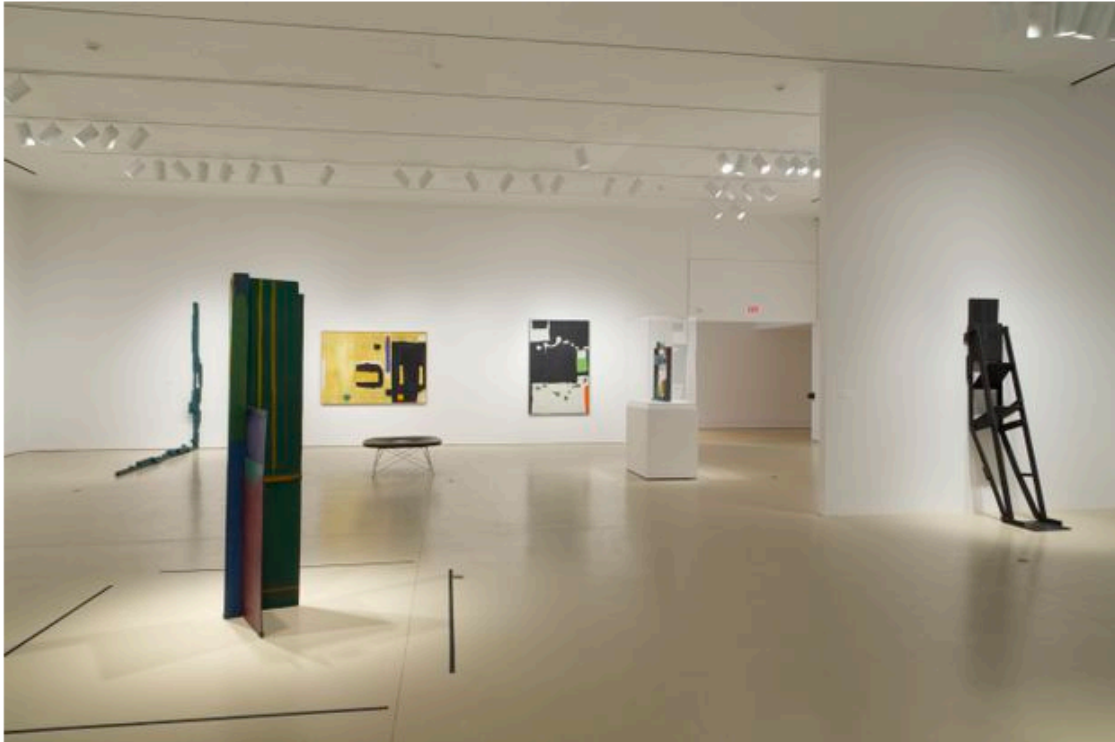




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REVIEW

Art Gallery of Hamilton exhibition profiles the early work of Michael Snow



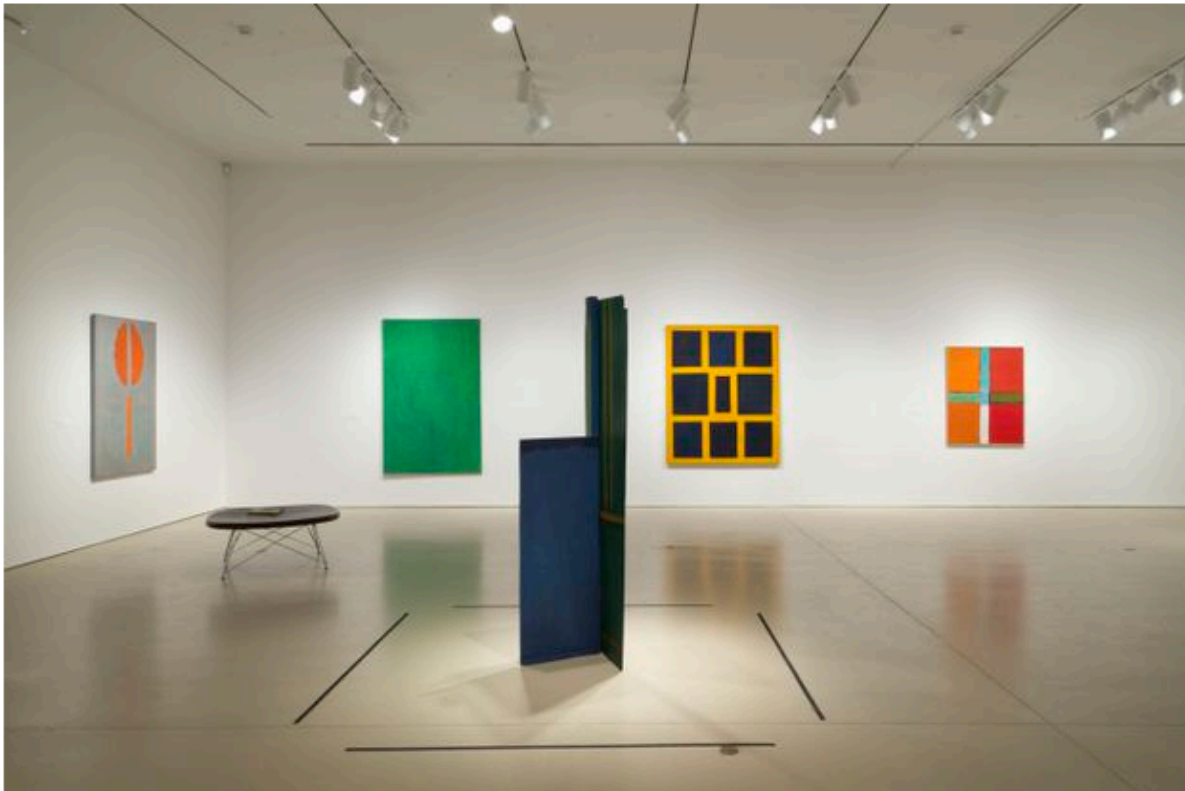
Shunt and Secret Shout, two works by Michael Snow, are part of the Early Snow exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

