



Madeleine Keesing

ASHES AND EMBERS

January 30 – March 18, 2007 American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center

Goya Contemporary · Goya-Girl Press

Introduction

JACK RASMUSSEN

I have exhibited Madeleine Keesing's work every chance I could for some twenty-five years. When we opened the American University Museum in 2005, I featured her work in the very first show. Ever since, I have been looking for an opportunity to show her art in more depth against the museum's curving walls and soaring spaces.

Madeleine's work has evolved slowly and steadily towards the perfect harmony of form and technique we see today. Her paintings are so physically attractive, it takes a real effort to pull oneself away from the saturated, aromatic drops that line the surface and consider their service in a higher order realm of mind and spirit. Like a prayer rug (or the more sectarian magic carpet ride), her art transcends mere

physicality. The pieces are visual mantras which focus the viewer inward and outward.

There is nothing "New Aged" or particularly "Pop" about Madeleine's work. However, *The Fifth Dimension* unwittingly describes her paintings in song:

Harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding, no more falsehoods or derisions, golden living dreams of visions, mystic crystal revelation, and the mind's true liberation.

I am sure Madeleine will forgive my clumsy, enduring attempts to bring her work to a wider audience. For her part, it is enough to lose herself in the moment, the ritual, and the trance that allows Madeleine to bring us such beauty.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator
American University Museum
Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

Artist's Studio
Shown at right, 2006
Washington, DC



Madeleine Keesing

THOM COLLINS

The power of formalist criticism to shape and limit the reception of non-representational art practices hasn't waned since the mid 1970s, when Madeleine Keesing first began to paint her subtle, chromatic abstractions. As a direct consequence, though her work always has been informed by important social-critical commitments—most associated with the historically marginalized pattern and decoration movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s—this is an infrequently discussed aspect of her work. Instead, following the protocols of a formalist criticism descended from Clement Greenberg, treatment of her paintings generally centers around the painstaking process by which they are made and the optical effect that this creates. But the significance of these paintings exceeds their elegant aesthetic qualities, as a brief account of Keesing's success in deepening and extending the pattern and decoration project demonstrates.

With his influential criticism of the 1940s, Clement Greenberg framed the reception of pre-minimalist abstraction in the United States and turned away from the social and political commitments that had shaped his earlier writing. Green-

berg evolved a theory focused on painting exclusively engaged with the formal aspects of pictures. He argued that the most progressive art of the day was being made by painters who sought to describe the irreducible truth of the medium and its associated processes. Greenberg privileged the flatness of the picture plane, the nature of paint no longer employed to describe something other than its own plastic qualities and a balance and coherence of internal pictorial elements.

Greenberg singled out for attention and praise the painters subsequently referred to as abstract expressionists. Greenberg's account of their achievements, particularly those of Mark Rothko, whose work has come to be understood as seminal for the color-field painting with which Keesing's oeuvre is frequently associated, is instructive here. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Rothko's project in his mature (post-1949) paintings is very much an attempt to come to terms with the profound trauma and new challenges faced by the individual in the wake of such recent tragedies as World War II, the Holocaust, and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We know from a variety of sources, including the artist's own

Thom Collins is the Director of the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. He has organized numerous exhibitions including *Somewhere Better Than This Place: Alternative Social Experience in the Spaces of Contemporary Art*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors: Politics in U.S. Art of the 1980s* and *Louise Bourgeois: Femme*. He has also written and lectured extensively about modern and contemporary art.

period protestations, that these intensely hued canvases with their floating blocks of color were designed to confront the viewer and threaten to absorb her/him into an awesome and terrifying abyss—a uniquely contemporary and powerful mobilization of the painterly sublime. But in Greenberg's writing, Rothko's achievement is reduced to the radical rejection of pictorial illusionism in favor of an unprecedented degree of flatness, as thin washes of pigment are now dyed into the canvas support. The net result: in his writing on Rothko (and his peers), progressive art making is described as a self-reflexive and a- or anti-social activity, its products disconnected from ideas and experiences extraneous to the materials and formal products of the painterly process. For the next generation of American artists, Greenberg's account became not only historical-critical gospel, but something of a how-to manual for ambitious artists, and the projects born out of an attempt to adhere closely to the values he espoused are numerous and well documented.

Among the most compelling challenges to formalist modernism were those launched from within activist movements in the latter 1960s:

antiwar, civil rights, and women's movements, in particular. At the forefront of feminist art making was Miriam Schapiro who, along with Judy Chicago, established the first comprehensive feminist art training program in the country in 1971 at the California Institute of the Arts. In her own work, she took direct aim at the central tenets of formalist practice, which she considered to be, at best, inevitably mute on such central feminist concerns as sexism, racism, and classism; or, at worst, a tool in the commercial and institutional marginalization of women and minorities. Schapiro called her breakthrough work "femmage," ("female"+"collage"). She created these large pictures by cutting and stitching together pieces of "found" fabric and her own handmade textiles to produce dynamic geometric abstractions. Trumpeting their relationship to quilting and other types of needlework, they assert formal and conceptual links between female-identified and fundamentally abstract domestic decorative arts practices—practices that long predate innovation-obsessed modernism—and the masculinist painterly abstractions of the mid-twentieth century.

Schapiro's femmage paved the way for the pattern and decoration movement of the early 1970s, in which the materials, processes, and motifs associated with the long, rich history of craft and the decorative arts were embraced and celebrated in painting, sculpture, and installation art. It is important to note, however, that while the products of the pattern and decoration movement were created as an implicit critique of abstract expressionism, minimalism, and color field painting as understood through the formalist critical frame, the more explicit feminist critique embodied in Schapiro's work was quickly abandoned. For many, including those committed to even the most "romantic" feminisms, it came to seem as though the products of the pattern and decoration movement existed at too much of a remove from both real politics and progressive art to have power to effect sustained institutional change of any kind. Always anathema to the descendants of Greenberg, by the late 1970s pattern and decoration work was also being dismissed as essentializing kitsch by a new generation of feminist critics and activists. Informed by sophisticated postmodern theory, they identified such uncritical borrowing and elaboration of visual tropes as politically problematic and, instead, advocated strategic appropriation and trans-

formation of semiotically dense and socially significant imagery already in circulation as a core artistic-productive strategy.

Madeleine Keesing graduated from the University of North Carolina with an MFA in painting in 1974 and began her independent practice at this moment of larger transition. She was educated in the formalist-modernist tradition, but was concerned about its growing association with reactionary politics. She was also attached to the agenda of artists like Schapiro—committed to opening a space for a progressive and explicitly feminist modernism—but anticipated the anti-essentialist backlash that would shortly dog and undermine them. So, Keesing started out on a path that would lead directly to her current painting practice—a novel synthesis of color field painting and her own variation on pattern and decoration work.

Her process, always evident in her product, is laborious. Keesing lays pigment down one droplet at a time to create the long, horizontal furrows that cover her richly pigmented canvases. The relationship of this structure to her ground colors—some complimentary, others of varying hue—creates a shimmering optical vibration. Her painterly marks are always uniform, from top to bottom and edge to

edge. Frequently, her application of color is uniform across a canvas, as well. At their most varied, her pictures are subdivided into grids of uniformly sized color zones. Her titles, to the extent that she uses titles, reinforce the centrality of these choices by referring simply and sometimes poetically either to her color choices—Yellow III, Sun Above, Copperhead—or to the number of colored rectangles within a single picture—Trio I, Trio II, Sextet.

Perhaps because of its subtlety, this series has been discussed almost exclusively as a late move in the history of American colorist abstraction that began with Rothko. An elaboration of the formalist critical line, this account quickly devolves to metaphysics and thus inevitably fails to relate Keesing's project to the artist's broader social-political commitments and the rich art historical context in which it was invented. While these paintings do offer enormous visual pleasure, as the formalist apologists of color field painting promise, their surface articulation and subtle compositional variations also link much of her oeuvre in a pointed way to the feminist project of Schapiro and her peers in the early pattern and decoration movement.

Keesing's regular, all-over surface patterns of interlocked paint daubs are created in a process

that approximates and appear as an exaggerated representation of weaving. They mimic and magnify the canvas underneath. In this fashion, both her process and its products insist upon their connection to traditional textile arts and millennia of significant cultural productive activity by women. She employs no needlework and relies on no found decorative motifs or materials, deliberately avoiding the debilitating clichés associated with the later pattern and decoration movement. Though her gridded canvases may further suggest elegant knitted blankets or quilts, they are at the same time clearly not. Keesing is a painter of abstract pictures, whose paintings must always read as paintings, even as they insist on their relationship to and continuity with historically female-identified handicraft. Neither simply decorative, as is much art produced after facile interpretations of the criticism of Greenberg and his descendants, nor the kitsch pastiche practice to which the pattern and decoration movement devolved after Schapiro's initial pointed gesture, Keesing's mature work should be understood as the materialization of a thoughtful and unique reconciliation of high formalist-modernist values and important feminist social-critical impulses suppressed in late modernism.

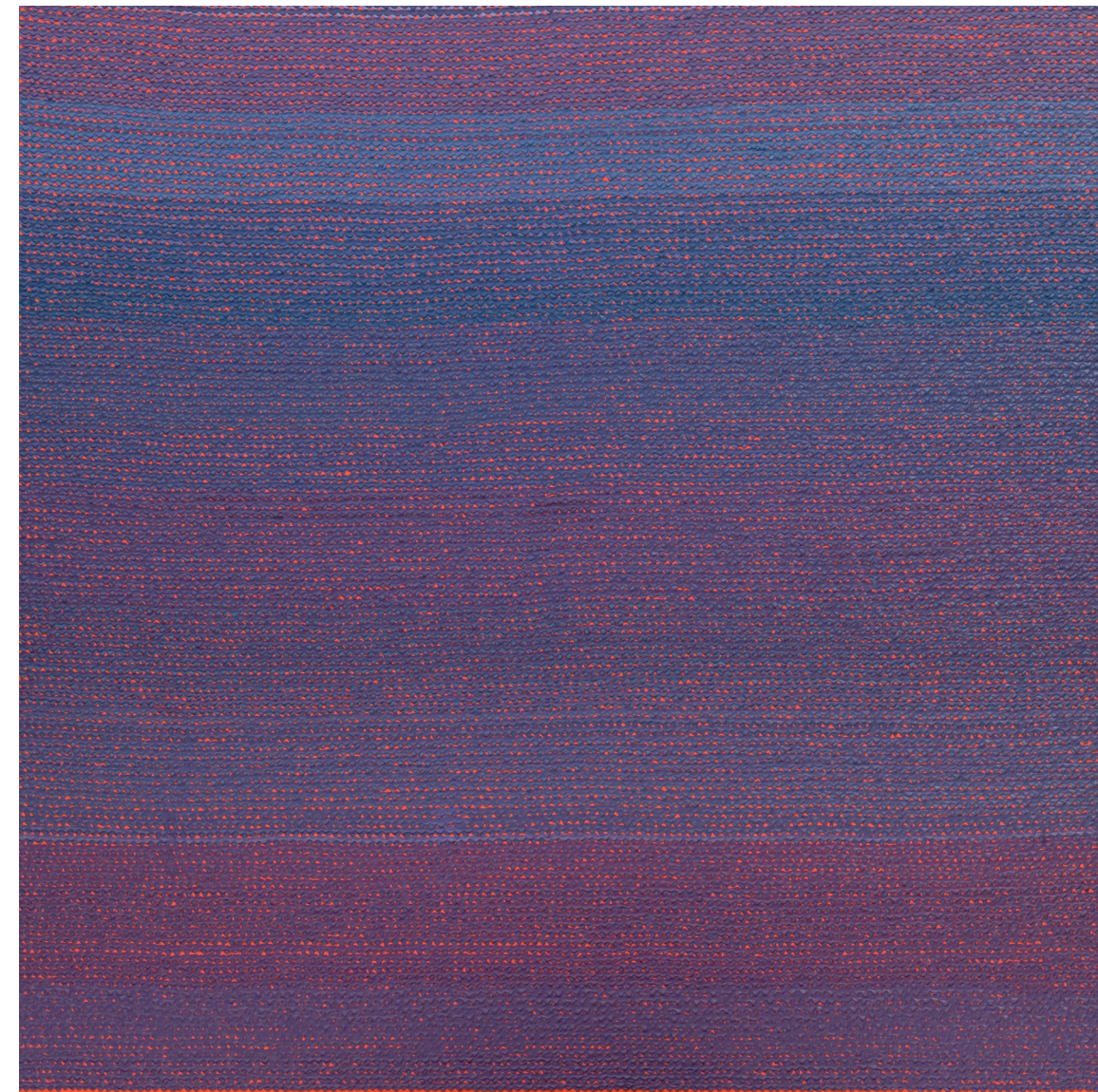
WHITE NOISE
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

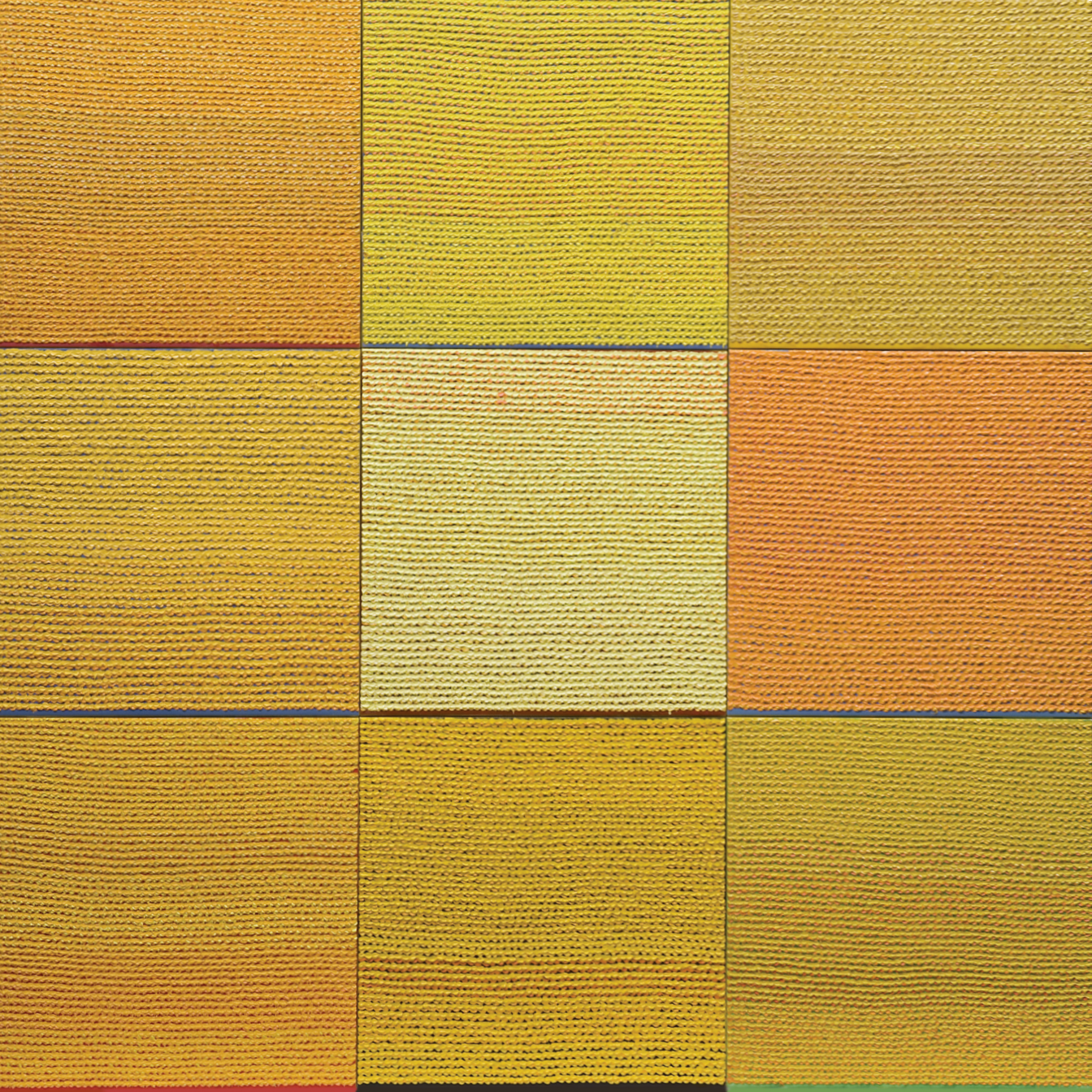




HOT
2005
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

COOLING
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

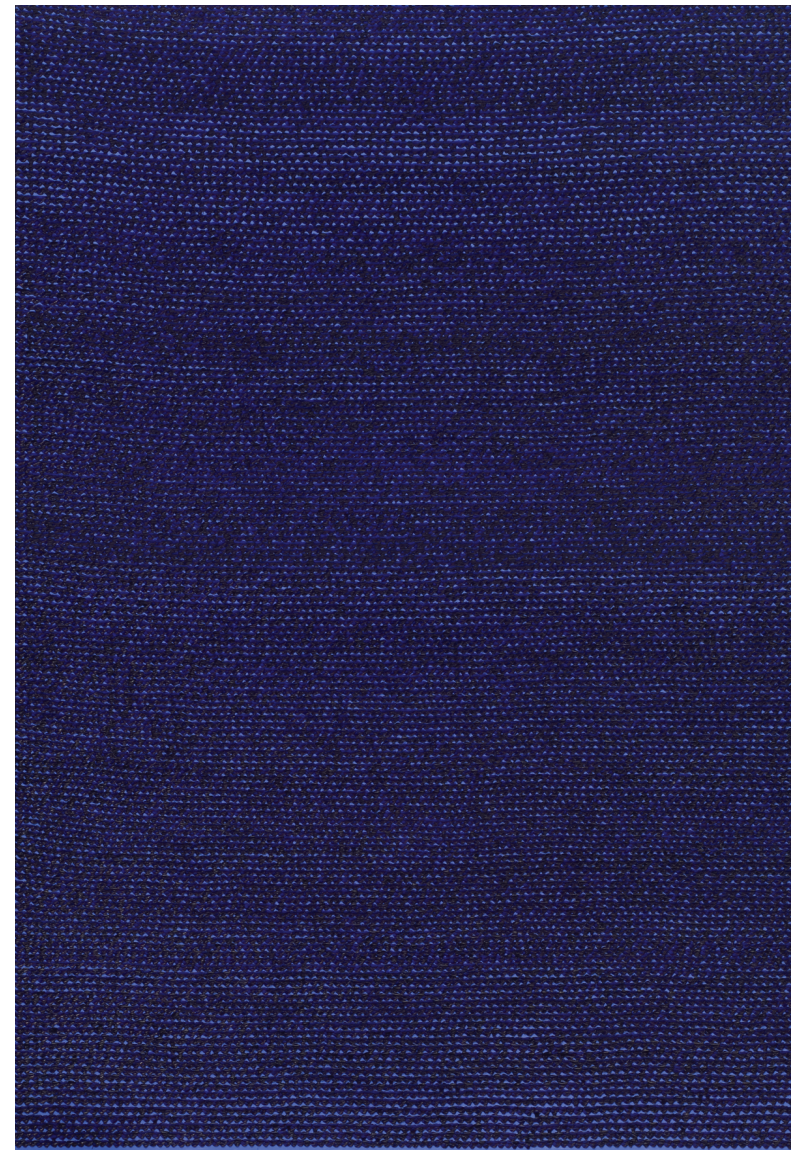


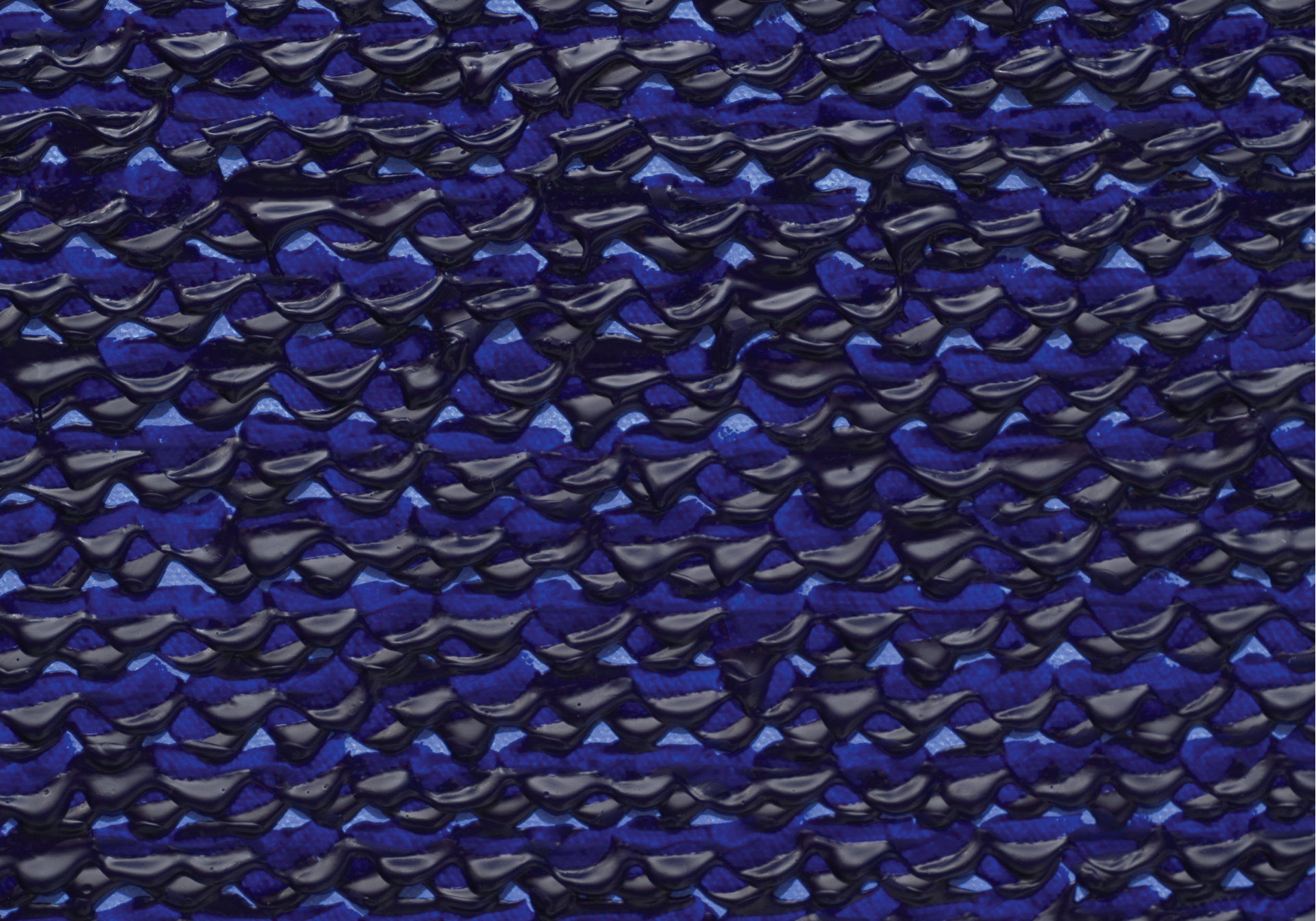


nine panel painting

DAYLIGHT
2004
oil on canvas
72 x 72 IN

ULTRA BLUE
2006
oil on canvas
72 x 48 IN

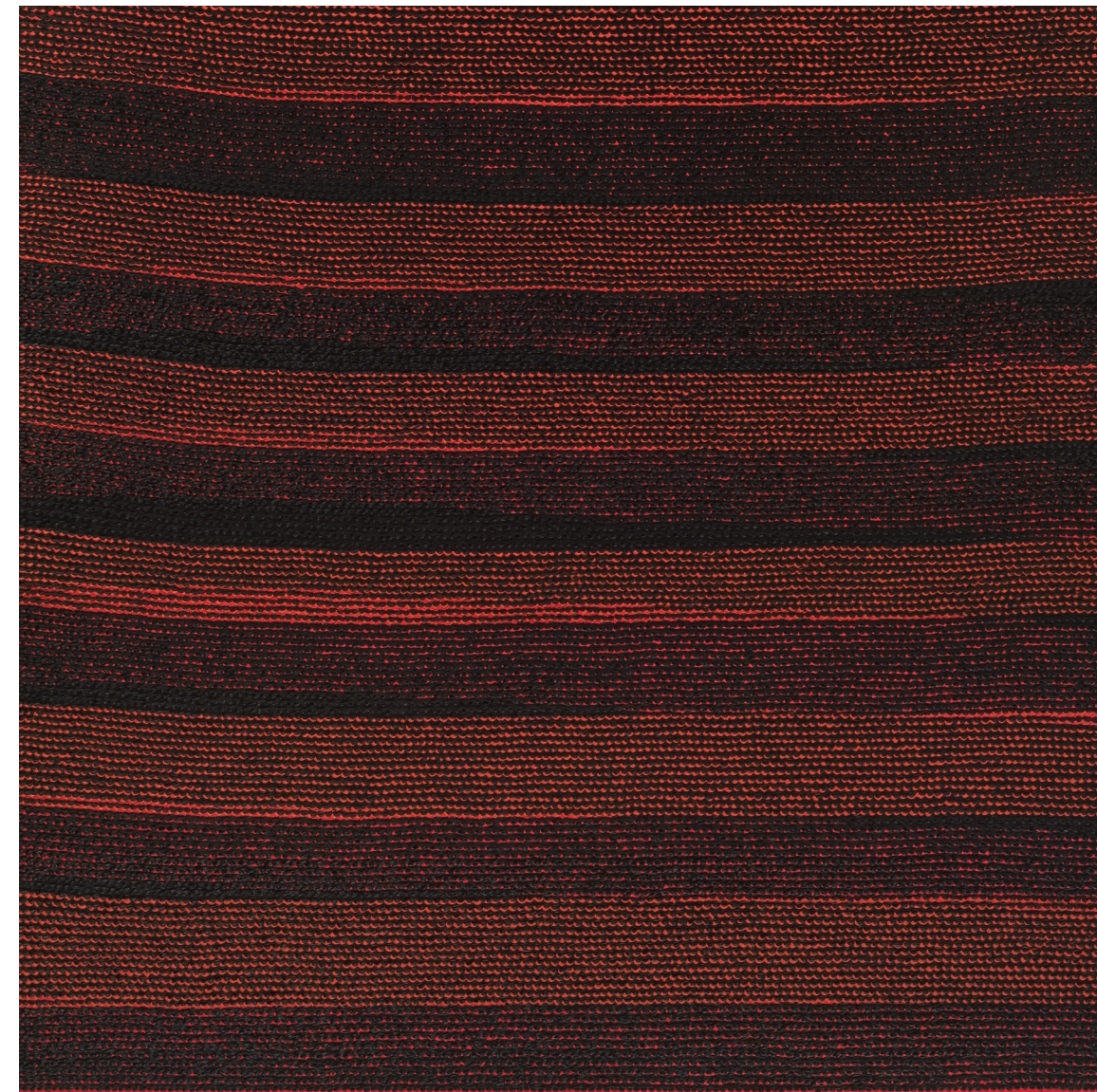


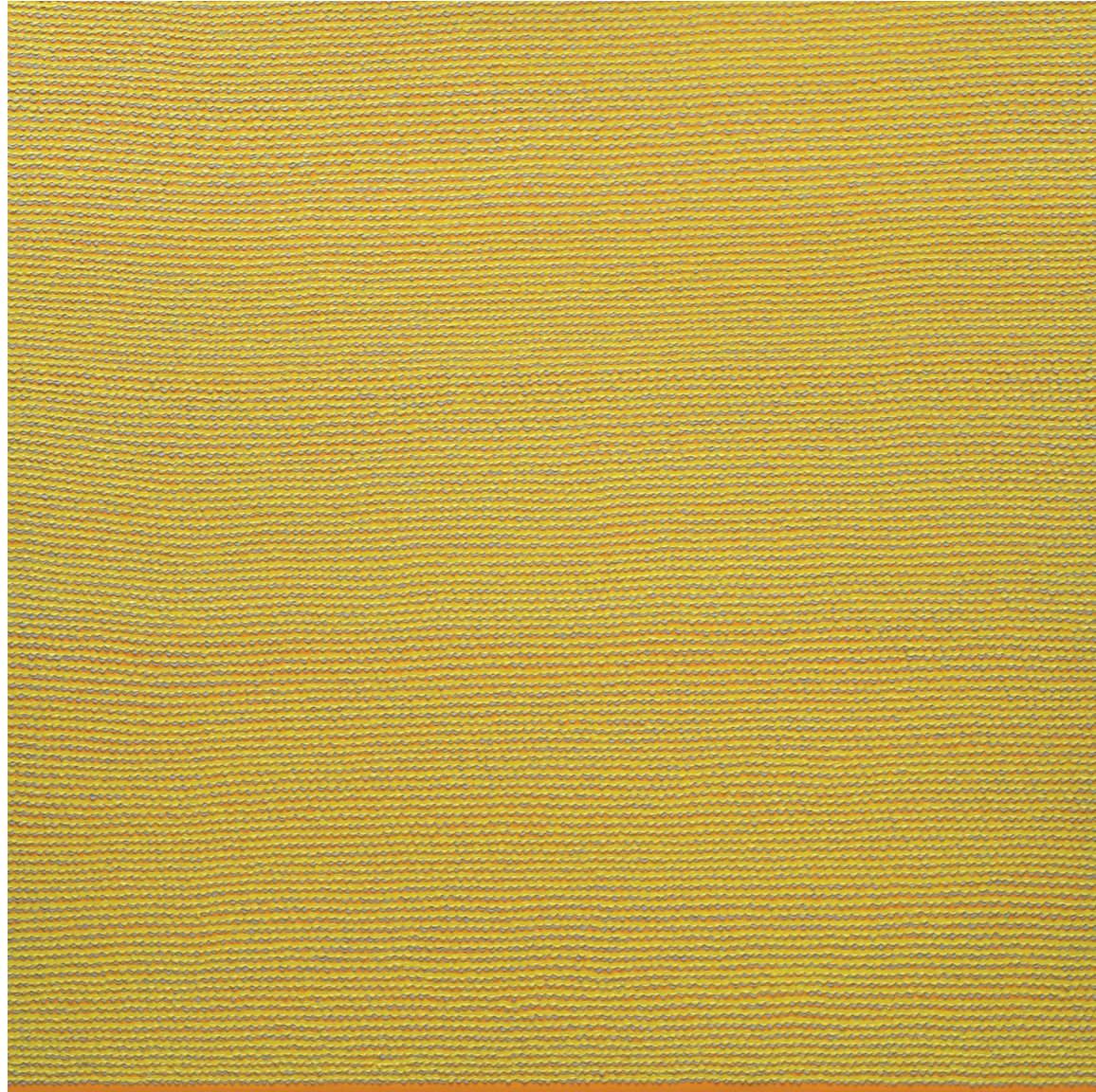


