

SUZANNE GIROUX

Giverny, le temps mauve

A travelling exhibition organized by
the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal



Réal Lussier

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

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LIST OF WORKS

Pont japonais n° 4, 1989

Video projection: video projector,
video disk player, video disk, color, 25 min.
Screen 60" x 84" and frame
Collection: Suzanne Giroux

Nymphéas n° 3, 1989

Video projection: video projector,
video disk player, video disk, color, 18 min.
Screen 60" x 84" and frame
Collection: Galerie Claude Fain, Paris

Étang et pont japonais n° 2, 1990

Video projection: video projector,
video disk player, video disk, color, 25 min.
Screen 60" x 84" and frame
Collection: Suzanne Giroux

Barque n° 6, 1990

Video projection: video projector,
video disk player, video disk, color, 30 min.
Screen 60" x 84" and frame
Collection: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Nymphéas n° 5, 1990

Video projection: video projector,
video disk player, video disk, color, 30 min.
Screen 60" x 84" and frame
Collection: Galerie Claude Fain, Paris

Cover page:

Étang et pont japonais n° 2, 1990

Photo: Denis Farley for the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Giverny, le temps mauve

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FOREWORD

In a recent work, Yves Michaud, former chief editor of **Cahiers**, published by the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou and now Director of the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts de Paris, attributed two functions to a contemporary art museum. The first is to be a "memorial." In the case of our institution, to be a memorial for works which have reflected our desire, since 1939, to be a party to contemporaneity. The second function is to "participate in the activity of artists of its time."

It is therefore within this perspective that the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal presents recent works by Suzanne Giroux in an exhibition entitled **Giverny, le temps mauve**.

Although, for the artist, it is surely not unusual to make reference to Claude Monet and his property on Île-de-France, where he created his famous gardens extolled in the prophetic works of the end of his career, what first draws the attention of a museum is the artist's use of video, a practice which reveals the potentiality of the image, while developing the scope of the instrument itself.

In so doing, Suzanne Giroux situates herself in the tradition of artists who question the nature of the pictorial work, either to reach its essence and therein discover its qualities, or to bring out its hidden depths.

We wish to thank Mr. Réal Lussier, curator of this exhibition, as well as the entire Musée staff, who all made a contribution to the success of this exhibition.

To our visitors and friends, whose presence at the Musée is always a stimulating source of encouragement, we wish to express our sincere appreciation.

Marcel Brisebois
Director

PREFACE

In the past ten years, video art has attempted to dominate a technique that is evolving rapidly. In a manner of speaking, it has consecrated the manipulation of the image, making the most of both the specificity of its medium and of the computer.

Like artists such as Bill Viola and Dan Graham, Suzanne Giroux, who minimizes special effects, relies on a certain economy in video art. In **Giverny, le temps mauve** she uses video to solve historical problems in painting. Her interest in the Impressionists dates back several years. Today Suzanne Giroux suggests contemporary solutions to Monet's concerns. These solutions necessarily involve the specificity of video, a specificity that is uncomplicated, without artifice, yet highly effective.

Regular visitors to the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal will have noticed that our programming recognizes the importance of video art. Many people have indicated their interest in seeing a permanent program developed for video art. Although the lack of space in our facilities at Cité du Havre have not allowed us to immediately respond to this wish, the new downtown museum will have plenty of space to present this art in all its forms.

Giverny, le temps mauve, an exhibition by young artist Suzanne Giroux, will not be an exception. The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal will indeed be able to follow the constant and exciting evolution of this art, an art that is so firmly rooted in the social fabric of our lives.

Moreover, it is through events such as **Giverny, le temps mauve** that visitors to the Musée are able to discover new dimensions of art, to experience magic moments of enchantment and delight.

