Ever Higher: “Leclerc à vol d’oiseau”

Rising ever upward and onward is no doubt among the most basic dreams of humankind, often symbolized by the bird’s flight: the Canada goose for the traveler; the dove for the pacifist, the eagle for the conqueror, the owl for the thinker, the gull for the wanderer. All of these traits hold true for the painter, along with nostalgia for a particular place, represented by the white goose for Jean-Paul Riopelle or Raynald Leclerc, who himself seems less fascinated with the bird’s formal beauty than with its flight toward higher and broader spaces, as we see in his most recent exhibition: “Leclerc: à vol d’oiseau” (2019).

This ascending movement can be seen from the first painting in the exhibition catalogue, entitled “Envolée”:

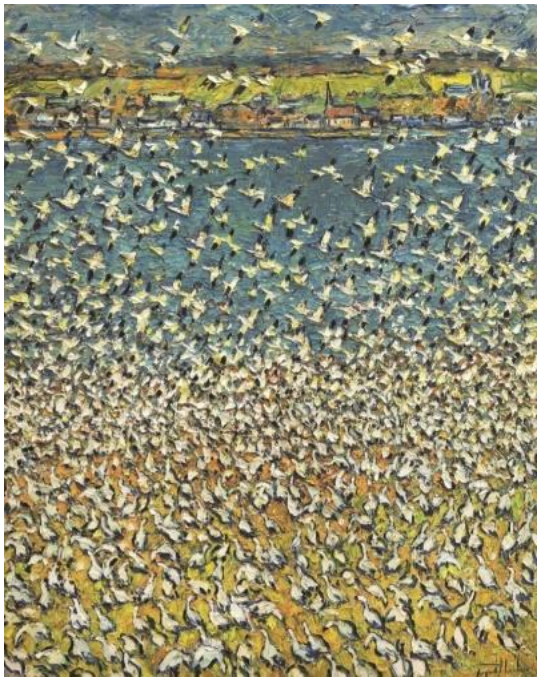
Figure 1

The vertical frame invites us to read from the bottom upward with a kind of “serial vision” that encompasses the bird’s flight, step by step, from its feeding at the bottom, through its takeoff with wings beating and unfolding in the middle, to its full flight skyward at the top, a progression that also suggests an essential aspect of Leclerc’s art—the point of vue chosen by the artist, along with the perspective and composition stemming from it—whose stages can be traced through the various books and catalogues that accompany the artist’s numerous exhibitions.

Leclerc celebrated the twentieth anniversary of his career in a first book: “Au coeur du Vieux-Québec” (2004). As the title suggests, the painter is located in the heart of the city, mostly adopting a close viewpoint encompassing a fairly limited and defined space, within which rises a building or monument whose height is often accentuated by a view from below, which also suits the steep inclines of this city perched on a cliff. In general, this space is closed off by a façade, a winding street, or a city gate turned toward a hidden place: all three in this painting titled “La Côte de la Montagne,” accompanied by the legend “leading upward,” a curious premonition since 15 years later we’ll see the same Louis-S. Saint-Laurent building from above.

