

Jack Bush
Sorel Etrog
Lawren S. Harris
Ray Mead
Guido Molinari
William Perehudoff

ABSTRACT BORDERS

Robert Motherwell
Louise Nevelson
Kenneth Noland
Jules Olitski

25 SEPTEMBER to
2 NOVEMBER, 2019

CURATED BY ALMA MIKULINSKY, PHD
In collaboration with Miriam Shiell Fine Art
and the Chloe Danyliw Collection

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Following the “big bang” of Abstract Expressionism – a style which famously shifted the centre of the art world from Europe to North America – American and Canadian painters were looking for alternative ways to create abstract work that would challenge the norms of their predecessors.

Among these strategies were Colour Field painting – a method of applying paint onto large areas of the canvas with delicate transitions in hues and shades – and Hard Edge painting – where transitions between colours are sharply delineated. These two methods are opposing in appearance and aim; while practitioners of the first were producing absorbing pieces that engulfed their viewers in immersive pictorial planes, those exercising the latter favoured impersonal application of paint achieved most often through strong geometric shapes and clear lines.

The show *Abstract Borders* at BEC Project Space explores the motifs of saturated colour fields and sharp lines in works by leading Canadian and American abstract painters as a means to explore intercultural relationships and cross-border influences. Borders in this exhibition are defined both concretely and abstractly: a border is a line separating two national entities, but it is also a metaphor, expressing that which distinguishes intellectual attitudes and philosophical approaches. But, as some of the artists in the show demonstrate, lines are meant to be crossed and borders transgressed, as influences and ideas travel across countries and from one artist’s work to that of a peer.



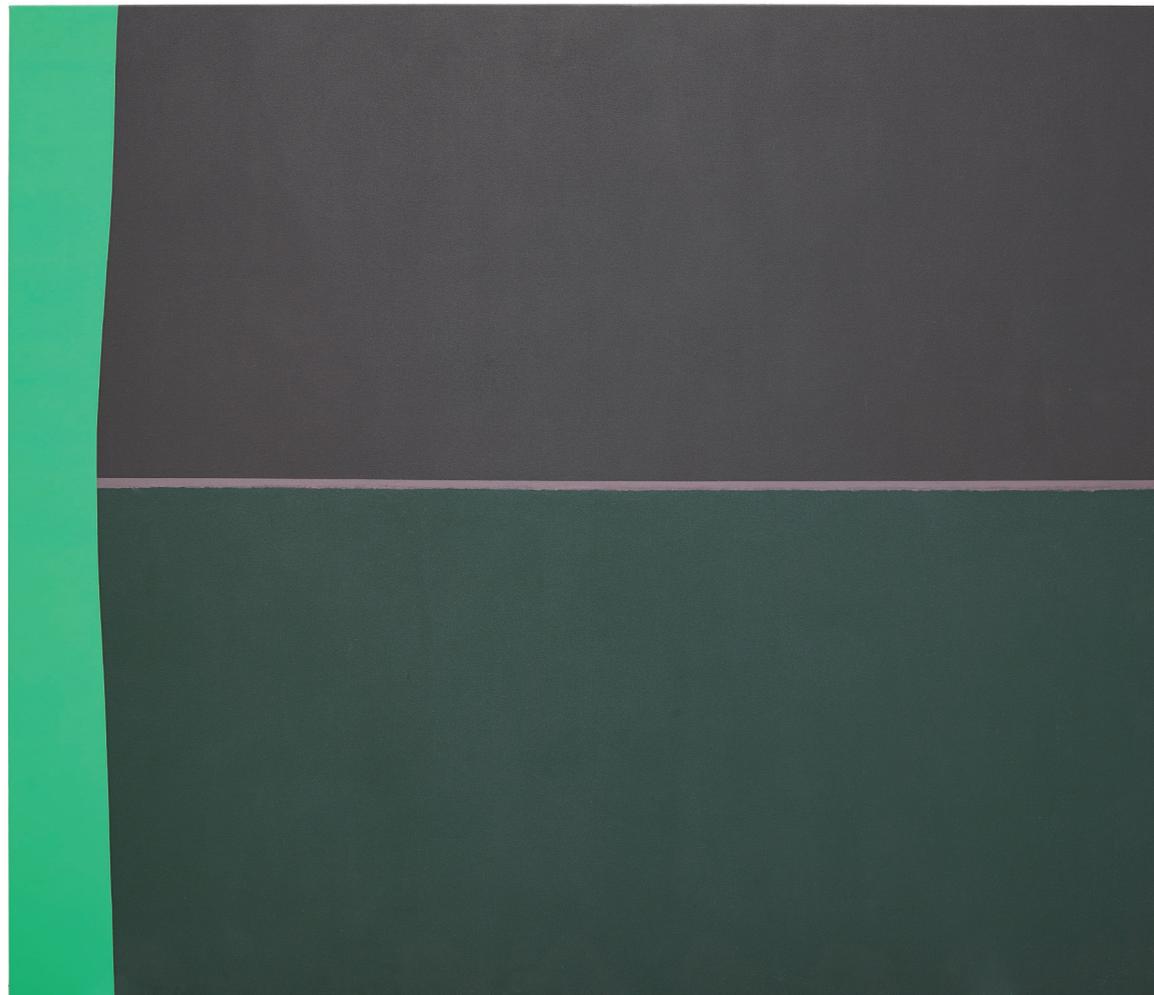
In **ROBERT MOTHERWELL**'s *Open No. 79 in Gray with Charcoal* meaning emerges from a contrast between lines and fields. For over a decade, the American painter (1915-1991) operated under a specific set of pictorial rules as he produced variations of his *Open* series: on top of a single layer of acrylic paint, Motherwell delineated three charcoal lines which form an open rectangle. The formal relationship explored in this work – between fullness and emptiness, interior and exterior, large and small, whole and fragment – provides an opportunity for meditative engagement with the painting, which exceeds its seemingly-austere appearance and minimal vocabulary.

