



DAVID

ROW

March 11 – April 8, 1989

—Joseph Masheck

Resemblances to Al Held, early or late, to the Frank Stella of broad-handed geometries, or to Sean Scully's paired panels, one striped this way, the other that, probably seem more vivid to someone just now tuning in and seeking to locate David Row than to anyone who has seen it all unfold. Given the way things are, how can one expect to lay out Reinhardt, Held, Stella, and ever expect to get to ask how Row's work relates to and differs from all theirs? For that matter, what about (1) the fundamentally linguistic stylizations of nature on the Shang and Chou bronzes, (2) Roger Fry on that, and (3) the eventual crisis of formalism? (Meanwhile, (4) do they even spell it "Shang" or "Chou" anymore?) At least one can state that Row is not alone, and not because his painting is derivative but because it *makes sense*.

Language, when it is on, live, entails some kind of spill back and forth between likeness and differentiation. A simple, but itself admittedly calculated, example: if I say that Row's images show the complexity of ships' rigging, yet also the trackable "logic" thereof, the first element runs a risk of appeal by sentimental association until tempered and clarified by arrival of the second, with one grid of meaning overlaying another. This, I mean to suggest, is quite like the compounding seriality of symmetric and asymmetric reversal and skewed overlay by which Row builds up his image with stencils of banded matrices. Note in the sentence—and by extension, see in the paintings—how the relation of initial assertion to subsequent, specifying qualification, with a resultant complexity, is itself "asymmetrical." The priority of sequence is not a priority of meaning; if anything, meaning spills back onto the first thought from the second, as significance (not mere complication) builds up in the paintings.

The largest new painting is a sort of triptych-plus, entirely black-on-black but for a margin of underpainting in other colors showing through along the bottom edge. Hung with a wide gap of wall between the third and fourth panels, all the same height, the sequence is one of varying width: narrow-wide-narrow-(gap)-intermediate. A pair of overlapping, wide vertical oval rings at the left overrides the first abutment of panels, while at the right a broader, "more circular" pair (again, similarity in difference) breaks across the gap of wall. Across an implied horizontal division running the length of the painting there swells up and down a symmetrical system of broad bands whose fannings-out and gatherings-in, like cables of a suspension bridge, do not coincide with splits between canvases but generate a separate scheme of slow, percussive optical beats. Alternations between gloss and matte bands and interstices (the glossy bands thicker, on top of the matte) themselves alternate, above and below, so that while here or there gloss or matte may be said to play "figure" to

the other's field or "ground," all elements are suspended in a charged mutuality. The whole large zigzagging image is checked from collapsing into perspectival illusion by a strong forward thrust. In fact, there isn't any "air space" to speak of, only an embeddedly crystalline, solid-state inflection that even the stretch of exposed wall does not fracture.

Vital to what I mean by Row's sheer linguistic is the mutuality of symmetry and asymmetry, which implies and calls forth yet larger symmetry embracing further differentiation. Significantly, Row tends to produce not only single paintings on paired abutting canvases but also "braces" of paintings that are structurally alternative to, not simply mirrorings of, each other. Taking on a mutuality of its own, such a brace is more than a proto-"series" of two. Two black-and-white, almost vyingly positive-and-negative, paintings: each offers a stacked, two-canvas vertical image, split left and right in black/white reversal, with a pair of overlapping vertical ellipses and a system of zigzagging angles. One, dominated by the rhomboidal segment of a hipslung Brancusian zigzag—half, whole and then again half a unit, vertically—has, if one insists, a black field in its left half and white at the right; in the other, where the rings or ellipses are more prominent as centered, symmetrically angled zigzags "belt" in and then out again, torso like. That these works can look so completely different, only magnifies the sense of articulated duality already active in any one painting by Row.

Row's "painter's" linguistic shows up, I think, a problem in the thought of C. S. Peirce, the founder of American "pragmatism" and a philosopher of interest to critics and artists for his linguistic distinctions between "icon" (which entails "likeness"), "index" and "symbol." Peirce, who happens to have found the Geodetic Survey a much more congenial outfit than had Whistler, is not the only major thinker who proves hasty with visually embodied thought; but in respect to its discussion of a pair of diagrams, his essay "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) could almost be titled "How to Pretend Our Ideas Are Clearer than They Are." Despite having surely *drawn* the originals himself, so presumably having had to take pains with their critical differences, Peirce sets these up to illustrate "imaginary distinctions . . . often drawn between beliefs which differ only in their mode of expression" (not that "the wrangling which ensues" isn't "real enough"—and no wonder). He takes it as obvious enough that to believe that "any" objects are arranged as in his Figure 1 (97 equidistant dots in an orthogonal grid forming an octagon with 5 dots top, bottom, left and right), and to believe that they are (re-?)arranged as in Figure 2 (97 equidistant dots in a diagonal grid forming an octagon with 4 dots top, bottom, left and right), are "one and the same belief."

*(text continues on page 12)*

Diagrams from Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878), as reprinted in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York, 1955), p. 29.

Figure 2

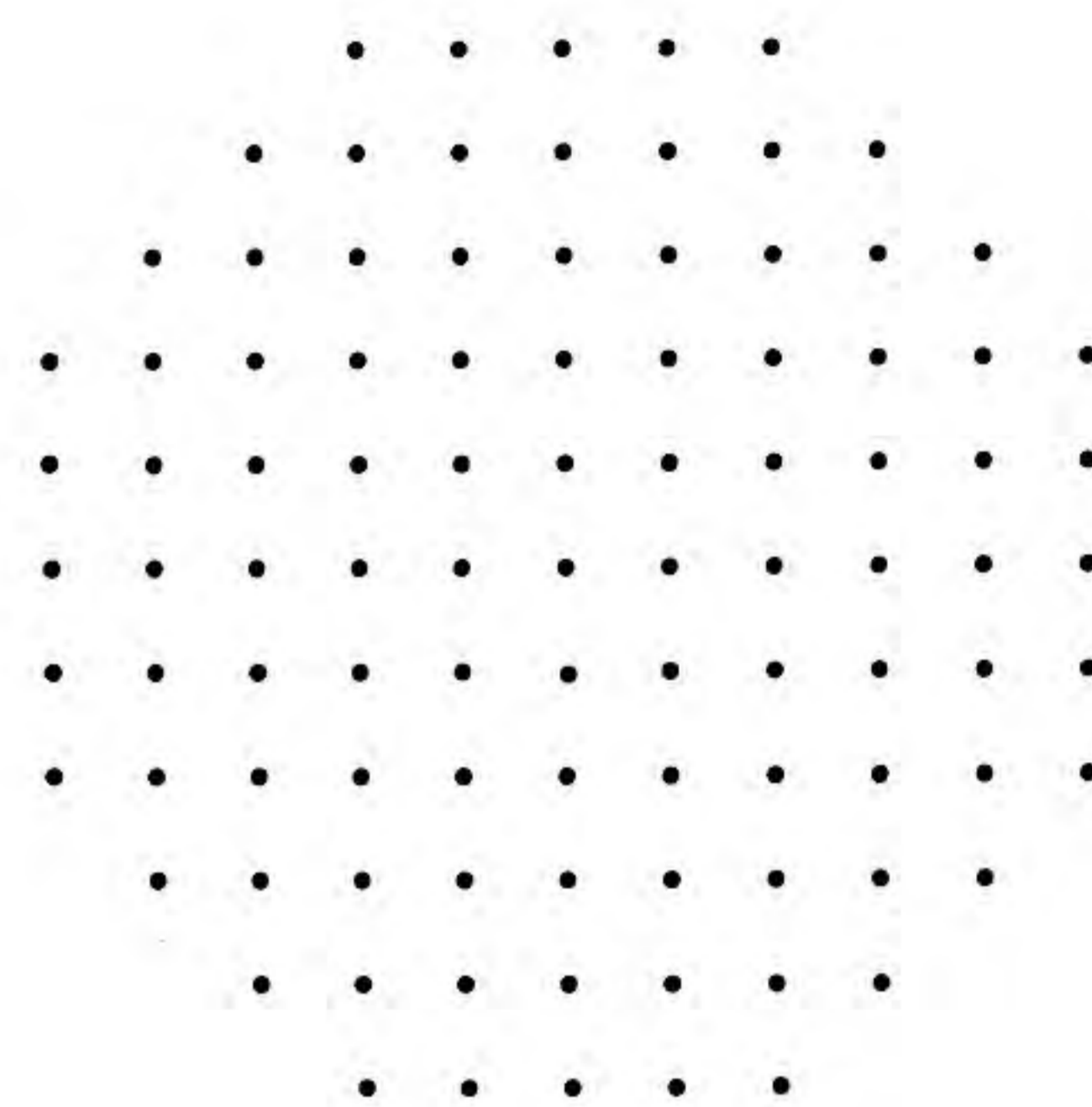
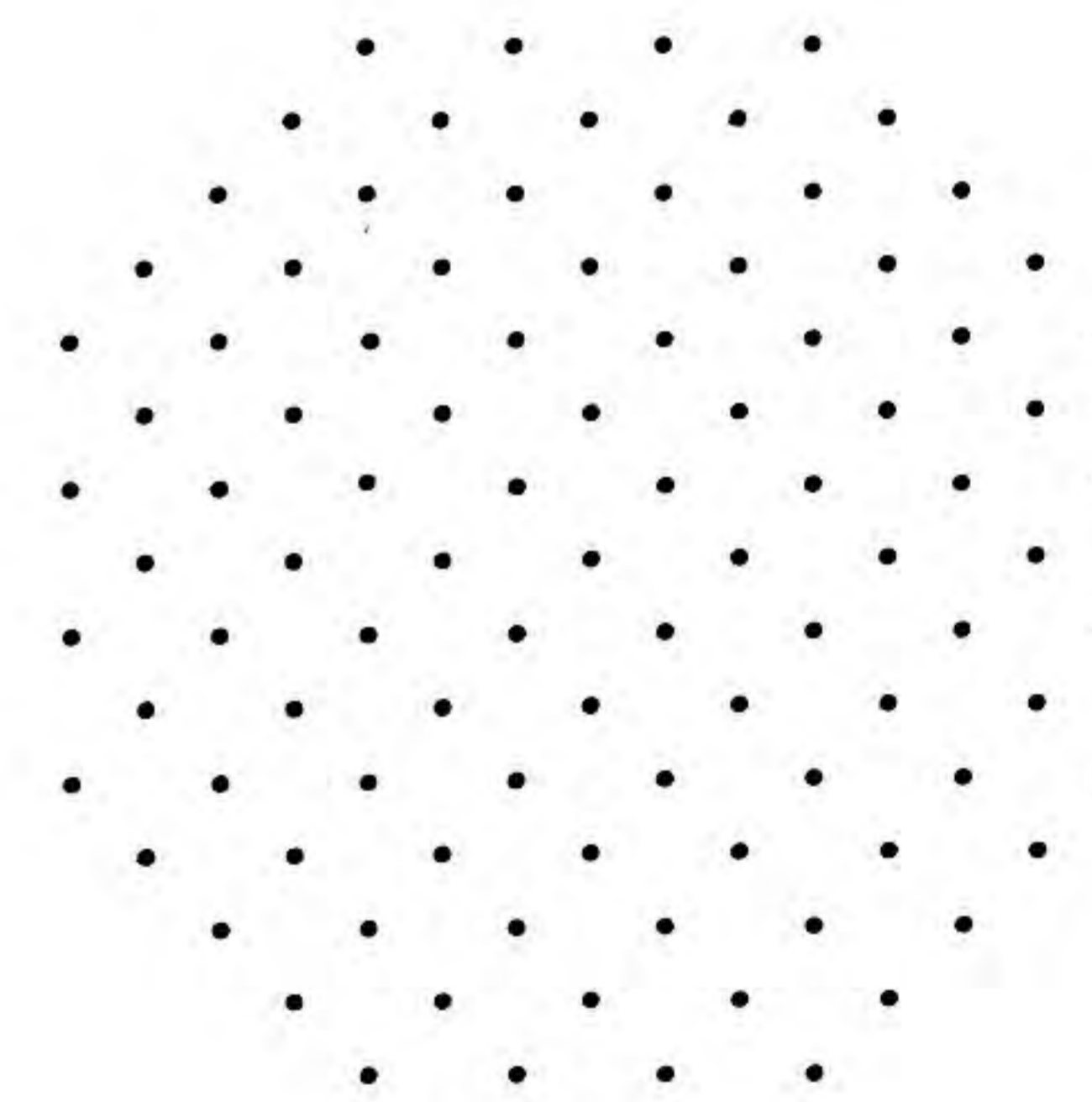