detail

ULTRA BLUE
2006
oil on canvas
72 x 48 IN

EMBERS
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN





SUN ABOVE
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

detail next page >

AFTER GLOW
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN







GIFT FROM PROMETHEUS
2007
oil on canvas
78 x 54 IN

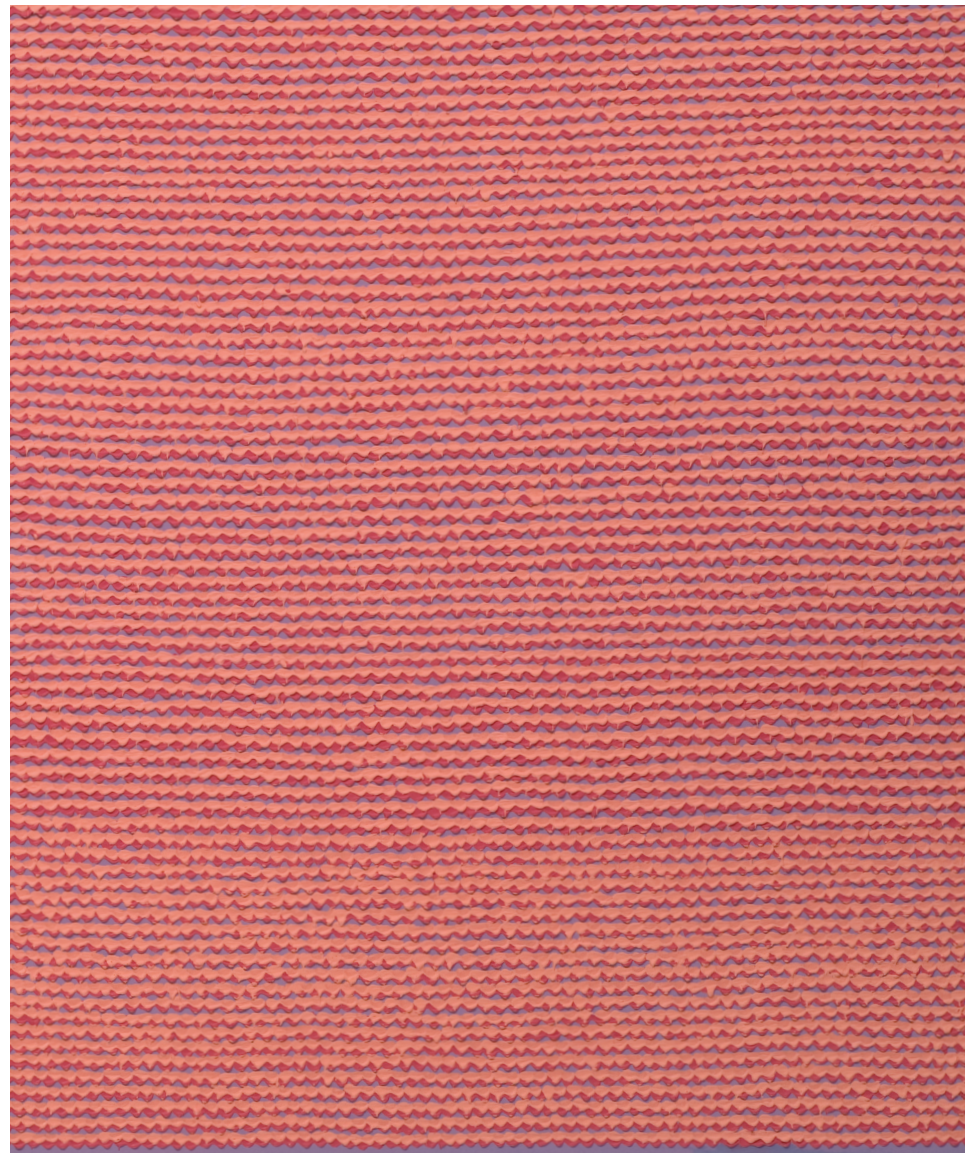
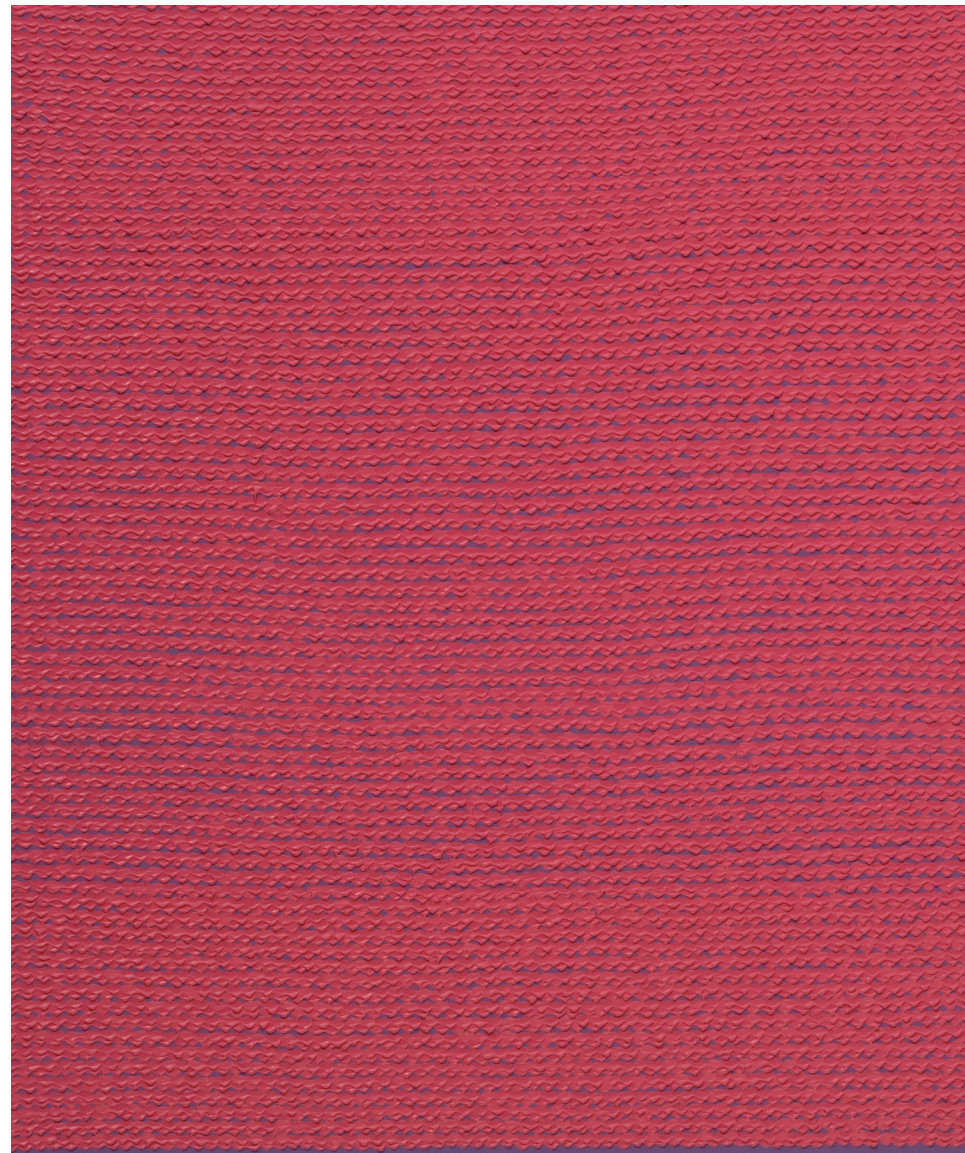
two part painting

SWEET DREAMS

2006

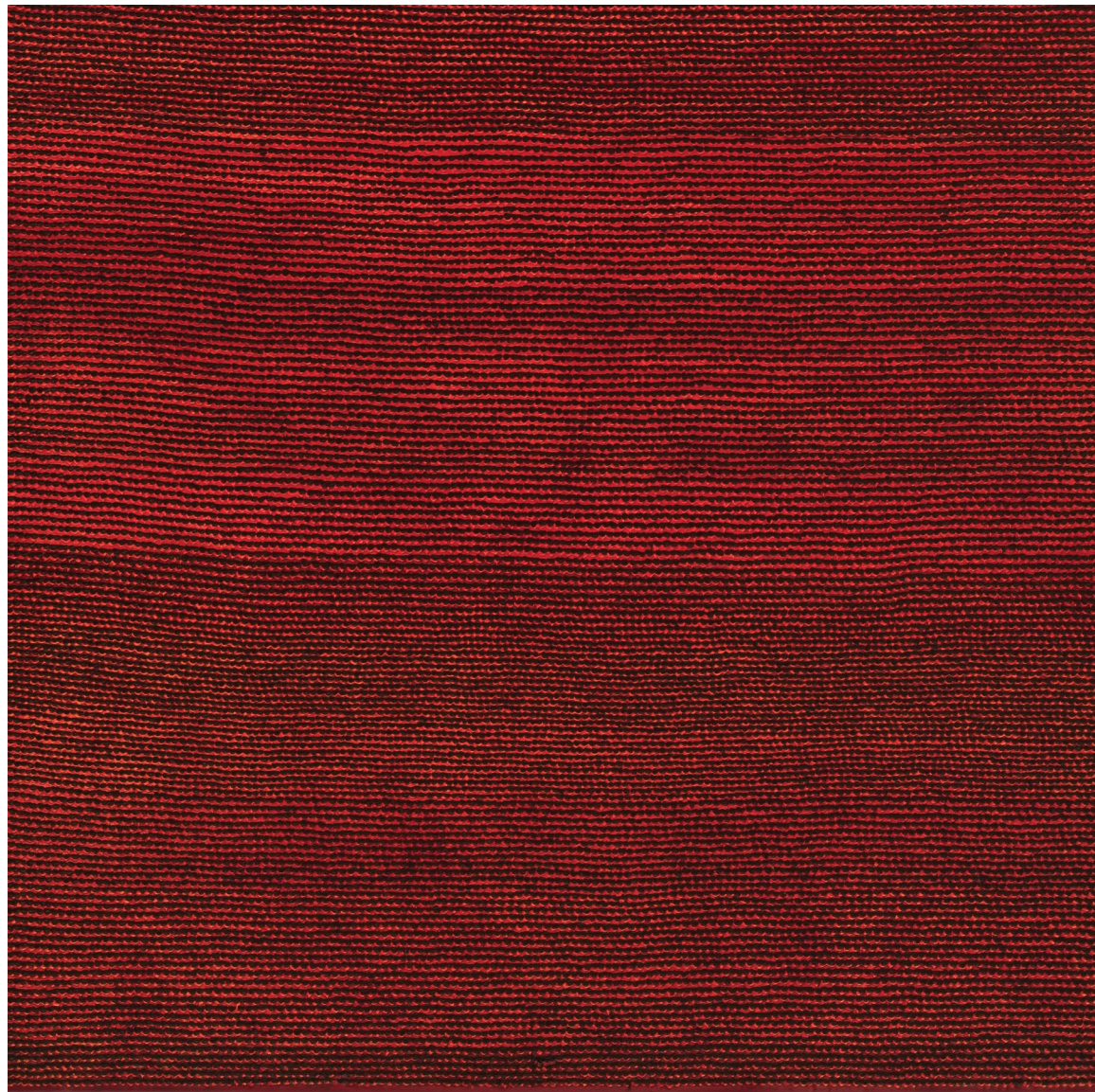
oil on canvas

36 x 60 IN



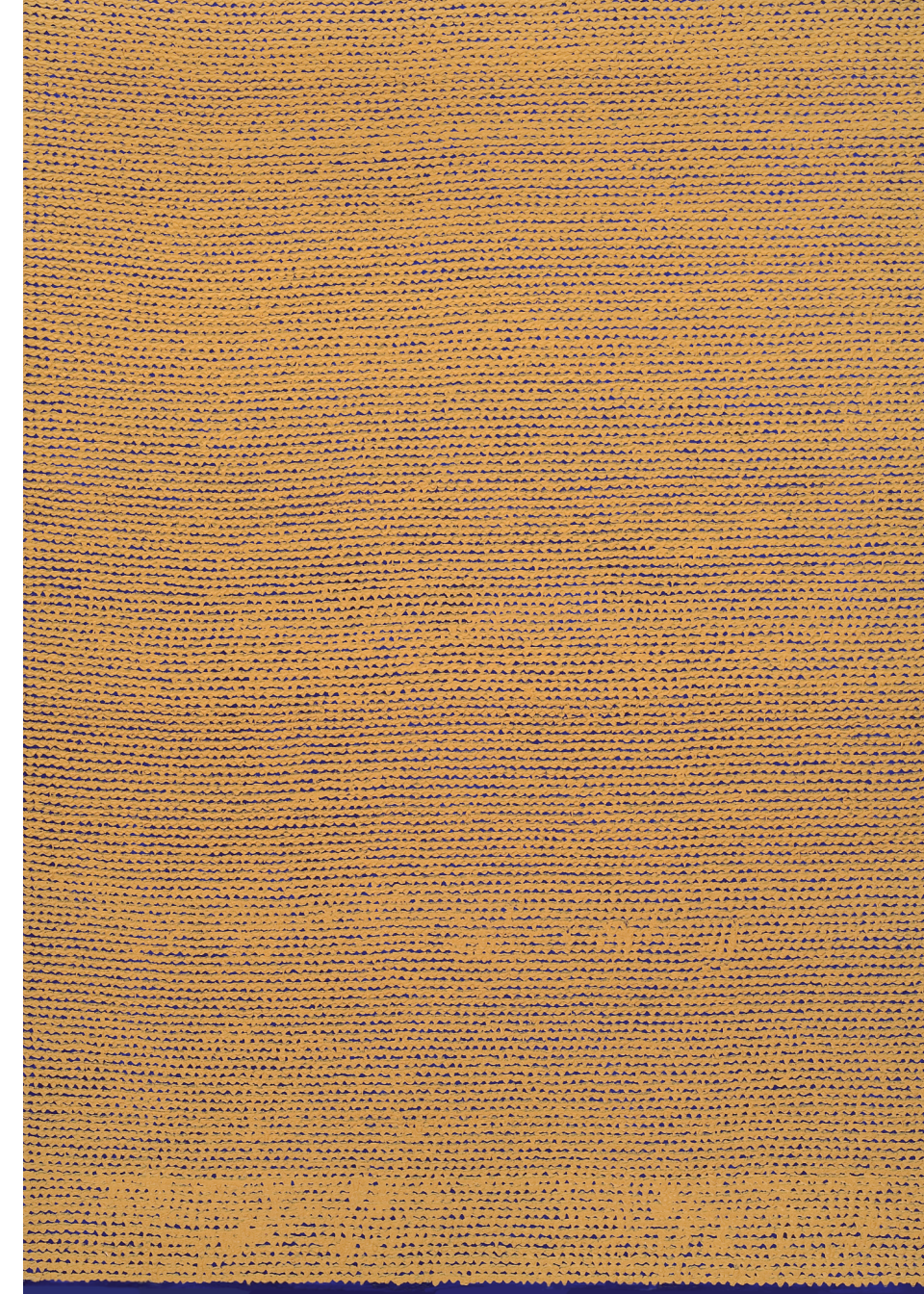
SILVER ECHO
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

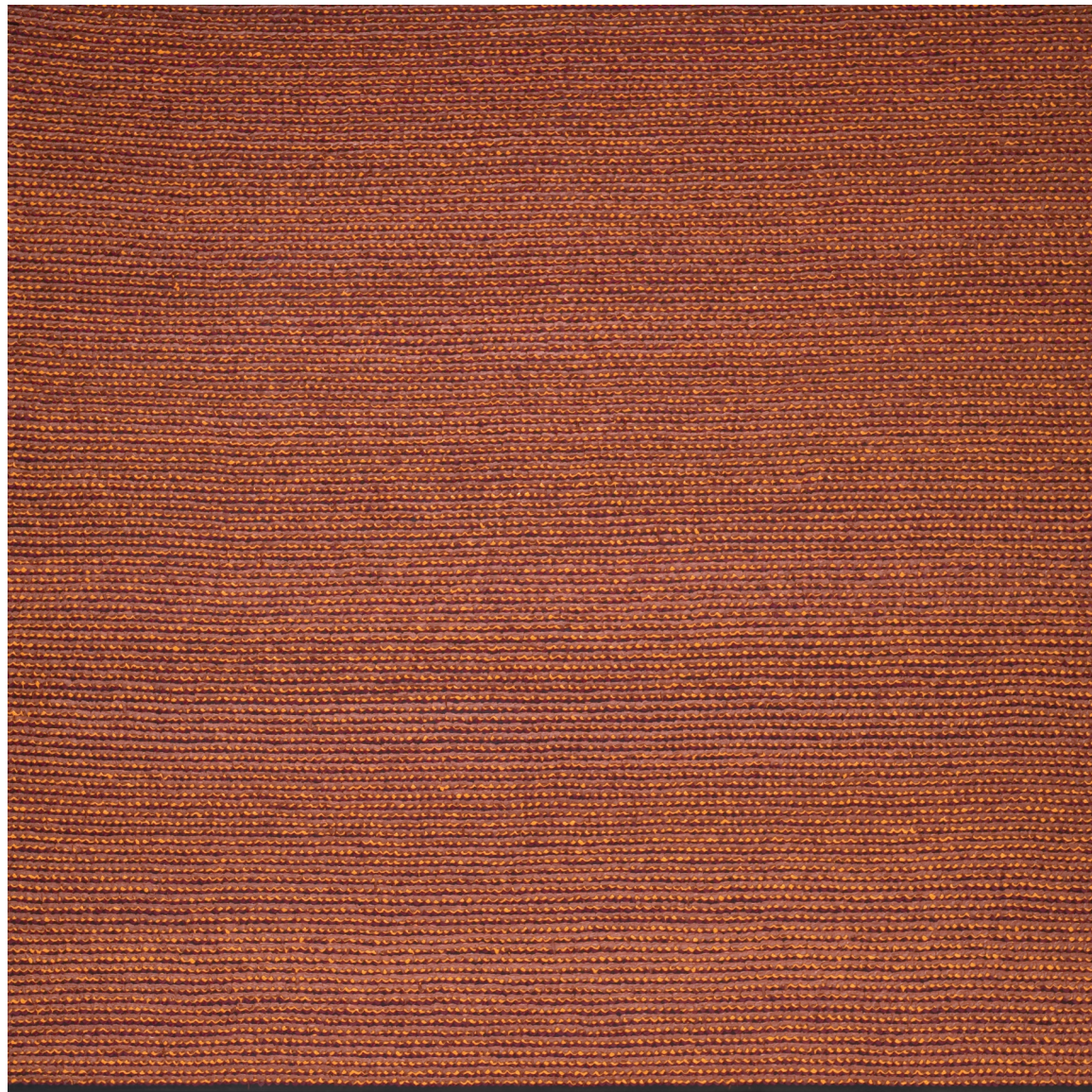




MELT DOWN
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

GLOW
2006
oil on canvas
72 x 48 IN





COPPERHEAD
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

detail

COPPERHEAD

2006

oil on canvas

60 x 60 IN





collection of martha macks-kahn

BRONZED
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN

DARK BLAZE
2006
oil on canvas
60 x 60 IN



MADELEINE KEESING

BORN

Woodbury, New Jersey, June 10, 1941

EDUCATION

1974 MFA, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
1971 BFA, California College of Arts & Crafts, Oakland, CA
1963 Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY

AWARDS AND GRANTS

1987 District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities

APPRENTICESHIPS

Richard Lindner, Phillip Pearlstein, Tal Streeter and others

SELECTED PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Guggenheim Museum, New York City, NY
Thomas Krens, Williamstown, MA
Bernard Koteen, Esq., Washington, DC
Maitre Emile Verbrueggen, Brussels, Belgium
Ambassador Gerardo Bueno, Mexico, DF, Mexico
Prof. Jonathan Pincus, Adelaide, Australia
Dr. Ian Franklin, London, England
IBM Corporation, Manassas, VA
Oliver Carr Corporation, Washington, DC
Sheppard & Enoch Pratt Foundation, Baltimore, MD
Martha Macks-Kahn, Baltimore, MD
Avalere Health LLC, Washington, DC
DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Washington, DC
American Society of Nephrology, Washington, DC
US Department of State, Art Bank Program, Washington, DC

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2008 Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
2007 American University Museum, Katzen Art Center, Washington, DC
LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
2006 Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
2005 Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
2001 Corcoran Museum of Art, Hemicycle, Washington, DC (catalog)
"Summer 2001: Prints & Drawings," Goya Girl Press, Baltimore, MD
1999 "(im)perfect," Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD (catalog)
Tiffany & Company, New York, NY
Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC (catalog)
"New Prints," Goya Girl Press, Baltimore, MD
"Chance+Necessity," Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, OH
"Contemporary Prints," Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Columbia Festival of the Arts, Columbia, MD
McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA
Boyden Gallery, St. Mary's College, St. Mary's City, MD
Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD (catalog)
1998 "Geometrice," Rockville Arts Place, Rockville, MD
Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD (catalog)
"Surface Information," Arts 901, Washington, DC

1997 Hemphill Gallery, Washington, DC
"Geometrice," Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
1992 The Caramoor Weathervane Exhibition, Katonah, NY
1990 "New Work - Madeleine Keesing & Marie Moser," Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC
1987 "Drawing by Washington Artistsm," Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, DC
1986 "In Black and White," Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC
50th Anniversary Alumni Exhibition, The Weatherspoon Gallery of Art, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
1985 "Madeleine Keesing: Painting & Leonard Cave: Wood Sculpture," Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC
"Capital Art - Rethinking Modernism in Washington, DC," The Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
1981 Jack Rasmussen Gallery, Washington, DC
1980 "Summer Show," Jack Rasmussen Gallery, Washington, DC
1976 "The Glass Door," Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC
1975 The Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
The Weatherspoon Gallery of Art, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
Lucien Labaubt Gallery, San Francisco, CA

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inside cover image

COOLING

2006

oil on canvas

60 x 60 IN



