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# John Lyman, Emily Coonan, Sylvia Safdie and Raymonde Godin Hedwidge Asselin

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John Lyman, *Portrait de Corinne*. Oil on canvas; 84 x 61.5 cm.  
Photo : Patrick Altman, Musée du Québec

## John Lyman, Emily Coonan, Sylvia Safdie and Raymonde Godin

The painter who works with pleasure is an amateur. The real painter works with anguish. Painting is a drug to him: he hates it but cannot leave it alone.

John Lyman

**L**yman at Musée du Québec and Montreal Musée d'art contemporain — "Mr Lyman dabbles mostly in greens of offensive hues. His colors are smeared on the canvas. His drawing would shame a school boy." This was the opinion of *Montreal Star* art critic, S. Morgan-Powell, when Lyman held his first solo exhibition in the galleries of the Art Association of Montreal in May 1913. Other art critics had similar reactions. Disillusioned, Lyman returned to France where he had spent his formative years, and passed the next fourteen years travelling. As the only son from a wealthy family, Lyman had the financial freedom to pursue his own interests. When he finally returned to Canada in 1931, he was prepared for a change in lifestyle. He became profoundly involved in the artistic community as a teacher, an art critic and an artist. These new activities led to the creation of the Eastern Group of Painters and the Contemporary Arts Society, in 1938 and 1939 respectively. Lyman was elected President of the C.A.S., a position he held until he resigned in 1945.

From 1936 to 1942, he wrote a column regularly for *The Montrealer* magazine. His articles remain some of the most articulate in Canadian art journalism and criticism.

This exhibition entitled *I live by my eyes* is a retrospective of Lyman's artworks. It was organised in 1986, by the Agnes Etherington Art Center, to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth. Forty-five canvases and drawings recount the different periods of Lyman's career from 1907 to 1962. Far from being offensive to our eyes today, these works seem to address us in a cool, calm, collective way. Figures and landscapes are his favourite subjects. There is no radical transformation in his art, but a constant preoccupation with the fullness of forms revealed by light and shadow; with the movement and energy of the shape suggested by line. Like his teacher Matisse, Lyman uses color contrasts to articulate space. This permits the viewer to rediscover and appreciate an important figure of modern painting. A most interesting and informative catalogue, written by Louise Dompierre, accompanies the travelling exhibition.

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*Emily Coonan: 1885-1971* — As in Lyman's work, discretion and emotional restraint limit Coonan's art but give it a visual unity. The Concordia Art Gallery presents the first retrospective of this Montreal Painter, an exhibition researched and curated by Karen Antaki.

Coonan appears to have been an interesting figure from the early part of the twentieth century. Born in Pointe St. Charles, in 1885, she enrolled in the art classes offered at the Conseil des Arts et Manufactures sometime around 1898. Being a devout Irish Catholic, Coonan's subject matter was inspired by her immediate context as evidenced by the "First Communicants." From the beginning she showed an aesthetic preoccupation for treating subject as a "motif." In 1905, she became one of Brymner's students at the School of the Art Association of Montreal. Understanding her serious ambition to become a professional artist, Brymner became an enduring supporter. Her stay at the school was marked by participation in various art shows, the regular winning of awards and the purchase of some of her student works. She eventually became one of the first women artists to exhibit with the Group of Seven.

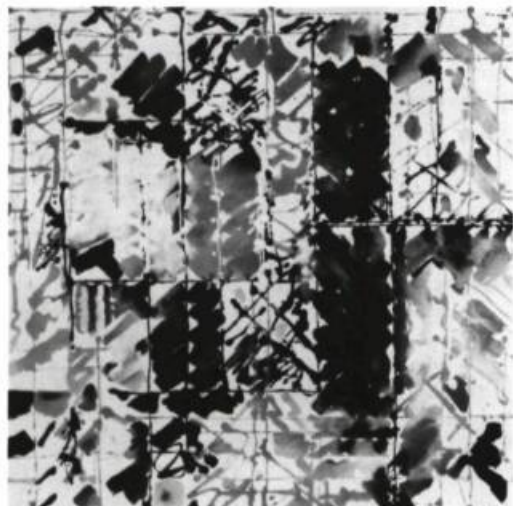
Coonan shares with Lyman a psychological detachment from subject, a sympathy for Post-Impressionism, and a way of treating landscape more in tune with a Quebec tradition baring traces of culture and history. She retreated from the art scene at the time Lyman returned to Montreal. The reasons are still speculated upon. She continued painting however, with the same determination. Hopefully we will discover more about this artist, one of the first exponents of Canadian modernism.



Safdie in Studio, 1987. Photo : Don Charney



Sylvia Safdie, *Goreme No. 9*, 1987. Mixed media on paper.  
Photo : Richard-Max Tremblay



Raymonde Godin, *Repères - Territoires*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas;  
120 x 120 cm

Sylvia Safdie at the Saidye Bronfman Center and at Galerie J. Yahouda Meir — A more "primitive" content is found in Sylvia Safdie's work as if it sprang from a collective unconscious. This artist favors unstretched canvas worked on the floor. "The process of the work," says Safdie in her notes, "involves layering, scratching, gouging, covering and exposing; I draw in, I draw upon, and I draw out the surface. I put down a mark, then another mark, and before I know it I set up a whole conversation - a relationship between past and present, between what is intended and what is spontaneous. I work on the floor using my hands to manipulate the materials, enabling me to be part of and "in" the work."

The *Masks*, presented at Yahouda Meir, are reminiscent of imagery in Lascaux cave paintings. Black or pale blue silhouettes of huge female figures amidst phallic forms cover the diversified surfaces of the canvas in *Tree Woman No. 3* and *Kora*. In other pieces, skulls appear imbedded in chests. Though dealing with death, these images contain a rich vocabulary of forms with varied, intensive colors that exclude morbidity. The dancing figure, floating in space with zoomorphic objects represent a hymn to life.

"Notes from my Journal" contain Safdie's thoughts on her œuvre. It is fascinating to see the artist's reflections on works to come. In these, there appears a fruit-like erectile form which culminates in the *Eidola* series presented at the Saidye Bronfman Centre. The evocative biomorphic form, open to interpretation, suggests a potential of life. In the *Goreme* series, a mushroom-like shape evokes human forms in conversation or in procession. The large canvases create strange and familiar images, both erotic and sensuous, that draw and arrest the eye.

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Raymonde Godin at Galerie Palardy — Raymonde Godin's art is more abstract, though profoundly rooted in nature. A Quebec painter living in France, she exhibited her recent canvases and drawings at Galerie Palardy during the month of October. Void, rhythm, and repetition are anchor points of her work. She paints standing over canvas laid on the floor utilizing acrylic paint for its fluidity. Forms appear on white grounds - as in nature, forms similar yet never the same. Days, seasons, and colors of passing time are weighed by the artist's emotion. The canvas is the scene of creation. Images echo the dream of the painter. The white space gives an impression of floating. Are we moving toward the landscape or is it moving toward us? Music to the eye, we follow the signs which create new seasons, new sceneries.

**Hedwidge Asselin**