Manon Blanchette

INTRODUCTION

by R  al Lussier

Suzanne Giroux was introduced to video in the mid-80s, when she began to use the medium to show her concerns with the history of art. In an earlier series of works, she focused her attention on representation of the female nude in the pictorial tradition. Using, among others, the classical subject of the odalisque, a recurring subject since the Renaissance, she posed the female model in a setting reminiscent of Ingres, the Impressionists and Matisse.

Using the video camera as a paintbrush, the artist focused mainly on the concept of time in this work. She made the viewer aware of how long the model was posing. By watching, participating in the model's time before the camera, the viewer also took part in the creative time of the work. Thus, the artist focused on one of the specific features of video as a medium: duration. The viewer is no longer standing in front of a mere transposition of reality through the medium of paint, but rather has the privilege of participating in the performance of this reality through the medium of video. Thus, with video, Suzanne Giroux has succeeded in composing paintings that trap time as it actually passes.

It is therefore not surprising that Suzanne Giroux went on to pursue her work in a series which makes immediate reference to Claude Monet, and more specifically, to his works at Giverny. Indeed, wasn't capturing the passage of time, the many changes or transformations of reality, the prime objective of the Impressionists? In conjunction with the scientific discoveries of their time, the Impressionists associated the optical effects of vision with representation. It was primarily a new perception of light: their stated goal was to directly and empirically study variations of light as it related to shape. Claiming to objectively analyse optical sensation, Monet more than anyone, recorded the slightest variations in each shape and succeeded in capturing the fleeting moment. The absolute pursuit of ephemera

found its ultimate conclusion in his "series" and finally in "Water Lilies."

It may be appropriate here to note that a certain comparison may be made between the upheavals caused by Impressionism in their representation of the world and those caused by the use of video in artistic practice. Don't they both represent a change in the traditional way of viewing reality?

The works in this exhibition are part of a recent series of works by Suzanne Giroux, based on "Giverny". These are video projections which give the viewer the illusion of large paintings, since the technical equipment is concealed behind a false wall; all that is visible are the screens. Using a fixed camera whose focus is slightly off, and a continuous long shot, these works highlight the pictorial nature of the image. Like Monet, whose exploration developed into a disintegration of shape, in favour of a juxtaposition of splashes of pure colour, Suzanne Giroux exploits the pictorial effects made possible by her chosen medium.

As noted earlier, there are indeed numerous affinities between video art and Impressionism. Doesn't the electronic image consist of tiny points of light, like the dots of colour on a painting? The vibrating image, its constant changes, the flashing light: aren't they similar to the fluid and ephemeral nature of paintings by the Impressionists?

The nature of this work once again brings out the principal concerns of Suzanne Giroux, while also highlighting certain specificities of video as a medium. Confirming the importance of the concept of time in her work, these works are associated with the representation of a subject which changes, sometimes perceptibly, sometimes not, with the passage of time. With its own attributes, video makes this same relativity of perceptions which so concerned the Impressionist painters, more or less discernable. The idea that things do not remain the same, do not remain

intact, that each new second brings about a change which transforms its very nature, is in this work transposed into images right before the viewer's eyes. It is interesting to note that one of the features of the video image is its perpetual motion: one image appears as another disappears.

The visual subject matter that forms the electronic framework is in constant motion: the image appears as it takes shape, then vanishes as it changes shape again.

Giverny also represents light. Indeed, it is the variation in light that changes how things look. Like Monet, Suzanne Giroux also attempts to capture the natural light that envelopes everything, which is never quite the same. A light that effects a metamorphosis in elements of nature and makes them, in a way, fluid and impalpable. Given these concerns, the subjects she has chosen are those which offer the most immateriality, such as water, which is nothing but reflection and vibration.

Characteristic of the video medium, Suzanne Giroux's images are above all pure light, since that is her obvious chosen material. Here, light sweeps away shape and absorbs the design. It is also light which gives the colour. In fact, colour and light are one, since it is impossible to conceive of colour without the luminous flow which underlies and nourishes it. This colour-light, transparent and perpetually moving, contributes to dematerializing the image, to making the subject more fragile and more intangible.

The video image makes it possible to rediscover the same sensations of a mobile, fluid nature, provoked by the paintings at Giverny. Shapes dissolve into the light and exist only as areas of intense, vibrant colour. In reality, light assimilates the image by gradually erasing its contours. The screen comes to resemble a blotter which gradually absorbs the colour, leaving only variously modulated fringes and gaps. All that remains is a diffuse image, glorifying colour, suggestive of the

INTERVIEW WITH SUZANNE GIROUX

by Réal Lussier

evanescence of a ghostly world and tending increasingly toward abstraction.

Reinterpreting Monet's pictorial expression in her own way, Suzanne Giroux shares with us her quest for time and light: the impalpable. Experimenting with the limitations of representation, she also highlights the specificities of her medium. If the works appear to be somewhat troubling, disturbing, it is because they present a new type of sublime, a beauty which video does not tend to valorize, yet one which is completely its own.

You are presenting a series of recent works entitled *Giverny, le temps mauve*. How did you arrive at this project?

In the summer of 1988, I read *Les cinq sens* by Michel Serres. In this book, Serres reflects on Impressionism and on the relationship between painter and model. At the time, I was working on my series of live models. Although I had never really thought about Impressionism, I had the feeling, in reading that book, that Serres was writing about my work. Unfortunately that was not the case, but it did make me aware that my work reflected some of the Impressionists' parameters.

Since I spend the summer in the country, I decided to take advantage of my surroundings and think a little more consciously about Impressionism, by touching on a "taboo" theme: landscape. Choosing this theme was quite a challenge for me. What was an artist like myself, who had been trained along the lines of conceptual art, going to do with a sunset? To my great surprise, the sketches were rather interesting. By the end of the summer, I realized that even without consciously wanting to, I had opened the door to Impressionism. On the other hand, these images remained very gratuitous for me, very experimental, because they were without reference to one of the foundations of my works, a rereading of painting in its historic framework. So I packed my bags and set off for Giverny.

How does this recent work on Giverny relate to your earlier works?

As I have just mentioned, first through the citational aspect of my approach. My imagery is directly borrowed from the body of art history. And, for me, going to work in Monet's gardens was to immerse myself in Impressionism.

The second link is an important part of my thought process, as much in terms of my production as in my research for my doctoral thesis: that is, the concept of poietics. Poietics is the science that studies the creative process, the work in progress, the "making" of the work.

Therefore, in this work, I "time" painting. This is an expression that Rober Racine has attributed to my work, which I consider to be extremely accurate. My works cannot be captured in one stroke, they involve a notion of physical time, during which perceptible changes may or may not occur. Right now, the earth is turning, but we cannot feel it. Yet changes are occurring and the earth's movement makes time pass. My works are fractions of time and, at Giverny, time is often mauve.

On the other hand, I feel that there is a difference between this series and my work on models. It's the **impression**.

More specifically, how has this recent work changed your thoughts about representation and video as a medium?

Before elaborating on **impression**, I would first like to talk a bit about the concept of representation in my earlier work. A fundamental source was this question: "How do I, in my time, understand the meaning of the word 'mimesis'?" How can I represent nature? In fact, I think that it is true to think that even the cave artists of Lascault and Altamira asked themselves this same question after seeing what instruments they had at their disposal. Today, artists have not only a wide range of instruments and techniques to consider, but also the whole history of art that has come down to them.

My reflection has led me to choose as my medium a video camera because this instrument is the source of most of the images we perceive during the day. Mostly via television, but also in exclusively video programming (like in the Paris **métro**), or in many public places also equipped with this type of programming or video projectors that show sports or entertainment on giant screens. Not to mention camcorders used by families to make their own tapes.

Technically speaking, my series on live models is shown on different television sets. Therefore the viewer is looking at a type of easel picture. Physically, the work is perceived only by the eyes. For

Giverny, I use a video projector and a giant screen (basically a huge canvas). The viewer therefore experiences the work through his or her whole body. In a way, this is a window open onto the world. What's more, the viewer's distance from the work changes his or her perception of it. As with Renaissance paintings and my own works on television sets, the ideal point of view remains the centre of the canvas.

