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At the Burnaby Art Gallery, Eli Bornowsky exhibition defies branding

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Eli Bornowsky's *Flying Machine* plays with forms, looking at what happens, as he puts it, "when different languages collide".

Eli Bornowsky: All Is Unmentionable, Up in the Air

At the Burnaby Art Gallery until January 18, 2015

Eli Bornowsky's new exhibition of paintings and drawings is filled with a confounding crowd of idioms and allusions. His references range from abstract expressionism to hard-edge geometrics, and from religious paintings of the Italian Renaissance to the conservative landscape tradition in Canadian art. His approach varies, too, from the playful to the existential and from the intellectual to the intuitive. It's as if this accomplished young abstractionist were defying any notion of style or subject matter, refuting our inclination to brand him or attach a fixed meaning to what he does.

Even the title of his Burnaby Art Gallery show, *All Is Unmentionable, Up in the Air*, suggests that, ultimately, art-making cannot be interpreted through anything as grossly concrete as words.

Still, while previewing his exhibition with the *Straight*, Bornowsky asks, "What happens when different languages collide? What happens when you have to switch from one way of working to another?"

He guides us past three large, dark abstractions that reference postwar European action painting and its register of enormous suffering and loss, and three small, dark abstractions that reference cubism and its calculated formal tropes. One of Bornowsky's strategies is to create two and sometimes three versions of the same abstract painting, forcing us to examine each more closely.

We pause in front of *Modern Jester*, a series of eight watercolour and gouache drawings on white hand towels, collected from the men's room of a chichi New York restaurant located near the Museum of Modern Art.

Bornowsky's dots, dashes, calligraphic scribbles, and splatters of colour, along with a recurring little grid, like a tiny window into an alternate universe, interact humorously, even satirically, with the name of the restaurant—the Modern—printed near the bottom of each towel. There's found poetry here, as well as descriptive unease.

Bornowsky, whose undergraduate studies were at Emily Carr University and who recently completed an MFA at Bard College, New York, seems to struggle to find the mot juste for the way he has juxtaposed so many different approaches to art-making within the past year of his practice. He talks about his fondness for “ambiguity”, then “discordance”, talks too about expressing chaos and confusion, which he sees as a more honest reading of existence than order and meaning.

A classically trained musician before he became a visual artist, Bornowsky also speaks about the “polyrhythmic sequencing” of his diverse works, and about creating art in an intuitive way, as if improvising on a musical instrument.

In the artist's book that accompanies the show, Bornowsky describes his interest in the contrapuntal and his admiration for Glenn Gould's radio documentaries, in which Gould applied that musical form to broadcasting by overlapping many individual speaking voices.

“The multiplicity of independent lines of speech invite the listener to move his or her attention freely within the cacophony,” Bornowsky writes.

And it's evident his paintings and drawings establish their own visual cacophony through which the viewer can navigate at will. In some senses, it's the journey we take between those widely different paintings and drawings—the lines we draw between the dots—that is as important as the artworks themselves.