Sylain P. Cousineau 1949-2013.

Cousineau is one of Canada’s well known French Canadian artists. He exhibited his work regularly since the mid seventies. The most familiar objects, if presented in a particular way and examined with fresh eyes, often seem to possess an altered significance, to be charged with new meaning. This simple fact, which reflects the dynamics inherent to all creative endeavour, takes on a singular force and heightened relief in the work of Sylvain P. Cousineau.

This artistic practice evolving steadily over a period of more than forty years. Technically speaking it is rich and varied (photographs, paintings, assemblages), and it is expressed in a tone and spirit of remarkable consistency. Cousineau’s essentially figurative painting focused initially on four apparently innocuous themes or motifs – a ship, a vase of flowers, a teapot and a birthday cake – that the artist has reworked over the years from different perspectives and according to different moods. The use of certain formal devices, also recurrent and frequently highly connotative (drips, brushstrokes, dots of colour), imbues the work with a powerfully reflective dimension, while also endowing it with a marked emotional charge.

In an approach that is both profound and playful, and in a tone marked by certain humour, Cousineau’s explorations centre primarily on the actual creation of art and, more generally, its relations with the world. Broad and all-encompassing, this approach nevertheless avoids orthodoxy and the rigid self-referentiality that modernity has sometimes imposed on the work of art (art about art). The openness shown by Cousineau and his resistance to any form of “programme” is particularly apparent in his employment of various other subjects. For example, a recent canvas features a red bird whose spread wings stand out against a blue sky; another shows a white dog running through a landscape; yet another depicts a castle, apparently emerging from a flower-bed, whose shape is vaguely reminiscent of a birthday cake. While different, however, these new subjects serve in some sense as substitutes for or equivalents of the four themes listed above, “the ship moving towards the moon being the same thing as a dog moving towards its bone.”

Although easily recognizable and accessible to all, the ideas and objects represented in Cousineau’s painting nevertheless carry multiple meanings. Thus, the number four itself (sum of the main themes used by Cousineau) possess a foundational significance. We need only think, for example, of the four elements (water, fire, earth and air) – considered in ancient times as the basic components of all things - or simply of the legs of a chair. Moreover, the various objects, at first view very different form one another, possess a number of common traits. For instance, all the objects serve as the container of source of another body; smoke comes out of the ship’s funnel; gifts emerge from the birthday cake; flowers seem to burst forth from the vase; and steam escapes from the spout of the teapot. These images, which evoke the idea of transformation, are not unrelated to that other phenomenon of transformation ( of an object or a viewpoint) that constitutes artistic creation; they thus play a metaphorical role in relation to the conditions and concerns of this practice.

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Tarot series

Around 1390, the astrologist and cabalist Jacque Gringonneur created for King Charles VI of France, the oldest known Tarot card deck, which is now on display at the National Library in Paris. The Tarot game rapidly gained in popularity among the courtiers, and some noble families even ordered the card decks depicting members of their families. With the advent of such new techniques as wood engraving and printing, the game spread through all of Europe, where it was played sometimes openly, sometimes on the sly, as it had been banned successively by the King and the Pope. Although no one knows when Tarot began to be considered a divinatory tool, it was used very early as a game; thus, it can be considered as the ancestor of our modern card games.

The Tarot deck comprises 56 minor arcanes (the 52 cards of our modern decks plus four knights) and 22 major arcanes. The various Characters represented are archetypes that are found in every mythology, ranging from Egypt to Scandinavia.

Sylvain Cousineau is an artist who paints Tarot cards. But contrary to the artists of the Middle Ages, he did not create a full deck of cards. He only painted some of the major arcanes on large-size canvases. Some of them are represented twice, such as the Fool, the World and the devil which endows these arcanes with a special status, while other are represented only once, such s the Chariot, the Monk (or hermit), and Death. Two are superimposed on the same canvas; the hanged Man and the Fire tower (or tower of God). Cousineau blends in his paintings the Tarot’s traditional imagery with images of his own such as flower pots and polka dot patterns.

One of the most widely used methods of card reading is the old Celtic method, in which the reader starts by taking the Fool out of the deck and laying it in the center of the table to represent the person who is questioning the cards silently. Unnumbered or bearing the number 0, the fool symbolizes the one who forsakes all logic and provokes common sense; he also possesses a dreaming a mystic side to his personality. Of both Fools which Cousineau has painted with much liberty, one is dressed in a vaguely-resembling 17th Century outfit and painted in an analytical cubistic style. Two little flowers grow between his feet and he is sticking out his tongue at us. The other one is dressed in vivid colours and is doing a little dance while holding a stick the right hand and directing an obscene gesture at us with his left hand.

After the questioner has shuffled and cut the deck of cards, the reader draws the first two cards and puts them crosswise over the Fool. These cards represent the forces that cross the path of, and cover, the questioner, i.e. the positive or negative powers that push him or oppose him to himself. On the double-patterned canvas, the Hanged Man stands in the foreground of the fire Tower, standing heard over his s and this number four. His hair flows almost symmetrically to the flames that lick the summit of the tower, and his face is blackened as if he has been brushing against the fire. The Hangman represents a change in personality at the cost of surrendering one’s ego, while the tower means the vanity of one’s materialistic ambitions and illusions.

The following four cards that are drawn are placed clockwise at the four points of the compass around the cross, beginning south. The latter is the basis of the question, something that is part of the subject’s experience. This card is said to stand under the subject. The west is behind hem which represents his recent past, while the North is over him and stands for an event that might occur in the future. The East, which is before him, represents the near future. The cards drawn by Cousineau are, in order, number 7, 9, 13, and 15. These are very important numbers in numerology are also essential arcanes in the Tarot game. Number 7, which means perfection, is the Chariot, that is the victory over the internal and external forces. This, however, is a relative victory as the conqueror becomes vulnerable if he gets off his chariot. So, this card means the desire to succeed rather than the success itself, and Cousineau has represented it accurately, to the exception of the wheels which are buckled. Number 9, which means initiation, is the Hermit who has been blessed with the light form heaven, but who must stay away from the crowds in order to keep it. The one painted by Cousineau has a pair of spectacles sticking out of his pocket, real glasses which have been glued to the canvas. The style of the lantern bears some similarities with Mondrain’s. Number 13 is a dangerous number. It represents Death, or rather a transformation, a destruction followed by a revival. Mystics often compare to death a drastic transition from a personal to a universal point of view. In the painting, Death radiates undoubtedly an aura of sexuality. It is represented as a buxom woman wearing a skeleton mask which cannot hide completely her brilliant red hair, long grey gloves and a polka dot bra. Her scythe has been replaced by an oar with which she seems to scattering real little glued to the canvas. Number 15, which is a combination of number 10 divinity, and of number 5t, humanity, as well as the number standing for eroticism, is the number of the Devil and signifies the attachment to material things and ill use of power. Man’s creations can destroy him if he strips them of their thoughts and beliefs. The first devil painted by Cousineau depicts a superb red Devil whose erection can’t be ignored under his yellow and polka dot underwear, while the second one looks totally harmless due to the bunch of flowers he is holding, which reflects today’s perception of the Devil by our society.

The last four cards are placed from bottom to top along a vertical line to the right of the cross formed by the six preceding cards. The first one represents the fears that the subject has about the question, the second one represents his close relatives’ opinions, the third one, his hopes, and the fourth one, the final result which must contain everything that has been read in the other cards. Three cards seem to be missing from the ones that Cousineau has drawn, and they are the most personal ones. But the last card is there, and Cousineau has even made two paintings of it: it is the World, number 21, which signifies total accomplishment, from the arrival to a state of cosmic conscience. The four elements that have finally reached a state of balance are symbolized by an angel, an eagle, a bull and a lion which surround a woman rather or an androgynous. Again, however, there has been a diversion from the original card. The traditional flower wreath has been replaced by a flower pot a la Cousineau, and in one of the paintings the androgynous wears clown makeup, a Carnival crown and a stylized hearth on his chest.

Every painting seems to be inviting us on an initiatory journey, the one that the Fool must take to attain the truth. This is how the most serious authors write about the Tarot. It does not predict the future, but rather pronounces oracles. It can also be viewed as a way of exploring the unconscious, like the I Ching, the Chinese Book of Changes. Moreover, both were studied by Jung.

Cousineau plays several roles here. He is simultaneously the one who draws the cards and who reads them, and the creator of the game. One can compare the artist to the fool and look at his paintings for signs of his unconscious. We are also faced with a lesson of universal scale: any viewer can identify himself with the Fool and ponder over the pitfalls that are awaiting him on his quest for truth…unless the Fool represents the human race in general. But, there is too much humour in Cousineau’s paintings to appreciate only their serious aspects.

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