

Radiant Energy

The Hard-Edged Abstractions of Rita Letendre, Doris McCarthy and Janet Jones

Reflecting on her earliest years at her grandparents' farm in Drummondville, Quebec, Rita Letendre mused in 1969 that it was there "I learned to fight, fist fight. And I learned to draw."ⁱ That she paired anger with art-making at the very onset of her life and practice is unsurprising: Gaston Roberge, in his essay for *Woman of Light*, a 1997 retrospective highlighting fifty years of Letendre's works on paper, titled his first subsection "Rage" in deference to her difficult upbringing and the racism she encountered in small-town Quebec: "My childhood is like a serious injury that has never healed... very early in life, I got used to protecting myself against people," he quotes Letendre.ⁱⁱ Wanda Nanibush, co-curator of the Letendre retrospective *Fire & Light* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2017, situated this emotion within the artist's intersectional subject position: "Her rage could well have sprung up as resistance to the violence she experienced as a child just for being Abenaki; a society that kept many in grinding poverty and its attendant social problems; a culture of deep religious conservatism; and a ridiculous world where the fact of being a woman limited all of one's endeavors."ⁱⁱⁱ Making art at mid-century was an embattled undertaking for a woman. To make abstract art as an Indigenous woman could only be harder. Anger was one motivation that allowed Letendre to crash through the barriers put in her path, but Letendre also chased light and held it in each of her canvasses. And it this light that draws us in.

The Clean Shape is an exhibition featuring artworks by Rita Letendre (b. 1928), Doris McCarthy (1910-2010) and Janet Jones (b. 1952) drawn from the MacLaren's Permanent Collection. Essential to each of the paintings in this exhibition are the clean, sure lines of hard-edged abstraction,^{iv} achieving resonances of forms that charge each artwork with enormous visual power. The title, *The Clean Shape*, is borrowed from Letendre, who describes how the simplification of her mural works influenced her paintings from 1964, allowing for "that vibration of a space that moves."^v Letendre and Jones, both known for working in abstraction, and McCarthy, who experimented in abstraction during a generative period in the 1960s, have all navigated contentious and opposing art historical forces in the production of their works. Individually, each artist represents a significant moment of feminist advancement within the trajectory of Canadian art. By grappling with the loaded visual language of abstraction, they worked in a field that was strongly male-identified and maintained by powerful male critics and tastemakers. Despite this pressure, what each of these artists creates radiates pure energy unencumbered by the constraints they encountered.

Doris McCarthy was born the first of these three artists, and the arc of her education and career neatly covers much of the modernist period in Canadian art history. Educated at the Ontario College of Art by Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald, both of the Group of Seven, her earliest works were emboldened by the expressive and emotional tendencies of these early Canadian avant-garde painters. Beginning into the 1930s and lasting into the 1960s, McCarthy was regularly featured in juried, group and solo exhibitions, and her renown as a realist painter grew over this period. However, just as McCarthy had responded as a student to the paradigm-shifting Group of Seven, in her mid-career she was increasingly inspired by her Painters Eleven peers. McCarthy's hard-edged abstractions do not imply a retreat to imagined, purely formal compositions: the artist described this style as "poetic realism," and consequently her abstractions retain a fidelity to actual landscapes (among those, the granite outcroppings and waterways surrounding her cottage near Georgian Bay). *Rock Movement #4* (1969) is a scene McCarthy painted multiple times over the course of the year, minutely adjusting the flat planes of colour that comprise this scene of Jackknife Bay. McCarthy's favourite month to paint was April, when the bones of the landscape reveal themselves most clearly, and her love of the attenuated late winter/early spring landscape is clear in this sharply delineated work. While McCarthy moved away from abstraction after completing roughly one hundred of these hard-edge paintings, long echoes of her geometric distillations can be seen in her Arctic and northern landscapes, suggesting that abstraction remained part of her muscle memory long after she returned to a more traditional practice.

McCarthy's hard-edge abstractions were rarely exhibited at the time of their making and there is some evidence that their creation was, at least in part, a pedagogical exercise. Her longtime friend, artist Marlene Hilton Moore recalls: "When Doris spoke to me about her hard-edge paintings, she commented, 'As a teacher, I could not teach something I did not understand.'"^{vi} McCarthy, in addition to her own prodigious artistic practice, was a much-loved educator at the Central Technical School in downtown Toronto, where she taught from 1932 to 1972. While her own education was steeped in the artistic experimentations of early Canadian modernist painters, she herself taught the first generation of postmodern Canadian artists, among them Harold Klunder and Joyce Weiland. For Weiland—as for many of McCarthy's female students—McCarthy's commitment and independent spirit modeled what it meant to be a woman artist, alive and responsive to the zeitgeists of her time.^{vii} Her nimble experiments in abstraction demonstrate McCarthy's critical

engagement with contemporary trends in painting and the MacLaren is proud to hold five of these rare McCarthy works, four of which are on view in *The Clean Shape*.

Much like McCarthy in Toronto, Letendre adroitly navigated between the competing camps of abstraction in the Montreal art scene during her education and in the early years of her practice. Rather than choosing between the emotionally intense abstractions of the Automatistes and the rational geometric compositions of the Plasticiens, Letendre never sought to align her work with any one camp. Instead, Letendre made canny choices that reflected her own priorities and artistic needs: she considered Paul-Emile Borduas her greatest teacher, but it was Guido Molinari who gave the artist her first solo exhibition in 1955. Despite her youth and her vulnerable position in the art world of the time, Letendre was ambitious and ambitious on her own terms. “I wanted to be a great artist painter—not famous, just a great painter,”^{viii} Letendre said of her early years, signaling not only her intentions to make a mark in the artistic scene of the time, but also a dedication to her own stringent expectations rather than those of her milieu. For Letendre, no style or mode of working was ever sacred—the only unassailable trends in her own practice were her instincts, the joy she took in painting and how unceasingly she returned to the studio over the course of six productive decades.

In the 1960s, Letendre moved to Los Angeles where a formative public art commission shifted her practice towards the hard-edged abstractions seen in *The Clean Shape*. At the University of California, Long Beach, Letendre was charged with a seven-and-a-half by six-metre swathe of wall suspended over a pedestrian walkway on the campus. Realizing that her impasto painting technique would not translate to this major outdoor commission, Letendre experimented with thin layers of epoxy paints and ultimately developed the first iteration of her arrow motif in the resulting mural, *Sunforce* (1965). *Untitled (A Dream)* (1969) was made the year that Letendre returned to Toronto; in it, an arrow is sharply outlined by the meeting of two richly saturated orange vectors on the lower left-hand side of the composition. The influence of post-painterly abstraction—a term invented by Clement Greenberg for an exhibition he curated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, the same year Letendre moved to LA—is clear in this painting, although the work’s illusionist references to light prevent its being neatly categorized as such. *Morning Glow* (1975) is an assured later painting from this body of work, its flat surface and mix of sharp and blended bands of colour reflecting not only the artist’s enduring interest in hard-edged abstraction, but also her innovative use of airbrush technology. While both paintings testify to Letendre’s masterful skill, the later work demonstrates how the artist was able to keep abreast of new trends in painting while making work in a style that was wholly her own.

If Letendre was able to work without undue influence from the Automatistes and the Plasticiens in her early years, and from Greenbergian modernism in her middle career, Janet Jones’ practice reflects instead a critical and early engagement with many of Greenberg’s tenets. A distinguished academic as well as an artist—Jones has a PhD from NYU, where her dissertation examined Greenberg’s relationships with the artists of his time—Jones’ work reflects a critically rigorous feminist investigation into modernist painting. Her paintings in *The Clean Shape* are drawn from two series of work shown in her 2009 touring exhibition, *DaDa Delirium*:^{ix} *DaDa Flow* and *Solo*. Taken together, these works play with recessionality in their evocation of the hybrid public/private spaces of the postmodern city. *DaDa Flow #3* (2006), for instance, is finished with an undulating pattern of oblique coloured discs, a mise-en-abyme composition of pot-lights refracted endlessly within a stark, glass tower at night. Two receding bands of colour anchor the work at bottom, one blue and the other green, tethering our attention to the flat plane of the canvas and ultimately holding us back from fully immersing ourselves in Jones’ technological sublime. Painted edges, not immediately apparent when facing the painting head on, extend the work beyond the frame; spot-lit by the specialized lights of the gallery, the painting is haloed by an acid glow.

Jones’ work has its origins in digital photographs, which are layered, collaged and then laid down in paint by the hand of the artist. “In my paintings, the surfaces hover somewhere between skin and screen, caressed by my touch but with no tracking of the hand/brush visible,” Jones comments.^x The pristine surface of the canvas communicates some of the purity sought in modernist abstraction—most notably, post-painterly abstraction, when the virtuoso gestures of abstract expressionists were banished from the canvas—but rendered impure through a postmodernist invocation of perspectival space. The paintings are meant to feel digital and deep, strange and sublime: as Jones notes: “I am trying to create a sense of delirium, of vertigo, a sense of instability in the viewer.”^{xi} Rather than work with the essential nature of the medium, per Greenberg, Jones’ engagement with painting is meant to test its boundaries, to reveal painting as an unstable screen to the world rather than a transcendental object concerned only with its own material qualities. At its simplest, postmodernism as a movement can be seen as a “renewed interest—not in the general, universal, central—but in the socially and historically specific, the particular, the de-centred (or ex-centric of our culture): the local, the regional, the ethnic, the female.”^{xii} The end of Greenbergian modernism for Jones is not something to be mourned: As curator Stuart Reid notes, it signals Jones’ freedom to “reclaim the sensual acts of painting, to embrace colour and light.”^{xiii}

The Clean Shape was catalyzed, in part, by the cleaning of Rita Letendre's canvasses, allowing the light they hold to continue to act as a beacon for us all. Pairing Letendre's work with McCarthy's and Jones' reveals formal affinities as well as each artist's commitment to their own, deeply personal trajectories. For women artists in the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, making work with, through and against the dominant narratives of those times required tenacity, bombastic energy and nerve. Abstraction, in particular, was a fraught field of investigation, popularly understood as the domain of the visionary male artist. *The Clean Shape* highlights these artists' engagement in hard-edged abstraction, distilling their iconographic forms into pristine, geometric compositions, albeit with their own signature touches: McCarthy's allegiance to the Canadian landscape, Letendre's invocation of light and Jones' eerie near-digital capture of an emerging techno-sublime. Spanning more than four decades of artistic practice in Canada, McCarthy, Letendre and Jones have not only blazed a trail for future women artists working in abstraction, each has produced remarkable work that holds and will continue to hold enormous power for many generations yet to come.

—Exhibition Curator, Emily McKibbin

ⁱ CBC Weekend with Barry Callaghan, 5:50, aired December 28, 1969. Available online: <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/896872003631>. Accessed February 28, 2019

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Gaston Roberge, *Rita Letendre: Woman of Light* (Laval: Belle Publisher, 1997): 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Wanda Nanibush, "Fire & Light" in Wanda Nanibush and Georgiana Uhlyarik, *Fire & Light* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017): 13

^{iv} While hard-edged painting was used initially by American critic Jules Langster in 1959 to describe the work of a specific group of American artists—among them John McLaughlin, Ellsworth Kelly and Sam Gilliam—the use of the term here reflects a slightly expanded version of Tate Modern's definition of hard-edged painting as: "paintings [that] were made up of monochromatic fields of clean-edged colour which reinforced the flatness of the picture surface." Tate Modern, "Art Term: Hard Edged Painting," n.d. Available online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/hard-edge-painting>. Accessed February 27, 2019

^v Quoted in "Rita Letendre in her own Words," *Art Matters Blog* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, June 26, 2017). Available online: <http://artmatters.ca/wp/2017/06/rita-letendre-in-her-own-words/>. Accessed February 27, 2019

^{vi} Quoted in Ben Portis, "Doris McCarthy: Centenary," presented at the MacLaren Art Centre, June 17, 2010 – July 11, 2010. Available online: <https://maclarencentre.com/project/doris-mccarthy-centenary/>. Accessed February 27, 2019

^{vii} Johanne Sloan, *Joyce Weiland: Life and Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2014): 4. Available online: <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/joyce-wieland>. Accessed March 4, 2019

^{viii} Roberge, *Woman of Light*, 12

^{ix} The exhibition, curated by Stuart Reid, Director/Curator at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, was shown at: Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound (March 13 to April 26, 2009); the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie (March 4 to May 23, 2010); the Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg (April 3, 2012 to May 5, 2012); and the McIntosh Gallery, the University of Western Ontario, London (May 16 to July 13, 2013)

^x Quoted in Georgiana Uhlyarik, "Janet Jones in Conversation with Georgiana Uhlyarik," in *Janet Jones: DaDa Delirium* (Barrie, Cobourg and London: MacLaren Art Centre, Art Gallery of Northumberland and McIntosh Gallery, 2010): 22

^{xi} *Ibid*, 24

^{xii} Linda Hutcheon, "Feminism and Postmodernism" in Ada Testaferri, ed. *Donna: Women in Italian Culture* (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1989): 25

^{xiii} Stuart Reid, "Silent Night, Electronic Night: On the Paintings of Janet Jones," in *Janet Jones: DaDa Delirium*, 10

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