In *Red Widow*, **JACK BUSH** (1909-1977) vibrantly contrasted colours through a largely-symmetrical yet irregular arrangement of forms. In this key example of Bush's signature style, the saturated colours and awkwardly-placed shapes both divide the pictorial plane and form a visual illusion that adds to the dynamism of the piece. The vibrant red dominating the painting's centre seems to be either receding into space or popping out towards the viewer, depending on whether one focuses on the two triangular forms to its sides or the green bands below or above it.

Jack Bush, *Red Widow*, 1964,
oil on canvas, 48 x 56 in.
© Estate of Jack Bush/SOCAN
(2019)

Another powerful colourist is Canadian **RAY MEAD** (1921-1998) who in the majestic *Hector's Gate* and the powerful *In Red* utilizes both large areas of saturated colours and bold lines but to a different effect than Bush, his fellow member in Painters Eleven. Whereas Bush's layout playfully undermines the canvas's geometric shape, Mead, in *Hector's Gate*, uses the canvas's rectangular form as a compositional starting point, as the horizontal lavender stripe

dividing the work into two equal rectangles breathes life into the dark hues of green and black. *In Red* plays with the viewers' expectations as Mead adds a yellow triangle and an asymmetrical band of blue, disrupting the composition and creating an optical effect, which reveals the impact of colour combination on the human eye.

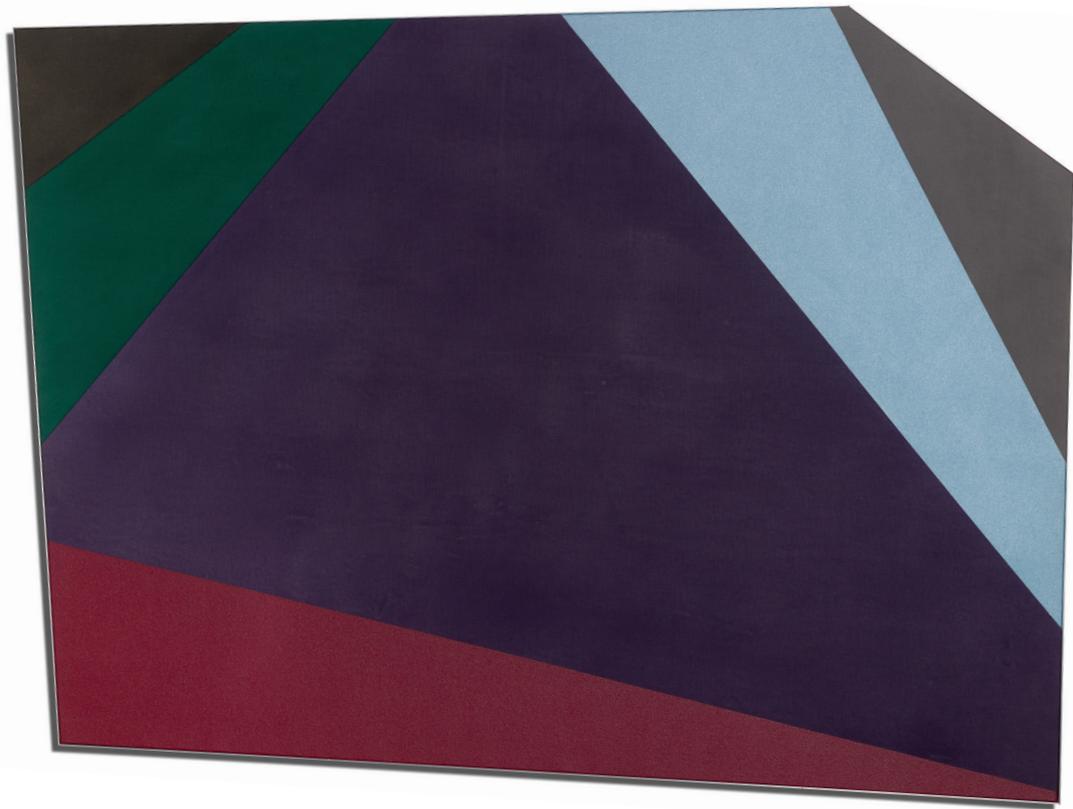


Ray Mead, *Hector's Gate*, 1976,
acrylic on canvas, 76.5 x 88.25 in.
© Estate of Ray Mead



Ray Mead, *In Red*, 1976,
acrylic on canvas, 77.5 x 87 in.
© Estate of Ray Mead

As a pioneer of American Colour Field painting, **KENNETH NOLAND** (1924-2010) greatly influenced both Mead and Bush, testifying to the fact that artistic inspiration cannot be stopped at the border. Known for engaging in a pictorial process that articulates anew the compositional relationship between centre and periphery, Noland's work challenges traditional ideas regarding art making. The painting *Flare* explores new modes of creation, as Noland worked with irregularly-shaped canvases. This structural choice also informed the composition; three bold lines dividing the work creating three uneven triangles and a fourth triangle albeit incomplete, each painted in its own colour, resulting in a harmonious balance created through disharmonious means.



Kenneth Noland, *Flare*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 85 in. (irregular)
© Estate of Kenneth Noland/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOCAN (2019)



While living in New York City in the early 1960s, **SOREL ETROG** (1933-2014) claimed that he was immune to the impact of contemporary American art, as he was too busy finding his own voice. But Etrog's early Painted Constructions appear, in the context of *Abstract Borders*, as a predecessor to some of the tendencies dominating the work of

Sorel Etrog, *The Ballade of the Diamond*, 1959, shaped panel with applied relief, 36.5 x 25 in.
© Estate of Sorel Etrog

his contemporaries. *The Ballade of the Diamond* displays a similar dissatisfaction, as Noland's *Flare* does, with the traditional shape of the canvas. Etrog combined wood panels of different sizes and shapes and added a layer of raised lines and forms to emphasize his departure from the painting's past. These pieces play on the border between painting and sculpture, as well as between figuration and abstraction.



JULES OLITSKI's *Marcus Flight* is an epitome of Colour Field painting due to the nuanced application of paint on the canvas. On the one hand, Olitski (1922-2007) sprayed green acrylic paint appearing as a dotted texture highlighting the surface. On the other hand, and like Noland and other artists working in this style, Olitski used a staining technique which allowed the paint to soak into the canvas' fibres, thus saturating the surface with a thin, yet beautifully-modulated layer of liquid paint, where the dominant red hue subtly plays with the yellow, green and pink undertones.

