

EMERGING ARTIST SERIES  
**JORDAN BROADWORTH**

EMERGING ARTIST SERIES  
**JORDAN BROADWORTH**

ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA  
2 April to 29 May 1994

Robin Metcalfe, Guest Curator





*Assembly, 1993-94. Oil on canvas, 147.3 x 170.2 cm*

## JORDAN BROADWORTH

Robin Metcalfe, Guest Curator

Jordan Broadworth's education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, from 1988 to 1992, came at a time of historical transition. Painting was then experiencing a reversal of fortune, a nervous rehabilitation after being intellectually eclipsed in the NSCAD of the 1970s.

In certain sessional instructors at the college, such as New York painter Laura Newman, Broadworth found antidotes to this lingering distrust of painting. At the same time, NSCAD's criticality gave him the freedom to violate the sanctity of painting traditions. His iconoclasm thus cuts both ways. Working in what was considered a conservative medium allows him to take a playfully subversive stance in relation to a "progressive" orthodoxy that is by now, a quarter century after Garry Neill Kennedy wrought an intellectual revolution at NSCAD, getting a bit long in the tooth. Broadworth likes to play off these contradictions, with an understated sense of humour, keeping open the questions of what painting is, or is supposed to be.

Like many artists, Broadworth has worked at odd jobs along the way to, and as a supplement to, a career in art. He paid his way through NSCAD partly through house painting. In Guelph, Ontario (near his birthplace of Georgetown), he worked in a factory making cardboard boxes. That activity finds an echo in his use of corrugated material to monoprint delicate patterns of parallel lines onto the surfaces of his paintings.

Broadworth's early works borrowed from the practice of house painting, making an implicit comparison with the everyday aesthetic of the dropcloth. Initially finding the conventional artists' tools of oil paints and canvas intimidating, he chose for a time to work on stretched bed sheets, in the cheap but sturdy medium of house paint. He still retains an affinity for the sombre neutrality of exterior house paint, with its characteristically muted colours: dark greens, greys, blues, browns, and maroons.



In his recent paintings, Broadworth begins with a first coat of acrylics, then works on top of that in oils. In some canvases, he mixes plaster in this acrylic base, producing a surface that can be sanded when dry. By thus suppressing the personal mark of the brushstroke, as well as masking the weave of the canvas ground, Broadworth reproduces the anonymous, workmanlike surface of a painted domestic wall.

If Broadworth's paintings are like walls, they are walls as seen by the house painter who, with his scraper, is privy to the secrets of their past. Layered and stripped down again, the surface speaks of the passage of time, each coat of paint representing a former presence that is now an absence.

To neutralize and level the final tonal values, Broadworth sometimes goes over the surface with a rag soaked in paint thinner, or spreads a thin layer of dark paint. Where his recent work has led to an exploration of "all-over" form, alluding to Jackson Pollock, Broadworth feels a need for "dampening the fervour" of Abstract Expressionism's explosive assertion of personality.

The larger paintings in this exhibition, some of them diptychs or triptychs, are predominantly horizontal and of various widths, but with a consistent height. Much of the labour that Broadworth puts into a painting is barely visible in the exhibited canvas. The artist underpaints in strong colours, then finishes in quieter ones, continually burying his work beneath successive layers. A vivid diagonal grid of contrasting colours, for example, will be painted over and painted over again, leaving only a ghost of a grid behind some other pattern. What remains from this process is the edge — one layer of paint just visible from beneath another. The tonal equivalency of other values focuses the viewer's attention on this edge, the mysterious residue of earlier deposits.

The energy, for Broadworth, is in the edge as a line, a form in itself, rather than as an outline defining a form. This creates an ambiguity between figure and ground: about whether a given form is to be taken as mass or space. In *Groce*, for example, the large ornamental bracket form that dominates the central rectangle is so close in tone to the surrounding squiggles that it becomes incorporeal, almost disappearing into the background as if into camouflage. The outline of the bracket form separates itself from the object to engage in an airy dance with the delicate tendril forms around it.

Like Ferguson in his "theorem" paintings — based on a folk-art technique of the nineteenth century — Broadworth also employs stencils. He has used these in the past to apply multiple images of automobile engine blocks, which then, paradoxically, acquire the airy quality of iris blossoms or even angels. In the present work, he has stencilled patterns based on architectural ornament. Consciously alluding (in *Consensus*, for example) to Barnett Newman's severely abstract stripes or "zips," these fretwork designs occur in ribbon-like borders and stripes that recall old-fashioned wallpaper borders, reinforcing the metaphor of painting as wall.

Broadworth quotes freely from a vocabulary of visual motifs derived from print sources. His knots, based on instructional diagrams, have an abstract, conceptual quality. The source diagrams are not renderings of visual objects, but instructional guides. Unlike real knots, which the eye can hardly decipher, diagrammatic knots must be visually coherent. This function determines their formal qualities: the broadness of their curves, and the envelope of space that surrounds every strand, allowing it to be seen as distinct from its neighbour.

