

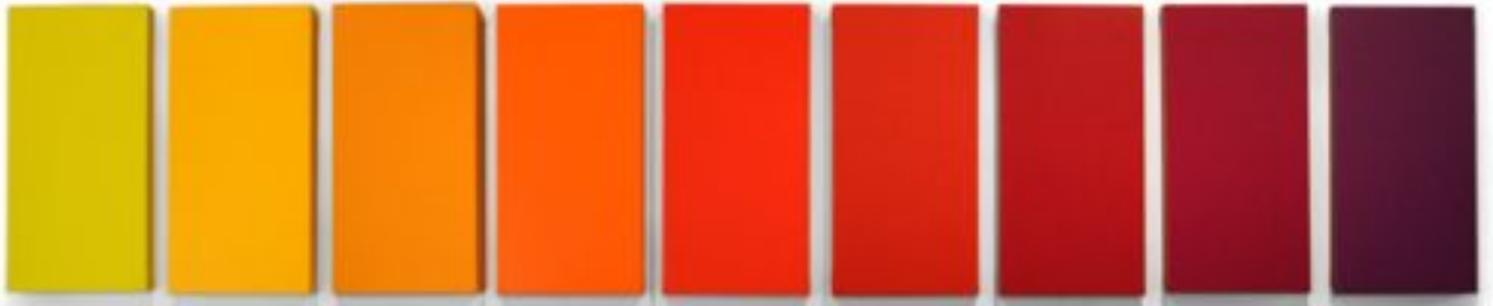
**SIRI BERG**

PAINTINGS 1967-2013

Front: *Black Series* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.  
Back: *Four Elements IV* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

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## Introduction

A rondo is a formal principle in music in which simple patterns emerge, much like in poetry, with the one constant being the first and last notes are the same. Everything in between may vary, from audible repetitions, accelerations and decelerations of tempo, and stanzas that prolong the musical form. The rondo first came to the attention of Siri Berg when she read *La Ronde*, the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century play by Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler. In *La Ronde*, Schnitzler portrays a series of brief interactions between two characters of varying and, at times, opposing social classes. These encounters, whether filled with conversation, silence, flirtation or provocation, all provide interesting commentary on how class distinctions can color human relationships.

Upon encountering the play, Siri posed a question to herself: How would one aestheticize a rondo? More to the point, how does an artist create a visual rondo, one that begins and ends on the same note, as it were, while maintaining a gradation that adheres to the strictures of color theory? This inspired riddle, which conjures images of Bach, Schnitzler, and Albers all sitting at the roundtable, is the place where Siri Berg truly began her artistic career. The result was her 1972 piece *La Ronde*, comprising a series of fourteen 12-by-12 inch panels of opposing semi-circles, arranged in a continuous row. The relationships of color Berg creates—whether viewed as a standalone note or sustained chord—are surprising because one can

almost sense that such distinct tones have never been placed side by side until now. Siri Berg is a masterful colorist, which is not to suggest she is merely a practitioner, producer or theorist thereof (all of which are true), but rather she is an inventor of color.

In the beginning, Siri's abstract art needed a complementing abstract idea, a story or cornerstone on which to rely and revisit when needed. Until quite recently, she had applied this standard to each new body of work. Following *La Ronde* and similarly complex works like her *Yin and Yang* series (1968) and *Kaleidoscope* (1971), she looked to the writings of W.B. Yeats for her "Phases" series, rendering in visual form some of the poet's more esoteric passages on the study of semiotics and lunar cycles. For the corresponding *Black & White* and *Four Elements* series', a spiritual sensibility emerges as she once again joins seemingly opposing entities: perfect geometric forms with basic representations of earth-bound forces of wind, earth, fire and water. For *Kabbalah*, a remarkable and seemingly endless series which marked her return to color in the mid 1980s, Siri draws inspiration from the Judaic teachings on the nature of self and its meaning within the universe. The precision and symmetry she applied to these works easily matched those of *La Ronde*, but a new compulsion had emerged. Siri began creating and re-creating the same image, over and over, using different media and executing at varying scale for each building block of her *Black Series* and *White Series*, each of her *Four Elements* and the *Kabbalah*. She was

not necessarily seeking perfection but perhaps a sense of closure, a cosmic equilibrium that successfully wed plasticity and nature.

With each subsequent body of work, Siri's scope and ambition continually grows. And yet, like a rondo, each series begins and ends with a premise, a guiding light, which precluded the need for something beautiful and abstract to simply be and not rely on outside forces.

Albers once wrote, "Art is revelation instead of information, expression instead of description, creation instead of imitation or repetition." Some time in the early 1990s something exceptional occurred. While at work in her Manhattan studio, Siri laid out a modest sized piece of linen and applied horizontal and vertical bands of solid, complementing color, all varying in thickness. The bands overlapped at certain points, which lent each painting subtle degrees of shade juxtaposed with a limited spectrum of color. It was a study in executing simple beauty using the most basic forms, and it all stemmed from nothing more than her desire to see these things interact. She titled these works a series of *Straight Line and Bars*, a clear indication of her new found ease, even modesty, with which she approached the canvas. It was at this time—after more than 20 years of exploring and studying, of discovering meaning in color and shape and form and through various academic forays—that Siri began practicing her art as a form of highly personal expression.

Amidst this return to nature, Siri began to play with

texture as well, meticulously applying layers of viscous oil onto defined portions of the canvas. It takes little more than a glimpse to realize how in command she is of this process. The subtle shifts from light to dark run deep yet are also evident at the surface, and brush strokes give way to points along the edges that she allows to bleed over the canvas ever so slightly. Katarina Cerny—whose introduction to Siri's 1986 solo exhibition, "Black & White 1976-1981," is re-printed in these pages—had looked to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* as guidance, and the modern master's words are just as appropriate here. "Color provides a whole wealth of possibilities of her own, and when combined with form, yet a further series of possibilities. And all these will be expressions of the inner need." As Siri's work matured and she found balance during this time, she also rediscovered not only this wealth of possibilities with color, but also what could be accomplished by reining it in. A great abstract work can find beauty from context, but its truth lies in utility; as she so aptly titles her culminating series of work, "It's All About Color."

This catalogue—as joyful as it was to put together, as it was to sit down with Siri in her studio on long afternoons to discuss her life's work, peruse decades' worth of archives, and examine hidden treasures up close—represents a mere fraction of what she has accomplished. The paintings are the beginning and the end, the bookends to her rondo, yet in between there is a vast sea of assemblage, collage, woodcuts, sculpture, drawings and sketches. There is enough work in her

studio alone to fill one museum and two lifetimes. And yet, when conversing with Siri about her art, whether concerning a single painting or entire body of work, one is quick to realize that she is far from done.

—Justin Wolf



Siri Berg in her studio, Riverdale, NY, 1977  
Photo: Glynne Betts



LA RONDE

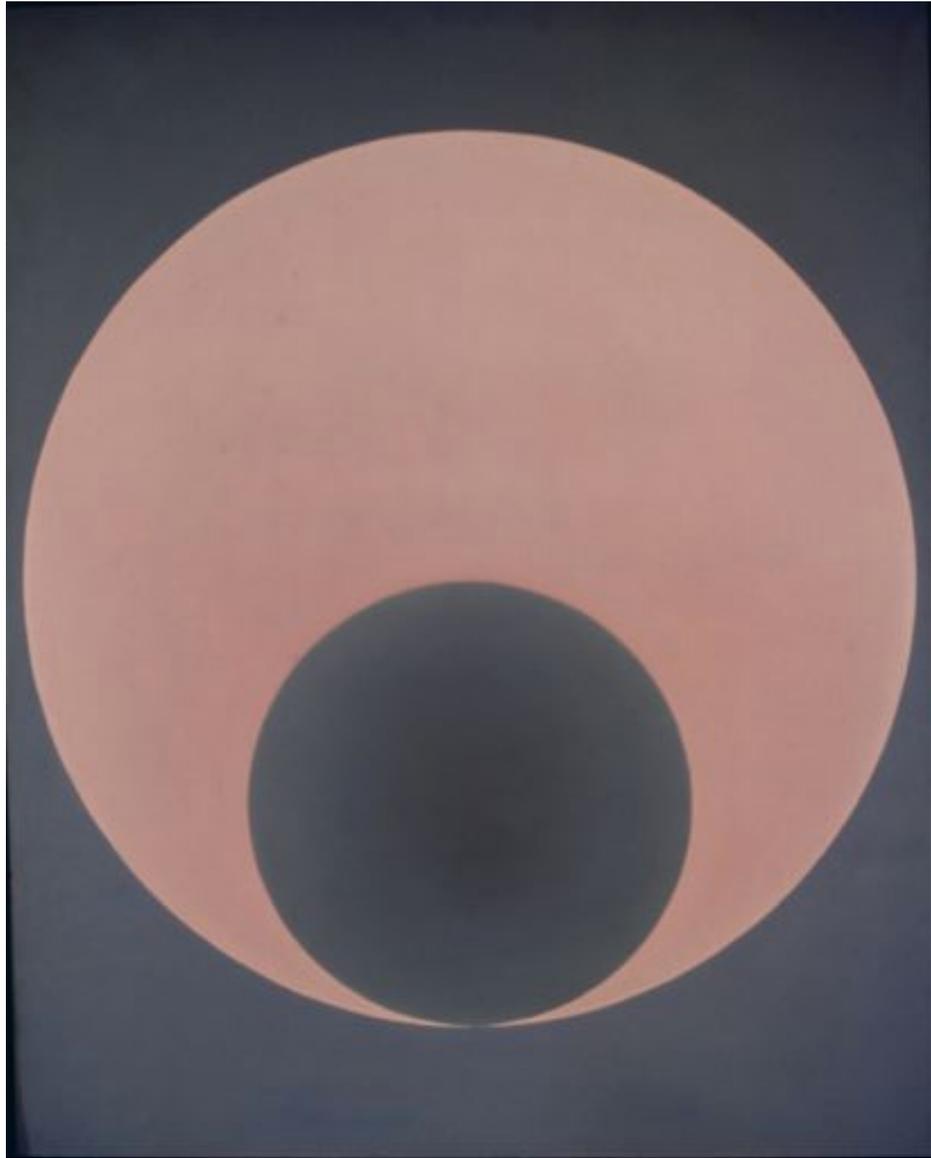
*Cycle of Life* (1967), oil on canvas, 28 x 28 in.



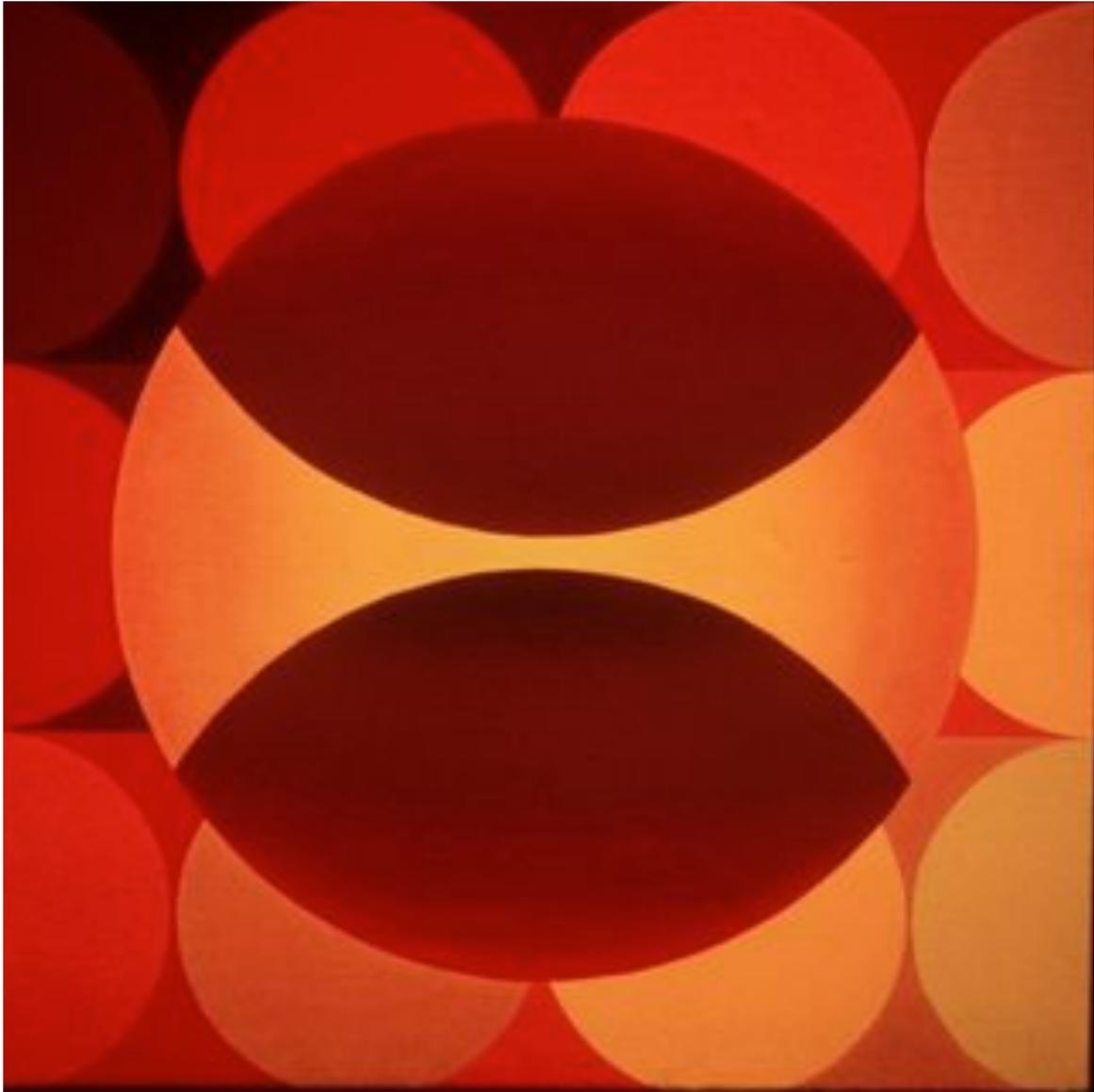
*Yin and Yang #2* (1968), oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in.



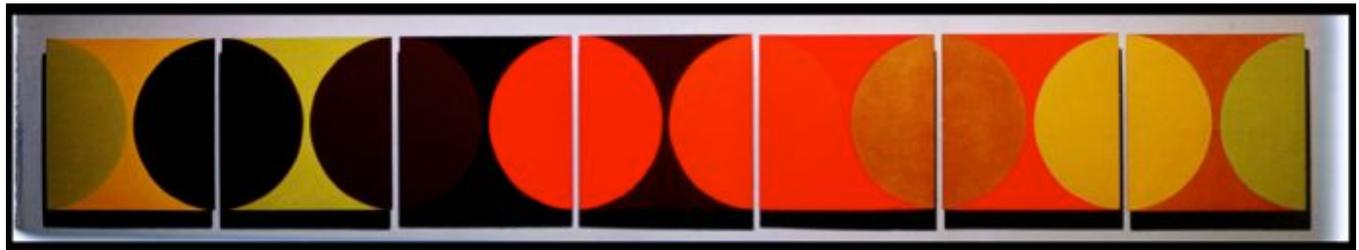
*Bottom Circle* (1970), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in.



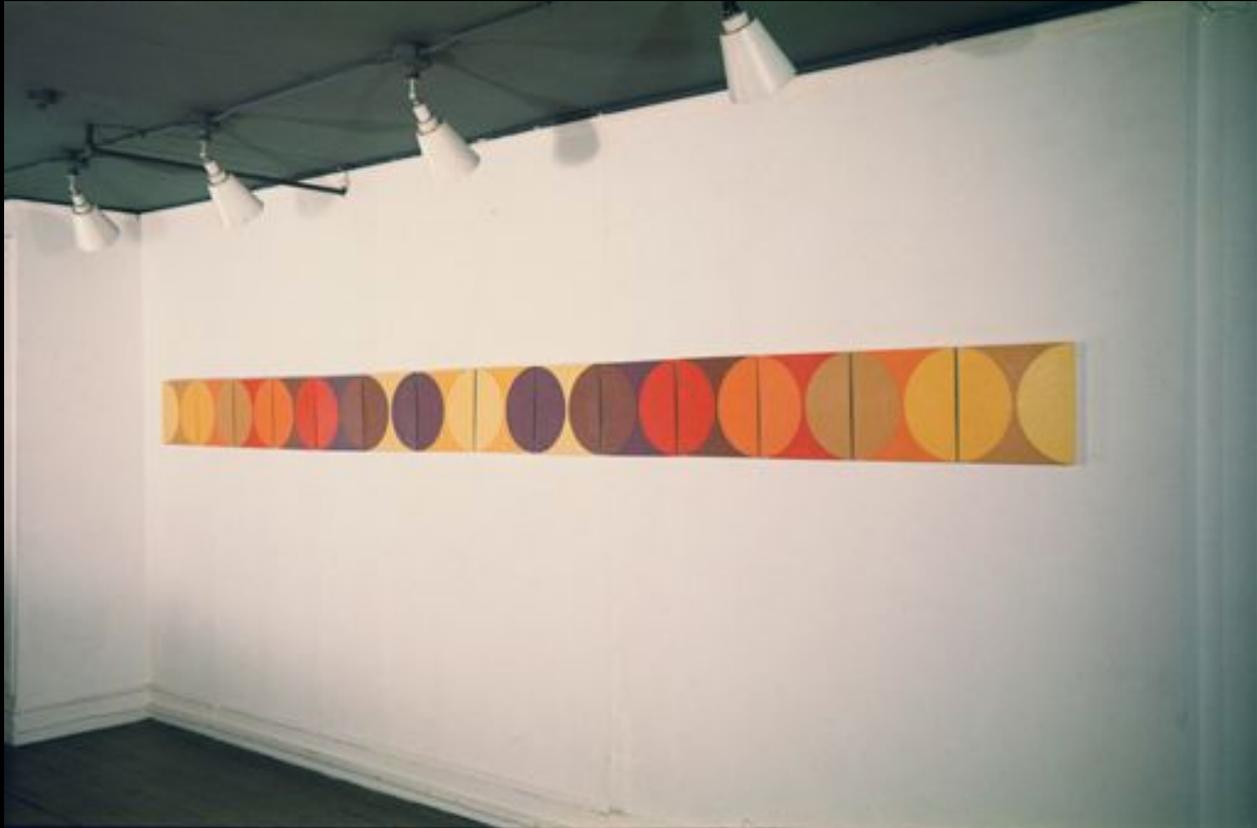
*Kaleidoscope* (1971), oil on canvas, 44 x 44 in.



*La Ronde* (1972), acrylic on masonite, 7 pieces, 12 x 12 in. each



Installation view of *La Ronde* (1972), double run, 12 x 12 in. each



*La Ronde* (1972), acrylic on masonite, 49 pieces, 12 x 12 in. each



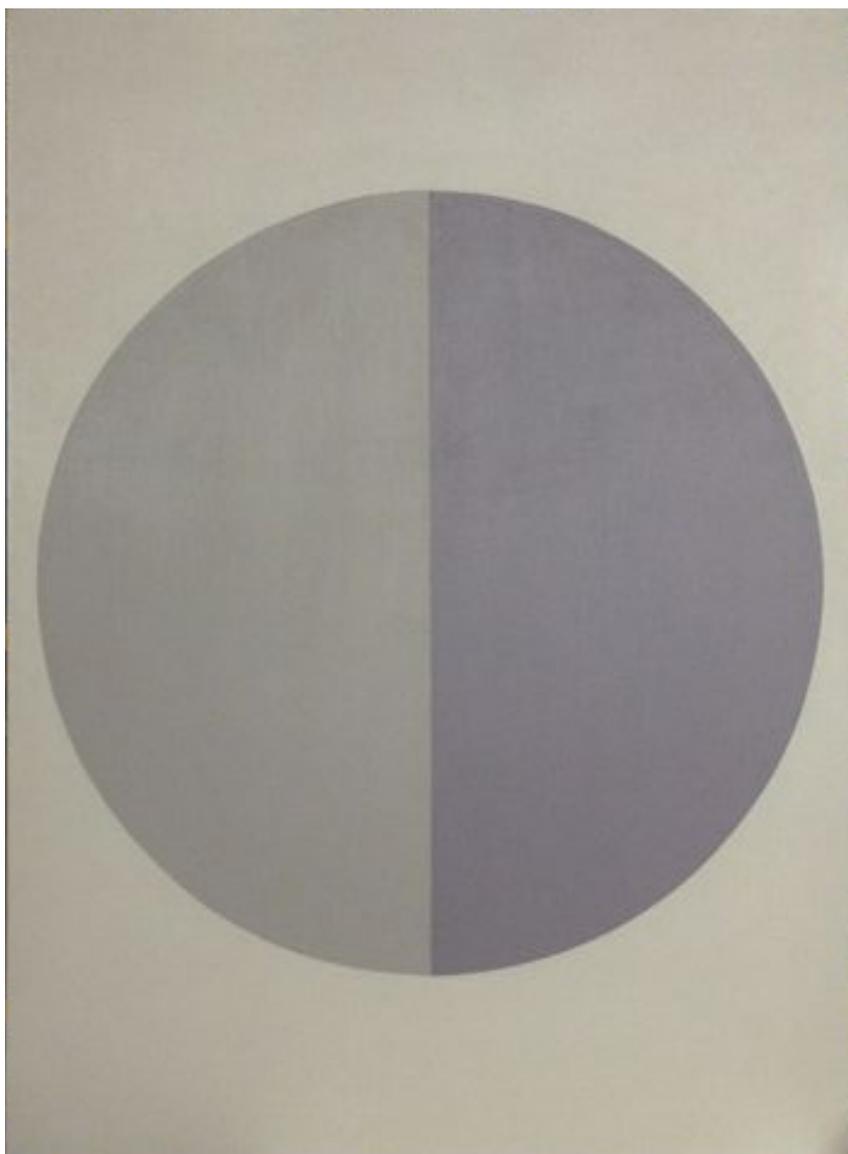
Installation view of *La Ronde* (1972), corner, 24 x 24 in. each



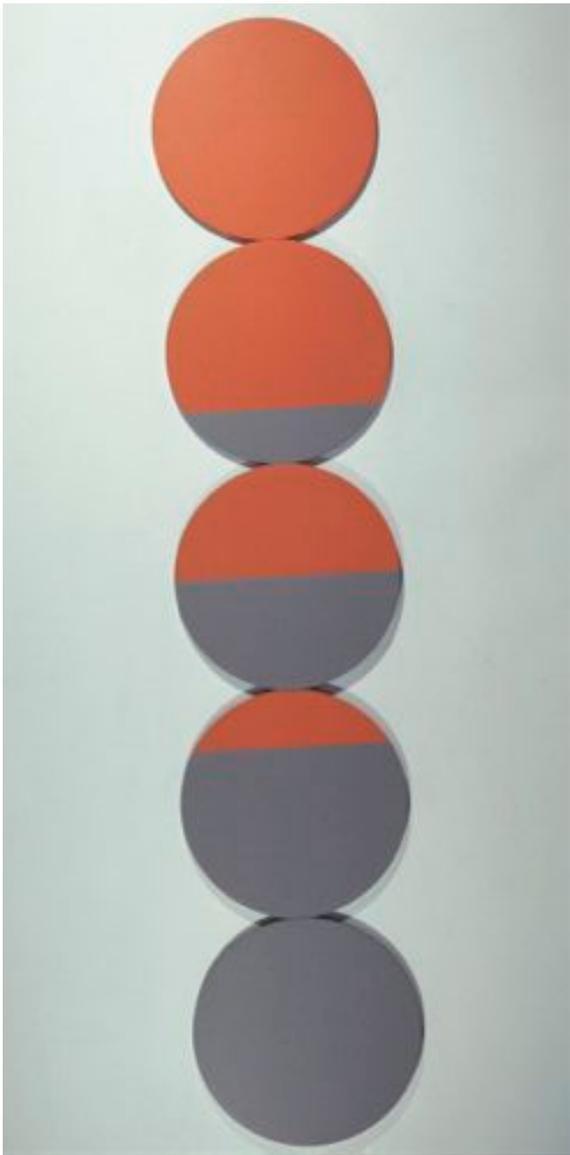


PHASES

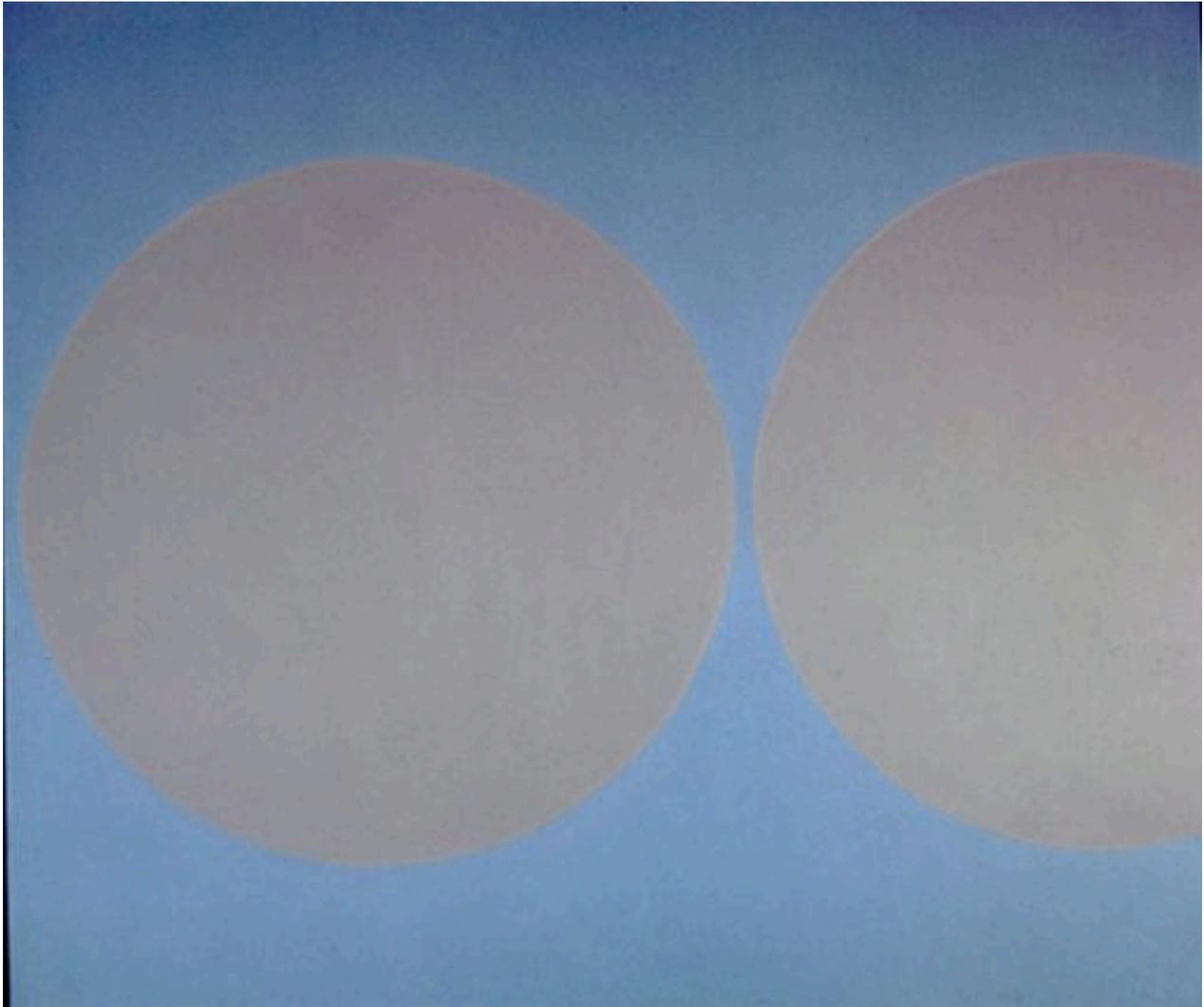
*Phase 1 (Shadow)* (1974), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 22 in.



