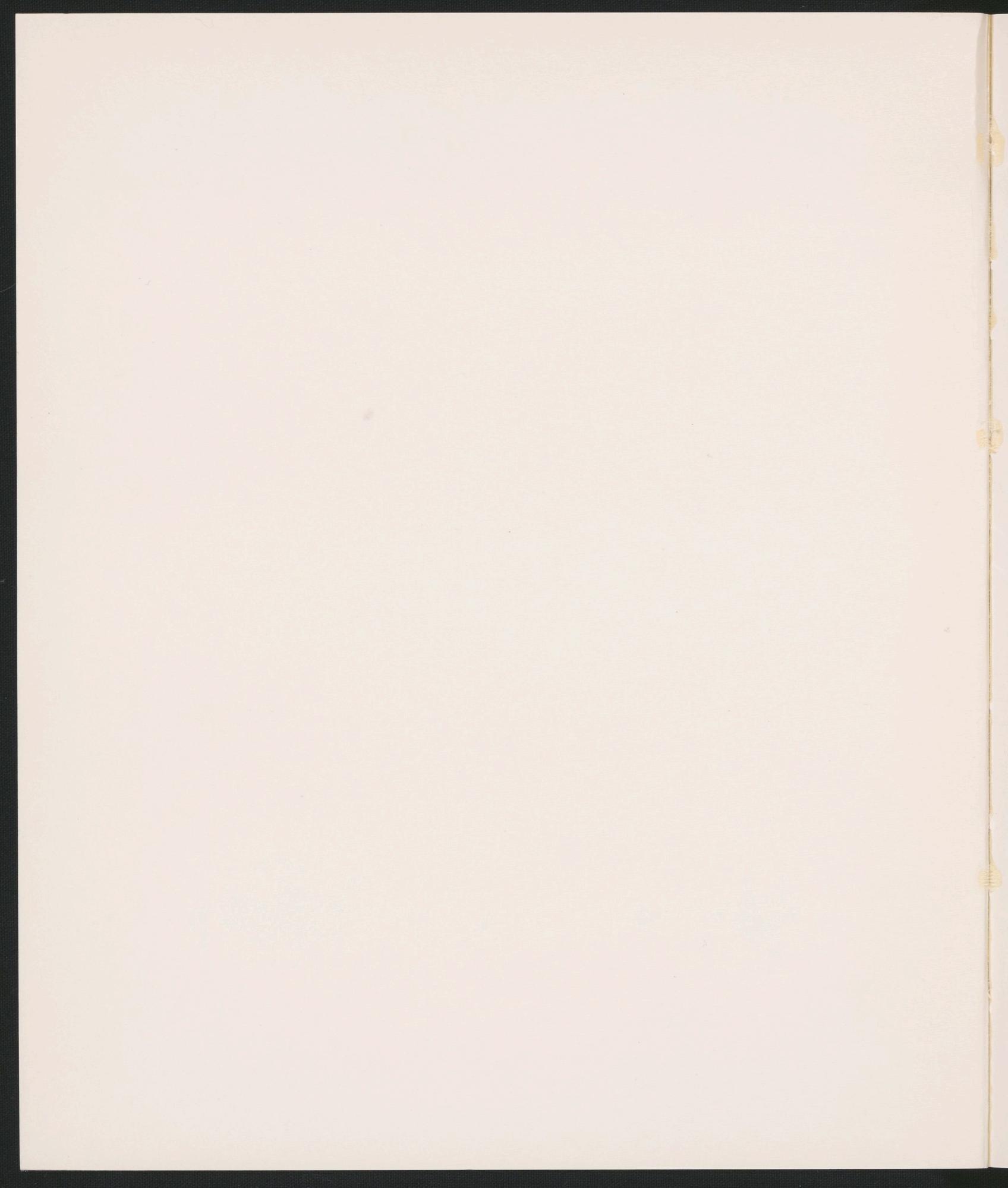
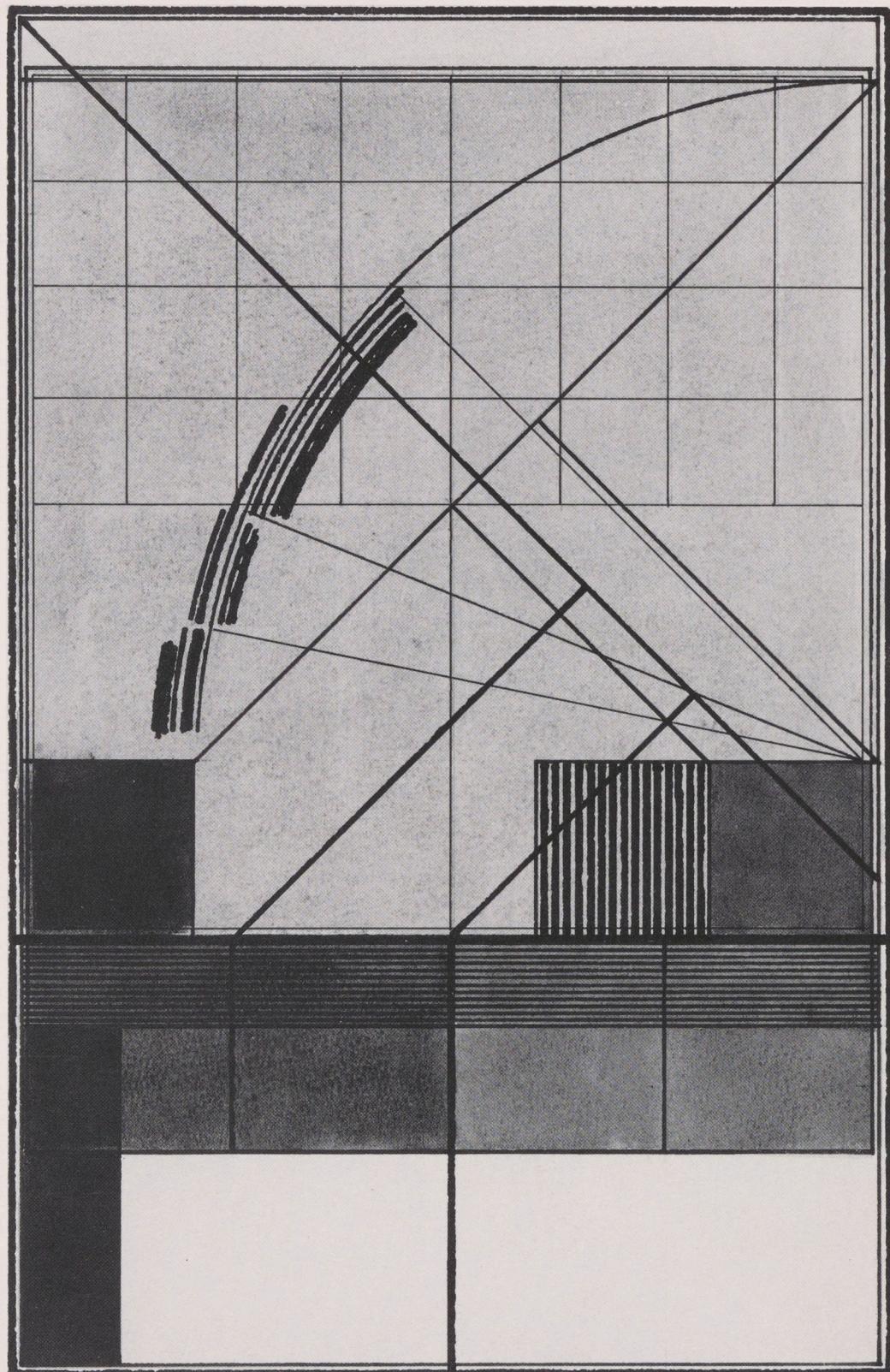


1985

Milan Mrkusich





Milan Mrkusich

and beyond further on
1970-1983

Milan Mrkusich

a decade further on 1974-1983

End papers: 'Logic forms, 1977 - 85'
Ink and wash on paper
320 x 210mm
collection the artist

rtboiauhMrkusich
no vertical supports
1974-1983

This catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition
"Milan Mrkusich - a decade further on, 1974-1983", held at the
Auckland City Art Gallery from 14 August to 25 September 1985.

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Milan Mrkusich 1985

Milan Mrkusich: a decade further on some introductory notes on meaning and method

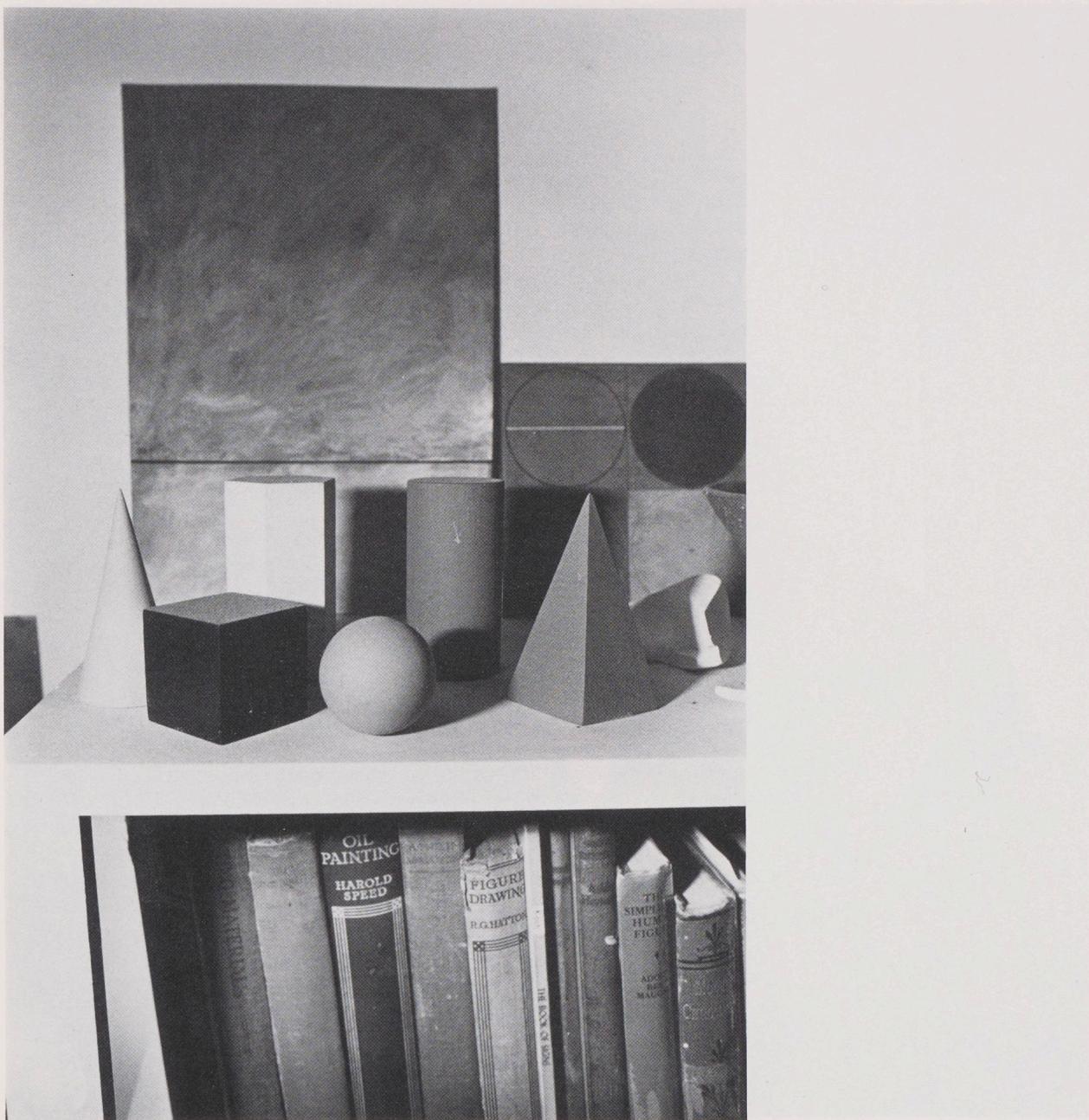
We are accustomed to thinking of a painting as consisting of a subject rendered on a canvas or panel according to an underlying structural scheme called a composition; of the sum total of all the components in the painting having a meaning; and of the painting referring to the world outside of itself.

In the case of Milan Mrkusich, and painters like him, however, this is not so. For Mrkusich the organisation of the components is the subject and no distinction between subject and organisation (or composition) is possible. Similarly, the content of Mrkusich's painting is not a symbol of, or reference to the world outside the work. The meanings involved are universal, intrinsic to the shapes and forms used. Meaning and form, form and structure therefore are, in Mrkusich's painting, fused into a single whole, a whole which is nothing more nor less than itself, which is 'real' and which aspires to a universal state of harmony dependent upon no external reference.

This is the second retrospective exhibition of works by Milan Mrkusich mounted by the Auckland City Art Gallery. The first surveyed the years 1946 to 1972, while this reviews the paintings from the subsequent decade, 1974 to 1983. Dominant among the works of the first show were the *Emblem* and *Element* paintings from 1963 to 1966, paintings containing circles, frequently inscribed in squares, occasionally divided with vertical and horizontal lines, often organised singly or in fours, and sometimes combined with squares over squares. The genesis of almost all that Mrkusich has painted subsequently – and the works which make up this exhibition – lies within these *Emblem* and *Element* works.

During the sixties Mrkusich became concerned with the symbolic content of the signs and symbols which had intuitively arrived in his painting. First Aniela Jaffe's examination of symbolism in the visual arts influenced the works painted in and shortly after 1962, but later C. G. Jung's *Man and his Symbols* of 1964 assisted him in clarifying the meaning of the symbols and shapes which he had developed. Rudolph Koch's *The Book of Signs* also assisted Mrkusich in coming to grips with common symbolic references of certain shapes which have recurred time and time again in various cultures and at various times, shapes which independently were appearing in his work. For a while, therefore, Mrkusich clearly and consciously pursued an understanding of symbolic forms which have crossed cultural frontiers, and have formed a common language accessible to people of widely differing experiences. In so doing he peeled a little from the onion-like layers of meaning heaped upon such forms and approached a clearer understanding of the content of his own.

Subsequently, however, Mrkusich's direct concern with meaning has receded and the painted forms have become less obviously 'alchemical', more rigorously elements in a self-contained, taught aesthetic structure. The universality of the symbols has not diminished, but their meaning can be less readily verbalized. The works are more 'recalcitrant', if you like, less willing to yield to demands for a specific



Mrkusich Studio 1985

interpretation. And yet in that very recalcitrance, they are more readily understood, more easily approached. The works are what they are; propositions about the nature of reality. Mrkusich can legitimately be seen as belonging in the continuum of a classical tradition, one concerned with formal relationships and structure, and with a clear and definite visual language. There comes a time when forms such as

these must stand in silence; as elements in an enduring language requiring no verbal rationalization or exposition.

In 1972 the artist said of his work:

"A painting shows the facts of its own particular condition. My way is to begin with an unambiguous form. This can be an all over geometric grid, or a squared circle in a quadrangular form. Both ways one approaches a tautological condition. The rightness or truth is self evident in the form itself. In the end, words fail to say what intuitional factors bring about the changes in this tautological condition which result in the work of art. Painting comes from an intuitional process of work, the purpose of which is to show a TRUTH."

In 1985 his methodology remains little changed; the works are basically the same in structure as those painted a decade or two decades before, despite apparent differences. Mrkusich has identified three ways of working to which all groups of his paintings subscribe. They are:

- 1) Through set relationships – a series of entities with at least one attribute in common.
- 2) Through topology – study of the order involved in the placing of one thing in relationship to another.
- 3) Through structure – the organising principle; in his case, simple arithmetical sequences.

He works in series, the paintings from which are all variants upon the same structural relationships. There is no one truth in any proposition, he believes, and hence several solutions or 'truths' will be achieved. In certain cases the size of a series will be limited by the restrictions of a concept – the chromatic and achromatic series for instance. In others the possibilities are open-ended, and a series will only be terminated when the artist is no longer interested in pursuing it further.

