

BY DOUGLAS MacLEAN

ABSTRACTION'S BOLD NEW FACE

SEVEN WESTERN
CANADIAN ARTISTS
ARE LEADING
A RESURGENCE IN
ABSTRACT IDEAS



As a student at the Ontario College of Art in the mid-1970s, I produced some innovative abstract work with a floor polisher as my brush. At that time, however, the phrase on everyone's lips was, "painting is dead." So I moved on to video work.

I mention this primarily because, of course, painting never died — although it certainly had its ups and downs during the past three decades. Travelling across the country lately, I've been surprised by how alive painting is. In particular, I am excited by the bold, new face of pure abstraction.

Seven Western Canadian artists who have recently caught my attention — I think they represent abstract art's current vitality and experimentation — are Saskatoon artists Marie Lannoo and Jonathan Forrest; Medicine Hat's Clay Ellis; John Eisler and Mark Mullin in Calgary; Bryan Ryley in Vernon and Camrose Ducote in Vancouver.

Lannoo, Forrest and Ellis were featured in *Spell*, a 2005 exhibition at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon showcasing 12 painters who are exploring abstraction by focusing on new concepts and practices.

John Eisler and Mark Mullin in Calgary represent abstraction's new face. Eisler's paintings emphasize sensations of our high-speed society, with its signal overload of high-speed internet, fast cars and music downloads. Mullin, who presented a major exhibition of new work at Calgary's Paul Kuhn Gallery in March 2006, plays with fluctuating diagrammatic elements combined with solid forms. His complex paintings, constructed on five-inch-deep stretchers, are simultaneously energetic and meditative.

The two British Columbians who I think fall into the category of new abstract artists — Bryan Ryley and Camrose Ducote — both show influences of older abstract painters in their approach. I see this as a positive; in abstraction, it is very hard to say something is "brand new." If we can find references to other artists and older works of art, does that make any of their paintings less original?

Not in my view. Influences are there for the taking, and successful artists realize the benefits. Jonathan Forrest has seen the work of Saskatchewan artists William Perehudoff and Robert Christie flourish, wane and yet survive. Certainly Forrest's devotion to colour exploration owes a debt to their influence. Possibly we can connect Clay Ellis's embedded pigments to paintings by Larry Poons and Jules Olitski, and maybe his thick plastic forms to Edmonton painter Graham Peacock.

Why should any of that information lessen our admiration for the endeavours of today's artists? Instead, I think it extends painting's concepts and opens the doors for new ideas.

Continued on page 48

John Eisler: Strobe #2.
2004, oil on panel,
35" x 23.5"

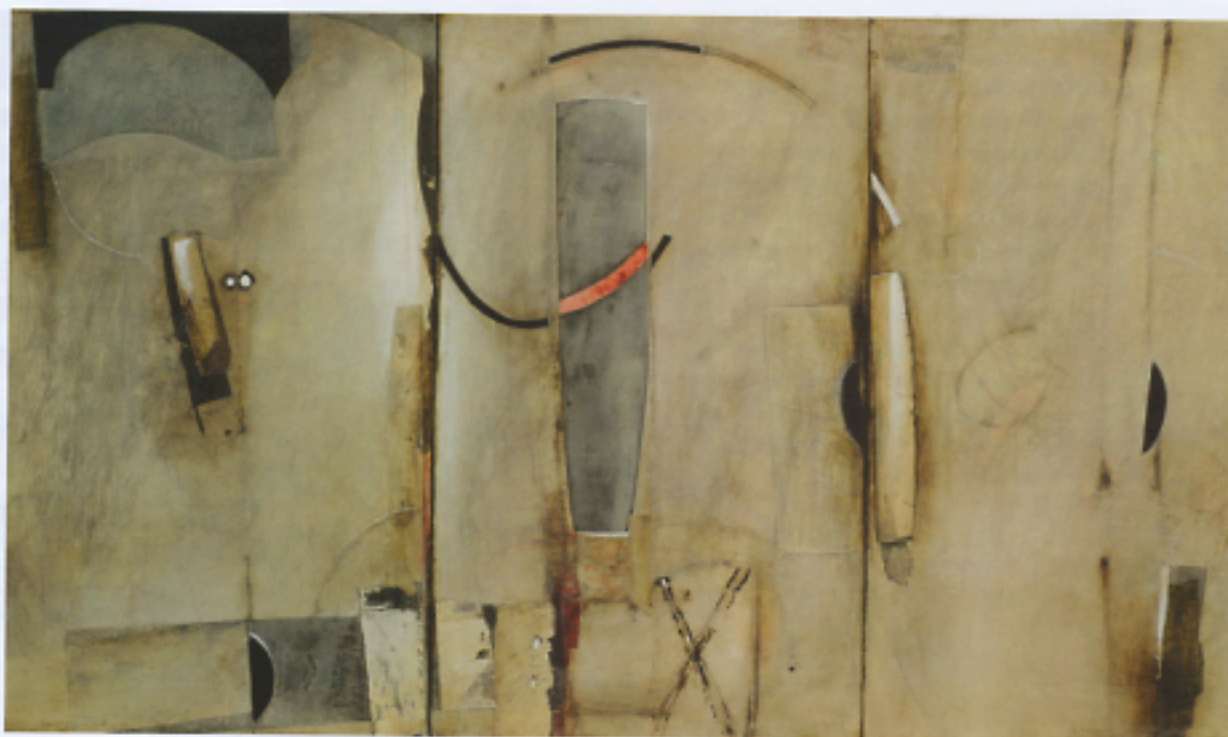
John Eisler is a 1997 graduate of the Alberta College of Art & Design and winner of that year's Board of Governor's award for excellence. With the exception of one group show in Toronto, Calgarians and visitors to that city are the only ones who have had opportunities to view Eisler's paintings in a gallery setting. In a review of his work published in the Winter 2004 issue of *Canadian Art*, Greg Elstrand calls Eisler "a visual DJ," suggesting he is "the interlocutor, and not just the translator, of the digital visual flow."