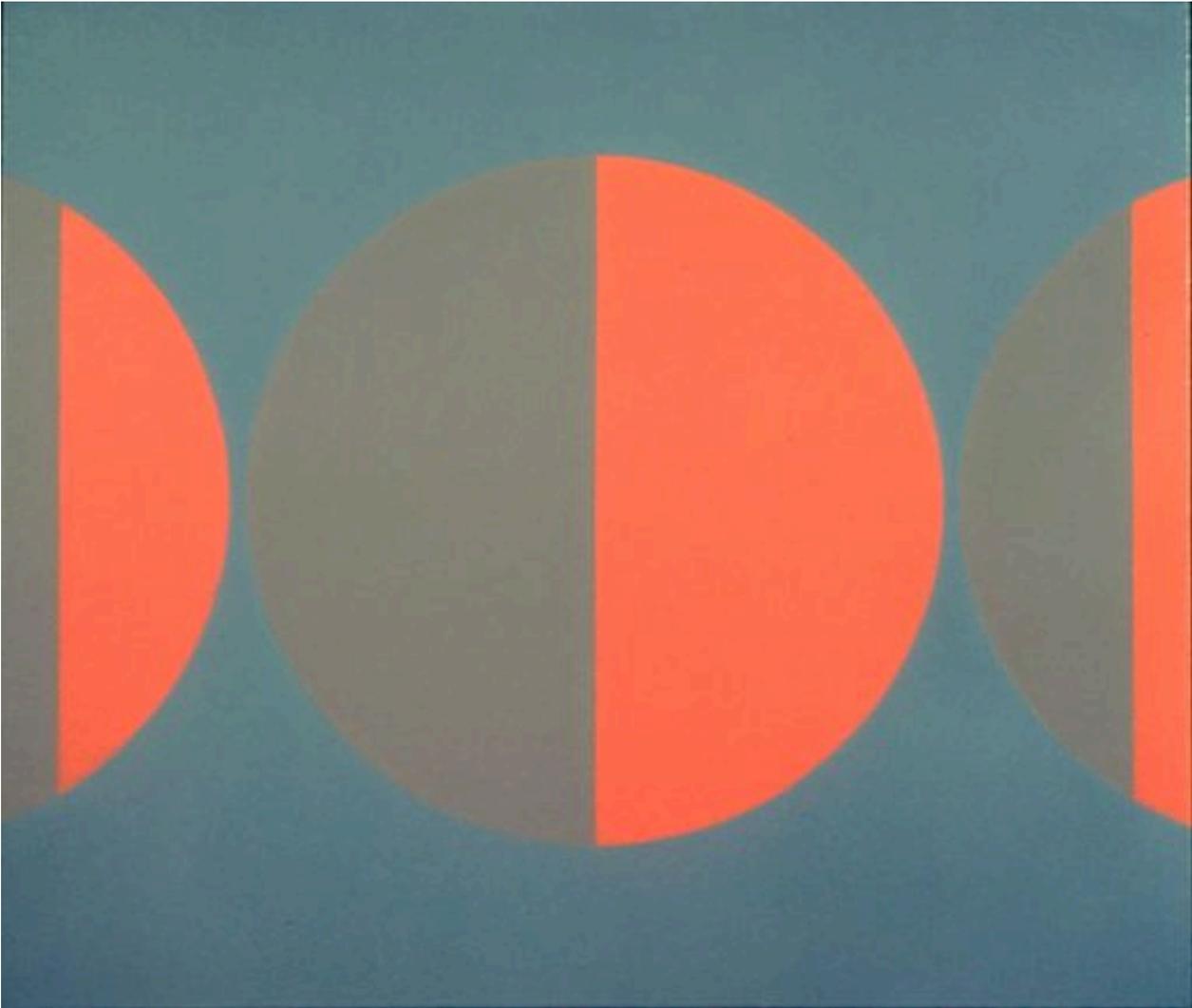
*The Shades* (1974), five shaped canvases, 20 in. diameter each



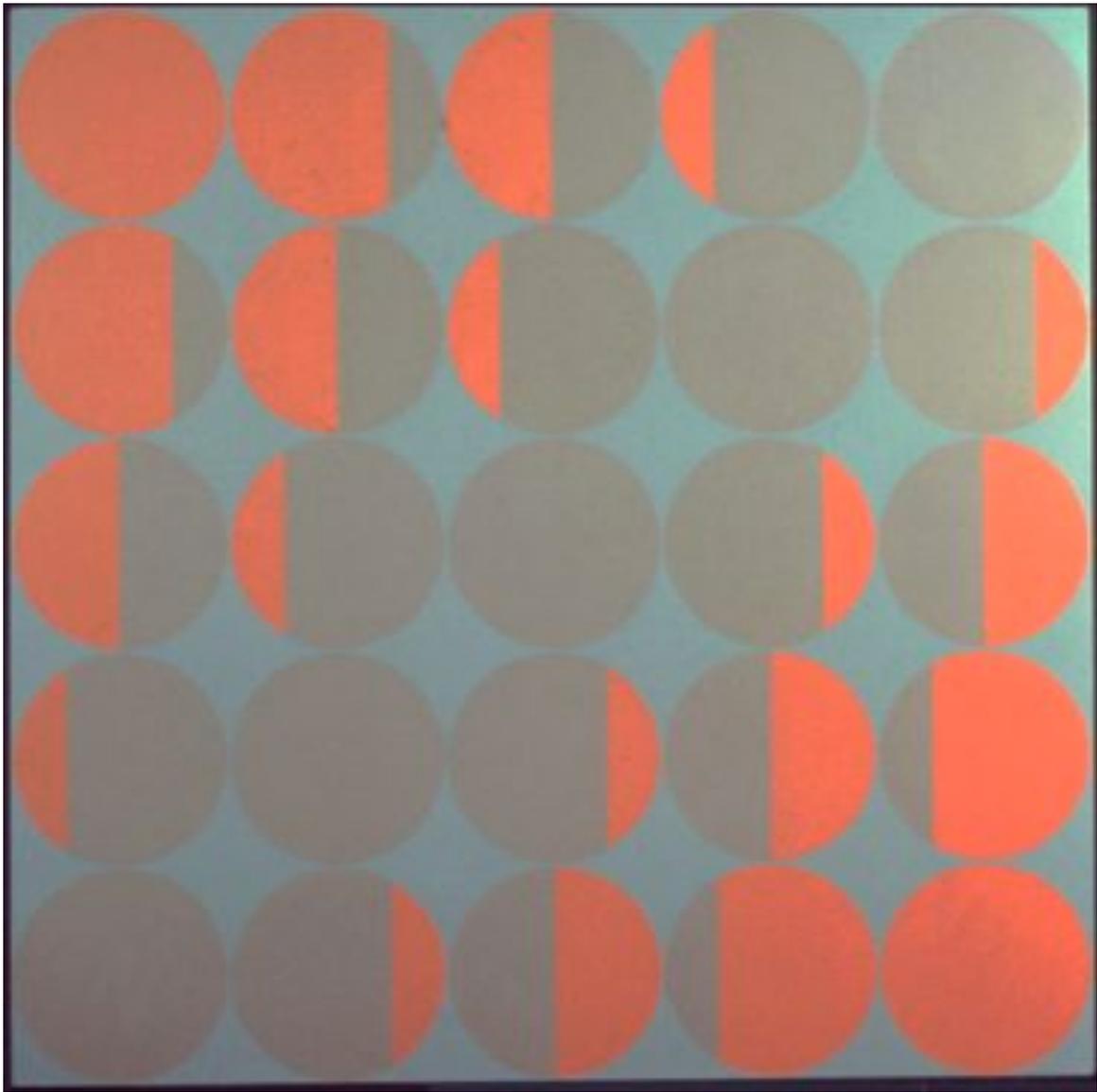
*Phase of Grace* (1974), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 70 in.

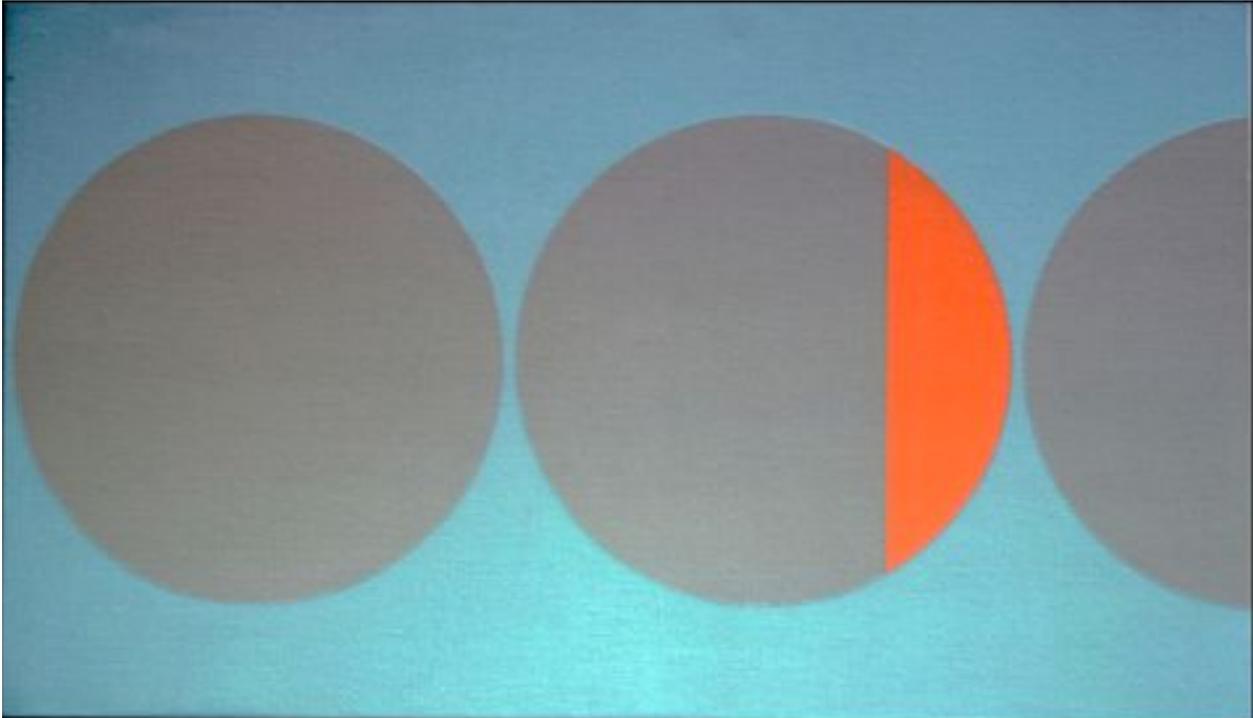


*Phases and Cycles* (1974), acrylic on canvas, 48 x 70 in.

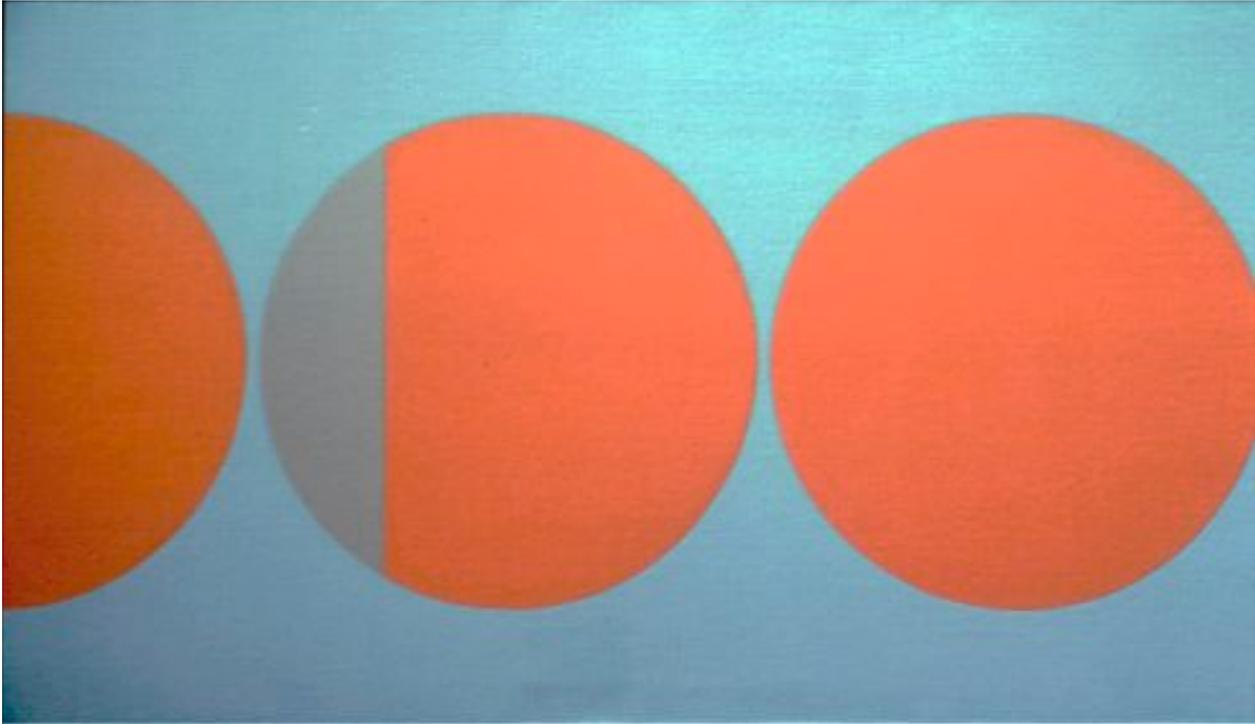


*Phase 25* (1974), acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 in.





*Phase 22* (1975), diptych, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 104 in.





BLACK & WHITE

**Introduction** Siri Berg: “Black & White 1976-1981”  
American Swedish Museum  
March 6 – May 31, 1986

Siri Berg is a native of Stockholm, Sweden, and has lived in New York for most of her adult life. The inspiration for her work combines the graceful clarity of Swedish craftsmanship with the clean lines of modern design. The disciplined purity of her paintings is achieved by borrowing the tools and techniques of the printer and craftsman—the template and compass, masking tape, and patterns. Her *Environmental Boxes* are constructed from industrial objects formed by technology, found in the hardware and surplus store bins of lower Manhattan.

The central motif of Berg’s work evolved from an earlier series of paintings entitled *Phases*. These were based on the book *A Vision* by W.B. Yeats. The works in this exhibition were completed between 1976 and 1981, during which she developed the circle image in the paintings of the *Black Series*, *White Series*, and *Four Elements*, and constructed the *Environmental Boxes*. The image of the circle, the ancient symbol of life, is explored in all its phases, and within the contrast of color represented by black and white.

