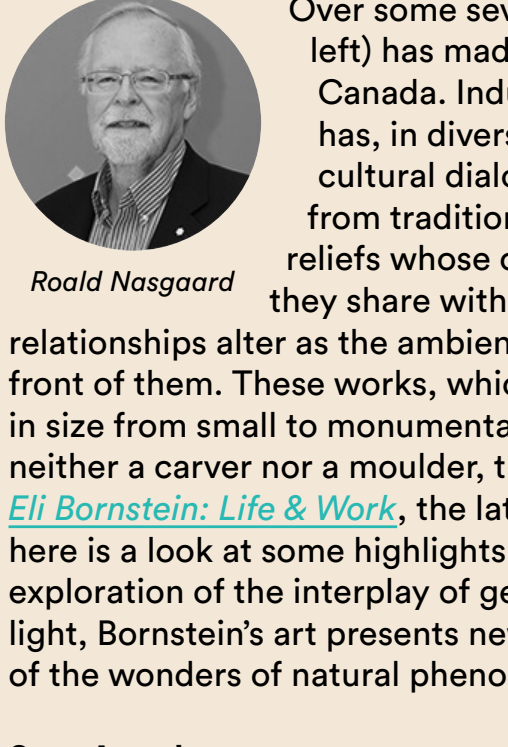


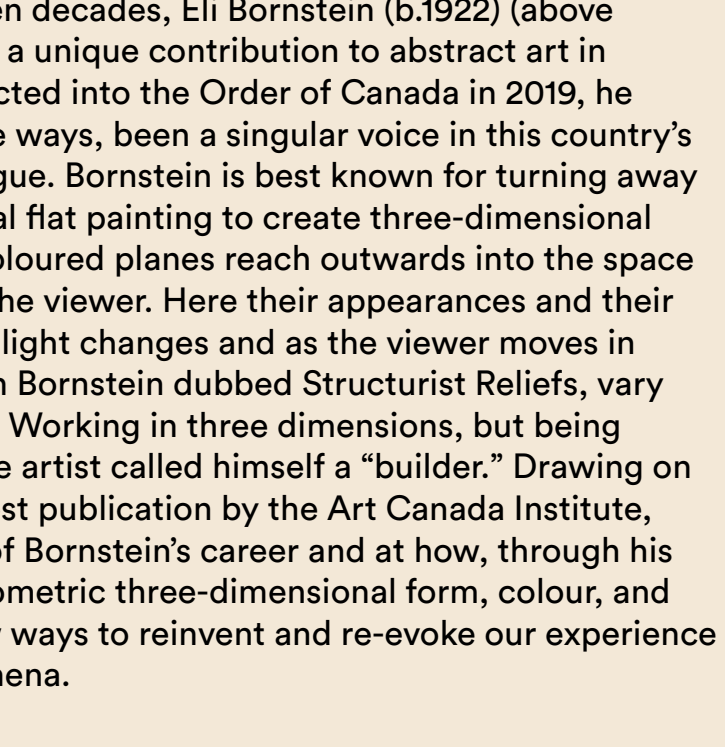
DECEMBER 20, 2024

ELI BORNSTEIN: LIFE & WORK ACI'S NEWEST BOOK ON THE GREAT 101-YEAR-OLD SASKATOON ARTIST

The first open-access online publication about Eli Bornstein, written by Roald Nasgaard, surveys the enduring career of this pioneering Canadian abstract artist, educator, and scholar.



Eli Bornstein with one of his Structurist reliefs in the exhibition *An Art at the Mercy of Light: Recent Works by Eli Bornstein*, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, 2013, photograph by Michelle Berg.



Installation view of Eli Bornstein, *Untitled Hexaplane Structurist Relief*, 2004, on the Canadian Light Source Building, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, date unknown, photographer unknown.



