A DISCUSSION OF FIVE CANADIAN PAINTERS
- RONALD BLOORE • BRIAN FISHER • YVES GAUCHER •
ROY KIYOOKA • ARTHUR McKAY -
IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE ARTISTIC AND CRITICAL SENSIBILITY OF THE 1960'S

by
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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1965

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required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

July, 1973
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Date _July, 1973_
ABSTRACT

Creative expression does not exist alone for the artist in moments of inspiration but, rather, exists also for those who participate in what the artist has created. Genuine artistic expression, in other words, joins together both the artist and the viewer in an unique form of communication.

The significance of such a close relationship became very evident in the 1960's when the so-called minimal and reductive trends in art began to emerge as a reaction against the excesses of New York Abstract Expressionism. This significance increased even further with subsequent experiments in monochrome and monotonal painting which had been introduced in the 1950's by Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, who are generally considered to be principal innovators of this trend.

The main channel into Canada for these new approaches came through the Emma Lake Workshops in Saskatchewan, with the Newman workshop in 1959 having the most impact. This paper will focus on the work of five Canadian artists: Ronald Bloore, Brian Fisher, Yves
Gaucher, Roy Kiyooka and Arthur McKay, who, at one time or another, have been concerned with such monochrome experiments, and who are among those who have brought attention to bear on the nature of the visual object. Through their painting, they have turned perception into an act of "communion" or "participation with," rather than "reaction to," a work. In order to place their work from the late 1950's in a broader and more accurate context, a chronological discussion of the background and stages in the development and acceptance of the new trends in art, is undertaken in Chapter 1. This survey focuses on the principles and directions in art, which were introduced following Abstract Expressionism, and presents a chronological analysis of critical comment and public recognition through exhibitions during the 1960's. The artists and their work are introduced in Chapter 2, and this is followed, in Chapter 3, by a discussion of the creative process that characterized their method of working and their approach to the act of painting which is relevant to the viewing of their work.

As is the case with most innovative trends, the critics and the public had some difficulty in naming or defining the new art, as it was not easily related to anything that had existed previously. The problem with overall terms and definitions, as always, was a general levelling
process which missed individual approaches and points of view. The artists generally feel that strict formal analysis and description is the best and most secure basis to work from, and that only through such a direct translation of the information actually on the canvas, should an interpretation be attempted. The issue of the two principal views of contemporary art criticism, which propose either a formal or a subjective approach, is put forth in Chapter 4 through the expressed views of major art critics from 1955 to the end of the 1960's.

When people are confronted by an image or approach that they have never seen before, they have no range of reference with which to compare it, and consequently they often misinterpret it, or do not see it at all. A discussion of the question of interpreting or attaching outside references to the imagery employed by the five artists is also presented in Chapter 4 with specific reference to their work.

It is generally accepted that, along with an increasing intellectual acceptance of the apparent extreme artistic solutions being proposed in the 1960's, an increasing optical acceptance was also taking place. Work that in the late 1950's looked radically simplified, un-coloured and virtually invisible, now appears much more
varied and 'available' to a sensitive, perceptive viewer. Chapter 5 includes a survey of this change in attitude in which the public became more accustomed to give a greater effort to viewing such works.

In the process of expanding the boundaries of perception, the artists in this paper have, to various degrees, introduced unusual visual relationships into their work. Subtle interactions, illusions and ambiguous situations require time to sort out, and the very act of visualizing these works and of giving them the attention that they demand, defines the quality of the experience that they deliver. The nature of perception, and of the visual experience as a whole is also discussed in Chapter 5 with reference to the use of colour, illusion and ambiguity in the work of the artists.

In order to fully describe any visual experience, then, it is necessary not only to be concerned with what is on the canvas in measurable terms, but also with what is "actually" seen and directly sensed in the viewing process. This interaction between the viewer and the work of art is analyzed in the Conclusion, Chapter 6. As Art McKay has observed:

Art will not yield its full meaning if approached in terms of any abstraction taken from life like thought or language. It must be sensed, reflected upon and then talked about.¹
The following discussion is an attempt to look at the factors that have influenced the way we look at "difficult" monochrome painting today and to discuss the fuller commitment necessary for viewers to achieve a more complete response from the work of art. What is important now is "to recover our senses -- we must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more."\(^2\)

**FOOTNOTES:**


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ABSTRACT

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DEFINING THE NEW SENSIBILITY

Since 1960, there has been an increasing amount of published discussion concerning the stages of modernist art during the last two decades. Several analyses of the process by which painting became painting alone and rejected unnecessary attributes have been attempted. The art of the 1960's, which has been concerned primarily with the specificity of the aesthetic object and of aesthetic experience itself, has been described by many terms: "reductivist," "rejective," "primary," "cool," "ABC art" and "minimal," to name a few. Its sources have been variously traced back to the aestheticism of Malevich, the geometry of Mondrian and the Dada of Duchamp.

Reaction Against Abstract Expressionism

A shift towards a new sensibility began in the 1950's, which was described by Barbara Rose as a "time of
convulsive transition not only for the art world but for society at large.¹ During these years many young painters were generally dissatisfied with the abstract expressionist style predominant in New York. They rejected not only the premises, but the emotional content of Abstract Expressionism. Within this group were some "older" generation artists who turned away from gestural art or never actually entered it. Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt stood outside the action painting milieu centred by deKooning. Pollock, as Alloway observed, has been "de-gesturized" by time and his large drip paintings of 1949-50 can be seen as related to the "all-over distribution of emphasis and the consequent pulverizing of hierarchic form" characteristic of the work of Newman, Rothko and later of Reinhardt.²

H.H. Arnason, in 1961, proposed the term "Abstract Imagist" for these non-expressionist artists, and it was these "Imagist" painters to whom the younger painters turned their attention.³

Newman, Rothko and Reinhardt have more specifically been identified as major innovators of current monochromatic and monotonal trends in art, which will be discussed further in Chapter 6. Their development since around 1950-51 has stressed the experience of the painting as a whole with a denial of compositional balancing, calligraphy and surface incidents (Figs. 43, 44, 45).
Reinhardt's theories about the noncommercial and nonutilitarian role of art were also significant factors in helping to change the artistic climate during the late 1950's. Many younger artists were drawn strongly to the intent of Reinhardt's statements.

By the late 1950's, while deKooning was still a powerful influence on the art scene and only the above few alternatives to Abstract Expressionism were being proposed, the shift in sensibility began to gather momentum. Alloway described the move away from gestural action painting as a:

mounting interest in symmetrical as opposed to amorphous formats, clear colour as opposed to dirty, hard edges as opposed to dragged ones.

Principle among the new approaches being introduced were the target and flag paintings of Jasper Johns, beginning in 1955, and Kenneth Noland's circle works from late 1958. Frank Stella produced a series of symmetrical black paintings during 1958-59 (Fig. 46), which were exhibited for the first time at the Museum of Modern Art's 16 Americans Exhibition in the winter of 1959-60. In the exhibition catalogue, Carl Andre wrote of Stella's black striped works:
Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his paintings. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of painting. . . His stripes are paths of the brush on canvas. These paths lead only to painting. 

These comments reinforce the concept of art for art's sake championed by Reinhardt's solid black paintings and Newman's single stripe works, as well as emphasizing their fidelity to the medium and their exclusion of unnecessary details. One further artist who should be mentioned in connection with the changing art scene is Ellsworth Kelly who as early as 1952-53, while in Paris, had painted a series of panel paintings in which each panel carried a single solid colour without visual variation or contrast. Kelly, along with Reinhardt, exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery, and her adjunct Section Eleven, from 1958-61.

Works such as Kelly's and those by other artists of this first phase of non-expressionistic New York painting were characterized by the term "hard-edge" which, according to George Rickey, was "invented" in 1959:

The phrase 'hard-edge' is an invention of the critic, Jules Langsner, who suggested it at a gathering in Claremont in 1959 as a title for an exhibition of four non-figurative California painters.
This exhibition, held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in July of that year, was actually entitled *Four Abstract Classicists*.

Perhaps the most important exhibition to take place at this time was Barnett Newman's one-man exhibition at Bennington College, Vermont in 1958 — followed in 1959 with a similar selection of 1946-52 works at French and Company, New York. The exhibition was a revelation to many artists and critics and its influence was widespread, as the general tendency in the late 1950's toward larger, more simple forms and toward a quieter, more objective surface suddenly was confirmed and in a sense defined by Newman paintings that were nearly ten years old. The flat, clean objective look of the 1960's was established even before the decade opened.  

E.C. Goossen, then head of the arts program at Bennington College, wrote an article based on Newman's works in *Art News* and it was apparently this article that prompted Roy Kiyooka, Ron Bloore and others of the Regina group, to ask Newman to lead the *Emma Lake* workshop in 1959. Again, Newman had a great impact. While he didn't bring any of his paintings with him and didn't do any painting while there, his personality and ideas were inspirational. Art McKay who was much impressed, commented on the Newman workshop:
. . . the year 1959 with Barnett Newman was a breakthrough. Members of the so-called Regina Group and others present, freely admit that Newman's workshop marked a turning point in their artistic development.

As Richard Simmins related in 1961, the example set by Newman inspired many artists to a more significant experimentation:

American painters like Ferren, Barnett, and Newman . . . have stimulated, stirred up, undoubtedly shaken these artists. But what has resulted was not a local imitation of abstract expressionism, but an intellectual upheaval resulting in great experimentation and an artistic milieu favourable to the production of important works of art.

The general direction in painting at this time, then, appeared to be characterized by a move away from heavily articulated surfaces with high textural variations, toward evenly applied, large areas of pure colour. In addition, the attitude of the artist towards his work also changed, from one of intense involvement with the process of painting to one of cool contemplation and control. Writing a few years later, in 1966, David Silcox noted a "New York influence" on Canadian art that characterized its transition from the late 1950's to the mid-1960's. He described the change as:
Leading from density towards spaciousness, from the tumultuous towards the neat, from the bountiful to the economical, from the personal to the impersonal, from the emotional blot to the intellectual diagram.11

This same shift in direction had taken place in New York at the turn of the decade and, as a result, the new sensibility took on an increased momentum and diversity.

Exhibitions and Public Recognition

Public recognition of the changing sensibility was made possible by a number of exhibitions during the 1960's which provided a focus for critics to discuss and attempt to define the limits of the new art.

The first exhibition of major importance was Toward a New Abstraction held at the Jewish Museum during the summer of 1963. Ben Heller, in his introduction, suggested that:

The still widespread interest in deKooning's ideas has been more of a hindrance than a help to the younger artists. . .[who] seem to stem most particularly from the revolutionary development of Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still.12

In spite of deKooning's continued influence, however, Heller alluded to the new artistic climate by referring to the
developing "post-deKooning world." He placed the new painting within the classic tradition and observed that a central characteristic of the artists in the exhibition was their conceptual approach to painting rather than their physical engagement with a medium. They were devoted to "a 'purer' hieratic conception of the act and meaning of painting."^14

In his introduction to the exhibition Three New American Painters held at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in January 1963, Clement Greenberg referred to the "difficult" nature of this new work and to the reaction of the art world at that time:

"... the greatest part of the institutional or official art world in New York still feels too much challenged by this kind of art, as indeed most artists and critics in New York still do. Indifference towards it may have changed to nervousness, but it is the nervousness felt in the face of a threat to established tastes."^15

In the spring of the following year, Greenberg's Post-Painterly Abstraction exhibition was displayed at the Los Angeles County Museum. He wrote that the "Hard-Edge" artists in the exhibition "are included because they have won their 'hardness' from the softness of Painterly Abstraction." Their work reveals a "move toward a physical openness of design, or toward linear clarity, or toward
Greenberg proposed that Hard-Edge artists develop from gestural ones: "a good part of the reaction against Abstract-Expressionism is...a continuation of it." He related this situation back to Wölfflin's cyclic theory of alternating painterly and linear styles which occurred throughout history. Abstract Expressionism, in other words, was characterized as a "painterly" style which had "degenerated into mannerism" while the recent developments in art were equated with the "linear" quality. In pursuing this approach, Greenberg rather emphatically disallowed any renewed interest or contact between the present artists and earlier geometric abstract art: "they have not inherited it [the hard edge] from Mondrian, the Bauhaus, Suprematism or anything else." Among the artists included in the exhibition were three Canadians: Arthur McKay, Kenneth Lochhead, and Jack Bush.

Barbara Rose in her article "The Primacy of Color," written in April, 1964, discussed some common characteristics of the recent trends in art:

*Order, logic, coherence, system, repetition, internal necessity and perhaps what one might term a Calvinistic sense of conceptual predestination are common to the new abstract painting.*

The main thing, she added, is that the "relativity of relational painting be avoided."
In October of the same year "a significant, though at the time little-noticed, exhibition," Young Artists was put on by the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York. In the catalogue introduction, E.C. Goossen described the general characteristics of the artists represented:

None of them employs illusion, realism, or anything that could possibly be described as symbolism. . .[but show a] concern with conceptual order.  

Richard Wollheim writing in Arts Magazine in January, 1965 was perhaps the first person to use the term "minimal" in referring to the new art. He suggested that a principal reason for the public resistance to the claims of this art can be related to its view of work or "manifest effort" as it occurred in "the making of a picture." He contended that there is an intentionally low or "minimal art-content" in such works as Reinhardt's "nearly invisible black paintings" which are "to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves" and as a result "possess very low content of any kind." Resistance to this kind of art, he suggested, comes from the spectator's sense that the artist has not worked hard enough or put enough effort into his art.
This idea of "manifest effort" was expressed more as a concern by Irving Snadler in the catalogue introduction to the exhibition Concrete Expressionism, at New York University in April of that year. He adopted the term "cool art" for works characterized by calculation, impersonality and boredom. He used Frank Stella as an example: "An art as negative as Stella's cannot but convey utter futility and boredom." He spoke out against conceptual or "one-shot art" as being merely "mechanistic" or "hollow and easy" and avoiding what he requires of a good artist - that he should "struggle" or "grope." Evan Turner, in 1966, also questioned the commitment of some artists whose work was concerned with subtle relationships:

... in the work of a number of artists in recent years, the contrast of tones, more often of values alone, is so very subtle that at any distance, there is virtually no feeling of commitment on the artist's part. After a certain point, subtlety can become regression.

