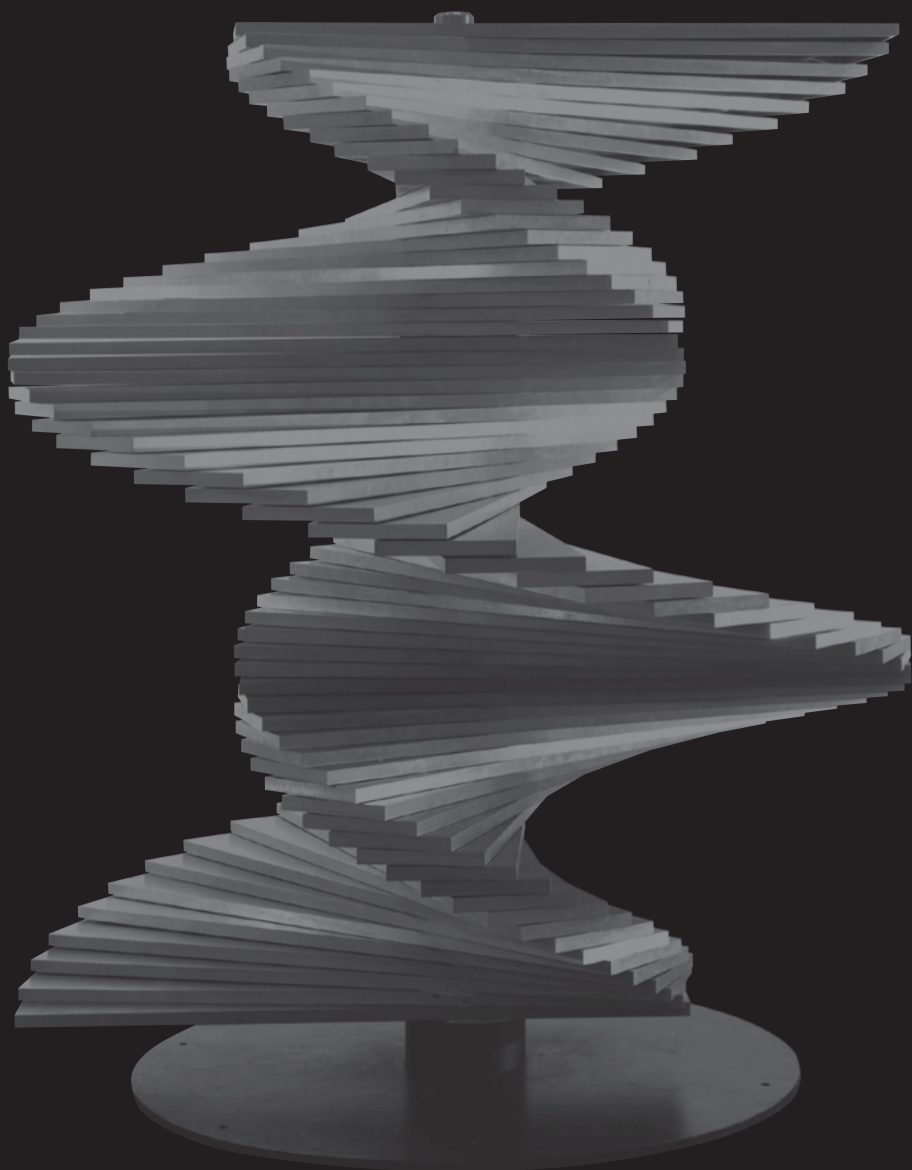

ULYSSE COMTOIS PHOTOGRAPHS

