

Contingency and Continuity:
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Negotiating New Abstraction
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Contingency and Continuity: Negotiating New Abstraction

Jordan **Broadworth**

Cora **Cluett**

Gina **Rorai**

Monica **Tap**

Denyse **Thomasos**

David **Urban**

Judith Nasby and Ron Shuebrook

Macdonald Stewart Art Centre
Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Introduction and Acknowledgments

"All art, one could say, is inherently abstract, for the process of translating ideas into form — to make one thing stand for another, or to make images on a flat surface appear three-dimensional — is a type of abstraction. Throughout art history there have been many different styles of art that have utilized an abstracting approach. But it was not until the 20th-century that what is commonly referred to as abstract art was established, as artists began making works devoid of any evident reference to the world of appearances, creating form for its own sake, subject to the laws of art rather than those of nature. By eliminating all illusionistic representation from their work, abstract artists have operated on an aesthetic frontier — what Piet Mondrian called "the edge of the abyss." They have explored new territory with a spirit of dedication and adventure that another artist, Eva Hesse, described in 1969 as "total risk, freedom, discipline." The phenomenon of abstraction radically altered the course of 20th century art, initiating a sea change that continues to be felt within contemporary culture."¹

Matthew Drutt comments on the phenomenon of abstraction by way of introducing the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's landmark exhibition *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (1996).

Curator Mark Rosenthal stated his approach to the exhibition as the attempt to adopt what might be the viewpoint of an art historian 100 years hence looking back at the 20th century. The result of his curatorial investigation was to systematically track the birth of abstraction in the mid-1910s through its many manifestations from Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, doctrinaire Formalism in the 1960s, Post-Minimalism in the 1970s to the ironic positioning of the Postmodern era at the end of the century. His approach revealed accomplishments and advances that came in a series of "fits and starts with only occasional moments of progressive thinking and deliberate self-criticism. Instead," he concluded, "the internal needs and expressive intention of each individual artist have taken precedence."²

Abstract painters whose careers began in the early nineties have been relatively free from dominating theoretical positions which have characterized visual art-thinking in previous decades. Artists of the 1990s are exploring aspects of their practice in the context of the theoretical underpinnings of a 100-year history of abstraction; but at the same time they are drawing on personal experience, their own vision and emotional power.

The intention of the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in organizing the exhibition *Contingency and Continuity: Negotiating New Abstraction* is to consider the work of six artists who belong to a generation of Canadian painters who are in their 20s and 30s. These artists, although aware of abstraction as a continuous century-long practice, are selective in referencing these traditions to arrive at their own unique approach to stating their feelings about the world.

The artists in *Contingency and Continuity* have already achieved national and international recognition. Denyse Thomasos received a Guggenheim Fellowship in painting and has exhibited in Philadelphia, New York and Toronto. Monica Tap was featured in *Maclean's* magazine's 1997 "100 Canadians to Watch." Cora Cluett had her first solo exhibition at a public gallery at the Art Centre in 1996 and has since exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Art Gallery of Hamilton and the Art Gallery of Windsor. Jordan Broadworth, who grew up in the Guelph area, has had a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and has participated in group exhibitions in Fredericton, Halifax and Toronto. Gina Rorai moved quickly from a solo exhibition in Toronto to a feature article in *Canadian Art* magazine and a solo exhibition in New York. She was also selected as one of *Maclean's* 1997 "100 Canadians to Watch". Since the mid-nineties, David Urban has had solo and group exhibitions in New York, Amsterdam, Milan, St. Louis, Houston, Montreal, Calgary and Toronto.

The artists in the exhibition are committed to abstraction as a vehicle for personal expression and for painting as an activity of contemplation. They bring their own vision and passion to engage the viewer in an intellectual and emotional relationship with the works.

Jordan Broadworth uses a combination of rectilinear formats and an underlying grid to anchor his work. Areas of muted colour applied in subtle transparencies are overlapped with curlicue decorative elements which suggest a lost Ontario architecture. His paintings are evocative of small landscape details and the built environment. Denyse Thomasos also uses a grid-like structure to organize her freely applied linear gestures. Crosshatching and diagonal thrusts create a vibrant interaction of strokes and drips which generates a rhythmic patterning across the work. Dense city architecture and the intimacy of a woven textile come to mind through these highly charged works. Monica Tap on the other hand uses the subtlest of drawn marks to refer to the grand tradition of landscape painting. The application of different coloured systems of linear markings produces an abstract work that leaves barely discernable narrative content such as a horse and rider or a gnarled tree. Similar to Tap, Gina Rorai's paintings are enmeshed within her own working method. Although there are perceptible references to the real world via still life arrangements, the artist's engagement is with the "world of painting." The colours, the marks and the viewers' perception are within that world. David Urban's muscular paintings compel through their complex colour harmonies and the physicality of the oil paint that leaves a map like the surface of hills and valleys. Each canvas is evidence of a new challenge and discovery for the artist and the viewer. Cora Cluett's paintings yield a different reading — one of quiet contemplation and etherealness, especially the mutedly-coloured works. The surfaces of her paintings are like human skin revealing little scars and puckers as evidence of their making. The markings laid down in a grid format hold our intimate attention while we seem to be contemplating a vast space.