From perhaps a more theoretical point of view, I can say that with *Giverny* I tried to set off in search of **video impressionism**. In terms of the structure of the work, I abandoned the more Cartesian, more Albertian space I had used in my series of models. I also abandoned the "pictorial touch", the "overdone" realistic look (characteristic of a long pictorial tradition but also specific to video). In fact, these new works are more pictorial than they are linear. (You could even analyse them according to Wölfflin's principles.)

The eyes try (in vain) to focus. I submit the viewer to a perception that is similar to our first experience with sight, as a newborn. Before perceiving the subject - the Japanese bridge, the water lilies, the boat - the viewer will capture the impression, I hope.

For me, the concept of **impression** - other people may call it something else - that I associate with Rothko, Turner, Monet of course, and even Pollock, several works by Robert Morris, and the superb works by Zorio, Turrell, and so many others, will perhaps give new élan to the debate on concepts of beauty, the sublime, that our era seems to be seeking after having experienced themes of depression, particularly in painting. I do not mean painting as a medium was depressing, but rather the theme of painting was depression.

You generally describe your works as video-paintings. Could you explain what you mean by this?

I would like to be somewhere on the borderline between painting and video. I do not claim to be either a painter or

a video artist, but I use video technology (without this equipment, my work would not exist) and the basis of my approach is first of all a certain appropriation of the pictorial tradition. As I see it, I do neither painting nor video, I do video-painting. But honestly, I don't place that much importance on this term. I do art. Period. On the other hand, I am horrified when my work is described as "installation." A particular work cannot be an installation, no more than a painting or a sculpture can be. Nor is this museum exhibition an installation. It is an exhibition of eight works that we have chosen to present one next to the other. To a certain extent, I suppose my work could be described as mixed media. So I am one of the many artists who are hard to classify. Which I find amusing.

Given the specificities unique to video, how does video contribute to formulating your artistic approach?

Probably by running counter to these video specificities. Technically, I am very concerned with **trompe l'oeil**. From the very beginning, I have wondered about how to work only with video equipment without it being noticed.

I would not dare name the specificities of video. I think that they may differ depending on what use is being made of them. I could mention, however, the **notion of time**, the **notion of sound** and the **notion of space**. The concept of "passage of time" is as old as the medium itself. One thing's for sure, I have no intention of trapping the viewer in time, like the videotapes of the 70s. Making viewers aware of the passage of time, by causing unpleasant sensations of physical and mental fatigue are of no interest to me. On the contrary, my works are made to be looked at, not viewed. Having often looked at viewers observing my work, I can certainly say that most of them stand in front of the work longer than a person normally spends in front of a painting. And of course, it depends on the viewer. As far as I'm concerned, I am perfectly capable of standing in front of a Rothko or a Barnett Newman for ages. In short,

my works are not designed to be looked at in their entirety, but rather as a fragment. Experimenting with time by fragment. Experiencing the poietics of the work. Seeing what there is to see at a certain point in time, then coming back ten minutes later to see something else. The metamorphosis of the work.

For the time being, sound does not interest me. On the other hand, when I first began my artistic involvement, I wondered about it for a long time - whether or not I should integrate sound. I preferred a temporal reference denuded of sound, like a photograph. It also decreases subjective connotations. The image remains purer, "wilder", less "cultivated" and less like video....

Countering the specificity of the flatness of video space is also very important. The works in the exhibition are representative of this concern. The image is not flattened, but rather exists on several planes. And, to conclude, my shots are static for each work. There is one shot but of a moving image, whereas ordinary video uses a constant sweep of images.

Your work makes a statement about forms of representation. How has video changed our perception of reality, in your view?

