

Wil Aballe

1375 RAILSPUR ALLEY
VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA
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+ 1 (778) 229 3458
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JOAN BALZAR

Above or Beyond

Opening: Fri, Sept 5, 6-8PM

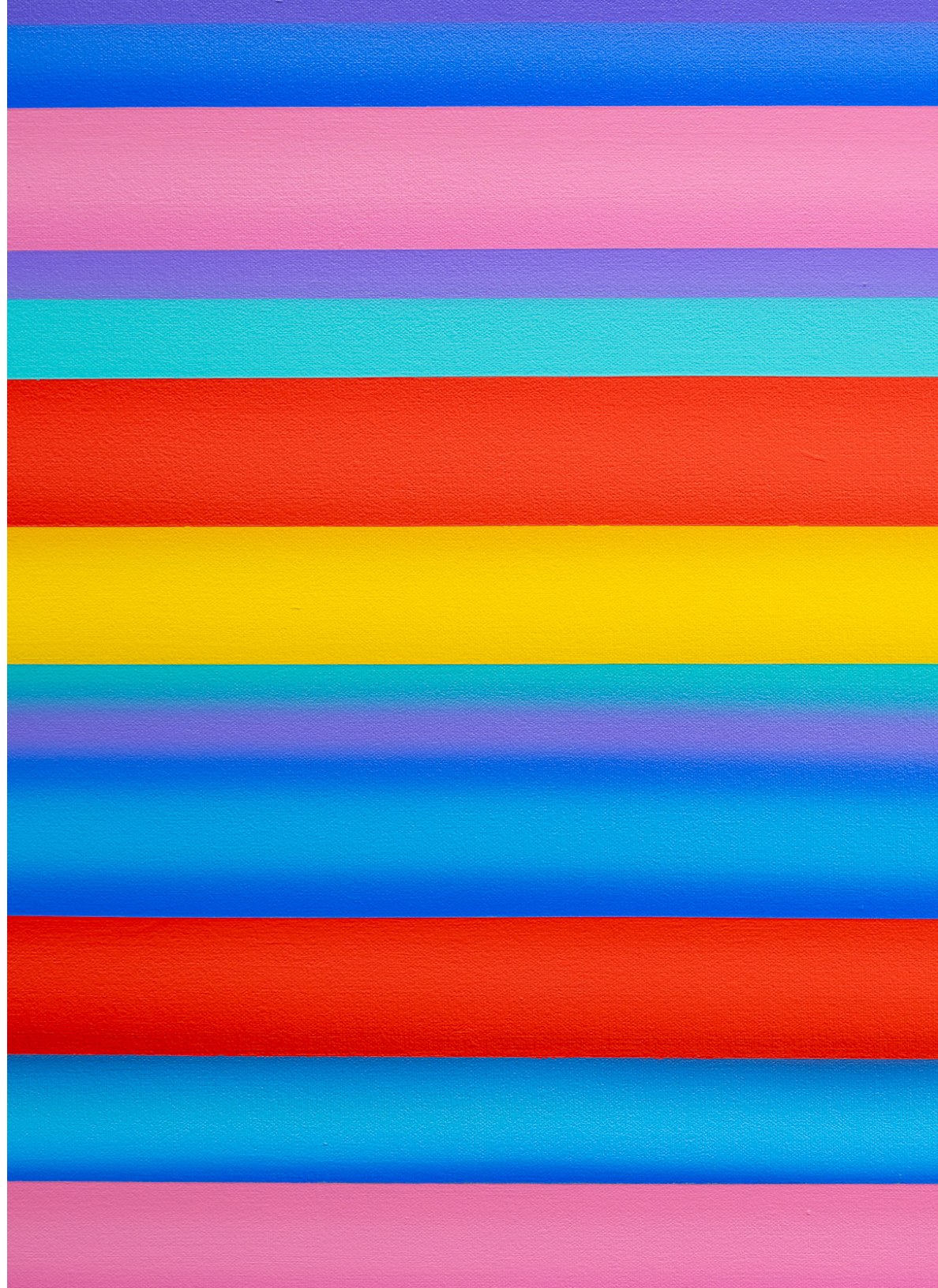
Exhibition: Sept 5 – Nov 8, 2025

Image:

