



PAOLO ARAO

P A O L O A R A O

Born 1977, Manila, Philippines  
Lives and works in Brooklyn

### **Education**

- 2000 Skowhegan School of Painting + Sculpture, Maine
- 1999 BFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond
- 1998 Loughborough College of Art + Design, Loughborough, United Kingdom  
Lorenzo de Medici Art Institute of Florence, Italy

### **Solo and Two-Person Exhibitions**

- 2020 *Never Too Much*, David B. Smith Gallery, Project Room, Denver
- 2019 *Here or There*, RATA Projects at 1 Rivington, New York  
*Key Change*, Glass Box Gallery, Seattle
- 2018 *Night Throbs*, Western Exhibitions, Gallery 2, Chicago  
*52 Weeks*, Barney Savage Gallery, New York  
*Flagettes*, Picture Room, Brooklyn  
*Project 14*, c2c project space, San Francisco
- 2010 *Between the Lights*, Franklin Art Works, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 2008 *Fornever*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York
- 2006 *Intermission*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York
- 2004 *Make Them Love You*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York

### **Group Exhibitions**

- 2020 *Triple Play*, Steve Turner, Los Angeles  
*Cut + Color*, Albany International Airport Gallery, Albany, New York  
*A Feeling Falls Apart*, Geary Contemporary, New York
- 2019 *Queer Abstraction*, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas  
*Shift*, Able Baker Contemporary, Portland, Maine  
*All We Want Is To See Ourselves*, FLXST Contemporary, Chicago  
*Shape Rattle & Roll*, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, New York  
*The Unusual Suspects: A View of Abstraction*, DC Moore Gallery, New York  
*Like Mercury in the Wind*, Oneoneone, Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
*Here: A Bit of Everywhere and Everyone They've Been*, NARS Foundation, Brooklyn  
*Woven Walls*, Morgan Lehman Gallery, New York  
*After & Because Of*, Marsh Gallery at Herron School of Art + Design, Indianapolis  
*Quiet March to a Warring Song*, The Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, New York  
*Ad Astra Per Aspera*, The Wassaic Project: Maxon Mills, Wassaic, New York  
*The Whole and It's Parts Through an Urbanistic Lens*, Space 52, Athens, Greece  
*New York is Now*, IS-Projects at Platforms Projects, Athens, Greece  
*Zina Al-Shukri, Paolo Arao, Anthony Sonnenberg*, Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco  
*An Idea, Maybe*, Foyer Gallery, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
- 2018 *Rhythm, Stress, and Pausing*, Super Dutchess, New York  
*Afterimage*, Paradise Palase, Brooklyn  
*Good Vibrations*, Mother Gallery, Beacon, New York  
*Three Squared*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
*Conveyor*, Morgan Fine Arts Building, Brooklyn  
*Half a Wave*, Pfizer Building Gallery, Brooklyn  
*Site Menagerie*, 86 Main Street, Yonkers, New York  
*The Cruellest Month*, Mother Gallery, Beacon, New York  
*Squaring the Sun*, Far x Wide, Brooklyn  
*Somewhere Nearby*, Bridge Productions, Seattle
- 2017 *The Flat Files: Year Five*, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Brooklyn

- Painting Not Painting*, Sindikit, Baltimore  
*Western Decoy*, No Place Gallery, Columbus, Ohio  
*Broad Stripes + Bright Stars*, Ely Center of Contemporary Art, New Haven, Connecticut  
*Common Ground*, Ana Nova Gallery, St. Petersburg, Russia  
*All Things Great and Small*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
*Overlaid and Underpinned*, Curating Contemporary  
*Steady Mess*, Bureau of General Services, Queer Division, New York  
*Postcards from the Edge*, Metro Pictures, New York  
*Object and Influence*, Hygienic Gallery, New London, Connecticut  
2016 *Casheesh*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
*Our City*, The New School, New York  
*Common Ground*, Triumph Gallery, Moscow  
*The Retrieval of the Beautiful*, The Painting Center, New York  
*Introductions*, Trestle Gallery, Brooklyn  
2015 *The Flat File: Year Three*, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Brooklyn  
*Remains to be Seen*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
2012 *Grey Full*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York  
2011 *Contemporary Drawings*, Barton Art Galleries, Barton College, Wilson, North Carolina  
2010 *Wall to Wall*, Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles  
*Observant*, ISE Foundation, New York  
2009 *Next Wave Art*, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn  
*Whitey on the Moon*, 106 Green, Brooklyn  
*Room Tones*, St. Cecilia Convent, Brooklyn  
*Give Them What They Never Knew They Wanted*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York  
*Intus Tensio*, or Appropriated Special, Centotto, Brooklyn  
2008 *Monsters*, RENTAL, New York  
*Making History*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York  
2007 *Hard Times*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York  
2005 *Introspective Men*, Madder 139 Gallery, London  
*Fresh Direct*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York  
2004 *Sunday Afternoon*, Match-Art, Brooklyn  
*Pencil Me In*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
*Cleanliness*, Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York  
*Playpen*, The Drawing Center, New York  
2002 *Emerging Artist Fellowship Exhibition*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York  
*Lucky Draw*, Deitch Projects, New York  
*Made in New York*, Arno Maris Gallery, Westfield, Massachusetts  
*SNAPSHOT*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut  
2001 *Interval: New Art for a New Space*, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York  
*Mitochondria Emancipation*, Asian American Arts Centre, New York  
*All Hands*, Pelham Art Center, Pelham, New York  
*AIM 21/ Artist in the Marketplace*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx  
2000 *SNAPSHOT*, Contemporary Museum, Baltimore  
*Fresh*, Butler's Laundromat, Skowhegan, Maine  
*Vermont Studio Center Resident Artists*, Helen Day Art Center, Stowe, Vermont

### **Residencies**

- 2020 Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, Nebraska  
2019 Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
NARS Foundation Residency, Brooklyn  
Vermont Studio Center, Johnson  
2018 BRIC Workspace Residency, Brooklyn  
The Millay Colony for the Arts, Austerlitz, New York  
The Wassaic Artist Residency, Wassaic, New York

- The Studios at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts  
 Keyholder Residency, Lower East Side Printshop, New York
- 2016 Fire Island Artist Residency, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, New York
- 2008 Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio, New York
- 2005 NYFA Artist Fellowship (Drawing) New York Foundation for the Arts
- 2002 Emerging Artist Fellowship, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York  
 Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Florida
- 2001 Artist in the Marketplace Fellowship, Bronx Museum of the Arts
- 2000 Skowhegan School of Painting + Sculpture Scholarship
- 1999 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson

## Bibliography

- 2019 Langevin, Julien. "Plastic Expressions in Particularity: Nature Moves in Tracy McKenna's Shift at Able Baker Contemporary," *Art Spiel*, November 21  
 "TxP (Textiel Plus)," *Issue 249, COLOR*, August  
 Barcio, Phillip. "Richard Kalina Curates an Abstract Art Show at DC Moore Gallery," *IdeelArtMagazine*, July 3  
 Arnold, Sharon. "Color, Conduits & Connectivity," *Bridge Productions*, June  
 Couzens, Julia. "Legacy of the Hand: Paolo Arao's Textile Paintings," *Two Coats of Paint*, May 11
- 2018 "Pictures at an Exhibition: Afterimage at Paradise Palase," *ArtNews.com*, November 30  
 Strumfield, Zan. "On the Cover," *Chronogram*, July (plus cover image)  
 Fontaine, Pearl. "Must See New York: Nick Cave, Justine Kurland, Paolo Arao and More," *Whitewall*, June  
 "New American Paintings, North Eastern Ed., Vol. 134," *Open Studio Press*  
 Issue 25, *Esopus*, Spring  
 Hancock, Eric. "Interview with Paulo Arao," Issue 6, *Maake Magazine*
- 2017 "Profile: Paulo Arao," *The Coastal Post*, December  
 Murphy, Olivia. "Paolo Arao – Yearbook 2016, Yearbook Paintings: Queering Abstraction"  
 Hannum, Terence. "Painting Not Painting," *B-More Art*, August, 14  
*ArtMaze Magazine*, Issue 02, April  
*Terra Firma Magazine*, Issue 04, February
- 2016 Artist Interview, *FLOORR Magazine*, Issue No. 5, August 12  
 Stone, Bryony. "The Queer Artists of Fire Island," *i-D Magazine*, July 14
- 2011 "100 Artists to Watch," *Modern Painters*, December 1
- 2008 Fusco, Maria. "The Happy Hypocrite: Issue 1 – Linguistic Hardcore," *Bookworks*  
 Fisher, Matthew. "The Distance of Drawing," *Matthews the Younger blogspot*
- 2006 Risemberg, Rafael. "A Weekend in the Country," *The New York Blade*, April 3
- 2005 "New American Paintings, North Eastern Ed., Vol. 56," *Open Studio Press*  
 "Readings," *Harper's Magazine*, January  
 Orden, Abraham. "Circus Without a Tent," *Artnet.com*, February 11
- 2004 *VOGUE (Portugal)*, November  
 Calendar, *The New York Sun*, October 19  
 Hitomi, Iwasaki. "Robert Lee and Timothy Liu. Mitochondria Emancipation," *Asian American Arts Centre*
- 2001 Smith, Roberta. "Funky Digs with Lots of Space for Performance-Oriented Hipsters," *The New York Times*, September 28  
 Ramoran, Edwin, and Lydia Yee. "Artist in the Market Place: 21st Annual Exhibition," *Bronx Museum of the Arts*

# SELECTED EXHIBITIONS



*Triple Play*. Installation view, Steve Turner, 2020



*Triple Play*. Installation view, Steve Turner, 2020



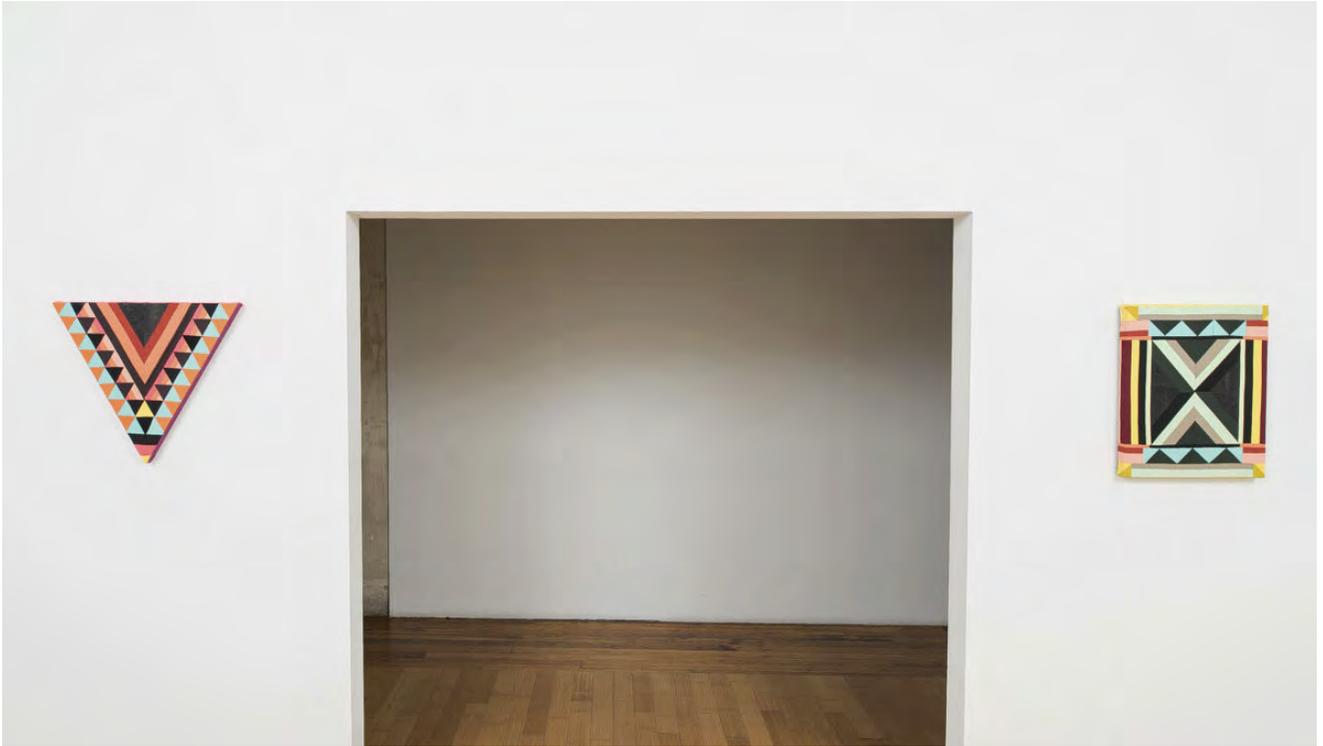
*Triple Play*. Installation view, Steve Turner, 2020



*Never Too Much*. Installation view, David B. Smith Gallery, Project Room, Denver, 2020



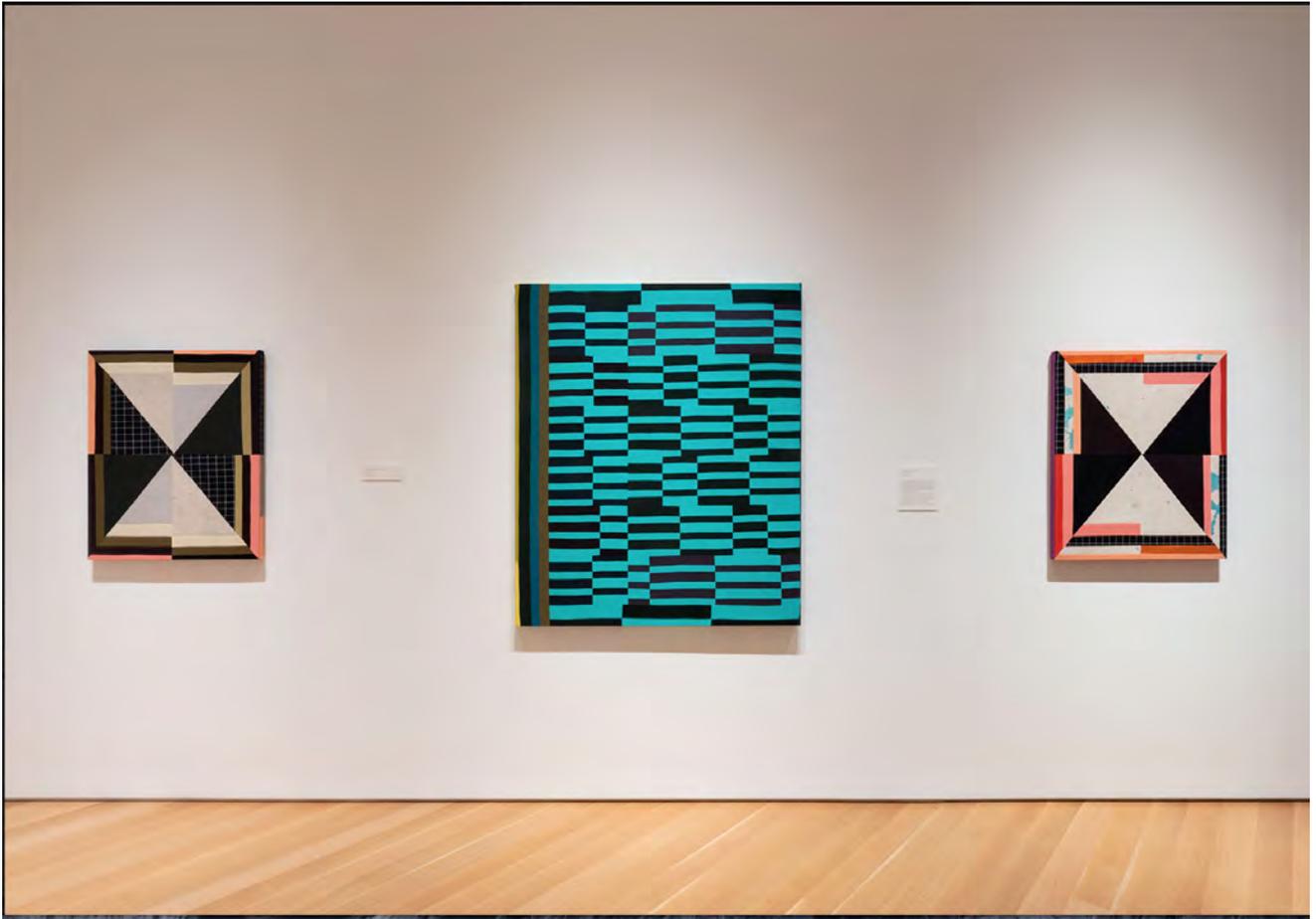
*Never Too Much*. Installation view, David B. Smith Gallery, Project Room, Denver, 2020



*Never Too Much*. Installation view, David B. Smith Gallery, Project Room, Denver, 2020



*A Feeling Falls Apart*. Installation view, Geary Contemporary, New York, 2020



*Queer Abstraction*. Installation view, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas, 2019



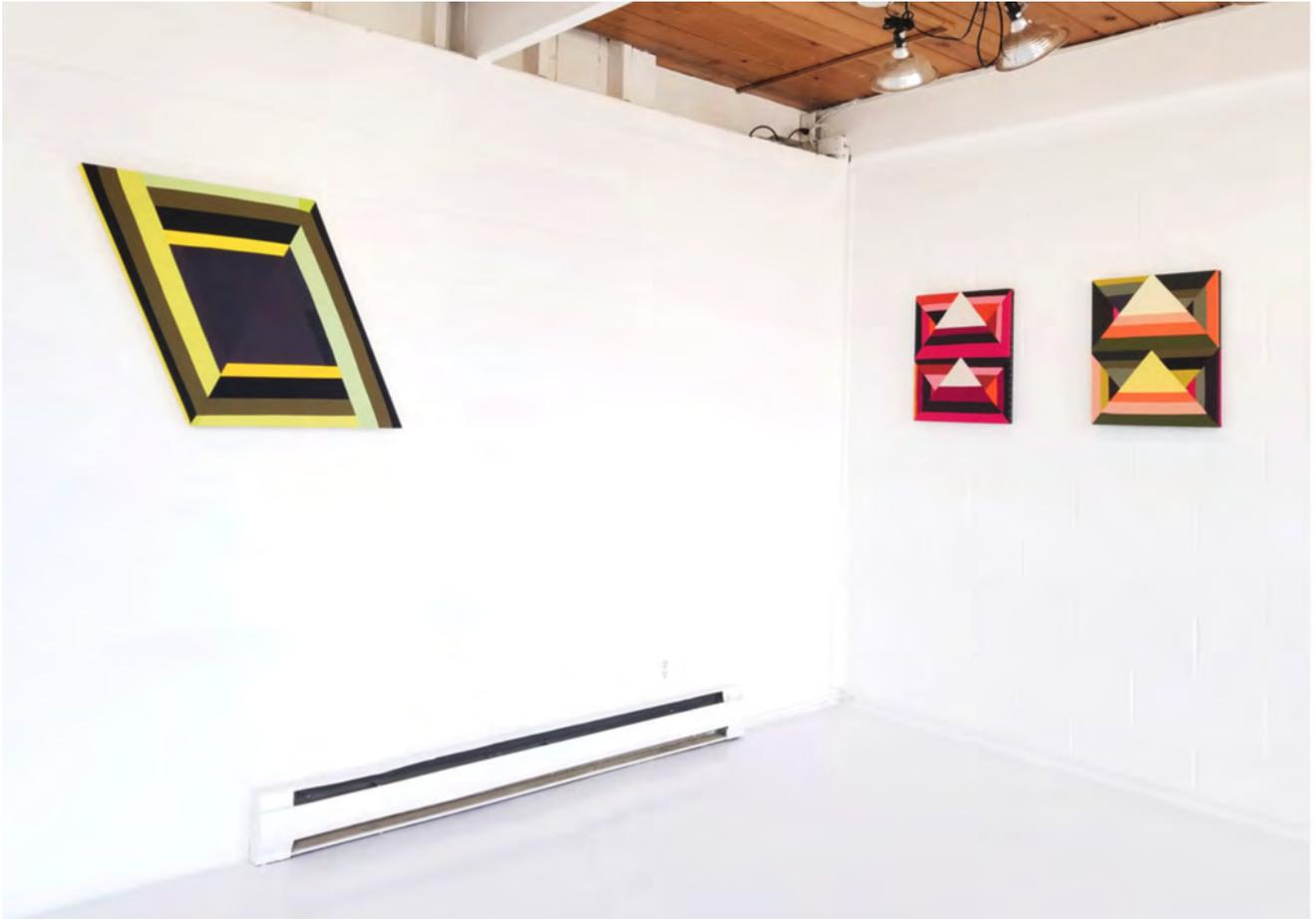
*Here or There*. Installation view, RATA Projects at 1 Rivington, New York, 2019



*Here or There.* Installation view, RATA Projects at 1 Rivington, New York, 2019



*Shift*. Installation view, Able Baker Contemporary, Portland, Maine, 2019



*Key Change*. Installation view, Glass Box Gallery, Seattle, 2019



*Key Change*. Installation view, Glass Box Gallery, Seattle, 2019



*Shape Rattle & Roll*. Installation view, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, New York, 2019



*The Unusual Suspects: A View of Abstraction*. Installation view, DC Moore Gallery, New York, 2019



