This exhibition focuses on pure or “non-objective” abstractions within the permanent collection of the South Dakota Art Museum. Completely devoid of naturalistic depictions, these artworks take up as their subject matter the composition and creation of the artworks themselves. The works presented range in date from the early 1950s to today and have been collected by the museum since its founding in 1970. They represent only a fraction of the rich and diverse mixture of pure abstractions that the museum owns and cares for.
Works by artists of local, regional, national and historical significance are included. Their practices are representative of a wide range of styles and movements within the field of pure abstraction. Some works are included because they are representative of a specific development or were created by important historical figures within that development. Others are included for their relevance to local and regional history, whether or not they fit neatly into or defy categorization. Some works are presented simply because of the diversity or continuity they provide in relation to other works within the exhibition.

Almost half of the works in the show were created by artists who have connections to South Dakota, with nine of the artists currently living and working in the state. The strength of these artists and their works prove that high quality abstraction has for a long time been alive and well in South Dakota.

The exhibition is limited to fine art tied to a lineage of abstraction that is part of a European tradition and evolution. It includes prints, paintings, sculptures and mixed media works. It does not include indigenous, folk, applied or craft artforms, like textiles, weavings, jewelry, pottery, quillwork and beadwork. While many of these types of works within the collection contain geometric motifs that are interesting in the context of Modernist pure abstraction, it was out of the scope of this exhibition to include works rooted in a decorative tradition. The historical lineage of these categories of work creates meanings and values for them that often differ from the works presented here.

Pure abstraction is quite explicitly the narrowing down of artworks to their essential components. A significant result of this process is that more attention is drawn to the characteristics, qualities and expressive potential of those components in and of themselves. Through a detachment from references to natural appearances, pure abstraction allows for an unmitigated sensory experience of an artwork. Where remnants of recognizable objects remain, this experience is obscured by the mental struggle for recognition and identification. It can distract from, if not dominate, the experience of the artwork. Without that struggle the viewer is able to freely explore the harmonious and dynamic arrangement of colors, shapes and lines; the energy, expressivity and craftsmanship of the artist’s hand; and the physicality of the artwork’s make-up. With pure abstraction the undeniable pleasure of easy recognition and the enjoyment of an artist’s technical dexterity in illusionistic depiction is traded in for the pleasure of experiencing a unique and original creation on its own terms, rather than as a substitute for or imitation of something that already exists in the natural world.

Overall the emphasis in this exhibition is on visual excitement created through strong color, design, expression, and the dynamic handling and exploration of media and materials. Most all pure abstraction contains a fundamental tension between order and chaos and this is present throughout the show. Some works speak more to the mechanical precision of geometric abstraction and others to the mysterious potentialities of expressive abstraction, with many works dancing back and forth across that line. We hope that viewers of this exhibition will take delight in the austerity or expressiveness of forms; in the boldness or subtlety of colors; in the visceral energy of materials drawn, brushed, poured, slathered, dredged and pooled onto their surfaces or the clean resonance of solid, flat color and empty space; in the retinal titillation of reflective glints and electric lines or the soft embrace of rich textures; in the simplicity and complexity of the interactions between all of the parts making up a whole. This exhibition is an examination and celebration of the beauty that can be achieved in art when it is freed to discover, define and express itself...

Enjoy!