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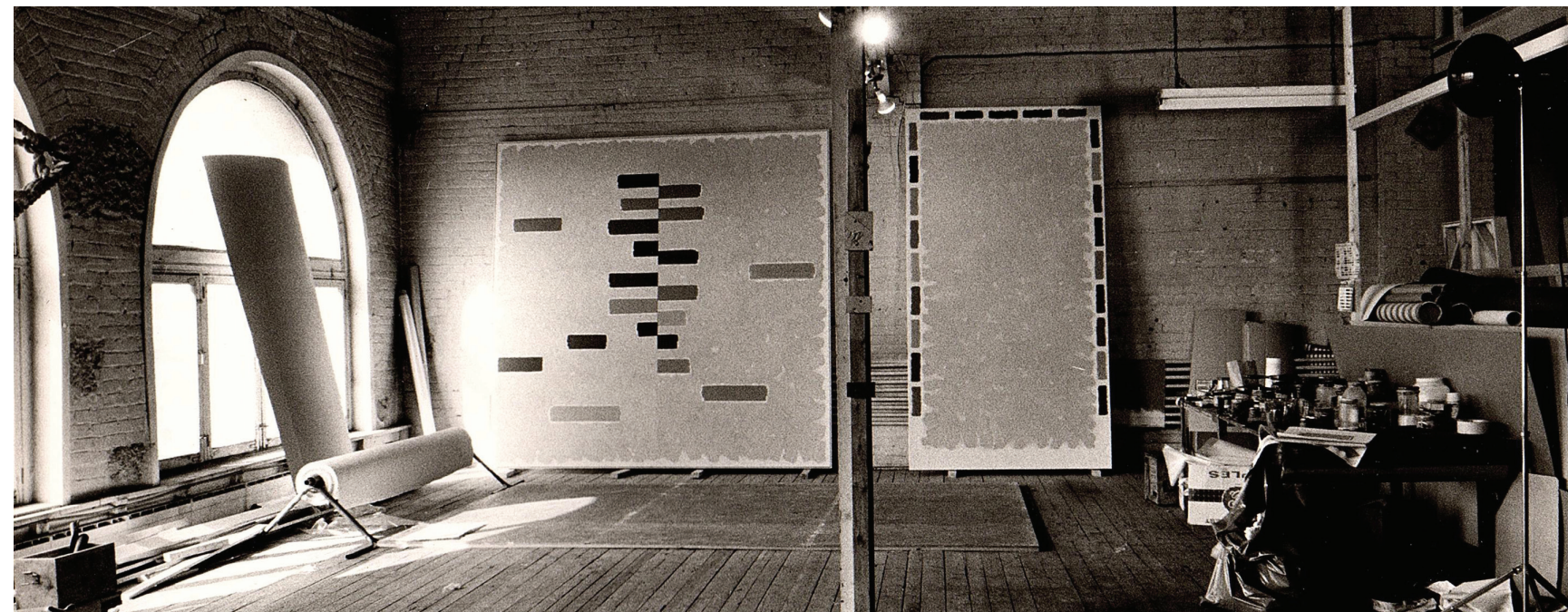
Acrylic on 30 birch panels, 72 x 138 inches (182.9 cm x 350.5 cm).

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Ristvedt's Montréal studio, 1973. On the far wall (L to R): *Phoenix*, 1973 (Cat. #9); and *Summer Window*, 1973, 114 x 60 inches (289.6 x 152.4 cm). Private Collection. In the foreground are sculptures by Canadian artist Henry Saxe (b. 1937) with whom Ristvedt shared a studio. Photo: Gabor Szilasi.

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# THE COLOUR OF HER DREAMS

# LA COULEUR DE SES RÊVES

*Eric Devlin*

Milly Ristvedt dreams in colour. Like her country. Born in Vancouver, she studied at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr University). She held her first solo exhibition in 1968 at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, the first in Toronto to represent Guido Molinari (1933–2004), whose name is synonymous with Canadian abstract painting. In the early 1970s, she lived in Montréal, where she cofounded and headed up the first Canadian artist-run center, Véhicule Art. For the past 40 years, she has lived and worked in Tamworth, a village located in the center of the triangle formed by Montréal, Toronto, and Ottawa. She has watched the sun rise over the Atlantic and set over the Pacific. To paraphrase the title of the famous work by Joan Miró (1893-1983)<sup>1</sup>, Milly Ristvedt is the colour of her dreams.

Milly Ristvedt rêve en couleur. Comme son pays d'ailleurs. Elle est née en Colombie-Britannique où elle a fait ses études à la Vancouver School of Art (maintenant Emily Carr University). Elle a eu sa première exposition solo en 1968 chez Carmen Lamanna qui a été le premier marchand torontois de Guido Molinari (1933-2004), le pape de la peinture abstraite canadienne. Au début des années 1970, elle a vécu à Montréal où elle a fondé et dirigé le premier centre d'artistes canadien, Véhicule Art. Depuis quarante ans, elle vit et travaille à Tamworth, un village situé au centre du triangle formé des villes de Montréal, Toronto et Ottawa. Elle a vu le soleil se lever sur l'Atlantique et se coucher sur le Pacifique. Milly Ristvedt est la couleur de ses rêves pour citer le célèbre tableau de Joan Miró (1893-1983)<sup>1</sup>.

## REVISITING AN OLD DEBATE

In post-war Paris, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles provided a remarkable showcase for a new art completely divorced from any visual representation of the natural world.<sup>2</sup> By turns termed concrete art, non-figurative art, and abstract art, this new current sparked passionate debate between the champions of a smoothly geometrical “cool” art and a more lyrical and gestural “warm art.” But it was by no means a marginal current: no fewer than 366 artists took part in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles of 1948.

## RETOUR SUR UN VIEUX DÉBAT

Dans le Paris d'après-guerre, le Salon des Réalités Nouvelles a offert une formidable vitrine à un “art totalement dégagé de la vision directe et de l'interprétation de la nature”<sup>2</sup>. Cet art était qualifié tour à tour d'art concret, d'art non figuratif ou d'art abstrait. Il y eut des débats passionnés entre les partisans d'un art “froid” - lisse et géométrique - et ceux d'un art “chaud” - plus lyrique, plus gestuel. Cet art était loin d'être marginal comme en attestent les 366 artistes ayant participé au Salon des Réalités nouvelles de 1948.

Warm and cool currents also swept through Canada's nascent post-war painting community, spawning such movements as the Automatistes, the Painters Eleven, and the Plasticiens. The evolution of an artist such as Fernand Leduc (1916–2014) is particularly eloquent in this regard. A signatory of the 1948 *Refus Global* manifesto, Leduc changed course in 1955, adopting a painterly approach based on simple, boldly coloured geometric forms. Then in 1970, he undertook his major *Microchromie* cycle, a series not of monochromes, but rather subtle studies of light. Michel Martin, then curator at Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, described these paintings as works in which the vibration of light alone becomes both matter and subject.<sup>3</sup>

Le chaud et le froid ont également soufflé sur la jeune peinture canadienne d'après-guerre avec les Automatistes, Painters Eleven et les Plasticiens. Le parcours d'un artiste comme Fernand Leduc (1916-2014) est, de ce point de vue, particulièrement intéressant. Signataire en 1948 du manifeste *Refus Global*, sa peinture évolue en 1955 vers des formes géométriques simples aux couleurs franches. Puis en 1970, il amorce le grand cycle des *microchromies* qui ne sont pas des

monochromes mais de subtiles études sur la lumière. Michel Martin alors conservateur du Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec décrit les microchromies comme des oeuvres dont “la seule action vibratoire de la lumière constitue à la fois la matière et le sujet.”<sup>3</sup>



Ristvedt in her Montréal studio, 1973. Painting in the background is *Carnival Green*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 30.3 inches (305 cm x 77 cm). Canada Council Art Bank. ABBA# 72/3-1660. Photo: Gabor Szilasi.

Like Fernand Leduc, Milly Ristvedt takes a deep interest in the colour of place and time. For example, when we look at this series of four rectangular miniatures, with their coloured squares swirling against a gray backdrop, we're not surprised to see the title: *September/October* (Cat. #58). This quartet, which dates from 2014, diffuses a distinctly autumnal light.

Tout comme Fernand Leduc, Milly Ristvedt s'intéresse à la couleur des lieux ou du moment. Par exemple, lorsqu'on regarde cette suite de quatre tableaux rectangulaires aux tonalités de gris à la surface desquels tombent en tourbillonnant des carrés de couleurs, nous ne sommes pas surpris qu'ils portent le titre *September/October* (Cat. #58). De ces quatre tableaux réalisés en 2014 émane une lumière automnale.



*Working Drawings*, 1973. Mixed media on panel, 20 x 23 inches (50.8 x 58.42 cm). Oeno Gallery. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CODES OF GEOMETRIC ABSTRACT ART

Milly Ristvedt belongs to an extended family of artists tracing its roots to the mid-20th century. I had the joy and privilege of knowing—and showing—some of these artists, including Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher (1934–2000), along with members of the family’s European branch, namely Aurélie Nemours (1910–2005), Ode Bertrand (b. 1930), and Martin Müller-Reinhart (1954–2009). The youngest members of this aesthetic family—artists like Milly Ristvedt and Martin Müller-Reinhart—took a very open-minded approach compared to some of their more intransigent colleagues. And you wouldn’t believe the fierce debates that racked this artistic family—quibbles and quarrels on par with ancient Christian polemics on how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

## PETIT MANUEL DES CODES DE L’ART CONSTRUIT

Milly Ristvedt appartient à une grande famille d’artistes qui sont apparus au milieu du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. J’ai eu le privilège et le bonheur de connaître ou d’exposer certains d’entre eux comme

Guido Molinari ou Yves Gaucher (1934-2000) ainsi que des représentants européens de cette famille esthétique comme Aurélie Nemours (1910-2005), Ode Bertrand (b. 1930) ou Martin Müller-Reinhart (1954-2009). Les plus jeunes de cette famille comme Milly Ristvedt ou Martin Müller-Reinhart ont adopté une attitude très ouverte devant l’intransigeance de certains collègues. Et vous n’avez pas idée des débats qui ont animé cette grande famille de l’art construit. Des débats pour un poil de pinceau qui nous rappellent ceux plus anciens de l’église chrétienne sur le sexe des anges.

Here are a few notions to help understand geometric abstract art. In the eyes of some practitioners, all traces of the brush—and by extension the artist’s hand—had to be totally absent from the work. In other words, the painting had to look machine made. For others, slight imperfections were tolerable, giving shape and movement to the divisions between colours. Some artists refused all 20th-century materials, such as masking tape or aerosol paint. Others eliminated specific elements from their work. In 1964, for example, Guido Molinari decided to paint exclusively with vertical stripes on the grounds that horizontal stripes evoked the idea of landscape. Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) refused to use green because it symbolized nature.

Voici quelques distinctions sur l’art construit. Certains exigent que la trace du pinceau, donc la main de l’artiste, ne figure pas dans l’œuvre. En d’autres mots, le tableau semble fabriqué par une machine. Il n’y a aucune émotion dans le trait. D’autres artistes acceptent que l’on sente la très légère imperfection du trait. La frontière entre deux couleurs devient alors sensible. Certains refusent tous les matériaux du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle : masking tape et peinture en aérosol notamment. D’autres artistes éliminent des éléments particuliers de leurs œuvres. Ainsi, en 1964, Guido Molinari décide de composer ses tableaux uniquement de bandes verticales car les horizontales évoquent la notion de paysage. Et Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) évacue le vert car cette couleur symbolise la nature.

And Milly Ristvedt? She did as she pleased, heedless of the doctrines of her colleagues. Molinari’s large vertical compositions

from the 1960s and the checkerboard motifs in his end-of-career *Continuum* series are all painted with surgical precision. The division between colours is clean and precise. The same goes for Claude Tousignant. It was the summit of what the critics term “hard edge” abstraction. But Milly Ristvedt has a completely different take on the question.

Et Milly Ristvedt, que fait-elle ? Elle se donne la liberté de faire ce qu’elle veut sans égard aux doctrines défendues par ses collègues. Par exemple, les grandes compositions verticales de Molinari des années 1960 ou les damiers de la série *Continuum* qu’il réalisa à la fin de sa vie sont exécutés avec une précision chirurgicale. La frontière entre deux couleurs est nette et précise. Il en est de même chez Claude Tousignant. C’est l’apologie du Hard Edge pour reprendre le jargon critique.

Her colour divisions are often blurred, with hints of raw canvas peaking through, as in the works of Jack Bush. In other cases, her squares of colour are executed with machine-like precision, in keeping with the Hard Edge practitioners. But rather than form a systematic grid, they are deployed on the canvas in choreographed sequence or isolated from each other, with no direct contact, awash in a large field of colour. Milly Ristvedt’s paintings follow their own precise rules, but lack the predictability of her colleagues’ works. She borrows from the codes of geometric abstraction, but disregards dogma to create her own artistic language.

L’attitude de Milly Ristvedt est totalement différente sur cette question. Le plus souvent, cette frontière est floue et laisse entrevoir la toile brute, tout comme dans les tableaux de Jack Bush. Dans d’autres circonstances, les carrés de couleurs seront froidement exécutés comme le préconisent les apôtres du Hard Edge. Par contre, ils ne formeront pas une grille rigoureuse mais ils répondront à une savante chorégraphie sur la toile ou bien ils seront isolés, sans contact direct avec d’autres au milieu d’un grand champ coloré. Les tableaux de Milly Ristvedt obéissent à des règles précises mais ils ne sont pas prévisibles comme les œuvres de ses confrères. Elle emprunte à cette large famille de l’art construit les codes de chacun, faisant fi des dogmes édictés.

Milly Ristvedt’s work follows no predetermined program. For starters, she prefers variety to repetition. In this, she differs from most of her contemporaries, refusing to adopt the kind of systematic approach espoused by Guido Molinari or the Swiss painter Richard Paul Lohse (1902–1988), who conceived and programmed his work in the 1940s and 1950s, but didn’t actually produce the paintings until 15 or 20 years later, when he had the financial means to do so and a market where he could sell them.

L’œuvre de Milly Ristvedt ne répond pas à un programme déterminé d’avance par l’artiste. D’une part Milly Ristvedt n’aime pas la répétition ; elle cultive la variation. Elle se différencie ainsi de la plupart de ses collègues en n’adoptant pas une attitude systématique comme celle de Guido Molinari ou le suisse Richard Paul Lohse (1902-1988) qui a pensé et organisé son œuvre dans les années 1940-50 mais exécuté les tableaux quinze ou vingt ans plus tard lorsqu’il a eu les moyens financiers et le marché pour les vendre.

This systematic approach is absent from Milly Ristvedt’s work. She constantly revisits themes she has already explored in the past. But her approach is not without rigour, as evidenced by the series *Breathing Space Room* (2012). In this series, she establishes a vertical band colour sequence repeated across canvases of widely different shapes and sizes. Even though all of the paintings feature the same colour sequence, the effect they each produce is very different, not to mention the spatial interaction between the works.

Ce systématisme est absent de l’œuvre Milly Ristvedt. Elle se permet constamment des retours sur des propositions déjà explorées. Mais sa démarche n’exclut pas la rigueur comme en témoigne la série *Breathing Space Room* (2012) où elle établit une séquence de couleurs sur des bandes verticales qu’elle va répéter sur des toiles de formats très variés. Même si tous les tableaux sont composés de la même séquence de couleur, l’effet produit par chacun sera très différent. Sans oublier l’interaction dans l’espace entre chacune des œuvres.



## THE PAINTING AS HAIKU

Like all artists' studios, Milly Ristvedt's workplace is overflowing with paintings. But every time I've visited, I've always had the strange impression that each of them was unique. I've never felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of them, or any sense of repetition.

## LE TABLEAU COMME UN HAIKU

Comme tous les ateliers d'artiste, celui de Milly Ristvedt déborde de tableaux. Mais à chaque fois que j'y suis allé, j'avais cette étrange impression que chaque tableau était unique. Je n'étais jamais assommé par la quantité et la répétition.

Take for example the small painting entitled *Fifteen Coats of Water* (1998). The title, both conceptual and poetic, refers to the number of coats applied to the rectangles that make up the grid.

Prenez par exemple le petit tableau intitulé *Fifteen Coats of Water* (1998). Son titre est à la fois très conceptuel mais également poétique. Le titre décrit le nombre de couche appliquée sur les rectangles qui composent cette petite grille.

Guido Molinari had a similar idea with his *Quantificateur* series, produced between 1978 and the mid-1990s. The paintings that make up the series are composed of vertical trapezoids, the bases and opposing ends of which differ slightly. The impression is one of perfectly rectangular strips. Molinari used a single colour per painting, but varied the quantity of paint in each segment, creating nuances of intensity and shade. The principle is simple, but rich.

Guido Molinari a eu une idée similaire avec la série des *Quantificateurs*. Les tableaux étaient formés de trapèzes verticaux dont la base et la partie opposée étaient légèrement différentes. Nous avons l'impression d'être devant des bandes parfaitement rectangulaires. Une seule couleur était employée mais en quantité différente sur chaque partie du tableau. Il se dégageait donc du tableau une légère nuance dans l'intensité de la couleur. Le principe est simple mais riche. La série des Quantificateurs débute en 1978 et se termine au milieu des années 1990.

Like a haiku, *Fifteen Coats of Water* is unique, even though it has affiliations with other works from the same year, such as the sumptuous *Judd* (Cat. #40). With the *Quantificateur* series, each painting is different, of course, but a certain lassitude sets in once you've seen the fiftieth canvas. The sense of variation is quick to end.

*Fifteen Coats of Water* est unique comme un haiku même si par sa composition, nous pouvons l'associer à d'autres œuvres de la même année comme le somptueux *Judd* (Cat. #40). Certes chaque *Quantificateur* est différent mais une certaine lassitude peut vous envahir après le cinquantième. La variation est une courte répétition.

## WHY GRIDS?

Since 1990, Milly Ristvedt's paintings have shared a common structure built around a central element: the grid. Present before, but in a less obvious manner, grids allow her to face the colours of her dreams head on, and contain them within the four walls of a square. The grid is a dynamic structure, not a rigid one, and can even give way to colour.

## POURQUOI LA GRILLE?

Depuis 1990, une structure habite les tableaux de Milly Ristvedt : la grille. Elle était présente auparavant mais de manière moins évidente. Cette structure lui permet de confronter les couleurs de ses rêves sur les quatre faces du carré. C'est une structure dynamique et non pas rigide. La grille peut même s'effacer pour laisser place à la couleur.

And where to next for Milly Ristvedt? The great British artist Bridget Riley (b. 1931) may have the answer to the question of the future of abstract painting as practiced by the Canadian artist. In 1983, in conclusion to a text on the blossoming of abstract art, she wrote "the potential of what is called abstract colour painting, which places particular emphasis on the interplay between colours, has barely been touched. I would expect and hope that by the year 2020 abstract painters will be extracting from this endlessly rich seam a range of exciting work that will genuinely enlarge the vocabulary of art and our perception of the world around us."<sup>4</sup>

Et maintenant où s'en va Milly Ristvedt ? C'est la grande artiste britannique Bridget Riley (1931) qui a probablement la réponse à cette question de l'avenir de la peinture abstraite telle que la pratique Milly Ristvedt. En 1983, elle écrivait en guise de conclusion à un texte sur l'épanouissement de l'art abstrait que « le potentiel de ce qu'on appelle la peinture abstraite de couleur, qui met un accent particulier sur le jeu entre les couleurs, a été à peine touché. Je présume – et j'espère – qu'en 2020 les peintres abstraits extrairont de cette veine infiniment riche un éventail d'œuvres stimulantes qui augmentera véritablement le vocabulaire de l'art et notre perception du monde ».<sup>4</sup>

The year 2020 is not far away—and Milly Ristvedt still dreams in colour.

Nous arrivons bientôt en 2020 et Milly Ristvedt rêve toujours en couleur.



*Ways of Seeing #2*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (121.9 x 121.9 cm). Oeno Gallery. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

1. **Joan Miró**, *Photo: Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves*, 1925, oil on canvas, *Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*.  
*Photo: Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves*, 1925, Peinture huile sur toile. *Collection du Metropolitan Museum of Art de New York*.
2. Adapted from Article 1 of the bylaws of Société du Salon des Réalités Nouvelles.  
Extrait de l'article 1 des Statuts de la société du Salon des Réalités Nouvelles.
3. **Fernand Leduc**, *Libérer la lumière* (*Musée national de beaux-arts du Québec*, 2006) page 24.
4. *L'esprit de l'œil: Bridget Riley*. (*Les éditions Beaux-arts de Paris*, 2008) page 178.

## BIO

After studying geological engineering and working as a scientific journalist for 14 years, Eric Devlin opened his first gallery in Montréal in 1988. He has participated in more than 50 fairs and exhibitions in Europe. He also served as president of the AGAC (Contemporary Art Galleries Association) and created the Montréal art fair *Papier*, which celebrated its tenth anniversary this year.

# SEEING IS BELIEVING

Lola Lemire Tostevin

On her website, Milly Ristvedt states that the nature of her art is to resist words. When asked about this she explained that words can never fully articulate what they want to convey. Her work, she said, is an expression of intuition, the ability to understand without the need for conscious reasoning. Yet, as a writer, I have been asked to write on her work.

When I first viewed Ristvedt's paintings in her studio I was reminded of the man who heard music for the first time, convinced he was hearing a language whose meaning people wanted to keep from him. I knew the usual vocabulary associated with the non-objective art I was viewing, theories based on "relationships of form and colour," "the orthogo-

In our minds there is an awareness of perfection and when we look with our eyes we see it.

- AGNES MARTIN

nal grid," etc... but I wanted to see anew. Too often concepts, theories, premises, call to mind what is already known, whereas the purpose of art is to see beyond the known. In other words, I wanted to cross a threshold. But could I, a writer, do this only through preverbal intuition? Is it possible to disconnect the eye from narration? Does a blind person disconnect what he "sees," from what his sense of touch tells him? He may feel the roundness of an apple, but it is the word "apple" that differentiates it from similar forms. It is the word "green" or "red" or "yellow" that defines the form. The word becomes, if you'll pardon the pun, the apple of his eye.

Approaching a work of art mainly through conventional thinking and language will control the interpretive act and impose conformist meaning. The same rule applies to the writing of poetry. As poetry extends the conventional use of language, language can extend art's intuitive range. Their coexistence creates more possibilities, more levels of meaning.

