

Jean-Paul Riopelle and I: *Impression passagère*

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When you go to sea, you have to know how to lay up provisions for many weeks. After that, you can live anywhere, very simply...Here, on the Île aux Oies, it's like being on my boat; I can withstand long sieges, spend the winter if necessary. An island is a sailboat without a mast. In any case my sailboat is my painting.

Jean Paul Riopelle ⁱ

Introduction

We seldom speak of “booking passage” anymore—that is something lost to Romantic period films and historical documents—now, we take trips, vacations, tours, junkets or simply travel. It's a telling linguistic transition. As artists, we travel to find our success, to make the right connections, to add lustre to our careers and find other artists whose ideas we can share: to learn how they work, to find new ideas, to see things from a different point of view that will break into our daily process and inform our work. But “passage” refers to the journey itself: the passing-of-time so significant a part of any kind of travel before the jet age. In the art market, art is a product, but for an artist, it is a process, a passage that seldom takes a direct route or arrives at the expected destination, but is always worth the journey. For most artists, the process of art becomes the process of life itself and for no one was this truer than Canada's most celebrated painter, Jean Paul Riopelle.

Passages are journeys of transformation; “rites of passage” transcend a mere shift in time, and allow for transition into another phase of existence. As a printmaker I also carry the alternate or complementary meaning of passages as the application of layers that result in a richly textured present rather than a past that grows increasingly distant with time. Looking back at my *impressions passagères* (my passing impressions), the journey that represents my life as an artist breaks down into a series of chapters consisting of a long series of passages from one place to another, from one set of friends and lovers and colleagues and associates, to another. One of the most significant passages was my time working with Jean Paul Riopelle and the extraordinary people who surrounded him.

Background

In some ways, the itinerant life is typical of successful artists even today, a necessity created by the art markets' seasonal shifting and the necessity for the artist to appear at openings, to be seen by their public, their collectors and their gallery owners. But for Riopelle and many of the artists who flourished in the post WWII

era, it was much more than this. The need for physical contact, to be in the same space with others, was an expression of freedom and to some extent a habitual pattern of existence created by the exigencies of Europe's exile artistsⁱⁱ of the 1930s and 1940s and the curious trans-Atlantic network that they created.

Repulsed and excluded by increasingly obscurantist strains of nationalism that arose in the early 20th century, artists, philosophers and scientists, of all means and media, flooded into the few culturally significant cities of Europe—Paris, Prague and London—where artists were still free to express themselves. Escaping from ever advancing conformism of new-born nationalist regimes and their expanding borders, some even took the step of moving to the United States establishing and reinforcing new cultural strongholds that became focal points for the radical exchange of ideas and techniques.ⁱⁱⁱ

Printmaking was considered a particularly apt and appropriate form of artistic expression during the war and in the post-war era when artists searched for a way to separate themselves from the elitism of church and state—the inflexible hierarchies of power they felt had contributed to the development of rampant nationalism and fascism. They joined forces with a more egalitarian outlook—art for everyone. The print, easily mass-produced, could be purchased by anyone, and new ideas, new symbols and icons could be spread easily. Many galleries employed printers to make prints of work their artist's had originally created in other mediums. Called “interpretation prints” they were often signed by both artist and printer although not original prints, they were a respected and common art form in Europe. However, In Quebec, interpretation prints were viewed with suspicion and questioned as to their authenticity. In Paris, artists such as Miró, Picasso and Kandinsky collaborated on fund-raising print editions to support the Republicans of the Spanish Civil War and to fund the Communist Cause. For this reason, among visual artists one of the most significant of these new focal points (certainly the most significant for printmakers), was William Stanley Hayter's print shop and school, Atelier 17, first established in Paris in the late 1920s and then moved in the 1940s to New York, then back to Paris in the 1950s. When Hayter moved his Atelier to New York at the outbreak of the war, many artists followed him or found him there; Riopelle was among them.

Riopelle was born to the democratic freedom of peace-loving Canada, but his self-imposed exile to Europe was real, a product of the suffocating regime that existed in the province of Quebec until the 1960s—a period of time referred to as *La grande noirceur* (“the great darkness”). He was among those artists who created and signed the then infamous and now famous *Le Refus Global* in 1948—a manifesto initiated by a group of artists calling themselves *Les Automatistes*, led by the great painter and teacher Paul-Émile Borduas. In it they state the right of artists to “break permanently with the customs of society and Church” (figure 1).



Figure 1, 1947
Jean-Paul Mousseau exhibition

Françoise Sullivan
photo: Maurice Perron

Quebec society of the 1940s and 50s was dominated by the leadership of politicians whose policies were tied to dictates of the powerful fathers of the Catholic Church. Despite, or because of this, under the long red skirts of this authoritarian society, the cities' pavements were pulsing with the sounds of jazz, the rattle of illicit dice, queer clubs, and the radical thinking of near neighbour New York. The mayor of Montreal infamously clamped down on "sin city," conducting raids on night clubs and even going so far as to clear all the undergrowth on Mont-Royal simply because this famous Montreal landmark could harbour the illicit sexual encounters it was becoming known for. The mood was generally stultifying, but the voices of modernism and the rising tide of *La Révolution Tranquille* (the Quiet Revolution) could not be completely shut down. In effect, the atmosphere was a microcosm of the radical nationalism of Europe. *Les Automatistes* were inflamed by the ideals of Surrealism and abstract expressionism that had crossed the ocean with European artists escaping the oppression of fascist governments and the neo-classical aesthetic they were enforcing.

