



TEDD CHURCH THE GAZETTE

"There is no such thing as colour. There are only colour harmonies," said Guido Molinari, shown at one of his retrospective in 1995.

## Molinari | Painter tried blindfold experiment

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"He talked to anyone who was interested in the subject, even if they weren't students in his class. Once he got started, it was impossible for him to stop."

Moli, as he was known affectionately throughout the visual arts community, reduced painting to its essentials - form and colour.

His philosophy about painting was simple: "There is no such thing as a colour," he once said, "there are only colour harmonies. A given colour exists only in its shape and dimensions - and in its correlation with other colours."

Guido Molinari was born in Montreal on Oct. 12, 1933. His father played with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra; his mother was the daughter of a craftsman who cast plaster religious statues.

Molinari began painting when he was 13. At 16, he contracted tuberculosis, and while he was recovering he read the authors who would shape the existentialist approach to his art: Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and Piaget.

Between 1948 and '52, Molinari studied design at the École des Beaux Arts and at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where he

### GUIDO MOLINARI'S WORDS

"For me, all painting is colour."

"I find it nicer to be slightly underground than overly accepted."

"Any work of art is a cross reference. It points out new aspects of life, it enriches. Artists strive for the positive. It is not an elitist attitude. One has to be initiated, as

in most things of life, even sex. Art is a perception and an act of faith."

"Abstraction is a novel. I mean, really, it is. There's no meaning in a text. It's how you read it. You have to read texts, whether they are on canvases or in print or played on instruments."

was taught by Louis Archambault and Marian Scott.

He opened his own studio in 1951 and, heavily influenced by the rectangular planes of pure colour of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, started producing canvases "anchored in colour, not in ideology."

He experimented by painting blindfolded and in the dark. Initially, his work was not taken seriously.

After Molinari read a 1955 article in Life magazine about Jackson Pollock dripping paint onto canvas, he went to New York to hone his taste for the abstract. When he returned to Montreal, he started painting using only black and white, and turned out some of the best works in his career. But he didn't make much

money from them.

"I form a parallel with Mondrian, who was never accepted in Paris," Molinari said at the time. "It was only in New York he had his one-man shows. My works, like Mondrian's, were initially dismissed as experimental art, and therefore unsuitable for collecting."

Molinari opened his own gallery, Actuelle, on Sherbrooke St. in 1955. Although he exhibited in the 1961 Paris Biennale and the critics liked him, he had a hard time selling his paintings until 1965, when he took part in an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

In 1967, Molinari won a Guggenheim fellowship.

During the 1960s, most of his paintings were multi-coloured

vertical stripes, but by 1970 he had abandoned the stripes in favour of modularized triangles and rectangles.

In 1976, the National Gallery in Ottawa held the first major retrospective of his work.

Molinari married Fernande Sainte-Martin, a leading Quebec journalist, writer and former director of the Musée d'Art Contemporain, in 1958.

They had two children, a son and daughter. Their daughter died four years ago.

Molinari was appointed an officer of the Order of Canada in 1971, and in 1980 was awarded the Prix du Québec.

A major retrospective of his work was shown at the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal in 1995. Since then, there have been major shows in France, Holland and Germany.

The family will receive condolences at the Sans Regret Funeral home, 3191 Ontario St. E., on Saturday starting at 10 a.m.

The funeral will be held at the Church of the Nativité-de-la-Sainte-Vierge across the street at 1855 Dézéry St. that day at 1:30 p.m.

# Canadian artist won world renown

CANADIAN PRESS

**OBITUARY** | MONTREAL — Guido Molinari, an inventive abstract painter who was a dominant figure in Canadian art for more than five decades, died of complications from pneumonia on the weekend in a Montreal hospital.

Molinari taught at Concordia University for 27 years until he retired in 1997.

"He was an extraordinary artist and a very generous man," said Eric Devlin, a Montreal art-gallery owner. "He enjoyed teaching and talking about art, and the construction of art just for the pleasure of it."