The exhibition *Contingency and Continuity* presents the considerable achievement of six Canadian painters who are barely a decade into their already successful careers. The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre is especially proud that three of the artists, Jordan Broadworth, Cora Cluett and David Urban are recent M.F.A. graduates of the University of Guelph. I would like to thank each of the artists for their commitment to the project and for the opportunity given to me and co-curator, Ron Shuebrook to interview them in

their studios. I thank Ron Shuebrook, a leading abstract painter for his essay in which he shares his own motivation and vision as a painter while providing an insightful discussion of the works in the exhibition. We appreciate the generosity of the lenders, a number of whom agreed to loan newly acquired paintings even before their arrival at their homes. All of the Art Centre staff participated in some aspect of the project. I thank Sorouja Williamson, Administrative Assistant; Verne Harrison, Gallery Coordinator; Gregory Klages, Promotion Coordinator; Shelley Langton, Gallery Assistant; and our many University of Guelph student employees. I also thank Dawn Owen, Collections Assistant, who completed the artist biographies. We appreciate the contribution, as well, of Jessica Wyman for assisting with text production and the beautiful catalogue design by Julie Gibb and Christian Morrison of GreenStreet Design.

The Art Centre has enriched the permanent collection by purchasing a major work by each of the six artists. The acquisitions were made possible through the generosity of the Art Centre Volunteers who raise funds for acquisitions, donations from Jean and Ron Higgins, and the Gordon and Evelyn Couling Estate. These contributions were matched by the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program. The exhibition and publication received financial support from the Canada Council for the Arts Dissemination Assistance Program. The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre is proud to present this exhibition which provides ample proof that abstraction continues as a vital and compelling practice well positioned to advance into the new millennium.

Judith Nasby
Director

NOTES

1. Matthew Drutt, *@Guggenheim*, (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1996), p. 1.
2. Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996), p. 3.

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Through my encounters with their works, I have come to consider certain artists across time as being among my friends and "companions". I have never known when and where I would discover for myself these artists of kinship and courage. There have been numerous historic figures who have inspired me, while many contemporaries have been valued as fellow travelers, including a younger generation of practitioners. The painters who are included in this exhibition, Jordan Broadworth, Cora Cluett, Gina Rorai, Monica Tap, Denyse Thomasos and David Urban, are among a number of younger artists who have stimulated my interest and earned my admiration.

The six artists in this exhibition are roughly of the same generation and are in their twenties and thirties. They have embraced the practice of painting in all of its layered resonance. Although certainly aware of the earlier phenomenologically oriented formalism and the transcendent aspirations of modernism, they seem to be committed to abstraction as a vehicle for the interpretation of this unstable moment in history. In doing so, they have confronted the critical potential of painting to invoke the continuities and contingencies of their own lives while acknowledging the rich resources of precedent and tradition. It is apparent from the experience of their works that they are fully conscious of the historical and social contexts of their practices as well as of the important roles that their individual temperaments, talents, and motivations may have in their production.

Jordan Broadworth

In the increasingly industrialized northwest edge of Guelph, a former games arcade and office for a miniature golf course now serves as the studio and home of Jordan Broadworth. As has often been the case in other urban centres, a failed business has offered a site for a committed artist to pursue his centered life on the fiscal margins. On the whole, it is an intriguing environment in which to be making his compelling constructed paintings which are evidently the results of negotiations between competing cognitive sources and structural impulses. Aspirations for transcendence are leavened by material fact and social reference. These works are clearly products of pre-meditation and improvisation, of purposeful representation and formal judgement.

Comprised of panels of stretched canvas that have been combined in slightly irregular rectilinear compositions, these object-like paintings possess a pictorial necessity and a physical urgency which is both confident and provisional. Employing acrylic as his primary medium, Broadworth uses various additive and subtractive processes ranging from stained and squeegeed grounds to various stenciled and masked shapes and patterns. Hard-edged forms collide with atmospheric passages; assertions and revisions are present and suggest a process of engaged decision making. Diverse greys, blue-greens, red-browns, salmon and ochre dominate this palette. Broadworth is obviously conscious of colour both as a means to suggest organic reference and human intervention and as a crucial element in the dynamic spatial organization of the painting.

