



Here is mystery, which is also pure beauty, in these delicate approaches of intellectual pathos, in which suffering and death and error become transformed into something almost happy, so full is it of strange light.

Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist*

*Movement*, 1899

## TOTALITARIONISM AND FLOWERS: ASPECTS OF DAVID BOLDUC'S WORK

Most of this essay was written years ago and filed away.

Recently I read Hanah Arendt's haunting 1951 study The Origins of Totalitarianism, her message of concern and mourning for the silenced victims of authoritarian politics bears repeating. My thesis

is simple: David Bolduc's work bears witness to humanity's losses inflicted by political repression in the twentieth century.

For those who know the artist personally, with his deep engagement in literature, especially the poetry and lives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avante-garde, the notion that a contemporary painter might attempt to embrace a coherent view from seemingly divergent and irreconcilable emotional poles will not seem farfetched. Bolduc attaches a seriousness of intent that parallels the traditional view of moral commitment to the painter's practice. Admittedly, while he respects the seriousness of Delacroix's ambition the contemporary situation requires an artist adopt a healthy dose of self-deprecating skepticism and detachment from public life. An intentionally submerged almost subversive view of necessary values, these are the fruits of a reflective studio life today. Bolduc's subtle ironic touch and self-effacement is so contrary to the relentless (self-promoting) obviousness that we are accustomed to that if we are to derive a message we must expect to search for it. For this artist, overtness is not a virtue. If opinions are expressed they are

embedded in the very making of the work, as a specific emotional key to permeate the viewer's consciousness. The text will not announce itself with the obviousness of advertising. Bolduc's views are delivered with the subtlety of the modernist poetry he loves. His work presents an exterior polish of ease, poise and perhaps even contentment: a style that can be seen as originating in the vocabulary of late 1960's decorative abstraction. Having assumed these works offer a thoughtful, emotionally reflective message, an engaged viewer is obliged to elicit that specific voice.

In 1993 Bolduc created two painted and collaged works entitled TASHKENT. I have always considered and presented them as a pair, entitling the left: 'Lenin's Garden' and the right 'Venetian Vortex'. Any number of viewers have declined to see these works as pendants: irreconcilable because so compositionally dissimilar. Admittedly 'Lenin's Garden' has a classically calm poise that conveys a sense of authority and even grandeur. While, as my title implies, 'Venetian Vortex' is a destabilizing swirl that only holds together because of its centralizing spin. But my intuitive sense was that these images were integrally linked, much like two facing leaves of

an illuminated text. The question of whether they should be hung as pendants lead me to inquire into the narrative text imbedded in the images, hoping that would provide an answer.



Six postcards from the Lenin Museum in Tashkent create a vertical totem in 'Lenin's Garden'. Nostalgic images of Lenin's

