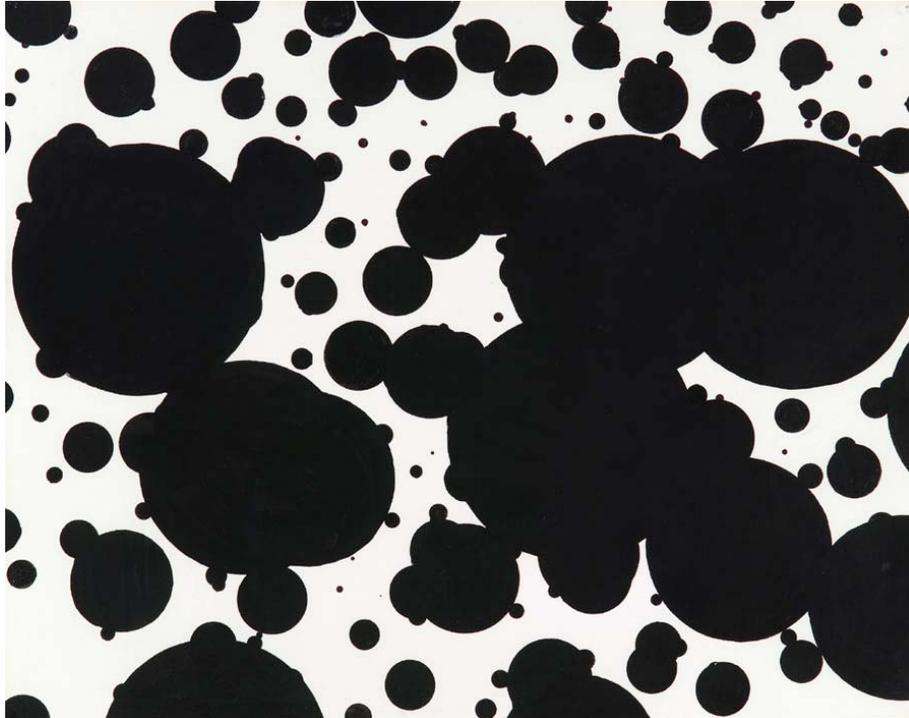


# ***Enacting Abstraction***



James Welling  
*Untitled (#F1), 1986*  
ink on paper

Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery  
Gift of Anne and Marshall Webb

## **TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE SPRING 2009**

**Vancouver**  
Artgallery

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# Vancouver Art Gallery

## Teacher's Guide for School Programs

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### *Enacting Abstraction*

The exhibition *Enacting Abstraction* presents an exciting and innovative array of abstract work from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present. The work reveals the complexity of the field of abstraction, ranging from the thickly textured gestural Abstract Expressionist paintings, to the almost machine-like hard-edge works of Geometric Abstraction, to the clean-lined high-tech installations of Minimalism. In this exhibition, pioneers of abstraction are contrasted with contemporary young artists who, almost a hundred years later, are exploring the same fundamentals of abstraction—bold forms, variable textures and vivid colours—through painting, sculpture and photography.

### DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of *Enacting Abstraction*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Enacting Abstraction* has three main goals:

- to understand the variety of styles and approaches within the field of abstraction,
- to consider abstraction in both historical and contemporary contexts,
- to explore individual artworks from formal, expressive and conceptual perspectives.

## THE EXHIBITION

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*Enacting Abstraction* presents a complex and varied array of artwork covering the spectrum of abstraction over the last hundred years. From the earliest decades of this burgeoning field, artists were, for the first time, separating the formal elements of art from the area of representation. From the first tentative explorations to the present-day acceptance of innovation in structure, concept and subject matter, *Enacting Abstraction* explores the enduring relevance and significance of abstraction.

The exhibition is organized around eight distinct areas within the stream of abstraction. Placed alongside one another, historical and contemporary works provide contrast and context for one another, emphasizing just how deeply the language of abstraction has penetrated the fundamentals of art.

We see the art of **Early West Coast Abstraction** still firmly embedded in the real world as we recognize shapes and forms from both nature and urban settings. The **Expressionists**, with their emotive use of paint, sought to avoid those real-world connections and create spontaneous paintings that sprang directly from the unconscious. The artists working with **Geometric Abstraction** reversed this trend by planning meticulously and attempting to remove evidence of the artist's hand through the use of hard edges, straight lines and vivid colours. The **Op Artists** further developed these elements to create the optical illusions that cause their works to shimmer and play tricks on our eyes. **Minimalists** used reduced, simplified and repeated geometric forms, often constructing objects out of high-tech materials like plastics and steel. The artists creating **Monochrome** work made drastically reduced forms structured around the fundamentals of shape and a single colour or tone. The works in **Conceptualism** focus first and foremost on the idea behind the art-making process, while the artists represented in the **Mark Making** section explore the artistic possibilities of line and gesture.