Lucy Lippard preferred the word "rejective" to characterize the new art as she found the words "reductive" and "minimal" to be somewhat "insulting in their implication of a final result that is less in quality than some earlier original." While "rejective" does imply a process of elimination, it also suggests a strengthening process
by which excess and redundancy are shed and essence retained. It does not, in other words, settle for less "because it's cheaper aesthetically or practically." She observed the following year that an integral element of recent American painting is "a"disaffection with 'easy art'," a concept that unites most of the artists working in various styles that have achieved prominence since 1946. She suggested that the "often and pejoratively remarked cult of the new is actually a cult of the difficult." Lippard associated the progressive and rapid replacement of art styles with:

the Oedipal ritual of action and reaction inherited from art history: the ruling genre, the most seen and thus most imitable style, becomes 'easy' and must be renounced for a more 'advanced' art.

It is evident from the examination of these important exhibitions to 1967, and the related comments by critics, that both critical and public interest in the 1960's had left Abstract Expressionism far behind, and was now concentrating on the trend toward simplicity and intellectual logic. This analysis will provide a basis for the following discussion which covers the artistic development of the artists who form the focus of this paper.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER 1


4. Ibid.


7. Alloway, loc. cit.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 25.


22. Quoted in Ibid.


25. Ibid., 30.


27. Ibid.


Chapter 2

THE ARTISTS

Ronald Bloore

Ron Bloore, who had been appointed Director of the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery and lecturer in art at Regina College at the School of Art, University of Saskatchewan in 1966, set an important example as both an artist and a teacher in the development of artistic expression in Regina.

His own work in the late 1950's was characterized by sombre, densely-worked, all-over surfaces created with the use of a palette knife. *La Forêt mécanique* (Fig. 1), of 1958, for example, reveals a complex and mosaic-like treatment of the surface. By this time Bloore had already introduced his unique use of enamel on masonite or composition-board, which was later to be adopted for use by Art McKay. In 1962, Clement Greenberg credited Bloore with introducing the "Borduas direction" to Regina, thus "warding off" the New York abstract painting of the 1950's with its "mannered brush swipes, and its deceptively
hackneyed scaffolding of light and dark." It was Borduas "Gallicizing" of the New York approach of Pollock, rather than de Kooning, and his own basic "integrity" that Greenberg suggested had the greatest effect in Regina at that time. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Emma Lake Workshops - particularly the Newman one of 1959 - had an equal if not greater effect on, not only Bloore's approach, but on the Regina group in general.

By 1960 Bloore was executing paintings in which he incised long, spoke-like lines into thick, white paint resulting in the formation of roughly circular configurations. These appeared either in groups of two or three images on a thin vertical format, or singly on a square format, such as Painting (Fig. 2), of 1960. In the first case the figure is set off from the ground by a variation in the tone of white, while in the second example it is "outlined" by a thick, gestural halo shape. Bloore has also used colour, either singly or in a limited range, to extend his basic theme. In Painting (Fig. 3), of 1961, for example, a white, roughly circular, cross sign is defined "negatively" on an orange background. Similarly, in Yellow-Green Painting of the same year, cross or star-like forms within square and rectangular shapes are defined by a roughly textured background being painted "over" them. While, in 1961, Bloore identified two main interests in
his work - "on the whole my interest shifts from works with an all-over activated surface to others with simple, single or double, symbol-like elements"³ - both these aspects appear to a greater or less extent in all his paintings.

He has achieved a wide variety within his chosen theme by varying the texture and surface design. While some works, like those mentioned above, are highly textured or are carved and incised so that they resemble reliefs, others, such as Small White Cross (Fig. 4), of 1962, have much smoother surfaces with a much simpler image.

Bloore stopped painting on canvas after a visit to Greece in 1962-63, on a Canada Council grant. He was obviously affected by the light and the brilliant white wall surfaces characteristic of the area as, upon his return to Regina, he destroyed all the paintings in his studio and, since that time, has worked exclusively in tones of white on masonite panels.

In 1964 he introduced a square cross or star image which was divided into a grid and, further, into geometric cell-like forms. This central image was placed in the centre of a 4 by 8 foot panel and flanked on either side by series of horizontal lines which were continuous on alternate ends. As this "series" progressed, the square grid image was simplified and filled the whole format,
now also in the shape of a square. In Painting No. 3, the grid is quite rigid and relates directly to the shape of the support. By Painting No. 6 (Fig. 5), of 1964-65, however, this grid has opened up and now resembles a piece of mesh fencing. In all these works, "flaws," characteristic of Bloore's method of working, play an active part in the composition. Another variation on the theme is seen in Untitled, of 1965-66, where Bloore has placed circles within squares in a group of four, flanked on either side by a series of horizontal lines at right angles to each other. Echoes of these lines are found in such 1967 works as the White Mural (Fig. 6), created for the Confederation Art Gallery and Museum. Balancing these lines are organic clusters of triangular shapes some of which fade into the ground and create an ambiguous relationship between them. As in most of his works, the images are usually derived from the shape of the support.

After a demanding commission to execute a 12 by 24 foot Dorval Airport Mural in Montreal, which was completed in 1968, Bloore began to vary his formats from the usual 1 by 1 and 1 by 2 proportions and also hung several paintings on the diagonal. A similar combination of rows of ray clusters and horizontal shingles characterized these 1968 and early 1969 works. In the midst of this series, however, Bloore painted an extremely simplified
work, *Untitled*, August-November 1968 (Fig. 7), in which four adjacent sets of overlapping clapboard-like panels are the only elements. This painting seems to be a precursor for an even more radically simplified series begun in late 1969. Each of these "line paintings," as Bloore calls them, consists of twenty-five horizontal raised lines, more or less parallel and continuous across the width of the 43 by 96 inch panel, with the exception of a few inches at either side. The lines are only slightly differentiated by their divergence from true parallels and by the slight gaps, flaws and inconsistencies characteristic of Bloore's approach. In more recent paintings, Bloore has reintroduced a wheel or "flower" form as a principal motif. In some works, these forms are distributed over the entire surface of the painting, while in others, such as *Painting* (Fig. 8), of 1971, the forms are combined with raised lines retained from the earlier series. This work gives evidence of the sensitivity of Bloore's immaculate surfaces to natural light.

**Brian Fisher**

Brian Fisher attended Regina College at the School of Art, University of Saskatchewan from 1957-59, studying under Kiyooka, McKay, Bloore and Ken Lochhead. After
graduating from the Vancouver School of Art in 1960 he spent two years in Rome - the first year on an Italian Government Scholarship and the second on a Canada Council grant. His basic imagery evolved from a series of plant or biological drawings done prior to 1964. While these drawings and his subsequent early paintings became progressively more abstract, they still retain associations to their organic origin, as in *February #3* (Fig. 9), of 1964. Fisher states that he first began straightening the lines up by hand but soon decided that he might as well use a straight edge. As a result the free-hand circular motifs developed into precise structures of mathematical precision, which were primarily closed and centralized lozenge or ellipse shapes. Some early paintings of this new series were monochromatic, and based on the ellipse — for example, *Pacific* (Fig. 10), done in 1965. In works such as *The Brink* of the same year, he introduced brilliant colours that added an intense vibrancy to the basic image. A greater complexity began to appear in the image of such works as *Mind Music* and *Chinook* (Fig. 11), also of 1965, and *Blue Echo* and *Lyra* of early 1966. Here Fisher used lines in a grid configuration which related to the format, and which at the same time described a series of arcs with separate focal points within the canvas. In general, these works are based on centralized pillar or cross forms
and on the relationship between expanding and contracting apertures. In *Angst* (Fig. 12), and *Ease*, both of 1966, Fisher returned to the ellipse and added a further complexity to the image by introducing two conflicting grid systems - one radiating from the focal points of the ellipse and the other parallel to the framing edge. The interplay of these two systems created an illusionistic moire pattern which, combined with strong opaquely painted shapes at the centre, contributed to a sense of ambiguous space.

These two works were created as opposites - both are ellipses and both have a centre split. In *Angst*, the outside elliptical shape is much more strongly circumscribed and the colours colder and more highly contrasted. *Ease*, on the other hand, is much more open, both around the outside, where the ellipse is close in tone to the ground; and at the centre, where there is much less tension than in *Angst*. As the titles indicate, the two works have opposite connotations that are clearly evident in the comparison.

Up to this time, Fisher had been working mainly with single ellipses, symmetrical double ellipses, or in some cases with two smaller ellipses within a larger one, and was concerned with seeking different ways of solving the centre of this challenging form. With *Enigma* (Fig. 13), in 1966, he worked into a triple ellipse in which the space is even more incongruous and difficult to locate
visually. The interconnecting ellipses can be read in different ways depending upon what combinations of lines and shapes are followed. These combinations became more complex in the *Dorval Airport Mural* completed in 1967, in which the ellipse motif was repeated seven times thereby compounding the multiple planes, opaque rectangular shapes, and ambiguous spaces of the simpler works. The following year Fisher cut the ellipse in half - reversing the halves on the canvas to get a straight line along the top and bottom. In this *Indirections* series (Fig. 15), he opened up the formerly enclosed space of the ellipses which led him to progressively eliminate that shape altogether. In a series called *Induction* (Fig. 16), of 1968, his characteristic lines now radiated out from what can be considered an "imaginary" high horizon line which is determined by the uniform level at which the lines are cut off. The images are now based on square and rectangular combinations which are defined exclusively by parallel vertical lines. Moire patterns again emerge when the two competing "structures" overlap.

Accompanying his elimination of the ellipse, Fisher began to reduce the tonal contrasts between the lines and the ground in order to emphasize the treatment of space. The forms, as a result, tend to float upwards from the bottom of the canvas and, less obviously,
three-dimensionally in space. This is particularly clear in the *Odyssey* series of 1968, and the *Indicant* series of 1969. In *Odyssey* the repeated but separate blocks relate to each other thus reinforcing the sense of depth that is given by their progressive diminishment in size. In these works Fisher begins to decentralize his forms and introduces a heightened ambiguity. As a result of experiments with Bill Bonnieman, an accomplished printmaker-friend, Fisher produced a related group of ten silk-screen prints in the *Odyssey* series in which he employs a wider range of colour but keeps the line colour and ground colour very close in tone. The result tends to make the floating linear structures even less-apparent than in the related paintings.

In another pair of paintings, *Memorium (Earth)* (Fig. 17), and *Memorium (Sky)* of 1969, Fisher experiments further with testing the illusion of perspective by splitting the monolithic form in the centre and introducing a contradictory space which pushes forward against the illusion of recession. This contradiction, which is characteristic of most of Fisher's recent painting, appears again in his *Steppe* series of 1970-71 (Fig. 18), where converging lines receding into depth, and evenly spaced lines, which act as a grid paralleling the picture plane, conflict with each other.
In 1972 Fisher's work underwent another significant change. His formats were reduced to 45 by 45 inches and, in most cases, were hung on the diagonal. The interior images were eliminated and the entire surface was now organized by a series of parallel vertical lines. His main concern now was defining space by colour rather than by line. The format, as a result, arose out of this colour which appeared to emanate from points at the extreme horizontal corners and which functioned similarly to the focal point of his earlier works.

Yves Gaucher

As early as 1960, Gaucher was beginning to achieve an international reputation as an innovative printmaker. Beginning in 1959, when he acquired an old proof press, he began to develop a new and unconventional technique. He basically experimented with extending the traditional etching technique by developing a greater degree of relief of the impression and by using colour to achieve a range of painterly effects.

In 1961-62 Gaucher created a series of copper-etchings in deep relief that involved free arrangements of roughly-textured stone-like forms in warm earth colours. These shapes were placed in very tight cluster patterns in
early works such as *Ligne, Surface, Volume 2* and *Asagao* (Fig. 19), of 1961. This pattern gradually opened up in such works as *Sqana* where a greater tension is created between the less-textured shapes.

Gaucher often used a combination of varied techniques such as relief- and intaglio-engravings, embossing and, "martellage" or overlaying with acrylic paste, in a single print.\(^7\) After the earlier restrained experiments with few shapes, he developed a series involving much more flamboyant patterns in vibrant but subtly combined colours. Two of these large multicoloured prints, *Sa* and *Aji* (Fig. 20), of 1963, reveal the use of laminated papers of various weights and colours as an integral part of the composition. At this point Gaucher eliminated the use of arbitrary shapes and began to work exclusively with straight lines and rectangles. David Silcox states that "the shapes were distracting from his chief purpose which was to emphasize the activities between the different elements rather than their appearance."\(^8\)

In the summer of 1962 Gaucher attended a concert of contemporary music in Paris where, for the first time, he heard the work of Varese, Boulez and Anton Webern performed. He was particularly impressed by Webern and spoke of his reaction:
When I walked out of that concert, I knew this guy had done something irreparable to me. I felt throughout my whole body that he had challenged every single idea I had about sound, about art, about expression, about the dimensions all these things could have. 9

Since the early 1950's he has listened to and studied recordings of Indian ragas played by Ali Akbar Khan and the music of Stockhausen, Luigi Nono as well as Verese, Boulez and Webern, but this concert was his first real confrontation with twelve-tone music. Gaucher liked Webern's technique - which was to send "little darts of sound out into space where they expand and take on a completely new quality of their own" - as it triggered in his mind what he was after visually. 10 As a result of this "apocalyptic experience" 11 he produced a set of three prints, which he called En Homage à Webern (Fig. 21). These prints involve a complex technique of positive and negative relief on white laminated paper. Geometric configurations of grey squares and short thin lines, which are raised but not coloured, make up asymmetrical compositions. Gaucher completed three more related prints in the same technique, but in colour, over the next two years - Fugue Jaune 1963, Pli Selon Pli 1964 and Point Contrepoint 1965.

These prints led Gaucher into painting. In 1965 he began his Danse Carrée series (Fig. 22), which were square
paintings hung on the diagonal. In these works, he took the square and line elements from the preceding prints and arranged them in symmetrical patterns which were related to the edge of the canvas. These elements were now in brilliant colour and were placed on an equally vibrant background thereby creating intense interactions and illusionistic after-images which Gaucher called "chromatic antagonisms" or "energetic events." The colours are uniform in value and create dynamic and ever-changing pulsating rhythms for the viewer.

