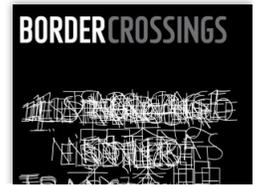


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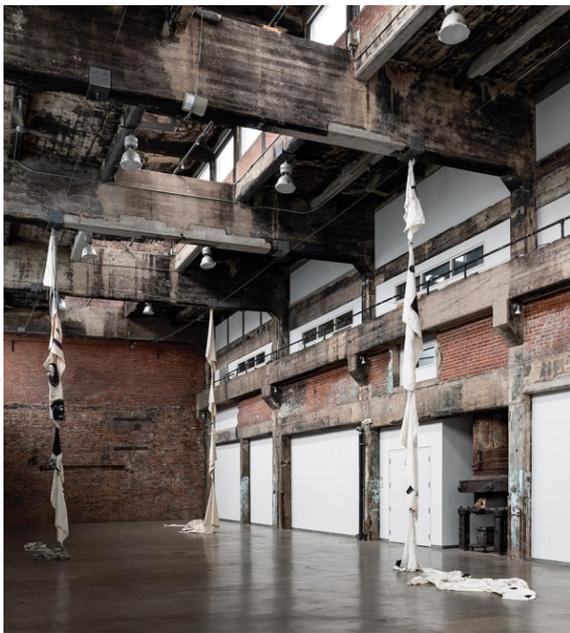
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“The Silver Cord”

James D. Campbell · Crossovers · Issue 149 · March 2019

I had already written the following review when I learned that my friend, the painter and improvisational jazzman John Heward, had died. Instead of amending it, I thought it should stand as is. Here is my latest act of interpretation on work that I have followed closely since 1980. In his studio I often called John’s work “serene,” by which I meant (and he knew) not what the *Oxford Thesaurus* prescribes but rather something like “bringing on contemplation and epiphany,” which is precisely what I feel about the work he presented here.



John Heward, installation view, “The Silver Cord,” 2018, Darling Foundry, Montréal. Photos: Paul Litherland. All images courtesy Darling Foundry, Montréal.

“Hold onto the silver cord,” Agnes Martin famously instructed her students, and this sage piece of advice was one she always observed herself—often not eating while working through long painting days to preserve a state of higher consciousness and a no-holds-barred intensity. Presumably, curator Caroline Andrieux found a similar unbroken intensity in the work of John Heward and Jean-Francois Lauda, since she titled this two-person exhibition after Martin’s protreptic.

Andrieux found other salient points of commonality, as well. First, some observations about John Heward’s installation in the larger Darling Foundry space in Montreal, which must now count as one of the most impressive ever mounted there. Heward’s work has never looked more elegant, edgier—or

alive. The *Abstractions* form a quartet of watchers, with the fourth dialogical partner being the viewer. They hitch a ride ceiling-ward like living entities in true 3D, their long tails coiling on the floor below. Ballasted by metal beam clamps, two come toward us in parade formation from the far quadrant of the space, and one squares off with bravado, bowing gracefully, in front of them. The outsized works invite our manipulation, and they are profoundly Janus-faced. Restless iterations of Heward’s many earlier selves as a painter, both literally and figuratively, they offer further evidence of his material/support mindfulness over long years—his signature material rayon soiled, painted and otherwise battle-

scarred but mostly just plain raw; the canvases the same, all clamped together to form dynamic spatial algorithms.

Heward grew up in a family that fostered his artistic ambitions from an early age. His aunt Prudence Heward was an important Canadian figurative artist whose work is represented in the collections of many major cultural institutions throughout the country. Spending long hours with her on the upper floor of the Peel Street home, Heward understood early on that paintings were decidedly not, as he says, “just decor on the wall, but they had a certain aesthetic significance, a certain aesthetic necessity for life.” This is clear in the abstractions executed a lifetime later and exhibited here.

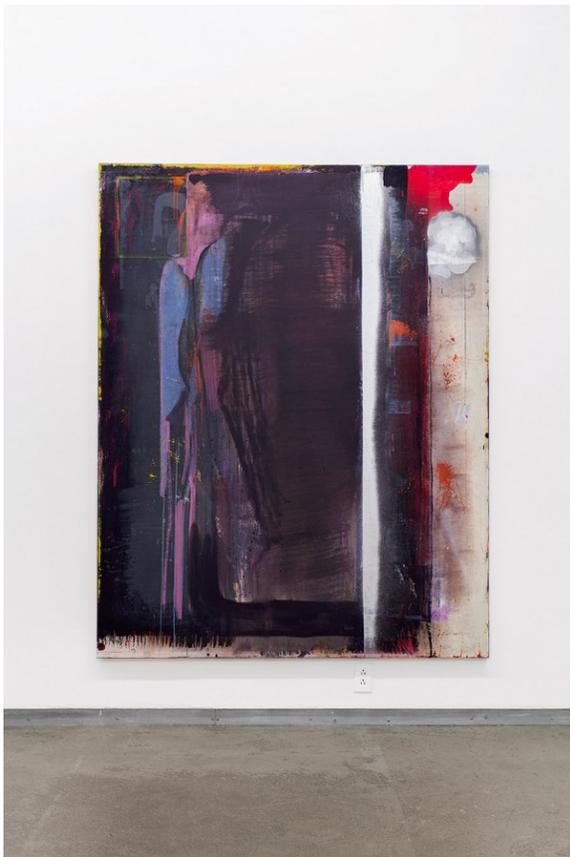
Perhaps his most openly anthropomorphized forms and ambiguous entities, these layered rayon and canvas sheets—often cannibalized from discarded works in earlier series, repainted or not and then used in tandem with newer sheets—were joined together loosely and hung at the top from a steel link attached to the ceiling (as is the case here) or wall. The resultant cowl-like configurations contributed to an ambiguous and extremely arbitrary disposition in space. Here, they enjoy a certain understated majesty.

I went to the exhibition in the company of artist Harold Klunder, who was working on a series of large prints in collaboration with Heward at Galerie PM in Montreal. Klunder likened the abstractions we looked at to a “falling cloud”—which seemed pertinent, given the gravity-defying nature of the work and the impression that the cloud layer, free from gravity, was moving down to the floor plane as though buffeted by unseen winds. He also likened the trains of the rayons on the floor to the spiralling dragons in Ch’an flung ink paintings performed by Zen Buddhists, or in Chinese Ming dynasty landscapes.

Heward’s long-standing familiarity with the Darling Foundry space served him well. In the mid-1980s, the artist created bronze sculptures using old wooden moulds he found there, and I still remember rummaging with him through the dusty precincts. It was also around that time that he began his corpus of abstractions. These strange swaths of rayon and canvas attached with beam clamps, and the Foundry’s location in Heward’s beloved Griffintown neighbourhood, made it a natural scouting ground from the outset. He served there as a consultant, and I succeeded him in that role for a time some years ago. I have noted elsewhere that Heward has much in common with an artist like New York abstract painter Jonathan Lasker. Not stylistically, mind you, but intentionally, because a similar critique of modernism is implicit in their respective bodies of work. There is also a shared concern for form itself as a primary issue in painting. Jean-Francois Lauda’s handsome suite of large stretched abstracts in the small gallery space seems at first opposed to Heward’s free-hanging wraiths. Closer



John Heward, installation view, “The Silver Cord,” 2018, Darling Foundry, Montréal.



Jean-François Lauda, *Untitled*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 60 inches. Photos: Simon Belleau.

investigation reveals all manner of mortice-and-tenon joinery between their two bodies of work.

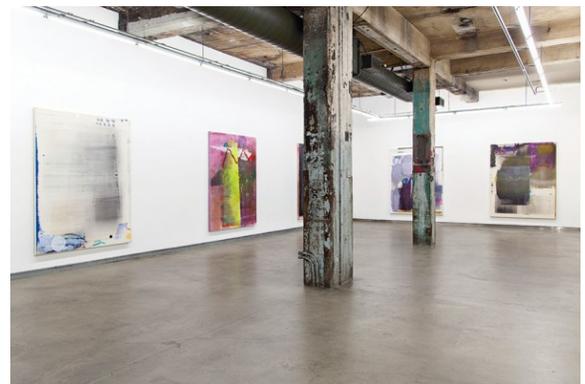
They cleave to Heward's elegant wraiths with a certain improvisatory energy and collegiality. Lauda, like Heward, isn't a formalist. Then again, the two find common ground in making improvised music. In his visual work, Heward has always been experimental with the surface, and Lauda is experimental with his procedural methodologies and contrapuntal strategies. Both artists have integrated contrapuntal thinking into their abstract works.

Lauda, like Heward, comes from an artistic family. His aspirations were encouraged from the outset. And, like Heward, he is entirely unafraid and a lone wolf. His muted palette is activated by rich exclamatory surges of chromatic light that issue forth from unknown and unknowable interior regions.

Also, it should be pointed out that Lauda, like Heward, is not afraid of getting his hands dirty. His work has a grunge component that segues seamlessly with Heward's soiled surfaces. His suite as a whole verges on an environmental installation, albeit not as grandly as Heward's does. He walks a tightrope between outright chaos and an uncanny order of control. Happy accidents abound and the use of templates from time to time lends a sense of underlying structure to the whole. Lauda is a virtuoso cabinetmaker of a painter, constructing his surfaces with minute precision even when they seem to have slipped into the gutter.

Well curated by Andrieux, the current exhibition aims to highlight the two artists' close affiliation with geometry. Heward's three unruly dragons form an equilateral triangle in the large space, while the horizontal line of Lauda's paintings in the small gallery suggests a kindred congruence. (It should be noted that Lauda is showing works from this same series at Angell Gallery in Toronto at the same time.)

Willem de Kooning once said: "If I do paint abstractions, that's what abstract painting means to me." Similarly, Heward and Lauda would agree that it is the active doing that demonstrates the meaningfulness, and perhaps the moral necessity, of a specifically abstract practice. This self-understanding in terms of the phenomenology of making is very much

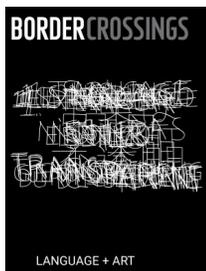


Jean-François Lauda, installation view, "The Silver Cord," 2018. Darling Foundry, Montréal.

what their work is all about. The emphasis here is on the making of objects still resonant of the accidents and incidents of fabrication, even as they suggest an ontology is being broached. They embody a triumphant voice of process still articulated in a materiality modest and unprepossessing, but eloquent, convincing and even moving in presence.

“The Silver Cord” was exhibited at Darling Foundry, Montreal, from September 13 to December 9, 2018.

James D Campbell is a writer and curator in Montreal, and is a frequent contributor to Border Crossings.



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