

Abstract Art: What is it? How does it speak to us?

Although abstract art is one of the most important artistic innovations of the twentieth century, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century it still poses problems for a great many people. A recent book about abstract art by the art historian Kirk Varnedoe is entitled Pictures of Nothing. The title is enigmatic. On the one hand, it could mean that the works of art under discussion are indeed pictures of nothing, meaning that there is nothing to see in them, nothing recognizable, which is a common complaint about abstract painting. On the other hand, the title could mean that these pictures are in fact not pictures of anything, and are not meant to be so. They do not mirror the world. They are something else, more like things with real physical characteristics, objects made of something, constructed out of paint, canvas, wood and other stuff. To understand abstract art, we must learn to let our senses respond to and value these real material facts.

Abstracting or abstract

Broadly speaking there are two ways to define “abstract” when it comes to art. “Abstract” as a verb: to abstract, or the process of abstracting; where the artist begins with something observed from nature, something figurative, and then proceeds to change it, to simplify it, to distort it; to make it strange for expressive purposes or in order to make us see something from a fresh perspective. This is small “a” abstraction. “Abstract” as a noun: when abstract painting is no longer distorted representation, but has crossed a line to where it has become something in itself, become an art of the real, as we discussed above, a thing constructed, usually, out of line, shape colour and texture by applying paint to a support like canvas or masonite. This is capital “A” abstraction.

(The dictionary also defines things “abstract” as something “abstruse and difficult to understand.” That has little to do with abstract art: while abstract artists, like representational ones, often have rich and complicated concepts or emotions to convey, in most instances they want to address their viewers lucidly and clearly.)

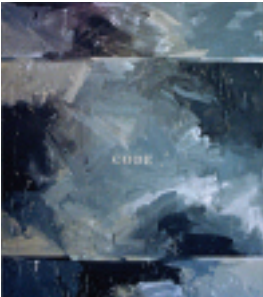
The question is: how can we usefully apply this two-part formulation to the paintings in this exhibition? Can we easily discern whether an abstract painting is an “a” or an “A”?

It is, of course, never so simple. Art, like other life experiences, is nuanced and multi-faceted. We could reasonably say that all art is abstract to some degree. Take an example near at hand. When F.H. Varley had to depict what was in front of him, a landscape or a person, in order to contain what he saw on a flat rectangular canvas, he had to make multiple choices about what leave in and what to take out. He had to decide how to draw and apply colour so as, at the same time, to be true to his subject matter and to his own temperament in translating it. Most importantly, the picture had to be interesting to look at.

Conclusion

To appreciate abstract art is to learn to see what is in front of our eyes. Adding some knowledge of art history and theory will, of course, enhance our insights. But the aesthetic experience begins in exercising, as Borduas said, “the intelligence of the sense.”

Then there is Gagnon’s Code, 1988. Its single, provocative, titular word is spelled out in the centre of the canvas as if it were a warning: a proclamation that secret information, accessible only to initiates, hides within. I suspect Gagnon had his tongue



Charles Gagnon, Code, 1988
(c) Estate of Charles Gagnon

in his cheek when he made this painting and that the “code” he asks us to decode is hiding in plain sight. The stenciled letters that spell out “code” after all, like words on a page, lie on the surface of the canvas, reminding us of its flatness. The horizontal lines in the upper and lower areas play the same anchoring role. In contrast, the loose brush-strokes are devices that subvert flatness by opening up illusions of space. Two contradictory systems meet. Loose brush strokes, of course, usually signal spontaneous expressionism; but here, examined more closely, they turn out to be mechanically applied and impersonal. These brush strokes seen individually are abstract. But when assembled together, where they run helter-skelter and their colours and values play havoc with space, do they not miraculously unfold into a tumultuously clouded skyscape?

These are the elements of the code that we are asked to discover. They also affirm, even as abstract painting increasingly forces viewers to create their own meanings, that a painting cannot mean just anything. The set of experiences a work of art evokes are indeed coded, and the clues to a painting’s uniqueness are in its visual and material specificities, which are there clearly for anyone to see. To look at abstract painting is to take pleasure in sight and to become a connoisseur of details. Paintings are things made of paint applied to a support. But artists can nuance their meanings in inexhaustible ways. For this reason, each time I stand in front of a familiar work of art, it can captivate my imagination anew, because it is like I am seeing it again for the first time. I have not seen it like this before.