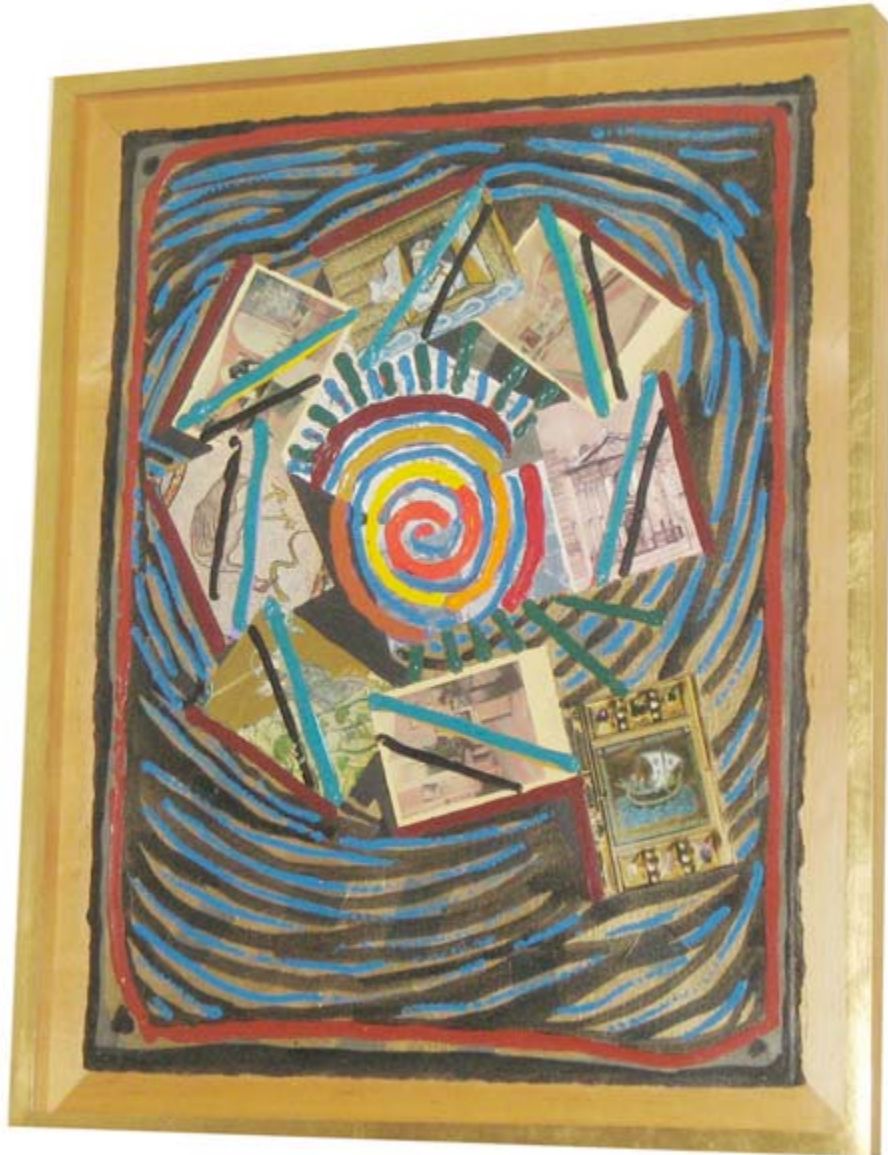
personal effects, his clothes, his Rolls-Royce vie with sculptural portraits and a globe of the world that presumably highlights his conquests. Overlaying these collage elements are painted images of a two-leaved flower depicted with Bolduc's signature style colour-bars of pure pigment. Framing these centralized images is an elaborate network of vertical bars of black over a field of gold and silvery-gray. There are a number of floating star-like X's of pure red pigment placed around the collaged totem. To reinforce its boxlike stability there is a red framing-edge line around the whole image. The result is somber and dignified but not without a lyrical elegance brought about by the red dandelion seed like stars floating across the field.

As already mentioned, the 'Venetian Vortex' presents a decidedly contrary face. Again the main collage components are postcards, several of which are from the Lenin museum series. Other images are of Byzantine style mosaics and enamels from St Marks in Venice. The postcards create a swirl or vortex, which begins from the center and spins outwards to the right. While all the other cards are struck through with lines of heavy pigment the last card with its

image of a sailing ship is given a reinforcing step up by underlining the left and bottom edges – a visual kick up and out of the picture.

The center edge of the vortex is described by pure reds, browns and yellows curling in while the field is a pattern of wave-like strokes of blue and black over a gold field. Bolduc has embedded tessellated patches by collaging small squares in the golden sea, which reiterates the Venetian mosaic theme. Again the whole composition is contained by heavy borders of black and brown that frame what would be a very unstable vortex in the midst of a churning sea.

'Venetian Vortex' presents a vision of energy, a seething restlessness spinning out of control.



