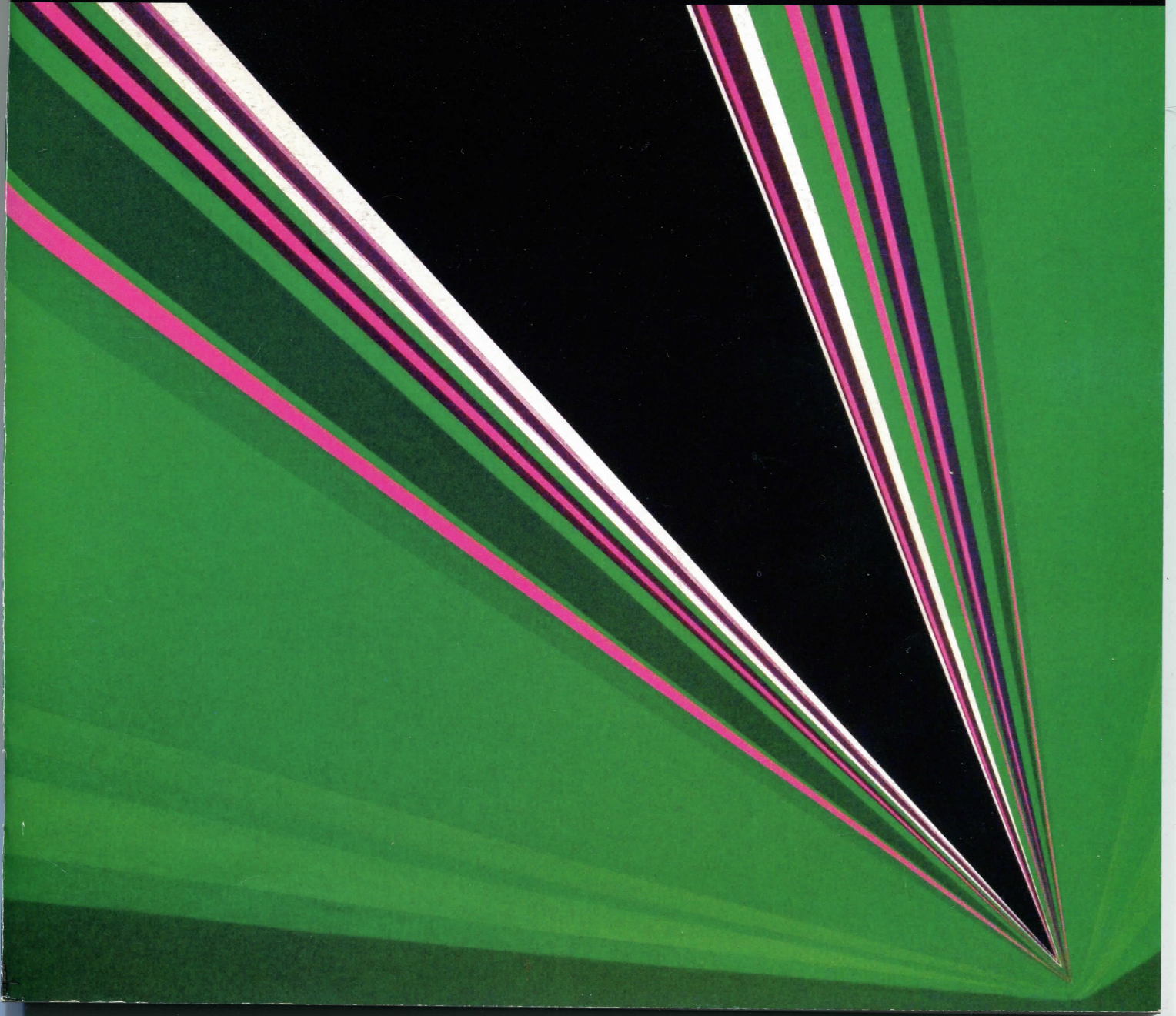


**Rita Letendre**



## The Trajectory of Rita Letendre

*At first it was just a crackling of sparks at the edge of the lash. The eye's iris bloomed deep in the night. Of course we knew comets passed this way, leaving wakes of aurora borealis. But there was no warning morning would split so brightly.*