ROBERT MCNAIR

In 1959, the 30-year-old artist Michael Snow took an old newspaper photograph of a British man who was hanged for murder and drew the felon's face 21 times in charcoal in 21 different styles, from faithful reproduction to quirky illustration to twisting cubist forms. Today, the message of *Drawn Out*, now hanging at the newly reopened Art Gallery of Hamilton, seems pretty clear: Here is a virtuoso artistic talent still searching for the right mode.

The young Snow finds it triumphantly in the next rooms of this show, wittily entitled Early Snow and devoted to the work he created from 1947 (the year he turned 19) to 1962, when he left for a decade in New York. There, Snow moved into experimental film and created what would become his best regarded works. (His most regarded works would have to be his cheeky public sculptures, such as the flock of Canada geese at the Toronto Eaton Centre.)

Concerning himself with the preface to all that, curator James King hangs a corridor of Snow's youthful stylistic wanderings that opens into a large main gallery exploding with decisive abstraction. There are fabulous paintings here, big and engrossing compositions such as *Secret Shout*, featuring two black architectural shapes set to the right on an open ochre ground, and *Blues in Place*, which translates jazz into hovering blue rectangles on a white ground.

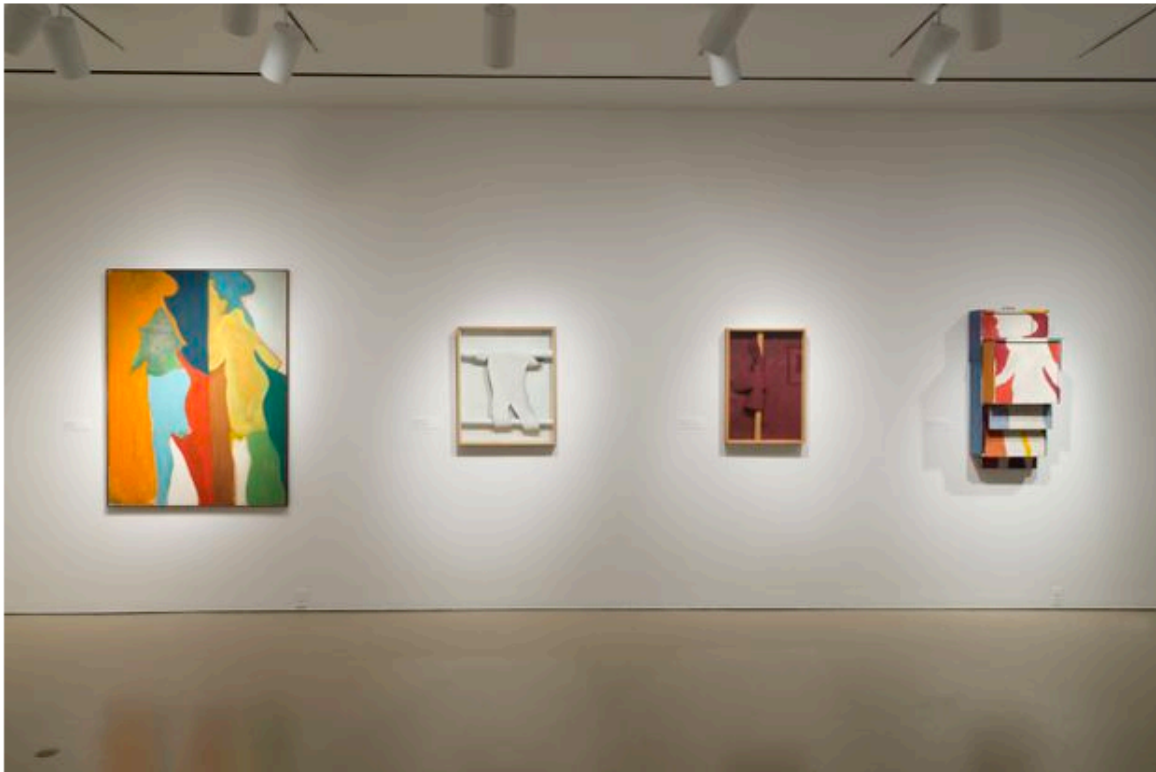


The main gallery explodes with decisive abstraction.

ROBERT MCNAIR

Like many abstract painters of those years, Snow was particularly concerned with flatness. It may be an arcane issue for lay people, so used to reading perspective into paintings that we barely notice it, but the painters themselves were seized by the paradox that the two-dimensional canvas had always been used in Western art to represent three-dimensional space. Snow explores that tension with characteristic wit. He turns folded pieces of paper into flat paintings; he experiments with the viewer's perception of space in the grids delineated in works such as *Self-Centered* (in which coloured bars bisect an orange and red background) or *Green in Green* (where the outline of a slightly darker square is barely perceptible in a field of green).

And in a series of sculptures that look like paintings and paintings that behave like sculptures, he straddles the two- and three-dimensional. *Shunt*, for example, is a thin, vertical assemblage of blue painted wood that begins on the wall and then runs down on to the floor, as though crawling out into the viewer's space.



The Walking Woman series, on display as part of the Early Snow exhibition.

ROBERT MCNAIR

And yet, Snow was never a single-minded abstractionist. He was also experimenting with the flip side, representation, in his familiar *Walking Woman* series. Here, a whole room is dedicated to the evolution of that work from an early, featureless nude to the development of the silhouette of the clothed woman, chopped off at the wrists and ankles and offered as icon rather than portrait. That point was made directly when Snow trotted her out to the Toronto subway and streets to photograph the life-size cut-out among real passersby.

King argues, convincingly enough, that Snow is a formalist – that is, he is more interested in the physical or visual form his art takes than its content – but half a century later, it's impossible not to consider the subject of a series that literally objectified the female figure. Perhaps you want to see it as yet another example of the pervasive, if stylish, sexism of the 1960s, or you can read it as Snow's own resistance to art history as he pushes its most reliable source of eroticism toward abstraction. The artist created a series of nudes leading up to *Walking Woman* and, tellingly, never bothered using a live model. Painting the woman's silhouette on canvas, he discovered he could cut it out and roll it up; this display includes two of the *Rolled Woman* works, where the female outline disappears into a lopsided scroll of coloured canvas. And so, flatness raises its head once again, and formalism carries the day.

Meanwhile, the side show at the Art Gallery of Hamilton draws on a sideshow in art history – the Symbolist movement that coincided with, but never outstripped, Post-Impressionism. The Symbolists were a stylistically disparate group of artists who shared a pre-Freudian interest in the unconsciousness and the dream world, which is the characteristic that curator Amy Wallace uses to unite them here. Specifically, *The Artist's Dream: Works of French Symbolism* investigates the dream as a symbol of artistic inspiration through works in the gallery's own collection as well as some strategic loans.

