

ITHIPOL THANGCHALOK

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

อิทธิพล ตั้งโฉลก

E-CAT-1-0330

SCC-019205-2543

ITHIPOL THANGCHALOK

The Color of Light

An Exhibition of Paintings 1998-2000

May 11 - June 12, 2000, Surapon Gallery, Bangkok

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

อิทธิพล ตั้งโฉลก

สีสันทรงแสง

นิทรรศการจิตรกรรม 2541-2543

11 พฤษภาคม - 12 มิถุนายน 2543 สุรพลแกลเลอรี, กรุงเทพฯ



An Analysis of the Paintings of Ithipol by Asst. Prof. Ithipol

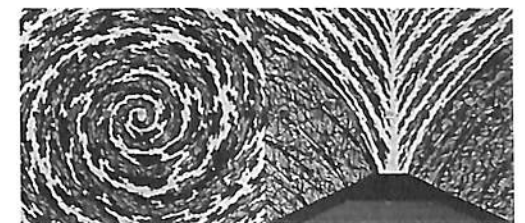
It is widely agreed that art criticism has largely failed in its mission to build a bridge between the creators of works of art and the art-viewing public. In Thailand this failure is due in large measure to the absence of professional art critics. Artists are left to explain their work to the public themselves. In my own case, I have been creating works of art for more than 30 years, but no serious attempt has ever been made to study, analyze and assess my work. And now, on the occasion of my second solo show, I must rely on my experience as art instructor and a critic of student paintings for almost 30 years to comment on my own work. This has its advantages and its disadvantages. The advantages are that as the creator, I have intimate knowledge and understanding of the process by which my art came into being. I can penetrate into the thoughts, feelings and frame of mind which shaped each work. As for the disadvantages, I can hardly be expected to be objective or dispassionate in my appraisal. But, fortunately, my purpose in writing these comments is not really to assess or praise, but rather to explain to the viewer the essential meaning behind the paintings. I hope that these remarks will enlighten and deepen the appreciation of anyone who looks at my art. And more importantly, I hope they will provide a starting point for a serious, in-depth examination and evaluation of my work by an impartial critic one day.

Ithipol has worked as an artist for more than 30 years, and during that time, he has experimented with a wide range of techniques and produced a tremendous number of prints, paintings and sculptures. But while only the paintings in the series "*The Color of Light*," produced in the three years between 1998 and 2000, will be discussed here, it will likely be impossible to refrain from mentioning some earlier works which have a bearing on his more recent output. Unlike his earlier work, the new paintings are semi-abstract. Almost without exception, Ithipol's other work has been entirely abstract. An early series of woodcuts, which earned him his first gold medal at the National Exhibition of Art, was also semi-abstract, containing recognizable images of old doors, windows and walls. A large mural painting on display at the headquarters of Siam Commercial Bank, which contains images of water and fire, could more rightly be called symbolist than realist. Of his prints, only the series of metal and wooden doors from old shophouses, completed in 1980, classifies as realist.

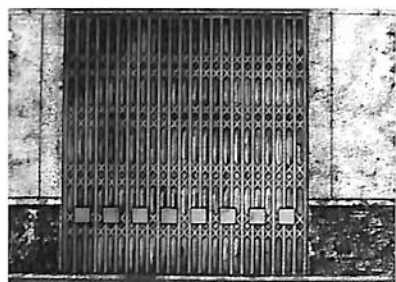
Why has it been necessary for Ithipol to work chiefly as an abstract artist? This is an important question that touches on the very beginnings of his career. Many of his fellow art students were so impressed by his skills



Woodcut



Water and Fire



Metal door

as a draftsman that one of his fellow art instructor, on admiring his paintings and lifelike sculpture, commented: **“Ithipol has made the wrong choice. Abstract art is not suited to his gifts. If he had chosen to work as a realist artist, he would have been much more successful.”** In other words, his decision to adopt an abstract approach to art was neither a way of compensating for inferior drafting skills nor a means of simply appearing “modern,” as the consistency of his work over the past 30 years can attest. Ithipol’s preference for abstraction is rooted in an attempt to convey his direct and immediate response to the truth of nature, which is subjective rather than objective. More than a desire to free himself from the rules and constraints of realistic portrayals of nature, the artist’s approach is tied to his conviction that only abstract art can express the “true aesthetic experience of the universe.”

In the East, art as an expression of the subjective has existed for centuries. In the Taoist scriptures of ancient China it is written: **“Above all else, painting is not merely an imitation of nature. Realism is not what matters in painting. Creativity is what is real. When a true artist paints a tree, it is not important for the tree to look like a tree. What is important is for the artist to capture the “essence” of the tree in his work. If he succeeds in this, then he has painted a true tree, one that lives and is not just made of paper stained with ink.”**¹ The Taoist teachings make clear that the duty of an artist is not merely to reproduce the surface of things as his eyes perceive them. Rather, he must convey his direct, spiritual experience of nature in order to express what is true.

