

# MARCEL SAINT-PIERRE

## **“De la matière à la pensée”**

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## **De la matière à la pensée**

**by Anithe de Carvalho**

In 1960s Québec, a new generation of painters appeared. Although they were the inheritors of Québécois modernity, they opposed both the old values and the newly established traditions. This generation distinguished itself from Québec art's automatist and neoplastic legacy, as well as recent American and European trends and groups. Marcel Saint-Pierre (MSP) is a member of that generation and, for the past 35 years, he has questioned what painting means today. Is it still possible to paint after all the upheavals within the discipline since the beginning of the 20th century? His answer has been to develop a practice that is utterly material, technical and extra-pictorial. MSP's painting is very much of its time; it has been exposed to innumerable influences (some of them from within the worlds of art and culture, others from the broader socio-political realm), thereby imbuing his pictorial practice with references to aesthetics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and structuralism. His paintings are all products of the ideological contexts that characterized the 30-year period during which they were produced. In other words, they are indebted to our society's postmodern Western episteme. By casting off the ideological and philosophical implications of an idealistic approach, the artist involves his production in a social materialist dialectical and historical process that belongs both to history in general and his discipline in particular. These influences have been noted and discussed by numerous commentators. Without being a faithful representation of either social conflict or the absolute autonomy of art, his painting

reflects a supremely original artistic vision that is part contemporary knowledge, part the artist's own particular techniques.

This essay will attempt to explain the originality of this artistic vision, pinpoint the artist's distinctive pictorial technique and show how his works are rooted in a materialist philosophy. The paintings MSP has produced over the past 10 years, in the *Frontières*, *Zones grises*, *Paris*, *Cévennes*, *Refuges*, *Déversements* and *Tondi* series, are suffused with matterist and formalist, psychoanalytic and Marxist, structuralist and surrealist considerations. Taken together, they are proof of his painting's highly structured, well-thought-out, knowledgeable, even erudite nature: the kind of art that generates a wide-ranging intellectual synthesis. Paradoxically, however, MSP's painting also feels very light because the technical process behind it, partially incorporating chance, both neutralizes the artist's intentional gesture and frames (so to speak) his expressiveness, allowing room for the indeterminate nature of materials. Since his painting is mostly abstract, this essay will deal primarily with the relationships between the works' formal elements, and how those same elements speak to one another, in a way that is inherent to various theoretical areas of knowledge and also sustains thought and the social space.

## **ABOUT THOUGHT**

In this account, what should appear are those configurations within the space of knowledge which have given rise to the diverse forms of empirical science. Such an enterprise is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of that word, as an "archaeology." *Michel Foucault*

### **The objet d'art as an object of knowledge**

This analysis will go beyond a traditional description of a pictorial subject's narrative iconography, and also beyond formalist interpretations with respect to painting's presumed orthodoxy and dogmatic autonomy, to consider the work of art as a unique cultural object. As such, it could be said to provide a means of granting us access, to a certain extent, to the phenomena of a given era and to the objective conditions in which it originated. This structuralist understanding was developed by the philosopher Michel Foucault through the no-

tion of the episteme: the prevalent worldview held by a social group at any particular period. In his statements about art and aesthetics, painting appears as an important social element in the configuration of knowledge. This essay attempts to examine MSP's works in relation to the conditions from which they emerged in a contemporary, postmodern context. What concerns us here are the discursive configurations or practices—the intellectual and material objective conditions—that gave rise to the numerous “figures of knowledge,” as that knowledge is assimilated and communicated by the artist through his work.

First, let us point out the interpretations suggested by various art historians. A specialist in visual semiotics, Fernande Saint-Martin, felt that, as of 1976, MSP was clearly returning to the Québec surrealist tradition. In speaking of the artists who would adhere to and transform automatist experimentation during the 1970s, she places him squarely within the automatist line. Writer René Payant interprets the artist's unframed canvases from the 1970s, and the folded ones from the early 1980s, as following a semiotic discourse. Payant's interpretation is based on formalist considerations, whereby the traces of the process convey inherent technical and intellectual knowledge. He coins the word “narrativization” to speak of these traces, so as to intellectualize a discursive practice that is fleshed out in the artist's techniques and effects. Nycole Paquin, on the other hand, has stated that, in the works he produced between 1987 and 1992, the artist would return to the “narrative ghost” (Transl. spectre de la narration ) because he returned to surrealist considerations while still allowing figurative elements to emerge from the imprints, a procedure characteristic of that period. Esther Trépanier's analysis focusses more on the influences that have impacted MSP's work and thought. She states that Québec's artistic avant-garde, of which this artist is a part, is dominated by a formalism that is at one and the same time the legacy of the province's automatist and neoplastic tradition, American abstraction, the counter-culture movement and the political ideologies based on the structuralist Marxism proclaimed by Althusser, as was the case with the French Supports/Surfaces group. Trépanier thus provides a more nuanced picture of the situation. Following Foucault's example, she also implies that MSP integrates into his artistic approach a critique of the history of painting, information about his own life and about the contradictions inherent to the era in which his paintings were made.

