



RITA  
LETENDRE  
Beginnings in Abstraction

RITA  
LETENDRE





# RITA LETENDRE

Beginnings in Abstraction

Curated by Linda Jansma

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery  
Oshawa

## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Rita Letendre: Beginnings in Abstraction

© 2005  
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery  
72 Queen St., Civic Centre  
Oshawa, Ontario, L1H 3Z3  
www.rmg.on.ca

GRAPHIC DESIGN: Rob Gray, DesignWorks Studio  
PRINTING: Laser Reproduction, Toronto  
PHOTOGRAPHY: Thomas Moore Photography, Toronto

CURATOR: Linda Jansma

*Rita Letendre: Beginnings in Abstraction*  
catalogue of an exhibition held at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery  
September 23, 2005 – September 24, 2006.

ISBN: 0-921500-61-0

1. Letendre, Rita, 1928 –
2. Art, Modern—20th century—Exhibitions.
3. Painters—Canada

I. Jansma, Linda, 1962- . II. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.  
III. Title.

Distributed by: ABC: Art Books Canada  
327 Ste. Catherine W., Suite 229  
Montréal, Québec H3B 1A2  
info@ABCartbookscanada.com

*Funding support from The Canada Council for the Arts and the  
Ontario Arts Council is gratefully acknowledged.*



Overleaf: Rita Letendre, c. 1954  
Photo: Ulysse Comtois  
Courtesy of Louise Masson

Cover: *Le Royaume des Samurais* 1961  
DETAIL

Modernism and its various early developments in Canada is a vital concern for The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Almost since its founding with the generous assistance of such people as Alexandra Luke, one of our “local artists”, the Gallery’s mandate has reflected its special interest in the story of Canadian modernism. Each year, along with other significant ways in which we bring the visual arts to our community, we organize an exhibition that examines a particular artist or aspect of Painters Eleven, at times including artists who were not members of that group but whose work contributed to the growth of modernist traditions. This year we are pleased to present important work by Rita Letendre whose early painterly abstractions are uniquely linked to both Les Automatistes and Painters Eleven as well as to internationalist trends. The singular path she took into hard-edge abstraction is perhaps somewhat better known, but the work we see in this exhibition speaks not only to her roots as a painter but also to what she would bring to the future of modern painting in Canada.

I thank Linda Jansma, Curator, for her intelligent exploration of Letendre’s painting from this period. And I offer special thanks to a small group of astute collectors whose loans and generosity have made this exhibition and its catalogue possible.

David Aurandt  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



## RITA LETENDRE: BEGINNINGS IN ABSTRACTION

In April, 1970 the Board of Trustees of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery established a collection policy that focused on Painters Eleven, Ontario's first abstract painting group. In 1974 the policy was revisited and expanded to include Canadian artists whose work paralleled the group, including the Automatistes and Regina Five, as well as artists whose work had been directly inspired by the Eleven.

That Oshawa was to become an institution with a unique platform from which to study post-war abstraction, stems from its origins. In 1967, Alexandra Luke, a member of Painters Eleven, willed the City of Oshawa thirty-seven works from her personal collection to be housed in a non-commercial gallery. Her husband, C. Ewart McLaughlin, gave monies for the building of the city's first public gallery and the Art Gallery of Oshawa (established in 1967 over a downtown store), became The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, opening its doors in 1969. The exhibition guidelines of those early years reflected the collection policy: shows focused on work by Painters Eleven and their contemporaries.

Since that time, the collection policy has been reviewed a number of times and now has expanded to include a focus on 20th and 21st century Canadian art. As an institution, we are, however, ever mindful of those first Trustees who had the vision to so clearly propose mandates unique within the Canadian public gallery system.

Each year, the Gallery mounts a year-long exhibition that re-examines and contextualizes an aspect of non-representational art. While Painters Eleven is one of the Gallery's obvious mainstays, exhibitions of artists such as Ron Bloore, James Gordaneer and members of the Automatistes have also been organized. The 2005-06 offering is the early work of Rita Letendre, entitled *Beginnings in Abstraction*.