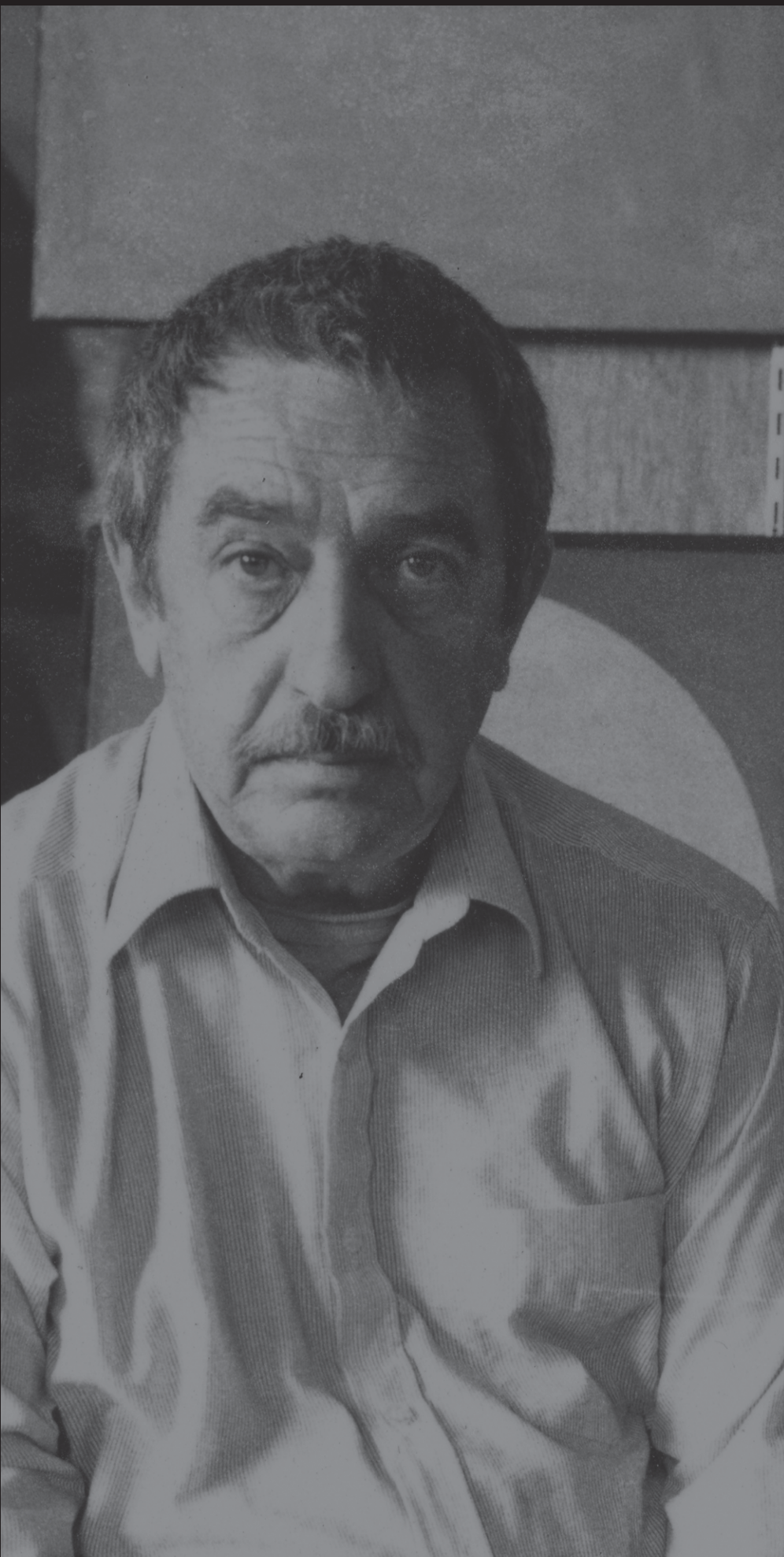
NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

