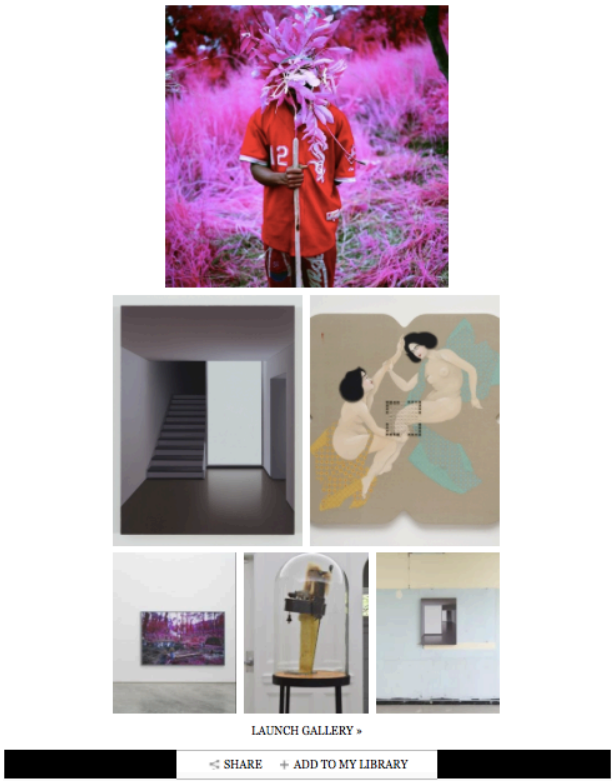
Interview

FASHION

ALTERING SPACE AND FORMING PLACE AT THE SCHOOL

By HALEY WEISS
Published 05/23/15



Initiating a dialogue between four artists of diverting origins and mediums, "A Change of Place: Four Solo Exhibitions" opened yesterday at Jack Shainman Gallery's The School, a converted schoolhouse two hours outside of Manhattan in Kinderhook, New York. With works ranging from Pierre Dorion's quietly evocative, minimalist site-specific paintings to Richard Mosse's surreal infrared photographs of the Democratic Republic of Congo's scarred landscape, the four-fold show covers vast territory, but its atmosphere remains constant: introspective, unselfish, and challenging.

To call the practice of each included artist (Dorion and Mosse, plus Hayv Kahraman and Garnett Puett) unique would be accurate, albeit an oversimplification. As a painter keenly aware of formalism, Dorion has created works based on the exhibition spaces in which he shows for the

last 10 years. After photographing the space, he reconstructs each image with his brush and a canvas, intimating how space forms experience. Through sculpture, audio, and painting, Hayv Kahraman elicits her experience as a refugee who fled Iraq as a child. Her recent paintings—perhaps most aptly classified as sonic shields—depict nude women and are delicately pierced, allowing pyramids of acoustic foam to poke through the surface, altering and absorbing the sound of the surrounding space. The results pose a formidable counterpoint to the sirens of war. Mosse's photographs also emerge from the violence of war, as he shot in Iraq during its occupation by the United States military, as well as among sectarian violence in the Congo for the last five years. For Garnett Puett, a beekeeper by trade, the show marks a return to the art world and an opportunity to revisit his "apisculptures," sculptural armatures upon which bees have worked, forming their signature geometric comb. Puett also allows bees to enter and exit beehives inside the gallery through holes in the wall (he will technically be working throughout the show's duration). As a whole, the varied works and artistic practices suggest a multifaceted understanding of place and, furthermore, how it may emerge out of space.

Prior to the opening, we spoke with each artist to learn more about their origins.

PIERRE DORION BORN: 1959 in Ottawa, Canada

BASED: Montreal, Canada

SPACE AS SUBJECT: My subjects are always the spaces in between, those kinds of spaces that are easy to overlook because you're going to a gallery to focus on the art object, the installation, or whatever is there. I'm looking at the absence of the art object and the space that's in between in [those] visits, like the architecture.

MY FIRST PAINTINGS WERE BASED ON... photos from the 19th century, from Nadar. They were historical figures borrowed from that body of work. This was almost 40 years ago, but I think it's quite close to what I do now. I was interested in some abstract approaches to figuration or images, and also the presence of the history of painting or the history of making images and photographic practices, and those concerns are still pretty present in my work. At the time I was using portraits—the human figure. Now the figure is absent but its [absence] is still perceptible in those spaces.

BECOMING SITE-SPECIFIC: A long time ago, 30 years ago, maybe more than that, I was creating installations using the whole architectural setting I was exhibiting in as support material. At that time I would really invest the whole space with paint, with my work, my paintings, but I would also paint on the walls, the ceiling, and everything, creating a kind of fictional, cultural space—a fictional art gallery or maybe a fictional artist studio. It was more postmodern and in tune with the kind of art that was happening at that time, and it was also a distanced way to approach painting with a bit of irony but without dwelling too much on the practice. From those installations, I started to work very closely every time with the space that I was going to have an exhibition at.

THE SCHOOL: I was very intrigued by the fact that there are these two classrooms that have been more or less been left in their original state. They moved all the accessories, all the blackboards and everything, but you can see the traces of the past of those rooms. It's in contrast with the very designed, white cube, contemporary architecture look of the rest of the space. I wanted to have those two aspects cohabit in my installation.

REMEMBRANCE... is a constant interest in my work—a strange presence of absence, in a way.

HAYV KAHRAMAN BORN: 1981 in Baghdad, Iraq

BASED: Los Angeles, California

THE SIRENS: The trigger was this sonic memory I have of growing up in Baghdad, and that was the sound of the sirens. The siren is basically a warning for an air raid. Whenever we'd be hit by air raids and bombs, etcetera, the siren would start. This was during the Gulf War in Iraq, so in 1991. Come to think of it, I've heard that sound throughout my life and childhood because the Iran-Iraq war actually started when I was four. My parents, when I asked them about the sound of the sirens, they recall having me as a little baby driving in the car in Baghdad and hearing that sound, and just completely panicking and driving into an alleyway, ducking in the back seat of the car holding me underneath them, waiting for it to go away. My experience, I wouldn't say was that traumatic. I was nine, 10 years old and heard it and remember running inside and we would just take cover, basically.

RESISTANCE: Sound waves shift around the surface of the [foam] pyramids and then they disperse. I started incorporating the foam into the canvas work by cutting the linen and having the foam penetrate from the back to the front. That act of surgically slicing through the linen was cathartic. There was a resistance there to the whole idea of war. That action was really significant. The paintings became objects that would alter the sound of the space they're in; they're not just paintings hanging on the wall.

SEEING HERSELF IN HER WORK: My work is very, very personal and autobiographical. Being a refugee going to Sweden—that's where we fled to during the [Gulf] War—I felt that I had to somehow assimilate and leave myself behind in order to be able to survive, to blend in, and become one of them. When you do that, you lose yourself somewhat and these are teenage years, so add that to the mix, all the hormones and everything. I've also been through an abusive marriage and I think the violence in the way that the body is dismembered [in my work] probably also stems from that. I remember when I first moved to the U.S. and I was still married in that abusive relationship, I started painting these figures. The subject matter was female genital mutilation, honor killings, and beheadings—really violent things—and my mom would call me from Sweden and say, "Hayv, are you okay? What's going on?" I'd say, "Well, yes, I'm fine, I just feel an affinity with these women, with their stories." At the time I was in denial about what I was going through and a lot of it surfaced in the work and still does. The dismemberment is very personal in that sense, but a lot of the subject matter and the theories are very research-based.

THE IDEA OF PLACE... obviously is very loaded, especially for me having left my home, moved places, and being of this nomadic [experience]. It carries a lot. If you were to ask me where my home is, I wouldn't know what to answer. I would never be able to say I'm an American; Iraqi-American does not feel right; I'm almost more comfortable saying an Iraqi-Swede but that's also incorrect at this point in my life. If I say I'm Iraqi, how Iraqi am I? It's really problematic. My parents left at an older age so they have a sense of an archive of memories from that place and that time that I don't have—mine are very limited. In a way, that's probably why I obsess about them in my work. My work deals with memories, archiving them, and reliving them. I miss [Iraq] but I'm a foreigner and I would be a stranger in Iraq. And what do I really miss? It's really a memory that I miss.

RICHARD MOSSE BORN: 1980 in Kilkenny, Ireland

BASED: Brooklyn, New York

BEING A "CONCEPTUAL DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER": I do think conceptual art tends to be very dry, and sometimes even approaching emotionless; there's no space for emotion. It's almost like emotion is a very dirty thing. That's the only place I think that the term "conceptual documentary photographer" may not be the most accurate [way to describe me]. But at the same time I wouldn't want to be called a romantic, either.

THE LAST TRIP, FOR NOW: This show is sort of a finishing point, a summing up. I wouldn't say a conclusion, but it's a final show in some respects, at least emotionally for me. I went back to Congo last May, June, and July to bring [back] *The Enclave*, which is a multi-screen video installation that I made. I'd shown it around Europe at various museums and at a few museums in the U.S. and Australia, so it had a good run, but I didn't feel like I could really say I'd finished the project or completed the circle until I brought that work back to Congo. It was a very symbolic thing to do, really, but it was also the right thing to do—to bring the thing back home and show the subjects the work that I'd made of them in their landscape. It was not without risk as well, as you can imagine in a place beset by war crimes, intimidation, and all kinds of conflict; the war in eastern Congo [makes it] quite an unstable place. In the end, it worked really well and no one got killed, no one was hurt, it was very well received—not by everybody, there was a lot of criticism from certain people, but a lot of people responded well to it. We had visits from groups of former child soldiers who recognized it and had fought in the remote locations where we'd shot. There was a real sense of catharsis for people like that and even moto-taxi drivers just came in, they'd heard there was a free show, and they were overwhelmed emotionally when they came out. I'd love to go back in 10 years on a holiday, but my heart is in a different place. It does feel like a while ago, Congo, for me; it feels like it's in the past even though it's not that long ago since I was there.

8 X 10 CAMERA: It's still my best friend. It's the person I go to when I'm feeling my most blue and it knows all of my inner secrets. [*laughs*] It's a very beautiful tool, like a fly fishing rod. It's very simple, in a way, very pure. I'm never letting that go.

THE HUMAN CONDITION: I've met a lot of war criminals in Congo, shook a lot of hands with blood on them, and everyone's got a side, everyone's got a story to tell; even the ones that are deeply suspicious of photographers or the press, and who are regarded as pariahs, even they have their side of the story, their historical narrative. We're talking about people who carried out the Rwandan genocide, who live deep in the bush in Congo or are hiding from their own acts and have nowhere to go. The victims of conflict tend to have this extraordinary sense of not just gregariousness but also a sense of the world that we in the West don't understand—a sense of the absurd. That sounds very flippant, I don't mean they have a great sense of humor, I mean that they understand the world in a very different way than people who are not used to living with tragedy. In the most miserable refugee camps, kids are completely overwhelmed with joy, and it's amazing, actually, how much survival instinct there is, how much people can deal with.

GARNETT PUETT BORN: 1959 in Hahira, Georgia

BASED: Kona, Hawaii

NUMBER OF BEES ABUZZ: 30,000

A RETURN: I pulled out of the art gallery scene in the mid to late '90s. For this show I worked on several pieces that I never finished in the '90s that I've had stored. I had a chance to finish them and repair a couple that got damaged in transit years ago. [I've] re-birthed them actually—that's sort of what this show is all about. It's great to finally get the time to come and do this.

A FOURTH GENERATION BEEKEEPER: We were beekeepers in south Georgia during the gold rush of queen breeding. The queen is very essential to the hive and my great-grandfather started producing queens at about the turn of the century, around 1910 or 1920. I got my first hive for my birthday at five years old. I'd go out there and get startled—it was an adventure. Once you work with bees and have been stung hundreds of thousands of times, you have no fear and it's just like a boxer getting punched; one punch isn't going to do it. I learned that immediately, I think the four generations bred that into me. I tried to get away from it after working with bees all of my childhood and teenager years; I went to college and threw the whole bee world away for the art world, but obviously I couldn't get away from it. I went through the process of doing hundreds of pieces and that whole process just got me back to my innate knowledge of bees from when I was five years old. I sort of went full circle in my life.

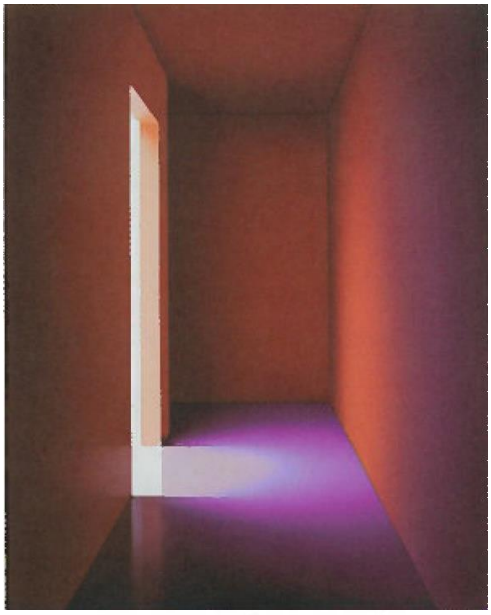
DAY-TO-DAY: I'm doing 95 percent honey production. We produce probably 400,000 pounds of honey per year. When I get time I go and work on the sculptural work.

THE HIVE: Once they're installed with the queen and the feed in the [sculptural] form, they want to go out and forage to bring in pollen and nectar. They'll fly just a few feet at first, and then a few yards, and it'll end up being maybe half a mile that they'll fly and come back. They navigate themselves and want to come back to that queen, that's one of the keys to it. I design for the scale of the sculpture so I know what kind of comb building they'll do and where they're going to do it, so I lead them that way. They go their natural way but with direction—just like with a normal hive, you have wooden frames that you can pull out of the hive. It's the same technology; we're leading them into a form that they do their natural work on.

NATURE IN MIND: I wanted people to be aware that these bees are out there—they're living, they're dying. I knew this was a way to get people focused on the environment. I was interacting with the bees in this collaboration, and I wasn't doing it for honey production or the commercial aspects of bee keeping. I was actually working with them very closely and giving them a nice place and a good notoriety, and making people more aware of how fascinating bees are.

"A CHANGE OF PLACE: FOUR SOLO EXHIBITIONS" IS CURRENTLY ON VIEW AT THE SCHOOL IN KINDERHOOK, NEW YORK AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC EVERY SATURDAY.

ARTNEWS



Pierre Dorion. *La Chambre Rouge II.*
2014. oil on linen. 33" x 25".

PIERRE DORION

JACK SHAINMAN
JUNE 5 - JULY 25

Pierre Dorion is a realistic painter who alights on the generic architectural elements of the modern world and strips away their contexts. He shows us a window blind pulled shut; a stainless-steel elevator door reflecting nothing but gradients of blue and mauve. Viewed as still lifes and interiors, these paintings depict post-Bauhaus industrial prefab—an urban environment as chilly as the city morgue. The expanses of metal and Sheetrock seem like 21st-century rejoinders to the Precisionist visions of Charles Sheeler and Ralston Crawford.

While those earlier artists took an almost Futurist glee in the forms of the industrial landscape, Dorion's stance is more minimalist, his imagery more matter-of-fact. There are no flakes of rust, no bubbles in the concrete. This immaculate úrban environment might have been created in Photoshop—except for the reality of the paint.

Dorion works from his own close-to-abstract photographs. Sometimes we see on canvas little more than a field of color, subdivided by a few stripes, suggesting the edge of a wall, door, or window. Other times, as in *Untitled (FS)*, 2014, it's an exhibition space divided by three lengths of yarn, a work by sculptor Fred Sandback. This concept of an artwork within an artwork perhaps implies some form of institutional critique. If so, it's a gentle one. Dorion's gaze is unblinking.

MONA MOLARSKY

Pierre Dorion

★★★★★

Jack Shainman Gallery, through July 25 (see Chelsea)

An arctic wind blows through this exhibition by Montreal artist Pierre Dorion. It's not the AC, but the icy reserve of his photorealist paintings, depicting ostensibly unremarkable architectural details.

Dorion pares down his subjects, often to the point of abstraction. *Blind*, a close-up of a shuttered white security gate, resembles a zippy Agnes Martin canvas of horizontal stripes. *Office*'s seemingly anonymous wall with four windows—rigorously flat except for nuances of highlight and shadow—ultimately becomes recognizable as part of Shainman's 20th Street space. We can identify a few other images as well, such as *Untitled (FS)*, a view of two cold, gray adjacent rooms crossed by yellow and blue diagonal lines. Dorion based it on his photos of Fred Sandback's Minimalist rope sculptures in a 2012 show at David Zwirner.

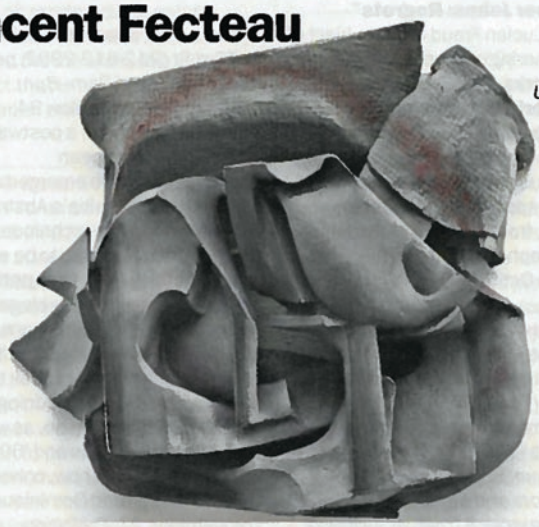
This attention to art-world details suggests an institutional critique of one sort or another, but the artist's concerns seem less hermetic than subtly emotional. The small, exquisite *La Chambre Rouge II* depicts an empty corridor or a vestibule, a liminal space with a doorway on one side. Bright light rakes in and, together with its reflections on the red walls and violet floor, creates an illuminated cruciform shape, lending the interior an achingly delicate spiritual charge.

Chilly, nearly glacial, Dorion's approach results paradoxically in a slow burn. His work responds to our moment of overwrought art with refreshing restraint. *—Joseph R. Wolin*

Ouverture V

THE BOTTOM LINE Photorealistic paintings bring the heat while keeping their cool.

Vincent Fecteau



Untitled

★★★★

Matthew Marks Gallery, through June 28 (see Chelsea)

Vincent Fecteau's work from the late 1990s consisted of wonderful small assemblages combining foam core and collages cut out of catalogs and interior-design magazines. In the two decades since, his sculptures have shed their pictorial skins for paint, becoming abstract arrangements of curved and rectilinear forms, suggesting a cross between Giacometti and Giotto.

His latest exhibition includes new abstract reliefs carved from resin, but also recent collages on foam core that recall his earlier efforts. The pairing of these bodies of work reveals their previously hidden affinities. First the collages: The untitled gem that combines a piece of real clothesline with pictures of carpeted stairs, a bedroom and what appears to be part of a stone fireplace has heft enough to hold a lot of the wall, even though it's no more than 15 inches long. The somewhat larger sculptures, which resemble vortices, pull off a similar feat. Less architectonic than Baroque, they recall the interior of an ear, or drapery folds.

They're painted in quiet colors (the gray-blues, greenish grays, pale terra-cottas and off-whites of hotel lobbies and corporate offices), while the collages incorporate elements such as a twist of ribbon or a picture of fabric hung as a swag—forms echoed in the reliefs. As the show makes clear, Fecteau's abstractions evoke images, while his collages are haunted by the visual and existential abstractions of everyday life. *—Anne Doran*

THE BOTTOM LINE Small pieces have a large impact.

PHOTOGRAPHS (FROM TOP): © PIERRE DORION, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK; © VINCENT FECTEAU, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Museums & Institutions

FREE American Folk Art Museum *2 Lincoln Sq, Columbus Ave at 66th St (212-595-9533, folkartmuseum.org). Subway: 1 to 66th St–Lincoln Ctr. Tue–Thu, Sat 11:30am–7pm; Fri noon–7:30pm; Sun noon–6pm.*
* **"Self-Taught Genius: Treasures from the American Folk Art Museum"** See Reviews.

¢ **Brooklyn Museum** *200 Eastern Pkwy at Washington Ave, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn (718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org). Subway: 2, 3 to Eastern Pkwy–Brooklyn Museum. Wed, Fri–Sun 11am–6pm; Thu 11am–10pm. Suggested donation $12, seniors and students $8, children under 12 free. First Saturday of every month 5–11pm free.*
* **"Ai Weiwei: According to What?"** This first New York retrospective of the famed Chinese artist and dissident lands in the Borough of Kings, bringing with it the American debut of *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, a monumental installation that comprises six iron boxes, each containing a life-size fiberglass diorama depicting a scene from the artist's incarceration. Through Aug 10.
* **Swoon, *Submerged Motherlands*** The Brooklyn street artist whose large, intricately cut pasted-paper murals are a familiar outdoor sight on walls throughout the borough creates a fantastical site-specific installation for the museum's rotunda gallery. Through Aug 24.

The Frick Collection *1 E 70th St between Fifth and Madison Aves (212-288-0700, frick.org). Subway: 6 to 68th St–Hunter College. Tue–Sat 10am–6pm, Sun 11am–5pm. $18, seniors $15, students with ID $10, children under 10 not admitted. Sun 11am–1pm pay what you wish.*
* **"The Poetry of Parmigianino's *Schiava Turca*"** See Critics Picks.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum *1071 Fifth Ave at 89th St (212-423-3500, guggenheim.org). Subway: 4, 5, 6 to 86th St. Mon–Wed, Fri, Sun 10am–5:45pm; Sat 10am–7:45pm. $22, seniors and students with ID $18, members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult free. Sat 5:45–7:45pm pay what you wish.*
* **"Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe"**

Art

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Going Beyond Space, Tradition and Society

By PETER PLAGENS July 18, 2014

Hito Steyerl:
How Not To Be Seen:
A F**king Didactic Educational Installation

Andrew Kreps

537 W. 22nd St. (212) 741-8849

Through Aug. 15

Hito Steyerl (b. 1966) has more credentials than a peace-conference diplomat. She holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, has had solo shows both at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and a retrospective exhibition that just closed at the Van Abbe Museum in the Netherlands. Ms. Steyerl is also a professor of multimedia art in Berlin and sometimes teaches at Bard College here. Perhaps predictably, her art has to do with such academic-sounding topics as, the gallery says, the "thoroughly globalized, digitized condition…the fluidity and mutability of images—how they are produced, interpreted, translated, packaged, transported, and consumed by a multitude of users." Sure enough, the featured work in this exhibition is a 14-minute video with the same profane title as the show. (The other works—a brief video of a flat-screen monitor being smashed, and some sculpture that look like props for the longer piece—are clearly side dishes). The thrust of the video runs in two directions. On one hand, the stentorian (and amateurish) voice of the narrator over shots of military calibration targets in the California desert seems to inveigh against ubiquitous government surveillance. On the other, gossamer images of people in burqas and white silhouettes of inhabitants of a gated community, as well as what the narrator calls simply "being a female over 50," appear to complain about the unfair social invisibility of certain groups. Ms. Steyerl's technologically sophisticated but conceptually overcrowded video can't seem to make up its mind between scolding and parodying. She may simply know too much to be able to shoehorn it all onto a screen in a quarter of an hour, or she may just need to put a little more art—the F-word doesn't count—into her art.

Nicola Samori:
Begotten, Not Made

Ana Cristea

521 W. 26th St., (212) 904-1100

Through Friday

Being an Italian modern artist has never been easy. The crushing cultural weight of Roman sculpture, Renaissance painting and Baroque architecture compels a painter either to imitate older art and hope that his skill can stand the comparison or to rebel against the luxury of Roman and Florentine beauty and slash canvases or put artist's excrement in cans (as did Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, respectively, in the 1950s and '60s). There is, however, a third option—embellishing traditional painting with tropes of modernist dread. This is what Nicola Samori (b. 1977), whose studio is a former church near the city of Ravenna, Italy, practices with melodramatic flair.

Painting shadowy Old Master-ish images on linen, wood or even copper, Mr. Samori then adds gobs of paint that make his subjects seem to grow tumors and melt toward the bottom of the picture. He blends everything so adroitly that skin is revealed as meat—as in the female figure appropriately titled "Fondamenta della Carne" (2014)—and meat is sometimes transformed into rock. Think Odd Nerdrum, with less Nordic bulk and more Italian finesse.

It's mannerist in the extreme, and a little pretentious, too. Mr. Samori's work is like an overpriced dinner in a candle-lighted restaurant with the ambience of an opera set. But all that butter and salt tastes so good. I know I shouldn't like it—but I do.

Pierre Dorion

Jack Shainman

524 W. 24th St., (212) 337-3372

Through Friday

The method of well-regarded Canadian artist Pierre Dorion (b. 1959), who enjoyed a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal in 2012, is straightforward. He takes photographs of architectural details and copies them—larger and simplified—in oil paint on canvas. Lately, he's focused on spaces in art galleries and museums, a choice some admirers

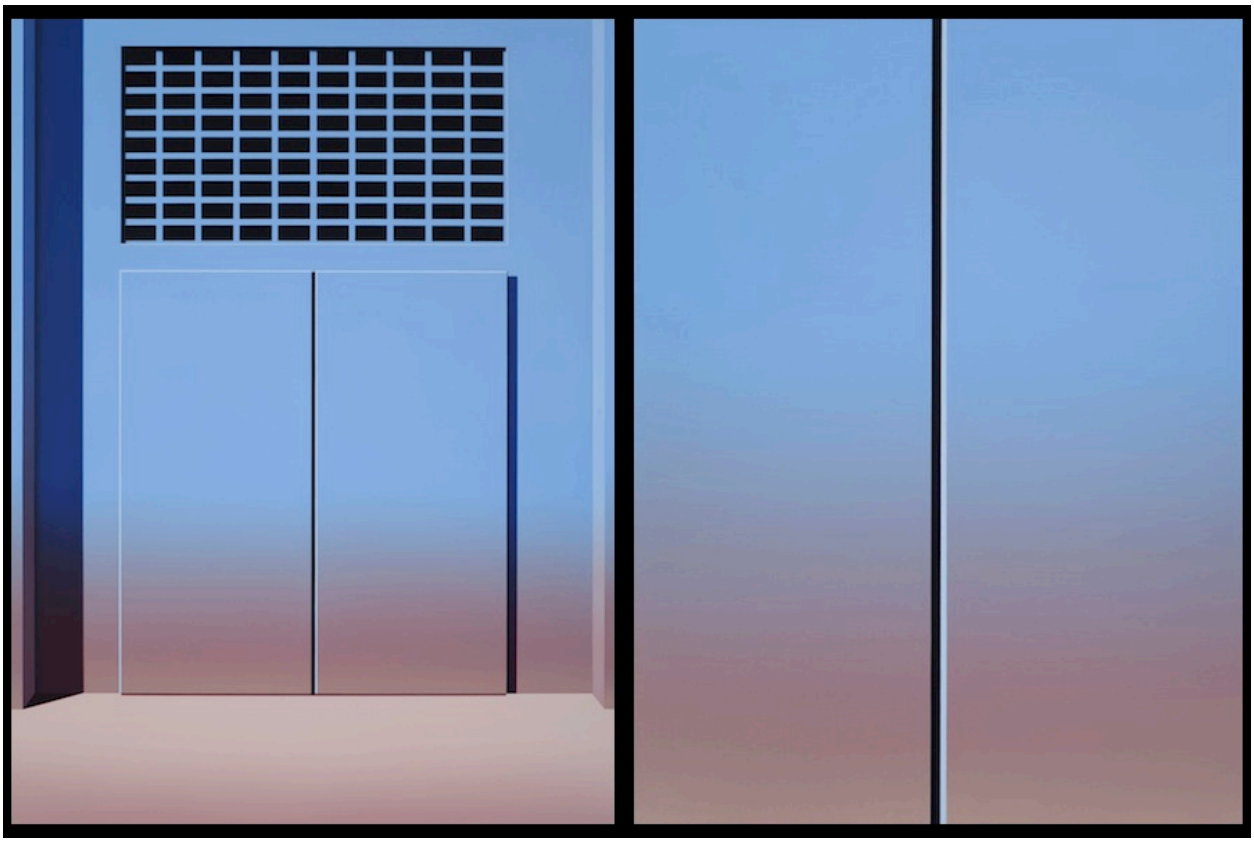
see as a version of what's called "institutional critique." True, a painting such as "Untitled (FS)" (2014)—a view of two minimalist rooms containing the work of the late artist Fred Sandback, who worked with installations consisting of straight, taut lengths of yarn—could reasonably be seen as a comment on the way that a museum exhibition that goes beyond the physical boundaries of painting can be recaptured within a painting. But in the context of Mr. Dorion's other pictures—clean, smooth, austere, quite un-jarring and tastefully colored compositions involving the likes of elevator doors and a shut-tight blind—they appear to be much less argumentative. In fact, the word "pleasant" would just about cover them all.

—Mr. Plagens is
an artist and writer
in New York

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Blake Gopnik's Latest Sightings
JULY 2, 2014, 1:58 PM

Daily Pic: At Jack Shainman, a Marriage of Canadian Traditions



Today's image goes up in memory and honor of Claude Simard, the French-Canadian co-founder of Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, who died suddenly last week. It shows "Granada I" and "Granada II," two canvases by French-Canadian artist Pierre Dorion now (more appropriately than ever) showing at Shainman. The pairing of abstraction and representation is obvious to the naked eye. For Canadians, however, the two pictures represent a special and unlikely marriage of two of the country's strongest traditions: The hard surfaces of Maritime realism (Alex Colville being its most famous proponent) and the hard edges of Quebecois abstraction (Claude Tousignant, Guido Molinari, Yves Gaucher). Both traditions came of age in the 1960s, when the nation as a whole did, and both still have great force for what goes on there.

