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FOUR DECADES OF PAINTING BY DAVID ROW

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February 18 – April 2, 2016

LORETTA HOWARD
GALLERY

525 WEST 26 ST NYC 10001 212.695.0164 LORETTAHOWARD.COM



Fortress, 1976
Acrylic on wood panel
12 x 51 inches

A snapshot of four decades of painting:

From Row's move to New York City in 1975 until his survey show at Loretta Howard Gallery

1976

1. After graduate school at Yale, David Row moved to New York. While living on Wooster Street in Soho, he shared a studio space in Chinatown with artist and friend, Sandy Skoglund.



1.

2. *Yield*, 1976, acrylic on wood panel, 10 x 41.5 inches



2.

1978

3. Charcoal drawing shown at the Drawing Center: *Untitled*, 1978, vine charcoal on Arches paper, 18 x 24 inches.



3.

4. David Row, about the time he met Dorothea Rockburne, following his first Drawing Center show.



4.

DAVID ROW: THE UNITY OF THE MANIFOLD

Barry Schwabsky

One question seems to form the consistent core of David Row's work, at least since I first became acquainted with it in 1987 and more dramatically since about 1990. The question is this: When and how does a painting, which has multiple parts, form a whole, a unity?

Naturally, the question itself turns out to have parts, hidden ones even, and these place its own unity into question: Is the question concerning a painting's wholeness really a single question? For instance, what appears at first to be a question about the painting's form unexpectedly (but is it really so unexpected?) turns out to be also a question about its color. And if there's anything we know after centuries of debate about the relation of form to color, it's that no one has ever arrived at a wholly satisfying solution to that issue.

In a curious and (as far as I can tell) rarely remarked passage from *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant specified that "sensations of colors and of tone have a right to be regarded as



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1982

5. & 6. Row showed work at CUNY Purchase, PS122, and again at the Drawing Center. Works from that time: *Untitled*, 1980, oil on canvas, 26 x 34 inches; *Untitled*, 1982, gouache on paper, 18 x 24 inches

1984

7. *Night Drawings* 1984, gouache on colored paper, 18 x 24 inches, from a show at 55 Mercer Gallery.

1987

8. *Bias*, 1986, oil and wax on canvas, 92 x 54 inches, from Row's first one-person exhibition at John Good Gallery, with paintings loosely based on Brancusi's *Endless Column*.

That year, Row received a National Endowment for the Arts grant in painting.

1990

9. *Homage to the Queen of Hearts*, 1990, oil and wax on canvas, 49 x 54 inches.

beautiful only in so far as they are *pure*," noting that, in this case, it is therefore "a determination which concerns their form." Only colors that are single and pure enable, Kant says, "the formal determination of the unity of a manifold of sensations."

Concretely, it is hard to know what the philosopher had in mind as examples of pure color, or even what kinds of colors he would have accounted pure. Any spectral color? What about black or white? But in view of the history of monochrome painting from Malevich and Rodchenko to the present, it is fascinating that Kant saw pure color as the one instance in which color would become equivalent to form.

And make no mistake, although Row's most significant precursors also include several whose work did not really touch upon the monochrome (Al Held, most evidently) and he himself has rarely resorted to the monochrome after such very early works as *Fortress*, 1976 (page2)—still for all that, to see Row's paintings without keeping in mind as their implicit background certain specifically New York avatars of monochrome painting would be to miss

10. *Theta*, 1990, oil and wax on canvas, 86 x 116 inches, in an installation shot at John Good Gallery.

1991

11. Installation of *Who's Afraid of Magenta, Yellow, and Cyan*, 1991, oil and wax on canvas, 133.5 x 161 inches, at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris.

12. *Untitled*, 1991, oil and wax on canvas, 94 x 115.5 inches, was included, along with *Split infinitive*, in *Conceptual Abstraction* at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York.

1992

Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters included two of Row's paintings.

13. *Negative Monument*, 1992, cast wax, 37 x 24 x 16 inches, fabricated for a show at Ascan Crone in Hamburg.



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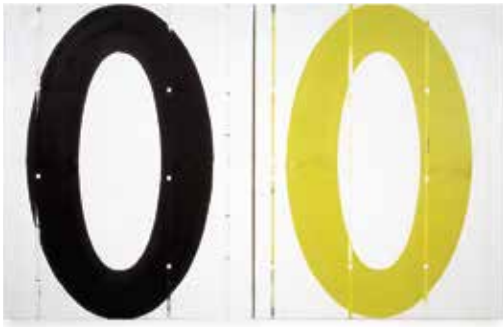


13.

half their point: Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, Robert Ryman's white ones or Ellsworth Kelly's primary colors, the Frank Stella of the late 1950s and early '60s and the Brice Marden of the mid-'60s through early '80s, Robert Mangold, Ted Stamm among others. Or am I permitted to say: It would be too miss half the fun?

I'll permit myself to say it. In fact, it's necessary, because the great danger when it comes to an analytical approach to painting such as Row's—and that of the tradition with which he has joined forces—would be to forget about visual and intellectual pleasure, the lightness and jubilation that are its main justification. Row's feeling for color is grave, but his feeling for form is ebullient. But that's an aside. I just wanted to remind you that (unlikely as this may seem) it's possible to mention Kant while still having something lighthearted in mind.

What all the painters I've mentioned—except perhaps Rodchenko—were aware of is that the monochrome, however pure, is never simple; it is always (to use Kant's phrase in what may not be the same sense he used it) "a manifold of sensations." Row's proposition has



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16.

1992-94

14. *Ground Zero*, 1992, oil and wax on canvas, 77 x 120 inches, like *Double Aught*, 1994, etching from Pace Editions, 18 x 24 inches, is representative of Row's series of *Zeros and Aughts*.

1995

15. Row's *Split Infinitive* was included in Mark Rosenthal's *Critiques of Pure Abstraction* catalog and travelling exhibition.

1996

16. Installation of *Flatland* at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, which was also reproduced on the cover of *Continuous Model: The Paintings of David Row*, Edition Lintel, Verlag Robert Gessler, 1997).

17. Mark Rosenthal's book, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, (Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York) includes David Row.

been, simply—simply in the sense of “not so simply”—to dissect that manifold and recombine its parts, to find its tensions, its contradictions, even its arbitrariness, and yet also still find its unity. Row's paintings are therefore not, I have to insist, made *after* the monochrome—no feeling of, “Well, what next now that *that's* been accomplished?” here—but in a strange sense *within* the monochrome, only now one whose monochromy is understood as having always already been more rhetorical than actual. (By “rhetorical” I do not mean “verbal,” but rather, “persuasive.”)

An early painting like *Koloph I*, 1986 (page 10), does not feature the clear division into segments typical of Row's later work—whether through the use of multiple canvases or of hard-edged rectilinear divisions within a single support—yet it clearly declares its double game: The left and right halves of the painting could almost be overlaid to form either a black or a blue monochrome—but just *almost* because one side or the other would have to be jogged up or down to make it work, as on the right, the shorter steps in the ladderlike pattern (reminiscent,

18. *Wind Cools Itself*, first shown at André Emmerich Gallery, New York, was later shown Galerie von Bartha, Basel, in 2010.

19. Row began working summers in his new studio in Maine, near where he was born. The house and studio were designed by his friend Richard Gluckman.

1997

20. *Roundtrip*, 1997, oil and alkyd on aluminum panels, 72 x 248 inches, at the National Airport in Washington, DC.

2001

21. Wall Mural, *Untitled*, 1997, china marker on blackboard paint, 72 x 248 inches, at The MAC, (McKinney Avenue Contemporary) in Dallas.



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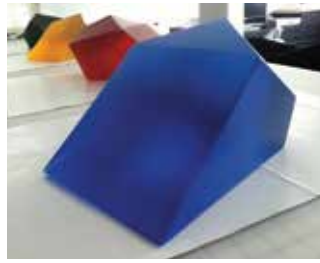
21.

as in many of Row's works of this time, of Brancusi's *Endless Column*) are lined up with the longer ones on the left, and vice versa. Still, the positive-negative duality within the work is held at a precise equilibrium so that the two sides grasp each other in an indissoluble unity that evokes the monochromy that is elided. Another instance of this positive-negative equilibrium—but top to bottom rather than side to side—can be found in *Untitled Black*, 1989 (pages 12-13), in which the form is articulated by matte and gloss black: monochrome or not exactly?

More than the sculptural *Endless Column* could ever do, unless it were built so tall it disappeared into the clouds, the pattern in a painting can imply indefinite reiteration simply by intersecting the edge of the canvas; availing itself of this possibility, *Koloph I* avoids making an issue of closure or fragmentation. By contrast, Row's three-part paintings of the 1990s, in which the differently-sized canvases abut to create complicated, typically ten-sided configurations, always present themselves as concatenations of fragments, with their swooping arc-like forms always implying the possibility of completion at a larger scale so as



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2003

22. *Eastport Elegy*, 2001, oil and alkyd on canvas, 88 x 141 inches, in *American Beauty* at McClain Gallery, Houston.

2006

23. *Cubist Blues*, 2006, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, from the *Demons in Paradise* series that included *Moby Dick*.

2008

Row won the Isaac Maynard Prize for painting from The National Academy Museum.

2011

24. Row created *Lighttraps*, translating geometric charcoal drawings into glass (*House Series*, 2011, cast glass 13 x 7 x 8.5 inches).

2012

25. *Ellipsis*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 96 inches from *Conceptual Abstraction* curated by Pepe Karmel, for Hunter College.

to form a letter O or, better, a numeral 0. The aptly titled *Split Infinitive*, 1990 (page 15), is a straight-faced trickster of a painting in which the three compositional zones do not accord with the three canvases that compose it. Like *Koloph I*, it is a two-color painting—but what complex, richly inflected colors!—that seems to desire above all the overcoming of its own compositional divisions, the attainment of single coloristic synthesis. Other works from the same decade include diptychs that do feature a completed 0 (zero) form, yet this “whole nothing”—if there can be such a thing—itsself can appear to slide in and out, not just of focus, but of presence, as in *Flatland*, 1994 (page 17). In that painting we seem to see two adjacent monochromes, red and chartreuse, but once again, the layering of these near-complementaries implies an inner kinship—an elective affinity—rather than anything like a contrast. Here, opposites don't just attract, they want to merge.

In some of Row's most impressive recent works, the flying arcs or fragments of ovals he has used for a quarter century take on new life by appearing in a different format: single,

2013

26. Two Palms Press shaped monotype project.

2014

27. & 28. Studio view of *Thingamajig*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 96 inches, and *Gizmo*, 2013, oil on canvas, 52 x 92 inches, both from exhibition *There and Back* at Loretta Howard Gallery.

2016

29. Installation in lobby at 2001 M Street, Washington, DC, of commission: *Ahab's Dream*, 2016, oil on canvas, 147 x 199.5 inches.



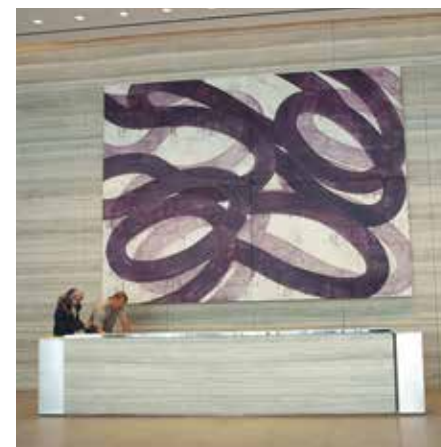
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irregularly shaped canvases such as *Cartography*, 2014 (page 23), with its six sides and angles, each side (if I am not mistaken) of a different length and therefore each angle. This is almost—another one of Row’s “almosts”—another two-color painting, blue and white, but again the painter is playing tricks, because of the red layered into the mix and seeming to outline parts of the painting, reinforcing its irregular form. In works such as *Split Infinitive*, the underlying questions was, “How do fragments come together to form a whole that is not the same as the whole or wholes they might once have been part of?” In *Cartography*, by contrast, where there is some residual sense that there might once have been a rectangle that has been carved away into a smaller but more complicated form, the question seems to be something more like, “How can so much be removed without losing the sense of the whole that might once have been?” In either case, the answer seems to have to do with a simple word for a complex phenomenon: desire.

On further thought, never mind Kant. Reread Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. ■

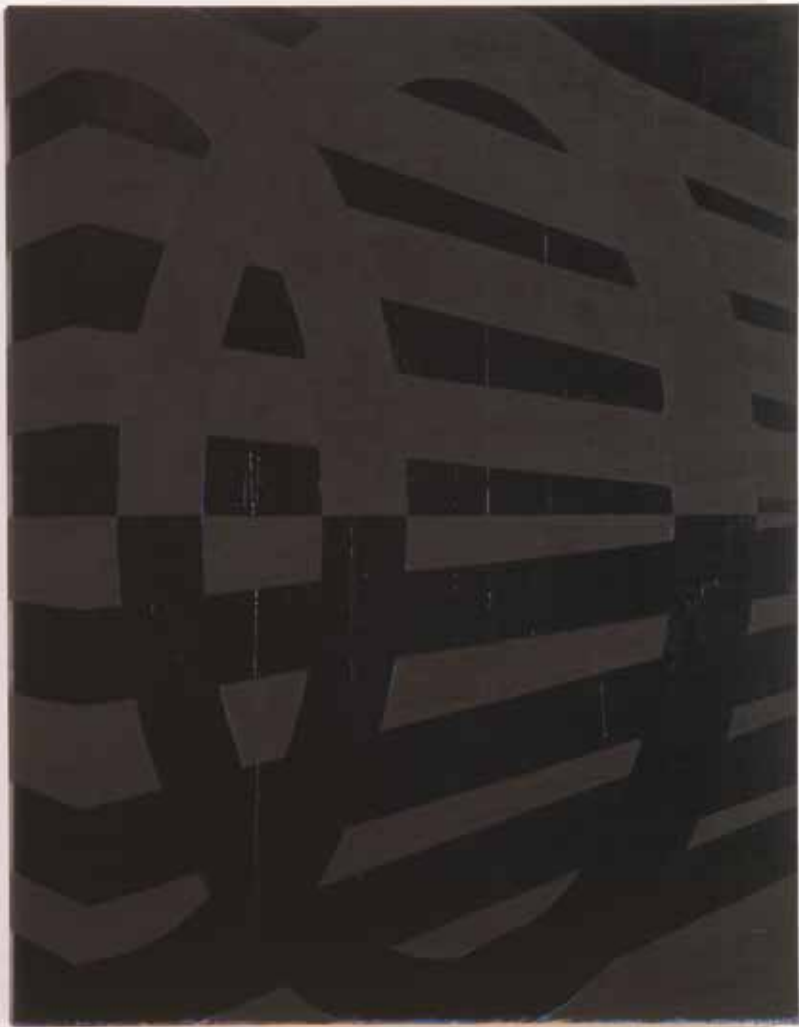


Koloph I, 1986
Oil and wax on canvas
84 x 66 inches

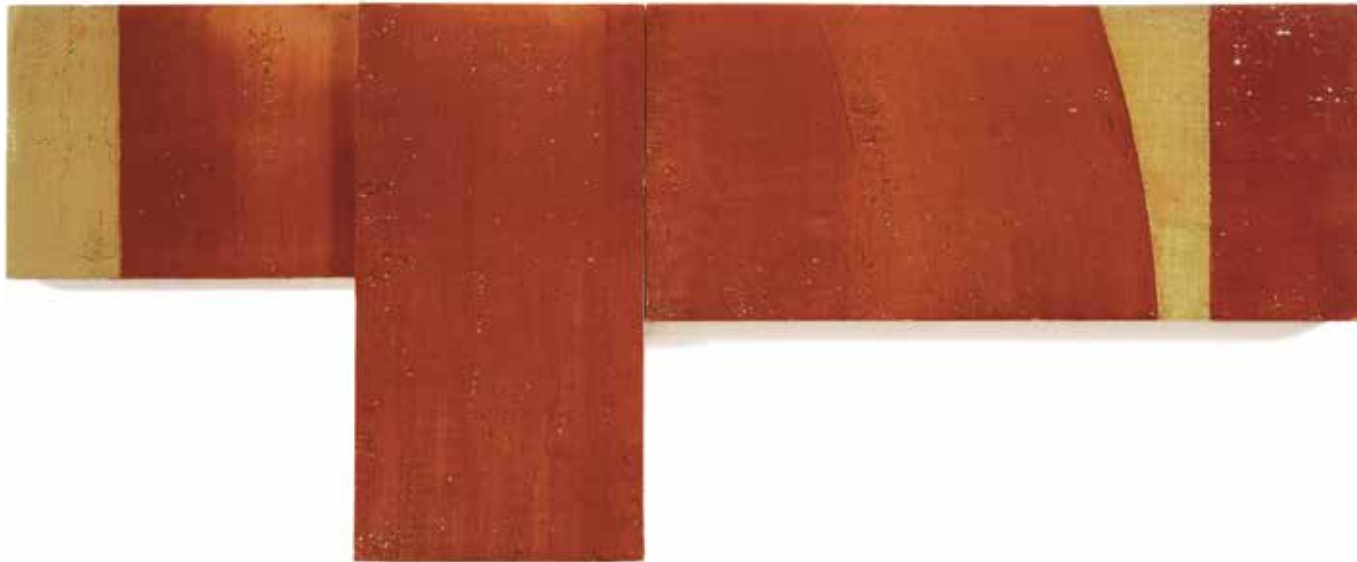


