

ETC



Tables are for turning...

Allan Pringle

Number 7, Spring 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36375ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pringle, A. (1989). Review of [Tables are for turning...]. *ETC*, (7), 70–72.

Tables are for turning...



Giuseppe Di Leo, *Via Erebus* (right panel), 1988.
Graphite on paper; 152 x 127 cm. Photo : Josef Gernaio

Giuseppe Di Leo, Waddington & Gorce,
May 24 to June 15, 1988 —

Jacques Payette, Michel Tétrault Art Contemporain,
November 16 to December 11, 1988 —

Jean-Louis Émond, galerie Frédéric Palardy,
October 29 to November 23, 1988 —

Drawings, paintings and sculptures produced since the era of Manet and Mallarmé have generally focussed greater attention on medium as productive rather than reproductive. Aristotle's age old dictum that "art imitates nature" has been undermined to such an extent that most twentieth century artists and theoreticians have become effectively indifferent to the cultural value of supposed resemblance. Emphasis has come to be placed on the ability to embody formal strategies in negation of mimetic potentialities. Many contemporary artistic creations proclaim formal necessity as their own poetic. Plato's "mirror" is shattered. Alberti's "window" is barred. Ruskin's "innocent eye" has been compromised.

Giuseppe Di Leo, Jacques Payette and Jean-Louis Émond are three Montreal artists who not only recoup, in some degree, mimetological aspects thetical

to classical convention but they also provide evidence of propagation of a recent aesthetic correlation. Their oeuvre constitutes an assimilation of traditional laws governing visual verity and a demand for the return of referents overlaying a demonstration of contemporary technical axioms. The principal subjects of their compositions are worked with attention to measure and proportion, incisiveness of form, and canons of perspective, leading to Neoplatonic pictorial representations of the natural or man-made world. These images of imitation emanate from grounds or masses expressive of a material or process-oriented investigation. The viewer is confronted by putatively universal schema superimposed over supports treated in a manner both exploratory and contingent. Di Leo's quasi-photo-realistic figures are enveloped in atmospheres composed of smudge, striation and sweeping gesture. Payette's furniture pieces, sketched with draughtsman-like



Jacques Payette, *Petit coffre sur une table à abattant*, 1988.
Acrylic and oil on canvas and wood; 152 x 178 cm.

acumen, free-float on textured, dripped and overpainted fields. Émond's anatomical studies well out from blocks of rough-cut or approximately rendered marble.

In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida designated analogous examples of superimposition, especially traditional signifiers re-motivated in new largely abstract contexts, as "new mimesis". Thus the essence of "new mimesis" and its inherent rhythmic interpolation between the antique and the modern may be perceived as establishing a fountainhead for the labours of Di Leo, Payette and Émond.

In Di Leo's recent large scale drawings man is no longer *Imago Hominis*, the image of man, but rather a human being who has experienced the incontinency, iniquity and pathos of life. Inspiration comes from below and from being audience to a woeful utterance: "the spirits have left me".

For Di Leo the forge of the human soul has become some strange underground cavern which remains open to the sky by a phantasmic vortex or infernal passage. Figures lean over the depth of that abyss and are licked by the sublime flames of the netherworld. Currents swell up from the underneath of things veiling figures in darkness or buffeting them with winds that reveal how violently in motion is the world below. The voracious mouth and open belly of the soul furnace threatens to consume everything that is brought near or poured into it.

Via Erebus, a diptych, is the most complex composition in the exhibition. In the righthand panel (illustrated), a graphite drawing depicts a fallen, classically-posed man being coaxed towards a descending stair by another man more casual (read: contemporary) in posture. The left panel is more material-oriented but not at the sacrifice of narrative. Yet another male figure, sketched in Pompeian red,

falls from the sky (like acid-rain) over the funnel-mouth of an industrial smoke stack. Where age-old Mount Vesuvius once erupted scattering volcanic ash, Di Leo's "shower" is a (post)modern implosion back into the fiery bowels of the earth. The introduction of materials such as marble, wood and gypsum board underscore the rawness and immediacy of a socio-political statement.

