

# Three painters get right to the point

Stressing the aesthetic ascendancy of the simple dot evokes the 19th-century pointillist sensibility of Georges Seurat

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Three shows on view at Art Mûr almost amount to an artistic manifesto. That the artists, Annie Hémond-Hotte and Dennis Ekstedt, both of Montreal, and Toronto-based Katharine Harvey, stress the aesthetic ascendancy of the simple dot as smallest unit visible to the human eye, may be just an interesting coincidence — though one intimating the possible recurrence of the pointillist sensibility of 19th-century dot-meister, painter Georges Seurat.

In her show, with the title *Les ARCS et autres formes primaires*, Annie Hémond-Hotte goes back in time, establishing the Romanesque cathedral as her frame of reference. The central motif in her painting, *L'Arc du bien et mal*, as in most of her work, is a round arch; this structure, in sombre green, melts visually into a background also in leafy hues.

Yet, if the colours do not exactly evoke cathedral stone, the armies of dots and paint slashes do emulate the notion of laborious construction, piece by piece. Hémond-Hotte's arch is not altogether as solid as a rock; it has warped contours arguably alluding to organic growth. It brings to mind a biological cross-section viewed through a low-power microscope. It's hard not to think of folk art, invariably based on the power of pattern and sheer replication.

Moving from micro to macro, we encounter Dennis Ekstedt's *Temporary Constellations* that consist of countless points of light. The vista is like that from an airplane of a city by night, except that these lights seem oddly inert, devoid of twinkle. Rather than expressing the breathtaking vastness of the view from the sky, Ekstedt's works have a kind of reductive effect, transforming metropolis into designs that morph into abstraction.

What gives Ekstedt's work a measure of life is the way his abstractions remain faintly plugged into the real world — you can't entirely forget the view-from-an-airplane theme. On a more conceptual level, the works invite us to consider the notion of metropolis, represented by the early Renaissance likes of Masaccio, as a function of macho walls and towers and, for many centuries, as a sequence of projectiles seen in profile. The transformation in Ekstedt's work into something even a bit more abstract than the view from 30,000 feet can be understood as a reflection on a post-modern society of the near-future.

The sky is also a major factor in Katharine Harvey's semi-abstract images of reflections on and in water. What the artist has done for some of her paintings is to go underwater with a camera and shoot pictures of liquid and light. She then translates the resulting images into paint, free of picturesque coral or intrepid divers, with the focus solely on the play of liquid and natural light.

Yet, there's something almost supernatural

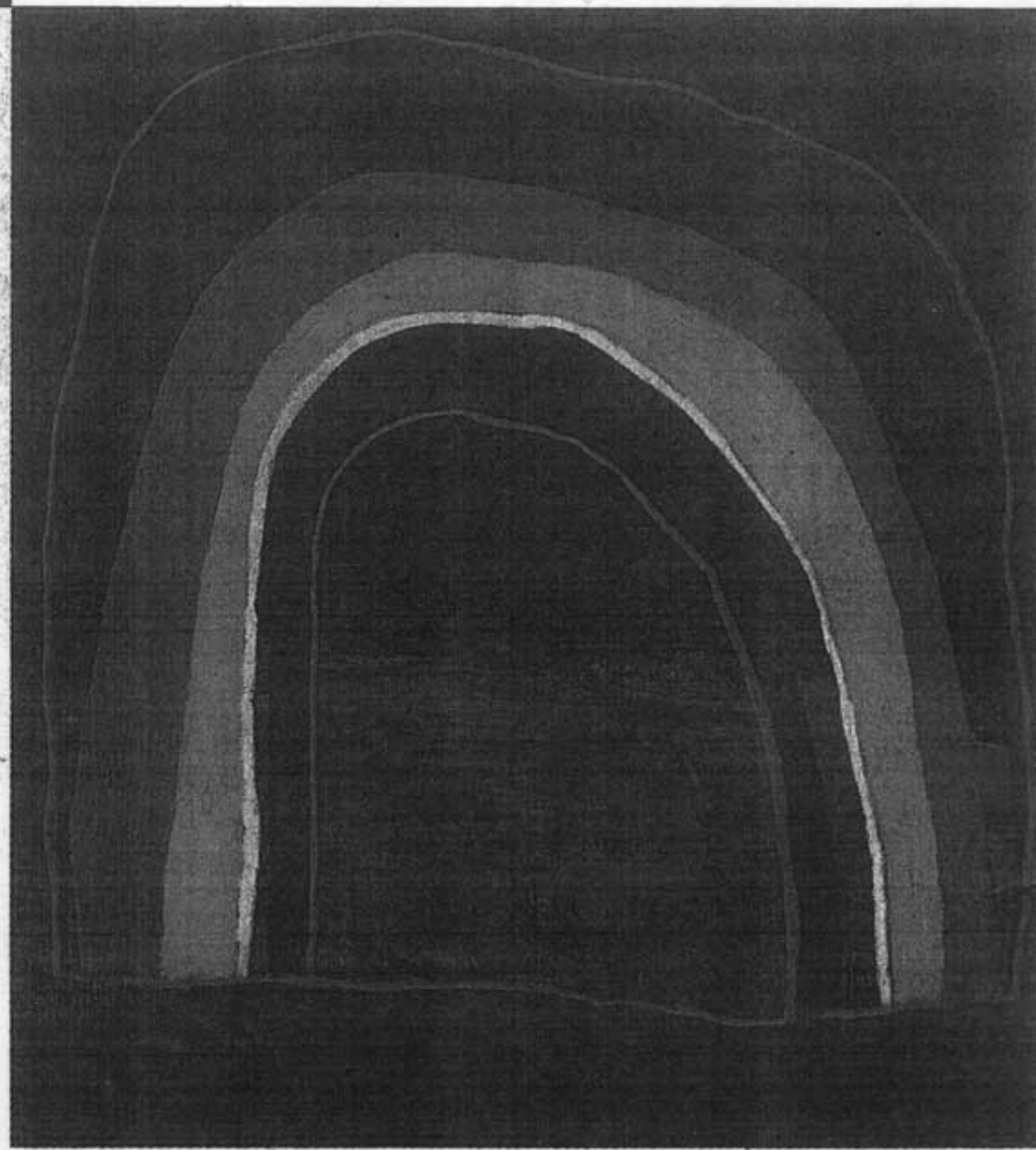
about the starburst of luminescence in Harvey's oil titled *Underwater Galaxy II*, in which we witness what could be an exploding nova or even the Big Bang. The apparition, light yellow at the centre with radiating orange streaks, threatens to fill the darkness, itself punctuated with celestial bodies of what could be just random air bubbles.

The pleasure in viewing this work, however, is not in its initial resemblance to some great photo-illustration in *National Geographic*, but in a curious visual dialectic. Harvey's spectacle is, in our imaginations, either astronomical or aquatic, high up or deep down. On a more basic level, the overall image presents two conflicting interpretations: as traditional illusion, with the viewer launched into a form of visual make-believe or as mere surface pattern, with the "real" subject being of an entirely physical nature, i.e. mere pigment on a wood panel.

This is the visual riddle inherent to much of what art experts have proclaimed as the true sign of modernism, in which the real subject of a work is the sum of its own physical parts, so that a brushstroke is equally important as the thing it's meant to represent. The means that art is ultimately a function of its components in the same way that the human body is composed of skin, bone and a lot of water; and this concept is dramatized by the sheer physical thickness of Harvey's works.

The artist produces her visual effects through application of 50 or more layers of acrylic gel, a translucent, fast-drying paint. The sheer weight of all that pigment becomes apparent only when we look at the edges of the paintings, framed not in the traditional manner, but by thick crusts of pigment; before they dry, the layers have spilled over from the top surfaces of the paintings.

The three artists demonstrate the seductive attraction of paint and painting, though whether painting has as much to say as it had before the invention of the art installation and video is, perhaps, a subjective call. Often it is a function of who is making that call: a painter



Annie Hémond-Hotte's *Licorne moderne* is part of *Les ARCS et autres formes primaires*.

or a post-painterly avant-gardist.

The burning issue has been subject of debate at art conferences over the last four decades. Of course, no official vote has been taken in favour of or against traditional painting, and the art world will never be made into a free democracy.

But to judge by the current paintings in galleries and museums, suppliers of art materials should keep an ample stock of oils and acrylics

on their shelves.

*Les ARCS et autres formes primaires*, by Annie Hémond-Hotte, *Temporary Constellations*, by Dennis Ekstedt, and *Water Fall*, by Katharine Harvey, are at Art Mûr, 5826 St. Hubert St. (Rosemont métro), until April 1. Call (514) 933-0711 or consult [www.artmur.com](http://www.artmur.com)