

## Lifeworks

## Art movements

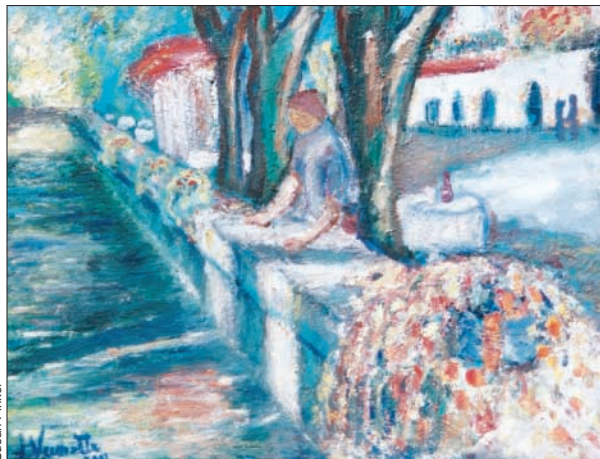
Artists and writers with Parkinson's disease and other movement disorders mounted an exhibit of their work at the McGill Centre for Studies in Aging Dec. 5–7, 2001. The centre is located in a stately Victorian mansion on the grounds of the Douglas Hospital in southwest Montreal, the artwork complemented by the wainscotting, fireplaces and ornate mouldings original to the turn-of-the-century building. Eight artists and writers with productive careers in the creative arts agreed to participate in the exhibition at the request of Dr. Michel Panisset, the director of the clinic for movement disorders. "We realized that we had a number of patients who were painters and artists and we asked them if they would like to contribute," he said, clearly pleased by the professional calibre of the submissions. Although the artists are linked by the fact that they all have movement disorders — Parkinson's disease, essential tremor or dystonia — the works were created spontaneously, not as part of any therapeutic program. There is no theme to the exhibit, which includes traditional landscapes in oils, surrealism in the tradition



**Viviane Elnécavé**, *Angel 911*, 2001 (after diagnosis of Parkinson's disease). Etching on celluloid. 37.5 cm x 50 cm

of Dali and impressionistic portraits that could have been painted by a young Bonnard. The show comprises work completed before and after diagnosis, but for most artists it is practically impossible to determine which canvases predate the clinical symptoms. Even Panisset, a neurologist who has followed the artists in his outpatient clinic for years, cannot tell which works of art were created through the veil of reduced range of movement, rigidity and tremor. "There's no indication of Parkinson's in Viviane Elnécavé's work," says Panisset, "except now painting takes her much longer and she's more tired afterward." A filmmaker at the National Film Board as well as a visual artist, Elnécavé has exhibited her work internationally and garnered prizes at international animated film festivals. Her work is ethereal and surreal, focusing on agents of deliverance such as angels and spirits. In some, the lurid palette and dream-like quality of the images give the viewer a glimpse of what it feels like to be kidnapped.

Panisset is quick to clarify that perception is not altered by Parkinson's and that the classic pill-rolling tremor is present only when muscles are at rest; although there would be some rigidity, tremors would not characterize the fine-motor control of an artist with Parkinson's when he or she is guiding a paintbrush. The converse is true of essential tremor. Jean-Louis Langlois, a landscape artist from the Charlevoix region of Québec, has succeeded in executing his highly detailed country scenes and is still painting actively at the age of 70 despite his essential tremor. "There are certain techniques



**Johanne Vermette**, *Un après-midi au verger*, 2000–2001 (after diagnosis of Parkinson's disease). Acrylic on canvas. 60 cm x 90 cm

to control it," he says cryptically.

The exhibit dispels stereotypes of Parkinson's disease and other movement disorders as debilitating diseases that obviate fine motor control and fluid expression. Johanne Vermette, an artist, mother and physician in her late thirties, thinks her painting has been enhanced since her illness was diagnosed two years ago. "The new style is less precise but more vibrant," she says. "I have a need to express myself more. I let myself go, sometimes painting with enraged fingers." Vermette adds that she has felt more creative since the onset of the disease and ponders whether her medication is playing a role in enhancing her imagination. Perversely, insomnia, one facet of Parkinson's, has allowed Vermette to paint undisturbed for hours at night when her children are asleep. Trained as a family physician, Vermette had to give up her practice a year ago because she began to have difficulty with multi-tasking and dexterity. "When I paint I'm in the best place because I'm doing only that. There's no planning, no hierarchy of actions, but just the urgency of living," she says.

**Susan Pinker**  
Montreal, Que.