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James Hansen: An American in Montreal

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[See table of contents](#)

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James Hansen, *Multivision*, 1987. Oil on canvas; 91.5 x 61 cm

James Hansen: An American in Montreal

With so many young Quebec artists clamoring for a share of the limited space available in Montreal's small number of contemporary galleries, it comes as no surprise that few of their American counterparts possess the opportunity to exhibit here, especially in one-man shows. James Hansen, a Bostonian, could be considered one of the lucky ones, were it not for the fact that he and his dealers have worked closely and diligently to establish a growing reputation on both sides of the border.

At age 35, with two previous shows at Galerie Samuel Lallouz - a solo and a group - and the present *Recent Works* (Oct. 21 - Nov. 10, 1987), Hansen has become more than just another American in Montreal. In 1988 he will exhibit in Boston, New York, Washington and Los Angeles.

What emerged from the collection of *Recent Works* was a portrait of an artist at the height of his powers, who had fulfilled the promise of earlier work and put it all together. The large oils on canvas and small watercolors on paper revealed elements of African iconography and other art historical references, transmuted persuasively into compelling and original, anthropomorphized images in rich hues of stained-glass intensity. These were humanly accessible paintings, in the international mainstream and with no outré messages.

Hansen has done very well in Montreal with Galerie Samuel Lallouz which engaged him three years ago, along with artist-friends Claude Simard and Myriam Laplante, to paint a 4000-square foot canvas on Biblical themes for a church in Larouche, Quebec. The venture demonstrated that young Quebec and American artists could collaborate on matters of common interest and stylistic idiom to create a cohesive whole.

Collector and public response to Hansen's œuvre has enlarge substantially in Montreal. While corporations have not been encouraging thus far, Hansen believes that next step is on the way.

As in the United States, buyers here are mostly private collectors, according to Hansen: "Where the difference lied is that I exhibit here infrequently, so it's a catch-up game for collectors to learn where my work has come from and where it might be going. At home, collectors have the advantage of being familiar with my work over a period of time. Yet the general understanding of my paintings is the same in both places and people apparently have the same reactions. I think it matters where you live, of course, in terms of the core of the painting."

What it means to exhibit here, observes Hansen, is that "it's another place to be seen. That's important, for there's a multiplying factor and things do snowball."

Hansen views the Canadian art scene as "pretty healthy. It's my impression that Canadian artists tend to look outside Canada and don't necessarily want to exhibit here. My Quebec friends seem to be doing rather well with shows in New York and elsewhere."

As for Quebec artists, Hansen holds the conviction that they are not imitating New York. "They are unique in what they do and although they're aware of New York trends, that knowledge doesn't change them. Even if they were to jump on the American bandwagon, the moment a new movement or style is written about and displayed in galleries, the excitement is over and it's already too late for emulation. To get caught up in trendiness is a waste of time, a sure death."

Hansen readily accepts that Quebec artists are more active in video and performance art than Americans. "American galleries couldn't market performance art and so they were very glad when figuration returned and they had real objects they could sell. We don't find painting dead. It remains an important and viable art form whose issues just seem to go on and on."

Everyone knows, commented Hansen, "that Canada is much more supportive of its artists in terms of grants, though you have to fill out huge, detailed forms. I only have to send a short letter and some colored slides to get consideration from a granting body in Washington."

Hansen confirms that Picasso did away forever with the romantic concept of the artist as irresponsible,



James Hansen, *Small Graces*, 1987. Oil on canvas; 107 x 92 cm

unbusiness-like and unaware of the art market. He says that he does keep "a tight control on where my work goes and on commitments to my galleries. New York may get first crack at what I make, since it's arguably the centre of the art world where most buying and selling goes on, yet even that dealer doesn't necessarily see everything I do. I learned from the example of Picasso to keep for myself pieces I like, or which point in a direction of interest for me. I look for an exhibition to be fairly tight as a unit, pieces that work together, like the collection I chose for Galerie Lallouz."

"I don't think in terms of what's most marketable for various cities. Perhaps each city possesses a distinctive taste and a different market potential, but

it's the role of my dealers to weigh that aspect, and the publicity. However, I do send out invitations to all collectors of my work, to let them know what's going on, though I have noticed that with success, people come on to me more."

"I hope they know what I'm doing, but whether they do or not doesn't matter. I think they respect me for what I'm doing and recognize that art is a very serious business for me. Really, the most important thing in this entire business is what happens between me and the painting in the studio."

Lawrence Sabbath