

ITHIPOL THANGCHALOK

MATTER OF THE MIND

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

อิทธิพล ตั้งโฉลก
วัตถุแห่งจิต

ITHIPOL THANGCHALOK

MATTER OF THE MIND

An Exhibition of Paintings 2000 - 2002

May 15 - June 6 2002

Gallery of The Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts

Silpakorn University, Bangkok.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

อิทธิพล ตั้งโฉลก

วัตถุแห่งจิต

นิทรรศการจิตรกรรม 2543 - 2545

15 พฤษภาคม - 6 มิถุนายน 2545

หอศิลป์คณะจิตรกรรมประติมากรรมและภาพพิมพ์

มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร กรุงเทพฯ

Matter of the Mind

Work on the series of paintings entitled "Matter of the Mind" began soon after my second solo exhibit, "The Colors of Light," which took place between May 11 and June 12, 2000, and by the time my third solo show opens in mid-May 2002, it will have taken a full two years to complete. The paintings in the new series are radically different from any of my previous work in terms of concept, form and technique, but this is in keeping with the very nature of art. When an artist exhausts the possibilities of one approach, he naturally moves in a new direction.

Unlike the paintings in the series "The Colors of Light," the new works do not draw their inspiration from nature. Neither are they impressions of city life like the paintings in two previous series called "Urban" and "Walls." And unlike the series "Fragments," they are also not a return to the past or a re-examination of my cultural roots in the temples of Chiang Mai. Instead, the conception for these new paintings gradually took shape as a result of my reading on the relationship between matter and the mind, concepts which have traditionally been posited as polar opposites, but which today are subject to a completely different understanding. Interestingly, this new understanding conforms to the Buddhist scripture which reads: "The word mind (vinyan) refers both to the knower and to that which is known. The knower cannot be separated from that which is known. Likewise, the act of seeing must have an object which is seen. The act of hearing must have an object which is heard. Anger must have an object at which it is directed. Hope must have something which is hoped for, and the act of thinking must have something which is thought about. If that which is known did not exist, likewise the knower would not exist. When a person who practices the dharma examines his mind, he will perceive the connectedness of the knower and that which is known. When we practice mindfulness through breathing, our awareness of our breathing is mind, and as we develop awareness of our body, the knowledge we acquire is also mind. In examining the objects in the world around us, he gained knowledge of those objects and our mind. In short, any examination of the connectedness of objects and the mind brings greater awareness of the mind."¹

What is even more surprising is the similarity between Buddhist beliefs and some of the latest concepts from the realm of physics. According to physicist Fritjof Capra, "Electrons have no existence independent of my perception of them. In the branch of physics which concerns atoms, there is no clear dividing line between the mind and objective reality, between the observer and that which is observed. We cannot speak of nature without speaking of ourselves at the same time."² Later he writes: "The way in which the scientist observes nature is intimately linked with the nature of his mind, his perception, his intelligence and his value system. Therefore,

¹ The Miracle of Being Awake (Trans.) P. 48, 49

² The Turning Point (Trans.) P. 100-103

the outcome of any scientific investigation and any subsequent technological applications are determined by the structure of the mind."³

For most of us, what we know and understand about objective reality is restricted to our sensory perception of the surface of things. But science has reached the point where it can prove that much of what we see and believe about reality is merely an illusion. As modern physicists believe, "If we adopt a macro perspective, the objects around us will appear to be immobile and lifeless. But if we magnify a rock or a piece of metal and examine its smallest elements, we will find that what at first appears lifeless is in fact alive with motion, and the closer we look, the more life we will perceive...Modern physics does not consider matter as fixed and immobile; rather, it perceives it as in a state of constant movement and vibration, the rhythm of which is determined by the nature of its molecules, atoms and nuclei. We have begun to understand that no structure in nature is unchanging. There is stability, but this stability is one component of a dynamic balance. The deeper we penetrate into an object, the more we must appreciate the dynamic quality of nature if we are to understand the nature of the object."⁴ This new understanding conforms to Eastern philosophical tenets dating back thousands of years. "The more we study Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, the more obvious it becomes that these three religions all view the world as in a state of constant movement, change and flux. Eastern philosophers conceive of the universe as an intricately-woven web whose component parts are inextricably linked in a relationship that is constantly moving. This single web is characterized by perpetual movement, life, movement, growth and change."⁵

These new insights also inform the works that comprise this latest series of paintings. Unlike previous paintings which have been inspired by impressions of nature and the environment, the latest works are informed by the notion of them as objects in themselves. They are two-dimensional, rectangular objects with length and width but without the conventional illusion of depth. They are intended to underscore the relationship between matter and mind, first between the paintings and the mind of the artist, and second between the paintings and the minds of the viewers. Consequently, the paintings are without representational images of objects commonly found in nature, such as earth, wood or metal. They are without physical use. Their only direct benefit to the viewer is likely to be the mere fact of perceiving them with his eyes, his brain and his mind. Admittedly, what one can perceive through art is certain to be different from what one can perceive through practice of the dharma or from the perspective of a modern scientist. Yet despite these differences, art does serve a religious function. As Professor Silpa Bhirasri noted: "The ultimate aim of art is identical to that of religion, namely, to purify the heart and mind of man."

The idea of creating works of art as manifestations of the mind came about gradually, as did the choice of form, technique and material. These choices were directly influenced by Buddhist philosophy and its fondness for metaphor. For instance, just as we must turn away from defile-

ments to attain perfection or ultimate beauty, I have chosen to strip away everything superfluous from my work — all the confusing narrative elements, meanings and worldly feelings, all the distracting forms and shapes. I have simplified the composition, retaining only what is essential and irreducible: dots. Dots are the smallest visual element. If dots are removed, the painting will be entirely blank. When dots are placed in succession, they form lines. As a general rule, dots and lines have no role in and of themselves; they are meaningless and insignificant. To have meaning, they must function as subordinate elements in combination with other visual components. But in the conception and execution of these works, dots and lines are used to create form; they become the subject and meaning in themselves, and in this way, they achieve a state of simplicity, purity, serenity, and universality.

