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ART LESSONS THAT DEVELOP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE  
TOWARD ABSTRACT ART:  
AN INTERVIEW STUDY

VIRGINIANNE

A THESIS  
IN  
THE DEPARTMENT  
OF  
ART EDUCATION

PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
AT  
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ART LESSONS TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD ABSTRACT ART: AN INTERVIEW STUDY**

**VIRGINIANNE**

The goal of this investigation is to find a simple body of knowledge that will provide teachers and students with the understandings needed to appreciate the visual passion of prominent abstract artists' works. In order to do that, I wanted to learn what art educators know in regard to abstract art, and about how they change students' negative attitudes toward abstract art, and how do art teachers motivate students to inquire further into a visual expression to ascertain its true worth, and what can inspire students to try to discover the value of the aesthetic experience offered in abstract art.

To Mary Euphemia



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
List of Figures .....	VIII
I. INTRODUCTION - Background of the Problem .....	1
Role of High School Art Education in Providing Answers..	6
What Is Abstract Art (Definitions) .....	8
Background for Research .....	9
Why Bother with Abstract Art .....	11
II. METHOD .....	15
The Unanswered Questions .....	15
Eight Different Approaches .....	17
III. FINDINGS FROM - A. The Lesson Plans and B. The Interviews	
A. The Lesson Plans - Difference Between Theory & Practice	22
B. The Interviews - Consolidated Opinions, Ideas, Insights	27
IV REVIEW OF LITERATURE - Tools to Understand Abstract Art	
Abstract Art and Psychology .....	34
Abstract Art and Science .....	35
About Understanding Structure .....	36
About Seeing .....	37
About Perception .....	38
About the Aesthetic Experience .....	38
About Art Criticism .....	40
Understanding the Art Language .....	40

V	GUIDELINES ABOUT TEACHING ABSTRACT ART.....	42
	Acquiring Background Information .....	43
	Learning the Power of Critique .....	44
	Changing Teachers' Attitudes .....	45
	Using Original Works of Art .....	46
	Learning How to See .....	46
	Acquiring Necessary Vocabulary .....	49
	Developing Analysis Technique .....	50
VI	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
	Summary .....	51
	Conclusions .....	52
	Recommendations .....	52
	BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	53
	APPENDICES .....	57
	Appendix A. - Interview Format .....	57
	Appendix B. - Teacher Questionnaire .....	57
	Appendix C. - Transcripts of Audio-Taped Interviews .....	58
	I - Frankie Toporowski Interview .....	58
	II - Karl Schutt Interview .....	59
	III - Sylvia Klein Interview .....	69
	IV - Roberta Huebener Interview .....	72
	V - Tim DesClouds Interview .....	74
	VI - Ellen Norris Interview .....	79

VII - Claude Dupuis Interview .....	80
VIII - Barbara Dytnerska Interview .....	86
Appendix D. - Art Lessons Concerned with Changing Negative Attitudes	
Towards Abstract Art .....	93
Lesson I - by F. Toporowski .....	93
Lesson II - by K. Schutt .....	97
Lesson III - by S. Klein .....	100
Lesson IV - by R. Huebener .....	104
Lesson V - by T. DesClouds .....	108
Lesson VI - by E. Norris .....	112
Lesson VII - by C. Dupuis .....	115
Lesson VIII - by B. Dytnerska .....	117

## LIST OF FIGURES

	<b>Page</b>
1. Cover of the 1989 brochure from the National Art Gallery of Canada to introduce the public to <i>Voice of Fire</i> by Barnett Newman.....	3
2. Stare-E-O 3D - Magic Eye - A New Way of Looking at the World, N.W.Thing Enterprises, Andrews and McMeel, Universal Press Syndicate Co., Kansas City, Missouri, 1993 .....	66
3. Michael Snow, <i>Lac Claire</i> , 1960, Contemporary Canadian Painting by William Withrow, McClelland & Stewart, 1992.....	88
4. Paul-Emile Borduas - <i>L'Etoile Noire</i> , 1957 - Contemporary Canada Painting by William Withrow, McClelland & Stewart, 1992 .....	94
5. Example student art work from Lesson I - Abstract Expressionism .....	96
6. Example student art work from Lesson II - Iconography .....	99
7. Example student art work from Lesson III - Part B Abstract Sculpture .....	101
8. Example student art work from Lesson III - Part C Abstract Sculpture .....	103
9. Example student art work from Lesson IV - Part A Non-Objective Art .....	105
10. Example student art work from Lesson IV - Part B Abstract Design .....	107

11. Example student art work from Lesson V	
Figurative Abstraction .....	110
12. Example student art work from Lesson V	
Figurative Abstraction .....	111

## I - INTRODUCTION

The National Art Gallery of Canada (NAG) purchased the abstract expressionistic painting *Voice of Fire* (Figure 1.) by Barnett Newman for 1.76 million tax dollars in 1989. This caused a widespread negative outcry from an overwhelming number of people in Canada. On one level, the dispute exhibited a nationalist sentiment that argued against the importation of so costly a work from the United States. The populace felt tax money should be used to support Canadian art and artists or at least be invested into historical collectibles such as an original Leonardo da Vinci drawing or other significant works of obvious value. On another level the controversy manifested the common distrust of abstract art. To the average person the conventional artisan skill required to create this painting did not justify the exorbitant amount paid for it. Opinions were expressed that the government should have focused on another use of public money, that the tax dollars spent on art education in high schools should have taught Canadians exactly why it was so valuable, etc.

In response to the innumerable inquiries from a concerned public looking for an explanation to justify the seemingly extravagant tax dollar purchase, the National Art Gallery held a free symposium about *Voice of Fire*, in their 500-seat auditorium. It was open to all and covered by the media. Because of my research interests, I attended this symposium and was permitted to tape-record the presentations. The transcribed audio-tape forms part of the data for this part of the study.

On the day of the symposium the auditorium was crowded far beyond its capacity with enthusiastic scrutinising guests, not just angry taxpayers and /or Philistines, all seeking to gain an understanding of this contemporary art treasure from a panel of

informed experts: Brydon Smith, Robert Murry, Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, and Serge Guilbault. Brydon Smith is the Assistant Director, Collections and Research, of the NAG, who negotiated the acquisition and wrote the text for the brochure, which was to inform the public about the painting (Fig. 1). Robert Murry is a professional artist who met Newman when he came to the University of Regina's Emma Lake Workshop for professional artists as the guest lecturer in 1959. He remained his friend and sculpture collaborator in New York City until Newman's death in 1976. Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, Professor of Art History at the University of Montreal has done considerable research on Newman and his contemporaries. Serge Guilbault, Professor of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, has organised a number of highly acclaimed conferences that looked at the painting relationship of Paris, Montreal and New York after the Second World War. This is the period in which Barnett Newman had a significant artistic influence. These experts were invited to give topical presentations, have an open discussion, and answer questions from the audience.

The first speaker, Brydon Smith, said he was going to limit his remarks to three aspects related to the making of *Voice of Fire*: the physical description, the technique used, and the official circumstances which prompted Newman to do the painting. Physically, the painting on canvas measures seventeen feet and ten inches by eight feet, with three thirty-two inch wide vertical stripes in oil, two of blue and one in the middle of red. Since Newman's studio at 100 Front Street in New York City had a ceiling of only twelve feet, Smith concluded that it had been executed horizontally. He proceeded to show slides of highly magnified microscopic cross-sections of the red and blue layers

# **VOICE OF FIRE**

**BARNETT  
NEWMAN**

**1905-1970**

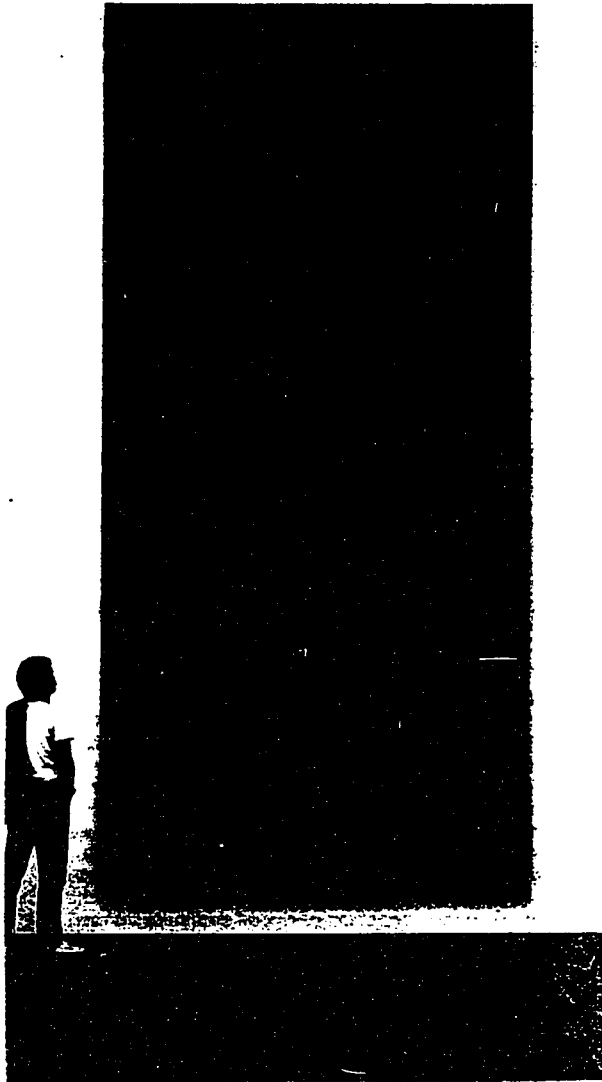


Fig. 1. Cover of 1989 brochure written by Brydon Smith to introduce *Voice of Fire* by Barnett Newman, to the public.



of paint, which revealed their pigment composition. He also revealed that Newman had used masking tape to get the relatively precise edge between the colours.

Brydon Smith explained that in 1965 Allen Solomon was appointed to organise the art for the American Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. It was to be a small survey of the major trends in contemporary American art and the participating artists would receive reimbursement for the cost of materials only. Newman received four hundred and thirty-five dollars reimbursement for contributing *Voice of Fire*, which he painted in 1965.

Briefly, Smith mentioned that at the time Newman was painting *Voice of Fire*, he was also writing a foreword to the republication of "The Memoirs of a Revolutionist" by Peter A. Kropotkin, a Russian Prince, scientist, anarchist and revolutionary. In this foreword Newman uses the term "voice".

In the twenties and thirties, the outcry against libertarian ideals that came from dogmatists, Leninists, Marxists, Stalinists, and Trotskyites alike was so shrill that it built an intellectual prison that blocked one in tight. The only free voice, when heard, was one's own. The existence of these memoirs, this remarkable work of Kropotkin himself, telling of himself, broke one's loneliness inside this solitary confinement. There were no other voices (Newman Introduction 6).

Artist Robert Murry's allotted time went into describing in endless detail the technicalities of building, fabricating and casting the rudimentary minimalist sculptures by Newman, *Here II* and *Broken Obelisk*, 1968. He spent very little time addressing their connotation. About *Broken Obelisk*, he did say:

Symbolism seems to win over metaphor as is suggested by its title, and its various meanings make for interesting speculation. There is not time enough to indulge myself now. However, I will say that in my opinion this work is so impressive in its physical presence that it transcends its less abstract characteristics, like the appropriation of an Egyptian obelisk and pyramid, as few other pieces of twentieth century sculpture have been able to do (Smith et al. 3).

Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin spoke only in French. This was unfortunate for those in the audience who were not bilingual because this presentation seemed to have met some of the informational needs of the audience. Her information moved toward a definition of modernism<sup>1</sup> in which she quoted Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko as saying, "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid, which is tragic and timeless"(Hess 86).

Lastly, Serge Guilbault provided a lively, controversial and somewhat paradoxical approach to Newman's work. He pointed out the similar assertions of individuality that many artists in Paris, New York and Montreal were pursuing during the fifties and sixties in the same purposeful abstraction that took different routes and had different exposures. But he felt that Newman's pursuit and presentation of individualism was quite different from Pollock's or Rothko's in that he "dragged with him the old inflated romantic ego, which in the end made him lose what he was presumably after"(Smith et al. 8).

---

<sup>1</sup> Modernism - What characterizes modern art and modernism? Chiefly, a radically new attitude toward both the past and the present. Mid-nineteenth-century Parisian painters, notably Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet, rejected the depiction of historical events in favour of portraying contemporary life. Their allegiance to the new was embodied in the concept of the Avant-garde, a military term meaning 'advance guard.' Avant-garde artists began to be regarded as ahead of their time. Although popularly accepted, this idea of someone's being able to act 'outside history' apart from the constraints of a particular era, is rejected by art historians. Atkins, Robert, Art Speak, New York, N.Y. Abbeville Press, 1990.

The three-hour meeting left most of the audience more confused and frustrated about abstract art, especially *Voice of Fire*, than they were at the beginning. What did the experts say? Did their words have any meaning to most listeners?

What were the answers to the questions about why this was such a valuable work of art? What were the artistic skills utilised by this abstract artist? What was his intent? None of these seemingly basic questions were answered. The rationalisations these NAG informants presented to the public were mostly ambiguous and incomprehensible art jargon that offered little insight into the Gallery's faith in *Voice of Fire*. Why did these two ardent groups of people, the assertive art experts and the enthusiastic knowledge-seeking audience, participating in a common quest, fail to reach their common goal of acquiring a shared comprehension of this abstract work of art? It was as though the NAG and the public were from different worlds, speaking different languages.

### **Role of High-School Art Education in Providing Answers**

An environment in which to study, analyse and experience abstract art works is provided at the NAG, but it means nothing without the basic educational tools of accurate information and a common language with which to communicate it. A common language enabling these two groups of Canadians, the abstract art experts and the inquiring audience, to talk to each other and arrive at an understanding of *Voice of Fire* had not been developed during their basic high school art education. As a result, many potential abstract art enthusiasts were frustrated and continued to believe that abstract art was nonsense and therefore worthless.

The average high school art teacher is expected to deliver an educated and informative directive that will guide students toward a comprehension of the intrinsic

value in important works of abstract art. But do the majority of art teachers know precisely what renowned works of abstract art are about? Can the art education they provide teach students to judge and experience for themselves the essence of abstract painting and thus share an appreciation of such works? Negative attitudes toward these works of abstract art could be due to the lack of answers to questions such as: What was the abstract artist's intent? What is the historical contextualization needed to situate these works within their pertinent influences? Is there a formalistic code to decipher the possible symbolic meaning contained within the visual experience offered by prominent works of abstract art?

The Minister of Education for the Province of Ontario, C. D. Gaitskell (1948) asked, "How may secondary schools meet the requirements of adolescents in their search for new and vital art forms? How may teachers receive more adequate guidance from their inspectors and from officials in the Department of Education?" (12) It is apparent that we still have not met the necessary requirements to bring the students to an understanding of the 'new' ideas in art that are over fifty years old!

The public response toward *Voice of Fire* reflects the common negative attitude toward abstract art by uninformed people in general. The ideas and values that are an integral part of the abstract art movement are also rejected. Inadequate curriculum and teachers who avoid addressing student misunderstanding of the conceptual nuances developed in abstract art, perpetuate these negative attitudes. It seems that many educators theorise and pretend to know, and maybe even believe they do know, the truth about what they are teaching in connection to this area of art. But if the public's negative outcry about *Voice of Fire* is due to their present art educational experience, something is

lacking, because too many people have not been informed. The national controversy over *Voice of Fire* makes it apparent that art education, for the most part, is not succeeding in keeping up with the contemporary meaning of art. If it was, the general public would appreciate the creative artistic innovation that makes this a truly valuable artwork. It also stresses an imperative need for curriculum reform in art. Are teachers and students of art satisfied with just identifying one artist's work after another? Are they satisfied with using the elements and principles of design to do a purely logical analysis of how the composition is structured? Is art about one knowing its iconography and thus being able to interpret a work? Knowing the historical context is not enough. Knowing the symbolism is not enough. What happened to aesthetic appreciation of works of art? Is there really something there to appreciate but we are unable to see it? People could not see the beauty in a VanGogh painting in the eighteen-eighties, yet today everyone can.

From the general public's response to *Voice of Fire* and other art works of similar style, it is apparent that the negative attitudes toward abstract art outweigh the positive.

### **What Is Abstract Art**

#### **Definitions:**

**abstract art:** Art representing ideas or feelings by abstracting certain qualities or elements from real things so that the result has little or no direct resemblance to these things. (Avis 5)

**abstract art:** Art that departs significantly from natural appearances. Forms are modified or changed to varying degrees in order to emphasize certain qualities or

content. Recognizable references to original appearances may be slight. The term is also used to describe art that is *non-representational*. (Preble 504)

**non-representational:** Art without reference to anything outside itself -- without representation. Also called non-objective -- without recognizable objects. (Preble 508)

**Abstract Expressionism:** An art movement, primarily in painting, that originated in the United States in the 1940s and remained strong through the 1950s. Artists working in many different styles emphasized spontaneous personal expression in large paintings that are *abstract* or *non-representational*. (Preble 504)

### **Background for Research**

When this research began, I had many of my own negative attitudes toward abstract art. I was one of those people who just could not see anything in a painting that was done by dribbling paint all over a huge canvas, no matter how the history books acclaimed the greatness of the artist. I did not have the same respect for artists exhibiting drawing skills that were childlike at best compared to the artist who exhibited skill in drawing realistically. I knew some abstract artists such as Picasso could draw realistically and chose not to. Yet I also knew that many of the famous abstract artists of the modern era, such as Thomas Hart Benton, Adolph Gottlieb, Max Weber, admittedly could not render realistically at all. The creator of *Voice of Fire*, Barnett Newman "was by far the least formally gifted of the group and had no discernible talent as a draftsman" (Hughes 318).

I wondered why someone with seemingly no drawing talent at all would choose to be an artist, and in order to find out I reviewed the life of Barnett Newman. It revealed his

innate passion for art. As a high school student he used to cut classes, often twice a week "spending hours looking at paintings" at the Metropolitan Museum (Hess 11). Newman's response to negative criticism about his drawing of a plaster cast model of Juno from a teacher at the Art Students League was: "You don't understand, this is modern art!" (Hess 14). Newman was not to be discouraged because he believed, that to be a creative artist, was "the highest role a man could achieve" (Rosenberg 229). Newman's parents encouraged their children to respect education and learning. His father was a founding trustee for the first Hebrew school in New York City. It followed that Barnett wanted to be an art teacher to earn his living, but that was refused him, because he could not pass the New York Board of Education's regular art teacher exam. This was due to the Board's "narrow-minded bureaucratic standards" of what an art teacher should be (Hess 25). Even with his extensive studio background, he was still unable to draw realistically. The School Board's rejection provoked him to organise a protest exhibition at the A.C.A. Gallery with his contemporary artist friends, titled, *Can We Draw*, and he wrote a "fiery preface attacking the official standards of academic draftsmanship"(Hess 16). The issue was that these artists' concept of drawing was different than that of the Board of Education. The situation was publicised in the Tribune. The Board of Education agreed to let Newman try the exam again. Again he failed. Eventually he was permitted to work as a substitute art teacher. It was the negative attitude of the members of the New York Board of Education that did not permit this exceptionally well educated scholar of art and practising artist of the day, to teach art. He could have taught his art students what he truly knew first hand about his new and contemporary world of art.

## **Why Bother with Abstract Art**

High school art teacher entrance standards have broadened and come a long way since Newman's times, but this same negative attitude toward the world of abstract art and its artists persists today. Why does it persist and what can be done to change this attitude? Is this effort to change negative attitudes towards abstract art worthwhile?

In 1961, M.L. Keiler noted that, "parents don't seem to have the vaguest notion of the contributions which might be made by art education to the students' development, to art and to society"(88). Eisner reiterated this observation in 1966 in his research about attitudes toward art education. He found that the vast majority of art students agreed with such statements as, "An artist's contribution to society is not as important as that of a scientist." and "Good art is a matter of personal taste"(43). Dr. Gene Mittler in 1972 stated, "If educational experiences in art criticism are to be effective, teachers must be prepared to devise and employ instructional approaches which will cause students to confront and overcome barriers to learning imposed by established attitudes about art"(Mittler, *Efforts to Secure* 64). These are negative attitudes toward art in general, but they do reflect why abstract art is still struggling to be understood in our present educational environment. Due to the persistence of these and other negative attitudes toward art education in general, Michael J. Parks decided to conduct an investigation in 1984 to see if art majors were receiving information about attitude formation and change as they relate to the teaching of art. He analysed seven prominent art education textbooks and found that, although attitude concepts were frequently mentioned in passing in these books only E.W. Eisner's 1972 text Educating Artistic Vision, dealt with attitudes in



depth. "No one else discussed what attitudes were, where they come from, or how they can be affected in an organised, systematic way"(Parks 3).

Parks noted the gap between theory and practice. Although the awareness of the importance of attitudes was expressed in art education texts, there was very little "promoting action"(99). The need for attitude formation and change applications in art education was expressed in his final recommendations. In this respect he identified the application of cognitive dissonance theories begun by Mittleer in 1972. Mittleer's concern in this research was specifically about the negative attitudes students had toward some styles of art, namely abstract art. He hypothesised that, if students are required to defend art works toward which they have a negative attitude in a debate situation, the experience would cause cognitive dissonance. The frustration caused by this counter-attitudinal assignment would cause the student to change their attitude to relieve the inconsistency and be "set to receive new cognition's with which to construct their arguments"(Mittleer - Efforts to Secure 61).

Mittleer went on to produce a high school text, Art in Focus. The first edition was published in 1986. Much of the necessary information for the analytical appreciation of works of art in general is outlined. There is also a bit of information about how to view and visually appreciate Barnett Newman's abstract minimalist sculpture *Broken Obelisk*. It explains: that at the point where the obelisk and pyramid shapes meet, both forms seem to disintegrate, to disappear, leaving you adrift with your own thoughts. Concentrating on that point, you will find your thoughts drifting inward to a meditative state. Thus the work acts as a vehicle by which you

enter into a deeply personal experience in which your thoughts are redirected from the world around you to the world within you. (Mittler 393 Art In Focus 1986)

This contemplation technique is a necessary process when viewing abstract art and if one does not take the time to apply it, the artist's message will probably be missed. From the survey, it appears that very little effort is spent using information like this to teach art students how to take the time to look, see and fathom other works of art in the same way as described above. What good is it for students to learn historical facts about a work of art that they have not learned to see? Classroom teachers continue to focus on having their students work with a variety of materials and using differing techniques to achieve product oriented results based on some researched theme about artistic expression. Students continue to experience the creative process of the making of art, and do not spend enough time developing their abilities to see and absorb the visual symphony of their newly created compositions.

If we compare the experience of visual art to music, imagine learning to play an instrument without hearing it or being able to recognise the message in the sound of the musical composition. To some, viewing abstract paintings is like playing recordings of music by Mozart or Miles Davis, but not listening to them, not sharing the listening, and therefore not experiencing what the music or art is about. The viewing of certain colour harmonies can make us feel cheerful or melancholy, just like hearing certain musical chords can, but we have to take the time to look, just like we take the time to listen.

In 1988, Mittler developed an art education video for classroom use, entitled Interacting with Art. It parallels his text, Art in Focus. A simple analysis technique to

"read" works of art is demonstrated. Three archetypal artists' styles are presented: the imitationalist, the formalist, and the expressionist. By answering a few questions, students can hypothesise about what style of artistic works they prefer. They focus their dialogue development on this preferred style of art first because they are open to it and therefore it is easier for them to relate to. They build their comparative analysis techniques for other works of art from there. The premise is that the students will be able to analyse their responses to works of art and state them in their own comparative terms. "If you are an emotionalist [expressionist] you may throw your hands up at a Newman"(Schutt Interview 55). A student may think at first glance that Newman is an intellectual formalist whose works are to be symbolically interpreted, but perhaps, when they look closer and analyse it comparatively, they will discover that he is an expressionist and the work is to be experienced emotionally also.

## **II - METHOD**

At present Ottawa has four unique secondary school boards: the Ottawa Board of Education, the French Language School Board, The Roman Catholic Separate School Board and the Carleton School Board. The education department of the National Art Gallery services all boards. Guided tours for students are so popular that teachers have to book far in advance and reserve dates to assure that their students will have the opportunity to observe the original works of the masters. This local educational situation provided a respectable number and variety of high school art teachers familiar with the National Art Gallery's abstract art collection, to investigate for a creditable inquiry. Fifty fliers were sent through board mail to all the local art teachers, inviting them to participate in a survey about abstract art that I was conducting.

The main questions in the survey were:

1. Did their students have negative attitudes toward abstract art as defined in the interview format?
2. How were they, the teachers, answering questions and addressing the negative attitudes?

### **The Unanswered Questions**

1. What am I supposed to see?
2. What was the artist's intent?
3. It looks like anybody can do abstract art so why is it so valuable?
4. What do art critics know about abstract art that earns their respect for it?
5. What should be appreciated in abstract art?

My purpose was to answer these questions and discover why negative attitudes toward abstract art persist and what could be done to change this. Therefore, I specifically wanted to study the abstract art lessons that teachers consider most successful in inspiring novice observers to have an interest in abstract art. I was especially interested in lessons that bring about a change in attitude and cause students to have a visual awareness breakthrough. I wanted to find the key points that influence students to have a similar aesthetic appreciation for abstract art as they have for works that exhibit excellence in painterly skill or the craft of realistic rendering. Ultimately, I wanted to discover a comprehensive lesson that would lead students to the aesthetic awareness of abstract art.

The initial forty-two responses to the fifty fliers that were sent were received by phone conversations or inter-school mail notes. The student attitude descriptions and lesson outlines were correlated according to perceived instructional similarities found in the brief descriptions of the abstract art lessons these teachers were presently using. This correlation resulted in eight groups of responses. The lesson groups were identified by a teaching style description. I chose one teacher to represent each style of teaching procedure (selection was also based on the teachers' willingness to participate):

- (1) Abstract art education is about expressionism;
- (2) Abstract art education is about the iconography in a carefully fabricated product;
- (3) Abstract art education is about the spontaneous experimentation and element of risk that is taken in the creation of an internalised work;
- (4) Abstract art education is about the historical context and the formal analysis of a visual composition;

- (5) Abstract art education is about being aware of the historical development of the creative steps in theory and technique and to continue the search for truly creative art forms with new ideas;
- (6) Abstract art education is about the documentation of the creative process;
- (7) Abstract art education is about the experience of seeing and perceiving in a contemplative way;
- (8) Education about abstract art requires that students get clear and relevant information.

The eight co-operating teachers were asked to submit an outline of one of their interesting lessons about abstract art and an example of student work resulting from that lesson. They also agreed to be interviewed about student and personal attitudes toward abstract art in the classroom. The interview would be based on the Teacher Questionnaire (Appendix B). The interviews were tape-recorded. I requested that the teachers allow the transcripts of the recorded interviews to be a shared part of this research. The teachers agreed. The transcribed interviews are in Appendix C.

All data was gathered in the same way for my survey (Appendix A). All teachers were asked to express their inclination toward teaching students about abstract art. The interviews (Appendix C) adhered to my teacher questionnaire to maintain consistency (Appendix B). The example abstract art lessons and the resulting student artwork are also included for further discernment (Appendix D).

### **Eight Different Approaches**

The selection of methodological examples begins with pedagogy from five seasoned model high school art teachers. Each teacher has a different expectation when conveying

his/her body of knowledge about abstract art to students. Comparatively speaking, they were all equally successful delivering their area of interest and expertise in abstract art.

(1) Abstract art education is about expressionism - Frankie Toporowski

She provides an exemplary basic-level high school art curriculum. The learning experience builds on a foundation in art history, explores techniques with different mediums and allows time for critique and art appreciation. Frankie believes there is value in teaching about abstract art because "people respond to it on a gut level rather than academically."

(2) Abstract art education is about the iconography in a carefully fabricated product - Karl Schutt

He represents teachers who focus on the technical process of making art. When introducing his students to abstract art, he says that he "tries to introduce students to the iconography concept, where an object or a colour has more significant meaning than just the image itself."

(3) Abstract art education is about the spontaneous experimentation and element of risk that is taken in the creation of an internalised work - Sylvia Klein

She exemplifies the teacher who considers the experimental creative process with the medium to be the most important aspect in teaching about abstract art. She is also an exhibiting abstract artist specialising in the photographic medium. With nothing but positive attitudes toward abstract art, she feels that, as a teacher, she is "probably conveying a sense of acceptance and a sense of wonder and mystery about abstract art." She reassures her students that, "it is OK to just explore and react to the [plaster] form

they are creating without knowing what the finished product will look like." She also wants her students to be aware of the spiritual aspect of art, to ask what has been externalised, and what has come from within.

(4) Abstract art education is about the historical context and the formal analysis of a visual composition - Roberta Huebener

She uses a more academic approach in art education. Lessons are focused on students acquiring a strong knowledge of the historical and theoretical background of the art they are studying. They concentrate on the significant step each style contributed to the ongoing development of art. There is also an emphasis on students identifying the elements and the principles of design that are being used in an observed composition. Roberta believes that "students who feel confident about their own ability to judge things seldom operate in a put-down mode. Negative attitudes are often a sign of insecurity and defensiveness." Therefore, she has at least one project per term in which students evaluate either partially or entirely the work they have produced, through critique and discussion.

(5) Abstract art education is about being aware of the historical development of the creative steps in theory and technique and to continue the search for truly creative art forms with new ideas - Tim DesClouds (teacher of students gifted in art)

Tim is representative of the teachers at high schools for the arts and is a practising artist who exhibits in contemporary circles. Only students with portfolios displaying their excellent technical skills are accepted. He said that it is important for these students to know that "what puts one (artist) on the pedestal is still the creative part."



In contrast to the seasoned teachers, a young art teacher just out of university was invited to offer her perspective on the latest contemporary method for the teaching of abstract art.

(6) Abstract art education is about the documentation of the creative process - Ellen Norris

Ellen had a new experiential procedure when teaching abstract art history. She requires her students to research abstract art in contemporary magazines. Here they would find in-depth personal histories of the artists' process and product. This information would then be used as a taking-off point for their art creations. Dialogue, writing and sharing the artistic experience are the main focus of her lessons. She has her students keep a "Process Diary" sketchbook.

Finally, coming full circle, two exemplary art educators from the National Art Gallery were invited to contribute. One instructs gallery visitors (a major portion of them being high school students) about the original abstract paintings and sculptures on display. The other is a former elementary teacher who develops educational projects for the NAG.

(7) Abstract art education is about the experience of seeing and perceiving in a contemplative way - Claude Dupuis

I was first introduced to Claude Dupuis' teaching methods when he was our assigned docent during a school field trip at the National Art Gallery. I was greatly impressed with the success of his approach with my students. He taught them how to look. He demonstrated the skill of seeing and the development of personal perception. They understood his elucidation and gained a new appreciation for the visual experiences

offered by these previously mysterious works of art. I was encouraged when he also agreed to contribute his teaching methods to this survey.

(8) Education about abstract art requires that students get clear and relevant information. -

Barbara Dytnerska

Barbara is a former elementary school teacher who now contributes her experience and expertise to the NAG education department. She is also part of a NAG research team investigating ways to help gallery visitors have a more fulfilling art experience. Barbara Dytnerska contributed the 1995 "Summary of the Focus Groups" toward the data of this survey, a summary of which is in Appendix C 79-80. She also donated the collection of comments from the "Share Your Reaction" response cards from the NAG gallery containing works by abstract minimalist and abstract expressionist artists including Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire*. A selection of entertaining and enlightening attitude commentaries is also exhibited in Appendix C 87-93.

### **III A - FINDINGS FROM THE LESSON PLANS - DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Originally it was thought that the procedure to change negative attitudes toward abstract art would be found through a survey of art lessons on this topic. I discovered that most of the lessons were quite different in content and practice from what the art teachers expressed in their interviews. When asked about their personal understanding, philosophy and attitudes toward abstract art, they had clear understandings with rationales and factual information to substantiate their opinions. Yet, the lessons lacked this attitude-changing content and the factual applications that would transfer those concepts to the students. The lessons were more about making abstract art than understanding it. Possibly the teachers' verbal introductions to the lesson contained this information but it was not evidenced in the lesson format or evaluation on completion.

1. Frankie Toporowski provides a general and basic art curriculum for students. She said that the students' attitude toward abstract art was merely that non-representational art is "virtually goofing-off, playing, wasting time". To change this attitude, one has to go to the foundation of the student's personal understanding and build an informed body of knowledge from there. For example, by having students follow the gradual development of a Canadian artist like Paul-Emile Borduas from his earliest works through his whole life's experience, they can see that his art is a reflection of his life. Then they practice a few abstract free-form expressionistic paintings for themselves. By sharing their abstract art with each other and making comments to each other about what is perceived in the

works, they become aware that their own artistic expression is also a reflection of themselves in the same way as work *L'Etoile Noire* (Figure 4.) is a reflection of Borduas.

Toporowski did not explain in the lesson plans what aspects of the work were perceived or how students do the sharing and commenting about what they see in their abstract works. She seemed to assume that they understand what has been achieved in the art works and are able to communicate their opinions. The critique does not appear to be a formalised part of Toporowski's lessons, nor is the critique evaluated.

Her message: the teacher has to go to the foundation of the student's personal understanding and build an informed body of knowledge from there.

2. The development of material and tool-handling skills in the student production of a quality art product is the only focus in the evaluation of the abstract art lesson of Karl Schutt. The abstract art lesson may be about symbolism and iconography themes in the content of the student's composition, but the teacher evaluation emphasises formal design and precise technique. The resulting student works offer rich possibilities for symbolic interpretations and analysis, yet the thorough evaluation ignores these issues. The art lesson seems to be more about conduct than art. This could be due to the type of teenagers he is dealing with and this is what they need to learn first. In Figure 6, the student's choice of still life objects, the arrangement, the choice of pattern and colour are all forms of expression which could be interpreted symbolically. To have students working with abstraction and not have them work with its potential meaning, or to analyse only the visual arrangement of the composition, is an empty or incomplete exercise. Learning about art is done after the classroom art has been created and the time is taken to look at it, enjoy it, and possibly interpret its deeper meaning.

His message: students should primarily be taught skills with tool handling and materials.

3. The concept of abstract art of the 'forties, 'fifties and 'sixties as taught by Sylvia Klein, was about expression and releasing repressed thoughts and feelings. It was also about breaking old concepts and ideas down into their simplest structural forms to effect an understanding of the bigger picture, and possibly restructure a new picture. To grasp the visual message contained in abstract works of art today, one has to allow the sense of sight to absorb, internalise, and thus experience them before any insights are transferred. The importance for them to feel free to explore their creative process is stressed in the lesson. A main concern is for them to be aware of the poetry and the magical quality of the work, but the lesson does not have an outlined experience designed to do this.

Her message: students should feel free to explore their creative process.

4. The academically-focused art teachers such as Roberta Huebener uphold the notion that students need to do comparative research with abstract art, to gain meaningful insights. Understanding and interpreting the content of a work of art begins with the students researching the relative historical contextual information of the period that produced that particular style. They must also be able to support or contrast their views with historical references. She believes the academic approach is a very important exercise in developing students' confidence in their own opinions. However, this academic approach does not seem to be connected to the classroom practice and production of abstract art evaluation. The lesson is a step by step, outlined design project,

with very limited analysis or interpretation connected to the demonstrated learning experience.

Her message: students need to do comparative research of abstract art to gain meaningful insights.

5. Tim DesClouds is at a school for the arts where the approach to the abstract art lesson is quite different from that of the first four regular school teachers. This is not so much in the content as in his presentation concerns, which are "based on the changing needs" of the students and "keeping the dynamics of the student/teacher relationship as the foundation and focus of the class." The art classes in this school have fewer students and are two to three-hours long, unlike the regular forty-minute class with thirty-five students. Here too I find little in the way of documented student communication about the concepts of abstract art, whether it be prepared dialogue or written reports. Even if the class discussions do bring up all the important material that assures a thorough understanding of works of abstract art, it does not necessarily mean it has been learned. Without the testing of their individual assertions on the topic, the teacher does not know that all students have assimilated these concepts.

His message: the dynamics of the student/teacher relationship should be the foundation and focus of the class.

6. The most recently graduated art teacher, Ellen Norris, seems to have the exemplar approach to deliver the body of knowledge about abstract art to a regular visual art class. Her lesson is more about the looking, the analysis and the written dialogue, than the classroom abstract art product. In her lesson about abstract art she has her students base

their experience on the work of renowned abstract sculptors and work with a similar approach and technique. Her approach is very personal and focuses on every student being able to express their opinions which are based on what they have learned about the abstract artist that they have chosen to research.

Her message: it is imperative that the students keep a written record of their artistic dialogue.

7. For the teacher who works in a gallery, with students looking at the original works of abstract art, the lesson becomes a lecture of information, direction and explanation. Claude Dupuis divides his lecture about minimalism into six focal areas: the historical background, the psychological approach, the seeing experience, the artist's political perspective and a description of minimalist work. His comments are open-ended and encourage further speculation from the students.

His message: "you want to be able to get the viewer involved in the process of seeing."

8. When planning an interactive video of an art lesson to inform average gallery visitors about abstract art, it was noted by Barbara Dytnerka that the information needed to be transmitted quickly, it had to suit different levels of knowledge of gallery visitors, and should be delivered in a lively, interesting way.

The message: it is necessary for the viewer of abstract art to have explicit information.

### **III B - FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS - CONSOLIDATED OPINIONS, IDEAS, INSIGHTS**

A. In the beginning of students' art education, teachers such as Karl Schutt observe that most students are not experienced enough to look beyond the craft of image rendering in art. They respond to skill, not content. But, he said, by working with the iconography concept of art they can be sensitised to see the content in abstract art. The well-rendered image can be symbolic of something else, such as the variety of objects carrying symbolically rendered psychological insights in the painting, *Arnolfini Marriage Group* by Jan van Eyck. From there they can learn that in abstract art or any art, simply the use of a particular colour can convey meaning. Today, many of the people viewing art are conditioned to expect immediate results when they look at anything perceptible. "If it does not happen instantaneously, they are going to shun it." Schutt says students need to be sensitised to take the time to look, to see, and to interpret what is in a work of art. Teachers feel that this is hard to do, when students resist new ideas because they appear as a threat to what they already know. Schutt compares it to a religious conversion, from the belief they have about seeing, to the new and different way of seeing the content in an abstract work of art.

His conclusion: to see the content in abstract art students require symbolic sensitising through working with the iconography concept of art.

B. DesClouds and Schutt mentioned the new and different experience of seeing that is offered by the popular Magic Eye (Figure 2.) series of computer-created three-dimensional visual illusion images. There is no depth of meaning in the images, but they



do challenge viewers to use their eyes in a different way. This seeing technique reveals visual images in a way that the viewer has probably never experienced before. Students are willing and enjoy taking time to try this specific "looking technique", which has to do with the way your two eyes are constructed, and your ability to control where your eyes focus. The illusion of depth happens in the mind's eye, when the brain mixes the two images from the right and left eye. One does not see this illusion by just looking at what is on the surface design. Similarly, the visual experience offered by works such as Barnett Newman's *Shimmer Bright* or *Yellow Edge*, take time and again, the seeing is done in the mind's eye, not on the canvas. A negative attitude can prevent one from being able to see the 3-D images the Magic-eye design contains, or the visual experience the Newman paintings offer. If one tries and fails to see what everyone else says they see, sometimes they decide that they do not have the ability to see in this way and stop trying. But, if they do see the Magic-eye image, they are more willing to try their seeing skills with a work of abstract art. The accrual is not the same for the "magic eye" experience as it would be with the artists abstract expression, but it is an eye opener toward deeper perceptions.

    Their conclusion: teachers should use new techniques to teach students about different visual experiences.

C. The lack of exposure to the original works of important abstract art was another factor teachers mentioned in the survey. It was important to be aware of this lack of exposure in order to begin changing attitudes. For example, Karl Schutt said music is a form of abstract art that students have a lot of exposure to. Therefore, they may be more sensitised to accept contemporary abstract creativity in this form. A suggested exercise

would be for students to find out what visual artists are doing that parallels the music they are already familiar with and accept. This research would also lead them to explore the technological advances that are also connected to the creative advances in artistic expression.

His conclusion: students should be made aware of similarities between visual abstract art and abstract art in a different form, more familiar to students, like music.

D. It was noted by S. Klein that students with skill in drawing could be "trapped" because they are less willing to explore outside those known parameters into abstraction. T. DesClouds said students have such a "respect for craft that creativity vanishes." They noticed that there was a correlation between academic ability and drawing ability. Generally, the more academic the students were, the less drawing ability they seemed to have. Generally, the academic students were more willing to think about the meaning of their drawing and internalising it. Teaching the concepts of abstract art to students who were not as academically inclined was more difficult. Some students were more naturally gifted and skilled at expressing in these visual terms than others. Sometimes they do not appreciate their own expertise; they feel that if something comes too easily, it cannot be worth much. This is another common negative attitude toward abstract art.

Their conclusion: it is easier to teach academically inclined students about abstract art.

E. According to Tim DesClouds, technical skill can hinder in another way, too. If, at first glance, a work of art exhibits too much refinement and skill in realistic rendering and appears to descend into the realm of illustration, the contemporary art world has a

tendency to reject it on face-value. This is the reverse of the negative attitude toward abstract art. The academically-trained art critic should be able to discern if the realistic rendering really has something to say or not.

His conclusion: students need to be aware that skill for the sake of skill is not accepted as fine (true) art.

F. Teachers such as Klein, Huebener and Toporowski, who focus on the creative process, experimentation and expressionism in their art courses, introduce students to abstract art by first drawing their attention to how times change. The induction of abstract art occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. At that time, European abstract expressionist artists had a need to lead the way and express what had been restricted culturally and repressed inside the individual. The earliest abstract artists, such as Kandinsky, were trying to render a new reality, the spiritual reality within, apart from the reality of nature.

Their conclusion: students should be aware that the first changes in abstract art were relative to the expressive needs of its contingent time.

G. Teachers at the schools for the arts recognise as DesClouds does, that it is important for students to know that the conceptual change period in history is what is crucial to the development of "modern" abstract art. It is the creative steps of the artists of the time that lead to these changes. Students must understand where abstract art came from and how it developed. Abstract art is about breaking away from the limitations of styles that come before. Abstract art's historical affiliation is usually about innovative change and there are "many vastly differing trends and styles"(Cirlot 3) for students to be aware of. The art

student of today must be aware of the changing influences now as well. In present western culture, everything and anything is openly expressed, nothing is withheld. Through the media, thousands of provocative images are flashed by every minute, expressionism gone wild, but does anyone notice or care what is being expressed?

    Their conclusion: the art student of today must be aware of present changing influences.

H. Most teachers advocate that anything identified as true art has to go beyond the surface. It has to say something. It has to be an expression. Klein says abstract art, as opposed to realistic art, tends to inspire wonder in the viewer. Tim DesClouds uses stylised African folk art to exemplify art that symbolically expresses in abstract form, the mystery of their spiritual world. He also points out how early abstract artists like Picasso, borrowed styles from such art traditions as those of Africa. Picasso abstracted images and ideas from many sources and created his own personal vision of the world. Student concepts of abstract art are further grounded by knowing that an artist like Picasso who drew from African symbolic art, also practised life drawing.

    Their conclusion: to be identified as true art, abstract art has to go beyond the surface, and has to say something.

I. Another aspect of attitude noted by teachers is that different works of abstract art are intrinsically more appealing to some than others. To some, rhythmical multicoloured shapes in works by the Aboriginal artist Alex Janvier are more appealing than bicolour vertical lines in the "zip" paintings by Newman. Rothko's "colour field paintings" are about the feeling that colour can generate, which some prefer to a Newman painting.

Newman's work seems to be more difficult to appreciate, more intellectual. For Tim DesClouds the comparison of formal abstract art to minimalist abstract art is similar to the comparison between listening to a lyrical melody or meditating on just one note and becoming one with it.

Their conclusion: abstract art is easier to accept in some forms than others.

J. A main barrier facing students such as DesClouds' at a school for the arts is not the making or the appreciating of abstract art, but again, how to communicate what is happening during the creative process. When asking questions about their works, there is a problem with language and communication because, "every professional discipline requires a specialised vocabulary for all but the most rudimentary communication" (Aitkins 33). Words such as scale and context must be illustrated in scenarios. When students who appreciate abstract art want to research further, they need to be familiar with the appropriate vocabulary to understand what has been written about these works. Teachers mentioned artistic language in the context of research sources found by students concerning the meaning in abstract art. Those sources were full of ambiguous, hard to decipher artsy jargon. This artistic vocabulary is necessary for them to describe their own experiences when creating a composition. The expressive language the students need to communicate their perceived interpretations takes considerable time to develop. "It is a little too deep for an average high school art class", says Toporowski. But, a few teachers said they did spend some class time with students exploring and expressing perceptions of abstract art using proper artistic terms.

Their conclusion: art jargon can be an obstacle in communicating student's perceived interpretation; art students should learn appropriate vocabulary in order to do further research into abstract art.

K. Students should also be encouraged to express their personal views about abstract works of art in critiques and discussions, making their points using artistic terms.

Teachers say that the majority of art in the world is not optically realistic but is usually a form of abstracted stylisation. Claude Dupuis says, "all art is abstract." Huebener states that students can learn to recognise what is of value in the art of others by evaluating their own works. Through such exercises they develop the ability to make a valid appraisal of any work of art. They soon learn to establish their own criteria for judging the intrinsic value in newly created works of art.

Their conclusion: students need to be given formal discussion exercises in critique.

L. The difference between seeing another's artistic conception and actually being able to bring one's own perception to a work depends greatly on a viewer's attitude. A main barrier to appreciating abstract art noticed by teachers such as Claude Dupuis, who guide student viewers through original works of art at the NAG, is their "looking" technique. It is more about identifying images by object or artist than perceiving or interpreting the expressions they contain.

His conclusion: students have to stop looking at or for, the mastered skill of realistic drawing or imitative painting, to be able to see and perceive what is beyond that.

## **IV - REVIEW OF LITERATURE – TOOLS TO UNDERSTANDING ABSTRACT ART**

### **Art and Psychology**

If students were made aware of the connection between art and psychology, they might be more interested in learning how to properly analyse works of abstract art. A study by Cretien van Campen of three instances, in which he found that pictorial similarities occur between early abstract paintings and illustrations developed by experimental psychologists, illustrates this fact. He compared the artist Klee's lessons at the Bauhaus with Russian constructivist thinking about industrial functionalism, to Wertheimer's gestalt psychological experiments. He then related the experimentation of the Dutch artist group De Stijl with artists such as Piet Mondrian, who dealt with the absolute austere in artistic purity, to Rubin's psychological experiments with figure-ground phenomena. Finally, he likened the visual analysis of the artist Kandinsky, whose concern was with the spiritual in art, to the ideas of the psychologist Theodore Lipps, who said "When I observe a form I am within it". Lipps also wrote a theory of empathy that discussed an art that eliminated the boundaries between the observer and the object observed. Cretien van Campen argues that these pictorial similarities emerged from the fact that experimentation with gestalt phenomena on the one hand and formal analysis of art on the other, have a common historical tradition. "Kunstwissenschaft"(science of art), started in the late nineteenth-century. This correlation continues today. Therefore, when students analyse their own work, it would be of interest to them to research and compare similarities in their works to that of other abstract artists. The students' analysis and

critique comparisons could provide them with insightful and meaningful feedback about themselves.

### **Art and Science**

According to Jesus R. Soto, there is a strong relationship between changes in the contemporary art world and what is happening in the sciences. This does not mean that art is a representation of scientific concepts, it is rather a form of wisdom that is an integral part of civilisation. The importance of truth has replaced that of beauty. The realities of both fields of study are engaged in a common struggle to challenge universal questions. The concepts of space and time have changed in science thanks to Einstein's theory of relativity, and also in art. They have changed from images frozen in the illusion of space according to the laws of perspective, to works of the twentieth century in which there are no longer any viewers, only participants in works of art that have become action. Dadaism, cubism, surrealism, abstract art, and futurism developed within the first twenty years of this century. The visual artists kept advancing, dissecting and redefining art until all that was left was the idea. Conceptual art of the sixties had no object. The viewer might find the words of the artist's idea on the art gallery wall, or see Performance Art, or the photographs of Earth Art, or experience Installation Art, but that was all. There was nothing to buy or collect. The opinion still lingers about modern abstract art that "its pseudo-serious intellectual musings are far inferior to the musings of real intellectuals in [science], philosophy, journalism, literature, or social criticism. What it lacks in substance, it makes up in words, bizarre antics, shock methods, and increasing strangeness in its subject and expression" (Huer 164).



Such a musing might be the inspiration for the *Fractal Cube*. It was shown at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, in 1993. It gives concrete form to the new paradigm of a cube as described by Benoit Mandelbrot in fractal geometry, "according to which every fragment of an object has the same structure as the whole"(Salat and Labbé 243). This theory changes the archetype of Brunelleschi's cube and central perspective with its vanishing point, to contemporary chaos theory and fractal geometry. Salat and Labbé created a cube into which the viewer enters and experiences themselves within the infinity of space and structure. This work of art clearly illustrates its subject and offers the ultimate in aesthetic experience.

### **About Understanding the Structure**

Even some professional artists do not understand something very basic about how their own pictures work. Molly Bang, a successful illustrator of children's books for more than fifteen years, did not understand her picture structure. In her search for how and why certain structures worked in her compositions and others did not, she discovered how basic the relationship between picture structure and our emotions is. In her book Picture This, about perception and composition, she provides principles that can be used by anyone to make strong meaningful pictures. She now describes picture structure in terms of feelings. These principles cannot be truly understood until they are experimented with and used. They are simply about the orchestration of abstract shapes within a composition. Her design principles answer such questions as: why a diagonal is dynamic, why a horizontal is reassuring and why red feels hot and blue cold. These simple facts are necessary for art students to learn, if they are going to be able to know why a composition works or does not work for them.

## About Seeing

Students need to understand the experience of seeing colours. According to Helena Curtis's 1979 text, Biology, seeing is about allowing the variety of coloured light waves to excite the optic system into response. Three primary colours; red, yellow and blue, are all that create the symphony of hues in our universe. Because red is a long, low vibration light wave, yellow is a medium vibration light wave, and blue is a short, high vibration light wave, they effect our nervous system in a similar way as do sound waves. If red were a sound wave, it would be a bass vibration and blue would be a treble vibration. The more intense the red or blue hue appears, the higher the volume has been turned up, so to speak. The nerves carry the received coloured light vibration information to the brain and that is how we notice or "feel" the colour we are seeing. When the coloured light wave stops, the eyes' nerves have a reaction period until they settle down to the neutral position again. This return action period causes the mind's eye to see the complementary colour (opposite on the colour wheel) in the place of the original colour. Therefore, if the original colour were red, the visual reaction colour seen in the mind's eye would be green.

A simple seeing exercise would be to have students experience these colour afterimages. A piece of paper with one intense hue is held in front of a pure white background to be stared at for thirty seconds. A bright light will begin to appear at the edges of the coloured shape. While keeping the eyes focused on the spot where the coloured paper is, the colour paper is then taken away. The eyes remain staring at that spot and within seconds a very pale complementary hue will be seen in the same shape

and area where the original hue was. This should be repeated with two different colours held up together so the viewer will have a clearer understanding of the experience.

This might seem very trivial, but it is an impressive first step for most novice art observers to experience. This basic seeing exercise is as necessary to the viewing of abstract art as sliding is to the experience of skiing. It is also a key to break through negative attitude barriers. Here, students will discover that there are viewing possibilities that they have not yet realised or appreciated. We work from this simple visual appreciation toward the experience and aesthetic value found in absolutely abstract art.

### **About Perception**

Ronald N. MacGregor spent considerable time from the 1970's to 1995 looking into visual perception. He regrets that there is still not much known about perceptual processes in aesthetics, only that perception is a complex adaptive system, and that to perceive is to become aware through the senses. He was concerned with how we acquire expertise in the various operations of the perceptive process. As an example of one perceptual operation, he used the artist's selection of visual material and its subsequent presentation as visual imagery. But the fundamental human activity of perception and how we come to acquire expertise in its various operations is still open for further study.

### **About the Aesthetic Experience**

Contemporary concepts of art education began when the traditions and standards of the shop system disappeared in favour of instruction in the academies of art in Renaissance Italy. The academies of art established artistic rules based on the ideals of the High Renaissance. Elizabeth Kenneday-Corathers examined the nature of "high art"

and the position of the artist in the late twentieth century. She found that the historic academy of art elevated the social standing of the artist, encouraged the "artist-as-genius" model and separated "high" or "fine" art produced in the academic settings from the manual arts practised in artisan workshops. Contemporary artists' aspiration for fame and uniqueness and for academic affiliation and validation, as well as their scorn for art forms produced in commercial and industrial settings, have their origins in the founding of the academies of art. Higher education, an institution that seeks to provide answers, has assisted in creating a scholarly form of art. In this environment, the intellectual proposition has become predominate to the art product. Innovative movements in art are absorbed into the academic curriculum and standardised by academic practice. She felt that the art movement produced in the university, "art as thesis", developed within the academic setting producing an art largely devoid of aesthetic content. Her conclusion is that a restructuring of art programs is needed to allow the development of aesthetic vitality in art education. I believe it is this aesthetic experience that moves the viewer and can change negative attitudes.

The J.P. Getty Museum sponsored a book about the nature of the aesthetic experience. After examining skill-based activities from chess to rock climbing, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson identified a common core of sensations within an aesthetic experience. The sensations were: "activity-focused attention, no awareness of past or future, loss of ego, control of skills, clear goals and feedback, and autotelic or self-rewarding motivation" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 120). These matched another study by Beardsley in 1982, which identified the same characteristics of the aesthetic experience. They concluded that theirs and Beardsley's are the same kind of "flow

experience." They also identified four content areas of the aesthetic experience with works of art: the perceptual, which focuses on the elements of art and design; the emotional, response to the content of the work; and the intellectual, which relies on theoretical and art-historical content. They also contend that "only when challenges and skills are nearly in balance does attention become focused. Consequently, a complex work of art will engage only a person who has developed complex visual skills" (179). The structure of aesthetic experience remains constant; its content is variable, therefore there is no one way to accommodate such experiences.

### **About Art Criticism**

Michael Bulka, in 1996 was "surprised and disturbed at the number of artists who do not know how to read a review," evinced this need for reform in art education also (22). Many artists see anything that is not approval or explanation as condemnation rather than an element in a dialogue, an attempt at conversation, or just what transpires during a good critique session. He blames the misreading of reviews on the "schools that do not teach students to think critically, to deal with a differing viewpoint"(22). Szekely observed in 1990 that art criticism depends on the ability to see and describe visual worlds in special ways. In the school programs he examined, it was noted that the final judgements over art works were too often left to the teacher. Completed works were given to the teacher for awaited grades from the more knowledgeable adult. Final critiques were rarely conducted, and when they were, they were usually led by the teacher and carried forward according to the lesson's original objectives.

## **Understanding the Art Language**

In Ivan Olson's 1997 investigation of educational reform, he noted that the arts seem to be receiving greater public attention, and in education, have become increasingly visible as models and sources of research and experimentation. Cultural literacy and critical thinking come together in the concept of awareness as it applies to aesthetic experiences. He wondered if this kind of awareness could be taught. Could a normative language of the arts be established and maintained in the schools? An example language is that of aesthetics as suggested in 1988 by Elliot Eisner, which distinguishes three types of critical statements: "descriptive, interpretative, evaluative", as a structural outline for discussion development (Olson 115).

Ivan Olson thought Berleant's concept of "engagement" to be appropriate for the high school levels of critical thinking, because it builds on "modes of experience: cognitive, instrumental, moral, religious, and aesthetic. This presents us with a logical approach to all art objects with the human mind supplying the order"(Olson 115).

## **V - GUIDLINES ABOUT TEACHING ABSTRACT ART**

In the recent past, visual art education curriculum has consisted of teachers delivering historical background information, compositional theories and technical guidelines for producing works of art. Students are then invited to practice, produce and hopefully experience the creative process. But, they are not learning to appreciate the insightful content of their work of art when it is finished. Today, teachers of art are not required to know how to draw realistically. They should, however, be able to teach students to identify the elements and principles of design in any composition. They must train students to use that information to analyse further how the composition was put together by using the principles of design as focal points. Then the students can make their own informed interpretations and evaluations of the visual expression. And finally, they must be given the opportunity to express their findings either verbally or in written dialogue, using the appropriate artistic terms. It is one thing to express oneself in an art form, but it is quite another to interpret what one's visual expression is saying. Artwork says something about the subject the artist has chosen, but it is also a personal expression of and about the artist. A student needs training and experience in critical thinking to grasp the in-depth expression of someone else's artistic intent. To motivate the creation of visual expression by students is not enough. Art teachers must also teach students how to recognise, interpret and understand their own "natural expressive marking system"(DesClouds 109).

As discussed in the remainder of this section, an art lesson that will change negative attitudes toward abstract art must have the following ingredients:

1. students should be provided with the sources for accurate background information;

2. critique should be a formalised part of art lessons;
3. teachers must work on their own attitudes toward abstract art;
4. whenever possible, original works of art should be used;
5. exercises in seeing, perception and aesthetic experience should be developed;
6. artistic vocabulary should be developed to express students' visual experiences;
7. techniques for analysing works of abstract art should be developed.

### **1. Acquiring Background Information**

"The majority of art teachers do not normally read research journals or regularly peruse the computer banks or microfiche files. They rely heavily on the knowledge they received in their college methods courses and the art education textbooks, which they have used"(Parks 8). The teachers need to be able to respond immediately to negative attitudes from their students. It is imperative for art teachers to be up-to-date and have a growing source of accurate information about current issues in the art world. This attitude should be ingrained in the teacher during their teacher training. Young minds strive to keep up with new ideas and experiences. This does not mean that discipline, skill and research are sacrificed as in the past with the experimental free-for-all in the name of creativity.

There are a variety of visual art texts available that offer lessons and vast amounts of pertinent information about the study of art. I noticed that teachers referred to them but on the whole the students do not use them. Much of the abstract art information in question here is now contained in the new art texts. Students could find answers to the persistently unanswered questions about abstract art and possibly change their negative attitudes toward its inherent value, if they used a reputable art text. Yet they are not



being used. Only the art history texts were being distributed to students on a regular basis. Most teachers preferred to develop their own art lessons to cover their school board's curriculum guidelines. The student critique or artistic question period was usually a minor, unevaluated, component. The teacher alone performed the final evaluations of the art produced, never the students.

The lack of knowledge and meaningful rationales about abstract art prevents most people from enjoying the aesthetic experience in great works of abstract art. Students need to find their own answers and do their own research. Proper information sources should be available in the school for their art students. The school library must be advised about exceptional books about abstract art and have them in their collection. This is a responsibility of the art teacher to make sure they are there. Teachers must be diligent. Such a book might be, On Abstract Art by Briony Fer (1997). It is reputed to be "less a rewriting of the history of Modernism and its aftermath than a kind of treatise on what pleasure in the abstract is, pursued through cases and examples" (Armstrong 9).

## **2. Learning About the Power of Critique**

What good is the classroom pursuit of creative artistic expression if it is never understood or respected by the students? Their artwork has to be shared and critiqued to have a meaning to them.

The practice of art criticism is predicated on the human determination to discover meaning in things. The teaching enterprise assumes that pupils can do something to find, and in some sense to create, those meanings. And then, as most teachers know, they tell their peers what they have found (Feldman, 86).

A critique is very difficult to conduct in a classroom with thirty-five teenagers. There are special skills that teachers need to develop to make critique a meaningful experience that includes the whole class. This teaching skill is one of the most important factors in changing negative attitudes toward abstract art. Teachers themselves need training and practice in leading critiques.

The critique should become a formal part of the abstract art lesson. The analysis and appreciation of the abstract works, done by the students, is not being conducted as a formal part of their art education. Inquiring dialogue about their works, conducted within the classroom situation, is the only way students will achieve a meaningful comprehension of abstract art. This knowledge-expanding experience is based on students doing the following: examining the personal works of other students, comparing them to what they know about the master abstract artists, and making insightful comments. By doing these activities, they will eventually overcome many inhibiting negative attitudes toward abstract art. Students should be encouraged to comment on what they see in their abstract work. Critiques should be part of all art lessons.

### **3. Changing Teachers' Attitudes**

Teachers must overcome their own attitudinal barriers before they can teach students how to look at abstract art. They themselves must learn how to look at a work of art, abstract or other, see it totally and know the visual experience of that work before they can teach students to do the same. To experience an artist's work, they too must learn to sit or stand quietly for a period of time in front of the piece, looking at it and trust that they can and will experience something visually amazing. By simply allowing their eyes

to absorb the composition offered in the abstract work of art, they can visually experience a whole new universe.

#### **4. Using Original Works of Art**

It is not surprising that in my survey, Claude Dupuis was the art teacher whom I felt most capable of bringing students through their negative attitude barriers toward abstract art and into the realm of the aesthetic visual experience. He educates with the original works of abstract art and not reproductions or textbook images as most classroom teachers must. Knowing that art students really want to learn and satisfy their curiosity about abstract art, this teacher is diligent in pursuing and providing the necessary lessons and access for them to acquire the cognitive information to do so. When teachers develop skills in aesthetic perception relative to their subject, they will be able to pass this awareness to an inquiring student. This is what it means to be a great teacher.

The visual experience is much more effective when one has contact with the actual works of abstract art, rather than reproductions. The gallery teachers experience the work for themselves before they attempt to present it in a lesson. These teachers have done their homework and are prepared to deliver accurate information and guidance that is intelligent, precise and understandable. The classroom art teachers do not have the same opportunity to indulge in the luxury of such an rich artistic learning environment, but they do have the opportunity to take their classes to these institutions that provide them with the original works and the services of these reputable teachers.

#### **5. Learning How to See**

Standing ten feet in front of a huge Newman or Rothko painting as Dupuis

begins the lesson is quite overwhelming. He asks viewers to look at an eight-by-seventeen-foot area all at once. This seems impossible because most people have only experienced using their eyes for reading and hyper-focusing on details whether near or far. According to C. Dupuis, the novice viewer usually begins by looking around the canvas and concentrating on small areas. He asks viewers to stand ten to twenty feet away from the canvas to expand their way of viewing. This begins with a wide-eyed non-focused stare toward a central area of a composition. The gradual relaxation he fosters allows viewers to concentrate in their looking or to meditate. Then there is a realisation that a glimmer of peripheral vision is coming into view. With a little more time and patience it is possible to see everywhere at once. That is when the visual events start to happen. Colour grounds begin to shift. Space perceptions change. Complementary colours cancel each other out. They disappear and reappear as totally different colours or as pure white light. Bright light areas come to life and start floating around. Lines come off the canvas and run right past the viewer. By now the viewers have lost the sense of self and are totally immersed in seeing. The experience is pure visual pleasure as listening to music is auditory pleasure. To interpret a meaning or to justify what the artist has done is not necessary at this time. "What matters is that art is genuinely felt, and that the artist is communicating felt experience" (Berry 267).

I have learned that abstract art is about the experience of seeing. Appreciating abstract art is about feeling what one is seeing. From the feeling, we are free to interpret all kinds of meaning. As passionately and powerfully as the abstract expressions were created, they have to be received with an equally open, receptive abandon.

Just as teachers allow students class time to develop the skill of producing visual expressions, so must they encourage students to spend time looking. They should guide that looking so that the students can develop their own inspection skills. Trained abstract art observers can read an artist's spontaneous brush strokes of colour or the jagged carved line as if they were the details of a plot in a novel. They can compare and identify common features that exhibit specific expressions of emotion as found in documented psychology research. To the student with this information, an abstract painting would then become as realistic a rendering of a *feeling or inner-spirit* as the painting of a vase is of an object. Once students have learned to recognise these features, they may further interpret the messages being communicated and thus make sense of and understand abstract art on their own.

How we are trained to see by our culture is another barrier, noticed by teachers, to seeing abstract art. Social biases cloud vision to the point that students cannot see anything except what they are looking for or what they already know. In Western culture, visual things are purposefully made to be very easily understood or sensational. We see by looking, defining, and then categorising. Once we do that, the "seeing" is finished.

Art teachers have to be perceptive viewers themselves first, before they can guide their students through the looking process into the true "seeing" experience. How do teachers guide their student viewers to perceive what they are looking at? Firstly, the teachers never tell students what they should be seeing. They begin changing concepts by asking leading questions to let the students discover the experience on their own:

"What is the difference between looking at a snapshot of reality and at a painting? [possible answer] Is it that everything in the snapshot is caught

but in the painting everything is chosen? What is more real, the abstract painting itself, or a realistic painting of a tree? What do you see along the edge of this line after you stare at it for a while?"(Dupuis App. C)

Gradually, teachers bring the student viewers of abstract art to see the visual experience offered by the work of abstract art in their "mind's eye," similar to the visual experience with the magic-eye 3-D compositions.

Teachers change negative attitudes when they enable students to alter their conceptual way of seeing, to a perceptual way of seeing. The students will now have confidence to encounter other works of abstract art for themselves. They will make their own visual discoveries of the aesthetic abstract adventure offered.

### **Acquiring Necessary Vocabulary**

It would not necessarily follow that the students would be interested in articulating the insights they have deciphered from the work unless they were trained and experienced with using the vocabulary to do so. Proper artistic dialogue is the counterpart of visual analysis in a meaningful critique process. Classroom conversation about art needs immediate art educational attention so that students can enjoy practising their critiquing skills and thus overcome negative attitudes about abstract art. This is not to say that they will necessarily like abstract art, but they will find it an interesting area of investigation and sharing of ideas. For students to communicate what they can see/read in a work of art, I have found that they must become familiar with using the established central language of critical vision.

### **Developing Analysis Technique**

The analysis technique is built on the student knowing (memorising) seven basic elements of design (line, shape, form, colour, value, texture, space) and eight basic principles of design (emphasis/focus, variety, proportion, gradation or contrast, movement, rhythm, balance or asymmetry, and harmony or unity). Students then practice identifying these features in a composition. Once they have characterised the elements and analysed how the principles have been manipulated in a particular composition they can then go on to describe them in terms of type or style, and start to build their own categories. They can build a descriptive vocabulary around these basic terms to use when analysing other compositions. Students may in fact be amazed at their natural intuitive abilities when analysing art works. Claude Dupuis observed this phenomena when he asked students who were viewing a Riopelle painting and a Borduas painting side by side, which of the two painters was older when his painting was created. Eight out of ten times, the students guessed correctly.

To begin a meaningful critique, the student must try to perceive the composition before an aesthetic experience can happen. If it does not happen, they should analyse the composition and try to understand why it does not work for them. Teaching students to perceive just one of the elements of design, such as colour, will begin to break down negative attitude barriers as visual sensations are experienced and realised.

## **VI - SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary**

Due to the misconceptions about abstract art since its inception in the early twentieth century, negative attitudes toward it continue to persist. As a result of its non-objective appearance, its lack of exhibited rendering skills, and its indecipherable content, inexperienced viewers favour negative, rather than positive, opinions about its value. In addition, most advocates of abstract art do not seem to have concise, consistent or understandable rationales to convince a neophyte. Hence the purpose of this survey of art education was to collect explicit information from those teachers who teach resistant students about abstract art on a regular basis. This was done by asking teachers to first express their views on the topic, then contribute one of their lessons that they felt was successful in imparting the essential information for a student to acquire the necessary knowledge for a basic understanding and appreciation of abstract art. From the many teaching approaches to the various types and styles of abstract art, major focuses of abstract art were identified and described. Some basic principles were found such as: abstract art is subject-oriented not object-oriented; it is a contemplative visual experience, not a narrative scene to be read; the art has to be experienced, not just looked at. Each teacher offered pertinent information, but in the end there were still many questions unanswered. Therefore, the lacking answers and explanations were obtained through the review of literature. When all essential information was gathered, plans of action for teachers to convey that knowledge to their students were discussed.



## **Conclusions**

It is evident that art education has failed to deliver the necessary information for the comprehension of abstract art that would lead to a positive attitude toward the appreciation of works like *Voice of Fire*. Because art appreciation is one of the primary goals of the art curriculum, art educators want to nurture positive attitudes toward abstract art. Yet the data from this survey suggests that the majority of classroom art teachers do not conduct evaluated, viewing, analysis and interpretation projects to affirm the learning that is required. The purpose of this research is to provide art teachers with a source of meaningful information concerning, and tools for, teaching about abstract art. Teachers can adapt tools for themselves to deliver these insights and direct their students to a new vision and thus a better understanding of abstract art.

Even though student work from these lessons exhibits interesting successful products, there was no actual documentation of the descriptive, interpretative or evaluative appreciation of them. The abstract art lesson by Ellen Norris requiring student dialogue to be documented in their "process diary" is a positive sign that things are changing in art education. Many pieces of this aesthetic puzzle are here. This work is an invitation to join the investigation of abstract art.

## **Recommendations**

To establish an environment that would maximise the potential for abstract art appreciation, classroom critique must be given equal importance to classroom art production. Art teachers must be trained and capable in leading critiques with a method similar to the example lesson by Ellen Norris. The critique must be an evaluated part of the students art mark.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### INTERVIEW FORMAT

Art teachers were invited to contribute to this investigation by:

- a) answering an introductory questionnaire;
- b) participating in a taped exploratory discussion about their personal teaching methods and experiences when teaching abstract art;
- c) contributing a lesson plan relating to the research topic, "lessons that change negative attitudes toward abstract art";
- d) submit examples from their lesson of the resulting student artwork;
- e) submitting a statement addressing attitudinal changes toward abstract art after the lesson.

NOTE: For the purpose of this survey the expression "abstract [work of] art" will only mean two-and three-dimensional art work which is non-representational, non-figurative and non-objective.

### APPENDIX B

#### TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you familiarise students with the body of knowledge connected to modern abstract art?

	Yes	No
a) The major stylistic movements and prominent artists	___	___
b) The historical context of the movements	___	___
c) The theoretical concepts and context	___	___
d) The elements and principles of design	___	___
e) Other _____		
2. State what you believe about the value of teaching abstract art.  
Is your belief part of your lesson? \_\_\_    \_\_\_
3. In general, how do your students respond to abstract art?
4. In your classes, how do you address negative attitudes toward abstract art?
5. Do you have a particularly successful lesson or course of study that helps students to deal with their negative attitudes toward abstract art?
6. Would you be willing to contribute to this survey:

	Yes	No
a) A personal interview on the topic of art lessons that change negative attitudes toward abstract art and which will be recorded on cassette;	___	___
b) A lesson outline;	___	___
c) Accompanying examples of student art work relative to this lesson outline;	___	___
7. Identify the level of instruction that your lesson addresses.

## APPENDIX C

### TRANSCRIPTS OF TAPED INTERVIEWS

#### INTERVIEW ONE with high school art teacher Ms. Frankie Toporowski (Quoted directly from written notes)

- VA Do you familiarise your students with the body of knowledge connected to modern abstract expressionistic art?
- FT Yes! History, styles, movements and the elements and principles of design, certainly, but not theoretical concepts. You must realise that I deal mainly with general level people, real, concrete, down-to-earth people. "Abstract," as such, is a little off the mark.
- VA State what you, the teacher, really believe about the value of teaching abstract art, and is your belief part of the lesson?
- FT I teach it because people respond to it on a gut level rather than academically. Sometimes it is a success, sometimes a bomb.
- VA How do your students respond to abstract art?
- FT It takes very careful exposure and explanations of its beginnings. When students understand they can't get enough.
- VA How do you, as a teacher, address negative attitudes toward abstract art?
- FT The same as one approaches all negative attitudes. Go to base level and work upwards. When understanding happens, positive attitudes follow.
- VA Do you have a particularly successful lesson or course of study that helps students deal with their negative attitudes toward abstract art?
- FT Canadian? A beautiful lesson which goes back to Borduas and the Church. A historical connection is made and then the work speaks for itself. As I mentioned earlier, in this setting it is necessary to begin at base level. What I do is far from an academic approach: I am not sure that the model from my school would be considered "sexy" enough for more elite [academic] school's consumption.
- VA Identify the level of instruction that your lesson addresses.
- FT Grades nine to Ontario Academic Credit [OAC]. [General]
- VA State briefly in your own words what the negative attitudes are toward abstract art that you have come up against when presenting educational information about abstract art to your students.
- FT The attitude is merely that non-representational work is virtually goofing-off, playing, wasting time. By the time that the principles of design have been inculcated, many works of masters viewed and discussed, various media experimented with and students are trained to work for a sustained length of time, abstraction etc., slips in with no problem.
- VA How is the lesson introduced?
- FT As I said, it is not parachuted in. There is a lot of preamble, discussion, comparisons, looking, trying and linking world history to art history, figuring out what came before, why artists do what they do, etc. The Abstraction show at the National Gallery last year [1994] certainly wakened a few sleeping giants.

- VA Outline the student assignment relative to your abstract lesson topic; Borduas.
- FT Students study examples, at least three works of Borduas from three different periods in his life. They do critiques, study his personal history and put themselves in his place. Then they observe my teacher demonstrations and try a few painting experiences themselves. If they are comfortable, we move to stretched canvas, and obliterate it if necessary and try again. Finally, they write a critique of one of their finished works with a justification statement.
- VA Have you observed attitude changes in the students as a result of the lesson?
- FT I cannot say that attitude change is the goal of any of these lessons. We do them to broaden horizons and present alternatives. I really do not care if the student still abhors abstract expressionistic art. He/she did experience it [the process] and is free to make decisions.
- It is somewhat like religious studies. Maybe the student will understand and enjoy aspects of abstract art but still not respect the work of some artists or recognise a scam when it might be. We recently found a photo of a work by Dali, just a little one, in which a child is kneeling before a naked man obviously doing pleasure for the man. The painting or drawing is called *The Pleasures of Childhood* - Scratch Dali! How many years have I plugged the work of that skilled pervert!

**INTERVIEW TWO with high school art teacher Karl Schutt**  
**(Transcript of taped interview)**

- VA Which of the following descriptions comes closest to your definition of non-representational art?
- KS Why did you decide to make four categories here?
- VA Because, for research purposes, in the data we need to have the teachers focus and identify their focus clearly and in common, then, from there, discuss the differences relative to their own impressions. Which area presents the most difficulty when teaching your students?
- KS I think probably (b) - the theoretical concepts - I guess? [KS asks about historical context and says he concentrates on that in grade twelve and OAC with the focus still on skills]
- VA But the point is ... do they "get it". When you say you are focusing on skills, are skills an integral part of the abstract expressionists? What is the skill? Or, is there a skill involved? Is there a difference between an artist and an artisan? [Discussion of Barnett Newman's painting *Shimmer Bright*, and how it works technically - about being teachers and "culturising" students.] Do you have a specific lesson?
- KS Do you mean that tries to bridge that gap between the more realistic and the conceptual?