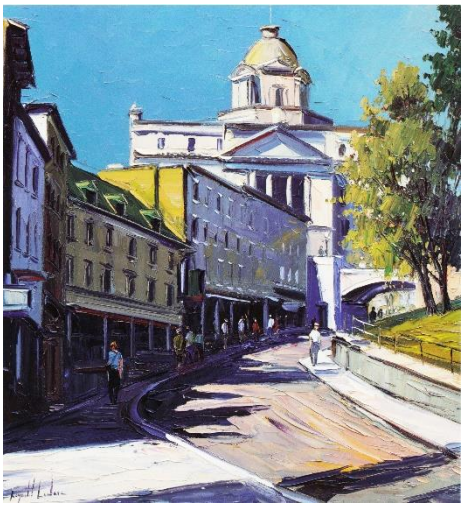
Figure 2

In his subsequent exhibitions Leclerc clearly seeks to depict broader spaces through panoramic views, as seen in the book “L’île d’Orléans” (2010). For the most part the landscape unfolds in parallel bands that are fairly well-defined—from the foreground, where an aspect of the island (a house, orchard, or garden), is often cut by a diagonal line denoting a path or a fence, intersecting the river in the middle ground, itself in front of a line of hills, outlined against the sky—a pattern imposed in part by the position of the island between the two shores of the Saint-Lawrence. In the painting below, “Entre deux caps se berce une île” (“An Island is Cradled Between Two Headlands”), however, Leclerc opens up the composition even more by locating the viewing position on the south shore, with the island stretching out in front of the Quebec City cliff, an impossible view according to Robert Filion, “for such a scene cannot be contemplated all at one time” (p. 15), thus underscoring one of the main vectors in Leclerc’s trajectory: the expansion of space, rendered all the more vast here by the sky itself, marvelously illuminated and accentuated by the heavy paint sculptured by spatula that is characteristic of Leclerc’s art.

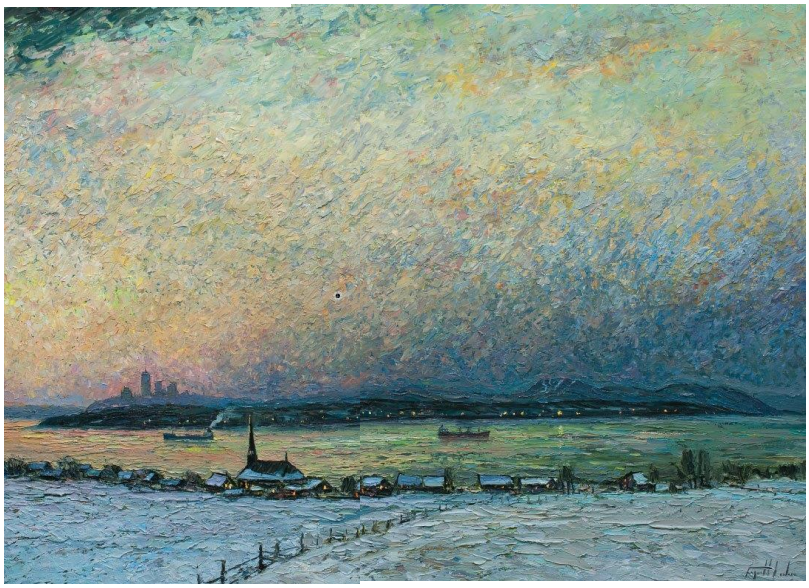
Figure 3

Beginning in 2012, with “Au sillage du Saint-Laurent,” Leclerc opens space even more through the choice of an elevated viewpoint: sometimes imposed by the landscape itself, as with the heights of Baie Saint-Paul or the Mount-Royal Park, but in other cases imagined, as with the Rocher Percé seen from above or Quebec City seen from the sky in “Je rêve l’aurore.”

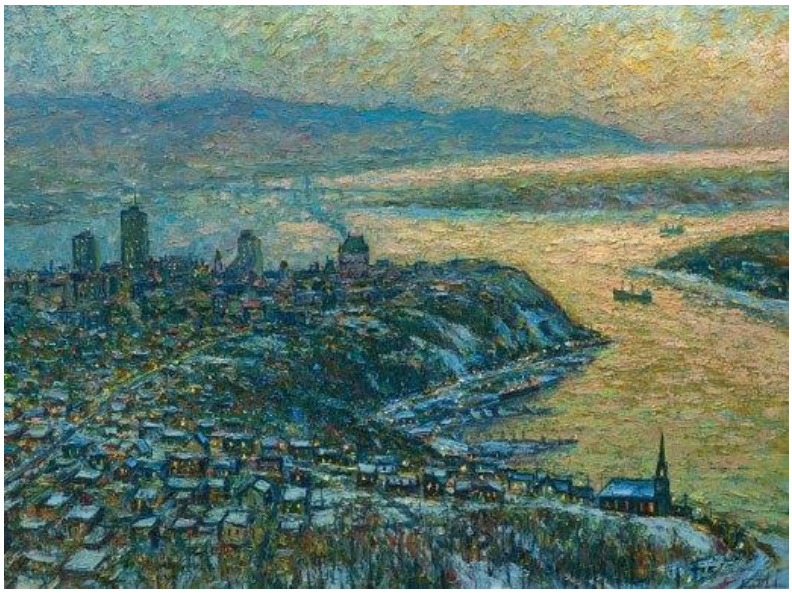
Figure 4

The elevated viewpoint enables the painter to avoid both the narrowness of the closeup and the lack of detail of the panorama, thereby creating a more complete view of Quebec City and its surroundings, from the Église Saint-Michel de Sillery in the right foreground, to the Château Frontenac, Hôtel Le Concorde, Marie Guyart Building, and Price Building in the mid ground, through the île d’Orléans, between the two branches of the river in the far ground. At the same time that Leclerc raises the viewpoint he also turns away from the limiting shores of the previous paintings to capture the river in its length, leading afar where the buildings, ships, and lands themselves diminish in size and detail as they receed from the foreground to finally fade into the foggy distance tinged with blue and gold.