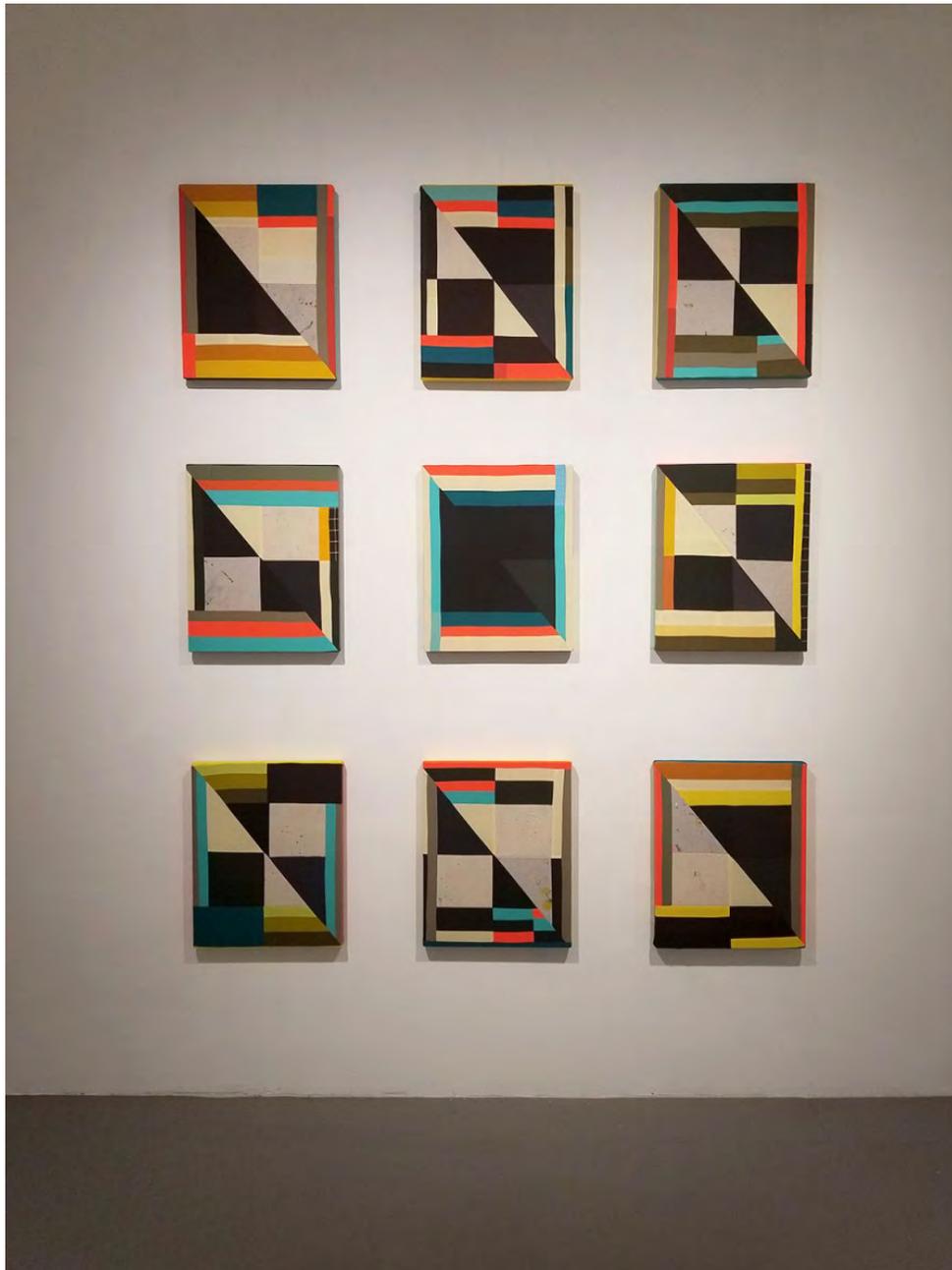
*Like Mercury in the Wind*. Installation view, Oneoneone, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2019



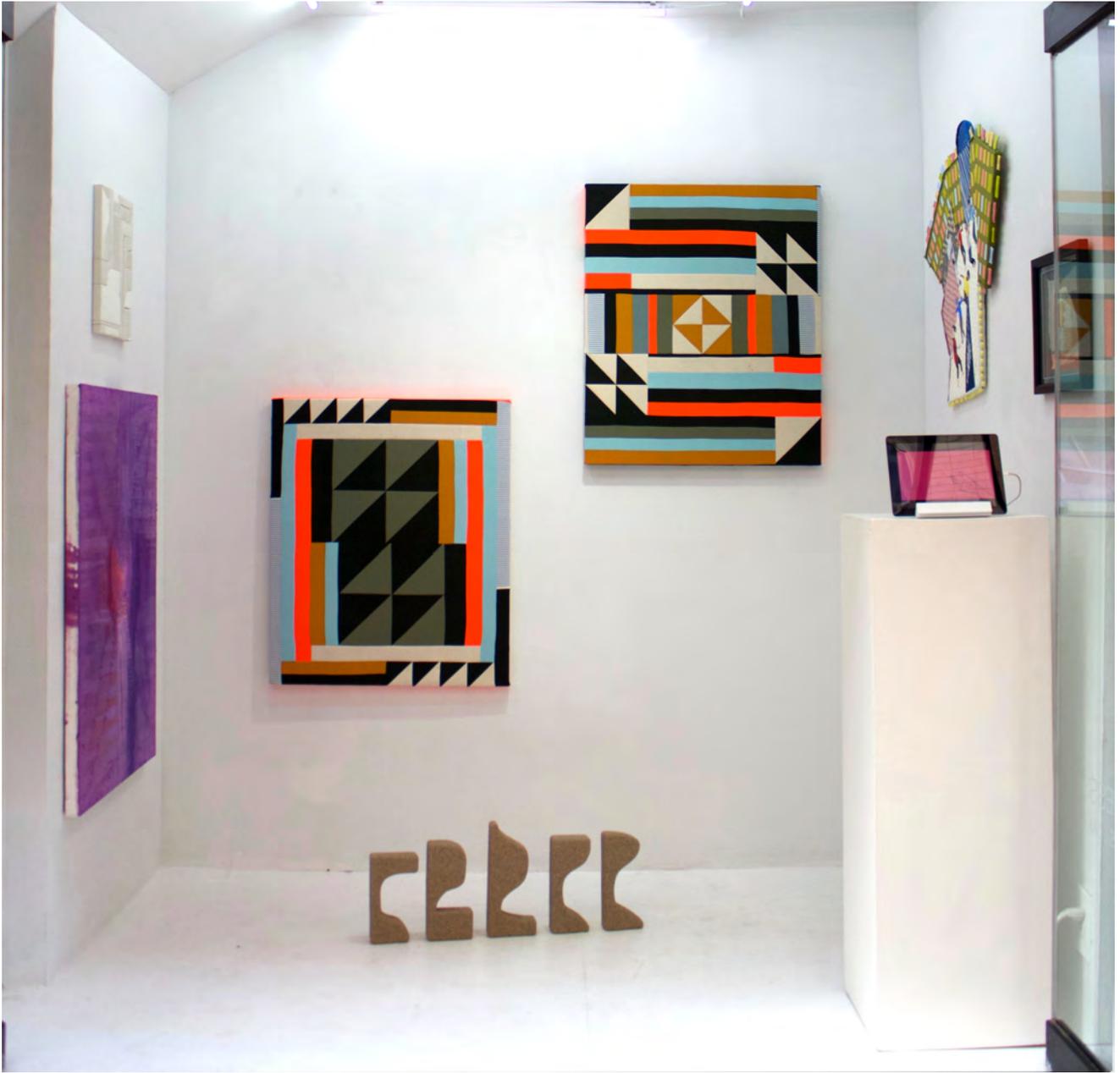
*Ad Astra Per Aspera*. Installation view, The Wassaic Project: Maxon Mills, Wassaic, New York, 2019



*Zina Al-Shukri, Paolo Arao, Anthony Sonnenberg. Installation view, Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, 2019*



*Zina Al-Shukri, Paolo Arao, Anthony Sonnenberg. Installation view, Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, 2019*



*Rhythm, Stress, and Pausing*. Installation view, Super Dutchess, New York, 2018



*Rhythm, Stress, and Pausing*. Installation view, Super Dutchess, New York, 2018



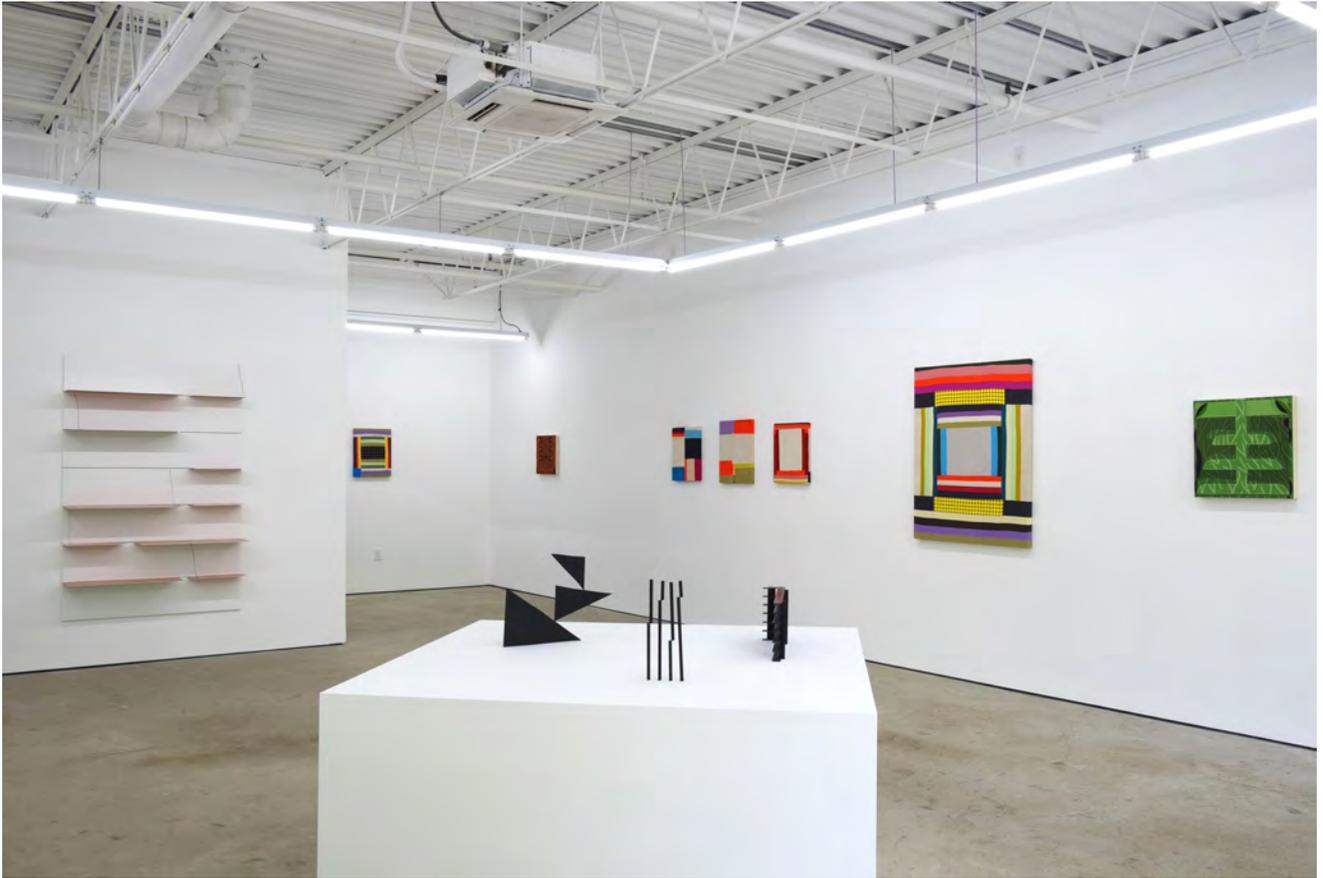
*Night Throbs*. Installation view, Western Exhibitions, Gallery 2, Chicago, 2018



*Night Throbs*. Installation view, Western Exhibitions, Gallery 2, Chicago, 2018



*Night Throbs*. Installation view, Western Exhibitions, Gallery 2, Chicago, 2018



*Good Vibrations*. Installation view, Mother Gallery, Beacon, New York, 2018



52 Weeks. Installation view, Barney Savage Gallery, New York, 2018

# SELECTED WORKS



*Armor*, 2020

Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas and handwoven fibers on shaped wood support  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22 inches (50.2 x 55.9 cm)



*Evolving Quilt Project*, ongoing  
Sewn canvas, corduroy, cotton, denim, silk and wool  
Currently 125 x 250 inches (317.5 x 635 cm)



*Healer, 2020*

Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas and handwoven fibers on shaped wood support  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22 inches (50.2 x 55.9 cm)



*Manila Mojo*, 2020

Sewn cotton, denim, wool, felt, nylon and canvas on shaped wood support  
20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm)