Mark Mullin: *Absorption Rates*, 2006,
oil on canvas, 72" x 72" x 5.25"

◀ Mark Mullin has established himself as a presence in the Canadian art scene in the few short years since completing his MFA at Concordia University in 1999. Citing the compelling "narrative engagement" of Calgary-based Mullin's imagery in his 2002 *Lost Horizon* exhibition at Artspace in Peterborough, Ontario, Maria Brendel suggested that, conceptually, the paintings incorporate "science, literature, play and magic." In 2003 Mullin had solo exhibitions in Vancouver and Toronto, and in 2004 he was a finalist in the 2004 RBC New Canadian Painting Competition. In a *Galleries West* web review focused on his March 2006 *A Sudden Change in Pressure* exhibition at Paul Kuhn Gallery in Calgary, Kay Burns noted Mullin's "fascination with the diagrams used to explicate mathematics and physics — and the notion that such complexity can be simplified into lines, circles and graphs."

Camrose Ducote's > subtle yet complex mixed media works attest to the Vancouver artist's meditative approach to her layered and reductive production methods. "The physical process by which I create each piece involves that of transformation, which is the theme I am attempting to address subjectively," she explains about her *Split* triptych series shown at Atelier Gallery in Vancouver in March 2006. Originally a textile artist — her sculptural gauze constructions were in the prestigious Lausanne international biennial in 1985 — Ducote brings a weaver's attention to detail to her work. Unlike most artists who title their pieces, she merely numbers each artwork, leaving the interpretation door open to viewers.