In later exhibitions, Leclerc explores esthetic questions like the role of color (“Leclerc en Provence,” 2014) and atmosphere (“Leclerc: au fil de l’eau,” 2016) in the optical unification of the painting, while maintaining his fascination with the effect of an elevated viewpoint on the perception of a real scene and its artistic representation, leading us back to the present exhibition—“Leclerc: à vol d’oiseau”—which is dedicated to this question.

One might begin to approach the various qualities of a bird’s eye view—at least in Leclerc’s case—by distinguishing it from a simple elevated viewpoint. Even when the latter is imagined, as in the preceeding painting, the painter tends to follow the conventions of traditional perspective—both linear and atmospheric—whereby the lines converge toward the horizon while objects diminish in size, definition, and vividness as they receed from the foreground—as is the case with ordinary vision, as we see, for example, in the following photo taken from the Observatory of the Capital on the 31st floor of the Marie Guyart Building, at more than two hundred and twenty meters of elevation, with the Parlement Buildings in the foreground, the Château Frontenac and Price Building in mid ground and the ile d’Orleans in the distance:

Figure 5

Photo: QuébecOriginal

As with the preceeding painting by Leclerc, the elevated view of the city—the highest attainable "without wings"—is more complete but far from being totally so, in that the objects progressively lose their visibility and identity.

This is no doubt why Leclerc goes even farther with the paintings in this exhibition, by adopting a "bird's eye view," which deforms and exceeds the traditional boundaries of perspective by tilting the space toward the viewer, which has the effect of shortening distances, thereby recuperating the most remote objects by pulling them towards the foreground. One can detect, for example, a subtle deformation of perspective in "Les Remparts":

Figure 6

Seen from the opposite direction of the two previous images, this wintry scene—a true symphony in white—respects the perspectival principle of diminishing buildings, but to a degree far less than "normal," to the point that we readily recognize, for example, the Église Saint-Michel de Sillery to the left, but whose enlargement suggests an advancing and compressing of space that can be confirmed by comparison with the image in the following aerial photo:

Figure 7
Photo: Répertoire du Patrimoine Culturel du Québec (Pierre Lahoud)

In the following canvas titled "Le Vieux Québec," where the viewpoint is similar to that of the two previous images, space is unified by the juxtaposition of the complementary colors orange and blue, pierced by the red and green colors, also complementaries, of the Château Frontenac and especially by the compression of space produced by the bird's eye view, even more radical here, where the Église Saint-Michel de Sillery, again relatively enlarged, seems to take its place beside the Hôtel le Concorde despite a real distance of some five kilometers.

Figure 8

The tightening of space accomplished by the bird's eye view stems in part from the bird's ability to hover over the scene, which enables the painter to adjust the height and angle of vision in order to match the concept of the city evoked by his imagination. To the degree therefore that the viewpoint is conceived as approaching perpendicular to the scene (directly above) the notion of perspective is proportionately reduced, to the point of eliminating the horizon in some of the exhibition paintings, like the following one, whose title "Survol" could easily apply to many others as well:


Figure 9

The radically elevated and oblique viewpoint enables Leclerc to uncover a rather unexpected aspect of the city's spatial configuration: according to a diagonal axis beginning with the trees of the Place d'Armes at lower right, following the rectangular roof of the Holy Trinity Cathedral through the Clarendon Hotel and Price Building, along the facades of the rue Cook before picking up the line of the rue Saint Jean ending with the City Gate at upper left. The geometric unity of the painting is "heightened" by the squares and rectangles of the roofs and the cubes of the buildings, as well as by the juxtaposition of blues and yellows combining in an overall green tonality in the heart of which explodes the red roof of the Anciens Canadiens restaurant on the rue Saint Louis.

