

125 NEWBURY

ISSUE 3

JENNIFER BARTLETT, ALFRED JENSEN, DONALD JUDD

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NO ILLUSIONS

FREE PRESS

Arne Glimcher

In the 1960s, Al Jensen could be seen at every gallery opening. He showed his work with the Martha Jackson Gallery and was very much a part of the scene. He was already in his sixties at the time, having been born in 1903—the same year as his friend Mark Rothko—but he also associated with artists a generation younger. Al was both ubiquitous and instantly recognizable as the little guy with a big head and a lion's mane of hair, always wearing a jacket and tie or a sweater, looking more like a businessman than an artist. This made him very conspicuous amongst the other artists in their jeans and studio clothing. Al looked like a banker, but a banker on Sunday in a tweed jacket.

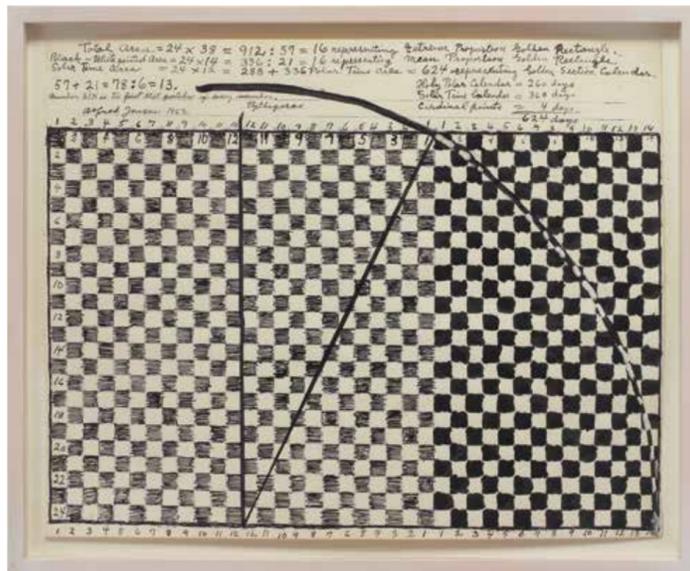
I first met Al at the opening of the *First International Girlie Exhibition* at Pace Gallery in 1964. By then I was already familiar with his work, which I had seen in an exhibition at the Jackson gallery in 1962 of red, white, blue, and black paintings, which resembled ledger sheets filled with stacks of mathematical equations. That work was as perplexing as it was exciting.

Some years later, Jensen invited me to come to the studio. I learned he had had a falling out with Martha Jackson and was looking for a new gallery. Visiting his studio was an incredible experience. It was a third-floor walk-up to a little apartment that served more as a storage closet than a working space. There were dozens and dozens of paintings, stacked one against the other along the wall. Fred Mueller and I had to squeeze through tiny aisles and peek through gaps between and over the tops of the canvases to catch a glimpse of what was there.

We would pull out whatever seemed most exciting, but there was almost no place to look at the work. Sometimes we'd take a painting out to the landing of the stairs to look at it together. There was a second floor, as well, where Al had an apartment that I believe he lived in. That too was so filled with stacks and stacks of paintings that it resembled another storage room. The paintings were irresistible in their originality and eccentricity and so was Al. We offered

him an exhibition and he accepted. Thus began our relationship, although it wasn't until 1972 that Jensen had his first exhibition with Pace.

Don Judd was always very enthusiastic about Jensen's work and owned a couple of Al's paintings. That was before Judd had even made art. At that time Don was writing art criticism, and really helping the careers of artists that he cared about. Most people associate Judd exclusively with minimalist taste these days, however his taste was broader than that. It ranged from the figuration of John Wesley to the painterliness of Jensen. It might have seemed like the antithesis of Judd's concerns, since Jensen was making a very personal mark—almost like a pastry chef, he was frosting the paintings—whereas Judd was eradicating the personal mark altogether.



As much as the work of the two artists diverge, the geometry of Jensen's paintings clearly resonated with Judd. There was also an overlap in the way Judd's work is so carefully conceived before construction begins, allowing it to be constructed by a fabricator. Jensen's compositions are just as carefully planned, first in studies on paper and sometimes in oil paint on blotting paper, where he defines the mathematical divisions of the canvas. After all the calculations have been carefully made, Jensen would laboriously transfer the pencil grid to the canvas. In this sense, Jensen's paintings are emphatically hand-made. Sometimes he would make charming mistakes in the system which revealed its humanity. Suddenly and unaccountably, he may be short two inches on the right. Rather than starting over, Jensen

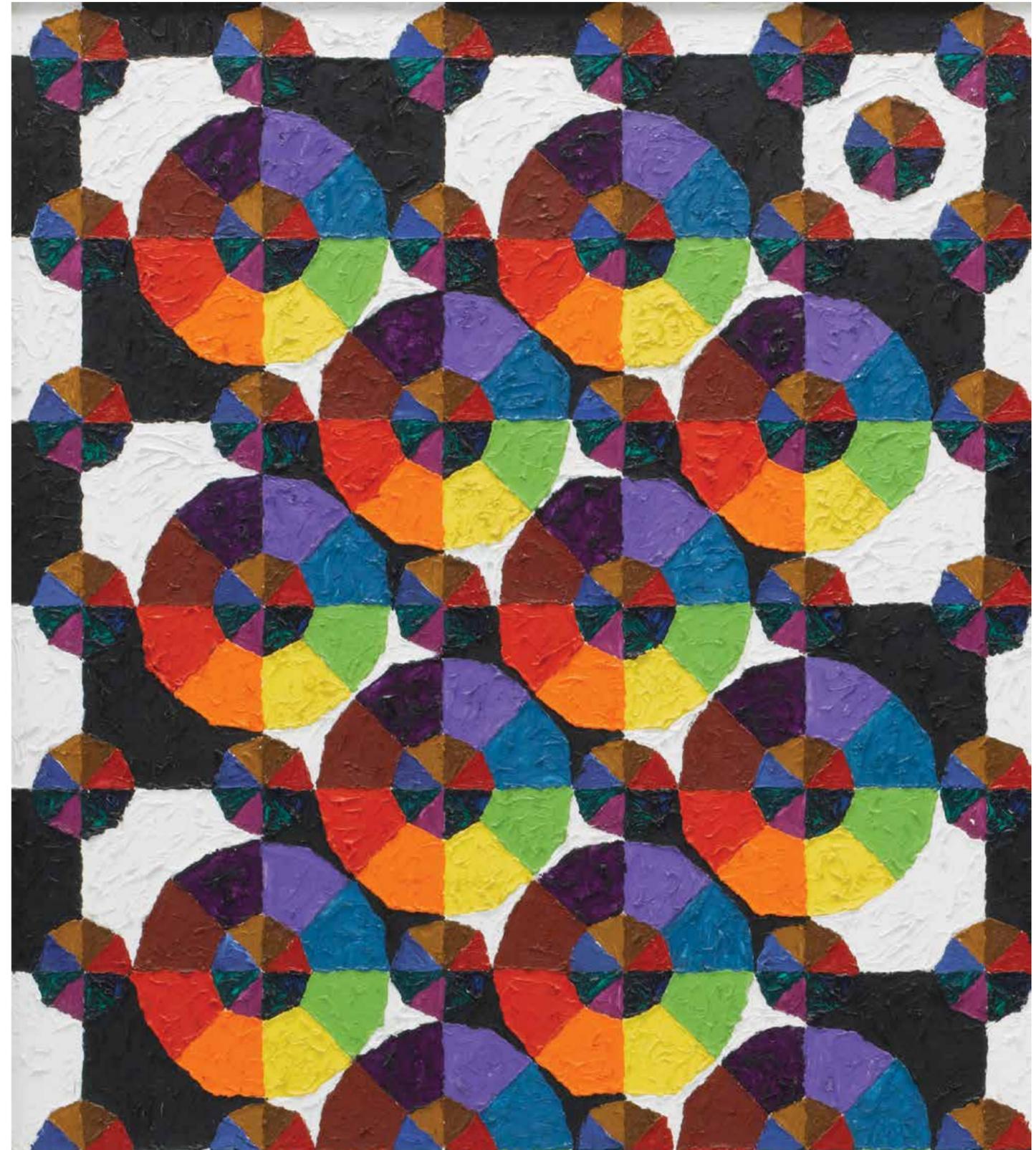
just filled in the missing space, extending the composition in the most surprising ways.

Judd was attempting to create the most perfect objects in the world. Non-referential objects of ravishing beauty. To that end he combined colored Plexiglas with polished metal, transforming the materials into something precious and jewel-like. From plywood to plexiglass, he could imbue preciousness and power into seemingly mundane materials.

An interest in systems links Jensen and Judd to Jennifer Bartlett, who was a generation younger than Don. After she first came to New York, Jennifer lived and worked in an apartment too small for the pieces she envisioned. To solve that problem, she began painting with enamel paint on individual panels of steel, which resulted in her legendary plate paintings. The first big plate painting that rocked the art community was *Rhapsody* of 1975/76, which MoMA now owns. When that work was shown, it was met with great adulation. The critics loved it and it made Jennifer a star. Even though she worked sequentially and according to a set of rules and logics that she set out for herself, I always had the feeling that the final arrangement of those plate works only happened with their installation. She was working with pattern, system, and surface, but also space. Jennifer's plate works had an extraordinary effect, and this was happening right at the time when both Judd and Jensen were at the height of their powers.

There have never been three artists more steadfast in their individual quests than Bartlett, Jensen, and Judd, three key figures in the New York avant-garde who also belong to sequential generations. They had no doubts about their paths in the history of abstraction. No doubts and no illusions.

Image: Alfred Jensen, *Number six is the first that partakes of every number. Pythagoras*, 1963. Ink on paper. 23" x 29". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.



Alfred Jensen, *Taj Mahal* (detail), 1975. Oil on canvas, in seven parts. 74" x 179". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.





AL JENSEN AND THE TRADITIONS OF THE MODERN

WILLIAM C. AGEE

This essay originally appeared in the catalogue for the exhibition *Alfred Jensen: The Number Paintings* at Pace Gallery in New York, Sept 29–Oct 26, 2006.

That the paintings of Al Jensen (1903–1981) are one of the singular achievements of post-1945 art has long been well known and appreciated. Their importance was widely announced in 1963 by two younger artists, just then emerging in New York, who were themselves to exert a decisive impact on American art in the coming years. Donald Judd and Allan Kaprow each extended the highest admiration for Jensen on the occasion of his show at the Graham Gallery in March of that year. Yet their praise took very different forms, a polarity that to a large extent set the diverging approaches to Jensen for years to come. Given their vastly different approaches to art, it is not at all surprising that Judd and Kaprow viewed Jensen’s paintings in sharply contrasting ways. In retrospect, this seems fitting, for Jensen’s world view was based on the opposing dualities that he saw as the source and substance of life-light and dark, positive and negative, male and female, life and death, among them.

Judd, whose criticism helped define the new reductive art of the 1960s, was never one given to overstatement, but he got right to the point: “Now and then a chance occurs for a narrow, substantive, categorical statement: Jensen is great. He is one of the best painters in the United States.”¹ Judd’s other comments about the paintings were telling; but about the complex maze of numbers, patterns, shapes, signs, emblems, letters, formulas, and cursive writings that animate Jensen’s surfaces, all referring to ancient cultures from Greece to China, he had nothing to say, except that “The theories are important to him and completely irrelevant to the viewer.”² Later that year in a full-length article, Kaprow, a father of collective action art, happenings, and site-specific installations, was also effusive, saying that “the contemporary vanguard looks to Alfred Jensen with an interest that is accorded few other older artists.” For Kaprow, moreover, Jensen’s cultural references made him nothing less than a “metaphysical artist, his vision cosmic”; the diagrams and numbers in the work were an attempt at a “theory of the universe, a world view...”³ that must be un-

derstood if we were truly to grasp the importance of the work.

