

Jack Bush plays with flatness in Vancouver show



KATE TAYLOR



Spinoff Yellow, by Jack Bush, 1976. Kyle Juron/Paul Kyle Gallery/Supplied

Painting a two-dimensional canvas that doesn't refer to the three-dimensional world is harder than you might think. Reading a mark on a flat surface as a representation of depth seems hard-wired into humans. It's a foundational impulse that shows up in prehistoric cave art and in a young child's ability to grasp the crudest drawings as figurative.

Nevertheless, flatness was one of the key goals of 1960s colour-field painting, which aimed to create canvases that were only about themselves, not the outside world.

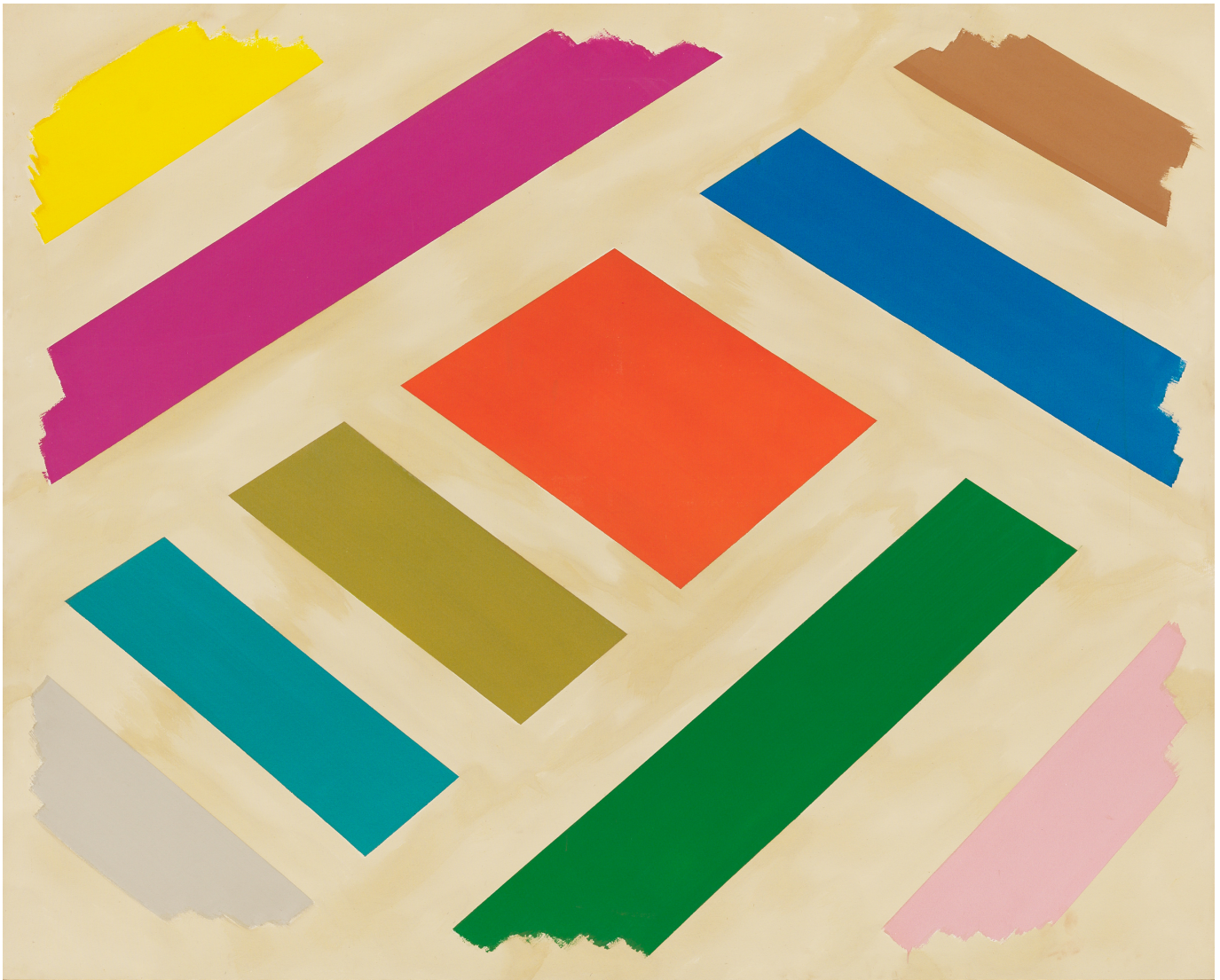
The artist whose work taught me the most about flatness was the Canadian abstractionist Jack Bush. A mini-retrospective of his work from the 1960s and 1970s now showing at the Paul Kyle Gallery in Vancouver presents another opportunity to delight in Bush's use of colour and composition. (The Toronto artist's work has always been shown regularly in his home province, with a major retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1976, the year before he died, and another at the National Gallery of Canada in 2014, but this is the first significant exhibition of Bush's art in Vancouver in almost 50 years.)



Untitled Christmas card by Jack Bush, featuring the sash motif, 1970. Kyle Juron/Paul Kyle Gallery/Supplied

And so, it's also a chance to reflect on the mischievous ways Bush addressed flatness. In a vestibule off the main gallery space, there is a small work on paper: Intended as a Christmas card, it is the one example here of Bush's famous sash motif. In those compositions, he stacked three planes, with the two outer ones receding to a smaller middle one (picture a bow-tie shape turned vertical). As curator Roald Nasgaard explains in a catalogue essay, *Jack Bush: Flaunting the Rules*, Bush was inspired by the cinched waistlines of mannequins in a store window. If you read the three-plane abstraction as one of art's recurring subjects – the hourglass shape of the female figure – then Bush has turned painting's historic male voyeurism into a pure aesthetic experience.

Often, as this composition grew and changed – in paintings such as *January Reds*, where similar tones of pink and red challenge the eye to read the forms, or *Blue Shaft*, where a blue swatch bisects the canvas – the sash can be read as a receding architectural space like a box, a corridor or a room. Flat? Not quite.



Series "D" Walkway of 1969-70, by Jack Bush. Kyle Juron/Paul Kyle Gallery/Supplied

In this show, there is another lovely example of this playfulness from the Series "D" – named for David Mirvish, who was Bush's dealer at the time. Walkway of 1969-70 features a diagonal of colour bars on a pale ground, carefully spaced like stepping stones or the stripes of a pedestrian crossing. The different colours refuse to lie still, floating up to the eye, then dropping back again.

The painting is one of the rare examples where Bush used hard-edged lines, presumably by taping off sections of the canvas. Otherwise, he relied on his own steady hand to create bars of colour, which by the 1970s had become swoops, rays and crescents in more painterly paintings such as Anthem or, the showstopper here, Spin-Off Yellow, in which large coloured strokes emanate from a white sphere.

Departing from the single aesthetic moment or “pow” that colour field sought, these works refer to the movements of music and nature as Bush plays with the dictates of abstraction. Perhaps that is why Nasgaard preferred “flaunting” the rules, not “flouting” them, for his title.

In an era where so much art is concerned with documentary content, it’s refreshing to remember Bush’s formalist experiments. His paintings are about seeing and looking, pretty good themes for art.

Jack Bush: Flaunting the Rules continues at the Paul Kyle Gallery, 258 E 1st Ave., Vancouver, to April 12.

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