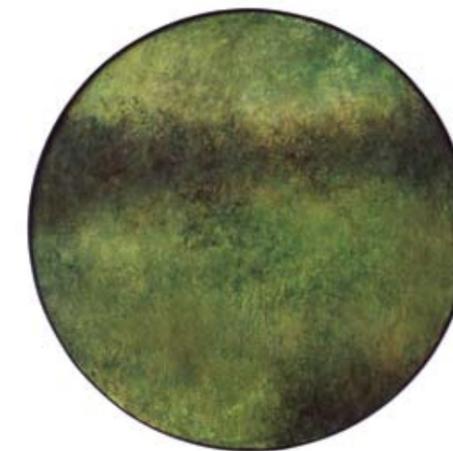


OF MODULES AND MASS ORNAMENTS

The module is the modernist building block. It forms the basic unit of modern cities, architecture, design and visual art, and it enabled modernist ideologies to erect cool towers of reason upon the ruins of Romanticism. As such it represents the epitome of sanity and sanitization, modernity's solution to superstition, infection, criminality, and madness. Indeed, in the West, the problems of the 20th century were increasingly addressed through systems of compartmentalization. This can be seen in modern medicine, which fragments the body into separate organs and specialties, as well as modern physics (quantum theory), which focuses its inquiries upon atoms. Perhaps the most obvious example of the importance of modules to modernist thinking may be found in the geography and architecture of the metropolis. Here a grid of electrified skyscrapers raises humanity up out of the dark, unhygienic confusion of medieval streets, simplifying the course of daily life through a geometric network of asphalt blocks. The idealized, modern city is thus the modular utopia *par excellence*.



Inasmuch as they seek to break the world into manageable parts, all modular systems inevitably encounter the problem of the individual against the mass. For roughly a decade, Jinny Yu's paintings have explored this conflict and its various ancillary issues, including the urban environment, mass communication, and globalization. It is interesting to note that Yu began painting *modules* after first passing through a series of abstract landscapes, and then a body of work exploring algorithms. These interests seem to merge in *modules* (1998–2003), Yu's first sustained exploration of the links between aesthetic and social patterns. A response to the repetitive, geometric motifs of urban architecture, *modules* comprises a series of approximately 100 paintings in which she addresses the "visually stimulating matrix of the grid" and its disturbing relationship to class.



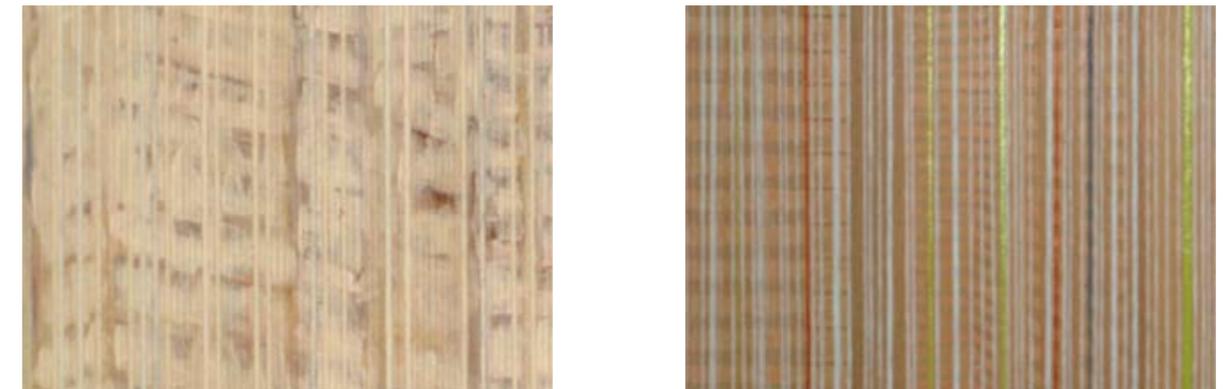
The importance of the grid within 20th-century art, and particularly modernist painting, is something of an *idée reçue*. As a result, there is a tendency to lump it in with the legacy of formalism, treating it somewhat simplistically as an emblem of everything postmodern artists sought to question and critique. Yu's paintings, however, disturb this process of reduction, revealing the grid to be more than a straightforward paradigm or means of homogenization. Although many modernists hailed it as a "blueprint" for unifying and balancing the chaos of modern and especially urban life, the grid's inverse ability to amplify the appearance of disorder should not be ignored. Grids may indeed promise to sublimate disparate particulars within a well-ordered harmonious whole—the fearful insecurity of an urban night dissipated in a reassuring grid of electric lights—but it takes relatively little for this appearance of cohesion to suddenly founder (consider the Northeast Blackout of 2003). In fact, there seems to be a paradoxical force at work in the grid, one that seeks to undermine its own consistency, or at the very least compensate for its conscious will-to-order. This is a phenomenon that post-minimalist and process artists played upon throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, and one that Jinny Yu also continues to explore.

Although the geometric patterns of Yu's *modules* cannot help but evoke Mondrian's famous quest for "dynamic equilibrium"—not to mention the subsequent work of American formalists, *les plasticiens* of Montreal, and even various Op artists—they do not limit their scope to the history of painting alone. The reference to modern high-rise apartments remains key, allowing the work to hover between aesthetic and social categories, and thus call into question the very idea of such boundaries. In this way, *modules* addresses the unexpected and paradoxical results of certain high-modernist ideals, namely the mundane, rather demoralizing social and economic disparity represented by once-progressive modular housing.



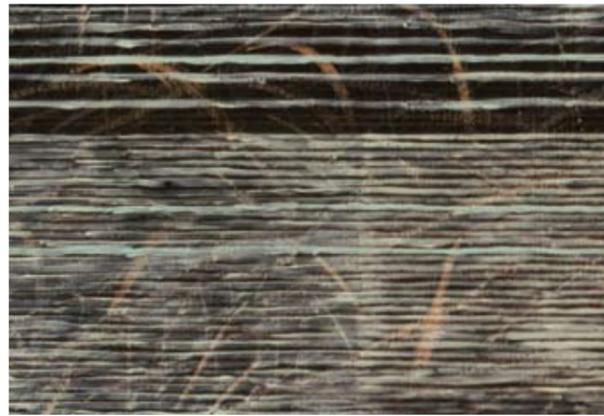
When the unity of the grid is threatened, concern tends to shift to the concept of a mesh. From a modern perspective the mesh is the grid gone wrong, and it appears when the latter's unifying structure suddenly seems full of holes.² We see this in Greenberg's attitude towards the "mesh" of "all-over, 'polyphonic' painting," which he feels suffers from "a lack of explicit oppositions" (i.e., horizontal and vertical axes) and therefore verges on the decorative.³ For modernism, nothing is more dangerous than the all-encompassing aesthetic mesh, which recalls the *gesamtkunstwerk* of Art Nouveau, and other arts and crafts movements at the turn of the century. For some, this kind of ornamentation is criminal.⁴ In its webs high art is entangled with kitsch and the unity of geometric forms is reduced to mere décor, what Harold Rosenberg once referred to dramatically as "apocalyptic wallpaper."⁵

The idea of a mesh emerges in Jinny Yu's work towards the end of *modules*, as she begins to juxtapose the repetitious geometry of architectural patterns with masses of more gestural, individual brushstrokes. It is noteworthy that the patterns of these marks resemble those of late abstract-expressionist painting, and particularly the kind Greenberg described as decentralized meshes on the verge of mere decoration.⁶ Eventually this work gives way to a new series of paintings, which Yu aptly titles *Interlace* (2003–2004). Here the conflict between the individual and the crowd, the grid and the mesh, continues to be played out, but this time through a consideration of technology and mass communication.



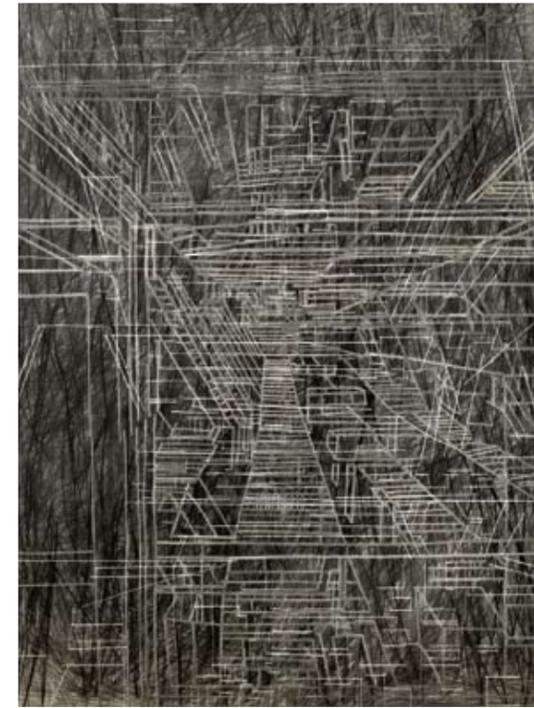
As the title of the series suggests, *Interlace* considers television as an aesthetic device and a means of social connection. A typical painting from this body of work consists of an overall screen of meticulously painted horizontal or vertical striations. Although these linear patterns allude to hard-edge abstraction, they are loose and done with a freehand. The result is a visual pulsation, or surface movement, which pure painting might have called "spirit," but which is instead achieved by mimicking the patterns of technology. Beneath this vibrating layer of lines, Yu deposits an accumulation of individual brushstrokes and other organic forms resembling plant leaves or grass. These images are at once "cancelled and activated"⁷ by the interlace above them, a tension that Yu increases by setting the paintings into recesses cut directly in the gallery walls. This final gesture cleverly alludes to the two-dimensionality central to formalism (indeed it takes it a step further), as well as the illusion of a box-like cavity or window that traditional easel paintings were said to "cut" in the wall. The fact that TVs, like modernist painting, evolved from boxes to flatter and flatter screens is another prescient irony alluded to by the work.

It would be unwise, however, to approach Yu's paintings from the perspective of formalism alone. Indeed, *Interlace* raises important questions concerning our cultural disconnection from the natural world (fields of grass experienced through the veil of television), as well as the paradoxical interconnection through isolation represented by modular systems of mass communication (TV boxes, podcasts, cell phones, etc.). One of the most interesting aspects of Yu's work lies in this ability to use abstraction for social and not just aesthetic critique. Throughout modernism, abstraction positioned itself against the disorder and conflict of society largely through denial, withdrawal, and increasing silence. Its fear of chattering mass culture (kitsch, mass media, ornament, etc.) was, in this respect, closer to a process of repression than critique. The neurotic modernist outrage in the face of monotonous, mass-produced ornament or kitsch is an ironic, unconscious admission of their intimate connection. Yu's work reveals this paradox and considers its broader cultural implications. Although abstraction was marginalized by the rejection of Greenbergian formalism in the 1960s and 1970s (and the subsequent "Clebashing" of the 1980s), its scope remains anything but narrow. A touch-stone for Yu in this respect is the work of art historian Kirk Varnedoe, who wrote, "Abstract art, while seeming insistently to reject and destroy representation, in fact steadily expands its possibilities. [...] The woven web of abstraction is now so dense that, for its adepts, it can snare and cradle vanishingly subtle, evanescent, and slender forms of life and meaning."⁸



It is interesting to note the continuing importance of the concept of a "mesh" or "web" in this view of contemporary abstraction, and its role as a vehicle of communication and meaning (connecting art and life). Not surprisingly, the motif is also central to the series of paintings Yu develops after *Interlace*, which she playfully titles *Me(n)tal Perspectives* (2004–2005). Done on flat sheets of industrial aluminum, this body of work returns to the urban environment, and consists of a series of fragmented architectural outlines floating on a charged background of chaotic, graphite scribbles. The mixture of skeletal architectural forms and dense, disorganized marks evokes the growing pressures that pollution and overcrowding place upon contemporary urban infrastructures. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to this as "an explosive misery secreted by the city"⁹—the grid as a catalyst for the ghetto.

Inspired by her own "ambiguous feeling towards the busyness of urban life,"¹⁰ *Me(n)tal Perspectives* embodies Yu's personal love-hate relationship with the city, its disturbing congestion and fascinating visual patterns. This ambivalence is implied through the juxtaposition of structured and chaotic forms (form/formlessness, abstraction/abstractness), as well as the title, which interlaces "metal" and "mental" through the use of brackets (a decidedly postmodern device). The resulting exploded views evoke the most visual aspects of the cityscape, as well as all those invisible elements and forces that contribute to its living energy: the formless cloud of smells, pollution, sounds, and even psychic projections that escape visual order.



Although when considering Yu's work it is tempting to set up a series of conflicts (grid and mesh, order and ornament, high and low, etc.), it is important to realize that these oppositions are relative and might function better as pairs. In a general sense, modernism was based upon a process of breaking complementary concepts into irreconcilable opposites, Adorno's famous "torn halves of an integral freedom" that do not add up.¹¹ Another more flexible paradigm might be the Jungian description of the unconscious, which is not in conflict with consciousness, but instead plays a compensatory role. Inasmuch as the grid may be considered modernism's conscious attempt to eliminate the moral corruption of ornament and kitsch,¹² an unconscious element will always seek to counterbalance this fixation. In other words, when ornamentation is forced into the void of repression, the problem of the decorative will arise as a form of compensation. The further it goes with its anti-ornament agenda, the more the modernist grid will unconsciously exacerbate the problem, as the lessons of postmodernism prove.

This process of balance and counterbalance is central to Jinny Yu's most recent body of work, *Story of a Global Nomad*. Although she continues to explore the "delicate balance of power that exists between the individual and the mass,"¹³ this new series of paintings turns specifically to the idea of mass ornament (inspired partly by North Korean Mass Games), as well as the paradoxes of globalization and cultural difference. Although it may seem a slight *non sequitur*, the ancient Greek word *kósmos* provides an interesting framework for considering these paintings. As a root, its definition encompasses "an orderly arrangement" and "the world, in a wide or narrow sense, including its inhabitants, literally or figuratively." Derivative words include *kosméō*, "to put in proper order, to decorate, adorn, garnish or trim"; *kosmikós*, "literally mundane or figuratively corrupt (i.e., worldly)"; and *kosmokrátōr*, "a world ruler, or an epithet for Satan." This array of potential meanings sheds new light on the idiomatic expression "the devil is in the details," as well as the English words cosmic, cosmopolitan, and cosmetic, which all claim kosmos as an etymological root. As a concept, it is thus surprisingly polyvalent. It also contains Yu's main thematic interests: the patterns of the universal and the particular as reflected in social organization and cultural ornaments.

In *Story of a Global Nomad*, Yu borrows patterns from a variety of cultural sources, including Islamic mosaics and decorative painting, Korean folk patterns, and Japanese art history. In so doing, she explores the nexus of abstraction and decoration, East and West, aesthetic and social content, regional and global culture. Like the word *kosmos*, this work contains both the “good order” of the world’s cultural works (decorous ornament), and the possibility of experiencing too many of them (becoming worldly). Although we often consider ornament a means of personal expression, it is really a way to register oneself within the cultural economy. We see this historically with women, who are regularly positioned in society according to their dress and adornment. This logic also applies to tattoos, piercings, hair-dye, and anything else that can be said to contribute to one’s *persona*. As Jung points out, the persona is “as its name implies, only a mask of the collective psyche, a mask that *feigns individuality*, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks.”¹⁴

In his famous text *The Mass Ornament*, German sociologist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer identified choreographed displays of showgirls, stadium patterns, mass games, and other “surface-level expressions” as ornaments of “the *mass* and not the people.”¹⁵ As modular units with a specific, at times mathematical function to fulfill, those involved in mass ornaments are never involved in thinking them through.¹⁶ As such they function according to an organized denial of difference often rooted in the logic of the grid. According to Kracauer, the mass ornament “resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them.”¹⁷ It thus functions as a mask. In considering it according to these terms, the mass ornament becomes another façade of the collective psyche. It is also a metaphor for the transformation of the globe through agriculture, urbanization, and globalization: the convergence of patterns of production and consumption resulting in a single, homogenous culture.

Against this uniformity (*kosmokrátōr*: world ruler/Satan), Yu invokes the concept of nomadism. She writes: “*The realization and acknowledgement of being a migratory global nomad made me feel free to use and appropriate patterns from everywhere.*”¹⁸ This awareness emphasizes the possibility of open space in an increasingly compartmentalized world. In their post-structural opus, *A Thousand Plateaus (Mille plateaux : capitalisme et schizophrénie)*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the nomadic as a process that reclaims striated, sedentary space (the grid of civilization) according to natural patterns, fluidity, and ad-hoc growth. *Tsunami*, one of the paintings from *Story of a Global Nomad*, offers a nice metaphor for this process. Featuring a repetitious geometric pattern overlaid with a loose, bright pink copy of Hokusai’s famous *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, *Tsunami* personifies the nomadic construction of personal narrative through the decontextualization of culturally-charged, impersonal symbols: a tidal wave of open space washing over a world of modules and mass ornaments.

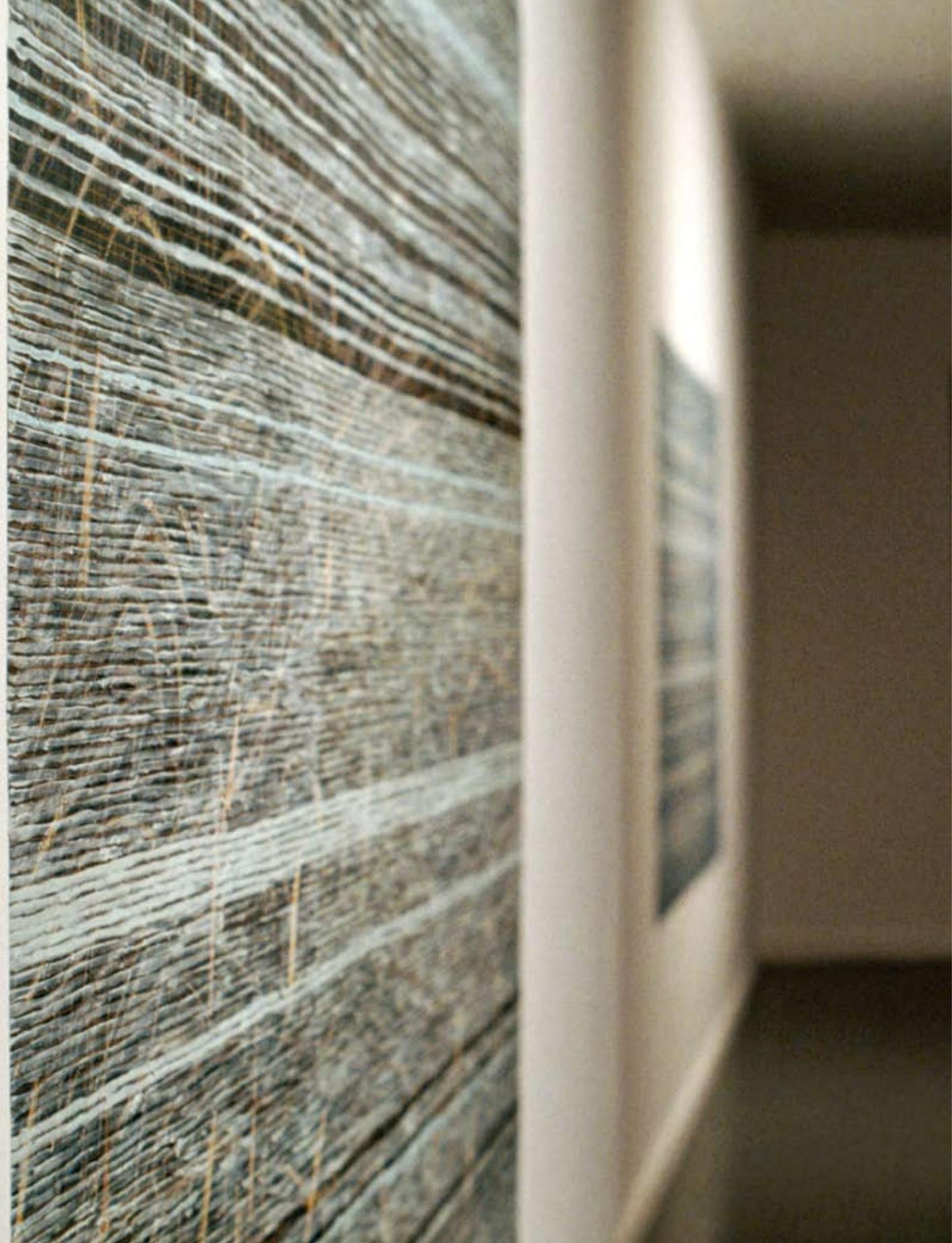


Notes

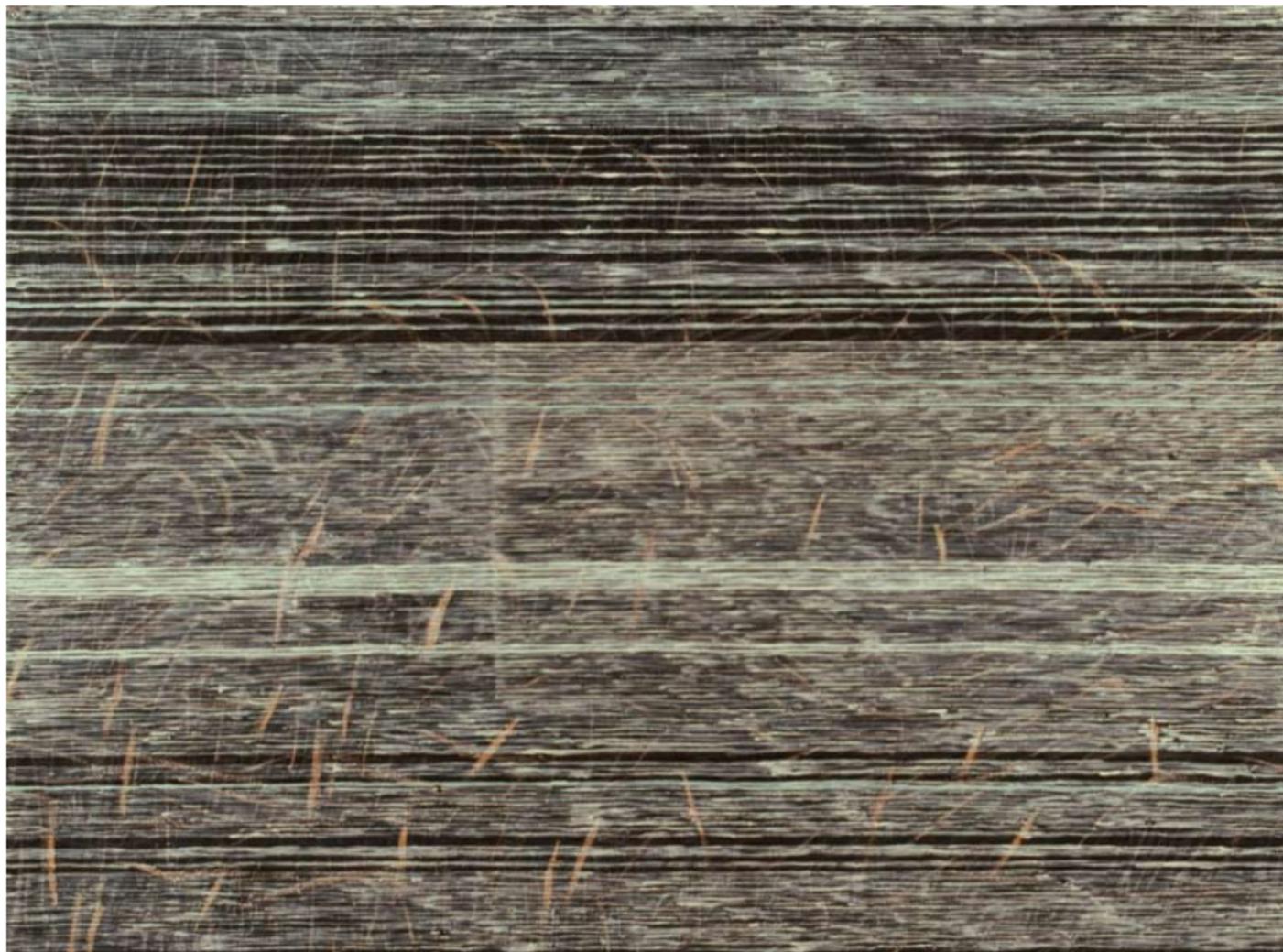
- 1 - Jinny M.J. Yu, Research Dossier (prepared for the Department of Visual Arts, University of Ottawa, September 4, 2007).
- 2 - Among its other definitions, the word mesh refers to “each of the open spaces in a net or sieve, etc.”
- 3 - Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 154-157.
- 4 - In 1908, Adolf Loos famously wrote, “If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder.” Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” (1908), *Crime and Ornament*, eds. Bernie Miller and Melony Ward (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002), 29-36.
- 5 - Harold Rosenberg, “The Actionist Painters,” (1952), *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1985), 34.
- 6 - Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 154-157
- 7 - Yu, Research Dossier.
- 8 - Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), xv-xvi.
- 9 - Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 481.
- 10 - Yu, Research Dossier.
- 11 - Obviously this convention is older than modernism. Theodor W. Adorno, *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 130.
- 12 - “The absence (*le vide*) of the ornament is not nothing, it is the grid.” Jacques Soullou, “Ornament and Order,” *Crime and Ornament*, trans. Mark Heffernan, eds. Bernie Miller and Melony Ward (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002), 87.
- 13 - Yu, Research Dossier.
- 14 - Carl Jung, “Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious,” *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 105.
- 15 - Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.
- 16 - Ibid, 77.
- 17 - Ibid, 77.
- 18 - Jinny Yu, “Mediation in Abstraction” (paper presented at the Universities Art Association of Canada, University of Waterloo, November 3, 2007).

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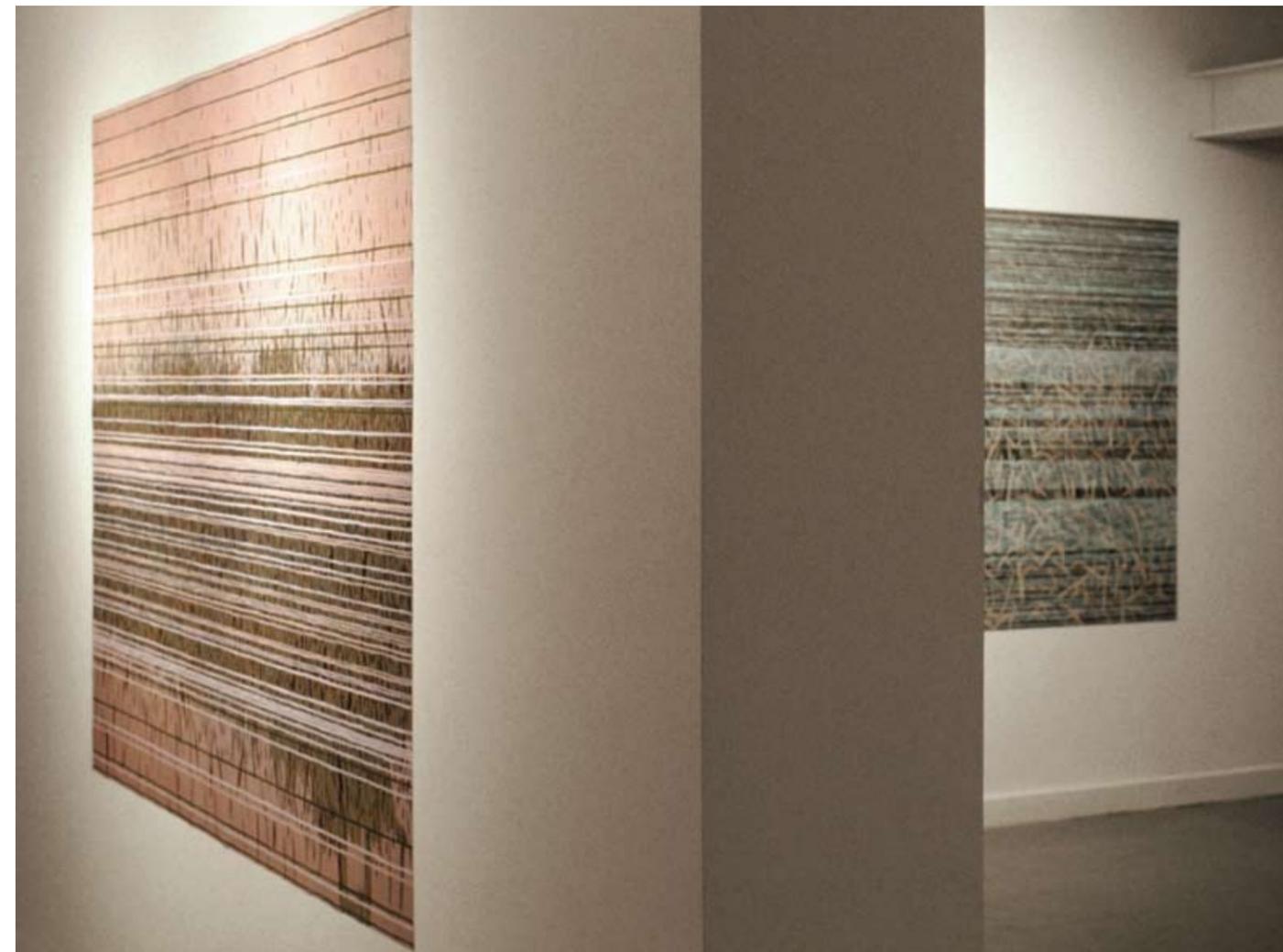
- p. 41 - *Tondo II*, 1999, 61 cm diameter, oil and cold wax on board | 61 cm de diamètre, huile et cire froide sur panneau
- p. 42 - *Algorithm II*, 152 x 122 cm, oil and cold wax on canvas | huile et cire froide sur toile
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- p. 43 - *Untitled 83*, 122 x 91 cm, detail, 2002, oil and cold wax on board | huile et cire froide sur panneau
Untitled 81, 91 x 183 cm, detail, 2001, oil and cold wax on board | huile et cire froide sur panneau
- p. 44 - *Interlace II*, detail, 2003, 127 x 170 cm, mixed media on paper | techniques mixtes sur papier
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- p. 46 - *Story of a Global Nomad, (Tsunami)*, 2007, 183 x 183 cm, graphite and oil on aluminium | graphite et huile sur aluminium



Interlace I, 2003, 127 x 213 cm, techniques mixtes sur papier | mixed media on paper



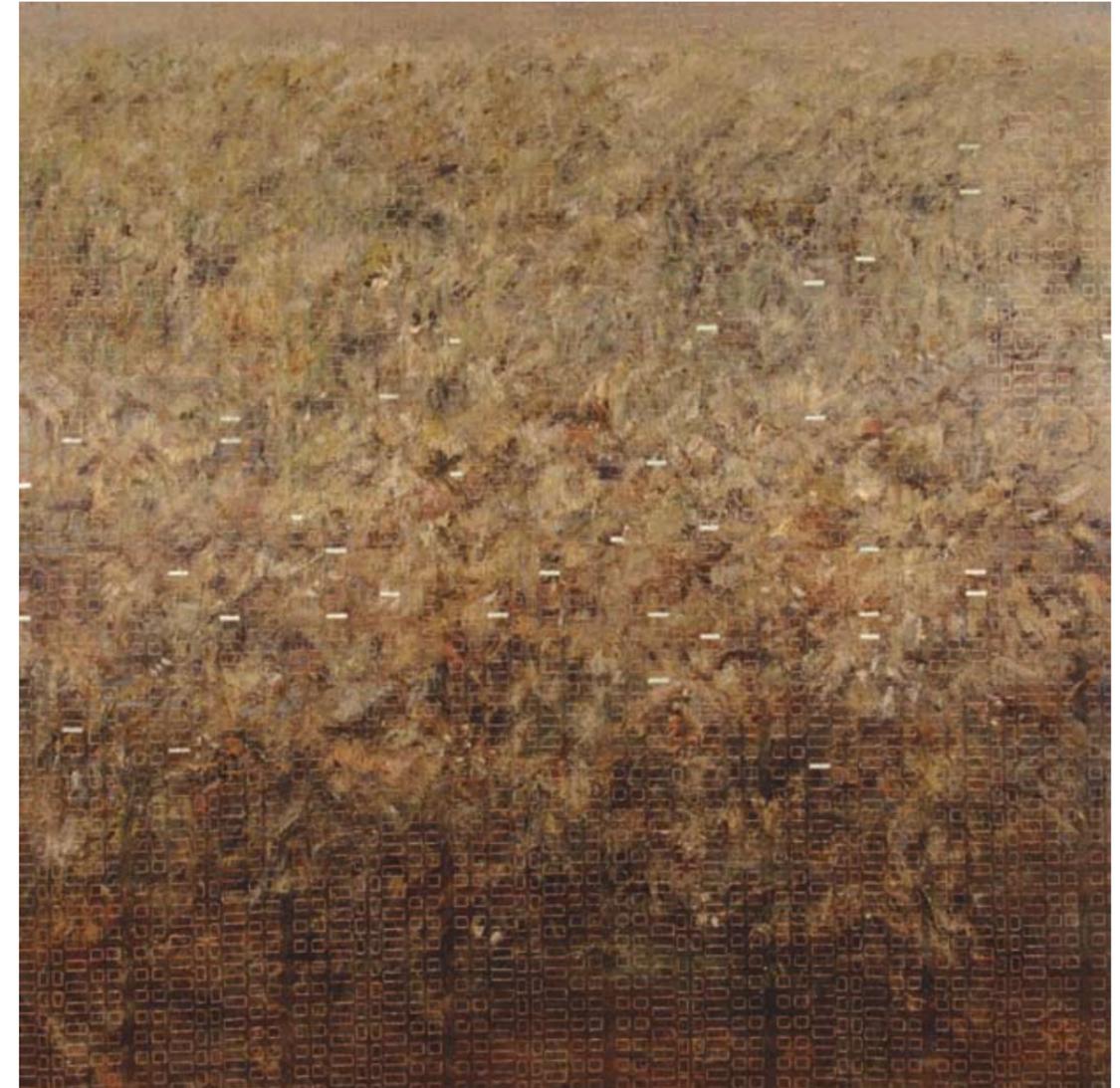
Interlace II, 2003, 127 x 170 cm, techniques mixtes sur papier | mixed media on paper



Interlace, Vue d'installation, Struts Gallery, Nouveau-Brunswick, 2003 | *Interlace*, Exhibition view, Struts Gallery, New Brunswick, 2003

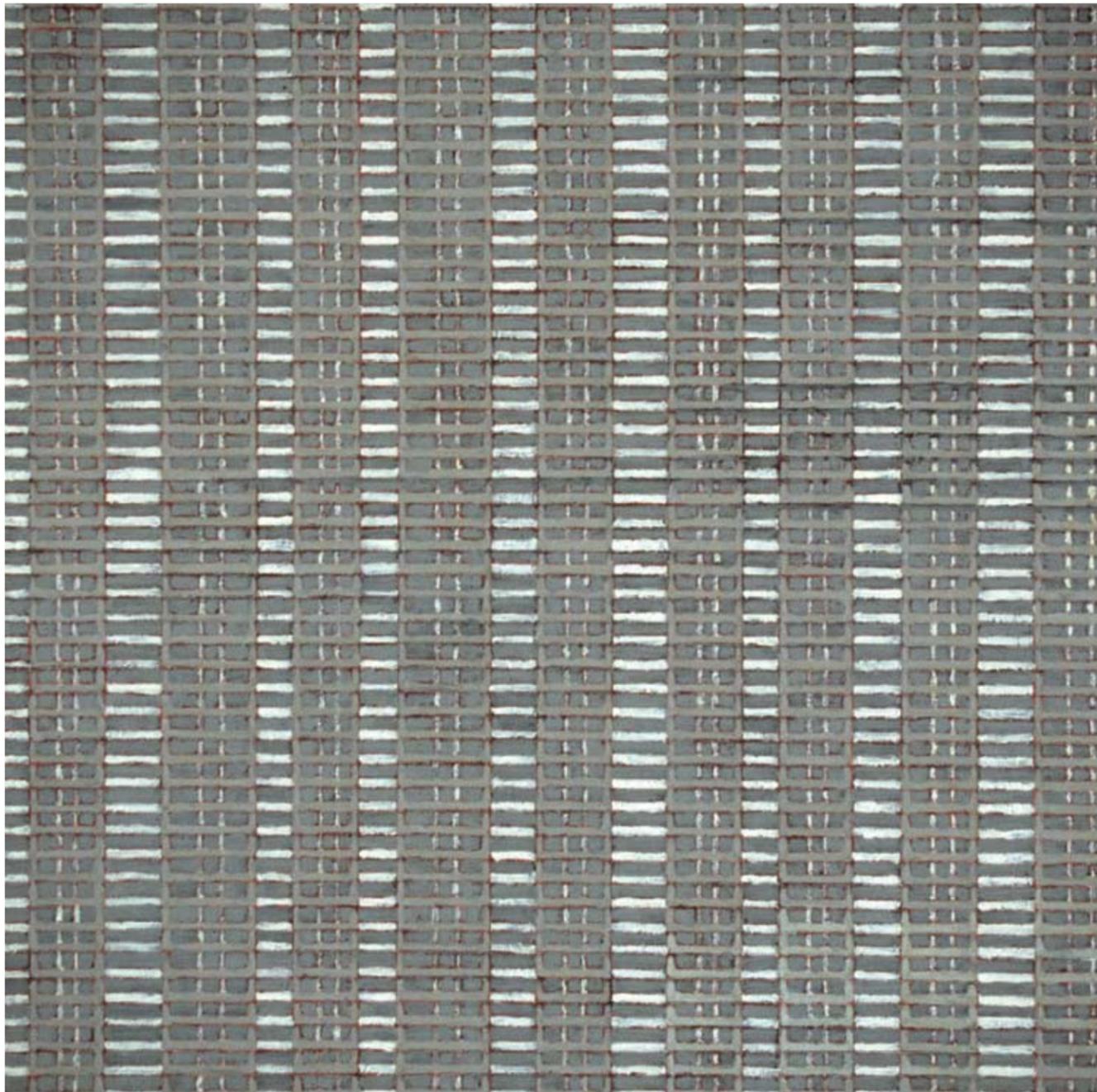


modules, Vue d'installation, galerie Art Mûr, 2003 | *modules*, Exhibition view, Art Mûr gallery, 2003



modules 8.8.BR, 2002, 243 x 243 cm, huile et cire froide sur panneau | oil and cold wax on board



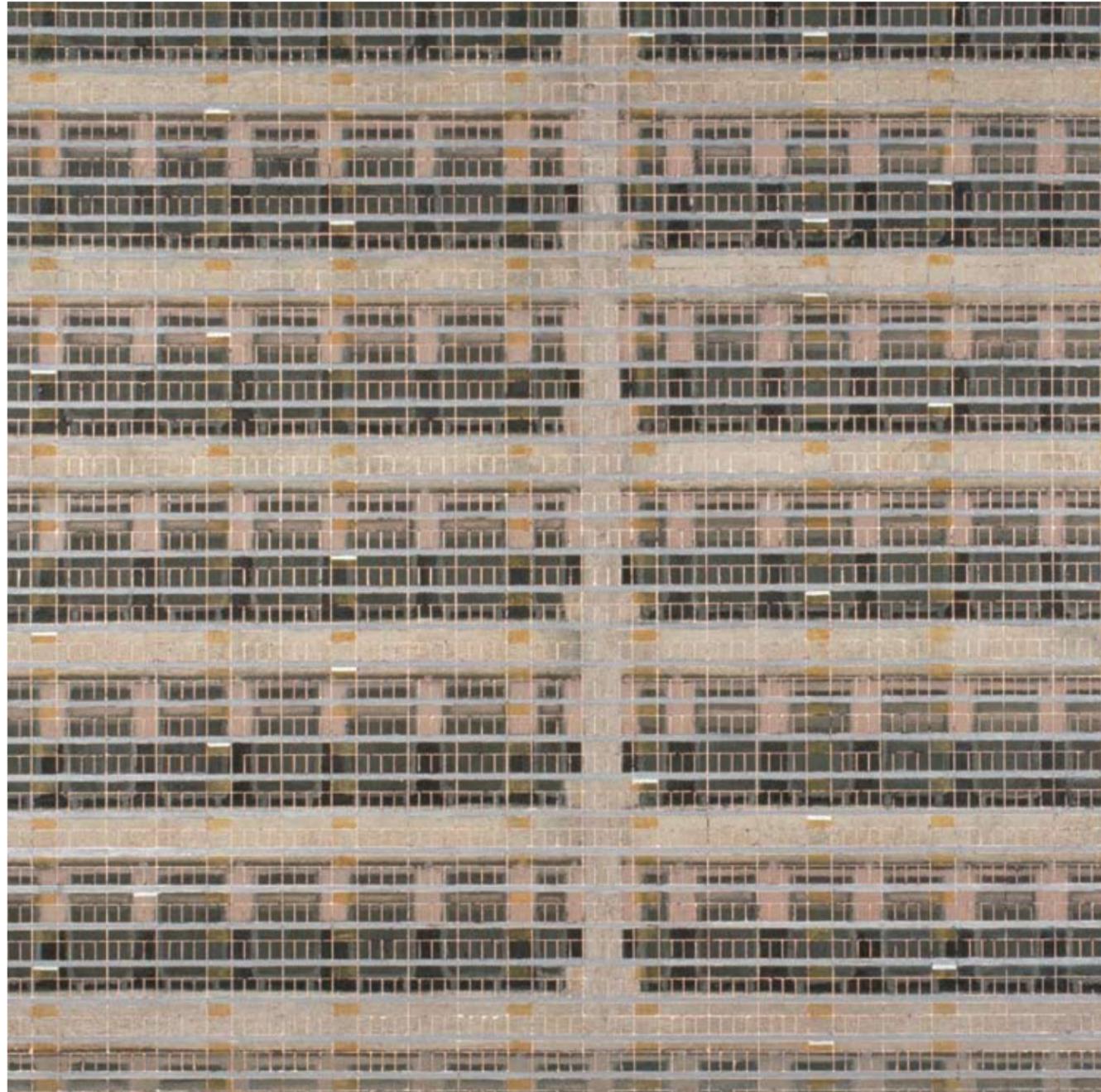


modules 2.2.G, 2002, 61 x 61 cm., huile et cire froide sur panneau | oil and cold wax on board



modules 3.3.I, 2002, 91 x 91 cm., huile et cire froide sur panneau | oil and cold wax on board

LES AUTEURS | THE AUTHORS



modules 3.3.3, 2003, 91 x 91 cm, huile et cire froide sur panneau | oil and cold wax on board

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