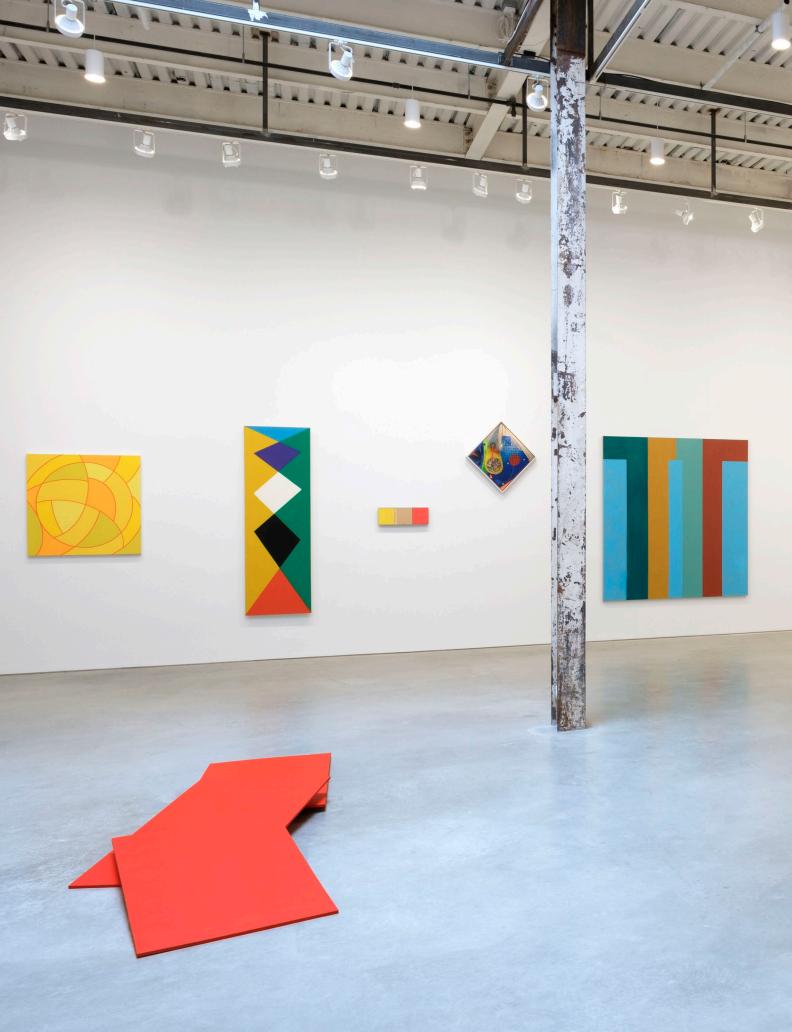
## ON BALANCE

AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

new work by AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

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American Abstract Artists (AAA) is a democratic artist-run organization founded in 1936 in New York City to promote and foster understanding of abstract and non-objective art. AAA organizes exhibitions and produces member print portfolios and catalogs. It provides a forum to discuss and expand ideas about abstract art by hosting critical panels and symposia and publishing the American Abstract Artists Journal. AAA distributes its published materials internationally to cultural organizations and documents its member history in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

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On Balance: New Work by American Abstract Artists
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# ON BALANCE

new work by AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

Essay by Mary Birmingham
Published by American Abstract Artists

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many people played a part in making this show of 62 member artists such a great success. We owe tremendous thanks to our curator Mary Birmingham, for her selections, installation, and overall vision. The staff at ART CAKE were indispensable in their on-site support. Many thanks are owed to the AAA Exhibitions Committee—Jacob Cartwright, Gilbert Hsiao, Rob de Oude, Don Porcaro, and Melissa Staiger—who worked tirelessly for the past year to make this show happen. Gratitude also goes to AAA members Julian Jackson, Jim Osman, Don Voisine, Mark Williams, and Patricia Zarate, who helped the Exhibitions Committee install the show. We thank Jacob Cartwright for his dedication in developing this catalog and the Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Foundation whose generous support made its publication possible. We also gratefully acknowledge The Lily Auchincloss Foundation for their support of the exhibition. Finally, we extend a special thanks to Cordy Ryman for his instrumental backing throughout the process and for giving us access to such a beautifully conceived space.

