

ELYSIAN FIELDS

Essay by Canadian Art Critic, Gary Michael Dault

GERALD DAVID PEDROS

This publication documents the exhibition of Gerald David Pedros: Elysian Fields.

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ISBN 978-0-9782953-2-2

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Design: Laura Woermke

Cover: Gladstone #26 Mylar Works

CLOUDS OF UNKNOWNING: SOME OF THE ART OF GERALD PEDROS

Not that I think Gerald Pedros's work has anything much to do with the 14th century book of Christian mysticism that bears the title I have also used here.

But the fact is, in the Gladstone Mylar works featured in this exhibition—part of the large body of work that bears the over-arching, mythological title, Elysian Fields—the pictures are informed by a strange, inchoate nebulosity, a cloud-like sense of *informe* (see below) that provides a certain kind of accessibility to his paintings, an inescapable sense of engagement with them. This sense of engagement, that generates an ongoing invitation to artist-viewer dialogue, appears to reside, to some degree, in that billowing, light-saturated veiling that characterizes the Mylar paintings, in that inchoate swirling mistiness, that sense of cloud that seems to render the Mylar works open and penetrable and, at the same time, dense and performative in a way that is more theatrical than participatory.

It depends on the picture, of course. Some of the Mylars are essentially curtain-like. The creamy, pink-beige picture designated as #33, for example, pours interior light out towards the viewer, as if the light were tumbling forward—like a foaming river breaking over a precipice and tumbling—occluding the landscape-like depths of the painting that seem to exist behind the fall of light. But in the lurid, creamy-rose #6, the acrylic pigment, plummeting down through the picture from the dark, horizon-like upper-edge, feels like the silent, painterly equivalent to a roar—a thrashing, sonic tumult hushed into pure visibility. This is essentially a kind of behavioral expressionism—where the painting's purely formal, non-representational elements seem to be in contention with certain programmatic readings of the paintings that tend to keep suggesting themselves ("impurely" or not) to the viewer.

I asked Pedros if he tended to discourage this seductive dualism that seems to lie within many of his pictures—especially within the paintings on Mylar. Does it matter if the viewer sees, in one of his paintings, more than a pure disposition of pigment and charcoal on a field? What happens if what is seen there also suggests a cloud or a waterfall? Pedros says it doesn't matter. Not to him, anyhow. I suspect that, like Walt Whitman, Pedros is large—and contains multitudes.

So it is with the paintings—which are elastic and expansive. "Painting on Mylar," Pedros tells me, "is the closest you get to the experience of fluidity." Let us, at this point, recast a statement by James Elkins' from his oft-quoted book, *What Painting Is* (Routledge, 2000). For Elkins, "paint is liquid thought" (p.207). His bracing contention that "Substances can express any feeling, any motion," can be usefully pushed a bit into a slightly absurd continuation: substances can express any feeling, any *emotion*." Furthermore, I would venture to say that substances (such as acrylic paint on Mylar) can also express, at the same time, motionlessness and e-motionlessness: paired and contradictory states and conditions that lie on the far side of cognition.

If Pedros's Mylars can embody both motion and feeling and if, at the same time, they can embody their opposites—motionlessness (stasis) and a cessation of emotion (thereby becoming a matrix of self-cancellation)—then they exist in realms related to certain readings of the idea of freedom.

In the disquieting speculations of Jean-Paul Sartre on the matters of liberation and freedom, an individual is not simply liberated into freedom but, contrariwise, "condemned" to it. If we look at Pedros's Mylars through Sartrean eyes, they become not the romantic sites of reverie and escapism, but, rather, insistent challenges to the viewer's sense of selfhood. They open vistas onto what we might call "the responsibility of vision."