2 Broadworth borrowed designs from the catalogue of *Country Comfort*, a Guelph business specializing in Victorian millwork.

One could propose a postmodernist reading of Broadworth's use of print sources. The saturation of our visual environment with photographic and print media has accustomed us to generating pattern out of visual residues of all sorts of representational processes. They distantly evoke the direct visual experience of real objects, a kind of ghost lingering in the image.

Gingerbread patterns — spindles, spandrels, and brackets — are a dominant motif in the present series of paintings. They are based on patterns derived from a catalogue of pre-fabricated house ornaments.<sup>2</sup> The original objects are purely decorative, with no structural purpose, but their patterns function as a major structural element organizing the composition of the painted space.

Some are severe and precisely symmetrical, containing the fluid ramblings of less disciplined forms. The large scroll-shaped bracket forms, however, many of them composites of Broadworth's own devising, have a fluid vegetative form, like the sinuous French curves of draughting instruments. At once thrusting and enclosing, they have a hemaphroditic ambiguity that is slyly erotic and recalls the more explicitly phallic fleurs-de-lys of General Idea's armorial bearings.



The architectural quality of Broadworth's composition goes beyond the direct reference to architectural ornament, to the way he organizes space. In this, he recalls the architectonic compositions of Ron Shuebrook who produces large, classically abstract canvases and smaller shaped constructions in painted wood. Shuebrook has served as a mentor and moral support for Broadworth.<sup>3</sup>

Broadworth's use of sinuous linear forms also shows some kinship with the work of NSCAD painting instructor Alex Livingston, which abounds in tendril forms as plant stalks, DNA strands, and fluid spatial envelopes. Both painters work with the tension between painting as a surface and painting as an evocation of space. In Livingston, it manifests itself in the characteristic device of the aura, at once a luminous halo and a flat splash of paint. Auras sometimes show up in Broadworth's compositions — nestled, for example, around the loop of a knot.<sup>4</sup>

Decoration and ornament have not been terms of praise in modernist criticism. Broadworth's playful toying with the bowerbird as a metaphor for the painter, however, challenges the viewer to consider how the act of painting is inescapably involved — whatever else may be going on — in ornamenting a surface.

Bower-building forms part of a courtship dance, an effort to secure a mate and progeny. Broadworth draws a witty analogy between this behaviour and his own activity — and that of other artists — in trying to attract the attention of art institutions and to woo critical validation. His work concerns the construction of art and the compulsions that drive it.

3 Shuebrook made a geographic migration that is the reverse of Broadworth's: he went from a teaching position at NSCAD to co-ordinating the MFA programme at Guelph. He now lives in Broadworth's hometown of Fergus.

4 I have written about Livingston in the catalogue essays for *Alex Livingston: Recent Paintings and Drawings* (AGNS, 1989) and for *Subject/Matter: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture in Nova Scotia* (AGNS, 1992).



Consensus, 1993-94. Oil on canvas, wood, 147.3 x 182.9 cm





*More Places Forever, 1993-94. Oil on canvas, wood, 147.3 x 180.3 cm*

## ARTIST'S CHRONOLOGY

### Place of Birth

Georgetown, Ontario

### Date of Birth

June 16, 1968

### Education

- 1992 BFA, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1992 Boston School of the Museum of Fine Arts  
East Coast Consortium Exchange, Boston,  
Massachusetts

### Solo Exhibitions

- 1994 *Survey*, Studio 21, Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1993 *Lost Objects: The Small Ones*,  
OO Magazine Gallery,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1993 *Lost Objects*, Y Level Gallery,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1992 *Prepositions*, Anna Leonowens Gallery,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1991 *Paintings*, Anna Leonowens Gallery,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia

### Group Exhibitions

- 1994 *Extremes*, Studio 21,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1992 *Painters of Promise*, Studio 21,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1991 *Insights*, Wellington County Museum  
and Archives, Fergus-Elora, Ontario

### Related Work

- 1993-94 Eye Level Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Assistant Co-ordinator
- 1993 Y Level, (Summer Symposium on Validation),  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Co-ordinator
- 1989-92 Nova Scotia College of Art and Design,  
NSCAD Studio Division, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Student Assistant
- 1990 Wellington County Museum and Archives,  
Fergus-Elora, Ontario  
Museum Assistant

### Related Volunteer Work

- 1993-94 Alumni Association, Nova Scotia College of  
Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Editor, Alumni News
- 1992-94 Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Information and Installation
- 1992 *Rewire* Summer Supplement  
(Student Publication)  
Co-ordinator
- 1990-91 Student Union of the Nova Scotia College of  
Art and Design, SUNSCAD  
Studio Division Representative
- 1989-91 The Act of Seeing with  
One's Own Eyes: Film Series  
Co-organizer