Through the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary artworks, we find dialogues opening up between the pioneers of abstraction and the current generation's counterparts. The delicate and orderly marine shapes and symbols of B.C. Binning relate to the fragile, ethereal pink and white sculptural forms of the contemporary artist Elspeth Pratt, which sharply contrast with Paul Émile Borduas' wildly gestural smears of paint on his canvas. Claude Tousignant's bright and bold target painting sits opposite Renée Van Halm's cerebral work of pixillated blocks of colour. Dan Flavin's Minimalist installation of coloured fluorescent light—as fresh and new as when he designed it almost forty years ago—responds directly to many of the more recent works nearby. At every turn, *Enacting Abstraction* offers an opportunity to rethink abstraction in its many forms and to demonstrate its continuing relevance and connections to the art of today.

The exhibition is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Daina Augaitis, Chief Curator/Associate Director.

# Abstraction 101: A Short Review

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*“Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colours, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential.”* –Artist Wassily Kandinsky

## What is Abstract Art?

In its purest form, abstract art has no recognizable subject and is referred to as non-representational art or pure abstraction.

Abstract art can also refer to work in which the artist has taken a recognizable subject, and manipulated, altered, distorted or simplified it.

Abstract art can be thought of as:

- art that is not concerned with accurate visual representation of the real world,
- art that is instead concerned with ideas and materials,
- art that is concerned with formal elements such as line, colour, shape and texture,
- art that does not represent the material world, and so can be seen to represent the spiritual world.

## Early Twentieth-century Abstraction:

In Western art, the idea that art had to represent something real or concrete was disrupted in the early twentieth century. Ideas from Impressionism and Cubism had begun to dissolve the picture plane and rules of perspective that had dominated art since the Renaissance. For the first time, the idea came into being that formal elements—including line, colour, shape and texture—could be the main subject of an artwork. Wassily Kandinsky is credited with creating the first completely abstract work in 1910. In 1912 he wrote a theoretical essay on abstract art titled *On the Spiritual in Art*, presenting the view that art (i.e., abstract art) should portray the spiritual and not just the material world.

The following streams of abstract art will be explored in *Enacting Abstraction*:

## Abstract Expressionism

*“At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”* –Art critic Harold Rosenberg

Abstract Expressionism is a post-World War II American art movement known for its expressive and loose brushwork. The best-known artist associated with this movement was the New York painter Jackson Pollock. Abstract Expressionism is also described as action painting because of Pollock’s practice of placing large canvases on the ground to pour, drip and splatter paint across their surfaces using sweeping arm movements. This gestural painting technique emphasized spontaneous, energetic, subconscious artistic expression.

In Quebec, a group of painters that included Paul Émile Borduas saw their art as exercises in political and artistic freedom. Using thick tactile spurts of paint and bold blotches of colour, they experimented with the spontaneity, immediate expressiveness and materiality of paint.

Subsequent generations of artists have continued working gesturally, emphasizing the expressive possibilities of materials and form. The Vancouver artist Elspeth Pratt uses common building and packing materials in place of traditional sculptural materials to construct her precariously balanced, often impermanent abstract sculptures.

## **Geometric Abstraction**

*"They have a tendency, many of them, to stress contrasts of pure hue rather than contrasts of light and dark. For the sake of these, as well as in the interests of optical clarity, they shun thick paint and tactile effects."* —Art critic Clement Greenberg

Geometric Abstraction is a style of abstraction based on simple forms that emphasize the flatness of the picture plane. This form of abstraction came into prominence in the 1960s, largely as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. These artists rejected the Expressionists' painterliness and gestural qualities, choosing to apply paint smoothly and precisely with clear, defined edges. Geometric abstraction attempted to reduce the canvas to essentials of line and colour and to remove the evidence of the hand of the artist.

The Montreal artist Claude Tousignant used flat, strong colour, hard edges and repeated lines and forms. The contemporary Vancouver artist Renée van Halm presents a grid of coloured squares—but asks us to consider the relationship of this work to an Emily Carr painting.

## **Op Art**

*"These works exist less as objects than as generators of perceptual responses."* —Curator William Seitz

Op Art is closely aligned to Geometric Abstraction in that the artists use hard edges, strong, flat colour and repetition of shape, line and form. But these formal elements are used specifically for the purpose of creating optical illusions that alter the viewer's visual sensations.

The British artist Bridget Riley created the impression of motion out of static colours and forms. Her works seemed to pulsate and flicker across the picture surface, inducing physical, psychological and retinal responses in the viewer.

## **Minimalism**

*"Order; it is extremely ordered; purity, because it is perfectly stripped down. But, above all, truth because it doesn't pretend to be anything else. And, like Shelley says, truth is beauty and beauty is truth."*— Tate Gallery curator Simon Wilson, speaking about Minimalism

Minimalism rose to prominence in the 1960s, also largely as a reaction against what artists perceived as the excesses of Abstract Expressionism. It brings abstraction to its logical conclusion: that art should not refer to or imitate anything outside of itself. Minimalist artists sought to remove the presence of the artist's hand and challenged the notion that their objects should be created by artists themselves. They also brought attention to the space occupied by both the viewer and their three-dimensional forms.

Minimalism emphasized repetition and is frequently used to refer to the severely reduced geometric objects being made out of high-tech materials by artists such as Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. Flavin became known for his sculptures created entirely out of commonly available fluorescent lights, using the essential properties of colours that were emitted by these lights as an integral element in his sculptural compositions. The Vancouver artist Neil Campbell's two huge circles are painted by Vancouver Art Gallery staff, following his directions.

## **Conceptualism**

*“Conceptual art is an art which questions the very nature of what is understood as art.”* —Art historian Tony Godfrey

Conceptualism is closely allied with Minimalism. The idea behind the art is seen as more important than the execution or craftsmanship of the work; these become perfunctory. Many conceptual artists have left a set of instructions for someone else to create the actual artwork. Conceptual art rejects the idea that talent or craft is necessary to create an artwork, which should be primarily concerned with ideas, knowledge and thought processes. Conceptual art asks questions about the nature of art and creates a space to engage the viewer in the dialogue.

Many conceptual artists, including the Vancouver artist Eric Cameron, draw up a set of clearly defined rules that control how the work will be produced. For his “Thick Paintings,” Cameron systematically—daily, over years—applied a layer of gesso to objects that determined the ultimate shape of the “paintings.”

## ARTISTS' BACKGROUND

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### **B.C. Binning (1909–1976)**

B.C. Binning was born in Alberta but lived in Vancouver for most of his life. He had planned on becoming an architect, but during an extended period of illness he began to draw and turned his attention to the study of art instead. After attending the Vancouver School of Art, he travelled with his wife to England and America to pursue his studies in art.

Binning's subject matter was clearly influenced by his passions. He returned to the subject of the sea and marine life repeatedly over the years, even as his work became increasingly abstract. His lyrical compositions, informed by his love of architecture, always retained balance, harmony and order. He used pattern, colour, texture and line in a strongly personal way. His humour and joy are reflected through his unerring sense of colour and design.

### **Paul Émile Borduas (1905–1960)**

Paul Émile Borduas was born in Saint-Hilaire, Quebec. He attended school until the age of sixteen, when he was apprenticed as a church decorator. He was later able to attend the École des Beaux Arts in Montreal and the Atelier d'Art Sacrée in Paris. After returning to his home town, he taught high school art while doing his own painting, and soon turned to abstract art. He was instrumental in writing a manifesto known as "Le Refus Global," which attacked the church and radically advocated the separation of church and state in Quebec. For this he was dismissed from his teaching post.

His involvement with the group known as the Automatistes brought him close to like-minded artists who were attempting to paint from the non-material world and express pure emotions, feelings and sensations. Believing in the unconscious mind as the source of all creativity, they produced large gestural abstract paintings that connected them to their American counterparts—action painters or Abstract Expressionists.

### **Eric Cameron (born 1935)**

Eric Cameron was born in England, where he studied painting and art history. He has lived in Canada since 1969, and now lives in Calgary, where he teaches art at the University of Calgary. His work has been shown extensively both nationally and internationally, and in 2004 he won the Governor General's Award in visual and media arts.

Although he has made paintings and videos, he has become well known for his conceptual artworks, most notably his "Thick Paintings," which he has been making since 1979. These consist of everyday objects that he coats with layer upon layer of gesso, until they take on a sculptural form that bears very little resemblance to the starting object, still buried under the surface. *Crouching Lobster*, which he continued to layer with gesso until it was sold, was made from 1979 to 1988.

### **Neil Campbell**

Neil Campbell was born in Saskatchewan and received his art education in Vancouver, Boston and Montreal. For fifteen years he lived in New York, where he exhibited his work widely. He currently lives in Vancouver, where he teaches painting at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and the University of BC. He has had numerous group and solo exhibitions locally and internationally. In 2006 he curated the exhibition *PAINT* at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In his recent art practice, Campbell applies his artwork directly onto the gallery wall. He creates large, bold geometric shapes and patterns that appear to float or hover on the white spaces between them. His colours are vivid and intense, often painted with a flat matte surface, and exude energy. His work for *Enacting Abstraction* will be painted by Gallery staff according to his specific instructions.

### **Dan Flavin (1933–1996)**

Dan Flavin was born and raised in New York City. After serving in the US Air Force in Korea, he returned to New York, where he attended art history classes. Although he was always interested in art and drawing, he never formally studied art. However, his lifelong explorations with light earned him international awards and acclaim as one of the most significant and original Minimalist artists of his generation.

In 1963 he began making artworks out of fluorescent lights. These works were attached to the wall, much like paintings. Later he started making large-scale installations that take the form of long corridors and define space in an architectural way. He used only store-bought fluorescent lights (in about ten available colours, straight and circular tubes), carefully incorporating the properties of the colour of light they projected into the overall design of the work. The ambient light transmitted from the fluorescent tubes occupied the space surrounding the work, becoming part of it. One memorable project lit up several train platforms at New York's Grand Central Station. Perhaps his most significant large-scale installation was the one that lit up the entire rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York for its reopening in 1992.

### **Elsbeth Pratt (born 1953)**

Elsbeth Pratt was born in Seattle and received her art education at the universities of Manitoba and BC. She has been practising her art for twenty-five years. She has exhibited widely, across Canada as well as internationally, and is the recipient of numerous awards.

Her interest in architecture is reflected in the abstract installations she creates out of common building and household materials. She uses the materials expressively, often in contrast to their utilitarian or conventional use. Her constructions include carved and painted polystyrene, wire mesh, wood, vinyl and corrugated cardboard, wedged together with a lightness and fragility that question the monumentality, materials and permanence of traditional sculpture. Viewers must enter and negotiate their way through the space that the installations occupy,

**Claude Tousignant** (born 1932)

Claude Tousignant was born in Montreal and studied at the Montreal School of Art and Design. After a brief and disappointing time in Paris, he returned to Montreal, where he still lives and works. He has received international recognition and numerous awards for his work as an abstract artist.

Although he has worked in drawing, painting and sculpture, it is for his paintings that he is primarily known, in particular for his hard-edged circles of concentric rings of colour, entitled successively targets, chromatic transformers, gongs and chromatic accelerators. From his earliest work as an abstract artist, he has committed himself to explorations of the relationship of light and colour. He said: “*What I wish to do is make painting objective, to bring it back to its source—where only painting remains, emptied of all extraneous matter—to the point at which painting is pure sensation.*”

**Renée Van Halm** (born 1949)

Renée Van Halm was born in the Netherlands, moved to Vancouver as a young child, lived, studied and taught in Toronto, Montreal and Berlin, and now lives in Vancouver, where she teaches at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Her paintings and installations have been exhibited nationally and internationally in solo and group exhibitions.

Van Halm frequently works in an area that addresses the blurred spaces between painting, sculpture and architecture. She is interested in the history of painting and, while continuing to work as a painter, questions the traditions and medium of painting. She includes new technologies in her work, often breaking from painting's traditional forms and techniques.

Of *Cull*, her work in *Enacting Abstraction*, she writes: “The piece borrows from the work of Canadian painter Emily Carr. I scanned and pixelated a postcard of her painting *Loggers' Culls*; this reduced her painting to a minimalist grid of coloured squares. I then replicated this grid, in acrylic paint, on a large constructed panel.”

**Bridget Riley** (born 1931)

Bridget Riley was born in London, England, where she received her art education. She subsequently taught art and worked for an advertising agency before working full-time as an artist. In the 1960s she received international recognition and was feted as one of the leading proponents of the new Op Art.

Often working in black and white, Riley created her distinctive patterns out of repeated shapes and lines. Meticulously planned for maximum optical effect, her lines flicker and pulsate across the surface, invoking the sensation of movement. Standing in front of her work, viewers experience physical, psychological and retinal responses.

## PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Life/Styles of the Artists (All levels)

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### Objective:

Students look at the ways artists used abstraction at different times in the twentieth century.

### Discussion:

Abstraction can be broken down into distinctly different styles, and artists can interpret abstraction in very different ways for conflicting purposes, with opposite points of departure. For some background to the different styles and periods, see introductory section.

### Materials:

- ❑ the Internet
- ❑ information sheets: Abstraction (page 12) and The Artists' Work (page 13)
- ❑ Student Worksheet: Thumbnail Sketches (page14)

### Process:

1. Ask students to explain what they think Abstract Art is.  
Use the following questions to facilitate discussion:
  - How does an abstract artwork look? (describe, give details)
  - Is all abstract work the same? If not, how? If so, how?
  - Why would an artist choose to make art that is abstract rather than realistic? (artists are making conscious decisions—not just unable to draw realistically)
2. Divide students into small groups, and give each group an Information sheet on Abstraction (page 12).
3. When they have read and understood the page, give them the Information sheet (page 13) The Artists' Work, describing some abstract artists' work
4. Have students work in groups to fill in the artists that they think belong under each style of abstraction.  
Teacher's Answer List (some of the artists can fit in more than one category):  
**Abstract Expressionism:** Paul Émile Borduas, Elspeth Pratt  
**Geometric Abstraction:** Claude Tousignant, Renée Van Halm  
**Op Art:** Bridget Riley  
**Minimalism:** Dan Flavin, Neil Campbell, Elspeth Pratt  
**Conceptualism:** Eric Cameron, Neil Campbell, Renée van Halm
5. Have each group use the Internet to research an artist from a different section:
  - Find some background information about the artist.
  - Get some information about significant artworks.
  - Make some sketches of the artist's work.
6. Have each group present their work to the class, showing and explaining the sketches.
7. As each group is explaining their artist's work, have the rest of the class make a thumbnail sketch of one of the works (Student Worksheet: Thumbnail Sketches, page 14)

### Conclusion:

Go back to the original discussion about the students' ideas of abstract art.

- Have they changed their ideas about what constitutes abstract art? How?
- What are the most important things they have learned about abstract art?

- If they were to be abstract artists, which style would they choose to work in? Why?

# Information Sheet: Abstraction

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## Abstract Expressionism

- Artists painted spontaneously, without planning or consciously thinking about it.
- Sometimes called action painting because the artists energetically smeared, poured, dripped and splattered paint thickly across the canvas.
- Today artists experiment with unusual materials, using them expressively to construct abstract artworks.

Artists: \_\_\_\_\_

## Geometric Abstraction

- Artists carefully planned their simple and often repeating shapes, lines and colours.
- They often used masking tape to paint clear, defined hard-edges.
- They applied their paint smoothly and thinly, using flat, bold colours,

Artists: \_\_\_\_\_

## Op Art

- Artists used simple repeating lines and forms to create optical illusions.
- Static colours and shapes seem to bounce and flicker across the surface.
- Viewers can experience physical, psychological and retinal responses.

Artists: \_\_\_\_\_

## Minimalism

- Artists used very simple repeated shapes, forms and colours.
- Often created smooth sculptural objects with clean lines using high-tech materials.
- Thought that art should not refer to or copy anything outside of itself.

Artists: \_\_\_\_\_

## Conceptualism

- The ideas behind the artwork are more important than the actual piece of art.
- Talent and good craftsmanship are not valued or seen as necessary.
- The artist might follow a set of rules to create the work, or provide instructions for someone else to make it.

Artists: \_\_\_\_\_

# Information Sheet: The Artists' Work

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## Neil Campbell

- He paints geometric shapes in strong colours, sometimes directly on the gallery wall.
- He designs his work carefully before it is created.
- For some works, he gives specific instructions to the gallery staff to create the work.

## Renée van Halm

- This particular work (*Cull*) appears to be a big grid of coloured squares.
- It is based on an Emily Carr painting.
- She uses a computer to pixillate the image from a postcard.

## Dan Flavin

- He created sculptures out of straight and curved fluorescent light tubes.
- The coloured light that is emitted from the tubes becomes part of the sculpture.
- Installations often fill large spaces with strong lines and a high-tech approach.

## Claude Tousignant

- He often painted large circles consisting of concentric rings of colour.
- He used sharply defined areas of flat colour.
- He usually used no more than two or three vivid colours in each work.

## Elsbeth Pratt

- She works with building and everyday materials.
- She makes installations that are precarious, fragile and insubstantial.
- She uses the materials expressively, to occupy space and question conventional uses.

## Paul Émile Borduas

- He wanted to express emotions and paint spontaneously.
- He didn't plan out his work, just took the paint and applied it to the canvas.
- His paintings had thick blobs of paint and bold splotches of colour.

## Eric Cameron

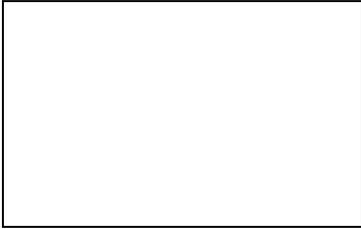
- He plans out his idea completely before he starts making it.
- He has a set of rules or instructions for the process he will use to make his work.
- The end result is defined by the way the materials end up working.

## Bridget Riley

- She uses repeated lines and shapes, and limited colours,
- She plans her work in great detail before starting to make it.
- Her work causes the viewer's eye to create movement out of static lines.

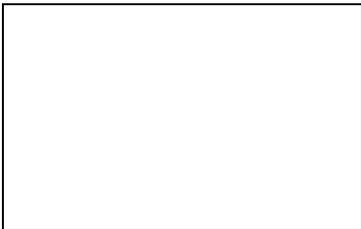
# Student Worksheet: Thumbnail Sketches

## Expressionism:



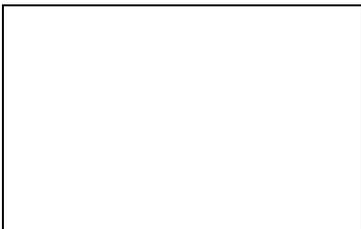
Artist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## Geometric Abstraction:



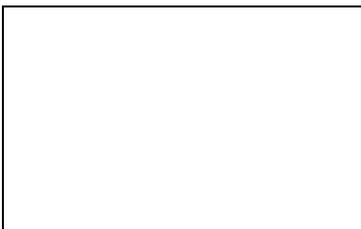
Artist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## Op Art:



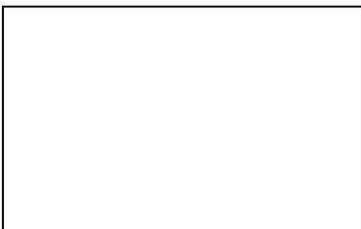
Artist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## Minimalism:



Artist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## Conceptualism:



Artist: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Abstracting from Art (Primary students)

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### Objective:

Students look at Renée Van Halm's contemporary abstract artwork created from a historical painting and make a class artwork based on an Emily Carr painting.

### Discussion:

Renée van Halm created *Cull* by scanning and pixillating a postcard of Emily Carr's painting, *Logger's Culls*, which, Van Halm says: "reduced her painting to a minimalist grid of coloured squares. I then replicated this grid, in acrylic paint, on a large constructed panel." The result is a huge panel of coloured squares. It is revealing to hold up a copy of Carr's painting next to Van Halm's, and to note how the colours correspond.

### Materials:

- ❑ from the Internet:
  - copies of Van Halm's *Cull* and an Emily Carr painting (not *Logger's Culls*)
- ❑ Class Worksheet: Abstraction Grid (next page)
- ❑ coloured pencil crayons OR markers OR watercolor paints and brushes OR coloured paper, scissors and glue.

### Process:

1. Discuss abstraction with the students, clarifying that some artists abstract from nature or the real world, using shape, line, colour and texture to relate their ideas to the original forms.
2. Show students a copy of Van Halm's *Cull*, explaining that she created this by breaking down an Emily Carr painting into colour squares that resembled the colour that was strongest in the corresponding area of the Carr painting.
3. Pin a copy of an Emily Carr painting to the wall. Lay a copy of the Class Worksheet: Abstraction Grid (next page) on a table. Give each student a number from 1 to 30. (you may need to rework the grid in order to accommodate all the students in your class).
4. Have each student find their number on the grid, and identify what colour on the Carr painting corresponds to their square.
5. Using the medium of your choice, have each student fill in their square with the corresponding colour. Students will only use *one* colour—the one that is dominant in their area.
6. Pin up the class-made abstract work alongside the Emily Carr image.

### Conclusion:

Discuss the differences and similarities between the two images:

- in terms of realistic and abstract representation,
- in terms of degrees of abstraction.

## Class Worksheet: Abstraction Grid

1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30

## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Abstracting from the Real World (Primary and intermediate students)

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### Objective:

Students look at the way B.C. Binning created abstract art that directly referred to objects from the real world, and they make an artwork based on their own observations.

### Discussion:

Binning developed his own distinctive style of abstraction, which includes recognizable elements. He used repeated abstracted shapes and a limited palette of colour, accompanied by symbols, shapes and lines that help describe what he wanted us to see. He returned to the theme of the sea many times, repeatedly working with boats and ships in different forms. Writing about boats, he said: “they abstract well.”

### Materials:

- ❑ viewfinders made by cutting a square out of the centre of a sheet of paper
- ❑ copies of Binning’s *Flotilla in Primary Colours* or *Convey at Rendezvous*
- ❑ at least five colours of paper (construction or origami), plus black
- ❑ large sheets of white paper
- ❑ scissors, glue and black markers (sharpies work best)

### Process:

1. In small groups, have students look at a copy of one of Binning’s nautical abstractions. Have the groups discuss, describe and analyze the painting. Some questions for them to consider:
  - What colours and shapes has the artist used?
  - Is the image completely abstract? If not, which parts are not?
  - What do you recognize?
  - What symbols has Binning included?
  - How has he used line?
2. Debrief with the class, making sure students have noticed the particulars of the painting that show it is a boat.
3. Tell students they are going to make an image in the style of Binning’s, creating an abstracted design of a section of the classroom.
4. Have each student look through a viewfinder and settle on an area close to them. It might include a corner of the desk, a pencil, part of a book, some of the floor, etc.
5. Have students cut shapes from the coloured paper and create their design, laying it on large sheets of white paper. Students might choose to use all of the colours or only some of them. Glue the pieces onto the paper.
6. Referring to the black lines in *Flotilla in Primary Colours*, have students use black markers to add detail to their image. Encourage them to think about adding symbols and designs, linking shapes, drawing on both the coloured parts and the white background.
7. Display and discuss the work.

### Conclusion:

Have students talk about the different images they see, and what elements (line, colour, symbol, etc.) were used to help describe each image.

## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Hard Edges, Popping Colours (Primary and intermediate students)

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### Objective:

Students review colour theory and create a work in the style of hard-edge Geometric Abstraction.

### Discussion:

In the late 1950s, the term hard-edge Geometric Abstraction was coined to define a new style of painting that initially described the work of four Californian artists. The style became popular in the '60s, emphasizing the use of strong colour, well-defined outlines and clear and precise compositions. Colours were carefully chosen to enhance contrast and vibrancy, or to create gentler optical effects. This new form of painting was possible because of the creation of a new generation of quick-drying acrylic paints.

A brief review of colour theory would be helpful for most students, to help them make informed decisions about using and understanding colour. Students should not see colour as absolute; colours react and change in context and in contrast to one another.

- **Primary colours:** cannot be mixed from other colours. They are blue, red and yellow.
- **Secondary colours:** are mixed from 2 primaries. They are green, purple and orange.
- **Tertiary colours:** are mixed from 2 colours adjacent to each other on the colour wheel (a primary and a secondary); e.g., yellow-green, green-blue.
- **Complementary colours:** are opposite each other on the colour wheel. They share no common colours. For example, red (a primary) and its complementary green (made up of the primaries blue and yellow) provide maximum contrast and intensify each other.
- **Analogous colours:** are 3 colours next to each other on the colour wheel. All of them contain a common primary; e.g., yellow, yellow-green and green. Analogous colours are used to create harmonious compositions with subtle contrasts.
- **Shades:** are created by mixing colours with varying amounts of black.
- **Tints:** are created by mixing colours with varying amounts of white.
- **Warm colours:** are reds, oranges and yellows and tend to pop to the foreground of the picture plane.
- **Cool colours:** are blues, greens and purples and tend to recede to the back of the picture plane.

### Materials:

- images by Claude Tousignant, Guido Molinari or other available hard-edge paintings
- sheets of unlined white paper
- clear (regular narrow) sticky tape
- washable** markers—2 colours per student
- paper towel

**Process:**

1. Review colour theory in as much detail as required.
2. In small groups, have the students look at some prints showing hard-edge paintings (e.g., by Touseignant or Molinari) and talk about what they see.  
Questions to guide them could include:
  - What kind of colours has the artist used? (Are they analogous or complementary?)
  - What kind of shapes have they used?
  - How have they worked with size and scale?
  - Have they created a pattern or rhythm through repetition?
  - What is interesting or eye-catching about the image?
3. Give each student a sheet of paper, clear tape and 2 washable markers (ask them to choose either 2 complementary or 2 analogous colours)
4. Tell students they will create an artwork using hard-edge Geometric Abstraction.
  - Think about line, colour, shape, scale and repetition.
5. Have them apply smooth, straight lines of clear tape right across their paper. They can create straight lines, diagonals and geometric shapes such as triangles and squares. Tuck and stick the edges of the tape to the back of the paper.
6. Smoothly draw one colour in each area defined by the tape, creating patterns by repeating or alternating colours in adjacent areas. Their work will consist of white (under the tape) and two other colours.
7. When all the areas are filled, students can take some damp paper towel and wipe off the tape so that the tape is clean and white, and the edges are sharp (hence the need for washable markers—permanent markers like sharpies will not wipe off).
8. Display the students' work and have them discuss it as a class.

**Conclusion:**

- Discuss the work in terms of colours, shapes and compositions.
- How are the effects of the complementary and the analogous colours different? (e.g., the complementary colours might cause each other to pop forward, the analogous colours might create a calmer effect)
- What role does repetition play? Is there a rhythm created through colour or shape?
- What other materials would this way of working be suitable for? (e.g., crayons, pastels, collage would work; oil paint would take far too long to dry)

# PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Painting from Nothing (Primary and intermediate students)

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## Objective:

To introduce students to Abstract Expressionist practice and have them create an artwork without conscious thought or planning.

## Discussion:

Abstract Expressionists painted directly from the unconscious—they wanted to create spontaneous work that expressed feelings, sensations and emotions. Their goal was to lay their paint on the canvas without any conscious thought or pre-planning.

## Materials:

- ❑ book: *Jackson Pollock (Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists)* by Mike Venezia
- ❑ large sheets of white paper
- ❑ limited colours of paint; e.g., blue, brown, red, yellow
- ❑ paintbrushes and water.

## Process:

1. Talk to the students about how Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock painted without planning their work and without painting realistic images.
2. Read students some or all of the Jackson Pollock book (if available).
3. In front of each student, set up paper, paintbrush and easy access to three or four colours of paint.
4. Do a “Guided Non-Visualization” with the students: (this is a *fun* activity, not to be taken over-seriously):
  - Have them close their eyes.
  - Ask them to think of NOTHING.
  - If thoughts or images enter their head, have them push them away.
  - Coax them to: think of NOTHING.
  - Remind them: think of NOTHING.
  - Tell them they are going to make a painting about NOTHING.
5. Ask students to open their eyes, immediately pick up their paintbrushes and paint NOTHING. (Nothing recognizable, anyway.) If something realistic starts to appear on anyone’s paper, have them change it into something formless.
6. Stop the painting process, and do the non-visualization again.
7. Have the students finish their painting about nothing.
8. Display their work and discuss it as a class.

## Conclusion:

Discuss the process, using the following questions to guide the discussion:

- How was that? Was it easy or difficult to make the painting?
- Did any feelings or emotions come up as the students were painting? If yes, how are they reflected in the painting?
- Are their paintings really about nothing? Explain.
- What did they think about the paintings? Are they interesting? Why or why not?
- Would they like to make this kind of art again? Why or why not?

# PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Practising Conceptualism (Intermediate and secondary students)

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## Objective:

To have students work with and address Conceptualism within the context of abstraction .

## Discussion:

Conceptual art begins and essentially ends with the idea. The hand of the artist and the construction of the work as an object of beauty are both secondary to the idea and part of the ongoing discussion about art itself. (See introductory section on Conceptual art.)

## Materials:

- ❑ information on Eric Cameron's "Thick Paintings" (see introduction). Images on Internet.
- ❑ Student Worksheet: Artwork Plan (next page)
- ❑ large sheets of white paper
- ❑ art materials; e.g., coloured markers *OR* coloured paper, scissors and glue

## Process:

1. Discuss Conceptual art. Describe and discuss Eric Cameron's "Thick Paintings," which are all about the idea behind their creation. The creation is subject to a set of self-imposed rules that the artist adheres to strictly.
2. In small groups, have the students plan out an artwork, filling in details on the Student Worksheet (next page) with the following guidelines:
  - The artwork will be made out of materials determined by the teacher.
  - The idea for the piece will be clearly formulated and written down.
  - It will be conceptual in nature and abstract by design, and could also be Minimalist (see introductory section for more information).
  - It will be feasible, viable and easily executed.
  - Fill out the worksheet in detail; do *not* write names on it.
3. Collect the worksheets, shuffle them and hand them out again to students, making sure that no one has their own planning sheet.
4. Without *any* consultation or discussion with the other groups, have the students make the art piece—following the directions exactly.
5. When the works are complete, lay them out and have the class look at them, determining which work was made according to whose specifications.
6. Discuss. Did the work meet the writers' expectations? What changed between the idea and the execution? Do the changes matter? Why or why not?

## Conclusion:

Discussion:

- WHO is the artist, the students who created the IDEA of the work, or the students who MADE the actual piece?
- Discuss Neil Campbell's work for *Enacting Abstraction*, which Vancouver Art Gallery staff painted on the wall according to the artist's specifications.
- Again discuss: WHO is the artist?

## Student Worksheet: Artwork Plan

Explanation of Artwork	
Size/ Dimensions	
Materials	
Colours	
Detailed/ Labelled Sketch of Work	

# VOCABULARY

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abstract: a style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- a. the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
- b. the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

colour: words used to refer to specific wavelengths of light: red, yellow, orange, etc. Colour may be descriptive, decorative and symbolic. Colour has both tone (degree of light or dark) and intensity (degree of brightness). Some words to use to describe colour are bright, pastel, warm, cool, in harmony and discordant.

Conceptual art: art in which the ideas behind the creation of the work are more significant than the end product. During the 1960s and '70s, conceptual artists rejected the idea of the unique, precious art object and focused on intellectual explorations into artistic practice.

contemporary: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists.

form: a shape that has been given a three-dimensional quality. Form may be implied by the use of tone and/or shadow, or may actually be three-dimensional. Some words to use to describe form are rounded, squared, angular, textural, volume and mass.

hard-edge: usually used in conjunction with the term Geometric Abstraction in the 1950s; characterized by the use of precise geometric shapes, intense colour and repeating lines. Colours were usually limited and paint was applied thinly and smoothly.

installation: art that is created from a wide range of materials and installed in a specific environment. An installation may be temporary or permanent. The term came into wide use in the 1970s, and many installation works were conceptual.

line: the path of a moving dot. Line is used to symbolize direction, imply movement, outline forms, suggest mood and determine boundaries of shapes. The quality of line can vary according to the tool and method used, the amount of pressure used and the way a line relates to other elements. Some words to use to describe line are jagged/smooth, thick/thin, weak/strong, curved, straight, implied, wavy and diagonal.

shape: a two-dimensional area that is defined in some way. Shapes may be open or closed, positive or negative, free-form or geometric. Some words to use to describe shape are solid, organic, repeated, symbolic and proportional.

symbol: something that stands for or suggests something else. For example, in North America, \$ is a symbol for money.

texture: the surface quality of an artwork. Texture can be real or simulated. Actual texture can be both seen and touched. Simulated texture cannot be interpreted by touching; it must be seen. Some examples of words to use to describe texture are shiny, smooth, rough, coarse, gritty and granular.

## RESOURCES

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### **Print:**

Godfrey, Tony. *Conceptual Art A&I; Art and Ideas*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998.

Moszynska, Anna. *Abstract Art; World of Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.

Murray, Joan. *Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999.

Nasgaard, Roald. *Abstract Painting in Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.

Price, Marshall. *The Abstract Impulse: Fifty Years of Abstraction at the National Academy, 1956–2006*. Manchester VT: Hudson Hills, 2007.

Smith, Annie. *Getting Into Art History*. Toronto: Barn Press, 1993.

Varnedoe, Kirk. *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Venezia, Mike. *Jackson Pollock; Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists*. Chicago: Children's Press, 1994.

### **Online:**

[www.artcyclopedia.com](http://www.artcyclopedia.com)

Online art encyclopedia, listing international artists, and museums and galleries with collections of their work.

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

Online dictionary and encyclopedia, created collaboratively by laypeople.