Three Untitled (fragments), 1992
All fresco on birch panel
10 x 15 inches each

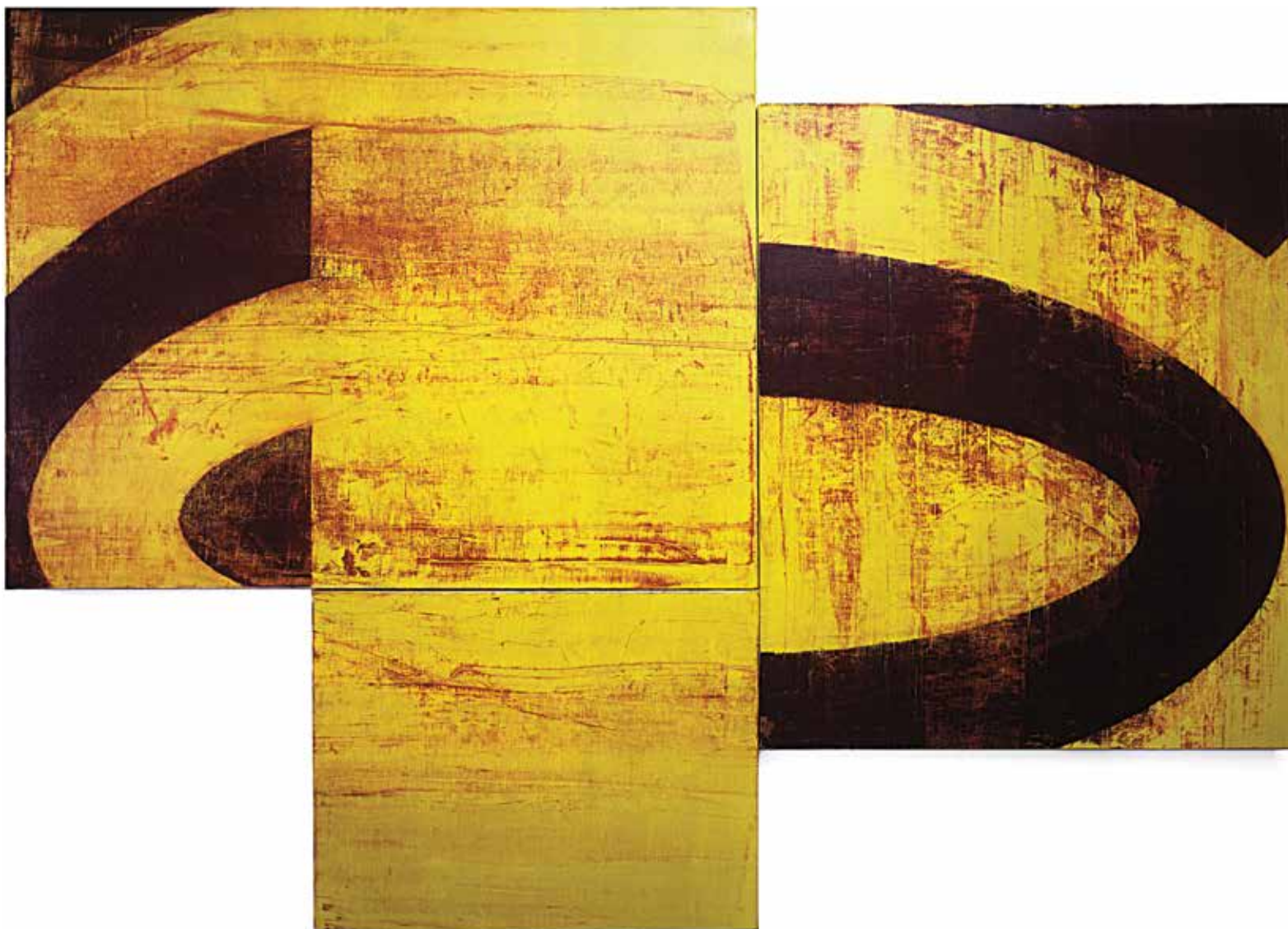




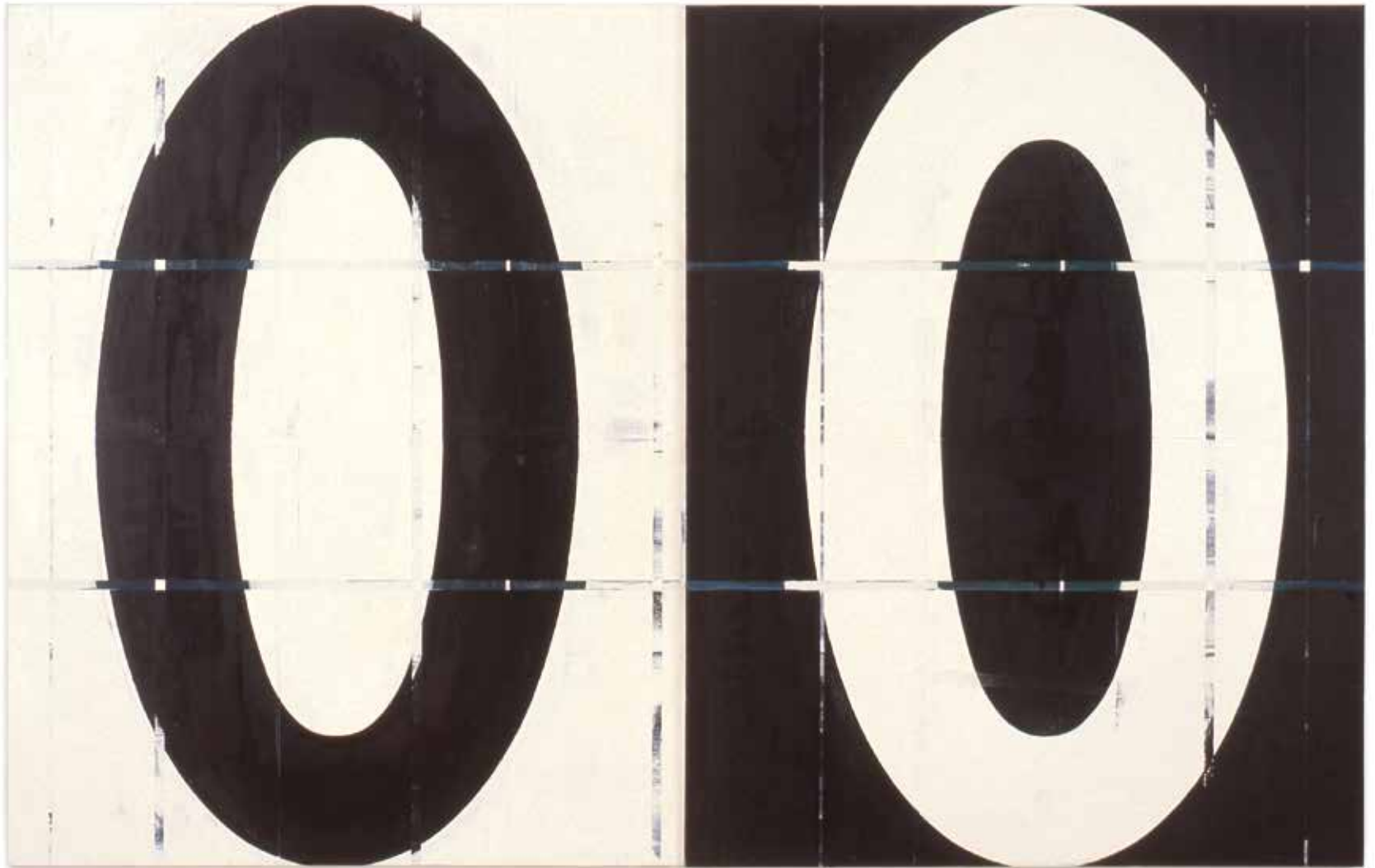
Untitled Black, 1989
Oil and wax on canvas
84 x 212 inches



