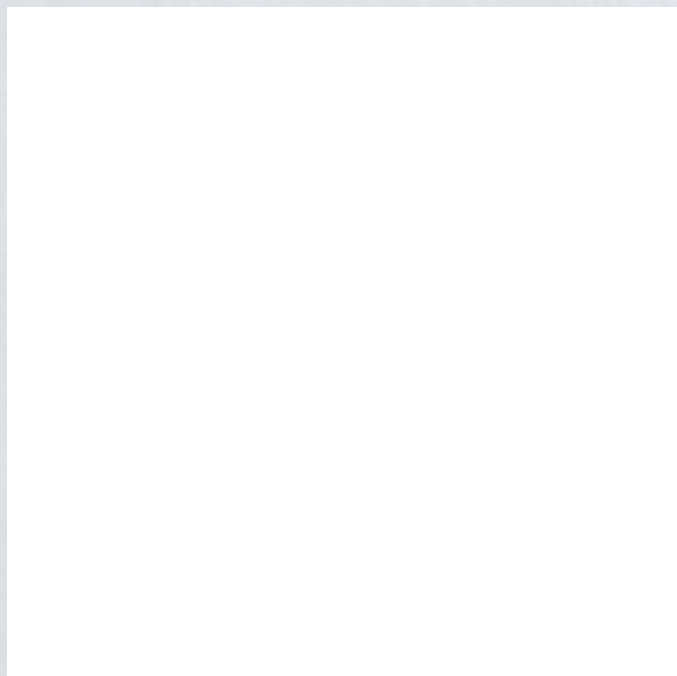
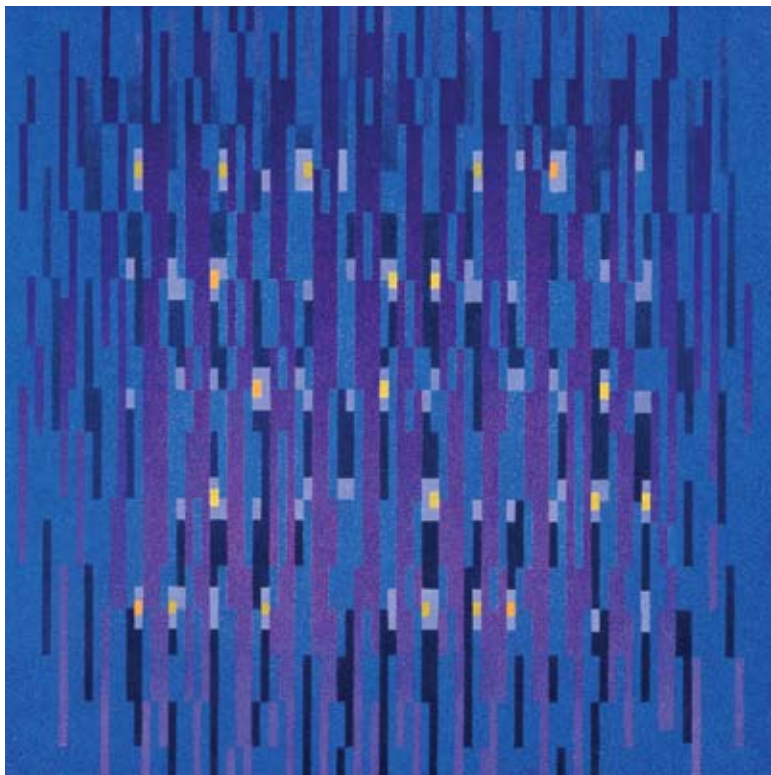


E. Nancy Stevens

P A T H W A Y S





PULSE

36" x 36"

acrylic on board

It is a distinct honour for the StFX University Art Gallery to present an artist of the caliber of E. Nancy Stevens. That it should be in Antigonish is all the more special as this is where Nancy lives and works. *PATHWAYS*, the body of work we are about to experience, is compelling in its beauty and intensity.

These paintings are patterns captured. Pattern is ever present. Even the non-patterns of chaos are, in the fullness of time, cyclical. Like it or not, from cradle to grave, we as individuals fit into this greater pattern/non-pattern. As individuals we interface within our allocated time and each other's lives as communities of family, friends, coworkers, citizens and nations. The world is a symphony of frequencies interacting and interlocking. Nancy's work sees this.

