

# Rewind: Paul Bureau

by MARK LANCTÔT

Galerie Trois Points, Montreal

Paul Bureau called his show "Turbulences" and it offered viewers an occasion not only to get better acquainted with his work, but also to reflect upon the relevance of abstract painting today.

Contemporary Montreal abstract painters are faced with the daunting task of measuring themselves against the likes of the Automatistes and hard-edge painters such as Yves Gaucher, Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant. Such a challenge could make younger artists question their resolve. Add to that the overwhelming weight of more than a century of international abstract practice and artists, like it or not, bear a heavy burden.

The modernist canon led to hero-worship, which inevitably prompted a backlash from a mutinous crew consisting of a new wave of painters well versed in postmodern irony. They set up a hegemony of their own. Abstracts became critically distanced and self-conscious, although, oddly, the new aesthetic looked objectively a lot like the old. Therein lies the critical head-scratcher: how can one painting of vertical and horizontal lines be an essay of pure, near-esoteric pictorial expression, and another almost identical work be a critical assessment of the place such paintings occupy in our cultural history? The true interest in abstract painting today lies in between these extremes, as does Paul Bureau's.

Coming after a well-received appearance at Toronto's Sable-Castelli Gallery in 2003, Bureau's recent works featured an increasingly complex arrangement of pulpy vertical colour bands. Closer to Sean Scully than to, say, Peter Halley, Bureau's skill as a painter lies in his acute awareness of what traditionally constitutes a painting. His work strikes a balance between notions of process, surface and colour. The viewer cannot experience one without the other: the paintings are frontal, coloured arrangements of juxtaposed irregular vertical strokes. Additional layers of oil paint are added until the artist reaches the desired pitch and resonance.

The works' physical properties are emphasized to the point where paint accumulates along the side of each strip to form a gooey overflow. Appeal also lies in the use of colour. More so than in the artist's previous, almost monochrome series, the new colour combinations give these "Turbulences" a seductive complexity. Our eye sweeps across the surface, then bounces from coloured band to coloured band, deconstructing and reconstructing our visual experience, focusing on a particular detail of a painting and then zooming out to take in the whole picture plane. During this exercise, all other preoccupations become secondary.

British formalist painter Sean Scully once said: "Abstraction's the art of our age...it allows you to think without making oppressively specific references, so that the viewer is free to identify with the work." Confronted by a roomful of Bureau's paintings, we're tempted to say that they are about our experience of the work at the moment in which we experience it—here and now, there and then.

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