Riopelle had travelled to France in 1946, forming close ties to Paris and the surrealist movement. He was a participant in two seminal exhibitions: *Exposition Automatismes and Exposition internationale Le sur-réalisme* in Paris in 1947. In the same year, he would be the only Canadian to sign the surrealist's manifesto: the *Rupture Inaugurale* (Inaugural Break) that severed the Surrealist's ties with the Communist movement. Riopelle may well have made his permanent home in France at this time had his wife Françoise not become pregnant. Wanting to be amongst family, they returned home for the birth of their daughter, Ysult.

As it turned out, the atmosphere of social protest would follow Riopelle to Montreal. Riopelle con-

vinced his fellow *Automatistes*, Fernand Leduc and Paul Émile Borduas, to write their own manifesto rather than signing that of the surrealists^{iv}. While Borduas wrote the principal text for the *Refus Global* manifesto and would lose his job at the *École du Meuble* because of it, Riopelle, who was relatively young at the time and beyond the influence of any *École*, received little overt censure. Nonetheless, his participation in this anti-establishment publication followed him even to his death in 2002 at the age of 78 when his funeral at Montréal's *Eglise Immaculée-Conception* caused consternation and scandal.^v While two fellow signatories of *Le Refus Global* boycotted the funeral on the basis that it was not in keeping with Riopelle's feelings about the church, a Catholic commentary wrote: "Why did the Archdiocese of Montreal lend one of its beautiful churches for the funeral of a trashy blasphemer? What is it that makes some clergy so terribly afraid to say no to the secular world?"^{vi}

Riopelle's move to Paris in 1946 and then, more permanently in 1949, would be one of a long series of moves in his life. His trips across the Atlantic were frequent, his homes many. While most Canadian and almost all significant Quebec artists have spent time in France, few went as well prepared or succeeded so completely. His reputation flourished in France, not only because of his talent, but his ability to find connections and especially to forge friendships with great artistic personages working in every medium. He surrounded himself with people who worked at the very top of their profession, whether furniture makers, art dealers, restaurateurs, writers or other artists—he liked the best of everything and the best of everyone. Even before leaving for Paris his work had caught the attention of the great leader of Surrealism in France, André Breton, who invited Riopelle to participate in an international exhibition of surrealist art in 1947. In his travels he crossed the paths of many significant figures including: Samuel Becket, Miró, Giacometti, Calder, Kline, and Braque. He joined the circle of expatriate artists in Paris that included Marc Chagall and Natalia Goncharova. His bohemian lifestyle gave him his 'bad boy' reputation. In Paris he and his gallerists fostered his image as a wild Canadian or "the peerless trapper,"^{vii} as André Breton dubbed him. He had his first solo show in Paris the same year he arrived, and by 1954 he worked under the wing of the highly influential and successful dealer, Pierre Matisse, son of the famous painter Henri Matisse. It was not until 1966 that Riopelle joined the illustrious stable of Galerie Maeght and began a period of intense involvement in the medium of print that would lead, eventually to our meeting in 1985.

Riopelle's Experience with Print before We Worked Together

To this day, Riopelle is primarily recognized as a great painter. Retrospectives invariably ignore his involvement in the print medium, but for Jean Paul Riopelle, his printmaking was an essential part of his artis-

tic practice. It represented a particularly malleable and opportune medium in which to record the quick shifting ideas of his intensely creative periods. They certainly helped to extend his career as an art-maker when his physical limitations made it increasingly difficult to paint.

Riopelle came to printmaking under the best possible auspices when he visited the legendary *Atelier 17* in New York in 1946 for a month and learned some basic print techniques. A haven for Europe's "exile artists," *Atelier 17* boasted a whose-who of visiting artists who studied print under William Stanley Hayter's innovative tutelage in a manner of acolytes before a high priest. When Riopelle visited there he met Joan Miro, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock as well—Miró and Kline would become lifelong friends. Nonetheless, it wasn't until 1954 that his prints first appeared in exhibition and even after that, print was not a significant part of his output. Despite the legendary draw of Hayter's *Atelier 17*, truly widespread acceptance of print came later. By the 1960s the innovations initiated in Hayter's *Atelier 17* had spawned a verdant new body of experimental art movements in North America. In Quebec, the Quiet Revolution, with its secular outlook and social democratic inclinations, brought the seemingly egalitarian and almost inherently political art form of



Figure 2: 1967

Riopelle at the Galerie Maeght press

Photo: from Catalogue raisonné Jean Paul Riopelle archives.

printmaking to new heights of popularity. All considered, perhaps it was no surprise that Riopelle did not completely embrace print until he joined Galerie Maeght. Aimé Maeght, the gallery's owner, was himself a professed lithographer, and in 1966 his dealers Jacques Dupin and Daniel Lelong dragged Riopelle to the ARTE print workshop on Rue Daguerre in Paris and introduced him to René Le Moigne, a master lithographer who would serve as Riopelle's lithographer for the next 30 years^{viii} (figure 2).

By the time I met him, Riopelle had an almost uncanny understanding of the print process and an intu-

itive feel for its potential. At that time, European printers refused to stray beyond the boundaries of print processes set by decades, even centuries, of precedence. Even something as basic to contemporary print practice as combining more than one printing method such as lithography and intaglio on a single print, was considered disreputable. This was a point of frustration for Riopelle. Just as in his painting, Riopelle was daring and experimental; he liked to mix it up and was allergic to abiding formulas. I had been trained in Quebec according to the European print tradition, but I hailed from cowgirl stock and had worked in print shops in New York where any method was accepted as long as it worked—I was ‘game’ to try anything. Riopelle appreciated that, and I became one of a very small group lucky enough to work with him. Together, he and I would push the boundaries of traditional print, creating entirely new processes and techniques.

My Background

I was born in Texarkana, Texas just across the border from Mexico. It was a place that held tightly to a “Dick and Jane”^{ix} version of America a picket-fence world where a little girl should aspire to follow the guidance of her father and older brother until she got married and followed her husband)—not the most liberal place to grow up in the 1950s. Despite my parents and my gender I studied painting at Monticello College in Illinois. I spent my summers working in New York City. I took my first printmaking courses under Laurence Barker at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan while studying painting and sculpture. In the summer after I left Cranbrook, I worked as a taxi driver outside of Detroit to earn money to go to Europe.

In the early 1970s I became, in my own way, an exile artist, I moved to Quebec with my boyfriend Pierre—gaining distance from my stifling upbringing. We divided our time between Quebec and Italy, but it was in Italy I felt I had found my spiritual home. I bought a stone farmhouse in the Sabine hills surrounded by acres of olive trees where I could paint. I drove a motorcycle with a sidecar for my dog, Diablo, exhibited in Rome, painted a mural for a tomb, taught art and English lessons in the medieval village of Forano Sabino, worked for a psychiatrist in Rome and was even judged Miss Forano at a beauty pageant.

I gave up my home in Italy in 1975 to settle permanently in Quebec. I printed at the *Atelier de l'Île* in Val-David and at GRAFF in Montreal. By 1982, I was more than ready to establish something solid and permanent and all my own. I bought the house that I am still living in now in the secluded mountain village of Val David, Quebec and, with impeccable timing, founded my own custom print studio, the *Atelier du Scarabée*, just as the art of print began waning as a popular and reputable art form in North America^x.

Meeting Riopelle

The Atelier grew into a dynamic and experimental custom print studio responsible for collaboration and

production of etchings, lithography, relief prints, screen-prints and hand made paper. Serendipitously, Riopelle had also established a studio only 20 minutes away in another mountain hideaway called Estérel. My being on the board of the *Conseil de la culture des Laurentides* (The Cultural Council of the Laurentians) meant knowing Lucette Lupien the General Director there, and because of the friendship we developed, I also came to know her husband, Werner Nold, a fellow contributor to this collection. At the time, he worked as a film editor for the National Film Board of Canada who had just finished editing a wonderful film on Riopelle^{xi} directed by Pierre Letarte and Marianne Feaver.

Riopelle hated cameras. He avoided interviews, but Pierre Letarte, along with his crew of three practically moved into Jean Paul's house. Over the course of almost two years they were with Riopelle constantly, either in Estérel or in France. The result was a warm and personal film. It was during that editing process that Jean Paul, returning from France, said he wanted a printer who would etch his plates for him. In Quebec, while some artists paid printers to edition their work—most artists still etched their own plates. Riopelle was looking



Figure 3: Philippe Briet, Hollis Jeffcoat and Riopelle, Saint-Cyr en Arthies, 1984

Photo: Jacqueline Hyde, Paris, from Catalogue raisonné Jean Paul Riopelle archives.

for someone who would prepare a plate for him to draw on and then etch the plate to be printed. Lucette recommended me, saying that I printed for important artists, such as Betty Goodwin. Riopelle asked that I meet him and his companion of that time, Hollis Jeffcoat (figure 3), an American, and a painter in her own right.

When I arrived at their home I walked into a big living room where Jean Paul was with a lot of people sitting in a circle of chairs - talking and drinking. In later years I would get to know him and expect the polar bear skin he always had draped over his chair and the wide black belt he wore to support his spine, but at this point it was rather unexpected. In fact, the entire collection of visitors seemed a bit like some eccentric after-

hours party of circus folk. They asked about my printing for Betty Goodwin and I said I didn't print for Betty Goodwin, I printed for Kitty Bruneau. It didn't seem to make a difference. The other guests left, some to homes in Montreal, others to catch a plane to France. I stayed behind and Jean Paul asked me to invite my chum, my partner Michel Beaudry whom I'd met in 1983, to come over for dinner. He came on the motorcycle and we ate and drank, and drank and ate, for the longest and most wonderful time. When we left, Jean Paul said, "*à demain,*" (see you tomorrow) which is how he ended our meetings for the next ten years from 1985 to 1995.

It was a run-on relationship. Jean Paul came to us in Val-David the next day and we stayed with him and Hollis the next weekend with our Irish Setter, Café, who lived with them all week and ate paté every day



Figure 4: Jean Paul Riopelle and Bonnie, Estérel, 1990

Photo: Lucette Lupien

while I taught at Concordia University and Michel worked in Montreal. Hollis called the dog Rose and made paintings from their moonlight walks together in the snow. We came directly to Estérel from Montreal, not even bothering to go back to Val-David. We slept there, we worked there, we ate, drank, and traveled—everything flowed into everything else—it was a way of life more than a job. In retrospect, it was an amazing balancing act: working with Jean Paul, teaching, and continuing my personal practice as an artist.