14 SEPTEMBER – 23 DECEMBER 2011



“MY IDEOLOGY OF ART IS THAT THERE ARE NO CATEGORIES SUCH AS *ABSTRACT ART* OR *FIGURATIVE ART*. THESE ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE AREAS. ON THE CONTRARY, THEY FORM ONE CONTINUOUS AREA. IT’S A QUESTION OF DEGREE, NOT OF TYPE. THERE ARE WORKS THAT ARE MORE OR LESS ABSTRACT; THAT’S ALL.” – ULYSSE COMTOIS



ULYSSE COMTOIS, best known for his kinetic sculpture, did not restrict himself to one medium or style but explored his ideas through painting, sculpture, and photography, as well as through abstract and figurative works. As he states, “My ideology of art is that there are no categories such as *abstract art* or *figurative art*. These are not mutually exclusive areas. On the contrary, they form one continuous area. It’s a question of degree, not of type. There are works that are more or less abstract; that’s all.”¹ Born in Granby, Quebec, in 1931, Comtois [1] studied briefly at the École des beaux-arts in Montreal (1949–50) before deciding to leave the school and to focus on his own art, inspired by the Automatistes and their 1948 manifesto, *Refus global*. He participated in the last two Automatiste exhibitions: *La matière chante*, organized by Claude Gauvreau [2] at Galerie Antoine in the spring of 1954, and *Espace 55*, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1955 [3]. After the demise of the Automatistes, Comtois joined the Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal and participated in their exhibitions from 1955 to 1959 [4–9]. Denise Leclerc notes that during this period he was torn between the loose paint handling inspired by the Automatistes and an “emerging geometrical rigour” favoured by the Plasticiens.²

In the 1950s Comtois worked in several fields, including freelance advertising, drafting, and photography (1951–c. 1959), as well as film editing at Radio-Canada (1954–62) and Artek Film Productions in Montreal (1959–61). In addition to his commercial work, Comtois photographed landscapes, cityscapes, family and friends, and his own artworks [10–16]. Photography was an important component of his practice and he explored its creative possibilities throughout his life, although he chose not to exhibit his photographs.

Comtois worked with sculpture in the 1950s, but it did not become an important part of his practice until the 1960s, after he had seen an exhibition of sculpture by the Spanish artist Julio Gonzalez (1876–1942) in New York. Inspired by Gonzalez and by Dadaist ideas, Comtois began to create welded-metal sculptures; he was one of the first artists to use the technique in Canada [17].³ He expanded upon his work by using other materials, such as marble, sandstone, and wood [18–22]. Some of the artworks from this period are made of laminated wood painted in bright colours. These small whimsical sculptures, like many of Comtois’s works, have a sense of fun and playfulness. In the mid-1960s, Comtois began producing kinetic sculptures [23–26]. Having created a stack of polished steel or aluminum plates that rotate along a vertical axis, the artist invites viewers to participate in the work by encouraging them to touch and move the plates, thereby creating their own artwork. In 1968, the National Gallery of Canada selected Comtois, together with Guido Molinari, to represent Canada at the 34th Venice Biennale and

purchased Comtois's *Column* for its collection, a work that has been on view at the National Gallery since 1995 [27–29].

From the mid-1960s to the 1990s, Comtois taught at several institutions, including the École des beaux-arts in Montreal (1965–70), Université du Québec à Montréal (1970–72), Université Laval, (1970–76), and Concordia University (1976–85; 1991–94). His painting during this period encompassed a broad range of styles, from figurative art to colourful pointillist-like pieces, to more geometric work characterized by black grid-like structures on a monotone or patterned surface. Joyce Millar describes Comtois as “an artist who deals with the concepts of space and structures and their interrelationships. . . . The complexities of form and colour create an underlying physical and spiritual tension.”⁴ Comtois also continued to work with sculpture, and in the mid-1980s he began an ambitious series entitled the *Romanesque Suite*, made of wood, wax, and bronze [30–33]. In this series, Comtois built each piece with layers of carefully applied modelling clay, his contact with the work and his manipulation of the clay evident on the finished surface. Unlike the columns of the 1960s and 1970s, which were made of identical pieces of machine-made steel or aluminum, the *Romanesque Suite* is a more intimate, thoughtful work.