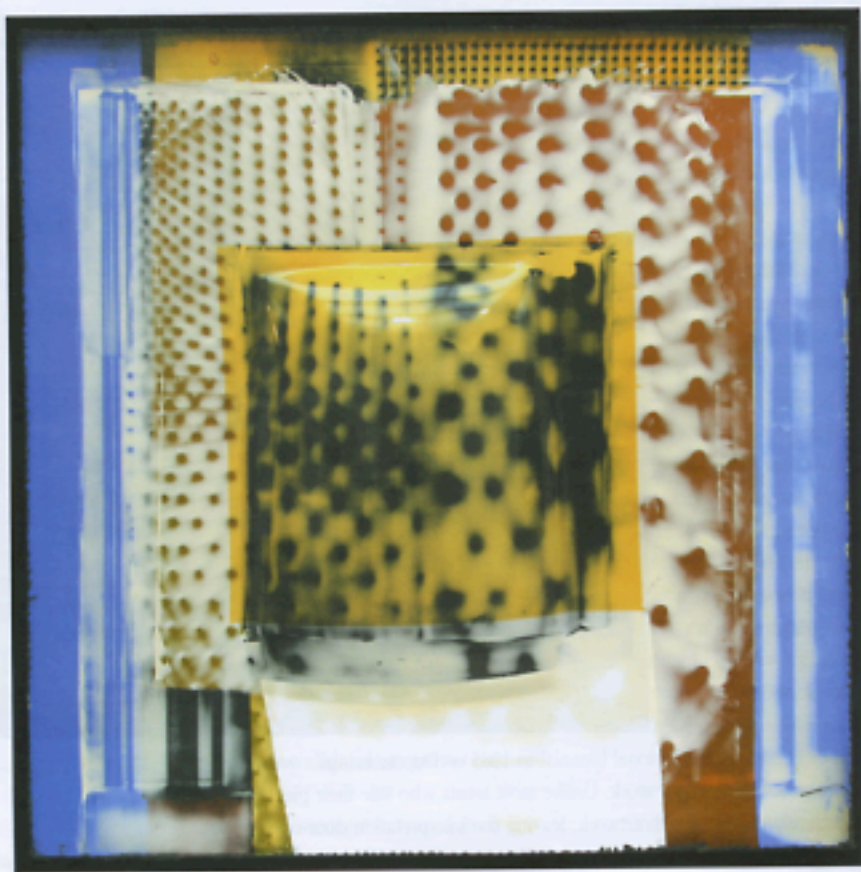
Camrose Ducote:
Untitled 05-33, 2005,
mixed media on panel,
21" x 38"

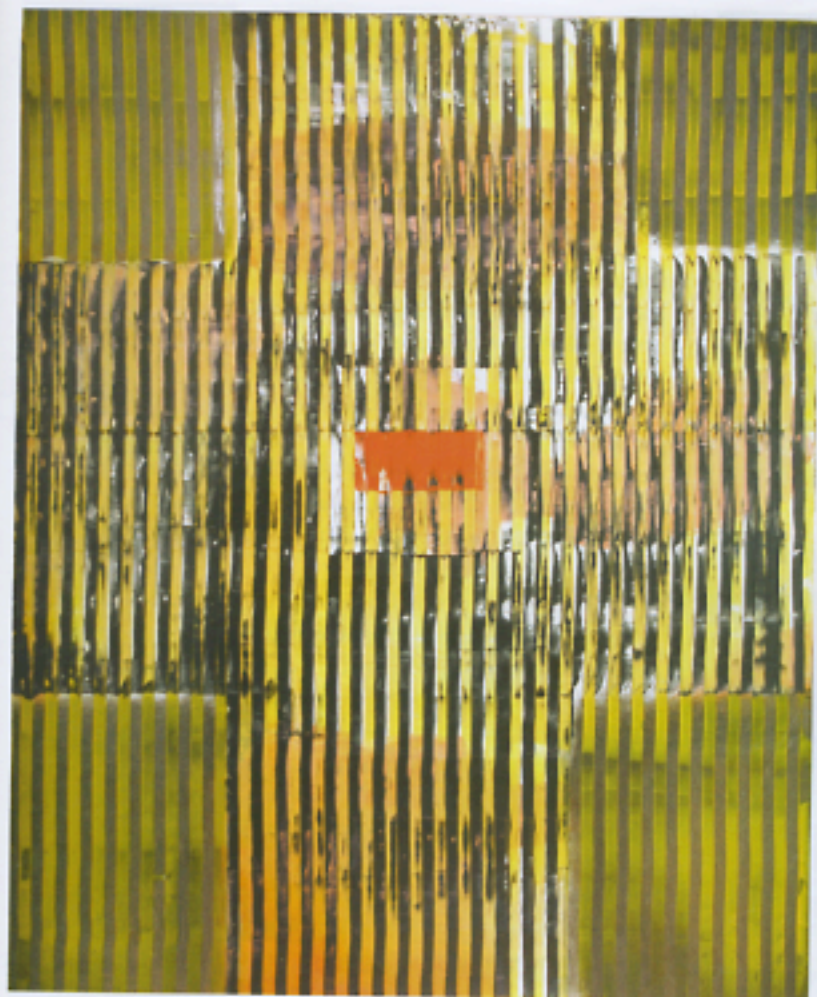
Marie Lannoo: *Tremolo #1*, 2005,
acrylic on panel, 24" x 24"

Marie Lannoo lives in the Saskatoon house designed for Otto Rogers, one of Canada's most notable abstract artists and among Lannoo's instructors at the University of Saskatchewan. After successfully exploring figurative painting in the 1990s, she returned to abstraction with the goal of answering a number of questions, including how to put the human presence into a painting so that it is visible but invisible as well. Lannoo hopes viewers will "realize she is playing with their perception of painting as much as their understanding of representation," Marie Leduc writes in a feature article in the Fall/Winter 2004 issue of *Articbole*. "Peering into her work, one is drawn to discover the underlying forms only to be pulled back again by the mirror-like reflection of the self."

Clay Ellis devoted the first two decades of his artistic practice to large-scale steel sculpture. In the mid-1990s, following a year in France, he began working with moulded acrylic and urethane. "I made a decision to make sure that I was doing work that guaranteed I was taking off the brakes," he said in an October 2005 interview with Edmonton art critic Gilbert Bouchard. "As an artist, you can't just duplicate the cutting-edge work or work in the image of people who came before you. You have to produce work that is in sync with your own time." A major accomplishment in Ellis's extensive exhibition record was a multipanel installation and video projection recently for the opening of the new Esplanade Art Gallery in his home town of Medicine Hat.

Clay Ellis: *Postmarks – Barrhead*, 2002,
acrylic and urethane, 48" x 48"



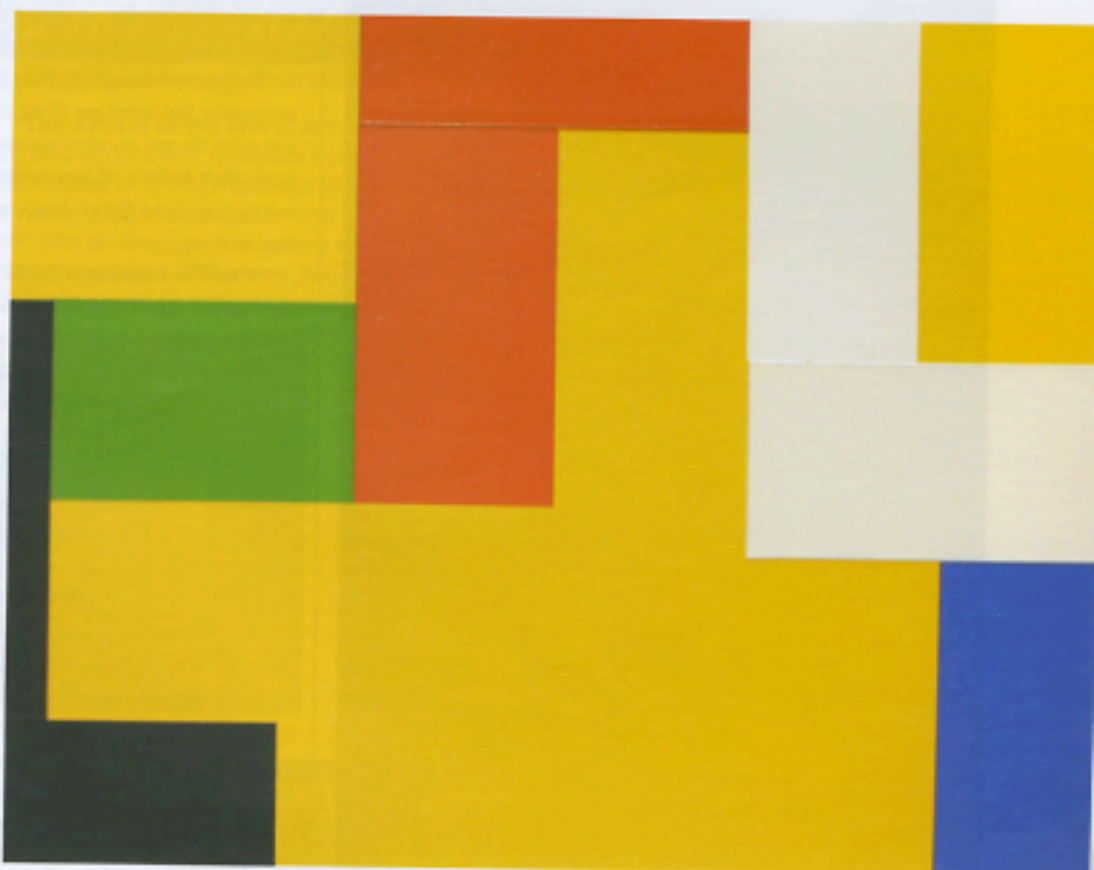


Bryan Ryley: *Four Corners*, Oristano, 2005,
acrylic on canvas, 41" x 33"

