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Perspectives on space-making

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PERSPECTIVES ON SPACE-MAKING

Exploring Rome : Piranesi and His Contemporaries, Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), Montreal. August 17 1993 - January 4, 1994. Michel Daigneault, *Abstraire l'Abstrait*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montreal. August 21- September 12, 1993



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Fantastic Monuments*, 1747-1750. Pen, brown ink, brown wash over graphite underdrawing on cream laid paper; 19,8 x 27,7 cm.
Collection : Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

Representing space in two dimensions is one of the fundamental challenges of the visual arts and while the scope of contemporary art is rapidly expanding, reflecting on such a basic issue can help give greater meaning to the current artistic debate.

Two recent exhibitions in Montreal dealing with subject matter from different disciplines and separated widely in historical time were nonetheless remarkable for their similarity of approach to the problem of pictorial space-making. At the Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montreal painter Michel Daigneault showed sixteen new abstract paintings and at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the exhibition *Exploring Rome : Piranesi and His Contemporaries* presented an impressive collection of drawings, etchings and watercolours by eighteenth century artists and architects.

The idea that a display of contemporary art might have a lot in common with an exhibition drawn from a period of art history raises some interesting questions about the terms avant-garde and contemporary. Montreal critic Ricardo Castro underlined his appreciation of this idea by opening a review of the Piranesi exhibit with a citation by Benedetto Croce: All history is contemporary history¹.

Ironically, it is arguable that the Daigneault exhibit was the less avant-garde of the two shows: while formalist abstraction remains marginal, it has nonetheless developed a distinguished history over nearly a hundred years. Those choosing abstraction today must assume a position relative to these traditions and, in this sense, Daigneault's work can be read as an attempt to revitalize an established artistic territory left somewhat neglected by the recent preoccupations of contemporary art. By contrast, much of the work of the eighteenth century artists represented in the Piranesi exhibit, including among others Hubert Robert, Richard Wilson, Fragonard and Robert Adam, was genuinely innovative. The eighteenth century was an era of profound social change in the Western World: a series of dramatic events that radically transformed art, economics, politics, and science took place within a condensed period.

The CCA exhibit, organized with the cooperation of New York's Pierpont Morgan Library and private collectors, was an ambitious undertaking that allowed for complex readings on many levels. Using Rome and Venetian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) as points of reference, the display celebrated the exchange of ideas and influences between different artistic disciplines during the



Michel Daigneault, *Abstraire l'Abstrait*, 1993. Acrylique sur toile. À gauche

eighteenth century. The main galleries of the museum were set up as a series of visual sequences that can generally be described in three groups. The first group concentrated on the work of Piranesi's teachers and predecessors; the second included a large body of Piranesi's etchings, drawings and watercolours; and a third grouping formed a survey of contributions by artists and architects directly influenced by the genius of the Venetian architect.

Rather than built commissions, Piranesi favoured the vehicle of expression was the perspective view. His contributions to this medium remain among the most important in modern art history, and in this sense he is as significant a point of reference for formal abstraction as the Cubist painters, Wassily Kandinsky, or Barnett Newman. An invention of the Renaissance, perspective is a method of representing space in two dimensions derived from optical principles and thus depends largely on visual criteria to interpret three-dimensional reality - often at the expense of spatial or tactile considerations. Such a visual bias was typical of the early applications of perspective from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, which favoured the communication of static object-oriented information. In the humanist tradition of man at the center, a single view point was located in the middle of the image to focus symmetrically on a fixed subject. These subjects were typically at some distance from the picture

plane and the net result was a feeling of scientific detachment.

By engaging objects in a more dynamic relationship with the picture plane and using multiple view points to suggest the experience of movement, Piranesi introduced spatial complexity and the dimension of time to his images - and thus created a more comprehensive rendering of the experience of real space. This is what marks his work as distinctly modern and ties it directly to many of the explorations of the twentieth century.

In the portion of the exhibit dealing with teachers and predecessors, the invention by the Bibiena family of *Scena per Angolo*, a method of rendering stage designs by the use of multiple view points, is clearly established as an important influence on the future work of Piranesi. The loose, atmospheric sketches of father and son Ferdinando Galli Bibiena and Guiseppe Galli Bibiena create an illusion of dramatic spatial movement by focusing obliquely on cavernous interiors. Whereas the inventors of *Scena per Angolo* employed it as a presentation technique for an allied art, Piranesi used the method as an end in itself, thus lending it true artistic purpose. The *Carceri* plates, a series of etchings of imaginary prison interiors, are probably the greatest achievement of this aspect of Piranesi's oeuvre. Unfortunately absent from the CCA exhibit, the *Carceri* were nonetheless well represented by Jean-Louis Desprez's pen

