CLOSE READINGS

Richard William Hill

I proposed this column to *FUSE* because I was concerned about the poverty of critical response to recent exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art. For a number of good reasons, our best and brightest art writers – with a few notable exceptions – have invested their energies in curating rather than criticism. A healthy art discourse is predicated on a balance between exhibitions and their critical assessment; we have a lively art scene and it merits sincere consideration.

This column is my modest effort to address this imbalance by providing frank reviews of recent exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art, assessing both the work and its presentation. The commitment I have made is to write only when I feel I can be entirely honest. That's not always easy, but I don't see the point otherwise. We'll see how it goes. There's no fool like an honest fool.

Alex Janvier

Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton) 18/05 to 19/08 2012

Alex Janvier's retrospective at the Art Gallery of Alberta could easily be divided into two distinct exhibitions: one a brilliant tour de force of energetic, lyrical abstraction, the other a dreadful series of experiments with figuration bordering on the stereotypical. As a senior Indigenous artist (Janvier is of Dene Suline and Saulteaux descent) and one of the first to declare himself a modernist, Janvier is due a serious retrospective. This exhibition, with its apparent desire to represent all aspects of the artist's long career with equal emphasis, winds up making a strong case for the abstract side of his practice and, sadly, an equally convincing demonstration of the weakness of his figurative efforts.

The seeds of both tendencies are evident in some of the artist's earliest work on display. In *Subconscious #3*, a small pencil drawing from 1960 when Janvier was still in art school, the elements of his finest work can be seen in embryonic form. Sinuous lines radiate out from a central point, snaking across the drawing's surface with a graceful, lively energy that is immediately contagious. However, the exhibition opens with a pair of very early figurative works – *Our Lady of the Teepee (1950) and Sacred Heart* (1952) – which make a less auspicious beginning. Granted, these works, painted when the artist was at the Blue Quills Residential School, are juvenilia presented primarily for their biographical significance. My intention then is not to assess their quality, but rather to note how they anticipate the artist's later, troubled relationship to figuration. Both works are painted in the Catholic votive tradition with the usual pre-Renaissance approach to scale and reliance on familiar, well-codified symbolism, although in this case with an Indigenous twist. *Our Lady of the Teepee*, for example, features a Madonna and Child with Indigenous features standing over a tipi and dressed in clothing decorated with abstract Plains motifs. It pleased the Catholics and won an honourable mention for Canada at the International Vatican Exhibition in Rome. [1] Such early achievements (however conservative the venues) paved the way for Janvier's entrance into art school, where he appears to have received a first rate introduction to modernist abstraction. Unfortunately, neither of his formative artistic experiences provided the artist with the formal or conceptual tools that he would need when he returned to figuration later in his career.

In all, the exhibition lingers longer on Janvier's early work than is strictly necessary to demonstrate the route he followed to reach his mature style(s). And given the understandably uneven quality of his early efforts, this is ultimately not to the artist's credit. Assuming we accept, for example, the career significance of a series of relatively weak line-drawing portraits from 1962, do we really need to see all three? Wanting to focus primarily on Janvier's considerable strengths, however, I was especially interested to see his early experiments with automatisme, such as *Automatiste Ink Caterpillars* (1962). This ink drawing is composed of clusters of line-forms scattered across the centre of the work. Most are organized around a single vertical line, with whimsical dots, lines and dashes projecting or radiating out from the original mark with tremendous variety. The influence of this sort of spontaneous mark-making is evident throughout Janvier's abstract work to the extent that it becomes clear that it is a driving engine of his creative process. Many of his most successful abstractions are structured around bold, sweeping lines or brushstrokes that arc out to occupy or divide the canvas and then are elaborated with a dense variety of lines, shapes and colours.

