

An abstract painting with a complex, layered texture. The background is a mix of colors including yellow, blue, brown, and red, with visible brushstrokes and splatters. The overall effect is one of organic, textured complexity.

# Ben Woolfitt Paintings

*With an essay by Donald Kuspit*







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## BEN WOOLFITT: AN INTRODUCTION

*Richard Rhodes*

The paintings of Ben Woolfitt thrive on visual contradiction. The tray-like frames that have come to be a hallmark of the work literally act as extensions of the surfaces. They push beyond the traditional role of frames to serve as boundaries for a space apart. In Woolfitt, that norm is contradicted. His frames resist enclosure. Rather than function as ends or limits, they transform into elements that signal a brimming over capacity. The energy of the painting spills over the edge. The paint looks molten, colors bubble, and the surface flows like a tissue of living flesh. A first take always reacts to the visceral exuberance of the objects, yet paradoxically the actual surfaces stand as eloquent contradictions to the impression. With their raised edges, the frames create a convincing illusion of bulk, but inside them, what we actually see on the color fields in front of us are intricate, semi-transparent layers of paint that reveal complex depths. In Woolfitt's paintings, space is tiered. It is a constructed event, worried by interrupted gestures and buried histories. As metaphoric entities, the paintings have a deliberate innerness that contrasts with their extroverted demeanor. They bear a sentient weight, and this subtle, elusive, aesthetic thickening translates into analogues of experience, archeologies of lives lived.

This existential abstraction is a significant arrival for Woolfitt. His art is sourced in the process-oriented, material abstraction of late modern painting. He is part of the post-Abstract Expressionist generation that formalized the terms and enhanced the scale of non-objective painting. But where much of that painting was a rational, studied engagement with pictorial space, a measure of the world in materialist terms, Woolfitt's recent paintings have pushed elsewhere. Their metaphorical objecthood revolves around expansion and complexity. It acknowledges the reopened contextual thrust of postmodern art that threads and ties the art object to an interpretive, socialized reality where no art object stands pristine and alone. His paintings are not puzzles of two-dimensional space. They leap instead into a referential life full of the ghosts and half memories of scraped residual color. Gestation is more important than gesture. Part of Woolfitt's purpose is an ongoing homage to painting's past. A picture of his can summon up the mournful passing shadows of a nocturnal Turner seascape.

Others parse the divine, symbolic realms of Renaissance masters, replicating the heavenly gold of Giotto or the vulnerable, pulsing reds of Titian. Woolfitt has come to use color as both an expressive and a semiotic tool. His work addresses not the practical science of chroma but meditational painting, a history of painting wrapped in an exploration of the human condition.

This is a surprising place for someone who started out in 1970s color field painting to arrive. However, Woolfitt's achievement is the more or less continual renewal of purpose that he has brought to his art, his late work—he is now in his 70s—in particular. He has let go of placing himself within shared professional styles in favor of making a more idiosyncratic, personal art. He is still an abstractionist, but an abstractionist who imagines the realm as an encrypted expressive mode that removes much of the analytical distance of the genre. Woolfitt's work feels closer, macro close at times. This interiority is perhaps partly an extension of his career, which has been somewhat irregular in that he has been much better known as a businessman during his 50-year painting career. Woolfitt is the name behind Woolfitt's Art Supplies, once considered one of the top professional art supply stores in North America. Decades of gratitude for his sourcing of top materials for artists pushed his own art into the background until the sale of the business allowed him to step publicly into his studio identity. The recent large-scale paintings are a result of that changeover and they bear the freshness of lost time triumphantly regained.

The diaristic nature of Woolfitt's long-standing drawing practice reinforces his painting. It is a reflective exercise that begins his days, and the drawings themselves are sometimes literally reflective, with silver leaf sections that counterpoint the graphite and oil pastel. It was the drawings that brought him to the attention of the distinguished New York art critic Donald Kuspit, who contributes an in-depth essay in this book. Known for his writings in *Artforum* and for books like *The End of Art*, Kuspit has forged his career as a champion of engaged creativity free from the constraints of market and academic consensus. For Kuspit, the psychic traditions of art are too important to give over to superficial practice and interpretation. Art satisfies deep needs in its makers and those needs sustain its dialogue with its audiences. This moral and ethical surety drew him to Woolfitt, and his words set Woolfitt's art into that timeless ambition. It is a fitting result for an art career so quiet and steadfast and full. Woolfitt has found his critic. The critic has found his art. Together they make a book where the enjoyment is ours.

## THERAPEUTIC ABSTRACTION: BEN WOOLFITT'S PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

Donald Kuspit

Like everything genuine, its inner life guarantees its truth.

—Franz Marc, “Two Pictures,” *Blaue Reiter Almanac*<sup>1</sup>

In my view, the skin that has been torn from the body, if it is preserved whole, represents the protective envelope, the shield ... to duplicate and reinforce one's own skin.

This protective skin is precious.... To be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations.

—Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*<sup>2</sup>

### Overview

Throbbing with color, beside themselves with energy—turbulent, manically excited, recklessly impulsive—the painterly abstractions Ben Woolfitt made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the consummate, epitomizing expression of the modernist pursuit of sensation for the sake of sensation: in Cézanne's famous words, the idea that painting is a way of “giving shape to your sensations,” more pointedly, “a personal apperception ... embodied in sensations.” The “sensationalism” of Woolfitt's paintings—compounded of seemingly innumerable layers of paint,<sup>3</sup> creating a sort of thick skin, a surface that seems impenetrable yet deep, as though hiding some secret or mystery, burying something that is unspeakable, lost forever as Pompeii was lost under a tide of lava—is at once inviting and intimidating, awesome and unsettling. It is impossible to find a sure perceptual footing in Woolfitt's Heraclitean stream of ever-changing, rapidly moving color, to remain focused on one place, to find a calm, stable space in which one can rest one's eyes. In some works—noteworthily *From A Blue Time*, 2003, and *To The Middle Of The Earth*, 2004—gestures concentrate to form an amorphous mass, but it is too molten and explosive to become a safe visual

haven. The mass tends to dissolve in the series of all-over paintings Woolfitt began a decade later—the *The Dawn Before Greatness Series*, the *Graceful Descent Series*, the *Turbulence Series*, and the *In The Glare Of The Golden Light Series* among them. There are few sharply defined, clearly demarcated, self-contained, insular spaces—no sign of the geometry in the diamond paintings made in 1975—although the colors are sometimes separated, as in *Blue Paradise*, 2016, with its sky-blue and golden yellow, seemingly at odds yet both heavenly colors. But the gestures remain as intense and bold, intimate and grand—and overwhelming—as ever.

The complex, churning, impetuous, lava-like textures—they're too violent to be soothing, yet too intimate to be resisted—of these late painterly abstractions dramatize and disrupt the skin of the painting, as though suggesting that it is scarred, has healed badly from some cutting experience, that there is more at stake than giving body to Woolfitt's sensations. In French, the noun “sensation” is related to the verb “sentir,” meaning “to feel,” suggesting that Cézanne's paintings are as full of feelings as of sensations—that he was painting his intense feelings under the guise of painting his exciting sensations. As the painter-critic Lawrence Gowing notes, “the idea of art as emotional ejaculation” began with Cézanne's palette knife paintings. Woolfitt's painterly abstractions are endless emotional ejaculations, flooding the canvas from edge to edge. Technically, they are contained by the limits of the canvas, generally a sort of off-square—for example, 78” × 66” in *Indian Summer* and *Symphony In Blue*, both 2016—giving them an almost icon-like presence reminiscent of Malevich's Suprematist square. The containing frame is also richly painted with ejaculative color and rampant gesture, bringing it into the painting without denying its geometrical separateness. But the containment afforded by the simple geometry of the canvas and frame is superficial, especially because it is denied by its painterly incorporation into the work. More subtly, each gestural layer of color contains the layer beneath it, the compactness of the whole making for a sense of self-containment. The final layer seals the work into hermetic grandeur.

The painterly abstractions that Woolfitt began to make in 2010—if ripeness is all, they are his ripest work, the late work of a mature master—have a double meaning: they simultaneously express and suppress, proclaim and contain, his emotions. To use Freud's distinction between id and ego, more broadly between the dynamic unconscious and the reflective consciousness, at first glance Woolfitt's painterly abstractions seem all dynamic id, but one

realizes that his consistent, repetitive use of one painterly layer to cover and conceal another is a deliberate, reflective act of the ego, and as such, a sign of emotional control and mastery. Woolfitt may be vehemently expressing his unconscious emotions, but he is doing so in a self-conscious, thoughtful way. The relentless, determined way he builds up his surface implies that it is not as free-wheeling—and daemonic—as it looks.

The result is an uncanny doubleness: the doubleness that is the sign of a true artist, as Baudelaire said: “An artist is only an artist on condition that he is a double man and that there is not one single phenomenon of his double nature of which he is ignorant.”<sup>4</sup> I think the difference between the reflective, introverted, darkish drawings, with their handwritten words<sup>5</sup>—they are sort of haiku-like tone poems—and the hyper-expressive, extroverted, brightly colored paintings convey Woolfitt’s double nature. The drawings have gestural elements, the paintings have linear elements, indicating that Woolfitt is able to reconcile the opposites while giving each its due. His works are an endless, in-depth self-exploration in search of self-knowledge—the sign of a true artist, an authentic master. In *In Red*, 2016, from the *Turbulence Series*, passion and aggression—Eros and Thanatos, or libido and the death instinct, to use Freud’s terms—ambivalently intermix in bizarre harmony. Acceptance of ambivalence—the doubleness, not to say contradictoriness of feeling—is a prerequisite and sign of maturity. Woolfitt’s paintings are psychologically realistic—they convey insight into the complexity, not to say paradoxes, of psychic process—as well as physically compelling.

