

# Art Forecast

---

## On Understanding Art

and an interview with Eli Bornowsky



TATUM DOOLEY  
AUG 18, 2021

---

When I don't understand something, I tend to obfuscate. I create writing that is jargon-heavy and dense as a way to cloak my inadequacy. This is not the self-knowledge of a young art writer, but rather a realization that has come to me after years of writing and publishing. I still slip up sometimes and publish theory-driven drivel, a sign that I need to return to the drawing board and understand the work before dissemination.

For this reason, I don't trust art writing that is incomprehensible. I take it as a sign of the author's own misunderstanding rather than my own. Perhaps that's my own ego talking, but I don't think so.

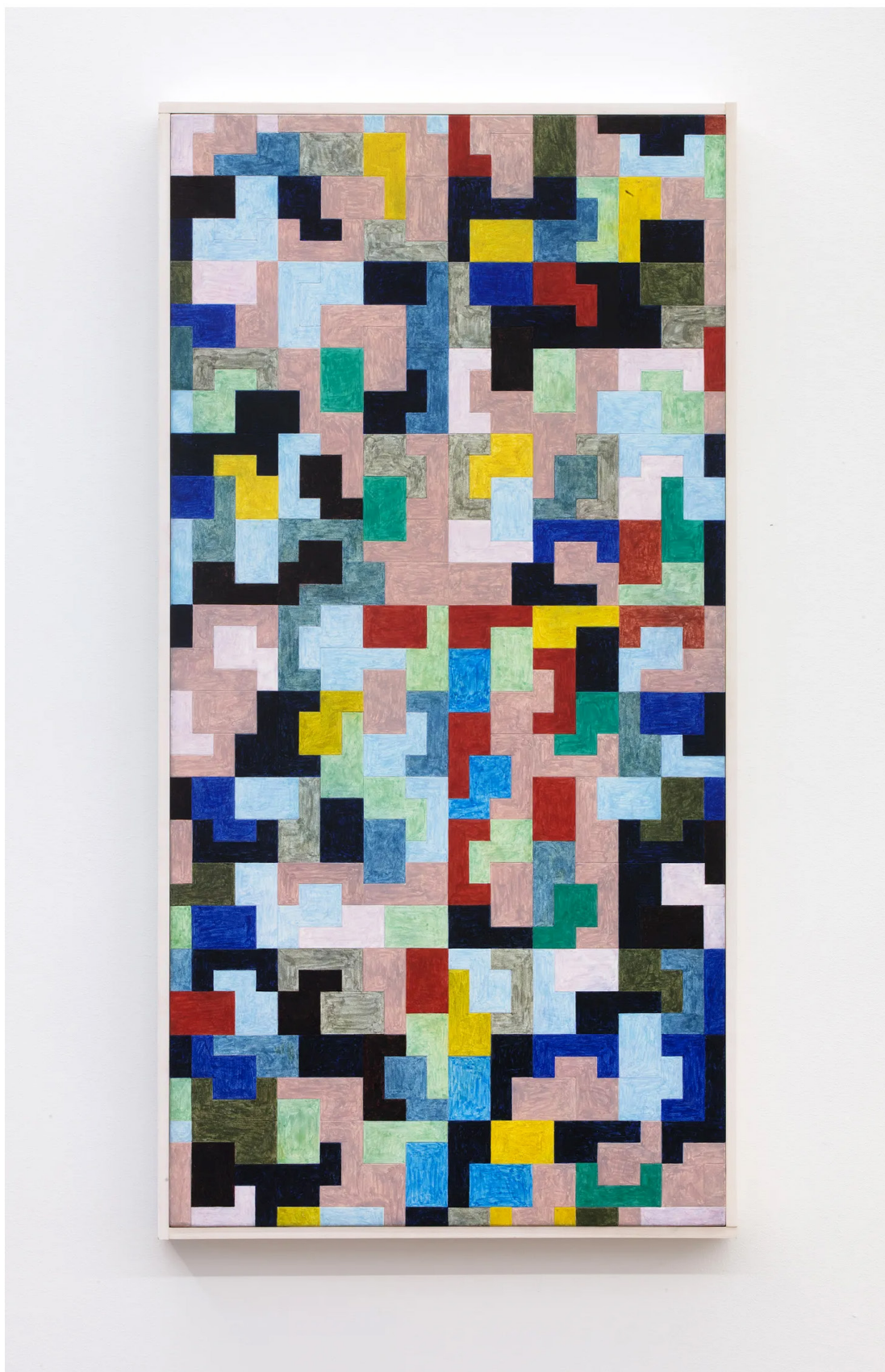
\*\*\*

I visited Eli Bornowsky's [two-person show with Yu Nishimura at King's Leap](#) when I was in New York. It's often said that documentation doesn't do work justice—such is the case with Bornowsky's paintings. Online, I read them as a series of shapes, almost mechanical in nature. I was drawn to the forms and patterns that repeat within the canvases. In person, I was drawn to the quality of the pigment, how it sparkles in places and grits in others. Between each space is a border, as if Bornowsky has carved into the canvas. These minute details fill a disproportionate amount of space in my mind.

The physicality of the paintings grips me. This is probably a good thing, because I don't understand the complex process of thinking behind the work. My non-understanding (mainly of coding, mathematics, and Gestalt psychology) allows me to view the work with a sense of fascination. The dissonance creates excitement in viewing. I don't know *how* Bornowsky achieves the almost optical illusions through repetitive forms and colours, or what's happening in my brain as I perceive these canvases, I simply experience them. Theory and well-thought-out care are present within the work, which translates to perceptual wonder. I'm gravitationally drawn to Bornowsky's paintings.

\*\*\*

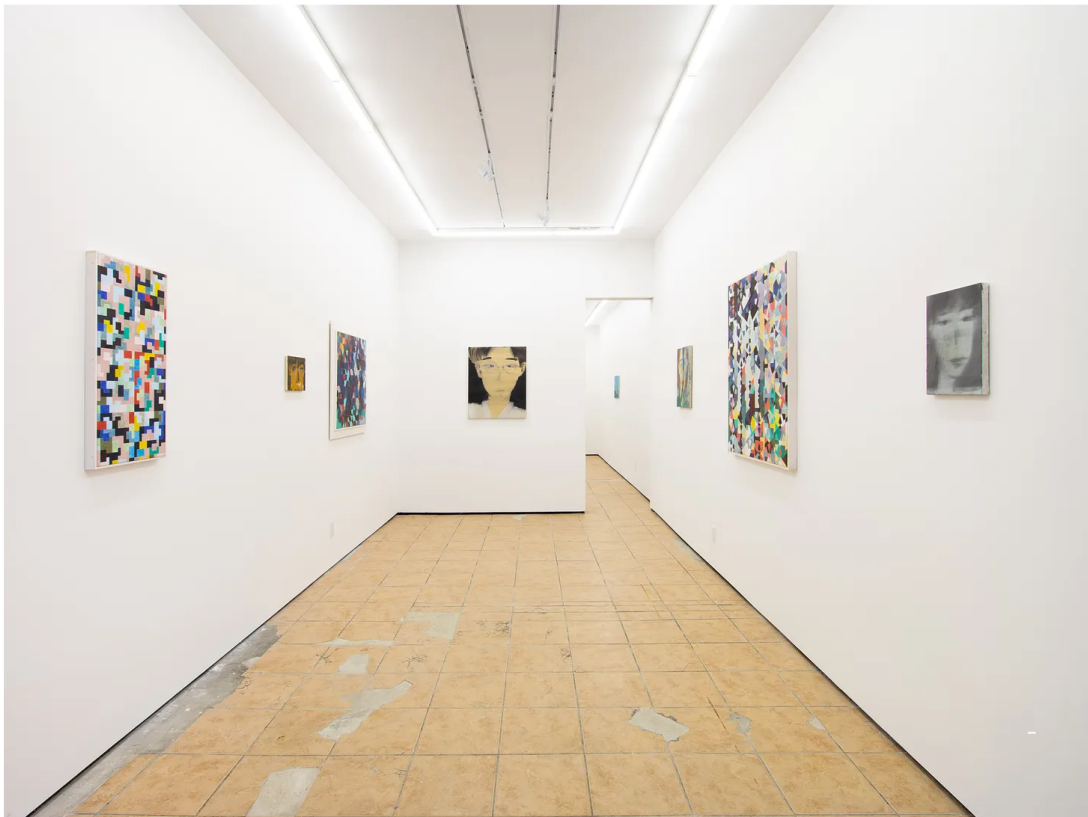
Eli Bornowsky was kind enough to expand on his process in a clear and empathetic way, which you can read below.



*Can you explain the type of paint you use and why you use it?*

I grind powdered pigments with egg yolk and water. The resulting suspension of coloured particles in the egg/water fluid is commonly called egg tempera. (The pigment is “tempered” with the egg.) It is a very thin and transparent paint, requiring several layers to build up a coloured surface. When built up in many layers, the translucent quality of the tempera allows light to penetrate the surface of the picture and bounce around between the particles of pigment creating an especially luminous surface. Of course, oil and acrylic paints are also capable of this effect, but as a medium for colour, I find the egg yolk affords the least colour distortion and allows for the highest quantity of pigment to sit on the surface of the painting. It is the traditional medium of Christian Iconographers.

Colour is a cornerstone of visual pleasure in my pictures and egg tempera physically allows for the purest colour experiences. (What colour actually is and whether or not it could be “pure” is certainly up for debate too.) The trade-off is that it is fragile, technical (best used with an animal hide-gel and chalk ground), and labour intensive.



*How do you title your work?*

Each picture begins with drawings that include a specific tiling of the plane (tessellation), a set of numbers large enough to apply one number to each tile, and a method of translation that orders the numbers within the tiles, determining the composition. Codes based on this schema are assigned to the pictures and are useful

in reminding me how a particular composition came to be. In general, I've found naming conventions applied to paintings to be disagreeable for my work. More often than not, the title for a painting is like too much icing on a cake. The codes become the de facto titles. For practical reasons, when it is time to exhibit the pictures, a title like *Isogonal25\_D41mod17* may be difficult to remember and may bind or jam discursive and commercial sensibilities, and so a vernacular reference may also be assigned such as, in this case: *(primary droop)*.



*Does intuition or spontaneity ever overtake planning in your paintings?*

Yes. The simple scripts and algorithms I use to generate my paintings are decisively primitive, but they are necessary for me to moderate romantic, expressionistic and anxious tendencies. In their basic form, the tessellations and numbers that constitute the diagrammatic planning of the paintings (usually as computer drawings and rudimentary Python scripts) are not often sufficient in themselves to generate a deep visual experience. (There are some interesting theories that suggest complex behaviours, including the evolution of life as we know it, may actually be the result of very simple algorithms. Cellular automata such as John Conway's "Game of Life" are fascinating examples. [Conway sadly left the planet due to Corona Virus Disease 19,

early last year.] Anyway, I've invented systems that form the structure for each painting, much like a musical score provides notation to a musician. What I perceive to be my own "intuition or spontaneity" while painting, such as choosing a new colour, or scribbling outside the rules I've set, can be measured by the systems that inform each work.

Of course, I sense in your question the notion that planning must be slow and take time, whereas intuition must be spontaneous and happen quickly. In my studio, I privilege a more elongated sense of time where planning and execution exist on the same spectrum along with the intuitive, arbitrary and random occurrences that contribute to making an artwork. I admit suspicion towards my own subjective "freedom of expression". It is often unclear whether or not I am just like an ant or other insect, running the preprogrammed script that allows me to function and be recognizable in our world.



*Are there any artists (contemporary or historical) that you're guided by?*

Answering your question about artistic guides I find my mind fashioning a multidimensional graph of friends. Skipping through the data I could tell you how, as a juvenile, I experienced some kind of “truth-event” with the music of Autechre. I met Mondrian in old books, and later his pals Vantongerloo and Reitveld, for example. And I had a few mentors in Canada: Neil Campbell and Eric Metcalf, and in New York, Cheyney Thompson who’s studio I have worked in for the last 6 years. Richard Tuttle is a master type figure I’ve been trying to kill off recently. Anonymous Tantra paintings from Rajasthan, India, are a keystone in my practice and I venerate Kwakwaka'wakw carvings from the North West Coast, British Columbia, especially the late Beau Dick. Recently, talking about art with my painting friends in New York Monique Mouton and Ezra Tessler has been very fulfilling.



*What was the first painting you made that would be recognizable in the work you're making now? How did you progress to the current iteration of your paintings?*

The first paintings I made, in 2007, were the origin story. I exhibited some at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in that year, and you would also recognize my current work in the “dot” paintings I made between 2008 and 2011. I had been influenced by my friend and teacher, Neil Campbell in Vancouver. He taught me how to make a picture with a strong gestalt, and how to recognize forms and structures under the surface of a picture, and how they could be felt in the body. Basic formal observations, like the relation between figure and ground were key, but Neil dialled these ideas up exponentially.

All the artistic detours I took since then, and especially grad school, seem quite funny to reflect on now that my work has returned to its roots.



*Your paintings feel like they fit together like a puzzle—is that an accurate description? How do you create a puzzle without a reference?*

If you mean the kind of puzzles with a picture printed on top, that is not quite right, although the traditional picture-puzzle is indeed an example of an irregular tessellation.

My work exploits a phenomenon of perception that Gestalt psychology has named “multistability”. The classic example of multistability is a black and white image depicting a flower vase in the center surrounded by two faces in profile. However it’s not quite possible to perceive both the vase and the faces at the same time, so we perceive them flickering back and forth: one as figure and the other as ground simultaneously. If you’ve ever enjoyed staring at a tile floor, for example, you’ve probably experimented with this perceptual phenomenon. The systems I’ve developed for painting multiply this perceptual operation across the surface of each work. In this way, the pictorial elements of my pictures have a scrambled hierarchy and do indeed act as perceptual puzzles to be constructed and reconstructed in various combinations by those who care to contemplate them.



---

**Born in 1980 in Alberta, Eli Bornowsky currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver, and an MFA from Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. His work has been included in exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Vancouver Art Gallery; the Western Front, Vancouver; Ottawa Art Gallery; G Gallery, Toronto; SFU Gallery, Burnaby; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and Unit 17, among others.**