Berg’s circles go beyond the minimalist paintings of the 1970s, which deliberately emptied themselves of content. Her circles are inspired by philosophical concerns, particularly the theory of opposites. Her paintings reach their simplest, most primordial

culmination in the aptly-titled *Big Bang*. In many of Berg's paintings, the circle at first appears to be in repose, but further contemplation reveals a boundless energy. Lines, patterns and grids carry the eye in a darting motion up and down, side to side, and diagonally across the canvas. The appearance of spherical forms within the paintings is created by circles that recede into the black or white background. In *Four Elements I & IV*, the white circle that recedes into the black actually is not reversed. Rather, it is raised against a white background that contrasts with its smoother surface.

Deliberate optical illusions and "accidents" of the medium play an important role in Berg's work. In *Black Series IV*, for example, two corners of the square are left unfilled, challenging the viewer's cognitive awareness. In *25 Times*, the playful impressions left by rubber bands relieve the severity of the grid.

The poetic appeal of Berg's work rest, finally, on the interplay of opposites. Color is particularly important. Vassily Kandinsky, in his essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, described white as "pregnant with possibilities." White is the perfect balance of all color yet, paradoxically, it is also colorless. Black, conversely, is the absence of color and light. If white is thought of as consciousness, and black as unconsciousness, combining the two to form a perfect circle creates one of nature's most simple yet endlessly fascinating images.

—Katarina Cerny, Curator

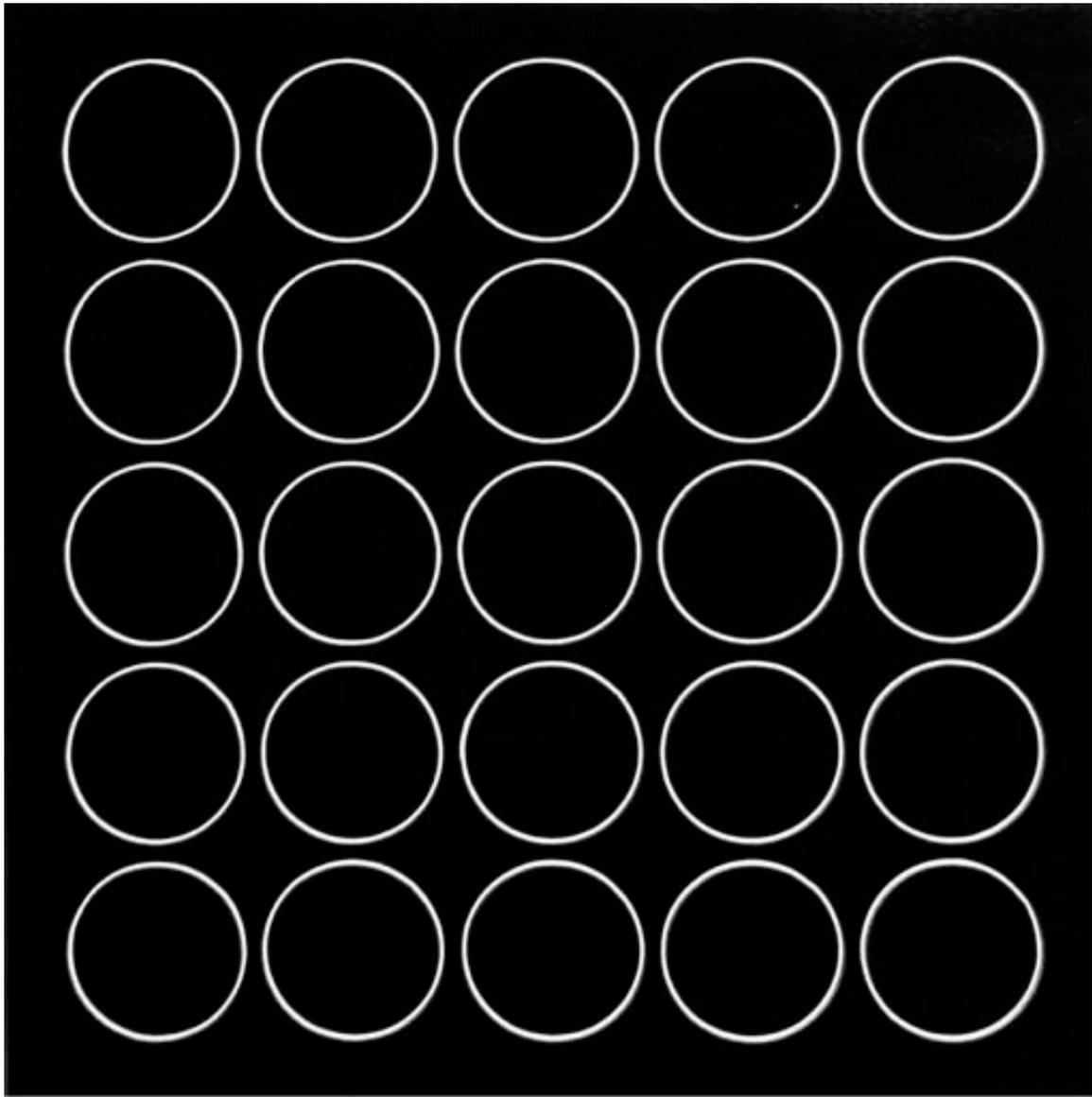
*Black Series* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.



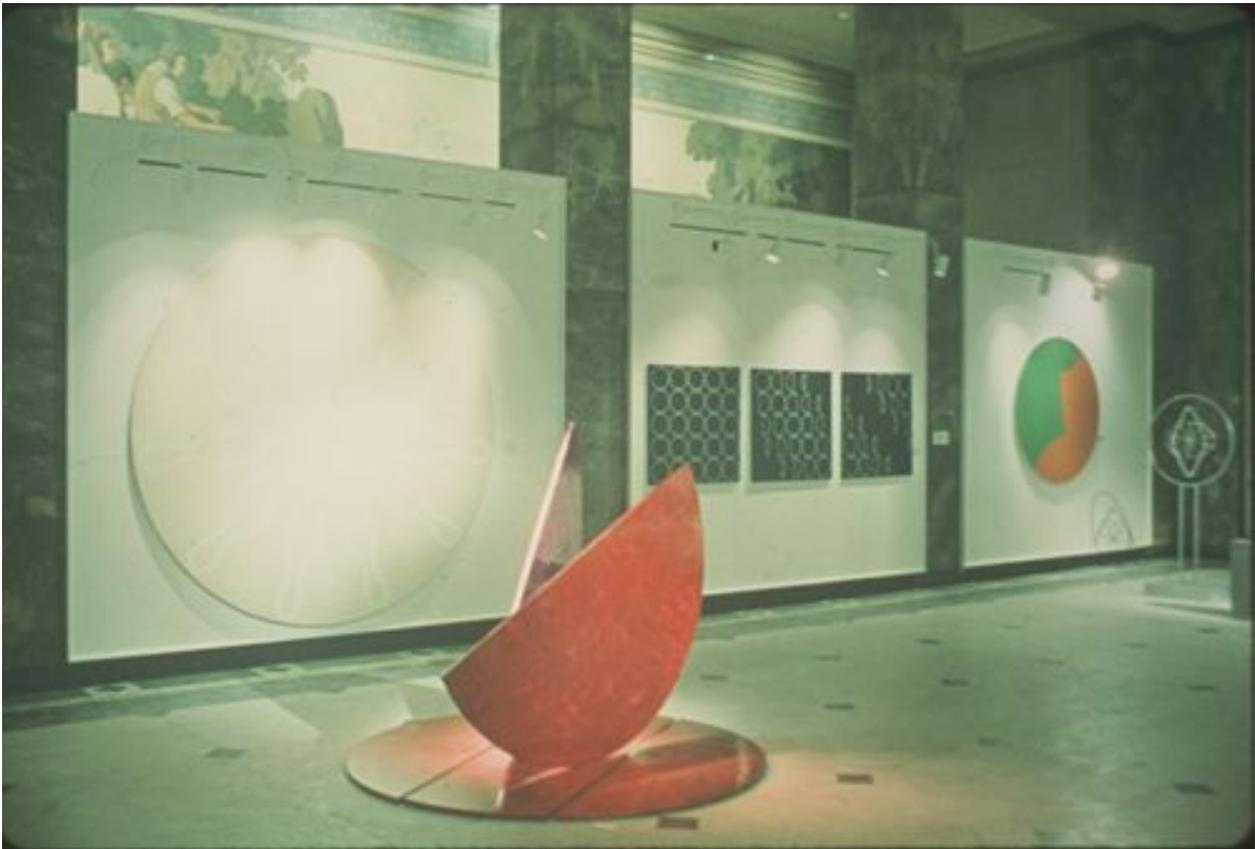
*Black Series* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.



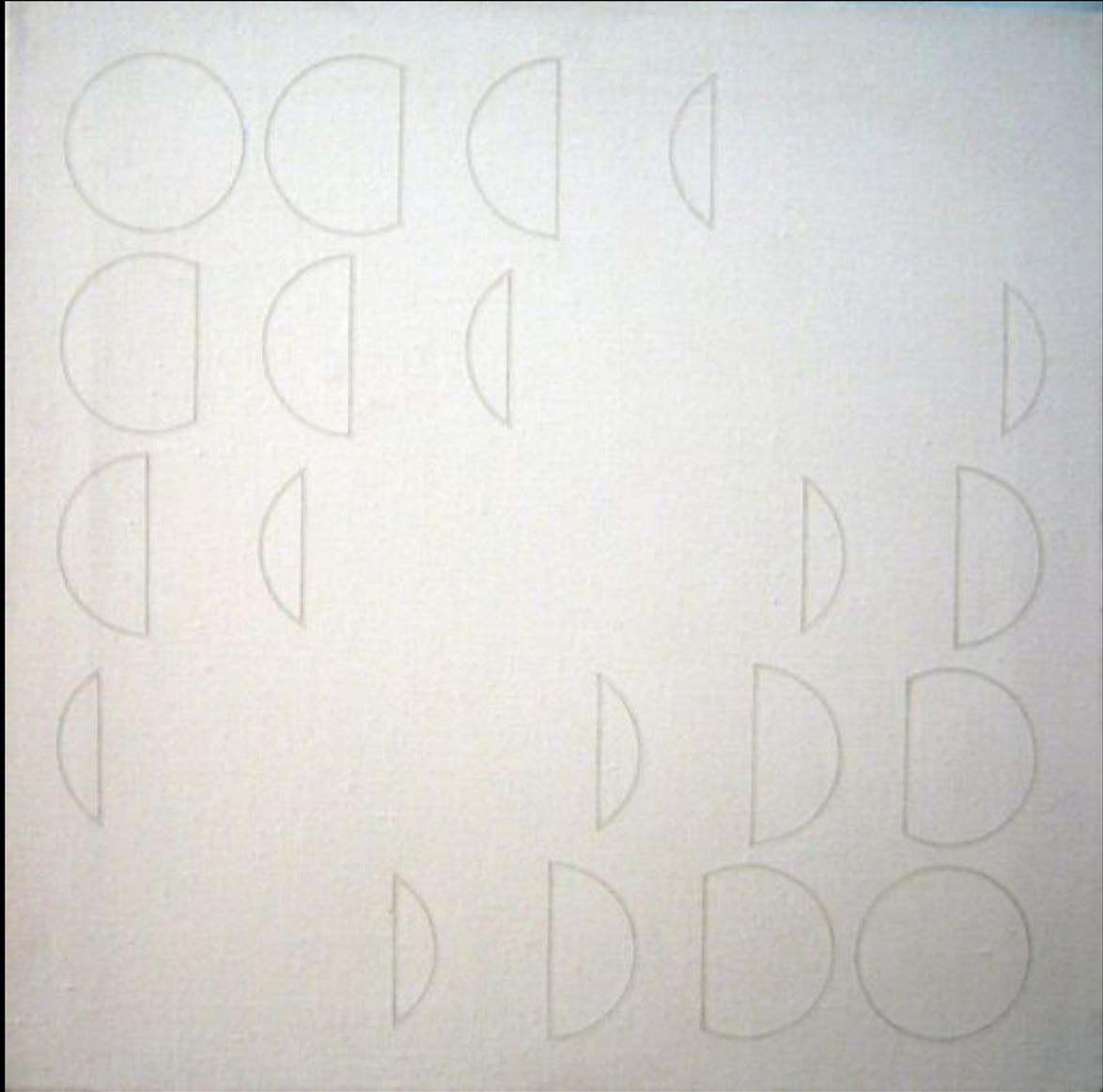
*Black Series* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in.



Installation view, "The Magic Circle" group exhibition, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1977



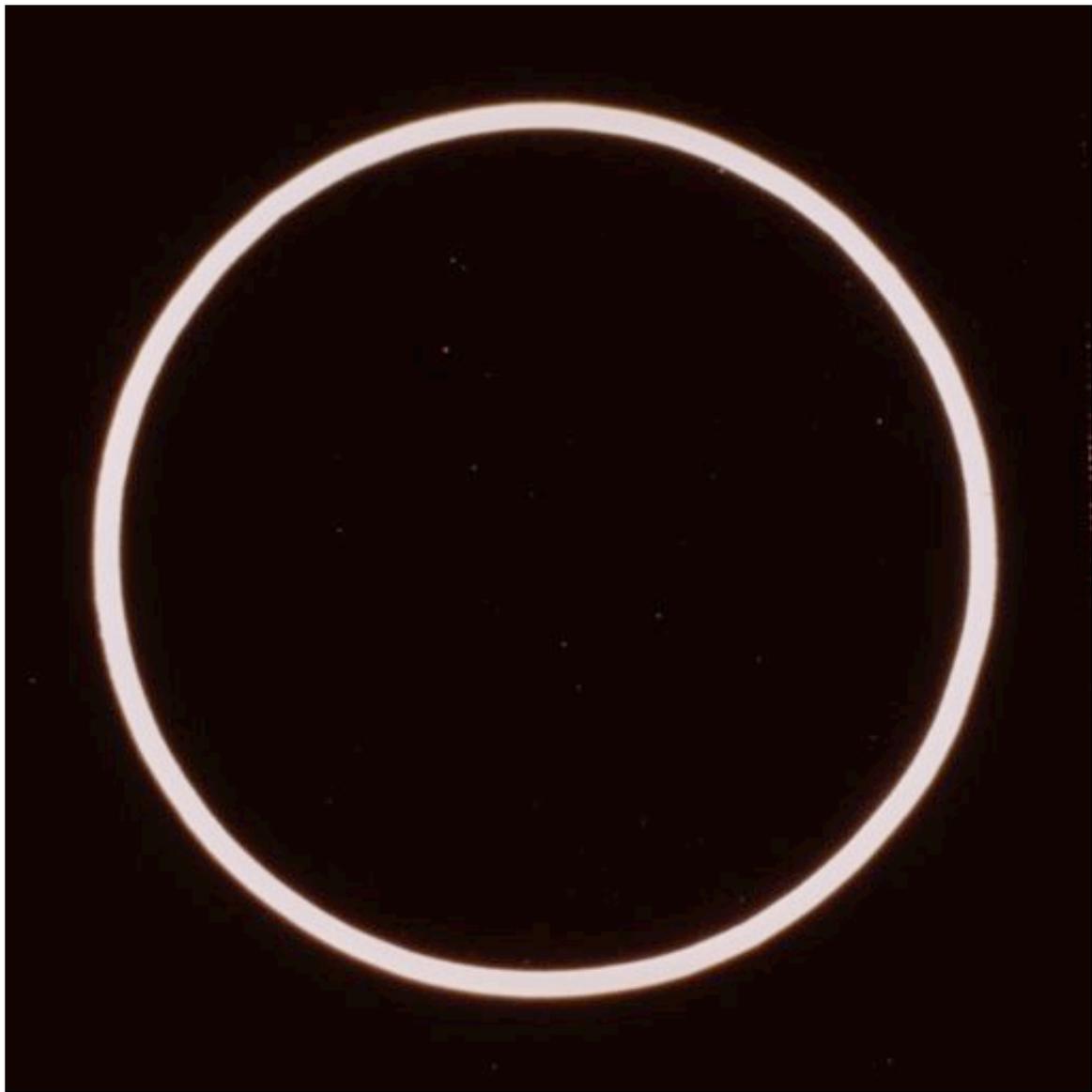
*White Series* (1977), acrylic on canvas with sunken relief, 54 x 54 in.



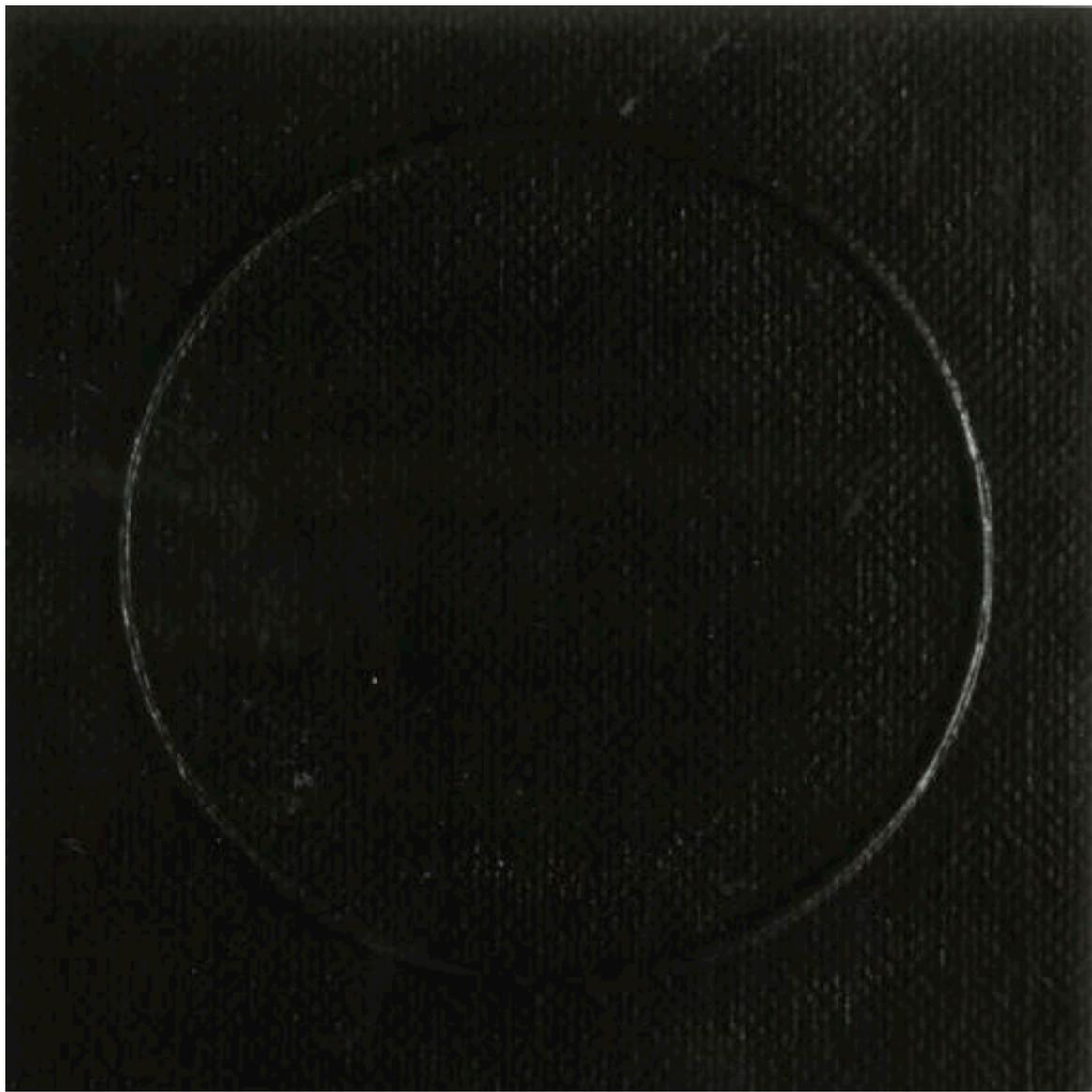


FOUR ELEMENTS

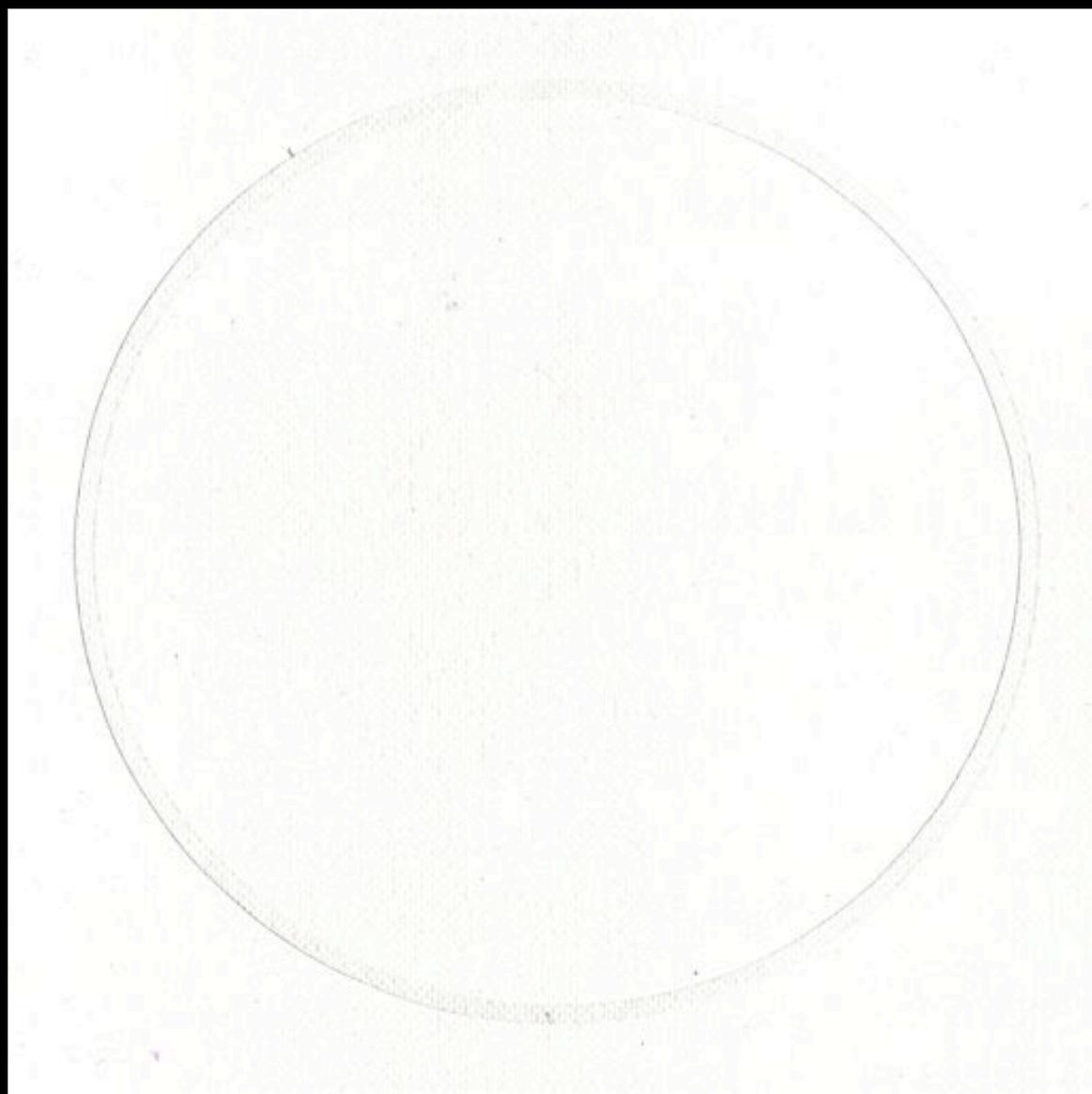
*Four Elements I* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.



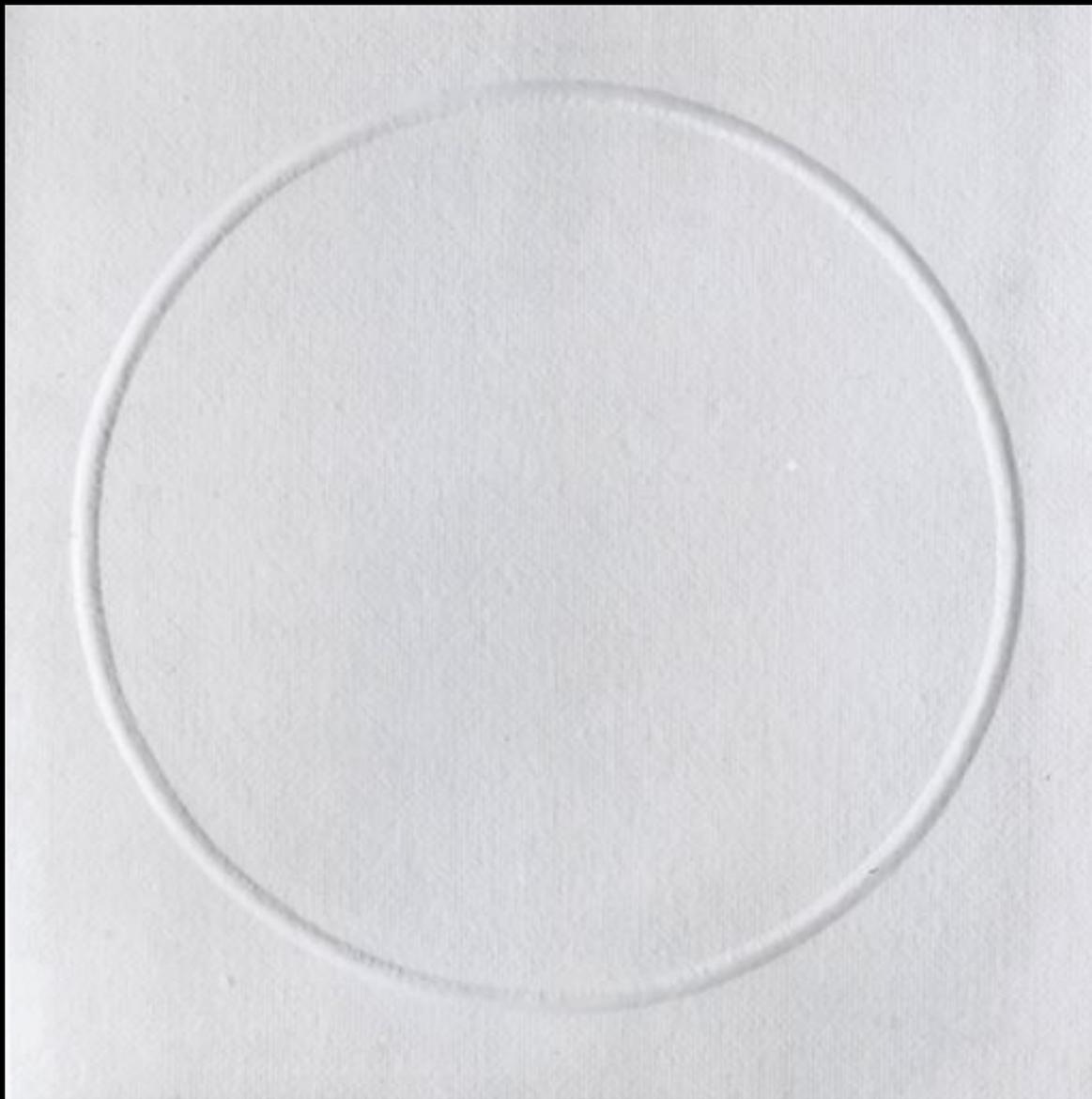
*Four Elements II* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.



*Four Elements III* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.



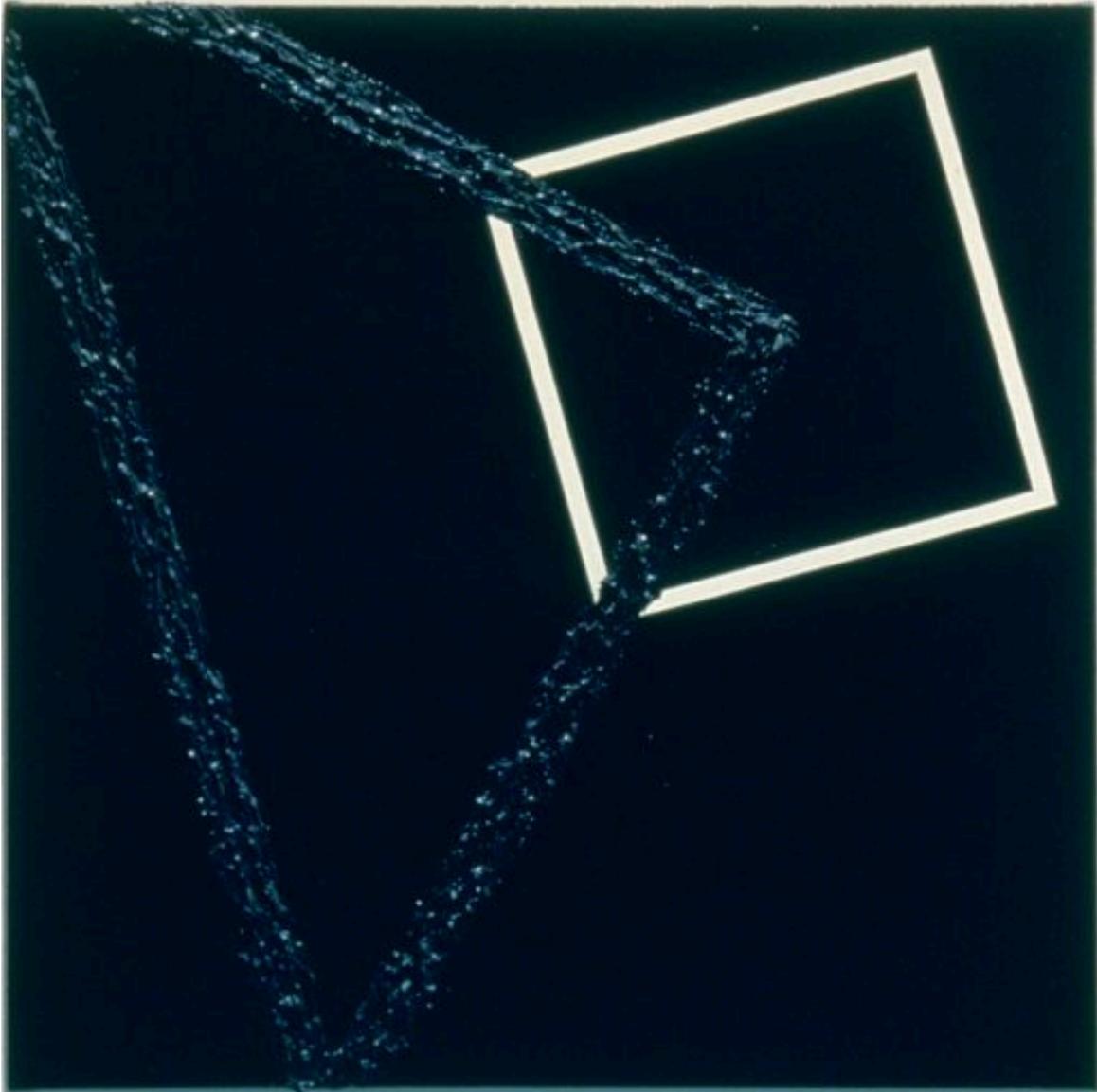
*Four Elements IV* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 in.



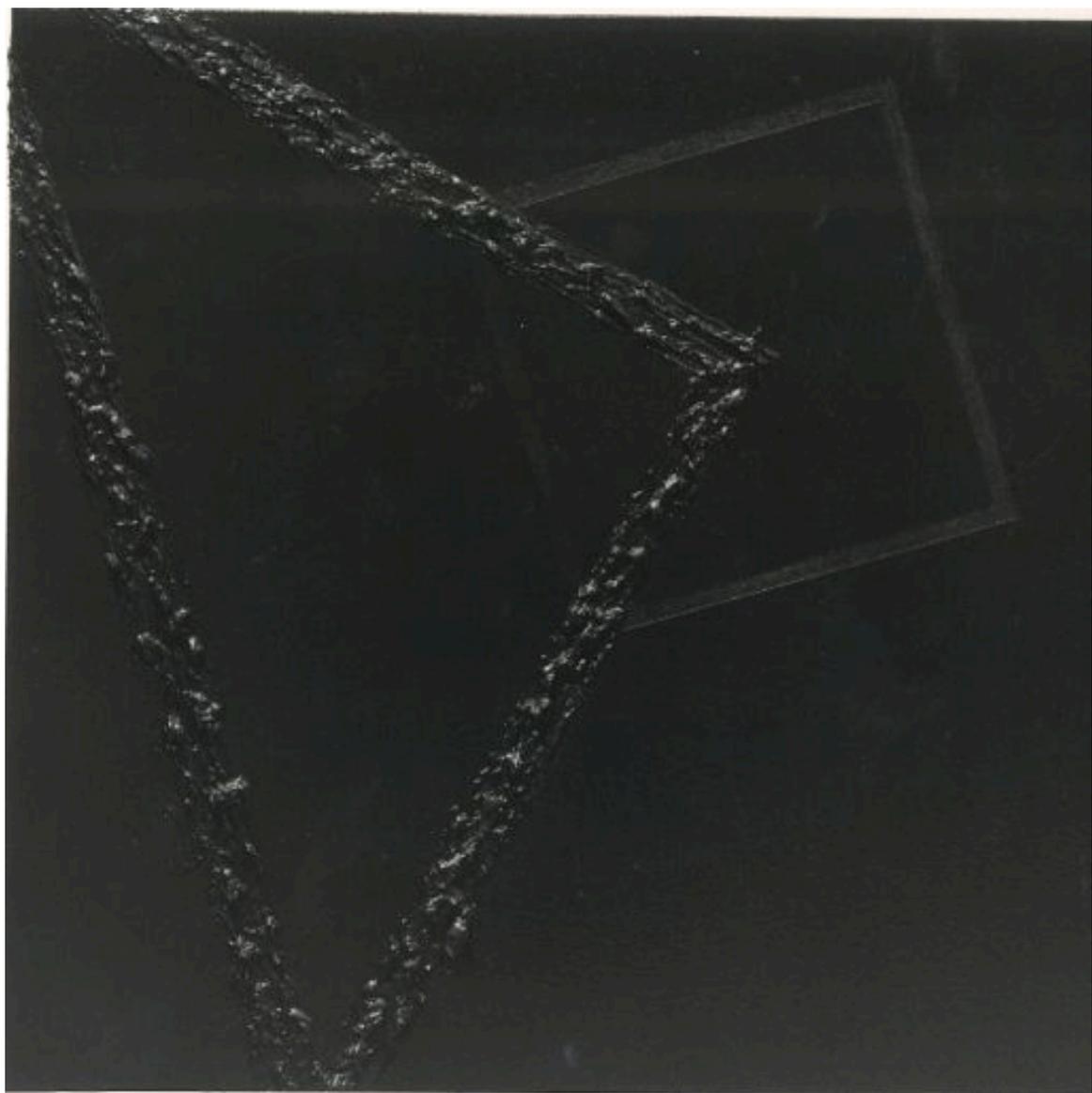


EMPTY SPACES

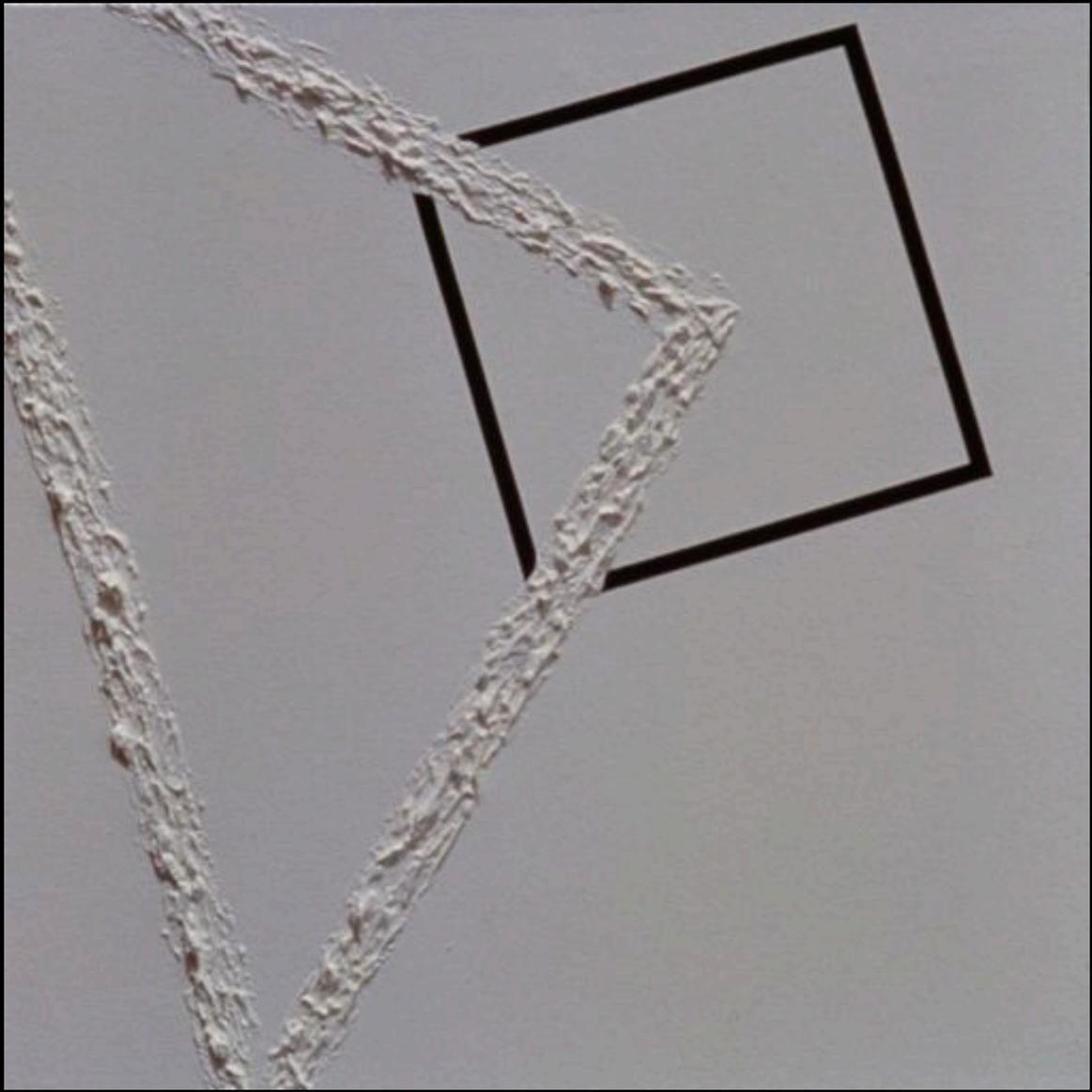
*Empty Spaces I* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



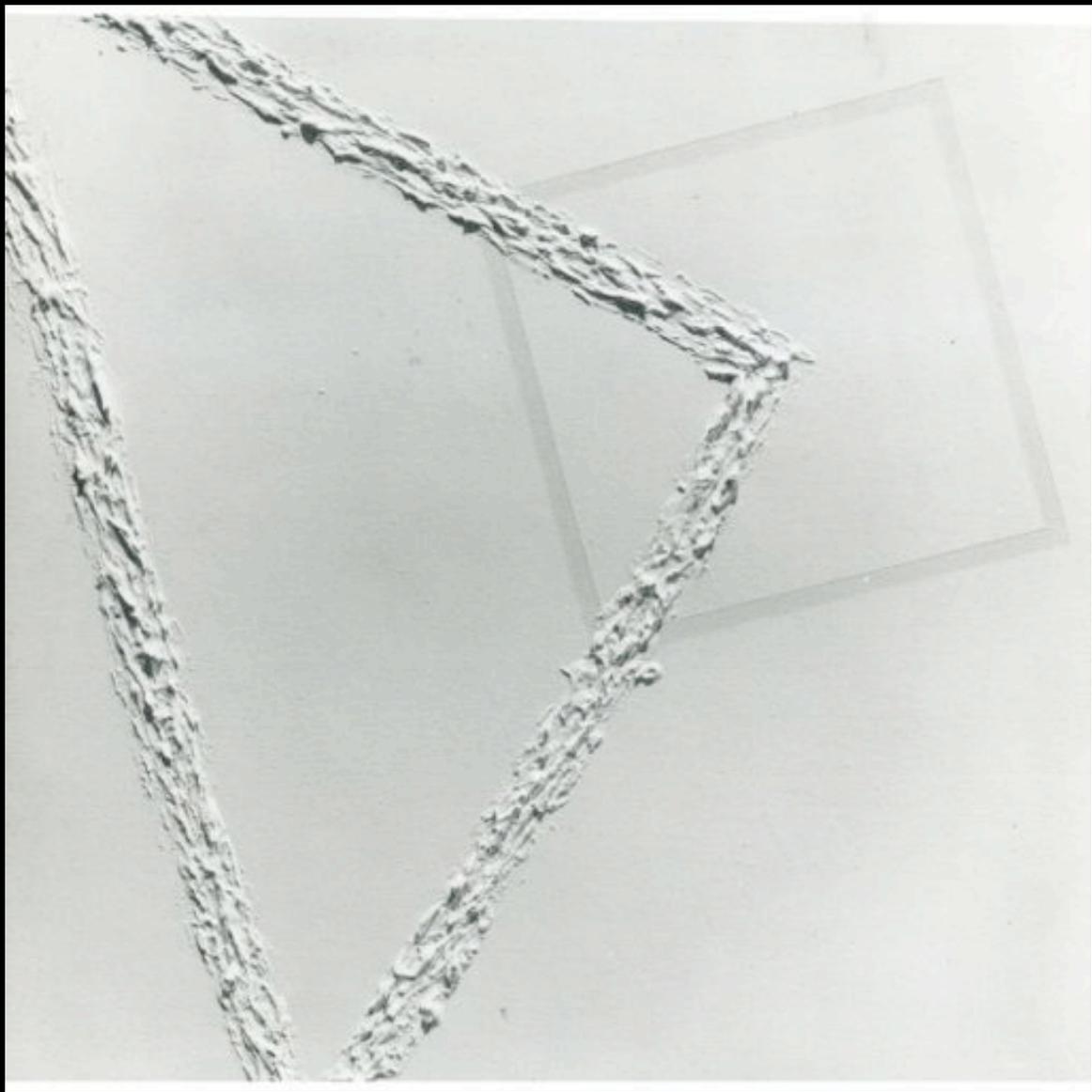
*Empty Spaces II* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



