

## **THE PASSIONATE GAZE**

*Understanding the difference*

Painting, engraving and drawing

Ten artists of Latin-American origin living in Montreal

Exhibition curator: André Seleanu

Texts by André Seleanu

## **BEING PART OF A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE**

This exhibition gives viewers an opportunity to appreciate the diversity and the richness of artistic expression among those Latin-American creators in visual arts who have chosen to live and to work here. The Montreal public now has a chance to discover a complex vision ripened in the sunshine – indeed, in the bracing light – of Latin-American traditions. The interest of this event lies precisely in its diverse nature: what participants have in common is their Hispano-American origin and residence in Canada going back for at least two years. Variety of experience thus gives individual creators considerable leeway in the display of artistic personality and in visual experimenting. While the exhibition illustrates manifold approaches, it makes no claims to any encyclopedic or exhaustive purview of Latin American art tendencies.

Montreal is in many ways a cradle or an historic city at the heart of *québécois* and Canadian art. The names of so many Quebec and Canadian artists have been associated with our metropolis: while risking to overlook some important names, one may cite Paul-Émile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle as *Refus global* (1) members; one may further mention the incomparable post-modern painter Edmund Alleyn, as belonging to an impressive roster of francophone artists who have marked the artistic destiny of Montreal. Anglophone artists who produced all or part of their work in Montreal include Arthur Lismer, a member of the *Group of Seven* (2), the landscape painter Goodridge Roberts; Marian Scott, a pioneer of modernity, the neo-expressionist Betty Goodwin, as well as many others ...

In such a rich and stimulating environment, immigrants have clearly contributed to the creative effervescence of the metropolis. It is essential to constantly reaffirm the importance of these artists, as the media headlines often miss their work, their public presence. And yet, the immigrant presence in the Montreal art world of today continues to be vital. In particular, the importance of Latin-American artists - inheritors of an extraordinary historical tradition – their artistic example and ability to inspire others as exponents of

a relatively cohesive esthetic, surpasses in our view the demographic share of the Montreal Latin-American community - with its Hispanic and Portuguese-language constituent groups. The Latin-American community in Montreal, numbers at present sixty-five thousand individuals while growing steadily.

## MÉTISSAGE OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS AND ITS STRENGTHS

In a world of continuous economic and cultural exchanges, the métissage - not merely of peoples - but that of cultural expressions as well, turns out to be a theme of very great interest. Mirroring in a way the ethnic and demographic make-up of Latin America, the art of this large geographic area most often reflects a métissage of cultures. Métissage may be at the root of the creative tension of this art and of the abiding interest it may elicit. Latin American art may also be regarded as primary, or archetypal, in reference to contemporary phenomena of métissage in the visual arts realm of today. In the internal dialogic of the presented works, featuring diverse sources of inspiration, we also discover the possibility of experiencing considerable esthetic pleasure.

Influenced by métissage - of Hispanic and Amerindian cultures - and indebted to numerous other European influences, Latin-American poetics are brimming with vital force and *joie de vivre* ; and they reveal a very specific energy, even when such poetics arise in the midst of the most tragic circumstances. Some ideas might be associated with Latin-American artistic expression; to wit, a certain presence of the miraculous, direct or sublimated influence of religious faith, and moreover of faith in life itself: a profound musicality linked to the respiration of colour. The taste for the material quality, as well as for the spiritual option - principles closely interwoven in the constitution of the work of art - characterizes Latin-American pictorial expression.

Latin-America possesses an old educational tradition in the arts whose origins go back to the seventeenth century. As early as the Baroque period, painters were already being trained in the tradition of the Spanish school of painting. This complex tradition continues to this day; while taking part in numerous biennales and international fairs, Latin-American artists are also following currents of the contemporary art world. Nevertheless, their work continues to reflect the inherent sensuality and the tragic content of events dividing their countries and their continent.

As a factor determining atmosphere or ethos, native influences are without doubt present in Latin-American art. In 1923, Adolfo Best Maugard, a Mexican painter and theoretician, formulated the hypothesis that certain formal elements in Latin –American art might reflect an indigenous influence: in particular the spiral, in its simple and double shape, circles and spheres deployed concentrically; combinations of semi-circular motifs forming a series of arches and the sinuous or zigzag-shaped line. These ideas may help us *to see* Latin-American art - if we also accept the Jungian concept of a collective subconscious, or of a common artistic subconsciousness.