As stated by the artist himself, his painting is imbued with the personal history of this painter-as-subject. It refers to earlier works of art and local history, as well as opposes past conventions and traditions. The illusionist pictorial tradition has been hauled to the dock and sentenced to oblivion. However, contemporary avant-garde and modernist traditions from the early 20th century are also cross-examined, as are various

pictorial practices from the second half of the century. The canvas itself also has its own history, which lends it an underlying materiality and a prior technical existence. In an attempted reading of painting's material history, the artist gives a kind of archaeological dimension to his work that is close to that of Foucault. Actually, his work alludes to a materialist-dialectical way of looking at his own personal history. In other words, his works correspond to configurations of knowledge, the products of the both possible and objective conditions inherent to the time and the immediate community to which the painter—consciously understanding these phenomena—belongs.

### **Marcel Saint-Pierre's artistic vision**

Whether autonomous, apolitical, socially committed, right- or left-wing elitist, created for an exclusive group or for the masses, art is not intended as a mirror for society or its various social classes. As was sometimes done in the past, reducing the aesthetic debate to the dichotomy between socially committed art and art for art's sake is not only simplistic and detracts from the archaeological value of objects, it is completely devoid of interest. Nevertheless, Pierre Francastel has argued that works of art, because they epitomize a specific culture, are a place where an era's various currents collide, which means that deciphering a painting, for example, is not something that can be done spontaneously, in the immediacy of the moment. Viewers require tools in order to do this and cannot immediately grasp either the meaning of the image or its spatial and signifying elements, nor, more specifically, the painter's artistic vision. However, Francastel believes that the painter does have the ability to create an original framework for that vision. He sees this artistic vision as being the synthesis of two different kinds of knowledge: technical and intellectual. Thus, the objet d'art does not represent the world; rather, it thinks about it, structures it, intellectualizes it. From this viewpoint, a work of art is one of the most complex objects in a world of objects because it is so highly structured. Remarkably, Paul-Émile Borduas had already thought of painting in just such a materialist way because he felt that art was a product of the material and the painter's sensibility: "All art consists of two things, both of which are equally real: tangible matter—metal, stone, wood, paint, paper, charcoal, etc.—on the one hand and, on the other, the artist's particular sensibility—an aesthetic capacity which is etched into the object's very matter." Following Borduas' thought in that respect, MSP is involved in the cultural realm as a technician who invents his own maniera, and also as an intellectual who theorizes about his pictorial practice. Thus, the pictorial space is not part of the external world, but rather a construction specific to an individual and his particular *modus operandi*.

## Intellectual knowledge

Historically, dialectical materialism was a theory developed by Karl Marx at the end of the 19th century. A product of the German materialist school of philosophical thought, Marx ruthlessly rejected idealistic and metaphysical means for understanding phenomena. The philosopher stated that, as objective reality, matter is the primary source of everything we see and is therefore distinguished from consciousness. For Marx, thought cannot exist independently of thinking, or grey, matter; the action of thinking is nothing more than actual movement, transformed and transposed within the human brain. Thus, understanding phenomena that are organically linked and reciprocally interdependent means interpreting them from a historical, analytical, dialectical point of view. In accordance with materialist philosophy, MSP asserts that “before being sensible, all discourse is materiality.” Indeed, he considers material and the technical process to be the fundamental basis of his painting. However, since it would be unthinkable to separate thought from matter and vice-versa, his works suggest he is piecing together discourses from many intellectual fields, such as the pictorial one referred to above. You may recall that his matterist investigations, together with his desire to articulate them within a discourse, are inspired by the postmodern episteme: psychoanalysis, structuralism, Marxism, painterly modernism, local and international history, and so on.

