

RITA LETENDRE

Tumultuous Paintings

Rita Letendre's art career consisted of periods in constant and contrasting evolution. Early, her works were gestural, as she experimented with various marks and application of thick layers of paint. Later, her expression metamorphosed into series of straight lines, at first highly calculated and later freer and more animated. Although she transformed her overall style, it was always based on a dark, often black, underlying structure that immediately galvanized the surface. This organizational system fostered the surging of light and a tumultuous energy. Inspired by the immanence of nature and life, conveyed by an obvious attachment to the landscape, Letendre takes us along the contours of roads and skies in motion or draws us into cavernous shoals.

The Musée has been planning this exhibition of Letendre's work for several years; to our regret, it is now taking place in the form of a posthumous tribute to this great feminist painter, who died last year. Among the few women artists of her generation, she helped to open the door for those who followed her. In a spirit of sisterhood, we have paired with her early works a selection of paintings by Québec women artists of her own generation and by younger artists who, like her, have adopted abstraction as a means of expression.

The exhibition, composed entirely of works from the Musée's collection, offers a look at a half-century of the career of Letendre, who loved freedom, travelled overseas, and lived on the west coast of the United States before moving to Toronto, where she settled permanently. Following her techniques and aspirations, the show begins with her early works, produced according to the precepts of abstraction formulated by Paul-Émile Borduas— precepts that she never entirely abandoned—and continues up to her late production.

Letendre's art made its way into our collection thanks to the Clercs de Saint-Viateur, the founders of the MAJ, who acquired a painting of hers in 1968. Almost fifty years later, her son, Jacques Letendre, and his partner, Monique Larocque, donated a group of works intended to complement the corpus that the Musée was gradually building. As we were organizing this exhibition, we noted that our collection includes a large tapestry that is a unique piece in her career. This is certainly the not only mystery reserved for us by Letendre, a prolific artist who was engaged in an endless search of self-discovery.

Julie Alary Lavallée, Curator of Collections

RITA LETENDRE

Drummondville, Québec, 1928 - Toronto, Ontario, 2021

1. *Sparks*, 1959

Oil on canvas, 82.2 x 153.9 cm

Wilfrid Corbeil Collection. Gift of the Clerics of St. Viator of Canada
2012.108

2. *Imprint*, 1962

Oil on canvas, 81.6 x 91.3 cm

Maurice Forget Donation
1995.188

These two works, with their spontaneous application of impastos, highlight Rita Letendre's attention to flat planes and her transition to abstraction in the early 1950s. Although her intention was to avoid figuration, these paintings give clues that stimulate the imagination and draw the eye to perceptible things. Letendre builds her paintings from close-up views, as if she were magnifying a detail from a larger image. The underlying black masses, along with those that overflow the edge of the canvas, pull us into a mysterious lair – a dark and no doubt disquieting place. The limited colour palette and sense of movement transmit raw emotion.

Quote on the wall

"I like to have a dense, strong black mass ... but the force of movement causes the colour to separate and shatter, a bit like the traces of an airplane in the sky. Strangely, my tumultuous paintings have always sold well. I think they must speak to people. There are always people who are willing to live with an all-black painting." - Rita Letendre

3. *Untitled*, 1961

Gouache on paper, 23 x 30.5 cm

Gift of Rollande Bengle

1994.031

4. *Untitled*, 1961

Gouache on paper, 22 x 30 cm

Gift of Rollande Bengle

1994.030

5. *Reverie*, 1961

Oil on canvas, 42 x 51.5 cm

Gift of Dr. Jacques Toupin

1994.008

In the early 1960s, Rita Letendre, immersed in Automatiste thought, produced numerous ink-and-watercolour drawings, as well as a series of small abstract paintings executed with a palette knife, following the principles of spontaneity and randomness. She left the background of some works white for financial reasons: coloured pigments were very expensive at the time. Her work bore resemblances to the New York school of Abstract Expressionism, especially the paintings of Franz Kline, due to her use of calligraphic lines, a restrained colour palette, the tension among the forms, and her strong expressiveness.

