

## Operating Systems

Pete Smith

Whatever we may think or affect to think of the present age, we cannot get out of it; we must suffer the sufferings, and enjoy the enjoyments; we must share in its lot, and, to be either useful or at ease, we must even partake its character.

— John Stuart Mill

Although it could be successfully argued that Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" is the prototypical manifesto for the *entirety* of Modernist painting, many of its underlying treatises had been lingering in the cultural atmosphere for quite some time. The idea that the function of artist-intellectuals in a society is to form and to express an intensely insightful understanding of the character of their age was inherited from Romanticism generally and German Romanticism specifically. The notion of *Zeitgeist* as "the collective individuality of a society"<sup>1</sup> and the view that high art should aspire to a sense of "fidelity to the spirit of the age"<sup>2</sup> were central ideologies that underscored the potency of the movement. Thus Shelley's famous English-language decree that artists are "mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present"<sup>3</sup> had its intellectual roots in the movement's original, continental branch.

The true stroke of Baudelaire's genius, however, is found less in his framing of the artist as the inspired revealer of hidden truths than in his specific understanding of where these truths were to be found in modernity: in "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent."<sup>4</sup> Thus, if we squint past the opulent glare of Baudelaire's romantic hyperbole, we uncover fragments of lucidity that bear consideration for the present moment as well. If the invention of photography had any more resounding impact on the development of Modernist painting, on Manet and his followers, it was this: that faithfully representing these newly uncovered truths was no longer enough. Rather, the painterly processes that created these representations had to further encapsulate modernity's perpetually shifting character. Paintings could no longer merely describe the present; they had to *embody* it. This thesis is thoughtfully and passionately argued throughout modernity. In countless manifestos, criticisms, and *paintings*, the familiar refrain is this: different forms of experience *necessitate* different forms of expression.

Let us fast forward.

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The epigraph is from John Stuart Mill's essay "The Spirit of the Age, 1," which appeared in the *Examiner* on January 9, 1831. Reproduced in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 22, *Newspaper Writings, December 1822–July 1831, Part 1*, ed. Anne P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pg. 92.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Harland, "Herder and the Spirit of the Time," in *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes: An Introductory History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), pg. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Howard E. Hugo, "An Examination of Friedrich Schlegel's 'Gespräch über die Poesie,' *Monatshefte* (University of Wisconsin) 40, no. 4 (April, 1948), pg. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pg. 508.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 13. The essay was originally published in 1863.

Perhaps the most insightful manifesto for art making in the early twenty-first century is Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction*. In it, Bourriaud states that the most "authentic forms" of contemporary expression are those which incorporate "inauthentic forms" into their production strategy, a layer of interference that acts as a mediating filter through which artists perform the varied enactments of their creative musing. Bourriaud claims that artists today seek

to produce singularity and meaning from the chaotic mass of objects, names and references that constitute our daily life. Artists today program forms more than they compose them: rather than transfigure a raw element, they remix available forms and make use of data.<sup>5</sup>

Let us press pause.

The works of Monica Tap and Michel Daigneault clearly embody the ideals laid out by Baudelaire and Bourriaud. Although their paintings and production strategies are "formally heterogeneous," the artists seek to discern "fragments" of meaning from the bedlam of information that bombards our contemporary experience. In the remainder of this essay I will seek important thematic congruencies through which to discuss the nuanced diversity of their painterly responses. I will argue that their works and "operating systems" offer an insightful glimpse into the frenzied nature of now.

### WHAT IS THE RESOLUTION OF MY EYES?

Monica Tap's paintings are based on video clips of the landscape that passes as she travels by train, bus, or car. Taken with a low-resolution, ten-frames-per-second, five-megabyte, digital still camera, this footage is uploaded into QuickTime, where still images are sliced from their raw data. Tap's paintings are representations of the "physical" landscape revealed at the speed of low-fidelity. Michel Daigneault's paintings are representations of the "social-visual" landscape, the complex web of graphics and images that flood our eyes and memories. His work blends abstract formal and/or compositional motifs with found, ready-made-template shapes and forms. These paintings are a veritable limbo of art historical and cultural memory. The work of both artists is vibrant and colourful, filled to the brim with an array of confident painterly negotiations that give substance to the ephemerality of the image.

