Martin O'Hara

The Privileged Moment

An Interview with Louis Belzile

Louis Belzile is wholly artist; his teaching is spun from that vortex of activity. In the linguistic medium probably most suited to his topic and his role — the medium of conversation with an understanding companion — he begins from and returns to the fundamental posture of the teacher vis-à-vis the taught, especially the adolescent, gathering as he goes however an all-encompassing statement of life and purpose. For him what is of vital significance to development and growth is the supremacy of the "relationship subject-object." O'Hara's sensitive interventions in an allusive stream of energetic talk prompt its continuities and its culmination, which is a moving return to the simplicities of truth in matter, and the worth of freedom.

M. O'H: Louis, you've had success as an artist and as a teacher both. Have you ever found any conflict between the two? Being a teacher and being a professional artist?

L.B.:Yes, during the period of my active teaching we somehow, in all honesty, created and enlarged the gap between the artist and the teacher, and it seems that the school system and the evolution of psychology has driven the artist out of the school. The main reason is, I would say, the work of Piaget, who recognized the fact that a child must go through an evolution, a growth — which was first recognized, I think, by the art teachers themselves through Herbert Read; any art teacher with a little experience will tell you the age of the child from his drawing. The second reason would be the work of teachers like Anne Savage, Irène Sénécal and so on, who also recognized the Read and Piaget work. There was no longer any need for the artist because the artist was in front of the child, shall I say, in primary grades; and in secondary the artist should have been at the side of the student. The image is that in elementary grades the teacher prepares the material and lets the child develop, while at the secondary level the teacher should, as in the tradition of the old masters, be next to the young person.

M. O'H: Are you saying that it's at the secondary level that artists should be involved in the schools, with the students?

L.B.: Yes, this is what I would say, but for some reason for which I have no scientific or specific explanation, while we were respecting the normal growth in primary grades we were not even attempting to have a child progress faster than at his own speed. It's later that the notion of the privileged moment, "Le moment privilégié," was utilized in primary grades to permit a child to acquire a higher level a little faster. Yet, as soon as we reached the secondary level, we stopped respecting the natural growth of the child and we still do not accept the fact that a boy at high school — 1st, 2nd, 3rd — is essentially realistic in his approach; and this has been denied by our school system for the last 20 years, in my opinion, and for that reason the art teachers drove themselves out of the school.

Schooling Intuition

M. O'H: I'm interested in that phrase "the privileged moment." Is it something you know as an artist? Do you feel moments that you would describe that way?

L.B.: Yes, the privileged moment in my opinion is due to a combination of two factors. The first one is what the teachers call the "situation d'apprentissage" — a method which is very widely known and used, which consists in putting a lot of paper and other materials around and in having good pictures on the wall, showing slides or films occasionally, so that eventually the child living in the midst of this material indulges in creative activity. Most teachers stop there, but if a teacher manages to surpass this "activité pédagogique" or "situation activity" and adds to it what I call communication, that is dialogue and so on, he makes possible the "moment privilégié." Apparently this moment is a very short period, and we all remember a "moment privilégié" which we have lived — in the sense that we say "Ah! Mr. So-and-so when I was in Grade 3 said this," and we lived with it — it's suddenly a great moment in our life.

M. O'H.: So it's a moment where something can happen or where you feel a certain power, a certain confidence?

L.B.: It is something which could be readily digested, and when I say digested I mean taken in by the child, which will affect his whole life — not just a little activity — it's a marked moment in his life, and everybody I know has had two or three, and they are not moments like social events, like a marriage or birthday — no, it's essentially an emotional and intellectual happening which remains very vivid.

M. O'H.: You speak a lot of the development that seems to be necessary in the child, that *is* in the child. These privileged moments, then, do they mark moments of development, or are they more random?

L.B.: Well, as we recognize easily between the age of 1 month to 1 year the physical developments of a baby, we can easily recognize by the age of 12 months if something is wrong with his hearing or eye-sight or muscular development. We know that if a child at 12 months doesn't walk it's a very dramatic thing, and yet it seems from the works of Skinner that it's the same thing for intellectual development, for cognitive development. If you don't reach by Grade 5 or 6 a certain number of abilities, intellectual and physical abilities, and what they call fine manipulation and so on, and coordination, and if you're not able to make relationships between verb and noun or a series of numbers, you are seriously handicapped, and then . . .

M. O'H.: Are we seriously handicapped if we haven't some kind of development in art? Is that a handicap?

L.B.: No, I can't say that. I have known and you have known a lot of people who have never touched art — in any form — music, plastic arts, or dance, or any form of expression, and have managed to survive. I do know a number of people who can't read or write and they manage to survive. Now, if you can't read or write — are you handicapped? I would say yes, and I guess I would say the same thing with art, but the person with the handicap doesn't know it, he is not aware of what he is lacking — he has developed other capacities and he manages to live.

M. O'H.: Why should we have art in the schools for everyone? We take it for granted in elementary school and to some degree in secondary.

L.B.: Well, it's my opinion it's the only discipline which creates a true relationship which is essential to have between a subject and an object through an intellectual operation. In other words my relationship with a sheet of paper, a musical instrument, is an experience which requires from me two things — skill, I mean fine manipulation, and a certain intellectual knowledge, and this is the best way to apprehend reality. In fact, it's the only way to apprehend reality. If you don't touch hot water, and if you don't think hot water, and if you don't think of heating and all of the implications of this hot water, well you never get the true relationship between you and hot water, but if you do it's the richest experience, it's the ultimate experience.

M. O'H.: You're using the word *intellectual* as a sort of key here. Most people think of the arts as having to do with an emotional development, with the area of feelings.

L.B.: Yes, but I don't — if I had a word to use, and if I could create a new word, I would say intuitive, which is to me a mixture of sure cognitive recognition and emotion. Take the example of the warm water. If you touch the warm water, you may, like the animal, first withdraw your hand rapidly and so on — some reactions are essentially physical — after that some reaction will be essentially

emotional, and then some reactions eventually intellectual, but the whole operation I would say is intuitive. To me that's the particular aspect of our intuition.

M. O'H.: Why should it be the plastic arts that we insist children get involved in? I know they do other art forms too, but is it essential that there be experience in the plastic arts for all human beings as they develop?

L.B.: Well, I would say first it's for practical reasons. The essential artistic relationship is, as I said, subject-object. All music teachers advocate that children should play an instrument — that's really what we are talking about, but for reasons of cost and so on they were limited to singing and learning to read music and so on, which is very often recognized as being very boring except for the few highly motivated. So because there is no object to relate to — well — in our schools mostly, somehow the whole system favoured the plastic arts.

M. O'H.: But you don't see it as essential that they should focus on the plastic arts?

L.B.: No — they don't have to focus on any particular art, if you make sure that the relationship which I talked about, which is in my opinion essential to development and growth, is the relationship subject-object.

M. O'H.: So you want it to be a concrete thing that you touch or see or manipulate; it has to be material.

L.B.: That's right. It has to be material. It cannot be abstract. It's not philosophy. It has to be matter.

Roots yes; progress no

M. O'H.: Thinking of your own art now — if I were to describe it in any basic way, I think of it as being concerned with light and space. These two elements seem to attract you personally very much. How universal is that? Do you think all the arts eventually lead into dealing with something as vast as that — as light or space?

L.B.: Yes, I think that there is no civilization, no forms of art which I have known since I've been interested in light especially, that have not tackled this problem of space, which is the organization of space and also the organization of light. Even in pictures like those of Mondrian which are more an organization of space than light. Today, we recognize that in fact there is a tremendous amount of light in Mondrian's work. And especially when we look at his architecture we finally realize what it's all about. It's a play of light and dark. I have always said that my art started with the Impressionists, but when you speak of that movement and then go into Mondrian's set of values, you end up with optic art which is also the exploitation, again, of light. And if I was to go back and name those

who influenced my thinking most I would go to Latour and then I would go to Rembrandt. But Latour really is the one that influenced me most in that sense — organization of light within a very rigid space.

M. O'H.: Is this experience of being able to go back to earlier periods of art, seeing it, experiencing it — is that a necessary thing for all human beings, do you think?

L.B.: Yes, you have to eventually find your roots. A young man of 30 or so can be a beautiful tree that produces fine fruits, and as soon as this happens you will see him automatically try to find where the roots are. This comes much later in life and experience, but to me it's essential.

M. O'H.: For this reason would you want to include art history of some kind along the way?

L.B.: Yes, because art history has the strange attribute of not being cumulative. The art experience in my opinion is not cumulative. In other words Van Gogh has taken nothing away from Rembrandt, and has added nothing either. To me it's a different experience and it seems that the history of art shows us some kind of horizontal range, pretty much like the sun that never sets at the North Pole — you see it cross all different mountains but it is always going on the horizontal line and comes right back. To me that's art — this is the experience of historicity in art. It's not a sun that goes up and down. It goes around, and from each angle it offers a vision of the world which is different. And it seems that there is room for eternity in that. And this notion of circle brings about the notion of eternal contemplation. You could stop at any of these angles and stay there for ever, and this is to me the type of experience which is unique in art.

M. O'H.: Are you saying then that there is no progress in the arts?

J.B.: That's right. There is no notion of progress. Progress doesn't exist.

M. O'H.: This makes it very different then from science or technology where we think of, say, building a better mouse-trap.

L.B.: That's right — because, in my opinion, science is cumulative. You accumulate the knowledge of your predecessors. You take advantage of their experiences, their mistakes, their good points, and then you go higher. For scientific growth a better image would be vertical growth; or if you want, some kind of a pyramid. Art is not like that. What Van Gogh did helps you not. What your friend's marriage experience is, helps you not. It's a different experience. Sure, there are connections that can be made socially, economically, and this is what usually has been done. In fact, that is not history of art. They've done a lot of sociology through art. Some people have done economics and art. They say you have to be rich, have free time in order to produce art, and they give you ex-

amples of people being primitive, superstitious, ignorant in doing the cave drawings. How do they explain that these are as fine as anything of Rembrandt or Michelangelo?

M. O'H.: So truth doesn't get sharpened the way one thinks of it in science?

L.B.: No. The phenomenon of the *Mona Lisa,* for instance, is a social phenomenon, not an artistic one. It's because the *Mona Lisa* has been placed in such a city as Paris, and a million people go there annually. It would be the same thing for *Guernica.* When *Guernica* goes back to the village in Spain, well, there will be maybe two or three people a month that will visit it, and that takes nothing away from *Guernica,* and the fact that it has been seen by millions adds nothing to it. It's just a social phenomenon — it added to the money for the museum.

Art in societies

M. O'H.: You spent a very long period of time in Africa in the Côte d'Ivoire. Did you experience art in a different way there?

L.B.: Over there, what I've seen is art as I presume it was practised during the 15th and 16th centuries. In other words, the artists are not free. They are part of the social tissue and they must produce. They are supposed to have been given — received from god or the ancestors — special skills which must be turned to the service of the population through religious, civic or other activities. And the artist cannot change the symbols. If you take a statue of the Ivory Coast and you bring it to your home and you look at it, separate from its place of origin, time, and space, it lives by itself. It has the necessary qualities that you require. It's an experience of art in a sense.

M. O'H.: Is the artist less personal than we think of in our tradition in the West?

L.B.: Oh yes! They see the artist like we see the plumber or the electrician. There is no question; you come to my house, you fix up the electricity, you install the wire with your skill, I pay you, and that's it. You have a special skill which the artist would tend to associate with god-given gifts.

M. O'H.: Where do we get this notion then of art as the thing that makes the individual more and more himself, and we expect each artist to produce something that is unique?

L.B.: Well that to me is the true nature of art. This is what the Marxist philosophy has tried to deny as being the most horrible, bourgeois attribute or fault, and for a long time I really thought so. Once you think of it, the artist has in fact a social responsibility to create this unique object. Why does he do it? Because it enriches the vision of the people around him, the society around him. Yet, as I said before, since it is not cumulative, it deprives people of nothing. Nor

does it give people a particular privilege. I see this as, yes, the very strange neutral quality of the art experience. I paint the canvas, I put it up on the wall. You may or may not enjoy it. It adds nothing to the canvas and it withdraws nothing from it. My relationship with the canvas if you like it is not enriched by your liking. It's only my ego that will be flattered, but this is not fundamental. It's really in a way superficial, and to me now it's very clear, it isn't a bourgeois nor a Marxist theory. If an artist is forced to paint his canvas in a certain way, well there is no worse form of slavery in the world and to me it's the ultimate form of slavery. Yet some people might ask me to do a landscape and I may enjoy doing landscape. You know, it's difficult to say what one is being forced to do.

M. O'H.: I'm trying to apply your last statement to your experience of the African artist. Is he a slave in that sense?

L.B.: In that sense, yes and no. The only explanation why I say no is the following. The chief, whoever is the responsible citizen in the village, will come to the artist and say, "Do me a mask for a wedding ceremony." All that he says is, "Do me a mask," but the artist knows already that he has to put, let's say, 3 triangles on the forehead. The artist may not even know what they mean; all he has to do is put 3 triangles on the forehead. The rest of the mask is his own creativity, so I would say it's a kind of give and take.

M. O'H.: Is he like the icon makers or the medieval painters who were using their symbols?

L.B.: But didn't know what they meant?

M.O'H.: Perhaps they knew, or perhaps they didn't.

L.B.: Yes, I guess it's the same. I do know artists, primitive artists like Villeneuve, who use symbols and don't always know what they mean. He has done some kind of Annunciation and you have the angel with the lily. He thought that was the symbol of Quebec or something. He doesn't know what it means but he uses it. In Africa there were a certain number of symbols that you were obliged to use. They pay the artist, the village pays the artist, for his work. As in Russia — I say this, but I have no proof of it — they say that the man must picture the wheat grower and it must be done in a glorious way, Breton style.

M. O'H.: I want to come back to your notion of the work of art as something neutral, that is not changed by me and that will remain there no matter how I react to it. It doesn't demand anything of me in a sense. And yet I am thinking of the numbers of times people get very furious when they look at a work of art, abstract works especially. You see people getting very angry in front of them. Is it ironic that they would get so angry at something that is just "there"?

L.B.: Well, yes, in the sense that it's again the relation subject-object. Now if the object can find itself a subject, which is a sympathetic viewer or a sympathetic reader, or theater-goer, there is a new community made, which is a new relationship. This relationship can be of two natures. The object can be rejected, or it can be accepted. But as I said before, the work of art is neutral. If you don't like Hamlet, it does nothing to the theatre piece, *Hamlet.* I'm not even thinking of Shakespeare. I'm thinking of the object. If you hate it enough to burn it up, of course . . but even then, it seems someone will have saved the original copy! You will remember in the thirties they were burning books in Germany — there was always someone who managed to save the object, and this relationship is to me extraordinary.

M. O'H.: You imply that art can, in the case say of theatre, create a new community, a new relationship.

L.B.: Yes, a new relationship. But to me this relationship is what I call the Ideal relationship, a communication. In other words when you go to the theatre you place yourself in a situation of learning — of acceptance if you accept the play. If you go in and if you have studied the parts, then you reach the stage of having a dialogue with the object, and to me that's a much higher relationship.

M. O'H.: Can we have this dialogue with a painting as well?

L.B.: Oh yes! the same type. You have people who love art in museums so much, it's almost a person-to-person relationship. They clean the works, they repair them, they note them, they give them names and numbers, they classify them, they do all kinds of things which the artist must at least admire. And it may be done with paintings, books, or musical instruments or whatever.

M. O'H.: So you see the museum as having the function of being the part of society that shows this dialogue?

L.B.: Yes, as being essential, because some manifestations of art (because of their neutral quality) would remain buried for eternity. Nothing would happen. Yet if you take them out and display them, people seem to believe that miracles could happen. When you think of barbaric societies, or barbaric invasions, they always destroy the works of art. They melt the gold, the jewellery, and so on. This is very interesting symbolically. Barbarism is the force that destroys whatever is unique.

Teaching a freedom

M. O'H.: I know in your own philosophy of art, your theory is quite specific and I know also that it comes out of two different schools that were important in the development of Quebec art — we had Borduas and the "automatistes," and you were one of the founders of the "plasticiens." Where do you stand in relation to these two movements now?

L.B.: A movement in art is only in my opinion valid if it allows two things. The first, I would say, and the most important, is to influence society in such a way as to permit the artist to attain a greater freedom. This is the first thing. When you think of Borduas, all that he asked for was freedom, and in fact the whole movement was against the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which I think is a noble and honourable institution, but at that same time it had somehow too much power over the life of the artists; so this movement was to acquire a greater freedom. In our case — the "Plasticiens" — we were to say as a group of the acquired freedom, "We're going to use it." And we did use it! I would say secondly — which is very, very important — these movements are only valid if they allow the individual to eventually become himself, liberated from undue pressures.

M. O'H.: So the movements are stepping stones for the individual artists?

L.B.: Yes, essentially, they are a period of crisis. I always associate with a period of crisis. And during these crises, which are usually brought about by society, mostly by conservatism, then the artist has to regroup and he must fight back in order to gain again his liberty.