*Le Royaume des Samurais* 1961  
DETAIL  
oil on canvas

The work in this exhibition ranges from 1954 to 1966 and reflects Letendre's view that one should "plunge into the ocean – forget about being cautious and wise about living..."<sup>1</sup> Her first blow at the cautionary life occurred in 1948, when she was working as a cashier in a mid-town Montréal restaurant. During quiet times, Letendre would sketch and, on one such occasion, a customer took notice. He convinced the nineteen year old to register at the École des beaux-arts, an institution she had never heard of.<sup>2</sup> She remained at the school for a year and a half and recalls that her departure was precipitated by one of her teachers who saw no point in her seeing an exhibition of the work by members of the Automatistes. "That was perfect incentive," says Letendre. "I can't remember the name of the show, but it was in the late 40s. We went to see the show and I thought, you know that is really fascinating. I felt emotionally very near, but I felt that this was another person's expression – that I would do something different. But it sort of gave me an open sky."<sup>3</sup>

Paul-Émile Borduas, the author of the Automatistes manifesto *Refus Global*, was an important influence. He stressed self-knowledge as the primary way in which an artist could produce a work that was particularly personal. Letendre became one of the second-wave of Montréal artists who emerged after the Automatistes in the early 1950s. Of her interest in abstraction she has said: "I think a person who is very much alive can give deeper meaning to his joy of life in a non-figurative painting."<sup>4</sup>

Her early abstract work from the mid-1950s period were grids of colour moving across the paper as seen in *Carnaval* and *No. 4 – Untitled*. The tiles of colour are applied in short gestural paint strokes with *Carnaval* in blacks, whites and red, while *No. 4 – Untitled's* lyrical, overall pattern is in muted tones of grey, green, wine and black. In these works, Letendre seems to reject the spontaneous visual record found in work by the Automatistes for the more organized and controlled composition of the grid.

Letendre sees her work as a continual progression: "...in my case, one tiny step leads to another. That is the way my mind works."<sup>5</sup> The steps that led from the figurative work that she was doing at the École des beaux arts to the early abstractions under the guidance of Borduas next led to bold abstractions more expressionist in nature. She began to visit New York City,



*Carnaval* 1954  
DETAIL  
oil on canvas



the Mecca of abstract expressionism, and the resulting work shows an increase in the gestural quality of her paintings. *Reseaux d'Intrigue* and *Petit coin de paradis* demonstrate Letendre's move to working with a palette knife or spatula. *Reseaux d'Intrigue* continues to show an overall patterning approach to the composition as did her earlier work, but now the grid of tiles has been replaced by tiles of colour that are twisted and turned, the impasto adding to the work's energy. The broad use of the spatula in *Petit coin de paradis* shows black and yellow gestural forms moving vibrantly across the canvas. The blue splash of colour to the right of the composition momentarily fixes the eye before it continues its journey through the painting.

As the years progressed, so too did the expressive nature of Letendre's paintings. *Echo Nocturne* and *Feux Follets* demonstrate a move towards central compositional imagery; this is not unlike the work of William Ronald of Painters Eleven, although there is a certain feeling of aggression in Ronald's central image paintings that is not present in Letendre's work. In *Echo Nocturne*, the blue and white central imagery shows an assured use of her favoured media, oil paint, not as evident in the earlier work. *Feux Follets* makes use of a bold palette of a central orange/yellow with a line of mauve bubbling along the bottom of the composition and acting to anchor it. Light, such an important aspect of her hard-edged work of the 1970s, is introduced in some of these earlier abstract expressionist works. The central white forms in *Entre Mars et Saturne*, *Les Royaume des Samourais* and *Isis* are used to bisect the composition. In *Isis*, the white form hovers, while in *Entre Mars et Saturne*, the shape moves, from the left of the composition, to intersect with a central orange shape creating a dynamic sense of movement. Unlike many of her colleagues, titles were important to Letendre. *Les Royaume des Samourais*, as the title implies, is a composition made up of horizontal slashes of paint bisected by the thrust of white light in the centre of the image.

