

## EVELYN PLEASANT, CLARK STREET, MONTREAL BY LOUIS MUHLSTOCK

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This essay provides an analysis of Louis Muhlstock's painting *Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal* from 1936 (fig. 1). It also includes comparisons to several works depicting black youth produced in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s, such as other paintings by Muhlstock, Prudence Heward and Dorothy Stevens.<sup>1</sup> Comparing *Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal* to other works from the same period depicting similar subject matter accentuates Muhlstock's intentions and preoccupations of representing the humble inhabitants of Montreal's slums. The two main aspects of the portrayal of black youth explored in this essay are the gaze of the model, and stereotypical representations of this racial "other" through nudity and associations to nature.

Louis Muhlstock was born in the small city of Narajow, Galicia in 1904. In 1911 he immigrated to Montreal with his family. Like many other Eastern European Jewish families, they struggled to make a living and were poor.<sup>2</sup> Muhlstock started drawing as a child. He studied painting in Paris from 1928 to 1931, when, due to a lack of financial means, he returned to Montreal in the midst of the Great Depression.<sup>3</sup> Muhlstock lived with his family in the slums of Montreal, first in a basement apartment on St. Dominique street, and then on Demontigny and Cadieux streets.<sup>4</sup> The dire conditions of the artist's neighbourhood were amplified by the Great Depression that started affecting Canada in 1929.<sup>5</sup> The Montreal artist drew children, unemployed men, sick and homeless people, deserted apartments and nudes as well as urban landscape which was a fairly new subject matter for Canadian artists at the time. In the province of Quebec, in particular, French Canadian painters depicted mostly religious and academic subject matter, and the countryside.<sup>6</sup> Even the Group of Seven did not paint scenes of city life, preferring instead to focus on nature and the wilderness.<sup>7</sup> The Contemporary Arts Society was founded in Montreal in 1939 by John Lyman, whose goal was to promote a modern and urban subject matter with an emphasis on the figure. Louis Muhlstock was a member of this organization. What differentiates him from other painters of his time is that he was particularly interested in humble people and depictions of the poor districts of Montreal. When he painted black people, he did not exploit their possible exoticism and racial "otherness" like other Canadian artists typical of this era.

*Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal* from 1936 is such an example. The young girl in this painting, identified by her full name, Evelyn Pleasant, is looking out a window, probably from her home, a natural and momentary gesture. Muhlstock called his work "a moment in time only," a description that reflects this portrait perfectly.<sup>8</sup> The materials used to create this work are oil on cardboard of 55.1 cm in height and 48.8 cm in length. The style of the painting is realist with Impressionist influences. The artist has created an engaging portrait through the predominant use of warm colors, such as red, orange and brown, and a balanced composition. The girl's red lips that match the colour of her shirt, and her orange scarf that creates a smooth transition to her brown skin, harmoniously contrast the bright turquoise colour of the window frame that delineates her portrait. The girl is double-framed, first, by the window frame and second, by the canvas. Muhlstock has positioned her toward the right part of the painting, almost in the centre. The painting is divided perpendicularly by the window frame, coloured with yellow and turquoise. The left side of the canvas is not completely void of human presence: the artist painted on the glass the fingerprints of a right hand, probably Evelyn's, since it matches her position. The girl's red shirt and lips, and orange scarf might be interpreted as a sign of exoticism, but more than likely Muhlstock has selected these colours to complement the tonal qualities of Evelyn's face.

The girl is identified by her full name, street and city she lives in, which confers her individuality. This is quiet unusual, since most paintings of black people do not identify them by their name, and rarely by their first name. Therefore, the personalization of Evelyn serves to undercut stereotyping, and shows Muhlstock's interest in the young person living in this urban space. She lived on Clark Street, as indicated by the title, which is not far from the street Muhlstock once lived on, St. Dominique. As curator Jennifer Couëlle explains, the artist "tends to acknowledge those of his surroundings which have an immediacy of meaning for him, one he neither avoids nor escapes. (...) Muhlstock pays his respects to what is most true to him, to what he knows."<sup>9</sup> Another remarkable aspect of this painting is the girl looking at Muhlstock and the viewer; thus, not being the only one being watched in returning our gaze. Evelyn Pleasant seems confined in her home, because of the double-framed composition, and yet she is most aware of what is happening outside. Even though this is a voyeuristic view, because the girl is in her private space and the artist is looking at her from the street, she too stares at us. As we will see in the following section of this essay, black girls depicted by Canadian artists during this era did not usually gaze at the viewer. They were the ones being watched, placing them in a very vulnerable position. In contrast Evelyn Pleasant confronts the viewer with an intense and serious look.

Another similar portrait to *Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal* is *Young Negro Boy*, also by Muhlstock (fig. 2). The painting is of a young boy, about the same age as Evelyn Pleasant, who looks sad and is very thin, as hinted by his sucked-in cheeks. Muhlstock's art was "not an art of proletarian protest but one that revealed a lucid and compassionate observation of the humble and the destitute."<sup>10</sup> These two paintings show that although the artist was interested in types he did not stereotype black people. Another work that exemplifies this is *Negro Children*, the portraits of three different girls, each with distinctive features (fig. 3). Muhlstock's representations of these young black people also indicate Montreal's growing awareness of the cosmopolitan character of the city. As Charles Hill observed, Muhlstock "has always been attracted to the outsiders in Canadian society, the unemployed, and omnipresent in Montreal in the thirties, blacks, native peoples, the elderly and the ill."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the artist was not interested in exploiting the stereotypical racial "other". Rather, he was interested in the above-mentioned "others" of society, and was determined to reveal the uniqueness of these individuals, particularly the poor children, who were growing up Montreal in the 1930s and 1940s.

In contrast to Muhlstock's depictions of black youth are Prudence Heward's overtly exoticized portrayals of black girls. Heward, a Montreal artist of this same period painted *Dark Girl* (1935) and *Negress with Sunflowers* (figs. 4 & 5). In these two works Heward's choice of background is exotic. Moreover, it is known that Heward painted *Dark Girl* in Montreal and not on a tropical island, which reinforces the fact that this is a stereotypical representation.<sup>12</sup> The plant in *Dark Girl* is a sumac, which is part of both the North American and African flora.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the girls are nude. In the 1930s and 1940s in Canada, paintings of white naked women were censored from exhibitions, while black female nudes were not.<sup>14</sup> This is because the black woman underwent a process of double fetishization, both sexually and racially.<sup>15</sup> Black women were both a racial and a sexual "other" possessing an animal/nature dichotomy.<sup>16</sup> Even though Heward did not remain indifferent to the girls' individual features in *Dark Girl* and *Negress with Sunflowers*, these paintings fuel a stereotypical image of black girls and women, who were believed to be very sexual, and thus associated to the wilderness of nature. The girl in *Negress with Sunflowers*, in particular, is looking away, placing her in a position of vulnerability. The *Dark Girl* is gazing in the direction of the viewer, but unlike Evelyn Pleasant, she is still compromised, because her head is tilted on a side, her back is arched, and her left arm covers her stomach. This position reveals insecurity and a sense of lassitude. Even though Heward's models have individual features, they are not identified by their name, which contributes to

their lack of individuality and maintains the categorization of the black woman. This too contrasts with Muhlstock's fully identified Evelyn Pleasant.

Another example by Heward, this time in an urban space, is *Girl in the Window* (1941) (fig. 6). The girl, who looks bored and pensive, is probably a few years older than Evelyn Pleasant. She is placed in a window facing a street, but this time the artist is inside the house, unlike Muhlstock's portrait of Pleasant. It is very unusual that her shirt is open, exposing her breasts, while anyone passing on the street could see her. Thus, the model's vulnerability is increased by her location and the possibility of an unwanted exposure. Even though the setting is in a city, Heward has eroticized the black girl by leaving her shirt open, most likely because of her "blackness/otherness" and its association with excessive sexuality. Another important aspect of these portraits by Heward is that the black women never look at the viewer, being the only ones watched. Thus, they are placed in a very vulnerable position, heightened by their nakedness. As art historian Charmaine Nelson explained, "a caste system is created in which the depicted vulnerability of the Black women empowers the white gaze."<sup>17</sup> Yet again, this does not apply to Muhlstock's *Evelyn Pleasant*, who confronts the viewer with a powerful and direct look.

Artists such as Heward created stereotypical representations of black girls that reflect a Canadian society of the twentieth century, when people were still generally racist. This does not mean the artists themselves were racist, but they reflect the society of that time, and the existing ideas and socially created meanings that were accepted. Art historian Alice Jim suggests that "stereotypes (...) are simplifications, reductive devices, meant to contain and control subjects according to universalizing notions of race and gender."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, "not concerned with diversity or individualism on the part of the subject in question, they serve to 'depersonalize individuals and thereby deny them the rights and dignity which our society professes to accord everyone.'"<sup>19</sup>

Two paintings depicting black female subjects some years younger than Evelyn Pleasant are *Clytie* by Prudence Heward (1938) and *Amy* by Dorothy Stevens (c. 1930) (figs. 7 & 8). *Clytie* is the portrait of a young black girl, dressed in her Sunday-best. She does not look at the viewer and even though the setting is urban, Heward painted some tropical-looking plants in the background, indicating the model's racial and sexual "otherness." The girl has a doll-like appearance and her posture is unnatural and very stiff. *Amy* too is the portrait of a young black girl, dressed casually, sitting on a chair, while holding her white doll in her hands. Even though she looks at the viewer, she seems indifferent and tired of posing for the artist. Both girls are known by their first name only, which creates a sense of familiarity between them and the viewer. However, it may be argued that, in comparison to Evelyn Pleasant, they lack individuality, since we do not know more about them.

