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DE MONTRÉAL

From the series « Mapping the Automatists in Montreal », #118

L'Atelier de la ruelle,
behind le 4553, St-Hubert street

Claude Gosselin, C.M., January 26th, 2022

The **Atelier de la ruelle** was the studio of the artists Marcel Barbeau, Jean Paul Riopelle and occasionally Jean-Paul Mousseau, from the fall of 1945 until the end of April 1946, that is to say for approximately 8 months. It was the artists themselves who gave this place the name **Atelier de la ruelle** in their communications.

The studio was a shed located at the back of 4553 Saint-Hubert Street, the home of the parents of Barbeau's friend Charlie Talbot. Barbeau lived with his parents at 4549 (1), the house next door. The studio was in the alley between Saint-Hubert and Resther streets.



During Fall 1945, the Barbeau family was living at 4549 St-Hubert street, and the Talbot family was located at 4553.

It was through the intermediary of his friend Talbot that Barbeau managed to rent these premises. The rent was set at ten dollars a month, which he paid from his savings from working at the family grocery store (2).

The **atelier** was the size of a shed. Poorly insulated from the elements, circular zones were painted on the floor to identify where the heat was: the red zone is the warmest since it is closest to the wood stove, the green one is an intermediate zone and the blue one, the furthest away, is the coldest. The whole place was utilized: walls, ceiling, floor (3).

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Barbeau invited Riopelle to share his studio in the fall of 1945. Riopelle accepted with even more enthusiasm since his parents did not appreciate his new abstract works. His mother considered them "works of the devil" and had destroyed some of them (4). Riopelle seized the opportunity to get out of the family home and to have a place where he could give free rein to his imagination and his need for freedom.

L'Atelier de la ruelle became a meeting place where other artists and colleagues from the École du meuble, Jean-Paul Mousseau and Bernard Morisset, and poets, Rémi-Paul Forgues and Claude Gauvreau, come to discuss art and comment on the works made there. Marcel Barbeau did his first attempts related to "automatism". He paints "with spontaneity, abstract paintings "seen from above", as he said, "fully realistic and of our time (5)".

Riopelle describes the life in the studio as follows :

"We had experimented freely in a studio, a shed if you will, where we found ourselves (sic), Mousseau with his problems, Barbeau with his problems and me with them, with a third absolutely complex problem which was: how to find the means to paint and to have money to paint? And since we had no means... we decided to paint with ripolin (6). [...] We came in. We painted. When one left, the other took his place, often taking over and redoing the neighbor's canvas. It was a way to free ourselves. We had the same problems and absolute confidence in the man next to us. So, if he wanted to repaint a canvas, it was because he thought he could do better (7). [...] We worked at such a pace that we took everything we could get our hands on. The essential, it was to paint and to paint at all costs. It was a destruction rather than a construction (8) ".

Although this was a great creative period, there are few works remaining from the studio, as most were created with poor quality, less durable materials. The artworks produced will be part of the first exhibition of the Automatists group, from April 20 to 29, 1946, at 1257 Amherst Street, now Atateken Street.

Talbot's parents did not appreciate the way the artists maintained the place and asked them to leave as soon as possible. Barbeau moved to 4553 Resther Street (9) for a short time in the summer of 1946, before moving into the apartment of the poet Rémi-Paul Forgues on University Street, which he occupied during the day to produce new works, while Forgues occupied it in the evening to write his poems.

Jean Paul Riopelle left for France on August 24, 1946. He returned on September 27 of the same year to marry Françoise Lespérance on October 30 (10). They left Montreal on December 9, 1946 and returned in the fall of 1947 when Françoise was pregnant. She gave birth to their daughter Yseult on January 1, 1948.

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We thank the authors and researchers who have published essays on the artists mentioned. The complete bibliography is given on our website.

We thank :

Research: Vincent Godin-Fillion, Auky Gonzales Gysin, Dominique Robb and Émilie Frenette;

Administration: Cassandre Roy;

Fundraising: the donors of CIAC MTL. You will find their names on our website (<http://ciac.ca/amies-et-amis-du-ciac>);

For the hiring of researchers: the governments of Canada and Quebec (salary support programs);

For the production of the podcasts: the City of Montreal, Montreal Heritage Program.

Claude Gosselin is the general and artistic director of the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal.