

**B R E N T
W A D D E N
A B O U T T I M E**

B R E N T W A D D E N

A B O U T T I M E

**WITH TEXTS BY T'AI SMITH
AND NICOLAS TREMBLEY**

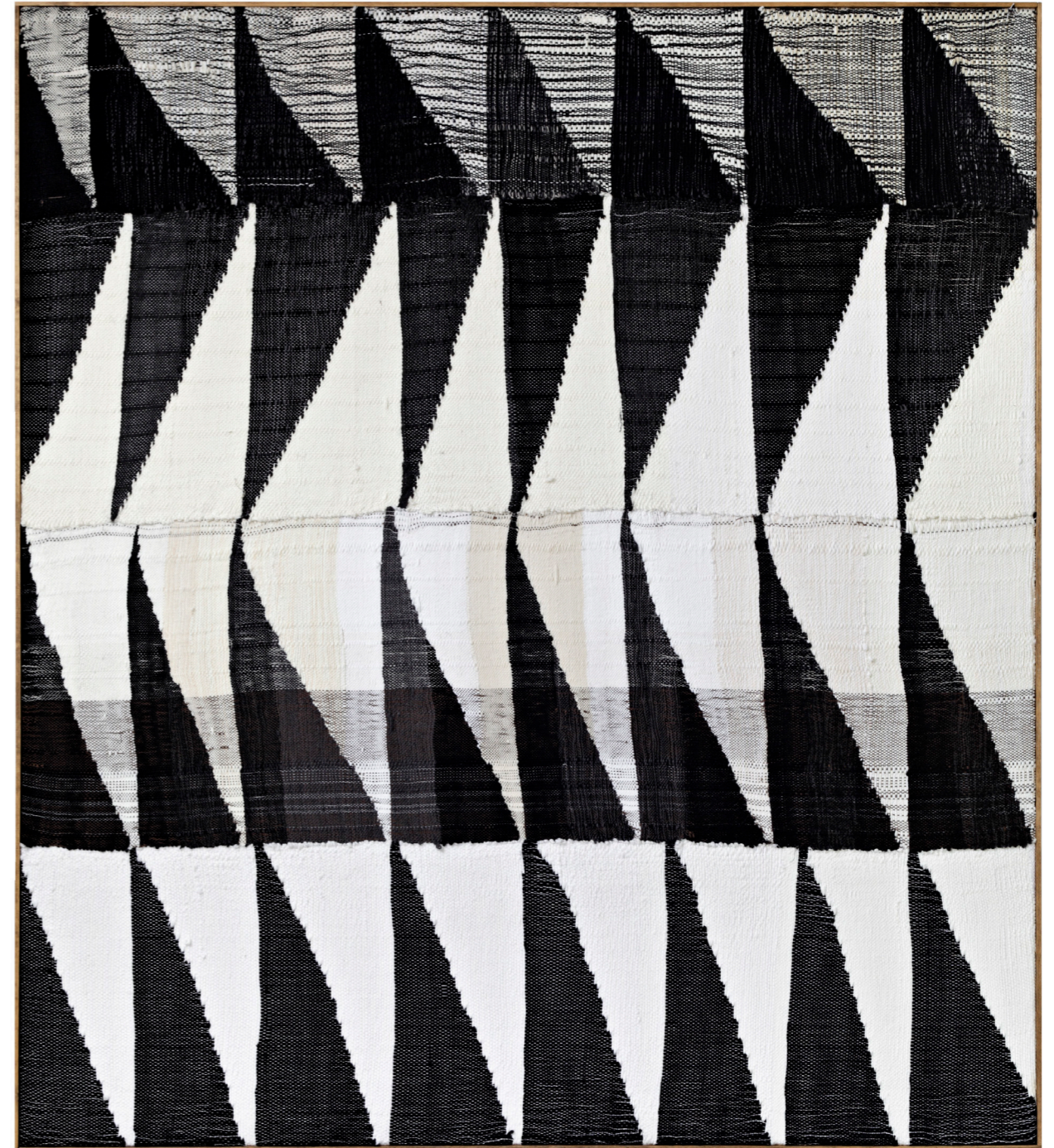
PERES PROJECTS

ALMINE RECH GALLERY

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

PACE GALLERY





Alignment #1, 2012
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
198 x 177 cm (77.95 x 69.69 in)

STRETCHING PAINTING: ON TENSION IN THE WORK OF BRENT WADDEN BY T'AI SMITH



Tensor One, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 180 x 180 cm (70.87 x 70.87 in)

Consider Brent Wadden's *Tensor One* (2014). A woven panel has been sewn to another panel and then together these panels are stretched and framed, so the work punctuates the wall like a discrete period on a page: full stop. But this work is also part of a sentence—a bigger grammatical structure, perhaps related to other works (like *Tensor Two* (2014)) with the same color scheme (always three colors). A particular pattern thus occupies a single, framed field, but then it stretches across, between, and among multiple iterations found in the gallery. A formal structure emerges from a series because we can determine the semantic unit: the diagonal, the triangle. The pieced-together squares of woven fabric thereby seem to form a single word or phrase that is also part of a bigger system. These surfaces bear the singularity of the typographical mark or word, and its structure—say, a language of the diagonal—that can be reconfigured and built.

Nevertheless, when looking around a room of walls filled with these stretched-fabric works, one gets the impression of a system gone awry. If this is a language, it seems, once in a while, to have lost sight of its syntax. Diagonals repeat in waves from left to right, from top to bottom; the system is based on these triangular units. But the modules are not determined by a logic so clearly defined in advance. Repetition is marred, irresponsible; the grain is jarring, inconsistent. If read like a sheet of music, across the field, the musician would lose track of the score: subtle mutations in the rhythm unfurl, falling out of joint.

The clarity of this diagonal-making system that Wadden has developed, adhered to seemingly endlessly in his process of weaving, is disrupted on two levels: first, in the grain—in the gradually displaced interlocking of thread joints, whose hazy angles refuse the clarity of mechanically generated forms; secondly, in the collage-like arrangement, the sewn-together fabric panels—as in *Alignment #52*



Alignment #52, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 236 x 200 cm (92.91 x 78.74 in)

(2015), where the piecing seems to reject a preconceived master plan even as its forms hold together through the strain of taught threads.

Perhaps it could be said most concisely in this way: Brent Wadden's works stretch and pull on opposing forces – at once material and conceptual, perceptual and logical. They yield tension.

1. A Categorical Conundrum

Wadden began his artistic life as a painter and continues, rather purposively, to define his current work with wool, cotton, and various synthetic fibers as “painting.” But what does this mean? How can this be so? For a work like *No. 1 (Dominion)* (2014) (pg. 89), he didn't set about choosing and mixing pigments. He hasn't used oil, gouache, or acrylic paint to posit lines, shapes, or fluid stains of color onto a substrate like canvas or wood. Instead, the artist has woven a flexible surface using differently sourced lengths of yarn – some purchased as leftovers, perhaps used and unraveled from old, knitted sweaters, some new – on a loom. Here, we are in the company of a textile, with all of its bumps and ridges, its interlocked joints and exposed knots – the flexible nature of this fibrous material further highlighted by Wadden's experimental procedure. Indeed, with *No. 1 (Dominion)*, the composition and surface are one and the same; the material field and the content of colored forms emerged together in the process of being built – line-by-line, layer of weft upon weft carefully shuttled through warp. The depicted triangles are literally entwined with the systematic intersection of threads; diagonal shifts of relative light and dark shades are artifacts of the material. In other words, unlike with painting, the physical structure that binds the fabric and the visual pattern of variable, intersecting triangles, are of the same ground.

In this sense, such an object could be said to belong to another category of art: tapestry. Putting aside its historical function (in the Renaissance) as insulation for drafty interiors, there are indeed overlaps in terms of material and procedure – the way shapes or “pictures” are formed in an otherwise perpendicular grid of warp and weft, the way the diagonals develop from gradually decreasing or increasing the relative length of differently colored threads. The threads, to be more precise, “interlock at the borderlines, either with neighboring weft threads that meet it or with warp thread, before turning back, after a change of shed, into its own field.”¹ Works like *GM 1* (2014) (pg. 60, far left) for instance, certainly relate to what Anni Albers would call “pictorial weaving,” referring to

¹ Anni Albers, “Tapestry,” in *Anni Albers: On Weaving* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), p. 66.

the kind of abstract, nonfunctional work that came out of the Bauhaus weaving workshop (which, having harnessed the principles of German Expressionist and Dutch De Stijl painters, was already a rather complex classification).²

And yet, defining Wadden's objects with the vocabulary of this particular textile field might, just as well, be inaccurate. While tapestry in its narrowest sense refers to a technique where the weft threads cover the warp completely (as in a Gobelin), and is most often created on an upright loom, Wadden's fabrics feature the warp in equal measure and were made through a process of trial and error on an otherwise inappropriate piece of equipment: a repurposed treadle loom bought off Ebay, or a laser-cut loom once given to him by "Action weaver" Travis Meinhof.³ I say "inappropriate" because better-trained weavers might have tied up the warp of the treadle loom to create patterns that are uniform throughout the surface of the fabric; they would have used such a loom more efficiently, by fully carrying the weft through the shed (formed by the raising and lowering of harnesses) and then, again and again, back and forth across the entire width. Or, as Albers did for her *Wall Hanging* from 1926, he might have used a complex method known as triple weave, where some threads are made visible, brought to the surface, while others recede (by permuted intervals) into the ground. Instead, for Wadden's single layered, plain-weave structures, he only ever shuttles the weft part of the way. He laboriously creates the diagonal, in effect, by misusing this apparatus—that is, by failing to take advantage of its economy of means. Moreover, what we are looking at is only occasionally a single piece of fabric. The surfaces are more often stitched together from two or more panels; as in *Alignment #53* (2015), they are collaged or pieced into patterns that further explode the principle of repetition so intrinsic to the textile medium—a condition that modernist weavers like Anni Albers, and more postmodern ones like Sheila Hicks, sought to exploit.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, where the selvages (sides) of tapestries and other hand-woven or off-loom wall hangings are invariably uneven, forming a curved edge against the wall and revealing the careful skill (or lack of skill) of the weaver's hand, the edges of Wadden's fabrics have been made rectilinear. His fabric has been stretched, as one would a piece of canvas, over and around a fixed, rectangular armature; and in the act of stretching a flexible network of threads—threads that are otherwise malleable, foldable—this surface has settled

² See T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

³ Wadden began weaving in 2009 after introducing himself to self-described "action weaver," Travis Meinhof in Berlin: <http://actionweaver.com/> (accessed Aug. 25, 2015). Meinhof introduced Wadden to some basic technical principles and gave him his first, laser-cut, DIY loom. Wadden fashioned this item (and then another like it) into a backstrap loom to weave his initial, smaller panels. Only later, in 2012, did he acquire the larger, four-harness treadle loom.

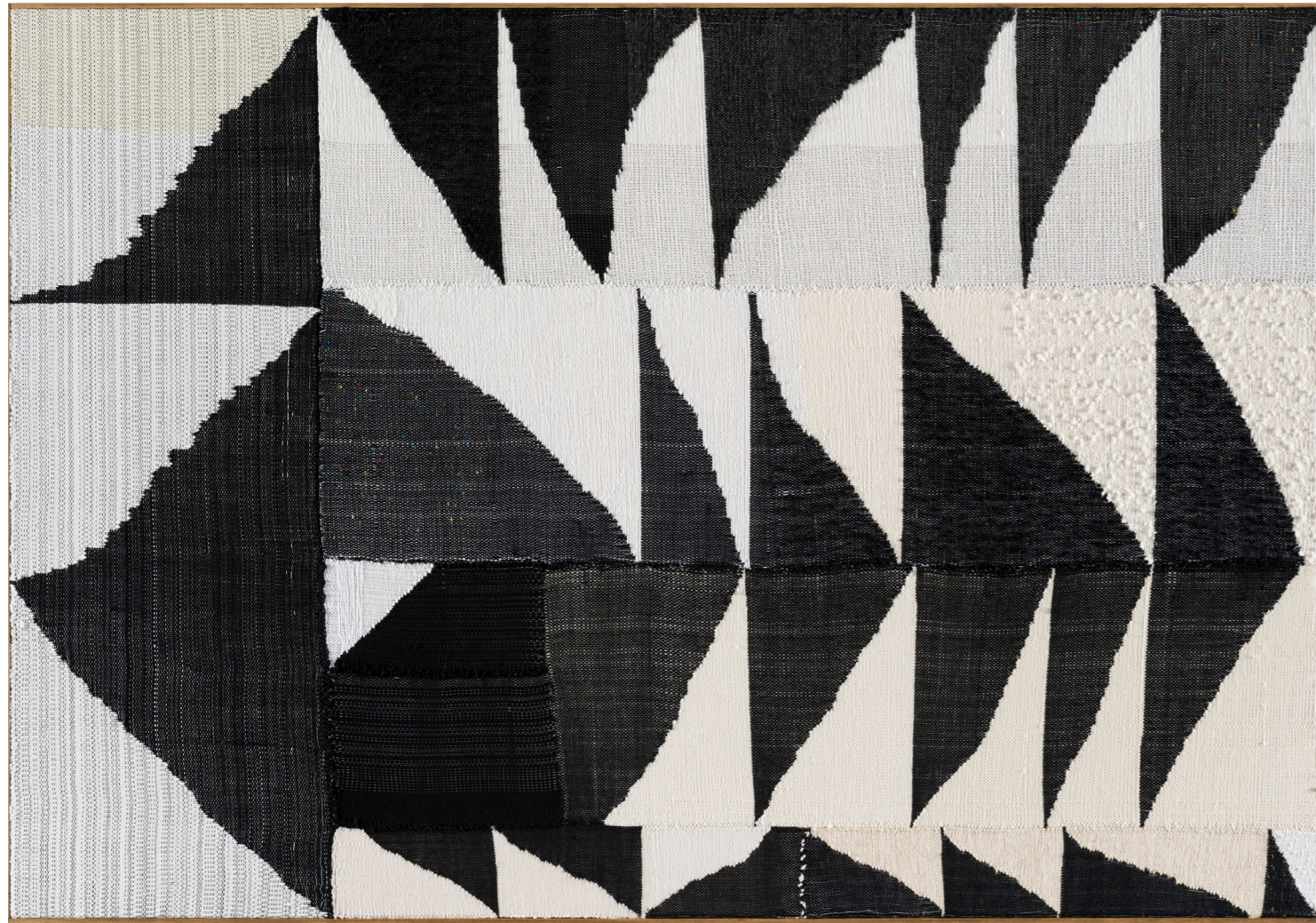
into a discretely defined entity. In its transfer from the loom to the stretcher, in other words, *Tensor One* asserts itself as a field of contained forms, a perfectly delineated (or framed) structure. It has thereby become a painting.

Still, in this "settling," there remains a categorical tension. For even as these forms are framed, they are also, as I've noted, found within the very matrix of the weave. While looking at *Alignment #54* (2015), on the wall, the distinction between what we see as a composition of formal, abstract shapes and the physical structure that holds it all together is indeterminate. What Wadden's work reveals, we could say, is a categorical paradox. His medium is neither tied to the material, nor is it fully dependent on a subsequently assigned category; its literal and discursive frames, its rectilinear support and his nominal act both do and don't match up.⁴ Having "combined the technology of one with the formal characteristics of the other," as Lawrence Alloway once remarked of a certain development in the 1960s, in which painting began to cross over into sculpture, Wadden's work both physically and metaphorically traverses from one medium to another.⁵ That is, in tautly wrapping the fabric around an armature, in becoming a painting and then returning to a fabric as we get closer to look at its surface, the object stretches the limits of what we still, in 2015, strangely cling to as discrete categories.

The argument here has begun with some rather formal observations. Formalist, even. The emphasis is on the limits of painting, but also not. On the category of tapestry, but also not. On the work's materiality, but also its concepts. On the

⁴ David Joselit has used the term "network" to describe recent developments in painting that are conceptually motivated and that often cross into performance or digital media—like the work of Jutta Koether, Wade Guyton, or Cheyney Thompson. In this case, Joselit argues, painting is not a medium, dependent on a specific material. Rather, they "visualize" the ways in which they are part of "networks of distribution and exhibition." Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): p. 125–134, 125.

⁵ Lawrence Alloway, "Introduction," *Systemic Painting* (New York: Guggenheim, 1966), p. 21, n. 8. It is important to keep in mind, however, that such a nesting of one medium in another did not first develop in the 1960s. It has a prehistory in modernism—for example, in photography, where the material may have been light, lenses, and celluloid, but its formal vocabulary was painting. So an image by Alfred Stieglitz could be defined as "pictorial," with trees framing a classically composed, misty urban scene, while a photo by László Moholy-Nagy could be abstract, like a painting by Kandinsky, with a subtle use of light and shade and the flat arrangement of geometric shapes. Or, even earlier, when stacked up layers of ceramic tiles across a nineteenth century building facade were apparently based on a textile principle. This is what Gottfried Semper in 1860 called the *Bekleidungsprinzip* (the dressing or cladding principle). Indeed, the textile as "the *Urkunst* or primordial art," Semper argued in 1860, accounts for the migration of styles and patterns from material to material. (The textile, in this sense, was the original, transmedial medium.) Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Santa Monica: Getty Research Institute, 2004).



Alignment #55, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 170 x 243 cm (66.93 x 95.67 in)

visual patterns, but also the tactile-material surface. It is impossible to determine which category has precedence. Wadden's work, we might conclude, figures a dilemma from the critical terrain of the 1960s, as specific media moved toward their dissolution. This history's tensions can be found in the work's texture.

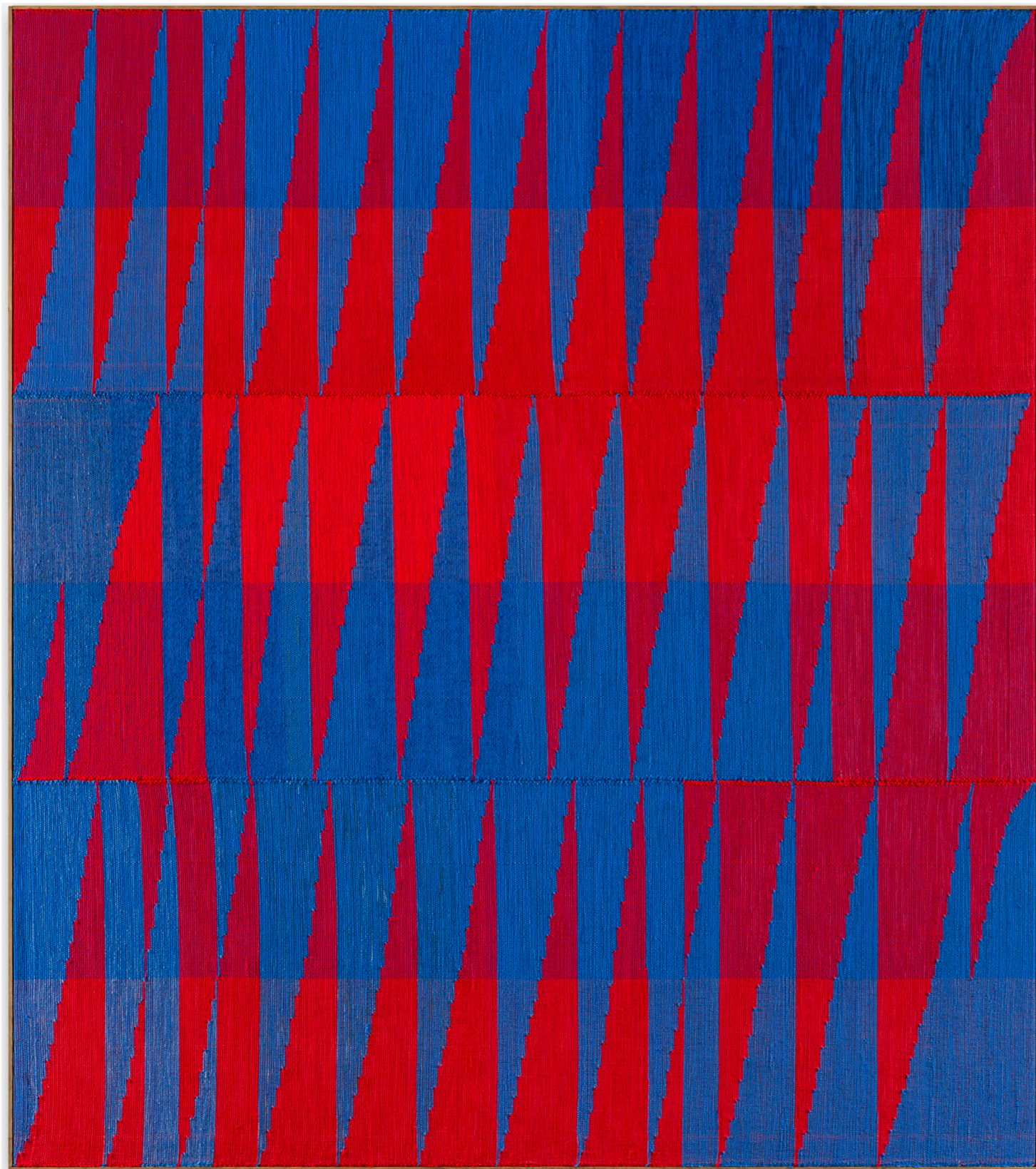
2. Literal and Depicted Shape

Wadden's work bears some reference to a particular, visual lexicon and history: American abstract painting of the 1960s—a vocabulary of interchangeable, geometric shapes, of "hard edges" that accentuate lines between light and dark, of images that are often serial in nature.⁶ Having developed a relatively discrete set of formal elements and a consistent technical strategy, his work enters the gallery as a series of related compositions. In 1964, Clement Greenberg used the term "Post-Painterly Painting," referencing the terminology of Heinrich Wölfflin, to describe the new, minimal vocabulary and method of staining that countered the gestural work of 1950s Abstract Expressionists. In 1966, for an exhibition he curated at the Guggenheim that year, Lawrence Alloway nominated this development "Systemic Painting" in order to account for the overlap of formal and conceptual (or systematic) procedures. And that same year, in response to an exhibition of work by Frank Stella, American critic Michael Fried described a logic in which a painting's "shape" became its "form." All of these sources could be drawn on to grasp how Wadden's work fits in this terrain: his participation in abstraction is indeed "post-painterly"; his choice of the diagonal pattern is (and isn't) conceptually determined by the physical apparatus in advance; these stretched and framed works are both three-dimensional and flat; they ask us, on some level, to consider the shape of the canvas as a formal principle.

For the time being, however, I would like to focus on a dialectic that played out in two essays by Michael Fried: "Three American Painters," from 1965, and "Shape as Form," from 1966. For it is in these pages that the narrative or fabric of abstract painting in the 1960s unravels into two competing threads. Or rather, it is here that we witness the eruption of materiality and "tactile metaphors" in what Fried determined to be its "sheerly optical" spatiality.

Putting aside Fried's antipathy to anything three-dimensional, "literal," or "theatrical" (as in transmedial), let's imagine for a moment that any tension between formal and material modes is what the critic was getting at when he

⁶ According to Lawrence Alloway, the term "hard edge" was first used by California critic Jules Langsner. But "the purpose of the term, as [he] used it in 1959-60, was to refer to the new development [in painting] which combined economy of form and neatness of surface with fullness of color." Alloway, p. 13-14.



Red/Blue #4, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 268 x 236 cm (105.51 x 92.91 in)

lauded Frank Stella's *Irregular Polygon* series. (We could even note that Wadden and Stella similarly collapse, to use the critic's terminology, the distinction between "literal and depicted shape.") According to Fried, "literal" would refer to the irregular, physical shape of Stella's substrate, and the latter to the patterns painted using acrylic resin on the surface. Thus, Fried wrote of these two types in Stella's work:

[N]either kind of shape enjoys precedence over the other—neither sponsors nor guarantees the other's efficacy as shape—any more than either the depicted or the literal limits of a shape that partly coincides with the edge of the support are experienced as more fundamental to that shape's efficacy than the other. Both types of shape succeed or fail on exactly the same grounds—grounds that do not concern the relation of a given shape to the shape of the support seen in its entirety. Each, one might say, is implicated in the other's failure and strengthened by the other's success.⁷

Addressing his reader—someone whose "conviction" Fried apparently expects to "compel" through the taught logic of his argument⁸—he invokes the literal flatness (materiality) of the support only to dispel its centrality. For Fried, like the late Greenberg of "Modernist Painting," the medium is no longer tethered to the flatness of the support.⁹ It is now vision or opticality itself; the question of "form" has become the abiding principle of painting. Yet such a condition is complicated, it also seems, by an apparent contradiction that erupts at the level of experience. While writing of Barnett Newman's work and influence on the 1960s generation of painters in the earlier essay, a curious moment emerges in which the critic notes a troubling overlap:

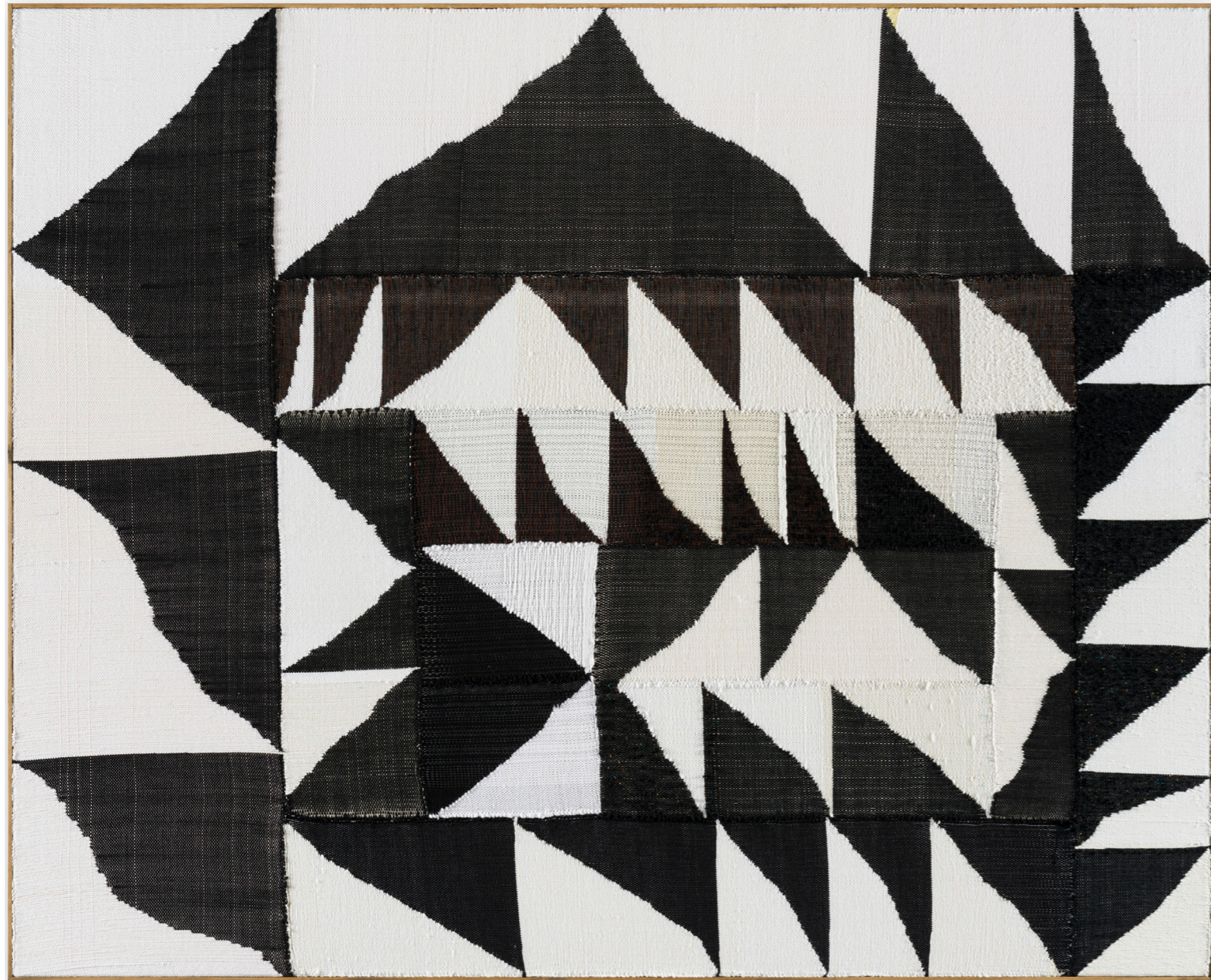
[A]s we gaze at the blue field in [Barnett Newman's] *Cathedra* we feel it begin to give way, to yield—palpably, as it were—to the probings of the eye; we have the sensation of entering a medium with a certain specific density, a medium that offers an almost measurable degree of resistance to eyesight itself; in short, we are driven to characterize our visual experience by means of tactile metaphors.¹⁰

⁷ Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 90.

⁸ Fried often uses the phrase "to compel conviction" in his writing, by which he means that a painting or his criticism must adhere so completely to its own, internal logic that an observer or reader is convinced, like a mathematical proof, of its value. Specifically, he cites Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* when discussing his methodological system. See Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," p. 1.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Michael Fried, "Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella" (1965), in *Art and*



Alignment #53, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 203 x 248 cm (79.92 x 97.64 in)

Fried ultimately declares that Newman's work provides a space in which any "illusion of spatiality" is no longer a tactile illusion—one that suggests the "possibility of literal, physical penetration."¹¹ Instead, it is "sheerly optical"; it provides "a space addressed to eyesight alone." And yet, at the same time, the work appears to yield to a phenomenological, palpable experience—one that is tactile, or at least laden with tactile metaphors. And this is partly because, as Fried admits, "individual senses such as sight and touch do not open onto separate spaces, hermetically isolated from one another, but...on the contrary, they open onto the same space."¹² Nevertheless, Fried explains, there is a "surprisingly simple" answer to this logical conundrum. For with Newman's "zips"...the beholder is faced with a complex situation in which his responsiveness to tactility and tactile space has been aroused but not allowed to come to a definite conclusion, as the illusive optical space that seems to lie beyond the vertical bands also, in some way or other, effectively subsumes them."¹³ Thus, in the work's "'deductive' relation to the framing edge," there is an "explicit recognition of the physical characteristics of the picture support," an "assertion of flatness," of tactile materiality, but also, as the experience of the painting progresses (whether this happens temporally, or immediately, is unclear), there is a shift from an illusion of tactile depth "in the direction of an increasing appeal to vision." All tactile connotations no longer "compete with opticality" but are rather subsumed by it. We are, Fried claims, left with a purely optical space.

Now, if I draw a comparison between Newman or Stella (as described by Fried) and Brent Wadden, it is because there is a similar tactile-optical dyad at work. But such a dyad has been put into radical reverse. With *Tensor One*, for instance, it is as though the tautness of Fried's mathematical logic has exploded into shards, and then reconvened, crystallized into a layer of sharp threads. The contradiction that Fried notes and attempts to overcome is now held in tension in Wadden's fabric.

In *Alignment #14* (2013) (pg. 27), for instance, the outline of a shape is not determined by a carefully controlled design in an otherwise fluid medium. Instead, it is the result of a hazy illusion. It is built up from a gradual stacking of widthwise edges that butt up against other widthwise edges. Here, verticality is produced from horizontality. Directionality takes place at odds with itself. And

Objecthood, p. 232.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fried continues: "If that were not the case, the things with which eyesight brings us into contact would exist only for the sense of vision and not for any of the others. But if that were so, they would lack the fullness of being, the complex, ponderable reality which objects in the world self-evidently possess as we encounter them in experience." Ibid., p. 232.

¹³ Ibid.

bumps and visible knots once in a while disrupt the otherwise strict lines that define triangular forms – the jointing of threads is imperfect. The rigidity of the geometric edge is marred by the attempt of threads to adhere to the logic of the grid. So we see the lines move, even if they don't, and the lines appear to pulsate or breathe. The matrix is coming together, only to fall apart. Ironically, it is only when Wadden introduces a kind of thread with the most texture (what is called "Bouclé") that a section or shape from a distance appears flat, most starkly white. (This is because the warp threads have been rendered nearly invisible.) But on closer inspection, the heightened fibrousness of the thread declares its physicality, its texture. As one moves in and out, closer and further away, the grain of the "canvas" reasserts itself as material, and then recedes, as form.

Thus, in a work like *Tensor One*, Wadden at once makes use of hard lines and subtle gradients – granular textures that return us to the physicality of the weave. Perhaps somewhat like Newman's zips or Stella's polygons, to exploit Fried's terminology, Wadden's canvases collapse the division between what we see as a composition of depicted, abstract shapes and the literal, physical shapes that have been built into the material fabric. But if they collapse, it is also because they are always on the verge of slipping. The formal pattern is perpetually subsumed by the (tactile) matrix, and vice versa.

3. Conclusion: Granular Synthesis

Weaving is a procedure that involves the stretching and pulling of threads until they are taught. Threads are fundamentally "submissive," as Anni Albers would say. It is only through the use of heddles, harnesses, and reeds that they are made to conform to a relatively stable grid. Off the loom, however, the fabric once again becomes malleable and soft: it can be folded and stored, it can wrap around a body, be cut into different shapes and sewn into a complex topology – say, a shirt or coat. But what Brent Wadden does is to fix this loom's grid, to hold the physical and metaphoric tension of the woven textile in suspension with the stretched canvas of painting.

And it is in this taught space that Wadden's work synthesizes a historical moment – one in which abstract painting sought to explore, and dissolve into, other fields. In its apparent simplicity and economy of means, this work forces the threads of that moment to meet head on, to form a clash, a resonating buzz of terms. The respective vocabularies of painting and fiber seem to divide and rejoin together – forming what the field of music would call a "granular synthesis," in which grains or samples of sound (or, we could say, historically determined gestures) are spliced and reconvened into a reverberating "cloud."

Thus it is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that Wadden often cites the work of Agnes Martin – or rather, Martin's tangential connection to the



Alignment #54, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 274 x 228 cm (107.87 x 89.76 in)

contemporaneous field of fiber art, which also developed throughout the 1960s.¹⁴ In other words, his work draws on a relationship: the way Martin influenced a generation of weavers and fiber artists, and a certain weaver by the name of Lenore Tawney who, occupying a studio next door to the painter at Manhattan's Coenties Slip, may have influenced Martin's curiosity about the structure and grain of her canvas. The artists were close friends and, in 1961, both titled one of their works *Dark River*, suggesting the coincidence of their media with one another – that is, they expressed the condition of happening at the same time or place or being identical. Indeed, as Lynne Cooke notes, in Martin's essay on Tawney's weaving for a short brochure, the painter may as well have been speaking of her own work: "it can be said that trembling and sensitive images are as though brought before our eyes even as we look at them."¹⁵ Since the 1970s, the division between craft (say, the world of weavers and knitters) and fine art has increasingly ceased to matter as much as it did then, in the 1960s. But as Wadden shows, with the re-emergence of textiles over the last few years, this division is unraveling once again, and being set into tension....¹⁶ And such a tension, his work suggests, may once again (or already) be found in the canvas grain.

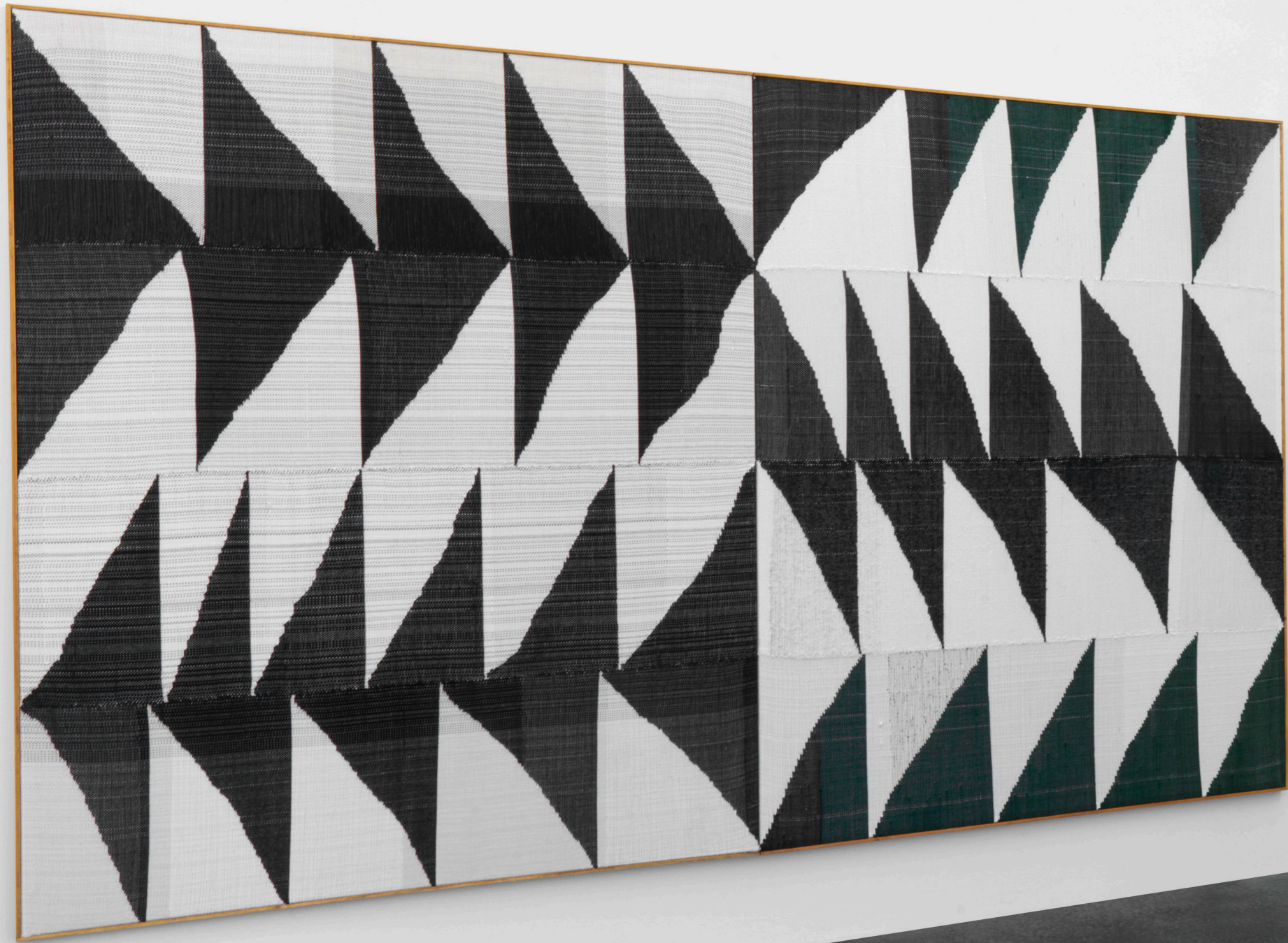
¹⁴ The development from tapestry to the field of Fiber Art was traced in the American context in three exhibitions, curated by Mildred Constantine, from MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design, and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen: *Wall Hangings* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969); *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972); and *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981). In the latter two exhibitions, however, the comparison was made more to sculpture, not painting. For a recent assessment of that work and those exhibitions, see Jenelle Porter, *Fiber: Sculpture 1960 Present* (Boston: ICA, 2014).

¹⁵ Agnes Martin, cited in Lynne Cooke, "...in the classic tradition...", in *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia, and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 13.

¹⁶ Several exhibitions dedicated to the topic of textiles, tapestries, and fiber art have been on view in Europe in the past several years, including *Social Fabric* (INIVA, London, 2012), *Decorum* (Musée de d'Art Moderne, Paris, 2013), *Hollandaise* (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, 2013), *TEXTILES: OPEN LETTER. Abstraktionen, Textilien, Kunst* (Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, 2013), *Kunst und Textil* (Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, 2013-14), and *To Open Eyes: Art and Textiles from the Bauhaus to Today* (Kunsthalle Bielefeld, 2013-14). Most of these have been interested in the metaphoric, conceptual, and political potential of textiles, but most especially their ability to exploit the intermedia condition and of contemporary art.



