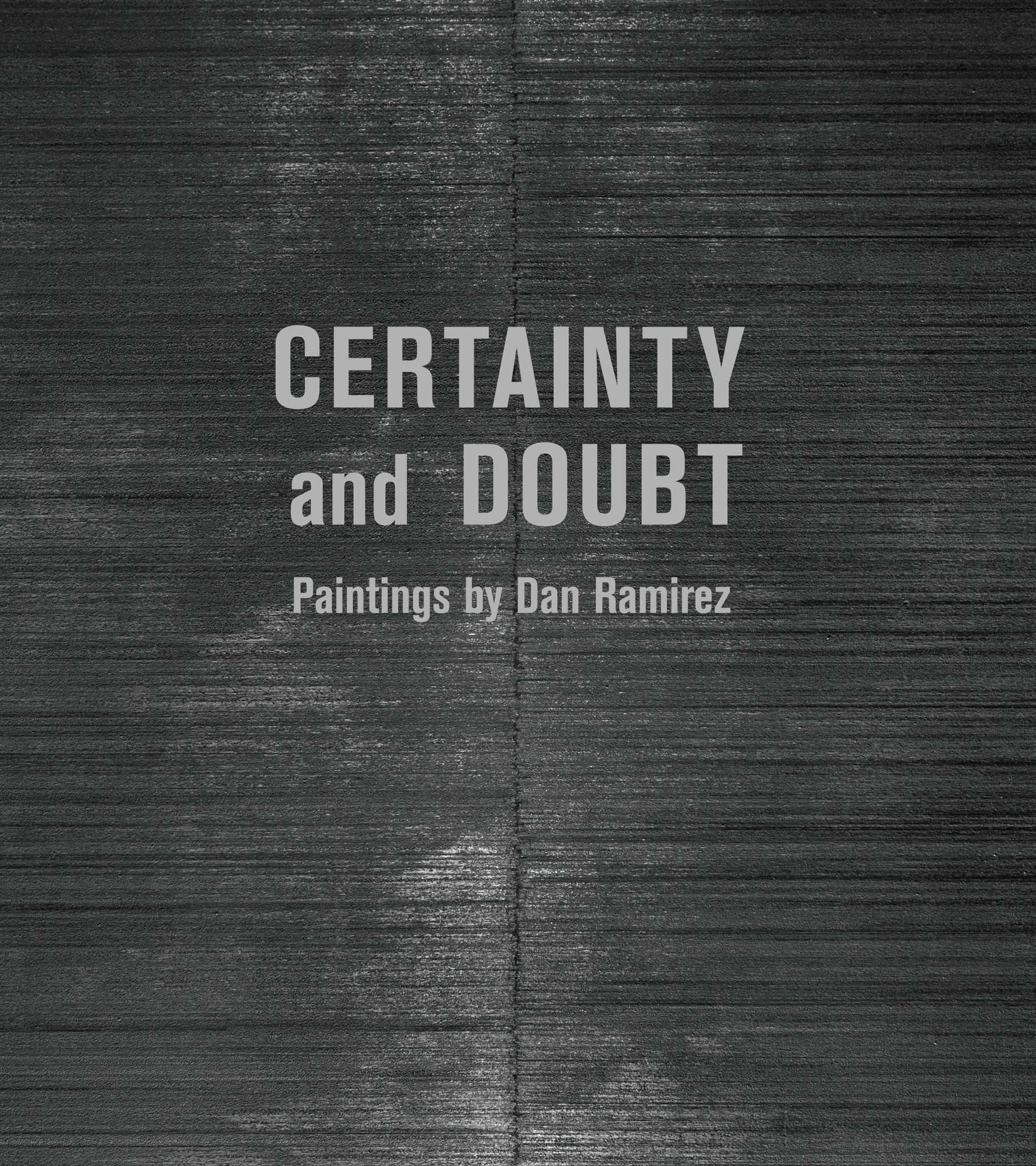
CERTAINTY
and DOUBT
Paintings by Dan Ramirez

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Chazen Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin–Madison
2017

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Director's Foreword

In the year 2000, Diane and Robert Newbury generously gave a painting by Dan Ramirez to the (then) Elvehjem Museum of Art. Titled, *I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil*, the work, which was painted in 1980, was not the first work by the artist to enter the museum: as a professor in the UW–Madison Department of Art, Ramirez participated in Art Faculty exhibitions throughout the 1990s. This was, though, the first of his works to enter this museum collection.

In 2016, Ann Sinfield, the Chazen Museum of Art's exhibition manager, brought the artist again to my attention when she suggested we build an exhibition around this stunning, potent painting. The work is an important one within Ramirez's oeuvre, as it originates within his *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen*, a portfolio composed of twenty intaglio prints from 1980. After additional research, Ann returned with a list of other works that grew out of the portfolio, along with a selection of works in regional collections that represent Ramirez's wide-ranging pursuits. Knowing the artist, and understanding both the depth of his interests and the quality of his efforts, made approval for this project a very simple task.

This catalogue makes an important contribution to the critical discussions of Ramirez's work. Two distinct approaches are taken in the essays by Dr. Richard Shiff, Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art, and Director, Center for the Study of Modernism at The University of Texas at Austin; and Buzz Spector, Professor of Art at Washington University in St. Louis. Both of these contributors have known Ramirez for many years, so their analyses are intellectual, but also personal.

Ramirez has received consistent support from a number of collectors who have extended their generosity to our efforts here at the Chazen. The exhibition includes many loans from private collections, and this publication was supported by some of Ramirez's longtime benefactors. Museums have also been very responsive to our requests for loans. We are grateful for the participation of all of these individuals and institutions.

It has been a pleasure to see this project develop. I look forward to seeing Ramirez's work receive even greater exposure because of it.

Russell Panczenko
Director, Chazen Museum of Art

Introduction

Color. Surface. Shape. Light. Dramatic statments—not loud, but assured. Impressive. Seemingly immoveable. The graphite surfaces glow and reflect light, changing as I walk by. Dark sections smother and swallow the light, sinking and receding. Angles and lines appear and taper away to nothingness, overcome by fields of soft color or joining into shapes of questionable dimension. The sides of canvases with subtle color or bold lines, or aluminum cladding that breaks away, demanding more space than allotted a mere stretcher. Shapes on white, textured surfaces, or areas of raw canvas, repeated, extended, broken apart. This is not just abstraction, it is a vocabulary, seemingly minimalist, but expressing more. This is a visual language, the phrases simple at first glance, but altered to accommodate a greater communicative need and expressive desire.

In April of 2016 I was in Chicago for *Latino Art Now!*, a conference organized by the Inter-University Program for Latino Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with the Smithsonian Latino Center. After hearing from artists, curators, collectors, and archivists active in the field of Latino visual culture, I headed out to see artwork at some of the many venues that were participating in the conference, including the National Museum of Mexican Art. What I encountered there was an extraordinary exhibition, curated by Dolores Mercado, titled *Contemplations: Dan Ramirez Works from the Permanent Collection*. It was a beautiful, complex, and completely engrossing selection of works, solely from the museum's collection, covering thirty years of the artist's career.

When I entered the gallery I was immediately enthralled. As I walked around, looking and staring, the feeling persisted. I did not know Ramirez's work, had no idea of the artist's connection to the UW–Madison, and was unaware that the museum where I worked, the Chazen Museum of Art, had an important three-part canvas in its collection: *I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil*. Painted in 1980, it had been a gift to the museum from Diane and Robert Newbury in 2000. What was happening in these works that generated such a strong response?

Ramirez works at an intersection where music, philosophy, and perceptual games form a foundation for the hard work of painting. He uses a complex visual vocabulary. Despite an intricate underlying intellectual structure, brushing up on your Wittgenstein is not necessary here. You don't have to be familiar with the music of Olivier Messiaen, or know what "amen" meant to the composer. There is no need to be a fan of Barnett Newman or Goya, and understanding what is or isn't minimalist, technically or not, is not essential. But if you can take time to look there is beauty and surprise, quiet, presence, and visual power. Behind the scenes are obsessions, questions, doubts, maybe some certainties, and certainly some denials, but there is also playfulness and pleasure, depth and light, surface and space. There is, basically, quite a lot to see.

Drawn from Midwestern collections—including generous loans from the National Museum of Mexican Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Smart Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Sheldon Museum of Art, and private collections—the Chazen exhibition is intended to expand upon the *Contemplations* show. Throughout his career, Ramirez has employed a consistent visual language to explore abstraction, religion, music, and play in paintings, prints, drawings, and digital works.

Adapting the vocabulary of Minimalism with a late twentieth-century experience, Ramirez's work is both personal and multifaceted. He delves into the spiritual, but—with homages to mid-century jazz and devotional compositions—also considers the physical similarities between the making of music and the making of visual art: he plays with media and toys with perception.

The exhibition is organized into three sections. The first and largest includes works from a group of related early series: *TL-P, Twenty Contemplations*, and *Celestial City*. These series form the foundation of the artist's lifelong practice. Titled for the artist's interest in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein, an early twentieth-century analytic philosopher, it is in the *TL-P* series that the artist developed his particular vocabulary. Integrating the minimalist terms of line and color into large spaces of gradated washes that refer to early nineteenth-century Romanticism, the resulting language challenges visual and conceptual certainty. The print portfolio titled, *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen*, is composed of twenty intaglio prints from 1980. The portfolio is an early example of the artist's exploration of music and religious devotion, particularly inspired by the work of the important twentieth-century French composer. The *Celestial City* works, named for a Messiaen symphony of the same name, continue the artist's grappling with the idea of devotion. By combining motifs of gothic architecture—specifically the tierceron-star vault—with references to the expressive power of Messiaen's music, Ramirez finds a luminous vocabulary to express a contradiction between faith and intellect, certainty and the unknown.

The second section of the exhibition focuses on drawings, as the artist has utilized graphite and washes on paper to explore compositional relationships throughout his career. The drawings demonstrate how play and investigation are central to Ramirez' art-making processes. Included are examples of his dense graphite and silver pencil trapezoids, precisely rendered, with shiny, reflective, perceptually disruptive surfaces. As evidence of the artist's history of experimenting, sketchbooks from different periods of his career are also displayed.

The last section of the exhibition includes recent work by the artist. A group of digital works that Ramirez characterizes as "illuminated manuscripts" continue his interest in the work of Messiaen but incorporate radiant metallic surfaces. These digital-born works signal a recent shift in the tools and methods the artist uses for sketching and production. With a selection of the *Nuages* and *La Luz* paintings, considerations of surface, light, spiritual contradiction, and music continue, but now incorporate visual responses to artwork seen during the artist's travels in Spain. The *Aletheia* works push the exploration of surface and depth: with their representation of peeled-back surfaces and celestial bodies, these works suggest both physical revelations and cosmological dimensions. One of these paintings was created in March of 2017 when the artist visited Madison and worked on-site at the museum. *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* unites the graphite surfaces and gradated color fields of the earliest works in the exhibition with the imagery of revealing or peeling back that is the hallmark of the recent works, bridging Ramirez' lifelong visual and intellectual concerns.

Featuring more than fifty paintings, prints, and drawings, this is the first major exhibition of Ramirez's work to borrow from multiple collections. Accompanied—and greatly enhanced—by this catalogue and its essays, this project is long overdue. With contributions from Dr. Richard Shiff, Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art, and Director, Center for the Study of Modernism at The University of Texas at Austin, addressing philosophy and the conflict of certainty and doubt; and Buzz Spector, Professor of Art at Washington University in St. Louis, focusing on music and its relationship to Ramirez's art making, I hope this effort provides an understanding of how Ramirez's process is deeply intellectual, creating work that is precise and arresting.

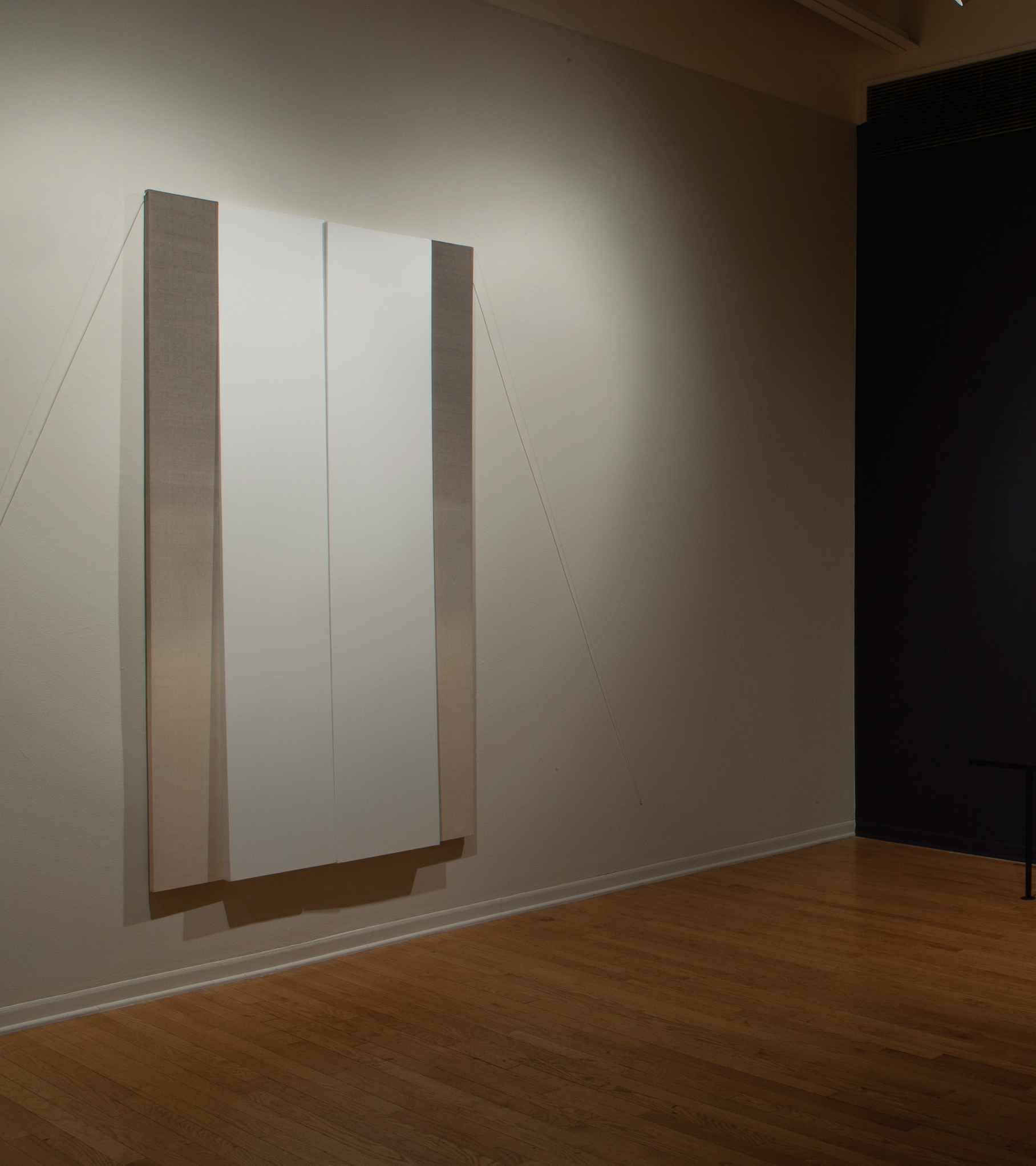
Exhibitions are never solitary efforts, and this one benefitted immensely from many individuals who helped, guided, and supported the work. The project would simply not have happened without the generosity of the lenders who opened their homes and collections, who shared their knowledge and their cherished artworks. I thank them

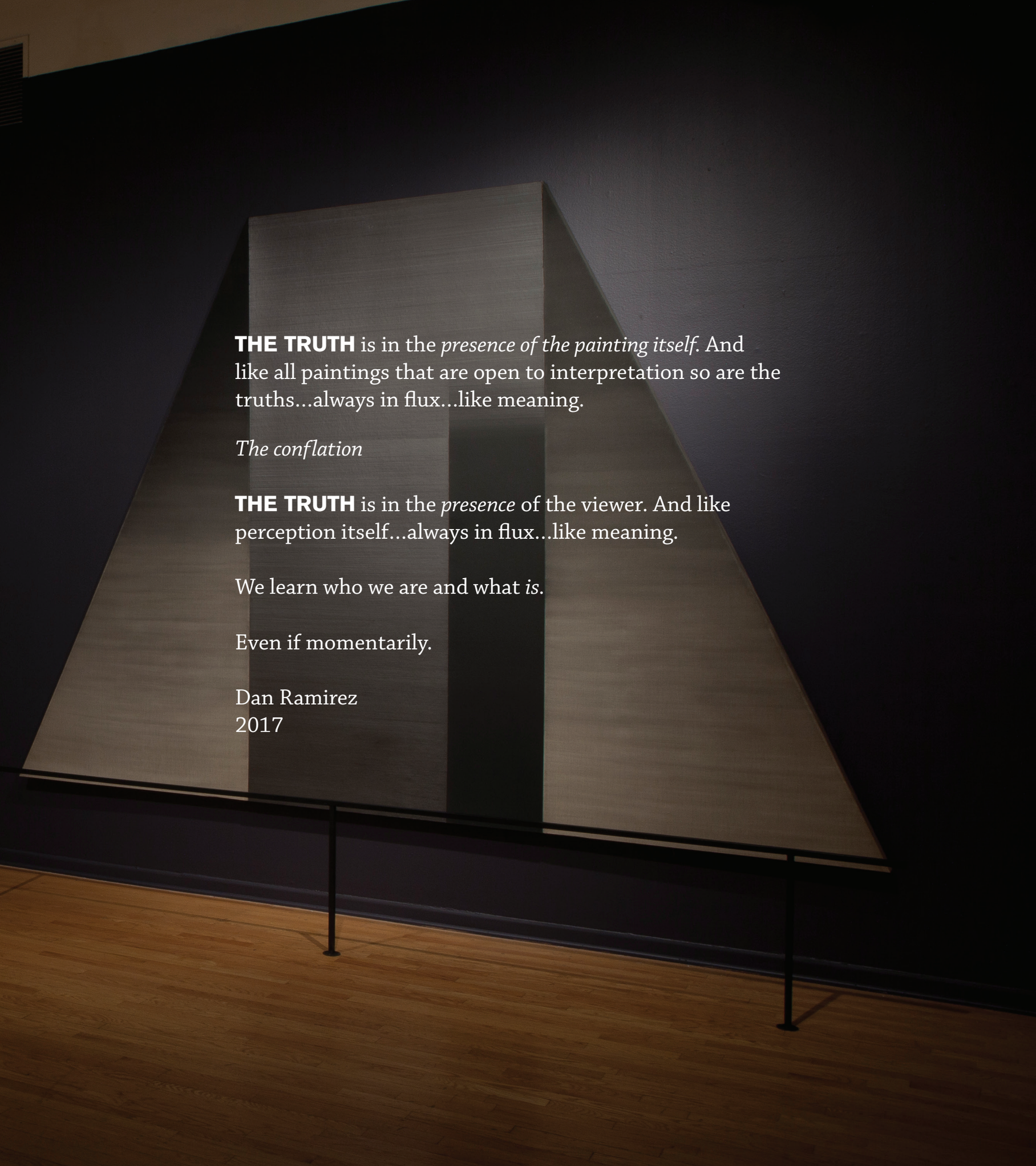
for their willingness to participate. An additional thanks to the individuals who generously provided funds for the production of this beautiful publication. It is a significant marker in an important artistic career, hopefully filling a void in the critical writing about, and documentation of, Ramirez's work.

Much gratitude is due to the staff at the Chazen who patiently worked with me through every stage of exhibition planning and implementation; they are a creative and dedicated group of professionals. Thanks to Kirstin Pires and Jeff Weyer for editing and designing this publication; Brett Stageman, Kate Wanberg, and Jerl Richmond for installation design and advice; and Amy Guthier and Candie Waterloo for collaborating on fundraising and programming. The recently retired, longtime director of the museum, Russell Panczenko, deserves special credit and thanks: his early interest gave the project legs, and his continued support through the last months of his directorship was essential for its completion.

I consider myself to be incredibly lucky that I had this opportunity to work with the artist Dan Ramirez. He made this project thoroughly enjoyable. His enthusiasm has never waned; he has been a patient, persistent, and completely fun collaborator. My thanks to him and Carol Pylant for their generous hosting, their willingness to entertain all manner of questions, and their sharing of ideas and artwork.

Ann Sinfield
August 2017





THE TRUTH is in the *presence of the painting itself*. And like all paintings that are open to interpretation so are the truths…always in flux…like meaning.

The conflation

THE TRUTH is in the *presence* of the viewer. And like perception itself…always in flux…like meaning.

We learn who we are and what *is*.

Even if momentarily.

Dan Ramirez
2017

A Minimalist Romance

Richard Shiff

Dan Ramirez devotes significant mental and emotional energy to writing about his experience as an artist. His texts are not mere records of the activities or thoughts of the day, but exercises in a process of reasoned observation that passes through numerous variations. He labors over his writings, progressively refining them, though with no intention of publication. Analogous to his aesthetic practice, his writing has evolved into a sustained exercise in self-understanding. Often citing philosophical texts, it constitutes a philosophy of its own.

Ramirez uses the language of his writings as an expressive medium in contact with his life of sensation. But the use of language, or of any system of signs, tends to render firsthand experience secondhand, perceiving it through a rhetorical filter. This is a philosophical problem of ancient lineage—distinguishing the appearance of a thing in its linguistic representation from its direct presentation in reality. What ought to count as contact with reality is yet another issue. As Ramirez musters the forces of shape and color, he knows that the devices of aesthetic expression can fail under the weight of their own rhetoric, just as language can fail.[1] He developed his art in terms of geometric abstraction and clearly articulated color, in part because these elements are immediately accessible to visual comprehension and relatively rhetoric-free. Even when the titles of his works allude to aspects of Christian theology or problems in analytical philosophy, a viewer has no cause to seek the location of the Virgin in the spatial complexity of *Contemplation of the Virgin, var. #3* (p. 34) or to attempt a demonstration of Ludwig Wittgenstein's claims by referring to the internal divisions of the rectangle that constitutes *TL-P 6.421* (p. 31). In both instances, Ramirez's geometry makes its own case.

What is the case?

"The world is everything that is the case": this was Wittgenstein's initial proposition for his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the "TL-P" that Ramirez enlisted to title a number of his works of the 1970s, in homage to the study that stimulated his thinking about communicative signs and the relation of doubt to certainty.[2] Wittgenstein argued that language cannot itself demonstrate its truth; it is tautological. This analytical dead end, which opens to other areas of intellectual experience, continues to fascinate Ramirez. In equal measure, perhaps more, he has focused on the perceptual conundrum of the Necker cube, a geometrical figure of competing illusions (fig. 1). He refers to the tension it establishes as it sets "visceral versus intellectual" aspects of perception in conflict.[3] The ambiguity of the Necker cube is compelling; it holds the attention of eye and mind despite a lack of authoritative verbal explanation. A general point can be made: we recognize that we perceive visual illusions—such illusions are real

Left: **I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil** (detail), p. 37.

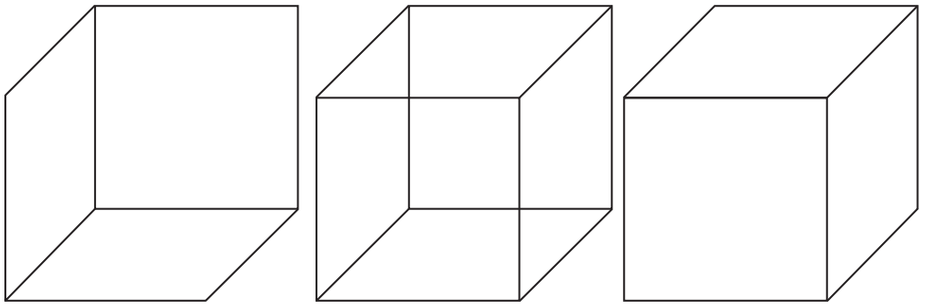


Fig. 1 Necker cube. Illustration Jeff Weyer.

perceptions, a lived reality—before, if ever, we understand, or can represent, their existence and significance in our lives. As a painter, Ramirez is an accomplished illusionist: "The spatial illusions and ambiguities I use are ultimately metaphors for point of view. Our multiple points of view challenge ideas about what is real, what is true, what can we know with certainty." In *Nuages: La Luz/dos* (p. 51), a black line or bar, which bisects the upper register of the composition, extends at a consistent width along the top of the canvas to the upper-left corner where it begins to taper as it descends along the left edge. This skewed element of visual framing—Ramirez refers to it as "slicing"—causes the upper -left quadrant of the painting to appear to tilt, bend, slip, or warp, even though its connection to the upper right quadrant is secure.[4] *Something* is happening, though precisely what is difficult to determine. Illusion is a reality that sometimes seems more than it is and sometimes less. In any case, it is a fact of our lives, despite our customary efforts at suppressing it. Ramirez creates his own "Necker cubes" to shake a viewer's faith in habitual patterns of observation. Habit makes a life efficient, but it prevents a multitude of phenomena from being perceived. Unseen because unnoticed, such phenomena never become aspects of "the case."

Language has its own problem of illusion. Let it be said that language must fail in adequately representing visual experience—or rather, that representation of any kind pales before the (chimerical?) real thing. Despite the abundance of philosophical admonitions, Ramirez enjoys the challenge of using verbal reflection to explore his practice of painting, illusion and all. He is his own critical theorist. Thinking aids his painting, though it may be more to the point that painting aids his thinking. The exercise of putting words to sensory experience becomes especially complicated when the available vocabulary is incapable of conforming to an artist's intuitions. Our culture conditions us not to sense our thoughts but to reason them—and to recognize and respect the difference. But thinking and sensing, logic and poetry, are so closely related in Ramirez's studio experience (and nearly everywhere else in his life) that the customary divide, both lexical and conceptual, obscures what the painter actually *feels* when he is most aesthetically alive—an immediacy of thought and sense compressed into an acute state of awareness, a state of being.

In his alternative creative capacity, Ramirez is a musician. He plays double bass, primarily jazz. In one of his writings, he uses his experience of sound as an analogous case to connect the intellectual aspect of painting to sensation, where his verbal resources might otherwise come up short: "There are moments of resonance…with the bass placed against my body…while searching for the appropriate string of notes…Like in a painting…the feeling [happens] as an intellectual event."[5] The intellectualism of creative experience with sound is easier for our culture to grasp than thoughts of adding red to expand an area of red. To what purpose, we might ask: If the red looks red already, will more of it look redder? Articulate reasons do not come forth, despite an artist's intuition, which in this example may have involved an intuitive estimation of scale rather than color. Much to the contrary, we can reason (or believe we can reason) a way through a passage of music by graphing chord structures or mathematically analyzing the harmonics. Music, even free jazz, has always seemed

more of a science than painting, if only because so much of it can be translated into systematic notation. But Ramirez was feeling the resolution of the line of sounds "against [his] body." The experience was visceral, and he could understand it as it happened. No analysis after the fact would enhance the feeling. Rather than think through a series of notes as preparation for playing and experiencing the music, Ramirez realizes that he feels the *thought* of the music at the same moment that he feels it in his touch on the strings of his instrument, in the sound that emanates, and in the vibration conducted not only to the ear but to the hand, arm, and torso.

"I remembered a technique described by one of [John Coltrane's] critics as 'sheets of sound.' ... [The verbal image] afforded me with a visual image."[6] For Ramirez, the metaphor of a sheet suggests a type of layering characteristic of both his thinking and his painting. One thought leads to another not so much sequentially, but as if the second were breaking through the surface of the first—summoned forth by it rather than entailed by it. Ordinary conversation can work this way, with one speaker either provoking a swerve in the thought of the other or interjecting words that seem to guide a sentence toward an unimagined conclusion. Ramirez enjoys animated conversation, but the verbal exercise can also be solitary, with thinking becoming a one-person multiparty exchange.[7] He sometimes refers to the process of thought as durational, alluding to Henri Bergson's speculations on consciousness and our awareness of multiple events in time, experienced as intersecting or multidimensional layers.[8] He has also discovered the writings of C. S. Peirce, who refers to "the *sensuous* element of thought" —a notion that allows the linguistic to approach the aesthetic, locating each in the other.[9] If thinking has a sensuous and emotional component, if even the most logical analysis has a visceral feel to it, then it should follow that Ramirez perceives his process of thinking at moments of the most intense visual and tactile sensation, the moments he devotes to painting. Painting is sensing, but painting is also thinking; and when illusions appear, they affect both sides of this cognitive split, perhaps only to demonstrate that the split remains a whole.

Layers

Since the 1980s, to conduct the exploratory drawing for which he previously used sketchbooks, Ramirez has been working with a variety of computer software. The computer screen, with its overlays and backlighting, facilitates a layered process of thought and visualization. It is at once Bergsonian and Peircean. On the computer, neither of the two mental operations, thinking with concepts and visualizing (sensing) with images, takes precedence over the other. Ramirez can pass through a great number of variations quickly, as if all were present in consciousness simultaneously. A single configuration rises to hold his intuition steady at a certain moment. In a technical sense, and perhaps mentally also, the configurations not selected remain present in the chosen one that seems to epitomize the durational experience, somehow visualizing the thought process or provoking completion of the thought by its image. What the computer extends and condenses as temporal experience, Ramirez, when painting, activates as surface matter.

Ramirez has developed a particular way of applying color—often a single hue gradated light to dark, a progression from luminous to obscure.[10] The technique generates an emanating light, similar to that of a computer screen: "There is a very strong-felt relationship between computer light and the gradated light that I use in my paintings to suggest space."[11] A distinctive variation on his method of capturing and projecting light is the use of gradated washes of iridescent particles, such as acrylic silver iridescent and pearl iridescent (*TL-P 6.421,* p. 31 and *Caelestis/Spatium/Res (Celestial/Space/Object)*, p. 48). Ramirez also makes use of acrylic micaceous iron oxide to build deep blacks that absorb light and yet remain subtly reflective because of a rough-surface texture (*Nuages: La Luz Azul en sus Ojos (Tres)* (study), p. 50). A quotient of luminosity is always a factor in the impression made by his areas of color, whether light or dark. A black can be matte (latex) or have a sheen (graphite); the paintings known as *TL-P* series sometimes exhibit both. Regardless of their "light," whites have an analogous range, dull to shiny. In recent years, Ramirez has been applying pearlescent acrylic thickly to create a wave-like

surface that "reflects" the peaks and valleys of the sheet of paint (*Epoche: L'echange II (The Exchange)*, p. 55). White of this kind has a particularly mellow shine.

In a number of works, Ramirez creates the illusion of a layer of color that curls to reveal another illusory layer beneath. When both layers are gradated in tone, a spatial illusion of distance or indefinite recession results, added to the illusion of physicality (the curling). And sometimes the curl exposes what amounts to nothing—nothing painted—a "nothing" that *presents*, rather than represents, the physical reality of the material support of the painted illusion. In the trapezoidal work *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* (p. 61), one of three areas of curl reveals the substrate of stretched canvas, sealed but left unprimed. (In Ramirez's current terms, consistent with his use of *aletheia* in the title, the illusion of curl "unconceals" the base of canvas—on this, more to follow). The game of perception does not end when vision hits bottom. The various levels of illusion continue beyond ground zero because, to the right of the exposed canvas, an area of atmospherically gradated gray appears to recede into deep space. Within the gray, the appearance of a single "planet," a small illusionistic sphere, articulated as ochre-day and blue-night, evokes space on an interplanetary scale. Here, Ramirez plays with representational irony, as if to disturb an environment of graphic forms that are insistently abstract. The circle-sphere alters the internal scale of the work, but not entirely, not without leaving the large size of the object itself, over six feet in height, as a challenge to visual reckoning. We face this object as if it were our human equal, human-size and utterly real. Then, in a turnabout, we lose ourselves in the fantasy of the fathomless space of planetary motion. As an object, the scale of *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* compares to the scale of any number of modernist works, more or less "minimalist" in effect—the art of Tony Smith or Richard Serra, works that impressed Ramirez in his early years as an artist.[12] But the scale of the *image*, so distinct from that of the *object*, remains in question, its illusion and ambiguity as boundless as the space between galaxies.

Just as the canvas ground anchors *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* and yet contradicts the gist of its imagery, similar sensory provocations arise when Ramirez introduces reflective materials into his visual orders, which reverse the usual path of pictorial light. *Aletheia: Kosmik Kathedral* (p. 63), a work on shaped-aluminum panel, is an example. Its configuration includes a spatially ambiguous area painted with high-gloss acrylic white, reflecting light rather than absorbing it. *Aletheia and the Cosmos: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen and his "Visions of the Amen"* (p. 59), is a set of "illuminated manuscripts," an unbound "book" of digital prints, also uses aluminum panel as the support. In this instance, the aluminum ground, significantly exposed, becomes an active source of light in the environment of viewing. The group of digital prints constitutes a sequel to the set of etchings dedicated to the composer Olivier Messiaen (*Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*, p. 38). In both series, Ramirez pays homage to Messiaen's demonstrations of faith and religiosity. The "illuminations" reflect actual light, which shines through the graphic configurations of sound that Ramirez inscribes on the sheets of aluminum. The metal grounds the inscriptions as paper grounds ink, but it also reflects, mirrorlike, an image of the viewer—a visual correspondence to Messiaen's establishment of self-defining presence through musical composition.

Irresolvable illusion—not the naturalistic illusion-*ism* of an apple in a still life or the sky in a landscape, but Necker-cube illusion, *real* illusion—has been a consistent feature of Ramirez's art. It affects him as much as he expects it to affect his viewers. It stimulates his mind and senses; and if it ceased to do so, he would make a different kind of art, or no art at all. As an exercise in understanding his aesthetic intuitions, he recorded his thoughts orally after completing *Aletheia* (fig. 2), another work that includes a form that curls. Within his rich commentary is an explanation of the visual device of "slicing," used to suggest that a painting, like any object, must be more than a surface. Surfaces reveal, if only to reveal themselves—they constitute what is accessible to sight. Obviously, surfaces also conceal; they conceal not only depths but other surfaces, other layers.

One of Ramirez's strategies is to paint the sides of a stretched canvas, not just as a wraparound, but as a revelation of what might lie beneath the frontal plane—

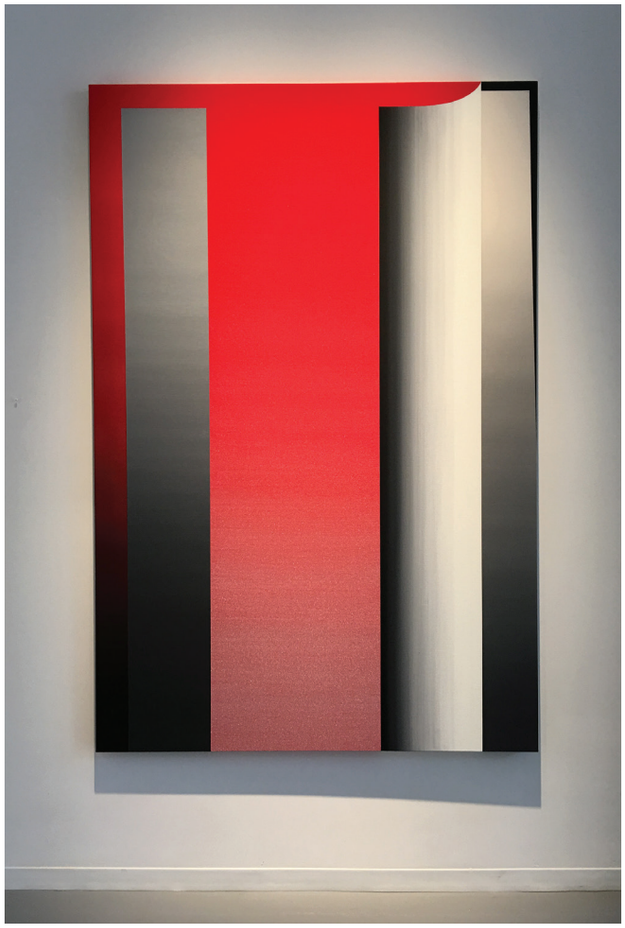


Fig. 2 (left), Fig. 3 (right), **Aletheia**, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 in., courtesy of the artist.

perhaps another layer with distinctive characteristics such as a gradation of light that suggests spatial depth, an illusion within the illusion (fig. 3). "As I work on the side," Ramirez says, "I introduce spatial planes related to the picture plane on the front."[13] The "slicing" element is the black-linear band that occupies the upper-right corner of *Aletheia*, tapering down the right hand edge of the canvas, the so-called picture plane. It seems to force the gradated area that it borders to lift forward and detach from a space underneath, which is partly, perhaps only *gradually*, revealed. We extend our comprehension of this space by viewing the side of the canvas as Ramirez has painted it, as a bar of light itself gradated. The configuration of the side joins that of the front at the bottom corner of the canvas. At that point, both front and side are colored the same deep black. The character of the side causes the frontal plane to seem paper-thin—which, of course, it is, since its existence is superficial. Or is it? It contains several forms of depth illusion of its own, all perhaps contradicted by the actual depth of the sides. But the sides, too, are "painting."

Describing the surfaces, planes, and layers of *Aletheia* with respect to the device of "slicing," Ramirez refers to another type of illusion of long-standing interest to him. It occurs when a line of surface demarcation, such as the boundary of a geometric form or a line of bisection, shifts to become the edge of a would-be volume. In *Veritas/Lumen/Res #13* (p. 45), for example, a line that appears to mark the edge of a rectilinear area of gradation

becomes the leading edge of an acutely angled and textured pyramidal form, which itself seems to pale in relation to the segment of a vault-like form beside it. However, the forms shake out in the visual perception of the moment, no linear or geometric element remains secure in a given identity. A similar kind of ambiguity occurs when Ramirez breaks the frontal surface plane of a painting-object by slanting or projecting one element forward or back in relation to an adjacent one (*Kiss of the Infant Jesus*, p. 35). Light then articulates the spatial identities, the places held by the parts within the whole, in curious ways. The perspectives multiply. "Things can be other than what they are," the artist remarks, paraphrasing Wittgenstein.[14] As he muses over lines, shapes, and surfaces, Ramirez realizes that he lacks full comprehension of the art he himself has created. The only solution is to continue making paintings.

A meaning to be sensed

"The paintings reveal to me that there is meaning to be found in the painting."[15] The simple syntax of Ramirez's statement masks its radical implications, both counterintuitive and countercultural. It recalls Wittgenstein's introduction to his own work, which may well have dissuaded potential readers: "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts."[16] How similar might be sufficient, Wittgenstein did not indicate. On his part, Ramirez suggests that the meaning of the art of painting will need to be rediscovered for each painting as it is made and viewed. He may have imagined a meaning for a painting before painting it, but if he did, the thought would not have been accessible to him without his having produced the painting. The thought would be the dream of a painting, not a painting. Viewers must accept that "there is meaning to be found," even though an artist cannot guarantee having inserted meaning of any kind into the forms and colors. The meaning of Ramirez's art consists in an extended questioning, like a text entirely rewritten with each additional line put down. The "case" is ever new.

A condition of this sort is counterintuitive for those locked into the belief that every object, situation, or action has a determinate cause. The cause lacks only to be identified, as if for every case—for every world, as Wittgenstein might say—we can identify another world to explain the first. Ramirez presumes no causes. Like Wittgenstein, he regards explanations as tautological. A set of causes would establish a genealogy of meaning, the kind of meaning in advance that results from a system of reasoning, not from sensory perception. He states that meaning appears to him only as he creates the painting, experiences the process, and perceives the result. His art may be immune to conventional historical analysis that reveals a meaning by investigating a cultural context—everything outside the work of art that supposedly enters into it, one world into the other. By Ramirez's experience of his art, it takes nothing of its context in; it projects itself out into the context, an environment of sensory phenomena. It is the "matter at hand," the case.[17]

If the implications of painting are so local and personal, why paint? Beyond the delight taken in crafting an aesthetic object, Ramirez believes that he benefits from being present as the object he creates assumes its meaning—again, not a meaning that he expresses or instills, but a meaning that the work offers to perception. Painting is not solitary; Ramirez understands it as social. If it affects his senses, emotions, and intellect, it should affect others analogously. The beneficial perception can be anyone's: "I am hopeful that the spirit that resides in the object of contemplation that I create…will alter a viewer's perceptions [and provide] a conduit to truth and meaning," Ramirez wrote. In the same set of typescript musings, he alludes to the passage from an absence of perceptible meaning to the presence of meaning—perceptible but ineffable—in a specific situation: "A painting is an 'is,' as an 'is' that has no content, until—*it is!*"[18] A painting just is, he seems to be saying, until it exists *just for you*. Or, to extend the thought: until it *is* you; until it holds the entirety of your attention and has become your consciousness. This condition applies to both artist and viewer. We might counter that it could be instilled by any object of attention. Yes, it could. But a distinctive painting, a true challenge to perception, is especially capable of assimilating consciousness to itself—no

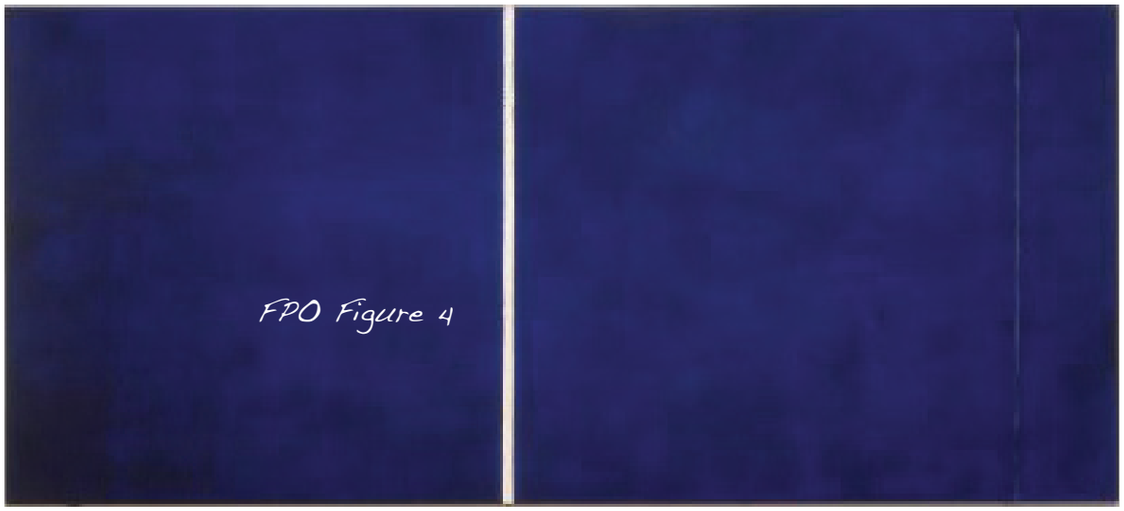


Fig. 4 Barnett Newman (American 1905–1970), **Cathedra**, 1951, oil and acrylic on canvas, 95 ⅝ x 213 ¾ in., collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, © 2017 The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

indiscriminate instance of conventional beauty, it presents a sublime vision to which nothing seems comparable.

The playful repetition of the word *is* in Ramirez's statement acquires in each instance a different sense. It tracks a linguistic path that opened to the artist when he read a number of essays by Martin Heidegger. Heideggerean philosophy relates the use of language to human presence as vigorously as Barnett Newman's art—an inspiration for Ramirez—relates visual scale to a human state of being.[19] Heidegger's philosophy converts logic to poetry; Newman's painting converts geometry to sublime gesture (*Cathedra*, (fig. 4). His essay of 1948, "The Sublime Is Now," has for years been notorious in art circles; Ramirez read it as a student and has probably reread it a number of times since. Although Newman had little interest in painterly illusion, his sense of the sublime—and why it resumed significance for the new "atomic age"—resonates with Ramirez's concerns. The sublime is hardly beautiful. To encounter a condition of sublimity is to subject the mind and the senses to disorientation and, as a result, to become hyperaware of the process of perception, engaged in a struggle to perceive. To the contrary, when encountering beauty, the mind and senses find a reassuring satisfaction in an order and harmony that seems always to have existed. Beauty is ideal, eternal. The sublime is existential. Newman gave the difference a history:

> The invention of beauty by the Greeks, that is, their postulate of beauty as an ideal, has been the bugbear of European art and European aesthetic philosophies. … [The] artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity. … In the Renaissance the revival of the ideals of Greek beauty set the artists the task of rephrasing an accepted Christ legend in terms of absolute beauty as against the original Gothic ecstasy over the legend's evocation of the Absolute.[20]

Ramirez often refers to a quest for the absolute, not because religious fervor drives him or because he expects to realize an absolute form or an absolute truth, reliable as a resource for the future. A certain faith nevertheless sustains him; it is faith in his own effort, which generates a passionate art—the passion of sublimity, not beauty. Like the minimalist artists of the 1960s, who were Newman's heirs, Ramirez presents materials and forms that directly affect the senses and the sense of place that sparks an awareness of existential being. In agreement with Newman, Ramirez takes inspiration from the Gothic expression of religious faith, not the Renaissance version. The eccentric dimensions of *Batlló La Luz V*, (p. 49), nearly six feet in height but only eight inches wide, relate to the Batlló cross, gothic-thin in appearance, which Ramirez encountered in

Fig. 5 Anonymous, **Batlló Majesty**, mid-12th century, wood with polychrome, 62 ½ x 47 ⅛ x 7 ⅞ in., Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, donated by Enric Batlló i Batlló to the Diputació de Barcelona; permanent loan, 1914; Inventory number: 015937-000.

Fig. 6 Tierceron vault, Chester Cathedral, Chester, UK

Barcelona at the National Art Museum of Catalonia (fig. 5): "I was struck by...its verticality, its objecthood. In response I painted a series of tall, thin works and called them *La Luz* or *The Light*....And of course blue suggests a celestial realm."[21] The combination of a forceful material presence with an evocation of the heavens qualifies as a gesture toward the sublime. Along similar lines of inspiration, a number of Ramirez's works, such as *Celestial City #9* (p. 47), develop intersecting curves that relate to a type of gothic vaulting known as the tierceron star (fig. 6): "With these paintings I was creating spatial maps of linear and curvilinear architectural space filled with light. To me these spaces represented something of the unknown, something you're drawn to explore physically and emotionally."[22] General statements are risky, but one seems to suit virtually all of Ramirez's work: the manifest tension that he generates between object and illusion—as between the canvas substrate and the painted atmosphere in *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans,* (p. 61)—fails to resolve into a formal order of compositional harmony and conventional beauty. Some aspect seems always to suggest that one of the links to perfection is missing. There is no synthesis, no resolution, no denouement. The best we can do is to invoke the concept of the sublime, even though twentieth-century critics overworked it dreadfully. Through sublime effects, Ramirez reaches for an absolute and perhaps touches it, but only in the instant, now but not forever.

If Roman and Renaissance vaulting is beautifully logical, by comparison the tieceron star puts engineering efficiency in doubt. It extends beauty into the sublime, with unpredictable consequences—a suitable resource for Ramirez's aesthetic investigations. A number of his plays on curvature, some inspired by the tierceron, are contained within an odd format, the trapezoid. Its geometry seems inherently ungainly, possessing neither the dynamism of the triangle nor the stability of the rectangle. From relatively austere presentations, such as *Untitled* (p. 29), to the Gothicized complexities of *Caelestis/Spatium/Res (Celestial/Space/Object)* (p. 48), Ramirez has deployed the trapezoid with limitless ingenuity. Think of it as a triangle that lacks its top. Unlike the full triangle that seems to rise from its

base, the trapezoid both rises and falls as a result of its truncated top and extensive bottom. Ramirez's trapezoidal formats always have a base that measures greater than the height. He notes an irony, which applies especially to a work like *Caelestis/Spatium/Res*, since it alludes to vaulting: "The trapezoid pushes down! Its gravity challenges the transcending implication of reaching toward God and the heavens."[23] Even the Gothic sublime, invoked by Newman and reemerging in Ramirez's arch-and-vault-like curves, encounters a dubious fate, immersed in the ambiguities of perception.

At this point, one of the artist's statements merits repeating: "The paintings reveal to me that there is meaning to be found in the painting."[24] To the contrary, we often regard artists as setting out to generate cultural meaning by expressing their thoughts and feelings. An artist expressive in this sense engages in a limited form of creative action; for if the thoughts and feelings already exist to be expressed, they might well benefit from being expressed by other means, in other forms. The meaning lacks a determinative connection to its means. Perhaps such a connection, inexplicable when it does appear, is sublime. Like Ramirez now, Newman could never predict the success of his work. He expected to learn—or unlearn, de-familiarize himself—in the face of his result, just as others might. "It is as I work that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me."[25] Ramirez has similar expectations and aims: to generate "a situation that provokes the kind of curiosity that would engage questions of truth and meaning."[26] His novel spatial illusions create ambiguities that affect eye and mind simultaneously—enough to cause a person, the artist included, to doubt the ways in which matters of certainty have been settled on the basis of sensory input. Yet what the senses reveal is as real as the matter at hand becomes. "For me," Ramirez states, "the spatial illusions and ambiguities I use are ultimately metaphors for point of view. Our multiple points of view challenge ideas about what is real, what is true, what can we know with certainty. ... I like my work to provide many possible interpretations for both myself and the viewer."[27] His art is first for himself, the first to doubt the cultural certainties.

Things other than what they are

Wittgenstein wrote of the possibility—perhaps a virtual certainty—that "whatever we see could be other than it is." We know only what our language can reveal to us through its descriptions—it is our world, it is the case—yet "whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is."[28] Language says nothing reliable about the essence or being of things. But there may be other ways of knowing to be discovered, more attuned to contradiction and illusion than rational language is, if only we were to let sensation into our thoughts. Here, Peirce's notion of the sensuous aspect of thinking aids *our* thinking.

Ramirez did not need Heidegger or Wittgenstein or Peirce to avoid the pitfall of an aesthetic expression too general to suit its medium. His art has never availed itself of clichés and conventionally beautiful gestures. His sensory experience is a certainty—he knows it is happening as it happens—but fixing the *meaning* of sensory experience is not the "matter at hand" for his art. There are numerous unfixed meanings, revelations of the moment that fit our conventional world no better than a Necker cube fits within a warehouse box. The term that Ramirez has incorporated into a number of his titles—*aletheia*—conveys something of the evolving truth that he seeks through his art, concerned to offer to others a path to the same type of realization. "I do not believe there is a 'hidden' meaning of life. I believe that truth is a search for meaning in life." A "search," but not for anything "hidden." The truth of art, not identical to its cultural meaning, is a "truth of the matter at hand," which ought to be eminently present.[29] Ramirez's remarks accord with the philosophical understanding of *aletheia*, a sense of truth (or true meaning) signified by a Greek term returned to modern consciousness by Heidegger. The Greek goddess of truth Aletheia corresponds to the Roman Veritas; but something profound, according to Heidegger, had been lost in the exchange. Heidegger (Ramirez, too) associates aletheia with "unconcealment": "We know too much and believe too readily ever to feel at home in a questioning which is powerfully experienced. For that we need the ability to wonder at what is simple, and to take up that wonder as our abode....

Fig. 7 Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828), **Doña María del Pilar Teresa Cayetana de Silva Álvarez de Toledo, XIII duquesa de Alba**, 1795, oil on canvas, 75 1/2 x 50 3/8 in., La Fundación Casa de Alba, Madrid.

Unconcealment [aletheia] is the chief characteristic of that which has already come forward into appearance and left concealment behind."[30] Illusion can generate "questioning which is powerfully experienced." It is "simple," and yet we wonder at it. If the wonder in a painting reveals a meaning, the revelation is a truth. Such truth is fluid: "'Truths' are objects of flux," Ramirez says.[31] The truth revealed by painting is that meaning will be found in its process as much as in the result. So painting, according to Ramirez, becomes a search for truth that bears its truth in itself. This position reduces to what seems like a logical riddle. It is the condition of painting when the painter assumes a romantic attitude to life and reality, where neither meaning, nor understanding, nor even truth can be fixed. Like life itself, the truths of life evolve and are to be sensed only within live experience.

Ramirez relates a thought process he underwent at an exhibition opening—not voluntarily—when he was challenged to define art and its process. His account is worth quoting at length:

> When I began to respond as to what I thought a painting's function was, what art's function was, it struck me as to how intuitive it must have been for prehistoric hominids, such as Neanderthal cave dwellers, to respond to the need to 'picture' on a cave wall the subject of their need to understand and survive. In many ways, perhaps in all ways, that is what the artist feels: the need to survive through a felt experience of 'the matter at hand.' To feel and then understand what that reality is and how it will impact one's survival. In this particular instance I felt myself trying to survive the initial feeling of my inadequacy to handle the question as it had been asked. In essence, I believe what I was feeling was the self-defining activity that all artists come to know and to embrace as the sentient nature of a life of art as well as the sentient nature of reflection.[32]

As the conditions of life change, including its modes of survival, the nature of truth changes. But the truth that we sense and think sets the conditions of life.

Romance

In 2005, then in 2010–11, and again in 2013–14, Ramirez created groups of paintings that allude to Francisco de Goya's so-called "White Duchess" (fig. 7): "I was moved by the color and the contrasts of light and dark in this work as well as by the beautiful paint handling of the white dress—its texture and brilliance. In my painting, *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa* (p. 52), I used the red, black and white of the portrait. I let some of the paint bleed into the canvas, suggesting the black of her hair." Ramirez adds: "I'm always exploring the possibility of creating metaphor and narrative through geometric abstraction. I love storytelling."[33] He freely admits to being a romantic at heart, touched by

what he learned of Goya's life and his putative affair with the portrait subject of the "White Duchess." Goya probably never pursued his erotic dream through to reality.[34] But his painting of the Duchess of Alba, is real, as is Ramirez's abstract sensory fantasia in red, black, and white.

The sensuosity of Goya's paint strikes Ramirez as worthy of the most intense carnal desires. Aware of the connection to a passionate Goya, a viewer might interpret the abstraction of *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa* in a literal (though metaphorical) way: the white is her opulent gown, the red her provocative sash, the black her abundant hair—the painter allowing the dark color to bleed (or be feathered), yielding an organic quality. Ramirez encourages these associations, which energized him as he painted. Yet, how much of a narrative have we? If the narrative is essential to the work, if it has become the unconcealed truth, we should be feeling it rather than interpreting it. The painting includes a black bar above the large area of white at the right that turns at a right angle and tapers downward, as if to penetrate the white and disappear into it; this black splits the area of white, perhaps to reveal what lies beneath (if anything).[35] Does the penetrating line enter into the paint, into the light, or into the flesh beneath the gown? There are many allusions and illusions that open to potential responses, and the story we tell to ourselves—aware of Ramirez's metaphors—will reflect no more certainty than the story of a love affair that may or may not have happened. The truth of the romance is indeterminate, and all the more "romantic" in a nineteenth-century sense for being the product of experience left unresolved, unconsummated. What matters for Ramirez is how he felt as he made the painting.

From a narrative that hinges on questionable historical facts, the metaphorical storytelling associated with *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa*, we can turn to autobiography, presumably more "truthful." With respect to *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* (p. 64), Ramirez has provided an introspective narrative of his feelings as he created the work. Four birchwood panels comprise the structure: an acute triangle at left with the raw material exposed; a vertical rectangle at center-left, stroked horizontally with dark luminescent graphite in two columns; a narrower vertical rectangle part painted and part exposed; and at right, the symmetrical counterpart of the triangle at left, its wood similarly visible. The narrower of the two vertical rectangles contains a dramatic instance of a curl that reveals the wooden substrate; it unconceals it. The "sheet" that "curls over," painted with oil and acrylic, reveals not only the wood but also its own white underside, while its frontal surface is gradated dark to light. Just as the curl introduces the possibility of layering (or its illusion), the gradation suggests depth or a physical warp that would result from bending—that is, a curl along the opposing axis of the "sheet" (or its illusion). Here, our every moment of perceived layering, depth, warp, or bending is simultaneously denied by the persistence of the ground of wood, which gives an utterly flat appearance. It seems without illusion, as if it would surely resist our gesture were we to touch it. As in a Necker cube, what one feature offers to understanding, another just as immediately removes.

But how flat is the flatness of the wood? When is "flat" flat? The question is a variant of another: When does language mean what it says? Or: When does a picture show what it represents—not something else? Ramirez ponders questions of this sort. They sustain his interest in generating a mental openness that can accept more than one aspect of the experience of illusion, a state of mind that can perceive the *reality* that illusion unconceals. In terms specific to its physical state, *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* put this matter to Ramirez as the "matter at hand." He recognized that the effect of his painstaking application of the two columns of graphite bars within the center-left rectangle had not produced an expected result. Since the 1970s, he had stroked graphite in long parallels on a number of different support surfaces (*Bild 12/für/S, W, B #6*, p. 32). In all cases, the graphite produced a visual quality that the artist willingly accepted as "beautiful"; its deep luminosity, from silver to coal, offered aesthetic reward to the attention of the eye. But now, in 2017, something had failed: "I experienced a shock at not feeling the kind of beauty in the central panel of my *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* when I stepped back and saw what appeared as smudge marks. They were

Fig. 8 Caspar David Friedrich (German, 1774–1840), **Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog**, ca. 1817, oil on canvas, 37 ⅔ x 29 ⅔ in. Inv.: 5161. On permanent loan from the Foundation for the Promotion of the Hamburg Art Collections. Photo: Elke Walford.

a disclosure of the patterns that were an integral part of the substrate of birchwood."[36] The slight texture of the surface of the panel had interfered with the disposition of the graphite, the stroking lost its evenness. Light reflection magnified the irregularities, leaving an appearance of "smudge marks." And this had happened despite Ramirez's skills acquired over decades. He had not "seen" the texture of the wood; but in the immediate retrospect of looking at what he had done, he recognized that this texture—an illusion rising to the status of reality—must have been an aspect of the tactile experience he had lived through. Perhaps an analogy would be the vibratory sound of the bass becoming tactile as Ramirez the bassist touched the strings. The sound passed into his body, not so much silently, but tacitly. He required a certain level of awareness to "hear" the sound as touch.

Why the shock of the smudge, Ramirez asked himself. His lengthy statement merits quotation:

> Applying the graphite, I knew that I was approaching the work freely, relying on spontaneity and intuition as I'm accustomed to; but the substrate, the birchwood, snuck up on me. I'm coming to sense that my fear of losing some kind of authorship, something that I have always felt was crucial to a work of art, may be misplaced. It's misplaced because I don't think of myself as the *sender* and don't approach the work with any specific *addressee* in mind. The generality of the work has more to do with the context of the work itself. It finds its own context. In the act of marking I was not sending a message, I was *consuming* [receiving a message, physically]. The sound of the scraping across the surface was inadvertently revealing the pattern of the birchwood underneath. But my focus was on the sound of the pencil scraping up and down and how the haptic nature of the feeling and touch reminded me of when I play bass or any one of numerous examples where touch enters the experience. Perhaps it was the substrate that was "sending." As for me, I was just listening and feeling the message [of the material, unconcealed]. But it would be ridiculous to infer from the experience that the substrate had a *voice* or *fingers* with which to 'speak' to me. The Northern German Romantics like Friedrich were pretty big on anthropomorphism, but that was then and this is now (Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*, fig. 8).[37]

With his stress on the primacy of experience—on the sensory passion felt beyond the limits of conceptualization—Ramirez is a romantic, even, it seems to me, from the perspective of a Friedrich or a Goya. In my professional role as critic-historian-*scribe*, I needed to settle some points of fact to avoid relying on a rhetorical illusion of accuracy where there was none. I asked Ramirez to confirm the title of the new work that contained the problematic area of graphite strokes. He replied that he was wrestling with

whether it should be *Aletheia: Scribes Reveal* or *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal*. We explored the ramifications in an exchange of several e-mails.[38] In the case of "Scribes Reveal," *reveal* functions as a verb; and the unwritten object of this verb becomes the information contained in the marks. When a scribe copies Scriptures, the interpretation of the legible text reveals divine instruction. With respect to Ramirez's painting, the scribes would reveal through their indexical markings the character of the wood beneath their instruments as well as the manual effort they expended.

In the case of "Scribe's Reveal," *reveal* functions as a noun. But by metonymy, the noun can mean virtually all that the verb signifies. The scribe's reveal is whatever is revealed by what the scribe does. Still more derives from this nominative version of *reveal*. A reveal is the space between the opening of a door or window and the walled area allowing access. The reveal amounts to a go-between layer of surface or space, both dividing and integrating and neither inside nor outside. The reveal is analogous to the thin-black-linear elements in many of Ramirez's paintings, including the tapering line that penetrates an area of luminous white in *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa*. A reveal is also the moment in a narrative when otherwise undisclosed information becomes known. It is the truth (to faith) of the Contemplation of the Infant Jesus as well as the truth (to desire) of Goya's erotic romance. In the matter at hand, it is the unconcealment of presence, a presence both material and human, sensed in the tactile feel of a scribe's writing—Ramirez's graphite marks on birchwood panel. As he applied the strokes, he felt the graphite, the wood, the blackness, its sheen, his body, himself. The reveal is full *consciousness* of a "matter at hand."

Endnotes

1 Philosophical concepts at the base of Western culture distinguish reality from appearance, as Richard Rorty, in a text that Ramirez admires, explains without acquiescence to the tradition. Plato sought to identify the "really-real" as the ineffable, "what is not describable at all [and] cannot be described differently"; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 21. If language can characterize a situation one way, it can characterize it alternatively; and the designation becomes subject to rhetorical embellishment, distancing it from its source or target in reality. I thank Dan Ramirez for sharing his thoughts, many of them expressed in the unpublished writings cited in this essay; I am grateful also for the time I was able to spend in his Chicago studio. And I thank Jeannie McKetta and Gilles Heno-Coe for essential aid in research.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 [1921]), 25.

3 Ramirez, in discussion with the author, Chicago, June 13, 2017.

4 "I call 'slicing' a linear tapered element that I have used over the years on the edges of my painting and inside areas of spatiality in central sections to create illusions of bending and separating areas of space" (Ramirez, unpublished text, June 8, 2016; see also below).

5 Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

6 Ibid. The critic was Ira Gitler in 1958, composing liner notes for the Coltrane album *Soultrane*.

7 See Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Gradual Fabrication of Thoughts While Speaking" (1805–06), in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. and trans. Philip B. Miller (New York: Dutton, 1982), 218-22.

8 See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910 [1889]); *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover, 2004 [1896]).

9 Charles Sanders Peirce, "Deduction, Induction, and Hypothesis" (1868), *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958-1960), 2:387 (emphasis original).

10 This technique, first applied during the 1970s in works such as *TL-P 6.421*, was inspired by Caspar David Friedrich's paintings *Monk by the Sea* (1810) and *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (c. 1818), which Ramirez had seen reproduced in Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (1975). He refers to the look in question as "a rolling cloud-like effect" (in discussion with the author, Chicago, June 15, 2017). "Rolling" was a quality he could actually achieve; initially, he lacked the expertise to produce smoothly gradated transitions. He nevertheless decided that a slightly irregular quality was preferable, perhaps because it conveyed a greater sense of the hand; and he has continued to incorporate this effect in his painting.

11 Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

12 Ramirez, in Julie Karabenick, "An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez," *Geoform*, June 2014, at http://geoform.net/interviews/dan-ramirez/5/ (accessed July 7, 2017).

13 Ramirez, transcription of an audio commentary, June 2016.

14 Ibid.

15 Ramirez, unpublished text, July 21, 2016.

16 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 23.

17 In recent years, Ramirez has used the locution "matter at hand" with a Heideggerean resonance (Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016; and see below). He states that truth—in the matter at hand—is "discernable not only as intellectually reasoned but as a 'felt' experience"; e-mail message to author, July 7, 2017.

18 Ramirez, unpublished text, July 14, 2016.

19 Ramirez's interest in Heidegger was spurred by his reading Claude Cernuschi, *Barnett Newman and Heideggerean Philosophy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012).

20 Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now" (1948), in John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 171-72.

21 Ramirez, in Karabenick, "An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez." The term *objecthood* refers to the capacity of a work of art to establish a presence in the here-and-now, as opposed to referring to a general cultural context. It can have negative connotation as well as the positive connotation that Ramirez gives it.

22 Ibid.

23 Ramirez, e-mail message to author, June 29, 2017.

24 Ramirez, unpublished text, July 21, 2016.

25 Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966" (1966), Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews, 189.

26 Ramirez, letter to the author, June 30, 2016.

27 Ramirez, in Karabenick, "An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez."

28 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 117.

29 Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

30 Martin Heidegger, "Aletheia (Heraclitus, Fragment B 16)" (1943), *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 104. See also, Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth" (1930), *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136-54.

31 Ramirez, e-mail message to author, July 9, 2017.

32 Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

33 Ramirez, in Karabenick, "An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez."

34 Robert Hughes, a source for Ramirez's knowledge of Goya's life, concludes that the love affair was more Goya's fantasy than otherwise; Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 157-64.

35 Ramirez refers to this type of line as "sliding" and "penetrating"; e-mail message to author, July 6, 2017.

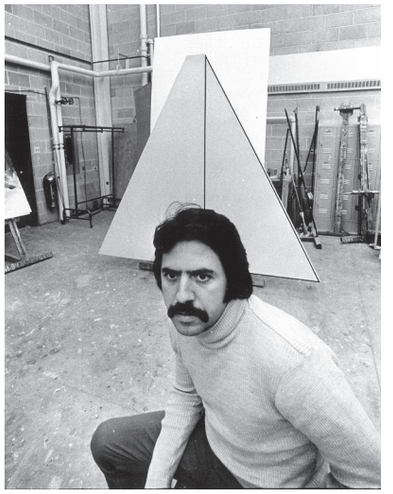
36 Ramirez, e-mail message to author, July 4, 2017.

37 Ramirez, e-mail message to author, July 6, 2017 (original emphasis).

38 July 4 to July 7, 2017.


CONTEMPLATIONS
DAN RAMIREZ

Dan Ramirez: Music of Spheres



Buzz Spector

A couple of years ago Dan Ramirez and I attended a performance of Olivier Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles* (*From the Canyons to the Stars*) at the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. This was the St. Louis debut performance of Messiaen's 1971–74 orchestral work, commissioned as a celebration of the bicentennial of the United States Declaration of Independence, and accompanied by a program of projected still and moving images by the artist Deborah O'Grady. The unconventional and demanding instrumentation in *From the Canyons to the Stars* has made it an infrequently performed work, but its tonal complexities evolve from a simpler model of devotion. Messiaen's devout Catholicism finds its expression in sequences of chordal triads that envelop the "noise" of its many percussion parts.

My friend's interest in Messiaen precedes my own; already in 1981 Dan's *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus* (p. 38), a group of twenty small etchings that took their title from Messiaen's 1944 piano suite, were the subject of a solo exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, and since then references to the French Modernist's music can be seen in many of Dan's paintings, drawings, and prints. Father Terrence Dempsey, S.J., was with us at the concert that night. As founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art at Saint Louis University, Terry had curated an exhibit of Dan's *Twenty Contemplations* at MOCRA in 2004, and joined our after-concert discussion of what we had heard and seen. We three were initially critical of O'Grady's projections, deeming them a visual distraction from the music and, even more so, problematic in their inclusion of such unnatural elements as highways, buildings, and electric power transmission lines. We discussed how photographic stillness made the images, whether of human structures or canyon walls, remote from us even as the music carried us far in its triadic immediacy. Terry offered that Dan's most overt artistic references to Messiaen's music were also among the most spacious atmospheres in his own work. I share this anecdote as a starting point for my reflection on how, over the course of his career, Dan has responded to music in his studio production and how his own spiritual journey is evidenced in the way he understands the ties between musical composition and the crafting of works of visual art.

There are references to musical notation in a number of Dan's paintings over time, as well as in such current works as his *Aletheia and the Cosmos* (p. 59) series of twenty digital prints on aluminum substrate that include readable musical notation from Messiaen's 1943 suite for two pianos, *Visions de l'Amen* (*Visions of the Amen*). Many of the works from Dan's *TCI* series from the early 1980s—the initials stand for *Twenty Contemplations #I*—include staff lines. The graphic reference to musical notation in these multipanel paintings is clearly visible, but with neither notes nor measure markings, there is no specific music

Above: Ramirez in his University of Chicago studio in 1977.
Left: **Contemplations: Dan Ramirez Works from the Permanent Collection**, an exhibition at the National Museum of Mexican Art, March 25–October 9, 2016.

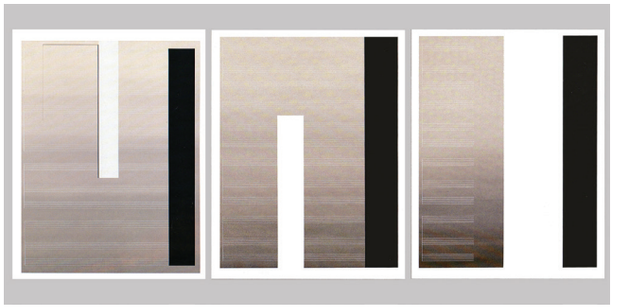


Fig. 1 **TCI: Variation #4 (Mi Hijo, Mi Hijo…)**, Triptych, 1982, acrylic on canvas 85 x 183 in., courtesy of the artist.

to come to mind. One such from the series, *TCI: Variation #4 (Mi Hijo, Mi Hijo…),* (fig. 1), is a three-panel acrylic on canvas work whose luminous portions, the result of the artist's application of many washes of silvery black pigment, are cut through with arrays of white staves. Against the atmospheric tonal gradation of the painted fields, these staves evoke a harmonics of silence. There is an apparent reference to John Cage's *4'33"* here, but the Cagean silence is scored in three movements, each titled "Tacet," and the sheet music contains no staves. Cage's title is the duration of the work and, while it can be performed with any instrumentation, the silence of all performances of *4'33"* will last just that long. The unnoted staves in the *TCI* paintings are for an unheard music rather than a duration in which all incidental sounds are proposed to be music.

From the beginning of his work as an artist, Dan's interest in abstraction resonated with his personal spiritual quest. He would not describe himself as ever having been a deeply devout practitioner, but if the pieties of the church were a lesser matter to him, notions of the immanent and sublime at the core of religious faith resonated with his own feelings in his life and in his studio work. Dan was introduced to writings by Ludwig Wittgenstein in graduate school (1975–77) at the University of Chicago. In particular, the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, with its vast logical scope and undertones of the inexpressible, emerging fully only at the very end, would guide Dan's intellectual trajectory for a decade. The concluding Wittgenstein propositions in the *Tractatus* bring us to grasp the limits of language's capacity to delineate the eternal, culminating in the single proposition 7: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Dan saw in Wittgenstein's intellectual armature an opening where the ends of language give way to the limitlessness of the visual field, a flash of insight that returned to him when he read Claude Samuels' *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* in 1977. Dan recalls reading of Messiaen's belief that God can only be comprehended in moments of illumination rather than by analysis, as itself a "flash," a recognition of the composer as a kindred spirit.

In his work of the 1980s Dan explored several ways of incorporating perceptual illusion as visual manifestation of the insightful flash. One example of this is *Contemplation of the Virgin: var. #3* (p. 34), whose central component is a rectangle composed of four vertical acrylic-on-canvas panels; the two middle of which are flat white while the outer two are stained in gradations of black acrylic wash on exposed canvas. This array is flanked by a pair of monofilament lines, attached to each of the outer panels at the top and angling outward to nearly invisible brads in the wall so as to make a virtual trapezoid. The monofilament is thick enough in diameter to cast shadows that viewers would initially read as edges of the form. The nylon lines' translucency furthers this illusion, which dissipates as viewers approach the work. In addition, the four vertical panels are flush at the top but the interior white ones jut out perhaps two inches at the bottom. The apparent trapezoidal unity of *Contemplation of the Virgin: var. #3* gives way as viewers move toward the work or even merely across the room where it is installed; its changing appearance is simply the falling away of an illusion in the minds of its viewers. This shift in cognition constitutes a perceptual scintillation, evocative of Messiaen's description of the momentariness of divine comprehension, but also Wittgenstein's description, in the *Tractatus*, of the Necker cube, the illusory isometric projection in which a cube reverses its spatial relationship to the paper it is printed on depending on which set of axes the viewer focuses on first. The falling away of illusion is at the core of both faith and philosophy, and this work's initial "oneness" remains in memory, similar to how a symphonic refrain reverberates in the moments following its final notes.

The most recent project incorporating music in Dan's work is the suite of twenty digital prints on aluminum whose full title is *Aletheia and the Cosmos: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen and his "Visions of the Amen"* (p. 57). This work has occupied the artist off and on for ten years, and its individual components all include portions of the score from the second movement of Messiaen's suite of seven pieces for two pianos. The title and opening bars of the second movement, "Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau" ("Amen of the Stars, of the Ringed Planet"), are clearly readable in the first print, and the concluding bars are visible in the last. Otherwise, for the most part, the places where words might be found are occupied by artistic affects constituting, so to speak, a music of spheres. In the overall grid of prints—stacked in four rows of five each—there is a repertoire of graphic embellishments, including whole or partial discs or ovoids, color bars and raking lines, catenary curves that suggest a peeling away of some prints from their substrate, and even manipulated astronomical photographs of celestial orbs. These effects move over, under, and through the pages of the score in all twenty prints, and their overarching purpose is to reinscribe the black background of the prints as outer space. Perhaps the entirety of Messiaen's movement is here, but the overall configuration of *Aletheia and the Cosmos* insists that a mental reshuffling of its score for a performance is not the point of the work.

Dan has never intended that any musical notation in this, or any other of his works, is meant to be performed. Titles, lyrics, notes; all are visual artifacts, adrift in atmospheres of color or endless black. The musical inclusions in *Aletheia and the Cosmos* are more comparable to how Picasso (fig. 2) or Braque incorporated portions of sheet music in their Cubist pictures. Dan's imagery interferes with instrumental reading, but not with the recognition of a readable armature. The deliberate reordering of Messiaen's "pages" encourages us to pay more attention to the materiality of what's present; the glossy surface of the prints and also the sheen of the metal to which they are attached. The polished luster of this substrate is visually close to the lustrous elements of the prints, as if the imagery were drawing into itself something of its material support. Dan

Fig. 2 Pablo Picasso (Spanish 1881–1973), **La bouteille de Suze** (Bottle of Suze), 1912, pasted papers, gouache, and charcoal, 25 ¾ x 19 ¾ in., Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946.

enlists substance and absence in service to his ideas about thinking and feeling. *Aletheia and the Cosmos* is a composition whose dialectical aspect necessitates that the gaze of reading become one of scanning, but that neither reading nor scanning can ultimately hold sway.

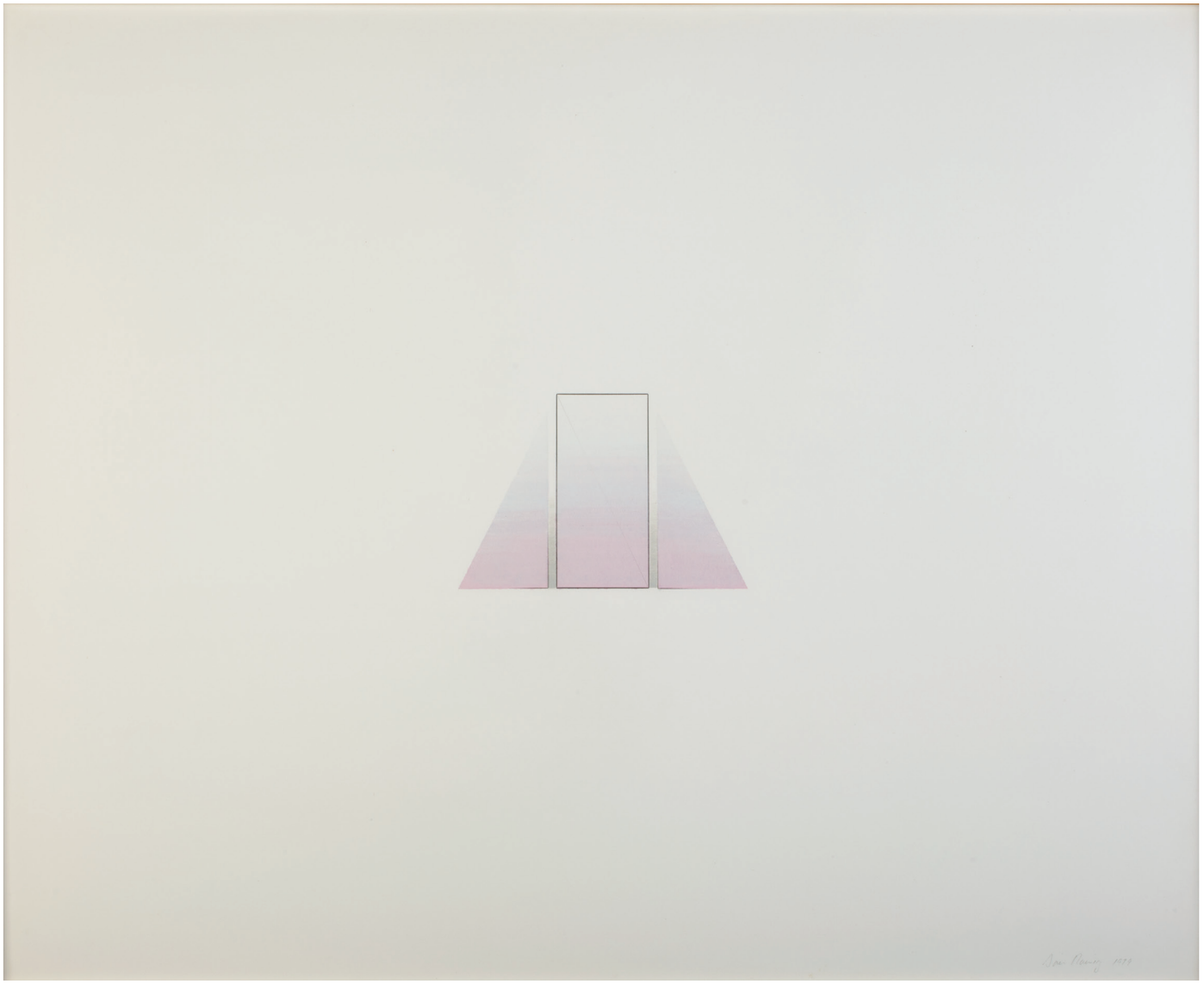
The definition of *aletheia* in philosophy is that of a disclosed truth, one that is manifest more than spoken. The cosmos manifested in these prints conveys the idea of musicality toward which Dan aspires in a different manner than how reading a musical score offers up its melody. We stand silent before *Aletheia and the Cosmos*, the fact of whose silence avails us to grasp its spiritual dimension. This homage to Messiaen reverberates between hearing and seeing. As William Carlos Williams puts it, in "Song," a brief lyric out of *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962):

> undying accents
> repeated till
> the ear and the eye lie
> down together in the same bed

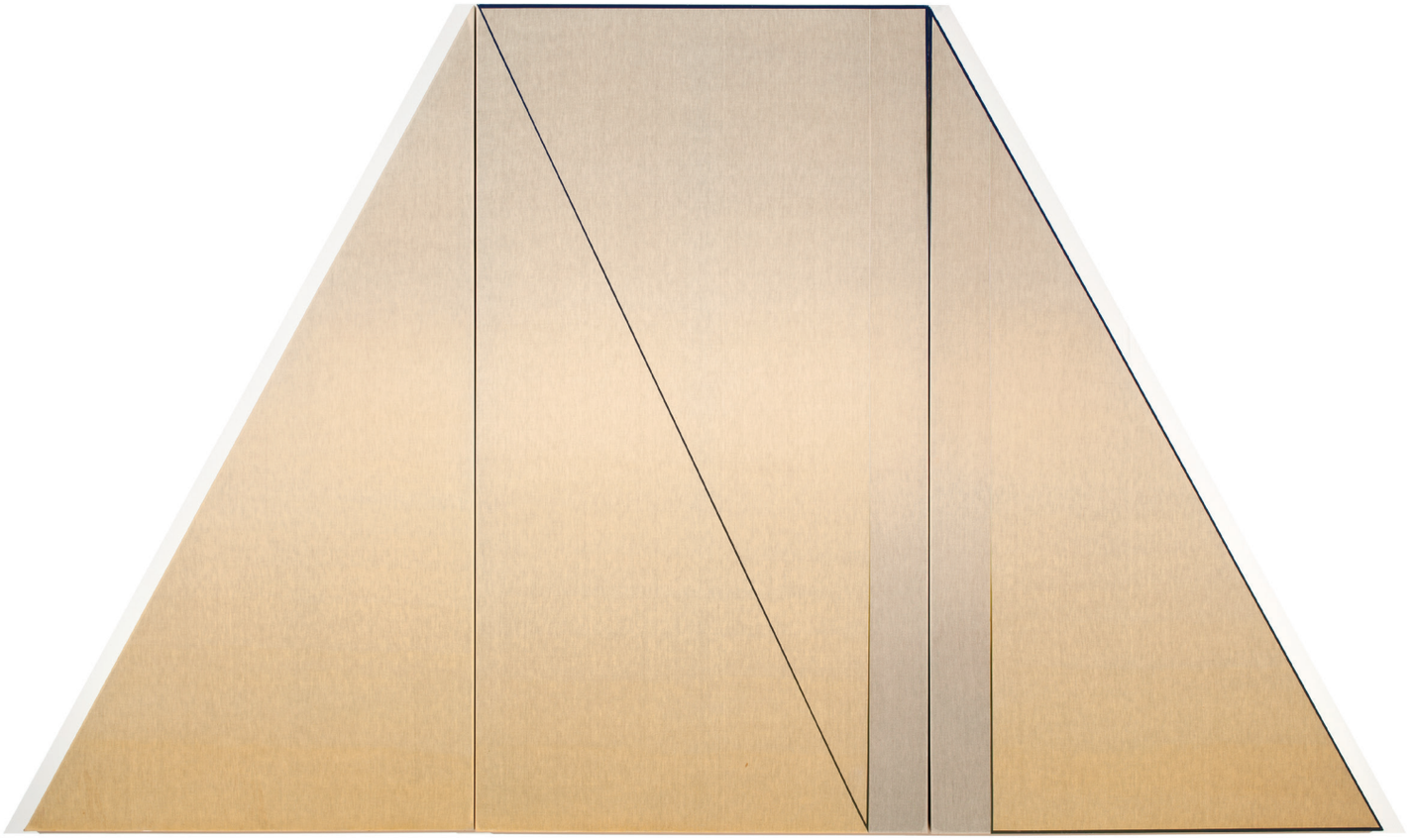

Aquatex

CERTAINTY and DOUBT

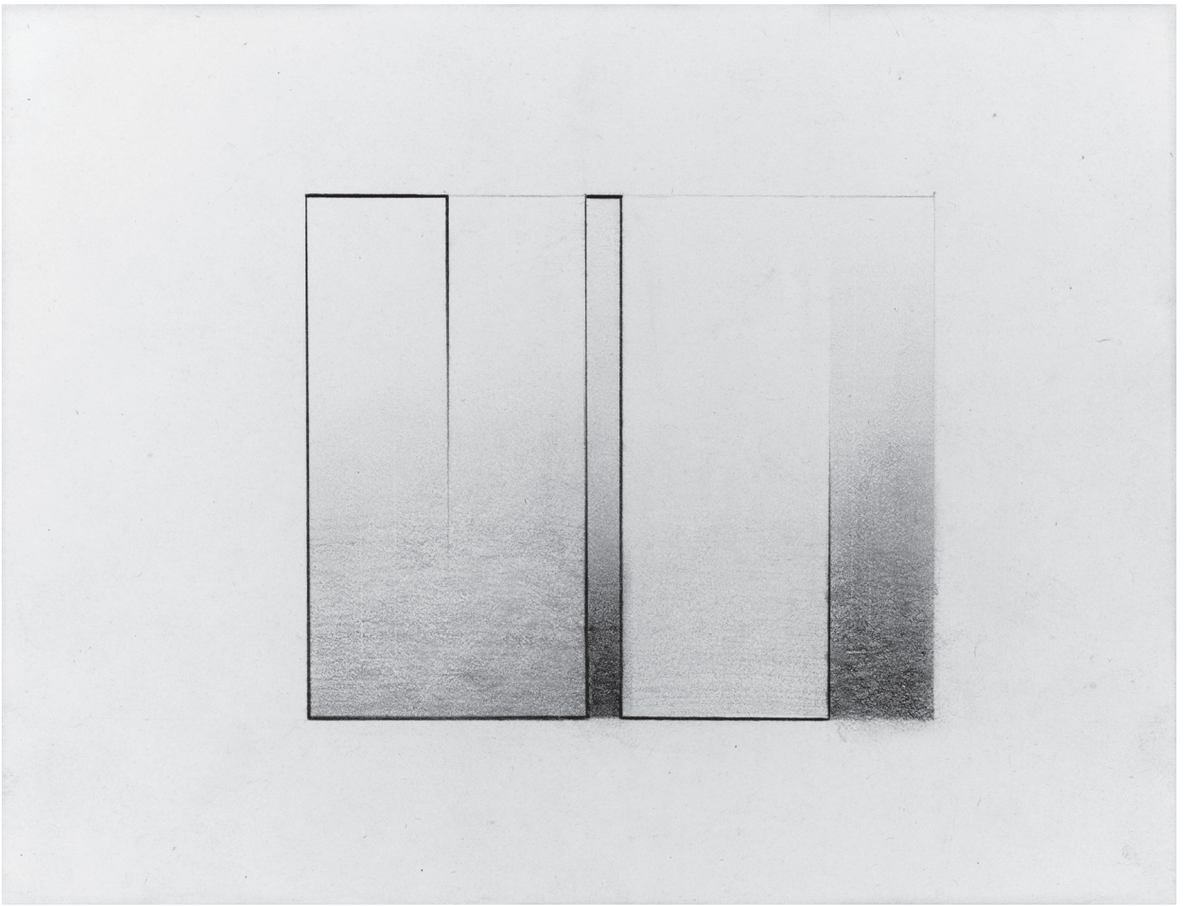
Paintings by Dan Ramirez



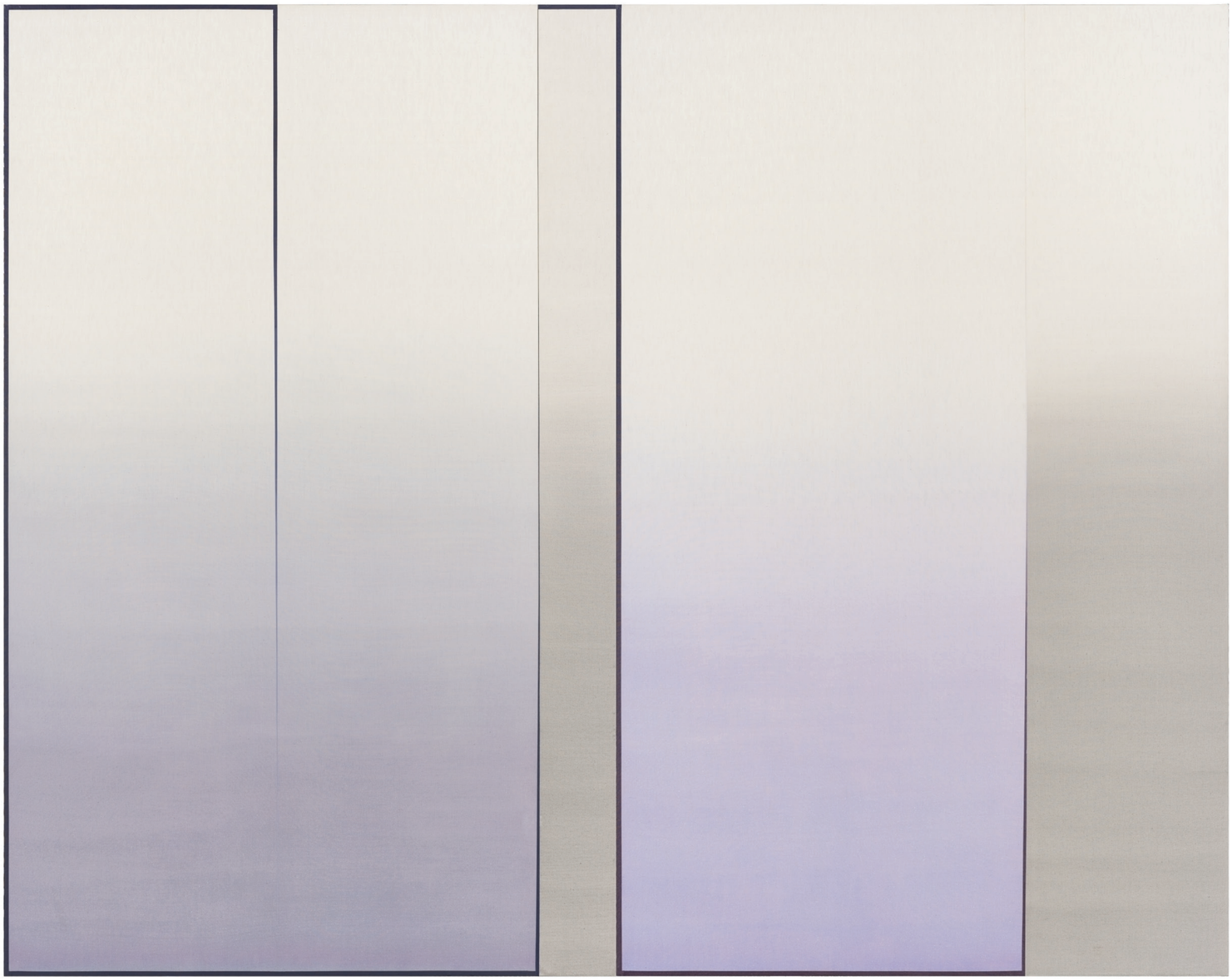
Untitled, 1979, graphite and watercolor, 32 ¾ x 40 ¾ in.
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Mark and Judy Bednar, 2015.02.



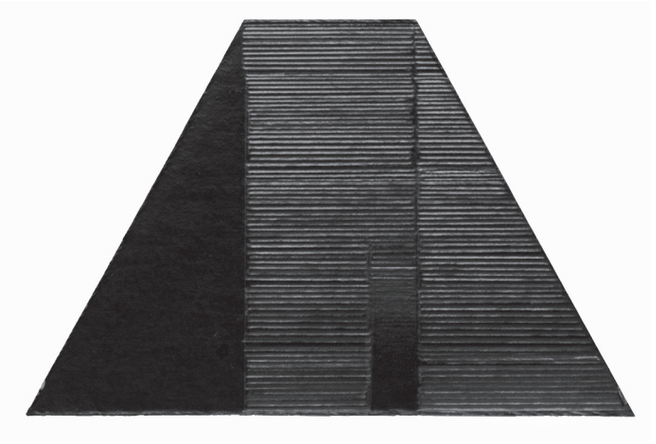
Untitled, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 138 in.
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Mark and Judy Bednar, 2015.01a–c



Untitled, ca. 1976, graphite on paper, 8 ⅝ x 11 ¼ in.
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Barbara and Russell Bowman, 1993.29.



TL-P 6.421, 1976-77, acrylic on canvas, 95 ⅜ x 120 ³⁄₁₆ x 2 ½ in.
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Marianne Deson and the artist, 1979.15.a–b.



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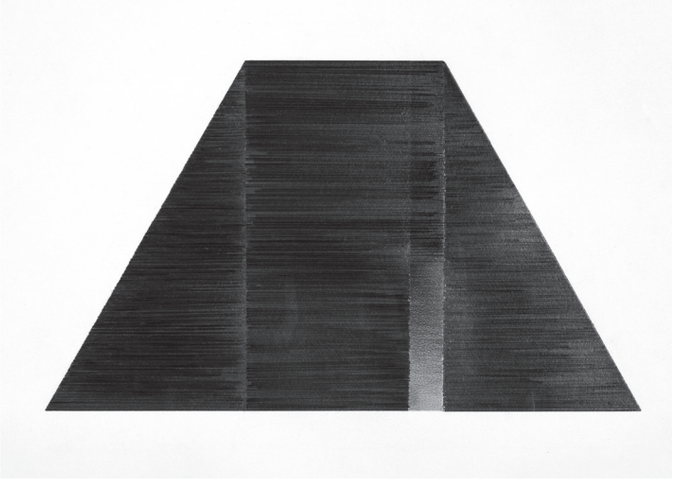

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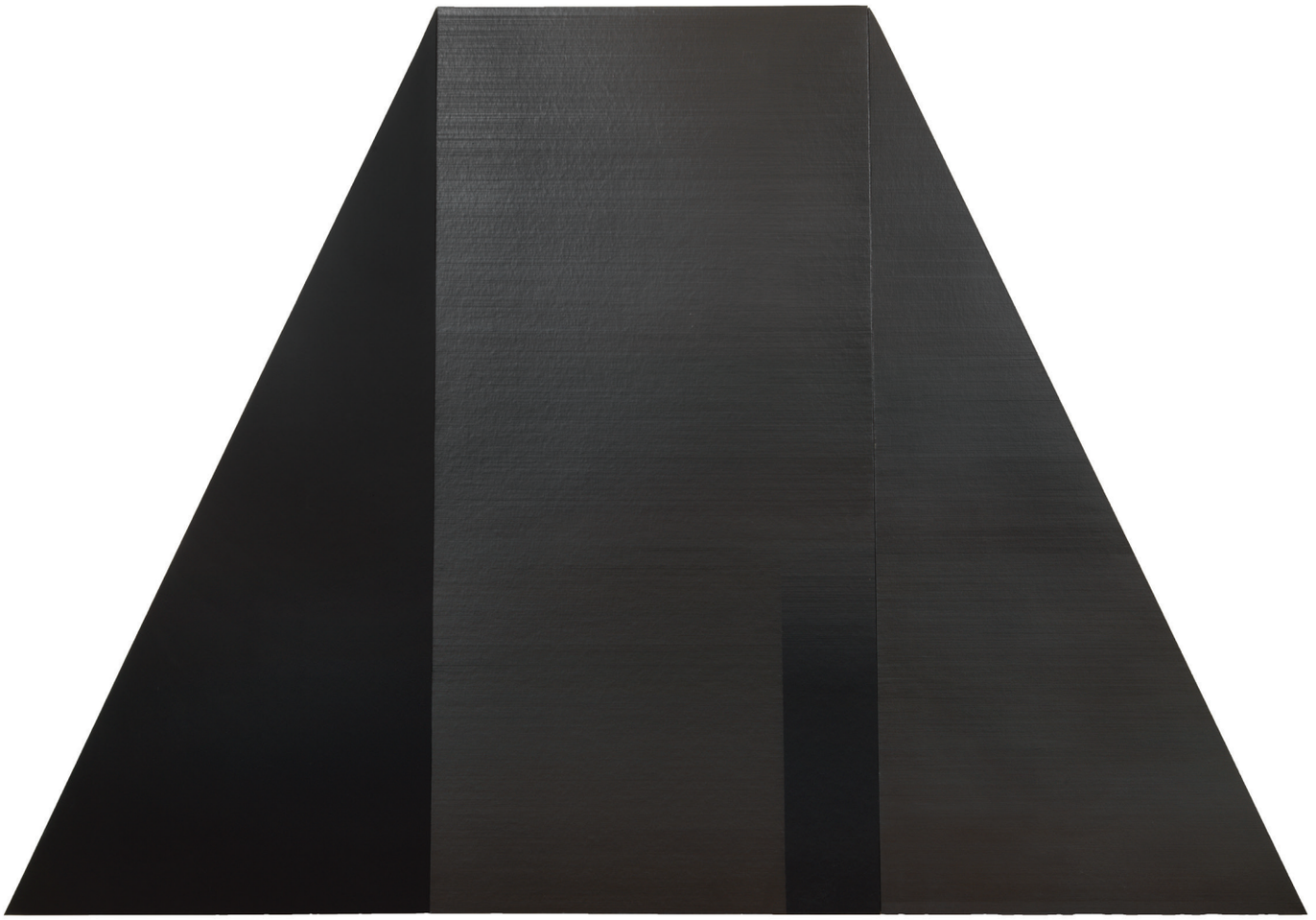
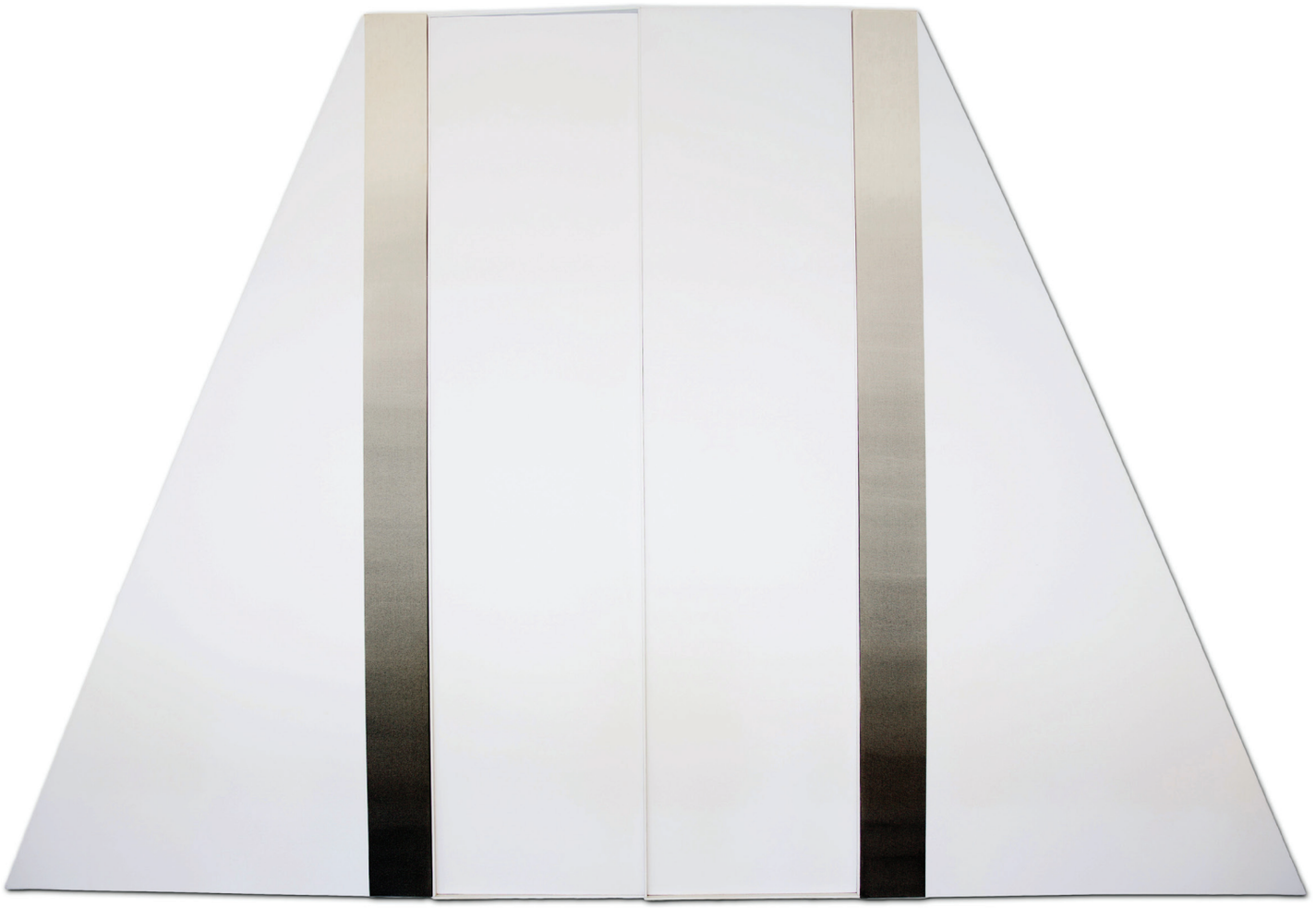
1. **TL-P** series maquette, 1979, graphite on board, 4 ½ x 7 x 2 in.
   Lawrence and Evelyn Aronson.
2. **A Study for the Silver Snow Leopard**, ca. 1982, silver graphite on paper, 30 x 40 in. (framed).
   Lawrence and Evelyn Aronson.
3. **TL-P 6.432**, 1977, graphite on heavy wove paper, 22 x 30 in.
   David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of the artist, 2001.380.
4. **Bild 12/für/S, W, B #6**, 1979, silver graphite and watercolor on museum board, 24 x 36 x 2 in.
   Mark and Judy Bednar.

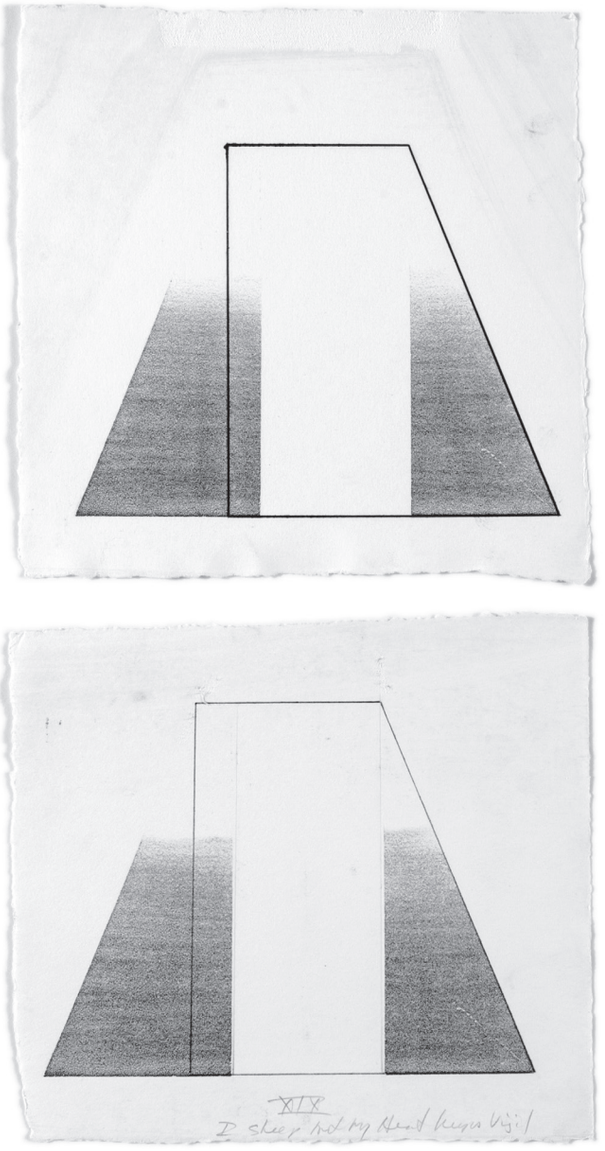


TL-P series, 1979, graphite, latex on board, 72 x 101 in.
Lawrence and Evelyn Aronson.

Contemplation of the Virgin, var. #3, 1981, acrylic, latex, monofilament line and canvas, panel A: 91 x 24 in.; panel B: 91x24 in.; monofilament: varied.
National Museum of Mexican Art permanent collection, gift of Roy Boyd in memory of Ann Boyd, 2014.188 A–B.



Kiss of the Infant Jesus, 1981, acrylic and painted wood on canvas, 96 x 122 in.
Benedictine University, Lisle, Ill.



I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil (proofs), 1981, intaglio, approx. 4 x 6 in. (each). Courtesy of the artist.

I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 158 in.
Chazen Museum of Art, gift of Diane and Robert Newbury, 2000.91a–c.

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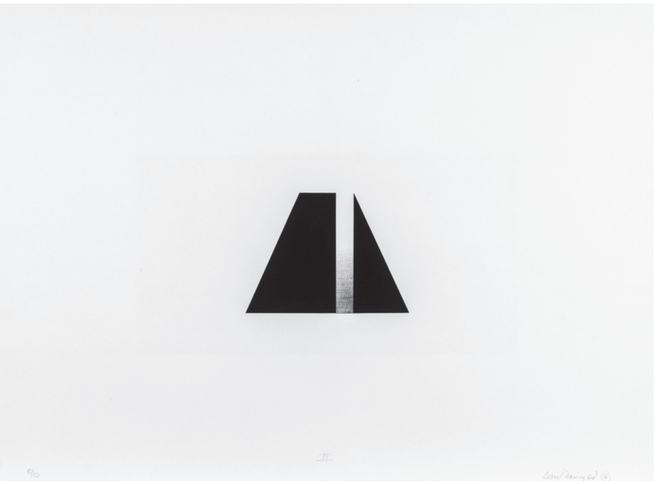

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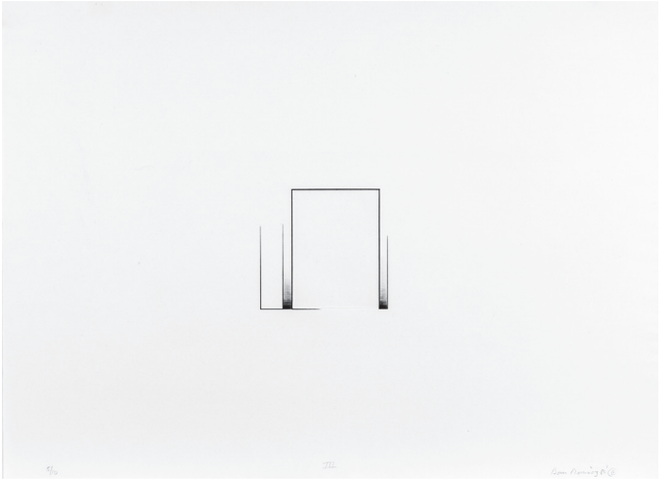

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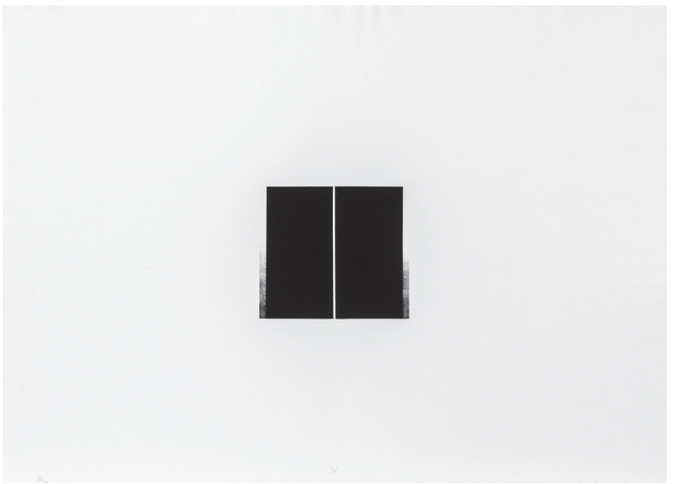
FOLDS OUT DO NOT PRINT

Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen; ed. 5/10, 1980
David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, gift of Loretta Thurm.

1. **Contemplation of the Father**, engraving, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 3⁄16 x 6 ½ in., 1997.59a.
2. **Contemplation of the Star**, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 7⁄16 x 7 3⁄8 in., 1997.59b.
3. **The Exchange**, etching, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 5 ½ x 5 13⁄16 in., 1997.59c.
4. **Contemplation of the Virgin**, etching, aquatint and embossing, 5 ½ x 8 ¼ in., 1997.59d.



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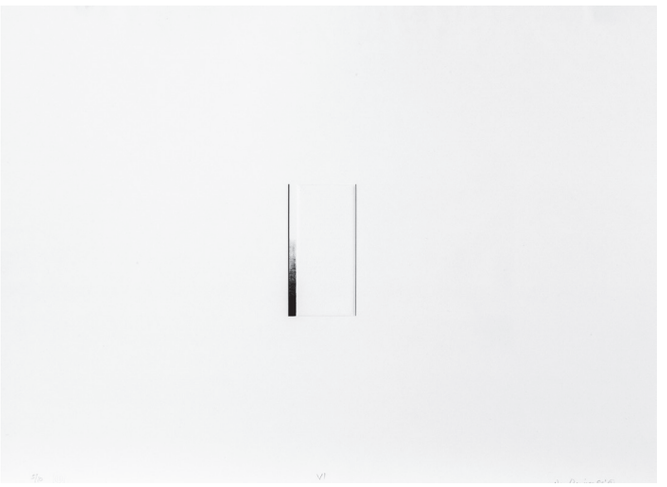

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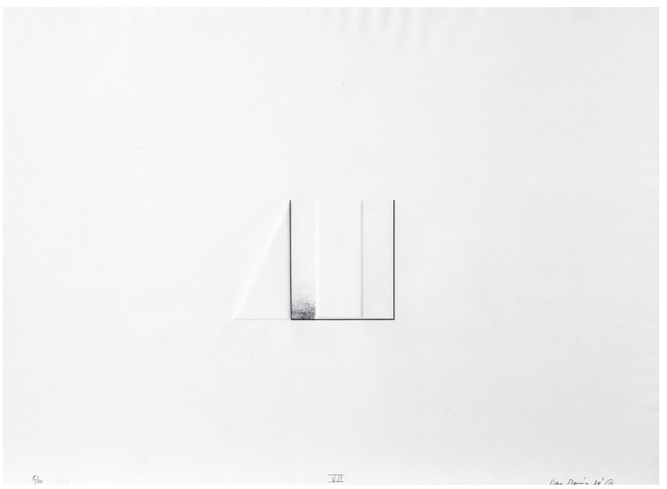

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5. **Contemplation of the Son by the Son**, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 15⁄16 x 6 11⁄16 in., 1997.59e.
6. **By Him All Has Been Made**, etching, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 8 11⁄16 x 3 1⁄16 in., 1997.59f.
7. **Contemplation of the Cross**, etching, aquatint and embossing, 5 7⁄16 x 7 5⁄16 in., 1997.59g.
8. **Contemplation of the Heights**, engraving, etching, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 7⁄16 x 14 in., 1997.59h.

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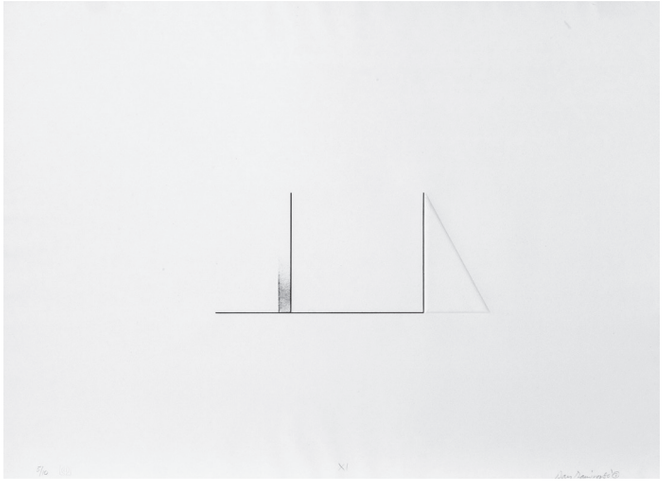

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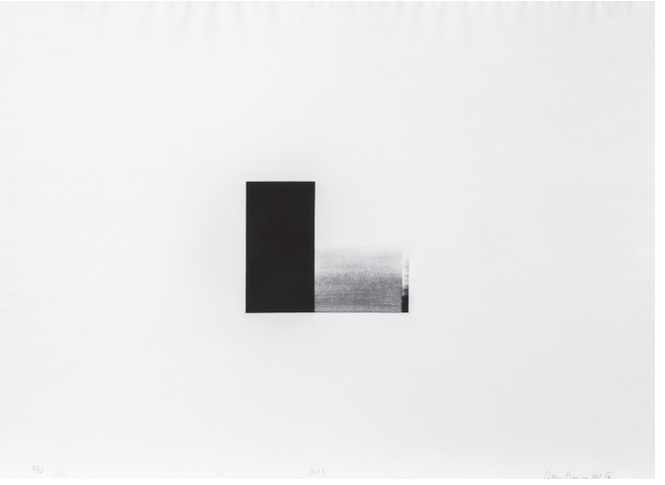

12

9. **Contemplation of Time**, etching, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 15⁄16 x 2 ½ in., 1997.59i.
10. **Contemplation of the Spirit of Joy**, etching and aquatint, 5 7⁄16 x 8 ½ in., 1997.59j.
11. **The First Communion of the Virgin**, etching, aquatint and embossing, 5 ½ x 12 7⁄16 in., 1997.59k.
12. **The All-Powerful Word**, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 15⁄16 x 7 ⅜ in., 1997.59l.

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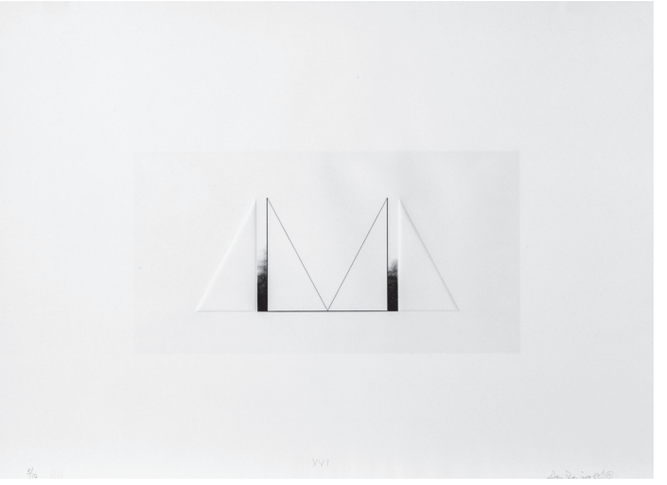

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13. **Christmas**, etching and aquatint, 5 7⁄16 x 7 1⁄8 in., 1997.59m.
14. **Contemplation of the Angels**, engraving, etching, aquatint and electrically vibrated drypoint, 5 7⁄16 x 8 1⁄4 in., 1997.59n.
15. **The Kiss of the Infant Jesus**, inkless engraving, aquatint, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 5 1⁄2 x 7 1⁄2 in., 1997.59o.
16. **Contemplation of the Prophets, The Shepherds and The Wise Men**, etching, aquatint and embossing, 5 1⁄16 x 11 13⁄16 in., 1997.59p.

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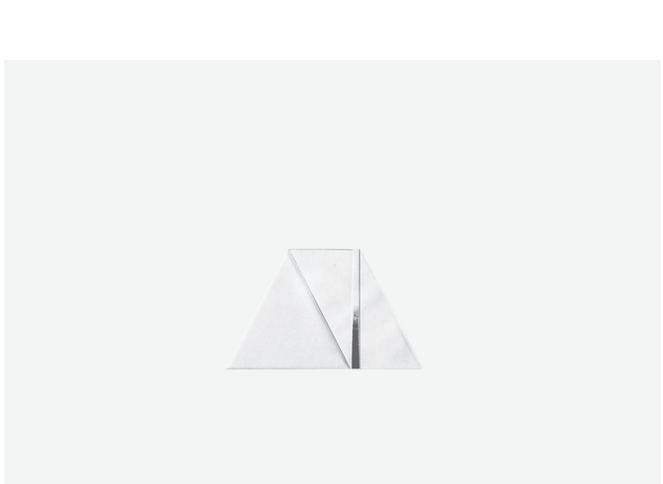

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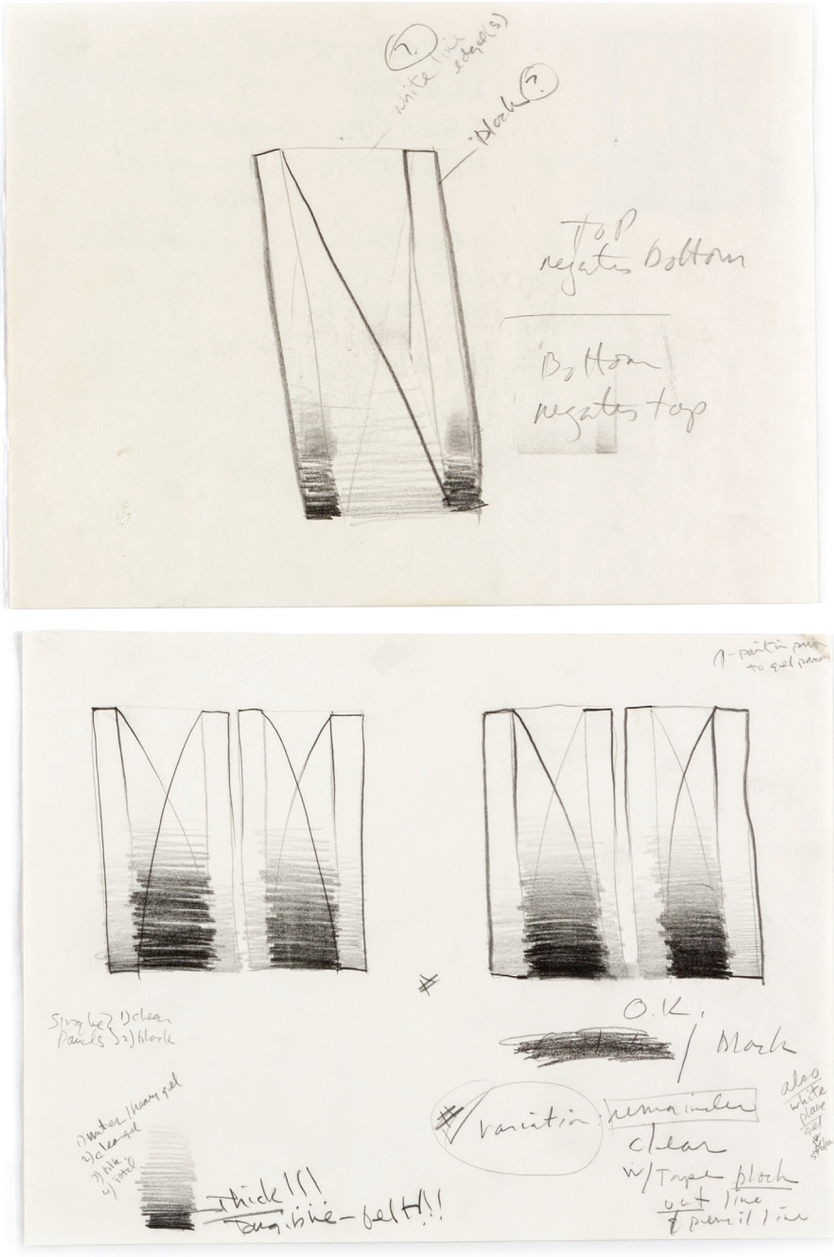
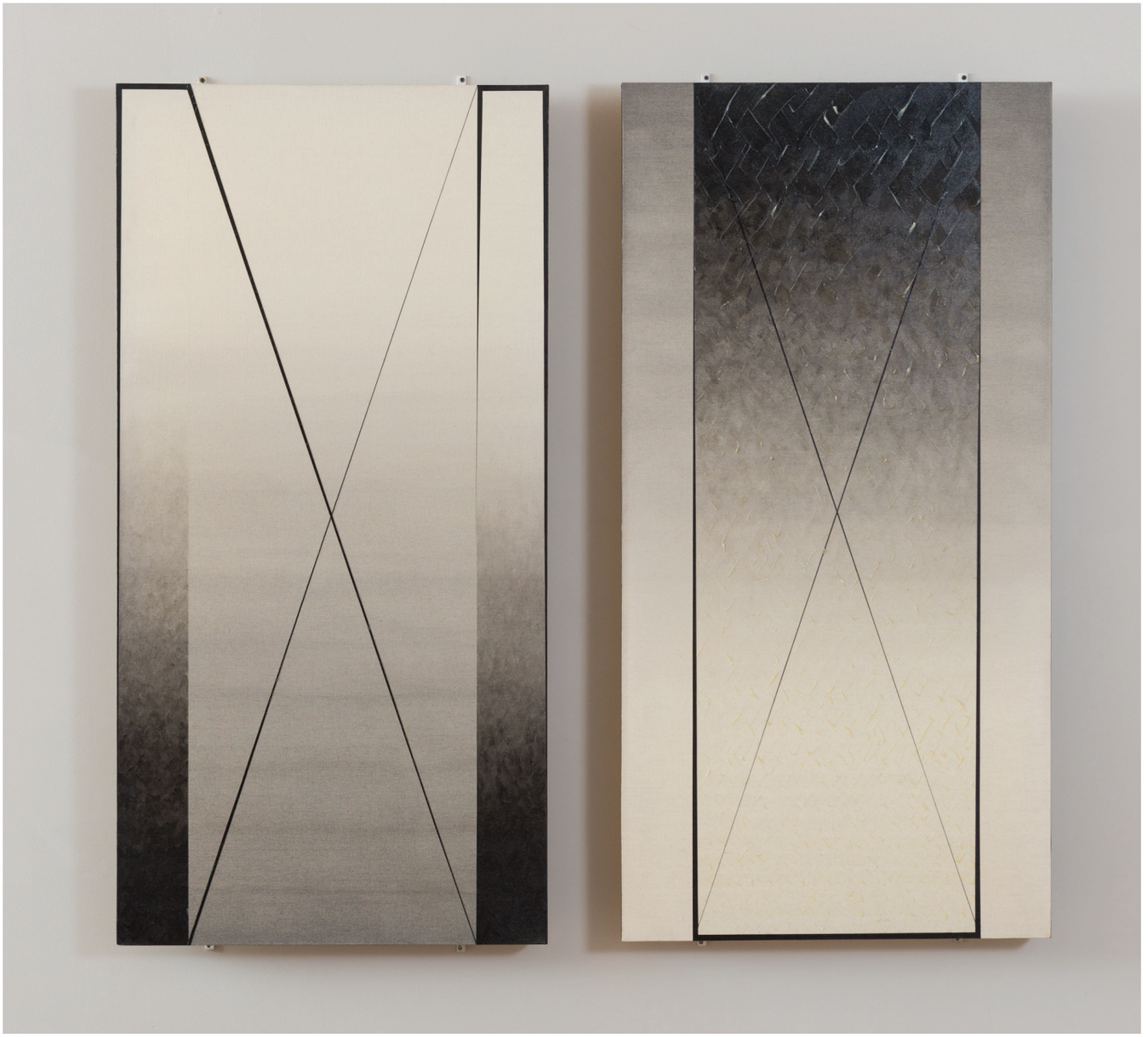
17. **Contemplation of Silence**, etching, aquatint and embossing, 5 13⁄16 x 8 in., 1997.59q.
18. **Contemplation of the Terrible Unction**, etching, aquatint, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 5 7⁄16 x 8 in., 1997.59r.
19. **I Sleep But My Heart Keeps Vigil**, etching, aquatint, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 5 ½ x 7 ¼ in., 1997.59s.
20. **Contemplation of the Church of Love**, electrically vibrated drypoint and embossing, 5 7⁄16 x 8 15⁄16 in., 1997.59t.

Ramirez at work on the series **Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus** at the Chicago Center for the Print in 1980.



Pages from an undated sketchbook.

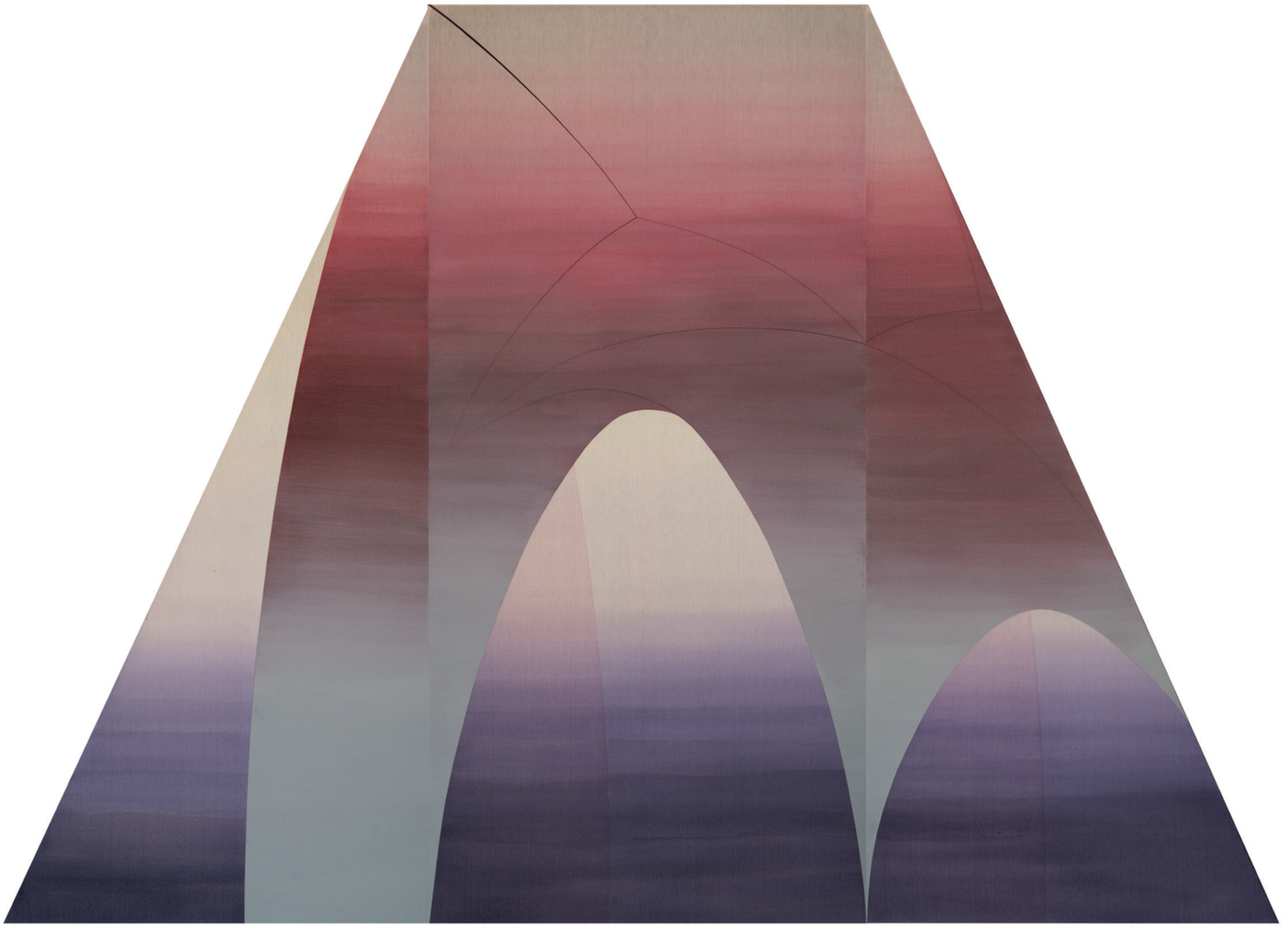


Angelus Lumen/Octo, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 65 in.
Collection of Mark and Judy Bednar.

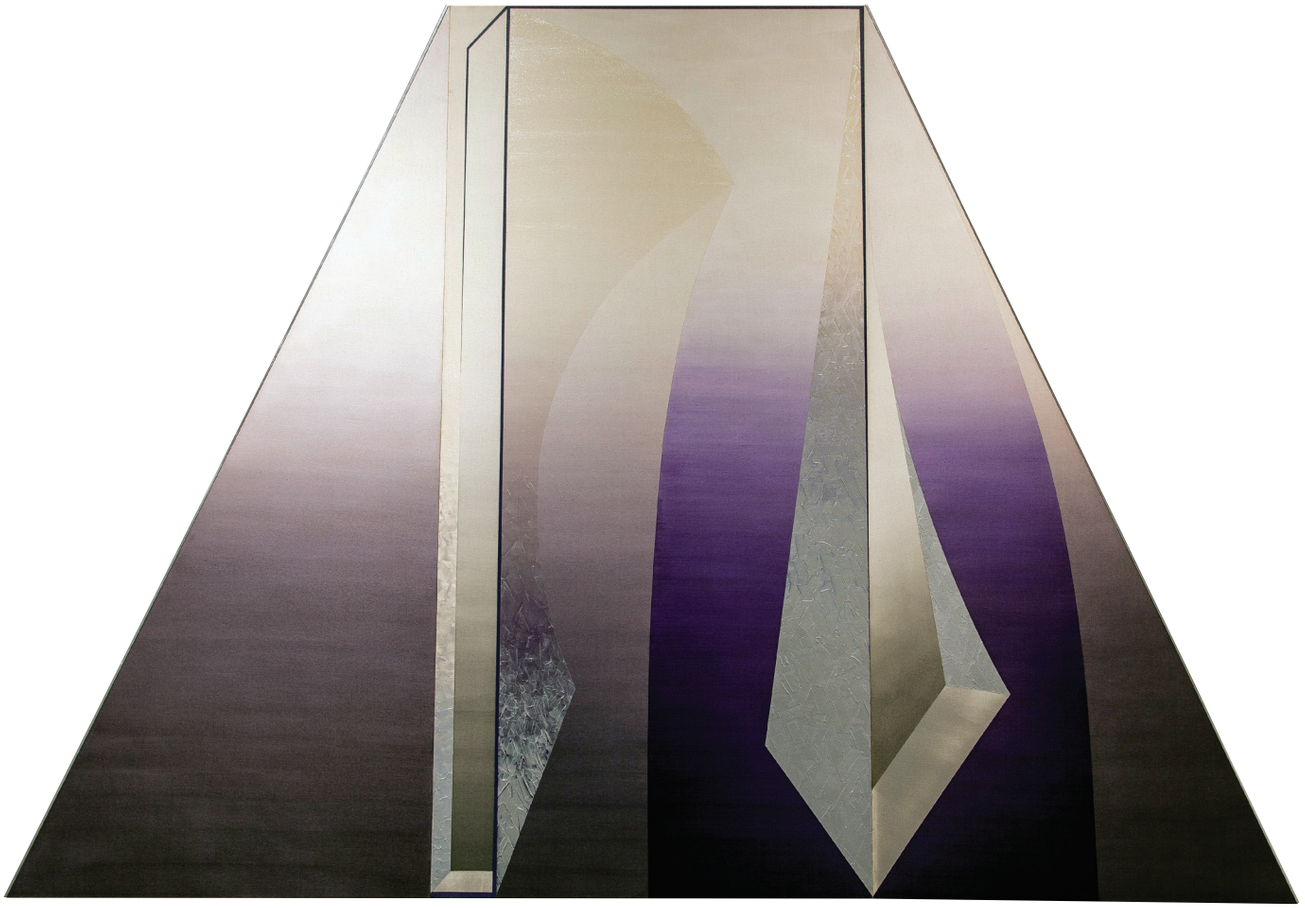
Black Angel #8, 1987, charcoal and graphite on paper, 22 x 30 in.
National Museum of Mexican Art permanent collection, gift of Thomas and Linda Heagy, 2013.124.

Veritas / Lumen / Res #13, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 x 1 in.
National Museum of Mexican Art permanent collection, gift of Thomas and Linda Heagy, 2013.146.

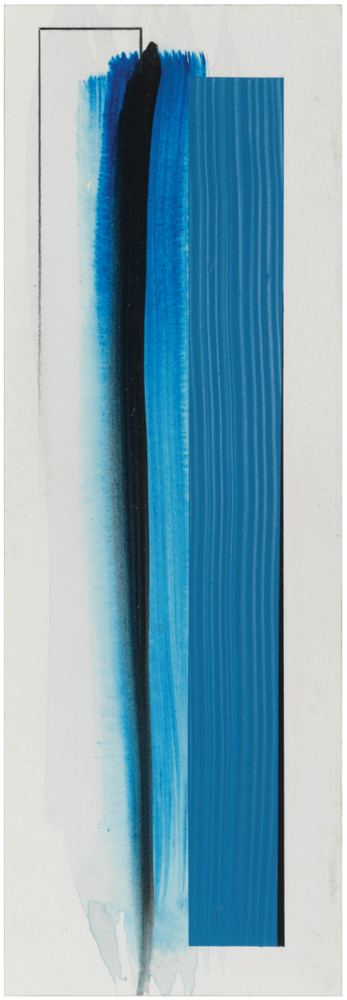
Robin's Flight, 1988-89, aluminum, bolts, and acrylic on canvas, 90 x 43 x 7 ½ in. Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Joel and Toni Fenchel, in honor of Dan Ramirez and in memory of Robert (Robin) Glauber, 2016.02.



Celestial City #9, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 126 in.
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, gift of Claudia R. and A. Jerry Luebbers, U-4963.1998.

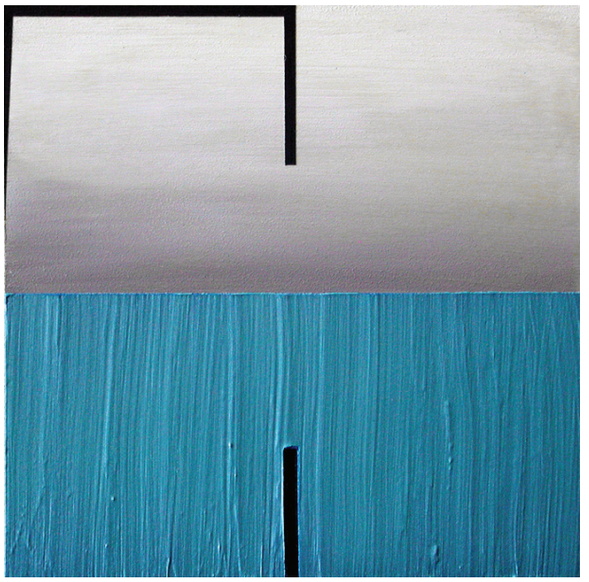


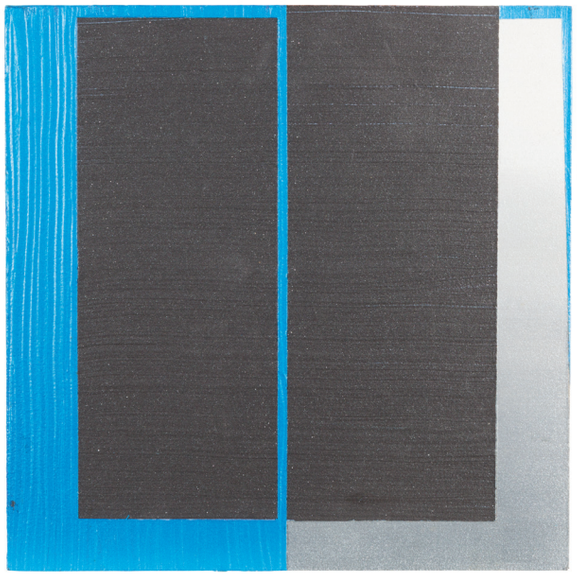
Caelestis/Spatium/Res (Celestial/Space/Object), 1988, acrylic on canvas, aluminum, steel, 90 x 127 x 2 ¼ in. Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University.



Left: **La Luz** (study), 2002, acrylic, ink wash and graphite on paper mounted on foamcore, 12 ¾ x 4 in.
National Museum of Mexican Art permanent collection, gift of Thomas and Linda Heagy, 2013.145.

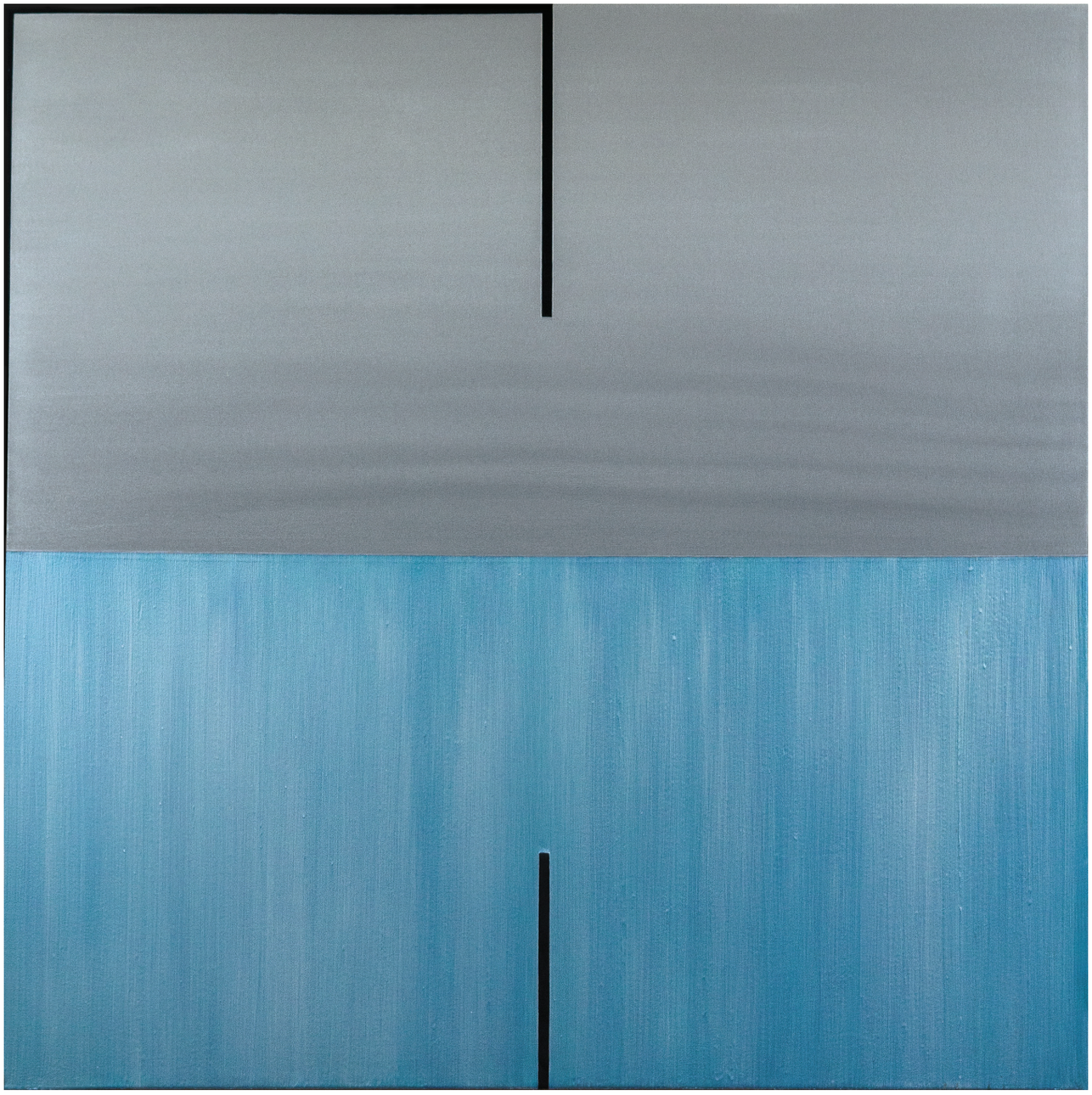
Right: **Batlló La Luz V**, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 8 x 1 ¾ in.
Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University.





Top: **Nuages: La Luz Azul en sus Ojos (Dos)** (study), 2002, acrylic on panel, 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ in.
Matt Ramirez and Anna Besler.

Bottom: **Nuages: La Luz Azul en sus Ojos (Tres)** (study), 2002, acrylic and micaceous iron oxide on panel, 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ in.
Matt Ramirez and Anna Besler.



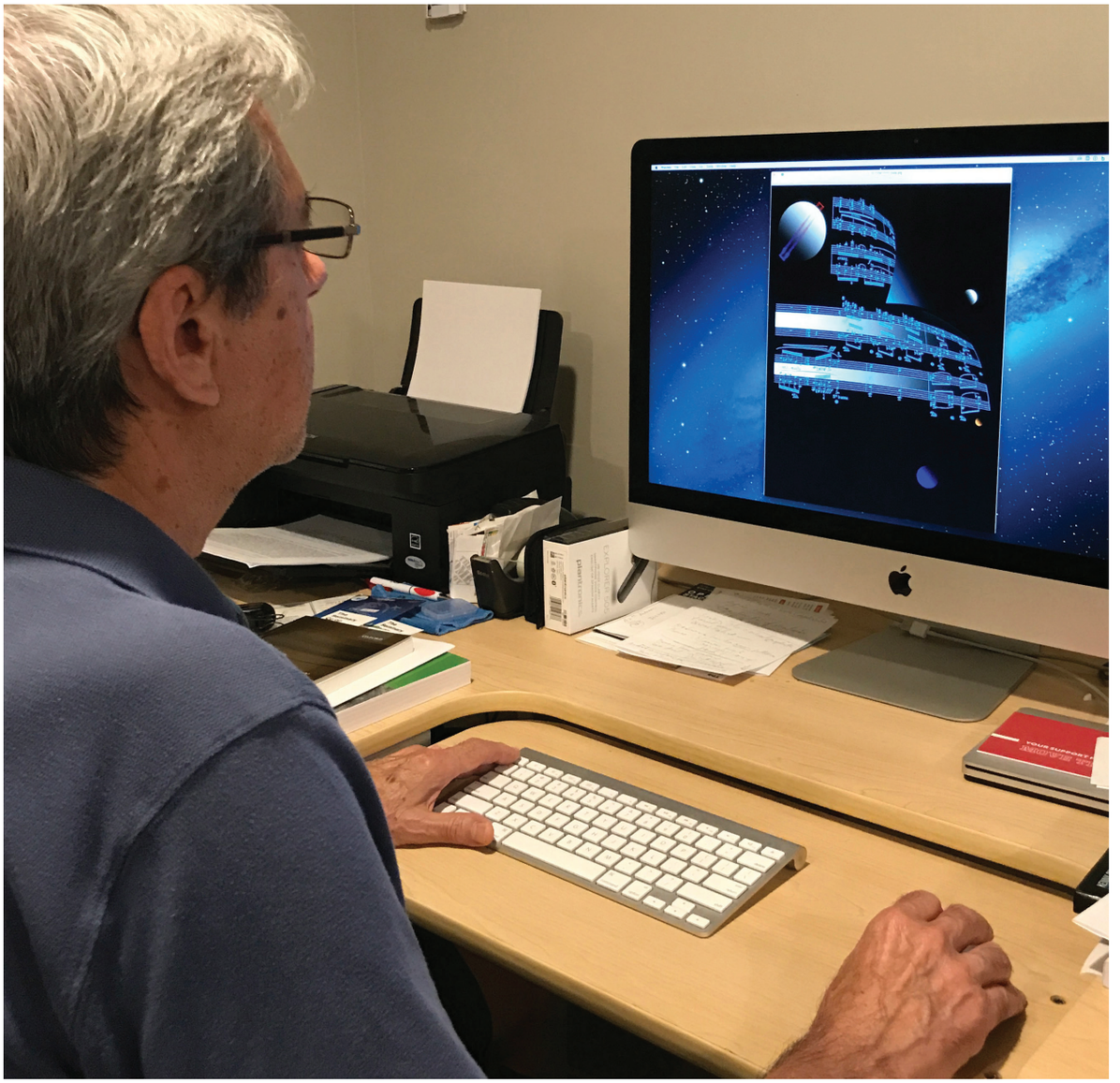
Nuages: La Luz/dos, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.
Richard and Marcia Pauling.

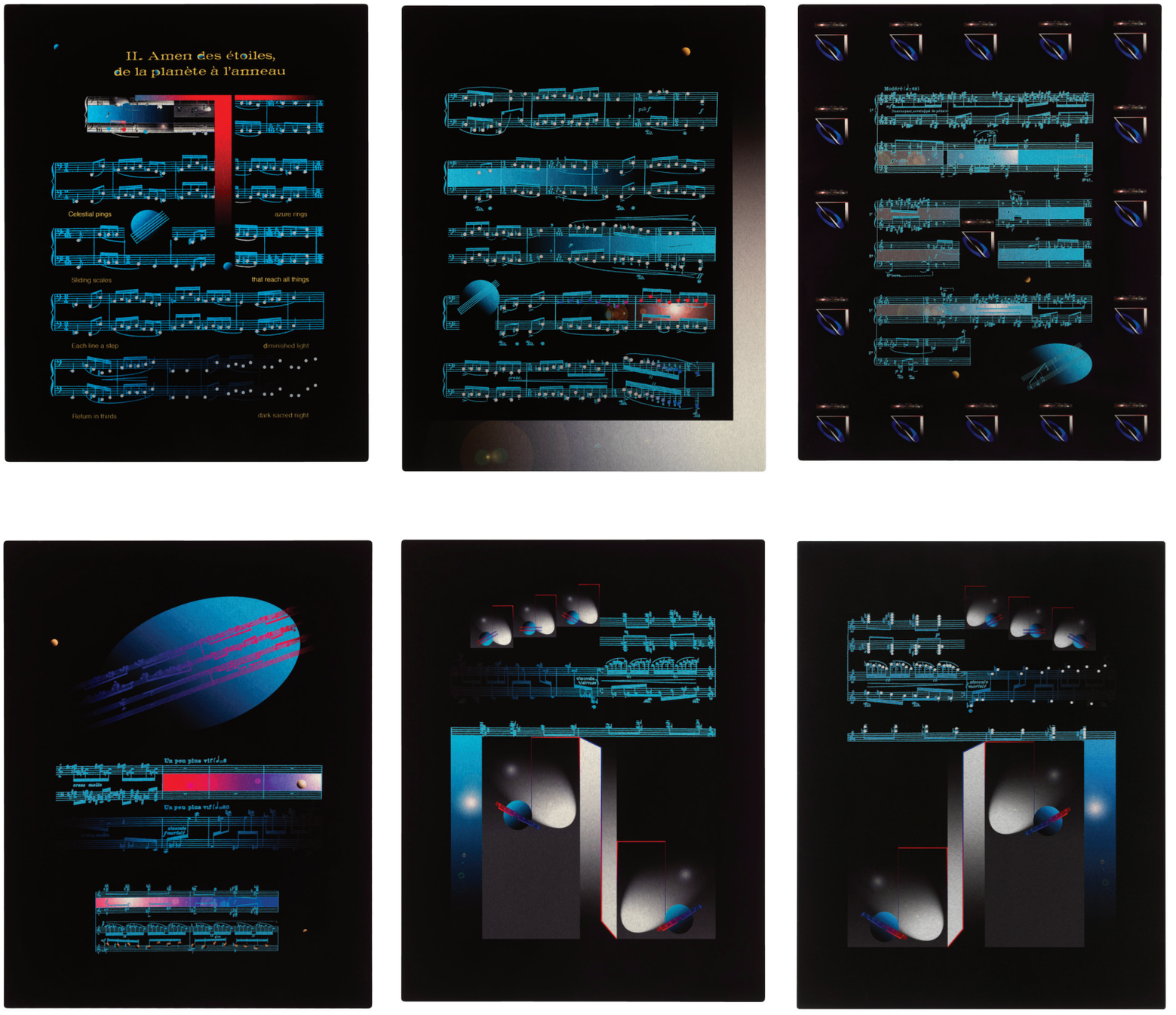
La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

La Duquesa: Vestido Blanco con Fajin Rojo (White Dress with Red Sash), 2013–14.
Oil and acrylic on panel, 24 x 18 in.
Private collection.

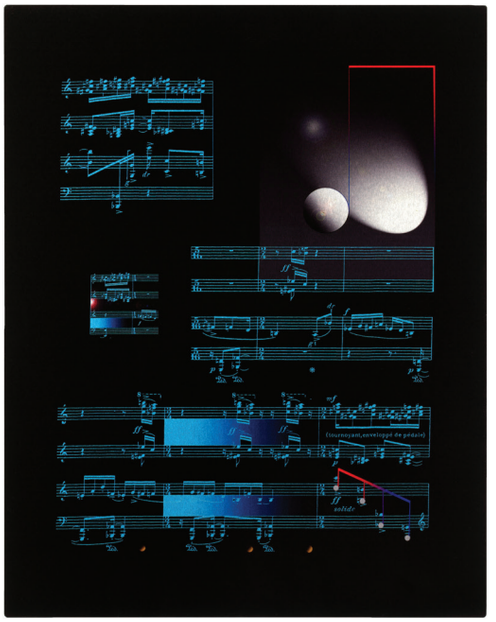
Epoche: L'echange III (The Exchange), 2013–14, oil and acrylic on panel (dyptich), 20 x 33 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

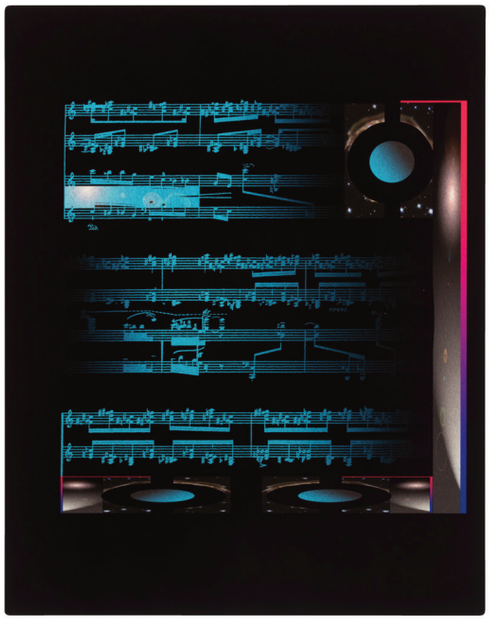
Epoche: L'echange II (The Exchange), 2013–14, oil and acrylic on panel, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist.

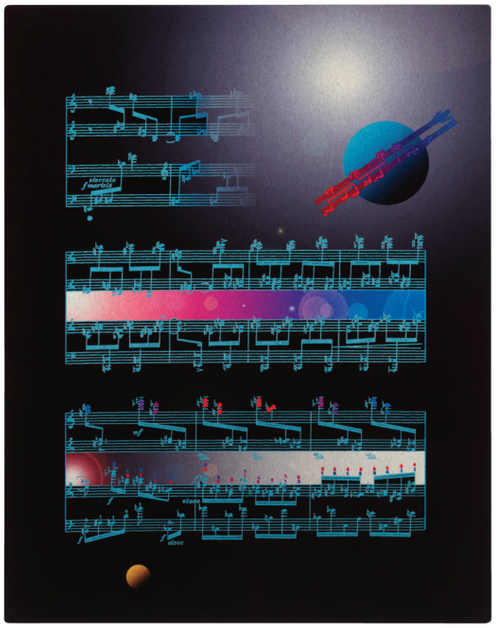


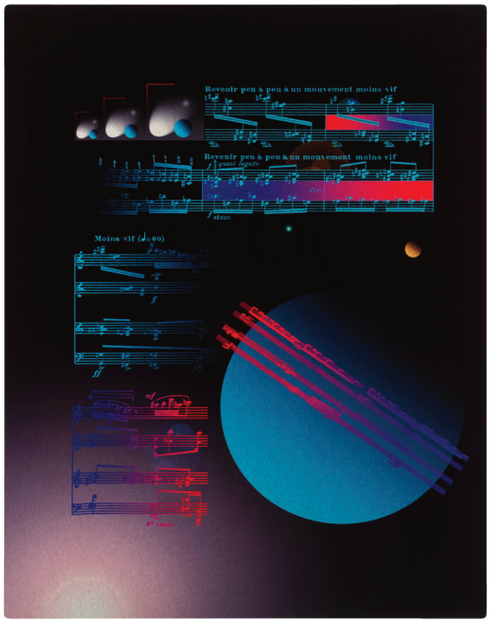


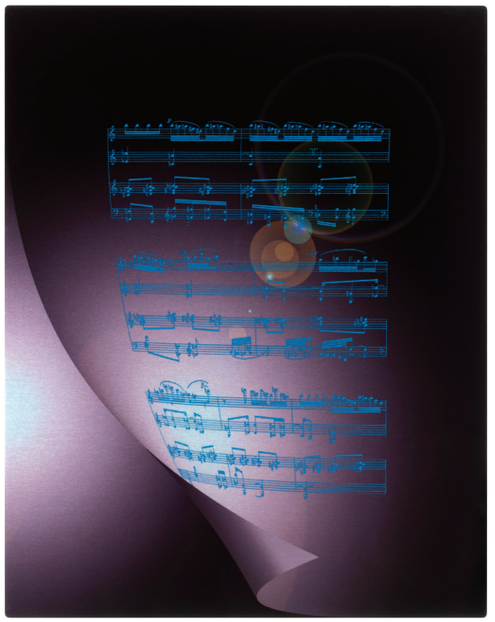
Aletheia and the Cosmos: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen and his "Visions of the Amen", 2016–17.
Digital print on aluminum, 59 x 59 in. overall; 14 x 11 in. each.
Courtesy of the artist.

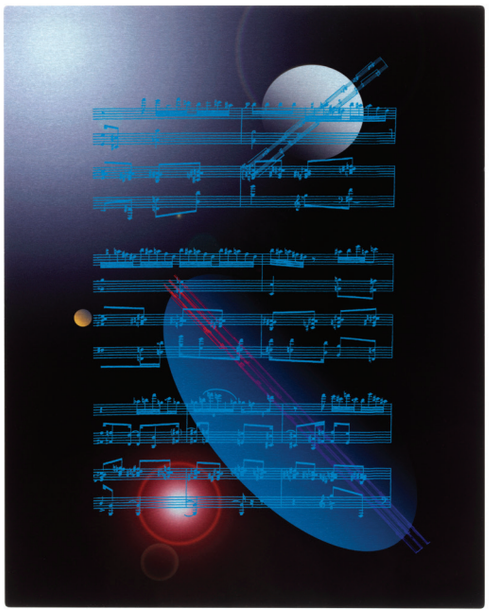

(tournoyant,enveloppé de poussière)
solide

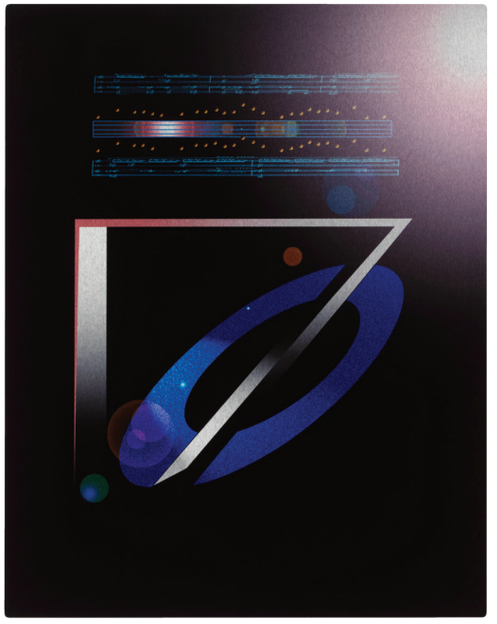


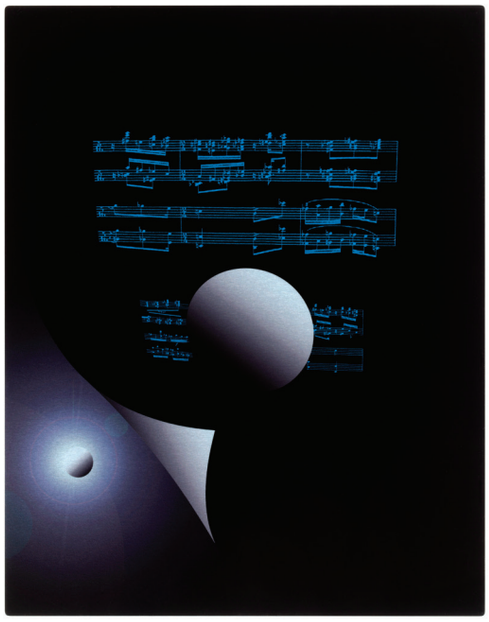

staccato
marcato

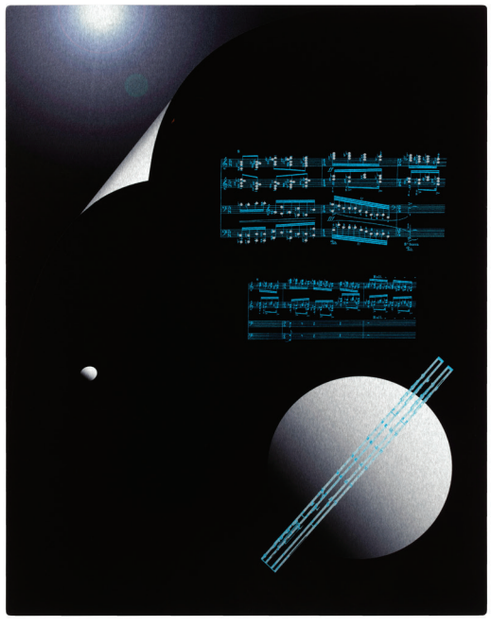

Revenir peu à peu à un mouvement moins vif
Revenir peu à peu à un mouvement moins vif
Moins vif (♩= 60)

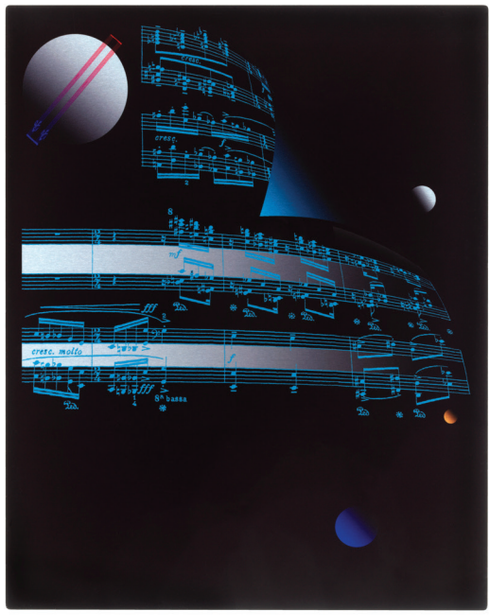


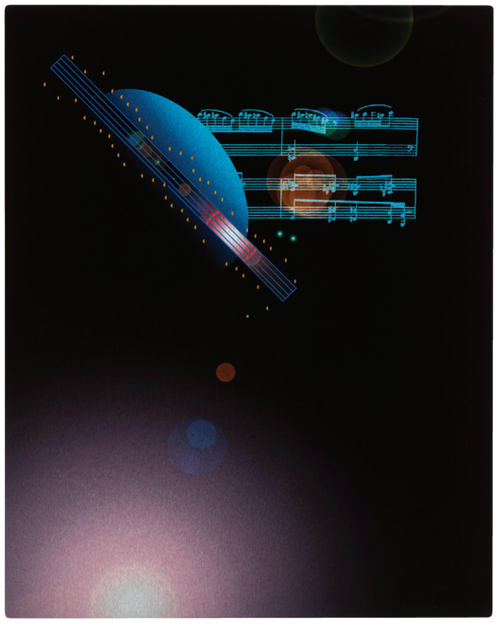


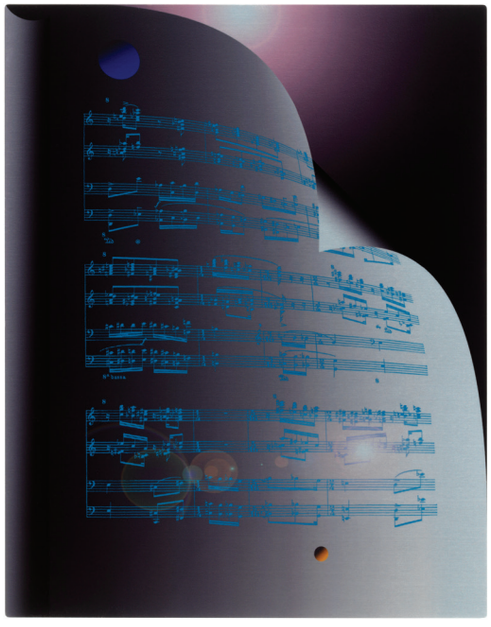












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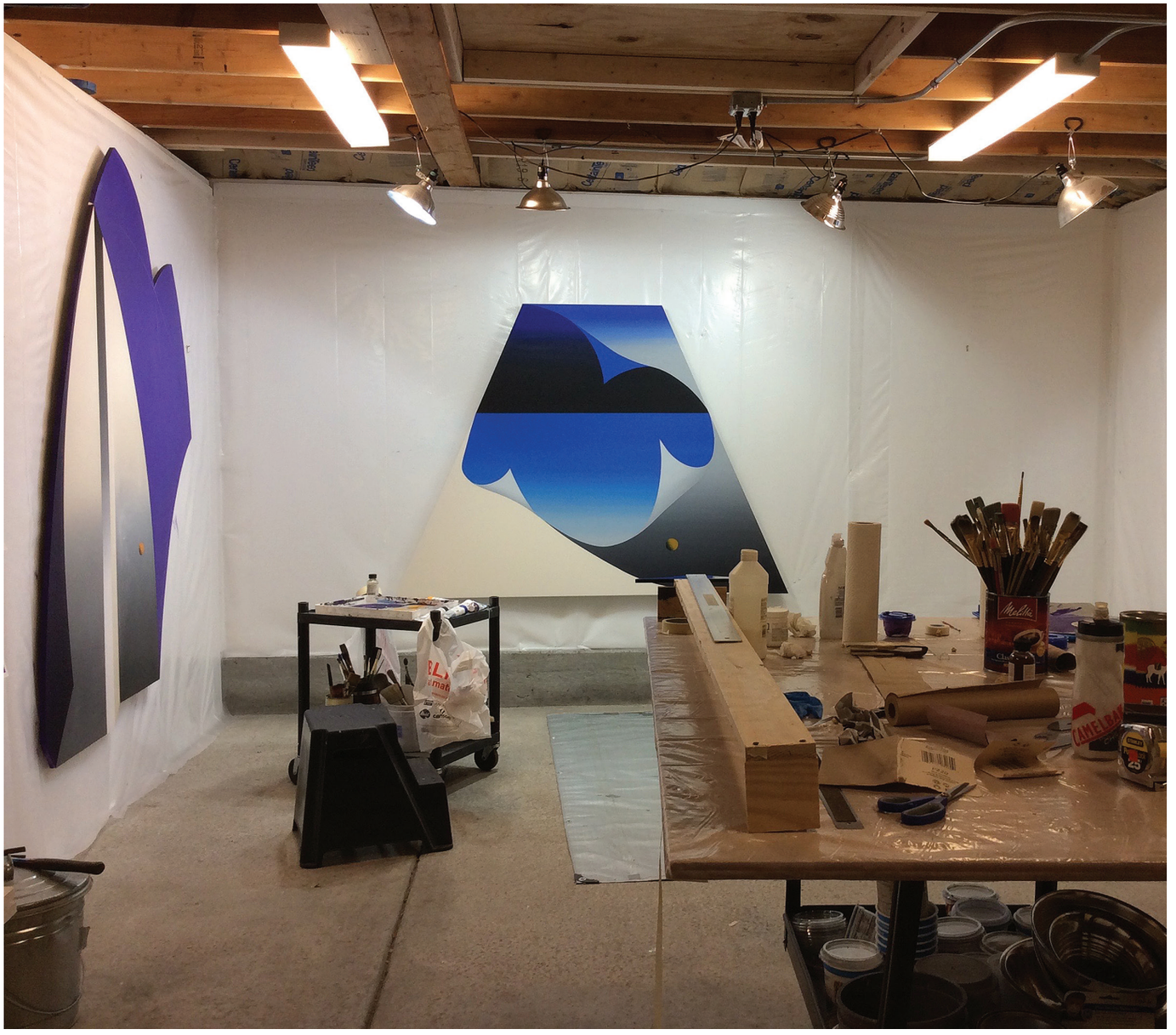
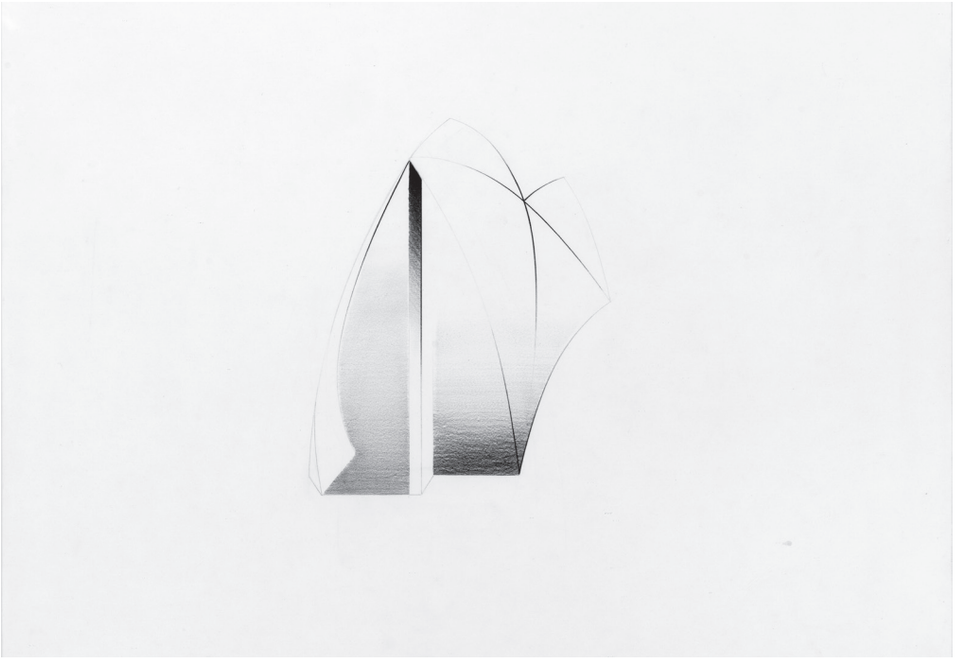


Studio view of **Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans**; (left) **Aletheia: Kosmik Kathedral** (in progress).

Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 55 x 75 x 2 in.
Courtesy of the artist.



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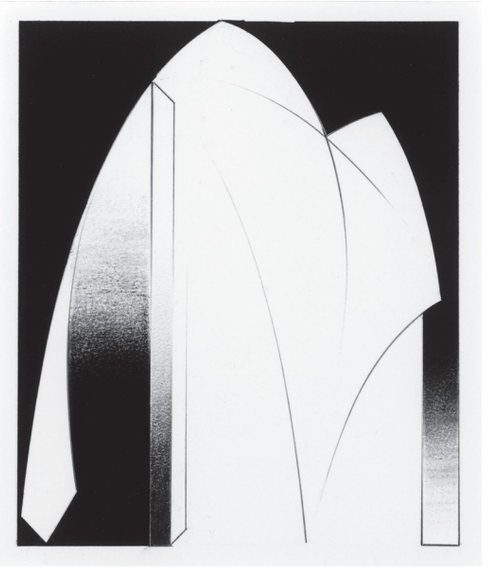

3

1. **Study for Aletheia: Kosmik Kathedral**, 1987, graphite on paper, 15 x 20 in. Jason Ramirez and Laura Bach-y-Rita.
2. **Arco series**, 2007, oil pastel and graphite on museum board, 19 x 16 ⅜ in. Richard and Marcia Pauling.
3. **Arco IX**, 2007, oil pastel and graphite on museum board, 7 ½ x 6 ¼ in. Michael B. Walker.

Aletheia: Kosmik Kathedral, 2016, oil and acrylic on shaped aluminum, 78 x 58 in.
Collection of Mark and Judy Bednar.

Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal, 2017, oil, acrylic, varnish, and graphite on wood, 94 x 135 x 2 in.
Carol S. Pylant, promised gift to the Chazen Museum of Art.

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Chazen Museum of Art

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