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 MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

**J O S E P H
B R A N C O**

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Still Life
[Project 3]



Still Life

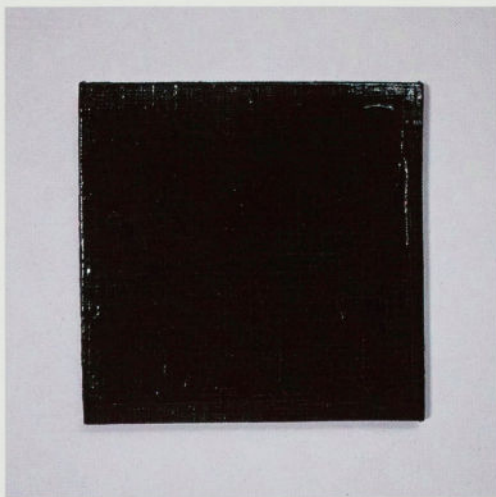
From his earliest creations, a group of painting-objects executed in the mid-eighties, Joseph Branco began defining the principal parameters within which his work would evolve. Unframed, cut-out or moulded so as to resemble different objects (a table, for example, or a frame), these canvases explore with some subtlety the various mechanisms that operate within the pictorial practice. Painting is approached through an examination of its various components — frame, support, surface, image. But these the artist exposes and transposes, so that they are perceived not so much in their basic materiality, but from the more complex viewpoint of their relations to one another and to the exhibition space, as well as their various uses throughout the history of painting, especially in the genre of still life. The following interview with the artist took place on December 3, 1992.

PIERRE LANDRY: *The title of the installation being presented at the Musée, Still Life, draws attention to a constant feature of your work since its inception: the reference to the well-defined historical painting genre of still life. What lies behind your interest in this pictorial form?*

JOSEPH BRANCO: It's first and foremost a question of individual sensibility. This sensibility began to emerge during a course I took in which the students were asked to create a piece based on the study of a work of art. I had chosen a painting by Henri Matisse — a still life that seemed to me to lend itself ideally to an analytic approach (cut-out, collage, assemblage, etc.). When the works were handed in, I discovered I was the only one to have chosen a still life, which was a surprise since for me there was a certain logic behind my choice. I then realized that the choice had been a personal one and that it was above all a question of sensibility. My conception of a still life made me see it as a kind of laboratory, an ideal place in which to conduct experiments. Since then, I have continually formulated my questions regarding painting in terms of this pictorial form.

Which of the characteristics of still life are particularly important to you? Which of its features nourish your work?

As I said, for me still life is a reservoir of experiments that enables me to focus on certain aspects (or effects) of painting. Already by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, still life had increased the value set upon the painter's work. Through the various textures and often highly sophisticated treatments employed in the genre, the very materials of painting were shown to advantage. This new appreciation of the painting practice also had its source in the content of still life, which usually involves the representation of everyday objects. The use of these objects seems to me to create an intimate link between the painter and the subject of his painting — a link that brings still life closer to the artist's daily life and his work in the studio. The time-scale that operates in a still life is actually more or less that of everyday life —



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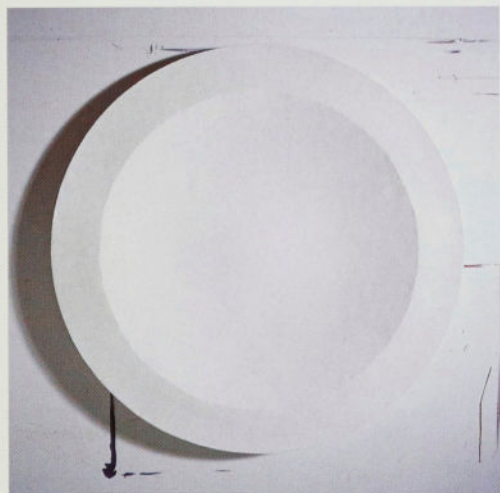
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an anonymous time, and therefore closer to the work's execution time than is, for example, the time (the narrative) represented in a history painting. Rooted in daily life, the time of a still life is similar to the time in which its execution can be described. For example, the phenomenal development of objects arranged on a table appears to me to echo the pictorial methods employed by the painter to render this same scene perceptible on canvas. In classical times, moreover, still life was considered a minor genre that could be used by painters to practice the basic techniques of painting. However, we realize that some painters chose this form for the dynamic and aesthetic values peculiar to it, such as the freedom it allows the artist to concentrate on the nature of his own painting approach. In fact, this freedom can be such that we begin to see representation as an epiphenomenon...

We tend to perceive still life as a closed space, which seems to be corroborated by the analogy you draw between still life and a laboratory. How would you define the space within which your work occurs — work that more often than not is presented in an apparently fragmented form?