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*Montreal Gazette*



TEDD CHURCH/CANADIAN PRESS FILES

**Artist Guido Molinari is seen at a 1995 show of his work in Montreal.**

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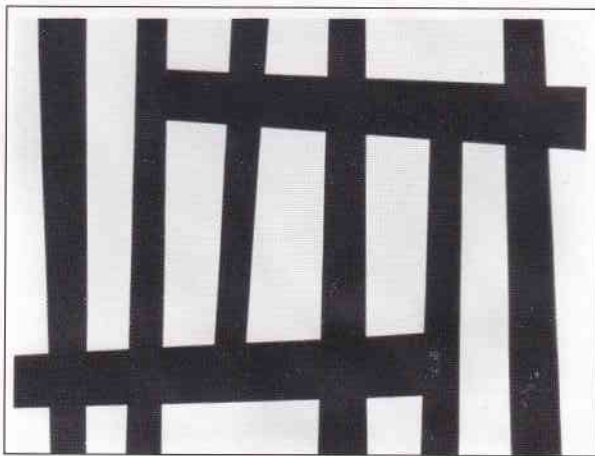
Montreal

# GUIDO MOLINARI: A VISUAL FEAST

By Gerald Needham

A large exhibition of paintings composed primarily of broad stripes, squares and triangles may sound very austere – what so many people today describe as “empty formalism.” On the contrary, Quebec painter GUIDO MOLINARI’s retrospective at the *Musee d’art contemporain* in Montreal this summer, offers the spectator a remarkable visual feast.

The exhibition, organized by Sandra Grant Marchand, has been beautifully installed with Molinari’s collaboration. The paintings are mounted on huge grey panels, often a very dark grey, which present the pictures very successfully. I stress the hanging because the spectator must stand and contemplate in order to absorb the play of colours. Molinari talks of duration and memory in his very articulate comments on his work, and our concentration is crucial. It is not an exhibition we can just walk through. Molinari has even banished the labels to the ends of the panels so that they do not interfere with the effect of the colours. This is a welcome change from the current fashion for curators not only to put labels close to the pictures, but even to add further labels telling us what to think about the works. These usually intrude on our peripheral vision and distract us from the effect of the picture.



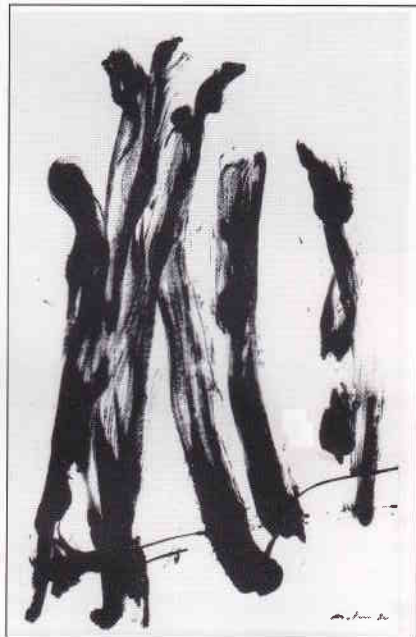
Guido Molinari, *Multi-blanc*, oil on canvas, 1958, 87.6 X 113.7 cm

At first glance Molinari may seem to be a geometrical abstractionist or an Op artist, but he is neither. The inclusion by Marchand of the rarely seen paintings, 1951-53, done between the ages of 18 and 20 by a blindfolded Molinari, reveal a very different approach. These were not a Dadaistic gesture by a young rebel, but research into the very basis of the act of painting. They were in fact inspired by the famous *Life* magazine article of 1949 showing Jackson Pollock in the process of painting, and by his reading of a letter from Mondrian to James Johnson Sweeney published in *Art News* in 1951. The philosophy underlying these early works - a combination of immediate physical expression and an underlying intellectuality - distinguishes most of his art.

Molinari is deeply concerned with the human response to art - through our eyes, mind and body. Observing the canvases with the blindfold off, Molinari noted the prevalence of left/right balance, though he generally made the right more dynamic. There was an emphasis on the upper left and lower right corners which tended to divide the picture into two triangles, while the lower part had a heavier gravitational quality. He felt these characteristics to be a direct expression of the human self, and has explored them in various directions since. For example, the vertical bands express the left/right duality, escaping the triangular division. When he repeats the same bands in a picture, Molinari sees this not as



Guido Molinari, *Untitled*, drawing 1954 (detail)



Guido Molinari, *Semiographe*, gouache on paper, 1980, 101.6 X 66 cm

simple repetition, for, as he emphasizes, the band on the extreme left has a different effect from the band of the same colour in the middle, which is changed by the band on its left. As we look at the painting the bands form different groupings, creating a shifting space, one that is not in the picture, but a fictive space, that we might say lies between the spectator and the canvas and the spectator, in the latter’s contemplation of the