M. O'H.: Is there any implication in that for education? If you think of art in the schools, do you see any parallels?

L.B.: Well, it's very difficult. The only thing that our society can do and our school system can do is to try to give to the teacher as much liberty as the artist has, but it is hardly possible for our or any society to let its school system go. In a way, they should. Personally I would think that if a society could give complete freedom to all its teachers this society would be one of the most admirable and advanced societies. The same way, I would use another example. If you can give every man in your country an automatic gun and there is no more crime and democracy keeps going as if nothing had happened, well then you have a very beautiful country to live in. In Quebec anyway, I think that the act of teaching, the act of any real teaching, is free. The teacher can teach the way he wants. His freedom is limited in the sense that he cannot teach what he wants and in the number of disciplines he can offer. But if I was to teach again — or if I was a teacher, I would certainly insist on fighting anything that could even begin to touch my liberty as a professional pedagogue.

M. O'H.: You have taught, I know, very young children, you've taught adolescents, and you've taught adults. Did you find the processes very different in each case — or would you say they had more in common than they had differences?

L.B.: Well, what they have in common is the joy and love of creation, of a relationship between spirit and matter which they control themselves. To me it's a great joy which makes time and space disappear for a moment. And this to me is

one of the greatest joys. I have had young children and adolescents at times in their "privileged moments." I had to kick them out of the studio; they wanted to stay at all costs. Nothing could take them away from what they were doing. So to me they were experiencing something.

The other thing is what I mentioned before. In the elementary school you have to lead the children. For the adolescent I would say we should be next to him and work with him in the old tradition of the master of the Middle Ages: "I want to show you how to cut the stone, you do it like this and you do it like that. A nose is done like that." I wouldn't go as far as that, but I would even bring back the old plaster casts in High School any time and I am sure the students would grow. You wouldn't think of a hockey coach not being able to skate well and play hockey well in high school. You need almost a professional hockey player to teach hockey in high school. The same for art. With adults, you have to be behind them. All they need is you to push them, to encourage them. You criticize, you try to be logical. So it's three different experiences, but the joy of doing is the same.

M. O'H.: You yourself — have you had any great teachers?

L.B.: Yes, I had two whom I remember very clearly. I had Jock Macdonald — I guess he was one of the first non-objective painters out in the West. He lived mostly in Victoria. He taught in Toronto. And I had another, Carl Schaefer. What he did to me, Macdonald, is that he made me realize that the flow, the natural flow of my intuition or inspiration had to be obeyed, had to be permitted to get out; and Carl Schaefer is the one who showed me that once it's out, you have to control it. You have to — it's not as if, because you have a lot of water, the tap has to be opened full all the time. It splashes everyone around the kitchen and that's no good. These two men really marked me. A third was André Lhote in Europe. He was a specialist in Egyptology. He wrote thick books about Egyptian art and he's the one that at that time gave me the notion of roots. I was too young, but I got it there. It was much later that I tried, in fact very recently, to find out where all this comes from.

M. O'H.: But you recognized that he planted that interest.

L.B.: Yes. I was very surprised at the amount of time he would spend in painting and the amount of time he would spend in research — time, money and effort, because he had to go to Egypt all the time and travel and was very, very serious.

M. O'H.: It's interesting that in each case you mention the influence they had on you, but you don't define it as a stylistic influence. You don't paint like any of those three artists.

L.B.: No, that's right. It's because of this very profound recognition — we say in French (in Québec it's a very popular expression) "Prends-toi pas pour un autre." This expression has a negative connotation, but if you turn it around it says "Take yourself for what you are." Even if I try to imitate, it's impossible. There

is enough of me — it's so anchored in myself that it's impossible for me to think otherwise. In other words I am convinced that I have inside me the necessary forces to paint, and the energy and the intuition, imagination, all the things that are recognized as being needed to make pictures, and I would never try to imitate anybody. It's impossible.

M. O'H.: Do you think it is characteristic of a great art teacher that he doesn't make his students feel that they must imitate in order to achieve?

L.B.: This is the point where I am so puzzled. To discover oneself! You can discover yourself through a certain number of activities, and as long as you know that you're learning you are in a situation of apprenticeship. If you know that, then to me imitation is worthwhile. At the age of 13 or 14 or 15 because of male and female physical changes the whole metabolism is in change, and the adolescent is insecure. They need somebody next to them, which means that you take them by the hand once in a while. You don't open the road as for the little child where you know you're in front to make sure the branches don't hit him in the face — you don't do that. You're next to him, and you show him certain techniques and then certain attitudes towards respect of the material, respect of the tools, respect of methodology. You start from the rough; you start with the broom, finish with the needle. And this assures him, and this also is a reminiscence for a short period of the way he learned to speak from his mother, and this I would like our art teachers to be aware of and do something about. I don't think we do.