



Saskatoon-based abstract painter **Jonathan Forrest**, at work in his studio

PLAYING THE ANGLES

WITH A CUSTOMIZED COLOUR MIX, ABSTRACT PAINTER JONATHAN FORREST IS SEARCHING FOR THE AESTHETIC ESSENCE OF HIMSELF

The rectangle has become Jonathan Forrest's primary shape — beds of vibrant acrylic colour that he lays on the canvas with varying degrees of thickness and texture. "The rectangle is a neutral container for the colour," he says, "there's no meaning or vested interest in the rectangle." He feels that the rectangle allows the viewer a direct relationship with the painting and its coloured surfaces within, of course, the rectangular canvas. For a show this summer at Calgary's Newzones Gallery, Forrest's canvases range in size from 24 by 32 inches to 5.5 by 7.5 feet.

While Forrest has previously painted in what he calls "splotches" — soft-edged stripes and other shapes with an almost organic feeling — it is his adherence to hard-edged forms over the past seven years that make his paintings readily identifiable.

The Saskatoon-based artist started using the rectangle as a purely practical device in 2000. Paintings were based on one big thick shape floating on a field. He taped off clean blocks, and filled them with paint, heightening the contrast between the flat canvas and the thick glossy colour. "Physicality is what my paintings are about," Forrest says. "I like the sense of a slab of paint." By choosing a 'given' — the automatic layout the shape provides — he is able to focus on the colour and paint. "Sticking with the rectangle has made me personalize it," he says.

Forrest's deployment of a common element has evolved to introduce complexity and radiate a painterly confidence. He imbues his flat expanses with motion and optical shifts — his sophisticated palette and eye juxtapose dazzling colours, enabling them to influence each other and move and dance in space. Colours seem to move forward from the canvas or recede deep into it.

Forrest calls the colour range in his current paintings "more personal" than in the past. His work of three or four years ago used primary colours straight out of the tube. In recent work he's refined his colour palette and he mixes all the colours himself, though he still uses straight black. Forrest makes much of black by using varying degrees of gloss and thickness. His slabs may be up to a quarter-inch thick, and may have a glossy sheen or a soft matte finish. Against this, he places translucent blues, radiant reds, murky greens, soft yellows, pink, chocolate and more.

BY STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Red Plane, acrylic on canvas, 2006, 48" x 66"

Forrest achieves a bold, playful quality by creating rectangles that are slightly "off" — with a bit of a tilt here, a leaning edge there, he creates a mischievous, unsettling quality. "I like playing with the knowns, the givens," he says. "And then I throw a small wrench into that order. I like to be ordered, but not too ordered."

"Essence", "offness", and "undeniable" are words that occur when Jonathan Forrest speaks about his work, which grows, he says, from the Modernist tradition — a range of painting from Braque to Pollock. It's a tradition that has had a strong base in Saskatchewan, after the first wave of Canadian abstract painters in the 1940s. The province had a particularly strong showing with the emergence of collectives and the formation of The Regina Five (Kenneth Lochhead, Arthur McKay, Douglas Morton, Ted Godwin, Ronald Bloore, and near-members, Roy Kiyooka and architect Clifford Wiens).

By the 1960s, other forms such as installation and performance art had taken the foreground, and the attention of patrons and the media. But abstract work never really disappeared, and the form has continued to evolve and redefine itself and grow beyond its modernist footings. Saskatchewan painter William Pehudoff has been dedicatedly pursuing abstraction since the early 1950s, acquiring an international reputation.

There's a direct line between the work of these artists and Forrest's inspiration, and in fact today Forrest often shares billing with Pehudoff and with painter Robert Christie. Their notable group shows have included the *Three Generations* exhibitions at the Kenderdine Gallery in Saskatoon in 2004, at ATP Gallery in London, England in 2005, and at The Gallery / Art Placement Inc. in Saskatoon, where Forrest is the general manager.

Forrest did not simply spring from the grasses of Saskatchewan as an abstract painter. He was born in Scotland, and emigrated with his family to Saskatchewan when he was 15. As a child he liked drawing, painting and music, and a high school art teacher recommended that he study art at the University of Saskatchewan. It was there that his path was set. In 1979 and 1980 he studied with Robert Christie, who was a professor there and would become Forrest's most important mentor.

"In his teaching style, he brought out what you already had in you."

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Forrest says. He completed both this BFA and Masters degrees at the University of Saskatchewan, and the professional relationship between Christie and Forrest has continued to grow. Christie is his 'day-job' employer, at The Gallery / Art Placement Inc. in Saskatoon, where Forrest is the general manager.

Keenly involved with the University's Emma Lake Art Workshops in boreal Saskatchewan since the 1980s, Forrest was first a participant, and in 2001 became the co-ordinator. Prairie abstraction continues to thrive at Emma Lake as well, and has since the legendary visit of Clement Greenberg in 1962, and his affirmation of Saskatchewan abstract art. Forrest hopes that the next generation will take over to keep the tradition of Emma Lake alive.

Though this summer's exhibition at Newzones is not Forrest's first solo show, it is significant. "A full show is where both the viewer and the artist really get into the full range of the work — into the real substance," he says. "My feeling is that I have been drilling down to what I'm about as a painter over the last couple of years and this show is a continuation of that process. I'm trying to get to the core of what I'm about, in colour. I'm mining the colour to get to the core of a personal colour experience." This is the essence he speaks of. Forrest claims no meaning or message in his paintings — the message, transmitted from painter to viewer, is the aesthetic experience itself.

While a love of the painter's materials calls him, laying in of paint fascinates him, and the process compels him, Forrest doesn't worry about fashion or trends. He acknowledges that painting itself, regardless of 'genre' goes in and out of fashion, and that abstract painting continues to have detractors and fans. What interests him more than trends is in making his paintings "undeniable." He says he hopes that the viewer "can love one of my paintings or hate it, but cannot deny it."

George Moppett, a curator at Saskatoon's Mendel Gallery, sees Forrest as an inventive, committed painter who well understands colour and surface and who has worked hard to create his own distinctive and evolving style. "He's a formidable young painter," Moppett says. "He'll continue to produce stunning works." ☞

Jonathan Forrest: Recent Paintings, is on May 12 to June 30 at Newzones Gallery in Calgary.

Steven Ross Smith is an arts journalist and creative writer based in Saskatoon. He is the author of *Celebrating Saskatchewan Artists*.