

VISUAL ART

Sylvie Bouchard

by James D Campbell

The oneiric resonance of Sylvie Bouchard's recent paintings was hugely seductive and a welcome introduction to this gallery's splendidly capacious new space on ave de Gaspé in Montreal. Installed in two adjacent rooms, the paintings formed an environmental installation in which subtle changes in trajectory, orientation and posture on the viewer's part meant equally subtle variations in the volumetrics of mood.

The work of Sylvie Bouchard has been integral to the Quebec contemporary art milieu for over 30 years. One of her early installations, at the Galerie Powerhouse in 1983, is memorable for its high level of formal invention. In her current show, she is still concerned with investing her viewers in the spaces she creates, as they experience the work. This exhibition brought to a highly sophisticated pitch her signature recurring themes: nature, architecture, the human figure and the role of the viewer. With their grisaille palette, these oils on linen have all the viscosity of carpenter's putty, and the visual impact sinks in quickly. The work effectively swallows us up—and slows us down.

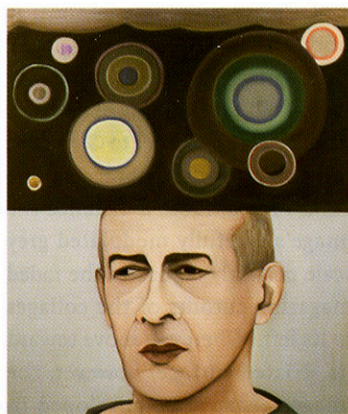
Bouchard is very deft with the paint application and these works are beautifully painted. Formalist *plasticien*-like tropes and the ubiquitous human form abound and share resonance and plasticity within a wider landscape that seems to pivot around us. In *Whiteout*, 2013, oil on linen, 91 cm x 76 cm, the organic shapes resemble white blood corpuscles with marshmallow consistency clinging to floor, walls and ceiling, delivering an eerier sensation of smothering, as though they were on the prowl to kill infection.

Think of the 1966 science fiction film *Fantastic Voyage* and the Isaac Asimov book based on the script in which a miniaturized submarine and crew is injected into the body of a scientist to destroy a brain tumour.

In these unframed paintings (all the better to have them open up on a wholly indeterminate environmental context), Bouchard mixes her subject matter to winning and quixotic effect: nerve cells, plants, minerals, the human figure, Claude Tousignant targets, *Automatiste*-like taches and other tasty revenants from native abstraction share the stage with the human form. The targets seem like thought blurbs or the blobs of an activating regime; what seems heterogeneous at first finally enjoys all the homogeneity of the dream.

By installing her paintings in such a way as to succour the viewer's role in the making of meaning, Bouchard builds an environmental installation in which each work contributes to the overall dream space, and discourages anything like rapid pacing (or remote viewing). She brings us right up close and personal with her paintings, and their decidedly meditative mien encourages slow and methodical perusal.

Here is where the element of time dilation comes in. I am not referring to time dilation as a literal difference of elapsed time between two events as measured by observers either moving relative to each other or differently situated from gravitational masses. This painting has nothing to do with relativity. Nor am I seeking to invoke images of Salvadore Dali's melting timepieces hanging from the boughs of trees (despite an insistently surrealist strain in Bouchard's work) but rather the



1

viewer's purely subjective experience of time in the presence of the work—either slowing down or speeding up. This is not necessarily a linear perception of time but a more phenomenological one in which the rigorous protocols of digital time are cast away and our internal awareness holds sway.

The scenography here, with its de Chirico moments and Giacometti constants—but not in any nostalgic or overtly referential way—lead us in from the wings where we are voyeurs and onto centre stage, where we enact her paintings for ourselves. Bouchard deftly intermingles abstract tropes—such as the colourful mini-Tousignant targets melting like smoke-rings in the torpid air—with representational elements—a human torso, say—and reveals in the process a very playful and decidedly *dwee* sensibility.

The exhibition as a whole had an overwhelming sense of deep quiet, if not probity, and a palpable hush. With plenitude and organic gravitas, and consummately ambiguous objects and situations, Bouchard once again asked her viewers to descend into the mythology of landscape where an uncanny strangeness was always felt. She reminds us of 17th



2

century French dramatist Jean Racine's famous line: "*Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit;*" In the depths of the forest your image follows me.

As noted earlier, and it's worth repeating, one of the distinctive characteristics of Sylvie Bouchard's corpus to this date has been its abiding preoccupation with the role of the viewer, and the employment of the human figure in the work. Bouchard gently but insistently pushes us forward and downward through her maze—and it is our own reflection that we see staring back at us when we reach the heart of her illusionist labyrinth. ■

"Fontainebleau" was exhibited at Galerie Occurrence, Montreal, from April 17 to May 10, 2014.

James D. Campbell is a writer and curator in Montreal who is a frequent contributor to Border Crossings.

1. Sylvie Bouchard, *Cosmos*, 2014, oil on linen, 91 x 76 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Louis Lussier.

2. Sylvie Bouchard, "Fontainebleau," 2014, installation view, Occurrence, Montreal. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Louis Lussier.

3. François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography*, 2013, translated by Peter Feldstein, McGill-Queen's University Press.