

John Heward

John Heward. Painting Talisman.

Three *abstractions* stream down from the heights of the Darling Foundry's main hall, gently sagging as they touch the floor: three slender swathes of cotton canvas and rayon squares attached end to end and ballasted by metal beam clamps. Each strip of fabric is roughly cut or torn, showing velvety fringes. The canvases are mostly covered by black marks, yet since they are folded, rippled, and twisted, they reveal the signs of their unknown language only occasionally. These *abstractions* are the work of Montreal artist John Heward. For over fifty years, Heward has been developing a unique painting and sculpture practice, reinventing ways of inhabiting places and of being in a space time after time.

Despite their vertiginous length, the three works presented here do not act as rivals of the hall's monumental space. Installed in a sparse cluster, they evoke improvised ropes offered to visitors to tame the room's volume and accompany their gaze as it ascends and softly descends along the folds and creases of canvas. Moving back and forth along these vertical conduits, the eyes catch a glimpse of some greyish splatter or a charcoal trapezoid, a soft blue stain in one spot and interwoven calligraphic marks in another. If one takes a few steps to the side, one will see a different sequence: canvas coiled into a spiral, a black band thickly painted against a fold, a piece of cotton left blank with no marks. The iridescent rayon flashes silvery glints here and there, sparkling like water in a stream.

Critics have discussed the analogy between painting and musical improvisation in Heward's work, emphasizing the fundamental position of attention and listening that is required in order to create a dialogue between sounds or visual signs.¹ Not wishing to reduce improvisation to a simple absence of structure, musician Eric Lewis offers the following definition: "improvisation begins from the realization that to improvise is

to engage in a collective practice: it is to improvise with others, and to commit to forming, however temporarily and provisionally, a community with others."² Indeed, Heward's works never impose their presence or their meaning: in order to *adapt* them to the space, the artist improvises their arrangement in situ, unless he decides to *adopt* the place through them in some way.

By creating an open dialogue between the work, the place, and the viewer, Heward offers a sensory experience that goes beyond visual perception. He improvises a way of "forming a community" in the main hall of the former foundry, a vast space that is deeply marked by its industrial past. Heward has intimate knowledge of these types of spaces and their history as he has made most of his work in a former industrial building—which was converted to a studio and living space—located on Murray Street, just steps away from the Darling Foundry. Furthermore, in the mid 1980s, the artist created bronze sculptures using old wooden moulds he found at the then still active foundry. It was also at that time that he began his corpus of *abstractions*, these swathes of hanging canvas attached with beam clamps, which also appear to have been collected from some factory or other.

In addition to their intentionally floating and indeterminate shapes, Heward's *abstractions* are unique in that they accumulate different temporalities: for each work, the artist creates a relationship between canvases that come from different eras, sometimes spanning one, two, or even three decades. Just like the works' highly modular nature of adjusting to the space in which they take place, their temporal elasticity creates a malleable archive of signs and marks that come together again and again. The *abstractions* create a fluid presence of multiple time periods to which the Darling Foundry's main hall seems to offer a natural habitat. Just like Heward, these

works have weathered the vagaries of a neighbourhood that was initially working-class and centred around the activities of the nearby harbour, then practically abandoned, remaining unused for a long time before experiencing the dramatic transformation of buildings that we are witnessing today.

Yet the river continues to flow a few blocks from here. In many respects, Heward's work resembles a flowing stream watching the world turn around it. The artist records the traces of time while placing a balm of canvas and quasi-magical signs on history's scars. By exhibiting his gestural art with grace, the artist offers viewers a meditative experience that opens out to possible meanings and becomes an active exercise of acquiring energies. Is this not how a "community forms"—around these talismans lucidly improvised for our era?

Ji-Yoon Han

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

1. Alongside his visual art practice, Heward has had an equally distinguished career as a drummer. Today, he is recognized as one of Canada's most eminent percussionists of jazz and contemporary music.

2. Eric Lewis, "Improvisation and the Ethics of Suggestion: The Musical and Visual Art of John Heward," *John Heward. Un parcours/Une collection* (Quebec City: Musée National des Beaux-Arts de Québec, 2008): 229.