

LARGE PRINT MATERIALS: Please do not remove.

EARLY SNOW : Michael Snow 1947-1962

This exhibition is devoted to the first fifteen years of Michael Snow's visual art. The first work is from 1947, when Snow was nineteen, and the last one is from 1962, just as he was leaving Toronto to live in New York City. At the age of thirty-three, the artist's work had already gone through many metamorphoses, and this exhibition displays the enormous accomplishments that had already been achieved by this ambitious young artist.

Above all, Snow is a formalist, an artist whose concerns are literally with the physical existence of a painting or a sculpture or any kind of art. In this regard, he is interested in the ideas that have formed his work and in the ways he has gone about giving shape to those ideas.

More particularly, Snow has always been fascinated with surface and the haptic. Specifically, how does an artist deal with the material existence of their work? For example, a painting is a two-dimensional flat object, and Snow has always accepted and played with this parameter. For him, surface can become the subject of a painting, and, in the process, traditional notions of representation can be pushed aside. Also, the physical presence of any art object has a haptic aspect to it in that it invites the viewer to be aware of its tactility.

In his early career, Snow, as he said, was often in a feverish state of "try this, try that." This exhibition displays the incredible creativity that was unleashed.

Guest curated by Dr. James King

BAY ONE GALLERY

1. Don Owen (Canadian 1931–2016)

FILM: Toronto Jazz 1963

26 mins

National Film Board of Canada

Michael Snow recalls: “I had started struggling with trying to find different ways of improvising in Toronto before I left. In addition to the Dixieland band I played with, I had had different bands of my own. Don Owen’s film, called Toronto Jazz, includes a group I played with. We played what we called modern—Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis themes.”

The film was shot in 1961 before Snow moved to New York City and includes a sequence in the artist’s studio, in which, to Snow’s bemusement, Don Franks, the film’s narrator, grabs a Walking Woman cut-out and transforms her into a makeshift guitar.

2. John (Jack) Martin (Canadian 1904–1965)

St. George 1947

oil on Masonite

Courtesy Stephen McCause, Frank Schwenger
and Factory Gallery

Young Michael Snow’s mentor, John (Jack) Martin, was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, England. He studied with his father, an architect and designer, then at the Slade and the Birmingham School of Art. He immigrated to Canada in 1924. In 1926, he was employed by H.P. Ritchie, a textile firm, where he introduced a stencil screening

process. Encouraged by Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer (1885–1969), Martin began exhibiting his work in 1931. From 1945 to 1953, he was the director of the design division at the Ontario College of Art, where Snow was his pupil. He encouraged his student to abandon design work in favour of fine art.

3. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Jazz Band 1947

tempera or gouache on paper

Collection Michael Snow

4. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Lac Clair December 1960

oil and paper adhesive on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1967

This masterful painting can be read in two ways. The greens and blues that fill most of the canvas are painted with various levels of intensity and the resultant layers on the surface immerse the viewer in its world. The four pieces of adhesive tape place a border on the inner world of the painting; in fact, they contain it. The result is a contrast between the rich texture of the blues and greens and the prosaic adhesive tape.

Lac Clair, near Chicoutimi, Quebec, was the site of Snow's mother's family cottage in the Lac Saint-Jean region. The greens and blues represent this body of water, where Snow as a child spent many happy moments. The four brown pieces of adhesive tape then become the land that borders the water. As in nature, a body of water is contained.

SPECTATOR GALLERY

EARLY WORK, 1947–1954

Music and visual art have always been at the core of Michael Snow's work. Jazz became a new form of music in the late nineteenth century and rapidly extended the boundaries of what it is as a major force in music. The movement towards experimentation in Snow's early paintings and sculptures reflects his keen awareness that jazz is constantly revising and reinventing itself.

In many ways, from the outset Snow attempted to discover visual equivalents for jazz—this concern can be seen in some of his early work. Also on display is his dexterity in drawing and some of his first representations of women.

5. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Still Life: Red Goblet August 1952

oil on Masonite

Collection Denyse Rynard, Toronto

6. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Moonlit House 1953

tempera on paper

Collection Denyse Rynard, Toronto

Paul Klee's (1879–1940) influence on this luminous, haunting oil painted in a wide variety of blues is obvious. Snow was attracted to Klee's purity of form, his careful regulation of colour values, and his playful approach to the surface of a canvas. At this time, the artist was also briefly under the sway of Ben Nicholson (1894–1982), who often

worked in an upright format; the English artist also liked to mix circular forms with boxes, and he also gave his oil paintings a collage-like effect so that the thinness of the canvas is countered with layering that bulks up the surface.

7. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

A Man with a Line 1953–54

mixed media on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of
Mrs. Nora E. Vaughan, Toronto, 1993

8. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Ocul 1954

ink, watercolour and photo dyes on paper

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Purchase, 1970

This large, surreal-looking ink and watercolour drawing was completed at Méribel les Allues, in the French Alps. At a table, a staring male figure sits beside a nude female. His body is constructed from downturned wine glasses. The woman's breasts and pudenda are eye-like structures, and even more eyes dominate the drawing: for instance, the lightbulb hanging between the two figures, at the top and bottom of the glasses.

There is a poignancy to Ocul. This Latin term is often used as a prefix in medical terminology to discuss diseases of the eye, and Snow may well be reflecting on his father's compromised vision. For any artist, the creative use of the eye is essential, but Snow was well aware of his father's disability. That awareness is poignantly captured in this image.

9. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Colin Curd About to Play 1953

oil on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario,

Gift of Sam and Ayala Zacks, Toronto, 1970

In Málaga, Spain, as here, Snow made his first attempts with a palette knife using “a technique I developed with gouache so they may be a bit clumsy.”

The subject of the picture was a young, classically-trained English flautist named Colin Curd. In conversation, Snow and Curd exchanged ideas about the audience for whom they played. Earlier, in 1950, Curd had played in an ensemble that included the English classical guitarist Julian Bream (b. 1933). Throughout his career, Snow has been aware of the persons who will look at his work and respond to it. Moreover, he knows such glances can be benign or malignant.

10. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Smoke 1953

watercolour on paper

Collection Michael Snow

11. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Black Sun 1954

gouache and graphite on wove paper

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift from the

Douglas M. Duncan Collection, 1970

12. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Meeting in Milan 1953

gouache on paper

Collection Michael Snow

Sketchbook Case

Sketchbook 3 1951

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

Untitled abstract 1953

matte opaque paint on paper

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

Sketchbook 8 1953

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

Sketchbook 10 1953

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

Sketchbook 14 1954

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

Sketchbook 17 around 1956

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

The modern conception of jazz (and art) as seen by Michael Snow around 1954

E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Michael Snow, 1992

MCQUAIG GALLERY

13. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Film: A to Z 1956

16 mm film, 6 mins

Cinémathèque québécoise

Michael Snow: "I was inspired at that time [1956] by studying the music and visual art that moved me most and then imitating and modifying it. . . . But my fascination with film came through my introduction to it as a particular process—learning what it was/is from the inside, as it were, adding frame to frame, twenty-four frames passing in one second on the screen."

The action of the film is sexual: the table and chairs are anthropomorphized to the extent that they attempt to mate with each other.

TABLES AND CHAIRS

Tables and chairs have always been an important segment within the still-life tradition, and this sub-genre allowed Snow to experiment with the idea of placing three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional space. In other words, it allowed him to experiment with the flatness of painterly surfaces while, at the same time, calling attention to their three-dimensionality.

14. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Three Chairs June 1956

bronze lacquer on polyester resin and metal base
Collection Edward and Marla Schwartz, Toronto

Like many artists of his time, Snow has been influenced by Alberto Giacometti's (1901–1966) stretched-out pieces of the late 1940s and early 1950s, in which the Swiss artist attempted to blend the human figure with landscape with results in work that is often said to represent humankind's tormented existential plight. Snow's adaptation of Giacometti is formalistic and not humanistic: he is simply interested in how a figurative piece can be elongated to take on abstract qualities.

15. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

The Table 1955

metal plate, metal wires and found objects covered with putty (epoxy?) and metallic paint (bronze powder?) on a painted wood base
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1986

16. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Metamorphosis-Chair 1955

oil and metallic paint, polyester resin on metal armature

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,

Gift of Michael Snow, Toronto, 2001

The idea of transformation is a key element in Snow's art. He is fascinated with how raw materials (for example, canvas, oil paint, wood) can be made into objects of beauty by the hand of the artist. In *Metamorphosis*, the chair is being animated into another object or, perhaps, a form of plant or human existence. Journalist Robert Fulford pointed out: This kind of sculpture "contains a special sort of excitement, a kind of refined joy. [*Metamorphosis*] shows a chair that is warped and twisted but still very much a chair. It appears to be in the process of changing into something else . . ."

17. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Petrograd 1917 1958

oil on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario,

Gift of Walter Carsen, Thornhill, Ontario, 1971

In Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), Russia, in the winter of 1917, scarcity of food led to riots. This event marked the beginning of the end for the Czarist regime and led to Nicholas II's (1868–1918) abdication and the eventual instalment of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and the Soviet regime. In choosing this title, Snow is gently suggesting that his abstract is part of a revolution in the history of painting. The four light-coloured boxes at the top of *Petrograd 1917* resemble tabletops, whereas the

thick lines separating the light-coloured areas at the bottom can be seen as table legs.

18. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Drawn Out 1959

charcoal on paper

Collection David Daniels and Kate Alexander Daniels

Alan James Grierson (age twenty-seven or twenty-eight) was sentenced to death at the Old Bailey—the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales—for the murder of Louise Berthe Gann (age sixty-three), whom he bludgeoned with a flat iron; he was executed at Pentonville on October 30, 1935. Inspired by a newspaper photograph of Grierson, Snow made twenty-one charcoal drawings in a wide variety of manners: representational, cubist, caricature and so on. The title is, of course, a pun: a single newspaper photograph of the felon has been drawn out to twenty-one drawings. The drawings of Grierson are a tour de force and show Snow's technical dexterity as well as his knowledge of a great many styles.

SOUTHAM GALLERY

ABSTRACTS

These canvases from 1958 to 1961 bear some superficial resemblances to Abstract Expressionist art. There are modified references to “the

Gesture” and “action painting” as practiced by Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and William de Kooning (1904–1997).

There is an even stronger affinity to the concern with surface and colour values seen in

Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). Snow’s originality resides in his blending of these two approaches.

Speaking of these works Snow has said: “Several different tendencies were involved, none of which were influenced by specific painters of the New York school. Rather, my works were concerned with the principles that certain New York painters were involved in in making their paintings.” Abstract Expressionism is often discussed in terms of existential anguish, but Snow’s is a formalism that seeks purity of form and line.

SCULPTURES

Snow’s transition to sculpture follows directly from his painterly renditions of tables and chairs. In *Shunt and Quits* he comments directly on the relationship between the walls on which paintings are hung and the floors on which sculptures are often placed. In so doing, the sculptor establishes a synchronicity between the two forms and demonstrates the relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects.

As Snow recalls, “I’ve always been interested in the physical aspect of art. ‘What is the matter?’ has been my question....In my work I’m always a sculptor....But I have also been, since my beginnings, a pure sculptor, an artist who makes objects, in three dimensions.”

FOLDAGES

From 1936 to 1954, Matisse made a wide assortment of cut-outs. The results are textured because some pieces of paper are glued on top of others. In 1960, the Hungarian-born French artist Simon Hantai began making his own pliage and pasting them on to his canvases, but they have little in common with Snow's attempt to combine painting with sculpture.

For Robert Fulford, the foldages were an important breakthrough for Snow: "The form is a sort of painting-and-sculpture combination— painting because it is framed and because paint is used; paper because the paper juts out from the basic surface...The most important aspect of all this is that it introduces into Snow's work an element of romantic fantasy.... In a sense, it throws together and synthesizes all those elements—intellectual, comic, sensual—which have been important in Snow's painting and drawing up to now."

19. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Quits 1960

oil, wood

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
Gift of Michael Snow, Toronto, 2001

20. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Painting Un-Foldage 1959

gouache on folded paper

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Anonymous Gift, 2000

21. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

White Trash 1960

paper on board

Collection Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton; purchased with funds donated by the Women's Society of the Edmonton Art Gallery

22. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Blue Monk 1960

opaque matte paint on folded paper,
multi-ply board, wood

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
Gift of Michael Snow, Toronto, 2001

Blue Monk is a painted sculpture with a particularly beguiling, majestic presence. “Blue Monk” is a jazz standard written by American musician Thelonious Monk (1917–1982) that became one of his most enduring tunes. It was first recorded in 1953 for the album Thelonious Monk Trio; it is a B flat blues composition. In paying tribute to Monk, Snow is indicating his interest in that musician’s advanced, improvised style.

23. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Colour Booth 1959

oil, wood

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
Gift of Michael Snow, Toronto, 2001

24. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Theory of Love 1961

oil and metallic paints on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario,

Gift of Sam and Ayala Zacks, 1970

25. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Green in Green November 1960

oil and lucite on canvas

Collection Morden and Edie Yolles

The grid here is asymmetrical, with the lines connecting to the rectangle in the centre of the composition. The surface has been painted with bright green brushwork; strips of masking tape have been placed to mark the lines of the grid. When work was finished, the tape was pulled away to reveal a darker green undercoat. This gives the canvas the sense that it has emerged from a hidden layer. Moreover, the light reflected by the individual brushstrokes makes the canvas glimmer.

26. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

The Drum Book September 1960

oil and enamel on canvas

Private Collection

27. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Self-centered 1960

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of

Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Strutt, Lucerne, Quebec, 1980

28. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Shunt 1960

oil on timber

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1970

Shunt derives its power when the viewer attempts to understand its meaning. The surface of Shunt is invitingly painted, but the form itself most resembles an elaborate piece of piping. These sculptures, Snow has pointed out, “were built to join the floor [traditional place for sculpture] with the wall [place of painting].” Snow also argues that these two pieces are related to the “objectness and depictionless aspect of the single-color and two-color paintings that I made in 1959 and 1960 (for example, Green in Green and Lac Clair) and the single-plane foldages such as White Trash led to making objects.”

29. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Secret Shout January 1960

oil and charcoal on canvas

Collection Marilyn and Charles Baillie

30. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Duol 1960

oil on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Fredrik S. Eaton, Toronto, from the Collection of Mrs. Signy H. Eaton, 1988

31. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Window 1960

wood, acrylic, polyethylene, glass, paper, cotton, wire, sheet metal,
chrome-plated sheet metal

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1970

32. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Blues in Place 1959

oil and paper collage on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1970

This painting can be read as an attempt by Snow to visualize a form of jazz—the blues—and to place it in space. The title of this canvas provides clues about how to read it. On the canvas, the various passages (five) in blue contrast sharply in shape with each other but are held together by the grid lines that occupy the centre. Two passages in black contrast with those in blue. The forms at the top and bottom are not connected to a grid; a horizontal shape begins in the middle of the canvas and culminates on the right side in what Snow would call a “constructed” gesture—one that comes as close as he ever does to the gestural painting of Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956).

33. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

News February 1959

oil on canvas

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University, Kingston, Gift of
Ayala and Samuel Zacks, 1962

34. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Good-bye 1959

oil, paper, carbon paper, aluminum on veneer plywood

The Bailey Collection

The title is a reference to the wooden bureau from which the piece of plywood was severed. This horizontal composition's division into three parts resembles a musical stave (staff), and the pieces of paper and carbon paper resemble musical notes. In addition, in a subtle way, Snow may be adopting Hans Hoffman's (1880–1966) "push-pull" technique wherein blocks in a painting push and pull against each other to give tension. Snow recalls: "About my abstract/painting sculpture of 1959–60: several different tendencies were involved, none of which were influenced by specific works by specific painters of the New York school. Rather, my works were concerned with the principles that certain New York painters were involved in, in making their paintings."

Steiner Gallery

WOMEN

Parallel in time to the abstractions are representations of women. In fact, from 1953 to 1959, representations of the female nude constitute a significant part of Snow's output. No models posed for any of this work.

The original Walking Woman figure, according to Snow, is "the daughter of works such as Seated Nude [which] was cut out of

cardboard using the same type of 'mat' or 'Exacto' knife as the collages and 'drawing' the same kind of forms."

35. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Clarinet Blues April 1954

gouache on paper

Collection Denyse Rynard, Toronto

36. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Seated Nude (Red Head) 1955

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of Avrom Isaacs and Donnalu Wigmore, 2017

37. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Seated Nude 1955

collage and watercolour on paper

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with funds donated by AGO Members, 1999

38. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Study for January Jubilee Ladies 1961

charcoal and ink on paper

Collection Linda Frum, Toronto

39. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Study for January Jubilee Ladies 1961

graphite on paper

Collection Linda Frum, Toronto

40. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Study for January Jubilee Ladies 1961

gouache and paper collage on board

Collection Linda Frum, Toronto

41. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

January Jubilee Ladies 1961

chalk, gouache and paper collage on

corrugated cardboard

Global Affairs Canada Visual Art Collections / Affaires Mondiales Canada

Collections Arts Visuels

Snow recalled the origin of this work: “In 1961 I reconsidered [some earlier collages] . . . and in a [reminiscent] mood made *January Jubilee Ladies*, a somewhat Matissean collage in which I used paper I found in my studio, a former storage space for a retail store. The title was written on one of those pieces of paper.”

This huge collage contains a wide variety of colours—red, blue, white, various ochres—but does not recall Henri Matisse’s (1869–1954) cut-outs as much as it is reminiscent of Pablo Picasso’s (1881–1973) *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)* (1911–12). The opulence of the floating female forms bestows upon this piece a sexuality reminiscent of the Spanish artist’s celebrated rendition of the five prostitutes. Snow was probably alluding directly to Picasso’s masterpiece: his gouache-collage contains five female figures and the spatial arrangement of the women in each work is similar.

THE WALKING WOMAN

The first Walking Woman was a five-foot-high cut-out in which a two-dimensional surface was given quasi-sculptural existence. Before beginning work on the first Walking Woman figure, Snow made other cut-outs—including one of a jumping female figure (now lost).

Here are five examples of the Walking Woman—one an oil on wood assemblage, two based in part on Snow's foldages, one on canvas and a series of photographs of the figure taken in various parts of Toronto. She may have initially existed as a cut-out but, soon after her debut, she juts out of the wall in Project. In 61-62, she is the subject of a monumental, intensely polychromatic composition. In Four to Five, she is the star of a series of photographs.

42. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

61-62 1961-62

oil and graphite on canvas

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
Gift of Avrom Isaacs, 2006

43. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Rolled Woman I 1961

oil and graphite on canvas, latex on
wood and board, cardboard tubes

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift from
the McLean Foundation, 1962

44. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Rolled Woman II 1961

oil on paper, board and wood, cardboard tube

Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University,
Purchase, Special Purchase Assistant Grant, Canada Council of the Arts,
1983

45. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Project 15 July 1961

oil and graphite on plywood, timber, metal, cardboard

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery Collection, purchased with funds from
the Walter and Duncan Gordon Charitable Foundation, 1993

46. Michael Snow (Canadian b. 1928)

Four to Five 1962, printed 1991

gelatin silver prints

Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,

purchased with funds donated by AGO Members, 1991