Claude trained as a painter in Ottawa, where Canada's Anglo and French cultures meet. If only he were here to tell us more about that encounter...

For a full inventory of past Daily Pics visit blakegopnik.com/archive.

Gopnik, Blake. "Daily Pic: At Jack Shainman, a Marriage of Canadian Traditions." *Artinfo.com*, 2 July 2014. Online.
http://blogs.artinfo.com/the-daily-pic/2014/07/02/daily-pic-at-jack-shainman-a-marriage-of-canadian-traditions/?utm_source=BLOUIN+ARTINFO+Newsletters&utm_campaign=174b5da5be-Daily+Digest+7.2.14&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_df23dbd3c6-174b5da5be-81869289

Clément puts her own gloss on the original photograph and show, almost as if the exercise were a 3-D Photoshop project in which the artist has taken great liberties with an image.

One could be swept up in a vision of endless iterations of Adrian Piper at a desk in the original photograph and Clément's imaginative reconstruction, but there is also the matter of Piper's participation as a woman in the original show to account for. As a young—and leading—conceptual artist aligned with older male colleagues at the time, one is reminded that Piper plays the role of secretary in the original show and photograph in a kind of pre-feminist social void. As we know, Piper went on to a distinguished career as an artist and academic philosopher, and it is not lost on Clément that Piper's stereotypical role in Siegelaub's show rates as an anomaly in what we might otherwise rate as—and this is always problematic in discussions of avant-garde art—socially progressive work. Of course, Siegelaub likely asked Piper to play secretary in his *mise en scène* for practical, documentary reasons: he wanted the situation, we presume, to look "normal." Anything but, as we learn from Clément's revisitation. ∎

"Sophie Bélair Clément: 2 rooms equal size, 1 empty, with secretary,[1]," curated by Eduardo Ralickas, was exhibited at Artexte from September 27, 2012 to January 26, 2013.

Cliff Eyland is a Winnipeg Artist.

VISUAL ART

Pierre Dorion

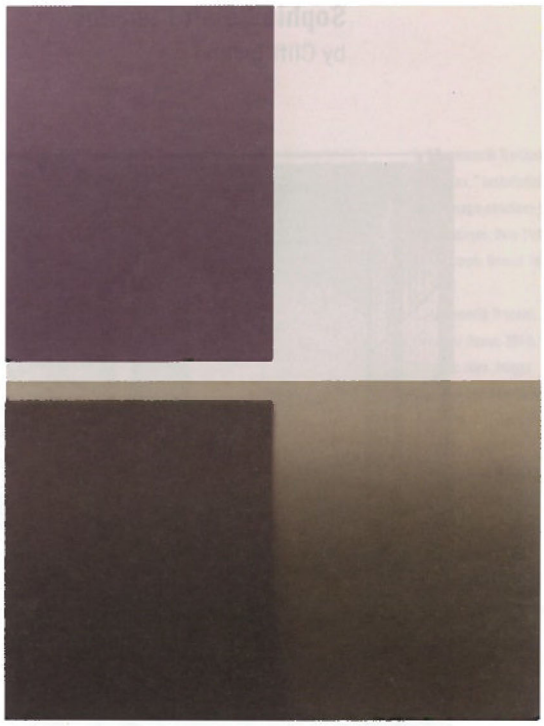
by James D Campbell

In English, we have nothing as perfectly expressive as the French word *frisson*—Pierre Dorion will appreciate this, I think—which certainly describes what I felt in the museum exhibition halls where his paintings—some 70, all told—were hung. Think of Philippians 2:12 (King James Version): "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Well, the paintings in this show effortlessly induced the same response. Within the limits of this paradox, Dorion's work staked its lasting auratic claim.

Indeed, as I walked through and worked through the paintings—"working through" ultimately signifying here, as in Maurice Blanchot's words "to keep watch over absent meaning"—the truly remarkable thing was just how expressive otherwise mute representational details and abstract fields were. Unexpectedly, around each and every corner, there was something like rapture to be had, and in full measure.

The rapture had to do with a mood that the paintings provoked. Of course, the *frisson* here was experiential but also, and perhaps more importantly, purely liminal. I mean, it was as though, as viewer, I was arriving at an undefined mental boundary where the paintings were talking and I was trying to apprehend an inexpressible concept for which there are no words.

Pierre Dorion's work brings such a response, perhaps, because it is haunted by so many things—a pervasive sense of erotic melancholy, the ghosts of Peter Klasen and Caspar David Friedrich and that late



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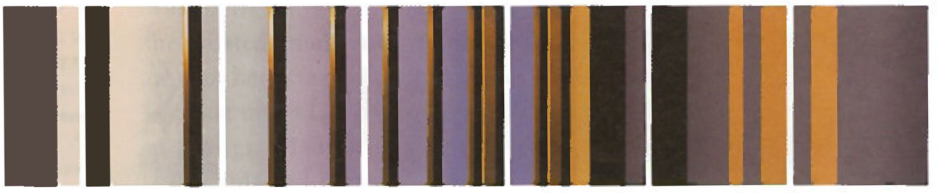
1. Pierre Dorion, *Louise*, 2011, oil on linen, 183 x 137 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy Musée d'art contemporain and Galerie René Blouin, Montréal. Photograph: Richard-Max Tremblay

2. Pierre Dorion, *Gate (The Piers)*, 2012, oil on linen, 152.5 x 114.5 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy Musée d'art contemporain and Galerie René Blouin, Montreal. Photograph: Richard-Max Tremblay

much, Dorion's corpus is uniquely his own, and very moving, albeit in the unlikeliest of ways. Although I have seen and appreciated his work for a number of years, and been convinced by its virtuosity, here, I was compelled to register its genius.

At once starting point and point of fulcrum, the reconstruction of "Chambres avec vue," an exhibition mounted by the artist in 1999 in a vacant apartment in the Dauphins sur le Parc building (situated across from Parc La Fontaine in Montreal), also sounded a grace note. The installation of those works was reproduced here, in the halls of the Musée, with great fidelity and care. *Chambres* is the pivot-point for a corpus that progressively winnowed out all material excess, one in which everything gratuitous was cropped, while remaining expressive in an uncommon and replete way.

Still working from photographic records of places visited, Dorion now valorized the detail, making it the punctum. The line elides between the architectural and the abstract, conflating emotion and the numinous. The two new polyp-



and *Sans titre (DB)*—demonstrate this quite clearly. Indeed, after leaving the museum, I had the impression of having left the largest, most cogent and cohesive environmental volume experienced in recent memory.

The light that slowly emanates from these paintings is laden with a pervasive sadness, frozen, or in the process of freezing before our eyes; here was a sense of mourning not acute but somehow *superliminal*. Ineluctably, it shadows our experience of paintings in which no shadows as such are seen.

A Claude Tousignant red monochrome appears here but is a ghost of its former self, as that painter's preoccupation with birthing autonomous objects with no relationship to the external is radically inverted. Dorion eschews mute objects, invests his with light, ambiguity, aura, a semblance of life, however tenuous (which in no way obviates or belittles his obvious reverence for the *Plasticien* master).

Dorion's work invites you in, never ejects or shuts you out. He does not foist the painting *qua* object upon you—he has always already factored you in as subject. He conjures a perfect threshold that every viewer must cross in trust. Similarly, in another way, the weird echoes of Peter Klasen are only sounded in the chosen architectural details and hardware leitmotifs of paintings like *Telephone* and *Vestibule (Chambres avec vues)*—and, of course, the integration of photography as resolute touchstone in the painter's process. Michael Merrill is surely a fellow traveller in this regard, as well.

It is tempting to see the gradual move towards total—and never totalizing—abstraction in Dorion's work (witness the chronological treatment here) as purely teleological. But that would altogether miss the central point of his work, which is wed at the hip to neither the representational nor the abstract, but towards the full gamut of the wholly human, and finding a zone of accommodation for the viewer's full experience of the work as auratic touchstone.

If, as some commentators have argued, the unmade bed at the heart of *Chambres avec vues* is Dorion's own, empty now, might it not also represent a soliloquy for the fraught presence of utopian signifiers, and a simultaneous recognition of human absence? Could this oblique reference be the legions of dead brought on by AIDS, and Dorion reflecting now, with courage and grace, on his own history as a gay man?

German theologian Rudolf Otto began his seminal book *The Idea of the Holy* by arguing that the non-rational in religion must be given its due, and then proceeded to focus on his seminal notion of the numinous. Otto characterized the numinous as synonymous with the holy (i.e., God) but minus its moral and rational aspects. I am quite sure that Dorion the person and the painter would reject such references—and yet there is perhaps a kernel of truth here.

Dorion's paintings certainly elicit an experience that can be likened to a sepulchral night tide, endlessly resonant, and endlessly engulfing. Otto summed it all up in the eloquent Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum*. He defined the *tremendum* component as follows: *awfulness* (inspiring awe, or a sort of profound unease), *overpoweringness* (that which, among other things, inspires a feeling of humility), *energy* (creating an impression of immense vigour). Well, here we have the nitty gritty of Dorion's paintings.

The *mysterium* possesses both the numinous experienced as wholly other—totally outside our normal experience—and the element of fascination, which causes the subject of the experience to be caught up in it, and rapturous. As Dorion has himself said: "The feeling is of interiority, not loneliness." How strange it is that he invests both representational and abstract paintings alike with vestiges of the *mysterium tremendum*.

To come full circle, an inventory of the *frisson* I experienced here, and have felt only infrequently in a lifetime of looking at art: an exhibition of Odilon Redon's *noirs*, Ad Reinhardt's luminously dark paintings at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 1991, the nail fetishes (front and back) in the collection of Arman exhibited at the Museum for African Art, New York City, 1997, which has haunted me henceforth, and the spellbinding and harrowing works of Rogier van der Weyden, 1399 or 1400, in an exhibition in 1964. ∎

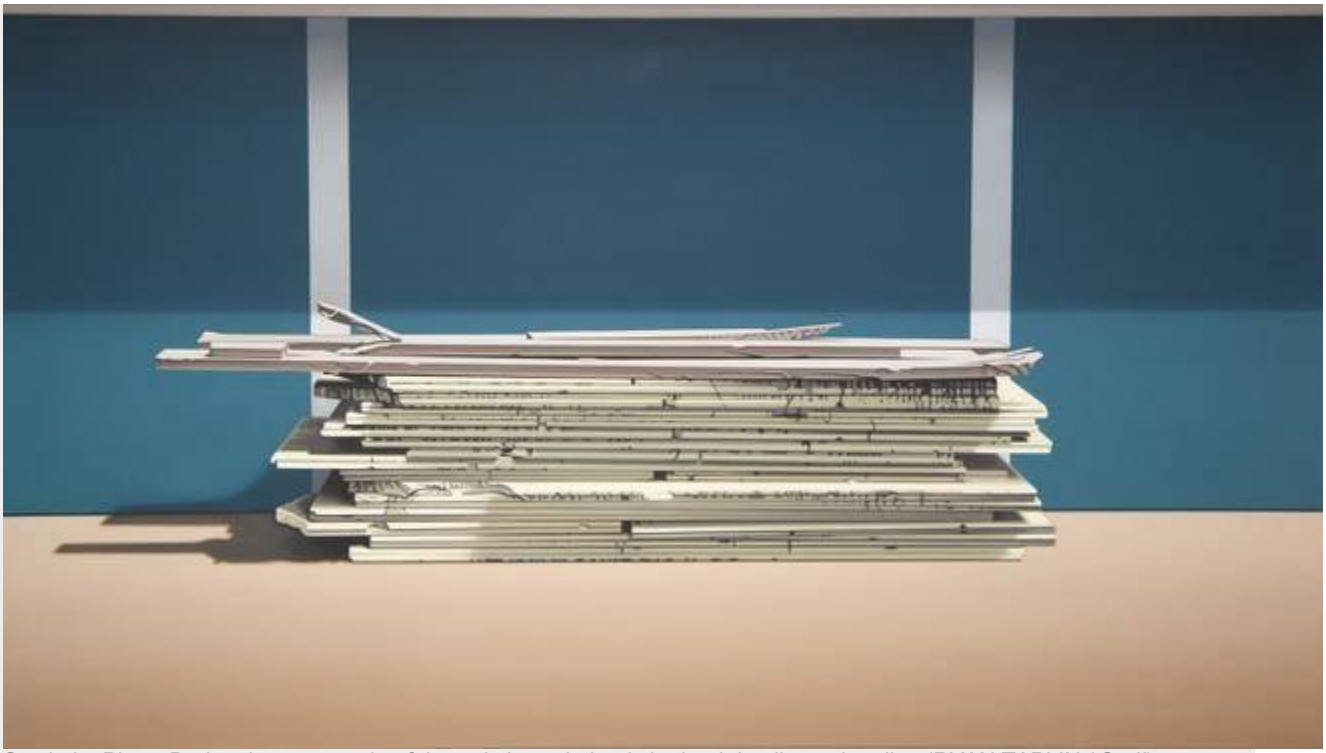
Pierre Dorion was exhibited at Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, from October 4, 2012 to January 6, 2013.

James D Campbell is a writer and curator living in Montreal who contributes regularly to Border Crossings.

Herald
Arts & Life

AT THE GALLERIES: Dorion at Dalhousie like a hall of mirrors

April 20, 2013 - **BY ELISSA BARNARD ARTS REPORTER | AT THE GALLERIES**



Stack, by Pierre Dorion, is an example of the artist's work that is both minimalist and realist. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

After spending a winter in renovation hell, there is only one word that rushes out of me when I see Pierre Dorion's massive paintings at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

"Space!"

Dorion offers vast, open spaces with crisp lines and architectural elements. Think Christopher Pratt.

However, Dorion is more urban than Pratt. His 27 works in a Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal exhibit are concerned with art history and the experience of viewing art, as well as with architecture, light and space.

A Montreal realist verging on abstraction, Dorion was born in Ottawa in 1959 and has an exhibit of his oil on linen paintings going back to small, dark, closeted spaces depicted in the 1990s and forward to gigantic, striped, minimalist concoctions and passionate gradations of light.

Barnard, Elissa. "At The Galleries: Dorion at Dalhousie like a hall of mirrors." *The Chronicle Herald*, 20 April 2013.
<http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1124181-at-the-galleries-dorion-at-dalhousie-like-a-hall-of-mirrors>

He puts monolithic black box sculptures in beige multi-layered gallery spaces within paintings. There is a hall of mirrors feeling to being a viewer in an art gallery looking at a painting of art in a minimalist gallery space much like Dalhousie's.

The viewer teeters between a sense of realism and illusion.

In 1999, Dorion hung paintings in an empty white-walled apartment in a once-luxurious downtown Montreal building. This exhibit includes a video of the apartment with the paintings, as well as some of the actual paintings.