Throughout his career, Bolduc has made extensive use of collage techniques. The effect of his presentation is not dissimilar from that of Walter Benjamin's prose – an ultimately subversive use of quotations from authority figures traditionally taken to be supportive of establishment values. "Walter Benjamin knew that the

break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreplaceable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. In this he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there had arisen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present and to deprive it of "peace of mind", the mindless place of complacency." (Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations*, p.39)

Bolduc's collage technique exhibits a distinct character. In the way the postcard images are tacked on to the field they retain an insistent independence - a stubborn rejection of assimilation. The postcard elements are reminiscent of the Italian gothic use of classical fragments or "spoiled" patched on to a façade - San Marco in Venice being the most delicious example. In both, the collage elements refuse to lose their intense specificity. Contrast this with the abstract expressionist technique of Robert Motherwell, which is based on Surrealist dream aesthetic, which intentionally fuses and integrates the collage elements into a larger gesture and melds to produce a compositional whole. Bolduc chooses to deny the eye an



easily assimilated whole forcing us to deal with individual collage elements as “thought fragments” in the same way that Walter Benjamin used citations in his critical essays: “Quotations in my work are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve the idler of his convictions.” (*Illuminations*, p.38)

The treatment of the central collage elements gives a clue to the narrative Bolduc has elaborated. In 'Lenin's Garden' the flowers leaves are black and obscure the postcard totem. The totem figure is surrounded by bars strongly suggestive of imprisonment. Only the red stars seem to possess freedom of movement in an environment that is rigid and controlling. Possessed of poise and authority the image presents the proverbial gilded cage, with the totem-figure trapped in an elegant prison cell. The reference to Lenin's career and Soviet expansionism is clear – a rigorous totalitarian regime incarcerates and deadens the sensitive flower/man. Only dandelion-stars can hope to elude authority's chilling grip. For man or flowers choice, simple movement is not an option. In the Taskent museum's exhibition of homage to Lenin's legacy or ruthlessness there is the haunting echo of Tammerlaines chilling soliloquy:

All nights of power to grace my victory  
And such objects are fit for Tamerlaine  
Wherein as a mirror may be seen  
His honour, that consists in shedding blood.

Marlowe, (*I Tam.* 5.2.2256-9)

In contrast, the 'Venetian Vortex' presents a swirling wheel of motion – an exhilarating and destabilizing image of energy. An enquiry into these postcard images is revealing: A Paris Metro map; a mosaic depiction of Noah in the Ark releasing a dove to find if land has reemerged after the Flood; Christ receives His vision: the Agony in the Garden; and the last image is of travelers in a tiny craft setting out on rolling seas. Only this last image of the ship has not been struck through with the spokes of the vortex-wheel. While possessing none of 'Lenin's Garden' controlled elegance and stability the vortex speaks of venturing out and the vitality of embracing risk, to new beginnings and hope.

A pairing of hatred. These two images deliberately confront opposing political and philosophic views tragically played out in the twentieth century. Their elaborately structured and interrelated narratives are actively reinforced by oppositional compositions. The emotional security of Totalitarian Order is confronted by the

challenges of Free-Will and Choice. The destabilizing chaos of a free society with all its liberating opportunity and risk is contrasted with the chilling confinement, exhaustion and inevitable sacrifice to a false safety implicit in tyranny's controlling calm.

There is a fear in pursuing this iconographic decoding that my interpretation may be incorrect, or worse still that we are confronted by work which for all its scholarly cleverness fails to transcend its subject, fails to deliver emotionally. Behind their quiet assurance, the formidable consistency of their opposing text, the *Tashkent* collages in their narratives project a spiritual whole. Perhaps this is the sustaining quality that Walter Benjamin refers to as the "truth content of a work of art". "The works truth content is the more relevant the more inconspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter, the beholder who contemplates them...decide(s) on its immortality. In this sense the history of works of art prepare their critique, and this is why historical distance increases their power." (*Illuminations*, p.4-5)



