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CANADIANART

TRANSlinear

McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton
Mark Cheetham

A friend once advised that if you want a large dog that doesn't take up much space, get a Scottie. "TRANSlinear" is a Scottie of an exhibition, a show of significant implications compressed into fewer than twenty carefully selected works. Created by curators Michael Davidson and Ihor Holubizky, the touring show is designed to spark debate about painting. Twelve core works are featured, by Nicole Collins, Michael Davidson, Angela Leach, Howard Lonn, Euan Macdonald, Kazuo Nakamura, Taras Polataiko, Margaret Priest, Tony Scherman, Ayad Sinawi, David Urban and Scott Wallis. They are supplemented with other works at each of the exhibition's eight venues, often by choices from the host institution's permanent holdings. Because these additions are attracted and adhere to the core group in different and often meaningful local ways, the result is indeed translinear; internally, institutionally and geographically.

This open and challenging principle of organization worked to great effect in the fall of 1999 at the exhibition's sponsoring institution, the McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton. McMaster's extraordinary collection of contemporary European and American painting imparted glory on the Canadian artists whose works stood engagingly together with the likes of Trevor Bell, Anselm Kiefer, Alexander Rodchenko, Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol. Multidimensional comparisons were invited by the intimate hanging, and all the works encouraged the desired rethinking of painting. Tony Scherman's *A Kim Phuc* (1999) is, like Kiefer's *Yggdrasil* (1985-91), a reflection on history, but seeing the two paintings close together also allowed a comparison of their masterly treatments of surface.

In an exhibition tilted towards abstract work, it was fitting to find Rodchenko's 1919 painting *Untitled*. Better yet was the chance to compare its constructivist agenda with Margaret Priest's three-part *The Body of Architecture II* (1996), made of ash, marble and fibreboard, and Scott Wallis's *Untitled No. 80* (1997), delicately painted on transparent film. A great range of contemporary visions of the abstract was on parade. In addition to the play of cultural inheritance in Polataiko's reproductions of Malevich's *Suprematism*, Nakamura's systematic display of numerical formulae versus Macdonald's looser grid form, Leach's optically mesmerizing interwoven loops and Richter's plain yet dynamic red mirror work, one could also react to the overtly painterly machinations of Collins, Lonn and Urban.

But "TRANSlinear" didn't come with a stylistic agenda. Elements of the show--paintings by Davidson, Scherman, Sinawi--either aren't abstract or combine this strategy with others. Ultimately, we question the categories but cannot be anything but optimistic about the practice. Whether or not we find the old options of figurative versus abstract useful, the work is frequently so convincing conceptually and materially that we can only conclude that strong painting of this sort will endure.