ZWANG, 2015. Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas. 269.5 x 211 cm (106.1 x 83.07 in)

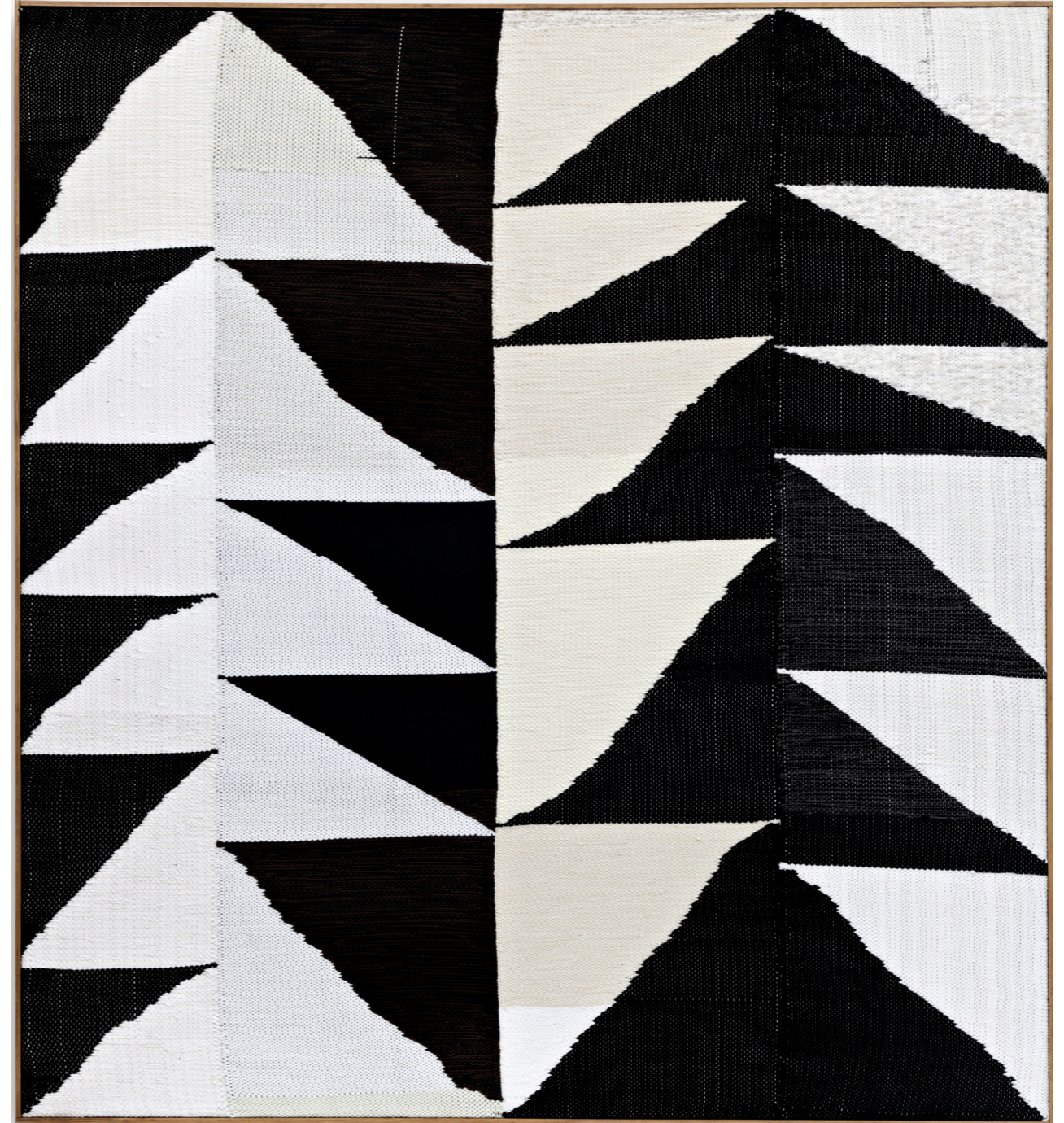




Alignment #18, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
180 x 190 cm (70.87 x 74.8 in)

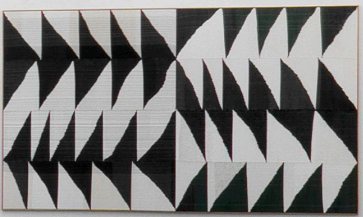
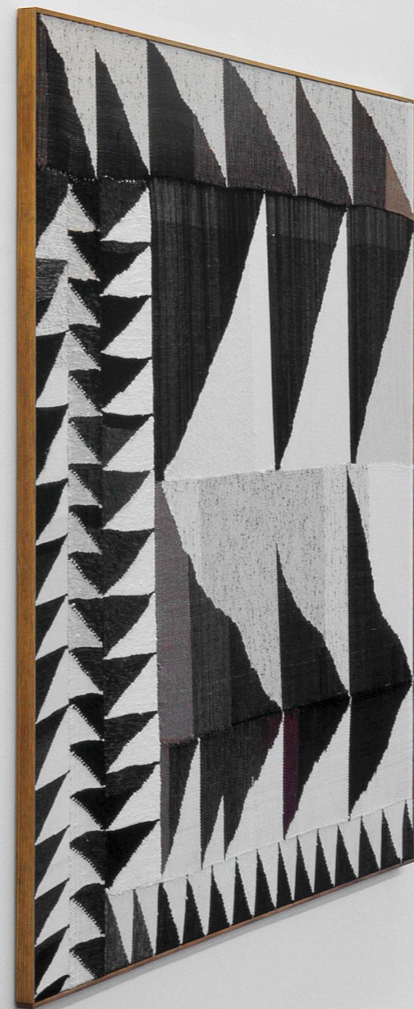
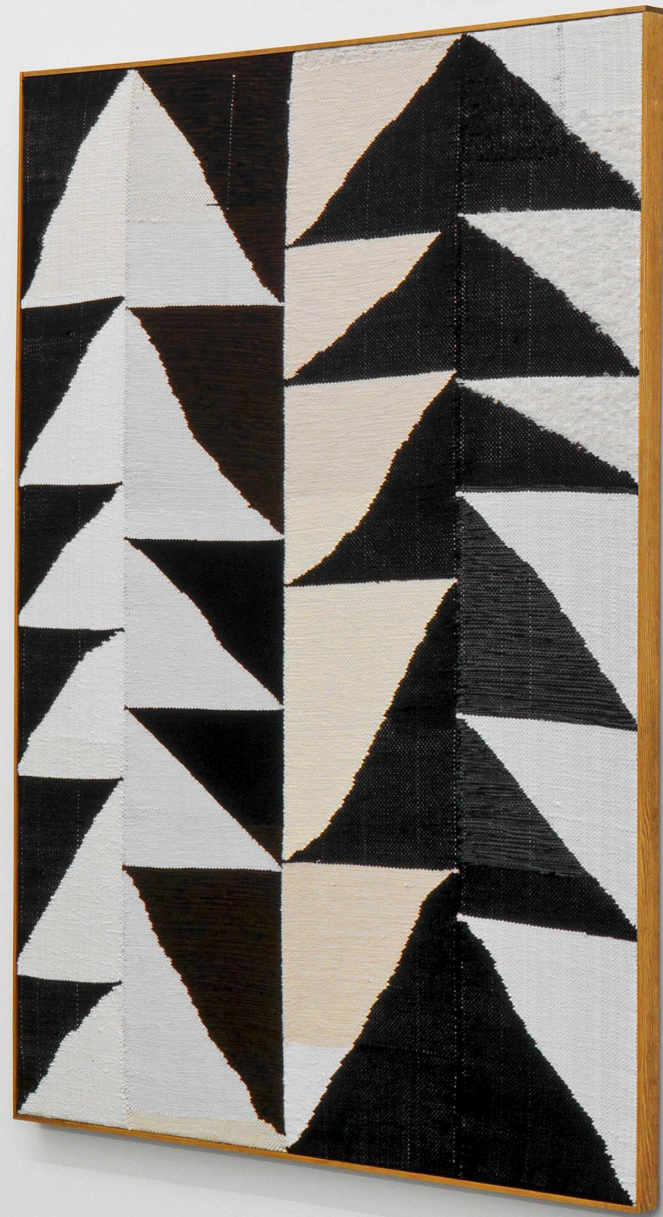
Alignment #14, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
200 x 165 cm (78.4 x 64.96 in)





Alignment #16, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
185 x 170 cm (72.93 x 66.93 in)



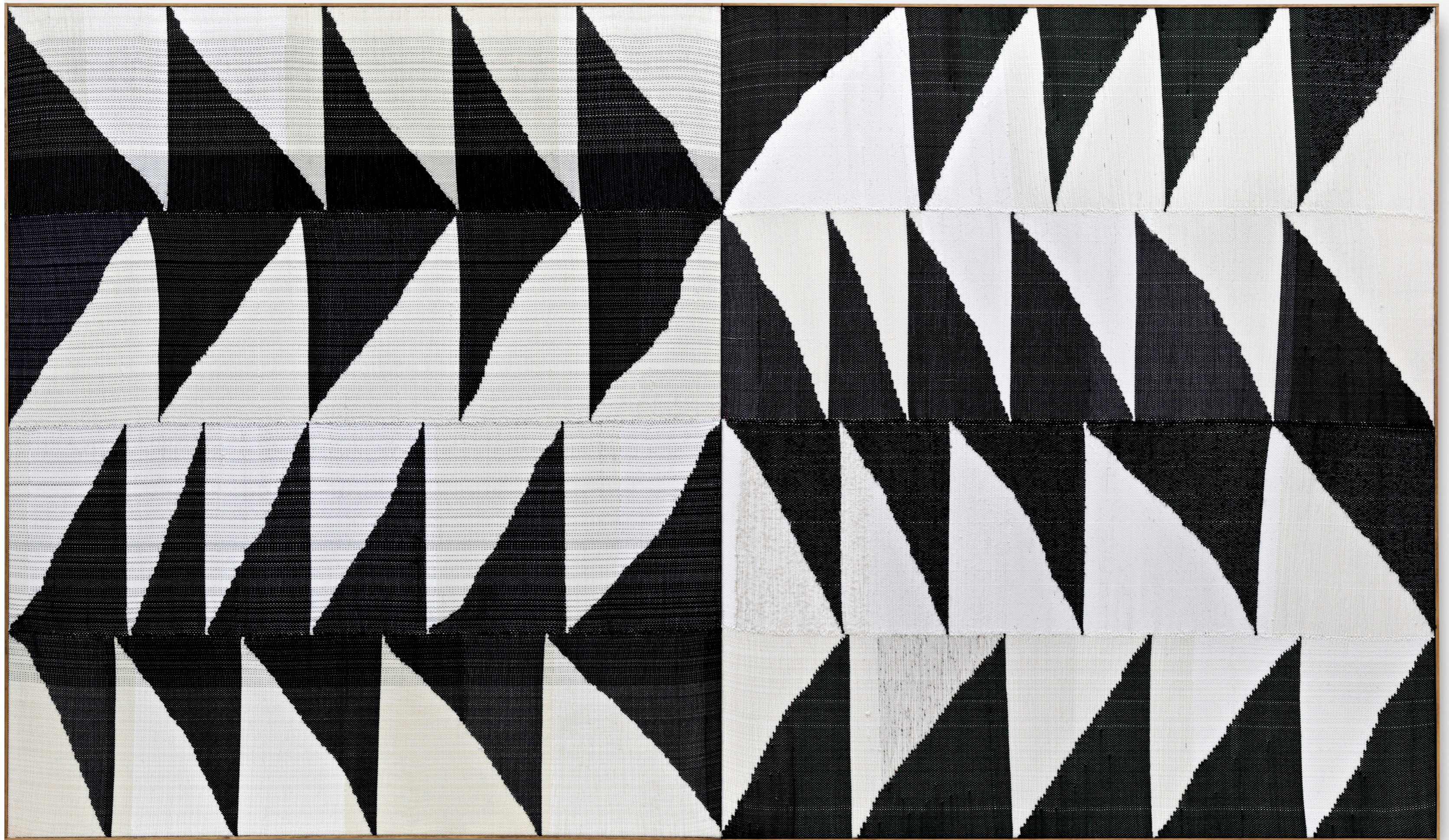


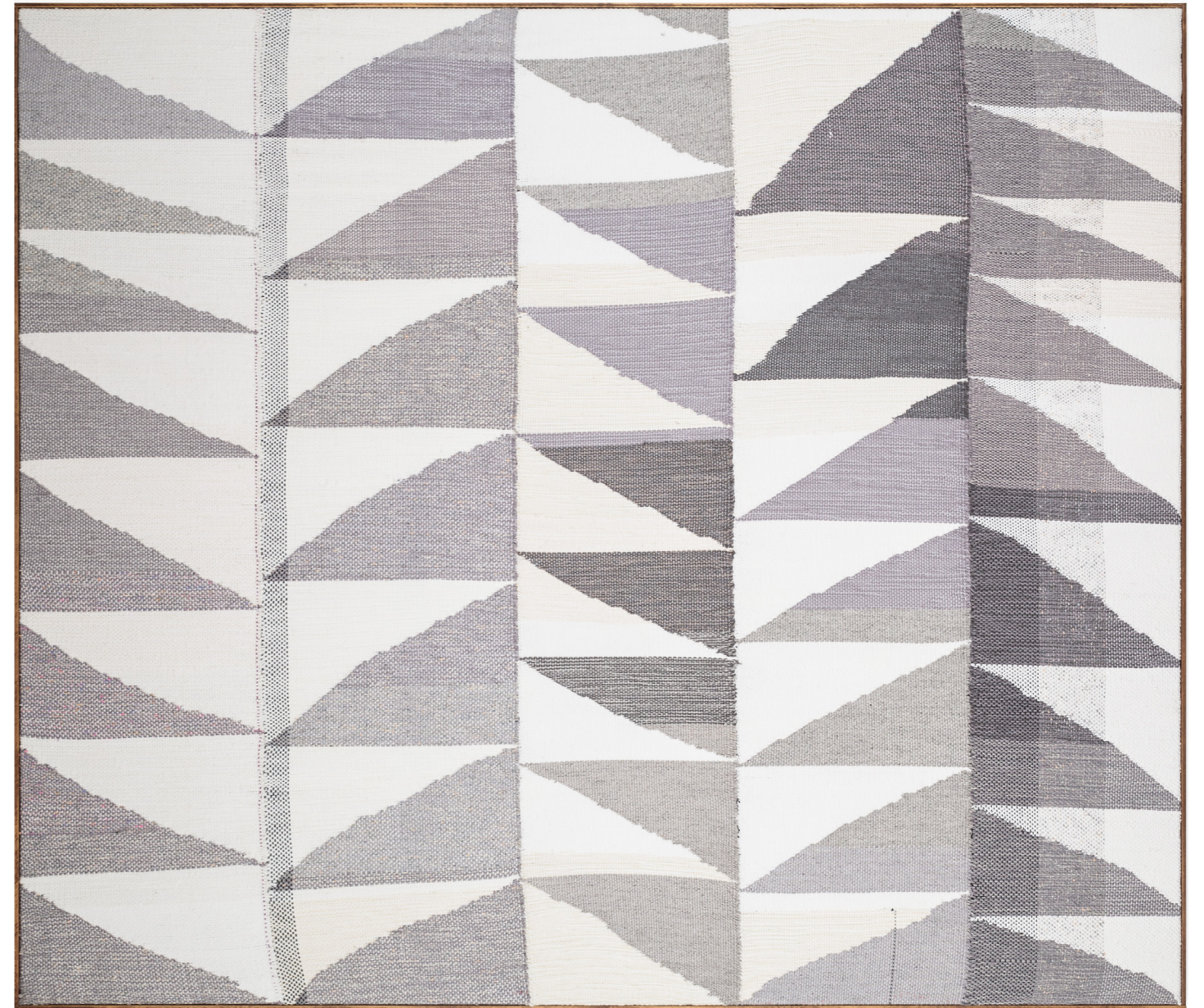






Alignment #23, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
185 x 215 cm (72.83 x 84.65 in)





Alignment #8, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
182.9 x 213.4 cm (72 x 84 in)



Studio view. Berlin, 2015

BRENT WADDEN IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLAS TREMBLEY

A studio visit is always an insightful moment. It is here that we often discover the universe of the artist, disconnected from the white cube where his oeuvres are typically presented to us. It is here where we listen to the music the artist plays while he works, where we get a glimpse of the books which guide his thinking, etc.... Here the works are treated differently, as if desacralized. The artist is here with "his work" and diverse elements of inspiration. Brent Wadden has a studio of this kind in Berlin, where he now lives. He is in solitude, discrete, and produces his time intensive works by himself, weaving, line by line.

