most part, they were passing through on the way to more personal styles.

## GALLERY 5

### 1955: THE PLASTICIENS AT L'ÉCHOURIE

In spring 1954, with the exhibition *La Matière chante*, the Automatistes, after many years of official and public resistance, finally won social acceptance for avant-garde painting in Montreal.

Within less than a year, however, in February 1955, four young artists—Jauran, Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jérôme and Fernand Toupin—unveiled their own exhibition, *Les Plasticiens*, at the café-restaurant L'Échourie. Their work, and their manifesto, repudiated Automatiste poetics and

spontaneity. Instead, they championed a new way to paint based purely in the plastic elements of painting: tone, texture, form and line. If their formal geometries were ground breaking for Montreal, their small formats and subdued colours retained traces of European modernist traditions, especially Cubism.

Rodolphe de Repentigny was the principal author of the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*. An art critic, he painted under the pseudonym Jauran. Until his untimely death in 1959, he vigorously defended abstract painting in *La Presse* and other publications.

The first Plasticien movement was short-lived (Jauran in particular stopped painting in 1956), but Fernand Leduc, the former Automatiste, soon adopted its compositional principles, while enlivening his paintings with fresh robust colours. After a second long stay in France beginning in 1959, Leduc returned to Quebec for good in 2006, where he continues to pursue an independent and productive career.

## **1956: MOLINARI AND TOUSIGNANT AT L'ACTUELLE**

In May 1955, shortly after the closing of the *Les Plasticiens* exhibition at L'Échourie, Guido Molinari launched L'Actuelle, the first gallery in Canada devoted solely to non-figurative art. The following year, he and Claude Tousignant each had solo exhibitions featuring works whose radicalism overshadowed nearly all the achievements of the first Plasticiens. Full of their own ambitions, both artists criticized the first Plasticiens for being too conservative and too influenced by European painting. The second Plasticiens instead were inspired by what they were learning from artistic developments in New York.

Their new paintings became a far more energetic form of geometric abstraction: large-scale, formally severe and uncompromisingly flat. They used automobile enamel and masking tape to define forms with the utmost precision—the first characteristic of their so-called *hard-edge* technique.

The public was perplexed, even hostile to the L'Actuelle exhibitions, which exacerbated doubts that the artists themselves harboured. Creating these new works was a great leap into the unknown. As the works in the alcove demonstrate, over the next few years, the painters systematically analyzed their new directions and thus laid the foundations for their future work.

## **1956-1960: THE SECOND PLASTICIENS**

The *second Plasticiens* were never a formal group. The term served to distinguish the painting of the 1955 Plasticiens from the more severe geometry introduced by Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant in 1956. The second Plasticiens included Molinari and Tousignant, Louis Belzile and Fernand Toupin—original Plasticiens who continued to explore geometric abstraction until the late 1950s—and Fernand Leduc, an Automatiste who turned to geometry, enhancing it with fully saturated colours.

Denis Juneau and Jean Goguen, two new names associated with this second generation of Plasticiens, expressed an interest in the relationship between art and society. Returning to Montreal in 1956 after studying contemporary design in Italy, Juneau adopted a strict formal vocabulary based on circle motifs—whole, halved, and quartered—of various sizes. As for Goguen, he always claimed to have discovered geometry purely by chance, when he noticed “a small white square” embedded in a gestural black and white painting that he was working on.

Following in the wake of painter Piet Mondrian, the second Plasticiens structured their paintings by balancing part against part in search of compositional equilibrium. They showed together in the exhibition, *Art abstrait*, in 1959.

### **1959: ART ABSTRAIT AT THE ÉCOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE MONTRÉAL**

The L'Actuelle gallery and the Non-Figurative Artist's Association of Montreal, both founded in 1956 to promote non-figurative art, had flexible policies concerning the kinds of abstract styles they showed. In contrast, the *Art abstrait* exhibition, which opened in 1959 at the École des beaux-arts, was strictly dedicated to the geometric abstraction of the second Plasticiens.

The catalogue, with an introduction by the art critic and theoretician, Fernande Saint-Martin, and individual texts by the artists, served as their manifesto. As Saint-Martin explained about geometric art: despite its strict hard-edge contours, it has little to do with rational calculation. On the contrary, it is an intuitive art that is fully immersed in human experience. Abstract art is not about appearance, but seeks to expose “the structures” behind appearances. This is why it reveals, better than traditional art, “the deepest dimensions of a new man.”

Despite their formal affinities, the works exhibited featured significant differences. Most of the second Plasticiens were determined to find resolutions to the disturbing anxieties arising from the contemporary world. Molinari and Tousignant, instead, revelled in modern instability, seeking not to simplify its complexities, but to give expression to its “multiple relations” (Molinari) and its “fundamental dynamism” (Tousignant).

### **THE EARLY 1960s: PRELUDE TO POST-PLASTICIEN WORKS**

Following the *Art abstrait* exhibition the participating artists took divergent paths. Once again it was Molinari and Tousignant who took the boldest steps in new directions. Both sought to liberate the action of colour by reducing their compositions to simple repetitive patterns, Molinari to vertical stripes and Tousignant to concentric bands. Both also repeated sequences, or series, of colours, once, twice or several times. They were fascinated with how colours seemed to change as their locations changed. They saw the ever-shifting appearances within their paintings as commensurate with the energetic volatility of contemporary experience in the real world.

Alongside Molinari and Tousignant, two new artists with comparable serious pursuits emerged onto the Montreal scene of the 1960s. Yves Gaucher initially composed with vibrant optical

colours, but by the end of the decade sought to engage his viewers in profound contemplative moods. Charles Gagnon was a little different, less about colour, but edgily challenging viewers with contradictory perceptual problems, at once teasing us intellectually and wooing us emotionally.

## GALLERY 6

### **THE 1960s – THE POST-PLASTICIENS: COLOUR’S CRITICAL ROLE IN PERCEPTION**

#### **Individual Pursuits**

#### **Molinari, Tousignant, Gaucher, Gagnon**

The term *post-Plasticien* is a neologism applied to the work of four artists, Guido Molinari, Claude Tousignant, Yves Gaucher and Charles Gagnon, who came into their own in the 1960s. Their work sought to eliminate the formal part-to-part compositions of the 1950s in order to liberate colour and to find new dynamic ways to engage the viewer.

Thus Molinari reduced his compositions to vertical bands and Tousignant to “targets,” both ordering their colours in repetitive series. Gaucher devised other optical strategies, while Gagnon developed his own ways to confound visual expectations.

The post-Plasticiens emerged at a time when hard-edge painting appeared everywhere on the international scene. In the mid-1960s, they exhibited across the United States within the context of Op Art. They found this label restrictive, however, because they related it to simple flashy effects and instantaneous responses, whereas their own works dealt with prolonged time-based perception. Though they too privileged pure unmodulated colour, they did not follow the fundamental principles of Post-Painterly Abstraction as practiced in the United States and other parts of Canada. Essentially, if Post-Painterly Abstraction was about the aesthetics of individual colours, the Montreal post-Plasticiens preferred the dynamics, rhythms and vibrations of colours in interaction.

## BIOGRAPHIES



PHOTO: BRYDON SMITH

### **Guido Molinari**

Born in 1933 and died in 2004 in Montreal

Guido Molinari was instrumental in cutting Montreal pictorial art off from its European roots and making it a North American art. A stay in New York in 1955 convinced him that true modernism didn't come through Automatism: rather, the trajectory passed from Cézanne to Mondrian and crossed the Atlantic after Cubism, to New York and Jackson Pollock. It's from this stylistic descent that Molinari drew the fundamentals of his future work.

Molinari took a critical first step with large hard-edge paintings that he exhibited at the L'Actuelle gallery in Montreal in 1956. As you saw in the first room, his innovation results from the black and white geometric shapes made interchangeable by

their identical treatment, which prevents you from definitively locating the background and the foreground. From this point on, paintings were no longer static images; they were evolving visual events.

In the 1960s, Molinari's fundamental accomplishment was his iconic series consisting of bands of colour. The composition is focused on vertical bands of equal width that neutralize the formal structure in favour of pure chromatics. The colours are arranged in repeating series, which draw the eye to gradually discover their inconstancy: each one is transformed when combined with the one that follows, in addition to evolving as the viewer shifts position in front of the painting.

An adept of hard-edge, Molinari nonetheless continued to draw spontaneously throughout his life. He wrote proficiently, including an analysis of the dynamic character of Montreal post-Plasticism, which he contrasts with the purist aesthetics of American Post-Painterly Abstraction.



