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The Refus Global: Then and Now.

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In the 1948 the social-political climate was ripe for revolution in Quebec. An artistic movement known as the Automatistes, and their manifesto "Le Refus Global", helped to ignite the flame of the quiet revolution.¹ We will discuss the painting "*Green Abstraction*" (figure 3), by the movement's founder, Paul-Émile Borduas to learn how he and the Automatistes contributed to the Cultural and Political transformation of mid century Quebec.

We will examine the painting "*Still Life with Open Book*" by Borduas's teacher, Oziás Leduc (Figure 1). The works of both master and student will be interpreted along side an analysis of my sculptures: "*Trapped by Knowledge*" (Figure 2) and "*Cross of Fiction*" (Figure 4). Specifically, we will consider the common theme of the duality of passion versus reason. This theme is implied symbolically in Leduc's painting, metaphorically in my own sculpture and explicitly in the rationale for Borduas's Automatiste style and the Refus Global. It will be shown that the notion of dualism between passion and reason as expressed in the manifesto, continues to be of relevance for an interpretation of my own art, 70 years later.

As a secondary objective, we will consider the influence of the Refus Global, on the patriarchal institutions of religion and politics. We will see how the manifesto helped to release artistic expression and culture from the stranglehold of those institutions in Quebec. It will be shown that the Refus Global emerged within the context of a larger, ongoing feminist effort towards the dismantling of patriarchy. My sculpture "*Cross of Fiction*", will be introduced as a continuation of the discussion raised about the effects of repressive ideologies in the lives of creative people.

Ozias Leduc (1864-1955)² was self-taught, earning his living principally a church decorator while also producing some secular works.³ At first glimpse, he appears to use art in a classical manner, to depict nature as it is objectively. However, he believed that the function of art was not to imitate nature but to expand upon it: "Le mensonge en peinture commence justement quand elle s'oublie et prétend montrer un double des objets, duperie qui la rend méprisabile".⁴

Leduc's opposition to mimesis in painting seems contradictory, considering he painted in *trompe l'oeuil* style, rendering subject matter as realistically as possible. François-Marc Gagnon has suggested Leduc is adding something to the painting and transforming it on a symbolic level.⁵ Commenting on "Still life with Open Book" (fig. 1) Gagnon goes one step further, interpreting the symbolism at play and suggesting that the open book alludes to ephemeral word based knowledge on the right page in contrast to a more timeless type of knowledge incarnated in art itself.⁶ Expanding on Gagnon's initial interpretation, Leduc seems to be alluding to the maternal instinct and passion within the mother-child attachment in the content of the left page while pitting this against the verbal language of reason on the right.⁷ Whatever the case may be, it is through symbolism that Leduc inserts visual commentary upon nature and avoids its mere imitation.

The notion of duality between passion and reason is precisely what is being depicted in my own sculpture: "Trapped by Knowledge" (fig. 2).⁸ We see a figure, confined within a box, standing on a light, pushing against a translucent Plexiglas wall, upon which letters are stencilled. The light inside the box represents the passion and creativity of the figure, which are prevented from being expressed beyond the *wall of language*.⁹ His body and soul are held captive by the only verbal means he possesses to express them. Thus he is

trapped by the knowledge of his own rational intellect and lives out the eternal conflict between passion and reason. The key to him getting out of the box would be through non-rational, non-verbal creative process in art.