We spent hours speaking about his unique and insular background and family upbringing in an island economy off the coast of Canada. Fed by folk art, Wadden elaborates on his distinctive practice which, though it happens to coincide with a resurgence of craft in the context of contemporary art, nevertheless feels unattached to any particular movement. This interview summarizes the days of conversation we shared in June, 2015.

Nicolas Trembley: We are here in your Berlin studio, surrounded by woven works in various stages of completion. Can you tell me a little about your process and how you began making this body of work?

Brent Wadden: I did a residency in Newfoundland, the island next to the island where I'm from, and I proposed to learn how to weave. In Germany I bought a broken loom on eBay out of curiosity. It came in pieces and it sat in my studio for a year before I really became interested in learning how to do this process. I didn't really have the time or the energy to dedicate to doing it, so I applied to do this residency and bring this broken loom to Newfoundland and spend the month figuring out how to weave.

Even before that, I did a small weaving project. There was an American weaver who was living in Berlin who I reached out to. He gave me a very tiny laser cut loom, which I worked on for a month or two. It's just a piece of wood with some holes stuck in it and



MASTER OF NONE. Installation View, Kinderhook & Caracas. Berlin, 2011.

some strings that are mounted on two different pieces, and you put your back on one end and that keeps the pressure. You hook it onto one side of an object and then you use your body to pull the tension. This was the starting point. All of my first weavings were made this way with the back loom, including the first ones, which were shown in Paris at Javier Peres' booth at FIAC. In Newfoundland, I spent the whole month weaving and made a group of small textile pieces. Six months later, I started oil painting and I made a comparative show with the oil paintings and the weavings in a small Berlin gallery called Kinderhook & Caracas. Two friends run it, Chris and Sol. They are both artists and I've known them for a long time.

NT: What was the relation with the weaving and your oil paintings? How did you display them?

BW: About a year before I started oil painting, I started weaving... I like the tension of having both of them in the same room, and the language that exists or is created by having both of paintings and weavings. Most people would consider oil painting a high art or high craft, whereas weavings one might consider as lesser. Textiles can just be installed on the floor, or wherever, and people don't tend to respect them as art. It's more of a disposable medium, and I wanted to create a dialogue in the gallery space between the two mediums.

In that first show, the weavings were hanging. From the wind created by a viewer going through the weavings, they'd slowly spin and made... I see it almost as a kinetic drawing. The composition was continuously changing and it also opened up these gaps for viewing the paintings as the weavings moved. After the first exhibition that I made with the oil paintings and woven panels, I took the panels and sewed them together to make larger two-dimensional pieces. I've done a similar version of that exhibition three or four times. I would either add to the pile of weavings or make new oil paintings for that exhibition, or there have been times when I put the weavings together and then they went to a gallery. Most recently I made twenty-five or thirty new small panels, and from those panels I have made four new pieces. They have a double life. They've already been exhibited as individual panels and then afterwards, they are sewn together to make new works.

NT: Three or four years ago you did your last oil painting. Why?

BW: It's hard to do both paintings and weavings at the same time because the way that you think about a process like painting is messier and it's hard to have paint and yarn in the same room. It's also a different process and it's smelly. When I sit here to weave, I'm there all day working. With painting you're spending more time thinking and looking instead of actually physically doing the work, the labor. It's less labor-intensive, but you have to think a lot more. The good thing about weaving is that when you're done you don't need to think about it... I'm not making decisions as I'm going along or thinking,

"Oh this is the wrong composition." There's no going back. You're already ahead of that part and you can only go forward. With painting you add layers.

NT: You never go back with weaving?

BW: No, you can't. I mean you can undo it, but it doesn't make any sense. If I make a mistake I never go back, but in painting if you don't like something you can just cover it over in a second or scrape it off. The two things do not go together for me right now. I would like to spend the time to start painting but I would need many months to get into that groove of starting over and I don't know where I would start now since it's been paused. I don't know, maybe I'd start right where I left off. But maybe that seems backwards...

NT: You also stretch hanging weavings. When did you start this process?

BW: It felt like a natural progression for the works to use them in a different way, and at that time I would always take the weavings out and lay them on the floor into different compositions to imagine what it would be like to make a two-dimensional piece. But at the time I had nowhere for large works to be shown. Peres Projects gave me the opportunity to exhibit works, which I wouldn't have been able to show before because I didn't have the space to hold a work of that scale. The weavings were so flexible as small panels... I could roll them up, put them into an IKEA bag, and store them under my desk. Now I have been framing everything. But at the moment there's some work that I feel like I could not frame, or maybe they don't need it.

NT: You frame them yourself. Was the idea to frame them similar to when painters traditionally used to frame their own work?

BW: Yeah, it is a traditional way of framing for painting, but in the beginning I started doing it that way because it was quicker and a lot easier to do it myself instead of sending the work to a framer. I usually don't have that much time to wait for a work to come back or I don't want to wait. I usually work to the last minute. I hardly ever have a work in the studio... I stretch them right before the show and then they go into the exhibition and I never spend time with them. It's nice to have some around for a few months, like I do now. When you stretch a painting, it's not just about building a frame and wrapping it around. The composition can completely change when you stretch it—a line of color could be two centimeters further down than the rest of the color stripe. That is a mistake that I may make, but if I send it to the framer and see that mistake later, I would probably be disappointed in it since it was not how I expected to be. There are always these problems that arise as you are stretching them, and you need to make the decision of where the tension should be more or less.

NT: What do you call the weavings now—do you call them paintings?

BW: That is the label that has been on the stretched weavings. They're displayed as paintings, but with my first exhibition the weavings were free hanging in the space as a sculpture, so it was hard to label it. I would just call them textiles or weavings at that time, or panels, whatever. It was a nice dialogue that came out of the exhibition, because people would come in and they would automatically choose a side to be on. They might automatically dismiss the paintings to be not relevant or not interesting, but the weavings, they could just be weavings. People would come in and say, "The weavings are in the way of the paintings. I want to see the painting by itself... I don't want to have all this stuff in the way."

NT: When you weave, do you know exactly what you're going to do? There is a sort of triangle form, which is a very recurrent motif in your work...

BW: It depends. With the individual panels I am usually just doing the same pattern over and over again, but there's variation in the patterning. Sometimes when I'm putting the panels together it either matches up or it doesn't, and sometimes there are holes in the works where I would fill it and make a panel that would specifically fit into the artwork. With the larger three panel works, I need more of a plan and I have to make sure that I have enough material. I usually make a small sketch and a loose composition where I know that one side's going to be light and one side's going to be dark. The striped pieces are quite measured and refined compared to the swoopy, triangular works. If each stripe needs to be one foot and to match up with the second panel, I need to have some kind of grid structure that can be consistent throughout the work.

NT: You said you do patterns on paper for the big pieces?

BW: Yeah. The multiple panel pieces are drawn with a small sketch first. The alignments usually do not have sketches. In the beginning, I would do a few because I didn't want to repeat myself and I want to see the different formulas that I could come up with for the piece, but I wasn't following the pattern strictly.

NT: You always weave yourself?

BW: I do... I have somebody that's been helping me sew the works together, but it does not feel comfortable having somebody make the decisions in weaving.

NT: No, but you could maybe ask some atelier to do it for you?

BW: I'm not interested in that.

NT: Why not?

BW: Lots of people work in that way but I'm less annoyed by my own mistakes than I would be by somebody else's. It feels more important to me to have my own hand in all of the decisions I made in the work.

NT: You make a lot of mistakes?

BW: Yeah, the works are completely filled with mistakes.

NT: What do you call mistakes?

BW: I guess they are more like inconsistencies... I think when a real weaver or someone who has been trained as a weaver sees my work, they are probably very irritated or annoyed. I don't fully know how to weave, so I'm coming at it in a naive way, which is fine. Visually, they are more interesting to me than having a very consistent surface. I've never intended to become a real weaver and use such skills. Although I am learning, it's more about how to do things more easily and more professionally. But it was never my intention of learning all of the techniques in a traditional manner.

NT: Where do you find your material?

BW: In Canada, I'm looking on Craigslist and Kijiji for people who are not using their yarn anymore and want to sell it. I've had some pretty big scores outside of the city. I normally drive for an hour, which is great. Sunday adventures. You'll pick up all this yarn from the seventies or eighties, from somebody's grandma, or from somebody who's stopped weaving, and they'll sell it to you very cheaply. I've acquired huge amounts of material, and I still have tons of stuff in my studio in Canada. I'm still trying to use it up. When I came back to Berlin in April 2015, I sourced all of this is new material, which I bought on eBay. It's refuse, used old yarn. As I'm collecting it, I need to wait until I have enough to actually make a piece. That is also part of the process, collecting material. Right now, I know I have enough red or purple to make a work.

NT: Why do you use old yarn? Is it a question of economy or just because the fibers were better before, or that the colors were different?

BW: No, it's not about the color. I think it's more about the way that I live. Whenever I am looking to buy something, I will look for it secondhand before buying it new. Recycling is a way of living where you just look to buy something from somebody else instead of going to a shop, or ordering something from a distributor. I'll buy yarn that is new but I always try to mix in older or used material as well because it changes the surface, and the texture, and to make a work that is 100% new, and acrylic or something, it has such a different energy, rather than having all of these random materials thrown into the mix.

I need to have enough of the material, or be strategic. It's hard to describe unless you're actually making the weaving yourself, but I will only have so much dark gray, and once I get to the certain point at the top of the work I have to then save enough to transfer the color over into the second panel. This is where the magic happens. The thing is, as you cannot see what you are doing. You only see one foot in front of you as you are weaving.

NT: You can't see what you do?

BW: It's all on a roll. I can only see one foot of the work in front of me, and then it rolls ahead and it's gone. Everything is tied together. I won't see it again until I take all it off, and that may be a week or two later.

It's great to continually learn, but it's not my intention. For the works, having the mistakes and the messiness and the inconsistencies also corresponds directly to my paintings. There are always these mistakes within my paintings, like if I run out of a color or something, I would just mix another color and not be so concerned about it being very thorough. I feel the same way with weaving. It happens all the time naturally now because I don't know the proper techniques. If a string breaks or I get these weird lines within the weaving, I accept those mistakes, whereas a production weaver, if they have a line in their blanket or something, they would probably be upset by it.

NT: Is the idea of the new works with vibrant color more accidental or does it depend on what you find on eBay?

BW: In the beginning, it felt hard for me to start bringing in colors because it's so easy for somebody to walk into a show, and maybe pick one work because they like the color red, or they don't like the color blue. That was one of the benefits of only working in black and white, compositionally you can just see it. It feels more of a refined idea. You eliminate that decision from somebody to think, "I don't like red". You can't complain about the color; you may only focus on the composition and the form, and the process as well. Once you add color into it, it almost becomes more Op Art or visually powerful.

NT: Over the past few years there has been a resurgence of exhibitions with textiles. It seems as though there is a new context for it.

BW: I have no idea. I was not aware of it, and I feel like I'm still not part of that scene. I have never been included in those shows; I feel like I'm not on their radar and it's not so common to see a weaving in a gallery context...At least I don't see it. There are a few weavers that I'm aware of what they're doing, but I don't see it so often. I think the first one was that show you organized, *Mingei: Are You Here?*



Mingei: Are You Here?, Installation View. Curated by Nicolas Trembley. Pace New York, 2014.

NT: *Mingei: Are You Here?* was not especially about textiles...

BW: It was not. Though I think folk craft in general has also risen. As with ceramics—there are so many artists working in ceramics right now—works are being created that look very handmade and rustic.

NT: What's your feeling regarding this resurgence of craft in a time where we have the most exciting new technological tools?

BW: Both are happening at the same time. There's so much art that is being made by, let's say, computers or three-dimensional printing. All the post-net artwork is happening, which can be hard for many people to accept as art, but perhaps they are more conservative or refined in their ideas of what art could or should be.

NT: Tell me about your interest in the Quilts of Gee's Bend created by women who live in Alabama.

BW: They used leftovers of material to make their work and the composition is very free. They don't follow a structure that was predetermined. Gee's Bend uses mostly old clothing, jeans, or old fabrics, but when pieces are produced, they don't have a feeling that everything looks older or previously worn. Their work informs me because even these artists who are working in numerous panels, must have some kind of structure or plan when they attach numerous pieces together in order to have some consistency between the panels. I happen to make sketches for the larger pieces, but it still becomes abstract once I'm weaving them.

NT: The outsider art is also something you have interest in, like the art of Maud Lewis, can you explain how important is for you and why her?

BW: She's the most famous folk artist from Nova Scotia. So much so that they have her entire tiny house on permanent display in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia! It's really amazing to experience. It's no bigger than 200 square feet and covered inside and out with painted flowers, birds and colorful, beautiful motifs. They say she had never seen art before and just started out by making postcard sized paintings at the age of thirty and sold them to tourists from her house for a few bucks a pop. It's sad but also very romantic that she is only getting this kind of recognition after she died.

NW: Those two references are important for you—can you explain in which way folk art is important for you?

BW: There's an honesty in both the art and the artists that I admire. They create without any inhibition or predetermined ideas of how art should be, and present it such a way that is so outside of how art is typically seen... like doing full on installations in their yards

or garages etc. You can drive right into someones yard without an appointment and look around and it's always a pleasure to meet the artist. It's very intimate. It's all word of mouth but they will sometimes put up a sign on the road saying "art" or "folk art". I love how DIY it is. Last summer my girlfriend and I went on vacation in Nova Scotia and visited as many artists as possible. We were lucky enough to find two old Barry Collpitts nude sculptures, one of a mermaid and another holding up a cloud, my most prized possessions besides a few screen prints by Dorothy Iannone that I've acquired over the past few years.

NW: How does it connect to where you are from?

BW: I grew up on an island on the east coast of Canada called Cape Breton Island. It was a mining town, but in the eighties, all of the mines closed and it was economically depressed... I was born into that situation. My family is in the fishing industry, a typical working class family. It's an interesting island because there's the industrial part of it where I am from, where there's forestry and fishing and coal mining, and then in the eighties all the industries disappeared and there is a more affluent side of the island as well. We used up all the resources and so everything crashed and people were just left on the island... all these working class people that ran out of work. The companies all left, because they were American companies or British companies, whatever. You had all these people waiting around for jobs, and they still are. I grew up in a very bad economy where people would hoard things and never let things go. You would always think you could use it one day.

My mom was into quilting of course and knitting, those kind of craft practices. But with weaving, whenever somebody from my hometown finds out I'm a weaver, they're like, "Oh my grandmother still has the loom in her house." It's a common object. Most people would weave dishcloths or a rug for their floor, usually something more utilitarian. Occasionally,

NT: What was it like to grow up on the island? Is there still an aboriginal population there and you feel your work is related to Aboriginal art from the East Coast of Canada?

BW: There are probably 200,000 people on the island. Then there's the more affluent part of the island from where I grew up called the Highlands, which is more beautiful... People came to the Highlands in the sixties and seventies, and they were mostly draft dodgers and artists from America. It feels way less desperate on that other end. You have people that are living on this other part of the island like Richard Serra and Philip Glass. It's straight up from New York, so it's very easy to drive there, so people summer vacation in Atlantic Canada. Atlantic Canada is made up of a few provinces like Newfoundland, P.E.I., Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. New Brunswick is huge, and it hugs the coast. But

at the end is Cape Breton Island. There's a causeway that goes across, so you don't need a ferry, so you can still access it very easily.

Aboriginals are still there, like the Mi'kmaq tribe. The communities are all very segregated though and their craft is not so present... not in the way it is on the West Coast of Canada. On the West Coast they are much more visual and have Totem Poles and a lot of traditional weaving, but in Nova Scotia it was not so present. Some say that my work is related to it, I've never said that, but people like to make that connection of being a Canadian artist, because it's weaving and it's very simple to conclude, "It's from aboriginal arts and crafts."

There are also French towns there, who trace themselves back to the settlers who went there. It is technically bilingual at a certain point in the Maritimes, the signs will have both English and French, and you can see certain towns in my region that are completely French. French fishermen are still living there; it's not ghettoized but is just segregated communities.

NT: So the connection is not there for you? For example, do you feel more comfortable when your work is related to music than to craft?

BW: I do a lot of the crafts, which intersect with Aboriginal culture for sure, but I've never made that direct connection with my own work. I am more interested in the reference to the "back to the land" movement and hippies that went to Canada who use weaving as part of their daily routine. I would never intentionally take an Aboriginal reference point or use it as a reference point for my work. I respect the cultural meaning of aboriginal crafts and the way it deals with their spirituality and rituals. For me, to just commodify it and to sell it in a gallery does not seem right.

For me, my work is more about patterning, and rhythm, and always making a mistake at some point throughout it. It's not a mistake if you purposely do it but there's a rhythm that happens, and there's a format in which you think. There's a formula that I'm using in each piece but there's always a mistake that exists in the work, which I allow to happen. I feel I'm more connected to music than craft but I'm not making art about music.

NT: That being said, I feel like there is a kind of spirituality in your work. Is this something that has always interested you?

BW: It was, but it's less of an influence these days. In the mid 2000's I was thinking a lot about how our auras or energies affect others and vice versa so I was trying to convey this in a series of portraits that were made up of numerous circles, each one expelling colorful geometric patterns in all directions. I was fascinated by the films of Kenneth Anger at that point, so when I discovered the work of Hilma af Klint and Augustin Lesage, who were both directly working with the occult and spiritualism, it was a natural match.

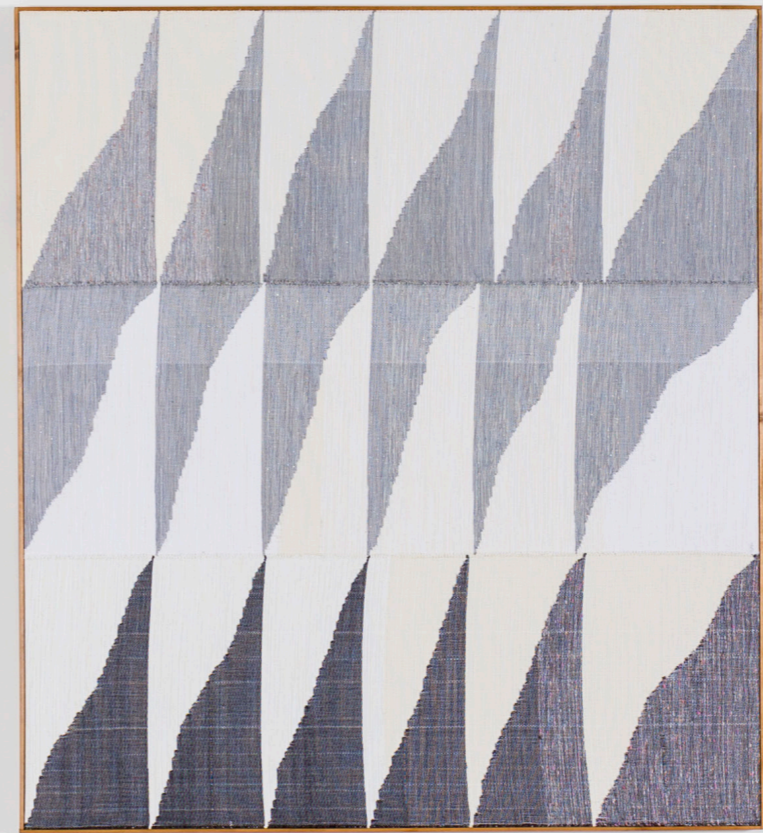
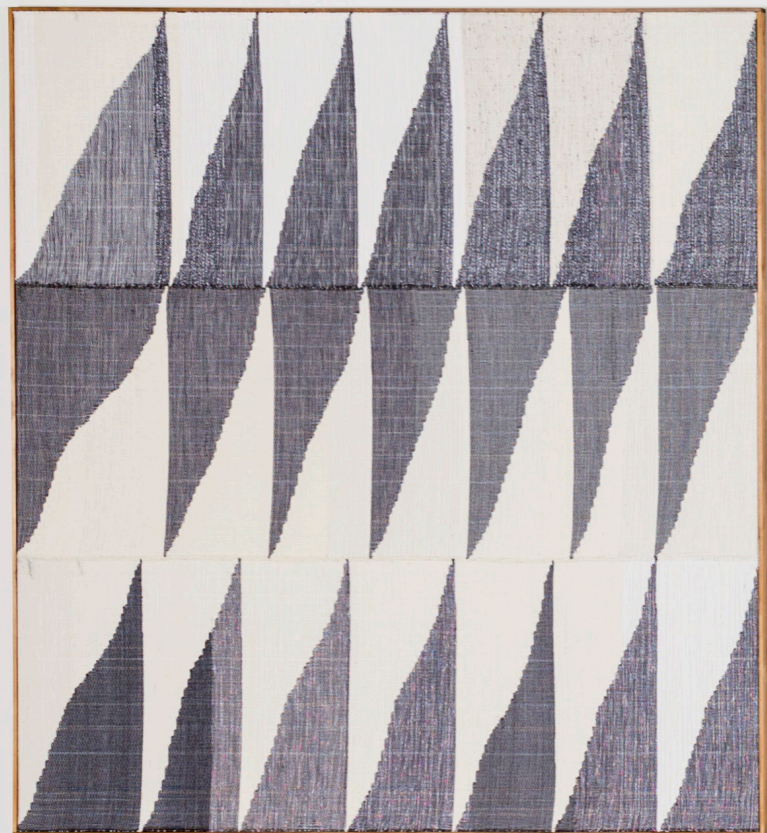
Around the same time I was doing some research about the Meditation Room in the United Nations headquarters in NYC, which consists of a large geometric abstract mural by Swedish artist Bo Beskow and a six-and- half-ton rectangular block of iron ore that sits in the center of the room. The space is meant to provide a quiet place for contemplation that can be used by anyone regardless of their religion. That really struck me, not only because it looked like a great exhibition, but because it had this other function. With this in mind, I produced my first installation of hanging weavings in St. John's, Newfoundland in February of 2011.



Mingei: Are You Here?, Installation View. Curated by Nicolas Trembley. Pace New York, 2014.

Alignment #34, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
223.5 x 173 cm (87.99 x 68.11 in)





Navy, 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
255 x 215 cm (100.39 x 84.65 in)

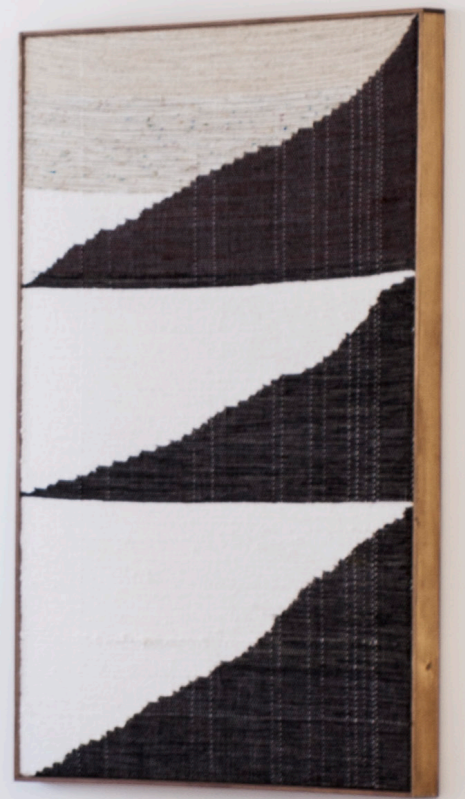
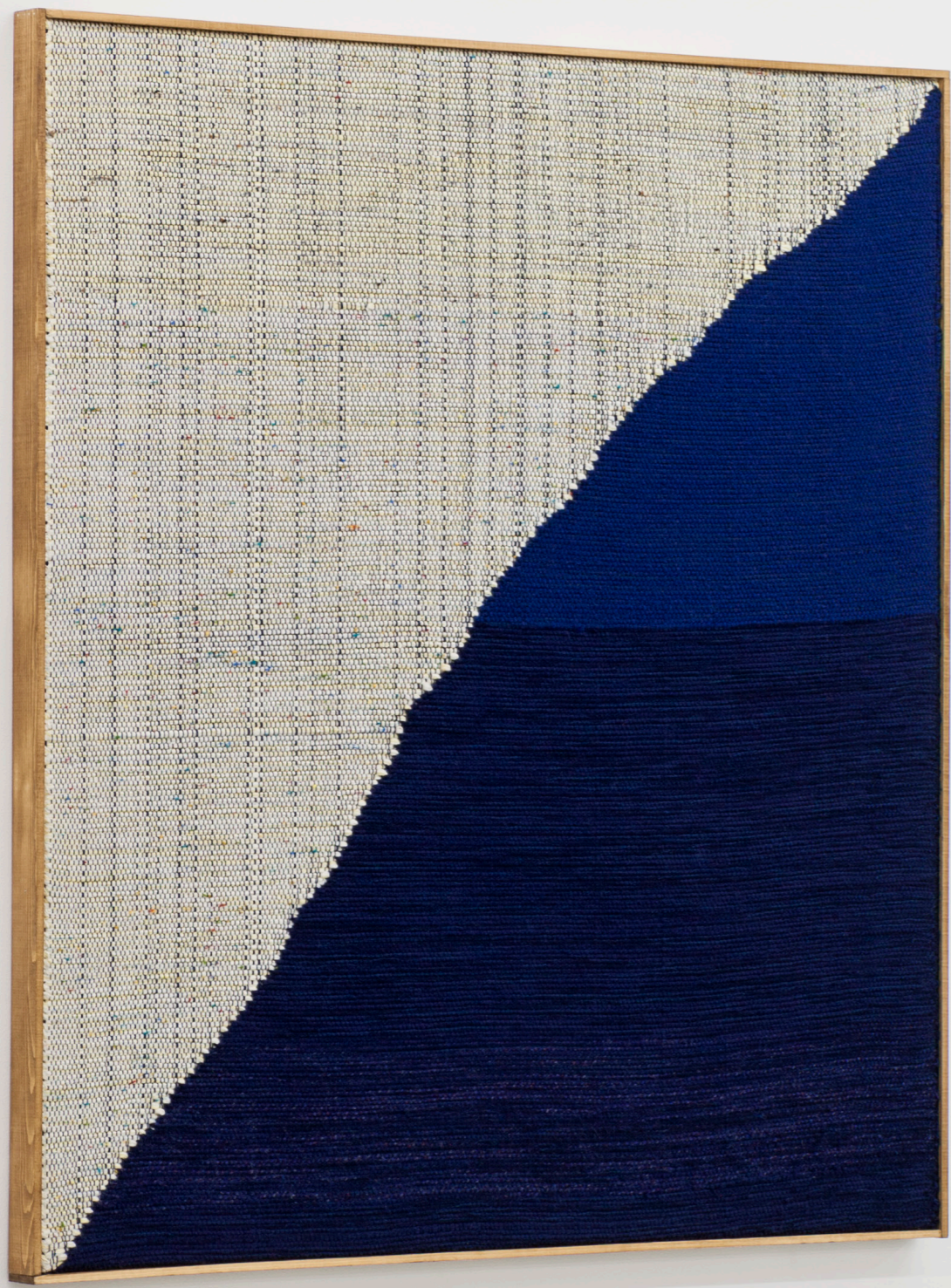


Big Red, 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
255 x 195 cm (100.39 x 76.77 in)

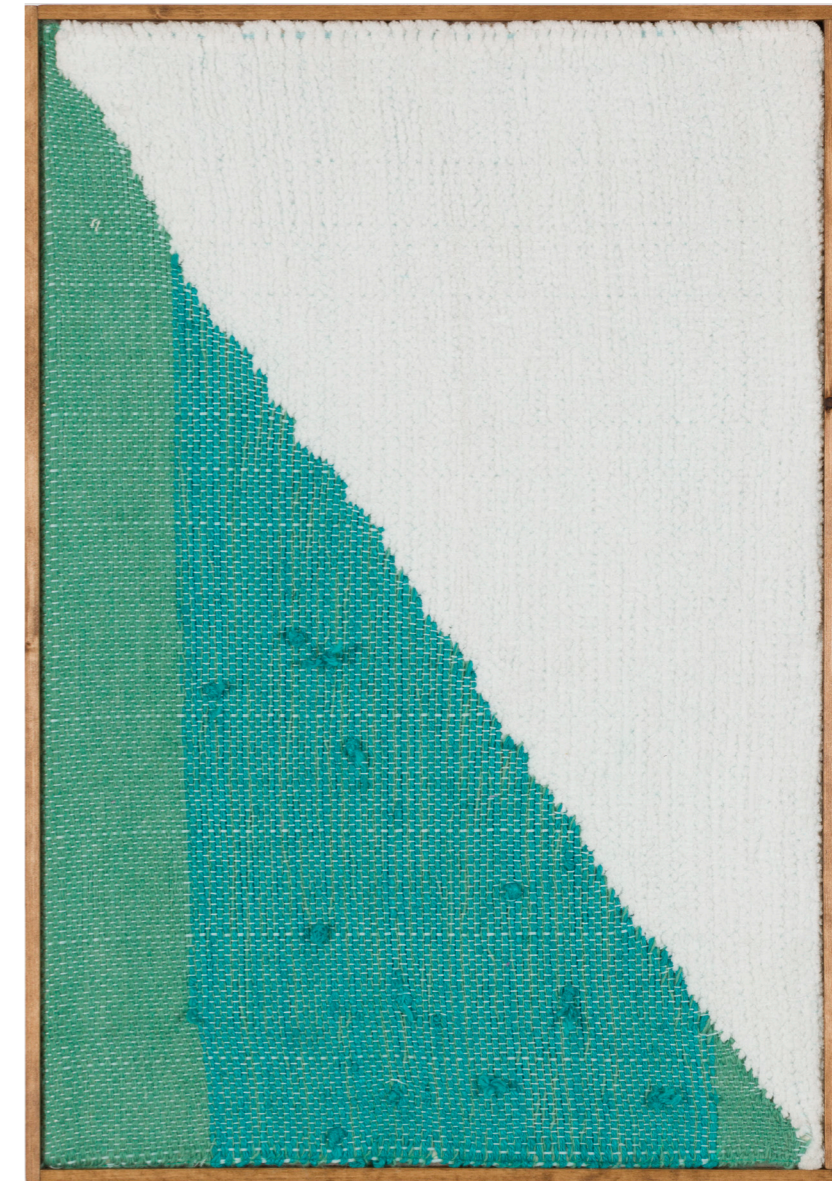


Alignment #35, 2013
Hand woven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
195 x 215 cm (76.77 x 84.65 in)

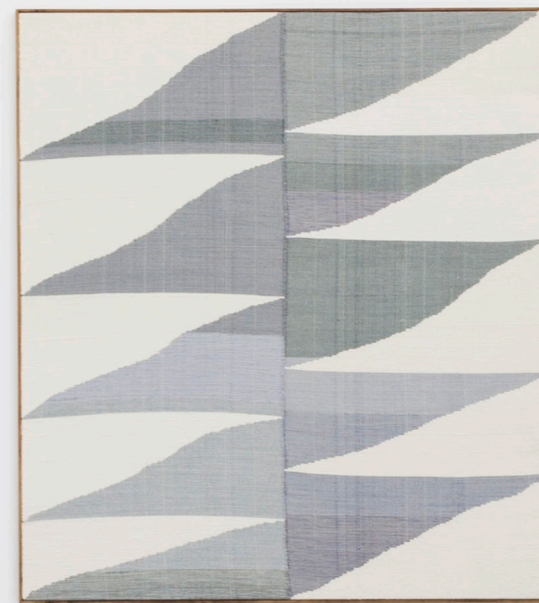
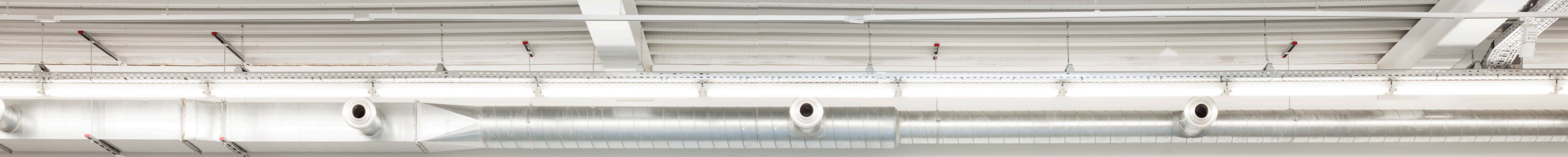


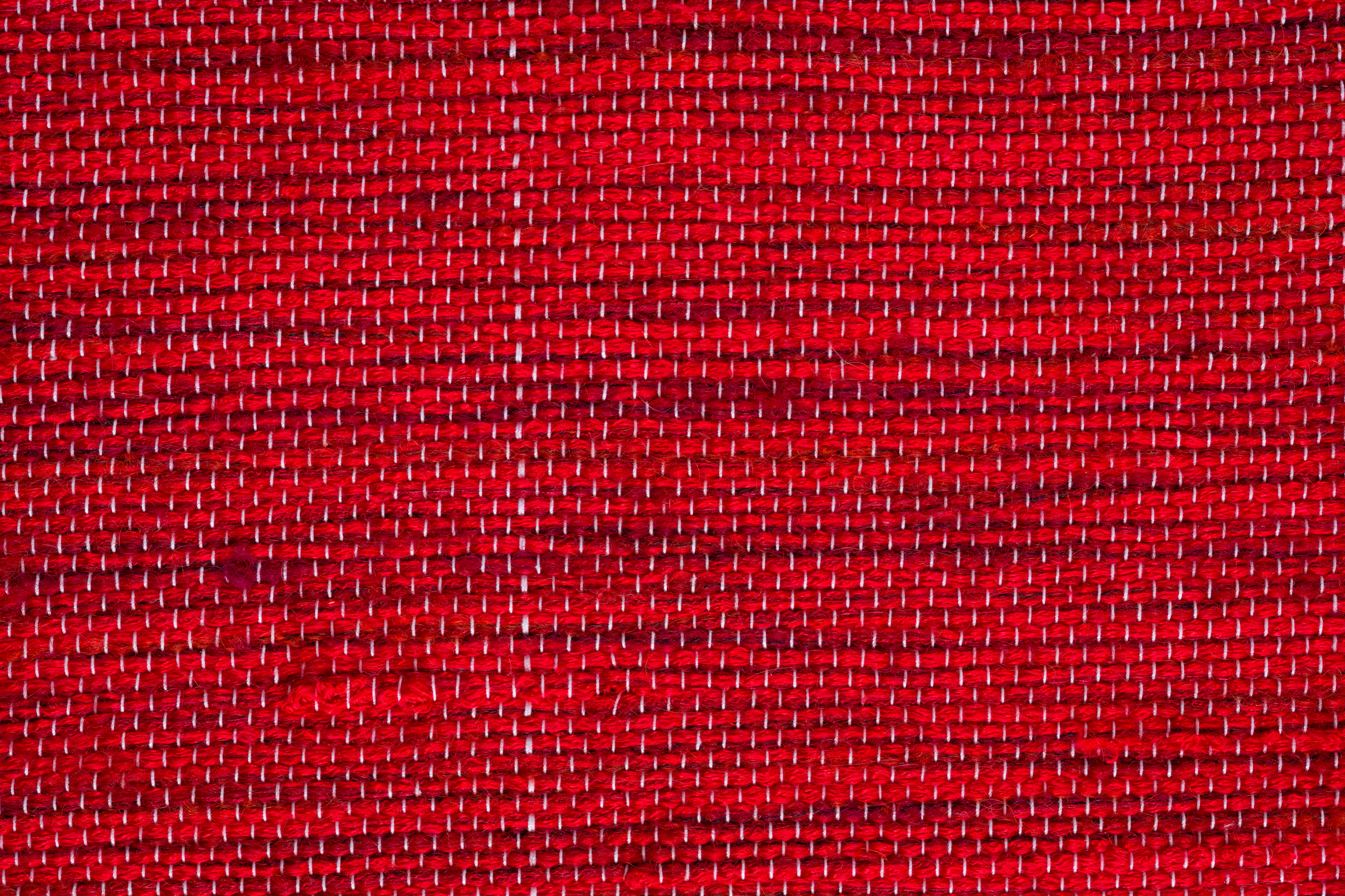






Single (Knotty Green), 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
61.6 x 56.6 cm (24.28 x 22.28 in)







Medium Double Double (Red), 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
182 x 182 cm (71.65 x 71.65 in)





No. 2 (Table Head), 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
268 x 227 cm (105.51 x 89.37 in)





No. 1 (Dominion), 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
269 x 210 cm (105.91 x 82.68 in)





No. 6 (Donkin), 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
268 x 227 cm (105.51 x 89.37 in)

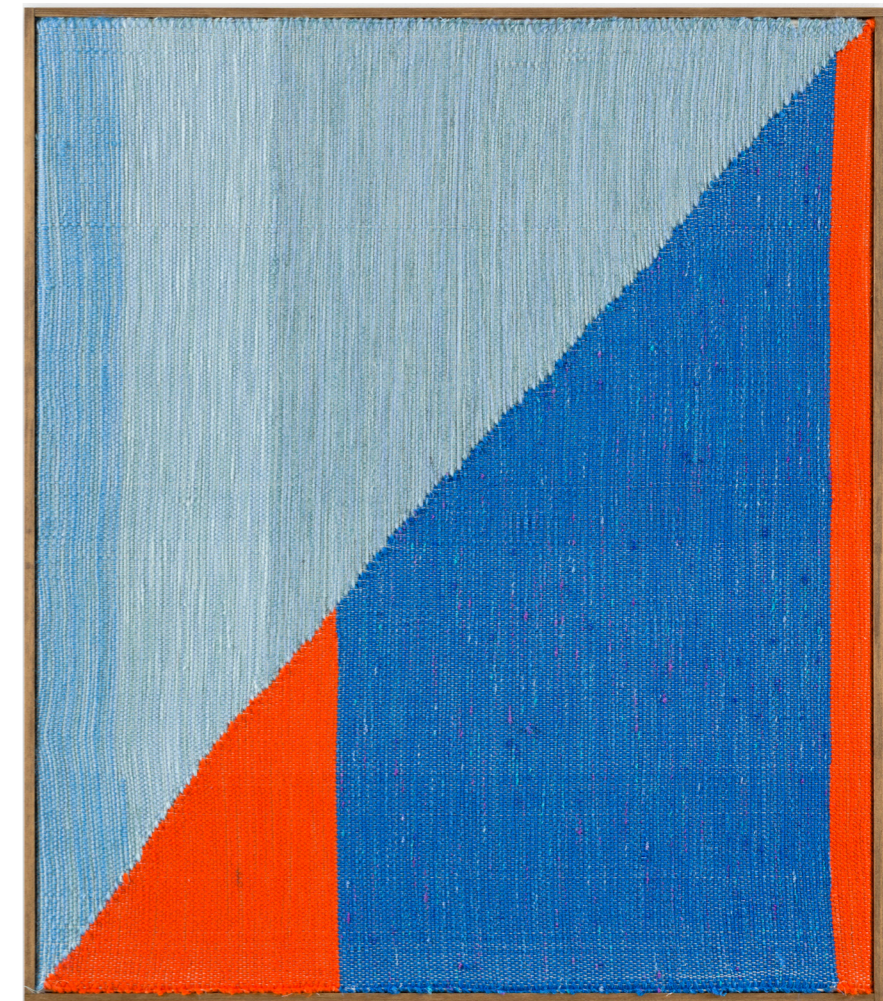






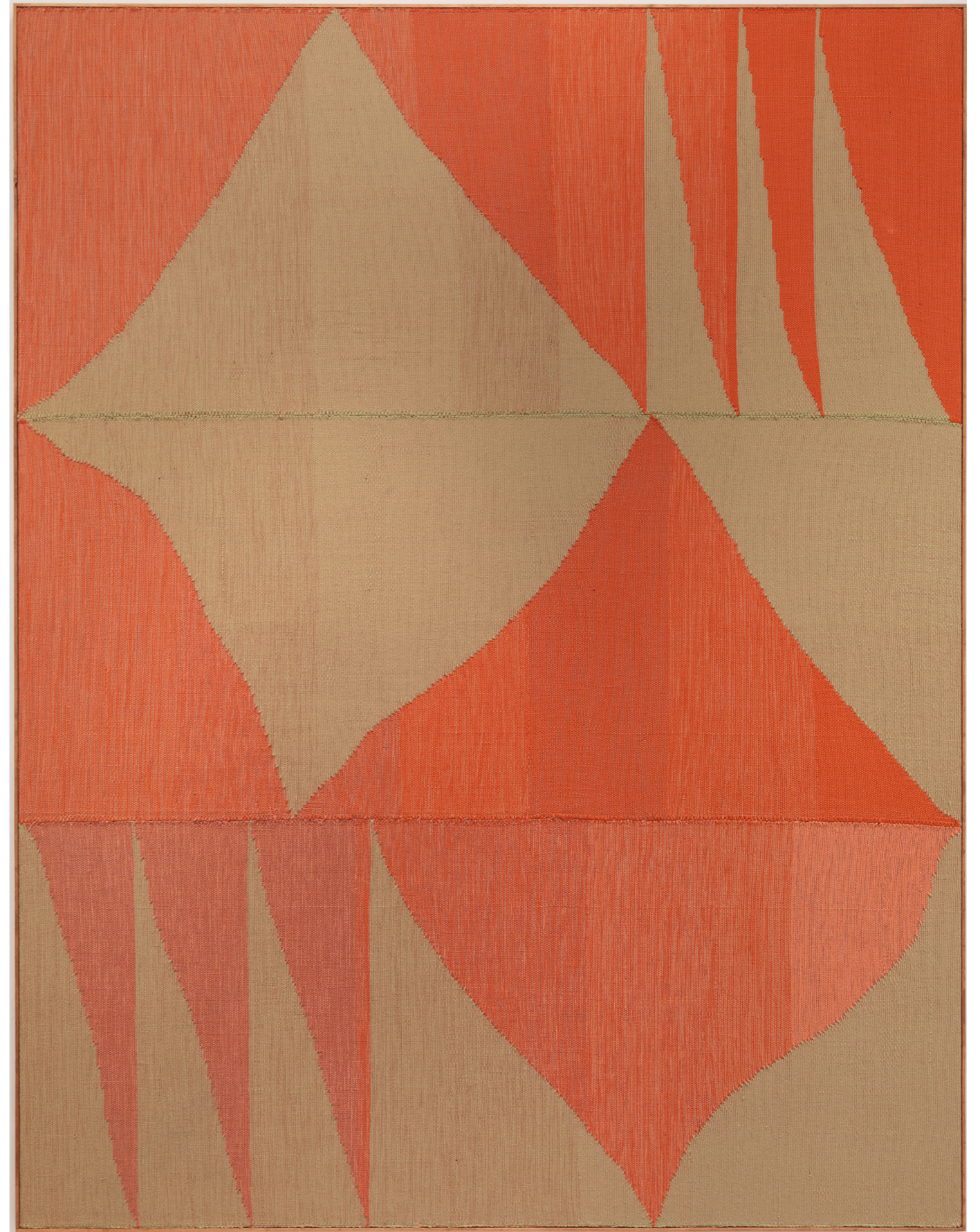


Autumn, 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
91.5 x 80 cm (36.02 x 31.5 in)



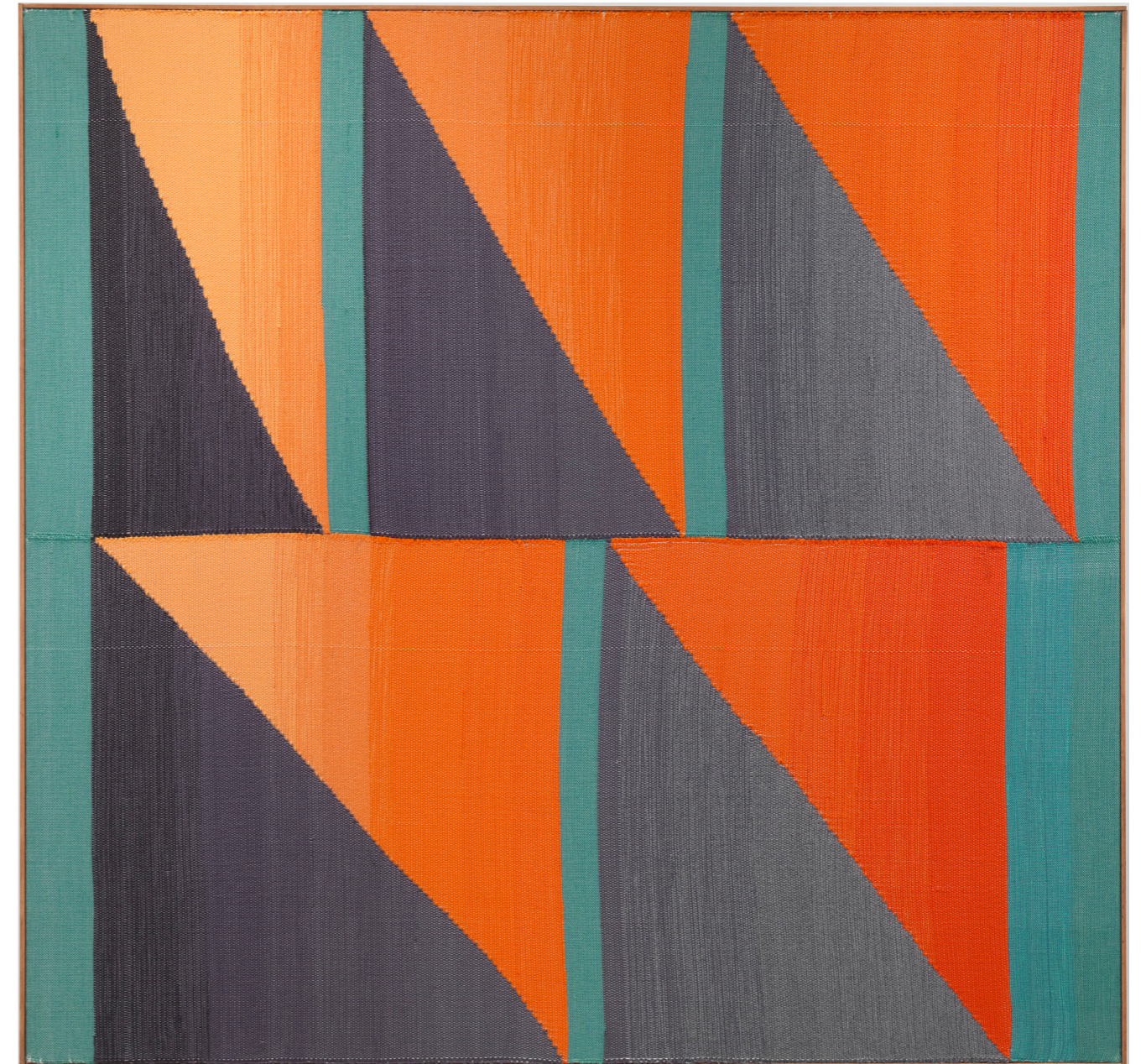


Avocado Salmon, 2015
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
271.8 x 208.3 cm (107 x 82 in)

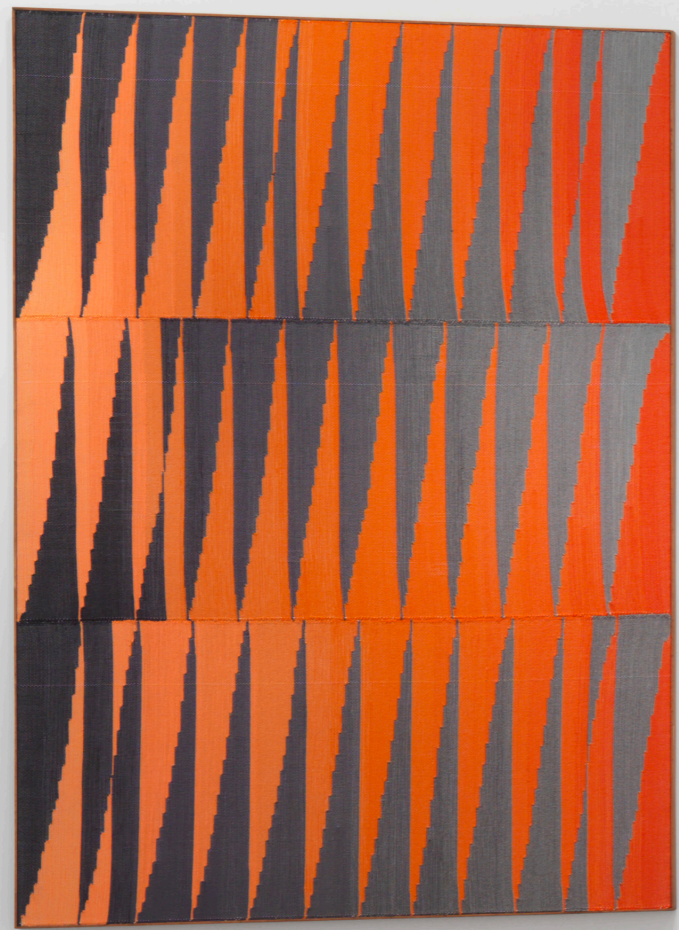


Big BW, 2015
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
271.8 x 208.3 cm (107 x 82 in)





5 Green Bars (double fade), 2015
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
180.3 x 188 cm (71 x 74 in)









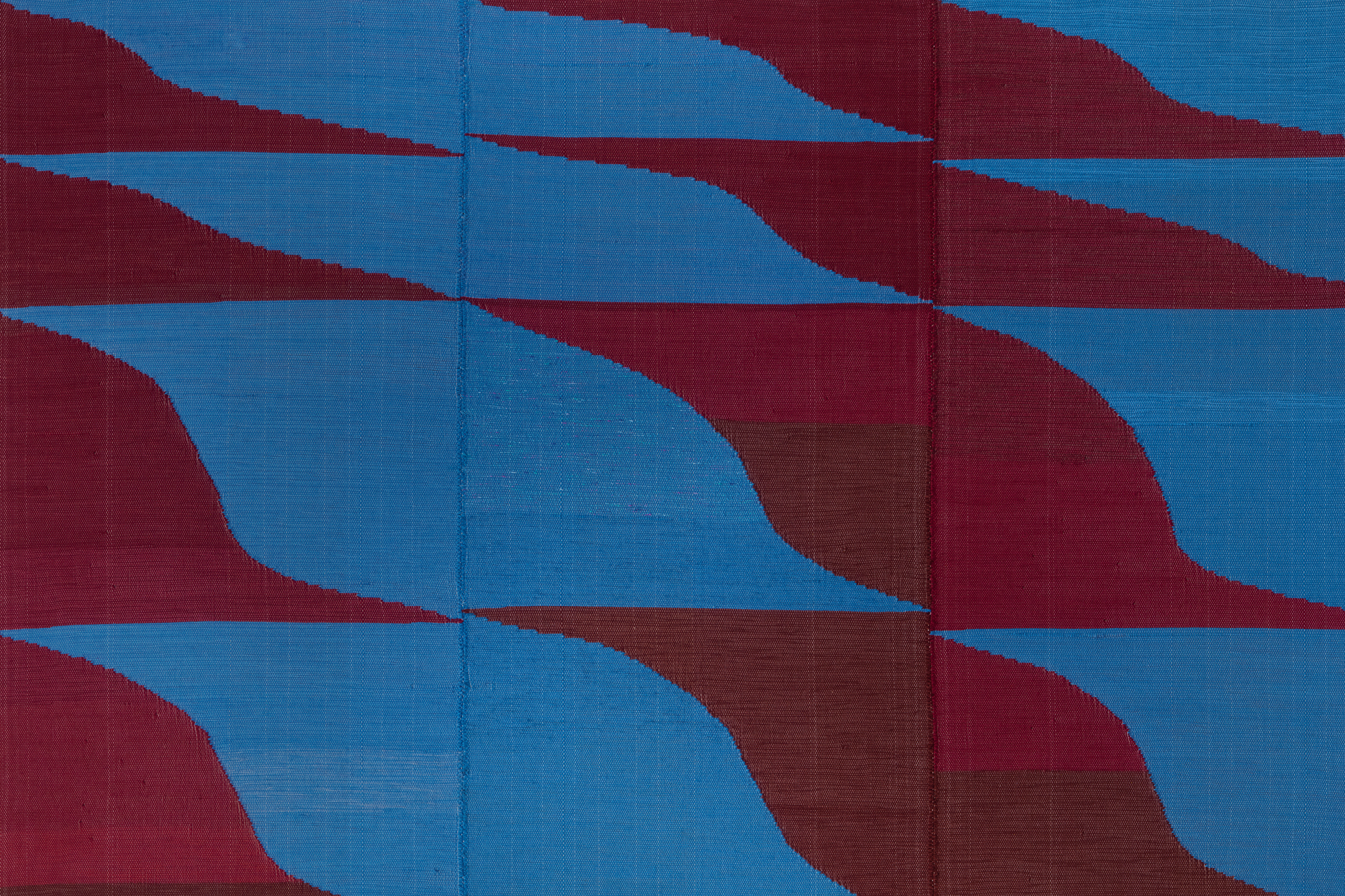


Black Robins Egg Blue, 2015
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
269.2 x 208.3 cm (106 x 82 in)



Morien, 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
230.5 x 182 cm (90.75 x 71.65 in)





INDEX

2-3

Alignment #47, 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
172.5 x 212.5 cm (67.91 x 83.66 in)

22-23

About Time, Installation View
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2013

30-31

About Time, Installation View
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2013

32-33

About Time, Installation view
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2013

34-35

Alignment #47, 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
172.5 x 212.5 cm (67.91 x 83.66 in)

36-37

Black Diamond, 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
202.5 x 182.5 cm (79.72 x 71.85 in)

40-41

Alignment #13, 2013
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
215 x 370 cm (84.65 x 145.67 in)

60-61

The Decline, Installation view
Almine Rech, Brussels, 2014

68-69

The Decline, Installation view
Almine Rech, Brussels, 2014

70-71

The Decline, Installation view
Almine Rech, Brussels, 2014

74-75

The Decline, Installation view
Almine Rech, Brussels, 2014

76-77

Medium Double Double (Red), 2014
(Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
182 x 182 cm (71.65 x 71.65 in)

80-81

Large Double Double, 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
182 x 212.5 cm (71.65 x 83.66 in)

82-83

Pit Pony, Installation view
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2014

86-87

No. 2 (Table Head), 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
268 x 227 cm (105.51 x 89.37 in)

90-91

Medium Double Double (blue / yellow), 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
182 x 182 cm (71.65 x 71.65 in)

94-95

No. 6 (Donkin), 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
268 x 227 cm (105.51 x 89.37 in)

96-97

Pit Pony, Installation view
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2014

98-99

Pit Pony, Installation view
Peres Projects, Berlin, 2014

102-103

Brent Wadden, Installation view
Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2015

110-111

Brent Wadden, Installation view
Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2015

112-113

No. 6 (Donkin), 2014 (Detail view)
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
268 x 227 cm (105.51 x 89.37 in)

114-115

Brent Wadden, Installation view
Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2015

116-117

Brent Wadden, Installation view
Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2015

118-119

Alignment #47, 2014
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
172.5 x 212.5 cm (67.91 x 83.66 in)

124-125

Blue Wine, 2015
Handwoven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas
271.8 x 208.3 cm (107 x 82 in)

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