Working/Living with Riopelle

And so, I spent the last half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s working with artist Jean Paul Riopelle: overseeing the production of his complete corpus of etchings during that period. I etched the plates and in the beginning I did the printing as well, later on, as the volume increased, I oversaw the printing which was done by various different printers over the years. Together we would develop his print ideas at *Atelier du Scarabée*, discussing how things could and would be done, what colours to use, and the order in which the plates would be printed (figure 4). We worked together often and because his homes and studios were divided

by the Atlantic, we also traveled, together or apart, in order to work on his prints. As long as we were able to keep on working, we didn't worry too much about money. I worked under the commission of Galerie Maeght-Lelong in Paris (now simply Galerie Lelong), Philippe Briet Gallery in New York City, The Moos Gallery in Toronto, and Galerie Esperanza in Montreal. While he had worked on his etchings with printers in France before working with me, he would have no others after we began working together. Once Riopelle had made a



Figure 5: Riopelle, Atelier de Vanves, 1967

Photo: Claude Gaspari, from Catalogue raisonné Jean Paul Riopelle archives

commitment to a particular printer, be it for intaglio, lithography or serigraphy, he was totally faithful despite the fact that many printers wanted to print for him and often made very interesting offers. Faux Riopelle prints would sometimes appear on the market and when Riopelle had stopped creating prints altogether, interpretation prints also began to turn up.

Printmaking is an art of layers; life with Riopelle was also an art of layers. Life never happened on a single plane. Riopelle's approach to the print was highly unorthodox: he seemed to see the print as only a first layer. I would sometimes have to hide/reserve initial prints from him or risk his taking them prematurely to his studio where he would rework *rehausser* their raw surfaces, each one a variation on an original theme which, if I wasn't

quick enough, would itself disappear under layers of inspiration. The print allowed Riopelle to experiment freely—the original idea for the print would evolve into many new expressions with the print forming a base or even, at times being taken apart and reassembled as a collage (figure 5). I sometimes wonder if his love of print was another aspect of his love of evasion, each layer obscuring the next, giving it intrigue and complexity.

We developed a wonderful work method that allowed us to keep working no matter where Jean Paul,

who was chronically nomadic, happened to be. It was a combination of screen-print procedures coupled with misunderstandings and serendipitous mistakes. Usually I would give him a printing-plate I had covered in hard ground varnish. Jean Paul would scratch a drawing onto it (his tool of choice for this was often a screw driver), and I would etch the plate where the metal was exposed and make a print in black and white. He'd put this black and white proof (an early print that would serve as a reference) on his wall and with different acetates (transparent films) and different coloured markers, he would built up his colour print layers (one colour per plate represented by each separately coloured film of acetate). In the first series I printed for him, the *Anticosti Series*, I would transfer the positive images of his drawings onto each plate using a highly toxic method known as the KPR method.^{xii} After a while I complained about the toxicity and Jean Paul suggested we adapt the "sugar lift" technique^{xiii} used for etching in France that involved using condensed milk. I went ahead and tried to figure this out at my Atelier, not knowing that in France condensed milk came in a tube. I developed a method where I would transfer his drawing onto a silkscreen covered with light sensitive emulsion which, when exposed, would create a positive stencil of his drawing through which I would then print canned condensed milk onto the plate. As with the traditional sugar lift method, I covered the condensed milk with a thin layer of varnish after which I dissolved the milk to expose the metal on the plate with his drawing, and then I would aquatint the plate and let the acid bite where the plate exposed the remaining image. It turns out condensed milk from a can is the ideal viscosity and it worked perfectly. I did all future editions for Jean Paul using this method, a completely non-toxic way of working.

Around the same time I came to know Riopelle he also became associated with Philippe Briet who was



Figure 6: Riopelle and Philippe Briet, Caen Exhibition, 1984
Photo: P. Victor, from Catalogue raisonné Jean Paul Riopelle archives



Figure 7: Hollis Jeffcoat and Philippe Briet, Caen, 1984
Photo: P. Victor, from Catalogue raisonné Jean Paul Riopelle archives



Figure 8: Bonnie Baxter and Philippe Briet
Atelier du Scarabée, 1987
Photo Michel Beaudry



Figure 9: Bonnie Baxter and Riopelle
Atelier du Scarabée. 1987
Photo Michel Beaudry

working for Karl Flinker at the time. Flinker had charged Briet with bringing examples of North American painting to France by its Ministry of the Foreign Relations in the 1980s. Briet idolized Riopelle and arranged an exhibition of his work at Caen in 1984 (figure 6, 7, 8,9). A few years later in 1989 Briet would open a gallery in New York,^{xiv} the Philippe Briet Gallery, Inc.

Briet wanted to open his gallery featuring a print that Riopelle made for the opening called *Honni Soit*



Figure 10: *Honnei soit qui mal y pense*, 1987, color etching original print, image size 44,6 x 60cm, on Arches paper 56,2 x 75,5 cm, Atelier du Scarabée, Galerie Lelong Éditeur, Paris, Catalogue raisonné of Hibou Éditeurs archives.

qui Mal Y pense.^{xv} (figure 10) Jean Paul wanted to call it *Bonnie Soit qui mal y pense*, but everyone thought the reference would be lost. We did the print: it was wonderful and no one understood the reference in the title or cared.

