

Sylvain Louis-Seize's Immersive Shine

Written by R.M. Vaughan

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Never trust a clean surface. There is always another layer, something underneath.

A painting is a bottomless pit (and I mean that in the nicest way possible). A painting is easy to look at, but to really see it – to, in essence, give to the painting what it so evidently wants to give to you, that sweet gift of light and colour and curious, telepathic messages – you have to stare. Stare without reservation. Stare with what people used to call “nerve”, by which they meant strength.

Stop whatever you are doing right now and stare at one of Sylvain Louis-Seize’s paintings. The word “paintings” hardly seems enough. You’ll see. I’ll wait right here.

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Begin with the basics: shapes, forms, patterns. I see spots. Spots and pools, geographical twists, half-buried crosses, waves and amoebas, zebra stripes, pinstripes, erratic marbling, spotlight corners and shady, secret alcoves. This is not a painting (while very much being a painting), it’s a map. A cartography of crossed roads (and salad-tossed signals) paired, almost deviously, with deliberate, synced semaphores.

Your brain searches for patterns, by nature. And when nature fails, we have art. In Louis-Seize’s work, this quest for the recognizable, the known, is both teased and rewarded. (Yes, there is a sexuality in play here. Or, rather, the performance of a sexual dynamic: the old Come Hither look, the naughty glance. How frisky! How very alive!). The eyes land on one reliable visual (a droplet, perhaps a tear) only to be led away from the near-articulated and onto something less formed, less near completion, more primordial (but hardly unschooled nor less “finished” as everything is deliberate).

This is the Op-Art game of peek-a-boo played without a ruler or a compass, without all that lifeless math. These paintings are set designs for a dance between two opposing cognitive impulses: the impulse to make order from (apparent) chaos, to be the boss of your own eyes, versus the impulse to submit, indeed embrace, Louis-Seize’s dissociative whirls. Don’t fight it, let both happen at once. Just watch.

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Sylvain and I are “of a generation.” Both in our early 50’s, both born in Atlantic provinces (he in Quebec, me in New Brunswick), both outsiders (a Francophone in Calgary, an Anglophone in Montreal), both very Generation X.

When I look at Sylvain’s paintings I see cues and nods that I know come from hours of 80’s TV (early MusiquePlus/MuchMusic/MTV graphics are all over his work), New Wave pop videos and album covers, nutty Memphis Group furniture, the seminal graphics Patrick Nagel created for the band Duran Duran. And fashion, I see mountains and mountains of crisscrossed, neon dipped, animal and “ethnicity” poached prints, great big loud and party balloon festive fashion. Think Cyndi Lauper wearing nine outfits at once. Think hair metal bands strutting in neon paired with houndstooth weaves. Dr. Huxtable sweaters! Loverboy and Michael Jackson in tomato-red leather. Everything first generation hip-hop. Kathy Acker’s cut-n-paste fiction. And hair styled to look like pagodas.

Every artist steals. That's the fun part. But few artists steal so cleverly, succinctly. Sylvain pin-drops his sources – those bygone, somewhat mad, keenly emotive colour wheels and fevered fabric swatches – neatly into the mix with tweezers. Sylvain is the DJ, he is what he plays (with apologies to David Bowie, another visual source deluxe).

However, nothing here says “retro.” It says “informed.” And made with love.

The goal is not to trigger a specific historical memory set, or worthless nostalgia, but rather to revive the lost art of adoration. It is hardly accidental that so many cruciform images appear in Sylvain's paintings. The paintings are acts of reverence. Much like the spin, spin, spin of a Sufi dancer. Or, perhaps more immediately, Madonna prancing in her most vestal modes (and vestments).

Digitalism risks depleting us of our ability to enter a painting, as one does, for instance, an Elizabeth Murray painting, or one of Jack Bush's blocked-then-loose abstracts; depleting us of our sense of depth as both spiritual and spatial. Of, well, our souls. Our souls at play.

I asked Sylvain what he most wants a viewer to do with, by which I meant react to, one of his paintings.

“Bathe in the colour,” he said.

