

From Painting to Relief: Seven Abstractions

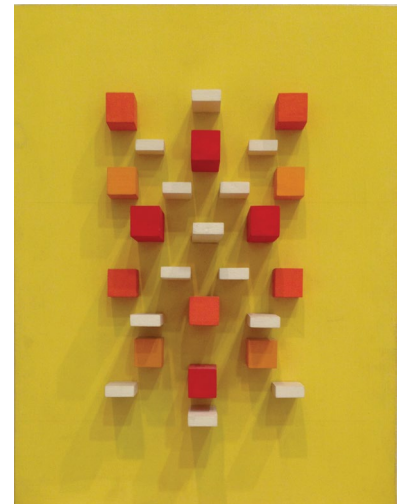
From Painting to Relief presents seven artworks that span the spectrum of gesture and structure in abstract art: Judith Allsopp, Diane Whitehouse, and Marion Nicoll contribute works that range from pure expressionism to centre-spectrum hybrids; Patricia Fulford and Elizabeth Willmott adopt an approach more like constructivism. The antithesis of structure in this grouping is Allsopp's gesture painting. Confidence and spontaneity are typical of abstract expressionism, but Allsopp's colour and composition make this work a pleasing and nuanced study. In Whitehouse's painting, peaceful coexistence melts into synchronicity. Borders are made indiscernible in a room where the outside world has come in, where the stability of a crossbeam is undermined by free and energetic applications of paint. Nicoll orchestrates another balancing act in her woodcut. In *Maybe Tomorrow*, she exploits the medium's natural inclination towards bold and abstract design in her use of positive and negative space. Fulford's Plexiglas sculpture expands an exploration of space into three-dimensions; it reflects her interests in "the figure as architecture, the figure as structural engineering, the figure as abstract design."¹ Lastly, Willmott rooted her practice in scientific theory and close observation of the natural world. Her reliefs represent nature's structure and creativity. Each of the works in this selection respond to the capacities of space and the pictorial frame with gesture, structure, or something in between. *From Painting to Relief* encourages viewers to consider the variation and malleability of abstract pictorial languages. **Organized by Jamie Wright.**

The Deed is for Today: Manifestos, *The Structurist*, and Abstraction

Hannah Keating

In the early twentieth century, the rising tides of Western abstraction prepared to crest. As interest in the malleability of pictorial devices mounted, a coinciding trend saw an increase in the number of artist-activists and propagandists in societies undergoing rapid change; artist manifestos proliferated. While the sheer volume and impact of twentieth century avant-garde manifestos² constitutes a sort of golden age, artists before and after this period have asserted their opinions on artistic responsibility. Moreover, discourse pertaining to style and status have repeatedly nourished public debate. Lending her own voice, Elizabeth Willmott wrote frequently for *The Structurist*.³ Her essays, along with those of editor Eli Bornstein, read as manifestos for structurist art. With sources that include Russian constructivism, Piet Mondrian's non-objective abstraction, and Charles Biederman's structurism, Bornstein and Willmott were steadfast in their aesthetic convictions and keen to differentiate, define, and defend their approach. Thus, in addition to believing in the social responsibility of the artist to communicate through plastic means, they upheld a second mandate to critique and theorize in written text.

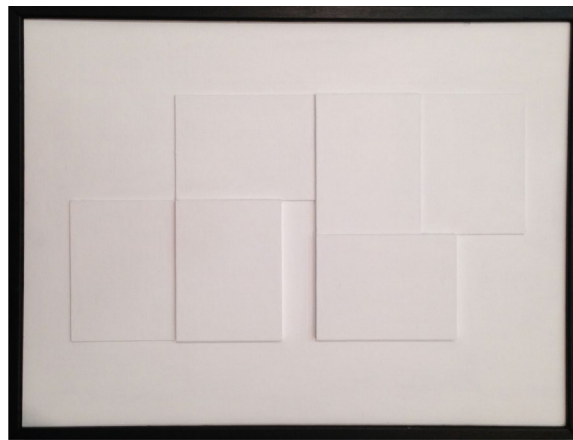
With reference to pieces published in *The Structurist*, this essay offers a brief introduction to the journal and the structurist art for which it was named. It will begin with a seminal twentieth-century Russian manifesto from the eighth issue and end with one of Willmott's essays from the tenth. In between, I discuss Bornstein's first-issue introduction. Though critical of more popular modes of abstraction, Bornstein admits in this opening essay that "whatever the approach, it cannot escape history!"⁴ Painted reliefs such as Willmott's did not, in the end, unseat abstract expressionism—by the 1970s, conceptualism and performance art were stronger competitors. However, Bornstein and Willmott supply their audiences with compelling perspectives on the role of the artist and the unity of art and nature as expressive processes. Given the path of history, these insights might be less well known. In that case, this discussion serves as a fresh position from which to view abstract art generally and *From Painting to Relief* in particular. Should they be more familiar, may it then be re-freshing and constructive.



Elizabeth Willmott, *Relief Structure #5*, 1963, painted wood.

Russia's post-Revolution art scene effectively illustrates the social and political consequences of artist manifestos alluded to above. The October Revolution of 1917 prompted a generation of artists to propose new visions for living and making art in their modern industrial present. Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner's *Realistic Manifesto* of 1920 is one such document that communicated intersecting political and aesthetic motivations.⁵ Responding to dominant attitudes with a passionate call to arms, Gabo and Pevsner's manifesto is often cited as an important stage in the early days of Constructivism.

In 1968, Bornstein commissioned art historian Camilla Gray to provide a new English translation of the *Realistic Manifesto* for the eighth issue of *The Structurist*. This editorial choice suggests both an interest in Gabo and Pevsner's constructive approach, i.e., in the content of the manifesto, but also in the manifesto itself as a public declaration, its tone and address. Gabo and Pevsner urge "artists, sculptors, musicians, actors, [and] poets" to turn away from cubism and futurism, which they claim are dead ends, and to embrace "the real laws of life." The manifesto encourages an art that is built as the world is built, in time and space: one that is unburdened by colour, outline, volume, and mass and committed instead to tone, direction, and depth. They declare allegiance to "kinetic rhythms" and conclude with this zealous decree: "into the squares and streets we shall carry our Deed, convinced that art cannot and must not remain a refuge for the idle, a comfort for the tired, a justification for the lazy... The deed is for today."⁶



Elizabeth Willmott, *Untitled (White on White)*, 1962, painted masonite.

Bornstein's "manifesto" is not fixed on revolution quite so much as this, and *The Structurist's* 50-year run is necessarily less succinct than Gabo and Pevsner's four-page pamphlet. However, Bornstein was also interested in a "new and better society."⁷ He expresses distress at the trends of popular, subjective art and argues that after centuries of growth and development in visual knowledge, artists should continue to pursue a fuller understanding of nature and art. Citing the foundational influence of Charles Darwin's theories of biological evolution, Bornstein outlines human progress as it pertains to visual knowledge in the inaugural issue of *The Structurist*.⁸ In this essay, he equates knowledge of the "objective world of nature" and of the "visual mediums of creation" with the 'forward' movements of biological evolution.⁹ His vision of a "continuing, non-repetitive"¹⁰ evolution in visual knowledge begins in the renaissance when many artists made conscious attempts to craft illusions of three-dimensional space. Following centuries of progress, Bornstein suggests that, post-Monet, contrasting visual goals split the pursuit of knowledge into two distinct paths: expressionist and structurist. He argues that the structurist vein, which includes Mondrian and his followers, led to advances in visual knowledge. He highlights Jean Gorin and Charles Biederman as champions of the evolutionary mission.

Gorin and Biederman both worked in the medium of relief structures. Neither paintings nor sculptures, relief structures unify the natural and the plastic in "an actual, palpable three-dimensional colour-in-space art."¹¹ Gorin's own self-conscious mission to advance the developments of his predecessors is summarized in the following excerpt:

It was about 1930 that I began to grapple with the principles of the concept of a truly spatial art...

The Neo-plastic painting was already composed with a view to expressing space, but it only had two dimensions... That is when I began to construct my works with lines and planes in relief upon one ground plane. That was the first step on the way to the third dimension: depth.¹²

Because it brings both objects of visual knowledge, nature and art, into closer relation, the relief structure was also Bornstein's medium of choice.

If the evolutionary model of art history was unfashionable in 1960,¹³ it is now rather outdated. The notion of a single lineage is a simplistic and culturally-specific model for the multifaceted, multimedia, and transnational patterns of visual art. It is also quite difficult to separate the pursuit of visual knowledge from numerous other levels of art that include commercial enterprises, craft, capitalist markets, and self-expression, which Bornstein does with such ease. Despite these criticisms, the point is that within this picture, structurist art, for its apparent non-objectivity, is conceived as the pinnacle of an art grounded in nature and the present. The three dimensionality of the relief unified art with the structures and processes of nature: its building-process, growth-process, forming-process, and process of creation.¹⁴ And in so far as structurist artists like Bornstein and Willmott embraced the lessons of the past and took an optimistic view of the present, they could resolve practical problems, both visual and social.

