BINNING, B.C.
(Medicine Hat, AB, 1909 – 1976 West Vancouver, BC)

Bertram Charles Binning followed in his family’s footsteps of becoming an architect, but the “expectations that Bert Binning would follow the tradition were frustrated by years of adolescent sickness that kept him bedridden. It was during these illnesses that he became interested in drawing, first as an occupation to pass the time; when he recovered it was to the graphic arts that he first turned, and in 1927 he began to study at the new Vancouver School of Art, under F.H. Varley and J.W.G. Macdonald.”¹ He never studied architecture formally, opting instead to study drawing both in Canada and abroad, but it was his explorations of visual art that complimented his architectural draftsmanship which, in turn, brought him to a teaching position in the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia. Binning’s career as an architect heavily influenced his art practice, and his vocabulary as a draftsman translated well to his drawings and paintings. In 1940, Binning designed the now infamous Binning House, one of the first examples of “modern” architecture in the Lower Mainland region of Vancouver; it has a flat roof, and open floor plan, a full wall of windows on the south side, and is tiered to follow the slope of the site on which it was built. It was the design of his own home in West Vancouver, BC, with architects Ned Pratt and Bob Berwick, which allowed him to play with large scale paintings for the first time: he completed murals for both the interior and exterior of this house, now a National Historic Site of Canada. This architectural project opened a dialogue with key architects along with West Coast – one being Richard Neutra in Southern California, who visited Binning and stayed with him in his home several times. Such visits then inspired and influenced the evolution of architecture in Vancouver, which resulted in the rise of Arthur Erickson’s attention and fame.

“It was an incubator for much of the West Coast modern talent… It nurtured people like [Arthur] Erickson and other who would gather there. It was inspirational, and it was a demonstration piece for modernism. It was an open house; [Binning] had salons there for artists and writers and musicians and architects. That lends it a historic significance beyond its mere built form.”²

Following over three decades of teaching at the University of British Columbia, combined with travels and studies in North America, Asia and Europe, along with exhibitions on three continents, Binning resigned as Head of the Fine Arts Department at UBC in 1968 and shortly thereafter took a sabbatical leave. This allowed him to devote

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² Adele Weder, architectural writer and critic, as quoted in John Mackie’s article “Historic house may become scholar’s home: Talks are under way to transform the West Coast-style bungalow designed by artist B.C. Binning”, Vancouver Sun, Saturday, December 22, 2007
much more of his time to painting, and the period 1969-1970 saw a new direction in his art – the Optional Modules. It was this series that highlighted his interested in construction, installation, colour, line and optics, and served as the pinnacle to his thirty years of practice.

“… I am still interested – and I suppose I always will be – in the architectural discipline of the canvas.”

With the Optional Modules series, while retaining his affinity for the architectural discipline of the canvas, Binning radically shifted his work away from the rectangular format he had always used. Binning felt “that one can work in a more three-dimensional and fluid way than just square or rectangular paintings.” He also wanted to allow “the beholder” of the work a way to enter the creative experience. Binning began the process working with small scale models for each work, to establish the various options of the modules. The result of this year of exploration yielded his most powerful works, resulting in the last significant body of work prior to his death in 1976.

Binning’s choice to use the term Optional Modules for this body of work refers to the “standardized, often interchangeable component of a system or construction that is designed for easy assembly or flexible use.” This term, used frequently in architecture and industrial design, also has roots in the digital realm; when discussing modules in the context of computers, a module is “an independent piece of software which forms part of one or more larger programs. Different languages have different concepts of a module but there are several common ideas. Modules are usually compiled separately (in compiled languages) and provide an abstraction or information hiding mechanism so that a module’s implementation can be changed without requiring any change to other modules.”

Optional Modules consists of 8 panels of stretched canvas, all equal in size, in the form of isosceles triangles. Binning used flat acrylic paint on the surface with hard-edge delineation of shape and form. By using two shades of grey (dark and medium), orange and yellow, the artist juxtaposes his colour in a way that creates tension in both line and form of each panel, and as an installation as a whole. This piece is intended to live up to its name – its modular nature allows for variable configurations, fully the intention of the artist.

Referring to his solo exhibition at Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver, George Woodcock states “Binning’s last current [sic] show, in 1970 (followed by the Vancouver retrospective of 1973), was the Optional Modules, abstractions on moulded canvasses divided into modular units which the layman owner might recombine as he wished.

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3 Thom, Ian, “Binning as a Painter”, B.C. Binning, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, 146
4 Ibid, 154
5 Ibid.
Architectural affinities here re-emerged, for it was a time when builders were involved in modular construction, but so did the concern for a public and participatory art, as Binning made clear in his own remarks about the show: “The beholder wants to be a part of art – and just as the artist – he wants to have a creative hand in it. So I thought in some modest way I might give the spectator a chance to enter into the thing by creating rectangles and triangles that could be assembled in all sorts of way to make up a design or painting of all kinds of shapes.”

By 1960 Binning had moved away from the more insistent patterning, from his abstract land- and seascapes, which characterized his work of the previous decade; in a series of highly reduced landscapes, many of which recall both the American painter Mark Rothko and the sublime seascapes of Turner, Binning explored the use of non-naturalistic colour and bold expressive forms. His final great body of work was the Optional Modules, a series first shown in Vancouver in 1970 at the Bau-X Gallery. These paintings represent a continuation of his interest in design, colour and form, but also required the direct participation of the viewer, requiring them to move around the work in order to comprehend it. This body of work as a whole reveals a return to the spirit of exploration so vividly seen in Binning’s first important body of paintings of abstracted ships and seascapes from the 1940s, heavily influenced from his recent travels and studies in Europe, which include Ships in Classical Calm (1948), in the National Gallery’s collection. Optional Modules were a highly individual but important contribution to Canadian abstraction of the period. As Doreen Walker has noted, these works are a game and reveal “something of the artist’s humour and something of his wit.”

The works in this modular series range from brilliant studies in vibrant colours to more muted greys, which emerged as winter approached. Therefore, it is possible that this piece was conceived around October 1969, during the transition from Vancouver’s stunning mid-Fall to its grey, wet winter.


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8 Ibid.
9 Small-scale, grey drawings of his Optional Modules works were incorporated into the announcement poster for this exhibition. After consulting with the current director of Bau-Xi Gallery (Vancouver), March 24, 2008, no copies of this poster exist.
11 B.C. Binning: A Retrospective, Fine Arts Gallery, UBC, 15
12 Walker, Doreen, “The Rich Architectonics”, Vie des arts 18, No. 72 (Fall 1973), 97

Binning’s awards include: induction to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (1968), the Order of Canada’s Medal of Service (1971), and an Honorary Doctorate in Literature, University of British Columbia (1974).

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