



MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

FRANÇOIS -
MARIE
BERTRAND

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Territoires mobiles

[Project 1]





A Notion of Fragmented Landscape

François-Marie Bertrand's painting is pure, concise, and somehow captivating. Arising out of an apparent simplicity and obvious economy of means, it relies on the ample yet limited register of monochrome painting and an exclusive use of orthogonal geometric configurations. Six new paintings, gathered under the title *Territoires mobiles*, very deliberately take their place within the particular topography of the room devoted to the Project Series, and raise various questions, like that of the exhibition space as a backdrop for a pictorial practice.

After venturing down the multidisciplinary paths of performance and installation art, François-Marie Bertrand has concentrated on painting since the early eighties, in a way that links up with the issues addressed by abstract art. Combining the legacies of the automatist and plastician movements, along with the experience of formalism, he challenges the specific nature of the pictorial discourse, first of all in works in which colour and gesture are plainly subject to a rigorous exercise in construction (used here in the sense of composition, assembly and structure, all at once). The recent works – specifically, those of the past four years – employ a tighter plastic vocabulary by juxtaposing geometric modules (triangular, rectangular and longitudinal) singled out using either red, ochre, green or purple, in a way that suggests, through the play of associations and size changes, formal and chromatic relations that are both precarious and carefully considered. The gradual reduction of the palette (the transition to compositions that call for just three, two or one of the four chosen colours) and the increasingly risky positioning of the coloured elements energize the structural relationships of balance and tension and establish both real and virtual relationships, centring on the notions of solid and void, between the fragmented painting and what the artist terms the “wall/space.” Recalling the properties of colour and the phenomena of perception, this painted oeuvre renews the experience of a silent, polysemous and paradoxical pictorial space.

Silence is not muteness; paradox does not stand for incongruity or inconsistency. The painter's interest in ambiguity, particularly perceptual ambiguity, underlies the dichotomous constants of the work: solid and void, presence and absence, symmetry and asymmetry, horizontality and



verticality, depth and surface, and finally, the fixedness of the plastic territory (that of the paintings individually and of the grouping as a whole) and the necessary mobility of the viewer. In the *Territoires mobiles* exhibition, the colour of the paintings is darkened, as if subdued by the density of the green and purple monochromes. The opaque, textured monochromy of each coloured element draws the eye straight to the depth and richness of the pictorial surface, at the same time as it puts up a definite resistance to attempts at partial, indicial interpretation. The orthogonal placement of the different segments of diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs (for lack of a better name) brings out their horizontal compositional ordering and summons up the notion of a vast, fragmented landscape in which the material and the virtual seemingly set up a reciprocity between the pictorial object (the "painting/matter") and the wall that supports it (the "painting/space").

Each picture is made up of several – from three to eight – rectangular frames of different dimensions, distributed over the wall in a way that scrambles the anticipated effects of a classical perspective or its modernist negation, and actually fosters, both in spite of and because of the rectilinear arrangement of painted solids, the perception of virtual curves. The mathematical, proportional spaces between the elements, like the distance between each of the paintings, correspond to the artist's apprehension and assessment of the multiple, irregular dimensions of the gallery. Far from being overlooked, the relation to the site connects the context and content of a work that deliberately contrasts the fragmentation of the visual object and the extreme materiality of its form.

Applied with bare hands, the successive layers of translucent colour, which changes slightly with each coat, permanently invest their metal or plasticized support, by totally obscuring it. This support, radically cut off from its primary nature – the metal is actually salvaged from refrigerator doors, and the vinyl, from manufactured building materials – retains only the solidity and durability of its origins, thus auguring a vaguely acknowledged lastingness. The accumulation of layers of acrylic colour renders opaque and saturated the tonalities of an intentionally reduced palette. The quality and fluidity of the textures obtained are reminiscent of encaustic.



Lecture erronée, 1992
acrylic on metal, 4 elements
48 x 352.5 cm
Photos: Louis Iussier

Viewed as both plane and space, the white wall is an intrinsic part of the pictorial challenge. Tinged with void, unpaintedness and absence, it nonetheless bears the imprint of the shadows cast, the respective weights of the chromatic densities, and the plastic rhythm of the broken succession of pictures. The traditional servitudes of canvas and paper, their favoured role as support, are literally transposed onto the wall, which has become a screen, framework and boundary.

However little or much it contains (of a single variable, but in large quantity), the monochromatic plane initially seems impenetrable; and yet, with experience, it invites contemplation – an active, “mobile” contemplation in the present instance, because of the differences in the particular configuration of each of the six paintings and the perceptual changes brought about by a shift in viewpoint. While avoiding tautology, this painting is nonetheless based on variation and similarities. The pictorial system ascertains its foundations within each work, by re-creating in a different way the ambiguity and unexpectedness of the spaces between the elements as well as the tonal substance of the modulations of colour. An imaginary, but verifiable, horizon line (we are far from an unquestioning return to a mimetic function, however) anchors the six paintings and calls directly on the awareness and understanding of the onlooker’s gaze. “The landscape sees; the eye thinks.”¹ The analogical references contained in the dark green and purple correspond to a certain idea of nature, the hypothetical and optical reflection of trees and water, borne out, in a way, by the vertical positioning above and below the horizontal axis.

As calm and austere as they may be at first glance, these paintings nevertheless compel an appreciation, from a distance, of a complex dynamics defying perspectives and perceptual habits and, from close up, a careful examination of the gestural profusion buried within the oneness of a single colour shunning all decorative effect in favour of opaque depth and a certain neutrality. François-Marie Bertrand makes use of remanence and dissonance, reckoning on the persistence of a series of abstract, dissimilar images to simultaneously reveal the sense and non-sense of visual certainties.

■ Josée Bélisle

1. This expression used by the artist is also the title of a work in the exhibition (“Le paysage voit, l’œil pense.”).



Works exhibited

- 1 *Résistance au présent*, 1992
acrylic on metal, 3 elements
81 x 324.5 cm
- 2 *Territoires mobiles*, 1992
acrylic on vinyl, 7 elements
45 x 550 cm
- 3 *Lecture erronée*, 1992
acrylic on metal, 4 elements
48 x 352.5 cm
- 4 *L'Éclipse de la distance*, 1992
acrylic on metal and vinyl, 4 elements
65.5 x 320 cm
- 5 *Territoires mobiles*, 1992
acrylic on vinyl, 6 elements
330 x 460 cm
- 6 *Le paysage voit, l'œil pense*, 1992
acrylic on metal, 8 elements
299.5 x 280 cm

The works all belong to the artist.



FRANÇOIS-MARIE BERTRAND

*Born in Granby, Québec, in 1953.
Studied at the Montreal Museum of
Fine Arts School of Art and Design
from 1969 to 1973.
Lives and works in Montréal.*

Solo Exhibitions

- 1983 Galerie d'art du Collège Édouard-Montpetit, Longueuil, Québec
1990 Galerie d'art du Centre culturel de l'Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, Québec
1991 Editorial offices of the newspaper *Le Devoir*, Montréal, Québec

Group Exhibitions

- 1980 *Symposium international de sculpture environnementale de Chicoutimi*, Chicoutimi, Québec
1981 *Le théâtre pour une spéculation...*, installation at 10 Pine Avenue West, Montréal, Québec (collaborative work)
1983 *L'Hybride Pi 3.1415926...*, installation and performance, Studio J 2020, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec (collaborative work)
1984 *L'Hybride Pi 3.1415926...*, installation and performance, Salle Alfred-Laliberté, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec (collaborative work)
1985 Galerie du Centre, Saint-Lambert, Québec
1986 Galerie John Daniel, Montréal, Québec
1987 Galerie Alliance, Montréal, Québec.
Galerie John Daniel, Montréal, Québec

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Brousseau, Jean-Paul. — "Quand la danse fait un saut quantique". — *La Presse*. — (May 4, 1983). — P. G 3
Thibodeau, Hélène. "Peintures et dessins de François-Marie Bertrand". — *Le Courrier du Sud*. — (October 26, 1983). — P. C 22
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Pritchard, Robert. — "Off the wall". — *St. Lambert Journal*. — (March 13, 1985). — P. 9
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Dumont, Jean. — "François-Marie Bertrand, peindre pour voir". — *Vie des Arts*. — No. 140 (Sept. 1990). — P. 76-77
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Writings by the Artist

- "Postmodernum omne animal triste". — *La petite revue de philosophie*. — Vol. IX No. 1 (Dec. 1987). — P. 71-93, 198-212.
— [in collaboration with François Raymond]
"Absence opaque". — *La Tribune*. — (March 30, 1990). — P. S 8

Territoires mobiles (Project 1)

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