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From the series "Mapping the Automatists in Montreal", #107

1257, Amherst Street (now Atateken)
The Automatists' First Exhibition,
April 20 to 29, 1946

Claude Gosselin, C.M., August 4th, 2020

Between 1940 and 1946, during World War II, 1257 Amherst Street (now Atateken Street) served as the headquarters for *The Woman Voluntary Reserve Corps / le Corps de réserve nationale féminin*, founded and led by the Captain Julienne Saint-Mars-Gauvreau, mother of Pierre and Claude Gauvreau. After the war, the Reserve Corps was dissolved and the premises were no longer used, even though the rent was still being paid. It was then that Madame Saint-Mars-Gauvreau made it available to her sons and their painter friends to hold an exhibition simply entitled "Exposition de peinture" which would be held from April 20 to 29, 1946.

This is the first Automatist exhibition, but not all the artists who will later form the Automatists group are present. The exhibitors were: Marcel Barbeau, Paul-Émile Borduas, Roger Fautoux, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau and Jean Paul Riopelle.

Even though it is said to be the "first", another exhibition had previously been presented in New York in January 1946 at Francizka Boas's dance studio. It was Françoise Sullivan, then a student of Francizka Boas, who organized the exhibition she called *The Borduas Group*. The works of Paul-Émile Borduas, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Jean Paul Riopelle, and Guy Viau were showcased. None of these artists were present. The exhibition generated little interest: even Pierre Matisse, a gallerist to whom Françoise Sullivan had shown the works, was not enthusiastic about them. It was only later that he would represent Jean Paul Riopelle.

Certainly produced by the group, a press release published in *Le Jour* on April 20, 1946 describes the exhibition: "These painters, relatively young, obtain

the pictorial essential, the plastic beauty, common to all generations of revolutionary painters, to Rembrandt, Delacroix, Cézanne, Picasso by the most advanced disciplines that are currently in universal painting: automatic drawing, decal without object. Their works freely channel the revealing explorations of chance controlled by human sensitivity. Now that their experiences have turned into tangible achievements, they represent the only Canadian hope for an art that can break down regional boundaries” (Anonymous, “Vernissage”, *Le Jour*, April 20, 1946, p. 4).

At the Montreal exhibition, all the artists are present at the gallery except Pierre Gauvreau, who remained in England at the end of the conflict to visit France later that year. During the exhibition, the artists meet regularly on site to chat with visitors. Claude Gauvreau remembers: “The atmosphere was frantic; we were drunk with fervor and joy. The exhibition took place in a working-class environment and I have never forgotten since that the common people had little prejudices and that they quite easily managed to conceive the legitimacy of this enterprise following a few sincere explanations; on the other hand, as soon as a figure in patent boots appeared, it immediately turned into a display of foolish pretensions and mockery, as contemptuous as it was blind. The group's non-figurative painting made its first public debut in Montreal, and the visitors' notebooks were filled with insulting comments such that today's exhibitions no longer experience them” (Claude Gauvreau, “L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope”, *La Barre du jour*, No. 17-20, January-August 1969, p. 59-60).

“No complete list of the works on display has been compiled: neither by the exhibitors, nor by critics or the press. Only Maurice Perron's photographs and the few mentions by the press and critics serve us as witnesses. We therefore know that Paul-Émile Borduas exhibits oils (including *L'île fortifiée*, 1941 and *L'île enchantée*, 1945) and gouaches (including *No. 17* and *No. 43*). By Pierre Gauvreau, there is *Colloque exubérant*, *Aspect franc* and *Baie d'esprit*. Marcel Barbeau and Roger Fauteux present inks. From Barbeau, let us note *Les maraudeurs de la nuit*. From Fauteux, we have no title. Fernand Leduc exhibits among others *Flore liée*. Jean-Paul Mousseau notably presents *Je bois de l'eau d'un puits*, *Rencontre brusque*, *Constellations*, *Fond de mer haïtien* and *L'oiseau dort*. Some of these titles probably refer to drawings made with pen and India ink. He also made two sculptures. Finally, Jean Paul Riopelle exhibits *Ainsi il n'y a plus de désert*, *Tout se retrouve* and *Jamais avril n'apparût*, which are either oils or watercolors” (François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois, 1941-1954*, Outremont, Lanctôt Éditeur, 1998, p. 263-264).

Art critic Éloi de Grandmont observes that the works exhibited “represent a well-defined trend in contemporary Canadian painting” while associating them with the surrealist movement (“Les arts. Surréalisme”, *Le Canada*, April

24, 1946, p. 5). As for Jean Ampleman, he describes the exhibition as follows: "Students and teacher, in the same room, in the same row, without preference for one or the other. True artistic democracy where only talent differentiates" ("Expositions. Des disciples au maître", *Notre temps*, April 27, 1946, p. 5).

The exhibition coincides with Borduas's solo exhibition at Morgan's Store, and the critics see a dichotomy between Borduas and the other exhibitors. However, Charles Doyon's criticism allows us to better understand the relationship between Paul-Émile Borduas and the other members of the group: "Without going into the subject well, we spoke of Borduas's imitators. If there is confusion, it is because in some backgrounds, there is a lack of objectivity. Each painter's research is directed towards the exploration of chance, which makes this group, one could say mutandist, an offshoot of surrealism. But that is where similarities end, and any idea of imitation must be ruled out in Borduas and his followers. Moreover, Borduas's style warns them and if satellites evolve in his orbit, he is clearly in the center of this radiation. All these young people are at the service of abstract art and they bring to it their personal adaptive qualities" ("Borduas et ses interprètes!", *Le Jour*, May 11, 1946, p. 7).

(Excerpts of reviews taken from F-M Gagnon, *Chronique*, p. 266-267 and F-M Gagnon, *Borduas*, MMFA, p. 119.)

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