~Gilles Hénault

I believe this brief retrospective at the Gallery Gevik will support my theory of a big bang early in the history of the artistic cosmos of Rita Letendre. It happened at the end of the fifth decade of the twentieth century of our era. Not long before, things had been cool. She'd gotten to know Borduas and the Automatist painters shortly after the publication of their now-famous manifesto, *Refus global*, in 1948. In a matter of months she dropped the figurative style learned at the Montreal Beaux-arts; in a couple of years she'd gone through what Barbeau, Mousseau, Riopelle and others worked out between 1943 and 1948, dropping modeling and depth and outline, moving toward two-dimensional, all-over, spontaneous abstract composition. She was among those selected by Paul-Émile Borduas for an exhibition that caused some contention in 1954: *La matière chante* (Matter Sings). By the mid-fifties she was adept in a more geometric, carefully composed manner, laying down *pavés* (paving stones) of bright colour, sometimes using a palette knife thick with oil paint. She was a quick study, hard-working, with her paintings well-represented in what is often seen as the last gasp of the Automatist movement: the exhibition entitled *Espace '55*. She was there at the coffee-house and gallery called L'Échourie, surrounded by the Gauvreau brothers, Leduc, Molinari, Paterson Ewen, involved in one way or another as the Automatistes became Plasticiens, joining a short-lived but very important Non-figurative Artists Association of Montreal. One of the few women showing in those circles at the time, she was soon recognized as a talent to be watched, praised in the writings of respected critics such as the young (never to grow old) Rodolphe de Repentigny.

This exhibition shows a selection of works from that period of the middle to late fifties. They tend to be small, bright, joyous in colour, balanced, solidly set within the borders of the canvas. Have a look at "Un matin d'été" (A Summer Morning, 1954),

for example, or "Jazz" (1953). Then, suddenly, around 1960, things changed drastically. To my eye, Rita Letendre became impatient with the Mondrian-oriented direction of the Plasticiens, and with a certain quietude in her own paintings. She moved to larger formats, laying the paint on with thick impasto, using large areas of dark colours through which bright, often angular sections exploded. As examples see "Partage du midi" (1962), or the very vibrant work on paper, "La fête" (The Celebration, 1963). There is not only a return to gestural techniques here, but a sense of powerful motion within the borders of the painting seeking to explode out, or across, or through. Where the hint of a grid remains, it often seems to be tearing apart by centrifugal force. The titles themselves often suggest geographic or cosmic shocks. Commentators at the time were highly aware of this new energy. Some of the changes we see in the paintings of this period, such as a growing preference for black set against strong colour elements, and for a broad, calligraphic stroke, certainly reflect her enthusiastic discovery of Franz Kline; but I don't see in Kline this feeling of explosive energy. And bursts of light and movement will remain in Rita Letendre's painting from now on, through many shifts in medium, colour and scale – the signature quality of her work, as far as I'm concerned.

This remarkable shift in energy corresponds with growing recognition of Rita Letendre's painting both within and outside Quebec. By 1960, she was winning significant prizes, showing with other non-figurative artists in a traveling exhibition organized by the National Gallery in Ottawa. In 1961, she was given a solo exhibition at the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal (six large paintings, of which two are now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario), and that very important exposure was soon followed by an appearance for the first time in Toronto (a group show at the Here and Now Gallery) and by

solos announced at Montreal 's important Galerie Denyse Delrue. It was the paintings of this period that won her a Quebec Government prize and a Canada Council Grant allowing her to leave for Paris in the Spring of 1962. They were also shown during the summer of 1962 in Spoleto, Italy, at an exhibition of modern painters from Quebec organized by the French critic Charles Delloye, a show now widely seen as crucial to the recognition of modern Canadian painting overseas. These months clearly marked a turning point for Rita Letendre, both personally and professionally, opening up new worlds for her considerable energies, encouraging her productivity. She says the Italians loved her aggressive, brutal paintings of that period; the French weren't so keen; in any case, most of her sales were still back in Montreal and Toronto. Guy Viau, in a small book that is among the first serious studies of modern painting in Canada, described her this way:

The painter Rita Letendre is fiery, but as thoughtful as she is passionate; her gesture as rapid as her reflection is deliberate. She says with a laugh that her most important artistic implement is the chair she sits on, endlessly interrogating her paintings, interrogating herself in front of her paintings. These works have the freshness of a beginning, the freshness of morning, suggesting natural cataclysms, or maybe planets colliding. As a woman painter, Rita Letendre incarnates power.

In Spoleto, she met Kosso Eloul, the Russian-born Sculptor then living in Israel, who was also showing at the *Festival dei due mondi*. It was a friendship that developed over several months in Italy, France, Israel and Canada until in March, 1964, Kosso was invited to teach at California State College at Long Beach. She went with him.

At Long Beach, two very important events occurred. During a large symposium on sculpture in which Kosso was involved, Rita was asked if she would be interested in painting a large mural for the campus, and the result was *Sunforce* (1965, more than 7 x 6 metres); meanwhile, June Wayne, founder of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, invited all participants in

the symposium, including Rita, to try their hand at printing. It's no accident that, at roughly the same time, the surface and shapes in Rita Letendre's paintings changed as thick impasto gave way to thinner pigment, with more sharply defined, large and angular areas of colour. Work on lithography led to silk screen, an ideal medium for these new hard-edged shapes, with the sense of movement and transition (sometimes collision) always there. Her reputation was growing at comet speed, with exhibitions across North America and abroad. By 1966, she and Kosso were represented by galleries in California, New York and Canada and were, in effect, commuters between Los Angeles and New York. It was now, also, that the large angular shapes in her paintings gave way to the wedges of colour that soon became her trademark, images (to my eye) of transcendent force fields moving at the speed of light across the canvas. An early example in this Gallery Gevik exhibition is "Rencontre" (Encounter, 1966), where mainly black points meet on a white background – and note the delicate flash of pearl blue just above the lower arrow.

Through the latter half of the sixties, Rita Letendre was occupied with working out this quality of light and movement through the motif of the wedge entering or leaving the space of the painting, usually, at first, in two contrasting shades. The edges of the shapes are hard and there is no longer any texture in the pigment. The preferred medium is now acrylic. There are often bright strips of primary colours, and variations on them, playing off each other to create the illusion of vibrations or waves. But once again, the suggestion of movement from or beyond the borders of the canvas is unique to her work. And note the continuing importance of black in examples from this exhibition such as "Blues" (1972) and "Klingit" (1973), where she painstakingly works out combinations of basically the same wedge shape through countless variations of colour. These were the first examples of her work I saw when I came to Toronto in 1972, especially the magnificent mural called "Sunrise," sixty feet tall and almost as wide, high on the wall of the Neil-Wycik student residence, now part of the Ryerson University downtown campus. They tell me the mural is still there for birds and butterflies to see, but unfortunately for mere humans, the city in

its wisdom allowed another building to rise immediately in front, eclipsing the sunrise. We had no better luck with "Joy," the large stained-glass mural she did for the Glencairn subway station in 1977, eventually removed because of engineering problems. Besides this and other large works of public art in and around Toronto, there were major projects in the early seventies in Dallas, Detroit, the state of New York, and in Québec. Her smaller works in various media were being shown in galleries and museums across the continent. She eventually had a studio in New York city, where she worked extensively on her prints and paintings, commuting to New York even after she and Kosso had decided to move to Sherbourne Street in Toronto in 1974. It was also around this time that she began to soften the edges in her paintings. We can see this happening in the lower and upper blue bands of "Malapèque" (1973), while the inner, green bands retain their hard edges. Eventually this blurring of the edge, often done with air brush, became more extensive, giving a kind of softness which, by 1980, is being explored in other media, such as charcoal and pastel. And for a moment there is a feeling of calm again, a hint of landscape. "La Tourmente" (The Storm, 1987) represents this mood for me, in spite of its title.

In 1995 begins what one critic calls the "third period" of Rita Letendre's painting, in which she returns to oils, using the palette knife and even her hands in powerful gestures, reintroducing volition across the canvas. Interrupted for months by the death of Kosso in November of that year, this life-affirming energy continues into the present and is well represented in the Gallery Gevik's current exhibition with works such as "Hurl Into Space" (1998) or "L'éveil du printemps" (The Awakening of Spring, 2004 – compare this with "Un matin d'été" mentioned earlier). Meanwhile, except for a very brief move back to Québec, she has remained in Toronto while her artworks travel the world, many settling in major collections. This city and our art historians have not given her the full attention she deserves, but sooner or later they'll see the light.

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