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The Thinking Eye, Yves Bouliane

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The Thinking Eye Yves Bouliane



Yves Bouliane, *Autoportrait*, 1988.
Oil on canvas; 13 1/2 x 9 1/2 in

The vicissitudes of pure painterliness are clearly demonstrated in Yves Bouliane's latest works at Galerie Marcel Pelletier. Despite several convincing solo shows — at Galerie Gilles Gheerbrant and elsewhere — Bouliane has remained one of Montreal's best-kept artistic secrets over the last few years. Now, with two successive shows at this new space, the secret is out.

The first of these two shows, from September 7 through October 8, included a number of abstract paintings and works on paper.

Irradiated with the carnal light of the life-world, these works resemble chunks of flesh just as much as they do shards of the spectrum. While they shy away from the metaphysical in their unabashed celebration of sense-experience, they are nevertheless — and paradoxically — as far from empiricism as one can get. Why paradoxically? Because while the empiricist recognizes all "surface" colors, there is in reality no clear demarcation of color and light. Some colors are transparent, others opaque; some intensely shine forth,

others recede. Bouliane's dense, tactile, highly-stratified surfaces embody seemingly endless permutations of color and light: the peculiar voluminosity of the world.

A few years ago, Bouliane exhibited a series of works called *Concentrations* at Galerie Gilles Gheerbrant in Montreal. In those works, heavily clotted, roughly circular extrusions of pure paint, become relief features on the surface, coagulating at eye-level in narrow, vertical compositions. These "concentrations" forced the alert viewer to adopt a face-on stance towards the work, which achieves a primal sort of life as we perceive it. That work — like the current paintings — affirm that our perception of it is not a passive, receptive process but a dynamic and interrogatory one. And one not lacking in a certain tension.

But now, Bouliane has pushed his plastic vocabulary even further by breaking open those concentrations like egg-shells and letting the yolk of pigment bleed across the surface of a given painting in a surfeit of painterly manoeuvrings that is the closest to the purely gestural that Bouliane has allowed himself.



Yves Bouliane, *Pont*, 1988. Oil on canvas; 37 3/4 x 20 1/4 in

Bouliane has preserved the narrow vertical scale in these works so that they involve the setting-up or formulating of a relation on the viewer's part that is at once visual and somatic. We instinctively respond to it with the whole weight of the lived-body, so intimate is the work's scale, as it directs our gaze within the voluptuous parameters of the field. Just as the concentrations of earlier paintings reminded us of the ghostly images and garish fictions we perceive when we squeeze our eyes shut, the diffusions of these paintings are like spectral surfaces and perceptual paradoxes.

The paintings are also laden with semantic and numeric data that serve to lure us within their remarkable surfaces. The word PONT (Bridge) appears in most of them, as do numeric sequences like 156 and alphabetic sequences like A...B. This information, discrete and thematic (but never formulaic), invests them with a cryptic subtext that becomes a lure for the eye and the intellect.

Bouliane's *Concentrations* grew out of his earlier *Masse* works, which were characterized by black, all-over "wash" surfaces in which the paint was allowed to drip on the surface but built up no sedimentation, only a shallow space haunted by the briefest and most fugitive memory of color. I likened them at the time to "ghosts instantiated on chalk". He turned to the *Concentrations* as a way of bringing out

everything latent in those surfaces, and an inner light began to suffuse their dark hues and multiple penumbral strata. But the concentrations themselves became a way of integrating a thematic optic in the surface.

In his current work, Bouliane has allowed himself considerably more latitude, and the concentrations have cracked open, becoming diffusions of color that flow in virtual rivulets down the eavesdropping of the vertical plane without constraint. The anamorphic modalities that were only implied in his earlier work are now manifest.

From October 12 through November 19, Bouliane exhibited a series of his new Autoportraits. The archaic fleshliness of these self-portraits sink — masked — into their fields with all the weight of silence. Subversively figural — the consummate painterliness as evident here as in the abstractions — they shimmer with a primitive memorableness and intensity.

In one self-portrait, the lower half of a face is cloaked with a square box — in effect, a mirror — with an inverted face inside it. Its inverted reflection? The imprimatur of a projection-making activity? The unformed face, features perhaps writhing in anguish, pinioned in its box like a curious trophy or medical specimen, becomes a symbol of the self at the mid-way point in some harrowing passage from inchoate matter to the certainty of form.

In another, an explicit primitiveness in the face echoes a 19th-Century Congolese mask. But it is a mask seen through the eyes of a Soutine. A mask that is all flayed flesh with skull-white glinting beneath.

These metamorphic self-portraits, with their iconic visages seemingly struggling to emerge from a matrix of raw, unformed matter — that finds its perfect metaphor in pure paint — that is the painting's organic space, tremble on the precipice between differentiation and fusion. They must also count as some of the strongest paintings Bouliane has executed to this date.

Any real experience of Bouliane's work — abstract or figurative — is ineluctably interwoven not only with the adumbrations of a somatic relation with the work, but with significant insights into the structure and methodology of visual perception itself and, as well, the psychological. The emphasis is on a primordial encounter with and subsequent interpretation of the intersensory world.

Bouliane's truly anamorphic vision — which has its root-strangeness in the very perceptual discontinuity that is endemic to the faculty of sight — becomes a paradigm for lived-through perceptual experience itself in the life-world. The why and how of seeing is treated in these works with all the startled wonder of the child — and the painter's painter.

James D. Campbell