< Bryan Ryley has avidly pursued the possibilities of drawing, painting and collage throughout the three decades of his artistic career. He primarily exhibits his artwork in Calgary, within the Okanagan region, and in New York with other alumni of that city's Pratt Institute. In his artist statement for *Red, White and Blue* at Vancouver's Elliott Louis Gallery in 2003, he writes: "Abstraction makes visible not the fruit of experience but experience itself, and through its open and suggestive form often points to the realm of the spiritual bound up in the physical." Ryley lives in Vernon and teaches at the Okanagan University College.

Jonathan Forrest moved to > Canada from Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1977. He participated in the Emma Lake Artist's Workshops in 1985 and 1988, as well as in 1991, the same year he earned an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan. His geometric compositions have mainly been exhibited in Alberta and Saskatchewan. In 2005, paintings by Robert Christie, William Perehudoff and Forrest were featured in a group show at APT gallery in London, England. When that exhibition was presented earlier at Kenderdine Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Sky Glabush, writing in the Summer 2004 issue of *Canadian Art*, dubbed Forrest a "torchbearer" for post-painterly abstraction.

Jonathan Forrest: *Primary Circuit*,
2003, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 32"



“...ABSTRACT ART IS GATHERING ENERGY AGAIN”

Continued from page 44

The Cy Twombly or Antoni Tàpies markings that appear for me in the work of Camrose Ducote are really a blessing. Both artists were brilliant in drawing with paint, and if indeed Ducote has looked at and admired their works, that's great.

How do these seven artists (I won't be tempted to call them a group) demonstrate a resurgence in abstract ideas? What I see in Jonathan Forrest's stencilled placement of slabs of saturated colour is a revelation: fresh, celebratory and joyful. I'm looking forward to his exhibition at Vanderlelie Gallery in Edmonton June 24 to July 6.

The haunting colour transparencies created by Marie Lannoo, seen at Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art in Calgary three years ago, made me want to swim into the glossy spaces she created. Her use of colour reflection, especially the outside edges of her canvases that transmit nuanced colour onto bare white gallery walls, exhibits sensitive and experimentally innovative perceptual ideas. Lannoo has a show entitled *See Nothing, See Everything* at the Kenderline Art Gallery in Saskatoon until July 14.


Clay Ellis, who previously focused on formalist metal sculpture, now works inventively in moulded polychromatic acrylic and urethane, creating tile-like volumes of thick, alluring colour that sometimes appear contained in a frame and are wall-mounted, and occasionally are displayed as double-sided freestanding sculptures. Each has an elegance that one would not think possible in a plastic medium. His *Farm Jazz* series combined the joy of music-making with the freedom of painting, and his *Postcard* series, shown at Vanderlelie Gallery in November 2005, included many sincerely beautiful works.

The gestural energies of John Eisler's paintings catch me up in their momentum and speed me along, offering just enough line-breaks to pause and enjoy the riot of colour screaming across the smooth surface of his work. Mark Mullin's off-beat colour palette, and his mixtures of hard and soft paint surfaces that challenge with a push-pull urgency, are similarly hard to resist.

When I first saw Bryan Ryley's large "cross" paintings in his *Four Corners* show at Paul Kuhn Gallery in the fall of 2005, my art memory drew references to Quebec painter Jean McEwen. While McEwen worked with cross formats in the 1960s, I am intrigued by Ryley's current pursuit of the cross as "form subject." There is a refreshing newness about his striated lines and flat, overlaid colour.

The appeal of Camrose Ducote's paintings lies in the quality of her drawing — an etching-like intimacy successfully translated to large formats — and in her muted surfaces punctuated with shots of pure colour. Ducote's latest paintings, active and aesthetic triptychs exhibited in *Split* at Vancouver's Atelier Gallery during March 2006, remind me of art from the past.

Searching out these new works has inspired me to continue to look for more and other ways abstract art is gathering energy again. I've also been encouraged to revisit abstract art's history, re-learning its successes and failures.

Both of these endeavours are part of a larger reassessment of painting in general, which is perhaps not a bad thing. In my book, painting has not only survived, it is becoming even more alive in Western Canada's abstract art. 

Douglas MacLean of Canadian Art Gallery is an art advisor and private dealer.

www.gallerieswest.ca