When Ristvedt was asked when and how she came to abstract painting with such a strong emphasis on colour as form she tells the delightful story of when she was eleven years old and she asked to join a group of women who met regularly on one of their landscape painting outings. For their subject, the women chose a fast-flowing river. Realizing she was not up to the challenge of painting a representational interpretation of water in all its movement and colours, Ristvedt turned to a landscape of hills, mountainside, and field. When she got home she set the painting aside for a while, and when she returned to it later she was amazed to discover it did not represent a literal painting of a landscape but a variety of the colour green. I suspect the reason Ristvedt tells this story is because it marks the decisive moment when she was freed from the representational aspect of art. Green, in all its depths, volumes, intensities were no longer a surface colour for a tree, a field, or a mountain, it existed for its own sake. Colour would become the main element of Ristvedt's art, the main factor in apprehending the world. One wonders if the nuances, the light created in the juxtaposition of various greens in the painting *Just So Green*, 1981, wasn't an extension of this memory.

As in poetry, a painting yields mainly what a viewer puts into it. The extent to which viewers see is who they are. But intuition is not static. It is refined and redefined through an accumulation of knowledge, experience and cultural complexity. Perhaps because I am a writer I am mindful of how the exchange of ideas, views and experience extends the range of understanding and perception beyond preverbal

intuition. As one of my favourite poets, Fernando Pessoa wrote, "Fields are greener in their description than in their actual greenness."

Ristvedt's thesis for her Master of Arts degree examines the work of three contemporary artists: Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Gerhard Richter. In her introduction she writes, "Artists who have worked with the [orthogonal] grid continue to explore the same eternally vexing problems and mysteries of our existence, but analyses of their art are cloaked in an atmosphere and language of rationalism. Critics and scholars have devoted their attention to discussing the properties of form, giving the behaviour and status of colour, as a property affecting mind and body, little mention."

Ristvedt's influences span a period of at least one hundred years. While it is impossible for such a short essay to go over the history of various art movements during those years, it is perhaps indispensable to keep in mind artists who first drew attention to the role of colour in their work. Matisse and Cézanne, to name but two, while painting from a sense of place were aware how colour defined form, making their canvases, and the places depicted, vibrant and extraordinary. Matisse complained he found it difficult to describe his process in words, yet he described it perfectly: "The problem is to dominate reality and, by extracting its substance, reveal it to itself... manipulate without danger the explosives of colours." He had discovered a way of defying the limitations of one of our senses, namely seeing.

At a movie I once attended with my then three-year-old grandson he asked if the real story was taking place behind the screen. As delightful and innocent the question seems, it suggests we are conditioned from a young age to expect a "true" narrative behind a partition or, in the case of art, behind a canvas. Reinhardt, Martin, Richter, Ristvedt, want viewers to understand that what is presented on canvas is the story.

A book I've returned to many times over the last thirty years



is Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Letters on Cézanne*. It exemplifies the strong relationship that exists between visual art and poetry. After visiting and musing upon Cézanne's work, Rilke became aware of the indissoluble relationship between object and colour, how colour defines form, thereby defining the object. Think of the red of Cézanne's apples. While crossing Place de la Concorde one day, Rilke noticed the area flooded in "an ocean of cold barely blue." Shapes in the background were no longer houses but "blue dove gray" forms. Cézanne's art had intensified Rilke's perception of the colour blue. He felt he could have written an entire monograph on it. "Suddenly one has the right eyes. The poets have learned to see."

Ristvedt shared a studio with Jack Bush in the late sixties, a period known for gestural abstraction also referred to as lyrical abstraction. Much of her work through the seventies and eighties combines expressive and what appears to be spontaneous organization. *Fabliau*, 1970 (Cat. #7), the first painting I saw in her studio immediately reminded me of a photograph of scarves hanging on a clothes line taken in North Africa. As I forced myself out of my figurative mode, I was reminded of the art of the sixties and seventies, of Jack Bush, of Colour Field painters such as Morris Louis, principally Louis's *Where*, 1960. Is this a criticism? Absolutely not. It is proof that Ristvedt, like many artists of the period, was pursuing techniques based on the visual

and complementary variance of colours. It also proves her standing in this important development in the history of art which tended to ignore women artists.

*Time Lapse*, 1986 (Cat. #27), is a favourite Ristvedt of mine. Still within the orthogonal grid, Ristvedt used an alla prima, or wet-on-wet method, building from the background up without waiting hours or days for the paint to dry. It immediately brought to mind a Kandinskian palette, but one that has been freed from the contingencies of place and time. Dense and vibrant colours against a dark blue velvety background gives the painting considerable depth. In spite of the wet-on-wet layering of colours, applied either with brush or roller or directly from tubes, etc... the colours are distinct, unmuddied. The painting gleams, the colours are in perfect harmony, the cool blue circle hovering at the top left stabilizes the saturated red form at bottom right. An exceptional piece.

Ristvedt used gestural brushstrokes to great effect in *Fifteen Coats of Water*, 1998. While a viewer's initial reaction could easily interpret the painting as being representational: "This is how an ocean looks at night," I concentrated on the pull of the fifteen brushstrokes that balance the composition. Each stroke is of a different fluidity, some more transparent than others because of the water used in diluting the blue paint. The exposed canvas-weave in some places emphasizes the



*Just so Green*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 96 inches (61 x 243.8 cm). Oeno Gallery. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

painting's essence, its own intrinsic meaning. Yet, I still found it difficult not visualizing a body of water at night. In extracting its illustrative features, Ristvedt retained two of the painting's most essential qualities: its own intrinsic value, but also a challenge to the viewer's deep-seated conditioning. Water, after all, is a perfect reflective medium. It can only see what it reflects. Such as in the myth of Narcissus.

