

ALEX  
BRUNING

SABBATICAL PAINTINGS  
AND  
IDEAS FOR PAINTINGS

GALLERY 1.1.1.  
SCHOOL OF ART  
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
FEBRUARY 4-27, 1985





FOLD, 1984

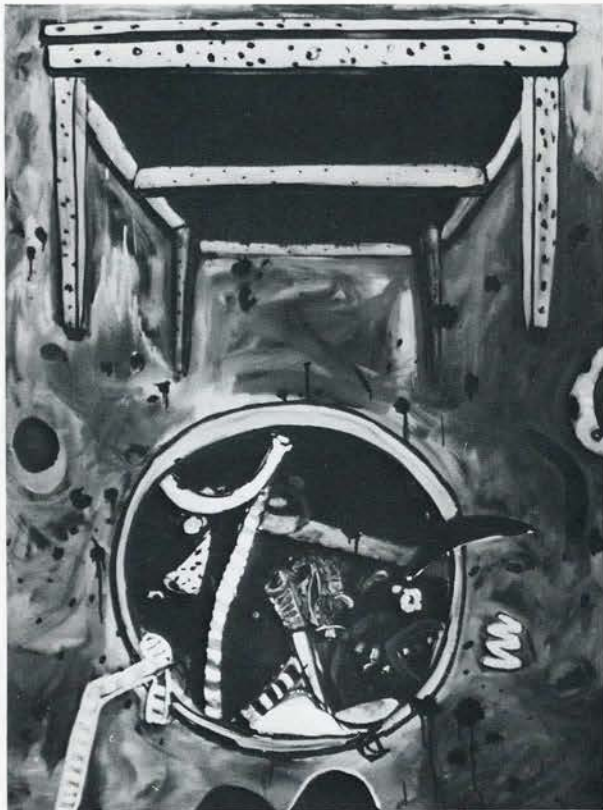
ALEX BRUNING:  
**SABBATICAL PAINTINGS**  
AND IDEAS FOR PAINTINGS – 1984

The drawings and paintings in Alex Bruning's present exhibition exist as part of a creative cycle, reasserting and redefining themes and formal structures from an earlier period of Bruning's work. In the sense that "you can't go home again," these works do not tread old ground;

instead, to a more youthful vision they bring additional life experience and creative experience, shifts of emphasis, and a new emotional intensity.

Some aspects of Bruning's work have remained constant from the mid-sixties to the present. In particular, a strong and articulate use of line and a





*CANDY FOR STUART, 1966*

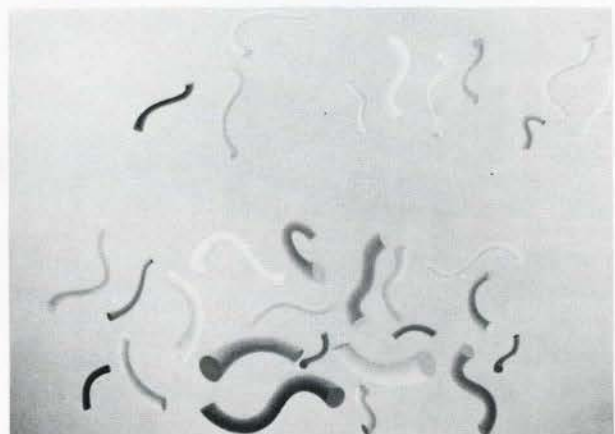
concern for drawing characterize the work of all periods. Bruning says, "I always work from a drawing and the drawing acts as more than just a point of departure since the painting does end up looking like the drawing." Generally, the images are conceived initially as small pencil drawings, and the canvases also begin with chalk, charcoal or pencil line. In most of Bruning's previous works, the linear was covered with paint in the final statement, but the line is alpha and omega to the current paintings: each makes intrinsic use of the original definition in line. Another recurrent theme is a visual ordering by means of a play on bilateral symmetry. This ranges through the works, from a true, clean-edged symmetry in some paintings to others which enliven symmetry by a slight imbalance toward right or left; yet others suggest a non-precise and more organic symmetry.