We are grappling with a pre-recorded reality. But as I was saying earlier, this way of perceiving the world, reality, is part of our everyday life, if not our senses. It's pre-recorded, but in a way, it's the "normality" of our times.

Looking at my canvas, the viewer is in front of an immaterial reality, one which is uniquely luminous. The work may appear and disappear at the mercy of Hydro-Québec... If we go a bit too far back in time, all that will remain of this exhibition will be eight large blank canvases.

THE NEW ELECTRONIC DIALOGUE

by Manon Blanchette

There are some works that escape being commonplace due to the wealth of the dimensions they suggest, as well as the originality and coherence of their approach. **Giverny, le temps mauve** is an exhibition of works with just this intensity: thought-provoking works that enchant, enlighten and captivate.

On a formal level, the exhibition is a travesty of the medium, since the actual video apparatus completely disappears, suggesting nothing other than painting. Very specific painting, to be sure: painting which was once revolutionary and which is today captivating: Monet's. Suzanne Giroux's video-paintings do more than merely captivate: they enchant, they bring the viewer up against an extraordinary force. When the magic takes hold, the mind remains aroused. Stimulated by the subject of the work and by the beauty of its depiction, memory becomes caught up in the game. First, it recognizes the impressionist effect as well as its subject. Then it detects the preoccupation with the fleeting moment.

Remember that the Impressionists painted quickly to seize that moment of very special light. Although they had a great desire for objectivity, it is still strange to note today how many works by these artists seem, on the contrary, to be so emotional. Calling forth a state of mind imprinted with ambiguity, they are themselves unclear in their form.

As an art historian, and therefore knowledgeable about the concerns of the Impressionists, Suzanne Giroux is able to solve their contradictions; she even criticizes them. To achieve her goal, she simply replaces the artist's eye with the video camera, while preserving the actual time of creation. It is thus that the subtle variations in light appear. It is only then that the "temps mauve" can be perceived.

Furthermore, the very specificity of video makes it possible to respect the nature of Monet's works. Like his

paintings, the video screen, this illusory medium, provides but a hazy impression. With its paint-like facade, video has been selected judiciously for its instantaneousness, its immateriality and its objectivity: the very concerns of Monet and the Impressionists. "If the Impressionists had known about video, they would have stopped painting!" says Suzanne Giroux, inferring by this that they would have found solutions to their aesthetic problems in video.

In addition to effectively reproducing the ambiguity of the image, the video format, itself ethereal since it is perceptible only by electronic scanning, gives a view of a landscape wavering between abstraction and representation. This modulation of the electronic surface challenges the correctness of the viewer's sense of vision and forces it into a constant effort to focus. This constant mental effort produces a thoughtful moment or space. The viewer, brought to experience a special moment in a place that has been completely organized so that this relationship to the work can be established, is enchanted¹. Through this enchantment, during which time the mind remains active, one realizes that the subject is only the pretext for this movement toward a meditative state of being. **Giverny, le temps mauve**, suggests to visitors a more acute experience of awareness and greater psychic freedom².

In fact, do we not recognize a very special power in video art? That of simultaneously transmitting a familiar external world and an internal world fraught with mystery and surprise. Indeed, this was affirmed by Peter Campus in his study of a work by Bill Viola³. Campus explained that this potential to unite the external and internal world in each individual is one of the special features of video, which uses in its basic format an electronic tube whose properties resemble those of the eye's retina. Video transfers light energy into electrical energy, very much like sight. Far from eluding the specificity of the electronic equipment used, **Giverny, le temps mauve**

makes it even more meaningful by integrating this specificity into a historic context that involves memory.

There is nothing gratuitous in Suzanne Giroux's work. Everything is solidly related to a logic of reality. A reality which can be read at several levels, a reality which relevantly seeks to reconcile itself with the cultural identity of its viewers. The Impressionists are certainly not unknown in the West or even in the East, where entire schools have painted in the Impressionist manner. The Impressionists are a part of our cultural landscape.

