

WITHOUT APPLAUSE

Pushed aside, forgotten in its cement sarcophagus, the work has been isolated like an unwelcome visitor stranded on a hostile shore.

It's not surprising that very few Montrealers know about the fountain. Few Canadians have ever heard of the man. Forty years after he made his debut in Paris, the artist is still "the native genius we've never discovered," as *Maclean's* magazine declared in 1957. Riopelle has always been misunderstood. Long considered Canada's guru of modernism, associated with the American Jackson Pollock and the school of action painting, he riled many, particularly among the arts establishment, when he returned to figurative painting at the beginning of the '70s. Since then, he has been like *La Joute*: abandoned, shunned and ignored by an uncomprehending public.

Still, nature – a Riopellian subject par excellence – is now being rediscovered. "People will soon be looking at these works and saying, 'What renewal, what youth!'" says Jean-Louis Prat, director of France's Maeght Foundation. It was Prat who organized the Riopelle exhibition "Yesterday and Today" presented last year in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, in the south of France. A similar exhibition will be presented at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal between November 9, 1991, and January 19, 1992, inaugurating the new wing of the museum. "I need room," says the painter. For the first time in Canada, Riopelle's large-scale works from the '50s will be displayed side by side with his more recent oeuvre.

It's eleven in the morning. Lac Masson, a peaceful little lake in the heart of the Laurentians, shimmers in the June sun. Since 1974 when he returned to Quebec after almost 30 years of self-imposed exile in Paris, Riopelle has lived here in a rustic, barn-like house (though he still owns land in France). An avid fisherman and hunter, he also escapes to Montmagny, a small town on the St. Lawrence River's South Shore. More than a home, this is his natural habitat, a place where he can watch the geese rest in mid-migration each autumn. It is a refuge to which he can repair to

commune with an unspoiled world.

The night before, he was up very late. Some representatives of a European corporation had travelled the 100 kilometres from Montreal to ask to use his name in support of an important artistic prize. "Fine," he said after hearing their plans, "but only if all applicants have been rejected by everyone. I want a prize for the rejected." The emissaries from the company – a liquor firm – looked at their host, flabbergasted. But he would not back down. Riopelle, his shock of white hair lending him an air of wildness, is an extraordinarily stubborn man.

His hands tremble now and he exhibits a marked twitch, the signs of a life lived in the fast lane. He is similar in many respects to the nature that inspires him. Riopelle resembles a landscape, one of his immense, distant and solitary, windswept winter landscapes in which everything is still, and yet everything is moving. As Françoise Sagan said of Jean-Paul Sartre, things are always zigzagging around him.

He was born in east-end Montreal in 1923. His father, Léopold, built houses. When asked his profession, his father would say "bourgeois." His mother, Anna, her husband's first cousin, was a strict woman, not given to outpourings of emotion. "Affection was hard to come by," Riopelle says now. His parents did, however, stake a great deal on this only child; they hoped he would become an engineer. Thus it was that he entered a polytechnic school after finishing his studies at Mont Saint-Louis, a high school renowned for its rigour and its military training. Without ever confronting them directly, Riopelle always felt alienated from his parents – separated by their basic incomprehension, particularly on the part of his mother, whom he still calls "the police." "Besides," he adds, half-curmudgeonly, half-mischievously, "I've never met a woman who didn't act like the police."

"In that case," replies Huguette, his constant companion, "you must love the police because you've had a lot of women."

Thirty years his junior, Huguette is Riopelle's conscience. And when the old anarchist is too caustic, when he starts railing /continued on page 59



Mi-carême (1990)

LA NATURE SAUVAGE

Pas étonnant que très peu de Montréalais connaissent l'existence de cette fontaine. De fait, il y a toujours eu un malentendu au sujet de Riopelle. Longtemps considéré comme le pape canadien de la modernité, associé à l'Américain Jackson Pollock et à l'*action painting*, il en a déçu plusieurs – et notamment la nomenclature de l'art – quand il est revenu à la peinture figurative au début des années 70.

Pourtant, rien ne permet de parler de rupture dans l'oeuvre de Riopelle. Sinon que désormais, la nature – sujet riopellien par excellence – se repeuple. Et que voit-on apparaître au-delà des icebergs, sur les berges et jusque dans l'épaisseur des forêts? Des bêtes. Des chiens et des loups comme dans *La Joute*. Mais surtout des oiseaux comme dans les séries sur les oies où se profilent de longs cous couleur de terre, de gracieux cortèges couleur de neige et parfois même du gibier, couleur de sang.

«C'est l'évidence que d'ici peu on regardera ces oeuvres et on dira: "Quel renouvellement, quelle jeunesse!"» Directeur de la Fondation Maeght, Jean-Louis Prat a organisé l'exposition Riopelle au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal du 9 novembre au 19 janvier prochain. Pour la première fois au Canada, les grands formats des années 50 côtoieront la production récente caractérisée par la multiplicité des techniques et l'utilisation de la bombe aérosol. /suite à la page 60