In the series of paintings on display it is clear that the artist’s intention is to express abstraction since although there are recognizable images of trees, leaves and water, Ithipol has employed a variety of means to downplay or edit out what is not essential to his vision. He has chosen only certain types of trees, leaves and flowers and magnified selected parts to many times their actual size. He has removed extraneous details so that all that remains are clean, flat forms seen in silhouette as if in reflection. And by doing this, Ithipol makes plain that the central concern of his paintings is light. But to appreciate light, it must be paired with its opposite, just as form must also appear in space, and this explains the presence of these forms in silhouette. This reliance on opposites is a cornerstone of almost all of his art, and it has guided Ithipol’s thinking since the beginning of his life as an artist. Throughout his career, he has explored different opposing pairs, such as controlled/free, static/dynamic, and light/shadow. These opposites form an inseparable relationship, commenting on one another and expressing two sides of one essential truth. It is a conception of truth which Eastern religions have articulated since ancient times. The Lama Govinda taught: **“The relationship between form and space is not one**

of opposites, but rather they are two sides of a single truth which co-exist and are inseparable.”² Taoism teaches: **“Serenity in serenity is not true serenity. It is only when there is serenity in the midst of movement that the rhythm of the soul is manifested both in heaven and on earth.”**³

“Light” is essential to the survival of all things on earth. It allows us to see the world in which we live. Without light, our world would be dark and cold. Light is pure energy. It warms us and creates and nurtures life. It controls movement and change. It is the difference between night and day, winter and summer. It is what propels the endless, restless cycle of the universe.

In the realm of art, light is a fundamental visual element. It creates value. The aesthetics of light and shadow or different values is essential to all types of visual art. Symbolically, light is used to represent beauty and goodness. Whether it is candlelight, firelight, light from an electric bulb, or light from the sun, light has always been a universal symbol of hope, prosperity, intelligence and a solution to problems.

In Ithipol’s series of paintings, light is a symbol of the pure natural energy that makes all life, growth, change and movement possible. It is also a vibrant expression of the artist’s own emotions and state of mind. Whereas in most other works of art in which light is little more than “an empty space,” a complimentary element serving to illuminate more important forms, in Ithipol’s work, light is the central focus. It represents the life force; it is endless change and movement and not a mere secondary element. In contrast, the trees and leaves which appear have been reduced to simple silhouettes. They are flat and still and occupy a subordinate role in the composition. The pattern of parallel lines which represent light was made using a special tool that resembles a comb. These lines seem to move and flow, pulsing rhythmically across the paper and penetrating every particle of the work. They are a tangible reflection of the relationship that exists between light and form – a relationship that is indivisible and eternal.

To convey his perception of what is true, Ithipol has developed an idiosyncratic language of painting which makes use of natural forms in silhouette and bands of color that reflect the concepts of time and change. Furthermore, in most of the paintings he has created throughout his career there are other important features, namely lines and geometric shapes. In the newest series of works, for instance, straight parallel lines appear on different planes. At times, they feature prominently; at other times, they are barely visible. But in each instance, they represent the unbending laws of nature – night, day, the seasons and even the movements of the solar system. Yet, at the same time, these geometric figures also recall nature’s duality (law/freedom, serenity/movement,



The Color of Light Series

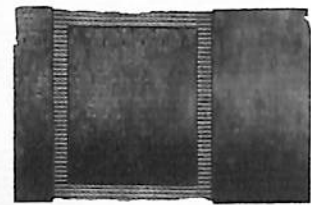
simplicity/complexity), thereby drawing attention to the essential meaning of the work.

As has been stated above, the current series of works is an expression, in the special language of painting, of the artist's direct experience of truth in nature. This perception of truth is intuitive rather than rational. It arises suddenly in the mind and is not the end product of a conscious thought process. For this reason, the artist is unable to find words to express his perception of truth. Instead, he must use his own special language to convey his understanding directly to others, and the basic tools of this special language are line, color, value, texture, form and space. Taken together, these tools constitute the language of beauty, a language that touches the deepest recesses of the heart and soul. In creating these works, the artist has revealed not only the truth of nature but the essential truth of painting as well.

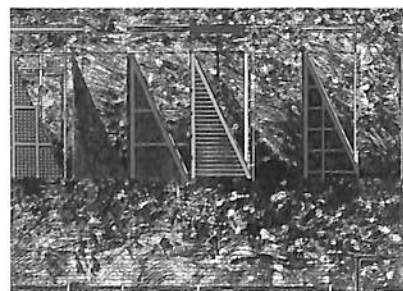
But for this language to effectively communicate with other human beings, the artist must rely on technique to unite form and content into a satisfying whole. In the paintings on display Ithipol has employed an experimental technique that reflects his background as a printmaker. The technique combines methods associated with painting with those more commonly used in printmaking. Specifically, he covers a piece of smooth, shiny paper with several layers of oil paint in various colors. Then, with a roller, he applies a layer of dark blue or black paint to the entire surface. When this has been done, he uses a special tool with teeth like a comb to remove the top layer of dark blue paint, revealing the various colors underneath. Where there are to be forms in silhouette, he does not scrape away the top layer of paint. This technique, which reverses the normal progression of light to dark or white to black, is intended to mirror the way in which the first rays of the sun expel the darkness of the night and reveal the shape of things they shine down on. This special technique is unique to the artist and gives his paintings a highly distinctive character. The unity of the work is due to the perfect harmony of content, form and technique.