Roald Nasgaard

Over some seven decades, Eli Bornstein (b.1922) (above left) has made a unique contribution to abstract art in Canada. Inducted into the Order of Canada in 2019, he has, in diverse ways, been a singular voice in this country's cultural dialogue. Bornstein is best known for turning away from traditional flat painting to create three-dimensional reliefs whose coloured planes reach outwards into the space they share with the viewer. Here their appearances and their relationships alter as the ambient light changes and as the viewer moves in front of them. These works, which Bornstein dubbed Structurist Reliefs, vary in size from small to monumental. Working in three dimensions, but being neither a carver nor a moulder, the artist called himself a "builder." Drawing on *Eli Bornstein: Life & Work*, the latest publication by the Art Canada Institute, here is a look at some highlights of Bornstein's career and at how, through his exploration of the interplay of geometric three-dimensional form, colour, and light, Bornstein's art presents new ways to reinvent and re-evolve our experience of the wonders of natural phenomena.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

CAREER START IN SASKATOON



Eli Bornstein, *Girl Reading*, 1948, collection of the artist.

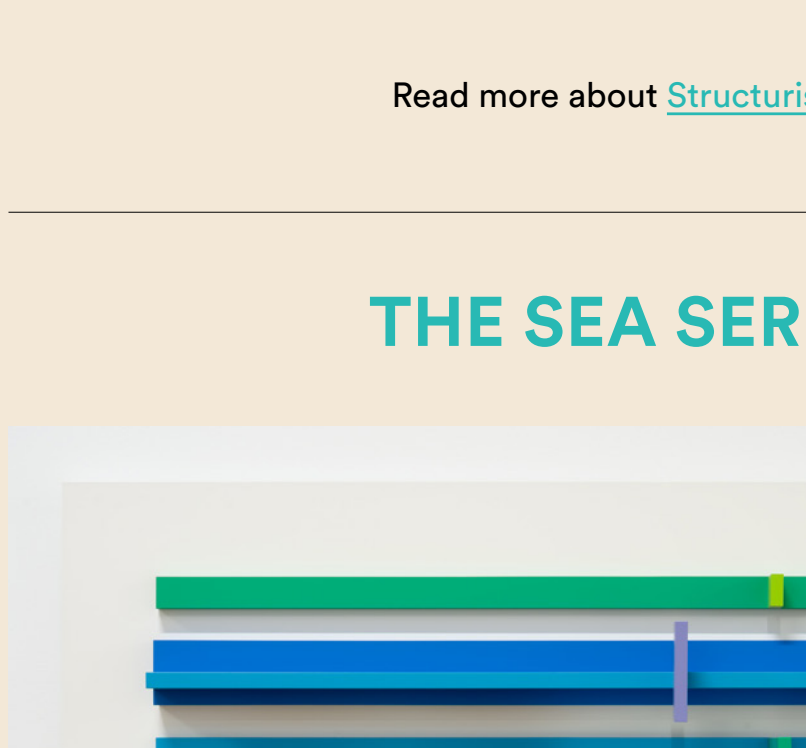


Eli Bornstein, *Saskatoon*, 1954, private collection.

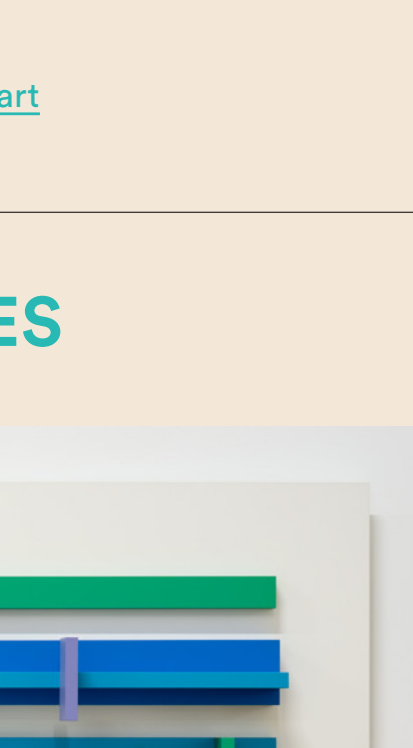
The work of Bornstein's early career is largely representational, as seen in his figure paintings like *Girl Reading*, 1948 (above left), and cityscapes like *Saskatoon*, 1954 (above right). Despite the dominance of realist art in Saskatchewan, where he moved in the early 1950s, he soon began to evolve his own art towards abstraction. *Saskatoon* remains essentially faithful to its original downtown subject matter but jauntily reimagines it using geometric abstractions and wry perspectives. Bornstein was influenced by Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Cubism, and the cityscapes of German American painter Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956). *Saskatoon* is indicative of a turning point in Bornstein's style. Abandoning topographical accuracy to favour formal stylization, he steered his art in new directions.

Read more about [Saskatoon](#), 1954

EARLY PUBLIC ARTWORK



Installation view of Eli Bornstein, *Aluminum Construction (Tree of Knowledge)*, 1956, Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Building (original site), Saskatoon, 1956, photograph by Leonard Hillyard.

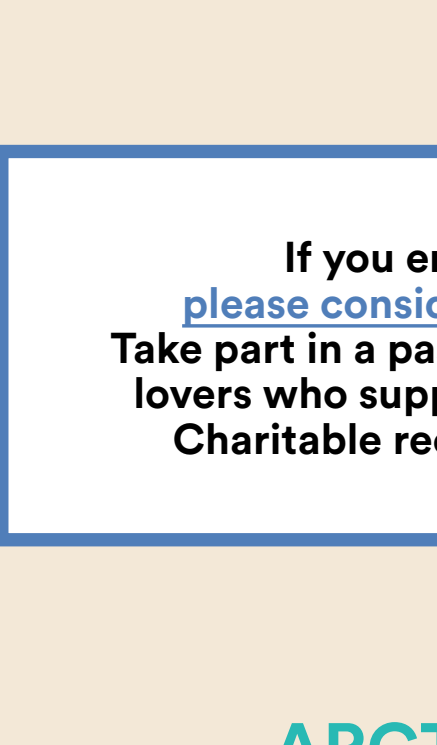


Eli Bornstein, *Growth Motif No. 4*, 1956, collection of the artist.

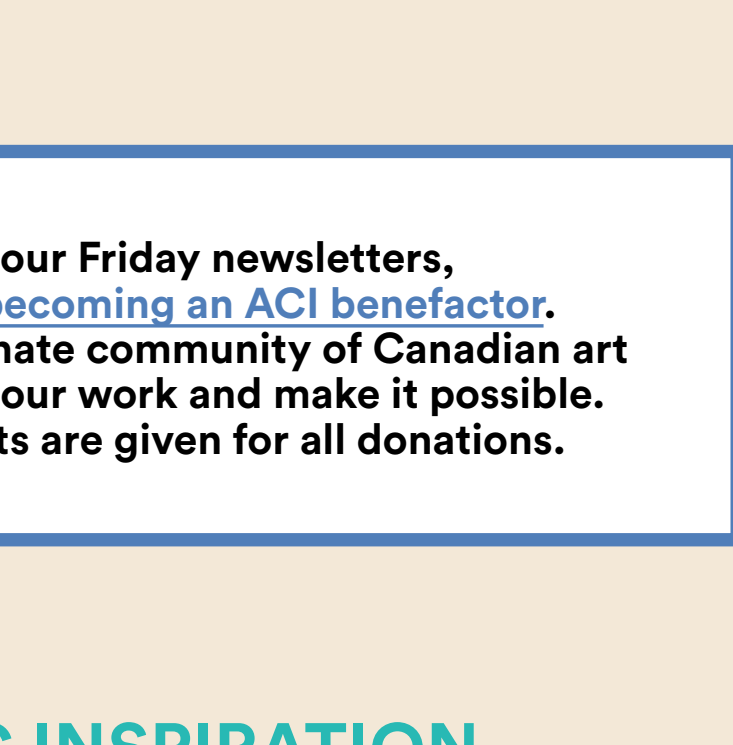
Aluminum Construction (Tree of Knowledge), 1956 (above left), was Saskatoon's first abstract public artwork, commissioned for the newly constructed Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation building. Initially, the sculpture faced strong public disapproval, including some calling for Bornstein's removal from his position at the University of Saskatchewan. Alongside his painting practice, Bornstein had also always been a sculptor, carving with wood and stone. With *Tree of Knowledge*, he turns his back on his previous use of solid mass and traditional materials, instead welding together an airy openwork structure using light-reflective industrial aluminum.