We have just considered the theme of tension between passion and reason in the work of Leduc, noting that it intersects with the rationale for my own sculpture. In the case of Borduas's painting, a connection to this theme seems more illusive because the content of Automatiste art does not depict anything at all but rather "...pure energy, the vital impulse of the thought-act without the mediation of language".¹⁰ To find our theme in *Green Abstraction*, one must first read the accompanying manual: *Le Refus Global*. In it, one finds very clear instructions for the interpretation of all Automatiste art: " Refus de toute INTENTION, arme néfaste de la RAISON. À bas toutes deux, au second rang! ... Nos passions façonnent spontanément, imprévisiblement, nécessairement le futur."¹¹ Automatism, as expressed in Borduas's work, does away with the tension altogether by giving in to passion and abandoning reason to a distant second place: "For them, the rationally organized spoils (and everything in the affectionate bosom of decadence); for us, the unpredictable passion..."¹²

While Leduc may have been visually pointing to the relationship between passion and reason, Borduas explicitly used the former and dispensed with the latter in his creative process. Thus, he embraced spontaneity and anarchy, rejecting intentionality. In this manner, his Automatiste process could be considered the opposite of Leduc's. As Borduas's "*Green Abstraction*" illustrates, the result is painting made of line, form, color, gesture and the total absence of figuration (fig.3).

When attempting to understand how their styles grew so different, we look into the master student relationship originally outlined by Gilles Lapointe and summarized as follows:¹³ Ozias Leduc and Paul-Emile Borduas both resided in their native town of St. Hilaire. His relationship with Leduc gained him access into l'École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, where he excelled. He studied religious art in France, as a protégé of Monseigneur Olivier Maurault, a member of the Catholic clergy. Borduas was on course to become a church decorator like his master but found himself swayed by the avant-garde of Surrealism, Cubism and later, Abstraction. He strayed from the path that had been laid out for him, at first with subterfuge, but ultimately breaking more audaciously, referring to Leduc as a "sentimental attachment which must be sacrificed".¹⁴

In the early 1940's the church dominated personal and political spheres, Duplessis ruled autocratically, the toll of the Second World War was becoming clearer, women had just obtained the right to vote in Quebec. In that environment, the Automatistes were born. Borduas produced his first non pre-conceived work *Green Abstraction* in 1941 (fig 3).¹⁵ Seven years later, a number of shows had legitimized Automatisme in Quebec and the Refus Global manifesto sent reverberations throughout Quebec culture. Borduas could no longer work as an art teacher and was fired from his job at l'École du Meuble.

The manifesto sought the "dissolution of all cultural boundaries" at a time when Quebec was still relatively insular.¹⁶ From the very first paragraph, it presents an unapologetic attack on preconceived notions of Quebecois identity as both French and Catholic: " Rejetons de modestes familles canadiennes-françaises, ouvrières ou petites bourgeoises, de l'arrivée au pays à nos jours restées françaises et catholiques par résistance

au vainqueur, par attachement arbitraire au passé, par plaisir et orgueil sentimental et autres nécessités".¹⁷

The entire document could be summarized by the dictum: "Don't over think it. Forget the past. Be free and do what you want!" Accordingly, as the visual representation of the Refus Global movement, the Automatistes sought an expression in art which was free from the constraints of a corrupt knowledge handed down by an elite group of Politicians and Catholic clergymen: "Un petit peuple serré de près aux soutanes restées les seules dépositaires de la foi, du savoir, de la vérité et de la richesse nationale".¹⁸

Through its criticism of autocratic political and religious institutions -and by association, patriarchy itself - the manifesto could be considered feminist literature. It is interesting to note however that patriarchy itself and the status of women are never mentioned in the document. In fact, Borduas himself reportedly had some hesitation as to whether or not women should sign the manifesto.¹⁹ Rose-Marie Arbour points out, there has been little attention to the fact that the women associated with the Automatistes as artists were never invited to participate in their shows.²⁰ While the Refus Global arguably advanced the cause of women, Borduas appears to have been a man of his time, working in a primarily male dominated art world.

We have discussed the essence of the Refus Global and its visual incarnation in the art of Automatism. While it can be said that the manifesto was a force for the liberation of artistic creativity from religious and political constraints, I wonder if there are not some unintended consequences of the condemnation of those patriarchal institutions 70 years on. Is it possible that pushing out one oppressive force gives rise to another? To answer these questions, we will examine my second work: "*Cross of Fiction*" (fig. 4).