Joan Balzar

#31 Neon Highway, 1999 (detail)

Acrylic on canvas



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Joan Balzar had already been immersed in various aspects of science and engineering around 1960 – when she made the switch from abstract expressionist painting, to her signature hard edge-style. Her interest became even greater as the Soviet and American space programs developed and then culminated with the Apollo moon landing of 1969. Not coincidentally various manifestations of arc-forms emerged in Balzar's work. With the emergence of hard-edge abstraction in the mid-1960s, a range of other quasi-orbital projects appeared, including orbital freeways around cities, the psychogeography of situationists and a plethora of 'trip' or orbit-related art forms especially as part of the vehicular wing of conceptual art practice. Those responses to what was seen drew on models from urban geography, philosophy and the scientific community. Balzar had no interest in the other form of 1960s 'tripping'. What Balzar did seek was work that transmitted to the viewer something of the power of the cosmos and the power of paint. With the many X paintings Balzar merged language, typography, poetics and the power of painted letters into some of the strongest abstract work ever produced in Canada.

Joan Balzar was "of her time", part of a larger global exploration of the benefit that might derive from hard edge rejection of representation in art. There was a plethora of circularity in art—often manifested as 'looping'—which had already been identified as a key element in the tautological readings of art's conceptual side by the mid-1960's. In Canada, circles and arcs were taken up in the post Kandinsky era. From 1960-1980, in what became known as the experimental, or independent cinema, there were hundreds of films that explored the cinematic potential of looping and repetition. Joan Balzar was not alone, she was doing what artists do best, creating and speaking through and with her own language one that was perhaps more inflicted with scientific influences than that of other arc-obsessed Canadians. The enculturated arcs of the 1960s and 1970s do not exist only in images. Jeff Wall's Landscape Manual essay extends the idea that the key role of the artist is that of sensitizing viewers via art to the everyday, in this case to the strangeness of landscape as it is transformed via the experience of driving. Wall sees the circular imperative of daily life in almost existential terms—we were 'going' but not really getting anywhere because the effort is always circular. If one can posit an overlap between Wall and Balzar, it might be in the presentation of ideas and images as 'information' about the world. The image folds back on itself, the subject of the image folds back as well, in a self referential circularity that has since come to define many processes relating to the making, distribution and reception of art. Which is precisely what Balzar has done with her arcs—fragments so small in relation to the imagined whole that they have almost no curvature. Balzar traces the power and sublime grandeur of cosmological rings, orbits, and arcs. As she has said, "my arcs and lines are fragments of a larger whole extending into a greater, lighter space."

This text was compiled from the catalogue "Vancouver Orbital" published on the occasion of Joan Balzar's 2011 SFU gallery exhibition of the same name, curated by Bill Jeffries.

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Joan Balzar

#37 Above or Beyond

Acrylic on canvas

27 x 54 in (68.6 x 137.2 cm)





