INTRODUCTION

TROY DAVID OUELLETTE

The first time I met Patrick Thibert was in 1987, when I was a student at Fanshawe College. At the time, he had fully embraced figuration and symbolism, engaging with more narrative, representational themes. Since then his expansive practice has grown to include myriad large-scale sculptural works, thousands of drawings, maquettes, schematics, doodles and journal entries. Today, his entire creative output continues to produce visual elements and working methods that form connections throughout his practice. One can readily trace the threads that weave together his concurrent interests in minimalism, the transformation of matter, and his understanding of chemistry. The latter forged in his formative years as a chemical technology student, which provided him with unique insights into material interactions. Minimalism, from the constructivists and suprematists onward have played a significant role in the formation of Thibert's visual acuity as has his intimate knowledge of materials—particularly metal.

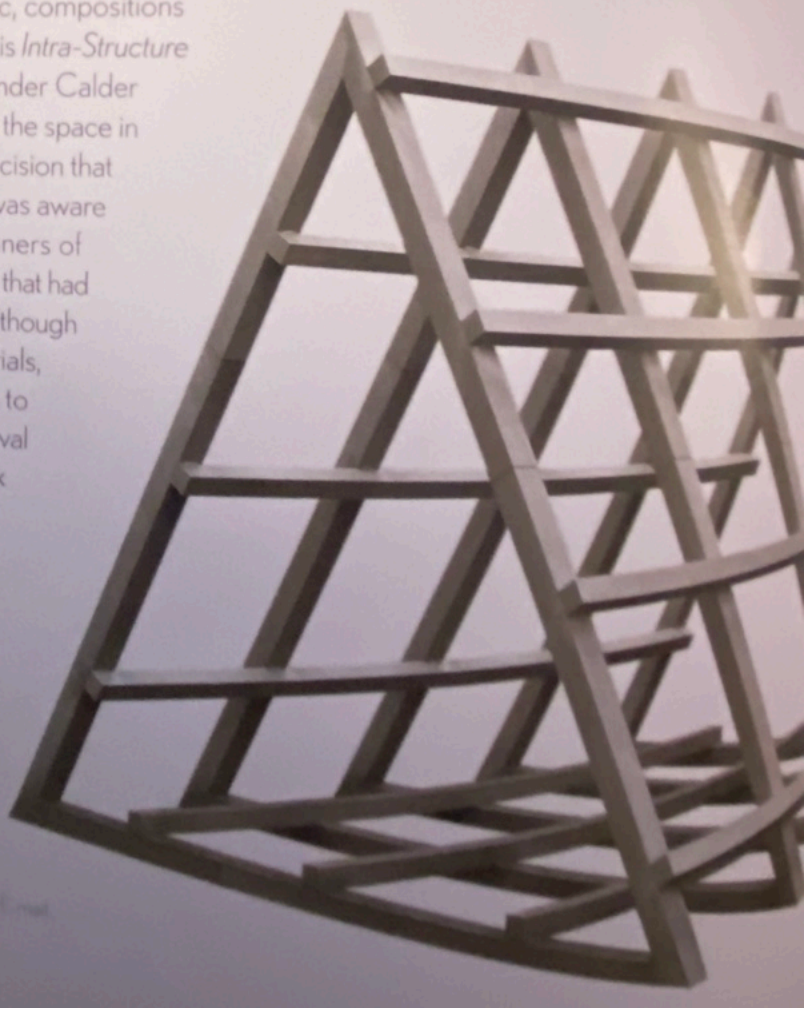
Chemistry has long resonated as a companion to the visual arts, most notably with regard to photography, metallurgy and ceramics, all of which involve material shape-shifting through guided intervention. Creative practice affords the unique ability to use the senses to find forms and discover new material combinations. Unlike the methodology used in scientific disciplines, which direct ones working process, Thibert utilizes happenstance as a means to proceed in his working process. His emphasis on phenomenon, in conjunction with aesthetic formalism means that he is in constant dialogue with the material/chemical substance of the work itself. Very few artists utilize chemical processes to the same degree as Patrick Thibert. Dove Bradshaw could be counted among them whose volatile mercurial chemical paintings transform depending on their interactions with indoor atmosphere. Additionally, Richard Serra's patinas and large volumetric constructions that make use of space so masterfully immediately come to mind.

Consonant No.2
January 2015
copper, tin, resin, plywood, aluminum
36 ¾" h x 38 ¾" w x 2" d

Window Field
August-September 1983
welded structural aluminum
112"h x 126"w x 126"d

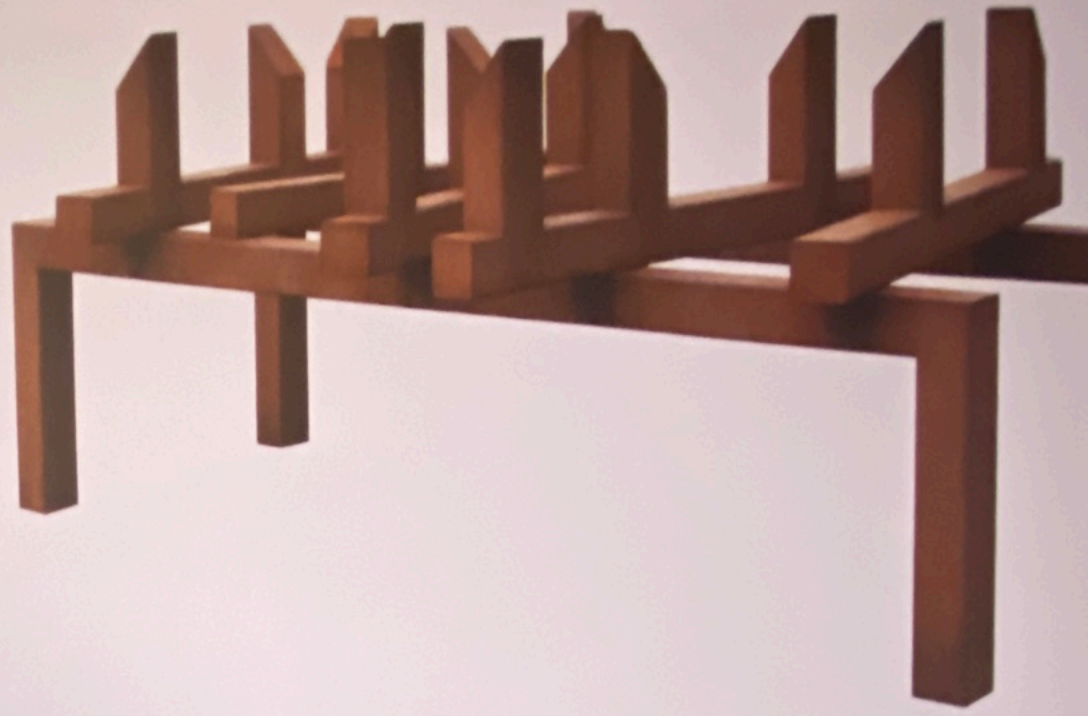
When considering the bulk of Thibert's new work I couldn't help but think of Donald Judd, who questioned the notion of minimalism in his text *Specific Objects*. Published in 1965, Judd attempted to establish the aesthetics of minimalism, rejecting the term by favouring "specific objects," an expression intended to repudiate traditional distinctions between art forms, and to describe works that were not easily categorized as painting or sculpture. Since 2011, Thibert's wall works touch upon some traditions of painting, namely through his use of flat colours and chemical interventions that are evocative of painterly effects. As he suggests "All of the panels are laminated to a plywood ground. At times I glue copper to copper, which gives me the option to use several patinas on the copper, or the tins, to give me a broader colour option to work with."[1] Yet these compositions are still firmly situated within the lineage of sculpture. Where he diverges, from much of his past work, is in the emphasis on surface treatments, and in his renewed interest in drawing, which feeds into and off of his sculptural practice.

Thibert's earlier angular, perhaps more dynamic, compositions from 1974 through 1978, and more specifically his *Intra-Structure* series, are more redolent of the works of Alexander Calder and David Smith, which invite viewers to explore the space in the round without the implied and intentional precision that Judd favoured. Judd was someone that Thibert was aware of during the late 1960s, but it was the forerunners of minimalism—Constantin Brancusi and David Smith that had the most impact on his early sculptural practice. Although each artist mentioned here used industrial materials, fastening techniques and fabrication processes to create large scale work, Judd's use of precise interval and repetition seems to pervade much of his work and has more of a kinship to Thibert's later *Field* architectonic works from the early 1980s. These grid-based geometric works have their roots in systems esthetics and one can see where they branch off from the slightly earlier table structures that explored utilitarian construction in such compelling ways. Thibert's interest in surface is evident here,



[1] "Tim and That." Message to Toby David-Ouellette. December 14, 2015. E-mail.

Skift
May-September 1979
welded steel
53 ¼"h x 120"w x 78 ⅛"d
Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario



but it is no small feat to jump from the floor to the wall. A whole set of other considerations must be formulated and conceptualized with an emphasis on interface or plane that supersedes the viewer's ability to experience the piece in the round.

Recent wall compositions such as *The Dance No. 3* (pg. 17), from 2015, mark a return to more expressionistic abstraction. In borrowing titles for some of his works, Thibert makes reference to Matisse, who also, later in life, embraced reductivism. For Thibert, the arc of the human body in Matisse's work became a starting point for this new series. The blurred edges of the *Dance* compositions recall Thibert's cut plane creations of 1977-1978 in which the raw torch-cut steel edges of the welded planes looked as though they had been ripped from another reality. In companion works (such as the *Crosscurrent* series) his titles evoke the process of electrical and chemical interactions, just as they are suggestive of how the viewer can cross over into an imagined world.

In *Crosscurrent No. 3* (pg. 6) the roughly 36" square work invokes Kazmir Malevich's *Black Circle* (1913), but unlike this early reductive work *Crosscurrent No. 3* embodies an awareness of complexity rather than a pure transcendental form. As one examines the composition more closely, the material interactions and re-worked surfaces of the broken circle engender a transformational object. Something equally evident in Thibert's *Linear Composition No. 11* (pg. 10), which combines a variety of materials, averting a direct connection to the minimalist notion of purity through form and medium. The personal expressive marks of Thibert himself are captured in the details.

As in many of the other works, *Crosscurrent No. 3* creates a portal or gateway for the viewer, allowing them to escape the specified literal imagery so common to the American post-minimalist school of the 1970s. Many

Linear Composition No.8
February-March 2015
copper, tin, pine, plywood, aluminum
42 ¼"h x 36 ⅛" w x 2" d

of Thibert's recent drawings and sculptural reliefs, for example, use a triad as a rule of thirds, allowing the viewer a way into the composition and leads me to believe there is an affinity with Barnett Newman's works. By utilizing diverse working methods and materials, in the drawings, he is able to experiment with metal-working processes such as scraping and scratching the surface to develop final compositions more quickly. In some very recent drawings, Thibert has introduced vibrant red pastel amid the deep black of charcoal, yielding a richness of colour that may not be so readily procured through patinas on metal. The drawings provide an interesting juxtaposition to the metal works, prompting viewers to more readily read the differences in his materials. With regard to his *Linear Compositions*, Thibert recently noted "I became interested in the idea of your perception constantly changing in spite of the simplicity (of the work)."[2] A comment that immediately brought to my mind the notion of visual perception, which grew out of Gestalt psychology. According to Robert Morris, one of the most influential theorists of minimalism, in his essays *Notes on Sculpture*, the minimalist painter or sculptor is mainly interested in how the spectator perceives the relationship between the different parts of the work and of the parts to the whole thing.[3] Indeed all of Thibert's wall works incorporate the different Gestalt and aesthetic principles of design that are so often seen in the abstract traditions of twentieth-century formalism.

When I asked him about his links to formal traditions Thibert stated that, "Right from the very beginning I wanted to introduce colouration into my work and allow the material to dictate the final colour... I also wanted to get sculptural works off the floor and explore the wall again." For Thibert these are important considerations and they should not so easily be dismissed. Just as Judd had questioned the boundaries and categories of painting and sculpture in early 1960s Thibert is rekindling the ambiguities that categories often present. In Judd's essay *Specific Objects* he argues,

> The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it. In work before 1946 the edges of the rectangle are a boundary, the end of the picture. The composition must react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important, and the relationships of color and form occur among them.[4]

In my discussions with Thibert he admitted that his irregularly shaped canvases, ones that would end up on the floor, were an important part of his early years as an art student. Now that he is re-examining irregular shaped

[2] Patrick Thibert, in conversation with the author, November 21, 2015.
[3] Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture*, Part 1, Artforum, February, 1966.
[4] Donald Judd, *Specific Objects, Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 2005, pp. 181-182.

wall compositions the work has come full circle, but with the added benefit of experience. For me, these new compositions epitomize what the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus suggested when he noted that, "No man ever steps in the same river twice."[5] For it is not the same river and he is not the same man. The currents are constantly moving and "crossing" as Thibert's earlier title suggests.

In some of the new works the irregularities in the outside dimensions are not initially evident, lending to the idea that perception is unpredictable and contingent. As a younger artist Thibert acknowledged that unpredictability played a large part in how his creative works emerged. This becomes evident when the exchange between doing, remembering, reworking, making mistakes, making corrections, realizing one's own position within a larger schema of real and imagined possibilities plays out. This generative nexus occurs when the work and the material "tells" the practitioner about its properties through the act of manipulation—as poïesis, thinking through doing and doing through thinking—and as the exchange between the artist and their work unfolds. Thibert readily admits that he learns something new from each creative encounter. Unintentional happenstance creates intentional intervention. This may include, for example, the way in which copper or tin tends to warp depending on the thickness of the medium, concentration, and temperatures it may be subjected to. Most of the time the fusing of material is done through soldering. In the case of some of Thibert's wall works, thin metal strips can only be affixed to get the desired results if epoxy is used rather than soldering. In another instance a patina may darken or lighten an area on a sheet of metal depending on the purity of the substance to obtain different colourations. According to Thibert,

> I sometimes really build up the surface and dig into it using special tools and burs and then I fill it. What happens is that there is a certain kind of line that forms around the rectangular form, on the right, even though the patina is going on simultaneously. A little bit later I became interested in bonding metal to metal instead of soldering it. In this instance it becomes more like collage.[6]

This notion of collage is an important aspect of the wall compositions as it references moments that come together to reflect different instances in time—not only in the construction of the work itself (or where it is derived) but in the viewer's own experience of seeing. For David Smith, collage was an important strategy particularly in the way he assembled his later large-scale geometric abstract sculptures. For artists, the integration of ideas of prediction and complexity are critical to the interplay between situation and semblance, reality and resemblance, where intuition, poïesis, and perception play key roles in the articulation of a body

[5] Peter Adamson, Classical Philosophy: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 33.
[6] David Thibert, in conversation with the author, Linear Composition No. III, November 21, 2015.

of work. In this sense poiesis is co-functional as it attempts to reconcile the congruent and incongruent elements between thought, matter and time, through the working process and speculations about viewer interpretation. Art has never been a singular descriptive system—it is produced through a wide variety of procedures and processes, which are acutely experienced, observed, and reflected upon.

In his most recent body of work, Thibert continues to explore abstraction. His œuvre has been a process of questioning widely held beliefs about what constitutes the work of art, something he has effectively done as a teacher, and in his practice. The importance of the studio environment is something that should not be understated. As a sanctuary, the studio is a place where artists collect their thoughts and explore processes that lead to new possibilities or ways of seeing. Creative practitioners, no matter what their stripe, absorb ideas from other disciplines—and use knowledge from other fields to enhance their own production. The studio is a place where what is needed is what is at hand.

For Thibert the singular thread that runs through his practice is the investigation of chemical material interactions. This is particularly interesting in light of the recent rise in new materialist philosophy, which includes everything from Indigenous ideas on the interconnectedness of culture and life, to Actor Network Theory (where objects are treated as part of social networks), to Object Oriented Ontology (where every entity that encounters another has no special status). Each have helped to elucidate visual practice, demanding an integrated sensory response. That is to say that often the quality of the work comes out of the way it is conceptualized in its making. One slip of the pencil can open up new vistas, and this chance encounter is part of what makes the process of creative expression so fascinating and diverse for both the viewer and the practitioner.

Linear Composition No.7
October-November 2014
copper, tin, pine, plywood, aluminum
60 ⅝"h x 23 ⅝"w x 2"d