To this day, the first question invariably asked in front of a Jensen painting is, “how much do I have to know about its references to understand it?” The answer given usually has been a variant of either the Judd or the Kaprow views. Either seemed alright with Jensen. On a visit to Jensen’s tiny studio on East 10th Street in 1970, this writer professed incomprehension after his extended explanations of hundreds of diagrams. Jensen seemed not to mind and we moved on to looking at and discussing one dazzling painting after another, speaking of them only in visual terms. (It was a most pleasant day, disturbed only by his look of stark terror and cry of “No never! Look what happened to de Kooning!” when I asked if he had ever considered moving to a larger studio.) He understood, I now know, that assimilation of the sources of his paintings would be given to only a few, and then only in the future. I also know that this did not bother him, for he believed that important and truly original art could not be understood in its time, that art lives not in the present, but in the future, that because of this, it would point the way to a better, more civilized world. Jensen liked to say “I am a signpost,”⁴ for good reason, it is now clear. It has taken years, but more has been revealed to us all, and has rewarded us with a deeper understanding of the man and his art. We now need to seek a rapprochement between the diverging Judd and Kaprow views and hope that the split between them can be reconciled. The key to understanding Jensen’s art is surely simple; it is not a matter of either/or, form vs. content, theory vs. structure, but rather a comprehension of the fusion in his art of the innumerable possibilities of painting to which Jensen gave new definition. Jensen ranged far and wide in all manner of fields and cultures, so far and often so obscure that in the future, as one writer noted, a Jensen Society might well gather to unearth and explicate his sources and their countless references.⁵

However, this need not detract from, or substitute for, the sheer visual radiance, the inunediacy and power, as well as the quality, the high achievement of these remarkable paintings. For above all Jensen was a painter, a working, disciplined painter engaged in the making of works of art. He was not a mathematician, an anthropologist, or a philosopher, and certainly not a mystic, or an eccentric, but a painter, one of the highest accomplishment. His content is deeply embedded in

the paint and color, for the systems generate and determine the painting, as an organic and vital force; they are literally inseparable, as part of the language of paint, with structure and subject held in a dynamic, creative tension of opposing forces, the dualities of life in which Jensen so deeply believed. As with any important artist, the more we know, the more we learn and assimilate, the better we will understand the work and the person. We might think of Mondrian and Judd himself, whose pure form-giving went hand-in-hand with extensive writings and philosophical, even theoretical, world views.

The apparent polarity within Jensen’s art, its sheer complexity, as well as his own extraordinary biography—born in Guatemala, raised in Denmark, study in Germany and Paris, world travel before returning to the United States and settling in New York in 1951—have had the effect of distancing him from us, even, as one writer observed, of intimidating us.⁶ Indeed, he has been described as an artist apart, a maverick, a kind of historical oddity, even a mystic or primitive, removed from the collective styles and movements of his day and of modern art.⁷ He was none of these things. He was fiercely independent (like many good artists), often a loner, and claimed no movement as his alone. Yet he was surely an integral part of the traditions of modernism that developed in the nineteenth century and have come down to us today. His art drew from, and in turn touched, virtually every development in American art from the early fifties until his death in 1981; it is now the subject of increasing respect and admiration among young and old, artists, critics, and public alike, as a well-spring, an inspiration for new painterly directions. He knew it to be so!

If we are to understand the man and the artist, the full and true importance of his art, we must see him in this broader context, and as anything but an outsider or maverick. Jensen himself saw it this way and in a letter of about 1957,⁸ carefully described the traditions and artists who had nurtured him. The critical task of locating a context for Jensen was begun admirably by David Anfam,⁹ who placed Jensen’s roots squarely in the milieu of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Mark Rothko, his close friend born the same year, and a charter member of the generation to which Jensen belonged by age. Others have asked how and where we might place him,¹⁰ and one¹¹ has commented that he did belong to a tradition, but the tradition was unable to absorb

him; the question of what tradition was not posed. The pressing task now is to expand on these first efforts and place him in the extended, multiple traditions of the modern, from nineteenth-century Impressionism to the conceptualism and then abstraction of the 1970s. This in no way reduces his singularity, his unique vision, but rather will make us see, in sharper focus, the extent and the nature of his originality.

How, then, do we connect him with the flow of modern art? It starts with the unusual and exotic events of his life. Jensen was born in 1903 in Guatemala, of German and Danish parents, was sent to Denmark at the age of seven after his mother’s early death, traveled and studied throughout Europe, with extended stays in Munich and Paris, before first settling in New York in 1934, then permanently in 1951. During the 1930s and 1940s he visited many important artists’ studios in Europe while acting as adviser to Saidie A. May, whose large collection is now in the Baltimore Museum of Art, giving him an extensive first-hand knowledge of the history of modern art. He therefore should be understood as a widely traveled, broadly cultured, well-, if largely self-educated, old world European, one of many who came to this country in the 1930s and 1940s, and who added immeasurably to the level of taste and cultural sophistication in America. His remarkable scope of knowledge of ancient cultures placed him as an inheritor of a classical education, once standard in old Europe, but largely extinct by 1950 in America. This was surely a factor in making him seem like an outsider, as did the fact that he was older, in his fifties, when his art matured. Like Tony Smith and Barnett Newman, Jensen was more appreciated, and more closely associated with the younger, emerging artists of the 1960s than with his own chronological generation. Since his art has continued to be an inspiration and guide for younger artists of broad persuasions, long after his death, he has been in a sense ageless, not identified exclusively with any one decade. Jensen liked it that way—“I am a signpost,” he said, calling himself a “messenger” between the past and the future,¹³ and he took pride in not belonging to any one style or movement.¹⁴

Jensen, as part of the myth that saw him as a primitive or outsider, has also been miscast as a self-taught artist. This is patently untrue. He began drawing his schoolmates at a young age, followed by years of formal training. Beginning in 1924, he returned to the United States from Guatemala and settled in San Diego for

two years. There he attended art school, studying with a “Mr. Schneider” (no doubt Otto H. Schneider, 1875-1950), whom he always remembered fondly and with gratitude for the lessons learned in the use of rich, thick Impressionist color and heavy spots of pigment, lessons that stayed with him throughout his life. There he learned of Hans Hofmann’s school in Munich and worked his way to Germany in 1926 as a sailor. However, he forgot Hofmann’s last name and mistakenly enrolled in a school run by Moritz Heymann (1870-1937). After finding his way to Hofmann, he concentrated on drawing from the old masters¹⁶ in the great museums of Munich, another important step in his classical education. He did the same during his travels throughout Europe, particularly valuing his copies after Rembrandt in Madrid, part of his ongoing “conversations with the old masters,”¹⁷ an old and venerated practice for young artists.

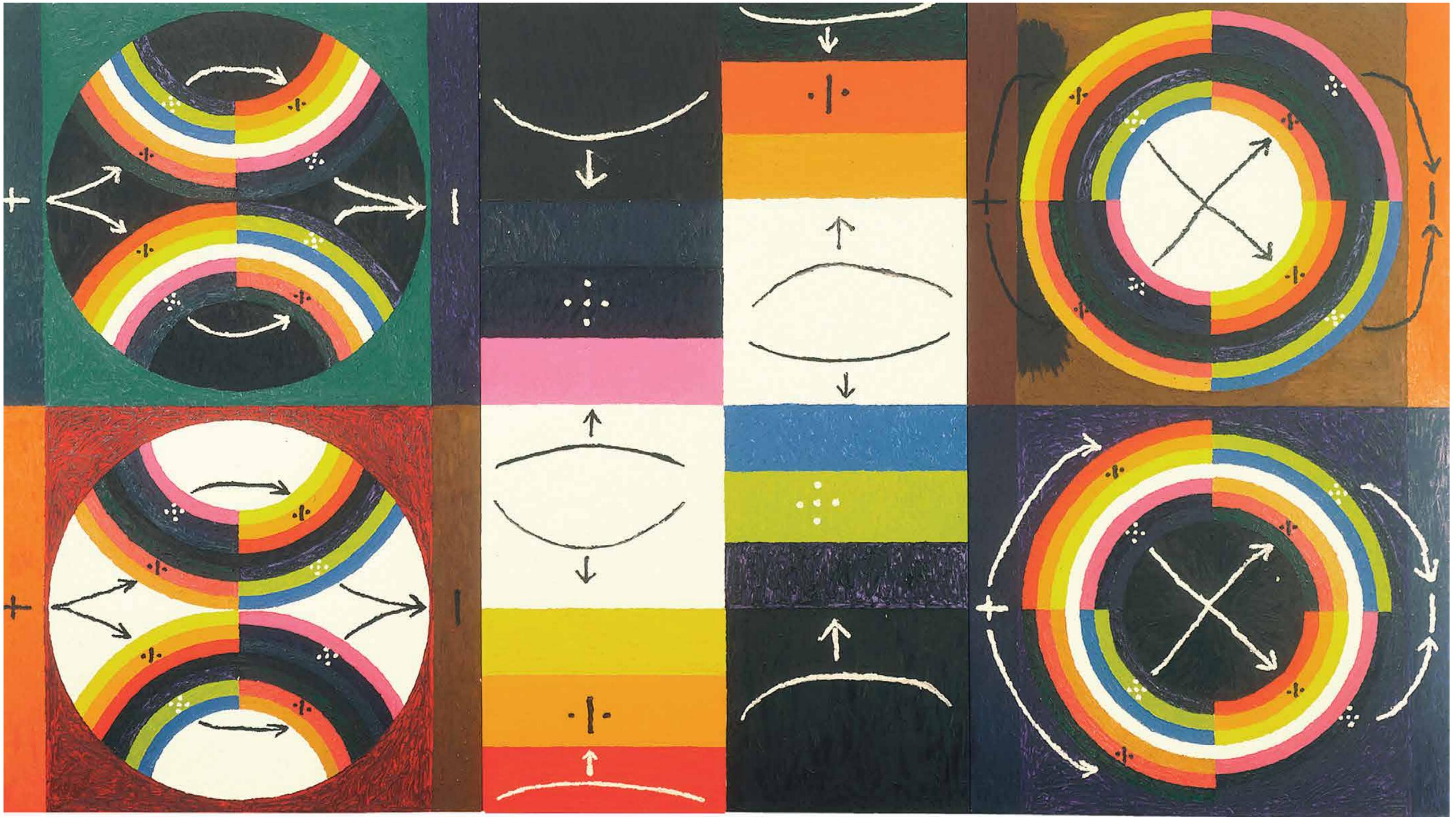
By the spring of 1928, Jensen had broken from Hofmann, feeling the teacher was too rigid in his methods and was keeping him from growing as an artist. One can easily understand this, but at the same time Jensen surely took away fundamental lessons in the use of high color as well as an understanding of Cubism. While there he also met Saidie A. May, a wealthy art collector and a Hofmann student, who extended her patronage, enabling him to continue his studies. They left Munich and Jensen enrolled at the Académie Scandinave in Paris that same year, there studying sculpture with Charles Despiau, and painting with Othon Friesz and Charles Dufresne, two old Fauvist members of the School of Paris. Friesz, he later recalled,¹⁸ taught him the significance of Impressionism, Cezanne, and Fauvism, and since he had known Pissarro and Renoir, introduced Jensen by first-hand knowledge to what Jensen called the “language of the French art tradition,” a four-hundred-year-old tradition, as he described it,¹⁹ that Dufresne helped him navigate. Thirty years later, Jensen could say that memories of his teachers’ words, their suggestive imagery, had to filter through his mind before he could paint a picture. Thus it is evident that Jensen had extensive, and early, training in and exposure to the long tradition of color in painting, especially that of heavy impasto, so important to his own mature art.

By 1938, in his continuing quest for knowledge of color, he had discovered Goethe’s famous treatise *Zur Farbenlehre*, which he read religiously for twenty years and which decisively affected his subsequent approach to color. But his ground-

ing in color had begun much earlier, and he should be understood as one of the Europeans who came to America in the 1930s, notably Hofmann and Josef Albers, but also the American Milton Avery, who enriched and extended the language of color into American art. This in itself was already a tradition that in this country could be traced back to 1908 and the Americans Patrick Henry Bruce and Sarah and Michael Stein, who helped Matisse found his famous school in Paris. In turn, it can be followed to the color field painting of the 1950s and 1960s, a glorious chapter in American art in which Jensen played an important, if still largely unrecognized role, the culmination of a modern tradition that had been integral to modern art since Impressionism in the 1860s.

Jensen’s education was helped immeasurably by his exposure to many of the masters of modern art, often through visits to their studios while advising Saidie May on her collection. Among others, Jensen visited Picasso and Miró, and of special import was his contact with André Masson in 1938 in France, who instilled in Jensen a desire to explore “dreams, passions, and the struggles of existence,”²⁰ to let color and plane “specify the bizarre, the myth, the dream and the dislocations of time and space,” the very description of Jensen’s later art. Like virtually every member of the New York School then, Jensen was profoundly affected by the Surrealism of the thirties, if in very different ways than most. So, too, Jensen benefited enormously, he recalled, by his contact with the renowned dealer Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, whose interpretations of Juan Gris guided Jensen to the planar concepts of Cubism, until, he said, “I arrived at their abstract resolutions.”²¹ Perhaps most important, however, was his voracious intellectual curiosity, which led him into extensive reading in ancient cultures, and to a deep belief in the ongoing importance of older systems, practices, and wisdom, which he held to have universal validity and could affect the world for the better. While artists such as Rothko and Newman had embraced primitive societies and their rituals as a source that the modern artist could draw on, no one had the kind of extensive and far-reaching knowledge, literally extending around the world, that Jensen had, and actually put into practice.

Thus, when Jensen settled in New York after Saidie May’s death in 1950 and began to concentrate on his own art, only now when he was close to fifty, he had undergone almost thirty years of training, some formal, some conducted inde-



Alfred Jensen, *Physical Optics*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 7' 2" x 12' 9". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

pendently through reading and travel. He did not take to the scene in New York, at least not to the social life at the Cedar Bar, and many thought he talked and speculated excessively. His old world civility and decency were surely out of step with the hard drinking, existential, egocentric angst that was so pervasive in New York in the fifties. He preferred to stay alone, at home, and continue his reading in ancient cultures. But he was no hermit by any means. He was well aware of what was going on and he did make friendships, most especially with Mark Rothko. Jensen worked with organic shapes that related to Abstract Expressionist biomorphism, but he seems quickly to have realized that as a newcomer to New York, since he had not been there at the beginning, his art ran the risk of becoming a pale imitation of the founders' work. Given his independent spirit, his broad worldview, and his insistence on a universal outlook, he may well have felt constrained by narrow Abstract Expressionist rhetoric, for he complained of Rothko's lack of dualities.²²

That he demanded for himself an original and personal statement was made clear in a letter of 1956, just before he did his first individual work. In it he wrote that although he praised Rothko, he condemned the imitators who "paint these large empty canvases," who are "only concerned with painting the background of the hereafter, those who paint compensatory day dreams of immortal wish fulfillment."²³ Jensen further elaborated: the "artist must face life as it is and as it evolves and continues," that the artist expresses life in its "specific reality," the dynamics of life as they directly impact on their own time. This, he concluded, was what he must do to make a "valid personal contribution."²⁴

Since his paintings so often appear mysterious and arcane to us, beyond our ready grasp, as he knew they would be, his declaration that art must be based on the "specific reality" of life may well come as something of a surprise. Jensen had his own, unique answers, but he was in fact part of a drive for a reality within the realm of abstract art that should be seen as part of another long tradition in the twentieth century. It dates at least to Picasso's love of material reality, is extended by Mondrian's "new plastic reality," and Stuart Davis' insistence that he was a realist artist although he was widely understood as one of America's best abstract artists. It continued into the 1940s and 1950s, as in Hans Hofmann's classic essays on *The Search for the Real*,²⁵ in

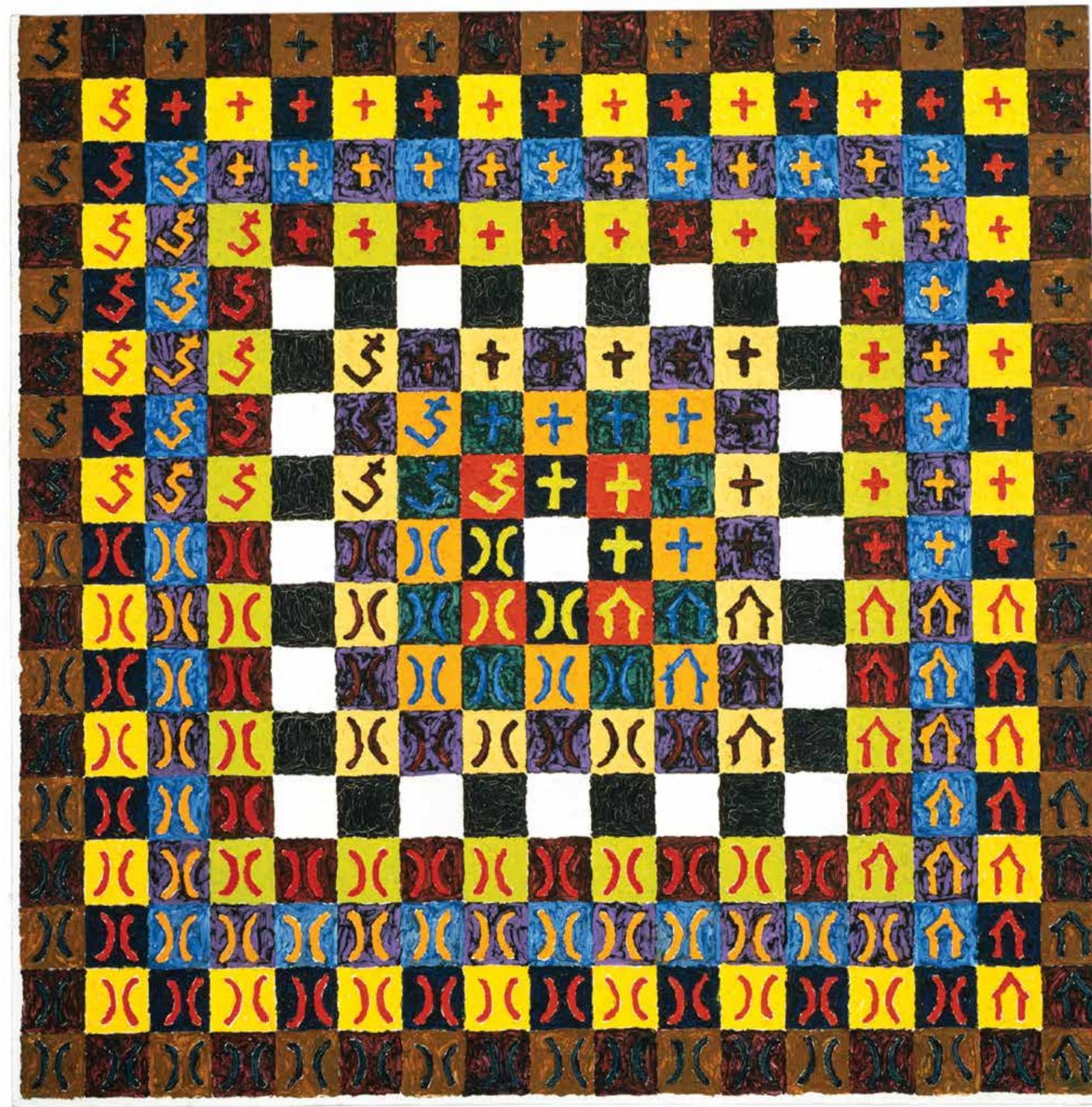
which Hofmann viewed the real as ultimately residing in the artist's quest for a higher order, in discovering his own spirituality. As shown in the classic *Art of the Real* exhibition held in 1968,²⁶ artists of all varieties of abstract persuasions have sought to avoid an abstraction devoid of any content, "the empty" canvases to which Jensen had referred. This concern became an increasingly pressing matter for artists emerging in the mid- and late 1950s, for more and more they saw countless variations of what they perceived, as Jensen had, as mannered, even academic versions of Abstract Expressionism, stripped of its original formal and emotive intensity. Kaprow commented that seeking the real was also the way of the ancients, who proceeded from the real and personal to truthful generalizations and broad principles.²⁷

We can also see Jensen in light of the ongoing dialogue, dating to the mid-nineteenth century with Ingres and Courbet, concerning the very sources of art. Would it be drawn from and refer to immediate life itself, or would it come from another kind of order, far and distant from the realities of the everyday world? Davis saw it as intrinsic to the world around him, its sights and sounds; Ad Reinhardt, on the other hand, saw art as pure and removed, inviolate unto itself.²⁸ Jensen, clearly, saw it as stemming entirely from the artist's experience of the world that he knew firsthand from immediate experience.