The following year Gaucher began a new series in which he reduced the compositional elements to thin horizontal lines, which he called "signals," and returned to the rectangular format. As with the previous series, a print was the lead-in, in this case Point Contrepoint. The paintings consist of a single-hued field activated by brilliant linear units arranged in symmetrical intervals and based on a modular system. The internal activity is accentuated by a pair of colour strips placed at the horizontal or vertical perimeters of the canvas which create compression between them and expansion through the opposite edges. Works in the series range from the subdued grey field of Homage à Ali Akbar Khan and the grey signals of Grey Silences for Green (Fig. 23), through the more active Signals - 8 Inch Progressions, with pink and blue vertical
lines on a yellow ground, and *Soft Signals at Dawn*, with double lines of blue and green on a grey ground, to such intense works as *Happy Birthday Raga* and *Cardinal Raga* (Fig. 24), of 1967, with vibrant signals on a brilliant red ground. Gaucher explored the whole range of interactions between various colours placed adjacently and, as David Silcox observed, he would sometime "marry the actual colour with the seeming colour to create a double illusion."13

Late in 1966 Gaucher had begun work on another series of prints which were based on a large number of exploratory drawings. *Transitions* consists of eight prints characterized by thin horizontal lines in a range of seven tonalities of grey. The composition develops by progression over the series. The first print is completely symmetrical around both axes while the next three prints employ variations of a mirroring system, which was related in detail by Chandler to similar systems in music - both serial composition and Baroque.14 The compositions are still based on symmetry but differ according to reversals and inversions of the basic set of elements. Asymmetry is introduced in the remaining prints and ranges from the almost imperceptible deviation in the fifth print to the completely arbitrarily composed eighth print in the series. While this final print is completely without axis or focal point,
it retains a sense of structure and balance which is characteristic of the artist's disciplined intuition, and which also underlies the development of his Grey on Grey series of paintings begun late in 1967 (Fig. 25).

Gaucher had been studying the behaviour of grey against other colours all through the Signals series - most frequently in the 1966 works - by using grey for the lines and, in a few cases, for the field itself. In the Grey on Grey series he concentrated on the possibilities of grey in a wide range of subtle tonal variations. Each work is a uniform field of a tone of grey carrying a set of narrow, horizontal lines of unmixed greys which vary in size, number and pattern with each painting. While one or two of the first grey paintings reveal traces of bilateral symmetry taken from the early Transition prints, they are generally characterized by the open and dynamic spatial rhythm achieved in the final prints of the Transition series. The paintings, which range in size from 30 by 30 inches to 9 by 15 feet and larger, are identified by a formula such as F-M-68B-1 in which the month, year and colourmix are indicated. Originally, however, Gaucher had made another reference to music by titling the works Alap, after "the initial, tentative section of an Indian raga before the heavy rhythm beings." 15
Gaucher has described the period between January 1970 and May 1972 as a transition period in which he was finding a new approach. He felt he had exhausted the possibilities of the 'Grey' paintings and, as a result, decided to "go back to symmetry and begin again." In December, 1969, he executed a dramatic red painting which acted as a "short circuit" and from which he took "two years to recover." Everything in the work was different than his normal procedure - in that it was sprayed and entirely preconceived. In the works of this two-year period such as Bleu, Vert, Bleu (Fig. 26), of 1971, he moved from grey monochrome fields, with superimposed patterns of lines, to wide horizontal monochrome bands divided, in some cases, by grey lines running from one edge of the painting to the other. Gaucher stated that the paintings were becoming "more and more silent" and that it was "only a matter of time" before the horizontal line "stretched right across the canvas." The spatial rhythm of these new works resulted from the spacing and variation of tonal values of the bands rather than from the superimposed "signals" of the earlier series. Gaucher has commented that he was attempting to put into each of these works "the entire effect" of the group of Grey on Grey paintings that were exhibited in Vancouver, Edmonton and London in 1969.
Roy Kiyooka

Roy Kiyooka studied at the Institute of Technology and Art, Calgary from 1946-49 and, in 1955, was awarded a scholarship to attend the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico. Since 1952, he has taught in a number of cities and has been a significant influence on the creative life and the development of an up-to-date artistic expression wherever his contact has been felt.

During the 1950's Kiyooka was working in a gestural style which involved an organic imagery and heavily textured surfaces reflecting the actual creative process. His attendance at the Emma Lake Workshops from 1955 to 1960 introduced him to American "big-attack" painting and brought about a "more objective structure" in his work. During these years he moved between a geometric approach, as evidenced in a series of symmetrical square paintings with geometric patternings, and a more organic, visceral approach in such works as Relief Painting with Five Panels of 1961. In this work, however, an overall pattern of rectangles and counter-balancing circular shapes tends to order the lyrical forms underneath. This characteristic balancing of organic form and movement with geometric elements is more clearly evidenced in Relief Painting with Incised Circles (Fig. 27), also of 1961.
Variations on the combination of open and structured forms characterizes a series of paintings, watercolours and collages done in 1962. Collage No. 4 reveals a greater freedom than that which existed in the previous works. Kiyooka developed a technique of building up layers of paper of various thicknesses, from semi-transparent to cardboard, thereby creating a woven network of gestural bands which also varied in size and intervals. Bright colours were used in the watercolours and paintings while the collages were mostly in black and white with several intermediate tones of grey.

By 1963 these gestural elements were being contained within hard-edge frameworks, as in Blue Zone (Fig. 28). These became progressively more important and by the following year hard-edge forms dominated his paintings exclusively. In works such as Mirak and Barometer #2 (Fig. 29), of 1964, Kiyooka retains the fluid, organic quality which is characteristic of all his works by combining rectilinear and curvilinear elements in a broad range of colour relationships.

It was also in 1964 that Kiyooka introduced the oval or ellipse motif into his work. He began a long series of paintings based on the ellipse either singly, as in Aleph #2 (Fig. 30), or as a connected pair, as in the Bridge series (Fig. 31), of 1965. These shapes enclose
backgrounds which are rectilinear, striped or otherwise patterned in opposition to the forms by which they are contained. The double ellipses are either vertically or horizontally connected. The ellipse, which occupied Kiyooka's attention for a number of years, represented a very versatile form for him:

\[
\text{At the time I got into ellipses, I saw ellipses in everything in the city... there were 'millions' of them around and they in their turn showed the diversity of possibilities.}^{19}
\]

Again, the colours cover a wide range. In some cases, however, they are in rather subdued relationships with shifts of hue, rather than in intensely contrasting combinations.

In 1966, after having moved to Montreal, Kiyooka's ellipses became more delicate and lyrical - "a gentle sort of mandala in perspective."^{20} They appeared in a series of large paintings characterized by subtle tonal relationships of an atmospheric blue colour. In Homage to Debussy (Fig. 32), several oval shapes float in a precise but delicate balance in relation both to each other and to the background. The ground is divided vertically into four panels, and horizontally by two tones of blue in close contrast to the superimposed ovals. The ovals are placed horizontally within the vertical divisions and at times bleed off the edges of the canvas, suggesting an extension
into the surrounding space. A similar sense of oriental space is suggested in Plaiedes (Fig. 33), a larger work of 1967. This painting is divided into five vertical units, each 3 by 6 feet, within which the ovals are allowed to float freely. Again, some of the ovals float off the canvas into exterior space while also advancing and receding in and out of the picture space itself. In both cases the narrow framework dividing the long paintings into panels becomes part of the composition and tends to apply a further subtle rhythm over the works.

Another delicate painting with the ellipse as the presiding motif is Daneb (Fig. 34), painted in 1968. In this work two pairs of ovals in pastel shades are outlined by thin orange lines in contrast to the cloudy blue background. Here the ovals are placed vertically on a background which is divided horizontally into two panels but tied together by a similar thin orange line running around the perimeter of the canvas. An ambiguous spatial tension is created by the subtle contrast of colours and the precarious placement of the forms which hover above each other. Later in 1968 Kiyooka stopped painting "because it was no longer knocking my head," but adapted his now familiar oval motif to a series of prints and a number of laminated cedar sculptures which he characteristically took to a great
variety of solutions. Most recently he has worked in the shaping of fibreglass sculptures whose gracefully flowing lines and subtle colours relate back to his earlier paintings.

Arthur McKay

Art McKay also studied at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art in Calgary. After three years there, from 1945 to 1948, he left to study in Paris and, in 1952, was appointed special lecturer in art at the School of Art, Regina Campus of the University of Saskatchewan.

In the late 1950's McKay was painting what he described as "an abstract version of English landscape painting" (Fig. 35). He came into contact with the work of Jackson Pollock while in New York in 1956-57, however, and by 1959 his landscape abstractions gave way to Pollock-oriented, gestural works characterized by an all-over distribution of evocative light-dark passages. Terry Fenton states that this change in approach was directly related to McKay's contact with Barnett Newman at Emma Lake in 1959. McKay has commented that Newman, J.W.G. MacDonald and Dr. D. Suzuki, in particular, were great influences on him: "Contact with these people made it impossible for me to avoid thinking." As a result of his contact with
Newman he decided to stop making oil paintings and instead resolved to "make marks," to "let things happen." To achieve this he began to scrape liquid flat flack paint onto paper sheets, 20" by 26", using a palette knife (Fig. 36). Late in 1959 he was looking for a way of translating these paintings on paper into a larger format and also for a firm surface that would allow him to continue working with the palette knife. The solution came from Ron Bloore who suggested the use of tempered masonite sheets, which he had been using since 1958. In 1960 McKay began to develop his now characteristic technique of scraping dark enamel thinly over white underpainting and thereby creating the illusion of heavy impasto on a virtually flat surface.

The circle motif began to appear in McKay's work as a dark ring shape in *Darkness* of 1961 and, later that year, was expanded into a larger disc motif in *Image of Time*. It was developed into the final form, with which he has experimented on and off since, in *The Void* and *Effulgent Image* (Fig. 37), executed simultaneously in 1961. In *Effulgent Image* the background is painted with a black enamel which emphasizes the surface illusion. It was in these four works that McKay progressively resolved his circle-in-the-square image, and over the next four years the formal implications of this image were extended to a variety of possibilities.
In 1962 McKay augmented these "circle paintings" by introducing an elliptical work, Tension (Fig. 38), in which a dark mottled centre image is superimposed on a brilliant red ground. He also began a new series in which he introduced a tablet-like square image with rounded corners and which was treated in a variety of ways. In some works the surface of the tablet was vertically striated, while in others, such as Mandala, concentric textured bands in the tablet shape are repeated inward to the centre. Another work from 1962, Image of Antiquity (Fig. 39), includes two tablet-like shapes which are separated by a striated centre panel. In still another variation, The Enclosure of 1963, McKay reduced the tablet shape to a wide band which resembled a frame and which enclosed a uniformly textured field with a predominant vertical emphasis. This format was extended into 4 by 6 foot panels such as Statement of Paradox and Enigma (Fig. 40), both of 1963. All of these centralized circle, rectangle and mandala themes have been taken through many variations up to the present.

In all the works to 1967, McKay used a limited, but very striking range of colour - usually subdued organic tones, such as in Mandala No. 1 (Fig. 41), or luminous blues or greens which are heightened by the mottled textural
appearance of the surface. Since then, however, he has added a greater range of brilliant colour which seems to relate back to Tension of 1962. In Untitled (Fig. 42), of 1971, for instance, the dark tablet form is surrounded by a vibrant acid green. Since 1961 McKay has been exclusively concerned with solving a symmetrical, centre-focussing image in spatial terms.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER 2


2. Ibid.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


10. In conversation with the artist, September 1972.


16. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.


24. Quoted in Fenton, *loc. cit.*
Chapter 3

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The Approach to Painting

As was evident from the discussion in Chapter 1, a major characteristic of many artists working in the 1960's was their consideration of the act of painting as a preconceived transaction. The artists considered painting to be a thing of the mind and sought to establish their paintings definitively before they were painted. In other words, the idea existed before the actual painting, with the emphasis placed on finished work:

The painting appears as a preconceived idea and whatever the labours to achieve it, however useful the accident may have been, whatever growth occurs in the process, the stress is on the finished work... The painting is no longer the record of an act; it is a result, a completion not a process.¹

As early as 1961 Ron Bloore's statement regarding his approach to painting seemed to coincide with this general trend:
. . . I am not aware of any intention while painting with the exception of making a preconceived image function formally as a painting. By this I mean that the appearance of each work has been consciously determined in my mind before executing it, and the general concept is not significantly altered by the requirements of material limitations.

While the conceptual approach to painting generally involves a "non-tactile and non-painterly technique," however, Bloore's work reveals an admiration for action or gesture painting. Even though he does make his "preconceived images function formally as paintings," his work is not purely mechanical. Barry Lord has observed that the material and technical limitations themselves have been anticipated at least as much as the formal image. He has also suggested that in spite of Bloore's "formalist" statements, the visual evidence of his paintings could lead one to describe him as a "delayed-action painter." The finished paintings record the decisions taken in the act of painting which are "evident, implicit in, and necessary to the appearance of the final work itself." These works are quite pronounced and controlled, built up by the manipulation of layers of paint to achieve a highly expressive surface. Bloore works on masonite panels with a broad putty knife using layers of unthinned oil paint directly from the tube. He then scrapes and manipulates each layer
into planes and ridges creating "welt-like" images and motifs raised from the ground. More recently, he has applied a thinned top coat of white paint with a spray gun, and a final modulation is achieved by carefully removing this layer over the raised lines with sandpaper. The various irregularities or flaws evident in the images in Bloore's paintings - caused either by different thicknesses of impasto or by inconsistencies in the scraped paint, attest to the prolonged act of painting by which the works were created.

McKay's works also give the impression of being "revealed" rather than "made." This is inherent in his method of painting in which he scrapes dark enamel thinly over white underpainting. This technique emphasizes irregularities on the surface as the dark paint fills in hollows in the undercoat and leaves the ridges and flat areas a light brown. The dark enamel acts somewhat as a transparent glaze. In later works, he manipulates the white undercoat and causes the glazed layer to give the illusion of heavy impasto on the thinly painted and virtually flat surface. As Clement Greenberg observed in 1963:

_McKay converted the Bloore-Borduas knife-handling into something altogether his own, and did with it some of the best as well as most ambitious paintings I have seen anywhere in Canada._
McKay's technique then, involves the stripping away of paint from a surface in order to "discover" an image.

Brian Fisher's paintings, on the other hand, are precisely laid out and mathematically calculated. They are based on a series of intricate working drawings which have been described as "tactile" and somewhat volumetric (Fig. 14). Richard Simmins commented on the importance of drawing to Fisher:

> drawing forms the base of his art - premeditated, planned, highly complex drawing - with a precision and control which is second to none in the country.⁷

This perfectionist technique demonstrates Fisher's complete mastery and control over this idiom which Chandler terms "cool rather than emotion."⁸ These preliminary drawings are based exclusively on the straight line as are all of his paintings and prints. More recently he has done finished drawings for works including and following the Indirections, and Indicant series. While he works carefully from a pre-conceived idea already worked out in drawings, he leaves the process open to make modifications as they suggest themselves. Fisher once spoke of his goal in these terms:

> Any discipline which you pursue to its very extreme will lead to an area which is something more than the sum total of the steps you had to take to get there.⁹
Since he began his series of grey paintings in December 1967, Gaucher has followed his disciplined intuition rather than any preconceived plan in his work. A neutral grey ground, which is continued onto the unframed edge of the painting is evenly applied with a roller. Gaucher then involves himself totally with the surface and lets his "experienced" intuition take over. He has commented that he spends as many as three weeks or a month looking at and communicating with the canvas, which he says is "charged with energy." Once he has established a union with the canvas, the structure becomes "inevitable" and he knows intuitively where to place his "lines." It has been suggested that Gaucher is like the Zen archer who "can hit the target even when blindfolded." In Guacher's words:

> you have to mentally establish this unity with the target before you can afford to let the arrow go. I still sometimes miss the target.

Thus, while the application of his "signals," which vary in length and width as well as in number and pattern with each painting, is intuitive, the overall problem of the series is determined in his mind before hand. Trial and error, in other words, occur off the canvas, instead of being incorporated into the painting itself. While the
changes evident from one series to another may appear "radical," Gaucher explains:

\[\text{that's just because nobody sees what went on between them. They weren't changes, they were developments. For the three or four prints I would put out a year, there would be another twenty-five I would destroy, plus thousands and thousands of drawings.}\]

The prints are thus an essential "phase" in Gaucher's distillation process and act as a "disciplined and resistant medium" through which he can test his ideas.\(^1\)

Like Gaucher, Kiyooka's oval images give the impression of "delicate placement" which Fernande Saint-Martin has described as an "intuitive equilibrium."\(^2\)

Gaucher has described his act of painting in Zen terms, as "know nothing spontaneity" and, according to Abraham Rogatnick, Kiyooka has also admitted to being drawn to the "paradoxical" Zen state which "welcomes intellectual joy as long as it can be experienced without intellectual interference."\(^3\) He has said of his paintings and collages that they are about things "waiting to reveal themselves" and about the artist "wanting to conceal himself."\(^4\) Art, for him, is an "artist's consciousness given form"; he has remarked that an artist must be willing to live in the life of the imagination and to give it some shape.\(^5\)
motives for painting are to "make art for the pleasure and anguish of it, to give it away for the same reasons." Each painting for Kiyooka is a unique experience.

**Serial and Systemic Methods**

A related development central to art in the 1960's is the preponderance of serial paintings. An interest in systems and serial methods has led many artists to work in runs, groups, or periods, as do the five artists considered in this paper.

A number of authors have attempted to define this trend in recent years. Principal among them is John Coplans who, in the introduction to his *Serial Imagery* exhibition in 1968, traced serialism back to the Dedekind-Cantor theory of variables. He pointed out that with Serial art:

> The masterpiece concept is abandoned. Consequently each work within the series is of equal value; it is part of a whole; its qualities are significantly more emphatic when seen in context than when seen in isolation.

Artist Mel Bochner offered an essentially similar point of view in defining "serial" as a procedure:

> Individual parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in how they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole.
Yves Gaucher's *Grey on Grey* series most clearly demonstrates this homogeneous quality where "the single painting is amplified in meaning by being seen in the context of the group."²¹

Coplans presented Monet, with his cathedral and haystack series, as the forerunner of serialization, and Albers, with his *Homage to the Square* series, as the father of modern serialization. He discussed Rothko, Gottlieb, Newman and Reinhardt as having, at one time or another, worked at a series of paintings, but discounted Newman's series of the *Stations of the Cross*, 1958-66, as dealing with a narrative rather than a serial approach. More recent advocates mentioned include Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella and the sculptor Larry Bell. Rather than dealing with variations on a single theme like Monet or Albers, these younger artists - including Bloore, McKay, Fisher, Gaucher and Kiyooka - seem to concern themselves more with a set of linked formal problems and solutions, which Coplans related to Mondrian's "plus and minus" series.²² Ron Bloore, in 1961, expressed such a view in referring to his method of working:

"... the paintings fall into distinct series which are usually composed of four or five large works which were preceded by smaller ones in which some formal or technical problems have been examined. ..."²³
This serial imagery differs from an evolutionary series, which has a beginning and end in view, and is treated rather as a continuum having neither a first nor a last element. Coplans suggested that it is to be comprehended as a macrostructure with variables, such as rhythmic variations of shapes and intervals, combinations of verticals with horizontals and diagonal variations, over the run of the series. The multiple ellipse series of Kiyooka and Fisher, discussed earlier, demonstrate such a logical connection between related works in which an idea is explored through variations on a theme until the artist's interest in the idea is exhausted. Evan Turner, writing in 1966, however, considered this serial approach to be a destructive factor and made a specific reference to the work of Art McKay:

The artist who deliberately, almost compulsively, limits his work for a considerable period of time to a modicum of factors, repeatedly explored in different juxtapositions may be attempting, like Arthur McKay, to achieve full comprehension of his chosen motif; but at the same time, in imposing such rigid limitations, he is, one feels, withdrawing and inevitably denying himself many other areas of exploration.

Susan Sontag suggested, on the other hand, that it is the "perception of repetitions" that makes a work of art "intelligible" and until one has "grasped, not the 'content,'
but the principles of (and balance between) variety and redundancy. . .these works are bound to appear boring or ugly or confusing, or all three."26

Lawrence Alloway, in his *Systemic Painting* article, proposed that a possible term for this "repeated use of a configuration" might be "One-Image art" in which we look for this "variety within a conspicuous unity." He seemed to lean more towards the evolutionary concept of serial paintings:

> the artist who uses a given form begins each painting further along, deeper into the process, than an expressionist, who is, in theory at least, lost in each beginning; all the One-Image artist has to have done is to have painted his earlier work.27

He adds, however, that while the end-state is known prior to the completion of such systemic works, it does not "exclude empirical modifications of a work in progress, but it does focus them within a system."28

**The Artist's Personal Involvement**

Mel Bochner has stated that "systemic thinking has generally been considered the antithesis of artistic thinking." He adds that systems are "methodical"; they
are characterized by "regularity, thoroughness, repetition" and a "continuity of application." Barbara Rose has observed that, like the mystic, many contemporary artists deny "the ego and the individual personality" in their work; and it has been further suggested by Lucy Lippard that "the Zen aim of a non-ego 'tabula rasa,' an equilibrium of intellect and expression, is not irrelevant to the arts of the sixties." Lawrence Alloway has proposed, however, that this approach to painting is not, as often claimed, impersonal:

The personal is not expunged by using a neat technique; anonymity is not a consequence of highly finishing a painting. The artist's conceptual order is just as personal as autobiographical tracks.

He further maintained that:

a system is not antithetical to the values suggested by such art world word-clusters as humanist, organic and process. . .on the contrary, while the artist is engaged with it, a system is a process. . . .

Terry Fenton alluded to the "impersonal" quality of Brian Fisher's work in 1966:

Fisher is above all concerned with creating an impersonal image that means different things to different
people. There is no gesturing, no evidence of the painter's hand in his work.\textsuperscript{34}

Fisher has maintained, however, that he is still very emotionally tied to the painting in the sense that he has to deal with it "on a material basis." He explained that what is visible is \textit{not} necessarily what the painter's involvement is, and suggested:

\begin{quote}
the quality of an unbroken and dry coat of paint is much different than the actuality of putting it on and indeed great pains have to be gone to in order to take all individual character out of it — it's a lot harder to paint without leaving any brushstrokes than to leave them.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Roy Kiyooka has also spoken to the issue of the human presence:

\begin{quote}
the painting itself gives the human presence. . .you can see the process in a painting however much suppressed it is. . .you can see the duration in which the thing could have happened.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Gaucher too, disagrees with the contention that the human element is missing from current purist art, and particularly from his own work:

\begin{quote}
I think this painting is extremely human, it deals with the essentials of existence; with rhythm, the central fact of life.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}
There is a more obvious human content in the works of Ron Bloore and Art McKay as evidenced in their actual technique of painting, discussed earlier. The element of the flaw or inconsistency in their worked surfaces implies a decidedly human view of the universe. John Chandler has suggested that there is also "an impersonal quality" about Bloore's works— as though they were "made by 'Man' rather than by 'this' particular man"— a quality that is also clearly evident in the works of Art McKay. Chandler adds, however, that this "impersonality" speaks more of a "universal humanity."

This concept can be related to all the artists under discussion here and will be pursued further in the next chapter.


4. Ibid., 24.


10. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.


18. Quoted in Ondaatje, loc. cit.


22. Coplans, loc. cit.

23. Quoted in Simmins, loc. cit.


28. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


37. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.


39. Ibid.
Chapter 4

CONTEMPORARY ART CRITICISM AND THE ISSUE OF INTERPRETATION

Formal and Subjective Criticism

During the period under discussion, two distinct approaches to art criticism have been postulated - a subjective or interpretive approach, of which Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess are prime exponents, and a formal approach related mainly to Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and their followers. The first approach emerged with Abstract-Expressionism in the mid-1940's and held the forefront until the late 1950's. They characterized action painting as a new anti-academic way of approaching the canvas which was the product of the artist's actions and which was interpreted in relation to a crisis of personal identity and painterly decision. The formalist school which gained prominence in the 1960's, identified the artist as the discoverer of solutions to formal problems inherent in the art of the immediate past. They proposed that the
achievement of the Abstract-Expressionists lay in their solutions to certain formal problems in painting itself rather than in any fundamentally different approach to the act of painting.

Mel Bochner has taken an artist's stance in relation to the various approaches to art criticism and identified three more or less interpretive approaches:

"Impressionistic" criticism, which has concerned itself with the effects of the work of art on the observer - individual responses; "historical" criticism, which has dealt with an a 'posteriori' evolution of forms and techniques - what is between works; and 'metaphorical' criticism which has contrived numerous analogies - most recently to scientism.

Like most artists working in "reductive" idioms, he suggests that what has generally been neglected is "a concern with the object of art in terms of its own material individuality - the thing itself."

Greenberg and Fried consider the reductivist tendencies in contemporary art in such formal terms as colour, composition, scale, format and execution. They also require that the artist is critic and not only of his own work but of art in general, especially art of the immediate past - in this case Abstract-Expressionism. The basic text in this Greenberg-influenced criticism is
is the article Modernist Painting, published in Arts Yearbook 4, 1961, in which Greenberg argued for this self-criticism within each art. "through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized." "Flatness" and "two-dimensionality" was the "only condition shared with no other art, and so modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else." The same concept was elaborated by Michael Fried as a concentration on "problems intrinsic to painting itself."

Several other critics have made reference to the new art as being "non-interpretive." In 1965 Barbara Rose characterized these new trends as "uninigratiating, unsentimental, unbiographical and not open to interpretation," and added that the young artists "eschew image or symbolical allusion for pure, non-gestural chromatic abstraction." Dore Ashton remarked in 1967 that this young generation of artists stood:

flatly against the metaphorical or analogical interpretation of the world... their 'objects' stand for nothing, interpret nothing; they are, merely, esthetically conceived objects, dealing with spatial experiences and certain kinds of visual information.

Nicolas Calas addressed himself to this question in referring to the work of Reinhardt, Stella, Robert Morris and their followers:
Mystic interpretations [of their work] are aesthetically meaningless, as were earlier attempts (often encouraged by some of the artists themselves) at explaining the work of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and Arp in a similar frame of reference. What is contrary to an evolutionary view of history is the endeavor to revive in our time the antiquated faith in universals of occidental and oriental mystics.¹⁸

Most of the younger artists are emphatically against interpretative readings of their work and are generally not given to polemics except when, as Dore Ashton suggested, it is "to divest painting of previous associations and place it in the context of contemporary thought."⁹

Susan Sontag, in her article Against Interpretation commented that, in most modern cases, "interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone."¹⁰ She suggested that "real art" has the capacity to "make us nervous" and that by "reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting 'that,' one tames the work of art...makes art manageable, conformable."¹¹ Interpretation, which is based on the "highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art," she observed, as it makes art into an "article of use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories."¹² Finally, Lucy Lippard suggested that a painting that is asked to be "both a painting and a
picture of something else that has nothing to do with painting per se" is likely to suffer from its contradictory roles: "Visual art is visual. . .Abstract art objects are made to be seen and not heard, touched, read, entered, interpreted."¹³

The formalist approach, then, seems to assume that the painter is totally isolated from his surroundings and that his expression comes from his solution to formal problems within art and art history rather than from any social or personal source. The difficulty in such an assumption is that the eye simply does not operate in a vacuum of isolated conditions and that whatever the eye sees, will be interpreted and responded to by the mind of the viewer.

Dore Ashton has written that:

*to assume. . .that the visible data on the canvas surface - the colors or structural evidence - is all there is, and works only in terms of sensory perception, is to impoverish the reception of works of art unduly.*¹⁴

In outlining his "Intentionalist Method," Max Kozloff, proposed that the important relation in a work of art is not between two or more forms on a surface, but between itself as a complex event, and the spectator," and further stated that:
the variables in the aesthetic experience, therefore, are the work, the spectator's physiological and emotional response, and whatever appropriate information he can bring to bear - all of which will affect the mutual shaping of object and subject.  

Lawrence Alloway has suggested that what is missing from the formalist approach to painting is "a serious desire to study meanings beyond the purely visual configurations and has asserted the need for critics to reintroduce "other experience" into their appraisals of the new art:

The pressing problem of art criticism now is to reestablish abstract art's connections with other experience without, of course, abandoning the now general sense of art's autonomy.  

He asked us to consider a number of formalist-based opinions which "acknowledge or suppose the existence of meanings/feeling "in their reference to the work of Kenneth Noland. Ben Heller, for instance, wrote that Noland "has created not only an optical but an expressive art," while Michael Fried called Noland's paintings "powerful, emotional statements." Alan Solomon has described some of Noland's "targets" as "buoyant and cheerful," and others as sombre, brooding, tense, introspective." Such descriptions are uncertain and rather vague and tend to coincide with Barry
Lord's observation that "the formalist error is... their failure to articulate the precise relation between form and feeling."\(^2\)

The approach of formalist critics, then, splits the work of art into separate elements at the expense of all other properties. This kind of analysis, which Alloway calls "formalist positivism," needs the "iconographical and experiential aspects" as well, and these, he suggests, can "no longer be dismissed as 'literary' except on the basis of an archaic aestheticism."\(^2\) Nicolas Calas observed that:

... as images of order and disorder may induce pleasant or unpleasant effects, it is as arbitrary to declare that a work of art can be appraised without taking into consideration emotional reactions, as it is to claim that the work of art is a self-referent object.\(^2\)

In The Shape of Time George Kubler wrote that the "existential value of a work of art, as a declaration about being," cannot be extracted from "adherent signals" - composed of intricate messages in the symbolic order - alone, nor from "self-signals" - the mute existential declaration of things - alone.\(^2\) He observed that the self-signals taken alone prove only existence while adherent signals taken in isolation prove only the presence of meaning, and suggested that existence without meaning
seems "terrible" in the same degree as meaning without existence seems "trivial":

\[
\text{We are discovering little by little all over again that what a thing means is not more important than what it is; that expression and form are equivalent challenges to the historian; and that to neglect either meaning or being, either essence or existence, deforms our comprehension of both.}\]

Susan Sontag has suggested that the aim of all commentary on art now should be "to make works of art - and, by analogy, our own experience - more, rather than less, real to us: and that "the function of criticism should be to show 'how it is what it is,' even 'that it is what it is,' rather than to show 'what it means.'"

