

Andrew Christofides

Parallel Universe: A paradise of images

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## Parallel Universe: A paradise of images

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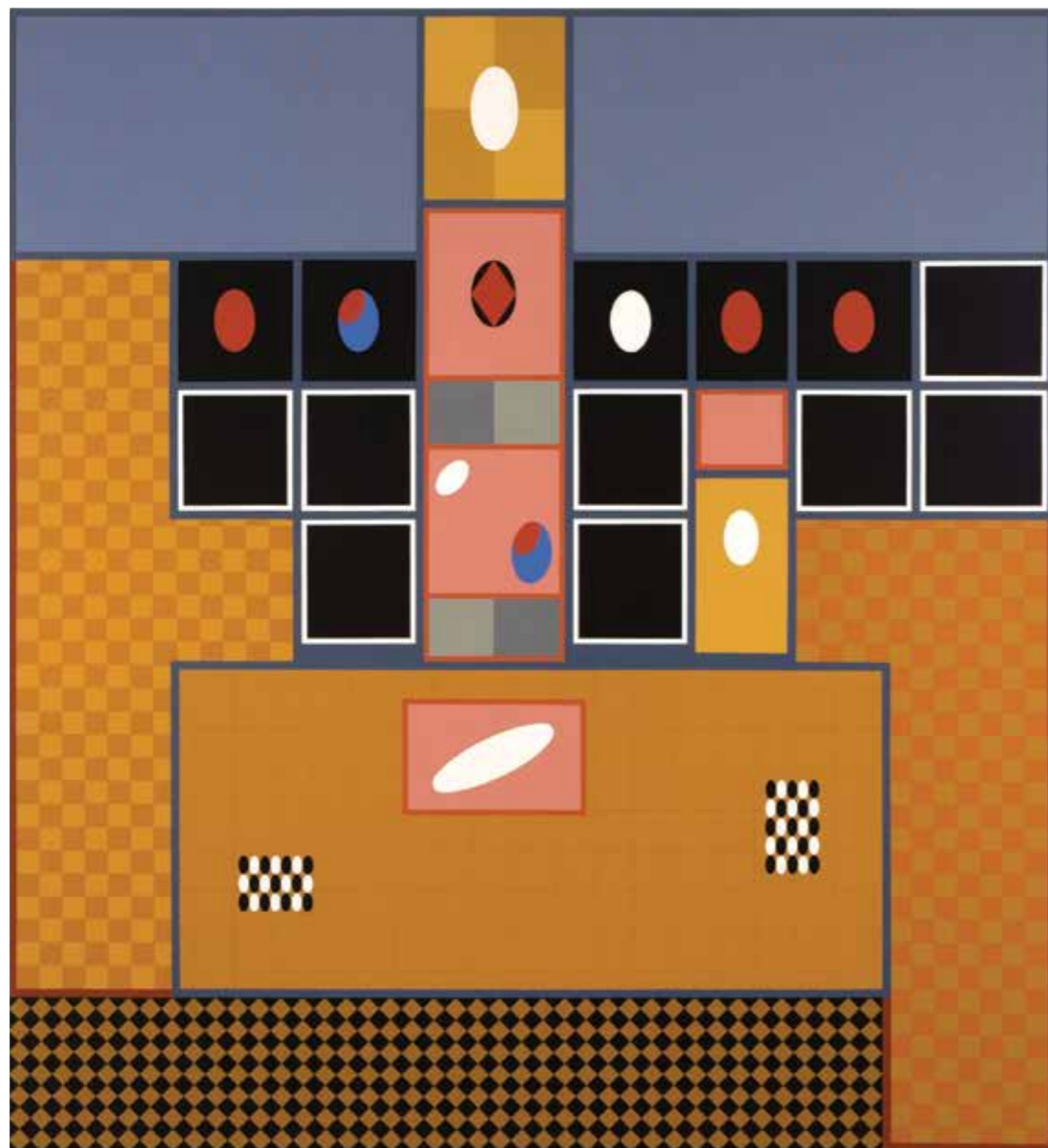
I have felt for some time now that my studio practice has existed in a parallel universe that, when coupled with lived experience, observation, introspection and, above all, imaginings, has evolved into a paradise of images – one with its own poetry and harmonies.

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Chippendale studio, Sydney, 2020



*Iconostasis* 2016 acrylic on canvas 198 x 183 cm

## MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

Paul McGillick

*"To bring meaning to abstract form – that's what my work has been about for the last forty years."*

– Andrew Christofides, 2020.

What do we mean when we talk about the meaning of art? In the past, the meaning of a painting was typically embedded in its iconography. In fact, there is a whole field of scholarship devoted to the interpretation of works of art based on iconographic analysis. To this day scholars continue to debate the meaning of paintings like Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*.

This, however, presupposes the representation of familiar things. Indeed, even contemporary figurative art can still have us trying to unravel symbols and metaphors or tease out obscure narratives even though we now lack that lexicon of established visual tropes which made Renaissance painting, for example, so semantically rich. But what of non-representational art – art which is self-referential and autonomous, which does not rely for its 'meaning' on visual references to the phenomenal world, relying instead on the formal properties of colour, line, shape, plane, surface and space? How can such art go beyond being merely decorative and become truly meaningful?

In his comment above, Andrew Christofides specifically uses the term 'abstract' because he makes a distinction between non-representational or non-objective art and abstract art, the former referring to nothing beyond itself, while the latter is an abstraction from the visual forms

of the everyday world. Christofides works in the space between non-objective art and geometric abstraction – in other words, in a "parallel universe" where he can generate a "paradise of images".

Such images we may call signs. This is apt, because Christofides has long been inspired by the non-objective tradition of Suprematism, De Stijl and Constructivism with its quest for a universal language, for a music of the spheres, penetrating into a spiritual realm. He is preoccupied with developing what he refers to as a "visual vocabulary and language of abstraction, especially of geometric abstraction". Language, in the words of the great Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, is "a system of signs that expresses ideas". If the elements of a geometric abstract painting appear to have no inherent meaning, then it is worth remembering that verbal language is itself made up of meaningless elements – in English, approximately forty-four basic sounds and their orthographic equivalents – which can nonetheless generate an infinite range of meaning when combined according to a system of grammatical rules.

Yet for a language to be capable of generating meaning, there has to be some kind of consensus among its users. So, for example, in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* there has to be some consensus as to the significance of the clothed and nude female figures and how this is





Small Iconostasis 2016 acrylic on canvas 76 x 84 cm

inflected by the respective roles of Cupid, water, and the sarcophagus on which the two women seem to be seated.

This is language as a social fact. But can an individual painter create a unique, self-contained language generating its own meaning while maintaining the autonomy of non-objective abstraction – in other words, make a painting which is meaningful, but which does not depend on some process of verbal interpretation or translation? In short, a painting whose meaning derives from its inherent aesthetic character, not from encoded meaning. After all, *Sacred and Profane Love* communicates primarily as a painting and its encoded meaning remains an inseparable part of the painting itself.

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“The importance of an artist is to be measured by the number of new signs he has introduced into the language of art.” – Henri Matisse.

Andrew Christofides has been exhibiting since the mid-1970s and over that time he has demonstrated an extraordinary consistency of purpose. This is not to say that there have not been changes, only to point out that Christofides’ work has been driven by the same ambition even if the means have continued to evolve.

As long ago as 2008, in an online interview at *Geoform*, Christofides commented: “I have always been drawn to an aesthetic of order, simplicity and elegance.”

This continues to be the case, although arguably the intuitive now plays a greater role and the abstracted representational elements – figure, ground, landscape – which have always been present, now seem to perform that role with greater clarity.

In fact, there has always been a tension between the rationality of Christofides’ numerically-generated images and the intuitive, between a geometric rationality and the world of experience. For Christofides, numerically-generated images do away with the need for a ‘subject’, leaving the painting free to generate purely aesthetic meaning. But there are two caveats to this.

Firstly, the way in which Christofides has used the Fibonacci number series to generate his images has itself an element of randomness. It is not entirely predictable and, therefore, allows for the intuitive.

Secondly, the tension between a rationally organised pictorial structure (using systems like perspective or the Golden Mean) and the subject matter has existed in painting since the Renaissance. Christofides remains passionately interested in Renaissance painting. In the *Geoform* interview he says:

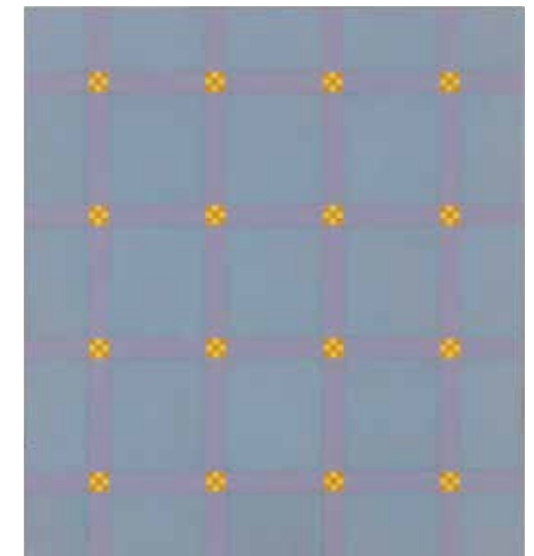
I have been drawn to the quiet, monumental and structured work of Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca and Giovanni Bellini, work that speaks of a classical, rational order...

Piero’s work is typified by the tension between an esoteric geometric construction and the intense emotionality of what is depicted. Even if the viewer remains unaware of the mathematically sophisticated geometry underpinning the painting, that order – like the music (or harmony) of the spheres – communicates subliminally, suggesting meaning which lies beyond words. This is a form of apperception whereby meaning is communicated directly

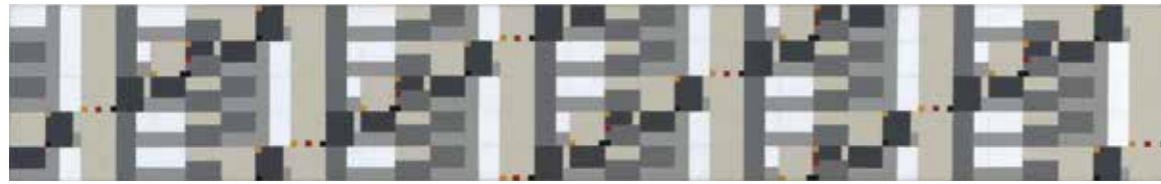
through visual perception, without the need to ‘translate’ the painting into words.

Pythagoras and his followers in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC believed that the proportions in the movements of celestial bodies (sun, moon, the planets) generated a form of music – something replicated by geometry. It is a concept exquisitely expressed by William Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*:

...Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold;  
There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;  
Such harmony is in immortal souls;  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.



Gridded light 2016 acrylic on canvas 56 x 51 cm



*(2,3,8) x 7 rotations - 6* 2017 acrylic on canvas 16 x 105 cm

Andrew Christofides aims to remove the “muddy vesture of decay” and provide direct access to the music of the spheres. He does so by providing sheer aesthetic pleasure – not to be confused with charming decoration – amplified by the use of an internally consistent lexicon of signs making up a pictorial language.

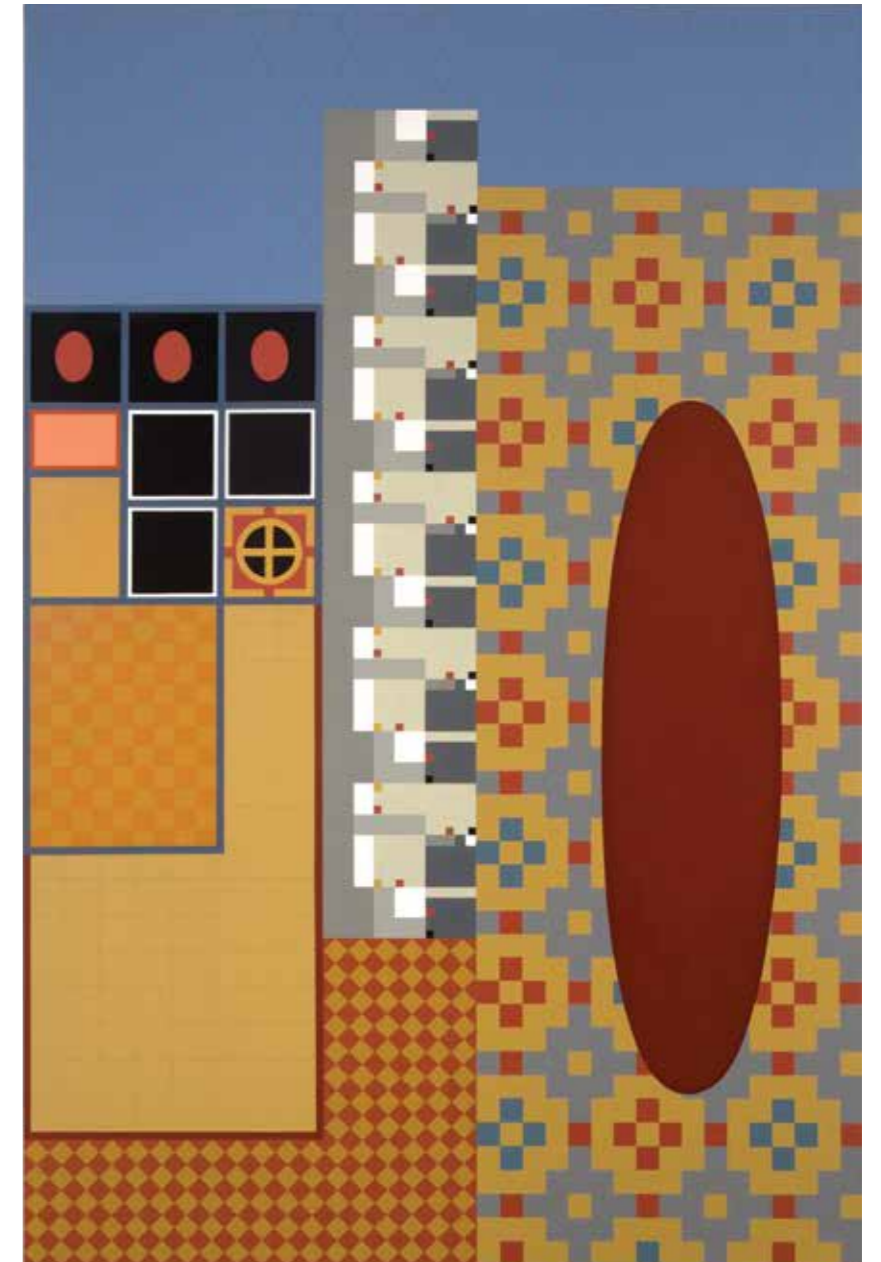
The organisation of these signs comes from a variety of sources. These include grids – his central organising element – and checkerboards. Both hint at the phenomenal world, but also serve to organise the surface of the painting and set up spatial relationships. He has also looked carefully at early maps and charts which he describes as “a schematic or diagrammatical way of representing the world” which is non-mimetic or non-representational.

Cyprus, where he was born in 1946, has also provided raw material for his visual vocabulary. He first re-visited Cyprus in 1974 and since then it has played an important role in his work, not so much in the sense of re-discovering a cultural identity, but as a culturally and visually rich resource. Hence, the colours of Cyprus, archaeological sites, Greek Orthodox churches and their plans, icons (Cyprus, which was a great centre of icon painting, never suffered the ravages of the iconoclasts and still has a rich heritage of icons), priestly vestments, village

life and town squares are all sources for the signs which make up his visual language. He also looks to calligraphy, especially Islamic calligraphy, and he continues to use numerically-generated images.

Central to his work, and true to the Western tradition in painting, is spatial ambiguity. At first glance, the paintings seem completely flat with no sense of depth. But they quickly reveal a figure-ground ambiguity where we can't be sure whether one form sits in front of or behind another one. The implied figure-ground device clearly suggests representation, but without compromising Christofides' commitment to abstraction.

Again, we go back to Piero where the viewer is required to engage with the painting and work at resolving such seeming ambiguities. This involves two kinds of tension: between what is depicted and how it is depicted on a flat surface, and between abstract geometry and images derived from the world around us. Suddenly Christofides' paintings are not the simple geometric patterns they initially appear to be. They become endlessly rich contrapuntal inventions in which a limited lexicon of signs transforms into a dynamic interplay of possibilities. It is no accident that two of the paintings in this exhibition refer to the seeming opposition of faith and reason – the intuitive and random versus the rational and orderly.



*Faith and reason II* 2017 acrylic on canvas 244 x 163 cm

These kinds of oppositions sum up the nature of human experience. Christofides' paintings offer a visual experience which parallels the way we experience the world as ordered, yet endlessly diverse, lurching between reason and energy, locked in a tussle between an ideal rationality and the fact of our emotional nature.



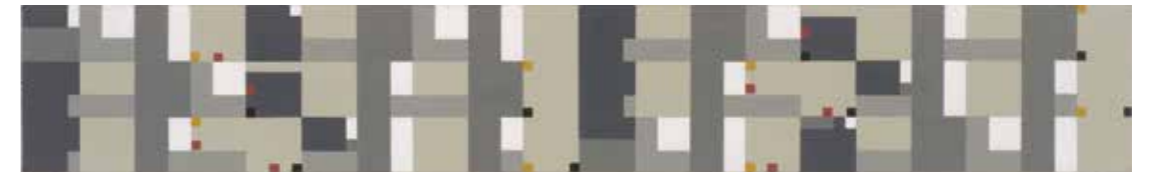
*Origin of reason* 2017 acrylic on canvas 60.5 x 45.5 cm

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In a painting like *Patriarchs* – the most 'figurative' in this exhibition – we see Christofides' signs most clearly at work. The shapes of the two 'figures' on the right suggest the robed patriarchs or priests of the Greek Orthodox Church with the patterning referring to the decorative vestments worn by the priests, such as the stole (*epitrachelion*). To the left we see the plan of the church including elements like the floor pattern and the square icons, blacked out for Easter. In the central part of the painting there is the town square and above it the sky (infinity).

These signs are repeated in other paintings, but organised differently to generate different shades of meaning. *Small Iconostasis* refers to the iconostasis, or wall of icons separating the sanctuary of the church from the nave and is a very two-dimensional representation of the church and all the elements which go to form it.

Some paintings (such as *Written Word*) are strongly calligraphic and employ signs which are either numerically derived or inspired by calligraphy and suggest not just language, but stylised human figures. Other paintings Christofides refers to as 'hybrid' paintings because they combine a range of signs. *Between Faith and Reason* opposes the church on the left (representing faith) with reason on the right comprised of numerically-generated signs, with the market place of everyday life in the centre. *Invasion of Logic*, on the other hand, is a large circular painting derived from early, circular maps. Here the West (on the left), with its rational systems invades (via a staggered blue path) the East (on the right) with its faith-based order.



*(2,3,5) x 4 Rotations* 2017 acrylic on polyester on board 10 x 63 cm

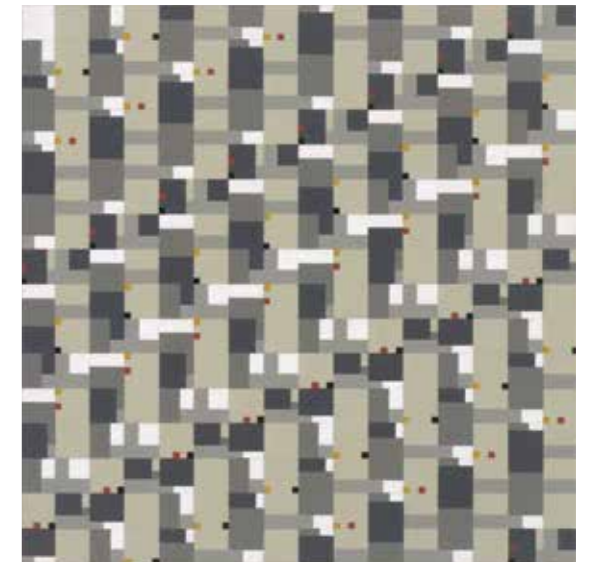
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Mathematics and music are closely aligned. So, as structured as Andrew Christofides' paintings are, we should not overlook the rhythms generated by his geometric elements, along with the counterpoint of his colour palette. In fact, while the graphic elements in the paintings suggest language, they also suggest early forms of musical notation – in itself a language-like abstraction of the music – and Christofides himself likens the meditative quality of his paintings to Gregorian chant.

But this is a special kind of music, the music of the spheres, whose rhythms are so attenuated they suggest an overwhelming sense of stillness. The music resides in the silences, or intervals, between the notes. In the words of the great Italian violinist, Uto Ughi:

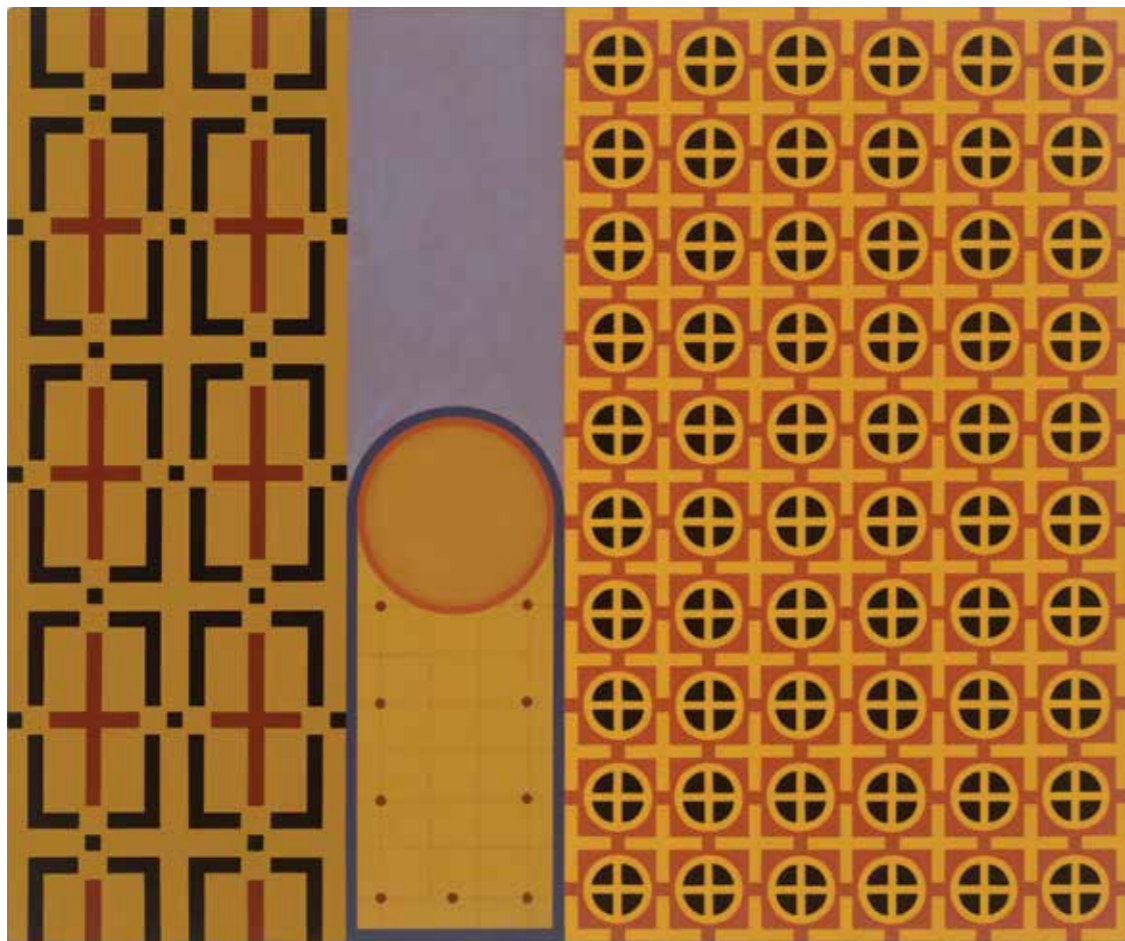
Silence is perhaps the most evocative and musical moment. The pauses and the silences are the most extraordinarily enchanting moments of music. Pauses and silences are indispensable elements to spiritual search.

Paul McGillick is a Sydney based writer on architecture, art and design.



*(2,3,5) x 17 Rotations + 2* 2017 acrylic on polyester 41 x 41 cm





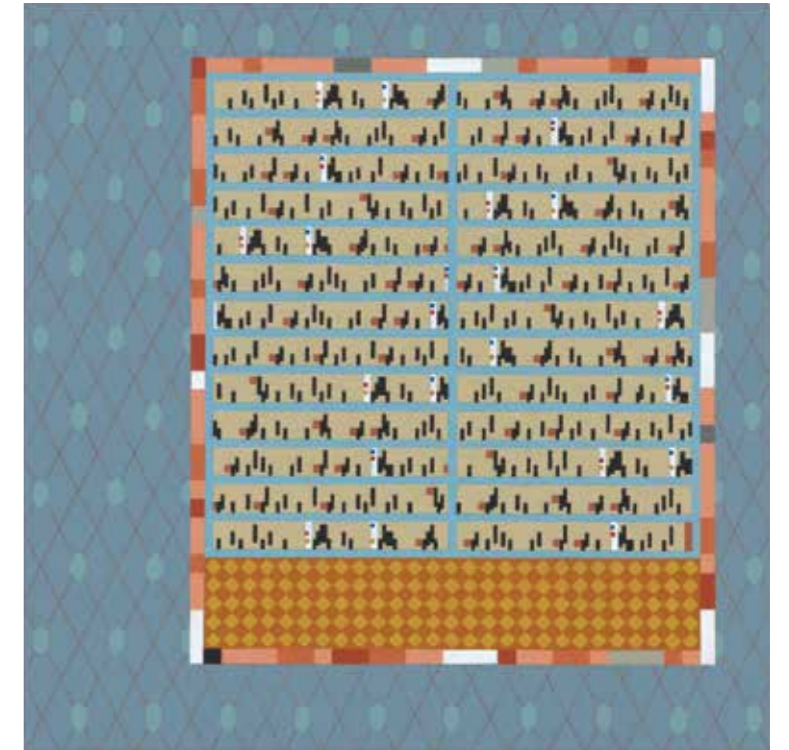
*Iconoclast II* 2017 acrylic on canvas 77 x 92 cm



