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**RITA LETENDRE** was born of Abenaki and Quebecois parents in Drummondville in 1928 and has lived in Toronto since late 1969. Her painting career began in Montreal in the 1950s, when she associated with Quebec's prominent abstract artist groups Les Automatistes and Les Plasticiens. Often the sole female artist in their group shows, she broke away from their approach to painting, finding it restrictive. Seeking to express the full energy of life and harness in her powerful gestures an intense spiritual force, Letendre worked with various materials including oils, pastels, and acrylics, using her hands, palette knife, brushes and uniquely the airbrush, which she began using in 1971. She received the Order of Canada in 2005, has completed commissions across Canada and the United States, and has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

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RITA LETENDRE  
TORONTO PUBLIC ART

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BY ADAM LAUDER

YYZ

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# THE ARTIST'S EXPLOSIVE VECTORS ARE EVERY BIT THE TRAJECTORIES OF A DAWNING SPACE AGE AS THEY ARE THE ENDURING SIGNPOSTS OF NON-CARTESIAN TERRESTRIAL WAYFINDING PRACTICES

For years, Rita Letendre's public art cut radiant vectors across Toronto's urban grid. After decades living in Montréal and California, the artist had relocated to Toronto in November 1969.<sup>1</sup> Through a combination of public and private commissions for monumental murals and large-scale canvases, she quickly made her mark on the notoriously generic public spaces of her adoptive hometown.<sup>2</sup> By the decade's close, her signature "arrow" paintings—iridescent, hard-edge abstractions—were a daily sight for thousands of Torontonians. Yet through a combination of misadventure and neglect, Letendre's once ubiquitous and cherished public art works began to disappear, beginning with *Sunrise* (1971), her dazzling, seven-floor mural for Ryerson's Neill-Wycik residence, which was permanently obscured when an adjacent 25-story residential tower was erected in 1978,<sup>3</sup> leaving only a 10-inch gap between the two buildings.

The titular sunrise of Letendre's luminous mural may be a nod to her Indigenous heritage, her mother being of Abenaki/Québécois ancestry. "Dawn is special to the Wabanaki [a Confederacy of five northeastern nations including the Abenaki]," notes scholar and tribal member Jeanne Morningstar Kent, "because we are the

'People of the Dawnland,' where sunlight first reaches North America each morning.<sup>4</sup> Other Toronto-area public art works by Letendre, notably *Tecumseth* (1972) and *Irowakan* (1977), likewise gesture toward this personal history. Duane Linklater, a contemporary artist of Omaskêko Cree heritage whose projects excavate subterranean narratives of Indigenous presence and resilience, has recently interpreted the disappearance of Letendre's public art as a symptom of Indigenous peoples' historic dispossession.<sup>5</sup> Yet the artist is wary of being pigeonholed, or misrepresented by non-Indigenous commentators.<sup>6</sup> When asked about her identity, she has responded evasively "I am myself, Rita."<sup>7</sup>

Wanda Nanibush, Curator, Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, has argued persuasively for recovering Letendre's Indigenous roots, tracing the artist's high-contrast palette and recurring arrow and wedge motifs to "a long Indigenous lineage of abstraction."<sup>8</sup> Notably, Letendre's hard-edge paintings radiate an "endless dualism"<sup>9</sup> reminiscent of the symmetrical foundations of Abenaki art.<sup>10</sup> Interpreted through an Indigenous lens, Letendre's signature arrow motif might symbolize "direction."<sup>11</sup>

The artist's explosive vectors are every bit the trajectories of a dawning space age as they are the enduring signposts of non-Cartesian terrestrial wayfinding practices: "[With the arrow paintings] I was influenced by going to the moon, going into space," she recalls in a new video interview recorded for the exhibition that this text accompanies, adding that "When we started going into space, I got so excited."<sup>12</sup> This celestial orientation aligns Letendre's arrow paintings with a broader "1960s 'cosmic' zeitgeist" associated with the experimental films of Michael Snow and the visionary media speculations of Marshall McLuhan, thus situating Letendre as an important precursor of more recent Indigenous futurisms.<sup>13</sup> If 1960s' artists' cosmic aspirations were symptomatic of a generational quest for identity, the "one-way trip" described by Letendre's ballistic abstractions anticipate the unilateral orientation of the artist theorized by contemporary non-philosopher François Laruelle, whose "non-aesthetics" rejects the specular politics of representation.<sup>14</sup> Laruelle instead postulates a conjugation of disparate materials resonant with Letendre's circumvention of categories.