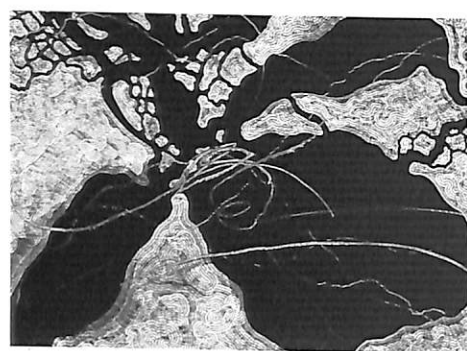
The only structuring principle at work in the paintings is the rhythmic repetition of dots and lines based on simple mathematical formulations. But this repetition is more than merely an organizing strategy; it is intended to evoke meanings and emotions associated with the constant ticking of a clock, the rhythmic beating of the heart, and the steady movement of air in and out of the lungs. It is meant to convey the gradual shifting of day into night, the rotation of the earth on its axis, and its revolution around the sun, all of which obey the same universal rules. And it is only with repetition that, through meditation, we can still our minds. At the same time, repetition also arouses feelings of monotony, feelings which we associate with the seemingly endless repetition and boredom of our routine, everyday lives.

To create the dots and lines that define this series of works, I chose not to use the usual methods of applying paint with a brush. Instead, I made deep grooves and holes in the surface of my materials to emphasize that they are materials. They have a depth which is real, not an artistic illusion. The painting technique is also unique to this series of works. Rather than using a brush in the conventional manner, I experimented with a technique designed to complement the ideas and goals that inform the work. Working with a thin piece of rubber, I quickly applied multiple layers of acrylic paint until the color had become murky and muddy. Again, the intention was metaphorical. By obscuring the surface of the object on which I was painting, I sought to allude to the ignorance, greed, and wrong belief which overpower the mind, cloud our consciousness and inhibit our intellect. On another level, each layer of paint functions as a sign, a reference to the accretions of time, to age and to the implacability of change. In short, the layering of paint is an attempt to give tangible form to time.

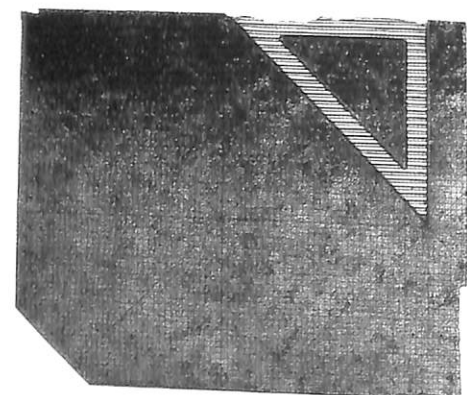
In addition to choosing the techniques and materials with which he will work, an artist must also decide on the size of his paintings. Determining the length and width that best achieve the desired sense of harmony and balance is often a difficult matter. In the past, my choices were usually based on internal considerations; they were subjective and influenced by habit. But as I started work on the new series, I adopted a different approach, basing my decisions on external criteria. Specifically, I worked with the unused plywood frames I already had on hand. Some were quite large; others small. In some cases, the frames were rectangle, of average size, and some were longer than most of the frames I had previously painted. Adopting this approach allowed me not only to think outside "the frame" of past habits, but also to solve the problem of what to do with the unused

³⁴ The Turning Point (Trans.) P. 100 - 103

⁵ The Tao of Physics (Trans.) P. 169



"The Colors of Light" Series



"Wall" Series

materials cluttering up my studio. It gave value to what was otherwise waste. Here again, I was operating on the principle of turning obstacles into opportunities. As work continued, I eventually began painting on floor tiles, which I found to be particularly well-suited to the concept of paintings as matter. Because the tiles are not especially hard, it was easy to make grooves in the surface by a variety of means, which included gouging, digging, scratching, scraping, piercing and chipping. As the floor tiles are a standard 9 inches by 9 inches, the size of the paintings is inextricably linked to the number of tiles of which they are comprised. For instance, some of the paintings are four tiles wide by six tiles long; others are six tiles wide by eight tiles long.

A comparison of the series "Matter of the Mind" and "The Colors of Light" clearly shows the differences between them. The paintings in the earlier series draw their inspiration directly from nature. The primary concerns are emotional and esthetic, whereas meaning and intellectual content are secondary. But in "Matter of the Mind" the reverse holds. Thought and meaning are the starting point, determining the process by which the paintings are created. Emotional and esthetic considerations are of lesser importance. In fact, the emotional and esthetic impact of these works might even be called a by-product, flowing out of the philosophical concepts which shape them. It is also a result of the two-fold process required for the creation of these works of art.

The first of these two stages was a conscious search for meaning and purpose. It involved planning and executing the work in a deliberate, step-by-step fashion. It included selecting the size of the frame, choosing materials, making mathematical calculations, and gouging and piercing. The entire process was a matter of thoughtful choices and external factors. The second stage of the work was much more spontaneous. In gradually building up the layers of paint over the grooves and holes I had already made in the surface of the tiles, I was able to work quickly and intuitively. I had no need to concern myself with form or composition. The work required no knowledge, justification or theoretical underpinning. It could, in fact, be done without any thought at all. I simply allowed my hand, eyes and mind to interact with the materials. As a result, the second stage of the creative process is an expression of spontaneous emotion and beauty. The changes which occurred as one layer of paint was applied over another were due to intuitive choices between perception and concealment; discord and harmony, and obscurity and clarity. The emotions evinced as the paintings progressed likewise flowed between joy and loss until the point at which no more work could be done. By adopting a strategy which divided the creative process into two distinct and contrasting stages, I was able to give form to the thoughts behind the works and achieve the goals I had set for myself. The approach I adopted allowed me to combine intellect and emotion, thought and feeling, discipline and freedom, as well as beauty and meaning in a harmonious, unified manner.