*Faith and reason* 2017 acrylic on canvas 61 x 51 cm



*Written word* 2018 acrylic on canvas 31 x 51 cm

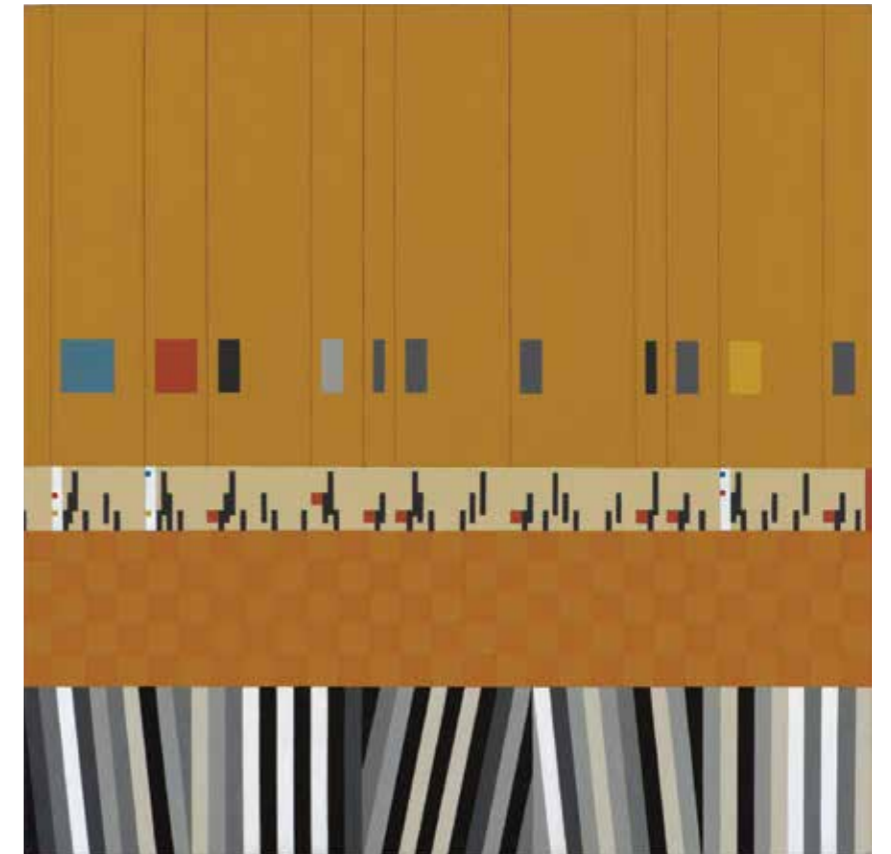


*Written word II* 2018 acrylic on canvas 41 x 41 cm

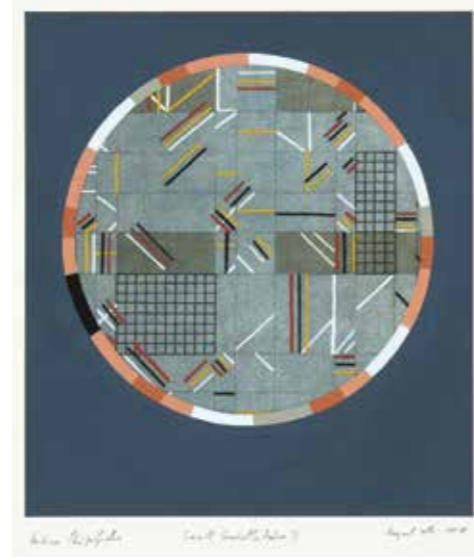
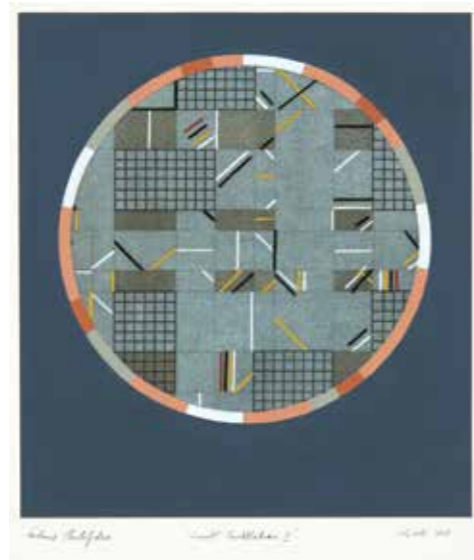




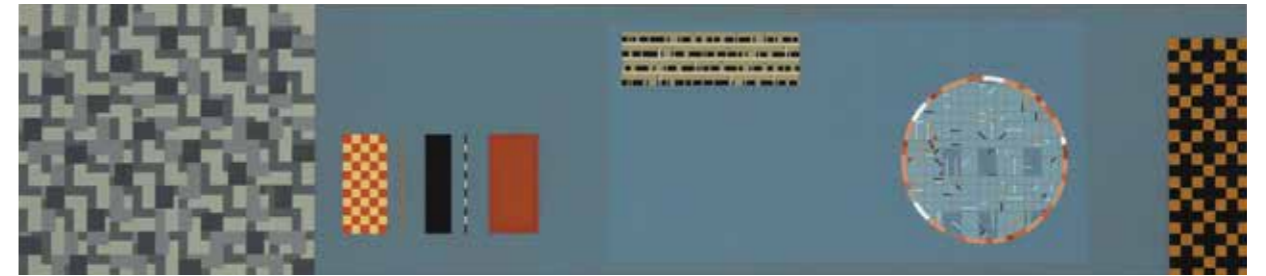
*Between faith and reason* 2018 acrylic on canvas 101.5 x 101.5 cm



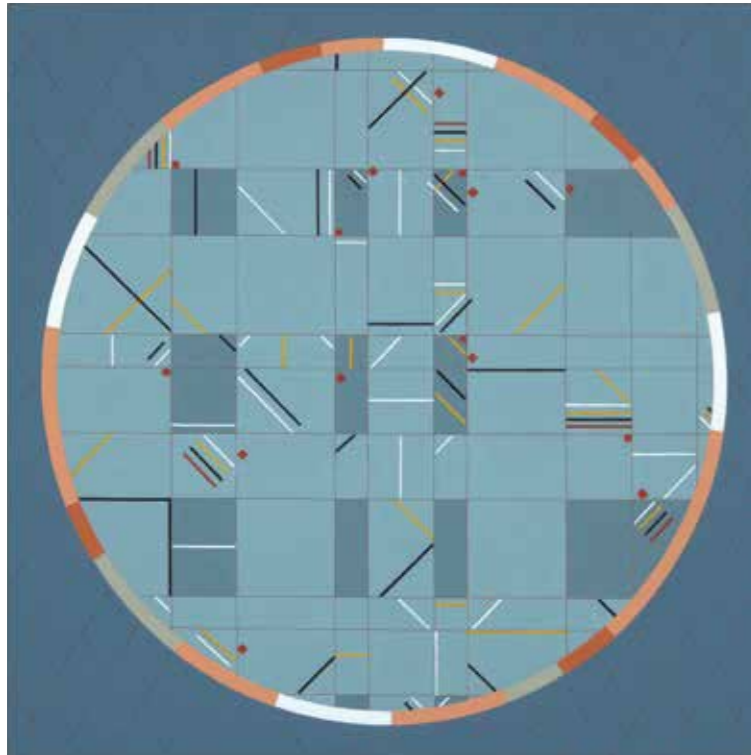
*Remembering the past* 2018 acrylic on canvas 41 x 41 cm



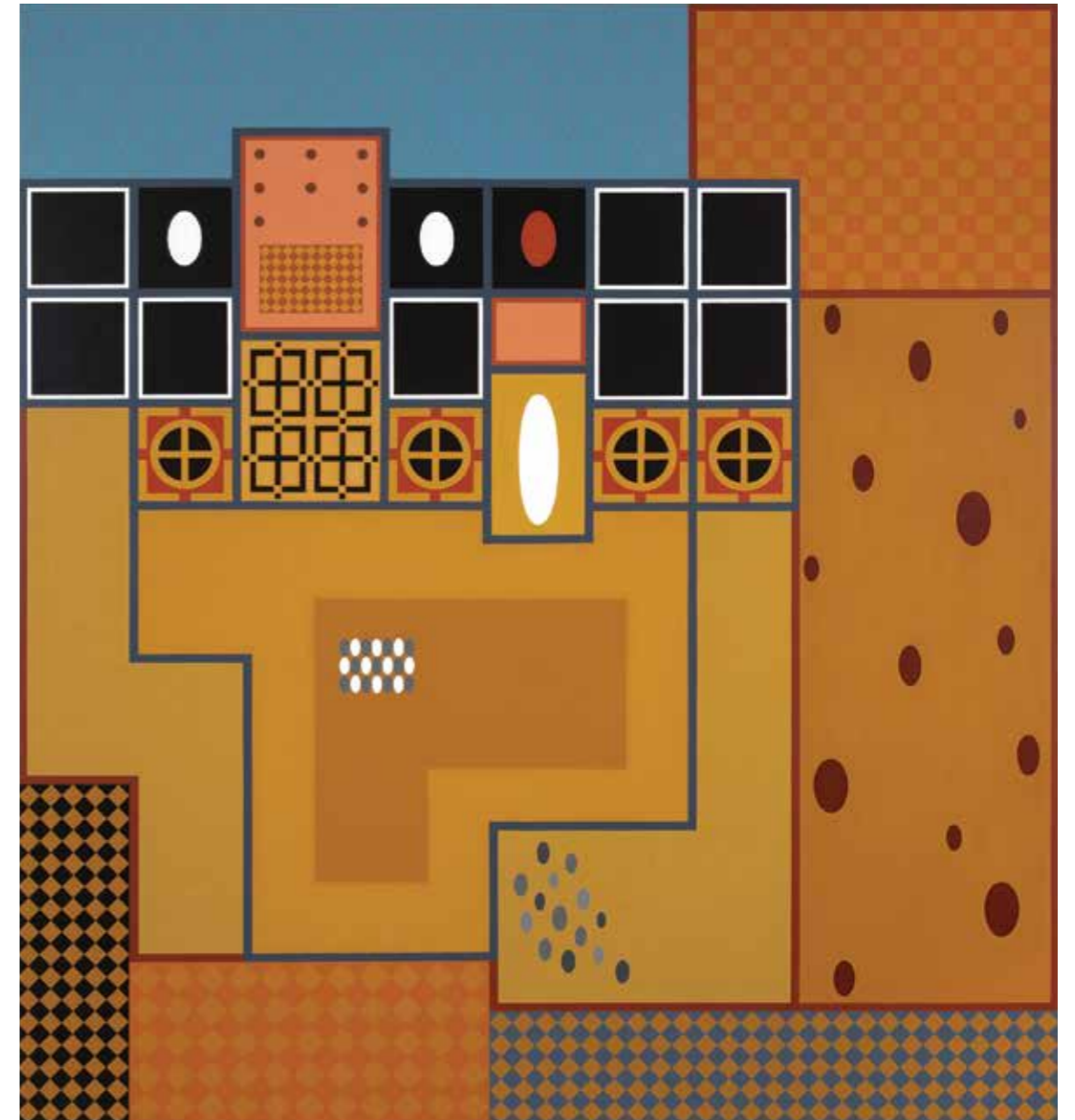
Small Constellation I, II, III & IV 2018 acrylic and watercolour on aquatint each 25 x 22.5cm



Studio archaeology 2018 acrylic on polyester canvas 30.5 x 137.5 cm

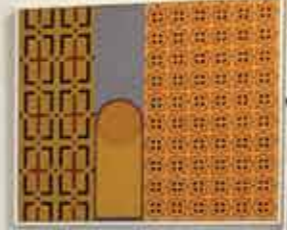


*Small constellation* 2018 acrylic on polyester canvas 46 x 46 cm

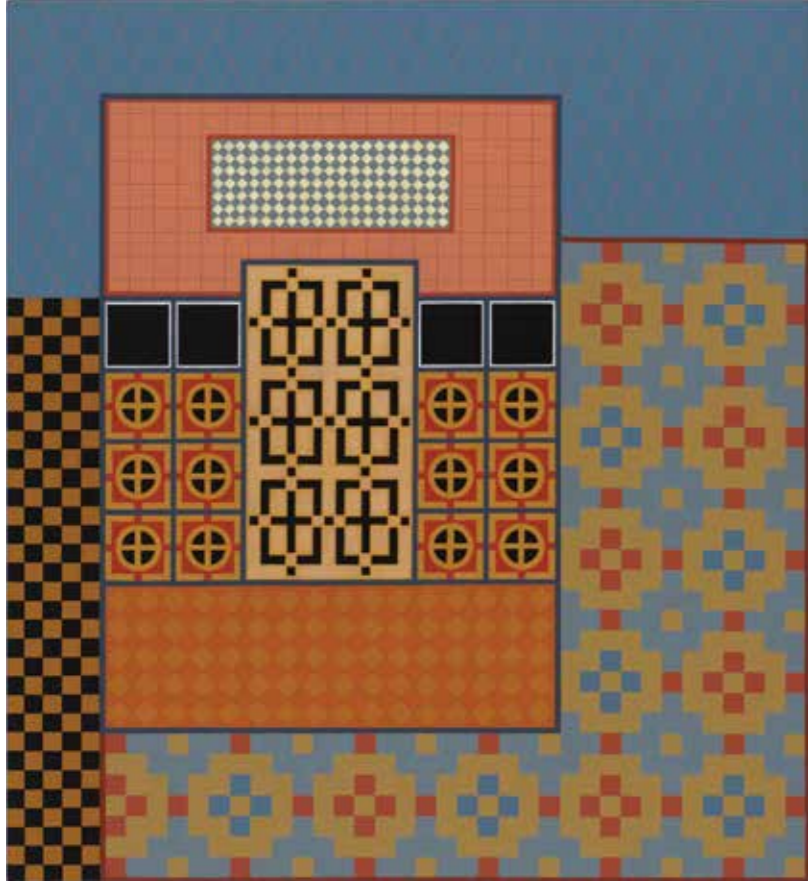


*Iconostasis III* 2018 acrylic on canvas 198 x 183 cm

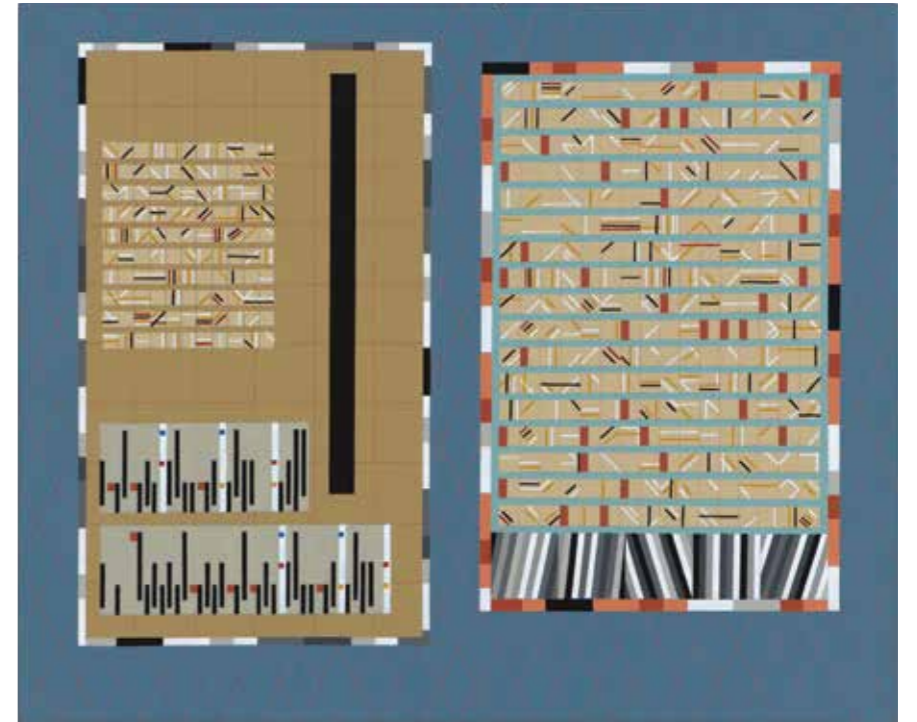




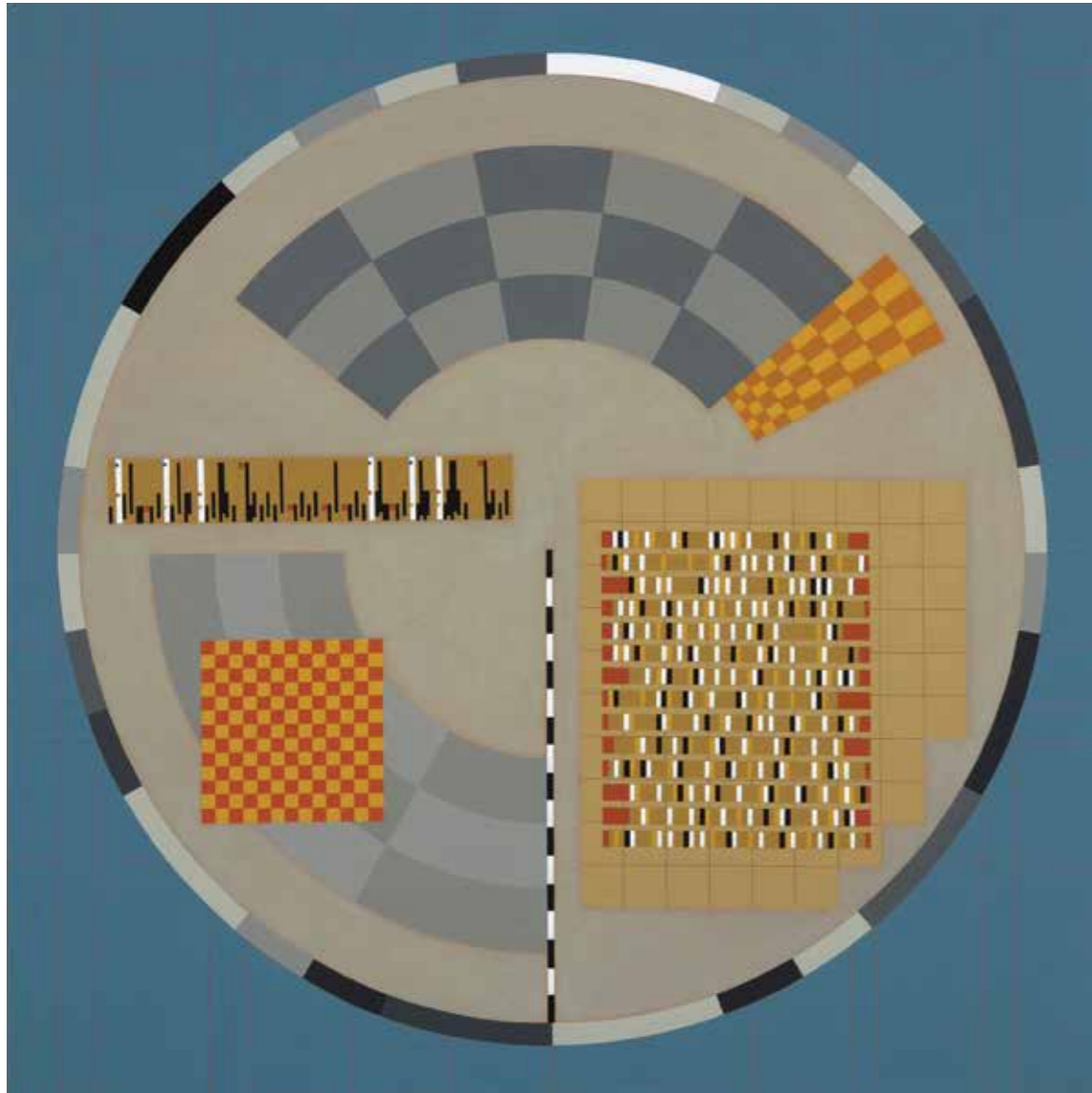




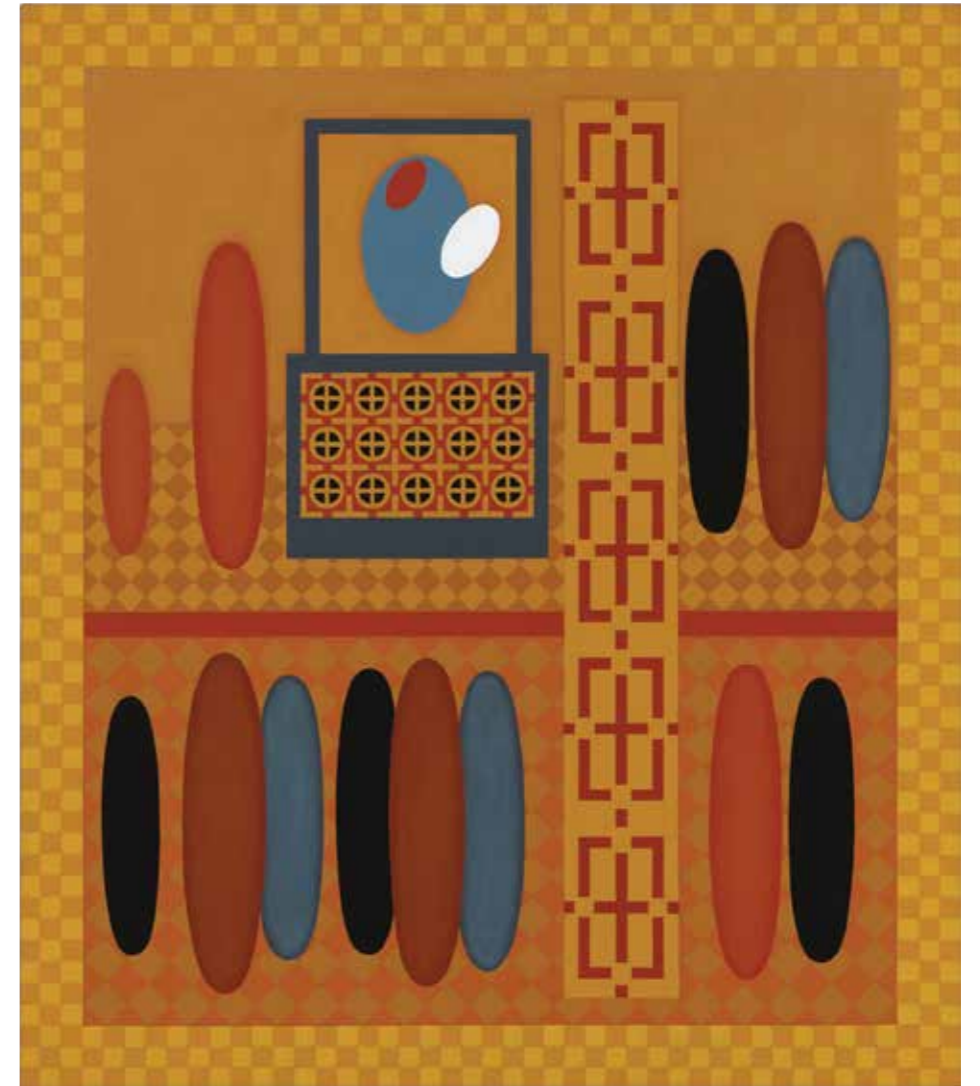
*Royal doors* 2018 acrylic on canvas 56 x 51 cm



*Written word III* 2019 acrylic on canvas 46 x 56 cm

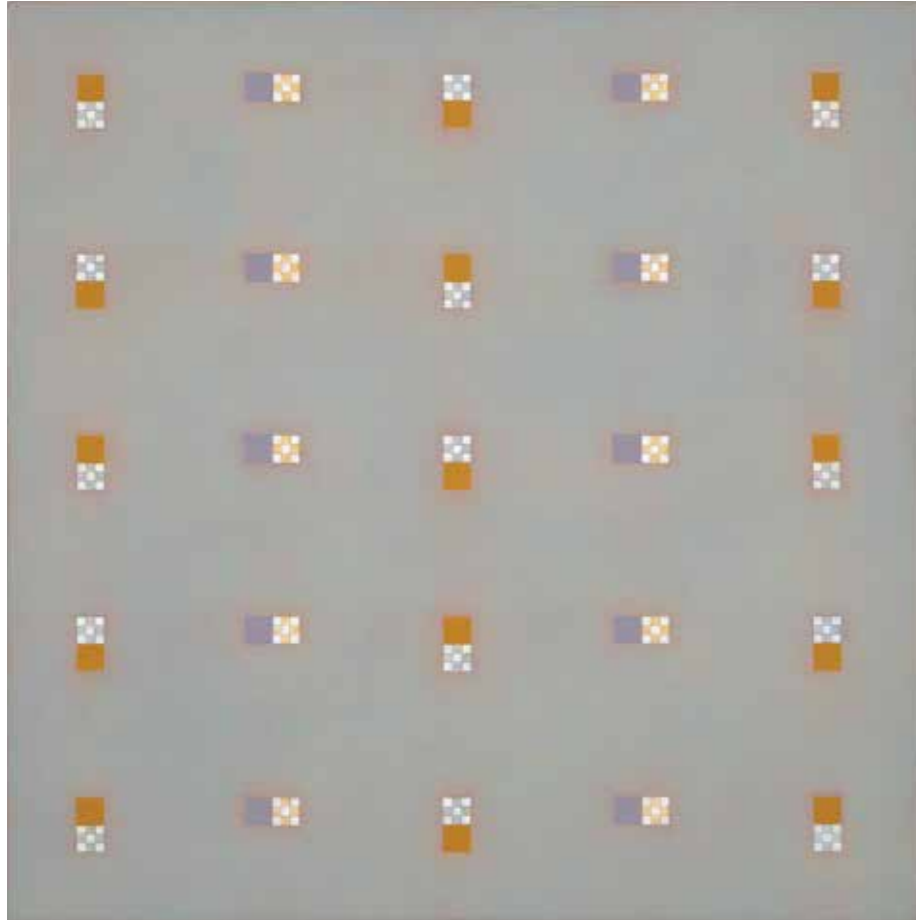


*Origins and evolution* 2019 acrylic on canvas 102 x 102 cm

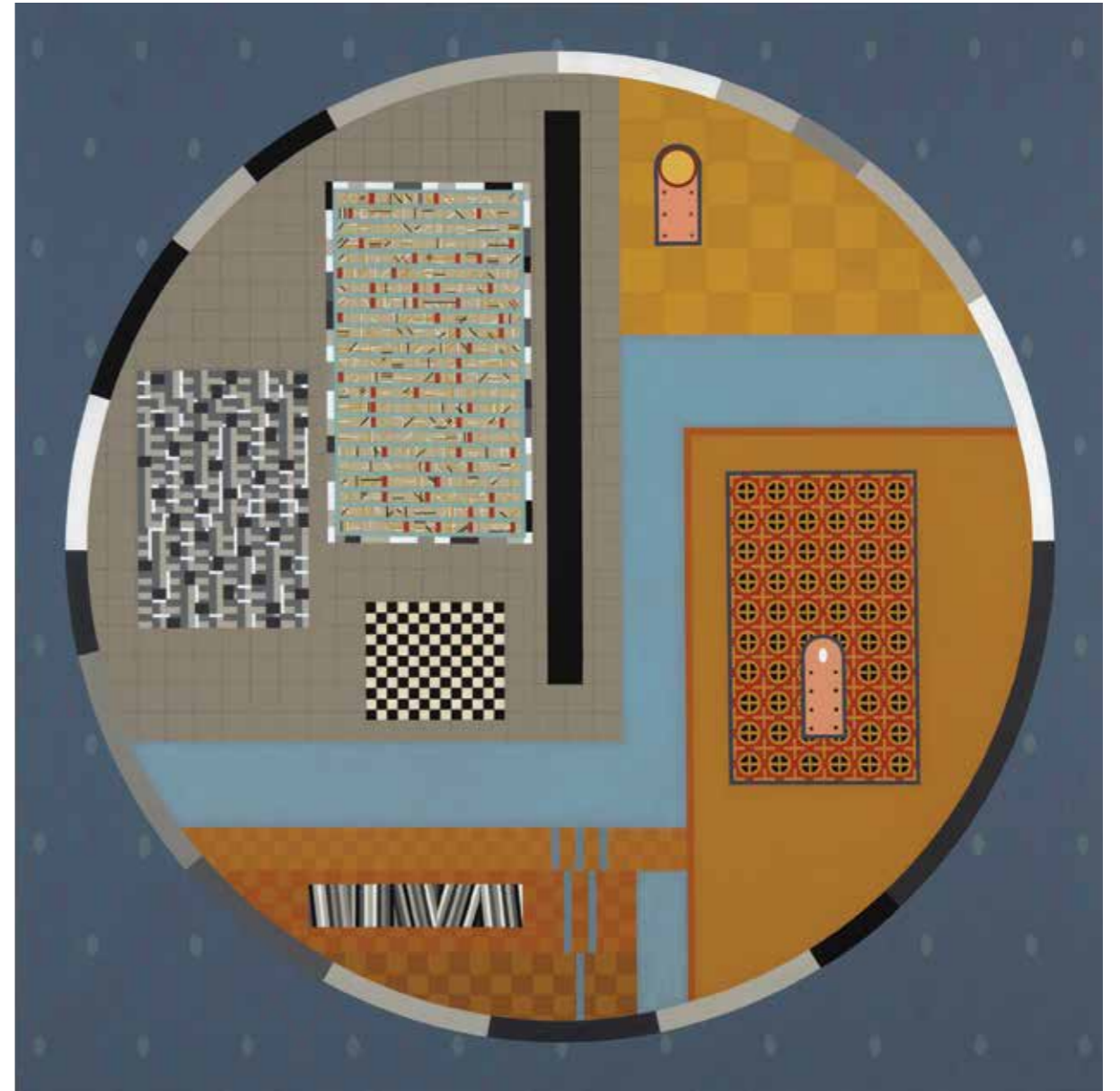


*Triumph of Orthodoxy* 2019 acrylic on canvas 76.5 x 66.5 cm





*Gossamer breeze* 2019 acrylic on polyester canvas 51 x 51 cm



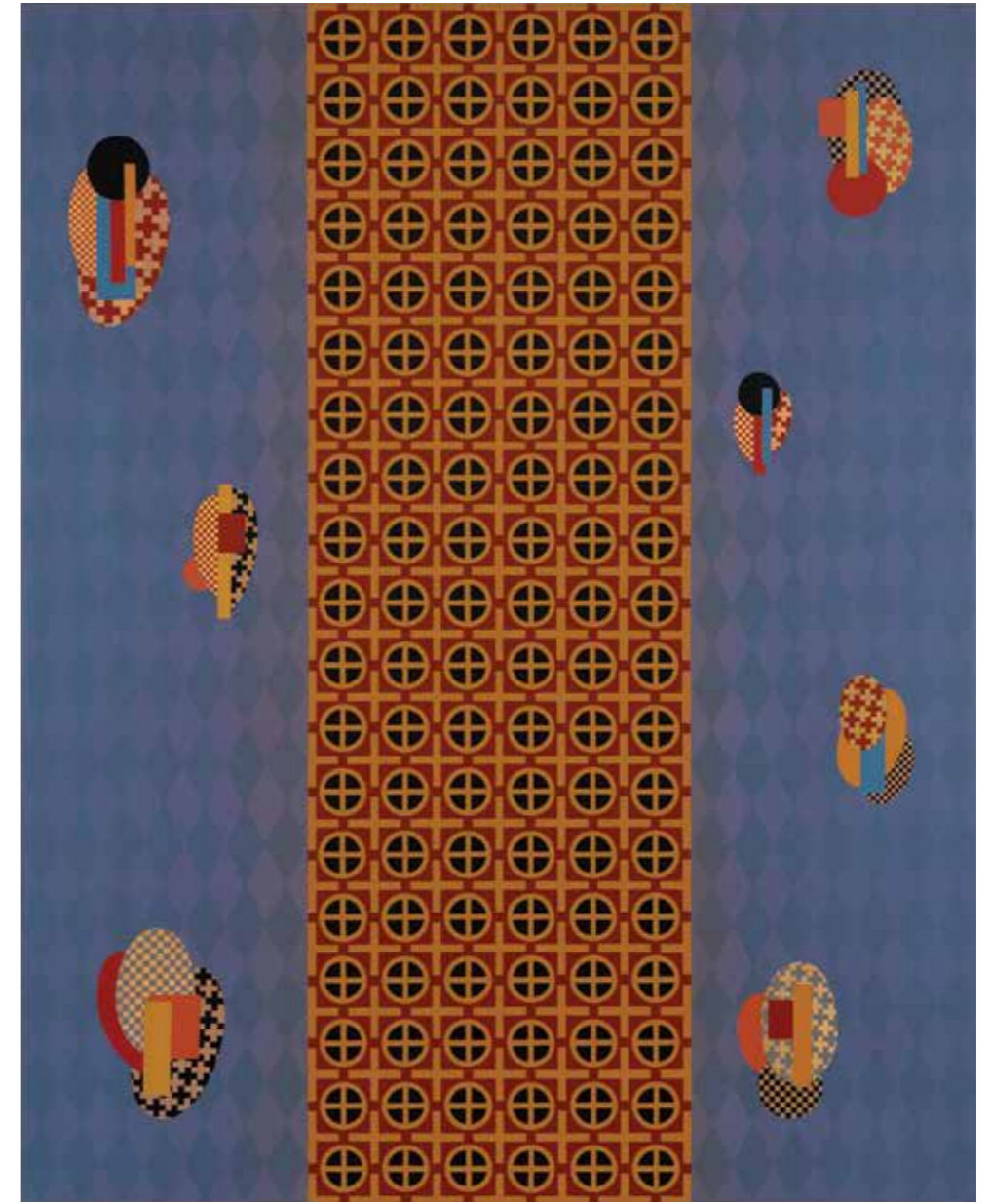
*Invasion of logic* 2019 acrylic on polyester canvas 153 x 153 cm







*Patriarchs* 2019 acrylic on polyester canvas 46 x 46 cm

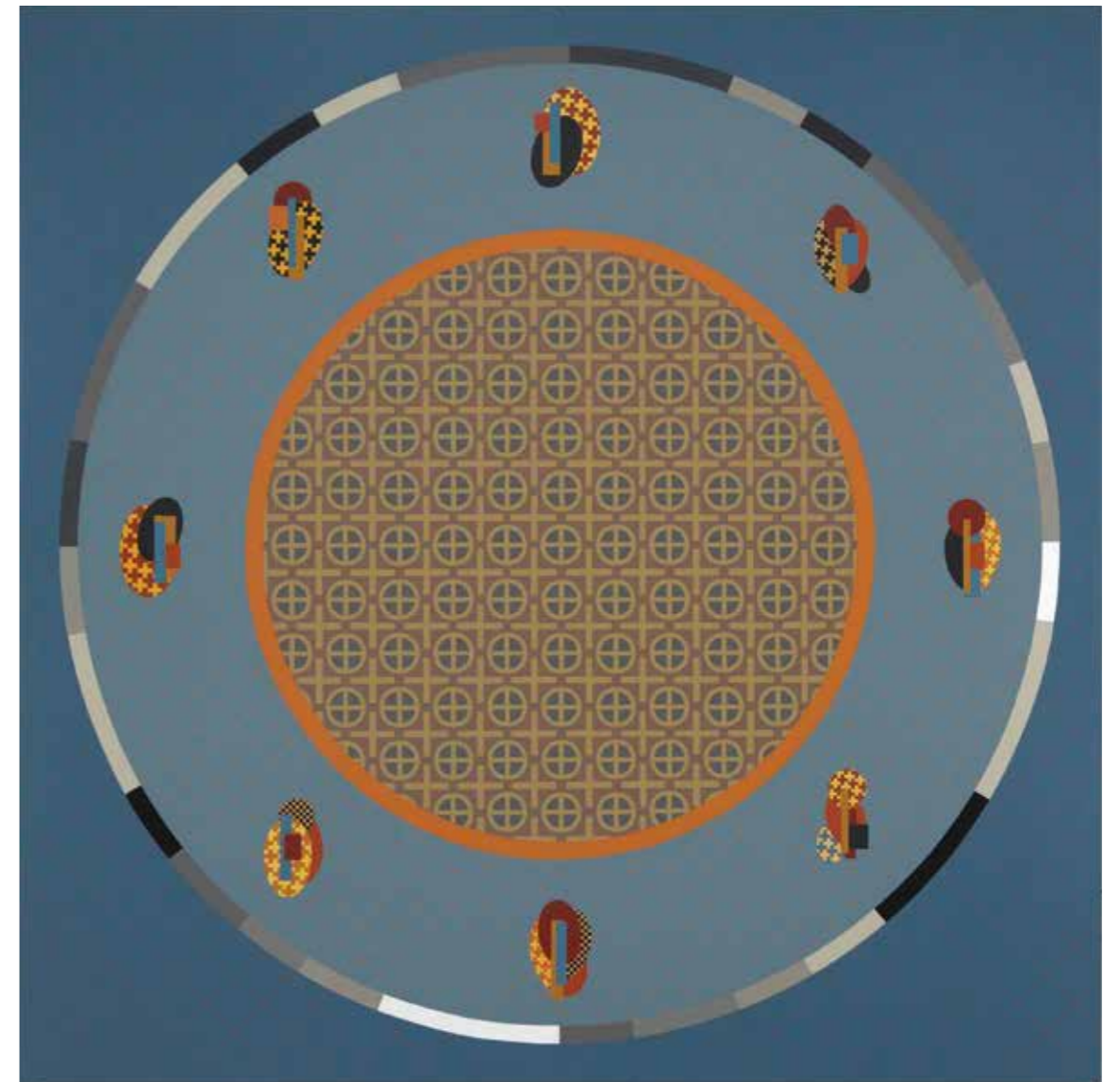


*Followers* 2019-20 acrylic on polyester canvas 153 x 122 cm





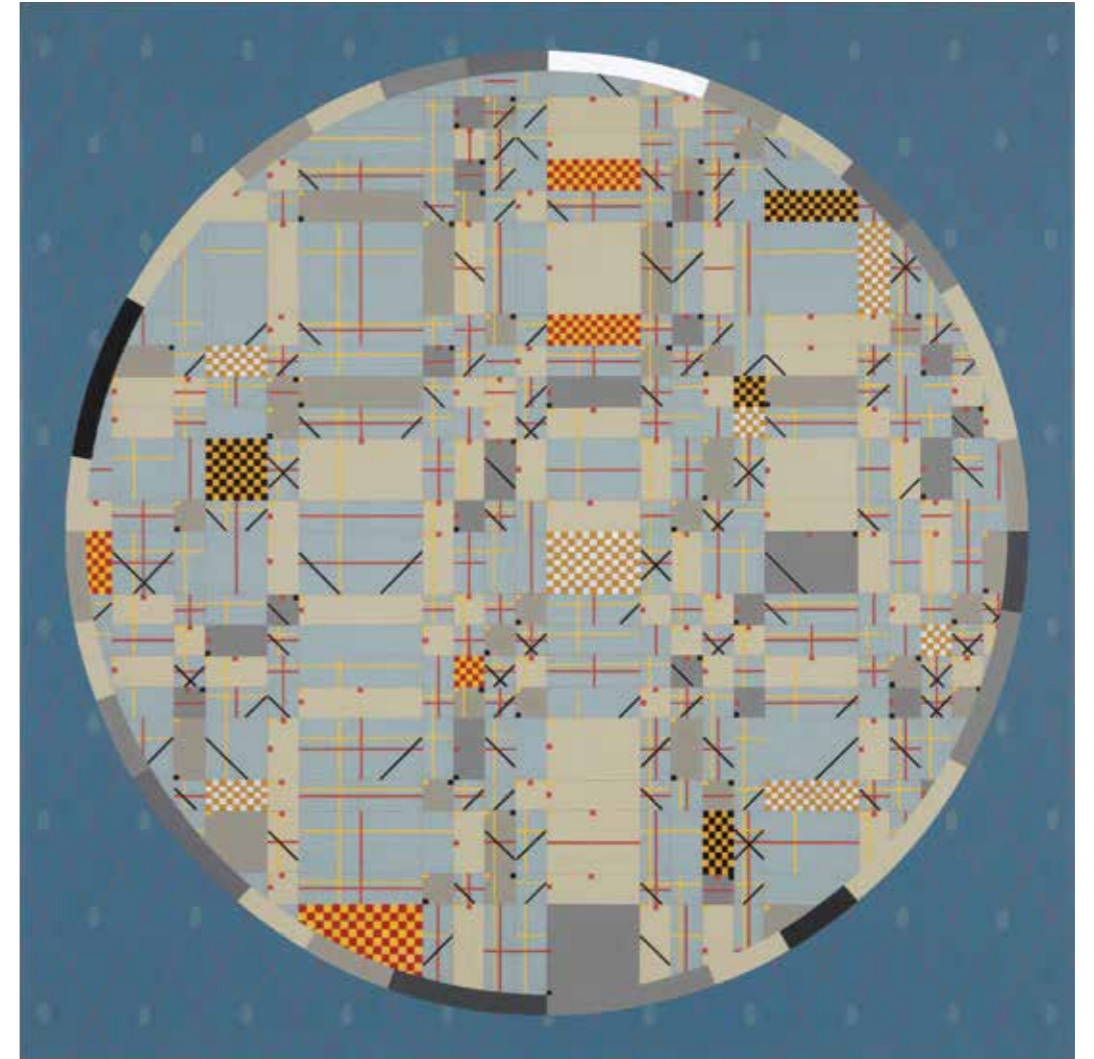
*Sceptics* 2020 acrylic on polyester canvas 76.5 x 61 cm



*Death of faith* 2020 acrylic on polyester canvas 153 x 153 cm



*Intuitive science* 2020 acrylic on polyester canvas 153 x 153 cm



*Evolving Universe* 2020 acrylic on polyester canvas 102 x 102 cm



## Andrew Christofides

Andrew Christofides was born in 1946 in Cyprus and migrated to Australia with his family in 1951.

After studying Economics from 1968 to 1971 at the University of New South Wales, he travelled to Cyprus and then to the United Kingdom, where he lived from 1974 to 1982.

In London, he studied Fine Art at the Byam Shaw School of Drawing and Painting (1974-1975) and Chelsea School of Art (1975-1978). Whilst at Chelsea, he was awarded a Rome Scholarship and a studio residency at the British School in Rome for 1978-1979 and the Picker Fellowship in Painting at Kingston Polytechnic in London for 1979-1980.

Since then, he has lectured in painting and drawing at numerous colleges of art in the United Kingdom and Australia, and was Head of Drawing at The College of Fine Arts, Sydney, from 2003 to 2012.

He has had thirty-six solo exhibitions in New York, London, Rome, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide.

Since 1978 he has been included in over 150 group exhibitions throughout Australia and overseas, including numerous museum and institutional exhibitions.

He is represented in public, institutional, corporate and private collections in Australia and overseas.

He currently lives and works in Sydney, Australia.

For a full CV, earlier works and studio archive visit:  
[www.kingstreetgallery.com](http://www.kingstreetgallery.com)  
[andrewchristofides.com](http://andrewchristofides.com)



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