collection

1. Yves Gaucher
Les Danses carrées

Curator: Nathalie Garneau

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery
The Danses carrées series marks a decisive moment in the work of Yves Gaucher, namely that point where, after seven years devoted almost exclusively to printmaking, he returned to painting. After training at the print workshop of the École des beaux-arts de Montréal, Gaucher completely gave up painting from 1960 to 1964 in order to experiment in extremely diverse and innovative ways with printmaking materials and techniques. Drawing his inspiration from Josef Albers’ Interaction of Color and the serial music of Anton Webern, he embarked upon a progressive purification of his formal language. The space in his prints gradually became more open and uncluttered, the forms were simplified, lines took on a geometric quality and all illusion of depth disappeared in favour of relationships that came into play solely on the works’ surface. This line of development culminated in the 1963 print series entitled En hommage à Webern. The viewer would henceforth apprehend the works “more through a perceptual experience with the surface than the content.”

By 1964 Gaucher felt that he had exhausted all of printmaking’s possibilities. That same year he produced the relief print Espace actif (1964) which “brought [him] back” to painting. Since then, Gaucher has made a few paintings on his own, but primarily by working on the large drawings that have occupied him over the course of his career. At this point Gaucher felt the need for expanses of colour, to open up to new possibilities, to develop “his vocabulary.” The Danses carrées series consists of a single painting, but also to colour. While he had tended to leave the ground of his prints free of marks, he now began working with a background colour which would function as an energy field. On this he arranged the elements that would henceforth characterize this new vocabulary: lines and marks of varying lengths and thicknesses, as well as diamond shapes. The choice of elements, their number and position were dictated by this energy field, as was their colour, since for Gaucher the latter had a “role to play in a very precise context as did the others.”

The dynamic interplay of chromatic contrasts and the ways in which the various elements are arranged over the surface of the works directs the gaze “by the strain of quantity, speed and direction of visual cues, by the capacity for colour to advance or recede, by the scales and contours of the next, to pass after-images, and other related effects.” Reading the works makes for an extremely dynamic experience: the elements are arranged in such a way that the eye is constantly moving in a rhythm determined by the composition. Indeed, Gaucher considered rhythm in his work as “a primal fact of life,” and the search for what he called “visual rhythms” constituted one of the foundational principles of his painting. The use of the small diamonds inclined by 45 degrees profoundly changes the way in which we perceive all of the elements inside the frame. The horizontal and vertical axes are thereby subsumed within a diagonal system that modifies their impact. First of all, the painting is grounded in a shift or displacement, with its oblique angle attesting to its rotation on its axis. In Gaucher’s work, this impression is accentuated by the title, Danses carrées, a recurring feature in the works of this period, and one that evokes both the centrifugal movements of dancers in formation. Thus, despite the geometry of a number of works from this series, they never give the impression of being “balanced,” for all symmetry is thrown off by the movement generated by the paintings’ spatial orientation.

Ranging the paintings diagonally transformed the relationship between visual elements and background that existed in the artist’s prints. The shapes of the painting’s axis, from 1964 and 1965, is thus changed. The edges of the paintings that Gaucher executed in 1964 and 1965 are often highlighted by a single colour. This colour, which describes the relations with the colours of the other compositional elements, helps to emphasize the shape of the painting’s axis. This colour, while it may vary over the years, is always the same for Gaucher. The composition of Gaucher’s prints sometimes seemed to create the illusion that it was within the axis that the painting’s colour was placed, thus, this possibility is denied in most of Gaucher’s paintings from this period, and particularly in those where symmetry is predominant. Echoing the shape of the painting by repeating the diamond motif throughout the painting, is to enter the series La Quadrature du cercle (1965) and Danses carrées: Modulatiou pour derriere (1965-1966)—the arrangement of the elements has no purpose in which to activate the edges of the works. For Gaucher it is not a question of evoking the ways in which the structural elements might extend into the surrounding space, but of circumscribing the composition and, by virtue of their titles, the colour variety.