Fittingly, for *Sunforce* (1965), her first outdoor mural, Letendre employed an epoxy

paint reserved, until then, "mainly for spacecraft engines."<sup>15</sup> Her choice of a non-traditional medium may have been influenced by the mural's locale: California State University, Long Beach being situated at the centre of a then burgeoning aerospace industry.<sup>16</sup> Fortuitously (as it turned out), neither epoxy nor the formidable scale of the 7 x 6-metre *Sunforce* would support the impastoed facture that had been a trademark of Letendre's foregoing abstractions, forcing a technical breakthrough that cleared a path for the crisp edges and uniform paint application of the subsequent arrow paintings.<sup>17</sup>

Letendre was invited to produce *Sunforce* in conjunction with the 1965 California International Sculpture Symposium, a ground-breaking event whose artist-industry partnerships cleared a path for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's renowned Art & Technology Program, whose contributors were likewise chosen by curator Maurice Tuchman. It may have been the participation of Kosso, Letendre's sculptor husband, that first brought her into Tuchman's sphere, but she shared the curator's fascination with science and technology: "If I had not been a painter," she reflects, "I would have been a scientist"; adding, "if I had had money to go to university."<sup>18</sup> Growing up in an

impoverished family of seven on the outskirts of Drummondville, Québec, a university education was, however, sadly out of the question.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the artist’s attraction to new media and techniques—from epoxy paint to computer aided design and drafting software—can be traced to her father’s work as an auto mechanic. (Letendre recalls that her father, who was of Mohawk/Québécois ancestry, “wanted to be French.”)<sup>20</sup> Whatever the case may be, an accident in her father’s auto shop proved life-altering: mangling one of her fingers, and sending the young Letendre to stay with her maternal grandparents for a period of convalescence that ended up lasting several years.<sup>21</sup> (This injury also prevented her from studying piano, thereby forcing the artist to channel her lifelong passion for music into her painting.) Letendre recalls a subsequent childhood

## AND GRANDMOTHER SHOW[ED] ME THE BEAUTY OF IT: INSTEAD OF BEING AFRAID, TO ADMIRE AND LOVE IT. ... NEVER BE AFRAID. SEE THING[S] AS THEY ARE.

incident, while picking strawberries at her grandmother’s home, as decisive in shaping her worldview:

I was with my mother picking strawberries in a field in the country, and a storm started, and it became [a] thunder[storm]. It was not far away from my grandmother’s home, and so we went to my grandmother’s home. And I was *terrified*. And grandmother show[ed] me the beauty of it: instead of being afraid, to admire and love it. And I think she was certainly one of the most important thing[s] in my life. Never be afraid. *See* thing[s] as they are.<sup>22</sup>

This dramatic event ignited a tireless inquiry into the nature of things that may account for the more prominent sense of structure evident in Letendre’s early painting compared to those of fellow second-generation Automatistes (followers of the revolutionary non-figurative painter and anti-clerical pamphleteer, Paul-Émile Borduas). It was Letendre’s keen plastic sense that brought her to the attention of Rodolphe de Repentigny, the chief theorist of the rival Plasticien movement, who signed his own canvases under the *nom de plume* Jauran. De Repentigny was an early and eloquent champion of the emerging painter. Yet today the artist is quick to distance herself from his geometric Neo-Plasticism, with its roots in the austere modernism of Piet Mondrian: “I reinterpret[ed] geometry ... I’m using structure, but not geometry.”<sup>23</sup> As Anne-Marie Ninacs emphasizes, Letendre “remained faithful to the teachings of Paul-Émile Borduas,”<sup>24</sup> an ardent proponent of “spontan[eity],”<sup>25</sup> even if she soon broke with his gesturalist technique.

Art historian Sandra Paikowsky notes that the artist’s production of the late 1950s was emblematic of the new spirit of “pluralism” which pervaded the post-Automatiste generation;<sup>26</sup> but Letendre’s synthesis of Automatiste gesturalism and Plasticien form was always singular.<sup>27</sup> Her early disrespect for limiting labels set the stage for an exploration of Zen philosophy, whose *kōans*—cryptic exchanges between master and student intended to provoke satori, or enlightenment—explode the dualistic constraints of conventional logic. Zennist non-duality may have offered Letendre a framework for negotiating her lived experience of cultural hybridity, as she explored aerospace imagery and materials in parallel with her Indigenous cultural inheritance.<sup>28</sup>

Rejecting static symmetry, Letendre’s arrows define a non-dual “parallelism”<sup>29</sup> that explodes the parallel postulate undergirding Euclidean space. Like certain cut-out paintings by Jackson Pollock, the dazzling iridescence of Letendre’s arrows stages a liberatory “tearing” of the modernist grid.<sup>30</sup> The vibratory rays of her hard-edge paintings recall Borduas’s relentless pursuit of “the infinity of everything.”<sup>31</sup>

Two of Letendre’s most significant public art works—*Sunforce* and *Joy*, her 1978 skylight for Glencairn subway station in

Toronto—suggest analogies with the “gateless gate” invoked by Paul Reps’s classic anthology of Zen parables, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (1957), as a metaphor for the *kōan* as a gateway to enlightenment requiring active audience participation.<sup>32</sup> Writing in reference to *Sunforce*, which is sited on an elevated crosswalk between buildings on the Long Beach campus of the California State University, Letendre has commented that,

I chose the wall over the passageway because I want people walking in and out of my painting. It must not be static—it must be dynamic with action and an interaction that continues in the mind of the spectator.<sup>33</sup>

*Joy* would revisit the interactive dynamics of *Sunforce* to reimagine the fluid space of transit animated by the earlier mural on

an even grander scale. At 54 by 6.4 metres, the majestic Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) subway station skylight—her only publicly funded commission—has been justifiably likened to a “cathedral.”<sup>34</sup> The winning entry in a 1975 open competition, *Joy*’s 318 individual panels of airbrushed tempered glass were installed between 1976 and 1977.<sup>35</sup> If, as Wanda Nanibush observes, Letendre’s adoption of the airbrush in 1971 supported her production of “mature colour field abstraction[s],”<sup>36</sup> *Joy*’s luminous, spray-painted canopy actualized the American colour field painter Jules Olitski’s seemingly implausible ambition “to spray colour in the air and have it remain there.”<sup>37</sup>

Like *Sunforce*, *Joy* defined a vibrant public space of “continuous action” that was also a powerful testament to the enduring presence, resilience and creativity of Indigenous people.<sup>38</sup> But after years of neglect that resulted in extensive weather damage, Letendre insisted that the ruined skylight be de-installed in the early 1990s.<sup>39</sup> *Joy* thereby joined a growing roster of public art works by Letendre that had either been de-installed, destroyed or obscured: from *Upward Dream* (1980)—commissioned by Omnitown Developments in response to the public outcry sparked by the corporation’s occlusion of *Sunrise*, only to be removed in turn when the masonry of the eastern wall of Neill-Wycik tower on which it was painted proved faulty—to *Urtu* (1972), which graced the Davenport Road office of Dr. Stanley Horowitz until it was painted over in the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> The current whereabouts of other public paintings—including the six-metre-wide *Now* (1971), commissioned by Greenwin Corporation for its Berkshire House residential and office complex at Eglinton and Yonge—remain unknown at the time of writing.<sup>41</sup> The monumental (3.1 x 15.6-metre) 1974 canvas *Irowakan*, originally installed in the lower banking floor of the Royal Bank Plaza in Toronto’s financial district, fared slightly better: after being transferred to Royal Bank’s Montréal office at Place Ville-Marie in 1985, it was acquired by the Joliette Art Museum in 2004.<sup>42</sup>

*Rita Letendre: Toronto Public Art* is the first exhibition focused on Letendre’s public art in Toronto. It reunites the recently-restored *Sunrise II* (1972)—an imposing sequel to the obscured Neill-Wycik mural, originally installed in the lobby of Greenwin Square on Bloor Street—with *Ixtepec* (1977), the basis for Letendre’s forthcoming reinterpretation of her 1978 skylight for Glencairn subway station, which is slated for completion in 2019.<sup>43</sup> Supplementary documents include plans for both the original and forthcoming Glencairn projects, as well as a new video interview with the now 90-year-old artist. The exhibition temporarily reactivates the publicness of Letendre’s Toronto public art as a speculative space of remembrance, reconciliation and futurity.

1 Georgiana Uhlyarik, “Letendre in Toronto,” in *Rita Letendre: Fire & Light*, eds. Wanda Nanibush and Georgiana Uhlyarik (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017), 86.

2 See Luis Jacob, “The Ward, Toronto: A Blank Space,” *Canadian Art* 32, no. 4 (2016): 90–91.

3 See Gunda Lambton, *Stealing the Show: Seven Women Artists in Canadian Public Art* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 56.

4 Jeanne Morningstar Kent, *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), 49. “[C]alled Wabanaki (People of the Dawn) by their inland neighbors, for each morning the first sunlight on the continent belonged to them. And they belonged to it, for they believed that Kisuhs, the great Sky Fire, was the ultimate spirit-power in a world in which everything was imbued with a sacred force.” Bunny McBride, *Women of the Dawn* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 7.

5 See Linklater qtd. in Adam Lauder, “‘The World Must Have Poetry’: Rita Letendre’s Public Art Interventions,” *Canadian Art* 32, no. 4 (2016): 116.

6 See “Painter Rita Letendre on her Work in 1969,” Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, December 28, 1969, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/896872003631>.

7 Letendre qtd. in Lambton, *Stealing the Show*, 51.

8 Wanda Nanibush, “Rita Letendre: Fire & Light,” in *Rita Letendre: Fire & Light*, eds. Wanda Nanibush and Georgiana Uhlyarik (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017), 20.

9 Letendre qtd. in Sandra Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” in *Rita Letendre: The Montréal Years 1953-1963* (Montréal: Concordia Art Gallery, 1989), 30.

10 “To guarantee symmetry in our designs, thin pieces of birch bark were folded several times and then bitten, creating small punctured holes. ... Folding the bark in this way is similar to the way people create cut-paper snowflakes.” Kent, *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art*, 24-25. The “acute black ray” that anchors many of Letendre’s arrow paintings recalls the “dark surface” of “spring-peeled birch bark” or “black broadcloth” of woodland clothing that serve as supports for much Abenaki expression. Anne-Marie Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” in *Rita Letendre: Aux couleurs du jour* (Québec, QC: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2003), 134; Kent, *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art*, 40, 27.

11 Kent, *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art*, 47.

12 Rita Letendre, “Rita Letendre,” video interview by Adam Lauder, July 13, 2017. “The force of life is marvelous to me. We see the same force in the sea, the sun, all around us. It is the same strength that makes human beings dream—to want to go to the moon—to accomplish the impossible.” Letendre qtd. in Elise Emery, “Sunforce,” 1965,” *Press Telegram* (Long Beach), July 21, 1965, n. pag.

13 David Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision and the Posthuman* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 118.

14 Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” 136; François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction: A Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012), 1.

15 Lambton, *Stealing the Show*, 55.

16 See Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, eds., *Art, Women, California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Rachel Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles: Materials, Processes, and the Birth of West Coast Minimalism* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2016).

17 Anne-Marie Ninacs also attributes the mutations in Letendre’s practice that led to the arrows to the artist’s association with the Tamarind printmaking workshop upon arriving in California. See Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” 134; see also Lambton, *Stealing the Show*, 55.

18 “Science always fascinated me,” Letendre continues; “knowledge of the world, knowledge of life, the way life evolved. ... If I had been from a rich family, and going to school and university, I don’t know if I would have been a painter: maybe I would have been, but I would certainly want to be a scientist also.” Letendre, “Rita Letendre.”

19 See Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” 6.

20 Letendre, “Rita Letendre.”

21 See Lambton, *Stealing the Show*, 51.

22 This memory bears some striking similarities to a Zennist parable annotated, according to Anne-Marie Ninacs, in Letendre’s well-used copy of Reps’s anthology *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*:

A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Muju, “A Parable,” in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and pre-Zen Writings*, ed. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1957), 32. See also Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” 137.

23 Letendre, “Rita Letendre.” “While Letendre herself did not subscribe to de Stijl flatness, the tempering of illusionistic space was certainly important for attaining harmonious colour juxtapositions and her increased use of white provided a new type of spatial field.” Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” 15.

24 Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” 136.

25 Paul-Émile Borduas, “Refus Global,” in *Refus global et autres écrits: essais*, ed. André-G. Bourassa and Gilles Lapointe (Montréal: L’Hexagone, 1997), 72.

26 Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” 19.

27 In fact, it is arguably Letendre’s colourism, and the interactivity of works such as *Sunforce* and *Joy*, rather than her occasional deployment of geometry, that aligns her work with a generation of “post-Plasticiens” who “pursue[d] new colour-based, dynamic ways of engaging the viewer,” notably Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant. Roald Nasgaard, “The Plasticiens and Beyond,” in *The Plasticiens and Beyond: Montreal, 1955-1970* (Markham, ON: Varley Art Gallery of Markham; Québec, QC: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2013), 14.

28 Paikowsky dates the beginnings of Letendre’s investigation of her Indigenous heritage to 1961: “It was at this time that Letendre became more interested in her own aboriginal Indian origins which she has said was prompted by her new interest in Mexican and Pre-Columbian art.” Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” 29. It is important to note that Abenaki art itself manifests a longstanding condition of hybridity: “Because of the reciprocal influences,” notes Kent, “there is difficulty in drawing a line between designs copied from European work.” Kent, *The Visual Language of Wabanaki Art*, 40. “Nuns ... taught our young women embroidery, and we taught them beading. The result was a blending of cultural designs.” Ibid., 22.

29 Letendre qtd. in Paikowsky, “Rita Letendre,” 30.

30 Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 282; see also Adam Lauder, “Rita Letendre: Confronting the Grid,” *Millions*, no. 2 (2013): 32-27. “Rays and radiations appeared. She mixed her colours with powder of mother of pearl in order to intensify the iridescence of the shafts of light radiating across the whole surface of her canvases.” Gilles Hénault qtd. in *Rita Letendre* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1974), n. pag.

31 Borduas qtd. in Ninacs, “The Teaching of life,” 132. “Letendre’s contrasts of deep, cool blues with radiant red and orange have an expansive quality of the infinite that cannot be contained.” Nanibush, “Rita Letendre,” 18.

32 See Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, “The Gateless Gate,” in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and pre-Zen Writings*, ed. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1957), 89-131.

33 Letendre qtd. in Emery, “Sunforce,” n. pag.

34 See Lambton: *Stealing the Show*, 50, 61; Jeanne Parkin qtd. in Lambton, *Stealing the Show*, 60.

35 Lambton: *Stealing the Show*, 61.

36 Nanibush, “Rita Letendre,” 18; see also Ninacs, “The Teaching of Life,” 135.

37 Kenworth Moffett, “The Sculpture of Jules Olitski,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 8 (1969): 367.

38 Letendre qtd. in Emery, “Sunforce,” n. pag.

39 “Procurement Authorization: Glencairn Skylight Replacement, Contract A11-5,” Toronto Transit Commission, July 12, 2017, [https://www.ttc.ca/About\\_the\\_TTC/Commission\\_reports\\_and\\_information/Commission\\_meetings/2017/July\\_12/Reports/7\\_Procurement\\_Authorization\\_Glencairn\\_Skylight\\_Replacement\\_C.pdf](https://www.ttc.ca/About_the_TTC/Commission_reports_and_information/Commission_meetings/2017/July_12/Reports/7_Procurement_Authorization_Glencairn_Skylight_Replacement_C.pdf).

40 See Uhlyarik, “Letendre in Toronto,” 98.

41 See Uhlyarik, “Letendre in Toronto,” 96. Other Toronto area public art works by Letendre that are currently missing in action include two commissions by J.D.S. Investments: the 1972 *Tecumseth*, originally installed at the Sheridan Mall in Pickering, and a series of paintings installed at 1000 Finch Avenue West. See Lambton: *Stealing the Show*, 57.

42 See Lambton: *Stealing the Show*, 59; Uhlyarik, “Letendre in Toronto,” 104.

43 “Glencairn Station – Skylight Replacement: August 2017 to March 2019,” Toronto Transit Commission, 2017, [https://www.ttc.ca/Service\\_Advisories/Construction/Glencairn\\_skylights.jsp](https://www.ttc.ca/Service_Advisories/Construction/Glencairn_skylights.jsp).