Jean Paul often had the look of a scared animal, vulnerable and sensitive. With his anxious coal-black eyes and nervous little laugh—he seldom looked anyone in the eyes, but despite all appearances, he never missed anything. Still, he didn't make it easy. He enjoyed being evasive, in his work, in his life and in his words. He would make appointments with journalists and then not turn up for them. He rarely went to his own openings. He only granted a handful of interviews in his entire lifetime, most of which were disasters. He preferred to talk about fishing, or hockey, or food. He was never on time.

I knew Jean Paul in his later years but even for a man in his sixties, his health was not good and he did very little to improve the situation. He would never consider an operation, not even to remove his cataracts, a simple procedure that would have helped him a great deal. He would cite the tragic death of his great friend Diego Giacometti who went into the hospital to have his cataracts removed and died there. Michel took him to the doctor to see about his back when it was really hurting him. He was certainly in terrible pain. At this point in his life not only did he have osteoporosis, but two of his vertebrae were missing and the others were crushing each other. Michel had difficulty getting him into the car. He trusted only Michel or Riopelle's general handy man and driver to drive, as a bad jolt could have meant a broken bone.

It's hard to imagine now, how he endured all the travel. But there was the other side of Riopelle, the part that deserved the nickname “peerless hunter” that he had been given in Paris as a young man. In this regard, Hollis was his perfect match. She had learned to hunt at an early age, could gut a fish, and skin a rabbit. She and Riopelle loved to be in the bush. The two of them would paint all day and then drink and entertain all night and still wake up sparkling with energy and crystal clear when the rest of us were hung-over. It was understandable for Hollis—she was thirty years younger than Riopelle—but Riopelle's generation seemed to have entirely different constitutions.

Jean Paul liked to please people, to entertain them and make them laugh. He was a wonderful storyteller when he got started, unwinding his stories in his gravelly voice, a glass of Ricard always at hand and a Gitane sending up an unhealthy atmosphere of smoke—another layer of evasion. He was without reverence, an iconoclast for whom nothing was sacred, not even his own dignity (figure 11). I remember him crawling



Figure 11: Riopelle, 1989 Photo: Bonnie Baxter

through a dog door into our house just to make Walter Moos the gallery owner laugh and throwing his dentures in the bushes when he wanted to be contrary. But inevitably he needed his space and he would retreat, particularly from confrontation. I suspect this is one of the reasons he traveled so often.

What is a friend? A milestone in life at a particular time. The little bit of “shared existence” we were talking about earlier. Giacometti gave me, that sleepless night, a bit of his life; and I did the same. My friends, Maître Garson for example, are those who have continued to see me, wherever I am, never mind the distance or whether I’m sick. After long separation, sometimes. But sooner or later, the faithful *rendez-vous*, a little life shared again. (Riopelle^{xvi})



Figure 12: Bonnie Baxter and Riopelle, Via Rail discussion, 1989 Photo: Michel Beaudry



Figure 13: Huguett Vachon, Bonnie Baxter and Riopelle, Via Rail layout, 1989 Photo: Michel Beaudry

He maintained three homes: his studio/home in Sainte-Marguerite-Estérel where I first met him, his home on Isle-aux-Grues (also in Quebec) and his home in Saint-Cyr-en-Arthies ready for him should he decide to switch to one or the other. In 1989 Jean Paul had gone back to his studio in Saint-Cyr, France just outside of Paris. He called one day and wanted Michel and me to come to work on a project given to him by Madeleine Arbour for Via Rail (figure 12,13).

I got the impression that the project was a pretext. He just missed us. So we came to him.

The studio was actually a huge converted garage with tiny living quarters. Jean Paul loved cars, loved speed, he loved to be at the helm (he also flew planes and owned a sailboat called the *Serica-Junior*). He had two Bugatti, a Jaguar and a few others I can't remember the names of (figures 14, 15). He even had a master auto mechanic who would come regularly to ensure the engines were in good order. By this time in his life he no longer drove frequently. His back was bad and in Quebec he actually preferred his Hearse, the only car that would supply a smooth enough ride for him.



Figure 14: Riopelle with his machinist and Robert Didier the caretaker, Saint-Cyr, 1989
Photo: Photo: Bonnie Baxter

Figure 15: Riopelle's studio/garage in Saint-Cyr Michel Beaudry in the Bugatti, 1989
Photo: Bonnie Baxter

It was one of those special times when I was reminded of what a truly great artist Jean Paul was. He had already been there a while without us and had obviously gone through what I like to think of as a *tempête de production* (work storm).^{xvii} The walls were encrusted and jewel-like with massive numbers of prints he had reworked. Whenever I'd walk in on his work like that I'd say to myself—"Oh My! this boy DOES have

talent” (Figure 16).

Not having grown up under the sway of the Riopelle mystique I was used to relating to Jean Paul the man, whom I ate and drank and worked with, over the practical details of executing his extraordinary work. At times like these it took my breath away to be before the magnitude of his talent and his sheer capacity for creative output.

