



John Heward / Jean-François Lauda

The Silver Cord

Curator: Caroline Andrieux



They are bits of idleness, therefore of extreme elegance; as though after writing—a highly erotic act—came sexual exhaustion: an item of clothing fallen in a corner of the page.
Roland Barthes¹

“Hold onto the silver cord” Agnes Martin would advise her students, encouraging them to avoid any form of distraction in order to stay focused on their work and give inspiration the best opportunity to arise.

Aesthetic connections form between one generation of artists and another, and what we call inspiration—a “divine” connection between thought and form—often develops in the wake of mentors’ work. This filiation seems to be very real between the works of established artist John Heward and those of Jean-François Lauda, both of whom place improvisation at the centre of their aesthetic research.

Working with abstraction, the two painters create expressive compositions in which gesture and geometry simultaneously free and contain the pictorial surface. Offering free and dynamic compositions, the works combine as much as they transcend different aesthetic codes.

Due to the sculptural aspect of Heward’s canvases and the play of scale in Lauda’s paintings, presenting these works in the Darling Foundry’s industrial spaces emphasizes their expressivity and opens a physical relation to them. In one of Lauda’s paintings, a large brushstroke with silvery glints traverses the surface from top to bottom, while in another, tiny daubs of colour rhythmically mark a corner. Hung from the ceiling and touching the floor,

Heward’s strips of canvas convey a form of inertia—of “idleness” and “extreme elegance” to borrow Barthes’s words on Cy Twombly’s work.

The current exhibition aims to highlight the two artists’ close connection to geometry. On the one hand, Heward’s three swathes of canvas, knotted end to end, accentuate and vertically traverse the main hall; on the other hand, a horizontal line is formed by the juxtaposition of Lauda’s paintings of identical dimensions placed around the edge of the small gallery.

The Silver Cord, this intangible connection, thus finds resonance in the spatial arrangement of the two exhibitions.

Caroline Andrieux

translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

The exhibited works are part of the following series:

Main hall:

John Heward, *Untitled (Abstraction)*, 1990 - 2018.
Acrylic on canvas and on rayon, variable dimensions.

Small gallery:

Jean-François Lauda, *Untitled*, 2018.
Acrylic and pencil on canvas, 76 x 60 in.

1. Roland Barthes, “Cy Twombly ou ‘Non multa sed multum’”, *Cy Twombly, catalogue raisonné des oeuvres sur papier*, by Yvon Lambert, volume VI (1973-1976), Ed. Multippla, Milan, 1979.

Front images:

John Heward, *Abstraction* (detail), 1990 - 2017 © Patrick A. Boivin.
Jean-François Lauda, *Sans titre* (detail), 2018.

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.

Jean-François Lauda

In Praise of the Indeterminate. On the Paintings of Jean-François Lauda

In a time of wide-spread digital experimentation and immersive installations of augmented and virtual reality, in an era of increasingly complex computer-generated animations and images produced at an unprecedented level of detail and resolution, what can abstract painting still mean in the field of visual arts?

In recent years, art criticism has tried—with more or less success and often a fair amount of derision—to describe “provisional painting,” “casual” painting, and even “zombie formalism.”¹ At minimum, critics agree on the difficulty of situating abstract painting today, at a time when it is no longer spearheading the aesthetic and visual arts revolution that evolved from the early 20th century to the glorious period of New York modernism in the 1950s and 1960s. Lacking its historical and critical mandate, might abstract painting be doomed to be nothing more than a minor, even decadent, genre, good only for decorating the mansions of the rich or stoking the speculations of the art market?

Since the early 2000s, Jean-François Lauda has been producing work that encourages us to take a more nuanced approach to the issue. Presenting ten recent large-format paintings, the current exhibition offers the opportunity to examine Lauda’s remarkably consistent research into what I would call the *indeterminate*. This similarly imprecise term hardly seems preferable to “provisional” or “casual.” Yet while these qualifiers serve only to include abstract painting in the attitudes particular to the current zeitgeist, it would seem that the *indeterminate* is precisely what our overdetermined, overregulated, and overprescribed world seeks to abolish—the certainly vague and even anachronistic place of improvisation and intuition.