Read more about [Aluminum Construction \(Tree of Knowledge\)](#), 1956

A MOVE TO THE STRUCTURIST RELIEF



Eli Bornstein, *Structurist Relief No. 1*, 1965, private collection.



Charles Biederman, #26, *Red Wing*, 1956–68, 1956–68, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

In the mid-1960s, Bornstein's work evolved into more complex and colourful compositions, as seen in *Structurist Relief No. 1*, 1965 (above left), with its vivid non-symmetrical symmetry. He shared with the American abstract artist Charles Biederman (1906–2004), whom he met in the mid-1950s, the conviction that the Structurist Relief, however abstract, must root its formal and colour relationships in the study of the processes of the natural world (see #26, *Red Wing*, 1956–68, 1956–68 [above right]). The colours of *Structurist Relief No. 1* are still the primaries: red, yellow, and blue. But Bornstein, who always carefully evolved his work step by step, would soon richly expand his palette.

Read more about [Structurist art](#)

THE SEA SERIES



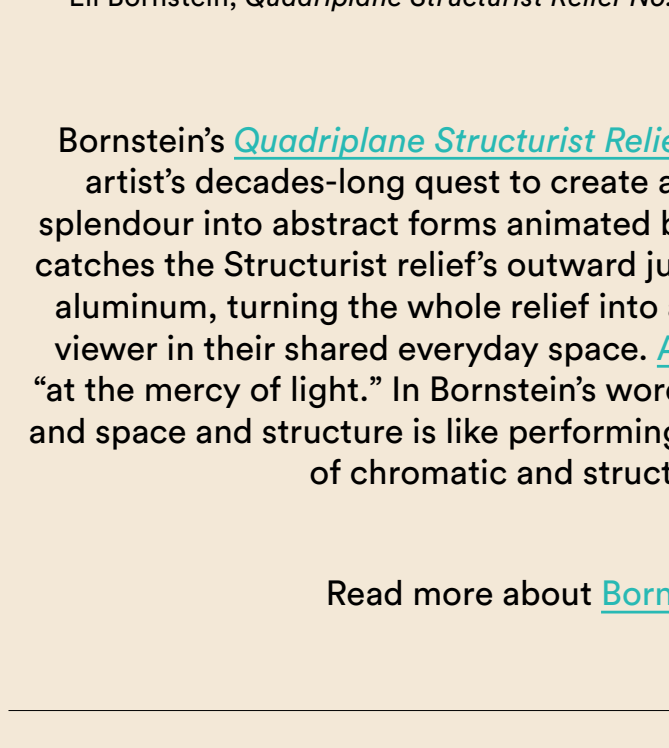
Eli Bornstein, *Structurist Relief No. 4-11 (Sea Series)*, 1965, Remai Modern, Saskatoon.

During a sabbatical in California, near Big Sur, Bornstein began a new group of works called the Sea Series. These works, exemplified by *Structurist Relief No. 4-11 (Sea Series)*, 1965, marked another pivotal shift in how he constructed his abstract reliefs. Previously, they tended to be centrally clustered on top of neutral backgrounds. Now, his composition introduces long, horizontal colour slats that hug the supporting plane and stretch outwards to squarely meet its edges and corners, occupying it authoritatively. It's a work vividly evocative of the land, sea, and sky at Big Sur's horizon.

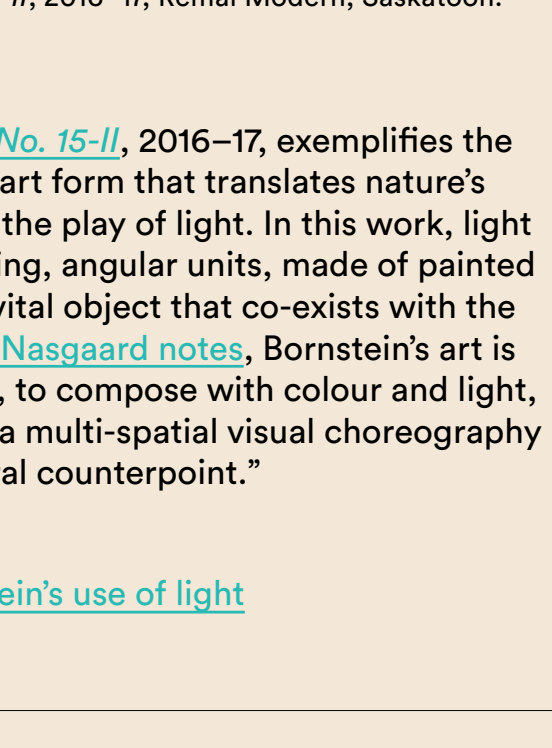
Read more about the [Sea Series](#)

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ARCTIC INSPIRATION



Eli Bornstein, *Arctic Study No. 38*, 1987, collection of the artist.