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Ron Bloore, Byzantium Sign #5, 1961, (c) Ron Bloore

THE URGE TO ABSTRACTION
OPENS SEPTEMBER 15, 2007



THE URGE TO ABSTRACTION

Roald Nasgaard

In the 1940s and into the 1950s, artists in Europe and the Americas increasingly came to believe that the future for advanced painting lay in abstraction. This was no less true in Canada where artists across the country rose to its challenges in abundantly innovative ways. This exhibition celebrates this Canadian urge to abstraction. Its objective is not primarily a historical exploration, but rather, using a selection of little-seen paintings from private collections, to give viewers, especially viewers new to abstraction, an opportunity to develop some tools for looking at abstract art, experiencing it, and taking pleasure in it.

Is not the most realistic image a mirror image, which shows everything in its infinitesimal detail? In a mirror we see everything, and yet nothing, until we select what it is we want to look at. We choose what we want to use the mirror for: to shave or to check whether this morning we have colour-matched our clothes and made ourselves up in the style we want to present to the world. Even the most realist artist looks at the world and selects only what is necessary to the depictive and expressive task at hand. Artists are always conscious of abstracting, of making choices in order to make pictures that are resolved formally and stylistically.

But if an image of a thing is necessarily an abstraction of that thing, abstraction in art is a matter of degree. Small “a” abstraction occurs at the far end of a continuum. At the near end of this continuum stands the kind of representational painting that strives for photographic accuracy. In photographic realism, artists play down the signs indicating how a work of art is made. Small “a” abstraction artists, on the contrary, stress how they have constructed their painting, and the materials they have used. In small “a” abstraction, it is the art of constructing, not the subject matter per se, that has become the principal carrier of meaning.

The Canadian Urge to Abstraction

The works in this exhibition date largely from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many artists in the Western world increasingly felt that if they wanted to be modern, they had to be abstract. They were responding to advances in science, philosophy and psychoanalysis. These disciplines revealed how the physical, emotional and spiritual worlds operated according to forces and laws not perceptible to the human eye. As a consequence, whether in literature or the visual arts, realism could no longer satisfactorily account for the deeper intricacies of human experiences. And if artists did need to represent the visible world, there was always photography.

In Canada, the urge to abstraction in the postwar years took many forms, usually defined by regions: Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, the Prairies and the Maritimes each taking individual stylistic approaches. If we were to order the works in the show by date, we would also discover how abstract art from the 1940s and 50s to the 1960s and 70s, changed style chronologically: from being expressionistic and painterly to becoming geometric and hardedge; from being personal to looking impersonal; from being hot to acting cool. The task of the exhibition, however, is not to provide a chronological or historical retrospective of the abstract movement, but to attempt to look at the paintings individually to determine what makes them tick, and what demands they place on us.

Small “a”s abstraction

B.C. Binning’s Grey Regatta with Purple Sun (Second Version), 1954, has immediately recognizable subject matter: small boats and pleasure craft such as those that plied the straits and coves of the British Columbia coast that Binning himself loved to sail. The artist has lined up his row of

boat hulls, as flat as silhouettes, across the picture plane like a festive parade. He has fitted them with brightly painted flags and other nautical insignia, all crisply held together by a scaffolding of lively fine lines that mimic rigging, water lines and waves. Everything is treated with whimsy and joie de vivre.

We should not suppose, however, that Binning has sat in front of his subject matter and made a portrait of it. More likely, back in the seclusion of his studio, and recollecting things seen, he designed a vocabulary of abstracted forms and out of them constructed a new, imaginary composition—one that suggests rather than actually depicts the regatta mood. Notice how Binning

wants us accept his witty drawing, his jaunty, flat colour patterns, and the rough texture of his burlap support, all on their own terms as expressive entities.

Part of the fun of looking at this and other small “a” pictures is to notice how representation and abstraction vie with one another. How exactly do we parse out the landscape in Dennis Burton’s Alberta Sky, ca. 1958? Is there

a still life or a landscape buried somewhere inside the golden textures of Alexandra Luke’s Untitled? Her evasive title doesn’t help. Does Robert Hedrick’s Shifting Field, 1960, do any better? Are we seeing a field of grasses blowing in the wind or rippling waves on a lake? Or is the subject matter purely formal: simply the flicker of paint on the field of the canvas?

Small “a” or capital “A”?

Other artists in this exhibition stopped thinking about painting as primarily engaged in representation. In Montreal, starting in the early 1940s, the Automatists, under the leadership of Paul-Émile Borduas, strove to make what they called “non-figurative art” using the Surrealist method of psychic automatism. The artists attempted to let the hand draw or paint

directly and freely out of the unconscious, without being inhibited by reason, previous knowledge or aesthetic concerns. Borduas argued as early as 1942 that the mystery of the act of painting was that the artist could bring “inert matter” (paint) “to life” by imprinting it with “human sensibility.” The viewer in turn responds to the artist’s work, to his sensate manipulation of the paint/matter, using, to quote Borduas again, “the intelligence of the senses.” This is the earliest articulation in Canada of the notion that we can, with our sensations and emotions, respond directly to the material components of art. It is the essential principle underlying capital “A” abstract art.

Sometimes, especially in the early years of Automatism, references to the real world nevertheless sneaked into their work. It would be fascinating to have peeked over Borduas’ shoulder as he was executing The Frog on a Blue Ground, 1944. How long did he stay faithful to his automatic writing procedure? To the end? Or did he let a more deliberate consciousness intervene during the last moments, causing him to tweak the painting ever so little, coaxing intimations of frogs and lily pads out from his automatic drawing? (We can ask the same questions of the paintings by Pierre Gauvreau, Marcelle Ferron and Fernand Leduc.)

Richard Gorman, like many of his Toronto contemporaries, wanted to paint as freely and spontaneously as the Automatists, but Toronto artists came out of a different background. They, like Gagnon in Double Feature, 1961, were influenced by Abstract Expressionism in New York. Gorman’s Torrid Zone, 1960, might more aptly be called “action painting”—self-expressive on the grand scale with bravura movements of the brush. Its title points less to geography than to a turbulent state of mind.

Capital “A” abstraction

Borduas and Gorman alike express themselves gesturally, but their paintings have something else in common. Both evoke the sensation of space behind the canvas, in the depth of the picture. Other artists looked skeptically at this lingering remnant of the space of representational painting and concluded that if their objective was to make what we have called capital “A” abstraction, all illusionism had to be squeezed out.

In Guido Molinari’s untitled paintings from 1955, the paint sits unequivocally on top of the canvas. It is thick and gooey. It is very real stuff. The application remains painterly, but not in an emotionally expressionistic way like Gorman’s. Instead Molinari’s manner seems quite impersonal and detached, as if he had spread the paint with a small trowel, simply doing a job. In other words, Molinari the artist (who, by the way, was a very emotional man) has got himself out of the way so as to let us, his viewers, with the least distraction, attend to the body of the paint, the bright colours and their juxtapositions and inter-actions, leaving us free also to listen to our own sensate selves.

In capital “A” abstraction, a painting is no longer an artist’s self-expression. It is not a metaphor for something elsewhere and it does not depict symbols of higher meaning. An “A” painting is a set of facts put forward for the viewer’s perceptual experience. In other words, the balance of responsibility has shifted. The artist no longer determines alone the final meaning of a work of art. Instead it is we the viewers who construct the meaning, building from our own experience by entering into conversation with the visual and physical phenomena that the artist presents to us.

Several Montreal artists of Molinari’s generation, beginning in the late 1950s, increasingly purged their painting of any remnants of painterliness. Instead they began to favour a clean, geometric style that operated on the formal tensions between hard-edged shapes as they disported themselves across the flat surface of the canvas. At issue in Tousignant’s Black Polygon, 1958, is not only a lateral resolution of forces, but also the push and pull of the coloured shapes in space. Because colours tend to advance or recede in relation to one another, Tousignant needed carefully to calibrate each colour to make it look as if

it really did lie on the same flat plane as each of the others. Paradoxical as it may sound, he had to create the illusion of flatness.

Yves Gaucher’s GR-1, 1968, is an example how, in the 1960s, artists learned to exploit optical effects to stimulate the eye (Op Art became the popular name of this kind of painting). Gaucher’s painting comes from a large series, the Grey on Grey paintings. All the works in the series are composed as rectangular fields of grey, across which are dispersed thin, longer or shorter, lines in white or grey tonalities, which run strictly parallel to the upper and lower edges of the canvas. The curious effect is how difficult, if not impossible, it is to fix GR-1 in our vision as a stable configuration. Instead, the individual lines seem to be cut free from their formal anchoring, deflecting the eye from one in relation to the next, with speeds and directions that seem entirely spontaneous. As viewers, we find our eyes performing a kind of dance across the surface of the painting that only stops when we stop looking. As in real life, time – duration and constant change - becomes a conscious part of the experience of the painting.



Richard Gorman, *Torrid Zone*, 1960
(c) Richard Burton



Claude Tousignant, *Polygone Noir*, 1958
(c) Estate of Claude Tousignant



Dennis Burton, *Alberta Sky*, ca. 1958
(c) Dennis Burton



Yves Gaucher, *Etude*, 1966
(c) SODART (Montreal) 2007



Charles Bertram Binning, *Gay Regatta with Purple Sun (Second Version)*, 1954
(c) Estate of Charles Bertram Binning



Paul-Émile Borduas, *La Grenouille au Fond Bleu*, 1944
(c) SODRAC, 2007