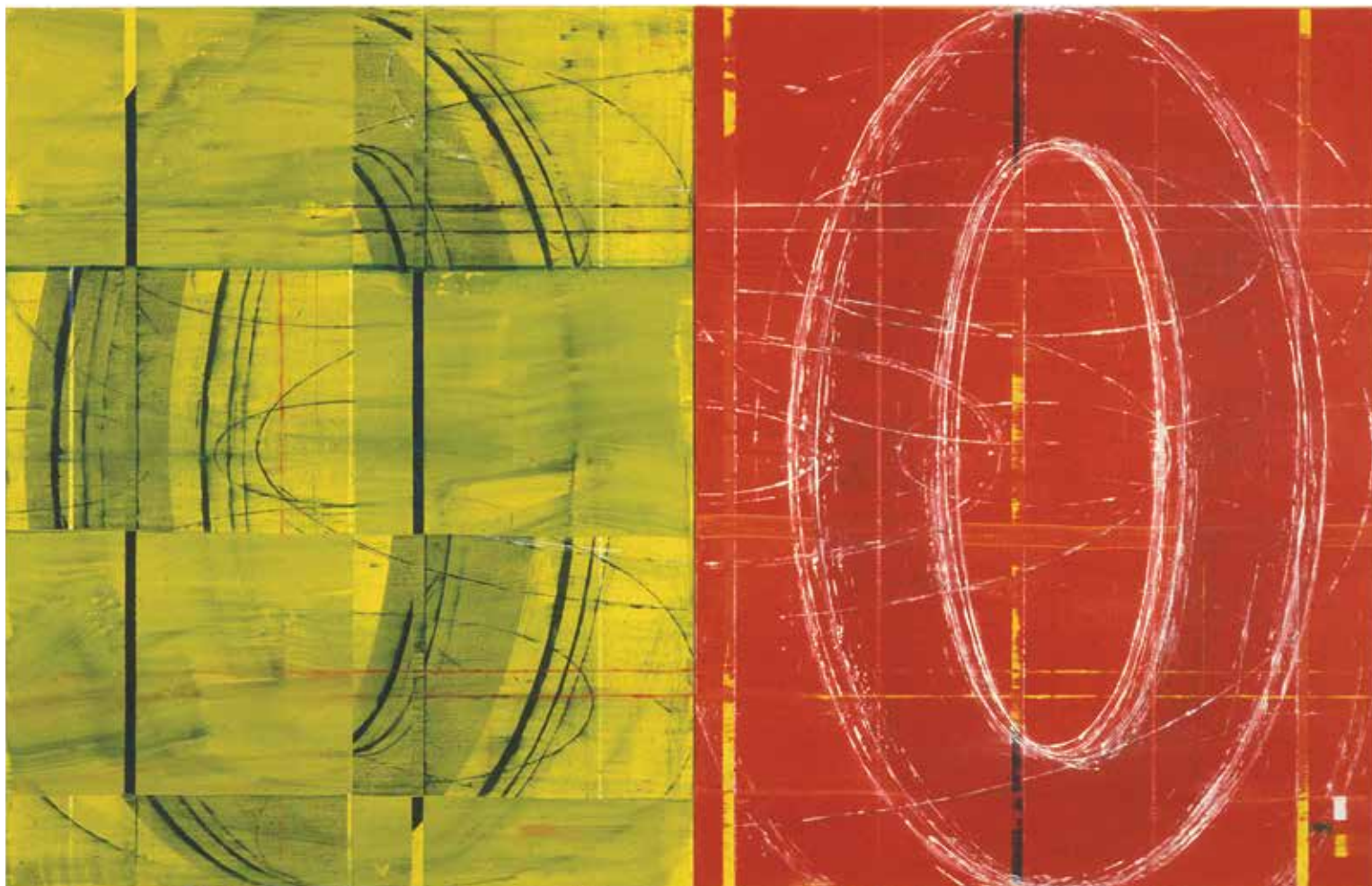
Dean Street Special, 1990
Fresco on wood panel
38 x 75 inches