Suzanne Giroux's video-paintings, due to their known dimensions and their great intrinsic beauty, are captivating: they attract the viewer who seeks immediate pleasure, too often absent in second-rate works. Thus, through the logic of the set-up and the many dimensions to be discovered, Suzanne Giroux restores a function of beauty. At a time when it was not deemed appropriate to recognize beauty as an effective and functional value of art, Suzanne Giroux proved the contrary. She introduces beauty into a strategy of art that brings viewers to a higher level of consciousness of the world around them and to her own psychic and spiritual world.

This awakening to other worlds is not, however, done without the aspect of time. As in the case of the Impressionists' work, **Giverny, le temps mauve** is appreciated in a minimum of real time, as indicated at the bottom of the screen. The work can therefore be fully experienced. It involves physical, psychological, spiritual and cultural dimensions for the viewer. It is a rich, potent work which has a lesson to teach.

1. In the exhibition catalogue for *Enchantment/Disturbance* by Power Plant, 1989, Renee Baert defines the word "enchantment" as a word which suggests acute awareness, or a moment of psychic freedom (p.28).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Peter Campus is quoted in the *Bill Viola* catalogue by the New York Museum of Modern Art, 1987, p. 10, by Barbara London.

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Born in St-Georges de Beauce, Québec, Canada, 1958, living in St-Georges de Beauce since 1992. Education: University of Ottawa, B.A. in Visual Arts 1981; Université de Montréal, M.A. in Art History 1982; Université de Paris, Sorbonne, Studies of P.H.D. in Aesthetics (DEA) 1986; and is presently completing a P.H.D. in Visual Arts at the Université de Paris 1, Sorbonne, Paris.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1993 *Giverny, le temps mauve: Suzanne Giroux*, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA. — Cat.
- 1991 *Giverny, le temps mauve: Suzanne Giroux*, 49th Parallel, New York, NY, USA
- 1990 *Giverny, le temps mauve: Suzanne Giroux*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, QC, Canada. (Itinerary exhibition). — Cat.
- Video Paintings by Suzanne Giroux*, Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Flor., USA
- 1989 *Suzanne Giroux Video Paintings: The Electronic Classicism*, University Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of Florida, Gainesville, Flor., USA
- Leçons de séduction*, Goethe Institute, Montréal, QC, Canada. — During the 5th Women's Film and Video International Festival. — Cat.
- Revisiter le modèle*, PRIM Video, Montréal, QC, Canada

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1992 *Quotations: The Second History of Art*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn., USA. — (Itinerary exhibition: Dayton Museum of Art, Dayton, Ohio, USA). — Cat.
- À mille lieux*, Marché Bonsecours, Montréal, QC, Canada. — Cat.
- 1991 *Site Memory: Contemporary Art from Canada*, MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ont., Canada. — (Itinerary exhibition: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA). — Cat.
- Tombeau de René Payant*, Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal, QC, Canada. — Cat.
- Vraiment Faux*, Fondation Cartier, Paris, France. — (Itinerary exhibition: Rotonda, Milan, Italy; Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany)
- 1990 *V.I.P. : vidéo - image(s) - peinture*, Galerie du Génie, Paris, France. — Cat.
- Odalisque*, Jayne H. Baum Gallery, New York, NY, USA
- 1989 *Les nourritures de l'art*, Centre d'art d'Évry, Évry, France. — Cat.
- Incorporation*, La Galerie d'art Lavalin, Montréal, QC, Canada. — Cat.
- Fictions*, International Airport of Montréal, Mirabel, QC, Canada. — Cat.
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- 1989 Syndicat d'agglomération nouvelle d'Évry; Centre d'Études du Sucre. — *Les nourritures de l'art*. — Évry: S.A.N. d'Évry, 1989. — Texts by Gilbert Lascault and Henri Yéru
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- Sans, Jérôme*. — *Fictions*. — Montréal: LGE/Les grands espaces: Aubes 3935 Galerie, 1989

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