

**john franklin koenig**







## Un monde de correspondances

L'exposition des récentes oeuvres de John Franklin Koenig est une invitation au voyage. Elle fait défiler devant nos yeux une succession de paysages intérieurs. L'artiste ne se laisse pas tromper par le monde des apparences. La somptuosité des couleurs ou la délicatesse des tons, la richesse de la matière ou la transparence des lavis font naître un monde de correspondances, au sens baudelairien du terme.

Sous le charme des toiles, nous traversons donc la saison violente des tableaux fortement colorés; la saison riche et opulente des oeuvres aux sourdes résonnances automnales, saison qui s'achève dans une calcination de symboles; la saison à la fois sereine et douce-amère envahie par un blanc "de cendre et de lait".

Mais ces climats psychologiques ou spirituels ne sont pas des phantasmes d'une imagination en délire. On y sent, au contraire, de profondes réminiscences telluriques, l'amour du peintre pour des espaces réels transformés par son lyrisme en des instants privilégiés, en des topographies de la sensibilité. Et comme John F. Koenig est un peintre d'une grande qualité, il sait trouver les accords chromatiques correspondant à ses paradis artificiels. Ses tableaux nous enseignent, entre autres choses, que voir le monde réel, c'est l'intérioriser, l'assimiler, le transformer en un monde pour soi, qui devient, grâce à la magie de la communication plastique, un monde pour les autres.

Un seul tableau n'épuise pas toujours la richesse d'une émotion plastique. C'est pourquoi certains thèmes reviennent, se précisent, s'épanouissent. Il en est de même pour les symboles graphiques (carrés, cercles ou rectangles) dont la résurgence gestuelle est comme la signature de l'artiste.

Gilles Hénault

Directeur du Musée d'Art contemporain



## **John Franklin Koenig, or the Ikebana of the mind**

When Koenig grew into painting, in 1950, geometry was all-powerful. Sixteen years later, it seems to triumph again, as if it had weathered without a scratch the minor catastrophies named tachism, action painting, lyrical (or other forms of) abstraction. The times have even made it sign a strange alliance with the noisiest of recent movements: Pop Art — a folk art for the mundane in Europe and for the Upper Crust in the United States. One fashion follows another, the Salons and Biennials add more roman numerals to their names, while a tiny handful of painters in each country grow in age and in wisdom.

John Franklin Koenig is one of these. He wasn't quite geometrical in 1950, and he still isn't. His sixteen years of painting have been classified under the most fantastic names, but he doesn't seem to notice, since he continues to paint with the same shocking obstination the simplest of things, which nonetheless one can never quite understand. The period may be Pop, Op, or What?, Koenig will still gather the stones on the beach, he will prefer the inn with the green shutters that looks out over the sea, he will drape his shower-curtain into a curve of mother-of-pearl, or make a collage for his tea-canister.

And yet, he knows who Hitler is, his first view of Europe, at 19, was from the turret of a tank; he has seen what he could of Hiroshima. But he is stubborn, he insists: he loves life. He also knows that we are dancing on the volcano. He's seen New York, been around Fujiyama, but has chosen little Europe, for he prefers its rhythm.

There are painters who grumble about the glory of others. They have the virtue of ugly women, a virtue that smells sour. Koenig is not one of these. He is contented enough with his own life to be able to have an interest in others and in many things: a cooky, a Japanese sado-masochist magazine, an old painting, a postcard, the rings in a pocket-size shop called "Altamira" in the rue des Saints-Pères. But he, like everyone, also has his reasons



atlii: 146 x 89 cm, 1966





to grumble: traffic-jams when he's in a bus, expensive shoes that wear out in three days, tooth-aches, heart-aches, etc. This rather long, rather futile list is only to remind you that although he may title one his paintings "Super Flumina Babylonis" (which made J.-F. Revel guffaw), and though he may have read a few philosophers (as his first biographer, Pierre Restany, liked to point out), J. F. Koenig is neither a hermit nor a misanthrope, he's a man of 1966, like you and me, who knows that the world goes 'round and who detests space rendez-vous that don't succeed.

And nonetheless, he insists, he paints. But he paints what? Here is the difficulty. He paints all sorts of things: abstract, pure, real, obscene things; accidents he wants to record, obstinate souvenirs that he wants to erase; vertical, horizontal, oblique and other simple movements; people, nobody, private jokes, and sometimes (even if it complicates things — but what's the difference?) everything all at once.

"One should not be indifferent to the knowledge that John F. Koenig had already the presentiment of these sensitive evidences before his departure for Europe" said Pierre Restany. "This realization of a new direction open to the artist of today in the path of his perceptive intuitions became the central axis of the later experience of the artist, the crystalizing reaction of his affective preoccupation."

It is also not lacking in interest to know that John F. Koenig was born in 1924 on the West Coast of the United States (which, according to Taine, explains his interest in space, and the Far East, and authorizes a distant relationship to Tobey and Graves); that he has been to Mexico (which explains "the violence of his chromatism", *op. cit.*); that he has roamed around quite a bit in the green-ness of our native Normandy (he has admired the "Nymphéas" of Monet, especially after he was told that they had inspired him; he has loved Varengeville, not because of Braque but because of the chalk cliffs, that he has photographed); last but not least, he has visited Japan several times, and here he last loved everything: the lamps, the people, the inns, the gardens, the bells, the pottery, and don't forget the mats, the pearls, the tape-recorders and the trains.



Nor must we be indifferent to the fact that John Franklin Koenig's painting has changed considerably these last few years. Of course there are people who are astounded by nothing, and who find him once again. But let us warn those who had the habit of floating, in his pictures, far from the madding shore, in mid-sea, on tip-cloud, that this period is far gone. Now one finds imperfect circles, triangles, squares, like in a painting of Sengai; bold engravings into the *matière* like those of his most recently acquired and most beautiful African mask; compositions that come from a certain Greek vase that he encountered in the Metropolitan Museum; crosses from the robe of a saint on a postcard icone. One of course knows that the original meaning of these masks has been forgotten, and the uses he makes of these small crosses is highly unorthodox. But these were only pretexts. But pretexts for what?

Pretexts for painting, playing, dreaming. And for this game, these are rules, and Koenig holds to them. And though he knows he's only playing, the game can be well or badly played, and seeing that he is patient, he slowly tries to learn to take all the tricks. He knows very well that no matter if walls are built of brick or paper, one day they will tumble down, but if he were to send a message off in a bottle, he wouldn't scribble it down. The Japanese children knew this already when they sent their most carefully written prayers, tied to a bamboo branch, floating down the river.

"Just like my photos, I consider my paintings as privileged moments", Koenig wrote recently. "But the photos are moments captured and frozen forever. The painter, far from accepting reality as something united and indivisible, given as such, goes on to search his forms "in the sleep of God". He must endow his creation with the possibility of multiple manners of existence. A painting is a sort of ideal Ikebana that allows the heart of the artist and the spectator to rearrange or give a different order to the hard or silken realities of life." Of his painting at least there has never been given a better definition.

Marc Albert Levin  
Paris, July, 1966



**musée d'art contemporain, montréal, oct. 1966**

**musée du québec, québec, nov. 1966**

**portland art museum, portland, ore., dec. 1966 — jan. 1967**

**tacoma art museum, tacoma, feb. 1967**

**gordon woodside gallery, seattle, feb. 1967**

**gordon woodside gallery, san francisco, march 1967**

photos: office du film du québec  
manteau dessiné par pierre lussier

printed in canada