

vivid city

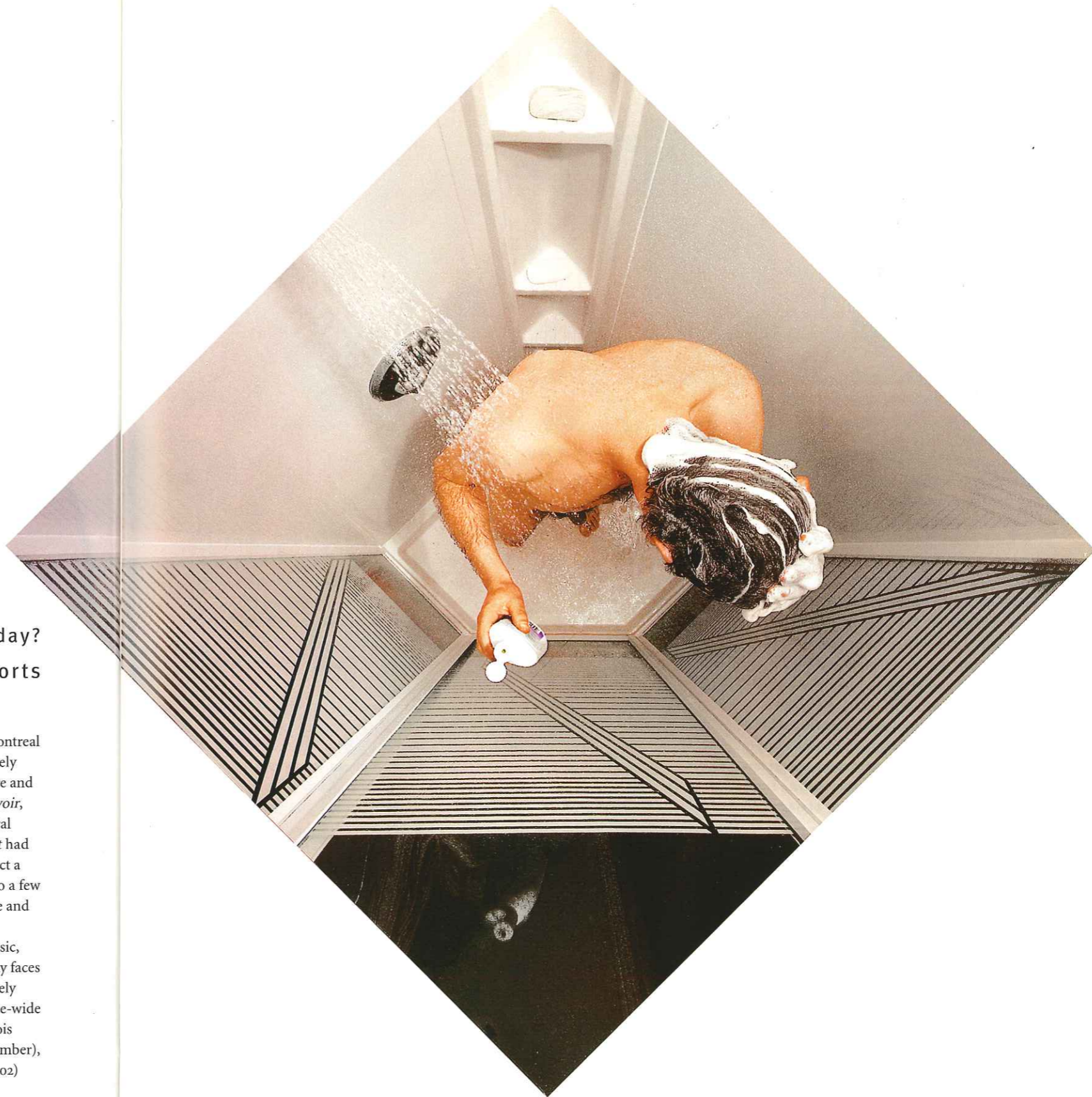
Who are the key players shaping art in Montreal today?

BERNARD LAMARCHE of *Le Devoir* reports

When I was invited to participate in this special Montreal issue of *Canadian Art* magazine, one idea came immediately to mind. Having had the chance to cover both visual culture and non-commercial music for the Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir*, I wanted to write about the immense diversity of the cultural practices ongoing in the city. The editor of *Canadian Art* had come up with a clear program I interpreted as if I had to elect a few artists in the critic's pantheon, but I could not reduce to a few names a city that should be known for the impressive range and vitality of its cultural offerings.

Montreal is known as a city of festivals. Jazz, French music, theatre, contemporary dance and techno culture in its many faces (think of MUTEK, MEG and Elektra) all boast their own lively events, and those devoted to the visual arts match this scene-wide effervescence. Two biennials and one triennial exist: *Le Mois de la photo à Montréal* (the 8th edition took place last September), *La Biennale de Montréal* (whose 3rd edition occurred in 2002) and the youngest, with its odd name, *L'Art qui fait Boum!*, dedicated to emerging artists.

Montreal is the city of festivals, but one should not think that quality concedes anything to quantity. The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal has filled the gap left by the closing



ABOVE: Alain Païement *Douche* 2001 Colour print 1.25 x 1.25 m Courtesy Galerie de l'UQAM

OPPOSITE: Nicolas Baier *Capillaires* 2002 Digital print Duraclar 2.44 x 2.44 m Courtesy Galerie René Blouin

In the past five years, many artists have emerged in the Montreal scene



ABOVE: Emmanuelle Léonard Yves Lemelin, *afficheur* (from the series *Les travailleurs*) 2002 Colour photo 48 x 33 cm

OPPOSITE: François Lacasse *Les voies naturelles* 2002 Acrylic and ink on canvas 2.28 x 1.52 m Courtesy Galerie René Blouin

of the exhibition space at Le Centre international d'art contemporain by continuing to offer artists the chance to mount sizable exhibitions of their works in a public space. Many artist-run centres, among them SKOL and OPTICA, have initiated strong special events like "Les Commensaux" (about relational aesthetics) and "De la Survivance (On Survival)," with components that spread out throughout the city, while their ongoing programming constantly addresses new topics. Moreover, the strong visual arts programs at both l'Université du Québec à Montréal and Concordia University, with the latter attracting many students from outside the province, help to assure vitality and a constant exchange of ideas.

In the past five years, many artists have emerged in the Montreal scene. A few of them stand out as having fulfilled their promise by becoming established names.

Alain Paiement is known for constructing spectacular environments inside which he recreates 3-D photographic panoramas of cityscapes. After spending ten years away from Montreal, exhibiting his work in Europe, Paiement returned two years ago with a show at Galerie Clark that demonstrated a new focus and enthusiasm. He still uses photography to scan reality, now using the methods of a geographer. For recent works, Paiement has photographed large surfaces (the underside of a car, or an entire room), mapping and reconstructing these spaces in a single composite image. His most ambitious project to date, shown at the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal last year, was the photo-mapping of the entire floor area of a two-apartment house, including the bakery on the ground floor, the balcony and part of the animated street below. In order to show photography's inability to take charge of the real, Paiement takes many shots of the area from ceiling-height, moving his camera each time. Using a computer, he joins these pictures into one

huge composition made rhythmic by the many small ruptures that point out the image's structural impossibility. If photography holds everything in abeyance, Paiement moves his camera to give many points of view at the same time. We are faced with no architectural barriers, and are given a radical new understanding of the space we are shown. But this method doesn't allow us to stand in the space any more: like a bird, the viewer is held spatially in a temporary suspension.

Nicolas Baier made a good impression at the 2000 Biennale de Montréal. Since he began exhibiting his work ten years ago, Baier, like Paiement, has found many ways to examine how we look at things. The fast-rising artist began as a painter, but now works using computers and digital photography (even though he claims that he is not a photographer and knows little about computer science). Like Paiement, Baier draws an inventory of the world that surrounds him. His method for registering his domestic surroundings is closely linked to the notion of bricolage. Baier takes many pictures of a certain space, then cuts and reorganizes them so that different areas of the surface of the final image represent different moments in time. For example, in one work an image of the artist's bedroom is cut into pieces and rearranged; its new grid suggests to us the way time alters any space. The contraction and dislocation of time is achieved in Baier's images thanks to his strong sense of composition. The work of this artist, who is now represented by Galerie René Blouin, is something close to a computerized magic realism. In *Nourriture/Vaisselle* (2001), some sort of membrane made out of gleaming metallic rectangles floats in front of a photo of the artist's kitchen, as if an otherworldly curtain has been added to the image, breaking the orthodox conception of linear time. In *Lévitacion*, the artist looks like he is floating horizontally in a kitchen. Here, computers introduce the supernatural to



closer to straight photography. Two recent projects have explored the reality of workers. Instead of taking pictures of sweating labourers or the faces of people deeply concentrated on their duties, she borrowed the gaze of 45 different people, including a farmer, a waitress, a cardiologist, a priest and a prostitute. Instead of controlling the shots herself, she asked these workers to photograph their workplaces themselves. In 2001, Léonard published a newspaper that was distributed free during Le Mois de la photo à Montréal. Last year, in an exhibition entitled "La vie en temps réel/Mode ralenti" (organized by L'Espace Vox), her series *Les travailleurs* was shown again as a gallery of worksite portraits. This series makes the important point that amateur photography usually never enters the workplace. But more important is what these photographs reveal about each worker's own environment. Rather than showing us common views, the images showed that the expectations we held in mind were usually false.

Painting, abstract and figurative, has been an exciting field to follow over the last few years in Montreal. Names like Stéphane La Rue, Francine Savard, Sylvain Bouthillette, Martin Bureau, Marie-Claude Bouthillier, Marc Séguin and many others have emerged. But one painter has been even more exciting.

In March 2002, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal organized a ten-year retrospective of the painting of **François Lacasse**. Over the years, this artist's work has been known as less flamboyant than effective, and in this show, we could see a painter slowly but consistently reinventing himself through 30 paintings comprising more than ten different series of work. In a glance we can see how, between 1992 and 2002, Lacasse advanced in his work and moved past his former style, which was articulated around a few paradigms of postmodernity. Today,

photography, and banality has been banished. Baier recently won the competition to produce one of the most expensive projects integrating art and architecture ever realized in the province of Quebec: one of his pieces will grace the facade of a new pavilion at Concordia University in downtown Montreal. If documentary photography has fed a strong tradition of Quebec photo art since the late 1960s, photographers like Paiement and Baier bend this tradition to a more formal approach. The work of **Emmanuelle Léonard** stands, in contrast,

closer to straight photography. Two recent projects have explored the reality of workers. Instead of taking pictures of sweating labourers or the faces of people deeply concentrated on their duties, she borrowed the gaze of 45 different people, including a farmer, a waitress, a cardiologist, a priest and a prostitute. Instead of controlling the shots herself, she asked these workers to photograph their workplaces themselves. In 2001, Léonard published a newspaper that was distributed free during Le Mois de la photo à Montréal. Last year, in an exhibition entitled "La vie en temps réel/Mode ralenti" (organized by L'Espace Vox), her series *Les travailleurs* was shown again as a gallery of worksite portraits. This series makes the important point that amateur photography usually never enters the workplace. But more important is what these photographs reveal about each worker's own environment. Rather than showing us common views, the images showed that the expectations we held in mind were usually false.



OPPOSITE: Jean-Pierre Gauthier *Le Grand-ménage* (detail) 1998–2000 Mechanical-hygiene installation: hardware, liquid soap, solid soap, domestic maintenance accessories Photo Guy L'Heureux Courtesy CIAC/La Biennale de Montréal 2000

BELOW RIGHT: Pascal Grandmaison *Running* 2003 Colour video transferred to DVD 60 min loop Courtesy Galerie René Blouin

BOTTOM: Massimo Guerrera *Porus (Hervé rue Bernard)* 2001 Colour photo 50 x 40 cm Courtesy Galerie Joyce Yahouda

instead of quoting other works of art, recycling images or giving way to hybrids, Lacasse delivers painting that returns to earlier dripping techniques, at the same time pushing them to new levels. These striking works give a primary place to the pleasures of painting and looking at painting. Lacasse has become a master in manipulating acrylic. Under his hand, the medium transforms itself, becomes marble, glass or milky clouds; the depth of the canvas becomes immeasurable. Lacasse is neither an alchemist nor a modernist revivalist, but the atmosphere of his new paintings is mesmerizing. While Lacasse's work has nothing to do with computers, his all-over style of painting nonetheless evokes a strong sense of virtuality.

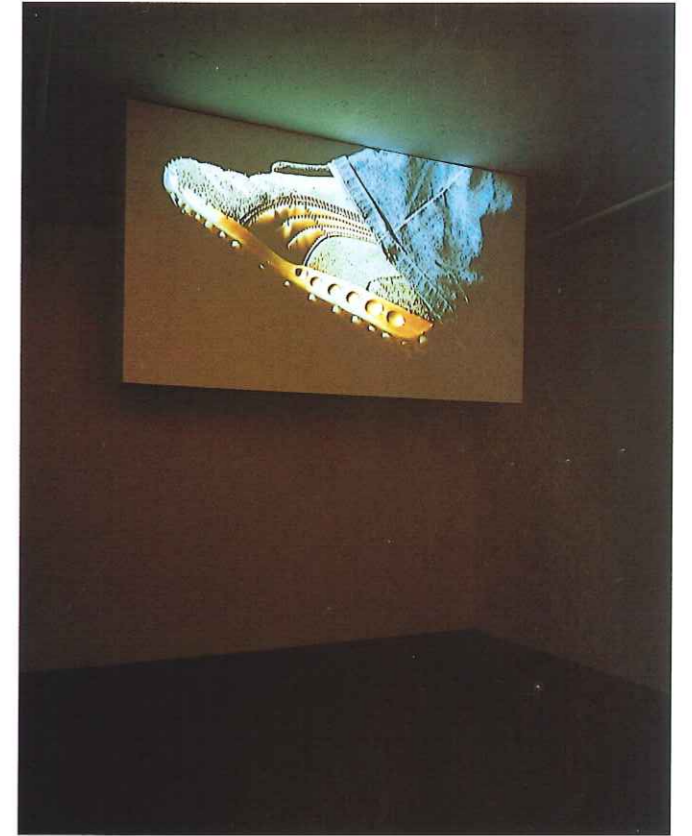
Sound research is another field in which artists from Quebec and Montreal have made significant contributions. **Pascal Grandmaison** has made an impression through his work in video, photography and new music. A recent compelling work investigated the notion of emptiness. At B-312, one of the many interesting artist-run centres in town, Grandmaison emptied the space, covering the longest wall with mirrors. In a small room,

he built a white rectangle, which was used as a projection screen. The projected images were of musicians playing drums, guitar, keyboards or melodica and a singer. Never could we see more than one musician at a time; never could we get a whole portrait. The musicians were seen only through isolated details or through the music they played. The video installation was autistic: the musicians couldn't hear the others' music. No communication was allowed. Through these portraits, the artist explores different registers of inexpressivity. Grandmaison is one of many new artists who do not confine themselves to one type of production. He recently produced a CD of the music from a previous installation entitled *Solo*. Grandmaison asked two musicians in the Montreal electronic music scene, Montag and Herri Kopter, to remix some of the tracks. Under the pseudonym Solo, Grandmaison contributed the other musical pieces on the record.

Jean-Pierre Gauthier is another artist working in both new music and visual arts. In the past two years, this conceiver of machines and sculptor of sounds has presented his work both in the Festival international de musique actuelle de Victoriaville,

one of the best festivals of new musical expression in North America, and at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Gauthier has also released a record of the sounds made by his twisted machines. His instruments are air compressors, radio interference, sheet-iron, tubes and pipes of all sorts, which give way to sounds that are both percussive and organic, linked to the human body and its functions. At the Musée des beaux-arts, he gave us *Échotriste*, in which eight rotating mirrors were placed on the floor. Large springs, suspended over the floor on a tentacular tubing structure, scratched along the mirrors' surfaces. The complex music that the work produced sounded like shrill cries. The installation's motion had a hypnotic effect on viewers that was heightened by the amplified music. In this work, Gauthier recycled in a mesmerizing way the dying technology of the turntable. Last summer, the artist also showed a new sound installation entitled *Sporadic Exchange* at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

Massimo Guerrera has been one of the most interesting figures on the Montreal art scene during the past seven years. Like a number of other artists, Guerrera has used the corporate structure of our consumer society, its codes and strategy of merchandizing, as an organizing system for his work. But his main artistic object/subject is food, which he uses as a device to articulate the relationship between the individual body and the collective body. It is through food that all other questions raised by his work are articulated—"namely, our permeability or imperviousness to others, our assimilation or rejection of what they transmit to us..." writes curator Anne-Marie Ninacs in the catalogue of an exhibition of Guerrera's work she organized in 2002 at the Musée du Québec. Since Guerrera began working in this direction, he has produced a tremendous number of engaging prostheses, drawings, interactive organic sculptures, photographs, prints and works made from food leftovers. He



has also held performances on the street in which passersby join him for a meal. Through his installations and performative actions, which might be said to lie closer to choreography, he has shown in many ways that the body is a constantly reconfigured agglomeration. His approach has led him to cross frontiers between the arts; he even participated in the 2001 Festival international de nouvelle danse in Montreal. ■

