

12 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Sans titre (Composition #2)

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled *Composition #2* on the Marlborough-Godard label, inscribed variously and stamped indistinctly, 1951
50 × 64 ½ in, 127 × 163.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Marlborough-Godard, Toronto
Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto
Private Collection, Montreal
Canadian Post-War & Contemporary Art, Heffel Fine Art
Auction House, November 19, 2008, lot 55, cover lot
Acquired from the above by an Important Private Collection,
Montreal

LITERATURE

Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné*,
addendum to *Volume 2, 1954–1959*, 2004, titled *Sans titre*,
reproduced page 420, catalogue #1951.006H.1951

ESSAY BY FRANÇOIS-MARC GAGNON

IT IS CHARACTERISTIC of Jean Paul Riopelle's paintings from 1951 to show a web of relatively straight and very thin lines cast on a heavy impasto background. The lines animate the surface, sometimes echoing the rectangular or square format of the canvas, and sometimes not. In *Sans titre (Composition #2)*, for instance, they introduce an oblique that suggests a tilting of the surface towards the left. Each painting of that year is a gem and this one is no exception.

One cannot deal with this 1951 painting by Riopelle without clarifying his position with regard to what was happening in New York at the time. In fact, the confrontation between Paris and New York happened in this same year, in an exhibition organized by the French art critic Michel Tapié de Celeyran, entitled *Véhémences confrontées*, at Nina Dausset Gallery in Paris.

In this exhibition was Jackson Pollock's *Number 8*, 1950, a typical all-over dripping composition that included aluminum paint, and Willem de Kooning's *Untitled (Woman, Wind and Window)*, 1950, a somewhat figurative picture—both paintings from Alfonso A. Ossorio's collection. On the broadsheet published by Tapié on this occasion, the works by Riopelle, Pollock and Wols were labeled as “amorphic.” Greatly admired in post-war Europe, especially by painter Georges Mathieu, Wols (a pseudonym of Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, 1913–1951) was less well known in America. But the very fact that Riopelle and Pollock were brought together in the same category is significant.

Tapié, as with many French critics of the time, had difficulties with the concept of an all-over composition, where there is no hierarchy between the elements and no points of focalization on the painted surface to attract the eye in one direction or another. This lack of focalization brought the reproach that one could not know why the painting stops where it does. It could have continued out of the periphery of the canvas, in all directions, without much damaging the general effect. As reported by critic Clement Greenberg in an interview with Deborah Solomon in December 1983 about Pollock's *Mural*, 1944: “People said it just went on and on like glorified wallpaper”!¹

For Tapié, Riopelle and Pollock had gotten rid of form completely. He did not see that they were in fact getting rid of, each one in his manner, the orderly and hierarchical composition so common in European painting at the time. Wols, Mathieu and Pierre Soulages kept the opposition between centre and periphery, between shapes and background, and presented their forms standing out on a background receding in depth behind them. It could even be more appropriate to speak of an all-over construction in the case of Pollock and Riopelle, to stress precisely this lack of composition. From this point of view, the title of our painting is a misnomer. Wisely, Yseult Riopelle's catalogue raisonné designates it as *Sans titre*.

We suspect that *Composition #2* is a title given by a gallery when the painting was exhibited. In those days, composition could have been seen as an equivalent of abstraction. Even Greenberg talked of all-over composition. It seems more logical not to designate as *Composition* a painting that aims at escaping any form of composition. This is true of both Riopelle's and Pollock's works, except that contrary to Pollock, Riopelle maintained the dichotomy between the lines and the spots of colour and created an extremely delicate animated surface that seems carried over by the wind instead of simply staining the canvas.

One has to go to his inks and watercolours of 1946–1947 to see examples in Riopelle's oeuvre of the same delicate balance between colour and line. The black lines were then compared to a spiderweb cast on a brightly coloured background. In his 1951 paintings, white and yellow lines also appear on a darker

background and the effect, although similar, became denser, more complex and powerful.

