

ETC



An affinity for the sublime

Claude Tousignant, « Modulateur luso chromatique », Galerie Art Mur, Montréal. November 18 - December 21 2006

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Number 78, June–July–August 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35021ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, J. D. (2007). Review of [An affinity for the sublime / Claude Tousignant, « Modulateur luso chromatique », Galerie Art Mur, Montréal. November 18 - December 21 2006]. *ETC*, (78), 40–41.

Montréal

CLAUDE TOUSIGNANT, "MODULATEUR LUSO CHROMATIQUE"

Claude Tousignant, "Modulateur luso chromatique"
Galerie Art Mur, Montréal. November 18 - December 21st, 2006

While most art people think of Claude Tousignant primarily as a painter, the truth is that he has constructed a considerable – and deeply considered – body of sculptural work over long years. Most recently, he has left painting behind to focus on the sculptural object per se. He has built a group of commanding sculptures called "Modulateur du Lumière," which have been shown to acclaim at their present venue and at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery at Concordia University. One of these sculptures recently entered the permanent collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and is currently on exhibit there. Tousignant himself has always called his paintings "picto-sculptures," and so he himself is to blame, if blame need be ascribed. By "picto-sculpture" he means paintings that have full-object status and enjoy complete parity with other things in the world. But perhaps the old taxonomy no longer matters. He has nimbly straddled both painting and sculpture, sidestepped the dichotomy and successfully shown that the old divide betrays nothing else than archaic habits of thinking. Tousignant, the creative being, has always been phenomenally restless, his work never stays put, and his

researches in colour and form have been nothing less than exhaustive. Here is an artist of extraordinary integrity *and* tenacity. In any event, his operative intention has been clearly stated for at least 50 years. (He showed his object paintings at Galerie l'Actuelle in Montreal in 1956.) He famously stated (in 1959) for the exhibition *Art Abstrait* at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, "What I wish to do is to make painting objective, to bring it back to its source – where only painting remains, emptied of all extraneous matter – to the point at which painting is pure sensation."¹

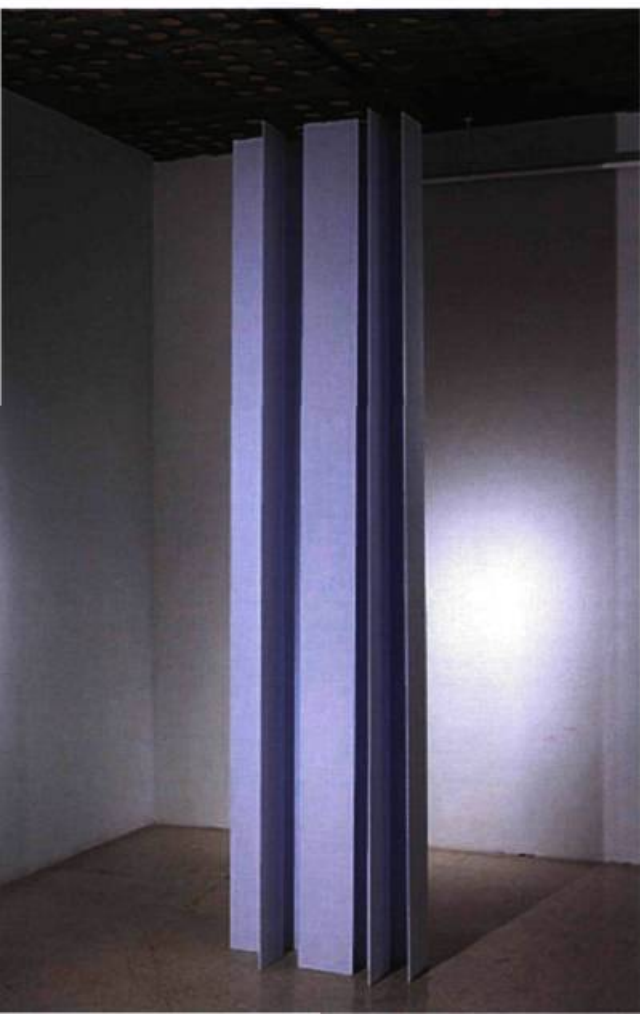
The aspiration is as true now as it was then, as his recent sculptural constructs amply prove. Indeed, from our vantage point in the spring of 2007, Tousignant is still both pioneer and prophet. He stands alone – and his avowed goal still holds true. His installation at Art Mur, entitled "Modulateur luso chromatique," is a group of eight sculptures, each acrylic on aluminum and measuring 112 inches high. They vary in width and, of course, colour. Tousignant is all about colour, and the tenor of his charged spaces is always fresh, chromatically speaking.

These sculptures are breathtakingly immaterial, pollen-soft colour terms. The pale blue of *Modulateur luso chromatique No. 5* almost dematerializes in front of the enraptured optic.