The four of us, myself, Michel, Riopelle and Huguette^{xviii} did spend some time working on the Via Rail project, but for the most part we enjoy being in France and celebrating Huguette’s Vachon’s 40th birthday. The project was to be an homage to the homeless “outsider artist” Scotty Wilson.^{xix} We also went to Paris to meet Jean Paul’s lithograph printer Le Moigne and went to eat at the restaurant *La Coupole*. Two years earlier, on the occasion of my own 40th birthday in 1986, Michel and I ate at *La Coupole* with Hollis and Jean Paul.^{xx}

But after all, it was spring and we drove around the countryside in Jean Paul’s Bugatti stopping at *châteaux* and other special little places (figures 17, 18). There was a restaurant in a village that had his paintings on the wall. A place was always set for him, much the same as at the *Bistro à Champlain* in Estérel. Once, when Michel was driving the Jaguar home from a restaurant *après un repas bien arrosé* (after a meal where the



Figure 16: Riopelle and Bonnie Baxter, Saint-Cyr, France, 1989

Photo: Michel Beaudry



Figure 17: Bonnie Baxter, Riopelle, Huguette Vachon, *au Château*, 1989 Photo: Michel Beaudry



Figure 18: Bonnie Baxter, Huguette Vachon, road trip through fields of *colza* (rapeseed), France, 1989 Photo: Michel Beaudry

wine flowed freely) and the police stopped the car, Jean Paul got out of the car and the police said something like, “Oh, bonsoir Mr. Riopelle, please don’t let us keep you.” It was obvious that Riopelle had a great deal of local respect. Paris and its countryside were glorious and we had a wonderful time.

My work with Riopelle did not end until 1993. Although we still saw each other occasionally until 1995, but what I now realize was that his creative time had really come to a close in 1992 with the death of Joan Mitchell, Riopelle’s most constant companion throughout the 1960s and 70s.^{xxi} She had been his second rib, despite all those who surrounded him and loved him and protected him, she, with all her temperament and stubbornness, was the foundation that gave him strength. In retrospect, he was never productive after the news of her death except in his final painting: a forty-five-meter-long painted triptych in Joan Mitchell’s memory called *Hommage à Rosa Luxemburg*. It seems, in trying to make sense of this passage of Riopelle and I, that for Riopelle, each of his homes was an echo of the other, a micro-infrastructure built around his loves and his requirements—friends and companions, gallerists, a gorgeous natural setting, a village filled with locals who knew and respected him, a friendly and admiring restaurateur, a studio space, a printer, a caretaker.... Yet each place offered the richness of its own particular flavours that would draw him to move again and again, making the travel worthwhile, and with each passage would come the force of discontinuity to act as a catalyst for creativity. This was an inheritance of the lifestyle of the Exile Artists of the mid 20th century. Still, at the heart of it all, perhaps, was Joan Mitchell, a phenomenal painter, intimate companion, a friend, a truly thorny critic and caustic catalyst against whom he could measure his own wit and achievement, maintaining a sort of external perspective and a desire to achieve: a polar star in Riopelle’s passage through life.

At the time I didn’t grasp this. I had never met Joan Mitchell. Although I sensed that her life touched his profoundly, I didn’t realize how closely his productivity was tied to her existence in his life. These are things I deduce now from what was left out of our conversations and that is saying a great deal, as we tended to work together on a visceral level, favoring gestures and looks to words.

Jean Paul and my final years working together were, in some ways, disastrous. We worked on a project called *Mouchetache*, a titled that played with the combination of the sound of the word *mustache* and *mouche* (fly) *tache* (stain) which referenced the process of making the images and the idea of a *coffret de mouches*, (captain’s chest of fishing flies): a project idea of Jean Paul’s that we had been talking about for years. We couldn’t get funding from Galerie Lelong in Paris. We did finally find support from Galerie Michel Tétrault and his business partner who thought a series of prints would make a wonderful addition to the exhibition Tétrault was planning as a celebration of Jean Paul’s 70th birthday. We should have known better, but artists



Figure 19: Paul Marier, Riopelle, Huguette Vachon, Nicolas Vachon and friend at Estérel, 1993 Photo: Bonnie Baxter



Figure 20: Paul Marier, Bonnie Baxter, 1993 Photo: Michel Beaudry

tend to think more about a project than the consequences of whom they're showing with so, despite Tétrault's already having a questionable reputation, we moved forward with the assurance of his backing.

The idea behind *Mouchtache* was fun, each of the *mouche* (fishing flies) made by Jean Paul's great friend and celebrated fisherman, Paul Marier, represented one of Jean Paul's friends or a famous figure like the "whore of Babylon" or "Jack Rabbit Robinson" (Figures 19, 20).

The process itself was both playful and ingenious. We rolled out long sheets of clear acetates on the lawn at either my home or at Jean Paul's. Paul Marier would take one of the *mouche* he had made, attach it to his fly cast fishing rod, dip it in India ink and then he cast the "fly" onto the acetate. It would land with this expressive black splat, which he repeated a number of times. All of these covered strips of acetate

were to be cut to plate size and each one of them would be used to make a plate of a different color of the overlapping *mouche tache* (fly stains). These plates were to serve as the background plates for each five-plate image. Jean Paul loved to sit and watch and see the whole thing orchestrated. There were many wonderful shared meals and everyone involved worked enthusiastically to make this project happen. I was in charge of the prints. Paul made the *mouches*. Lise Gauvin^{xxii} was to write accompanying texts. The wonderful Maurice Perron^{xxiii} crafted the captain's chest of drawers to house the *mouches*, the prints and a set of texts (including writings by the conservationist, Archie "Grey Owl" Belaney *Le Hibou gris*,^{xxiv} Jean Paul's hero), and an essay on fly-fishing by an 18th-century nun (figure 21).