Imagery - Iconographic and Archetypal Considerations

The question of content and the interpretation of current "minimal" painting trends, therefore, has been a hotly contested issue in the 1960's. As discussed above, many contemporary artists assert that only what is actually there is important - in Frank Stella's words: "What you see is what you see." They describe their works matter-of-factly, and any statements or interpretations relating to content, meaning, or intention are prominent by their
omission. Barbara Rose has observed that, if the work is to be taken at face value, the content:

should be nothing more than the total of the assertions that it is this or that shape and it takes up so much space and is painted such a color and made of such material.28

The apparent simplicity of the works of the artists being discussed here was arrived at through a series of complicated, highly informed decisions, each involving the elimination of whatever was felt to be nonessential. Brian Fisher refers to this process:

it follows... if you're working in a formal sense, it very often happens that you get on a sequence of reduction - you start taking away - you recognize more and more what is not essential and what is essential. ...29

This reduction of means involves highly formal statements and, as a result, these artists tend to work with a close relationship to geometric forms.

Symmetry, a related concept that has been employed by these artists, neutralizes compositional relationships and allows for concentration on the whole rather than on parts. Even when such symmetry is not used, as in some works by Gaucher, Bloore and Kiyooka, it is more accurate to speak of the "positioning" of the image rather than of "composition" in the conventional sense of the word. The
neutral geometric motifs and images used in their works provided for an absolute, rigidly disciplined scheme or device which tended to minimize, but not eliminate, the intrusion of figurative associations or interpretations.

There are strong formal links between the works of these five artists, particularly in the recurrence of circle, ellipse, square and rectangle motifs. In addition to being ideal devices for the exploration of various formal problems, however, these geometric images can also be considered in iconographical terms. Lawrence Alloway commented on Noland's circles, for instance, in these words:

> Whatever he may have intended, [his circles], never effaced our knowledge, built-in and natural by now, of circular systems of various types. Circles have an iconography; images become motives with histories. The presence of covert or spontaneous iconographic images is basic to abstract art, rather than the purity and pictorial autonomy so often ascribed to it. 30

The circle or mandala image, and the square and ellipse, have existed as "significant forms" in many different cultures for thousands of years. Such mandalas, either a "magic" circle or square, or a square within a circle, are evidence of the "oriental antecedents of the theory that abstract patterns are charged with energy or spiritual forces." 31 These mandalas, or abstract patterns, were used as an aid to meditation inducing what would now
be called a "hypnotic trance." The devotee, monk, or yogin meditates upon the pattern, the centre of which is believed to be the seat of the deity. During meditation the mandala becomes charged with immense power and the deity appears before the mental eye of the devotee.\(^{32}\)

In addition to the more general function of the symbol, by which there exists a connection between itself and the object to which it occurs; and the function of reference, where the viewer's interest is directed to something apart from the symbol, Susanne Langer identified a third function of symbols, which is:

their power of formulating experience, and presenting it objectively for contemplation, logical intuition, recognition, understanding. . . it formulates the appearance of feeling, of subjective experience, the character of so-called 'inner life,' which discourse - the normal use of words - is peculiarly unable to articulate. . . .\(^{33}\)

This use of symbols through which man is aided in contemplating the inner workings of his own mind is "somewhat alien to our extroverted, nature-conquering western culture" and is, as Arthur McKay suggested:

of a highly personal nature and meaningful only to people who are interested in introversion and speculation of what we would call a mystical nature.\(^ {34}\)
Much of the central geometric symbolism evident in the work of these artists can be discussed in archetypal terms and, therefore, can be considered as part of each person's experience of life. The universality and timelessness of these "signs" is an important factor in this consideration. Arnheim has related that the human mind "receives, shapes, and interprets" its image of the outer world with all its "conscious and unconscious powers," and he suggested that "the realm of the unconscious" could never enter our experience without "the reflection of perceivable things." George Kubler has observed that continuity through repetition is the means by which a symbol exists and that its identity depends upon the ability of its users to attach the same meaning to a given form:

the person using the symbol does so in the expectation that others will enlarge the association as he does, and that the resemblances between people's interpretations of symbols will outweigh the differences.

The "preconceived images" of Ron Bloore have been described by John Chandler as "doodles - the repeated and often modular images made by people of like temperament quite subconsciously. . . ." He has also drawn a relationship between Bloore's images and those of Barnett Newman which were described by Newman as "significant
ideographs and hieroglyphs," "primordial messengers of unknowables." Thomas Hess, in his remarkable monograph on Newman, wrote that, to Newman the circle motif suggested "an image of the void, the pregnetic moment" with analogies to such "overt sexual and mythological overtones" as the egg and the sun.

Lucy Lippard contrasted the circle, "an active, organic shape with connotations of rolling, spinning, the sun, the moon, and other natural and symbolic impedimenta," to the square which is "patently static, man-made, lifeless, inert and inactive." McKay has stated that this circle motif, used by Noland as well as Jasper Johns, Ron Bloore and others, was "in the air as well as the area" (Regina) during the early 1960's.

Like Newman and other painters of the 1940's and 1950's, such as Adolphe Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell, Bloore is concerned with the "content" of his paintings and also like them, he has expressed a strong interest in primitive and archaic art. In 1943, Gottlieb and Rothko had made a joint statement about content:

There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.
In this context, Bloore's "timeless" motifs and immobile patterns have been likened to Sumerian tablets, "tattoos caused by incising the skin of primitive peoples, the raised reliefs of archaic Chinese bronze vases, and the walls of Egyptian tombs. . . ."43

Roy Kiyooka had an early affinity for the works of Gottlieb. His double and multiple oval imagery has been discussed in these same archetypal terms. Fernande Saint-Martin has described Kiyooka's work as basically the "elaboration of primordial form, carrying timeless meanings, which can serve as a basis for a modern mythology."44

In this connection, Kiyooka has stated that:

In this secular age that has followed the death of God, artists must try to find for themselves a path to the most profound realities. For myself, I want to create ritual objects, magic objects from which will rise occult meanings.45

Brian Fisher has expressed a similar interest in the occult and, as a result, his work from 1965, which also contains a complex oval imagery, can clearly be considered in this same context. Similarly, Art McKay's images come from the depths of his imagination and are conceived in "symbolic" terms:

My paintings for some years have been almost exclusively concerned with a strong hypnotic centre focusing image, or with a texture diffused evenly over a square or rectangular symbol.46
These paintings can clearly be associated with the centre-focussing mandala images discussed earlier.

The works of Yves Gaucher are independent of any such possible associative connotations. They can be related to the context of an observation made by Peter Fingesten who stated that non-objective art has "broken through the process of symbolization itself." He suggested that its "formal referents" are not symbols in the traditional sense, evoking something outside of themselves, but "simply are without denotive content altogether." Gaucher has commented that he has chosen those elements in pictorial language that best express his content and suggests that if we wish to express essence, we must get rid of all superficial pictorial elements. Music, which is an "assimilated content" in Gaucher's work, appears metaphorically as an "analogical abstract structure" in the paintings, rather than as the actual representation of avant-garde music scores which is often suggested by critics.

It is in finding out the unifying factors in the world, and not the individual variations which are discounted as being "transitory," that Ron Bloore, too, argues for "art as a non-imitative kind of imagery, one that's completely non-figurative." Bloore's images are not forms which signify a meaning but are rather "signs which
merely signify. By their concern with such "metaphysical essences," the work of not only Gaucher and Bloore, but of Fisher, McKay and Kiyooka as well, can be related to the "pure art" of Mondrian, Malevich and the Symbolists. Merleau-Ponty stated, however, that no essence can be discovered if considered in "idealistic terms" as given to a "pure spectator":

> When we speak of essences we are trying to express how we open onto the same world as others. Essences have value, therefore, only insofar as they connect my experience with the experience of others. They can never be regarded as giving us a thing in all its purity, because we never perceive anything in that way. 51

The Artist's Reaction to the World: Associations with Nature

Many of the decisions made by these artists concerning their choice of imagery can be related to their reaction to the world of reality. The artist, McKay observes, can react to his world in two ways:

> The artist can catalogue the horror of the human situation or he can withdraw and conceive of images that are formed in worlds other than this one. Personally, I am drawn toward the latter. 52

In his paintings, McKay creates a mysterious universe or "otherworld" that is in a constant state of flux:
The sort of world which I find absorbing is not the static objective world of things, definitions, logic, and appearances, although we live mainly in that world. It is the continuum of sensed qualities: moving, flowing, and constantly in focus and flux.

Ron Bloore also thinks it necessary to "get away from the here and now" but, in contrast to McKay, he is concerned more with "getting below the flux of daily life and trying to penetrate and find out what are the common bonds that unite mankind." To Bloore, continuity is "a means, a form of knowledge." He states that his whole existence is based on what people have transmitted to him, and feels that:

"a society which creates 'permanent' things is positive, optimistic and secure and can come to grips with time, and create forms, and the forms in turn will be transmitted to a multitude of people."

This search for an essential order in nature, or at least for an underlying pattern, has also occupied the work of Brian Fisher and Roy Kiyooka. It is inevitable, Fisher suggests, that the areas of an artist's experience that are most meaningful to him should be "thrown into relief" by his imagery, an imagery formed by his "intuitive apprehension of the patterns underlying the bewildering complexity of this world." Roy Kiyooka confirms that "each
painting must reflect, as much as possible, my sense of the order beneath the surface of objects - for me, a painting is above all a celebration of that order."

The mathematical and intellectual precision of Anton Webern's ordered world was sympathetic to Yves Gaucher's approach to painting and thus he, too, is part of this general trend. Gyorgy Kepes, in *The New Landscape*, speaks of this predilection for order in terms of basic comprehension where the "essential vision of reality presents us not with fugitive appearances but with felt patterns of order which have coherence and meaning for the eye and for the mind." He draws a parallel between art and science, which can here "meet on common ground":

Symmetry, balance and rhythmic sequence express essential characteristics of natural phenomena: the connectedness of nature - the order, the logic, the living process.58

Fisher, however, has suggested that a change has come about in man's basic preference: "The human preference for symmetry and order has given way to the recognition that order and disorder exist side by side and must be accepted on an equal basis.59 Lancelot Law Whyte, also in *The New Landscape*, made a similar observation in relation to the sciences:

In his long pursuit of order in Nature, the scientist has turned a corner. He
is now after order and disorder without prejudice, having discovered that complexity usually involves both.60

In the same book, Arthur L. Loeb referred to the fact that this discovery of order and the "structure of matter" as we know it, is partly of our own making and is thus quite subjective: "we tend to structure our perceptions and to create frames of reference suitable for relating various observations to each other."61 It is this tendency that leads the viewer to respond to the basic order and nature connotations evident in the paintings of these artists. While Fisher has developed a more abstract image from his early nature-oriented drawings – which he found to be too readily associative with outside meanings – an organic and fluid quality is retained even in his most formal, hard-edge works. Like the works of all of these artists, they are analogous to, yet distinct from forms perceivable in the natural world. The sense of immense, open space which must influence most, if not all, artists who have lived on the prairies is also present at least metaphorically in some of their works. Their exploration of this concept of deep space exerts a strong emotional force on the viewer. In 1962 Barnett Newman stated that, since his childhood, he had always been aware of space as a "space-dome" and he remembered:
shocking my friends by saying I would prefer going to Churchill, Canada, to walk the tundra than go to Paris. For me space is where I can feel all four horizons, not just the horizon in front of me and in back of me because then the experience of space exists only as volume.

Roy Kiyooka has referred to the lasting impressions that the prairie landscape had made on him in his youth: "The breadth of sky there that sheltered nothing but the naked eye has something to do with my paintings." In 1959, Kiyooka referred to the 'tenuous' but 'inevitable' relationship to nature - a relationship that has remained in his work: "The painter is a part of nature and nature is all around him." Gerry Gilbert made an appropriate analogy to Kiyooka's ellipses when he described them as "coming out of the sky" - "two loci surrounded by a sky of distances adding up to the same thing." His work is characterized by what David Thompson has referred to as "an instinctive response to rhythms and forms that link the painter's own activity with what used to be called 'the world of nature.'"

The same organic and fluid quality found in Kiyooka's work, is also evident in the paintings of Brian Fisher - especially in his use of the ellipse. In addition, the delicate moire patterns further the sense of organic form and act as a counterpoint to his precise geometry.
Fisher also has been moved by the expansive prairie space which "extends 360-degrees in all directions." He related that in order for people to respond to such open space it is necessary to learn to look at space in a positive way, as they do with the full landscapes of trees and mountains in which they can differentiate between things. 

Ron Bloore finds that his studio near York University gives him the same sensation of open space that he knew on the Prairies, especially in the winter. He says "it's like working on the roof of the world." Barry Lord compares it to the wide-open expanses of sky and snow on the farmlands around Edmonton which is "bigger, higher, emptier than Saskatchewan, more abstract - it hurts to look at." Bloore's images also bear some relationship to natural forms, and appear to have grown like trees or crystals. The organic areas of ray clusters, especially, in his 1968 works reinforce this impression of generation and growth which further separates him, as well as the other four artists, from most "Minimal" trends.

The paintings of Art McKay too, contain rhythms analogous to the moods of nature. While they are not references taken from nature, they give the impression of life. McKay commented on this characteristic of his painting:
A sense of life and rhythm and colour in specific evocative order can exist without reference and is valuable in itself. It stimulates the sense of awareness by which we live insofar as we are able to respond to it.  

