

going out

EXHIBIT A HARMS' WAY

Yellow by Bradley Harms
Reviewed by
Gary Michael Dault

Part of the Summer Group Show at the Angell Gallery, 890 Queen Street West, 416-530-0444. To Aug. 19.

Bradley Harms agrees that his exacting abstract paintings, such as *Yellow*, the work illustrated here, owe some of their precision (their apparent precision, anyhow) to his having begun his career as a printmaker. "Printmaking gave me a heightened awareness of the importance of materials and techniques," he says on the phone from his studio in Calgary. "But you always have to be cautious when you use the F-word to talk about painting," he says.

The F-word?

"Craft," Harms says. Ah. Well, he's right of course. Craft is one of those words that seems to elevate mere procedural skill over the intoxication of invention and the presumed rapture of the painterly act.

But for Harms, who has contributed three works (including *Yellow*) to a small summer group show now at the Angell Gallery, the idea of craft is not constricting.

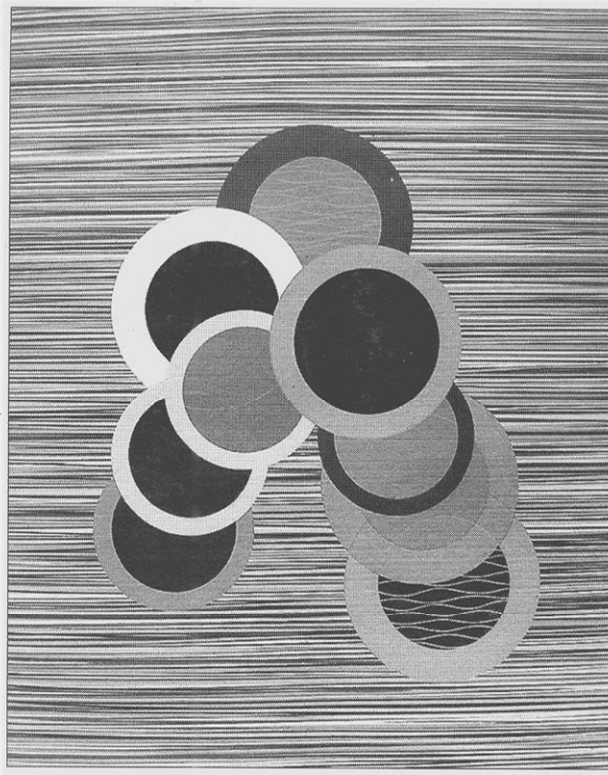
"Craft," he insists, "is a smarter, tighter way of getting things down."

And what is it, exactly, that Harms gets down? He likes to refer to his kind of painting as "smart abstraction," not out of ego but because, he explains, the term evokes for him a hyper-awareness of what pigment can do and the contexts in which it can do it.

In a typical Harms (and *Yellow* is typical), there is a dazzling field of thin, multicoloured, horizontal stripes of paint, upon which he has imposed a configuration of bright, interlocked and overlapping discs and circles of paint.

The paintings seem so perfectly realized that you find yourself assuming — at first glance, anyhow — that they must be machine-made. It's only when you look at them closely that you notice the little waverings: some variation, for example, in the thickness and density of the stripes, and traces of the adjustments preliminary to the final placement of the discs and circles.

"I try to be perfect," Harms says,



Yellow: Picture row on row of multi-colour underneath the vivid orbs.

“
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“but I'm not ever going to be.”

It is, in fact, this inevitable imperfection that lends his paintings a great deal of their meaning. “We are in a digital age,” he notes, “and I want to have a dialogue with it.” How? “By entering into a kind of visual discussion with the tropes of digital reproduction without having to utilize them.”

Exactitude with a human face?

What does this mean in practice? Harms says he sees the thin, precise lines that form the backgrounds to his paintings as “vectorized versions of the pixel.” Which is to say, as dots or pixels of colour stretched out and given direction and energy along their paths. This means, according to Harms, that his coloured lines and discs will not simply sit there staring back at you, but will possess “an implied versatility,” a constant quickening and

pulsing. That's traceable not to programming, but to the degree to which he allows a certain latitude for intuition, for the mysteries, he says, of “touch,” for “the humanity of inconsistency” — all of which adds up to what Harms calls the “alchemy” of a painting. Despite the apparent machine-made aloofness of his finished paintings, each line, each circle or disc of colour, possesses what Harms insists is “its own history on the canvas.” Each line or disc is there because of the artist's momentary decision to put it there — not because of some system he has chosen for generating paintings. “I'm actually a very dedicated painter within the traditional notion of painting,” he says, “even though I try constantly to access new ideas.”

I accuse him — genially — of being romantic. He doesn't flinch as much as I expect. “We live in an age of irony,” Harms replies. “And I don't think we're allowed to be non-ironic in our painting any more.”

But Harms is non-ironic anyhow. “Paintings have to maintain their interestedness,” he says.

Is interestedness actually a word?

“I guess not,” he says. “I make up words all the time.”