

While there have been occasional rumblings about "elitism" in the choice of works (a criticism that seems refuted by the fact that the Bank has somehow found 650 artists worthy of support) and about the scheme creating an artificial and largely illusory art market, the Bank is obviously a brilliant success. So much so that former cultural affairs minister Jean-Paul L'Alber, by no means an unquestioning admirer of Ottawa's policies, proposed an exact copy of the scheme for Quebec in his *Livre Vert*.

And *Seven Canadian Painters*, an exhibition of works from the Bank's collection now on view at the Saidye Bronfman Centre, is an eloquent testimonial of the discernment that has been exercised in the choice of works.

The show includes two canvasses each by Claude Breeze, Paterson Ewen, Charles Gagnon, Gershon Iskowitz, Ron Martin and Guido Molinari, and one very large painting by John Meredith. It is part of a larger exhibition that will leave next spring on a three-year tour of Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Western Europe and is the first of a number of projects that will see a wider dissemination of the Art Bank collection in the future. For Montrealers, the show carries an added significance: It is a reminder that such major figures as Ewen, Iskowitz, Martin and Meredith are hardly known in this city — a sign of just how peripheral to the Canadian scene Montreal has been allowed to become.

But this is the only sombre note to be sounded about an exhibition that includes so many important paintings, so handsomely installed by the Bronfman Centre. No one would pretend of course that its thirteen canvasses constitute anything like a survey of Canadian painting. What it does instead is

indicate the diversity and daring still exercised by our artists in a medium that has, throughout this century and time and time again, been pronounced moribund.

In fact, if this exhibition has a theme, it would be the tenacity with which our major painters continue to wrest new and personal solutions from painterly idioms one would have thought exhausted long ago.

The two Molinari canvasses reflect this sense of self-renewal in a most compelling way. *Structure Triangulaire Gris-Brun* of 1972 represents the artist's classic preoccupation with systems, or rather, with a systemic approach to dividing the surface plane into areas of color whose shape is engendered by the contours of the canvas. In the recent *Vert-Brun*, on the other hand, the color dynamics are entirely liberated from structure. The vertical panels of four different hues exist autonomously and no longer in permutations, they function purely as sensory stimulus instead of being elements of an intricate structure. There is a Matissean sense of *volupté* exuded by this work whose novelty within Molinari's oeuvre will be obvious to those who have seen his current retrospective at the MMFA.

Charles Gagnon is a sort of gymnast who straddles the fence between hard-edge and gestural modes. He makes incursions into the areas of structure and chance without straying too far into either; in *Screenspace No. 2*, the drips and brushstrokes are held in check by the horizontal grid. The entire work

finally rests on the astonishing elegance of Gagnon's touch. This artist raises the notion of good taste to something that approaches being a state of grace.

The show's other participants work in varieties of expressionism. The gesturalism of Meredith's *Japan* vacillates between action painting and calligraphy, that of Claude Breeze flirts with representation, with an overt if unrealistic representation of landscape. And Ron Martin uses the expressionist's idiom to examine and lay bare the mechanics of making a painting — in one green and one black canvas he begins with a given quantity of paint and distributes it on the surface with an orgiastic energy that is, paradoxically, all the more fervent for being divorced from any affective motivation.

It may not be quite fair to deduce this from just two works, but Iskowitz' lyricism, a kind of Abstract Expressionism, while quite thrilling visually, seems overextended in the large formats he uses. His art appears to be an intimist one and there is an uneasy sense of betrayal about seeing them stretched to fit a heroic, public format — it's as if a love note had been blown up and spread across a billboard for everyone to gape at.

Two stupendous landscapes by Paterson Ewen bring the exhibition to a glorious end. Painted on wood panels that have been gouged as well as overlaid with wood and metal reliefs, Ewen's works display such a delirious and original range of painterly effects that if we ever decide to embark on a search for the Great Canadian Landscape, we'd do well to begin with a visit to Ewen's studio. Best news of all: Ewen will soon have a major solo exhibition, the first in many years in his native city, at Roger Bellemare's Galerie B.