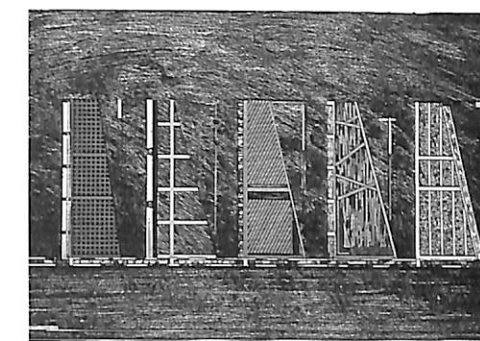
A comparison of the works in "Matter of the Mind" with the paintings and prints in the series "Walls," "Urban," and "Fragments" points up clearly both similarities and differences. Among the shared characteristics is the presence of abstract forms and flat planes of color which give emphasis to the two-dimensional nature of the works. There is a primary concern with textures; no attempt is made to create an illusion of volume

or depth. The works in these series also give center stage to the interplay between opposites, a theme I have explored for more than 30 years. Some of these opposites include form and space, light and shadow, order and freedom, stillness and movement, and mind and matter. While in constant opposition, these terms are also inseparable, like two sides of a single truth. In contrast, as I have tried to explain above, there are also differences which set the paintings in my most recent series apart from any of my previous work. The most fundamental difference is in the influence of Buddhism and modern physics, which, after extended reflection, have shaped the concepts, goals and working strategies of the paintings in "Matter of the Mind." These paintings are conceived and executed as objects in themselves. Unlike the works which comprise "Walls," "Urban" and "Fragments," which, although they are abstract, allude to objects in the outside world, the new paintings make no reference to nor do they imitate any other objects found in external reality.

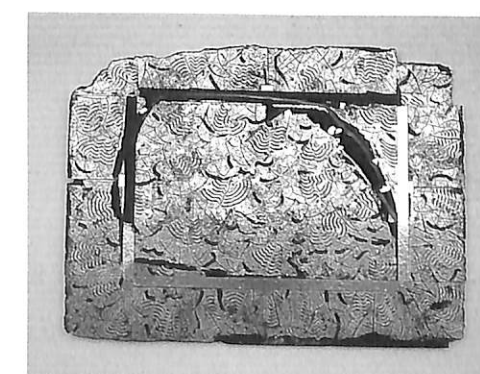
Two of the paintings included in this third solo exhibit, World without Color (Boats on the Mahanak Canal) and World without Color (Charoen Krung Road) are markedly different from the other works on display. I did the first of these paintings for the 18th Annual Art Exhibition by the Members of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts held last year. As the theme of the exhibit was "Recalling the Past," both works are a re-examination of ideas and techniques I first explored as a student some 35 years ago. Not only do they reflect the dramatic changes in Thai society in the intervening years, but they are also a record of my experiences and emotions at that time in my life. They capture the sun's heat, cool shadows, and the riot of sound and movement that remain vivid in my memory even today. In recalling my development as an artist, I achieved my first measure of success with my drawings. Then, in 1969, I won a bronze medal at the National Art Exhibition for some woodcuts I had done. I was awarded a gold medal in the following year. The paintings World without Color (Boats on the Mahanak Canal) and World without Color (Charoen Krung Road) represent a return to the subject matter I first explored in my early drawings and woodcuts. They are similar to large plates from which prints have never been made. They are evidence of a vanished world, a world without color, and a tangible expression of the reality of time. Yet despite their obvious connection with the past, these two paintings share common features with the series currently on display. Although they contain recognizable images of city life and have an illusion of depth, because they are meant to resemble woodcuts with lines and grooves cut into the surface, they have a flat, two-dimensional quality more like the plates for a woodcut or an etching than a line drawing.

Over the more than 30 years of my career as an artist, I have moved from one work to another, one series to another, and one period to another. An analysis of the development of my work throughout this time — its common threads, its variations and its range — would show that I have been much more motivated by inner forces than by any concern for artistic trends and fashions. The changes that can be discerned in my work have been motivated by my experiences, my knowledge and my growing artistic maturity. A life dedicated to art is by necessity a reflection of the true nature of the artist. As the American master Jackson Pollack noted: "Painting is a state of being....self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."

