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The head is a paltry matter... Paul Béliveau, Thomas Corriveau, Tom Hopkins

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The head is a paltry matter...
Paul Béliveau, Thomas Corriveau, Tom Hopkins



Paul Béliveau, *Suite Jéricho IX : le baiser*, 1988. Dry pastel on paper, 112 x 152 cm. Photo : Claire Morel

Ideas are only the voids of the body.

Antonin Artaud

As Lautréamont noted in *Maldoror*, writers have a strange tendency to seek out and express resemblances and differences which are hidden in the most natural properties of objects (read : works of art); and these properties, often the least apt to lend themselves to sympathetically curious combinations, are exploited by the essayist to enhance style and to project the ridiculous and unforgettable aspect of an eternally serious owl. It is in consideration of the above 'accumulated' statements — a fragment of relatively obscure prose elevated to banner-heading, a somewhat pessimistic epigraph (equally (in)appropriate, perhaps less negatively re-cast, as coda), and a query of cause — that the recent œuvre of Paul Béliveau, Thomas Corriveau, and Tom Hopkins has been marked out for collective review.

The perception of art by the layman or by the everyday 'enthusiast' goes in a rather different direction from the perception of art by the professional critic or theoretician. Modernist art appreciation established a system for treatment of autonomous problems and esoteric questions which fell under the inner logic of a high culture domain — the exclusive domain of the expert. In many regards, the recent exhibitions of Béliveau, Corriveau, and Hopkins offer a fare antithetical to most modernist-elitist perspectives. All three artists propose a path for the revival of a more resolute involvement in art in which personal narrative will once more play a meaningful role. A demand for authentic self-expression and the subjectivism of a hyper-stimulated sensitivity dominates. A differentiated relinking of present day culture with an every praxis is sought. As well, a return to the romantic concept of the artist as an heroic protagonist of the myth of painting is evoked. The pure immanence of art is asserted, its utopian content is disputed, and an adherence to a communicative rationality restores the aesthetic experience to a broader public spectrum. In



Thomas Corriveau, *Poursuite N° 1*, 1987-1988. Oil on canvas, 244 x 152 cm. Photo : Don Cormier

these, and in other respects, the works of Béliveau, Corriveau, and Hopkins touch base with sometimes parallel, often overlapping, so-called, neo-conservative and neo-romantic trends.

With the *Jéricho Suite* (La Galerie Estampe Plus, Quebec, April 10 - May 5), Paul Béliveau conjoins a glance into the formless and boudless subconsciousness with an awareness of humankind's supersensible destination. A series of large-scale, predominantly black and white (interpret : day/night, waking/sleeping, true/false) acrylic paintings and dry pastel drawings initiate a discourse between subliminal and symbolic message. Solitary figures wander dark, ambiguous spaces dwarfed by apparently abandoned monumental buildings in compositions such as *La Grande Place*, *Le Discours* and *Le Sermon*; downtrodden processions file across bleak, and blackened plains in two renditions of *Le Guide*; mother and child are united in some waking nightmare in *Le Baiser*.

Neo-conservatism in general, and Béliveau's work in particular, proclaims a return to humanist tradition, and is characterized by an eclectic histori-

cism. The redemption of history, is however, ahistorical. Architectural history appears reified, fragmented, and fabricated. Béliveau's references to ruins (of Jéricho) form a popular front of pre- and anti-modernist elements incorporated to codify viewer response. The result is a history surrogate effectively soliciting a sense of nostalgia.

Béliveau's imposed scale relationship between edifice/space and human figures suggests the alienation of man in the face of modernism's institutionalized art and politics. The mother and child theme discloses a longing for a restitution of traditional (family/human) values and is seen as a logical extension of the artist's preceding *Fragment de nuit* series which probed the subconscious for our common childhood fantasies and phobia.

In an exhibition entitled *Courir* (Galerie Chantal Boulanger, Montreal, April 23 - May 21) Thomas Corriveau lent authentic expression to life experiences he encounters in his own centered subjectivity. The historical past and modernism's futurist vision are abolished in the instantaneous moment — the timeless present. Routinized cognition and everyday action are dramatically rendered on grandiose tableaux with surfaces oof scumbled/sfumatoed pigment. These surfaces might be likened to Keat's 'sensitive plate', taking the 'impression' of the mundane and the pedestrian (also thinking here of the artist's suburban backyard fantasy/escape into a fictive world of the 'airport paperback novel' with *Kidnappé*, an animated film presented at *Les Temps Chauds*, Musée d'art contemporain), and raising it to the dimension of the heroic through the emotional intervention of the artist.

Corriveau's larger-than-life runners, walkers, climbers... (or fragments thereof) are first and foremost phenomenal in the sense that one need not understand or even contemplate their design or other purpose in order to be effected by their grandeur and simplicity. Experience of the work flows from the innocence of direct perception.

The banality of Corriveau's subject matter serves to lead the 'initiated' spectator down another avenue of appreciation. The artist also plays upon the contradictions inherent in the polarization of the spatial and the temporal which has produced two separate categories of aesthetic experience — succession and simultaneity. In the diptych, *Poursuite no.1*, for example, the artist/spectator is positioned with worm's-eye-view on a stairway between a pair of ascending legs. One is conscious of the step (that frozen instant/action) but in order to fully grasp the sense of time and space one must look (successively) up and down the stairs or, by virtue of the paintings; installation, back and forth across the gallery. The two adjacent canvasses create both a static inter-spatial tension and, through the viewing sequence, an illusion of duration. The viewer is beckoned to imaginatively envision the



Tom Hopkins, *Hjertøy*, 1988. Oil on linen, 183 x 198 cm.

meld of instantaneousness and progression.

Daniel Bell, one of the most respected American authorities on neo-conservatism, argues that the crisis of culture in modern Western society can be traced directly back to the split between cultural activity and societal function — to the advent of ‘art for arts sake’ and the emergence of the autonomous ‘objet d’art’. Rather than challenge or rework the resulting de-humanizing and anti-social elements of entrenched cultural modernity, Tom Hopkins reacts by escaping, in ‘post-histoire’ manner, to an historical epoch just prior to the radical departure of modernism. With his most recent œuvre (presented in two back-to-back solo exhibitions — Grünwald and Watterson, Toronto, March 26 - April 13; and Galerie Kô-Zen, Montreal, May 7 - June 11) Hopkins whole-heartedly embraces the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of an idealized Romantic era. Keats’ “world of sensations rather than thoughts” becomes manifest in the poetic transformations of the artist’s imagination.

Hopkins readdresses a number of themes central to the repertoire of the nineteenth century Romantic, most notably among these, the ubiquity of the sublime and the pathological euphoria and perseverance of the human spirit in high adventure and adversity. In *Hjertøy* (referencing Kurt Schwitters’ Scandanavian island retreat) the waterspout of a hurricane bears down on a derelict boat — a cogent metahhor for the vulnerability of man-made order in face of nature’s

destructive potential. Elements of air, water and earth assume the protean character of a primal flux in paintings such as *Mist*, *Arena*, *Carriers* and *Mediterranée*. In the latter work especially, light appears most fiercely in its maximum concentration as fire, recreating Byron’s “whirling gulf of phantasy and flame” that very nearly obliterates reference to man.

Humankind persists nonetheless. A circus performer handstands on the highwire, taunting fate, in *Rehearsal 1850*; a man-Atlas achieves the super-human by supporting the weight of a giant sea-turtle in *Illusion : Domination*; and two women struggle to recover from some devastating ordeal in *Monuments and Figures*. In almost every case, the artist benefits from the spectator’s sensuous insufficiency in witness to testaments of the magnitude and might of nature, educing an awareness and awe of the noumenal.

In a pluralistic art milieu characterized by ‘les petites histoires’ and convoluted metaphilosophy, the heroizing and affective aspects of the œuvre of Béliveau, Corriveau, and Hopkins are most beguiling divertissements. “The head is a paltry matter... feed it crumbs, it goes on singing just the same.” (Pier Giorgio de Cicco, 1979)

Allan Pringle