

# Celebrating Bonnie Bronson and her art

A retrospective and  
work by all 20 Bronson  
fellows are on display

By **BOB HICKS**  
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"Bonnie could force beauty out of the earth or steel or paint," curator Prudence Roberts quoted a friend of Bonnie Bronson in an essay about the Oregon City painter and sculptor in 1993, three years after Bronson died at age 50 in a mountaineering accident.

Turns out Roberts was right, as lots of people knew in 1993, but fewer and fewer have noticed in the ensuing years. That's largely because for most of that time, Bronson's art has been pretty much out of public view. Her name has been kept alive through the Bonnie Bronson Fund award, which for the past 20 years has been given to one Oregon artist each year.

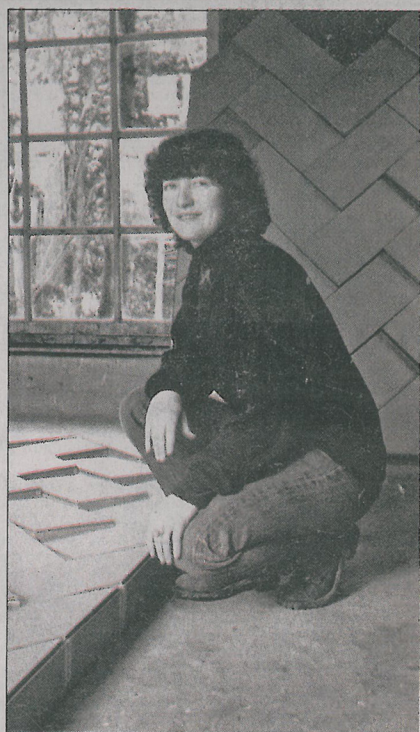
This fall Portland is celebrating a citywide retrospective on Bronson and the art awards named for her, with exhibits at Reed College (which holds a large collection of her work), The Art Gym, the Portland Art Museum, Elizabeth Leach Gallery and elsewhere.

The main attention this month turns to two shows: a selection of work by all 20 Bronson fellows at the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College, and a large-scale retrospective of Bronson's own work in the Swigert Commons of Pacific Northwest College of Art.

## A sculptural slap in the face

The eye-opening PNCA exhibit suggests that, while Bronson could indeed coax beauty from earth, steel or paint, her work wasn't just pretty surfaces: It demanded that you think about it, too.

Dominating the back wall is the



ESTATE OF BONNIE BRONSON

Bonnie Bronson works in her studio on her large cardboard sculpture "Kassandra" (1980), which was junked after its initial exhibition because it was too hard to store. The piece has been reconstructed for the Pacific Northwest College of Art exhibit based on Bronson's meticulous notes and drawings.

# Bronson

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heroically scaled "Kassandra." Made up of five long sections that create a 10-by-24-foot bas-relief, it's an impressive sculptural slap in the face.

A sand-brown piece that casts shadows from its many interlocking segments, it looks a bit like a basket weave, or like herringbone-patterned pavement. From a distance it's monumental, like a great slab of stone or steel. Get up close, and you discover it's made of corrugated cardboard.

What's more, the original was destroyed after its initial showing, at Blackfish Gallery in 1980. The piece on view at PNCA has been reconstructed based on Bronson's meticulously recorded plans and drawings. What does that say about the concepts of originality, duplication and permanence?

Such questions flow naturally from this insightful retrospective, which was curated by Randal Davis. Davis also wrote a fine catalog essay that links Bronson's work to a broad artistic sweep that runs from Jacques Derrida to Robert Motherwell and Donald Judd — in addition to Bronson's husband, prominent Oregon sculptor Lee Kelly.

Davis stresses the importance of structure, especially grids, an obsession similar to but not necessarily aligned with the Minimalist movement.

The inclusion in this show of a pair of relatively early abstract paintings is well-aimed, because so much of the later work seems to rise in relation to them.

The paintings are thickly textured, straining toward sculptural status, and despite their abstraction they aren't accidental — Bronson's blocks and segments, her primary grids, are already in place, waiting to be extracted and brought to the fore.

Geometry becomes more and more important in the sculptures, which toy with

Bronson's fractured grids are primal, but they aren't cold. Call it messy Minimalism: Always lurking between the lines is the prospect of life.





ESTATE OF BONNIE BRONSON

Bronson and her son, Jason Kelly, outside her studio in 1965. Bronson and her husband, sculptor Lee Kelly, had recently moved from Portland to an old five-acre dairy farm in Oregon City that served as their studios, gardens, retreat and home. The barn and other outbuildings made it possible for them to work on large projects. They renamed the farm Leland Iron Works. Lee Kelly still lives and works there.

horizons and folds and sharp-cornered excursions outside the picture frame. As Davis points out, the sculptures remain wall-bound and essentially pictorial: They're three-dimensional, yet they still exist within the universe of the flattened plane.

Bronson also cared about the relationships between color and material. Some of her metal pieces are brusquely metallic, but on closer look they're subtly

and marvelously varied in their hues. Some are frankly celebratory, coated (often with enamel) in blues and purples, oranges, golds or greens.

And for all her emphasis on lines, the lines get smudged. Bronson's fractured grids are primal, but they aren't cold. Call it messy Minimalism: Always lurking between the lines is the prospect of life.

A second look at "Kassandra" and the idea

of permanency: The same thing happened to Marcel Duchamp's infamous 1917 "Fountain," his store-bought urinal that was apparently tossed in the rubbish after its initial showing, and which was then replicated several times in the 1960s.

There's another similarity: Duchamp turned the urinal 90 degrees from its standard utilitarian position before exhibiting it. Bronson finished constructing "Kassandra,"

then turned it upside-down when she hung it on the gallery wall. Sometimes the essence of art really is in how you look at it.

### Work, life entwined

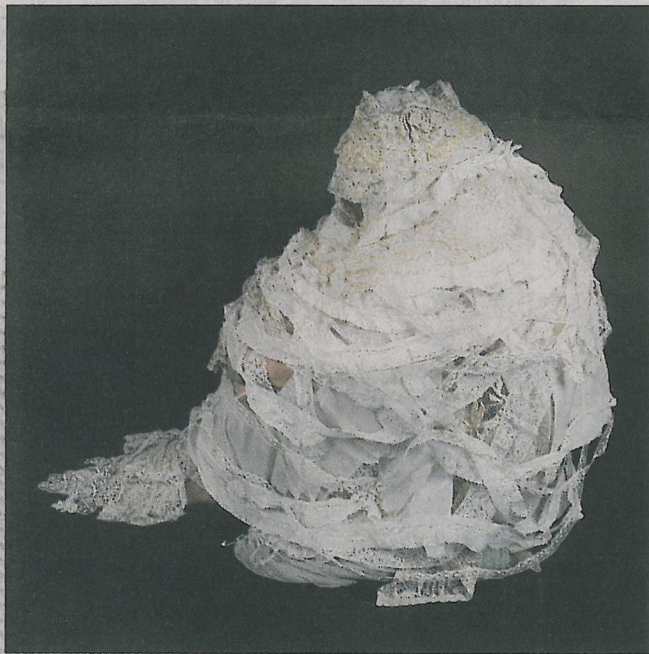
"More than most artists," Roberts continued in her 1993 essay, "Bronson resisted labels and did not want to be associated with one style, technique or medium. ... (Her) work was so entwined with 'the rest' of her life that it is impossible to separate her artistic activities from her garden, her rock climbing, and her ability to create beautiful living spaces. Her studio was, quite literally, the heart of her home."

So what, if anything, in the two decades of the Bonnie Bronson Awards, ties together the 20 fellowship recipients in the Hoffman Gallery exhibit? Besides being prominent public figures on the Oregon art scene (even though several have since moved on), maybe it's simply the willingness of each to do as Bronson did and follow their art wherever it might lead them.

The Bronson Fellows show, which was curated by Linda Tesner, is beautifully installed and could stand on its own as simply a good exhibition of work by a varied group of prominent Oregon artists. Yet viewing this show in the light of Bronson's own work is more than just a parlor game.

Judy Cooke's little cardboard wall sculptures, for instance, are tiny echoes of "Kassandra." Helen Lessick's elegant installation "Becoming," which is dominated by a diaphanous falling sheet of bead-chain lines, plays with ideas of minimal structure, pattern and beauty. So does Paul Sutinen's room-sized "Memories 1990-2011," which combines formal pattern with an Ikea-like playfulness: It's intellectual art, yet it could also be the walls of a little girl's bedroom.





**ABOVE LEFT** | Bronson's 1963 painting "Untitled (cream)" (oil on canvas, 48.25 x 47 inches) suggests a debt to Abstract Expressionism but is already showing hints of ideas that would come to the forefront in her later work. The paint is laid on thickly, giving the piece a thick, almost sculptural feel, and the geometrical thinking that would emerge as grids is evident in the painting's structure.

ESTATE OF BONNIE BRONSON

**ABOVE RIGHT** | Nan Curtis was named the 20th Bonnie Bronson fellow. Her work is on display along with the other fellows in a 20th anniversary retrospective.

### Bonnie Bronson Works 1960-1990

**Where:** Swigert Commons,  
Pacific Northwest College of  
Art, 1241 N.W. Johnson St.

**Hours:** 7 a.m.-10 p.m.  
Mondays-Fridays, 8 a.m.-  
10 p.m. Saturdays, 9 a.m.-  
10 p.m. Sundays

**Closes:** Oct. 9

**Admission:** Free

**Online:** pnca.edu,  
bonniebronsonart.com

### Bonnie Bronson Fellows: 20 Years

**Where:** Hoffman Gallery,  
Lewis & Clark College, 0615  
S.W. Palatine Hill Road

**Hours:** 11 a.m.-4 p.m.  
Tuesdays-Sundays

**Closes:** Dec. 11

**Admission:** Free

**Online:** lclark.edu/hoffman\_  
gallery, bonniebronsonart.  
com

Christopher Rauschenberg, a photographer known for his roving urbanscapes and landscapes, instead is represented by a widescreen version of a row of men's neckties (with at least one belt in the mix). Its stripes echo Bronson's formalistic patterns. In a way, so do the textiles by Marie Watt and Adriene Cruz, the elegant pine-needle sculptures of Carolyn King, the order-out-of-chaos assemblages of Nan Curtis, even Judy Hill's wonderful ceramic and molded-glass figurines, which are individual women yet also the same, arranged in straight lines but not quite uniform.

Other works seem to defy parallels with Bronson's — and so what? As Roberts wrote, her art and her life intertwined, and that covers a lot of possibilities. Malia Jensen's standing bronze sculpture of a pair of snakes playing tug-of-war with a sock is graceful, funny and audacious. Ronna Neuenschwander has a pair of good Mali-inspired earthenware figures that carry the weight of politically inspired titles. Lucinda Parker and Laura Ross-Paul are represented by signature paintings.

Then there's Bill Will's see-through, 13-foot-long showstopper "House Trap," the frame of a small house raised on a stick like a feral animal trap, although there's no bait inside. On first blush it's an elaborate punchline: house, mortgage, prison bars. Yet it's also formal, stylized, balanced, airy, suspended — a thing of simple beauty in its own right. It quietly urges you to look again.

And maybe that's the Bronson effect.

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*Bob Hicks is a Portland freelance writer; bobhicks5@gmail.com; artscatter.com*



# visual arts

## Lee Kelly and Bonnie Bronson

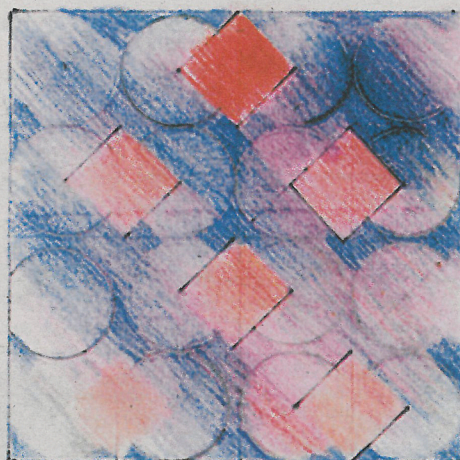
It's been Lee Kelly time all autumn, mostly because of the veteran Oregon sculptor and painter's first-rate retrospective at the Portland Art Museum (it ends Jan. 9) but also because of "Chrome," his smaller and more focused show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery that continues through this month.

The pieces in "Chrome" are brawny and funky and musical in that abstract Lee Kelly way, with maybe a few more biological and even anthropomorphic twists than his later, more geometrically rigorous pieces. These sculptures are from the 1960s, and they all got their beginnings from old auto bumpers (he preferred Buicks and Cadillacs) rescued from scrap yards. These days they might be hailed as recycled art; at the time, they were something to play with. They underscore

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LEFT | **Untitled (Bumper II)**, by Lee Kelly, 1966/67, part of "Chrome" at Elizabeth Leach Gallery



BONNIE BRONSON ESTATE

**Grid V (untitled)** by Bonnie Bronson. Mixed media on paper, 6x6 inches.

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the quirkiness often lurking in his work and help give a more complete sense of his prominent place in Northwest art.

Meanwhile, far from gallery central, a small show called "Grids" has gone up at Winestock, a wine shop and gallery in downtown Oregon City. The show consists of 10 small drawings from the estate of Bonnie Bronson, who is chiefly known these days for the annual artist award in her name but who was an artist to be reckoned with before her death in 1990, at age 50, in a climbing accident on Mount Adams. Bronson was married to Lee Kelly.

The drawings at Winestock — strict geometric forms in graphite and ink on paper, overlaid with sensuous streaks of colored pencil, and probably made around 1985 or '86 — seem in one sense like simple practice pieces and in another like little puzzles: how much

variation and beauty can you squeeze into a restrictive form like a rhymed couplet or a geometric grid?

There is much more than this to Bronson's legacy, but these drawings — the first gallery showing of her work in 18 years — are a modest start. What they do mainly is to whet the appetite for a larger and broader look at her art, which is being cataloged. Elizabeth Leach will install such an exhibit next fall, around the time of the next Bronson Award announcement, and an intriguing slice of Oregon art history will be revived.

*Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave.; 503-224-0521, elizabethleach.com. "Chrome" ends Dec. 31.*

*Winestock, 820 Main St., Oregon City; 503-656-9463, winestockoc.com. "Grids" ends Dec. 31.*

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# Art as biography: a Bonnie Bronson retrospective

By JOEL WEINSTEIN

Special Writer, The Oregonian

Writer Amiri Baraka titled a chapter in one of his books, "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall." The important thing about art, he argued, is not the artifact but the idea behind it — the process of "forcing it into existence."

It's a useful notion for viewing the retrospective exhibition of works by the late Bonnie Bronson, which is showing through April 4 at the Portland Art Museum. By 1990, when she died at the age of 59 in a mountain-climbing accident, Bronson had established what most people would consider an undeniably successful, artistic career. She had done numerous private and public commissions. She had won prestigious awards such as an Oregon Arts Commission fellowship.

Yet the first thing anyone who knew Bronson will tell you is that, even in the art-communified 1980s, her "career" was of little concern to her. Lee Kelly, her husband and frequent collaborator, marvels at the amount of artworks she threw away. And the Museum's Prudence Roberts, who spent more than a year organizing this exhibition, says that she found work slashed by Bronson in a haphazard, dusty cache, put away without regard for the future.



## Bonnie Bronson Retrospective

WHERE: Portland Art Museum, 1219 S.W. Park Ave.

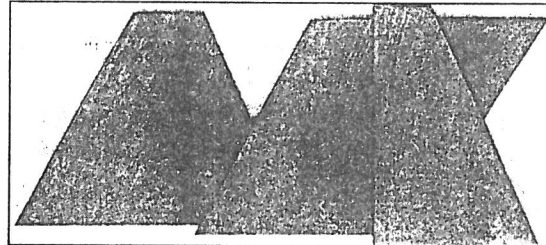
WHEN: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays (to 9 p.m. Thursdays); 1-5 p.m. Sundays; closed Mondays

ADMISSION: \$4.50 general; \$2.50 students; \$1.50 children 6-12; free for seniors on Thursdays

After spending so much time sorting through Bronson's art, Roberts adopted a view similar to Baraka's. She came to see Bronson's individual artworks as signifying transitions in her thinking, each one "a shedding of skin." What interested Bronson was ideas. She was intrigued by unfamiliar materials, processes and, especially, encounters with distant cultures.

## OUT OF COLDNESS, WARMTH AND LIGHT

Even from the entrance to the museum's Contemporary Gallery, there is a palpable sense of warmth and lightness emanating from Bronson's retrospective. The feeling comes through despite the cold, inanimate materials that line the walls: metal, enamel, wood, cardboard.



"Jas #1": acid etched steel, 1979.

The work is eclectic. There are large, multipaneled geometries of enameled steel and delicate wax-paper paintings; burnished steel surfaces that gleam as brightly as polished chrome; and cardboard construction painted like the blush

of a tropical sunset. On one wall hangs a large wool tapestry.

Chronologically, this 30-year survey actually begins in the back room. That's where you'll find the hoary influence of abstract expressionism in a chaotically painted, dark-toned canvas from Bronson's art school days. However, the show gradually reveals someone whose ideas were formed, not by artworld fashion, but by curiosity about the hazy and malleability of new materials and awe for the landscape and antiquity.

Bronson began working with welded steel after collaborations with Kelly. A grant from the Art Advocates Project (a business community program of the '70s) allowed her to develop a groundbreaking, enameled process in what was then a highly unusual alliance with industry.

Making models for steel work of architectural scale, Bronson discovered cardboard as a medium. "Streak O' Lightning" from 1978 has the overlapping rectangles characteristic of her large steel pieces, but the soft material gives the translucent colors the warmth of a dusky Caribbean sky.

The "Grandma's Dream" pieces use cardboard's alternating smooth and corrugated surfaces — in addition to paint — to form regular patterns, another recurring tendency in Bronson's work. Curator Roberts says these pieces were Bronson's response to quilts: not merely the form, but also the central role that quilting once had in women's lives.

The colors and contours of the natural world dapple this exhibition like cloud shadows on forested terraces. In some cases, Bronson made explicit connections between the

landscape and the human body, as in the enamel-on-steel panel "Green Knees" from 1973, which resembles meadowy knolls as much as human limbs. "Nature Study Part II" from 1971 is an oil-on-wood diptych made of actual window frames, through which rosy landforms mimic an unmistakably female anatomy under a chartreuse sky.

Bronson's connection with the land was not bookish or otherwise casual. She was an avid mountain climber and hiker. During the 1980s, after she and Kelly married, they set out to create a self-sufficient artistic and educational community at their rural Oregon City home, based on what Kelly calls "the land in balance."

## LANDSCAPES AND OTHER PLACES

Even as the world turned aggressively materialistic around them during the next two decades, they pursued this ideal, conscientiously reshaping the land and carpeting it with transplanted flora and their own artworks. It became a dense, eclectic sculpture park, ringed by tall firs and veined with gravel paths and reflecting ponds in the Japanese style.

After their son died in 1978, Kelly and Bronson embarked on world travels almost on a whim, first to Nepal and later to Mexico and Central America. Bronson's affinity for the indigenous cultures that she discovered — the living societies of Nepal and the ruin sites of vanished Aztec, Mayan and Toltec civiliza-

tions of Latin America — gave her work a dramatic new impetus, taking it far from the studio tradition that had been the source of her creativity for so long.

Anyone who's visited the ruins of Oaxaca or Yucatan can see how freely she quoted from pre-Hispanic architecture and decoration. "Serpent Feathers," for instance, has both the plumage forms of the ubiquitous feathered serpent of Mayan lore and a series of horizontal lines that evoke the great, crumbling pyramids' sheer staircases. The "Chac" series — colorful carved wood wall reliefs — is reminiscent of the glyphs that indicate speech in pre-Hispanic stone carvings.

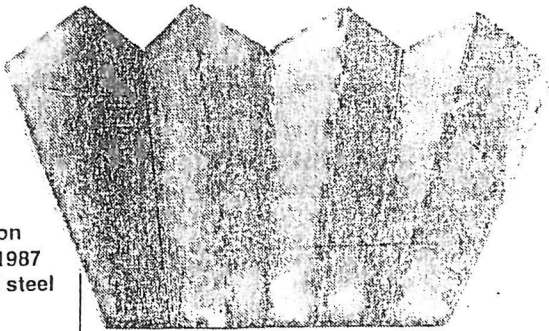
Bronson's vision was not concerned exclusively with the remote and the otherworldly. In her show, you see polished steel decorated with luminous auto-body decals and riveted seams — stuff that speaks of industrial technology, even of war machinery — alongside homages to ancient Mayan gods. There is steel whose hard, angular forcefulness is undisputed, and metal surfaces that have been etched to the earthy creaminess of a mudflow.

Kelly and others emphasize that Bronson's artistic routine was entwined with her daily life as a gardener, householder and citizen. She was very much engaged with her own family and the civic life of Portland, and she was fascinated by the larger human community.

Because of this, Roberts has put together a show that is not just a retrospective of Bronson's artworks. It is also a visual biography of the artist's life.



Bonnie Bronson  
*Serpent Feathers III*, 1987  
Cold rolled steel



**bonnie bronson 1940-1990**

*No one sees the beginning of things,  
but only the middle. —Bhagavagita: II:28*

Portland artist Bonnie Bronson stopped in mid-exploration, killed in a mountaineering accident on the slopes of Mt. Adams on August 4th. A summation of her 25-year career remains unformed. Ideas and experiments are stilled in her studio.

Bronson at 50 was a sculptor. She was investigating sculptural movement in her final works. Born in Portland, she studied painting at art schools in Kansas and Eugene before returning to the Portland Museum Art School (now PNCA) in 1959. Bronson was an artist who needed to travel, physically and mentally, to glean new ways of approach.

Bonnie Bronson created a wealth of works in steel, wood, and impermanent cardboard. In 1973, with a grant from Art Advocates of Portland, she developed an inventive industrial enamelling process, which allowed for gradations of color and illusionistic depth in her architectural steel shapes. Her works using this process brighten the public collections of the City of Portland Justice Center and the Wy'east Day Lodge on Mt. Hood.

Bronson also worked in more traditional forms: tapestry and woodcarving. She elaborated on the motifs of other cultures, actively seeking new ways to see. With her husband, sculptor Lee Kelly, Bronson sojourned repeatedly to mountainous country. The influences of Nepal, India, and central Mexico are evident in her work.

At the time of her death, Bronson was investigating sculpture to be scaled. A rock climber of some accomplishment, she fabricated a climbing wall with technical holds bolted on to her studio walls. These holds were sculpted from rosin and grit, and the artist was again infusing color into industry. She was working with composer Michael Stirling to create sound for this sculpture: music which would respond to the route of the climber. To Bronson, it was interaction which livened the world.

A continuing aspect of Bronson's work is the garden planted in the outskirts of Oregon City. These grounds are both sites for sculpture and sculpture itself. As in her steel work, Bronson used gradated color and texture to create miniature environments reminiscent of a Zen garden. The continuing focus is on subtlety: the slowing of the eye, the sensitizing of the body, the shifting of the sun. These gradations, inherent in all of Bronson's work, may well be lessons in the course of a life and how we choose to experience the living.

—Helen Lessick

*A trust fund has been established to document Bonnie Bronson's work and create an on-going scholarship program. Donations can be made to the Bonnie Bronson Trust Fund, c/o Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 204 SW Pine Street, Portland, OR 97204.*

*Helen Lessick is an artist who lives in Portland and New York.*



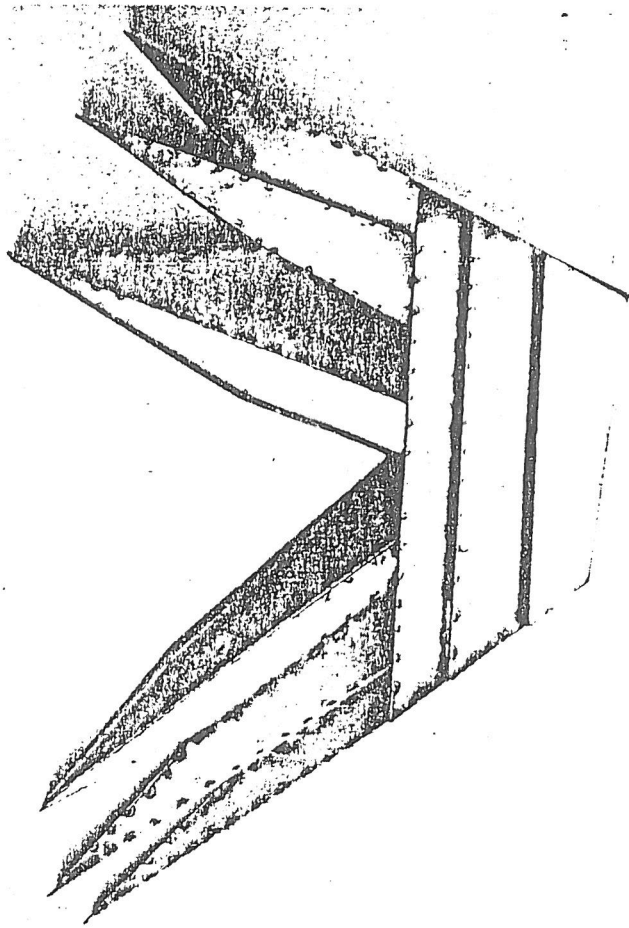
# A SUMMER CROP

Portland / Lois Allan

The visual-arts equivalent of summer-time reading can be found in the spate of group shows in the galleries. This is the time for variety, pleasure and discovery, all of which are in evidence in the recent work of three artists—Richard Morhous, Bonnie Bronson and Cody Bustamante—showing at Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Morhous focuses on the magical aspects of the circus in vivid pastel and mixed-media works on paper. Surfaces are developed until they glow; saturated primary colors are set off by complementaries and rubbed, layered and shaded to the point that they are both tactilely and visually appealing. This expressive use of arbitrary color is similar to that of the early German expressionists, as are the compressed space and bold, simplified forms favored by Morhous. He uses heavy black outlines and the shapes of ropes and tent poles to point up angularities and to convey a sense of dynamic rhythms.

Even though this description may suggest a similarity to Max Beckmann's circus paintings, the relationship is tenuous—a slight matter of stylistic approach to the same subject. Where Beckmann's circus is a metaphor for the human condition, portentous in its implications, Morhous's circus is one of sheer delight in the thrills and excitement of the event itself. Beckmann's *Acrobat*, the well-known painting of a large, mystical figure crouched on a trapeze high above the crowd, makes an instructive comparison for Morhous's *Glide*, in which a trapeze artist is again the subject but here is a handsome, muscular figure in white who swings out gracefully from the trapeze. Behind him is the blue, lavender and yellow tent top, crisscrossed



Bonnie Bronson, *Serpent Feathers IV*, 1987, cold rolled steel, 29" x 40", at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

by a ladder, angled tent poles and a high wire. This painting is about physicality, about life lived rather than contemplated.

A visit to Aztec archaeological sites by Bronson was the inspirational instigator for her five metal wall reliefs, all titled *Serpent Feathers*. Her enduring interest in repetitive patterns is here combined with a sensitivity toward and respect for the material—cold rolled steel in this case—to produce pieces that are elegant in their simplicity.

During the early thirties, truth to materials was a concept expounded by British modernists. Bronson follows that tradition by permitting the material and the process of working it to remain obvious and in-

rounding them. The surface is activated not only by the spot-welds but also by the marks and the slight changes in texture on the bare steel.

Watercolors, pastels and sculptures by Bustamante round out this tripartite exhibition. The imagery, mainly of rabbits and birds, is in his familiar lexicon, but in these media a whimsical, lighter approach has developed. The impact of the sculptures, as well as the drawings, is dramatic but delicate, colorful but subtle. In each drawing, the figure is either isolated against the white paper or given a minimal background. In each of the sculptures, which are constructed of wood and miscellaneous other materials, a small bird stands on a high perch. The appeal of their fragile look is undermined by beaks made of nails and, on one bird, a row of nails down the back.

Full exploitation of the medium is evident in Bustamante's watercolors. From a distance, one sees the sparkle and vividness of the many colors that form the image. Close inspection reveals a multitude of small areas, sometimes separate, sometimes overlapped or layered, that meld into a satisfying whole. There are fine gradations of texture as well as color, and occasional dribbles across the white paper indicate spontaneity. The subjects are few little creatures who sport decorative markings, usually stripes, circles and crosses, and who often have inappropriate anatomy. Nonetheless, they are presented with a dignity and charm that seem to say, "I'm OK, but you may be a little peculiar." Not much psychological import to be sure, but quite enough for summer endeavors. □