There is a remarkable consistency to Daigneault's formal and iconographic vocabulary in the paintings on view, which date from 2002 to 2008. Although new forms gradually creep into his lexicon, the recurrence of familiar shapes gives his work a sense of constancy without ever feeling feigned or repetitive. These shapes become specified terms in his idiosyncratic, painterly language. In *Outer Space* (2008), Daigneault employs a large semi-centralized motif of multicoloured RVs that cluster down from the painting's

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay. How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), pg. 4.

upper right side. The conglomerated mass of forms comes perilously close to the painting's edge without extending beyond its frame. This bulky pilgrimage is contained within a faded cobalt-blue ground that is interrupted by a chocolate-milk-coloured, continental-maplike structure that crosses the middle of the painting laterally. A wispy delineation of maple leaves gives a light but tangible weight to the painting's bottom edge. It is a compelling cantation of our national symbol in that Daigneault avoids the more common graphic simplifications that mark our flag and local hockey jersey. Rather, he presents the familiar foliage quasi-naturalistically, as a sparse silhouette rendered in soft grays that grounds the whimsical melody of his sophisticated composition.

*From the Train II* (2005) is the earliest of Monica Tap's works presented. The earthy but colourful, pixel-like patchwork of her painterly mark making is contained within a horizontal blurring that implies an inherent sense of lateral movement. Unlike the "posthumous blurring"<sup>6</sup> of Gerhard Richter, Tap's blurring is structural; it is built into the painting's drawn, compositional framework. In *Road to Lily Dale II* (2006) this horizontal banding gives way to a Mondrian-like system of pluses and minuses. There is also a noticeable increase in the overall wattage of her palette's luminosity. In Tap's most recent paintings, however, these earlier structural motifs become more internalized, and a true embarrassment of brushwork, opacities, and colour daubs radiates from the confines of their large-scale frames. *Between Winter and Summer* (2009) is one such piece. A bright, turp-thinned, under-painted orange bleeds through the slim trees that cross the middle left side of the painting. The olive and umber and sap and beige of tree and leaf and rock and sky are backlit by this uncanny glow. Thick, triangular shards of paint punctuate the surface with a gooey, shiny viscosity that breaks the painting's spell of loose verisimilitude. This is the glare of the window, the glare of the screen.

## HOW FAST DO I PROCESS INFORMATION?

Time and speed are essential themes in Monica Tap's paintings. Her works are testaments to the frailty of a moment, incandescent renderings of a travelling landscape that rushes past in a trancelike convoy. The speed of a car. The speed of video. The speed of information. The speed of light that reaches our eyes; a whirlpool of data reaching our brains with ferocious velocity. The speed of a brush, attached to a hand, attached to a body. Ten frames per second. There is a careful urgency to Tap's mark making. She is making these marks as fast as she can, as fast as she can maintain control over her eyes and body and materials. Fat over lean over hardly-even-there. Every once in a while she is able to breathe: masking tape placed on almost wet paint, lifting a little bit but bleeding a little more. These paintings give us the optics of speed. The plein air landscapes of Impressionism happened at the speed of real life, but that was the pastoral life of Sunday excursions: day-trippers and faux-bourgeois tourists. Monica Tap's paintings are the speed of commuters, the speed of necessity. Process and exhale.

Time and speed are likewise important themes in the work of Michel Daigneault. In contrast to Tap's turbulence, however, Daigneault's collage-like mash-ups give us a

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<sup>6</sup> By which I mean that the painting is entirely "completed" before his wet-on-wet blurring occurs.

sense of being “out of time.” His use of wonky, Surrealist compositional conventions immediately signals the roundabout fancy of dreamscapes, for if the legion of Andre Breton has taught us anything, it is this: we know what our subconscious is supposed to look like. Daigneault wields this trope with inspired virtuosity. His shapes morph unhurriedly into smeary fields of lush, open hues. There is a leisurely narrative to his compositions. Our eyes move slowly across Daigneault’s panels: right to up, down to left, looping around through the marshmallow centre. We read the semiotics of his images like words spelled in the sky by an airplane. This is slow looking. We feel the deliberateness of our gaze. Moving our eyes alone seems inadequate. We have to move our whole head, our whole body. Stepping in, moving back, we discover more at each interval. At every step, the funny-strangeness of his eccentric plot proverbially thickens.

