

A case for abstract art

BY ERIC BUNNELL
TIMES-JOURNAL STAFF

Remember the blaze of controversy kindled by the National Gallery's \$1.8 million purchase of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire*?

London, Ont. painter Brian Saby knows why abstract art like Newman's masterwork, gets no respect sometimes.

Saby says it's because the critics just don't know what they're talking about.

"It's a lack of education."

Saby's reception as an abstract painter has been kinder. After all, he's famously quoted as having said, "I'm living proof

you can sell abstract paintings in London." — a statement that Saby, although a successful artist, allows in hindsight "isn't completely true."

As an artist-in-residence during the past several weeks at the art gallery, Saby has been talking up his work and the case for abstract art.

Local gallerygoers can weigh in this week, the final week of an exhibition of Saby's large canvasses at the St. Thomas-Elgin Public Art Centre.

The show — *Brian Saby 99-06 Large Paintings and More* — closes Saturday in the art centre's main galleries with a party starting at 8 p.m.

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himself on a couch trying to work through a dark mood.

The piece is called *Heaven is a Place*. The title plays on a Talking Heads song, *Heaven is a Place*

(Where Nothing Ever Happens).

A series of paintings which greet viewers as they enter the gallery, and in each of which a brightly-coloured Y trisects dark fields of colour to which

(It's also final night of a four-day exhibition in the gallery's Timken Foundation space celebrating the healing power of art over mental illness.)

Saby is an intuitive painter who explores opposites like order and chaos by allowing his images to flow unfettered from his subconscious on to his boldly-coloured — but hugely-layered — canvases.

"I usually don't know what a painting's going to look like. I've been painting so long that I trust my intuition to go in. I'll get a vision, a beginning vision. But the painting doesn't necessarily look that way."

up to 32 coats of paint bring depth, began as no more than a thought by Saby to paint a black work.

When finished, the series — with imagery inspired by the view Saby had from a bench of a tree



Abstract artist Brian Saby and his series of paintings reflecting on his father's bipolar disorder. An exhibition of Saby's work continues this week at St. Thomas-Elgin Public Arts Centre. (T-J photo)

He points to one of the largest works in the exhibition, in which five red circles hover above a series of loops.

"I had a dream when I

was very young about being shot. I started out with that but, then, the painting worked away from that."

When he began paint-

ing, the circles were the bullet holes of his dream.

But when he finished, Saby, had completed a painting which pictures

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— had become a reflection by the artist on his father's bipolar disorder.

As the series' creator, Saby is contributing to this week's exhibition of art and mental health.