



Almost Begin

Bronson Smillie

Afternoon Projects

In the pursuit of an ideal art, Piet Mondrian's goal was to eclipse his subjectivity so as to shift his artistic role from involved interpreter to humble deliverer, explicitly of the world's objective truths. He sought to achieve this, for the most part, by making basic formal elements—like line, shape, colour, and space—the primary focus, not only as a constructive framework but as a philosophy. And he did feel like a deliverer of something greater, getting as much of himself out of the way as he could, but no artist can fully achieve that; they must still participate, at the very least in the ordering of parts. What makes more sense to me is to regard the permanent entanglement between the intuitive and the analytical as a collaboration, a view and treatment that was at the crux of geometric abstractionism, a movement of which Mondrian was a part (with Wassily Kandinsky, Agnes Martin, and Josef Albers as a short list of others). Like the architect, the composer, or the poet, these artists used repetition, order, economy and harmony as crucial mental tools for their building. Which is to say, they had a grasp on the mathematical principles that comprise this world. To even be near the study of philosophy, Plato made the claim that the five mathematical disciplines of ancient Greece—arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and harmony—must be mastered. A tall order for the contemporary philosopher (or the artist, who uses craft to interpret similar profound ideas), but I recognize his point. To get to the greater abstractions, like truth or meaning, it would be useful to have some knowledge of the elemental spirit and structural principles that underlie the material.

But what about the early stages of recognizing that these principles exist in the world, in and out of view, like a latticed network? Bronson Smillie seems to enact this in his solo exhibition *Almost Begin*: the stage where crude, exploratory creation and the imminent graduation into a more developed thinking meet and grapple with one another. The verb 'enact' is key here, as he possesses an aptitude for refinement and the decipherment of nuance, which makes what appears naive in his work a deliberate choice. The child-like objects and motifs—letter blocks, encyclopedias "de la jeunesse", line drawings of a house—are present to convey a mind in the midst of crucial development, like a kid on the brink of adulthood. But the movement towards greater thinking is the main point. The works suggest they are the products of a young, forming mind actively parsing and processing the underlying abstract concepts that make up what we sense and know. The books, for instance, are methodically combined to form modular grids or a straight, curving line, all laden with the geometric: right, scalene and obtuse triangles, the occasional tiny cylinder. The phrase 'Troubles Making', spelt out of blocks, repeats each letter like the recognition of what constitutes rhythm; the build up of one note moving into another, resulting in the kind of change that creates meaning (a word, a song). The drawings, with their snaking curves, adjacent dots, and evocative symbols, suggest something musical, traveling on the page like the stops and starts of a dance. And note the phrases made of address book letters on the side—*My First Low*, *Best Flop*, *Act Below*—diminutive, like a whispered vocalization. "Peinture-poesie", or painting-poetry, was the nomenclature Joan Miró used for his "dream" paintings of 1924-27, works that contained a sparse scattering of



abstract symbols and the occasional word or phrase; Bronson's drawings share this evocation. They also evoke poetry written in more complex forms, like the villanelle or sestina, which find meaning and flow even as language is constrained by the austerity of a certain formality. These last few points have less to do with enactment than with evidence of Bronson's artistic maturity, of his ability to perform something that he has already transcended with the subtle tenderness typical of his work. If things are becoming more raw, more simplified, it's more a gesture of moving backward towards a less cluttered (and ideally purer) state; and moving backward can happen at the same time as moving forward.

To be clear, Bronson enacting all of this is a theory. You might offer another, which might be more convincing, and I welcome it; it's important to be proven wrong. That being said, Bronson using repetition, order, and economy to create something harmonious is not theory, but fact; like the aforementioned geometric abstractionists, he marries intuition with analysis, feeling with methodology. To me, the real point of Bronson's artistic manifestation of that grappling, youthful state of discovery is the implicit suggestion: isn't this kind of where we always will be anyway, regardless of age, trying to make sense of our world using the tools we have and always stopping short of the final answer? While good abstract art can get dangerously close to something formless and ineffable—so close that the boundaries between signifier and signified almost break down, and the work just is—there will always be a gap, one that forever situates us in the question. It could be argued that in the Neoplastic works he made in the last decade of his life, Mondrian finally closed that gap, something he had been striving to do for years. But I think that he remained in the state one writer observed him to be in in the years that preceded that era: "Mondrian knew in 1914 what he had to work for, but as yet he was still searching..." Like we all know, all are, always will be.

- Rosemary Flutur

Artist Bio

Bronson Smillie (b.1992, Calgary, Alberta) holds a BFA in Painting and Drawing from Concordia University and currently lives in Montréal, Québec. He is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice involves sourcing objects and creating works with materials that no longer fulfill their purpose within late-capitalist modes of consumption. Solo presentations include *Almost Begin*, Afternoon Projects, Vancouver (2023), *A Place for Everything*, april april, Brooklyn, NY (2023), *Tempo 85*, Espace Maurice, Montréal, Canada (2022), *NADA New York*, with april april (2022), and *Forever is Closing in*, MoMAPS311, Ottawa, Canada (2019). Group exhibitions include *Nicelle Beauchene*, NY (2023), *LVL3*, Chicago (2023), *AXENÉO7*, Gatineau (2022), *Petrohradská Kolektiv*, Prague (2021), among others.