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GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

In 1985 Robert Bordo created the first of his "geographies"–small map-like paintings with fragile, alternately liquid and granular surfaces. These works, which suggest parallels between painting, exploration, and discursion in general, have never been larger than four feet wide and even less than that in height. Despite their modest scale, the "geographies" signaled Bordo's coming of age as an artist. They also marked a significant break with his work until then.

A decade earlier he was painting on a scale that was commensurate with the postwar ambitions of the New York School. Yet the monumental figure compositions and abstractions that he created between 1973 and 1980 disclosed a fundamental disaccord with the tradition to which he seemed committed.

Bordo's involvement with a conception of art that was rooted in New York School aesthetics, and the primacy of a certain kind of drawing in his early paintings, resulted from his enrollment in 1972 at the New York Studio School. This he did at the suggestion of the painter John Fox, the only art teacher in Bordo's native Montreal who ever responded positively to his artistic ambitions. To a young artist like Robert, whose predisposition for intuitive painting might just as well be genetic, Montreal was in many ways an unsympathetic environment. It was, for instance, the kind of place where a roll of masking tape counted among the most essential tools for local painters. Fox had heard that the Studio School offered intensive artistic training of a kind that was both better suited to his student's needs and unavailable in Montreal.

The school that Mercedes Matter founded on West 8th Street in 1964 was predicated upon the belief that virtually everything of merit in art could be located, microcosmically, in the act of drawing. According to Studio School doctrine, drawing is an inherently metaphoric and organic process (a metaphor for life itself) in which the artist studies the model and attempts to fix its essential, volumetric coordinates on a flat surface. "Successful" drawings achieve this effect through the interactive manipulation of largely planar pictorial elements, result-

ing in highly structured abstractions. If this vaguely metaphysical endeavour sounds familiar, that's because it recapitulates an approach to modern art teaching that Hans Hofmann had codified three decades earlier in a different building on the same Manhattan street.

To believe in the value and self-sufficiency of this approach to art during the 1970s required nothing less than cult-like devotion. Although Bordo remained a student there for roughly three years, it took him longer than that to acknowledge the infelicity of this approach for his art and to act upon it. At the Studio School he had received a good deal of encouragement, most significantly from Philip Guston. The courage and inventiveness with which Guston was at that time responding to the constraints that belief in abstraction had imposed upon his own work supplied Bordo with a formidable model. Yet as a model of independence from aesthetic orthodoxies, Guston could be of only limited value. Almost everything about him inspired continued devotion to the mythic creed of the romantic creator.

There was nothing particularly odd about the fact that the figure compositions Bordo created between 1974 and 1978 averaged six by eight feet and were painted in a postcubist style as evocative of Max Beckmann as of Willem de Kooning. But this stylistic tradition was inconsistent with the highly intimate subject matter of his works, which evoked a sometimes untroubled, sometimes alienated, sense of place and community: figures on a beach; couples in domestic interiors; guys in a steamy bar. The constituent elements of Bordo's youthful figurative style had emerged at different moments during the first half of the twentieth century as attempts to restore to painting the gravity and cultural significance that, throughout the history of bourgeois art, have been threatened with extinction. If Bordo's goal was to reconcile the emotional, intimate side of his nature with a concern that painting surpass the "merely" personal, he would have to find other means of doing so.

Towards the end of the 1970s Bordo renounced his figurative style. Although it enabled him to define a personal relation to postcubist art and New York School ambition, it also confined him within a highly contradictory and unsatisfying mode of narrative painting. Robert turned to the creation of large, moody abstractions in the hopes that nonfigurative painting might offer him a wider range of intuitive and expressive possibilities. Yet the sometimes belabored surfaces and impassable spaces of Bordo's abstractions principally expressed his continuing sense of confinement as an artist. That he turned to abstraction at precisely the moment when figuration – or more precisely representation – was emerging as the most important issue in contemporary art and theory should not be taken as proof of his ignorance of these developments or his lack of interest in them.

Rather, it attests to the far more complicated way in which this artist would deal with communities and with ideas that–seemingly antithetical to his own–both threatened him and yet affirmed his own very differently reasoned discontent with the state of contemporary painting.

Difficult though it must have been, his retreat from representation had one completely beneficial effect. Robert's immersion in the material and ideological conventions of expressionist abstraction was precisely what he needed to loosen the grip of the latter's appeal.

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The route to the geographies was indirect. Robert's artistic development has always been contingent upon a number of factors, none more important than the ambling process of painting itself. Among the aspects of his relationship to painting and tradition that Bordo's confrontation with abstraction forced him to reconsider, perhaps the most crucial concerned what it means to construct a painting's surface. The emphatic linearity and brushiness of his abstractions testified to the rudimentary instruction in painting technique that he (and so many other artists of his generation) had received. Typical of late modernist pedagogies of art, all that was deemed necessary in this regard was to teach "direct" painting. According to late modernist mythology, such an unmediated approach to paint application was equated–both moralistically and delusionally–with artistic integrity, spontaneity, and originality.

