

WITHOUT APPLAUSE *continued from page 56*

against “idiotic governments” or “ridiculous regulations” (because he is being interviewed by *enRoute*, he lashes out at Air Canada’s nonsmoking policy), she smiles to smooth things over.

Riopelle, generous with his friends and shy with everyone else, is also an agent provocateur, somewhere between controversial French songwriter Serge Gainsbourg and American novelist Charles Bukowski. “An independent Quebec?” he snickered during one of his rare television appearances. “It might as well be called New Albania.” A friend of René Lévesque and Québécois balladeer Gilles Vigneault, Riopelle has never voted for anyone. “Politics,” he said first thing that morning, “is just a bunch of crap.” Unlike his old friend, the abstract painter Joan Miró, who supported his native Catalonia’s demands for autonomy, Riopelle has never felt any sympathy toward Quebec nationalism. “I don’t believe in roots,” he says when questioned about his period of Parisian exile. “Only in uprooting.”

The truth is that his relationship with his home has always been about confrontation. Not with the Quebec of black spruces, rivers and white geese, to which he is bound by a kind of secret kinship, but with Quebec society, against which he had to rebel, he believes, to give birth to the painter within.

At the time when Riopelle became certain that he would paint, Quebec was in the shadow of the period known as the *Grand Noirceur*, the great darkness. Maurice Duplessis was premier. At L’École du meuble, where Riopelle was enrolled as a young man of 20, he rubbed shoulders with the new Quebec in the person of Paul-Emile Borduas, the leader of the Automatiste movement. It was a heady time, and in August 1948 the movement created the *Refus global*, an angry manifesto and critique of the Quebec status quo. The establishment, from the publishers of *Le Devoir* to the religious hierarchy to other-minded artists, reviled the upstarts. The 16 signers, among them Riopelle and his young wife, Françoise Lespérance, were isolated. Borduas lost his professorship at L’École du meuble (and eventually died in poverty, in Paris) and Riopelle chose the path of exile.

MONEY TALKS



Peinture (1989)

Riopelle’s popularity has skyrocketed over the past few years in all the art capitals of the world. Having exhibited for years in Paris, London and New York, Riopelle, who has created roughly 10,000 works—half of them canvases—is considered an important artist, one whose work’s financial value withstands crises and recessions. In May 1989 at an auction held by Sotheby’s in

New York, a canvas completed in 1955 sold for \$1.7 million.

And June last year, at a Paris auction, a small (88 cm by 130 cm), untitled canvas painted by Riopelle in 1953 sold for more than a million dollars. Reliable sources confirm (anonymously, as art purchasers are notoriously secretive) that this summer, a Toronto collector paid more than \$2.5 million for one of the painter’s works.

In 1964 the federal government commissioned a painting for the new international airport in Toronto for \$20,000. At the time, it was the costliest work ever to have been requested by Ottawa. Exactly 25 years later, the Canadian government gave the work to France to commemorate the bicentennial of the French Revolution. The canvas, which was installed with great ceremony at the new Paris Opera, was assessed at that time as being worth more than \$1.5 million.

Not all Riopelle’s work enjoys the same popularity. As a general rule, recent works fetch less. Still, this hasn’t kept some from selling for small fortunes. It is said that a contemporary canvas measuring 40 cm by 50 cm now runs between \$25,000 and \$30,000.—Lyne Fréchet

For Riopelle, the path also led to Paris, where he settled with his young family (his first daughter had been born just months before). With his dark gaze and his slightly headstrong appearance, he possessed the type of mysterious and intense beauty that intrigues men and attracts women. Two of his greatest passions date back to that period: sleek cars (he still has a 1931 Bugatti) and the circus.

In postwar Paris, a new world was being created in the cafés. Among his friends were Irish expatriate playwright Samuel Beckett with whom he had “long discussions,” the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whom he “adored,” as well as Pablo Picasso, poet and surrealist André Breton, Salvador Dali and Miró. About Miró he

says, “People thought we were discussing painting, but we were really talking hockey. Miró and I were both crazy about hockey.”

For someone who delights in launching scathing attacks against society and its institutions, Riopelle seems strangely incapable of saying an unkind word about anyone. Mention a name and he invariably replies with a superlative. If he says nothing, the person must really be insufferable. He does incline to people who are very close to nature and are somehow marked by it. That’s how he speaks of his hunting guide, “who can tell a crane from a goose simply from the sound of its wings,” or his pal Marier, “a world fly-fishing champion,” or the dog breeder /*continued on page 62*