

Extreme Painting

A new breed of radically expressive painters
heats up summer IN MONTREAL

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS



WIL MURRAY *Clara Bowes & Open Toes* 2005 Polyurethane on board
48.2 cm x 1.24 m PRIVATE COLLECTION
PHOTO GUY L'HEUREUX

Over the last few years, a new manner of figurative painting—visceral, knowingly banal or aggressively two-fisted, deeply ambivalent about the lightness of the virtual and hostile to the opinion that figurative painting is dead—has emerged in galleries from Toronto and Montreal to New York, Berlin and beyond. If the tendency has been scantily noticed by Canadian critics and gallery-goers to date, that could change abruptly this summer, when a galaxy of shows presenting this radical art opens in Montreal.

Instigated and coordinated by the Montreal art dealer René Blouin along with Benjamin Klein, assistant director of Pierre Trahan's Galerie Division, "Extreme Painting" is a series of exhibitions in private galleries across the city that will showcase new work by a variety of Canadian and international practitioners. The list includes the Canadians Kim Dorland, André Ethier, the duo of Dave and Jenn and Wil Murray as well as the Los Angeles artist Allison Schulnik, among others.



LEFT: KIM DORLAND *Self-Portrait*
2009 Oil on board 50.8 x 40.6 cm
COURTESY GALERIE DIVISION
PHOTO ANIE DESLAURIERS

RIGHT: DENIS PELLERIN *Néuphars
de résilience 1* 2008 Mixed media
1.52 x 2.44 m COURTESY GALERIE ORANGE
PHOTO GUY L'HEUREUX



The painting seems bent on revenge against a digital culture that is dematerializing everything, vaporizing it into a bright mist of pixels

The topics via which these artists declare their concerns range widely, from Schulnik's angrily urgent, snarling and snapping wolves to Dorland's spiritually troubled suburban and rural idylls to the carnivalesque portrait-ure, charged with tense neurotic force, of André Ethier.

However sharply they may differ in style from one painter to the next, the canvases of these artists have certain things in common: what Blouin calls an "excess of material, and some kind of delirium and overdose which is so different from works done under the influence of Photoshop. I find it very reassuring that it's not something that can be resolved on a computer screen. It's something that requires the involvement of the body. I'm interested in those things that are impossible to make without materiality and human gesture, that are not only cerebral and intellectual."

Blouin also admires the high-wire acrobatics of the artists, their willingness to risk painting lushly and expressively in an era dominated by the flat photographic imagery coming at us incessantly from television, movie and computer screens, and from the walls of galleries and museums.

"The young people who do this do it because they have no choice, like all the great artists," Blouin says. "I keep thinking of Beckett, who complained about why he had to write these books he didn't choose to write and that nobody would read. The artists will die if they don't do it. These painters are the only ones I'm interested in. They have no financial security, they have no promise that it will work out—and still they are obliged to do it."

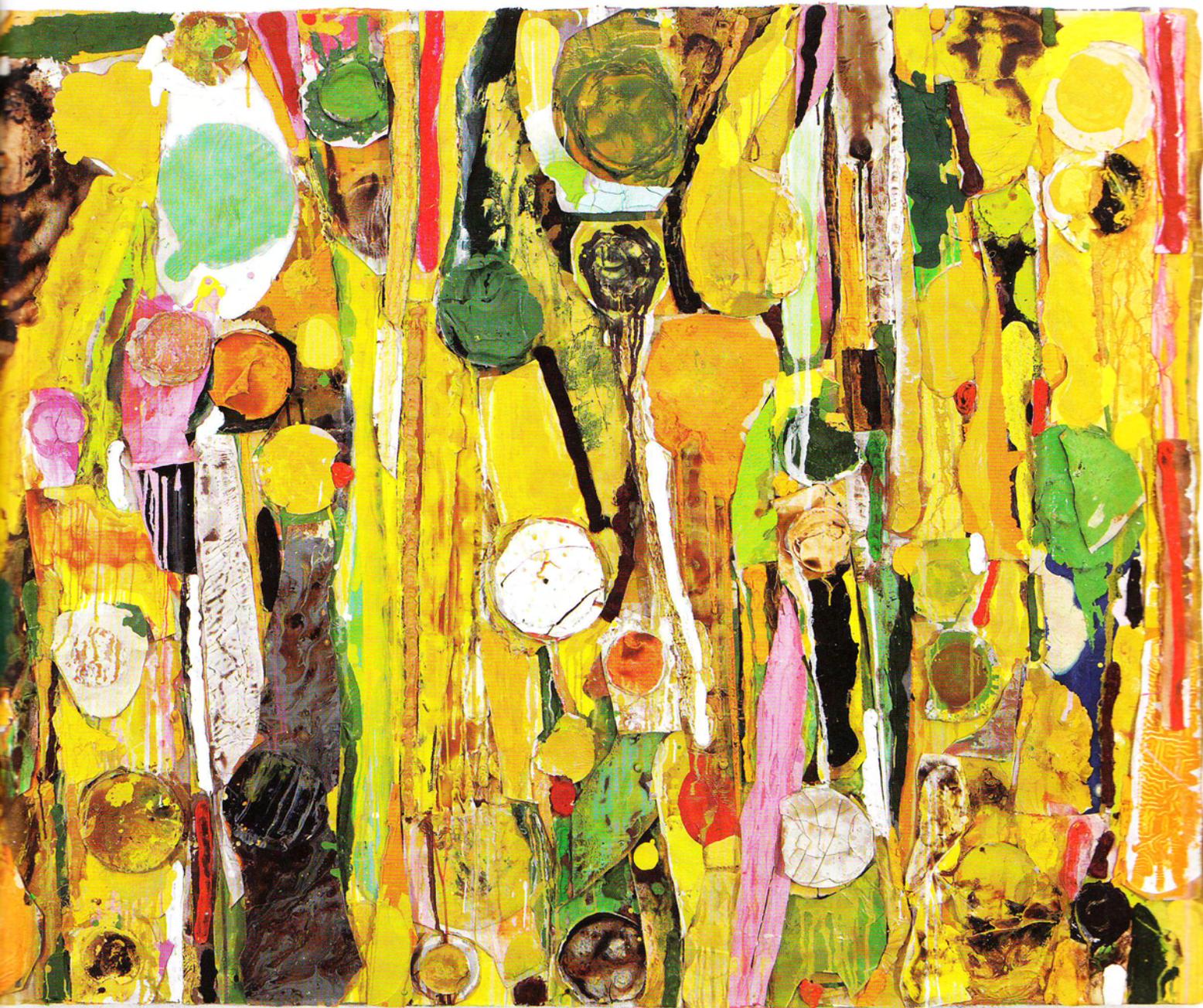
And they do so with full knowledge of the highly developed art-world discourse that has long proclaimed painting of this kind to be obsolete and even reactionary.

"I find it bold and interesting that these young people are visiting with new energy territories that have already been explored, and they still find

room to breathe and blossom—regardless of all the gloomy pronouncements about the death of this and the death of that, and the death of history," Blouin continues. "These are all wonderful ideas, but the reality is very different. Nothing ever dies. I am influenced by Robert Filliou's idea of the permanence of creativity—like war, creativity is permanent," he contends.

The notion of doing a group of shows celebrating vital new painting took shape last fall during conversations between Blouin and Pierre Trahan, owner of Galerie Division and collector of Kim Dorland's work. Benjamin Klein, a writer and a painter in his own right, was soon involved in the discussions. (Klein's painting will be exhibited as part of the summer event.)

Had things worked out as the organizing team hoped, the shows would have been mounted in galleries across Canada. But the proposal got a cool reception in most places west of Quebec: galleries in the rest of Canada were busy with other things, or unable to cooperate for logistical or professional reasons, Blouin told me. So it was decided that Montreal, where private galleries were more enthusiastic, would host the summer exhibitions. The spaces that have signed on to the project, in addition to Galerie René Blouin and Division, include Galerie Trois Points, Parisian Laundry, Galerie PUSH, Galerie Simon Blais, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Joyce Yahouda Gallery, Galerie Roger Bellemare, Galerie Dominique Bouffard, Galerie Donald



Browne, Galerie Orange, Galerie Pangée, Galerie D'Este, Han Art and Projex-Mtl Galerie. (Each venue will curate its own show under the general rubric; all the shows will be titled "Extreme Painting.")