Figure 21: The *mouche* team from Left to Right: Michel Tétrault, Paul Marier, Huguette Vachon, Maurice Perron, Jean Paul Riopelle, Bonnie Baxter, Michel Beaudry, Carmen Perron, 1993

Photo: Maurice Brére

My entire house and studio in Val-David was turned into a print shop for the project. I was also preparing for my first solo exhibition at a museum that was set to open just a month after Riopelle's exhibition. It



Figure 22: Bonnie Baxter, acid-bath, 1993

Photo: Michel Beaudry

was very lucky that my work was sculptural at this time and I was able to free my house and print studio for the production of *Mouchtache*. My two printers camped on the land, the garage was an acid-bath room, the dining room table was used to dry the printing-plates, the bathtub was used to dissolve the sugar lift, and the studio accommodated the proofing of the plates (figures 22, 23, 24, 25).

Figure 23: Bonnie Baxter rinsing the aquatint, 1993

Photo: Michel Beaudry





Figure 24: printer Gianni Galati with *mouche* on press, *Atelier du Scarabée*, 1993

Photo: Bonnie Baxter

Figure 25: Riopelle with *mouche* splats, *Atelier du Scarabée*, 1993

Photo: Bonnie Baxter



Finally all the preliminary work was completed. Then it was time for Jean Paul to do his part and he could not, it was no longer in him. I had known from the beginning it was risky business to give him a deadline. Jean Paul never worked under a dead line. He always said, “When I paint I never hesitate and when I hesitate I never paint.” All of the preliminary work on the four plates of each image was worth nothing without his intervention, without the plate he was to put on top. Tétrault would not pay me, I could not pay the printers I’d hired. We argued. The rest of the team was angry at Jean Paul, but I could not protect him, and he could not protect me. The work was never finished. In the end, I had to hire a lawyer to retrieve what I was owed. It was a sad end to my relationship with Jean Paul Riopelle.

Riopelle drifted into his final chapter of life living in virtual isolation, cut off almost completely from old friends and family on Île aux Oies, cared for by a his companion, Huguette Vachon. It was not until 2005 that I was able to work with these issues of a spectacular relationship that had literally gone “splat.” The passage of “Riopelle and I” came to a close and life, as it tends to do, introduced a new chapter. It was time to rethink my own practice, to have my own creative crisis. I went in search of a means of expression that was capable of articulating my changing map of the world, a new, more visceral connection to the cycles of life and death. A new beginning came with a deliberate conflagration, the burning of much of my own work from the past decades. Using some test-proofs from the plates I had created for the project *Mouchtache*, twelve years earlier, I added my own layers, my own *impressions passagères* to create the large format digital prints,



Figure 26: *Coming out of sleep (après mouchetache)*, 2005
Digital Image: Bonnie Baxter



Figure 27: *Reine mouchetache*, 2005
Digital Image: Bonnie Baxter

Coming out of sleep (après mouchetache) and *Reine mouchetache*, (figures 26, 27) finally putting to bed my sense of loss and frustration.

In a way, these prints represent portraits of Riopelle and myself: each image containing the fly that Paul had made to represent us. The left sided image of *Coming out of sleep* represents Riopelle: a grand natural vista perfect for hunting and fishing and his *mouches* (his heroes, his admirers, lovers, companions, aids and friends) swarming like insects, complicated by the underlying engraving of the Japanese bill. The image to the right, *Reine mouchetache*, represents me: I take the role of queen, after all ... *Bonnie soit qui mal y pense*. My *mouche* “splat” marks my temple and the “bonnie-fly,” with its sparkingly sharp hook, rests dangerously close to the image of my own watchful eye embedded in the complex engraved curves of the British queen’s monetary representation—beauty, craft, and market are all overtaken by the glance of the human soul as it peers beyond the layers of human society and human endeavor. I think Riopelle, the “peerless hunter,” would have liked the play on words and appreciated the paradox of the poppies, their sense of majestic carnage and their forgiving remembrance.

This chapter too would pass. I decided to move forward with a new series of artwork, “Jane’s Journey.” From Val-David I went back across the Atlantic, for another motorcycle ride across Europe, this time on my 60th birthday with my best chum, my husband Michel, just as we had done when we were 20, although not with each other. I traveled across Europe and the United States to see how they, and I, have changed, and how memory and time have their own way of layering imagery. I posed myself in the guise of a virtual Jane (a self-created archetype of North American womanhood based on a composite of Janes, from Jane Doe, Calamity Jane, Jane Mansfield and Plain Jane to Jane of the “Dick and Jane” readers) before the grand sites and settings of Paris (as she appears on the cover of this collection), Rome and the little medieval village of Forano in the

Sabine Hills.

So time and distance collapsed upon themselves and I find that the rewards of having shared passage with Riopelle and the other souls, great and small, that I have known, have taken me very far away from the layer-less expectations of femininity in the 1950s which I began with. At times, life's passages can seem to create layers that are dense and impenetrable, but for the most part they provide reassuring evidence of the simultaneity, synchronicity, and serendipity that abounds in life. Jean Paul Riopelle was surely one of my greatest rites of passage, a marvelous, transforming experience of learning how to live life as an artist, as a human being, how to revel in the passage, to value the *impressions passagères*, good and bad, and find the extraordinary in the ordinary.

My thanks to Christine Unger who researched historical aspects of the text and gave me invaluable editing advice on the text throughout the process. A fabulous person who seems to know what I mean even before I am able to say it.

My thanks also for the insight and the keen eye for detail supplied by Yseult Riopelle, Michel Beaudry, and Hollis Jeffcoat, whose own memories of Riopelle helped to supply some of the gaps in my own. I am particularly grateful for Yseult Riopelle's generosity in supplying six wonderful images, and for her blessing of this essay.