6. *Untitled*, 1962

Gouache on paper, 32.9 x 41.2 cm

Gift of Laurent Lamy

1994.001

7. *Influx*, 1968

Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 227.7 cm

Gift of Jacques Letendre and Monique Larocque

2017.017

In 1965, Rita Letendre moved to Los Angeles, but she was always on the move, spending time in Montréal, Toronto, New York, and Israel. It was during this time that she discovered hard-edge, a technique for applying paint precisely and without impasto, cutting the surface into geometric shapes. She used this

technique for *Influx*, fragmenting the flat space into coloured beams. A large black mass ending in a sharp point cleaves the surface and pushes the colour aside. Until 1975, she constantly reworked and transformed this strictly hard-edge image with tiny variations in colour and composition.

8. *Untitled No. 16*, 1966

Acrylic on canvas, 121 x 101 cm

Gift of Jacques Letendre and Monique Larocque

2019.089

In the early 1960s, the art market expanded and Rita Letendre's paintings became larger. Around 1964, she began to articulate her works around geometric masses – angled polygonal shapes, made with less impasto and clean colour. It was at this time that her emblematic “arrow” motif came into being; it was to recur throughout her career from then on. These asymmetrical masses, shifting and in friction, are both opposed and linked. They brush up against each other, sometimes actually touching, but always remain stretched to the brink of rupture. In *Untitled No. 16*, the tension, rendered by light impastos where the four points converge, is palpable.

9. *Untitled*, 1962

Ink on paper, 44.7 x 49.8 cm

Maurice Forget Donation

1995.186

10. *Morning Glow*, 1972

Silkscreen 34/80, 61 x 96.7 cm

Gift of Patrice Drouin

1983.247

In 1965, in the midst of her five-year stay in California, Letendre became interested in techniques for multiples; she began with lithography and then worked in serigraphy. Over the next fifteen years, she produced highly successful serigraph editions around the arrow motif. Starting in 1968, the arrow was embodied as a thin band of colour in the centre of the work, like a powerful light beam bursting out of the frame. She chose her titles to describe the light, as in this work's title, *Morning Glow*. With time, the coloured

rays became wider and wider, so that the surface became completely covered in multicoloured diagonals featuring bold chromatic combinations.

11. *Koohiaak*, 1976

High-warp tapestry, 191 x 283.5 cm

Gift of Ruby and Bruno Cormier

1985.066

12. *A Day (to Jack Firestone)*, 1976

Pastel, ink and charcoal on paper, 52.5 x 69.5 cm

Maurice Forget Donation

1995.187

The composition of this tapestry is related to the small-format *A Day (to Jack Firestone)*. The elongated arrow, concentrated in the lower part of the work, is reduced here to a series of thin diagonals, leaving modulated, mist-coloured hues to enliven the rest of the surface, where many horizon lines converge. The colour is more natural and pastel-toned, rather than the synthetic hues of her serigraphs. Having never learned to weave, Rita Letendre had this high-warp tapestry (which would normally have been a low-warp tapestry) made by Atelier Grimal. Up to now, no tapestry had been inventoried in her production.

13. *Shei*, 1978

Acrylic on canvas, 183 x 106.3 cm

Gift of Jacques Letendre and Monique Larocque

2019.088

In 1971, Rita Letendre began to occasionally use an airbrush instead of a paintbrush. Five years later, she was using an airbrush for most of her paintings. This made it possible to produce new effects and work more quickly, especially when she was creating flat hard-edge zones. She used this technique for the vertical-format *Shei*. Here, the arrow motif is slender, vertical, and reduced to a few fine diagonal lines that cross the surface from top to bottom. Orchestrated with a limited colour palette, the work is deployed in a suspended space.

14. *The Day Rises*, 1984

Acrylic on canvas, 107 x 183.1 cm

Gift of Jacques Letendre and Monique Larocque

2018.003

15. *Awakening*, 1984

Pastel on paper, 38.1 x 56.3 cm

Gift of Pierre Bruneau

2019.011

In the early 1980s, Letendre completely abandoned airbrushes but retained the flexibility, nuances, and atmospheric effects of sprayed colours. At this time, she created etchings and large charcoal and pastel drawings in which the arrow reappeared. There is a clear reference to landscape in this production, as there would be in her late oil paintings, notably thanks to the use of titles conveying feelings linked to times of day. Paper and canvas became the receptacle for her hand movements—a lively, highly turbulent space.

16. *The Echo*, 2000

Oil on canvas, 137.4 x 183.4 cm

Gift of Jacques Letendre and Monique Larocque

2018.004

FLOOR PLAN

2nd floor

Salle Harnois

