

Mesmerizing patterns of form and shape

By **BRIAN LIBBY**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

There's an episode of the sitcom "Seinfeld" in which a series of characters become transfixed by a 3-D poster. As they stare at a seemingly abstract pattern, a figurative image slowly becomes visible: an optical illusion as artistic parlor trick. On the show, George Costanza gets so disoriented by one such 3-D poster in the bathroom at a party that he walks out half undressed.

Luckily, Margie Livingston's show at Clark College's Archer Gallery in Vancouver, "New Work," brings no such unwanted side effects. But her paintings, like the 3-D image that bewildered George, reveal their essence over time as one's eyes become conditioned to its patterns. These are not optical illusions, but the images similarly seem to leap out of the frame.

Livingston, who grew up in Vancouver but now lives in Seattle, just won the prestigious Betty Bowen Memorial Award from the Seattle Art Museum. The award is a testament to how she has made up for lost time as a working artist.

Previously, Livingston worked in the advertising industry in New York before earning a master's degree in painting from the University of Washington in 1999, where she has also since taught. In 2001, she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship that she used to study German romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich.

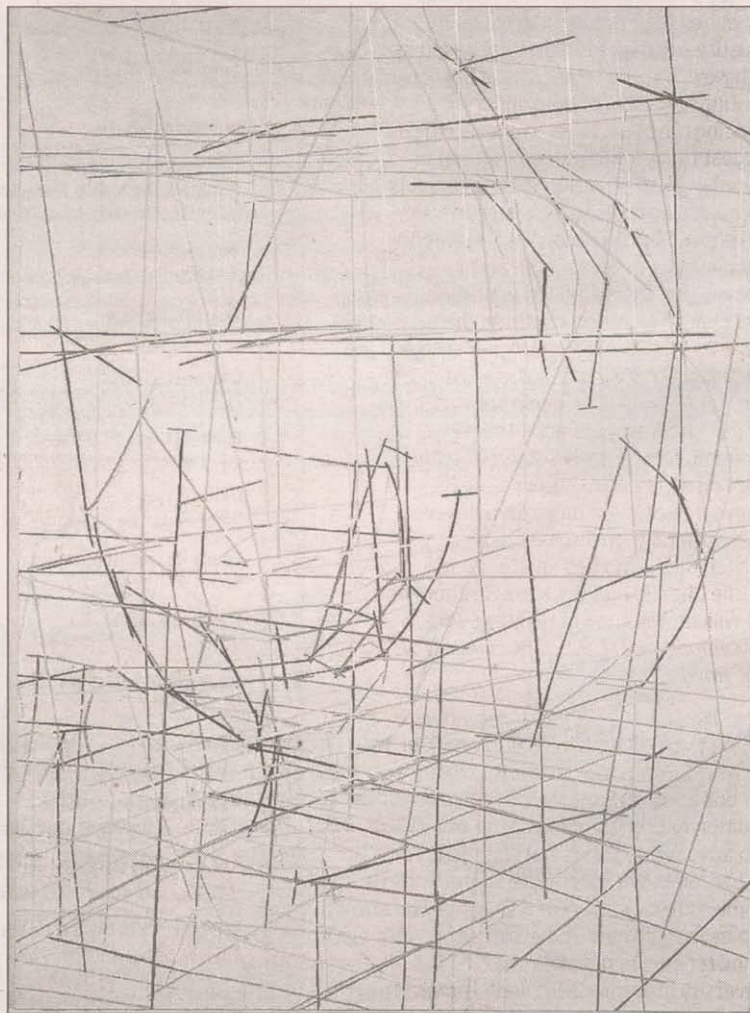
But Livingston doesn't muse on post-modern personas like advertising professionals turned artists Andy Warhol and Portland's Jim Riswold. Nor is her work scenic like Friedrich's.

The nine abstract oil paintings in "New Work" are a Mondrian-esque series of long, thin multicolored lines on white linen. The tighter weave of this material allows greater precision with the paintbrush. And indeed, from a distance the works almost look like drawings. They're meticulous enough to resemble something technical, like an electrical system blueprint. But then the small imperfections soon begin to reveal themselves, bringing the warmer and more resonant touch of the human hand. As a result, these geometric-looking abstractions percolate with life.

Before painting anything, Livingston builds elaborate models from a combination of organic and man-made materials such as wood, bamboo and string. Livingston is very strict about how and from what angle she paints her model, even keeping her spot marked with a piece of tape on the floor so as to maintain one continuous perspective.

Yet it's not a strict representation of the model that Livingston seeks. In her artist statement, she writes: "Although my paintings are structural, what I'm after is the tension between things falling apart and coming together."

The show's two largest works, "Structure (left)" and "Structure (right)," each several feet long and wide, allow Livingston



"Structure (warm and cool 2)" by Margie Livingston

review

"New Work" by Margie Livingston

Where: Archer Gallery at Clark College, Penguin Student Union Building, Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver, Wash.

Hours: 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday; 1-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

Closes: Oct. 22

to most fully stretch out her linear configurations. Portions of these paintings feature tight grids, while other areas are wide open with space, the difference not unlike that between West and East in a population density map of Oregon, although perhaps more harmonious.

The artist's smaller works make up for in texture what they've lost in scale. "Structure (warm and cool 2)" and "Structure

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(warm and cool 3)" feature, along with the same manner of colored lines, barely visible crisscrosses of white paint in the negative space. Because the white linen underneath camouflages it, the viewer concentrates on the contours of the dried paint, its physicality. This is especially so in a series of small works, including "Structure (warm and cool 8)," which are about the size of a 5-by-7-inch photograph.

But the strength of Livingston's show lies in her larger-scale works, which have a quiet grandness, fusing nature's random wildness with the rigidity of synthetic structures. Here, as colors give way to one another against the spare white backgrounds,

they appear to be in perpetual motion. Like the numerous forms it conjures, from scaffolding to a bird's nest, monkey bars to campfire kindling, the paintings bring alive the beauty of structure.

In so doing, Livingston's "New Work" has the capacity for wonder, but only after one has become conditioned to look at the work in the way it requires, to almost look through it. Perhaps this is a kind of slow-motion illusion, coming alive as one's viewing of the artwork deepens. But instead of a definable figure emerging from behind the patterns, like in the cheap 3-D poster, there is instead the open-ended opportunity to project one's own imaginings onto Livingston's screen-like white backdrop.