



208 Jean Paul Riopelle

AUTO CAS OC QMG RCA SCA 1923 – 2002

Verts ombreuses

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1949 and on verso signed, inscribed No. 6 and Cat. 4 and variously and stamped twice indistinctly
45 ¾ x 35 in, 116.2 x 88.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Arthur Tooth & Sons Ltd., London
Laing Galleries, Toronto
Contemporary Art, Christie's London, June 30, 1994, lot 12
Private Collection, Toronto
A.K. Prakash and Associates Inc., Toronto
The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen, Vancouver

LITERATURE

J-P. Riopelle: Paintings 1949 – 1959, Arthur Tooth & Sons, 1959, reproduced and listed, titled as *Verts ombreux*, unpaginated
Yseult Riopelle, *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 1, 1939 – 1953*, 1999, reproduced page 303 and listed page 370, catalogue #1949.017H.1949

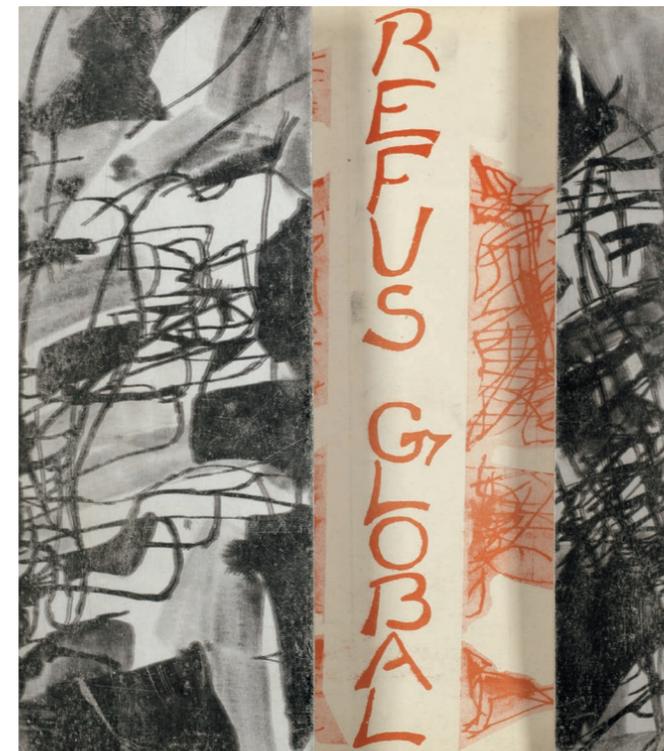
EXHIBITED

Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, *Current Trends: Third Exhibition*, 1955, catalogue #64
Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, *J-P. Riopelle: Paintings 1949 – 1959*, June 23 – July 18, 1959, catalogue #2

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE relocated permanently to Paris in 1948, shortly after the great Automatist manifesto, *Refus global*, of which he was a co-signer, was published in Montreal. In Paris, he quickly found his aesthetic bearings with the Surrealists, particularly through ongoing discussions with André Breton and his friends. The young Riopelle had the wind in his sails, and in the spring of 1949, he had his first solo show, *Riopelle à la Dragonne*, at Galerie Nina Dausset, also known as La Dragonne.

“All the rosettes on the cathedrals are blown joyfully to bits. The air is about to bloom. Love has rubbed it all clean with its stone of thunder.” This poetic passage, taken from a collaborative conversation between André Breton, Éliisa Breton and Benjamin Péret entitled “Aparté” that appeared in the exhibition booklet, is a rapturous phenomenology of Breton’s encounter with Riopelle, both personally and in his recent work. The art of Riopelle, depicted as the emergence of a new, living force, thus attained a special kind of early maturity, affirming the Automatists unequivocally in their rejection of the sclerotic lessons of Academicism to pursue a mode of expression that imperatively rejected any and all purely rational constraints.

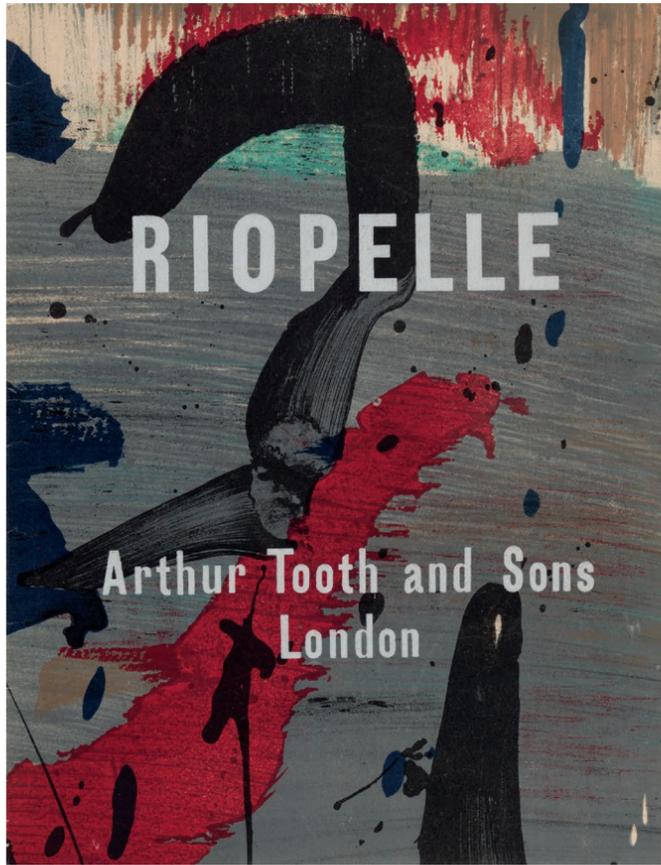
Verts ombreuses, painted that same year, evidences Riopelle’s aspiration to “total chance” as a way to return to nature—not



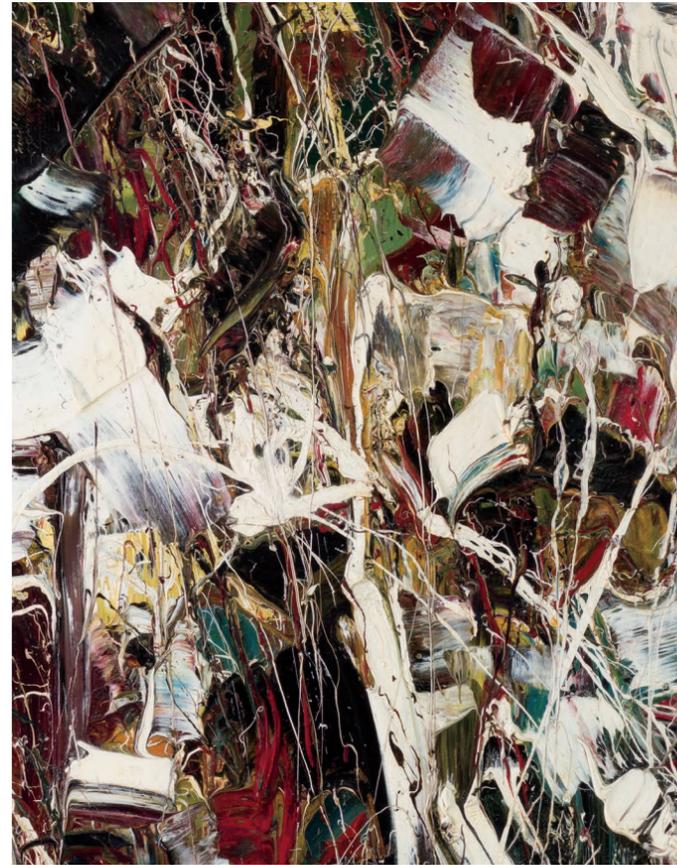
Éditions Mithra-Mythe, Montreal, *Refus global*, 1948

nature as it appears, but as the foundational principle and source of what is expressed in the creative act. Riopelle thus operates in the thick of it, on two distinct planes. The first, paradoxically, of near unfathomable density, a general impression arising particularly from the deep shades of paint lavishly applied all over the canvas, their subtle colour modulations both contrasting and harmonious as applied with the palette knife. And the second suggested by another operational level, Riopelle now overlaying an extensive whitish cloud formed by a combination of more or less opaque spots and smears applied almost casually here and there with the knife, but which nonetheless seem clustered along the path of the more or less thread-like filaments flung straight from the paint tube. Out of shadow comes the light. Riopelle exploits here the power of white to great effect, using it to organize the composition as a whole, define the space, and evoke a kind of depth within it.

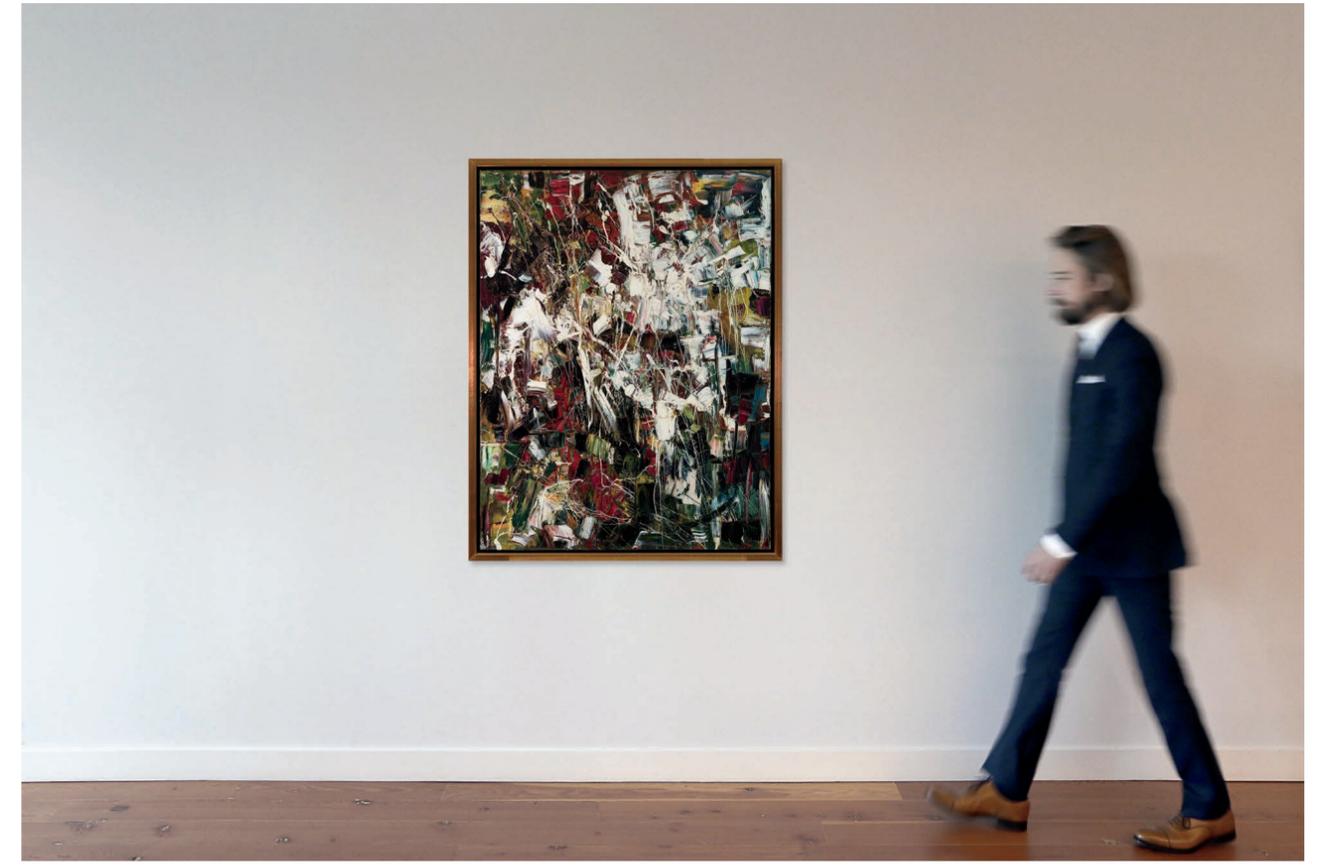
The intrinsic qualities of works such as *Verts ombreuses*, dating as they do from a period critical to the future trajectory of Riopelle’s career, have contributed much to securing him a place among the defining figures of French Lyrical Abstraction. His work would soon be part of important curated exhibitions



Arthur Tooth & Sons, London, J-P. Riopelle: *Paintings 1949 – 1959*, 1959, catalogue cover



detail



that defined the practice of abstract art both in Europe and the Americas. The first of them, *Véhémenes confrontés* (*Vehement Confrontations*), in March 1951, again at La Dragonne, evinced a commitment to what we might call Informalism (Art Informel), as opposed to abstract formalism. It related Riopelle's work closely to that of leading European abstractionists such as Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu and Otto Wols, and Americans including Willem De Kooning and Jackson Pollock. The exhibition catalogue was in the form of a manifesto, and many of the artists agreed to contribute their own texts. Riopelle used his contribution to proclaim, "Only total chance is fertile," allowing us to be fully spontaneous, thus "giving cosmic liberation every opportunity to enter."¹

Riopelle appears to have applied an understanding of the painterly act in *Verts ombreuses*, considering things like the active role given to the seemingly omnipresent dribbles and fine sprays of paint that shoot off in every direction until the entire composition topples into an essentially sensorial elsewhere free of any time or place referent. This purely pictorial state of affairs stems, despite all appearances, from space-times feverishly buzzing with transfers of energy—actions and reactions that arise out of the painter's random changes of position relative to the work being developed. Here Riopelle's approach differs from that of other

abstraction practices, including the "action painting" associated with American Abstract Expressionism, because, through a process of explosive creation, its ultimate tendency is to forcefully bring out the living breath inherent in Riopelle's always unflagging concept of nature.

The retrospective exhibition *J-P. Riopelle: Paintings 1949 – 1959* opened at Arthur Tooth & Sons in London on June 23, 1959. *Verts ombreuses*, reproduced and listed in the catalogue as *Verts ombreux*, immediately assumed the role of a foundation on which Riopelle's work in the ensuing decade—critical to its international recognition—could legitimately develop. Consider the phenomenal critical impact of the artist's "mosaics" period, a high point in his search for spontaneous, unhindered expression already brilliantly begun. It is equally true for his use of white in pursuit of the organic character of the composition, as is clearly seen here, and even more spectacularly in a series of large "white" paintings he would paint in 1954 to 1955 and about which Pierre Schneider would aptly remark: "Riopelle deliberately puts obstacles in his own way. He rejects colour and, to create depth, has saddled himself with what's least 'diggable'—white."²

Riopelle met Joan Mitchell in 1955, when she was a young American painter in Paris. She and her work would, in the course of their 25-year relationship, provide another source of

inspiration for his continued thinking about the use of white. The gouaches and oil on paper works Riopelle produced between 1956 and 1959—three of which were included in the Tooth & Sons exhibition—already clearly show Mitchell's influence. Like Mitchell, Riopelle made white, most often applied in broad patches, the dominant structural factor in the effective rendering of the works of the period, while the thinking behind them seems in a way like a systematic working-out of what he had begun in *Verts ombreuses*.

We thank Michel Martin for contributing the above essay, translated from the French. Martin is a former curator of 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. Riopelle in *Véhémenes confrontés* (Paris: Galerie Nina Dausset, 1951), exhibition catalogue.
2. Pierre Schneider, "Jean Paul Riopelle," *L'Oeil* (Paris), no. 18, June 1956, 47.

ESTIMATE: \$2,500,000 – 3,500,000