

***Space Blind with Blue*** is more object than painting. Yet its visual strategies go hand in hand with Gagnon's core painting practice as he pursued it through the second half of the 1960s in a succession of major series that he titled *Probe*, *Steps* and *Glory*.

Just the year before, in 1965, Gagnon had set up a studio in a building he had rented at 3 St. Paul East in Old Montreal. He was soon joined by Yves Gaucher, who took over the floor below him, and in 1966, by Jean McEwen, who took the floor above, with Charles in between. (Gaucher departed ten years later in 1975, while both Gagnon and McEwen stayed on until 1990.) But Gagnon was the odd man out, neither steadfastly a painter nor, like Gaucher, hard-edged and abstract. Instead, he persisted happily in being a chameleon. Even while he painted, he worked indiscriminately across a variety of mediums and materials, and whether he painted, built complex box sculptures or made films and photographs, he always delighted in visual ambivalence and intellectual paradoxes.

***Space Blind with Blue*** is a construction made with a rectangular sheet of raw aluminum. From its middle bottom Gagnon has cut out a small, slightly elongated square, and then adhered the altered sheet to a board support. The cut-out quasi-square in turn reveals the flat board surface underneath, which he has painted a blue so dark it could be black. It's subtle, of course, the aluminum so thin that its depth is hard to discern. But the aluminum sheet itself he has worked over with a grinder, etching out an all-over pattern of striations and swirls that catch and reflect light, and that, as they twist and turn, ripple and spiral, carve out deep illusory spaces. In contrast, the sharp-edged blackish square sits heavy and implacable.

The square, along with its particular shape and placement, comes out of Gagnon's own work. But this is also the 1960s, and Gagnon would have been acutely aware of the issues at play in the larger art world, especially in New York, where he had lived and continued to visit regularly. Can we analogize ***Space Blind with Blue*** as a re-staging (deliberate or not) of the concurrent challenge to Abstract Expressionism from Minimalism: the reflective hand-brushed finishes of David Smith's stainless steel acrobatic *Cubi* sculptures, abruptly brought down to earth by the dense and obdurate steel solidity of Tony Smith's *Die* of 1962? At the same time, ***Space Blind with Blue*** comports itself in the ambience of Op Art (a style at its height in the mid-1960s) when it invites viewers to shift their feet and turn their heads to trigger the retinal events within it.

***Space Blind with Blue*** also signals how Gagnon has been refocusing his work to make more explicit its material reality, exploiting how paint by itself can spur viewers' sensual engagement. Hence the contrariety of Gagnon's *Glory* paintings from 1969: how they can at one moment, and from one point of view, act like traditional pictures, and at another, and with a shift of perspective, turn into literal objects. When first I stand still in front of ***Glory #3***, its central field opens up my vision into ethereal illusionistic space. But when I move my body or look at it sideways, then it also reconfigures itself, now into another material body that is spread with helter-skelter, ever-changing glistening paint textures. Alternative rewards: pictorial transcendence or factual earthliness?

***Screenspace #2*** from a few years later—Gagnon's installation of the Christian Pavilion for Expo 67, his film *The Eighth Day* and a trip to Japan have intervened—surprises by how Gagnon has rethought those all-over, seemingly amorphous grisaille fields of the *Glory* paintings. Now he gives them structure, dividing his canvas into four crisply edged, stacked horizontal bands, framed by narrower flat black bands above and below. Equally remarkable is how, where before Gagnon applied his paint in impersonal strokes, now his gestures have become turbulent and emotionally loaded.

Structurally we should not discount Gaucher's influence here. He, after all, was just downstairs in the studio building where for a few years he had been working on his own series of *Colour Band* paintings composed of horizontal colour planes that like Gagnon's, abut along masking tape—perfect lines. But whereas Gaucher always insisted on flawless austerity, Gagnon thrives on surfeit: splotching, dripping and spilling with seeming baroque abandon. Or so, at first glance, we may think. Gagnon may have cultivated the semblance of spontaneity, but in truth there is little that is really haphazard here. That at least is an implication to be drawn from a notebook in Gagnon's archive dated from September 1973 to January 1974 whose entries are evidence of how meticulously Gagnon planned the disposition and relationship of his paint

strokes, his spills and the drips. To follow the distribution of his markings and their tonalities, to discover where his splotches of paint amass along the band edges, and then to skip along with his linear white vertical drips is to reveal a sequence of surprising regularly measured rhythms. Given that the spacing of the four bands is equal, might they not suggest a musical staff, the incidents along its length like paint notes playing their visual concert?

Gagnon was deeply committed to music, but he was equally a filmmaker very conscious of the mechanics of film projection. So if we were to read *Screenspace #2* vertically instead of horizontally, sensitive to the instability caused by the unequal width of upper and lower black framing bands, does the composition not scroll like a roll of film strip, the several bands representing an image of a different painting event or observational moment? Gaucher said that one of the challenges of composing with horizontal lines was to defeat landscape's horizon line. Gagnon, on the contrary again, seems unapologetically to embrace natural phenomena, the bands in *Screenspace #2* like grey-toned slices of panoramic sightings of brooding skies on the edge of rain or snow. It is not incidental that in 1970 Gagnon had bought a farm in Ayer's Cliff in the Eastern Townships, after which many of his paintings conjure up the drama of weather patterns ever-present in the vast heavens that dominate the landscape surrounding his property.

The many grandly scaled paintings that follow through the rest of the decade are unabashedly emotionally expressive, sometimes wrenching us into dark Wagnerian moods, sometimes making us swoon below deliciously painted pink and blue rococo skies. But as always, as quickly as Gagnon teases us into illusionistic space, or unleashes our passions, he denies us resolution, cutting through his atmospheric spaces with that hard Montreal line. An intellectual check is always there in the form of black or white frames, hard-edge horizontal breaks, in the time shifts and in the paint stuff itself, all restating the artificiality of his constructions and underscoring the unresolvedness of the issues at stake.

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