Here the compression of space seems to entail a reduction of its scope to a single neighborhood, but this is not always the case, as seen in the painting "À vol d'oiseau," which, by gracing the cover of the catalalogue for the exhibition, to which it also lends its name, and by its very dimensions (40 x 60 inches), can no doubt be considered the piece de resistence of the entire collection.


Fig. 10

The size of the painting matches the scope of the space depicted (comparable to that in Figure 5), which encompasses the whole of the Old City from the upper city, delimited laterally by the Château Frontenac on the right and the Price Building on the left, to the lower city where the Corridor of the Littoral runs along the river, leading to the Port of Quebec, with the Bassin Louise and the grain elevators to the upper left. Despite the painting's rigorous composition--based in part on the triangle formed by the two main buildings of the upper city and the Pointe-à-Carcy at the apex in the upper center--the space is so vast and the buildings so numerous that the eye cannot take in the totality of the canvas in its full richness of detail at a single glance. Consequently, the viewer is invited to scan the space, to cross it visually, which suggests yet another aspect of the reigning metaphor for the exhibition: the bird's flight itself ("le vol"). In fact the bird's eye view adopted by Leclerc is not only elevated, it is mobile, and might more properly be termed a "bird's flight view," which creates a certain freedom within the space, whereby the viewer's eye, like the bird's in its flight, can stop at any given place—let's say, at the Louis-S. Saint-Laurent Building to the left of the Château, which was depicted from below in Figure 2—before heading elsewhere—perhaps toward the sailboats to the upper right, which seem quite large in relation to the scale of the buildings, even though at some "distance" from the foreground. This "enlargement" of the most "distant" objects applies to all of the objects in the upper portion of the painting, including the boats in the Bassin and the grain elevators, an effect that is also attributable to the mobility of the view imagined by Leclerc. It's as if in advancing, like the bird in full flight, the space unfurls and opens up, while the objects take form and assume their propre size and place instead of receeding in depth, as with traditional perspective or even the modified versions of the preceeding images. We have here a synoptic view, where all the parts are equalized and equilibriated in a harmony created by the shapes, as well as the colors, atmosphere, and texture of the paint deployed by Leclerc.

Can we not say that in this painting, as with so many others in the exhibition, the notion of perspective ends up crumbling and the various planes meld into that of the surface of the canvas: that is, in the domain of artistry, where Leclerc accomplishes his work of transformation and unification, described acutely and

suggestively by Robert Filion in the catalog: “We’re on Leclerc’s turf here. These places are his, and we can sense that they exist first and foremost in his mind; here we are, inside a game, like a maze in our memory; we’re making our way through; we’re lost; we’re found again, recognizing a place we once lived in or glimpsed and that seems, possibly, hesitatingly familiar. Here we are, inside the game the painter’s ever-replenished eye loves to play, and he invites us to play it with him” (p. 10).

The image of the maze or “labyrinth” in the original French text evokes at once the complex configuration of Quebec’s streets seen from above and the origin of the term itself in Greek mythology. The Labyrinth, we may recall, was the invention of Daedalus, chief architect for King Minos of Crete, who had it constructed to hold the monstrous Minotaure, before emprisoning Daedalus and his son Icarus in order to keep them from revealing its structure. Daedalus escaped, precisely by constructing wings of wax and feathers for him and his son to fly above and beyond the walls. Icarus was to fall into the sea for having flown too high near the sun, the very symbol of the fallen hero, whereas Daedalus, despite his grief, was able to reach the Island of Sicily, where he authored numerous other creations.

Through the paintings in this exhibition, Leclerc himself, like Daedalus, rises above the limits of art and reality, in the painter’s case by adopting not wings but a “bird’s flight view”; but, as with his Greek ancestor, this is far from his last invention, for three reasons: first, because even the preceeding “traditional” views, those with winding paths and distant fog, also lead us to dream of other skies; second, because a technique is never definitive but always deployed according to the painter’s vision for a particular motif; and finally because a true artist never stops renewing that vision, as Leclerc stated some five years ago: “I have to find a way to stay real—maintain my integrity through the creative process even if it means calling everything into question. I really believe that artists have to constantly fight the temptation to stick with what’s easy or worst of all look for formulas that sell” (*Leclerc en Provence*, p. 20).