

Painting in Between: Tensions and Trajectories in the Work of Sara Robichaud

“The Milk is Opaque” invites us to glimpse the evolution of Sara Robichaud’s work over the past few years—from a purist approach to abstraction where the properties of paint and the parameters of nature (gravity, temperature, humidity, etc.) served as her primary subject matter—to an inventive abstract style that creates tensions on the canvas through a play of opposites, employs commonplace objects as tools to produce form and texture, and is layered with a personal narrative.

The richly coloured large-scale painting, *Suspended Elation 8* (2006), is an example of Robichaud’s earlier explorations into formal abstraction and the intensely physical process in which she was engaged. The work is part of a series created using an apparatus specially designed by her husband Denis, nicknamed “the contraption.” It allows Robichaud to move and hover horizontally above her large canvases. Denis acts as a collaborator, following the artist’s direction and pulling the ropes that control her motion, while she pours and scrapes paint across the surface. The resulting work is characterized by momentum and movement—we get a sense of the artist’s speed and the broad, sweeping way she builds layers with washes of colour. Though over time she has become more practised with her materials and can predict outcomes and exert more control over the composition, Robichaud values the element of chance and the spontaneity inherent to this way of working. Her work continues to be motivated by the potential for discovery and surprise.

The new canvases that make up “The Milk is Opaque” are part of a fresh trajectory for Robichaud, both personally and professionally. Born earlier this year, the artist’s baby is a new collaborator. Robichaud is painting with and for her daughter Amélie, who has inspired in her a desire to explore beauty. Paintings have been constructed gradually in her home studio, between hours spent nursing and caring for her baby girl, who Robichaud sometimes wears in a pouch on her chest as she performs repetitive tasks; preparing the canvas, applying tape to form shape and create line. Out of necessity, Robichaud’s process has slowed, allowing time for close looking, so that her next move on the canvas is more considered and deliberate.

What makes Robichaud’s new work so engaging and seductive are formal and conceptual tensions that play out on the canvas. In *Sinister Virtues*, soft, curvy lines that show the trace of the artist’s hand, contrast with a hard-edge diagonal. Reflective, translucent forms are juxtaposed with areas of solid matte colour. On the same canvas Robichaud moves fluidly between pure abstraction and representation.

Because she and her husband are in the course of renovating their 1914 house, vintage household fixtures—a rose coloured bathroom sink, a claw foot bathtub—have made their way into her studio. For *Sinister Virtues*, parts of a toilet (the most unglamorous of fixtures) are distilled on the canvas to their simplest form, and out of their usual context, their shape appears both familiar and strange. The lid of the toilet doubles as an ovoid, a shape characteristic of Haida art. Made with thickly applied opaque colour, the slightly raised edges of these dense forms butt up against raw canvas. The combination of muted greens and mauves contrast with intense purple and black add to an overall feeling of unease, as disparate elements collide. In this work, as in others of this series, perspective is skewed, and flatness competes with the illusion of space and depth.

In several of her newest pieces, Robichaud experiments with textiles, using them like screens to overlay delicate glossy patterns that activate the surface of the work. In a massive canvas, called *Interference Violet*, a piece that anchors the series, Robichaud elaborates on this technique to dramatic effect. She applied iridescent gel paint over a lace tablecloth, then carefully pulled it away from the canvas. Its trace creates a stunning texture and rhythm that Robichaud enhances and with hard-edge, geometric insertions of colour. The lace pattern alludes to the traditional handicraft of another era, and while it suggests something made lovingly by the hands of a grandmother, the tablecloth Robichaud used is mass-produced, likely synthetic.

Evocative of a family dining room table after a party, the dark form in *Interference Violet* has an amorphous quality and seems to grow and spread out like a stain, tricking the eye and suggesting dimension. These purple and black organic forms re-appear in other of Robichaud's new works. Their roundness, and the way they appear to curve in and connect to each other, call up the mid-twentieth century modernist sculptures of Barbara Hepworth.

Informed by the lineage of abstract painters that goes back to the late 1940s, and influenced by contemporary painters like Vancouver's Holger Kalberg and Montreal's Lise Boisseau, Robichaud's unique approach balances sentimentality and emotion with intellectual pursuit. In "The Milk is Opaque," Robichaud challenges viewers to engage with the sets of contradictions and complexities that play out on the canvas, and decide what is resolved and what is unresolved.

Julie Bevan April 2011