## FORGING A NEW IDENTITY

In the act of immigration, it is incumbent on the artist to create for himself or herself a new identity on multiple levels. There is a corresponding fluctuation of the artistic gaze. A new identity is about to be born: an original identity influenced at once by Montreal, Quebec and Canada – and simultaneously by Latin America and the affective and cultural springs that may have nourished the artist... In their new city, creators will experience alternatively a sense of discovery, of novelty, or that of indifference of the native-born to their presence; they will feel

rejection and love... Their art will emerge so much the richer. Made sharper by emigration, their gaze will etch out new images: novel impressions will be added to the memory – strengthened and more subtle at once – of the original ambiance and of the light of one's country of birth.

I would rather not generalize on the topic of the artistic tendencies represented in the event entitled *The Passionate Gaze*. Since Latin-American artists do love life and an intense eroticism of the artistic gaze subtly permeates their images, one may note that the *joyous* attitude prevails over the tragic aspect of life, which yet remains subtly present. Conceptual expression also informs contemporary Latin-American art and some of the work presented here. This exhibition does not illustrate any theoretical point. We only want to emphasize the high professional level of the artists' work. In this context, the time is ripe for immigrant artists - and for Latin-American artists in particular - to be fully recognized as members of the Quebec and Montreal art world.

#### Footnotes

- (1) A manifesto signed in Montreal in 1948, constituting an important milestone in the development of modern art in

Quebec as well as in the intellectual evolution of this province.

- (2) A group of landscape artists who radically transformed and modernized Canadian painting

### Artists taking part in the exhibition

#### **1. David Alvarado (Costa Rica)**

A certain surrealist quality suffuses David Alvarado's art, whose trademark style seems to be the sinuous line matched by sensuous colours. His expression includes a memorable use of arabesques. Autobiographical aspects are included in images of cartographic character and a lightness of touch reveals a concern for the visual pleasure of the viewer. The totality of the work exudes a form of mysticism, perhaps an *esoteric* vision – and maybe an interest in theosophy.

#### **2. Juan Aquino (Peru)**

Aquino, who has lived in Montreal for more than twenty years, expresses in turn the essence of Andean landscape, and the sensuousness of the nude. His painting reveals cubist and impressionist influences. As a landscapist, he attempts to trace the miraculous aspect of geological creation, under the intense

hues of tropical skies. The treatment of the oil paint reveals the ludic aspect of the act of painting. Without doubt, Aquino may be associated with the tradition represented by the mystical Mexican landscape artist Dr. Atl, active in the first part of the twentieth century. As a portrait painter, Aquino tends to express the immanence of personality.

### **3. Claudia Bernal (Colombia)**

Claudia Bernal's engraved work belongs to a tragic sensibility, less commonly displayed in this exhibition. The series entitled *Chimera* expresses a corrosive critique of oppression and a pessimistic vision of life and religion. This grotesque and mystical bent may be ascribed to the ethos of a Christianity of tragic and rebellious nature, abundantly referenced within the tradition of Hispanic imagery, including in Goya's work. The series is a testimonial to a continent victimized in turn by foreign interventions, various forms of oppression and frequent internecine struggles. The engraved work expresses a powerful feeling for the Andean mountain range the *cordillera*, and the extensive alpine plateau of Bogotá (*sabana*). Claudia's large paintings, which express the telluric dynamism of the Andean environment, place her in a chromatic tradition embracing the

Ecuadorian painters Eduardo Kingman and Osvaldo Guayasamin.

#### **4. Angela Calle (Colombia)**

The artist creates oniric spaces where very carnal angels are frolicking as diaphanous creatures defying the force of gravity. In these floating and decorative visions, there is something that reminds us of the erotic formulation of the Art Nouveau of a Gustav Klimt or an Egon Schiele : these are images that may in fact be read on various levels. Calle shows mastery of both profane and religious allegory. She knows how to conjure very imaginative colour accords, such as a fine and rare harmonization of ultramarine blue and orange and copper tones. As if projected on cathedral domes, her gravity-defying beings seem to glide along curving trajectories.

#### **5. Alicia Hernandez de Coll (Venezuela)**

*Emancipation* is a work which develops a subtle feminist discourse while demonstrating an ingenious organization of the painterly field. Geometrism with cubist echoes is saturated by an intense tropical light suffusing powerful colours that include green and yellow. The geometric discourse is articulated on the triangle and also follows the zigzag line. Intersecting lines and planes suggest a thematic at once of inner distress, as well as

one of emotional growth. In other works of the *Emancipation* series, Alicia marks out very fine colour continuums intimating a poetry of complementary colours. This refined colour structure creates a counterpoint to the suggestions of a certain cubist formalism that articulates her pictorial language. In the plastic discourse and the geometric symbolism, one may discern echoes of the work of Joaquin Torres Garcia, the modernist Uruguayan artist of seminal influence, founder of the *Universalismo constructivo*.