From 1962, Letendre spent almost two years in Paris, Rome and Israel. The final two works in the exhibition were completed after that time and reflect a movement away from the organic forms that she had been using to the more hard-edged geometric forms that she would become known for in the 1970s. *Percée* from 1963-64 still shows a heavy application of paint with a spatula, while *Impact* is painted with a brush and has a far flatter

*Echo Nocturne* 1960  
DETAIL  
oil on canvas

surface with more defined shapes (she would eventually move to using an airbrush in her purely geometric work). The thicker paint handling around the shapes does, however, create a similar vibrating surface to the ones with a heavier impasto treatment. At this time, Letendre was particularly interested in the conflict created by the large masses within the confines of the composition; she saw them as “prisoners struggling to free themselves.”<sup>6</sup> The wedge shapes are an obvious precursor to Letendre’s vibrating narrow lines that would culminate in points. She became interested in working with the wedge shape and a flat paint technique while she was doing a large outdoor mural for the University of California; the impasto that she had been using up to that time, made little sense on a grand scale. Later paintings such as *Percée* and *Impact* continue to create a compositional tension through the gestural way in which the space is organized.

It is interesting to note that after a number of years of working with geometrical abstraction, Letendre would return to the expressionist forms for which she first became known. Pastel would lead her back to oil paint and the directness of the medium that she was no longer feeling with the airbrush technique. Her latest work, now fifty years after her initial foray into abstraction, are broad, expansive expressions of light and colour. Letendre is a tour de force in Canadian painting and *Beginnings in Abstraction* serves to acknowledge her contribution to Canadian modernism.

Linda Jansma  
CURATOR

1. Interview with Rita Letendre and Joan Murray, July 8, 1977.
2. Nancy Hazelgrove, “A Line Has Two Sides,” *Artword*, Winter 1994/9, 5.
3. Interview, Letendre and Murray.
4. Sandra Paikowsky, *Rita Letendre: The Montreal Years* (Montréal: Concordia University, 1989), 18.
5. Nancy Hazelgrove, 6.
6. Rita Letendre, *Rita Letendre: A Continuing Tradition* (Toronto: Moore Gallery, 1994).

*Percée* 1963-64  
DETAIL  
oil on canvas





RITA LETENDRE  
PAINTINGS



*No. 4 – Untitled* 1954  
casein on artist board  
79 x 60 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION





*Carnaval* 1954  
gouache on cardboard  
38.1 x 53.3 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



*Reseaux d'Intrigue* 1958  
oil on canvas  
65 x 81 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Petit coin de paradis* 1959  
oil on canvas  
45.7 x 50.8 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



*Echo Nocturne* 1960  
oil on canvas  
47.6 x 63.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



*Entre Mars et Saturne* 1961  
oil on canvas  
61 x 50.8 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