While in Paris in the winter of 1994 David Bolduc executed 30 small black ink studies on thick white paper. Consisting mostly of intimate highly detailed studies of single flowers, there were a few references to other subjects: a portrait of Baudelaire from a somewhat awkward lithograph and a tantric Indian lingam stone. This *Paris Flower\_series* comprised a sensual meditative fantasy in exquisite linear elegance and highly refined black and gray ink washes. The series is a contemporary equivalent of a pillow book, an erotic supplement to a cultivated Oriental bedroom. First exposed in the bleak Toronto winter of 1994 the series seemed like an attempt

to perform a set of harpsichord variations amidst downtown traffic. At that time the *Flowers* appeared fragile, over-bred, and evanescent. The product of a Paris sojourn, it reflected a moment of perfect balance never to be recaptured. With their hot-house fed Paris sensuality they capture a quality of distanced and reflective detachment perhaps only available to an outsider waylaid from his day-to-day reality.



One of the major themes of Bolduc's work in the 1990's centered around flower imagery. Few of these works read as 'flower pieces', in the sense of being traditional still-lives of pretty colour

ensembles. Often the flower image was overlaid upon disjunctive collage compositions and acted as a focusing mandala reminiscent of the fan like rays of pure colour that Bolduc has employed as an artistic signature since the 1970's. The *'Paris Flower Series'*, in its scale, technique and visual effect - in the nineteenth century, illustration quality - seemed anomalous even eccentric in the context of the artist's oeuvre. My argument is that Bolduc's is a thinking poetic voice. His work grows associatively and reasserts itself so that divergences that initially appear stylistically contrary can be seen, in retrospect, to be profound contributions to the central thrust of his practice. The question is then, how does this 'Paris Flower' series fit into the artists work of the 1990's: into the larger conceptual view embraced by Bolduc's concerns?



The Paris Flower series is exquisite to the point of exemplifying an effete fin-de-siecle connoisseur taste. They are reminiscent of Mondrian's flower pieces which were executed throughout his mature career (and not as previously thought a peripheral money generating exercise of the artist as a young man). Also there is an affinity with Ellsworth Kelly's ongoing engagement with nature's contours as experienced by line drawing. Often Kelly's studies are of leaves, flowers and plants with the focus solely on the edge - the disciplined rectitude in grasping individual, almost breathing, outline. A third and more tentative connection is with the divisive break or "zip" of Barnett Newman which dogmatically holds that all the painting has to offer is at the edge: by dividing one space from

another, by apportioning, and thereby defining proportion as the essential harmony. There is an affinity in Bolduc's arching tulips, between the blackness of a stem and the white-field expanses on either side of that dividing line. The intensity of detachment, of simple (yet so difficult to attain) observation and clarity of purpose to record without imposing. All these artists are practitioners of pure abstraction in which colour as space, presence and absence, proportion as balance, purity and perfection are the stakes. What unites Mondrian, Newman and Kelley in both their representational and non-objective work is a spiritual yearning to express visually an internal harmony. In their divided fields, those crystal-cut passages of space, we see and sense and feel the assurance of the existence of perfection.





Employing a technique of purity and discretion Bolduc uses flower imagery to bridge to the sense of yearning for spiritual values. The 'Paris Flower' series presents a sequence of successive intensely discrete images, intimate, exclusionary, hypnotically focused, that act as emotive steps to ascend. These are but stairs of meditation for a dream of purity.

Flowers in their fragility, short-lived evanescence and powerfully isolating purposelessness demand attention. To the exclusion of all else. In an urban world of utility and clamour Bolduc's Paris images demand an internally reflective, focusing calm. These thirty studies slowly unfold their message through their intense manifestation of proportion; their monumentality of scale with economy of size; distilling a concision of effect with black cutting through white.

Bolduc's crisp incised spaces still to deafening. In contrast our public world is just so much noise. Here we attain the private, the silent, the meditative mode in late twentieth century life. These Paris Flower images present a view of life – the need for quiet,

reflection and a self-contained calm, receptive to the satisfactions of an inner peace.



