

Abstract Thinking

Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity of composition and for colours, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential.
Wassily Kandinsky, artist

According to Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980), the fourth and most complex stage in human cognitive development is characterized by the development of abstract thinking. Defined as a level of learning about things that is removed from the facts of the 'here and now' and from specific examples of the things or concepts being thought about, abstract thinking involves the ability to reflect on events, ideas and perceived analogies and relationships that others may not see and to apply these reflections to hypothetical situations to solve problems and test solutions.

This definition of abstract thinking is an apt description for the process of abstraction as expressed in the visual arts. Beginning in the late 19th and continuing throughout the 20th century, the sources of inspiration for many artists shifted from the external world to their personal internal visions and to concerns with the actual material of paint and the act of painting rather than the story a painting told. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s the spotlight on art production in Edmonton was on formalist abstract painting. Supported and promoted by the Edmonton Art Gallery, the University of Alberta and the commercial galleries, this relatively cohesive spirit in art making effectively put Edmonton on the national and international art stage during these decades.

While abstraction was championed by the Edmonton art establishment, however, many viewers were left scratching their heads, wondering what it was all about. The exhibition *Abstract Thinking* confronts this perplexity 'head on'. Featuring the paintings and drawings of Allen Ball, Jim Corrigan, Scott Cumberland, Nicole Galellis and Ruby J. Mah this exhibition examines some of the aims and inspirations behind abstract art production, and the processes used by these artists, in order to gain an understanding of abstraction itself.

Abstraction continues to be an energetic and open-ended exploration for many visual artists throughout Alberta. Through the art works presented in this exhibition viewers are invited to investigate the origins of this genre of artistic expression, the various manifestations of this practice throughout the 20th century, and some of the contemporary directions abstraction in the visual arts embraces.

Abstract Thinking was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program is supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

Travelling Exhibition 2011-2013 Seasons

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition for the 2011-2013 seasons. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves up to 50 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide for the show. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The Artists

Allen Ball Scott Cumberland Ruby J. Mah
Jim Corrigan Nicole Galellis

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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Front Cover Image

Nicole Galellis, *Rococo Ripe*, 2011
Acrylic, polyurethane on board
Collection of the artist



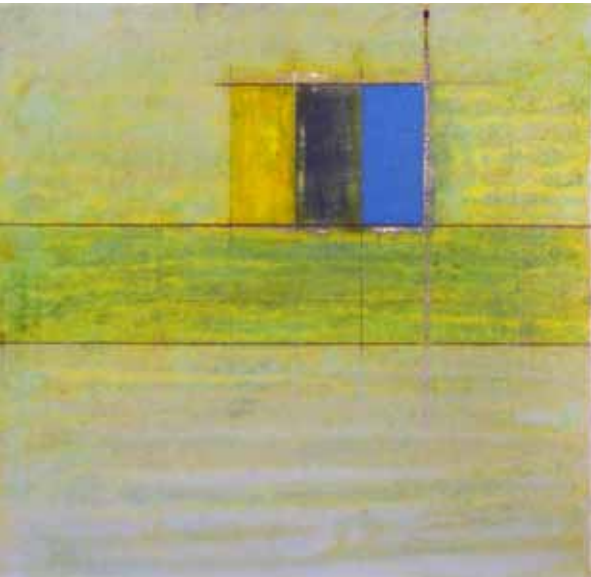
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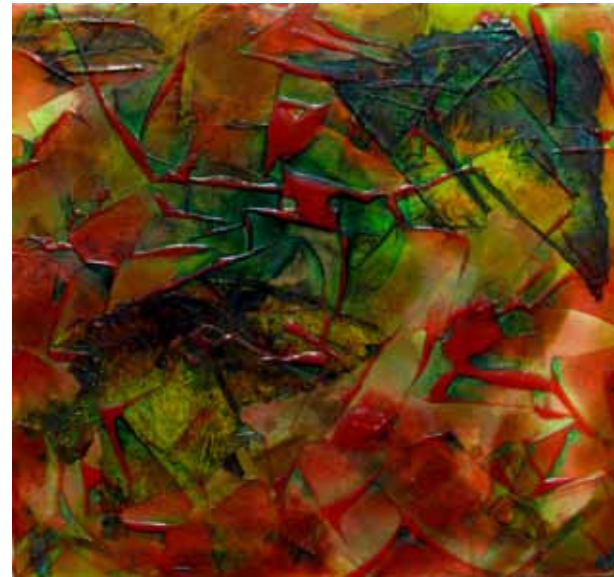
*Looking at contemporary art is like learning a new language.
It takes time and patience.*

Kitty Scott, curator

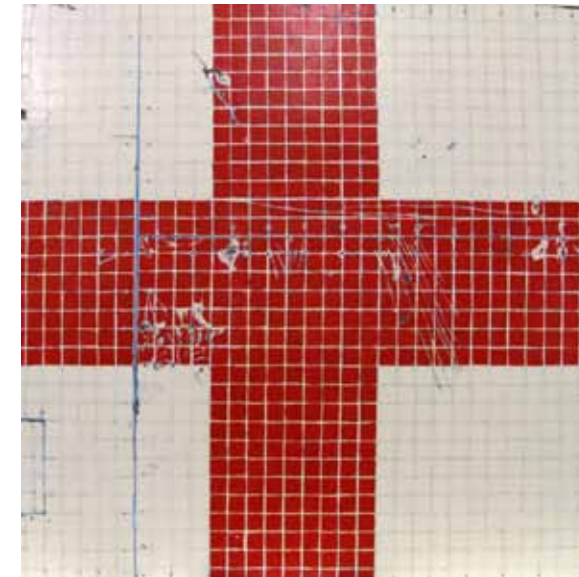




Jim Corrigan
Study for Buffalo Pound Lake, 2010
Acrylic, graphine, varnish on board
Courtesy of Lando Gallery