- VA Right! Where the kids would "get it"! That they could look at it and have an appreciation and a wonder of ... It is a whole different way of looking at art and it is a whole different skill. What was Barnett Newman's skill?
- [Discussions and explanations of how we differentiate between different kinds of art: a) representative, b) symbolic, c) expressionistic (which is to be interpreted like a Rorschach), and d) experiential - colour-field painting. I use an example learning experience from a senior citizens' art class. They freely manipulate or play with the paint colours on a paper surface for a given period. Then the resulting products are hung up. Together they decide which is the best and analyse why. This is a simple experience for them to learn to appreciate abstract non-objective art.]
- KS The closest I come to that is to try to introduce students to an iconography concept where an object or a colour has more significance than just the image itself. It begins to get them to attempt to understand the symbolism and look beyond the surface image. It sensitises them to expect to find more in an object rather than just looking at face value.
- VA Like if a painting is done with an extra amount of red, well, that was for a reason and what does the red mean?
- KS Right! Or if the sky was red rather than blue, what significance has that change made to the whole concept of the painting?
- VA When you say iconography, do you think that this comes from your own historical background?
- KS I think so. That is from my teaching experience. I think what you need to do is to sensitise them to the idea and to find symbols that they already have that have a double meaning. Through that, build up a vocabulary that is going to allow them to look at things with the possibility of having more meaning to it than just the one simple image.
- I think on the other hand too, this business about not having the same frame of mind as five years ago is important. It means that you have to prepare the ground so that you are willing to accept this new kind of vision of things. I think from the point of view of what you expect the student to experience, after this, I think that there are going to be different levels of awareness.
- VA What kind of reaction have you had from your students about Barnett Newman's painting *Voice of Fire* or, let's say the new [acquisition] Rothko [painting]? How do they respond to them?
- KS Generally they are quite willing to take the general public attitude of resistance.
- VA Because there is no information at the gallery on how to look at them?
- KS Well, yes, and because they have not been sensitised to it. I think if you were to apply this to music, the student walking around with their walkman on all the time is more willing to accept bizarre unorthodox music sounds than he would be unusual visuals, because he does not have that kind of preparation to accept them ... right?
- VA An interesting point! And another thing they have got here too is that they are looking for something unique, new and different. So the artists ... back to Barnett Newman ... the reason I do what I do, artistically speaking, is because I

love horses and bodies, so therefore I create with them. Barnett Newman loved ART and thought the greatest thing in the world for a person to be was an artist. He loved paintings and how they worked visually. I love how the body works and how every creature on the planet works ... and feels [to the touch]. Barnett Newman was not interested in forms so he never drew them. He was into ideas. That was an excellent example about the student and the exposure to the art of music, because they listen to so much, especially front line contemporary stuff, so they will be looking for somebody who is breaking the traditional concepts.

KS And they will be sensitive to it because they have more awareness of the differences and subtleties. But I think with the visual arts, exposure to things like abstractism -

VA [I interrupt] - That might be a good example lesson for you. The music interpretation lesson, do you do one like that?

KS I have done some, but I think with my grade nines, since we are going to be teaching the mob, I am going to try to do more of that.

VA I have done it. I took music like Tom Waits' contrasted by a lyrical singer like Loreena McKennett, some East Indian music with lots of rhythm in it, Arabic, Oriental and so on. The students would create freely [on a two dimensional surface and a medium of choice] with the basic elements and compare their works to see if there was a common visual language to express the same sounds. Then the students would choose music of their own. No one was to say what their music was. They could use any or all the elements of design and with those, create visual music. When we put up the finished art works, others were to describe what they saw - musically speaking - and how did this art make them feel. Was there a similar rhythm, mood to the music it was based on?

KS I think that is an area where students are more highly exposed and it permits more opportunity to communicate and the music is already an abstract form.

VA You always have music. I remember from your classroom that you always had music playing. I don't. I don't let them wear a Walkman. Generally, I do not have music at all. I like it quiet ... and I am trying to learn to be a more expressionist/interpretative teacher while I think you are more skills oriented ... interesting.

KS I am to some degree. I like to get the student to experience the fact that they can produce something they can appreciate.

VA So, connecting that appreciation - What they can appreciate, can that relate back to the appreciation of something like *Voice of Fire* or not?

KS I think it might if you prepared it carefully enough. But to tell them to paint stripes and then compare the two, it is too superficial. He's not really painting stripes but that's what people think he's doing. That's the danger of the abstractness, that what you see is not what is being done.

VA What do you think he was doing? I do not know what Rothko was doing but I think it was along the same lines as Newman's work.

KS I think that Newman and the other artists were painting alike in that period of time. You have all those people in Quebec, like Emile Borduas or Jacques Hurlubise who also painted stripes, then went to fluorescent and neon canvasses,

- and all of those people who were experimenting and relating the visual effects of the interplay of colour. Joseph Albers is the guy who painted hard-edge colour boxes and all of those people. And it really goes right back to the impressionists, who were doing the same thing. What these people have done is taken a magnification of an impressionist painting and blown it up into a magnificent size because it's basically that whole tradition followed through - of losing the image.
- VA And just having the visual effect ... can the visual effect have as much impact as a literal visual image?
- KS I think that is where you come back to how sensitised a person is to a reality that doesn't have visual images in it. If a person is open-minded to a non-visual image communication, they are going to be more willing to accept these non-literal images. But if you are brought up to expect literal images to explain things to you then you are going to be confused by the lack of the image. And you may even reject it because it is going to be foreign to your philosophy of communication.
- VA [I recount an experience with an East Indian Muslim student who tried and tried for the longest time struggling to see the depth illusion in the Magic Eye holographic type images. Was he having so much difficulty because his cultural art tradition does not work with three dimensional illusion, perspective and form? He did finally see it after persisting for over a month and working with it at home. Just like me with abstract art, he was determined to "get it," to see the full intention of the images.]
- KS But you see the time it took him to "get it" the average person doesn't want to devote the time to accomplish the experience. If it doesn't happen instantaneously, they are going to shun it.
- VA That, is a sign of our culture?
- KS Yes, we are used to and want instant gratification.
- VA What do you familiarise your students with?
- KS [He answers the question by bringing in "integration" with other arts.]
- VA The value of teaching abstract art?
- KS To some degree I do give them the skills first.
- VA Because, with a lot of teachers all they do is abstract art or design composition ... is that a big cop-out?
- KS If it is only surface. To decorate the paper and not put any meaning into it beyond its surface image, I think, is not taking advantage of what happens.
- VA So is the value in teaching abstract art relative only to the meaning and not to the decorative qualities?
- KS I think they should respond emotionally either way.
- VA So it is not an intellectual [analyses] response?
- KS That is subject to public opinion, too.
- VA But it is negative? They do not respond emotionally, saying, "Oh, I love it,"- Or do they?
- KS If they respond positively, it is a response from students who are quite independent from the student body in the class. Those who are not subjected to class pressure.

- VA Some of them respond that way, the same way they put rings in their noses.
- KS Exactly! To be different. To be individual. They don't "get it," but they respond as if they do so that they can separate themselves from the basic class opinion, or they have enough self-fortitude to stand up and take recrimination from the class no matter what they say. It is very hard to gauge an honest response.
- VA On the whole, would their opinions differ from abstract art as opposed to realistic representational art?
- KS It is hard to tell that response too. Because anything that looks realistic may have more meaning to it than on a surface level. So maybe they are still responding only to the technical qualities of the surface rendering. Right?
- VA So the response to abstract art is relative to the technical skill of the artist and not necessarily to the "art" of the art?
- KS The student's response to the art in the first place is a result of technical competence in rendering. They respond to a skill in rendering, not to content or meaning of the object. So that the response you are getting is not a response of what you are expecting to be responded to. They are not responding to the meaning of the object, they are responding to the surface rendering. And, if the rendering is so simplistic as a stripe, they think it is meaningless, because there is no skill involved in the rendering. If the same stripe were painted from black to white through all sorts of shades of grey, or from one colour to another, carefully blended, they might respond totally different to it than if it were painted in one colour. But all you are doing is measuring the response they have to the technical skill.
- VA How do you as an art teacher address these negative attitudes to abstract art?
- KS What I think is that I am trying to get them to examine the work beyond the surface level. There is more to art than a surface rendering.
- VA Do you have a particular lesson or course of study that helps students to deal with negative attitudes to abstract art? [I explain that when I introduce students to Barnett Newman's painting *Shimmer Bright*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I ask them to stand still and stare at it for at least five minutes. Every thirty seconds I keep asking "and what do you see happening now?"]
- KS I don't have a particular lesson that I do this in.
- VA The reason I want a lesson ... As a teacher, you are the lesson, but I also wanted some images from students ... even if you wrote up the music lesson idea - the Walkman and the culture of the normal day of the student. How can you incorporate that into a lesson? Maybe in your grade nine class in the fall, you could do it and I could document it, or show the process, or choose the music, or whatever. [We chat about the book Roberta Huebener has from 1949 on the analysis of visual art using the elements and principles of design and also note that Mittler's school text Art in Focus was not published until 1986.]

- KS           What we are talking about is how quickly we want change to happen. The Newman kind of art is very sophisticated. It is like what opera or jazz is to music. How much of the general public do you ever expect to want to sit in on an opera?
- VA           I agree. I think it is sophisticated too, but maybe it is the opposite and extremely basic.
- KS           You have to determine what portion of appreciation you want the students to come to accept. How many students do you want to accept it? If every student began to accept that as art, we would have stripes everywhere. We would be totally inundated because this would no longer be a limited art form. It would be a commonplace thing that would not have any meaning anymore. It would be like street signs. The amount of acceptance has to be realistic. How many of your friends are willing to accept Newman? Do you want everybody to accept Newman or not?
- VA           Not only accept it, but also appreciate it, "get it". It is like the traditional Japanese art of Mitsugi Kikuchi [a well-known local artist] which is representational with flowers and birds so everybody can connect with it sensually, emotionally, whatever. He even grinds the colour pigments and mixes his own paints. You appreciate a flower because of its shape, texture and colour and you almost appreciate his paintings because of their creamy velvet texture and vivid colours even though they are in an image form. His technique is so wonderful. And his compositions are really about Ikebana meaning.
- KS           I think it is like religion. You are talking about a conversion experience, when accepting Newman. But not everybody believes in your religion, right?
- VA           It is not quite like that either. If I had a choice between a Bernini sculpture and a Newman painting, I would take the Bernini any day. I still love what I love, the sensuous form, wherever they might be.
- KS           But you are talking to some degree about this sudden realisation.
- VA           I am talking about negative attitudes basically. I just chose one area. A lot of teaching has to deal with negative attitudes. Maybe that could be one of the questions I should have: What do you think a negative attitude is and why do you think there is such a thing? But we have to focus this issue down to a common issue in art education only. Most of the time we have negative attitudes to learning about new things that we don't believe there is anything more to know than what is obvious. We are unable to expand our concept, or we are not willing to say that we do not know. We stifle our curiosity because we have become comfortable in our structures, the perimeters that our culture has set up for us. Pretty soon we bury ourselves in our section of the multicultural society.
- KS           My opinion is the 'magic eye' images are there and you can see them if you want to but if you don't want to ... and is it important for the students who say, "It means nothing to me, I don't want to." Why do you want him to see it? Why push him to see it when he doesn't want to or he's not ready to, right?
- VA           Negative attitudes can hold people back in general from their own personal growth, from being happy, because they refuse, or like you say, "I hate it, I don't like it, I'm not interested." So what I'm looking for is the salesman quality of you as a teacher that stops people from having that negative attitude to

learning something important about art; lessons that convince people to listen, or that there might be of some value in changing their attitude.

KS           You can't make them see the 'magic eye' image. All you can do is prepare the ground and say, "To see this three-dimensional illusion, you have to do certain things." To some degree you even have to have a little belief in there, just like religion, and when all of those things come together and you want to focus your attention on it, then it will happen. But if you don't have these pre-conditions and the desire to see them, you'll never see them. That is the only thing the lesson can do. The lesson cannot do the conversion thing. The lesson cannot say, "Well here it is, it's going to happen now." You have to only prepare the student so that he allows the time and he prepares himself for this thing.

VA           That is what I am looking for, the thing that will prepare somebody to jump off and fly. [We discuss how the specialised teaching methods of a gymnastics teacher in college could teach an insecure adult like me how to trust their instruction and learn to do something she had been afraid to do all her life: a cart-wheel.]

KS           Part of the preparation is getting the student to also perceive that there is more than one meaning to an object, over and above even its surface illusion [a discussion follows on how Claude Dupuis teaches students to see Newman's sculpture *Here II*. It is three eight-feet-high cast bronze pillars that look like boards balanced on a base. After staring at the sculpture for a while, three glowing after-images appear and float around in front of your eyes wherever you look. The black space underneath the base of the sculpture becomes a glowing golden cross bar after-image and rises up the sculpture pillars. These after-images combine together visually, creating three golden crosses that continue to rise above the actual sculpture as the viewer looks up.]

VA           Again, I ask him to come up with a lesson by the end of September. We chat about Picasso.

KS           You might not like Picasso now but who knows when this experience will happen with him?

VA           Very true! It is like what you were saying about the person who needs all these different teachers. Maybe if I were a person who was frustrated with women, I would really like Picasso because I would "get it." But for me, I look at his artwork and it seems so contrived that it makes me very annoyed. I do not like it at all, but maybe that was the artist's intent. He was frustrated by women! You know!

KS           Now what you need to do is to determine what 'sensitising' you would have to go through to appreciate Picasso and run a test and see whether it would make a difference. Maybe you have not exposed yourself to the same kind of pre-test preparation you did for Newman, which was virtually taking a year off to do a Masters Degree and focusing on him particularly.



Fig. 2. Stare-E-O 3D - Magic Eye -(Section of an image - with permission) A New Way of Looking at the World, N.E. Thing Enterprises, Andrews and McMeel, Universal Press Syndicate Co. Kansas City, Missouri, 1993.

- VA I still do not emotionally like Newman paintings - but I like discovering how to see what he was trying to do technically and from that interpreting what the meaning was with a slight hint from the titles, even though I also find them very contrived. That is, other than that one piece in the Museum of Modern Art (M.o.M.A.) *Shimmer Bright* - the title is appropriate. The thing I liked best about it was the fun we had with the students when we all discovered how to see it. When the two blue stripes on the left of the canvas reappeared as two white fluorescent lights flashing again and again off the right side of the canvas. We would try to see how many flashes we could hold in our vision. I would probably like it the same way I like the 'magic eye' three dimensional illusion prints. It is an experience and, therefore, maybe I do appreciate Picasso in my emotional (negative) reaction to it. He nauseates me ... and maybe that was his intention.
- KS There was a time when I found de Kooning nauseating but now I think his work is fantastic. I came to see how the attitude toward women at the time he was painting was so well reflected in his work - such as Marilyn Monroe, with the long legs, and really turning the female into almost a god. The way Monroe's image was revered and it was all legs. When he painted, he made these luscious legs out of pink paint and it dripped all over but the face had no features, as if the person's personality had no importance and was just this body/flesh thing. He painted with such emotional violence, just like a rape scene, taking place in the painting. I thought it was fantastic.
- VA When I think of de Kooning, I'm not threatened by his work. If I have this negative response, it's not a negative attitude, but is it a negative response or attitude to Picasso when I look at his work? It really makes me angry, and in a way I respect that.
- KS When a person looks at de Kooning, it is really ugly on the surface, but when you really examine the image beyond the surface, the content of the image is so typical of the fifties and sixties, the Marilyn Monroe concept of women and the way they were treated. But the people who go to see de Kooning ... how could anyone paint something so ugly, surface treatment, emotional, distorted, big eyes, teeth showing ... just revolting image on the surface. But when you examine the significance to the society that produced it you see into it ...
- VA So that is what Picasso was doing too?
- KS Exactly! If you are only working on the surface treatment of the distortion of the body then the painting is going to be revolting and that is what people are responding to ... [more discussion on this same topic]
- VA Using iconography! That is a good way to show students that there is more to the work than what the image itself belies.
- VA Maybe you could give me your lesson on iconography because it may be more you than the music interpretation thing. When you say iconography, how could you use it to interpret music into non-objective visual imagery?
- KS Well, the interesting thing is our Board of Education has a video by Mittler on content and he explains three types; immitationalist, intellectual formalist and expressionist. These three different image-types are products of three different individual psyches. You have the freedom-loving student who is



the emotionalist, the one who lives by the rules who is the formalist, and then the other one is the intellectual / symbolist, thinker.

I teach my adults at night school that you are going to fall into one of these three categories of human types. You can type yourself by looking around your house and if you are a sloppy housekeeper, you are probably the emotional expressionist type. If you are the type who is very concerned about decor, you might be the formalist. If you are the intellectual, you might represent your lifestyle in a totally unique and symbolic way. When you look at categorising yourself with these three different groupings, then the way you are going to relate to art is going to be related to that. If you are the emotionalist, you may throw your hands up at a Newman. But if you are by nature the formalist you may think; "These stripes are fantastic! They are so equal in size!" ... And you are going to analyse it. If you are the intellectual, you are going to be looking beyond for the mystical qualities and try to interpret it and look for relationships.

Taking into consideration the makeup of the student, you need this to prepare your lesson because each different type of student is going to need a different type of 'sensitisation' before they are going to be willing to accept that image. If that student is an emotionalist, they may never accept Newman, but they may accept de Kooning. Because ...

VA           Is that why people have a very strong negative attitude to the intellectual artist, because art in their definition is emotion or expression connected to emotion?

KS           When you think of Alex Colville, he drafts this thing out and puts it in a grid. There are some art students who would love to do that because. "There's the answer. If I do this I'm going to get these results!" Whether it is relative or not, it doesn't matter. [Discussion on Colville]

KS           I'm going to go back to this idea of religion because there are so many different types of religions and a person to some degree has either entered a religion through childhood and has been inducted in that way or there has been a conversion experience. The student, who has been carefully nurtured to begin to believe in modern art through childhood up, might be willing to accept that that is one way. Then there is the other one who suddenly sees the stripes. Suddenly it opens up a whole new vista. But then there are all these different types of religions and there are some people who never would ever believe in the stripes, but there is some other aspect of art which they have to believe in ...

VA           I do not think that the stripes are an unknown, whereas belief has got to do with the unknown. Some people cannot see the 'magic eye' images and they do not believe they are there, or ever will be there for them. They believe they can not see and therefore they won't even try.

KS           What do you want to do with them? Do you want them to see it or not?

VA           It is not quite like religion. On the whole, in education, there is a lot of unwillingness to learn stuff - like the student (usually female) who says, "I can't do math."

KS           Your response to art is the same way. If you get the electrical engineer there, someone who has to measure everything out, they are really going to enjoy a painting that has these hidden mechanical things. They are going to be

examining it. The surface is one level, but then they will go on to the mechanics underneath. I think that has a role in art too. Who is going to appreciate what? The nature of the individual really has an important role to play, especially when I am teaching adults. I tell them what type of person they are with the Mittler chart, because the sooner they realise what type of person they are the better for understanding the type of art they will enjoy. Why go to a class where everybody is learning the formalist approach when you are the emotionalist? You are just going to be frustrated all the time.

When you think of the students you have, it is important for them to realise who they are so that when they are ready to take an art programme or appreciate art, they go through the right channel to arrive at the experience that is relative to their senses.

VA And you as a teacher ... ?

KS I try to show them all the different groups. I try to determine the type of person they are so that they realise what they can do and what psychologically works for them.

VA So they get comfortable? They do not have to understand art through the expressionist channels; there are other channels?

KS Yes. Even the same work can be examined from different avenues.

VA Well, that is how I have chosen the different art teachers for this thesis. Frankie is basic, simple, and small in her assignments but loves reading the symbolism in the resulting works. Roberta is the intellectual, always wants to give the whole thing, has a ton of information, and totally overwhelms people. Sylvia again is very different, the formalist maybe. She has the least drawing skill, similar to Newman in a way. She is always submitting works to art competitions and getting recognition for her creativity. As a teacher, she is extremely structured and demands very high standards of finish. Her students have to do very finished work, complete and hangable art works, to pass. But all the art works look the same. Now in my classes you would never even think that they all started off with the same assignment an expressionist teacher, maybe but I do like my classroom neat.

KS I think it is important that the students experience different types of teachers so that they can find their own niche and their own approach.

### **INTERVIEW THREE with high school art teacher/artist - Mrs. Sylvia Klein (Transcript of taped interview)**

VA What is your definition of abstract art?

SK I think the one thing you have to remember is that you are asking me now, when I am fifty-three, and if you would have asked me these questions at thirty-three you probably would have got ten different answers.

VA Good point, and you were a teacher at thirty-three?

SK I probably taught more abstract art at thirty-three than what I do now.

VA So, are you switching back?

- SK It is not a matter of switching back. It is a matter of responding to some of the needs of the students and where they are right now. So, I am probably teaching less abstract art now than I used to. I am still getting personal expressions from my students. The times change. Twenty years ago, you did not have Barnett Newman at the National Gallery as you do now. It might have been easier to get that across twenty years ago. That is my feeling.
- VA Why?
- SK I think that with television and video games, people are a lot less actively spiritual.
- VA And Newman is spiritual? This is the second time that this has come up in my interviews.
- SK I think all abstract expressionists are spiritual. They are not dealing with the concrete reality and trying to detect it but they are trying to get their very own responses in the world and what they have experienced and they are not using concrete objects. They are really able to look beyond that. They are stripping away the skin and the bones and getting down to the real guts of feelings and emotions and spirituality.
- VA So twenty years ago you feel that students were more connected to spirituality. I thought that what you were going to say was that twenty years ago kids had no such thing as AIDS. They were a lot freer. They were more experimental. They wanted to be different. Because there were those aspects, is that why they could be connected to a spirituality?
- SK I had not thought about it like that.
- VA Do you have a lesson that deals with negative attitudes toward abstract art?
- SK I do not have any negative attitudes toward abstract art as a teacher, or as a person. So, I imagine that when I am confronted with abstract art and I have to talk about it to my students that I am probably conveying a sense of acceptance and a sense of wonder and mystery about abstract art. I think when that happens, that makes them feel more relaxed about accepting it.
- VA Because you are 'there' and they trust when they see somebody who is experiencing something and it comes across honestly. You are not selling them a bill of goods. Maybe your attitude goes beyond the words.
- SK Yes. I think it is the total attitude, the body language too.
- VA The words are not enough?
- SK That is true. You, the teacher, have to be convincing and if you are they are more willing to listen.
- VA And if you are convinced, the message therefore gets across more easily. When you have a student who has skill in drawing and you ask them to do something that is more expressionistic, do you have difficulty convincing that type of student?
- SK Students who can really draw well think they are the cat's meow and God's answer to creation. I would say that it is probably a lot easier to work with a student who has slightly less drawing ability which is one of the things we have had at Glebe High School, which attracts the more academic type of student. Most of the students do not have great drawing ability. They have a minimal

amount of drawing skill. I think that these students are more willing and more able to explore. Probably those who can draw really - well - feel trapped - or maybe they do not feel trapped, but they are.

VA Because they have been gifted with a skill?

SK They think that this is all there is. They are able to see something and they are able to draw it. I do not know if they really internalise it ... it is difficult to know. You really have to be with those students for a longer time to know.

VA But if you have a student like that - this is the point of the survey - do you have a lesson that helps them become less trapped in their skill? Do you have a lesson when, at the beginning of the lesson the student has a negative attitude toward abstract art but after experiencing the lesson or after - sometimes it is just a verbal explanation - their attitude changes? [The tape is turned off while Sylvia collects her thoughts.]

SK Kasimir Malevitch.

VA Abstraction began with him?

SK For me it does. His white on white that I saw when I was eighteen years old at the M.o.M.A. in New York, which was my first trip to the museum. I was spell-bound by this piece. It is pure abstraction of white on white.

VA And in what era did he do this?

SK Probably in the twenties or teens. I should know ... because he is so important to my work. My whole egg series started off with white on white based on Kasimir Malevitch's work that I saw when I was eighteen. [We talk about a passion being created that focuses our artistic lives, like my passion for horses' moving, sensuous sculptural form.]

VA A lot of times people think that abstract art is just a happening and then interpret it later like a Rorschach test. What if you wanted to be like Newman and you have something you want to say and how do you get that down in three stripes and two colours?

SK For a teenager to do a piece of abstract work really requires a total separation from what this person already knows. Now I think it is easy to do a constructivist piece of work using colour and composition to get started. You can look at Mondrian's work and you might be able to see how, if you look at his early pieces when they are still realistic; and then when he goes toward abstraction; and then his last works which are truly constructivist little rectangles of colours and shapes.