This piece expresses the voice of a Caucasian, heterosexual man, in a conversation about gender roles. In parallel to the motivation for the Refus Global, the "*Cross of Fiction*" takes aim at the corrupt knowledge that I have been handed regarding my purpose and function as a man in society. As the explanatory text makes clear (figure 5), my experience and expression of masculinity is oppressed by the actions of some men, leading to its current culturally inherited bad reputation. This reputation is bequeathed to me by defunct political patriarchs, obsolete warmongers, and the corrupt religious establishment in the name of the Holy Father. I reject not only the institutions and the men they have corrupted but also any attempt to define my masculinity with a reputation, which is theirs alone. Taken together, they are the burdensome *Cross of Fiction*.

Nearly 70 years after the Refus Global launched its rejection of patriarchal institutions, it appears that masculinity itself has developed a bit of a *reputation problem*. Have we thrown out masculinity with the proverbial bathwater of patriarchy? Is this an unintended side effect of feminisms' tireless and necessary work of redressing the imbalance of power over more than a century? After 100 years of realization that men are globally responsible for an imbalance of power, have some of us not drawn our own dark conclusions about masculinity itself? The result is that men like myself who *cross over* gender barriers, into traditional women's fields may encounter suspicion and distrust simply because they are men.

As a male minority working in the predominantly feminized fields of childhood art education and art therapy, I have experienced first-hand the negative impact of masculinity's bad reputation. The "*Cross of Fiction*" stands in resistance to any presumption of masculine guilt.²¹ It represents the crucifixion of masculinity by man's

actions, for it is masculinity itself, which is being sacrificed for their sins. As can be read in the accompanying text (fig. 5), the piece denounces those patriarchal institutions responsible for corrupting men and ruining the reputation of masculinity but it also signals my rejection of that reputation on a personal level.

We have examined the work of Leduc and his student Borduas and presented their common theme as: the duality of passion versus reason. This theme was also shown to intersect with the rationale for my own work in the piece *"Trapped by Knowledge"* (fig.2). We suggested that Leduc points to that duality symbolically in the narrative of his painting, while I present it through the metaphor in my sculpture and Borduas refers to it explicitly in the manifesto. It was suggested that *"Green Abstraction"* and in fact all Automatiste painting addresses the conflict within such dualism by abandoning intentionality and reason all together. In this sense, the products of Automatiste art were presented as precursory visual incarnations and of the Refus Global.

As a secondary objective, we considered the content of the Automatiste manifesto for its direct condemnation of the oppressive patriarchal institutions of religion and politics. It was presented that the reputation of masculinity itself has suffered as a result of the fact that men have consistently been called out and shamed for immoral behaviour under cover of those institutions.²² My piece: *"Cross of Fiction"* was introduced as an attempt to break free from the bad reputation of those *politically correct* patriarchal institutions, which continue to hold some control over my creativity.

It is an interesting exercise to ponder what Borduas would think of Quebec art and culture today. In spite of the decline of religious and political influence, has that much really changed? Some might argue that the influence of money has replaced religion and that people are as isolated as they ever were: "Où est le secret de cette efficacité de malheur imposée à l'homme et par l'homme seul, sinon dans notre acharnement à défendre la civilisation qui préside aux destinées des nations dominantes?".²³



Figure 1. Ozias Leduc, *Still Life with Open Book*, 1894, oil on canvas, 35.5 cm X 48 cm.

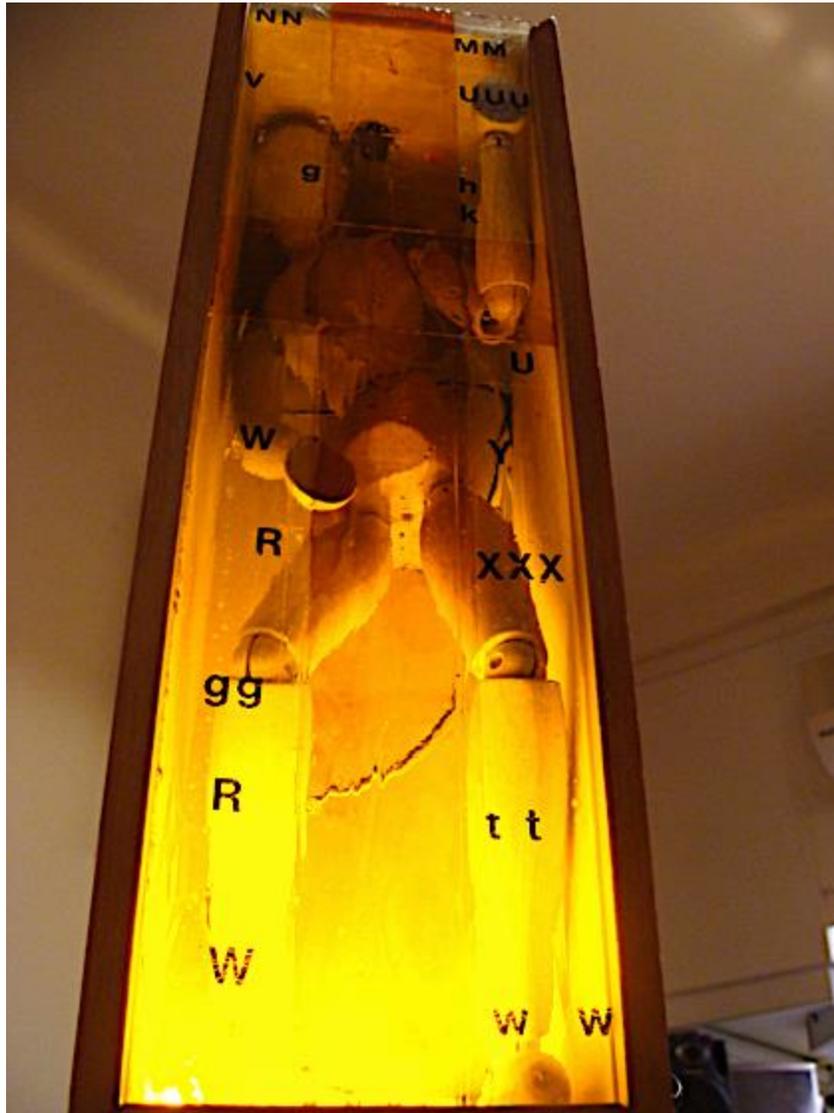


Figure 2. Tomartist, *Trapped by Knowledge*, 2010, mixed media lightbox sculpture. 8cm x 6cm x 24 cm



Figure 2. Paul-Émile Borduas. *Green Abstraction*. 1945. Oil on Canvas. 26 cm x 36 cm.



Figure 3. Tomartist. *Cross of Fiction*. 2016, Bee's wax on wood installation.

BECAUSE

Because we have an image problem.
Because we beat and enslave women.
Because we kill for honour and pleasure.
Because we are responsible for all the rape and murder
in the world.

Because we leave our children behind.
Because we abandon our families.
Because we lack empathy.
Because we are violent.

Because we are addicted to pornography.
Because we are dependent on sex.
Because we sexually abuse children.
Because we are unfaithful.

Because we create a heavenly father to replace the one
missing right here.
Because we dominate everything.
Because we exploit the earth.
Because we use religion to do it.

Figure 5. Tomartist *Cross of Fiction*, 2016, (accompanying text).