Woolfitt is a process painter in more ways than one. He may be acting out his intense feelings—purging them—but he is also examining—analyzing—them as he does so. He seems to be dissecting them as he presents them: the colorful gestures are like tissues laid out for microscopic study. Blood seems to have been spilled in the process, as the lurid red in numerous works—conspicuously in *Splash*, *Today*, and *An Elusive Day*, all 2017—suggests. The gestures may congeal into an amorphous mass, but they are individualized into originality. Woolfitt’s paintings—his seemingly “sensational,” carefree handling of his fluid medium and seemingly “sensational,” careless expression of his fluid feelings—are carefully calculated. The gestural “acts” in his action painting are crafted and judicious rather than random or accidental. Unconsciously scanned, Woolfitt’s painterly abstractions convey the hidden order in seemingly chaotic disorder, to allude to Anton Ehrenzweig’s theory of artistic perception.

Since Kandinsky, abstract painting has been said to be modeled on music. “All art aspires towards the condition of music,” Walter Pater famously wrote. “For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.”<sup>6</sup> For Pater it is only in what he calls the “abstract language” of music that art achieves this it does so. Woolfitt’s painterly abstractions are a “chorus of colors,” to quote Kandinsky,<sup>7</sup> the founding father of musical abstraction. More particularly, Woolfitt’s musical abstractions are a climactic statement of what the critic Clement Greenberg, the great advocate of abstraction, called “all-over, ‘decentralized,’ ‘polyphonic’” painting, “advisedly borrow[ing] the term ‘polyphonic’ from music ... with particular reference to Schönberg’s methods of composition,”<sup>8</sup> reminding us that Kandinsky’s musical painting was inspired by the “radical ... ‘new’ music” of Schönberg, which Kandinsky heard in 1911. It was new and young then, and Woolfitt’s paintings, which carry it to new heights, show that it remains young and fresh. If the best musical abstractions convey the harmony lurking in dissonance—the coherence in chaos—then Woolfitt’s musical abstractions are among the very best, for one needs chaos theory to fully comprehend the rhythms of their seemingly arrhythmic painterliness. *Symphony in Blue*, 2016 is heavenly painterly music, as its amorphous fusion of sky-blue and bright yellow suggests. It is a modern dissonant music, but the lively colors embrace each other, as though struggling to harmonize. The narrow frame, thickly covered with gold paint, with a thin red line of paint on the inside, seems to refine the painterly music with no loss of intensity.

Woolfitt’s drawings are more intimate and poignant than his paintings. They invite quiet contemplation rather than orgasmic pleasure. The question is what their relationship to the paintings is. First looking at the drawings, one text leaped out at me, seemed a convincing clue, an unexpected avenue of insight into the inner meaning of the paintings, however much they appear to be especially extravagant emotional ejaculations, Abstract Expressionism gone emotionally berserk, over the edge (as the painted frame suggests): in May 2007 Woolfitt wrote: “Drawn—slightly—softly across the surface—touching—like a skin—feeling—every nuance and texture—leaving my mark—as many have done on my skin—.” His skin, but also his father’s skin—skin “crinkled as was my father’s hand—now so desperate for love knowing he would leave us.” “Crinkled. The loss—the pain—the man—the



father—finally saying Ben—I love you.” Again: “Crinkled # For my father—or for me, about my father.” Woolfitt identifies with his father, and was desperate for his love, which finally was given shortly before his death. And then: “Emerging—a series on the painful moments in my life—Mother—Sister and Father—Gone away.” They are all dead, and he misses them all, longs for them all, loves them all—Woolfitt is the lone survivor of his family. His paintings compensate for their loss: their absence is implicit in their painterly presence. The many painterly layers fill the emptiness he felt when they passed away. In a perhaps absurd sense, all his colorful gestures are so many flourishing flowers thrown on their graves.

Woolfitt identified with his father—he implies that their hands had the same crinkled skin. It is as though he has stripped his father’s skin from his dead body and immortalized it in the dramatic—traumatic—textures of his painterly abstractions. The colorful gestures are voluptuous scars, seductive yet painful. The drawings accompany the paintings, comment on the emotional state in which Woolfitt made them, reveal the painful secret behind their pleasurable lushness. I am arguing that the luminous paintings are incomprehensible without the elegiac drawings: their brooding mournfulness is transcended—and disguised—by the colorful splendor of the paintings. Fraught with the suffering of loss, the drawings become memento mori. They have a tenderness to them, a softness of tone, a certain delicacy to their touchiness, in contrast to the hard-driving, let-it-all-emotionally-hang-out paintings. Their mood and aesthetics are different, for they serve a different purpose: the drawings move more slowly than the paintings—one is invited to linger on the words, to think about their meaning, all the more depressing because of the twilight zone that pervades the drawings—whereas the lavish paintings convey Woolfitt’s determination to go on living at full speed. They show him thriving, full of joie de vivre, over-the-top ecstasy; the drawings convey his misery and loneliness, his suffering and melancholy. Taken together, they suggest his bipolarity, even as they bespeak universal existential truth.

Woolfitt’s father, mother, and older sister—his family—were what the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut called selfobjects,<sup>9</sup> individuals that are inalienable parts of the self. They raised him, facilitated his development, but something went amiss in it—his remark about his father finally saying that he loved him suggests what was missing—which is why he turned to group therapy to remedy it, and to complete his development—to become an artist. If a group is a kind of family, then the years he spent in group

therapy—for that is what it was—at Therafields were years with a second family.<sup>10</sup> It was at Therafields that Woolfitt became an artist. His art serves a therapeutic purpose—has a healing function. Jung had many patients who had no sexual or social problems, but were depressed: he suggested they get in touch with their creativity by painting. Art is most convincing when it has a therapeutic—transformative—effect. Orpheus’s music calmed the beasts, transforming them into peaceful pets, and David’s music lifted King Solomon out of his depression, so that he could rule with wisdom. Woolfitt’s painterly abstractions express his beastly instincts; his insightful drawings give him a certain wisdom—the worldly wisdom necessary to survive as an independent artist, which was part of the purpose of his successful art supplies and picture framing business. It kept him connected with art, even as it showed that he had developed a reality principle.

He begins the day making the introspective drawings—sometimes they record dreams he remembers on awakening—and continues it making the expressive paintings. It is as though he brings his unconscious emotions to consciousness by giving them verbal form in the drawings—the murkiness of some of the emotions is suggested by the blurriness of some of the drawings, as well as the indecipherability of some of the texts, as Reid notes—which frees him to convey their unspeakable power in the paintings. The drawings are, in effect, fragments of a self-analysis, an ongoing monitoring of his feelings, while the catharsis of the act of painting liberates him from them. For all their raw energy, the paintings seem have an aura of transcendence, that is, of “going beyond.”

### Some Particulars

The diamond paintings, made in 1975—“a breakthrough year for Woolfitt,” as Carpenter writes—are uniquely important in Woolfitt’s development, for they signal the moment when he came into his own as an artist, an artist in pursuit of perfection. “The diamond [is] a pre-eminent symbol of perfection,” even more significantly of immortality—it is the alchemist’s Philosopher’s Stone. The Buddha sits on a diamond throne, for Plato “the World axis is made of diamond.” Its “hardness, translucence and brightness” make it the “Queen of Stones.” Its “immutability” signals its “incorruptibility.”<sup>11</sup> It is a symbol of wholeness and integrity—the ideal in geometric form. With the diamond paintings Woolfitt dedicated himself completely



to art, asserted his integrity and autonomy, his wish to perfect his art, to make immortal art. “bp Nichol once observed,” Carpenter notes, “the diamond could serve as a neutral container—‘something to paint into,’” which brings to mind Woolfitt’s remark, quoted by Carpenter, that the grid is “a containment for my feelings.” But while Woolfitt’s diamonds do serve as containers for paint, sometimes green, sometimes black (with a hint of blue), the important thing about them is the aura of invulnerability and transcendence their intelligibility gives them.

Geometrical forms are sacred forms, with an auratic presence, emblematic of pure ideas, as Plato argued in his myth of the divided line. To use Plato’s distinction, color belongs to the realm of sense illusion, geometry to the realm of pure—abstract—thought: fusing color and geometry, each epitomizing its realm, Woolfitt’s diamond paintings afford a sort of peak experience of essences. If the later painterly abstractions deal with existential emotions, the diamond paintings deal with essential ideas. Indeed, ideas essential to abstract art, divided from its beginning into geometrical/conceptual and non-geometrical/expressive factions, the former represented by Malevich, the latter by Kandinsky—both of whom said their art was about feeling. Initially hesitantly, in *Untitled (Green Diamond)* and the *Untitled* brownish-purplish diamond, Woolfitt tries to bring the opposites together: smooth, vaporous gestures, some brown, some violet, slowly rise from the bottom of the canvas towards the brownish-purplish diamond at the top, but never quite reach it, even as a few of them touch it. In the green diamond work—the diamond is more or less centered, its lower angle touching the bottom of the canvas—the gestures are more energetic and black. They fail to penetrate the perimeter of the triangle, although a gesture of black streaks across it, dividing the diamond into horizontal halves without disturbing its integrity.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, in three large, horizontal, rectangular black and white paintings also made in 1975, an inner rectangle is flooded, overrun, all but obliterated, destroyed—in one work a right angle is all that remains of this rectangle within the rectangular canvas, in the other the inner rectangle is more or less intact, distinguishable—by raging black gestures. Attacked by the dynamic gestures, the static rectangle barely holds its own. It remains fixed in place even as it is overwhelmed. The Manichean conflict between black and white and geometry and gesture—intelligibility and instinct, enlightenment and excitement—symbolizes the conflict raging in Woolfitt’s psyche. These panicked black and white paintings are prescient

masterpieces: the conflict between black and white becomes the conflict between colors in the later abstractions. The painterliness becomes more textural, dense, agitated, but there is the same sense of endless conflict. One might say that the diamond has dissolved into liquid gold in many of the later masterpieces—an ironical reversal of the alchemical process—but the geometrical frame remains a kind of alembic, not as ideal as the diamond, but nonetheless promising transcendence—the transcendence of wild instinct and sensuous chaos by calm and collected intelligibility.