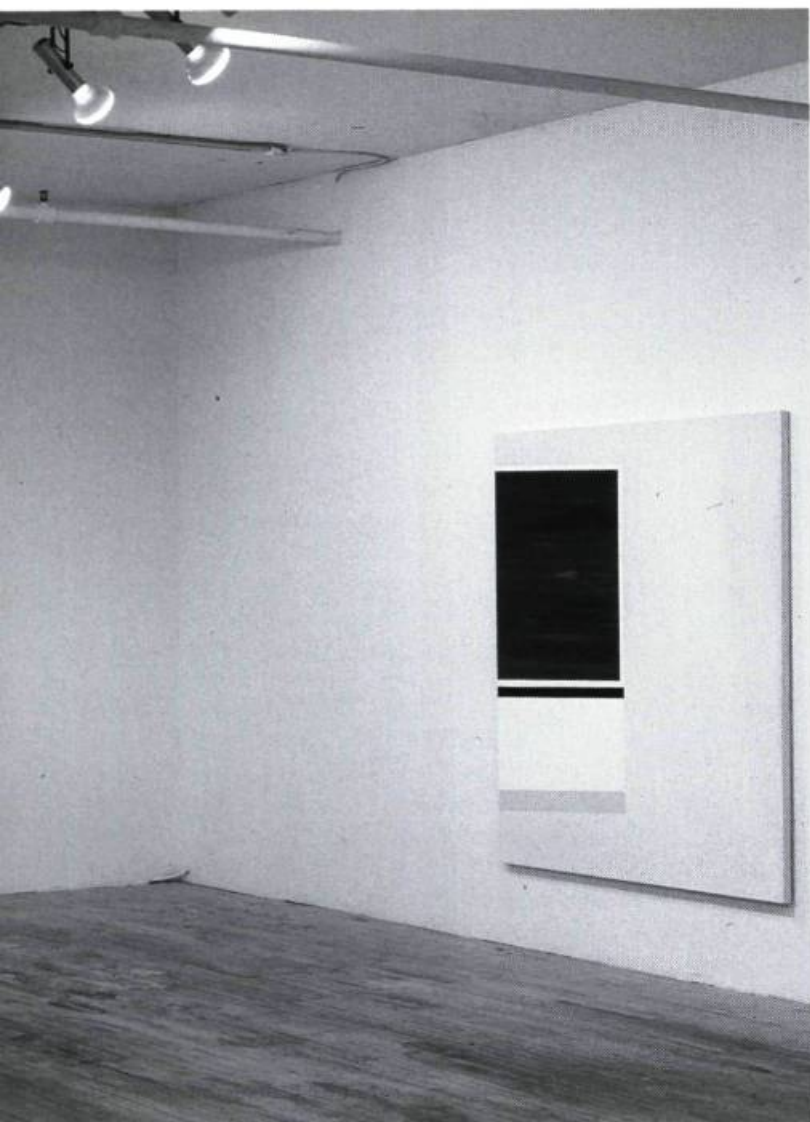


PHOTO : GUY L'HEUREUX

Collection du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Gracieuseté : Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal.

and ink sketch *Fantastic Interior with Torture Scene*, inspired by plate II of the series. Through the use of multiple view points, space is rendered as an active, complex presence, at times ambiguous, at times clear. Even the monumental Roman architecture of masonry vaults and arches, often exaggerated and wildly out of scale, is overwhelmed by this new conception of space.

While Piranesi's treatment of interior space offered the eighteenth century a first glimpse of modernity, many of his more apparently conventional views of Rome (known as the *Vedute*) offer equally significant contributions to pictorial space-making. The carefully researched descriptive texts prepared by curators Sara Denison, Myra Nan Rosenfeld and Stephanie Wiles were particularly helpful in drawing attention to the subtleties of pictorial manipulation in these images. Accompanying the etching *The Façade of the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano* were descriptions of the positioning of the church façade close to but on an angle with the picture plane and the framing of this central part of the image with radically foreshortened neighbouring buildings. This apparently simple but carefully calculated placement of objects engages the eye directly in the image and creates a palpable spatial atmosphere.

By exploiting the planar characteristics of objects for pictorial purposes, Piranesi took the first steps towards Cubism and, by extension, formalist abstraction. In twentieth

century formalist painting the picture plane advances to its limit, finally merging with the image and the painted surface to form one coherent whole. While the initiation of these developments remains Piranesi's primary contribution to modern art, his painterly attitude also deserves some mention, since it added another important dimension to his work. In the portion of the exhibit entitled *Rome Transformed: A Painterly Vision of Architecture*, the curators guide us through works showing how Piranesi revolutionized etching by adopting the painterly approach of Venetian art to activate the surface of his pictures. Following as it did a propensity for stiff, linear treatments, this innovation in etching has found profound echoes in twentieth century abstractions' pursuit of pictorial flatness.

