

# Abstract Painting in Canada

Jonathan Forrest (b. 1962)

If we want to speak about prairie abstract painting in terms of postmodern values, the recent work of Saskatoon painter Jonathan Forrest better fits the bill. He is the youngest and perhaps the last direct descendant of the tradition that began with Greenberg, passed down to him through Perehudoff and Christie, the tradition that so long retained its faith in painting *qua* painting independent of external references. Throughout the 1990s this must at times have seemed a lonely stance, and there is a tone of defensiveness in the catalogues of Forrest's exhibitions during that decade: "He works within a tradition that seems to have slipped from favour" (Robert Christie); he "can be seen as a survivor of the modernist school" (David Humphries); "For more than a decade Forrest has persistently made very unfashionable abstract paintings" (Helen Marzolf).<sup>25</sup> Forrest's own thoughts were more forward looking: "If we look back through the early eighties and until recently, it's been a time when abstraction has been most unpopular. But within the painting community, abstract painters, it's also been a time of stagnation. I think there are a number of painters now interested in abstraction that are looking at ways to emerge out of that period without denying the history and what you're interested in. How do you take it to the next stage, break out of the known, accepted forms of expression without denying where you come from?"<sup>26</sup>

Forrest's recent paintings such as *Generation*, 2002 (fig. 143), juxtapose and overlay rectangular slabs of paint, like big thick colour chips, in a tightly gridded structure. But there is little of Christie's ideal of visual singularity here. Instead, the blocks of paint/colour bump and elbow and crowd one another as if vying for individual attention, some for the moment in ascendancy, others holding back, girding themselves for a future attack: Hofmannesque push and pull without harmony or resolution. But if these paintings are about postmodern notions of decentredness and dissolution, they are quite cheerful about it in a deadpan kind of way, and self-possessed, and, consonant with most other youthful abstract painting across Canada, quite without irony or cynicism.