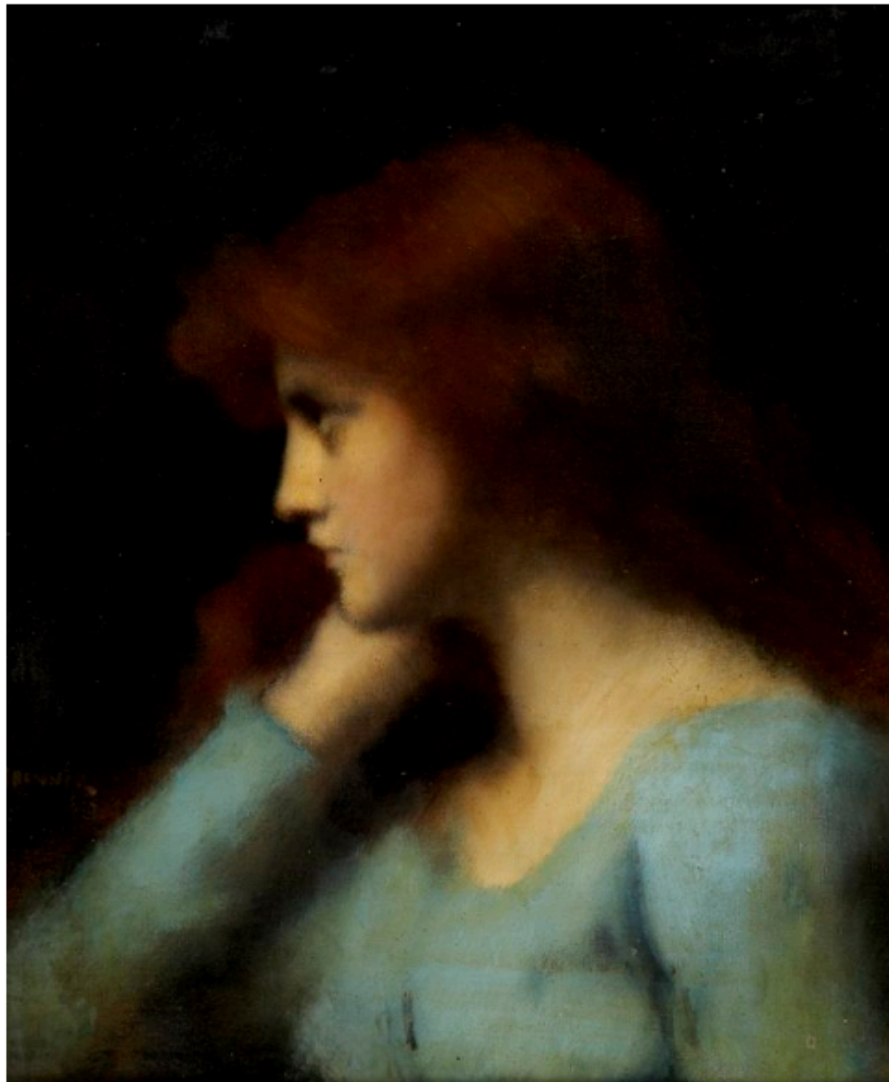
Take, as an example, the soft, brown, foggy paintings of Eugène Carrière, an artist who used the blending technique known as *sfumato* to introduce figures as though glimpsed in a dream. This haziness has nothing to do with the effects of light observed by the Impressionists but rather seeks to reproduce the mental state in which figures are only half seen. Here, it's particularly compelling in a portrait of the artist, his wife and his son or a picture of his son sleeping, where the effect seems to suggest the intimacy with which the most familiar presences in our lives hover in our unconsciousness. More emphatically, the artist uses it to depict the allegorical figure of Painting appearing ghostlike beside her model.



Eugène Carrière's paintings use the blending technique known as sfumato to introduce figures as though glimpsed in a dream.

The show also features some work by better-known artists of the movement, including some surreal illustrations by Odilon Redon for Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, and several scenes by Édouard Vuillard showing figures sitting in darkness but silhouetted against external light sources.

Still, the Symbolist label isn't very sticky – those paintings by Vuillard seem more directly related to Post-Impressionist experiments with depicting the vagaries of perception – and the show also includes several sculptures by Auguste Rodin and his colleague and lover Camille Claudel, figures only loosely related to the movement. Here, the dream becomes decidedly erotic with the inclusion of a small version of *The Kiss* as well as the madly embracing couple of *Eternal Spring*, in which the title is symbolic but the passion seems anything but.



Jean-Jacques Henner is represented by a series of paintings of redheaded women gazing into the distance, including this work, *Contemplation*.

MIKE LALICH

Not all the artists are of this calibre. Amusingly, Jean-Jacques Henner is represented by a whole series of redheaded women shown in profile gazing into the distance and two biblical subjects where the same dreary pose is used to depict a dead woman and the dead Christ, laid out as if at a morgue. The repetitions would seem to go beyond mere professional efficiency to suggest a certain lack of compositional imagination.

That's an ironic lapse considering the Symbolists' chief talent was pursuing the imagination. A back room devoted to the graphic arts includes delicious little woodcuts by Félix Vallotton. A murder is enacted but the victim is hidden behind a bed frame; delicate water nymphs linger with threatening intent. It's the odd corners of Symbolism that can prove the most rewarding.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton reopens July 16; Early Snow has been extended to Jan. 3, 2021 and The Artist's Dream to Jan. 10.

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