



This exhibition presents recent work by three Vancouver artists—Warren Murfitt, Derek Root and Steven Shearer—who have different approaches to making art but who have in common the use of visual references to forms of abstract art from the 1960s. To organize an exhibition of this type has its difficulties. The desire for similarities of a shared ideology that would lead to a concise or definitive exhibition has, in this case, to be dispensed with. None of these artists was fully aware of the other's work, nor have they participated in discussions with each other as to how they arrived at using this visual language. This exhibition is more a proposition than a conclusive statement.

Perhaps it is better to consider Murfitt, Root and Shearer individually as part of tendencies internationally that represent a re-examination of the language of abstract art. In Europe and North America in particular there is an effort by many artists to find ways of entering into the various idioms of abstract art. Currently, there is no identifiable "movement" as such. This is unlike the work of artists affiliated in some way to the so-called Neo-Geo movement that emerged in New York during the mid-1980s, whose paintings also carried the look of abstract art from the 1960s. The paintings of Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, Peter Schuyff and Philip Taaffe, for example, made ambitious, confident and critical work that was as connected to Conceptual and Pop sensibilities as to Hard-edge or Op. A discourse developed around this work that found mutual interest in the contradictions between technology, poetry, the vacuity of

culture, and the notion of originality as a dead concept. Today, there is no central place of activity and the discourses can be at odds with each other. Current approaches to abstraction problematize and elude easy categorization. Much contemporary abstract work uses uncertainty as its catalyst and challenges ideas of the absolute.

This recourse to uncertainty is also different from the self-assured attitudes that largely characterized abstract art of the 1960s. It was a decade abundant in newly named movements of abstract art, among them Colour-field, Hard-edge, Op and Minimalism. These movements variously promoted the primacy of the eye and the object's autonomy relative to the artist's touch and to the rest of the world. In the legacy of New York critic Clement Greenberg, the content of the work was the object itself; it was art and only art, although it was ironic that commercial and fashion design was quick to appropriate it. This era represented a kind of climactic conclusion to a linear development that dominated Western art during the past century. As appealing as this work was in its aesthetic appearance and ideological authority, its endgame tactics were rejected by many artists in the early 1970s. This opened the floodgates for other kinds of art practices that re-engaged with the complexities of the world that we actually live in.

Vancouver was also active in embracing abstraction during the 1960s. Numerous artists, among them Brian Fisher, Reg Holmes, Roy Kiyooka, Gary Lee-Nova, Michael Morris and Bodo Pfeifer worked with these forms. Other important centres of such activity in Canada were Regina which hosted the Regina Five, who were in direct contact with New York through the Emma Lake workshops, and Montreal where artists looked both to New York and Paris for their chromatic investigations and vigorous program of reduction. In Vancouver, however, abstraction was handled with a kind of irreverence that set it apart from other Canadian centres and New York. It was equally connected with the new spirit of "swinging" London and the light-filled suburban optimism of Los Angeles. The requisite flatness of Hard-edge painting was undermined by configurations that created elaborate depths of illusion, and the cultivation of impersonal surfaces was disrupted by the inflection of hand-painted brush marks.

The artists in this exhibition are neither nostalgically yearning for, nor trying to echo the work of that period. Their work is also unlike painters such as Allyson Clay, Mina Totino and Renée Van Halm who are currently working in Vancouver. In differing ways these three women challenge the patriarchal history of abstraction by turning its language into a forum for feminine subjectivity in terms of gender roles, sensuality and domesticity. But like them, Murfitt, Root and Shearer approach abstraction as a language that can be re-entered from an oblique position that transforms the work into something else. And this creates a tension. While the work carries the look of abstract art from the 1960s, it rejects the authority that is embedded within it and this gap instills an underlying anxiety.

There is a clear seduction in the visual impact of the work presented in this exhibition. The artists understand how the use of patterns and materials can hook one's attention. While they employ this seduction to incite an immediate response by the viewer, a promise of a purely visual experience, there is, at the same time, something unsettling. Murfitt's patterns look abstract, yet are deceptively familiar; Shearer's systematic patterns include text that speaks of doubt; Root's pristine appearing surfaces are marked with the imperfections and variations that come with being hand-crafted. The visual beauty and dynamism of these works become vulnerable and convey the struggle that abstraction still faces.

Warren Murfitt presents a conflict between an intense visual and physical experience and the social/political underpinnings of the source material he employs, plywood. Plywood resonates with the implications of the troubled resource-based economy of British Columbia. The queasy moiré-like patterns of the plywood are initially read as an abstract design, like an exaggerated Colourfield painting, but details transform into poetic passages reminiscent of cloud formations or the rippled surface of water. Placing this pattern in a mirrored room, a device used by both Lucas Samaras and Michael Morris/Gary Lee-Nova in the 1960s, he surrounds the viewer with an environment that is both abstract and literal. However, the curve in the mirror creates bizarre distortions that exacerbate any reconciliation between the two. Having drawn upon Minimalist aesthetics for a number of years, Murfitt places us right in the middle of the

problematic relationship between abstraction, representation and social meanings. And although his patterned wall mimics the scale of heroic painting, it is in fact a photograph.

Steven Shearer also turns to technological devices to produce his work. Computer hardware designed for truck and window vinyl signage is used to concoct systematic patterns that recall geometric abstraction. The incredibly thin, even surfaces and razor sharp edges exceed the flatness and clean edges of traditional Hard-edge painting. Shearer comes from a background of figurative painting, but felt it was a moribund practice and that the language of abstraction combined with commercial technology opened up new possibilities for making art. His discreetly distorted, somewhat off-key iconic shapes have an optimistic tenor, and the inclusion of texts into these patterns make the paintings "speak". But they are pleas for help. These pleas reflect the instability of both painting and abstraction in the art world today, and their melodramatic intonation pits popular sentiments against high art. As a younger artist who is distanced from the activity of 1960s abstraction, Shearer is able to enter its visual language without feeling the responsibility of having to bear its ideological baggage.

Derek Root's work is the moodiest of the three. During the past decade he has also worked through representational painting and, for the time being, has moved on to the reductive visual language of abstraction in order to re-examine the basics of painting. While Murfitt and Shearer use contemporary technology to produce their work, Root constructs his paintings by hand; they are intensely physical objects. These paintings (and his are the only "true" paintings in this exhibition) are ambitious in scale and surface quality, yet are at the same time anti-monumental. The sense of confidence characterized by the geometric and Minimalist sources that he draws from is put to test. Root chooses colours that are difficult to place in terms of mood or historical era. The surfaces reveal the nuance of the hand even when the paint is poured on, as in his monochromes. The tensions arising in this work come from the contrast between elements of authority that are integral to the visual language he uses, and the evidence of skepticism that has gone into the actual making of the pieces. Their meaning and intent is elusive and this frustrates any easy reading of his work.

What puts the work of these artists in an awkward position is their use of abstract forms from the 1960s with its accompanying avoidance of the issues and politics that have characterized much art of the 1990s. Yet embedded in the work in this exhibition is the failure of abstraction in the 1960s to make a final, authoritative statement about art, and Murfitt, Root and Shearer's confrontation of this finality is indirectly complicit with the goals of issue based art; that is, they challenge the regulated and authoritative systems that comprise society. They enter this discourse from an unexpected position that is not specific in its content, but that speaks of the larger "abstract" sense of failure of a confused society struggling with the anxiety of a lost optimism. In an odd way, they straddle the gap between the domain of the aesthetic and the political. This work rises out of the pathos of 1960s abstraction to become engaged in a international discourse. But unlike much abstract work currently coming out of Europe, for example, which is attempting to recapture individualism, transcendence, or is architectonic, the work in this exhibition carries an irreverent tenor. Irreverence provides a distanced, questioning, and confrontational stance. It allows one to participate in a discourse without having to conform.

**Keith Wallace**

## Biographies

Warren Murfitt graduated from the Vancouver School of Art in 1977 and was a founding director of the (N)on Commercial gallery (1984 – 1986) and the Association for Noncommercial Culture which is still in existence. Murfitt has exhibited in various artist-run centres and public art galleries including the Walter Phillips Gallery, Or Gallery, Charles H. Scott Gallery, the Kamloops Art Gallery and Gallery Sans Air.

Derek Root graduated from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1985. He has exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Jan Baum Gallery in Los Angeles, Genereux Grunwald Gallery in Toronto, Charles Jordan Gallery in New York, the Heffel Gallery and Diane Farris Gallery in Vancouver.

Steven Shearer graduated with a BFA from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1992. He has exhibited at the Atelier Gallery in Vancouver and the S. L. Simpson Gallery in Toronto. In March of 1995 he will be part of a three person exhibition at the Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver in March of 1995.

**Warren Murfitt**  
**Derek Root**  
**Steven Shearer**

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Centre Panel: Warren Murfitt	A Purple Haze 1994 (detail)
Left Panel: Derek Root	Untitled Study 1994
Right Panel: Steven Shearer	will you love him . . . (sic) 1993

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