National Gallery of Canada
Joan Balzar

**Artist:** Joan Balzar (1928-2016)

Joan Balzar, a Vancouver-based artist who came to prominence in the 1960s with her hard-edged geometric paintings, is considered a pioneering figure in the development of abstract painting on the West Coast. She first studied at the Broadway Edison School in Seattle and subsequently at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr University of Art and Design) under Peter Aspell, Don Jarvis, Joe Plaskett, and Jack Shadbolt. Her dynamic and brightly coloured paintings often depict arcs, orbits, and curvilinear forms reminiscent of the atomic age and incorporate industrial materials such as aluminum, Plexiglas, or neon lights. As she stated in an interview with curator Bill Jeffries in 2011, “I was obsessed with science, the space program and the moon landing…I just can’t get into trees”\(^1\) She aimed to create “spontaneous combustions” through her colour combinations and experiments with perspective and scale in order to create powerful sensory experiences for the viewer. While based primarily in Vancouver, Balzar travelled frequently to South America and lived for a number of years in Guatemala and Mexico where she also exhibited her work. She was represented by Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver beginning around 1966 when the gallery hosted Balzar’s first solo exhibition in Canada, and later by Elliot Louis Gallery, Vancouver. She was included in the 1967 exhibition *Northwest Artists 53rd Annual Exhibition* at the Seattle Art Museum and was one of five artists awarded a purchase prize, for *Perimeter* (1967), which entered the SAM collection. Major retrospective exhibitions of her work were held at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in 2003, the West Vancouver Museum in 2009, and most recently at the Simon Fraser University Art Gallery in 2011. Her work can now be found at the Seattle Art Museum, Vancouver Art Gallery, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and the Simon Fraser University Art Gallery.

Following two successful solo exhibitions in 1959 in South America, one at the Municipal Palace in Antigua, and later at the Biblioteca National in Guatemala City, Balzar returned to Vancouver in the early 1960s to find an energetic, burgeoning art scene in her native country. Vancouver was poised to make its mark on the international art scene with its diversified artistic movement that combined a spirit of idealism with Marshall McLuhan’s innovative ideas about electronic communication and media, enthusiasm and curiosity about space travel, and a desire to broaden one’s perspective and range of experiences through the use of psychedelic drugs. This spirit of artistic renaissance, as David Silcox has described, was preempted by several major events that took place at the UBC Festival of Contemporary Art in

---

\(^1\) Quoted in Bill Jeffries, *Vancouver Orbital* (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University, 2011).
1964: *The Medium is the Message*, an interdisciplinary project undertaken by dancer Helen Goodwin, artists Takao Tanabe and Iain Baxter, and architect Arthur Erickson was a first in the creation of a multi-media environment. Concurrently at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Curator Alvin Balkind presented the ground-breaking exhibition *Art Becomes Reality*, giving Vancouver its first taste of American Pop Art. The Vancouver Art Gallery, under the new direction of Richard Simmins similarly sought to break new ground through his fervent promotion of new young talent. His 1964 exhibition *New Talent: BC* featuring artists Claude Breeze, Audrey Capel Doray, Sherry Grauer, Reg Holmes, and David Mayrs was a major step towards his goal of “turning the mausoleum he inherited in 1962 into the swingingest gallery in Canada.”

The VAG’s reputation as one of the nation’s most avant-garde and progressive institutions was cemented in September 1966 when the Canada Council of the Arts awarded the gallery the largest operating grant in the country. At a press conference announcing the grant Jean Martineau stated that “We [the Canada Council] had to give you the biggest grant in your category because, compared to Montreal and Toronto, you are moving ahead so fast.”

The years 1965-1966 were significant for the developing avant-garde art scene for several other reasons: Richard Simmins brought the exhibition *London: The New Scene* to Vancouver (Oct. 30th-Nov. 28th 1965), introducing artists there to British Pop and Op art, as well as the shaped canvas. One year later, in December 1966 Doug Christmas opened the Douglas Gallery, which incorporated the New Design Gallery and Christmas’ own framing shop. The new gallery immediately made its mark on the Vancouver scene with an exhibition of Rauschenberg prints and went on to provide support for local artists such as Gathie Falk. It was within this fecund climate that Balzar had not one but two solo exhibition at Bau-Xi Gallery in 1966. *Spinner #1* was included in one of these, the first time it was exhibited to the public. While initial reviews were not all favourable, the artist was not deterred; she continued to exhibit regularly in group shows including the unjuried show *Spectrum 68* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in which hundreds of local artists participated.

The openness and inclusivity that Simmins had espoused at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which gave emerging artists like Balzar an institutional platform from which to experiment with new media and styles, was later carried on by Doris Shadbolt and Tony Emery. The most fruitful example of this was a collaboration with the Intermedia Society, an artist’s co-operative that promoted new media in the arts, providing artists with access to expensive equipment and creative spaces in which to work. Founded in 1967 with significant funding from the Canada Council, Intermedia was a creative incubator for artistic explorations of every kind and community-based art making. For three years the VAG was turned over to Intermedia in the spring for week-long art extravaganzas *Intermedia Nights* (1968), *Electrical Connection* (1969), and *Dome Show* (1970). The literature is inconsistent in its assessment of Balzar’s involvement with Intermedia, however she is listed in the Intermedia archive compiled by photographer

---

2 Joan Lowndes, “The Spirit of the Sixties: by a witness” 142
3 Quoted in Joan Lowndes, “The Spirit of the Sixties: by a witness,” 142.
Michael de Courcy as part of the Society around 1968. Though the artist worked exclusively on canvas, the themes that she explored were similar to her contemporaries who worked in installation, sculpture, and media art. For example, Michael Morris and Gary Lee-Nova’s immersive environment Prisma (1968) was commissioned for Intermedia Nights. The work consisted of a seven-sided room with mirrored walls and floor, as well as a black Plexiglas ceiling. Flooded with soft multi-coloured lights and a soundtrack of chanting and drums, visitors were transported into an infinite space immersed in light, colour, and sound. The spatial illusions and kaleidoscopic effect of the mirrored room are echoed in Balzar’s works such as Spinner #1 where the large scale, brightly saturated colours and spiralling forms offer similar allusions to altered psychedelic states and other-worldly space. Both works are symptomatic of a larger desire throughout the 1960s to marry art and science through new aesthetic forms that could “open the doors of perception.”

Like the Minimalists, Balzar was interested in new industrial materials such as neon and plastics. However she never abandoned painting, rather incorporated new materials to expand the optical possibilities of the two-dimensional canvas, similar to Michael Morris’ use of mirrors in his Letter series paintings. Balzar maintained a concise visual language through her career, consisting of arcs, orbitals, and stripes occasionally interspersed with tubes of neon lighting as she sought to transmit to the viewer “something of the power of the cosmos and the power of paint.” Her aesthetic vision also included creating light in her paintings, “not just by the addition of neon tubes, but in the paint itself.” While the use of these forms stemmed from Balzar’s interest in science, the arc and spiral forms re-emerged pictorially around 1965-1971 in the work of many other artists including Frank Stella (Protractor series, 1967-71). His work in turn can trace its influence to the target paintings of Jasper Johns and later Kenneth Noland. In Canada, the circle or elliptical forms were taken up by Claude Tousignant as early as 1955, Roy Kiyooka around 1967 and later by Patterson Ewen.

In contrast to Montreal-based geometric abstract painters such as Claude Tousignant and Guido Molinari, who sought to rid their paintings of any outside referents, thus reducing them to autonomous, self-referential objects, Balzar’s paintings are fully immersed in the sensorial environment and are ripe with references to electronic communication and space travel. This is much like her contemporary Brian Fisher who created spatial illusions by folding, replicating, and reflecting forms on the canvas. As Scott Watson writes, the illusionistic space of these paintings “presage the effect of rapidly receding space as cipher for the vastness of interstellar space that became a cinematic cliché after Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1969).” Art, for Balzar and her Vancouver contemporaries, could not be divorced from life.

---

5 Quoted in Jeffries, Vancouver Orbital, 5.
Please cite in the following manner:

Krista Broeckx, Acquisition Proposal for Joan Balzar’s *Spinner #1*, accession #47524, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.