

Gesture and Geometry | Chris Ahlers, David Brown, Laurie Skantzos

We live in a world of heightened visual literacy – we are confronted, on the regular, by image makers and the images they make – and we are acute visual readers. But most of us are hard pressed to pin words to the images that we process day in and day out. Our visual vocabularies aren't nearly as well developed as our ability to find (or give) meaning to visual ephemera.

So, what of abstraction or that of abstract painting? The art historical canon has taught us to know and understand abstraction in primarily formal terms – an application of the elements of design, that of color, form, line, shape, space, texture, and value – in an attempt to discover what is familiar (or to locate the meaning) within the abstract image. But all visual media are composed of formal elements.

Abstraction defies logic because it lacks precise subject matter; however, abstraction is simultaneously and inherently both precise and subjective. It is also often gestural and geometric. In constant oscillation between this and that, but never (or not for long) the thing in the middle.

'Gesture and Geometry' features the work of three abstract painters. They share a mode of expression and have parallel interests in materiality and process, as well as (some) techniques, but they've never shown together. This exhibition marks the first instance in which the paintings of Chris Ahlers, David Brown, and Laurie Skantzos share physical space, where the distinctions in their practices supersede the similarities. Challenging the reductive notion that abstraction can be distilled into its formal parts, these paintings occupy the in-between, offering a kind of call-and-response within each composition and from painting to painting.

Ahlers' paintings flirt with illusion in a way that Brown's and Skantzos' simply do not. At times, he paints the illusion onto the canvas or panel, knowingly inviting the familiar, tempting the viewer into a false conversation with subjecthood. But the communion of shape to meaning is as elusive as the illusion purports it to be. Illusion – a thing that is there but wrongly perceived – and elusion – the fugitive mark, or gesture, that hovers just out of reach but is still near enough. We hang onto those moments – those little gifts from the artist to the viewer – upon which we seek to find meaning and get caught up in the meaning-making of it all.

Among the three, Ahlers wrangles the most surreptitiously with material choices, incorporating (here and there) remnants of other things. Literally, 'things.' Bits of drop canvas that once protected the studio floor. Strips of terra skin that behave so differently to canvas or panel yet meld, not quite seamlessly, onto the painting's surface. To frame or not to frame. His largest painting is shaped and pieced together from four off-angled panels and oh, the surprise of it. We are accustomed to entering painting, in general, at its right-angled edge, where we think we know and understand its beginning and end; however, in Ahlers' shaped painting, the composition seems to bulge gently at the spot where it's meant to stay put. We are winged into the image and, when we find ourselves back at the edge again, we're bounced back in.

Brown's paintings, on the other hand, are matter-of-fact. His uniform surfaces are created using a hot wax method, allowing fine layers to build, trapping pigment and light between each. This exhibition of same-sized, mostly tonal paintings invites comparison, one composition to the next. Although their material manufacture is systematized, this is not the same as 'sameness.' Each seems to operate by the same rules; however, the longer we look, the less alike those rules appear to be.

Brown operates in discrete elements – some shapes live below the surface, others hover above – tethered by dot leaders, elegant yet stuttered lines that arc (or leap) from one wax island to the next. The eye hones in on the sculpted lip around each island. These are forms! Not shapes. Forms that float, under or over, defying the painting's painted-ness. We are caught in-between. We are suspended between what was and what will be, as though we've arrived just after one event and before the next.

We do talk about 'time' in painting but we don't talk about painting as a time-based discipline. That is, how fast or slow a painting can be 'read' – how quickly it's meaning is revealed. Or, how expeditiously a painting is made, some are painted in hours or days, some (painstakingly) in years. Time, in the context of Brown's paintings, is embodied in its material substance. As we attempt to reconcile (find meaning) between one form and the next, the waxy surface of the painting reveals an infinite depth, despite the fact that it is only millimetres deep. What happens in-between is a quotient of time within which we are suspended, like pigment and light, despite the matter-of-factness of the painting.

Whereas Skantzos' works are gestural and emotive, and she plays the most with scale. She employs a templating technique for every single one of her brushstrokes, using fat bristled brushes, as well as squeegeeing and scraping tools. Her compositions are built from slightly elliptical or amoebic shapes, long-fingered lines, like rows of standing reeds, and great arcing bridges. Of the three painters, Skantzos is the bold colourist, sometimes applying hot hits of pure hue directly from the tube.

In her unhesitant application of paint, Skantzos asserts painting's age-old aura, it's indefinable quality that sets painting apart from all the other arts. There is a frenetic energy to her paintings, as the elements jockey for position. Often the largest and bossiest are held in check by sets of lines, like the fingers of both hands have been drawn through fresh paint. If Ahlers' works are illusive and Brown's works suspend time, Skantzos' works return us to painting's essence, although not resolutely to its fundamental elements. She gives us mark making, at once searing and confident, and clearly made by hand. It is in the wide sweep of her arm, the five-finger spread, and the broad hatch marks that define her compositions where, in this exhibition, we are returned to gesture and geometry.

From here to there and between this and that. Sometimes swinging wildly. Sometimes hitching for a moment, just there. That is the place where abstraction lives, where its meaning is anchored, before sliding back again.

Dawn Owen, Curator at Guelph Museums