This same sense of an underlying rhythm, which permeates life, music and nature, surfaces in Gaucher's painting.

\[ \text{rhythm} \cdot \text{love} \cdot \text{rhythm} \cdot \text{life} \cdot \text{rhythm} \]

Gaucher, as mentioned previously, became extremely interested in the activated space created by the "sound" of the cell structure of Webern's music - "the cell is placed in space, allowed to expand or grow, and then die." Sound is thus looked upon as "clusters of particles" rather than as a linear system and, as a result, patterns are not discerned as they occur over a period of time. John Chandler feels that this is what Gaucher means when he refers to "modifying our notion of natural elements by seeing them as 'energetic events,' occurring in time." The discussion of perception and the act of seeing, which follows in Chapter 5, will make this process clearer.

2. Ibid.


4. Ibid., 103.


11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 10.


17. Ibid.


20. Quoted in Alloway, loc. cit.


22. Alloway, loc. cit.

23. Calas, op. cit., 249.


25. Ibid., 25.


30. Alloway, loc. cit.


32. Ibid.


42. Quoted in Chipp, *op. cit.*, 545.


45. Quoted in *Ibid*.

46. In *Statements, op. cit.*, 68.

47. Fingesten, *op. cit.*, 5.

48. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.


52. *Statements, loc. cit.*


55. *Ibid.*
56. In *Statements*, *op. cit.*, 49.


59. In *Statements*, *loc. cit.*


72. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.

Chapter 5

THE EDUCATION OF THE EYE

The attempt of observers to either read meaning into symbols or to impose symbols upon a nonsymbolic treatment of subject matter has been discussed by Peter Fingesten:

No verbal gymnastics will make its mysteries more comprehensible precisely because one symbolism cannot be substituted for another.¹

The problem is that the syntax of the spoken or written word cannot approximate the subtlety and ambiguity of the interrelationships of elements in the type of painting being discussed here. Brian Fisher has observed that the people who are "involved in the making of visual art, as distinct from its examination," do not generally depend very much on language as a "vehicle for forming, clarifying and communicating their feelings about their discipline; much less do they trust language to properly 'explain' art itself." The real reason for this he suggested is that:
The fundamental meaning of any particular painting is not accessible through words. The organization of visual stimulae to evoke a particular range of responses in those perceiving it depends for its coherence on conventions which have little to do with language conventions.\(^2\)

The basis for such "other" conventions will be examined in the following discussion.

The Development and Acceptance of Monochrome Painting

It is generally accepted that non-objective monochrome painting has two main sources: aestheticism and Dada - "art-for-art's sake" and "anti-art." The two principle events which set the precedents for this development occurred within a year of each other, and for early fifty years "marked the limits of visual art."\(^3\) In the first of these Kasimir Malevich painted a black square on a white background in 1913 which he followed in 1918 with his "suprematist" White on White series. That same year, Alexander Rodchenko executed a black-on-black canvas, apparently in reply to Malevich's White on White work - both were sent to Moscow's Tenth State Exhibition of 1918.\(^4\) The theories of aestheticism were put forth in Malevich's The Non-Objective World. Principally, a painting was considered as an independent object:
Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without 'things'.

The second major event occurred in 1914 when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a "ready-made" metal bottle-rack as an original work of art. In opposition to aestheticism, he advocated that art be freed from any pretension to some "higher" purely aesthetic value and proposed that the making of art be automatic rather than preconceived and composed. In other words, he advocated the autonomy of the artist over the autonomy of the work of art.

While on the one hand these two approaches appear to oppose one another - Malevich's aestheticism representing a search for the transcendent, universal, absolute, and Duchamp's "anti-art" the general denial of the existence of universal values - they also have a common characteristic, that of "renunciation." Duchamp renounces the uniqueness of the art object and its differentiation from common objects while Malevich rejects the notion that art must be complex. As a result, this led both men ultimately to reject and exclude from their work "many of the most cherished premises of Western art" in favour of an art "stripped to its bare, irreducible minimum."
generation of artists beginning in the 1950's, whose work is characterized by a similar reduced simplicity, appear to be examining in a new context the implications of these somewhat radical decisions. As Barbara Rose observed, the results are often "a curious synthesis" of these two tendencies and "must be taken as some sort of validation of Malevich's and Duchamp's prophetic reactions." 7

Monochrome painting had its "rebirth" in the early 1950's mainly through the experiments of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, whose works are generally considered to be the major precedents for the current monochrome trends. All of them, in different ways, have stressed the experience of the painting above all surface incidents and combine formal innovations with an evocative viewing experience. Lucy Lippard has identified three types of current monotone or monochrome painting: "the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative; and the gesture of defiance, absolution or comment." 8 These types are found, to various degrees, in the work of the three artists.

Several works by Barnett Newman from 1950 are characterized by only slightly modulated, single-colours and single surfaces (Fig. 43). His place as the artistic father of most subsequent monochrome painting was established at his first exhibition of completely non-objective
monochrome works, with his characteristic vertical stripes, at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1952. Due to a general lack of public and critical response to his work, however, Newman temporarily withdrew from the art scene and did not exhibit again until 1958. Newman literally inundated the viewer in colour and his wall-size canvases provoked an immediate, total response. To intensify the optical impact of the monochrome, Newman suppressed atmospheric and tactile details. His monochrome theme continued in a long series of fourteen Stations of the Cross from 1958-66, which concluded with a precise, white-on-white work. Newman related his work to the sensation of the sublime, describing them as "revelations of the primitive art impulse" to express the "awesome feelings" felt before the "terror of the unknowable."  

In 1950 Mark Rothko, also began to simplify his work and reduced the number of elements to two or three rectangular forms arranged symmetrically one above the other. The loose brushwork and closely related palette gives an atmospheric sense to his paintings. As with Newman's work, the large scale of Rothko's colour fields, altered only by slight changes, give rise to an overwhelming colour sensation. These subtly stained areas of colour tend to "dematerialize" the surface causing the forms to hover outward and envelop the viewer. His dark paintings
since the late 1950's (Fig. 44), approach monotone by rejecting drawing, detail and impasto for what might be called "colour-light." This emphasis on a diffused and differentiated light, rather than a steady, flat light, relate these works to the "evocative" branch of current monochrome painting.

Also at this time, Ad Reinhardt began a series of all-red or all-blue paintings that were strictly symmetrical and characterized by a close-valued colour saturated into the canvas. A 1952 exhibition of these works at Betty Parson's Gallery apparently made little public impression of any kind. Over the next few years he progressively eliminated colour until, in 1958, he arrived at the predominantly black square monochrome works that occupied his attention until his death in 1970. He wrote:

There is something wrong, irresponsible and mindless about colour, something impossible to control. Control and rationality are part of any morality.

Reinhardt's statements were extremely formalist- and aestheticist-oriented as is evident in his description of the ultimate paintings:

The one work for a fine artist now, the one thing in painting to do, is to repeat the one-size canvas -- the single-scheme,
one-color monochrome, one linear-
division in each direction, one sym­
metry, one texture, one formal device,
one free-hand-brushing, one rhythm. . .
painting everything into one overall
uniformity and non-regularity. 12

In this sense Reinhardt clearly fits into the "formally
rej ective" category of monochrome proposed by Lippard.
As Chandler suggested, however, there is a tremendous gulf
between Reinhardt's paintings and his published statements, 13
and the intensity of sensation given off by the paintings
must relate him also to Newman, Rothko, and the "evocative
and mystical" category.

A number of other artists were experimenting with
a monochrome type of painting during the 1950's and a few
major examples should be mentioned. Following Newman's 1952
exhibition, Robert Raushenberg's White Painting, painted
in 1951, was exhibited for the first time at the Stable
Gallery in 1953. This work consisted of seven vertical
panels hung horizontally forming a 6 by 10½ foot rectangle.
He also created several other white paintings in 1951 which
were based on modular units hung in various configurations.
In contrast to the surrealist-inspired background of Newman's
evocative approach, Rauschenberg's work is linked more to
Dada or to Lippard's "gesture of defiance or comment" in
its questioning of the nature of white and of art as a
whole. In addition to his target and flag series, Jasper
Johns also created a group of highly textured monochrome works (Fig. 47). Frank Stella's symmetrical black paintings of 1958-59 (Fig. 46) and Paul Brach's all-blue and all-grey works with faintly superimposed circular images (Fig. 48), are also important to the development of the current trends.

The importance of the 1958-59 Newman exhibition of monochrome works at Bennington College and New York, and the exhibition of Stella's symmetrical black paintings in 1959-60 was referred to in Chapter 1. While these and other early exhibitions were noticed by the artists, it seems evident that most, if not all, of the experiments with monochrome or near-monochrome painting met with relatively little public success until well into the 1960's. Lucy Lippard has recorded that a "retrospective" exhibition of Reinhardt's work at Betty Parsons' Section 11 in 1960, "went relatively unnoticed" and that it was not until the "modest success" of the 1965 three-gallery show at the Graham, Stable and Parsons galleries, which covered paintings from 1951-53 and the latest black works, that his work became more widely recognized. Subsequent large Reinhardt exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in 1966-67 and at the Marlborough Gallery in 1970, along with Newman's Stations of the Cross exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966 and his retrospective at Knoedler & Co., in 1969,
and, in Canada, the exhibition of Yves Gaucher's Grey on Grey paintings at the Vancouver and Edmonton Art Galleries in 1969, have contributed to the general acceptance of monochrome painting. A monotonal or monochromatic canvas, therefore, appeared blank or "empty" to most people until well into the 1960's when the experience of these exhibitions, in particular, appears to have heightened the perceptual faculties of the public and has made such works "more visible."

Even in the late 1960's, however, such works undoubtedly looked more extreme than they do today. Along with increased intellectual acceptance, then, monochrome painting has also provoked increased perceptual acceptance. In discussing the work of monochrome painters today it is necessary to take the education of the spectator's eye into consideration. As Lucy Lippard commented:

> the art of esthetic sensation, no matter how rejective, how impersonally it is handled, evokes a psychic state, the positive and total experience of seeing. . . . 15

The Nature of the Visual Experience

The five artists being considered in this paper are part of a relatively small group who are adding a dimension
to the way we look at art. For them, painting is largely about seeing. They explore the area of visual experience by creating paintings of subtle ambiguities and perceptual nuances as a means to extend the range of visual art. John Chandler has expressed that the most important artists are those who manage to help us "to extend our vision - to make us see what we have overlooked before."16

Visual experiences are based on two different aspects - the patterns of the light waves themselves and what we actually see. Rudolf Arnheim observed that every visual pattern is "dynamic" and that the "essence of a visual experience" cannot be expressed merely by "inches of size and distance, degrees of angle or wavelengths of hue":

These static measurements define only the 'stimulus' that is, the message sent to the eye by the physical world. But the life of a percept - its expression and meaning - derives entirely from 'perceptual forces'. Seeing is the perception of action.17

These dynamic aspects belong to any visual experience as intimately as the static qualities of constants such as shape, size, texture and colour. In other words, while what we see is connected to what is there, it is not necessarily determined by it. It is determined, rather, by what we have seen in the past and what we expect to see.
As Arnheim observed, shape is determined by more than what strikes the eye at the time of observation:

The experience of the present moment is never isolated. It is the most recent among an infinite number of sensory experiences that have occurred throughout the person's past life. Thus the new image gets into contact with the memory traces of shapes that have been perceived in the past.  

The most recent image, therefore, is an indivisible part of the large stock of images stored in our memory.

Brian Fisher, in discussing perception, remarked that in trying to determine "the actual physical reality of an object - in other words information that is constant for everybody - it was found to be something less than 50 per cent and that everything else was all learned." Roy Kiyooka adds that "nothing in the world is hidden" but is there for everyone. In other words, everyone can see the same things scientifically - it's just a "matter of recognition," of becoming aware of them. What we see then is not necessarily what is there - we have learned to see in a particular way. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has stated that:

There is no vision without thought. But it is not enough to think in order to see. Vision is a conditioned thought; . . . the thinking that belongs to vision functions according to a program and a law that it has not given itself. It does
not possess its own premises; it is not a thought altogether present and actual; there is in its center a mystery and a passivity. 21

Myrna and Irwin Gopnik have reported that "students of seeing - those trying to determine the antecedents and consequences of the processing of visual information" - generally break the process up into a sequence of three interactive but relatively distinct elements: "1. sensation; 2. percept; 3. concept" which refer, in order, to:

1. the contact of the receptor organs with the emitted physical signal;
2. the conversion of this signal into the form of information appropriate to the particular organism;
3. the higher cognitive processing involving memory, insight, attitudes, etc. 22

In John Chandler's words perception "is based on sensations that carry information about the object perceived," while sensation "is based on sensory stimuli that carry other information. . . particularly about the relation of the viewer to the object and about the sensation itself." Perception, which is clinical and objective, he characterizes as "other-conscious"; while sensation which is fluid, volatile and subjective, is characterized as "self-conscious." 23 According to Arnheim, recent psychological thinking encourages us to call vision a "creative activity of the mind":

Perceiving achieves, at the sensory level, what in the realm of reasoning is known as understanding...eyesight is insight.24

He adds that the human mind searches for the solution of a visual problem by means of all its faculties, "the intuitive power of perception and the reasoning power of the intellect."23

In order to fully describe any visual experience, therefore, it is necessary to be concerned not only with describing what is there in measurable terms but also with what we actually see. This will become more evident in a fuller examination of the monochrome paintings of Bloore, Fisher, Gaucher, Kiyooka and McKay.

Colour, Illusion and the Element of Ambiguity

Related to the general interest in exploring visual experience through subtlety and perceptual nuance, there has been a reduction in the use of strong colour contrast. Colour is used in a more evocative or neutral manner and preference is shown for blacks, whites, greys, browns and pale atmospheric tones. The artists experiment with close values of nearly identical hues and, at times, with the variation of degrees between matte and gloss surfaces. One of the most interesting characteristics of
monochrome painting is the wide range of expression possible within its ostensible restrictions. Every minute surface variation or value change takes on a highly charged importance in the context of the whole. The means is reduced in order to give emphasis to what remains. Some of the paintings being discussed here have more than one colour and are not therefore, strictly monochromatic. They clearly 'appear' monochromatic, however, until the senses have been adjusted to accept the subtle colourations and, therefore, they will be considered in this context.

The subtle and often ambiguous interplay between figure and ground in some of these works is carried close to the threshold of visibility. Leo Steinberg, in reference to the paintings of Paul Brach, in 1964, identified four different kinds of invisibility which are relevant to the present discussion:

Invisibility by disappearance. An object absent, remote or indistinct leaves a leftover emptiness and straining to see . . .(such a) vacant geometry suggests depleted voids, voided containers. . . .

Then, invisibility by extinction of light. . .Not actual darkness - which conveys a specific degree of absence of light - but a self-consistency or opacity that can be neither brightened nor deepened.