In particular Gaucher tends to play down formal structural relations in favour of the kinetic activity, these “formal structural relations” are absolutely foregrounded in asymmetrical compositions. Gaucher had earlier endeavoured to go “from symmetry to asymmetry” in the print series En hommage à Webern, of which he remarked in 1966: “In my ‘Homages,’ I was trying to get from one print to the next, to pass from a symmetrical premise to an asymmetrical one. (...) That’s one of the key principles that I believe I carried over in my work to the Webern series. I realized that before I could take liberties with respect to a problematic, I had to first understand that I am free to take liberties with respect to it; this is what allows one to take on asymmetry without the continual concern of infinitely more complex proposition.” This study of asymmetry continued into 1968, when the works Danses carrée/I était une carée (1965) and Danses carrée (Gros mauve) (1966). In the first of these, the painting’s axis begins on the bottom left, and located just above the median’s dead may seem, at first glance, to be divided into two identical parts that echo one another. In the second of these works, the vertical line running through the painting is offset very slightly left of centre, while the symmetrical formation of small diamonds is offset toward the right. In both cases, the asymmetry is revealed only gradually to the gaze, which must study the surface of the works for some time in order to grasp the full range of its complex actions activating the surface of these works, the viewer had to keep gazing at them for some time, a reaction that Gaucher sought to generate. The viewer’s participation is greatly solicited in these works made in 1964 and 1965, as he require one to engage the gaze in an effort to grasp the relations between forms and colours. Through this effort, which occurs within the viewer’s own space, the viewer actualizes the idea of duration inherent in its composition and, in so doing, completes this transformation of the gaze engages viewers wholly within an experience that ends, not in some absolute, but at that moment when a painting ceases to hold them, when looking ceases to be a strictly rational act and becomes a creative one instead. In this respect, “... Gaucher’s philosophy as an abstract painter, as he has himself avowed, is an existential one in which the human agent assumes full responsibility for his own actions and experiences, that is, in which the observer truly shares in-as opposed to passively surrendering to-the creative act.”

Created during a brief period of transition—these works would soon be followed by more sober paintings using paler colours—these Danses carrées paintings that Yves Gaucher made in 1964 and 1965 present a unique and particularly vibrant moment in his development and in his life: the optical dynamics of colour contrasts, the notions of symmetry and asymmetry, and the idea of duration and the rhythm and duration.  

Nathalie Garneau  
Max Ernst Curator  

Translated from the French by Donald McGrath  

Born in Montreal in 1934, Yves Gaucher is one of the most important figures of abstract painting in Quebec and Canada. A major influence in both printmaking and painting he received numerous prizes and awards throughout his career. From 1966 to 2000 he taught printmaking and painting at Concordia University, Yves Gaucher died in 2000.


3- Yves Gaucher quoted by Gaston Roberge, in Autour de Yves Gaucher (Québec: Éditions Le Loup de Gouttière, 1996), p. 64. [Free translation]

4- Ibid., p. 64. [Free translation]

5- Yves Gaucher had his first painting exhibition in 1965 at the Galerie Agnès Lefort. This show of 13 paintings was made up mainly of Danses carrées, all but one of which were hung diagonally.

6- Roberge, op. cit., p. 87. [Free translation]


9- Nasgaard, op. cit., p. 42.


11- On this point, Gaucher declared, “My state of personal crisis came about in 1963. I was compelled to question myself about viewers’ attitudes toward the painting. I no longer left them any choice; they could no longer be evasive, but had to become as creative as possible when confronted with my paintings.” Remarks recorded by J.-P. Gilbert and published in “Visites d’atelier,” in Etc. Montréal, vol. 1 no. 1 (Fall 1987), p. 35. [Free translation]


Works Exhibited

Danse carrée (Gros mauve), 1964 acrylic on canvas, 248 x 248 cm Collection Musée d’art de Jolliette Gift of an anonymous donor

Danse carrée/Il était un carré, 1965 acrylic on canvas, 172,5 x 172,5 cm Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Steinberg, 1965

“Once upon three Pupiks”, 1965 acrylic on canvas, 43 x 43 cm Private collection

Étude pour La Quadrature du Cercle, 1965 acrylic on canvas, 65 x 65 cm Private collection

Le Pupik à mé-mé, 1965 acrylic on canvas, 32 x 32 cm Private collection

Danse carrée : Modulation pour Germaine, 1965-1966 acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 cm Private collection

COLLECTION 1
May 26 to July 9 2005

COLLECTION is an exhibition program that explores in-depth different aspects of the Permanent Collection.

The Gallery wishes to thank Germaine Gaucher, the Musée d’art de Jolliette and the Canada Council for their generous support.