Figure 1

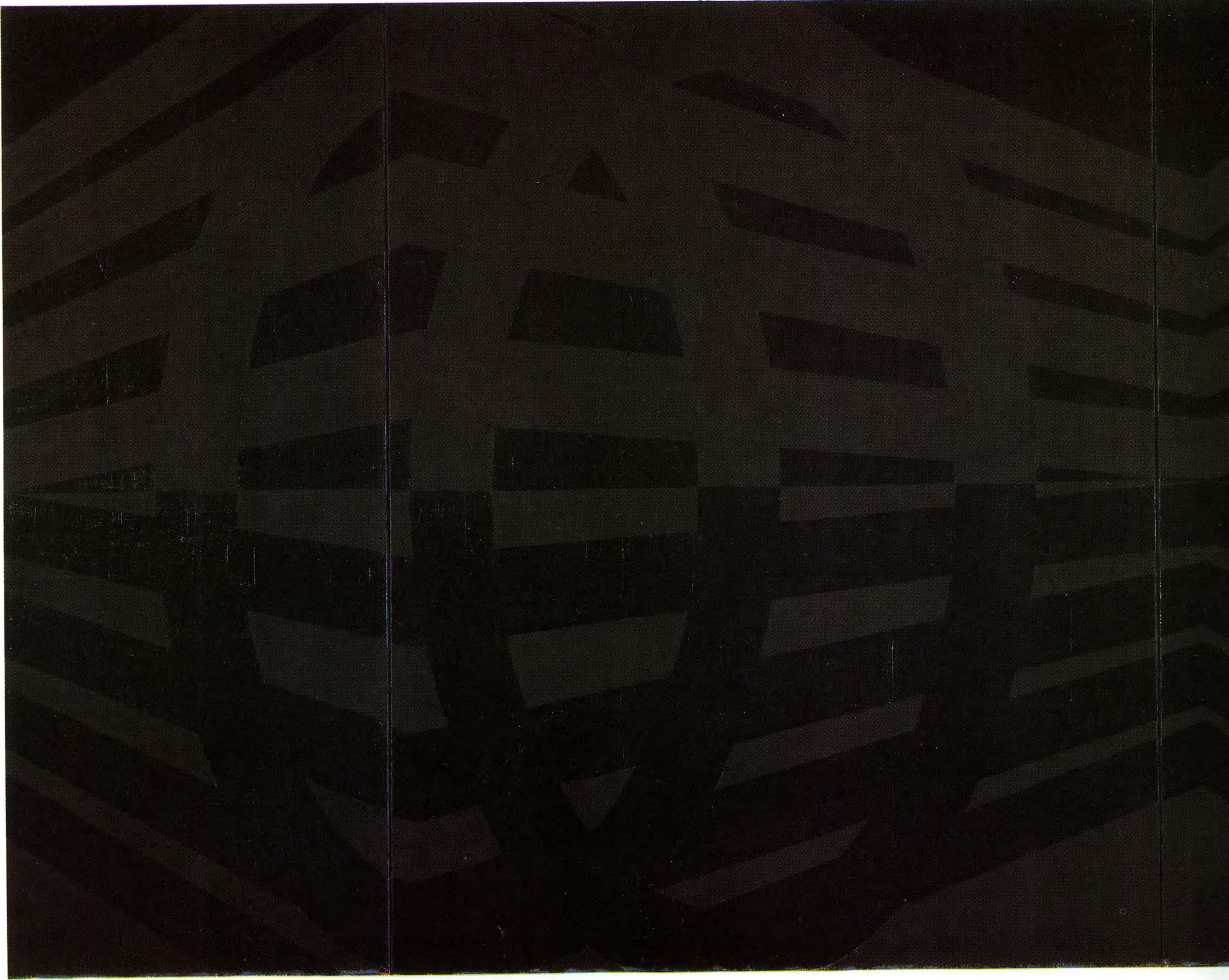


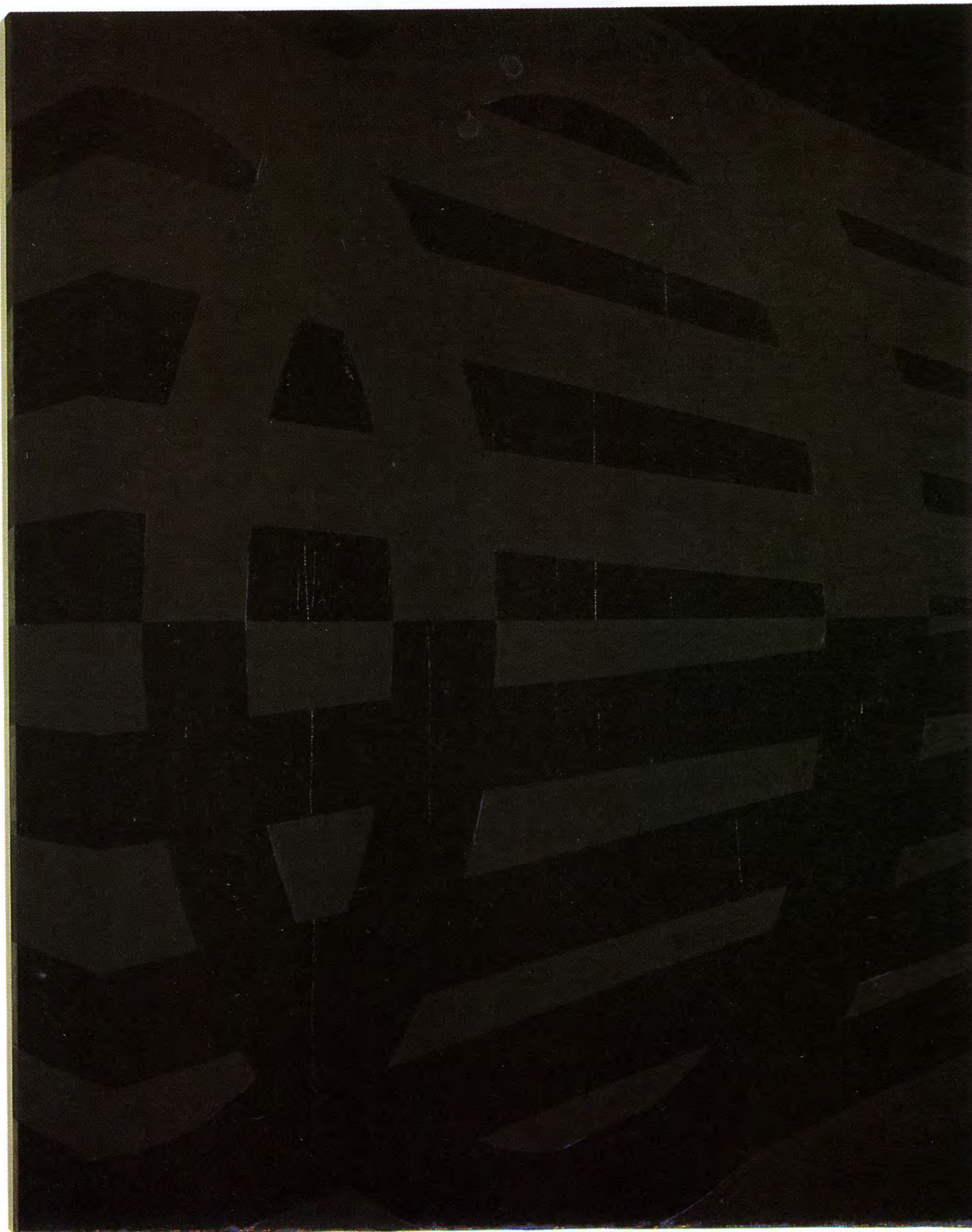
UNTITLED, 1989.  
Oil and wax on canvas  
77" x 108"