Jim Osman and Joanne Freeman
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT, AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS, 2023



LILY AUCHINCLOSS FOUNDATION







### ON BALANCE

MARY BIRMINGHAM, curator

hen a group of artists in New York founded the organization
American Abstract Artists (AAA) in 1936, they believed that the
best way to promote the acceptance and growth of abstract art
in the United States was by presenting annual exhibitions of their work. They
envisioned themselves as an inclusive exhibiting organization that would
accommodate a variety of abstract styles while giving equal weight to all
its members. From the start, AAA's exhibitions incorporated examples of
geometric, expressionistic, and biomorphic abstraction. Its commitment to
diversity in abstraction has remained steady for nearly nine decades and
has expanded to include optical art, found objects and repurposed materials, digital technology, photography, video, and even light.

AAA continues to uphold the tradition of "all-in" member shows, regularly organizing these large exhibitions. I was honored when they invited me to curate the latest version—the first one they have held since 2016. Their democratic approach, however, created a curatorial challenge: how to select recent work by more than sixty current members, honoring the individual viewpoint of each artist while developing a cohesive exhibition. Since I saw the assignment as a kind of balancing act, I decided to lean into that idea and frame the show around it. On Balance: New Work by American Abstract Artists, examines balance as a compositional element as well as a curatorial strategy for selecting and exhibiting objects. Additionally, when viewed as a whole, the full assembly of works in the exhibition can be seen as a physical manifestation of AAA's cooperative spirit—a kind of visual metaphor for the impartiality and egalitarianism characterizing an organization that makes an equal place for each member.



Fig. 1. Kim Uchiyama, Portico



Fig. 2. Mark Williams, PoC #23



Fig. 3. Mara Held, Bubbling Well



Fig. 4. Emily Berger, Night Life

Balance in a work of art refers to how the individual elements—line, shape, color, value, space, form, and texture—relate to one another in terms of their visual weight. The four basic types of balance—symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial, and crystallographic (or mosaic)—are represented throughout the exhibition, including in these examples:

In symmetrical balance, the composition is the same on the left and right sides of a central axis. (fig. 1)

In asymmetrical balance, the elements of a composition are different but still feel balanced because they are equally weighted. (fig. 2)

In radial balance, compositional elements emerge from a central point, almost like spokes on a wheel. (fig. 3)

In crystallographic (or mosaic) balance, equal weight is given to a large number of repeated elements that are not perfectly symmetrical. (fig. 4)

Most artists use formal balance instinctively. The nuanced differences among its various types may not be immediately noticeable to the viewer, but how we perceive balance always affects the way we respond to art. Selecting works for an exhibition that feature different types of balance and distributing them proportionately throughout the space helps to keep the installation dynamic.

These four types of balance can also apply to the overall layout of an exhibition. Contemporary art is often hung in symmetrical, asymmetrical, and radial arrangements, while salon-style installations employ crystallographic balance. For *On Balance*, I used asymmetrical balance to guide the exhibition's layout, relying on it to set up lively, rhythmic patterns that would allow individual works to shine.

Working with a large cohort of artists—each having a well-developed practice and a unique point of view—seemed intimidating at first, but ultimately it provided a wealth of possibilities for a well-balanced and broad-reaching show. I was able to choose works in a variety of media that demonstrate the growth and continuing relevance of abstraction in contemporary art. The innovative use by some of the artists of quotidian materials such as found cardboard, scrap lumber, rug padding, ceramic tile, and plastic beads, and commercially available products like plywood, MDF, polypropylene webbing, acrylic, and aluminum underscores AAA's recognized commitment to diversity in abstraction.

In selecting the work, I considered formal elements like geometric shapes, lines, and patterns, negative and positive space, brushwork, texture, and surface quality, always weighing the similarities and differences. I tried to find enough affinities among the works to create a harmonious installation, while incorporating the right amount of contrast to strike an interesting balance. Color was obviously a major factor in choosing the work; similar palettes suggested compatible relationships within smaller groupings, while several distinctive works stood alone as strong accents. Size was also a critical part of every decision. I included many easel-size paintings, considering them the most comfortable fit for the exhibition space, but I also chose a handful of very small and very large works, which I placed throughout the galleries. I think of these visual "notes" as the syncopated beats that "jazz up" the rhythm on the walls.

As a curator, I am always interested in the dialogues that can occur when artworks hang in proximity to one another; placed together in a new context, they often communicate fresh ideas. I chose each of the works for this exhibition with an eye toward the installation, considering the different ways they might interact on the gallery walls. This concept is echoed in the layout of this publication, which pairs images of works that are adjacent to or near one another in the installation. Discovering similarities and contrasts between the works creates a dynamic experience for the viewer moving through the space or a reader turning the pages of the exhibition catalogue.