The care with which Mrkusich's paintings are made, and the vigour with which he confines and directs his means have suggested to some a doctrinaire attitude to painting. The reality is quite different, however. Mrkusich has described his method as "undisciplined", the process of painting as "growing and grasping", and the result as "a sum of destructions". The concept of "undisciplined", at best, is a flexible thing, and there can be no doubt that the term applied to Mrkusich is altogether different from its application to certain other artists. Nevertheless, it is wrong to think of Mrkusich as a clinical painter sheltering within a vigorous formal discipline and responding to externally applied theoretical and aesthetic constraints. In the end, "you go by the look of it", he reflects, and the work will be right, will be finished when intuition tells you so.

Mrkusich has always worked in series. In these he can observe the evolution and growth of an idea and when a series is under way a concentrated period of activity will ensue. Between the series are long periods of gestation.

Generally speaking the ideas which are developed in each series are first articulated in small diagrams and rough colour plans. They are the 'blueprints' and come about spontaneously, intensely and intuitively. Within these concept sketches lie the elements which will be



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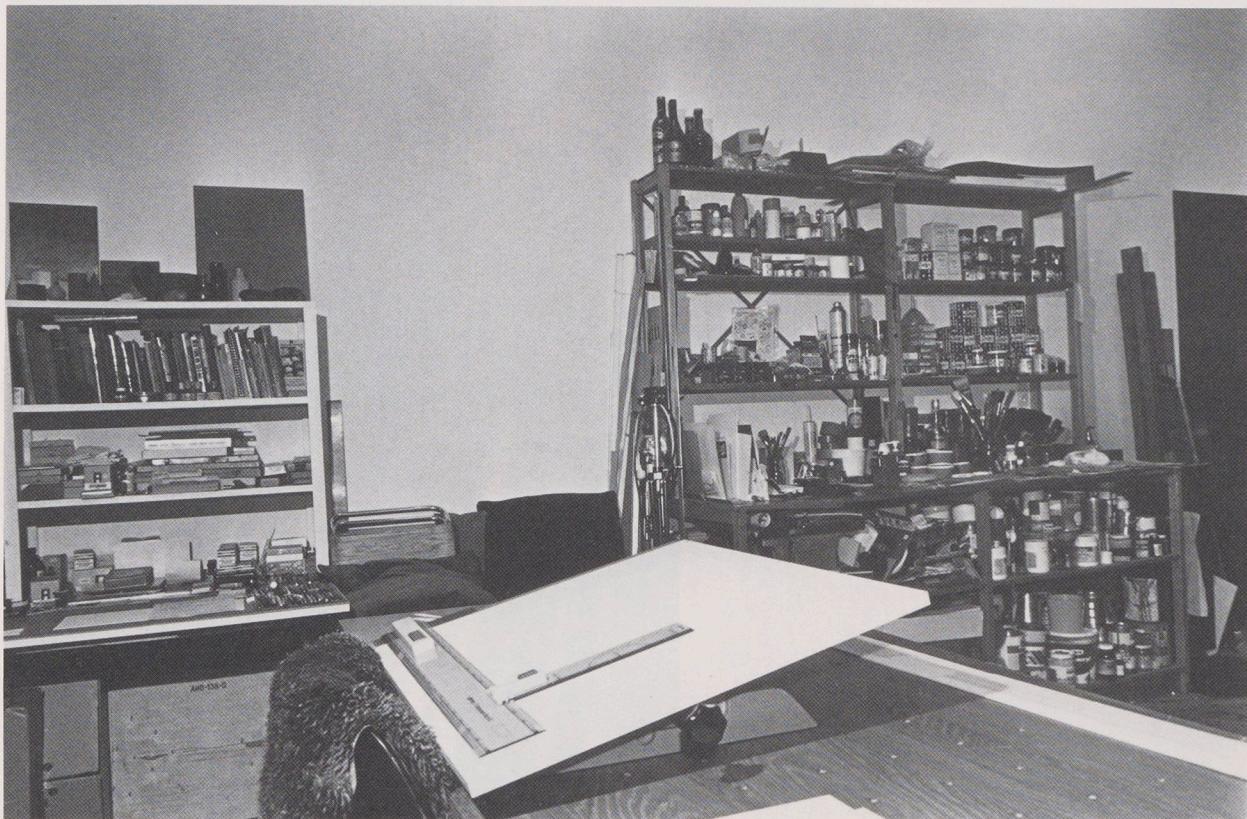
revealed and developed in the larger paintings. The sketches are subjected to further development in drawings on graph paper, but again these are not diagrams for meticulous scaling to the dimensions of the canvases. Instead, they are preparatory works standing alone as steps in a sequence out of which the paintings come and no matter how tight the geometric basis, variations will occur between diagram and final work.

Mrkusich works in a well-ordered studio. His colours and equipment, his preparatory studies, his past works which form the context for new paintings, are all close at hand. He works on a horizontal surface, choosing to paint on a table-top or on the floor.

His panels or canvases are all prepared in advance at the appropriate scale, one chosen to suit the materials and gestures of making, a scale determined by the artist's physical size, the materials from which the support is made and those with which the painting will be executed, the limit of size of tables and equipment, etc.. In Mrkusich's case scale is inseparably, inexorably, linked with the total concept for the work and has no other significance than its part as an ingredient in a whole, homogeneous structure.

On the support he applies three gesso grounds, the last sometimes tinted. Over these grounds goes the first layer of colour, and then the second and subsequent layers. As a week or two of painting and consideration take place the hue of these initial colours may change. Indeed quite the opposite colour from the first layer may eventually result. At times the choice of colour will be determined by the need to conform to a chromatic or achromatic plan, but even then they are seldom strict sequences and Mrkusich varies them according to impulse. Despite his determination not to yield to a disciplinarian attitude towards colour, a practice which does persist however, is a tendency to develop along conventional chromatic progressions, from

Mrkusich Studio 1985

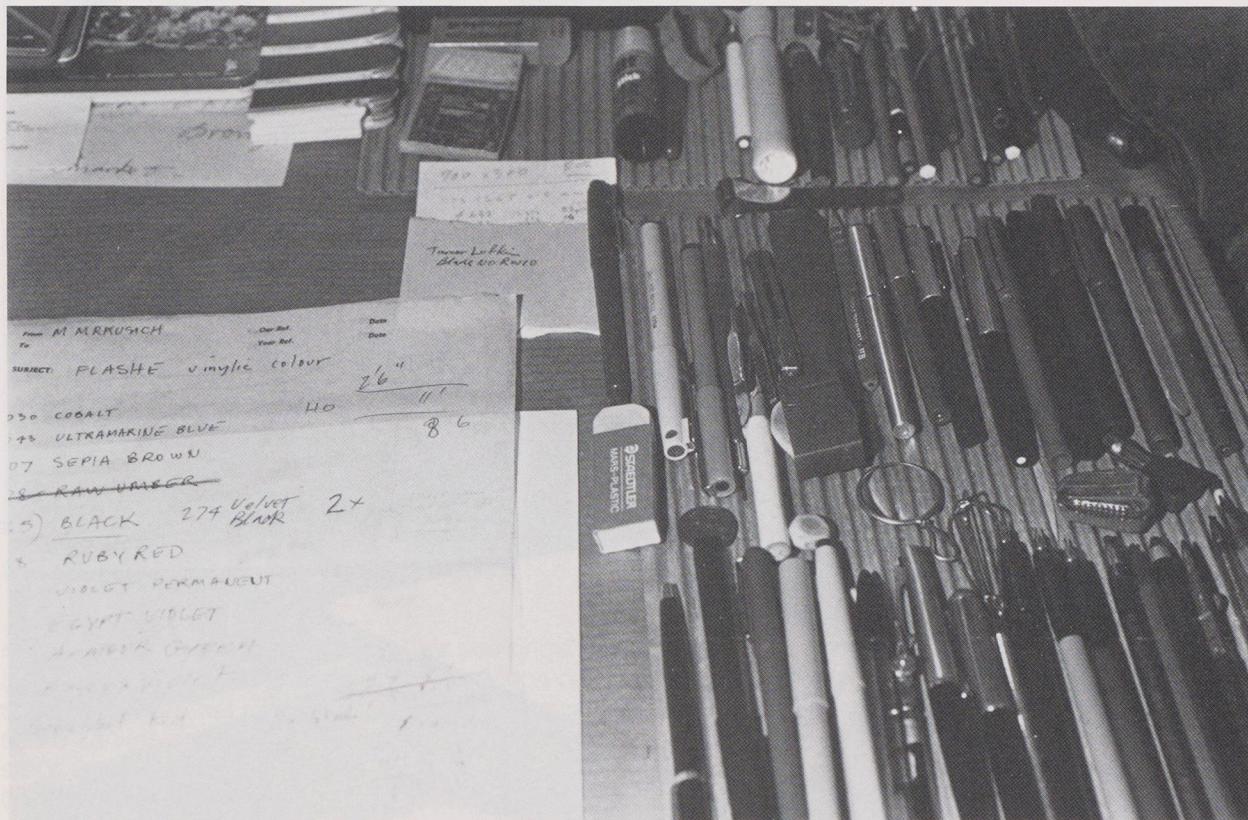


yellow to orange, to red, through red-purple to purple-blue. Nevertheless, in the end, as with so much else, his choice of colour is empirical and unscientific – it may even be regarded as spiritual in the "meta-" series where colour is 'metamorphosised'.

The process of painting, for Mrkusich, involves long periods of looking. A month – more – will pass after the initial period of painting before further work is undertaken on a canvas. When a painting seems complete, further change may still take place after a passage of time or, conversely, the period of contemplation and consideration may reveal the requirement for no further alteration. Bit by bit, layer upon careful layer, the structure, colour and surfaces of these exquisite paintings are built up and revealed. They are worked and burnished with the tradition of the craftsman, immaculate and perfect in every respect. Surface, colour, form and scale are welded into a homogeneous unit which is both subject and content, a unit which finds its context in the works that have preceded it and the tradition that nurtured it.

The closing act for Mrkusich, when each work is completed and adjudged satisfactory, is its recording. Both photographically and through entry in a progressive, sequential notebook, the work is described and placed within its family. There it is meticulously documented; an act which not only marks its completion but also

Mrkusich Studio 1985



forms a nursery from which new series and new works will grow. All of Mrkusich's painting is best understood in the largeness of his whole production, something that this exhibition seeks to allow us to do.

"A decade further on" is a bringing-up-to-date of our knowledge of the work of Milan Mrkusich.

Mrkusich is one of New Zealand's senior artists, a modernist of uncommon single-mindedness, and of uncommon clarity. It is sad that his work, until comparatively recently at least, has enjoyed greater circulation and more support outside Auckland than in his home town. Perhaps this exhibition – ironically restricted to Auckland because of the vulnerability of the works under touring conditions – will go some way to putting the record straight at home.

The Auckland City Art Gallery is proud to host the second Mrkusich retrospective exhibition and wishes to record its abiding gratitude to the artist and his wife, Florence, Dr Peter Leech of the University of Otago for his considerable analysis of Mrkusich and the place of modernism in New Zealand, the owners who, once again, have honoured us with the loan of works from their collections, and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand for its support of the show.

T. L. Rodney Wilson
Director
Auckland City Art Gallery

Painting, Object, Relation a decade of Milan Mrkusich painting

To confront painting is, or ought to be, to confront inflections of humanity, projections of mind and feeling figured in the objects of painting – to confront what Walter Pater once nicely called “the perpetual weavings and unweavings of ourselves”.¹

Yet mostly we allow our sense of humanity in such confrontation to terminate, inchoately, in primitive aesthetic allegiances: an allegiance – we do not know quite why – to this rather than that manner of painting; or an allegiance – again we do not know quite why – to this rather than that medium of art. And then our discussions find expression in terms of the crude partnerships of allegiance and disallegiance: in terms, that is, of what we take to be the goodness or badness of that which prompts the allegiance or disallegiance.

In writing of the paintings of Milan Mrkusich I shall remain firm with the idea that to confront those paintings is to confront inflections of humanity, projections of mind and feeling. My purpose, that is, is not to provide merely a context of art theory, or art theoretical history, for a reading of the paintings.² It is, much more, to retrieve and reconstruct a psychology of human feeling in the contemplation of the paintings.

This is not a customary form of critical articulation – though I will later have reason to cite two critics of painting who are exceptional and uncustomary. And it is especially not a form of critical articulation to which we are accustomed in writing of the modernist manner which Mrkusich painting instantiates. But the motivation of the endeavour is, with wonderful simplicity, represented in a newspaper cartoon made by that astutely modernist painter, Ad Reinhardt, in his famous series, *How To View High (Abstract) Art*.³ The cartoon has two frames. In the first, a spectator points scornfully at an abstract painting and exclaims, “Ha, ha, what does this represent?” In the second, an arm extends from the painting to point equally scornfully at the now cowed spectator and demands, “What do you represent?”

It is the concern of the first part of the essay to try to address that latter question. And it is an address which begins in art generally in a purely philosophical distinction between the art of painting and the art of theatre. It is a distinction, however, which I shall say invites two deeply different inflections of humanity, projections of mind and feeling. And that modernist painting was to speak of itself in contempt of theatre, in the felt need actually to defeat theatre, gives a first focus to my theme of feeling.

But the feeling expressed by modernism in the desire to defeat theatre and theatricality is by no means local to modernism. It has, I shall try to show, a long persistence of sensibility in the history of painting. And the reason for this, I want further to say, is that the feeling is no less than an aesthetic particularization of a general opposition and tension in human feeling: a craving, on the one hand, for object; and a craving, on the other, for relation. To found that claim I shall introduce some central contentions of psychoanalysis. And the

first part of the essay concludes with broad reflection on the tension felt in art between objecthood and relationality – a tension felt not just in the opposition between the art of painting and the art of theatre, but in an opposition between certain kinds of painting.

The second part of the essay brings Mrkusich painting more directly into view. But there are still two preliminary and general points to make. The first concerns a simplicity of seeing painting – a simplicity we frequently ignore, I shall say. And the second concerns a simplicity of object in painting: a simplicity in the fact that a painting is a surface with edge, with colour, with surface form.

It is on the foundation of these points about painting that I shall want then to go on to identify five phases of Mrkusich painting over a decade. And in exploring those phases and their instances, the aim will be to find particularization of the structure of human feeling in and beyond art discussed in the first part of the essay. In this respect, I shall try to reveal a tension of feeling which may be said to emerge in the fifth and final phase of Mrkusich painting. And from that revelation I shall attempt a conclusion not only to the stylistic analysis of Mrkusich painting but to the notion of style in art generally, and to what might be called style in human personality – those fixes of self which discover representation and projection in works of art.

ONE Painting, Theatre, Object

That painting is estranged from theatre is a philosophical obviousness. For painting (sculpture too) is an art of object, theatre an art of relation. And the metaphysics of the two conditions are inimically different. Painting, in and for the sake of its objecthood, seeks autonomy, an independence and self-sufficiency of existence: it is an emplacement of out-there-ness (call it otherness). Theatre, in and for the sake of its relationality, seeks communion, a dependence on and sharedness in sociality: it is an occasion of in-here-ness (call it inherence). If painting discovers its identity in the complete object, theatre may only discover itself – as Brecht, first, came to see – in the completed relation with its own audience.

Such philosophical obviousness was instinct to modernism in painting (and sculpture). That is to say, it was an obviousness which informs not only the distinctive, non-relational character of visual modernism's objects – their refusal to render either doggy acquiescence or embracing invitation to the spectator; but also visual modernism's concern with the nature and achievement of objecthood.

At the same time, however, it is clear that visual modernism's instinct was more than the awareness of a philosophical polarity between painting and theatre. It was experienced as a feeling of deep intensity – a feeling expressed in conscious animosity to theatre and theatricality.

Such feeling is apparent in one of the central tracts of visual modernism: Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood".⁴ At first, Fried seems content to specify an internal ideal of visually modernist ambition; he writes,

It is the overcoming of theatre that modernist sensibility finds most exalting and that it experiences as the hallmark of high art of our time.⁵

But such ideal is quickly turned aggressive and revealed to have its motivating feeling in a contempt for theatre. That theatre merely "exists for" an audience "in a way the other arts do not" – that theatre is in other words wholly relational – Fried writes

more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally.⁶

And then this revealed contempt carries Fried much further – far beyond the expected borders of an articulation of modernism in the visual arts. For, Fried insists, "theatre is now the negation of art".⁷ And moreover that

The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre.⁸

Thus, oddly it may seem, is a feeling in and for visual modernism registered in an overspill (some would of course call it overkill) from a purely philosophical distinction between painting and theatre.

