

WARC Gallery is pleased to present an interdisciplinary project honouring renowned artist, **Françoise Sullivan**.

Making a Song

New works by
Françoise Sullivan

Curated by Natalie Olanick

February 12 – March 20, 2010



Song Series: No.5, 2010, 60" x 72", oil on canvas.

Opening Reception

Friday, February 12, 6 – 8 pm
Artist + Curator will be present

Artist + Curator Discussion

Saturday, February 13, 3 pm

On Demand Film Screening

Dédale

Created 1947 – 1948
Performed by Ginette Laurin
Filmed by Edouard Locke,
1977, Approx. 8 min.

DANCE PERFORMANCE

Presented in partnership with
Art Gallery of Ontario

Based on Françoise Sullivan's original choreographies from 1947 and 1948, as well as two later works from 1981 and 1993. Performers include Ginette Boutin, Rober Racine and Daniel Soulière.

February 10th – 7 pm
Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario
Free with admission

Working with Françoise Sullivan has made me more aware of the hard to define, almost unnameable spirit we all have and contribute to culture. Françoise Sullivan believes that the unconscious is a doorway to our creative soul. In her practice, which has included painting, sculpture, photography and dance, we see her grace and strength manifest themselves in varying forms.

Her involvement in the 1940's and 50's with Paul-Emile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and other members of the *Automatistes*, led to the seminal manifesto, *Le Refuse Global*, that would irrevocably catalyse Quebec society. Sullivan's short phrases, which compose her essay in *Le Refuse*, express her thoughts on dance, creativity and the social/political circumstances of the day.

"Art can only flourish if it grows from problems which concern the age, and is always pushed in the direction of the unknown. Hence the marvelous in it."¹ As early as 1948, Sullivan strove to explore the relationship of spirit, the unconscious, and the unfolding of it into dance, words and images.

We can think of the canvas as a stage, to draw together the different mediums that Sullivan is active in. Throughout her explorations of sculpture and photography, Sullivan found herself in a place where the material process left her unfulfilled. For her, the nature of the materials used in these disciplines demanded that the creative process have a pre-determined end point. The space for change and contemplation of a work was limited. Sullivan's paintings and choreographies share a process that springs to life – in the moment that paint hits the canvas or a slight movement of the body expresses the passions of the artist.

Sullivan considers her talents to be best described in painting and dance. These mediums allow her process a flexible structure, which in turn holds on to the spontaneous gesture central to creativity. The moment of creation for Sullivan remains active as the marks or steps involved are being expressed. The border between artist, object and audience is not completely formed, and therefore leaves room for exploration and emotions to seep out between known boundaries.

Dance, as a vehicle for exchange between dancer and audience, is described by Sullivan as a rhythm. "We must establish, by and for rhythm, an education which provokes in the dancer the need and spontaneous power to exteriorize felt rhythms. And finally, we must discover the effect of these different rhythms on the onlooker, because these rhythms are among our most efficient forces of communication". In dance, the movement of the body is the drive that connects the emotions of creative freedom with physical reality. The interpretative movement of the body articulates the intention of the work.

Painting captures the artist's personal touch in rhythmic, gestural forms, shaped from brush marks and subtle variations of colours. The constant application of a brushstroke is Sullivan's meditative process. The addition of paint to the surface is a residue of the intuitive act. The layers in these paintings reveal more each time we view them and intermix as they move in different directions, creating edges of forms inside the canvases. Sullivan has focused on circumferences and borders for some time: "I was intrigued by the subtle suggestions of a margin of a border where the colour runs up against the confines of the frame, colour, and begins to fray into uneven patches of near or contrasting colours."² Sullivan navigates through the complexities proposed by plane, surface and colour. She arrives at her conclusion with unique paintings that describe her vision of light, flatness, and edge.

For Sullivan, each series of paintings envelops their own palette. Each work is a study of the interactions of loose strokes of colour, the events of the moment and the artist's imagination. She describes her choice of colours as coming to her and "feeling right" at the time she begins to paint.

In Sullivan's most recent series of paintings, *Song*, we see her boldly partnering blacks, browns, yellows and pinks that become part of a trail that leads us deeper into her painting process. Sullivan's monochromes and other reductive abstractions manage to create nuances and variations that reinvigorate the genre. In *Song*, she has created a variety of shapes and a combination of marks that challenge our perception of form and process. One field of colour emerges from another, generating personal associations that are then drawn back to the unifying dominant feature of the works - a warm, supple yellow hue.

Sullivan's repertoire of shapes, which move across the middle of the picture plane or creep toward the edge, are given a distinct presence by small, almost hidden forms that emerge on the canvas. These restrained, but energized brush strokes create the most assertive, formal element of Sullivan's paintings and this series continues with this understated yet poised, painterly quality. Subtle differences of hue, value and tone allow her marks to be boldly declarative and yet, simultaneously paradoxically, softly enigmatic.

Sullivan has said that Paul-Émile Borduas believed what counted most in a work of art is its song. In this exhibition, she continues to "sing" and believe in the power of the human spirit.

Natalie Olanick

¹ Françoise Sullivan, *La danse et l'espoir, dans Refus Global* (Montréal : Mithra-Mythe, 1948), trans. Ray Ellenwood (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1998), 103. Originally published in 1948.

² Serge Allaire, *Françoise Sullivan: Paintings 2007*, Catalogue, 2008 Edition Simon Blais (pg.8)

Edited by: Deborah Carruthers

Project co-ordinator: Deborah Carruthers

Biographies:

Françoise Sullivan has lived an extraordinary life in the arts. Each successive decade has witnessed a new chapter in her creative growth: in the 1940s she was a founding member of the Automatistes, along with Paul-Émile Borduas, Fernand Leduc, Pierre Gauvreau, Louise Renaud, and Madelaine Desroches. She was a signatory of the Automatiste manifesto, *Refus Global*, to which she had contributed a seminal essay, "Dance and Hope", and pursued studies in modern dance in New York with Franziska Boas. In the 1950s she was an innovative dancer and choreographer; in the 1960s she was a sculptor, undertaking often large-scale steel works; in the 1970s she had a conceptual practice, relying upon photography as a narrative and documentary tool; and by the late 1970s, she returned to painting, which remains the focus of her artistic practice today. Sullivan's practice is truly trans-disciplinary, which in retrospect has revealed an internal logic and essential consistency to her diverse creative undertakings. Painting can be considered her unifying medium. Indeed, in a recent essay, Sullivan declared: "Painting inhabits me. It always has."^[1]

Since the early 1960s Sullivan has regularly exhibited in private galleries in Toronto and Montréal, most recently with Galerie Simon Blais in Montréal. Sullivan has shown internationally in Italy, Sweden, Belgium, Germany and Japan, amongst other countries. She has had several major museum exhibitions at the Musée d'art Contemporain in Montréal, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec, and the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. Her work is collected by many museums and universities across Canada, such as the National Gallery of Canada and the University of Regina in Saskatchewan. She has received Honorary Doctorates from Université du Québec in Montréal, York University in Toronto, and is a member of the Royal Academy of Canada. In 2001 she received the Order of Canada, and in 2009 was promoted within the order to an Officer of the Order of Canada. In 2002 she received the Order of Québec, and in 2005 she was a recipient of the Governor General's Award in the Visual Arts and Media. In 2008, Sullivan was the second recipient of Gershon Iskowitz Prize at the AGO.

^[1] Françoise Sullivan, "My Painting Is...My Painting Is," in Françoise Sullivan, exhibition catalogue, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, 2003, 41.

Natalie Olanick is an artist, writer and part-time curator. She teaches at Dawson College and is on the board of Articule gallery in Montreal. She has shown her work in various galleries and museums in Canada and the United States. Her most recent show was at Propeller gallery in Toronto, Fall 08. She is always amazed at where art takes her.

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