This small exclusive world to which you refer is that of the "classical" still life, whose ideal was one of a completed whole. This type of painting aimed at a perfect equivalence between reality and fiction. The relationship between the painting (the representational site) and its referent (the external world) could only operate in a closed, reflective loop (the mirror being the keystone of the classical system of representation). This reality/fiction equivalence obviously leaves no room for the new experiences and knowledge that modernity brings. Following the succession of changes introduced into this closed world by the advent of modernity, I have retained a series of experiments undertaken by, among others, Cézanne, Matisse and the Cubists. One thing these painters did was to raise the surface of the table (an important compositional element of still life) so it coincided with the painting plane, thus creating an analogy between the table, a support for objects, and the painting, a support for representation. By laying these planes one upon the other — the illusional plane of the table and the real, two-dimensional plane of the painting — these artists marked a fundamental change, a rupture between the old model and the developing notion of the painting-object. One must be careful here, however, for this analogy between the plane of the table and that of the painting had already been suggested occasionally in "classical" still life by a particular object (a knife, for example) depicted so that it no longer participates in the perspective of the scene, but seems rather to float near the surface of the work, drawing the gaze beyond the painting and, thus, beyond representation.

I have often used as a starting-point the notion of the frame, which should be understood in its widest sense, that is, as an interval. For me, the exhibition space is the frame of my work. The wall is the support (the table) on which the objects (the paintings) are arranged. In a way, I deconstruct the traditional still life and give it a concrete, unlim-



- 1 Element for a still life
Camera, 1993
 - 2 Element for a still life
Tile painting, 1993
 - 3 View of the artist's studio
 - 4 Element for a still life
Circular painting (plaster), 1993
- Cover:
Element for a still life
Circular painting (wax), 1993 (detail)
- Photos: Mario Bêlisle

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iting space within which the spectator can circulate, something like the way the eye moves around a painting.

How does the installation on view make use of the exhibition space? To what extent did the exhibition space influence the form the work takes?

I have certain initial requirements regarding the exhibition space. The spaces I employ are fairly neutral (a relative neutrality, obviously), generally white, and free of obstacles. The relation between the work and the site is defined by an exchange between the space and the objects I place within it, which modify one another. As in some of my earlier works, the space of this piece is relational: it is defined gradually by the relations that are established between the various elements. The objects on the walls (mouldings that take on the form of paintings or objects that are easily recognizable in spite of their unusual treatment) simultaneously fragment the space and build it up into non-directional zones. The space is therefore both discontinuous (because of the presence of diverse shapes and materials) and marked by a certain unity (resulting from the descriptive nature of the treatment and the positioning of the objects on the walls).

The wall acts as a link between these two facets of the work; it is the wall that establishes the relational space I mentioned earlier. But overall it also defines a fictional space. It therefore has to be neutral and at the same time visible as a support. It must reveal itself by withdrawing, by dissembling...

For me, the autonomy of art resides in the preservation of an experimental space where art is free of all determinisms and at the same time retains its ties with the ordinary. To attain this goal, still life seems to me ideal, for it renders perceptible objects that are already familiar. By favouring description over narrative, still life lends itself to a critical approach that makes use of empirical experimentation rather than representation and that thus remains closely linked to our personal knowledge of the world. I was trained in this critical approach and it still inspires me today.



JOSEPH BRANCO

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Studied at the Université de Montréal in
1980-1981 and at the Université
du Québec à Montréal from 1982 to 1990.
Lives and works in Montréal.*

Solo Exhibitions

- 1992 Galerie Brenda Wallace, Montréal
1990 *La Force de l'habitude*, 372 Sainte-Catherine Street West, Espace 410, Montréal
1989 *Janvier*, 1592 Saint-Laurent Blvd., 3rd floor, Montréal
1986 Galerie Horace, Sherbrooke
1984 Galerie Motivation 5, Montréal
Galerie Jolliet, Montréal

Group Exhibitions

- 1992 *Instabilités du regard*, Galerie à la Cour des arts, Ottawa
1991 *Visions 91 - Les cent jours d'art contemporain de Montréal*,
Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal
1988 *Dessin*, Galerie Skol, Montréal
1987 *La sculpture fait surface*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1986 *Montréal-Genève*, Centre d'art visuel, Geneva, and Villa du jardin alpin, Meyrin, Switzerland
1985 *Peinture au Québec : une nouvelle génération*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

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1987 Payant, René. — «Une orientation audacieuse». — *Spirale*. — No. 69 (April 1987). — P. 4
1985 Daigneault, Gilles. — «Une célébration de la jeune peinture québécoise». — *Le Devoir*. — (May 18, 1985). — P. 25, 36
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