Embedded within an expressive pictorial structure, shapes derived, literally, from off-cuts of architectural gingerbread are dispersed in ways that reinforce the overall coherence of the combined canvasses while allowing disjunctive and descriptive passages to challenge the certainty of the physical support. These curvilinear fragments and patterns contrast with interlaced geometric planes; painted gestures vie for attention with linear traces. Broadworth has obviously explored this dense visual vocabulary in an effort to create an aesthetic experience that is akin to the complexity of daily life. There

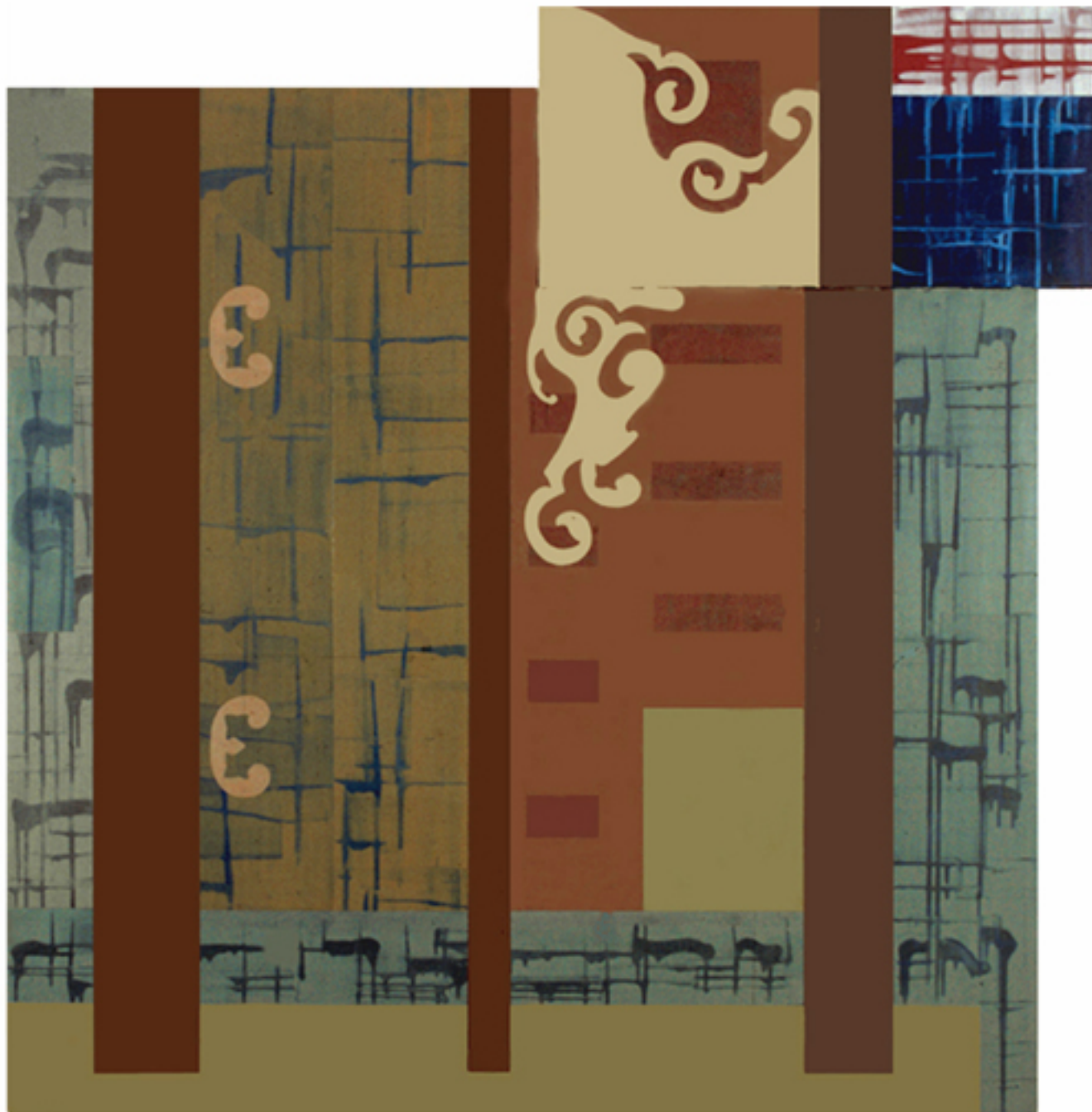
is no overriding, external factor that unifies absolutely the pictorial structure of these paintings. However, through a remarkable juggling of the physical and visual components, Broadworth has created works which suggest a desire for order while maintaining a sense of flux. These paintings could certainly be perceived as metaphors for the unstable nature of our own historical moment.

