**Disquieting the Gaze**

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When Sylvie Bouchard embarked on her career in the early 1980s, she developed her work in the context of what was then termed "the return to painting."[1] At that time (1983-1985), she produced installations whose construction, frontal quality and, to some extent, iconography principally referred to painting (its practice and history), an orientation she shared with other emerging artists on the Québec scene.[2]

After 1986, she moved away from installation. Adopting instead the more traditional medium of painting, she began producing large-scale pieces on wood: watercolours until 1990, then oil paintings until 1993. The paintings deploy strange compositions, their dream-like landscape quality accentuated by Bouchard's technique (creating a transparency that reveals the grain of the wood surfaces). Starting in 1992, the human figure, until then used discreetly (scattered, miniature figures) or indirectly (ghostly silhouettes) appears as a central focus in the compositions—mainly in interior scenes—positioned in direct relation to the spectator. Without abandoning the figure, which is still present in her recent pieces, her work of the last decade, made up for the most part of oils on canvas, represents interiors whose peacefulness (the surfaces are smooth, sometimes even soft) and intimate scale give off a sense of calm.

At the same time, Bouchard has always maintained certain areas of *imprecision* in her works or even, here and there, the odd spatial inconsistency that, in such otherwise measured work, is disorienting—disquieting even—to the spectator. This disquiet is all the more troubling since it seems to stem from the very structure of the works—from their framing, their *definition* of the object, the role the human figure plays in them—and since it emanates from an initially reassuring pictorial universe characterized, moreover, by an undeniable technical assurance.

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Presented in 1983 at the Powerhouse Gallery, the first of Bouchard's installations (simply titled *Installation*) consisted of two and three-dimensional elements—hung or standing, but always near a wall—between which existed a certain relationship in either their form or their function (chairs, benches, structures recalling a window or grid). This frontal approach was similarly evident in an installation exhibited a year later in the group show *Drawing – Installation – Dessin* (ill.). Here, Bouchard opted for a more unified presentation made up of juxtaposed wood panels that created a separate space even while it shared the same vertical boundaries of the gallery, namely floor and ceiling. The walls thus created were painted with forms reminiscent of architecture (arches, doors, windows, towers, stairs). And, like the preceding installation, the work was punctuated by three-dimensional elements, such as two wooden boxes strategically placed at the foot of the walls, evoking the idea of the doorstep (a *repoussoir* setting off the field of representation) and of an obstacle (painted yet real masses whose presence contradicts the illusion created by the painted forms).

In *L'Observatoire des mille lieux* (1985, ill.), an installation also composed of painted panels, the spatial work became more complex, mostly due to the positioning of the panels, which were placed at an angle to the actual walls. The exhibition space was simultaneously dislocated and recreated, the usual reference points (doors, windows, mouldings) partially eclipsed. As was the case in the preceding installation, the iconography of *L'Observatoire des mille lieux* borrowed architectural forms (arches, stairs), even while rendering some of these forms less legible, simultaneously referring to landscape and the built environment.

With hindsight, these first works foreshadow the direction of the later pieces. They make ready use of the illusionism inherent in painting with the paradoxical goal of underlining its artifice. They address the spectator directly while maintaining a distance, creating a dynamic that would continue to be a driving force in Bouchard's work as a whole.

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Of the various operations painters must perform in creating a work, framing—establishing the limits that will contain the composition—is the first. At least, that is what Alberti maintains in *De Pictura*: “Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen; and I decide how large I wish the human figures in the painting to be.”[3]

The theoretical and practical significance of this short passage is well established. Aside from its instructive, even commanding quality, the Albertian notion of the window has in fact become, thanks to its extended associations (opening, threshold, passage), at once a model of vision and one of painting’s fundamental features, in both practice and theory, still constituting a basic precept of the discipline—an essential parameter, a constraint to be tested.