In Russian Angel, a large scale painting completed in 1995, Bolduc crystallized definitively his themes of spiritual yearning and meditative loss. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of

Soviet-era communism, the early 1990's were a moment for historical reflection. The collapse of the Stalinist construct and its authoritarian empire created a void filled by strife, violence and ideological chaos. In Russian Angel, the prison bars of Lenin's Garden have given way to the jagged edge of frayed wire. A floating Angel-like form appears contained between lacerating expressionist black and gray bands. A yielding backlit field of skin-soft gray breathes with a dull warming light. The overall effect is an alter piece that conveys an emotive life-pulse, in a receiving mode, an icon in front of which a row of small candles would not seem inappropriate.

The surface of Russian Angel has heavy raised marks of pedimenti – the scars of previous paintings. In the 1990's Bolduc took to repainting many older canvases, often several times, so that the marks of previous images underlie the image that currently dominates. These pedimenti/scars act as memories of past lives, of vissions suffered and endured, tributes to battle and survival. The drawing of the angel is suggestive of Russian icons with halo-like rays and fluttering drapery in movement. There is an evocation of

the radical phase of Russian Futurism of 1913-19 – Larinov, Goncharova and Malevich's illustrations for experimental formalist poetry are remembered if not specifically quoted. And there is an over whelming mood of sadness, of grieving for the revolutionary movement consumed. The angel stands as a lone figure for that sacrifice and loss: the somber pulsing colour key, his confinement and repression convey he is a victim of the Gulag. At the end of the twentieth century this is as close as a secular artist can come to a Pieta: an icon acknowledging the spiritual sacrifice to authoritarian statism and ideology. In commemorating the Gulag Russian Angel pointedly reminds us that "secular power is essentially the ability to perform certain operations on the body: to remove it from one place to another, to confine it, to cause it extreme pain, to reduce it to ashes.... And it is preeminently when his body is subjected to torments that the obstinant heretic is almost suffused with the conviction that his soul is inviolable." (S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p.80)

Bolduc has melded the spiritual intensity of the Paris Flower series with the somber means and message of the Tashkent

collages. This canvas Russian Angel possesses a quality of heavy time slowly yielding, of historical consequences being meditated upon. We are presented with an essay on the results of a ruthless authoritarian agenda. The heavy-hearted, disillusioning, tragedy of political ideology is exposed in a lament for man's suffering.

In the 1990's, Bolduc reached his 50's as a mature artist with an achieved personal style, the result of more than thirty years of extensive travel, reading and reflection that builds a visual culture. His work could be seen merely as a polished articulate 'fin de siecle' style incorporating historical references and skillfully exploiting a variety of techniques to evoke a vague sense of nostalgic sentiment. But this view ignores Bolduc's precise contribution: a probing intensely personal practice that demands of itself a questioning, reflective view of life as it is lived in our time. Earlier I suggested that perhaps 'contentment' could be sensed in his mature work, but contentment distinguished from and opposed to complacency – a particularly Canadian disease. The values he visually articulates are harshly critical of ideologies espousing the necessity of political authority (in whatever form), of collective institutional thinking, and

of the indifference to personal responsibility that individual conformity entails.

David Bolduc's work of the 1990's attests to his commitment that from a traditional painting practice an engaged viewer can demand, and if vigilantly pursued expect to find, a precise poetic statement of emotional depth and delivery. As condescending and obscuring as the term 'decorative abstraction' in art discourse is, Bolduc's images still seem to fit that characterization. To deny that a decorative style might possess the dignity of conceptual intent and weight of emotional delivery is to merely excuse the obligation of probing appreciation - a commitment that merely corresponds to the artist's labour. Bolduc's work suggests that a sublimated and yet potent narrative message can be carried by a critically disparaged 'superficial' style. It should alert us to a strategy of serious late twentieth century work to cloak itself in self-effacing subtlety.