Just as Broadworth's studio environment has evidence of changing priorities and histories, his paintings also suggest their own relationships to the conditions and practices of the recent past. Through the inclusion of strategies and techniques that are familiar to knowing viewers, these paintings invoke and recycle earlier traditions while finding new meanings in their incisive juxtapositions. The masked edges, the object-like supports, and the broadly painted grids are echoes of earlier practices from the sixties and seventies of such artists as Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, Harvey Quaytman and Richard Smith. The ghost of the found and transformed readymades of Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns are obviously recalled in Broadworth's use of architectural elements as pictorial catalysts. In his insistent integration of deliberately architectonic and formal structures with elements of cultural reference, he seeks a position for abstraction that is of his time, yet acknowledges the likelihood of human continuity.

Completed in the last several months, the four paintings by Broadworth in the exhibition have continued to deal with the concerns that he has been investigating for a number of years. Having grown up in Wellington County in Ontario, Broadworth studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston prior to returning to the area in the mid-nineties. Since completing his M.F.A. studies at the University of Guelph in 1997, he has maintained his serious practice and has begun to build an increasingly prominent career with exhibitions in public and commercial galleries in Ontario and Atlantic Canada. Despite his youth, Broadworth has been committed to the development of his demanding abstraction for the last decade. Recent works sustain his propensity for pursuing strategies that court contradiction.

There is an intense seriousness in his efforts while, at the same time, he remains open to pictorial incidents that are sensual and discovered. As described above, he has embraced a relational approach to the composition of his paintings while aiming "not for resolve, rather than for a conditional alliance . . . there is an architectonic framework that is consistent yet . . . promotes diversity (there is diversion but not entertainment)"¹. These substantial, almost wall-like compositions are large without being over-scaled. They encourage the viewer's awareness of surface and the objecthood of the painting while suggesting the possibility of receding spaces within asymmetrical, unpredictable, grid-like structures. The close contrasts of the colour relationships effectively modify the edgy, potentially "over the top" gingerbread pattern and geometric repetitions of the compositions. Without the knowing restraint and daring unpredictability, Broadworth's paintings would be in danger of being simply decorative.

The combination of his critical intelligence, lightness of touch and formal inventiveness has produced a remarkable body of paintings which acknowledges various historical languages of abstraction while seeking avenues to exercise his own wit and subjective points of view. The limited representational elements integrate within the resonances of colour, surface, and structure to construct the aesthetic content. The conjunction of the so-called modernist grid with retro-versions of pre-modernist architectural decoration seeks to reconcile notions of the essential and the applied. Jordan Broadworth has sought to communicate meaning by renovating conventions and negotiating a region of mutual interest. Viewers come to experience meaning in these paintings through their active engagement with all of the material and perceptual characteristics of the works.



Jordan Broadworth
Back In - Back Out, 1998

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Nasby, Judith, 1945-
Contingency and Continuity: Negotiating New
Abstraction

Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Macdonald
Stewart Art Centre, Jan. 21 - Mar. 21, 1999.
ISBN 0-920810-64-0

1. Painting, Abstract - Canada - Exhibitions.
 2. Painting, Modern - 20th century - Canada - Exhibitions.
 3. Painting, Canadian - Exhibitions.
- I. Shuebrook, Ron, 1943 -
II. Macdonald Stewart Art Centre.
III. Title.

ND245.5.A28N37 1999 759.11'07471343 C99-930109-8

Exhibition Curators:
Judith Nasby and Ron Shuebrook

Catalogue Design:
Julie Gibb and Christian Morrison,
GreenStreet Design

Printing:
Ampersand Printing, Guelph

Photography of Works:
Cora Cluett: Courtesy of Wynick/Tuck Gallery; Jordan
Broadworth: Andrew Locky; Gina Rorai; Martin
Schwalbe; Monica Tap; Courtesy of Wynick/Tuck
Gallery; Denyse Thomasos: Courtesy of Olga Korper
Gallery; David Urban: Martin Schwalbe

The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ontario
is supported by its sponsors — the University of
Guelph, the City of Guelph, the Upper Grand District
School Board and the County of Wellington — by mem-
berships and donations and by grants from the Ontario
Government through the Ontario Arts Council and the
Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation and
from the Federal Government through the Canada
Council for the Arts and the Museum Assistance
Program of Canadian Heritage.

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