Soluble Flesh
Peter Dubé

There are two women in red, shapes uneven and deliberate, swimming in white space and joined waist to waist, each of them surrendering — or sharing — substance, each of them seeming to overflow into the other.

Though there aren't.

There are rough-hewn, broad outlines forced onto otherwise blank surfaces. Curves and lines that suggest more than they represent.

And yet they so clearly *will* the representation.

Here — I tell myself — is a limit. Seated in front of the painting, attempting to render a thought about it: its specificity, its vitality, and its materiality for that matter. I stumble, naturally. I trip over the untranslatable physical presence of these images and the troubling complexity they call up.

But then — in a very real sense — so do they.

More importantly, they stumble over some of the same issues I do: limits, boundaries, the body and its ambiguous contours, identity, the issue of physical

presence itself. The mutable red forms mentioned above are only one of the images in Marie-Claude Bouthillier's new series, *Resister, se disoudre,* to evoke these measureless themes. For just such reasons — particularly their insistence on the corporeal — I want to take these paintings' physical presence as my starting point.

A triptych also towers in the space. Three figures stand side by side, recognizably human, just recognizably female, all in the same postures and in the same colours. Each of their heads is different though; the first sports a flip coiffure, the next seems volatilized, or exploded, the third is absent, a pair of blue circles suggesting eyes is all that remains of it. Are they the same figure transforming — slipping off a shape to try on something new? Are they different figures? What does the question mean — after all, if a figure changes shape, is it not a new one? As intriguingly, all of these tall forms are built up from tightly packed dots, each dot distinct, underlining the loose construction of the overall figures, an atomization. The rows of rigorous points become a matrix, or a kind of grid.

Those dots recur in a number of smaller works in the show as well; paintings that are, strictly speaking, the only non-figurative work in the series. Here the points relentlessly repeat, move towards the edge of the surface, stretching the notion of the "non-figurative." The more we observe them, framed by the tall feminine forms, the more they suggest a cellular structure, the pattern

of skin. One sees the surface of the body echoed in a play against the limits of what might be called a figure. Painting as tissue sample.

In other figural studies — both heads and full-scale — Bouthillier reprises the initials that animated her last major series, *mcb*. Three letters, repeated over and over take up the work of the cellular dots and create different forms. Those forms are joined to the fast line work or spheres so evident in other pictures. The pairing of the artist's name (or, more properly, initials) with the figure brings forward the materiality, the bodily nature, of identity itself and, of course, prompts reflection on the relationship of these images to the tradition of self-portraiture.

Finally, though, it is the collision — or collusion — of this restrained iconographic vocabulary with the strong handling of paint that situates the work at another breaking point, that of figuration.

In reducing form to its basic, primordial elements, this series raises the question of the primacy of form itself — and the centrality of the body to our perceptual world. Undeniably paint or pigment, canvas or paper, this reduction of imagery calls out to our earliest memories of visual representation; souvenirs of the eye's savage promiscuity; this curve *is* a little girl's hair, a circle *can* be a head. Every child has scribbled these shapes in the edges of napkins, or the corner of a page and said "look I made a…." The desire-

filled claim that wants to dissolve the chasm between the represented and the representation.

But then, this work is far from that simplicity, despite its purposeful simplifications. The application of pigment is firm, the treatment of the material as foregrounded as the figure itself. The carefully rough placement of the acrylic and clear trace of the brush demand our attention. In addition, all of the heads, outlines, bodies are layered against radically reduced backgrounds, undercutting the claims of more traditional portraiture or figuration, and asserting the buried truth that all forms are *formed*.

And so, these daring pictures both test the limit between a thing and an image, between the figurative and the abstract, and, I would argue, assert their right to occupy space on either side of the divide. They are instantly open — and they are permeable. Moreover, because they have so thoroughly foregone any claim to the illusionistic, the accurately representational — without abandoning the recognizable — they call out to be granted the power of the iconic, the *sign* at least. Looking at them, there is a temptation to assent, to accord them a right to their simultaneous positions and to find pleasure in that.

It is in this sense that they *are* a kind of resistance; a resistance to a too-narrow notion of reading, a resistance that works to dissolve the problems of categories. Through the simplification of *form* and the heightening of *formedness*

they stake out a limit point of analysis and open up a space where painting and drawing become a kind of sympathetic magic or a form of play. Their physical presence, their corporeality in every sense, so palpable that their reading defies hermeneutics — a blank circle and curve merely implying, and doing it in a kind of silence. Thus, in the face of something so unusual in a gallery space, both they and their reader do stumble for a moment as they meet.

And given this, perhaps I too should acknowledge Bouthillier's generosity in making such a claim for the power of aesthetic experience to make a way:

There are and there aren't two women in red, swimming in white space and joined waist to waist. There are *and* there aren't.