It is that feeling, not the philosophical distinction, which I want to track in writing of the paintings of Milan Mrkusich. But in that tracking, it is not the aim to re-animate (some would say disinter) modernism itself. Certainly it would be perverse, or merely ignorant, to fail to see the association of Mrkusich painting to modernism, and thereby to its feeling. But if modernist, the feeling is not *only* modernist, and it is not particularly modern. It is a feeling in and for visual art which persists over the history of painting (and sculpture), and in the history of sensibility. It is the feeling, for instance, which finds manifestation and celebration in the paintings of Piero della Francesca and Paul Cézanne.

The acute critics of our century who have written of this feeling in respect of both Piero and Cézanne include Bernard Berenson and Adrian Stokes. For instance, Berenson has this to say in a brief but deeply moved and moving work written late in a life dedicated to sensitizing our responses to art:

After sixty years of living on terms of intimacy with every kind of work of art, from every clime and every period, I am tempted to conclude that in the long run the most satisfactory creations are those which, like Piero's and Cézanne's remain ineloquent, mute, with no urgent communication to make, and no thought of rousing us with look or gesture. . . . It is enough that they exist in themselves.⁹

This pure existentiality of the paintings of Piero and Cézanne – their absolute refusal to engage in ready relation with the spectator – is, for Berenson, the source of serene satisfaction "in a moment of exasperated passions like ours today" when

whether we know or do not know what is the matter with us, we crave for the inexpressive, the ungrimacing, the ungesticulating: for freedom from posing and attitudinizing . . .¹⁰

And it is further interesting that Berenson himself, in proposing illustrative contrast with the paintings of Piero and Cézanne (for

instance, those of Breughel, Rembrandt, David, Delacroix), employs the conceptual opposition of the "existential" and the "theatrical".¹¹

Adrian Stokes discerns a similar feeling. Piero's painting, he writes,

does not suggest a leaning from the house of the mind. He shows, on the contrary, the mind becalmed, exemplified in the guise of separateness of ordered outer things: he shows a man's life as the outward state to which all activity aspires.¹²

In no sense, Stokes adds, can Piero's paintings be thought "dramatic":

The finality revealed is too great in Piero's pictures for any such word, the finality revealed even when, like Uccello, he represents a battle in progress. The disposition of shapes by means of colour and perspective afford a sense of completeness, so that not only is the purely visual aspect of things stressed, but it is enforced to such a degree that happenings, ferment psychological and physical, are subsumed under formulae of absolute exposure, in terms, that is, of unalterable positions in space.¹³

To consider the broader ambience of the feeling of which Berenson and Stokes write – beyond, that is, its foundation in painting – will be the task in a moment. But it is perhaps first worth noting how, in the construct of their terms for the feeling, both Berenson and Stokes are open to, if not indeed inviting of, specifics of modernist painting. Clearly there is for both an attachment to objecthood, not relationality: to that mode of painted object which simply is, which exists out-there in its separateness from us. And both find in this the antithesis of theatricality and the dramatic. But, further than this, Berenson for example is led to foresee a future of painting in and for such feeling which is

guaranteed to depict nothing but abstract figures, Euclidean, or even more remote from objects in the world as ordinary mortals see it.¹⁴

And what is this but an anticipation of the primary abstract mode of modernist and Mrkusich painting?

With Stokes, a different specific of modernist painting may be thought associatively to emerge in his writing thus:

Piero, as did Cézanne whose sense of colour was equally dominant in his sense of form, preserved the two-dimensional character of the picture-space – a certain archaic flatness, then, of forms – in conjunction with great depth and a great volume.¹⁵

And what is this but an anticipation of modernism and its irrevocably central concern with flatness in painting – a concern, indeed, made to seem definitive of modernist painting by its principal critical apologist, Clement Greenberg.¹⁶

To gain an enriched sense of the feeling for objecthood and its tension with relationality in the history of painting, there could be no better recommendation than a reading of the works of Adrian Stokes and Bernard Berenson. But, any more than that it is merely modernist, it should not be supposed that the feeling is only a feeling in and for painting, or, indeed, a feeling in and for art itself. And it is at this point that I want to come back to the question posed in Ad Reinhardt's

cartoon: the question, that is, of what we might represent as human beings in experiencing, or failing to experience, that feeling.

In fact, the feeling, and its opposed tension in feeling – runs extraordinarily deep in human experience generally. Or so we may learn from psychoanalysis. For, psychoanalysis of the late Freudian mode discovers, such a feeling, and its opposed tension in feeling, is mobilized very early in life, and at the crucial and momentous moment of securing a sense of self.

It would be inappropriate here – perhaps more obscuring than clarifying – properly to engage the apparatus of psychoanalytic theory, and especially the complex apparatus of the pertinent theories of Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott and John Bowlby.¹⁷ But a surface (reconstructively mixed) gloss of those theories might be attempted.

That we emerge as the individual human beings we are is, in general for psychoanalytic theory, a question of the ways in which we 'work through' the earliest experiences of life (emphatically not, as it is commonly mistaken to hold, simply *what* those experiences may have been). And a primal experience which all human beings share in working through is what Winnicott has called 'separation anxiety': that is, the individuation of self in separation from the helpless dependence of earliest infancy.

In the attempt to work through such anxiety, two successive sets of feeling are involved. The first is the (unconscious) feeling of a loss of identity of self in the threat of separation: a fear, it might be said, of the disappearance of self in falling away from continuous relation in the world (the fear expressed, for instance, in infantile rage for suckling and rage against weaning). The second is the (unconscious) feeling of a loss of integrity of self once separation is fully acknowledged: a fear, it might be said, of the disintegration of self unless, in separation, the self can find its own distinct objects in the world (the fear expressed, for instance, in fierce infantile attachment to such objects of otherness as a blanket or teddy-bear).

The two fears, then, can be thought to have intrinsically connected desires and intolerances. The first desire is for the accumulation of relations of self which are taken to reflect an identity of in-here-ness (inherence); and there is an intolerance of that which seems to threaten, or deny, identity-in-relation. The second desire is for the accumulation of objects of self which are taken to reflect an integrity of out-there-ness (otherness); and there is an intolerance of that which seems to threaten, or deny, integrity-in-object.

In respect of these successive sets of fear, desire and intolerance, there are two general claims which psychoanalytic theory would make.

The first is that in the working through of the primal separation anxiety both sets of feeling contribute in the continuum of development. But it is likely that one or the other set assumes greater prominence. And in the face of the subsequent anxieties of life, one or other is likely to inform response. (Where anxiety in later life comes to have the acuteness of an anxiety in secure sense of self, extreme fixation to one or the other set of feelings may lead to different forms of madness. That is why, without diagnostic force in infantile development, Melanie Klein names the two sets of feelings, respectively, those of the 'paranoid-schizoid position' and those of the 'depressive position'.)

The second claim of psychoanalysis is that such sets of feeling and the prominence they assume in early life leave permanent residues. In human development – indeed, for psychoanalysis, this is what development constitutes – mind and feeling project themselves ever more widely in features of the world and in our living in it. Thus, prominence primally given to identity-in-relation, or to integrity-in-object, comes later to find new and more distanced focuses and attachments. In mature life, for instance, they emerge in forms of sociality, of morality, of politicality and, in general, in forms of reflectivity and imagination. But they emerge perhaps most clearly in forms of aesthetic allegiance. For here there is a greater immediacy of subjectivity. If the other forms of living in the world tend to bring with them questions of how best to live one's life, forms of aesthetic allegiance much more directly instantiate ideals of answers. There is no question – or it would be pitifully craven to think so – whether it is 'best' to find allegiance in one manner of art rather than another. In aesthetic experience we stand only for ourselves. And hence the force of Reinhardt's cartoon question "What do you represent?" in confronting art.

In tracking the feeling of modernism back to and then forward again from such paintings as those of Piero or Cézanne, and then in informing the feeling with basic insights of psychoanalysis, the aim has been gradually to accumulate to the feeling wider allegiance and significance. The detailed consideration of the manifestation of the feeling in and for Mrkusich painting is the concern of the second part. But just before moving – so late, I am aware, in the endeavour – to that concern, a final fixing of comment ought to be made about painting and theatre, and about objecthood and theatricality in painting itself.

That visual modernism should have spoken of itself in contempt of theatre, I began by saying, turns first on the philosophical obviousness that painting (sculpture too) is an art of object, theatre an art of relation. But this obviousness, I hope it is by now evident, turns more deeply, more psychologically, on primal concerns with integrity-in-object or identity-in-relation. And given the developmental prominence of one or the other primal concern and their uneasy coexistence with each other in individuality it is of course likely that an allegiance to an art of object such as painting or an art of relation such as theatre will find themselves in tension. In fact, I speculate, it would be extremely uncommon for any individual to find equal allegiance to, or value in, both arts. What is more to be expected is that allegiance to one will mean, at least, indifference to the other; or, in escalating degree, a sense of the other's irrelevance, or of its spuriousness; until, in the fiercer reaches of aesthetic animosity, the one will seem – as I have already cited theatre to seem to Fried – essentially a negation of art itself, a negation which demands defeat for the sake of art itself.

Still, even within each of those arts – within painting, and within theatre – there can be aesthetic tensions between objecthood and relationality. That is, there will be forms of painting which strain towards relationality and the condition of theatre; and forms of theatre which strain towards objecthood and the condition of painting.

The particular ways in which painting may strain towards relationality I shall try to make apparent in the discussion of a tension which emerges late in the decade of Mrkusich painting: a tension, that is,

within the main body and orientation of the painting. But for the moment a few general points can be made.

The most obvious way in which a painting may strain towards relationality is in terms of specific content which it may offer to the spectator. It might, for example, be the content of portraiture, the depiction of a human face, to which the spectator can feel a relation of immediate human interest. Or it might be the content of naturalism, a scene or episode of living, to which the spectator can feel a relation of immediate human familiarity.

Or, a little less obviously, a painting may strain towards relationality in terms of specific expressiveness. It might be a boldness of colour, or colour-relation, to which the spectator can feel a relation of immediate human excitation. Or it may be an energy of expressive execution to which the spectator can feel a relation of immediate, shared, human activity.

But however, in the end, the straining towards relationality may manifest itself in painting, perhaps the simplest way of characterizing the tension between objecthood and relationality is to return to the curious phrasing which Bernard Berenson employed. He wrote, it will be recalled, of the 'ineloquent' quality of Piero's paintings; and indeed, the subtitle of his entire exploration of art from Piero is *The Ineloquent in Art*. What is curious in this is of course that we do not, normally, think of 'ineloquence' as a term of approbation. But then consider it this way: eloquence, mere eloquence, can often be no more than rhetoric, a way of engaging us, relating to us. The ideal of ineloquence in the objecthood of painting is the refusal of such relational speaking to us and the elevation of the ideal of an object of painting to speak *for* us. But of course it is easier to discern the eloquence of that which speaks *to* us rather than the ineloquence of that which speaks *for* us.

TWO Object in Mrkusich Painting

It is not that a Mrkusich painting, or painting of its mode, demands of the spectator a complexity of perceptual, aesthetic and psychological process. On the contrary, it insists upon a simplicity of process. But simplicity is not obviousness; and the achievement of simplicity can be the most difficult endeavour.

Two first considerations, I shall then say, of confronting a Mrkusich painting form around two simplicities of painting: a simplicity of seeing a painting; and a simplicity of object in a painting.

A painting is a surface with edges. It has colour. It has surface form. That is all there is simply to seeing a painting – any painting. Yet that simplicity of seeing is something we tend far too swiftly to escape. We like to introduce what may be called intransitivities of seeing: not seeing directly, but seeing-in and seeing-as. It is asked what we are supposed to see *in* a Mrkusich painting, or what we are supposed to see it *as*. And then variations of temperament compound the error of the asking by concluding, on the one hand dismissively, that there is just nothing to see in a Mrkusich painting, nothing to see it *as*; or, on the other hand in quasi-humility, that what there is to see in a

Mrkusich painting, what there is to see it as, seems too remote, too difficult.

The swift attachment to the intransitivities of seeing – seeing-in and seeing-as – may well be an expression of the desire closely to possess the objects of sight: to want them immediately to relate to us through what we find in them and what we find them as. But the interest and significance of simply seeing a Mrkusich painting is very different. For it concerns a deeply important fact about simple seeing generally.

Seeing is the sense – pre-eminently of the senses – which gives us a world out-there, other than us, at far or near distance from us. Touch, taste, smell, hearing require a much greater immediacy of relation to their objects. The sensations vanish when their objects are not close in to us. And in this respect, consider the contrast of seeing: for in fact we are *unable* to see that which is too closely before our eyes and, to gain focus, need to hold ourselves away from it.

Seeing, then, simple seeing, is seeing a world out-there, an otherness from us. And the insistence of simply seeing a Mrkusich painting is the insistence of seeing, and celebrating, a construction of out-there-ness. It is a refusal, that is to say, of the theatrical construction of in-here-ness.

But, to turn to the second simplicity of painting, though a painting just is a surface with edges, with colour, with surface form, there are, obviously, infinite variables in these features, infinitely multiplied in association with one another. In other words, even if a painting is, or should be, an object of simple seeing, it need not be a simple object of simple seeing. Indeed there could not be in associations of surface with edge, colour, surface form a purely simple object of simple seeing – though it was certainly the ambition of Minimalist painting to want to achieve this.

The problem, however, is that the more complex an object of simple seeing becomes, the more difficult it is to see its integrated construction of out-there-ness. For instance, variations in the weight or density of paint on the surface will have the effect of distorting the surface out of its two-dimensional plane. And colour-juxtapositions on the surface, unless manipulated – as so magnificently in the paintings of Piero della Francesca – with absolute awareness of tonality and complementarity, will produce recessions and projections in surface, a paradoxical farness and nearness in a surface without third dimension. And again surface form can begin to disintegrate the object in the construction of out-there-ness – to create the impression that it is not a whole and singular object but merely an assembly of discrete parts in varying degrees of tension or disharmony with each other.

It is within this matrix formed by the two simplicities of painting – a matrix placed against the ground of feeling articulated in the first part – that specific features and instances of Mrkusich painting over the last decade can now be brought into view.

In a moment I shall suggest that there are five phases of Mrkusich painting in this period which are defined by variant aspects of colour and surface form. But that these phases are continuous with each other is perhaps best brought out by concentrating first on the prevailing theme of painting as surface with edge.

The first aspect of this theme in Mrkusich painting is that whatever variations of colour and surface form the painter introduces what

remains invariant is a constancy within individual paintings of weight and density of paint. That is, in simply seeing any Mrkusich painting of this period it is crucial to observe that there are no inequalities, no unevenness of emphasis, in the way in which paint is made to give life to surface.

This aspect is certainly a function of the technique of painting which Mrkusich employs: the fact that the surface is constructed in indiscernibly thin layers of paint, and that each layer has an all-overness – it is not, for instance, an accumulation of small individual brushstrokes. But whatever interest the technique of painting might have in itself, its critical significance lies in what it bespeaks in terms of aesthetic decisions and refusals. For no technique of painting – or of art generally – should be assumed to be just arbitrarily adopted. The choice of technique – anyway in the hand of the competent painter – reflects contemplative purpose. For instance, the Impressionist technique of the *virgule* brushstroke is party to the general refusal to see the world in separable blocks or sweeps of colour. And the Mrkusich technique is party to the general insistence upon integration in the constructions of out-there-ness – the refusal to allow individual parts *in* the surface, or as discernible layers of the surface.

The second aspect of this theme of surface with edge in Mrkusich painting of the period is the painter's attention to edge, to the form that the literal edges of the paintings construct.

A cultural curiosity of painting – virtually the entire history of painting until very recently – is that it edges itself, as surface, in rectangularity. (That there have, though uncommonly, been tondo or lunette paintings, or the shaped canvases of our time, serves only to punctuate this curiosity.) But is this not odd, in view of the infinite modes and images of painting over history? Is it not, for example, especially odd with naturalistic and depictive painting? Why should depicted objects of the natural world – which have no such geometrical contour as rectangularity – be so constrained, or cropped in image, by the edges of a strictly rectangular painting? Would it not, in this respect, be more 'natural' for the surface contour of a painting to follow the contour of its subject – for it, say, to be frilled like the edge of a cloud, or fringed like the edge of a tree? (And if this seems crazy, why does it seem so, and what does this say about painting?)

The conventional rectangularity of paintings may perhaps discover significance and meaning at a deep level of human consciousness.¹⁸ But it is not difficult to read in rectangularity images of containment, unification and definition of a world in its associations in ordinary living. Consider, for instance, that we live in rectangular rooms in rectangular houses, in streets and cities formed in right-angles. Or that we do not form fields of produce, fields even for animals, in circles and hexagons.

Such images of containment, unification and definition of a world are certainly instinct to each of Mrkusich's paintings. But of course this could not simply be a point made in respect of the rectangularity of the paintings, since this is the general convention. What, however, with Mrkusich painting enforces and gives emphasis to such images is that the painter is acutely aware of the way in which his variant surface forms fall within and reflect on the rectangular edges of the works. That is to say, though risks are certainly taken, there is rarely any

disharmony, or tension, set up between the edges of the painting surface and what the surface contains as form. As with the idea of surface alone, the idea of surface with edge comes to be, in Mrkusich painting, an implacable commitment to integration in the constructions of out-there-ness, to the integrity of objects other than us.

At this stage, though, it will be useful in further exploring the particularities – and the risks – of Mrkusich painting over the last ten years, to suggest that there have been five separable phases: phases, that is, of particular employment of colour and of surface form rather than general commitment to the idea of painting as surface and as surface with edge.

The first phase occurs within the years 1974 to 1976, and the works are given title by the word 'painting' followed by a colour-name.¹⁹

It is in this first phase that the objects of Mrkusich painting assume the greater simplicity. There is singularity of colour; and a singularity of surface form in the holding of colour by the triangulations which appear at the four corners of the rectangles of the paintings.

But even in these singularities of simplicity there is deep visual intrigue and collusion. The colours, though they have a name (or composite name, as in *Painting Blue-Grey*, (cat. no. 3,) or *Painting Bronze Green II*, (cat. no. 5) have a diffused atmospheric quality. The suggestion is of a mist or haze which tints vision. But then a mist can seem to roll, a haze to billow. And it is in this respect that the surface form triangulations come to have active force, in a doubly referential way. The first way refers just to the atmospheric quality of the colour: the triangulations – they might be seen as corner mounts – paradoxically pin the atmosphere flat, make it continuous with the surface. But in this, and exactly to avoid the impression of uneven emphasis or tension in the surface which the 'pinning flat' may produce, the triangulations themselves are made continuous with the atmospheric colour. That is to say, though the triangulations may at first sight appear chromatically different from the atmospheric colour, in fact they simply expose the range of tonality in the atmosphere.

The second way refers not to the colour quality of the paintings, but to their rectangularity. For the triangulations are of course themselves right-angled. And thus colour, and tonality of colour, seems to be built into, built up to the edges of the rectangular surface. Especially interesting in this building is the fact that though the triangulations do not follow every edge of the paintings, they do, when seen as corner mounts, extend an invisible influence down or across each edge.

In this first phase of painting, then, there is an absolute collusion of colour and surface form, no possibility of breaking into, or breaking up, the integrity of construction. And this, when allied to Mrkusich's prevailing attentions to surface and surface with edge, gives to the first phase perhaps the most dominant sense of an integrity in object out-there, other than us.

The second phase of Mrkusich painting cannot be so distinctly dated, or identified by title, as the first. It begins some time in 1977, carries into 1978, and then reappears again in 1983.²⁰

In this phase, a singularity of colour is sustained, though its atmospheric quality is gradually reduced, made slightly more homogeneous as colour. The triangulations go, and their place as surface form is assumed by the rectangulations which now occur at

the base of the paintings. (In certain instances of this phase with the parenthetic designation 'linear series' – for example, *Monochrome Blue (linear series) 1977* (cat. no. 17) – there is back reference to the triangulations in the linear bisection of a right-angle. But there is a forward reference here to paintings of the third phase: the bisections appear, so to say, as 'cuts' of colour, and this feature can be more directly discussed in terms of the third phase.)

The rectangulations of this phase are addressed to a challenge of surface form rather more than, like the triangulations, to a continuity of colour. And the challenge is to avoid, in their clear delineation from the body of the painting, the falling away or separating of the rectangulations from the painting as a whole, and thus the disintegrating or partializing of surface.

The challenge here is met in the collusion of two facts. The first is that the rectangulations are simply identical in colour and chromatic look with the body of the painting: in that sense, the colour-identity overcomes the marked delineations. But the second, and more visually complex, is that the rectangulations do not look so much to be *parts* of the painting as themselves *instances* of it. That is, though in a literal sense the rectangulations are contained and unified by the rectangle of the painting, they also, in having identity of colour and form, seem reflexively to contain and unify the complete painting itself. Once again, then, in this second phase, there is no possibility of breaking into, or breaking up, the integrity of construction – no part of the painting which we seem able visually to prise away or split off from the whole object.

The third phase of Mrkusich painting in the decade falls across the years 1978 and 1979 and is principally marked by an innovation of medium: the paint surface is now literally broken up in separations of cardboard rectangles.²¹

It is with this phase that the more severe risks to integrity of object which characterize the second half of the decade of Mrkusich painting begin to be taken. And here that, in exact proportion to the severity of risk, internal variation of aesthetic attainment begins to show. (It is an interesting feature of the sustained address of the first two phases that it is hard to find distinct grounds of selective allegiance between their instances. But, for important reasons I shall later want to identify, the third and succeeding phases each offer a range of painting whose extremes pull aesthetically one way or another.)

Where, in the second phase, the rectangulations are delineated *in* the surface, the third phase introduces actual incisions of surface. The paintings, that is, come to have literal parts to them, and, more or less evidently, parts which seem to be floated on the surface (most evidently, perhaps, in *Monochrome Green 1979*, cat. no. 29).

How is it, then, that Mrkusich seeks to meet the challenge to integrity of object which this innovation of medium issues?

The first response is a further reduction of the atmospheric quality of singular colour. The sense of a mist of colour remains, but almost indiscernibly so: it stops, that is to say, just this side of opacity and the block to vision – rather than tint of it – which opaque paint surface is. So now it is as if a taut skin of colour, a skin which seems to form over the incisions, holds the surface smooth and flat.

The second response is to give to the paintings a geometric system

of rectangulations which seems to spread across the entire surface and hold it in bond to the system. These geometric systems vary greatly in complexity, and it is this variation, I suspect, which is the foundation of aesthetic variation in the paintings. For it is only when the system is complex and self-referential that it exercises a power of integration over surface. That is to say, in the instance of *Monochrome Purple* 1979 (cat. no. 28), the system is so highly articulated that it becomes impossible to see it merely as a relationality of parts.

Moreover, as is the case with *Monochrome Green* and *Monochrome Orange* (cat. no. 30) from the same year, the rectangulations make direct, reflexive reference to the rectangularity and edges of the entire painting (there is a perseveration, in other words, of the technique of the second phase).

But where, in the case especially of the monochromes of 1979 with the sub-designation 'Four Areas' the geometric system is very simple, and the rectangulations do not refer as form to the entire painting, then integrity as a painting begins to look precarious. With *Monochrome Red, Four Areas* (cat. no. 25), for example, there is a sense of mere seriality rather than system. And seriality, of course, has no internal rule of end or closure: the series can always be continued. Thus, in looking at this painting it is difficult not to form the visual expectation of a possible continuity beyond the edges; and these expectations may be further encouraged by the fact that the rectangulations of the four areas are not instances of the rectangularity of the painting.

To say this is certainly not aesthetically to disparage this painting and its associates. But it is to identify the emergence of a dialectical tension in the range of the third phase – a tension, I have suggested, which is to become more evident in the fourth and fifth phases. That is to say, the Mrkusichian ideal of integrity in object begins to have a greater self-consciousness – a fuller awareness of the relationality which the ideal stands against.

The fourth phase of Mrkusich painting occurs in 1980 and 1981 with the 'Area' paintings.²² And here the challenge to integrity in object is both extremely simple and extremely bold. For now everything is given over to simple seeing and the perception of colour and tonality. That is, in these works surface form (except in the image of form in colour) ceases to have an active role.

Each of the 'Area' paintings seems at first sight to comprise a juxtaposition of colours, usually two, sometimes three. And the general problem is that juxtapositions of colours can readily lend themselves to separation and disintegration (this is indeed the problem which both Piero and Cézanne sought to overcome in their acute senses of colour-complementarity). Without here reaching into the intricacies of colour theory, the fact is that in the juxtaposition of colours one or the other may assume dominance for the eye. And this may be a matter of relative light or saturation, of relative chromatic weight, or relative recession or projection. And if we add to this the further matter of our psychological associations to colour (such instincts as to think red vivifying and blue pacifying), the problem of discovering an integrity in the juxtaposition of colours can assume monumental proportion.

In this fourth phase there is again variation in the way in which Mrkusich addresses the problem. In other words, there is a further stretch of dialectical tension within the range of paintings in this phase.

Certainly there is the same equal insistence of weight and density of *paint* on surface, but there can be different insistences of *colour* in surface.

At one end of the range, the integrity of object in colour is subtly affirmed in a visual continuity of progression in tone. The affirmation here is most apparent in paintings of 1980 such as *Two Areas Yellow*, *Two Areas Blue* (cat. no. 35) and *Four Areas Achromatic* (cat. no. 36).

But falling towards the other end of the range there are paintings such as *Three Areas Blue and Orange* 1981 (cat. no. 38) and *Two Areas Orange and Maroon* 1980 (cat. no. 34). Particularly in the case of the first, the eye seems at odds with itself in seeing the integrity of the painting through an impossible seepage of the upper and lower areas of blueness into the redness of the middle orange area. In the case of the second, the eye is perilously closer to defeat for the same reason of tension for dominance between the redness of the orange and the blueness of the maroon. The painting, in other words, can seem to split in half, lose its integrity in object, when one or the other area is seen to assume dominance.

However, in the dialectical tension of the range of paintings in this fourth phase, an aesthetic pull, one way or the other, asserts itself more clearly than in the range of the third in which the pull was more abstractly between the integrity of hieratic system and the relationality of series. For now, through colour, if integrity in object pulls one way, what pulls the other is a sheer dynamism of relation. There is no doubt for instance that a firm aesthetic allegiance claimed by, say, *Two Areas Yellow*, must be radically different from a firm allegiance claimed by *Two Areas Orange and Maroon*. Or, if firmness of allegiance is made difficult in view of the equivocal quality of the latter painting, consider another which can be said most naturally to fall within this phase: *Achromatic with Orange, Purple and Green* 1980 (cat. no. 33). Of course, in surface form this work seems to belong to the second phase; but both in date and in its colour juxtapositions, its implication in the fourth phase is strong. And the point is that this painting is, by far, the most dynamic and relational of any of Mrkusich's paintings so far in the decade: it is the painting which most seems to deny or negate an integrity of object, and so to invite allegiance through a quite different range of feeling.

But if that one painting can seem a (still subtle) stylistic rogue in the past decade of Mrkusich painting, it nevertheless bespeaks the dynamism and relationality which, in an unrelated but similarly disturbing way, suffuses the fifth and final phase of Mrkusich painting. That is, it can come to seem not so much a rogue to style as the herald of a deep tension in style.

The fifth phase, dated 1983 and 1984, includes the two series, 'Segmented Arcs' and 'Arcs and Lines'.²³ And it is a phase quite impossible to read in terms of integrity of object. That is to say, the dialectic of tension between objecthood and relationality in the third and fourth phases simply goes. The fifth phase in other words stands in the starker contrast to the first and second. And in that starkness, there is just one securing – and revealing – fact: the fact that, unlike any other phase of painting, the fifth is disrupted in the course of one year by a group of paintings which clearly belong to the second phase – a phase, I suggested, in which the affirmation of integrity in object is

deep and without either chromatic or surface form risk. That group of paintings comprises *Painting Red Achromatic* (cat. no. 46), *Painting Blue Achromatic* (cat. no. 47) and *Painting Green with Blue and Black* (cat. no. 48), all from 1983. It appears as if, in working through the fifth phase, the painter suddenly felt in need of the aesthetic security of the second phase. For there is simply no possibility of reading that group of paintings in relation to the characteristics of the fifth phase.

But then why, in the middle of the fifth phase, there might be the need of such aesthetic security is obvious. For in the fifth phase, virtually every rule of style laid out in the earlier phases is broken.

The rule of surface is broken: the integrity of surface in the paintings comes to have unequal emphasis in virtue of the variation in weight and density between paint and the increasingly apparent use of wax crayon and coloured pencil.

The rule of surface with edge is broken: there is no longer any harmonious continuity within or reference to the rectangular edges of the painting; and indeed some of the works are half-turned to the perpendicular in a manner which inevitably looks to de-emphasize right-angularity.

The rule of colour is broken: no longer is there continuity of colour, or tonality of colour, for new and vivid (non-complementary) relations of colour are introduced in crayon and pencil.

The rule of surface form is broken: not merely is there no continuity within edge, there is, in the motif of the arc, a clamour for continuous relation *beyond* edge. And of course with this continuous relation comes the most evident negation of the image of containment, unification and definition of a world – a negation of integrity in object.

That each of these rules is, in the fifth phase of Mrkusich painting, broken – it seems almost systematically broken – is not for a moment to say that as a phase it is aesthetically inferior to the preceding four (indeed it would be no surprise at all if some were to find this the most aesthetically dynamic and exciting of the phases). But it is to say that the paintings of this phase are very different, both stylistically and in psychological foundation and address. That is, if the commitment of Mrkusich painting to this point has been to (integrity in) object, then the fifth phase commits itself much more to (identity in) relation. And it is in the elaboration of this point that I now want to bring the essay to a conclusion: a conclusion which serves both the style description of object in Mrkusich painting which has so far occupied the second part, and the identification of the psychological roots of feeling for object or for relation which occupied the first.

That the fifth phase of Mrkusich painting breaks the rules of style laid out in the earlier phases amounts, I have suggested, to a negation of painted object. But the point can be put the other way round: the fifth phase is an affirmation of painted relation. And hence the temptation to see the phase as, for Mrkusich, comparatively theatrical.

The affirmation of relationality, I implied, can be seen in the fifth phase in the new relations in surface, in discontinuous relations with the edges of surface, in the vivid colour-relations, and in the clamour for continuous relation beyond edge. But perhaps the relationality of the phase can be best and most simply brought out by concentrating on the motif of the arc.

Every arc – in itself a relation of embrace – finds continuation in a

circle. But the image in circularity has quite different associations for us from the image in rectangularity (the image of containment, unification and definition of a world). Consider, for instance, that though we live in rectangular rooms and houses we have circles of friends and move in social circles. And a reason we do not think ourselves to have rectangles of friends or to move in social rectangles is that we do not think ourselves as containing friendship or society. We are rather contained by them, contained in relations within the circle, part of the circle. Or consider that in games, or real hostility, we seek to encircle and in that way contain the enemy, establish a relation of dominance and possession. (And what difference does it bespeak when we think of ourselves not as trying to encircle, but to square off, or up, to an opponent?)

Arches then – or their implicit continuation in circles – seem to offer us the form of relationality within which we can find ourselves. And this is exactly the offer made by Mrkusich paintings of the fifth phase. In the way in which the arches spin off in circles beyond the painted object, we can feel ourselves included, taken in by the extended spatial embrace of the work. We find, that is, an identity-in-relation. (Theatre of course perpetually cultivates just this relation of spatial embrace: from the construction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, to theatre-in-the-round, and in general the contemporary theatrical obsession with setting the proscenium arch behind the audience, to include and surround it in-here.) But then this identity-in-relation is the very opposite of the integrity-in-object of the first four phases of Mrkusich painting. There, as I have argued, we can find no way to break into the paintings, to get inside them and find them surrounding us in a circle of relation. The paintings are irredeemably out-there to us; we are not in-here with them.

But now it might be asked, insofar as Mrkusich paintings of the fifth phase appear to forfeit the rules of style earlier laid out, does this not constitute a radical *change* of style for the painter? And in that change of style are there not also grounds for attributing an equally radical change of psychological foundation and address?

