Le carnet : Histoires de l’art

Printmaker, Painter and Person: Ghitta Caiserman from World War to Cold War

Graveuse, peintre et personne : Ghitta Caiserman de la Seconde Guerre mondiale à la Guerre froide

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Abstract

We investigate the first two decades of Ghitta Caiserman’s long career, a career which has yet to receive the attention it warrants in Canadian art history in spite of her substantial prominence during much of it. These early decades reveal an artist already deeply engaged in national and international public spaces and institutions, as well as in those specific to her city of Montreal. Her precocious work of the 1940s, in particular the prints, was overtly socio-political, and holds an important place in Canadian graphic satire. The postwar shifts we witness, while more evidently focused on the personal in her paintings, find her no less engaged. Her turn toward the more deeply subjective was marked in particular by a fusion of subject and formal concerns; it is this fusion, in the context of an art world that had given such precedence to the formal, that gives her the space to engage with the world around her as a teacher, a mother, a public figure, and a feminist before the fact.

Résumé de l’article

Nous enquêtons sur les deux premières décennies de la longue carrière de Ghitta Caiserman, une carrière qui n’a pas encore reçu l’attention qu’elle mérite dans l’histoire de l’art canadien, malgré l’importance considérable qu’elle a eue pendant une grande partie de celle-ci. Ces premières décennies révèlent une artiste déjà profondément engagée dans les espaces publics et les institutions nationales et internationales, ainsi que dans ceux propres à sa ville de Montréal. Son œuvre précoce des années 1940, en particulier les estampes, est ouvertement sociopolitique et occupe une place importante dans la satire graphique canadienne. Les changements d’après-guerre auxquels nous assistons, bien qu’ils soient plus manifestement axés sur le personnel dans ses peintures, ne la trouvent pas moins engagée. Son tournant vers le plus profondément subjectif est marqué en particulier par une fusion des préoccupations pour le sujet et la forme; c’est cette fusion, dans le contexte d’un monde de l’art qui avait donné une telle primauté au formel, qui lui donne l’espace nécessaire pour s’engager dans le monde qui l’entoure en tant qu’enseignante, mère, personnalité publique et féministe avant le fait.

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> "If someone asked you to name our province's outstanding women personalities who would you choose?....When it comes to women artists there was more difficulty for one's personal taste in art enters the picture so strikingly here. Two artists mentioned by practically all those interviewed were Lilias Torrance Newton and Ghitta Caiserman."

This 1959 note in the *Montreal Gazette* gives a sense of the prominence enjoyed in the postwar period by Montreal artist Ghitta Caiserman-Roth (1923-2005). In the 1940s and 1950s, she produced an extensive range of prints, drawings, and paintings in which she dealt with the politics of war, of class struggle, and of the self in society through an engagement with modernist codes of figurative representation. As one decade gave way to the next, changes in the North American political climate appear to have coincided with a shift in her chosen imagery, which becomes more allusive and personal, referencing women's experience through religious and domestic themes. In this article, we chart the first twenty years of Caiserman's career (she would add the name Roth at the time of her second marriage, in 1962) and situate her work against what has become the standard later-modernist narrative of a teleological path to abstraction. We recover her preoccupation with subjectivity as it refers to the artist's body and space, seeing in this theme a harbinger of the feminist concerns that also mark Canadian artistic practice in the second half of the twentieth century. The artist's subjectivity can, of course, be usefully studied from her self-portraits[1]. Nonetheless, in considering the theme of this issue, we find the artist on a path that translates such a concern in the context of her relationship to institutions and public spaces that structured Québec and Canadian women's lives during the Second World War and in its political and economic aftermath. As the writer of a 1960 article on Caiserman in *Canadian Art* put it, "The sympathies of the artist are involved in the society in which she lives" (McCullough, 1960, 85). Caiserman's growth as person and artist is negotiated from the vantage points of artist, activist, printmaker, satirist, painter, teacher, mother, wife, and citizen of Canada at mid-century. Her face and body are constant referents throughout these years. So are the spaces and symbolic orders in which her artistic practice found its meanings: spaces of action, creativity, and exhibition (the factory, the studio, the home, the school, the gallery, and the museum) were yoked to symbolic orders of community and tradition: the social institutions of art, religion, and marriage that she investigated and harnessed to explore her own changing position in the post-War world. We argue that even in her turn toward the more subjective in the postwar years, her art, like her many and varied involvements in education, actively refers to and even critiques these social institutions.

Ghitta Caiserman's career began early, watched over by encouraging parents. Her father, Hanahiah M. Caiserman (1884-1950), emigrated from Romania to Montreal in 1911[2]. He swiftly became involved in socialist politics and was a union organizer and activist for *Po'alei Zion* (Labor Zionism) in support of clothing workers and Jewish bakers, teaching political economics to union night classes throughout the 1910s. Also involved in the inception of the

Jewish Public Library in 1917, Hanahiah Caiserman was founding general secretary of the Canadian Jewish Congress (1919), honorary president of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society (1920), activist for the establishment of separate Jewish schools[3] and, by 1936, affiliated with the Baron de Hirsch Institute and Benevolent Society of Montreal (Baron de Hirsch Institute, *Lovell's Montreal Directory* 1936-1937). He was also a passionate supporter of Yiddish culture and literature. Publishing a study of Yiddish literature in 1934 (*World Cat* identities) and hosting salons for artists and writers at home with his wife Sarah (Wittel) Caiserman (1893-1967), he wrote extensively in the Yiddish press, notably for *Keneder Adler*, where he also reviewed art exhibitions. Of his reviews, those that concerned Ghitta were written under a pseudonym (Andrus, 1981, 13). Sarah Caiserman, a pioneer entrepreneur and founder/owner of the Goosey Gander children's clothes company, made her husband's political and cultural activities possible, for these were largely volunteer efforts; she was also a key supporter for Ghitta's career, enabling her to rent studio space following her return from studies in New York in 1944.

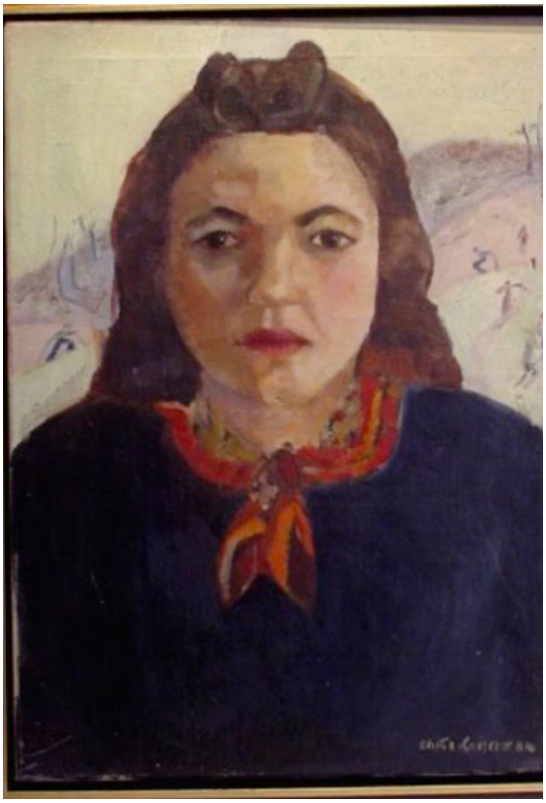

Figure 1. Ghitta Caiserman, *Self-Portrait*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 17.6 x 12.5 cm (plate)
Private collection

The Caisermans' salons welcomed journalists, poets, and artists such as Alexander Bercovitch (1891-1951), who would come to the Esplanade apartment to give Ghitta painting lessons, and Ernst Neumann (1907-1956); Ghitta also met Louis Muhlstock (1904-2001) in these early years (Andrus, 1981, 13). In 1936, when Ghitta was thirteen, her father sent in an artist's information sheet to the National Gallery of Canada listing his daughter's early accomplishments. "She has completed a year at Montreal High School[4], a year and a half's training with Bercovitch and has participated in group exhibitions, receiving honorable mention awards at the YMHA[5] and at the 1936 Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal." Giving as her contact the family address at '4223 Esplanade Avenue', he offers us a hint to the young artist's sense of herself in her immediate environment, walking out onto the street each day with Montreal's Mountain before her – a relationship that appears beset with tense identification in her 1939 *Self-Portrait*, where her face and torso command the foreground. Her chestnut brown hair, red patterned neckerchief, and blue jersey, each richly tinted, frame a determined, searching expression quite at odds with the swiftly brushed figures of skiers on a pastel-hued hill in the distance. We guess at private and social vectors of self and group identification in this

painting, which dates from the time that Caiserman, all of sixteen, moved to New York to live with her sister Nina Caiserman (1915-1963), a dancer affiliated with the Martha Graham dance company living on Fourteenth Street, so that she could begin her studies at the Parsons School of Design on 57th Street (Andrus, 1981, 15). Before long, her curriculum at Parsons, while remembered as being especially important to her development as a painter, was rounded out and in some respects superseded by sessions at the Art Students' League, also on 57th Street.

While both painting and printmaking were central to Ghitta Caiserman in her New York years (1939-1944), the etchings and lithographs undertaken at the Art Students League (and, later, in Montreal), speak to the specific importance of politically oriented printmaking in the artist's practice, and to her newly developing affiliation with the communist movement (an affiliation which put her into lasting conflict with her father, to whom she had long been and continued to be very close)[6]. Some five decades later, on recommending the acquisition of a selection of twelve early prints from this era by the National Gallery of Canada[7], this political orientation was stressed in a report prepared by Rosemarie Tovell, who was at the time the curator of Canadian Prints and Drawings. Tovell annexed comments prepared for her by Ghitta Caiserman-Roth (Caiserman-Roth to Tovell, 1992). All but one of the prints bear the hallmarks of Caiserman's political engagement in the 1940s. As Tovell noted,

> Among the artists active during the Second World War, Ghitta Caiserman-Roth stands alone in her depiction of biting socio-political commentaries on the war. Her political activism and outlook were acquired during her student years in New York from 1939 to 1944. There she studied with such "left wing" artists as the twins, Raphael and Moses Soyer and Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League (...) Caiserman-Roth's 1943 and 1944 prints were pulled during Harry Sternberg's print classes at the Art Students League. Because she had only limited access to the printmaking facilities, Caiserman-Roth was only able to print very small editions, the largest being not more than eight. They were not really meant for commercial release and, with the exception of *Night Shift*, were never exhibited. (Tovell, 1992)

Here are names that recur in all the literature on Ghitta Caiserman's formative years: painter and printmaker Harry Sternberg (1904-2001) taught at the Art Students' league from 1934 to 1967; the annals of the students who benefited from his guidance beg further investigation into the artistic network Ghitta may have enjoyed while in New York every academic year during Canada's wartime[8]. Sternberg's instruction in printmaking is held to have been supported by the technical expertise of colleague Will Barnet (1911-2012), who would have pulled the prints of Sternberg and his students. Twin brothers Raphael and Moses Soyer (1899-1987 and 1889-1974 respectively), who emigrated to New York from Russia in 1912, are known to have also taught from premises at Sixteenth Street in the 1940s; thus, Ghitta may have worked with them both there and at the Art Students League. Like Sternberg, the Soyers adopted social realist objectives that committed art making to supporting political action.

That the majority of Caiserman's work at the time was equally committed to this purpose is understandable: in the wake of the US entry into the war in December 1941, this Canadian artist, who had, as we've seen, been nurtured since childhood in the socialist world of her parents, found herself studying and working in a milieu also oriented by the transfer of allegiance by the Soviet Union to the Allied position following its invasion by Germany earlier that year. Images of Axis destruction, of cooperation between workers and management in the war effort, and satirical portrayals of bourgeois civic life combine in Caiserman's printmaking of the 1940s. Her prints proffer the didactic and synthetic visual messaging that had been a hallmark of satirical-symbolic imagery in the well-known socialist/communist periodical *The Masses* and its successor *The New Masses*; it was characterized by a summary lithographic crayon style that hearkens especially to the later work of French lithographer and painter Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) who had decried, through majestic, bleak prints, the destruction wrought by militarism at the time of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). The concision of Daumier's litho crayon style had been taken up in the pages of *The Masses* after 1913: Boardman Robinson (1876-1952), John Sloan (1871-1951), and Peggy Bacon (1895-1987) each using it to powerful effect (see especially Zurier 1988). In the late 1930s, closer to home in Montreal's *Clarté* and Toronto's *New Frontier*, Harry Mayerovitch (1910-2004), using the pseudonyms Henri and Mayo, had adapted the style in a series of cartoons linking Québec premier Maurice Duplessis to Canadian fascist leader Adrien Arcand and the German Führer Adolf Hitler.

The twelve prints acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1992 help us to identify the young Caiserman as the newest member of this movement in Canadian graphic satire. Indeed, in Esther Trépanier's 2008 book and exhibition *Jewish Painters of Montreal: Witnesses of their Time*, pride of place is given to political caricature as exemplified by Mayerovitch and Caiserman. The term *witness* is apt: we turn to these works to understand artistic responses and graphic ideas as Caiserman formulated them in her own time, while we have little information about the circulation of these small editions. It is fair to say that the 21st century has brought them renewed resonance. Of the eighteen works by Caiserman chosen by Trépanier in this exhibition, two (*War Effort*, 1944, and *War Profiteer*, 1946) were from the National Gallery of Canada acquisition, while two more were images also acquired by the NGC but for which Trépanier secured copies in the collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (*Unconditional Surrender*, n.d. and *Underground*, dated by the NGC as 1944 and by MNBAQ as 1943.) At the time of writing, MNBAQ has consistently exhibited these graphic works in the permanent collection display it inaugurated in 2018. But as we are reminded by Rosemary Tovell, writing in 1992, these works had "never been exhibited, except for *Night Shift*". Their public circulation in the 1940s was limited perhaps to Ghitta's close circle; for all their power, enhanced by the artist's use of steeply angular compositional space with strong contrasts of scale, of jagged movement propelled by a bold use of summary line, and clear messaging that seems intended to compel allegiance to her cause, they come to us as images designed for mass distribution that instead remained, for the most part, away from the public space to which they seem designed to appeal.

It is all the more intriguing, then, to consider that in 1943 Caiserman was yet to produce the bulk of this work, so redolent of her time in New York and so closely associated in the historiography with its remarkable artistic/political pedigree. At the Spring Exhibition of that year, she presented herself to her hometown audience through the personal enigma that she had engraved onto the plate of *Night Shift*.

This enigma is that of a woman at work in a munitions factory (and so no less concerned with war). "During the war years", she wrote to Rosemary Tovell,

> I studied in New York and would come back to Montreal during the summers to work in the war plants. I worked on both day and night shifts. This etching is a self-portrait in a dream about the shell examining I did... my feet are in water... the shells have wings and are flying around, and this gives the etching a surreal quality. (Caiserman to Tovell, 1992)

We can imagine, then, that *Night Shift* was 'dreamt' - and then etched - sometime between September 1942 and the time of the 1943 AAM Spring Exhibition. It's the dream of a young artist who places her countenance, the privacy of her body, once again (as in the 1939 *Self-Portrait*) in, or against, a landscape. Let's imagine what it meant for the artist, who had just turned twenty, to present this work to the public of her home city.

Figure 2. Ghitta Caiserman, *The Night Shift*, 1943, Etching on wove paper, laid on cardboard 17.6 x 12.5 cm (plate) National Gallery of Canada

A self-portrait in a dream: in a space marked by surrealism, to be sure, a space whose narrative structure might also recall the early Renaissance. A self-portrait in three times, three stages perhaps. Closest to us, Ghitta Caiserman with her feet indeed in water, standing or sitting at a conveyor belt, examining the artillery shells at a war plant. The photograph on the cover of David Fennario's *Motherhouse* (2014), a play about the British Munitions Factory established in Verdun at the outset of the first World War, gives us a sense of mimetic correspondence to certain aspects of Caiserman's etching. The munitions workers – who evidently came to number 6,800 in all at the height of production – sport the same wide-collared white overalls in that photograph as the three Ghittas; their heads, also just like the Ghittas', are covered with a white cap, which for each of the Ghittas frames a face that indeed bears a resemblance

to the face that greets us in the 1939 self-portrait we have already considered. The three etched faces establish a continuity that will be confirmed in 1949, in an etched portrait of Ghitta by Fred Taylor.

The strong eyebrows, the stern expression, the diamond mouth, the well-defined jawline and, in both *Night Shift* and Taylor's portrayal, the fringe-cut hair, enable us to establish a repertoire of Ghitta Caisermans. But the artist's approach to her own body opens another line of enquiry for which her entire career provides further material. This exploration may speak to an erotics (no less political) or at least a troubling of the artistic conventions that had circumscribed male visions of the female body, by introducing to public view its private significations, or rather, the *privacy of its significations* – codes that withstand male deciphering. In this sense, *Night Shift* might be usefully studied alongside self-representations or portraits of women in the works of Sylvia Ary, Mimi Parent, Suzanne Duquet, and Rita Briansky[9]. Of these artists, Parent went furthest towards the surrealist strategies that confounded masculine behaviours in viewing and representing the female body. Her sometimes playful approach casts a line through recent Québec art history, pinpointing a tension that is common to both *Night Shift* and, more recently, the work of Cynthia Girard[10].

Figure 3. Frederick Bourchier Taylor, *Ghitta Caiserman Pinsky*, v. 1949, eau-forte, vernis mou ; 27 x 14 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

Figure 4. Frederick Bourchier Taylor, *Ghitta Caiserman Pinsky*, v. 1949, eau-forte, vernis mou ; 29 x 22 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

Figure 5. Sylvia Ary, *Artist and Model*, 1943, Pastel on Carton, 76,5 x 73,8 cm, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec

The symbolic structure of *Night Shift* comes into focus if we compare it with Sylvia Ary's *Artist and Model*. In Ary's case, the artist's back and backward glancing face inscribes the sign of skin, nudity and erotic tension through the configuration of roles ascribed to artist and sitter. For Caiserman, the location of eros is not refracted onto a sitter, activated by the artist's viewing: instead, the artist considers herself, although still setting up her body as one instance of a multiple iteration. Here, eros is invested in the fishing figure at upper left who is sitting, legs apart and bare, the fishing pole emerging away from her genitalia. It hoists and swings the phallic munition shells from a second Ghitta who is seated at the conveyor belt that is both inside and outside the factory structure that forms her backdrop, to a third Ghitta, seated in what seems to be read as a meadow giving on to a fenced rise at the left, a small hill at the right. Up here, the fisherwoman Ghitta appears to be the dreamer, her head wrapped not only in the factory cap but in a mist surrounded by stars and winged phalluses/shells dotting a night-and-day sky. The dualities of times of day, of places inside and out, serve to suggest a mysterious correlation between landscape, architecture, and body.

While the artist's own sense of this mystery belongs to her alone, we can enquire into the specifics of time and place that presumably ground the dreamer's experience and that are reorganized in her image. Our earlier reference to the play *Motherhouse* by David Fennario leads us first to wonder if Ghitta Caiserman might have been at work during her wartime summers at the same Verdun site. This is unlikely: her image clearly references (and her later comments confirm) the production of shells. The Verdun factory, ceded to Dominion Textile in 1919 and redeveloped for the production of munitions in 1940 by Defence Industries Limited (a subsidiary of Canadian Industries Limited, under contract the federal Ministry for Munitions and Supply), exclusively manufactured small arms ammunition. But the Verdun plant was just one of several set up by DIL on Montreal Island and in surrounding regions. The only plant to be organized for the production and filling of shells with explosives was that at Sainte-Thérèse, near Blainville, north of Montreal.

The Sainte-Thérèse munitions installation would have been easily accessible to Ghitta as a summer worker. By 1942, the family had relocated to an apartment at 430 Boulevard Saint-Joseph, west of Saint-Laurent, at the T junction with avenue Querbes in Outremont (thus following a pattern of upward mobility satirized in the novels of Mordecai Richler, a direct contemporary of Ghitta's). From this apartment, a short walk to avenue du Parc would bring

Ghitta to the number 80 tram stop, to go North to what was then known as Gare Park Avenue Station and a transfer to the CPR commuter railway line to Saint-Jérôme. The Sainte-Thérèse station lay just beyond Île-Jésus (today's Ville de Laval). The new plant, built on expropriated farmland, was a major complex of over three hundred buildings on a site of six thousand acres, with homes for workers, service buildings, a community centre, a hospital, the railway station, a bank and even a chapel. The Laurentians, by then replete with winter ski resorts and summer-home communities that drew Jewish families every year, rose in the near distance.

Accordingly, we might read the 'pastoral' qualities of *Night Shift*, the apparent *insouciance* in the artist's approach – quite at odds with the bold, severe structures of her other printed and painted work in these years – as an ironic reference to this benighted landscape. The grasses, tree, and gentle hills that surround the brick factory structure are a strange setting for the required safety of distance from a dense urban centre in which any accidental explosion would be catastrophic (memories of the 1917 Halifax harbour explosion proving to be still very raw in Canadian government procurement). Was the idyllic tone in keeping with the workers' experience of their daily, or nightly, wartime work? How did the round-the-clock production impact workers' lives – indeed their bodies? Those who did not live onsite could commute to and from Montreal thanks to the 24-hour train service. Perhaps Ghitta was billeted in one of the onsite homes. Perhaps relationships with other workers took shape in some way and grounded what at first appears to be an erotic fantasy but on considered reflection reads more like a wry, humorous dispensation – after all, only the artist's body(ies) is/are present here. The phallic shells might almost be dildoes. Perhaps, in the end, the surrealist aspect of this piece is itself under ironic, or indeed satiric scrutiny, through the medium of the artist's persona. Deciding what is at stake is ultimately less important than recognizing that the tension between integration and disjunction among the three Ghittas, from both their factory and their landscape, in a logic of near weightlessness, points us to strategies of incomplete disclosure, of space for the viewer's wonderings and wanderings, of a hidden polysemic order that may well ground the experience of the artist in wartime just as much as the overarching political and military objectives prosecuted in the War.

While *Night Shift* appears thus to be the only print exhibited by Ghitta Caiserman in the 1940s, belying the overall importance of printmaking to her overall artistic practice, there is little doubt that she was committed to placing her painted works, just as imbued with social engagement as the lithographs and etchings that she kept closer to hand, into the public arena. It was a natural outcome of her life to that point. It was painting that had been at the centre of the world in which she had lived with her artistically and culturally active parents: her father gave her "paintboxes and beautiful coloured paper," and "he 'gave' me a teacher," as we have seen, the painter and set designer Alexandre Bercovitch, with whom she studied in 1931-32 (Caiserman, *Insights*, 1993, 8ff). She met the painter Louis Muhlstock around the same time, as we mentioned earlier, and she spoke later of the lasting influence of walks

with him in her neighbourhood, when he spoke of "seeing" and not just "looking" (Caiserman, "Beginnings," 1981, 13).