Thank you to Alana Riley and Jocelyne Belanger who have helped refine the text with their thoughts. I am also indebted to the editorial skills of to Luc LaRochelle whose "mot juste" has helped me with more than just words.

And finally, thanks to my two much loved fairy godmothers who take me on adventures I would never have imagined.

Endnotes

i Erouart, Gilbert, Jean Paul Riopelle, Donald Winkler, and Fernand Séguin. Trans. Donald Winkler). Riopelle in Conversation. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1995.

ii Barron, Stephanie, Sabine Eckmann, and Matthew Affron. Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Neue Nationalgalerie (Germany), 1997).

iii "The condition of cultural exile ... is, in part, a heightened instance of the condition of the American artist, for whom transaction with foreign models is a nearly inescapable exercise." Horowitz, Joseph I. Artists in Exile. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008) xvii.

iv Nasgaard, Roald Abstract Painting in Canada (Douglas & McIntyre, 2008) 71.

v Sullivan, Françoise, Pierre Théberge, Guest. Host, Gloria Macarenko. Reporter, Anna Asimakopulos. "Jean Paul Riopelle's Funeral Causes Controversy" Canada Now. (CBC Television broadcast, Duration: 02:00. 18 March 2002). Available HTTP: http://archives.cbc.ca/arts_entertainment/visual_arts/clips/749/

vi "Riopelle: death of a giant? Catholic Insight," May 1 2002, Gale Group.

vii André Breton is quoted as saying: "Riopelle's painting is the art of a peerless trapper. Traps for beasts of the earth and of the skies. Traps for the traps. It's when those traps are snared that real freedom has been achieved." Erouart, 13.

viii Yseult Riopelle (Interviewer), "René Le Moigne" Jean Paul Riopelle: Catalogue raisonné des estampes, (Research and Direction), Gilles Daigneault, Monique Burnet-Weinmann (Montreal, Quebec: Hibou Éditeurs 2005).

ix "Dick and Jane" was a series of elementary school readers used to teach English throughout North America from the 1930s to the 1970s. Their limited and hypnotically repetitive vocabulary, and narrow, sexist, and racist views of what constituted a valid home life helped to shape the prejudices and expectations of far too many young minds.

x "After the great success prints had enjoyed in the sixties and seventies came the letdown of the eighties." Grandbois, Michèle (Ph.D.) "The Quebec Experience" Sightlines: Printmaking and Image Culture. ed. Jule, Walter, (Calgary: University of Alberta Press, 1997) 171.

xi Feaver, Marianne and Pierre Letarte (Directors) Riopelle. (National Film Board of Canada: 1982). Available HTTP: www3.nfb.ca

xii The K.P.R. was a method used to create a printing plate from an existing photograph or drawing. The process uses a chemical called K.P.R. (Kodak Photo Resist), which is now unobtainable because it is considered harmful.

xiii Sugar Lift is an aquatint technique in which the artist paints onto a plate with sugar syrup. An aquatint ground is substituted for the syrup before biting' the image into a printer's plate.

xiv Sadly Briet was found murdered in his New York apartment in 1997 at the age of 37. Available HTTP: [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Briet_\(Galeriste\)](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Briet_(Galeriste)) or [http://www.speedylook.com/Philippe_Briet_\(Galeriste\).html](http://www.speedylook.com/Philippe_Briet_(Galeriste).html)

xv "Honi soit qui mal y pense" translated as "Evil be to him who evil thinks" is the motto which appears on the Royal coat of arms of the United

Kingdom. Available HTTP: <http://en.wikipedia.org>

xvi Erouart, 13. (this is a reference marked according to the MLA style the ladies asked for it refers to page 13 of the previously mentioned viii After periods of not working at all he would explode into a storm of productivity, even calling me at night to bring him more paper.

xvii Huguette Vachon was Riopelle's companion at that time and until the time of his death.

xviii Scotty Wilson had been included in the Surrealist's circle and was infamous for his inability to speak French despite the fact that he lived in Paris. The story was that, in order to communicate, he would keep little pieces of paper in his pocket saying *Pain* (bread) or *Vin* (wine) or whatever else he might need, in French and give them to people.

xix In 1986 we stayed with Hollis Jeffcoat in Paris, after delivering the Anticosti prints to Galerie Lelong. She had just left Riopelle who was devastated by her departure and had followed her to France.

xx Mitchell, Joan, Jane Livingston, Linda Nochlin, Yvette Y Lee. The Paintings of Joan Mitchell. (Whitney Museum of American Art: University of California Press, 2002).

xxi Lise Gauvin's work is also referenced in this collection in two other essays: "Literary Border Crossings: Figuring Migration and National Identity in Chadort Djavann's *Comment peut-on être français?*" and in *Lettres d'une autre*" by Patrice Proulx (University of Nebraska at Omaha)

xxii Maurice was one of the fifteen signatories of *Le Refus Global* in 1948 along with Jean Paul Riopelle as well as being the photographer who documented those who signed the manifesto as seen in the exhibition catalogue produced by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Mémoire objective. mémoire collective. Photographies de Maurice Perron, Québec, du 2 décembre 1998 au 26 septembre 1999.

xxiii Archie Belany (1888-1938), dubbed "Grey Owl" was a Canadian born in Ensland who portrayed himself as a Native American writing books, lecturing and making films on wilderness life and the importance of conservation. Available HTTP: www.econet.sk.ca