Sometimes the works seem more dark than light, as in *Amethyst*, 2011; sometimes they seem to balance dark and light, however eccentrically, as in *Pearl*, 2011; sometimes they seem to blend dark and light seamlessly, as in another work—untitled—from the *Graceful Descent Series*. Sometimes black blemishes the colors of living nature—green and yellow—like the black death, as in *On A Blue Day*, 2005, or haunts it, as in two untitled works from 2007. *On A Blue Day* is particularly stunning for its daring insertion of dazzling white over the blue horizon and under the black sky. The flickering white in *The Dawn Before Greatness Series*, 2010, is also startling—truly “enlightening.” It is as though the light suddenly appeared in Plato’s dark cave. *Opening*, 2014, with its rectangle within a rectangle—another near square—is explicitly iconic, perhaps an homage to Malevich’s Suprematist square.

There are few, if any, greater masters of color and texture than Woolfitt. To my critical eye he has surpassed Jules Olitski—he acknowledges his influence—in the handling of surface, and surpassed Hans Hofmann—another “mentor” and model, for Greenberg the abstract painter par excellence—in the handling of color. The fiery red and self-dramatizing surface of *Indian Summer*, 2016, *Today*, and *An Elusive Day*, both 2017, make the point decisively. Woolfitt is one of the beacons of painting, as Baudelaire called the painters he admired, and of abstract painting in particular.



## Notes

(1) Franz Marc, "Two Pictures," *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Viking, 1974), 67

(2) Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 50, 51

(3) The "long and detailed process" of making these "remarkable works of art," Denis Reid writes, "involves working on a canvas that is laid out flat, applying a coat of glossy acrylic gel medium with a small amount of pigment, working it in with a trowel or palette knife and a rubbing cloth, letting it dry, then adding another coat for upwards to 120 layers, a process that can take as much as four months. A deeply rich, complexly coloured topography is realized with this technique, a surface that is endlessly engaging."

Denis Reid, "Introduction," *Musings: Drawings and Paintings by Ben Woolfitt* (Tokyo: Embassy of Canada, Prince Takamado Gallery, 2011), 3

(4) Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," *The Mirror of Art, Critical Studies*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 145

(5) "Woolfitt's drawings of the past decade present an even more profound accomplishment" than his paintings, Reid writes. (To me, they are equally profound—complementary in their depth.) "Their diaristic basis is signaled by the double-page format of many of them, literally an open book offered up for our perusal. All of the sophisticated techniques he has perfected over the past thirty years or so are deployed, including a waxed ground, silver leaf, frottage images, graphite and powdered chalk rubbed in by hand, and the evidence of his hand is even more pervasive, often in the form of actual handprints, and in the writing, of course, in every work. This writing, which by its nature reflects his state of mind, varies in length and in nature, from a single word, like a title, through to a number of lines with the cadence of a poem. That the writing is sometimes indecipherable does not seem to matter. It is, however, like every deliberate mark, smudge or appendage, a carefully considered part of the composition. As with the paintings, we are acutely aware of the process of making these drawings as we examine them. They are more intensely personal than the paintings, however, at times darkly so, evidence of the artist's aspirations, anxieties, his deepest feelings and concerns...."

Denis Reid, "Introduction," *Musings: Drawings and Paintings by Ben Woolfitt* (Tokyo: Embassy of Canada, Prince Takamado Gallery, 2011), 3

(6) Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance* (1873) (New York: Modern Library, no date), 111

(7) Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences/Three Pictures," *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 361

(8) Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," *Art and Culture, Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 156

(9) "Kohut defined *selfobjects* as those persons or objects that are experienced as part of the self or that are used in the service of the self to provide a function for the self. The child's rudimentary self merges with the selfobject, participates in its well-organized experience, and has its needs satisfied by the actions of the selfobject. The term *selfobject* only has meaning with regard to the experiencing person; it is not an objective person or a *true object* or a *whole object*."

Michael St. Clair, *Object Relations and Self Psychology, An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000; 3rd edition), 142

(10) Woolfitt had his first one-person exhibition in 1969. That same year he "entered Therafields, the psychotherapeutic semi-co-operative organization founded by Lea Hindley-Smith just two years before. Therafields gave him a sense that 'the inside is important,' that many of life's decisions, including the creation of art, are shaped by the unconscious parts of the mind, to which the artist needs access. It confirmed for him that through art he could address the conflicts in his life. But Therafields was more than a therapy that could focus his energy, provide direction, clarify his strengths and weaknesses, help him to redefine himself—it was a way of life and a valuable entrée to a creative group of people. Woolfitt was soon working in a shared studio that he helped set up for some twenty members of Therafields. Therapist Grant Goodbrand and poet bp Nichol would organize week-long workshops—so-called Marathons." Working with others in a shared studio was in effect group therapy, as were the Marathons.

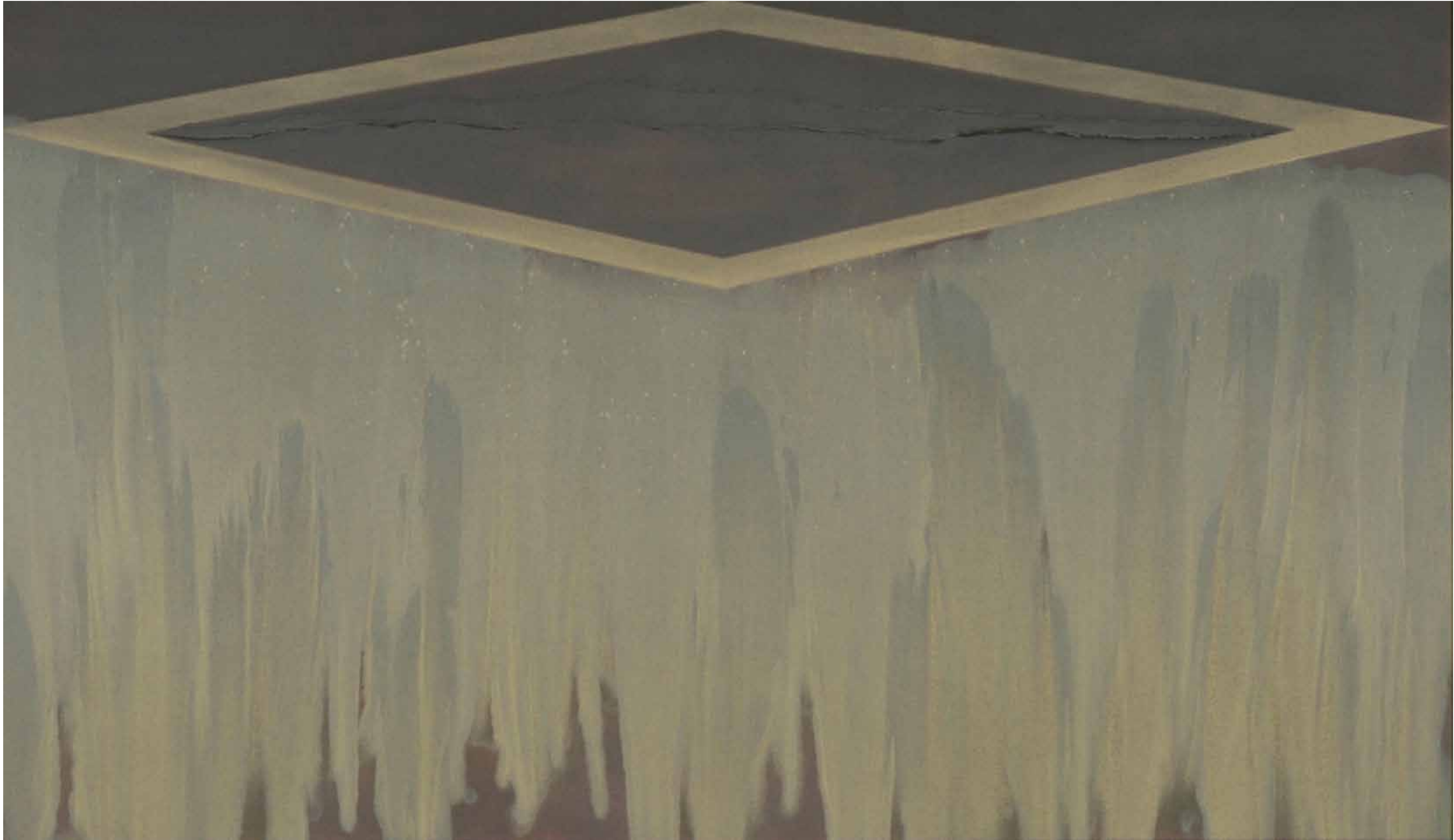
Ken Carpenter, "Ben Woolfitt as Intimist," *Ben Woolfitt as Intimist* (Toronto: Gallery One Editions, 2003), 5–6