The motif of the window (and its corollary, the door) recurs in Bouchard’s works, where it takes on different roles. It is present, above all, in an instrumental manner (following in this way Alberti’s instructions): that is to say, as a device that brings us to see (that defines what must be seen), that delineates and orders, includes or excludes. This is evident in the carefully centred composition of each of the two parts of *Paysage avec figure* (cat.) and the elliptical “ground” of *Paysage inversé, l’enracinement du ciel* (cat.) that acts as a *repoussoir*.

At other times, the window is also represented—that is, literally shown. In *Paysage itinérant 1* (cat.), a dark, irregular perimeter outlines a vague landscape that seems to be just emerging. In *Atelier Groover* (cat.), the image of the window echoes the theme of the studio in that they both evoke the conditions (the device and place) that preside over the elaboration of the artist’s work. In *Intermittence* (cat.), the diptych form allows for the juxtaposition of the two previously mentioned states: the window as an instrument for the gaze—as witnessed by the very tight framing of the drapery of curtains represented in one of the elements; and the window as image—the represented window that suggests, as the expression goes, an opening onto the world.

In *Histoires de peintures*, Daniel Arasse reminds us that "Alberti's window does not open onto the world at all; it is not a detail of the world that we see from this window, but the frame through which we can contemplate the subject. It is the rectangular drawing of the surface that will be painted, the framing, which determines the perspective."[4] This does not mean we cannot attempt to look beyond the frame, however. For what Arasse implicitly notes here is that painted works convey an inherent ambivalence: paintings are at once matter and illusion, frame and opening, surface and depth.

Many of Sylvie Bouchard's works underscore this ambivalence in a more pointed way. In *Pavillon* (cat.), a landscape is clearly visible in the background, beyond what seems to be a window—unless it is just an illusionistic representation, a landscape painting, as the work's composition, alternating between its two dimensions and the illusion of depth, seems to confirm. In *Paysage intérieur* (cat.), the represented landscape reveals itself at the outset as a painting within a painting: it is in fact the landscape seen in *Paysage avec figure*. This *mise en abyme* is also at work in *Random* (cat.) and in certain recent paintings, but indirectly, through the repetition of motifs characteristic of Bouchard's painting rather than through any reference to a particular work. In *Intérieur* (cat.), what at first appeared as a window could as easily be seen as a pale blue textured plane suggesting the sky. It is also notable that from close up, at a 90-degree angle, a door partially hidden behind curtains is outlined in the wall, leading to a staircase and yet another space.

A door, like a window, is an opening that simultaneously divides and connects; that both joins interior and exterior and sets them apart. But each notion operates differently, each possesses its own range of connotations: "The door is not essentially visual. Through the door, one enters and exits. Through the window, one looks. It is the window, and not the door, according to Alberti, that acts as a metaphor for painting. But if, on a structural level, the window suggests a gaze directed from the interior to the exterior (in this context, from culture towards nature), the door can be the object of visual investment as well, but in the opposite direction. It is defined by the gaze turned towards the *interior*.

What is more, it is not simply the gaze from the exterior into the interior … that really confers these characteristic connotations on it, but the gaze from one interior into another interior—as in the door through the wall between two rooms, two spaces. It represents a less clear-cut delimitation than the window, which separates 'culture' and 'nature'."[5]

A small drawing titled *Interstice* (cat.) illustrates the sharp yet subtle contrast between door and window. As the title suggests, the drawing represents an intermediate space, relatively limited but big enough to fit a person and a table. In the foreground, a door offers a passage from one room to the next, while in the background, windows are set in the wall at eye level, suggesting a hypothetical opening for our gaze. As much as the similarities between the formats of the door and window tend to link these two openings, the opacity of the windows and the connotations of the door (the gaze turned inwards) contribute, on the contrary, to creating the impression of a narrow space that presents the spectator with a question, a conditional invitation. "The door as motif is, to be sure, immemorial: traditional, archaic, religious. Perfectly ambivalent (as a place for passing beyond and a place that prevents our passing), and used as such in every mechanism and every hidden corner of mythical constructions.… For the door represents an opening—but a conditional opening, threatened or threatening; capable of giving all, or of taking everything back."[6]