Comtois's career can be characterized by an emphasis on exploration. During the course of his life, he continued to experiment in order to find the best way of articulating and communicating his ideas. The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal held a major retrospective of his work in 1983. Comtois received numerous prizes, including the Prix de la Province de Québec (1964), the Prix Paul-Émile Borduas (1978), and the Prix Louis-Philippe Hébert (1991). His work is in museums and private collections in Canada and abroad, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. Ulysse Comtois died of cancer at the age of 68 on July 10, 1999, in Sainte-Madeleine, near Mont Saint-Hilaire, Quebec.

Cyndie Campbell

Head, Archives, Documentation and Visual Resources

With special thanks to Frances Smith

¹ Ulysse Comtois quoted in Claire Gravel, “Ulysse Comtois: Sauvagement individualiste,” *Le Devoir* (Montreal), Saturday, 23 March 1991, C2 (our translation).

² Denise Leclerc, “Ulysse Comtois,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, canadianencyclopedia.com (accessed 12 June 2011).

³ Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), p. 104.

⁴ Joyce Millar, “Ulysse Comtois: Voyageur in Time and Space,” in *Parcours synthétique: Ulysse Comtois* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'UQAM, 1996), pp. 5–6.

CHECKLIST

Unless otherwise noted, the items in the exhibition are from the Ulysse Comtois fonds donated to the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives by Louise Masson.

- 1.** Clockwise beginning in the upper left corner:

Ulysse Comtois and Guido Molinari, 1968. Photograph: Robert Millet [?]. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

Ulysse Comtois, c. 1954. Photographer unknown.

Self-portrait, 1987.

Ulysse Comtois, 1978. Photograph: Éditeur officiel du Québec.

Ulysse Comtois, c. 1941. Photographer unknown.

Self-portrait, 1987.

Guido Molinari and Ulysse Comtois, 1954. Photograph: Robert Millet. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

Ulysse Comtois, c. 1960. Photographer unknown.

Self-portrait, 1987.
- 2.** Claude Gauvreau, c. 1955. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 3.** *Espace 55: exposition / exhibition: groupant 11 peintres de Montréal / Showing 11 Montreal Painters* (exhibition catalogue). Montreal: [G. Corbeil, 1955].

The Opening of *Espace 55*, 1955. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 2 photographs.
- 4.** [An Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal exhibition opening], c. 1955–59 (left to right: Fernande St. Martin, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Robert Millet, Rita Letendre). Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 5.** [An Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal exhibition opening], c. 1955–59 (Léon Bellefleur). Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 6.** Paterson Ewen and Jean-Paul Mousseau, c. 1955–59. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 7.** [An Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal exhibition opening], c. 1955–59 (left to right: Paterson Ewen, Fernande St. Martin [?], Guido Molinari). Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 8.** [An Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal exhibition opening], c. 1955–59 (left to right: Léon Bellefleur, Fernand Toupin, Fernand Leduc). Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 9.** [An Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal exhibition opening] c. 1955–59 (left to right: Jean McEwen, Fernand Leduc, Mrs. McEwen, Paterson Ewen [?]). Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 10.** Ulysse Comtois, *Rita Letendre*, 1949–60. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 4 photographs.
- 11.–16.** Ulysse Comtois, *Untitled*, c. 1950–60. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 6 photographs.
- 17.** Ulysse Comtois, *Premier Pas*, c. 1960. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 2 photographs.
- 18.** Ulysse Comtois, *Untitled*, c. 1961. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 2 photographs.
- 19.** Ulysse Comtois, *Torse*, c. 1965. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 20.** Ulysse Comtois, *Alufonte*, c. 1965. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 21.** Ulysse Comtois, *Bronze*, 1965. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 22.** Ulysse Comtois, *Mailles*, c. 1966. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 23.** Ulysse Comtois, *Column #2*, c. 1967. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 4 photographs.
- 24.** Ulysse Comtois, *Column #6*, c. 1967. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 2 photographs.
- 25.** National Gallery of Canada, *Interactive Sculpture: A Creative Family Activity* (brochure). Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1999. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, *La sculpture interactive: salles d'art canadien* (brochure), Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1999. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 26.** Ulysse Comtois, *Column #4*, c. 1967. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois. 2 photographs.