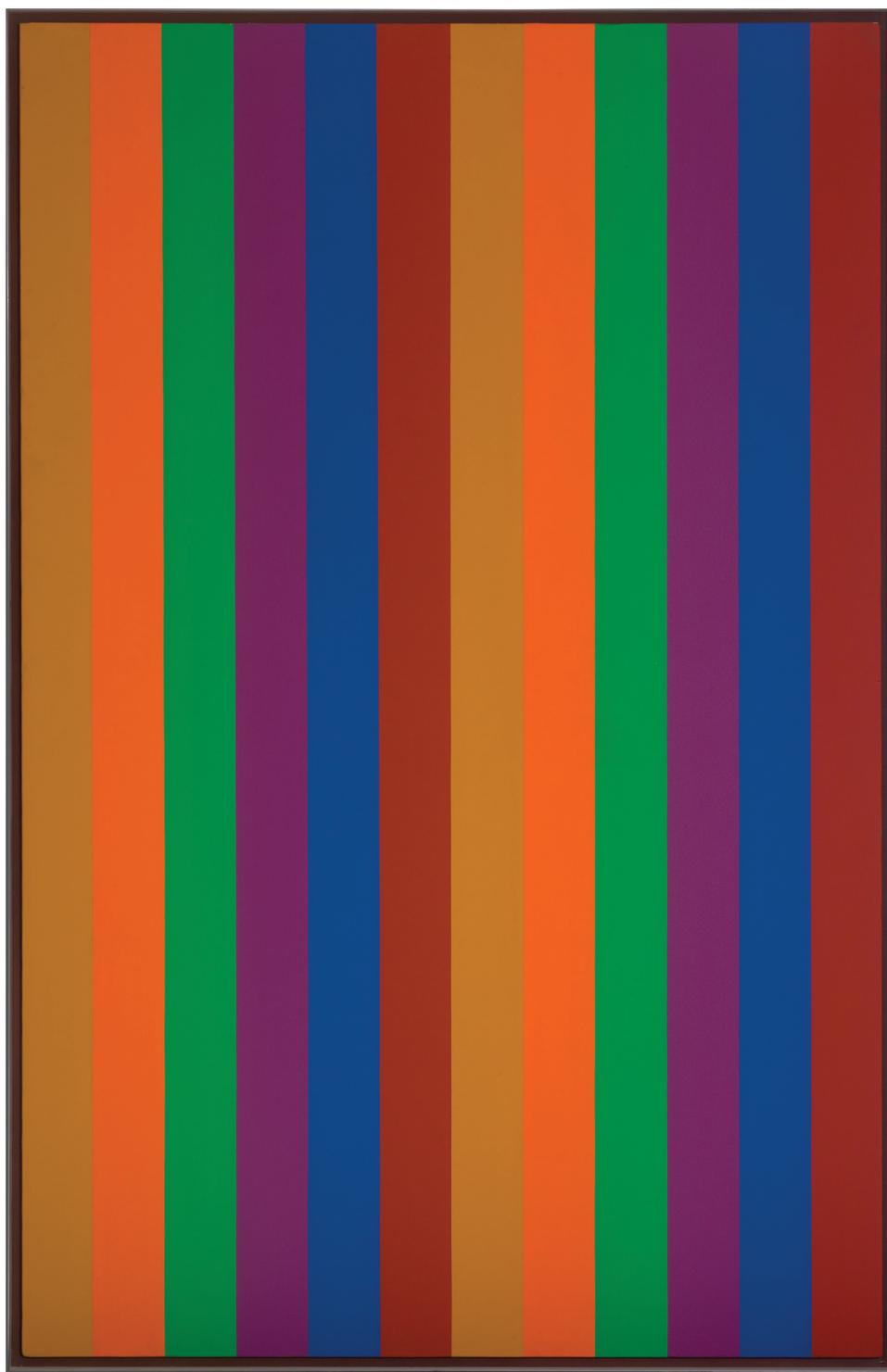
Bi-Serial Brun-Ocre by Canadian **GUIDO MOLINARI** (1933-2004) is a masterpiece of geometric abstraction. Although appearing technically simple, it demonstrates a deep understanding of both the science of colour and its emotional impact. The composition is comprised of twelve vertical bands of lively shades, whose juxtaposition and sequence generate a nuanced optical illusion, causing the surface to appear as vibrating as the bands' colours seem to blend into one another.

Saskatoon-born **WILLIAM PEREHUDOFF** (1918-2013) also painted in the vein of Post-Painterly Abstraction and was inspired by Noland, as did Bush and Mead, his peers. In *AC-78-33* the delicate transitions of hues and shades at the painting's centre are countered by a series of five long parallel stripes in a contrasting colour palette. By choosing to work in a wide horizontal format, the painting refers to the broad horizons and vast sky of the Canadian Prairies.

LOUISE NEVELSON (1899-1988) also used collage in her work as she built her compositions from used, ready-made objects that she found on the streets of New York. As can be seen by *Night Rhythm III*, she first sanded these objects before painting them black and neatly placing them in a frame, also black. The frame in this piece functions as a border. It contains the elements at the work's centre, marking their material alterity and textural dissimilarity while defining their status as art.

An artist who crossed the borders between figuration and abstraction as well as between Canada and the US is **LAWREN S. HARRIS** (1885-1970). A key member of the Group of Seven, Harris's iconic mountainous landscapes are perceived as symbols of Canadian painting in both style and subject matter. But Harris was a trailblazer who, for the majority of his career, turned his back on nature and focused on abstract work. The central element of *Painting* is a vortex of twirling forms and intermingled shapes, that are distinguished by soft transitions in hues and shades. It is a work filled with spiritual symbolism expressing the artist's theosophical belief and engulfs its viewer with its subtlety; its visuality functions as a passageway or a cross over of sorts to a higher transcendental realm.

previous page:
Lawren S. Harris, *Painting*,
c. 1962, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in.
© Estate of Lawren S. Harris



Guido Molinari, *Bi-Serie
Brun-Ocre*, 1968, acrylic on
canvas, 72 x 46 in.
© Estate of Guido Molinari/
SOCAN (2019)

The ten artists in this exhibition, while arriving at their styles from different points of departure, all produced abstract art that engages with ideas of borders, both as painterly practice and as theoretical concept.

The painterly juxtapositions in this exhibition reveal how even the lines of the “hardest” of Hard Edge painting, say Molinari’s, cross over and bleed into one another, and how even the most expansive of Colour Fields, say Mead’s or Motherwell’s, reaches its full effect when contained by limits, be they structural or painted. At its core, the show reveals how boundaries between art historical categories are not fixed as artists exceed conceptual and physical constructs. The visual conversation between the works on display brings to the fore the boldness of each artist, who in their own way pushed the borders of their styles and furthered the visual dialogue of abstraction.

Alma Mikulinsky, PhD
Toronto, 2019

Principal Acknowledgements

Abstract Borders marks the second installment of BEC Project Space, an ongoing collaboration between the Chloe Danyliw Collection and Barbara Edwards Contemporary. This exhibition continues our commitment to curated presentations of the highest caliber. *Abstract Borders* could not have been realized without the unprecedented support of Miriam Shiell, whose discerning eye has helped us secure these masterworks. Personally, I continue to be inspired by the generosity of Andrew Danyliw, whose passion for fine art overcomes all obstacles, whatever our vision.

Curator's Acknowledgements

Every exhibition is a collaborative effort, but even more so ones curated in the height of Canadian summer. My deepest and heartfelt gratitude to Barbara Edwards for her vision, energy and humour but mostly for the opportunity to bring together such incredible work. Neda Omidvar answered a million questions, shared her expertise and offered ongoing support with her characteristic grace and calm. A huge thank you to Liana Ernszt who assisted in transitioning from concept to reality, helping to envision the works in space. I thank Miriam Shiell who shared her knowledge of abstract American and Canadian art; I benefited from her nuanced understanding of the works, their context and history. Simon Bentley's support was key in guaranteeing all the works arrived to Toronto. I am grateful to Andrew Danyliw for creating such a beautiful gallery space and for our ongoing conversations about art.

Exhibition Sponsors

Chloe Danyliw Collection, Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Miriam Shiell Fine Art, David and Bunni Bresver, The Estate of Sorel Etrog, Dorset Fine Arts.

Design

Natalia Reis Design

Abstract Borders is curated by Dr. Alma Mikulinsky, an art historian and curator whose exhibitions of modern and contemporary art have taken place in museums in Asia, North America and South America. Her writing has been commissioned by prestigious institutions such as Musée National Picasso-Paris and Tate Modern. Her book on Sorel Etrog will be published by ACL in February 2020.

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