We thank the late François-Marc Gagnon of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, Concordia University, for contributing the above essay in 2008.

1. Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 153.

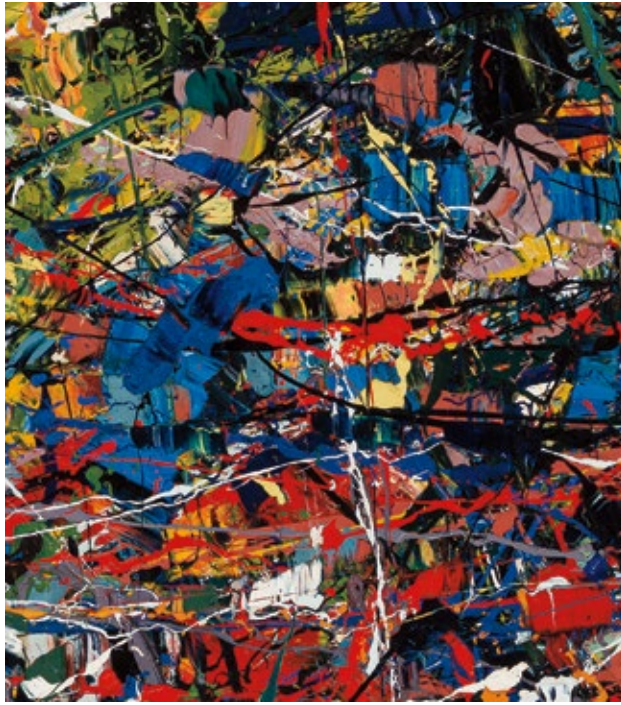
ESSAY BY MICHEL MARTIN

IN LATE 1948, Jean Paul Riopelle, a member of the avant-garde Montreal collective Les Automatistes and co-signer of their *Refus global* manifesto, moved permanently to Paris with his family after a pivotal stay there in 1947. During this post-war period, the young artist was actively involved in the Surrealist movement, falling in with André Breton and his circle of artists and writers. Paradoxically, Riopelle would nonetheless distance himself from surrealistic poetic imagery to pursue an abstract practice predicated on the inherent expressive power of matter and the spontaneity of gesture. In this he was inspired by his research involving automatic writing techniques and the desire to efface all utopian realist references. It was an approach that left no room for compromise.

His paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, including our *Sans titre (Composition #2)*, from 1951, are the result of this erasure of concrete imagery in favour of a dizzying dive into the heart of what justifies the work's true meaning. No longer does the painter proceed by reflexively stepping back from the work, as was the case with academic painting. Instead, he confronts its physical reality, engaging in a face-off with the canvas and jettisoning every established convention in the process. Consequently, order is henceforth dictated solely by the intuitive cohesion between the act, the manipulation of the tool, the chromatic material and the sign.

The calibre of Riopelle's new approach quickly earned him accolades from some critics, who recognized him as one of the most promising young artists associated with the current commonly known in France as Lyrical Abstraction, a generic term that encompasses different emotive approaches within abstraction. This trend stood in deliberate opposition to rational geometrism, while at the same time attempting to keep pace with the remarkable rise of American Abstract Expressionism. Within this context, Riopelle was invited to take part in a number of significant exhibitions, collectively serving as explorations into the myriad “extreme” paths informalism was taking not only in France but also in Europe and the United States.

Among these exhibitions, *Véhémences confrontées*, presented at Galerie Nina Dausset in Paris the same year Riopelle painted this *Sans titre*, is of particular significance. Indeed, it served as a manifesto of sorts, with a catalogue that included event organizer Michel Tapié's essay as well as texts by many of the participating artists. So, in addition to having his work displayed alongside that of Parisians such as Camille Bryen, Hans Hartung, Georges



detail

Mathieu and Wols, and Americans the likes of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, to name but a few, Riopelle also penned an informative text about the foundations of his approach: “Only total chance is fertile—no longer an exclusive function of the means, it instead can take real control—because truly total chance necessitates a physiological, physical and psychic opening by the painter’s physicality, giving cosmic liberation every opportunity to enter and influence the work.”

Facilitating such “cosmic liberation” was very much the driving force behind Riopelle’s creative impulse when he painted this magnificent *Sans titre* in 1951. Through raw and random applications of colour using a palette knife or applied directly from the tube, the painter’s gesture comes to life even as it controls the extent of its constructive reach. And so the painting takes shape, like a fragment of purely pictorial reality whose profound meaning is buried deep within the artist’s experiential memory. This experience transposed to the canvas through a series of artistic interventions, like a succession of spontaneous interactions and reactions, resembles the luminous explosion of a magma of colourful materials, where the centre of activity is deftly encircled by the trajectories of splatters and whitish filaments, themselves interwoven in a fine mesh of coloured lines radiating in all directions. The result is a structural dynamic that imposes a ubiquitous sense of rhythm on the piece, complicating the process of perception, since the viewer’s eye is constantly engaged by a multitude of visual impulses distributed across the entire painted surface.

It is important to note here that, unlike Pollock, Riopelle uses paint splashes and drips not as an end in themselves or as essential features of the work, but as means, on par with the collisions



detail

between contrasting masses of colour and the harmonious transitions between them under the smoothly applied pressure of the knife, to ultimately reveal the quality of the landscape-like space that dwells within. For even though he contributed in most of the manifestations of Art Informel as it was understood by the proponents of “art of another kind,” Riopelle’s practice stands apart, more often than not, because of the enduring sense it gives us of the artist’s close connection with nature. This connection is not expressed in terms of representation, but rather in terms of the work’s emotional and inspirational impact. This *Sans titre* undoubtedly stands as one of the most eloquent embodiments of this distinction.

In the words of Georges Duthuit: “Jean Paul Riopelle’s paintings are like a tangle of yet undifferentiated sensations, swirling and branching out with precision and power, yet not definitively flowering; they most certainly look like something, but what exactly we do not know. Did the painter ‘look at nature so much that nature disappeared’? We can definitely feel it, as if it were physically present.”¹

Successively held in private collections in Montreal, this Riopelle oil on canvas, *Sans titre*, now reveals itself as one of the brightest, strongest and most effective compositions from this pivotal period in the artist’s life. The large-format work bears all the hallmarks of the flagship works that will mark the beginning of Riopelle’s journey towards his famous series known as the “mosaics,” created a few years later—a collection that in retrospect contributed substantially to his international renown.

We thank Michel Martin for contributing the above essay, translated from the French. Martin is a former curator of



Jean Paul Riopelle at his studio on rue Durantin, Paris, circa 1952, with our work *Sans titre* (Composition #2)
Photographer unknown
Courtesy of Yseult Riopelle

contemporary art at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (1978 – 2008) and was curator of the exhibition *Mitchell/Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation*, organized by the MNBAQ in 2017.

1. Georges Duthuit, *L’Image en souffrance*, vol. 1, *Couleurs* (Paris: Collection Littérature générale, Mercure de France, 1964), 15.

The centenary of Riopelle’s birth has been widely recognized since fall 2022, and the celebrations continue in Canada and internationally. Events range from music to theatre and include an unprecedented number of exhibitions. The National Gallery of Canada will mount *Riopelle: Crossroads in Time*, a retrospective featuring works from both public and private collections

(October 27, 2023 to April 7, 2024). At the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, incomparable storyteller Robert Lepage premieres *Le projet Riopelle* mid-December. And in France, where Riopelle lived almost half his life, a special collaboration between the Jean Paul Riopelle Foundation and the Maeght Foundation, Centre Pompidou and TV5MONDE will enable audiences to rediscover the artist’s work throughout 2023 and 2024. For a full listing of events, see <https://fondationriopelle.com>. Construction continues for Espace Riopelle at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, a pavilion dedicated to Riopelle that will be part of the existing museum.

ESTIMATE: \$3,000,000 – 5,000,000