

THE FINE ART SOCIETY

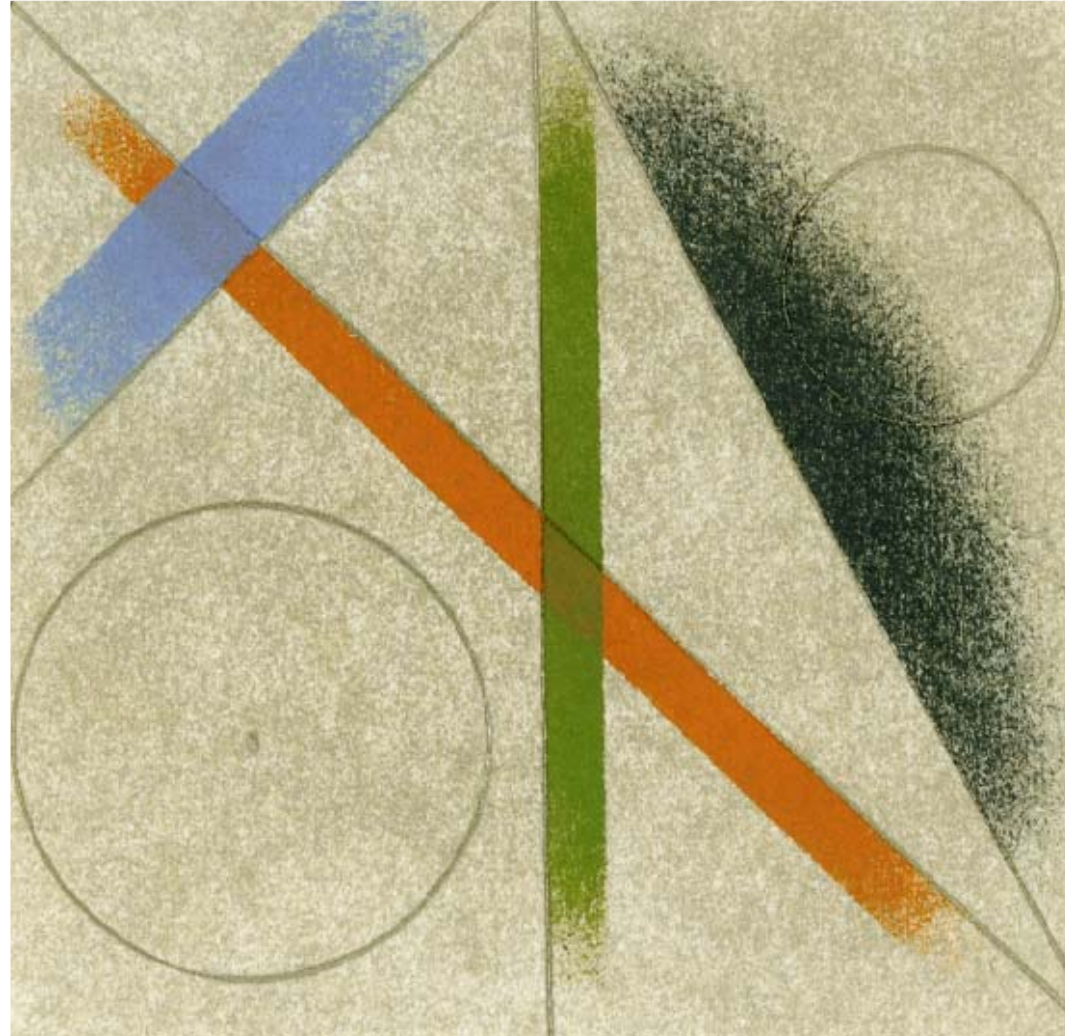
28 FEBRUARY TO 15 MARCH 2007

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MICHAEL CANNEY 1923-1999

Oils, Alkyds and Reliefs

The Fine Art Society
Liss Fine Art
Robert Miller

FOREWORD

The 49 works in this show were produced by Michael Canney in the last 25 years of his life. The pictures come from the artist's estate and represent the most significant group of his work ever to come on to the market.

Canney was an innovator, and discovered the possibilities created by the invention of a new medium. Alkyd oil paint was developed in the 1930s and 40s for industrial processes which required special paint finishes. The addition of alkyd resin to oil paint gives more flexibility when dry and speeds up the drying process. This medium was to have a profound influence on Canney's work in his later years. It allowed him to paint with a precision which is impossible with slow drying oils, laying contrasting tones adjacent to each other with no bleeding of colours, and to produce effects on the surface of the paint, with a variety of techniques, almost immediately after the paint had been laid down. The result is a stronger and more permanent work of art, less susceptible to damage as it dries and more durable when the process is complete.

Born in 1923 at Falmouth he was, from an early age, inculcated into the modern art movement in Britain, and in particular that of the West Country, where so many leading artists of the 20th Century were based. From his first experiences visiting exhibitions, his time serving in the forces in Italy, and on to his career as an artist he came into close contact with colleagues of the highest distinction and some of the greatest creative minds of twentieth century art: Giorgio De Chirico was an early influence and encouraged Canney to pursue his enthusiasm for art. Aged nineteen he met Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth and was to collaborate with Hepworth on an open air

exhibition at Penlee Park. He became friends with Roger Hilton, Patrick Heron and Peter Lanyon. In 1958 he met Mark Rothko who liked his work: they had a shared admiration for John Tunnard, whose work was then little known. Mixing in the artistic circles of the time he came to know William Scott, Robert Adams, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Tobey, Naum Gabo and Francis Bacon. These friendships and associations kept Canney involved with painters and painting. He lectured, wrote, made broadcasts and commented on the work of artists of his own time, and always sought new breakthroughs in his own work.

The earliest pictures in the show are from the 1970s and are painted in oil on canvas; they are, like all of his work from this time onward in the Constructivist tradition. The compositions are asymmetric, with clear blocks of colour, and the surfaces are smooth, even polished. In *Composition with Red Angle* (cat.12) the shapes are varied asymmetrical inventions, juxtaposed by the artist, with differing colours to form an intriguing yet stable composition. Similarly the painting *Composition in black* (cat.11) is a taut construction of interlocking forms made stark by the heightened contrast of the palette. In these two pictures, as in the other nine oils in the exhibition, the language is simple, an arrangement of many solitary colours to construct a composition on a single tone background. Canney's inventiveness is clear and easy to appreciate and with great precision and painstaking technical ability he is working at the limit of his materials.

In the late 1970s and early 80s Canney embarked on two new projects, the first of which he continued until

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Designed by Dalrymple
Typeset in Magma and Minion
Printed by Die Keure, Bruges

Cover: *Composition with Blue Square* (cat.13)
Frontispiece: *Composition with Green Strip*
Gouache and pencil · 4½ × 4½ in · 12 × 12 cm

*More works available than are
illustrated in catalogue*

the end of his working life. His paintings became concerned with formal geometric shapes, in particular the square, and he experimented not just with composition using these shapes, but deconstructed them, cutting, folding, peeling, unravelling and dividing, sometimes using numerical sequences such as Fibonacci, and often using common fractions such as $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{5}$, which he maintained were easily understood by the human eye. Between 1979 and 1983, to show his ideas to best effect, Canney used the second of his new projects, the white relief. The purpose of the minimalist, stark works was in his own words: 'to master the simple in order to proceed to the complex. For example, the whiteness of the reliefs is not a search for purity or even for a simplicity of statement. White permits the element of relief to show most readily.'

As he progressed further with his analysis of the square and other shapes he was at the same time starting to use a paint type which would transform the variety and appearance of his pictures. His discovery and experimentation with alkyd allowed his vision and thoughts to come to fruition in a burst of creativity which lasts until he was finally forced to abandon painting due to ill health.

Alkyd, or alkyd oil paint contains a resin which means that the medium dries quickly, or more accurately 'sets' or hardens. This happens in a matter of hours and allows blocks of colour to be laid down adjacent to each other without any danger of 'run' or mixing. The earliest dated works by Canney using this medium are from 1981 and include *System with Circles No. 1* (cat.30) which while exploiting the technical advantages has not quite departed from the earlier compositions. But with *Four Plus Four Equals Two* (cat.19) we can see a new departure in the form of the composition. Canney first creates the composition in a white relief, and then realises the same idea using only four colour tones. From these early experimentations the work quickly takes on a third element, that of surface treatment, to produce scratched

areas (*Rotation No. II*, cat.8), rubbed areas (*Construction*, cat.39), incising (*Three Triangles*, cat.33), lifting of paint (*Enveloping V*, cat.6), and that of delivering pigment into the grooves of paint already dried (*Granite Village by the Sea*, cat.34). At this time he retired from lecturing on art, and he was invited to curate an exhibition of his recent work at the Newlyn Art Gallery in Penzance. In the catalogue notes Canney has chosen to describe the medium not as oils but as painted in alkyd.

With these new found possibilities, and his exceptional feel for colour, Canney started to create much more complex images, laying bands of colour over one another, he paints a third, fusing in his mind, and then on the panel the 'resultant' patch of colour. Each of these sections has been laid down independently, left to dry, and then the others filled in. At the same time as he paints these vibrant colourful pictures he also produces incised monotone pictures (*Sgraffito 3, 4 & 5*, cats.25-7), these beautiful works echo his period of making white reliefs, where he 'masters the simple to proceed to the complex'. In these compositions he takes his meditations on the square to a deeper level of analysis, no longer preserving the surface area, he uses only the outline, and when these are folded on themselves, and their corner angles are changed he reveals the possibility of an infinite number of permutations, while arranging the shapes on a muted ground of delicate sgraffito paint.

Michael Canney's art developed throughout his life, but once he had adopted the Constructivist style he continued it. Experimenting with both composition and media, his work combines visual beauty and a love for materials, with a sharp intellectual study of form, geometry and balance. His own very particular style developed alongside some of the major names of the modern movement in British art. This comprehensive show of Canney's work provides the opportunity to enjoy, and reassess his own contribution to 20th century British abstract art.

Robert Miller

CATALOGUE



1 CONSTRUCTION No. 5
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
12 × 12 inches · 30,5 × 30,5 cm



2 TARGET
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
19¾ × 19¾ inches · 48 × 48 cm



3 SIDE FOLD VI, 1985
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '85 on the reverse
11¼ × 11¼ inches
27 × 27 cm



4 GRID FOLD, c.1987
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
24 × 24 inches · 61 × 61 cm



5 ENVELOPING II, 1987
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '87 on the reverse
11½ × 11½ inches · 29.2 × 29.2 cm



6 ENVELOPING V, 1987
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '91 on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



7 SPIRAL SYSTEM 1, 1982
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '82 on the reverse
24 × 24 inches · 61 × 61 cm



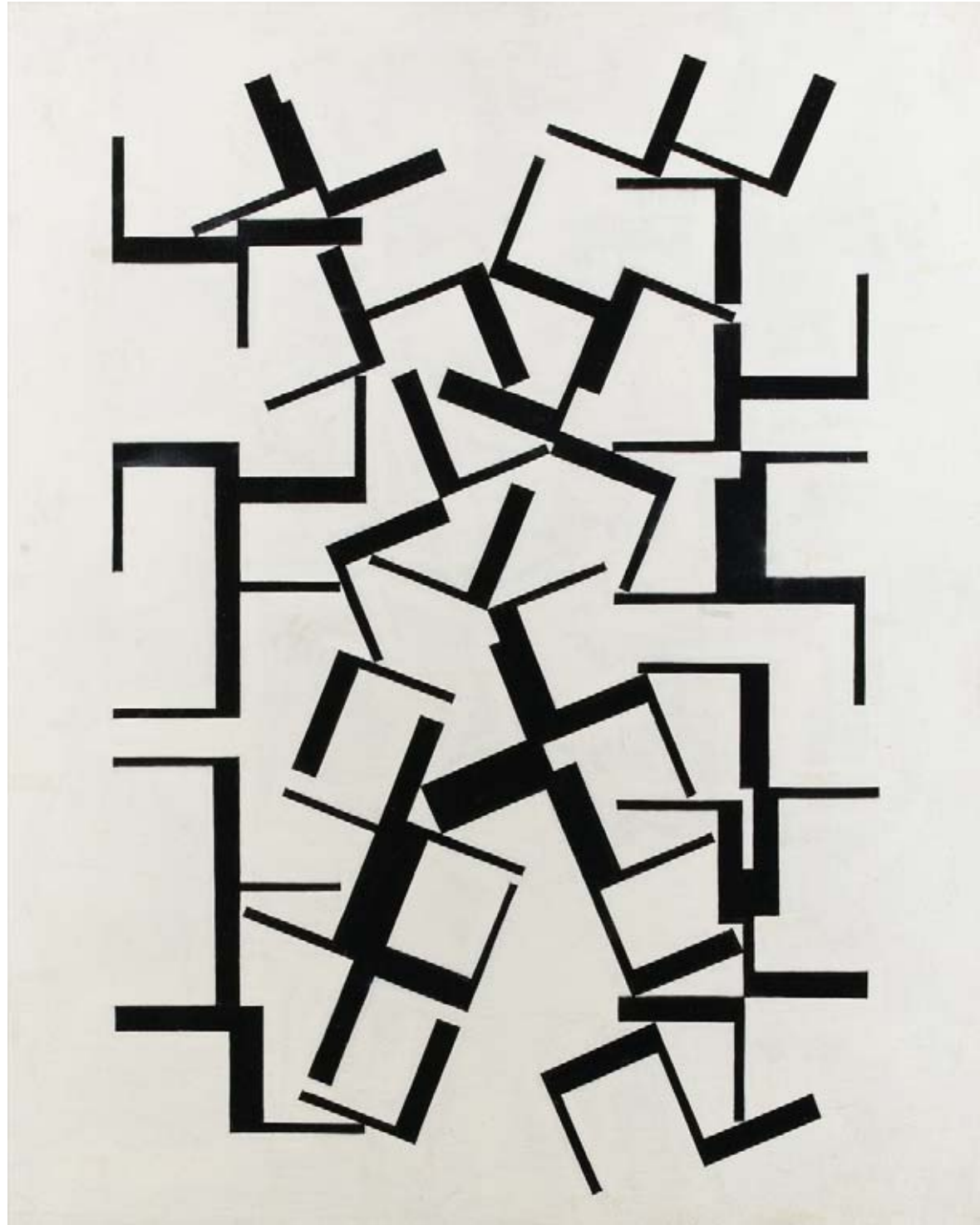
8 ROTATION II
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
24 × 24 inches · 61 × 61 cm



9 COMPOSITION WITH GREY TRIANGLES
Alkyd on panel · Painted verso
24 × 24 inches · 92 × 92 cm



10 COMPOSITION WITH GREEN AND ORANGE
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 36 × 36 cm



11 COMPOSITION IN BLACK
Oil on canvas · 30 × 24 inches · 76.2 × 61 cm



12 COMPOSITION WITH RED ANGLE
Oil on canvas · 30 × 25 inches · 76.2 × 63.5 cm



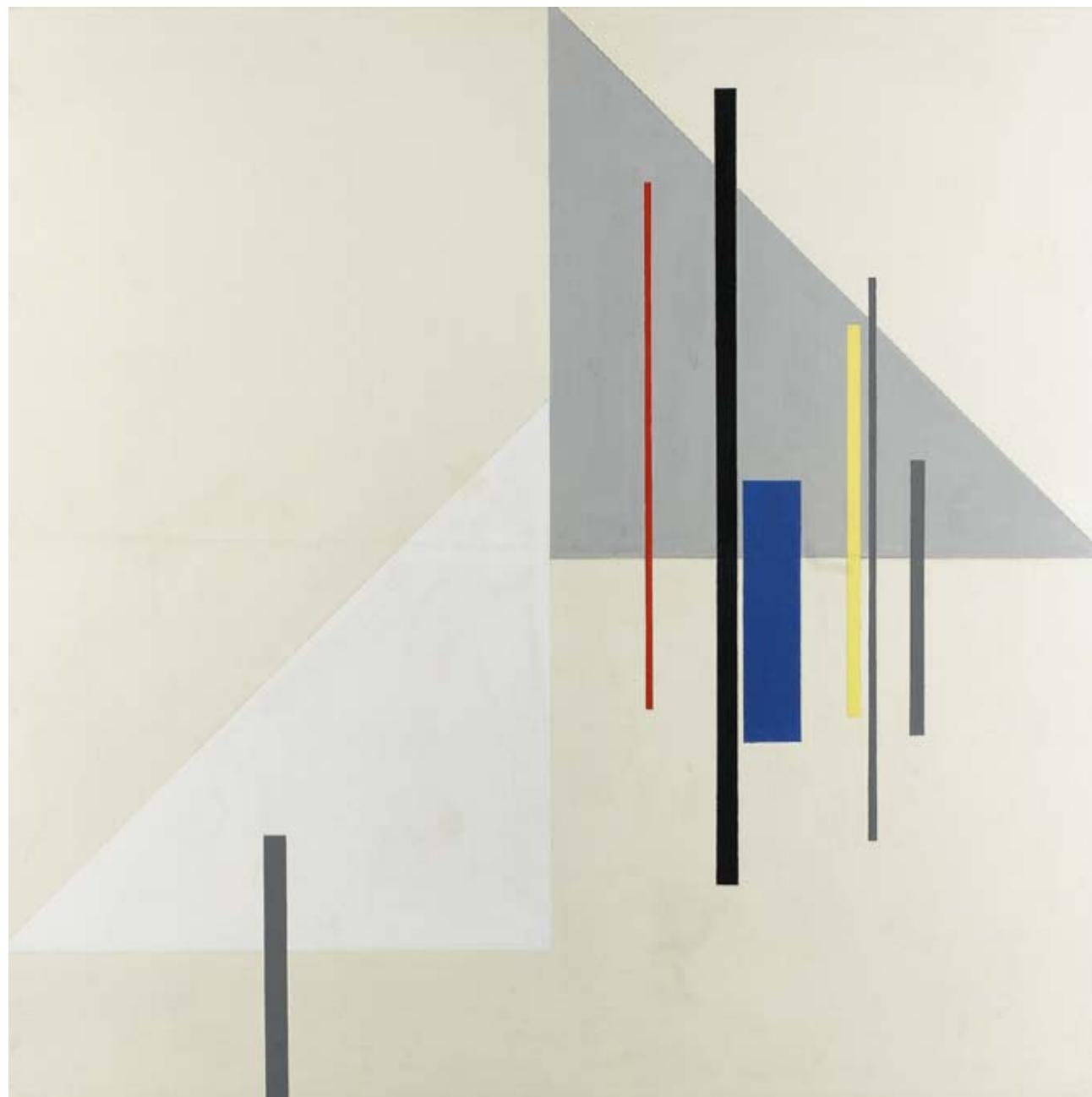
13 COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, c.1975
Oil on canvas · 28 × 24 inches · 71 × 61 cm



14 COMPOSITION WITH RED BAND, c.1975
Oil on canvas · 30 × 24 inches · 76.2 × 61 cm

15 BALANCING
Oil on canvas · Signed and titled on the reverse
36 × 36 inches · 92 × 92 cm





16 TWO TRIANGLES
Oil on canvas · Signed and titled on the reverse
36 × 36 inches · 92 × 92 cm



17 HOMAGE TO GORIN, 1978
Oil on canvas · Signed, titled and dated '78 on the reverse
36 × 36 inches · 92 × 92 cm



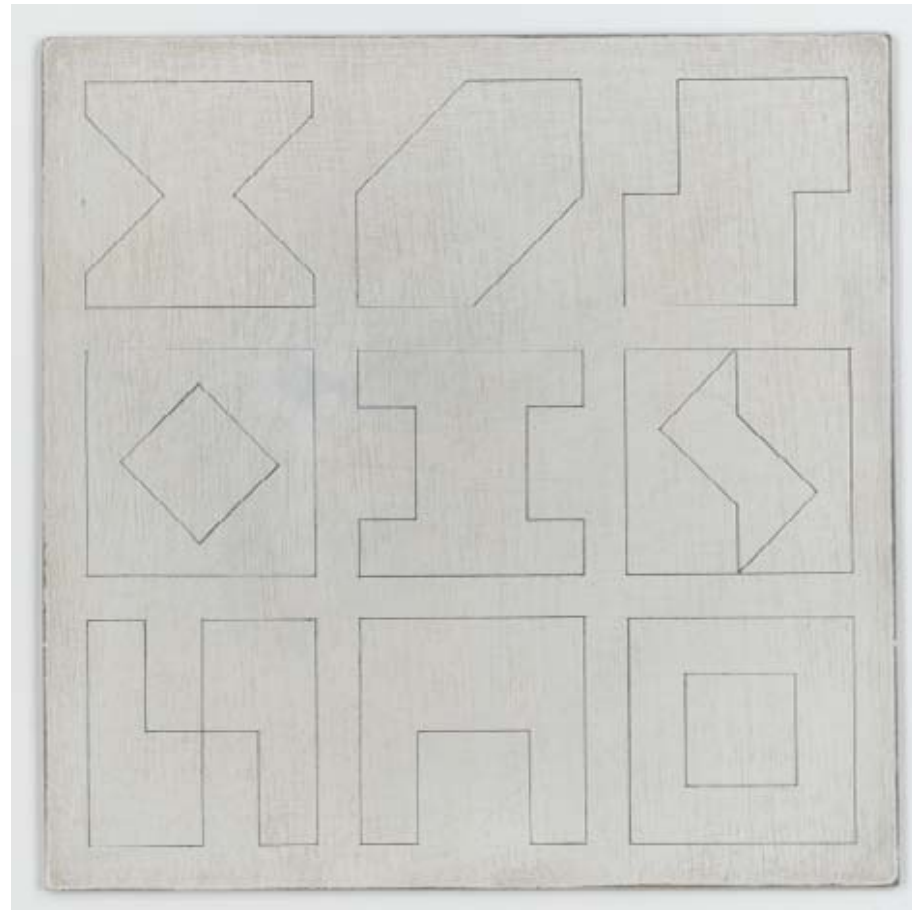
18 SEQUENCE ONE TO FIVE, 1981
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '81 on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



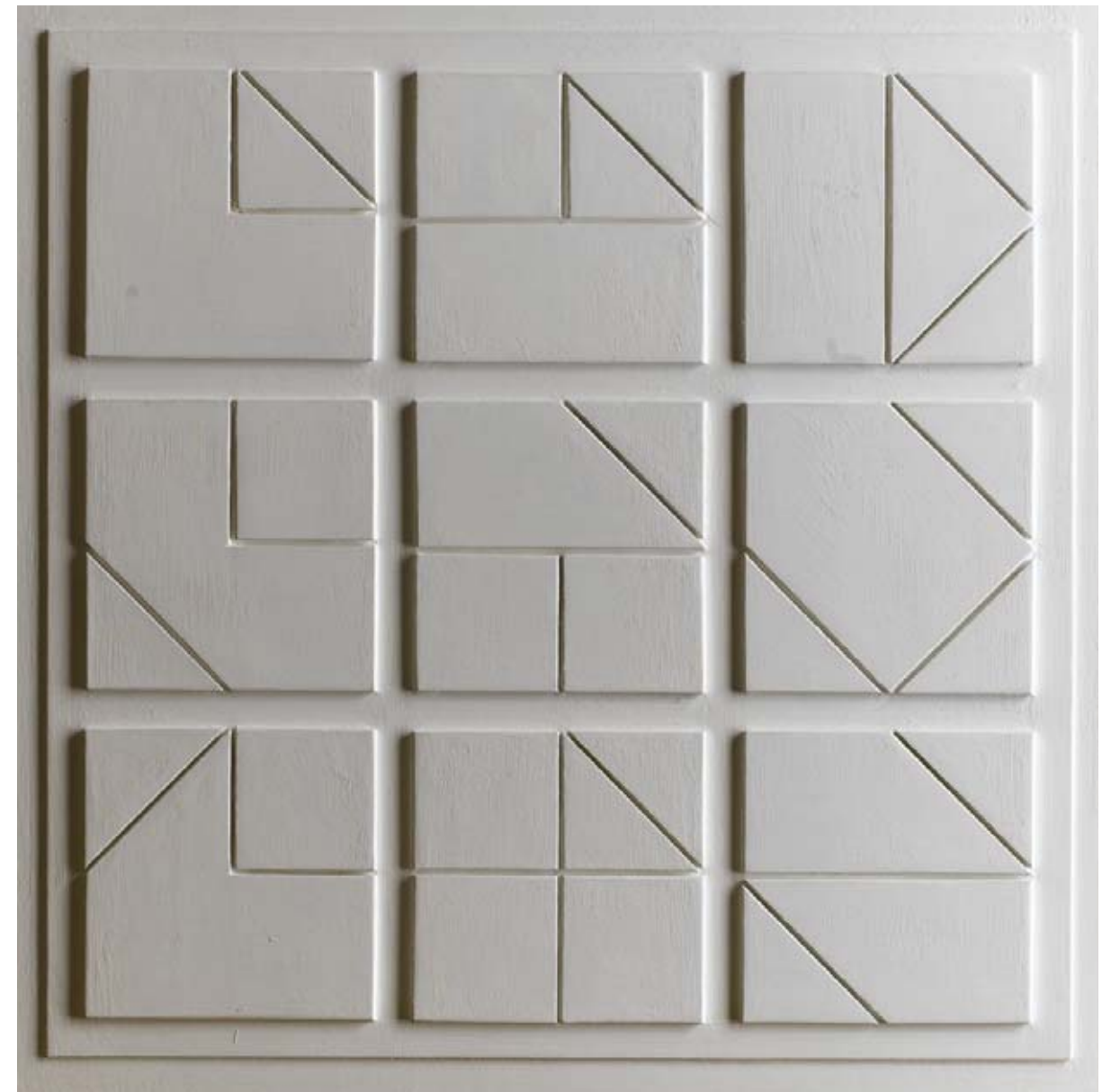
19 FOUR PLUS FOUR EQUALS TWO No.1, 1982
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '82 on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



20 FOUR PLUS FOUR EQUALS TWO (VERSION 3), 1982
Relief · Signed, titled and dated '82 on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



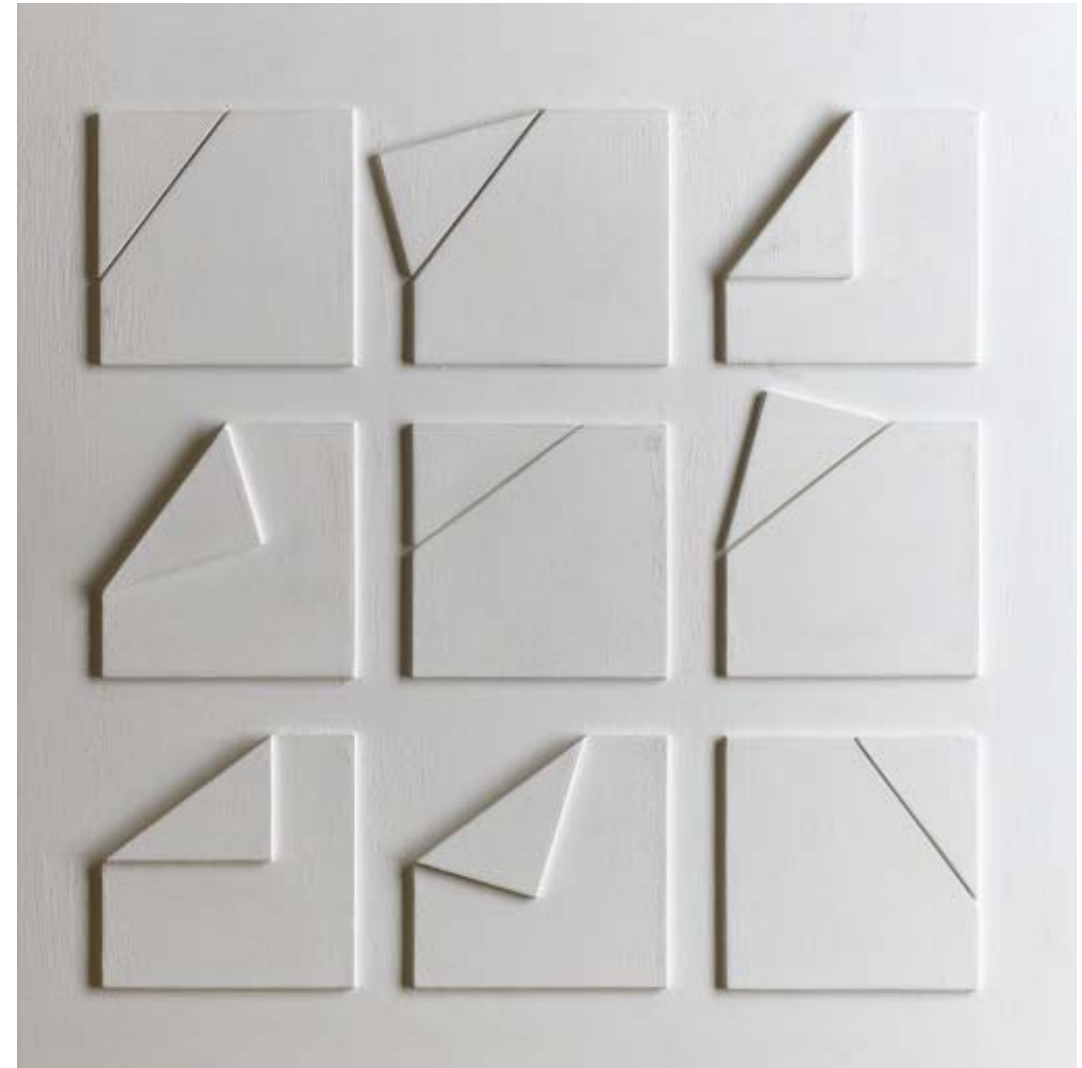
21 THREE QUARTER SQUARE
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
12 × 12 inches · 30,5 × 30,5 cm



22 SEQUENCE NO. 3
Relief · Signed and titled on the reverse
15 × 15 inches · 38 × 38 cm



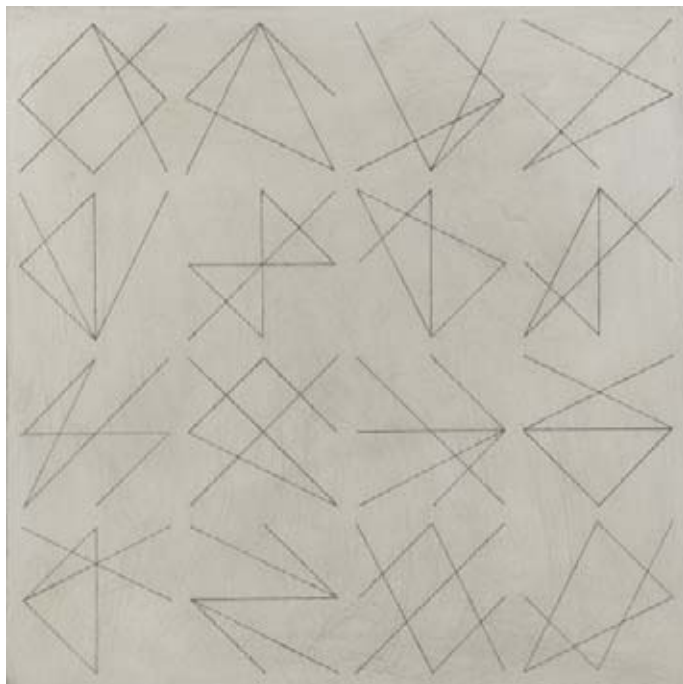
23 FOLDING NINE VARIATIONS, 1981
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '81 on the reverse
24 × 24 inches · 61 × 61 cm



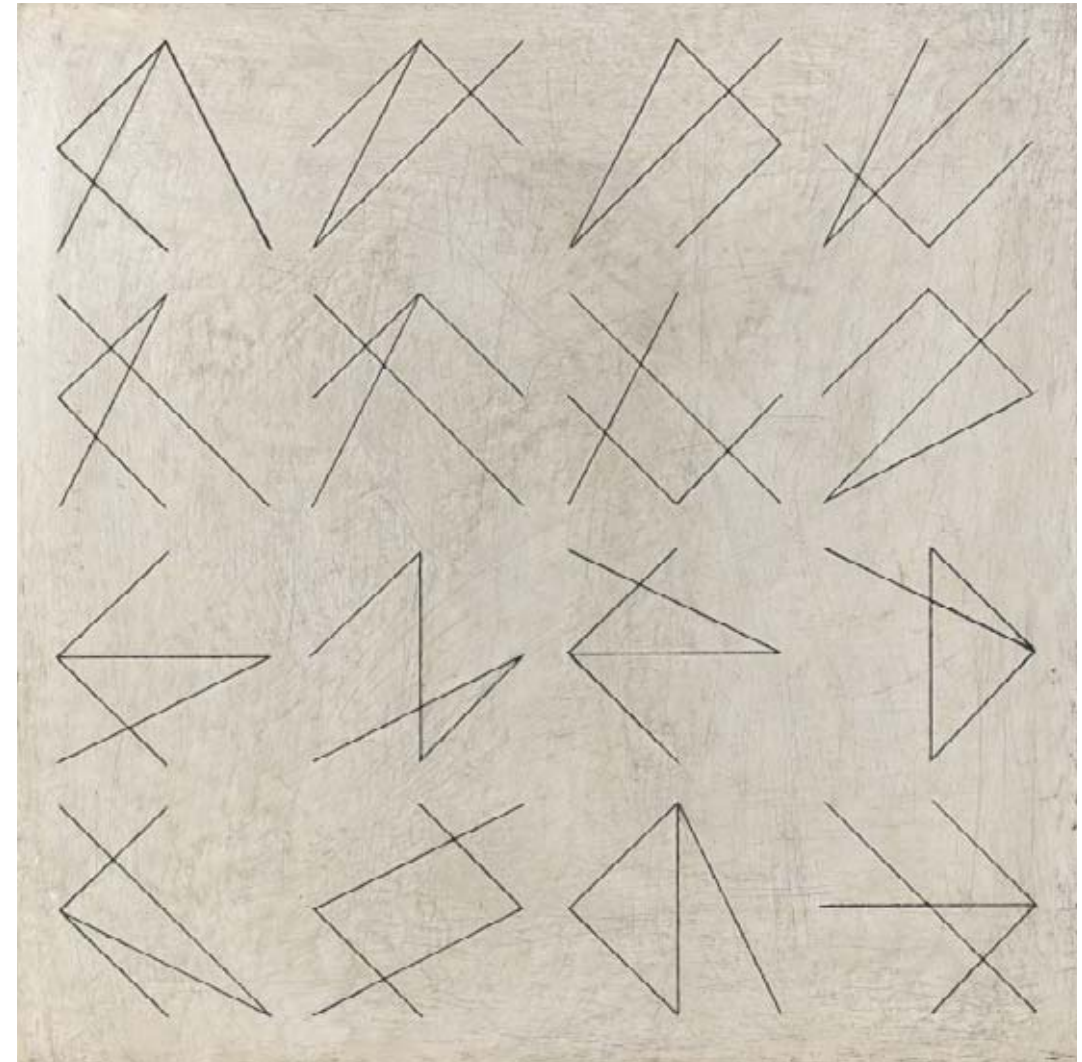
24 BASIC SEQUENCE
Relief · Signed and titled on the reverse
20 × 20 inches · 51 × 51 cm



25 SGRAFFITO NO.3, c.1982
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



26 SGRAFFITO NO.4, c.1982
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm

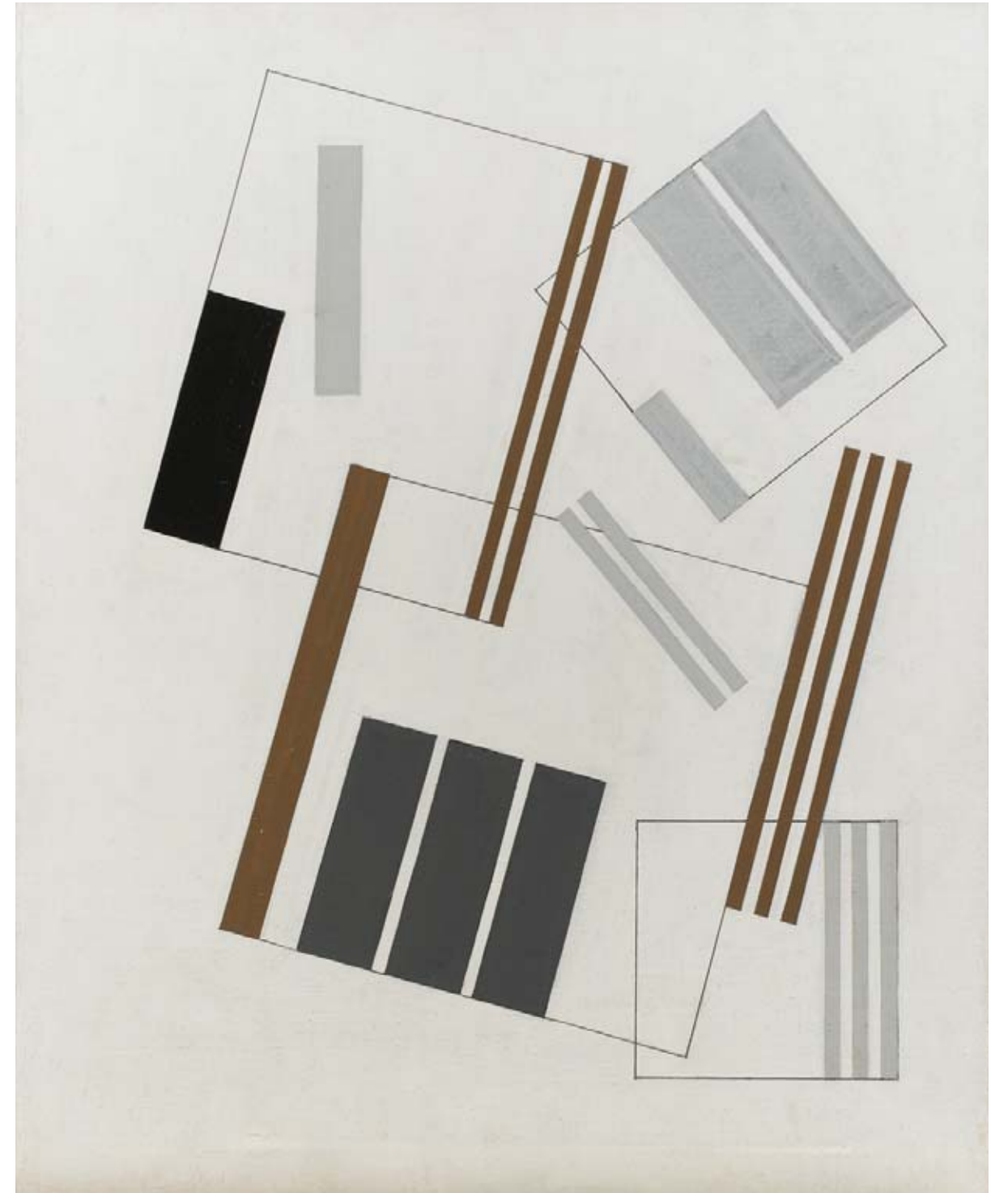


27 SGRAFFITO NO.5, c.1982
Alkyd on panel · Signed and titled on the reverse
14 × 14 inches · 35.5 × 35.5 cm



28 COMPOSITION WITH WHITE STRIPE
Oil on canvas · 14 × 10 inches · 35.5 × 25.4 cm

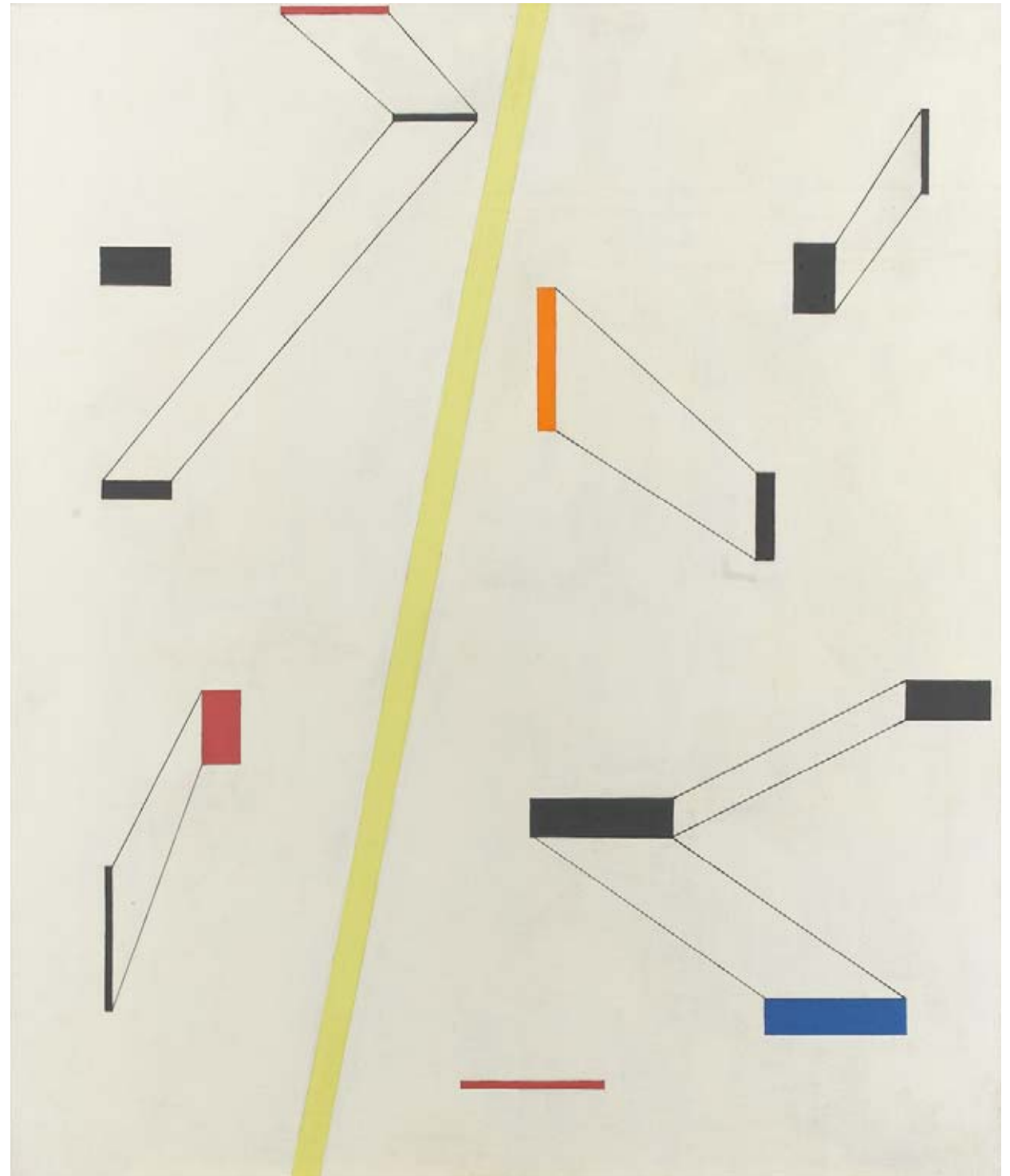
29 1 - 2 - 3
Oil on canvas · Signed and titled on the reverse
20 × 16 inches · 51 × 40.5 cm





30 SYSTEM WITH CIRCLES No.1, 1981
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated 1981 on the reverse
24 × 24 inches · 61 × 61 cm

31 COMPOSITION WITH YELLOW STRIPE
Oil on canvas, 30 × 24 inches · 76.2 × 61 cm





32 CONSTRUCTION 90, 1990
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '90 on the reverse
13 × 7¾ inches · 33 × 19.7 cm



33 THREE TRIANGLES, 1991
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '91 on the reverse
16 × 10 inches · 40.6 × 25.4 cm



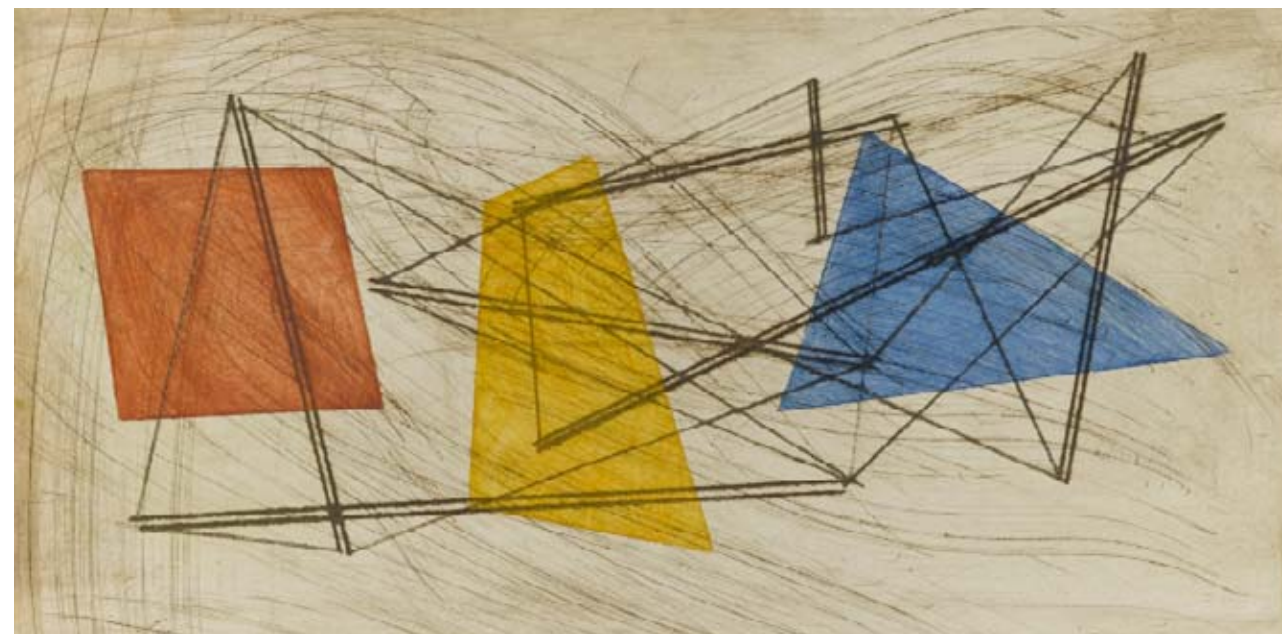
34 GRANITE VILLAGE BY THE SEA, 1986
Alkyd on panel · Signed and dated on reverse
14 × 14 in · 35 × 35 cm



35 CASOLE D'ELSA II, 1984
Painted relief · Signed, titled and dated 1984 on the reverse
14 × 26 inches · 35.5 × 66cm



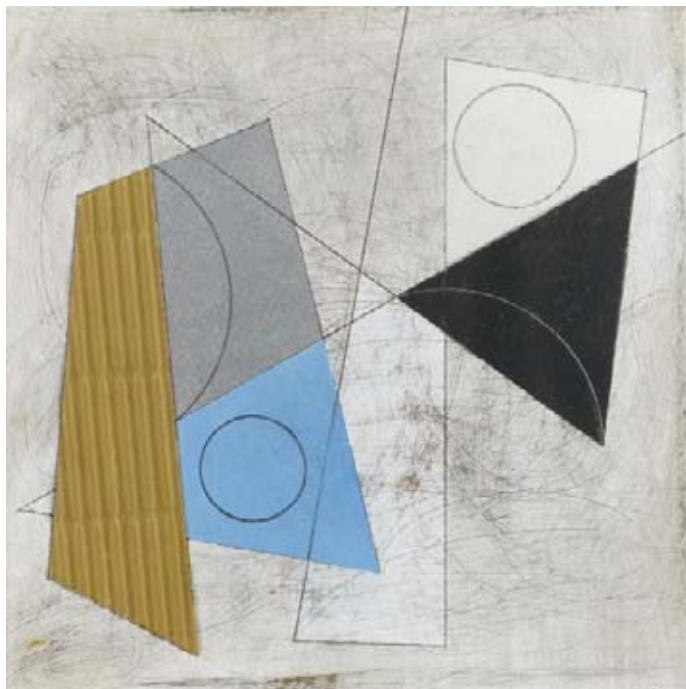
36 CASOLE D'ELSA I, 1984
Painted relief · Signed, titled and dated 1984 on the reverse
20 × 21½ inches · 50.25 × 54.5cm



37 RIGGING
Alkyd on board · Signed and titled on the reverse
4½ × 9½ inches · 12 × 24 cm



38 LEANING, 1993
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '93 on the reverse
9¾ × 9¾ inches · 24.7 × 24.7 cm



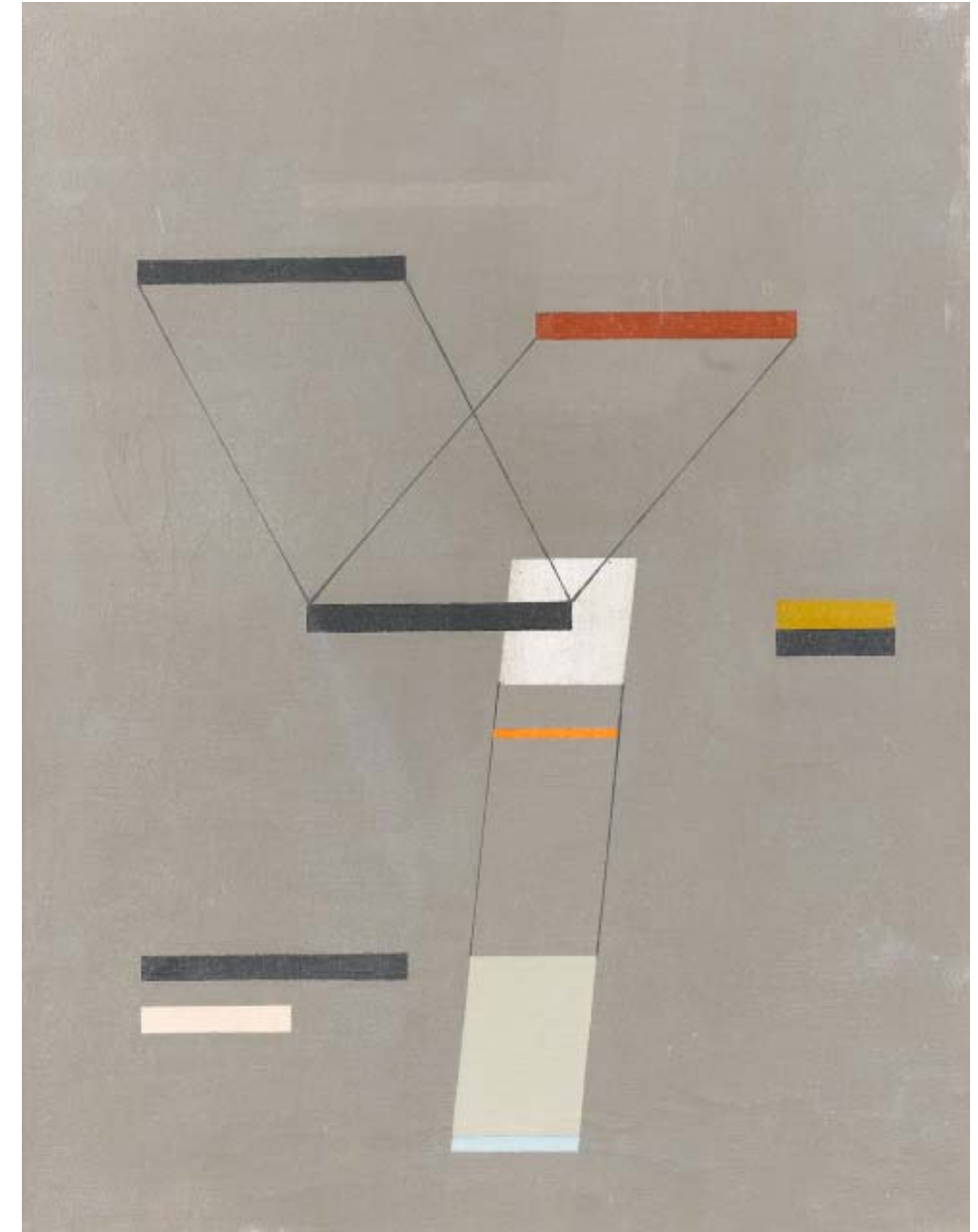
39 CONSTRUCTION, 1985
Alkyd and collage on panel · Signed, titled and dated '85
on the reverse · 7½ × 7½ inches · 19 × 19 cm



40 GAME OF CHANCE I, 1991
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '91 on the reverse
8¾ × 6¾ inches · 22.2 × 17 cm



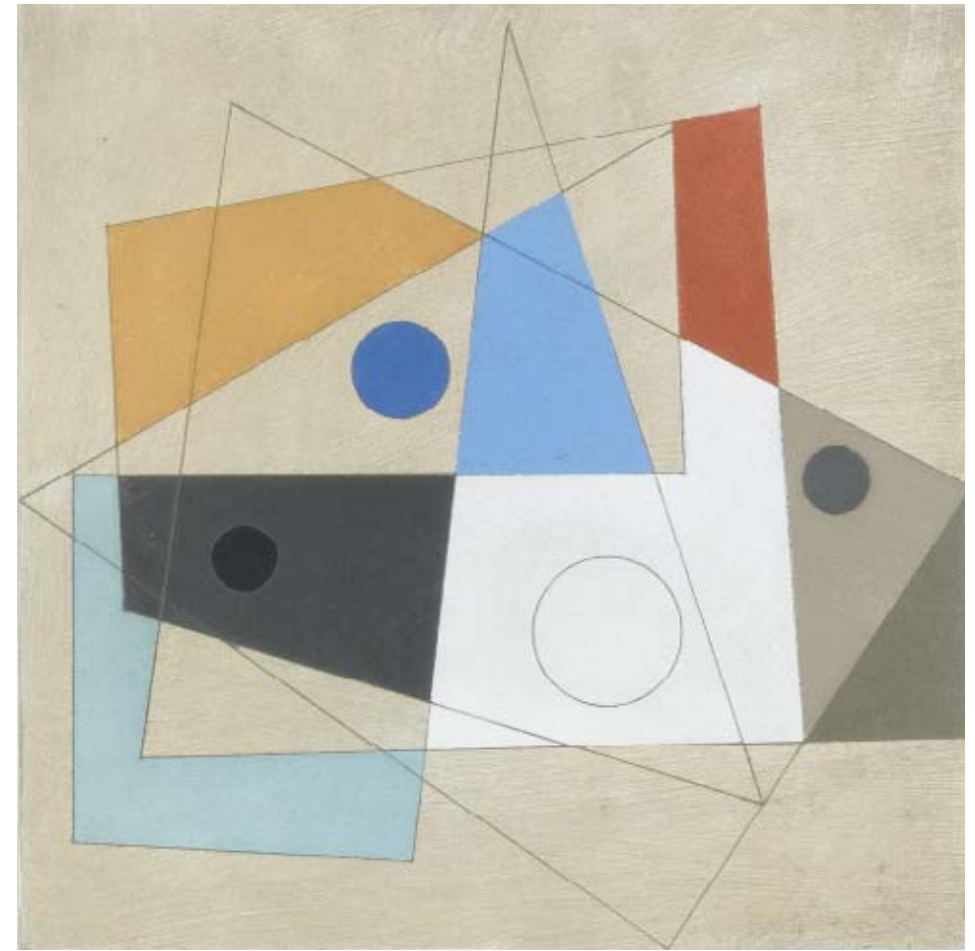
41 VERTICAL STRUCTURE, 1985
Alkyd on board · Signed, titled and dated '85
on the reverse · 17 × 5¼ inches · 43 × 14.5 cm



42 COMPOSITION WITH TRAPEZIUM
Oil on canvas · 18¼ × 14 inches · 46.3 × 35.5 cm



43 CONSTRUCTION II, 1993
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated '93 on the reverse
10 × 10 inches · 25.4 × 25.4 cm



44 FISH FACTORY, 1993
Alkyd on panel · Signed, titled and dated 1993 on the reverse
10 × 10 inches · 25.4 × 25.4 cm

MICHAEL CANNEY CHRONOLOGY

1923 Born at Falmouth. Father the Vicar of Pencoyls, a small mining village near Redruth.

1928 Taken annually to St Ives Show Days, to visit artists' studios, and to see the Porthmeor Gallery, showplace of the St Ives Society of Artists.

1937 Encouraged to study art seriously by his school art master, W. Lyons Wilson, a fringe member of the Surrealists, an exhibitor at the Redfern Gallery and a friend of Herbert Read and Henry Moore

1940–2 Full-time student at Redruth and Penzance Schools of Art, and then Leonard Fuller's St Ives School of Painting which was more informal, being modelled on a Parisian *atelier*.

1942 Holds a one-man show of watercolours of Cornish landscapes and seascapes. Ben Nicholson shows his first work locally at Penzance Art School. The uncompromising abstract causes outrage among older members of artists' colonies at Newlyn and St. Ives. Canney introduced to Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo and Bernard Leach.

1945–7 War service intervenes. Serves as draughtsman in the Royal Engineers in North Africa, Italy and Austria and documents his travels with many drawings. Deeply affected by Italian art and architecture. He meets Giorgio De Chirico in Florence in 1945, who is encouraging about his work. In Austria becomes art editor of an army newspaper, and later joins British Forces Radio Network in Graz and Vienna. Whilst on leave in Britain, sees important

Picasso exhibition, and on returning to Austria, makes a number of experimental drawings in an Analytical-Cubist manner.

Visits St Ives School exhibitions which included work by Nicholson, Hepworth, Lanyon, Wells, Wynter, Barns-Graham and others. Also attends exhibitions in the crypt below the Mariners' Chapel: *'The Crypt Group exhibitions marked my first encounter with certain aspects of Constructivism, a movement that was to play an important part in my own art and thinking some twenty-five years later. In retrospect, these exhibitions were the most exciting events that I can recall in St Ives, reflecting as they did, a unique period of creativity. One really did feel that one was at the forward edge of art in Britain, and that this was a moment that would never be repeated.'*

1947–51 Enrols at Goldsmiths College School of Art. Fellow students include Bridget Riley and Albert Irvin. Meets Victor Pasmore at the time of his conversion to abstraction. In 1947 he sees a major London Picasso exhibition, and the London Gallery's anthology of Cubist painting organised by Mesens.

Continues to paint in Cornwall and attend Crypt Group exhibitions. Works on Festival of Britain projects on the South Bank, and visits Italy, Paris and Brittany.

1950–2 Incapacitated intermittently with serious attacks of pulmonary tuberculosis. Returns to Cornwall to convalesce, and when recovered paints extensively, especially at Newlyn and Mousehole. Spends six months in post-graduate study at the Patrick Allan-Fraser Art College, Arbroath, where he meets Joan Eardley, Robin Philipson

and other Scottish artists. *'My illness which at first seemed a disaster, turned out to be the best thing that could have happened, as it gave me the opportunity to paint full-time, without any external pressures or worries...'*

1951 First London exhibition.

1952 Works with Denis Mitchell, Barbara Hepworth's studio assistant, on large mobiles in sheet aluminium, for the St Ives Festival.

1952–7 Teaches and lectures in London. Begins making reliefs and develops his Neo-Cubist work. Meets wife Madeleine in Penzance in 1954, and their son is born the following year.

1956 Appointed Curator of Newlyn Art Gallery, a post which fortunately only occupied six months of the year, with the rest of the time free for painting.

1957 Organises with Barbara Hepworth an exhibition of British sculpture in Penlee Park, Penzance. The exhibition includes important work including Henry Moore's *King and Queen*.

1958 The paintings begin to change under the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Peter Lanyon, who exhibited regularly at Newlyn, and was a close friend. Looks for a more measured and geometric structure to his work, and although Gabo had left for America in 1946, his influence still lingered in West Cornwall where Constructivism was a common subject for discussion. Meets Mark Rothko through Peter Lanyon *'A man of great presence and charm, he was very generous about my work and spent some time looking at it. This was very encouraging as I regarded Rothko as the most important painter on the international scene at that time'*.

1957–8 *'Roger Hilton stayed with us while searching for a studio at Newlyn, and we became good friends. My work was becoming increasingly abstract and we had some discussions about the problems involved. He would reiterate*

the basic teaching that he had received in Paris, which seemed to be essentially concerned with the use of colour in a purely abstract sense. This was the advice that I needed, and it has served me well ever since'.

Researches and organises the exhibition *Paintings of the Newlyn School 1800–1900*.

In 1957 becomes West Region contributor on the arts for the BBC. Canney knew many artists in the area, and the work developed rapidly. Between 1957 and 1977 he contributed some two hundred documentary programmes both for radio and television. Continued painting and exhibiting his own work.

1962 Re-designs Fore Street Gallery in St Ives with architect and painter John Miller.

1956–65 Through his work at Newlyn Art Gallery, the Fore Street Gallery and in broadcasting he continued to be a central figure in artistic circles in the West Country.

1964–5 Teaches at Plymouth College of Art, and leaves Newlyn Art Gallery for Porthleven, where he administers the Summer Painting School.

1965–6 Is appointed visiting Gallery Director and Lecturer at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Is involved in a number of exhibitions, including a major exhibition of Dada and Surrealism, in collaboration with the Santa Barbara Museum and Art Gallery.

1966–83 Is invited by Paul Feiler to join the staff of the West of England College of Art. Remains in Bristol where he becomes Principal Lecturer in Painting in the Department of Fine Art, leaving finally in April 1983.

1976 Documentary on ecological and environmental problems wins major award for BBC at Berlin International TV Film Festival.

1978 Collaborates with Patrick and Delia Heron on travelling exhibition *Norman and Alethea Garstin – Two Impressionists*.

1982–4 One man exhibitions at Bristol University, Prescote Gallery, Banbury, Newlyn Art Gallery and Prescote Art and Design, Edinburgh.

1984 Moves to a 14th century palazzo in a medieval hill-top village between San Gimignano and Siena, and establishes a studio there.

1985 Scripts the dramatised documentary film *A Breath of Fresh Air*, on painting at Newlyn, 1880 – 1930. The film is shown at the Barbican Gallery, London in conjunction with the exhibition *Painting in Newlyn 1880 – 1930*. It subsequently wins a television documentary award in New York.

1990 One man exhibition The Belgrave Gallery, London.

1993–9 Moves to Wiltshire in early 1993 and dies there three days short of the millennium.

SELECT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1942 Piazza Studios, St Ives

1956 London Group

1956–64 Newlyn Art Gallery

1958 Waddington Galleries

1960–63 Sail Loft Gallery, St Ives

1961 Piccadilly Gallery

1962 Arnolfini Gallery

1962–64 Fore Street Gallery, St Ives

1963 Cultural Centre, Ostend

1964–65 Porthleven Gallery

1965 University Gallery, Santa Barbara, California

1970 Bath Festival

1974–81 Royal West of England Academy

1979 Park Street Gallery, Bristol

1980 Wills Lane, St Ives

1980 Penwith Gallery, St Ives

1980 Newlyn Art Gallery

1980 Beaux Arts Gallery, Bath

1982–83 London Group

1983–89 Michael Parkin Gallery

1987 Chicago International Art Fair

1990–2004 The Belgrave Gallery, London

2003 Market House Gallery, Penzance

ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS

1982 Prescote Gallery, Banbury

1982 Bristol University

1983 Newlyn Art Gallery

1984 Prescote Art & Design, Edinburgh

1990 The Belgrave Gallery, London

1995 The Belgrave Gallery, London

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Plymouth City Art Gallery

West Riding Education Committee

Cornwall Education Committee

Royal Cornwall Polytechnic

Imperial War Museum