In working this way, the artist must act quickly and without hesitation. Because Ithipol must complete the scraping while the paint is still wet, he is unable to make any preliminary drawing. His movements must be decisive and instinctive, and he must maintain a high degree of concentration throughout the entire process. His eyes, hands, heart, and mind must become one with his paper, tools and paints as he works. It is this immediacy and the absence of afterthought which give the paintings their purity and sincerity.

In painting elements from nature, Ithipol appears to be rediscovering the very essence of things. This is particularly remarkable in that most of his previous work has dealt almost exclusively with urban life and man-made objects. His series of woodcuts etchings and paintings entitled "Wall," "Urban"



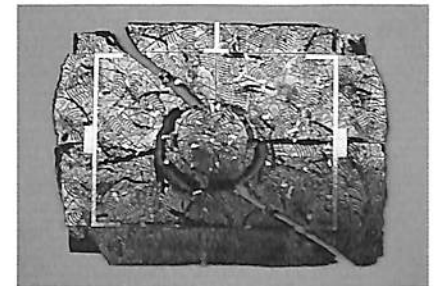
Wall Series



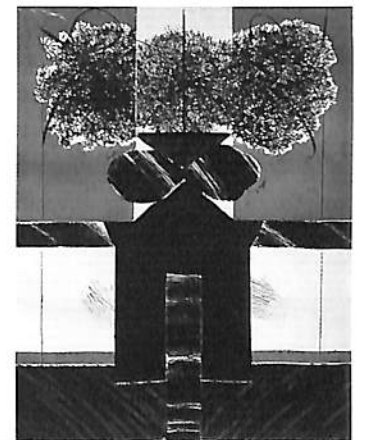
Urban Series

and "Fragments" are primary examples. This should not be too surprising since Ithipol was born, grew up and has always lived in Bangkok, and as is true of most artists, he has drawn inspiration from his own life and environment. His very first works were direct reflections of his life experiences in the city of his birth. Even though he completed a series of lithographs entitled "Trees" during this same period, the trees he depicted were city trees, trees whose growth had been controlled and constricted by human hands. Between 1970 and 1988, the vast majority of Ithipol's paintings and prints dealt with city life. It was not until the end of 1988 that one can see a major directional shift in the artist's work. The series "Fragments" marked an important change in the content, form and techniques employed in Ithipol's art. He turned his attention away from his physical environment and found new inspiration in the temples he visited in Chiang Mai. Because his mother was a native of Chiang Mai, Ithipol had had many opportunities to visit the northern city from the time he was a boy. He was familiar with many of the city's temples. But on this particular occasion, he saw them in a new way. His visit occurred at a time when his development as an artist allowed him to see in the temples a source of inspiration for a new series of works.

A second major shift in the artist's career took place early in 1998 and grew out of his usual routine around the house. One day, while relaxing in the garden, he happened to look up into the branches of the many beautiful trees that surround his home. He noticed how the sunlight reflected off the leaves and was suddenly inspired to begin work on a new series of paintings which he entitled "The Color of Light" and which concern natural elements. On seeing these new works, a fellow art instructor from another institution joked: "It's a sure sign of old age when you become interested in nature and the temple." Perhaps this is true, but a more likely explanation seems to be that whatever changes have occurred in the course of Ithipol's long career have been the result of intuition rather than conscious thought. It might even be said that any new ideas and insights have arisen unbidden in the course of his day-to-day work as an artist and not through any research into the theories of painting. In other words, the artist's renewed interest in nature and tradition is merely a desire to return to his roots and rediscover what is common to all humanity. This is a desire shared by all Eastern artists since the dawn of time.



Fragments Series



City Trees

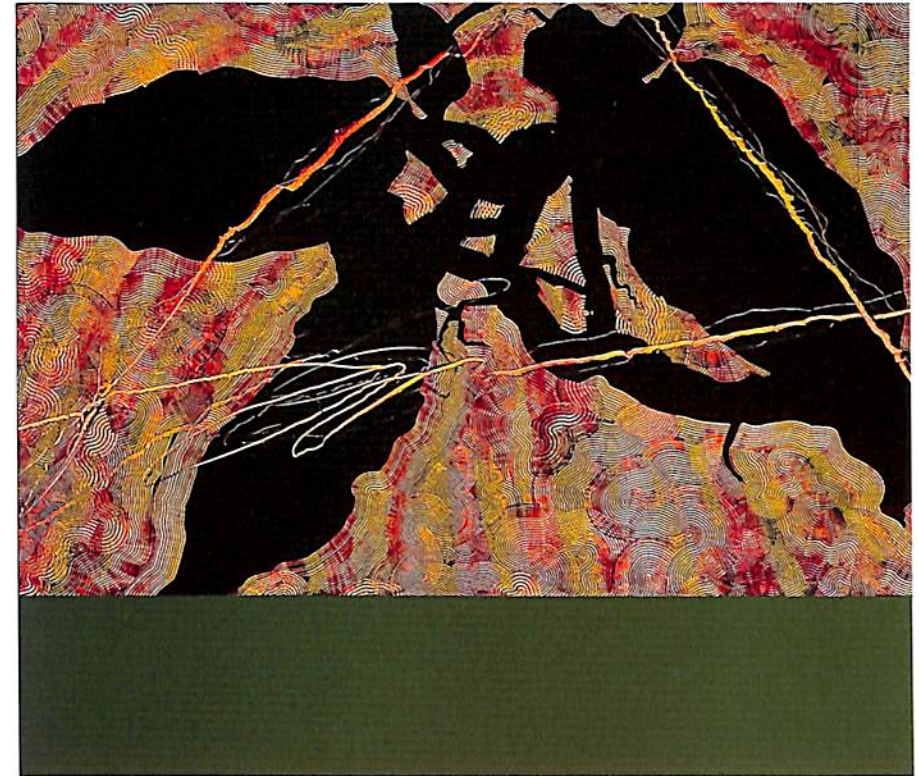
Asst. Prof. Ithipol Thangchalok
English Translation by R. Michael Crabtree

¹ Chang Chieng-Yuan, Creativity and Taoism, p.233

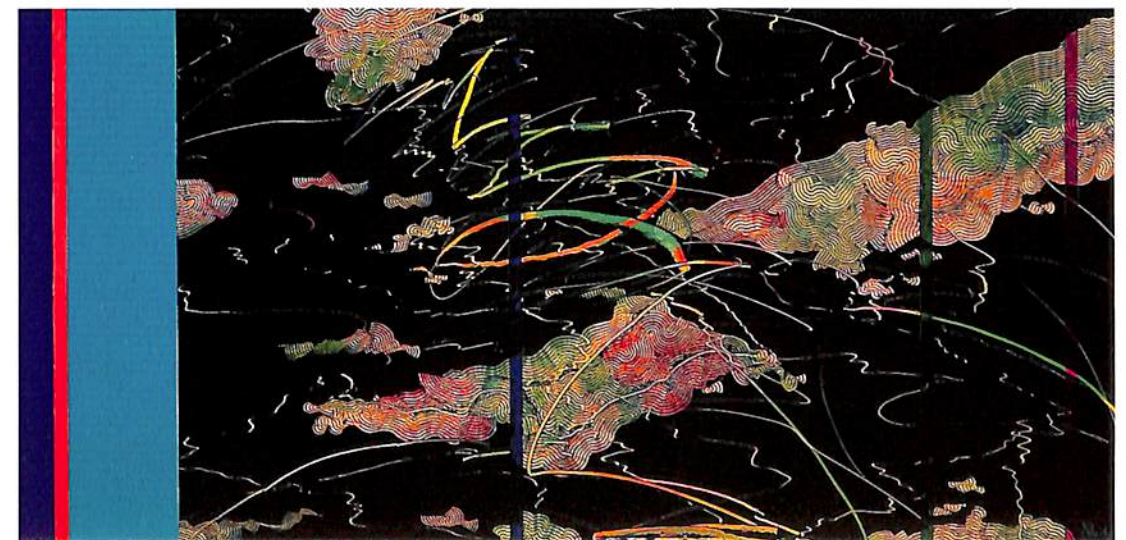
² The Tao of Physics (Trans.), P.188

³ The Tao of Physics (Trans.), P.170

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Forces of Light 1, 1998
Oil on paper mounted on wood with formica
103 x 116 cm, 40 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 45 $\frac{5}{8}$ ins



Urban River, 1998
Oil and Acrylic on paper
54.7 x 109.5 cm, 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins



Silhouette, 1999
Oil on paper
79 x 79 cm, 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins



Evening, 1999
Oil on Paper mounted on wood
78 x 78 cm, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ ins

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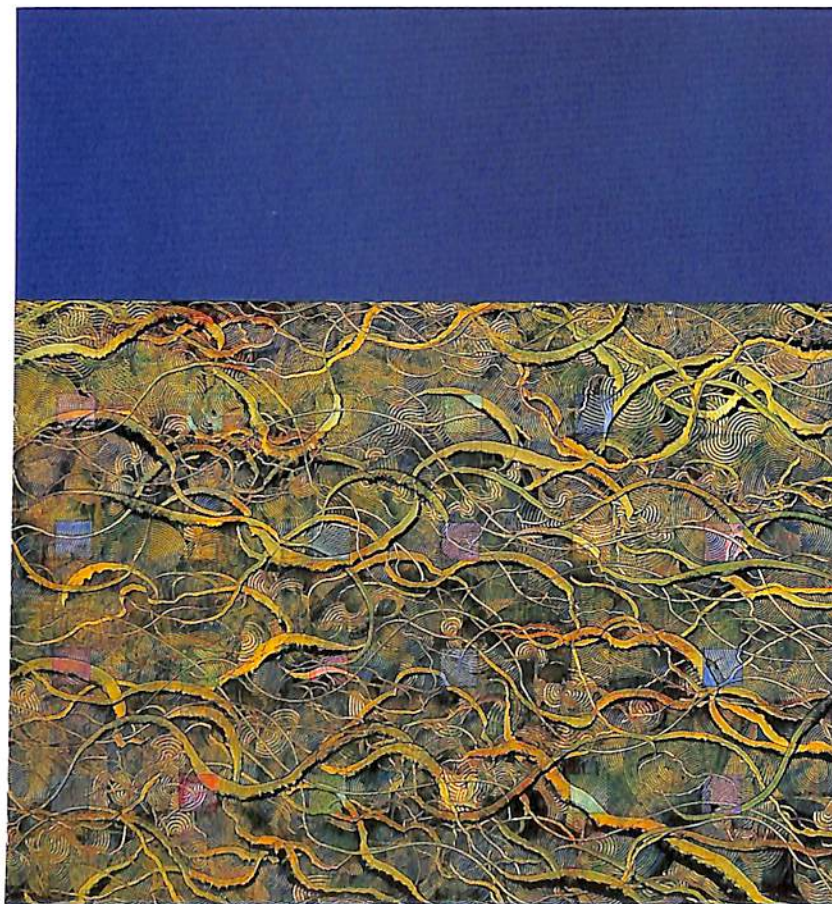
Leaves, 1998
Oil on paper
95 x 79 cm, 37 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins



Stream 1, 1999
Oil on paper mounted on wood
78 x 78 cm, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ ins

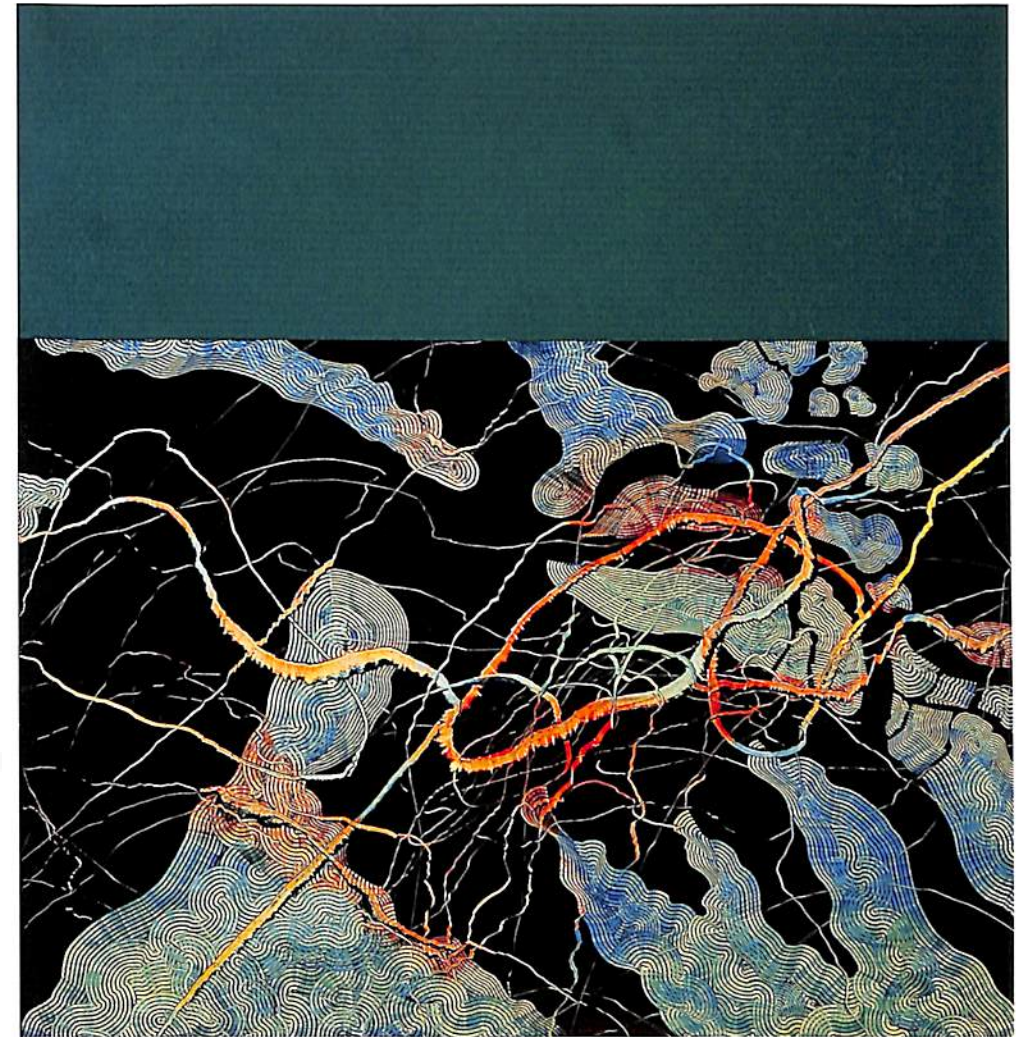


In the Garden 2, 1999
Oil on paper mounted on wood
78 x 78 cm, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ ins

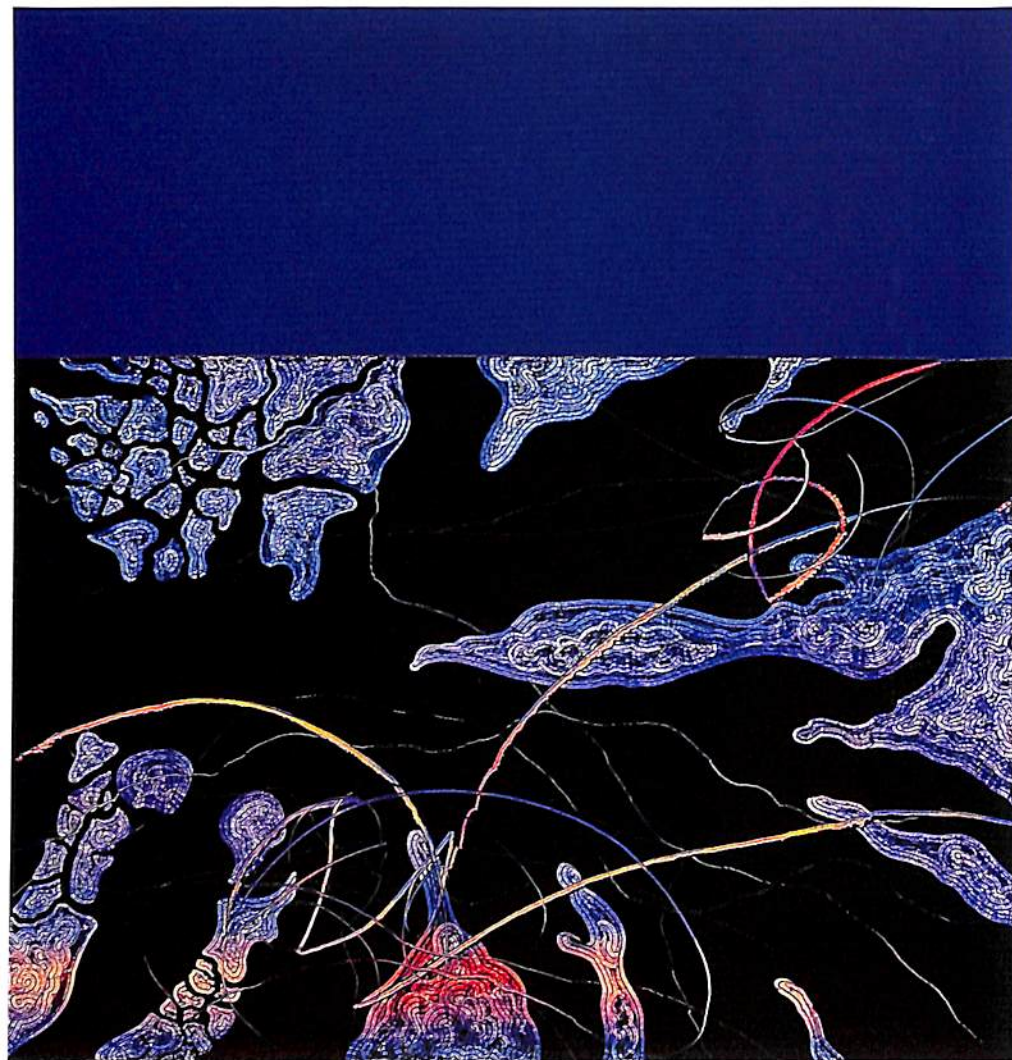


Endless Movement 1, 1998
Oil on paper mounted on wood with formica
120 x 110 cm, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ ins

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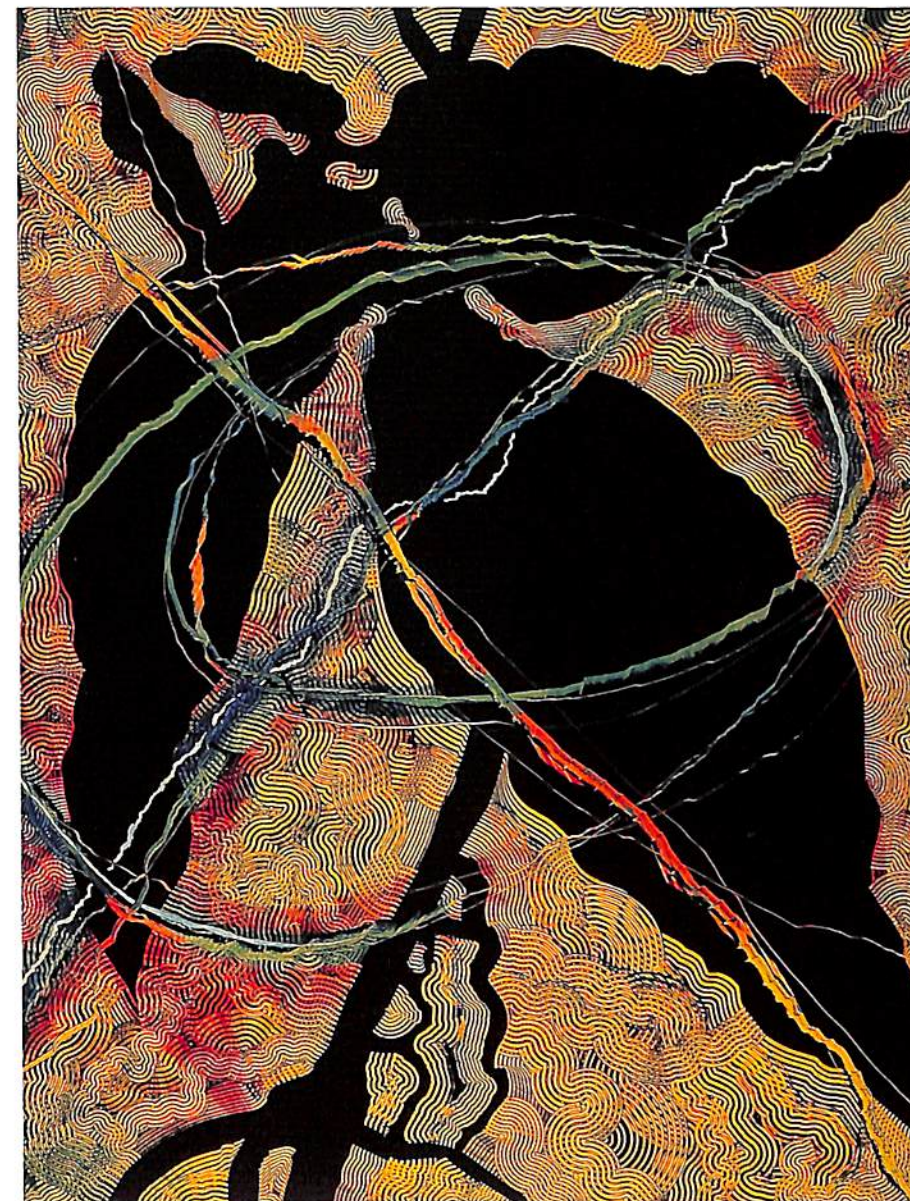


Into the Light, 1998
Oil on paper mounted on wood with formica
120 x 110 cm, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ ins