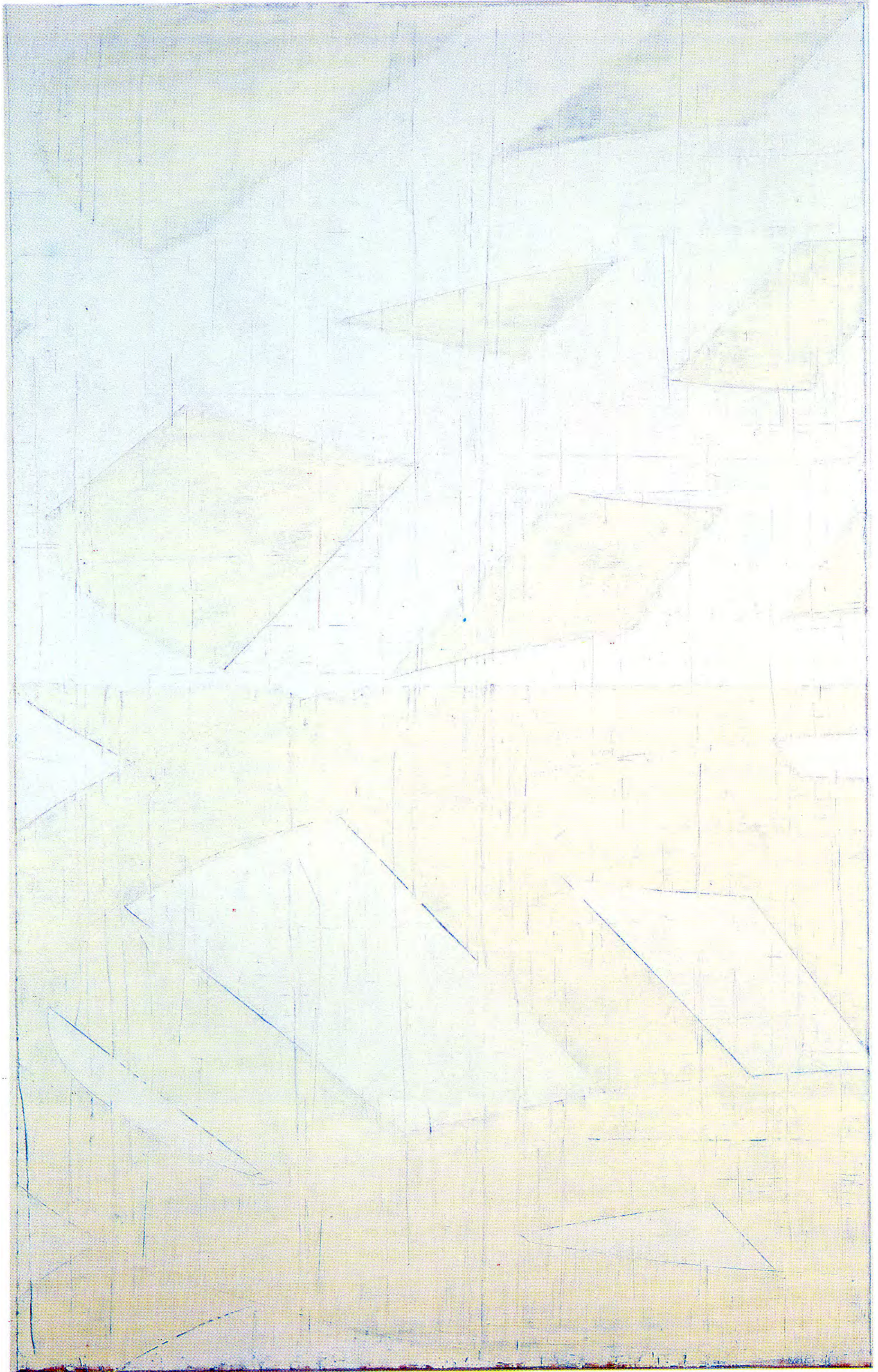
UNTITLED, 1989.  
Oil and wax on canvas  
84" x 212"