"Pure sensitivity, in which the intelligence has not been brought into play, may excite our emotions, but never our admiration, nor those heightened pleasures of the intelligence that a true work of art affords us because it allows us to see the sense of order and

meaning, that harmonious logic, which is usually hidden us by life."

(Marcel Proust in Tadie, Bio, p.65)

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## Postscript:

In Kohl, a large canvas of 2000, Bolduc returned to his signature style exhibiting a less graphic and dispersed 'allover' field. A mood or evocation rather than a statement is presented by wholly abstract means. The pedimenti of previous paintings are more in evidence and from a flickering impasto/relief field the sense of felt memories emerges. Colour dominates and is received in a visually pulsing way. Woven, the deep blues, grays and golden greens and rust browns meld with strands of red and yellow ochre defying separation. Only Bolduc's signature colour rays of pure applied pigment override a submerged gentle curling swirl to hold a field that would drift out like a fog leaving one bereft. The whole image yields to an evocation of mood. In Kohl, the artist re-affirms his central concerns within the gentle undemanding style of 'post-painterly abstraction'. An intent observer will perceive the achievements of past exercises sustained and carried along, evoking memory and soulful meditation. In the fluttering strength of Kohl's precise evocation of a clinging persistent mood, by insisting upon a spiritual dimension in self-reflection, the message is not without hope.





Two other works of the recent moment can be cited: "Screen #3", 2003 is a horizontal ghost of a canvas in which remarkably this glazes of oil paint obscure a previous image. There are raised pedimenti/scars memories of a field of bamboo. Over top Bolduc has laid down a grid of alphabet letter, the sequence of which, like reminiscence is a bit wandering. To the left the rays of colour-bars stand alone, eloquent but severely diminished in colour towards the monochromatic. A spectrum of hesitant flickering grays - "gray that most philosophic of colours, the colours of meditation, must have suited the moods of the Puritan mind." (C. Sterling, *Still Life Painting*, p.51) More a reflective echo than an assertive voice, Screen #3

whole abstract arrangement reduces its message to a haunting flickering twilight – gravely melodious.



In Winter Night, 2004 the memory of Russian Angel has been compositionally revisited to a remarkable degree. There is the same centralized 'figure' outlined in lines of pure colour pigment and

hemmed in on both sides by darker horizontal bars. The colour key is decisively different – a scarlet red so saturated as to remind one of organic textile dyes. Accordingly the emotional voice is closer to jubilant celebration than ‘Russian Angel’s’ mourning. Initially it is surprising to see two similar compositions could convey such disparate messages. The title of Winter Night hints at longer reflection and over time one perceives an intentionally unresolved ambiguity in the abstracted central image. A more prosaic reading of a glowing candlestick that embraces light and shadow alternates with the suggestion of a dancing figure that twists depending on how much the eye extends the mass and breath of the center. A “Winter Night” evokes the meditative solitary light of a single candle, the warmth and solace of light saturated reds. These reds are so infused with pulsing warmth that one cannot but think human blood. And with it the memory of Marlowe’s “his honour that consists in shedding blood” returns to mind and cannot be expunged.

Bolduc’s recent works, in their physical handling of paint constantly invoke a consciousness of the human condition. No matter how abstractly the image is presented the viewer is

repeatedly tempted to read into the picture a human figure: In the Blackboard the rays come to symbolize a watching human presence; in Winter Tale a swirling dancer emerges from the centralizing mass of colour. Bolduc's emotionally laden arrangements of colour conjure up a portrayal of the human soul, envisioned as possessing a flickering spiritual light. For those of us sympathetic to the late Venetian Renaissance school's expressionist dialogue with colour there is the reminiscence of Titian's touch:

Such extraordinary dynamism of handling, with its *crescendo* of touches creating a design susceptible to an interactive exchange of colour and light, affirms how Titian, having adopted the matter of paint as the main protagonist of his art...initiated the magic "impressionism" with which he would express with even greater desperation the tragedy and anguish of human existence. (F. Valcanover, *Titian, Prince of Painters*, 1990, p.286)