But first, what is there to observe in Lauda’s paintings? The answer is unavoidably subjective given the deliberate

absence, on the part of the artist, of any clue or explanation. I for one see a series of gestures that are not unidirectional and that shift from scraping to stamping, from spraying to rubbing to lightly brushing the paint on the canvas. These gestures are nebulous at times, at times precise, in one area loose, in another defined, and sometimes shaky on a life-size canvas. In successive layers, they construct a body of paintings that are in turn stroked, scratched, stained, and that reveal their textures and moods *veil by veil*: areas of humidity and dryness, powdery effects and liquid rushes, the depletion of paint on raw canvas and the swell of material that leaks and bleeds as though by happy accident.

The method is resolutely experimental. No organizing principle seems to guide the painter’s interventions, other than perhaps a vertical line that structures and divides most of the works in the exhibition. For a long time, Lauda has been using lines to emphasize the paintings’ boundaries, their edges or angles. Here, the line begins to shift the frame to the interior of the image. Better still, it drags in its wake a horizontal movement, like the pole of a flag fluttering in the wind, making the painting’s entire surface more dynamic and simultaneously propelling the observer’s gaze to move laterally from one painting to another. The result is paradoxically both atmospheric and sedimentary: a balance of tension between transparency and opacity, between improvisation and accumulation, between plane and movement, understood through this mobile vertical line and a few scattered anchoring points (small dots of colour placed, sometimes in a line, along the edges of the paintings).

Corresponding to the varied gestures outlining a possible field of indetermination is the artist’s curiosity for what can be found under the visible surface; his curiosity for the *underneath*. This *underneath* can be understood in several ways. Needless to say, it involves the coats of paint that precede the coat still to come with which the artist must compose,

endeavour to transform, and also renounce in order to be able to continue making the painting. But the *underneath* can also designate every new coat that appears on the painting, over the others but deeper, as the result of the pictorial exploration. Either way, Lauda's paintings offer us layers of different times assembled on the same surface just like a palimpsest.

In contrast to modernist abstract painting's striving for invention and aesthetic renewal, Lauda's painting style does not claim to break with the past. Instead, it intuitively seeks to relate heterogeneous times and make these times co-exist in a single image by including traces of prior gestures—those set down on the canvas as much as those set down by predecessors. Yet the paintings do not leave me with an exact memory of them. They escape my eyes' grasp; they resist my attempts to capture them in words, as though everything in them conspires to prevent me from clearly identifying or individualizing them. To complicate matters even more, the artist indiscriminately titles his paintings *Untitled*, placing them in an indefinite collection of images without hierarchy. Herein, no doubt, lies the freedom of the painting that is so important to the artist, a field that remains open to any possibility, and is therefore *indeterminate*.

So then, why make abstract paintings today? In a world in which it has become increasingly difficult to escape oneself, one's identities and sociopolitical context, Lauda bids us to enter an indeterminate place, *despite everything*. He does so not in modernism's domineering way or in a melancholic, backward-looking manner, but with remarkable gentleness through an intimate, experiential relationship

with time, gestures, and bodies, carefully avoiding to *grasp* any one thing and always ensuring a certain *buoyancy*. Such an attitude could be seen as escapist in the face of the injunctions proliferated by everyday news, but might not such a sideways step and anachronistic breath be precisely the attitude that will safeguard our potential to actually be contemporaries of our time?

Ji-Yoon Han

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

1. Sharon Butler, "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists", *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2011 (online).
Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting", in two parts, *Art in America*, 2009/2012 (online).
Walter Robinson, "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism", *Artspace*, 2014 (online).