Figure 6. Ghitta Caiserman, *Men loading*, 1945

During the first years of World War Two, her training in the rich art world of New York included, as we have seen, study with the painters Moses and Raphael Soyer, twin Russian-born figurative artists who favoured the kind of antifascist socialism practiced so often in the United Front era - not paintings of the class struggle, but rather of empathy with working people, and also, in Raphael's case, of the unemployed and homeless. Moses said, "Most of my paintings reflect an interest in the casual moments in the life of plain people" (Soyer, 1972, 38). It is easy to see how the Soyers would have fascinated Caiserman, and how she may have looked back to them as she developed her own ways of working. Of course one cannot pin this or that influence to an artist's paintings – as the artist David Milne said, "you could see a painting through the crack of a door... and be influenced for life" (Milne, 1936, 35) - but some experiences do appear especially important.

Returning to Montreal in 1944 after her studies in New York, she set up a studio in an empty storefront found by her mother Sarah. She joined the Federation of Canadian Artists and began her practice as a professional painter. But she was on the move again the following year when her new husband Alfred Pinsky, once a fellow student in New York and now in the Royal Canadian Air Force, was posted to Halifax. She and Pinsky maintained their mutual interest in the working class and in antifascism. Together, they wrote a piece 1945 for *En Masse*, a literary and arts magazine[11]. That same year, however, there was a change in her approach to art and the social. This was marked by an especially important painting, *Men Loading*, which also gives powerful evidence of her level of accomplishment.

In this painting of shipyard workers loading large and obviously heavy bags, each of the three men is made distinct from the others by subtle and even delicate colour, colour which would seem at odds with the hard, sweaty work they are doing were it not for the new importance to Caiserman of creating an energetic visual whole. The colour allows the men's forms to join in a single flow. "I made a very rhythmic thing of it," she said later, "synthesizing what I had seen with what I knew. The subject matter was really secondary. I really felt that I was just starting

then" (Caiserman, "Beginnings," 20). That is a striking statement for an artist with a long-time commitment to the social. It reflects Caiserman's own later sense that for her, painting had become a matter of fusing her subject and her formal concerns. The artist Michael Forster noticed much the same thing a few years later: in reviewing a show of four young Montreal painters at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, he found her work the most "coherent" of the four, and while he though many of her pieces still had the heavy influence of the American artist Ben Shahn, he admired two paintings that didn't: "with lots of technique and perception, she seems here to be as much interested in making a picture as in saying something, and she does both with success" (Forster, 1950).

Once back in Montreal in 1946, Caiserman began to pursue a vigorous practice of exhibiting, in addition to co-founding and running the Montreal Artists School with Pinsky (until 1952). She became a model of professionalism in Montreal's public spaces and institutions. There were the regular society shows, both there and elsewhere in Canada. She showed at the Spring Exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal (the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) and the Jewish Artists Group, which also held spring shows, and with the Canadian Group of Painters (which she joined in 1954) as well as at the annual winter shows of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. By 1952 she was well enough recognized to serve on the jury for the Art Association of Montreal's Spring Exhibition. She joined the Canadian Society of Graphic Art in 1950 and, still a young artist, she was admitted to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1956, an institution once too conservative for artists like her – but it too had had to change with the times. Other memberships followed. She was also active as a speaker; for example, the *Gazette* of 27 November 1947 noted that "This evening there will be a symposium on the works of three Jewish artists: Chagall, Pissarro and Picasso. The speakers who are Canadian artists, will be Harry Mayerovitch, Ghitta Caiserman, and Saul Field". A few years later, she gave a series of ten lectures in the city on *Turning Points in the History of Art* (McCullogh, 1960, 84). These are further signs of her energy, of the recognition of her teaching ability, and of the public profile she had developed.

National recognition came quickly. In 1950, she received one of the three top prizes in the O'Keefe Art Award for artists under thirty, and in 1951 she won a $1500 scholarship (not taken up) to study at the Instituto Allende at San Miguel de Allende, in Mexico[12]. And she was already being chosen to represent Canada abroad. In 1947, when she was still in her early twenties, her work had been selected for both the *Exhibition of Canadian Women Artists* in New York and the *Festival mondial de la jeunesse démocratique* in Prague. Her painting was among a group of works from the Prague exhibition to be shown first at the Art Association of Montreal.

Her paintings in the late forties and early fifties included cityscapes such as ***Street Scene*** of 1948. This painting is broadly conceived and so rigorously constructed that at first one scarcely notices the dozen or so figures along the street. The low winter sun enters between the buildings and picks out details and colours on the left, but the figures themselves remain

in the shadows. This focus on architecture and streets, however, was unusual when seen within her long lifetime of paintings and prints; overall, she concerned herself very much more with humanity.

We have seen how her socialist views came out directly in her printmaking of the 1940s, and the social continues to come through in her postwar painting. Reviewing the same 1950 show as Michael Forster, the critic Robert Ayre discussed the "newer trends" represented by the show and said that while Caiserman and her husband Alfred Pinsky were still too dependent on "Ben Shahn and some of the other modern Americans," their paintings of "the seamy side of city life" were full of promise and covered ground that needed to be investigated in Canada" (Ayre, 1950, 30ff). The following year Ayre made the point again: "Ghitta Caiserman's world is bleak indeed, a harsh world painted harshly with cold colour and angular, rigid forms. Of late, granting her city-bound people a release in music, she seems to be reaching for more grace, but both she and her husband, Alfred Pinsky, who is warmer in colour and freer in composition, have a painful awkwardness to overcome. Nevertheless, they deserve credit for painting aspects of Canadian life that have been too much neglected. There are few to keep them company" (Ayre, 1951, 366).