In 1915, Kazimir Malevich, the leading exponent of colour theory painted his first *Black Square* against a white background evoking the experience of pure non-objectivity against timelessness. He named the concept Suprematism. I am as wary of concepts claiming "purity" as I am of the term Suprematism. Both terms suggest dominance over other schools of thought. I prefer the words of Agnes Martin: "Artists try to maintain an atmosphere of freedom in order to represent those [free and creative] moments. And others searching for the meaning of art respond by recalling their own free moments."

I have attended exhibitions of the work of the three artists Ristvedt mentions in her thesis. The experience on each occasion was divided: intuitive coherence, but also reactions triggered by cultural and social conditioning. I loved Reinhardt's paintings permeated with colour with only hints of background partitions. However, my initial reaction to his paintings of black crosses instinctively reminded of religious totalitarianism, fascism, and deep mourning. On the other hand, the thin and blue stripes of Ristvedt's *Breathing Space for Agnes*, 2012, had the opposite effect. They create an atmosphere of light and air generating a scansion of breath, a rhythm of inhaling and exhaling. As I remember my experience of this particular work, as well as the seven remarkable panels that make up another similarly titled piece, *Breathing Space Room*, 2013, I become aware how language deepens my initial experience. Words expand and refine the significance of what was first perceived at an intuitive level,

much as it does in the scansion of poetic lines.

*Everything and Nothing*, 2012 (Cat. #55), was the last painting I viewed on my studio visit. After five hours I felt I had seen every possible colour on the spectrum and in a way I had. Titles can influence how paintings are interpreted, the reason I am wary of them especially when a title seems to have nothing to do with the painting itself but merely an instrument of identification for some ineffable feeling. Because most of Ristvedt's titles do not relate to anything outside her paintings, they add to their understanding. The grey stripes in this painting could simply be the result of mixing black and white, but it is so much more. Black, the total absence of light, is experienced as nothing but its colour. White, on the other hand, absorbs every colour on the spectrum. In combining black and white in all its permutations, the painting represents nothing figurative, yet it contains everything fundamental to its creation. As Ristvedt points out in her thesis, quoting Gerhard Richter via John Cage, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." *Everything and Nothing* has nothing figurative to show but it is showing it. Richter has described his own grey paintings as a result of being depressed, going through periods of hopelessness, etc... The textured greys of *Everything and Nothing* on the other hand project tranquility, reflection and, ironically, silence.

I believe one of the reasons Richter remains a favourite of many art lovers is the facility with which he explores different styles and movements or, in Ristvedt's words, "he was not held captive to any stylistic or material process regime."

I would have loved to have seen *Increments*, 2015 (Cat. #61). It consists of 66 panels, each one a foot square, depicting colour and volume against a white background. It's as if each white panel had released its own colour. Unfortunately, the 66 panels were packed in boxes when I visited and, because of time and space, it was impossible to see them. It is the kind of major work whose viewing requires an entire gallery

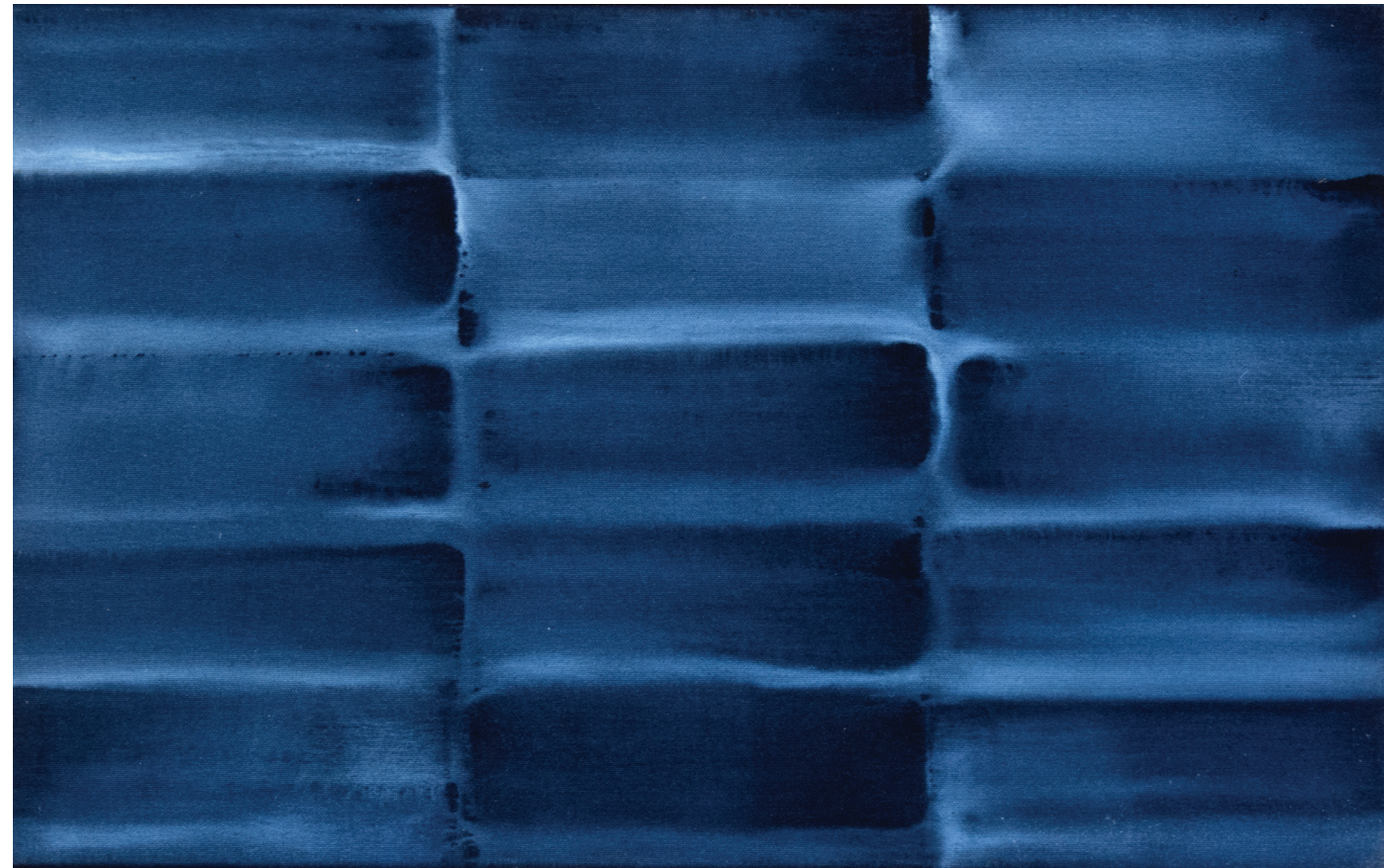


or part of a museum. I suspect it was influenced by a long list of artists who played crucial roles in the history of colour theories such as Mondrian, Richter, and, as Ristvedt herself has noted, Ellsworth Kelly, principally Kelly's *Colors for a Large Wall*.

I doubt Ristvedt has come to the end of her painting career, yet *Increments* is of such consequence it feels like the culmination of decades of creative exploration. Although I saw it only on a monitor, I reacted to this piece on many levels, wondering at the story behind the screen, a story undoubtedly about the relationship of colours, their contrasts

and many hues, about nothing representational yet about everything concerning Ristvedt's art.

There is no doubt that Milly Ristvedt works from a profoundly intuitive place where she maintains its reality, upholds its autonomy. As I come to the end of this short essay I worry I will not have done her or her art justice. The 160 or so pages of her thesis, including more than 100 academic and specialist texts listed as her sources, are so commanding I fear they leave little room for a personal approach. It is unrealistic to expect most viewers, including myself, to experience this art with the knowledge displayed in Ristvedt's



*Fifteen Coats of Water*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 24 inches (38.1 x 61 cm). Oeno Gallery. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

thesis. But then I remind myself that a work of art isn't complete until someone other than the artist encounters it, thereby defying notions of ownership, specialization, repetitiveness. Each viewer brings knowledge to a work of art that the work itself cannot provide. Giving ideas a form, and putting them out into the world provides the crucial link between seeing and thinking. The result may not be as pure as an artist or a writer would wish, but it is one of the many dangers of creativity.

Lola Lemire Tostevin ©



*Breathing Space for Agnes*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches (121.9 x 91.4 cm). Oeno Gallery. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

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#### BIO

Lola Lemire Tostevin has published thirteen books including eight collections of poetry, three novels, two collections of literary criticism which also include essays on the visual arts. Her translations of French texts on and by Quebec artists have appeared in several venues.



# A LIFE IN COLOUR

Milly Ristvedt

This is a story that contains some clues to the path I've taken as an artist. Just as a river changes and manifests itself in unpredictable ways once it leaves its source waters, and meets up with the physical obstacles and tributaries that help further direct its course, it is hardly possible to trace with accuracy all the elements that influence the journey of an artist. Something will always be missed, but foundational conditions and experiences are important starting points.

My early years were spent in a small town at the foot of mountains that disappeared into the waters of Howe Sound on the west coast of Canada, a place of

horizontal grey-blue sea, and forest-green verticality. I remember standing in my crib and deciding that the muddied 'seafoam green' of the walls in my room was a damp and lifeless colour, much like the gray sky outside the window. When I was old enough to run and play, most of my time was spent outdoors, often exploring the surrounding wilderness alone. In the deep gloom of the mountain's forest I often found moments of light and beauty, but I suspect my later passion for colour developed in part as a rebellion against the sombre and nuanced tints, tones and shades that make up the restricted palette typical of British Columbia's coastal landscape.

In Grade 5, 1952, I came across a reproduction of one of Franz Marc's *Blaue Reiter* paintings; a painting of a blue horse in a colourful, abstracted landscape. I had earlier fallen in love with horses and spent hours tracing images of them, but this was something quite different. The painting was not about the horse; it was about primal energies and colour.

Sometime later that year I joined a group of local artists on one of their painting ventures. We set out on a Saturday morning to the site they had chosen; a fast-flowing creek in which granite boulders, colours enhanced in the process, caused eddies and swirls to form in the sparkling waters that rushed over and around them. As magnificent as the scene was, it was beyond my skills and limited poster paint palette, so I turned to face the hills and mountain.

Painting the trees rising in layers upward to their intersection with the sky absorbed my attention the rest of the afternoon. Once home, I set the painting board down on my desk for only a moment or two. When I turned back to it I discovered, with a spine-tingling jolt, not a landscape painting but a collection of shapes of various greenish hue on a piece of paper. It was probably later in that same year that I saw an image of an abstract painting by Paul-Emile Borduas, and despite my previous limited exposure to art, recognized the kinship with my paper with green shapes.

Those early experiences began to shape what was to come, but just like the river, obstacles that threatened to drastically alter its course had to be negotiated along the way.

We were a typical 1950's working class family of five, living in the company town where my father worked as a miner. His unexpected death just before I turned fifteen was devastating, causing long-lasting disruption to our lives. With no family member employed by the company and no savings, we had to move to Vancouver where I completed my final three years of high school, working full-time as a waitress for one of those years.

In the turmoil of this period I could not think about art as a serious pursuit. I was urged to focus on developing secretarial skills instead of academics. After high school I spent a year at a low-paying job that held no future, so I quit just as August was beginning. I spent the next couple of weeks lying in the sun and reading. One day, propped on my elbows in the midst of Paul Tillich's, *The Courage to Be*, the question, 'What is it you want to do?' entered my mind, immediately followed by, 'Make art'.



Ristvedt at the studio of French painter Alain Clément (b. 1941) during Triangle Artists' Workshop, 1995, Marseille, France. Photo: Anon.



I raced home to call my high school art teacher, who advised that there was an art school in Vancouver and urged me to put a portfolio together and apply. I scrambled to collect what little artwork I had saved from high school (including drawings donated for the purpose by a classmate, her signature carefully erased and replaced) and presented myself to the Director of the Vancouver School of Art, barely a week before the year was to begin. With such a “sketchy” portfolio I was lucky to be admitted, and can only put it down to low enrolment that year. A friend offered to pay my tuition fee and I gratefully accepted.



Ristvedt working in her Tamworth studio, 2017. Photo: Oeno Gallery.

This was a life-altering decision. I began school in a heightened state of exhilaration that did not abate even as I worked full-time evenings for most of the first year. Skills in design, drawing and sculpture were sharpened in first year and my first real introduction to Art began. The painter Takao Tanabe taught Composition, and when I learned to challenge his ideas with my own, we developed a strong and lasting respect for each other. At the Vancouver Art Gallery I saw the work of artists as diverse as Rembrandt, Art Mackay and Jasper Johns, and fell in love with the sculpture of Jacob Epstein. There were several private galleries, but in the early 1960s the art scene in Vancouver was small.

The next year I found part-time work in a law office, which made continuing at school easier. Some fellow students and I visited the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, to which art museums from across the country had contributed works from their collections. Among the most memorable for me were works by Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clifford Still, and Mark di Suvero.

Artist and poet Roy Kiyooka was my painting instructor in second and third year and from him I received a solid introduction to colour, most notably the theories of Johannes Itten. Roy was instrumental in introducing us to modern, contemporary and avant-garde theories and movements in all disciplines, including poetry, dance, film and music, and to many of the most au courant and provocative artists of the day. He was exceptional also in setting students free to develop their own ideas and practices, in the enlightened belief that to continue to grow as an artist in the outside world, it was best to first test one's ideas in the supportive critical environment of the classroom.

After experimenting briefly with oils, enamel house paints, and some dangerous paint concoctions that involved melting Lucite crystals in turpentine, I made my own acrylic paints

with Rhoplex medium and powder pigments. The paintings that resulted were gestural, multi-hued patchworks, evidence of my increasing fascination with colour.

I did not have the luxury at the time to focus on anything that was not vital to my development as a practicing artist, so my attention to art history began with late 19th Century Impressionist artists such as Cézanne and Monet. I was even more stimulated by twentieth century art and artists, particularly artists of the Bauhaus, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Colour Field painting and Conceptual Art, and my immersion in their theories and practices provided the fertile ground my work would emerge from.

I was fortunate to have received this grounding because it became increasingly difficult to continue as a student. At the end of third year in 1964, I took the train to Toronto; a tougher and more stimulating milieu for a budding artist. Before finding a job and a place to live, I spent a week in New York staying with a friend from my high school days and visiting all the major art museums. I enlisted the advice of an art dealer who generously helped me narrow down the number of private galleries in Manhattan to those devoted to contemporary painting and sculpture.

I visited all 33 galleries, and returned to Toronto saturated and exhilarated. I began to process what I had absorbed, although it would be months before I had time or space in which to work things out. First I found a full-time secretarial job to pay off a student loan, and also began to get to know the city and its art community. A year later I was living rent-free in a basement and had the use of studio space elsewhere, large enough in which to begin the Colour-Field series of paintings that evolved into the titled works first shown at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1967. My interest in sculpture surfaced in shaped canvases in 1969, followed by gestural line on raw canvas works, as I continued to explore all the elements of painting.

By 1968 I was making larger paintings and needed more space than I could afford. Jack Bush was also looking for studio space, and I soon found one large enough for us to share. We had separate working spaces but often got together for coffee to talk about art. Jack was supportive of younger abstract artists, who in turn held him in great respect.

In 1970 I moved to Montréal in the midst of a political crisis that was keenly felt by all Québec society. I soon became active in the visual art community and helped establish the first artist-run centre in the city, along with thirteen other artists, and was its first Director. I took on a role as Montréal representative for the newly founded Canadian Artists Representation, but quit when a conflict arose with an existing Québec artists' organization.

My work continued to develop in the midst of all this, in spite of the “painting is dead” spirit of the day. By 1973 I was working with three different sets of strategies intended to foreground colour and its relationship to space. In the spring of that year, I married and returned to Ontario to live and work.

In 1975, working in a studio in Barrie, a major shift took place in my painting. I discarded earlier more planned approaches and started producing work in which ideas developed during the accumulation and testing of painting materials, and the resulting painting relied on immediate, intuitive, and visceral responses in its execution. A year later my husband and I built our studios in rural eastern Ontario, and for more than forty years this has been the base from which many more changes have taken place in both life and art.

Painting is an ongoing exploratory process. In 1982 I wrote:

“I don't like to pin myself down. I like to keep all options open at all times. I pay attention to the obsessions of the

moment if they are strong, and if they are not, I take a spontaneous/intuitive approach. The idea is to keep going.

Whatever consistency or character there is to my work probably owes itself to the fact that my obsessions have remained remarkably stable over the years – and central to them is the idea of the artist as a transformer of energy. Central also is the constant awareness of dynamic tension, coupling very nicely, for instance, with colour as a working element (limitless, ambiguous, visual, visceral) and with whatever I trick myself into learning about the form that these elements can take. “

Painting is my freedom ‘to be’ in the world, to transform what I think and feel about life, to express the essence of things that matter. Colour is the magical sensation and substance, the ‘philosopher’s stone,’ that for me represents hope in a time of great challenge for us all. At least for now, the river outside my studio window continues on its journey to the sea.



Ristvedt in her Tamworth studio next to *Damselfly Blues*, 1998 (Cat. #42). Photo: Stephen Handerek.