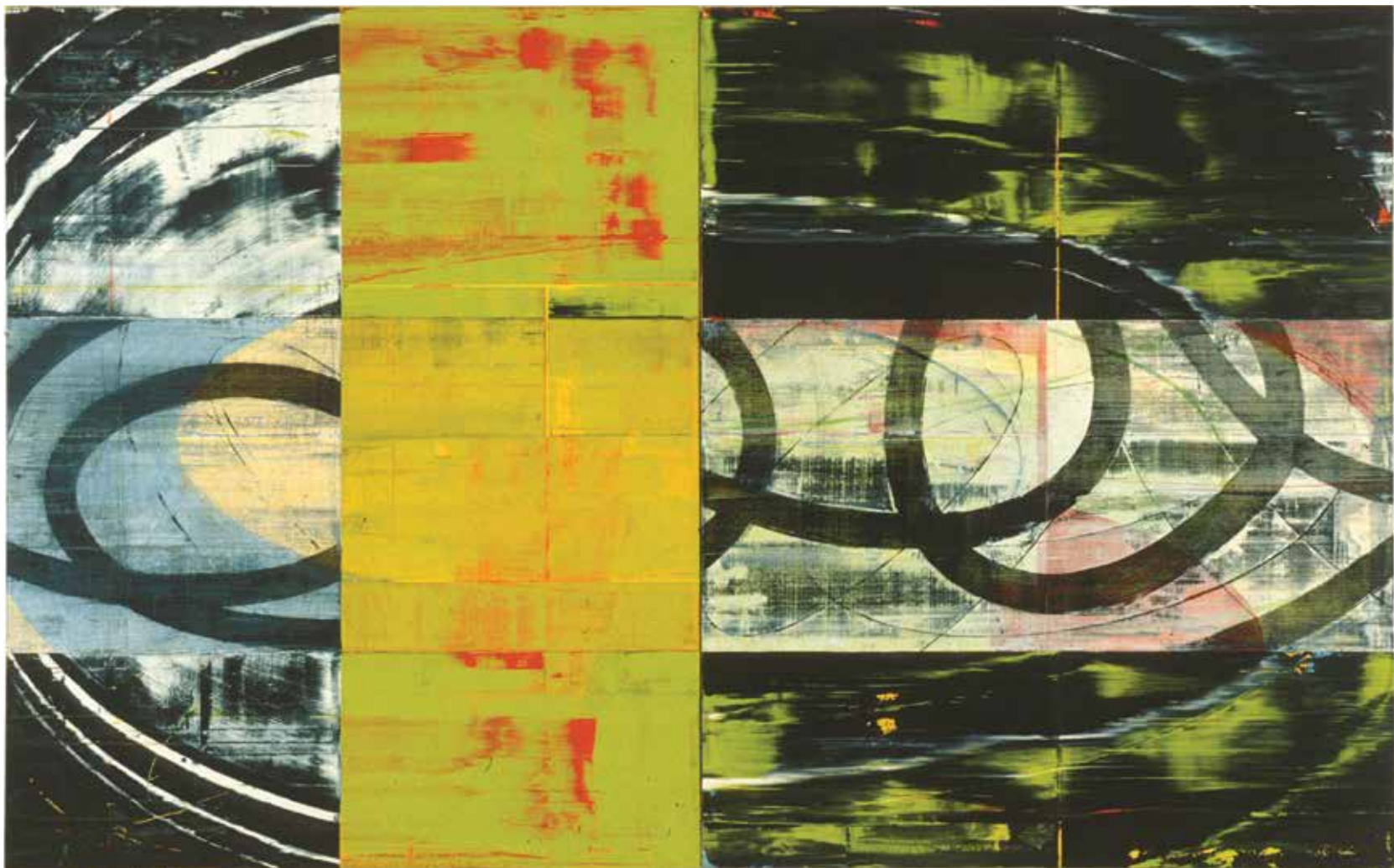
Split Infinite, 1990
Oil and wax on canvas
86 x 116 inches



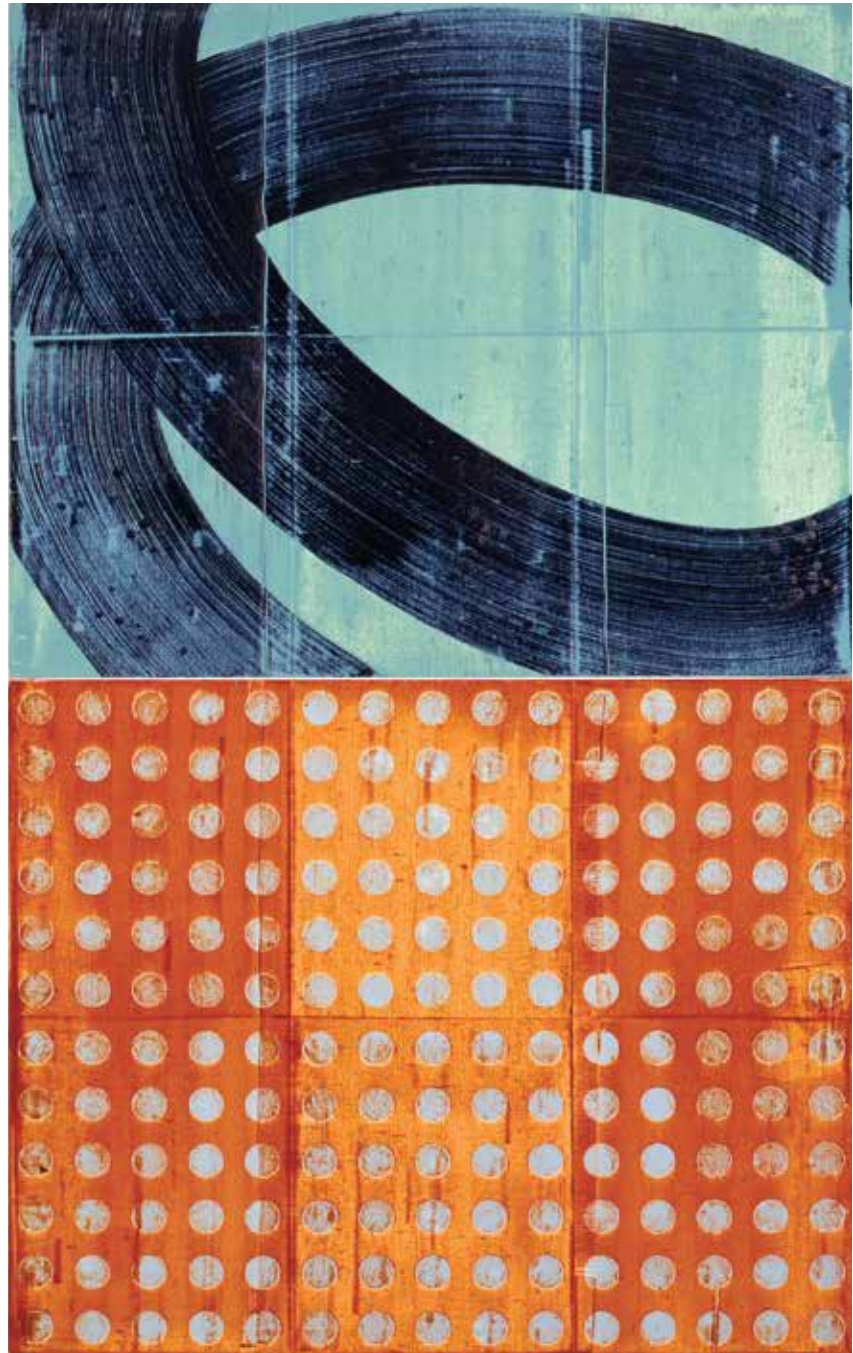
Nine Below Zero, 1993
Oil and wax on linen
90 x 144 inches



Flatland, 1994
Oil and wax on canvas and linen
77 x 120 inches



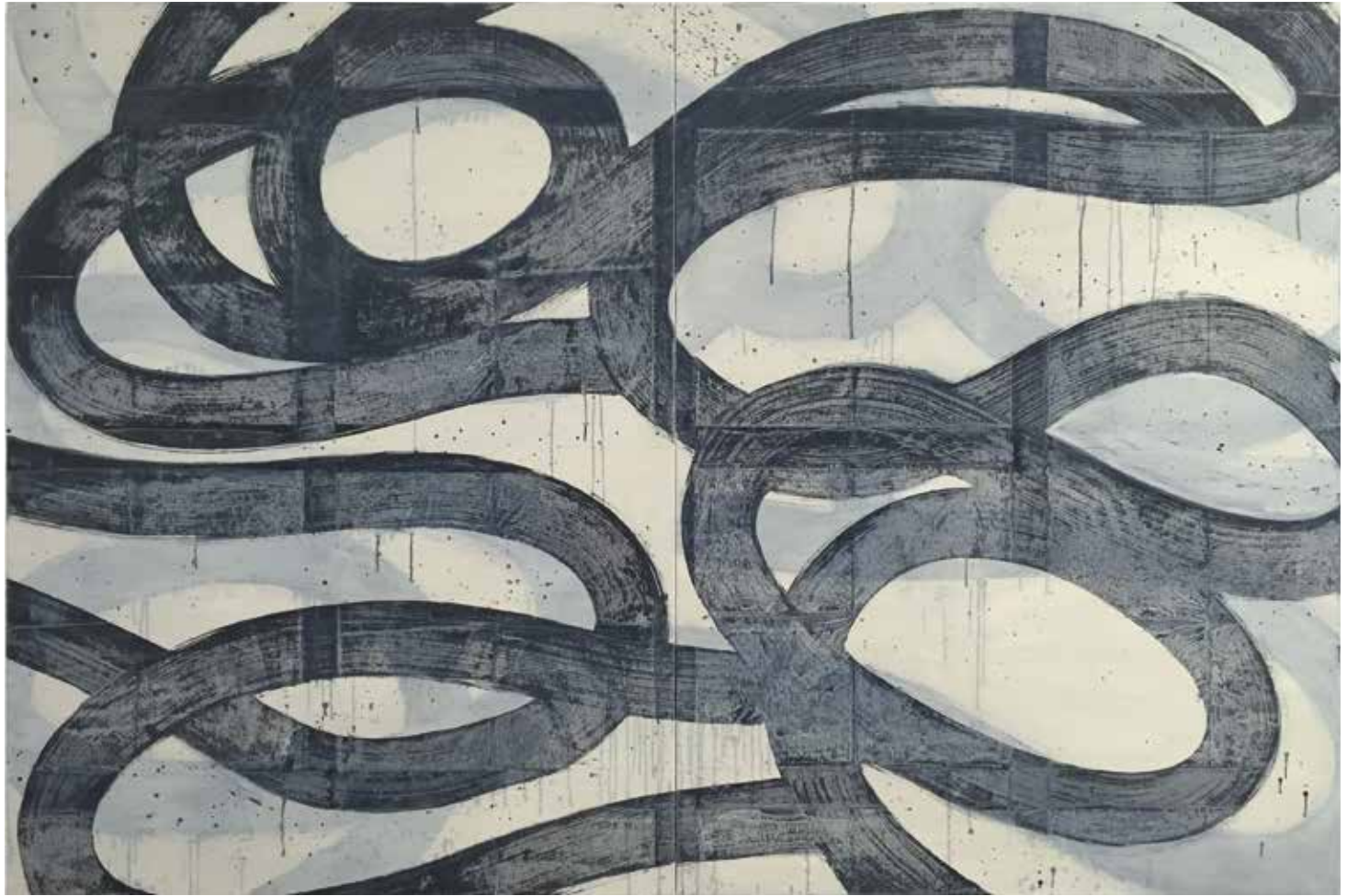
Wind Cools Itself, 1996
Oil on canvas
90 x 144 inches



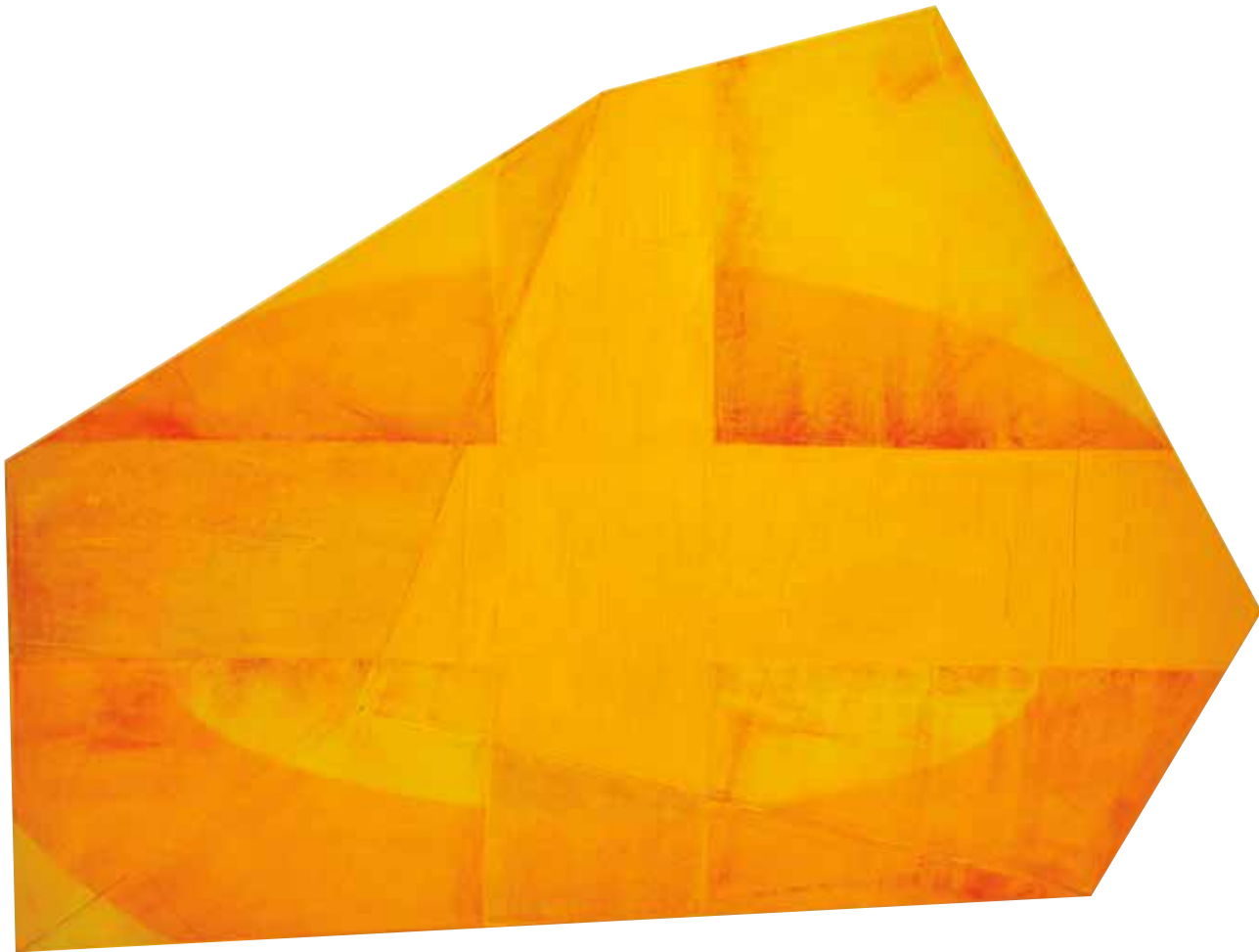
Point of View, 2001
Oil on canvas
96 x 60 inches



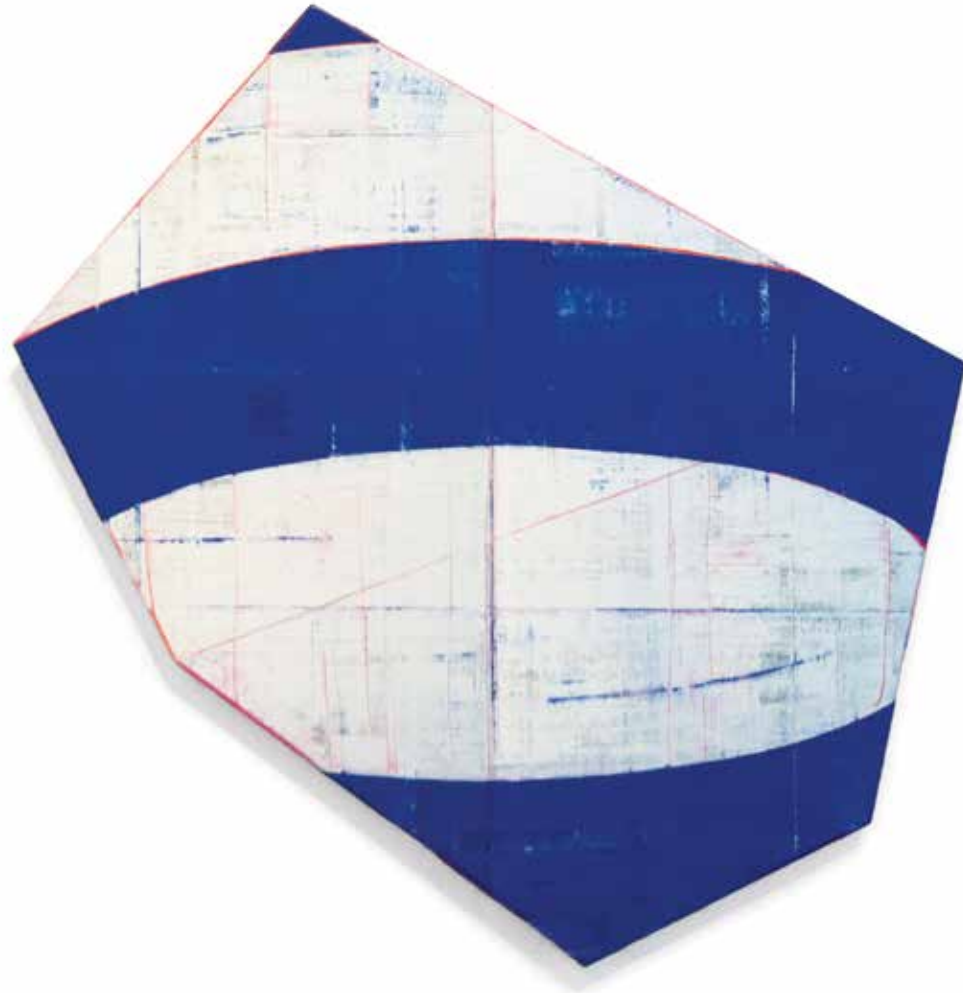
Here and There, 2003
Oil on aluminum panels
28.5 x 44 inches



Catskill, 2015
Oil on canvas
66 x 100 inches



Elektor, 2013
Oil on canvas
63 x 83 inches



Cartography, 2014
Oil on canvas mounted to board
42 x 38 inches

This catalogue published on the
occasion of the exhibition

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www.lorettahoward.com

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