If they come together according to plan, the exhibitions in Montreal should give the Canadian gallery-going public a strong introduction to the new painting activity, and enable us to grasp the sources and sensibilities that lie behind the art. For example: the roots of this painting appear, at first glance, to lie deep in the Neo-Expressionism of 30 years ago. But when examined more closely, the canvases show themselves to contain little of the melancholy, the sense of injury and vulnerability, common in the canvases of 1980. Instead of admitting defeat or embodying discouragement, the painting seems to be bent on revenge against a digital culture that is dematerializing everything, vaporizing it into a bright mist of pixels.

Benjamin Klein, reflecting on the history of this move in art, says, "In the last ten to 15 years, there have been breakthroughs in painting led by

people like Peter Doig, Daniel Richter, Cecily Brown. In Canada, we have people who belong to this new thrust in confrontational, conceptually strong figurative painting. It's not Neo-Expressionism. It's not 'bad' painting in the normal sense. There's a new school organizing itself around a few international leaders like Doig."

Indeed, among the contemporary artists who have cleared a path through the wilderness of virtualized reality for the young painters in these upcoming shows, no figure stands higher than Peter Doig, both Blouin and Klein told me.

"Doig has found a way to combine imagery with the richest possible painting technique, and his work very clearly addresses the critiques introduced into the world of painting by Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans and others," Klein said. "People whose work follows Tuymans are illustrating deconstructionist clichés. Those who continue on making paintings that kill painting in a facile way are not adding anything to the language. Paint-



PAUL BUREAU *Untitled* 2009
Oil on cardboard 40 x 26 x 2 cm
COURTESY GALERIE DONALD BROWNE
PHOTO GUY L'HEUREUX

avoid, Group of Seven landscape paintings (in the case of some canvases by Dorland), Dada (given a provincial, anti-urban turn by Dave and Jenn) or the haunted Viennese portraits of Arnold Schönberg (Ethier).

And like all sport, the new painting is serious, but not solemn. "Extremity can be lots of things," Klein said. "The analogy is to extreme sports, which can be pretty stupid. I like the comedy of that, the idea that high seriousness is not necessarily the way we have to approach everything. But extreme sports and extreme painting include the same speed, aggression, violence and heat, not to mention the possibility that human emotions need not be greyed out so that rigorosity can be achieved." Like a sports field, the studio can be the site of struggle, "especially if you're a painter, given the unique animosity toward painting that seems to exist today, as compared to any other medium. Challenging bourgeois taste as well as contemporary art sensibilities—that involves the kind of risk you expect from extreme sport; it has the same violence, the same visual impact."

The Montreal exhibitions will engage in their own complex games with the viewing public this summer—courting us with vividly expressive imagery, defying postmodern good taste with gestures driven by raw emotional authority, pushing back against the pundits. According to Klein, "Extreme Painting" will argue "that the best recent painting exemplifies a tendency with depth and brains—that what to some is tasteless or crazy, and for others juvenile or even naive, is in fact a

strong new form of art...Painting worldwide right now is at a high point, flush with recent achievements. We intend to demonstrate the scope and power of Canada's many outstanding painters, and hope to reach a new, integrated public for their works." ■

See more works from "Extreme Painting" and a complete guide to the exhibitions at canadianart.ca/extremepainting

ing did come back to the fore, and it will be difficult to shake it off."

While contesting the very large territory in contemporary visual culture occupied by digital imagery, the extreme painting of these new artists looks more like a cartoonish twisting of recent creative trends (including the use of computers to generate pictures) than an attempt to overturn them. It maintains its independence by playing a rough dialectical game with sources, whether the mass-mediated pictures that nobody these days can