

## Reading Space

André Lamarre

*Les tableaux effacent les murs.*  
Georges Perec

Sophie Lanctôt's series of small pieces first suggest a detachment of the wall. Painted on wood or canvas, these works are mounted on a support of sufficient depth to turn them into painted boxes. The sides add or repeat lines and colours, or extend the motif. They are very nearly sculptural objects, as the wall recedes and the imaginary blocks advance toward us.

Each series issues from a place of observation, from the experience of a place, in which a fragment of space has been extracted in the form of sketches or photographs. Whether comprising a friend's overseas residence, a family home in the country, or the artist's studio in Montreal, all are interiors, whether a general view of a part of a room or close-ups of objects — sometimes extreme close-ups of non-figurative motifs, taken from inhabited space nevertheless. An initial listing would include passageways (with descending staircase or view of adjoining room), sitting areas (with table, chairs, or armchairs), arrangements of everyday objects (lamps, vases, knick-knacks, plants, toys, etc.), picture-bearing walls (with photographs, paintings, drawings), and floor patterns. All these private vistas constitute still lifes or empty interiors devoid of human presence. Yet their pictorial representation accentuates a strong sense of presence and intimacy.

In linking her work with Georges Perec's literary experimentations, the artist highlights formal aspects of her endeavour: the uniformity of square framing, and varied reiterations of place, element, object, and motif. As with Perec, who imposes constraints on the writing, Lanctôt's approach structures the image extraction by framing the view, each work seemingly part of an infinite spatial and temporal grid. This abstract structure is echoed in duplications of the paint-object's perimeter (often through vertical coloured bands), the repetition of floor tiling, and the *mise en abyme* produced through windows, paintings, and other geometric apertures. Each exhibition of a series creates a unique arrangement of pieces in an exploded checkerboard scattered over the wall, each piece offering its own imaginary view. Lanctôt shares with Perec a technique of cutting up inhabited space, as if itemizing the constituent parts of material events while paradoxically marking a creative course. Perec presents his book, *Espèces d'espaces*, as a *journal d'un usager de l'espace* (or “diary of a space user”). Building on the same idea, Lanctôt engages an intimate practice of painting, in which perception, recollection, and invention communicate. To read space is to interpret it.

Lanctôt constructs a space within the framed view of experienced space by combining impulse, imagination, and aesthetics. Before the contingency of place and object, it is colour that carries affect. Prior to narration or autobiography, the contrasts, tonalities, and intensities have a direct effect. Without the codes, the colours of childhood, solitude, or mourning are unpredictable. Colours affect us. Affects colour us. Such is Lanctôt's implicit lesson. As the first reader of space, the artist titles each series, then each view, identifying and associating it with an action: *Espace pour attendre* (“space to wait”), *Espace des souvenirs* (“space of memories”), *Espace pour vivre* (“space to live”), *Espace pour s'envoler* (“space to fly away”), and so on. In fact, all these titles are interchangeable, all these places derive from *Espace de survie* (“space of survival”) (2002), and are as much a quality of imagination, memory, and thought as they are of everyday perception or habitation. That is why, often parenthetically, the title highlights an

object in the scene (chair, chandelier, vase, etc.), as if to realize in words a process of recognition that helps organize the visual field.

Presented, each time, is a space of transformation and a space in transformation. Perception, recollection, and invention constitute equivalent operations when framing, classifying, constructing, and interpreting. Dwelling in a place is a complex, overdetermined affair, comprising layers of experience. Collage (photographic fragments, a page from a phone book, etc.), transparencies, overlaid representations, and pictorial self-citations are all part and parcel of this practice, which constructs being, the present, and space all at once. Variations in stroke and application techniques, and the mix of the figurative and non-figurative give each image its singularity. *Le temps qui passe [ . . . ] dépose des résidus qui s'empilent*: “The passage of time [ . . . ] leaves residue that piles up,” writes Perec in *Espèces d'espaces*. From personal history and the arrangement and choice of objects (furniture, knick-knacks, materials, colours) every place carries an emotional charge, both powerful and secret. Interrogating these systems of traces, Sophie Lanctôt snatches from the wall blocks of space that are built before our eyes, with a pure intensity, at once reserved and generous.

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