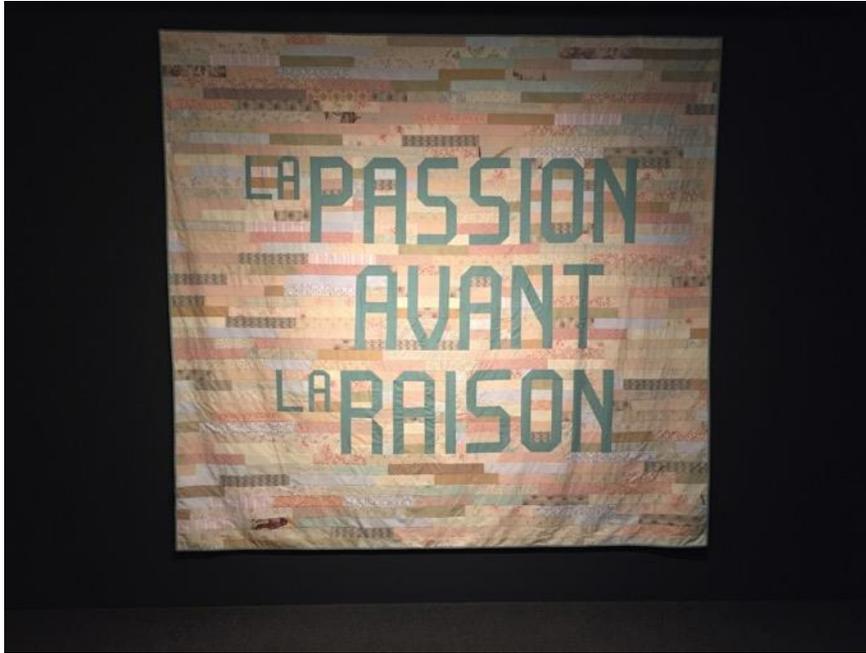


Figure 6. Mark Clintberg, *La Passion Avant la Raison*, mixed fabrics quilt, various dimensions.

Notes

¹ François-Marc Gagnon. "Paul-Émile Borduas Life and Work." Art Canada Institute. 2014. Accessed March 13, 2016. http://www.aci-iac.ca/content/art-books/20/Art-Canada-Institute_Paul-Émile-Borduas.pdf. (p.45)

² Wikipedia contributors, "Ozias Leduc," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ozias_Leduc&oldid=703559804 (accessed March 16, 2016).

³ For a list of those works, see:
<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artist.php?iartistid=3195>

⁴ Ozias Leduc, cited in: SAINT-MARTIN, FERNANDE. 1980. "Le Sujet De La Peinture Et L'automatisme De Borduas". *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 7 (1/2). AAUC/UAAC (Association des universités d'art du Canada / Universities Art Association of Canada): 4–14. <http://0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca/stable/42629982>. (p.8).

⁵ Gagnon, François-Marc. "Three Apples" Video lecture No. 2, *From Realism to Abstraction in Canadian Art*, from Concordia University online course content, Montreal, Quebec, March 11, 2016, retrieved from:
http://www.econcordia.com/courses/realism_abstraction/lesson2/lecture_english.aspx.

⁶ Gagnon, François-Marc. "Still Life with Open Book (III)" Video lecture No. 2, *From Realism to Abstraction in Canadian Art*, (33 mins, 26 seconds). From Concordia University online course content, Montreal, Quebec, March 11, 2016, retrieved from:
http://www.econcordia.com/courses/realism_abstraction/lesson2/lecture_english.aspx.

⁷ The terms passion and instinct are used interchangeably. Thus the theme of instinct in opposition to reason is sometimes referred to as the theme of passion in opposition to reason for the purposes of this discussion.

⁸ There is however a variation on the theme of the duality between instinct and reason in my work, which is closer to the way in which Borduas presents it. It is the idea that a person can be trapped by what they know. Reason and rationality can be acquired at the expense of passion and the two are not always compatible. Likewise, intellectualization in the shape of verbal knowledge can be an impediment to sensation of affective experience to some extent, thus inhibiting freedom. This piece (figure 5) by Mark Clintber featured in a gallery of the Belgo building on February 27th, 2016 appears to illustrate that the theme is alive and thriving today in the work of other artists.

