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# BERT BINNING'S EXHIBITION IN VANCOUVER

by Joan LOWNDES

In 1967 the term "scene" suddenly began to be applied to Vancouver. The onrush of young talent, handling with ease the new international styles, swept aside the older pre-scene painters, who were ignored and rejected even as teachers.

Recently one of the most important figures of that pre-scene, Bert Binning, was once again presented to the public as a creative artist. His one-man show at the Bau-Xi Gallery was his first in nine years.

What had caused such a hiatus in his work? A contributing factor may have been the competition from the young establishment, but essentially one feels that the administrator had swallowed up the painter. Two years ago, in a courageous attempt to regain his own soul, Binning resigned as head of the Fine Arts Department at the University of British Columbia to become a professor only.

The additional time gained for himself resulted in *Optional Modules*, as he

called his show. The basic idea was promising: geometric segments which could be fitted together in various ways to change both the total configuration of the object-painting as well as the interplay of surface pattern. Thus a rhomboid could be transformed into an oblong, a pinwheel, and so forth, while the internal dynamics might be reversed from an expanding diamond to a point of tension between two flying wedges. Participation and fun were possible from the artist who once declared that "the business of serious joy" was neglected in Canadian painting.

However the execution fell sadly short of the intent. Instead of contacting a fabricator and thinking in terms of light-weight plastic multiples, Binning made huge canvases of the order of 44" by 88 1/2", on stretchers nearly 2" thick. The eight or more modules of which they were composed were held together by big metal clamps. Few people are going to struggle with such an unwieldy arrangement.

In general the show lacked the wit and concision of earlier paintings. The technique was surprisingly lax: brushwork, which should have been impersonal, obtruding by its unevenness. This offhand treatment of surface, betokening either waywardness or a claim to special status, tended to destroy elegance.

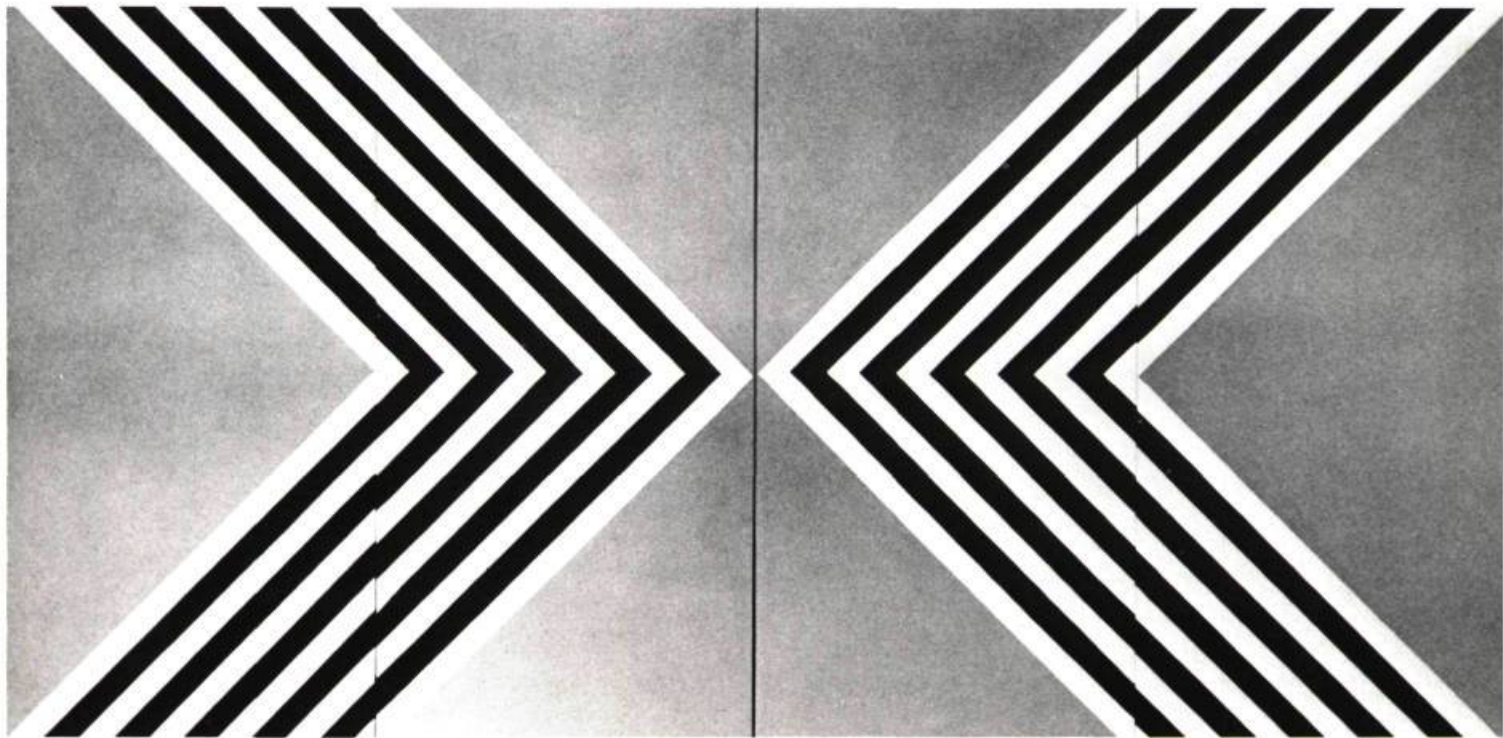
Despite these flaws the Vancouver Art Gallery purchased a work, perhaps not so much because of the intrinsic quality of the exhibition as to document a phase in Binning's career, for it is planning to give him a major retrospective in the fall of 1971.

Tony Emery, the director of the VAG, is indeed seeking to restore a more balanced view of the over-all achievement of the pre-scene painters. He began last year with the Shadbolt retrospective which is still touring the country. Binning is not so multi-faceted as his compeer, but the survey will reveal him as painter, teacher, muralist and to some degree architect. It will

include drawings, of which the VAG has just received an additional two from the collection of the late Charles Band, and of course many ship canvases from the Fifties. It is these latter which one evokes for Binning at his peak and by which he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1954.

He was as fond of regattas as Dufy. His little boats frolicking on the water, their rigging and fluttering pennants abstracted into taunt design, had a wonderful gaiety and fertility of invention. They are part of the visual heritage of all British Columbians.

As for his architectural commissions for which he received the medal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, they are very much present as one goes about one's daily business in Vancouver. The most notable are his 44-foot mosaic in the main branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and the mosaics and colored "fins", sea-green and blue, which impart a lightness of spirit to the B.C. Hydro Building



*Optional Modules*, 1970. Acrylique, 4 panels: 44 in, by 88 1/2 (111,8 x 224,8cm). (Phot. Charles van den Oriden.)