

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Gesture & Geometry: Navigating the threshold between observation and abstraction
The collective works of Chris Ahlers, David Brown & Laurie Skantzos



Elora, Ontario – continuing until February 17, 2019 | Assembled in the Minarovich Gallery at The Elora Centre for the Arts, the work of award winning artists Chris Ahlers, David Brown and Laurie Skantzos calls your attention and requests your presence. Dawn Owen, Curator at Guelph Museums describes the show best in this excerpt from her critical essay (see attached): *“‘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 techniques. This exhibition marks the first instance in which the paintings of Ahlers, Brown, and 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.”*

"This show is perhaps one of the most beautiful that I've experienced at ECFTA - an incredible array of colour, shape and texture - large open canvasses that attract the eye and hold your attention. This exhibition is a fabulous promotion for the power of creativity and collaboration."

ECFTA Board Member

Guelph artist Chris Ahlers' acrylic and mixed media paintings employ geometric and geomorphic abstraction, colour play and the exploration of materials to invite interpretation both as scenes and surfaces. (see bio attached)

Toronto based artist David Brown's abstract encaustic paintings utilize beeswax, oil, and spray paint to construct a multi-layered, multi-sensory experience. (see biography attached)

Guelph artist Laurie Skantzos' process driven painting is largely inspired by the interactions of colour, shape and application. She works with oil and cold wax medium, layering shapes upon shapes, adding richness and textures to the surface. (see biography attached)

The Elora Centre for the Arts is located in a restored, three-story limestone schoolhouse in one of Ontario's most picturesque villages. The building consists of 10 large classrooms converted to provide over 10,000 square feet of dedicated studio, gallery, and performance space.

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

Written by: Dawn Owen, Curator Guelph Museums

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 Skantzios' 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, Skantzios is the bold colourist, sometimes applying hot hits of pure hue directly from the tube.

In her unhesitant application of paint, Skantzios 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, Skantzios' 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

Chris Ahlers



Chris Ahlers studied film production at Ryerson University from 1987-90, and in 1992 opened Wyndham Art Supplies with his parents Otto and Marg. Since then he has maintained a part-time studio practice while being involved in the store and the creative processes of countless artists. The daily exposure to other artists' approaches and methods have informed and enriched his appreciation for both the conceptual and material considerations in his work. He shares a studio with his wife Tammy Ratcliff.

Ahlers' work has been exhibited in private and public galleries across Southern Ontario, and he has taken part in group shows at the Art Gallery of Guelph, Wellington County Museum & Archives, Renann Isaacs Contemporary, the Guelph Studio Tour, Guelph Arts Festival, and the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition. His work is in public collections in Toronto and Guelph, and private collections in Canada and the U.S.

Artist's Statement

As a non-objective painter, my pieces often refer to the 'real world' or lived experience but do not necessarily depict it in straightforward terms. For me the act of painting is often a reaction to, or reflection of the sights and sounds, textures and moods I experience in daily life. I use painting to convey and also convert information and sensory input from one form to another, like a filter or lens that can magnify, distort or clarify. My method tends toward the intuitive, where plans can change according to the relationships that emerge within each piece as it develops.

I am interested equally in the material aspects of paint; it's tactile qualities and surface, colour, volume and with compositional concerns. Working primarily in acrylic, I incorporate numerous paint mediums and additives as well as collage and drawn elements. I like to play at the threshold between painterly mark-making that is rich in gesture and intent, and more ambiguous forms and passages that appear to have occurred naturally, or over time. My goal is to create work that is visually engaging and offers a space in which a viewer can explore and dwell, make associations and infer personal meaning.

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David Brown



David Brown graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 1992. He has a 25 year award winning career in the international art and design industry. In 1996 David's work was honoured by Toronto's Design Exchange when it was included in "Type Culture", an exhibition of top designers chosen for their pivotal influence on Canadian Typography. David Brown taught Industrial Design at OCADU from 1996 to 2006 while also operating a successful product design studio.

David is the founder and managing director of Toronto's SpeakEasy[®], creating networking opportunities for established and emerging artists since 1996. In 2013 he initiated the Five Star collective aimed at facilitating member participation in international art fairs which have included Aqua Art Miami, Clio Art Fair New York and Fountain NYC.

David's abstract encaustic paintings have been shown at numerous galleries and museums across Canada and the U.S. Recently he mounted a solo exhibition at The Painting Center in Chelsea NYC. His paintings are held in private and corporate collections in North America, Europe and Asia. The products he designed have been sold across North America, and his work has been published in books and magazines throughout Canada and the United States.

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David Brown's Artist Statement

I approach the act of painting like a builder; using wax, spray paint and print techniques to construct a multi-layered, multi-sensory experience. I am interested in observing, collecting and reflecting the visual cacophony of urban life. In my work, layers record time, almost archaeologically, with image fragments encapsulated and experiences accumulated in the wax.

My process starts by gathering visual and auditory impressions formed while walking through the city. I collect images and textures from objects that have been discarded, walls that have been tagged and posters that have been covered and torn. Sound is one of the senses you are bombarded with daily but is not often represented visually. My goal is to include all the senses in my work.