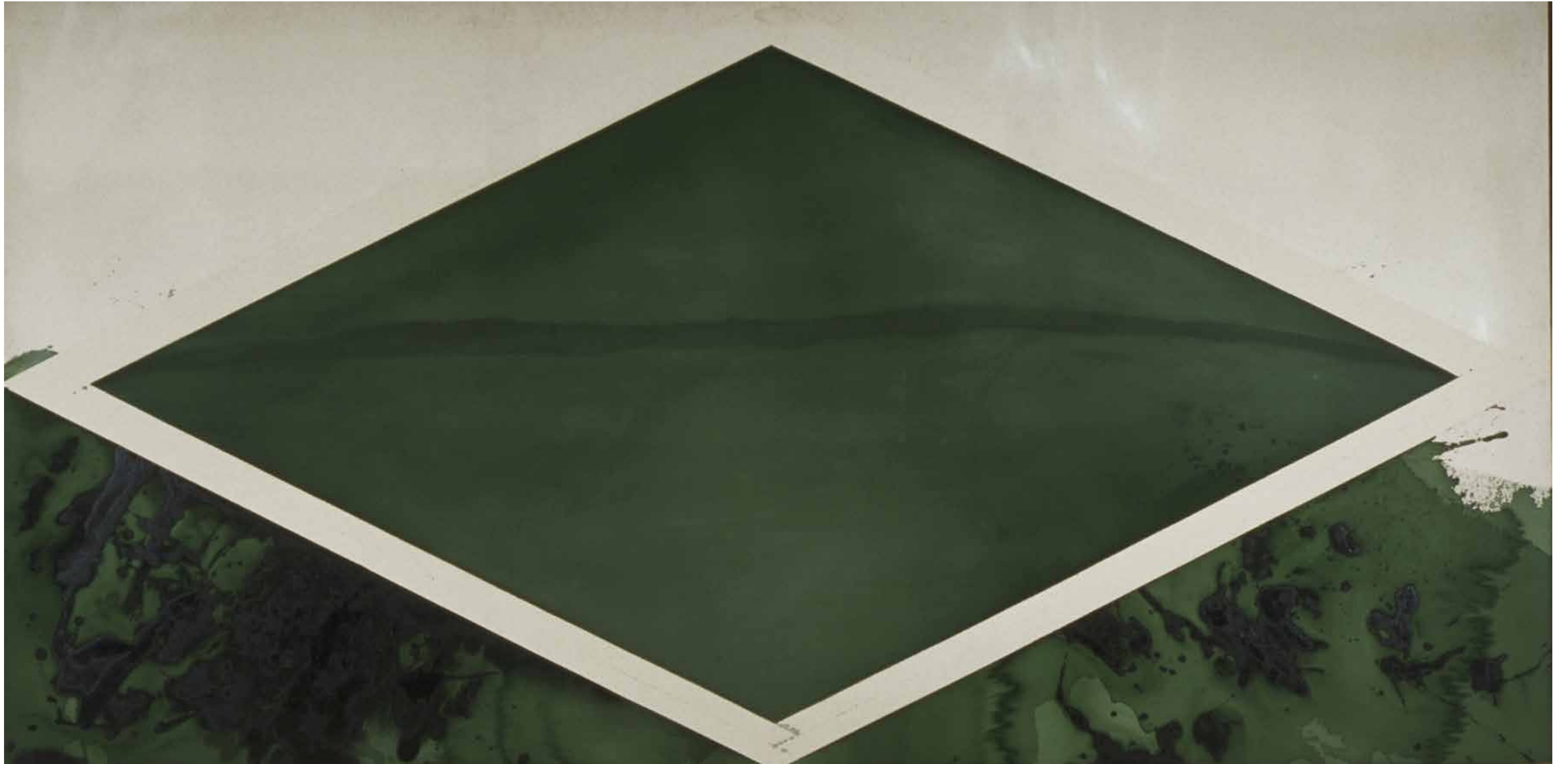
It is worth noting that Intimism was a style of "late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century painting that made an intense exploration of the domestic interior as a subject matter." A domestic interior is a site of family life. It is where the interior life of the family members makes itself felt. The Nabis Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard were its most distinguished practitioners. While they used "the Impressionist broken-color technique of capturing the light and atmosphere of the fleeting moment"—the fleeting emotional moment, I would add—"they exaggerated and distorted natural colors to express mood," resulting in "dense areas of color" that had little or no descriptive function, that is, were in effect abstractly expressive. Woolfitt can be understood as an abstract Intimist, that is, a painter expressing his deepest feelings about himself and his family in and through dense areas of moody color, suggesting that each of his paintings is in effect a different take on his domestic interior.

The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Intimism." Encyclopædia Britannica, 16 Mar. 2001, [www.britannica.com/art/Intimism](http://www.britannica.com/art/Intimism)

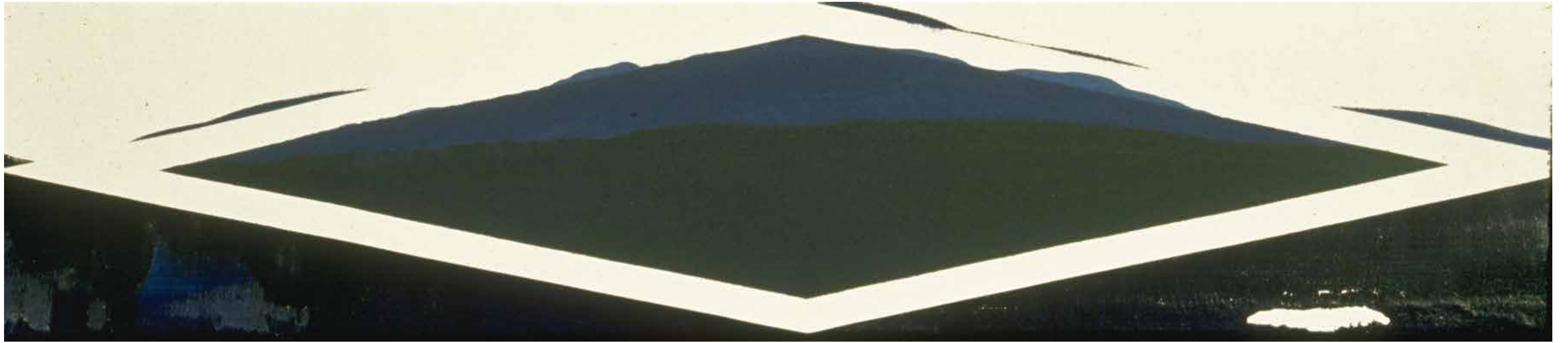
(11) Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Penguin, 1996), 290–291













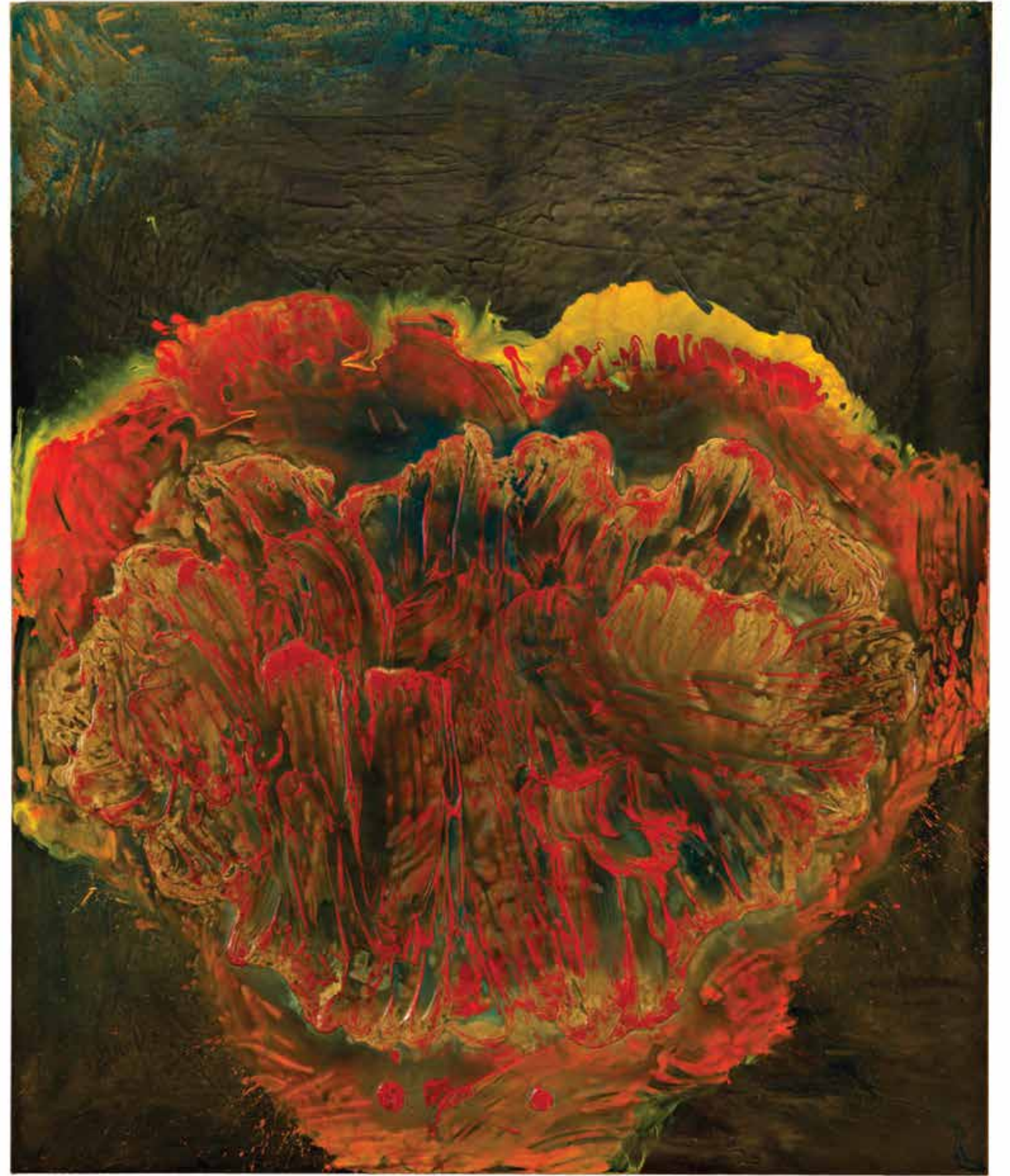




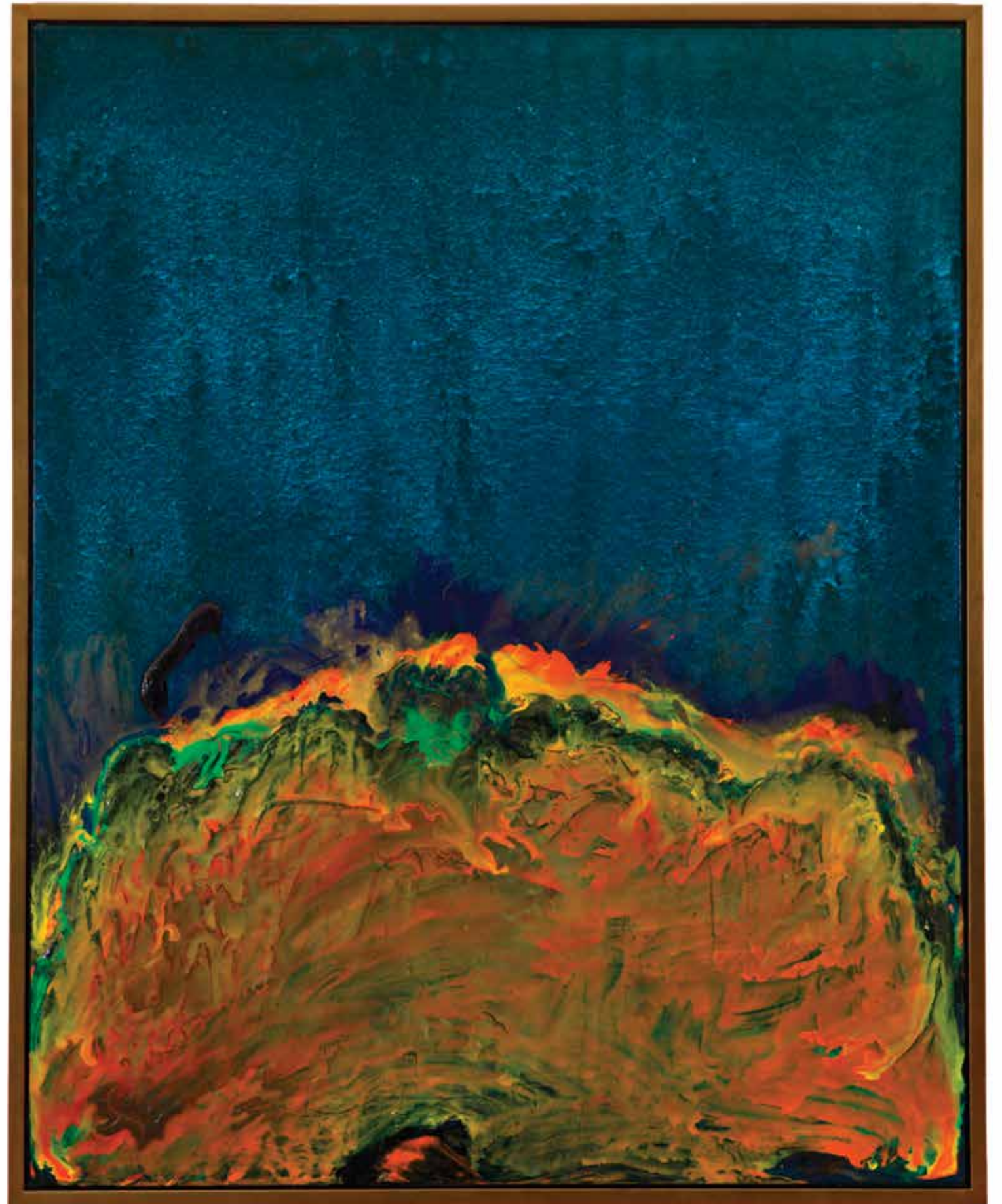




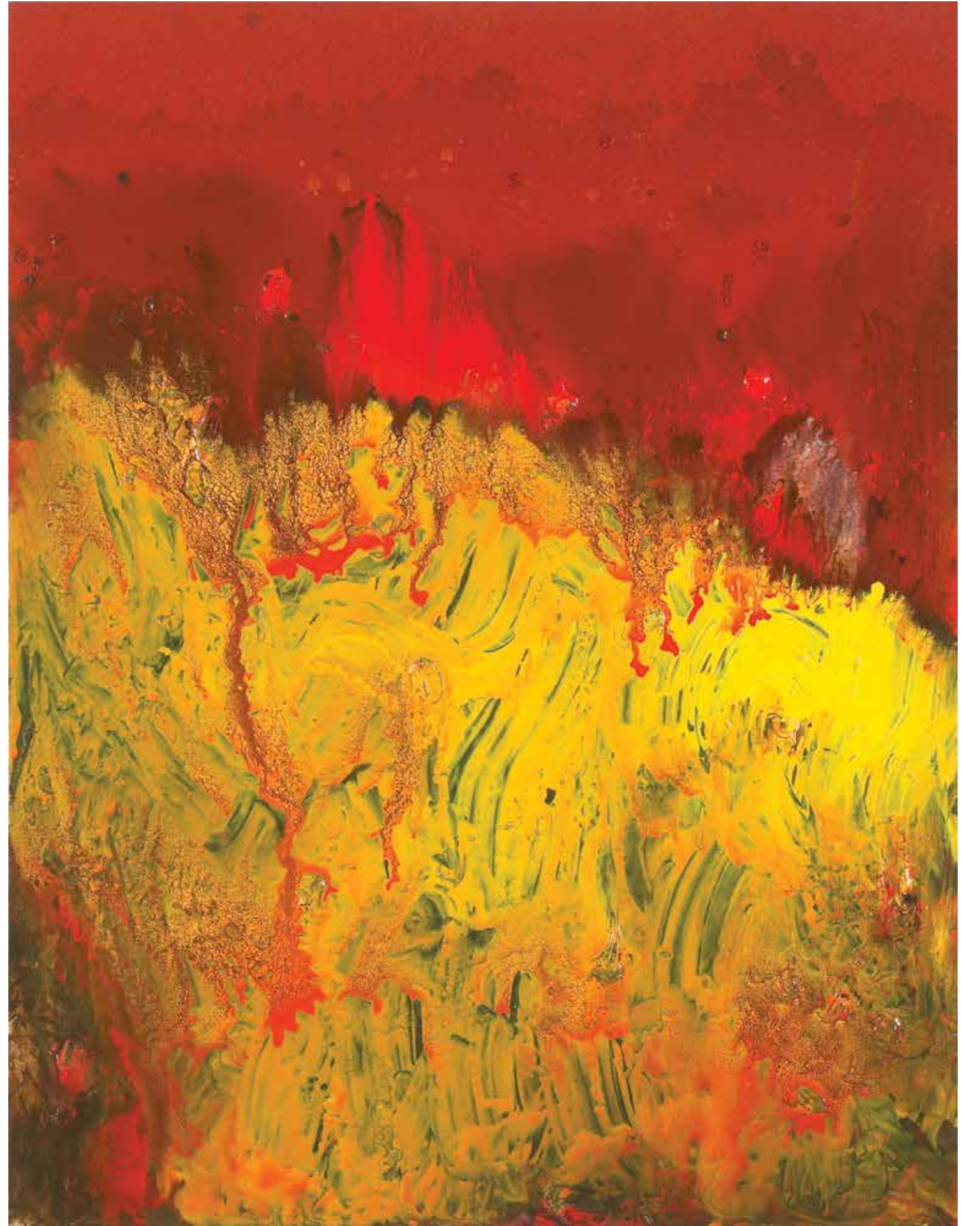




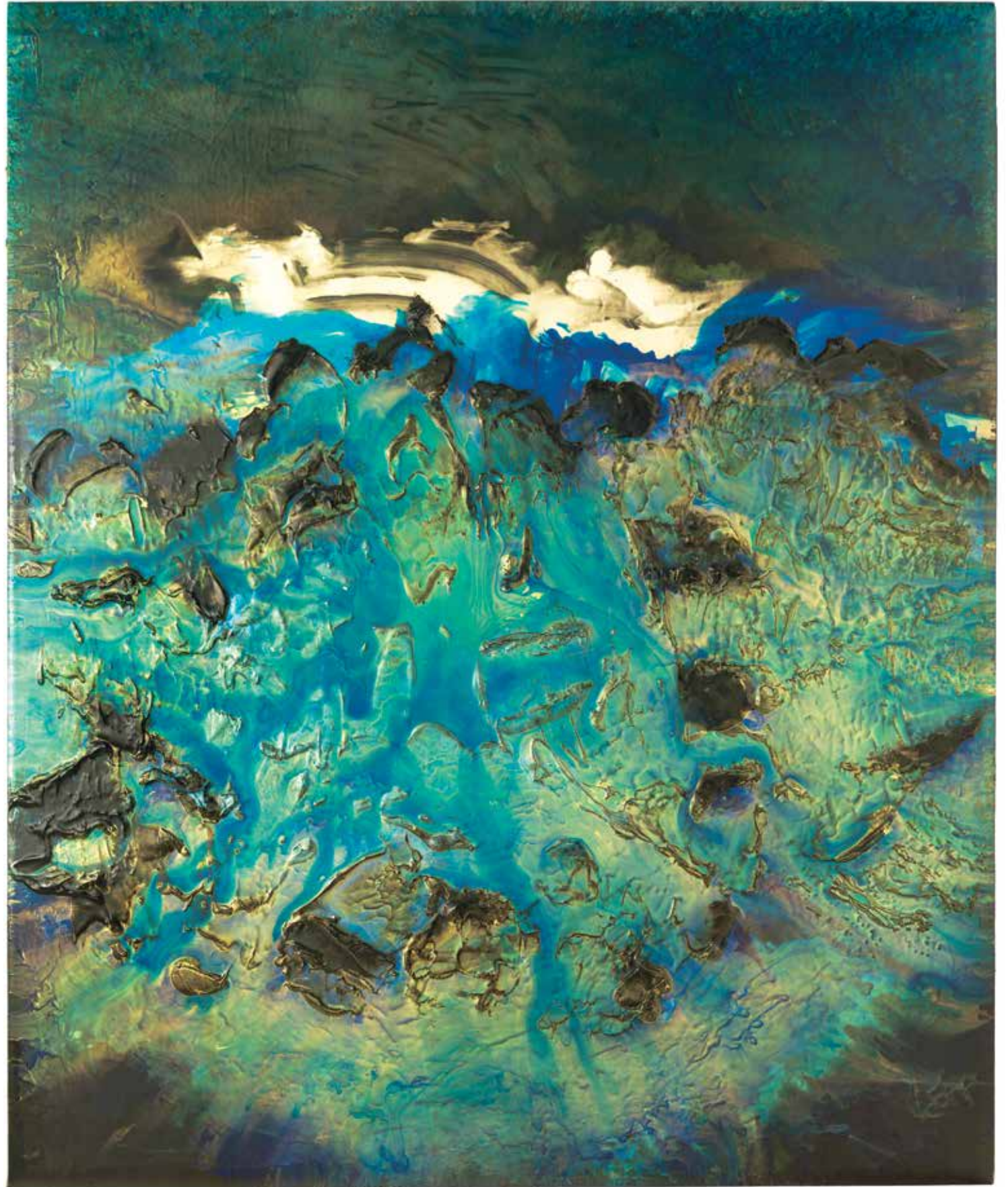








































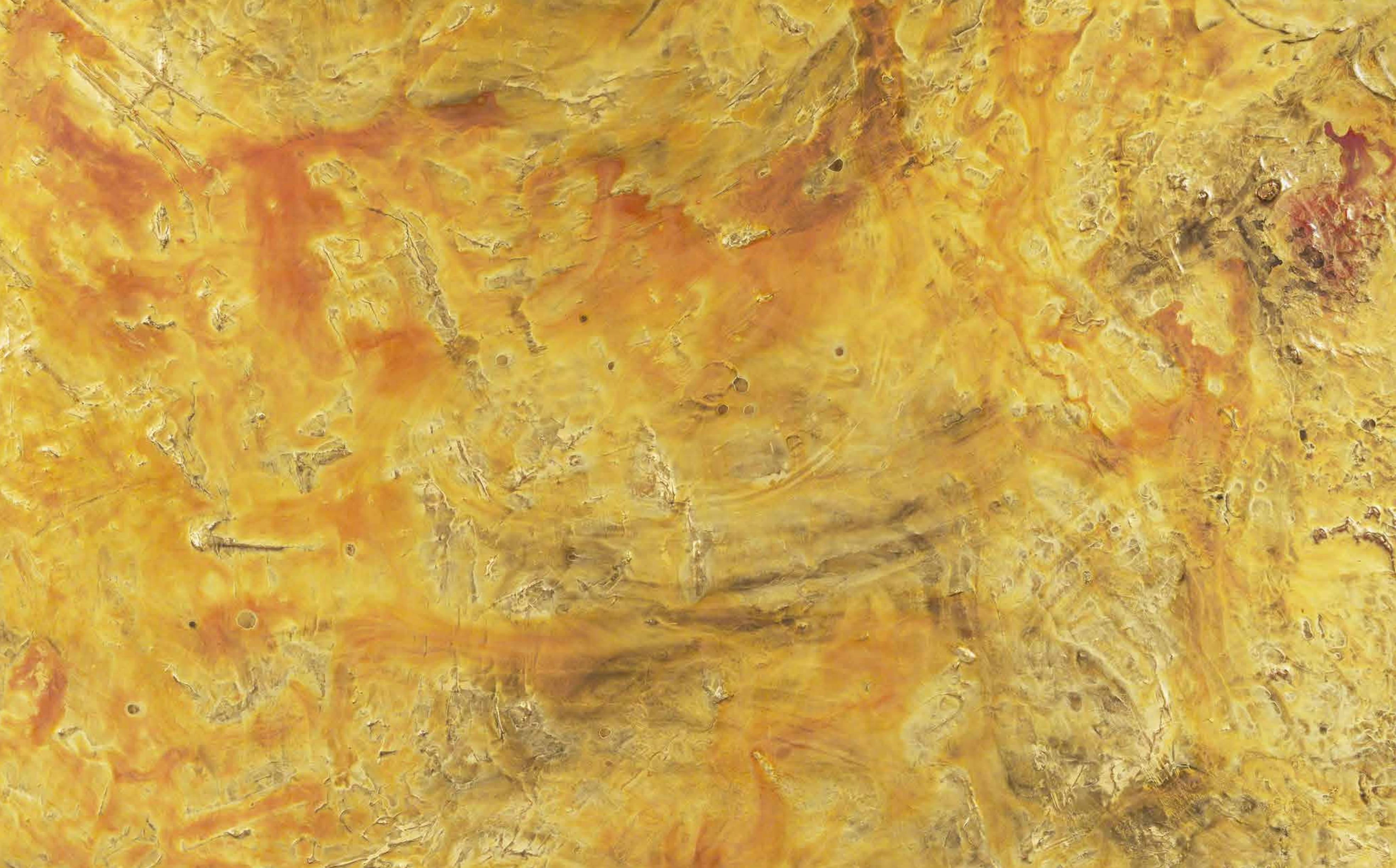




























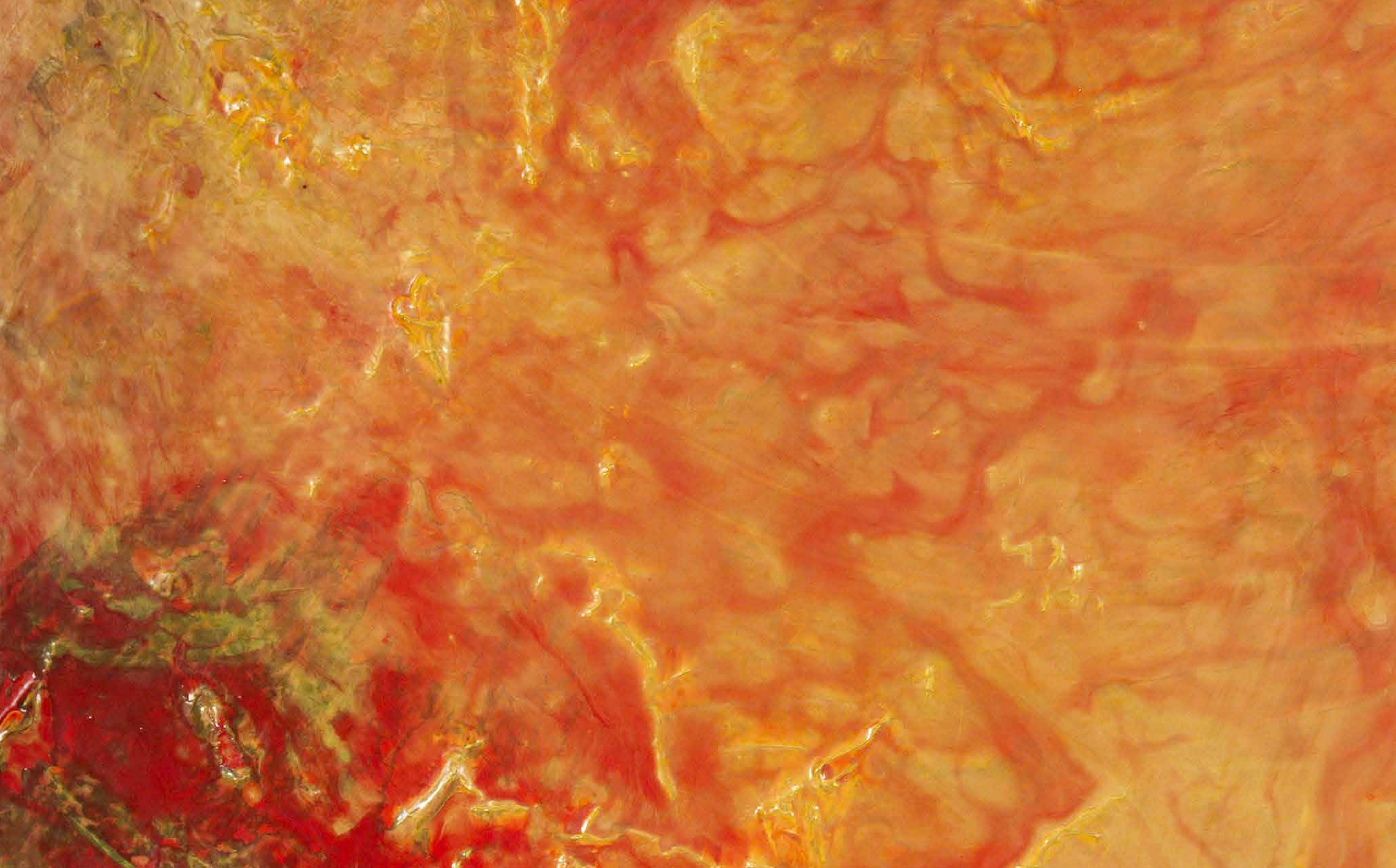




























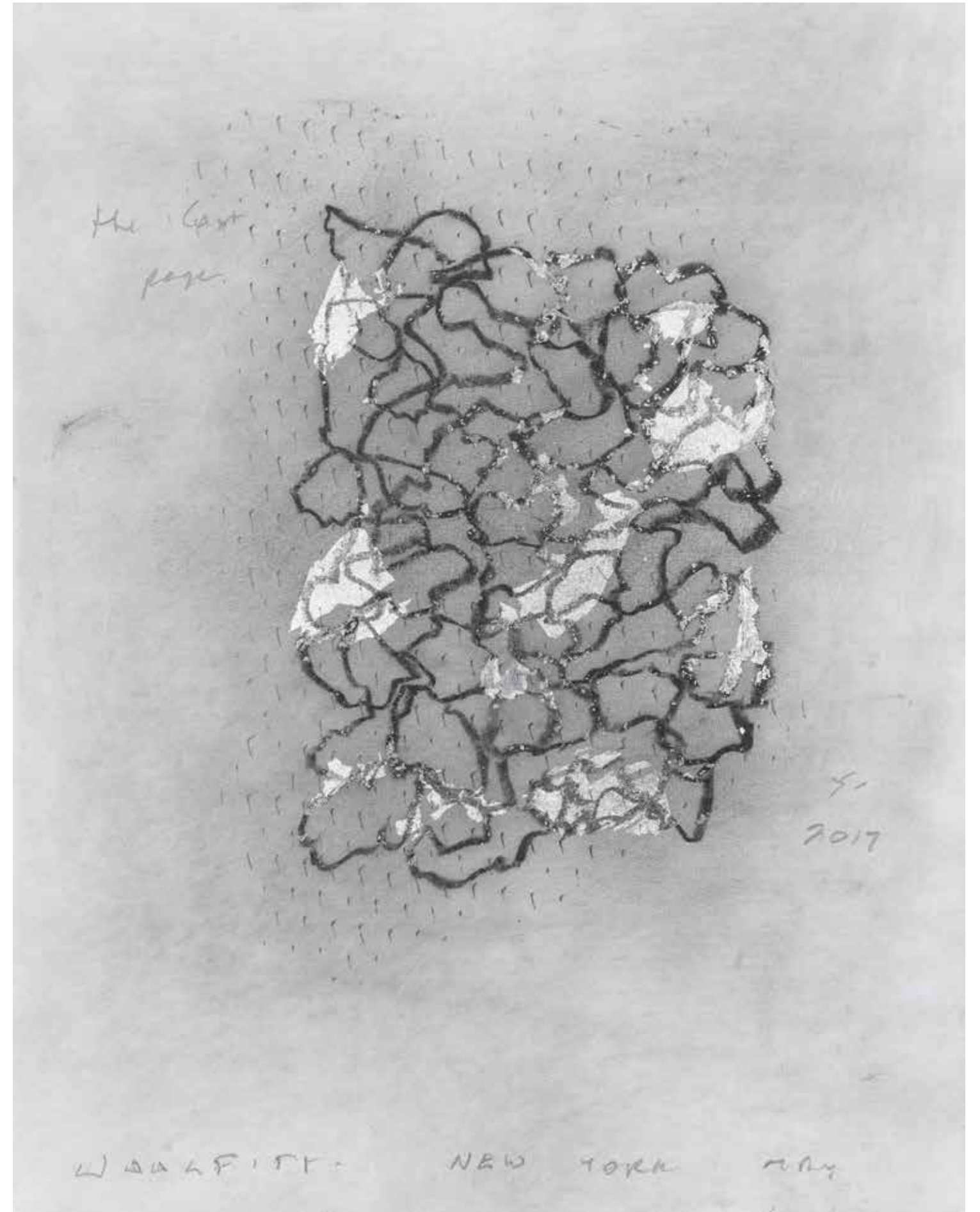




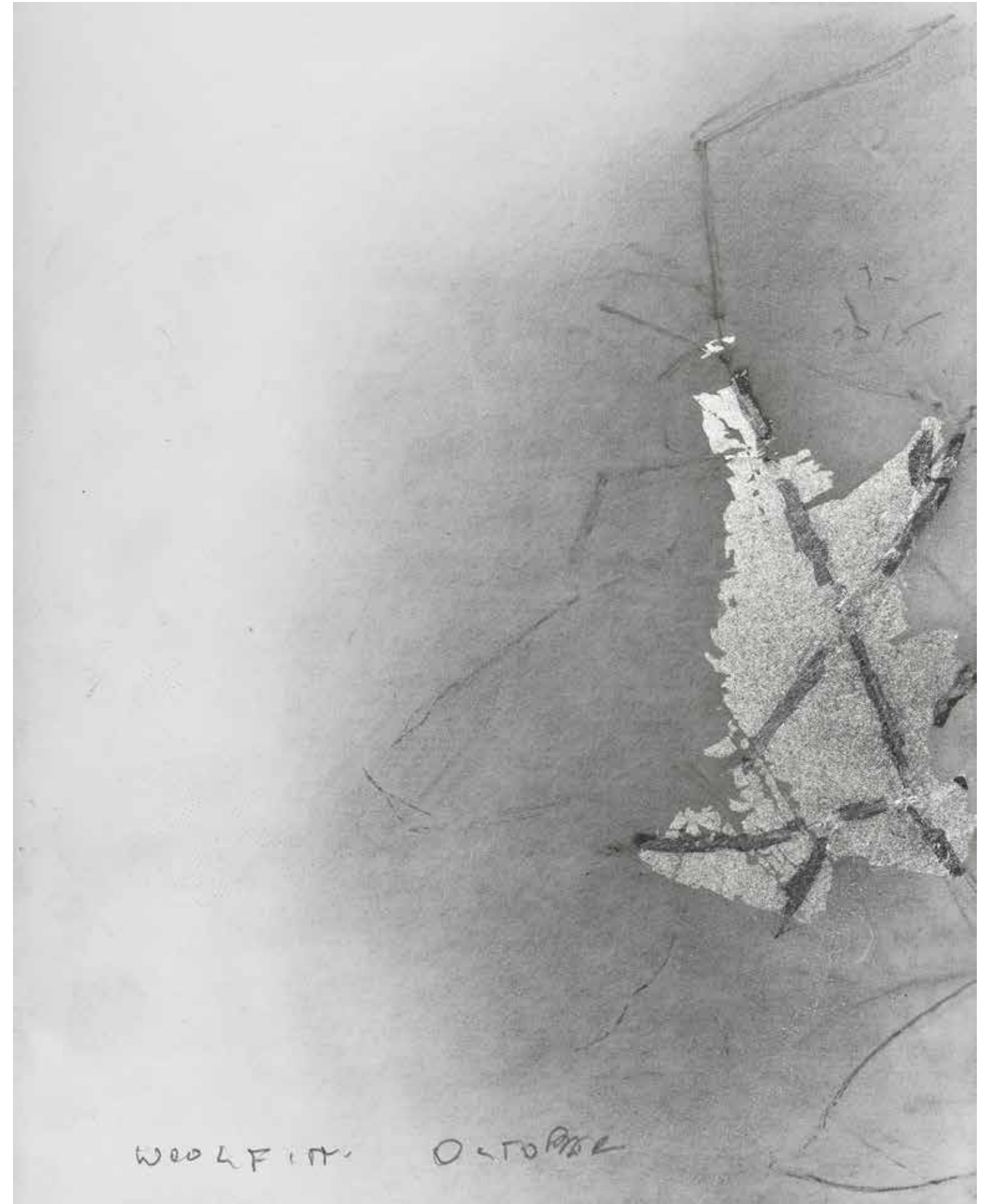




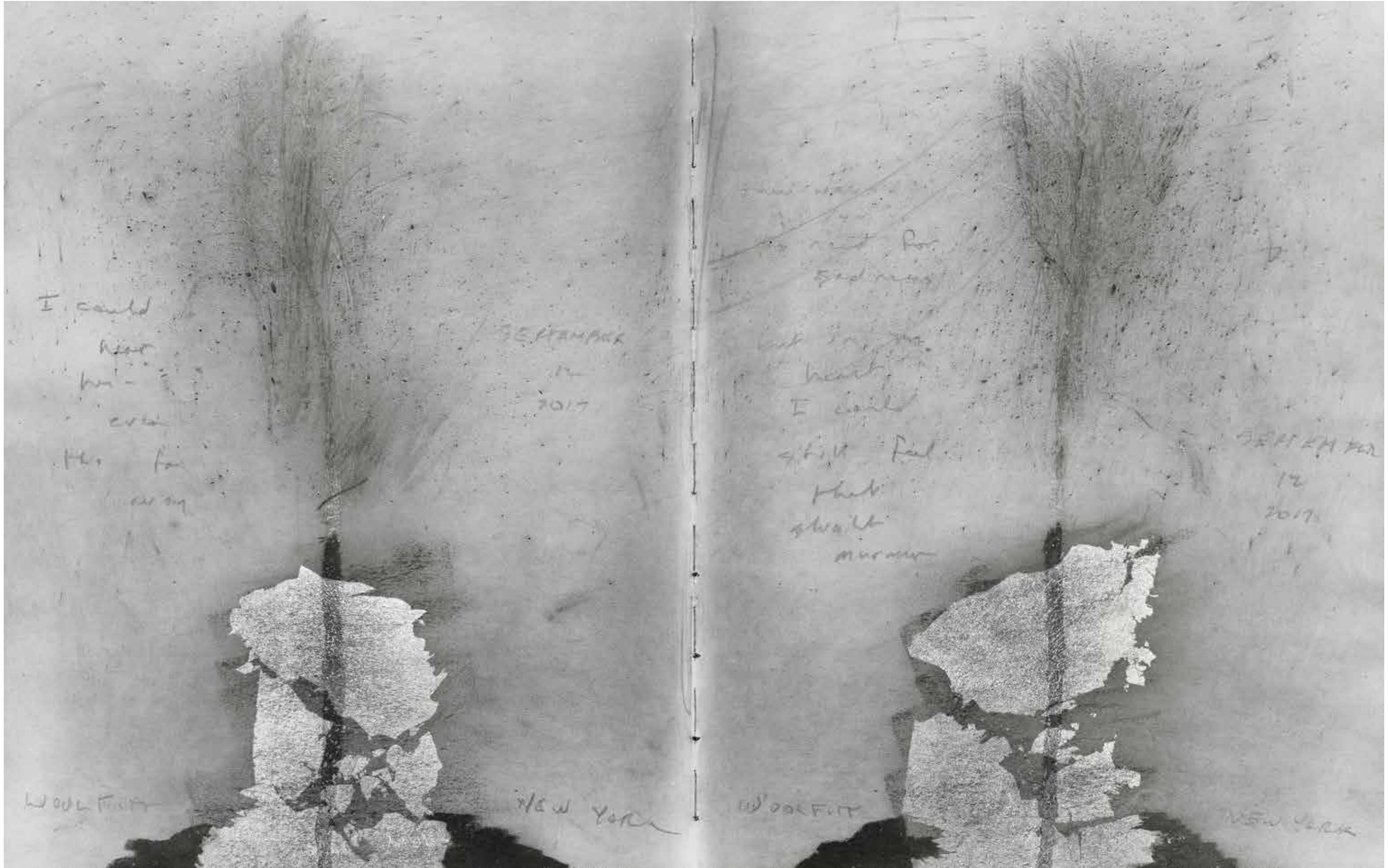




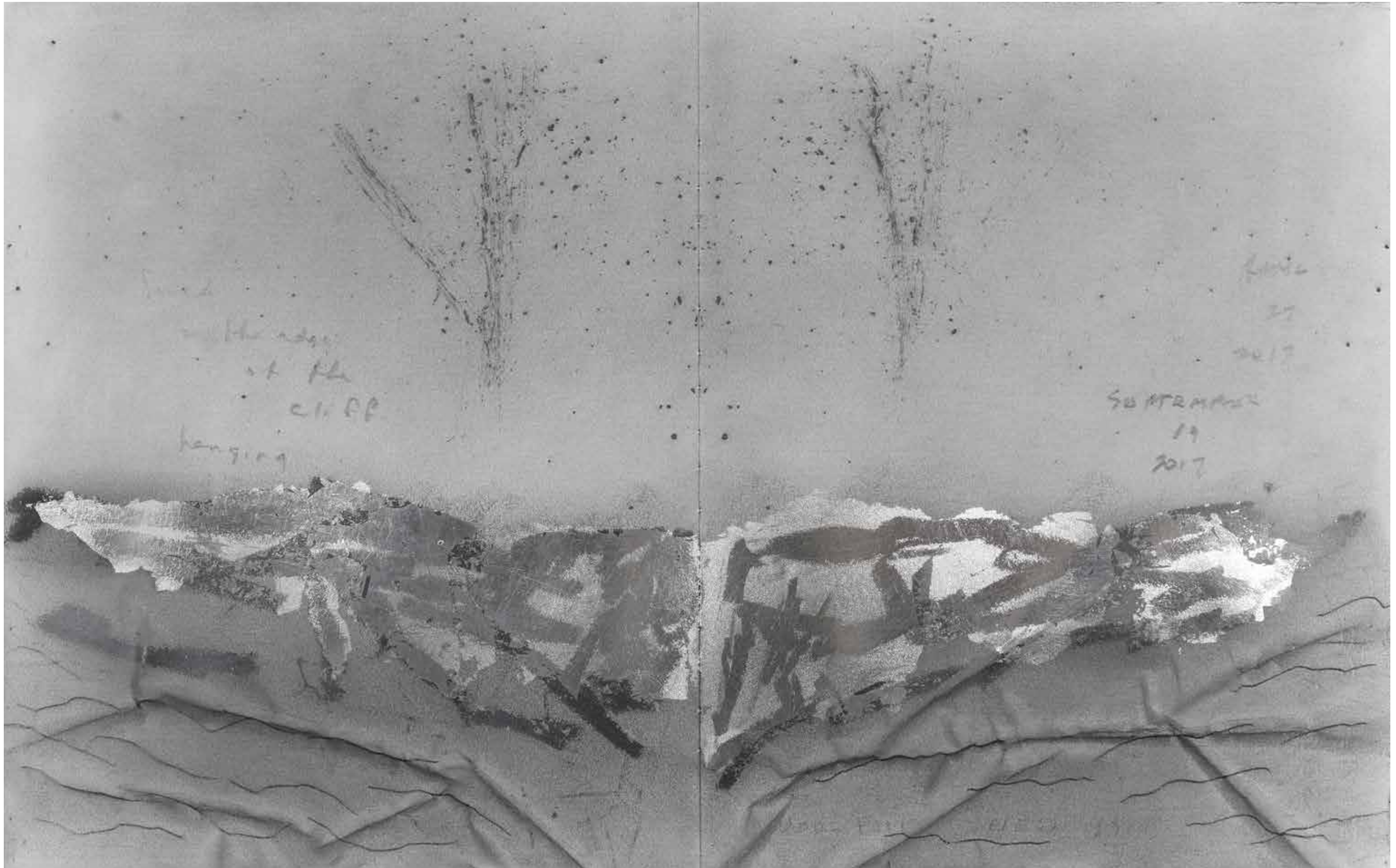




















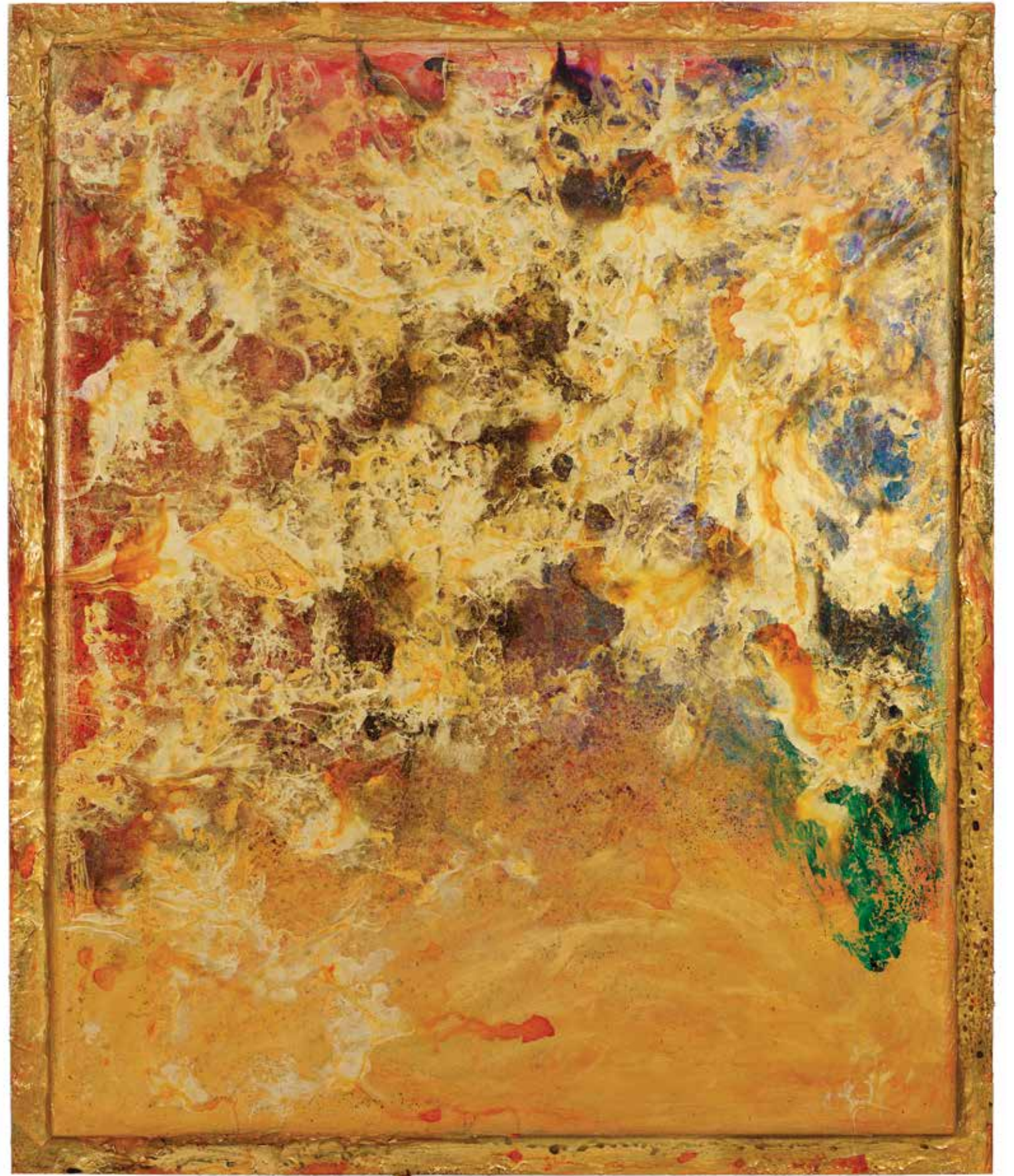


























## SOLO EXHIBITS

2018 Oeno Gallery, Toronto  
2017 Richard Rhodes Gallery, Toronto  
2014 DeLuca Fine Art Gallery, Toronto  
2011 Prince Takamado Gallery, Japan  
2009 Moore Gallery, Toronto  
2009 Oeno Gallery, Toronto  
2007 Bangkok University Gallery, Bangkok  
2005 Moore gallery, Toronto  
2004 Gallery One, Toronto  
2002 Carlo Alessi Unpublished, New York  