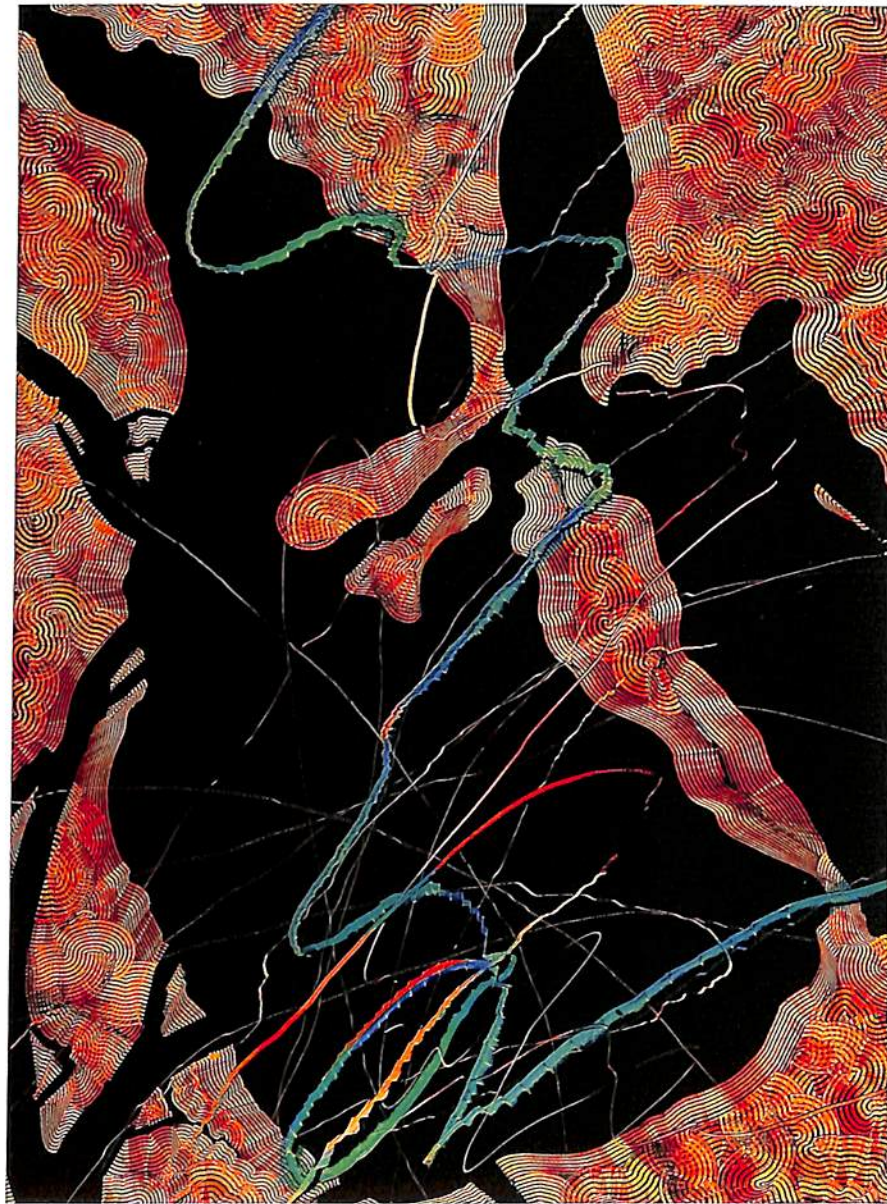


Dusk, 2000
Oil on paper
120 x 110 cm, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ ins

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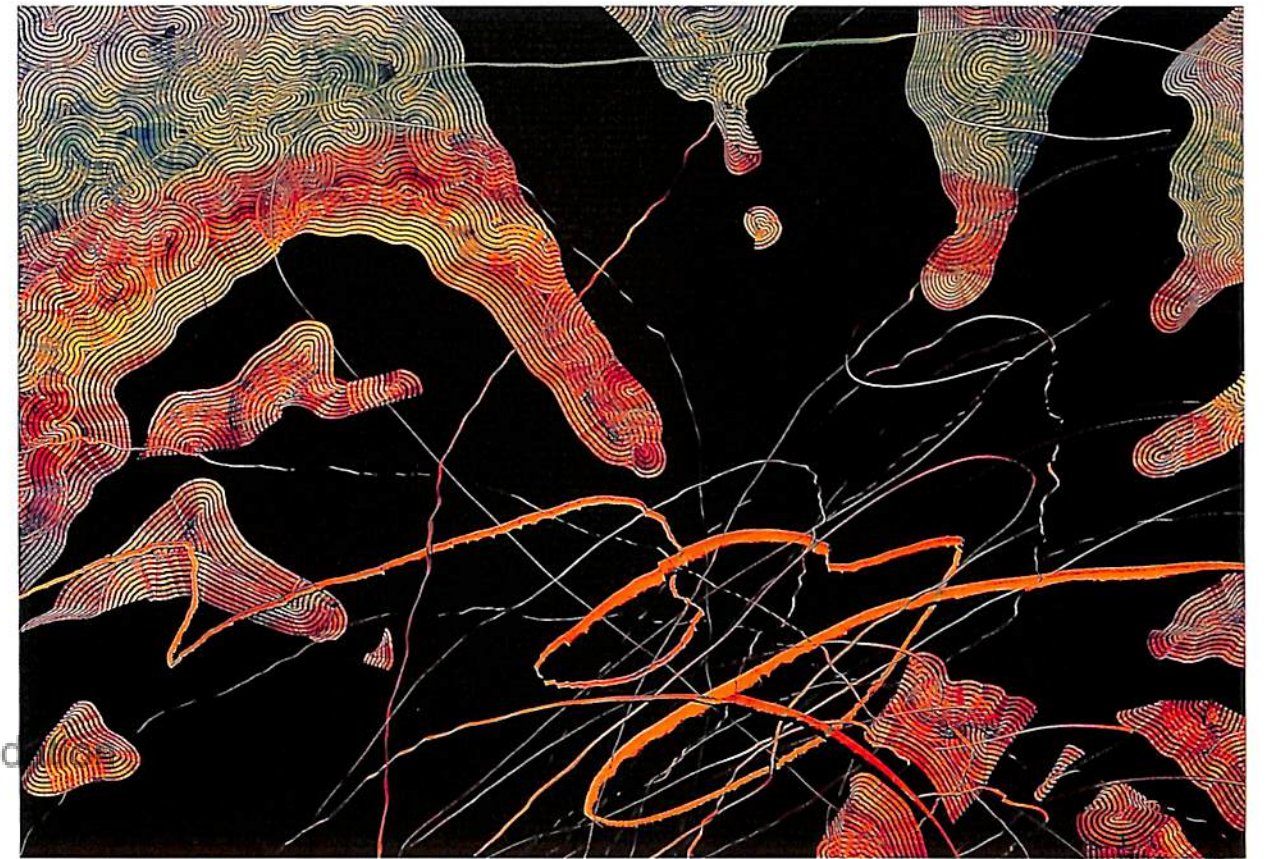


Forces of Light 2, 1998
Oil on paper
109.5 x 79 cm, 43 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins



Northern Light, 1998
Oil on paper
109.5 x 79 cm, 43 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins

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Early Morning Light, 1998
Oil on paper
79 x 109.5 cm, 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins