

To render the void

In 1955, at the very outset of his career, Edmund Alleyn found himself in Paris, after having been awarded a prize in the Concours Artistiques de la Province de Québec. He had intended to stay for two years but in fact he stayed for fifteen. We can't say then that he experienced the political and cultural events that took place in Quebec towards the end of the fifties and in the sixties. His kind of painting is therefore hardly analogous to what was being done in Quebec at that time within the movements of the Automatistes and the Plasticiens. Of course we do find a certain symmetry in the organization of pictorial space and a certain affirmation of the materiality of the pictorial support, that allow for the traces of the artist's intervention to show through; however, nothing here is really comparable to the gesturality of abstract expressionist art or the rectilinear forms of formal geometric painting.

Even though his first paintings take on an abstract appearance, they still belong, as do many other paintings of this period, to the landscape tradition. The lines, the forms or the colours still suggest the idea of a fluid and informal nature, one that can reflect a fluctuating sense of imaginary or a shifting state of mind. With *Contreforts* and *Sur la grève*, for example, we can still make out the heaps of debris, washed up on the shore by the sea, that comprise the formal elements of the paintings. Similar to an intricate network of wood fibers upon which an organic tissue is arranged, *Contreforts* extends itself in all directions at once. In other paintings, mineral elements become part of a spatial arrangement, as if the space were divided into several sedimentary strata, suggesting a cutaway view of the earth's crust.

With the beginning of the sixties, the ligneous forms disappear to make way for long bands in earth coloured tones, the formal composition of which is sufficiently sparse as to restrict itself to a central motif, floating in the middle of the painting. This stain seems at times darker, at times lighter, depending on the nature of relationship established between the figure and the ground. This preoccupation with questions pertaining to the picture plane and the ground, to the scene and the background

is found in virtually all of Edmund Alleyn's paintings. It even reappears in more recent paintings, where the isolated figures (furniture, plants, statues) are lined up side by side on a black or grey ground. This indefinite mass produces above all a focal point, an opening in the painting that provides a glimpse into a bottomless space, an abyss into which all existential worries and the most saturnine dreams fade.

Stranger (1960) and *Ombre d'un doute* (1959) are composed around an oblong form, suggesting a chasm, whereas *La crevasse* (1959), with bands of colour crossing through it, is more reminiscent of a fault line where two masses separate to make space for a void. *Le noeud* (1960) is arranged like an encounter between verticality and horizontality, with two striations fused together in the middle of the painting intermingling their colours.

Locus of contention, area of shadow, gaping hole, all of these spaces visually reconstruct the sites of inner experience, one that pushes back the limits of the known and explores unknown territories. The idea of nothingness, that existential philosophy has often dwelled upon, is viewed as a substantialisation of the void, a questioning of meaning when there no longer is meaning. During that era, Jean-Paul Sartre also conceived of the distinction between the "for-itself" and the "in-itself", defining the relationships of being to the world and the inevitable gap between thought and action implied by that, as if the body were separated from its will. Moreover, Meurseault, *The Stranger* in Marcel Camus' novel, illustrates the perfect anti-hero who, not being able to explain the motivation behind his murderous gesture, is condemned to death without feeling that the verdict is in any way his concern. Indifferent to what is going on around him, he does not comprehend the expectations that people have of him. In the same way, the world seems beyond reach in Edmund Alleyn's paintings; the feeling of powerlessness that is experienced in not being able to transform it concretely makes one want to succumb to passivity.

In 1964, Edmund Alleyn began a return to figuration with three versions of the same image, all entitled *Au-dessus du lac*. Different biomorphic signs are still to be found in the composition, but interestingly, the water motif with the sunset also appears literally for the first time in the background of the painting along with a canoe in the middle of the horizon. Nonetheless, the image of water functions in much the same way as the abstract figures do: it circumscribes a background that isn't a background. Despite the multiplicity of possible symbolic connotations associated with water, in Edmund Alleyn's paintings its representation always refers to the same idea. It is not the clear water of the river, nor is it that of the tumultuous sea, it is rather the calm water of the lake. Its apparent tranquillity does not bring to mind the tempest of the river's current or the sublime feeling experienced before the sea's incommensurability, but rather the doubt before the unfathomable depth of the lake.

According to Gaston Bachelard, (*L'eau et les rêves*, 1942), deep water, in contrast with translucent water, absorbs images instead of reflecting them; the opaqueness of the water attracts the gaze into an abyss that can be none other than that of death. Still, according to Bachelard, the lake's water becomes the substantialisation of nothingness, a dissolution of being into a vague fluidity. The surface of the water, and this is particularly the case in the paintings of Edmund Alleyn, does not mirror back an image, only dusk's filtered light lends some animation to the waves as it skims over them with an undulating glow. Revealing nothing, the water invites us to meditate on the void and to ponder the limits of representation. In *Dérive* or *Skin* (1985), the body of water occupies the entire surface of the painting, with the same motif reframed in the centre, thus adding more depth to the perspectival space, or creating a "mise en abyme", an infinite inward recession of representation itself.

But it is really with *État stationnaire* (1965) that the most astonishing changes take place. The biomorphic motifs have

transmuted directly into geometric signs (by taking up the same formal similarities) that now refer to the new world of technology. Reels of sound tape, computer systems, electrical wires, and medical apparatuses now make up the artist's new lexicon. Bodies, very often dismembered, float in an indeterminate space, while being plugged into medical apparatus that explores probes, and or auscultates their interiority. It is not the body though that is being appropriated but its mental activity.

Always preoccupied with the human condition, Edmund Alleyn was reacting at the time to the medical world's fantastic desire to analyze and control humankind's smallest desires, with a will to forever improve the fate of humanity. In this era of rapid changes, Edmund Alleyn's images show yet again a static human being, hunted down like an animal and condemned to seek a refuge in an idyllic inner world that doesn't correspond to the reality of the technological world. The process of rupture that Edmund Alleyn carries out was also registered within a discursive shift which at that time questioned the psychological definition of the individual and the concept of the autonomy of consciousness. Edmund Alleyn opts instead for a sociological interpretation that presupposes that environment and social status have a determining role in his thinking and the nature of his gestures. In this context, the human being is no longer free to do as he pleases, but he remains rather conditioned by his environment.