But as the Cold War period set in, Ghitta Caiserman, even while becoming more and more a public figure and while continuing her active teaching career, began to be more and more private in her art. It may be appropriate to consider the fact that she was living in a most uneasy time. Today we have little sense of how shockingly people found the world to have been changed by the Holocaust, the war, and the atomic bomb. The artist Pegi Nicol wrote to a friend in 1947 that "the world is in a desperate state of fear right now and so things tighten and become tense," and artists of course reflect that (Nicol McLeod, 1947). Another major figure in the Canadian art world of the time, Charles Comfort, spoke of the "woefully changed psychology" of the present generation of artists, deprived of the security felt by the Post-World War I generation (Comfort, 1948, 7-8). A French Canadian reporter commented that while one must not become obsessed with the bomb, "we already live in a veritable atomic atmosphere" (Brosseau, 1949). Of course, artists could make any number of responses within this atmosphere of angst, and no one can say that any particular response comes directly out of it. However, we may look at Caiserman's turn in the fifties toward a more personal, interior approach against this background. There is a new exploration of the unconscious as drawing comes strongly into play, and this affected her painting greatly. It may be relevant to note here that the growing movement of non-objective art, which Charles Comfort linked to the psychology of the era, was partly based in a similar turn toward the unconscious. In Caiserman, this more personal, inward approach remained firmly figurative. One outcome in the fifties was a prominent window series, painted from the interior of her house, and another was her growing interest in self-portraits, already a theme at the beginning of the war.

Caiserman's position in the Canadian art world continued to grow. The city's private galleries took her on, and they constituted a more and more important part of the scene. Hélène Sicotte notes that as the fifties advanced, there was an acceleration of the number of galleries in the city that amounted to a "gallery boom," not only in numbers but in the variety of positions gallerists took toward art (Sicotte, 1995, 42). Women gallerists were among the most important figures, taking a leading role in the development and increasing importance of these informal public institutions, just as women had been leaders in the growth of teaching institutions. Caiserman's career climbed within this world, and she maintained a constant and consistent practice of exhibiting in these public spaces, just as she had previously maintained such a practice in the public spaces of print culture.

A few of the new galleries had particular importance (Lafleur, 2003, 69; and see article in this issue of *Le Carnet*). Of these, the Galerie Agnès Lefort took Caiserman into her stable. While Agnès Lefort was loved among young Montreal artists for offering them their first shows and for excellent business terms, she established her credibility with an impressive stable: "Riopelle, Borduas, Roberts, Pellan, Ghitta Caiserman-Roth, Tonnancour et Cosgrove formaient son avant-garde, prestigieuse s'il en fut" (Matte, 1983, 80).

Caiserman had regular solo exhibitions in the fifties, and one in particular, at the Dominion Gallery in 1954, had special importance, and not only for her own career, according to Rodolphe de Repentigny, one of Montreal's most important and thoughtful critics of modern art. He went as far as to say that her show "opened a new perspective on Canadian art" (Repentigny, 1954). Caiserman succeeded in producing paintings, he said, "in which the plastic qualities are remarkable and in which the subject is not insignificant." The subject may be striking – "sometimes troubling, sometimes amusing, and always rich in resonances", but at the same time, "It would be wrong to distinguish the subject from the execution, since one of the merits of this art is its wholeness". Subject and execution cannot be separated. This declaration must have pleased Caiserman tremendously, since, as far back as 1945 when she painted *Men Loading*, she had been intent on that very thing.

A new openness toward modern art grew out of Montreal's "gallery boom," and nonfigurative art in particular rose tremendously quickly in importance, reflecting the international trend. While Caiserman participated very actively in the blossoming of modern art in Montreal and was recognized as a modern, she continued to work as a figurative artist and stayed apart from this sweeping movement. It was a strong and deliberate choice. Of course, she was very conscious of the fact the dominance of the nonfigurative, and she took a positive approach to the challenge, commenting in 1957 that "with almost everybody on the other side, I think we have to be better painters to make our points. Our surfaces, for instance, have to be just as exciting, as, say, Borduas's surfaces" (Caiserman, quoted in Fulford, 1957, 74). A statement again reflecting the importance of marrying subject and form. And, a few years later, she said,

Figure 7. Ghitta Caiserman, *First Steps* , 1956

"I am not embarrassed by the fact that painting has a history – as have I. Rembrandt interests me as much as Riopelle" (quoted in McCullogh, 1960, 87). One is reminded of the point made by literary historian Candida Rifkind that "the term 'modernism' is increasingly understood to include the many and varied artistic developments, both transcultural and asynchronic, elite and popular, of the cultural and institutional formations of modernity" (Rifkind, 2009, 14). Caiserman understood that very thing about the openness of modernism, as did Repentigny, and she deployed it in developing an art that held a unique place in Canadian art history. In fact, it was a position that would take her beyond modernism.

A great example of this is the painting *First Steps* of 1956, later described by Caiserman as an effort to convey "the child's world of uncertainty with everything going in different directions" (*Ghitta Caiserman-Roth: A Retrospective View*, 36). We might suggest that a global uncertainty is also reflected. Lolly Golt offers a wonderful description of the child as being "severely" isolated from human contact, instead "watched over by a spidery plant emerging from an ornate tub" (*ibid.*). Nearer us and lying just off the edge of the very unstable carpet/landscape on which the child takes her tentative steps (Rodolphe de Repentigny saw that surface as a sort of *tabula rasa* [Repentigny, 1956]) is a hand mirror in which we see Caiserman's own face. It is a deliberately awkward set of elements. We can easily see the painting as postmodern before the fact, with its almost jarring freedom from attention to the relation of the image to the frame, its bold insertion of the personal and the private into the world of the public, and its distance from the concerns of an art world that had placed abstract expressionism at its apex. It constructs a domestic reality that is given whatever certainty one could achieve in that era. To de Repentigny, it was part of an effort to inscribe in her œuvre "une méditation presque mystique sur soi et l'expression de la vie quotidienne" (Repentigny, *ibid.*). It steps toward a feminism that was soon to grow out of such concerns.

Home, motherhood, the artist's response to personal conditions and social expectations takes the consideration of 'institution' and 'public' onto a different basis, although it could be argued that by being artistically active about both home and school Ghitta was at work on two principal spheres in the preparation of the child for the adult world.

As a teacher, it has to be remembered, Ghitta Caiserman was especially involved with public and higher education for adults. With Alfred Pinsky in Halifax, she had led night classes at the local YM-YWCA before they launched, on their return to their home city, the Montreal Artists' School at 1421 MacKay Street[13]. Her career as a teacher took her to Sir George Williams University (later Concordia), the Saidye Bronfman Centre, the Université du Québec à Montréal, and to a range of teaching engagements at colleges and universities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and British Columbia (CWAHI). She continued to be a student herself, notably exploring new possibilities in printmaking with Albert Dumouchel (1916-1971) at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal in 1961-62.

She was a lifelong student and teacher of art's history. The interviews she granted through her lifetime and her 1993 publication with Rhoda Cohen, *Insights. Drawing in the Studio*, based on conversations between professional artist and psychoanalyst sharing a new studio space, attest to her strong identification with artists of the past.

In this respect, much more detailed study is needed to align Ghitta Caiserman's work as it discloses meaning in the encounter of its private and public dimensions and in light of her extensive knowledge of historical and contemporary traditions, in both graphic arts and painting, in portraiture, landscape, still-life and interiors. A fitting example of such a dialogue with art history, insofar as it connects with the themes we have explored here, comes in the five lithographs that make up the *Wedding of Samson* series of 1951 (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec). Ghitta Caiserman, six years into married life, four years into her work as an independent school co-director and instructor, examines and revises the visual structure of Rembrandt's painting of the same name (1638), in the collection of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden[14].

Rembrandt had taken up a seldom-illustrated incident in the life of Samson, as related in the Old testament, Judges 10:14. The scene portrayed comes at the event of the seven-day wedding feast Samson has organized to celebrate his marriage to a Philistine woman, un-named in the text. In the painting, we see the bride bathed in light and serenity, gazing out at us from a plane set just lightly angled and off centre. She is surrounded by the antics (drinking, eating, kissing) of young adult guests. To her left, her husband decides to enliven and vary the proceedings by setting a riddle to a group of young Philistine men; the wager being the gift of thirty cloaks and thirty sets of men's clothing. The smiling bride, now impervious to the physical motions arcing away from her, silent in the din, will soon be entreated to learn the answer to the riddle from her husband and relate it to her kinfolk. Doing so, they announce the answer and win the wager. Samson honours it in anger, understanding that his confidence to his bride has been betrayed. He goes to the Philistine's village and kills thirty men, bringing back their cloaks and garments to settle his debt. Such is Samson's life: promised by God as a man who will initiate the deliverance of the Israelites from the Philistines, Samson is

constantly outwitted, releasing superhuman anger and destruction which, by a strange logic, leads the story of that deliverance forward.

In adopting and adapting this story and Rembrandt's composition – the unnamed bride enigmatically smiling as a tragic set of events is set in motion – Ghitta Caiserman uses it to test out three compositional innovations across her series of five prints. She uses Rembrandt's lighting to move away from her more Daumieresque crayon noir style to a structure of deep contrast between light and dark. In four of the prints, the figure of the bride is still central to the wedding party; in the image reversal inherent to the lithographic process, Samson now sits on her right. In two variations, Caiserman keeps to the action as it is presented by Rembrandt: Samson turning his back to his bride and the other revellers in setting his riddle. In each of these variations, the face of the un-named bride might be held to be almost anonymous: but a comparison with the 1939 self-portrait, especially, allows us to wonder if this is a self-representation: that Ghitta the teacher, the woman (the wife?), may be here made silent, muted by narrative (and masculine) forces that isolate her at the banquet table. In this space of feasting, of celebration, the young woman has become a cipher, an accessory, almost an irrelevance to the ritual of the seven-day event and its political function in uniting families and communities: here, Israelite and Philistine, the subjugated and the captors. We can't help but think of the recent independence of Israel and its meaning for Jews in Canada, and for Ghitta, given that her father had died one year earlier, and that he had long been a moving force for the Canadian Jewish Congress. We would need to learn more about Ghitta's relationships with Alfred Pinsky and Hanahiah Caiserman to see if we can interpret the Samson figure as one or the other of these men. It's especially the evocation of a likeness between the central bride and Ghitta herself that leads us to this speculation.

Figure 8a. Ghitta Caiserman, *The Wedding of Samson*, 1951, estampe : lithographie, 52 x 67 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

Figure 8b. Ghitta Caiserman, *The wedding of Samson : variations on a theme by Rembrandt*, 1951, estampe : lithographie, n. et b., 53 x 67 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

Figure 9a. Ghitta Caiserman, *The Wedding of Samson*, 1951, estampe : lithographie, 52 x 66 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

Figure 9b. Ghitta Caiserman, *The wedding of Samson*, 1951, estampe : lithographie, 54 x 67 cm, BAnQ Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie

In a second set of variations, Caiserman has put aside, seemingly, the matter of resemblance, creating the Bride and Samson as players in a game of hand-held mirrors presented to one-another, setting up doublings within the space of the print[15]. In Figure 9a, the artist has blackened the image area of the lithographic stone and drawn through the applied ink with a scraper. Dispensing with all but the most essential lines. The bride is still central, frozen behind the banquet table, but Samson is now some Bacchus, clad only in loin cloth, holding his own mirror close to the bride's face. In Figure 9b, Caiserman has apparently increased the scraping quite extensively, using some solvent like mineral spirits to densify what were fine lines in 9a, now becoming a series of grey highlights that accentuate the volumes of the figures' limbs, each bearing the marks of ink dispersal and bubbling, or the graphic denotations of surfaces. A fifth print focuses only on the figure of the bride.

Figure 10. Ghitta Caiserman, *The wedding of Samson (the bride alone)*, 1951, estampe : lithographie

Standing mutely like a doll, or as a figure that has escaped from a series of costume designs, she sees in the mirror a face which, if it is hers, is speaking, while her lips, outside the mirror, are closed. We seem to have returned to the strategy of conferring an unavowed function onto a double of the self that is assigned space elsewhere in the image, and to the interplay of space/not-space that partakes of our self-projections into other roles in (what become) the confines of open, shared public space.

While it's difficult to resolve the possible meanings that contextual analysis allows us to posit into a single iconographical explanation, we can, for the time being, place Caiserman's *Wedding of Samson* series of 1951 in the lineage inaugurated with *Night Shift*. These narrative and visual experiments – shifts – may create equally experimental spaces that are not destined for public access but that allow the artist to negotiate the fullness of her persona as it takes its place in family, in the institutions of society, in history (and art history). The teacher who remained a student sought opportunities to examine the self as much as the materials of artistic practice - or to help the one take its place – its rightful place – among the others.

Notes

1. Preparatory studies for this article were presented at the 2015 and 2021 conferences of the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative (*The Artist Herself*, 8-9 May 2015 and *Modernisms, Inside and Out*, 30 September - 2 October 2021). See https://www.concordia.ca/finearts/art-history/research/cwahi/conference.html

2. Biographical information can be found online at https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/caiserman-hanane-meier, accessed 27 August 2022. See especially Pierre Anctil, *History of the Jews in Québec*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2021.

3. An issue in Québec politics and education that reached stalemate in the 1930s and that was resolved only in 1997 with the realignment of Montreal schools from religious to language affiliation.

4. Thus not following many of her young Jewish contemporaries to nearby Baron Byng High School on St. Urbain, where progressive approaches to art education were offered by Anne Savage, who counted Alfred Pinsky (1921-1991) and Moe Reinblatt (1917-1979) among her students.

5. More precisely known today as the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association, YM-YWHA. This acronym was established at the time of the merging in 1950 of the two associations, both founded in 1910. See https://ymywha.com/fr/a-propos/, accessed 28 August 2022.

6. Thanks to our anonymous evaluator for emphasizing this change in Ghitta's relation to her father.

7. The works acquired were *War Profiteer*, 1946, lithograph on wove paper 44.7 x 31.6 cm; image: 36.1 x 28 cm, 36675; *War Effort*, 1944 lithograph on wove paper, 31.7 x 48.3 cm; Image: 25.3 x 30.7 cm, NGC 36672; *Freedom USA*, 1944, lithograph on wove paper 48.9 x 31.6 cm; image: 37.6 x 17.5 cm, 36677; *Mademoiselle Coutu* gouache on Kraft paper 80.4 x 48.9 cm, 36682; *Unconditional surrender*, lithograph on wove paper, laid on cardboard 45.4 x 32.5 cm; image: 37.5 x 28.8 cm, 36678.

8. For example, the group known as the "Fourteenth Street School" included Isabel Bishop (1902-1988), Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876-1952) and Raphael Soyer (discussed below). Esther Trépanier has drawn attention to the affinities between Québec artists and this group in the 1930s insofar as they shared a concern with representations of the city and its denizens. See 'Les solitudes canadiennes : réflexions à partir de quelques publications récentes', *Journal of Canadian Art History*, vol 16, no 2 (1995) : 77-87.

9. Such comparisons were made possible in the two exhibitions that made up *Femmes artistes du XX^e^ siècle au Québec*, organized by Esther Trépanier for the Musée national des beaux arts du Québec in 2009-2010. See Esther Trépanier (ed.), *Femmes artistes du XX^e^ siècle au Québec : oeuvres du Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec*, Québec, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, coll. « Arts du Québec », 2010, 287 p.

10. For example, the series *Love and Anarchy* presented at Galerie Hugues Charbonneau in 2017. See https://cynthiagirardrenard.ca/Amour-et-anarchie-Love-and-Anarchy

11. It was a critical piece on the exhibition of the work at Allan Harrison at the Art Association of Montreal. *En Masse* appeared in four issues only. In content and range of contributors, it was a sort of after-the-fact United Front periodical. https://canadianpoetry.org/volumes/vol19/whitney2.html

12. A compelling history of the school and of its growing importance for Canadian artists is given in John Virtue, *Leonard and Reva Brooks. Artists in Exile in San Miguel de Allende* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2001).

13. The address corresponds to a site just south of Concordia's Howard Webster Library building. Long one of the converted stone façade townhouses that still line much of the street North of De Maisonneuve, the site is at the time of writing cleared for new construction.

14. The devastated city of Dresden was situated in East Germany. We can well imagine that any number of printed resources available in 1951 enabled Caiserman to select this work as the basis for a series of lithographs; for example, the 1946 translation of the study Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible by Polish-born art historian Franz Landsberger (1883-1964), who had emigrated to the United States in 1939. Landsberger devotes a chapter to Rembrandt's study of the Old Testament, and directly references the Wedding of Samson. Whatever the sources, it's unlikely that Caiserman's choice was arbitrary.

15. It is tempting to enquire into the likelihood that Caiserman had knowledge of the work of Jacques Lacan, whose "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"was delivered as a talk at the Interantional Psychonalytical Conference in Zurich in 1949.

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