Translated into codes of paint, passages of music and conversation, sounds and sights colour her palette. Compositions of "if this, then that" come and go, patterns combine and recombine until the artist decides that the message has been revealed. With its meaning now far greater than the sum of its parts, each work is a conversation, a pathway we are invited to explore and enjoy.

I would like to thank Nancy and her partner Kingsley Brown for their patience and hospitality in working with the StFX Gallery to make *PATHWAYS* possible. My thanks also to curator and critic, Tila Kellman, who wrote the insightful catalogue essay. Thank you to Ruth Young for the catalogue design. To the Chair of the Gallery Board, Dr. Mary McGillivray, StFX Academic Vice-President and Provost, and to fellow Board members, thank you for again presenting to Antigonish and the communities of northeastern Nova Scotia the best in contemporary visual art. Thank you to our Friends of the Gallery and in particular to our season sponsor, MacLeod Group, and exhibition sponsor, A.A. Munro Insurance, for partnering with StFX University Art Gallery to make this possible. Finally, thank you to Jöst Vineyards for providing the opening toast to artist E. Nancy Stevens.

Bruce Campbell, RCA
Gallery Director and Artist in Residence StFX University



PRIME

36" x 36"

acrylic on board

IN THE LIGHT OF NUMBERS

E. Nancy Stevens' passion is exploring pictorial space through the fundamental materials of abstract painting: colour-light and form. When you walk into a roomful of her paintings you are submerged in an experience of scintillating, vibrating colour that gives the sensation of movement but is locked in place. Despite bright colours and hard-edged compositions, this is a contemplative art, one in which colour relationships slowly pry apart space to give your eyes and mind some breathing room. Unburdened from the task of representing character, realist place or story, the paintings of *Pathways* synthesize a new kind of experience of the concrete world, an event that can absorb you, as a viewer, into a new self-perception in the field of painting.

Stevens writes of finding inspiration in the conflicting practices of Neo-Impressionism and the Minimalist art of the 1960s. However, the work of Montreal painter Guido Molinari provides a more critical context than the latter. Neo-Impressionists, such as Georges Seurat, advocated using colours seen in reality or even breaking those colours into their components. Finding that adjacent rather than mixed colours produced a more intense experience, they applied paint in small dots, leaving their mixing to viewers' perception. Since colour expresses emotion, Neo-Impressionist painters believed that pointillism provided a bridge between interior emotions and concrete reality. Minimalist artists, such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd, also aimed at synthesizing an experience of objective reality. They reduced their works to essential qualities of colour and surface, producing simplified objects stripped of internal compositional and colour relationships and relieved of artists' aesthetic choices and touch. They often used number series as a compositional guide. Although series such as prime numbers are purely abstract, the Fibonacci series describes order observable in nature while remaining a mathematical progression, thus linking abstract thought to reality.

Although Stevens shares the Minimalists' interest in numerical seriality, unlike them, she is concerned with opening rather than expurgating pictorial space. Montreal painter Guido Molinari's practice explored the same territory, especially in his "stripe" paintings of the 1960s that have an affinity with Stevens' work. Deeply involved in the Neo-plastic theories of Piet Mondrian, Molinari, like Seurat and Stella, was continuously reassessing pictorial space. In Molinari's work, space is constructed from

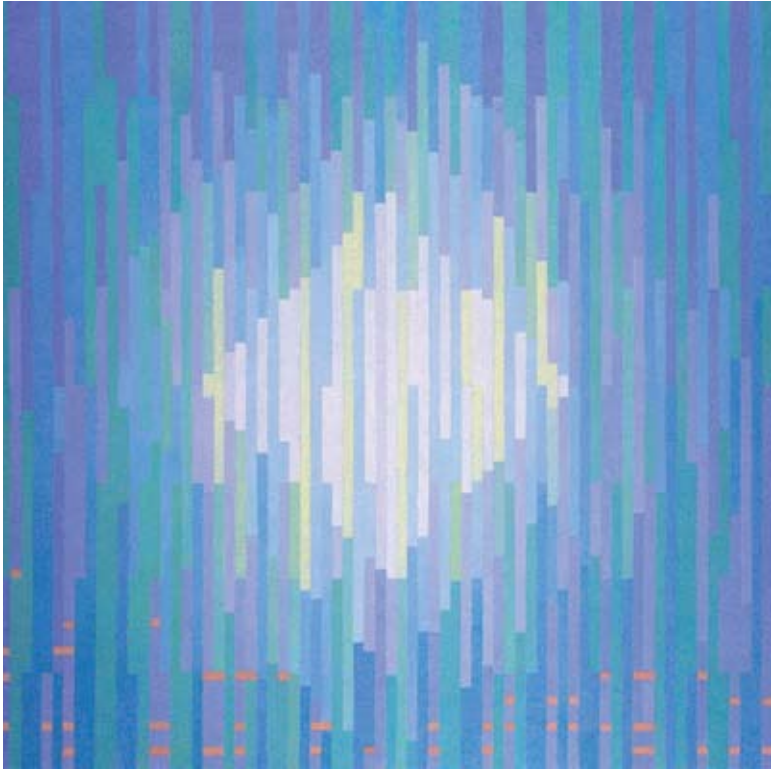
the spatial character of colours and their interaction according to their juxtapositions and quantities. Consequently, the value of this practice lies in the creation of space by 'colour-light.' This has social value, argued Molinari, because "[t]he main purpose of art is to relate oneself to the objectivity of reality. That is, to express adequately the numerous relations of the individual with his surroundings."¹

Like Molinari's, Stevens' paintings propose emotional experiences based on objective colour relationships. The rhythm of stripes in *Prime* intimates its basis in prime numbers (2, 3) interspersed with prime gaps (1, 4). *Earth* plays on the Fibonacci series and its compositional derivative, whirling rectangles, to suggest spiral motion. For the deep blue *Pulse*, Stevens subdivided and recombined vertical bands so that they interlock, opening new kinds of space. The vertical "stripes" of the lovely, golden *Warm* are divided into lengths according to prime numbers including 2, 3, and 5. Describing the organization of the complex horizontal bands depends on what counts as the basic unit: a single colour or a repeated combination. The colour relationships of gold and violet, salmon and green, red and white vibrate to give an intensity and warmth not found in any single or even isolated pair of colours. Optically, the paintings ripple with suggestions of wave-ordered phenomena like light, water and sound. The colour is never saturated or unbroken. Dot by dot, she intervenes with aesthetic judgement to vary colour continuously. She layers colours in depth so that warm gold next to cool violet can be underlain by the opposite values. The effect of the interlocking values is to hold the surface reasonably taught while opening it to a softer and deeper optical space than the saturated, monochromatic stripes of Molinari.

In this colour-space, you and I find our selves in a new spatial order with light as its content. As *Light* suggests, we discover this existence because, in Anne Simpson's words, "Light falls through you."

Tila Kellman

¹ G. Molinari in P. Théberge, *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)*, Ottawa, 1976: National Gallery of Canada, p. 40



LIGHT

36" x 36"

acrylic on board

PATHWAYS

My work has evolved from the discipline of a classical art education at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Mount Allison University, where I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, and my experience as a graphics artist translating idea into image with CBC Television.

In my 1995 exhibition *HORIZON PAINTINGS*, at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, I explored the conflict of chronological time and the illusion of space. Time was resolved as autobiography and experience in my 2001 exhibition *IN TRANSIT* at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery.

These paintings, influenced by the radiance of Impressionism, the energy of Cubism and the elegance of Minimalism, take another direction, another pathway, in the exploration of time.

I am drawn to the clarity of geometry and the aesthetic potential of music and words. Combining these interests with the natural rhythms of land, sea and sky, I have translated them into optical events where spatial conflicts and their resolutions can occur.

Abstraction liberates colour and form from representational functions. The simple shapes of squares and rectangles are transformed into thematic sequences of number theory, fragments of music or language. Altering their geometry by repeating the patterns horizontally allows the shapes to become more complex.

The rhythmic repetitive forms can suggest movement or meditation as they emerge from the layers and textures of pointillist colour. The shapes become positive or negative as colour, selected for its physical and expressive qualities, defines their position and direction. The picture plane becomes a place where the viewer may be part of the activity and adventure of form and colour.

But optical events are only part of the exploration. Within the confines of stability and instability (colour), stillness and movement (form), are the pathways of my search for order and balance – something beyond the material world.

Nancy Stevens



LINK
36" x 36"
acrylic on board