Balance is a condition in which the even distribution of weight enables someone or something to remain upright and steady; arguably, it is one of the reasons AAA has remained a viable and relevant organization. Since its formation during the Great Depression, AAA has successfully navigated through some choppy waters—WWII and subsequent global conflicts, economic ups and downs, social and political turmoil, and most recently, a global pandemic. While a commitment to abstraction has always been its primary guiding force, we should also consider the crucial role balance has played in positioning AAA as a steady presence in a shifting art world.

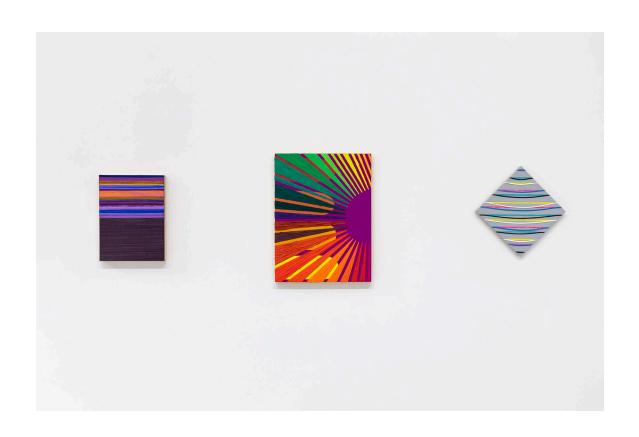
AAA's membership has grown and evolved, numbering more than 350 past and present members. Notably, women have always played significant roles in the organization. (Of the thirty-nine founding members, nine were women—two of whom went on to become AAA presidents.) Today, AAA has achieved gender equality, with just over 50 percent of the members identifying as female, establishing another significant balance in this cooperative, artist-run organization.

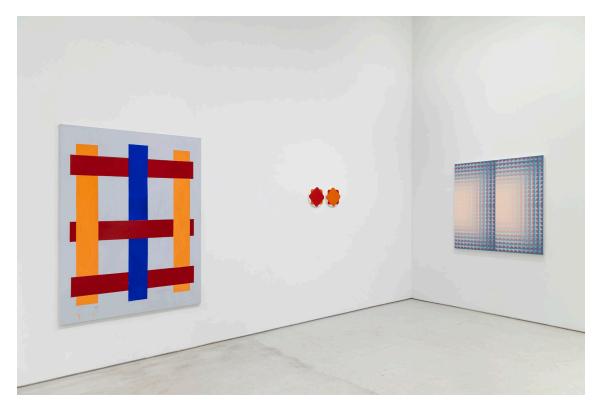
Like their predecessors, AAA's current members divide and share the responsibility for sustaining the organization—planning exhibitions, publications, and public programs. They are also tasked with preserving its significant history. Harnessing the same sense of collegiality and collaboration that has characterized AAA from its inception, they keep the organization steady. But balance is not stasis; these members are all working artists, and that is what ultimately keeps the organization moving forward. While AAA may nurture or even create a platform for abstract art, on balance, its member artists have always been the reason for its endurance.





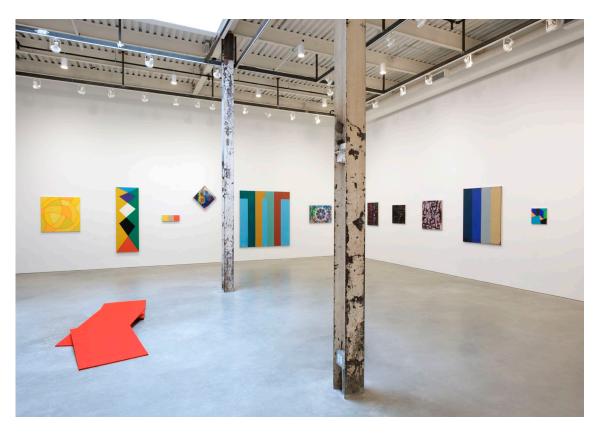


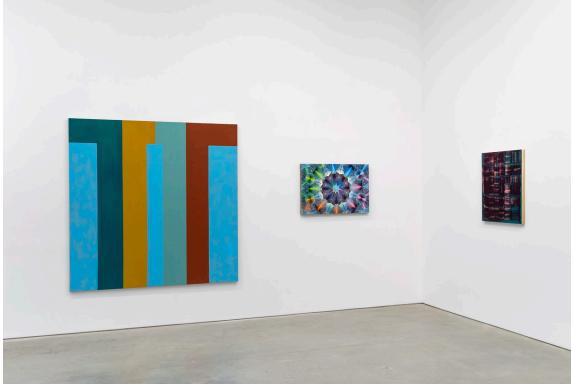


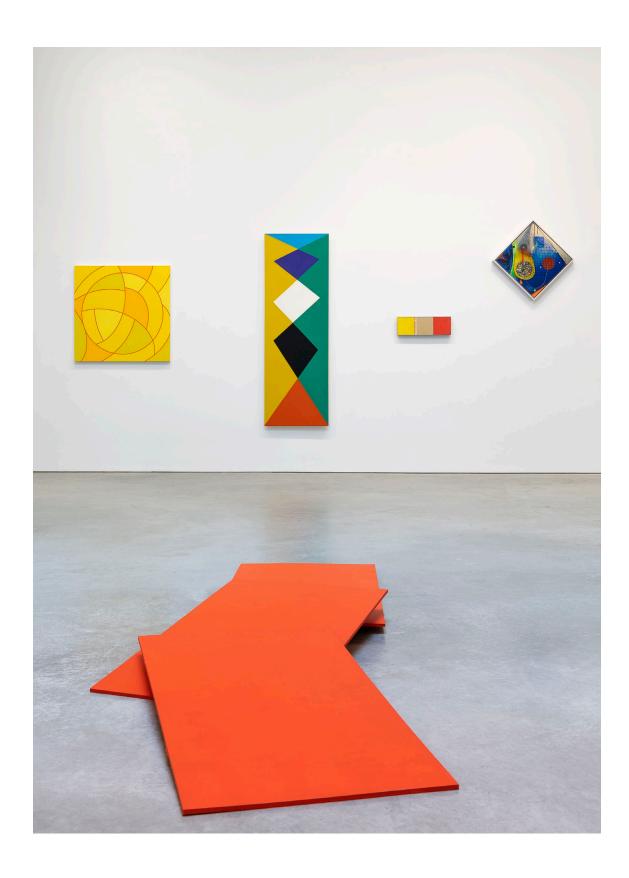








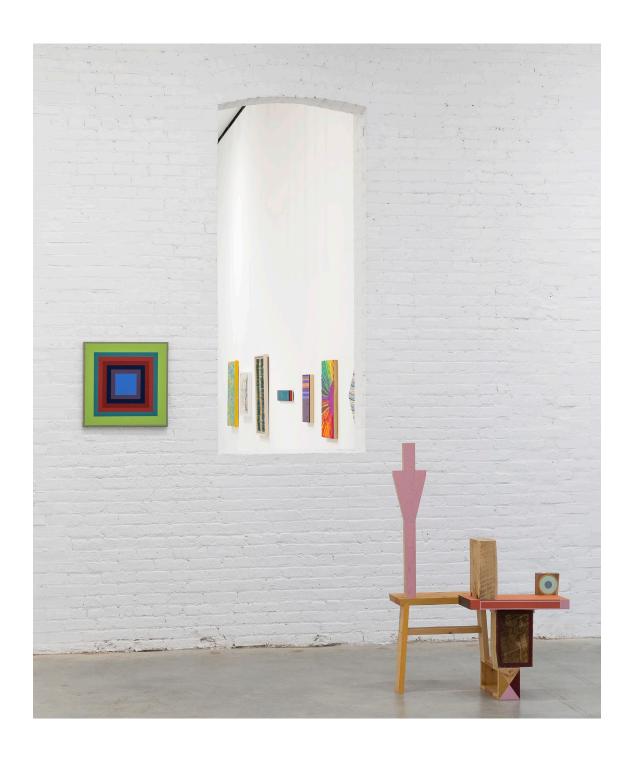




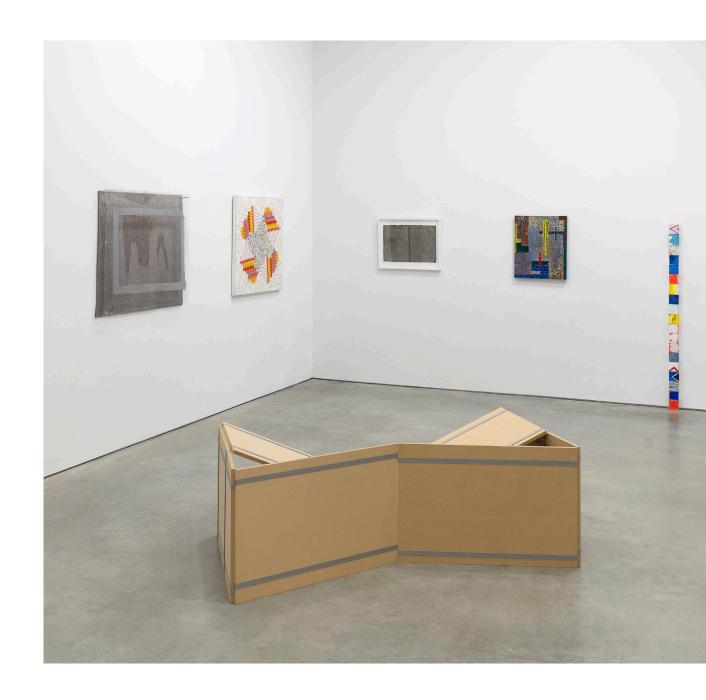