#33 Gladstone Mylar Works

Freedom is clearly not just chaos. It is, rather, the site of a different set of perceptions, receptions and responsibilities. Pedros' tumbling, swirling veils of pigment—held up like light on the slippery surfaces of his Mylar sheets—are, in fact, part of a large, well-established genre of method and effect sometimes referred to as "l'informe" (a term associated with the thought and work of French writer Georges Bataille, and excitingly explored by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in their *Formless: A User's Guide* from Zone Books, 1997). For Bataille, Krauss and Bois, and other theorists of formlessness, the manifestation of the *informe* or formlessness breaks down the rather weary, hoary standoff between form and content, and provides a third possibility: formlessness is, to use Bataille's term, "a job." Or, a role. Formlessness "counters the fetish of form, and is defined more by what it does than by what it is." Are Pedros's Mylars about rushing tides of pigment (clouds, waterfalls, mists, blah blah) or are they about pigment employed in any fluid rush? (the task of the artist being to make discursive, all-encompassing things). I recommend the establishing of a practice, in painting, not of *either-or*, but, instead, of *both-and*.

In aggregate, the Gladstone Mylar Works are protean, shape-shifters sharing a medium and a format: #21—a icy, triangular composition in blue, brown, grey and cream, looks distressed like an old wall. #30 is like the cusp of a waterfall, all tumult thundering down. The moody, indeed rather operatic #26, in golds and grey-browns, bears a graphically bubbly texture, as if the whole picture were on the boil. #24 is as pink as a blush and billowy as a cone of carnival cotton candy, while #11, with its deep and sonorous creams, ignited with light against an ominous, lead-coloured "sky" (you see how easy and pleasurable it is to read

these paintings programmatically?), strongly evokes the epic paintings of the Hudson River School (the American Luminists such as Frederic Church, George Caleb Bingham, John Frederick Kensett et al).

There are two more addenda to our *Gladstone Mylar* discussion, and they sit in opposition to one another.

First, it is important to stress that no matter how engulfed in the “informe” the paintings appear to be, each is nevertheless cued to, tethered to, a shard of solidity—usually a strongly-presented “horizon-line” across the top of the picture (reinforced, sometimes, by vertical marks down the sides of the paintings, near to and indexing the rush in the rest of each work).

Second, it is important to re-stress—and this runs counter to the work of the structure-giving “horizons,” how profoundly *bodily* the paintings are (this reprises Pedros’s comment about his getting close to the “experience of fluidity” during the making of the works).



#6 Gladstone Mylar Works

The statement irresistibly awakens the sleeping Sartre, always slumbering just below the surface of this entire disquisition—Sartre and his preoccupation (see the penultimate chapter of his *Being and Nothingness*) with viscosity, with stickiness. Viscosity, Sartre argues, is an anti-value, “the attempt of plenitude to overwhelm nothingness.”(1) And it is as bodily as the devil. Sartre then goes on to quote the unfailingly arresting Gaston Bachelard: “My body,” writes Bachelard, “is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body in so far as the house was already an indication of my body. This is why my body always extends across the tool which it utilizes; it is the end of the cane on which I lean and against the earth; it is at the end of the telescope which shows me the stars; it is on the chair, in the whole house; for it is my adaptation to these tools.”

The body always “extends across the tool which it utilizes.” The painter’s arm, its sweep. His brush. His stick of graphite. His scraping finger.

To shift our attention from the Gladstone Mylar to Pedros’s *Stratford Series* is to move from untrammelled viscosity to viscosity kept (barely) within



Stratford Series #1

2009

boundaries. *The Stratford Series* paintings are to the *Gladstone Mylars* what architecture is to wilderness. In the *Stratford* works, there is brushiness aplenty, sensuousness in force (*Stratford Series #1*, for example, throbs like a volcano anterior to eruption, while *Stratford Series #2* offers a still, deep-green endlessness that is like being under the sea), but this painterly restlessness and agitation is kept in check—to some degree at least—by the almost subliminal presence, within each painting, of a thinly drawn or delicately scraped upwardly pointed arch—like a Gothic portal or window.

Where does it come from? Given the fact that, like Tennyson's *Ulysses*, each of us is a part of all that we have met, there is a possible explanation in Pedros's admiration for a certain Anglican church window in the Montreal of his childhood ("the pointed top was like a the bow of a boat...on a voyage through the sea of life, on its way to heaven..."). The arch also derives, perhaps, from scraped, distressed, timeless walls he saw while visiting in Crete ("I've watched a wall for two or three hours..."). But those are (possible) autobiographical sources for the series of paintings. Where do the arches really come from?