*Mixed Signals (Diptych)*, 2020

Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas, handwoven fibers and map pins  
56 x 18 inches (142.2 x 45.7 cm) each



*Sage*, 2020

Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas and handwoven fibers on shaped wood support  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22 inches (50.2 x 55.9 cm)



*Seer*, 2020

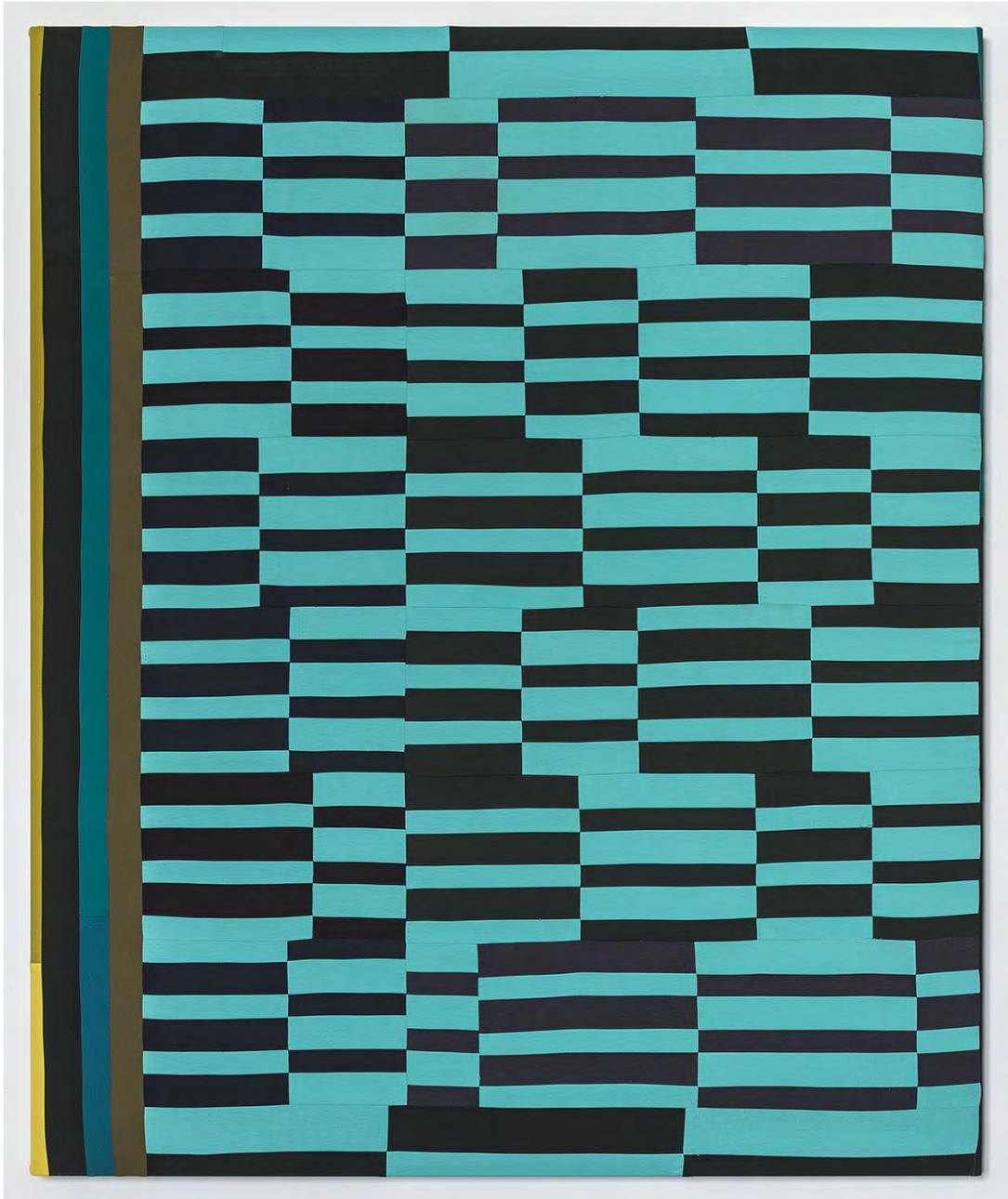
Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas and handwoven fibers on shaped wood support  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22 inches (50.2 x 55.9 cm)



*Birds in Flight (No. 5)*, 2019  
Sewn cotton, silk, denim, corduroy, canvas and map pins  
126 x 110 inches (320 x 279.4 cm)



*Diamond Pitch*, 2019  
Sewn cotton and canvas on shaped wood support  
33 x 27 inches (83.8 x 68.6 cm)



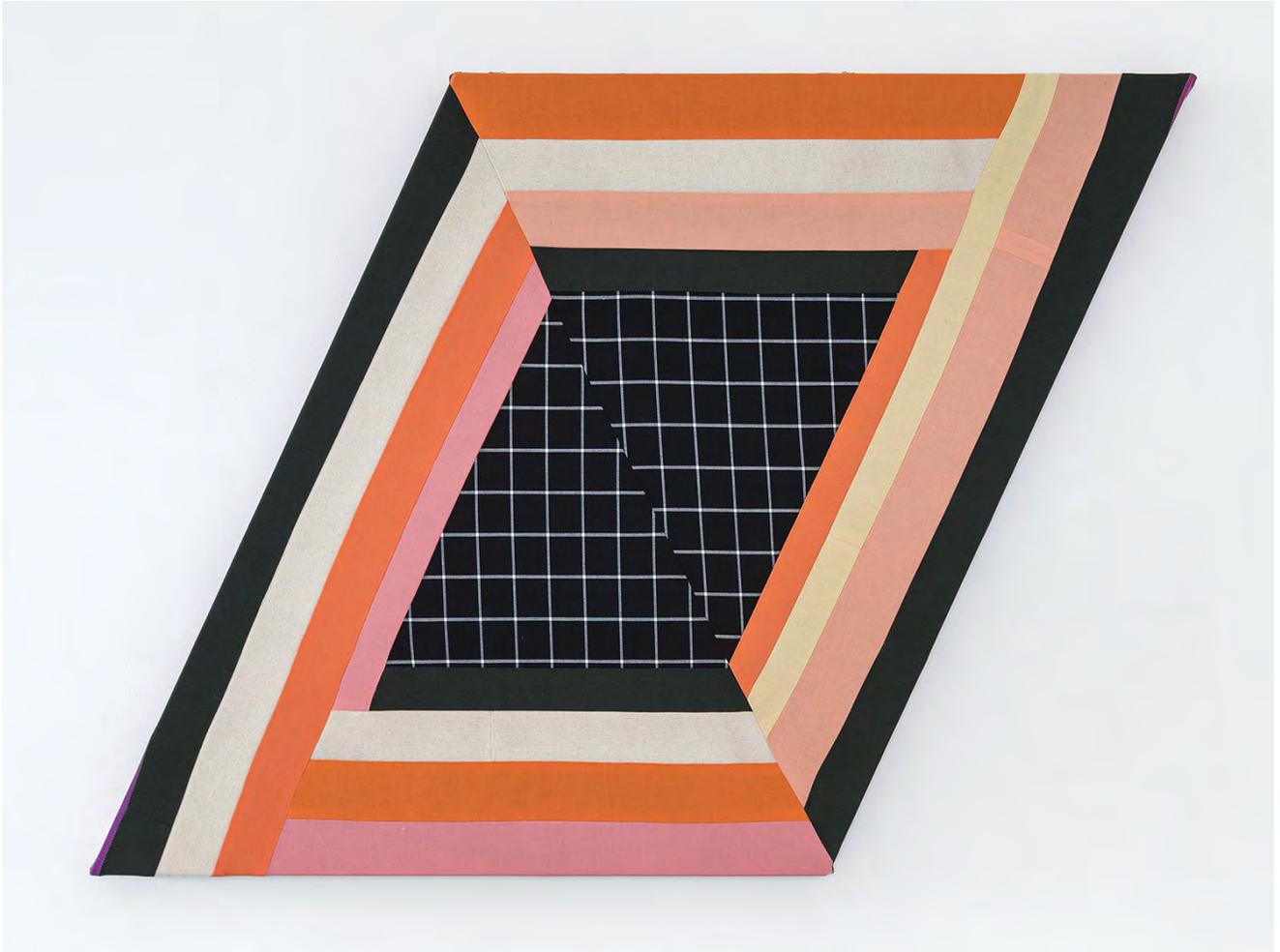
*Electric Oasis*, 2019

Sewn cotton, canvas, colored pencil and acrylic on shaped wood support  
54 x 45 inches (137.2 x 114.3 cm)

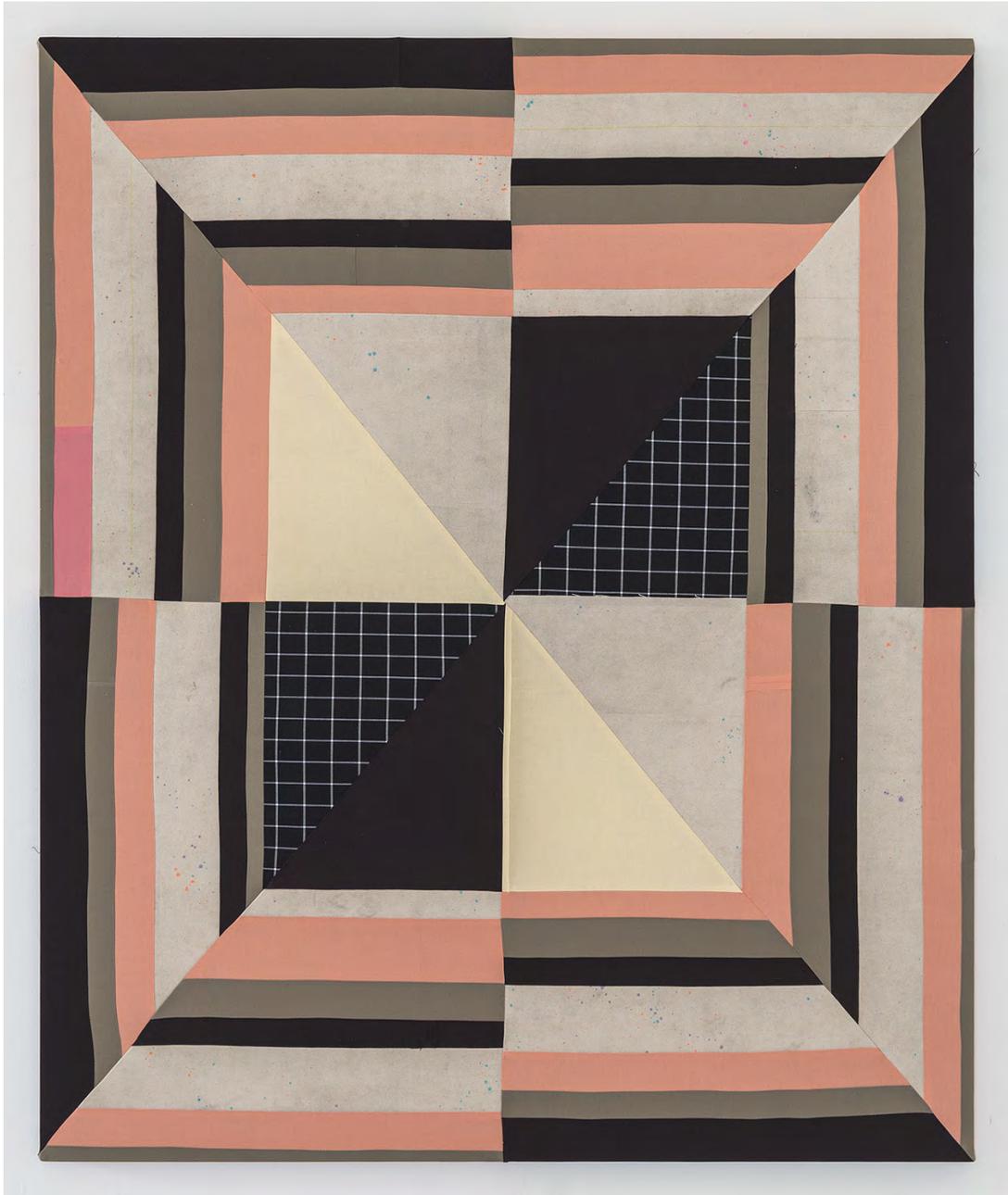


*First Breath (for Pia), 2019*

Sewn cotton, corduroy, canvas, acrylic and colored pencil on shaped wood support  
68 x 55 inches (172.7 x 139.7 cm)



*Fruit Machine*, 2019  
Sewn cotton and canvas on shaped wood support  
25 x 34 1/2 inches (63.5 x 87.6 cm)



*Soft Focus*, 2019

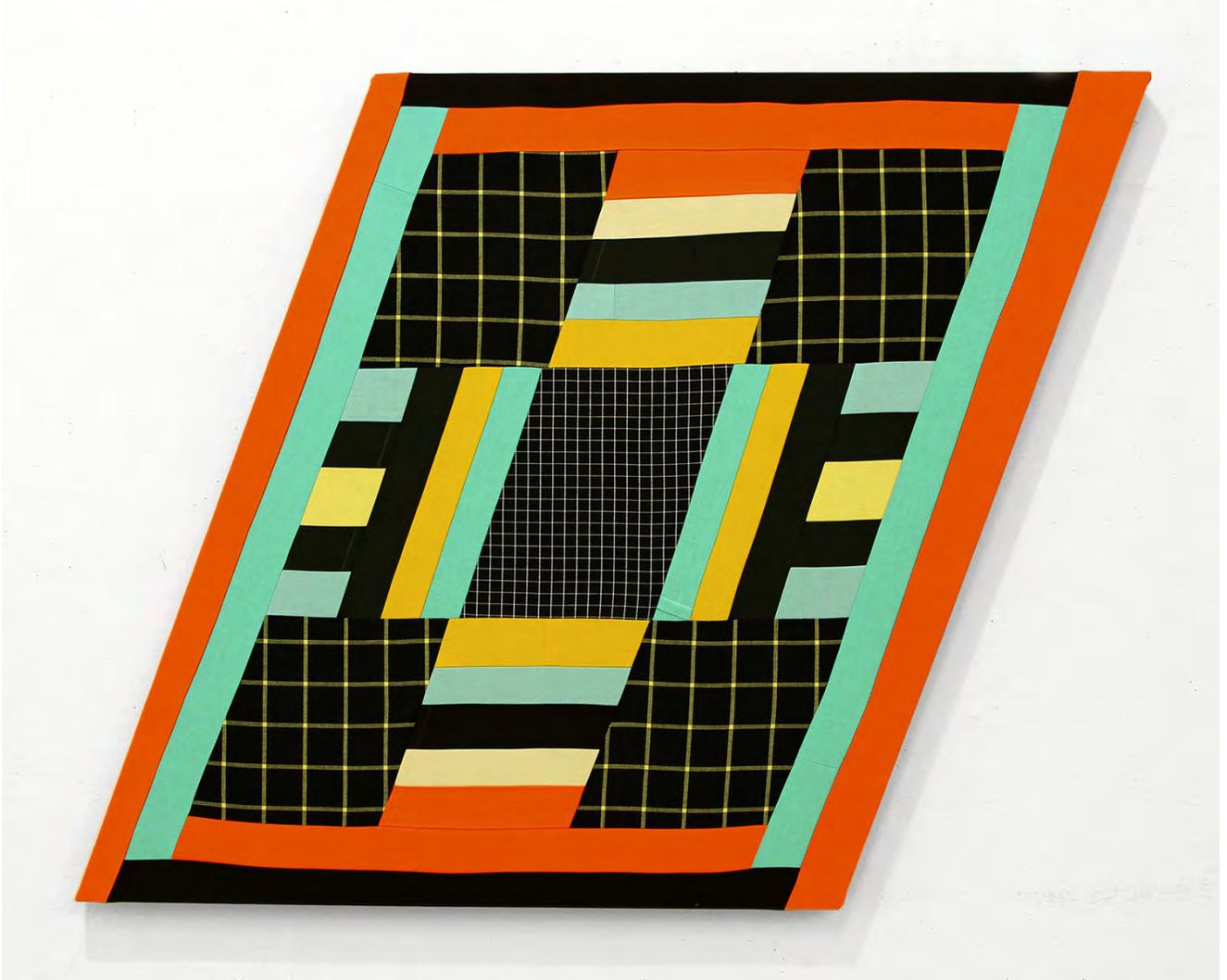
Sewn cotton, canvas, colored pencil and acrylic on shaped wood support  
54 x 45 inches (137.2 x 114.3 cm)



*Birds in Flight (No. 2)*, 2018  
Sewn cotton, canvas, colored pencil, acrylic and map pins  
87 x 67 inches (221 x 170.2 cm)



*Choral Quarrel*, 2018  
Sewn cotton and canvas on shaped wood support  
45 x 36 inches (114.3 x 91.4 cm)



Chro Ho, 2018  
Sewn cotton on shaped wood support  
25 x 32 inches (63.5 x 81.3 cm)



*Fever Stitch*, 2018

Sewn cotton, canvas and colored pencil on shaped wood support  
45 x 36 inches (114.3 x 91.4 cm)



*Lucky Star (Diptych), 2018*

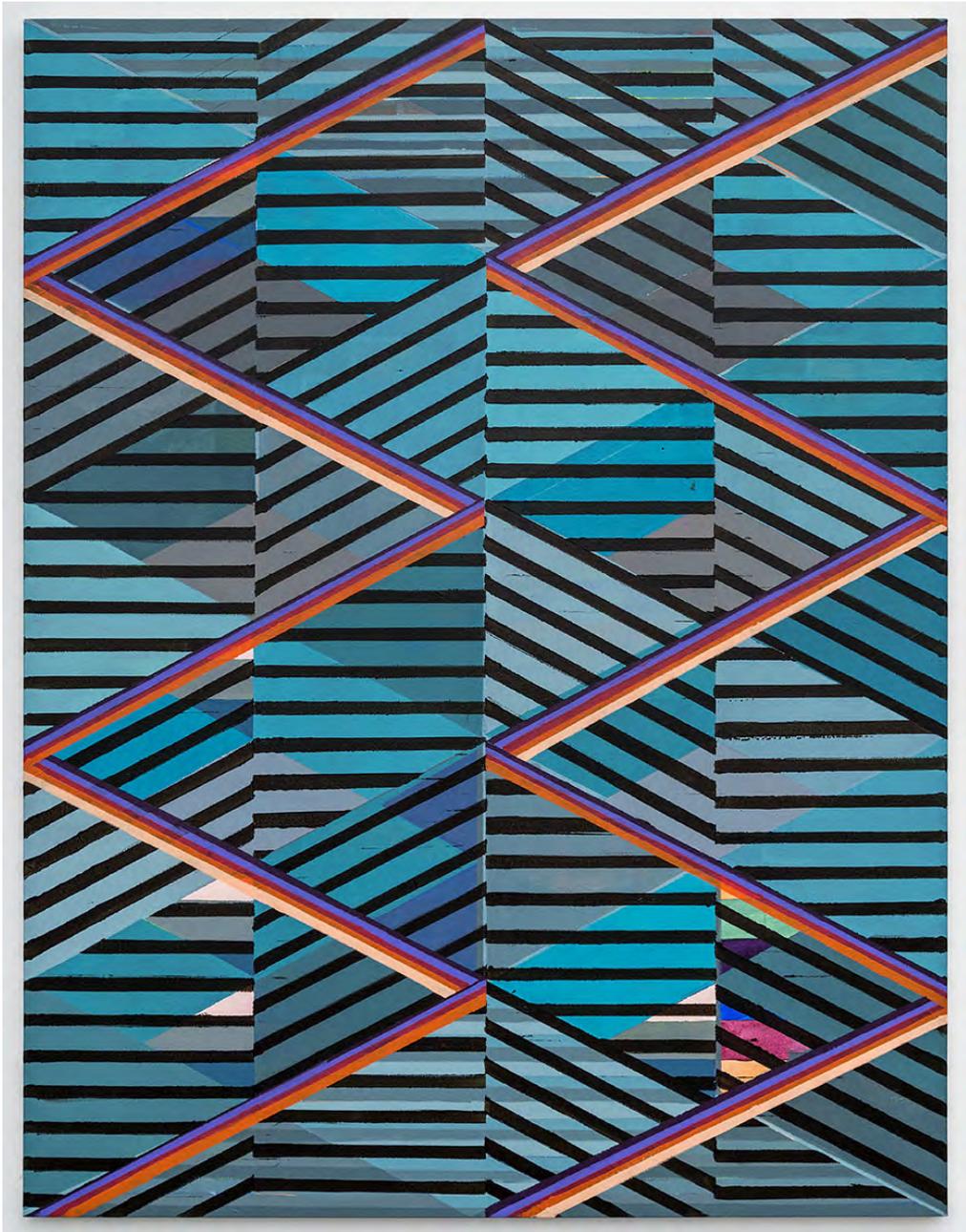
Sewn cotton, canvas and colored pencil on shaped wood support  
24 x 18 inches (61 x 45.7 cm) each



*Whip It*, 2018  
Sewn cotton on shaped wood support  
25 x 32 inches (63.5 x 81.3 cm)



August 16, 2016  
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas  
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)



*Sunset Strips*, 2016  
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas  
60 x 46 1/2 inches (152.4 x 118.1 cm)