His enthusiastic engagement with automatisme and other movements in modernist abstraction are what place Janvier in such an unusual position as an Indigenous artist of his generation. That said, his path was nearly blocked at the outset by the paternalism of the federal government. After a successful first two years at the institution that would later become the Alberta College of Art and Design, Janvier decided to major in fine arts. Without his consent, the Department of Indian Affairs chose instead to enrol him in the commercial art program. Supportive faculty members Illingworth Kerr and Marion Nicoll advocated on his behalf and Janvier was eventually allowed to major in fine arts (albeit with reduced financial support), graduating with honours in 1960. The fact that he was able to go on to forge a compelling personal style within the modernist movement, in a milieu that was dismissive of or openly hostile to signs of cultural difference, is a tribute to Janvier's persistence and ability. This is why he is something of a legend within the Indigenous art community, despite being less known outside these circles and neglected in the major histories of abstract painting in Canada.

↑
Alex Janvier, *Lubicon* (1988).
Acrylic on canvas.
Art Gallery of Alberta collection.
Courtesy of the AGA.

Familiar with the intense racism and assimilative pressures that Janvier experienced – he once described the situation he grew up in as "Rhodesian" [2] – I feel compelled to respond to the swirling space of his abstract canvases as an arena of defiant freedom. Each canvas becomes an opportunity to perform this freedom on the most personal terms, giving spontaneous life to dynamic combinations of line, shape and colour that the artist quickly made his own. But the liberation of abstraction was a double-sided gift for an Indigenous artist in the 1960s. One could be free to the extent that one remained non-objective; if subject matter was to enter one's practice, it often had to do so under the cover of a pseudo-universality that was in reality, as is now obvious, the projection of the dominant ideas in Western thought at the time. Think, for example, of the iconic American critic Clement Greenberg criticizing the Toronto abstract painter Kazuo Nakamura for being "too captured by Oriental 'taste.'" [3] Janvier himself insisted at one point that, "I am an artist who happens to be an Indian. I am an Indian self that is identified with the Great Spirit and not with the art." [4] This disavowal gives a sense of the conundrum Indigenous artists faced at the time: it was impossible to be both Indigenous *and* modern.

In trying to recover the Indigenous influences on Janvier's modernist works, art historians, and the artist himself, have noted the inspiration of northern Plains traditions of abstraction. [5] Yet his core stylistic elements – the spontaneous, asymmetrical

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information in this review comes from Lee-Ann Martin, *The Art of Alex Janvier: His First Thirty Years, 1960-1990* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1993). Martin is currently at work on a highly anticipated monograph on Janvier.

[2] Quoted in ibid., 7.

[3] Quoted in Joan Murray, *Painters Eleven in Retrospect* (Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1979), 76.

[4] Quoted in Jacqueline Fry, *Treaty Numbers 23, 287 and 1171: Three Indian Painters of the Prairies* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1972), unpaginated.

[5] Martin, *Alex Janvier*, 7-8, and Janvier's biography as posted on his website.

compositions, the swirling, undulating lines, the arcing, tapering shapes—all seem to be his own. Questions of his Indigenous identity do erupt from time to time in his early abstractions in less predictable ways, most notably in his choice of titles. The relationship between abstract paintings and titles is often a vexed one. In the absence of explicit subject matter, a title can easily overdetermine a viewer's experience of the work, and many painters simply numbered their canvases to avoid this. Janvier's abstractions do tend to have subjects though, however oblique, and in his case the significance of titles becomes complicated. At times they relate directly to the subject and inspiration of a work in a way that is immediately graspable, while at others they seem more cryptic or personal.

Fly, Fly, Fly (1979), for example, was inspired by watching swarms of cluster flies moving across the window of his studio in northern Alberta. The work sets thin radiating spokes of black, dark blue, turquoise, purple, orange and red against a tan linen surface. Other colours appear as well, particularly in the central grouping of marks and shapes. Several pale yellow globes also stand out at various points across the surface. The lines are thin and elegant, but spiky and barbed with hooks. The painting becomes at once a stylized record of the flies' swarming movement and an evocation of their dark bodies and bristly limbs. For the artist to have been able to so effectively bring forth the unlikely beauty of this experience is a gift of insight to the viewer.

