



Materiality and Perception in Contemporary Atlantic Art

TOM SMART

complicated surfaces and depths that the illusory overlays establish, you are drawn not just into the painting itself but to an artistic consciousness that seeks to present itself boldly and emphatically while immersing you in a dialogue with its artist subject. There is nothing one way about his painting. Its bold purpose is declarative, demanding that the viewer respond to the signs and symbols set down in graphic cadences. The signs spell out a language of an entirely different order that grabs the unconscious and alters perceptions.

An analogous impulse informs Jared Betts's art, which incorporates a creative strategy of dream visioning. His multi-modal paintings—formalist, abstract, colour-saturated, gestural compositions that combine graphic mark-making with the inscrutability of colour fields—inhabit the imaginative space where consciousness dissolves and expresses its symbolic iconography in dreams (p. 45). Through a dense visual vocabulary, Betts's painting conjures immersive sensory experiences that enfold not only the creator of the statement but also the viewers into a cerebral environment. His project, while materially based and referencing contemporary painterly approaches, seeks to propel the perceptive viewer into the realms of metaphysics—all the better to confront the ways in which mind and body come together, detach, and then re-combine in new, adaptive configurations.

A similar vision informs Deanna Musgrave's large-scale paintings (p. 6). Her immersive compositions envelop the viewer and activate the gallery spaces in which her paintings are exhibited. Musgrave invites viewers to examine how identities are formed and evolve as we gain more experiences. Her art is almost like a form of visual music where cadences and harmonies, discordances and lyrical passages all serve as visual simulacra of what it means to be human.



Introduction

In addition to being an arts patron, benefactor, and advocate for art and artists (particularly from New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada), Marion McCain was an artist. As a student at Mount Allison University, she studied visual art and art history. This experience formed the foundation of a lifelong appreciation for the visual arts and artistic creation.

When my research for this exhibition began, I had the opportunity to look closely at two works of art Marion McCain made as a university student. One was a fine, intricately crafted ring, and the other was a decorative piece of furniture that included a delicate pattern incised in leather.

What struck me initially was that these objects reflected a creative sensibility that found expressive agents in different materials. In shaping and using these materials, Marion McCain was attuned to exploring their properties and potentials as artistic media. Materiality was an important artistic stimulus for McCain; things and matter inspired her, propelling her to follow the paths that opened up as she formed and combined materials when creating new meaning through art.

What soon became apparent to me was that, by combining different materials, she opened up new ways for me to view art and the world around me. The objects she created, while having a purpose as jewellery and furniture, were not limited to their functionality. The unique juxtapositions of form, matter, and media changed my perceptions.

opposite:
Daina Mulgrave (New Brunswick)
A Conversation with Emma Raine, 2019