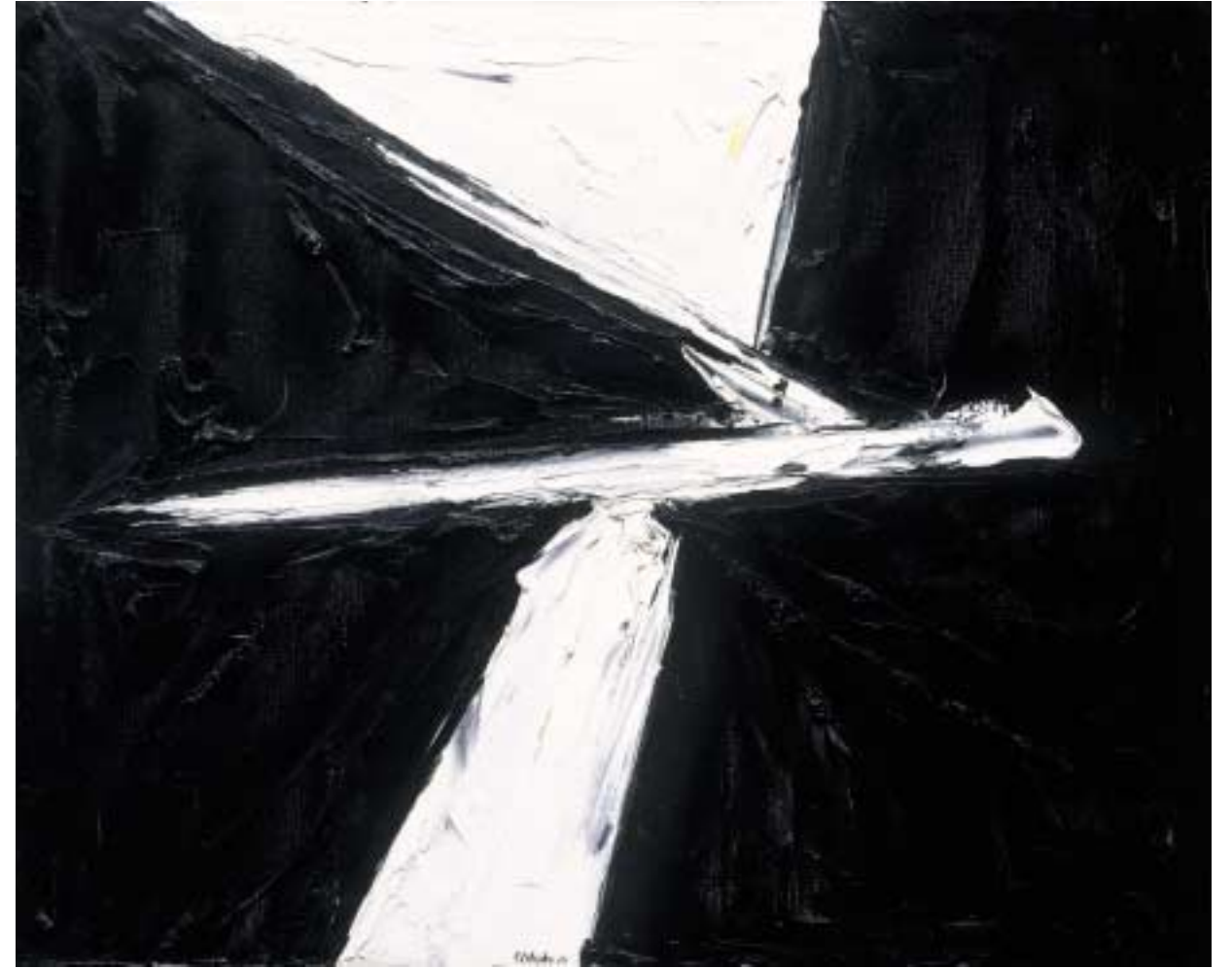


*Feux Follets* 1960  
oil on canvas  
47.6 x 63.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



*Le Royaume des Samourais* 1961  
oil on canvas  
105.5 x 76.5 cm  
THE ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
GIFT OF RUBY CORMIER, 1992





*Percée* 1963-64  
oil on canvas  
81.4 x 102 cm  
THE ROBERT McLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
GIFT OF MARJORIE HARRIS, 1994



*Impact* 1966  
oil on canvas  
76 x 101.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

## LIST OF WORKS

*Carnaval* 1954  
gouache on cardboard  
38.1 x 53.3 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*No. 4 – Untitled* 1954  
casein on artist board  
79 x 60 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Reseaux d'Intrigue* 1958  
oil on canvas  
65 x 81 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Petit coin de paradis* 1959  
oil on canvas  
45.7 x 50.8 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Echo Nocturne* 1960  
oil on canvas  
47.6 x 63.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Feux Follets* 1960  
oil on canvas  
47.6 x 63.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Entre Mars et Saturne* 1961  
oil on canvas  
61 x 50.8 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

*Isis* 1961  
oil on canvas  
82.3 x 91 cm  
THE ROBERT McLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
PURCHASE, 1991

*Pyrotechnie* 1961  
oil on canvas  
91.4 x 107.4 cm  
THE ROBERT McLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
GIFT OF MARJORIE HARRIS, 1994

*Le Royaume des Samourais* 1961  
oil on canvas  
105.5 x 76.5 cm  
THE ROBERT McLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
GIFT OF RUBY CORMIER, 1992

*Percée* 1963-64  
oil on canvas  
81.4 x 102 cm  
THE ROBERT McLAUGHLIN GALLERY  
GIFT OF MARJORIE HARRIS, 1994

*Impact* 1966  
oil on canvas  
76 x 101.5 cm  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1928 in Drummondville, Québec, Rita Letendre studied at the École des beaux arts and under Paul-Émile Borduas. She had her first solo exhibition in Montréal at the Bar l'Échourie in 1955. Since that time, she has shown her work in solo and group exhibitions throughout Canada (Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Québec, among others), the United States (New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco) and internationally in Paris, Japan, Italy and Israel. Her work can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal, Vancouver Art Gallery, San Diego Art Gallery, Long Beach Museum of Fine Arts among others. She has completed commissions throughout Canada and the United States.

Rita Letendre is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy, the Order of Québec, and the Order of Canada.