To make a distinct and personal art, an art of the real, Jensen set out to integrate his past and current life experiences, to fuse his memories of his childhood in Guatemala and the Mayan culture with his exposure to Western culture. This contrast was one of the first of the sharp dualities that for him came to be the basis of art and life. He called on his memory of watching the burial of his mother, when he was but the age of seven, the highly colored lid of the coffin, with four silver angels pointing to the four directions, an early instance of the quadrilateral Mayan vision that came to be at the heart of his work. He had been profoundly shaped by the dualities of that experience—the stark contrast of life's most elemental forces—life vs. death, light vs. dark as the coffin was lowered into the grave, the light of the brilliant sun and colors on the coffin vs. the dark of the earth, the underground, positive vs. negative, only a few of the manifold dualities that Jensen subsequently saw as the very essence of life. By choosing an art of this nature, he was seeking, he said, nothing less than an "art of salvation."²⁹

Later in life, as he read and re-read Goethe on color, Jensen came to understand the dualities within Goethe's color theories, of how for Goethe the prism divides light into black and white, the opposite of Newton's theories of color as a single arc or rainbow. Jensen was able to equate Goethe's divisions of color with Mayan dualities, particularly Mayan number systems, and indeed with the limitless dualities and correlations within systems of numbers throughout the ancient world, or in the solar system, and even of the entirety of nature. By 1952, he had put this equation into practice in a series of colored diagrams based on his readings of Goethe. Jensen explored color and its interactions in its dualities of warm and cool, active and passive (for him, male and female), often through concentric bands of hues that recall, if distantly, the Orphism of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, or even the chromatic circles in Chevreul's pioneering studies of color that he knew well.³⁰ They had little or nothing to do with his then current work on canvas, and apparently Jensen did not really consider them works of art. But Rothko admired them, and understood their beauty and their potential, and in 1957 suggested that Jensen use them as the basis for fullblown paintings, complete in themselves. Jensen heeded this wise suggestion and thereafter he became, in his own words, "a painter of diagrams."³¹

If it had been a long time in coming, Jensen's breakthrough was swift and decisive, its results coming quickly to breathtaking fruition. In a small oil signed and dated at the upper right July 20, 1957, hardly bigger than some of the diagrams, Jensen seemed to summarize his past and declare his course for the future, a virtual diary of his long journey to that day. No wonder, then, that he often spoke of his work as moving through time and space, no fantasy for him, but a record of what had been true and real in his life. The painting is entitled *My Oneness, A Universe of Colours* and it announced a union of the elements he had been exploring for so many years, especially color, which he saw as filling the world, here fused in the harmony and balance of the concentric circles. The color is centered exactly in the midpoint of the surface and radiates out to fill the surface with the primaries and their variants, contrasted only by green at the center, and alternating with black bands. The last circles, at the edges, are black and white, the source of all color as defined by Goethe, and embodying a basic duality of the universe, pointing to all other dualities, which he cele-



Alfred Jensen, *The River Diagram: Lo Shu*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 60" x 60". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.



Alfred Jensen, *Emission Spectrum*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 74" x 37". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

brates with a joyous quote from Shakespeare. It tells us that Jensen had found his direction, centered and focused now, a man in accord with himself, his art, and the universe, which he tells us on the surface is now his "Self-identity" and "Self integration," or his Oneness.

The circles are loosely painted, which locates the painting at a critical historical juncture, both looking back to the textured surfaces of Abstract Expressionism, while also pointing forward to the more highly defined and clarified structuring of late 1950s and early 1960s abstraction. It is a key painting in the history of this period in American art, a history that is still insufficiently known. Jensen's work should be considered in tandem with the target paintings of Jasper Johns, first shown in January 1958, the concentric circle paintings of Kenneth Noland, also just emerging, as one of the first announcements that a new kind of art was on the horizon. Cosmic subjects, prominent here as well as throughout Jensen's art, were also at the heart of much of Noland's work at this time, as in his *Ex-Nihilo*, 1958, or *Lunar Episode* of 1959, an aspect rarely examined, still all but overlooked.³² In turn, these cosmic subjects can be traced in American painting to the Luminists of the nineteenth century, and even further to the romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich and even Turner.

Jensen's painting came a year after Pollock's death in 1956, a turning point in American art, after which there came a massive reassessment of where art might go. The post-Pollock shift came through a move toward a more open and more easily read, a more clarified type of painting in the face of what was understood as the increasingly overworked, clotted surfaces of second-generation Abstract Expressionism. The move had been announced by Hofmann in his first slab paintings of 1956, and the burst paintings of Adolph Gottlieb, begun in 1956-57. These artists, as well as Jensen and a generation of younger emerging artists, sought to keep the power, directness, scale, and size of Abstract Expressionism while moving to a more legible kind of painting. This was a process of clarification, often seen before in modern art, starting, for example, with Cézanne and Seurat seeking to clarify Impressionism, to make of it something solid and monumental, or the invention of collage by Picasso and Braque, which had the effect of opening up the dense, almost illegible surfaces of Analytical Cubism. We should also include the work of Frank Stella, Al Held, Ray Parker, and Ronald Bladen, as

well as Kaprow himself, as figures in this shift of the late 1950s, but for the first time we can now see just how important Jensen was in this development. Kaprow understood Jensen's involvement with the emerging art, and because of his youthful spirit, thought of him more as a cousin than as a father figure.

In his seminal article of 1958, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,"³³ Kaprow outlined his belief that Pollock's art called for a new, broader kind of realism, one that was as large as life itself. It is almost as if Jensen, in his unique way, set this as his goal. Infinite variations of circle formats appeared throughout his life, all bearing on his experience of the real world, none more so than his 1961 collage *A Film Ringed the Earth*, celebrating the first manned space flight. Here the circles stand for nothing less than the earth itself, as seen from space, proving to him the way color is seen on the edges of the horizon, a belief Jensen had held but could not prove until the flight. He was ecstatic. In a catalogue statement of October 1961,³⁴ he told the story of an afternoon walk that he and his uncle had taken long ago. As they came out of the woods, they saw a rainbow, and his uncle said "Mark it in your memory: where the pure color hues touch the earth, there the fairy folk have buried their treasure." Excited by nature's brilliant display, Jensen recounted, "I ran towards the colors hoping to grasp at the elusive mirage." He had made a compelling abstract work, but one with a real content, based on an event of huge import, from real life, but leavened by poetic evocations, thus achieving in a stunning manner a solution to what had plagued artists for years: the search for a true content in abstract art. The only other artist who might be said to incorporate a content as real within ambitious abstracting painting was Stuart Davis, although his was an inward, more personal type of journal. As in so much else, Jensen stands virtually alone, but at the same time he was still very much a part of a broader art and art historical development.

Concentric circles and their variants, some oval, some ovoid, continued to appear through out his work. By 1958, color had become deeper, and fuller, covering the entire surface, as in *Galaxy I* and *Galaxy II*, now referring to the entire universe. Later, as in the *Negative Optic Electric Force*, *Positive Optic Electric Force*, a painting that records his increasing interest in the work of Michael Faraday and his study of magnetic fields. However, circles were only one of the numerous patterns

adapted by the inexhaustibly inventive Jensen. Early on, "simple" rectangular checkerboards appeared, as in *The Apex is Nothing*, 1960 and *Zeus*, 1962. In the first, the paint is so thickly applied that it borders on low relief, a quality that Judd admired and the type of surface that would lead him to describe Jensen's work as "having no space." This type of heavy surface may well have encouraged Judd in his own drive to eliminate the last traces of European illusionism, his primary objection to earlier art. As Judd saw it, the first task of the American artist was to rid himself of this old illusionism, the last vestige of an old world system of social and artistic hierarchies. In this case, Jensen's heavy textures equate with an all-over expressive intensity on the entirety of the surface, long a path of modernist painting dating to Impressionism. Now, however, Jensen employs it in a newly clarified format. Its four-part division embodies Jensen's goal of incorporating a quadrilateral vision of the ancients, including the Mayans. It is dead-on frontal, centered precisely at the midpoint of the surface, a metaphor of Jensen's own newfound artistic and personal balance and harmony. It also is an early use in Jensen of the grid as the structural basis of the surface, a device that became increasingly important not only to Jensen but to any number of younger artists during the 1960s and 1970s. Its simple divisions, so clear and sure, will recall the classic work of Mondrian, an artist Jensen admired and respected, that had continued to exert a strong example for American art well into the 1960s, a sub-history of art in itself. Jensen's simplified color usage, consisting of the Mayan duality of black and white at center, also recalls Mondrian's reduced palette of the three primaries plus black and white. Further, the grid here is a variant of late Cubism, thought to be moribund by 1945, but in fact a powerful stimulus for the next twenty years, and responsible in great part for the high level of achievement in the 1960s in the late work of David Smith, Hans Hofmann, Stuart Davis, and Charles Sheeler, among others. This is another sub-history, in which it is now clear Jensen also played a significant role, and not before recognized. The checkerboard pattern in *Zeus* also recalls earlier work of Mondrian, but in fact was based on the floor plan of the Temple of Zeus, which he had visited and measured exactly.

If slow in coming, Jensen's breakthrough and subsequent development thereafter came as nothing less than a veritable torrent, built up after thirty-five

years of preparation. By 1960, as in *Square Beginning — Cyclic Ending, Per I–V*, the scale, physical size, and complexity of his paintings underwent a quantum leap forward, almost as if his imagination could no longer be contained within the boundaries of a single canvas. *Square Beginning* measured more than 20 feet across and consisted of five panels, all distinctly different, a feat all the more remarkable since they were done in a tiny studio that seemed hardly to measure more than 20 feet in any direction. It was surely larger than any other work done at the time, other than public murals; nor was it exceptional within his art, for Jensen consistently made paintings of this size and scale. It is as if Jensen had re-imagined and then re-invented an altogether new level for the long-standing Abstract Expressionist drive to make a mural-sized art, which had come to be known as the “Big Canvas.”³⁵ Jensen also introduced a new complexity of elements, here using early Chinese mathematical systems³⁶ with numbers taken from Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Reading from left to right, the panels start with multiple elements, a dense surface patterning within an inscribed circle, representing the female, and a square, the male, then move to an ever simplified format, ending with a frontal, highly clarified structure. It is as if Jensen were outlining and actually demonstrating the course of art from the 1950s into the sixties, from relative multiplicity to a higher, clearer definition of fewer elements.

In 1963, Judd described Jensen’s paintings of that time as having “no space,” alluding no doubt to the total fusion of paint, color, surface, and pattern that amounted in effect to a full purging of any type of illusionism, a structure in which all elements are absolutely equal. “Many of Jensen’s paintings are thoroughly flat,” he went on, “are completely patterns. Jensen’s paintings are not radical inventions, but this aspect is. There are no other paintings completely without space... Jensen, though, relies completely upon the strength and complexity of the patterns. The work is blunt, lush, and strident. The paint is applied thickly and passionately with a knife [not true as it turns out]; the edges are irregular. The relationships described in *Per IV* are enormously interesting.”³⁷ Judd’s emphasis on the importance of the patterns tells us a great deal about Jensen and his art, namely that the structure and content are not two different systems forced one on another, but are a fusion, a blend of generative forces. The patterns and number-

ing systems were a way to get the painting going, to activate it, to propel, as he saw it, a mix of science and art in a single, universal vision. We may or may not know much if anything about Shang bone inscriptions or Mayan number systems, but the surface activity provided by them is compelling, dynamic, ceaseless; they are concrete and flat elements, with no vestiges of depth, virtually self-contained objects. Jensen was surely on the mark when he commented that “My art is concretely anchored in my picture’s content.”³⁸ Little wonder that his art could be a model for both the possibilities within the emerging purist, minimalist art of Judd and the real life happenings of Kaprow.

After 1960, numbers became more and more central to Jensen’s work. That year he read J. Eric Thompson’s book *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*,³⁹ which opened new windows into the understanding of the culture in which he had been raised as a child. Jensen discovered that the Maya number system functioned identically with color in place and number, that the design in number is similar to the phenomenon existing in the prismatic color order espoused by Goethe.⁴⁰ It was a remarkable discovery for him that revealed a cultural interaction between widely separate civilizations, between Maya numbers and Goethe’s color and the Western scientific and artistic tradition. An ever-growing interest in Pythagoras and his systems contributed significantly to his fascination with numbers. Ancient Chinese, Mayan, Egyptian, or Greek cultures, their systems, their interconnections, indeed with their very look, their visual character, became sustenance for his voracious curiosity, and as inspirations for ever more complex painterly surfaces.