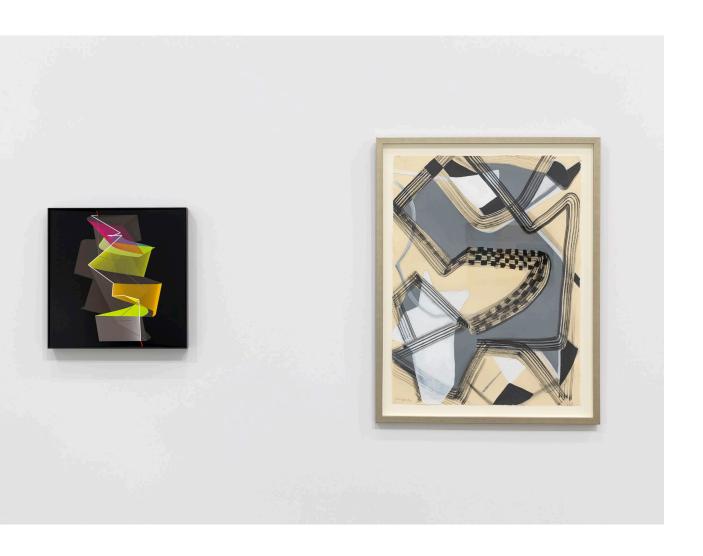




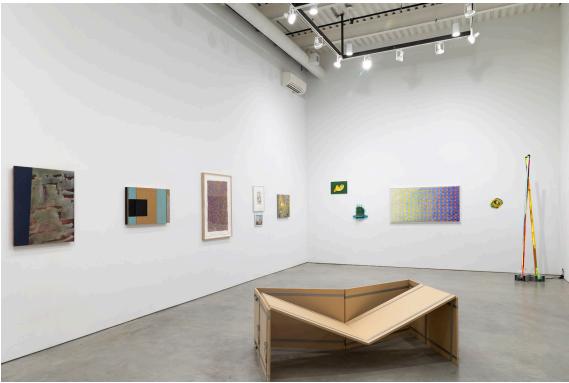








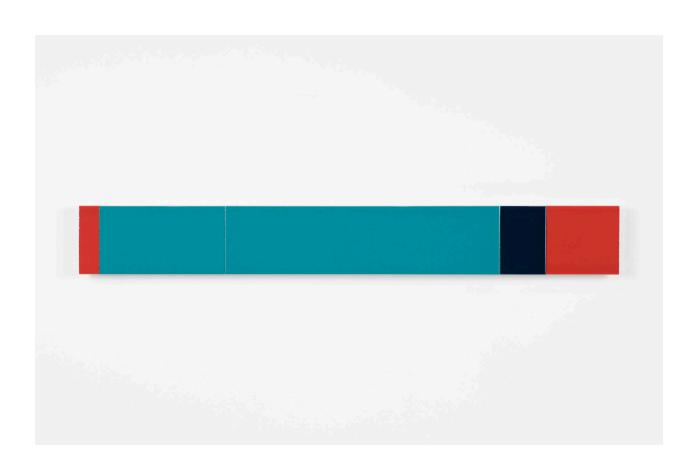






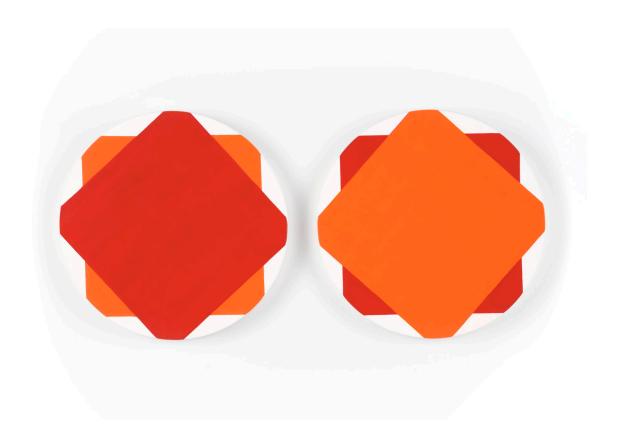


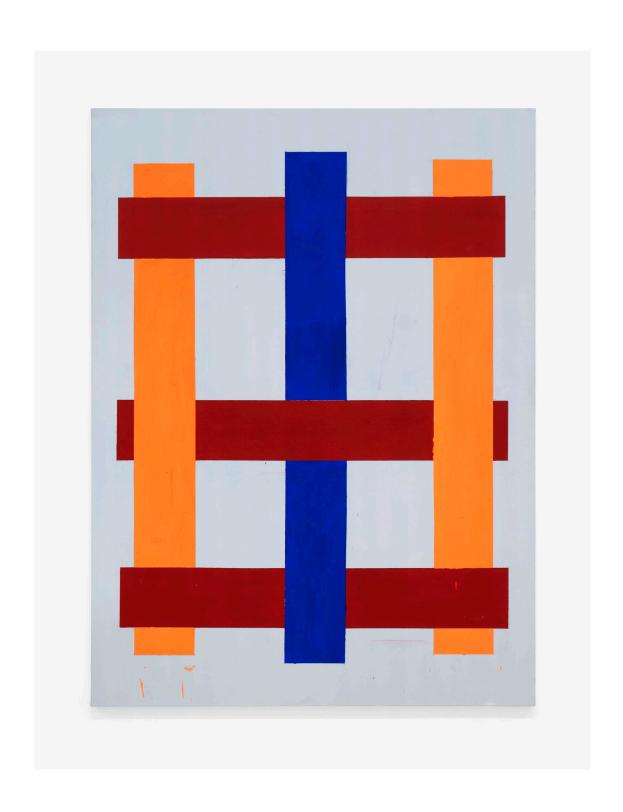




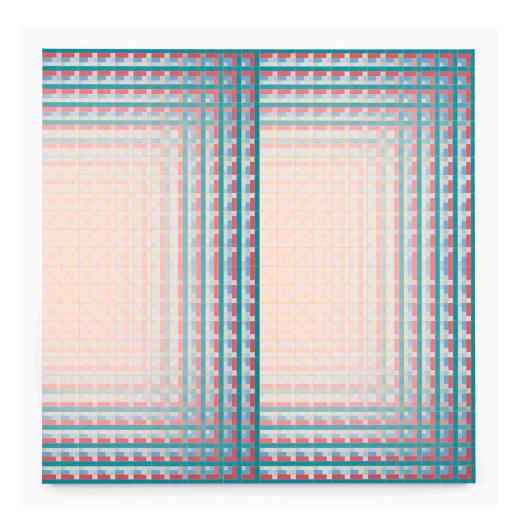


























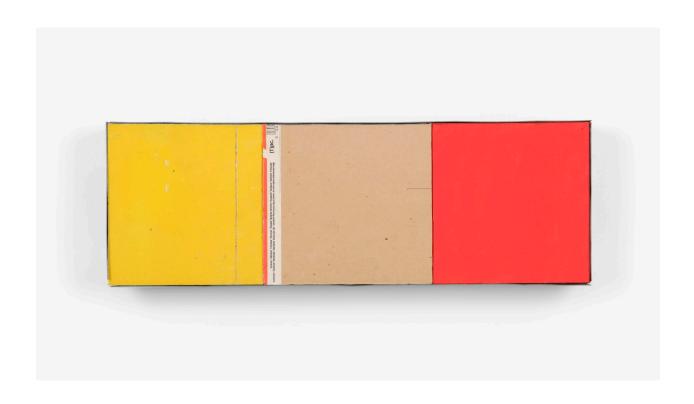


















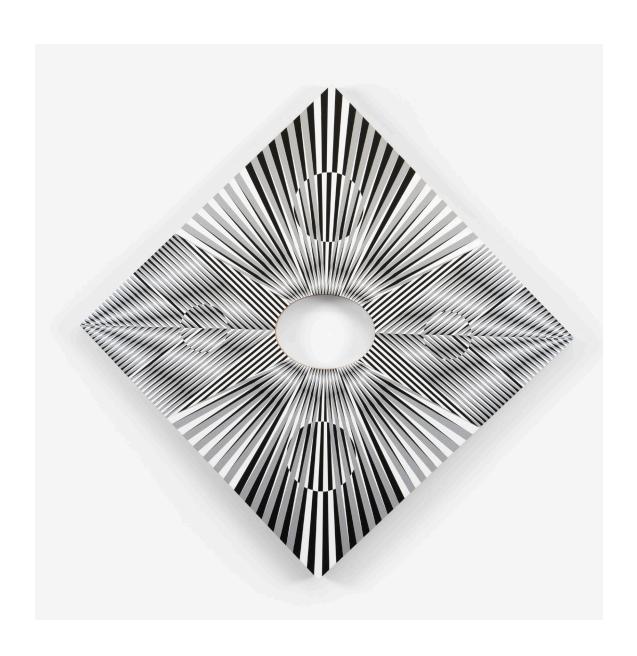














**Nola Zirin**, Outside the Triangle, 2022, Oil and acrylic on wood,  $24 \times 12$  in.



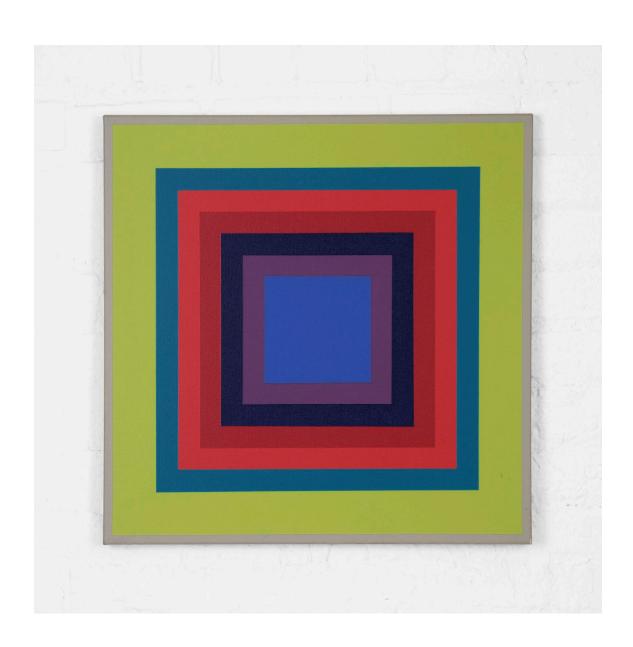


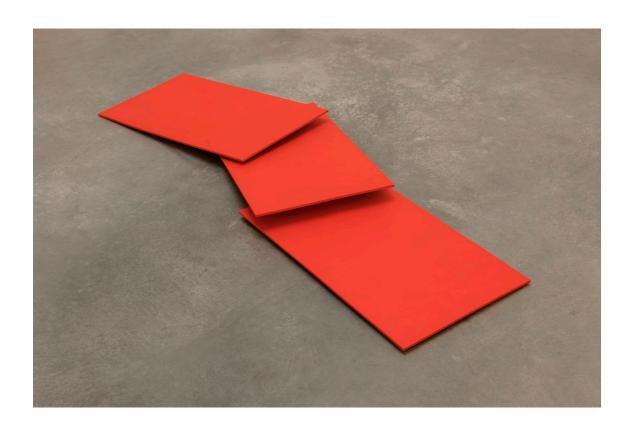
**Mary Schiliro**, Side by Side 1, 2020, Acrylic paint on Mylar,  $85\frac{1}{2} \times 12$  in.