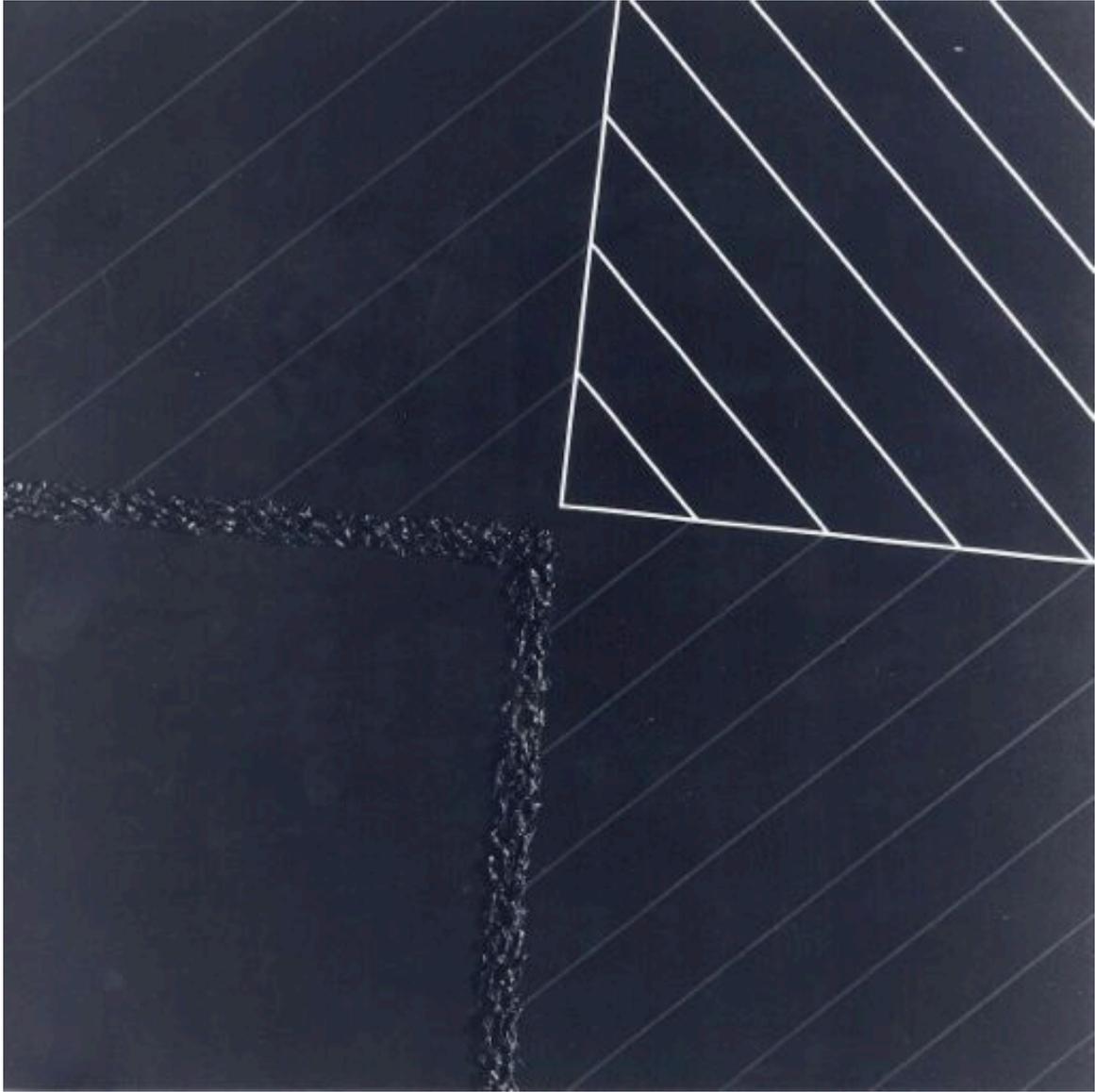
*Empty Spaces III* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



*Empty Spaces IV* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



*Empty Spaces* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.



*Empty Spaces* (1986), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30 in.





KABBALAH

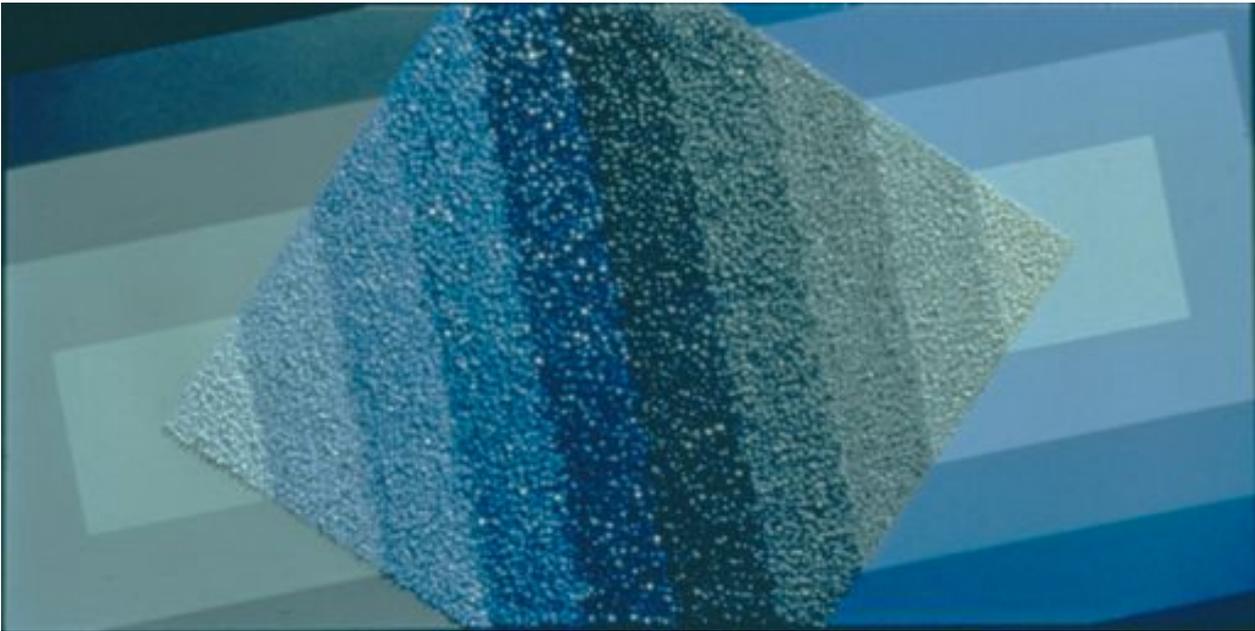
*Kabbalah* (1985), acrylic on canvas, 35 x 95 in.



*Modular Triptych* (1986), oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30 in. each



*Endless Blue* (1986-97), oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 x 80 in.



*Kabbalah* (1985), oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.



*Kabbalah* (1998), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in. each



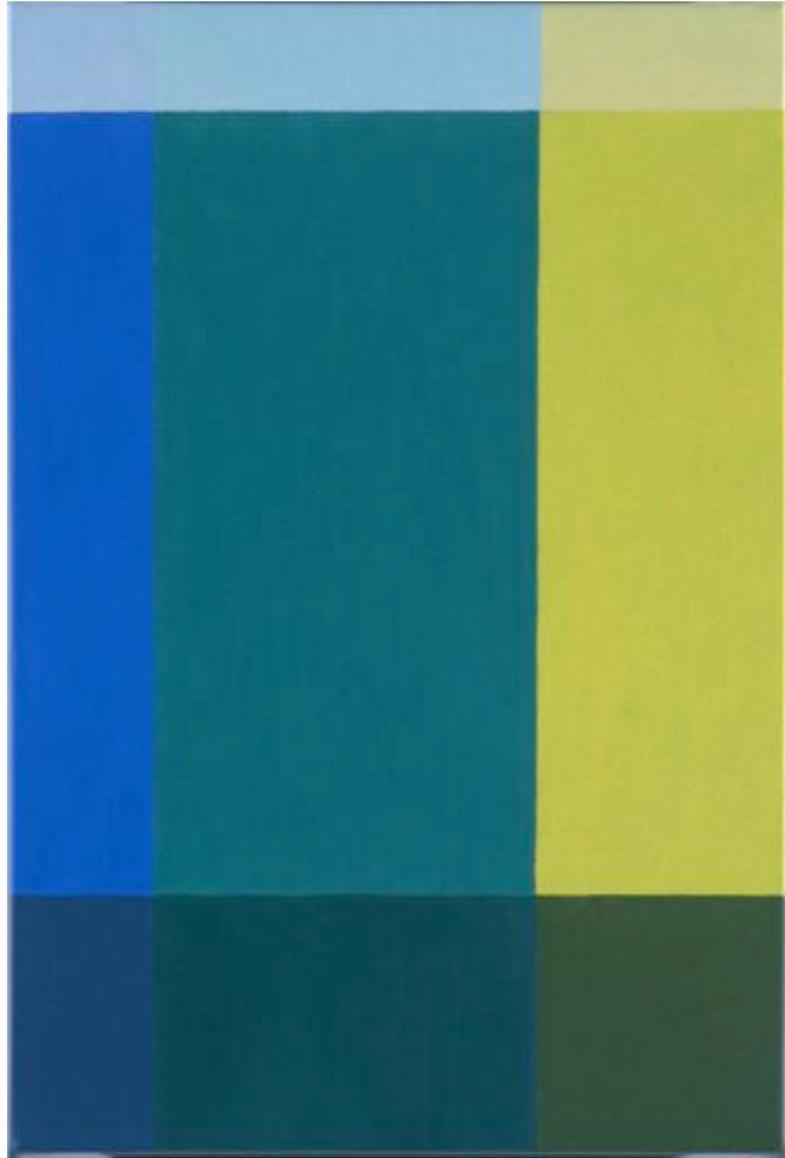
*Kabbalah* (2000-02), oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 in.





STRAIGHT LINE & BARS

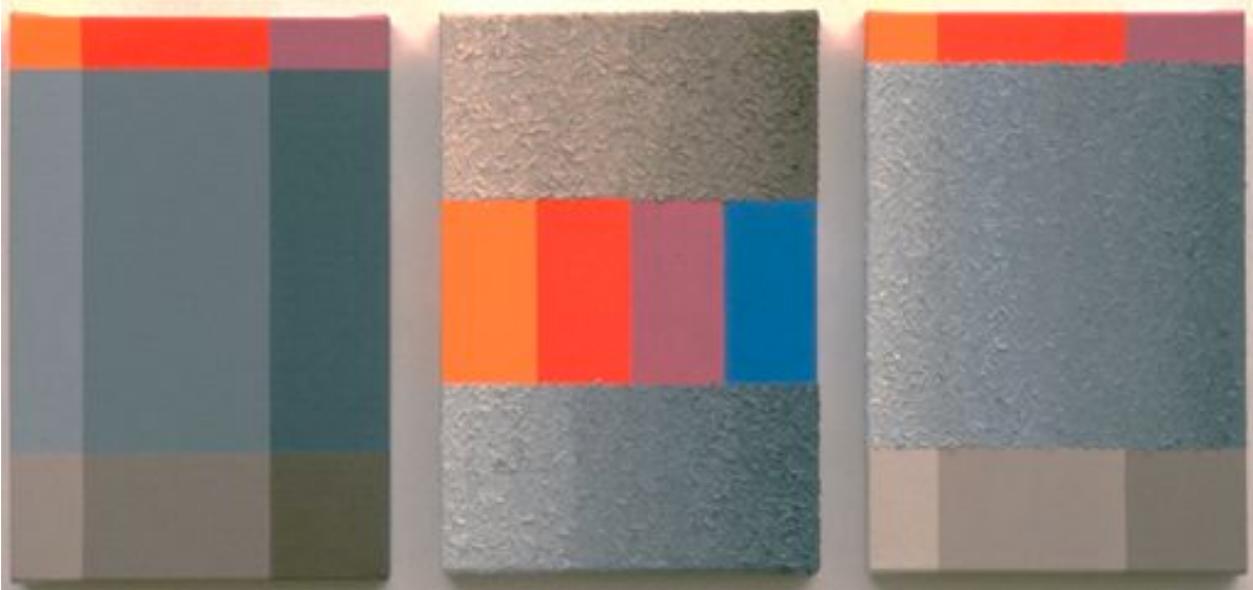
*Bars* (1994), oil on linen, 15 x 10 in.



*Bars* (1995-96), oil on linen, 15 x 10 in.



*Bars and Straight Line* (1995, 1995-96, 1995-96), oil on linen, 30 x 20 in. each



*Straight Line* (1996), oil on linen, 30 x 20 in.





IT'S ALL ABOUT COLOR

*Stormy Weather* (1999), oil on linen, 12 x 12 in.



*Indigo I* (1999), oil on linen, 12 x 12 in.



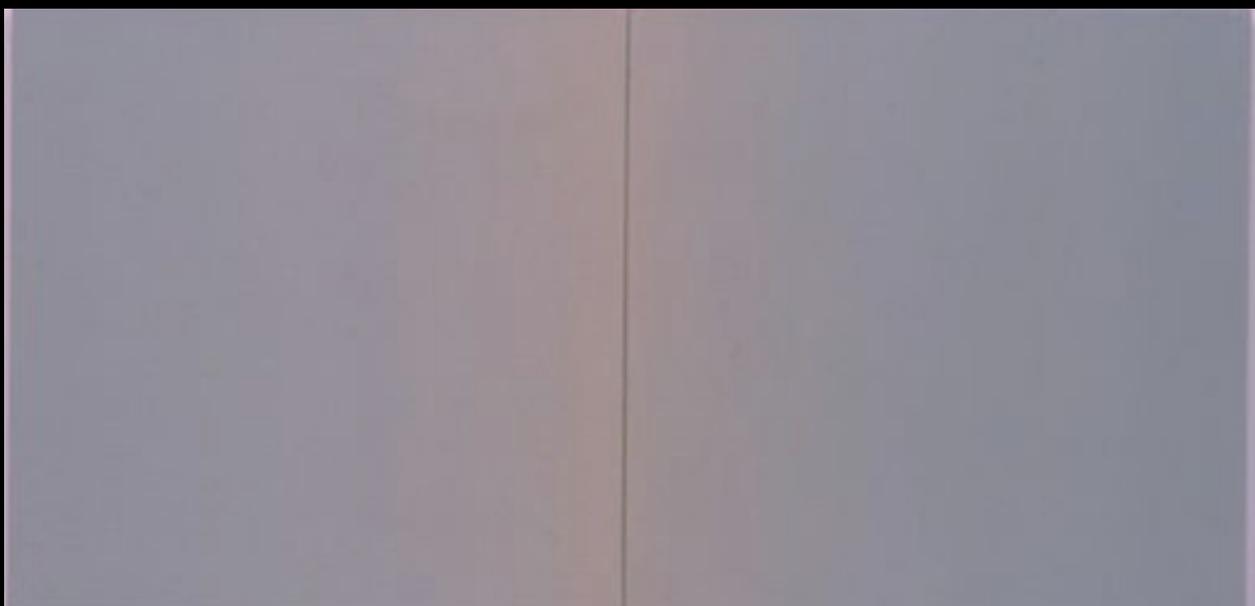
*Hot* (1999), oil on linen, 12 x 12 in.



*Crimson Lake* (2000), oil on linen, 30 x 30 in.



*Dusk to Dawn* (2001), oil on linen, 14 x 14 in. each



*Pissaro's Purple Trees* (2002), oil on canvas, 14 x 14 in. each



*Pinwheel* (2005), oil on canvas, 14 x 14 in.



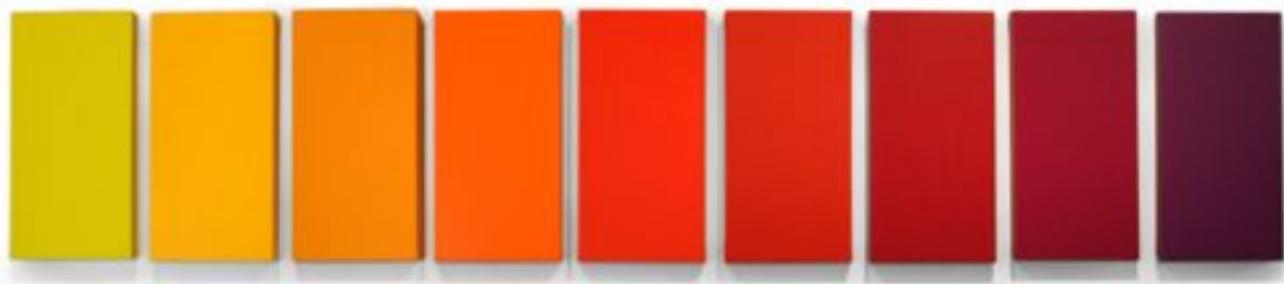


*It's All About Color I* (2011-2013), acrylic on canvas, 9 panels, 20 x 10 in. each





*It's All About Color II* (2011-2013), acrylic on canvas, 9 panels, 20 x 10 in. each





## **Studio Visit: Siri Berg in New York**

*FAD Website (UK)*

September 12, 2012

On entering the home and studio of Siri Berg I am welcomed by the artist, a petite, radiant woman. Softly spoken and elegant she stands in front of a selection of her life's work that adorn the walls. One is immediately struck by a sense of calm order and organisation. She invites me to sit and we begin an intimate and fascinating discussion of her life and work.

Born in Sweden in 1921, Berg came to New York alone as a teenager, leaving as she describes it the "constriction" she felt in Sweden. It is clear from her smile, as she warmly reflects, how much she loves New York and the freedom it allowed her in following her artistic path. It wasn't until her thirties that Berg became fully focused on producing Fine Art. Married twice and with two sons, it was in her home in Riverdale that she first began to paint; on a bridge table in her bedroom. As one son moved out she would claim his room as a studio and it soon became clear she would need more space. With the encouragement of her stepdaughter she started seeking a studio in New York City and the one she found is the one she remains in to this day.

In her home and studio you can gain a serious overview of her work throughout the years. The work of Berg consists of three main bodies, assemblages (made from found objects), paintings

and collages. Most are minimalist, but there are other works created in a more geometric abstraction. She speaks of her influences from the Bauhaus, mostly it would seem, in terms their “revolutionary and unconventional” approach, and adds, more pragmatically, that her influence derives from the “home furnishings not furniture or fine art, forks and knives and things like that... I was open to it – nothing stopped me.”

The show of her work that opens on the 6th September: *Black and White 1976 – 1981: Redux 2012* focuses on a moment when there is a departure from her normal striking use of colour. Her choice of black and white, at this time, is perhaps not surprising in that her use of colour is typically very bold and direct including series’ of monochromatic panels. The show at Hionas Gallery, New York, NY, provides a rare opportunity to see these earlier pieces, concentrated on black and white.

In her current show which is a selection of work from her previous exhibition of 1986, at the American Swedish museum in Philadelphia, she uses circles in space, not so much to create an image that might be thought minimalist in the nihilistic sense of being stripped of emotion to the bare bones, but rather, still full of energy and deep reflection. In the original exhibit (now in her studio) her piece “Big Bang” in title and in composition is a perfect reflection of this. She speaks of the redux with excitement: “interesting,” she says, “when it’s up to see how one reacts when it has been so long ago,” poignantly, in fact, as this group of works marked her departure, at the time, from these

compositions of spheres ending with the aptly titled “Big Bang.” Fascinatingly she would return to this theme 7 years later but with the injection of powerful colour very much changing the mood, which she explains by saying “the theme needed to be explored again.” In this show we can appreciate the cool, calm and collected precision of this excursion into pure black and white.

—Clementine Kitty



Siri Berg circa 1971, with *Kaleidoscope* (1971)

SIRI BERG was born in Stockholm, Sweden. She received her BA from the Institute of Art and Architecture at the University of Brussels. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally for over 30 years in such countries as Australia, China, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Spain and Germany, and across the United States. Her work is included in the permanent collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Southwest State University Art Museum, Minnesota; Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY; and the Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm, among many other public and private collections. She is a long-time member of the American Abstract Artists and has taught Color Theory at Parsons, The New School for Design for over 30 years. She lives and works in New York City.



## **SIRI BERG**

**Born** Stockholm, Sweden, 1921

**Education** B.A. Institute of Art and Architecture, University of Brussels;  
Pratt Graphics Center, Brooklyn

### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

- 2013 "Phases" Hionas Gallery, New York
- 2012 "Black & White 1976-1981: Redux 2012" Hionas Gallery, New York
- 2011 "Beyond Measure" C2 Fine Art, St. Petersburg, FL  
"American Abstract Artists 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" OK Harris, New York  
"Siri Berg / Works on Paper" Structural Madness
- 2010 "Easel Artist" w/ Guest moderator David Cohen, Franklin 54, New York
- 2009 "Color" Broadway Gallery, New York
- 2008 "It's All About Color" Franklin 54, New York  
"Geometric Acrylic and Mixed Media Paintings" Southwest Minnesota  
State University Art Museum, Marshall, MN
- 2006 "It's All About Color" Gibson Gallery Museum, SUNY, Potsdam, NY
- 2005 "2005 Year of Swedish Design Seminar" Australian National Maritime  
Museum, Sydney  
Pickled Art Gallery, Beijing
- 2004 "Color Elfante" Valencia, Spain  
Berlin Kunstprojekt, Berlin
- 2003 Konsthäuset, Stockholm  
Swedish American Museum, Chicago  
ETS (Educational Testing Service), Princeton, NJ
- 2002 Official residence, Consul General of Sweden Olle Wastberg, New York
- 2000 Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ  
Hallwyl Museum, Stockholm
- 1999 The Museum of the Southwest, Midland, TX  
The American Swedish Museum, Philadelphia  
Walter Wickiser Gallery, New York

- 1997 The Robert C. Williams American Museum of Paper Making, Atlanta  
Westbrook Gallery, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta  
Walter Wickiser Gallery, New York
- 1995 Walter Wickiser Gallery, New York
- 1992 Galerie Konstruktiv Tendens, Stockholm  
Elaine Benson, Bridgehampton, NY
- 1991 Yeshiva University, New York
- 1990 Elaine Benson, Bridgehampton, NY  
Alena Adlung Gallery, New York  
"8<sup>th</sup> Annual Works on Paper" Top Award, QCC Art Gallery of CUNY, Bayside
- 1989 Alena Adlung Gallery, New York
- 1987 Paula Allen Gallery, New York
- 1986 Paula Allen Gallery, New York  
"Black & White 1976-1981" The American Swedish Museum, Philadelphia
- 1981 American Scandinavian Foundation, New York
- 1976 Debel Gallery, Jerusalem  
Cultural Center, U.S. State Department, Jerusalem

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2013 UNTITLED International Contemporary Art Fair, Miami Beach, FL
- 2012 "Twist" Southwest Minnesota State University Art Museum, Marshall, MN  
"Re-Generation" Curated by Carrie Patterson, The Painting Center,  
New York
- 2011 "Red, Black and White" Structural Madness  
"Embrace" Immigrant Museum, Vaxjo, Sweden  
"American Abstract Artists International 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary " Galerie obqo +  
Deutscher Kunsterbund, Berlin; OK Harris, New York  
"Works on Paper" C2 Fine Art, St. Petersburg, FL  
"Streamline" C2 Fine Art, St. Petersburg, FL  
"Splendor of Dynamic Structure: Celebrating 75 Years of the American  
Abstract Artists" Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY
- 2010 "It's a Wonderful Tenth" Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

- 2010 "Visual Play: 5 Contemporary Painters" Shorecrest Preparatory School Fine Arts Gallery, St. Petersburg, FL  
 "American Abstract Artists International" Museum Aragonese Castle, Otranto, Italy  
 "Looking Back: 40 Years at the Pelham Art Center" Pelham Art Center, Pelham, NY  
 "Continuing Color Abstraction" Curated by Rella Stuart-Hunt, The Painting Center, New York
- 2009 "Artists of the Month" ART Fairs International Biennale, New York ARTs Pavilion, Venice  
 "Color" Southwest Minnesota State University Art Museum, Marshall, MN
- 2008 "No Chromophobia" OK Harris, New York  
 "American Abstract Artists" The Painting Center, New York
- 2007 "Mostly White" Franklin 54 Gallery, New York  
 "Punchbowl" Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
 "The Grid" Reeves Contemporary, New York  
 "Equality Now" Benefit Auction, Franklin 54, New York  
 "Continuum: In Celebration of 70 Years of American Abstract Artists" St. Peters College, Jersey City, NJ  
 "New Art Project" Small Works Invitational, Kutztown, PA
- 2006 "Net Media Exhibition" Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
- 2005 "American Abstract Artists" Yellow Bird Gallery, Newburgh, NY  
 "Ideal: Selections from the American Abstract Artists" Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
 "Engaging the Structural" Curated by Julie Karabenick, Broadway Gallery, New York
- 2004 "Fall Bloom" Curated by David Markus, Broadway Gallery, New York  
 "SWEA 25 Jubileum exhibition" Millesgarden, Lidingo, Sweden
- 2003 "Works on Paper" William Whipple Gallery, Marshall, MN
- 2002 "Master Paintings and Woodcuts" William Whipple Gallery, Marshall, MN  
 "Abstract Dilemmas" The Martin Gallery, Muhlenberg College, PA  
 "The Elements of Geometry" Monique Goldstrom Gallery, New York

- 2002 "Blobs, Wiggles an Dots, Webs and Crustillations" Curated by Lucio Pozzi, The Workspace, New York
- 2000 "Art on Paper" Curated by P. Rosensweig, Maryland Federation of Art, Annapolis, MD
- 1998 Federal Reserve Bank, New York  
"Art on Paper" Curated by E. Rathbone, Maryland Federation of Art, Annapolis, MD
- 1997 "Inaugural Show" McLean Gallery, Malibu, CA  
"Four Women Artists" Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta, GA  
Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Morris Louis Gallery, Jerusalem
- 1995 "Identity & Illusion: A Tribute to Ingmar Bergman" Thomas Nordenstad Gallery, New York
- 1994 "The Universe as Collage" Shirley Fitterman Gallery, New York
- 1993 "Aishet Hayil: A Woman of Valor" traveling exhibition (1993-1998), Yeshiva University, New York  
"Computer Age Fine Art" The Williams Gallery, Princeton, NJ
- 1992 "Generations II: A Survey of Women Artists at the Millennium" A.I.R. Gallery, New York
- 1991 "Geometric Abstractions" Galerie Konstruktiv Tendens, Stockholm
- 1988 "Richesse du Papier" Galerie Fontainas, Brussels  
"Reflections on Technology" Hillier Group, Princeton, NJ
- 1986 "Architectural Images in Art" Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- 1980 "The Silvia Pizitz Collection" Birmingham Museum, Birmingham, AL
- 1979 "Unknown Universes" Pace University Gallery, New York
- 1978 "Art for Public Spaces" Bridges Gallery, New York
- 1976 "Contemporary Reflections" The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT

### **Selected Collections**

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York  
 The Jewish Museum, New York  
 Pace University, New York  
 Yeshiva University, New York

Gray Art Gallery, NYU, New York  
Moderna Museet (Museum of Modern Art), Stockholm  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, MN  
Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY  
University of Alabama, Birmingham  
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham  
Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta  
The Coca-Cola Company, Atlanta  
Air Touch Communication, Washington, DC  
AT&T  
IBM  
Revlon  
Wang Industries  
J.P. Morgan Chase  
Chemical Bank  
Public Service Mutual  
The Reuben H. Donnelly Company  
Deloitte & Touche  
Seidman & Seidman  
Sanford C. Bernstein Company Inc.  
GCI International  
Svenska Handelsbanken  
Scanoil  
Kreab & Gavin Anderson  
PK-Banken  
Mr. John Naisbitt  
Dr. and Mrs. Raymond Sackler  
Hon. Consul General of Sweden, Olle Wastberg and Inger Claesson  
Renee and Ted Serure Collection  
John G. Inch Collection

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Hionas Gallery  
124 Forsyth Street  
New York, NY 10002  
(646) 559-5906  
[www.hionasgallery.com](http://www.hionasgallery.com)