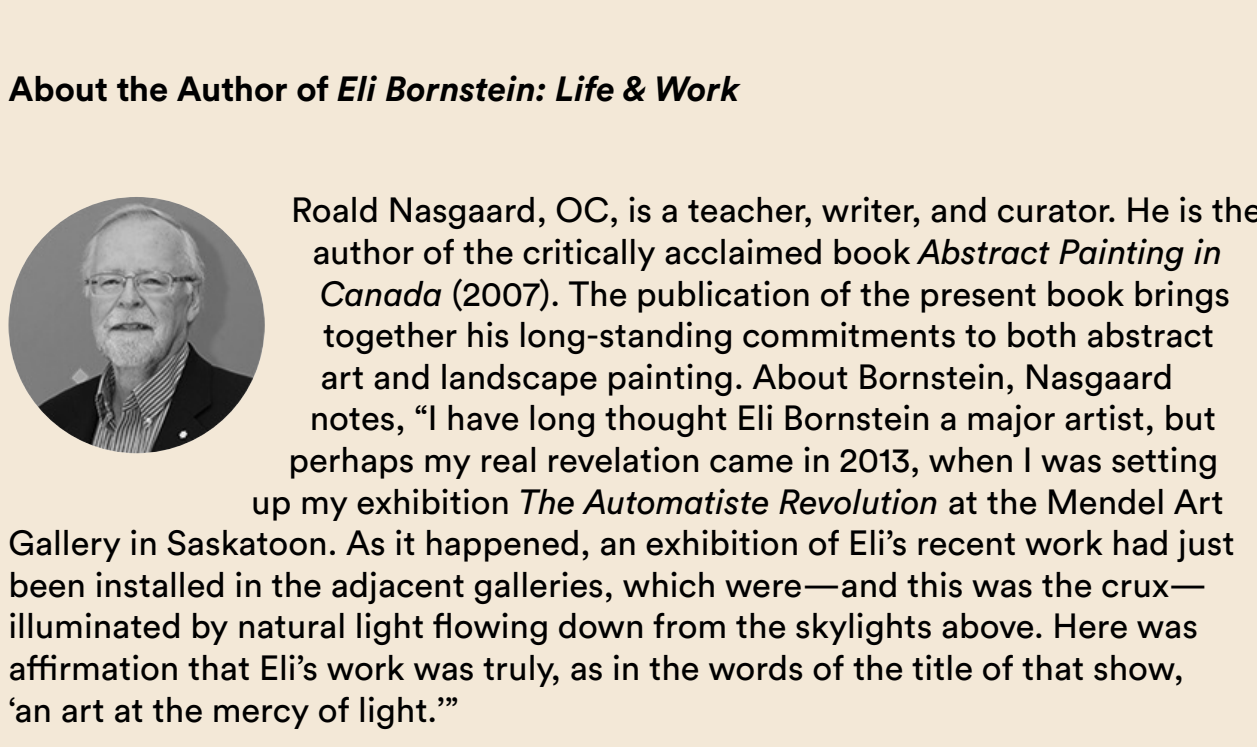


Eli Bornstein, *Arctic Study No. 7*, 1986, collection of the artist.

The striated, floating, blue colours seen in *Arctic Study No. 38*, 1987 (above left), and *Arctic Study No. 7*, 1986 (above right), reflect the influence of two trips. Bornstein took to the Canadian Arctic in the summers of 1986 and 1987. When the artist returned home, he incorporated his observations of the arctic landscapes into increasingly sublime reliefs. But even before that, confronted with the wind and weather on Ellesmere Island, he found it expedient to work with watercolour, a medium he had not used for some thirty years. [As Bornstein noted](#) in his Arctic journals, he sought to express the sensory experience of the natural world "without imitating [its] appearances," evoking nature through an abstract interplay of form and colour rather than by direct representation.

Read more about [Arctic Study No. 38](#), 1987

PICTURES IN PLEXIGLAS

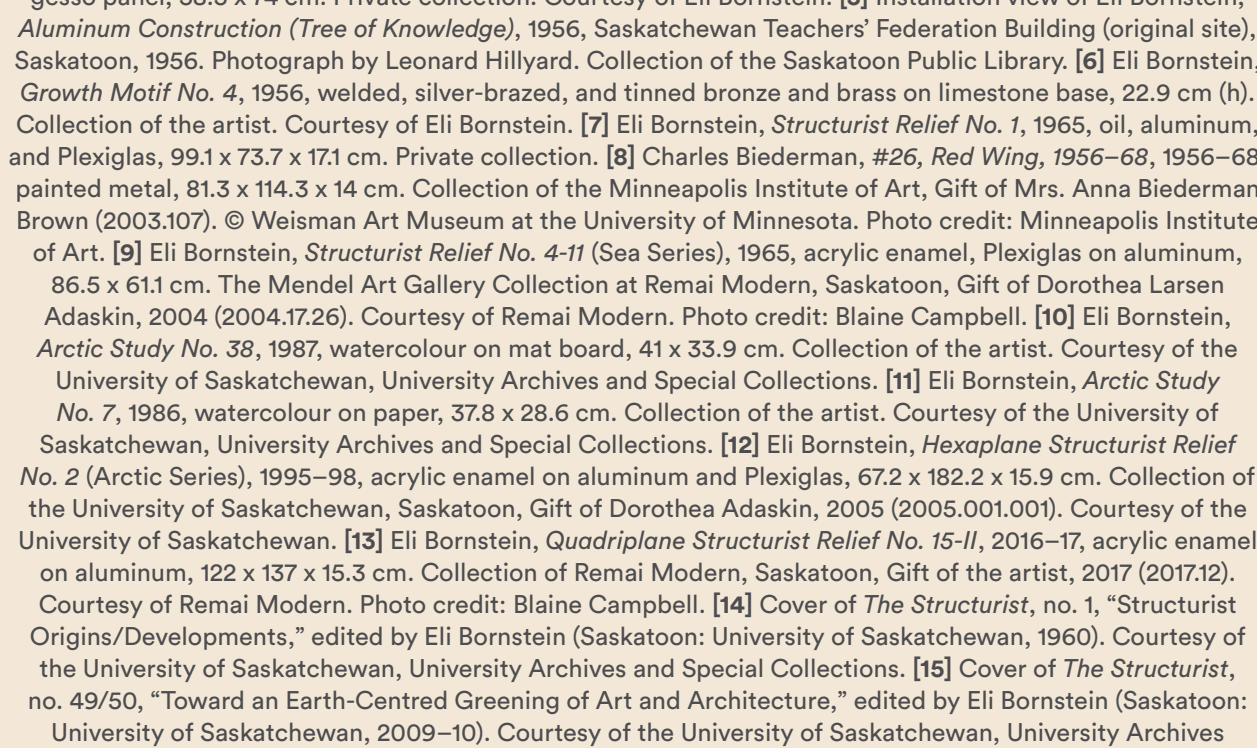


Eli Bornstein, *Hexaplane Structurist Relief No. 2 (Arctic Series)*, 1995–98, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Hexaplane Structurist Relief No. 2 (Arctic Series), 1995–98, showcases Bornstein's innovative use of transparent blue Plexiglas. The idea originated in 1986, on his second day on Ellesmere Island, inspired by the mirror-like reflections of icebergs in the water. By incorporating translucent Plexiglas into his enamel-painted reliefs, Bornstein added depth and richness to the colours while enhancing the existing arctic-blue colour palette. This development was significant for him, as Plexiglas captured the iridescence and fragility of the icy arctic landscape, creating an illusion of extending the work beyond its physical materiality.

Read more about [Hexaplane Structurist Relief No. 2 \(Arctic Series\)](#), 1995–98

NATURE'S SPLENDOUR THROUGH LIGHT



Eli Bornstein, *Quadriplane Structurist Relief No. 15-II*, 2016–17, Remai Modern, Saskatoon.

Bornstein's *Quadriplane Structurist Relief No. 15-II*, 2016–17, exemplifies the artist's decades-long quest to create an art form that translates nature's splendour into abstract forms animated by the play of light. In this work, light catches the Structurist relief's outward jutting, angular units, made of painted aluminum, turning the whole relief into a vital object that co-exists with the viewer in their shared everyday space. [As Nasgaard notes](#), Bornstein's art is "at the mercy of light." In Bornstein's words, to compose with colour and light, and space and structure is like performing "a multi-spatial visual choreography of chromatic and structural counterpoint."

Read more about [Bornstein's use of light](#)

THE STRUCTURIST

Cover of *The Structurist*, no. 1, "Structurist Origins/Developments," 1960, edited by Eli Bornstein.

Cover of *The Structurist*, no. 49/50, "Toward an Earth-Centred Greening of Art and Architecture," 2009–10, edited by Eli Bornstein.

Part of Bornstein's artistic legacy is his journal, *The Structurist*. Launched in 1960 (above left), the journal explored how art and architecture evolve in response to social, cultural, technological, and environmental changes shaping human experiences. Published regularly until the year 2000, with anniversary issues in 2010 (above right) and 2020, it took an interdisciplinary approach to art and architecture. Contributors included notable figures like abstract painter Josef Albers (1888–1976), art historian Erwin Panofsky, and philosopher Marshall McLuhan, cementing Bornstein's legacy in Canadian art. Manitoba-based art historian Oliver A.I. Botar considers [The Structurist](#) to be one of Bornstein's most significant contributions to Canadian art and intellectual history.

Read more about [The Structurist](#)

About the Author of *Eli Bornstein: Life & Work*

Roald Nasgaard, OC, is a teacher, writer, and curator. He is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Abstract Painting in Canada* (2007). The publication of the present book brings together his long-standing commitments to both abstract art and landscape painting. About Bornstein, Nasgaard notes, "I have long thought Eli Bornstein a major artist, but perhaps my real revelation came in 2013, when I was setting up my exhibition *The Automatist Revolution* at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. As it happened, an exhibition of Eli's recent work had just been installed in the adjacent galleries, where were—and this was the crux—illuminated by natural light flowing down from the skylights above. Here was affirmation that Eli's work was truly, as in the words of the title of that show, 'an art at the mercy of light.'"

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