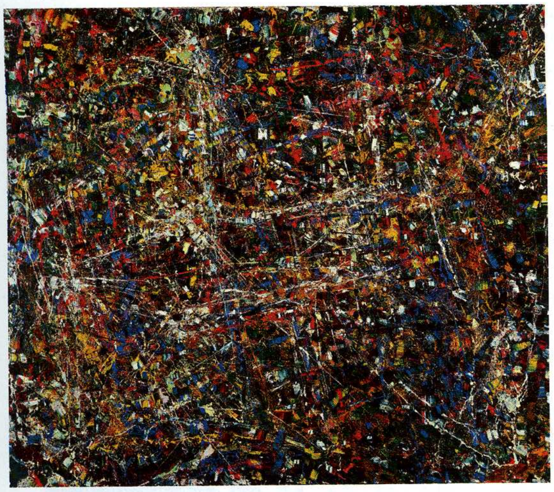
Jean-Paul Riopelle
ACQUAVELLA GALLERIES

An eight-volume catalogue raisonné currently being published in Canada asserts the country's claim to this patriarchal figure of modern French painting, who was born in Montreal in 1923. Hometown boy makes good. Yet it was all Jean-Paul Riopelle could do to escape the city and its time-hardened resentments: francophone, Roman Catholic Quebec versus anglophone, Church of England, maple leaf America. Riopelle found refuge from Quebecois revanchism in the alternate AbEx universe of postwar Paris, where he soon became a highly regarded artist, right up there with Pierre Soulages, Georges Mathieu, Vieira da Silva, and other painters devoted to art informel or tachism (as the French equivalent to Abstract Expressionism was known).



Jean-Paul Riopelle, *Quinze Chevaux Citroën* (Fifteen Horsepower Citroën), 1952, oil on canvas, 75 x 90½".

Acquavella has, in measure, reconstituted "Grands Formats," Riopelle's 1977 exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, and added several large works on paper to the survey. These characteristic large-format oils date from 1952 through 1975; though but seven in all, they illustrate certain broad (and ultimately deleterious) changes that overtook Riopelle's work during that quarter century.

Like many North Americans—Canadians and Yankees both—Riopelle in fact participates in what is above all a French story. Contemporaneous artists such as Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell are likewise representative Paris painters despite their deep American roots. Indeed, after meeting in Paris in 1955, Riopelle and Mitchell survived an alcohol-inflamed affair that endured over decades. No tales out of school there, though both the scale and blocky simplicity of Mitchell's works of the 1970s and after echo aspects of Riopelle's later style and possibly their turbulent relationship.

In the '50s, when he was doing his best work, Riopelle developed a method in which he manipulated heavy layers of dark oil paint flecked with lighter color through the supple use of palette knives. This created the paradoxical effect of a dappled, whipped-up, frenzied turgidity. His personal, flickering, decentralized composition at the time—a kind of AbEx allover—is often attributed to the painter's love of speed and the automobile, a canard that Jean-Louis Prat, the former director of the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence, repeats in his catalogue essay. Those enthusiasms have been true of everybody from the Italian Futurists on down, and to hear it said again trivializes Riopelle's already difficult to admire achievement. To be sure, the claim bears upon the painter's most famous work, *Quinze Chevaux Citroën* (Fifteen Horsepower Citroën), 1952, but the argument is also used to cover Riopelle's larger body of work, which, no matter what you think of it, is about art and not affection for automobiles.

In the '60s, Riopelle started working on far more hieratic compositions—often large triptychs whose vertical elements attain mural scale when placed side by side. These imposing, crushingly aggressive works mark a return to figuration. (In this shift from the allover to figure/ground composition, one is tempted to cite the coincidental model of Jackson Pollock's return to figuration in 1951–56.) Headlike or treelike references emerge as putative subjects. *L'Arbre*, *Toto*, *La Dame de Carreau* (Tree, Toto, Queen of Spades), 1962, or *Festin* (Feast), 1968, are exemplary. At this juncture Riopelle's use of the palette knife loses a certain urgency and bounce, suggesting the use of larger, stiffer spatulas, drawing his work closer to a kind of scoured, parietal calcification. In this latter dragged mode one is tempted to see the germ of the squeegeed and compressed surfaces of Gerhard Richter's much later abstractions.

One wonders too whether an admiration for Le Corbusier's ferroconcrete Unité d'Habitation is reflected in the troweled, cementlike color and weathered surfaces of Riopelle's paintings of the '60s and '70s, not to speak of the sheer weight of these immense solemnities. (See, for example, *Le Lac du Nord-Est* [The Lake of the North-East], 1975.) Some lighter, more dexterous, even calligraphic paintings on paper—but still huge for all that—completed an informative, auspicious but equivocal exhibition that further valorized Riopelle's painting of the '50s (about which there is a settled, positive consensus) while exposing anew the overbearing fustian of his later work.

—*Robert Pincus-Witten*

Sally Mann

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The male nude that is the subject of the thirty-three photographs in Sally Mann's "Proud Flesh" series, 2004–2009, on view in Gagosian's recent exhibition, is about as far from the ideal of ancient sculpture as it is possible to get. There are a few torsos, but their arms and legs are invariably cut off by the edge of the picture. Disturbingly, it's not clear that the missing limbs are implied. Like certain of Max Ernst's and René Magritte's limbless torsos, they are all skin, as if they were depictions of T. S. Eliot's "hollow men." In other words, Mann focuses on what psychoanalysts call part objects; there is no whole object, only fragments of a disintegrating object, and a peculiar kind of insubstantiality to all the flesh on display.

A further difference from ancient statuary is that the skin of Mann's figure is marred, not just because of the "flaws" generated by her photographic process—chemicals leave a textural residue on the image, suggestive of automatist accidents, which at times distracts from or even obscures the image—but also because it is marked by time, and fades into oblivion even as the photograph memorializes it. *Hephaestus*, 2008, the startling image that is the cover of the exhibition catalogue, suggests that the skin has been burned away by death, even as half of the body remains irradiated by light, which lends it a certain ghostly presence but does nothing to distract from the corrosive blur that invades it, death finalized by the black absence that replaces the head. As in other photographs, a table in the foreground—does it derive from the window ledge in front of the figures in many Renaissance portraits?—is much more solid and durable than the figure itself.

The devastating effect of these works is accentuated when one learns that the person depicted in Mann's images is her husband of forty years, who is now suffering from muscular dystrophy. Her photographs seem to anticipate his death; they are marked by impending loss. "Before me lay a man as naked and vulnerable as any wretch strung across the mythical, vulture-topped rock," she writes in a text accompanying the show, but any attempt t mythologize—or immortalize—him is bound to fail, because he i conspicuously mortal. Indeed, she recognizes that her husband' "trademark god-like nobility" is entirely absent from these images That is, she "unflinchingly"—her word—faces the physical truth, de idealizing the husband she clearly idealizes. The greatness of Mann' photographs comes out of this stoicism: They offer no solace, bu relentlessly focus on the trauma of decay we must all face, the deat that slowly but surely wastes our bodies.

The psychoanalyst Hanna Segal has noted that in classical traged the "beauty in the feeling of inner consistency and psychological trut in the depiction of those destructive forces . . . and their inevitabl