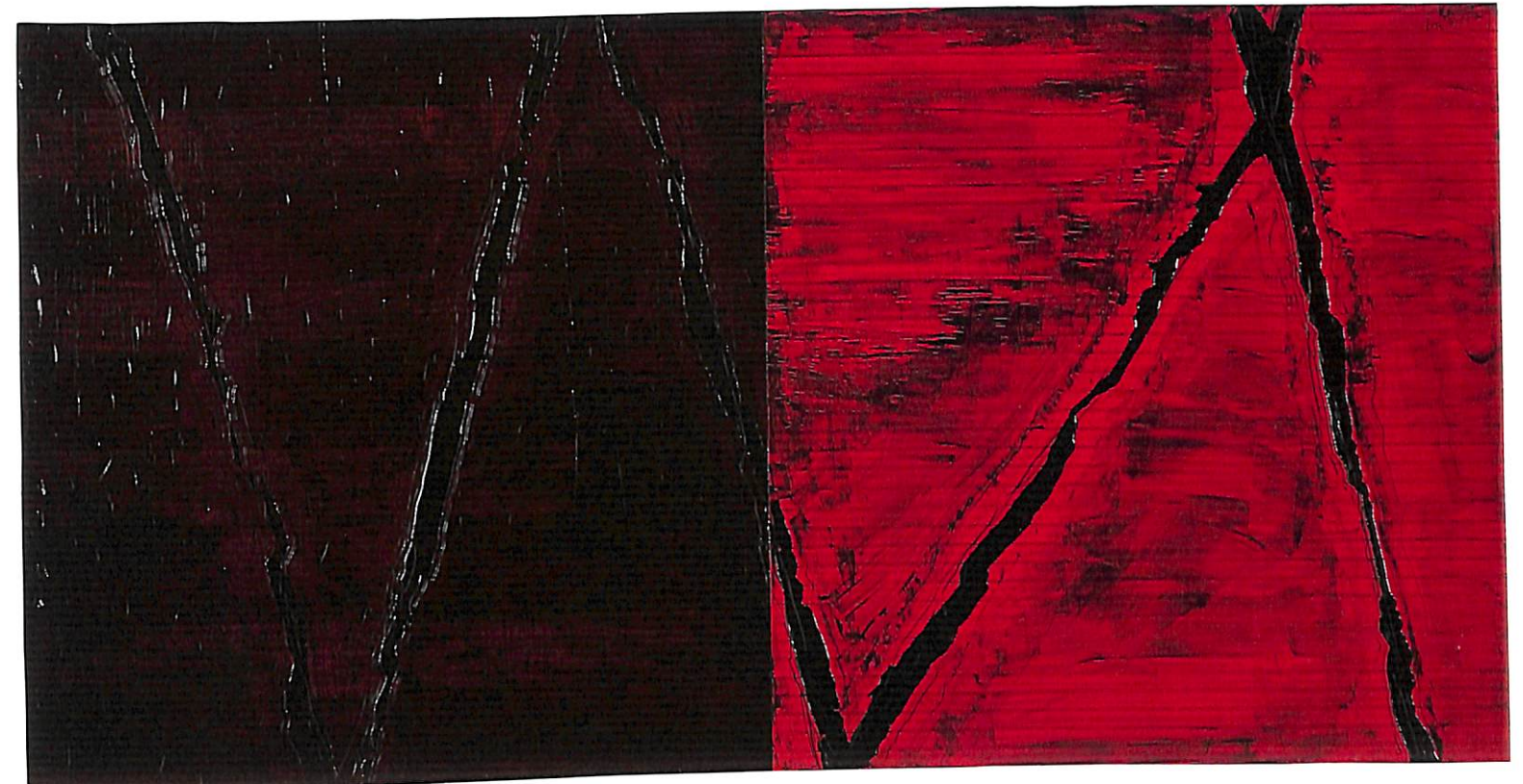
Ithipol Thangchalok



"Urban" Series

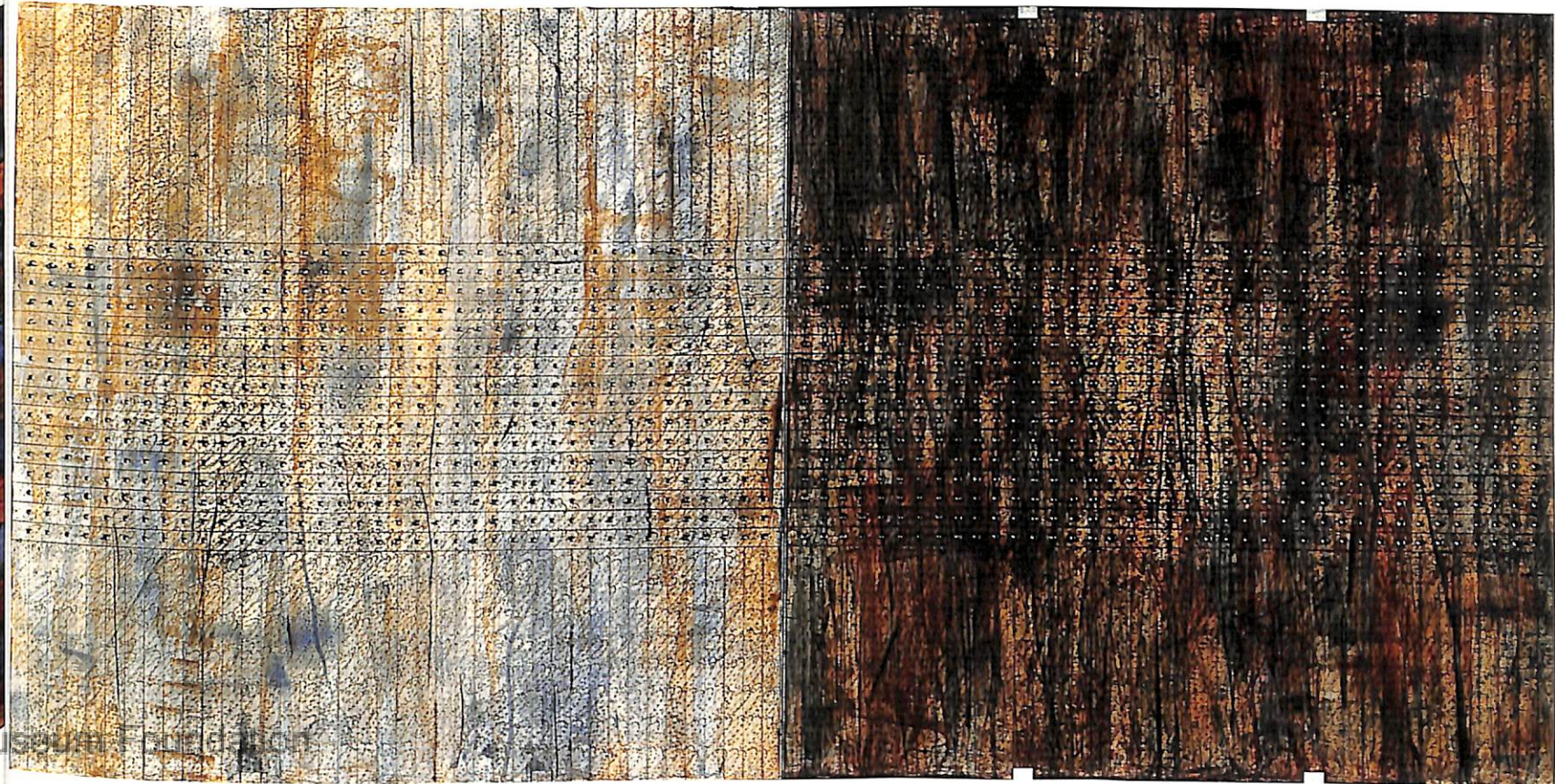
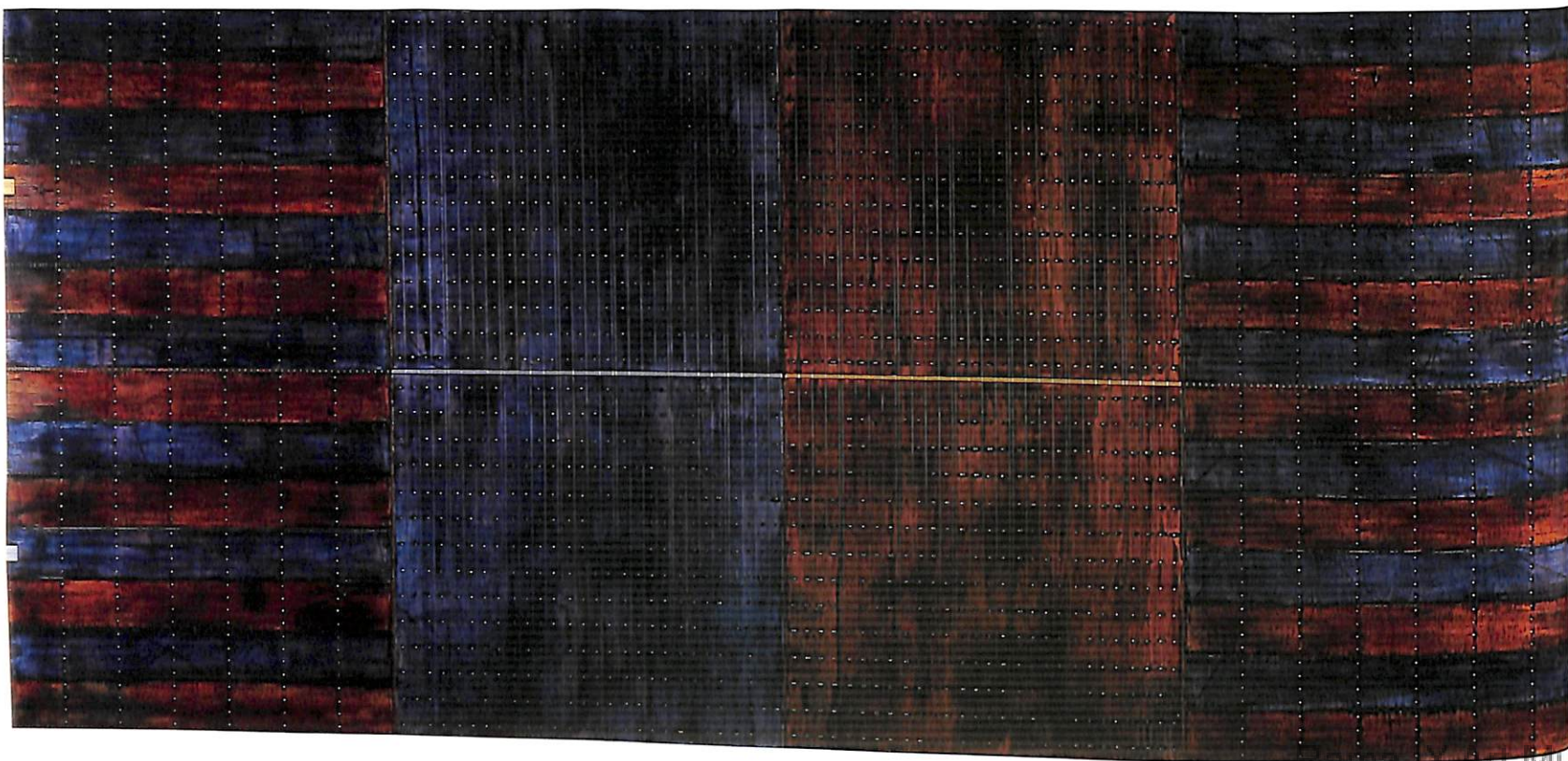


