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Jeanie Riddle, Galerie Thérèse Dion, Montreal. July 14 - August 25, 2007

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Montréal

JEANIE RIDDLE: *BLACK PAINTINGS*

Jeanie Riddle, Galerie Thérèse Dion,
Montreal, July 14 – August 25, 2007

he black paintings that Riddle exhibited were big, bold, ambitious, and, not least, astonishingly tasty. The latter was a surprise given their seeming severity on first viewing. Upon closer inspection, however, they revealed themselves in their generosity of self-presence and capacity for amplification far beyond the tidy constraints of the painting plane. Riddle paints with rare brio. Indeed, here is a painter whose painting licks, love of painting and familiarity with the history of Modernism are all beyond question. She's done her homework well, and brought new content and phenomena to the table with gusto.

We can clearly see that Riddle was less influenced in this work by the black paintings of all the usual suspects – Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman and, for that matter, our own Ron Martin – than by her own attempt to reinvent abstraction on her own terms, no holds barred and without issuing any disclaimers. Riddle refuses to be constrained in her art by narrow, hand-me-down theoretical concerns that may well seem to her – and her fellow travelers – to be hopelessly archaic in the present tense of painting.

Ad Reinhardt famously described one of his black paintings as being: “A free, unmanipulated, unmanipulable, useless, unmarketable, irreducible, unphotographable, unreproducible, inexplicable icon.” His painting, in which the gestured presence of the hand was suppressed, hovered at the very periphery of the visible. Riddle, in her own black paintings, soundly rejects Reinhardt's much-vaunted strategies of denial. While she, too, celebrates the vicissitudes of the reductive spirit in painting, her work is all about a philosophy of embrace, not exclusion. Her work springs from life, not theory. Her exhibition at Dion was a celebration of the voluptuous eye – and pure painting at its most supple, engaged and “impure”.

I mean ‘impure’ in the sense of subverting some basic tenets of the Reinhardtian project while preserving certain of its mini-

malist principles. To call her paintings “Black Paintings” may involve a little tongue-in-cheek on her part. She is being overly literal because she subverts the black uniformity of surface with resilient paintwork and tasty painting phrases in red and white that, when seized upon, provide Barthelme-like guilty pleasures in the seeing. She wants to alleviate the austerity of her paintings with small epiphanies that speak eloquently to the optic-like a flash of red on the hat of a passerby on a busy city street or the yellow streak of a school bus glimpsed from inside a café. Riddle said to me: “I work with ideas from the everyday in a dramatic and bold way. I think about poetry and my daughter and God. About having creative energies and moments of exalted sensation. I have a fixation about economy and exhausting potential in simple forms. This is the exercise.” This is positive energy, indeed, and an affirmation of the wholly human.

Ad Reinhardt was a genius at describing his project in negative, not positive, terms. He held that the history of Modernism was itself a “negative progression.” Riddle may share his reductive spirit, but nothing of his domino-like nihilism. Arguably, Reinhardt's work was alleviated in its austerity only by a certain Zen sensibility. If thoughts of the work of Shari Hatt and Eric Cameron come to mind more often than Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella when viewing Riddle's paintings, it is a tribute to her, the tense she inhabits and the place she works from.

Riddle's black paintings are based loosely on the Phonetic alphabet. They grow organically out of quotidian life. She has said: “They speak to the everyday visual information surrounding us like graffiti and advertisements as well as pollution, branded products, concrete, or the black of a fast car. They are a response to these observations and are translated through minimal static gestures on the last painted layer and the potential meanings between *painted thickness*. Using reduction as my process, I develop a relationship with these physical maps, and the paintings at their very best become territories of the subconscious and surface areas where one can delve.”

The paintings are also consummately *domestic* artifacts. Not for Riddle those Modernist castles in the air, the blueprints of which derive from theoretical tracts. She remains firmly on the earth and of the earth. So what looks at first glance like a bold, black square canvas with a family resemblance to Reinhardt in her show suddenly reveals itself as untidy plenum rather than vacuum, and a vibrant cartography of domestic life and all that it entails.

There is nothing anecdotal about this work or say rather that *everything* is anecdotal therein: the clear and sensuous presence of her paint applications, the thick membrane of paint that always rings authentic and true, the fact that Riddle will scar the outer epidermis of the palimpsest of layered painting tissue with a mark, a suture, an inflection, say, of deepest red, and so on. These black paintings are not merely *black* paintings – they do not escape into invisibility but become more literal, more real – and more resoundingly poetic the longer we spend with them. The composition of the painting often seems like original color laid down on sleek Naugahyde furniture. Riddle has radically cracked open the scale of these works. As you stare longer into the painting, the pigment as excrescence can be palpably felt as expressive presence. The swirling applications of paint come alive. Stored



labor is felt. Surfaces grow antennae. There is aqueous warmth. Deep waters, tidal pulls. We dive in.

Reinhardt wanted his paintings not to reflect or inflect their surroundings. Riddle wants the opposite. She understands the need for impurity – and adherence to new ideals. Reinhardt spoke of aiming for “a pure abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting – an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of nothing but art.” He is talking about things that seem hopelessly arcane in the context of new abstraction. Beyond geometry and the voluptuous stuff of her paint, Jeanie Riddle touches on domestic realities and the condition of being here, that is, of being a woman in the world and of the world who paints. Segregating painting and world is not something she espouses. Expunging all referents to things outside painting would, for her, make painting hermetic, self-referential, and unreachable. She wants to heal the breach between thing and world. She values communication, above all.

A critic once suggested that Reinhardt’s work could also be looked at in a spiritual context. Reinhardt would no doubt have disapproved. Reinhardt saw his painting as our own Claude Tousignant does, as adamant in object quality, as pure object. However, to the extent that he was drawn to the occult side of negativity and the meditative order of Zen Buddhism, well, Riddle shares the latter attraction. (Reinhardt became a student of Zen through his friendship with the poet Thomas Merton, who was an authority on the subject.) Reading her paintings can also be a very Zen experience.

Speaking of her working process, Riddle says: “I am interested in working with the substitution of architectural function and art materials shifting and recreating the space and materials, used in a way that negates how objects might normally be presented or found, or that act as layers of skins or protective wrapping. This sets up a playful and emotionally charged undertone to my formal intentions.”

The skin of the object is pre-eminent in her black paintings, the surfaces of which are like black leather drum skins drawn taut and resonant over the radii of full, rather than empty, spaces that suggest hidden depths.

Paradoxically, Riddle is able to secure a full measure of existential meaningfulness for her paintings without voiding them of information that is by no means “extraneous” but which relates to her own autobiographical consciousness, and the folklore of the painting moment in which she finds herself, on one level light years removed from the theoretical orthodoxies of critical late Modernism and on another only a Louisiana heartbeat away. She may share a few of its worthier values – but little of its stigma and

none of its stigmata. In so doing, she explodes the autonomous, self-referential capacity of the monochrome without sacrificing its hard-won integrity – and that is a rare achievement, indeed. On the basis of this show, Riddle has emerged powerfully into the foreground of that group of inventive, committed and restless abstractionists who have come up in the last few years—including Carmen Ruschiesky, Jennifer Lefort, Michel Daigneault and David Blatherwick – and who are breathing new life into abstract painting in this country.

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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.

