

Abstract art stars at Arts Barns

Challenge to design the show before the new building was finished, curator says



Gilbert Bouchard
Visual Arts

PREVIEWS

**Nancy Fox's
Flora, Furniture
and Suits**

Showing at: SNAP Gallery, 10137
104th St.

Until: Sept. 6

Eleven Exhibitionists

Showing at: TransAlta Arts Barns,
10330 84th Ave.

Until: Mid-September

With the Fringe happily raging away, thousands are descending upon Old Strathcona's renovated TransAlta Arts Barns. If they're not catching shows, they're perusing the outdoor performers, or just plain people-watching and chilling in the beer tents.

Some are even coming down for the visual arts, especially the Eleven Exhibitionists show curated by Mitchel Smith and adorning the Arts Barns' broad, high-ceilinged corridor between the Fringe box office and the volunteer headquarters entrance.

"It was a thrill to be asked to coordinate the inaugural art exhibit in the newly renovated Arts Barns," says Smith. "The biggest challenge to the show was that I was designing it before the building was totally finished, based on conversations I'd had with the architects and the Fringe folks. All things considered, the whole process went amazingly smoothly."

Smith decided to invite a selection of artists whose work intrigued him, focusing on practitioners working in the abstract tradition. The final show features 11 artists (including himself), the "maximum number" the space can comfortably accommodate,



Works by Mitchel Smith, above;
James Walsh, top right; and
Sheila Luck, right

the enviable range of the work, spanning a tiny colour field work that's less than a foot square to one work that's 13 feet wide.

Five exhibit artists hail from Edmonton, with the balance working out of various North American cities and London, England. Artists include Peter Hide, Terrence Keller, Sheila Luck and Dan Christensen. With the exception of Hide, who has a wall-leaning sculpture in the show, all the work is canvas-based.

"I like visceral painting and the work of artists concerned with the manipulation of media," Smith says, underlining that said manipulation also encompasses myriad approaches to paint manipulation.

On the one end of the spectrum, James Walsh's painting on display boasts surprisingly ethereal three-inch thick mounds of paint,



is intensely flat, producing a deeply graphic work that manages to never obscure the texture of the underlying canvas nap.

Artist probes colour

Say the words "visual art," and most people think "colour."

In fact, given the bright splashes and dashes of abstract paintings like those in the new Arts Barns, the naturalistic hues con-

watercolour landscapes, and even the subtle gradients of grey or type of tint contained in a large art photograph, it's hard to talk about art at all without talking about colour.

Yet as vital and central as colour may be to our vision of art and to the processes of artists, it's not exactly inherent.

Regardless of media, subject matter or bias of theory, colour



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practitioner for every individual work. While many a work of art strives for that "natural look," in the end it's more illusionary than not and dozens, if not hundreds, of other choices could also have been made.

To that end, printmaker Nancy Fox's tidy three-series-strong exhibit at the SNAP Gallery — Flora, Furniture and Suits — sets out to deconstruct some key aspects of these choices, examining exactly how artists and viewers relate to colour and even how it may work as a visual/artistic code.

Case in point: you might very well long for the "green, green grass of home," but what exactly do you mean by "green"? In the "flora" section of Fox's show, the Edmonton-raised, Toronto-based artist superimposed black-and-white images of grass and roses on different shades of numbered

shades of green-and-pink layout papers.

"I'm trying to explore how perceptions of colour and images relate by separating and combining them in some way. It's a gentle, lighthearted probing," she says, noting that none of the silkscreened grass and flower images seem particularly natural despite all being printed on "official" greens and pinks.

"I specifically chose to silkscreen because it plays off the different layers so well. I like that push and pull of realism and illusion which I also like playing with, especially in my 'furniture' series where I'm playing with the basics of how two-dimensional spaces get to look three-dimensional.

"Everybody throughout history has been conditioned in different ways to see images and layers of symbols."



Nancy Fox with her work at SNAP Gallery.