"Fragments" Series



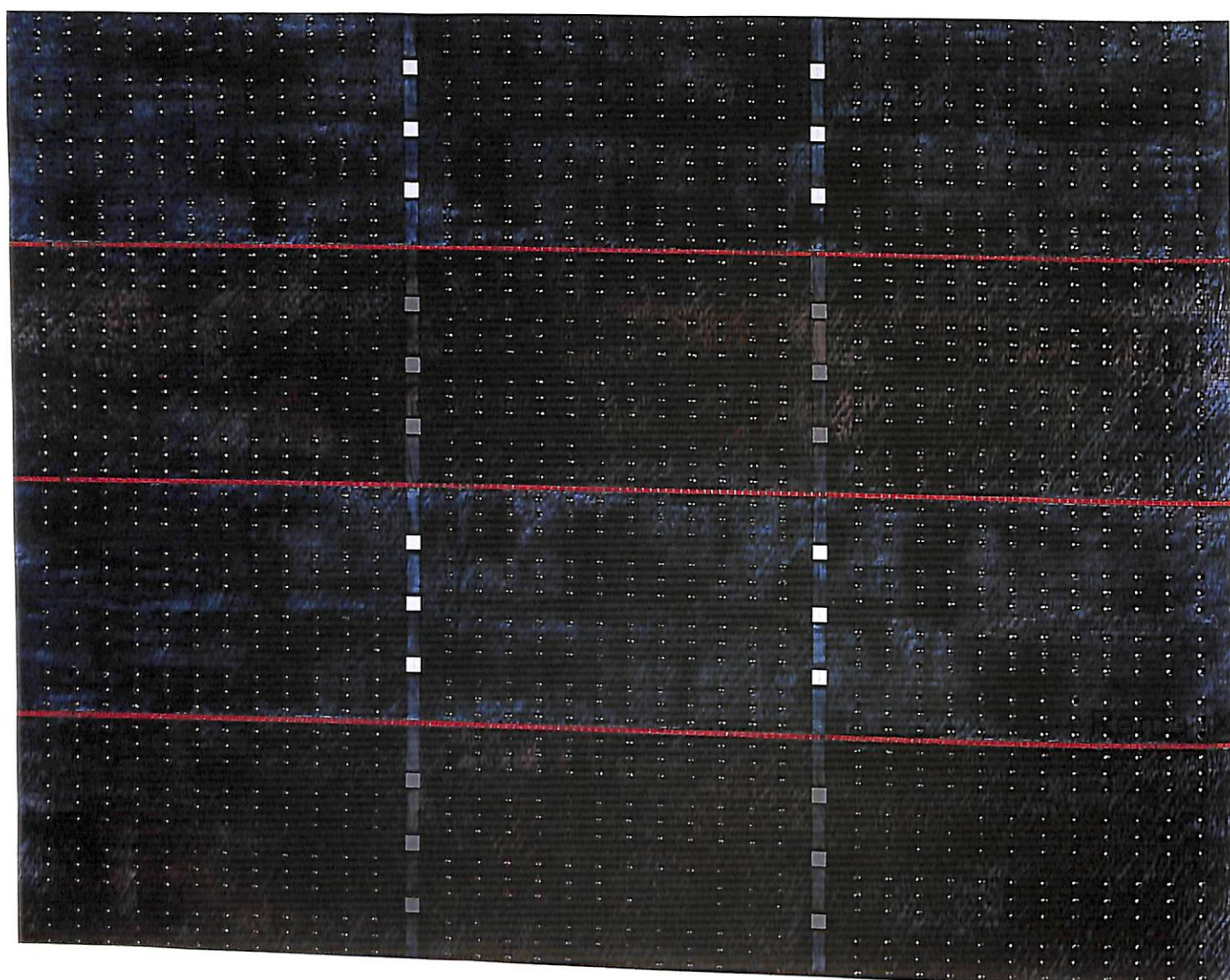
Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Silence & Sound, 2000
Aerosol Acrylic Lacquer, Acrylic
on Plywood with Formica
81 x 158 cm
31 ¹/₈ x 62 ¹/₄ in