Concordia University, 1400, boul. de Maisonneuve Ouest, LB 165, Montréal (Québec) H3G 1M8 ellengallery.concordia.ca


Photography: Paul Litherland

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2- Danielle Blouin, « Un graveur atypique », Yves Gaucher, Montréal, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2003, p. 38.

3- Yves Gaucher cité par Gaston Roberge, Autour de Yves Gaucher, Québec, Éditions Le Loup de Gouttière, 1996, p.64.

4- Ibid., p. 64.

5- Yves Gaucher a exposé pour la première fois en tant que peintre en 1965 à la Galerie Agnès Lefort. L’exposition, qui réunissait 13 tableaux, était surtout composée de Danses carrées. À l’exception d’une œuvre, tous les tableaux étaient suspendus en diagonale.

6- Roberge, op. cit., p. 87.


9- Nasgaard, op. cit., p. 43.

10- Transcription et adaptation, par Martine Rheaume et Jean-Jacques Nattiez, d’une causerie d’Yves Gaucher, le 3 avril 1996, à l’occasion d’une Rencontre entre arts visuels et musique organisée au Musée du Québec, dans le cadre d’une rétrospective sur la gravure au Québec, et reproduite dans le catalogue Yves Gaucher, Montréal, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2003, p. 68.


**Oeuvres exposées**

**Danse carrée (Gros mauve)**, 1964
acrylique sur toile, 248 x 248 cm
Collection Musée d’art de Joliette
Don anonyme

**Danse carrée/Il était un carré**, 1965
acrylique sur toile, 172,5 x 172,5 cm
Collection de la Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen, Université Concordia
Don de M. et Mme Arnold Steinberg, 1965

"Once upon three Pupiks", 1965
acrylique sur toile, 43 x 43 cm
Collection particulière

**Étude pour La Quadrature du Cercle**, 1965
acrylique sur toile, 65 x 65 cm
Collection particulière

**Le Pupil à mé-mé**, 1965
acrylique sur toile, 32 x 32 cm
Collection particulière

**Danse carrée : Modulation pour Germaine**, 1965-1966
acrylique sur toile, 96 x 96 cm
Collection particulière

**COLLECTION 1**
26 mai au 9 juillet 2005

**COLLECTION** est un programme d’exposition qui explore en profondeur divers aspects de la collection permanente.

La Galerie remercie madame Germaine Gaucher, le Musée d’art de Joliette et le Conseil des Arts du Canada de leur appui généreux.

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Dépôt légal - Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, 2005
Dépôt légal - Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2005

Photographie : Paul Litherland

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Yves Gaucher
Les Danseuses carrées
26 mai au 9 juillet 2005 / May 26 to July 9 2005
collection
La série des Danses carrées marque un moment précis dans l'œuvre d'Yves Gaucher, soit celui où, après s'être consacré presque exclusivement à la gravure pendant sept ans, il se remet à la peinture. Entre 1960 et 1964, après sa formation à l'atelier de gravure de l'École des beaux-arts de Montréal, il abandonne complètement la peinture pour effectuer des expérimentations extrêmement diverses et innovatrices avec les matériaux et les techniques de l'estampe. Inspiré par la lecture de « Interaction de Color » de Josef Albers et par l'écoute de la musique mélodique d'Anton Webern, il procède à une éphémère progressive de son langage formel. Graduellement, l'image dégagne, les formes se simplifient, le trait apparaît comme un élément géométrique et toute illusion de profondeur est ainsi topographiquement strictement à la surface des œuvres. Cette recherche culmine avec la suite d'estampes En hommage à Webern de 1963. Dans cette série, il s'agit davantage de l'expérience perceptuelle, plutôt que par la lecture significative du contenu. En 1964, Gaucher a l'impression d'avoir épuisé la possibilité de la gravure. Il réalise la impression d'encyclopédie en relief Space actif (1964) et déclare qu'il n'y Songe plus à la gravure, qu'il souhaite toutefois publier ce qu'il a produit dans ce domaine. Ce terme n'est pas étranger à laッツe artistique de Gaucher, qui a toujours cherché à exprimer son art de manière claire et concise. Il s'agit d'une manière d'exprimer ses idées et sentiments de manière directe et concrète. En somme, le sens de cette œuvre est de chercher à exprimer des idées abstraites de manière tangible et accessible aux spectateurs. Il met en place une sorte de dialogue entre la gravure et la peinture, créant ainsi une forme d'expression artistique nouvelle et originale.
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