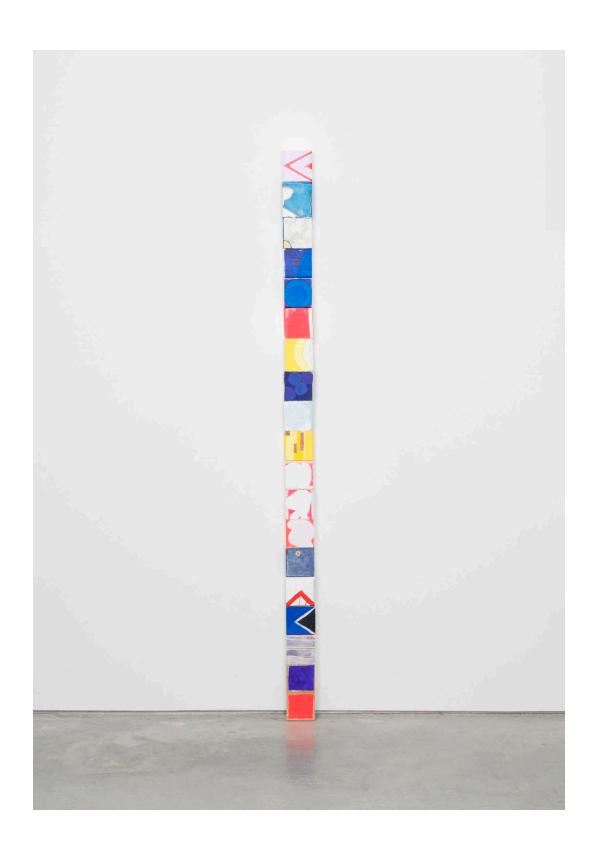


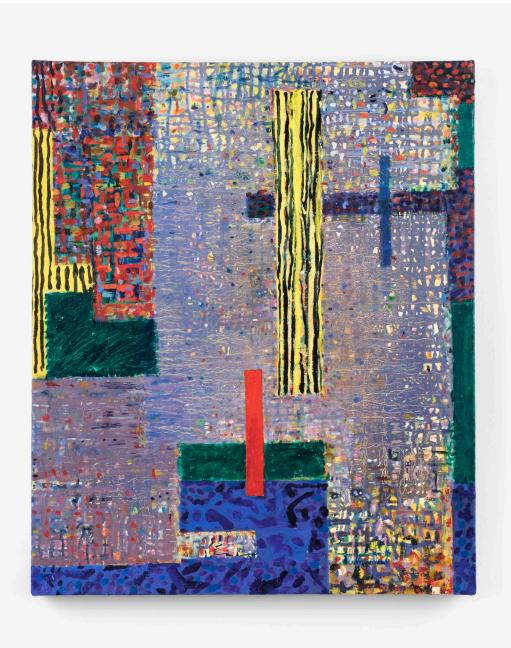
























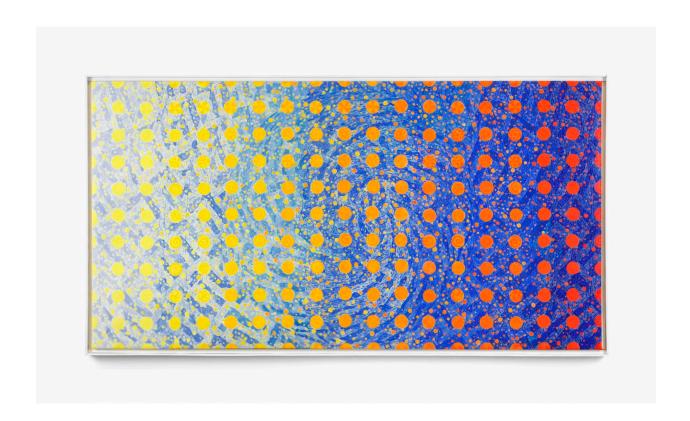


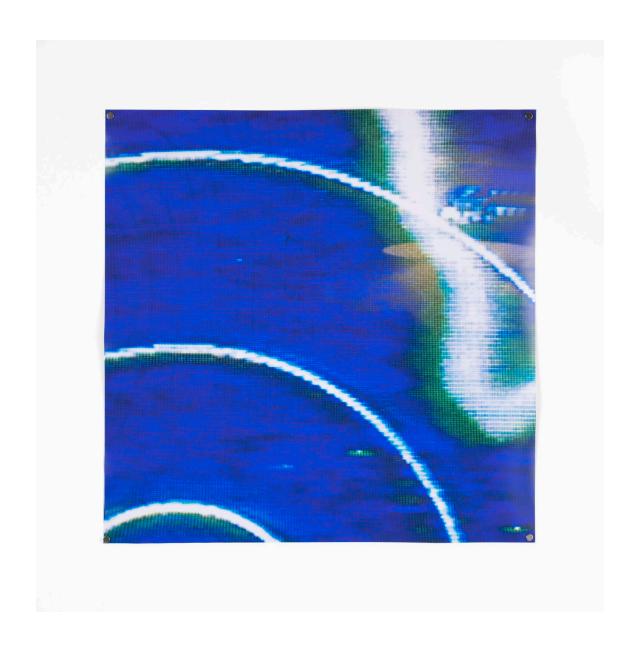




James O. Clark, Lean Today, Rich Tomorrow, 2022, Aluminum, plastic, LED lights, dimensions variable























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