### HOW MUCH MEMORY DO I HAVE?

Michel Daigneault’s paintings are (up)loaded with a vast inventory of visual memory. As if you are walking through a second-hand shop filled with recycled design motifs and hermetic art historical referents, these paintings present an immense catalogue of twentieth-century painting and its fallout as twenty-first-century kitsch. In this regard, Daigneault’s paintings are particularly lewd. Generally focusing his art historical lens on more peripheral or “marginalized” Modernist moments, Daigneault pulls an assortment of skeletons from the annals of twentieth-century abstraction and mixes these motifs with similarly blush-inducing moments from popular culture.<sup>7</sup> These works probe and indulge a vast range of our guilty pleasures. *Quand la couleur signifie* (2006) is a particularly intriguing instance. A sea of watery-coloured, tattoo-parlour flame balls waves across the better part of the background. Several flame-coloured flame balls fall through the centre of the canvas into a fleshy heap of misty, airbrushed puddles. An airbrush is itself a fairly bawdy device to incorporate in an abstract painting, referencing Jules Olitski, jean-jacket art, and van painting. The pencil guidelines that recur around some of the sparsely laid-out forms is a clear sign of “tracing” that interrupts the “painting as drawing” convention traditionally (and heroically) linked to historical abstraction. The true comedy of the piece, however, comes from the Tanguy-like blobs in the bottom left-hand third, which cast a faint shadow over the Post-Painterly background haze. This moment of trompe-l’oeil slapstick best encapsulates the encyclopedic humour of Daigneault’s work. Monsieur Greenberg, however, would not be laughing.

Memory is likewise an important theme in the work of Monica Tap. Camcorders are a tool meant to enhance personal memory. For people of a certain age, few important moments in our early lives are not contained on some form of magnetic strip. The contemporary task of enhancing memory is, of course, more or less assigned to the realms of the digital. An algorithmic stream of ones and zeros perfectly recreates my son’s first birthday, or at least the parts of that event that seemed worthy of having the lens turned in their direction. In this sense, there is something mildly creepy and ultimately tragic about the direction in which Monica Tap points her lens. The “rugged Canadian landscape” that once seemed so eternal to the Group of Seven and their horde appears, in Tap’s paintings, to be fleeting and ephemeral, in danger of vanishing. These

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<sup>7</sup> As in “You know, I actually really like YES album covers.”

are not only landscapes passing from our vision; they are also passing from our experience. Monica Tap wants to remember. She wants us to remember too.

### HOW MUCH STORAGE CAPACITY DO I HAVE?

“I want to be a machine” is one of the more famous Andy Warholisms in circulation. In contemporary art, however, artists have extended and refined this notion. Monica Tap “wants to be” a camcorder. Michel Daigneault “wants to be” Photoshop. The obvious difference between their methodologies, however, is that where Warhol sought a more “mechanical” means of production (through silkscreen), Daigneault and Tap deliberately court the individual machinations of their own bodies and imaginations. In so doing, their work captures a splinter of precision about what it is to be, here and now. Of course, some would argue that the medium of paint is itself an anachronism and that more “contemporary materials” offer a more “honest” reflection of our current moment (the art world’s peculiar brand of *contemrophilia* and *contemptrophelia*). Painters, however, are drawn to painting precisely *because* of its history. It gives us context. For painters, the history of painting is the common denominator through which we can compare the nebulous scope of our collective experience. Through it, we gain a more thorough understanding of where we’ve been and where we sit. The paintings of Monica Tap and Michel Daigneault offer us this.

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