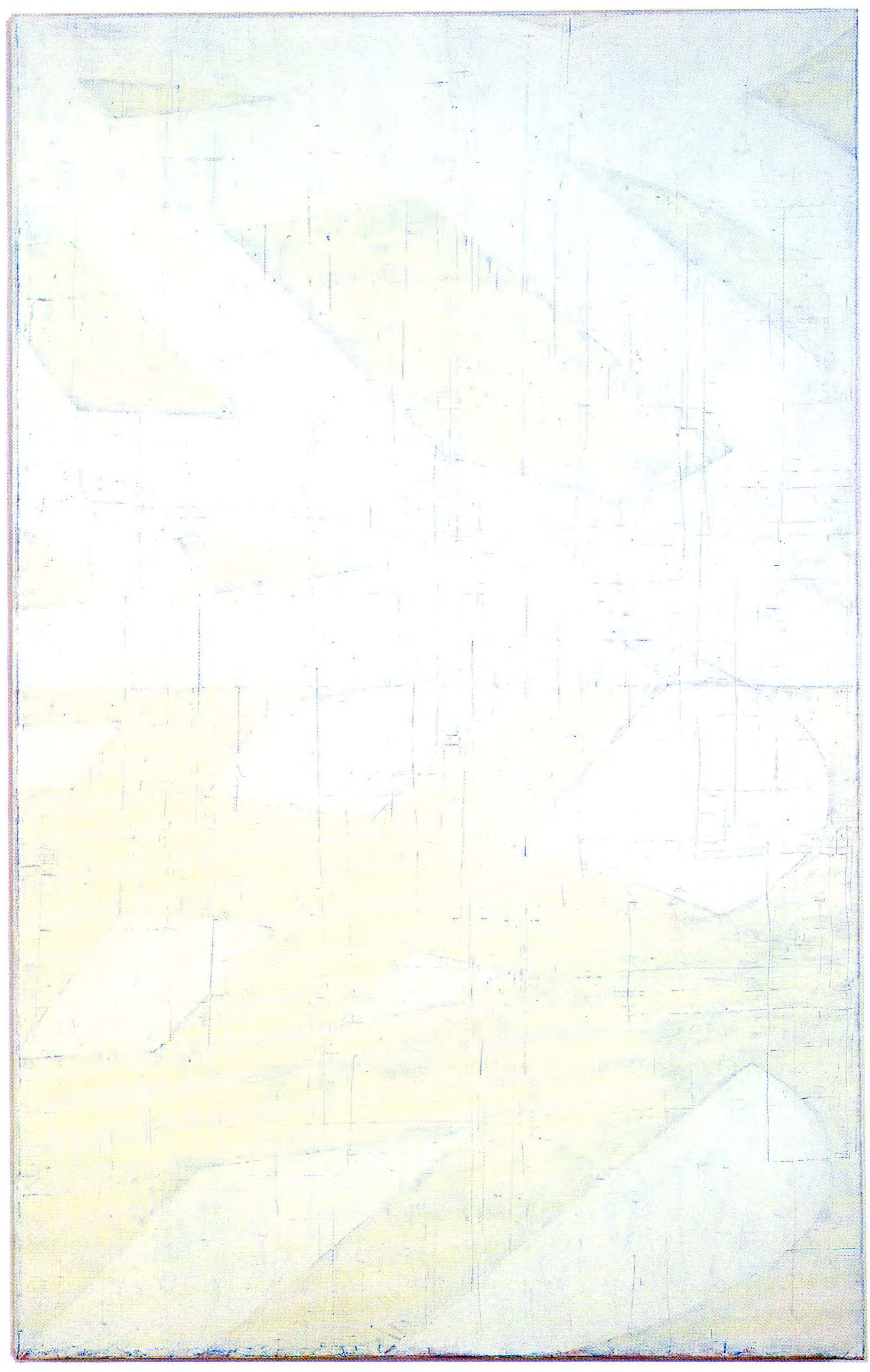




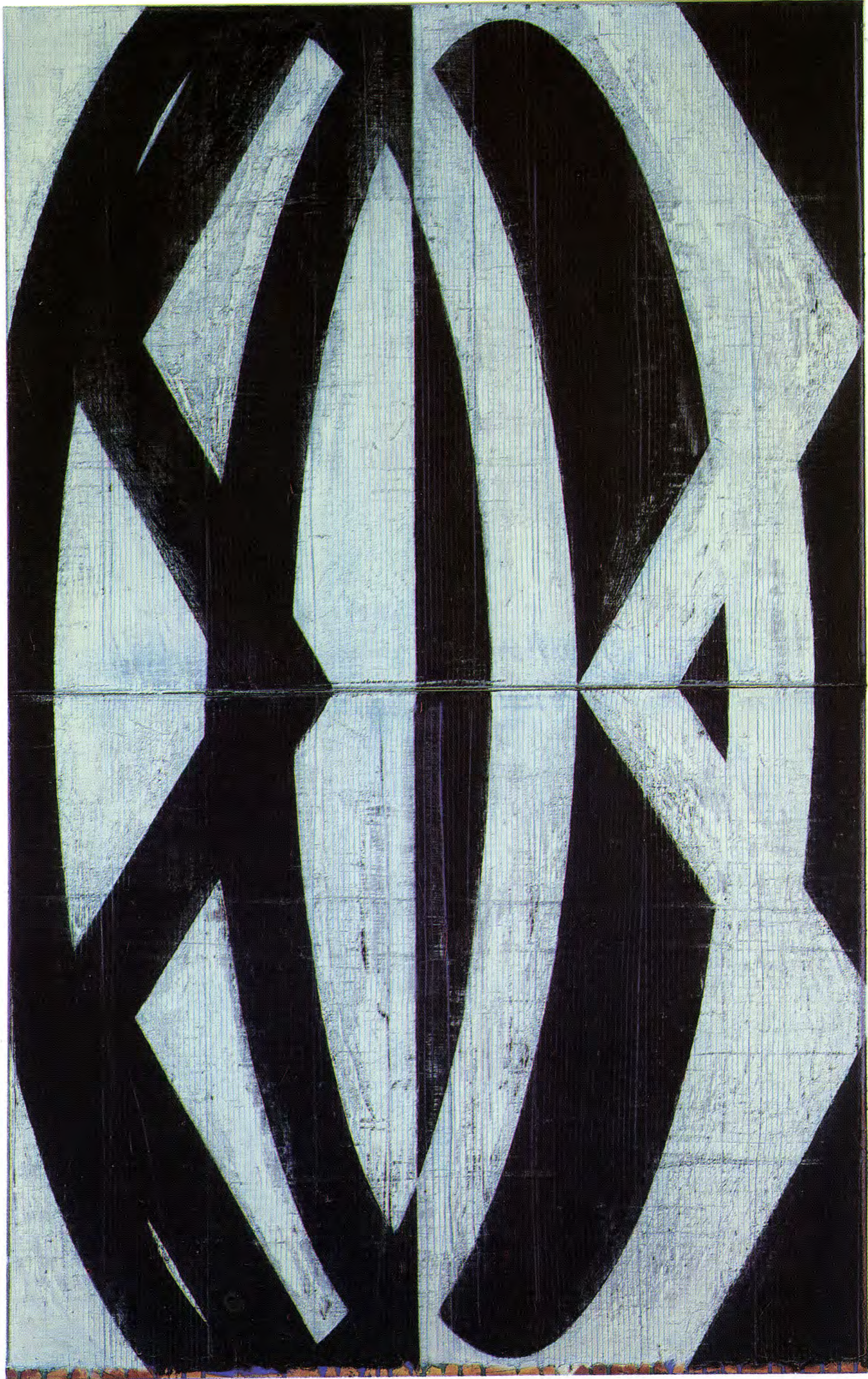


UNTITLED, 1989.  
Oil and wax on canvas  
77" x 116"





UNTITLED, 1989.  
Oil and wax on canvas  
64" x 40"



UNTITLED, 1989.  
Oil and wax on canvas  
64" x 40"



Well, yes *and no*, much as the squared-away 48-star flag of the early Johns paintings sort of is, but also is certainly not, the zigzag-fielded 49-star U.S. flag of Alaska's admission to the Union or 50-star "Hawaiian" flag of today. Notwithstanding the short-haul efficiency of the dash to a "bottom line," Peirce will eventually brush up against the material texture of one mimesis (*rendering*) or another: if beliefs only matter in their consequences, "no mere differences in the manner of consciousness of them can make them different beliefs, any more than playing the same tune in different keys is playing different tunes." But if so, why do composers specify one key for the rendition or realization of their abstract structure? Without wanting to sweep pragmatism itself crudely aside, Dewey and all, I cannot overlook that here may be one deep root of the cheery, all-American philistinism of "What you see is what you get." Imagine telling Aristotle that two things differ *only*, merely, in their mode of expression!

Remember the routine where someone picks up a piece of sheet music and says, reading aloud without any sense of the necessary intonation, "I don't understand these lyrics: 'You say "tomato," I say "tomato"; you say "potato," I say "potato" ' "? That is quite like the position Peirce is in when he refuses to acknowledge the mimetic differences between his diagrams, one plainly orthogonal, the other just as plainly diagonal in design. And that is very different from the live and essential asymmetries of David Row's paintings, where inflections that are neither arbitrary nor, exactly, "contrived" are generated within the essentially cognitive process of his painting. As penetrating as he otherwise can be, what Peirce misses with his very different diagrams is just what David Row's painting insists upon, always doubling itself in a way that realizes and heightens subtle difference. Row's very faithfulness to the materiality of oil-in-wax must be what makes it possible for him to extend that materiality to his thinking process as well as to anchor his abstractions in the world.

All photos by Sarah Wells

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