It should be noted that Marcel Saint-Pierre was affected by structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser’s analysis of the works of painter Leonardo Cremonini, specifically Althusser’s statement that the latter did not paint objects, but rather the relationships between human beings and things. MSP also invests painting in this way: he does not use it to represent things, but to visually represent the development or deconstruction of discourse. He feels the purpose of pictorial practice is to present “how and by what method meaning can be produced, without there necessarily being a meaning, since it is more important [...] to show whatever will get the ‘viewing’ started.” (Transl.) From a dialectical perspective on the movement of knowledge, this means that everything “gains a new life, drawing upon that which alters existing knowledge.” (Transl.) The artist also feels that painting is by no means exempt from the social need for discourse, nor from its ideological impact. In that sense, pictorial autonomy is entirely relative since, if painting speaks of itself and of its specificity as a plastic medium in formalist terms, it cannot hold forth in such a way without bringing in other intellectual fields. This is what distinguishes MSP from artists who create tautological or minimalist art: from the outset, he recognizes that “the artistic practice also speaks of something other than itself.” Like Borduas (who acknowledged

that a painting is an object of no importance,) MSP admits that a painting “cannot do anything to help world hunger and very little to advance political causes. It is the result, rather than the goal, of an experiment.” It is also, indeed fundamentally, not merely a product but a process. This plea in favour of experimentation, of discovering the world through painting, places the artist on the side of matterist investigations, although it does not confine him to a fetishism of materials. Without being subsumed by the societal mirror that characterizes all forms of realism, or foundering in the strictly essentialist and spiritual quest to which the history of abstraction has long been relegated, MSP has made it his goal to go beyond these various positions.

### Technical knowledge

Saint-Pierre’s explorations are ongoing, and have changed considerably over time. His early pictorial methods have been radically transformed and have even given rise to unexpected developments. In the early 1980s, the artist experienced a highly adverse reaction to the solvents used in oil painting. This objective, material condition forced him to abandon oil in favour of acrylic paint and hence revise his earlier methods. At that time, he remembered that residual marks were unexpectedly left behind on the newspaper or plastic sheets he used to lay down to protect the floor. Thus, a new procedure was born from the objective particulars of his previous work. By combining decalcomania with his prior experiments in folding and soaking, he created imprints with “reserves” or holes that he then filled in with brushstrokes of paint before making the final transfer. The end result resembles a kind of delicate, painted skin transferred onto a gesso-primed canvas. By utter coincidence, MSP has created a process that is unquestionably his own: a kind of imprint-retouch-transfer that is partly derived from decalcomania, a technique used by the surrealists. Saint-Pierre’s version of this process uses a pigment-soaked canvas that he then lays on top of a sheet of polyethylene. Only the imprint left behind by the excess liquid is preserved and transferred to another canvas. This template is reused to create knots and other small canvas sculptures. However, when he retouches his painting and transfers it onto canvas, the artist goes beyond simple decalcomania to create a new and innovative technique. Next, we shall look at the many steps that add complexity to the new method.

Saint-Pierre wanted to do away with the subjective gesture. Hence, his technique always includes folding and immersing the canvas in vats of very liquid acrylic paint. The cloth is then laid on top of and unfolded over a polyethylene sheet whose two surfaces are industrially varnished. The excess liquid drains off the canvas and adheres to the plastic surface, thereby creating an imprint. Without waiting for the surplus pigment to

be completely dry, once some of the moisture has evaporated, the canvas is gently lifted off the polyethylene, revealing some areas that have a lot of pigment and others—called reserves—where there is none. The pigmented spots have the tendency to shrink and run together, randomly creating new and unexpected configurations. His first works using this technique produced the *Travaux renversés* (1984) and *Venise* (1986) series. Later, however, when he began using the brush to retouch and further define some of the reserves, these works were grouped into the *New York Thruway* (1987–1990) and *Déluge* (1992) series. The fact that the viewer can occasionally sense the artist's hand would appear to contradict MSP's firmly stated intention to remain anonymous. However, when the paint comes into contact with the polyethylene, the drops shrink; as the spots dry and condense the artist's gesture is obliterated. However, sometimes, when mixed with an acrylic medium, these drops adhere better to the plastic and the brushstrokes—and, by extension, the hand of the artist—become visible. However, this is not what matters. What does matter is that, starting from the reserves, the painter uses the brush to create paths and lines (some more definite than others), adds colour, validates or invalidates certain image-producing figures. The acrylic film is so thin and fragile, it could break at any moment and ruin the work, so the process of transferring that film onto a primed canvas is a much more perilous undertaking. It adheres to the canvas by means of a transparent layer of acrylic medium, which is what makes the colours so bold and bright. Once dry, the sheet of plastic is gently removed, literally leaving behind its "skin" and its industrial coating. This thin, delicate layer now forms the surface of the painting. In fact, it could be seen as the first coat of varnish. In what constitutes a major shift in Saint-Pierre's technical investigations, whereas previous works freed the canvas from its stretcher, here it is mounted on it after the fact. The use of acrylic and various polyethylenes lend other stylistic and formal effects to the procedures used in these later works.

