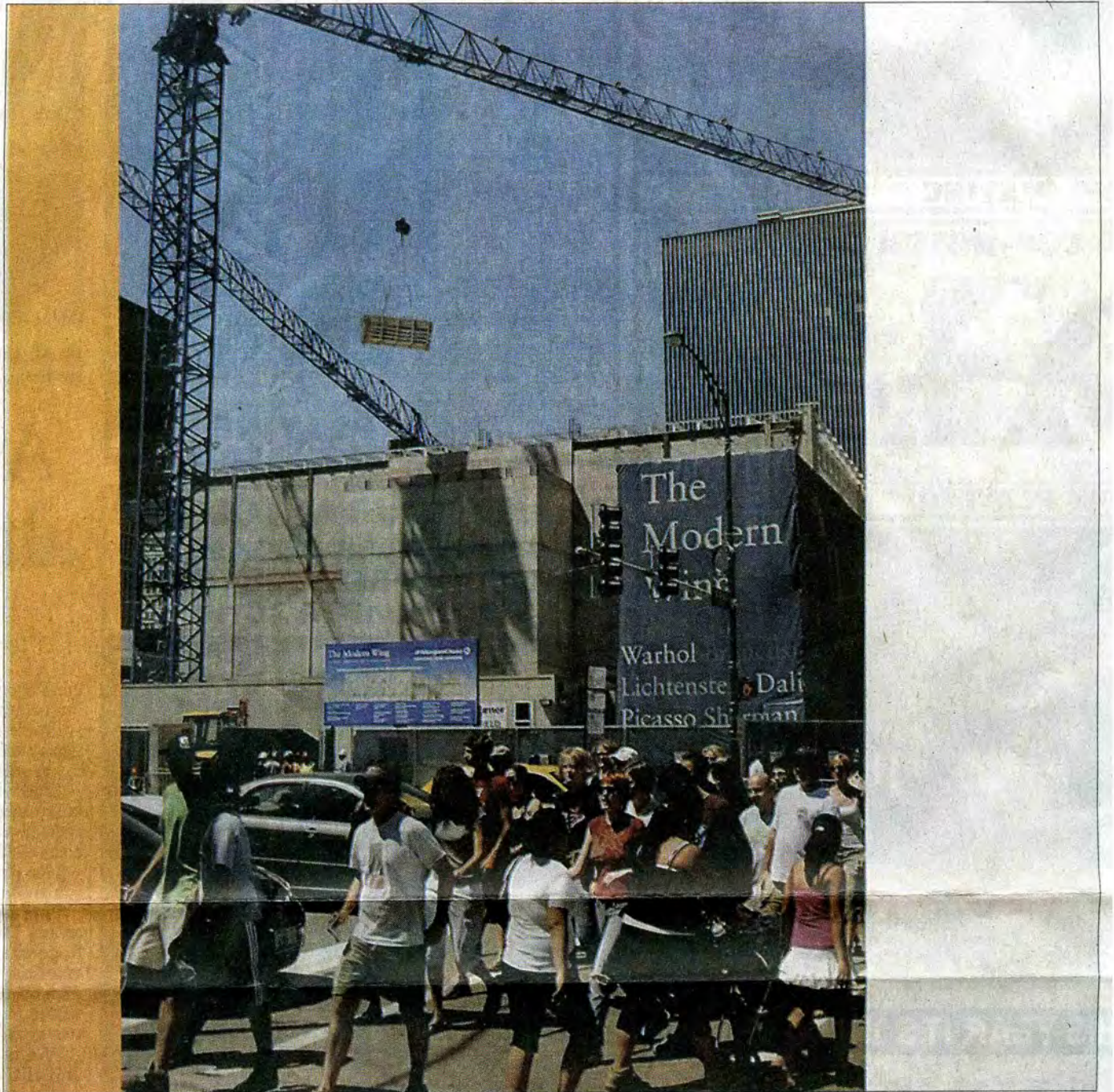


The intersections of a career

VIEWFINDER | Vancouver's Ian Wallace reviews his 40 years of creativity in a gallery exhibit of his conceptual artworks



PHOTOS BY GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

The Modern Wing, by Ian Wallace.

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN
VANCOUVER SUN

For years, artist Ian Wallace has been interested in intersections. Most people spend as little time as possible in them as they rush from where they've come to where they're going. Wallace, however, sees something more in these in between spaces than banal white lines on pavement.

Take a crosswalk for example. Wallace describes the grid it creates as a formal structure that marks the theatre of public movement. On the sidewalk you're on the edge of the stage. Step into the crosswalk and you've stepped into another zone, an area momentarily reserved for pedestrians but usually the territory of traffic.

In this theatre, there can be people daydreaming, talking on a cellphone or riding a bike. What happens is totally unpredictable but one of the hundreds of images he took of intersections on a recent visit to Chicago caught his attention.

In the top part of the photograph, there's blue sky and building cranes. In the middle section, a concrete wall of the new wing of the Chicago Art Institute under construction. On the wall, you can see a banner with the last names of some of the leading artists of the 20th century: Warhol, Brancusi, Lichtenstein. In the bottom third, there's the crosswalk with a group of mostly young men and women facing the viewer as they cross the street.

There's more going on here than a photographic image of an urban street scene. The large format photo has been laminated onto canvas, a material traditionally used by painters, not photographers. On either side of the laminated image, there are bars of painted colour: yellow on the left, white on the right.

Called *The Modern Wing*, the title describes both the content of the photograph and what's going on in the work as a whole.

Although the work is domi-

nated by a photographic image, it's also framed by the colour strips to reference abstract painting, a development Wallace believes will mark the 20th century's most significant contribution to the history of art.

"What I'm doing is fusing two traditions of modernity, trying to give them some kind of equal balance," Wallace said in an interview.

He added, however, that photographic images are so powerful, they tend to overwhelm anything in close proximity. So the painted canvas becomes a support, a frame for the image.

The Modern Wing is one of several works by Wallace in an exhibition at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery that runs until Nov. 17.

Wallace may not be a household name outside art circles but he's the artist and intellectual responsible for bringing Vancouver's conceptual art scene to world attention starting in the 1970s.

He was born in England in 1943 and moved to Canada in 1944. In a career that included 30 years of teaching art history at the University of B.C. and then at what became the Emily Carr Institute, Wallace influenced a generation of artists.

When he was 24 and teaching at UBC, he met a 21-year-old art student named Jeff Wall, Vancouver's most well-known photo-based artist.

The exhibition at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery is a look back at 40 years of art-making by Wallace. The works have been selected with an eye toward illustrating how Wallace's current works have been informed by his past.

"What I wanted people to think of my current work a little bit through where I started from," he said.

Wallace talked about his artworks as the exhibition was being set up. Judging from his informative, easy-going manner, Wallace would have been an impressive teacher because of his ability to talk clearly about complex ideas.

One work was lying on the

floor of the gallery. It consists of five pieces of 12-foot-long 2-by-10s. They're arranged so that they create two abutting U shapes. They're not glued or nailed together. Covered by clear vinyl, they look simple and minimal. But that's exactly what *Untitled (Plank Piece)* is supposed to look like.

In preparation for the first exhibition of the piece in 1969 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Wallace sent a drawing that included directions to buy the planks in a lumberyard and how to assemble them. When he drove across the

country to see the exhibit, all he had to do was sand off a footprint on one of the pieces.

"After the show they sent it back to the lumberyard," he said. "I really liked that — making art in a simple and direct way."

Such an unadorned artwork focuses your attention on the material, on the grain of the wood and its physical properties. The clear plastic refers to the canvas of traditional painting and the planks underneath, the stretcher that provides its structural support. But instead of the materials being covered

and hidden by paint, they're all plain and visible.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wallace said he tried to get down to the fundamentals of art. He was studying prehistoric art and massive outdoor creations such as megaliths, Indian stone circles and Peru's Nazca Lines, a series of huge figures made by removing pebbles from the ground. Among artists, there was a movement to create monumental outdoor earthworks such as *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson in the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

Untitled (Plank Piece) was a

It takes a bit of time and work. I put on a bit of music. I had a couple of beautiful assistants and we would kind of boogie on the back of the canvas — a little action art.

IAN WALLACE

On his technique for producing the paintings (*Untitled Monochrome Series*) at left.

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way for him to bring inside a scaled-down version of those simple but massive outdoor works.

Hanging on a gallery wall are three *Untitled* works in red, green and mustard that build on his earlier works when he was trying for zero content.

For Wallace, the photographic image is powerful because it's an imprint of the world — a direct impression on a negative of what's seen through the lens. He decided to apply that idea to painting by making paintings that are imprints.

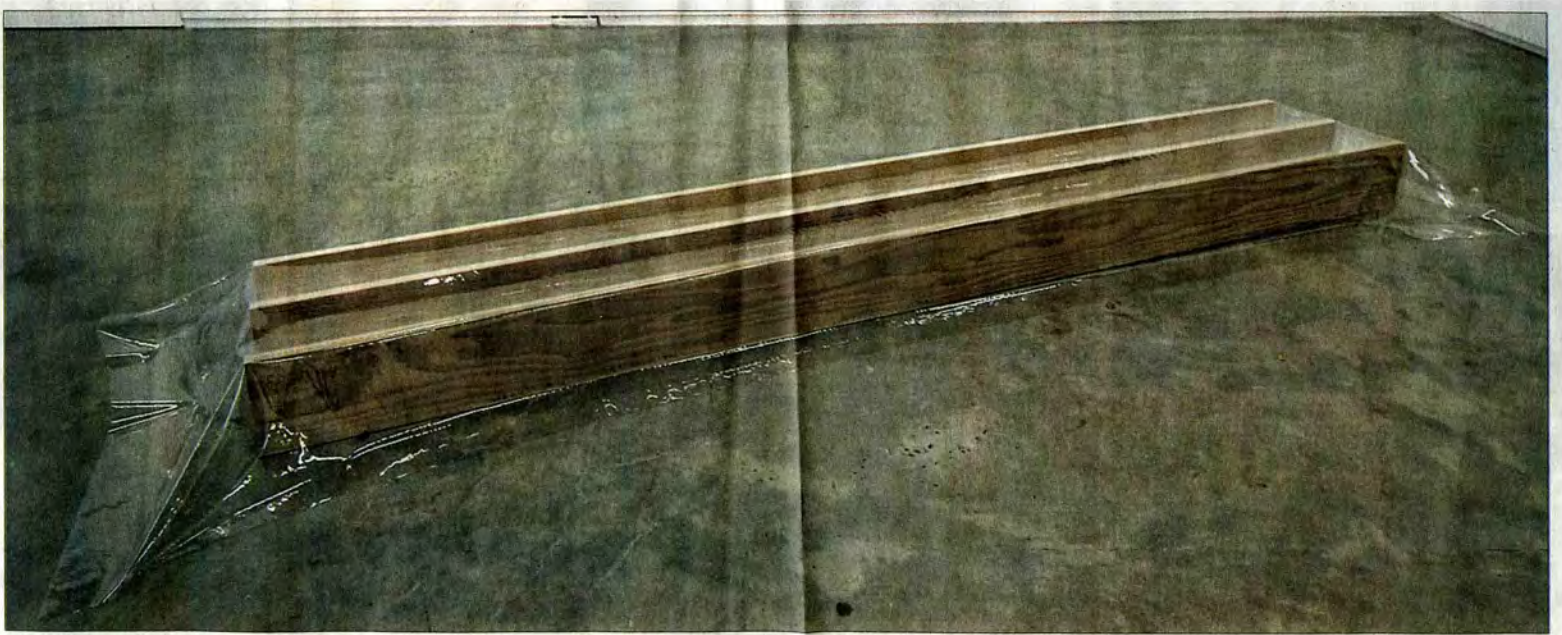
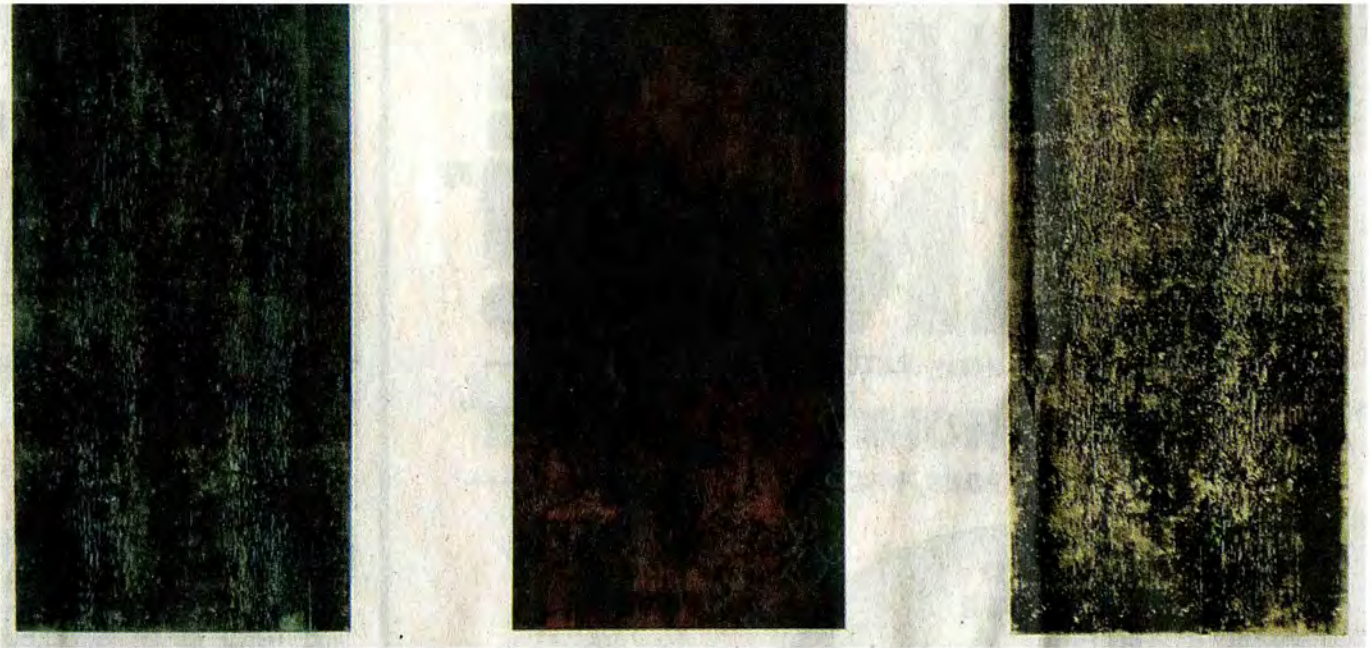
He started with 4-by-8 sheets of plywood, the standard building material size in B.C. He nailed them to the floor of his studio and painted them in black printer's ink. Over that he laid canvas that had been painted various monochromatic colors. Then he walked over the back with wool socks.

The result is a direct imprint of the plywood surface on the canvas showing its random texture. Hung side by side, the three colours make the paintings move in relation to the wall: the painting in mustard moves toward the viewer, the one in red recedes and the one in green stays put.

"It takes a bit of time and work," he recalled in creating the series.

"I put on a bit of music. I had a couple of beautiful assistants and we would kind of boogie on the back of the canvas — a little action art."

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Untitled (Plank Piece), by Ian Wallace.