

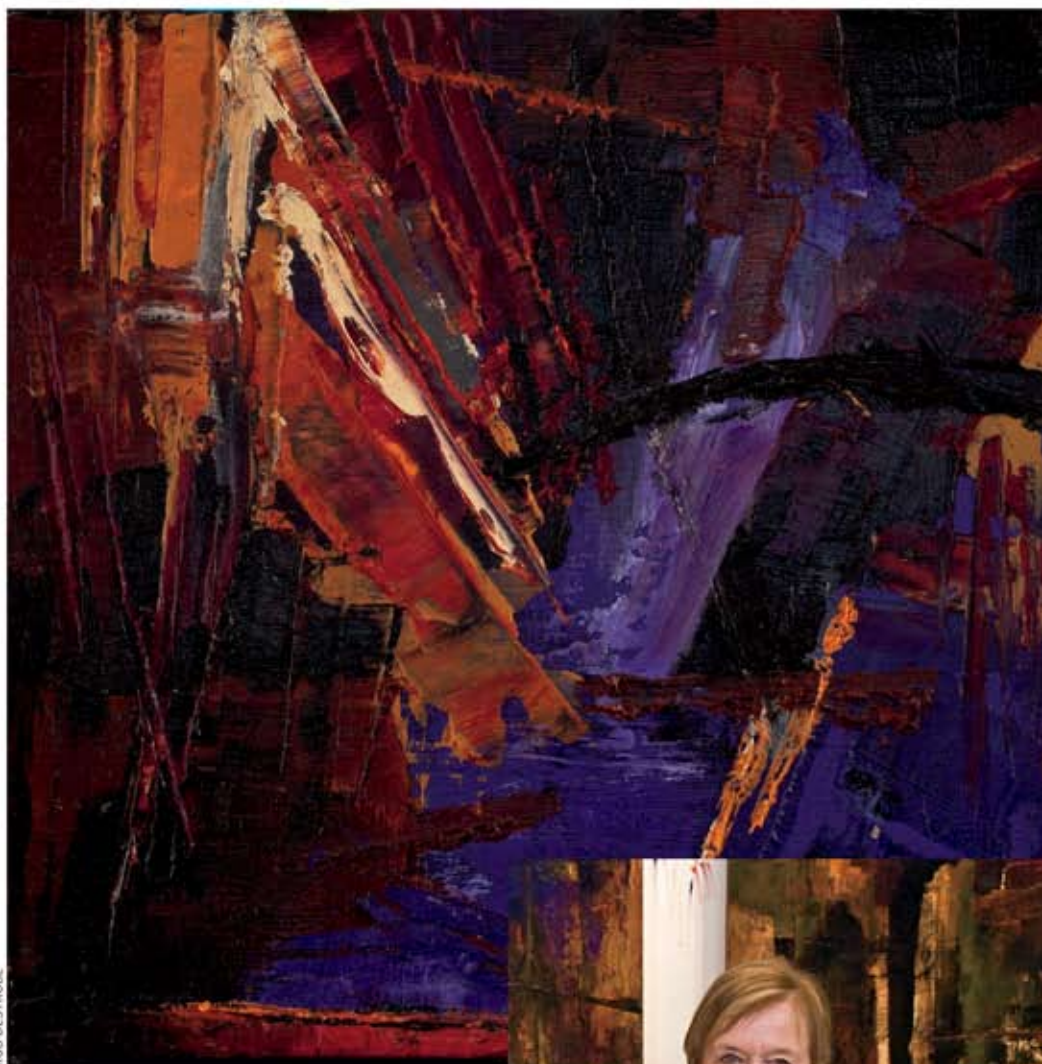
# ABSTRACT ART: THE ALLURE AND THE ANGST

Abstract art tends to evoke strong emotions, from passion to insecurity. YAM offers new ways of looking at this still-misunderstood art form.

When the Belfry Theatre kicked off Victoria's fall arts season with *Red*, a glimpse behind the brush of famed Russian-American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko, it also gave audiences a crash course in abstract art. Local scenic artist Carole Klemm's luminous recreations of Rothko's enormous red and black canvases may have provided the visuals for the play, but the ideas behind the art — and its infinitely more difficult relationship with viewers — were on display as well. As Rothko explains in the show, "Let the picture do its work, but work with it. Meet it halfway, for God's sake. Lean forward, lean into it. Engage with it!"

## THE SECRET TO 'GETTING IT'

Abstractionism is often seen as the most challenging work to appreciate. But is there a secret to engaging with abstract art? "People can be intimidated by it, because they don't know if they're getting it right or not," says Nicole Stanbridge, associate curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV). "But it's not about getting it right — it's about what it evokes in you, what you're responding to. Look at it as an experiment, an exercise — don't try to understand its meaning or narrative but what the artist is trying in terms of formal materials."



**Above:** "People were so angry that I was doing this abstract stuff," says Victoria-based abstract artist Donna Eichel (right), whose work is now celebrated for its originality and enigmatic power. Above: Eichel's "Riopelle Rap" (oil on board, 12" x 12").

## TAR, SQUEEGEES, AND DIRTY WORK

For Rothko, those materials included rich pigments, the canvas size, and his signature multiform colour field technique; for local abstractionist Donna Eichel, it's more about transformation, tar, squeegees, and hard physical work.

Describing her work as "enigmas," Eichel takes sketches of objective images (machinery, abandoned lumber mills,



factories) and subjects them to fiercely physical bouts of painting and scraping on mahogany boards, large and small, creating vibrant abstract pieces rich with intensity but slim on recognizable features.

What may start out as a photo of an old engine eventually becomes a contradictory mix of tones and textures.

"Even though I rely on images from the real world as starting points, material and tools are extremely important elements of my work," says Eichel. "I often think of Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message' — nothing could be closer to the truth in my thinking."

As noted art historian and critic James Elkins explains in his 1998 book *What Painting Is*, there's far more to any piece of art than simply what it attempts to represent. "Painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colours and the artist responds in moods," he writes.

"All those meanings are intact in the paintings that hang in museums: they preserve the memory of the tired bodies that made them, the quick jabs, the exhausted truces, the careful nourishing gestures. Painters can sense those motions in the paint even before they notice what the paintings are about. Paint is water and stone, and it is also liquid thought."

## BEYOND ABSTRACT ANGER

One look at Eichel's pieces reveals their inherent physicality, but effort alone isn't always enough. An artist for more than 30 years (the last 15 in Victoria), Eichel recalls one mid-90s exhibit in Ottawa that didn't over go too well.

"People were so angry that I was doing this abstract stuff, the curator didn't even want to show me the comment book," she chuckles. "A lot of people get incensed by abstract work — it's just not in their world. But abstraction is like jazz: you take a song and it changes through the improvisation. So art is like music; you often can't say why you like one piece better than another, but you just do."

Stanbridge suggests keeping the genre in mind. "With abstract work, the artists aren't trying to represent a tangible thing to understand with our reasonable mind — it's an abstract concept, right? Just keep an open mind. Everyone is allowed to have personal taste and say they like or don't like something, but the more challenging thing to do is understand pieces in a broader context ... it may not be the kind of work you love, but you can appreciate what it's trying to do."

Ultimately, says Eichel, the real meaning of a piece rests with the viewer. "It's all about what they think," she says. "There's absolutely no right answer. ∴"