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## Marcel Saint-Pierre, Boogie Woogie

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## Marcel Saint-Pierre, *Boogie Woogie*



Marcel Saint-Pierre, *New York Thruway '87 : #1 (Greyhound)*,  
1987. Acrylic film on canvas; 168 x 335 cm  
Photo : Daniel Roussel

Marcel Saint-Pierre, *Boogie Woogie*,  
galerie Trois Points, November 5 to December 1, 1988 —

“[an artist] may be said  
to have lived as many millennia  
as are embraced by the span  
of his knowledge of [art] history”  
Marsilio Ficini<sup>1</sup>

“**W**hat is in a name?” Juliet’s rhetorical question presupposed the assessment that a rose given any other name would not suffer the loss of its quintessential qualities. In posing the same question in relation to Marcel Saint-Pierre’s most recent series exhibited under the exhibition title *Boogie Woogie* one may be on the path to discovering not the least essential aspect of the œuvre. Commencing with an inquiry into the malleable meaning of title, it becomes apparent that ‘name’ may well be the major stake of the subject of the work.

The *Boogie Woogie* title gathers itself a host of inseparable associations, ascribed to the artist’s own memory on one level (Marie-Sylvie Hébert titled her catalogue essay *De la Mémoire en Boogie Woogie*), but also becoming part of the reader’s recall as they trace the labyrinthine pathways of hermetic significance. Perhaps sounding immoderately bookish, the title might be classified in terms of Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics as a *dicent indexical legisign*.<sup>2</sup>

*Boogie Woogie* is a *legisign* because its representational function is discharged through the public

medium of language. It summons a myriad of shared viewer responses, trains of sound, remembrances in all measures of degree — upbeat blues rhythms, raucous nightlife, implicit urban biases... Even the repetition of the signifiers (oogie-oogie) engenders an emotional tone as it trips off the tongue. Any impression of narrative or structural coherence is supplanted by the notion of chaotic improvisation.

Improvisatory aspects associated with title may also be read as *indexical*. They point to the manifestation of the work as an outcome of a set of environmental conditions. The paintings were inspired by several sojourns to New York City and by the fragmented shards of sensory experience gathered on those occasions. Compressed memory clips and verbi-visual flashes of the urban jungle are coalesced in pigment (specifically acrylic pellicules) on huge sheets of plastic, then transferred (in the manner of printmaking) onto prepared canvas supports. The plastic matrixes serve in an autobiographical dimension as memory-membranes imprinted with the artist’s impressions. The *matière* of the paintings in general, their consistent presentation as superimposed planes of colour and formal arrangement



Marcel Saint-Pierre,  
*New York Thruway '88 : Broadway at 42nd Street, 1988.*  
 Acrylic film on canvas; 152.5 x 335 cm. Photo : Daniel Roussel

as mark and void, can be likened to the complex overlaying of musical riffs and grid-patterns of the urbanscape, respectively.

The œuvre would also tend to test the limits of both the artist's and the viewer's art historical knowledge. The subtle, underlying lattice-pattern of the paintings and the employ of the title *Boogie Woogie* are presumably a reference to the late great works of Mondrian bearing the same name and also inspired by the hectic pace of New York life. Saint-Pierre's career-long affinity with 'les plasticiens' would tender to support such an association.

Hébert's catalogue essay cites analogies to Van Gogh's palette, Cezanne's spatial constructs, Degas' period fascination with the theatre, etc. Ancient Egyptian mural art, Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism and Futurism are some of the "styles" noted as precursors to Saint-Pierre's obvious Modernist preoccupation. Such casual or sweeping associations, although characteristic of many art historical approaches (Saint-Pierre is an established art historian and theoretician), might be interpreted as a means to theoretically substantiate an unresolved aesthetic — to lay an historical foundation for a largely exploratory practice (for Saint-Pierre exploration is after all evidently the "name of the game"). To quote Ficini again : "(...) what is mortal in itself achieves immortality through history; what is absent becomes present; old things are rejuvenated; and young men soon equal the maturity of old ones."<sup>3</sup>

Once the observer embarks upon a referential odyssey through art history there can be no end to interpretative play. Seurat also painted the borders of his canvasses; Klee revised the legacies of Cubism and

Expressionism and gave a privileged place to title; Kandinsky dealt primarily with sense impression experiencing objects and music in terms of colour; Twombly scrawled more or less decipherable graffiti in brilliant colour over white grounds. ... All of this is name-dropping. It is outside of the work, creating *ex post facto* associations which return us to Peirce's concept of *dicent*.

Finally, at the risk of wrenching Saint-Pierre's work from personal and art historical contexts, it might be worthwhile to consider the implications of colour as the artist's principal vehicle, one of psychological expression. Saint-Pierre's life's memories are malleable in coloured pigment. Carl Jung once proposed a diagram of memory comprised of an eight pointed star (Boogie Woogie music is played with a rhythmic ground bass of eighth notes) surrounded by containers of fluid colour.<sup>4</sup> The disquieting question posed by Jung, and in this instance by viewers of Marcel Saint-Pierre's work, is whether there is enough *aqua nostra* [water of life] to reach the central star.

Annie Paquette

#### NOTES

1. Marsilio Ficini, letter to Giacomo Bracciolini, *Marsilio Ficini Opera omnia*, Leyden, 1676
2. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Dover Books, New York, 1955, pp. 98-119
3. Ficini, *op. cit.*
4. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 192