The major focus of Michel Daigneault's exhibit, entitled *Abstraire l'Abstrait*, was the pictorial space created by the play of planes advancing, sliding and angling before the picture plane. The clarity of this theme, presented with a didactic precision not common to contemporary art, should be particularly commended. The sixteen pictures were installed in pairs or groupings that unfolded as a series of inquiries on the pictorial results engendered by a series of basic variations on a theme. While the individual works had undeniable merit in their own right, the show had to be seen in its entirety to be understood, and for this reason was very much an installation comprising sixteen

paintings. The artist proposed a formal rectangular image in a type of open window format as his basic theme and his two variables were the positioning of this window at various angles to the picture plane and the variation of surface textures of the paint.

If Piranesi's work freed pictorial space by bringing objects into a closer dialogue with the picture plane, Daigneault's exhibit took this idea one step further by sliding oblique planes from one painting to another around the gallery. Two typical pairings in the show were *Regarder* and *Atelier n° 1*, installed near the entry, and *Portrait d'une Conversation* and *Converser* which occupied an adjacent corner. In the first pairing, an acrylic painting of a sun-baked yellow rectangle was coupled with a mixed-media work depicting an open window covered with a sheet of translucent paper. The two images complemented each other convincingly: the diffuse light captured by photography in *Atelier n° 1* confirmed the real existence of the painterly illusion created by the faded yellow forms of *Regarder*. In the second pairing, the translucent yellow rectangle of the first two pictures is brought forward to the picture plane and then tilted at a slight angle to offer a clear comparison between a flat modern view and an oblique perspective of the same subject. These simple variations underlined the sensitivity of space-making devices to even the most modest transformations and made a strong case for the legitimacy of formal abstraction as a technique of visual research.

The decision to exhibit mixed-media work incorporating photography alongside acrylic on canvas paintings worked very much to the exhibitions credit, providing both an insight into the artists process and greater depth to the overall formal concerns of the show. While tipping his hat to the role the camera has played in our perception of the ambiguity of surfaces and the flatness of images, Daigneault also used photography to further expand the field he had developed for his mobile planar constructions. In *Atelier nos. 2,3, 4 and 5*, we see photographs of paintings with flat subjects (some of which are exhibited in original form in the show) taken at oblique angles in the studio. By placing the camera in this way in front of his paintings, Daigneault makes an interesting comment on the relationship between the eye and the subject. As in Piranesi's first experiments with multiple view points, we are reminded that an original image can never exist independently of a moving eye or camera.

By clearly structuring the installation of his works, Daigneault rendered accessible the traditionally aloof practice of abstract painting. Combined with his awareness of art history, this accessibility lent the pictures an uncommon freshness and originality. While fundamentally cerebral, Daigneault's paintings nonetheless make a case for an

open-ended rationalism that appears to fulfill many of the neglected promises of the eighteenth century thinkers who first developed the scientific method. If certain experiments in formal abstraction in the 1960s and 70s ended in aesthetic impasses brought on by the very constraints intended to inform the work, Daigneault shows how an aversion to dogma and an open-minded attitude can breathe new life into an artistic territory that had apparently been exhausted.

Appearing concurrently in Montreal, the Piranesi and Daigneault exhibits offered a unique opportunity to reflect on the perennial challenges of pictorial space-making. While the two displays clearly identified perspective and modern planar construction as basic space-making devices, they also bridged the gap between the two by showing how profoundly the history and expression of these techniques are intertwined. Considering the two shows together one also remarks on a certain short-sightedness prevailing in much of today's debate as to what constitutes contemporary art. With the disintegration of the idea of the avant-garde, the apologists of post-modernism would be well advised to question some of their conceptions of linear historical time. By expanding his vision of history and foreign cultures, Picasso showed that primitive African sculpture is a form of Modern Art. It is by applying the same understanding that the perspectives of Piranesi survive today as contemporary artistic expressions. If our current conception of contemporaneity is somewhat limiting so too is the insistence of particular cultures on the ultimate authenticity of a given method of spatial representation. Such a phenomenon can only lead to the conclusion that reality is defined in cultural terms. When one considers that traditional Oriental art uses neither planar construction nor perspective to create space but instead defines proximity or depth through vertical location, the limits of Western space-making devices become all the more evident. Ultimately, what these different approaches have in common is illusionism, leaving pictorial expression forever in pursuit of its elusive missing dimension.

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NOTE

¹ Benedetto Croce is cited in Castro, "Ricardo, Back to the Future : CCA takes stirring trip to 18th century", *The Montreal Gazette*, Saturday, August 21, 1993, p.12.