At points the paintings are virtually nothing but numbers, so that they become nothing less than walls of sheer paint and color, carried by row after row of numbers. Arrayed on a huge scale and size, anywhere from 7 to 24 feet across, they confront us with a “direct, visceral impact”⁴¹ that is likely to stop us dead in our tracks. “Art is not a practical achievement,” he said, but rather is something that penetrates into the interior of the viewer.⁴² He was surely right, for these powerful works leave indelible imprints on and within us, unlike anything else we are likely to have experienced. Theories of numbers are mixed and superimposed on the surface patterns with color principles, philosophy, astronomy, religion, history, physics, and electricity, among myr-

iad other disciplines, all derived from ancient civilizations. The use of numbers and symbols was not in itself new. One thinks of the great portrait by Thomas Eakins, *Professor Henry A. Rowland*, 1897 encased in a large frame inscribed with the symbols pertaining to Rowland’s work in measuring light, a work admired by the young Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton. We may also recall the symbols and numbers in certain pictographs by Adolph Gottlieb, or the number paintings of Jasper Johns, dating from 1957. But no one took them to the size and scale, to the complexity and degree of sheer visual power, as a vast and unified pictorial system, in the way that Jensen did. It was a singular feat.

Judd ended his 1963 review in a typically abrupt and understated manner: “The color is particular to Jensen and very good.”⁴³ In these few words Judd defined one of the most salient and compelling aspects of Jensen’s art: his color. We need remember that color includes not just hue, but weight, density, amount, proportion, luminosity, and balance of pigment as well. Finally, it is color in all its manifestations, its pure visual glory that carries Jensen’s paintings. It is the color that binds them together as unified wholes, for the numbers are identical with color, as in the concentric squares of 1973 *According to the Numbers, Per III*, a format which might be compared with similar formats used by Josef Albers or Frank Stella. It stands out for sheer inventiveness of hue, including the purple field in which it is set, sublimely brushed, for its vibrancy, as well as for the infinite contrasts and gradations of hues. In the 1970s, Jensen was at the height of his powers, with each successive work seemingly more ambitious, more complex, more dazzling than the previous.

By 1978, at the age of seventy five, Jensen was painting with the vigor and assurance of an artist half his age, his work one of the great manifestations of the Western tradition of old-age art that extends from Rembrandt to Matisse. In that year, Jensen completed one of his most ambitious paintings, a two-tiered, twelve-panel work reaching vertically to 9 feet, and laterally to 24 feet. By any measure, *Twelve Events in a Dual Universe* is virtually unmatched in post-1945 American art for its chromatic power and brilliance, rivaled only by Stella’s protractor paintings of 1968-69. Its numbering system refers apparently to the Lo Shu, the Ho Thu, and the I Ching (Panel 9), and Jensen tells us (Panel 7) that in this majestic work there is a “dual strong interac-

tion and experience of interpenetration existent here,” giving us a key to understanding this work and indeed the entirety of his art. We can say he is telling us once again that color, shape, number, subject, and pattern interpenetrate, all interact through dualities as one, indivisible and whole in a single pictorial unity. This fusion, as he tells us (Panels 9 and 11) is not just an ancient oracle but bears on our present situation. “It is therefore a book of wisdom,” reminding us that Kaprow had understood Jensen’s wisdom from the start.⁴⁴ *Twelve Events* is literally an epic saga, unfolding before us like a giant movie screen, or as if we were discovering a long lost mural in an ancient cave, just as so much of his art seems simultaneously both remote and thoroughly contemporary. In this way, Jensen takes us on a journey through space and time, as if we were being transported in a pictorial time machine. As the title tells us, each of the panels is indeed an event, operating singly but within the parameters of the dual universes, the two rows of paintings, the two worlds of color. Each row has its own system of number and color, one within a white field, the other dense and filling the entire field. As our eye moves over the enormity of surface, we may feel as if we are witnessing, and indeed also hearing, a grand symphonic composition, and/or the syncopated rhythms of fast-paced jazz. It has been noted⁴⁵ that there is actually very little stylistic change in Jensen’s work, which comes as a surprise when we first think of it, for the endless variety and invention of color and pattern and number make it seem as if the style was always in transition. But once Jensen had found his way, the texture, the thick paint, the frontal divisions of the grid, the brilliant color were enough to carry and extend his powers of invention and imagination into new pictorial fields.

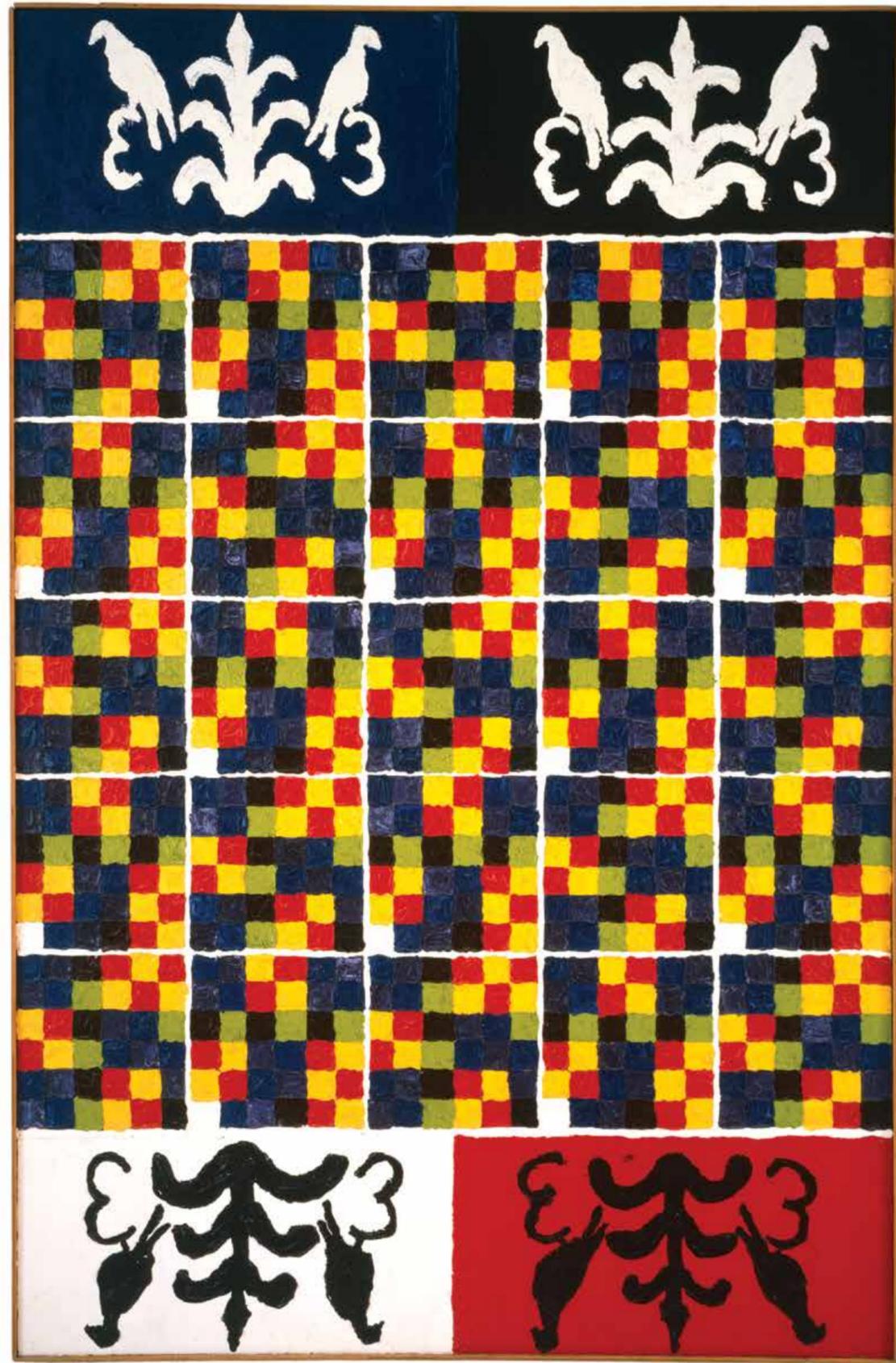
Good art is often not especially spectacular, but Jensen’s work usually is, in the best sense of the word, for it was done within the traditions of painting, of the language of paint. These later, glorious bursts of color, so much Jensen’s own, come as a constant surprise and revelation, as if from another world altogether. No wonder that he has seemed like an outsider to so many. But they can be traced back fifty years and more, to Mr. Schneider in San Diego, to Friesz and Dufresne in Paris, to Jensen’s early fascination with Goethe. There can be no doubt that Jensen was a singular artist, but he was at the same time part of something larger, past but ongoing, a living, vital tradition of painting. To recognize this will

help to see him whole, in full light, freeing us to explore his multifaceted art in all its richness. It will mean, one hopes, that the apparent split in the Judd-Kaprow interpretations can be put to rest, and we can simply revel in the wondrous riches of his art.

Jensen himself understood this, and well expressed it when he said that each work “is a structure complex and not easy to unravel, nor can the truth inherent in its build up easily be read. My work is too integral in its make-up to tear it apart and thus to analyze the fragments of truth gleaned from its fractured remnants. My art represents a wholeness, a free time and space structure, a color and form realization equal to a vision beyond verbal explanation.”⁴⁶ Jensen’s vision was based on a belief that the wisdom of ancient cultures was worth preserving, and knowing, that through it modern society could even change itself, could transform itself from the cynicism and despair of the age into a culture of hope and optimism. If this sounds utopian, let Judd, Jensen’s early and lifelong champion, have the last word: why Judd asked, was it utopian to see something wrong in the society, then do something to change it for the better?⁴⁷ Why, indeed.