Georges Jeanclos, *Boat for St. Julien*, 1991, terracotta, 51 x 29x 48 cm

and of new possibilities for the celebration of life. The sculptures display a further dichotomy in a number of ways. This is evidenced by a thoughtful juxtapositioning of elements and themes, with undifferentiated, almost generic descriptions of the body, including the faces, which seem androgynous, along with the similarity of many of the moulded components, e.g. hands and shaved heads (these appear as if they were survivors from the concentration camps of the Holocaust). The figures are adjacent to highly personal yet sometimes puzzling and illusively fragmented text. Duality is also echoed with the recurring use of clothing fragments plus frail, broken and implied limbs. These are repeatedly contrasted with fully-modelled intact and whole human forms in an ever present ambiance of dormancy, of temporary vs. eternal burial (possibly under forest leaves), of rebirth and emergence (babies’ heads without hair) plus a constant sense of imminence or impending action.

*Drum*, with its enormous burden, is the most metaphorical piece in my view since it represents an unbearable, deadly and crushing weight,

along with the affirmative, hopeful and regular beating of a heart, coming from an ancient musical instrument, likely the oldest invented by man. The partial Hebrew narrative reads, *Locked Garden - Wave*. This is symbolically the culmination of coming to terms with the weight of an incredibly sinister and complex legacy in a life of anguish, senseless persecution and prejudice. *Drum* represents an entire generation living with a horrible history. It is “the expression of the sculptor’s frame of mind as he grieves and .... expresses a confident hope in life ....”

The strikingly serene *Kamakura* sculptures each have an almost totally symmetrically balanced, grounded and steady posture, while they evoke a sense of the sublime, inspiring veneration. These pieces were derived from an interest in Japanese landscaped gardens and Zen Buddhism. The artist refers to them as “body landscapes.”

At the base of *Mary and Joseph* one finds an incongruously small form (presumably the Christ child), one quarter the scale of the main figures. Discontinuous limbs, dangling, bro-

ken and fragmented, imply their presence without being there, and speak of a bitter history, reflecting the suffering of the artist’s people. The barely visible prayers spelled out in Hebrew characters at the base were the last words of the Jews as they were executed during the Spanish inquisition: “One God - Israel - Listen God - Our God - One God.” The form of the chair Mary is sitting on is the one inconsistency in the show, its shape being seriously out of character with the entire exhibit: it resembles a modern formed and laminated plywood stool, a large mass of uninterrupted clay looming above the head of the diminutive child figure.

The iconography of Jeanclos’ work is very broad. His commissions have included: the replacement of the Romanesque figures of the tympanum in the church of Saint Ayoul east of Paris; a memorial to Jean Moulin, a French Resistance leader, (on the Champs Elysees in Paris); plus a commemorative piece for the heroes of the Resistance in World War II.

The great strength of Jeanclos’ oeuvre is the placement of his vast and creative strong-hold which he supported on a stratified base, consisting of a profound reverence for life and intense introspection. This footing, resulting from a catharsis, allowed Jeanclos to purge his very deep childhood wounds of anguish and personal upheaval.

In his own words the artist has recounted his family’s plight during the Nazi occupation of France: “Like savages, forever marked by fear of being surprised, arrested.... they fled to the forest and hid for an entire year!” For Jeanclos, it is the insight and wisdom which also followed this catharsis, that has led directly to his success as a passionate and dedicated artist. ■

AUTHOR:  
Peter Alexander Por is a multi-media artist and architect who recently graduated from York University.

painting. Thus, there is not space in the picture, but neither is it flat, so we escape the sterile discussion of flatness in modern art.

In the early 1970's Molinari turned to the triangle with its gravitational pull, to explore the principles he had noted in the blindfold paintings. He found that exactly the same triangle looked and felt different if stood on its point rather than its base. A dynamism results from the sense of imbalance, even in pictures that are quite symmetrical. In some paintings where the base of a triangle is set on a diagonal, we have the rare occurrence of a suggestion of recession or perspective. Though this creates an intriguing play of relationships, these pictures are few, perhaps because a space within a painting changes the relation that Molinari wants with the spectator.

I have dwelled on our physical response to the paintings, to explain why they are not examples of geometric abstraction. This becomes clear in Molinari's drawings from all the periods of his career, which are a valuable addition to the show. They are free abstract drawings, many resembling the automatic drawings of the Surrealists. They look like the work of a completely different artist, and they make us see that the paintings too, result from a physical response and activity, and are not calculated. Molinari has said touchingly about his drawings, "For me drawing is very close to poetry, very close to the skin." This statement also clarifies the artist's life-long commitment to abstraction, his belief that depicting objects would distract from the viewer's direct experience of the works.