An important aspect to consider when analyzing Canadian depictions of black people during this period is the social and economic background of the artist. Painters, who were mostly white, executed numerous commissioned portraits of wealthy people and more informal paintings of friends and members of their family. Paintings of black people are rare, because people of color represented a very small minority. According to the census, there were 862 blacks living in Montreal in 1921 out of a total population of 618, 506.<sup>20</sup> Even though Canadian Black history started in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or even before, Blacks have always represented a discriminated minority. For example, Canada's Immigration Act of 1910 restricted non-white immigration, restaurant owners could legally refuse to serve people of color, and McGill University did not accept them to study law or medicine.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, almost all black women were working as domestics and 90% of all the black men worked for the railways.<sup>22</sup> In the 1930s, the Great Depression amplified their precarious economic condition. Therefore, one can only imagine the state of black women in a society that discriminated against them because of both their race and gender. Artists would find black models in their own households as domestics, in positions of menial labour, or in

community centers.<sup>23</sup> Thus, from the beginning, there was a certain social and economic power relationship established between the white artist and the black model. Muhlstock, on the other hand, came from the same humble background as his black female models, which is a possible explanation for their more natural and less exotic rendition, such as *Evelyn Pleasant* or *Young Negro Boy*.

In conclusion, Louis Muhlstock was interested in the individual character of the social “others” of society, such as homeless, sick, poor or black people. The painting *Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal* from 1936 is such an example. The work illustrates the artist’s interest in types, individual character and the urban space. Therefore, his depictions of black people are very different from most paintings of this racial and sexual “other” from the 1930s and 1940s.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Louis Muhlstock. *Evelyn Pleasant, Clark Street, Montreal*. 1936. Oil on cardboard. 55.1 x 48.8 centimeters. Private collection. (Image: Francois-Marc Gagnon)



FIG. 2

Louis Muhlstock. *Young Negro Boy*. Ca. 1939. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 38.1 x 33 centimeters. Private collection. (Image: Monique Nadeau-Somier)



**FIG. 3**

Louis Muhlstock. *Negro Children*. Charcoal on paper. (Image: Kenneth Saltmarche)



**FIG. 4**

Prudence Heward, *Dark Girl*. 1935. Oil on canvas. 92 x 102 centimeters.  
(Image: Charmaine Nelson)



FIG. 5

Prudence Heward. *Negress with Sunflowers*. Oil in canvas.

<[www.klinkhoff.com/gwk/home/gwkexhbrowse.asp?WID=1333&artist=60](http://www.klinkhoff.com/gwk/home/gwkexhbrowse.asp?WID=1333&artist=60)>



FIG. 6

Heward Prudence. *Girl in the Window*. 1941. Oil on canvas. 86.4 x 91.5 centimeters.

Art Gallery of Windsor. (Image: Evelyn Walters)



FIG. 7

Prudence Heward. *Clytie*. 1938. Oil on canvas. 101.8 x 66.6 centimeters. (Image: Nelson)



FIG. 8

Dorothy Stevens. *Amy C.* 1930. Oil on canvas. 86.8 x 76.4 centimeters.  
(Image: <[www.cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/enthusiast/thirties/artwork\\_f.jsp?mkey=9796](http://www.cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/enthusiast/thirties/artwork_f.jsp?mkey=9796)>)



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the essay, I will use the term “black” to highlight racial differences, which are very important to my argument. However, their origins might be African-American, Caribbean, or Canadian.

<sup>2</sup> Monique Nadeau-Saumier, *Louis Muhlstock : The Urban Landscape 1930-1950* (Montreal: Concordia University, 1989) 19.

<sup>3</sup> Nadeau-Saumier, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Nadeau-Saumier, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Nadeau-Saumier, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Nadeau-Saumier, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Nadeau-Saumier, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Bigué, “Louis Muhlstock,” *Michel Bigué Art Gallery*, 4 Nov 2010

<<http://www.galeriemichelbigue.com/en/louis-muhlstock-eng>>.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Couelle, *Louis Muhlstock the Draughtsman* (Montreal: Saidye Bronfman Centre, 1989) 22.

<sup>10</sup> Couelle, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Charles C. Hill, *Louis Muhlstock/ A Survey of Forty-Five Years* (Windsor: The Art Gallery of Windsor, 1976) 4.

<sup>12</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Through An-Other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists - Black Female Subjects* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1998) 19.

<sup>13</sup> Grace Powell, *Challenging the Status Quo: Prudence Heward's Portrayals of Canadian Women from the 1920s to the 1940s*, M.A. Thesis (Montreal: Concordia University, 2008) 94.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Charmaine Nelson, “Coloured Nude”: *Fetishization, Disguise, Dichtomy*, M.A. Thesis (Montreal: Concordia University, 1995) 5.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, *Through An-Other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists - Black Female Subjects*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Ming Wai Jim, *Black Women in Canada: A Documentation and Analysis of the 1989 Exhibition Black Wimmin - When and Where We Enter*, M.A. Thesis (Montreal: Concordia University, 1996) 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ming Wai Jim, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy W. Williams, *Les Noirs à Montreal 1628-1986*, trans. Pierre Desruisseaux (Montreal: VLB Editeur, 1998) 67.

<sup>21</sup> “Black Montreal,” *Best of Montreal*, 20 Dec. 2010 <[http://www.best-of-montreal.com/ethnic-montreal/black\\_montreal.html](http://www.best-of-montreal.com/ethnic-montreal/black_montreal.html)>.

<sup>22</sup> “Black Montreal,” 39.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson, *Through An-Other's Eyes*, 22.

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