NOTES

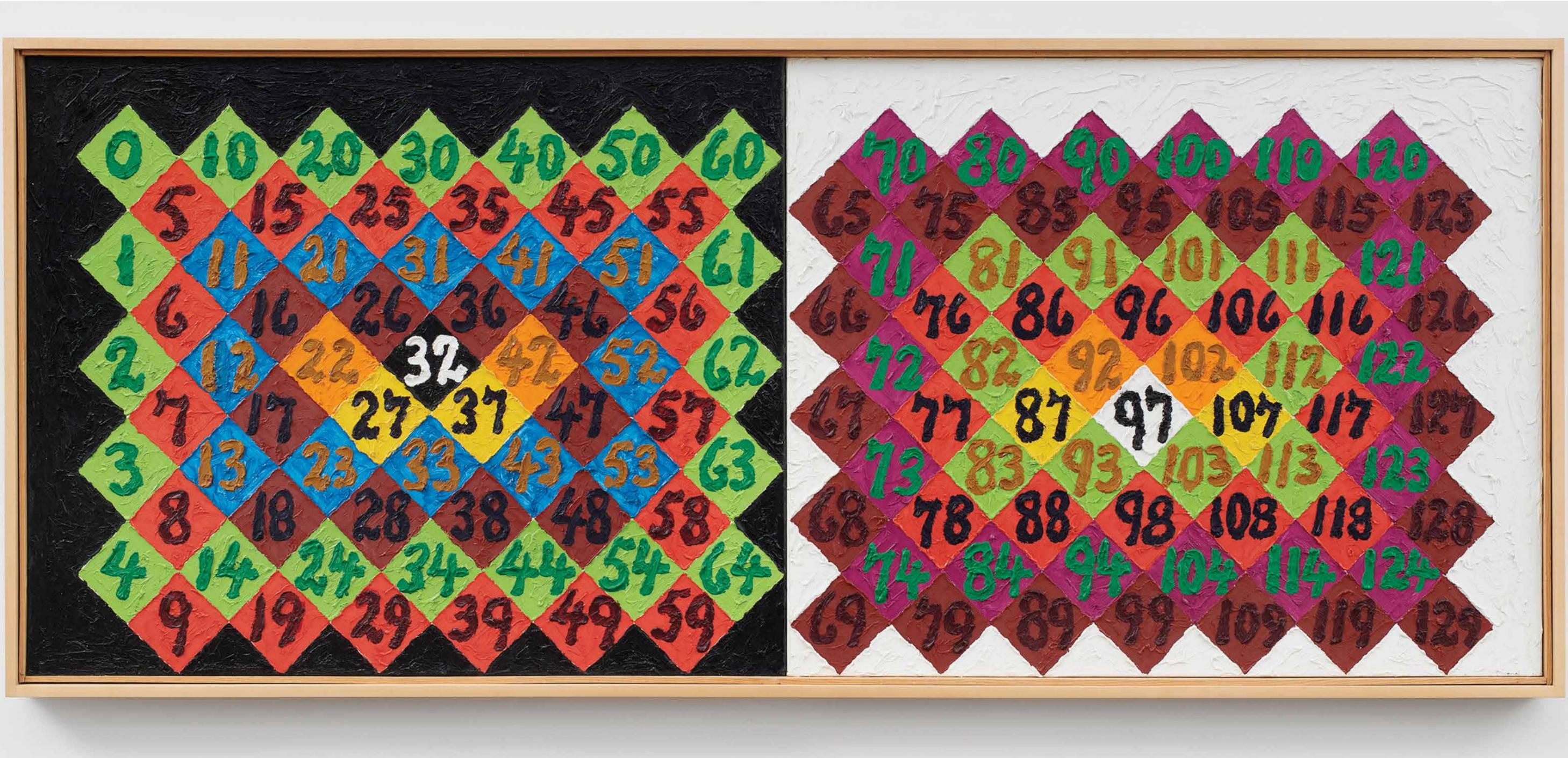
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Alfred Jensen, *Divine Analogy. Per IV. Hekatompedon Pattern, Female*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 76" x 50". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.



Alfred Jensen, *Pentagram II*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 18" x 18". © 2023 Estate of Alfred Jensen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Pace Gallery.



IN THE GALLERIES: AL JENSEN

BY DONALD JUDD

Arts Magazine, 1963

Now and then a chance occurs for a narrow, subjective, categorical statement: Jensen is great. He is one of the best painters in the United States. He was born in 1903 and has apparently developed the kind of work shown here in the last five years or so. *Duality Triumphant: Per IV: Heaven-Female* is one of the four larger paintings. There are quite a few others. This one has a reversed mate. The vertical rectangle of *Per IV* is quartered diagonally, centering on a point two-thirds of the way up the canvas. The largest area, which is black, is at the bottom. "Unity 52" is written on it in white. White is at the top and red to the left and blue to the right. A large circle with a diameter somewhat more than half the painting is centered on the crossing of the quarters. It has a sizable center, half alizarin purple and half apple green below, divided along the lower-left to the upper-right diagonal, as is the whole circle. This is divided into ten segments which cut five equal concentric rings into checkered arcs. On the lower side three segments of two rows are yellow and red. In the third row the alizarin purple and the apple green alternate through both halves. The same three segments in the two outer rows are checked blue and a middling purple. The remaining two segments in the lower half are just the reverse; there are three segments of the yellow and red on the outside—and so on. The circumference of the top is thickly outlined in black and that of the lower half in white. Outside of the folded form produced by the quartering, there is no space.

Many of Jensen's paintings are thoroughly flat, are completely patterns. Jensen's paintings are not radical inventions but this aspect is. There are no other paintings completely without space. The much-used reversed areas and especially the subdivided circles have occurred before—in Delaunay's circles for example. Jensen, though, relies absolutely upon the strength and the complexity of the patterns. The work is blunt, lush and strident. The paint is applied thickly and passionately with a knife; the edges are irregular. The relationships described in *Per IV* are enormously interesting. The two colors of four and six checkers correspond across both halves but so do the equal numbers of disparate colors. The six and the four of the same colors correspond within each half. The alternating row is checkered like the others but is outside of all of these relations. The circle has fifty arcs and the two center halves, which makes fifty-two (weeks). This Unit has a multiplicity of divergent states. Jensen has elaborate theories based on Mayan, Babylonian and the other astrological, astronomical and calendrical schemes. The titles come from there. Thinking of the nature of Pythagorean philosophy, half science and half mystery, is probably most pertinent to his interests. The theories are important to him and completely irrelevant to the viewer. The color is particular to Jensen and very good.

(Graham, Mar. 5–30.) – D. J.







Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1989. Douglas Fir plywood with brown Plexiglas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 19". © 2023 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1978, Douglas Fir plywood, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 45" x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". © 2023 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1989, Douglas Fir plywood, 36" x 60" x 60". © 2023 Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

BOMB Magazine, 2005

THREE EXCERPTS

1.

JENNIFER BARTLETT:

[In 1964] I married Ed Bartlett and got a loft in New York, 175 dollars a month for 2,500 square feet. I commuted from New Haven to New York to the University of Connecticut where I taught, slept in my office, then back to New Haven.

ELIZABETH MURRAY:

That was the Greene Street studio? I remember it well.

JB: I was there for 13 years. Jon Borofsky was across the street. Richard Serra and Nancy Graves were married. Joel was married to Amy Shapiro. You and Don Sunseri were married; Chuck and Leslie Close and Joe and Susan Zucker lived around the corner. With Chuck, Joe, and me, there were lots of dots on Greene and Prince streets.

EM: Do you remember the first work you did in the loft?

JB: I'd write out a list of ideas for work, and beside them I'd put down the artists I felt owned them. Art at that time had to be new. One had to make the next move. I did the things on my list that other artists didn't want to do. They were conceptual, off base, not correct. They involved committed trips to Canal Street for rubber plugs, plastic tiles, hanks of rope, red plastic teapots, which I would subject to various ordeals: baking, freezing, dropping, painting, smashing, et cetera.

EM: Right, I remember that. But you just said something very interesting—you sort of muttered under your breath, just now, That's how the plates started. I want to ask you about that. But I also want to remind you of your birth present for [my son] Dakota. You gave him these plastic boxes filled with in-

credible things, little tiny shapes that were like asteroids. There was a whole world, a universe in those boxes.

JB: They fit in small steel drawers; I made a written key describing the items in each one.

EM: It reminds me so much of the unfolding of the metal-plate pieces, where you develop incremental variations using these 12-inch squares. Looking at your studio right now, it's the same issues and ideas of the world, and colors and shapes that are all still there. All compartmentalized.

JB: Yes.

EM: So you just said that that's how the plates started.

JB: Do you remember two things that were happening then? Process art, where everything was on the floor—

EM: Who were the process people?

JB: Alan Saret, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Joel Shapiro, Barry LeVa, Mel Bochner, Robert Morris, with his felt pieces, Robert Smithson. The other thing was pushpin art; everyone put their art on the wall with pushpins, no frames, no glass. Many featured graph paper. I liked James Rosenquist's idea of an impersonal style. I'd usually make mistakes on my graph paper. I'd knock over a cup of coffee, then accidentally walk on the paper. These were not Frank Stella's discreet coffee cup rings. I'd noticed New York subway signs. They looked like hard paper. I needed hard paper that could be cleaned and reworked. I wanted a unit that could go around corners on the wall, stack for shipping. If you made a painting and wanted it to be longer, you could add plates. If you didn't like the middle you could remove it, clean it, replace it or not. There had to be space between the units to visually correct plate and measuring distortions. My dilemma was, which measurement system, feet and inches or metric? In 1968 it was predicted that we would go metric. I bet we would continue with our standard measuring system. The smallest large

unit of that system is one foot. The plates were cold-rolled steel, one foot square with a baked enamel surface, and a small hole in each corner with which to fix the plate to the wall. A quarter-inch grid is then epoxied onto the baked enamel. I went on the bus to see Gersen Feiner at his factory in New Jersey. He made the plates with deburred edges and sub-contracted the enamel surfaces to someone who did home appliances. He continues to make them for me.

EM: Your grid was a given. You worked out very inventive systems. Did you know Sol LeWitt then?

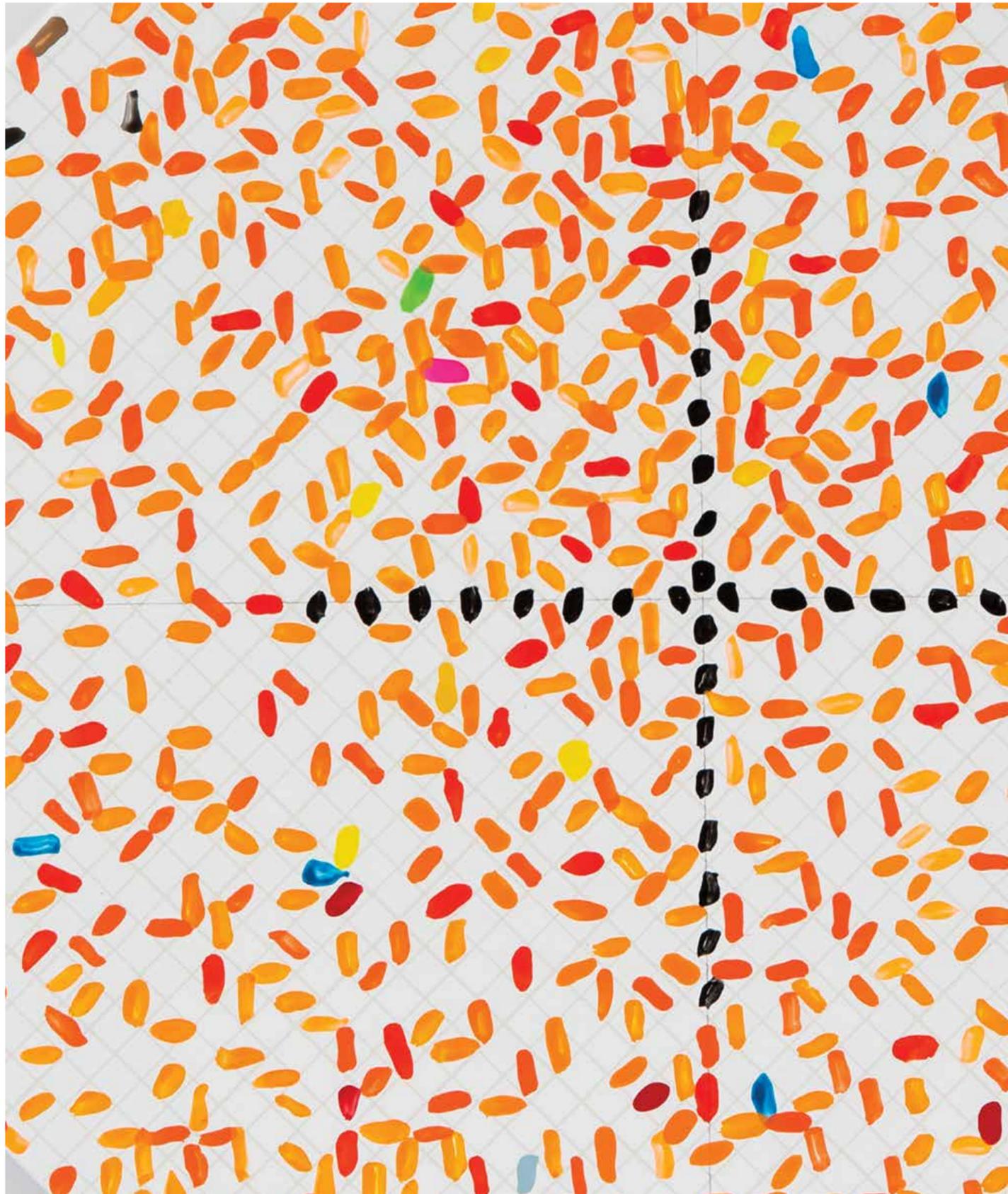
JB: I thought Sol was wonderful. And I think he may have recommended the silk-screener Joe Wantanabe, who screened the first plates with the quarter-inch grid. You know that problem in high school when everyone's wearing a certain kind of shoe—in my case it was Joyces or Teardrops—and you buy a version of that shoe, and it's much more wrong than if you had been independent and worn mukluks. In New York, I felt a distance between myself and others. I didn't understand a lot of what was going on, what people said or how people felt about art. I feel that to this day. I don't feel threatened by it anymore. I don't understand, sometimes, what other people are seeing, or what they're after, but back then it seemed necessary to pretend that I understood. Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" had been published, one of the great mid-century poems. And on a good day I could follow 15 of his 32 rules. I first showed at Alan Saret's. He was very supportive. He built a bamboo stairway, beautiful, and I fell through and went to the hospital to have my leg seen to. I saw a lot of Alan during that time. Very much his own person, and completely honest.

EM: When did you first show the plates, at Alan's?

JB: In 1969, 1970. My first gallery show was at Reese Paley's in January 1971. I was on crutches. After I fell through Alan's staircase I continued injuring one leg or the other before each show, group or solo.



Jennifer Bartlett, *Axis*, 2011. Enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates, 54" x 54". © Jennifer Bartlett. Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and The Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust



Jennifer Bartlett, *Axis* (detail), 2011. Enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates, 54" x 54". © Jennifer Bartlett. Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and The Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust

2.

JB: . . . In 1971, Richard Artschwager, whose work I admire, came to the studio and said, If I'd invented these plates I'd really try different sizes, and different-sized grids. I thought, I see what you mean. In 2004, I added 50-centimeter squares, 18-inch squares and 24-inch squares with different grids. I get interested in following rules I select; I have found the visual results are always surprising. I did a simple counting piece, six colors in a sequence that builds so that each color expands its domination, starting always on the upper left-hand corner and reading left to right, and then drop down a line. The piece is called *Ellipse*. This way of counting created ellipses. I don't know why. I understand the visual phenomenon but would not understand the explanation. But chaos theory made absolutely perfect sense to me.

EM: Why do you think that is? What intrigues you so much about these number systems?

JB: I have other ways of thinking about what we do. Because of you, I became interested in using oil on canvas. I started combining plates and canvas; then paper, plates, canvas, and glass. I made three-dimensional pieces that stood in front of the paintings that obscured or commented on them. *Seawall* and *Fence* are examples.

EM: That's interesting to me, because, even talking about *Seawall* and *Fence*, "paintings with objects" has a whole different sound to it than talking about paintings that are about a house, or about numbers that develop ellipses through a counting system. I see a similarity in a way. You reach into the bag and you say, monsters, no babies. Or, babies standing up, babies lying down. Monsters in the corner. There's always a system, whether it's a dot or whether it's monsters made up of dots. Am I right?

JB: Yes. This painting started two years ago. There were nuns, and it was hilarious to me. These nuns

sitting at a table and embroidering a theater curtain in Brussels. The nuns disappeared and became two trees, two windows, a table, two plates of fried eggs, and two chairs.

EM: First of all, the painting is made up of one rectangular shape, and then two squares on top of it. So it looks like kind of an upside-down table shape.

JB: I'd never thought of that.

EM: The two trees make me think of something between Vuillard and Seurat—a Pointillist kind of thing. Like a little theater. I think there's a theater aspect to your paintings that nobody ever discusses. A stage, and then you enact a play. Even in the most abstract ones, there's some kind of a story going on. In this one, I see the two trees on either side so it's kind of symmetrical. But then it becomes Matisse-y and Bonnard-like, with the red table and the two chairs. I like the painting; it's really an intriguing painting. So far we've talked about the beginning of your real work, which starts in the very early '70s, late '60s, and was influenced by the kind of ideology and philosophies of what kind of art you could make during that period of time. What was permissible, and how you worked your way in and out of it. You fit in, and yet you had your own way of fitting in. So that you didn't fit in. You always had an interest in the past. Van Gogh was the first guy that you fell in love with, because he's all about those tiny, dotted marks, and building up an image with increments of paint that you can clearly make out. Seurat is about those little tiny dots.

JB: On the way east, the train stopped in Chicago. I saw Seurat paintings for the first time, heaven. They were the right size. When I'd seen Gorkys, I was very disappointed: the size seemed wrong. I had thought they were bigger.

EM: We saw those beautiful slides that knocked you over, then you saw the painting, "Hey, it's a little squinty thing."

JB: The late '60s and the '70s was a time of incredible passion, and poverty. No one I knew was making their rent from art. I got into a cab, and the painter Bob Moskowitz was driving it. To sell a painting was an extraordinary event.

EM: That's so different now. Whether it's good or bad, I don't know, but I know that none of us had any money. Or expected to have any money.

JB: Nope.

EM: Everybody had day jobs, and you did art for the hell of it. Everybody was ambitious, and wanted their work to be seen. It had nothing to do with making money.

JB: Do you remember all those art-for-fur-coats in the '60s?

EM: That happened to us, with Sidney Lewis.

JB: When we got our washing machines! God bless Sidney Lewis.

EM: Everybody's first TV and first washer. The thrill when that happened, being able to order anything out of that catalog, like a slide projector, a washer-dryer. It was fabulous. Sidney Lewis brought the middle class to poor artists. I remember seeing all those shiny new appliances sitting around in everybody's crummy apartments. There were no elevators; you had to carry all that stuff up these steep staircases.

Let's get back to the monsters and work in the past. I stopped you because I was talking about Seurat and Van Gogh and how I see all of that stuff colliding in your work. I felt that we had a connection, although I saw you as further ahead than me. You had figured out a way to paint and not paint. You had that beautiful surface of the enamel plates.

JB: If you did the same thing to a figurative image as you would to an abstract one, why would one look cozy and cute, and the other minimal and pure? I thought about the dialogue between *Intersection* and *House*.

EM: They were almost like a film; you could edit and add and mix.

JB: Except the plates were hard, and you could hold them, and see them. They were fixed to the wall, not illuminating it.

EM: Then you did a show at Paula Cooper's.

JB: That was an all-black show, abstract systems. The house piece had lost. I rented a room in Provincetown from Jack and Wally Tworkov. Jack was working on paintings of chess moves. He said something that was important to me, about ambition. He said, "Can you imagine a situation in which you don't have the kind of ambition you have?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said that the happiest moments in his life were not the big events, the attention. For him, a true sense of happiness might occur in the morning; pouring a bowl of cereal, he might look out the window and see that a bird had landed on the butterfly bush. I responded to this. I believe what Jack described has brought me joy all of my life, a grouping of things in stillness.

EM: And this is something you feel you'd like to have in your paintings.

JB: Yes. Then I think, the bird has blood, the bird can move like me. The bird can fly. The bird needs to eat to stay alive. The bush can move, it won't move far, it will move in relationship to the weather, it will also move with the seasons in time. Then I'll think, they're both made of molecules, like me.

3.

JB: That's the only thing I could never figure out, what figurative meant. If a painting is white with a red square in the center—

EM: That's the image.

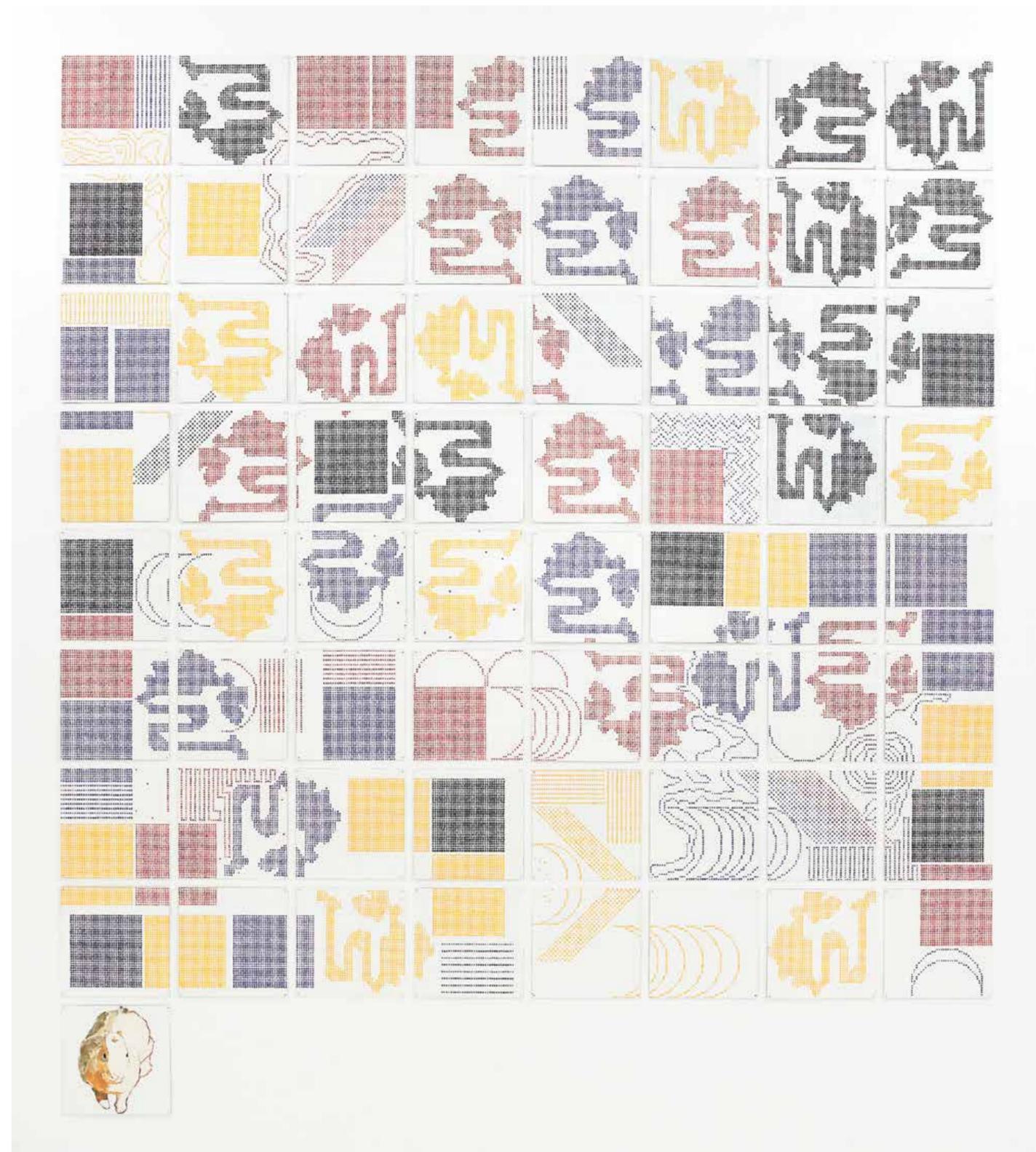
JB: It's a red square. That is a thing. That is just as figurative to me as a blooming peony. I've never been able to make the distinction in my mind.

EM: What exactly people do mean by abstraction.

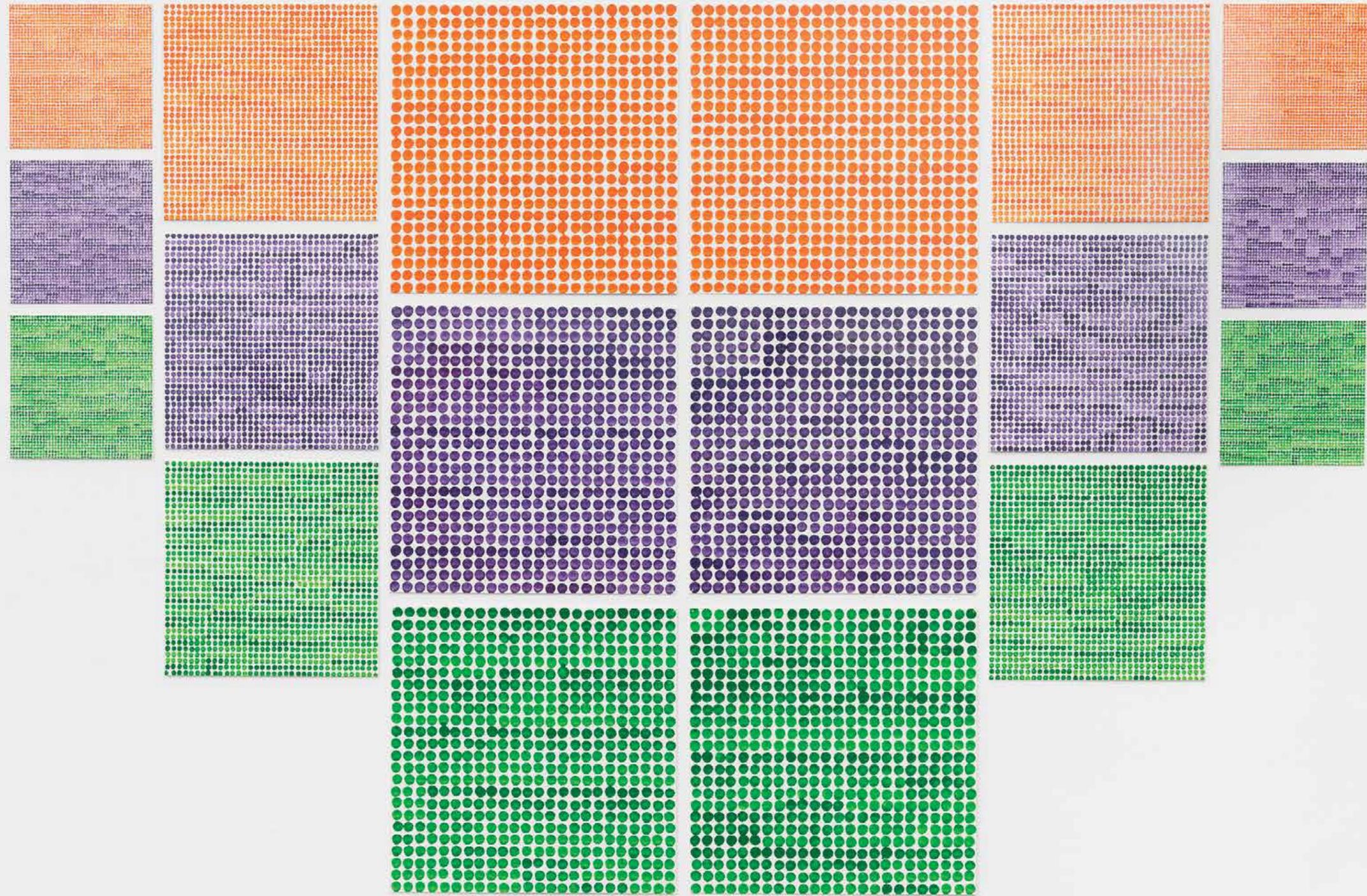
JB: I don't know what they mean. I

don't know what they're talking about. Like all of us, I wanted to be the best artist in the world, and I wanted everybody else to think so, too. I'd ask, "Am I being smart? Am I being stupid?" I'm old enough that the justifications are meaningless. Some things move me and they have to stay that way, even if I don't like looking at them, and other things have to change, because they are not interesting to me. I spent 30 years trying to convince people and myself that I was smart, that I was a good painter, that I was this or that. It's not going to happen. The only person that it should happen for is me. This is what I was meant to do.

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Jennifer Bartlett, *Alphabet Eight*, 1993. Testor's enamel, baked enamel and silkscreen on 65 steel plates, 9½' × 8½'. © Jennifer Bartlett. Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and The Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust



Jennifer Bartlett, *Small, Medium, Large (primary)*, 2007. Enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel, steel plates, 75" x 9' 7". © Jennifer Bartlett. Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and The Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust

ON VIEW IN TRIBECA**52 Walker**

52 Walker St

Gordon Matta-Clark & Pope.L:
Impossible Failures
February 3–April 1, 2023

81 Leonard Gallery

81 Leonard St

Irrational Craft: Rhea Barve, Abby Cheney, Delia Peli-Walbert, Hannah Eve Rothbard, Kris Waymire
February 9–March 30, 2023

Alexander and Bonin

59 Wooster Street

Stefan Kürten and Rita McBride: *I continue to live in my glass house*
February 7–March 25, 2023

Artists Space

11 Cortlandt Alley

Yasunao Tone: *Region of Paramedia*
January 13–March 18, 2023

Renee Gladman

January 13–March 18, 2023

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

7 Franklin Pl

Group exhibition
January 19–February 18, 2023

Jeni Spota C.

January 19–March 4, 2023

Saif Azzuz

February 24–March 25, 2023

Bortolami Gallery

39 Walker St

Junkyard Dreams

January 13–March 4, 2023

Cynthia Talmadge

Goodbye to All This: Alan Smithee Off Broadway
13 January–25 February 2023

Broadway

375 Broadway

Lars Fisk

January 19–February 25, 2023

Davina Semo

March 2–April 8, 2023

CANADA

61 Lispenard

Katherine Bernhardt: *“I’m Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?”*
January 11 – February 25, 2023

Chapter NY

60 Walker Street

Antonia Kuo and Pauline Shaw

January 6–February 18, 2023

Samuel Guerrero, Maren Karlson, Heidi Lau, Rosha Yaghmai, Stella Zhong
February 24–March 25, 2023

Olivia van Kiuken

February 24–March 25, 2023

CHART

74 Franklin Street

Carrie Schneider: *I don’t know her*
January 19–February 18, 2023

Shona McAndrew

February 23–April 1, 2023

James Cohan Gallery

52 Walker Street

Lee Mullican: *Paintings and Sculptures*
January 13–February 25, 2023

48 Walker Street

Bill Viola

February 23–March 25, 2023

Deli Gallery

36 White Street

Alina Perez and Arel Lisette:
Not Dark Yet
February 24–March 25, 2023

Jeffrey Deitch

76 Grand Street

18 Wooster Street

Denny Dimin Gallery

39 Lispenard Street

Damien H. Ding: *Private Paintings*
February 17–March 25, 2023

George Adams Gallery

38 Walker Street

Maya Brodsky

February 24–April 1, 2023

GRIMM

54 White Street

Volker Hüller
January 26–March 18, 2023

The Hole

86 Walker Street

The Hole x The Pit:

Into the Vortex
February 11th–18th, 2023

JDJ

373 Broadway

Athena LaTocha: *Small Works*
January 12–February 25, 2023

Daniel Giordano: *Chamber of Ultimate Solution*
March 2023

JTT

390 Broadway

James Yaya Hough

February 16–April 1, 2023

Damon Zucconi

February 16 –April 1, 2023

Kapp Kapp

86 Walker St

Gilbert Lewis: *Portraits*
January 14–February 25, 2023

Haylie & Sydnie Jimenez
March 11–April 15, 2023

Anton Kern Gallery

91 Walker Street

Friends & Family
January 13–March 4, 2023

Andrew Kreps Gallery

22 Cortlandt Alley

Bertina Lopes: *I know the mystery that mother suffers*
January 13–February 18, 2023

394 BroadwayRoe Ethridge: *AMERICAN**POLYCHRONIC*

January 13–February 18, 2023

David Lewis

57 Walker Street

Ravi Jackson: *Hard Core*
January 13–February 24, 2023

LOMEX

86 Walker Street

Luhring Augustine Tribeca

17 White Street

Tunga: *Vê-nus*

January 13–February 25, 2023

Martos Gallery

41 Elizabeth Street

Passages

January 19th–March 4th, 2023

Mendes Wood DM

47 Walker Street

properties without object
March 2, 2023

Mother Gallery

368 Broadway

Off Paradise

120 Walker Street

Maximilian Schubert: *Nocturnes*
February 17–April 17, 2023

Ortuzar Projects

9 White Street

Joey Terrill: *Cut and Paste*

January 19–February 25, 2023

Patrick Parrish Gallery

50 Lispenard Street

Sam Keller: *Weird Energy*

January 6–February 17, 2023

P·P·O·W

390 Broadway

Adam Putnam: *Holes*

January 20–February 18, 2023

Tom Knechtel, Jimmy DeSana

February 3–March 11, 2023

kaufmann repetto

55 Walker Street

Re-Materialized: The Stuff that Matters
January 13–February 18, 2023

Kerry Schuss Gallery

73 Leonard St

Tom Fairs and David Schoerner: *Woods*
January 13–February 18, 2023

Storage

52 Walker Street

Press Release II

February 3–March 4, 2023

Theta

184 Franklin Street

Engineering For the Human Spirit: From Gentle Wind Project to I Ching Systems, 1983–2022, Organized by Nick Irvin
January 11–February 11, 2023

ULTERIOR

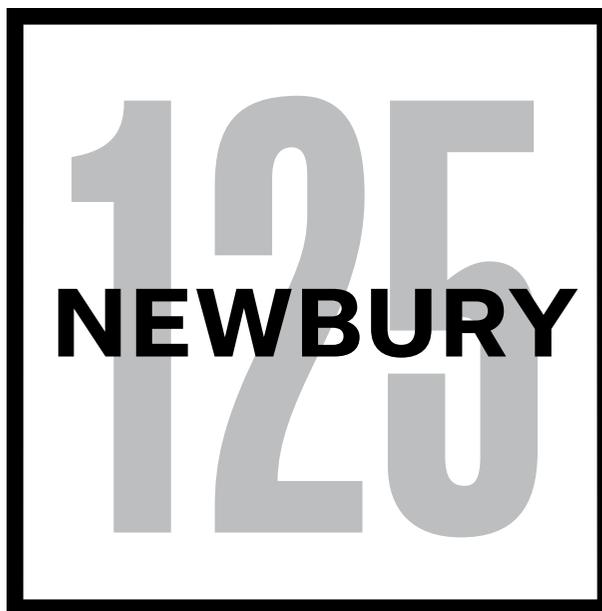
424 Broadway

Gaku Tsutaja

January 12–February 18, 2023

Maryam Amiryani: *Bibliophile*

February–March, 2023



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