



31 Claude Tousignant

AANFM LP QMG RCA 1932 –

Septimale

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed, titled,  
dated 1969 and inscribed 2-69-36  
35 ½ × 35 ½ in, 90.2 × 90.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist  
Winchester Galleries, Victoria  
Acquired from the above by the present Private Collection,  
Victoria, early 2000s

MODERN ABSTRACT PAINTING in Canada was redefined in the 1960s through the innovation of Claude Tousignant and Guido Molinari. In 2009, Tousignant’s achievements were characterized by Sarah Milroy as being of parallel international excellence to those of Jeff Wall and the Vancouver School of photography.<sup>1</sup> Tousignant was a creative force in Montreal for over seven decades whose breakout moment is forever associated with his shaped canvases and their unique perceptual space. His paintings, resolutely systemic and opulently sensuous, are defined in the *49th Parallels: New Canadian Art* exhibition catalogue as

paintings generally structured by the interlocking of two distinct colour progressions (a strategy which keeps the problem of “taste” from looming too large). They rely particularly on the retinal properties of the eye and its restless saccadic movements, and with this added note of chance are unpredictable in their effects: their geometry, so carefully constructed, existing paradoxically first to order, then to subvert, the colour that it carries.<sup>2</sup>

Tousignant’s achievements were heralded in exhibitions and awards, first in *The Responsive Eye* (Museum of Modern Art, 1965) and then with First Prize in *Perspective ’67* (Art Gallery of Ontario and Expo 67). Important shows in 1968 included *Seven Montreal Painters* (MIT, Cambridge, MA), *Canada 101* (Edinburgh International Festival), *Canada, art d’aujourd’hui* (in Paris, Rome, Lausanne and Brussels) as well as *Canadian Artist 68* at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the *Seventh Biennial of Canadian Painting* at the National Gallery of Canada. Tousignant’s place in Canadian art history was celebrated before his 40th birthday with a National Gallery retrospective, presented in 12 venues in Canada and also in Paris.

*Septimale* from 1969 is outstanding—one of Tousignant’s newly defined bidimensional paintings, their circular form establishing uniform peripheral tensions. Any clues to depth are removed. Its iconic flat surface has no overlapping colours, no apparent top or bottom, no left, right, figure or ground. The artist’s goal: lyrical pure colour in successive concentric bands, the pre-eminence of colour liberated to reverberate through time. Tousignant’s pulsating circular paintings are durational,

something entirely new, paintings that need time. His simple rhythmic systems allow two colours when mixed by the eye of a viewer to produce a third colour free from the confines of the painting surface. This newly generated third colour is active only in the perceptual moment and new space shared between the painting and its observer.

Tousignant’s “targets” are the most immediate of the artist’s circular structures. *Septimale* consists of just seven bands of colour, all equal in width. In 1973, Tousignant explained colour interaction in an interview with Danielle Corbeil: “My intention was that the confrontation of the pairs of colours—which by their juxtaposition produced, so to speak, a third colour—should establish a series of relationships with these third colours.”<sup>3</sup>

Tousignant is an outstanding colourist, and counter-intuitively his adoption of a circular support de-emphasizes form, highlighting instead the materiality of colour. Acrylic paint was new, and its unique properties, opacity and heightened pigment saturation provided the artist with previously unknown capacities. His patiently mixed colours are compelling. Colour draws you in, individual colours advance and recede, and their rhythmic pulse takes over. In *Septimale* the artist interlaces two serial systems—one three qualities of red, and the other four qualities of green—each contrasting pair equivalent in value.

The radically different hues of alizarin crimson to magenta and the four greens never settle, and as such resist being seen as a pattern. The asymmetry of the seven competing bands creates constantly shifting chromatic harmonies. And depending on where your eye rests, those third colours, always unique to you. In the words of Jessica Veevers: “With Tousignant artworks we are forcibly, intentionally, and strategically no longer looking *into* them to discover their mattering, like with perspectival painting, we are looking *at* them and interacting *with* them and they are pushing back, more than any previous painting.”<sup>4</sup>

We thank Gary Dufour, adjunct associate professor at the University of Western Australia, for contributing the above essay. A modern and contemporary art specialist, Dufour was formerly the senior curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1988 – 1995) and chief curator/deputy director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia (1995 – 2013).

Please note: this work is unframed.

1. Sarah Milroy, “What a Strange, Thrilling Trip This Is,” *Globe and Mail*, March 7, 2009, R7.
2. Dennis Young, *49th Parallels: New Canadian Art* (Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1971), exhibition catalogue, n.p.
3. Quoted in Danielle Corbeil, *Claude Tousignant* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1973), exhibition catalogue, 15.
4. Jessica Veevers, “The Intersection of Materiality and Mattering: Acrylic Paint and Montreal Hard-Edge Painting” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2020), 56.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 250,000