

Bornowsky does dynamic duos

VISUAL ARTS

ELI BORNOWSKY: WALKING, SQUARE, CYLINDER, PLANE

At the Western Front until January 22

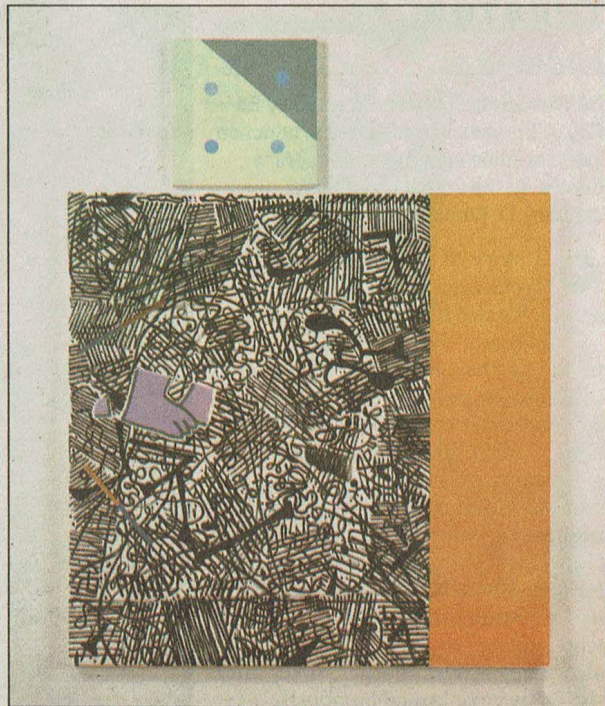
With their knowing play of colour, form, and wit, Eli Bornowsky's recent abstract paintings and drawings constitute a nifty launch exhibition for the newly renovated gallery at the Western Front. Only a few years out of art school, the Vancouver-based Bornowsky has distinguished himself as an articulate painter, draftsman, sound artist, critic, and curator. In all these media, he has displayed considerable formal and intellectual rigour. He has also shown a determined commitment to marrying the science of optics to the musical, the spiritual, and the mysterious.

Previously, Bornowsky dedicated himself to a series of understated geometric abstractions that employed circles of slightly modulated colour formatted within squares. However, as curator Jesse McKee writes in his insightful exhibition essay, Bornowsky's new paintings are noticeably more ambitious in scale and "visual vocabulary". They're also more reliant on intuition. Each of the seven oil-on-canvas works on view comprises a large square surmounted by a much smaller one. In a sense, these works are asymmetrical diptychs whose panels complicate rather than complete each other.

With their quiet arrangements of circles, dots, and stripes, the smaller canvases call up the geometric abstractions we already associate with Bornowsky. The larger canvases are more exuberant, mixing it up with broad fields of black scribbles, lines, and smudges posed against vertical or horizontal bands and triangles of flat colour. In many instances, such as in the work titled *a*, the black-on-off-white marks are evocative of musical notation—of notes, staves, and treble clefs.

Counterposed on these pseudo-gestural grounds are other motifs that function as paintings within paintings: crisscrossing and right-angled stripes of opaque and semi-transparent colour; miniature expressive and geometric abstractions; reductive little landscapes; and, wonderfully unlikely, a lavender-coloured, three-toed cartoon foot. The visual conversations between and among all these different forms and applications are both odd and charming. The paintings in *Walking, Square, Cylinder, Plane* are much more outgoing, unsettling, and funny than the artist's earlier, more meditative geometrics.

Also on view is *Saturna Island*, a drawing and mixed-media installation located in a vitrine standing against the north wall of the gallery. In this response to a Gulf



Eli Bornowsky's *a* features a large image that evokes musical notation and a smaller geometric abstraction.

Island holiday, Bornowsky has laid out a shallow grid of 14 line drawings, executed in black ink on white paper, separated by provisional borders of black-painted balsa wood, and interspersed with teeny-tiny watercolour and gouache abstractions. The ink drawings appear on first viewing also to be quite abstract, but on closer study, natural, architectural, and, again, musical references emerge. One of these works, for instance, is suggestive of ocean waves and another of a corrugated rooftop, while yet another evokes overlapping cedar shakes marked with—could it be?—demisemiquavers.

In an interview with the *Straight* in 2008, Bornowsky declared that he was not "a referential artist", that he did not see his art as calling up or critiquing modernist painting. There is, however, a neat little *contemporary* reference in his new work: the upper panel in *Description* contains a striped wedge with a rounded edge that looks like a homage to Bornowsky's colleague Elizabeth McIntosh, whose solo show at the Contemporary Art Gallery just closed. Bornowsky's show is approaching its end, too; Saturday (January 22) is its last day. Get there while you can.

> ROBIN LAURENCE