Then there is a painting done of the apartment itself with an ornate ceiling lamp like a beacon in a drama of hallways and doorways. Within the painting is a painting of messy clothes in a corner.

It's a wonderful magic trying to puzzle this all out.

Some images are serene abstracted realism, like a shingled wall against blue space with a pile of drywall and boards, very much like a Pratt painting but a bit messier.

Some of Dorion's earlier works are more realistic. As opposed to a later, humongous painting of a window blind that could be a 1960s minimalist stripe creation, there is a realistic shingled wall with paint that is eroded and an odd black window.

There is a mystery and tension in Dorion's work in the empty spaces from a deserted art gallery to a subterranean-feeling space like a defunct bar with a deep black interior and hanging lights from a decayed ceiling.

A graduate of the University of Ottawa in 1981, Dorion has exhibited regularly in Montreal and New York, as well as across Canada and Europe. This exhibit, curated by Mark Lanctot of the Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal, runs to May 12. Gallery hours are Tuesday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; weekends, noon to 5 p.m.

Next year, Dalhousie Art Gallery is the location for a contemporary realist painting exhibit of 50 paintings by 10 to 20 Nova Scotia artists.

It runs Jan. 17 to March 9 and is curated by Canadian art writer-curator Tom Smart with Peter Dykhuis, Dalhousie Art Gallery director-curator, acting as "co-pilot."

Dykhuis sees this exhibit as starting the conversation.

Barnard, Elissa. "At The Galleries: Dorion at Dalhousie like a hall of mirrors." *The Chronicle Herald*, 20 April 2013.
<http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1124181-at-the-galleries-dorion-at-dalhousie-like-a-hall-of-mirrors>

The Gazette
montrealgazette.com

Pierre Dorion ventures out of the ordinary

By John Pohl, Gazette Visual-Arts Critic October 12, 2012

The windows depicted in Intérieur are representative of the empty spaces and subdued colours in Pierre Dorion's paintings. (Photo: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal)

A new exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain shows why Pierre Dorion merits his place at the top of Montreal's artistic pantheon.

With Dorion, the whole is greater than the sum of its 70 parts — the number of paintings in this mid-career survey.

One or two Dorion paintings, often portraying empty spaces in subdued colours, in a group show can seem somewhat dreary. But in an exhibition this large, it is evident that Dorion is succeeding in his quest to, as he put it in an interview, "take something ordinary and inject it with intrigue."

The subjects are indeed ordinary and spare: a set of windows in Intérieur; passageways leading to rooms in Vestibule (Chambres avec vues); a pile of boards in Stack. But these crisply painted works are reflections on the materiality of our world.

"The feeling is of interiority, not loneliness," Dorion said.

Every painting represents something, he added, but as his work becomes more abstract, the "something" can be as tenuous as a fragment of a minimalist artwork or the space between it and another work.

The exhibition begins with paintings Dorion installed in 1999 in a luxury apartment facing Lafontaine Park that was built during the optimistic years between Expo 67 and the Olympics. Some of the paintings, like Telephone and Vestibule, mimic the space's furnishings.

The park was also a meeting place for gay men, curator Mark Lanctôt notes in the exhibition catalogue, a theme picked up by David Deitcher in his essay.

Deitcher identifies the rows of coloured bars in Dorion's most recent and most abstract work, Gate (The Piers), as an allusion to a waterfront area in New York used by gay men to engage in public sex. Deitcher sees in Gate a reference to a generation that was decimated by AIDS.

Dorion's use of real space and the attendant emotional content differentiates his abstract works from those of his Plasticien forebears, who purposely masked emotion in their non-objective painting, Deitcher writes. It also created a barrier between their artwork and the viewer.

Dorion, however, is a postmodernist who leaves the meaning of a painting open for the viewer to complete, Deitcher said.

Dorion confirmed this in his interview: "I'm trying to create a closed sector between the viewer and the artwork."

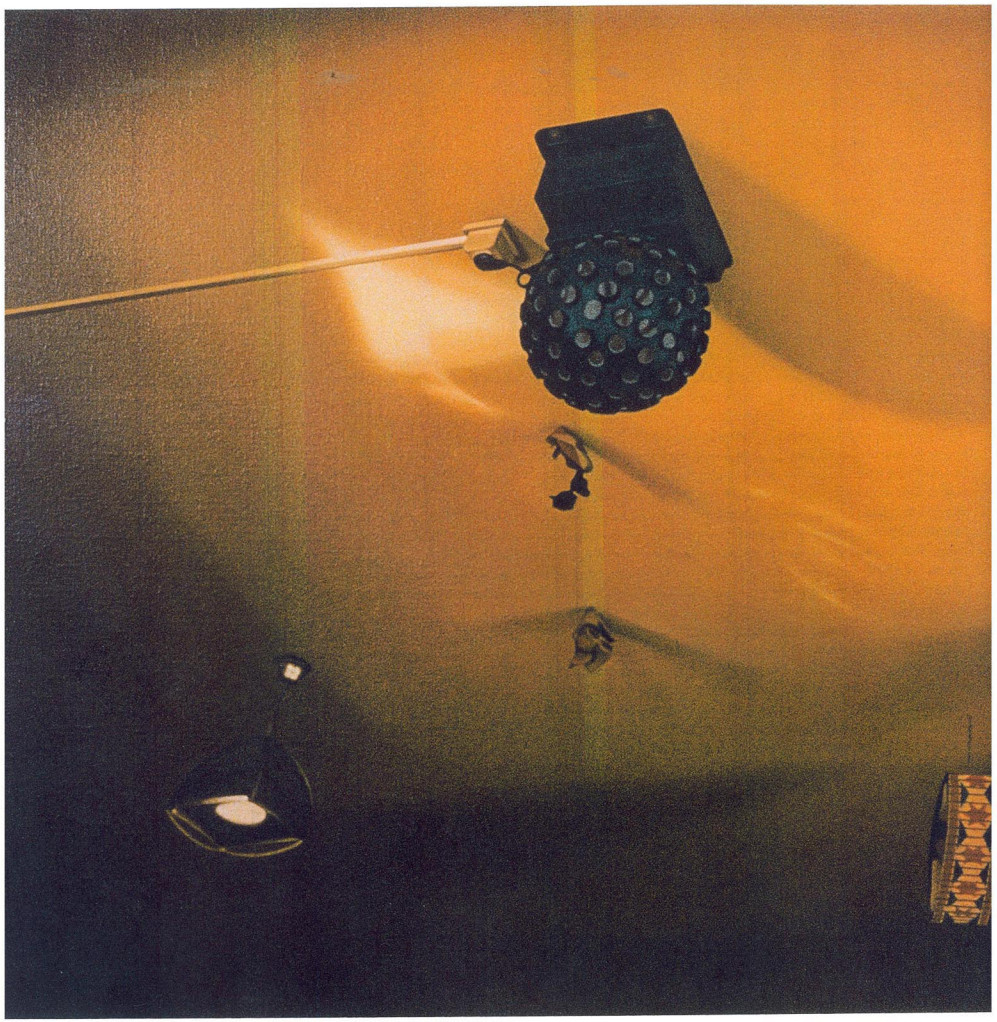
Sharing the spotlight with Dorion at the contemporary-art museum is Janet Biggs, a Brooklyn-based video artist who offers documentary collages of individuals in harsh environments.

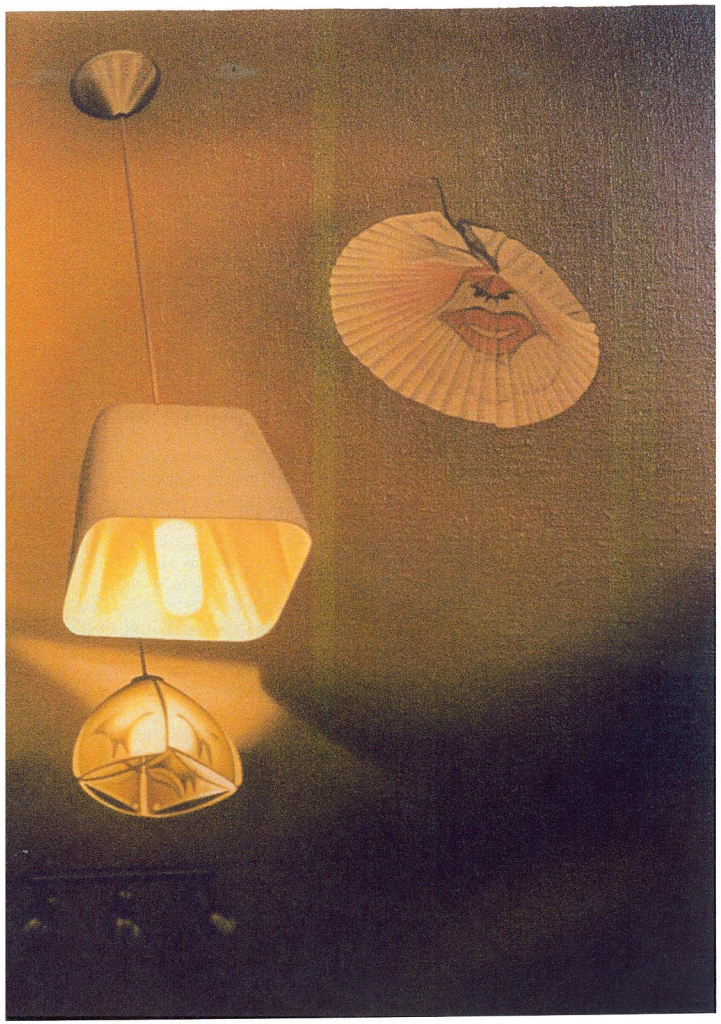
She subverts the documentary form in her beautifully constructed videos. There is music, but no voice-over or narrative. The segments are cut and pasted out of sequence.

One shows a sulphur miner in Indonesia, his face covered by a scarf, boring into live volcanoes for sulphur crystals he must then convey down a steep trail in wicker baskets balanced on his shoulders.

Another video shows a man paddling a kayak through Arctic waters full of ice floes.

*The **Pierre Dorion** and **Janet Biggs** exhibitions continue to Jan. 6 at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 185 Ste. Catherine St. W. Visit www.macm.org.*





Plafond (Bruxelles)
1999 O.I on hemp
91.5 cm x 1.68 m
COLLECTION NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA ALL PHOTOS COURTESY GALERIE KENE BLOUIN PHOTOS RICHARD-MAX TREMBLAY

The missing

PIERRE DORION AND THE ART OF EMPTINESS

by DAVID DEITCHER

"IN THE BEGINNING I WAS IN LOVE WITH PAINTING, AND AT THE SAME TIME I TRIED TO KILL IT," STATES DORION

IN JANUARY, 2007, Pierre Dorion returned from a pilgrimage he made to the Hamburger Kunsthalle—pilgrimage being the operative word. He travelled to Hamburg for one reason only: to take in a once-in-a-lifetime retrospective exhibition of works by Caspar David Friedrich, whose early-19th-century Romantic paintings Dorion reveres. Curious, then, that Dorion says he's been "trying for years not to be a romantic." In declaring his anti-romanticism, Dorion implicitly acknowledges the romantic in him. Since the mid-1990s, he has been making meticulous, photo-realistic paintings of places and things: domestic interiors, nightclub interiors, parks, park benches, storefronts whose windows hinder rather than assist vision, holes in walls, etc. What these paintings have in common is the absence of people within them; that, and the fact that they're all based on photographs—mostly snapshots that Dorion has been taking wherever he goes since 1994.

It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that Dorion's studio contains more snapshots than anything else. Four-by-six-inch colour prints cover walls and work tables in loose grids that appear to be organized according to formal and thematic congruences and complementarities. Dorion looks for certain formal dynamics in the world and shoots them when they catch his eye, just as he scans the world he inhabits for found representations of modernist abstraction. Thus, when he sees a wall with holes in it, he thinks of Lucio Fontana's punctured monochromatic paintings of the 1950s and 1960s (snapshots of such walls led to Dorion's paintings *Paris, 15 août* and *Trastevere*). Only a few snapshots get to be pinned up on the narrow wall that is adjacent to the far broader one that serves as Dorion's primary work surface—these are the chosen few that he will project, as colour slides, onto prepared canvases for painting.

Dorion's remark about repressing his inner romantic is reminiscent of another provocative statement he has made: "J'étais [au départ] en amour avec la peinture et j'essayais de la tuer en même temps." Translated: "In the beginning I was in love with painting, and at the same time I tried to kill it." He has withheld from his own works all signs of the romantic spontaneity and tactile expressiveness that many viewers want, and even expect, from the medium. Painting from photographs, Dorion long ago turned away from the romantic tradition as embodied in Abstract Expressionism, Tachisme and Neo-Expressionism. By the same token, his works recognize but don't capitulate to the proscriptive critical discourse that framed painting between the 1970s and the turn of the millennium. But to say that Dorion is a highly controlled anti-romantic is not to say that his paintings—even at their most controlled and chilly—are devoid of affect; quite the contrary.

In painting *Bowring Park,* a series of four views of a picturesque park in St. John's, Newfoundland (two painted in 1999 and two in 2006), Dorion selected notably non-picturesque vistas that are devoid of either human or animal habitation. In *Bowring Park IV,* the view has been reduced to a single razor-sharp, slightly curved diagonal that ascends from the lower left of the canvas to halfway up the right side, with a pearl-grey sky that graduates almost imperceptibly from pale grey to slightly violet-grey above, and, below, a flat, deep-green area with only the slightest variegation in its upper reaches to signal swelling terrain. Dorion's process intensifies the sense of desolation that his chosen subjects so often evoke. According to Merriam-Webster Online, "desolate" denotes emptiness, the absence of life—"devoid of inhabitants..." reads the first entry; "joyless, disconsolate, and sorrowful...as if through separation from a loved one" the second. Once he decides which snapshot he intends to paint, Dorion has a professional photographer reshoot the original print using a macro lens, which captures the maximum possible amount of visual information from the original. Nevertheless, the resulting slide takes Dorion one generation further away from his original viewing experience. Such rephotography also subtly heightens contrast and abstracts shapes, but not nearly as much as Dorion does himself while painting the picture. He simplifies forms and eliminates extraneous details such as trees in the background or clouds in the sky. Dorion also premixes all the colours he uses in any given painting, further flattening its shapes and eliminating any potential for (romantic) painterly incident.

In 1999, Dorion based a painting called *Plafond (Bruxelles)* on a snapshot he took of a bar ceiling in Brussels. The focal point of this picture is arguably a spherical black lens-studded fixture—the normally unseen source of the swirling disco lights that lend a hint of delirium to dancing in otherwise dimly lit clubs. Like the snapshot, the painting shows the light source as it looks in broad daylight, exposed in all its ungainliness amid the torn paper traces of past revelry. In 2002, Dorion revisited the subject of what's left behind after the party is over in a different, more clearly modish setting; the scene in *Ornement II* follows a fire in a club on New York's West 14th Street, and features a mildew-spotted ceiling, an exposed wire leading to a bare bulb and three mid-century-modern, globe-shaped hanging light fixtures that would be the envy of the Cuban-American artist/designer Jorge Pardo.

FOLLOWING PAGES
LEFT: *Ferry* 2006 Oil on linen 1.52 x 1.31 m

RIGHT: *Couple (Saint-Roch)* 2001 Oil on linen 1.82 x 1.21 m

Plafond (Bruxelles) was one of several paintings that figured in the exhibition that Dorion installed in May, 1999, in a vacant apartment in Les Dauphins sur le parc, a concrete residential tower that overlooks Montreal's Parc Lafontaine. Entitled "Chambres avec vues," the exhibition marked a turning point in Dorion's development.[1] For one thing, it subtly demonstrated his increased responsiveness to the political and cultural life of the late 1980s and 1990s—a period dominated by the deadly combination of the spiralling AIDS crisis and the resurgent conservatism of the Thatcher, Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Mulroney administrations, whose policies amply demonstrated their disregard for the lives of the queers and junkies who were most severely affected by the (at least partially) state-induced health emergency. On a more positive note, the period was also marked by the emergence of a powerful, persuasive, take-no-prisoners brand of queer and AIDS activism in response to the related epidemics of AIDS and homophobic violence.

Dorion traces his inspiration for "Chambres avec vues" to an intimate exhibition by the American artist and AIDS activist Zoe Leonard. During the spring of 1995, Leonard used her Essex Street studio in Manhattan's Lower East Side to stage an intensely personal—and political—installation. The installation featured a few of Leonard's signature black-and-white photographs, but its principal raison d'être was a suite of sculptures, each consisting of a piece of fruit that Leonard tore apart and then painstakingly reassembled with needle and thread, buttons or zippers. The fruit sculptures identified Leonard's project as an act of public grieving for the celebrated American artist *maudit* David Wojnarowicz, who died at the age of 37 from AIDS-related causes during the summer of 1992.[2]

"Chambres avec vues," less specific in its purpose and purview than Leonard's tribute to Wojnarowicz, offered visitors an opportunity to view a carefully selected group of paintings installed in a domestic interior devoid of any other signs of domestic life. The installation encompassed works in a variety of genres, but included no figure paintings—the figure having been exceedingly rare in Dorion's oeuvre since 1994. At that time he executed the last in the cycle of heartbreaking photo-based self-portraits that he began in 1990 in response both to the sickness and eventual AIDS-related death of his lover in August, 1991, and to learning in 1987 that he too is HIV-positive.

Upon entering apartment 1112 at Les Dauphins sur le parc, visitors first encountered *La Chambre verte*, a lush painting whose colours and quality of light are as soft and comforting as the cotton clothing that is simply and lovingly shown hanging from wall hooks and resting on a straight-backed wooden chair alongside a six-pack of water bottles. *La Chambre verte* suggests rest, comfort and, to this observer, travel; perhaps an intimate, presumably passionate experience in a foreign city that was memorable enough to commemorate in a snapshot.[3]

Like other works in "Chambres avec vues," *La Chambre verte* suggests a dialogue with works by other contemporary artists. During the first half of the 1990s—just prior to the introduction of the highly effective combination drug therapies that are now used to treat people with AIDS—a number of artists used clothes to evoke and honour memories of everyday intimacies. Wolfgang Tillmans shot several memorable photographs on this theme, including one of a semen-stained white T-shirt, neatly folded and alone; another showed a well-worn pair of jeans pulled suggestively over a bulbous newel post. In 1992, the American artist Jim Hodges created an intimate installation entitled *What's Left* that consisted entirely of gay-coded items of clothing (black leather shoes, worn Levi's 501s with silver-studded black leather belt, soiled briefs and a black T-shirt) carefully arranged on the floor as though carelessly left behind by a man who leapt out of them in the heat of passion. The suggested passionate encounter is presented as past through the addition to the arrangement of a fine silver chain-link cobweb.

"Chambres avec vues" can be read as an allegory of life amid loss in the age of AIDS. Dorion was very careful in his choice of location for the installation. It's no coincidence that apartment 1112 overlooks Montreal's Parc Lafontaine, a long-popular gay cruising ground in Montreal's overwhelmingly francophone east end. The melancholy tone of Dorion's installation results not only from the paintings themselves but also from the experience of seeing them in this otherwise barren domestic setting, which overlooks a site where gay men for so long congregated to cruise, make out and fuck in public with medical impunity (though still at considerable risk of homophobic assault and/or arrest). "Now we think/as we fuck" read the opening lines of a poem by the African-American writer Essex Hemphill, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1995. The poem encapsulates the moment that Dorion is addressing in "Chambres avec vues"—the moment when gay men realized that unprotected sex could be lethal. One painting quietly refers to the impact of AIDS on gay subcultural spaces. In *Le Quai de Béthune* (1998), a silver-grey

GIVING SHAPE TO ONE'S INNER LIFE IN SUCH A CAUTIOUS, CODED WAY RELATES TO DORION'S ANTI-ROMANTICISM

rectangle floats in a murky field. The rectangle is in fact an unoccupied park bench (a recurring Dorion motif) that the artist photographed in Paris at a moment when the Seine had flooded its banks and the bench was surrounded by water. As he recalls,

> *The Quai de Béthune is on Île-St-Louis and it is a gay cruising ground. I took the picture from above, in a park, and the lower half of the painting shows that point of view—the top of the wall surrounding the park. It was March, a grey day, and the muddy water of the Seine had flooded the area. I liked this minimalist image of a grey rectangle (the bench) on the verge of disappearing in this opaque atmosphere. I think I saw it as a metaphor for the AIDS crisis and its death toll.*

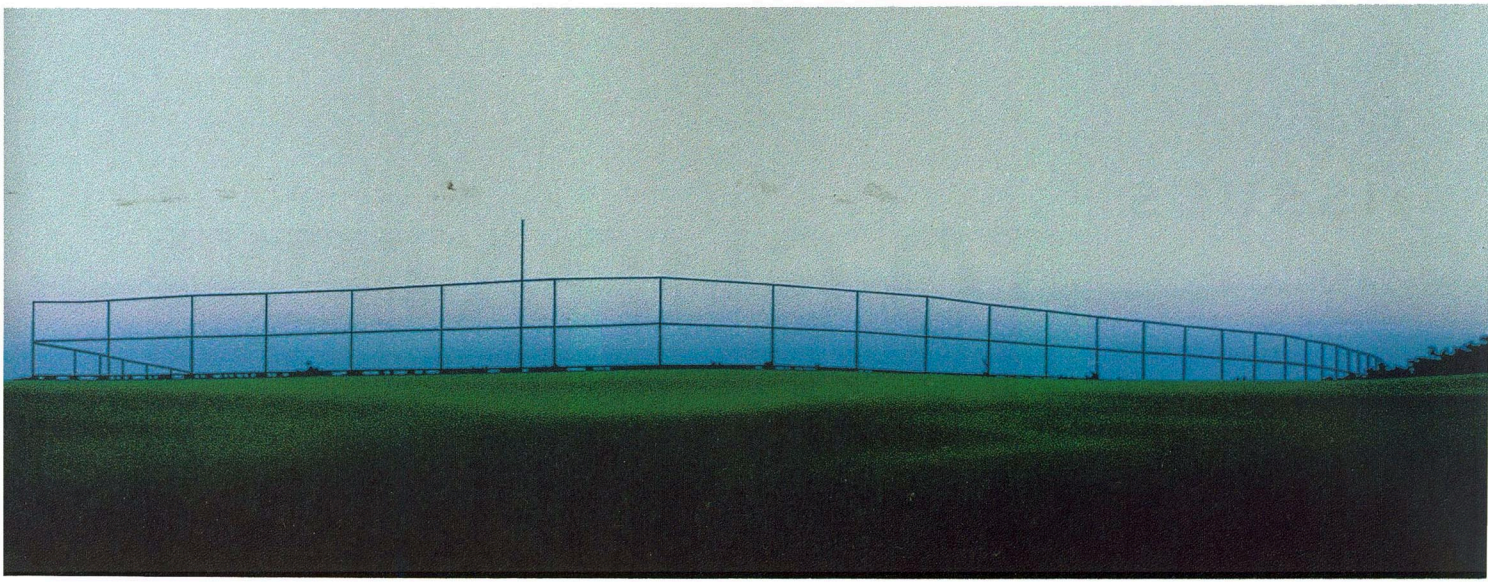
In one of the bedrooms of apartment 1112, Dorion installed *Téléphone* (1998), a seemingly straightforward painting of a wall-mounted telephone. In this context, the painting evokes a longing for connection, for human contact; but the telephone also has about it a menacing quality that brings to mind the fear and dismay that a ringing telephone too often induced at the height of the AIDS crisis, its role as the herald of dreadful news. Bruce Hugh Russell, writing in *Parachute*, has interpreted this work differently, in terms of the *unheimlich* (uncanny) quality of the telephone as a dated marker of modernity.

"Chambres avec vues" also included a painting of a scene in which a monochromatic painting hangs on a wall above a rumpled bed. The gentle folds of the bedding and the indented pillow point to the bed's former occupant(s), now gone. This untitled painting is one of several executed by Dorion over the past decade that allude to the dialogue he has sustained with the works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose 1995 retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum made a profound and lasting impression on the artist. I am not the first to note the relationship between Dorion's painting and the 1992 billboard project Gonzalez-Torres created for New York's Museum of Modern Art, which comprised a vastly enlarged, strangely luminous black-and-white photograph of his own bed, its two pillows bearing concave impressions of the heads that once lay on them.

Since the late 1990s, Dorion has demonstrated extraordinary technical virtuosity in his painting, even as his subjects have become more personal, albeit in his controlled, coded way. Even at their most personal, his works don't provide the viewer with easy access to anything more private than a general sense of melancholy that is consistent with the desolate subjects that attract his attention. Consider, for example, *Bench*, a 2006 painting of an empty park bench facing away from the viewer within a field of chartreuse. Its combination of a melancholy subject and a vivid use of light and colour exemplifies the balance that Dorion has achieved in his work over the past decade. *Ferry* (2006) depicts a pair of uninhabited blue-green plastic benches side by side on the deck of the ferry that crosses the St. Lawrence River at Rivière-du-Loup. Seen frontally, the benches form a strong horizontal mass just below the middle of the canvas. Dorion has abstracted his snapshot's visual information to a point where the painted image brings to mind colour-field paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s (the scene as photographed is itself a found reference to modernist abstraction). More telling than the image's capacity to open onto modern art history, however, is the way in which the twin benches in *Ferry* come to within a hair's breadth of touching. The thin gap between the benches imparts tension and drama to the static image, lending poignancy and more than a whiff of desire to a viewer's experience of a pair of otherwise soulless hard plastic objects. In their proximity and similarity, the benches suggest a couple—more precisely, a same-sex couple. Indeed, in 2001 Dorion gave the name *Couple (Saint-Roch)* to a painting of a pair of uninhabited chairs sitting next to one another in a cavernous and otherwise empty space.

Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn, among other gifted queer contemporaries, have also deployed pairs of objects as ciphers for same-sex couples. Gonzalez-Torres's simple, moving *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987–90) consists of a pair of battery-operated office clocks that hang next to one another and mark time's passage in perfect synchronicity—until one clock's battery begins to fail and the "perfect lovers" fall out of sync. Gonzalez-Torres also created a photographic jigsaw puzzle (based on a snapshot of his own) depicting twin garden chairs, *Untitled (Paris, Last Time, 1989)* (1989); a pair of adjacent mirrors embedded in a wall, *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991); a pair of suspended light bulbs, *Untitled (March 5th) #2* (1991); and a pair of strings of lights, *Untitled (Lovers-Paris)* (1993), which he memorably laid beside one another on the floor, where they suggested twin puddles of post-coital luminosity.[4] Picturing pairs of things is a veiled way for Dorion to make the affective dimensions of his life available to others.

Giving poetic shape to one's inner life in such a cautious, coded way relates back to Dorion's professed anti-romanticism; further-



Bowring Park III 2006 Oil on linen 91.4 cm x 2.43 m

more, it echoes the dialectic of concealment and revelation that, according to the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is emblematic of the "epistemology of the closet." In her groundbreaking book by that name, Sedgwick demonstrates, through close readings of canonical works by such novelists as Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville and Henry James, the pivotal role of that dialectic in shaping modern literature, examining its power in terms of the terrifying force of the prohibition against same-sex desire. Sedgwick also addresses other culturally generative binary oppositions, including sentimental versus unsentimental, and argues that the qualifier "sentimental" became perhaps the ultimate term of derision in modernist culture as a result of the marginalization of the feminine in the construction and maintenance of patriarchal modernism. She argues for the importance of an unlikely postmodernist project that she identifies exclusively with women and gay men: the risky project of rehabilitating the sentimental. In visual art, Gonzalez-Torres's emotionally resonant post-minimalism is central to this initiative, as are Dorion's controlled yet poignant, suggestive yet indirect evocations of love, loss and vulnerability.[5] To fully understand Dorion's alienation from his own romantic impulses, it is helpful to recognize both the power of the cultural taboo against the sentimental and Dorion's efforts to challenge the inhibiting effects of that prohibition.

The art historian and critic Miwon Kwon recently described Gonzalez-Torres's art in terms of a conjoined dynamic of "intimacy-in-distance," of "distance-in-intimacy." Dorion similarly keeps the viewer removed and yet engaged, allowing a measure of doubt on our part about the nature and meaning of the enigmatic and desolate subjects he chooses to paint while drawing us in through the sensuality of his sometimes crystalline, sometimes muted surfaces. A notable development in Dorion's work over the past decade has been a tendency toward greater brilliance and consistently vivid colour. Compared to the introspective self-portraits and the Roman views he painted in the early 1990s, his newer works display a marked clarity and chromatic intensity.

Dorion strikes a balance in his paintings between the formal and the personal, between removal and engagement. His subjects may be neutral and opaque or more transparent references to solitude, same-sex love and loss. He is consistently responsive, however, to the way the past reverberates throughout the everyday. His paintings attest to an incipient hopefulness—a fragile state of being more fully alive in the present. ■

1. The unconventional setting for the project at Les Dauphins recalls other instances in which curators and artists have chosen to exhibit art in non-museum, non-commercial settings; for example, Normand Thériault, Claude Gosselin and René Blouin's 1985 staging of "AURORA BORÉALIS" in the lower levels of an apartment tower in downtown Montreal. That show included Dorion's installation *Mes confessions*—perhaps his final expression of the ambivalent effects of Roman Catholic dogma and ritual on a queer kid growing up Québécois during the 1960s.

2. In tearing the fruit, Leonard symbolically enacts some of the rage she felt at the loss of this angry, articulate artist. The roughly stitched fruit sculptures imply the impossibility of complete repair while also quoting from *Silence=Death*, a 1990 video by Rosa von Praunheim (with Phil Zwickler) in which Wojnarowicz appears, unforgettably, with his mouth sewn shut, grommets and all.

3. Travel seems right: the Uliveto-brand water bottles suggest Italy as the site of this experience, as does the horizontally striped black-and-white T-shirt on the chair.

4. During the early 1990s, as the culture of identity politics was reaching critical mass, Gonzalez-Torres took considerable satisfaction in never incorporating homoerotic imagery into his work—at least not in any conventional sense. He took similar satisfaction in never trafficking in equally reductive ethnic stereotypes.

5. There are risks involved in attempting to rehabilitate the sentimental. Since 9/11, in the United States the Bush administration has used sentimental sops alongside terror alerts to prevent people from having or developing critical distance from the government's manipulation and outright lies.

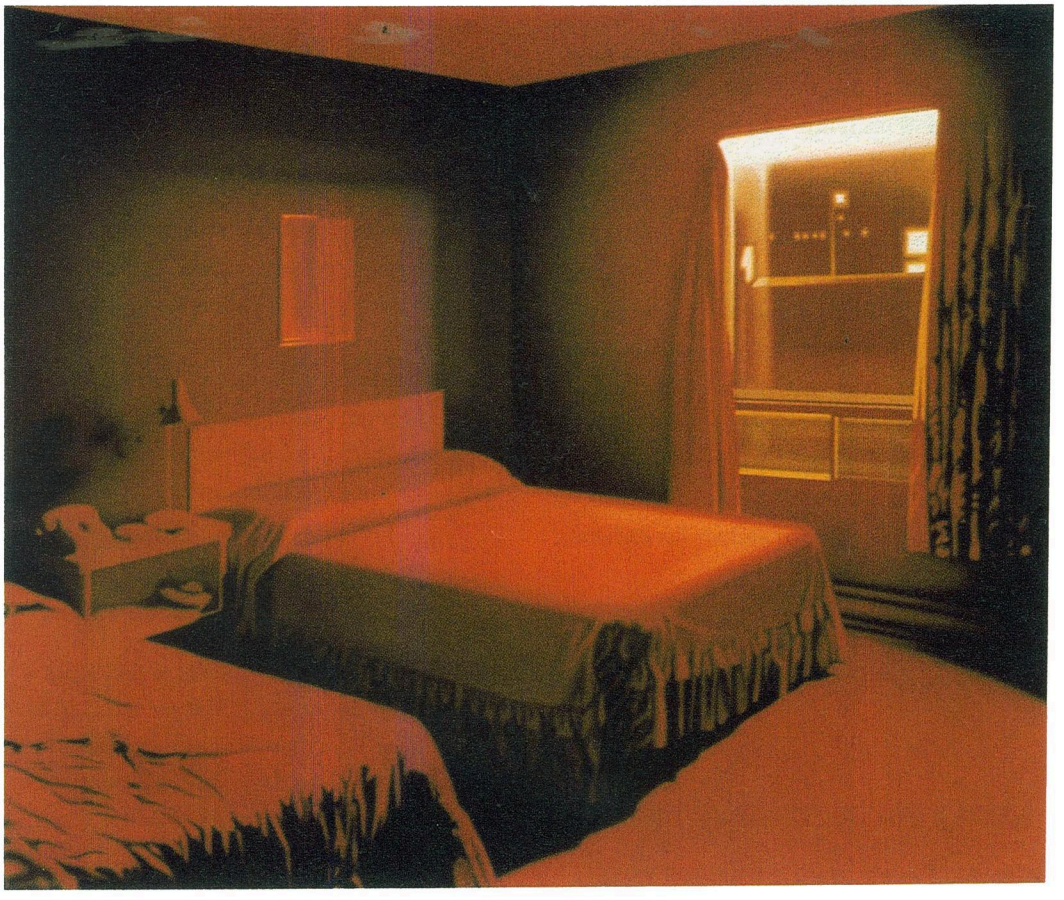
Best in Show

Recommendations by R.C. Baker

Pierre Dorion
Although these paintings are oil on linen, they might just as well be formica—Dorion's surfaces and subject matter are that shiny and utilitarian. The images of a frosted white window and the two plastic seat lids of an outdoor latrine form a pyramid of perfect squares; a steel partition door in a restroom swings inward toward an unseen toilet, defining a warm rhombus of space against a creamy, blank wall. Through precise compositions, Dorion reduces such über-banalities to abstract totems that elide their sources. Less interesting are his iconic views of neckties and basketball hoops, but small gouaches of a copying machine and an Op Art–like detail of an institutional building wittily conflate their shared mundanity. *Jack Shainman, 513 W 20th, 212-645-1701. Through November 10.*

Simply Deep

An Interview with
Pierre Dorion



Hotel Room, 2003, oil on linen, 91.5 x 106.7 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

facing page: *Shower*, 2004, oil on linen, 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Pierre Dorion's paintings are mysterious. No matter how much you know about their making (he begins with a monochromatic field of colour, which he then reduces by adding content), you are still left with a sense of strangeness in looking at them. I want to say they are uncanny, but I don't want them haunted by the shades of Surrealism. Even so, there is something inexplicable about the effect he is able to generate from such plain subjects: a pair of unoccupied chairs in a large room, four tires leaning against a wall, an irregular stack of wallboard, an empty corridor, a shower stall. This last painting, called *Douche*, 2004, is comprised of a cream-coloured towel hanging in a shower next to and above a blue shower curtain. There is almost nothing in the painting—even the tile combination seems desultory—and it can't be argued that it is about anything. But *Douche* is irresistible, as compelling as the photographs of dirty sinks, washing machines and swept rooms taken by Jeff Wall in the '90s. Interestingly, Wall took a photograph of a single, drooping sunflower sitting on a kitchen counter in 1995, while Dorion painted his equally tired-looking *Tournesol* in 2002.

Of course, the significant difference between them is their media; Wall is a photo-based artist and Dorion is a painter. Much of his work is a serious inquiry into determining the relationship between the two art forms, to see how one feeds the other and, of equal importance, where one departs from the other. The fact that Dorion works from photographs, even images found discarded in the streets of New York, further complicates his commingling of the two media. These are images he knows nothing about, but which he finds completely captivating.

Dorion says that he uses photography intuitively. He studied it at university at a time when he was still

deciding whether to be a painter or an art historian. There remains in his intense connection to European art history a residue of that initial interest. What also remains is a sense of his role as painting's adversary. "I was in love with painting," he says in the following interview, "and trying to kill it at the same time." He found the medium could stand the rigour of his assault, and from that point on he has been an ardent and faithful painter. "I feel strange if I spend two or three days without painting. I have to go back to the studio and work." It is not inconsistent that in a practice as committed as his, he would begin to find in his own work, and in art in general, sufficient inspiration from which to paint. His work now quotes itself, as well as other artists. For Dorion and for his audience, the mystery persists.

Robert Enright interviewed Pierre Dorion by phone in Montreal on June 6, 2004.

MY TAKE ON HISTORY AND ON PAINTING WAS VERY IRONIC. I WAS IN LOVE WITH IT AND WAS TRYING TO KILL IT AT THE SAME TIME.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *When was it that you decided to question the relationship between painting and photography, a tension that seems central to your work?*

PIERRE DORION: It was during the first year that I arrived in Ottawa. Most of my teachers were abstract painters and it was the '70s, a time when there were all these interdictions about what you could and could not do in art. It was all right to be a painter but to be a figurative painter, unless it was mildly Pop, was not approved of. I tried my way at abstraction and made some very unsuccessful paintings. Then I started to look at contemporary art magazines and I stumbled on an article in *Artforum* about the relation between painting and 19th-century photography, especially Nadar portraits. I became obsessed with one particular image mentioned in the article—the portrait of August Clésinger—and I started to use it in my work and continued the whole time I was in university.

BC: *Did you know anything about Nadar or about 19th-century French photography?*

PD: I knew a bit about Nadar because of the history of Impressionism in 19th-century art but I also took a course in the history of photography taught by Penny Cousineau-Levine, a wonderful teacher who gave us a lot of information about the historical and contemporary practice of photography. That was instrumental in the way I look at both painting and photography and how I use them in my work even today.

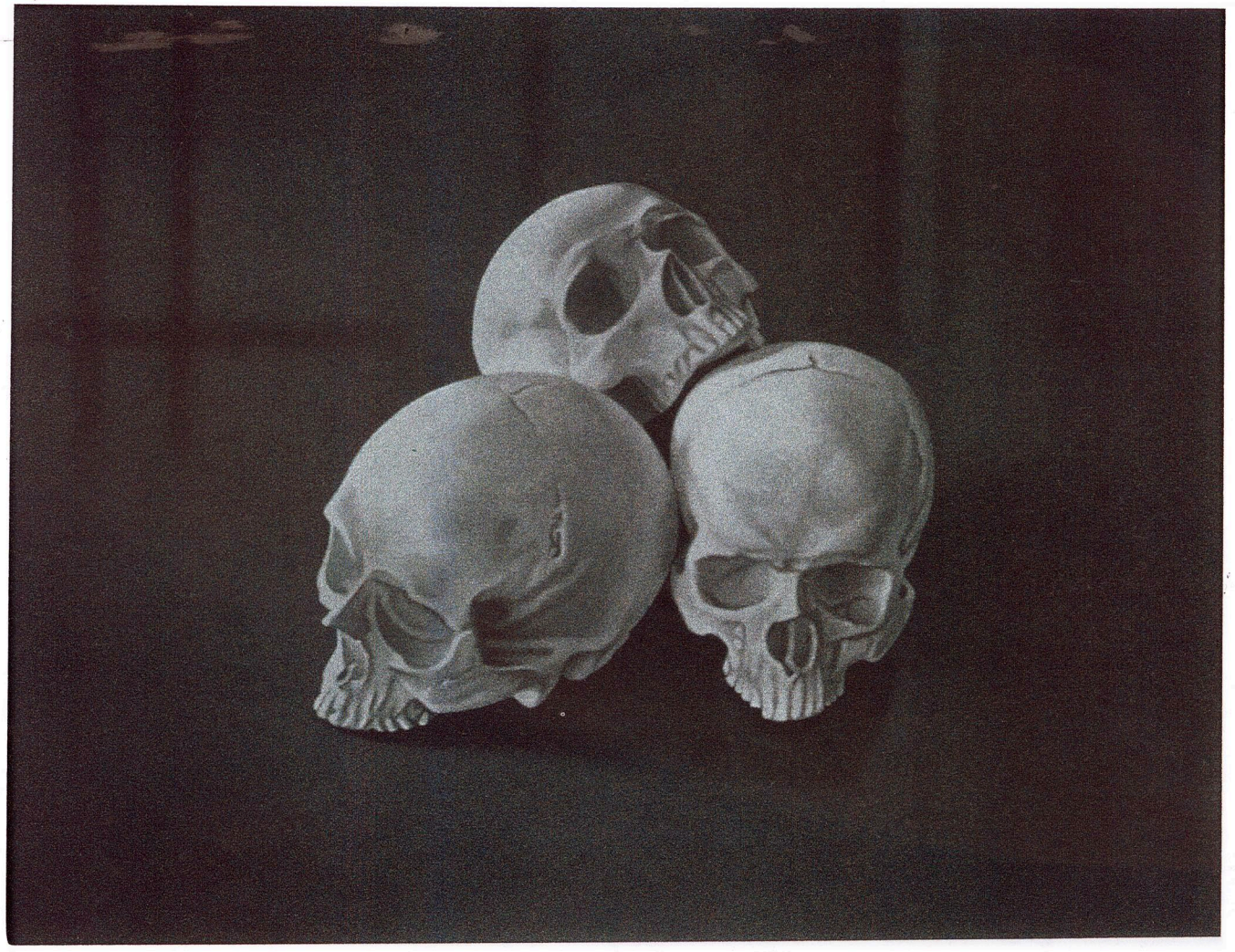
BC: *So the combination of the article in* Artforum *and your education fixed the relationship between painting and photography as the central problem for your art?*

PD: It did not happen as quickly as that. I think I used photography because for me there was no other solution to keep figuration in my work. After that I realized these questions were very important for me and I started to go deeper into them. But that didn't happen until the second half of the '80s. I had started doing the collage pieces in the first half of the '80s, which were an extension of what I was doing at university. I had the energy of youth and the effervescence of a young practice. It was a way of approaching images from a more deconstructivist way of thinking. I was trying to make something contemporary. I wouldn't call it painting but I was working with images and with manual mark-making. So because of this deconstruction I needed the collage practice more. I was using all kinds of found materials—old wallpaper, handwritten notes. I didn't want to use a lot of very bright colours, so the work was mostly black and white. I wanted to make work that had a patina of time. This aspect of time was very important.

BC: *The idea of time is readable as a process on the surface and is implicit in the content of your painting.*

PD: Exactly. I needed to keep that history present in my work and I think it is still there. Maybe it's not as obvious as before because now my sources are from contemporary environments.

BC: *You seem to go back to Europe more than you turn to American sources of contemporary modernist painting.*



Vanitas, 2004, oil on linen, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

following page:
Vanity, 2004, oil on linen, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

PD: Yes. The aspect of my work that was more American and contemporary came out in my work more recently. At first it was a challenge for me to see how my work would translate images with elements borrowed from North American world environments, modern cities and modernist American painting. Those elements were very hard for me to approach and I didn't feel comfortable with them at first.

BC: *You were also doing large-scale solo work at the time, as well as collaborative work. What were those projects and how did they come about?*

PD: They were an extension of the way I was working with collage but trying to make something more spectacular out of this approach. It was a very in-your-face kind of practice. The first of these projects was a collaboration with Claude Simard, an artist who now lives in New York. I took this very theatrical and spectacular mode of presenting painting and tried to apply my own ideas to it. Then I did three big installations by myself, using mostly images borrowed from turn-of-the-century religious schoolbooks from Quebec. The mode of figuration that Claude and I had used was a neo-expressionist, trans-avant-garde style that was in vogue back in 1983. The whole thing was very ironic: we were trying to make a comment on the way the art market worked. Remember, what was happening in New York was a microcosm of the way the art market worked at the time, with the explosion of figurative painting. And we were trying to cancel the identity of the author in those installations.

preceding page: *Store Front (8th Avenue)*, 2001, oil on linen, 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

BC: *Had you already started doing self-portraits prior to your trip to Rome in 1991?*

PD: The self-portraits ran from 1989 to '94. But in 1986 I went to Rio for eight months and that was very important for me because it was where I was working out these new ways of approaching the canvas. My first paintings with the palette knife originated in this Brazilian trip. I was in this totally isolated environment, which was the right context to make those experiments.

BC: *Any time a Montreal painter mentions a palette knife, I think of Borduas and that great tradition of abstract painting that emerged in Quebec.*

PD: Of course, but I was thinking more of Nicolas De Stael when I was using the palette knife. I was thinking of painters from the School of Paris. I felt more comfortable using references to European painting than I did either to the tradition of Borduas and Riopelle or to American painting.

BC: *When you went to Europe, did you have the intention to immerse yourself in European culture?*

PD: Something that was very much in my mind was the Grand Tour. I was thinking of the early Corot studies from the 1820s and '30s that I'd seen at the Louvre. So all the things that I found attractive were now in front of me: the references of these painters and also their experiences. So it was very instrumental to the way I work now.

BC: *Did you do a lot of painting when you were actually there, or did the majority of the work get done after you returned to Canada?*

PD: I worked a lot there because I had an exhibition in Rome at the same time. I was trying my hand at taking notes from drawing but mostly I was using a little Minox camera. I took hundreds and hundreds of snapshots, brought them back to Canada and had them on the wall because they were things that were personally inspiring. But it took me a few years before I started to work from them and that came almost by accident. That was the "Roman Series."

BC: *Is the surface of the paintings in the "Self-Portraits" closer to photography than to textural painting?*

PD: What is not always obvious when you see them in reproduction is that the surface was done with a palette knife. They have the surface of an aged wall, like a fresco. The tricky thing with the portraits was the choice of poses. I wanted things that were not too literal and I also wanted to keep some kind of mystery to it. I didn't want to put very obvious content in those paintings, which would have been easy because I was using the figure and there was a narrative linked to the pose. At the time I was looking at a lot of Symbolist paintings, especially Fernand Khnopff for the poses, other Belgian painters from the turn of the century and Puvis de Chavannes for his relationship of figure to surface. I thought in those pieces there were elements and gestures that indicated ways of using the body that had some connection to what I was trying to do. I worked with a photographer who was documenting my work at the time and we did maybe a dozen sessions. I would have the pose in mind; I was always wearing the same suit because it was the most neutral uniform I could find. I didn't want something too contemporary and I wanted something that had an historical connotation at the same time.

BC: *In these self-portraits the figure is solitary and is framed within a frame, which is itself continued within a frame. What was it you were doing with this sense of composition?*

PD: I wanted to use the figure as a device to indicate some things I was working with at the time, which were very specific colours and an equally specific sense of light. These blues or browns or ochres are never clear colour; they're always kind of foggy, as if they're asphyxiating or suffocating in the atmosphere. That kind of indirect light, filtered by history and time, was also very present when I started those palette knife paintings with the accumulation of layers. The result was a kind of monochrome painting with this aged, old wall surface and this very specific colour. I think the figure is juxtaposed on the surface to make those colours and surfaces even more present. In fact, the figure in the first few pieces from that series is sanded. I used sandpaper to erase it and also to enhance the patina even more. So although the figure is painted with a brush, there is almost no touch. It looks like an apparition or a disappearance of something. It was a way of obtaining a very strong notion of absence and melancholy.

BC: *So were both of you denying ego?*

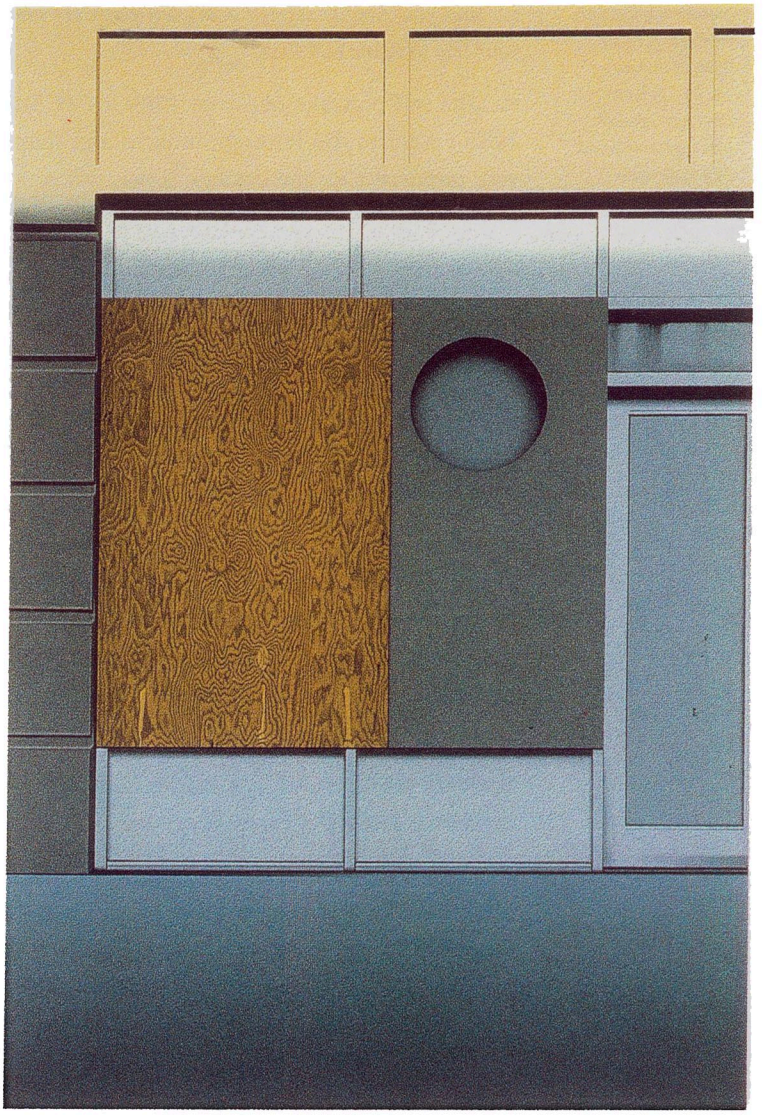
PD: Yes, but I moved on to a very personal use of these installations because I really liked the energy they provided. I was using things with historical subject matter and images but I ended up making something that was very ephemeral. Everything was done with cheap materials—enamel paint on backdrop paper, applied on the walls. So everything was doomed to impermanence. People would come into the space and they would be confronted with painted walls and ceilings and a profusion of images. Actually, my source of inspiration for the installations was museums in Europe, especially artists' studios like the Gustave Moreau museum in Paris.

BC: *So it wasn't Kurt Schwitters and his Merzbau that you had in mind as much as an idea about museology?*

PD: It was a combination of both. It was like these were displays of art history and also of the artist's life; witnessing the traces that he left in the environment where he worked and where he made those beautiful pieces that are now in our history books. This combination of the public and the private was something that appealed to me—a very intimate environment that was at the same time museological.

BC: *So what did you take away from that experience that subsequently became useful to you as your practice became more individual again?*

PD: First of all, they attracted a lot of attention, so they were very successful in terms of advancing my career. There was a lot of energy coming out of the experience but also a "bad boy" attitude towards painting. My take on history and on painting was very ironic. I was in love with it and was trying to kill it at the same time. What those exercises confirmed was that I was not able to kill painting. So my direction shifted away from this ironic installation practice to the pictorial object of the painting per se, to the canvas on the stretcher, to this object that I'd never approached before in my life. Figuring out how to face the real painting became my major challenge. It was a question of focussing on things in the making of the painting—like the pictorial surface and colour—that I'd never been able to work with before. That's when I did the pieces with the palette knife using 19th-century French architectural photography.



I WANTED TO USE THE FIGURE AS A DEVICE TO INDICATE SOME THINGS I WAS WORKING WITH AT THE TIME, WHICH WERE VERY SPECIFIC COLOURS AND AN EQUALLY SPECIFIC SENSE OF LIGHT.

BC: *I'm intrigued by the emotional distance between the work and the viewer, and the equally important emotional distance between you and the work. What's your sense of where you are in the painting itself?*

PD: The emotional thing is very tricky for me. It manifests itself more in the ideas and the concepts behind the painting than in the paintings themselves. It's a Brechtian thing.

BC: *This is your painterly version of the "Alienation Effect"?*

PD: Exactly. That was taught to me very early on in the CEGEP in Quebec, even before university. Most of my teachers were Marxist in their approach. They showed us a lot of Jean Luc Godard movies.

BC: *And you were reading back issues of* Cahiers du cinema?

PD: Yes, some very specific essays. I was 16 but was totally fascinated by that approach. It gave me ways of looking at—and also of making—an art object, which were very important to me before I went to university.

BC: *I think of you as a kind of a romantic Marxist. You love the patina of history at the same time that you oblige the viewer—and yourself—to regard the painting itself very closely. But it's the romance that attracts you to the subject.*

PD: I think that is a contradictory but very complex description of what I do. This romanticism has been at the root of my work from the beginning because of my involvement with history and because of a certain melancholy that comes out of the atmosphere of the work. I think that without those tools it would have been easy for me to fall very naïvely into a kind of conservative work.

BC: *Has there been anything systematic in your use of photography?*

PD: I think it's more intuitive. Foremost I'm a painter and there's a lot of intuition in the making of a painting. As I said very early on, the photographic reference imposed itself on my work if I wanted to pursue a figurative painting practice. But then at the same time Peter Galassi's book called *Before Photography* was extremely important for me. I don't think I'm trying to illustrate those theories or that I'm trying to make work in the way that Jeff Wall does, for example. Artists like Jeff Wall are inspiring to me but my project is different because it results in painting.

BC: *When I look at a painting like* Minerva Medica, *1994, it has a stillness about it that seems to be more about painting than about photography.*

PD: There was a mishmash of different references and inspirations that came into the making of that piece, but it still used photography as a point of departure.

BC: *In looking at your work, I've made notes to myself about seeing evidence of painters as different as Edward Hopper, de Chirico and Tim Zuck.*

PD: I'm very happy with that description. It's like a beautiful set of quotations.

BC: *I mention de Chirico because his work has a sense of unease that can move towards dread. You're aware of a sense of melancholy in your work, but are you aware that it also has a disconcerting quality about it?*

ROMANTICISM HAS BEEN AT THE ROOT OF MY WORK FROM THE BEGINNING BECAUSE OF MY INVOLVEMENT WITH HISTORY AND BECAUSE OF A CERTAIN MELANCHOLY THAT COMES OUT OF THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE WORK.

PD: I think there is an uncanniness. Maybe one of the reasons the content of the work is often very strange is because I don't want to make anything that is obvious.

BC: *A piece like* Closer, *2002, is almost purely formalist. If you were just painting, rather than painting a narrow, door-lined hallway, it could easily turn into a Guido Molinari.*

PD: This one is interesting because it came from a snapshot I found on the street. Someone must have taken a photograph in this hotel hallway and then discarded it. I thought it was a perfect image for the kind of work I was trying to do: very formal compositions that still used decayed urban environments.

BC: *I also think of Alex Katz when I look at certain of your works. He's the master of scale and mark-making.*

PD: Definitely, but I was also thinking of some of the

Quebec plasticiens, like Claude Tousignant, Guido Molinari and Yves Gaucher, because of the flatness of my surface. My picture surface is slick and there are no brush strokes left. Like Molinari, I also use quite a lot of masking tape in making these paintings.

BC: *One of your most engaging paintings is called* Vanitas, *1997. I know that Richter has done skulls, and so has every Spanish painter who ever lived. What made you choose that subject?*

LIKE A DISEASE, IT'S SOMETHING I'VE GOT INSIDE ME. I HAVE TO WORK EVERY DAY. I'M VERY HAPPY WITH IT. I FEEL VERY STRANGE IF I SPEND TWO OR THREE DAYS WITHOUT PAINTING. I HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE STUDIO AND WORK.

facing page: *Interior (Chelsea)*, 2003, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 55.9 cm. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

PD: Well, I had these skulls in plaster made for an early installation in the '80s. I took photos of them on the floor of the studio, thinking of Cézanne's studio. There was also the challenge to make a painting out of something that's been so used so many times. As usual, Richter was the thing to avoid mostly. His blurry effect is something I've always avoided. That's probably why I want to make my paintings look so crisp.

BC: *It's one thing for you to talk about formalism but you've also painted a hotel room with such an infernal red palette that I can smell sulfur in the room. I'm sure the devil left his hoofprints on the bed.*

PD: This is another painting done from a snapshot I took in a hotel room near Quebec City. I was on my way back to Montreal after a long day of driving. There was nothing in Quebec City, so I had to go to a truck-stop hotel outside Quebec. It had a big neon sign that was close to the window, so when I opened the door, the room was saturated with this red light. I thought it was amazing and decided I had to take a picture. It came out pretty well and then I said, I really have to make a painting. A red painting is tricky. Red is very opaque and at the same time it's very bright; if you put in white, it becomes dull; if you put in just a bit of darker colour, it becomes soiled, dirty-looking. So to keep the right balance is very tricky.

BC: *So the process for you has been one of learning how to be a painter?*

PD: Completely. I knew this was going to be a long and slow process but very enriching at the same time. And I'm very happy with what I've got now. It's a question of trying to figure out my own limits and my own possibilities.

BC: *So you've worked hard at painting?*

PD: It's something I've got inside me, like a disease. I have to work every day. I'm very happy with it. I feel very strange if I spend two or three days without painting. I have to go back to the studio and work.

BC: *And once there, you want to make beautiful paintings?*

PD: I don't want the work to be too seductive, I don't want to attract attention by making a thing where the craft is so incredible that you fall off your chair. I find what John Currin has been doing quite fascinating, but at the same time it's pretty borderline. The last paintings are masterful in terms of craft and at the same time he keeps a conceptual distance in the way he manipulates the objects. But it's also easy to fall into something very conservative from where he is sitting. I don't know where he's going to go, but right now he's just on that ledge. It's something I could not do. I'm trying to make something that functions using those tools and to make it function, it has to deal with beauty and some aspects of seduction. Just not too much.

BC: *But* Douche, *2004, is such a beautiful painting, in the way that Jeff Wall's abstract photographs are beautiful. He has one photograph of an irresistibly ugly sink. It happens that you both arrive at beauty out of something that should have no right to make that claim.*

PD: I've been fascinated by his work, but I must say that I had not seen his still lifes and interiors before I started making these paintings. When he had his show in Montreal a few years ago and I saw these images for the first time, I thought, My god, I could have made a painting out of that picture. It was a kind of chance, poetic meeting. ■

DE VISU

La réalité peinture

Le Musée des beaux-arts relance enfin sa programmation d'expositions temporaires en art contemporain. Avec Pierre Dorion, dont la peinture se fonde sur une appréhension photographique de la réalité. À moins que ce ne soit le contraire.

PIERRE DORION, PEINTURE ET PHOTOGRAPHIE
Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1380, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, jusqu'au 20 mai.

JÉRÔME DELGADO

Il y a le cube blanc, incontournable réalité — contraignante, diront certains — à la diffusion de l'art, à sa mise en exposition. Il y a désormais, à Montréal, un «carré d'art contemporain», le nouvel espace que le Musée des beaux-arts consacre à l'art actuel.

Et pour l'inaugurer, quoi de mieux pour explorer, ou défoncer, cette idée du cube, du carré, que la peinture de Pierre Dorion? Plans rabattus, jeu de lignes et d'angles, une attention soignée aux nuances de ton — minutieux dégradé pour évoquer une lumière ambiante. C'est la manière Dorion, qui conteste les limites du cadre en même temps qu'il les célèbre. Dorion, le commissaire qui signait cet automne l'exposition *Off the Wall*, au sujet des rapports de l'œuvre avec son contexte de présentation.

Tableau potentiel

Un pied dans la représentation, parfois même dans l'hyperréalisme, un autre dans l'abstraction pure, Pierre Dorion se plaît dans l'ambiguïté. Il n'est pas le seul, bien sûr, mais ses compositions à lui, épurées parfois comme une œuvre minimaliste, sont parsemées de détails, de petits motifs descriptifs, qui révèlent une réalité autre que celle de la matière picturale. Une sorte de voix hors champ sous-tend ses tableaux, même les plus formalistes.

Ça fait une quinzaine d'années que l'artiste, natif d'Ottawa mais établi à Montréal, peint ce genre d'œuvres. Mais pour la première fois, avec cette expo au MBAM, il révèle ses secrets. Ses 14 huiles (de 2009 et de 2010), bien étalées sur trois murs du «carré», sont accompagnées, ou complétées, sur le quatrième mur par une série de polaroïds. Les uns étant le résultat, direct ou non, des autres.

Il était déjà évident que son hyperréalisme, sa touche par moments fort léchée, découlait de la photographie. Par le «peinture et photographie» de son intitulé, l'expo officialise certes cette démarche. Mais il y a plus.

L'inspiration de Dorion peut venir d'un lieu réel, d'un espace intérieur, d'une fenêtre, d'un marquage au sol, ils ne sont, pour lui, que des traces picturales, des lignes sur une surface. Il voit, dans tous ses éléments du quotidien, un tableau potentiel, une abstraction en deux dimensions.

«Si j'avais à résumer, dit-il dans le texte affiché au musée, *je dirais que je peins d'après photographie, mais que je photographie en peintre. Mon but est de faire de la peinture parce que je suis peintre et que ma vision, bien que filtrée ou relayée par la photographie, est toujours motivée par le désir de voir ces lieux traduits en peinture.»*

En fait, Pierre Dorion devient, avec le temps, plus abstrait. Exposé régulièrement à la galerie René Blouin, il semble avoir fait le pari, l'an dernier, d'abandonner ses paysages hyperréalistes au profit d'une facture moins narrative. L'expo au MBAM confirme cette voie. Elle l'affiche avec éclat.

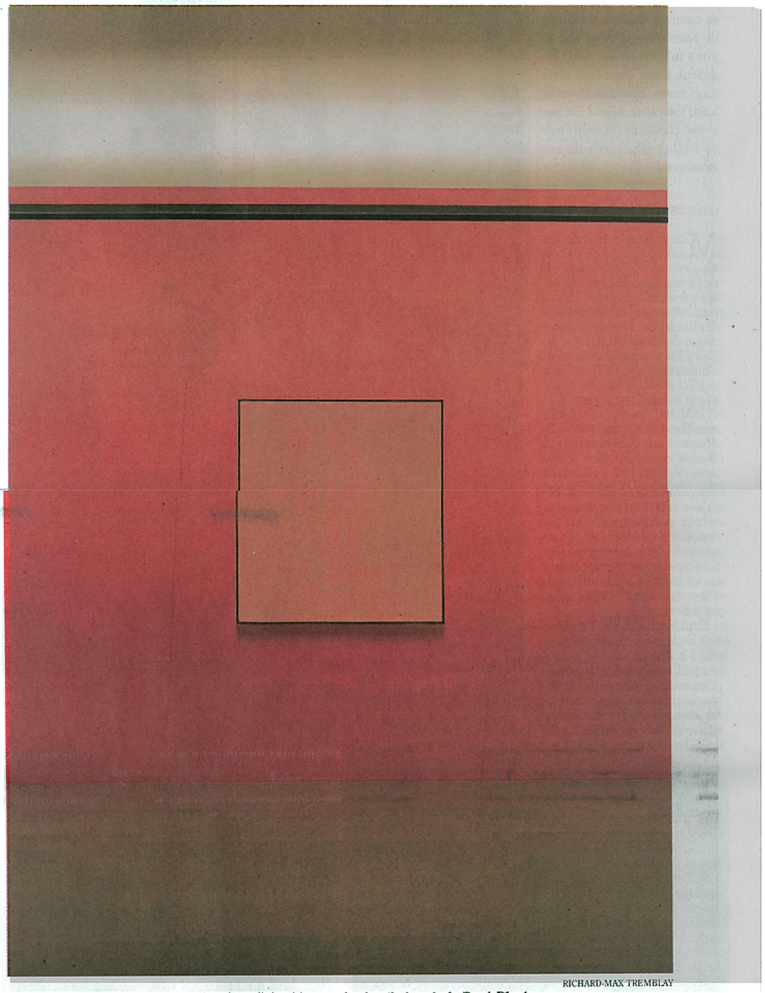
Comme le dit l'artiste lui-même, *«l'évidence de l'identité des lieux photographiés, leur histoire, leur usage, s'en trouvent presque effacés.* [Ça] *me permet,* poursuit-il, *de travailler davantage les données fondamentales de la peinture, telles que la composition, mais surtout la couleur et la lumière.»*

Un petit régal

Dans certains cas, il est plus ou moins vrai que les lieux photographiés *«s'en trouvent presque effacés»* — on reconnaît une porte, un vestibule, un puits de lumière. La plupart du temps, par contre, on a l'impression de se trouver devant des études autonomes de couleurs et de formes. Si quelques titres d'œuvres insistent sur la littéralité de la composition (*Red Cabin, Ouverture, Exposition...*), d'autres tirent vers le non-narratif. *Sans titre* (James Turrell) évoque le travail de la lumière de l'artiste américain, alors qu'ailleurs Dorion se réfère à Flavin et à ses néons colorés, ou à Fred Sandback et à la verticalité de ses constructions.

Pierre Dorion, peinture et photographie, montée avec la contribution de Stéphane Aquin, conservateur en art contemporain au MBAM, s'avère un petit régal. Malgré une certaine récurrence de la signature Dorion, malgré un ton léché, trop parfait, l'ensemble exposé bénéficie de son accrochage. C'est rythmé. On est piqué à vif d'un tableau à l'autre — même d'une photo à l'autre. Cette grande salle, carrée, blanche et somme toute banale, lui sied bien. Sa simplicité, justement, ne fait pas ombrage au travail mis en relief. Ça promet pour la suite.

À noter que la galerie René Blouin exposera, en avril, d'autres peintures récentes de Dorion, dans le même esprit que celle-ci.



RICHARD-MAX TREMBLAY

***Exposition*, 2009, de Pierre Dorion. Avec l'aimable autorisation de la galerie René Blouin.**

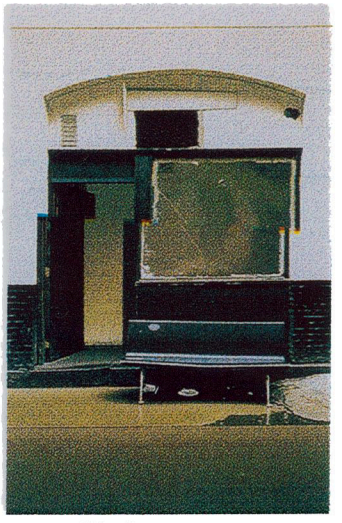
ARTnews
SUMMER 2002

Pierre Dorion

JACK SHAINMAN

Pierre Dorion's long relationship with perspective and illusionary representation bore magnificent fruit in this suite of nine oil paintings. Although the show's title, "I Must Have Been Blind," comes from a love song by Tim Buckley, these compositions are concerned not with love but with absence. Dorion's scenes, all based on photographs either found or taken by him, are devoid of people, populated only by objects—automobile tires, chairs, a car.

But Dorion is neither reviving Pop art's fetishization of banality nor reinventing photorealism. In these meticulously painted canvases he simply presents us with the enigma of existence. He isolates objects and places as if to ask why they are here. *The Window*, for example, is just that, a window in the side of a clapboard house. We cannot see through those black panes of glass, just as we cannot fathom the universe and must, like Dorion, take it as it is.



Pierre Dorion, *Store Front (15th Street)*, 2001, oil on linen, 72" x 48". Jack Shainman.

Dorion flirts with the history of art and artists—explicitly in *The Rock*, where a garishly painted boulder in a public park becomes an impromptu Dubuffet; and less obviously in *Store Front (Hudson Street)*, where he transforms a half-boarded-up building entrance into a minimalist abstraction. In both cases we are sensitive to the associations only because Dorion has isolated these objects. He may not be able to explain why the universe exists, but he does show why art exists.

Closer, a view down an apartment-building hallway, touches on all of Dorion's subjects. Nothing is happening in the hall. And that is the point. Like Rackstraw Downes, Dorion uses perspective to hold a mirror up to the viewer: the universe can only have the meaning we give it. Dorion's corridor is his destiny as a painter, the remaking of the meaningless cosmos in his own image. ***—Alfred Mac Adam***

VISUAL ART

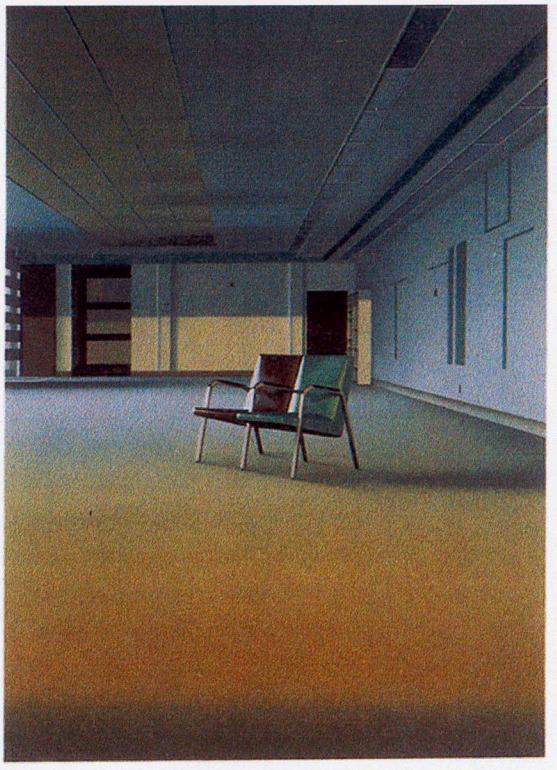
Pierre Dorion

Joseph R. Wolin

The slick surface of photography, produced by mechanical and chemical means, has always denied the identity of the artist. Photography exists, for all intents and purposes, without the trace of its maker's hand (despite an originary act of selection: what part of the real to transcribe or whether to take a picture at all). The surface of painting, on the other hand, built up by human action, has for most of its history served to announce the presence of its author. From the Morellian details of Renaissance altarpieces to the gestural brush strokes of Abstract Expressionist canvasses, painting displays the traces of the artist's decisions as palimpsest of personality. The photograph's vaunted indexical relationship is to its *subject*, to what it depicts; painting is indexical to its *making*.

A painting of a photograph, then, might be expected to be doubly indexical, or, perhaps, not indexical at all, as if the two modes of imprinting traces on a surface cancel each other out. Pierre Dorion's recent paintings seem to explore both options. Larger than any of his works seen lately, the canvasses in his recent New York exhibition also lacked the darkened edges that have characterized his photographically based paintings for much of the last 10 years. Those edges functioned as markers of the photographic, and of the nostalgic—vignetting the images like aged snapshots, flawed by vagaries of the lens or the development. The new works, consequently, seem somehow fresher, more modern. Yet they continue the artist's contemplation of unpeopled, largely vacant places. Dorion tends to picture generic interiors, unmarked façades, overlooked situations—liminal spaces *in between*. If these were film stills, as photo-based paintings so often seem to be, they would be transitional shots, scenes between narrative action. An empty and anonymous corridor in *Closer*, 2002, might be that of a protagonist's apartment building, or it might be a Minimalist installation, the alternating black and white painted mouldings disappearing into the one-point perspectival distance like so many Donald Judd boxes. In *Couple (Saint Roch)*, 2001, two joined chairs sit in an otherwise empty room of uncertain purpose (banquet hall, institutional rec room?). There is a certain kind of finality about this picture; the seats seem to wait expectantly for the absent human presences that would occupy them. Surely they represent a nod to the thematics of the pair in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Dorion paints thinly, smoothly and evenly, without much evidence of the passage of the brush, his canvasses seeming to aspire to the surface of photography. And this erasure of the hand feels like self-effacement, a gesture of considered demurral. The author has absented himself, inducing a focus on the photographic nature of the image and making more acute the desolation of the subject. Dorion depicts the depopulated, the rundown, the slightly passé and, like the photographs from which they are painted (according to Barthes, *all* photographs), his pictures embody both memory and melancholy. Despite the bleakness and anonymity of his subjects and the intermediary photographs, however, Dorion has not erased himself completely. His paintings remain paintings.



Pierre Dorion, *Couple (Saint Roch)*, 2001, oil on linen, 72 x 48". Photographs courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

While basing his images on photographs of real, though mundane, sites, the artist eliminates detail and flattens space so that his works take on a high degree of abstraction. *Closer* could almost be a stripe painting of vertical lights and darks, were it not for the cheap incandescent fixtures in the centre. The New York exterior of *Store Front (Hudson Street)*, 2001, becomes a geometric arrangement of a single circle amid orthogonals, one rectangle enlivened by a

Pierre Dorion, *Closer*, 2002, oil on linen, 48 x 72"

trompe l'oeil plywood grain, as if the artist referred to Cubist collage. Likewise, *The Window (Signal Hill)*, 2001, an entirely frontal, cropped view of a darkened, mullioned window on the side of a whitewashed and peeling clapboard house, constitutes an entirely rectilinear composition of horizontals and verticals, whites, blacks and greys. Dorion composed his scenes with large areas of flat, monochrome or nearly uninflected colour, and most feature blank or virtually blank bands at the bottom, some almost halfway up.

And while the artist's hand may be only subtly apparent, in very small details, those details are idiosyncratic. The tips of the trees in the background of *Machine (Sainte-Eulalie, P.Q.)*, 2002—a portrait of a vintage car with mismatched hubcaps and a flat tire, abandoned in the grid of an empty parking lot—resemble the stylized flames on a hot rod. Dorion achieves the sodden atmosphere of *Store Front (15th Street)*, 2001—an anonymous façade with an open door, a salvaged bench, some trash and a pile of melting snow—with a particular notation that represents water drops on cement sidewalk, metal bench and brick wall. It is just these quirky and personal painterly marks that indicate Dorion's intensity of vision and execution. A unique sensibility and touch—the traces of the artist's identity, however muted—enable these paintings to transcend the alienated banality of their photographic sources and realize a sad beauty and a profound grace. ■

Pierre Dorion's "I Must Have Been Blind" was at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, from April 19 to May 18, 2002.

Joseph R. Wolin is an independent curator and critic in New York.