Of course, in one respect, the answer to that question can only be given by the next decade of Mrkusich painting (though for those fortunate enough to have seen the first paintings of that next decade the answer is clear and clearly negative). But there is already internal reason for thinking that the paintings of the fifth phase do not represent a *change* of style so much as an *awareness* of style. As I have already indicated, the fifth phase is interrupted in a curious way by the appearance, or reappearance of paintings which naturally seem to belong to the second phase – as if the painter suddenly sensed a need for aesthetic security in the former integrity-in-object. And it is this point, I think, which can be developed in a final comment on style and on aesthetic and psychological feeling.

The phenomenon of radical style-change in art can be deeply disturbing: it has the force of parallel in the phenomenon of a radical personality-change in a human being we have come to know well. But radical style-change in art is in fact a phenomenon much rarer than is often supposed in the zealous pursuit – practised by artists themselves, by art historians and by critics – of visible marks of 'growth', 'progress', 'development'. What is much more likely to be the

case with an artist with an initially established style (and to be an artist and to have an established style seems to me unnegotiably definitive of artistry) is that a consciousness of style – a self-consciousness – can be now more, now less, acute. And this, I believe, is precisely the case in the fifth phase of Mrkusich painting. After a long, awesomely sustained commitment to integrity in painted object, Mrkusich manifests his awareness of what that commitment has been set against through attempting paintings which now work more with relationality and invite our identity-in-relation.

But to have this kind of awareness is, beyond art, to be conscious of self, to be fully and sanely human. As it was remarked in discussion of the psychoanalytic theory of feeling for integrity-in-object and a feeling for identity-in-relation, it is a central contention of the theory that *both* feelings are acknowledged in an ideal balance of maturity. And for one feeling entirely to obscure the other is, as Melanie Klein's terminology of 'paranoid-schizoid' and 'depressive' implies, to be mad, or maddeningly immature, in one way or the other.

Paintings, though, are not, or are certainly not just, biographies of feeling in the *painter*. (The tedium and irrelevance of writing about art which earnestly assumes so has been nicely caught in the diagnosis of a 'Van Gogh's ear syndrome'.)²⁴ Paintings, anyway paintings of worth, are rather more biographies of human feeling as such. And in this respect, to view the paintings of Milan Mrkusich over a decade is to undertake an ultimate test. And it is not, or not alone, an aesthetic test. For in discovering allegiance or disallegiance to the paintings – or patterns of allegiance and disallegiance within their phases – we find, or should find, projective fixes of our own, deeply human, feelings of self. The essay has been an endeavour to suggest how the paintings may be thought to represent the feeling for integrity-in-object, and so a tension in opposition to the feeling for identity-in-relation. But the ultimately testing question in understanding aesthetic allegiance or disallegiance is not what the painting (far less the painter) represents: it is Ad Reinhardt's question "What do you represent?"

Peter Leech

Notes

- 1 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* in *The Works of Walter Pater*, London 1900, Vol. 1 p236
- 2 For a discussion of the art-theoretical context of Mrkusich painting see my essay "Milan Mrkusich: The Architecture of the Painted Surface". *Art New Zealand* 19 pp34-39.
- 3 Ad Reinhardt, *PM*, New York, 24 February 1946
- 4 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum*, June 1967; quotations are taken from the reprint of the essay in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York 1968, pp116-147
- 5 Fried, p140
- 6 Fried, p140
- 7 Fried, p125

- 8 Fried, p139
- 9 Bernard Berenson, *Piero della Francesca; or The Ineloquent in Art*, London 1954, p7
- 10 Berenson, p6
- 11 Berenson, p15
- 12 Adrian Stokes, *Colour and Form* in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London 1978, Vol. 2 p198
- 13 Stokes, *The Quattro Cento*, Vol. 1 p135
- 14 Berenson, p6
- 15 Stokes, *Colour and Form*, Vol. 2 p196
- 16 See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York 1966
- 17 The psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein is elaborated in a long series of essays and is best first approached through Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, London 1973. For Winnicott's theory, see D. W. Winnicott, *Collected Papers*, London 1958. For Bowlby's theory, see John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, Harmondsworth 1971.
- 18 Discussions of the symbolic values of certain shapes occur in the writings of Jung and his commentators.
- 19 Catalogue numbers of the first phase paintings are: 1 to 8
- 20 Catalogue numbers of the second phase paintings are: 10 to 19; 23, 31, 46 to 48
- 21 Catalogue numbers of the third phase paintings are: (9), 20 to 22, 24 to 30
- 22 Catalogue numbers of the fourth phase paintings are: 32 to 41
- 23 Catalogue numbers of the fifth phase paintings are: 42 to 45, 49 to 51
- 24 I owe the scornful phrase to Ted Bracey. And I should like to acknowledge the presence of Ted Bracey and Francis Pound – host to first ideas for this essay – in many discussions of and in my thinking about art in New Zealand. I am grateful also to Louise Wilton for discussion which formed thought in the writing of the essay. And I am especially aware of the good experience of several intense hours of conversation about his own art and art generally with Milan Mrkusich.

Catalogue

1 *Painting Red* 1974

acrylic, canvas 1730 x 1730 mm
collection Mr J. Gellert, Auckland

2 *Painting Cobalt Blue* 1974

acrylic, canvas 1730 x 1730 mm
collection Mr N. McGrath, Lower Hutt

3 *Painting Blue-Grey* 1974

acrylic, canvas 1730 x 1730 mm
collection Auckland City Art Gallery

4 *Painting Purple* 1975

acrylic, canvas 1730 x 1730 mm
collection Kobi and Patricia Bosshard, Dunedin

5 *Painting Bronze Green II* 1975

acrylic, canvas on board 1205 x 1205 mm
collection the artist

6 *Painting Blue-Grey II* 1975

acrylic, canvas on board 1205 x 1205 mm
collection Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui

7 *Painting Grey* 1976

acrylic, canvas 1800 x 1730 mm
title and signature inscribed verso.
Bank of New Zealand Art Collection, Wellington

8 *Painting Green* 1976

acrylic, canvas 1800 x 1730 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collecton the artist

9 *Four Zones Dark* 1976

acrylic, canvas 1690 x 3020 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

10 *Monochrome Red* 1977

acrylic, paper on card 614 x 454 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

11 *Monochrome Blue* 1977

acrylic, paper on card 614 x 454 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection Professor E. Olssen, Dunedin

12 *Achromatic Black* 1977

acrylic, paper on card 614 x 454 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

13 *Monochrome Blue* 1977

acrylic, canvas 1716 x 1375 mm
Paris family collection, Wellington

14 *Achromatic Grey* 1977

acrylic, canvas 1716 x 1375 mm
private collection, Auckland

15 *Achromatic Dark* 1977

acrylic, canvas 1716 x 1375 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

16 *Monochrome Red* 1977

acrylic, hardboard 1202 x 891 mm
collection Kobi and Patricia Bosshard, Dunedin

17 *Monochrome Blue (linear series)* 1977

acrylic, hardboard 1200 x 899 mm
collection Auckland City Art Gallery

18 *Area Light Blue (linear series)* 1978

acrylic, hardboard 1200 x 899 mm
collection Mr J. Gellert, Auckland

19 *Area Light (linear series)* 1978

acrylic, hardboard 1200 x 899 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

20 *Monochrome Yellow* 1978

acrylic, cardboard 1225 x 809 mm
collection Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch

21 *Monochrome Red* 1978

acrylic, cardboard 1220 x 811 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

22 *Monochrome Blue* 1978

acrylic, cardboard 1224 x 808 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection Mrs V. Leung, Auckland

23 *Achromatic with Red and Green (linear series)* 1978

acrylic, canvas 2134 x 1615 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

- 24 *Monochrome Yellow, Four Areas* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1187 x 1225 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 25 *Monochrome Red, Four Areas* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1187 x 1225 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection Mr and Mrs M. C. Paterson, Dunedin
- 26 *Monochrome Blue, Four Areas* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1187 x 1225 mm
 collection the artist
- 27 *Monochrome Indigo, Four Areas* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1203 x 1220 mm
 collection the artist
- 28 *Monochrome Purple* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1220 x 1203 mm
 collection the artist
- 29 *Monochrome Green* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1223 x 1200 mm
 collection the artist
- 30 *Monochrome Orange* 1979
 acrylic, cardboard 1225 x 1200 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 31 *Achromatic Dark with Red* 1979
 acrylic, hardboard 1200 x 1200 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection Kobi and Patricia Bosshard, Dunedin
- 32 *Yellow Achromatic* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 1600 x 1222 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 33 *Achromatic with Orange, Purple and Green* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 1600 x 1222 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection Mr J. Gellert, Auckland
- 34 *Two Areas Orange and Maroon* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 1220 x 1524 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 Paris family collection, Wellington
- 35 *Two Areas Blue* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 1220 x 1524 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 36 *Four Areas Achromatic* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 1220 x 1638 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 37 *Three Areas Achromatic* 1980
 acrylic, customwood 917 x 1228 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 38 *Three Areas Blue and Orange* 1981
 acrylic, hardboard 1372 x 1200 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection Auckland City Art Gallery
- 39 *Two Areas Yellow-Orange* 1981
 acrylic, customwood 590 x 2440 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 40 *Two Areas Red-Purple* 1981
 acrylic, customwood 590 x 2440 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 41 *Two Areas Purple Blue-Green* 1981
 acrylic, customwood 590 x 2440 mm
 title and signature inscribed verso
 collection the artist
- 42 *Segmented Arc on Black* 1982
 acrylic, wax crayon, coloured pencil, hardboard
 1499 x 1220 mm
 collection National Art Gallery, Wellington
- 43 *Segmented Arc on Blue* 1982
 acrylic, wax crayon, coloured pencil, hardboard
 1499 x 1220 mm
 collection Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin
- 44 *Segmented Arc on Yellow* 1982
 acrylic, wax crayon, coloured pencil, hardboard
 1499 x 1220 mm
 collection the artist

45 *Construction on Red (small)* 1982

acrylic, wax crayon, coloured pencil, hardboard
1200 x 895 mm
collection the artist

46 *Painting Red Achromatic* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, canvas 2273 x 1510 mm
collection the artist

47 *Painting Blue Achromatic* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, canvas 2273 x 1510 mm
collection the artist

48 *Painting Green with Blue and Black* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, canvas 2273 x 1510 mm
collection the artist

49 *Arcs and Lines on Maroon (diamond)* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, coloured pencil, canvas
1600 x 1600 mm
collection Mr N. McGrath, Lower Hutt

50 *Arcs and Lines on Blue* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, coloured pencil, canvas
1600 x 1600 mm
collection the artist

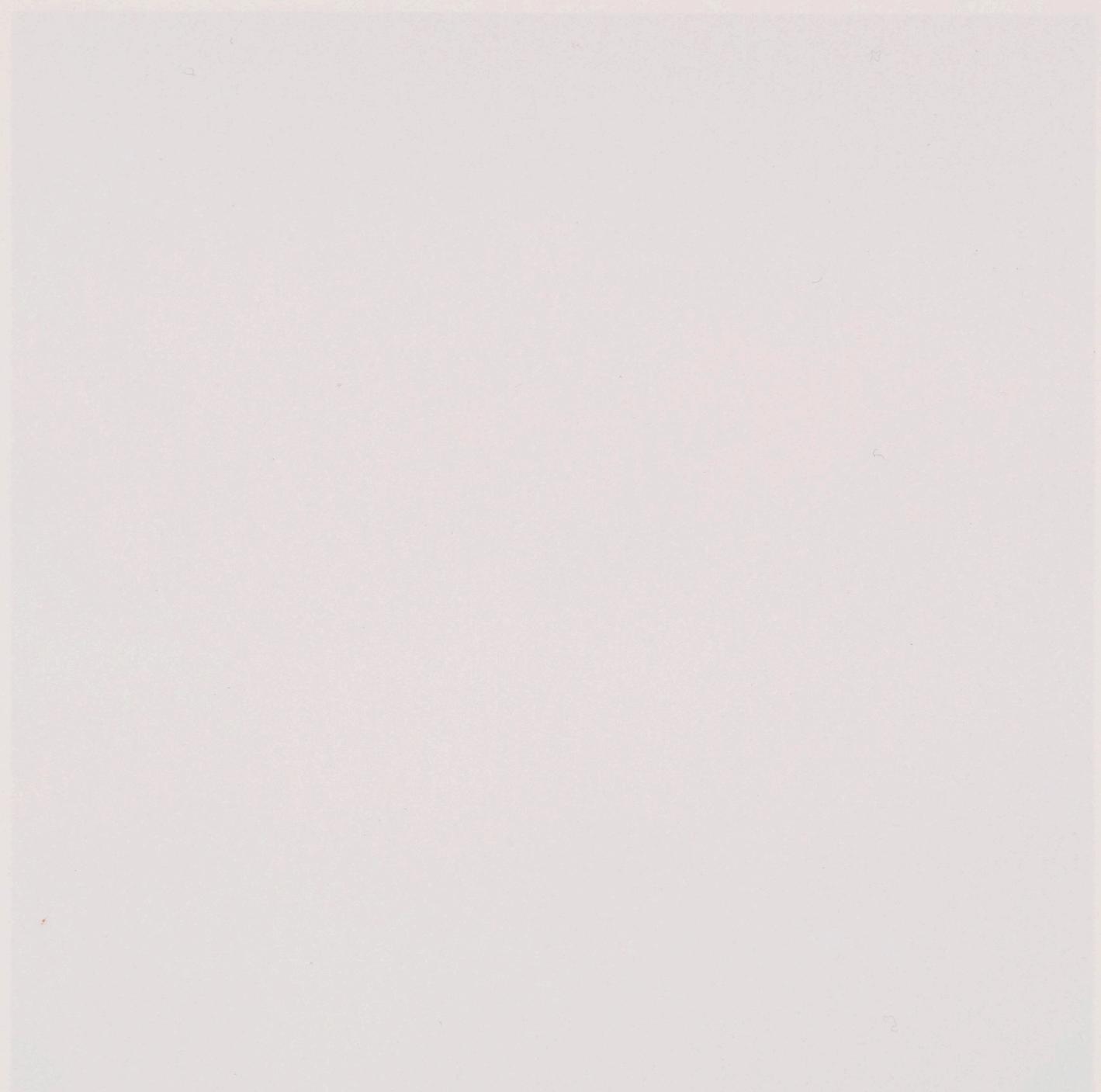
51 *Segmented Arc on Green* 1983

acrylic polymer, wax crayon, coloured pencil, canvas
1600 x 1600 mm
title and signature inscribed verso
collection the artist

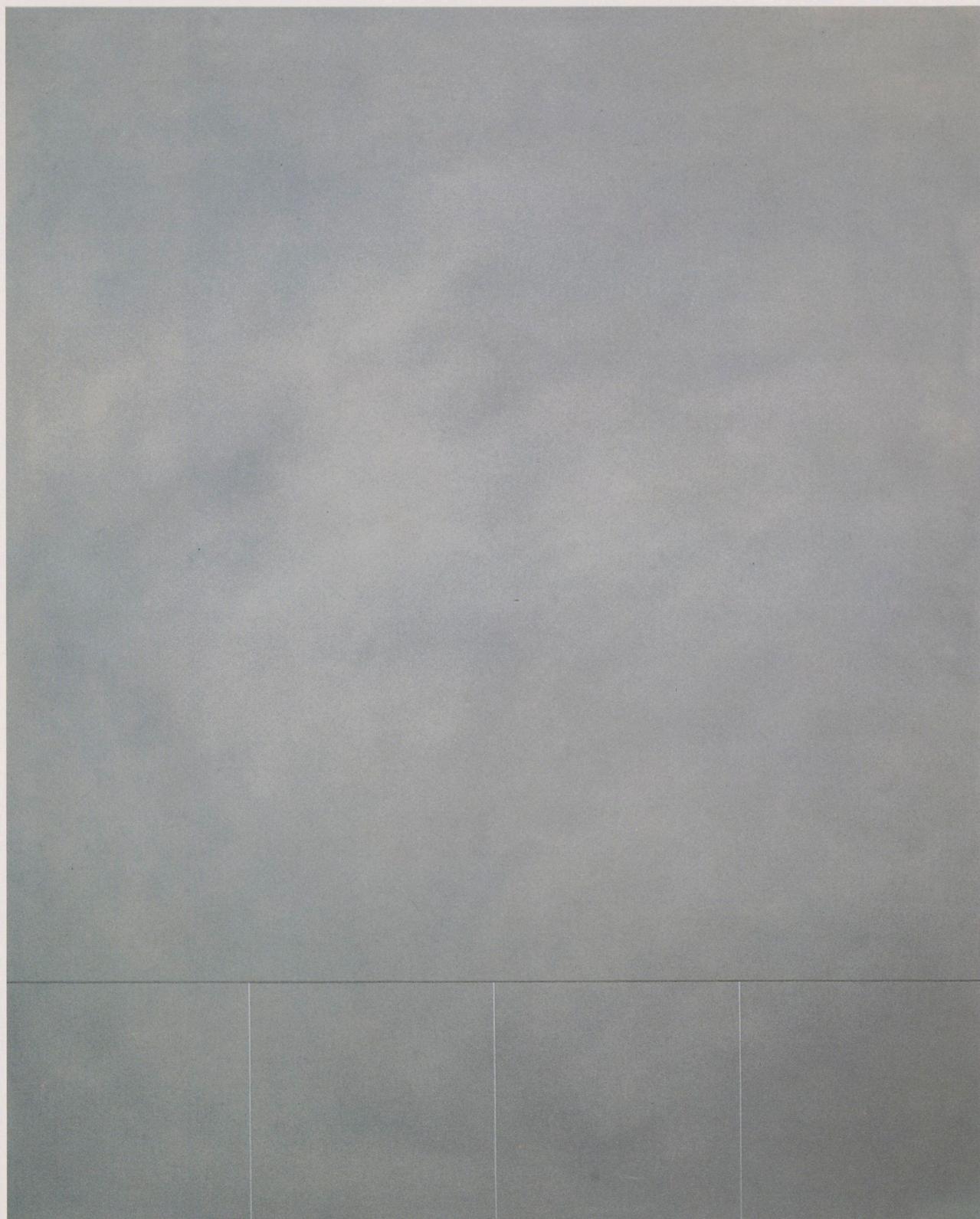
Plates

cat. no. 1 *Painting Red* 1974

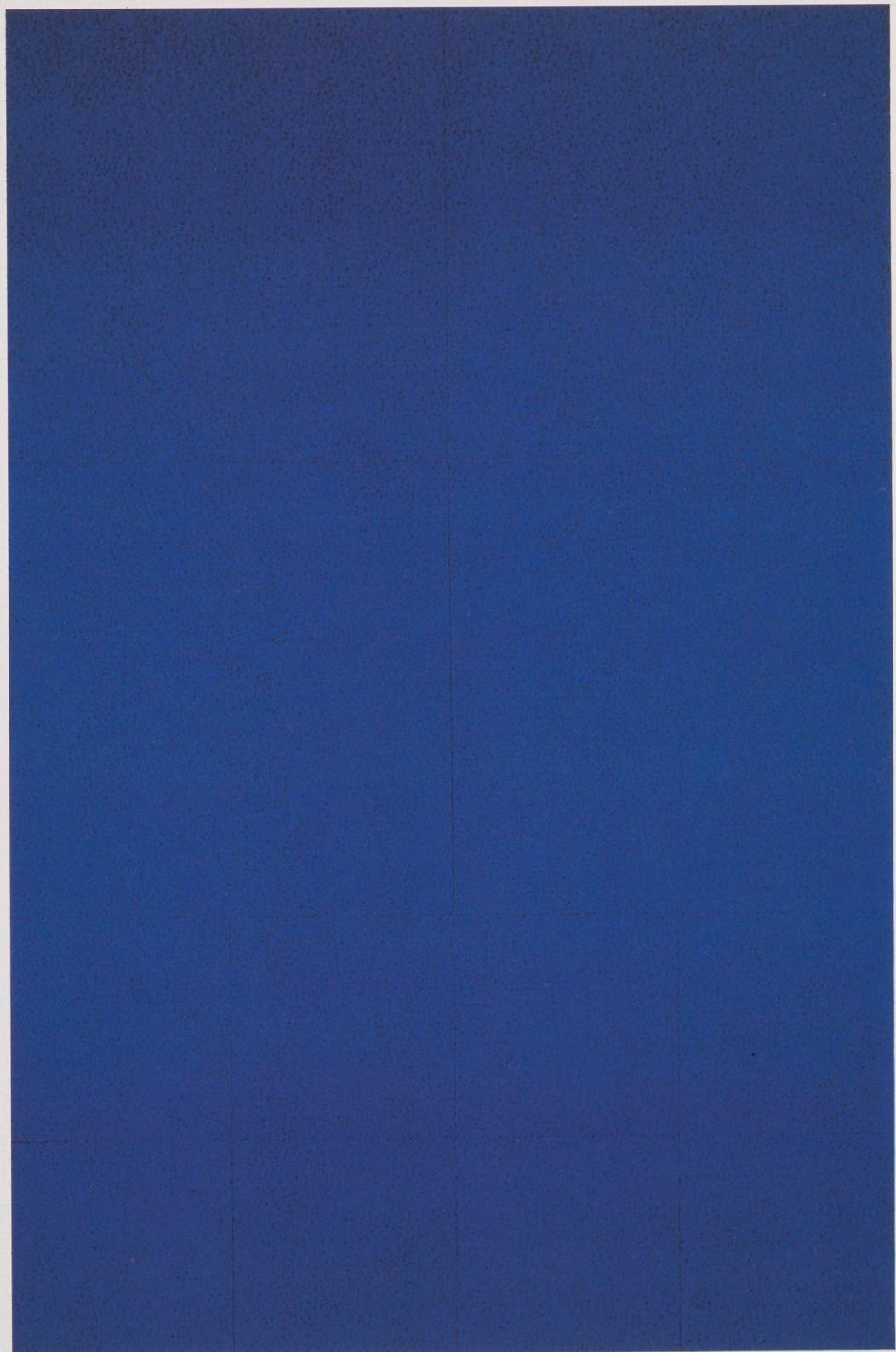


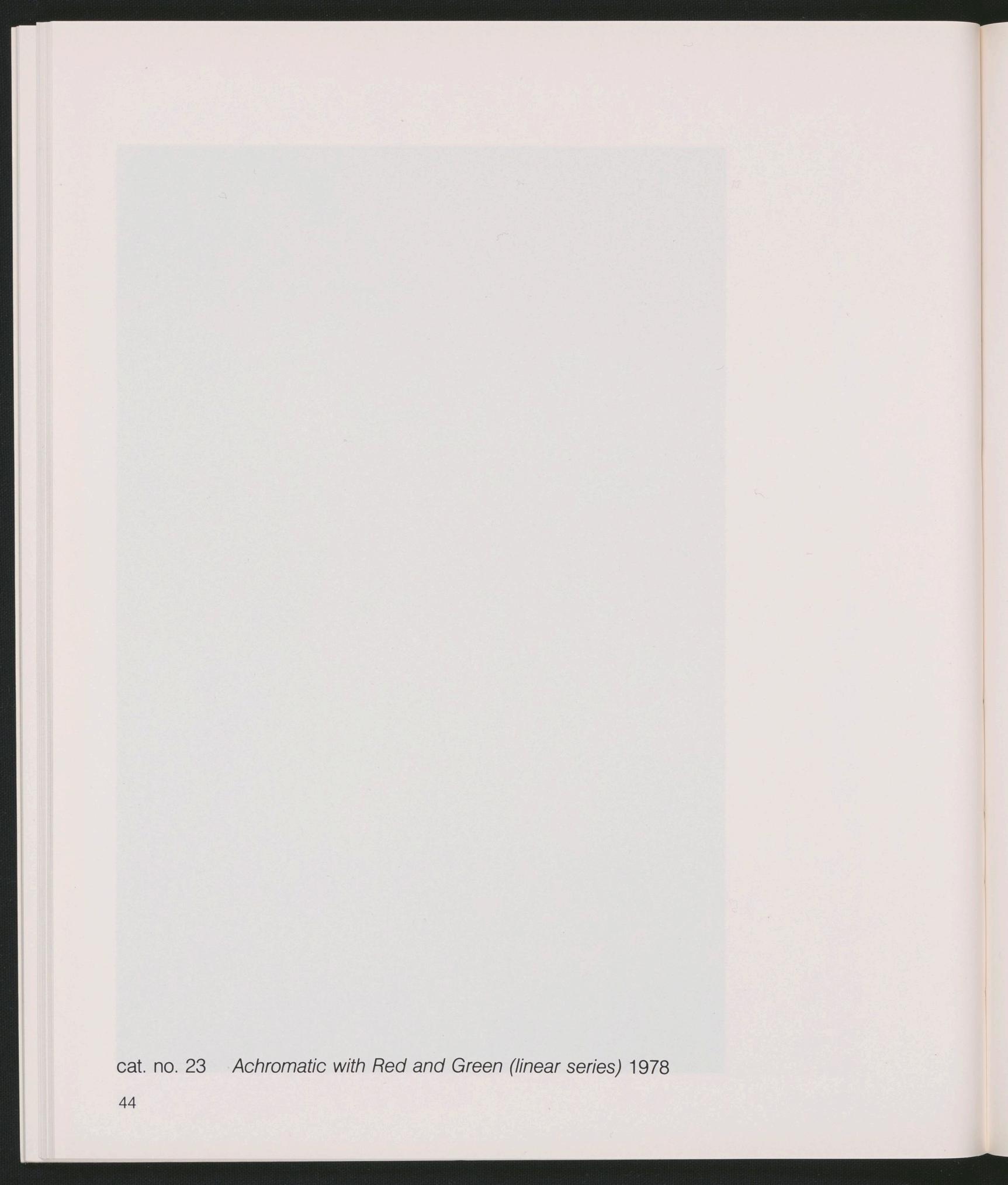


cat. no. 14 *Achromatic Grey* 1977



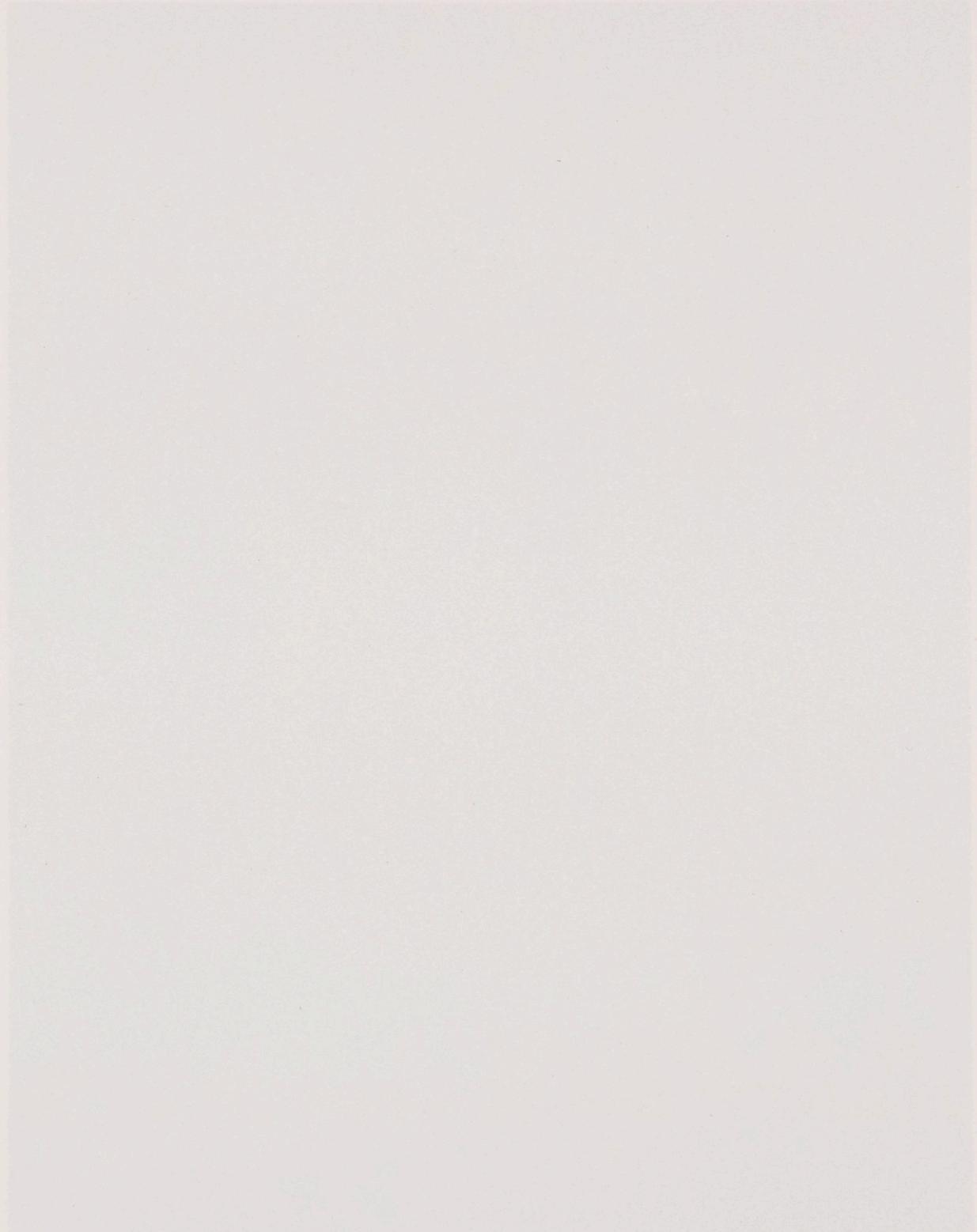
cat. no. 22 *Monochrome Blue* 1978



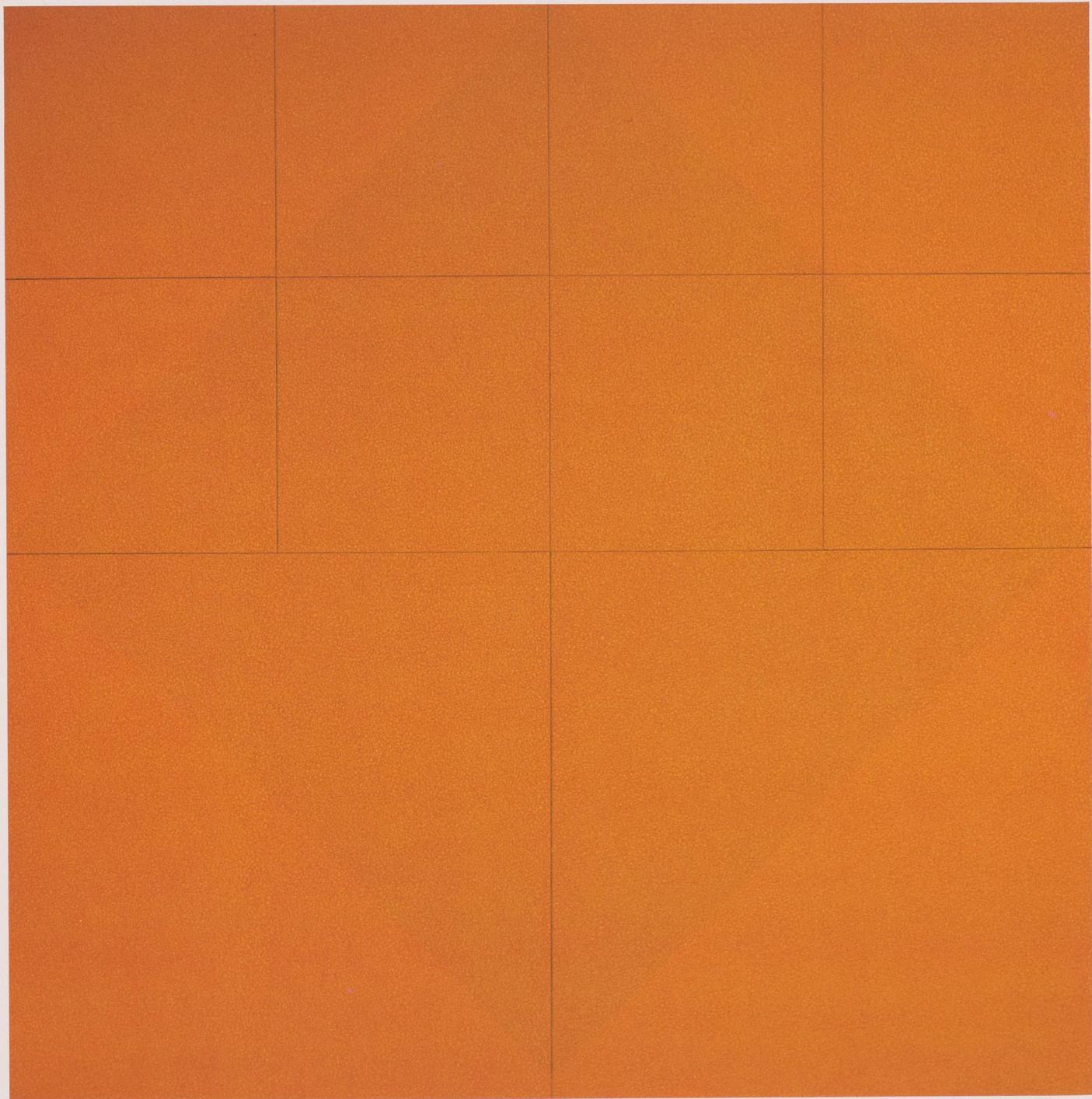


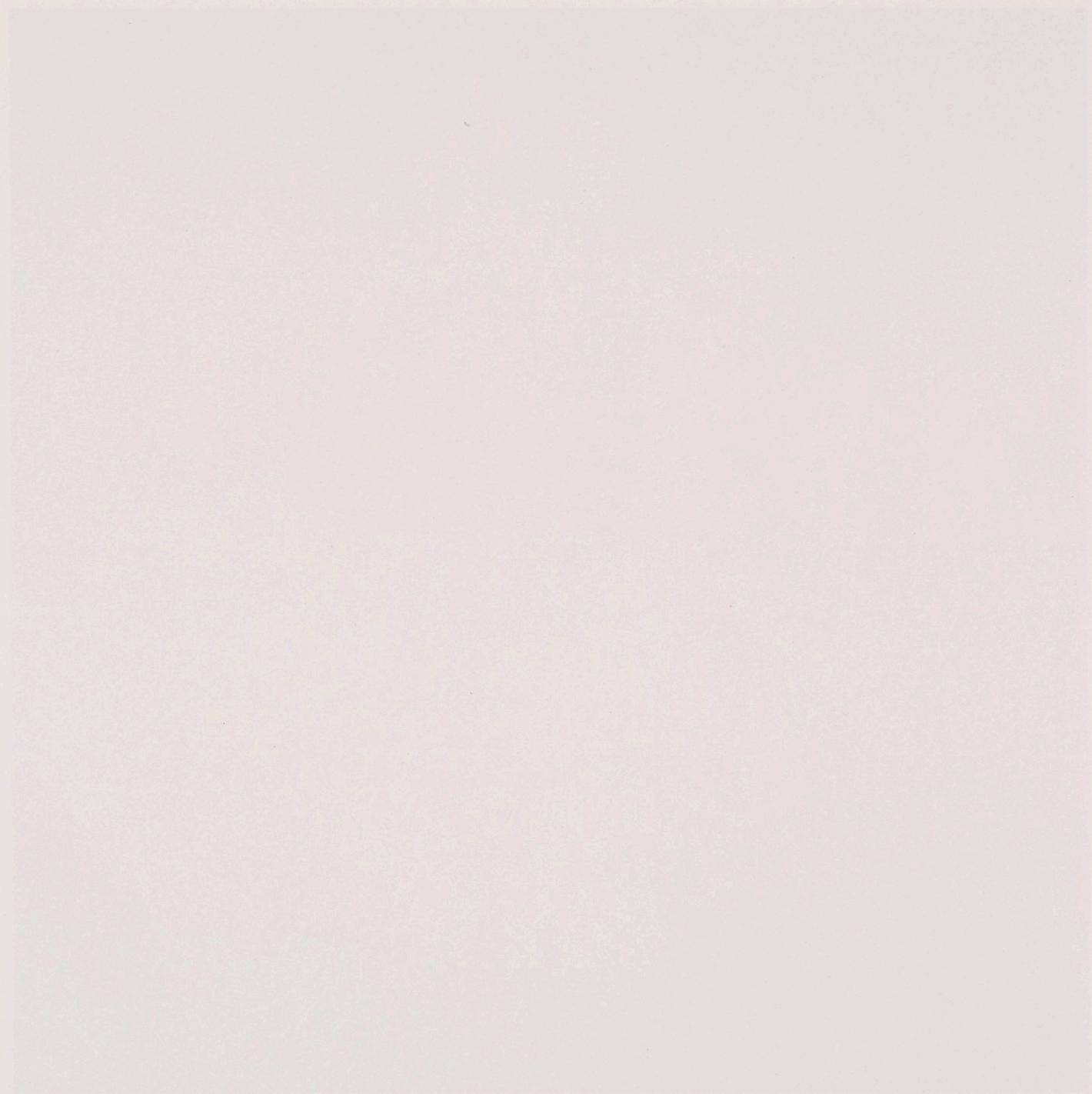
cat. no. 23 *Achromatic with Red and Green (linear series)* 1978



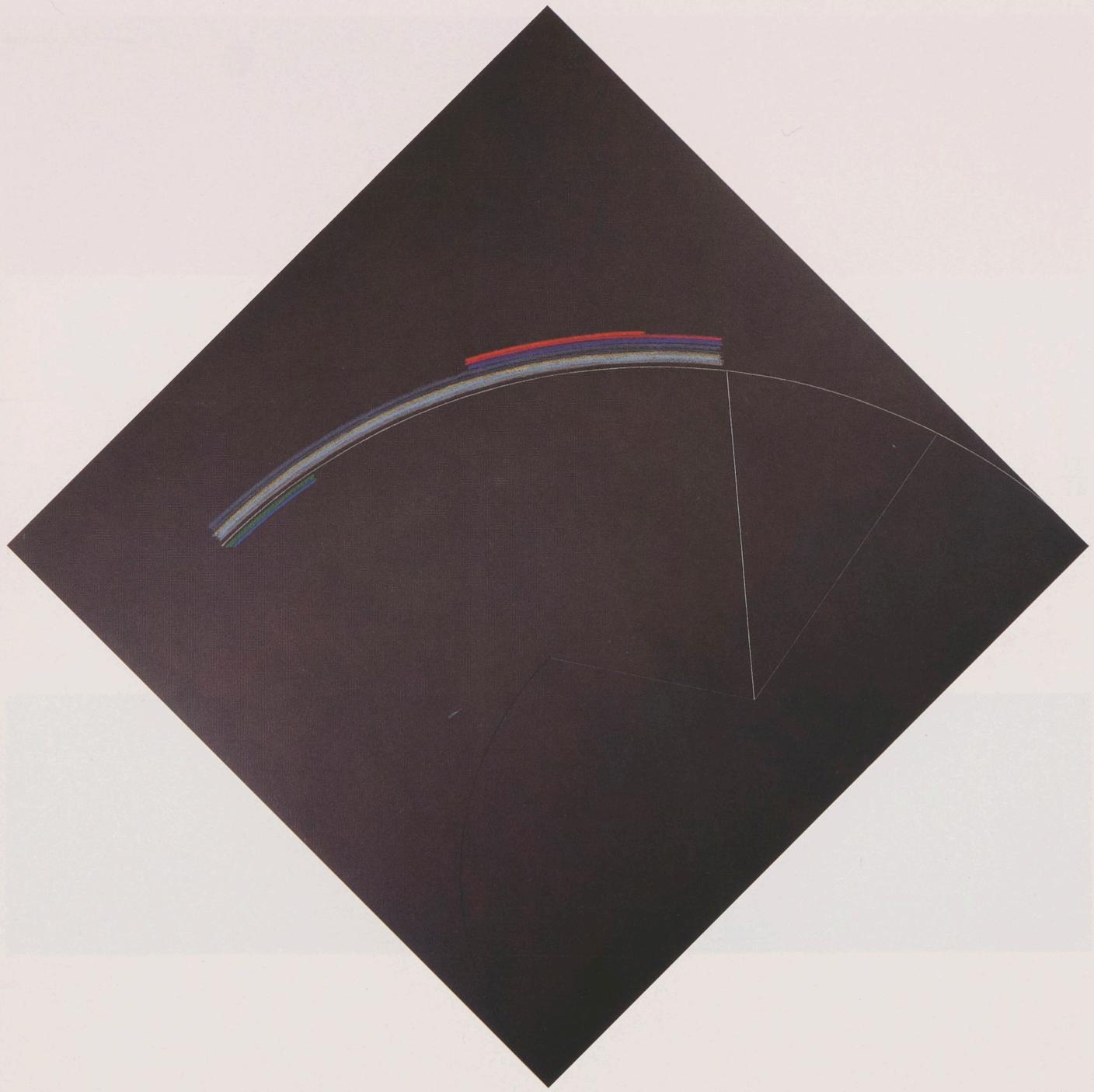


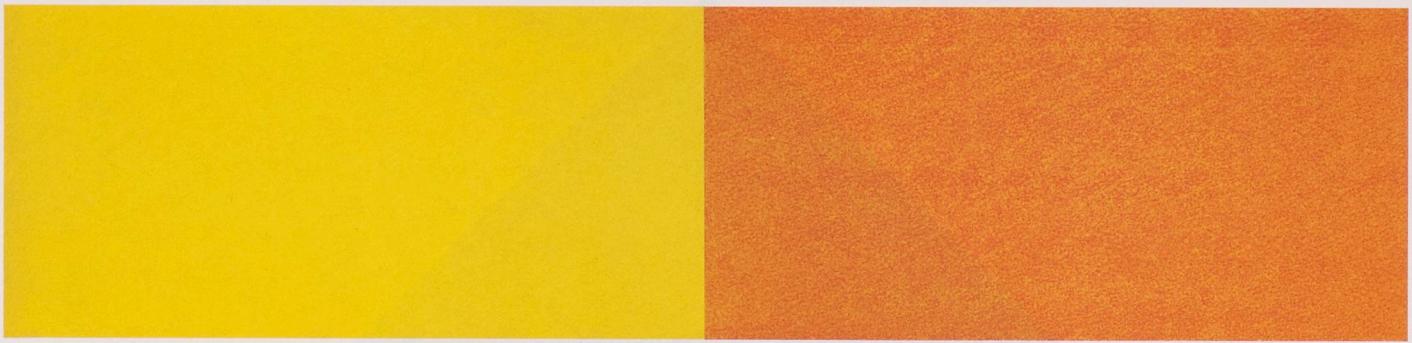
cat. no. 30 *Monochrome Orange* 1979



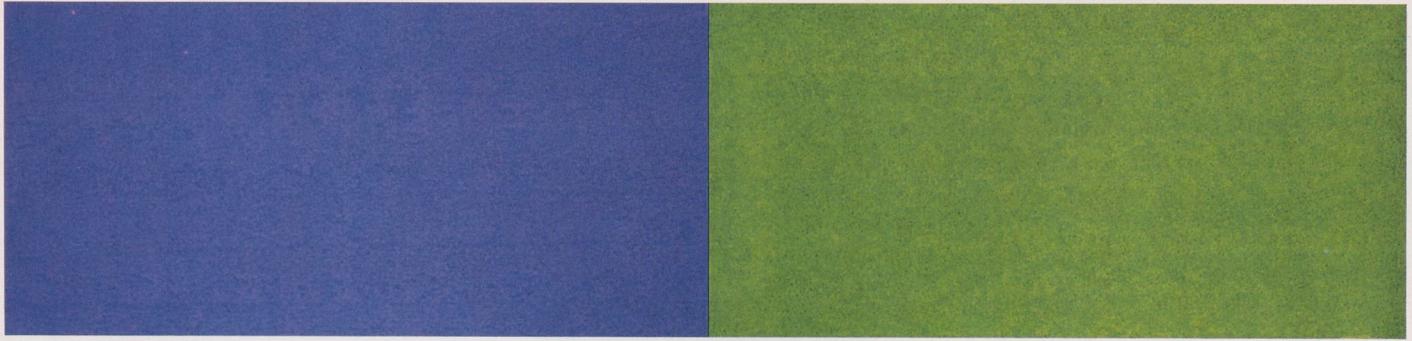


cat. no. 49 *Arcs and Lines on Maroon (diamond)* 1983

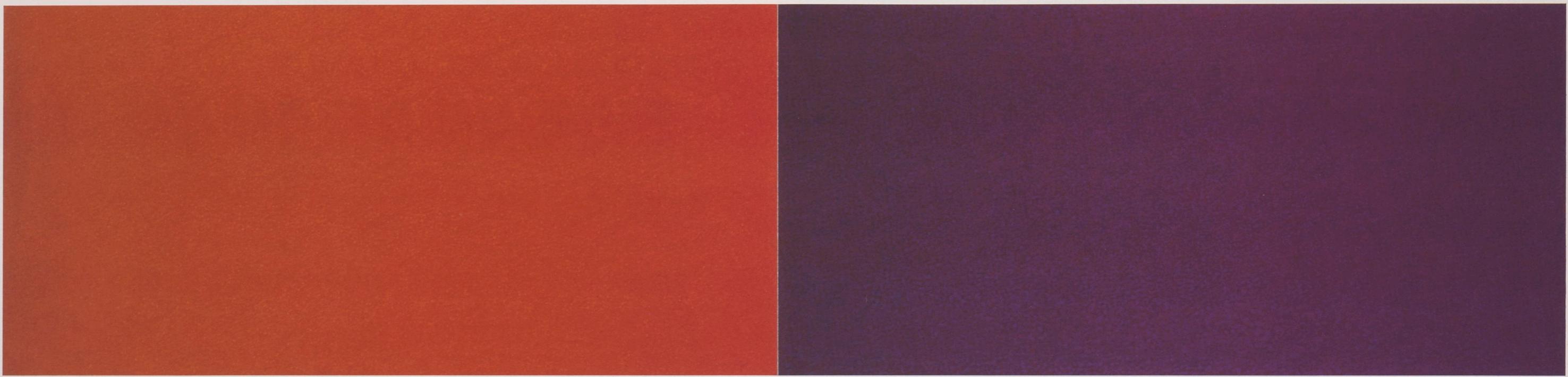




$\frac{39}{41}$



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- cat. no. 39 Two Areas Yellow-Orange 1981
cat. no. 40 Two Areas Red-Purple 1981
cat. no. 41 Two Areas Purple Blue-Green 1981



Exhibitions

1949	June	School of Architecture, University of Auckland, first one-man show comprising paintings and drawings 1946-49
1950	18 June – 9 July	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary Artists 1</i> (group show of 13 artists), three works on paper 1949-1950
1951	8-28 Oct	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary Artists 2</i> , four works 1950
1953		Tauranga Art Society, guest exhibitor
1954	2?-26 September	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Object and Image – New Zealand Fellowship of Artists</i> , recent paintings
1955		Auckland City Art Gallery (entry foyer), one-man show, paintings 1955
1956	May – June	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>New Zealand Painting</i>
1957		Tauranga Art Society (group show of 16 artists), six works 1954-56
	Nov – Dec	Auckland Society of Arts, <i>Paintings, drawings, watercolours</i> , one-man show of 28 works
1959		Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Eight New Zealand Painters</i> , four works (paintings and works on paper) 1946-55
	Apr – May	Gallery 91, Christchurch, one-man show comprising paintings 1957-58
1960	Apr – May	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Drawings</i> , recent drawings
	May – June	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Painting and Sculpture</i> , five works 1959-60
1961	6-21 Apr	Auckland City Art Gallery, Associates' exhibition, three-man show with J. P. Snadden and D. Peebles
	18 May – 18 June	The Gallery, Auckland, eighteen works 1960-61
	Nov – Dec	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Paintings from the Pacific – Japan, America, Australia, New Zealand</i>
1962	28 May – ? June	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Painting</i>
	30 Oct – 9 Nov	Ikon Gallery, Auckland Festival, one-man show, sixteen paintings 1961-62
		Ikon Gallery, Auckland, one-man show, recent works on paper and collages
		Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Painting and Sculpture</i> , recent paintings
		Ikon Gallery, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich Prints</i> , monotypes, drawings and gouaches

- 1962-63 Commonwealth Institute, London,
Commonwealth Art Today, New Zealand
 section organised by Auckland City Art Gallery
- 1963 Nov – Dec Auckland City Art Gallery, *Contemporary New Zealand Painting*, recent paintings
- 1964-65 Japan, India and Malaysia, *New Zealand Painting and Ceramics*, four works from 1963,
 organised by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts
 Council of New Zealand
- 1965 Ikon Gallery, Auckland, *Milan Mrkusich, Louise Henderson*, paintings 1963-65
 Commonwealth Institute, London,
Contemporary New Zealand Painting, four
 works, organised by the Queen Elizabeth II
 Arts Council
 London, Paris, Brussels, *Three New Zealand Painters* (with J. Henderson, J. Perry and
 pottery by B. Brickell, H. Mason, L. Castle and
 D. Blumhardt), sponsored by the External
 Affairs Department, Wellington
New Delhi, 5th International Contemporary Art Exhibition
- Nov – Dec Auckland City Art Gallery,
Contemporary New Zealand Painting, recent
 paintings
- National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and
 Australian State Galleries, *Eight New Zealand Artists*
- 1966 22 Mar – 2 Apr Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland,
Paintings from 1960 to 1963, one-man show,
 paintings 1960-66
 Darlinghurst Galleries, Sydney, *Five Auckland Painters*, in association with the Barry Lett
 Galleries, paintings 1965-66
- Nov – Dec Auckland City Art Gallery, *Contemporary New Zealand Painting*, recent paintings
- 1967 20 Feb – 3 Mar Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, *Milan Mrkusich, Louise Henderson*
- 16-29 Sept Palmerston North Art Gallery, first prize,
Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art
 New Vision Gallery, *Christian Art*, paintings
 1966
- 1968 Auckland and national tour, *Benson and Hedges Exhibition*
 Bonython Gallery, Sydney, *Five New Zealand Artists*, paintings 1966-67
- 5-16 Feb Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, one-man show,
 recent paintings
- Mar – Apr Auckland City Art Gallery, *Ten Years of New Zealand Paintings in Auckland*, paintings 1955;
 1961-63; 1966
- Mar – Apr Auckland City Art Gallery Festival Exhibition,
Recent New Zealand Sculpture, painted reliefs

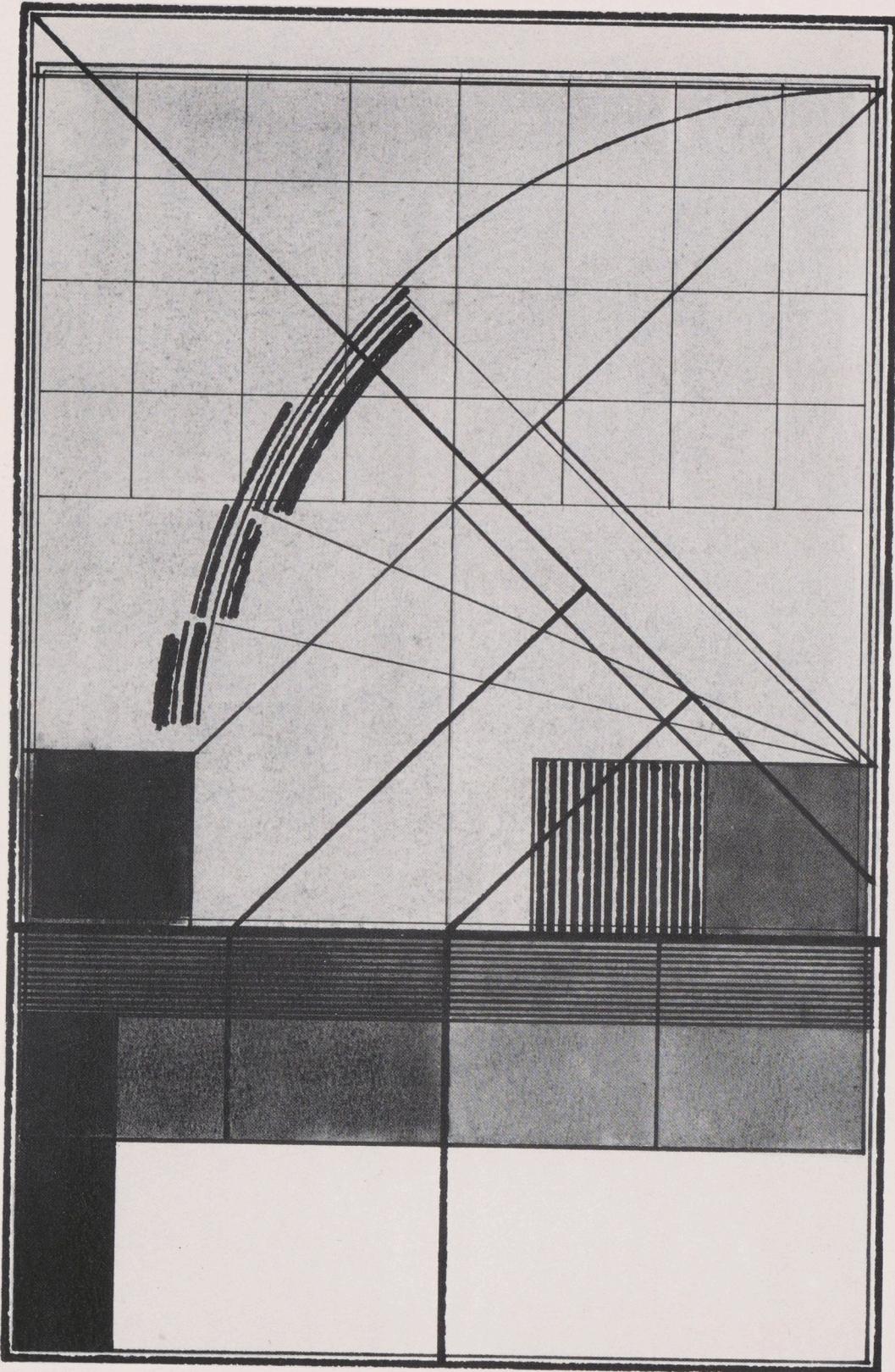
1969	25 Mar – 4 Apr	Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland Festival Exhibition, Auckland, <i>Twenty Works</i> (19 from 1968, one from 1969)
	May	Auckland Society of Arts, New Zealand Society of Sculptors and Associates, six recent paintings
	Sept	Vancouver, <i>Pan Pacific Exhibition</i>
1970	Mar – April	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, one-man show, recent paintings
	6-17 July	Tokyo, <i>International Young Artists</i> , merit award
		Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>New Art of the Sixties</i> , a Royal Visit exhibition presented by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, paintings 1961; 1967
		Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, <i>Twenty paintings 1969 – 1970</i>
		Auckland and national tour, <i>Benson and Hedges Exhibition</i>
1970-71		Smithsonian Institution travelling exhibition, Washington D.C., various United States museums, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Painters</i>
1971	Feb – Mar	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Ten Big Paintings</i>
	27 Apr – 8 May	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Recent Paintings</i>
		Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North Centenary Collection, <i>Contemporary New Zealand Painting</i>
1972		Christchurch and national tour, <i>Benson and Hedges Exhibition</i>
1972	Mar	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Recent paintings</i>
	19 June – 7 July	Petar/James Gallery, Auckland, <i>First exhibitions, six artists, three works</i> (two from 1971, one from 1972)
	26 July – 15 Aug	Department of University Extension, Auckland, Milan Mrkusich, six paintings 1964 to 1967
	Sept – Oct	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Milan Mrkusich, survey exhibition</i> , paintings 1946-72
1972	13 Nov – 1 Dec	Petar/James Gallery, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich Meta Grey and Dark Paintings</i> , 10 paintings
1973	24 Apr	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, eight recent paintings
1974	6-22 Nov	Petar/James Gallery, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich Recent Paintings</i> , works from 1974
1975	5-11 Apr	Petar/James Gallery, Auckland, and Pakuranga Community Art Centre, <i>Two Generations of New Zealand Abstraction</i> , eight artists
	20 June – 12 July	Petar/James Gallery, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich, seven major paintings 1965 to 1968</i>
	4-21 Nov	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Seven Paintings by Milan Mrkusich</i>

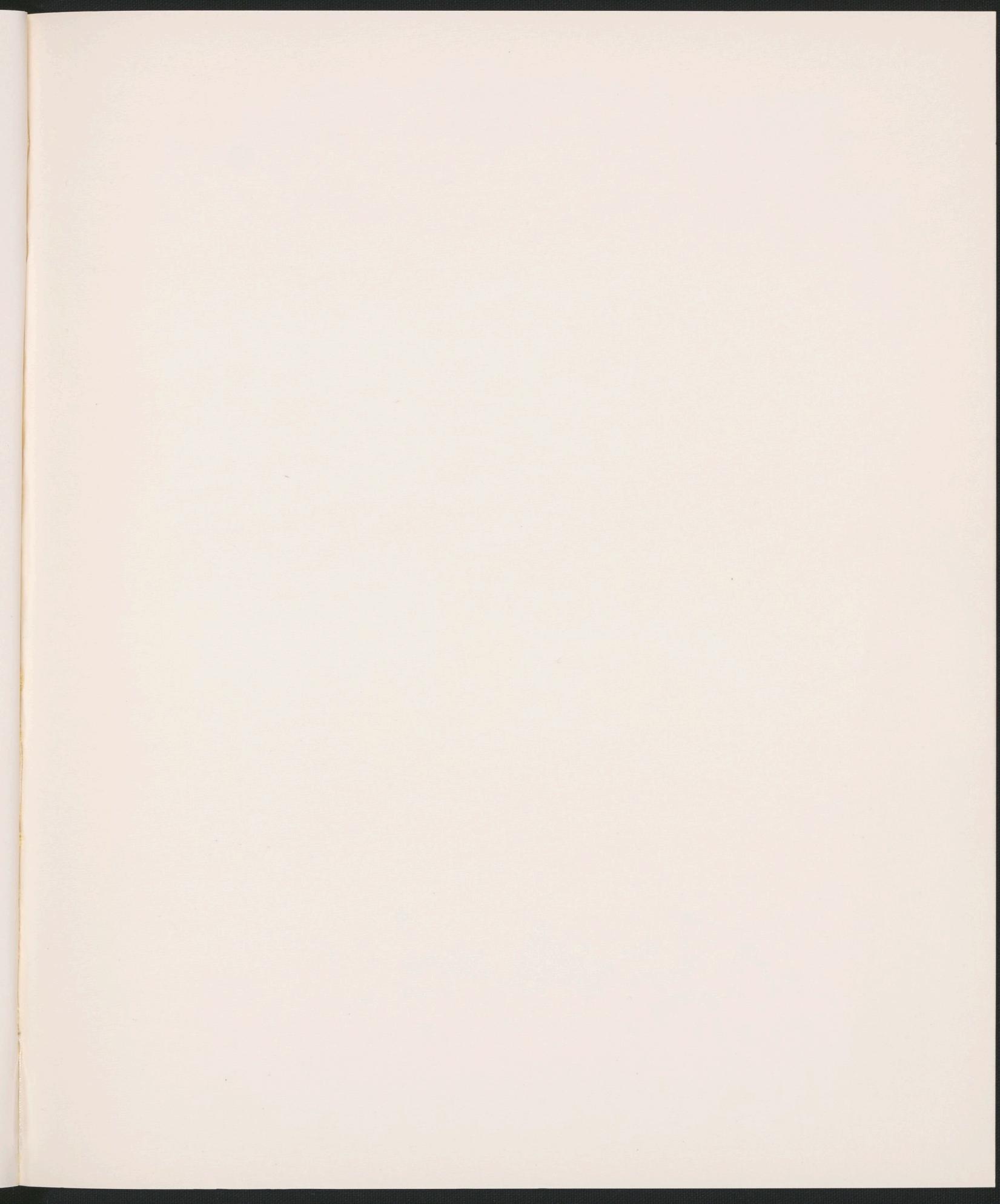
1976	15 June – 12 July	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Milan Mrkusich Collages, Reliefs 1959 to 1963</i> , 11 works
1977	2-13 May	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich paintings</i> , nine paintings from 1975-76
	14-24 June	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>In Retrospect I</i> , six artists, two Mrkusich works from 1966 and 1970
	30 Aug – 16 Sept	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Group Exhibition 4</i> , seven artists, two Mrkusich works from 1963 and 1975
	20 Sept – 7 Oct	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Five recent paintings and works on paper</i>
	11-28 Oct	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich/Geoff Thornley</i> , five works from 1968, 1970 (two), 1973 and 1975
1978	21 Feb – 10 Mar	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Five big paintings 1978</i> , five artists, Mrkusich, <i>Four Zones Dark 1976</i>
	8-19 May	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich Paintings</i> , 10 paintings from 1977
	5-15 Sept	Gallery Data, Auckland, <i>Milan Mrkusich, Works on Paper</i> , 11 works from 1977
	17 Oct – 3 Nov	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Recent paintings and works on paper</i>
1979	21 Apr – 9 May	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Milan Mrkusich Paintings 1977 to 1979</i>
	26 June – 13 July	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, re-exhibiting the June 1949 School of Architecture, University of Auckland exhibition
	1-19 Sept	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Milan Mrkusich Monochromes 1978-79</i> , six paintings
1980	8-25 Apr	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Six recent paintings</i>
	22 Apr – 9 May	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Paintings 1977 to 1979</i> , seven recent paintings
	12-29 May	Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, <i>Monochrome and Linear Works: 1978-1979</i>
1981	11-22 May	Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, <i>Eight New Works by Albrecht, Bambury, Killeen, McCahon, Mrkusich, Ross, Scott, Walters</i>
	6 June – 3 July	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Five recent paintings</i>
	16 June – 3 July	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Paintings 1980</i> , five paintings
	13-24 July	Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, <i>Area Works</i> , seven paintings
1982	4-21 May	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Four Recent Paintings</i>
	14 June – 2 July	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Paintings and Works on Paper 1980-1982</i> , 10 works
	Oct – Jan 1983	Museum of Art, Carnegie International, also travelled to Seattle Art Museum
	Dec – 16 Jan 1983	Auckland City Art Gallery, <i>Recent paintings</i>
1983	28 June – 16 July	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Five recent paintings</i>

1984	8-26 May	Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, <i>Recent paintings</i>
	3-28 July	Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, <i>Four paintings</i> , 1982-83
1985	22 Apr – 11 May	Artis Gallery, Auckland, <i>Paintings 1966-82</i>

Biographical Notes

- 1925 Born Dargaville April 5, 1925. Parents had come to New Zealand from Padgora, Yugoslavia.
- 1927 Family moves to Auckland.
- 1930 to 1941 Education St. Joseph's Convent, Parnell, Marist Brothers School, Ponsonby, and Sacred Heart College.
- 1942 Apprenticeship in Writing and Pictorial Arts.
- 1946 Gave up commercial art to paint full time. Attended private life class.
- 1949 Formed the design firm of Brenner Associates with Desmond Mullin and Steve Jelicich. Worked as designer and colour consultant.
- 1950 Married. Designed studio and home which was built in 1952.
- 1958 Decided to paint full time.
- 1959 Designed mosaic Stations of the Cross, Church of the Holy Cross, Henderson. Designed mosaic mural for B. J. Ball building in Auckland.
- 1960 Mosaic mural for C.S.R. Building, Fort Street, Auckland. Stained glass window and mosaic Stations of the Cross for St. Joseph's Church, Grey Lynn, Auckland.
- 1964 Chapel windows, Auckland Citizens, Seafarers Memorial Centre, Auckland. Mosaic mural for Foodstuffs Auckland Limited.
- 1967 First prize, Manawatu Prize for Contemporary Art.
- 1969 Merit Award, International Young Artists' Exhibition, Tokyo, Japan.
- 1971 Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand Fellowship.
- 1981 Visited Sydney, Australia.
- 1982 Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand/Air New Zealand travel grant to visit United States of America, and major art galleries and museums in Los Angeles, Washington, Pittsburgh and New York.





Auckland City Art Gallery