A long swing also occurs in subject matter: fairly explicit subject references in the mid-sixties, usually sharing space in the same image with ambiguous subject-organic shapes, were followed by a period of total abstraction, while the present work returns to hints of forms from the world around us and to a mythical treatment of these forms. In earlier paintings, a buckshot scattering of wastebasket contents or of food-like remnants escapes from a circular shape which plays the role of container. In compositional

opposition to the circle, Bruning introduces a table image, sometimes fully realized as a four-legged form, drawn in perspective, and sometimes implied by a rectangle doing visual service as a table-top. In some of the paintings the table floats, hovering in two-point perspective above the circle and strewn rubbish shapes. The table's miraculous ascension seems a little surprising and precarious, but conveys none of the angst and threat implicit in the hovering shapes of Bruning's 1984 paintings. The reference in the earlier works seems to be to the artist's working environment, the cluttered studio. Strong multi-coloured contrasts and expressionist paint handling add to the vivid optimism of these works. Strongly defined shapes and a graphic emphasis on contour line that is organically loose and painterly contribute to the linear emphasis.

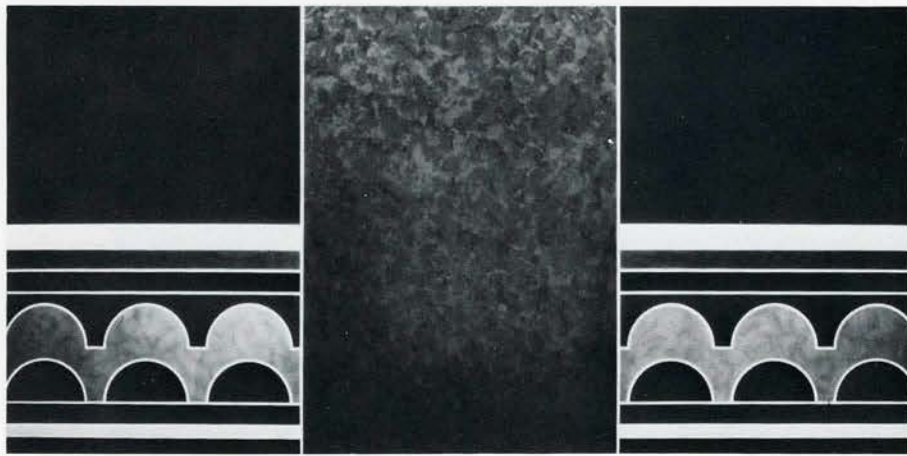
In the early seventies, Bruning made a shift from these personal images to more historically referential, hard-edged abstraction. These works break the painting rectangle into bands and rectilinear fields of some complexity, using, as pattern-making units, triangles, semi-circles and arch shapes reminiscent of Navajo and Zuni weaving and ceramics. Colour predominates, still vibrant and widely ranging, but less raw, with extremely subtle nuances of warm and cool. Paint surface is minimized in keeping with the tenor of the time, but there are selective areas of textural paint application cleanly bound by hard-edged definition of shape.

Feeling these handsome works to be increasingly impersonal, Bruning moved through a series of black and white brush drawings on paper back to the earlier and more expressive handling of paint, introducing at the same time shapes that flirt with subject reference. These transitional paintings present on a painterly ground two related but opposing shapes; softer-edged and



*UNTITLED, 1969*

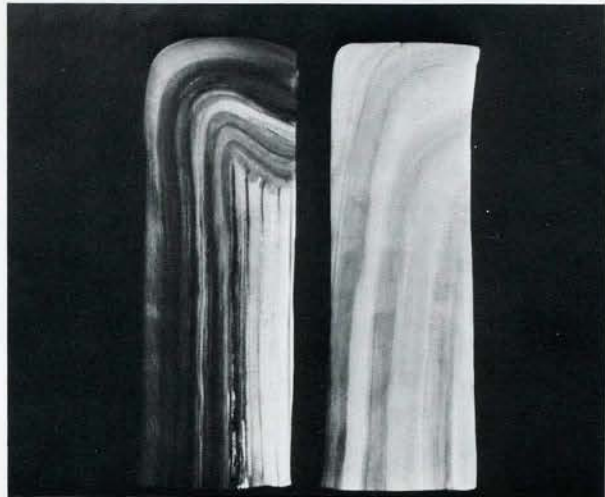




*MIA SERIES, 1974*

muted in colour, these shapes are mostly light on dark grounds, with striated colouring like that of marble, and are arranged in double, column-like forms. By contrast with the aggressive Zuni-patterned abstraction of Bruning's work in the early seventies, the columns have a melancholy and brooding presence very different from formalist non-objectivity. In subsequent drawings, Bruning pushes this difference further: the column-like shapes begin to suggest the human form, bending, gesturing slightly, acquiring spine-like "S" curves and a hint of appendages. Reciprocally, the line returns to a smudged play of hard and soft, light and dark, rather than the previously severe, geometric contour.

In these drawings, the figures are always restricted; they do not move about their appointed space or gesture freely. And then, bound, they rise in the most recent paintings into the air, to levitate, seemingly precarious and too heavy above the minimally suggested bed, table, or floor surfaces below. Some suggest a dead-weight plunge rather than levitation; some float more easily; but the hint of a fall seems always anxiously present. In some the table reappears more emphatically, with drawing on the table surface which seems to reflect the form hovering above. The drawn calligraphic line is dominant and descriptive; encircling and binding the floating forms in a gestural way, it establishes the illusion of fully three-dimensional volumes. Although the connection of table and seance comes to mind, these forms seem too heavy and too corporeal to be specters. With titles such as "Water Moth," "River Table," "Barge," and "Pier," the paintings convey a deliberate ambiguity. What is the medium of flotation? It is simultaneously air and water.



*EDMONTON SERIES, 1977*

Deliberately formally unresolved in terms of traditional painting, the images also speak eloquently of a human inability to resolve life's conflicting pressures. Do the bound and restricted figures float, buoyed up by a watery medium, or have they temporarily checked a free fall through space? Compared to the optimism of the earlier works, the dark greys and blacks of many of the forms, and the paintings' reduced colour relationships, are ominous. Yet the peachy pinks, blues, and springtime chartreuse of the air/water spaces seem unbelievable colours in which to die. Light and colour save these paintings from despair, but their images identify anxiety as a central concern in this mature redefinition of Bruning's vision.

Sheila Butler

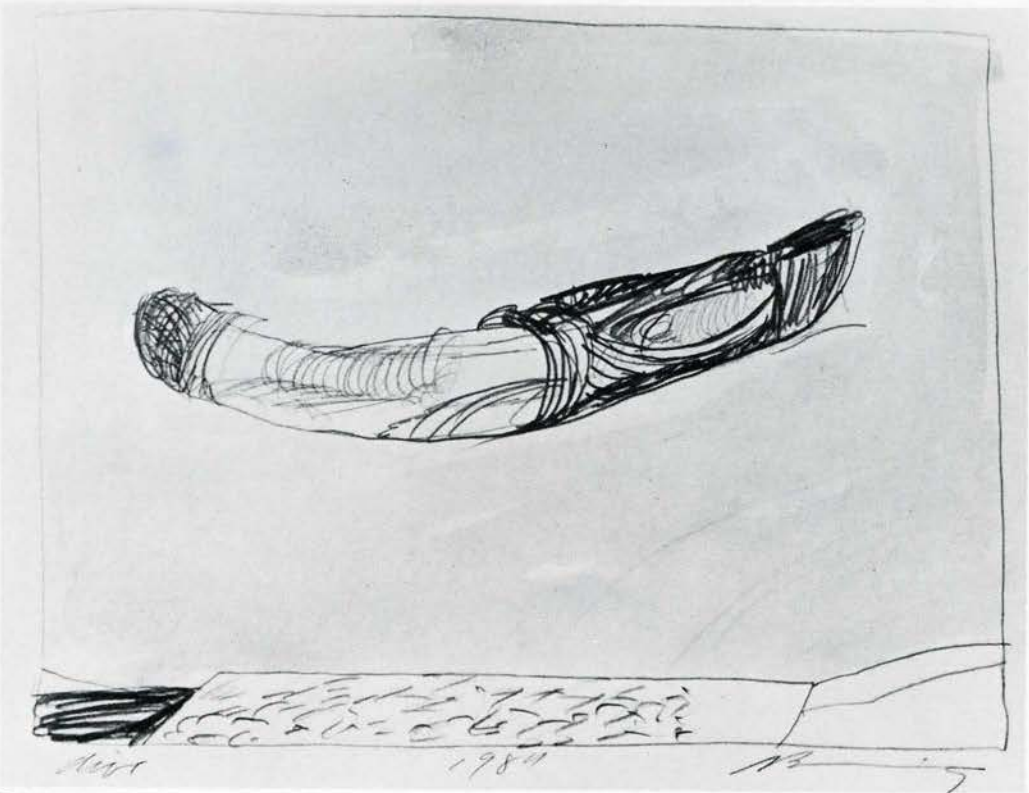


DIVE, 1984





PULL, 1984



DIVE, 1984



JUMP, 1984





FALL, 1984

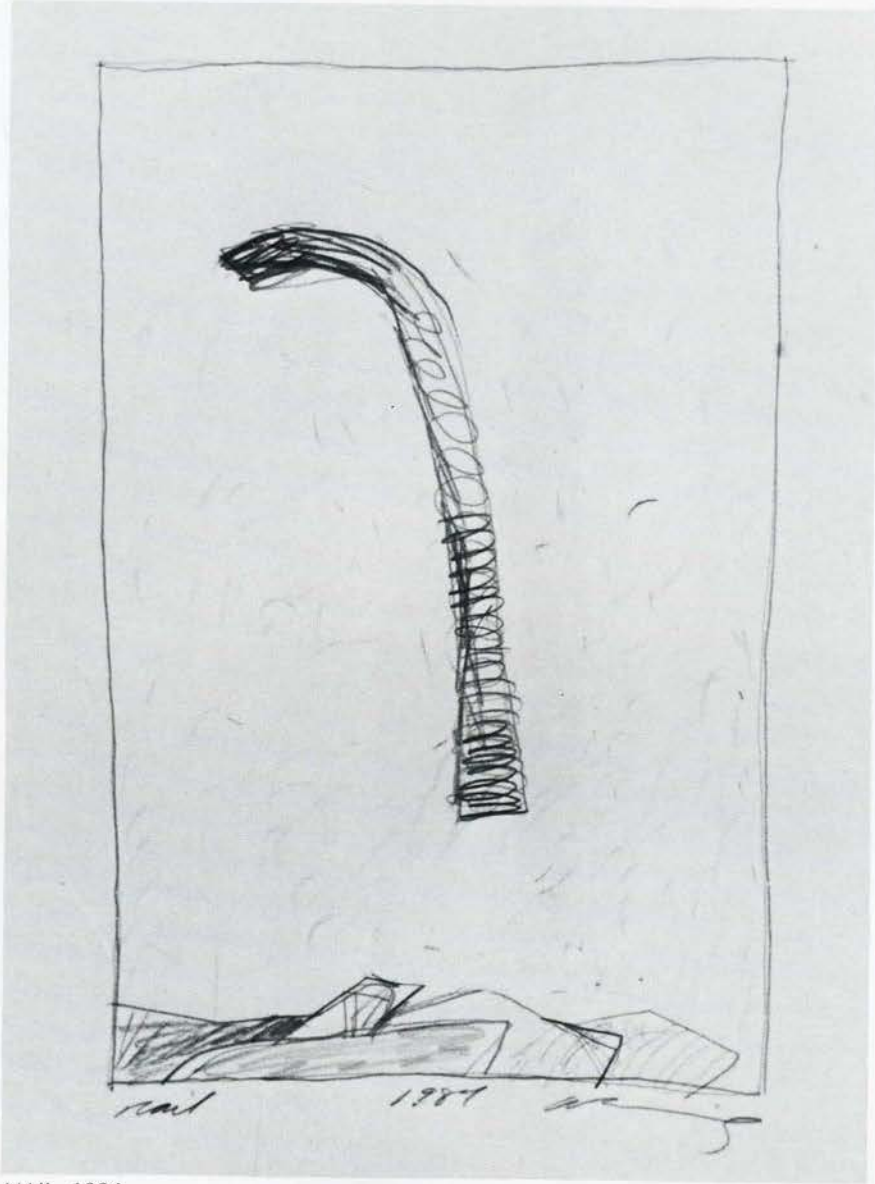


PIER, 1984



LIFT, 1984





NAIL, 1984

# WORKS IN EXHIBITION

## PAINTINGS:

*FLOAT*, 1984, oil & charcoal/canvas, 216 x 165.5 cm.

*FOLD*, 1984, oil, charcoal, chalk pastel/canvas, 229 x 173 cm.

*DIVE*, 1984, oil, charcoal, chalk pastel/canvas, 216 x 173.5 cm.

*LIFT*, 1984, oil & charcoal/canvas, 229 x 173 cm.

*TWIST*, 1984, oil & charcoal/canvas, 229 x 173.5 cm.

*SPIN*, 1984, oil & charcoal/canvas, 213 x 173 cm.

## DRAWINGS:

40 ideas for paintings: sketches on paper, pencil, watercolour, coloured pencil

Sizes vary from 11 x 15 cm to 26 x 20 cm

All works completed in 1984

## ESSAY ILLUSTRATIONS:

(*NOT* in exhibition)

1. "Candy for Stuart" — oil/canvas — 1966, — 178 x 147 cm.

2. "Untitled" — oil/canvas — 1969 — 230 x 350 cm.

3. "Mia Series" — acrylic/canvas — 1974 — 229 x 457 cm.

4. "Edmonton Series" — oil/canvas — 1977 — 203 x 229 cm.

# BIOGRAPHY

Alex Bruning was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1937. He attended Washington University, St. Louis, receiving his B.F.A. degree in 1966. During 1968 he completed his masters' studies at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and immigrated to Canada to begin teaching at the University of Manitoba.

Alex has exhibited both in Canada and the United States where his works are in private and several public collections including the Canada Council Art Bank, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the University of New Mexico, the University of Alberta, and the Morton D. May Collection, St. Louis.

He is currently teaching Beginning Drawing and Advanced Drawing at the University of Manitoba and continues to paint at a studio in Winnipeg's historic warehouse district.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and most important I want to thank my wife, Diane Whitehouse, whose warm encouragement, advice, and long involved critical discussions were crucial to the evolution of this body of work. Secondly, I want to express my gratitude to Sheila Butler whose time was so generously given in writing the essay and whose insights and questioning helped me to see more within my own work than I had previously. Next I am grateful to Charlie Scott and the University of Manitoba for the sabbatical year and the work space that helped to make these paintings possible. I want to thank Dale Amundson, Grace Thomson, and Zared Mann of Gallery 1.1.1. for the help they have given me in the preparation of this catalogue and in the hanging of the exhibition. The financial assistance of the Manitoba Arts Council is also gratefully appreciated.





FLOAT, 1984