⁹ My italics: metaphor.

¹⁰ Van Schendel, Michel, and Ruth G. Koizim. 1983. "Refus Global, or the Formula and History". *Yale French Studies*, no. 65. Yale University Press: 53–73. doi:10.2307/2930038. (p.57)

¹¹ Paul-Émile Borduas, 1948. *Refus Global*. La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec Collection Littérature québécoise. Volume 93 : version 1.0. Retrieved from <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/Borduas-refus.pdf>, March 03, 2016. (p.20)

¹² Paul-Émile Borduas, *Écrits/Writings 1942-1958 trans. and eds. François-Marc Gagnon and Dennis Young (Halifax: 1978), 45-54*. Retrieved from: http://www.conseildesarts.org/documents/Manifeste/manifeste_refus-english.htm, March 13th, 2016.

¹³ Lapointe, Gilles. 2011. "Quitter le maître, accomplir sa différence : les voies divergentes de Borduas et Alleyn. (French)." *Journal Of Canadian Art History* 32, no. 1: 113-136. *Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 12, 2016).

¹⁴ Cited in: Lapointe, Gilles. 2011. "Quitter le maître, accomplir sa différence : les voies divergentes de Borduas et Alleyn. (French)." *Journal Of Canadian Art History* 32, no. 1: 113-136. *Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 12, 2016). (p. 130).

¹⁵ This piece was chosen because it is considered to be the first non-preconceived piece shown by Borduas. In fact, for the purposes of this analysis, virtually any of his abstract pieces could have been chosen because the movement of automatisme and all of the paintings within it can be considered a visual representation of the refus global. It is really the movement itself, as expressed in the art of its members which is being considered in this paper.

¹⁶ Van Schendel, Michel, and Ruth G. Koizim. 1983. "Refus Global, or the Formula and History". *Yale French Studies*, no. 65. Yale University Press: 53–73. doi:10.2307/2930038. (p.61)

¹⁷ Paul-Émile Borduas, 1948. *Refus Global*. La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec Collection Littérature québécoise. Volume 93 : version 1.0. Retrieved from <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/Borduas-refus.pdf>, March 03, 2016. (p.5)

¹⁸ idem.

¹⁹ Arbour, Rose Marie. 1994. "Identification De L'avant-garde Et Identité De L'artiste: Les Femmes Et Le Groupe Automatiste Au Québec (1941-1948)". *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 21 (1/2). AAUC/UAAC (Association des universités d'art

du Canada / Universities Art Association of Canada): 7–20. <http://0-www.jstor.org/mercury.concordia.ca/stable/42631184>. (p.10) (p.17)

²⁰ Cited in Arbour, Rose Marie. 1994. "Identification De L'avant-garde Et Identité De L'artiste: Les Femmes Et Le Groupe Automatiste Au Québec (1941-1948)". *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 21 (1/2). AAUC/UAAC (Association des universités d'art du Canada / Universities Art Association of Canada): 7–20. <http://0-www.jstor.org/mercury.concordia.ca/stable/42631184>. (p.10)

²¹ There was recently a political debate over whether or not to allow single male Syrian refugees into Canada because of the "danger" such men might represent. It was expressed in the debate that security screening for terrorists would accord preference to men if accompanied by women and children. This situation stands as one among many concrete examples of the manner in which the male reputation has been destroyed by the patriarchal institutions of religion and politics pointed to by Borduas's *Refus Global*.

²² Most recently, the 2015 film "Spotlight" named hundreds of Catholic parishes in Boston and throughout the U.S in which clergymen were found guilty of sexually abusing children.

²³ Paul-Émile Borduas, 1948. *Refus Global*. La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec Collection Littérature québécoise. Volume 93 : version 1.0. Retrieved from <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/Borduas-refus.pdf>, March 03, 2016. (p.13)

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