Embedded Conflict in the Work of James Gordaneer, 1952-2002

by

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We accept this thesis as conforming To the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the painting of James Gordaneer from his years as a student in Ontario during the fifties, to the present. Gordaneer’s work is examined in relation to the social and artistic debates that most shaped each decade of artistic production since the mid-century. This thesis particularly emphasizes Gordaneer’s relationship with the Modernist art theories of American art critic and theoretician Clement Greenberg, by discussing the conflicted position such theories held in relation to the artistic production of artists who sought to carve their own path, away from the dominant theory of Modernist Abstraction.

My discussion about Gordaneer’s artistic development is divided into six chapters. The first chapter traces his early years as a student at Doon, in the Ontario countryside, and identifies the origins of the conflict between Modernist Abstraction and representational painting practices associated with Canadian notions of identity. The second chapter describes Gordaneer’s years as a Modernist Abstractionist from 1960 to 1966 with particular attention paid to the development of Post-Painterly Abstractionist styles in the international arena and their effect on the Canadian art scene. The third chapter focuses on Gordaneer’s gradual move away from abstraction in his work from 1970 to 1973 and locates in the practice of landscape painting a form of resistance to Modernist Abstraction’s prohibition against representation and this theory’s association with originality and freedom. The fourth chapter looks at Gordaneer’s increasingly surrealist painting production from 1973 to 1980 and discusses his relocation to Victoria in 1976 and the effects of that change of location on his art. The fifth chapter looks at Gordaneer’s work during the 1980s and the effects on his painting of a return to Hard-Edged Abstraction in the early part of the decade. The final chapter looks at
Gordaneer’s most recent, and perhaps more unusual, work produced during the nineties and to the present. Called “Topologism” by Gordaneer and his collaborator Raymond Lorens, this style used topological mathematics to create a pictorial space that more accurately reflects a Postmodernist, particularly posthumanist, understanding of the self’s relationship to the world.

Examiners

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Introduction

Even more than most Canadian artists, James Gordaneer is on the margins of contemporary art history. The work of Canadian painters in the second half of the twentieth century who have pursued representational styles has been difficult to place within an art-historical narrative and an art-critical reception that favours artists who more closely have followed the evolution of avant-garde styles since the 1950s. This has led to the exclusion of a number of significant artists from the canon: artists who, in reaction, have frequently adopted a strategy of conscious isolation from the mainstream of Canadian art. This is the case of Jim Gordaneer. Deeply shaped by the conflict between representational styles—particularly the landscape genre—and Abstract Expressionism that took place in the fifties during his student years in Toronto, Gordaneer’s career has fluctuated between periods of engagement with Modernist Abstraction and periods of resistance to that monolith. During fifty years as a painter, Gordaneer’s artistic practice has engaged with the fundamental concepts of Modernism; analysis of his pictorial evolution thus reveals his active consideration of the requirements of linear stylistic evolution, originality, purity of form, and exclusion of subject-matter both by adhering to those concepts and by conflict with them.¹ Now, at the end of his life, Gordaneer has finally set aside the conflict that shaped his career, to

¹ This thesis will use capital case “Modernism” to refer to what some describe as “Late Modernism,” or the development of Abstract Modernist painting that arose in New York during the mid-century under the influence of art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg. Lower case “modernism” has its roots in French painting of the nineteenth century. The tradition of modernist painting gave rise, in the early twentieth century, to the painting of the Cubists, Futurists, Bauhaus, and Constructivists, among many other artistic groups.
produce paintings that make reference to his many stylistic and intellectual influences without being constrained by any. This achievement, plus his inventiveness and technical mastery, makes his work worthy of scholarly consideration.

Surveys of Canadian art often posit a progression from Modernist Abstraction, to anti-Modernist Pop-Art and conceptual art, and, finally, to Postmodern manifestations such as New Media and Installation Art. Within this narrative, landscape and figurative painters who have negotiated courses between the theoretical and stylistic authority of Modernism and their innate sympathy for subject-matter and traditional genres have often been treated as valuable but peripheral artists who tend most often to represent deep-rooted nationalism. Departing from this assessment, I believe that the work of artists such as Paterson Ewen, Gordon Smith, and Gordaneer, among others—while certainly expressing something of their relationship to Canadian identity—reveals significant fissures in the grand narrative of Modernism, with its assumed associations with freedom and originality, that have not been sufficiently studied. My examination of Gordaneer’s career from the 1950s to today, although it does not attempt to provide a comprehensive theory for understanding the fissure in Modernism mentioned above, provides a case study of the divisive issues that affected and influenced the painting of many artists who came of age in Canada at the mid-century. This study in turn, may suggest lines to follow in a new, broader historiography in future.

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2 Examples are David Burnett & Marilyn Schiff, Contemporary Canadian Art (Edmonton: Hurting Publishers, 1983); and Terry Fenton & Karen Wilkin, Modern Painting in Canada: A Survey of Major Movements in Twentieth Century Canadian Art (Edmonton, Alta.: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1978).
Born in Toronto in 1933, Gordaneer’s art training was limited to a few summers at the Doon School of Fine Art. Students at Doon during the 1950s learned to paint landscape en plein air, taking advantage of the pastoral setting of the southern Ontario countryside. During the second half of the fifties, after traveling to Mexico and Europe, Gordaneer moved away from landscape and figurative painting to begin exploring Abstract Expressionism. Then, throughout the sixties, Gordaneer was fully engaged with abstract styles and exhibited in Toronto’s commercial galleries and in several academy exhibitions, garnering some attention as an up-and-coming abstractionist. After moving with his wife to Orangeville, Ontario, Gordaneer again began to explore the landscape in 1971. The isolation of the country allowed him finally to assimilate his abstract formal experiments and also to investigate a surrealist figurative vocabulary based on automatism and collage. From 1973 to the end of the decade, Gordaneer was fully engaged with the figure, but a figure saturated with surrealist connotations. His return to representation in the seventies also marked his most successful period as an artist. His desire to distance himself from the Toronto art scene, however, led him to move even further from it and in 1976 Gordaneer and his family relocated to Victoria, BC.

Victoria has been good to the artist. Soon after arriving in the city, Gordaneer obtained teaching positions at the University of Victoria, Camosun College, and the Victoria College of Art, where he was a respected painting teacher until his early retirement in 1992. In 1986, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria held the most important public exhibition of Gordaneer’s career. Titled James Gordaneer: The Circus Series, the

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show comprised large-scale works that combined the figure with a simplified style derived from Hard-Edge Abstraction. Despite that exhibition, Gordaneer felt increasingly isolated from his immediate artistic environment at the VCA where abstraction held sway; more important, he was also dissatisfied with his own work. By the end of 1989, he had again secluded himself from the local artistic community, but that time in an isolation that was not total. From 1989 to 1999, Gordaneer worked in close collaboration with a philosopher, the late Raymond Lorens. The two men founded a group of artists under the name Chapman Group, named after the street where Gordaneer’s home and studio are located, and set out to elaborate a systematic critique of Modernism, and to explore an alternative pictorial language to both Modernism and to the “postmodern” artistic practices prevalent in the late eighties and early nineties. While this phase of Gordaneer’s career was extraordinarily productive and intellectually stimulating, he has gone on in his most recent work to create paintings that finally, and by his own estimation, synthesize his entire career. Discussing his latest Shadow Series, Gordaneer has said:

Psychologically, I feel these works resulted from my coming out from under the weight, from under heavy “shadows” as it were, of past and recent art history and from the influence of mentors.\(^6\)

Although he has been consistently admired by colleagues who think of him as a “painter’s painter,” Gordaneer has enjoyed only moderately successful sales of his work and has had to earn his living by teaching.\(^7\) His isolation has led to the almost complete

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\(^6\) James Gordaneer, Artist’s Statement, November 2002.

\(^7\) In 1999 McLaughlin Gallery curator, Linda Jansma, said of Gordaneer’s work: “We’ve always found him an underrated artist. His early abstractions were some of the strongest abstract work coming out of the ’50s and ’60s.” Quoted in David Leach, “The Rise and Fall of the House of Chapman,” Monday Magazine 25 #13 (April 1-7, 1999), 7. Gordaneer’s work is in the McLaughlin Gallery collection. It is
absence of critical writing about, and interpretation of, Gordaneer’s painting. Apart from newspaper reviews, of which those by art critics Frank Nowosad and Robert Amos stand out, Gordaneer has been the subject of limited academic study only as a Canadian surrealist.  

Gordaneer’s figurative work of the seventies was included in the 1978 catalogue and exhibition *Other Realities: The Legacy of Surrealism in Canadian Art* curated by Natalie Luckyj; French surrealist José Pierre also briefly mentioned Gordaneer in the 1980 article “Le Surréalisme en Colombie Britannique;” finally, in 1995, Canadian artist and art historian Yves Larocque briefly discussed Gordaneer in his doctoral dissertation “Le Surréalisme et le Canada: histoire de l’idée du surréalisme au Canada Anglophone entre 1927 et 1984.”

It is primarily to redress the lack of scholarship on Gordaneer that this thesis is written. The study aims to provide the first comprehensive overview of his entire career. Generally devoted to a particular decade, each chapter offers contextual analysis of Gordaneer’s painting by locating his artistic evolution in relation to the cultural and social conditions within which the works were produced. The formal characteristics of his work are analyzed, and where relevant, direct and indirect influences are identified

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also in the collections of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Esso Collection, Canada Council Art Bank, University of Victoria, Concordia University, Imperial Oil, Crown Life, Queen’s University, Dow Chemical, McMichael Canadian Collection, Sarnia Art Gallery, Sir George Williams University, Prince George Art Gallery, Peel Region Art Museum, and the Homer Watson Gallery.


and discussed. Each chapter also offers an interpretation of Gordaneer’s changing painterly modes, particularly as he addressed the embedded conflict between representational art and Modernist Abstraction I have identified above. Because that issue was so important to Gordaneer’s eccentric evolution, the six chapters that make up this thesis read as a series of variations upon the theme of Modernism. Consequently, each chapter assesses Modernism from a particular viewpoint—as an aesthetic theory, as a painting style, and as a contested philosophical and political position.

Chapter 1 covers the early years of Gordaneer’s career in the 1950s. The chapter identifies a group of artists who did not fit either the predominant conservatism of the landscape painting that dominated Canadian artistic institutions, or the new style of the Abstract Expressionists, whose painting quickly became associated with absolute creative freedom and originality. Artists such as Gordaneer had been trained in the nationalist tradition of landscape but also wished to participate in avant-garde modes without altogether abandoning subject-matter. Left outside the two camps into which the Toronto art scene divided in the fifties, these artists of the “middle ground” had the task of carving out their own creative direction away from that pointed out by either Modernist theory or the regressive entrenchment of the traditionalists. This chapter also looks at the political connotations of the Canadian landscape, particularly as that style came to symbolize opposition to the rapid intrusion of American culture in Canada.

The theme of Modernism is addressed and expanded upon in chapter 2. From 1960 to 1966 Gordaneer moved decisively into abstraction. The chapter looks carefully at Toronto’s artistic environment in the first half of the sixties and, in particular, draws a comparison between painting by important Toronto Post-Painterly Abstractionists, such
as Jack Bush, and that by Prairie artists at Emma Lake. By using only strict formalist analysis to discuss Gordaneer’s work of this period, the chapter aims to show his engagement with the artistic debates raging during the sixties about the direction of abstraction. Even as his painting engaged with Post-Painterly modes, however, Gordaneer maintained that his work reflected representational relationships or motifs that made reference to landscape and figure and that continued to align him with the artists of the “middle ground” discussed in chapter 1. His hesitancy to abandon subject-matter contributed to his increased sense of estrangement from Toronto’s art scene and, eventually, led him literally to leave the city for the countryside of southern Ontario. Soon after, Gordaneer also moved back from abstraction to landscape painting.

The necessity of linear stylistic evolution, the concept of originality, and the proscription of subject-matter are essential to Modernist theory. Chapter 3 discusses the origin and significance of these ideas in Clement Greenberg’s Modernist theory. The theories and art of Canadian artists who actively resisted Modernism’s conceptual monopoly during the sixties and seventies, such as Paterson Ewen and the London Regionalists, are explored to provide a background to understanding Gordaneer’s landscape painting of 1970 to 1973. This chapter locates in Gordaneer’s use of the landscape motif a mode of resistance that paralleled the strategies of the Canadian artists mentioned above. Thus, models of Canadian identity based on landscape and the wilderness are studied to understand Gordaneer’s use of that genre as a way to negotiate his own position in relation to Modernism. The chapter concludes that the practice of landscape painting became for Gordaneer the means by which he literally grounded his
experiences as he opened a critical space through which he confronted Modernism’s rejection of subject-matter.

Gordaneer’s painting in the early part of the seventies opened the door to his unapologetic inclusion of figurative subject-matter, allowing him to explore the surrealist methods of automatism and collage to construct images that depicted complex narratives. Chapter 4 looks at the international and Canadian context of figurative painting during the seventies to frame Gordaneer’s work from 1973 to 1980. The influences of Francis Bacon, R.B, Kitaj, and Maxwell Bates on Gordaneer’s painting are carefully explored. The changing reception of surrealism in the United States and Canada is also discussed, since the movement had been seen as anti-Modernist during the fifties and sixties the period of abstraction’s apogée. Here, the classification of Gordaneer as a surrealist is ultimately questioned, however, and an alternative interpretation is offered which suggests that, while he used a surrealist vocabulary that appropriated automatism and collage, Gordaneer ultimately does not adhere to the aesthetic and political aims of that movement. Instead, I believe he elaborated a “baroque” syntax created by transforming his surrealist vocabulary through the calligraphic brushwork of Victoria painter Jack Wise and by Gordaneer’s experience of Victoria’s geography and climate. Gordaneer’s painting of the late seventies literally dissolved spatial structure through the sheer extravagance of his brushwork; his subject-matter oscillated back and forth between images and marks.

For Gordaneer, 1981 to 1989 represented a return to the Modernist principles that had preoccupied him in the 1960s. In 1981, he participated in an “experimental year” at the Victoria College of Art that required teachers and students to engage only with Hard-
Edge Abstraction. Chapter 5 narrates how Gordaneer’s participation in the experimental year changed his work dramatically and made apparent the fact that the conflict between representation and abstraction that had been embedded in his practice in the fifties was not yet resolved. While his work left behind the rich, painterly style of the seventies, his last foray into abstraction had the effect of decisively placing Gordaneer on the side of representation. Although his Modernist-derived style of the eighties met with public approval, by the end of the decade, I believe, Gordaneer’s resistance to Modernism was no longer expressed in his painting. Instead, he began articulating a critique of Modernism citing the examples of Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, and Philip Guston—artists whose careers had also been determined by the same struggle.

Finally, during of the nineties, Gordaneer systematically defined an alternative theory to Modernism. Beginning in 1989, he began to work in close collaboration with Lorens. For the next ten years, the two men carefully elaborated a conceptual approach to painting that would restore the space, and figurative content, which Modernism had abandoned. Looking to the New Physics as a model for contemporary representations of reality, Gordaneer and Lorens used the curved space of “topological” mathematics as the foundation for representational paintings that invited space back into the picture, without falling back to perspectival space. The chapter describes the symbiotic relationship between Gordaneer and Lorens, their method of working, and the changes that occurred to that method as others joined their investigation. I believe Gordaneer and Lorens’s philosophical formulation can best be understood in the context of cultural Postmodernism. To this end, the chapter discusses semiotics and Postmodern theory, particularly in relation to posthumanism. The efforts of the two men, and the topological
style they founded, finally freed Gordaneer from Modernism, but the qualities of his work during the nineties that most stand out are those he had exhibited all along: a willingness to explore and question his assumptions about painting, and a profound love of the act of painting itself.

The range of topics covered by this thesis has required extensive research in both primary and secondary sources. I am grateful that, throughout my investigation, Gordaneer, who is my former painting teacher, generously sat with me for many interviews. He also opened his archives containing personal letters, newspaper clippings of reviews, exhibition invitations, and slide collection. I was able to reconstruct a chronology of his stylistic evolution by looking at slides and at the many works he has in storage. That, together with a chronology of exhibitions and reviews, was the first step that directed me in each case towards the secondary sources needed to place his work in context. My research into the art-historical environment of Canadian art from the fifties to today revealed a fissure in the understanding of Canadian artists who, like Gordaneer, have fallen into the gaps of the dominant art-historical narrative. To understand Gordaneer’s evolution, I found no models that adequately matched his eccentric development. As a result, in each chapter I sought to construct a coherent critical interpretation of his work by looking at theory—particularly to Greenbergian Modernism, to Postmodernism, and to notions of identity derived from Canadian Studies—to articulate what I believe are the most relevant aspects of Gordaneer’s painting in the period under discussion.

While continuous themes in Gordaneer’s painting and development have certainly emerged, his seemingly abrupt stylistic changes have prevented me from drawing
absolute conclusions about his work. This I can say with certainty, however: Gordaneer’s painting speaks of stubborn search for autonomy from aesthetic ideologies. It speaks of restless dissension from an expected and encouraged artistic evolution. It speaks of an absolute commitment to painting as a relevant artistic practice despite his marginality. And it articulates all this simply—delighting in the act of making a gesture upon canvas.
Chapter 1: Conflicts Embedded: Training Years

The 1950s were years of change and transformation in Canadian art. During that decade landscape painting ceased to be the major preoccupation of painters and was replaced, in a matter of a couple of years, by Abstract Expressionism—then the most widely practised style of the avant-garde. This change is usually explained in Canadian art histories as the final triumph of the “new,” progressive art style over the formulaic repetitiveness of the Canadian landscape genre, particularly plein air landscape, with its assumed nationalistic content. Such accounts, however, simply do not give enough attention to the intellectual rift that the rapid change from one end of the art spectrum to the other caused for young artists learning their craft and positioning themselves on each end of that conflict. James Gordaneer was one such artist coming of age in the contested environment of the fifties Toronto art scene, and the chronicle of his first decade as a painter is typical of that of many artists of the period. What was atypical about this stage of Gordaneer’s career was not the energy or originality with which he embraced the new faith in Abstract Expressionism but, rather, the degree to which his painting practice became divided—as his own allegiances were divided—between his desire to be a part of the postwar avant-garde and his natural sympathy towards Canadian painting traditions.

This tension determined his development during the fifties; far more important, the shifts from one side of the rift to the other, and eventually the desire to close the fissure between them, became the ambiguous thread that runs through his fifty-year-long practice.

This chapter aims to investigate how this initial conflict—what Claire Bice called the “Conflicts in Canadian Art”—became intrinsic to Gordaneer’s artistic outlook. The chapter will first delve into the nature of that conflict and the meaning ascribed in the 1950s to the two divergent art styles—Abstract Expressionism versus landscape painting. Next, an alternative to the binary argument will be located in the position of representational artists affected by Modernist styles who fell between and so, I maintain, mediated between the avant-garde and the traditionalists. A detailed account of Gordaneer’s early training and influences from both sides of the conflict will clarify how fundamentally the very public argument taking place in Toronto shaped his approach to art. To conclude, the effect of the artistic debate on Gordaneer’s work will be analyzed to understand how conflicting approaches embedded in his art practice and became central to the evolution of his work.

Abstract Expressionism: Freedom and Propaganda

Gordaneer’s brief artistic training consisted almost solely of summers spent painting the landscape around Doon, Ontario, where he attended the Doon School of Fine Arts, one of many summer art schools that peppered the province’s countryside during

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2 Claire Bice, “Conflicts in Canadian Art,” Canadian Art 16 #1 (February 1959), 30-35.
the fifties. Red Barn of 1952 is an example of his work of this period (Figure 1). More will be said later of Gordaneer’s hesitancy to take formal art education, choosing instead to follow the southward winter migration of Canadian artists to Mexico in 1955 and 1956 (Figure 2), and later, in 1957 and 1958, to Europe for extended periods of painting where he produced abstract works such as Untitled of 1959 (Figure 3). As has been noted, the facts of Gordaneer’s training years are typical of the period, not just in the details of his education and travels but also in his vertiginous transformation from outdoor landscape painter to abstractionist, with a brief pause in Cubist figuration. Indeed, in the autumn of 1956 abstract and non-objective styles were so widely pursued by Toronto artists that conservative art critic Graham McInnes expressed despair in the pages of Canadian Art at the exclusion of nature as subject-matter and wondered about the apparent monotony and similarity of the abstract work.4 By the time of the Third Biennial of Canadian Art in 1959, the jury—made up of Donald W. Buchanan, Colin Graham, and Gordon W. Washburn—found that, although four hundred artists had been considered (twice as many as for the Second Biennial two years before), most of those invited to participate worked in Abstract Expressionist modes or in automatism. The “Report of the Jury” explained their choices: “On the whole…the jury found that little real talent seemed to be devoted in Canada at the moment to the more traditional forms of representational painting.”5

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3 Gordaneer was a student at Doon during the summers of 1952, 1953, and 1954. He was a working student in 1955 and started teaching there in 1956. James Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, February 28, 2001.


How did abstraction become the stylistic choice of so many Canadian artists? One often-repeated answer centers on the influence of Painters Eleven on conservative painting and exhibiting practices in Toronto during the early 1950s. The members of Painters Eleven—William Ronald, Jack Bush, Oscar Cahén, Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakamura, Jock Macdonald, Hortense M. Gordon, Harold Town, and Walter Yarwood—came together in November 1953, linked not by any explicit art theory, movement, or goal other than to facilitate the exhibition of abstract art in Toronto. As Joan Murray writes, “the group was a league for defense against the various artists’s [sic] societies which then controlled the scene, primarily the Royal Canadian Academy and the Ontario Society of Artists.”

The appearance of Painters Eleven, however, did not cause but responded to growing frustration and exhaustion with the preeminence of landscape painting derived from that of the Group of Seven, whose content seemed weighed down by the constraints of nationalist symbolism. More will be said later about how the Canadian landscape genre, and other representational styles, came to be seen as a last ditch of sorts against perceived attacks upon Canadian culture by foreign influences. Suffice it to say that, in the debate between abstraction and representation, abstraction stood for internationalism.

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8 Five years before the “Abstracts at Home” exhibition in 1952 that led to the formation of Painters Eleven, art critic Barker Fairley had questioned the preeminence of Group of Seven-style painting. Also anti-abstraction, Fairley hoped Canadians would develop a stronger figurative tradition following in the footsteps of School of Paris painters such as Picasso or Matisse. Fairley, “What is Wrong with Canadian Art?” *Canadian Art*, 16 #1 (Autumn 1948), 24-29.
and so was in step with the political and ideological shifts that were taking place in the Western World as a result of the Second World War.

With most of Europe in ruins, postwar Canada found itself the world’s second industrial power, behind only the giant to the south, and shifted its allegiances away from Britain towards the United States. For the first time in its history, Canada began to consider its global position and to stretch out its arms towards the world, confident in its economic ranking. Culturally, however, the nation remained behind not just Europe but, more significantly, and nearer to home, the United States. Canadian individuals and government institutions questioned the authority of that country as a cultural model for this country. The spread of American cultural models through mass media was unstoppable, however; it became essential for progressive artists to “catch up” with the apparent internationalism espoused by New York artists and art critics who had quickly fashioned themselves the new cultural fulcrum of the postwar period.9

By 1950 New York School Abstract Expressionism was branded the most advanced international style. The “school” promised—with the typical optimism of American marketing—freedom from European tradition, freedom from social constraints, and freedom from provincialism through internationalism. The transformation by American artists of what had begun as a marginal and exploratory style, responding to the dual stimuli of formalist European Modernism and the public aspirations of the Mexican mural movement, into a symbol of Cold War America is intelligently exposed by Serge

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9 Quebec artists had begun their explorations into abstraction in the early 1940s and their original inspiration lay in French Surrealist automatism. Although Toronto artists were well aware of the sophistication of Quebec abstraction—Bush admitted that John Lyman and Paul-Émile Borduas were important examples to the Torontonians—the overwhelming influence on Toronto came from New York artists and critics. see Murray, Painters Eleven in Retrospect.
Guilbaut in his influential study *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. A summary of his conclusions bears repeating here to understand how the meanings embedded in Abstract Expressionism, through the style’s symbiotic relationship with American ideology, made it ripe to become the style of the growing postwar moneyed and leisured Anglo-Canadian middle class.

Guilbaut’s argument focuses on the success with which the United States transformed itself into the postwar cultural leader and the key part painting played in its gaining that position. He discusses at length the transformation of the avant-garde from clusters of politically committed left-leaning intellectuals to a-political individualists, concerned—departing in this respect from almost all previous Western artistic practices—mainly with the material and formal qualities of painting. According to Guilbaut, this transformation reached critical mass and became permanently embedded in the political discourse between 1947 and 1949, when anticommunism became a fundamental feature of American culture and politics. In the Cold War environment, both American artists and European expatriates living in the United States had to adapt to the new frigid political climate, and most did so by making the content of their work private, in turn expressing that private content as public declaration. This personal strategy came at a time when the validity, even the possibility, of representation was in doubt. In an age when the savagery of the Second World War had culminated in the horrifying instant of the atomic bomb, straightforward description and even

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expressionistic representation of the new reality were felt to be reductive and trivial. “To describe was to accept the unacceptable,” Dwight Macdonald said. Abstraction was an art of obliteration and of negating the possibility of representation in the moral uncertainty of the postwar and was thus persuasive as the only viable style of the avant-garde. But, unlike abstract and non-objective avant-garde movements of the first half of the century, American Abstract Expressionism distinguished itself by being self-consciously and aggressively individualistic: it was the pictorial choice of individuals seeking above all to be different and original rather than to belong to a movement.

This insistence on individualism paralleled a similar strategy of postwar, left-wing intellectuals in Western Europe and the United States who needed to recover their independence from both the fascist right and the totalitarian left. Guilbaut rightly notes that from avant-garde individualism to bourgeois passivity there was but a small step. This step was taken decisively towards the political right when Abstract Expressionism reached public recognition and quick critical success at the same time as the United States was trying to define itself as the upholder of the liberal values of the political centre. The United States quickly became the defender of freedom from both sides of the political pendulum, and pointedly from Communism.

Avant-garde artists, now politically “neutral” individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized and coopted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology. The new painting was made in the image of the new America, powerful and internationalist but anxious about the Communist threat.

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11 Ibid., 197.
12 Ibid., 200.
Ideological contradictions between the project of the avant-garde and American liberal ideology were ignored or squelched. Instead, both sides focused on the power of Abstract Expressionism as a symbol of freedom—the freedom to create controversial art incomprehensible to the majority of the American public; the freedom for artists to unmoor themselves from the fetters of European tradition; even the freedom to destroy himself, as Jackson Pollock did, in the maelstrom of modern existential anxiety. “Freedom was the symbol most actively and vigorously promoted by the new liberalism in the Cold War period. Expressionism stood for the difference between a free society and a totalitarian one,” writes Guilbaut.13 Ironically, as we now know, in the Cold War United States’ allegiance to freedom was only symbolic, and political and even social dissidence and deviation from a narrow code of behavior were persecuted and punished.

By 1950, uncompromising avant-garde individualism was so thoroughly coopted by American capitalist liberalism that even Mark Rothko’s mystical abstractions were reduced to sophisticated decorative objects in the pages of Vogue. That same year, de Kooning, Pollock, and the late Gorky represented the United States in the Venice Biennial; and their work, and that of other “Irascibles” (as Life in January 1951 titled an article on major American Abstract Expressionists) was in great demand.14 The transmutation of Abstract Expressionism into a tool for American propaganda was the price these artists paid for success. In 1951, as McCarthyism grew in domestic politics and Cold War hostilities continued and were abraded by the Korean War, the use of American cultural symbols to proselytize began in earnest through the European

13 Ibid., 201.
14 Ibid., 204. Gorky died by suicide in 1948, but his work was admired and influential throughout the fifties and sixties.
publication of cultural magazines established with CIA funds.\textsuperscript{15} These publications spread the “New York Abstract Expressionist” doctrine that was backed, with unparalleled vigor, by traveling exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art throughout Europe and Latin America.\textsuperscript{16}

By 1950 Abstract Expressionism was fully embedded in the fresh myth of liberal capitalist freedom and thus reflected back to forward-thinking Canadians a picture of themselves as belonging on the correct side of new cultural paradigms. Looking from Britain to the United States for cultural and economic direction, and for ideological leadership, English Canada began to question its traditional cultural values. Despite the hidden ideological contradictions entrenched in Abstract Expressionism, not to participate in the new liberal avant-garde seemed to be conservative and regressive. Further, the “progressive” Abstract Expressionist style was closely tied to economics, as Guilbaut notes in relation to the painting sales of the “Irascibles,” and to the new purchasing power of a growing and increasingly consumerist middle class both in the United States and Canada. It is no coincidence that Painters Eleven came together after some members exhibited “Abstracts at Home” in Simpson’s department store in Toronto, where their works served as props in new Modernist interiors. I do not contend, however, that Painters Eleven and other abstract and non-objective Canadian artists were explicitly aware of the political ideology embedded in Abstract Expressionism. What these artists were conscious of was the associations of that style with progress, freedom, originality,

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 204.
individualism, and political liberalism; in other words, they were aware that the postwar avant-garde was fundamentally different from that of the pre-war period and that it was no longer necessary to legitimize artistic activity through association with European art traditions and discourses. In this environment even Canadians, with their relative lack of historical roots and fledgling cultural identity, could become key players in the new “internationalist” avant-garde.

**Landscape Painting: Traditionalism and Protectionism**

Resistance arose, however, to the influence of the United States on Canadian culture. As Denise Leclerc writes, “it was the beginning of a kind of hesitation-waltz, a dance that has not yet ended. Canadians still waver between a desire to participate directly in international affairs and a wish to withdraw . . .”\(^{17}\) Perhaps the most visible effect of this cultural anxiety was the formation in 1957 of the Canada Council that followed the tabling of the report of the Massey Commission, the first report on the state of the arts, literature, and science in the country six years before. The Massey report had urgently called for outright protection against American mass culture with its vulgarity, and shown suspicion of Americanization in all areas of high culture.\(^{18}\) Reacting to the same protectionist sentiment, the fifties also saw resurgence of interest in Canadian landscape as a key symbol of cultural uniqueness.\(^{19}\)

Chapter 3 will explore further the meaning embedded in the Canadian landscape genre and its relationships to notions of Canadian identity. For now it is sufficient to observe that this tradition, perhaps first formulated by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven in the teens and twenties, established subjects of the Canadian landscape as the basic prerequisite to Canadian art. The foreword to the Group’s 1926 exhibition stated, “[T]he Group of Seven realize that subject is not necessarily an ingredient of a work of art. Nevertheless it also feels the Canadian environment is the most potent stimulus to Canadian creative genius.”20 The importance of local scenes was tied to a nationalistic impetus to create art that would correspond to the character and interests of Canadians and thus throw off the shackles that had kept Canadian art at the periphery of British artistic concerns.

In the 1930s and 1940s and during the Second World War, other art styles came to the fore which, while not challenging the Group’s position within the Canadian art canon, certainly broadened the categories of art practised in the country. The 1950’s saw a return to the nostalgic certainty of Group of Seven styles and theories, particularly as promoted by summer art schools that opened all over Ontario, and encouraged amateur and professional artists to sketch en plein air. Both the practice of landscape painting in situ and the amateur movement itself were influenced by the teachings and writings of Arthur Lismer and Frederick B. Housser.21 The two concepts together—ideas of amateurism combined with the practice of outdoor sketching of Canadian landscape

subjects—formed a cornerstone of what was understood as a fundamentally Canadian approach to art. In his article “The Amateur Movement in Canadian Painting,” Housser underlined the necessity of equating “home grown” painting techniques to the “wilderness” of the Canadian north. European academic painting techniques simply could not be used to describe Canadian reality, and so amateur Canadian artists, who were presumed never to have stepped on European soil and to have had only a peripheral knowledge of academic practices, alone could contribute to an authentically Canadian painting tradition—wild painters to paint the wilderness. Among prominent amateurs Housser included Tom Thomson, Bertram Brooker, and L.M. Fitzgerald, but his categorization was slippery since he also incorporated all members of the Group of Seven as “implicit” amateurs simply because none, he said, had learned their craft in Europe.

Housser’s classification of amateur artists hinged on their distinction from professional artists—namely, artists who made their living through painting by sales or teaching and whose interest in art was tainted by economic necessity and perhaps even corrupted by the desire for lucre or position. Amateurs, according to this ideology, were committed to painting for its own sake, and understood art’s capacity to aid in reaching spiritual aspirations:

...[A]mateurs would laugh at being even remotely classed as professionals. Their work is in many instances emphatically original, with a solid intellectual base, sincere and very much in earnest. Theirs is not a

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23 This is far from true. In fact, several members of the Group, including Varley, Lismer, and Jackson, had academic art training in Europe. See Hill, The Group of Seven, Introduction, and Chapter I.
24 Lismer was adamantly anti-commercialism in art. He wrote, “the present danger of commercial interest, exploiting the merely attractive temptation of brilliant advertising and seductive window display to the susceptible public, is in failing to encourage its artists and craftsmen to put distinguished design and workmanship into the actual making of commodities.” “Art Appreciation,” Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 66.
taking up of painting as an accomplishment or pastime, and activity so prevalent in England; but a serious realization of the spiritual significance of the art element in life.  

Summer art schools, such as the Doon School of Fine Arts and the Muskoka Art School, opened in the late forties and early fifties to fulfill a need among growing numbers of amateurs to spend a portion of their leisure time in a hobby that stressed links to their national roots by involvement in a traditionally Canadian painting activity, and also to spend time in the tranquil isolation of rural Ontario. At a time when large numbers of the rural population were migrating to urban centers, when many women who had joined the workforce during the war chose to remain in those positions, and when Canadians enjoyed an economic boom that allowed them to travel, to enjoy more free time, and to allot a greater amount to discretionary spending than ever before, a trip to Waterloo County—where the Doon School of Fine Arts was located—was also a trip down Memory Lane.

Seeking to root themselves back into community and history, amateur and semi-professional artists who attended these summer art schools unconsciously became a literal link to the past, using and reusing the increasingly nostalgic ideas of Group of Seven painters. Landscape painting in situ, according to traditionalists and amateurs, needed to be nurtured as a way to prevent the further dissolution of national identity into a decentralized, a-cultural consumerism that actually only supported the growing cultural hegemony of the United States. Yet, the legitimacy of those professional and amateur artists lay precisely in their unconscious but stubborn resistance to the unstoppable encroachment of an increasingly desultory modernity that

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categorized—and still categorizes—all in binary terms: progressive *versus* regressive; abstraction *versus* representation; freedom *versus* restriction; past *versus* present.

*The Middle Ground*

The debates that fractured the English Canadian art scene in the fifties did not in fact divide neatly into two camps, however. Alternatives to the “liberating” rhetoric of the abstractionists or the obduracy of the staunch traditionalists were found in a shifting middle ground that was, and continues to be, hardest to define precisely because it borrowed from both sides without necessarily attaching itself to specific theories or doctrines. Gordaneer is one artist from the period who cannot be easily classified as belonging to either side of the artistic debate. The work of the artists who defined that middle ground—R. York Wilson, Gordon Smith, Jack Shadbolt, and Maxwell Bates also come to mind—borrowed techniques and strategies from the Modernism of the School of Paris, such as Cubist fracturing of composition or a Fauvist palette, but made them their own by naturally and intuitively including—without boast or dogmatism—Abstract Expressionism or representational subject-matter as they saw fit.

Writing about the exhibition “Points of View,” organized by the Art Gallery and Museum in London, Ontario in 1959, painter and curator Claire Bice noted three distinct viewpoints or factions then vying for prominence in exhibitions and in the pages of newspapers and art magazines.\(^{27}\) The then-recently-formed “Ontario Institute of Painters,” mostly stolidly realist academics that included landscape painters, opposed the abstraction of Painters Eleven. Bice was critical of the pieces exhibited by both

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\(^{27}\) Bice, “Conflicts in Canadian Art,” 30-35.
extremes—and for similar reasons. Both sets of artists seemed to him to have reached a dead end to their particular explorations. The realists lacked inspiration; landscape specially was stuck in the prettified and mundane:

All too evident in this part of the exhibition are the pitfalls of the landscape painter—the overblown outdoor sketch, the slick licks of light which appeal to “everyone” like a hit-parade tune, the sticky-sweet romantic sentimentality of the landscape destined from the moment of conception for its role over the suburban fireplace.28

Painters Eleven did not fare much better:

...Nowadays the quality of their collective work is weakened by the derivative exercises of more than one member reflecting the dominant inspiration of Cahén. As a group they have brought attention, favourable and unfavourable, to non-objective painting in Canada, but they seem now to have nowhere to go....29

Of the three groups, Bice favoured the “in betweeners” who sided with neither the conservatism of the academics nor the bombastic individualism of the abstractionists. Instead, painters like Wilson and Smith, who used Modernist techniques but did not throw out subject-matter, indicated a way out of the stylistic impasse. Bice quoted Wilson’s definition of the aspirations of the middle ground:

Neither completely literal, nor completely non-figurative painting is quite satisfactory to me. I prefer something that comes between these two classifications, [something] that might be called figurative abstraction. The subject-matter may be quite obscure but it should be there for the viewer who puts forth a little effort to discover it.30

Significantly, most histories of Canadian art of the 1950s tend to ignore the efforts of this group of artists. Mostly mentioned in passing or, worse, as part of a regressive movement towards outmoded European Modernism and nostalgic narrative traditions,

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28 Ibid., 32.
29 Ibid., 33.
30 Ibid., 34.
these artists have not been fully studied in the artistic debate of the fifties.\textsuperscript{31} I contend that these artists, although they did not coalesce into a group and lacked a coherent public position, did in fact explore an alternative that need not be defined as derivative or unoriginal simply because it did not neatly fit within the new postwar definitions of the avant-garde and its one-sided art-historical arguments. More will be said in chapter 3 about how and why postwar Modernism, influenced by the writings of Clement Greenberg, defined itself as the next step in art historical evolution, to the exclusion of representational art practices and popular culture. For now, it is enough to say that, in Toronto of the 1950s, Modernist Abstraction had not yet triumphed over all other art styles, leaving some space open for “middle ground” artists to explore personal alternatives. Nevertheless, maintaining a clear position in the face of opposition from both sides of the artistic spectrum was not easy. Without the critical support of theorists and propagandists—from either side—artists such as Gordaneer found themselves in a kind of no-man’s-land where their artistic evolution grew out of tensions arising precisely from having spent their formative period in the cauldron of opposing influences of the 1950s.

\textit{Conflicts Inscribed in Gordaneer’s Practice}

Gordaneer’s years at Doon, where he first went as an amateur, fundamentally shaped his understanding of art. His decision to become an artist was informed by the art practices and the environment of friendship and learning he still keenly remembers.\textsuperscript{32} It was at Doon that outdoor sketching became Gordaneer’s way of grounding himself in the

\textsuperscript{31} See Burnett & Schiff, \textit{Contemporary Canadian Art}, 46.

\textsuperscript{32} Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, February 28, 2002.
experience of being in the landscape. It was also there that his suspicions of commercialism and careerism in art became entrenched by association with the idealized values of amateurism. Finally, at Doon School he found out, and began to practice, emerging alternatives to the all-prevalent landscape tradition. His early experiences there gave him personal knowledge of the tensions that were tearing the Toronto art scene apart.

Situated in the hamlet of Doon, in a lovely rural part of Waterloo County, about sixty miles west of Toronto, the Doon School of Fine Arts was opened in 1948 by William “Ross” Hamilton and Elizabeth Hamilton in the former home and studio of the county’s most prominent citizen, the painter Homer Watson. Not intended for professional artists, Doon focused on affordable art teaching “for the people” and had no entrance requirements other than “an enthusiastic interest in painting, whether as a beginner or as an experienced artist.”33 Like many Canadian art schools at the time, Doon’s curriculum was primarily shaped by the ideas, methods, and theories of the Group of Seven, with special attention to the *plein air* techniques of Frederick Varley, who had taught there during 1948 and 1949. In the eighteen years Doon School was open, a number of prominent artists taught summer courses: Wilson, Varley, and Gordon Payne initiated the curriculum; later instructors included Yvonne McKague Housser, Lawrence Arthur Colley, Herbert Sidney Palmer, Jack Bechtel, Leonard Brooks, Adrian Dingle, Alex Millar, and Clare Bice. Jock Macdonald taught for a few weeks in the summers of 1958, 1959 and 1960. Carl Schaefer—at the time instructor and later Director of Drawing at the Ontario College of Art—had a long tenure at Doon from 1952

to 1964 and was popular and respected. Finally, Gordaneer joined the ranks in 1955 as assistant and later instructor, until 1964.³⁴

The teaching roster represented every faction in the debate that divided the Toronto art scene during the 1950s. Palmer and Dingle were commercially successful artists with academic styles. Wilson and Brooks were influenced by Cubism and by Mexican art and fell in the middle ground between the conservatism of the academics and the unfamiliar explorations of Macdonald’s abstractions.³⁵ Although the focus at Doon, regardless of instructor, was outdoor sketching, Schaefer, Yvonne Housser, and Varley—of course—taught this with all the weight of their well-established, virtually academic, position as direct links to the Group of Seven. At Doon, academics, landscape painters, moderate Modernists, and abstractionists represented in microcosm the artistic debates of the fifties.

When Gordaneer arrived at Doon for his first week of guidance in 1952, he attended Adrian Dingle’s class, but a few weeks later, when he returned for a second week, he joined Jack Bechtel’s group and moved away from Dingle’s slick, realistic style towards Bechtel’s impressionist outdoor-sketching technique.³⁶ Gordaneer’s early painting Red Barn (Figure 1), made that first summer under Bechtel’s supervision, shows his understanding and enjoyment of landscape painting in situ without a trace of the strict realism of the academic.³⁷ Carl Schaefer further influenced his practice of outdoor

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³⁴ Ibid., 10-13.
³⁵ For more on the influence of Mexican art on Canadian artists see Christine Boyanoski, The Artists’ Mecca: Canadian Artists and Mexico (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992).
³⁷ The two artists formed a strong friendship from that first summer on. Gordaneer began teaching as Bechtel’s assistant in the summer of ’55, after spending the winter at the school convalescing from a serious car accident he and Elizabeth Hamilton had suffered the previous summer. During his slowl
sketching; although Gordaneer did not attend any of Schaefer’s courses, on occasion Gordaneer sat in on the older artist’s well-attended Monday-morning lectures. Schaefer, whom Gordaneer regarded highly, was renowned as a Canadian Regionalist painter specializing in watercolour and as the first artist in the country to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative painting, in 1940. 38 Through informal critiques, Gordaneer learned of Schaefer’s practice of heightening colour contrasts by including rain-laden grey skies, such as those in Schaefer’s Storm Over Fields, of 1937 (Figure 4). This was a constant suggestion Gordaneer often accepted, as in his 1953 oil sketch Algonquin Park (Figure 5).

Algonquin Park and the later Fish-Houses, Port Dover, of 1955 (Figures 5 and 6), painted en plein air, show Gordaneer moving away from Schaefer’s compositional conservatism towards a more Cubist approach. These are transitional pieces in which the influence of R. York Wilson is in evidence. Wilson, also Gordaneer’s teacher at Doon and a continuing supporter during his first years as an artist, had long hoped that the Toronto art scene would imitate the vitality of its Quebec counterpart. 39 Wilson, influenced by ideas acquired during travels in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, in early 1950, had already begun in his own work to use a modified Cubist technique of shifting planes to introduce abstract elements to his work. 40 Both at Doon and in private lessons in Toronto, Wilson taught this technique to Gordaneer, in whose work it began to make

recovery, Gordaneer spent the winter painting in Watson’s old studio and going on sketching excursions to Algonquin Park and Port Dover with Bechtel, who had also taken leave from teaching at the Ontario College of Art to paint in the area.

38 Carl Schaefer: Retrospective Exhibition; Paintings from 1926 to 1969 (Montreal: Sir George Williams University, 1969), 7.
its appearance in 1953 in small, tentative oil paintings like *Algonquin Park* (Figure 5). Gordaneer has described Wilson’s technique as “shifting planes moving from background elements over figures. [While] figuration is still in evidence, the planes were more geometrically angular.” Work produced in 1955, such as *Fish-Houses, Port Dover* (Figure 6), represents a considerable movement forward in Gordaneer’s development of compositional skills, appropriation of Cubism’s fracturing aesthetic, and use of fauvist, non-realistic colour with a preponderance of pinks.

By 1955 Gordaneer already had first-hand experience of the tensions driving even his own teachers and mentors in completely different directions. While he would not begin to explore Abstract Expressionist styles until the next year, after returning from his first long painting trip in Mexico, Gordaneer investigated Wilson’s middle path fully—addressing Modernism through Cubist composition and color. The Cubist work met with guarded approval from Schaefer, who held conservative views and saw himself as representing the old guard and as a bastion of true pictorial values. Schaefer was not truly supportive of Gordaneer’s abstract explorations, however, soon becoming a “distant admonishing presence” in the younger artist’s life.

Wilson moved into abstraction in 1953, in paintings like *Non-Objective No. 2* (Figure 7), which exhibits his preference for using diagonals to fracture the composition into distinct colour shapes. Gordaneer did not follow his teacher into abstraction until 1956, when he returned from his first trip to San Miguel de Allende, where he painted in

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42 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 29, 2002. Schaefer was explicit about his position in *Carl Schaefer: Retrospective Exhibition; Paintings from 1926 to 1969*, “Personal Reminiscences,” 8.
the winter of 1955 and spring of 1956. From the 1930s on, Mexico had been a favourite destination of Canadian artists, who gravitated towards art colonies such as San Miguel, drawn by the exotic locale and low cost of living but also by the environment of artistic support made possible by the government’s educational policies established in Mexico’s post-revolutionary fervour of the 1920s. Mexico made a particularly good destination during the war years, when Canadian artists could not easily go to Europe. In the 1950s Mexico offered a more pluralistic environment to Canadian artists, where they could escape the conservatism of the academies and art societies that defined artistic discourse back home, and the stiffness of eastern-Canadian society. American and Canadian artists experimented with alternative media and grounds and were influenced by the colourful figurative Modernism explored by noted Mexican artists such as Rufino Tamayo.

The paintings Gordaneer produced there shared a “spiky, cloisonnist style” with that of other Canadian expatriates working in San Miguel such as Wilson, Leonard Brooks, Yvonne McKague Housser, Roy Kiyooka, and Toni Onley. Those works demarcated a breaking-point for Gordaneer: although still figurative in their emphasis on shape and colour, and indeed made following his tried-and-true technique of sketching en plein air, they already emphasized pictorial qualities rather than factual representation (Figure 2). The work done during those six months of full-time painting in Mexico also marked Gordaneer’s first inclusion into the ranks of young professional artists. On his

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return to Canada, Gordaneer’s solo show of Mexican work—exhibited at the Doon School Gallery in June 1956—was positively reviewed in an article by Pearl McCarthy in the *Globe & Mail*. The article bears quoting at length for the way McCarthy distinguishes between Modern art that still adheres to drawing and composition, and art that does not:

Gordaneer is still very young, but he can now take rating as a professional. Like everybody else he used Mexican scenes and forms. Unlike most others, he has worked prodigiously on his drawing and has never limited his view of Mexican figures to mere design. It is picture-making with design as an essential element, and always a sense of life….

It has been common to blame confused or disjointed art on the fact that the times are out of joint, and the public has been asked often to realize that it must accept this disjointed situation. Now it appears that help is coming from the younger artists themselves who find that there is a thrill in climbing on top of the problems and finding that that is the special privilege of high intelligence. Obviously a young man like Gordaneer, still limited in experience, is setting out to try to find out an engagement between formal and living interests, between theory and the world.\(^4\)\(^7\)

The qualities that made Gordaneer’s Mexico paintings stand out—drawing and composition—placed him squarely in the middle ground. There is veiled indictment of Abstract Expressionism in McCarthy’s vague criticism of “confused or disjointed art” that justifies itself, according to her, by reflecting disjointed times. McCarthy, like Bice, seems to have been a supporter of the middle path between academicism and Abstract Expressionism. In the Mexican work Gordaneer was still adhering to his early training by recording the particulars of his environment *in situ*, but in a style that allowed him to begin exploring purely pictorial elements like colour and composition. This would soon change, however. The next stage of his development saw him focusing on the interplay

between drawing and colour as a way of entering the canvas but distanced from the familiar *plein air* sketching techniques that had driven his explorations until 1956.

**Abstraction, Travel, and Friendship**

Travel to Europe in 1958 and 1959 and friendship with young Toronto artists who were (or had been) students of Jock Macdonald would play an important part in Gordaneer’s stylistic development. Significantly, Gordaneer chose not to attend the Ontario College of Art where both Schaefer—who encouraged him to become a student there—and Macdonald taught. Although he admired Macdonald’s work and teaching methods, Gordaneer learned from Doon teachers Bechtel and Alex Millar—who also taught at the College—that the environment at OCA did not promote creative freedom.

In fact, students as well as progressive instructors felt OCA had become a stagnant institution where only the narrowest academic approaches were applauded. Often, Carl Schaefer and Jock Macdonald were opponents in this battle, a losing one for Macdonald, whom Schaefer would often publicly ridicule and who wrote in 1956:

> I am still having to fight a lonely path for my methods of education of painting. I am obtaining some excellent work from my students, but not a member of the College staff will ever express one word of interest in the work produced.…

Gordaneer’s decision not to pursue formal education in Toronto, and his unspoken bias against academies, born of amateurism, pushed him to seek alternative means to

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acquire the kind of disciplined and systematic knowledge possible through institutionalized art education. In the mid-1950s there was a number of art schools in Canada, the United States, and Mexico that were already turning the wild, personal markings of Abstract Expressionism into teaching techniques: Macdonald’s classroom at OCA, Hans Hoffman’s summer school in Provincetown, and David Alfaro Siqueiros’s experimental workshops in San Miguel de Allende, to mention a few. Travel put Gordaneer in contact with young artists who had been trained in such schools. In Mexico, in 1956, he met Richard Reid and Don Riechert, from Winnipeg, and Leonard Brooks, who had taught at the Doon School and studied in San Miguel with Mexican experimental muralist Siqueiros. These artists introduced Gordaneer to Abstract Expressionist theories and techniques and to the work of New York School artists Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. His appetite whetted, on returning to Canada Gordaneer made a special visit to the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, where he saw at first hand Abstract Expressionist works in the New Acquisitions rooms.

Moving away from the Cubist compositions of his Mexican work, Gordaneer jumped fully into abstraction and in 1957 produced confident non-objective paintings with a loaded, colourful brush. Always prodigiously productive, Gordaneer’s paintings of this period are eloquent explorations into the possibilities of paint. Either thickly painted, as in *Red Abstraction* (Figure 8), or gestural and loose, as in *Abstract Study* (Figure 9), these works represent the beginning of Gordaneer’s development of a set of

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personal techniques and approaches that would develop into his own unique painterly vocabulary. At this time Gordaneer used an automatic technique that began by layering thin washes of paint on canvas or, alternately, by using a confident brush in a gestural manner. These initial demarcations of compositional elements and colour would then be re-worked with thicker paint until the painting acquired the desired psychological and physical density.

Such initially tentative expressionist techniques were enriched by a better understanding of Abstract Expressionist theory acquired during a trip to Ibiza and Paris in 1958 and 1959. In an interview in 1971, Gordaneer reminisced,

The six months in Paris were the loneliest months I’ve ever spent. It was just before the wave of painters from Canada. However, I met Ross Coates there….I was greatly influenced by what Ross…told me about what was happening in American art in the New York School.\footnote{Jacqueline Boughner, \textit{Interview with James Gordaneer} (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1971), 2-3. Gordaneer did take trips to New York in those years; but he did not spend a sustained period of time there.}

The second trip to Europe, from 1958 to 1959, decisively pushed Gordaneer towards abstraction. Conversations with Coates and visits to American Abstract Expressionist exhibitions in Europe instilled in him a belief in the style’s implicit associations with progress, modernity, and the avant-garde. Like many other artists, Gordaneer came to believe that freedom from representation—the independence and drama of using colour and brushwork for their own sake—was the way to engage with his times.\footnote{Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 29, 2002.} His understanding and appreciation of Abstract Expressionism were, however, far from being systematic and, although he did know something of the theory
and criticism that supported the style, his attraction to Abstract Expressionism was mostly based on sensuous enjoyment of paint and colour on canvas.

On his return to Canada, the period from late 1959 to 1961 established Gordaneer as an up-and-coming abstractionist. He exhibited widely in artists’ societies, among others the Ontario Society of Artists, the Canadian Watercolour Society, the Royal Canadian Academy, and the Canadian Group of Painters, of which he was a member. Critics and gallery owners often noted his abstract work. It was during this time that he had most contact with Macdonald at Doon—where the older artist taught one day a week—and with Macdonald’s student Ted Jackson. Although their personal contact was spare, the older artist’s influence on Gordaneer seems to have been significant. “He was very encouraging,” Gordaneer recalls. “He gave me a sense of belonging. I had the feeling Macdonald felt I was on the right track.”

Gordaneer, however, continued to resist purely non-objective approaches. Quick studies of market scenes or funeral processions, such as Funeral Coach Ibiza, of 1957 (Figure 10), were used as entry points for abstracted form and colour explorations. At other times he would start by applying paint automatically and then wait for an image to emerge. While often the images remained fully abstract, he always read into them figurative or landscape elements, such as the implicit horizon in Red Abstraction (Figure 8). This may account for his predilection of the style of the late Arshile Gorky. Perhaps more than the work of most other New York School painters, Gorky’s lyrical, self-referential abstractions combine organic, loosely painted forms that allude to landscape or place (Figure11). Gorky’s apparent engagement with the idea of landscape as a base for

55 Ibid.
abstraction offered Gordaneer the opportunity to re-introduce that most Canadian of interests: the individual’s relationship to the land. His work of 1959, such as *Autumn Growth* (Figure 12), shows Gorky’s influence in the use of the brush as a drawing tool upon the canvas. “[Gorky’s] brush”, Gordaneer has said, “seemed to be informed by draughtsmanship, whether it was very broad and runny or articulate and linear. The thing that really interested me was the drawing aspect of it.”\(^5\) Through use of the brush as a drawing tool Gordaneer could still obliquely refer to subject-matter and allow a narrative that harkened back to his earlier years as a Canadian landscape painter to sneak back into the pure pictorial space of Abstract Expressionism.

## Conclusion

Gordaneer’s desire to refer to subject-matter placed him, from the start, in an ambiguous position that was, nevertheless, closer in spirit to Wilson’s and Gordon Smith’s moderate stance than to Painters Eleven’s swift embrace of the painterly modes and myths of American Abstract Expressionism, or to the stubborn attachment to tradition of academics and “neo-academic” landscape painters such as Carl Schaefer. Having been influenced by all three positions, Gordaneer’s standpoint was all the more difficult to define because it belonged to none of the camps but gave respectful acknowledgment to all. Ambiguity and willingness to explore the autonomy of being on the artistic periphery—of belonging to no group—were the true legacy of those early years.

\[^5\] Chapter 4 discusses this influence in more detail as it plays an important part in Gordaneer’s surrealist explorations of the 1970s.

Unease was the key note in Gordaneer’s explorations into abstraction during the second half of the 1950s. He was not seduced, as so many young artists were, by desire to express upon the canvas the most hidden reaches of his own psyche. By his own admission, Gordaneer has always been uncomfortable with “that whole business of expressing one self.” He “could not pay much attention [to it] because what else can you do but express yourself?” 58 As we have seen, his knowledge of avant-garde styles, gained through trial-and-error, was by no means theoretical—although it was clear to him, even then, that not to explore the new style was akin to closing himself off from history. Yet, the pull towards subject-matter, landscape, and the methods traditionally used to capture subject-matter remained unabated. Conflict arose from these disparate influences. While Gordaneer may not have been explicitly aware of the ideological underpinnings of Abstract Expressionism that Guilbaut observes, he ultimately did believe the style was “advanced,” “free and freeing,” “individualistic,” “original,” and “progressive.” By contrast, landscape painting stood for “tradition,” “nationalism,” even “conservatism;” but was also associated with the authenticity found in actual practice of the tools of his trade as a way to bridge the gap between subjective observation of the world and its representation.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, the freedom promised by mid-century Modernism was by no means unfettered. The effort to understand the nature of the new limits, within a painterly sensitivity shaped by observation and representation, became Gordaneer’s unspoken preoccupation. Gordaneer’s years of training from 1952 to 1959 led to a divided approach, by which he sought to negotiate between the sensuous allure of

58 Ibid.
pure painting and the necessity to ground himself in the world by painting *it*—by reproducing *that* world on canvas.
Chapter 2: City Life: Explorations in Abstraction: 1960-1966

Toronto art in the second half of the 1950s was dominated by modes of painting that fall under the broad category “Abstract Expressionist.” After engaging with practices that emphasized expressive painterly techniques and content whose explicit substance was the artist’s own psyche, painters working during the first half of the 1960s stripped down precisely those qualities that are most associated with Abstract Expressionism. James Gordaneer’s work between the years 1960 and 1966 reflects the reaction against Abstract Expressionism prevalent in Toronto at the time. By focusing on this short period of seven years when Gordaneer’s early painting first became fully abstract, this chapter charts the influences to which Gordaneer’s work responded at the time.

The first part of this chapter will discuss the changes in stylistic direction in Canadian art of the early sixties and, in particular, in Toronto painting of that time. Attention will be paid to the influence of Clement Greenberg’s definition of Post-Painterly Abstraction, especially as it dictated the artistic exploration taking place at the Emma Lake Workshop in Saskatchewan. In contrast with Toronto painters, Emma Lake artists more stringently stripped away pictorial elements not strictly prescribed by Greenberg’s Post-Painterly theories. The differences resulting from each of their approaches are indicative of the hesitancy of some Toronto artists completely to abandon subject-matter as source for their abstract explorations.
Next, this chapter will carefully examine, year-by-year, the technical and stylistic evolution of Gordaneer’s work from 1959 to 1966. The formalist analysis used in this section aims to be an example of the emphasis on purely material pictorial qualities that was fundamental to Modernist criticism, and to explain the internal development of Gordaneer’s technical explorations into abstraction. The particular characteristics of Toronto painting of the period will provide the basis for examination, by contrast, of Gordaneer’s painting. While I believe Gordaneer’s work of those years followed in some ways the typical pictorial development of artists working in Toronto in the early sixties, his approach differed from that of other Toronto artists significantly and also responded to influences from European sources that were not the norm in that city.

This chapter argues that Gordaneer’s development towards an approach to painting that can be considered Post-Painterly Abstraction is distinguished from that of other artists in Toronto by his tendency to isolate himself, socially and aesthetically, from the city’s artistic culture in the first half of the sixties. Reflecting the conflicted approach that had become embedded in his practice in the fifties, Gordaneer explored abstraction, but even as he delved into Post-Painterly approaches he either referred to spatial relations found in landscape painting or resisted conceiving of his painting as entirely abstract. Moreover, like a few other Toronto artists, his major influences came not from Toronto art stars like Jack Bush, but from Spanish Tachiste painters such as Antonio Saura and Antoni Tàpies. As Gordaneer felt increasingly isolated from the Toronto art scene, his abstract investigation led him literally back to the landscape as he relocated to the Ontario countryside that had been fundamental to his formative years as a painter. As chapter 3 will show, his return to the country also marked a determined move away from
abstraction and back to representation, but by that time fundamentally changed by the Post-Painterly vocabulary he learned from 1960 to 1966.

**Toronto Painting 1960 to 1966**

“What’s Next after Abstract Expressionism?”, an article by the American critic Jules Langsner that appeared in *Canadian Art* in the fall of 1962, is telling of the sense of exhaustion with Abstract Expressionism that fueled artistic changes in Toronto during the first half of the 1960s. The question indicates the end of Abstract Expressionist painting as the characteristic, “original,” and therefore prestigious style of the avant-garde. It also typifies the anxious quest for that “great next thing” that would fulfill what Abstract Expressionism had so self-consciously been—the artistic representation of its age.

Langsner reviewed the work of Canadian painters in the exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction* held the previous April at the Los Angeles Museum of Art. While the article is clearly biased towards Canadian painting that had been most influenced by the American critic and curator of the exhibition, Clement Greenberg, the fact that it was published in the Canadian art magazine with widest circulation is noteworthy. The tone of the article indicates that Abstract Expressionism had long shown signs of weariness, since the question posited in the title proved to be rhetorical and those signs had already developed into something like a solution. The answer, according to Langsner, was found precisely in the American and Canadian work exhibited at the Los Angeles exhibition that reflected Greenberg’s latest theories. As Langsner wrote, “Greenberg now espouses a non-painterly approach to the abstract image on a flat surface presenting a configuration
marked by clear forms in clear hues, without any kind of personal touch in the application of paint.”

In the catalogue essay to the *Post Painterly Abstraction* exhibition in Los Angeles, Greenberg explained why he now favored a different approach to abstraction. The artists in that exhibition, Greenberg wrote, were reacting against the standardization of the stylistic features of what he scathingly called the “Tenth Street Touch:”

As far as style is concerned, the reaction presented here is largely against the mannered drawing and the mannered design of Painterly Abstraction, but above all against the last. By contrast with the interweaving of light and dark gradations in the typical Abstract Expressionist picture, all the artists in this show move towards a physical openness of design, or towards linear clarity, or towards both.

In addition to “openness of design” and “linear clarity,” Greenberg further described other characteristics shared by the artists he had chosen for the exhibition:

Another thing the artists in this show, with two or there exceptions, have in common is the high keying, as well as the lucidity, of their color. They have a tendency, many of them, to stress contrasts of pure hue rather than contrasts of light and dark. For the sake of these as well as in the interests of optical clarity, they shun thick paint and tactile effect. Some of them dilute their paint to an extreme and soak it into unsized and unprimed canvas. In their reaction against the “hand-writing” and “gestures” of Painterly Abstraction, these artists also favor a relatively anonymous execution.

Openness of design, linear clarity, the use of clear, high key color, stress on contrasts of “pure hue” rather than tonal contrasts, flatly applied or diluted paint that

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soaks into unsized canvas, and execution lacking in personal markings became Greenberg’s prerequisites for the new style of abstraction. Therefore, Langsner’s article did not just pose a question; it intended to provide a directive to a problem that by then had already resulted in the appearance of a variety of Canadian artistic approaches, not all fall in within the limits of Greenberg’s Post-Painterly Abstraction. Most Canadian Modernist painting of the sixties was indeed driven to clean out and simplify the frothy painterly excesses of Abstract Expressionism. David Silcox summarized this tendency in his influential article “Canadian Art in the Sixties,” which classified the new trends from the vantage point of the middle of the decade:

> Whether you look at the work of a constructivist, a geometrician or an expressionist, the scales are at present weighted by formalism. The words that describe Canadian art today are elegant, smooth, refined and restrained. While these may not describe all that has happened or explain the emergence of new forms of expression, they seem to characterize the most important work done in the Sixties in every style and to differentiate it from the Fifties.5

Unlike Langsner, Silcox, with the advantage of four more years, did not assume only one possible path of evolution from Abstract Expressionism. His article discussed three other significant developments in the art of the period: the new relationship with “mass media” as subject-matter and stylistic source; the state of sculpture; and a new emphasis on figurative art.6 However, simply by the space given to abstract art in the article, it seems clear Silcox placed this type of work in the centre of Canadian art of the period.

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5 David Silcox, “Canadian Art in the Sixties,” Canadian Art 23 #1 (January 1966), 55.
6 Ibid.
In Toronto most of the new approaches to art of the early sixties were centered on the artists’ production exhibited at the Isaacs Gallery. The new generation emerged in an environment that reacted to the innovations introduced to Canada by Painters Eleven. The Isaacs Gallery exhibited the increasingly conceptual work of Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland that led them away from painting into a variety of new media. It also showed the painting of Graham Coughtry, who introduced plainly figurative references into expressionistic and painterly compositions; and canvases by Gordon Rayner, who followed what could be termed a Post-Painterly evolution—without being a “Post-Painterly” artist—by cleaning his paintings’ surfaces of impasto and flashy brushwork. While these and other Isaacs’ artists formed the core of “hot” young artists in Toronto, their significance was in large part due to the growth of public and private patronage in the city, and to increased attention paid the visual arts by the media. Indeed, William Ronald himself became a media star. As Barrie Hale wrote of this generation of artists, they found themselves, more than Painters Eleven, “in the right place at the right time, and in the right company.”

Despite the Toronto art scene’s mounting boast that it was a national, even international, art center, it was during this period that regions other than Central Canada began to call for art discourse that would acknowledge and address localized artistic and

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9 As recently as 1958, academic and art critic Hugo McPherson had written “Can Toronto Overtake Montreal as an Art Centre?” for *Canadian Art* magazine. The article stirred the old rivalries between Toronto and Montreal and pointed out that the number of artists in Toronto, and support available to them, was larger and better in that city than those available in Montreal. The article is reprinted in Doug Fetherling, ed., *Documents in Canadian Art* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1987), 248.
social questions. These issues were, more often than not, left out of the largely self-aggrandizing discourse on art generated in Toronto and Montreal. Of particular importance to the discourse of Canadian Modernism was the experimental work produced on the Prairies around the locus of activity that were the Regina Five and the Emma Lake Workshops. Emma Lake would ultimately and radically influence the painting practice of each artist that attended, with the introduction of the theories and critique of Greenberg and those American artists he favored during the sixties: Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Michael Steiner, who were workshop leaders at different times during that decade.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to establish to what degree Emma Lake influenced Modernist Abstraction in the rest of Canada; what is clear is that the stylistic evolution of the painting produced there typifies the direction taken by abstraction generally during the decade of the sixties. While not all abstract art in Canada adhered to Greenberg’s “Post-Painterly” theories, described as doctrines by some, a parallel can be drawn between the theory’s central concern to rid painting of all considerations that are not strictly pictorial, and the general move towards “restraint,” as Silcox characterizes it, in most Canadian painting of the early sixties.

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10 Even as close to Toronto as London, Ontario, an art community with differing concerns grew around Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers. Often denominated “Regionalists,” these artists sought to produce art that was directly and unambiguously engaged with the reality of living in a particular place at a particular time. The Maritimes, as well, developed characteristic artistic approaches in representational painting, often in some way derived or related to Realism as influenced by photography. The West Coast differed generally from the Maritimes in that multiple styles were in evidence, though the work of the region is often characterized by a particular link to landscape as a referent to existential questions.

The work produced by Kenneth Lochhead and Arthur McKay, two of three Canadian artists chosen by Greenberg to participate in the Los Angeles County Museum exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction*, emphasizes the painting’s surface by coating the canvas thinly with little manipulation of the paint material.\textsuperscript{12} Shapes are unambiguously composed in distinct, often geometric, areas. There is no room for personal expression or emotional reaction. McKay does allow texture in his work, but it is derived from the application process itself and not from manipulation of paint to represent objects, concepts, or emotions. The third Canadian included in the Los Angeles exhibition, Jack Bush, illustrates another trait: surfaces created through the process of applying thin washes of highly saturated colour onto primed or unprimed canvas. The effect is a unification of colour and painting surface into one whole “painting-object,” with no distinction between two-dimensional surface and paint. Yet, no description of the technical characteristics of this type of painting would be complete without some consideration of the conceptual approach that gave rise to it. In this regard, Terry Fenton succinctly described the change that took place between abstract painting of the fifties and that of the sixties,

[There was] an enormous shift in approach from a kind of romanticized psychology to a kind of passionate logic…. Art became, as it never had been to such an extent, a matter of conception. Because intuition and the irrational were regarded as beyond the reach of criticism, they were frequently dismissed. What could be talked about—what was important—was how art was consciously conceived.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Langsner, 282-283
\textsuperscript{13} Terry Fenton, “New Canadian Painting,” key-note speaker at the *Painters’ Symposium, March 2 and 3, 1977* (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University Press, 1977), 8.
The characteristics in the work of Lochhead, McKay, and Bush that are echoed in other painters of the period—and which therefore show a general stylistic direction—can be reduced to four: the use of high-key, largely clear colours; simplified compositions, often symmetrical and formed by juxtapositions of hard-edged shapes; experimentation and exploration of alternative paint qualities and applications; and, finally, emotional restraint, even detachment, from the painting process.

Yet, the painting Gordaneer would have been most familiar with—Toronto painting—demonstrated these general characteristics, but not all at the same time and certainly not fully-formed as if the Abstract Expressionist painting that had become synonymous with serious art in Toronto in the late fifties had come to a sudden end.

From 1959 to 1962, parallel developments occurred, for example, in the painting of Richard Gorman, Graham Coughtry, and Dennis Burton. Their work changed from what Hale described as the “Toronto look”—painterly, “large attack” brush work and passionate, expressive composition—to simpler surfaces generally defined by experiments with paint application that created grounds where a few shapes often pushed against each other or against the corners of the canvas in unusual configurations. As Karen Wilkin has written, in such paintings their components look as though “jammed together, forced into or against the canvas, not deduced from it,” as for example in Burton’s The Game of Life, of 1960 (Figure 13).

The three-year evolution, from 1959 to 1962, of Toronto painting exemplified above shows analogous growth to that which took place in Saskatchewan under the

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disciplined tutelage of the Emma Lake Workshops. Yet, unmistakable differences can be seen; for one, few Toronto artists were willing to follow theoretical dictates to the point of near clinical purity of the Prairie painters. More important, however, Toronto painters seemed hesitant to let go of figure or landscape references. Even Jack Bush would often deduce abstract compositions from sketches done from landscape motifs around his garden and from other everyday objects such as neckties and dresses. The continued use of references to recognizable subject-matter nicely encapsulates the conceptual differences between the paintings of these two regions. The description used by David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff to compare Toronto painting of the sixties—as an “event”—to Montreal painting of the same period—as “research”—applies equally well to comparison between Toronto and Prairie painting. Paintings as event, according to Burnett and Schiff, are defined by surfaces where “spaces [contain] formal pictorial expressions [that arise] directly from the complexity and variety of the artists’ lived experiences, including their experience of other art, whether their own or their responses to the work of other artists;” while in painting as research:

The appearance of [these] paintings is removed from the action of their creation; they stand as objects that do not permit the spectator to trace back, through the work itself, the process of its making. [These] paintings are deliberately limited to the fundamental qualities of painting, to colour, to tone, to mass and to shape.19

Toronto painting of the period may not have had the internal logic of either Emma Lake or Montreal; what it did have was nearly endless variety to address the problem of

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16 One notable exception is Jack Bush; however, his work balances austerity with warmth and can rarely be described as clinical.
18 Burnett and Schiff, 84.
19 Ibid.
precisely how to cleanse the overwrought Abstract Expressionist surface. Toronto painters answered the question, “What’s next after abstract expressionism?” not by stripping the canvas surface of all but intrinsically pictorial elements, but by chipping away, cutting off, cleaning out in a way that can be described as “knowing.” The example of Painters Eleven had taught good lessons to young Toronto artists, and from them they would learn both to transform and obliterate the all-over, heavily painted surfaces of the older generation by introducing greater variety of paint application and tools; by extending the possibilities of the kinds of paints that could be used and their consistency; by exploring new and unusual, sometimes clashing, colour palettes and letting those colours direct, to a large degree, the composition; by expanding their vocabulary of forms to include eccentric, sometimes unbalanced shapes; and finally, by doing all that massively—on a new monumental scale that owed much to the heroics of New York abstraction and very little to the intimacy and constraints of the studio easel.

One Painter’s Evolution

It has been necessary to review the changes in Canadian painting of the early sixties in order to understand how and why the work produced by Gordaneer between 1960 and 1966 edited out many of the painterly tropes of the Abstract Expressionist style he had explored at the end of the fifties. By his own estimation, Gordaneer’s career pattern has been shaped by fluctuations from periods of pictorial extravagance to periods of restraint. Phases of an abundant, painterly style, rich with impasto and baroque forms determined by the sheer intensity of the pigments, consistently led to what he terms a
“hardening up.”\textsuperscript{20} The reaction was usually characterized by renewed respect for the autonomy of form and its relationship to colour. The necessity for such a clearing out of excess appeared for the first time in 1959 and 1960, when he consciously moved away from explicit references to figurative motifs in his Abstract Expressionist painting to an abstract style composed of dark paint applied in large brushstrokes. Unforgiving editing governed his artistic choices for the next five years as he emptied the paintings of both colour and brushwork.

A closer look at the work he produced each year between 1960 and 1966 gives us insight into the kinds of stylistic decisions one Toronto painter was making in the artistic environment of the sixties. This analysis will also help us understand how Gordaneer’s artistic development fit within the wider move towards Post-Painterly Abstraction. These descriptions of his formal and technical evolution during those years attempt to explain the stylistic concerns that preoccupied him, as well as to clarify Gordaneer’s similarities to and differences from other Toronto painters.

\textit{Seated Nude}, of 1959 (Figure 14), introduced to Gordaneer’s pictorial vocabulary large areas of dark colour or black. Although abbreviated figurative elements like a chair or female form remained, these were obscured by the bold use of projecting shapes of single colour to break up the background space. Gordaneer remembers that in this piece he was working the surface over again and again, building it up and then scraping it back down with palette knife.\textsuperscript{21} By 1961 all recognisable figuration had been erased, and the changes over those two years indicate intense research into alternatives to the literal

\textsuperscript{20} James Gordaneer, Personal Notes, March 19, 2001.
\textsuperscript{21} James Gordaneer, Interview with Lucia Sanroman, May 12, 2002.
“building up” of oil paint on canvas. *Untitled*, of 1961 (Figure 15), for example, looks new and fresh despite the fact that it is Abstract Expressionist in style. In contrast to the impasto surfaces of his Abstract Expressionist painting of the fifties, here the canvas is primed but visible as a ground for loose, runny brushstrokes that entirely define the composition. Gordaneer recalls that these paintings began with gestural motions using a large house painter’s brush. He relied on the different textures and densities left behind by brushes loaded with runny paint to build up the image. Although seemingly free of coloured pigments, these paintings have alizarin and a variety of blues, sometimes mixed with the black, to create subtle hues.\(^{22}\) This series was the first time in Gordaneer’s evolution that the white canvas, reminiscent of Lochhead and Noland, is left visible; it is also the first time that paint is applied in washes of varying densities and let dry as it drips on the canvas’s surface.

Paring down the colour palette to black and white only, the *Shield Series* of 1962, such as *Untitled* (Figure 16), reintroduced formal compositional elements.\(^{23}\) The repeated oval inscribed with an “X” literally in-forms textural and tonal changes. *Shield Series* compositions were derived from drawings and collages whose constructed origin is apparent in the juxtaposition of well-defined shapes, in distinct tones from white to black, cut off arbitrarily or pushed against the edges. Variations in tone result both from the combination of oil paint and enamels and from the use of large-brush application and scraping off with trowel. Gordaneer did not think of the motifs in this series as fully

\(^{22}\) A painting from this series, titled *The Wall*, was illustrated in the 90th *Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists*, 1962. *The Wall* was then reviewed by Paul Duval, “Accent on Art.” *The Telegram*.

\(^{23}\) This body of work was exhibited in April of 1964 at the Penthouse Gallery in Montreal. The show was reviewed by Robert Ayer, “Artists in Contrast at Two Exhibitions,” *The Montreal Star* (April 16, 1964).
abstract, however; instead, these works represented a reduction of subject-matter to essential elements that were abstracted evocations of hierarchy and brutality. His persistent refusal in this period to title his paintings is further evidence of a clear attempt to escape subject-matter.

By *Untitled* of 1963 (Figure 17), the only element left from the *Shield Series* is a large ellipse containing “flying” shapes moving across the canvas. The rigid shields have given way to the unusual, typically unbalanced, Torontonian composition structured around the contrast between black flat oil paint and high-gloss enamel. The solid, flatly laid out paint blocks out areas of the canvas that show some of the wet drip technique used in the 1961 work. Gordaneer saw in this work the end of the reductive approach of the previous three years. “I was getting the urge to be more painterly,” he has said, “[and was] looking for freedom from using only two or three items over and over again.”

Also worth noting is the change in scale of the work. Although no sizes are available for the pieces, Gordaneer recalls increasing the dimensions of his canvas during this time.

Unquestionably large-scale 5’ x 5’ stretched canvases were used the next year, 1964, in paintings that allowed colour back in. *Slack-wire* (Figure 18) is brilliantly colored, although the work introduced only yellow and green—two additional colours—to the black and white of the previous years. After the stringency of the prior

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24 Gordaneer, Interview with Sanroman, May 12, 2002.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 A painting similar to this one was included in the catalogue for the 93rd *Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists*, 1965. The piece, titled *Pombal*, is listed as measuring 60” x 60”. The same piece appeared in a photo spread in the *Globe and Mail* with the following caption: “Prizewinning paintings, sculptures and entries in the 93rd Annual Exhibition of Ontario Society of Artists will be on show at the Art Gallery of Toronto until April 18.” Kay Kritzwiser, “At the Galleries,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 27, 1965), 15.
palette, Gordaneer felt he had accomplished the “clearing of decks” he sought. Now he wanted to bring back colour, “without losing the power of the formal composition of the black and white pieces.” Colours where added one at a time, finally forcing black and white out altogether. Together with the changed palette came a relaxation of compositional means. Originally abstracted from representational motifs, the painting was derived from collages where shapes stood in for spatial and figural relationships. Compositionally sophisticated and flatly painted in complex colour combinations, these paintings represent Gordaneer’s further understanding of the stylistic evolution evident in Canadian painting at the time.29

Finally, in Untitled, of 1965 (Figure 19), six colours are visible, with only one shape left in black.30 Paint is applied flatly, but pictorial interest is generated through the composition that breaks the picture plane into inter-dependent, jigsaw-like forms. Yet, the shapes are organic rather than geometric and so resonate with references to relationships found in the natural world. Composition again takes center stage in 1966 in large works such as Untitled (Figure 20), where black makes an appearance once more. The strange, free-floating arrangement of forms recalls Wilkin’s assessment of Toronto compositions as “jammed together” and “forced into or against the canvas.”

28Gordaneer, Interview with Sanroman, May 12, 2002.
29 Although Gordaneer does not remember the precise pieces selected, it was mostly work produced in 1964 in this style that was chosen for the exhibition “Jack Bush, Ina Meares, James Gordaneer,” at Trinity College, University of Toronto, in January and February of 1966. The indirect influence of Harold Town should be acknowledged. Town’s paintings and collages were widely exhibited in Toronto and his work often formed a general background of images often quoted by younger artists.
30 A painting similar to this one was included in the catalogue for the 94th Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists, 1966. The piece, titled Celebration 1, is listed as having measuring 62 _” x 60”.

A change of locale from the city to the country may be partially responsible for the emergence, also in 1966, of a new, clearer, and lighter lyrical abstraction. Painted on 18” x 20” coated stock paper, the wonderful *Untitled Watercolor* (Figure 21) is completely unlike the large-scale oils of the same year. Gordaneer recalls that this piece was part of a series, a reaction against his increased rigidity in the formal oil paintings. He continued to work in this style in the years to come, and Chapter 3 will further discuss the influences that contributed to the seemingly sudden development of this approach. It bears mentioning here, however, that the oil paintings were done in Toronto while this watercolor was painted in Orangeville, Ontario, after Gordaneer had moved with his wife to a renovated country schoolhouse. This watercolor marks an important transition towards the pictorial coherence sought after by Post-Painterly Abstraction and particularly by Color Field painting. The thin washes of colour soaked right into the paper soon made their way into canvases sharing similar qualities. This work resulted from Gordaneer’s previous five years of experimentation with formal composition, but now counterbalanced by looser brushwork that conveyed a sense of monumentality despite the reduced scale of the watercolor.

Gordaneer’s painting quickly moved away from the explicitly figurative motifs of his 1959 painting into the a-spatial flatness of his more Abstract Expressionist gestural forms of 1961. The exploration of 1961 into expressive brushwork soon gave way to the stringent *Shield Series*, with its focus on structure and composition over brushwork and color. This led Gordaneer by 1962 into entirely black paintings where flat semi-geometric forms float in front and behind each other distinguished by slight variations in tone and texture. Perhaps hesitant to continue emptying his canvas, Gordaneer began to
re-introduce color in 1963; but with color the implication of depth and landscape elements also returned. For the next three years Gordaneer played a game of theme and variations, using shapes derived from collage paper cutouts. In 1966 something completely different appeared. After the busyness of the cutout paintings, with their heavy opaque colors and sharp edges, Gordaneer began to let paint naturally form its own shapes through the use of transparent washes on a white surface applied with loose brushstrokes.

**Influences**

The previous review of Gordaneer’s evolution in the first half of the 1960s demonstrates that he was part of the generation of young Toronto area artists that were devising new ways to address the problem of abstraction. Like other Torontonians involved in this process, Gordaneer experimented with paint density and quality; he too cleared the canvas of extraneous elements by focusing on composition and colour in unusual configurations. His painting showed awareness of the interest in surface and its relationship to the literal flatness of the canvas that concerned Prairie artists at Emma Lake. The central question is one of influence. Was Gordaneer’s evolution directly affected by the work of a particular Toronto artist? Had he become consciously aware of the paintings produced at the Emma Lake Workshops? Alternatively, was he simply following an internal evolution while remaining attentive to the painting and theory discussed and produced around him? Finally, his work poses a last question: how does Gordaneer’s painting of the first half of the sixties fit within the definitions of avant-garde painting of the time?
Jack Bush is usually called the single most important Toronto artist of the period.\textsuperscript{31} His influence upon the younger generation of the sixties is taken as a central fact of that decade, and so it is reasonable to question what influence if any he had on Gordaneer. This question is all the more pertinent given that Gordaneer exhibited in a group show with Bush in 1966, at Trinity College, on the campus of the University of Toronto.\textsuperscript{32} Organized by Bush’s art dealer and gallerist David Mirvish, the show featured large paintings by Bush, Ina Meares, and Gordaneer, whose selection comprised work from 1964 and 1965. It was Mirvish who chose Gordaneer as a participant in the exhibition, since in those years he was an occasional visitor at the younger artist’s studio. While Gordaneer was well aware of Bush’s work both before and after the exhibition, he never met the older artist, nor does he recall a particular kinship to Bush’s work. Gordaneer found Bush’s uncompromising reduction of the canvas to few large, individual areas too far removed from the organic shapes—with reference to the natural world—that were and remain closest to Gordaneer’s sensitivities. Although no records are available of the exact works by Bush in the Trinity show, it can be guessed from the date that they might have comprised pieces of the \textit{Sash Series}, begun around January of 1963 and still in production in 1966 (Figure 22).\textsuperscript{33} Comparison with \textit{Big One}, of 1963, and \textit{Slack-wire} of 1964 (Figures 22 and 17) shows that, while both works are composed of large, flat shapes of color applied with little texture, Gordaneer’s painting seems less abstract than Bush’s because his forms spread out across the canvas in a tonal

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\textsuperscript{31} Wilkin, “New Internationalism,” 74.
configuration that reminds the viewer of the light foreground, dark middle, ground and middle-tone background of landscape painting. Bush, on the other hand, entirely breaks with the subject-matter that inspired the Sash Series, emphasizing instead the flatness of the canvas by the close tonal proximity of the large sweeps of color that make up the vertical, geometric composition.

Even fewer commonalities are found between Gordaneer’s work and that of the third person in the exhibition. In the summer of 1962 Ina Meares had gone to the Emma Lake Workshop, where Greenberg had critiqued her pieces favorably.34 Her paintings at the 1966 exhibition were, according to Barrie Hale, “canvas-on-canvas-collage: oval forms stained vertically like Easter eggs and then applied to an unsized field.”35 An earlier work of hers, Prairie Promise possibly of 1964 (Figure 23), has the same characteristics and shows little similarity to Gordaneer’s work. What Meares’s painting exemplifies, however, is more important than the formal relationship of her painting to Gordaneer’s. The normative influence of Post-Painterly Abstraction as practised at Emma Lake defined her approach as well as the style of her work; moreover, her participation at an Emma Lake Workshop directed by Greenberg was considered important enough by Canadian Art magazine to be mentioned in a preamble to a short article on her published in 1964.36

At the time of the Trinity College exhibit, Gordaneer may not have been directly influenced by Post-Painterly theories and practices, since his work of 1964 and 1965 was still composed of solid blocks of paint laid on primed canvas. Yet, the discourse of Post-

Painterly Abstraction was all around him; he could not help but be influenced by it to some degree. Greenberg’s Post-Painterly theories, and the painting of the artists he championed, were regularly featured in art magazines such as *Studio International, Art in America* and *Canadian Art* that Gordaneer read regularly. He also recalls visiting the Mirvish Gallery to see shows by Emma Lake artists.\(^{37}\) It was only a matter of time before Post-Painterly Abstraction crept into Gordaneer’s canvas, but the influence of that style was anything but direct. Gordaneer did not himself go to Emma Lake, nor does he recall discussing Greenberg’s theories with other artists. Rather, he sees his use of washes of pure color absorbed on by the painting’s surface, exemplified by his 1966 *Untitled Watercolor* (Figure 21), as a reaction against the opacity of the large-scale canvases of the year before, and a desire to open up the canvas to a different kind of space not entirely flattened out by large interlinked shapes of color.\(^{38}\)

A more direct influence on Gordaneer’s work of the first half of the decade can be traced back to Ottawa painter Rick Gorman, Gordaneer’s studio neighbor in 1960. A student of Jock Macdonald, Gorman was a well-known member of the Isaacs group. Until Gorman moved to England in 1965, the two artists visited each other’s studios frequently and shared ideas about paint styles and techniques.\(^{39}\) More important, his evolution paralleled that of Gordaneer, going from heavily painted, colorful abstractions in the late fifties, to a black and white series done between 1960 and 1963—dates that roughly parallel Gordaneer’s own elimination of colour.\(^{40}\) Gorman’s *Form Number Two*  

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\(^{37}\) Sanroman, Interview, May 12, 2002.  
\(^{38}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{39}\) James Gordaneer, Interview with Lucia Sanroman, March 26, 2001.  
in Flight, of 1960 (Figure 24), shares with Gordaneer’s Untitled, of 1961 (Figure 15), vigorous use of large brushwork on white, primed surfaces. Both paintings convey the speed and excitement of direct action upon the canvas for the joy of trying out new application techniques and paint densities.

The key influence behind the austere black and white paintings by both artists lay outside Toronto, however. In 1961 The Museum of Modern Art in New York organized the traveling exhibition New Spanish Painting and Sculpture, which was shown at the Art Gallery of Toronto that November. Gordaneer attended the exhibition and, to this day, keenly remembers the graphic black and white work of Antonio Saura and the “black” paintings of the Catalan Antoní Tàpies. A catalogue of the exhibition still remains in the artist’s possession. He also owns a small catalogue published by the Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1961 featuring the latest paintings by Saura. It is illustrated with numerous black and white reproductions, such as Crucifixion 6 (Figure 25), reminiscent of Gordaneer’s Untitled 1961 abstraction (Figure 15).41 The influence of Spain was reaffirmed in 1962 when Gordaneer traveled to Europe for the third time, this time accompanied by Miria Rasanen, whom he had married in 1961. The couple spent time on the Mediterranean coast of Spain and in Greece as well as in Finland, Miria’s homeland, and other northern European countries.42

Gordaneer was well aware of the work of influential Toronto painters, like Bush and the well-known Isaacs Gallery artists. Indeed, his work of 1964, 1965, and 1966

42 Gordaneer, and Gorman were not the only Canadian artists influenced by Spanish painting. In a very different style, Jack Chambers found in the dark sensibilities of Goya and Velázquez a source of inspiration for his representational style. See Jack Chambers: A Retrospective (Vancouver and Toronto: The Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1970).
exhibits the characteristics of the prevalent style of the time—large scale, simplified compositions made up of flatly painted shapes. Yet, Gordaneer’s most direct influences were from his studio neighbor, Gorman, and from Spanish abstract painting, which he avidly sought after first seeing it at the Toronto exhibition. Although by 1966 elements of Color Field painting appeared in Gordaneer’s work—demonstrating the prevalence of the style in art magazines and avant-garde galleries—it is significant that his salient influences came from a close friend and from European painting. By eschewing more obvious sources at this point in his career, Gordaneer was further establishing a tendency to isolate himself from artistic trends and communities that would only grow through the rest of his career.

**Social Context: The Outsider**

Non-representational painters in Montreal also looked to Europe for models of contemporary abstraction, perhaps for analogous reasons to Gordaneer. He felt isolated from the “happening” Toronto art scene of the sixties, which was largely driven by the Modernist quest for originality, and by linear artistic evolution that often excluded alternative viewpoints and differing art theories. Full of self-congratulatory enthusiasm, Toronto artists and critics firmly believed their city had finally bloomed into a stimulating art scene. There were good reasons for such growth. Young Toronto artists of the sixties were given patronage by the Canada Council and were also encouraged by a new breed of avant-garde art dealers who also brought art work with an international

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reputation, mostly from New York and more rarely from Europe to be shown at their Toronto galleries. The avid media covered such events as never before. As Barrie Hale has written, art critics such as himself, Robert Fulford, Kay Kritzwiser, David Silcox, Hugo McPherson, and Dorothy Cameron mixed at art events with TV camera crews from the CBC and society-page writers.  Unquestionably, the Toronto art scene was booming even if it remained parochial and cliquish.

Possibly because Toronto had not previously experienced the excitement of believing itself a legitimate art centre, the “scene” was tinged with self-importance and elitism. A case in point was the group of artists that formed the “stable” at the Isaacs gallery; they were viewed as closing ranks against those who did not fit their public persona or agree with their views of what constituted relevant art. Although he participated in group shows at the Jerrold Morris Gallery in the early sixties, Gordaneer, like many other young Toronto artists, came to view the cliquish atmosphere of Toronto’s avant-garde community as limiting:

I was never part of the group [at the Isaacs Gallery] socially. I also didn’t do what they were doing; as much as they were influencing me I never got on to their styles…. The thing that really astounded me in those years was a steady stream of similar work [being produced in Toronto]. That seemed to be the criterion. There were developments and changes, but nothing radical. Such was the elitism of that scene; though at the time I considered my desire for change to be a shortcoming.

Significantly, Gordaneer cites his “desire for change” as a major roadblock to his gaining critical notice or enthusiastic gallery representation. Fueled by prodigious

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44 Hale, Out of the Park, 51-52.
45 In a follow up article to his earlier “Can Toronto Overtake Montreal as an Art Centre?” Hugo McPherson, claims “…the Toronto art scene, while still a provincial art centre, is rapidly becoming Canada’s art capital.” McPherson, “Toronto’s New Art Scene,” Canadian Art 95 (January-February 1965), 8.
46 Gordaneer, Interview with Sanroman, March 26, 2001.
productivity, Gordaneer’s painting from this early date underwent constant transformation as he became intrigued with different styles, techniques, or ideas, and put his considerable talents into exploring them and then moved on to other things. At no time in his career has he felt the need to establish himself as the purveyor of a particular type of painting, however accomplished. On the contrary, Gordaneer’s core quality as an artist has been restless, relentless curiosity to experiment with the formal qualities of painting as well as with how the meaning conveyed through its representational symbolic language comes to be. Like a few other important artists, Gordaneer has not been driven by the ambition to find that perfect, “personal” style that can be transformed into an “original” commodity. Needless to say, this did not make him popular with art dealers during the art boom of the sixties, nor later as his career evolved and his style rapidly met a growing range of challenges.

Artistic restlessness is often individualistic, since it is difficult to find another person or group that can keep up with one’s every shift and transformation. Part and parcel of Gordaneer’s isolation from the art scene was the fact that, unlike many other Canadian artists of the period, he neither made the required pilgrimage to Emma Lake, nor did he meet Greenberg in Toronto during one of his trips to the city. While not all the artists Greenberg encouraged were inevitably noticed, many, like Ina Meares, were automatically assumed to have higher understanding of the aesthetic logic behind Modernism’s evolution and therefore had a better chance to have their work published in the national media and noticed by Canadian critics. Without the encouragement that comes from having coherent critical response—whether positive or negative—Gordaneer’s evolution took place mostly in isolation, as a personal response to
the art he saw around him at such places as the Art Gallery of Toronto, the Isaacs Gallery, and the Mirvish Gallery.

Left outside the loop, Gordaneer adopted a self-isolating strategy, moving in 1966 with his wife to a refurbished schoolhouse of 1883 in Orangeville. In a decade when the city of his birth was transforming itself into an art center of note, Gordaneer left—precisely at the point it was least advisable to do so. Yet, immediately his self-imposed exile yielded results. The countryside harmonized his interests, and land and abstraction soon came together in the richest, most personal works of his career up to that point. Gordaneer has said of the period, “It was the most important move of all because for the first time I really had roots, and started to find out what I was all about as far as painting was concerned.”

Rather than searching outward for multiple external influences, after 1966 he began to harmonize all he had learned—his abstract exploration and his representational experiences into landscape painting—since the start of his career fourteen years before.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the development of a young artist struggling with differing influences and approaches as he slowly defined his own painterly interests. Peripherally, it has also dealt with how art-historical discourse is shaped. As chapter 1 argued, Greenbergian Modernist discourse provided little creative space for artists formed in the specific cultural context of the Canadian postwar period. As Abstract Expressionism, and later Post-Painterly Abstraction, became the leading theoretical and

practical positions in avant-garde Canadian art, alternatives were left outside the critical fold, beyond legitimacy.

From 1960 to 1966, Gordaneer followed an artistic evolution fairly typical of abstractionist artists of the period, for he sought above all to maintain and pursue consistent formal internal logic. But the seeming purity of Gordaneer’s stylistic evolution hid his hesitancy fully to embrace abstraction, as evidenced by his resistance to describe *Untitled*, of the *Shield Series*, and *Slack-wire* (Figures 16 and 18) as fully abstract noting instead their representational characteristics. Yet, this was not unique to Gordaneer. Artists such as Bush, and most explicitly Coughtry, used figurative and landscape motifs as source material for abstract paintings. Unlike them, however, Gordaneer did not feel comfortable with the fact that his constantly changing style and his inclusion of representational elements could not be given free rein in an art scene dominated by Modernist criticism. That critical environment effaced figurative connotations by hiding them behind a façade of pure abstraction or, worse, by dismissing them as the eccentric manifestations of artists who were unable to surrender entirely to painting’s assumed internal logic.

These factors, I believe, predisposed Gordaneer to be attracted to the Spanish painting of Saura. While Saura’s work displayed the looseness and excitement of Abstract Expressionist painting, it still represented images such as crucifixes or dolls. Gordaneer found in this European source an alternative to the universalizing claims of Greenbergian Modernism. During the first half of the sixties, Gordaneer’s representational inclinations were held in check as he delved into abstraction; but even as he arrived at a Post-Painterly statement, in the lovely *Untitled Watercolor* of 1966
(Figure 21), he began to move towards a pictorial language literally and intellectually outside the constraints so subtly imposed by the Toronto art scene.
Chapter 3: From Abstraction to Landscape as Witness

The landscape motif reappears in James Gordaneer’s painting of the early 1970s. The re-emergence of subject-matter in the work of the period is evidence of his frustration with the limitations imposed by Modernist methods and theories, and particularly with the indiscriminate condemnation of representational subject-matter by Modernist critics during the previous decades. The choice of the landscape genre to reintroduce subject-matter to his pictorial vocabulary is significant. The Northern landscape, both as geographic reality and as symbolic representation through painting, is widely considered formative in the creation of Canadian identity. I suggest, however, that Gordaneer’s landscape paintings of 1971 to 1973—while embedded in a history of art where their meaning reverberates with notions of national identity—are, rather, expressions of bearing witness to the “eye” and, expressly, the “I” of the painter. The compositional characteristics of these paintings explicitly point to the usually implicit subjective viewpoint of the artist / observer. As such, the works serve as both witness to and evidence of the particulars of a lived existential moment.

The chapter begins with a discussion of Modernism that includes a definition of the term, particularly as the theory influenced concepts of linear stylistic evolution, originality, and bias against subject-matter. After his abstract work of the sixties, Gordaneer’s work did not follow an orthodox Modernist stylistic evolution. In the early seventies, another Canadian artist on the periphery, Paterson Ewen, was also challenging notions of linear stylistic evolution, originality, and proscription of subject-matter. I
discuss Gordaneer’s gradual move away from abstraction in the late sixties as an act of defiance similar to Ewen’s against the theoretical monopoly of Modernism. I also discuss the challenge to the concept of originality formulated by the London Regionalists—of which Ewen was not a member—in the late sixties and seventies because these artists, suspicious of the seemingly “internationalist” and “a-political” character of Modernism, elaborated an idea of originality based not on stylistic formal invention, but on the appropriate depiction of and engagement with their locale.

Gordaneer’s landscapes from 1971 to 1973 reflect his involvement with the environment in which he lived, but while he was aware of the political motivations behind London Regionalism, he was not particularly interested in formulating a consistent theory to support his work. Next, the chapter discusses the origin of the association of landscape painting with Canadian identity by looking particularly at the writings of Northrop Frye and Gaile McGregor. I believe Gordaneer’s landscape painting should be understood, following Frye’s and McGregor’s ideas about the relationship of Canadians to the landscape, as a grounding locus from which he has come to terms with his experiences. As such, this is the genre to which Gordaneer has returned, again and again and which has grounded his more experimental pictorial explorations.

**Modernism Challenged**

Definitions of Modernism usually begin by drawing a distinction between modernism and Modernism where lower-case “modernism” is the substantive of the adjective “modern,” which designates the occurrence of contemporary life in all its
myriad characteristics, from high culture to grass-roots popular expressions.\(^1\)

Significantly, a crucial trait of upper-case Modernism is its aim to differentiate between “relevant” Modern art practices and the “irrelevant” art practices of both the academy and mass culture. In “Modernist Painting” Greenberg gave the following reasons for isolating the arts from culture:

> Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, [the arts] looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as if it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.\(^2\)

Modernism seeks to isolate visual art from its own culture by emphasizing the internal coherence of artistic practices as aesthetic manifestations, and not by analyzing them as cultural expressions. While Modernism acknowledges a link between aesthetic standards and culturally conditioned human values, the theory stresses the changeability of those values through history. Thus, “great” art corresponds to its time only insofar as the aesthetic values that inform the artwork naturally also change through time. In this way Modernism fundamentally underscores the requirement of a linear evolution of styles both in the history of art and as projected forward into the future. Because “great” art must fit within that linear evolution—and in so doing acknowledges that past art no longer corresponds to the ever-changing aesthetic values of contemporary culture—the concept of originality is a prerequisite of Modernist art practice.

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Style emerged as a key concept in Modernist art. Clement Greenberg’s formulation of a self-critical methodology that isolated the essentially defining characteristics of the discipline itself had the effect of reducing the formal features of each medium to a few stylistic markers. As he wrote in 1960, “The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrenched it more firmly in its area of competence.”\(^3\) The result, however, was that such rationally derived “characteristic methods” quickly became stylistic tropes that were legitimized through recourse to the semi-scientific objectivity of logical theoretical discourse.\(^4\) Moreover, stylistic stability became a prerequisite of “serious” art, as paintings needed to further the preconceived stylistic evolution of the medium as well as to fit within the artist’s own oeuvre in a seemingly inevitable, “rationally” sequential way.

Banished from the allowed stylistic features of Modernist art was subject-matter. Modernist painters sought to limit the visual signifiers of their medium to its essential qualities of flatness, colour, and shape. They saw subject-matter as “traditional, illusory, sentimental and regressive” and found freedom in the direct impact of unmediated signs upon the viewer.\(^5\) Modernists argued that subject-matter deceptively endeavors to convince the viewer of the seeming reality contained through the symbolic encoding of representational images. The image means something other than what it empirically is and so needs to be translated into a verbal narrative that is, literally, “read” from the signs

\(^3\)Ibid., 85.
\(^4\) For a similar analysis of the narrow definition of “style” in Quebec’s Modernist painting see Heather A. Fraser, “Paterson Ewen: The Turn from Non-Figurative to Figurative Painting,” Journal of Canadian Art History 13 #2 (1990), 25-49.
\(^5\) Ibid., 25-26.
on the canvas. Naturally, Modernism’s exclusive preoccupation with the “characteristic methods” of the discipline of painting denies the possibility of representation at all, but this proscription is required by the belief that quality in art “resides in the mode of representation” as a way to by-pass the need to decode complex signifiers and thus allow an unmediated continuum of visual perception between creator and viewer. Modernist painters believed that the abstract art resulting from their deductive theorizing was, in a word, transparent, holding no other meaning than that apparent in the raw identity of the physical work of art itself.⁶

During the second half of the 1960s and all through the 1970s, the principal tenets of Modernism were consistently if not systematically challenged, not just by a younger generation of artists, for whom Modernism had quickly become the equivalent of the academy, but also by artists whose practice had been fundamentally shaped by Modernist discourse. Canada saw the simultaneous emergence of art practices related to the anti-high-art sensitivities of Pop Art—a movement that self-consciously attacked the distinctions between high and low art elemental to Modernist arguments—and Conceptual approaches to content. Michael Snow’s Walking Woman series, produced between 1961 and 1967, borrowed the abbreviated graphic imagery of advertising and commercial design and applied it to the silhouette of a woman. The pieces defy easy categorization, for they reverse the usual direction of image-appropriation in Pop Art: the abbreviated, flatly painted images of a woman, produced in a technique also reminiscent

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⁶ Yet, transparent signification is impossible. For a critique of the operation of abstract paintings see Alex Potts, “Sign,” in Nelson and Schiff, Critical Terms for Art History, 23-24.
of abstract art, were taken out of their high art environment into the streets to take their place among the jetsam of mass culture.\textsuperscript{7}

Further, artists who chose their medium to correspond to the content of the artwork resisted the notion of originality and the requirement for linear evolution in artistic development. Thus, a feminist artist like Joyce Wieland appropriated traditionally feminine crafts such as quilting and embroidery to produce work that not only sidestepped the question of originality, but defied categorization within a Modernist interpretation of her artistic evolution.\textsuperscript{8} What is more, these pieces are all about subject-matter. In opposition to Modernist Abstraction’s epistemological transparency, such conceptual pieces place their value precisely on the multivalent potential of signs.

Many artists moved away from painting, a move that began the now cyclical questioning of the medium’s capacity accurately to represent our era of rapidly changing, technologically advanced mass media. Even those who continued to paint would anxiously tackle the relevance of a Modernist theoretical formulation that had become increasingly unyielding to their desires and intuitions.\textsuperscript{9} Paterson Ewen, for example, transformed his painting in the few years between 1966 and 1970. He went from producing work dominated by the most stringent rejection of representational subject-matter as formulated in Quebec Modernism, to work that manifests, as Heather Fraser

\textsuperscript{7} David Burnett & Marilyn Schiff, \textit{Contemporary Canadian Art} (Edmonton: Hurting Publishers, 1983), 94.


\textsuperscript{9} In 1977 The Agnes Etherington Art Centre held a yearlong exhibition, titled \textit{Painting Now 76/77} (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University Press, 1977), whose aim was to showcase the most advanced painting in the country. The exhibition ended with a symposium where the central questions discussed were “What is the status of Canadian painting now amongst the other visual arts in Canada?” and “Why are painters leaving the medium to join other areas of the visual arts?” See \textit{Painters’ Symposium, March 2 and 3, 1977} (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University Press, 1977), 1.
writes, “a change in attitude from one of denial and exclusion to one of acceptance and tolerance.” Fraser studied the importance of the concept of stylistic evolution in the theoretical formulations of Quebec Modernist painting of the mid-twentieth century and found that the concept was closely allied to “humanist values of ‘freedom’ and ‘rationality’” as a way to assess and legitimize artistic quality. Freedom in that formulation was narrowly defined as liberty from the regressive nostalgia of subject-matter. Thus, the conceptual change required of Ewen to shed the theoretical framework and subtly moralizing associations of Modernist painting should not be underestimated since he needed to re-formulate his own understanding of freedom from one allied to stylistically-original form to freedom in a wider sense: freedom from self-imposed limitations. Those limitations had, until his use of borrowed motifs of diagrammatic drawings from scientific sources led him to censor himself and to reduce the possibilities of his work to carry symbolic meaning.

About the same time, in the late 1960s, the authority of visual art as symbolic carrier made itself apparent in the work of a group of artists centered in London, Ontario. Patently critical of the anti-nationalist, deceptively a-political, aspirations of Abstract art, these painters began a regionalist movement that sought to make the particular social reality of their region the subject-matter of their work. Greg Curnoe, founding member of the London Regionalist movement, coined the term “oregionalism” to define ironically a key difference between the Regionalist’s nationalist content and the internationalism

10 Fraser, “Paterson Ewen,” 25.
11 Ibid., 26.
12 Ibid., 45.
13 It has been argued in chapter 1 that Modernist abstraction is anything but apolitical. See Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).
expressly sought by Modernism and other art movements. “Oregionalism” commingles the meaning of “original” with “region”:

…[O]riginality was the measure of significant art and …originality naturally proceeded 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 intrinsically to be different from all other regions.¹⁴

Regionalist focus on national identity was fuelled by frustration with American dominance over Canada in both the economic and cultural arenas.¹⁵ To emphasize the importance of his social context, Curnoe adopted a radically “sited” approach that blurred the categories between art and life: his art fed off everyday life in a seamless and continuous way, and vice-versa.

While Regionalism has played a part in Canadian visual art for several hundred years, the Centennial Celebrations in 1967 engendered a self-reflective mood and focused attention on the Canadian character and Canadian institutions.¹⁶ The granting programs of the Canada Council, which generated competition between regions, further encouraged emphasis on regional differences. It has also been noted that the periodical Artscanada began to show a marked leaning towards regionalist art when Anne Brodsky, formerly education officer at the London Art Museum, was appointed editor of the journal.¹⁷

The political tensions implicit in the public discourse around Abstract Expressionism in the fifties were becoming, by the late sixties, publicly articulated by

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¹⁵ Belton, Sights of Resistance, 57.
¹⁷ Fraser, “Paterson Ewen,” 42.
movements and artists that challenged Modernism on political and nationalist grounds. Representational symbols of gender identity, national identity, and political identity were emphasized as a way to free art from the constraints imposed by a Modernist theory that seemed increasingly out of touch with the desires and reality of many artists. The importance and power of Modernist theory should not be underestimated, however, as it continued to be the most formative—and so most resisted--artistic ideology up until the 1980s.

**Essentialist Identity and Landscape**

In discussing Gordaneer’s painting between 1960 and 1966, I applied a method close to formalist analysis. While the previous chapter was not exclusively formalist in its analysis, its main points were related to stylistic evolution within a fairly limited range of considerations. Contextual analysis was largely centered on how Canadian painting manifested Modernist development, couching all arguments and interpretations within the set boundaries of a theoretical progression of painting towards a previously stated goal. The formalist structure of that chapter is justified by the fact that such analysis was fundamental to the art of the period and thus sheds light on the way those ideas were informing Gordaneer’s work and that of many other artists at the time. Accordingly, this chapter calls for a shift in methodology to discuss the next development in his work. The chapter uses sources from Cultural Studies as a way to contextualize the landscape motif within the broader framework of Canadian culture. The cultural meaning attributed to landscape—more specifically the Northern wilderness—brings to the fore social constructions of national identity and key particularities of the Canadian character that have informed the art and literature of the country. Furthermore, the late sixties and
seventies in Canada brought widespread challenges to Modernism as the primary theoretical formulation in the visual arts and called attention away from internationalist aspirations to nationalist concerns.

By centering my arguments in this chapter on a concept of “essential” traits of national identity derived from Canadian Studies, I am aware that my analysis is open to the challenge of reducing the complexities of a modern multi-cultural nation into a manageable, preconceived, and ultimately distorted notion of identity. When that concept of Canadian identity is based on an assumed fundamental relationship with the landscape, and particularly with the idea of the wild, the issue is complicated further. Associating “Canadianness” with a special connection to the landscape, and with the “wilderness,” is itself predicated upon European notions of the Sublime and the Pastoral. By their very nature, such concepts leave out both First Nations people and more recent waves of non-European immigration. This is not to deny that the character of some Canadians has in fact been informed by the vastness of the large tracts of wilderness in this country; it simply states the obvious fact that there not one “essential” trait fundamental to Canadian identity.

There are a number of reasons I explore the importance of concepts of landscape and wilderness as they relate to Gordaneer’s painting. While I do not believe that Gordaneer is an ideal example of a Canadian whose inner self is modeled on images of wilderness and land, he is, nevertheless, a man of his time who learned to paint—as chapter 1 discusses—while immersed in the rural landscape of southern Ontario and in a painting tradition originally formulated by the Group of Seven. Testimony to the importance of that early experience is the fact that he has returned to painting his
immediate natural surroundings again and again throughout his career. In this chapter I have chosen to take at face value a definition of Canadian identity based on landscape further to elaborate on the significance of that formative experience on Gordaneer’s work and, to some degree, on his identity. In the case of painting, it is all the more important to explore the meaning of the landscape and wilderness in the Canadian context since those motifs, and the concept of nationhood they expressed and largely gave rise to, lie at the heart of what can be called an original Canadian painting tradition. I contend that within that framework the Canadian landscape genre can be most fully understood as the site of resistance to American Modernist styles outlined in chapter 1.

_De / Construction Towards the Landscape_

It was within the contested artistic environment in Ontario during the sixties that Gordaneer painted at his farmhouse in Orangeville. Isolated but not cut off, Gordaneer was well aware of the new focus on issues of national identity and Regionalism, and of the breakdown of Modernism as the defining theory in painting and sculpture such movements revealed. Analysis of the work he produced in response to his new rural setting suggests engagement with the issues outlined above. Not only does the work from 1967 to 1973 represent a re-evaluation of the Modernist concepts of stylistic evolution, originality of style, and bias against subject-matter, but his open re-establishment of subject-matter as a major motif and preoccupation reveals a new confidence in the fluency of his visual vocabulary to bear a narrative of place sifted through the particularity of his subjectively lived experience.

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18 Gordaneer still owns the magazines he read in those years. These include _Artscanada, Art in America_, and _ArtForum_ among others. James Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, June 7, 2002.
Part of a series that had begun in 1966 with *Untitled Watercolor* (Figure 21), the acrylic paintings produced during the first three years at the Orangeville schoolhouse show, as chapter 2 discussed, many features of Post-Painterly Abstraction. In *Yellow Act* from 1969 (Figure 26), primed canvas is the ground for gestural line drawing and watery splashing. Gordaneer recalls that the first stages of the work involved free, automatist mark-making and painting which would be edited out using opaque white paint to create a finely tuned balance between free expression and exact compositional articulation.\(^\text{19}\)

Yet, precisely the way contained colour areas relate to the white ground evokes a traditional figure / ground dynamic. In hindsight, Gordaneer has said, “I really think these paintings are about subject-matter. I cannot help [but] look at them and start to see things, albeit not fully identified.” Significantly, his arguments for not moving fully into representational subject-matter at the time paralleled those of Paterson Ewen. Like Ewen, Gordaneer also associated “freedom” with the absence of subject-matter:

> I did not want to be weighted down with having to make things look like things. These things happened while I was painting, they would suggest certain objects or situations but I would not push it in that direction totally. It [was] a looser and freer interpretation. I did not feel weighted by the fact that I had to overly identify representational aspects.\(^\text{20}\)

Contradictory desires were coming to the fore: on the one hand Gordaneer wanted to fulfill a yearning for figuration that was less and less satisfied by adherence to Modernist pictorial practices; on the other, Modernism had informed his sensibilities and his way of thinking about painting so that moving away from abstraction towards

\(^{19}\) Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, June 7, 2002.

figuration would not occur until he was satisfied he had followed Modernist theories to their inevitable conclusion.\textsuperscript{21}

Modernism located artistic legitimacy in painting on the mode or method of representation itself, which in painting was reduced to the medium’s qualities of colour and paint, the two-dimensional flatness of the picture plane, and the physical size of the work itself. Gordaneer took this a step further and, rather than add paint on to the flat Modernist surface, would carve into it. Cannibalizing his own unsuccessful abstract work of previous years, the \textit{Cut-Out Series} produced in 1969 and 1970 literally hacked those Modernist paintings to pieces, deconstructing their two-dimensional surfaces and inviting actual physical space into the new works. In the totem-like \textit{Untitled} (Figure 27), flat surface is dismantled to the point where categories are blurred: the piece sits uneasily, figuratively and literally, between sculpture and painting—not unlike Snow’s own \textit{Walking Woman Series}; shapes, reminiscent of biomorphic organisms or topographical contours, seem to float free in front of or behind each other, now framed not by the limits of the piece but by the real world.

Representational subject-matter remained hidden in the \textit{Cut-Out Series}; yet, those works exemplified a significant breakdown of the limiting categories of Modernism and led soon after, in 1971, to a style that would not just allude to real spatial relations but include the resulting figure-in-landscape motif in small pieces on paper best described as fragmented poetic narratives. A typical Gordaneer strategy has always been to abruptly change style or technique. But such changes actually reflect a longer gestation period that remains under the surface until a new series comes to the fore. Style and its

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}
associations with originality and quality were, by Gordaneer’s own admission, a burden to him, for he felt that his lack of a stable style reduced his appeal to gallery dealers who bank on the stylistic stability of artists. His resolution of pictorial problems by seemingly abrupt stylistic changes, and his desire to do so freely without marketing considerations or aesthetic restrictions, has always been fundamental to Gordaneer’s working method.\textsuperscript{22}

In order to break down the Modernist barrier prohibiting subject-matter from Gordaneer’s painterly canon, however, he needed to reduce the scope of his investigation by trying out new challenges at a smaller, more intimate scale. The disposability, size, and playfulness of the watercolor-gouache medium used for the series of collages discussed above finally allowed him to re-introduce subject-matter and to enjoy the surprising representational narratives that resulted from the process of drawing and collaging. In \textit{Untitled Collage} (Figure 28), ink markings and paper cutouts create random narratives that are nudged in particular directions through Gordaneer’s usual editing with flat, opaque colours.\textsuperscript{23} Yet, what we see in this collage—biomorphic forms placed like still-life on grounds over which they also hover—came to be \textit{a posteriori}. Gordaneer has said of these pieces:

\begin{quote}
The narrative there is evolving out of the work. I did not sit down to get a particular narrative. Narrative has always been an afterthought, even though I may have had a certain unconscious way of making up a story, it was always revealed afterwards.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Collage Series} of 1971 points towards Surrealism as a significant influence. But Gordaneer would not pull at that particular thread until late 1973, when the human

\textsuperscript{22} Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, March 26, 2001.
\textsuperscript{23} Although Gordaneer does not see direct influence from Harold Town in these work, he admits Town’s collages played a part in showing him the possibilities of the technique. \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{24} Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, June 7, 2002.
figure finally appeared in his large-scale painting, fully fledged and brimming with Surrealist connotations. Some lessons learned from the collages were used immediately, though, in the next major series of paintings produced, also in 1971. In the *Landscape Series* subject-matter is finally openly acknowledged, and made unashamedly to carry the content of the pieces. Although making full use of everything he had learned about form and colour from his many years of abstract exploration, large-scale acrylics like *Green Landscape* (Figure 29), take a definite step towards explicit but evocative signification.

Produced during a time when Gordaneer had finally found harmony between social life and family life, between daily necessities and the solitude of the painter’s life, these paintings chronicle the complexity and poetry of place.\(^\text{25}\) This *Landscape Series* marked both a *return* to the genre of his youth and a *reconsideration* of the significance of landscape as a fundamental means to ground experience—as a means literally to set-down-in-matter the impermanence of being—and to do that completely, incorporating both his subjective experiences and the connotations of landscape painting in Canada.\(^\text{26}\)

In the short years Gordaneer and his wife had lived in Orangeville, his work had undergone significant change. After the abstract painting that had been his major interest in Toronto during the first half of the decade, from 1966 to 1970 Gordaneer re-evaluated his adherence to Modernism, not with theoretical postulations but through his intuitive pictorial evolution. Instead of pursuing a linear development from Abstract

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\(^\text{25}\) Both Gordaneer children were born in Orangeville, Alisa in 1969, and Jeremy in 1972.

\(^\text{26}\) This series was exhibited at the Merton Gallery in Toronto in October 1971. The show was favorably reviews by Kay Kritzweiser for the *Globe and Mail* who noted the beneficial effect of the rural environment on Gordaneer’s work. See, Kay Kritzweiser, “Rustic Life Influence on Gordaneer Painting,” *The Globe and Mail* (October 19, 1971), 23. The same exhibition was also shown at the McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa from November to December of the same year. See the catalogue for the exhibition: Jacqueline Boughner, *Interview with James Gordaneer* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1971).
Expressionism, to Post-Painterly Abstraction, and presumably to increasingly reduced abstract modes, Gordaneer unexpectedly went from Abstract Expressionism, to Post-Painterly Abstraction, to representationalism. It is significant that the subject-matter that would open up for him representation as a viable artistic mode was landscape painting. The genre that had most formed his early artistic experiences would become the means by which Gordaneer would begin a redefinition of his pictorial interests.

The Landscape and the Self

The Landscape Series of 1971 brings to the fore the question of the relationship between these works and the context of Canadian nationalism in the late sixties and seventies (and in particular in relation to the Regionalists discussed above). Further questions arise in regard to the development from abstraction to landscape in the work of a number of Canadian Modernists at roughly the same time. These parallel manifestations can be said to form a general background of ideas in which Gordaneer was working out his own pictorial problems. Better to understand Gordaneer’s position within the history of contemporary Canadian art, and also to show how landscape can be understood as a genre through which many Canadian artists were finding alternatives to Modernism’s overarching monopoly of artistic relevance, the importance of landscape as a signifier of identity in Canadian art and literature needs to be understood. As will be

27 Chapter 1 discussed the importance of the landscape genre as practiced during the fifties in rural summer schools. While that chapter pointed to possible political implications of the genre as a mode of resistance to American avant-garde artistic styles, it did not elaborate on the symbolism and cultural significance of the genre in the Canadian context. The argument in this section discusses the relationship between Canadian identity and geography as discussed in Canadian Studies.

28 Terrence Heath noted that almost all of the Regina Five returned to landscape as a major preoccupation. Terrence Heath, “A Sense of Place,” in Alvin Balkind, et al., Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada (Toronto & Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), 47.
seen, like other Canadian painters and writers, Gordaneer used landscape in a particular way, addressing identity in relationship to a specific place. Thus he focused back on himself—his own subjectivity—as a way of mediating both daily experiences and artistic explorations.

To begin to answer these questions, it is useful to briefly trace the history of the landscape motif in Canadian art, to understand the meaning it implicitly carried when Gordaneer first became a painter en plein air in the fifties, and later in the seventies when the motif again became central to his work. Terrence Heath maintains that the history of art in Canada is distinguished from European models by its adaptation to the distinctive conditions of the Northern geography to which it responds. Of all the genres, landscape painting has historically most embodied Canadian aspirations and unconsciously expressed the dominance of the rigorous, distinctly non-European Canadian landscape that was experienced first by European colonizers and later by their “Canadian” descendents. As I discussed in chapter 1, in the twentieth century it was the Group of Seven who most fully developed a landscape iconography that quickly became identified with modern Canada. Their paintings of the Canadian wilderness—virtually always empty of human beings and habitation—reflected back to the nation the picture of Canada it wanted to see: untamable, wild, and uncorrupted by Modern society yet ripe with creative and economic potential.  

29 Ibid., 45. Some of the arguments in this section are indebted to Heath’s analysis of contemporary Canadian landscape painting.  
In twentieth-century Canadian literature and art criticism national identity came
down to representing the wilderness. Gordaneer’s work is rather different in that he does
not paint the wilderness. Nevertheless, formative concepts established by literary critic
Northrop Frye and later developed by cultural analyst Gaile McGregor shed light on
aspects of Gordaneer’s relationship to the pastoral landscape genre that is his subject.
Discussing the pervasiveness of the relationship between the untouched Canadian
landscape and national identity, Frye was the first to pose the classic definition of the
Canadian character. Canadian sensibility, he wrote, is not determined by the question
“Who am I?” as much as that of “Where is here?”31 McGregor expanded on that
definition, noting that previous assertions of the positive role played by the landscape in
national identity overlook the profound fear the land engendered in Canadian inhabitants,
particularly in the pre-industrialized past.32 That terrifying reality required, she argues,
the active re-writing of the meaning associated with landscape to make it liveable:

If the Canadian had merely disliked his environment things may have been
different, but because his recoil was so extreme—because he withdrew
himself from it so completely—nature became to a large extent
demythicized, invisible. This development meant that after a while the
landscape became a kind of tabula rasa, naturalized to a degree that has
been impossible since the primitive first projected the spirit of his
ancestors into the trees: useable again.33

As these models suggest, Canadians willfully transform the wilderness into a “place.”
Thus, landscape paintings can be interpreted as locators that put in position not a

32 Gaile McGregor, The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 58.
33 Ibid., 71.
geographical locale but a point around which the Canadian imagination can begin to settle.

I do not believe Gordaneer’s identity or relationship to landscape painting corresponds exactly to the terrifying model Frye and McGregor proposed. The part landscape painting, and particularly *plein air* landscape painting, has played in Gordaneer’s life from his earliest years, through the 1970s—and even now—*does* exactly corresponds with a symbolic “putting in position,” through his awareness of the landscape around him, of a grounding *locus* form where Gordaneer has consistently made sense of experience. The key difference between Gordaneer’s landscape paintings of 1971 to 1973 and those of the uninhabited wilderness initiated by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven in their Laurentian Shield paintings is that Gordaneer paints only the inhabited landscape. But if a breakdown of the meaning of the landscape in Canada may seem less significant to paintings of the “tamed,” rural countryside that are his subject-matter, the concept is still determining by comparison. If wilderness can be defined as the place “where the wild things are,” the rural countryside can be defined, following Frye’s lead, as “reflective, observant, …pastoral.” The exact opposite of the wilderness, the rural landscape becomes the basis—by contrast to the idea of the wilderness—of an eminently personal, self-protective mythology that is as opposed to wilderness as it is to the perceived “assault” of the impersonal, and also uncontrollable, modern urban center.

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35 Frye identifies this tendency in Canadian culture with the “pastoral myth,” and believes David Milne to be the painter who best represented it. However, he also detects nostalgic, reactionary leanings in
The definition of the pastoral landscape sketched above corresponds to Gordaneer’s approach to the motif in his work of the early seventies and to the relationship to his environment his painting suggests. *Green Landscape* (Figure 29), with its clean colours and lyrical composition, expresses the release that his relocation from the country to the city brought and suggests quietude and delight in his new region. Yet, while Frye identifies the pastoral tendency with regionalism, it would be a mistake to associate Gordaneer with the Regionalist movement. Although Curnoe was an acquaintance and sometime visitor to the schoolhouse, Gordaneer remembers that at the time he felt uncomfortable discussing art in a theoretical way. “In Orangeville I could not engage with theories in a friendly way,” he recalls, “[theories] always got my back up.” He found Curnoe’s constant proselytizing on the politics of art intriguing but authoritarian. Although committed as never before to his immediate community, Gordaneer did not advocate a politically active social role for himself in that community, or for the artist in society. While Curnoe’s Regionalist paintings are acutely and literally descriptive of the entire range of physical, cultural, social, and mnemonic events that make up a “community,” Gordaneer’s landscape paintings are fairly generalized and still relate formally to his previous Modernist explorations. His *Landscape Series* is even more dissimilar to the Realist work of Jack Chambers—another leading spokesman for Regionalism and for nationalist concerns—who in those of his works which were photographically inspired representational paintings, focused on the commonplace details

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37 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, June 7, 2002.
of his home and his immediate London, Ontario, community. Significantly, Gordaneer was specifically choosing to paint his large-scale landscapes in a generalized but evocative style as the fact attests that he was also producing a number of realistic pieces to give as gifts to the farmers of the area. In this beautifully simple way, Gordaneer felt he was giving back to the community:

We became part of the community in a profound way…. I would paint their mailboxes…. I repainted the sign of a neighbor who had horses. It was a large sign on metal. The image was there but rusty and I washed it and refurbished it as closely as I thought…. It worked out beautifully. He was thrilled. I think each of the neighbors at some time or another were given a painting of their homes.38

By choosing to address his painterly preoccupations in a style derived from his previous Modernist abstractions, Gordaneer acknowledged the importance of that tradition to his work; yet, like Paterson Ewen and Gordon Smith, Gordaneer also felt dissatisfaction with the limitations of the style and wanted to address landscape while still maintaining a link to international art styles. While the differences between Gordaneer’s Modernist-derived landscapes and Ewen’s work of the same period are obvious, Smith’s abstracted landscapes of the early seventies have more in common with Gordaneer’s paintings of the same dates, despite their geographical distance. At this time both artists shared an abbreviated style that pointed generally to landscape without inundating the viewer with mimetic details. But they fundamentally differed in their aims: while Smith’s rational compositions can be seen in, for example, West Coast M-5 (Figure 30) as “a direct attempt to make the most basic statement about the visual experience of the ocean, where the elements of nature seem to be reduced to their simplest visual forms:

38 Ibid.
sea and sky.”39 On the other hand, Gordaneer was not trying to reduce the characteristics of the landscape to any essence—a pictorial strategy that differs from Modernism’s idealistic procedures only in appearance. Rather, I argue, he was attempting to enlarge the meaning of his work to include the notion of “place” as conceived above, as the locale at which his own imagination could begin to settle.

The metamorphosis of the simplified, Modernist-derived landscape into a metaphoric locus transforms a formalist exercise in landscape to—borrowing again from Heath—a “mythopoeic place,” a place where myths are made.40 But the myth that Gordaneer’s paintings create and circumscribe is, I believe, that of the artist’s self as becoming, precisely at the point where the artist meets the world through the act of painting. This argument characterizes myth differently from the way Heath does by using the philosophical definition of the term as the opposite of “logos” in the quote below:

Plato’s Greek distinction between two ways of explaining what happens: either by providing an explicit rational account (logos), which combines with belief to form accurate knowledge of the essence of things; or merely by telling a story with figurative significance (mythos).41

Gordaneer’s Landscape Series situates a “mythopoeic place” in that the paintings acted as the site from which he reflected figuratively or metaphorically on his being positioned in a particular place in the world with all the linkages to home and dwelling that entailed. Yet, he did not rationally focus on the empirical characteristics of his locale because, ultimately, the stories his paintings tell are not about the observable facts

40 Ibid., 59.
of the Orangeville countryside, but about the ways he experienced that countryside. Paradoxically, the focus on landscape reflexively returns that focus on the self. As McGregor notes, “[T]he habit of apprehending the landscape has the effect of turning the viewer’s attention back upon himself habitually, no matter what may be ‘out there.’”

She generalizes further that the contemporary Canadian landscape is duplicitous, as its content is not, ultimately, a description or representation of the land, but signifies instead “simple self, being: that is, being-in.”

Although Gordaneer has never interpreted his landscapes of the early seventies as manifestations of “himself,” certain compositional characteristics of the paintings give such reading credence. Throughout his career Gordaneer’s approach to painting has changed, often dramatically, as his understanding of art and of reality has evolved. But I have observed that, as he has explored differing styles and alternative theories, Gordaneer has consistently returned to the stability of his relationship with landscape painting as a kind of return to himself—a return to that which is most central to him as a person and as an artist. I believe that it was in the Landscape Series of 1971 to 1973—the first time Gordaneer openly re-addressed the genre after his training years in the fifties—that his practice of landscape painting acquired this particular profile.

Focus on subjectivity is apparent in Blue Landscape (Figure 31), an ambiguous image where the sky can also be identified as water. Free-floating forms and uncertain elements are pinned down and contained by the repetition of geometric structures that

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42 McGregor, Wacousta, 76.
43 Ibid., 94.
44 Gordaneer never interprets his work. This statement can be extended to his theoretically based painting of the nineties.
frame what we see. These frames construct our experience of the spatial relations in that airy / watery world by defining what lies outside of the “outside” the painting depicts. This iconography of containment illustrates McGregor’s ideas about the focus back on the self inherent in the relationship to the Canadian landscape, which she has identified as a central image in Canadian painting. By erecting containment through the use of geometric enclosure, she argues, Canadian artists emphasize the interior / exterior, human / inhuman dichotomy that has resulted from the constant measuring against the ever-presence of the wilderness / Other. As I suggest, in the twentieth century as the wilderness has dwindled, it is the chaotic urban center that has become that unmanageable “other.”

Gordaneer’s use of the geometric frame motif throughout this series imposes a constructed order on the visual experience of an otherwise generalized pastoral landscape. The frame controls the experience of seeing, but by Gordaneer’s estimation also stands in for the human element—the human element that constructs, orders, and controls—always present in his landscape painting and seemingly absent in this series. Notably, Gordaneer’s framing element also substitute for the “eye” of the artist for it suggests the activity of observing and breaking into “frames” vignettes from his everyday life to be depicted later in the studio. This technique had been widely used by surrealist artists whose influence on Gordaneer will be discussed in chapter 4. The source of the painting is apparent in this compositional framing device, as is evident in

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45 Ibid., 95-97. Twenty years later, in the early nineties, Gordaneer returned to geometric enclosures associated with a Cartesian understanding of the self in the world.

46 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, June 7, 2002.
Edge of Easter’s representation of a strip of sky and landscape Gordaneer saw through the bedroom’s window-blind every morning as he awoke (Figure 32).47

In Gordaneer’s paintings the frame represents the “eye,” but by extension it is also the “I” of the artist. Like McGregor, Jonathan Bordo has also identified the contemporary landscape as primarily representing the “self” of the artist:

With modern landscape art, the work is done from the stance of the artistic subject’s immersion in the world; the image is an artistically rendered and hence privileged record of that existential presence. As such, it is more like a cipher than a mirror, even though the cipher might present itself as a mirror.48

In Bordo’s argument, the absence of evident human presence in contemporary landscape painting, in the form of traces of human habitation or images of human beings, plays a major role in re-directing the content of those landscapes from the accurate representation of the outside world to an oblique reference back to the subjectivity of the artist / observer. He further remarks that the traditional role of landscape painting was to be evidence of various, often grandiose, human endeavors. Thus, the “witness figures” that populated landscapes of the past bore witness to the “reality” of the scene depicted, whether that scene illustrated events from classical mythology or the taming of the North American natives and habitat.49 The curious absence of such witness figures in contemporary landscapes alters their function: the picture itself is both witness and evidence of the subject’s—the artist’s—being there, not at the site represented in the painting, but being there painting it. In other words, contemporary landscapes bear witness to the existential reality of the artist’s lived experience; ultimately, they bear

47 Ibid.
49 See Bordo, “Picture and Witness,” and “Jack Pine”.
witness to the way that existence is sifted through the subjectivity of that particular human being.

Gordaneer was not unique in moving away from abstraction during the early seventies or in freshly regarding the landscape as valid subject-matter. But analysis of how he shifted towards representation sheds light on the problem that his generation of Canadian artists—the generation that had been formed in Canadian art academies and summer art schools during the postwar era—faced as they challenged the Modernism that had informed their coming to artistic maturity in the second half of the fifties.

Embedded in a pictorial tradition where the landscape genre is identified with nationhood, Gordaneer’s return to landscape in 1971 naturally points to the significance of that genre as he sought to open up a critical space where he could establish something about himself that was, nevertheless, self-consciously on the periphery of the international artistic discourse and of the highly politicized and fractious Canadian artistic environment. As chapter 4 discusses, I believe that the interpretation of the relationship between Gordaneer and the activity of landscape painting elaborated around his Landscape Series serves as a framework for understanding his relationship to landscape painting from this point on. Gordaneer’s Landscape Series demarcates a mythopoeic place where his individual and individuating experiences of Orangeville’s rural countryside are evoked freely, without justification by recourse to nationalist discourse or to the self-sustaining underpinnings of Modernist painting. Yet, as evidence of his “I,” the works are testimony to a vigorous reckoning with Modernism within the larger cultural framework of the complexities of Canadian identity. In a typically (post)modern twist: the paintings themselves became the frame through which he made
sense of those experiences, and in so doing they symbolically witnessed—as if looking right back at him—his being there painting them.
Chapter 4: Baroque Syntax: Surrealism and Figurative Painting

In the years 1973 to 1980 James Gordaneer created a pictorial vocabulary that allowed him seriously to examine figurative painting. The landscape genre, however, remained the ground from which he expanded the spatial structures realized in the Landscape Series towards intuitive exploration of a figurative vocabulary drawn from surrealism. Surrealist techniques of automatism and collage allowed Gordaneer to make a transition to a representational pictorial space inhabited by a cast of characters drawn from life and photographic sources. Neither fully belonging to the surrealist movement, nor serving to illustrate dreams or fantasies, Gordaneer’s work of the period nevertheless adhered closely to the fundamental vocabulary of surrealism. I argue, however, that his surrealist vocabulary would not serve to compose surrealist statements since he did not adhere to the movement’s underlying political and aesthetic aspirations. The narratives resulting from the interplay between surrealist-derived vocabulary of both figuration and technique, and spatial structure founded on the West Coast landscape, elucidated instead what I define bellow as a *baroque syntax*, where poetic meaning was entwined with and grew out of his real experience, and where organic forms both defined a fluid space and created the figuration.

This chapter begins by relating the biographical details of Gordaneer’s life from 1974 to 1980. After providing an overview of his pictorial development in 1974 and 1975, the chapter looks at the reasons Gordaneer decided to move with his family to Victoria, BC, in 1976. Gordaneer’s first impressions of Victoria, his initial contact with
the artistic community, and the state of the art scene in the city during the mid-seventies are discussed in detail. This is followed by a short description of Gordaneer’s West Coast painting from 1976 to 1979 and of the enthusiastic public reception his work received at the time.

Next the chapter will discuss Gordaneer’s figurative painting of the seventies by giving a broad genealogy of figurative art, particularly during the period of the mid-century when Modernist Abstraction was at its apogee. This section also looks at the work of Francis Bacon, R.B. Kitaj, and Maxwell Bates to understand the influence these artists had on Gordaneer, and to illuminate the general context, international and national, of the re-emergence of figurative painting in the seventies of which Gordaneer’s work was a part.

Following, the chapter explores definitions of surrealism and looks at the changing critical reception of the movement in North America, and at the spread of surrealism in Canada. With the possible exception of Bates, the artists mentioned above have been classified as surrealists. Gordaneer’s figurative painting of the seventies was indirectly influenced by surrealism, through Bacon and Kitaj, but it also explicitly and directly used the surrealist pictorial methods of automatism and collage. While he does not see himself as a surrealist, only as a “Canadian surrealist” has Gordaneer been included in international exhibitions or considered in academic scholarship. Therefore, the principal intention of this chapter is to understand the exact character of Gordaneer’s

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surrealist influences. The chapter analyses Gordaneer’s particular use of automatism and collage and his development of a figurative surrealist vocabulary, but argues that he cannot be considered a surrealist artist since he did not believe in the necessity of liberating the mind from the oppressing control of logic and reason as a form of social and political resistance, which was so essential to the surrealist movement.

I believe the effect of Victoria’s urban landscape, the city’s colours, and the influence of Jack Wise’s calligraphic techniques all enhanced Gordaneer’s pictorial vocabulary with baroque elements. The last sections of the chapter identify the characteristics of Victoria that most affected Gordaneer’s work, and also look at the influence of Wise on Gordaneer’s painting technique. Gordaneer’s work from 1977 to 1979 increasingly created fluid spaces where brushwork gave rise to figurative elements that blurred the distinctions between figure and ground and that invited narrative reading but also resisted it. Thus, I conclude that Gordaneer’s painting of the seventies, while founded on a surrealist pictorial vocabulary, ultimately led him to a baroque syntax that, as I will argue bellow, resists binary interpretations.

**From Orangeville to Victoria**

After the *Landscape Series* of 1971 to 1973, Gordaneer began to delve into other traditional painting genres and by 1974 was painting still-lifes and the human subject. As *Roller Derby* suggests (Figure 33), in 1974 his style was still dependent on the flatly painted shapes of pure color of the *Landscape Series*, but now the spaces created by those forms became theaters for figurative narratives with surrealist connotations reminiscent of Francis Bacon. 1974 was an extraordinarily productive year for Gordaneer. He painted literally hundreds of oils and watercolors, ranging in subject-matter from his own
children to images from fashion magazines like those used in *Two From Vogue* of 1975 (Figure 34). At the time he was also keenly interested in animal subjects, particularly animals associated with the circus or the races, as in *First Run* (Figure 35)—two themes which are still part of in his work today.

In a short period Gordaneer’s work had completely changed. He had worked through abstraction and arrived at forceful and rich figuration. Gordaneer’s productivity attests to his excitement at expanding his painterly vocabulary. This was also evidenced by the fact that he began to show consistently and to sell his work to interested collectors in Ontario. In 1973, 1974, and 1975 Gordaneer had numerous commercial exhibitions in Toronto and Southern Ontario, many of which received public attention or were reviewed by the press. In Toronto, Gordaneer held solo exhibitions in 1973 at the Merton Gallery (April-May) followed by a show of drawings at the Gadatsy Gallery. The next year, 1974, the Merton Gallery had another solo exhibition of paintings produced in 1973 and 1974. Some paintings from that exhibition were later taken to Brampton, Ontario, and shown at the Gustaffson Gallery in November of that year. Drawings were again exhibited at Gadatsy Gallery in Toronto in March-April 1974. Gordaneer had only one exhibition in 1975, in May, at the Merton Gallery.

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3 The opening of the Merton Gallery exhibition was photographed by *The Orangeville Record*.

“Local Artist’s Works Displayed at Toronto Gallery,” *The Orangeville Banner* (May 10, 1973), 5. Exhibited were the last of the *Landscape Series* painted in 1973.

4 *Roller Derby, First Run, and ILL Wind August* (Figures 33, 35, and 37) were shown at this location. “Bringing Images to the Edge of Reality,” *The Orangeville Standard*, (November 13, 1974), 8, refers to this exhibition.

5 Included in it were *Final Run, Two From Vogue* and *Ill Wind August* (Figures 34, 35, 37). It was positively, though briefly, reviewed by James Purdie, “At the Galleries,” *The Globe and Mail* (May 10, 1975).
Despite regular exhibitions, Gordaneer felt increasingly restless. He recalls coming home after the opening of the Merton Gallery exhibition of 1975 and wondering, “What is next?” It was clear to him that there was little chance of receiving any further critical attention in Ontario since his work continued, as chapter 5 discusses more fully, to move along paths largely unsanctioned by the eastern art establishment. Gordaneer began to look for a change of scene that would encourage his artistic growth. After eight years, the isolation that had been beneficial to his growth after moving to Orangeville from Toronto now felt constraining:

I was really cut off because it was difficult to get together with [artists in Toronto]. But even though the option was there, I did not partake of the artistic community in Toronto.

He and his family had stopped in Victoria in 1974, when they traveled to visit his wife’s parents who had recently moved to Port Alberni, BC. The city’s mild climate was a strong incentive to move there, but Gordaneer also remembers associating Victoria with Maxwell Bates, whose show he had seen a year before, and identifying the West Coast with Jack Wise, whose paintings he had admired in the cover article on the artist in the Winter 1975 issue of Artscanada. For Gordaneer, as much as anything else, Victoria meant the painting of these artists to whom he felt a connection lacking in his relationship with Toronto painting. Victoria held the promise of a friendly and expansive art scene, a community of artists to which he could belong.

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7 Ibid
9 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002. Although he does not recall it, it is possible Gordaneer read the article by Charles Shere “Four Days in Vancouver and Victoria,” that appeared in March 1975 in Artscanada. While concentrating on Vancouver, Shere did visit the studios of a few
Compared to his prodigious productivity of 1974, 1975 saw a decline in Gordaneer’s output since his time was taken up with preparations for moving and with the sale of the schoolhouse, which took longer than the Gordaneers had anticipated. The move was finally made in July 1976. The small family of four packed itself into its Datsun station wagon and drove across country.

Though small, Victoria’s art community flourished during the 1970s. During the fifties and much of the sixties the local art scene had often been reduced to a few artists working in relative isolation, constantly battling to gain acceptance for contemporary art amongst a generally uninformed public. The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria had long encouraged the development of local artists by providing them with a venue to show their work and by educating the public on newer art trends. Opened first as the “Little Centre” in 1946, the AGGV moved to its current location in 1951, at the same time appointing its first full time director, Colin Graham. The gallery underwent a series of expansions in 1958, 1962, and 1968 which added contemporary wings and proper storage space. Naturally, the expansions allowed for a greater variety of exhibitions that covered both the local and national art scenes and even, occasionally, international art. The AGGV’s second director, Richard Simmons, who replaced Graham

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in 1973, pushed the gallery’s mandate in a definite avant-garde direction that encouraged contemporary discourse.

Equally, possibly more important to local culture, the University of Victoria, established in 1963, had created a Visual Arts Department four years later, which Don Harvey chaired from its inception. UVIC’s art department was instrumental in bringing notable Canadian artists to the city, such as Harvey, Doug Morton, and John Dobereiner. This institution, together with Camosun College, and the Victoria College of Art—originally formed by Bill Bartlett in 1973 as the Northwest Coast Institute of Arts—were the main venues for art education in the city.

By the mid 1970s, many Victorians had received training in the arts and needed places to show and sell their work. Since the opening in 1969 of Pandora’s Box, commercial contemporary galleries in the city have had a precarious existence, often closing their doors not long after opening. At the time of Gordaneer’s arrival in the summer of 1976, Utley’s Art Galleries in Sidney, the Backroom Gallery, Kyle’s Gallery on Fort Street, and Winchester Galleries were dealing in contemporary art. The two artists-run centers in the city were Open Space—conceived by Gene Miller and opened in 1971—and the Signal Hill Creative Arts Centre—organized in 1969, which later became X-Changes Artist’s Gallery and Studios. Of these galleries, only Open Space, X-Changes and Winchester Galleries are still operational, the latter under different ownership, however.

Gordaneer had contacted Don Harvey at the Visual Arts Department inquiring about the possibility of part-time employment at UVIC and called on him at the university soon after arriving in Victoria. Although at first it seemed all positions for fall
had been filled, Harvey called him a week later offering a post as a drawing teacher starting in September 1976. About the same time, Gordaneer also approached the Victoria College of Art for possible employment. The Summer Program was in session at the VCA, and director Joe Kyle called into their meeting the two professors teaching on that day. Gordaneer remembers vividly his excitement and surprise upon seeing Jack Wise, together with William Porteous, the drawing instructor at the College, walk into the room:

Meeting Wise was a very big thing. There he was right in the same room [with me], chatting amiably. It was almost a confirmation of the rightness of moving here—with a young family to look after... It was encouraging.11

Gordaneer did not start teaching at the VCA until summer 1977, where he quickly became a much-admired painting instructor, teaching there until 1992. His visit to Camosun College yielded quicker results, and he was offered drawing and painting classes starting immediately.

Even more than the speed with which he found the part-time employment he needed to paint without economic pressures, those early visits introduced him to like-minded artists that would soon become friends. “In each case,” he has said, “while there were no immediate job offers there was tremendous warmth when looking at my work.” Ian Thomas at Camosun College went so far as to say as Gordaneer showed his portfolio, “the question is not whether you are good enough for us, but whether we are good

11 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002.
enough for you.” 12 This was a complete change from the environment in Ontario. Gordaneer had finally found an artistic community.

The move to Victoria had the desired effect. Gordaneer began to draw the city and its environments with renewed enthusiasm for *plein air* sketching, literally drawing-in this new place to his imagination. He had not abandoned outdoor sketching entirely at Orangeville, but there it was not done with the constancy, the intensity, that made that first batch of Victoria drawings, done days after arrival and through the fall, worthy of a show of their own in Ontario in spring 1978 (Figure 36). In Victoria his painting jelled, diversified, and became freer than it had been in the East. The seeds that had been planted in Ontario in *Ill Wind August* (Figure 37) bloomed in 1977 when Gordaneer took full advantage of collage and automatism in pieces like *Beautiful BC #2* (Figure 38). West Coast imagery became fundamental to his work as he tackled the familiar grays and blues of Victoria’s winter in such paintings as *Coastal* (Figure 39). But the bright summer colors of the coast, like those in *Telephone Booth* (Figure 46), also made their way into his painting, often as part of narratives that referred to his new urban environment. By *Untitled* of 1979 (Figure 41), the rich surface quality of the Victoria paintings of 1977 and 1978 took over, the sheer materiality of paint that made up those surfaces nevertheless still resonated with figurative and landscape connotations.

The relocation to Victoria was successful. He made friendships, and finally felt comfortable as part of an artistic community. Soon he was sought after as a teacher, and his paintings were admired for their inventiveness and technical mastery. The many well-received solo exhibitions he had in the late seventies, which began in April 1977

with a solo show at Utley’s Art Galleries in Victoria, is indicative of Gordaneer’s public acceptance. The Utley’s show comprised a series of figurative watercolors, produced soon after his arrival in Victoria, and a few oils painted in fall and winter 1976. Gouaches and oils were shipped to Toronto for another solo show at the Merton Gallery in October-November 1977. This was followed by yearly exhibitions at the Merton Gallery until 1980, and Toronto’s Gadatsy Gallery showed his drawings during the same years. In 1978 Gordaneer became a Kyle’s Gallery artist and held yearly exhibitions at this Victoria gallery until 1982. Nevertheless, Gordaneer’s success was moderate; he has never reached more than a moderate level of commercial success and public recognition.

**Figurative Painting in the 1970s**

How to include the figure, alone or in groups, into the discourse of painting, particularly after the Modernist reduction of pictorial space to a literal two-dimensionality, was a central preoccupation of many artists in the 1970s. In progressive Western art, figurative genres had dominated painting until the first decade of the twentieth century, when abstraction began to appear in the work of the Cubists. Defined as “the representation of human and other figures, as well as all objects which are part of the visible world, of whatever degree they may have been changed by the artistic process,” figurative art was seen as the exact opposite of abstract art. This caused the genre to be much reviled immediately after the Second War as a result of the emphasis on

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14 J.P Hodin, *et al*, *Figurative Art Since 1945*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 9. In this chapter I have chosen to use the term “figurative” rather than “representational” since the latter is often confused with realistic and even photo-realistic styles.
abstraction in the art criticism of the 1950s. J.P. Holdin points out that, as early as the first surrealist manifesto in 1924, figurative art was formulated as protest against the Apollonian purity of Cubist-derived abstraction. Such associations continued to be made well into the 1970s, even despite the proliferation of conceptual art movements and alternative art media that complicated the question.

Surveys and general scholarship often identify Francis Bacon and the Anglo-American R.B. Kitaj, in Britain, and the Armenian immigrant Arshile Gorky—whose main body of work was produced in New York during the thirties and forties—as principal continuators of a post-expressionistic figurative tradition that married aspects of surrealism with the brut aesthetic of existentialism. Of these artists only Gorky has been affiliated with Breton and the surrealist movement. The painting of Bacon and Kitaj, however, have been more difficult to classify. While their work is not strictly realistic, it has been positioned in the slippery area where “New-Realism,” Magic-Realism, and surrealism form a vaguely fantastical association. The rehabilitation of all three artists began during the late sixties and seventies, when they were viewed as examples to follow by young painters working with the figure. This was the case with

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15 Ibid., 10.

16 The term “post-expressionistic” refers here not to American Abstract Expressionists, but rather to their German predecessors. Gorky, who died by suicide in 1948, is the possible exception. His work is usually awkwardly categorized as part of the American Abstract Expressionists despite his evident use of surrealist automatism and titles and forms that suggest figuration. Many painters moving from abstraction to figuration viewed his painterly solutions as a precedent for the successful marriage of the two styles. See Edward Lucie-Smith, Movements in Art Since 1945: Issues and Concepts, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995) 26-28.

17 Although today neither Bacon nor Kitaj are considered realists, during the early seventies the fact that their work was unapologetically figurative caused Émile Langui to describe their work as “New-Realism” or “Magic-Realism” in his essay “Expressionism Since 1945 and the Cobra Movement,” in Figurative Art Since 1946, 87.
Gordaneer, who has been influenced by each one of them at different times in his development and particularly in his figurative work of the seventies.

The growing relevance of figurative painting in the seventies is evidenced by the publication date of 1971 of the survey *Figurative Art Since 1945* whose contributors included J.P. Hodin, and Lawrence Alloway among others. Pointedly anti-abstractionist but also equally anti-Pop-Art, the type of painting the artists above pursued displays narrative structures often referred to as “humanist”—in stark contrast to Pop’s all-consuming irony and cannibalistic use of mass media imagery. Loosely articulated as “a feeling combined with a style to communicate a human condition,”18 the adjective “humanist” as applied to art demonstrates the difficulty of categorization based on similarities between the work of artists that may only share a certain earnestness in their use of the figure. The influence of the British School of figurative painters naturally reached Canada, as the article “British Painting ’74” makes clear, in the March 1975 issue of *Artscanada*.19

While valuable, the example of figurative painting in Europe and the United States was not absolutely necessary since Canadian painting already had many “humanist” figurative painters of its own. A case in point is Maxwell Bates, who had been active on the British art scene before the Second World War and successfully tackled the expressionist figure for decades from his home in Calgary.20 Bates was widely exhibited, having numerous shows in commercial galleries throughout the

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country, often reviewed in *Artscanada*. Bates’s simple, sardonic use of the figure was counter-balanced by the solemn mysticism of Winnipeg painter Ivan Eyre, another artist whose career was followed closely by Canadian art magazines. Closer to surrealist dream-derived imagery than Bates’s, Eyre’s work of the late sixties and early seventies owed more to the ambiguous spatial theater of Bacon and the British school than did the work of the older Bates.

Bates and Eyre are but two instances of figurative painting coming to the fore in the 1970s. As we have seen, the late 1960s and 1970s also saw the appearance of the London Regionalists in Ontario, and a whole school of Realist painters in the Eastern provinces. *Artscanada* titled the theme of its May 1973 issue “These Ambiguous Images,” referring, as editor Anne Trueblood Brodzky wrote, to “several painters and sculptors who—though widely disparate in their subject-matter and style—share on a metaphorical level an ambiguous imagery.” Included in the issue were articles on Ivan Eyre, Maxwell Bates, and Louis de Niverville of Montreal. A year later, in 1974, Barry Lord published his *History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People’s Art*, one of a handful of Canadian art surveys that distinguished itself from earlier and later surveys by its obviously subjective approach, and also by Lord’s intense bias toward figurative art. Like many Marxists, Lord favored figuration and supported the work of artists that showed the correct representation of populist—actually leftist—subjects. Painting again made the cover of *Artscanada* in March 1975 with the theme “Some Aspects of the

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New Painting.” The “New Painting” referred to in the title, however, was not necessarily “humanist” figuration but was, rather, exemplified by the loosely representational work of Paterson Ewen. Referring to “humanism” throughout the catalogue essay, the traveling exhibition Of Human Bondage, organized in Oshawa by the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in 1976 and curated by artist Robert C. Freeman, features the work of Canadian painters who explicitly took the expressionistically painted human figure as their main subject. Finally, realistically rendered human figures were the subject of another Artscanada issue in December 1976. Titled “Modes of Representation,” the issue actually focused on the Realist painting of Jack Chambers, Alex Colville, and other East Coast Realists, while the Americans Duane Hanson and Joseph Raffael oddly were covered as sculptural counterparts to the Canadian painters.

The variety of approaches to the human figure exemplified above are representative of a lively and contested art scene where the figure as a legitimate subject was at first tentatively broached and, later, regularly analyzed and interpreted. Yet, curatorial and art-critical practices were still prejudiced in favor of abstraction. Significantly, the 1977 Painters’ Symposium at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston was held in order to address the question of the medium’s relevance in the face of performance, art installation, conceptual art, video art, among others. Nevertheless, Terry Fenton, keynote speaker at the symposium, gave a lecture in which Modernist Abstraction, alone, was seen as uniquely redeeming painting’s relevancy to contemporary

24 Freeman, Of Human Bondage, (1976).
culture. As we will see in chapter 5, his was not an isolated position amongst the culture-keepers of the Canadian art establishment.

**Gordaneer: Figurative Influences**

Bacon, Kitaj, and Bates have all influenced the evolution of Gordaneer’s figurative style in key respects. Bacon’s raw but abbreviated figurative style and his spatial references helped Gordaneer make a leap into figuration after the abstracted landscapes of 1971. Learning from Picasso’s jarring dislocations of human anatomy, Bacon resisted moving into abstraction instead applying those lessons to a method in which figurative images, often taken from photographic sources, were painted and repainted, inviting accident and free association.²⁶ Bacon’s figures arrived on the canvas through a series of sought-after accidental paint markings and scrapings, coaxed out from unprimed surfaces until they were imbued with a disquieting expression—as much a surprise to the artist as to his audience. *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho*, of 1967 (Figure 42), shows a woman placed in a space taut with ominous tension. The spatial references are defined by the formality of the perspectival box—both a stage and a cage—within which Isabel Rawsthorne is held. This spatial construct typical of Bacon concentrates our attention on the main figure but also adds a definite three-dimensionality to a pictorial space that would otherwise simply be flatly painted areas of colour.

Gordaneer briefly made use of Bacon’s spatial “cage” and other aspects of his method. Like his earlier landscape series of 1971, *Roller Derby* (Figure 33) is still

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painted in acrylic and also exhibits the interplay of flatly painted shapes of pure colour against forms done in a looser, watery style apparent in the earlier work; but by 1974 Gordaneer had clearly been looking at Bacon. Aware at the time of the influence, Gordaneer has said in hindsight that he saw this work (and another similar painting done at the same time) as “the closest [he] has ever come to Bacon’s style.” In *Roller Derby* we see confirmation of his attraction to the combination of gestural, expressive figure with spatial structure, but the painting also bears signs of Bacon’s working method. Like the British painter, Gordaneer was using photographic images as source for his figurative work. As Gordaneer remarked in an interview given November 1971, photographically derived images were transferred unto the canvas using the same automatic method employed by Bacon, but without his air of impending violence:

> I start with an idea, from a picture in a magazine, for example, and I dabble at it for a bit. Gradually, over a period of time, I almost tease myself into getting involved with the idea until, eventually I am completely absorbed by it and the painting suddenly takes shape.²⁸

Borrowed from sources as disparate as *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, and the weekend supplement to the *Globe and Mail*, photographic images were pieced together and juxtaposed, often betraying their collage sources. *Two From Vogue*, of 1975 (Figure 34), already shows Gordaneer moving towards a more representational approach and away from Bacon’s vague figuration. Attracted to the rich costumes of the models, and to the narrative potential of the juxtapositions of two images, Gordaneer’s painting also indicates the influence of R.B. Kitaj’s literary narratives, which also rely heavily on


narrative dislocation. Kitaj’s *Synchrony with F.B.—General of Hot Desire (diptych)* of 1968-69 (Figure 43), is an example of how the painter’s characters, described as “somnambulant wanderers in strange worlds painted in a gamut of brilliant and acidulous colors,” are imbued with a high degree of symbolic meaning. While Gordaneer has never sought to attain the literary allusions of Kitaj, this painter influenced and encouraged Gordaneer to allow his eclectic imagery to resonate with poetic suggestion, and to let traces of the collaged source of the image remain.

Finally, Gordaneer felt real affinity with the work of Maxwell Bates when he finally had a chance to see it at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1973. The older artist’s direct, expressionist approach, which uses boldly painted figures to hide compositional sophistication behind a cartoonish façade, remains to this day a model Gordaneer follows. Although this influence was at work during the first half of the seventies, it did not come fully to the fore until the later part of the decade, and particularly in the eighties.

**Surrealist Links**

Except for Bates, all three artists discussed above have been associated with surrealism. It is possible the link between the work of these painters and surrealism stems simply from all-too-easy categorization of figurative painting that does not follow the conventions of realistic representation yet takes a stand against abstraction by including poetic association and metaphoric meaning. Whatever the case, in relation to

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30 Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002.
31 This was the case sometimes despite their protestations, as with Bacon’s disavowal of Dawn Ades’s conclusions to her study of the artist. See Sam Hunter, “Metaphor and Meaning in Francis Bacon,” in Gowing and Hunter, *Francis Bacon*, 27.
these artists the label is used as an adjective and not as a noun, and most often no involvement with the French Surrealists of the Manifest du Surréalisme of 1924 is implied in the literature.

Labels and categories exert some authority, however, and by 1974 Gordaneer himself was acknowledging the influence of surrealism. When recalling his painterly history in a 1974 interview, Gordaneer noted, “I was influenced, as many young artists were in the fifties and sixties, by the New York school. [More recently] I developed a surrealist tendency.”

His library still holds today the Thames & Hudson “World of Art Library” volume on Surrealism edited by Patrick Waldberg, acquired, the cover says, “Nov. 13 / 70.” Waldberg’s study contains the art historian’s analysis of Surrealism together with key documents of the movement including Antonin Artaud’s “Address to the Dalai Lama,” and André Breton’s first and second surrealist manifestoes, as well as Breton’s “Surrealism and Painting.” The extent to which Gordaneer read and digested the information in that compilation is not clear, but further evidence of his affinity with the style is evident in another article that for years was not far from his night table after reading it in 1970.

“Paris: The New Surrealists” appeared in the March-April issue of Art in America and discussed the “revitalized surrealism” that, according to Carol Cutler, had developed in Parisian circles since the beginning of the 1960s. Gordaneer was not moved by the social consciousness and political activism that permeated this “new surrealism;” what he was drawn to was, specifically, the illustrations on page 130 that

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32 “Bringing Images to the Edge of Reality,” 8.
34 The information regarding the Art in America article was told to the writer in conversation.
showed the painting of Leonardo Cremonini, Yves Lévêque, and Theo Gerbe (Figure 44). Of the three painters, only Cremonini is well known, but Gordaneer did not try to look for other examples of their work, simply preferring to let the images play in his imagination to point in the general direction he wanted his figurative work to follow. Interestingly, all three paintings echo through Gordaneer’s work of the 1970s. Something like Lévêque’s calligraphic brushwork came to dominate the painting of the late seventies although, as we will see, Gordaneer then was also influenced by Jack Wise. The large-scale abstracted landscapes of 1971 and 1972, moreover, have something of Gerbe’s clear colors and fluid forms. But, of the three, it was Cremonini’s ambiguous imagery that would come to his mind most often, reminding him of the blurred uncertainty of dreams and exemplifying the success of works that avoid narrative closure.\(^{36}\)

Precisely the ambiguity of surrealist imagery is what Gordaneer sought: “I think I found a way of dealing personally with aspects of surrealism that I liked: the mystery, maybe even the absurdity of it.”\(^{37}\) Not willing to rally wholeheartedly under the surrealists’ sometimes dubious fantastical imagery, Gordaneer believes the influence of the style—both as a methodology of image-making and as a set of visual and narrative conventions—was a means for him to make the transition away from abstraction and into figuration:

In the sixties the prevalent style was almost always abstract; and while I did contend with it, I always missed the figurative element. Perhaps the interest in surrealism was to validate an urge I had to paint in a more

\(^{36}\) James Gordaneer, Personal Notes, January 28, 2002. For a number of years Gordaneer kept meticulous dream diaries, although he never used them as source material for his painting.

\(^{37}\) Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002.
figurative style but to avoid early influences (Ashcan School, Group of Seven, etc.).

Despite Gordaneer’s hesitancy to be considered a surrealist, it is only as a “Canadian surrealist” that he has been noticed in academic scholarship and public exhibitions outside Victoria. In 1978, Gordaneer was part of an exhibition organized by curator Natalie Luckyj at the Agnes Etherington Art Center aimed at exploring the links between European surrealism and Canadian painting. Titled *Other Realities: The Legacy of Surrealism in Canadian Art*, the show hung from September 16 to October 29 in Kingston, Ontario; a smaller version travelled to Canada House in London for January-February of 1979, and to the Centre culturel canadien in Paris for March-April of the same year. The catalogue sketched a surrealist genealogy stemming from the contact with European surrealists by Alfred Pellan and Paul-Emile Borduas, and independently with Jock Macdonald in English Canada. Luckyj did not find a linear evolution between these artists and the contemporary painters included in *Other Realities*. She went so far as to indicate no link between European surrealists to contemporary Canadian artists—unlike the accepted lineage of American surrealists. She established that, with few exceptions, knowledge of surrealism in Canada was acquired, like Gordaneer’s, at second hand:

Many contemporary Canadian artists are working in manners which suggest a relationship to Surrealism. Of the twenty contemporary artists represented in this exhibition hardly any, with the exception of Art Green

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38 Gordaneer, Personal Notes, January 28, 2002.
39 The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria held a solo exhibition of Gordaneer’s “Circus Series” in 1987. Although he has participated in many group shows organized by public art galleries, this exhibition is the only other instance of attention from cultural institutions that does not catalogue him as a surrealist. See Liane Davison, *James Gordaneer: The Circus Series* (Victoria: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1987).
40 Luckyj, *Other Realities*, 6.
who met Matta, had any direct personal contacts with European surrealist artists. These artists made their contacts with Surrealism through exhibitions, periodicals and books. Thus the visual images of Dali, Magritte, Ernst etc, are the sources for these artists rather than the literature of Surrealism.\(^{41}\)

Luckyj found that, although none of the artists in the exhibition “produced genuinely similar work,” their works shared “an increasing interest in other realities as a viable alternative to Abstraction and Realism [amongst] a growing number of contemporary artists from Victoria B.C. to St. John’s, Newfoundland.”\(^{42}\) Her conclusion substantiates Gordaneer’s assertions of his relationship to surrealism. However, as I will discuss later when examining automatism and collage in more detail, I believe Gordaneer’s use of these techniques adheres closely to the aesthetic aims of the movement.

Gordaneer has said that his paintings and drawings evolved freely “from the first mark I put on the canvas independent from any preliminary notes or sketches.” His paintings in Other Realities came to be by following an intuitive automatism and a “juxtaposition of varied and seemingly unrelated images which spring from the unconscious act of applying marks.”\(^{43}\) The paintings Ill Wind August, of 1974 (Figure 37), and Beautiful BC #2, of 1977 (Figure 38), and the pen drawings, Untitled #15 (Rooster) andUntitled #4 (Elephants), both of 1974, bear this out in different ways.\(^{44}\) The earlier Ill Wind August depicts two figures—a dog and a woman—drawn from different sources and put together randomly, simply following the compositional

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{43}\) Both quotes were taken by Luckyj from a questionnaire returned by the artist. Ibid., 18.  
\(^{44}\) Both oil paintings are illustrated in black and white in the catalogue. Ibid., 30.
demands (Figure 37). The narrative effect of the images’ dislocation is of foreboding and alienation, as if in a dream. The later Beautiful BC #2 shows development of these techniques (Figure 38). In the work the photographic sources are dissolved by the actual necessities of the paint-handling. The meaning of each image—a motorcycle and a woman leaping over it—is obscured and then transformed into a mechano-biomorphic being resonant with the light of spring.45

Luckyj’s exhibition catalogue is cited in the most extensive analysis of surrealism in English Canada performed to date. “Le Surréalisme et le Canada: histoire de l’idée du surréalisme au Canada Anglophone entre 1927 et 1984”—translated as “Surrealism in Canada: an Intellectual History of Surrealism in English-Speaking Canada Between 1927 and 1984, or A Survey of Surrealism,”—is a doctoral thesis completed in 1995 by Yves Larocque for the Université de Paris.46 Gordaneer is mentioned on pages 526, 558 (with an illustration of Beautiful BC #2), and 583 of the thesis. First stating that Gordaneer “borrowed the syntax of surrealism for a short period”47 and that his style is closer to that of Matisse than to Miró’s, Larocque later elaborates,

…James Gordaneer’s (born 1933) first gesture on the canvas is a jumping off point for his imagination. The automatism of Matta (Beautiful BC #2, 1977) combined with the organic forms of Miró outraged, in 1971, a journalist from the Kitchener-Waterloo Record: “the two forms […] appear to be either lungs or full bags of dust from some full vacuum cleaner and are connected to each other by what appears to be a piece of

45 Of all the Canadian artists discussed in Other Realities, only the West Coast Surrealists were identified as consciously emulating the Surrealists of the prewar period. Gordaneer was scarcely aware of the existence of this group, but he was briefly mentioned in an essay by José Pierre (“Breton’s successor” according to Carol Cutler) that discussed the contributions of the West Coast Surrealists to the movement. Pierre simply states there is not sufficient information to write anything conclusive regarding Gordaneer’s position as a surrealist, but his legitimate inclusion in the essay was not doubted. Cutler, “Paris: The New Surrealists,” 132, and Pierre, “Le Surréalisme en Colombie Britannique.”
46 Larocque, “Le Surréalisme et le Canada.”
holing.” Such description of the work in question shows that indeed, Gordaneer’s metamorphoses are of the first order and most effective as suggestive images.

[…le premier geste pose sur la toile de James Gordaneer (1933) sert de levier pour relancer l’imagination L’automatisme de Matta (Beautiful BC #2 1977) succède aux formes organiques de Miró qui avaient outré en 1971 le journaliste du Kitchener-Waterloo Record: “the two forms […] appear to be either lungs or full bags of dust from some full vacuum cleaner and are connected to each other by what appears to be a piece of hose.” Une telle description de l’oeuvre en question, montre qu’en effet, les métamorphoses de Gordaneer sont de premier ordre et des plus efficaces quant à la suggestion de l’image.]48

Larocque isolates the aspects of Gordaneer’s painting that entrench it firmly in a surrealist vocabulary: his use of automatic techniques together with his amalgamation of disparate images into one composition that, through dislocating the images from their original context and blurring their meaning with random brushwork, result in poetic and sometimes disturbing narratives.49

Defining Surrealism

While the scholarship just cited, together with Gordaneer’s statements about the influence of surrealist styles on his work, may categorize the painter as a surrealist, such classification brings with it more questions than it answers. Surrealism as an adjective is used, and often misused, to describe anything and everything, from fantasy paintings meant as illustrations of dreams, to works that simply do not adhere to a realistic rendering of the world may that be in the form of representation or narrative method. In

48 Ibid., 558. Translation by Stephany Aulenback.
49 Confusion arises from the disparity of the date of the quote from the Kitchener-Waterloo Record, 1971, and 1977, when Beautiful BC #2 was done. The article could not possibly refer to this work, or to the any of the other paintings in Other Realities from which Larocque drew his images. The full citation for the article is Angel Castillo, “Looks Like Painting without a Palette,” Kitchener-Waterloo Record (January 16, 1971).
other words, it is notoriously difficult to define what constitutes “surrealism” and what falls into the subcategory of “magic realism,” or even of “fantasy,” and even if such subcategories exist. Other questions arise when considering the spread of surrealism into the Canadian context. What is meant by surrealism in Canada? What does Canadian surrealism have in common with the movement that gave rise to the term?

Breton gave the basic formulation of the key characteristics and aims of surrealism in his “First Surrealist Manifesto” in 1924. It was that definition that most influenced scores of poets, writers, and painters, first in Europe in the years after 1924 and then during and after the Second World War, in the United States. By the late 1960s, however, surrealism had been subsumed into a larger cultural sensibility, rather than a stylistic typology. The popularization of the surrealist movement contributed in part, as Hal Foster points out, to its having been banishing from Anglo-American accounts of Modernism where, as he writes, it was lost twice:

…Repressed in abstractionist histories founded on cubism (where it appears, if at all, as a morbid interregnum before abstract expressionism), it was also displaced in neo-avant-garde accounts focused on dada and Russian constructivism (where it appears if at all as a decadent version of vanguardist attempts to integrate art and life.)

Anglo-American formalist art histories and criticism saw surrealism as a deviant movement disrespectful of formal clarity as well as improperly literary. As the formalist critic Michael Fried opined, “the extent to which a painting is contaminated by the Surrealist sensibility is the extent of its failure.” However, the Dada Surrealism and

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50 See Waldberg, *Surrealism*, 72.
51 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xii.
their Heritage exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1968 began the movement’s vindication; it was the first major surrealist exhibition held in the postwar period by probably the most prestigious modern art institution on this side of the Atlantic. This exhibition, and the positive critical responses it elicited, resulted in the proliferation in the early 1970s of artists who once again openly invited and acknowledged influence by surrealism.

In Canada the presence of surrealism in exhibitions and art writing before Luckyj’s Other Realities exhibition was limited.53 Yves Larocque’s doctoral dissertation gives a detailed analysis of all Canadian exhibitions with a surrealist focus and discusses the shifts in the understanding of surrealism in Canada these exhibitions reveal.54 Larocque found that surrealism made its first appearances in Canada clandestinely, tied to psychoanalysis and the popularization of Freudian ideas about the self.55 He stresses that surrealism in English Canada moved away from French surrealism and was subject to two distinct waves of influence. The first wave of surrealism, associated with Jock Macdonald, was transmitted more or less directly through reading of translations of the manifestoes and other literary, art historical, and art critical material and translations of the writings of Freud and psychoanalysis. The second wave of surrealism came later and


54 Tremendously useful, Larocque’s dissertation offers a thorough historiography that covers the exhibitions, articles, and every instance of the usage and definition of the term “surrealism” in all Canadian art surveys published until 1995.

55 Ibid., 619.
informed notions of the fantastic and Pop and metaphysical art. Further, the second wave of surrealism most appealed, according to Larocque, to the artists of the West Coast and also to painters living in Southern Ontario, many of who took up Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious and who were often interested in mysticism.

It was the second wave of surrealism defined by Larocque that influenced Gordaneer. I believe, however, that Larocque’s analysis of Gordaneer is overgeneralized and does not identify how and to what degree Gordaneer used the fundamentally surrealist techniques of automatism and collage to inform his own pictorial vocabulary. In order fully to understand the genesis of Gordaneer’s images it is necessary to attempt a delineation of what comprises a surrealist image, a basic definition that is also missing from the dissertation, particularly in relation to the original explanation given by the French surrealists of the aims of automatism and collage, the two techniques Gordaneer has most used to construct his figurative work.

**The Use of Automatism and Collage and Surrealism’s “Underlying Ambition”**

What is fundamental to a surrealist image? Is there an essential difference between a surrealist image as conveyed in a painting or a poem? These questions preoccupied Breton when in a 1935 lecture in Prague he stated that there was “no difference in underlying ambition between a poem by Paul Eluard, by Benjamin Péret and a canvas by Max Ernst, by Miró, by Tanguy.” Breton’s original definition of

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56 This second wave also influenced Alex Colville and the work of other Canadian Realists. *Ibid.*, 620.
58 André Breton as quoted in Matthews, *Languages of Surrealism*, 103. The arguments in this section borrow extensively from Matthews’ analyses in chapters 2, 6 and 8 of his book.
surrealism had exposed the primacy of automatism as the main revelatory tool of the surrealist artist, regardless of medium or form. According to Breton, the surrealist image becomes in the precise instant of creation, and is informed through an act of pure automatism. The surrealist image does not precede its expression and is not, then, a mere representation of something pre-existing in the mind of the painter or poet. Furthermore, importance of the surrealist image lies primarily in the fact that it is evidence of the possibility of accessing a place where logic and reason exert no control over the mind. Therefore, the “underlying ambition,” as Breton described it, shared by the artists discussed in Prague was one: to bring forth from the unknown.  

The common association of surrealist painting with literary formulations—as a kind of visual representation of fantastical poetic or prose compositions—is a misunderstanding of the original aims of surrealism. J. H. Matthews writes that in the months following the publication of the “First Surrealist Manifesto” the ability of painters to use automatic techniques was questioned. For Breton and the French Surrealist poets painting was not meant to be an illustration of linguistic formulations. It was argued that painters could only re-create images of previously imagined events, whether those events were representations of dreams or cadavre exquis. The solution to this problem lay in the use of automatist painting techniques or chance effects together with the

59 Breton’s equation of the two forms, painting and poetry, fluctuated; his position changed from belief in the capacity of visual images to carry “proper” surrealist intent and content, to complete condemnation of the art form as anything other than a poor illustration of dream sequences and ill-though out image constructions. See Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995) xv-xvi. J.H. Matthews, Languages of Surrealism (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986) deals with the question extensively.

60 Ibid., 106 and 112.
appropriation of images jarringly dislocated from their original context through collage.\textsuperscript{61} Such methods, the French Surrealists believed, would ensure that images emerged unforced and unmediated by language directly from the artist’s subconscious. These methods would also prevent the viewer from being able to see in the outcome a logical narrative structure. Yet, logical disruption is not an end in itself for surrealism—after all it is not Dadaism—rather, as Matthews writes, “the surrealist image is vital where it proves to be sequential in a new way,” where it leads to previously unknown associations that cannot be easily placed within logical grammatical structures.\textsuperscript{62}

While automatic painting actually followed the practice established by writers, collage has no parallel in writing. As an image-making procedure, collage relies on the viewer’s awareness that the images existed in a different context before their present depiction, and that the original framework is no longer part of their representation. The predictable de-construction of the original source leads to the unpredictable construction of a new surrealist image that is more an “encounter,” to use a typically surrealist term, than a forcible re-attachment of disparate elements. By definition, and adhering to the same directive of accidental creation as automatism, collage imagery breaks temporal and spatial contexts not to obliterate meaning but, on the contrary, to instill it with a new, surprising significance that develops from juxtaposition and metamorphosis. Purposefully perplexing, the meaning created by the collaged image helps overcome the viewer’s natural tendency to exercise reason and to apply linear logical discourse,

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, 112.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, 109.
exciting instead poetic invention. But such poetic invention is not the same as Dadaist negation of meaning. What is fundamental to a surrealist image in painting is the startling narrative created from simultaneous destruction—through de-construction—and re-investiture of meaning that is built into automatism’s and collage’s processes of signification.

A Surrealist Vocabulary

Gordaneer had practiced automatic drawing and painting since the late 1950s when, largely influenced by the example of Jock Macdonald and his students, he had begun to experiment with Abstract Expressionist methods. At that time, however, his awareness of surrealism was only peripheral and filtered through his understanding of Modernist Abstraction. This continued throughout the 1960s in numerous abstract drawings and watercolors that came to be through automatic technique. Significantly, automatic brushwork became, in 1973 and 1974 when Gordaneer was formulating an approach to the figure, his principal means of setting down the image on the canvas. While the figurative subjects he worked on were often borrowed from photographic sources, they were laid on the canvas without a preliminary drawing, enticed into focus through the act of applying paint almost irrespective of the representational demands of the image. The imagery that resulted from this method came to be at random, as was the case with the heart-shaped form between the two riders in the oil painting First Run, of 1974 (Figure 35). When asked the reason for including such a loaded icon, Gordaneer answered, “I don’t know where that came from. It just appeared.” Adding, “when I work

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63 Ibid., 142-143.
with an image I try not to identify it. [...] I try to bring it just to the edge of reality and leave the viewer to make the identification."\(^{64}\)

In Victoria during second half of the seventies, Gordaneer’s automatism fused with his exercise of abstract calligraphic paintings done alongside Jack Wise when both taught at the Victoria College of Art (Figure 45). Producing literally dozens of India ink and Chinese brush paintings, Gordaneer began to see the brush as almost alive, an active participant in the painting process. He soon began to use these techniques in his larger oils, such as *Untitled* of 1979 (Figure 41). “Many of the paintings I did in those days,” he recalls, “were started as calligraphic strokes until the landscapes or figure started to emerge from those markings.”\(^{65}\)

Gordaneer’s use of collage also goes back to his Abstract Expressionist years when he created paper works made from found scraps, or from unsuccessful drawings or paintings. In the seventies, however, his figurative subjects were mined from newspapers and magazines, and not from the artist’s own work.\(^{66}\) Originally seduced by some aspect of the photograph—such as the luxurious costumes of the two women in *Two From Vogue* (Figure 34), or the polished, rounded forms of a motorcycle for *Beautiful BC #2* (Figure 38)—Gordaneer painted the motif on the canvas without first drawing it, and also cut it off from its original context. This act of severing remains evident in something indefinable about the image. That most important of surrealist aims—the creation of a jarring, surprising, and new poetic narrative—is also one of Gordaneer’s most resounding

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\(^{64}\) “Bringing Images to the Edge of Reality,” 8.
\(^{65}\) Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002.
\(^{66}\) Significantly, it was through the medium of collage that Gordaneer first allowed the figure to make its way into his work in collage series done in 1971 (Figure 28).
achievements. Poetic narrative is a revelation that counts on shocking our common sense into at least accepting the possibility that there is a real and persuasive poetic “other” that does not need reason or causality to exist. Gordaneer’s painting, such as *Ill Wind August* (Figure 37) and the later *Untitled* (Figure 41), imbues his images with a meaning that did not exist before they came to be upon the canvas and that *only* exists upon the canvas.

Gordaneer appropriated and exercised a surrealist vocabulary that succeeded in resisting the seduction of relying on painting’s representational facility to give shape to pre-existing dream images or fantastical formulations. Unlike the early surrealist work of Kenneth Lochhead and even Ivan Eyre, he adhered to surrealism’s “underlying ambition” of trusting accident and chance to step into the unknown rather than illustrate it. I contend, however, that his use of surrealist vocabulary would not in fact form a surrealist “sentence” or statement, since to do this he would have had to believe in the aesthetic and even political necessity of liberating the mind from the oppressing harness of logic, of reason, ultimately of modernity, and of the political systems that arose from them. Instead, the fresh context of Victoria would push his work towards a new, joyously lush subject-matter that would lead him, as I will discuss below, to a baroque syntax where fluid pictorial space, influenced by landscape, interlaced with imaginative figuration.

*The Urban Pastoral*

The conflation “urban pastoral” strikes us as contradictory: what is the urban if not the opposite of the pastoral? Urban, from the Latin *urbs* for city, is a place where the rural has been removed from the site. The urban is the citified, the anti-pastoral. Reflective and ordered, the pastoral is a foil to the chaotic energy of the city but also to the savage dangers of the wilderness. The pastoral evokes rural life at its most charming,
simple, and serene—at its most idealized. As a term from art and literature it describes works that portray or suggest rural life but always do so in a lyrical vein. The two terms are never used in tandem. However, I suggest that Gordaneer’s paintings produced after his move to Victoria in 1976 fit this new category. Gordaneer had worked in a pastoral vein before in the landscapes produced in his youth at Doon, Ontario, and then later in the more cerebral Landscape Series of 1971. In Victoria the city would come into his lyrical representations of land. But this was less a manifestation of creative invention than simply a response to the new locale, since Victoria itself fits somewhere between the soft topography of the countryside and the architectural formality of the city.

The urban pastoral appeared in the series of drawings Gordaneer did soon after arriving in Victoria (Figure 36). The mood of the urban pastoral was manifested, as well, in a new palette, which was first infused with the familiar soft grays and muted colours of the city’s winter, like those in Coastal, of 1978 (Figure 39), and later, as summer arrived, with the season’s rich, fresh colours, almost tropical in their intensity. Gordaneer turned to the pungent green of lawns, to candy tones like those of the city’s flowers, and contrasts as uncompromising as the meeting of ocean and land. This is evident in Telephone Booth of 1977 (Figure 46), as is something else: mutinous lushness—the privilege of this coast’s vegetation—expressed through constant, over-all brushwork. All this is contained by references to the city and its life, also by an underlying structure that, though hidden, makes its presence know by providing a foundation for the constant changes to the brushwork. Thus, the architecture of the city is the subject of the 1977

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gouache *Telephone Booth* (Figure 46), but it is the underlying grid structure below the
gouache brushwork that controls the composition by dictating the tonal changes in the
work.

**Jack Wise**

The shift to bright colours and new, rich brushwork mentioned above were also
affected by the other important influence on Gordaneer’s work of the late seventies: the
techniques and philosophy of Jack Wise. To Gordaneer’s satisfaction the two artists
developed a close friendship after Gordaneer joined the Victoria College of Art. It may
be partly due to the encouragement he received from Wise that 1977 was a productive
year, even by Gordaneer’s exceptional standards. He recalls that Wise, who lived on
Oxford Street behind Gordaneer’s Chapman Street address, would often come by his
studio:

> Of all the artists I have known he and I were the ones that perhaps were
> the closest. He used to come to the studio very often, and he would sit
down and smoke cigarettes. He was always complimentary about what he
> was seeing, and encouraging.

Wise influenced Gordaneer’s use of gouache, which he had seldom utilized before
(Figure 46). The most important influence, however, was Gordaneer’s new use of
calligraphic brushwork. From 1977 to 1980 Gordaneer produced many quick studies of

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68 Although Wise was never one to proselytize, and he “taught by example,” as Gordaneer says,
his learning and practice of Eastern philosophy and meditation appear to have aided in Gordaneer’s own
spiritual search. Always attracted to the great mystical traditions and to meditation, whether Eastern or
Western, Gordaneer was moved by Wise’s great integrity in pursuing a life where his art served to
communicate something other than the limited perspective of the artist’s own ego. Gordaneer, interview
with Lucia Sanroman, July 9, 2002.


70 Gordaneer maintains that the stimulus was mutual: while Gordaneer began using gouache, Wise
delved into oils.
India ink that recall Wise’s *Sword in Stone* (Figure 40), for example. Gordaneer’s works on paper of this period were, as he said in an interview in 1978, directly the result of working alongside Wise (Figure 45).

I am meeting Wise on my own terms, I think, and have found that these calligraphic drawings have nourished my paintings a great deal. They have a directness and energy that is appealing.  

In these calligraphic drawings, as well as in the gouaches and the oil paintings where he applied the same techniques, Gordaneer paid close attention to Wise’s directive to allow the brush to move freely and let the image flow from that action. In this way, Wise believed, the marks did not reflect the artist’s ego—his taste and ideas—but manifested universal energies.  

It is also possible that Gordaneer’s use of an underlying structure by which to order the intricacies of the brushwork was emulating the two main conditions of the Chinese calligraphic method: “structure,” attained through the shape of the characters, and “brush-method.”  

The stylistic elements of Gordaneer’s urban pastoral—his references to the rich colors and forms of the West Coast landscape together with subject-matter that addresses the city—and his new, responsive calligraphic brushwork created paintings that both invited and resisted interpretation. Discussing Gordaneer’s 1978 exhibition at Kyle’s Gallery, which included *Coastal* and *Telephone Booth* (Figures 39 and 46), art critic Frank Nowosad pointed to the interpretative uncertainty of Gordaneer’s work:

Approaching Jim Gordaneer’s paintings and gouaches, the viewer is set adrift in a terrain of underwater foliage. Floating amidst the organic forms

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71 Nowosad, “The Urge Simply to Paint.”
and the richly laid out greens and blues streaked with odd visceral colors, one “marine cloud-gazes”. The eye is stimulated but the mind draws its own responses. The works need the personal marking of a title, yet naming remains only an oblique suggestion.  

**Conclusion: Baroque Syntax**

The dictionary defines “syntax” as the pattern of forming sentences or phrases in language. A baroque syntax in my usage is therefore a pattern or series of elements that together constitute a pictorial system based on baroque aesthetic principles. Wölfflin’s elucidation of the term “baroque” rested on the binary opposition between Renaissance and baroque. His argument was based on contrasting the characteristics he saw in each style: linear *versus* painterly, planar *versus* recessive spatial articulation, clear composition *versus* obscured, unclear construction. A baroque painterly syntax bases its pictorial system on a stable methodological or technical vocabulary which nevertheless creates a perplexing interplay between forms. Baroque syntax affirms spatial depth that, incongruously, often carries its own negation within through the organization of figural relations that obscure the spatial organization. Finally, baroque syntax relies on the creation of ambiguous narratives that demand from the viewer full participation but that also resist recognition. Michael Ann Holly finds that the baroque aims to “represent the unrepresentable.” Additionally, her succinct explanation of the effects of the baroque further clarifies the consequence of a baroque syntax,

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74 Nowosad, “The Urge Simply to Paint.” This article may be the most informative and perceptive review of Gordaneer’s entire career.


Anti-Platonic in its disparagement of lucid clarity and essentialist form, baroque vision celebrated instead the confusing interplay of form and chaos, surface and depth, transparency and obscurity. As a result, it dazzles and distorts rather than presents a clear and tranquil perspective on the truth of the external world.

There are parallels between the concepts of the baroque and surrealism; but the two are not the same. Surrealism exhibits the same stubborn fluidity as the baroque: both eschew categories and encourage epistemological slippage. However, despite the popularity of the term as an adjective, surrealism is still a movement and a philosophical standpoint with specific agendas and aims, both aesthetic and political. Gordaneer has always understood surrealism as essentially tied to those political and aesthetic aims. For this reason, his relationship to the term has always been ambiguous; his response to association with it, hesitant.

Contrasted with surrealism, the baroque is not a self-described movement or philosophy. The baroque is a stylistic category. Although Gordaneer has never identified himself in any way as a baroque artist or his work as baroque compositions, I propose that his painting of the second half of the seventies falls closer to a baroque syntax than a surrealist one. While automatism and collage, the basis of Gordaneer’s pictorial vocabulary, are innately structured to be first and foremost destabilizing, his surrealist vocabulary became the basis for a baroque syntax in order to express something of Gordaneer’s new reality. The paintings became a revelation not of what lay within the artists but, and no matter how fanciful the imagery, of what was without.

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77 Ibid., 92.
In order to analyze these assertions let us look at *Untitled*, of 1979 (Figure 41). Following Wölfflin’s definition, the work is obviously painterly rather than linear except for the remnants of the spatial structure created with a grid, with pencil and ruler, still visible as a diamond pattern on the upper right hand corner. Although not articulated as Albertian perspective, this geometric shorthand stands for the modern equivalent of the spatial scaffolding of the baroque period. Both types of spaces hold the figuration in place, a figuration that in both cases obscures by dissolving the contours of the figures into one another, and in this way it paradoxically denies the three dimensionality of the space. Further, baroque pictorial space is fluid; sculptural figures push its boundaries and twist it into shape. Finally, paralleling the absence of narrative closure in the baroque, the narratives in Gordaneer’s paintings of the second half of the seventies are always elusive, as Nowosad notes, gathering into meaningful instances only to disappear again into paint: look at *Untitled* and see the arms and profiles of figures; or see plants that choke a woman or an animal; or see the slow dance of two people in a night forest.

Yet, *Untitled* was the product of a precise methodology founded on surrealist techniques of automatism and collage. During Gordaneer’s figurative explorations from 1973 to 1975 he had appropriated a surrealist vocabulary to create images that emerged freely but that also made use of his own history as a painter. After 1976, in Victoria, the surrealist vocabulary did not metamorphose into a fully-fledged surrealist syntax but rather into a baroque syntax that, although close to surrealism’s ambiguity, was not self-consciously trying to do anything other than to expand the possibilities of paint on canvas by welcoming back the figure into the picture. As he said regarding the paintings at the
1978 Kyle Gallery exhibition, Gordaneer’s painting had made no allegiance to anything other than his “urge simply to paint.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} Nowosad, “The Urge Simply to Paint.”
Chapter 5: Crisis Points: The Nineteen Eighties

The conflict between abstraction and subject-matter that had threaded through James Gordaneer’s development for thirty years was finally resolved decisively on the side of figuration and subject-matter during the 1980s. In 1981, hard edge abstraction was pushed to the forefront of Gordaneer’s canvas. That time, however, the need to move away from the extravagant approach of the work of the seventies towards formal restraint—towards a “hardening up,” as he calls it—did not only respond, as it had so often in the past, to his inner need to re-establish the terms of pictorial exploration, but rather to social pressures. For the first time in his career Gordaneer belonged to a community of artists—the faculty at the Victoria College of Art. When Joseph Kyle, principal at the college, announced that the 1981 school year would be spent exploring the formal manifestation and spiritual connotations of hard edge abstraction, Gordaneer felt obliged to commit himself to the endeavor. The “experimental year,” as it was called, led Gordaneer to a crisis point in his painting and teaching. After being forced to reduce his pictorial vocabulary to its bare essentials (Figure 47)—to eschew everything he loved about painting—Gordaneer’s return to subject-matter in 1983 marked the end of a thirty-year struggle to negotiate between disparate stylistic directions. Nevertheless, his painting was fundamentally affected by the stylistic strictures of the “experimental year.” Throughout the eighties, Gordaneer’s figurative narratives were painted in a simplified style in which color, composition, and line told the story (Figure 48). By the end of the decade, Gordaneer had full command of that approach (Figure 49). Beautifully
composed and surprising in their color palette, the paintings were overtly concerned with style. Content was secondary to formal considerations.

This chapter briefly analyses the theories and practices that defined the parameters at the Victoria College of Art during the 1981 school year. Gordaneer’s painting of the eighties, and the changes resulting from the “experimental year,” are examined mostly in terms of its formal characteristics. The chapter also relates the positive reception of Gordaneer’s new simplified style by galleries and reviewers. A gap will be identified, moreover, between the formal qualities of Gordaneer’s work and his growing need to articulate intellectually and pictorially a critical distance from Abstraction. In this regard, the key artistic mentors who informed Gordaneer’s critique of Modernism will be discussed, with particular attention to the way their opposition to the theory was articulated.

The chapter claims that the eighties were bracketed by two crises in Gordaneer’s practice. The first was prompted by the “experimental year.” The second was subtler and more personal. While Gordaneer was pleased with his evidently elegant and accomplished work, I argue that by the end of the decade the paintings no longer reflected his dissension from the very principles that informed his own paintings’ stylistic simplicity. I propose that Gordaneer’s years from 1985 to 1989 were a gestation period nourished by the example and ideas of artistic mentors who had found their own way out of the theoretical impasse and stylistic monopoly of Modernism. The critical space opened up by the influence of those artists led, by the end of the decade, to another crisis or turning point that would not, however, manifest itself on canvas until the nineties.
Experimental Year

The artistic explorations formulated during the “experimental year” were largely based on Barnett Newman’s views of the relationship between abstraction and spirituality. By the 1980s, Post-Painterly Abstraction had long ceased to be the main preoccupation of the avant-garde; yet, Joseph Kyle still believed—with something approaching zeal—in the supremacy of abstraction over all other styles. I believe, however, that the VCA only adhered to a bias exhibited by many curators and critics in Canada, particularly on the prairies and elsewhere in the West, in favor of abstraction. Reacting to the rebirth of expressive figurative painting in the early eighties, those art professionals sought to argue for abstraction in increasingly spiritualist terms that more often than not found in “purity” of form a door to the “sublime.”

A collective “clearing of decks,” the “experimental year,” designed by Kyle and William Porteous (Figure 50), threw out the life drawing, still life, landscape, and figurative painting that had been the main subjects taught at the VCA since its inception. From September 1981 to June 1982, faculty and students focused on hard edge abstraction to distance themselves from the assumed corrupting influence of subject-matter and investigate instead a purer, “aniconic” conception of painting. The methods employed were formulaic: only straight line, flat surface, and pure color were allowed. Both students and faculty were encouraged to find a format—“the simpler the better, down to one or two color stripes,” Gordaneer recalls. This basic design could then be used again and again to explore different color combinations that were believed to

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1 Robert Amos, “Three Rings of Fun in View at the Art Gallery,” *Times-Colonist* (February 28, 1987). William (Bill) Porteous was the drawing and design teacher at the college.
encompass all the meaning of universals. While little written material about the year is available for research, more of Kyle’s intentions, who formulated the theoretical basis, can be gleaned from the following statement written to accompany his painting Deus ex Machina #17 of 1985 (Figure 51).

From the time I started to paint, I sought to make paintings that would have the same quality of absoluteness, purity and coherence as music, but more importantly would be able to move the viewer as music moves the listener. For this reason I have embraced a pure abstract style that is primarily inspired by an internal stimulus. Although color is of capital significance in the works, form and structure are equally important. As to content, I am attracted to universals and things spiritual. My aspiration is towards Presence, Beauty, Delight and Ecstasy.³

The statement is quoted in full because in many key points it reflects the theories of Barnett Newman. In its equation of abstraction with spirituality, Kyle recalls Newman’s declaration in 1947 that the best American artists “create[d] a truly abstract art that can be discussed only in metaphysical terms.” “These artists,” Newman continued, “are at home in the world of pure idea, in the meanings of abstract concepts….⁴” In this context the “experimental year’s” reduction of visual means and emphasis on formal invention responded to the desire to find a pure, perfect form that found its ultimate validation not in the concept of “beauty” based, as Newman perceived it to be, in European art historical models, but rather on the exaltation of the absolute and the sublime, the rapture of the indescribable.⁵

However original the “experimental year” seemed to Kyle and Porteous, I contend that their need to re-establish the primacy of Modernist Abstraction on theoretical

⁵ Ibid., 201.
grounds was a response to the confusion that characterized the art world of the late seventies. Plurality, rather than theoretical ascendancy, was the keynote then; competing styles and approaches—conceptual art, performance, minimalist art, to mention a few—gained a preeminence that questioned Modernism’s supremacy. Indeed, the challenge to Modernism, first made in the fifties by Neo-Dada and later Pop Art, had by the seventies become reflexive—a matter of course—to the degree that the relevancy of painting, possibly the most hallowed Modernist medium, was questioned on the grounds that it could no longer reflect the multiplicity of experience of contemporary life. Yet, a rift between the multifaceted practice of Canadian artists and an uncompromising—one could even say reactionary—adherence to Modernism on the part of many Canadian curators, art administrators, and commercial-gallery owners showed that Modernism was still a dominant doctrine where it possibly counted most—in the public and commercial gallery space.

Evidence of this is found in the transcript of the “Painter’s Symposium” that took place on March 2 and 3, 1977, at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, in Kingston, Ont., to close the rotating, yearlong exhibition Painting Now. The guest speaker was Terry Fenton, then director of the Edmonton Art Gallery and a true believer in the superiority of abstraction. His topic on the first evening was “New Canadian Painting,” and, while he acknowledged the many competing styles of painting in Canada at that moment, he

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7 Burnett and Schiff acknowledge this state of affairs in passing. See David Burnett & Marilyn Schiff, Contemporary Canadian Art (Edmonton: Hurting Publishers, 1983), 262.

8 Painters’ Symposium, March 2 and 3, 1977 (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University Press, 1977); and Painting Now 76/77 (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University Press, 1977).
argued that the vast majority of *good* Canadian painting was abstract. Fenton’s arguments in support of abstraction were largely based on the fact that such works purportedly transcended nationalist content and thus could be positively evaluated against the wider international context of recent art. This was an old claim given a new patina by pointing to the “new” forms, in relation to international abstract art, that Canadian abstract artists were exploring. That qualified certain artists—Bill Perduhoff, Kay Graham, Dan Salomon, David Bolduc—as original and necessarily relevant.9

Possibly Fenton’s support of abstraction as Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery at a critical point in the seventies may have had to do with the pervasiveness of that style in Alberta and other Prairie provinces, and perhaps on the West Coast.10 By the late seventies, Vancouver also boasted a number of well exhibited abstract artists, some of whom were shown together at the Vancouver Art Gallery in October of 1979. Titled *Affinities: Ten Painters of This Region*, the exhibition comprised artists who, according to curator Ted Lindbergh, were “the second and third generation spiritual descendents of a few dozen innovators who so altered the language of painting that it became the *lingua franca* in virtually all art/academic enclaves, however removed from the commercial and critical centers of the visual arts.”11 Lindbergh’s curatorial statement left no grounds to suggest that alternative views of the primacy of Modernist evolution in art discourse had been established for decades through artistic practice and critical theory.

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9 Interestingly, as soon as Fenton opened up the discussion the symposium took an embattled tone when painters of all stylistic persuasions, including abstractionists, took exception to his highly selective art historical arguments.

10 The popularity of abstraction in those provinces is discussed in Burnett and Schiff, *Contemporary Canadian Art*, 263.

Significantly, Fenton’s pro-abstraction arguments paralleled some strategies employed at the Victoria College of Art during the “experimental year” to ensure quality. In both cases, formal innovation was equated with originality, relevancy and authenticity. Nevertheless, while the methods and attitudes encapsulated by the “experimental year” fit what I argue were fairly widespread and mainstream curatorial and critical practices in Canada, the actual abstract painting formulated at the college adhered to a narrow definition that was far more stringent than anything exhibited in *Affinities* or championed by Fenton. Doubtless this had to be Newman’s influence, but I also suggest that the rebirth of figurative painting broadcast by the influential survey exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting*—organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in London from January to March of 1981—motivated the urgency and vigilance with which abstract purity was defended at the little college. The Huns were at the door, and they were bearing oily, loaded brushes!

Contemporary art surveys attach much importance to *A New Spirit in Painting* since the exhibition advanced the position that the answer to painting’s widely contemplated malaise could be found in figurative art. An implicit critique of Modernism as well as of conceptual art practices, the exhibition held that, after decades of being wrongly characterized as nostalgic and self-indulgent, figurative painting actually extended the terms of artistic discourse by including human narrative and doing so in vigorous, “painterly” styles as far away from pure abstraction as painting could go.

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The exhibition did include some abstract work—by Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, among a few others—and some Abstract Expressionist masters—De Kooning, Cy Twombly—but neither abstract mode was presented as holding primacy over other styles. In fact, while *A New Spirit in Painting* did anthologize painterly practice of the seventies and early eighties, it also aimed to re-evaluate the work of previously ignored or isolated masters of figurative painting such as Francis Bacon, Balthus, and Lucian Freud, and the late work of Philip Guston. By so doing, the exhibition also intended to give younger contemporary artists, mostly working out of the German Federal Republic and Italy, a pictorial lineage and an art historical legitimacy of their own—one that was pointedly European in origin rather than American. The eighties finally validated the work of artists, such as Bacon, who had been influential on Gordaneer during the seventies. Ironically, Gordaneer’s work of that decade anticipated the Neo-Expressionist trend of expressive brushwork and loosely surrealist narratives, but at a time when he had moved away from that style. By 1981 the “experimental year” was a more pressing and immediate question to him than anything offered by yet another stylistic shift proposed in yet another far-off art centre.

Ultimately, the environment at the VCA did not encourage artistic freedom. Instead of enlarging the terms of artistic debate to include the changes that were affecting the art world in Canada and abroad, the administration at the college retrenched to a Modernist ideology that did not allow for dissension from certain fixed principles. It was difficult, if not impossible, to argue against “purity” and against abstract formal invention as a symbolic representation of spiritual values. Nevertheless, as we will see, Gordaneer rose to the challenge by finally facing head-on his own assumptions about Modernist
abstraction: he chose figuration over abstraction and began to articulate a consistent critique of that theory.

**Effects of the “Experimental Year”**

Given Gordaneer’s personal inclinations, and the fact that the “experimental year” addressed issues he had already explored in the sixties, it is not clear why he chose to stay at the VCA and change his own work to fit the directives from the college. This seems particularly uncharacteristic since Gordaneer had managed to avoid the pressures from a group or art scene up to that point. Furthermore, his decision to stay at the college in 1981 was fraught with misgivings and cost him his valued friendship with Jack Wise, who did not want to participate and as a result left the college. But economic pressures finally determined Gordaneer’s decision to remain at the college: with a young family to support and reduced sources of income in Victoria, Gordaneer thought he had little real choice but to stay in order to meet his financial commitments.

It is true, nevertheless, that he participated in the “experimental year,” also, because by the end of the seventies he had begun to feel his work needed to go through the corrective shift to a “harder,” less painterly style that had characterized similar stylistic changes in the past. The “experimental year acted as a house cleaning,” he recalls, adding, however, that it was “a very abrupt shift” that would not have led him into pure abstraction on its own. Perhaps because of this, he was on the sidelines of the daily lunchtime discussions between Kyle and Porteous. Gordaneer felt he was “lagging behind” the other VCA teachers because he “was trying to come to terms with hard edge

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abstraction but was still hanging on to some of the painterliness.” “Even though [the works] might be abstracted,” he has said, “I had a lot of difficulty moving away from subject-matter.”16

The old conflict between abstraction and landscape subject-matter was still evident in the title of the first series done during the “experimental year”. Comprising paintings exploiting the interplay between verticals and horizontals, the West Coast Series are abstracted landscapes with clear reference to that subject, as #3 Sunrise makes evident (Figure 52).17 Gordaneer’s mild remarks about the effects of the “experimental year” on his studio practice veil the fact that he had been forced to abandon brushwork, drawing, figurative and landscape subject-matter. While he admits that during the “experimental year” he finally understood the Modernist evolutionist arguments that dictated the inevitability of abstraction, Gordaneer remembers that year as a crisis-point in his work. During that time he was forced to question what, why, and how he was painting.18

The crisis of the “experimental year” extended into his teaching. For the first time in his teaching career, he did not know what to say to his students or how to help them with their work. “I felt very lost, “he recalls. “Other than say ‘clean this out a bit,’ there was such a narrow range of requirements that I found it very difficult to give a critique.”19 Gone were the visits to Victoria’s Fishermen’s Wharf or Beacon Hill Park where he had previously taken his students to sketch outdoors as source-material for

16 Ibid.
17 The West Coast Series and the Diamond Series were shown at Kyle’s Gallery in Victoria, in April to May of 1982 (Figures 52 and 47).
19 Ibid.
studio paintings. In 1981 no still-lifes were set up in his painting classroom—one of his usual exercises to help students understand the relationship between background and foreground, and between positive and negative space. Instead, students were given design exercises with one or two geometric shapes plus color to hone their compositional skills. They were told to create variations on particularly successful geometric designs.

At the end of the 1981-1982 school year, Gordaneer was glad to learn from Kyle that the “experimentation” was over and that classes could go back to normal. Nevertheless, the college would not be the same for the rest of Gordaneer’s tenure there. Camps formed around the teachers: those who favored abstraction followed Kyle, while students who were attracted to expressive figurative painting held Gordaneer’s classes in high regard and learned much from Porteous’s life drawing lessons. More troubling, the rest of Gordaneer’s years at the college were marred by the fact that he was cast as a sort of latter-day “Douanier” Rousseau—an excellent but naïve painter who lacked the discipline and intellectual clarity to follow through with pure abstraction.

*After Hard Edge*

While the “experimental year” lasted only one school-year, the effects of that stylistic shift in Gordaneer’s work were felt for the rest of the eighties. To begin, he changed his medium from oil paint to acrylic. This would change again about 1986, when he began using acrylic as under-paint with oil for the over-painting. From the “experimental year” onwards, Gordaneer also acquired the practice of working in series on a set theme. While he had worked in series before 1981, this became a primary part of

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his method after that and afforded him a more systematic way of addressing the formal issues then central to his work.

Series often overlapped in production throughout the decade. Key characteristics of each theme were kept until Gordaneer had worked out the formal and compositional issues he wished to explore. In 1982 he began work on the *Couple Series* (Figure 53), which continued into 1984 and overlapped with the *Circus Series* (Figure 48). By the time that ended in 1985, Gordaneer had already begun a series of imaginary *Portraits* (Figure 54). That theme again overlapped with a second *Couple Series* painted through 1986 and 1987 (Figure 55), when the *Neighborhood Series* made its appearance (Figure 56). Paintings of imagined settings finally gave way to local landscapes in late 1988 and 1989 with the *Sidney Spit Series* and *Beacon Hill / Dallas Road Series* (Figure 57). These were accompanied by still-life in the *Cornucopia Series* and *Plant Series* (Figure 58).

This systematic approach was characteristic of stylistic changes to his work. Rather than the intuitive transformations that had distinguished his work earlier, in the eighties Gordaneer sought firmly to establish a formal problem that needed to be resolved as a theme and variations. While in *Conversation II*, of the *Couple Series* (Figure 53), the composition was dictated by the device of locating two figures in the setting of a cocktail bar, in *Springboard*, of the *Circus Series* (Figure 48), Gordaneer used two figures again, but this time with the added requirements of including motion and the colorful, patterned environment of the circus tent. As Liane Davidson wrote for the catalogue to the 1987 exhibition of the *Circus Series* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, “Gordaneer’s foremost intent was to utilize the formal compositional structures
available in painting to communicate to the viewer the experience of the figure’s movement, the tension integral to their performances and the character of the circus’ ambience.”

One important stylistic consequence of the reduction of pictorial means was to step away from the “baroque” syntax of the seventies, founded on the integration of surrealist automatic techniques and expressive brushwork. This was achieved by focusing on composition and colour as carriers, primarily, of formal invention and, secondarily, of narrative meaning. While still working from quick sketches drawn from his imagination, such as the working draft for Springboard (Figure 59), these pieces moved one step away from the automatic techniques he had used previously by concentrating on thematic continuity and simplicity. The sketches were not produced, as they had been in the seventies, as suggestive entryways into an unknown world of images, but were viewed as means to create unusual compositions on a known theme. Gordaneer worked without a model, imagining with a few gestural lines a composition that could tell the whole story of a particular moment in a circus performance or, alternatively, of the tension and alienation between a couple. This new method, Gordaneer felt, allowed for new freshness and immediacy that had become lost under the layers of sensuous brushwork in the previous decade. He could then concentrate on perfecting color and composition; he could concentrate on style.

In place of the draughtsmanship of Gordaneer’s works of the late seventies, the work of the eighties let flatly painted color areas tell the story. Gordaneer’s painting of

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22 Ibid.
the late sixties and his *Landscape Series* of the early seventies were precedents for his reduction of formal means to color, line, and shape. But the work of the eighties simplified and codified that already reduced approach. Before the eighties, five or six colours would be chosen to epitomize place, and only a few lines were used to represent figures, landscape, or objects. These minimal means could create lucid, eloquent paintings like the *Circus Series*, where a few pastel colors “carefully calculated in tonal values,” as Robert Amos wrote in a review of the show, “present a balance at once full of energy and peaceful.” Later work took this a step further by exploring the potential of such pictorial simplicity to relate more psychologically complex narratives. His *Neighborhood Series*, begun in 1987 and continued in 1988, is evidence of this. The spare starkness of *Regrets Only* conveys emotional alienation and loss in the city through a few gestural lines painted in variations of red and green (Figure 56). Such works had the quality of memories for Gordaneer. They recalled Toronto’s streets, stores, and parks and the urban dramas that unfolded there.

Gordaneer’s style of the eighties left the ambiguous, pliable space of the seventies for works where depth played only a small part. Gordaneer’s focus on the simplified formal characteristics of painting was well received but, as will be seen, the terms in which the work was discussed, and the restrictions of the style itself, also limited his pictorial exploration by defining him as a painter interested solely in style over content.

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Public Reception

Given the small amount of attention his work has customarily received, Gordaneer’s usual remarkable productivity met relatively good public response in the eighties. He had successful shows in Ontario at Toronto’s Gadatsy Gallery in 1984, Brampton’s Region of Peel Art Gallery in 1987, and Simcoe’s Lynwood Arts Centre in 1990. He showed part of the Neighborhood Series in 1988 at the Threshold Gallery in Vancouver. Elsewhere in BC, Gordaneer exhibited some of the Portrait Series at the Prince George Art Gallery in 1988; and the next year, in 1989, the Beacon Hill / Dallas Road Series showed at the Grand Forks Art Gallery. The Portrait Series was exhibited in 1986 at the Fine Arts Center of Washington State University in Pullman. That same year Gordaneer was included in the Art in Victoria 1960/1989 exhibition, organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria to survey the work of what it considered the best local artists.

In Victoria, also, his two principal exhibitions of the decade took place. In 1987 the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria showed James Gordaneer: The Circus Series, from February 5 to April 12. Curated by Liane Davidson, the exhibition was one of a series that responded to the common complaint of local artists who felt ignored by the institution. Well received by the public, the Circus Series was reviewed positively by Times-Colonist art critic Robert Amos, who approved of Gordaneer’s move away from his calligraphic markings of the seventies towards a cleaner style. Amos’s analysis of the works focused on their formal qualities and on the appropriateness to the theme of the few compositional elements. Davidson pushed this point further in the catalogue, 24

25 Amos, “Three Rings of Fun in View at the Art Gallery.”
pointing out how Gordaneer’s work bridged the gap between subject-matter and Modernism’s requirement of making qualities of medium the only content of painting:

A fundamental issue in modern painting is addressed and possibly satisfied by Gordaneer’s paintings as the portrayal of the subject and the qualities of the painting used to create the image become symbiotically related. The dual nature of paintings—form and content—are in the Circus Series happily married.\(^\text{26}\)

While, at the time, Gordaneer did not give clear evidence to suggest he was specifically setting out to find a way to bridge the gap between Modernism and subject-matter, there seems to be a grain of truth in Davidson’s observation, since the “experimental year” had brought Modernism to the forefront of Gordaneer’s thought. Nevertheless, Davidson’s statement is simplistic: strictly speaking, due to Modernism’s underlying logic there is no way to bridge the gap to subject-matter as Gordaneer himself would eventually conclude.

Gordaneer’s work of the eighties did not easily lend itself to different interpretation, however. His emphasis on form, composition, and colour covered his growing dissension with and criticism of Modernism’s emphasis on purity, originality, and stylistic consistency. Paintings like Springboard and Clover Point #1 (Figures 48 and 49) were instantly appealing and could slip easily under the protective mantle of a modified Modernist approach. It was implicitly understood that elegant and unadorned use of forms, colour, and line—the very basic elements of picture making—were the most significant aspects of Gordaneer’s work.

Shown at North Park Gallery in February-March 1989, the exhibition James Gordaneer: Two Themes: Arcadia/Cornucopia cemented Gordaneer’s reputation as an

\(^{26}\) Davison, James Gordaneer: The Circus Series.
aloof master of form and as a first-class colourist. The show, as the title states, consisted of two series hung as sets on opposing gallery walls. *Arcadia* consisted of oil painting of Victoria’s seashores made in the flattened style characteristic of the decade. The *Cornucopia Series* was painted on square canvases, whose flattened style was already moving towards a more painterly, lush brushstroke. *Cornucopia* got the most attention (Figure 58). In his review, Amos’s wondered why Gordaneer was not better known and his work more avidly collected since his still-lifes, Amos argued, filled the bill for anything one would want in a decorative painting.\(^\text{27}\) Art critic Frank Nowosad’s write-up of *Cornucopia* began by affirming the series as “a lesson in painting:”

\[\text{In these eight painting Gordaneer exercises form and colour. He contrasts soft amorphous shapes with solid blocks, bold stripes, and pointed designs. He paints a lightly-speckled orange fruit with the delicacy of Charles Demuth. He dexterously divides space and manipulates the horizon line. He shows why the eggplant is aubergine. And he smacks down wobbly rectangles of blue, electrifying the whole with daubs of yellow and orange. Like the American painter Milton Avery, Gordaneer makes you aware of the allure of off-beat colours.}^{28}\]

Clearly impressed by the series, Nowosad again identified Gordaneer as a painter in his prime who had, by 1989, developed a technically accomplished and balanced pictorial style. But the characterization of Gordaneer as a technical master was also limiting: his work of the time came to be viewed by critics as reliably gifted but little else. The detachment the tone of the reviews suggested reflected the fact that the struggle Gordaneer was going through in his long, personal debate with Modernism was no longer played out in the paintings. Not because, as Davidson wrote in the *Circus Series*  


catalogue, he had resolved the problems posed by Modernism by bridging the gap between formalism and figuration through stylistic simplification, but because Gordaneer had solved at least one problem set by Modernism. The “experimental year” irrevocably decided Gordaneer on the side of subject-matter, and so the works of the eighties overflowed with ease and delight in representational genres. Yet, I believe that Gordaneer’s elegant style actually limited his ability to express his growing distance from the values of purity and aesthetic consistency fundamental to Modernism.

“Something Hard to Come Up Against”

Gordaneer’s last foray into abstraction in the eighties represented a personal crisis that was resolved by his keeping some stylistic characteristics of hard edge abstraction but applying to them representational subject-matter. That, however, does not fully capture the difficulties Gordaneer had in working his way out of the crisis brought on by the exigencies of the experimental year, and complicated by his increasingly embattled position at the college. While the paintings of the eighties were formally successful, they nevertheless were far from being manifestations of free, personal self-expression. In fact, he now believes he was then overtly preoccupied with the problem of style rather than content, and that the works were a kind of “conversation with recent art history, but still trying to include what I liked about painting.”\(^{29}\) Modernism was still constraining him, but in the eighties the battle was not played out on the canvas.

Not able fully to articulate a critique of Modernism on his own, Gordaneer found mentors in artists who had wrestled with the same problem and discovered their own

\(^{29}\) Gordaneer, interview with Lucia Sanroman, September 23, 2002.
ways out. Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, Philip Guston, and, closer to home, Maxwell Bates, were in some cases influential stylistically; but, more important, their resistance to abstraction gave Gordaneer the necessary critical space to find his own alternative.

Maxwell Bates had died in Victoria in 1980. Although Gordaneer had not been a close friend of the older artist, he felt attracted to his work long before his own move to Victoria in 1976. As we have seen in chapter 4, Bates’s example influenced the expressiveness of Gordaneer’s figurative work of the second half of the seventies; but it was in the eighties that Gordaneer would be most affected by him. Reminiscent of German Expressionism, Bates’s work marries raw stylistic directness with satirical narrative that often conveys pathos and alienation. In Bates’s Kindergarten (Figure 60) can be found precedent for Gordaneer’s Neighborhood Series, such as Regrets Only (Figure 56). Although Gordaneer’s painting did away with expressive brushwork, both works suggest entire worlds of estranged personal relationships through a few concise forms and un-modulated colour.

Gordaneer’s identification with Diebenkorn was not stylistic but was based on his need to justify his attachment to subject-matter. Diebenkorn had returned to representation between 1955 and 1967 after becoming dissatisfied with abstraction.30 Diebenkorn’s reasons for looking to the world for pictorial direction echo one of Gordaneer’s complaints regarding abstraction. While painting the abstract series of 1981

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30 For an analysis of Diebenkorn’s representational work see Gerald Nordland, Richard Diebenkorn (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 85-145.
and 1982, Gordaneer had found his pictorial decisions were made arbitrarily. Once the format had been decided upon and the color palette chosen, the painting process was self-evident; it remained only to set down the predetermined forms on the canvas. The method allowed for little empirical give-and-take between artist, canvas, and subject that could lead to surprises while working and reveal, as in his work of the seventies, something unknown about himself or about painting. Diebenkorn, facing the same problem, had said in 1969:

I can remember that when I stopped abstract painting and started figure painting it was as though a kind of constraint came in that was welcomed because I had felt that in the last of the abstract paintings around ’55, it was almost as though I could do too much, too easily. There was nothing hard to come up against. And suddenly the figure painting furnished a lot of this…

Abstraction is self-referential not just in terms of its foundation on an internally coherent theory, but in that the work’s formal characteristics—the way it looks—are a response to the artist’s internal stimuli, whether these be intellectually or emotionally based. Representational painting, as Diebenkorn suggests, refers to something outside that closed system and brings up different demands. Such demands—what Diebenkorn calls “something hard to come up against”—ask for faithfulness to something other than the vagaries of self or of preconceived formulas. In earlier chapters I have referred to these demands, this “something hard to come up against,” as related to Gordaneer’s need to “ground” himself in the world through representation of his immediate surroundings. Diebenkorn points to another aspect of that “grounding”: representational painting’s basic

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32 Chapter 4 articulates the importance of surprise and revelation in Surrealism, and the influence of those aspects of that movement on Gordaneer’s work.
requirement to “stand for” something other is unyielding. It limits what is possible to do on canvas, but in limiting it defines the field of action. Once defined, that field becomes a stage for the artist to exercise choice that carries the weight of objectivity and of necessity.

From Milton Avery, Gordaneer learned simplicity of means. Mentioned often in Gordaneer’s reviews as an artist with similar stylistic concerns as Gordaneer, the American painter offered a brilliant example of how to bridge pictorial necessities and subject-matter. As Nowosad noted in his review of *Cornucopia*, Avery mastered “off-beat colours” and gave Gordaneer a model for attempting to transform abstracted colored shape into landscape or still life. In *Green Seascape* (Figure 61), painted by Avery in 1954, five unrealistic colours somehow speak of beach and mountain, just as Gordaneer articulated the same things with a few colors in *Clover Point Series, #1* (Figure 49).

For Gordaneer, moreover, Avery’s example went beyond style. In Avery’s long battle against critical isolation on account of his continued use of subject-matter, precisely during the critical period from 1940 to 1965 when abstraction reigned supreme, Gordaneer saw his own struggle. Significantly, in the last page of his copy of Barbara Haskell’s *Milton Avery*, Gordaneer wrote three notes referring to the text:

- 60 – Avery’s use of subject matter
- 140 – “He transcended his physical and economic suffering by focusing exclusively on refining and perfecting his painting.”
- 146 – The critical demise of Avery; the removal of support from younger artists (i.e. Newman, Gottlieb, Rothko); his credo.

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34 See Amos, “Three Rings of Fun in View at the Art Gallery,” and Nowosad, “Simple Gifts.”
The passage marked on page 146 seems to mirror Gordaneer’s own painful position in the eighties:

In addition to being denied critical approbation because of his adherence to recognizable forms, Avery failed to become engaged in contemporary theoretical concerns. He was not interested in discussing the intellectual or spiritual aspects of art, and this estranged him from an art world attuned to rhetoric and the redefinition of painting. The formal implications of art outlined by Greenberg were not important for Avery; he had incorporated them into his painting twenty years earlier—but not because he was interested in extending the frontiers of art.\(^{35}\)

Gordaneer’s spare notes and the passages to which they refer illuminate, far more than his work of the period does, his feeling of isolation and embattlement stemming from the environment at the college. That feeling had brought to the fore, once more, the old questions about the validity of his own endeavors. Haskell’s words uncannily pointed to Gordaneer’s position on the place that theory held in his painterly practice. Although he understood all too well the theoretical implications of Modernism, he chose—as he had done in Toronto in the sixties and seventies—to refuse to identify himself as an overtly theoretical painter, instead defining himself simply as an artist responding to pictorial problems intuitively rather than intellectually.

Nevertheless, Gordaneer continued to shape and sharpen his internalized argument against Modernist Abstraction through the radical example of another painter: Philip Guston. The influence was not stylistic but conceptual. Guston, who had been a well-recognized Abstract Expressionist and a significant player in the fifties New York art scene, was an articulate speaker whose disarming argument against Greenberg’s Modernist theories strengthened Gordaneer’s position. Given the importance of formal

and spiritual “purity” during the experimental year, Guston’s disagreement with Ad Reinhardt’s derision of any practice not predicated upon painting’s purity—upon its absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency—fundamentally changed Gordaneer’s own attachment to that idea. The following quote from Guston, again marked in Gordaneer’s copy of a monograph on the artist, not only articulated Gordaneer’s own position on the inner logic of Modernism, but verbalized what now seems obvious: painting is not now, nor has it been in the historical past, truly about purity, but about images—images that correspond to their times and reflect the artist’s subjectivity, but images nonetheless.

There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art: That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is “impure.” It is the adjustments of “impurities” which forces its continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden.36

And Guston practised what he preached. His “late style” (Figure 62), derided by critics and old supporters when he unveiled it in 1970, confronted head-on the strife and even ugliness of digging out from beneath the endless potentiality of paint on canvas, an image—a full, unapologetically lively image that held allegiance to none of the principles by which Guston had successfully painted for forty years.

While at the time he self-consciously defined himself as a non-theoretical painter, through the example of artistic mentors like Avery and Guston Gordaneer opened up the critical space necessary to undertake a thorough appraisal of the arguments used at the VCA to validate the return to hard edge abstraction. His painting of the eighties manifested the emphasis on pure pictorial means highlighted at the college but made more palatable to him by the inclusion of subject-matter. Nevertheless, this was not

enough to express his dissension from Modernism. Although Gordaneer was pleased with the aesthetic qualities of his own work, it was the alternatives and critiques offered by his artistic mentors, not his own painting, that reflected Gordaneer’s mounting dissatisfaction.

**Portent of Change**

The formal beauty of Gordaneer’s work of the eighties was the result of thirty years of committed painting. But works like *Springboard* or *Cocina I* (Figures 48 and 58), perfectly balanced in composition and colour as they are, feel like the calm before the storm—a stillness that portents change.

Having come face-to-face with abstraction again, Gordaneer finally laid to rest the old conflict with subject-matter embedded in his practice as a young man. In the eighties, Gordaneer became decisively, and despite personal difficulties at the VCA, a figurative painter. During the second half of the decade, Gordaneer prepared the ground for what would come. His last struggle with abstraction and the ongoing pressures from the college, where Gordaneer’s attachment to figuration was subtly derided, forced him to articulate a theoretical defense against Modernist Abstraction’s self-referential justifications. By no means an eloquent speaker or systematic theorist, Gordaneer formulated an informal but powerful critique of Modernism by looking to painters who themselves had wrestled with such questions. The painting and statements of Milton Avery, Philip Guston, and Richard Diebenkorn offered a reappraisal of values for forty years associated with Modernist Abstraction. Those artists found that quality, originality, and particularly freedom and purity, attributed solely to a certain kind of abstract practice, need no longer be viewed as the only legitimate artistic goals. Through
such influences Gordaneer learned he could tackle head-on a redefinition of Modernism’s preconceived aesthetic to find his own space for self-expression.

At the end of the eighties Gordaneer began to open his work to question, creating a second crisis-point, heightened by the fact that the overt preoccupation with style of the work of the period allowed it to fall too close to the purist, formalist requirements of Modernism—particularly as understood at the VCA—without truly challenging those values. After that gestation period, Gordaneer would again express on canvas his changing ideas in the nineties, when—for better or for worse—his work underwent radical transformation, becoming the arena for experimental explorations into space and content.
Chapter 6: Conflicts Resolved: “Topologism” as Postmodern Gesture

To say that during the 1990’s James Gordaneer’s painting underwent a radical transformation gives us a good start to understanding what happened to his painting in that decade. The use of this noun has disadvantages, however, since it is often applied to artistic changes that are not transformative but are, rather, simply alterations to previous styles. The dictionary definition of the verb to “alter” includes “to make some change in; to vary in some degree, without an entire change.”¹ This is not what took place in Gordaneer’s painting. From 1989 to 1999 his art was transformed. To follow again the dictionary definition, it underwent “an entire change in form, appearance, nature, disposition, and content.”²

The aim of this chapter is to understand the nature of the transformation that took place in Gordaneer’s painting in the nineties. When looking at his oeuvre during that decade, one immediately asks: what brought about the changes from the Modernist-derived style of Sidney Spit #7 to the strange biomorphic undulations of Tuba Player? (Figures 75 and 78). To answer this question the chapter will follow closely the evolution of Gordaneer’s work through the decade—as has been done previously—by analyzing examples of every stage of his development though those years. The chapter also intends to explain the reasoning that led to the radical changes in Gordaneer’s approach and painterly methods by focusing closely on his association with Raymond C.

¹ Consolidated Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary (Chicago, 1957).
² Ibid.
Lorens and the objectives, theories, and methods of the style and artistic group the two men founded. Through these activities Gordaneer finally put to rest his old conflict with Modernist art theory, specifically with abstraction, by elaborating a systematic critique of that theory. Finally, the theoretical approach both men founded and explored will be placed within the context of Postmodernism, in particular of a posthumanist understanding of the self that challenged Modernist concepts of the relationship between subject and object, self and world.

This last phase of Gordaneer’s career represents a significant shift in his approach in several key respects. Until 1989 Gordaneer had worked in isolation. Associations with colleagues had been important to his painting in the past, but from 1989 to 1999 Gordaneer no longer painted in seclusion but in collaboration. As a result, during the nineties Gordaneer’s painting became theoretical as it had never been before. This chapter explores in detail the philosophy and cosmology that were central to his inquiry. While Gordaneer had been aware, through each stage of his development, of the critical and theoretical issues informing art, he had consistently avoided identifying himself as a theoretical artist. His work of the nineties brings this into question since the complex philosophical issues he undertook became central to his work, and to his outlook on life, and remain vital to his painting today.

Methodological Problems

As chapter 5 discusses, by 1989 Gordaneer had come to a crisis point in his artistic exploration that was fueled by the disparity between the sophistication of his pictorial style—derived from Modernist abstraction—and his frustration with the stylistic
and theoretical ascendency of Modernism and its circular—“self-reflexive”—arguments.\(^3\) This tension opened his work to inquiry; nonetheless, the question might have remained nothing more than constant, nagging doubt were it not for the fortuitous development, during the second half of the eighties, of a friendship with Lorens. As had occurred in the past, Gordaneer would often use the open forum of personal relationships to push his painting into new territories. His relationship with Raymond Lorens—a Mexican philosopher and theologian, and by that date already an enthusiastic admirer of Gordaneer’s work—would prove to be the most significant influence on his work of the nineties and, he has said, possibly the catalyst for the most decisive changes, both artistic and philosophical, of his entire life.\(^4\)

In the fall of 1989 Lorens and Gordaneer began to meet regularly in Victoria for informal discussions that would vary from explorations of the nature of painting, the state of contemporary art, politics, and religion, to Lorens’s own area of inquiry—the epistemological implications and the challenges posed by the New Physics (Quantum Mechanics, Relativity Theory, and Chaos Theory) to Cartesian rationalism, empirical positivism, and finally to traditional theological concepts of creation. Gordaneer has written of these first meetings:

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\(^4\) David Leach, “The Rise and Fall of the House of Chapman,” Monday Magazine 25 #13 (April 1-7, 1999), 8. Lorens had moved with his family to Vancouver Island in 1974 to avoid persecution by the Mexican government stemming from his controversial editorials in Mexican newspapers. In Canada he changed his name to Raymond Lorens from Raimundo Cuervo Llorens. However, he also went by Raymond Cuervo Lorens and Raymond C. Lorens. Gordaneer and Lorens met in 1986 at the Victoria College of Art.
These conversations introduced me to ideas and facts related to physics, history, and so many disciplines I had only vague knowledge of. I found it encouraging [the conversations] reflected my own concerns of many years.

The conversations were free-ranging, utterly engaging, and long, soon running to six or seven hours. I attended those Sunday conversations at Gordaneer’s home and studio on Chapman Street. Only eighteen at in 1989, I participated in the discussions at Chapman Street, which would become perhaps the most formative experience in my understanding of art and in my own practice as painter. I was the first person to sit in and listen to the dialogue between the two men—which would be transformed by 1992 into the weekly formal meeting of the Chapman Group of artists, who included anywhere from six to nine painters, writers, and poets, all younger than Gordaneer and Lorens. Until I left the Chapman Group in 1997, I kept notes of the formal lectures Lorens gave every Sunday. These notes included lengthy observations on Gordaneer’s rapidly changing painting and the concepts to which they responded. It is important, then, to acknowledge my personal involvement with this period of Gordaneer’s career, which naturally brings into question my objectivity regarding his painting during the nineties.

The issue of objectivity in art-historical research has been brought into focus by the changes that have taken place in art history since the 1970s. The “old” art history has justly been found guilty of ignoring the social context determining the production and reception of artwork, of overlooking the structures of power that informed that context, and of obscuring the way the art historian’s own social context and position affecting

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5 James Gordaneer, Personal Notes, November 28, 2002.
their reading of art. It is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss fully what is now called the “new art history,” but it can be said that the “new art history’s” acknowledgment of subjectivity identifies an apparently inescapable indeterminacy between the art historian’s subject and his or her objectivity/subjectivity in relation to it. Nevertheless, the past did take place; historical documents do exist. It appears the best way out of the objective/subjective conundrum is to acknowledge the art historian’s position in relation to his or her subject.

Here is my acknowledgement: I was there. It is possible that my position in relation to Gordaneer’s work of the nineties makes objectivity not just theoretically suspect, but actually impossible. Nevertheless, my research methods and intentions remain the same for this chapter as they were for previous ones: to explain Gordaneer’s painting in relation to his social and artistic context. In this regard, few people know as much as I do in order to describe and discuss the reasons and effects, both positive and negative, of Gordaneer’s shift in philosophical perspective and artistic technique during the nineties. It is not my aim—let me be clear—to elaborate an apologetics of Gordaneer’s admittedly unconventional stylistic and theoretical approach during that time. I do not intend, either, to convert the reader to the style and principles elaborated by him and Lorens as founders of the Chapman Group. As I have implied in other

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7 At its worst, the indeterminacy between historical data and the historians who document it permeates research to the point where no historical event or document can be said to be objectively observable—it can not be found to have definite empirical existence outside the mind. Subjectivity—characterized as the cultural, psychological, and power structures that define the subject—distorts historical data by implicitly or explicitly embedding it in relation to the art historian’s own cultural framework.
chapters regarding his work of each period, the ultimate “success” of Gordaneer’s painting in any decade cannot be evaluated on the basis of the work produced during that time alone, but on the capacity of his own painting to explore fully whatever questions he chose to investigate, regardless whether these fit avant-garde artistic interests or the interests of his closest friends and associates.

This chapter may well tax the reader’s patience as I try to give an account of Gordaneer’s new painting techniques and of Lorens’s theoretical system, using mostly primary documentation and my own notes and recollections. Let me start by making the rather obvious observation that Gordaneer and Lorens’s areas of knowledge, interests, and life-long preoccupations permeated their conception of what they felt at the time to be a new approach to art. As will be apparent, their aims and the areas they chose to explore determined to a large degree the nature of their answers, in hindsight making both their results and the arguments upon which they are based appear arbitrary and perhaps even tautological. However, this alone does not disqualify their endeavors, since it is no different from most other speculative theories or art movements: the definition of the questions largely determines the solution.

A Symbiotic Relationship

From 1989 to 1992, Gordaneer painted incessantly. Every Sunday, Lorens came to Gordaneer’s Chapman Street home and began the day’s dialogue with new information on or insights into the previous week’s meeting. Then the discussion would move to the studio, where Gordaneer’s painting gave a pictorial answer to Lorens’s challenges and questions from the previous week. This, in turn, opened further areas of inquiry for Lorens, who spent part of the following seven days elaborating his answer to Gordaneer’s
painting. That way of working was a true dialogue in which both would bring their pasts into play. Gordaneer contributed wide knowledge of art, forty years of painting experience, and an unusual willingness to experiment and question his own assumptions about painting. Importantly, Gordaneer’s long and conflicted argument with Modernism, and his innate sympathy with representation, fundamentally defined the artistic issues that became central to the discussions. Lorens, not unfamiliar with conflict himself, contributed a keen intellect trained in philosophy at Jesuit seminaries in Mexico, and personal knowledge of the importance of challenging power structures that had been honed and tested during the sixties when his articles for Mexico’s largest daily, *Excelsior*, made him a target of political persecution by the ruling party.

More important, Lorens had spent the better part of the eighties writing a still unpublished manuscript titled “The Slaying of the Bull: Three Questions of Metaphysics that are Defining the End of Dogmatism.” As the title suggests, in this work Lorens detailed his personal view of the implications for creation theologies—to dogmatism—of the paradigm shift caused by the New Physics. His text focused on three questions beginning with the “teleological question,” which addressed the problem of ultimate causes within the framework of the randomness in matter revealed particularly by Quantum Theory and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. The second issue Lorens explored was what he called the “ontological question,” by what he meant the redefinition of the nature of existence and being in relation to a Postmodern understanding of reality as subjectively constructed of cultural accretions defined and

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8 Gordaneer, Personal Notes, November 28, 2002.
10 Written under his original name Raimundo Cuervo Lloréns.
constituted by language. The final issue investigated was the “topological question” where a description of the relationship between matter and spirit is posited by using topological mathematics as a model. Topological mathematics, defined by Lorens as “the branch of geometry that studies what remains constant in change,” is also the geometry scientists use to describe the curved geometry of space-time in General Relativity and the space of our universe.\(^\text{11}\) The field’s requirement of continuum during morphological change allowed Lorens the physical and metaphoric ambiguity necessary to formulate a physical model of a continuum between matter and spirit.

Lorens’s aim was to break down the boundaries between spirit and matter—mind and body—that had become, he believed, so fundamental to the binary definitions of reality at work in modern thought. He sought to establish the foundations of a new theology that integrated physical and spiritual dimensions through a metaphoric and phenomenal continuum between the physical realm and the metaphysical and philosophical realms. In the “Prologue” to the work, Lorens acknowledged that his approach to these complex issues was “neither scholarly nor academic,” and was meant to be read as “free flowing and unsystematized considerations of a subjective kind.”\(^\text{12}\) Perhaps as a result, “The Slaying of the Bull,” while displaying Lorens’s extraordinary creativity and knowledge, has its inconsistencies as a philosophical treatise.\(^\text{13}\)


\(^{13}\) By attempting to give a succinct description of Lorens’s thought as represented in “The Slaying of the Bull,” I am aware that I have reduced, and perhaps distorted, his arguments. It may be impossible to do otherwise, however, since my interest here is to show the conceptual continuity between Lorens’s thoughts on the nature of existence and his contribution to Gordaneer’s painting.
The objectives of Gordaneer and Lorens’s discussions corresponded to issues that had long preoccupied each individually. As they slowly defined a new artistic theoretical foundation and critical methodology, two key aims came to the fore: first, the need to elaborate a consistent critique of Modernist theory; second, the necessity to find an alternative to that theory that would allow for a more coherent representation of Postmodern concepts of reality and the self, particularly as defined, I argue, by Lorens in “The Slaying of the Bull.” It must be added, however, that while I believe Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s analysis and aims paralleled Postmodernist challenges to Modernism—as Humanist cultural movement and as artistic theory—they both felt their aesthetic inquiry was occurring in a vacuum and outside the theoretical frameworks available in the late eighties and nineties. Their sense of intellectual and artistic isolation may have been exacerbated, moreover, by the controversial tone of their first public act.

**Defining the Problem: 1989 to 1992**

In February 1992, Gordaneer had the first exhibition of his experimental work produced over the previous three years. The Victoria College of Art Gallery was hung from floor to ceiling with Gordaneer’s paintings exhibited in chronological order, beginning with the pieces produced in 1989 as early answers to his and Lorens’s two-way conversation. For the occasion Lorens gave a lecture on the ninth of February explaining the reasoning behind every stylistic change and defining, for the first time, the theoretical foundations of Gordaneer’s new style, which they had begun to call “topologism.”

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The gallery was packed with many of Victoria’s art community when Lorens began that memorable lecture. Three hours later the audience’s patience had been taxed to the maximum as Lorens moved around the room pointing to particular works and tried, fruitlessly, to give a synopsis of the changes to Gordaneer’s methodology and the importance and theoretical implications of his current work. Public reception of the paintings went from bewilderment to aversion; Lorens’s lecture was more openly criticized since a great many people found it long-winded and offensive in his claims against Modernism and in favor of “topologism.” Perhaps the public presentation of Gordaneer’s three-year transformation was doomed from the start. The changes his work had undergone, and the depth at which the two men criticized and questioned their own methods and beliefs, remain tremendously difficult to explain briefly even with the advantage of hindsight.

I will take Lorens’s notes for the 1992 lecture too as my starting point for discussing Gordaneer’s painting between 1989 and 1999, and the theory that gave rise to it. The lecture notes cover twenty-two points of analysis of Gordaneer’s painting and explanations of Lorens’s theoretical contributions to the project. The discussion began with a critique of Gordaneer’s painting of the eighties—the “starting point” for their work together. Identifying the paintings of the eighties as technically successful but ultimately lacking theoretical foundation, Gordaneer and Lorens set out to produce a succession of paintings addressing specific problems in that work.

The *Muse Series* (Figure 63), begun in the winter of 1989 and finished a few months later in February 1990, displays expressive brushwork, where as Gordaneer had previously pursued cleaner surface quality. Realistic representation, which increased as
the series progressed, became the focus of the paintings. Lorens explained both men’s interest in investigating the semantic aspect of representation in these works—what he referred to as “what the painting says and what the painting shows”—by distinguishing between the connotations of the imagery and the style of their representation. Meaning in the *Muse* paintings was signified through the image itself but also through the qualities of the brushwork and color used—in other words, through “what the painting shows.” Each of the portraits corresponded to one of the nine Greek goddesses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who presided over the arts. Thus, *Calliope* (Figure 63), the goddess of heroic poetry, stands confidently in the middle of the painting staring at the viewer, and yet her commanding stance is largely conveyed by the energetic brushwork rather than by the image of the nude figure herself, with its blank obscured face.

At this stage of their exploration, also, Gordaneer and Lorens established a direct relation between representational signs—such as objects, figures, or landscape—and space. Their contention was that any time a representational image came into the painting, it introduced its own space *by association* regardless how flatly painted it was. Thus, as *Euterpe* shows (Figure 64), as the *Muse Series* became less expressionistic the nude occupied increasingly believable space—a room with a chair for example—and color convey realistic modeling.

Early experiments appear to have been formulated to accommodate representation as much as to explore the meaning of “abstract,” painterly strategies such as expressionistic brushwork. As the work became increasingly realistic, Gordaneer and

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15 *Ibid.* As will be discussed, Lorens’s and Gordaneer’s interest in the semiotic aspects of representation corresponded to Postmodern inquiry into the nature of images as signs.
Lorens saw in the expressionistic brushwork and drawing of the earlier pieces an echo of precisely the kinds of “problems” they both thought had led to a general crisis in the painting of the eighties. According to their critique, the significance of and correlation between image signification and the material qualities of painting had begun to blur to the point that contemporary painting had become meaningless. Artists were deciding to paint expressionistically—or strictly hard-edge—on arbitrary grounds. Approached this way, neither style expressed awareness of the relationship between pictorial formal means and meaning; both simply manifested a vaguely defined self-expression. Lorens expanded this critique by outlining problematic characteristics associated with both Abstraction and the Neo-expressionism of the eighties: both styles suffered from low resolution, trivialization of color, obliteration of spatial illusion, and “objectification of the threshold of the evoked and the physical.”

Gordaneer’s paintings of winter 1989 allowed the two men to establish the parameters of their critique of Modernism and of contemporary painting. The next stage led them to elaborate their response to that critique. Interestingly, during those first three years of their joint investigation, as Gordaneer changed his style based on Lorens’s observations, so Lorens learned a great deal about painting. As a result, many pictorial concepts new to Lorens were not necessarily original, but he understood them from the perspective of a non-painter. So, for example, when Lorens noted in the Muse Series a distinction between “what the painting says and what the painting shows,” he was talking about the difference between style, or technique, and content. I believe that Lorens’s fresh look at traditional pictorial problems allowed Gordaneer to reevaluate his

\[16 \text{Ibid.}\]
conceptual foundation, and in some cases to relearn certain aspects of his approach to painting.

During the years Gordaneer and Lorens worked together, there was little mention of Gordaneer’s painting before the 1980s, so that certain aspects of Gordaneer’s previous stylistic experiments returned to his work at this time but were not recognized as re-elaborations of previous modes of painting, only as new investigations. Nevertheless, Gordaneer’s evolution from the expressionistic brushwork of Calliope (Figure 63), on to the impressionistic realism of Euterpe (Figure 64), and finally to the anecdotal realism of Bellhop, painted in September 1991 (Figure 65), recapitulated—but was far more systematic and methodical than—the changes that had governed his previous development. The transition from the Muse Series to the Niche Series, of which Bellhop is an example (Figure 65), hinged on Gordaneer and Lorens’s focus on space as one of the primary areas of exploration in their elaboration of an answer to their critique of Modernism, and to Neo-expressionist painting of the eighties.

**Probe into Space**

As the 1992 lecture discussed, in the summer of 1990 Gordaneer, accompanied by his son Jeremy, made a trip to Africa to teach painting at a Canadian community in Uganda. Faced with that unfamiliar environment, Gordaneer did what he had always done: he returned to sketching outdoors to situate himself in that experience. In *plein air* paintings like *Hut*, of July 1990 (Figure 66), Gordaneer paid particular attention to the way in which pictorial space was defined and delimited by representation. He found that each thing—a hut or tree—invited three-dimensional spatial relationships, not through Gordaneer’s stylistic or perspectival strategies, but by the meanings embedded in the
image itself. At the same time, in Canada, Lorens also thought about space as he carefully read Frank Stella’s *Working Space*.\(^\text{17}\)

Reviewers of *Working Space* often note the clarity and delight with which the American abstract artist analyses and critiques contemporary and historical painting in order to expose what he considers the malaise of abstract art since the seventies.\(^\text{18}\)

Starting from the premise that 20th century abstraction under the requirement of absolute flatness had lost its vitality and direction, Stella suggests that a new “working space” for painting could be found in the kind of potent pictoriality developed by seventeenth-century artists Caravaggio and Rubens.

What painting wants more than anything else is working space—space to grow with and expand into, pictorial space that is capable of direction and movement, pictorial space that encourages unlimited orientation and extension. Painting does not want to be confined by boundaries of edge and surface. It knows from the experience of Caravaggio that if its working space is perceived as real and palpably present, the depicted action will have a chance—it will have room to move and breathe.\(^\text{19}\)

Stella’s often brilliant analysis of the need to re-introduce space to painting is sometimes overshadowed by what seem to be self-justifying strategies for his own most recent work. While he acknowledges the capacity of the human figure to describe and define space, Stella displays the usual queasiness of abstract artists towards representational painting, stating unequivocally, “Modernism is the painting of the twentieth century, and abstraction forms the core of its pictorial growth and strength.”\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) Stella, *Working Space*, 35.

\(^{20}\) *Ibid.*, Stella’s remarks about figurative art are from page 71. The quote on Modernism is from page 113.
But if Stella felt that the “semiabandoned techniques of mechanical and representational illusionism” were creatively bankrupt, Gordaneer and Lorens found in Stella’s study justification and fuel for Gordaneer’s vigorous investigation into space through representation.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, Stella’s analysis of the development of the coherent, fully realized pictorial space of European seventeenth-century painting clarified for Lorens the epistemological foundations of perspectival space.\textsuperscript{22}

After Gordaneer’s return from Africa in 1990, he and Lorens began to develop an answer to the problems in contemporary painting—which they defined rather differently than Stella—by setting out parameters for what they called “probes”.\textsuperscript{23} The first probe was begun in the fall of 1990 as an investigation into “Cartesian space,” or the rationally constructed, perspectival, Euclidean space of seventeenth-century painting.\textsuperscript{24} By qualifying Euclidean space—in other words, ordinary two- or three-dimensional space—as “Cartesian,” Lorens was alluding to the influence of René Descartes on the philosophical thought of the early modern period. According to Lorens, Descartes’s definition of matter as strictly quantifiable and located in a specific point in space, together with his theory of mind which established the separation between body and mind—by identifying the substance of mind as incorporeal, indivisible, non-spatial, and unextended—was the foundation upon which the depiction of perspectival, Euclidean

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 113 and Lorens, “Notes for the Lecture.”
\textsuperscript{22} For more on the changing philosophical associations of perspectival space see “Into the Maelstrom of Metaphor” in James Elkins, The Poetics of Perspective (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1-44.
\textsuperscript{23} “Probe: 1. to search into or examine thoroughly;” in Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, (New York: Random House, 1990).
\textsuperscript{24} Lorens, “Notes for the Lecture.”
space in modern European painting was predicated.\textsuperscript{25} Gordaneer and Lorens were well aware that the formulation of perspective was a Renaissance phenomenon originating in Florence around 1420. By associating the representation of space in European painting up to Cartesianism Lorens was alluding also to the tradition of Western philosophical thought which gave rise to both Descartes and perspective.

Instead of simply copying the perspectival chiaroscuro of Caravaggio’s painting, Gordaneer and Lorens isolated what they considered the fundamental characteristic of its representation: a dependence on the mechanics of linear projection. Their literal approach involved the separation of spatial structure from realistic illustration by strictly basing the paintings on geometric sketches, which they called “orthogonic architectons” (Figure 67).\textsuperscript{26} Gordaneer’s \textit{Niche Series}—begun in the winter of 1990 and continued with variations until the fall of 1991—was based on “orthogonic architectons.”\textsuperscript{27}

Considered a starting point for the painting, the “orthogonic architecton” (Figure 67) was drawn independently of subject-matter to explore, as will be discussed later, randomly generated narratives. First conceived as a series of niches that delimited the action within particular vignettes—as in \textit{Marina} of early 1991 (Figure 68)—Gordaneer soon developed a whole vocabulary of techniques to address the figurative description of those originally abstract, geometric, architectural designs. \textit{Bellhop} (Figure 65), painted a year later, depicts “volumetric” figures illustrated in three-dimensions as if standing on the “architecton,” and “shadow figures” which adhere to the planes of the architecton and

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\textsuperscript{26} The “orthogonic architectons” bear notable resemblance to Gordaneer’s \textit{Landscape Series} of 1971 to 1973. There is no direct link between the term “architecton” used by Lorens and Gordaneer, and the term “Arkhitekton” used by Russian avant-garde Kasimir Malevich.
\textsuperscript{27} Lorens, “Notes for the Lecture.”
\end{flushright}
appear as flatly painted projections upon those surfaces. Finally, the double portrait of Gordaneer and Lorens, of late 1991, (Figure 69) went a step further in the exploration of the dependent relationship between the meaning carried by the figures and space. The various niches that make up the “orthogonic architecton” in this piece have ambiguous spatial connotations. These connotations fluctuate back and forth between a continuous, fractured “wall” upon and against which the two large figures appear, and the smaller adjoining nooks containing narrative elements. Gordaneer and Lorens ultimately found that without the figures adhering to, standing on, or contradicting the flat planar geometry of the original architecton, reading of spatial depth would not be possible and the piece would revert to the flat abstraction of its origin.

Gordaneer’s Niche Series successfully explored the spatial questions defined in their method by creating a whole technical vocabulary. Yet, Lorens felt that the biggest contribution of this probe was to allow them to study with more care the associations of Euclidean space with the Cartesian concepts described above. Like Stella, neither Gordaneer nor Lorens saw any purpose in reviving perspectival pictorial space, particularly since Loren’s own philosophical and theological ideas revolved around the far-reaching implications of the paradigm shift caused by the advent of the New Physics. Lorens found that in a world where physics contradicted Descartes’s definitions of matter, and where his separation between matter and mind was radically brought into question by such discoveries as Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, the reality depicted by Euclidean geometry—in painting from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century—no longer applied.
As a result of this insight, Gordaneer and Lorens came to see their task as the creation of a new space for painting that corresponded to the reality brought into focus by the New Physics. In “The Slaying of the Bull,” Lorens had elaborated a cosmology where matter and energy—he saw spirit or mind as an form of energy—developed concurrently and inseparably from the single origin of the Big Bang through “endogenous evolution.” 

Relativity Theory dictated that matter was made up of the same substance as energy but instantiating at different speed; Lorens believed that any accurate representation of space had to make reference to the fundamental ambiguity and interdependency of energy-matter. Following Einstein’s ideas, Lorens additionally proposed that the relationship between energy-matter was dependent on a continuum of spacetime. Therefore, the perceived separation between material objects—whether things or people—and the space that enveloped them was only the result of the framework of observation.

Looking to the non-Euclidean “spacetime continuum” formulated by Herman Minkowski in 1908 to express the reciprocal relationship of space and time in Relativity Theory, Lorens and Gordaneer set out to create a pictorial analogue to Minkowski’s equations. They found help in the elliptical geometry first conceived by Berhard Riemann in 1854. Einstein adopted Riemann’s geometry in his General Theory of Relativity to formulate his notion of the curvature of space and time, since elliptical geometries allow for the description of curved space-time.

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geometry “rejects the Euclidean parallel postulate on the assumption that there are no parallel lines and, if extended far enough, any two straight lines in a plane will meet.”

Struggling with the pictorial and theoretical definition of non-Euclidean space for his painting, Gordaneer and Lorens spent a weekend at a Benedictine monastery in Mission, B.C., in the fall of 1991. Gordaneer and Lorens were armed with a small book on topological mathematics and with Leonard Shlain’s *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time and Light*, published that year; neither questioned their decision to look to advanced physics as a means to address the relevance of figurative painting to the cultural context of the late twentieth century. More will be said later on some problems their appropriation of aspects of the New Physics entailed; for now, it must be observed that inevitably, in transposing equations into pictorial representation, a degree of arbitrary association between disparate disciplines was made.

At the Benedictine monastery, Gordaneer and Lorens decided to create a graphic depiction of Riemann’s geometry as an undulating grid or “field”. They also began using diagrammatic interpretations of topology to address the transformation from objects observed in three-dimensions, to their two-dimensional pictorial depiction upon the curved grids. Already utilized as the spatial metaphor for Lorens’s cosmological model in “The Slaying of the Bull,” topology offered visual enunciation of continuums that allowed for particular change within a constant formal structure. Thus, one object could be transformed into another by “bending, stretching, or twisting, but not by overlapping, tearing, or cutting.”

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32 This is called a “topological transformation” in mathematics. *Ibid.*, 369.
strategy since they needed to address the relationship between figures, objects, and space as one—that is to say, as mutually dependent and inseparable. Lorens conceived the “topological continuums” (Figure 70) upon which Gordaneer painted figurative narratives as “two-dimensional reality” where “there is no real separation between background and foreground.”

After fall 1991, Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s probe into space continued, but on very different visual and theoretical bases. Gordaneer drew countless Topological Architectons (Figure 70) that would be used as the foundation for figurative works. When it came to painting them, however, his task was to devise techniques that would make apparent the underlying curved structure of the topological architectons.

**Topological Probe**

During the February 1992 lecture, Lorens abridged the more detailed explanation given above of the specific mathematical sources of Gordaneer's topological painting. Instead, he went to considerable lengths to describe the metaphoric associations of Gordaneer’s topological field with the emerging new logical and physical reality described by science. In this new reality, objectivity could no longer be taken as a fact of human existence, and consciousness, or mind, was indistinguishable from matter. Topological painting, Lorens contended, represented this emerging reality better than any other pictorial mode of the late twentieth century. Lorens’s claim was not well received at the lecture, not only because his analysis, based on physics, made totalizing claims

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33 Lorens, “Notes for the Lecture.”
34 Lorens, “Glossary of Terms.”
35 Lorens, “Notes for the Lecture.”
about that “new reality” and the appropriateness of topologism to describe it, but also because the topological paintings presented that day represented an early, somewhat awkward, stage of the style.

*La Toilette*, painted in September 1991 (Figure 71), was included in that exhibit as a transitional work between the *Niche Series* and fully topological works of a later stage. An “allomorphic architecton”—an architecton that combines two dissimilar spatial structures—it joins Euclidean geometry on the right to elliptic, topological geometry on the left. The figure of a woman sitting on a green chair occupies the entire topological field, becoming one with it. Distortions warp the woman as well as the chair she sits on and make both seem pliable, reminding the viewer of the “bending, stretching, and twisting” characteristic of topology. By contrast, the “orthogonic” area of the painting is convincingly life-like, and does not have the artificial tonal divisions used by Gordaneer to describe the curves in the topological areas. This early technique, used to describe the continuums of the topological “fields” by distinct areas and tonal shapes, continued to be used in *Mrs. Still*, also of September 1991 (Figure 72), one of the earliest examples of a completely “topological architecton.” Again explained as a transitional piece by Lorens because of the carefully graded tonal segments meant to follow the curves of the painting, the central figure in this work is reminiscent of the multi-perspectival views of Cubist painting. Instead of radically dislocating instances of the figure—as seen from different view points—by using linear breaks as Cubism does, however, space and figure are equally affected by the convolutions of the curved topological grid upon which *Mrs. Still* is painted creating a continuum where space and time are one *seamlessly*, rather than through disjointed instances of isolated moments of observation.
Lorens’s lecture did not mention that the two works demonstrated some of the problems Gordaneer was having with elaborating the technical characteristics of the new style. Modeling in Mrs. Still was problematic (Figure 72). While darks and lights needed to follow the permutations of the curved topological architecton, the tonal range was too close for the spatial structure to read clearly. Moreover, by modeling with distinct shapes in specific tones, he contradicted the whole concept of continuum. An added problem was the decision to exclude shadows from the composition since these, thought Gordaneer and Lorens, required a light source outside the dynamics defined by the topological “field” of the painting. Thus, in Blue Mural (Figure 73)—the last painting discussed in Lorens’s lecture—a decision was made completely to separate darks from lights by introducing a “light beam,” meandering around the canvas irrespective of the subjects depicted or the convexities and concavities of the “topological architecton.” Solutions to these problems, however, were not formulated until the fall of 1992; but it is unlikely that later developments of the style would have convinced the artistic community in Victoria, which remained deeply skeptical of Gordaneer’s new approach and of the theory Lorens was developing concurrently.

The Formation of the Chapman Group

By February 1992, Gordaneer and Lorens had identified the premises of their pictorial investigation. Their analysis began by giving form to Gordaneer’s previously inchoate critique of Modernism and of its deleterious effects on contemporary painting of

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37 Apart from the exhibition at the Victoria College of Art Gallery in February of 1992, organized by Gordaneer and Lorens, Gordaneer did not have further exhibitions of his topological work until 1998 and 1999.
the 1980s, whether figurative or abstract. In the lecture Lorens had outlined that critique specifically around pictorial “problems.” To start, he had found that contemporary painting suffered from “low resolution,” by which Lorens meant that even representational work shied away from the kind of illusionism that had been prevalent in historical European art. Second, he observed that Modernism and Neo-expressionism “trivialized color,” meaning that color was not used realistically to describe objects depicted, but to express the artist’s inner emotion. Third, he identified such art as having led to the “obliteration of spatial illusion,” which referred to the primacy accorded in Modernist abstraction to flatness as means for the discipline of painting to critique itself; he also pointed to the terms of Stella’s criticism of late twentieth century abstract painting. Finally, Lorens noted the “objectification of the threshold of the evoked and the physical.” This last criticism was the most obscure, alluding to Greenberg’s dissolution of content into form by which “the physical” qualities of painting—such as color, brushwork, and flatness—became the subject-matter erasing symbolic content rooted in representation.

To address these issues, Gordaneer and Lorens formulated a new type of pictorial space within which color and content could be redefined in the context of descriptions of reality elaborated by Lorens. By implicitly defining the purpose of art as the visual representation of cultural values, they paralleled, I believe, similar strategies by such critics of Modernism—in particular of Greenberg’s theory—as Marxist art historian T.J. Clark. As a response to Greenberg’s assertion of artistic autonomy from cultural values, Clark had drawn a genealogy of the emergence of flatness in nineteenth-century French

38 Lorens, “Notes from the Lecture.”
painting noting that in its time it had conveyed populist anti-academicism and signified “modernity” by its allusion to posters, labels, and photography. “Flatness,” Clark concluded, “was therefore in play—as an irreducible, technical “fact” of painting—with all of these totalizations, all of these attempts to make it a metaphor.” Like Clark, Lorens also saw the pictorial medium as the metaphoric carrier of complex, culturally embedded meaning. For Lorens, value was attached not to the aesthetic qualities of Gordaneer’s painting, but to its capacity to stand for late–twentieth-century experience. As I will discuss, this strategy corresponded to some aspects of Postmodernist artistic theory; one difference was that Lorens and Gordaneer chose to base the parameters of their symbolic equation on descriptions of empirical reality expressed by the New Physics.

After the lecture Gordaneer worked constantly until July 1992, when his production was unexpectedly cut short by sudden illness. To the great alarm of friends and family, a viral infection put Gordaneer into a coma for two weeks. During his long convalescence, he took stock of the project that had taken so much of his time for three years and confirmed his commitment to it. The coma had one positive effect: Gordaneer says it hastened his retirement from the Victoria College of Art, where after the February lecture his new experiments were received with open hostility by some of the faculty.

Nevertheless, in the in early 1992 the spatial configuration by which Gordaneer’s painting made its metaphoric allusions visible was still problematic and undergoing definition. The same could be said of Lorens’s theoretical structure. A more definite

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pictorial and theoretical method began to emerge, however, between 1992 and 1996. By 1996, when Lorens finally set down in writing the fundamental definitions and aims of topological painting, the nature of their endeavor had completely changed. What once had been speculative exercises into the nature of painting consolidated into definite methods that could be employed by diverse artists. Thus, Lorens’s 1996 document began by establishing the reason for the investigation as follows:

“[It is] a joint effort by J. Gordaneer and R.C. Lorens to develop a system of critical analysis on the subject of art (past and contemporary), from where an artist could then develop his/her own personal styles that, while individually free, would nevertheless be founded on stable methodological considerations.40

The document titled “The Chapman Group,” written by Lorens in February of 1996, is significant for several reasons. First, it further articulated Lorens’s definitions of painting in general and of the theory and aims of topological painting specifically. Second, it outlined the aims and means of the new style in relation to the pictorial methods originally developed by Gordaneer. Third, by its very title, it disclosed a shift away from the painterly endeavors of Gordaneer, to those of the group of young artists who had begun to gather around the two men. Finally, the document took an openly combative position towards most other artistic and theoretical approaches practiced in the mid-nineties.41

By defining topological investigation as a group activity, Lorens hoped to counteract what he believed to be the excessive individualism of modern artistic practice,

41 Ibid. As mentioned above, I began attending Gordaneer and Lorens’s discussions from 1989 on. Jeremy Gordaneer joined us in the fall of 1991. After 1993 Jean Gaudin, John Climenhage, Mark Laver, and Lina Branter, among others, began attending regularly, Andrew Cienski joined in 1997. It should be noted here that each one of the members of the Chapman Group explored different aspects of topologism and so likely have somewhat different accounts of the artistic investigation of topologism.
hence its over-identification of artistic values with self. Thus, in theory, pictorial problems were addressed jointly by all members of the group, as the terms Lorens used in “The Chapman Group” indicate: “we take art to be a meaningful statement. As such we take it as being of the same nature as language.” 42 While the document stressed the participation of all members of the group in the creation of pictorial methods, it was in fact Gordaneer who most contributed to the continued development of topological painting techniques, and Lorens who carried on building the conceptual underpinnings. Nevertheless, the sense of community that developed in the Group gave each person a feeling of common purpose that imbued the enterprise with excitement and resolve. Everyone in the Chapman Group believed single-mindedly in the importance of topological painting. Furthermore, for Gordaneer the Chapman Group brought a complete reversal of the previous isolation he experienced at the VCA. Nevertheless, as will be discussed, there were disadvantages to the communal posture of the Chapman Group; one was that, in their wholehearted embrace of topological painting—and of Lorens’s artistic and philosophical theories—the group not only cut itself off from Victoria’s artistic community but, worse, was perceived as an eccentric and sometimes reactionary “art cult”. 43

**Color Probe**

One key difference between Lorens’s “The Chapman Group” document of 1996 and the lecture notes of 1992 was the reduction of the key critiques, or “problems,” of

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contemporary painting from four to three. In the “Chapman Group” document, topological painting elaborated three “probes” by which to redress “the loss of space,” “the trivialization of color,” and “the subversion of the narrative” introduced by Modernism and Neo-expressionism.44 With the conception of topological space, Gordaneer and Lorens believed they had redressed “the loss of space,” and that they had established a new “working space” that could become the spatial metaphor of the late twentieth century and of the twenty-first to come. Their probe into color, however, was still evolving. Aiming to end the “trivialization of color” that Lorens believed had resulted from abandoning nature as source, Gordaneer and Lorens formulated two parallel ways of addressing the complications of realistic representation in topological “fields.”

The first method sought to address the shift from the naturalistic colors of the subject-matter and its “un”-natural depiction in topological painting. Objects and people underwent radical transformations on a topological “field,” and the appropriate tonal description was difficult to develop. After the 1992 lecture, Gordaneer worked on solutions to the problem of modeling by differentiating between two distinct techniques of paint application. Sidney Spit Revisited, painted in April of ninety-two (Figure 74), was a continuation of Gordaneer’s technique in Mrs. Still (Figure 72). By “revisiting” his own painting of the late eighties from the Sidney Spit Series (Figure 75), Gordaneer wanted to highlight the changes to his style and to study the effects of the topological “field” on subject-matter by describing tonal changes, using as reference what he and

44 Ibid., 4. The problem of the “objectification of the threshold of the evoked and the physical” was dropped.
Lorens called the “wave function” of matter. Tonal changes in *Sidney Spit Revisited* adhere to the concavities and convexities of the underlying architecton and not to the naturalistic lights and darks of the earlier work. The second approach to modeling developed by Gordaneer and Lorens at this time alluded to the “particle function” of matter. Lorens used to describe the application of paint in this method as a brush moving over the curved permutations of the topological architecton like a particle traveling, over convexities and concavities, from one end of the canvas to the other. An early example of October 1992 is *Self-Portrait with Janie* (Figure 76) (Janie is an Ontario friend of the Gordaneers). Instead of the separate tonal segments of the “wave function” paintings, this technique emphasized continuity by gradually blending tonal differences using small brushstrokes. Ultimately, it was the particle method of paint application that would persevere, since it made the continuum fundamental to the style more clearly apparent and also helped to resolve the difficulty of locating the light source for topological painting.

As Gordaneer’s 1994 *Still-Life with Duck* suggests (Figure 77), he continued to investigate the positioning of a light source in relation to a topological “field” and, more pointedly, its casting of shadows. *Still Life with Duck* (Figure 77) is an allomorphic work in which the distinction between the two spatial structures is made by using a “light beam” that crosses the painting diagonally. Objects in the Euclidean area are described three-dimensionally; light behaves naturally by traversing the emptiness between objects and projecting shadows through space unto neighboring surfaces. By contrast, objects in

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45 Einstein ascribed a dual nature to light quanta in his Relativity Theory. Light functioned as both a particle and as a wave.
the topological area seem to exist in a parallel physical universe where light emanates from the depths of the undulations, flowing out of rather than traveling through space. “The chiaroscuros of topologism,” wrote Lorens, “are of an endogenous kind, it is a “light” resulting from within the thing-like event itself.”

*Still-Life with Duck* (Figure 77) is also an example of Gordaneer’s second color method. Lorens described it as the “maieutic method” because the color was built up using thin glazes of pure color in red, yellow, and blue—as if asking the canvas what it needed next to come to the desired end. *Still-Life with Duck*, again, shows the different approaches required by the topological “field.” The tonal cast of the red paint in the topological area, as well as the method of building it up from the white canvas, accentuated the sense that light and color emanated from, rather than fell towards, topological space. The quality of continuum was also aided by the “maieutic” method, since all areas of the canvas were painted using different layers of the same three colors.

Due to the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of this method, Lorens hoped it would be particularly effective in preventing “trivial color” from coming into topological painting. However, despite having used this method for a number of years and creating notable successes, such as *Tuba Player* (Figure 78), Gordaneer would eventually become frustrated by its inflexibility, too, and set it aside for more expressive painting techniques in later years.

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47 This method of paint application corresponded to a color theory created by Gordaneer and Lorens that used the frequency of colors as its source. I will not, however, discuss topological color theory here, since this would extend my investigation beyond the theoretical areas towards which this thesis is oriented.

48 “Maieutic: of or pertaining to the Socratic method of eliciting new ideas from someone.” *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*. This method was elaborated somewhat earlier than the work above, in early 1993.
**Narrative Probe**

The third probe that Gordaneer and Lorens established was to “revert the narrative” to its former status as conveyor of content. This last probe had at its core an anti-abstractionist stance because “narrative,” or the content communicated by representational images, became fundamental to pictorial meaning in a way that Formalist Abstraction had rejected.\(^\text{49}\) Formalist Abstraction specifically attempted to create a pictorial system where images had direct impact on the viewer without mediation through words or through a system of signs, emphasizing instead the aesthetic pleasure that could be derived from the formal qualities of the object itself.\(^\text{50}\) Gordaneer and Lorens rightly identified a primary area of critique of Modernism in the semiotic interpretation of pictorial images. Engagement with images as culturally embedded signs had been, in fact, a strategy of anti-Modernist artists since the sixties, and had become one of the main areas of analysis in proto-Postmodern thought. Oddly, Gordaneer and Lorens did not make reference to Postmodernism in their theory. I contend this owed to the fact that, while Lorens’s theory was linked in key ways with Postmodernist ideas, his ultimate aim in focusing on “narrative” as a third, indispensable probe of topologism was meant to both attack Modernist theory but also, and at the same time, to refer to a “meta-narrative” where, as we have seen, space, color, and now figure were metaphors for a new reality defined by the cultural context of the late twentieth century. In Lorens’s concept of this emerging cultural context the universal physical event, and the cultural event, were both evidence and substance of a randomly determined, evolutionistic


experience of universal self-creation. In other words, their ideas corresponded in some degree to Postmodernism, but not in every respect.

In their narrative probe, Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s analysis established as their first premise that all art—whether figurative or abstract—carried a story. Abstract art bases its meaning on the artwork’s capacity to disengage from the cultural context of its production—as Brian Wallis has written, “to separate itself from the “real” world to provide an imaginary place of ideal reflection.” Lorens maintained this hid a false dichotomy. It was not, he argued, that abstract art did not contain a narrative, but that the symbolic content it communicated was limited to Modernist theory itself. Abstraction’s symbolic content was simply too limited, he concluded. The inclusion of figuration, of representation, in the systems of signs that made up the artwork allowed the diversity necessary to convey all the symbolic allusions possible for the art object to be a multivalent, more accurate metaphor of reality.

The second stated premise upon which Gordaneer and Lorens set out to establish their narrative probe seems less clearly defined. By referring to the “randomness of creativity,” Lorens required the use of representational images to paint narratives that developed contingently. Topological painting could not depict the elaborate narrative programs of “history painting,” since this would be nostalgic and retrograde. Instead, as Lorens wrote, “what is being done is to allow figuration…to result contingently; dictated

53 Sanroman, Notes, 1992.
by considerations of plasticity rather than by any need to tell a story.” Paradoxically, this statement contains echoes of Greenberg’s desire to separate aesthetic pleasure—derived from the material attributes of painting—from the content or “story.” More will be said below on the sometimes ambiguous relationship between Modernism and Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s topological theory, but I believe that it was not fundamentally important for topological theory to establish the necessity of “randomness” in developing pictorial narrative and that this contributed to inconsistencies in topological theory.

This strategy can be more clearly understood, however, as reflecting the predispositions each man brought to their joint investigation. Gordaneer never favored narratives that depended on preconceived stories. In his painting of the seventies he had explored automatic surrealist techniques and collage precisely because these allowed him to investigate the symbolic content of images and remain surprised by the results. Gordaneer used similar collage and automatic techniques in Bellhop (Figure 65); yet, the latter work hides the automatic origin of the images by utilizing them primarily to define a coherent Euclidean space. As I have discussed, Gordaneer and Lorens had found in the Niche Series—to which Bellhop belongs—that representation was essential to the clear articulation of space, and particularly to the articulation of the differences between topological and Euclidean space. Yet, to justify the need for representational imagery, in either spatial structure, on the basis that without it the innate qualities of each space could not be apparent, does not stand up to reason. Both spaces are based on geometries that

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exist primarily as mathematical equations; in other words, their qualities have been originally defined in an absolutely abstract, parallel realm of representation.

Nevertheless, the graphic illustration of topological space that Gordaneer developed in the architectons (Figure 70) at first did need the figure to transform itself into something more than strangely undulating surfaces dotted with macaronis and jellybeans. By using “randomness” as his guiding principle, Gordaneer was able to transform those grids into dynamic, shifting continuums of light and mass that give rise to and become unpredictable narratives, sometimes of surprising poetry, such as *Homage to Hopper*, of August 1994 (Figure 79). Gordaneer set out to paint this work knowing he wanted it to be a tribute to the American painter. He did not know, however, that the painting would quote from recognizable works by Hopper, or that by citing Hopper’s compositions and architectural use of light and shadow he would come a step closer to resolving problems of narrative continuity he had encountered in earlier topological paintings. *Homage to Hopper* is what Gordaneer and Lorens called an “invented” narrative: the images were collaged together from disparate sources—Hopper’s *Lighthouse at Two Lights, Eleven A.M, Early Sunday Morning*, and *The Lee Shore*, with a photographic portrait of the American artist reproduced in Lloyd Goodrich’s *Edward Hopper*—which came together to “make up” a compelling and resonant new story.56

The terminology of the narrative probe, however, had difficulties in accounting for subject-matter painted from nature, such as portraiture, still-life, and landscape. The degree to which “randomness” plays a part in the narratives resulting from those subjects is reduced since it has its source outside the imagination of the painter and has not been

mediated by other forms of representation such as photography or reproduction. Gordaneer and Lorens nevertheless still believed “randomness” ultimately did determine the manner of depiction of that subject-matter. Topological theory was partly based on metaphoric representation of the New Physics; as a result, Gordaneer and Lorens believed that direct experience of unmediated natural phenomena was impossible. Since everything—people, things, land—was actually composed of undifferentiated particle matter, the quiddity of things, Lorens believed, was imposed upon matter by the observer. Thus, Gordaneer did not just represent the visible physical characteristics of a particular woman in More Kris than Kris (Figure 80), but imagined what she looked like. As she sat before him, he formed a mental image of Kris’s physical appearance and combined this with his mental image of her personality finally to produce a portrait.

The two believed the same of Gordaneer’s landscape paintings. Some topological landscapes were painted en plein air, but in some cases Gordaneer used these outdoor sketches to created updated versions of the local landscape that had occupied so much of his attention in the past. Chaos to Order: Fairfield Scenes, of 1998 (Figure 81), wonderfully combines Gordaneer’s loose outdoor sketching technique with impermanent dynamics of topological “fields” by including various scenes from the area in one work. Strictly speaking, in this case the narrative is both “invented” and “imagined” since it represents images that Gordaneer had originally painted in situ but then combines them into an “invented” narrative.

The narrative methods described above were created to escape the often overwrought, self-conscious, and sometimes “preachy” narrative programs that often resulted, Gordaneer and Lorens thought, from using painting as a forum to tell a personal
story. But I do not believe Gordaneer avoided this pitfall altogether. By the time, in March 1999, that Gordaneer and other members of the Chapman Group held an exhibition titled “Chiapas Liberation Theology and Art” at Victoria’s Eaton’s Centre Fourth Floor Gallery, everyone seemed to have set aside that particular directive. Gordaneer made three paintings to convey the brave battle being waged by the Zapatista Army of Liberation for indigenous rights in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. One of those works was a portrait of an anonymous leader of the movement, Subcomandante Marcos (Figure 82). The unusual depiction of Marcos’s trademark balaclava as unstable, even fierce, topological undulations suggests its own overwrought narrative.

One undeclared but key issue at play in the elaboration of the narrative probe, I believe, was the capability of topological pictorial strategies to convey a “meta-meaning.” Part of this “meta-meaning” was to make topological painting the theoretical opposite to Modernism; but it was in the symbolic equation of the style with Lorens’s ideas about the nature of the physical universe, and the part played in it by a self-ordering consciousness in matter, that constituted the substance of the “meta-meaning” informing topological painting. This is evident in both Fairfield Scenes and Subcomandante Marcos, which are part of Gordaneer’s Chaos to Order Series (Figures 81 and 82). Discussing the importance of the concept of chaos to topologism, Lorens wrote:

Because Topologism deals with art as a language…meaning (as represented by the figure) [stems] from “the absence of,” in other words, from chaos. This “becoming” of meaning happens in a topological manner.\(^\text{58}\)

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\(^{57}\) The exhibition was held from March 11-14.
\(^{58}\) Lorens, “Update on Topologism,” (May 1997).
He concluded by quoting Jewish theologian Martin Buber: “human life, as a specific entity which has stepped forth from nature, begins with the experience of chaos as a condition perceived in the soul.” Accordingly, the terminology in these titles is significant: “random,” whose dictionary definition includes “occurring or done without definite aim, reason, or pattern,” does not mean the same as “chaos,” which is defined variously as “1. a state of utter confusion and disorder; and 2. the infinity of space or formless matter supposed to have preceded the creation of the universe.” Lorens’s interpretation of the New Physics led him to believe that randomness played a fundamental part in the evolution of matter, from the initial inchoate chaos of the universe’s origin, to our current ordered cosmos—order which is constantly dissolving back into chaos. This was a cosmos that, he further maintained, was ordered through and by language as that which defined and preserved meaning.

In this context, I believe, the strategies proposed in Gordaneer and Lorens’s narrative probe make the most sense. Representational images satisfied Gordaneer’s need to make a final stand against abstraction. They also imparted meaning in the context of a larger universe of semiotic correlations. This subject will be formulated in the next section.

**The Semiotics of Topologism**

Language played a fundamental role in Lorens’s ontology. It was also the basis upon which he elaborated one of the most fundamental aspects of topologism: “We take

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59 Random House-Webster’s College Dictionary.
art…to be of the same nature as language." With this straightforward statement Lorens exposed the concept on which topology’s circuitous pictorial universe was built. By establishing that a work of art operates like a system of signs in a similar way to language, Lorens agreed with semiotic interpretation of art which argues that our understanding of images “no longer operates at a purely visual level, but also concerns the articulation of meaning.” This allowed Lorens to apply similar analytical premises to his and Gordaneer’s theory of art as he had done to address the epistemological questions in “The Slaying of the Bull.” To address both enterprises, Lorens used British philosopher Bertrand Russell’s analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, found in the introduction to the first, 1922, English edition of the text.

The paragraph in Russell’s “Introduction” that Lorens later applied to the linguistic systems of visual art bears reproducing here in full:

In order to understand Mr. Wittgenstein’s book, it is necessary to realize what is the problem with which he is concerned. In the part of his theory which deals with Symbolism he is concerned with the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language. There are various problems as regards language. First, there is the problem what actually occurs in our minds when we use language with the intention of meaning something by it; this problem belongs to psychology. Secondly, there is the problem as to what is the relation subsisting between thoughts, words, or sentences, and that which they refer to or mean; this problem belongs to epistemology. Thirdly, there is the problem of using sentences so as to convey truth rather than falsehood; this belongs to the special sciences dealing with the subject-matter of the sentence in question. Fourthly, there is the question: what relation must one fact (such as a sentence) have to another in order to be capable of being a symbol for that

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other? This last is a logical question, and is the one with which Mr. Wittgenstein is concerned.\textsuperscript{64}

Lorens made several significant changes to Russell’s analysis. To begin, he took at face value that art, as language, should also seek to establish the “conditions required for a logically perfect language,” which, by its very wording, implicitly founded artistic quality in the relations between the art “sign” and the “things”—or culturally construed reality—it represents.\textsuperscript{65} Consequently, Lorens went on, for visual art to be a “logically perfect language” it needed to address the four problems of signification which Russell identified above: the psychological problem, the epistemological problem, the empirical problem, and finally the logical question. Lorens modified these four “problems”—or questions, as he called them—to apply them to painting:

We work with four categories in which manifest coherence is to be required of art: (1) coherence with the true self of the artist; (2) coherence between the marks used (color, texture, shapes, figures, etc.) and the iconography of the moment; (3) coherence between the esthetic tensions of the work and the esthetics at play in the world producing the work; and, finally, (4) coherence between the meaning of the painting as a whole, with the meaning of the world in question as a whole.\textsuperscript{66}

I believe there are several arbitrary correspondences made in Lorens’s appropriation of Russell’s analysis. The most obvious are his modification of Russell’s “epistemological problem” to “iconography” (or the system of marks that make up an image), and from the “empirical problem” to the “esthetic question.” Finally, Lorens changed the terms of Russell’s “logical question” to a requirement of coherence with “the meaning of the world in question as a whole.” Furthermore, by demanding coherence in

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.}, ix.
\textsuperscript{65} Lorens, “The Chapman Group,” 2.
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.
every one of the four areas originally outlined by Russell, Lorens proposed a model for language—whether images or words—as more stable, and more capable of absolute signification, than Russell or Wittgenstein had in mind, and certainly, than most linguists expect today. When Russell refers to psychology, he does so to identify a problem or disparity intrinsic to linguistic representation; he is not demanding—as Lorens does—that a person using language ensure that their inner psychology be in *coherence* and complete correspondence to the sign. Russell’s definition of the psychological problem is addressing the difficulty of ascertaining the way language unpredictably changes through personal, subjective, *intention*, thereby negating its capacity for absolute realistic representation. Ultimately, as Russell writes, Wittgenstein was seeking to identify the limits of logical signification itself and doubted the very possibility of absolute *coherence* between “the structure of the sentence and the structure of the fact.” Thus, Russell concludes:

That which has to be in common between the sentence and the fact cannot, so [Mr. Wittgenstein] contends, be itself in turn *said* in language. It can, in his phraseology, only be *shown*, not said, for whatever we may say will still need to have the same structure.\(^{67}\)

Nevertheless, Lorens’s changes are understandable since his intent was not to create a consistent semiotic theory, but simply to establish the parameters upon which to formulate an art-critical discourse that included context—and expressly cultural context that must be represented in art in a “logically coherent” way—and in so doing to oppose Modernist denial of the currency of images as linguistic signs. More practically, Lorens identified all areas in which an artist needed to find correspondence between the signs he

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\(^{67}\) Russell, “Introduction,” x.
or she used and the cultural context, also linguistically construed, from whence all came; thus allowing Gordaneer to see such tools of his trade as spatial representation, realistic color application, and figurative depiction specifically as these related to the four questions discussed above.

I conclude that Lorens’s conception of the sign seems to be closer to that of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who in the American pragmatic tradition laid more emphasis on the sign’s correspondence with the outer world, than to the Continental structuralist theories of Ferdinand de Sassure and others, who—perhaps more closely following on Wittgenstein’s analysis—focused on an idealist, internal understanding of the sign. 68 In order to comprehend the qualities of the new space of continuums posited by Gordaneer’s topology, representational signs must refer to something beyond the four edges of the canvas—to something from which each level of representation depicted on the canvas originates. Topological painting contains signs that are read as curved continuums with reference to the phenomenological universe. It also represents objects and figures with reference to the world of everyday experience. Color refers to the real world, but also to particle matter. The resulting narratives refer to all of the above but also to the traditional genres of portraiture, landscape, and so on. In Gordaneer’s *The Circus Animal’s Desertion*, painted in 1999 (Figure 83), this layered encoding further makes reference to two distinct types of language. Based on the W.B Yeats poem of the same name, Gordaneer’s images illustrate the linguistic signs of the poem in a direct way. It is the pictorial space depicted that challenges the viewer’s habitual mechanisms of signification. The appearance of familiar images on Gordaneer’s canvas, as they are

68 I am indebted to Alex Potts for the formulation of this idea. Potts, “Sign,” 17-18.
distorted to fit the strange convolutions of the “topological architecton,” forces the interpreter—the viewer—to reassess his or her previous experience decoding figurative and spatial pictorial signs. Thus, Gordaneer’s topological painting, he and Lorens contended, ultimately asks the interpreter to construct a new definition of the reality within which signs operate.

Modernist signs, as we have seen, function on different assumptions. “[M]odernist aesthetics,” writes Potts, “has taken the anti-iconographic stance of nineteenth-century naturalism to its logical conclusion—it is not just that the true significance of a work is said to reside in its mode of representation rather than in the object represented, but the very possibility of its representing an object is denied.” Lorens’s assertion of art’s linguistic character is a break with the self-referential strategies of Modernism; in this way it allowed Gordaneer to articulate and expand a critical position where his adherence to subject-matter was given theoretical foundation.

**Topologism and Modernism**

Gordaneer’s topological painting was a response to his mounting dissatisfaction, during the eighties, with Modernist Abstraction. Nevertheless, through that decade Gordaneer’s painting had not, I contend, reflected his growing disbelief in Modernism, or his frustration with Modernism’s rejection of representation. It was that state of mind that opened him to Loren’s ideas in the late eighties. The analysis that would eventually lead to the topological painting Gordaneer produced in the nineties began by questioning Modernist assumptions about the nature of painting. Thus, Gordaneer and Lorens

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70 Gordaneer, Personal Notes, November 28, 2002.
formulated a theory that opposed Modernism in significant areas. Lorens theorized that representation is fundamental to painting’s nature. According to him, without representation—or without the metaphoric linguistic constructs embedded in representation—painting could only be decoration, as it avoided its elemental character as embodiment of the contextual moment. Painting’s aim was not, as Modernism had argued, the purification of the characteristics of the discipline itself precisely to differentiate itself from cultural context, and particularly from “low,” suspect, cultural expression, but to integrate itself within that cultural framework.

Partly owing to Gordaneer and Lorens’s use of Stella’s *Working Space* as a departure-point for their investigation, topologism does not simply hold an opposing position to Modernism. Indeed, Gordaneer and Lorens adhered to a Modernist conception of originality, and of art-historical evolution, that posits topological painting as a continuation of Modernism. The ambiguity of topologism’s relationship to Modernism originated in Lorens’s agreement with Greenberg’s identification of the two-dimensionality of the picture plane as the most essential, and truthful, material characteristic of painting. “What we are doing,” Lorens said at the 1992 lecture, “is that we are saving the conquest of the twentieth century—less deceit—and at the same returning to the depth of the real world.”

Gordaneer and Lorens did not conceive of the “topological architecton” as a three-dimensional space, but rather, as a two-dimensional field without separation between background and foreground. In “The Chapman Group” document Lorens explained, “we have taken the two dimensional (flat) space inherited

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71 Sanroman, Notes, February 1992. If this sentence sounds inflated, one might wish that Gordaneer and Lorens had looked to outside influences more often, to avoid the unfortunate hermetic quality of some of their statements.
from modern art and, after curving it capriciously…embedded it into the real space of the viewer, a space of course necessarily three dimensional.\footnote{Lorens, “The Chapman Group,” 5.}

Implicit in the statement is Gordaneer and Lorens’s agreement with a Modernist definition of stylistic evolution of art since the nineteenth century. In this linear progression, topological art was to be the next step from the dead end of Modernist Abstraction. This thesis was the theme of the largest work Gordaneer produced during the nineties. From the spring of 1995 to spring 1996, Gordaneer worked on a “diorama” of fifteen panels, four feet by six feet each (Figure 84), which were conceived as one long narrative program. Titled \textit{Space Lost Space Regained}, the piece was shown in March 1999 at the MacPherson Library Gallery at the University of Victoria.\footnote{From March 30 to April 29. Discussed by Leach, “The Chapman Group,” 8.} \textit{Space Lost Space Regained} ambitiously reviewed the Modernist history of art—from Edouard Manet to Ad Reinhardt—as an inevitable progression from Realism to absolute flatness, and proposed topological painting as the natural evolution. The composition of the “diorama” includes quotations of decisive works or styles of the recent art historical past, beginning with Manet’s \textit{Déjeuner sur l’herbe} (Figure 85), and moving on to Cubism (Figure 86), and finally to abstract painting reminiscent of Reinhardt’s (Figure 87). Joining these superimposed vignettes is a continuous landscape of Victoria that changes in style as it refers to the styles in the vignettes. In the Expressionistic panel (Figure 88), for example—which quotes both Paul Gauguin’s \textit{Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling the Angel)} and Gordaneer’s own \textit{Calliope} (Figure 63)—the landscape running behind is suggestive of Fauvism and of German Expressionism. As “space was lost” with
abstraction the landscape disappears (Figure 87), only to be saved by topologism, first through “Orthogonic architectons” (Figure 89), and then by fully topological areas where the background landscape motif weaves back and forth with figures (Figure 90). The “diorama” ends where it started: Déjeuner sur l’herbe is quoted again, but this time the figures and landscape are both affected by the curves upon which they lie (Figure 91).

Of all the topological paintings Gordaneer produced during the nineties, I believe the “diorama” to be the most problematic. The didactic and programmatic aspects of the work take over, making it difficult for a natural, felt understanding of Gordaneer and Lorens’s ideas to come through. By basing the validity of the work on its correct visual representation of a theoretical argument, the diorama opens itself to criticism of the terms of its arguments and not to the quality of the painting. A major problem with the way Space Lost Space Regained constructs its case is how it presents art-historical evolution. Instead of questioning the linear evolution of art history, the diorama “buys into” the highly selective, orthodox Modernist construction of art history that is dependent for validity on isolation of art from cultural context, and on formal originality. Ironically, strictly speaking within this historical interpretation, topological style and theory would be found not just to be eccentric but also to be actually deeply flawed. Modernist theory admits nothing outside its own rationale because it purports to be a logically coherent, closed system. For Modernists all roads lead to flatness, color, and the four edges of the canvas. They do not inevitably lead to undulating fields as metaphors of spacetime. Topologism may be one among many other artistic movements—such as conceptual art, anti-art, and performance art—that emerged as a reaction against Modernism. For these reasons, interesting as the diorama is, the second half depicting topological space seems
like a rhetorical gesture and does not appear to follow logically from the artificial, Modernist art historical evolution of the first half. Despite the extraordinary technical accomplishment of the diorama, one can also criticize the fact that the content of the work completely outweighs the style and form of the painting, which looks disjointed, busy, and burdened by the narrative program.

*Space Lost Space Regained* also made clear the importance of the modernist styles of the early decades of the twentieth century, such as Cubism and Futurism, that paralleled many of topologism’s visual strategies as well as its interest in modern science. The difference between the interest in space and time, or in spacetime, so important to Cubism and Futurism, and that of topologism was that the latter took Quantum Mechanics as the scientific theory that most decisively challenged the objectivity of empirical reality, and as such as the most pertinent representation of reality to be used in topological painting. Nevertheless, the interests and pictorial strategies of Cubism and Futurism, with their emphasis on the Einsteinian idea of the fourth dimension, was an example to follow to Gordaneer and particularly to some of the younger members of the Chapman Group.74

By asserting that topologism continued and corrected the artistic evolution that had led to the dead-end of abstraction, Gordaneer and Lorens, expressed the belief that their theory, and the art that resulted, illuminated something of the “true nature” of reality. As discussed above, it seems Lorens held there was an absolute standard of exactness between the linguistic signs encoded in an artwork and the world to which they referred. Modernists too had based their statements on belief in an absolute standard of

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exactness, but in their case between the material form of the artwork and Idealist forms. Both theories finally upheld an unchangeable, core “Something” upon which art ultimately based its truth-value and its aesthetic qualities. Given Lorens’s conception of art as signifier of a contextually constructed, constantly changing reality, the strategy of justifying topological painting on similar absolute standards to Modernism seems unnecessary and contradictory. This contradiction in topological theory, however, gains significance by highlighting the fact that Lorens wanted to avoid the kind of relativistic epistemological and moral universe that Postmodern theories advocate.

**Topologism as Postmodern Gesture**

Despite Lorens’s hesitancy to characterize topological painting as Postmodern, I believe it is in relation to Postmodernist definitions of art and reality that topologism has most to offer. The term “Postmodernism” is notoriously difficult to define. Postmodernism depends on such shifting analytical strategies—and on more-or-less arbitrary constructions of what constitutes “Modernism”—that Michael Walsh’s conclusion may be the most appropriate: “perhaps postmodernism is itself postmodern;

vexing, contradictory, dissimulating rather than simulating, undecided if not actually undecidable.”

Postmodernism can be understood as that which continues and expands modern traditions; alternatively, it is also that which opposes them. In some cases it is regarded as the era that follows the “Modern Period” and the Humanist tradition, and is equated in this instance with posthumanism— which marks the end of absolute belief in reason—and with focus on the self as primary existential entity. The indeterminacy of meaning revealed by this position illuminates the Postmodernist focus on analysis of the modes, aims, and effects of representation. Thus, for Postmodernist writers and critics the construction of meaning is the central issue of the period since it manifests the mechanisms through which consciousness comes to be, and also the way reality is perceived and constructed. Postmodernism, tied to posthumanism, has led thinkers to question firm notions of the self embedded in the “Cartesian cogito” of the “Modern Period.” From deeply held Postmodern epistemological skepticism—which denies the possibility of cognitive apprehension of anything beyond the self’s linguistic formulations—stems a new conception of the self that transcends the binary categories between self / world by positing a model for the self as epistemologically integrated with

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77 Gaggi, Modern / Postmodern, 18.
78 Risatti, Postmodern Perspectives, 10.
“empirical” reality by becoming as well as begetting that reality. Or, as Ihab Hassan has said, reality conceived as a “cosmological extension of human consciousness.”

Topological theory shares this conception of the self with Postmodernism, or more specifically with posthumanism. By disturbing traditional dualistic categories such as background and foreground, or space and object or figure, topologism also posited a “self” that is inseparable from its environment. When Gordaneer and Lorens established an inseparable inter-dependence of space and figure they agreed with the above description of the self as “a cosmological extension of human consciousness.” Figures in topological painting not only are literally embedded in their physical and cultural context but give meaning to that context. Furthermore, as was discussed above, the visual strategies of topologism seek to disturb Cartesian definitions of mind and matter by establishing a fundamental, linguistic correlation between representations of space and figure and the parallel system of representation that informs the New Physics. Because Gordaneer and Lorens departed from the position that meaning resulted from language, they believed in the validity of topological painting by making its aesthetics correlate with different aspects of Quantum Mechanics, Relativity Theory, and Chaos Theory. In a cosmology where all is language there is no reason that painting cannot become a metaphor for the physical workings of the universe, which are themselves defined through alternate modes of linguistic mathematical representation.

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80 Ihab Hassan quoted Ibid.
Naturally, the semiotic interpretation of images as linguistic signs is another feature topologism and Postmodernism have in common. Gordaneer also used the Postmodernist strategy of historical quotation in paintings such as *Space Lost Space Regained* or *Homage to Edward Hopper* (Figures 85 and 79), and for similar reasons: he and Lorens were concerned with identifying the epistemological connotations of culturally recognized imagery. There is another notable aspect in which topologism and Postmodernism have parallel ends: Postmodernism has been said to oppose the Modernist association of art with great ideas by great masters;^82^ by not distinguishing clearly between each of their contributions to topologism—by always using the pronoun *we*—Gordaneer and Lorens sought to counter Modernism’s individualistic fetish.

There is, however, an essential point upon which topological theory and Postmodernism do not agree. As art historian and theorist Ann Kaplan concludes:

> Both usages of the postmodern involve a thinking that transcends the very binarisms of Western philosophical, metaphysical and literary traditions which have been put into question by poststructuralism and deconstruction. To this extent, the use of the term ‘postmodernism’ signals a moving beyond / away from the various positionings (not only aesthetic, but those dealing with class, race and gender) of previous totalizing theories. ^83^ Topological art did not abstain from seeking to establish a totalizing theory of its own. Ultimately, this can be traced back to Lorens’s need to create a complete, self-sustaining, cosmology with a point of creation and a teleological direction. In turn, one suspects, this also resulted from the psycho-social needs of the two—from the position as “outsiders” in the context of culture in post-1980s Victoria. In “The Slaying of the Bull” Lorens

^82^ For more on this see Wallis, “What’s Wrong with this Picture? An Introduction,” in *Art After Modernism*, XIII.

formulated a model of the cosmos where everything, including painting, related in some way to a theology of divine self-creation. Thus, in 1998 Lorens wrote of topological painting:

The Chapman Group takes art to be a language…. But the language of art is a doxological language. The doxology of art is not of a doctrinaire God, but rather of a universal absolute of beauty. 

There is nothing Postmodernist about this statement. The doctrinaire tone of the statement speaks of a notable change in the aims and inner dynamics of topological painting and of the Chapman Group. It also brings to the fore one of the main problems that faced topological painting. Because topological painting seeks to re-define pictorial and conceptual categories, it relies on the viewer’s knowledge of, and agreement with, of all that I have explained above. While Gordaneer’s topological paintings have much to offer, they cannot really be understood or accessed unless the viewer can read the signs encoded in the artwork. In this, however, topologism does not differ from other art styles. What it does do is ask of the viewer to become aware of the way that signs operate and, furthermore, that he or she then set aside their reflexive interpretative mechanisms. Finally, and most problematic, it also asks the viewer to believe in the kind of reality of which it purports to be a metaphor. This position could be termed a modified, subtilized, or inflected postmodernism.

The End of the Chapman Group

As the tone of Lorens’s statements became increasingly dogmatic, full agreement with them was more and more difficult to elicit. Lorens’s desire to re-establish a

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connection to a spiritually-based epistemology paralleled Gordaneer’s long quest for spiritual meaning; however, the general public in Victoria was less than willing to follow this particular path. Gordaneer writes:

The bond that united the Chapman Group members in a common cause prompted somewhat unfriendly attitudes from other artists and former colleagues and friends of mine. An element of this unease of others, I am sure, was warranted on their part. But my attitude was, “so be it!”

Gordaneer held only one solo show during the nineties, and it was of his work of the seventies. Otherwise he exhibited only as a member of the Chapman Group until the summer of 1999. The largest and best attended of these occasions was “The Chapman Group Open House and Art Show,” hung at Gordaneer’s home on April 19, 1998. The review of the show by *Monday Magazine* reflects the opinion of many visitors:

If art is a mirror of society, the Chapmans live in a cosmic funhouse. With a profound disdain for contemporary art, their work has arrived at a style…dominated by twisted, undulating, forms and faces that look like bloated specimens floating in jars of formaldehyde.

Although, in their haste to mock topological painting, the reviewers all but missed the finer points of the paintings and sculptures on show, there is some truth to their assessment. The work of the members of the Chapman Group, as a whole, suffered from the same over-emphasis on conceptual approaches I identified above in my analysis of *Space Lost Space Regained*. This was a notable change for Gordaneer, who had not

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85 Gordaneer, Personal Notes, November 28, 2002.
88 For more of this see Mark Laver, “From the *Painted Word* to the Mystery of Vision: How Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Art Changed my Approach to Painting,” unpublished essay (April 24, 2001).
only never been considered (or thought of himself) as a theoretical artist, but whose painting had always followed an intuitive evolution whose content, as I have shown, was nearly always the experience of painting itself. Nevertheless, it was Gordaneer’s painting that established the forms and means by which topological works signaled their meaning, so while his approach was more calculated than anything he had explored before, His sheer productivity and compelling pictoriality gave topologism its sensual characteristics—that which came unmediated through the eye. The painting produced by other members of the Group rarely overcame the technical challenges posed by the style. Consequently, these paintings relied even more heavily on their content and on the audience’s agreement with the increasingly ideological position they represented.

The change to religious terminology in Lorens’s statement of 1998 marks another shift in the inner workings of the Chapman Group. From 1989 to 1992, Gordaneer and Lorens’s investigation was experimental and open-ended. The core concepts of topologism were in place by 1992. From then to 1995, Gordaneer developed the pictorial vocabulary to go with that. By 1996, when “The Chapman Group” document was written, however, Lorens began to move away from painting into politics, philosophy, and theology. By 1998, Chapman Group meetings, while still consisting in part of discussions of art, were largely concerned with politics, Liberation Theology, and religion.\(^8\)

Concern with political and religious issues transformed the tone of topological theory. What had once been a questioning tool became an ideological position. While

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Gordaneer had always formulated varying pictorial answers to Lorens’s intellectual inquiries, by 1996 the methods he had created to address a changing and changeable theory began to harden into a style. Furthermore, as more painters joined Gordaneer and Lorens’s meetings, both men became aware of the need somehow to impart what they knew to others. Thus, Gordaneer’s experimental techniques soon became a matter of dogma. Topologism, from the start, had had a rigidly structured series of steps to achieve a particular end result; in the earlier period, though, those structures could be changed to accommodate new information. As time went on, even Gordaneer became hesitant to alter his own methods. Not that the paintings were repetitive, as we have seen by the number of different approaches and probes he pursued in those years; rather, the changes to his work were always first formulated conceptually, and the nature of those concepts was less adaptable as time went on.

By early 1999, the close personal connections that had developed among members of the Chapman Group were beginning to chafe. The anti-individualistic character of their endeavors had its limitations. Deviation from the stylistic method, from the conceptual basis, or desire to seek individual artistic careers were viewed with unease, particularly by Lorens, who felt the younger members of the Group were not ready to explore the implications of topologism on their own. By that time, however, there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between Gordaneer and Lorens that the work they had set out to investigate had been completed. As Lorens told Monday Magazine at
the time, “everyone will have to go their own way, and see what they can do in a year or two. Maybe then the concept of the group will have a new validity.”

The Chapman Group disbanded in April 1999. Raymond Lorens died of a massive heart attack that July, putting an end to the relationship with Gordaneer that had been at the heart of their endeavors during the nineties. As for Gordaneer, he came out of the Chapman years enriched with a whole new tool kit of ideas and pictorial means:

> I feel blessed by the experience, professionally, and from the friendships that have been cemented in a most active and growing way. One of the main tenets of Raymond’s thinking was the “random flux” of events that come to be, from chaos, by the doing of the work. This is the lasting and growing legacy of these years.

Topological theory is inconsistent. Theory is a form of representation and, as Barthes has remarked, “representations are formations, but they are also deformations.” Gordaneer’s topological painting is unwieldy. It may ask too much of its audience. It asks, for example, that the viewer become comfortable with its busy surfaces. It asks that its often overly illustrative descriptions of mathematical theorems, of the New Physics, or of Postmodern concepts, be accepted. It asks that the viewer believe in the representation of reality for which it ambitiously attempts to be a metaphor. And it asks all that without that palliative of Postmodernism—irony. Lorens was right. Gordaneer’s paintings of the nineties are about belief, but not necessarily the religious belief that Lorens so boldly and obsessively poured into his unorthodox “Slaying of the Bull.” Gordaneer’s topological painting is about belief because the ideas that transformed his art during the

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91 Gordaneer, Personal Notes, November 28, 2002.
nineties entirely changed his outlook on art and life. He had to believe in them to paint them. Once again Gordaneer grounded his experience of a new landscape by painting it, but this was a landscape of signs and systems of though “in-forming” that which we call reality, that which cognition observes, understands, and conforms.

In the systemic, constantly becoming, Postmodern universe there is no place for totalizing theories. In this context, contradiction is not a negative result but an unavoidable characteristic of the system(s). So, topologism is inconsistent. It is contradictory. As a concrete painterly act it also anchors the centrifugal motion of Postmodernist entropy by delimiting what could be disparate, incongruous, and inchoate responses. Gordaneer resolved his conflict with Modernism through his and Lorens’s elaboration of topological theory. He anchored his critique of that theory by painting images where the figure and the landscape—genres that run through his oeuvre like a theme and variations—were absolutely necessary and the fulcrum point for a whole universe of enfolded signification.

Gordaneer’s topological painting is not his last statement. It is just another step along the way. But it is the step that has taken him in an entirely different direction. His painting of the nineties, I argue, is a Postmodern gesture. The works are themselves a representation of his changing self whatever that may be—whether he was coming to understand the New Physics or reassessing his relationship to the world and to himself—within a cultural context that is also constantly changing. I will resist the temptation to make totalizing claims of Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s topological painting. It was what it was—ambitious, eccentric, clumsy, full of potential, intelligent, earnest, imaginative, self-doubting, absurd, sometimes beautiful, and always hopeful.
Conclusion

As we have seen, the painting of James Gordaneer has been driven by mixed influences, contradictory styles, and conflicting theories. Under his brush, such disparate sources have merged in paintings that constantly reflect back and upon his past but, at the same time, say something new and surprising. After researching Gordaneer’s career and observing and interpreting his work, I have concluded, again and again, that for him the act of painting mediates his experience of the existential moment when the past constantly becomes the present. It is through the practice of painting that he has reflected on the world and engaged with the theoretical issues that inform his work. Finally, that act has opened the psychological and intellectual space necessary for him to develop an understanding of art and reality that more coherently reflects the ongoing historical moment.

Gordaneer’s artistic education during the 1950s aligned him with the tradition of Canadian landscape painting precisely at the time when the face of art in the country would be permanently changed by Abstract Expressionism. Caught between natural sympathy for representational styles and the stylistic and critical hegemony of Modernist Abstraction, Gordaneer’s painterly evolution was shaped by the need to address and resolve that fundamental tension. Yet, the associations of Modernist Abstraction with creative freedom, originality, and aesthetic significance were difficult, perhaps impossible, to escape. As a result, Gordaneer’s painting has been defined by consistent ambivalence between participating in the avant-garde abstractionist styles that responded
to Modernist theory, and at the same time maintaining the validity of realism as an artistic expression of contemporary life.

This tension has placed Gordaneer at the periphery of artistic movements all his life. His artistic evolution has not been linear or consistent. It has been characterized by willingness to be influenced by multiple, often opposing, movements and styles rather than by adherence to a single aesthetic position or stylistic tendency. For these reasons, isolation became a strategy of resistance to an artistic and theoretical discourse from which he felt estranged. In a period dominated by highly speculative avant-garde movements, Gordaneer adopted the persona of the outsider by repeatedly departing from his artistic milieu and embracing the role of the intuitive, rather than intellectual or theoretical, artist.

Precisely because Gordaneer has situated himself on the periphery, I believe, his work is important. As Jan Bialostocki writes, artists at the periphery “make the choice of developing independently chosen elements to create out of various influences an art autonomous and original.”¹ Such artists reveal what often goes unsaid in the prevalent art-historical narratives of the second half of the twentieth century, by finding a gap where resistance to the dominant discourse was possible, without aligning themselves, however, with any of the many anti-establishment movements legitimated by anti-Modernist avant-garde theorists and critics. The tension between Modernist Abstraction and representation that has threaded through Gordaneer’s entire career suggests that, for many Canadian artists who came to artistic maturity during the fifties, Modernism

acquired the characteristics of ideology. Like Gordaneer, artists such as R. York Wilson, Gordon Smith, Paterson Ewen, and Jack Shadbolt subscribed, during different periods of their careers and to one degree or another, to the prerequisite of linear stylistic evolution, the importance of originality, the rejection of subject-matter, and the necessity of formal internal logic as requirements for artistic quality and relevancy. Faced with work that did not fit such demands, artists like Gordaneer chose the freedom found in marginality and eccentric stylistic evolution as a form of resistance to that hegemony.

If engagement with and resistance to Modernist Abstraction have driven the narrative of Gordaneer’s career, I contend the themes and approaches that have plotted that account emerge in hindsight as the significant motifs of the story because he returns to them persistently throughout his life. All through Gordaneer’s career, his relationship to the landscape genre and attachment to figuration have been counterbalanced by delight in the material means of painting—pigment, brushstroke, color, and shape. As I discuss below, in the give-and-take between these two needs Gordaneer elaborated approaches to landscape that framed his more experimental pictorial explorations. He formulated narrative methods for figurative painting based on surrealist automatism and collage that remain central to his work to this day. The formal qualities of his use of color, paint application, and composition have ultimately responded to a desire to engage with the raw materiality of paint, often while depicting ambiguous pictorial spaces that create depth while denying three-dimensionality. Finally, his engagement with and understanding of the conceptual issues of the dominant theories throughout his career consistently contradict his carefully crafted persona as an anti-intellectual painter. This is perhaps most evident in his explicitly “theoretical” stage, as Lorens’s collaborator.
In Gordaneer’s practice, the landscape frames his experience, but this function of landscape is not limited to the privileged framing of the artist’s everyday life—what he looks at and lives. I believe the constant practice of landscape painting also frames Gordaneer’s more intuitive pictorial experimentations: those leaps of faith that have been fundamental to his development. Thus, in situ landscape painting is for Gordaneer a stable frame, in the Kantian sense of the parergon, or external complement. The different styles of abstract and representational painting Gordaneer has explored throughout his career have been the site of experiments in content, form, and technique that stand in contrast to the relative stability and stylistic consistency of his outdoor landscape painting. From his early landscapes of the Ontario countryside to his latest Victoria paintings (Figure 1 and 92), the practice of in situ landscape drawing and painting frames Gordaneer’s studio works by marking a border from which the complexities and eccentricities of the latter can be observed and defined by contrast. This practice, however, has also functioned as a frame to which Gordaneer has persistently returned to “rest easy” in the security of uncomplicated—though not necessarily realistic—representation while engaging with the problematic of negotiating between disparate artistic sensitivities.

Automatism and collage flung the doors of representation wide open for Gordaneer. Abstract automatic painting techniques were important to the development of

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2 According to Kant, the frame or parergon, meaning “by-work,” is not an empirical starting point but rather a marker of limits that makes the form of the work which it frames “more clearly, definitely, and completely intuitable, and besides stimulate[s] the representation by [its] charm, as [it] excite[s] and sustain[s] the attention directed to the object itself.” Quoted in Paul Duro, ed., “Introduction,” The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2. For a recent influential discussion of the parergon see also Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
American Abstract Expressionism and, more to the point, Gordaneer’s approach to that style. When, after a decade of exploring abstract modes, Gordaneer again began including the figure in his work, he did so by using automatist painting techniques to depict images derived from collage (Figure 37). During the nineties, as Gordaneer and Lorens addressed the issue of narrative in contemporary representational painting, variations on his previously established methods of automatism and collage would be used again, but transformed by the necessities of his new exploration into curved space (Figure 79). In both cases, Gordaneer’s aim was to disassociate himself from control over the narratives created by his figurative compositions and thus allow for the random creation of surprising, and even poetic, images.

Modernism was the subject of consideration in Gordaneer’s painting in two general ways: as a dominant theory and as a style that placed value on the material qualities of the discipline of painting itself. Gordaneer was originally seduced by that engagement with pure painting as the only—and self-defining—preoccupation of the artist. It is precisely Gordaneer’s pleasure in exploring all the formal possibilities available to painting, as painting, that is apparent in his Abstract Expressionist work of the second half of the fifties (Figure 8), in his Post-Painterly Abstract canvases of the sixties (Figure 26), and, finally, in his Modernist-derived figurative painting of the eighties (Figure 48). Gordaneer practised abstraction because not to do so in the fifties and sixties would have made him, in his own eyes, irrelevant and reactionary, but also—perhaps more important—because abstraction allowed him simply to paint. That desire to paint—to get lost in pigment and brushstroke—remained an important part of his work of the seventies as he again began exploring figuration (Figure 41). It gave
impetus, by the end of the decade, to what I have called a baroque syntax that dissolved binary categories through the sheer density of his calligraphic brushwork.

That tendency to blur binary categories emerged again in his work of the nineties as he and Lorens developed topological painting. While Gordaneer would not return until the late nineties to the impasto surfaces of his work of the seventies (Figure 82), topological painting sought to create a pictorial space unifying background and foreground. It did so, moreover, by establishing precisely the kind of underlying geometric structure upon which some of the baroque figuration of the work of the seventies had been constructed (Figure 41 and 70). As Gordaneer and Lorens set out to define the parameters of their investigation into the requirements of a “logically perfect painting,” dissolution of spatial boundaries through paint application—that implied the interdependence of the image depicted with the material means of painting, and of things with the space they inhabit—paralleled only in formal ends Gordaneer’s approach to the figure in the seventies. One key difference between the work of the two periods, however, is that Topologism openly challenged Modernism on theoretical grounds, while Gordaneer’s baroque figurative work of the seventies had done so only implicitly.

It was that challenge to Modernism—by understanding and finally overcoming it—that persisted through Gordaneer’s career. Gordaneer’s and Lorens’s topological painting finally articulated Gordaneer’s opposition to Modernism’s proscription of subject-matter by making representation essential to painting and by linking aesthetic quality to appropriate expression and reflection of a constantly changing cultural context.

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3 _Untitled_, of 1970 (Figure 41), builds its shifting surfaces on an underlying geometric structure made explicit at the upper-right corner of the painting as a pencil grid. The _Topological Architects_ (Figure 70) also disappeared under the figurative images of topological painting.
By reintroducing spatial depth and narrative, with direct reference to the New Physics and to a posthumanist understanding of the self, the two men were able to sidestep some of the most enduring arguments in support of abstraction. But in attempting to situate topologism within the evolution of Modernism, Gordaneer and Lorens perhaps unwittingly reinforced the requirement of linear stylistic evolution that Modernism argued for. This strategy continued to place Gordaneer’s eccentric evolution, presumably before topologism, outside art-historical and art-theoretical categories. It also distanced his history from appropriate consideration during the topological years. Gordaneer nevertheless reflected back on to approaches he had developed earlier—such as his use of automatism and collage to address randomly generated narratives, or of underlying geometric structures to support images that, at the very least, created ambiguity between foreground and background. Gordaneer “borrowed” from himself reflexively, however, since the complex representational issues topologism raised demanded that he use every method in the painterly vocabulary he had developed during his entire career.

It was Lorens’s introduction to Postmodern thought that has been most important to Gordaneer’s late phase. The content of his painting today still reflects the philosophical and cosmological issues he and Lorens delved into during the nineties. His painting also remains committed to exploring pictorial representations of the phenomenological reality of the New Physics. But it does so in a more personal way than was possible when he and Lorens were formulating the basic premises of topologism. Gordaneer now investigates the subjectively construed dimensions of spacetime, not by illustrative representation of curved topological space, but by breaking the space of continuums with projected shadows that fracture the undulating surface of topological
painting. In the recent *Tiger Act*, of 2002 (Figure 93), a woman merges into a tiger through Gordaneer’s unifying façade of brushwork and paint; but images and elastic surface are disturbed by shadows that come out of nowhere to question the relative position of those elements to one another and, by extension, to the viewer.

In the end, Gordaneer holds allegiance to nothing but his own pictorial intuition. This has been the gift of his marginality. But that marginality has had a cost too. The lack of critical opinion in which his work has grown has made his evolution more convoluted than it needed to be. One might also wish, moreover, that Gordaneer had been more open to direct engagement with the many anti-Modernist movements formulated from the fifties on that might have supported his position. Nevertheless, his location on the periphery of Canadian art has given him the freedom to explore differing art styles, to borrow philosophical positions, and to question and alter his painting as he pleased, creating from all these disparate sources an autonomous art that, while personal, resonates with issues significant to the recent history of Canadian painting.

With this study I do not purport to establish the conceptual groundwork for a comprehensive theory of Canadian artists of the periphery. I simply wish to open a critical space from which we can understand and appreciate the tension and conflict embedded in the practice of artists who came of age under Modernism but who sought to carve their own path, away from the dominant aesthetic theories of the second half of the twentieth century. These artists are particularly significant in that they reveal the social and political implications of artistic debate, and the difficulties of finding a personal space for true self-expression.
James Gordaneer is a complicated artist. Unwilling or unable to assume any one of the personae contemporary artists adopt in order to gain critical recognition, his rich painting has gone un-interpreted and, worse, largely unviewed—a great loss to Canadian art audiences. Despite all I have written in this thesis, when I stand before one of Gordaneer’s paintings something new is revealed to me—something outside my interpretative analysis and unrelated to the significance of his oeuvre to the canon of Canadian art. Each time this occurs, I am surprised by the many ways that Gordaneer’s painting can show me—as if asking me to return briefly from the linguistic forest of art history—that what visual art says, it says through the whisper of sight.
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(i) Interviews

A key part of the raw material in this thesis has been interviews with Gordaneer conducted over a two-year period. The dates of these interviews were February 28, March 19, and March 26 of 2001; April 25, May 12, June 7, July 9, July 11, July 29, and September 20 2002.

Notes I took from 1992 to 1997 as a member of the Chapman Group supplemented the interviews.

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