2002 Prince Arthur Gallery, Toronto  
2001 Prince Arthur Gallery, Toronto  
1995 Baird Gallery, St. Johns  
1987 Bowen Gallery, Toronto  
1982 Private Exhibition, Toronto  
1981 Vivaxis, Toronto  
1980 Wingfield, Toronto  
1978 Vivaxis, Toronto  
1977 Gallery O (Olga Korper), Toronto  
1976 Gallery O (Olga Korper), Toronto  
1976 Phoenix Theatre, Toronto  
1975 The New York Gallery, Rochester  
1974 Gallery O (Olga Korper), Toronto  
1973 Toronto Center of the Arts  
1971 Hart House, University of Toronto.  
1969 Founders College, York University, Toronto

## MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC  
Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto, On.  
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Barrie, On.  
Remai Modern Art Gallery of Saskatchewan  
MacLaren Art Gallery, Barrie, Ontario



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Ben Woolfitt** is a modernist and postmodernist painter and the founder of the Modern.Toronto, a Toronto museum dedicated to the exhibition of non-objective painting. Born in Saskatchewan in 1946, Woolfitt has lived in Toronto since 1965, when he enrolled at Founders College, York University. Early in his career, in the late 1960s, Woolfitt was influenced by Color Field painting, especially the works of Mark Rothko, Morris Louis, Hans Hofmann, and Jules Olitski. In 1972, he founded Woolfitt's School of Contemporary Painting, where he taught, and in 1978 he established the wholesale business Woolfitt's Art Supplies.

**Donald Kuspit** is one of America's most distinguished art critics. He is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Art History and Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and has been the A. D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University (1991–97). He is also Senior Critic at the New York Academy of Art. He has received numerous awards and fellowships and has written numerous articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays, lectured at many universities and art schools, curated many exhibitions, and edited several series for UMI Research Press and the Cambridge University Press. He has written monographs on individual artists, serves as a contributing editor for several art magazines, and has published four books of poems. His major writings include *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (1979), *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (1993), *Health and Happiness in Twentieth Century Avant-Garde Art* (1996), *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (2000), and *The End of Art* (2004).

**Richard Rhodes** is an independent writer and curator. He is also the former editor of *C Magazine* and *Canadian Art*. He showed a selection of recent paintings and drawings by Ben Woolfitt at his Toronto project space Richard Rhodes Dupont Projects in 2017.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Ben Woolfitt







