

New Research in Abstraction Exhibition
Robert Linsley, Mike Murphy, Jennifer Phelps, Sasha Pierce
Hacienda Sarria
By Wojciech Olejnik

New Research in Abstraction is an exhibition presented in Kitchener, Ontario. It consists of 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional work, featuring four artists concerned with issues in abstraction. Collectively, their work considers the formal language involved in the making of abstract art and reassesses the limits of this language.

This exhibition seems to follow a progressive logic. This logic starts with Jennifer Phelps' abstract marks, moving to Robert Linsley's abstract planes, then to Sasha Pierce's deconstructed paintings, and finally to Mike Murphy's sculptures. This progression appears to rely on the abstract's mode of being, on the abstract's productive nature. And this logic seems to end not only with the sculptural, with the 3-dimensional, but also with illusionism. The abstract marks appear as landscapes or cocoons. The abstract planes appear as figures or islands. It seems that in this exhibition the limit of the abstract mark is illusion itself. More importantly, that the illusionistic element is accessible in the abstract, that somehow the abstract folds into the illusionistic. But how can this be? How can there be a moment at all when the formal becomes mixed up with the apparent? In pure Platonic terms, one transcends from the shadows and phantasms into the realm of the real, the realm of the forms. Here however, (through visually) the process is reversed, where the light of reason is extinguished for the undeterminability of the apparent, of the illusion. .

It is difficult not to read this work in terms of light. The viewing space itself has light flooding from all directions. The 3-dimensional pieces are situated in the middle of a courtyard, which is surrounded with arches. On the walls, behind the arches hang the 2-dimensional pieces.

In Robert Linsley's paintings the paint like light floods the canvass, bending around the edges. The edges themselves are not well-defined; they are the combination of bumps on the canvas and splatters of dried paint. The paint forms into vibrant shapes, which twist and turn on the flat, grey background. These shapes appear to be created from the centre outwards. It is as if their original core was a perfect geometrical shape, which overflowing with paint slowly transformed into its final, deteriorated double. Gravity and entropy may be at work here, but this very transformation is a gesture of the process of art-making, where even the very act of drying paint can be a gesture. In the process of art-making the properties of paint can be manipulated the way the properties of the universe can be manipulated by changing theorems and equations.

Jennifer Phelps' paintings are procedure-based. By rubbing the canvas over rocks, she is able to create dense marks, which resemble a linguistic system, or a microscopic organism. The viewer however, has no access to the actual process. These marks are opaque, and on their own have no meaning. As a collection, these marks weave an image that becomes very familiar to the viewer: the image of a landscape. This image looms over the constructed systems. It becomes activated by the articulation of the individual scratches and marks, and becomes manifested by the resulting gesture of the system, as something intangible, but visually inescapable.

Sasha Pierce's work creates the most explicit link between flatness and dimensionality in this exhibition. Her paintings literally fold into shapes, come off the stretcher and become 3-dimensional objects. In fact, she leaves a rolled-up canvas and the unfinished frame as an artwork itself, as the logical step between the 2-dimensional painting and the 3-dimensional painting. These sculptural paintings have a chilling presence, as if the viewer confronted simulacra itself. They appear as figures, sometimes resembling a person, other times a strange animal. However, she does not mimic the figure. Instead, she prescribes to the most abstract of exercises, which first considers colour and shape, then questions dimensionality itself. The figure-like being is the conclusion of this exercise, and there, at the edge of dimensionality and abstractness lays the ghostly presence of the other.

Mike Murphy's work seems to be rooted in a formal language. In his 3-dimensional work, one can always identify the juxtaposition of lines and planes, of negative and positive space. He uses various industrial and commercial materials. His pieces appear more like found objects with unspecified function or value, than abstract work. The apparent formal concerns, which at first seem so unavoidable in the work, are annulled, as connotations with tents or banners arise. The work cleverly covers its tracks denying a formal reading, which is slowly consumed by the sheer spectacle of the colour and glitter of the stained sheets and shooting aluminum covered cardboard beams.

There is also a more overall reading of the exhibition that is possible. That the barely self-sustaining planes of Linsley's work are no longer sustained in Pierce's work. That the brittle line in Phelps' work is only the residue of a process and in Murphy's work is an actual object, a wire. Although the line and the plane venture into new and different dimensions, they can be themselves the objects of an examination on a more elementary level, a level that art apparently can share with science in the pure, formal realm. However, once a line ventures into a new dimension its formal attributes become invalid; at this point it crosses the limit of the formal. In a sense, to ask how it is that lines venture is a question about gesture. This is true because a gesture is always a sign first, hence, it is always part of a code, part of a comprehensible language. Yet, as a gesture is part of a formal framework it is also an expression, an expression beyond a semantic reading. More precisely, it is a residue of an action; only an appearance of an object, only a simulacra of the form. In a lot of ways, a gesture brings the same problematics that are attached to the theories about light. Is light a wave or a particle? A gesture operates similarly; it is indeterminable. Yet, as in a cloth a fold can be stretched into flatness, so a gesture can be reduced to a form. And before light there is only flatness, but once light is considered there are only folds, there are only gestures. But nothing is before light, if we follow Einstein's observations on the foundations of modern physics. At a fundamental level, we must start with the velocity of light and not a line or a plane. The line only ventures into space with light, it folds the way light bends. This is especially true of Murphy's work, where the very intensity of the aluminum beam finally disattaches itself from the spatial and formal concerns. As these beams climb from the floor their luminosity overwhelms the viewer below. Their gesture is an act of forgetting, forgetting the line, which disappears behind the fold.