### **Critical acclaim**

Entranced by the obsessive nature of Saint-Pierre's explorations into matter and his analytical creative processes, critics and art historians have paid tribute to its originality even as they continue to dissect MSP's maniera or unique technique. Without focussing unnecessarily on MSP's home-grown origins, the inventiveness of the process—developed during the 1980s—gradually came to be seen as the Québec artist's contribution to pictorial expertise. On that subject, Jocelyne Lupien claims that, over the years, Marcel Saint-Pierre has developed and refined a method that is uniquely his, a "a truly remarkable, unparalleled creative process,

a kind of long drawn-out and exacting ritual (Transl.).” Thérèse Saint-Gelais uses the word “trademark” to convey the distinctiveness of his procedure. Both of these art historians believe that an intellectual synthesis takes place within the works. Others express their appreciation in different terms: Francine Paul speaks of the “true techné” (employing the Ancient Greek word for art from which “technique” stems) used to create every single one of his works. Today, the painter’s work continues to be defined by the same rigour.

For his part, art critic Raymond Bernatchez finds MSP’s technique entirely distinctive and the results astonishing; likewise, Jean-Pierre Le Grand speaks of an “unconventional procedure” that is the product of much thought and exploration. Bernard Lévy, Editor in Chief of *Vie des Arts* magazine, believes the technique to be an “original and independent language,” that originated in the artist’s method and was developed through his radical materialist worldview, producing works Lévy calls unique. Taking this thought even further, Mona Hakim states that the technical expertise of the work is intrinsic to its very content. Given that these writers are aware of this, it would be unwise to reduce MSP’s work solely to the matter of which it is composed, for its originality surpasses these technical and material aspects.

## **ABOUT MATTER**

As previously stated, the aim of this essay is to support the theory that, for at least 37 years, MSP’s paintings have been suffused with matterist and formalist, psychoanalytic and surrealist, structuralist and Marxist considerations. Unfortunately, this essay does not provide sufficient space for the analysis of these paintings to do justice to the structuralist conception inherent to each of his works. All the writer can do is remind the reader that each painting may contain discourses of several natures. Let us now proceed to examine how the works in the *Frontières*, *Zones grises*, *Paris*, *Cévennes*, *Refuges*, *Déversements* and *Tondi* series, produced between 1998 and 2008, point to the layering of these various fields of knowledge.

### **Frontières series (1998)**

The word “border” (*frontière*) conveys the notion of physical, mental or economic boundaries, to which can be added that other dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious. The word does not speak of

unity. Basically, borders are boundaries, markers, edges, lines, margins and limits, all of which separate spaces. However, aside from the notion's socio-political, historical and psychological ramifications, the paintings in the *Frontières* series deal exclusively with the medium's physical limits. This series voluntarily restricts itself to examining art history and each painting's internal discourse, the actual materials—canvas, wood, acrylic—but also the work's narrativization, in the sense that a "border" can be a transition zone between one thing and another. Even if we narrow our analysis to mere considerations of matter and history (limitations of the painting, canvas, materials) we nevertheless realize that Saint-Pierre also plays with the distinction between figure and ground, i.e., he leaves traces of his work on the surface that should not be there. He also investigates the transition between paintings within the same series and the usually erased link between individual imprints. In so doing, he joins two works together on a single surface, two images of different dimensions on the same background. The goal of the *Frontières* series is to investigate evidence of the transition from one state to another; it distinguishes itself from the *Tableaux composés* (1994–1995) and *Alliage* (1997) series. By juxtaposing heterogeneous media and time frames yet extending their internal associative logic by combining canvas and other materials within the same work, the *Frontières* series ushers in a change with respect to the two previous series. It does so by its unfinished appearance and also by its more or less monochrome quality: the original imprints are grey, but slight touches of colour are added to them during the creation of the painting.

A few of the materials used in *Frontières* no 3 have left traces on the medium: raw canvas, reserves filled with gesso, acrylic film. The main compositional element is the horizontal line that runs two-thirds of the way across the painting: it divides the top from the bottom but stops short of the left side, where we see a large area of burnt umber. The pale ochre that gradually shades off below this horizontal accentuates the delicacy of the transparent film. Here, the raw canvas visible within the shapes is clearly different from the reserves, partially filled with white, in the upper part of the work. Thus, the tonalities of the openwork and golden highlights vary according to the folding process, even as it recalls the presence, and role of, the blank canvas and the white gesso on the surface of the painting. This practice reaffirms the distinctive properties of all the matter used by the artist, and renews an internal discourse on the discipline of painting and the history of art.

Like the preceding painting, *Frontières* no 4 was born from an abandoned imprint on a crunched-up plastic film. The combination of ultra-fragmented textures is analogous to the grain within the strips of white- and red-cedar chipboard. In *Frontières* no 5, the pale yellow brilliance of the varnished luan makes the crunched-

up plastic even brighter. The imprint's crumpled quality can have a vegetable or organic connotation, as in *Bande verticale* from the *Alliage* series, where the scunchings recall the splinters or flakes etched into metal through galvanization. This connotation emphasizes the painter's attention to the physical qualities of all his materials.

### **Zones grises series (1999)**

A "zone" is a place, space, location, sector, region or territory, and "grey" (gris) usually refers to anything that is dull, drab, dismal or devoid of interest. (More specifically, grey indicates a colour part way between black and white.) However, apart from its composite words, the expression "grey area" is commonly used to designate something that is unclear, vague, imprecise or not properly understood. In short, this title refers to various areas where knowledge is uncertain, or where certainties are questioned.

Taken in the context of MSP's previous work, a painting like *Rouge incertain* is distinctly ironic. Within his oeuvre, the artist has set up the kind of discursive combinations or materialist attitude that makes it impossible to rest on absolute truths or dogmas. Because it is the last one in which the artist combined two different materials, this painting completes the preceding series. It also conveys at least two meanings and evokes two fields of knowledge. The first one essentially deals with the chemical and pictorial aspects of art and the notorious instability of red pigments. The second expands beyond the art world to the social and political realm and has to do with the future of the world's communist regimes. In Nathalie Dubuc's 1995 film *Rouge chinois*, when commenting on a particular painting he was working on (*There's no more permanent red*) MSP seemed to imply that the colour famously associated with rising up against and overthrowing exploitative systems was gradually fading. It galled the artist to allude to the failure—whether from the mishandling of the far left during the 1970s and 1980s or the desertion of many former militants—of the revolutionary utopias.

Because they reconcile the pictorial with semiotic discourse, the paintings *Vert signal* and *Signe bleu* open the door to both different hues and the realm of signs. In other words, these paintings evoke codes, roads or, indeed, popular culture, where blue is overwhelmingly held to be the perfect colour, even the contemporary symbol of a certain kind of happiness. *Signe bleu* puts these conventions, and the various meanings attributed to the signs of the cross, to the test. In short, these two paintings call into question the general status of

signs and the names of colours. Isolated works such as the 1999 *Sous le chapiteau* could be said to develop the above-mentioned issues and provide a foretaste of the new series the artist would produce in Paris.

### **Parisian works (2002)**

Marcel Saint-Pierre spends a few months each year in France. Although Paris is a centre of artistic and political culture, it is also a noisy, polluted megalopolis. Strangely enough, the works he produced there in 2002 deal with the theme of landscape. If the noticeable linear networks characteristic of *Zones grises* and *Alliage* tended to disappear in *Sous le chapiteau*, giving way to a highly varied mix of tones, applied directly to the polyethylene sheet, it is the Parisian work entitled *Sauvé des eaux* that marks the real transition—although the pigment-free area in the left-hand corner of *Sous le chapiteau* resembles the one in the upper right-hand corner of *Sauvé des eaux*, which brings us back to the unoccupied margins of the *Frontières* series.

However, because all the reserves in *Sauvé des eaux* have been filled, that work gives the impression of elements floating on an aquatic background: an impression conveyed by all the other paintings from this period. The title, a reference to the Christian culture of the West, is an invitation to dip into the biblical story of Moses. One can see the faint, bearded trace of this ancient, legendary character in the upper right-hand corner. However, this ghost of a figure is neither planned nor anticipated; it is merely a technical coincidence.

*Racines au carré* follows the same compositional logic. The way the colours have mixed together on the polyethylene creates the impression of a underwater scene with eels swimming among undulating reeds. However, MSP contends that what we see is more like a cut-away view of the earth or the skin that enables us to examine branches, roots or nerves at our leisure. Given their random dimensions, it is impossible to decide between these varying interpretations, but it is clear that Saint-Pierre layers several fields of knowledge: technology, mathematics, architecture, etc. A diagonal line runs through the centre of *Image engloutie*, which has large reserves, and the same kind of background and shapes are found in *Fait main*. The title could allude to the fact that the painting was created by hand, thereby resurrecting the artisanal tradition at the heart of the artist's technical processes. In this respect we may recall the political intent of MSP's early work in the 1970s, when painting was synonymous with dyeing, and when art and craft were one and the same. One can also see the ghost of a comical, childish hand—perhaps even obscene, definitely not innocent—that hides the unquenched desire to touch everything and the visual pleasure that provides. This hand is also reminiscent

of the one evident in Bordel (2002), a tribute to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In fact, the original title of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* was *Bordel*; from a psychoanalytical point of view, the title of MSP's work makes that earlier title, which art history has repressed, even clearer.

An altogether different path is suggested by *Dans le sillage*, a transitional work that completes the Parisian period of 2002, but that also paves the way for the following series: *Cévennes*. The formal change at work here is partly based on an entirely materialistic difference: Saint-Pierre began using a thinner plastic film for the imprint. This enabled him to create a network of extremely fine, filament-like lines. In addition, although the *Cévennes* series imprints abound with local colour, they are much more liquid than usual, creating variations in shading that give a strong impression of depth. In these works, the narrativization of shapes that René Payant spoke of look completely different, taking on a new direction and a new meaning.

### **Cévennes works (2003–2004)**

In 2003 and 2004 the artist lived with his friends André-Pierre Arnal and Francine Slovak among the mountains and steep-sided valleys known as the *Cévennes* region. This area, which has a Mediterranean climate, experiences periods of drought in the summer months, and violent storms in the spring and fall. In fact, the so-called *épisodes cévenols*, which last for several days, bring torrential rainfall (accompanied by highly localized storms) that submerges shorelines and bridges, washes away roads and carries off everything in its wake. The landscape is completely transfigured. The region used to be known for its silk production; today, people still hunt for game and harvest chestnuts in the fall.

The reason for this description is that, just as New York and Venice exerted a conscious or unconscious influence on the subject matter and matterist effects used in the previous, eponymous series, so it is logical (although by no means imperative) to assume that the *Cévennes* would also have an effect on the artist. In fact, this series reveals a persistent attraction to nature and its myriad effects. In some works, MSP returns to the "narrative ghost of iconography." This expression was used by Nycole Paquin to express the artist's delight in layering space within the painting, aquatic scenes, mysterious figures and so on.

*Purple Rain* and *Raiders on the Storm* are both works that are the products of this setting and a change in

technique. Networks of fine lines run across both of them, making the creases in canvas and plastic visible. Aside from these aspects of formal narrativization, both point to fields of knowledge other than the technical. Based on the title, I would guess the artist intended us to associate these works with the turmoil wrought on the landscape by such devastating torrents, i.e., with the geographic knowledge acquired by MSP through his stay there.

But we can take this line of inquiry further: these works that so sublimely evoke certain natural landscapes also point us toward music, either to a knowledge of popular culture or art history and the romantic aesthetic. Like the works of 19th-century symbolist painters, these powerful, raging landscapes present the viewer with many different shapes; in a work such as *Raiders on the Storm*, these shapes could even be human figures that receive light from and reflect the splendour and violence of nature. It is quite possible that MSP is returning here to evocative, referential considerations and that the nature-culture dichotomy in these works is, so to speak, destroyed. As for the musical allusions, they are also present in his earlier works. *A Walk on the Wet Side* from the *Déluge* series (1990–1992) refers to *A Walk on the Wild Side*, a song by Lou Reed, *Raiders on the Storm* is inspired by *Riders on the Storm*, a song by the American rock group The Doors—although the painting is about criminals, whereas the song is not. In both cases, by changing a word in the title, the artist conveys a whole new meaning. The materials used in *Purple Rain* (also a reference to popular music) combine to surprising formal effect. A number of purple-tinged grey areas seem to float indistinctly in the foreground like halos or nimbi. This (unconsciously reinterpreted) sfumato effect occurred when the diluted pigment was applied to the polyethylene, thereby making it unstable. Gravity probably made the heavy white lead the first layer to be laid on the plastic sheet, thus making the surface opaque. This filtered the light, scarcely allowing the coloured pigment to show through.

To continue in the same technical vein, *Vert picholine* contains a similar kind of accident, visible in the grey areas grouped together in certain parts of the canvas. This work, infused with a remarkable shade of olive green, is a typical example of the extra-pictorial allusions made by many of the paintings in this series—the picholine is a very tasty olive from the south of France. The work's spatial organization provides glimpses of a greenish landscape with a liquid area in the foreground, a middle area and a sort of leafy curtain that draws the eye to the right of the foreground, where an unexpectedly mysterious figure can be seen. Infused with the Cévennes region's palette, this specific colour evokes both popular culture and French culinary traditions. Ter-

rasses also immerses us in Mediterranean hues, this time earthy browns, and is divided horizontally, as though by a knife blade, into areas that could be seen to resemble the actual terraced mountain sides. The way the artist works the opaque, solid black areas is reminiscent of certain tachiste paintings, Borduas' ambiguous holes, or the outline of a decorative motif. Archers and Claire-voie both derive from the same colour palette. Whereas Archers appears to reveal a hunting scene, with arrows and descriptive vectors, Claire-voie both opens and closes a window within the painting. These narrative shadows—hunting scene and window with a view—are readily visible in these two works, but in Claire-voie, the artist challenges the reference to the historical “perspectivist” window in painting. Claire-voie definitely alludes to previous theories that painting is a window that opens onto the world, and that helped develop linear perspective and the illusion of three-dimensional space—but, perhaps other elements are present instead, such as two-dimensionality and pure pictorial qualities. The painting presents a decentralized geometric construction: a square within a rectangle, and a progression of opposing strips and openwork. Other references can also be grafted onto this flat surface, playing off the light of its empty and full spaces, but it is undoubtedly preferable to give its polysemous allusions free rein.

### **Déversements series (2004)**

This series marks a growing interest in landscape and all its various forms. In our desire to see it as natural, we all too often forget that the landscape is a construction. These paintings from 2004 resemble the Parisian aquatic compositions in their light, diffuse chromatic background over which clear and transparent shapes appear to float. However, there is a horizon that divides the surface, a border that separates one varnished area from another. For, in this series, Marcel Saint-Pierre experimented with different varnishes: water-based acrylic varnish, an oil-based product for the final coats and epoxy or urethane-based sealants. In contrast to the traditional application of varnish in thin coats with a brush, Déversements 1 brings two kinds of varnish—one water-, the other oil-based—together by simply pouring them onto the surface. Those wishing to perceive the full effect can view the work from a specific angle in order to see the dividing line between the two kinds of varnish. This particular vantage point also brings the matte or glossy areas of the surface into play and makes the painting bear witness to matterist theories on varnish as an autonomous pictorial element. Déversements 3 and Déversements 4 present thick and extremely shiny outpourings onto a thin, matte surface.

These call to mind, once again, the debate within art history circles concerning the nobility of materials and

the distinction between art and craft, etc. Also, the word *déversement* (discharge) indicates a social statement, an environmental awareness, and brings to mind oil tanker spills, as well as sewage that spews into waterways.

### **Refuges series (2004)**

In a logical progression, the next series, *Refuges*, deals with the themes of protection and nature. The shades used allude to a naturalized landscape, as they did in the previous series. However, this landscape is now viewed as a place to which one can retreat in order to find peace and/or safety. Natural and urban spaces correspond in that they become places where members of the animal and vegetable kingdom find shelter. But unchecked production has drastically changed the environment, reducing nature and its sanctuaries into hostile places that are not suitable for preserving life. The Earth is no longer a sanctuary; instead it has assumed the role of a potential enemy. The *Refuges* series prompts an awareness of the current environmental situation, even as it provides us with aesthetic escapism in the form of shapes and colours. In short, these paintings do more than simply evoke the necessity for preserving these places: they revive the social concerns of the previous works.

*Refuge no 6, Affolement gris* is composed of dynamic diagonal lines that direct our gaze toward the work's two vertical limits. Interestingly, in a speech made to the *Maison des arts de Laval* in 2007, Marcel Saint-Pierre compared these shapes taking flight to wild herons. It is worthwhile mentioning that this endangered bird has become a symbol in Laval for identifying wetlands and wildlife conservation areas. Whether MSP is deliberately making allusions to nature or highway codes, or whether the shapes are purely pictorial, the artist uses the title of the series, the title of the painting and the painting itself to address many issues of politics and mass culture. In a similar vein, *Refuge no 5: Repaire rose* and *Refuge no 4: Migration orange* are more commentary than landscape: whereas the first refers to the concept of shelter in shades of pink, the second raises the question of certain species migrating above our heads and seasonal changes of colour. This painting's distinctive signs elicit recognition and a common imaginative response.