During the early '80s, more than a few painters shared Bordo's estrangement from such romantic dogma. Unbeknownst to each other they responded, in part, by turning to a wide range of hitherto proscribed painting techniques. These included such indirect, literally premodernist methods as underpainting and glazing, and led to experimentation with varied oil mediums, encaustic, and dry pigment.

Bordo's first "geographies" were small works in which an allover camouflage pattern was painted directly onto children's chalkboards, and subsequently onto masonite panels. Either the camouflage concealed the outlines of globes, or it opened, like clearings in a forest, to disclose chalked-in battle strategies. The title of one painting, *Hidden Agenda*, implied that such imagery concerned more than it represented; that in addition to the intimations of international conflict (in Central America), the painting dissimulated a more lighthearted agenda. Indeed, from the start Bordo's geographies have poked fun at the conventions of late modernist painting: figure-ground tensions and gestural, "abstract" inventions lurked in the camouflage and in what it concealed.

While the capacity to reflect upon geopolitical crises, and to deflate aesthetic dogmas were among the benefits of Bordo's improvisations, so was the registra-

tion of emotion and the creation of visual pleasure. The first of the "lake district" paintings made this abundantly clear. These vivid blue and gold geographies, which evoked aging maps of Canada, exploited the episodic character of a technique in which the artist spilled, coaxed, blotted, and feathered layer upon layer of liquid paint to form fragile surfaces of extraordinary chromatic richness. Nor is it coincidental that only after Bordo gained a measure of critical distance from New York School aesthetics could he evolve the pictorial means to tap into what it feels like to be a Canadian at such a distance from Canada. The desire to effect a more benevolent space for painting, one in which existential humor displaces the all-too-familiar melodrama of existential distress, situated this artist at equal distances from New York and Canada.

The geographies enabled Bordo to draw, paint, think, and feel at the same time. His discovery of this highly suggestive and flexible morphology set in motion a fruitful reciprocity between technical exploration and imaginary innovation. That reciprocity–apparent in the variety of printing techniques and printed imagery that Bordo quickly adapted as components within his painting process–resulted in an abundance of poetic condensations.

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The most recent paintings can be divided into two broad categories. First, there are works that advance Bordo's consideration of Canadian identity and allude to recent developments in world politics. These developments range from the collapse of social orders, and the rewriting of national boundaries, to the threat of national dissolution–not least that of Canada itself. In paintings such as *Thaw* and *Blizzard*, Bordo uses silkscreen to register within the alternately transparent and opaque layers of painting small black and white maps that appear almost daily in the pages of *The New York Times*. More often than not these maps represent eastern European cities such as Bucharest, thus suggesting that "thaw" refers to the fate of Cold War politics. But the layers of paint that variously obscure or melt away to reveal these maps also deliver a phenomenological effect, summoning remote but never forgotten aspects of the Canadian climate. Looking at that portion of *Thaw*'s right-hand panel where the white turns yellow around a map of Bucharest, I cannot help remembering the look of melting snow, discolored by dirt and dog piss, in Montreal's early springs. That the left-hand panel of this diptych should comprise a "lake district," devoid of all signs of human settlement, not only relates to the historical mutability of national boundaries and ideologies that is this painting's ostensible theme, but intensifies the element of nostalgia for the north.

In *Blizzard*, an all-over black tracery which consists of a single map repeated on a grid is obscured by a dappling of pure white paint to suggest the midwinter

storm. At first, the painting reads diagrammatically, from above, yet, given time, it also opens onto a lateral view into the deep space of a forest in a snowstorm. Here the prototypically modernist oscillation between flatness and depth is handled with enough humor and sensuality to mock the more solemn execution of what long ago assumed the character of a boring cultural reflex.

In his recent work Bordo has also expanded upon the expressive possibilities of the "lake districts" by creating darker paintings that testify to the darker side of nature. *Untitled Land* pictures deep brown continental masses among golden seas. Like a Rorscharch test, only without the reassuring presence of its perfect symmetries, the dark contours of these (literally) projected land masses invoke reptilian and feline shapes; or the dark limbs of a fir tree seen close up against the sky at dusk. This painting, which still resembles an aging map, also recalls the vertiginous cuts in a painting by Clyfford Still. All of which suggests that perhaps this "scary nature"–a descriptive term that Bordo jotted down in his notebook to refer to such paintings–denotes not only whatever remains beyond one's control "out there" but inside as well.

The capacity to plumb mysterious depths where only flatness exists is also prevalent in the second of the two categories that I've imposed (for the sake of an admittedly artificial clarity) upon Bordo's recent paintings. This category features works that might seem difficult to classify as geographies at all since they seem little more than monochromatic abstractions. By turning to the most extensive group of these monochrome paintings, those that seem worthy of the designation "night skies," their affinity with the geographies can be clarified.

Since the summer of 1989, which Bordo spent in upstate New York, he has intermittently painted square or nearly square works that are saturated from edge to edge in deepest blue. Upon closer inspection, some of these paintings–for instance, one called *Night Air*–contain the not-so-random, stenciled choreography of flying insects at various depths from the picture's surface. Again, it is humor, a quirky sense of visual poetry, and a meandering process–not formalist concerns–that led the artist to counter the romantic, illusory depths of this airborne ballet by imposing upon the surface of the painting the clumsy, man-sized boot prints of someone who has happened upon this swarm.