You can do these exercises with the students and they will give you good results. But for them to actually say something of their own, within their limitations. I suppose they can do it, but they are not going to do a Newman because they do not have all those years of experience and experimentation that Newman had before he came down to that particular minimalist piece of work. He just kept on subtracting and abstracting until less was more. When you give a student a piece of abstracting to do, they do not have that much life behind, them so you can only give them exercises that are going to *teach* them *about* abstract art. But if you are expecting them to do Newman and really feel Newman, there might be one or two, but it certainly won't be the whole class.

VA            You give them something and ask them to abstract it. It almost becomes a work in design, no spirit and no emotion, in a way. But can an exercise in design produce that?

              Why are some students' non-objective abstract works more successful than others are? One wonders why some students just have it from the beginning of time, like those who can draw, some tend to be able to abstract feeling and therefore some meaning into visual form. Whatever it is they do, it is always interesting, unique and yet communicates. Usually they do not even realise that they have got it.

SK            True; because it is not concrete and comes easily, they will probably slough it off.

**INTERVIEW FOUR with high school teacher - Mrs. Roberta Huebener**  
**(Quoted directly from written notes)**

VA            Do you familiarise students with the body of knowledge connected to abstract art?

RH            Art is art, whether abstract or representational. Abstract art is part of the total history of art and optical realism is only a very small part of the total. Of course, I state my prejudices and allow for disagreement.

VA            How do your students respond to abstract art?

RH            No problem. Occasional remarks about the price of the *Voice of Fire*, but we deal with it. Kids are entitled to their likes and dislikes but not to ignorance.

VA            How do you address negative attitudes toward abstract art?

RH            Yo! Ginny, this ain't enough space. We should talk. There are at least two sides to every issue but it is not necessary to fight. If kids are able to retain their opinions while learning the reasons, there will be at least some understanding, if not outright conversions. Besides as long as you don't deal exclusively in labelling something abstract many students will in fact recognise the elements and principles of design - the beauty of shape or line - separate from subject matter. Don't they study math? Don't some play music? Those subjects are abstract.

VA            Do you have a lesson that helps students deal with their negative attitudes toward abstract art?

RH            I've never assumed there would be a problem of negativity, to me it is a question of knowledge, information, and exposure.

VA            What is the negative attitude addressed?

RH            The most common question from students is, "Why is it worth that much?" - the cost versus value problem. Is that painting worth it? Was the artist a charlatan? But this is a real issue. I treat it as an issue, not a fight! But what I would do on the spur of the moment is to tell a few historical facts about the rise of photography, influence of non-western art, scientific progress in the study of light and colour, etc. Then I would point out that very few artists get the 1.5 million that the gallery pays dealers for famous work. The real lesson starts in

grade nine and does not stop until OAC level and is found to one degree or another in every project.

Critiques and discussions also play a major role in drawing kids out about their own process in developing an idea for a piece. I always assign students to write art reviews: in grade nine and ten about two per year; grades eleven, twelve and OAC one per term [four per year]. They must express their personal views. As long as they do the assignment in good faith they will get a good mark and I will not judge their judgments of the art.

Always find at least one project per term that students can evaluate either partially or entirely themselves. Establish some of their own criteria for marking or establish criteria through discussion with the class. This will develop students' confidence in their own judgment and make them more acutely aware of what a professional artist thinks about. Both peer and self-evaluations are useful in this regard. Negative attitudes are often a sign of insecurity and defensiveness. Students who feel confident about their own ability to judge things seldom operate in 'put-down' mode. Often negative comments about modern art are attitudes of their parents that they are just parroting. Trying on an adult attitude to see if it flies. Facts are the best cure for this.

VA For example?

RH So, we go back to the nineteenth century, 1850 to 1900. What were the French and English artists doing at that time with art? Art was about exploring and discovery new ways and ideas. The artists also explore new territories such as photography; new science theories on vision such as X-ray. The artist and the patron were in a democratic business attitude. The nineteenth century artist was the mainstream of modern art. Journalism began then. In response to the academies juried exhibits and competitions, The Salon de Refuse 1865, stamped with a big 'R', was where artists who were refused by the regular galleries, exhibited their works.

Students don't have to like abstract art but they must make sure their opinions are informed. Specific points have to be made.

How the National Gallery makes its decisions on what works to collect - Diana Nemiroff will explain it to them when your students visit the NAG library. These institutions are always underfunded - what therefore would they collect? They cannot afford to collect Rembrants therefore Contemporary Minimalism was the obvious area. This is serious art that is affordable

VA What is serious art?

RH Serious art is honest art, whose purpose is to communicate visually, give a visual experience, motivated by individual inspiration versus what others see. Realism is only a blip in the history of art. There are seven main styles of representation art: optical-realism; idealism; social realism; impressionism; stylisation; surrealism; non-objective.

Teachers give students a problem to solve in abstract design but abstraction is not about design. Math,  $2 + 2 = 4$ , is an abstract notion. Only when you have the apples is it real. A three-dimensional image of apples on a two-dimensional surface is an illusion. Music is abstract. For Jimi Hendrix, music is

war. Program music like Debussy's *Le Mer* is music as a storm. Art serves different purposes at different times.

The book Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, written in 1979, is about drawing from within. The mark or line is to express the feeling hate or love. There is a central language of vision, the elements and principles of design. I have a book on this topic, written in 1949 titled, The Layman's Guide to Modern Art - Painting For The Scientific Age, by Rothbun & Hayes, Oxford Press, New York. Kids have to feel that they can trust you not to crush their ideas. Therefore you must persuade them that abstract art is valid. The problem is how to get through to the students and not be their adversary.

VA The only modern style that is readily accepted is surrealism because one sees and identifies the realistically rendered symbolic images. The bizarre compositions invite investigation. The viewer is drawn to solve the visual puzzle.

**INTERVIEW FIVE with school for the arts teacher/artist; Mr. Tim DesClouds  
(Transcribed from taped interview)**

VA Do you familiarise your students with the body of knowledge connected to modern abstract expressionistic art?

TD Yes, all of it.

VA Do you come up against negative attitudes toward that form of art?

TD It is different at Canterbury because it is a "school of the arts." The frustration is that once the students understand, say, the formalist aspects of abstract art, we give them the knowledge, but can they make other people understand it?

In grades nine and ten it is not so much that they have trouble with abstract art, but if they start doing things that are abstracting ... to be able to talk about it, and to explain it, is the difficulty ... so it is more in dealing with their peers. The frustration to them is not in trying to do what they see is important in abstract art but the inability to explain what they are doing.

In other words, you have something like the *Voice of Fire* at the National Gallery ... now! they appreciate it when a teacher explains it, but as soon as they step out the door they can't argue for it, and that causes frustration. So, let's say that they learn about the *Voice of Fire* and when they go home, their parents say it is crap. They cannot explain it to their parents and that frustrates them because they do not have the vocabulary or the cross-over to be able to convince someone else and that can become very frustrating.

VA And you as a teacher, how do you help them?

TD Probably you can help them by always putting it into historical context, because a lot of abstract art is always fighting or rebellious against what went before it. Like, abstract art did not come out of an empty vacuum. It is always fighting something, so you need the historical context to put it into perspective and by giving them the vocabulary to be able to talk about it.

- VA But the art itself should evoke an emotional ... whatever. Abstract art has got to do with our visual sense, not talking and listening.
- TD The hard part is ... I am sure, if you bring in people who have no biases and they see an abstract painting, they will be open to it and get something from it. You stick a three or four year old in front of the *Voice of Fire* and they are going to say, "neat bright colours" or "It's big!" They are going to get some kind of feeling from it. But there are so many biases by the time you get them into high school. In this society when we start teaching them about art, they bring so many biases with them. You are dealing with people that are covering up their senses.
- VA Or have had them covered up?
- TD People look at the *Voice of Fire* and ... I can see that there is a coldness and an intellectual side to that type of abstract art, but if you look at something like the native piece by Alex Janvier at the Museum of Civilization as you go down the stairs ... how someone cannot have something evoked in them with that piece ... because there is a real lyrical feeling to it. There is a warmth and it is still non-representational. People will still close themselves off to that even though you would think that anybody that would be open to it would get some kind of an emotional feel from it.
- VA So, [positive] attitude has got to do with open feelings toward something? If we were to get to a point where there is a lesson or an experience that can teach people to be open we would have it. I will give you an example, about an art teacher who has a class of senior citizens who want to learn to do paintings, probably realistically. The teacher has them do an exercise in free-form water painting for about ten minutes, to experience the paint. Then they compare the resulting works and decide as a group, which are the best. They become open and evaluate, but what are they evaluating?
- TD But there is an intellectual side to that. You take a Mark Rothko for example. He is dealing more with the feelings that the use of his colours generates in the viewer, whereas Barnett Newman's works are a lot more intellectual. To appreciate Newman has a lot to do with understanding the financial success of the work too. He was honest about his work but there is that intellectual side to it. As far as all minimalism is - is to break art down to the core, the simplest ... it is still a visual experience ... but it is like music too. You go see a minimal music performance and the person is playing one note over and over again and the resonance of that one note is the purity of that one note. That is also uncommon to our society because Western society is unlike what happens in Eastern society as far as giving time to art and meditating in front of it and becoming one with it.
- VA [I tell him about the visual effects in Newman's works and use *Shimmer Bright* as an example. (Shutt Interview 55) It is not just intellectual abstract symbolism in its most minimalist terms. It is about the seeing experience. It is about becoming one with the painting and seeing in the mind's eye.]
- TD It is the student viewer giving time to the work of art - to look at it and interpret it.
- VA Is there more to it than just looking at it and interpreting its deeper meaning? What does *Shimmer Bright* mean? I do not think it is that intellectual.



He is not really trying to say that much in this painting. I think it is the visual experience that the painting evokes in the viewer that is important to him.

TD But he is saying a lot by saying it is minimal. That was a problem before. It was not story telling, which was what art was before. He is not telling a story. He is breaking down our concepts about what art has to be. If someone did what Newman did now, it would be easy to copy and that is the main thing that people have a hard time with. It is such an easy thing to copy.

But to think ... it is like Picasso's abstract piece of taking a seat off a bike [it becomes a bull's head] and the bicycle handles to be horns and calling it *Bull*. Well, it is intellectual in the sense that he is changing our whole perception of what it takes for something to become an art image. For someone to copy that idea, or way of doing art, they are not changing it, they are just doing what has been done before.

VA Like Deschamps?

TD It is the technical ability to do that which master artists have done, especially for students who have an overwhelming, and I think, misplaced, respect for craft to the point that creativity vanishes. In other words, someone can copy really well. Someone basic in their approaches can copy very well. You have to watch that they are saying something too.

Technical skill hinders in another way because there are some artists who are very good technically and sometimes in our present art world, they are not accepted, that is, in the fine art world, because they are considered crafty. They are actually saying a lot, but people cannot look beyond the traditional way they are approaching their work, which is unfortunate.

But there is always that balance, that is, just for the sake of craft and being technically good at something an artist is recognised. The thing is that kids do not realise either that there are thousands of proficient, technical artists out there. There are very good illustrators. The thing is ... what puts one on a pedestal is still the creative part.

VA Like what Barnett Newman did. Students and people in general will say, "Anybody can do that!" [paint three stripes] but they never ask the question, "Just what is he really doing and why?" They have not got a clue that every one of his works has a visual experience beyond the surface colours and lines, let alone the interpretative meaning. Only, after they learn to participate with the painting and "get" the visual experience will they begin to understand what he was doing.

[We discuss the visual experiences connected to particular works such as - *Shimmer Bright, Here II*, and *Yellow Edge*. I also express my appreciation for the heated arguments I had with Tim in the past about art education. The six years before I transferred to Canterbury High School the School for the Arts, I had been teaching in an eight-teacher art department at the High School of Commerce with a much different educational mandate. Commercial art was the focus. The acquisition and refinement of artistic skills came before creative experimentation was permitted. It was during the two years of teaching with Tim and the other art teachers at Canterbury, that I became aware of my own negative attitudes toward the body of knowledge connected to the world of modern fine art and especially

abstract art. These unresolved arguments are what motivated me to go back to school and do this research.

We talk about the different cultural attitudes toward art and how being from a Muslim culture inhibits one's ability to see and work with depth illusion. Three-dimensional form, figures and animals are rejected from Muslim art due to their religious beliefs.

We also review the *Voice of Fire* seminar and talk about the educational information the NAG offers the public and question if it meets the needs of our students?]

TD       The thing is, as far as abstract art goes, or any art, you have got to get by the surface. As an exercise you tell a kid that they can do a portrait of themselves but then we go: "Is that really you? What is your spirit?" With a lot of exercises you can get into what is the spirit of something, or the inner self of something. That can get corny, though. Kids can turn off that too because it can be very threatening. For instance, start with a grade nine class and say, "Do your inner-self in your next composition!"

Bringing in other cultures ... the funny thing is, when taking African art in university, it was made clear to me that all the western people who went over to Africa were thinking that the African artists could not carve well, realistically, because of their stylised masks and so forth and that their art was primitive and therefore unsophisticated. But really they were excellent craftsmen, but they saw no need to represent themselves as their body. They saw needs to represent spirits and their own spirit, but not represent themselves, the mere copied image of themselves.

It was not until the western influence came into Africa that they started to represent people in a realistic fashion. But the only people they did realistically at the start were the white people because they saw them only as a surface image with no spirit. You look at native art and even aboriginal art, totems and so forth, they are always dealing with the spirit ... even though it is never in a realistic way. It is a figurative abstraction of reality.

VA       So when you have an imitated image of reality, it tends to inhibit the viewer from thinking about its meaning. Whereas when something is stylised, like Haida Indian art's stylised form, it leaves you wide open and you are not caught up with the identified figure form, or animal form, or a face, or whatever it is. It does inspire a different way of thinking about form. If they did a horse, it would be a spiritual sign of the horse, which would instil in the viewer the idea horse. A huge spectrum of meaning would spring from the image. But if you have a realistic sculpture of a horse, it simply stops there, no question, "What does this mean?"

TD       There is an art school in Toronto, Andrew Hague I think, where they deal with non-objective art at the start, which I disagree with. Picasso said that there is no such thing as non-objective art, everything comes from nature or reality and is abstracted.

Non-objective art is a catch phrase that I think is dangerous for a teacher to use because it sounds as if the work is coming from nothing. Kids are dealing with colours and so forth and it can become very shallow. It can become really

shallow copying a Newman just for the sake of the elements and principles of design. What is in it, to do this? But the kids can be convinced that this is all that is there, which would be ridiculously shallow to do.

The masters of the so-called non-objective abstract art, except for some of the abstract expressionists in America, most were based in traditional education to their art. People like de Kooning are well-grounded in traditional art, like life-drawing and drawing from nature, getting that base behind their work. That grounds the knowledge of where abstraction is coming from instead of the reverse.

As a teacher, if you are just saying, "interesting colours; nice rhythmical lines; that colour works well with this colour," you have got to watch that it does not get picked up in a surface way. The thing about abstract art or any art is that it has to have a kind of guts to it. There has to be an intelligence to pick that up and express it - meaning something.

VA But to me the elements and principles are the tools to analyse and interpret the composition that you see.

TD You are not going to bring in a Deschamps and teach it to a class of basic grade nines. You are not going to be able to.

VA I disagree. This is exactly what I do with my grade nines. It is their first assignment. "What is art?" We talk about Deschamps while first showing slides of his painting, *Figure Descending the Stairs*, then from the NAG collection, his 'ready-mades' - the urinal titled *Fountain* and the hat-rack dangling on a string from the ceiling titled *Spider* etc. Their first art project is to bring in their 'ready-mades.' Sometimes they have not done their homework and they will just grab any object in the classroom and interpret it as something else, like a stapler as a snake's head, or one I especially liked was the lever-style cork screw as a man with two arms etc. So, in a way, you can use Deschamps to show that interpretation is a very big part of what "fine art" is and what seeing it is all about. Picasso's bike is a bull.

TD We are dealing with kids that are not as quick as the ones at Glebe. I am saying that there are different angles you can take and get deep. Consider Barnett Newman - there are twenty levels of interpretation that you can give. If they can understand the basic things about it, that is fine. There are different levels that things can be interpreted at, and those artists are working like that too because some of the decisions they make are surface and some are for a deeper meaning. Every painter is dealing with something.

VA So if you were to have negative attitudes, what is the percentage of the students that would say that "this is not art!"?

TD It can happen at Canterbury in this way. The kids present a portfolio to get into the school and are usually really proficient at rendering. Sometimes your better students have the most difficulty with abstract art. Because, if they are proficient technically they see the other route as coping-out and they are fair to say that.

There is a lot of art out there that in which the artists are coping out. But you have to explain to the students, show them the masters, the grounding behind the work. You can usually convince most kids that it is legitimate to express

things in an abstract way and that you can do a colour-field painting with just colours to show emotion.

You can get a whole class to do this and I think they will all agree that it is worthwhile. You can bring music into it. Music itself is totally abstract. If you put lyrics to it, it confines the interpretation of the music. But people like the lyrics to define music. You can go off into a wonderland, sometimes on a more intriguing adventure just listening to music. The same thing can happen just looking at art, especially abstract art.

For them to be convinced of the other side of art, the money aspect, the fame, the historical aspect, the importance, relevance of it, that is a whole other can of worms. They can say, "Really neat, but why would someone pay two million dollars for it? This is really neat, but why do we need an institution to show this stuff?" And their questions like that are legitimate.

VA Do you intend to answer them?

TD They spent two million on a Barnett Newman, but there are people starving in Canada! Why are we doing that? Those are good questions and the only way that those questions are coming is usually from an intelligent point of view, or at least the kid is thinking. So you attack it in an intelligent way and you debate about it and if they leave thinking, "Yes, it is legitimate to do this, but I do not see why two million dollars had to be spent on it!" then I think maybe they will mature into it or maybe they do not mature into it. Maybe their way of looking at it is fine for them.

My personal thing is about the purchase of the Rothko. They bought ... second-rate art by those abstract expressionist artists, because they want something from all of them in their second-rate collection.

VA But Newman only did five monumental canvasses!

### **INTERVIEW SIX with student teacher/artist Ms Ellyn Norris** **(Transcribed from video-tape of lessons.)**

EN When I made a decision to teach art history through the use of contemporary art magazines there were two main advantages, I felt. One was that it was more insightful to the artists' intent and process, because there are contemporary art magazines such as Canadian Art, Art Form, Parachute, which give articles that talk about the artists' work more in-depth than the history books did. The other advantage was that I thought it removed preconceptions of artists' work, such as when you think Dali, you think of the melting clocks, and when we think of Van Gogh we think of either portraits or sunflowers. We know as teachers and people who have studied art on the university level that an artist's work is a body of work throughout their life, but students do not realise that at the time. So a lot of time is spent showing students not just what is good about the work and what is bad about the work, but what is in between is what I was really interested in focusing on, the development.

So, also in linking it [the *in between* process of the artist] to the art-making process of the students, I found interesting. For example, this unicorn that a grade seven student was making - she was having problems with not giving the unicorn legs, although she had made the decision that she wanted it to be wading through water. The story was of the unicorn and how it rained and Noah's Ark floated away and the unicorn was being covered in water. But she was having problems in leaving this poor unicorn without any legs. "Can I do that?" So, I said, "Well, actually I was looking through a Canadian art magazine and came across a Joe Farfard bronze sculpture where the cow was lying down," and although it was not exactly the same decision she had made, formally, it comforted her to know that she could actually have it down in this position, or not necessarily standing up. And also these contemporary magazines can lead to the student's own work. So, I decided on that as the assignment for my grade ten, eleven group.

**INTERVIEW SEVEN with National Art Gallery teacher Mr. Claude Dupuis  
(Transcribed from taped interview.)**

- VA As a docent at the National Art Gallery, do you have a particularly successful lesson that helps the uninformed viewer deal with negative attitudes toward abstract art?
- CD The abstract lesson starts with the Group of Seven because Lawren Harris was the first abstract artist in Canada. He painted abstraction for thirty-five years, physical abstraction. He and Booker, who was a philosopher, had similar ideas. The first problem with abstract art is the word "abstract." To me all art is abstract because abstraction just means taking something from something, not the whole thing. So if you make a painting you are always eliminating some things and leaving some things in. So what you do is, you are abstracting. Even if you are being representational, you are abstracting certain elements.
- VA Therefore all the definitions of abstract art fit, because all art is abstract.
- CD Yes! The business of making art is abstracting to take certain elements from all the possible elements. If you do a nature painting you are abstracting from the scene you are looking at. You decide what details you leave out and which you put in.
- VA But it is minimalist abstract - abstraction to the nth degree - which presents the most difficulty for a viewer to "get". How do you deal with the problem that the viewer has in viewing these works?
- CD The biggest problem people have in looking at abstract art has to do with two things. It has to do with looking, with the way they look; and with the concept, what their concept of art is.
- Most people have this idea of art as a craft. If they cannot see the craft, then they cannot see the art. They can't see it because they do not know how to look at it. The way they look at things is the way they are taught. The way they learned to see is through things like photographs and television. They learned to see in places like shopping centres and malls, where they have thousands and

thousands of things to look at. In these places things are designed so that they are very easily understood. If something does not do that, then they ignore it. If you go into a gallery and something is somehow not telling you what it is, you move on and look at the next thing. They do not spend time actually looking at it to see what they really can and do see.

VA Are you saying because of how people are taught to see, they do not allow themselves to see and perceive on their own or in their own way?

CD Yes. But what about when people look at something and are simply amazed by it? People do not have a problem with a child having a collection of rocks because she/he thought they were pretty rocks. But if it was an abstract painting, like a Borduas, and if it was made in the same way, made as an object, just another object that relates to nature, they cannot deal with that because they have that problem of craft, their definition of art. [They cannot accept a painting as an object the same way a beautiful rock as an object created by nature.]

That is one problem. The other thing is, with photographs you tend to look at the most important thing in the photographs. It is usually a person or something like that and the rest of the [causals] in the composition are incidental. Realise that paintings are totally ... there is nothing incidental or accidental in the painting. It all add to its effect, to make an easy definition of what the importance of it is.

If you see a Borduas or even a Newman, "Oh! It's stripes!" So the mind looks at it and then the little voice box defines what the thing is. As if you are walking through a shopping centre. It is sort of like; "Ah! A pair of shoes, a CD." This is what your mind is saying. "I will find it. This is what I am looking for and what I have come to see." So in the gallery they do the same thing, "Ah - ha! Three stripes, black and white blobs." They do a quick definition of the objects and then they stop looking because they think they have seen it.

VA But if it is not just a line, it is a?

CD Well, it depends on what it is. Some abstractions, like the Harris - it is symbolic abstraction. It is an illustration of a religious belief. With Borduas, it is a more psychological stance that they have connected to the subconscious and spontaneity abstraction and with Newman it is back again to symbolism, and then there is Molinari. Some find it hard to find the difference between Newman and Molinari because they are both stripes. They are both very plain, colour-field, if you want, but they are miles apart in terms of their content.

VA Then this is the type of person, one who has not learned to look further, who cannot see or conceive the content of an abstract painting at a glance? What level of instruction does this lesson on abstract art address?

CD I deal mostly with students. My thing is to get them to look and also to see the difference between a conception and a perception. For example, if they are looking at a Tony Smith sculpture (a Tony Smith box) and I ask, "What is that object that you are looking at?" ... they say, "It is a box." Then I'll say, "But what do you see?" They say, "I see a box." Then I'll say "But you do not see a box, a box is an idea. How many sides does a box have?" "It has six." "But you only see two or three sides depending on where you are standing. What angles are they?" "They are right angles." But you do not see right angles, because the angles are

either acute or obtuse depending on where you are standing. So the perception is different from the concept, but most people do not see that.

VA Should we be dealing with the analytical mind of these artists' visions?

But we just see, then we identify what we see into the categorical concept area that we have already defined or have learned a definition for, of all those things that look the same. I personally do not get down to analysing how I am seeing. I do not think about what I have just seen. I just accept my concept, categorise, stop looking, and move on.

CD That's right! That is the way we normally look. We see something and then we form a quick concept of it, which is usually verbal. What happens is that once the concept is formed we do not look at it anymore because we have seen it and identified it. We know what it is.

VA Like the paradigm shift, the theory that it is almost impossible to change a concept. For example the radical new design for the ultimate bicycle seat with only two small round pads to sit on. It is not accepted because it does not look like our concept of a bicycle seat, and that shape is based on a saddle. Now, what is the body of knowledge that is connected to the study of abstract art?

CD Well, the other thing is finding language that expresses the so-called abstract or theoretical concept, but in everyday terms. Like when we talk about the context of a piece, or the scale of a piece and the context. Well, that is a kind of abstract, but if you say, "Imagine, for example, an apple, and you put the apple on the window-sill or the same apple in the middle of a gymnasium floor, you can see how the context affects the way you perceive the object." Where is it and what is around it? So this is the verbal illustration that allows them to then understand what scale and what context mean, in terms of a line or a form. You do not have to use the word "context." It helps to illustrate that.