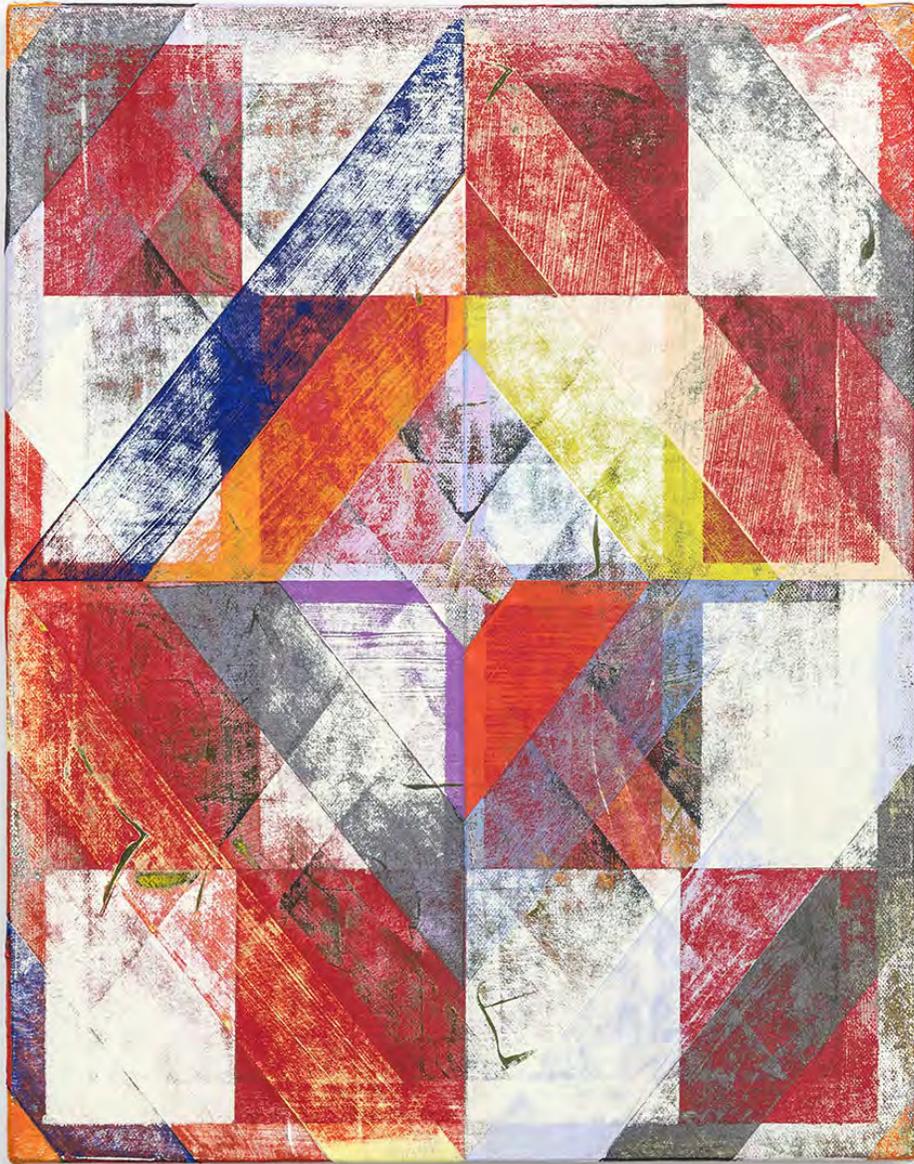
*Yearbook (December), 2016*  
Acrylic and colored pencil on 31 canvases  
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm) each



*Let's Get Digital (Diptych)*, 2015  
Acrylic on canvas over panel  
16 x 12 inches (40.6 x 30.5 cm) each

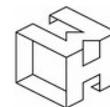


*You x Me = Infinity (Diptych)*, 2015  
Acrylic on birch panel  
14 x 11 inches (35.6 x 27.9 cm) each



*Checkers*, 2014  
Acrylic on canvas over panel  
14 x 11 inches (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

SELECTED PRESS



## COLOR, CONDUITS, & CONNECTIVITY

Sharon Arnold | June 2019



Paolo Arao \ Sexy Mother Pucker 2019 Sewn cotton, canvas, corduroy 20 x 16 x 1.25 inches

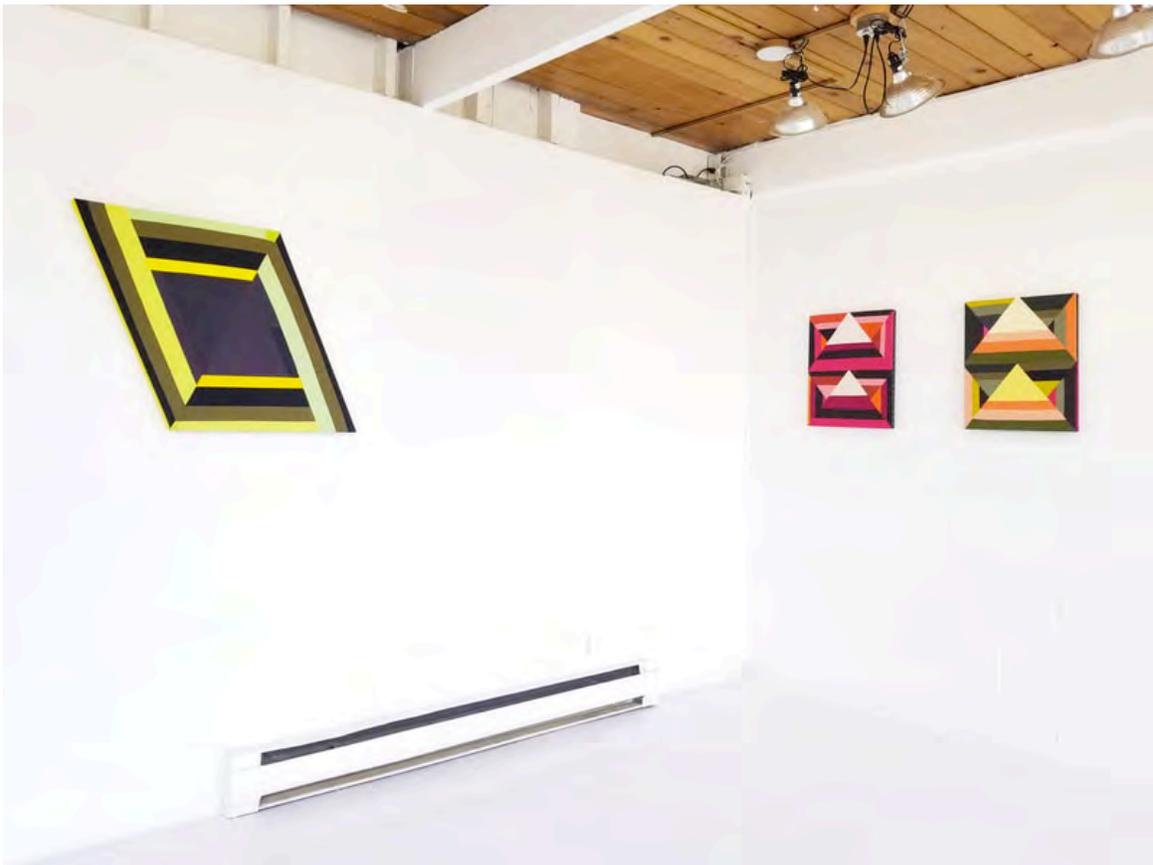
It was a warm sunny day in March of 2018, and I was enjoying a walk from Fort Greene to Paolo Arao's studio in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn. There, I was to meet with him and Sue Danielson, who had curated a group show of New York-based painters at Bridge Productions that January. Paolo had been among them, and this visit was a way to connect and continue building upon the initial thread of the exhibition. The show, *Somewhere Nearby*, was a tender gathering of artists revealing the presence of a bi-coastal community that had formed through social media. As I walked, I thought about how I was here stepping into physical space to complete the connection. In a funny way, the map of New York City only becomes clear from traversing its expanse on foot. The mysterious underground topography of subway lines belie the closeness of the city's near and adjacent neighborhoods. Still, the train is a conduit, a literal

connection between a place that is otherwise unreachable there, and here. The railroad as we know it is often considered, in retrospect, a harbinger of the internet; appearing just before the telegraph. These were the precursors of our ever-shrinking global community, a physical mainframe bridging distance through a network of intersecting lines. And here we were, connected through art, the internet, and railways.

When I arrived, the warm familiarity of this large industrial space flooded me with the smell of old wood and metal, a hundred layers of paint, and the presence of people working across time in a space imbued with the bustle, movement, and energy of bodies. I walked down the hallway to arrive at a bright, compact, and color-filled studio. In the corner stood a tall stack of neatly folded, brightly hued fabric. On the floor was a large irregular piece of raw canvas, a drop cloth, which I learned later would be incorporated into Paolo's work at the time. The history of fabric has a relationship to the history of railways, and this building, in how far this material has traveled, and how it's imbued with the stories of those who've



touched or worn it. Imprinted on the fabric was its use across time, each interaction, those who stood upon or walked across it, leaving an impression of their footsteps. Paolo's presence, movement, and energy would become a part of the textile's life history as well, as the marks he inadvertently made through his own footsteps or dripping paint became a part of the material's memory. That morning, the work on the wall of Paolo's studio included a few new pieces in which Paolo had sewn material together to create abstractions in patchwork. While no longer using quite as much of the canvas drop cloth, this method of composing with sewn, colorful fabric and canvas has become the main focus of Paolo's work today.



Paolo Arao \ Know Wrong Angles with She Likes to Boogie & Forest Skin installation view at Glass Box

In *Key Change*, Paolo is bringing us four distinct groups of work that stand alone, but ultimately work together in their entirety as an installation. The throughline between them is the way he uses patterning, and particularly triangles, as a foundation for his composition. They include a series of shaped parallelograms, leaning forward as if moving at high speed; a series of sewn diptychs he refers to as "same-sex" paintings, mirroring each other with slight variances; a set of intricately striped rectilinear paintings; and a large textile construction of triangular pieces. These are each a direct reference to their lineage in



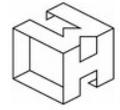
Modernist expression, hard-edged painting, and post-painterly abstraction. The tactility of the sewn pieces resists flatness— the stitches and folded corners become an accumulation of texture against a field of colorforms, another pattern. A new addition to the work in this exhibition is the use of corduroy and denim, further connecting the history of the fabric to the body, similar to how the material would appear in a quilt. These new textures assert a sculptural presence speaking to both their painting-ness and object-ness; their past and their present; their dual lives. Paolo speaks to the way he relies on chance through errors in sewing, creating inevitable imperfections. In enabling uncertainty, and releasing expectation, he thwarts an imposed straightness of the line, thus queering the composition by allowing a wandering seam; or mending, repairing, and bringing together things we wouldn't ordinarily predict to adhere or appear side by side. An unexpected tenderness towards our attention to storytelling, uncommon to ordinary formalism, comes forward.

The political symbolism of both quilts and flags, and the declarative nature of a banner as the bearer of a family crest or cultural emblem, is as personal as it is political, declaring identity. In the case of queer

histories, these textile art forms have played a huge part in activism, rallying people around a cause, and representing community. The universally understood symbol of the Rainbow Flag was designed for just that purpose. In 1978, Harvey Milk commissioned artist, designer, and drag performer Gilbert Baker to create the Rainbow Flag for the San Francisco Pride parade. Taking note of the display of pageantry present in the recent 1976 Bicentennial celebration of the US, Baker created this colorful icon as a way to represent the gay community through a more inclusive, broad-spectrum symbol than the familiar, pink triangle. In 2019, we have an even wider range of flags to represent a full array of queer identity, including a pastel hued flag for the trans community,



Paolo Arao \ Haptic Chromantic 2019 Sewn cotton and canvas  
20 x 16 x 1.25 inches

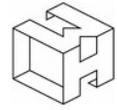


and a revised Rainbow Flag with black and brown stripes to represent the BIPOC queer community. The multiplicity of banners continues to expand, bearing a growing number of family crests.



Paolo Arao \ *Birds in Flight (No. 6)* 2019 Sewn cotton, canvas, corduroy, denim Installation view with *She Likes to Boogie* and several sewn paintings (left)

Paolo deftly combines the legacy of the rainbow flag and the triangle together in his work, celebrating shape, form, color, and multiplicity. Triangles appear everywhere, but in particular, *Birds in Flight* is built from multiple smaller pieces that construct a larger pennant. Its use of bright hues and tessellation defies restriction; a resistance to systemic and dismissive colonial definitions of gender, race, sexuality, symbolism, craft, and cultural context. Creativity is a method to navigate obstacles, to sprint ahead of mainstream culture to find a sense of freedom, flexibility, and movement in spite of society's narrow definitions. Paolo is using this nimble maneuverability around color, material, and context as a tactic to elicit, prompt, and provoke a creative solution. The mistakes that occur are an artifact of this circumvention. Each notion of "right" and "wrong" becomes a query rather than a terminus. They are steps towards another outcome that would have been unavailable had the door been closed to chance. While Paolo speaks to putting himself in a "compositionally uncomfortable situation" while making the work, he also talks about not dwelling too long on a painting, important in the way that it's important to not overthink things— to not



overdictate the shape the work is meant to be. What doesn't work for this piece, may work for the next, and in this way processes stack and leapfrog across a body of work to become a signature. While color and overall patterns or compositions may repeat themselves, their uniqueness is found in the materials, the stitch, the patchwork of each individual construction.

Paolo's tender treatment stitches together multiple lineages and histories to create a new story of the present, of his lived experience, today. In describing his deeply rooted connection to the patterns and color found in textiles from the Philippines, as well as his awe and appreciation of Gee's Bend and Amish quilts; he notes the way their color, composition, and construction evoke a strong visceral and emotional power. This invocation speaks to the syncretism of an aesthetic cultural memory from Filipino, African, and Amish patterning passed down through generations of people. Across the world, inherited cultural art forms include colorful patterned geometry in infinite combinations and compositions. Coded deeply within these works are histories, documentation of the lives of people, storytelling, and cultural signification. Creators weave in the lives of their families, their communities, and themselves. Paolo, working in this way, does the same: threading and sewing the stories of his life, his Filipino lineage and cultural heritage, and his queer and artistic communities to form a larger whole.

The bright hyperchromatic hues of *Key Change* pop in the light-filled space of Glass Box Gallery. The interplay of color isn't confined within a single piece, but charges the entire space with its presence, enveloping us in the process. As participants in the experiences Paolo creates, we get to feel his tender attention to histories, lineages, and inquiry come through in passionate color and delight. He gives us an opportunity to read and re-read the work in an unprescribed way, to see it fully. The breadth of materials, colors, shapes, and rhythm simultaneously intersect, converge, and unravel like railways to connect the distance across space and time of craft, culture, lineage, and stories. Like people, they interact and impact on an emotional level. Like people, they are asymmetrical, dynamic, off-center, askew; sewn up and mended, and lovingly gathered. Bringing us together through the work, Paolo's geometry connects us to him, and to each other.

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

## Legacy of the hand: Paolo Arao's textile paintings

By Julia Couzens | May 11, 2019



Paolo Arao's exuberant textile paintings radiate a bracing freshness, like nautical flags snapping brightly in a cracking breeze. From a distance clear color and crisp geometry flip space backward and forward, causing the eye to toggle in and out of the paintings' nuanced, irregularly faceted grids. Seen up close, quavering, irregular seams of sewn fabric argue against the lacquered, bulletproof stance and historical superiority of the painted surface.

Arao's small-scale but energetic paintings slyly use the cultural significance of textiles and the grid, arguably the warp and woof of modernity, to signal inclusivity and the emergence of expanding art historical lineages. Historically textiles, particularly quilting practices, have been viewed as mainstays of craft and design — products to

enrich our material lives, as opposed to "higher" fine art practices that aspire to the abstract realm of metaphor. Deploying scraps of fabric, some hand-dyed or cut from studio drop cloths, Arao constructs geometric abstractions using asymmetrical balance, flat areas of bold color, or color so subtle it's no more than a haze. The strength and clarity of Arao's compositions, their rich tactility and architectonic space, bridge the uneasy gulf between the decorative heritage of textiles and the intellectual rigor of abstract painting.

The gridded modules of nine and fifteen paintings, composing *Everyone* and *Of Color* respectively, are animated by syncopated variations on Arao's block patterns. Like the acclaimed quilts of Gee's Bend, the resourceful intelligence of these works is to be found in their supple structure and relationships of color and scale. *Everyone* is organized around the central binary of black and white intersecting squares and triangles, bracketed and upheld by surrounding planks and strips of rust, purples, oranges, and pinks. *Of Color* uses rectangles and squares of black, white and gray supported and defined by a scaffolding of primarily turquoise, olive greens, yellow ocher, orange, and taupe. Exposed seams, random paint spatters, frayed edges, and the odd piece of checked cloth or polka dot subtly intervene to give the work its texture and nuanced tactility. This is the heritage of the handmade and handed-down, the fragile yet binding thread of touch.

## On the Cover: Paolo Arao's Mister Sister

Zan Strumfeld | July 12, 2018

When artist Paolo Arao sees color, he hears music. Call it synesthesia, but it probably relates more to his former life as a classical pianist. As a Navy brat, Arao's family moved from the Philippines, where he was born, to Hawaii, then Florida, eventually settling in Virginia. "Growing up and knowing I would only live in a certain place for a specific amount of time, it was hard for me to make friends," Arao says. "So, I spent many hours just playing piano." With a scholarship to Virginia Commonwealth University, Arao was on track to become a performer and composer. However, his curiosity for visual art blossomed in college, and he made the switch to a BFA in painting. "I was drawn to geometric abstraction because I saw some similarities with music," he says. "Structure and color and form and rhythm—I was able to see it through the lens of music with harmonies and dissonances."



Mister Sister | paolo arao | acrylic, colored pencil, sewn cotton and canvas | 2018

Yet finding a way to harmoniously represent his queer identity fostered an even deeper curiosity. After graduation and a residency at the Vermont Studio Center, Arao moved to Brooklyn. Initially without a studio and limited space to paint, he began sketching self-portraits and homoerotic drawings with charcoal. He was offered a showcase, and dove into an unexpected decade-long career as a charcoal artist. "I was getting pigeon-holed making these gay drawings, and I wanted to get back into painting. I was trying to think of ways to

represent my queer identity without depicting the body. But how can you do that through abstraction?"

Enter *Mister Sister*, the marriage of sewn textiles, acrylic, and colored pencil that graces this month's cover. It's not obvious there are queer motivations upon initial viewing, though the title—coincidentally sharing the name of one of Vermont's first gay bars, and where the painting was made during Arao's second residency at the Vermont Studio Center earlier this year—provides a helpful layer. Here, along with the other paintings he'll be exhibiting at Beacon's Mother Gallery mid-July, Arao explores the paradoxes of both queer formalism and geometric abstraction.

While much of his work is based on the rigidity of the grid, Arao plays around these restrictions. By using textiles, he softens the geometry; by stretching the canvas, he distorts it; by finding odd color combinations, he goes along with—and against—the system. Arao's profoundly intimate creations are echoed by their small size, appropriately inviting the viewer to take one step closer and examine these complicated relationships beyond formalizations. "I like seeing how certain colors aggravate each other, and addressing that—and my own personal—tension. It's like going back to music with dissonant and harmonic tones. I see these colors and textiles trying to create balance out of imbalance."

## Interview with Paolo Arao

Eric Hancock | 2018



**Hi Paolo, thanks for talking with me. This is my inaugural interview so let's get this started!**

Hi Eric, happy to be the first!

**Can you tell us a bit about your background and what motivated you to become an artist? How has your work evolved over time up to this moment?**

I was born in the Philippines and moved to the US when I was two years old. My father was in the US Navy so I grew up in Hawaii, Florida and Virginia. I received my BFA in Painting from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. And I moved to NYC in the fall of 2000 immediately after a residency at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. I've been living and working in Brooklyn for the past 18 years.

I started playing the piano at a very early age. In high school I attended the Governor's Magnet School for the Arts in Norfolk, VA to study music. I was surrounded by other musicians, visual artists, dancers and performing artists. I went on to study Music Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University. I aspired to be a classical pianist, but after the first semester of my freshman year, I became curious about the visual arts.

Since graduating from VCU with a BFA, my work has evolved over the years. My work has gone from gridded abstractions in oil to representational and photorealistic graphite drawings on paper and then back to painting with acrylic. In recent months I've been working with acrylic paintings, sewn textiles and fabric collages.

**What's your favorite medium for the preliminary planning stages of painting? Do you make drawings?**

I make drawings in a small sketchbook. Sometimes my paintings are a conglomeration of parts taken from multiple sketchbook drawings. More recently my work has become more improvisatory and I let the paintings emerge and unfold during the process of making without too much planning.

**Your work taps into a nostalgia for older recognizable art historical forms, which seems to be a prevalent approach for a lot of engaging painters these days. How does your appreciation for art and design history play into your formal decisions? I see some similarities between your painting and for or instance quilt design, how much of your inspiration doesn't strictly fall under the category of Fine Art?**

My work is rooted in geometric abstraction. There's a lineage of history that I'm both working with and against. I'm experimenting with ways to explore the elastic concept of queerness through abstraction – specifically geometric abstraction. And one of the questions I ask myself in the studio is “Can abstraction or geometry be gay?” Working with textiles feels like an appropriate material to help soften the geometry and “straight” system of the grid that I've been working with throughout the years. Quilts and textiles have been a rich reference source for me as well.

**This is somewhat of an unpopular question, but have there been any fashionable approaches to painting from the last several years that bother you. I'm somewhat of a fanboy, but I like to keep my critical faculties sharp, so to speak. Feel free to plead the fifth here :)**

I try not to get too bothered by or caught up with what's fashionable. Taste in the art world is cyclical and eventually almost everything becomes fashionable at one point or another. I believe in what I'm doing and why I'm making the work I make.

**Let's talk about your color usage—do you lay out your color schemes beforehand, and how strictly do you adhere to that in the process of painting?**

Color is both personal and political. I sometimes pre-mix a few main colors and then create secondary or tertiary mixes as I go along. I admit that there are colors that I gravitate to more than others, but I like to mix things up by playing with colors that are intentionally ugly or jarring and placing them next to other colors to create a vibration or dissonance.

**Are you looking at any current painters whose work excites you?**

This list is far too long and constantly changing! Although he's not a current painter, a painter I'm currently looking at is Alan Shields.

**Do you make one painting at a time, or do you have multiple works going at once?**

I like working on multiple projects at the same time. I bounce back and forth between making paintings, sewn textile constructions and fabric collage. And I've been working on a

trilogy of yearlong projects that involve making one piece at a time. Each of these projects has a set of self-imposed parameters regarding scale, frequency and duration.

The first in this trilogy is Yearbook (2016.) I painted one 12 x 9 inch painting every single day for the entire year. There are 366 paintings in total (it was a leap year.) Each painting was completed in the span of one hour. The second in the trilogy is 52 Weeks (2017.) For this project I painted one 18 x 15 inch painting for each week of the year. Each painting was completed in a single session—a session lasted anywhere from 3–10 hours. All 52 paintings from this project are currently on view in my solo show at Barney Savage Gallery in TriBeCa (until July 22nd.) The third part of the trilogy will begin in 2019 and will consist of twelve large scale painted textile constructions. Stay tuned!

**I'm going out on a limb here, but the images seem to have a diurnal quality-with an inherent time of day. There are orbs and implied contrasts between shade and light. Do you think about that at all?**

A large majority of the paintings from my “52 Weeks” series were completed during the morning or early afternoon. I am most productive in the morning and I’m rarely in my studio in the evenings.



Installation photo of Paolo's solo exhibition "52 Weeks" currently on view at Barney Savage Gallery in New York City. Courtesy of Barney Savage Gallery, NYC

**You're playing with transparency and opacity, punching holes in the foreground and skewing elements to reveal the background. I'm thinking of the two paintings Departures and Troubled Light in which the background jumps into the foreground in a kind of hypnagogic reversal. Is there a conceptual underpinning for the spatial skewing?**

The skewing, transparencies and perceptual shifts are meant create an intentionally uncomfortable yet playful space in my paintings. There's an uneasiness or restlessness to the forms. It's like they're dancing or resisting stillness. Some of the forms push against or penetrate each other. I want the viewer to see the many layers of the painting and not just what's on the surface.

**In my own work, abrupt detours and periodic denials have produced a variety of failed experiments and divergent material. Did you have much of a growing pain phase, or has your development been fairly smooth?**

I embrace failures and mistakes. It's become an integral part of my process. Sometimes these failures become catalysts for another work or body of work. I'm really interested in the intersection of intention and imprecision and maybe doing things the wrong way to reveal something new and deeply personal.

**Does doubt ever factor into the making of the work? At which part of the process do you feel the strongest positive feelings for your work?**

Doubt (and fear) are motivating factors. I'm constantly questioning my moves. Sometimes if I think it's a wrong move, I'll gravitate towards that. I often take three left turns instead of one right turn to get to where I need to go. I like to get lost in the work and find my way through.

**Art business versus making, what's the split look like for you?**

I try to take care of all the business stuff before I head out to the studio in the morning and then maybe check back in during the evenings. I prefer to spend the majority of my day focusing my energy on making.

**What's your studio like. Do you have specific light requirements or a super customized set-up?**

Right now, I'm on a residency at the Wassaic Project—so my studio is currently in a barn!

I'm grateful to be participating in six residencies this year. When I'm not at a residency, my studio is in Bed Stuy a very short walk from Clinton Hill where my husband and I live. My studio is minimally furnished with a work table, rolling cart and chair. I try to only have the materials I need to work with on my current projects. I keep older paintings and miscellaneous studio supplies in a storage space.

**Do you listen to music when you work?**

I don't listen to music as often these days. However, when I do it's usually an instrumental playlist on Spotify that begins with Philip Glass or Nils Frahm. But other times I'll listen to

pop music or 90's R&B if I'm doing something that doesn't require much thinking or decision making.

**Do you talk shop talk with friends? I live in L.A. And mostly my friends and I just gossip a lot. It seems like post grad school the contentiousness of art practice dissipates a bit. Reading difficult and polarizing theory seemed to help ratchet up the tension when I was in school. Do you do stuff like that, introduce contentiousness into your process?**

I can't say that I do. I did not go to grad school—it didn't seem right for me. Instead, I went to an artist residency at the Vermont Studio Center right after graduating from VCU in 1999. I've done a number of other residencies over the years as well as studio visits with other artists. It's been a great way to meet artists from all over the world and create an expanded network and community. I've learned so much from the lived experiences of other artists. It's definitely helped my process in the studio. Most of my conversations have been constructive and critical in helping to navigate ways of surviving as an artist outside of academia.

**At the end of the making, towards the reception phase, do you feel precious about the work's showing, or are you on to the next creative phase fairly quickly?**

Once a work is done, I'm usually on to the next thing. I try not to be too precious about each painting. I know there's going to be another painting and then another and so forth. I've learned to let go more easily.

**I love your work, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me!**

My pleasure!

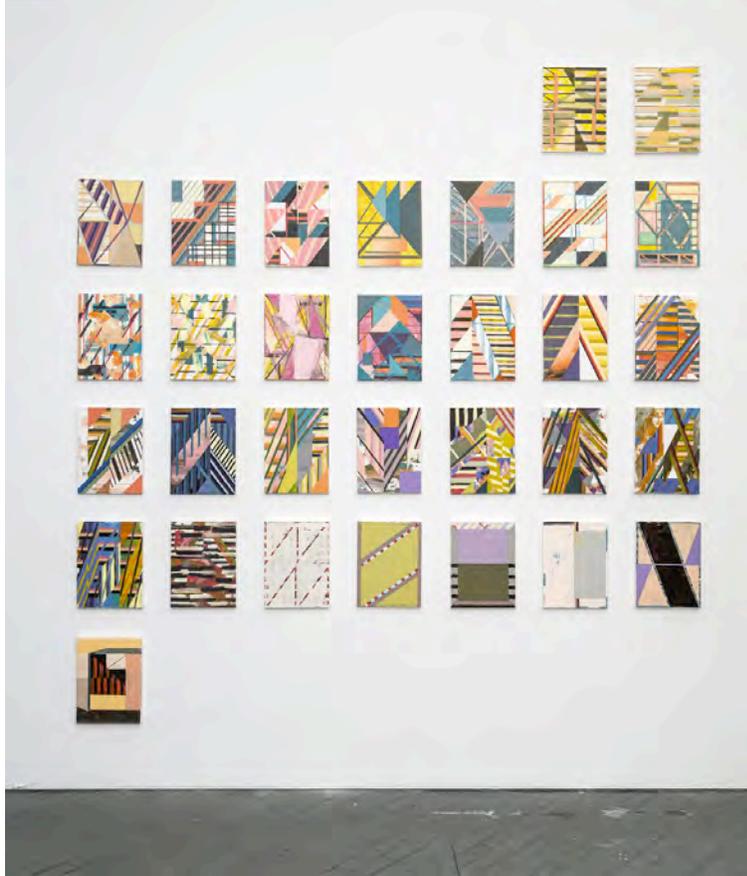
**Thanks so much for sharing your work and talking with us!**



Detail of the installation of Paolo's solo exhibition "52 Weeks" currently on view at Barney Savage Gallery in New York City. Courtesy of Barney Savage Gallery, NYC

## PAOLO ARAO

August 12, 2016



Yearbook (January), 2016, Acrylic and colored pencil on 31 canvases, 12 x 9 inches each

**Could you tell us a bit about yourself. How long have you been a practicing artist and where did you study?**

Growing up in Florida and Virginia, I had dreams of becoming a classical concert pianist. I went to a school for the performing arts in junior high and high school. I competed and performed in local and regional piano recitals. I'd spend hours every day hunched over the piano, practicing Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Beethoven. I received a scholarship to study Music Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. But after my first semester as a music student, I came to the realization that it was NOT the path for me. I really wanted a change and to pursue something different so I applied to VCU's visual arts program; I

was accepted and as a result I lost my music scholarship. Initially my parents weren't too thrilled about that decision!

I received my BFA in Painting at Virginia Commonwealth University (1999) and attended a few artist residencies soon after graduating: Vermont Studio Center (1999), Skowhegan (2000), and The Atlantic Center for the Arts (2002).

I moved to New York in the Fall of 2000. And I have lived and worked in Brooklyn ever since. For the past couple of years, I've been focused entirely on making paintings as well as works on paper.

I'm also currently training for a couple half marathons taking place in the fall; one on Staten Island, the other in Philadelphia.

**Could you talk about the group of paintings under the name “Yearbook”? Would you say that by giving yourself rules and restrictions, with this time-based project, adds another layer to the work?**

Yearbook (2016) is an epic visual diary that consists of one painting every morning for an entire year. I give myself only one hour to complete each painting. I definitely work better under pressure so this self-imposed time restriction allows me to focus on the most essential elements to communicate in each painting in that given moment. Mistakes, failures, successes, and indecisions all share the same space.

I’ve made a habit of texting a photo of each completed painting to my husband every morning. And it’s become somewhat of an extended love letter to him. Besides exhibiting all 366 paintings (it’s a leap year) in its entirety, I plan to publish this project as a book.

I think there’s so much freedom in giving yourself restrictions. I’m always curious about the possibilities and directions a painting can go given the strict parameters I’ve established for myself. One hour is not a lot of time to make a painting, but I love the challenge. There are more failures than successes, but that’s true in anything. It’s slightly uncomfortable allowing people to see these vulnerable and imperfect moments. But it definitely adds another layer to the work.

**Your work has a repetitive nature to it, with repeated patterns and even duplicates of the same painting in your series of works called “We Belong Together”. Could you talk about this series of works and the reason behind it?**

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is such an important artist for me. His work has had an insurmountable impact on how and why I’ve come to make my work. His artwork of two wall clocks perfectly in sync with each other titled "Perfect Lovers" is an emotional and conceptual drop-kick to the face. It’s poetic, deeply personal and conceptually rigorous - all with such an economy of means.



Piles, 2016, Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas,

# FLOORR

It's inspired my series of diptych paintings called "We Belong Together." These diptych paintings approach abstraction from a queer perspective. Presented in pairs, these paintings are equally about sameness as they are about difference. They're also very much about the act of looking and shifting perceptions. And a lot about being in tune with someone you love. I affectionately refer to them as my "same-sex" paintings.

## **What do you hope the viewer gains/reacts from looking at your work?**

I make paintings because I LOVE painting. I'm a sucker for skewed geometry, bold patterns and discordant colors. I have a soft spot for hard edges that flirt with imperfectly hand-painted areas. And I get excited when patterns slip or collapse happily into one another to create a dynamic, strange and dizzying space. I love when hues sing slightly off key through chromatically dissonant bands of color. There's a playful awkwardness to my paintings, as if they're dancing (possibly even tipsy) with two left feet and vertigo. I want viewers to feel that.



Two Left Feet and Vertigo (Diptych), 2016, Acrylic + colored pencil on linen over panels, 10 x 8 inches each

## **Are your works designed and planned out before the work begins, or do you cut straight to applying paint to canvas, and let the patterns develop through process?**

My process involves a bit of both. I'm a planner and I love to make lists, but I can also be very impulsive. Some days, I feel the need to work out a pattern or overall composition or palette out in my sketchbook before moving on to the painting. Other days, I work

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intuitively and directly on the canvas. It's classical versus jazz. It really depends on what mood I'm in as I'm getting ready to start my work day in the studio.

## **Tell us a bit about how you spend your day/studio routine, what is your studio like?**

I'm a creature of habit. I love to make lists. I need a routine otherwise I feel like I can't get anything accomplished. I really think this comes from all those years as an aspiring pianist and the daily routine and discipline of having to practice the piano for hours and hours on end. I often go out for a run in the morning before I head to my studio.. I'll run anywhere from 3 to 6 miles during the week and longer runs on the weekend.

I've found that I tend to work best earlier in the morning. My mind is the clearest in those early hours of the day. My studio is in Clinton Hill, in a huge industrial complex of buildings, located one block away from the Brooklyn Navy Yards. It's conveniently located about 4 blocks from my apartment. I'm very lucky. It's one of the best and most "professional" studios I've had (believe me, I've had many!) in my 16 years living in NY. I moved into it when they were being built out so everything was brand new and is still in great condition.

## **What artwork have you seen recently that has resonated with you?**

My husband and I went on our honeymoon in Italy this past June. We visited Florence, Rome, Naples and Positano. And I would have to say that the Duomo in Florence is still as mind blowing today as it was when I first saw it back in 1998 while studying abroad in Florence. The facade of the Cathedral, the patterning of the marble on the exterior and the scale of it is absolutely and quite literally breathtaking.

## **How do you go about naming your work?**

Titling work can sometimes be a process. I try not to make titles too specific, because I want the viewer to have their own associations in relation to the work. That being said, I borrow titles for my work from song lyrics, or poems, or books I've read. Often times titles will come to me as I'm out on my morning run or from conversations I've overheard. I think those titles are the best ones!

## **What does the future hold for you as an artist? Is there anything new and exciting in the pipeline you would like to tell us about?**

I'm currently one of five artists in residence at the Fire Island Artist Residency in Cherry Grove, NY. It's an amazing and magical residency and the first of it's kind in the US specifically for LGBTQ artists.

I've got a couple group shows coming up in the fall. The first is in NYC at the Bureau of General Services, Queer Division and it's an exhibition of the five artists in residence at the Fire Island Artist Residency in NY.

The second is an exhibition called "Common Ground" curated by Vika Dushkina at Triumph Gallery in Moscow which will eventually make it's way to the US. The details are still being worked out.

Besides these shows, I'll be working on getting my Yearbook project published as a book. So please stay tuned!



Tie Breaker (Diptych), 2015, Acrylic + colored pencil on linen over panels, 12 x 9 inches each