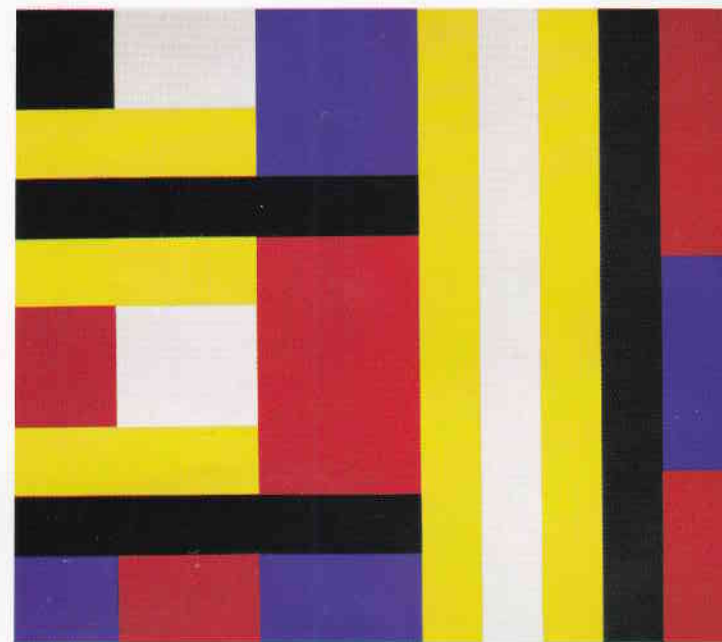
These are Molinari's paradoxes: the paintings are intangible abstractions, yet very physical, and he is a lucid intellectual who can refrain from trying to paint ideas. Nevertheless, as noted above, the paintings do have a basis in his engagement with ideas, notably those of Korzybski, Piaget and Mondrian. He has successfully internalized these ideas into his beliefs about relationships within the human body and psyche,



Guido Molinari, *Asymetrique jaune*, 1959, acrylic on canvas, 152.1 X 122 cm, coll. Museum of Modern Art, New York



Guido Molinari, *Sans Titre*, 1951, oil on masonite, 59.6 X 44.4 cm



Guido Molinari, *Vertical horizontal blancs*, 1960, acrylic on canvas, 93.2 X 114.5 cm



Guido Molinari, *Diptyque triangulaire*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, Two elements: L: 231.5 X 292.6 cm/R: 292.2 X 231.2 cm

and his belief that the oppositions and connections between blocks of colour can express them.

Since the remarkably original black and white pictures of 1956, colour has certainly formed the basis of the artist's paintings. This is especially true of the pictures since 1975 (which Molinari calls his *qualificateurs*) in which we can scarcely talk of forms at all. Two or three almost identical colours are placed on the canvas, meeting at a slight angle, often invisible at first. These canvases return to the dualism of left and right with the closeness of the colour seeming to overcome it, promising a resolution of human division. Yet the subtle displacements that become more evident with our gaze, keep us always in suspense.

Given the fact that colour is the most subjective of visual elements, response to Molinari's paintings will vary, especially in the effect of individual pictures, but the intelligent selection in this show makes it very clear that Molinari is one of the most original and one of the most outstanding Canadian artists since the Second World War.

Needless to say, paintings like Molinari's have to be experienced first-hand and full-size. Reproductions in books and catalogues, although valuable, cannot adequately convey this experience. Consequently, I have several major regrets about this retrospective exhibition: it is not going to travel and it will not reach the audience it deserves. Also, the catalogue which includes a long interview with Molinari by Marchand, and a very useful essay by former Art Gallery of Ontario curator, Roald Nasgaard, has only a French text. The show has been extended to October 1 and I can only urge a trip to Montreal to see it! ■

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Molinari -a lecture

Bronwen Payerle

Art embodies our vision of the world.  
Pulling intellectual response  
pushing emotions forward  
for recognition.

Brush strokes both subtle and bold,  
freedom with pigment, motion.  
Discovering ourselves -- forming  
beliefs. All in perspective

Forward and back  
the canvas breathes; interchange  
between colours' relationships, with  
objects determining space.  
Desire to see and understand  
allows investigation.  
Processes.

Scanning.

"Don't create detail, read  
it into the painting."

"Colour doesn't exist by itself."

Art is our expression,  
Life merely the armature.