#### **6. Elsa Gallegos (Mexico)**

Her flower renditions implicitly carry an erotic charge. Precise evocations of roses with parallel rows of petals inscribe the work within a certain realm of Baroque imagery. These flowers invite comparisons with oceanic expanses: a vastness of waves of purple- or coral-coloured arabesques, with some subtle surrealist connotations. The canvasses of Elsa Gallegos also evoke the sensuous colour of Diego Rivera, the great twentieth century Mexican muralist and flower painter. Gallegos' art may equally belong to a Baroque and to a surrealist tradition. The polysemic richness of the work is remarkable. We note the pleasure the artist experiences in representing the complex forms of nature. Thus, petal textures quite naturally evoke the feel of silk.

## **7. Anamaria Gómez Upegui (Colombia)**

Black and white by themselves may produce effects tantamount to a near infinity of colours, as in the work of Anamaria Gómez, who does black ink drawing. This remarkably ingenuous work also reveals a powerful sense of decoration. Its sense of humour is based on abbreviation, on concision. This graphic artist displays some of the gusto and of the acid humour of Saul Steiberg, the witty and lyrical New York cartoonist. In Anamaria's formal organization and surface topology one may discover a kinship with the work of Escher, the Dutch artist and inventor of impossible geometries. Gómez' symbolism belongs to the realm of the fable.

## **8. Maria Fernanda Jaramillo (Colombia)**

The artist's painting evokes nature by resorting to the use of intermediary colours and to the subtle refinement of plane intersections. She possesses the fine touch of the water-colorist, while using oil or acrylic. Cubist expression that forms a sort of discreet background to her work, hints at the limitless dimensions of the universe. She seems attuned to a dream-world that manages to evoke dimensions of the invisible - and of the ineffable - thanks to cubism, to transparencies and to off-colour shades of ochre, green and orange. With vanishing points intimated by uncertain perspectives, the artist's poetic

universe may also be envisaged within a surrealist esthetic of a “parallel” realm worthy of Yves Tanguy, the surrealist master.

### **9. Neliam Rivas (Venezuela)**

Neliam Rivas is a practitioner of genre-painting in the vein of a contemporary hyperrealism that evokes both seventeenth century Dutch still-life and the Spanish Baroque. (recalling intimations of Zurbaran) Let us note the presence - nay, the *immanence* - of water melons, of the pear and of the apple. Abundant, almost tropical light emphasizes fruit volumes. Realistic light and texture effects may actually evoke the thought of a certain Spinozian philosophy of immanence of the divinity in matter – a fact that corresponds to a Latin-American vision of the sacredness of creation. In her desire to perfectly reproduce nature, Neliam Rivas demonstrates her fascination for spiritual transcendence.

### **10. Luis Fernando Suárez (Colombia)**

His painting at once gestural, geometric and abstract, offers a psychological space of repose and meditation. The painterly gesture helps both viewer and creator attain mental rest. Some observers note a subtle rapport with Rothko's work - yet Suárez' pictorial matter is denser, more Colombian, more tropical. The sensation of light Suárez integrates to the translucency of the coloured surfaces is meant as an avenue to

reaching the “inner landscape”. In a premonitory gesture, the artist created in 2001 a painting showing ghost-like images of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on a red background. The painting of Luis Fernando Suárez has recently taken a minimalist and a sculptural orientation, as his work also turned to the monochrome. Shaping pictorial matter in depth, he adds a third dimension to the visual field, creating references to plowed fields or to the shapes of geological relief.

**Andre Seleanu, exhibition curator**

The curator of this art event has been since 1997 a regular contributor of the Quebec art review *Vie des Arts*, as well as of the Toronto magazine *Canadian Art*. André Seleanu is thoroughly familiar with the Quebec, the Canadian and the North-American art scenes, and he also follows closely contemporary art in Latin America. After a study tour to Bogotá in 2007, he wrote for *Vie des Arts* an important four part essay of art journalism entitled *Contemporary Art in Colombia*, dealing with some unexplored esthetic and social issues in Colombian art. André Seleanu also published in *Vie des Arts* an analytical study of contemporary art in Cuba, in the wake of a major Cuban art exhibition that took place in Montreal in 2008. As an art critic and journalist, André Seleanu is interested in describing and analyzing the multiple relations between

reality and contemporary art, while taking into account aspects linked to painting, sculpture, installation, performance...

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*These explanatory texts were originally written by André Seleanu in a French version. They accompanied the collective exhibition entitled Regard et passion, also curated by the author. The event was hosted in September 2009 by the Simon Bolivar Cultural Center of the Consulate of Venezuela in Montreal and it was a presentation by Latinarte, a cultural organism in Montreal..*

*All texts, French originals and English translation, are by André Seleanu.*