When pop and expressionist art reigned, and post-modernism was preparing to make its bold debut, Willmott reflected on the role of the artist in a 1970 piece for *The Structurist*. Fifty years had passed since the Russian brothers Gabo and Pevsner had published their own manifesto, but Willmott perceived changes in society, technology, and culture that begged once again for a socially engaged art. In her essay, Willmott condemns pop and expressionist art for failing to recognize the modern world or to provide solutions to its problems.¹⁵ She declares a decided commitment to social and political engagement in her own work:

I call my art realistic because it attempts to reach visual solutions to what I consider to be the fundamental needs of man in our time: egalitarianism, man's potential for creative awareness, humane urban environments, humane technology, the positive function of nature in man's life, and the integration of abstract concepts of science with our everyday vision.¹⁶

Built as nature is built and resembling the structures of modern technology and science, her works present a view of the world that does not pit nature and technology against one another, but promotes their interconnection. Willmott explains that she believes such a view "is essential to the development of a liveable world."¹⁷ It is a belief that reflects her socialist, constructivist roots.

Indeed, Willmott's text shares strong ties with the *Realistic Manifesto*. Moreover, her modest painted reliefs answer its call for a kinetic art; projecting planes encourage the viewer to move through real time and space to encounter new forms and perceptual experiences. Whereas the post-impressionists and cubists painted multiple viewpoints and temporalities on a two-dimensional surface, the reliefs animate those pictorial functions in the dynamism of cast shadows and projecting planes. A difference worth noting is the use of colour in her relief structures. North American structurists believed colour was a vital element of human perception, which contrasted with its previous dismissal by Gabo and other constructivists as "superficial."¹⁸

The fusion of paint and sculpture in Willmott's reliefs exemplify what Bornstein called "the end of illusionism in art."¹⁹ Each plane appears to be the result of both logical and coincidental placement; they are tangible manifestations of nature's ability to be creative or self-limiting.²⁰ Michael Greenwood describes this effect as the coexistence of "an active potential for change" with "concrete reality," which reflects "the tendency of biological forms to proliferate and to assume ever more complex and differentiated aspects."²¹ Willmott's abstraction synchronises art with science and nature to resolve the fissures between art and disciplines of logic and reason, to commit to the cohesive enterprises of art, humanity, and nature. Uniting the processes of organic growth and human creativity is the structurist's expressive case for this mode of abstraction and for a peaceful coexistence of nature and technology.

Endnotes

1. Patricia Fulford, in *Sculpture '67 An Open-air Exhibition of Canadian Sculpture*, edited by Dorothy Cameron (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1968), 68.
2. See, for instance, Marinetti's *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* (1918), and Gropius' *Staatliche Bauhaus* (1919).
3. Eli Bornstein founded *The Structurist* in 1960 at the University of Saskatchewan. It was a forum for international discussions on the topics of art, architecture, and nature as they pertained especially to constructive abstraction and the relationship between art, society, and ecology. *The Structurist* was published annually from 1960 to 1972, then in double issues every other year until 2010. See <http://www.usask.ca/structurist/>.
4. Eli Bornstein, "Structurist Art — Its Origins," *The Structurist* 1 (1960): 11.
5. Camilla Gray, "A New Translation of the Realistic Manifesto," *The Structurist* 8 (1968): 43.
6. Gray, "A New Translation of the Realistic Manifesto," 43-47.
7. Bornstein, "Structurist Art — Its Origins," 4.
8. Charles Biederman's *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948) is Bornstein's inspiration and primary referent.
9. Bornstein, "Structurist Art — Its Origins," 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 7.
12. Jean Gorin, "A Note on the Transition from Painting to Relief," *The Structurist* 1 (1960): 32.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 9.
15. Elizabeth Willmott, "Art and Society," *The Structurist* 10 (1970): 39.
16. Willmott, "Art and Society," 43.
17. *Ibid.*, 42.
18. Michael Greenwood, "Relief Structures: Elizabeth Willmott and David Barr," *artscanada* 202/203 (1975-76). Accessed on *The CCCA Canadian Art Database*, December 13, 2016, <http://ccca.concordia.ca/c/writing/g/greenwood/gre009t.html>.
19. Bornstein, "Structurist Art — Its Origins," 7.
20. In a letter addressed to Charles Biederman dated April 24, 1960, physicist David Bohm describes his conception of artistic expression: "By the word 'express' one does not mean that this something is already there in him [the artist], fully formed and just waiting to come out. Rather, one means that it comes into this form fully only in the process of expression. Thus, the process has in it an aspect that is free, not determined by anything other than itself, i.e. it has the character of the infinite to be self-limiting (or perhaps, to be 'creative')." See *Bohm-Biederman Correspondence: Creativity in Art and Science*, edited by Paavo Pytkäinen (London: Routledge, 1999), 13.
21. Greenwood, "Relief Structures," *The CCCA Canadian Art Database*.

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Further Reading

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