By the mid-1980s many of Janvier's titles related directly to Indigenous politics. *Lubicon* (1988), one of the finest works in the exhibition, is a lively riot of shapes, lines and colours set against an intense, red background. The core of the composition appears to grow out from a densely patterned centre and then tapers in elegant arcs and curves out toward the edge of the canvas. How this image relates to the political battles of the Lubicon Lake Nation is not at all explicit in the work. Janvier has reportedly claimed that the use of red in the painting was symbolic of his political anger about the degradation of the environment on which the Lubicon depend, but I don't see how one might deduce that meaning from the work itself; the red appears to me as a beautiful field upon which the astonishing activity of the painting plays out. [6] Before learning of Janvier's own characterization of the work, I read it more as an homage to the spirit of the Lubicon struggle. It seems to be a lively and affirmative show of political solidarity: less defeated than Robert Motherwell's elegies to the Spanish Republic, but functioning in a similar modernist tradition.

Janvier's Indigenous identity was also referenced through his oft-noted act of signing his pre-1977 artworks with his treaty number. This may seem at first like a modest form of protest, but I suspect one shouldn't underestimate the anger condensed into that small series of marks at the edge of the canvas. They become little black holes that affect the gravitational field of the entire canvas, threatening, maybe, to swallow all that affirmative, lively energy. But perhaps that's what it means to be a successful Indigenous modernist: productively trapped between hope and negation. The artist claims both Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee as influences, [7] and in Janvier's art one can see the former's joy in lively movement and life-energy tempered to a harder edge at times by a dose of the latter's sardonic wit. The constant tension between the freedom of pure rhythmic energy and the small eruptions of political anger that occur in their margins and titles make the liberty he takes for himself in the abstractions that much more exhilarating.

Although Janvier included representational elements from time to time in his early paintings, in the late 1980s he took up figuration and figure in the landscape scenes as a primary concern. The move made a certain sense in the context of the period. Modernist abstraction had lost its avant-garde status under the postmodern assault. It was, among other things, representative of the old establishment. At the same time, it was suddenly possible, at least in some corners of the art world, to address questions of ethnicity outside the limited parameters of the modern and the primitive, without being dismissed as parochial. Janvier courageously took up the challenge, creating a series of large figurative paintings in which he addressed his political hopes, fears and anger directly and explicitly in large-scale works for the first time. The project was ambitious enough to fail spectacularly.

The exhibition features one of these mural-sized works, *Nehobetthe (Land before they arrived)* (1992). Janvier divided the canvas with his familiar sweeping arcs, but now these shapes describe what are, in effect, a series of imaginary windows through which to view scenes of life before European contact. In each scene Indigenous figures and animals occupy a colourful cartoon paradise, a fiction so Romantic and sentimental that it would gag Walt Disney. The figures themselves verge on the stereotypical, and one is reminded of the criticism of some Harlem Renaissance painters who, it was said, could not look beyond internalized stereotypes to imagine a liberated vision of the African-American body. [8] This is a pity given the rich figurative Plains tradition. But there is more convincing freedom, liberation and celebration of life in any of Janvier's abstractions than in this work, and for that reason a more convincing political expression as well.

Many artists, including those of tremendous ability, have uneven oeuvres, and I am happy to work my way through Janvier's lesser works if the reward is *Fly, Fly, Fly* and *Lubicon*. But to make the best case for his art in an exhibition, a more judicious selection of works is necessary. I don't know why this didn't happen—whether the artist insisted or the curator was genuinely impressed by all the work—but the result under-serves the artist, and therefore the institution and its publics as well. This is most evident in a centre gallery that exemplifies the divided heart of the exhibition, where *Nehobetthe* and *Lubicon* face off on opposite walls. Together they produce a cacophony. Looking one way I find myself thinking of murals I've seen on high school walls. Looking the other I can imagine how terrific this exhibition could have been if it had included only the good stuff.

Richard William Hill is an independent writer and curator, and Associate Professor of Art History at York University.

[6] Ibid., 40.

[7] From Janvier's official website.

[8] This question has often been raised and debated in relation to the work of Palmer Hayden. For a recent exploration of the question, see John Ott, "Labored Stereotypes: Palmer Hayden's The Janitor Who Paints," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 102-115.