

PATERSON EWEN

The Turn from Non-Figurative to Figurative Painting

I got thoroughly tired of the discipline of keeping the paintings clean and neat — I did two breakthrough paintings where I used felt. I gessoed one fairly large canvas and then picked out a particular blue and dipped a piece of felt into the paint and daubed it onto another spare piece of canvas until I got more or less a nice dot. Then I ran a dotted line without tape across the canvas... then I did a second one on gessoed canvas with black dots. I was convinced at that point that they were a kind of phenomena and not abstract paintings.¹

P aterson Ewen turned from “abstract” or non-figurative painting to figurative painting in 1970. After over 20 years of modernist non-figurative painting he acknowledged and found valuable the presence of subject-matter which, in Montréal during the 1950’s and 1960’s, had been condemned as traditional, illusory, sentimental and regressive. To stress the formal drama of Ewen’s “turn,” however, is to overlook the most important aspect of his new figurative paintings: a change in attitude from one of denial and exclusion to one of acceptance and tolerance. Ewen had resisted the idea of abstraction, the gradual erosion of all subjects other than the absolute freedom of form, as a matter of degree, throughout most of his career in non-figurative painting. But by 1970 he fully accepted abstraction as a matter of kind: an approach to painting in which the subject and the object were perceived as not only indivisible but also unquantifiable. Ewen’s “turn” cannot be seen as a shocking avant-garde revolution of form nor as a return to his early figurative work of 1949-54. In his figurative and non-figurative work before 1970, Ewen believed that freedom in painting required the domination of the object over subject-matter. In his “turn,” Ewen implicitly criticized this belief integral to the concept of style and the avant-garde mentality.²

In Montréal during the mid-1950’s through the 1960’s, art critics and artists continued the awareness of art history as a means of establishing credibility for Québécois artists. This idea had been proposed by Borduas and Pellan. The concept of style used in establishing a history of art in Montréal was taken to extremes, not only in the judging, but also in the making of art. Briefly, the creation of styles and sub-styles required a scientific objectivity and the suppression of the historian’s subjective impressions in the observation of

concrete form. Observable form, the object, was to be trusted while iconography and hermeneutics, which involved subjective response, were relegated to a separate and secondary investigation. Svetlana Alpers, in her 1977 essay "Style Is What You Make It," was critical of this concept of style in the analysis of art. Absolute stylistic categories were created "in the interest of externality and objectivity freeing the observer from any responsibility for them. The presumably objective categories of large historical classifications are then (silently) treated as aesthetic properties of each object."³

This approach to style was supported by humanist values of "freedom" and "rationality." Freedom in art was demonstrated by its discovery in original form, but, ironically, such "discoveries" conformed to a predetermined notion of the inevitability of history — a history of western art chosen from work which represented artists' ability to conquer their limitations and to progress. Human limitations or artistic failures, represented by art or qualities in art which appeared regressive or repetitious or which did not fit their period styles, were devalued or suppressed to preserve the linearity of stylistic change. In the developing history of art in Montréal during the 1950's and 1960's, Ewen's "failures" were seen as his inability to eliminate referential subject-matter from his paintings and his reluctance to evolve towards what Montréal activist and painter Fernand Leduc called, in 1954, "la plus haute présence formelle."⁴ Ewen's reputation for lagging behind the Montréal avant-garde and for being inconsistent within his own œuvre was created and perpetuated by critics, historians and artists who relied too heavily on the concept of style; and by Ewen himself. In this article I will chart the changes in Ewen's attitude towards this concept in painting from his initial enthusiasm to his angry and ultimate criticism of this position as implied by his turn to figurative painting in 1970.

In Montréal during the 1940's and 1950's, the polarity of avant-garde and traditional forces supported the development of art history as a progressive evolution of style through the "discovery" of original form, running like an old movie of the good guys versus the bad guys. This simple but no less powerful theory of change in art seemingly distinguished such artists as Ewen's teacher at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts' School of Art and Design, Arthur Lismer, from the radical Automatiste, Paul-Émile Borduas. In 1972, Montréal artist André Jasmin wrote that, during the 1940's, Lismer represented the institutionalized and traditional figurative painting of an "anglo-saxon bourgeoisie" and Borduas represented the spirit of French non-figurative painting martyred in the cause of progress.⁵ However, these artists' reputations were both built on the humanist value of freedom. Lismer's belief that "where there is revolt, there is life"⁶ reflected an attitude no less "avant-garde" than that of Borduas who enjoyed "splendid anarchy."⁷ As well, both Lismer and Borduas believed that the formal elements of painting were more significant than subject-matter. In

regards to representation in painting, Lismer believed that form in art (the object not the subject) could speak of universal freedom: "Art is not a matter of skill and exclusive ability, but a universal gift possessed by all in some degree. This universality is the basis of modern teaching in the arts. It postulates the belief that representation is secondary to the idea of art as a social function, which is the concern of every person. It is not bound by fixed rules and formulae."⁸

In *Refus global* (1948), Borduas criticized the use of subject-matter in paintings by Dali and Tanguy: "because memory is involved, interest focuses more on the subject treated (idea, analogy, image, unexpected association of objects, mental connection) than on the real subject (the plastic object, appropriate to the sensual properties of the material used)."⁹ This somewhat ambiguous dialectic of avant-garde non-figurative and traditional figurative painting sustained the belief that modernism in painting was a matter of degree, not a matter of abstraction. The more painting was perceived to be removed from nature or from any subject-matter other than freedom of form, the more modern and better it became.

When Ewen visited Borduas in St-Hilaire in the early 1950's, he learned that the words "freedom," "revolution" and "progress" were necessary parts of the avant-garde vocabulary. However, in 1986, Ewen recalled that these modernist qualities were not represented by Borduas' paintings:

I got very upset the first time I went and sat [in Borduas' studio]. I knew enough by then, even though my own paintings were not avant-garde by any means, to know that you don't put hardly formed objects in the middle of space and then have a ground behind them. ... Borduas was supposed to be an automatic painter, yet he said that he got a lot of his forms from looking down into the Richelieu River. That's what is in a lot of his paintings — underground flora floating in front of a background. ... what were supposed to be very avant-garde paintings by Borduas in Quebec were really behind the times.¹⁰

Despite his skepticism about Borduas' ability to achieve his goals in painting, Ewen believed in and sought freedom through a reliance on form and the suppression of "sentimental," inauthentic subject-matter.¹¹ Ewen described his evolution from figurative to non-figurative painting in an article by the influential art critic, Rodolphe de Repentigny in January, 1955:

"Depuis neuf ans que je fais de la peinture, j'ai travaillé à l'abstraction pendant cinq ans, et ce n'est que l'an dernier que je suis parvenu à déboucher véritablement, à laisser tomber le sujet entièrement." Le sujet lui était devenu tellement rébarbatif qu'il s'arrêta de peindre pendant un an pour en sortir.

... "Un effort intellectuel doit être fait pour comprendre la peinture et l'étude des qualités formelles est indispensable." Mais alors pour être peintre il ne



fig. 1 Paterson Ewen, *Untitled*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 78.6 × 97.2 cm, Montréal, Mr. & Mrs. H. Arnold Steinberg. (Photo: The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon)

s'agirait que d'avoir un bagage de connaissance? Non. "Le peintre doit à un moment prendre tout cela pour de l'acquis, de purs réflexes, et poursuivre inquiet, son chemin." Toujours selon Ewen, "Cette démarche est le seul moyen d'éviter l'académisme."¹²

In 1986, Ewen compared his experiments with style during the 1950's to the experience of "climbing a greasy pole."¹³ If his goal was to destroy the subject, figure-ground illusion, and to develop a greater freedom of gesture, then his climb back up the pole was a rapid one. A comparison of two works from 1954 reflects Ewen's growing confidence in spontaneity or "pur réflexes" in painting. In *Untitled* (fig. 1) patches of earthy colour joined by black lines, float slowly from right to left on a dirty white ground. Form and ground begin to merge in *Untitled* (fig. 2) through a confident use of black lines which slash emphatically from left to right across a boldly horizontal canvas. Black striations of oil which seep into areas of unsized canvas create boundaries for the riotous colour: green, blue, brown, red and yellow. Although Ewen attempted to

reduce “un bagage de connaissances” in his work, he was uncomfortable with the large gesture of automatic painting. Ewen explained both his attraction to avant-garde painting and his discomfort with formal extremes in painting to de Repentigny: “Je suis convaincu qu’un artiste a besoin de discipline, et cependant par tempérament je suis facilement romantique. Mes premiers efforts abstraits étaient très romantiques, et j’étais inquieté par le surréalisme, mais depuis lors je me suis ressaisi, et j’accorde une extrême importance à l’ordre des formes et des couleurs.”¹⁴

By 1955, a style of solid colour and hard-edged forms for many artists assumed the position of avant-garde painting, making Borduas’ automatisme appear more traditional. This perception was announced by the artists who



fig. 2 Paterson Ewen, *Untitled*, 1954, Oil on linen, 47.7 × 152.4 cm, Montréal, Robert Asselin. (Photo: The London Regional Art and Historical Museums, London, Ont.)

participated in two exhibitions, *Les Plasticiens* and *Espace '55*. Ewen took part in the latter. Borduas accused the young painters in *Espace '55* of “archaïsme” and Fernand Leduc, an acknowledged leader of the new style, retaliated by denouncing the “colonialisme de Borduas.”¹⁵ This new shift from automatisme to first generation “Plasticien” painting, in which the object was perceived as the dominant subject-matter, was encouraged by an increasing awareness of art history as expressed in the writings and paintings of leading critics and artists in Montréal. Fernand Leduc reviewed the decade since the automatiste “revolution” in an unpublished article “Art de refus... art d’acceptation” (Oct. – Nov., 1954). According to Leduc, the “démarche automatique” began with Borduas’ 1942 gouaches and found its apogee in *Refus global* (1948). The “démarche surrationalnelle,” again initiated by Borduas with his “peintures surrationalnelles,” led to the “démarche cosmique” which began after *La Matière chante* (April 21 – May 4, 1954), the last Automatiste exhibition. In this logical evolution, according to Leduc, non-figurative painting relied increasingly on pure form.

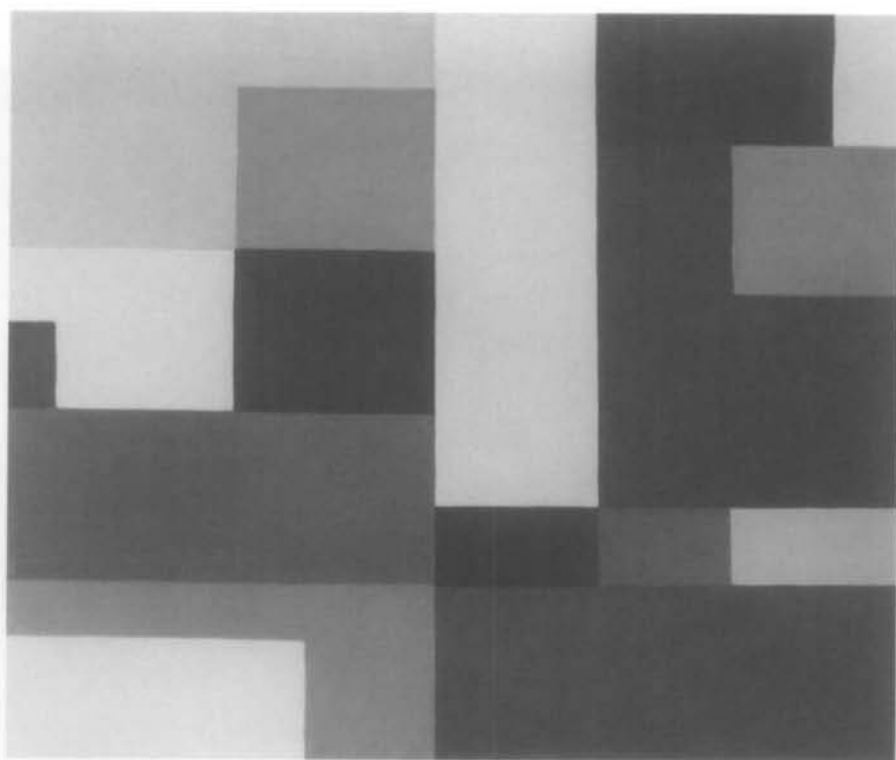


fig. 3 Fernand Leduc, *Imbrication*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 60.8 × 70.9 cm, Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain. (Photo: MAC)

Leduc concluded that the goal of “la plus haute présence formelle” may be attained through the elimination of all subjects other than the absolute freedom of form. Yet, ironically, that freedom was based on a logical, predetermined historical pattern. Paintings such as Leduc’s *Imbrication* (fig. 3) represented a step towards his goal. Ewen found them “hard to take.”¹⁶

Ewen remained skeptical of the goal of absolute freedom through original form. In 1986, he recalled his favorite quote by Matisse: “Originality is a monster.”¹⁷ However, he distinguished originality from individuality. Quoted in a 1956 article, he defined originality in painting as “personal”: “I’m trying to use the knowledge I’ve acquired to create a painting as original — as personal — as possible that will express a point of view in terms of plastic discovery and will have artistic order. I’ve chosen this direction because I feel the basic values of all painting are non-figurative.”¹⁸ For Ewen independence became an avoidance of extremes in style and ideology through a balance of gesture and formal structure in his art. Ewen’s colleagues saw his formal decisions in such

paintings as *Untitled* (fig. 2), exhibited in *Espace '55* as a compromise between automatisme and "Plasticien" painting. Gilles Corbeil, author of the *Espace '55* catalogue essay, echoed Leduc's logical, evolutionary approach to painting in Montréal by placing the work of the exhibitors, Leduc, Ewen, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Pierre Gauvreau, Guido Molinari and six others between poles of "psychic accident" and "plastic values."¹⁹ Ewen and Molinari, whose works contained calligraphic lines and suggestions of space, differed from Leduc, Gauvreau and Mousseau in that "while undergoing this evolution [they] retain some of their surrealistic qualities." In light of Leduc's summary of Montréal's history of painting in which contemporary painting had superceded the "démarche surrationalnelle," Corbeil's description of Ewen and Molinari could be interpreted as the suggestion that they were a step behind the three other painters. Ewen must have agreed with this perception of his work, if not the category because he did the English translation of the original French *Espace '55* text.

The inaugural exhibition of *Les Plasticiens* occurred at the same time as *Espace '55*. Like Leduc, the exhibitors in *Les Plasticiens* were conscious of history and they supported the dominance of the object over the subject. In their manifesto these artists wrote:

Les Plasticiens s'attachent avant tout, dans leur travail, aux faits plastiques: ton, texture, formes, lignes, unité finale qu'est le tableau, et les rapports entre ces éléments. Éléments assumés comme fins. La Renaissance avait libéré les arts de la servitude à un rituel spirituel. Les divers grands mouvements du XIX^e siècle et finalement le Dadaïsme, le surréalisme et l'Automatisme les ont libérés de la servitude à un rituel matérialiste. Mondrian a permis de réduire l'ultime aliénation de l'œuvre peinte, l'extériorisation de la concentration sur soi-même.²⁰

Rodolphe de Repentigny, who was also a Plasticien painter (using the pseudonym Jauran), believed that logical æsthetic direction was crucial to the strength of Canada's reputation in art. For this reason he was highly critical of Painters 11. De Repentigny felt that, without a manifesto, all that held these anglophones together was technique.²¹ He compared Painters 11 to the Montréal artists who

laissant comprendre qu'ils ont à peu près simultanément évolué dans de nouvelles directions... par contre pour ce qui est des peintres torontois, je crains que leur manière actuelle ne gagne de plus en plus de terrain, académiquement, dans les années à venir. Non que je n'admire pas le travail d'artistes comme Town, Ronald et autres, mais j'ai l'impression que leur 'style' va être pris comme critère artistique par les officiels de l'art canadien, tout comme le fut la peinture du Groupe des Sept pendant plusieurs années.²²

Ewen was caught between a belief in progressive abstraction, “la plus haute présence formelle,” and his skepticism about ideals. His reputation for being a step behind the avant-garde by retaining “surrealistic” qualities in his art, was perpetuated by his continued resistance to *Plasticien* painting. Artists and friends noted Ewen’s “problem,” his restless exploration of paint through gesture, and gave him the nickname of “the prospector.”²³ Ewen’s difficulty in adhering to a progressive liberation of form concerned Rodolphe de Repentigny in his 1958 review of painting in Montréal: “Ewen s’est montré très variable dans son exposition: ce jeune peintre depuis plusieurs années livre à notre admiration des toiles individuelles d’un grand intérêt d’une écriture parfaitement au point, mais ses expositions d’ensemble laissent toujours perplexe.”²⁴ In 1958, Ewen acceded to the call for a conscious direction in painting without losing his sense of independence. Ewen demonstrated control of his explorations in gestural and *Plasticien* painting through the use of themes and the claim to direct aesthetic influences.

Ewen claimed that his use of rhythmic patterns in such paintings as *Nuit d’été* (fig. 4) was influenced by a little known Italian painter, Giuseppe Capogrossi (b. 1900).²⁵ The similarities of patterned surfaces in their work is secondary to the resistance both artists held for extremes of *Plasticien* or “informel” art. In a lengthy article by Cesare Vivaldi in *Art Aujourd’hui* (Jan., 1959), Capogrossi and “la nouvelle avant-garde italienne” were described as a “transitional” group faced with “une période où, de tous côtés, l’on assiste à la transformation des styles en procédés commerciaux, l’‘informel’ lui-même et, avec lui, l’‘Action Painting’, risque de tourner rapidement au ‘Kitsch’ et se trouve actuellement au stade de l’académisme, de la fausse avant-garde.”²⁶ This new avant-garde’s desire to maintain a combination of action and “informel” painting resulted in a style which Vivaldi called “informel-naturalisme.” In their attempt to redefine and thus legitimize the inference of subject-matter through the gesture, they claimed to have avoided academism by involving all the senses, not just the eye. Vivaldi had serious reservations about this group’s ability to produce a progressive art in the face of modernist tenets:

on cru [sic] possible de proposer à nouveau le problème de la “nature” comme une conquête actuelle, la présentant en termes au “continuum” matériel. Mais, en réalité, nous est mons [sic] que ce problème non seulement ne constitue rien de nouveau, mais qu’il n’a même pas la consistance d’un véritable problème dans l’art moderne. La continuité de la matière et son identité voilà bien des questions peu récentes! Courbet en eut une perception assez exacte et, à sa manière, Cézanne lui-même qui, par son indifférence vis-à-vis du sujet, mettait délibérément sur le même plan une “pomme et un homme, une colline ou la mer”, en des termes opposés. ... La génération italienne de transition comme la française, n’a certainement pas contredit ces postulats. ...²⁷



fig. 4 Paterson Ewen, *Nuit d'été*, 1958, Oil on canvas,
77.1 × 92.4 cm, Montréal, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo: M.M.F.A.)

Despite his doubts about these painters' ability to avoid being labelled regressive, Vivaldi heralded their attempts as "la nouvelle figuration." Through his claim to direct aesthetic influence, Ewen acceded to the Montréal critics and artists' demand for control of aesthetic direction. Yet Ewen was able to maintain his independence through his choice of influence, identifying perhaps with Capogrossi's mediation of styles and his resistance to the absolutes of *Plasticien* or "informel" painting.

Ewen carried Capogrossi's formal influence into his first thematically grouped paintings, *The Stream of Life* (1958-59). This theme, which brought greater control to his experiments, was inspired by a second formal influence. In 1958, Ewen was impressed by the painted designs on a Haida war canoe: "It [*The Stream of Life*] is a landscape, but it is stylized to the point of being almost symbolic. When you put it altogether it flows. It is about life in the most basic sense — mountains, rivers, boulders.... I wasn't too conscious of it at the time except that I suspected.... that the Haida Indians took their motif from the basic things in Nature which connects with geology and water — you know, water,

earth, air and fire.”²⁸ *The Stream of Life* (fig. 5) was a metaphor of universal character which compared human endurance to the strength of nature. This metaphor, a tool which Ewen used to give direction to his experiments of the late 1950’s, will be discussed later when it reappears and gains greater significance in his work of the late 1960’s.

Ewen’s use of metaphor forces us to question his attitude towards modernist non-figurative painting in Montréal. However, the obviously figurative elements in such works as his 1960 painting *Night Regatta* (fig. 6) should not be overemphasized. His use of metaphor and his attraction to Capogrossi’s “nouvelle figuration” may be seen more as a defence against “logical” change, the loss of gesture in painting and his desire for independence than as a rejection of the concept of style. Ewen still believed that subject-matter was regressive. When asked about his goal in painting, he replied to a critic in 1961: “Je veux continuer de m’engager résolument dans ma direction actuelle afin d’être de plus en plus abstrait même contre la Nature visuelle pour tenter de toucher les profonds sentiments humains de l’homme qui sont sa Nature aussi, mais sa Nature intérieure.”²⁹

Ewen’s need to suppress subject-matter continued to conflict with his use of gesture. In his determination to maintain a mediation of styles in painting, he invited three painters, Ray Mead, Henriette Fauteux-Masse and Virginia de Vera, to form the “Formal Lyricists” in 1960. This short-lived group claimed that they were “in search of an equilibrium between lyricism and formalism enriched by all these years of complete plastic freedom. ... We are not as geometric as the plasticiens and not as free as the automatistes.”³⁰

The consensus of critics, historians and artists preoccupied with logical change in style in the creation of a history of art in Montréal, was that there *was* a “School of Montreal.” This “fact” was announced when the art historian Jean Cathelin was invited to lead a conference on the “school” at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in December, 1960.³¹ The desire for the creation of a school to define the development of painting in Montréal was inspired by the growing number of artists in the city and the renewed interest in art collecting. Historian, Yves Robillard, observed in a 1985 article, “L’histoire des Galeries Denyse Delrue,” that increased market activity during the late 1950’s and 1960’s inspired the MMFA director, Evan Turner, to begin a series of exhibitions on collecting, upon his arrival in Montréal in 1960 and annually until his departure in 1964.³² Robillard also commented that the early 1960’s in Montréal were characterized by “une véritable obsession des artistes québécois à vouloir exposer à l’étranger et faire partie du ‘grand réseau international’.”³³

Ewen was included in the first international group exhibition of Québec artists to be organized by the province. Thirty artists participated in the Festival

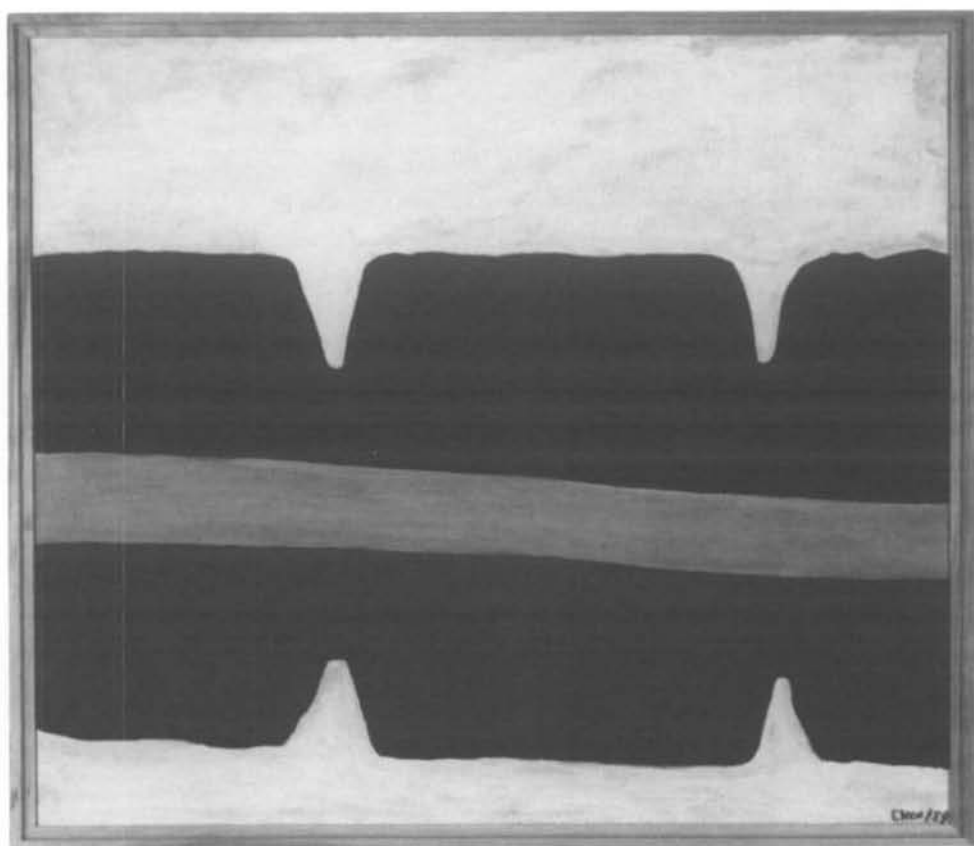


fig. 5 Paterson Ewen, *The Stream of Life*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 126.8 × 152.5 cm, Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain. (Photo: Denis Farley, MAC)

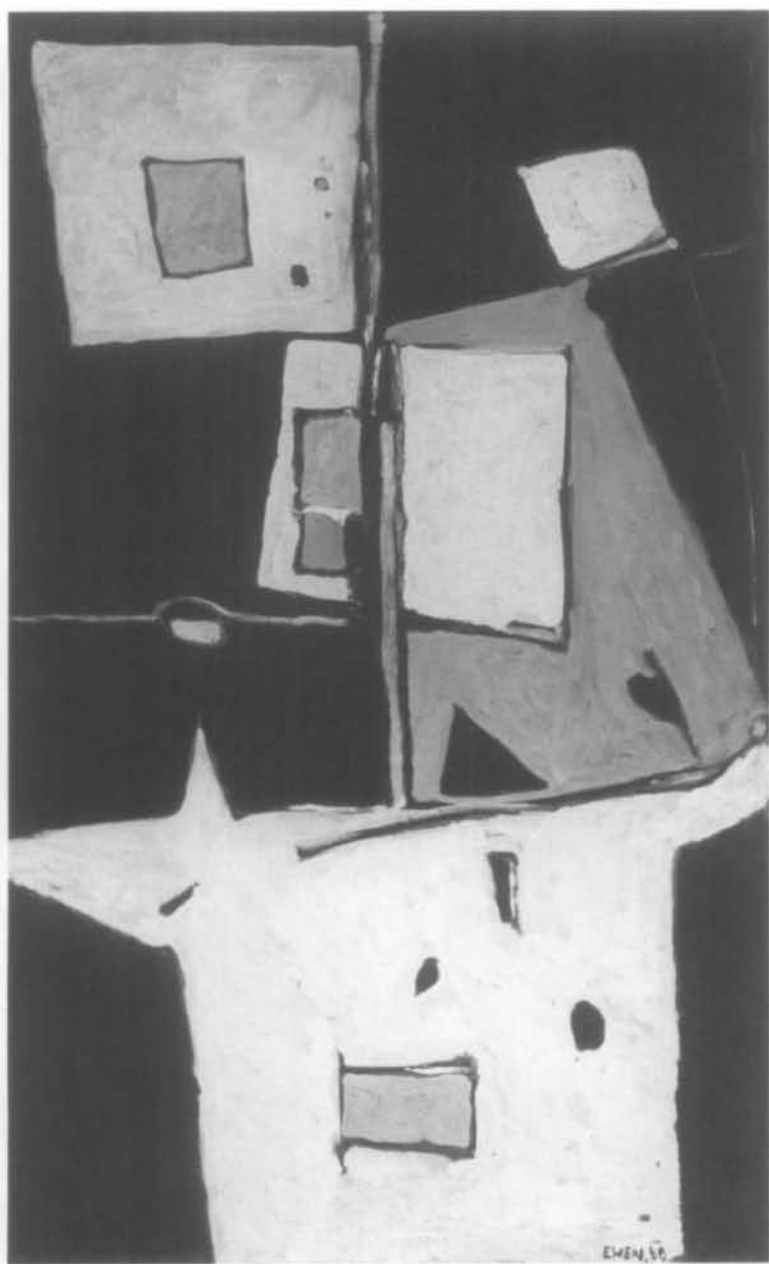


fig. 6 Paterson Ewen, *Night Regatta*, 1960, Oil on canvas,
152.4 × 92.7 cm, St-Lambert, Madeleine Lavallée Ferron.
(Photo: The London Regional Art and Historical Museums, London, Ont.)

of Two Worlds, Spoleto, Italy, in 1962. The exhibition catalogue *La Peinture Canadienne Moderne: Vingt-cinq années de peinture au Canada-français* defined Québec painting in the following categories: les pionniers; le post-automatiste; le mouvement plasticien; la tendance surréalisante; nouvelles recherches. In this evolution of French-Canadian painting, Ewen was classified as a "post-automatiste": "Pat Ewen occupe une phase unique dans le mouvement continu de l'Automatisme: il fait entendre un message troublant, kafkaïen."³⁴ Ewen's "démarche vers l'abstrait" was seen as hampered by Kafkaesque emotion and the result was a "combat pictural" rather than a distinct avant-garde or plasticien style.

In the mid-1960's, Ewen adopted the techniques of second generation Plasticien painting. In 1964 he shared a studio with Molinari and Claude Tousignant and from them he learned to apply tape and acrylic paint to create clean edges and flat shapes. Molinari, the acknowledged leader of the hard-edge painters in Montréal when Leduc left for Paris in 1959, wrote in 1966 that pop, colour painting and optical painting were three reactions against action painting. Unlike hard-edge painting, however, these reactions were regressive:

Ces trois tendances représentent un mouvement en arrière dans l'évolution de la peinture abstraite car elles réintroduisent dans le tableau la recherche d'un espace illusionniste.

Les peintres "hard-edge" ne sont préoccupés d'aucune façon par la troisième dimension, les notions de figure et de fond et l'espace qu'ils créent est [sic] le résultat de l'interaction dynamique de la couleur. ... Ce qui est demeuré essentiel dans la peinture contemporaine après les définitions de Malevitch, c'est la nécessité de détruire non seulement l'objet, mais aussi les allusions à l'objet qui réintroduisent, dans le tableau, le dynamisme propre à l'objet naturel. C'est dans la mesure où la peinture élaborera des structures qui ne reposent pas sur celles du monde extérieur qu'elle pourra devenir expressive de la réalité émotionnelle du monde intérieur.³⁵

In his paintings, Molinari emphasized the purity of the object, planes of colour in dynamic juxtapositions and freedom from subject-matter. From among the possibilities presented to Ewen, his only alternative to the historical determinism of the concept of style was skepticism. He found Molinari's planned perfection in painting extreme and he asserted his independence from it:

Tousignant was doing targets and Molinari was doing vertical stripes and I was doing neither of those things. But sharing a studio with both of them and then sharing a studio with Molinari [in 1966-67], I picked up techniques — both of how to lay on paint and how to get a perfect line. Molinari was fanatic about that. He confessed to me once: "Sometimes I go home and I can't sleep because I keep thinking this isn't perfect." If even one of those tiny little spots on the edges was noticeable, his work really wouldn't

work. ... My work wasn't ever that accurate or detailed in technique but then it wasn't really supposed to be.³⁶

While using hard-edge techniques, Ewen resisted their ideological implications in his paintings through the use of layered colours and forms and gestural lines. In light of Molinari's attitudes, such lines which, in Ewen's thematically titled *Diagram of the Multiple Personality* (1966) paintings (which suggested trees through latticed windows to one critic), would have seemed regressive.³⁷ While the use of theme and gesture in *The Diagram of the Multiple Personality* (fig. 7) suggested subject-matter, the subject continued to play a secondary role. The work was titled after its completion when Ewen's son, Vincent, noticed the work's similarity to a diagram, "the general picture of man" (fig. 8), in Lecture One of P.D. Ouspensky's *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. Ouspensky described his diagram: "there is no oneness in man and there is no controlling centre, no permanent 'I' or Ego.... When man says 'I' it sounds as if he meant the whole of himself, but really even when he himself thinks that he meant 'I', it is only a passing thought. In an hours time he may have completely forgotten it, and with the same conviction express an opposite opinion."³⁸ Ewen's dislike of absolutes is reflected in his attraction to Ouspensky's view of human inconsistency. In fact, he felt that his paintings more clearly described human nature including, perhaps, his own: "I won't say it [the painting] was more accurate, but in a sense it was more real than his [Ouspensky's diagram] because he simply put the pronoun 'I' in each square. In the painting sometimes we're barely in the picture and sometimes we're stabilizing.... the middle one — it's a stabilizing factor."³⁹

Critics found these paintings repetitious and the artist, once again, was seen to be lagging behind the avant-garde. Laurent Lamy reviewed Ewen's last show at the Galerie du Siècle (called Galerie Denyse Delrue until 1962) in June, 1966: "Peinture pas tout à fait 'op', pas tout à fait géométriste, Pat Ewen réussit à faire la jonction des deux tendances. Il a profité des expériences précédentes et prolonge un mouvement qui chez Barbeau, par exemple, n'était resté qu'amorcé. Ewen ne fait pas figure de novateur. Il est celui qui continue et qui porte plus loin une idée déjà lancée."⁴⁰

1965 and 1966 were years of personal strain for Ewen. Throughout his career as a painter he had held a full-time job but between April 1965 and September 1966 he experienced four changes of employment.⁴¹ In 1966 he separated from his family. These factors plus criticisms of his lack of innovation may have contributed to his decision not to exhibit in 1965 and only once in 1966 at Galerie du Siècle. However, in the midst of misfortune, incentive to paint came in 1967 when Yael and Ben Dunkelman offered him a retrospective exhibition (March 12, 1968) at their Toronto gallery. Possibly this opportunity to review his entire painting career at a moment of personal strain brought

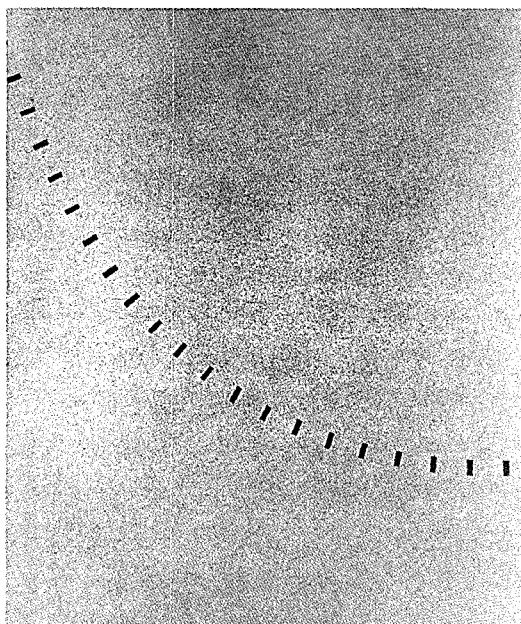
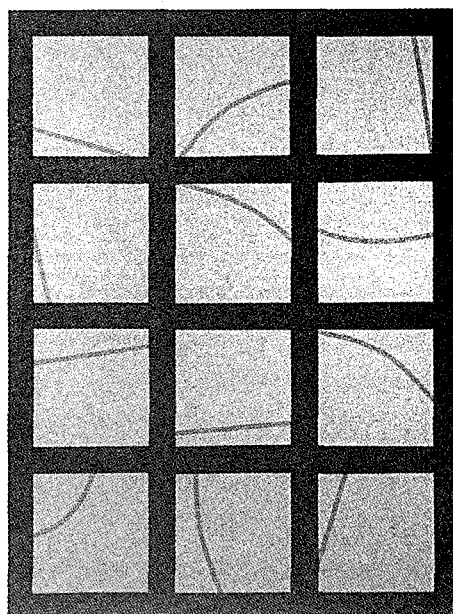
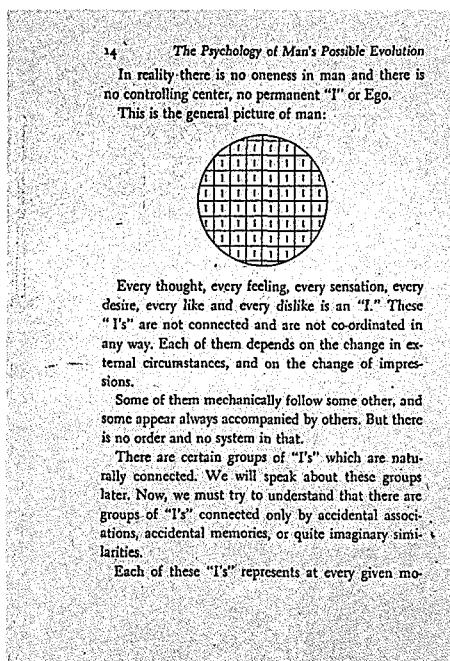


fig. 7 Paterson Ewen, *Diagram of the Multiple Personality No 1*, 1966, Acrylic on canvas, 229.2 × 170.4 cm, Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain. (Photo: MAC)

fig. 8 "The general picture of man." (Photo: from P.D. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* [New York: Knopf, 1954], 14)

fig. 9 Paterson Ewen, *Lifestream With Time Intervals*, 1968, Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 × 127 cm, Toronto, Carmen Lamanna Gallery. (Photo: Hank Visser, C.L.G.)

about the revival in 1967 of his 1958 theme, *The Stream of Life*. In *Lifestream With Time Intervals* (fig. 9), Ewen's 1958 metaphor for human endurance became a symbol, perhaps of his persistent need for independence. Personal rhythms, represented by irregular distances between stripes of flat colour running from the top left to the bottom right of the canvas, were created through a highly physical process combining gesture with the dominant avant-garde style of the late 1960's:

If you look closely, not a single one of those lines is equidistant from the other. What I was trying to do... was to marry minimal art with gesture, this was the main point of these... What I did — I would actually run up to the painting and zip tape along and then a certain length away from the tape I would zip another tape along... and I would rip off a piece of tape and put it across. So I would end up with all these little elongated rectangles. But that was all done in a gesture.⁴²

After a series of bouts with ill health in 1968, during which time he moved from Montréal to his sister's home in Kitchener, Ontario, Ewen ended up in a London, Ontario, hospital. When he was discharged and had settled in London, Ewen continued with great energy to create his *Lifestream* paintings. With this same energy, he became involved in the London art community. In 1969, he took part in six shows, one of which, a three man exhibition with Royden and David Rabinowitch at the London Public Library and Art Museum (September 3 – 30, 1969), was reviewed by Lenore Crawford in the *London Free Press*. In this review, Ewen discussed the significance of the lifestream: "This whole conception of the paintings is the idea of a lifestream that goes through everyone's life and universal life — and I've picked a little bit of it for each painting. I feel that there is a life force going on somewhere... it relates to electronic waves."⁴³ Ewen reduced his "electronic waves" to a single continuous stream dipping and running through a large field of colour in 1969. At his retrospective exhibition in London's artist-run space, the 20/20 Gallery in January 1970, he explained the process by which he arrived at the continuous stream, giving added significance to such works as *Lifestream* (fig. 10, 1970). He proclaimed that the stream had become his "freedom shape... trying to break out of the square or rectangle"⁴⁴ and that anger had inspired these paintings: "One day I got angry — I usually chose the colour carefully but I just put this colour on and was crazy about it right away. ... It sat around for a couple of days. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Seized by an irrational anger about something one day, I decided to use it."⁴⁵

Contributing to Ewen's anger and feelings of constraint were his lack of sales and his soured relationship with the Dunkelman Gallery. When Ewen accused Ben Dunkelman of hiding his work from the public and of inflating his prices and then threatened to sever their relationship, Dunkelman took legal

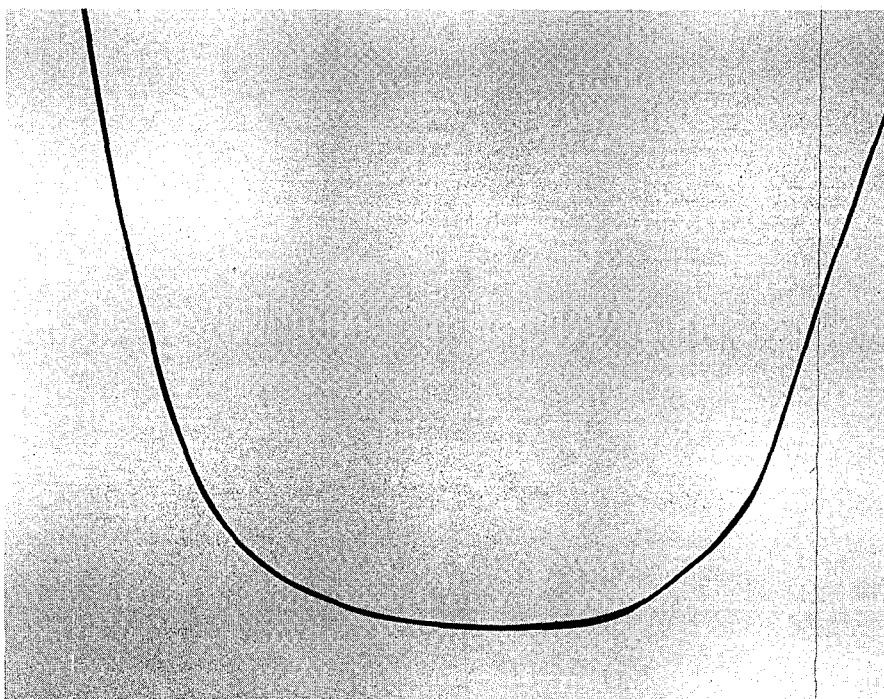


fig. 10 Paterson Ewen, *Lifestream*, 1969, Acrylic on canvas,
241.3 × 304.8 cm, Toronto, Carmen Lamanna Gallery. (Photo : C.L.G.)

action against the artist demanding the return of \$1,313.63 in advances and the choice of Ewen's most recent work.⁴⁶ For Ewen, this experience could only have recalled similar situations with the Parma Gallery in New York and Galerie Denyse Delrue/du Siècle where he exhibited from 1956 to 1958 and 1957 to 1966 respectively. Both galleries went bankrupt and kept many of Ewen's paintings.

Ewen's suspicions of galleries and the anger which he directed at the canvas, may have reflected the growing tensions within the art "system." Montréal painter Alfred Pellan made some astute observations on the art system in an article by Gilles Hénault in 1960:

Pellan attribue cette espèce d'effervescence, cette pullulation d'écoles et de genres au fait que la bourgeoisie a accepté soudainement la peinture moderne après la guerre. "Cela a créé des débouchés énormes, et chacun a tenté de préparer son produit à sa propre sauce. Comme le public achetait de plus en plus, il fallait produire de plus en plus vite. Résultat trop de facilité... Cela ne durera pas indéfiniment. D'ici quelques années, on arrivera au point de saturation".⁴⁷

The growing number of artists, galleries and concomittant increase in competition and appetite for novelty saw the avant-garde almost turn into tradition overnight. William Seitz, guest curator of the 1968 Seventh Biennial Exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in which Ewen was chosen to take part, observed that due to the "multiform and copious nature of Canadian art" this exhibition may be "the last time that the major medium of painting can be comprehensively presented."⁴⁸

The acceptance of a plurality of styles in Canadian painting was encouraged by national self-awareness as the Canadian Centennial approached. By the late 1960's in London, regionalism had begun to replace original form in the concept of style as a definition of excellence and authenticity in painting. Competition between regions was stimulated by the Canada Council through its democratic distribution of funds to artists and by the Toronto-based periodical, *Artscanada*.⁴⁹ In the 1960's *Artscanada* began to reflect a bias for regionalist art. London Regionalism, coming to the forefront of the new authenticity in painting, was featured regularly in *Artscanada* when Anne Brodsky, former education officer at the London Art Museum was appointed editor of the periodical. Nancy Poole, in her book *The Art of London*, observed that: "This was a great boon for several London artists who were all well known to her. Now they received a great deal of attention nationally. Almost every edition had at least one article on either a London artist or what was going on in the area."⁵⁰

The leader of London Regionalism, Greg Curnoe, was critical of the idea of original form and its paradoxical relationship to the predetermination of style. By associating original form in art with an artist's immediate environment or region, he redefined the meaning of originality and coined the term "oregionalism." London writer, Chris Dewdney, explained this term in a 1984 article:

The first reading was ironic, that originality represented an ideal state unobtainable in reality a sort of chimera, the commodification of "newness" presented as it were a quality (see *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* by Wyndham Lewis), which acknowledged its ironic essence as mythical; ie., that total originality was a naive concept. The second and contradictory meaning, and the one which proceeds the furthest towards what was or is oregionalism, was non-ironic. That originality was the measure of significant art and that originality proceeded naturally from region, itself posited as a kind of engine of differentiation which generated all native and truly original minds. Region was implicit in this meaning of original because it became the final arbiter of originality. To be true to one's region was of necessity to be intrinsically different from all other regions.⁵¹

The same anti-style sentiment appeared in *S/W 17*, an exhibition of 17 London artists in which Ewen took part. The exhibition's "editor," Nancy Poole, attempted to characterize London's art and artists in the catalogue essay:



fig. 11 Paterson Ewen, *Landscape, Near Ospringe, Ontario* (July 17, 1969), 1969, Oil on board, 20.3 × 25.4 cm, Toronto, Anne and David Skene-Melvin. (Photo: Heather Fraser, Hamilton)

"There is no 'London School' but there is a London atmosphere — and right now the air of London is electric with artistic expectation and excitement. No one can quite explain what has happened but none of us doubts that LONDON IS WHERE IT'S HAPPENING."⁵² Clearly, stylistic categories or schools of art created through the "discovery" of original form, had lost significance for many London artists.

During the panel discussion for the 1970 retrospective opening at the 20/20 Gallery, Ewen focussed his critique of the art system on the concept of style and the avant-garde mentality: "As objects my paintings fit into a category which I reject. ... no matter how hard you try to free yourself, you will become elitist anyway." He expounded further on his distrust of the system in Lenore Crawford's review of the retrospective: "Because of the persons who bought my paintings I have determined never to paint another canvas. ... I don't know what I'll do. But I'm determined it won't be this sort of thing."⁵³ In early 1969, Ewen had given a presentation to the students of London's Beal Secondary School during which he was asked to describe the role of the artist.⁵⁴ He replied that an

artist must act as a model of freedom. Yet, how had Ewen defined freedom? By maintaining gesture in his paintings of the late 1950's and 1960's, he had shown his skepticism of the goal of freedom through progressive abstraction and ever original form. Under the predetermination of the concept of style in Montréal, Ewen's attempt to gain freedom through independence had only resulted in his reputation for lagging behind the avant-garde.

As if to demonstrate that he could paint whatever he wished, Ewen painted two small oil landscapes while on a camping trip in 1969.⁵⁵ On a second expedition that same summer to visit friends north of London, he painted at least one more landscape (fig. 11).⁵⁶ However, these works were not realized outside of a belief in the domination of the object over subject-matter — an approach to art rooted in denial and exclusion that was fundamental to the concept of style in Montréal. Ewen was able to consider freedom as something other than the skepticism of progressive abstraction only when he acknowledged the value of his own limitations in this approach to painting:

I really felt like just playing instead and I thought I was making an anti-art gesture in the formal sense with those last paintings. Daubing rows of dots on plain canvas with felt. But then somehow this turned out feeling more like traces of things moving through space and this is what first suggested the idea of phenomena. ... I began reading. I got all kinds of amateur books and old textbooks about phenomena. How rain falls and how lightning works, clouds, eclipses and waves. I began to get the feeling as I read that what we usually call the more simple things are immensely complicated so I just accepted my limitations and put down the part of these happenings that were for me fun to do.⁵⁷

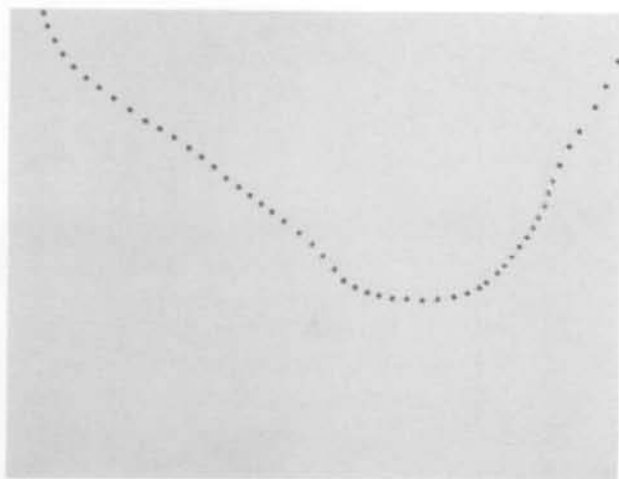


fig. 12 Paterson Ewen, *Traces Through Space*, 1970, Acrylic on canvas, 144.8 × 213.4 cm, Collection of the artist.
(Photo: Stephen Perry, Hamilton)



fig. 13 "Drop of water in a hot frying pan." (Photo: from Duncan C. Blanchard, *From Raindrops to Volcanoes* [New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967], 142)

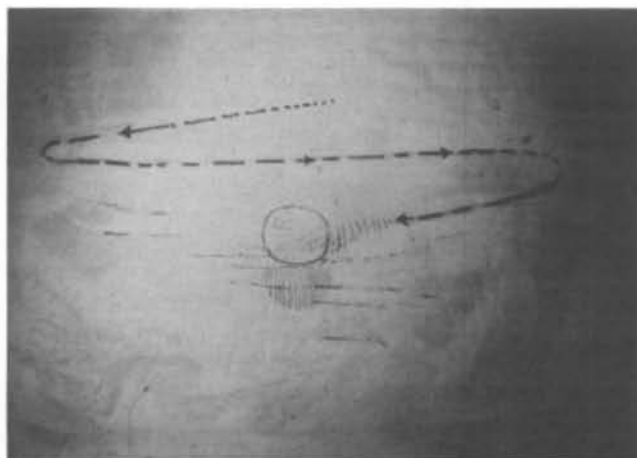


fig. 14 Paterson Ewen, *Drop of Water on a Hot Surface*, 1970, Acrylic on canvas, 304.8 x 365.8 cm, destroyed. (Photo: Stephen Perry, Hamilton)

After painting one of his "daubed" paintings *Traces Through Space*, (fig. 12), Ewen began to explore a life-long interest in science. He picked up a 95¢ paperback book on popular science, Duncan C. Blanchard's *From Raindrops to Volcanoes* (1967) and copied at least two diagrams from it, "The thunderstorm is a generator" and "Drop of water in a hot frying pan." Both of these were executed in acrylics (compare figs. 13 and 14). The latter work which Ewen called *Drop of Water on a Hot Surface*, was the recreation of the third drop in Blanchard's diagram which sizzled and sped over a hot surface for minutes before evaporating. This image which Ewen painted over one of his large *Lifestream* paintings, reflects both the strength and ephemerality implicit in his theme of endurance in the "stream" paintings.⁵⁸ Significantly, in Ewen's new approach to painting, the subject did not dominate the object. In other words, the quantifiability and divisibility of the object and the subject were irrelevant. In taking images from science books he chose those that were "not so scientific that I couldn't understand them. So I went to early books about rain. Some of the ones about rain are not that old. I think they are pretty sound scientifically. Not that I cared much. It was just like still-life as far as subject-matter went."⁵⁹ Ewen strung *Drop of Water on a Hot Surface* with grommets and ropes across a wall in his London studio where it remained for several years as perhaps it served as a reminder of his turning point.⁶⁰

Philip Monk, in his *Paterson Ewen, Phenomena Paintings, 1971-1987* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987), presents a satisfying approach to Ewen's break. In developing his thesis on Ewen's turn as one from mimesis to semiosis, Monk's discussion of the work is appropriate to what he has identified as significant. Limiting his study to the material practices within a single "structure," the "phenomascapes," and forgoing the idea of the artist as a creative "demiurge," he focusses on "something else of significance" which "rests within the direct act of making and the decisions of that process." A problem arises, however, when Monk must go beyond the "great series from 1973 to 1974." Ewen's self-portraits, his appropriations of imagery by other artists (Hokusai and Pinkham-Ryder) and in general, the paintings of the 1980's cannot be fully discussed through a semiological approach. They require the identification of another structure or code. Such works move out of the single structure of the phenomascapes.⁶¹

However, Matthew Teitelbaum, in his catalogue, *Paterson Ewen: The Montreal Years* (Saskatoon, The Mendel Art Gallery, 1987), suggests that Ewen's evolution into the hard-edge style was full of "stops and starts." As well, Teitelbaum claims that the artist was unable to eliminate landscape elements from his work. For Teitelbaum, these two characteristics which focus primarily on Ewen's lack of formal innovation explain the artist's "return" to figurative painting in 1970. In fact, Ewen had never truly given up the landscape. This assessment is not unreasonable, given the long held reliance on the evolutionary concept of style in Montréal painting and the domination of the object over the subject. However, Teitelbaum's concept poses difficulties considering the complexity of Ewen's attitude towards predetermined style and his desire to escape classifications in which he was always found to be weak.

Either much of recent art is not art at all or the standards we have inherited are no longer valid. To reject the message of contemporary art is to state that what is art is determined by historians and critics rather than by artists which has always been a ridiculous proposition.⁶²

Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, Ewen believed that the painted object should dominate the subject-matter. Thus, suggestions of subject-matter, primarily through his use of gesture, may be seen as the skepticism of the absolutes of a paradoxical demand — freedom of form through predetermined order — and a desire for independence. When Ewen allowed the subject to emerge from the object as not only undeniable but also valuable, he rendered obsolete the concept of style which had trapped his thoughts and paintings between stylistic poles of good and bad formal innovation, avant-garde freedom and traditional stasis. Ewen's figurative paintings after 1970 do not signify a "return" to his early figurative work of 1969 to 1954; there was a change in his attitude towards painting from one of exclusion and denial to one of tolerance

and acceptance. His acceptance of the value of human limitations led to the perception that abstraction was a matter of kind where questions of the divisibility and quantifiability of the object and subject, so vital to the idealist pursuit of absolute freedom in the concept of style, were irrelevant. Indeed, there is irony in the fact that Ewen's implicit criticism of the concept of style has gone unnoticed and, seventeen years after his "turn," it has come back to haunt his non-figurative paintings of the 1950's and 1960's.

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Curatorial Assistant

Art Gallery of Hamilton

Notes

1 Paterson Ewen in a taped interview by Robert McKaskell, "Paterson Ewen and Robert McKaskell, Interview for Retrospective, 1976: 1954 – c.1967," London, Ontario.

2 The avant-garde mentality which may be thought of as a sociological phenomenon rather than aesthetic fact, was a mechanism for change in the arts in Montréal. This mentality belonged to non-figurative and figurative painters alike and incorporated a fundamental belief that a dialectical discourse between the old and the new was a means to progress. The notion that a dialectic existed between progressive avant-garde and static traditional painters was contradicted by at least two factors: the avant-garde commitment to the traditional value of freedom; and the increasing reliance of historians critics and artists, on the authority of art history to determine the path of stylistic change in painting. The self-conscious integration of this mechanism and the avant-garde mentality with all its contradictions in Montréal painting during the 1950's and 1960's, resulted in a hierarchy of artists based on the perceived degree of subject-matter explicit in their work.

3 Svetlana ALPERS, "Style Is What You Make It" (1977), *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 138.

4 Fernand LEDUC, "Art de refus...art d'acceptation" (1954), *Fernand Leduc, Vers les îles de lumière, Écrits (1942-1980)*, ed. André Beaudet (Ville LaSalle: Éditions Hurtubise, 1981), 147.

5 André JASMIN, "Le climat du milieu artistique dans les années 40," *Peinture canadienne-française (débat)* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971), 9.

6 Ken JOHNSTON, "The Professor is a Rebel," *New Liberty* (1951): 44.

7 Paul-Émile BORDUAS, *Refus global* (1948), trans. Ray Ellenwood (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1985), 41.

8 Arthur LISMER, "The Value, Meaning and Place of Art in Education," *The Dalhousie Review* (Oct., 1927): 378-389.

9 BORDUAS, *Refus global*, 46.

10 Paterson Ewen, transcript of taped interviews by Matthew Teitelbaum, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, summer 1986, 149-150 (referred to as Teitelbaum interview in subsequent notes). Ewen was introduced to Borduas and the other Automatiste artists by Françoise Sullivan whom he married in 1950. The impact of this significant Montréal artist on Ewen's work is an important topic which provides opportunity for a separate investigation.

- 11 Paterson Ewen in a taped conversation with Greg Curnoe, "Greg Curnoe and Paterson Ewen, Tues., March 18, 1969, 3 p.m., London, Ontario."
- 12 Rodolphe DE REPENTIGNY, "Comment le peintre Pat Ewen passa du paysage lyrique à l'abstraction," *La Presse*, January, 1955.
- 13 Teitelbaum interview, 202.
- 14 DE REPENTIGNY, "Comment le peintre Pat Ewen."
- 15 Fernand Leduc quoted in Pierre THÉBERGE, *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954 – 1976)* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 15.
- 16 Teitelbaum interview, 195.
- 17 Teitelbaum interview, 100, 157, 188, 272.
- 18 Jacqueline MOORE and Louis JAQUES, "Their Objective is Non-Objective," *Weekend Magazine*, Vol. 67, no. 36 (September 8, 1956): 12.
- 19 Gilles CORBEIL, *Espace '55* (Montréal: M.M.F.A., February 11 – 28, 1955).
- 20 Alain PARENT, *Les Premiers Plasticiens* (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1977), n.p.
- 21 DE REPENTIGNY, "Le groupe des onze," *Vie des arts*, 12 (Fall, 1958): 27-32.
- 22 DE REPENTIGNY, "Expositions: Nos expositions ne sont pas routinières," *Vie des arts*, 8 (Fall, 1957): 27.
- 23 Paterson Ewen, artist's statement for his March 12, 1968 solo exhibition at the Dunkelman Gallery, Toronto. MG 28 III 110 Vol. 2, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.
- 24 DE REPENTIGNY, "Les premières expositions de 1958," *Vie des arts*, 10 (1958): 42.
- 25 Jacqueline VAN DYK, *Paterson Ewen in the University Art Collection* (London, Ont.: University of Western Ontario, McIntosh Gallery, April, 1986). Also mentioned in conversation with the author, February 21, 1988.
- 26 Cesare VIVALDI, "Libres opinions sur l'art italien contemporain: La nouvelle avant-garde italienne," *Art Aujourd'hui*, 21 (January, 1959): 9.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 10-11.
- 28 Teitelbaum interview, 126.
- 29 Anon, "Peinture abstraite et péril atomique," *La Patrie* (November 26, 1961).
- 30 "'Formal Lyricists', New Group to Seek Recognition in the Arts," *Montreal Gazette*, January 6, 1960.
- 31 An excerpt from his talk entitled "L'école de Montréal existe" was published in Jean CATHELIN, "L'école de Montréal existe," *Vie des arts*, 23 (Summer, 1961): 14-20.
- 32 Canada Collects, 1860-1960 (1960); Doctors and Art (1961); La Collection CIL (1962); La Collection Horner (1963); La Collection Hirschorn and La Collection Bronfman (1964). Yves ROBILLARD, "L'histoire des Galeries Denyse Delrue," *Cahiers*, Vol. 7, no. 27 (Winter, 1985-86): 8.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 34 [Charles DELLOYE], *La Peinture Canadienne Moderne: Vingt-cinq années de peinture au Canada-français*. 50 festival dei due monde (Spoleto, Italy, June 26 – August 23, 1962), 95.
- 35 Guido MOLINARI in "Ten Artists in Search of Canadian Art," *Artscanada*, XXII, no. 1 (January, 1966): 63-4.

- 36 Teitelbaum interview, 196.
- 37 Laurent LAMY, "Paterson Ewen à la Galerie du Siècle," *Le Devoir*, June 4, 1966.
- 38 P.D. OUSPENSKY, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 14.
- 39 Teitelbaum interview, 248.
- 40 LAMY, "Paterson Ewen à la Galerie du Siècle."
- 41 Paterson Ewen's résumé, 1968. MG 28 III 110 Vol. 2, Public Archives of Canada.
- 42 Teitelbaum interview, 296.
- 43 Lenore CRAWFORD, "Ewen Art Works Lauded," *The London Free Press*, January 7, 1970.
- 44 Paterson Ewen in a taped panel discussion, "Paterson Ewen, Robert Millet, Barry Lord, Royden Rabinowitch, Greg Curnoe, etc., Jan. 6, 1970, 20/20 Gallery, King St., London, Ontario."
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Dunkelmann Gallery correspondence. MG 28 III 110 Vol. 2, Public Archives of Canada.
- 47 Gilles HÉNAULT, "Pellan dénonce les 'trucs' en peinture," *Le Devoir*, April, 1960.
- 48 William SEITZ, *The Seventh Biennial of Canadian Painting* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, May, 1968), 9.
- 49 ROBILLARD, "Galleries Denyse Delrue," 9.
- 50 Nancy Geddes POOLE, *The Art of London, 1830-1980* (London, Ontario: Blackpool Press, 1984), 141.
- 51 Chris DEWDNEY, "Oregionalism: Geocentricism and the Notion of Originality," *Provincial Essays*, 1 (1984): 4.
- 52 Nancy POOLE, S/W 17 (Rothman's Art Gallery of Stratford, September 20 – November 1, 1969).
- 53 CRAWFORD, "Ewen Art Works Lauded."
- 54 Don Bonham, taped conversation with author, March 31, 1988, Toronto, Ontario.
- 55 Doreen Curry, conversation with author, January 23, 1988, London, Ontario.
- 56 David Skene-Melvin, conversation with author, June, 1988, The Arts and Letters Club, Toronto, Ontario.
- 57 Nick JOHNSON, "Paterson Ewen, Rain," *Artscanada*, 196/197 (March, 1975): 41.
- 58 Dave Gordon, taped conversation with author, March 25, 1988, Kingston, Ontario."
- 59 Teitelbaum interview, 307.
- 60 *Drop of water on a hot surface* (1970) was destroyed after Ewen left his 19 King St. studio, London, Ontario, in the spring of 1971. When he returned, subtenants had taken the work down and folded it. It was so badly damaged that, after 1973, Ewen discarded it.
- 61 One criticism of Monk's approach may be found in Greg CURNÖE, "Monk's Dream," *Parachute* 55 (July-Sept. 1989): 61-63.
- 62 James S. ACKERMAN, "Interpretation, Response: Suggestions for a Theory of Art Criticism," *Theories of Criticism* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1984), 43.

UN TOURNANT DANS L'ART DE PATERSON EWEN: DU NON-FIGURATIF AU FIGURATIF

En 1970, Paterson Ewen délaisse l'art abstrait, ou non-figuratif, pour se tourner vers le figuratif. Après avoir utilisé pendant plus de vingt ans le vocabulaire pictural du modernisme non-figuratif, il reconnaît la présence du sujet et en apprécie la valeur. À Montréal, au cours des années 50 et 60, l'art figuratif avait été décrié comme traditionnel, illusoire, sentimental et régressif. Toutefois, insister sur l'élément dramatique de ce tournant dans la carrière d'Ewen serait oublier l'aspect le plus important de ses nouvelles œuvres figuratives : le passage d'une attitude de refus et d'exclusion à une attitude d'ouverture et d'acceptation. Durant la plus grande partie de sa carrière comme peintre non-figuratif, il avait résisté à l'idée de l'abstraction, la disparition graduelle de tout sujet au profit de l'absolue liberté de forme, comme terme de référence. Après son changement de direction, il accepte pleinement l'abstraction en tant que genre — une approche de la peinture où le sujet du tableau et l'objet représenté sont perçus comme étant non seulement indissociables mais aussi non quantifiables.

À compter du milieu des années 50 et jusque dans les années 60, les critiques d'art et les artistes montréalais se fondent sur une histoire de l'art qui réunit les concepts de style et d'avant-garde pour établir la crédibilité des artistes québécois. Le concept de style selon lequel, ainsi que Svetlana Alpers l'a fait remarquer en 1977, les caractéristiques propres à de grandes divisions historiques étaient considérées comme éléments esthétiques des œuvres d'art avait été poussé à l'extrême dans la critique aussi bien que dans la pratique de l'art à Montréal. La liberté, valeur humaniste à la base de ce concept, se manifestait dans les arts visuels par la "découverte" de la forme originelle. Curieusement, ces découvertes se conformaient à une idée prédéterminée de l'histoire — une histoire de l'art occidental à partir d'œuvres qui représentaient la capacité de l'homme à aller au-delà de ses limites et à progresser. Dans le contexte d'une communauté artistique qui privilégiait cette approche de la critique et de la création, les limites d'Ewen étaient évidentes. Ses pairs y voyaient l'incapacité d'éliminer le sujet de ses tableaux et d'évoluer avec les peintres d'avant-garde vers ce que le peintre et activiste montréalais Fernand Leduc appelait, en 1954, «la plus haute présence formelle». La réputation qu'on lui fit d'être déphasé par rapport à l'avant-garde de Montréal et de manquer de cohérence fut créée et maintenue par les critiques, les historiens de l'art et les artistes qui s'appuyaient fortement sur le concept du style. Ewen lui-même n'offrait aucun démenti à cette position.

Nous retraçons, dans cet article, les étapes du changement d'attitude d'Ewen à l'égard du concept de style qui est à la base de la production et de la perception de l'art à Montréal dans les années 1950 et 1960, depuis l'enthousiasme initial jusqu'à la colère et l'ultime rejet. Ce changement d'attitude ne peut être vu comme une audacieuse révolution dans la forme ni comme un retour à ses tableaux figuratifs des années 1949-54. Dans son œuvre, aussi bien figurative que non-figurative, d'avant 1970, Ewen croyait que la liberté en peinture s'obtenait par la domination de l'objet sur le sujet. En 1970, il critique implicitement ce dogme inhérent au concept de style et à la mentalité d'avant-garde.

Bien qu'il croie à la liberté par la forme et qu'il la recherche en supprimant les sujets «sentimentaux» et factices, il devient sceptique quant au but de la liberté absolue par le moyen de l'originalité de la forme; il fait sienne la maxime de Matisse que l'originalité est un monstre. Il établit une nette distinction entre originalité et indépendance. Pour lui, l'indépendance c'est éviter les extrêmes dans le style et l'idéologie par l'équilibre, dans son art, du geste et de la structure formelle. Et pourtant, les artistes et les critiques conscients de la réalité historique, tels Fernand Leduc et les Plasticiens, soutiennent que c'est par une progression logique de la forme, dans laquelle l'objet en vient à dominer de plus en plus le sujet, que le Canada peut asseoir solidement sa réputation en art.

Ewen trouve «difficile à accepter» le style de la nouvelle avant-garde montréalaise avec ses formes aux lignes dures; il résiste en conservant le geste dans sa peinture. Lorsqu'il expose ses premiers tableaux non-figuratifs à *Espace '55*, son utilisation du geste fait problème. Le catalogue de l'exposition le décrit comme étant moins avancé que Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau et Pierre Gauvreau, parce que son œuvre a conservé des qualités «surréalistes». Dans un article de 1954, Leduc, chef de file reconnu du nouveau style, avait déjà écrit que la «démarche cosmique» avait surpassé la «démarche surrationalnelle» de Borduas. En 1958, Rodolphe de Repentigny, éminent critique d'art et membre du groupe des Plasticiens, sous le pseudonyme de Jauran, écrit dans *Vie des Arts* que, bien que les tableaux de Ewen lui plaisent, son œuvre dans son ensemble le laisse «perplexe». Lorsque Ewen est invité à participer à la première exposition collective d'artistes québécois à l'extérieur du Canada, au Festival des Deux Mondes à Spoleto, Italie, en 1962, il est classé, dans le catalogue de l'exposition, comme post-automatiste et, là encore, en dehors du mouvement de l'avant-garde ou du style plasticien de deuxième génération.

Dans sa série de tableaux *Stream of Life* (1958-59), Ewen atteint l'étape de la direction esthétique consciente. Il organise ses tableaux en utilisant des thèmes, plutôt que des formes de plus en plus épurées. *Stream of Life* est une métaphore de caractère universel, où l'endurance de l'homme se mesure à la force de la nature. Bien que l'inclusion d'un élément figuratif, un ruisseau, présente sous un jour équivoque son attitude à l'égard de la peinture moderne non-figurative, à Montréal, il est évident que Ewen continue à considérer le sujet comme un élément régressif. Dans un article sur son exposition de 1961 à la galerie Denise Delrue, il dit: «Je veux continuer de m'engager résolument dans ma direction actuelle afin d'être de plus en plus abstrait même contre la Nature visuelle pour tenter de toucher les profonds sentiments humains de l'homme...» (*La Patrie*, 1961). Ce besoin de supprimer le sujet entraine constamment en conflit avec le désir, exprimé par l'emploi du geste, d'éviter les extrêmes. Même quand il adopte les techniques des contours aux lignes dures, l'emploi de ruban et les formes géométriques plates en acrylique, on critique son manque d'originalité. Lorsqu'il expose ses groupes de tableaux à thèmes, *Diagram of the Multiple Personality*, à la galerie du Siècle, en juin 1966, Laurent Lamy écrit dans *Le Devoir*: «Il est celui qui continue et qui porte plus loin une idée déjà lancée.»

Le thème de *Stream of Life*, qu'il reprend en 1967 dans *Lifestream* et qu'il conservera après son départ pour London, Ontario, en 1968 et jusqu'en 1970, a pour Ewen une signification particulière. Par ce groupe de tableaux, où se développe

une série de rectangles allongés sur fond monochrome jusqu'à l'effet dramatique d'un mince ruisseau qui court à travers les toiles de 10' × 12', Ewen exprime sa colère pour la façon dont il est traité à l'intérieur du système artistique. Nous devons à William Seitz, conservateur invité de la septième exposition biennale de la Galerie Nationale, en 1968, qui avait choisi Ewen pour en faire partie, quelques remarques pénétrantes sur le système artistique au Canada. Dans le catalogue de l'exposition, il fait remarquer que, à cause de la «nature multiforme et abondante de l'art canadien», cette exposition pourrait bien être «la dernière où le mode d'expression de premier plan qu'est la peinture puisse être présenté de façon globale». Le concept du style, comme mécanisme du changement et de la compréhension du changement dans l'art pour les historiens, les critiques et les artistes, avait perdu de son importance.

Le rejet graduel de la notion d'originalité en tant que «découverte» de l'innovation formelle se produisit avec la naissance d'une nouvelle vision de l'authenticité en art — le régionalisme. Le régionaliste Greg Curnoe, de London, inventa le terme «orégionalisme» pour indiquer que l'originalité, ce qui différencie une chose d'une autre, est solidement enracinée dans l'environnement immédiat de l'artiste. Au cours de la rétrospective de ses œuvres, à la galerie 20/20 de London, en janvier 1970, Ewen exprime, lui aussi, son scepticisme à l'égard du concept de style: «En tant qu'objets, mes tableaux entrent dans une catégorie que je rejette... peu important les efforts que vous mettrez à vous libérer, vous deviendrez élitiste de toute manière». Dans le *London Free Press* de janvier 1970, il précise: «... j'ai décidé de ne plus peindre une seule autre toile...»

Durant ses années à Montréal, sa recherche de la liberté par l'indépendance lui avait valu la réputation de traîner derrière l'avant-garde. Il n'a pu considérer la liberté autrement que comme une forme de scepticisme à l'endroit de l'abstraction progressive qu'à partir du moment où il a reconnu la valeur de ses propres limites vis-à-vis une approche de la peinture fondée sur l'absolue originalité de la forme. Il a vu dans son tableau de 1970, *Traces through Space*, un geste «anti-art» qui lui a fait comprendre qu'il ne créait plus d'œuvres abstraites, mais plutôt une sorte de phénomène. *Drop of Water on a Hot Surface*, image prise dans un populaire ouvrage de vulgarisation scientifique, marque une nouvelle définition de la liberté dans laquelle la possibilité de quantifier ou de diviser l'objet et le sujet n'a plus de raison d'être. Alors que, dans ses œuvres des années 1950 et 1960, l'objet était perçu comme dominant le sujet, dans les décennies qui suivent le sujet ne l'emporte pas sur l'objet. Ewen nous rappelle, en 1986, que sa nouvelle imagerie «est tout comme une nature morte pour ce qui est du sujet». Pendant plusieurs années, *Drop of Water on a Hot Surface* est resté accroché au mur de son atelier de London, au moyen d'anneaux et de cordes, comme un rappel de ce point tournant.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette