
SUBSCRIBE FROM \$0.99/WEEK

A man who thought deeply about his art

BLAKE GOPNIK

TORONTO

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 13, 2000

This article was published more than 25 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.

When Yves Gaucher, one of the greats of Canadian abstraction, died of throat cancer on Friday, Toronto art dealer Mira Godard happened to be on her way to Montreal; her trip brought her directly to the artist's deathbed.

"Gaucher was quite a presence," she said, back in Toronto yesterday but still unable to believe her loss. "It was always nice to have him around."

They'd been close friends ever since the early 1960s, when the young Gaucher walked into the Montreal gallery she'd just bought, and proclaimed: "I'm the one who never finished school, but I'm going to be a painter."

A painter he became -- one of the country's best -- but the artistic self-assurance, even pig-headedness, that was a Gaucher trademark was also mixed with an impressive generosity of character. I should know: Mr. Gaucher gave me my very first interview, for a school project done with a

scene. But that didn't stop the artist from taking seriously the questions of two art-loving school kids, and answering them with the same deep thought he was famous for, in art and life.

A long career as a teacher at Concordia University in Montreal left many students in his debt; they say he could be stern, even unyielding, in where he thought their art should go, but always also a rich source of ideas and inspiration. (Ms. Godard remembers how he insisted that work such as his demanded long and full attention, never a passing glance as background to the rest of life: "Don't do your shopping list," he told her. "Look at Albers's work; look at my work.")

I didn't talk to Mr. Gaucher again until earlier this year, when he gave *The Globe* the chance to run a preview of his very latest works -- who knew they'd be his last? -- but Mr. Gaucher hadn't changed. He was still tough, and serious, but also eager to talk to anyone who cared about his kind of art as much as he did.

Like the man, it turned out his work really hadn't changed so much since his very earliest days. The new project -- collages of intensely coloured paper, glued down in rigorous, straight-line grids -- was a close recall of the seminal *Signals and Silences* triptych he did in 1966. A study in primary colours, in the subtle inflection of pictorial space, in the rhythms that lines play out across a composition -- there was no way Mr. Gaucher could have known it, but he'd come full circle, and would never get to take off on new tangents.

The recent Gaucher art is also summative because it shows him coming back to experimental work on paper, where he got his start.

After buying his own printing press in 1960, Mr. Gaucher fooled around with various forms of gestural, expressive abstraction, mashing up his

came across the atonal music of the great Modernist composer Anton Webern, and realized the power of manipulating empty space through well-judged forays into it.

The music that inspired Mr. Gaucher is so spare as to be painful. People may enjoy the aggressive atonality of Webern and his ilk, but few find soothing pleasure in it. Almost all the works of Mr. Gaucher, on the other hand, are deeply easy on the eye -- a contemplative pleasure, rather than a painful source of tight-browed contemplation. They come closer to a Japanese esthetic -- as transmitted to us, maybe, in the placid rhythms of Eric Satie -- than to hard-edged Modernism.

Mr. Gaucher came to prominence as a printmaker, working in a medium that stresses intimacy over heroism, gentle nudges over great big shoves. When he blew his printmaking up to canvas size, it didn't really change what he was all about. He wasn't making the brazen I'm-an-artist statements of Barnett Newman or the other American champions of colour-field abstraction; he was just seeing how big subtlety could get. Sometimes, the translation doesn't work -- a major commission in the atrium of the Art Gallery of Ontario just sees subtlety inflated into lifeless boredom -- but when it does, as in those *Signals and Silences* of the early sixties, the quiet eloquence of a Gaucher can fill a room.

It's lucky this is so. *Songs Without Words*, the artist's final show, which opens on Sept. 30 at Ms. Godard's Toronto gallery, will have to speak entirely for itself; its tragically apt title was chosen before the artist knew he'd got a sickness that would deprive him first of speech, then life.

Sign up for our Morning Update newsletter. Start your day with context and insight on the biggest stories shaping our lives