Ruby J. Mah
The Queen Of Hearts She Made Some Tarts, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist



Allen Ball
The Divine Image, 2008
Oil enamel on linoleum on board
Collection of the artist

Like all painting, abstract painting is not a unified practice. Rather, the term 'abstraction' covers two main tendencies. The first involves the reduction of natural appearances to simplified forms and, in the exhibition **Abstract Thinking**, is an inclination expressed in the work of Jim Corrigan.

Jim Corrigan has described himself as '...a victim of (his) time and place.' Having been raised on a farm west of Red Deer, his artistic vision, like many artists in Alberta, has been inspired by the Alberta landscape. As an art student, however, he was introduced to and influenced by modernist abstraction. As a result, while he has remained 'true' to his roots and to the land as a source of inspiration, he has interpreted this subject in an abstract manner.

Corrigan begins many of his paintings *in situ*, working directly from what he sees before him. Rather than creating a reproduction of his chosen setting, however, he 'boils' the scene down to where spatial relationships, geometry and formal elements such as shapes or colours dominate. In painting this artist searches for the language that will define the scene and create order out of the morass of things going on around and before him. In this distillation he seeks to say something fundamental about the land and painting itself.

While Corrigan strives for a 'minimalist expression', however, his overall process is anything but minimalist in nature. Beginning with layers of primer to create a porous, paper-like surface which absorbs the paint and provides a luminosity in the finished work, he then applies multiple layers of acrylic washes which are often sanded back and repainted. Through this layering he aims to build a depth of surface and edge detail as well as a sense of density of colour and texture reminiscent of the overall feel of the particular landscape elements that inspired him.

The second tendency in abstraction involves the construction of art objects from non-representational basic forms. Such objects are not created by abstracting from natural appearances but by building up with non-representational shapes, colours and patterns. Such works are usually ones without a recognisable subject and the subject of the work is often the formal elements themselves.

The painting *The Queen Of Hearts...* by Ruby J. Mah is an example of this aspect of abstraction. While Mah finds inspiration in or ideas from the world around her, such ideas are not fixed. Rather, inspired by the freedom abstraction allows, she approaches her work in an experimental and spontaneous manner. For Mah the process of painting, the *moment* of painting, is an important action as she considers her paintings to be active rather than passive in nature.

The work *The Queen Of Hearts...* clearly demonstrates Mah's process. This painting is part of a series of works entitled Down the Rabbit Hole, inspired by Lewis Carroll's story *Alice in Wonderland*. While Mah was inspired by the text, however, she did not interpret it literally. Rather, she focused on the mood and colours she associated with certain phrases. Beginning with a red 'ground' on the canvas, creation of the work then became a process of action, interaction, and reaction to the paint medium and what was happening on the canvas. Using paint scrapers, trowels, and other tools, she moved the paint around to create her marks. As in all her works, layering of colours was also extremely important in the creation of this painting. Using opaque and translucent colours and a mix of wet and dry layers of paint, Mah has allowed the underpainting and drawing to show through. She continued working in this manner until she felt the image was resolved and she had created the 'look' and feeling she was after.

Through following this process each of Mah's paintings take on an organic life of their own and, through their surface texture and multiple layers of colour, pull the viewer in for a rich aesthetic experience.

During the mid 20th century abstraction in the visual arts in Edmonton was largely focused on formal concerns. Artists engaged with abstraction emphasised the material of paint and the act of painting and strove for a purely aesthetic response to the colours and textures expressed in their paintings. After the 1980s many artists began to re-introduce allusions, illusions, symbols and metaphors into abstract painting. This is expressed in the work of Allen Ball.

As an artist Allen Ball tends to work in series and his paintings in the exhibition **Abstract Thinking** were inspired by William Blake's collection of poems entitled *Songs of Innocence*. For Allen Ball, born in Britain, the paintings in his *Songs of Innocence* series are a personal investigation of what it means to be English and he chose the poetry of Blake as inspiration as, according to the artist, Blake is synonymous with 'Englishness'. The actual imagery in each painting corresponds to a word, phrase, mood or idea expressed in the poem being examined and also expresses this investigation of personal heritage.

The painting *The Divine Image* is an excellent example of the artist's intent and the use of external references in abstract painting. Blake's poem concerns the love of God and love for the human form as an expression of God's image. Ball extended these ideas to an expression of love for England and the English people. To express this he chose the symbology of the cross of Saint George. St. George is the patron saint of England and the flag of St. George, a red cross on a white background, has been associated with England since the Crusades. In 1190 this flag was adopted by England and the City of London and, from about 1277, St. George's cross officially became the national flag of England and Wales. With the union of Scotland and England in 1606 the St. George Cross became a key component of the Union Flag and later the Union Jack of 1801.