And invisibility due to dimmed vision; whether through blindness or the sightlessness of inattention. . .unseeing indifference or disinterest. . . .
And...the invisibility of an encompassing undifferentiated homogeneity.
Obviously, where all differentiation is lacking, nothing will show. Oneness too is invisible.\textsuperscript{26}

While a painting with a great deal of visual information can be visually exciting, the same can also be said of a work with very little information that can be perceptually analyzed in a variety of ways. Formal complexity is not necessarily an index of richness of content. The paintings being discussed here are visually stimulating not in spite of the spareness of information, but because of it. As Robert Morris stated: "Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience."\textsuperscript{27}

The reduced means employed by these artists creates an expanded range of vision through the concentration upon essentials and the formal elements become the carriers of ambiguities and contradictions which originate in the eye of the spectator. As a result, the Gestalt theory that we always reach for the simplest interpretation does not necessarily hold. E.H. Gombrich observed that:

\ldots since art has begun to cut itself loose from anchorage in the visible world, the question of how to suggest one reading rather than another of any arrangement of forms has become of critical importance.\ldots

Our inability to see ambiguity often protects us from the knowledge that 'pure' shapes allow of an infinity of spatial readings.\textsuperscript{28}
Ambiguity, in other words, confuses the artistic statement and interferes with the observer's perceptual judgement, causing him to shift back and forth between two or more incompatible conceptions. In such ambiguous situations, the visual pattern ceases to determine what is seen, and subjective factors in the observer become more effective. Sam Hunter suggested that the element of ambiguity "resides in the reconciliation of a determinate system of formal organization with the indeterminate human factor." The same rich interactions which are created with the subtle use of colour by these five artists are also evident in the structures of their works. Many of their paintings provoke in the viewer a simultaneous experience of depth and plane. After the initial moment of confrontation, when the contradictory perceptual effects operate simultaneously, a period of adjustment follows. During this time the ambiguities are reconciled, or at least identified, while the eye and the mind alternate between the competing interpretations. Lucy Lippard identified the prime critical problem involved in evaluating such works as the distinction between the absurd and the ambiguous. She quoted from Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948):

*The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is*
to deny that it can ever be given a
meaning; to say that it is ambiguous
is to assert that its meaning is never
fixed, that it must be constantly won.31

In order to deny the illusion of depth on a two-
dimensional plane, the picture is either made absolutely
frontal by flat forms or geometric shapes on a regular or
symmetrical support, or is made contradictory by the use
of illusionistic devices which distort the visual facts
and force the eye back to the plane. The term "illusion,"
according to Arnheim, relates to "a difference arising
between the physical and psychological world [which] makes
us commit a mistake in dealing with things."32 As Merleau-
Ponty stated it, "judgement," which "supplies what is
missing in sensation," cannot explain illusion or "halluci-
nation," the difference between "seeing and thinking one
sees."33 In discussing the work of the five artists,
this ambiguous information, which can be interpreted
perceptually in a variety of ways, will be more evident.

The ultimate in monotone, monochrome painting
is, of course, the black or white canvas. As the two
extremes, the so-called no-colours, white and black, are
associated with pure and impure, open and closed. White
has been described as "open, peaceful, potential, hopeful,
a 'tabula rasa,' and black as "reserved, final, absolute,
Arnheim observed a "peculiar, twofold quality" in the colour white:

On the one hand, it is the supreme fulfillment, the integration of all the richness to which particular colours can add up. But on the other hand, it is also the absence of hue and therefore of life. . . white is completeness and nothingness.

Ron Bloore uses only whites in his paintings but, by employing them in subtle combinations, by using matte and gloss, and by taking advantage of the many properties of light and shadow, he achieves a multicoloured expression within the white range. It is thus easy to understand that when asked why he doesn't paint in colour, he simply answers, "I do." He has used as many as twenty-three different hues and tones of white in works like his Dorval Airport mural of 1967 and as few as two in his recent works since 1971. Barry Lord suggests that Bloore's selection of whites is inevitable as subtle relief is visible only in terms of light and shadow and any colour other than white would obstruct the direct translation of light in the relief - "the direct translation of light is what Bloore's new paintings are about." In these paintings he develops a highly expressive surface of flat white and ivory, gloss and matte, and subtle relief that is sensitive to direct and refracted light, reflected and absorbed light,
and shadow. Bloore enjoys the contradiction between their "existence as physical entities" and what he terms "their ethereal embodiment of light."\(^{38}\) He creates his images with a sensitivity to the conditions of natural light that the environment offers for perception. "Ideally," he says, "the paintings would be outside and you wouldn't even notice them."\(^{39}\) When seen in natural light for an extended period of time, these works reveal a full range of constantly shifting nuances of colour.

Art McKay has used a wider, but still limited, range of colours in his work. In addition to organic tones of red-brown and blue-grey tones, black has been the most characteristic colour in his palette. The expressive qualities of black contribute much to the evocative experience given off by his paintings. Black represents not only the absence of colour - a symbolic void with mysterious implications in both the Western and Eastern traditions, but it also has certain "inescapable allusions to romanticism."\(^{40}\) McKay thus sets up a polarity between his reduced image and format and the romantic allusiveness of his use of colour.

Since 1967 Gaucher, also, has been concerned more with subtle relationships of tones rather than with strong colour interaction. His Grey on Grey paintings of 1967-69 are of subtly different tones of grey with proportions of
blue, rose, green, yellow, purple and other colours added. The difference is often not evident except by comparison. For the lines or "signals" of untinted grey which are superimposed on the ground in various configurations, Gaucher uses eight or ten values of a black-white mixture with the exception of black and white themselves. Like the greys of the ground, these lines are extremely close in value and the variation is usually only determined in the context of the painting as a whole. They modulate the field of the painting and affect the intensity of the colour field where they occur.

In his paintings from 1970-71; the tonal modulation of the greys is also extremely subtle and a sensuous spatial rhythm is created from the spacing and tonal values of the adjacent bands, some of which are divided by a grey line extending across the canvas from edge to edge. To Gaucher, the colour grey contains "all colours and all emotional states." As early as 1965, he had recognized the richness of grey and its sensitivity to its surroundings. His paintings since then reflect his acute awareness of this fact by establishing "a context of such finely-tuned sensibility that the slightest hue becomes operative." Gaucher's paintings, like those of Bloore, are extremely sensitive to changes in light which create unexpected shifts in colour and tone. He is equally a
perfectionist in the hanging and lighting of his works, however, and states that a painting "has to be given a chance to behave in the way it wants to - if the chance is denied, it just shuts up." 43

John Chandler has drawn an analogy between the subtlety of Gaucher's paintings and the music of the East and contemporary electronic music of the West. Western music, which has for some time been characterized by strong contrasts, sounds jumpy to an Easterner - "like a bird hopping from branch to branch" - while electronic music has permitted a much greater subtlety and it is this "art of fine discrimination" that Gaucher has applied to his work. 44 Gaucher feels that his paintings create their own kind of visual sound or, at least, "a very delicate silence." 45 While most paintings shout, his whisper. 46 Such an analogy is effective for the work of all the artists being discussed here.

From 1966 to 1968 Kiyooka's paintings, too, were characterized by tonal modulations rather than the strong contrasts of his earlier work. These subtle tonal relationships soften the precise geometric oval forms which tend to float ambiguously within and between their vertically divided panels. In some cases the ovals are not immediately seen, but emerge and fade only as the eye shifts from one part of the canvas to another. Here again, the subtlest change in lighting can cause a revolution in a canvas, as can its position relative to another work. His use of atmospheric blue tonalities and the asymmetrical placement of the oval forms reinforce the characteristic
organic quality of his paintings. As David Silcox has observed: "his work is best when it is quiet and contemplative. . .he is more the master of subtlety than of force." 47

Fisher has also favoured semi-atmospheric tonalities in his recent paintings. The soft shades contribute a floating quality that seems quite out of phase with his characteristic precise geometry. In addition to creating ambiguous moiré patterns with straight lines, the hard edge is now destroyed by the subtle interaction of colour which changes according to the individual viewer. Forms that are defined on the vertical axis gradually fade away towards the horizontal edges. When a precise line structure is superimposed on a field of a closely related tone of the same colour, an ambiguous figure-ground relationship is established. The forms or "presences" seem to float free of the base structure inducing a "mystical" movement in space. At times, these barely visible forms also seem to project in front of the picture space compounding the spatial illusion evident in the works. Proper lighting again is critical for the operation of the visual experience to be effective.

The same investigations undertaken in the paintings have been projected into a remarkable series of ten prints entitled *Odyssey*. Here, as in the paintings, Fisher creates
a challenging visual experience in a difficult medium using close-valued tones of colour, from white on a blue-grey field, in *Odyssey* No. 1, through subtle blues, reds and other colours in succeeding prints. The line colour tends to mix with the ground colour to give yet a third one. Where the lines are close together, near the focal point, the pure expression of the line colour dominates, while at the edges, where the lines are spaced wide apart, they are practically invisible and the ground colour is the strongest.

Fisher's paintings contain spatial ambiguities derived through explorations into the perceptual effects obtained when two conflicting geometries coincide. By superimposing a horizontal or vertical grid over a diagonal one, illusory moiré patterns emerge and appear as real as the lines from which they were made. This illusion depends on Fisher's flawless execution in order for the patterns to be regular since any variations would tend to destroy the over-all reading. While the viewer attempts to resolve the ambiguous effect he can take a certain satisfaction from the fact that the camera is also fooled by the "hallucination."

In his more recent works, Fisher creates a vast space through a system of lines which begin at the bottom
of the canvas and converge toward a distant point outside of the confines of the format. The vanishing point is therefore only implied as the lines do not meet, as they do in his earlier oval series. Concerning his Steppes series, Fisher commented:

The space where all these lines are converging is what is known. The lines are positive in the sense that they can be measured, graphed, and so on. The space on the other side of them is what is not known. . . .49

Superimposed on this line system are rectilinear or square forms which combine to create an infinite number of form-space relationships. In some cases these forms are almost imperceptible due to the subtle colour contrasts and the lack of any drawn contours. The edges of the forms are implied by ending the vertical or diagonal lines at a uniform level. In other works, Fisher creates ambiguous spatial relationships by directing attention into depth along converging lines and then redirecting the eye back to the frontal plane by either leaving a void in the centre or by an ambiguous overlapping of the grid. Lucy Lippard called such incongruous illusionism "perverse perspectives" which are described as:

founded on disunity, on a complex, tightly structured denial of pictorial logic that. . .never wholly abandons the assertion of the picture plane. . .
but distorts and reconstructs that plane outside of the conventions of depth simulation.

Fisher has stated that while his work may appear to be preoccupied with "optical" effects, he tries to avoid the stigmas attached to so-called "optical art" by avoiding retinal fatigue through his use of more subtle relationships.

As previously described, the difference between figure and ground in Gaucher's paintings is also very subtle. The lack of differentiation introduces an ambiguous reading of the surface as "unlocalized space." It is not uncommon for viewers to greatly exaggerate the size of the superimposed lines and to detect colours and patterns that really do not exist. Even the sizes of the canvases themselves are often confused with each other. From his earlier experiments with line interaction, where active illusions of space and movement occurred, Gaucher moved, in 1971, to the subtle use of the field where the illusion of space is much more shallow. In this sense Gaucher rejects the philosophy of the minimalists as they "try to destroy illusion, but can't."

This same subtle spatial illusion occurs in Roy Kiyooka's recent work, where flat ovals tend to advance and recede from the picture plane due to the variations in tones of blue. An ambiguous situation occurs when, like
Gaucher's signals, the oval forms appear in areas where they actually do not exist. In some cases, the oval shapes also bleed off the edges of the canvas, suggesting an extension into the surrounding space.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Art McKay's ambiguous surfaces give the illusion of being thick impasto in spite of actually being thinly-painted and smooth. Terry Fenton observed the tendency of viewers to touch the surfaces in an attempt to resolve the curious experience where they are forced to "reassess the painting in terms of eyesight rather than touch." An additional spatial ambiguity is created through the strong inward pull in his tablet and circle paintings which is denied by the emphatic surface of their centres. This tendency relates these works to some of Fisher's multiple ellipse paintings. McKay also creates a curious tension between these apparent, heavily worked surfaces and the simple, centrally-positioned images which contain them. In his latest works, McKay has brightly coloured his borders so that the inner part of the image is held in a still greater tension.

This characteristic ambiguous interplay of figure and ground is also evident in most of Bloore's paintings. The subtle variations and inconsistencies in the extremely simplified "image" in the recent works most clearly illustrates this enigmatic quality. These raised welt-like
images have contributed an element of ambiguity to all of Bloore's work. In his 1967-68 works, for example, it is particularly evident. Here the raised lines sometimes delimit form and distinguish figure from ground, while, at other times, they function independently of image and ground in the space of the painting. The ambiguity of the common contour between two closed images, or between a closed and an open one, is reinforced by the fact that, although physically unchangeable, the contour almost always assumed a different shape. This depends on whether it is seen as belonging to one or the other of the two adjoining surfaces. Barry Lord has observed an "ambivalent tension" between these geometric elements and the demands of the rectilinear format due partly to the "tenuous" nature of the welts and borders that sometimes disappear into the ground. A very subtle relationship exists between the images and the surface around them and an ambiguous illusion of surface and depth results. While he respects the integrity of the two-dimensional picture surface, it is only in its "taut suspension with the expressive intensity and form declaring clarity of his low-relief raised surfaces."56

Such elements as sensations are obviously difficult to describe. As has been discussed, analogies are often used and are generally useful to explain the strange or difficult by the more familiar. The unfortunate problem
in this regard is that analogy is often confused with identity. Gaucher dislikes any attempts to give art what he calls a "literary concept" and he suggests that "each language in art speaks in an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in any other medium." True art, according to Gaucher, should be a purely visual language, just as music is a purely auditory language: "art must speak only to the eyes, and to nothing else, to reach the soul."
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER 5


7. Ibid.

8. Lippard, loc. cit.


12. Quoted in Ibid.


45. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.

46. Chandler, "Dialogue at an Exhibition. . .," loc cit.

47. Silcox, loc. cit.


49. In Statements: 18 Canadian Artists, op. cit., 49.


53. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.


56. Ibid., 39.


58. In conversation with the artist, September, 1972.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION - THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE VIEWER

It is known that intensity of experience varies with the individual viewer: "every retina produces its private mirage in which colour, speed and frequency of the illusionary movement become a subjective experience."¹ As John Chandler suggests, instead of "reading" a painting only a little at a time, the viewer should attempt to take in the whole work at once and "see it subjectively" as well:

"You are working too hard. Paying too close attention. Reading rather than seeing. Simply let the painting confront you."²

A work of art encountered as such is an experience, and intellectual and aesthetic pleasure can merge in this experience when the work is visually strong and challenging. As a result, viewers begin to think about what they see rather than simply weighing the formal or emotive impact.