PHOTO: TESS BOUDREAU

### **Claude Tousignant**

Born in 1932 in Montreal

Claude Tousignant, like Molinari, made a first breakthrough in an exhibition at the L'Actuelle gallery in 1956. His paintings, as seen in room 5, stand out by the division of the surface in solid vertical or horizontal planes, rendered in the glossy enamel paints used in automobile body shops. These works would have appeared revolutionary anywhere, and in fact, most of

the public and the art critics were bewildered by their simplicity, by the absence of all reference to an identifiable reality.

Until the end of the decade, Tousignant sought a way to liberate colour from the constraints of form. His approach ultimately led him to create, toward the mid-1960s, the "target" painting, which was his post-Plasticien signature and a true landmark. He first positioned his concentric circles in stimulating colours in rectangular formats. Then, to abolish formal tensions altogether, angles were eliminated, resulting in a perfect circle.

Tousignant gave his paintings an undulating flow, created by the interaction and pulsation of colours, in different combinatory modes, as seen in the various series that he produced between 1965 and 1969, such as *Chromatic Transformers*, *Gongs* and *Chromatic Accelerators*. As the artist intended, our experience of this visual dynamic echoes that of our own existence when confronted by the complexities of the contemporary world.



### **Yves Gaucher**

Born in 1934 and died in 2000 in Montreal

Yves Gaucher was already known on the international scene as an innovative and award-winning printmaker; however, he did not adopt the hard-edge style of painting until 1964. On a visit to Paris in 1962, he first heard the music of contemporary Austrian composer, Anton Webern. He was impressed by the "small sound cells projected into space," where they expand to take on new qualities and new dimensions.

In 1963, with the *Homage to Webern* series and then the print entitled *Yellow Fugue*, Yves Gaucher introduced a vocabulary of abstract geometric notation, consisting of lines, squares and strokes that cover the entire surface of the paper and that the eye connects in clusters or reads as networks, which immediately dissolve to take on a different form.

For Gaucher these notations were "signals," which in 1965 he combined in a first and important series of paintings called *Square Dances*. This was the closest contact that he had with Op Art. Continuing with the musical theme, the *Ragas* discreetly unfurl their slower rhythm, in a near contemplative mode.

Gaucher was also impressed by American painter Mark Rothko, whose works can so easily put the viewer in a state of trance. While Molinari and Tousignant were temporal painters, Yves Gaucher embarked on a spiritual quest, culminating in his outstanding achievement—the 60 or so *Grey on Grey* paintings, completed between 1967 and 1969.





## Charles Gagnon

Born in 1934 and died in 2003 in Montreal

Charles Gagnon differed somewhat from the other post-Plasticien painters in that he was the first Montreal artist to study for a prolonged period in New York. He stayed there from 1955 to 1960 and encountered all the avant-garde approaches, including those developed by Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg. He also discovered

experimental cinema and the music of composer John Cage. Throughout his career, Gagnon often combined diverse means of expression, including the cinema and photography.

Nonetheless, like the other post-Plasticien painters, he remained determined to engage the viewer in a conscious experience of art. Even in his works imbued with expressionist allusions, like 1965's *Luncheon on the Grass*, he challenges our visual expectations with destabilizing hard-edge lines, which the eye must confront in order to move beyond and maneuver in the painting's pictorial space.

The shimmering surfaces of the *Glory* and *Step* series, completed at the end of the 1960s, bring to mind photographs or cinema screens; however, the window that frames them serves as an intellectual reference point. Like spirits we invoke, the illusions that they reveal confound perception. In fact, these painted works all consist of artificial constructions. What you must see there in reality is the complexity of visions, thoughts and feelings that the works provoke.

## CREDITS

The *Plasticiens and Beyond, Montreal, 1955-1970*, is an exhibition coproduced by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and the Varley Art Gallery of Markham, initiated by Roald Nasgaard.

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

### Opening Hours

Tuesday through Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Wednesday until 9:00 p.m.  
Closed on Mondays

### Admission

Adults: \$15 ▪ Seniors: \$12 ▪ CAA members: \$13 ▪ Students: \$7 (under 30) ▪  
Youth (12-17): \$4 ▪ Members-Friends and children under 12: free

### To Contact Us

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