The installation invites the viewer to move freely within the limits of these meditative sculptures, and also encourages perception of the installation situation itself and the progressive immateriality of hue in real time. Returning to the issue of "picto-sculptures," one could argue that the sculptures are free-standing paintings folded out in real space; preserving their folds in the time of our own somatic appraisal; like musical passages, they slow the time of assimilation down and draw out the experience of viewing.

You can't get at the truth of these works without spending time walking in and around them. They insist on measured appraisal over time and they set out very subtle conditions for the appraisal. They encourage the taking of as many "best possible views" as possible to build up a sense of colour's immanence in terms of very carefully modulated and measured chromatic volume construction.

It might be useful to look backward at the work of another pioneer for a moment. Barnett Newman's first solo show in 1948 predated Tousignant's by only eight years. Newman was a fellow traveller, who expressed admiration for Tousignant's work when it was shown in New York in the 1960s. Soon after his first exhibition, Newman stated, manifesto-like: "We are in the process of making the world,



Claude Tousignant, "Modulateur luso chromatique # 1"

to a certain extent, in our own image.”² Presumably, Tousignant would have agreed with this sentiment and, in 1965, having experienced Newman’s sculpture *Here II* at close quarters, he recognized what Newman had achieved – and what he wanted for his own work. He has said:

“This work defines the relationships between certain objects and space, rather than presenting an object in space. It breaks completely with the notion of “monolithism” in sculpture. It shows us that an object exists through the space that contains it. It explodes the traditional, accepted standards. It is an assertion of the relationship between things in order to explain the nature of things. A definitive work that gave me a completely new notion of sculpture.”³

Newman reprised his famous zip paintings – such as *The Wild*, which literalized the Zip (being eight feet tall and all of one and a half inches wide) – in sculptures that amplify his painting concerns in real space. But Tousignant was never interested in reprising paintings as such. He has always gone several steps further. And one could never imagine Tousignant executing a work as referentially fraught as Newman’s *Broken Obelisk* (six thousand pounds of Cor-Ten steel, over 25 feet high), which was dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr., after his assassination (even though there is no clear historical reference). That sculpture was essentially a pyramid crowned with an inverted, fragmentary obelisk.

While not historically referential, the symbolic value of the sculpture still radically exceeds its phenomenological implications, and presumably this is something that Tousignant, who is extremely rigorous, would never abide in his own work. However, having said that, both Newman and Tousignant share a marked affinity for the sublime; for making work that could yield the sublime without overt or implied recourse to the figure.

As Steve Polcari has argued, “Newman has been able to realize the sublime, a constant concern of his work, in sculpture – without such traditional symbols of death as skulls and skeletons, and with very few indirect references to nature, an allusion basic to his painting.”⁴

For Tousignant, the sublime means testing the viewer in new perceptual situations wherein the finest gradations of colour and calibrations of form require meditative engagement and devotion on the viewer’s part in real time. In Newman’s sculpture, the sublime implied the heroism of the creative impulse perennially renewed in chroma as a spatial phenomenon, and in this respect, both artists come from a similar place, aesthetically speaking.

In 1968, Tousignant executed his *Homage à Barnett Newman*, a worthy tribute to the artist’s memory and one of Tousignant’s first “environmental” formulations. Space in this work is the articulating medium for a colour that transgresses it structurally, implicating the observer in a field of somatic traps, so that one could no longer distinguish the space of the sculpture from one’s own lived space.

Tousignant has said, “The most interesting factor in

Claude Tousignant, “Modulateur luso-chromatique # 3”.



sculpture, and that which is peculiar to it, is space. In all my attempts at sculpture, I have tried especially to stress this factor. In my 1967–68 sculpture *Homage à Barnett Newman*, I was attempting to create a sort of drawing in space, a drawing composed of chromatic vibrations. I believe that when one gets involved in this sculpture, one gets the impression of the immaterial nature of the object. The sculpture becomes almost pure space.”⁵

In the new sculptures exhibited at Galerie Art Mur, we find not only another stunning homage to Newman some 40 years later, which Newman surely would have loved, but without a doubt one of Claude Tousignant’s finest treatments of sculpture as pure space.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

NOTES

- ¹ Claude Tousignant, “Pour une peinture évidentielle,” in *Art Abstrait* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1959), p. 28-29.
- ² John P. O’Neill, *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews*, (ed.) by John P. O’Neill, (University of California Press, 1990), p. 240-241.
- ³ Quoted in Normand Thériault, *Claude Tousignant: Sculptures* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), p. 35.
- ⁴ See Stephen Polcari, “Barnett Newman’s ‘Broken Obelisk’” in *Art Journal*, Winter, 1994, online text.
- ⁵ Cited in James D. Campbell, *After Geometry: The Abstract Art of Claude Tousignant* (Toronto: ECW, 1995), p. 90.

James D. Campbell lives and works in Montreal, and is a writer and independent curator. He is the author of over one hundred books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art*. His most recent publication is *Channeling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure* for the Plattsburg State Museum.