How big are you going to make it? At what point does the thing become or go from being an object to an environment? As paintings get bigger and bigger and bigger, does it make a difference, like the *Voice of Fire*? You see a picture of it in a newspaper and then in real life. So you find you relate back to the size of your body. Is it bigger than me? Is it smaller than me? It is a kind of primitive way, the way you have to look at abstract painting. You have to become like someone from another planet who just dropped into a supermarket and is seeing everything without having a clear concept of what it is and just try to deal with the sensory information that you are getting.

There is also the aspect of seeing in two places at the same time. You have to stare at the Newman long enough to get these effects of colour reversal and that kind of thing. If you look at Tony Smith's *Box* for example - I ask them to move their head from side to side. They see the shape changes but they cannot accept that. They say, "But the box-shape stays the same." Then I say, "Imagine that box is a picture of a cube on a TV screen and we have it turning around like this. Now we have this thing animated. It is turning around. As you walk around it, you see that it is turning but you know that you are turning. ...Try to reverse your perception and say, "No! I am a fixed point of reference, that perception is actually turning and changing. As I move, I change the appearance of this object." So in things like Andre's *Lever*, that is precisely the effect. If you walk

around the room, it moves. You see, conceptually you say I am moving, the objects are still, but perceptually I am still and they are the things that are moving. It is the perceptions that are moving around here. You can move an eleven-story building just by tilting your head.

VA It is like the dream state. It moves, not you. If we take reality as a dream.

CD Yes, we have this concept of space and time that says we move through space and time.

VA What about the aesthetic experience?

CD It depends on the work of art. Like Newman's *Voice of Fire*, you get a fantastic aesthetic experience through the effect of the complementary colours and once they see that, they realise, "Oh! There is something more."

VA So is it only then, when they realise that there is more, that it is a successful experience?

CD Yes. ... They come in they say, "We do not see anything!" So we teach them to see something and they say, "Oh! I was wrong. I thought there was nothing there but there is actually something more there." Then they turn around after that and they look at the black painting, *Yellow Edge* and say, "Well, what is that?" So you see they have already changed their attitude, because now they are thinking, "Maybe I thought I knew what that was but now that I have seen this painting, I'm wondering, maybe there is something there too." Different paintings will have different things in them that you can make them see.

Take for example, the Molinari, a big painting with many lines painted on it. I have tricks that make them become aware of what they are seeing. I ask them to look at those two lines. "What line appears to be closest, the little one or the big one?" They usually say that the little line looks closest and I say, "Well, that is interesting because usually something small looks further away. Why does something small look close?" and they say, "Well it is brighter than the other one." Then they begin to realise how the brightness can affect their perception of depth and space.

With Robonovich's *Line With Holes*, my mind starts to group them into groups. These four seem to go together because they are in the same area and they are the same size, so your mind kind of groups the holes into little constellations like stars. But if you think about it, those holes are on different pieces of metal. If the pieces were not together or if they were spread out then the whole relationship would disappear. So your mind is making the connection based on a kind of a false logic. It is sort of like the Greeks looking up at the sky saying that these stars look like they belong together, it is a constellation! But if you change the point of view, you know that the stars are not close together at all. They just appear that way from here. It is the way your mind tries to make connections and join things together.

Another thing is words like "real." A painting of a tree, what is this? It is paint. The Borduas is also paint on canvas. This [Borduas] looks like paint on canvas. This looks like a tree but it is really paint on canvas. So that is not more real, the tree is an illusion. So when you are using the word "real" you are actually talking about an illusion of a tree. Whereas the Borduas is real because it looks



like and is exactly what it is, paint. It is concrete. It is something real. This is the difference between conception and perception.

VA What is the value of teaching abstract art?

CD There is also the whole psychological aspect of abstraction, too, when you get somebody to draw quickly. Imagine that this is an art class and I give you a sheet of paper and you can do what ever you want. What is the first thing that you do? It is to figure what you are going to do and come up with an idea. You want a concept before you begin to draw. But if I said, "You have thirty seconds to cover that piece of paper, starting now!" You do not have time to think. So, you cover it anyway you can. So, then you say, "Is everybody's work going to look the same?" No! They know that they are all going to be different. Well, how come? Why does one person decide to take black and another take orange? One starts in the middle and another at the edge. One might just throw stuff on. What does that tell you? Well, it somehow tells us something about the person. So you can use this to psychoanalyse. Then the viewer is also psychoanalysed because of what they say they see in the work and we are not all going to see the same thing. Like the Rorschach test.

VA So they have to tune in to get it, the actual work of art here! ... We have been educating people with picture books, slides and prints of abstract art, but to really get it, the aesthetic experience, they need to see and perceive for themselves the actual real work of art.

What is it that opens up their aesthetic, visual change - the visual experience? How can they identify it elsewhere?

CD Well, the thing is that then they can see that there are at least two ways that they can look at something. The first time they look at it - I could be talking to people for at least ten minutes and they won't see anything in the *Voice of Fire*, for example. They are staring at the painting the whole time and nothing happens; maybe to the odd person. But if I say, "OK everybody! Stare at this particular area for the next minute, and then I ask, "What do you see?" they tell me of a whole different experience and I say, "Well, how come you didn't see that before?" Because they had stopped looking at the object, really. You see, the other thing is when you are looking at a painting like the *Voice of Fire*, the painting itself does not change; what changes - what happens - is, it is all happening in the eye of the person looking at it. All the effects of colour and anything else that they see happen in their eyes getting tired and this kind of thing. ... really to see it, you have to be watching what happens inside your head, not just the object out there, but when it gets inside your perception. What happens to it is what you are doing.

You know when you are looking at a Riopelle and a Borduas side by side - and I tried this quite a few times, and asked which of these two painters is older. Not always, but eight out of ten people will say, "The Borduas! He is older." Is that not amazing? If we had two paintings of a landscape; how could you tell anything about the artist? You get a Corot and a Constable. Can you tell me which artist was older when he painted the picture? You can't! But if it is just blobs of paint, all of a sudden it is revealing something. This one is more energetic, more of a show-off, the other one looks more serious and black and

white. It has more of a mature feel to it. Yet it is just blobs, and once you start to see that, I think, then they start to realise that there could be things to look for there and elsewhere.

VA But what if the viewer had to make a choice of living with a print of a VanGogh or a print of a Newman? Would you have an answer for that?

CD Sometimes we do a Newman, then we say, "Let's go look at the Jordan." It is a very interesting painting, but then again when you look at Jacob Jordan's painting you have a feeling that you know what it is all about because you recognise everything that is in it. But then everything that is in it is a symbol of something else. So to understand what it really means you actually need a whole lot of knowledge, background information. Whereas to look at a painting like Newman, you do not need any information, you just need an open mind. If you stand in front of it and look, it will happen to you. You do not have to know the history of art or the elements and principles of design or have a dictionary of symbolism. You just have to have the right attitude and you can "get it." With the other ones it does not matter how good your attitude is you have to have the knowledge to understand what it means. You know, to actually get to what the artist intended. And if in the end you ask them which one they prefer they usually say they prefer the Newman to the Jordan - some would not. They like the flashy look of it.

VA What I thought you might say, too, was that they like their personal involvement. It needs to be experienced.

CD Exactly! And that is what Newman said - "my art is an event" - so basically that means if nothing has happened then you have not seen it. That is what I tell them too. "If you are standing in front of a painting and nothing is happening, then you are not seeing it." The experience is better for them, in a way. It is more, if they have a perceptual experience. The experience of a Baroque painting is much more intellectual, in the end, because it involves more of a reading and an understanding of the symbolism and the historical context. For example, the orange peel is the symbol of time and an unlit candle on a stack of books is the symbol of what is left after death.

VA But Barnett Newman grew up in an extremely intellectual family. His father started the first Hebrew school in New York City and therefore his home was always boarding Jewish scholars and teachers from all over Europe. So I thought Newman always thought of art as an intellectual exercise. His work was not expressionistic art but a formalist attitude. Then I read about his interest in achieving and expressing "the sublime," but I could not get the aesthetic "sublime" feeling when I saw his work. It left me cold, until you showed me how to look, or perceive the image. Then I started to "get it"!

CD He was probably one of the best-educated people in North America.

VA Now, what do you think about Rothko, Gotlieb, Pollock and Newman? None of them could draw? [Do a realistic rendering of something]. Does anyone ever think that is a necessary part of the artistic process, to be able to draw? Well, I guess that is part of the concept of craft. Is it that you can be taught and trained to draw but you cannot be trained to think?

CD I do not know. But I think you can be trained to think too.

VA Really! I think education inhibits thinking because I had a Carleton University Ph.D. Mechanical Engineering student from China boarding with me for over four years. She knew everything that was in the books. If she was given a problem she knew how to put it down on paper and solve it theoretically. But she could not do or see it [the engineering problem] in reality. She could not figure out what the problem was with the gears on her bike. I figured it out and I sure don't have an engineering degree, or that much experience with bikes either.

At the beginning of my art courses, to all levels of students, I always introduce the creative process in art [problem solving] with, "You know more than you could possibly learn if you went to school for the rest of your life. It is a gift of the mind. So use it. Think!"

Back to abstract art. To get people to see is it like getting people to think? Are you working toward that? Because you do not tell them what they will see. They will discover it on their own as you guide them by asking questions and they have to perceive - think!

CD No! I guide their looking. I guide it through the eyes as much as I can. So I try to get them to focus on the painting, so I can find ways. For example, about the Riopelle, I ask, "Is there any structure to the way the colours are set up?" So they start looking for structure. I try to get them away from this concept thing into perception, by getting them to look and to watch what happens when they see. So I do not know if that is really thinking. It is more basic than thinking. You see what happens with perception; your eye abstracts it, divides and channels. It is really hard to get beyond that. Like with Impressionism "Look at this white; wait a minute, look at this snow. What colour is it? It is not really white. Isn't there some blue, purple and yellow?" So they started to look at their perceptions and then they started to see the colour that was there in nature. Whereas before, when they were taught conceptually, how to paint academically, snow is white, sky is blue, trees are green and that is it.

VA Manet theorised that the eye captures in the moment only the image without background and therefore his art reflected that belief.

CD The Gestalt ... what the eye sees. The image came off the background. Most abstraction tries to avoid the formal relationship to circumstance so that things become interchangeable, like in Newman's painting. Is the blue the background or is the red? But it alternates. Like the thing with the vase or the two profiles. The eye cannot see both at the same time.

#### **INTERVIEW EIGHT with National Art Gallery teacher Ms. Barbara Dytnerska (Transcribed from cassette tape and hand written notes.)**

VA Does the gallery provide a body of knowledge connected to abstract art to the visiting public or students?

BD The gallery provides theme rooms with informative video lessons to be listened to in either French or English through individual earphones. Printed handouts explaining aspects of the different exhibitions are provided free. And if

there is a text [book] that goes with an exhibition, tied-down copies are available throughout.

For example, if they go into the last room in the Canadian section they have the video, *Discovering Abstraction*, which was prepared for our exhibit, "The Crisis of Abstraction." It is about modernism in Canada.

VA How do gallery visitors, in general, respond to abstract art?

[In answer to this question I was provided with a detailed report of the analysis of the nine hundred and eighteen response cards collected in Gallery C-214 where the public was asked to "Share Your Reaction." In 1994 enhancements were installed into gallery C-214 of the NAG. They were the *Voice of Fire* and three other works by Barnett Newman, as well as *No. 16*, a colour-field abstract by Rothko, *No. 29* by Jackson Pollock, *1949 G*, by Clifford Still, *Black Box* by Tony Smith, and *White Flower I* by Agnes Martin. Cards were left in that gallery for the public to write their responses to these works of art.]

VA Do you have any particularly successful lessons that have helped your students here at the National Gallery deal with their negative attitudes toward abstract art?

BD I tell them to "slow down" and look. Don't impose. Have no preconceived ideas as to what they see there. Sit, allow yourself the time to look. Relax. It is to the sceptics, people who are not convinced that these are great works of art, that we have to give the tools to understand or know how to look and see. To become visually sensitive takes years and years. Children "get it" because they come with no preconceptions.

VA Did you ever have these negative sceptic attitudes to abstract art?

BD Of course! To Michael Snow's painting, *Lac Claire*. (Figure 3.) I taught art history and at first I thought art was about the marks visible on the canvas. I "worked it" and it became one of my favourite paintings. I took the time! Imagine him just working with three elements [blue paint and beige masking tape on canvas] to express "Lac Claire."

VA What do you mean by "working it"?

BD Well, I got a lot of help from the children. Just simple questions to children that lead into ..."What is your gut reaction to this painting?" A good teacher always asks questions. They don't bore their students by giving them all the information, all the answers. Then depending on where the answers lead us, that's where we go with the lesson.  
"What are the elements? What is the colour used?" [Answer] "It is blue." "What kind of blue? Is it the same everywhere? Are there gestures? Can you see beneath the blue?" We are investigating. "Is there another element? What is this brown stuff?" [Answer] "It is masking tape on the corners, there." "Why? What is the texture? Is it dry or what? Why is it not all the way around? What does it do to your eye?" [Answer] "It directs your eye." There is a tension between the tape and the blue. Now this leads us to mood. "What is the mood of the painting?"

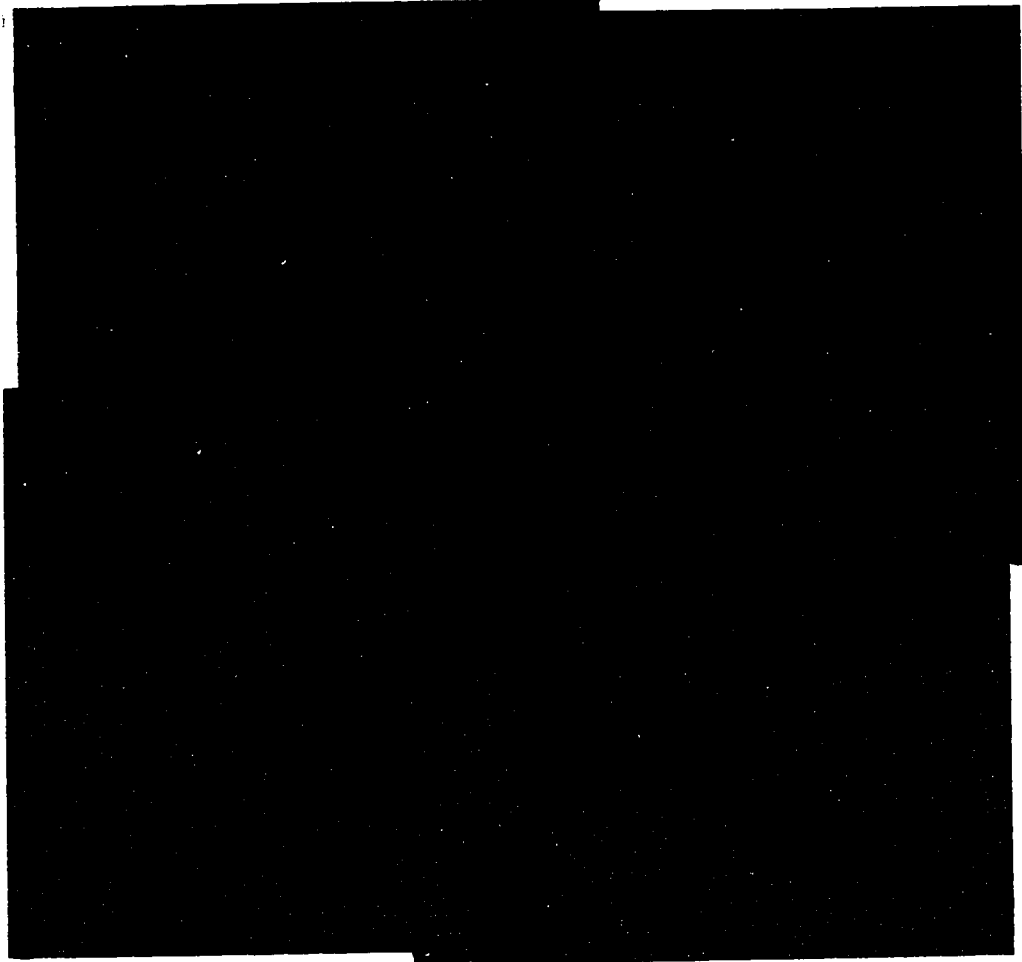


Fig. 3. Michael Snow, *Lac Claire* - 1960 - Contemporary Canadian Painting by William Withrow, McClelland & Stewart, 1992.

Where are we, inside or outside? So what do you think that brown stuff is?"  
[Answer] "It is the sand!" And eventually they get it, the meaning in the painting. The artist had done this with minimum and non-traditional materials. Therefore, a feeling, a mood, that the artist has had, the artist has recreated in a new and different way. The gestures, the way he has applied the paint, it is not flat, it is his visual synthesis of what a lake is about, its essence, but it is not a lake; it is the universal lake, the idea lake.

VA How do you help a student understand why this minimal painting of a lake is as significant as, if not more so, than the realistic rendering?

BD People at that time were no longer satisfied with the traditional values of the exterior world. X-rays were taking pictures of the inside of the body. There were all the discoveries connected to the atom, and Freud was investigating how we think. The artists were ready to experiment and explore, too. They tampered with their psyche inside, in order to get that energy into their work and discover an irrational world. There are no grey-brown rocks in the new Lawren Harrises. The artists intensified what they were gifted to see to share the vision.

VA Now I can see Michael Snow's lake, but what do I see in Rothko's *No 16*?

BD Mark Rothko was looking for an outlet into the spiritual side of man that life did not offer. Every time you see a new abstraction you get another set of jigsaw puzzle pieces to piece together. There is a lot of stuff out there that is horrible. Products of the imitators, not the truly inspired and skilled creator. So for the viewer to learn to see in a new way is like learning to ride a bicycle at thirty, or a better example is learning to downhill ski. There are so many handicaps, not only in your body, but also in your head. Society and culture just wear us down and use us up. You almost have to be obsessed to be a creative artist and break away from the confines of culture. Matisse said, "without art my life is not balanced." If we were balanced we could see, be free to see like a child. Life is such a pain, such a struggle, but if you release it on your own you will find your own energy source.

As part of Barbara's interview, she presented me with a copy of the January 1995, *Summary of the Focus Groups*, prepared by Capital Research, a division of the Bytown Group, Inc., in which I personally participated as a member of the group of teachers invited. We were to give our responses to, and opinions of, colour slide images of art from the NAG collection. Their survey of our comments was a beginning step toward the preparation of an art education video to help visitors appreciate the National Gallery's contemporary art collection. There was a particular focus on works of abstract art. Many of the responses confirmed that there was, in general, a negative attitude toward this type of art.

Their survey also found that the majority of art teachers visit the NAG three or four times a year with their students and even more frequently on their own because of personal interests in art. By listening to their students' comments throughout gallery visits, it was clear to teachers that students' common intrinsic definitions of contemporary art was not so much defined by a historical periods as

it was defined by an artistic styles. They do not really know what that style is, but it is related to "abstract," difficult to understand and it is the opposite of "classic."

When respondents were asked what information they need to understand contemporary art further, the one response that was common to all groups was an explanation of the artist's intent.

A number of issues surrounding contemporary art were mentioned spontaneously by group members. The major issues mentioned were the high prices of contemporary artwork. There was a common belief that they could have done the work of art themselves. There is a lack of information, and a lack of understanding of what lies behind the works of art.

Everyone agreed that there are generally many misunderstandings about contemporary art. Although most participants agreed that the media's usually-negative reaction to contemporary art is an issue, it had to be raised by the moderator and was not mentioned spontaneously by any group. The issues that they raised are more immediate and relate to some of their own feelings or the feelings of those around them.

Barbara also contributed another part of the NAG investigation into what the public wants and needs to know about their contemporary abstract art collection to the present survey. It comes through comments left by visitors on the "Share Your Reaction" response cards collected in gallery C-214 (the gallery containing the *Voice of Fire*). These (8.5x 5.5 in.) lined cards are left in C-214 and the NAG invites visitors to write comments on them and share their reactions to the art works by leaving their cards behind in a binder with pocketed pages. This small selection from the total 918 comments is drawn from a period between October 1994 and June 1995. The NAG continues to collect and stock these cards, as it believes in the value of giving the public a voice, and a shared collective learning experience.

**I felt this collection reaffirmed the focus of my survey. Negative attitudes to abstract art prevail and each one needs to be addressed with a new focus in art education.**

SAMPLE COMMENTS on monetary and artistic value to -*Voice of Fire*

NEGATIVE EXAMPLES:

" I search and search for the inner significance of *Voice of Fire* - how could it possibly merit the exorbitant price it fetched. But I still only see three stripes on the wall. I consider myself open to the artistic experience but feel that I could have painted three stripes down a canvas myself."

"Enjoy the work in this room except those by Barnett Newman. I have read, listened, discussed with the "Knowledgeable" ones but am unable to appreciate *Voice of Fire* - I want to but I can't."

"OK, I admit I don't know about art. But I know what I like and I don't like that *Voice of Fire* ... What's happened to Norman Rockwell or Robert Bateman? Now that's art worth paying for!!!"

"I think people who are entrusted with public funds should really take time to assess what they are doing. The money spent on a *Voice of Fire* is an outrage and no one can justify it!"

"The *Voice of Fire* - Who are these people trying to kid? There's a story called "The Emperor's New Clothes". What's impressive about it is how many people got scammed."

#### POSITIVE EXAMPLES:

"These works are about how the artist feels - it is part of a unique experience in time that can never be repeated. These artists are at one with themselves. These works are like their journals. Stand in front of *Voice of Fire* and open your mind. You will learn to see!"

"The hullabaloo caused by the National Gallery's purchase of *Voice of Fire* makes me quite sad. Perhaps the gallery should display an Apache Attack Helicopter and its price tag next to the work. Unlike the ... weaponry used by the Canadian military, the public can come and use Mr. Newman's work. I thank the National Gallery for providing me the opportunity to enjoy *Voice of Fire*."

"Any work that can evoke so much anger in some people and introspection in others must certainly be achieving what the artist intended."

"Controversy, Solidity and Intensity are all important factors in what makes modern abstract art. GREAT ART PROVOKES REACTION."

"At first I wasn't impressed at all. Then I sat down to look for quite a long time. I took the booklet and was inspired by the comments: Yes, the real importance of this artwork does not lay [sic] in itself, but what it does within me ... "

#### OTHER COMMENTS:

"If you hear voices. You need a shrink. If you see voices. See your opthamologist!"

"I think it is upside down."

#### COMMENTS ON OTHER WORKS IN GALLERY C-214



**Mark Rothko - No. 16**

"I think that when Mr. Mark Rothko was painting this picture the canvas under his hands was crying."

"... When I looked at it long enough, my mind cleared for a second, my body felt numb and then all kinds of ideas flooded into my brain."

**Jackson Pollock - No. 29**

"The intense inside of a person, his thoughts, his feelings, his emotions, his insecurity and his confidence. This is a beautiful expression of the human mind."

**Clyfford Still - 1949 G**

"I like the Clyfford Still because it reminds me of our world slowly being covered in darkness, starting in the middle and working its way out."

**Tony Smith - Black Box**

"It reminds me of the Rub-bic's [Rubik's] cube square on the side and it will take time to figure out."

**Agnes Martin - White Flower I**

"There is such a quite peacefulness in her art. Serenity and order!"

**OTHER COMMENTS:**

"If you are confused, if you don't understand, and the most thought you've put into it is a comment in this book and all you had to say was negative, insulting the artist's intelligence, maybe you should go to the library and learn. [Negative] Criticising is too easy."

"These works provide a focal point for dialogue such as that found in this book. True, open, egalitarian debate on art is rare and hence valuable ... Thank you for this forum."

An analysis was done to identify trends in the responses, with particular attention being paid to comments about values; the values associated with collecting contemporary non-representational art; the value of controversy; the assigning of monetary value to art; and how people respond aesthetically to art, particularly the type displayed in C-214. The analysis of the response cards from Gallery C-214 revealed that 49% of the cards dealt specifically with the *Voice of Fire* and within that 22% of the responses were negative, 16% were positive, 6% were mixed or undecided and the remaining 5% were exclamatory, strange or sarcastic.

## APPENDIX D

### ART LESSONS CONCERNED WITH CHANGING NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD ABSTRACT ART

#### ART LESSON I by Ms. Frankie Toporowski

Title: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

#### INTRODUCTION TO THE CANADIAN ARTIST PAUL-EMILE BORDUAS

He was born in the village of St. Hilare, twenty miles outside Montreal on the Richelieu River. He was the eldest son but frail and sickly. At seven he was bed-ridden with rheumatic fever and probably began to draw at this time by copying illustrations. After five years of schooling, the maximum available in the village, he began working with fellow villager and painter Ozias Leduc. Leduc's work was very nearly of European stature, but it was circumscribed by the tradition of religious art so that Borduas' training was, in its way, as narrow and formal as any offered by the Canadian art academies of the day.