## **Tondi series (2003–2008)**

Although there are a few prior examples, since the years 2003–2004 the artist has been almost exclusively painting tondis. This series (which is, of course, part of a pictorial tradition that goes back to Delaunay's first chromatic circle in 1913) is obviously reminiscent of Québec artist Tousignant's neoplastic output or the American tradition of Johns or Noland. The tondo usually generates concentric shapes that, when combined with vivid colours, produce the retinal effects characteristic of op art. Artists in this tradition tend to explore the dizzying effects involved in retinal persistence, pulsation and vibration. But, by returning to the neoplasticists' vision of dynamic space, Marcel Saint-Pierre stands against the principle of simultaneous contrasts. In fact, this is not the first time that he has opposed the concept of light and colour defined by Newton's disk. *Moli-mélo*, an unframed work from 1978, was based less on the idea of colour as light, and more on a matter-ist, if not chemical, concept of colour. The goal of MSP's circles is, once again, to literally neutralize the impact of targets on the human eye and minimize the circles' optical effect.

Two steps are readily recognizable in the production of these circles. In the evocatively titled 2004 exhibition *Capteurs chromatiques*, rather than the force of acceleration or chromatic expansion, what we sense is concentric forms in which contrasts dissolve and where colours and shapes appear to implode. In some of his 2005 works, MSP even attempts to neutralize or balance the centripetal and centrifugal forces of colours. In certain works, the centre is slightly displaced or the strips are somehow uneven, while others show rifts or places where the concentric shapes overlap. These reduce the effects of optical depth by giving contrasting shapes extreme flatness of field. *Ondes internes*, *Spin no 1* and *Révolution orange* all exemplify this process. However, since MSP's paintings never deal with only one concept, the undulating target shapes refer to both the human body and astrophysical formulae. Again, *Révolution orange* juxtaposes two very different subjects: pictoriality and scholarly culture on the one hand and knowledge of political events and popular culture on the other. The "revolution" of the title is equally evocative of the complete rotation of an orange-coloured circle as it is of the events that took place in the Ukraine in 2004, where striking workers and protesters branched thousands of orange flags. But it was given that title after the fact.

A second exploratory phase began in 2007 with *Suite nocturne*. With this work, the painter focussed solely on investigating the dark polarity of the colours used. Many of the paintings from this phase—specifically

Infrarouge, Lueurs no 2 and Bleu caracol—are so dark and dense that the viewer must get close in order to properly discern the nuances in shading. The first of the above-mentioned works presents scarcely visible radial lines. The second was the result of a serendipitous matterist effect: when the imprint was done, heat and humidity combined to create a concentration of hazy, velvety blue on the polyethylene sheet. The third work, Bleu caracol, uses the same subdued hues. However, in the words of Daniel Arasse: “Nothing is visible.” A snail could be happily hiding out in the painting and the viewer would never know where it was. It is impossible to fully discuss this topic without referring to the large-scale circular works exhibited at the Galerie Verticale Art Contemporain in 2008.

In conclusion: since the start of his career, Marcel Saint-Pierre has attempted to embrace art in accordance with a materialist philosophical stance. His art is imbued with a wide variety of intellectual concerns. These have led the artist to develop an original artistic vision and turn his materialist experiments into a discourse in such a way that they become part of the theoretical foundation of his approach. His works also reflect other intellectual considerations arising from many different systems: sociological and political, Marxist and psychoanalytical, artistic and cultural, and so on. Not only are these areas of knowledge associated with a certain era—i.e., they are a product of the postmodern episteme—but Saint-Pierre succeeds in weaving them into complex and erudite layers. In other words, the works in the series mentioned in this essay show that the artist has synthesized knowledge from these fields. Both the paintings that preceded 1998, as well as those that came afterwards, succeed in configuring this “matter for thought,” and remind us that, over the course of his career, his artistic vision remains still utterly seamless.

### **Anite de Carvalho**

#### **Curator**

Anite de Carvalho, an independent curator and art critic, teaches art history at the post-secondary level. Her master’s dissertation on the various kinds of public participation and collaboration with respect to the works of Québec artist Maurice Demers will be published by Lux Éditeur sometime this year. She has collaborated with Marcel Saint-Pierre on a work about Serge Lemoyne, to be published by Éditions Les 400 coups. De Carvalho is currently completing her interuniversity PhD at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her thesis deals with the institutionalization of participation (by the public and other contributors) in participatory art works in Québec, from the 1960s until today. She is a member of Galerie Verticale.