Remember please that I am writing this only weeks after fire at Notre-Dame de Paris, mere days after the devastating 274 Jarvis Ave artist space blaze in Winnipeg. If I'm looking for healing auras here, can you blame me?

But, never trust a clean surface. The healing will have to wait. As Sylvain himself tells me:

For me the pieces represent a social commentary on our insta-perfect, enhanced and photo edited/filtered world. To the plain eye they are pretty pieces, but when you look deeper, the shaded elements represent darker episodes in my life and everyone's lives (anger, resentment, hopelessness, periods of indifference). But to the outside they are photo edited and enhanced or disguised by the brightness and colour of the piece. Where you are drawn to depends on how deep you are willing to go into the work.

There are no pretty pictures. There are pictures that move us, pictures that alarm us, pictures that tell stories, and pictures, like Sylvain's (“pictures” is such a flat word, especially here) that remind us that all imagery is invested with (and sometimes haunted by) mystery. There are simply too many acts of transference and its cousin, projection, in any act of viewing to definitively say an image is unquestionably fixed, entire in its immediate presentation. For Sylvain, the dark hearts that beat in each of his works remind us that information is an animal, a wild animal; tame from a distance, rarely so up close.

Furthermore, it ain't all fun and games. I love reading Sylvain's colour salads as acts of joy and clever mystery, but to ignore the anchoring shade is to ignore another kind of beauty, another kind of intrigue – one derived from two observations built into the work: art is as inherently, gorgeously unreliable as any other free creature, and that the dark holds its own attractions.

Where light exists, it is pure, blazing, fierce; but light exists almost nowhere, and the blackness itself is also pure and blazing and fierce. Carl Sagan

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Mid-career/mid-life is murder. In Canada, it's cold-blooded murder. We want new and newer because we haven't learned how to value what's in front of us right now. It's a post-colonial hang up; and let's leave it there, on the hook.

Nevertheless, nobody walks into their second or third decade of art-making in this country without trepidation. Mid-life prompts caution, mid-career prompts repetition, even retreat. Not for

Louis-Seize. Just looking at his work, I figured he was maybe 31 and maybe three years out of an MFA from one of the big schools. A fresh face. He's not, but his art is fresher than daisies in July. And he admits that his latest works follow several years of exploration and trial and error.

Every artist does that, you say. And yes, they do: but an artist in mid-everything going off in new directions is a thing to behold, and celebrate. There is more boldness here than in most street art and almost all contemporary conceptual art. Really, the only crossover I can make off the top of my head (one must be party game-ready in this life) is performance art, which has of late rediscovered flamboyance. I would wear one of these paintings to a party and *be* the party game.

Sylvain says, "the medium [paint] is not as important as the sensitivity."

Like a performer, Louis-Seize follows his intuition. Of course, there are other considerations. Many. But when an artist describes their work as primarily an act of feeling one's way forward and paying attention to their own sensitivities, their inner cogs and gears and the way they pop together, that artist is describing a performance. One made concrete, in this case, but no less theatrical, no less alive.

To be so bold about one's enthusiasms in mid-career, a time when artists are expected to "settle" into their practice and set aside youthful experimentation and risk, is courageous and heartening – because the art world thrives on repetition and predictability (while at the same time being constantly anxious over keeping up, staying current; small wonder so many of us lose our bearings later in life), and on what marketers call product consistency.

Forget all that, Louis-Seize's new work posits, as it merrily jumps overboard.
How liberating!

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When I was about 11 years old, my family went to Florida for March Break. I barely remember Disney World, Cape Canaveral, Busch Gardens, all the cavernous malls and castle hotels. But I will never forget the glass bottom boat ride across the swamps.

Under a brilliant, hard sunlight I watched dime-sized, powder blue fish dodge long, devilish gray eels. Lime green sea grasses bent under the boat's hull, disturbing schools of silver darts and, above them, butter yellow dragonflies made of spun glass. Pink lotus, white lotus, purple lotus. A frog as big as a plate, eyes blazing orange. Before the tour was over, I wanted to do it again.

Now, finally, I have.