

It's a wistful painting, its pinkish palette knife-strokes trailing off into an evanescent white ground. It's tempting to read nature into its imagery, but one must be careful. At this stage in his work Borduas was given to stress the material body of his work: the way in which he almost sculpts his fields of white paint, their thick skin punctured with equally solid opaque black and brown patches. In 1958, therefore, *Transparence*'s lyricism is unique, and certainly at the opposite end of the spectrum from the three monochromes—red, white and grey—that Borduas made the same year, which seem almost entirely about the paint's body and viscosity.

Transparence was executed in Paris, where Borduas had arrived, full of optimism, in September 1955, after two fruitful years in New York. But Paris disappointed him. It was no longer the hot spot that it was when the Automatistes had shown there at the Galerie de Luxembourg in 1947. Its creative daring had been far surpassed by Abstract Expressionism in New York. If Paris also failed to give Borduas's work serious attention, the last five years of his life in the city were nevertheless remarkably productive. They were a period of both of consolidation—Borduas bringing to new resolutions the lessons learned in New York—and striking out in new inventive directions. Although he himself stayed faithful to painting, his increasing fascination with sheer materiality suggests that he may have looked with more than curiosity at the proto—Arte Povera innovations, like Lucio Fontana's punctures and Alberto Burri's burlap collages, work that he would have seen in both New York and Paris.

Transparence is reticent, the paint applied discreetly, sometimes leaving exposed bits of the white gessoed canvas ground or applied in layers so thin that they retain the canvas's texture. The painting is organized into four horizontal bands, two of which are slightly bluish, all four feeling out tonal shifts as if to evoke atmospheric illusion. Over top of, and sometimes embedded in, the white ground, flutter a quartet of rose-pink configurations, either windblown or hovering there like a small flight of winged insects above a snowy field. To resort to representational analogies seems unavoidable.

It is the freshest of paintings. But maybe it is also a touch nostalgic, as if Borduas were taking time to glance backwards into his own memories, to reconsider and rethink earlier themes for the present. For his colour and lightness of touch there are distant echoes in his early *Spring Morning*, 1937 (Art Gallery of Hamilton), a small painting that he showed at the 55th Spring Exhibition at the Art Association of Montreal in 1938. Its pastel pinks and its loose, delicately sketched whites are resonant with the lessons of Impressionism and of Maurice Denis, at whose school he had studied in Paris in the 1920s. The painting caught the attention of John Lyman, and Jacques de Tonnancour admired "its freshness of touch and of colour."¹

There are other nearer echoes, especially of his paintings from 1953, executed after he arrived in New York while in the process of absorbing the lessons of Abstract Expressionism. This was when he collapsed into flatness his former Surrealist figure-ground spaces, often deploying lateral knife strokes to shut out our view into depths beyond. Sometimes he overtopped his flattened grounds with individual sign-like gestures, adding descriptive titles like *The Signs Take Flight*, 1953 (MMFA). An especially apt forerunner to *Transparence* might be *The Dance of the Glacier*, 1953 (Private Collection). In it, darker paint strokes flit rhythmically across a lighter background that the title identifies with ice and snow. And referencing the title again, the overlain paint strokes "dance," a metaphorical description that led François-Marc Gagnon to recall the figure of the Automatiste dancer Françoise Sullivan, as she was photographed by Maurice Perron performing her 1948 *Danse dans la neige*.² But in 1948 Sullivan was in her winter boots.

¹ François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas* Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1988, p. 274.

² *Ibid.*, p. 336.

The choreography of *Transparence*, instead, is gravity-free, even ethereal, and the painting luminous and intimately poetic. Is this perhaps why Ayala Zacks—she and her husband, Sam, may have acquired the painting already in 1958 from the *Paul-Émile Borduas—Harold Town* exhibition held that year in London³—did not include it as one of the many Zacks donations to museums, but kept it close until the end of her life?

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³ Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, *Paul-Émile Borduas—Harold Town* October 1958, No. 9.