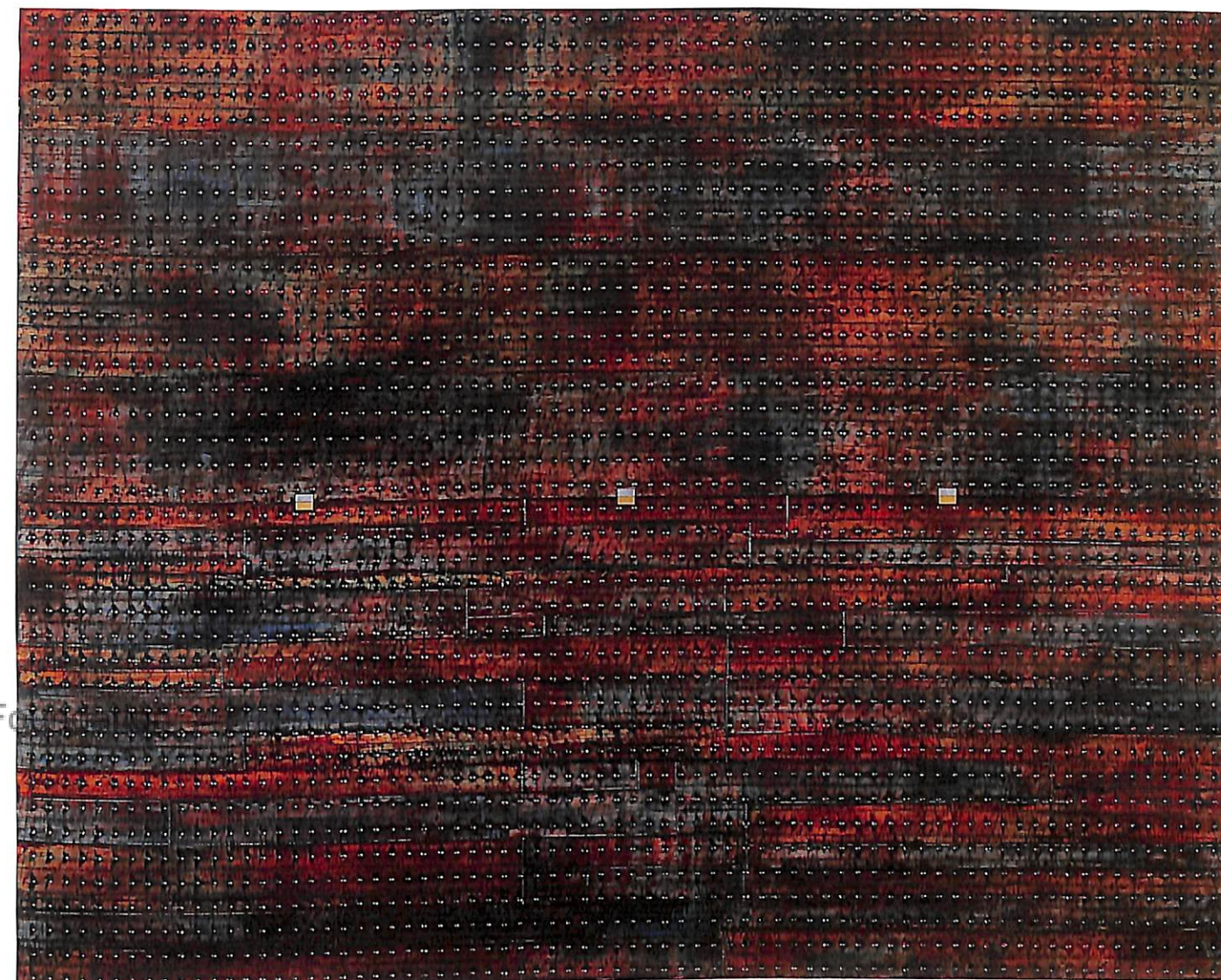
Dots and Lines on Gold and Silver, 2000
 Acrylic on Formica and Plywood
 115 x 250 cm
 45 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 98 $\frac{3}{8}$ in

