



Along the Path in Veronique Chagnon Côté's Paintings

Véronique Chagnon Côté's new work offers several familiar landmarks that establish an initial sense of immediacy. *Vous êtes ici* (You are here), the title tells us, and the installation is presented as a garden in which perspectives are laid out. However, everything unfolds so that a pleasant displacement occurs, gradually opening up new points of view that bring to the fore the relative nature and perpetual postponement of "here we are."

Thus, the artist shares her fascination for the cultivation of gardens and for the genre of landscape painting. Both are secular traditions in which one of the roles is to give shape to nature, which, already, can be perceived only through culture. The ambiguous views engaged in the paintings are so many clues that indicate the painter's path through the plethora of visual, historical and theoretical references that are attached to these traditions.

The ground was laid in earlier work in which Chagnon Côté treated the landscape by interweaving it with built spaces, architectural components or garden furniture. Playing with smooth surfaces, or slightly thick and dripping textures, she confronted the very materiality of the image with illusory spaces that alternated between exterior and interior views. There were also firsthand experiences, revelations, at the Botanical Gardens, which is just minutes from her home, but also in the gardens at Versailles, well known for its extensive plans of arranged orderly plantings. She refers to it now with maps, which reveal above all the clarity of their motifs and their patterns. The mathematical foundations of such shaping of nature are as important here as they are in architecture – for which the artist cultivates an equal interest.

From among the present corpus of work, one of the paintings has a motif, resembling the famous oculus of the Pantheon in Rome. None of the other works appear to refer to a known building. They configure rather improbable topologies that sometimes become openwork partitions, sometimes plunging perspectives. Here everything plays on the flatness of the support, which the artist emphasizes with her very smooth surfaces and tilted compositions that are fully developed through 'hard edge' techniques.

At the same time that the colours add up in multiple layers, from darker to lighter in order to display speckled and grainy textures – like compacted sediments that have accumulated for a long time – light rays and ghostly figures appear, giving a surprising lightness to the density of the whole.

A parallel forms between the artist's meticulous effort and the steady care that a gardener brings to her work. The calculated gestures and the colour palette give an artificial finish to the acrylic paint, making the natural world remote and frozen, confirming the heterotopia of gardens. In her reflections, the artist evokes Foucault's notion¹ that the garden space is either illusory or compensatory. Dependant on the rest, the garden might indeed be indicative of a greater illusion or it may compensate for shortcomings. Therefore, the dual phenomenon of the artialisation² of nature – nature in the garden and the garden in painting/installation – operates in Veronique Chagnon Côté's work, cleverly inviting us to reconsider our ways of inhabiting the world at a time when, one must admit, the future is unsettling.

Marie-Ève Charron

Independent curator and art critic for Le Devoir, Marie-Ève Charron has organized group exhibitions such as *Le désordre des choses*, (with Thérèse St-Gelais, Galerie de l'UQAM, 2015), *Archi-féministes !* (Thérèse St-Gelais and Marie-Josée Lafortune, OPTICA, 2012-2013) and *Au travail* (Musée régional de Rimouski, 2010). She has had numerous texts published in *esse arts + opinions* and has contributed essays to books on the works of the *Fermières Obsédées*, Michael Merrill and Anthony Burnham. Since 2004, she has been teaching art history at CEGEP Saint-Hyacinthe and at Université du Québec. In 2016-2017, she will curate a major project *Made in Quebec* of Kim Waldron's work to be presented at the FOFA Gallery and CIRCA art actuel.

¹ Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies," a lecture given in 1967, published in *Dis et écrits*, Volume IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1994 (1984), p. 752-762.

² Referring to the notion of Montaigne, Alain Roger develops the idea in *Court traité du paysage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.