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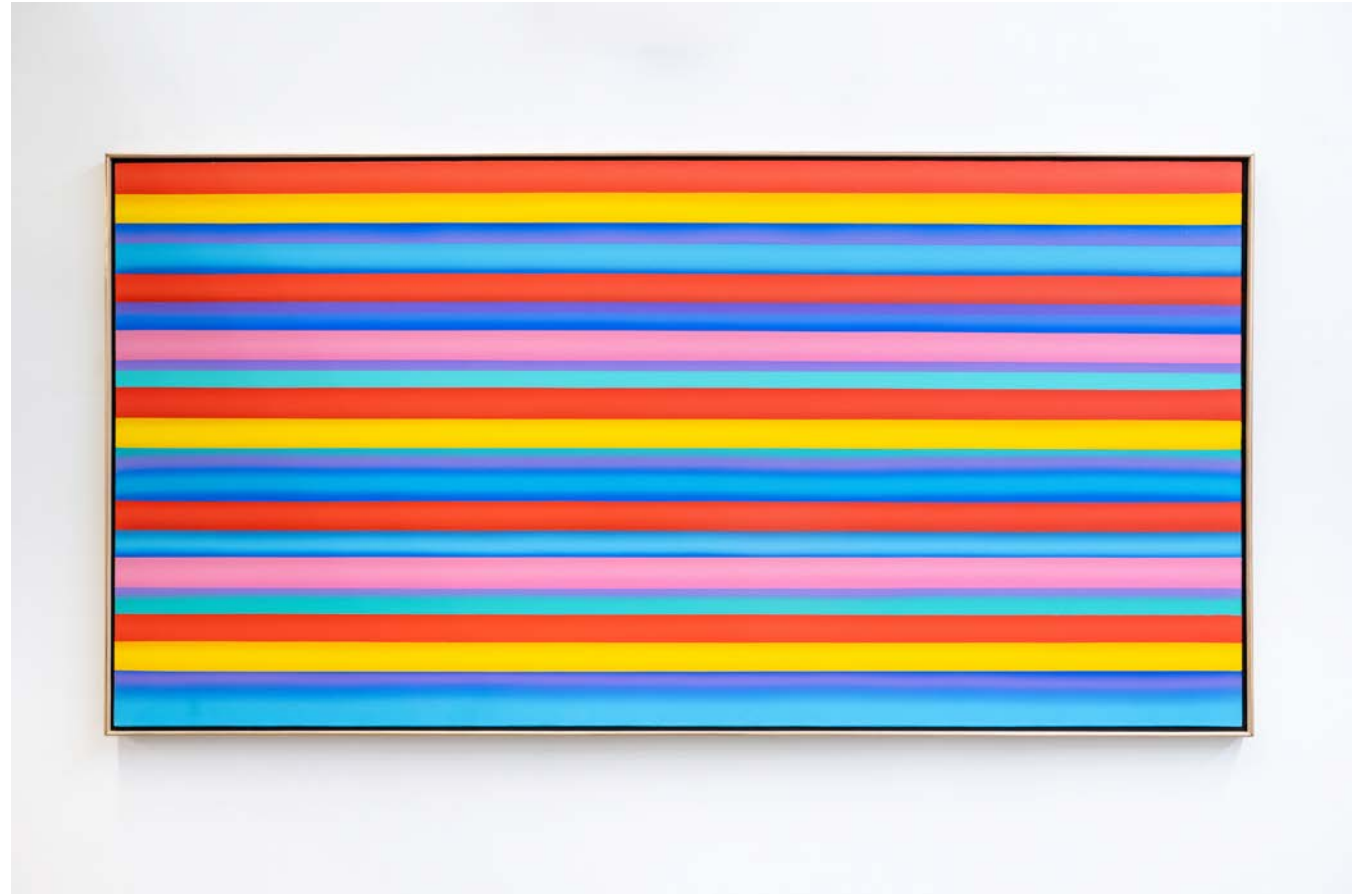
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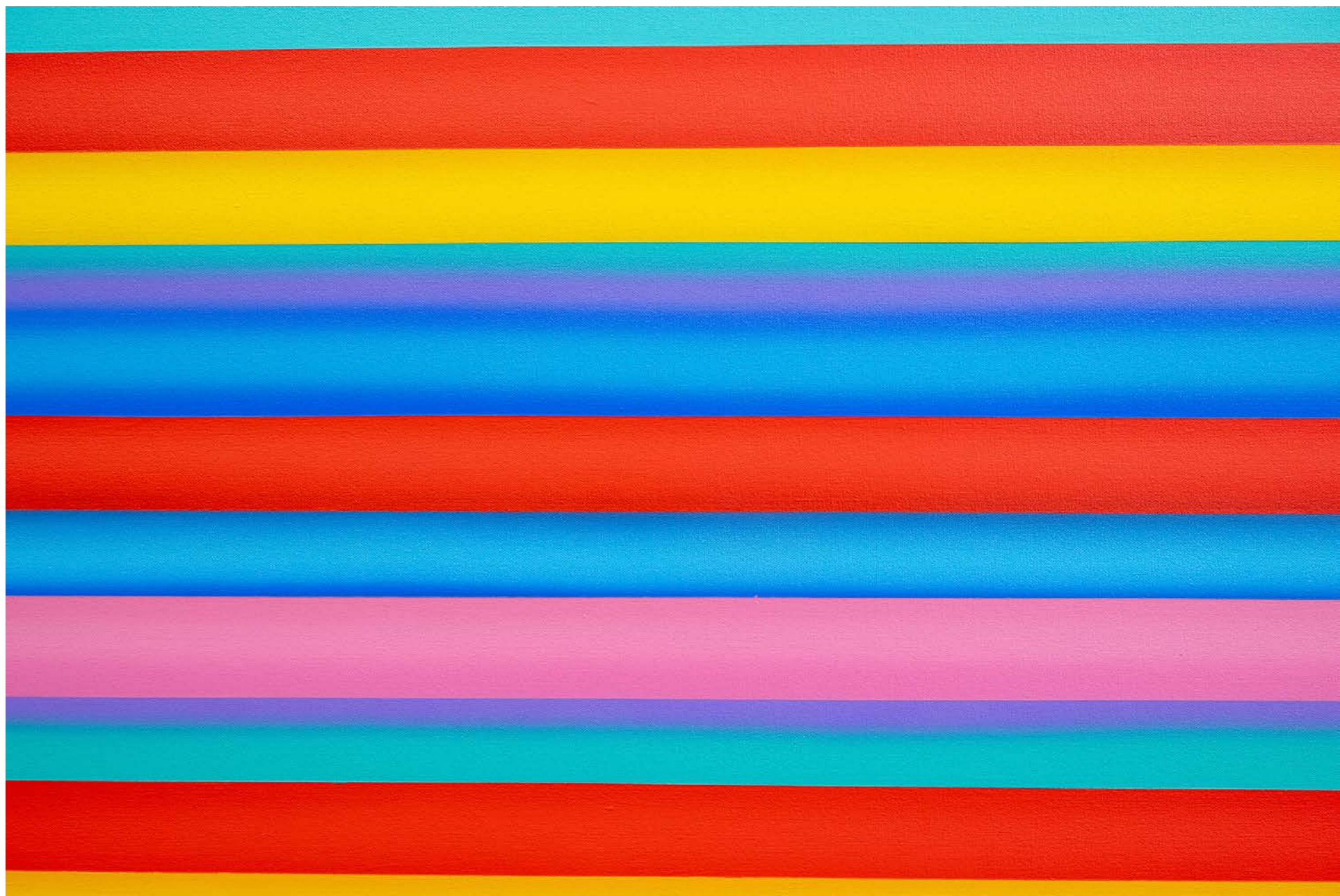
Joan Balzar

#31 Neon Highway, 1999

Acrylic on canvas

35 x 84 in (88.9 x 213.4 cm)





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Joan Balzer

#16 Nova, 2003

Acrylic on canvas

35 x 84 in (88.9 x 213.4 cm)





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Joan Balzer

#25 Neon A, c. 1994

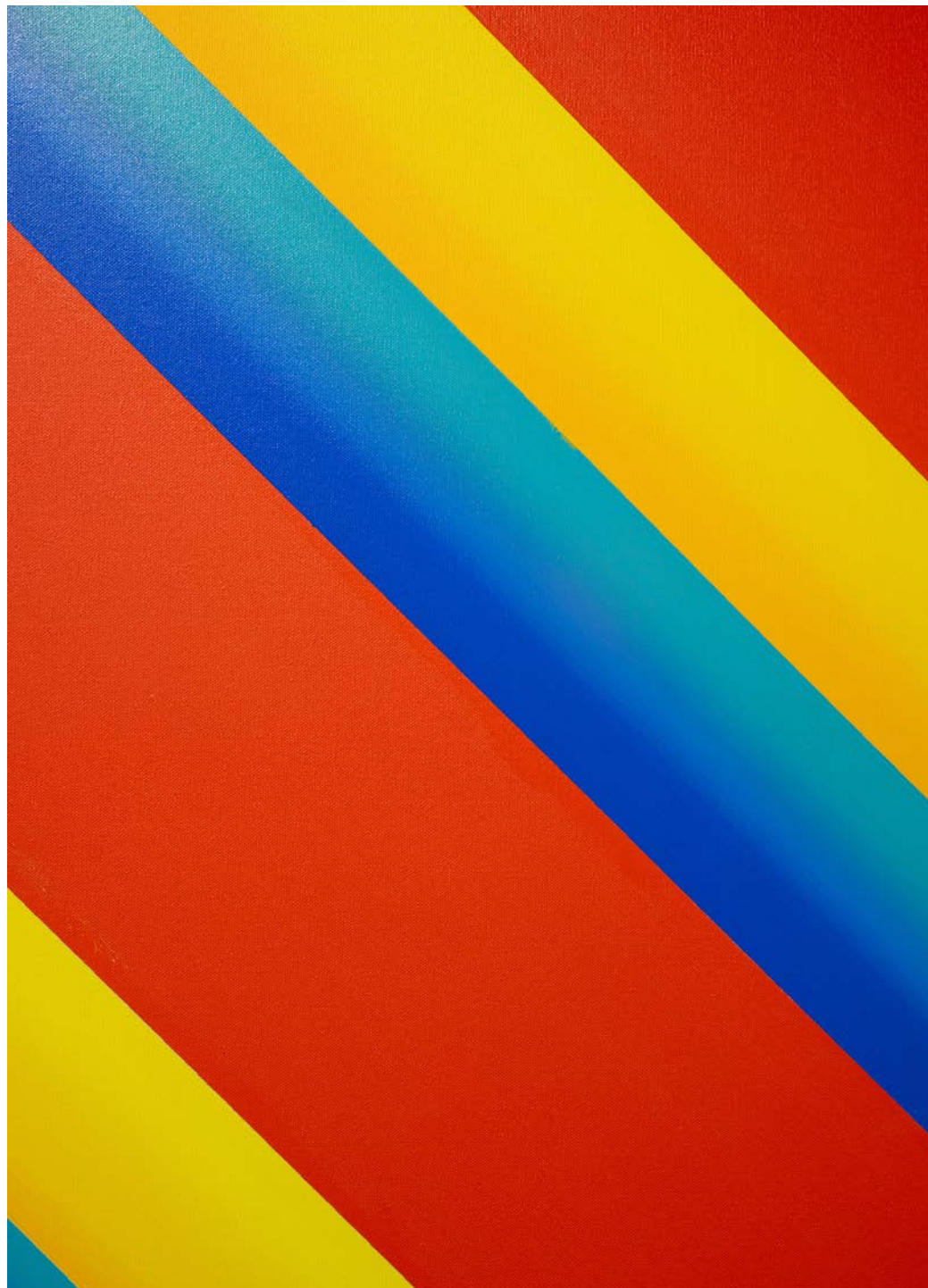
Acrylic on canvas

36 x 36 in (91.4 x 91.4 cm)



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Joan Balzar

#26

Acrylic on canvas

3 canvases

each 24 x 36 in (60.9 x 91.4 cm)



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Joan Balzar

#22 Yellow Square

Acrylic on canvas

36 x 36 in (91.4 x 91.4 cm)



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Joan Balzar

#36

Acrylic on canvas

24 x 36 in (61 x 91.4 cm)



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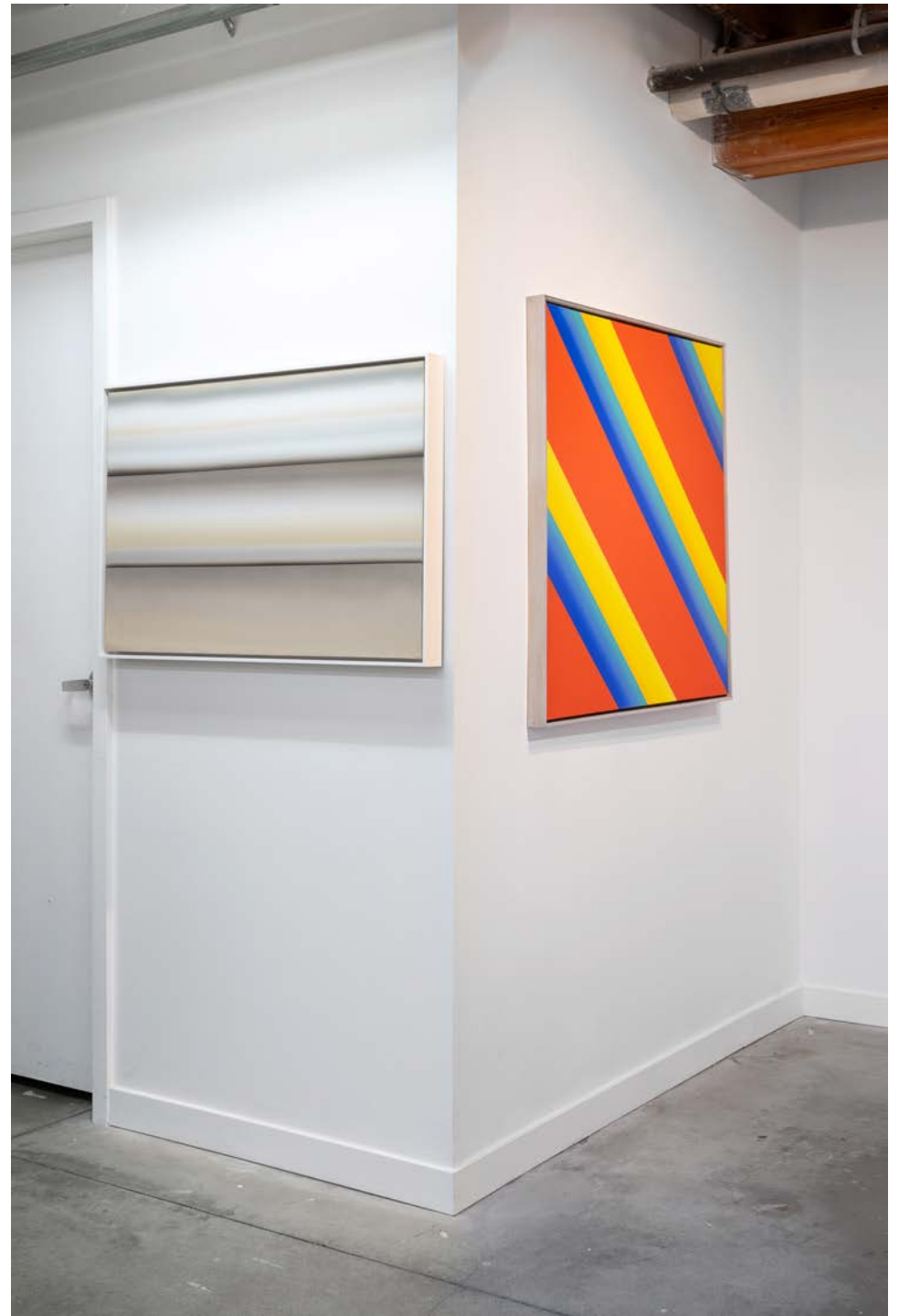
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BIO

JOAN BALZAR (1928-2016) was foundational to the development of abstraction and conceptualism in British Columbia. Raised in Victoria, Balzar also lived in South America, Mexico and Guatemala, where her work was featured in major exhibitions throughout her career. From the 1950s, she was fascinated by the atomic age and electronic communication, incorporating neon, aluminum and plexiglass in her paintings. Working with the then-avant-garde medium of neon lighting (which also has a significant history unique to Vancouver), Balzar took it one step further by incorporating these luminous tubes into the body of her paintings. Channeling this material vibrancy, her large-scale “X” and “W” series of paintings project the illusion of three-dimensional relief sculpture, as one might read a neon sign, despite being two-dimensional works on canvas. Her pieces include materials such as acrylic, wood, neon tubing, and electronic transformers on canvas.

Balzar studied with painters (Jack Shadbolt, Joe Plaskett, Peter Aspell, Roy Kiyooka and Don Jarvis) at the Vancouver School of Art (Emily Carr University). This group of Canadian artists achieved early success in the 1960s, with expansively scaled, hard-edge abstract paintings and later, through their conceptual explorations.

Balzar’s Op Art canvases matched her persona: intensely bright and sophisticated. Op Art was an international art movement that emerged in the 1960s, and was actively embraced by a dynamic group of Vancouver artists of which Balzar was included. This new form of art celebrated instability, transformation and movement—evoked by both the optical phenomena occurring within a composition, and by the physical movement of the viewer in front of the artworks.

Following the breakup of her first marriage, Balzar left Vancouver and moved away from Canada for an extended period of time, to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and then Guatemala. Balzar lost a significant cache of work in the 1970s, when a fire broke out in her West Vancouver home and studio, and some of her paintings and documents were also damaged and lost during her travels in Mexico and Central America. However, her surviving body of work – including luminous pieces in the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, Seattle Art Museum, West Vancouver Museum, Audain Art Museum in Whistler, and private collections – solidify her place in Canadian art history.

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JOAN BALZAR CV

Education

Honors Graduate, Vancouver School of Art, 1958
Studies in Paris, 1958
Studies in Mexico and Guatemala, 1959
Commission to paint in major Mayan City of Tikal, Guatemala
Masters in Curriculum in Fine Arts (incomplete)

Awards

Allied publications "Prize Winning Paintings", 1969
Bau-xi Gallery Choice, 1969
Vancouver Art Gallery Annual Painting Award, 1969
Purchase Award, Seattle Art Museum, 1968
Canada Council Grant, 1967
Koerner Foundation Scholarship, UBC Summer School, 1956, 1957

Collections

National Gallery of Canada
Audain Art Museum
Seattle Museum, Seattle, Washington
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
Toronto Dominion Bank, Toronto
El Peten, Guatemala
Antigua Museum, Guatemala
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC
Victoria Art Gallery, Victoria, BC
Morris Belkin Gallery, University of BC, Vancouver, BC
Private Collections in Canada and USA

Exhibitions

Morris and Helen Belkin Satellite Gallery, UBC, 2003
Mezzanine Art Gallery, Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Vancouver, 1999
Vancouver Art Gallery "Exit Series", Intermedia, 1969
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Light on Light", Intermedia, 1967, 1968

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Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 1967, 1968, 1969
New Design Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 1962
Bibliotec National, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1969
Palace of Capitanes Generales, Antigua, Guatemala, 1959
Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, UBC, 2001
Victoria Art Gallery, "A little but of funk", 2002
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Coloring of West", 2000
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Out of this Century", 1999
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Vancouver 1965-1975", 1996
Seattle Art Museum, "55th Annual Northwest Artists", 1969
Seattle Art Museum, "54th Annual North West Artists", 1968
Bau-Xi, "Focus", 1969
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Canadian Cross Section", 1970
Vancouver Art Gallery, "New Talent BC", 1970
Federation of Canadian Artists, "Spectrum", 1967
Vancouver Art Gallery, "Annuaals", 1959-1969

Teaching

Vancouver Art Gallery - Advanced Painting, Figure Painting and Drawing
UBC Faculty Club - Painting and Drawing
Vancouver Art School - Painting
University Women's Club - Painting and Drawing
West Vancouver Recreation Centre - Advanced multimedia workshop
Douglas College - Fundamentals of Painting and Drawing