

PROPERTY OF VARIOUS COLLECTORS

20 Jack Hamilton Bush

ARCA CGP CSGA CSPWC OSA P11 1909 – 1977

Winged Totem

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed, titled, dated December 1973, inscribed *Toronto* and *Acrylic Polymer W.B.* and stamped with the André Emmerich Gallery stamp
88 x 47 ½ in, 223.5 x 120.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto, 1974
Estate of the Artist, Toronto
André Emmerich Gallery, New York, 1981
Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York, 1988
Private Collection

LITERATURE

Jack Bush: Paintings 1965 – 1976, André Emmerich Gallery, 1984, unpaginated, reproduced
David Moos, editor, *The Shape of Colour: Excursions in Colour Field Art, 1950 – 2005*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005, essay by Mark A. Cheetham, pages 32 – 35
Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2007, page 120
Marc Mayer and Sarah Stanners, *Jack Bush*, National Gallery of Canada, 2014

EXHIBITED

David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto, *Jack Bush: Recent Paintings*, 1974
André Emmerich Gallery, New York, *Jack Bush: Paintings 1965 – 1976*, 1984, catalogue #15
MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, *The Collectors*, September – December 1995

JACK BUSH WAS one of the most gifted abstract painters anywhere in the 1960s and 1970s, when abstraction was unquestionably the prestigious and competitive art form internationally. As Marc Mayer, director of the National Gallery of Canada, has suggested in the 2014 catalogue for the recent *Jack Bush* retrospective, Bush's trajectory was typical of many artists from Ontario, which makes his international achievement surprising. He worked successfully as a commercial illustrator in Toronto for much of his life. He was influenced by—and then departed

from—the landscapes of the Group of Seven. In the 1950s, he was pivotal in another important collective, Painters Eleven. He paid close attention to European abstract art and became an important confrere of the Americans whose approach to painting critic Clement Greenberg dubbed post-painterly abstraction, including Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. As Sarah Stanners establishes in *Jack Bush*, contemporary British painting and sculpture was also crucially important to Bush.

Despite his affinities with progressive American painting in the 1960s and 1970s, Bush was never a conventional abstractionist nor one to adhere to a program. He continually experimented through a number of painting series. His colour sense was unique. He once observed that in group exhibitions, his work always looked different—it had personality. As he stated, “There it was: not like everybody else’s. The difference was Bush, and I just couldn’t get rid of it... fortunately.” Bush articulated the language of abstraction with a Canadian accent. The irony of this claim is worth pondering.

His painting is usually taken to be the epitome of a Greenbergian, High Modernist preoccupation with those “formal” qualities that are purportedly unique to painting: flatness, surface extension, colour and form. This theory of the purity of abstraction—its purposeful, rigorous and ameliorative departure from the everyday world into a realm of absolutes where nationality makes no difference—also has a happily hedonistic dimension. In Marc Mayer’s view, Bush’s works are laudable because they are “pictures of nothing.” We are implored simply to look at and enjoy the beauty of these formal manipulations. But is there more to Bush’s paintings? A keenly pleasurable work such as *Winged Totem* offers both an example of the pleasures of the formalist approach and a test case for its premises.

Bush began his *Totems* in 1973 to 1974. These large and visually exciting paintings typically deploy one or two linear arrays of coloured forms composed in an unpredictable sequence. One edge of these shapes is usually “hard,” cleanly defined, while the other is torn and feathers off into the expansive ground. Some *Totem* paintings are horizontal, but the definitive format is vertical, as in *Winged Totem*. Because of our own corporeal verticality perhaps, we read the totem form as upright and floating in an indeterminate space. The bottom pink form is not grounded in any way; in fact, its lower edge is the most frayed of any in the picture. From bottom to top, Bush adds to this a green, red, blue and finally an intersecting yellow form. Each is boldly saturated and—in contrast to the soft and thinly painted ground—apparently





Man standing beside Kwakwaka'wakw totem pole outside of a longhouse, Alert Bay, BC
silver gelatin print, circa 1915

Photo: City of Vancouver Archives, AM1376: CVA 102-02

solid. This vertical band is placed to the right of the centre of the canvas, which gives room for the all-important yellow swatch to dominate the top of the image and to define its horizontal plane.

It is the addition of this vibrant yellow lateral form in *Winged Totem* that reveals Bush's experimentation with the languages of abstraction here. He plays knowingly with figure and ground and also with what "totem" might imply for viewers. If we read the five colour forms as lying flat to the image surface, as doctrinaire formalism might require, we would see the yellow "wing" that protrudes behind the blue form as shorter on the right than on the left. Looking for a narrative, which Bush would reject as a proper response, we might think that this wing or arm is broken. But at the same time, this yellow form does not sit flat to the surface as the other four colours do. We can also see its right wing as foreshortened, suggesting that the pole is turned in three-dimensional space. The image is flat and not flat at once.

Bush's titles are usually laconic and not necessarily referential. In a strictly formalist context, they would be off bounds as a key to interpretation. But "totem" is by definition a potent concept. Prominent artists have used this cipher—American abstract sculptor David Smith created *Family Totem* in 1951. Constantin Brancusi's signature columnar sculptures are totemic. For Bush the Canadian, Emily Carr's *Totem in the Forest* of 1931, and many other cognate works, such as *The Crazy Stair (The Crooked Staircase)*, would be hard to ignore. Most significant in such a chain of associations are Indigenous carved totems, whether ancient or modern. Derived from the Anishinaabe word for clan, *doodem*, in English, "totem" connotes a sacred being or object. Like the play with two- and three-dimensional space in *Winged Totem*, then, the associations of "totem" flicker across this work.

Winged Totem is compelling as paint on canvas—it establishes its own world. It also expands in many directions, raising what we could call aesthetic questions that are not so much in the work as triggered by it. For example, Bush made a clear distinction between fine art and his work as a commercial illustrator. Regrettably, given his talent in both realms, he discarded most of his nine-to-five projects (apparently to make room in his house for other work). We are left to wonder to what extent we might want to bring these practices into contact. How too should we understand the combination of Bush's extensive first-hand knowledge of avant-garde British and American mid-century abstraction with his explicit choice to work in Toronto for his entire career? Is the "Canadian accent" particular to his work important, or is abstraction a universal language after all?

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s*, for contributing the above essay.

This work will be included in Sarah Stanners's forthcoming *Jack Bush Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000



EMILY CARR

The Crazy Stair (The Crooked Staircase)

oil on canvas, circa 1928 – 1930

43 ¾ x 26 in, 110.2 x 66 cm

Sold sale of *Fine Canadian Art*, Heffel Fine Art Auction House,

November 28, 2013, lot 130

Collection of the Audain Art Museum, Whistler

Not for sale with this lot