The fact that the paintings discussed here contain an image and are not strictly monochrome is an important...
factor, for in focusing or resolving the figure-ground relationship the viewer actually becomes involved with the process of viewing the paintings. Because of this process and the emphasis on the "act of seeing," the paintings function as the means for having a special kind of experience. The painting loses its immutability and becomes a means of discovery which is difficult to assimilate to another known fact or experience.

It has been suggested that Gaucher was deeply affected by the attitude expressed through the late paintings of Mark Rothko — that "a painting is not a painting" but is "mediumistic...allusive and has import."3 As Gaucher remarked: "my paintings are not paintings anymore but environment conditioners."4 When illusionistic space in a painting is closely viewed, therefore, it tends to reach forward and become part of the space between the viewer and the work. In the area between the canvas and the eye of the spectator, relationships are dynamic and continually changing. This space was described by John Chandler, in referring to Gaucher's grey paintings, as "alive with movement - like dust in a beam of light, or heat rising from the pavement."5 The viewer, therefore, is no longer simply an onlooker but becomes a part of the space creation itself. In Merleau-Ponty's words, perceived space is "existential space," and it:
. . . does not refer to physical space or to geometrical space, for perceived space does not belong only to the object or only to the subject; it belongs to both at once. . . Space is thus 'orientated' in relation to the body-subject who perceives.  

These artists succeed in reducing the overt "humanist" content in their work but not the fact of confrontation with the viewer, who must experience the difficult paintings as an individual and force his perception into new areas. Sam Hunter, in reference to the paintings of Ad Reinhardt, made a relevant comment:

Reinhardt's implacable icons involve the artist and observer in an 'action,' no matter how distilled or recessive its visible evidence. That is, the order they create and uphold is no longer absolute in 'de Styl' terms, but human, momentary in its sources and historically relative. . . .

He continued by stressing the "humanistic stance" that Reinhardt's approach represents:

. . . one must understand that Reinhardt's rejection of the frivolous and easily consumed, his insistence on the privacy and intimacy of the communication between artist and viewer, represents no nihilism but an identifiably humanistic stance.

Paintings, with what appear to be inaccessible or difficult images, therefore, invite a great deal of participation and contemplation, and such an experience reinforces the
conclusions put forth in Chapter 3, that such works are not, as is often suggested, inhuman or impersonal.

It is evident, however, that monochrome painting demands that the viewer be entirely involved in the work of art. In looking at the work of the artists it has been clear that a great deal of effort is required to "see" them, but that this effort is absolutely essential to the kind of experience they provide. Unless the viewer is completely committed to experiencing them, he can expect little, if any, experience at all. As Brian Fisher suggests: "the viewer, if he wants to see, should suspend his own expectations and open up to what is there."9 The artists generally expect the spectator to give a commitment as total as that which they give themselves.

Ron Bloore has admitted that for him "the meaning of any work of art is determined entirely by the individual experiencing it."10 Art McKay also has stated that, in the process of communication, the artist is not self-sufficient but relies on the existence of "responsive individuals" who look closely at the artist's work.11 An object of art, therefore, only communicates when it is confronted by someone who can "respond to its specific order" and relate this response to incidents in his experience:
Communication is a flow between two points, both of which must be open. A painting's communication is as dependent upon the receptivity of the viewer as it is on the presence of meaning in the work viewed. Nothing happens unless the work has something to give and the viewer has the experience, sensitivity and insight of the kind that can receive that 'something.'

George Kubler has described works of art as "gateways" where:

the visitor can enter the space of the painter...to experience whatever rich domain the artist has fashioned. But the visitor must come prepared: If he brings a vacant mind or a deficient sensibility, he will see nothing.

Works like Gaucher's grey paintings then, have ceased to be objects with an identifiable or discernible image and have become instead "a kind of magic wall" from which the viewer may extract only what he puts in.

Roy Kiyooka feels that an artist advances art when he "enlarges the parameters of his psyche," and consequently, anybody who is a non-artist, in order for him to really experience paintings, has to somehow "come to the parameters of his own psyche," just as painters do. His insights, therefore, will only be equivalent to how far he can go in that direction. Jerry Gilbert observed that Kiyooka has "helped a lot of people to believe what they know - his work gets me to measure up to my sensibilities."
Susan Sontag has also remarked on the "peculiar dependence" of a work of art upon the "cooperation of the person having the experience." She added that this person may see "what is said" but remain unmoved either through "dullness" or "distraction," and offers an interesting analogy:

Art is seduction, not rape. A work of art proposes a type of experience designed to manifest the quality of imperiousness. But art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject.

The works being described here cannot be partially experienced but must actually be engaged with to be seen at all.

A very different sort of experience is created, therefore, an experience that exists in time as well as space. This is largely due to the amount of effort that these paintings demand of the viewer - more time and concentration than most viewers are accustomed to, or in most cases, are willing to give. Lucy Lippard has offered a description of the process of viewing montonal paintings that is pertinent here:

The first impression is one of the most general nature; the second is likely to be one of boredom with the general nature, and only then does the viewer penetrate 'beyond' boredom to pure esthetic enjoyment of the particular object and its particular qualities."
This time element is psychological. It is difficult for an intellectually oriented viewer to give the required amount of time and concentration to viewing such paintings without bringing in outside literary, religious or sociological references with which to respond. If the viewer does take the time, he will be "rewarded" by being able "to stand in a sense outside of time, freed from the endless change and flux of the world of events and commodities." The viewer who allows himself to be "tuned in" to Gaucher's grey paintings, for instance, can experience them "intra-sensority as sound and motion," in addition to sight, and also "extra-sensorily in that they induce a stage of contemplation" rather than simply a visual sensation.

The works by these artists, in other words, act like objects of contemplation demanding not simply a different order of perception but inducing a significantly different state of consciousness from the normal. Fisher, for example, aims at finding "visual equivalents" for the "reality of tranquility through introspection, contemplation and repose." To become involved with a work of art entails:

the experience of detaching oneself from the world. But the work of art itself is also a vibrant, magical exemplary object which returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched.
John Chandler objects to those who consider Gaucher's paintings as inducing some kind of calm or tranquility and suggests rather, that they are stimulants, not tranquilizers - "the end of contemplation is not tranquility but 'ecstasy'...not perception or conception but intense sensation." Susan Sontag described this process as "dynamic contemplation" and stressed that however much the spectator is "aroused by a provisional identification" of what is in the work of art with real life, his ultimate reaction as long as he is reacting to the work as a work of art must be "detached, restful, contemplative, emotionally free, beyond indignation and approval." In analyzing our response to the paintings by these artists - a withdrawal from the everyday world, an almost "disinterested" contemplation, a sense of detachment from normal space and time and a resulting increased awareness of oneself - it is evident that such responses conform more closely to Eastern values than to traditional Western thought and are in direct contrast to much art of the 1960's which seeks an instant and immediate impact. Richard Simmins suggested in 1961 that through McKay's interest in controlled LSD and mescaline experiments, the artist became more aware of how "time could become strangely elongated and how space suddenly lost its dimensions." McKay observes that the "psychedelic generation of young
people who 'turn on,' 'tune in' and 'drop out' would perhaps relate more to his paintings than others, due to their interest in "psychological acrobatics": to "extroverted, action-obsessed people the whole exercise is meaningless." In 1964, he had stressed this introverted, contemplative character of his works:

These paintings...are attempts to re-establish contact with and immersion in feeling and therefore are introverted, hypnotic and mostly a combination of concentric and eccentric movement... they are contemplative.

Similarly, the works of the other artists being discussed are not concerned with visual impact or with causing an immediate reaction or revelation but rather, are intended to manifest a slow intense life of their own.

The prevalent "nonromantic concept of simultaneous detachment and involvement" has been attributed by Marshall McLuhan to a "general orientalization of our electronic age." Such a state of "suspended consciousness" might properly be described as mystical or spiritual experience. Alan Watts relates that Zen masters attach the highest importance to such "meditation" or "sitting Zen" ("za-zen"). This "za-zen" relates to the Zen quality of seeing reality directly in its "suchness." To see the world as it is "concretely undivided by categories and abstractions," one
must look at it with a mind which is "not thinking" or in other words, "forming symbols about it." "Za-zen" is not, therefore:

sitting with a blank mind which excludes all the impressions of the inner and outer senses. It is not 'concentration' in the usual sense of restricting the attention to a single sense object, such as a point of light or the tip of one's nose. It is simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now.32

This awareness, then, is attended by a "vivid sensation of nondifference between oneself and the external world" or between the "mind and its contents" - the various sounds, sights, and other impressions of the surrounding environment. Naturally, says Watts, this sensation does not arise by trying to acquire it; it just "comes by itself when one is sitting and watching without any purpose in mind - even the purpose of getting rid of purpose."33

Such Zen qualities are an assimilated part of Kiyooka's art which, as George Bowering observed, brings "contemplative curved beauty out of a styleless jumble of the fractured and soiled and rectangular."34 Bowering sensitively described his responses to the intense and quiet "Japanese quality" of Kiyooka's paintings and sculpture: "I found myself gazing long at those pieces as I seldom do at anything, feeling the welcome cool filling my head and body."35 Such responses are evidently the result of Kiyooka's intent:
... not to make monuments
but to lay beside a mountain,
the fragility of a painting
the fragrance of a life lived. 36


8. In preface to Ibid.


18. *Ibid*.


22. Shadbolt, loc. cit.


32. Ibid., 155.

33. Ibid.,


35. Ibid.

36. Quoted in Ibid.
Figure 1. Ronald Bloore. *Le Forêt mécanique*, 1958. Enamel on masonite (45 1/2" x 85 1/2").

Figure 2. Ronald Bloore. *Painting, June*, 1960. Oil on masonite (48" x 48").
Figure 3. Ronald Bloore. Painting, 1961. Oil on masonite (48" x 48").

Figure 4. Ronald Bloore. Small White Cross, 1962. Oil on masonite (18" x 48").
Figure 5. Ronald Bloore. Painting No. 6, 1964-65. Oil on masonite (48" x 48").

Figure 6. Ronald Bloore. White Mural, 1967. Oil on masonite (142-3/4" x 146-1/2").
Figure 7. Ronald Bloore. *Untitled*, August-November, 1968. Oil on masonite (48" x 72").

Figure 8. Ronald Bloore. *Painting*, 1971. Oil on masonite (96" x 43").
Figure 9. Brian Fisher. *February No. 3, 1964.* Oil on masonite (18½" x 25½").

Figure 10. Brian Fisher. *Pacific, 1965.* Acrylic on canvas (54" x 68").
Figure 11. Brian Fisher. Chinook, 1966. Acrylic on canvas (66" x 44").

Figure 12. Brian Fisher. Angst, 1966. Acrylic on canvas (44" x 56").
Figure 13. Brian Fisher. Enigma, 1966. Acrylic on canvas (68" x 113").

Figure 15. Brian Fisher. Indirections-Aquarian Dream, 1968. Acrylic on canvas (44" x 44").

Figure 16. Brian Fisher. Induction No. 2, 1968. Acrylic on canvas (32" x 56").
Figure 17. Brian Fisher. *Memorium (Earth)*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas (68" x 82").

Figure 18. Brian Fisher. *Steppe II, No. 3*, 1970. Polymer acrylic on canvas (66" x 132").

Figure 20. Yves Gaucher. Aji, 1963. Embossing and etching.
Figure 21. Yves Gaucher. *En Homage à Webern*, 1963. Impression in relief on laminated paper (22" x 30").

Figure 22. Yves Gaucher. *Danse Carrée Un bleu me l'a dit*, 1965. Acrylic on canvas (30" x 30").
Figure 23. Yves Gaucher. *Grey Silences for Green*, June, 1966. Acrylic on canvas (50" x 100").

Figure 24. Yves Gaucher. *Cardinal Raga*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas (72" x 72").
Figure 25. Yves Gaucher. The artist with some of Grey on Grey series of 1967-69. Acrylic on canvas (various sizes).

Figure 26. Yves Gaucher. Bleu, Vert, Bleu, 1971. Acrylic on canvas (80" x 92").
Figure 27. Roy Kiyooka. Relief Painting with Incised Circles, 1961.

Figure 28. Roy Kiyooka. Blue Zone, 1963. Oil and lucite on canvas (68\(\frac{1}{2}\)" x 68\(\frac{1}{2}\")).
Figure 29. Roy Kiyooka. **Barometer #2**, 1964. Polymer (aquatex) on canvas (97" x 69").

Figure 30. Roy Kiyooka. **Aleph #2**, 1964. Polymer (aquatex) on canvas (68-1/4" x 93-3/4").
Figure 31. Roy Kiyooka. The Bridge, 1965. Acrylic on canvas (60" x 60").

Figure 32. Roy Kiyooka. Homage to Debussy, 1966. Acrylic on canvas (40" x 120").
Figure 33. Roy Kiyooka. *Pla{ides}, 1967. Acrylic on canvas (72" x 180").

Figure 34. Roy Kiyooka. *Daneb*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas (96" x 96").
Figure 35. Arthur McKay. Grass in Winter, 1956. Oil on canvas (21" x 32").

Figure 36. Arthur McKay. Untitled, 1959. Flat black on paper (20" x 26").

Figure 38. Arthur McKay. *Tension*, 1962. Enamel on composition board (48" x 72").
Figure 39. Arthur McKay. *Image of Antiquity*, 1962. Enamel on composition board (48" x 84").

Figure 40. Arthur McKay. *Enigma*, 1963. Enamel on composition board (48" x 72").
Figure 41. Arthur McKay. Mandala No. 1, 1967. Enamel on composition board (48" x 48").

Figure 42. Arthur McKay. Untitled, 1971. Enamel on composition board (48" x 72").
Figure 43. Barnett Newman. Abraham, 1949. Oil on canvas (83" x 34").

Figure 44. Mark Rothko. Red and Orange, 1955. Oil on canvas (69" x 51").
Figure 45. Ad Reinhardt. **No. 24, 1954, 1954. Oil on canvas (20" x 50").**

Figure 46. Frank Stella. **Tomlinson Court Park, 1959. Enamel on canvas (84" x 108").**
Figure 47. Jasper Johns. *Green Target*, 1955. Encaustic and newsprint on canvas (60" x 60").

Figure 48. Paul Brach. *Gate No. 2*, 1963. Oil on canvas (45" x 41").
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