

Commentary

Painting Terrorism: The October Crisis Canvases of Dennis Tourbin and the Lessons of Art for Political Expression under Watchful Conditions

Christopher Dornan
Carleton University

The October Crisis was a violent blister on Canadian history and Québec nationalism alike. There was, on the one hand, the murderous fanaticism of the FLQ; and on the other, the authoritarian response of the state, which rounded up young people in Montréal in police vans, put other young people with machine guns on the streets of Ottawa, and promised worse if everyone did not behave. “Just watch me,” warned Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. If there is such a thing as charismatic panic, this is what it looked like.

To his core a peaceful man, Dennis Tourbin was profoundly shaken by those fraught weeks in 1970. He fell on them as an artist. He was interested in other subjects before he turned his attention to the October Crisis, and he went on to other ideas afterward. But there was an interval in which he produced his small black and white paintings in large numbers and his large colourful paintings in small numbers. The monochrome paintings document the October Crisis like pages being spat from an office printer. The big colour canvases are the size of flat-screen TVs. These paintings and this subject matter made his reputation as an artist.



Artist: Dennis Tourbin, 1991, October Fragments. Photo credit: Dany Custodio

The October Crisis, for most who lived through it, was experienced via bulletins, images, footage, hysteria. One of the goals of the FLQ was to wrest control of the media, to command total attention, to force the newspapers and networks to publish its angry

Christopher Dornan is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, 4306 River Building, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6. Email: Chris.Dornan@carleton.ca.

manifesto, a show of how it had humiliated a state power. Tourbin made the media representation of this traumatic political episode the focus of his regard.

His style of painting was especially suited to capturing the stream of late-twentieth-century media consciousness. Newspapers and news broadcasts were themselves a species of pastiche. Murder and politics occupied the same daily bundle of print as the horoscopes, the supermarket flyers, and the comic strips. News has always been a near-irrational jumble of facts, observations, arguments, contradiction, and advertising, all clamouring to set the metronome of what matters. Tourbin's October Crisis paintings are an attempt to capture all that and nail it to a wall. They amount to a body of work, coherently arrayed. They are supposed to hang together rather than hang separately, as though the fragments of headlines and photos depicted in each painting add up to a narrative.

The work of an artist now dead, the paintings are a form of punctuation between transience and permanence. Nothing lasts forever. Even when archived, newspapers and broadcasts are what the librarians call ephemera. Tourbin was trying to fix the ephemera in time, to commit them to canvas, to inject them with the status of an installation in an art gallery—to give them the stamp of, if not permanence, then endurance.

Look at the difference between the small black and white paintings and the large, colourful canvases. The small paintings mimic newspapers of the day—big-font headlines, a top-of-the-fold picture, and columns of text, all devoid of colour. The vivid pastels of the large canvases are like no newspaper ever published. The colours are cartoonish, the colours of the kindergarten. They are like ransom notes designed by an advertising agency.

Some of Tourbin's earlier pieces are explicitly jokes. He painted "television" not by depicting a screen-in-a-box in brushstrokes on a two-dimensional surface but by slathering paint on a cast-off portable TV set. With its rabbit ears and confusion of primary colours, the work looked like *Sputnik* stuffed into a psychedelic valise. He did the same thing to newspaper vending boxes. Brash paint on the outside was a form of tagging the paper-and-ink contents inside, drawing the eye to the point of purchase, to the box. It was an exercise in benign vandalism.

In 1995, Tourbin was to have his vandalism displayed in the National Gallery of Canada—a career achievement, a validation of his talent. Had the show been mounted, it would have attracted its measure of attention. Paintings of newspaper coverage of the October Crisis? In the National Gallery? There would have been high-pitched chatter among the commentariat and then that would have been that.

But the exhibition was cancelled because its timing was impolitic. With Québec about to vote on a referendum on secession, for the National Gallery to mount an installation reminding everyone of the death of Pierre Laporte—his corpse in the trunk of a car at the hands of extremists in the name of Québec—would have incinerated careers in the executive ranks of the National Gallery. To cancel was to court a different scandal, one in which everyone kept their jobs and the art became all the more piquant.

The affront to the artist was a Möbius strip for media attention. The work became celebrated not because it was displayed in the National Gallery but because it was *not*

displayed in the National Gallery. There it was, gone. Dennis Tourbin: the show he never gave.

The National Gallery delivered the bad news by leaving him a voice mail message, but the people on the line kept talking when they thought they had hung up. His answering machine recorded them discussing how he might react, allowing him to eavesdrop on people talking behind his back. Not only did he overhear something he was not intended to, he had a recording of it that he could replay publicly. As always, Dennis Tourbin was ahead of his time.

Imagine an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* in 2050. An original Tourbin found in the attic will have sticker value because it will have a story attached to it. Once upon a time, this artist was scandalous. He is implicated in history.

Tourbin was fascinated by how the media cut experience into shards and then repackage them as though they make a coherent whole, when of course they do not. So what is the cultural status of painting—fixing an image in time—when images of moments in time are without number? Why tear strips from newspapers then paint depictions of those fragments? Why paint images of images? Why not go directly to collage—just affix ribbons of newsprint onto the canvas in a form of papier mâché?

Because that would be to eliminate the painting, and the painting was paramount. Tourbin not only wanted us to look at the headlines and the flow of words, he also wanted us to notice the paintings. We react to a startling image differently from the way we become absorbed in a book. And so, in that playful way of his, he made canvases that were nothing but bold images of painted words on a flat surface.

There are right-wing news outlets and left-wing news outlets, tabloids and broadsheets, public broadcasters, private broadcasters, guerrilla digital upstarts, and emergent news media empires. They all squabble and compete with one another for audience attention and advertising revenue. But they all share a set of steadfast, deadpan conventions about how things in the world should be depicted—strict parameters like the ropes and rules of a boxing ring, another sort of canvas.

From *Bloomberg* to *BuzzFeed*, *Vice Media* to *Al Jazeera*, they are all unrepentant Realists. There is no such thing as an Impressionist newscast, a Cubist front page, a Futurist wire service, a Dadaist foreign bureau.

Documenting the October Crisis, Dennis Tourbin was painting an op art newspaper, page by page, in order to hang it in a gallery.

In a free society, journalism and gallery art are two distinct strains of exhibition and expression. The gallery is a physical space in which the artist is afforded near-absolute liberty while you, the spectator, can say whatever you like as long as you do not raise your voice. Like the library, the art gallery is a place of enforced quiet, a place of murmurs. Journalism is not nearly so tranquil. Journalism is democracy conducted at the top of its lungs, trigger happy for controversy. Tourbin smashed the two together as though in a particle collider.

The paintings were never intended as a political provocation. If anything, they were an appeal for calm delivered after the fact. But they were also a sly reminder that gallery art oddly mutes the spectators on whose attention the art depends, while the news media in the 1970s screamed headlines at people who could not scream back.

A gallery exhibition courts the gaze of spectators even as watchful attendants keep an eye on the spectators. Patrons are allowed to talk openly about how they believe the paintings are hanging in the wrong order, but try to rearrange them and security guards will lunge at you with Tasers.

Art is something that can be defaced and so must be protected. Journalism is well nigh impossible to deface. Burning books or paintings is the work of a hateful society; burning a newspaper is just a means to light kindling. The end product of journalism is yours to do with as you please. Paint all the portable TVs you want.

The closest one might get to defacing journalism is the type of vandalism Tourbin depicts in his *October Crisis* series, in which kidnapping and assassination were used to seize control of the media, to make everyone pay attention. “Just watch me.”

Those days even murderous fanatics needed the centralized media to get their word out. When there were only a handful of newspaper and broadcasting companies, having one’s manifesto read over the airwaves was the first and sometimes the only goal of every late-twentieth-century underground cell from the Symbionese Liberation Army to the Baader-Meinhof Gang. Today’s more up-to-date extremist has a different media strategy.

If he were alive today, how might Tourbin have painted the here and now of perpetual threat and permanent surveillance? How does one capture the Twitter reaction to atrocity? The arraignment of radicalized youth? The security bill drafted in haste? The dull hour-upon-hour CCTV footage of empty night-time parking lots?

Even in a fishbowl of full disclosure in which everyone records every passing moment and shares this unfolding record in real time with everyone else—the Book of Faces—there are still places of public assembly where we, the people, are not allowed to take pictures, while cameras hidden in the ceiling take pictures of us. The casino, the bank, the art gallery. The airport security kraal especially.

Airports the world over are transit points, waiting rooms, shopping concourses, and food courts where passengers are well advised to watch their tongues. They are the dead zones of free societies. In the shuffling cordons leading to the X-ray machines and the full body scanners, the very place designed to protect us from terrorism, the mere mention of terrorism is enough to trigger the attention of the mall cops deputized to monitor us. How does one paint terrorism in such circumstances, when even taking a snapshot is prohibited? Setting up an easel is out of the question.

And now that images of beheadings are an internet recruitment tool for extremists, what, today, would be the artistic depiction of terrorism so inflammatory that it could not be shown?

Dennis Tourbin died in 1998 at the age of 51. A retrospective of his work was exhibited at Brock University’s Rodman Hall Art Centre in 2012, and another staged by the Carleton University Art Gallery in 2014.

Reference

Tourbin, Dennis. (1991). *October Fragments*. [Acrylic on canvas]. © CARCC, 2016. Collection of Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University.