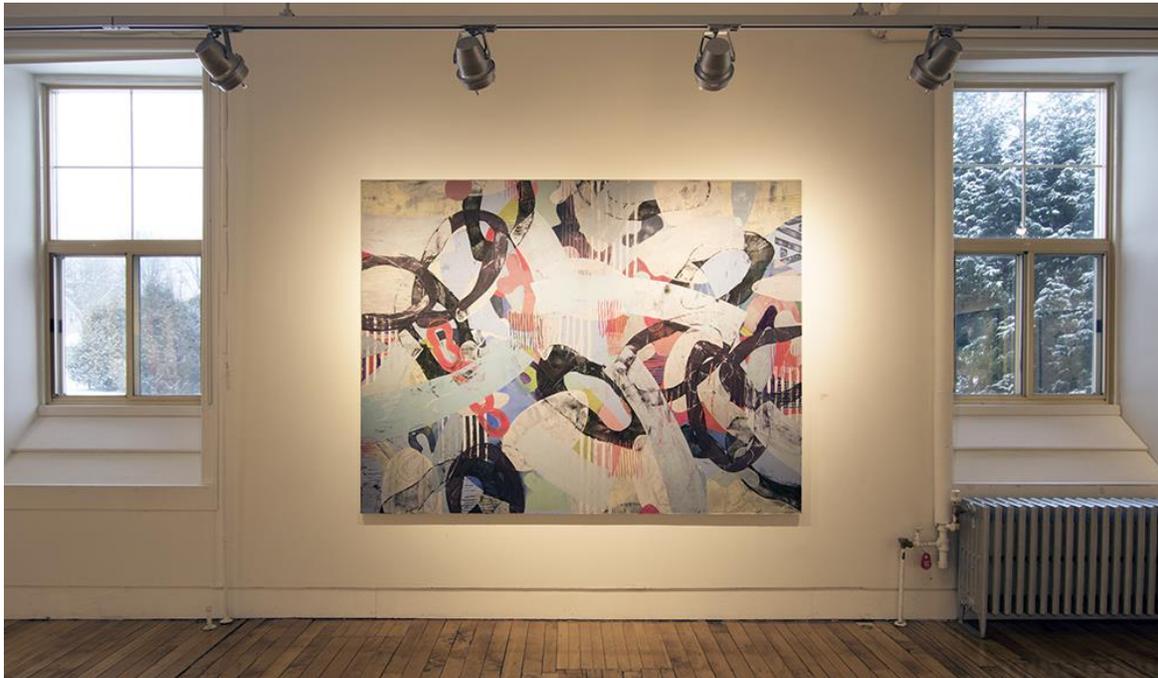
The encaustic medium has become an integral part of this goal. Wax is a sculptural, flexible, organic material with a strong personality. Throughout history it has been used for embalming, preserving and healing. It's versatility is demonstrated by the range of qualities it can yield, from opaque to translucent, shiny to matte, thick to thin, smooth to textured. At certain instants, I am encouraged to work quickly and then in other moments I am granted time to reflect. The wax and I have formed a partnership, it tells me where and how to proceed as much as I guide and tease the molten medium.

In my work, I think of each mark as a problem that needs to be solved, a path to explore. In the Painted Series I transfer a digital collage of details from my image bank as a beginning. This collage involves found typography, textures and graphic marks decayed by the elements. Spray paint and layers upon layers of wax are piled on top. The final result is a very thin sculpture with fragments of long forgotten messages resonating through.

The visual language of graffiti, surveyor symbols and pavement markings form an armature for the depiction of three-dimensional space. I add greater depth using rectilinear and perspectival stripes, free floating organic and geometric forms. I strive to weave these elements through different levels while balancing the composition. Shapes are often rendered in positive and negative form to represent movement and create depth. The thinnest fibers that travel across the upper stratum of the picture plane hint at light or energy propelled from an unknown source.

I think of my paintings as contemporary landscapes that reflect the experience of living in an urban environment. I encourage viewers to consider traces of human activity by translating basic senses into the visual realm. I strive to represent time and space, sight and sound, in a quiet loudness.

Laurie Skantzos



Laurie's contemporary, process driven painting is largely inspired by the interactions of colour, shape and application. She studied fine art at the University of Waterloo and her work is displayed in galleries throughout Ontario. She regularly participates in shows such as the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition and International Affordable Art Fairs with Spence Gallery. Laurie's work is included in private and public collections across North America, Europe and Asia. She works from her studio in Elora Ontario where she is the resident artist at Elora Centre for the Arts.

Laurie also teaches sessions at the Guelph School of Art, Elora Centre for the Arts, and a week long intensive during the summer at the Wellington County Museum. She offers private and semi-private classes in her studio. The focus is on building a visual vocabulary of tools and techniques while further establishing each participant's unique voice.

My painting practice is experimental and rigorous. I work with oil, incorporating cold wax medium mixed with alkyd. Shapes upon shapes are layered, using hand cut templates. These are somewhat crudely made and imperfectly spaced, which thwarts initial control while indicating the human hand involved in the making. Working wet in wet, unexpected transfers occur, adding richness to the surface. I scrape back in areas to reveal linear elements from the edges of raised forms. In some sections there are up to 15 layers. Layering, scraping back and re-application of paint in a manner that both obscures and reveals simultaneously, leads me through a process driven inquiry where discovery and exploration are the main objectives. Evident in the final works are a diaristic passage of time and the history of development.

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