Repetition, 2000
 Acrylic on Formica
 122 x 244 cm
 48 x 96 in

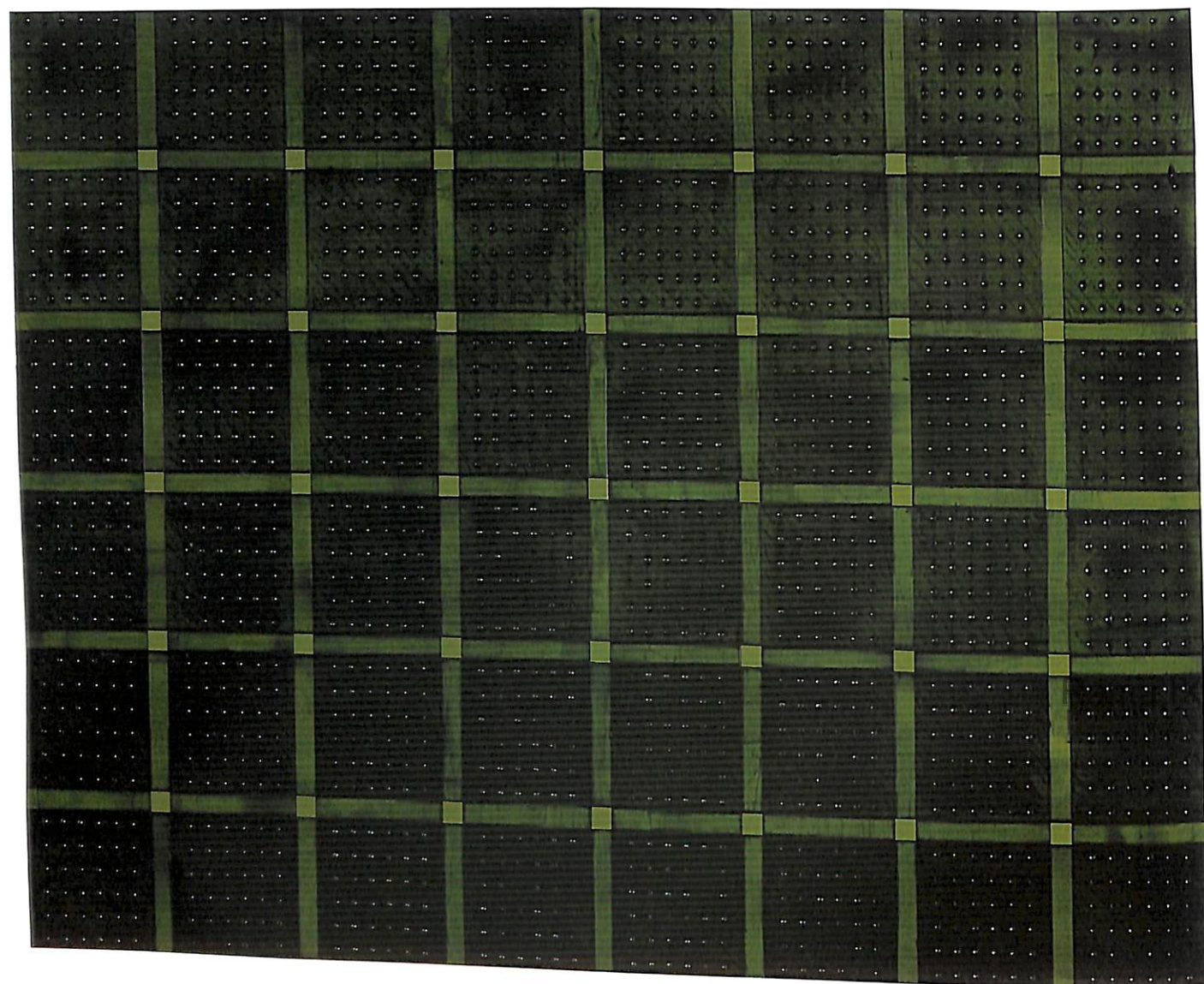


1.728 Dots, 2000
Acrylic on Formica and Wood
122 x 159.5 cm
48 x 62 $\frac{3}{4}$ in

Art Museum For

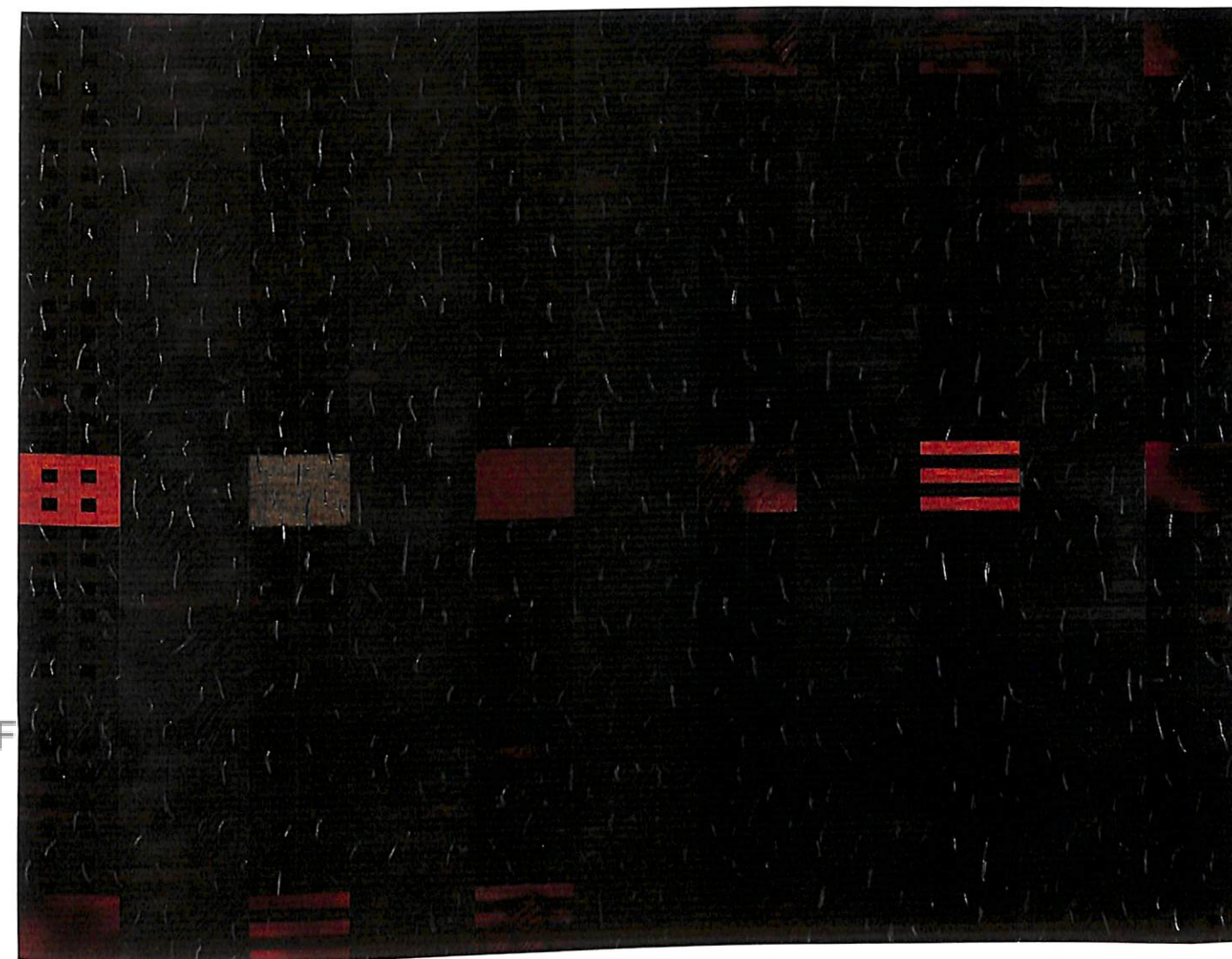


Three Squares, 2000
Acrylic on Formica
120 x 150 cm
47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 59 in



Green Squares, 2001
Acrylic on Formica
120 x 150 cm
47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 59 in

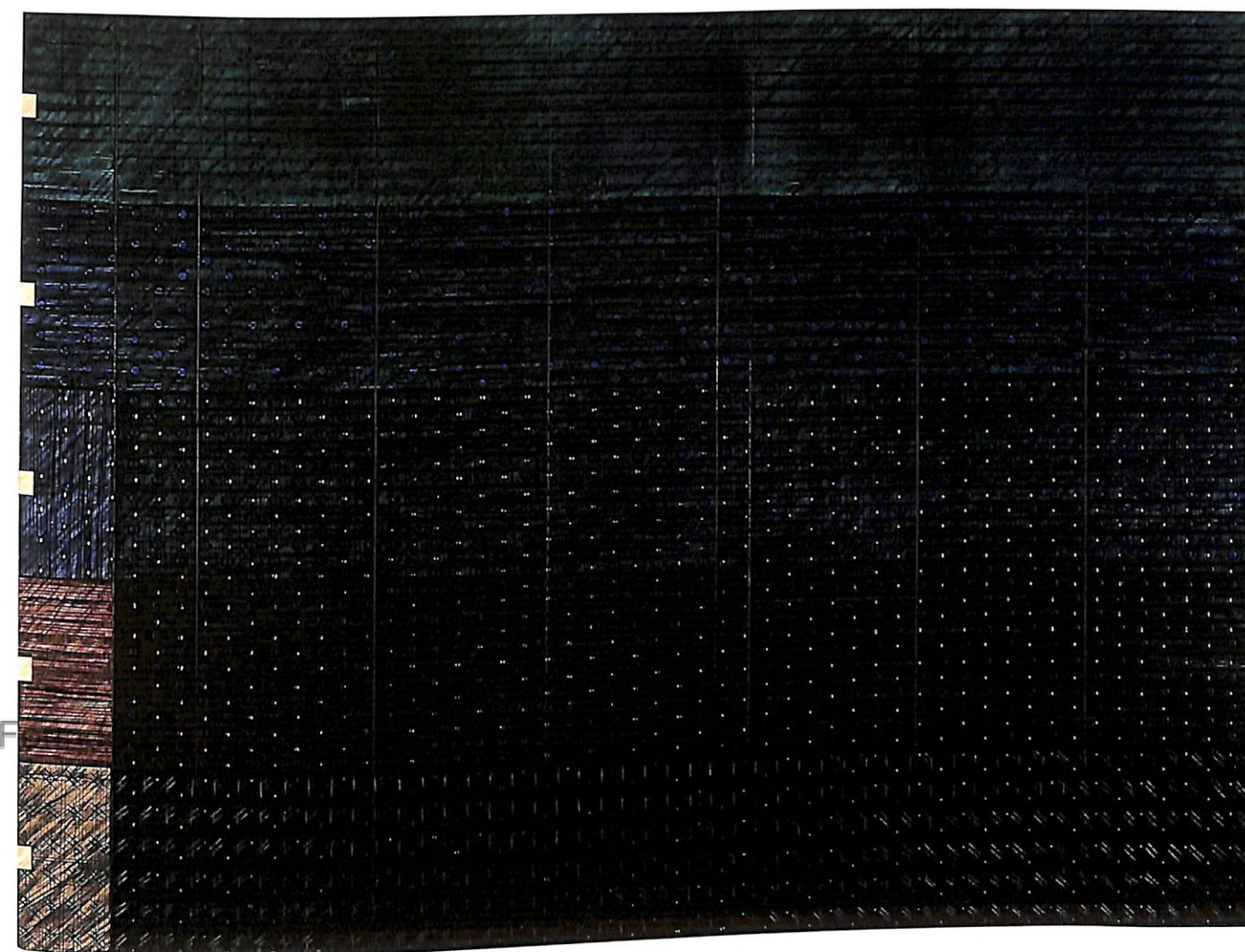
Art Museum F



6 Layers of Color, 2001
Aerosol Acrylic Lacquer, Acrylic on Plywood
122 x 160 cm
48 x 63 in



744 Dots on Gold, 2001
 Acrylic on Formica Mounted on Plywood
 122 x 165 cm
 48 x 65 in



Blue Stripe, 2001
 Acrylic on Vinyl Tiles Mounted on Plywood
 122 x 165 cm
 48 x 65 in