

Marie Claude Bouthillier Let us begin, as the saying goes, at the beginning.

After all, the right starting point is the foundation of every success, whether a journey or an argument. And in the painting of Marie-Claude Bouthillier - in so many respects both a journey and an argument - the starting point is a paradoxical constant.

Building on first principles, Bouthillier's work turns around the very foundations of painterly practice; texture, pattern, the picture plane, frame and grid relationships, colour and its absence among them. Indeed, two major series in particular have tipped her hand by extending these investigations iconographically.

One of them, titled *Au commencement, comme en ce moment*, plays eagerly with the implications of the Biblical creation narrative. The other, *Babel*, was a series of reiterative depictions of the legendary tower - the birthplace of the world's myriad languages. It is an ambiguous image, marking the place of both the end of some hypothetical primordial unity and the beginning of complexity, richness, difference.

Now, in her newest series << *mcb* >> Bouthillier turns to a different point of origin, a place at the intersection of writing and painting. She pokes at the buried roots of the communicative act.

Repeating the first letters of each of her three names - m, c and b - in an endless cycle, the painter builds up recognizable shapes from the looping script. Her oversized images begin to seem a forest, a closely massed army of tree trunks. A field of tall grass waving in a breeze is also recognizably a sea of flames licking skyward. Among these, there are also simple geometric shapes or grids, forms now suggestive of building blocks, begging the inevitable question of what they might become. Out of the strange accumulation of writing, fragments of a world emerge, asking to be identified, asking to be named. All of it a play of her initials and the surface.

Initials. Three letters that - not being a word - denote nothing, but that simultaneously overflow with meaning. At once a kind of metonymy for the artist's self (initial as a shorthand for the signature) and an origin (initial, as in occurring at the beginning or first), the letters themselves, reduced signifiers, are both foregrounded and lost in their own numbers. Thrust forward as they are, they trouble any ordinary reading. They are neither the most banal of possible writings - the sort of doodling one might do during a particularly dull meeting - nor the very gesture that creates, in the market at least, both the authenticity and the commodity status of the art object.

Surface. Another incongruity, suggesting at once the topmost or visible layer of a thing, or - when read as a verb - to rise from the depths. A contradiction that ought not be reduced to a purely linguistic pun. These paintings draw a share of their singular strength from the strain between the viewer's awareness of the thin layering of pigment atop the supporting canvas and the contrary observation that the image rises out of the very accumulation of paint.

And in a sense, the paintings replicate the unquietness that haunts every new beginning. The seductions of the familiar pull against the lure of the unknown - letters ripped from their context and the suggestion of an almost familiar image. Trees, fires, circles, all of them tantalizingly both handwriting and drawing.

It is this very uncertainty regarding the paintings' status that troubles observational comfort. Writing should be linear - something in us clings furiously to this - its communicative status arbitrary, assigned and yet paradoxically naturalized. Images insist on their transparency. The old-fashioned assumption that a picture is a slice of reality or - when non-figurative - about its very medium. These paintings call into question any such comfort, any such originating myth. The banalities of communication - textual, visual - are played off against their suddenly startling (and why?) discontinuities.

These pictures insist on tension, on acknowledging that words and images remain - and will

continue to remain - unfixed, spilling over into unforeseeable new combinations and patterns. That occasionally they might do this together. That there might not be a resolution, and that there might not need to be one.

And there lies in such tensions, between the sense of one's identity and one's sense of things; between the world's visuality and the sense that something lies below it, an opening into these paintings. An invitation - less to the voyage, with its implicit notion of a terminus and a return - than to a kind of self-renewing departure. To a risky, but gorgeously liberating, nomadism.

Peter Dubé