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- 27.** Ulysse Comtois and Guido Molinari, 1968. Photograph: Robert Millet [?]. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 28.** Exhibition catalogue for the XXXIV International Biennial Exhibition of Art, Venice, 1968, National Gallery of Canada, *Ulysse Comtois, Guido Molinari*. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1968.
- 29.** Installation views of *Ulysse Comtois and Guido Molinari: XXXIV International Biennial Exhibition of Art, Venice*. 1968. Photograph: Roloff Beny. 3 photographs. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 30.** Ulysse Comtois, *Romanesque Suite F-6*, cast bronze with brown patina on wooden base, 1985. Collection: National Gallery of Canada.
- 31.** Ulysse Comtois, *Romanesque Suite F-7*, 1985. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 32.** Ulysse Comtois, *Romanesque Suite F-1*, 1985. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 33.** Ulysse Comtois, *Romanesque Suite F-11*, 1985. Photograph: Ulysse Comtois.
- 34.** Galerie Agnès Lefort, *L'exposition des œuvres récentes d'Ulysse Comtois*, 8–22 April 1967 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 35.** Galerie Agnès Lefort, *Ulysse Comtois*, 14–26 April 1969 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 36.** Marlborough-Godard Gallery, *Ulysse Comtois*, 18 March–6 April 1972 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation file, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 37.** Marlborough-Godard Gallery, *Ulysse Comtois: tableaux récents / Recent Paintings*, 14 April–6 May 1976 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation file, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 38.** Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, *Ulysse Comtois 1952–1982*, 7 April–22 May 1983 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation file, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 39.** Marlborough-Godard Gallery, *Ulysse Comtois: New Paintings*, 31 March–21 April 1979 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation file, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 40.** Galerie Simon Blais, *Ulysse Comtois: Explorateur*, 24 March–1 May 2004 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 41.** Plein Sud, centre d'exposition et d'animation en art actuel à Longueuil, *Parcours synthétique: Ulysse Comtois*, 23 March–24 April 1996 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 42.** Winchester Galleries, *Ulysse Comtois (1931–1999): Selected Work*, 7–28 January 2006 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 43.** Stewart Hall Art Gallery, *Ulysse Comtois: Oeuvres sélectionnées / Selected Works*, 2 February–16 March 2008 (exhibition notice). Ulysse Comtois Documentation File, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 44.** *Ulysse Comtois, 1952–1982* (exhibition catalogue). Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1983. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 45.** Edmund Alleyn, *Ulysse Comtois* (exhibition catalogue). [Paris: Galerie Edouard Smith, 1966].
- 46.** *A Display of Contemporary Canadian Works of Art: Organized by the National Gallery of Canada, on the Occasion of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 2–10 August 1973 at the Canadian Government Conference Centre, Ottawa / Exposition d'œuvres canadiennes contemporaines, organisée par la Galerie nationale du Canada à l'occasion de la Réunion des chefs de gouvernement du Commonwealth, du 2 au 10 août, 1973, Centre de conférences du gouvernement canadien, à Ottawa* (exhibition catalogue). [Ottawa: 1973]. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
- 47.** *Vie des arts* 52 (periodical). Montreal: Société La Vie des arts, 1956–.

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Column, 1967-68, 67 aluminum plates on steel base, 195.6 x 162.5 x 162.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
Photograph: Robert Evans.

Self-portrait, 1987. Ulysse Comtois fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.