Like the window motif, the door takes on different forms in Bouchard's work. It is first found as an image, for example in *D'entrée de jeu* (cat.) and *Scène d'atelier* (cat.), where it forms an opening in one of the side walls, recalling, in this oblique representation, the "conditional opening" defined by Didi-Huberman. The door once again calls its ambivalence into play: is it an invitation out, to go see what is beyond, or on the contrary, as Stoichita suggests, an intrusion into the space of the work by a neighbouring space—or even another potential painting that could be both a threat (to the integrity of the existing work) and a promise (of other works *forming an extension* of the existing work). From one work would come another—as though, through this circulation of the gaze and between the spaces, the work shown could not be resolved into only "one."

The door is likewise present, but in an implicit manner (as a vague opening more than an architectural element), in the diptych *Colin-maillard* (cat.). The purplish grey plane in the right half can be seen as an obstacle, whereas the yellow plane in the left half seems to give access to a colourful void—or better yet, seems to be itself that colourful void. The idea of a door/plane opening onto a space of pure colour (to the point of becoming one with it) is also present in *Autoportrait* (cat.) and in the various elements in the series *Le Bandeau d'Arlequin* (cat.) and *Les Chambres colorées* (cat.)—works whose very format recalls the metaphor of the door more than that of the window. A door that, here, leads to strange compositions, places that are at once empty and inhabited, where a narrative would normally take place, a *subject* would be set.

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Objects play a leading role in Sylvie Bouchard's painting—a role that is all the more important as they are limited in number and as their function is, at first glance, obscure. The presence of objects in the installations of the mid-eighties, such as the chests placed up against the painted panels, has already been noted. Over the years, other objects have appeared, strictly two-dimensional ones: more chests; a few tables; here and there, items of clothing; curtains that partially mask an opening, blocking the space or simply represented as a panel; models, significantly more numerous than the other types of objects; a blue sphere (a ball?) and various other objects, the natures and roles of which one would be hard pressed to precisely identify.

Indeed, in Bouchard's work, objects are very ambiguous. Describing the blue sphere (cat.) definitely as a ball would be taking the interpretation too far, as its context (it is set on a grey ground, in front of a painting representing tree trunks, not far from a pink strip running along the right border of the work) does not provide any indication of its true nature. It is similarly difficult, even impossible, to precisely identify the objects placed on the little shelves in the work entitled *Horizons* (cat.). Certainly, the curtains, coats of arms, clothes, tables and models represented elsewhere are more easily identified, but

they are no less silent regarding their real use. Why are they there? What function should we attribute to them? In short, how are we to *designate* them?

Barthes, referring to the objects represented in seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, writes: “An object’s use can only help dissipate its essential form and emphasize instead its attributes.” Representing an object in the light of its use helps to describe and distinguish it. Barthes compares the “useful aspect” of an object with its “fundamental form”, affirming, in regard to Dutch painting, that “here, in other words, is never a generic state of the object, but only circumstantial states.” He continues: “Behold then a real transformation of the object, which no longer has an essence but takes refuge entirely within its attributes. A more complete subservience of things is unimaginable.”[7]

In contrast with the Dutch still life, which seems to present an inventory of the uses of the object, Bouchard’s paintings offer to our gaze objects that are apparently devoid of function, as though the artist were on the same road as the Dutch painters but had taken the opposite direction: objects that are usually highly “circumstantial” and whose usefulness seems to be self-evident (table, clothes, curtain, etc.) she displays in a different state with correspondingly different functions: they play a part in the balance of the composition; act as a break or link between two spaces; open up or close off a kind of depth within the painting space.

And when a certain usefulness is conferred on them by the context—when, for example, a table serves to display a model or when a coat dresses a figure—the narration, only just begun, immediately breaks down. Yet it all seems to have been put in place so that the “narrative” may take “form”, so that a subject may be laid out: framing and depth, texture and modeling—it is all so convincing at first glance …

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The human figure occupies a central position (literally) in Bouchard’s work. What does it do there? What are its surroundings? What relationship does it maintain with the

spectator? First of all, it is defined through poses rather than actions. The figures' gestures, in the rare cases when they make them, seem directed, dictated by the imperatives of the pose rather than by an action already set in motion before the picture was produced. The environment surrounding the figures is usually an interior, and therefore "constructed". These are spaces that appear to be carefully delineated but that, on closer examination and at certain angles, prove slightly improbable. Each of the four paintings in the series *Les Chambres colorées* (cat.), for example, presents a space where colour, whether it covers an entire wall or only a few sections of it, seems to have the principal function of articulating space in order to create depth—but where, in reality, planes and sections of colour merge to produce surprising spatial articulations.

Alone in this space, and consequently in intense interaction with it, the human figure (sometimes shown in close-up, and hence fragmented, as in the recent paintings, but generally represented in its totality) is seen as shorn of its usual attributes (for example, as the primary narrative device), becoming purely the object of our vision.[8]

We are touching here on an old dichotomy between the visible and the sayable which Alberti exacerbated by saying that the window allows us to "see the subject." In so doing, "Alberti sets up a relationship between two heterogeneous terms: a window, which is for the eyes, and a subject, which is for language," writes Wajcman. He goes on to say, "rather than causing an inconsistency, the heterogeneity of the relationship is the source of the richness and strength of Alberti's analogy—its substance, its very reason. Far from disqualifying it, the tying together of the sayable and the visible is a sign of its newness and the basis of its significance."[9]

At first glance, Bouchard's paintings seem to pose an enigma and, in this sense, to contain a narrative. But beyond the "realism" of their rendering (at least in the works of the last ten years), which gives them an undeniable sense of plausibility, and even with their occasional gestures, the figures shown offer little hold for verbal description. In fact, these paintings are above all silent spaces, representations of absence. But, as Didi-Huberman notes, "the deserted space is not a simple space where there is nothing at all.

To show visual evidence of absence, it takes, at the very least, a symbolic alliance, or its fiction."[10]

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Painting revolves around a series of paradoxes that, as Arasse reminds us, the idea of framing contains and summarizes better than any other concept. When we look at a painting, we also see the frame facing us. This frame presupposes a *front* and an *interior*—not one *or* the other but one *and* the other, simultaneously, indissolubly linked.

In *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Didi-Huberman focuses on two apparently opposing "figures" of the spectator, which are consequently emblematic of a dichotomy at the very core of our relationship with the work of art: on one hand, "the man of tautological vision" who holds strictly to what he sees, affirming, "The object I see *is* what I see; that is all." on the other hand, "the man of trusting vision" who turns the experience of seeing into an exercise centred on a hypothetical *beyond* revealed by the work of art. The former does everything possible to "deny the temporal nature of the object, the effect of time or metamorphosis on the object, the work of memory—or obsession—in the gaze" with, as a result, "an overly enthusiastic, pitiful triumph of language over vision." The latter believes with certainty that something is hidden in what we see—something like "a grand statement of truths from beyond, of hierarchical Elsewheres, of paradisal futures and messianic confrontations…"[11] To move beyond these two positions, which come together in their implication of the supremacy of language over vision, Didi-Huberman creates a dialectical relationship between them — bringing into play, one in relation to the other, that which is *this side* and that which is *beyond*. He returns to the idea that "the image is structured like a threshold,"[12] and implicitly suggests that the gaze directed at the work is constructed at the precise point where language joins the act of seeing—and is engulfed by it.

This idea that the painting acts as a threshold in relation to which the gaze occupies an unstable position (between faith and tautology) is the driving force behind many artistic

practices. However, some attest more than others to a keen consciousness of this state of affairs. Sylvie Bouchard's approach seems to belong to this group.

When the artist creates illusionistic spaces whose apparent depth she contradicts by inserting within them spatial inconsistencies; when from one work to another or within the same piece she employs the various connotations of the window and door motifs (surfaces or gaps, open or closed passages, suggestions of a different—exterior or adjacent—place); when she places, here and there, objects whose simple presence is all the more affirmed since their nature or function seems enigmatic; and, above all, when she depicts the human figure in a realistic manner without incorporating it into any subject or narrative—in this way directly addressing the spectator while maintaining a certain distance (absorbed poses, averted gazes)—Bouchard summons up both that which is this side and that which is beyond in the work, permitting the painting to simultaneously unfold on different levels (figurative, material, symbolic) and, in this way, offer the viewer a new experience that is in many ways paradoxical, and may even provoke a feeling of disquiet, a sense of "uncanny" strangeness.

This "uncanny" strangeness nevertheless seems to have little to do with the nature of the things represented (landscapes, architectural spaces, objects, figures). Indeed, their strangeness is hardly disquieting in the context of pictorial fiction. In fact, what Freud termed "the uncanny" relates more to the placement (and not the nature) of things: "The uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it."[13]

It is notable that Bouchard's paintings are rarely framed—yet another disorienting factor. If the function of the frame, as observed by Wajcman after Poussin, is to separate the space in the painting from all the objects around it, what happens when the frame is absent? "The frame is a presenter.… The frame reveals the painting and reveals it as a painting.… Conversely, the absence of frame always leaves the nature of the image in

doubt: painting? mirror? real image? The question can become undecidable within the painting itself when interiors are featured."[14]

Certainly, the risk of confusion is minimal in a museum exhibition. But the absence of frames nonetheless has an impact, in particular on the relationship between the work, the exhibition space and the spectator. The presence of structural and figurative echoes between the work and the surrounding space only adds to the spectator's disorientation. At the same time, the calm strength emanating from the works, regardless of their format, is striking. Without coming under the *in situ* heading, Bouchard's works take their place in the exhibition space with remarkable aplomb, establishing such a rapport with the space that it seems to be an integral part of the work, becoming both container and contents, real space and representational device.

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[1] In Quebec as elsewhere, this "return" came after twenty years of questioning modernist dictates (formalism and the quest for specificity)—dictates that painting, more than any other art form, had come to embody.

[2] Many solo and group exhibitions demonstrated the role then played by installation on the Québec art scene. Examples that come to mind include the exhibition *Aurora Borealis* (1985, Centre international d'art contemporain, Montréal), devoted to Canadian installation art, as well as the event *Montréal tout-terrain*, which was held a year earlier by a collective of art historians and artists (among them Sylvie Bouchard) and which brought together, in what had formerly been a clinic in Plateau Mont-Royal, fifty-five artists, most of them at the beginning of their careers, many of whom had chosen to create installations with pictorial qualities.

[3] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), p. 55.

[4] Daniel Arasse, *Histoire de peintures* (Paris: Denoel, 2004), p. 57. This work is actually the transcription of a radio series entitled *Histoires de peintures* by Daniel Arasse, aired from July 28 to August 29, 2003, on France Culture.

[5] Victor I. Stoichita, *L'Instauration du tableau* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993), p.58; quoted by Gérard Wajcman in *Fenêtre. Chroniques du regard et de l'intime* (Paris: Verdier, 2004), p. 233.

[6] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), p.185.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 5-6.

[8] To paraphrase Jean Louis Schefer, Sylvie Bouchard's painted spaces are, like Saenredam's churches, sites that are "totally absent of function" where figures pose "as though they have been excused from signification." Jean Louis Schefer, "L'Interprétation suspendue," *Artstudio* 18 (Fall 1990), p. 10.

[9] Wajcman, *Fenêtre* (cited in note 5), p. 274-275.

[10] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Homme qui marchait dans la couleur* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2001), p. 51.

[11] Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons,* p. 19-21.

[12] Ibid., p. 192.

[13] Sigmund Freud, *Psychological Writings and Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 122.

[14] Wajcman, *Fenêtre*, p. 311-312. In his discussion on the representation of interiors, Wajcman refers to the spatial ambiguity of the background in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*—an ambiguity similar to the spatial imprecision of Bouchard's works.