In *Vessels* — *Premiere Source* an expectant mother kneels in contemplation beside the opening of a desert well. To the woman's left, a row of liquid containers are hung like plumb lines pointing downwards to the place of retribution. The soul of the unborn child seems to take as mysterious root that station where fire and water struggle.

In *Lupa Elysium* an infant squirms in the arms of her "she-wolf" mother as a dark, twisting firebrand springs from the earth nearby. *Incubii Descending on the Palentine* sees two demonic paramours locked in combat over a pair of shrouded corpses. Stoicism and cynicism are swept aside; reality is cloaked in Homeric myth; and theatrics of the human ordeal are brought to the fore.

Jacques Payette's most recent solo exhibition of paintings represents a radical departure from the artist's traditional fare not only in terms of technique but in theme. Payette's current interest in experimenting with abstraction is a career first, as is the absence of the human figure (except for a 1981 *Stairwell series* exhibited at galerie Don Stewart). A fifteen-year-long preoccupation with figurative realism in a calculated Sheeler-like style has been abandoned. In place of total precisionism there is evidence of the artist's random intervention. Flowers (specifically *prunus serulata* blossoms) or boxes (and their ghosts) become pale substitutes for the human form.



Jean-Louis Émond, *Stèle pour un silence*, 1988.
Italian marble; 136 x 39 x 36 cm. Photo : France Andrée Sevillano

The series might also be perceived as a new call for unity, simplicity and communicability. Payette offers an illustrator-type actuality or its neoacademic complement posited in the empty abstraction of modernist field painting. A syntax and vocabulary is employed such that the viewer is able to instantaneously isolate and identify plastic modes as well as distinguish subject matter. Furniture types drawn directly from Jean Palardy's *The Early Furniture of French Canada* are recognized by most observers who derive a measure of comfort from familiarity and "knowing". Their presentation in fields of flecked, scumbled and sfumatoed oil and acrylic pigment further facilitates ready acceptance. A nostalgic sense of the past is generated by the antique tables, coffers and chairs set against weathered and amorphous grounds. The sometimes sensuous, always affecting colours and the diverse textured surfaces of those same grounds subordinate thought to gaze. The facile seduction and security of the "known" draws the spectator unconsciously into the work.

Jean-Louis Émond's latest sculptures are forms in which the play of sensation and intellect are set in accordance with the laws of harmony and proportion. Proportion, especially, takes on a transcendental character with reference to the human body.

Body fragments and anatomical details, sculpted as they are in relation to an organism recognized as complete (i.e. with two arms, two legs, a head and a torso), initially appear lacking in equilibrium or deficient

in certain symmetries and correspondences. They are not mimetic in the Platonic sense of demonstrating gesticular mimicry or of "doubling" the visible world. They do however reach a certain essence of absolute truth, what Aristotle referred to as *aletheia* (unconcealment), inasmuch as the works are faithful to the artist's concept of the dignity and grandeur of man.

Nowhere is this concept more apparent than in Émond's white marble compositions. In *Le Délit* a single powerfully rendered limb stands ready to take on the weight of the world. The magnificently articulated shoulder of *La Nuée* contorts across a rib cage. A polished partial figure emerges from a rough-hewed mass in *Stèle pour un silence*. The integrity of Émond's work is evident only to those who grasp the conceptual rigor and come to an understanding of the "whole" through the act of giving life to its parts — through appreciation for construction, promulgation and arrangement.

The work of Di Leo, Payette and Émond is agonistic. On the one hand the artists struggle to appease a conditioned audience which has come to expect rudimentary formalizations. On the other hand the artists are marginals in that they rejoin Aristotle's massive and repressive nonhegemonic philosophy. Together they engage in a discourse that generates the illusion of an imaginary resolution of real contradictions.

Allan Pringle