In the "night skies" the boots often just amble across, triggering the perceptual oscillation that enlivens so many of Bordo's paintings, and the aesthetic conventions to which they refer; at times, however, they perform a dance of their own, thus alluding to the fact that Bordo, who has lived with a dancer for a decade and has designed sets for the choreographer, Mark Morris, finds parallels between painting and dance.

The printed pattern of boot soles, which the artist sometimes builds up in

considerable relief in the blue monochromes, ultimately derives from a pattern of little footprints that Bordo stenciled a year earlier on the surface of *Short Hike*, a diminutive green painting. Building upon–and improving–an earlier idea, Bordo has been able to add hiking and dancing to his other geographical metaphors in which painting is compared to mapping and mental divagation.

One can easily show that, as a whole, Robert's monochromatic works developed as a poetic and logical consequence of the earlier geographies. In addition to the "lake districts" and other mappings, from time to time Bordo painted broad oceanic expanses. Sometimes it seemed as if the blues just seduced him; sometimes as if he wanted to see just how small a land mass could be inserted at one edge or another of a painting to anchor it perceptually and thematically. In all these works Bordo promoted the inherent ambiguity between a pale blue that denotes "seas" on globes and maps and the very similar blue that fills the sky on a sunny day. Especially when those tiny land masses were consigned to the margins, the spectator had no difficulty reading the atmospheric depth of skies into the blue expanse. In other such works Bordo compounded the plurality of readings by using rubber stamps and stencils to add airplanes to sky-blue paintings which he further enriched with the red and navy border of an airmail envelope. It was only a matter of time before Bordo turned to his first monochromes: aqueous paintings devoid of shorelines and land masses–seemingly emptied of painting itself–in which he submerged networks of drawing or faint transfers from newspaper articles.

Not all the monochromes have the naturalistic appeal of the "night skies" and watery seas, nor is their capacity to reflect upon aesthetic conventions limited to modernist ones. *U2-R* is a gunmetal grey diptych that directs much of its critical energy at the profusion of machine-crafted, vaguely menacing contemporary works of art. Running horizontally across the middle of the opaque (in every sense) left-hand panel is an attenuated, black shape that suggests the watery passages of a "scary nature" painting. In the more transparent right-hand panel, with its mechanistic grid, the artist repeated–and inverted–the same shape in the same position, midway between top and bottom. The inversion enables the spectator to discern in the menacing black shape the frontal silhouette of an early prototype for a "stealth" bomber.

Painting monochromes has also given Bordo a chance to reflect upon the transcendental modernist tradition that led to such radical abstraction in art. This engagement is especially apparent in a number of modestly scaled paintings that date from the summer of 1990, which the artist spent on Cape Cod. There he made use of an old pattern, first used by New England quilt makers, that a friend once brought to his attention. As a nexus of zigs and zags, the pattern is highly

suggestive of its name: "drunkard's path." That a parallel is easily drawn between the path of a drunk and the "method" of the intuitive painter might explain its appeal for Bordo. Using the pattern as an underlying grid, he proceeded to create some of his most reticent paintings to date. Among these is a white one in which the pattern is clearly discernible as texture, and a cloudy grey one in which it is all but invisible. To both works Bordo added one more telling detail: a speech balloon, devoid of speech. In the white painting he outlined the balloon with a smooth, measured line; in the grey one he painted it in fits and starts, three times over, to symbolize halting, vain attempts to speak.

A tragic topicality is suggested by the fact that these empty speech balloons appear in nearly empty paintings, in which the act of painting is wholly indebted to a pattern borrowed from a quilt. Who, today, can think about quilts without thinking of the *Names Project*, a massive quilt in which thousands of the people who have died because of the AIDS crisis are memorialized? Another related work, also dependent upon the "drunkard's path," is completely black. Within the blackness Bordo painted a phone chord, its coils stretched tautly across the surface. Perhaps such an image refers to the emotional dread of late night telephone calls; perhaps to the model of art as communication that is such a concern among contemporary artists. All three monochromes – white, grey, and black – ruminate upon a pictorial tradition of transcendent abstraction and, with more than a hint of self-deprecating, somewhat dark humor, find it silent, but not entirely dead.

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According to the historical model that accompanied modernist art, monochromes signaled the end of the line for painting. Characteristic of the artistic identity that Robert Bordo has gradually assumed – one that straddles both modernist and postmodernist positions – he rejected this teleology, and set out to investigate the expressive potential of the most radically taciturn development in the history of painting. At the same time, he has continued to survey, reformulate, and test the limits of his geographical method, returning to older forms as he searches for ways intuitively to expand upon a flexible pictorial language that also relates to the rudiments of painting. Like other contemporary artists who insist upon the irreducible complexity of art, Bordo explores the potential for significance in what he does best. His geographies employ modest, poetic means to demonstrate that private feelings and public concerns are both crucial to contemporary cultural production; to propose that perhaps we would all be better off – in life as well as in art – if once and for all the borders that maintain such inherently oppressive oppositions were dissolved.

– David Deitcher