It's not possible, of course, to say for sure. And why would anyone want to anyhow? My own feeling is that the arches of the *Stratford* paintings are about ascension, desire, the restless need to move up, and above, and beyond restriction. To loose the bonds of earth. Isn't that what all meaningful art tries to do?

Gary Michael Dault
September 14, 2009

1) "Viscosity is the quality of all sticky, gummy, gluey, adhesive, absorptive, clinging, miry, sucking, sugary, molasses-like, honey-like, pitch-like, leech-like things—things that are fluid, soft, yielding, docile, compressible, collapsing, deflating, foundationless, baseless, creeping, squashy, and slimy...." (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Citadel Press, 1966, p. 300).



Stratford Series # 8

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Gladstone Mylar Works #21

Graphite / Acrylic 30" x 30



Stratford Series #5

Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 4'



Gladstone Mylar Works #26

Graphite / Acrylic 36" x 36"



Stratford Series #23

Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 4'



Stratford Series #21

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Gladstone Mylar Works #24

Graphite / Acrylic 30" x 30"



Figure in a Landscape #2

Works on Mylar 36" x 48"



Figure in a Landscape #3

Works on Mylar 36" x 48"



Walls of Crete #4

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Walls of Crete #1

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Stratford Series #20

Acrylic on Canvas 60' x 48'



Gladstone Mylar Works #11

Graphite/acrylic 24" x 18"



Stratford Series #13

Acrylic on Canvas 3' x 4'



Gladstone Mylar Works #30

Graphite / Acrylic 32" x 45"



Stratford Series #9

Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 4'



Stratford Series #7

Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 4'



Figure in a Landscape #4

Works on Mylar 36" x 48"



Figure in a Landscape #1

Works on Mylar 36" x 48"



Stratford Series #24

Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 4'



Walls of Crete #3

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Gladstone Mylar Works #1

Graphite/Acrylic 24" x 18"



Gladstone Mylar Works #7

Graphite/Acrylic 24" x 18"



Walls of Crete #5

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Gladstone Mylar Works #3

Graphite/Acrylic 24" x 18"



Walls of Crete #6

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"



Walls of Crete #7

Acrylic on Canvas 36" x 36"

CHRONOLOGY

BORN:

Montreal, Quebec, Canada 1951

STUDIED:

Dawson College, Montreal, 1972-74

Concordia University, Montreal, 1974-77 (BFA)

Concordia University, Montreal, 1980-83 (MFA)

STUDIOS:

Pouch Cove Foundation Art Residency Program, Newfoundland (2005)

Banff Centre Leighton Artists Colony, Banff, Alberta (1993)

La Sociedad mexicana de Artes Plasticas 95.O.M.A.R.T.) Mexico City, Mexico (1987)

Le Centre Genevois de Gravure Contemporaine, Geneva, Switzerland (1978)

Toronto, Ontario

Montreal, Quebec

AWARDS

Ontario Arts Council (1997,1995,1992,1989, 2001)

Canada Council (1979)

Greenshield Foundation Graduate Assistantship (1976 -1977)

SELECTED CANADIAN EXHIBITIONS:

2009 - Thielsen Gallery, Elysian Fields, London, Ontario

2009 - Fieldcote Museum, Ancaster, Ontario

2007 - MacLaren Art Center, Barrie, Ontario

2007 - Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

2006 - Woodstock Art Gallery, Woodstock ,Ontario

2006 - Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

2005 - St. Thomas-Elgin Public Art Centre, St.Thomas, Ontario

2005 - James Baird Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland

2004 - Outline in Black, Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

2001 - Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

2000 - Roberts Gallery Limited, Toronto, Ontario

1999 - Jean-Claude Bergeron Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario

1997 - Thielsen Gallery, London ,Ontario

1997 - Blyth Festival Art Gallery, Blyth, Ontario

1997 - Wallace Galleries Ltd., Calgary, Alberta

1996 - Elgin - St.Thomas Art Gallery, St.Thomas, Ontario

1996 - Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

1995 - Ottawa School of Art, Ottawa, Ontario

1995 - Centre Interculturel Strathearn, Montreal, Quebec

1994 - Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario

1993 - Centre of Contemporary Art, St. Thomas, Ontario

1992 - Temiskaming Art Gallery, Temiskaming, Ontario

1991 - Elgin - St.Thomas Art Gallery, St.Thomas, Ontario

1989 - Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montreal, Quebec

1985 - Centre Saidye Bronfman, Montreal, Quebec

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

2009 - Mexico

2008 - Salon de La Plasticas Mexicana, Mexico City, Mexico

2006 - Public Exhibition, Berezategui, Argentina

2006 - Faculty of Arts Universidad Nacional de Tucuman, Tucuman, Argentina

2006 - Public Exhibition, Catamarca, Argentina

2006 - 2005 - 4th International Conference on Public Art & Muralism, Tlaxcala , Mexico

1994 - Swords into Plowshare Peace Museum, Detroit, Michigan

1991 - Galeria Praxis, Mexico D.F.

1991 - Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico

1991 - Kilkenny Arts Festival, Kilkenny, Ireland

1991 - Guinness Hop Store Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

1990 - Ernst Brant Galerie, Cologne, Germany

1987 - Sociedad mexicana des Arts Plasticas, Mexico City

1978 - Centre Genevois de Gravure Contemporaine, Geneva

1978 - Galerie Parallele, Geneva, Switzerland

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS:

- Museo Nacional de la Estampa, Mexico City

- Consejo Nacional Para La, Mexico City

- Musee d'Estampes Geneva, Switzerland

- Centre de Gravure, Geneva, Switzerland

- S.O.M.A.R.T., Mexico City

- Guinness Brewery, Dublin, Ireland

- Bibliotheque Gabrielle Roy, Quebec City

- Consulate General of Morocco, Montreal

- St. Thomas-Elgin Public Art Centre, St. Thomas

- Teleglobe Canada, London, Ontario

- Woodstock Art Gallery, Woodstock

- London Life of Canada, London, Ontario

- Concordia University, Montreal

- St. Joseph's Hospital, London, Ontario

- St. Thomas - Elgin General Hospital, London, Ontario

- University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario

- Canadian Art Bank

- Air Canada Corporation

- Museum London, London Ontario

CURATORIAL PROJECTS:

Pamela Williams, *In the Midst of Angels* / Esther Rausenberg, *Anima of air spirit soul*

January 17 – March 18, 2009

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Tobey C. Anderson, *The New American Century Project*

November 14 – January 10, 2009

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Aidan Urquhart, *Making Memories* / Helene Lefebvre, *Social Queen*

September 6 – October 26, 2008

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

The Bank Job: Three Canadian Painters - La Raza Artists Event - 353 Richmond

September 2008

London, Ontario, Canada

John Krygsman, *Upon Closer Introspection* John Maggio, *Images along the Way*

July 12 – August 31, 2008

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Richard Tetrault, *Urban Topographies*

January 19 – March 8, 2008

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Gerald Vaandering, *Under the Influence* / Leslie Putnam, *Alternate Route*

November 10 – January 6, 2008

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

**Holly King, Francois Morelli, Lorraine Sims, Michael Smith, Shelly Reeves, Giuseppe Di Leo,
*Conflux, Seeing Apart***

June 16 – August 18, 2007

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Ron Milton, *Symbols*

Jan 20 – March 3, 2007

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Jan Row / Julie Berry, *Discovering a Different Shore*

Jan 20 – March 3, 2007

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Walter Redinger, *Apparition*

February 2 - March 18, 2007

Canadian Southern Railway Station, St. Thomas, Ontario (co-curated)

Brian Saby, *99-06*

September 2 – October 21, 2006

St. Thomas Elgin Public Art Center, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada