

War of the art worlds

ABSTRACTION LIVES / *The members of the Edmonton Contemporary Artists' Society are having their fifth annual show.*

But some locals wonder whether these diehard formalists represent Edmonton, whether they are really contemporary, and maybe even if they are much in the way of artists.

BY CHARLES MANDEL
Special to The Globe and Mail
Edmonton

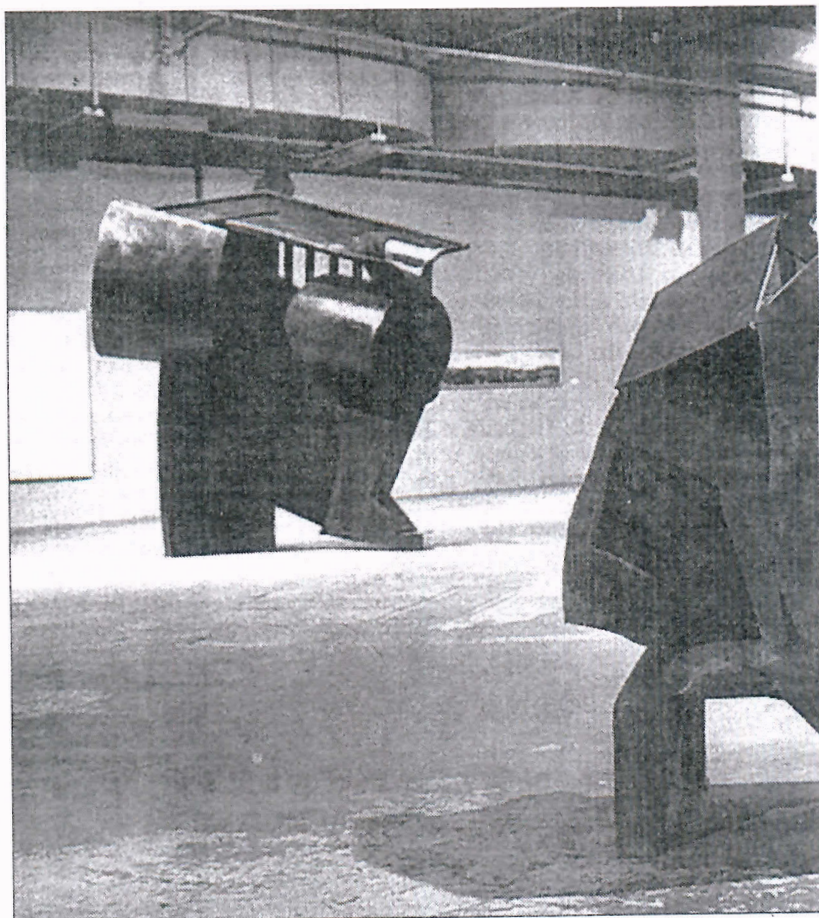
INSIDE the old bus barns, a cavernous space now housing an arts complex — and a farmer's market — on Edmonton's south side, painter Robert Scott and curator Russell Bingham are fussing over a sign for the Edmonton Contemporary Artists' Society's fifth annual show, running in the barns until Oct. 26.

"People won't know what ECAS is," Scott complains, gesturing at the sandwich board. Bingham shrugs: "It's art." Scott still looks dissatisfied. Referring to the farmers market next door, the rangy painter retorts, "They'll think we're selling pigs."

ECAS has been accused of many things over the past five years in Edmonton's rival-ridden art scene, but selling pigs isn't one of them. The society of 27 painters and sculptors has been called elitist, dated, irrelevant, an old boys network, and many other unflattering things, because they have insisted on making art on their own terms, pursuing an elusive value they refer to as "quality."

For ECAS members, the medium is the message. Unlike their rivals, the mostly younger artists whose post-modern imagery, videos and installations often fill today's galleries, ECAS artists work largely within the strict limits of abstraction. Paint, mostly acrylic, is pulled, pushed, scraped, swiped and stretched in just about every conceivable way. The sculptors put their media through similar manipulations, welding steel slabs together in rusting configurations, or piling chunks of wood atop one another. The end result is best described as art for art's sake.

To outsiders, the society is a close-knit group whose idea of what constitutes art is very narrow indeed. Its membership roster is a formidable list



Top, *Seeing Blue*, by Laurie Walker at the EAG; above, *Edmonton Reciprocal and Chechaquo*, by ECAS member Bianca Kahn. Two esthetic extremes.

ble. "What it's about is maintaining a particular standard of quality. I think that's what links the members. I don't have a problem with saying it's elitist. ECAS doesn't lower the denominator to appeal to a larger section."

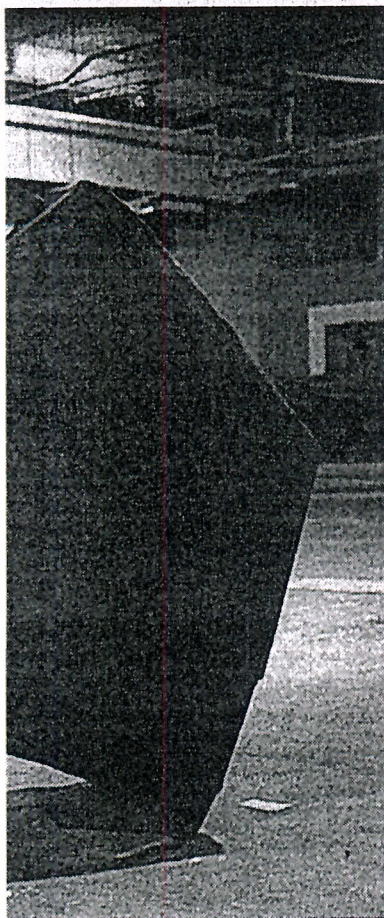
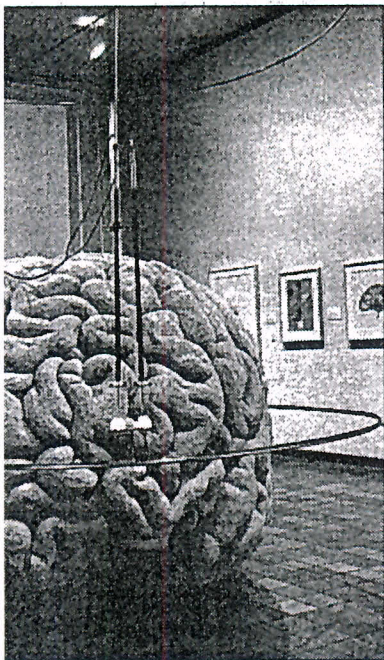
But painter Allen Ball has a problem with ECAS's claims. He's the director of an Edmonton artists co-operative and a maker of postpop images — such as *Casper the Friendly Ghost* painted on wallpaper — and he voiced

painting and sculpture."

Many other Edmonton artists privately complain about ECAS, but few will air their grievances in public. Ball said people are reluctant to talk about ECAS members because of their high standing both within the city's small gallery circuit and at the University of Alberta. "Some of these people are very powerful."

The public, on the other hand, has no such qualms. Last year, newena-





ty, by ECAS's Royden Mills (left),

we're relevant."

While ECAS has existed for only five years, its core membership goes back to the 1960s. Their patron saint is the late New York critic Clement Greenberg, the unyielding arbiter of taste who championed Jackson Pollock in the fifties and U.S. hard-edge abstraction in the sixties. Beginning in 1960, when Canadian Art magazine toured him across Western Canada, and continuing up to his death in 1994, Greenberg found an attentive audience in Edmonton, particularly in Terry Fenton, director of the Edmonton Art Gallery from 1972 to 1987.

During his tenure at EAG, Fenton championed Greenberg's ideals of abstraction. He put up show after show of locally-produced colour field painting and heavy steel sculpture, inciting the fury of uncomprehending audiences and the ire of artists of other schools. The New York City critic's influence over the gallery's programming led writer Robert Fulford to say that the EAG looked as if "Greenberg had purchased the building and made it his summer cottage."

Greenberg himself dubbed the gallery Fentonia, a coinage that the public quickly appropriated as derogatory shorthand for its typical shows of colour-washed canvases and rusting slabs of welded steel.

'I don't have a problem with saying it's elitist. ECAS doesn't lower the denominator to appeal to a larger section.'

At the same time, a number of formalists had a lock on teaching at the University of Alberta — painters such as Graham Peacock and Terrence Keller, or sculptor Peter Hide, who regularly received visits from his former teacher, the renowned British heavy-metal sculptor Sir Anthony Caro.

Some students said it was impossible to escape the sense that these teachers' style was the only one.

George Bures Miller, a multimedia and video artist who lives in Lethbridge and is currently showing in Belgium, France and Austria, said he found the painting program at the university so rigid that he dropped out in his third year, in 1982. Miller switched to the Ontario College of Art, where he could major in photo-electric art.

It's easy to see why Miller is less than enamoured of the art of ECAS members. The 37-year-old artist creates wildly kinetic sculptures, such as racks of light bulbs that hop up and down, that are as far from their quiet minimalism as you can get. And he said his university experience left him questioning anyone who promotes art as a religion.

"At the time, I was trying to paint

time professors has diluted the influence of the abstract artists at the U. of A. And after Fenton's departure to Saskatoon in 1987, the Edmonton Art Gallery began to turn its back on the city's large formalist group, at least according to ECAS members. Russell Bingham, EAG's associate curator of contemporary art from 1980 to 1990 and a founding member of ECAS, said that after Fenton's departure, the emphasis shifted away from the works of the modernist locals.

That perceived shift was largely responsible for the rise of ECAS. "People felt their chances of showing in a public way as a group were starting to vanish. Things had changed in the city, particularly at the EAG," Bingham said. "They felt they had to do it themselves if they wanted to do it at all."

At least one former EAG administrator thinks that's nonsense. Alf Bogusky, EAG director from 1992 to 1996 and currently director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, maintains evidence shows the gallery devoted plenty of space to the Edmonton camp. In fact, EAG says that over the past decade it has shown 64 exhibits of abstract work by more than 100 mostly local artists.

"It's true, though, that they don't have the 100-per-cent prominence, as was the case at one point in time," conceded Bogusky. An exhibition such as New Science, for instance, currently on at the EAG, is completely alien to the ECAS idea of art. That show features a brain the size of a boulder carved out of foam rubber and all manner of other up-to-the-minute installation art.

Bogusky noted that the factors that led to the prominence of Edmonton abstraction no longer exist. In the mid-eighties, changes to Canada Council funding were designed purposely to broaden the range of contemporary art exhibited in major public galleries. Until that point, block funding without peer review allowed directors and curators to program to their individual taste — which in Edmonton up to that time had run to abstract art.

But all this is water under the bridge to ECAS members. Their relentless pursuit of quality continues to drive them to produce their art — in many instances of an undeniably high calibre. Without the benefit of any grants, they produce their annual show, publish a quarterly newsletter and regularly meet to debate artistic ideals.

Their perceived elitism continues to infuriate Edmonton's art community, but their steadfastness earns them a grudging respect. "I think it takes a great deal of courage to continue doing work when there isn't a wider, vogueish acceptance of it," Bogusky said. "I think strong artists will continue to produce good work in the face of all kinds of opposition."

the yard." Macklin lost the commission.

And while artists here won't go on record with their opinions, a large contingent of them came out swinging when they announced the first Aggregate show in 1995, and followed up with a second in 1996. Without explicitly referring to ECAS, the Aggregate — a grab-bag of mostly young painters, sculptors and installation artists