While continuing to work with Leduc, he earned his degree at L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montreal and began to teach drawing. But, in 1928 he quit his teaching post and went to Paris. Though he left his Paris art school in disgust, and had trouble supporting himself through church-decoration commissions, he did discover the work of Braque, Soutine, and Renoir.

Back in Montreal by 1952, he tried to live by his painting alone, but was unsuccessful; so he became a teacher of design in the primary schools. In the classroom he was greatly struck by the beautiful spontaneity of children's art. He struggled with his own art, trying for the same spontaneity, but he felt cramped by his upbringing, by the arid provincialism of Quebec and by the repressiveness of a clergy-dominated society. Of the whole decade of the thirties he later wrote, "In ten years of intense work only ten paintings were in any way worth keeping."

At one point, in an effort to escape his milieu, he wrote to the New Hebrides and Tahiti to ask about the possibilities of emigrating. The answers were discouraging so he stayed in Montreal, fighting it out, reading, thinking and speculating and trying to put his theories into practice. In 1957 he became a teacher of painting and art history at L'Ecole du Meuble, a design school with a reasonably progressive atmosphere. All this time, Borduas was still painting representational subjects. Then in 1940, the invasion of France by Germany brought an influx of Parisians to Montreal. One was Pere Couturier, a Dominican teacher and artist, who lectured for a year at L'Ecole du Meuble on all the latest ideas from Europe. Another was Borduas' contemporary and compatriot, Alfred Pellan, who was returning after a decade in Paris and who proceeded to exhibit his avant-garde work.

In this atmosphere of ferment in 1941 - at the age of thirty-six - Borduas did his first abstract paintings. Later he wrote, "Children, always of great interest to me, opened up the way of surrealism, of automatic writing. The most perfect condition of the act of painting was finally unveiled." The historical connection is made.

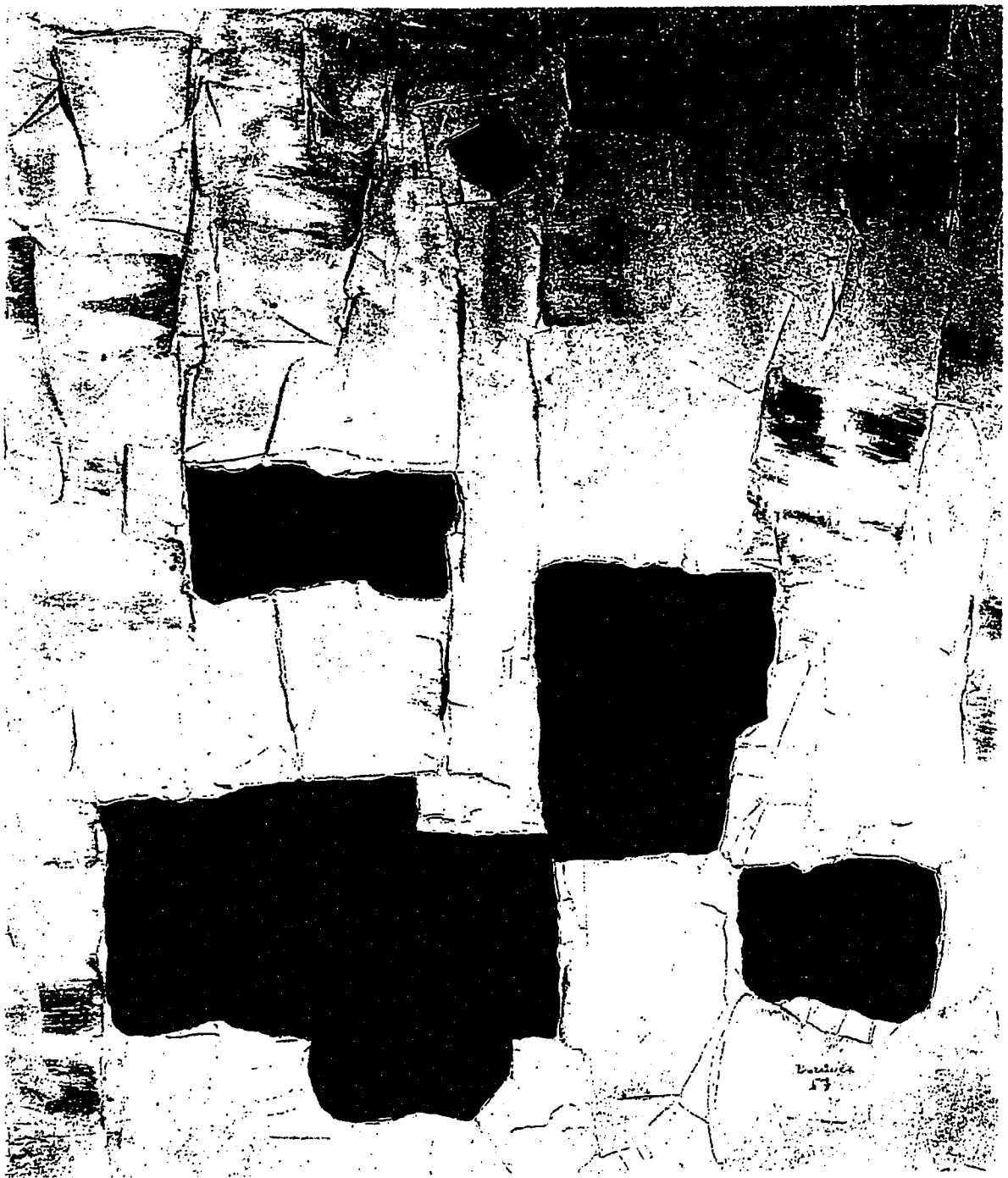


Fig. 4. Paul-Emile Borduas - *L'Etoile Noire* - 1957 Contemporary Canadian Painting by William Withrow, McClelland & Stewart, 1992

## ASSIGNMENT: EXPRESSIONISTIC PAINTING

### Historical Research

While looking at slides and pictures of the works of Borduas from three different periods in his life students are invited to:

- a) Compare the styles and note the differences.
- b) Try linking the world history to the art history.
- c) Why do artists do what they do?
- d) After studying his personal history put yourself in his place.  
What would you do?

Medium: liquid tempera paints on white Mayfair paper

Style: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Theory: The Elements of Design that can be used in a composition.

1. LINE
2. SHAPE = 2D
3. FORM = 3D
4. COLOUR
5. VALUE (the more or less of an element)
6. TEXTURE
7. SPACE

Technique: While thinking of a situation decide what the **mood** of it is.  
Choose the **colours** that you think best express that feeling.  
Using your **brush** to apply the colours create the **feeling** in a visual form.



Fig. 5, Example of student work from Lesson I - Abstract Expressionism

## **ART LESSON II by Karl Schutt**

Title: STILL LIFE BASED - ABSTRACT TEXTURE COLLAGE

There are two types of texture:

- A) Actual texture (something which can be felt by touching) and
- B) Illusionary texture (something which looks rough but actually feels smooth.)

### **INSTRUCTIONS**

1. On Mayfair paper 25 x 33 and lay out your drawing so that the entire surface is covered by the still life.
2. Put your name in the bottom right hand corner.
3. When the work is complete staple it to a sheet of black paper 3 cm. wide on the top and sides, and 5 cm. on the bottom.
4. Use your contour still life drawing as a reference drawing and create a composition using a combination of objects from the drawing to create a new image.
5. Once the new design has been completed use a combination of real and illusionary textures to create a work which depends heavily on textures.
6. Illusionary textures could be obtained from photos printed in magazines. Smooth areas could be created with coloured papers.
7. Outline could be added to create a unified yet abstract image.
8. Actual textures could be found in the wallpaper catalogues in the art room.
9. Cut and fit the shapes carefully. Use bond fast glue to stick objects in place.
10. Keep the paper clean of excessive glue.

## EVALUATION

1. Layout .....20
  - (a) Paper about 25 x 33 cm.
  - (b) Name in the bottom right hand corner
  - (c) Black paper 3 cm. wide on the top and sides and 5 cm. wide on the bottom
2. Transfer of drawing ..... 30
  - (a) Use your contour still life drawing
  - (b) Create a composition
  - (c) Outline could be added
3. Textures .....30
  - (a) Real textures
  - (b) Illusionary textures
  - (c) Smooth areas could be created with coloured papers
4. Neatness .....20
  - (a) Cut the shapes carefully
  - (b) Fit the shapes accurately
  - (c) Glue the shapes carefully
  - (d) Do not have excessive glue spots
  - (e) Attach the collage to the black paper carefully
  - (f) Make sure your name and level is on the drawing

## PARTICIPATION

1. SKIP CLASS - loses 20% for class behaviour because absent without a note.

Note: .....

2. LEAVES EARLY WITHOUT PERMISSION - loses 20%.

Note: .....

3. 20% DEDUCTED - fails to use personal tools / class tools properly and safely.

Note: .....

4. 10 MARKS DEDUCTED - failure to return borrowed art room equipment such as

rulers, pencils, erasers, compass, other .....

5. 10 MARKS DEDUCTED - for failure to help clean-up or organise the classroom.

Note:.....

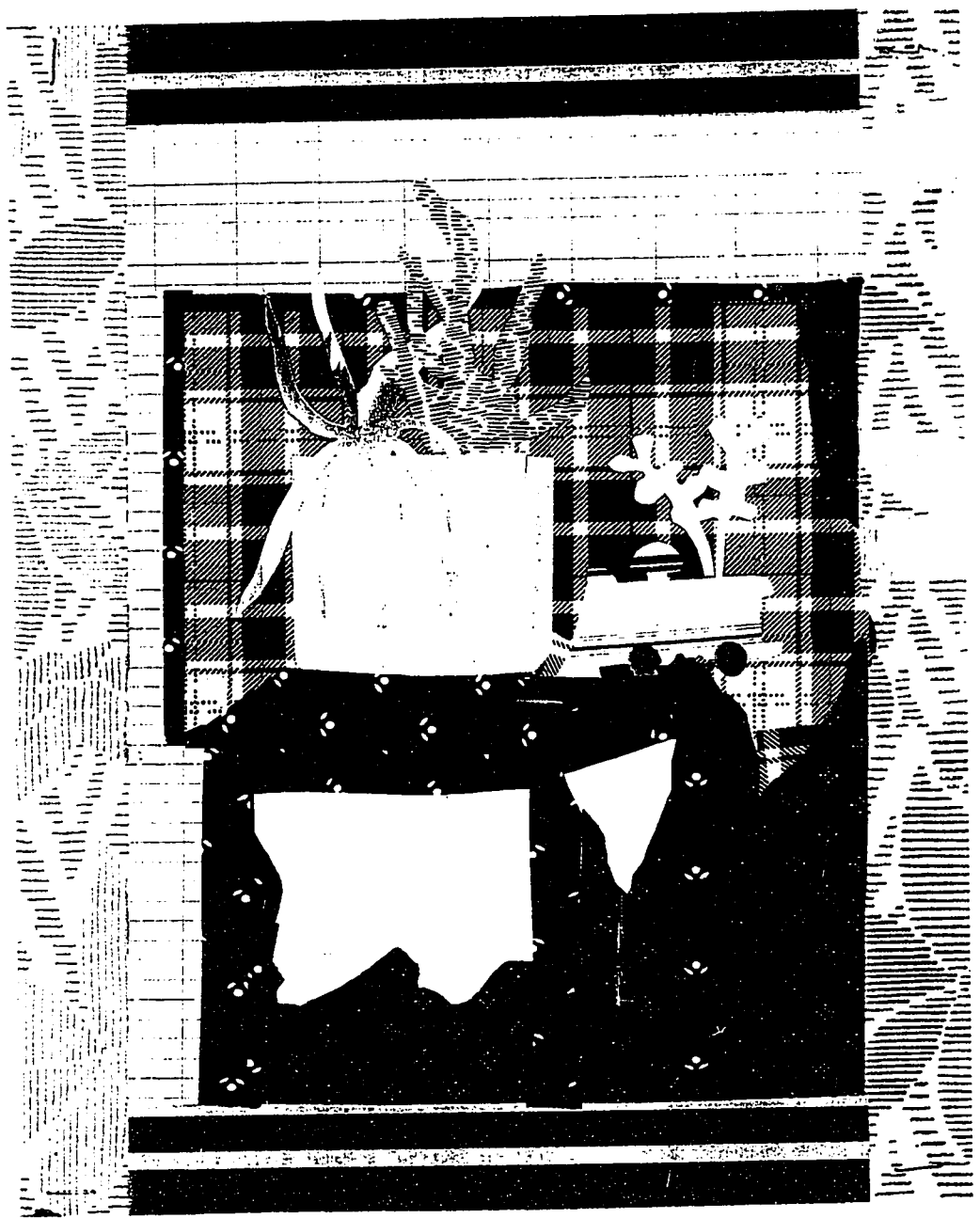


Fig. 6, Example of student work from Lesson II - Abstract Design



## **ART LESSON III by Mrs. Sylvia Klein**

### **Title: INTRODUCTION TO ABSTRACT SCULPTURE**

#### **Part A**

1. Historically research the figurative art found in books and magazines. Note: the realistic, stylised and abstract styles. (Slides of figurative sculpture will be presented in class with special attention to Henry Moore.)
2. Class discussion on the differences from realistic to simplification in design.
3. Using stove-pipe wire, make a small ten-inch figure based on your own anatomical dimensions. Cover the basic wire figure in a simplified manner with plaster of Paris casting strips. Close off open areas, combine arm and torso or open up an area in the middle.
4. Finish the sculpture by painting it.

#### **Part B**

1. Look at non-objective sculpture, for example, Tony Smith or Louis Nevelson. Be able to discuss the components of these works and also the poetry of these works. What is their magical mystical quality? (Which, they usually do not see but if polite will listen and perhaps later internalise and then hopefully externalise. If it does not happen on a purely affective level, but on a concrete level that is OK. because they have to start growing from somewhere.)
2. Using semi-rigid, soft paper (Mayfair) cut shapes and twist and combine shapes. These will be small and make several of these small maquettes. Select your favourite one and blow it up.
3. Using corrugated cardboard (from boxes) create shapes. Twist and tape together. If wire is necessary use wire to help retain the design flow. Using newsprint, paper mache three coats on the sculpture. Use paper towel for the final coat to see the shape clarified. Texture may be added. (sandpaper, rice etc.) Paint the finish.
4. The final product is often a pleasant insightful surprise for the student.

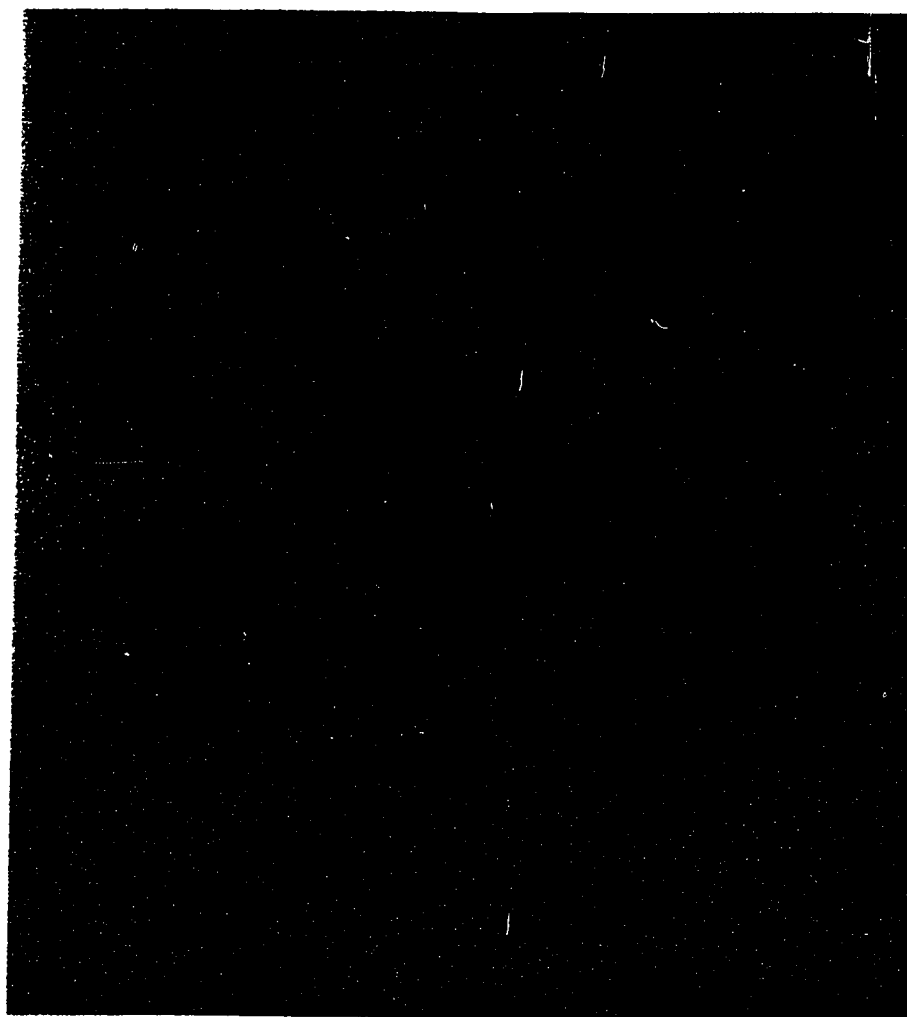


Fig. 7. Example of student work from Lesson III - Part B - Abstract Sculpture in paper.

## Part C

1. Look at sculpture-figurative, realistic, to non-objective - and focus on the shapes and textures.
2. Pour plaster of Paris into a plastic bag and drape it over shapes that the students have brought in. When plaster has hardened the bags are removed.
3. Explore the shape and form of the plaster. Carve and reshape the plaster into a new entity.

You might not be comfortable at first because you really do not know what direction to move in. Let me reassure you that it is OK. to just explore and react to the plaster form without knowing what the finished product will look like. May I emphasise that the poetry within yourself will be revealed.

4. You will be given two weeks ( $3 \times 70 \times 2 = 420$  minutes minimum) of class time to work, first chiselling with kitchen knives followed by smoothing with sandpaper.

*Sylvia Klein's observations: "The results were very positive. It was surprising to the students that they could produce a non-objective sculpture that would embody interesting shapes, textures and rhythms that had a very personal expression."*

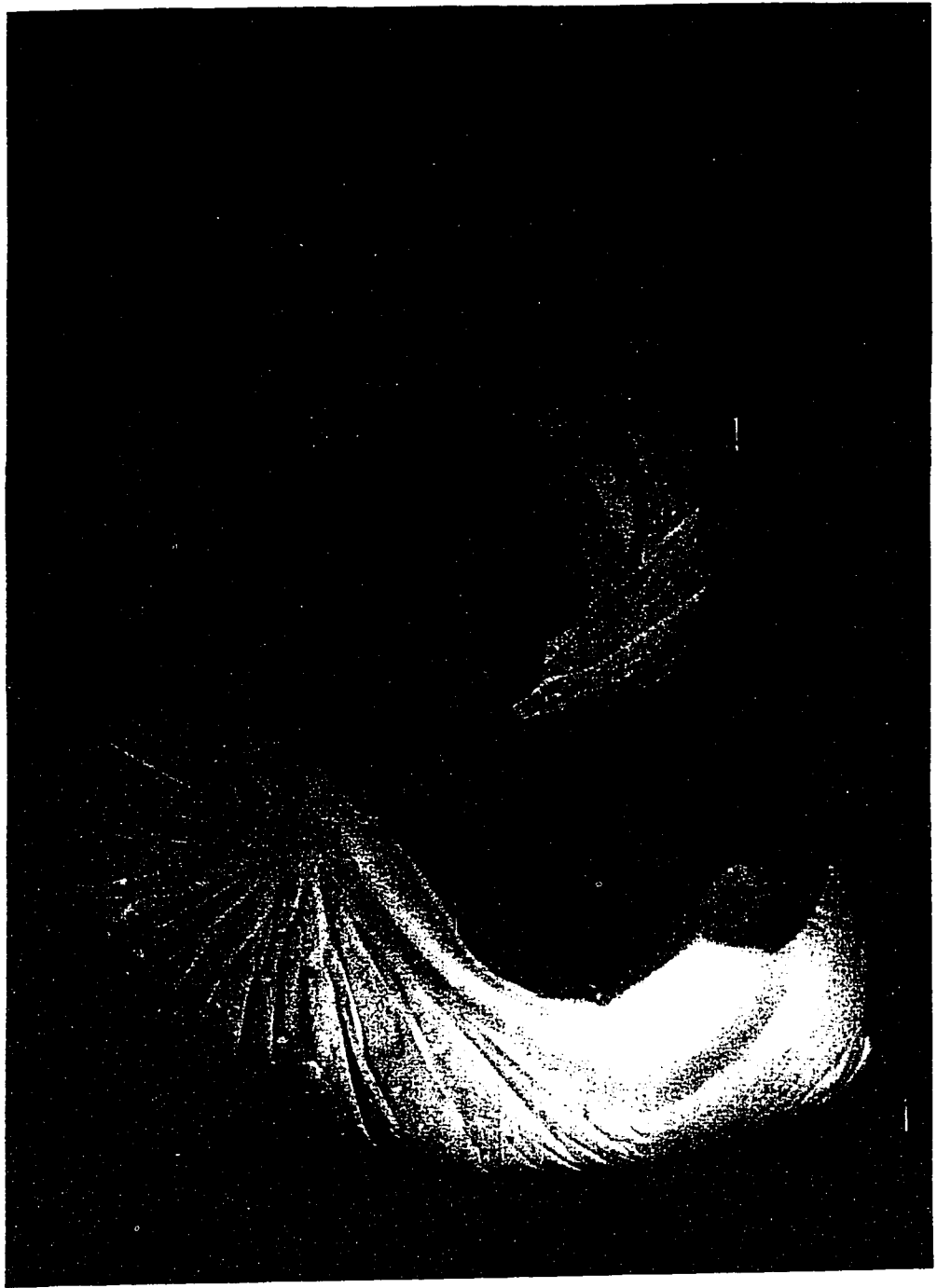


Fig. 8. Example of student work from Lesson III - Part C - Abstract Sculpture in plaster.

## **ART LESSON IV by Ms. Roberta Huebener**

### **Title: NON-OBJECTIVE ART**

#### **Part A**

Introduction to the abstract non-objective creative process using brush strokes, colour harmony and composition selection using the elements and principles of design.

1. On a (24 x 36 inch) full sheet of high gloss design paper apply two colours of tempera paint using several tools and a variety of techniques such as blending, scumbling, daubing, and scraping. Work with lines, shapes, forms, colours, values, textures and space, creating freely.
2. When this part of the exercise is completed, zero in, framing off the most visually interesting areas of the original composition.
3. Cut the original design into smaller selectively chosen composition pieces.

#### **Part B**

Learn the following definitions from realism to abstraction - quick and simple.

1. High (Super) Realism - often photographic looking or "Trompe l'oeil".
2. Realism - an attempt to reproduce nature and present things as they are.
3. Stylisation - the subject is recognisable but may be simplified, lack perspective or have important details emphasised only.
4. Abstraction - definite move away from reality. Aspects of real subject may remain but there is a substantial amount of distortion, mixed up parts, colours, etc. as in cubism by Picasso.
5. Non-objective - there is no recognisable intended subject matter in the picture, just colour, shape, texture, etc. An essence is expressed.

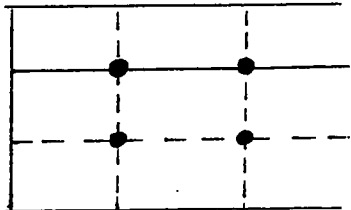


Fig. 9. Example of student work from Lesson IV - Part A - Non-Objective Abstract Art

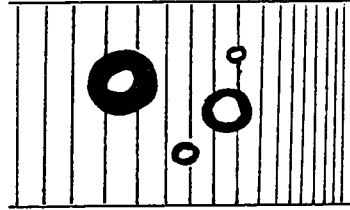
**ASSIGNMENT:** Create an abstract or stylised design based on a familiar object,  
for an example a musical instrument.

# OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT IN YOUR DESIGN

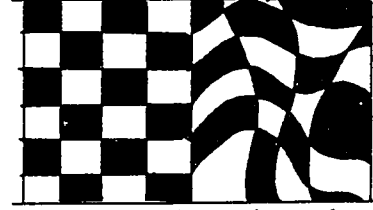
CENTRE OF INTEREST ----- or ----- PATTERN



typical locations  
for a centre of  
interest

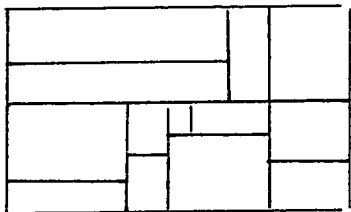


Dominant  
Sub-dominant

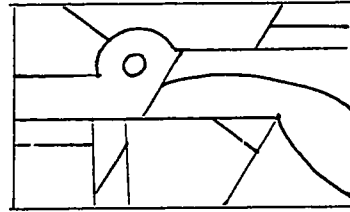


Regular or irregular  
repetition of a  
subject

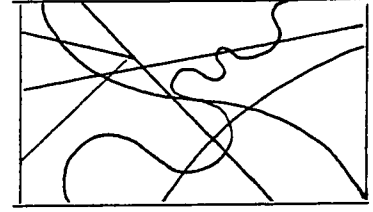
STATIC ----- or ----- DYNAMIC ?



calm, quiet  
orderly ...  
lots of horizontals  
& verticals

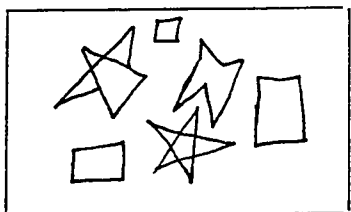


mixed

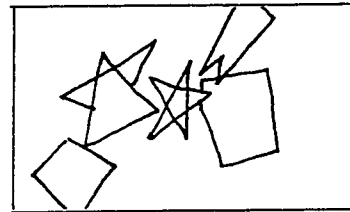


excited, busy  
suggests movement  
lots of curves &  
diagonals

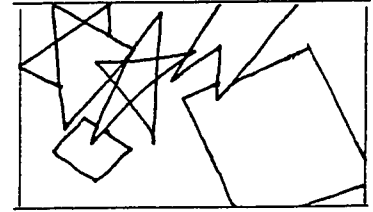
"ANCHOR" YOUR DESIGN TO THE FRAME OF REFERENCE.  
(Relate subjects to each other)



Poor -----



Better -----



----- Best

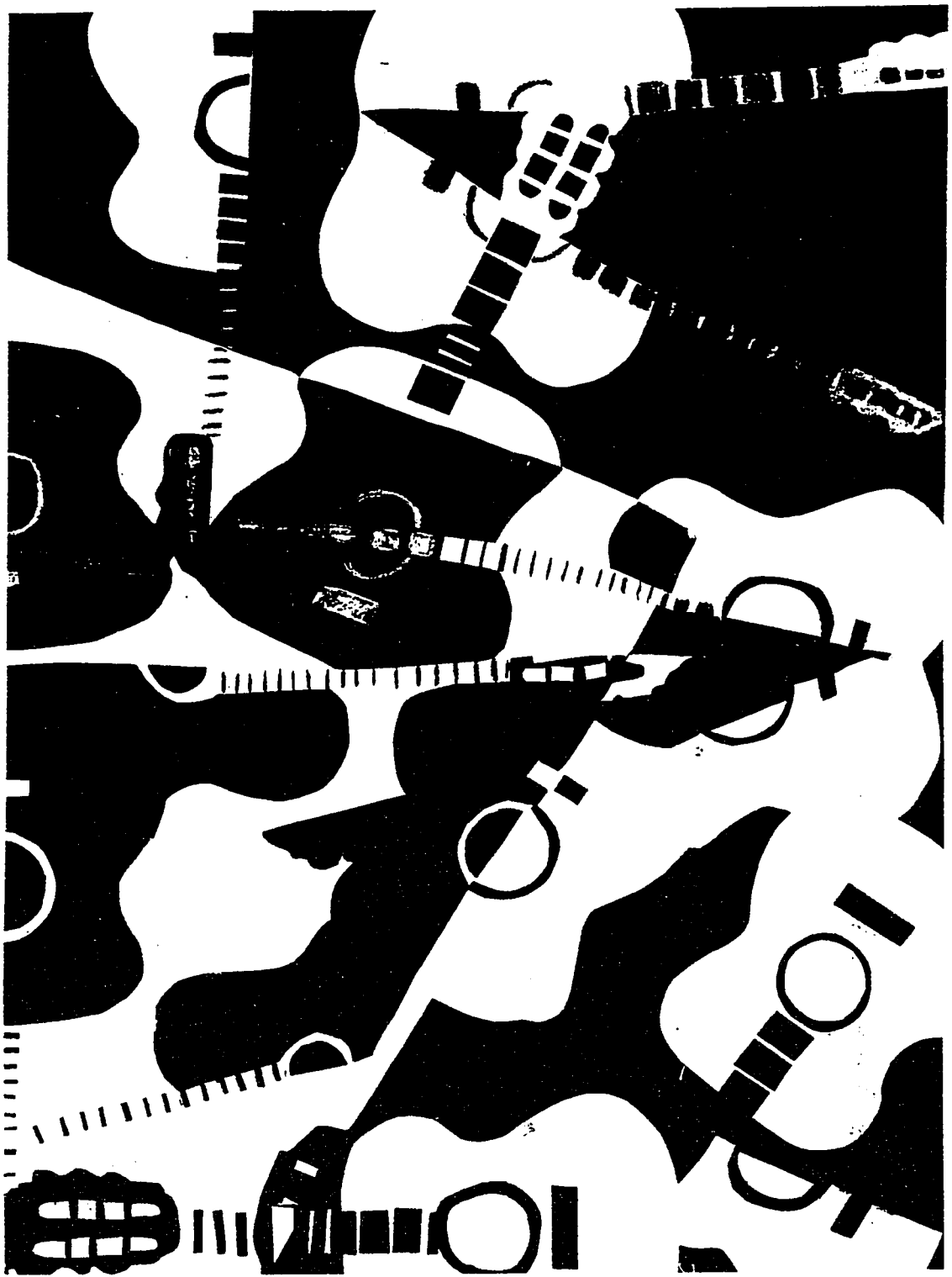


Fig. 10 Example of student work from Lesson IV - Part B - Abstract Design



## **ART LESSON V by Mr. Tim DesClouds**

**Title: GRADE NINE DRAWING UNIT**

### **Introduction:**

The following lesson plan is a recent studio project addressed by my grade nine class. The catalyst for this lesson plan came through the most recent showing of Betty Goodwin's work at the National Art Gallery.

I hesitate writing down lesson plans in fear that my teaching will get watered down and follow the needs of the curriculum more than those of my students. By avoiding making concrete notes of my lessons it forces me not to rely on past performances, keeping the classes fresh and based on the changing needs of my students, and keeping the dynamics of the student/teacher relationship as the foundation and focus of the class.

In regards to this research paper, I firmly believe abstraction and any historical art movement connected to abstraction cannot be taught and should not be taught in isolation from historical context, and the root of any visual expression is in that of nature. The teaching of abstraction should not be watered down to simple visual illusions or straight observation of formal design; rather, it should come through the understanding of direct observation of nature and the expressive documentation of that experience.

**Grade nine drawing unit on the creation of a natural expressive marking system, through direct observation of real objects.**

This unit comes out of a firm base in the use of construction lines to establish form and shape with a picture plan. It also comes out of further development of compositional devices to draw the eye through a given space and the creation of shallow or deep space on a two-dimensional plane.

**OBJECTIVE:** For the student to be given the awareness of how different marking systems can give an emotional response to the viewer.

**RESEARCH:** Students will research, with the aid of a teacher, the marking system of numerous artists throughout the art world. (Documentation of such marking systems will be noted in their sketchbooks.)

**STUDIO WORK:** Students will do a series of large drawings, three by eight feet, one drawing per each two-hour session over a period of one week. (Each work will have the same simple form as a catalyst and the object will be placed as a still life for direct visual reference for the first three pieces.

**PROCESS:** a) Before each drawing the student will choose an emotion. He/She will then pair that emotion with a marking system (with the aid of the research done), and create a tonal drawing using the established marks over a construction line foundation.

b) At the end of the third drawing, a class critique will take place. At this time it will be made clear, the visible importance of marks in creating an emotional response, over that of the actual subject matter.

PART 2: a) The catalyst will change for the next two drawings, using the human form. The students will now choose an emotion and pair a marking system to that emotion. In taking the knowledge gained in the first three drawings of a simple object, the students will now combine the expressiveness of the chosen marking system with the visual capabilities of formal composition and psychological power of human gesture and tension between two human forms.

b) The following critique should stress how the direct process envisioned by the artist before she/he starts will establish the groundwork for projecting emotion in the viewer. The elements of design are only tools for the human hand to establish a marking system for an underlying emotional response in the viewer going past the initial subject matter confronted by the viewer.

PABLO PICASSO, in conversation -1935:

"Abstract art is only painting. There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work. Whether he likes it or not, man is the instrument of nature. It forces on him its character and appearance."

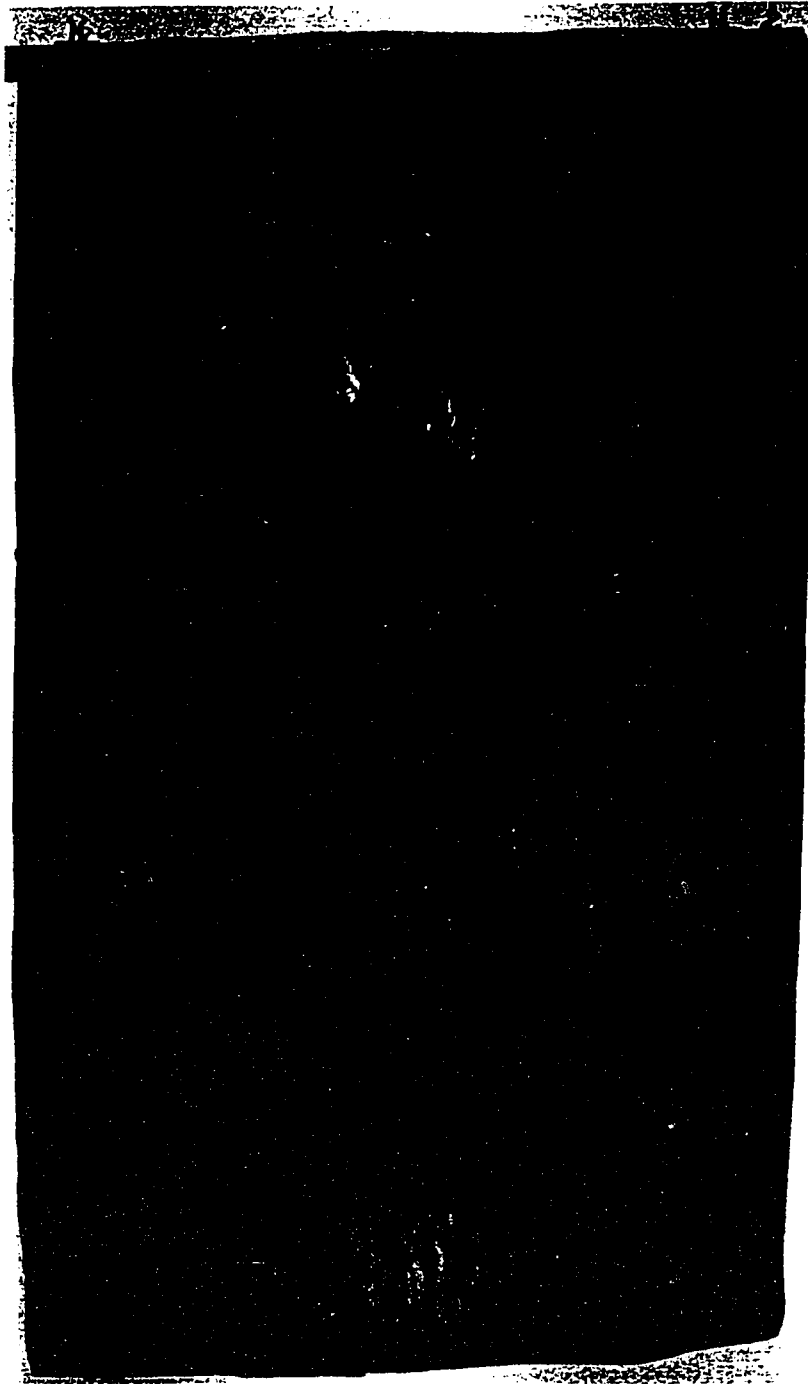


Fig. 11. Example of student work from Lesson V - Figurative Abstraction

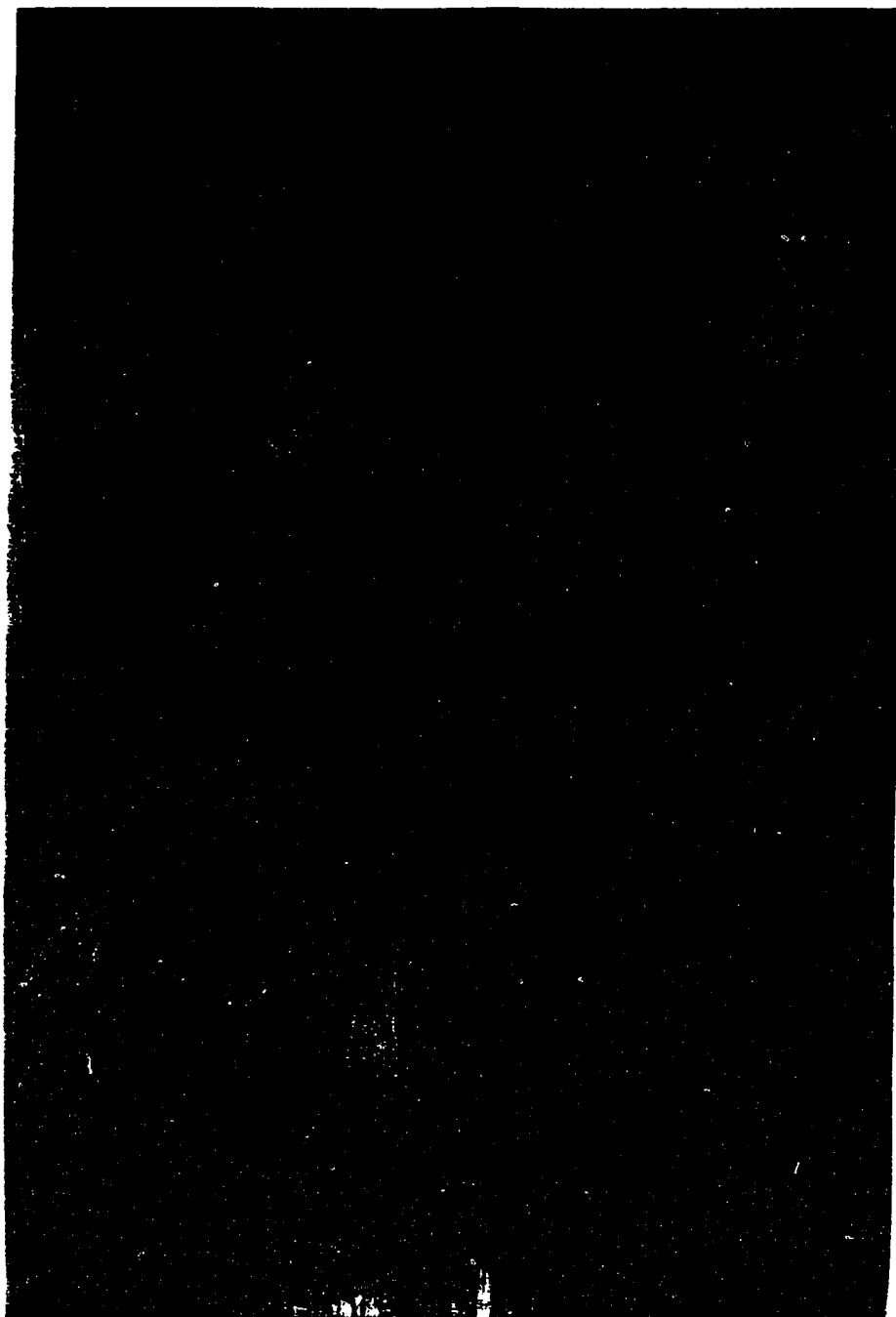


Fig. 12. Example of student work from Lesson V - Figurative Abstraction.

## **ART LESSON VI by Ms. Ellyn Norris**

**Title: ART HISTORY - THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN MAGAZINES**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Students would look through various art magazines and decide on an artist that they felt was interesting, exciting, and new for them. Then they would answer various questions on the period the artist worked in. What did they feel they were trying to express? How could they create an art piece in a similar style using their own ideas as well as a style of the artist?

### **ART DIALOGUE:**

The dialogue began in a written form where the students answered questions. Certain questions I asked were on their artist. We start a sort of journal, talking back and forth to one another in a written form. They would answer the questions and give their opinions on the artist's work and I tried to pick up on where their interests were. What they were thinking about? Were they were thinking more about the artist's life, or were they thinking about the materials that the artist chose, or whether they were interested in the content the artist talked about in their work. So the dialogue began to become more individualised at the beginning as a written form.

When they became more comfortable in expressing themselves in writing, they were asked to talk to the rest of the class on their artist and why they chose them and what they found interesting.

### **PART A: - STUDENT WRITTEN WORK: (transcribed from video of class presentations)**

Student A. I chose the photographer Charles Hewitt because he seems to bring inanimate objects to life. They seem to be more alive from the perspective that he has chosen to take his photographs and draw his paintings, than the way we usually look at things. Buildings for example - he seems to capture them as though they are alive. Instead of only looking at them from ground level we see them from above, across and on an angle. These different dimensions change the size and shape. When we see them from ground level we see one-dimensional. He is also showing the buildings in a very different dimension, from very close.

The same thing with the stairway ... usually stairs are just for walking up. He shows them at a different angle. It is as if he is showing them from the stairs point of view, like what the stairs see. The interesting parallel between the artist and me is I like to take photographs and like to draw too. This artist shows me another way or method of viewing and drawing what I see.

Student B. The artist I picked was Edvard Munch, because of how he used the feminine figure in a lot of his work and I use a lot of that myself. Now I want to express more freely with my backgrounds and also use his feminism in my work. I think that by using his style I will work a little more freely in my paintings. A lot of my other work is just filled in and made to measure where I feel I want to

express more in this painting. His subjects were very solid, like mine, but the backgrounds were very surrealistic, free and open.

**PART B:** Now we are into the process of their work. We stopped and talked about it, teacher to student, and with other class members. We would talk together about their work and share how it was going. I really encouraged them to bring themselves into their work - express something that was about them, their heritage, something they liked to do, involve it in their work.

**CLASSROOM DIALOGUE:** Next we are going to hear them talk about their work in a personal and meaningful way.

**Student C.** This is a sculpture I made after the sculptor whose work I saw in a magazine, Tony Smith. His sculpture was made out of steel and I did not have that kind of material so I used cardboard paper. I think it came out pretty good.

**Teacher:** So, would you like to have done it out of steel?

**Student C.** Well, I don't think so because I didn't find it too, too interesting, and I guess it would take really long to make it out of steel and it would probably be very complicated.

**Teacher:** Why did you choose Tony Smith?

**Student C.** Honestly? Because his first name is Italian.

**Teacher:** Why did you choose Eve Hess as your example artist?

**Student D.** The reason I chose Hess is because she was expressing how she felt. These are my favourite colours and I wanted to see how they blended together. These colours have a lot of meaning to me because they are the colours of the flag of Jamaica.

**Teacher:** What are the meanings of the colours?

**Student D.** The green is because we have spring all year, the yellow is for the golden sunshine and the black is for the people of the country.

Now the students are ready to visit an art gallery, view real art and continue to dialogue.

**GALLERY DIALOGUE:** Art student response to abstract art while visiting a gallery.  
(Transcribed from video)

**Teacher:** How do you feel about this work of art? [an abstract painting.]

**Student F.** I don't like this! I do not like this because quite frankly I don't know what it is and I don't know what to think of it. It just seems to me like a squirted splotch of red paint on a piece of hanging canvas. [Canvas was not stretched.] I don't see the point of it. I don't know why there should be a point to it. I don't see why this should be considered art. This seems like something a five-year-old would do or maybe even I would probably do in art.

I'm not an art critic. I don't think I should be evaluating this because I don't know what I'm talking about. I can't find any symbolism in it. I don't feel anything special about this and I just don't know what the big deal about it is. I wouldn't

hang it. If I had an art gallery I probably wouldn't hang it unless the artist could explain exactly what it was and I could believe him.

**Teacher:** OK. Let's challenge this a bit John, and try to give it a personal meaning. What does red mean to you?

**Student F.** colour, blood maybe?

**Teacher:** What about the canvas?

**Student F.** I guess its something artists use to paint on.

**Teacher:** Take it out of the realm of being an artist's material. There are other things you use canvas for besides painting on.

**Student F.** I don't get what you mean.

**Teacher:** What are some other things you can make out of canvas?

**Student F.** Well, sails are made out of canvas.

**Teacher:** OK. There's a start.

**Student F.** Hey! I get it! This red thing looks like a buoy!

**Teacher:** Aha! We are getting some personal meaning here.

## **ART LESSON VII by Claude Dupuis**

**Title:** ABSTRACT ART - MINIMALISM: "HOW MANY WAYS TO SEE A BOX?"  
Advanced Seminar Outline - (Two hours)

**Introduction:** "If you have come to listen to someone talk about minimalism there are probably two things you want to get out of it; the historical information and you want to be able to appreciate it"

**Definition:** Minimalism is an extreme form of abstraction. It is a twentieth-century style with the idea of reducing a work of art into its basic formalistic parts; line, shape, form, colour, value, texture and space. They seem to be the result of a very intellectual activity and not intuitive or spontaneous.

**Historical:** Minimalism as the result of historical evolution.

- A. The western idea that art evolves comes from the patriarchal view of nature and man's progress, of always having something new and better than before.
- B. The Renaissance view of art as the "I" "eye". I see, therefore I have a point of view, where the spectator is a fixed point.
- C. Cartesian view, "I think, therefore I am", which brings the view down to thought. Has thinking replaced seeing?
- D. McLuhan's "acoustic space" where everyone is at the centre of a sphere with different points of view. This view changes when we share an experience like when we all watch the same television program.

**Psychological:** Minimalism and the phenomenological approach. For example; Tony Smith's *Box*, How does one relate to this kind of sculpture?

- A. As a viewer you are at the centre of the event.
- B. You have to split yourself in two. (Schizophrenic?) On the one hand you are looking at the object, on the other hand, you are watching yourself, trying to be aware of any possible inner changes that may have taken place within you, as a result of being next to, or around that object. You have to be able to see both those things happening at the same time.

**Sport:** Minimalism as a seeing experience

- A. You do not have to have anyone else there telling you what to think (what it means) or feel (how to see). You are at the centre of the event and you have to deal with it yourself.
- B. Some of the most obtuse writing is from art critics of the seventies who tried to describe what was going on in their minds when they walked into a Donald Judd or a Carl André exhibition. It gets pretty confusing. They can barely communicate and in the end it really does not mean anything anyway.



**Political:** The anarchy idea associated with minimalism is anti-hierarchical.

A. The American artists were upset by the attitudes of the Europeans toward them. They thought America was young and therefore did not understand true culture development and art.

The American response by Barnett Newman, who writes after the bomb; "Your culture has only brought us two World Wars, and close to the destruction of the planet. Who are you to tell us!"

B. Minimalism comes at the end of a whole line of anti-art movements in Europe when artists were banding to destroy the institutions such as "The Academy". Artists, who see those institutions as part of the social problem and as symptomatic of what had gone wrong. (Dada)

**Description:** How many possible ways are there to describe minimalism in art? There may not seem to be much happening when you look at it but when you start to talk about it, the subject seems endless.

1. Are minimal art pieces very small? Walter de Maria's painting of two parallel white lines on the Mojave Desert is two miles long. Christo's *Fences* are minimalistic.
2. What is the importance of context, of where the piece is, of the site, of the general situation of the object and the viewer? An apple provokes a totally different perception if it is on a windowsill or in the middle of a gymnasium.
3. Are minimalistic works realistic?
4. What is the difference between the conceptual and the craft side of art? During the Renaissance, artists lobbied for fifty years to be included in the Liberal Arts Guilds, and not to be considered as craftsmen. Artists were about ideas and not craftsmanship. Four hundred years later we are still having the same argument.
5. Marcel Duchamp was an artist who let the material itself suggest the idea.
6. Minimalism is so abstract and basic it is purified. It has a certain purism almost evangelical feel to it.
7. Another element of minimalism, is the idea that the art-object should be totally self-referential. You do not have to have taken a course in art to understand an installation.
8. The term minimalism is rejected by almost every one of the artists we call minimalists. None of them accept it. Judd said that the word was "meaningless in every way".

**ART LESSON VIII - by the National Art Gallery Education Department Group  
with Barbara Dytnerka (in progress)**

**Topic: A proposed interactive learning information video about the Contemporary Art Collection of the NAG**

**OBJECTIVES:**

1. Would it be possible to transmit the needed information in twenty minutes?
2. Would the information communicate to different groups like the student and/or the gallery visitor?
3. Would the artist themselves be in the video talking about their work?
4. Would the presenter be a critic or a curator? (Most group members did not feel that the critic or curator would be suitable for the role.)
5. The video has to be presented in a lively and interesting way and not in a dry, documentary approach. This is of particular importance in communicating with the student target audience.
6. Would it be available for purchase through the bookstore?
7. Would there be question and answer sheets to supplement the video?