

The Berding Memorandum

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

(front cover)

Searching for Radials, 2016,
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas,
76 x 63 inches

The Berding Memorandum

Thomas Berding | October 15 – November 20, 2016

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY



The Berding Memorandum

I feel there is much work to be made by digging deeper ...

— Thomas Berding, 2016

Since the 1980s, the most challenging aspect of contemporary abstract painting has been to make something that we never anticipated seeing before, which does not resemble another's visual abstract language. Thomas Berding's uniquely distinct paintings overcome this challenge with brio and inventiveness. The lightness of being in his work, the range of forms, contours, edges, saturations and coloring – and the lightness of the spaces in between his network of slashes, swatches, and other painterly exchanges is so navigable for the eye that the paintings are airy, permeable, and most significantly – in enigmatic semiotic terms – written in a language that is all his own.

The thick rulebook from which Berding operates is epistemological, involves diligent archeological excavation, and requires an authoritative, objective approach to the development of the elegant embroidery of his formalistic language. If the approach is objective and studious, the piquancy and experimentation of the invention is subjective. The results of this meticulous, process-based methodology, blended with its novel content, are embodied in the poised virtuosity of his paintings. We perceive an elastic membrane of painterly activity, which resembles the finite metaphors one might need to invent to begin to describe something as inscrutable as

visualization of what string theory might look like. The paintings intrigue because their spatial sophistication is a foil for their apparent casual informality. They poke the viewer, they goad, and they ply their trade – and they are not above pulling the odd sardonic leg. Yet they immediately bristle to attention and we are overtaken by their proximity and propriety, as if we could only ever expect to witness their playfulness – far away from the corner of an eye, or embedded in a blink – because full-on, they snap to their margins with all the wisdom of a mandarin enacting an audacious closing move.

The manual is thick and heavy, yet the paintings possess a sense of urbane buoyancy. The Berding backstory is a lifelong enterprise of labor, diligence, and accrued evidence. And on this particular journey, there were years of layered accumulation, seasons of ideas and paint pressed down like carbon forming into anthracite. Over the last 15 years, the artist has developed a taxonomic sensitivity to what constitutes expedient form and significance. *The Berding Memorandum* was never the rulebook; it is the implicitness of all the stratum of form, ideology and meaning encapsulated, woven and made sentient in the gravitas of his paintings.

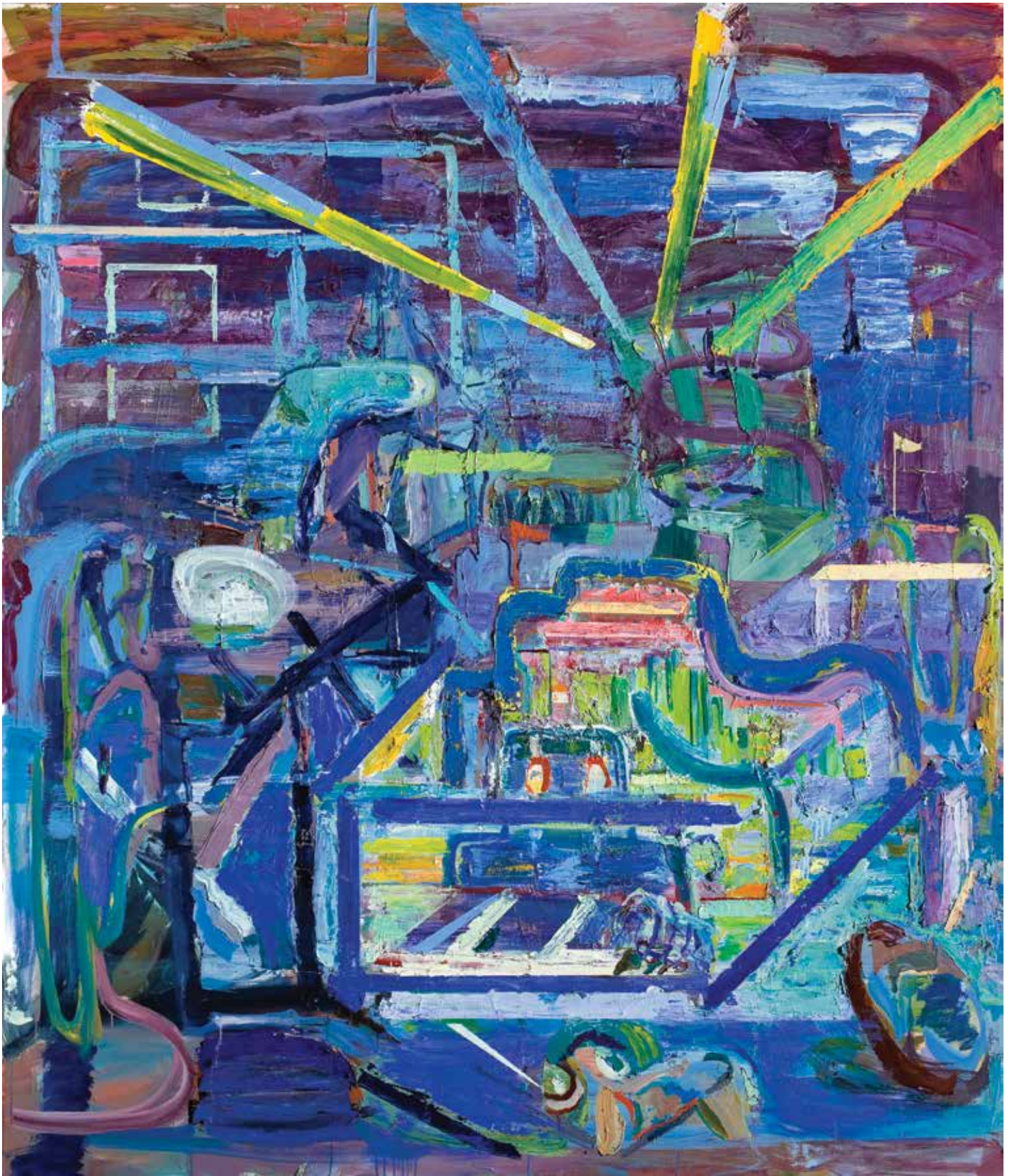
— Dick Goody, October 2016



Transport, 2008

Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches

Jackson National Life Insurance Collection






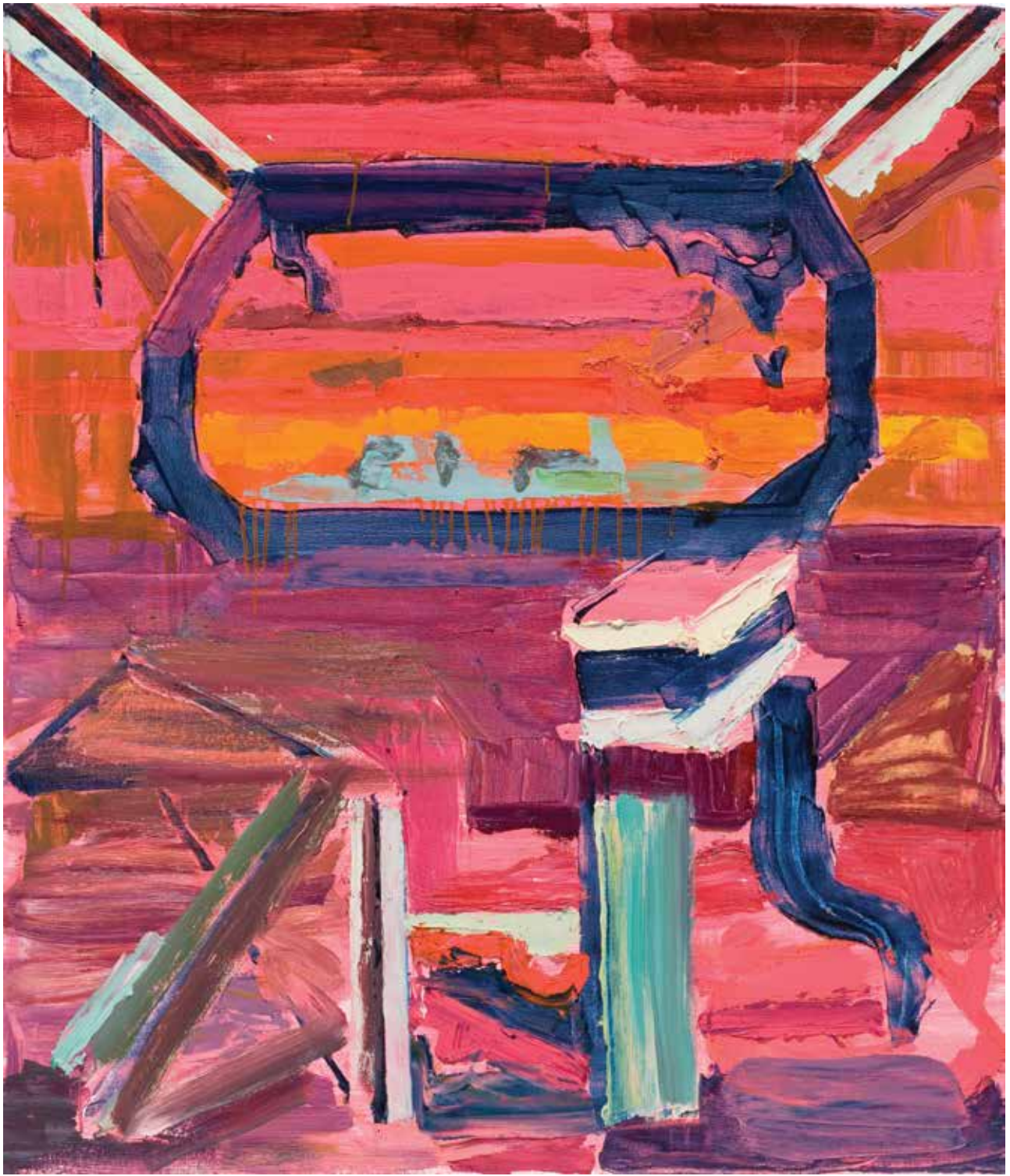
The Lab, 2008, Oil on canvas, 48 x 44 inches




Good Reception, 2008, Oil on canvas, 26 x 24 inches
Greater Lansing Housing Coalition Collection



Sighting, 2008
Oil on canvas, 42 x 36 inches





By Land and By Sea, 2008
Oil on canvas, 70 x 76 inches






Street Side, 2008, Oil on canvas, 26 x 24 inches



Command Tree (Modified), 2013, Oil on canvas, 44 x 48 inches
Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum Collection



Explosion View, 2013
Oil on canvas, 44 x 48 inches






Blue Dish, 2013, Oil on canvas, 48 x 44 inches
PNC Bank Corporate Collection



Light of Day, 2010, Oil on canvas, 44 x 48 inches
American Money Management Collection



Breakage, 2014
Oil on canvas, 70 x 76 inches






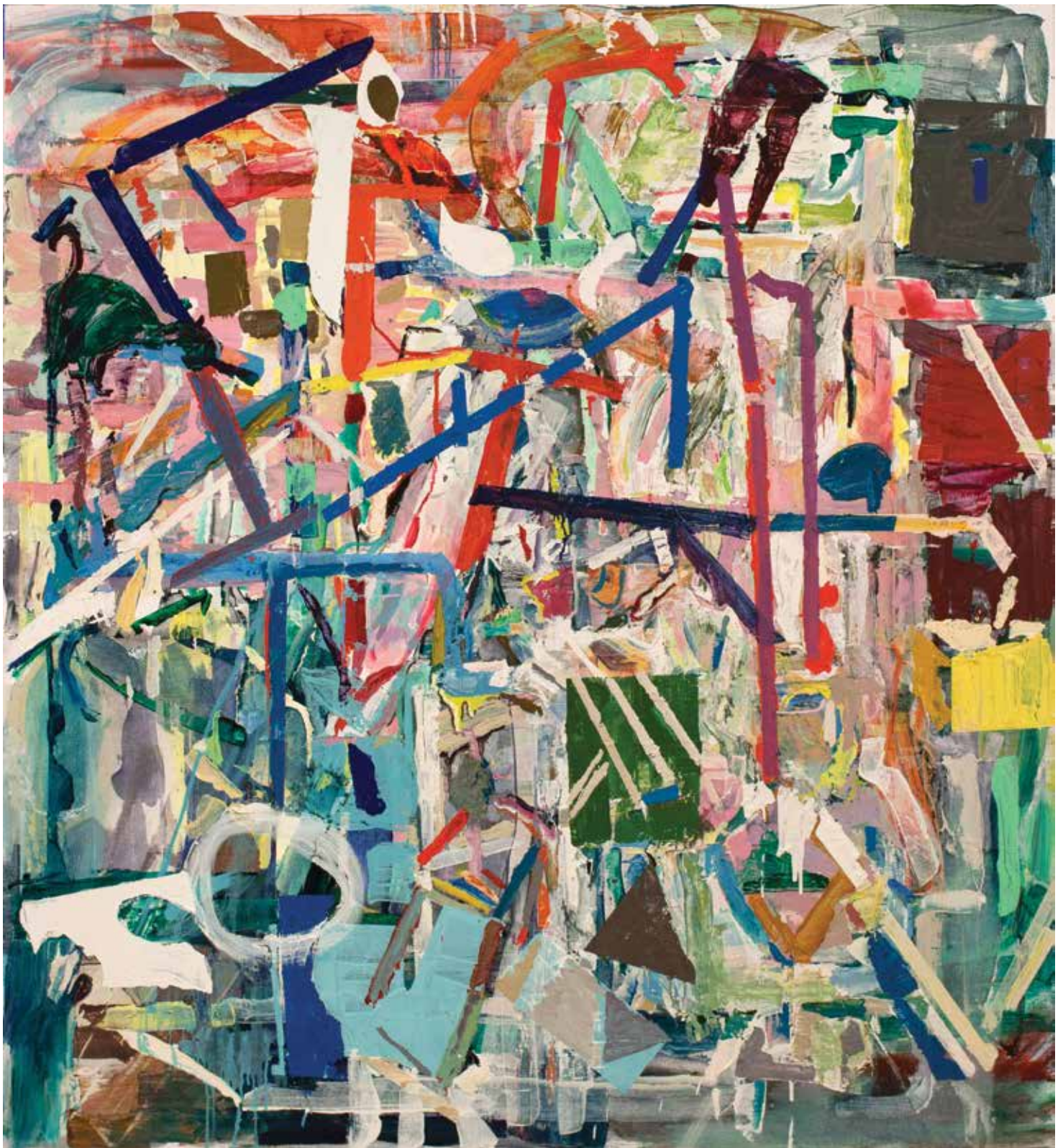
Model Behavior, 2013, Oil on canvas, 16 x 13 inches



Orange Like You, 2014, Oil on canvas, 76 x 70 inches



***Encrypted Self*, 2014**
Oil on canvas, 76 x 70 inches
Detail shown on pages 24-25

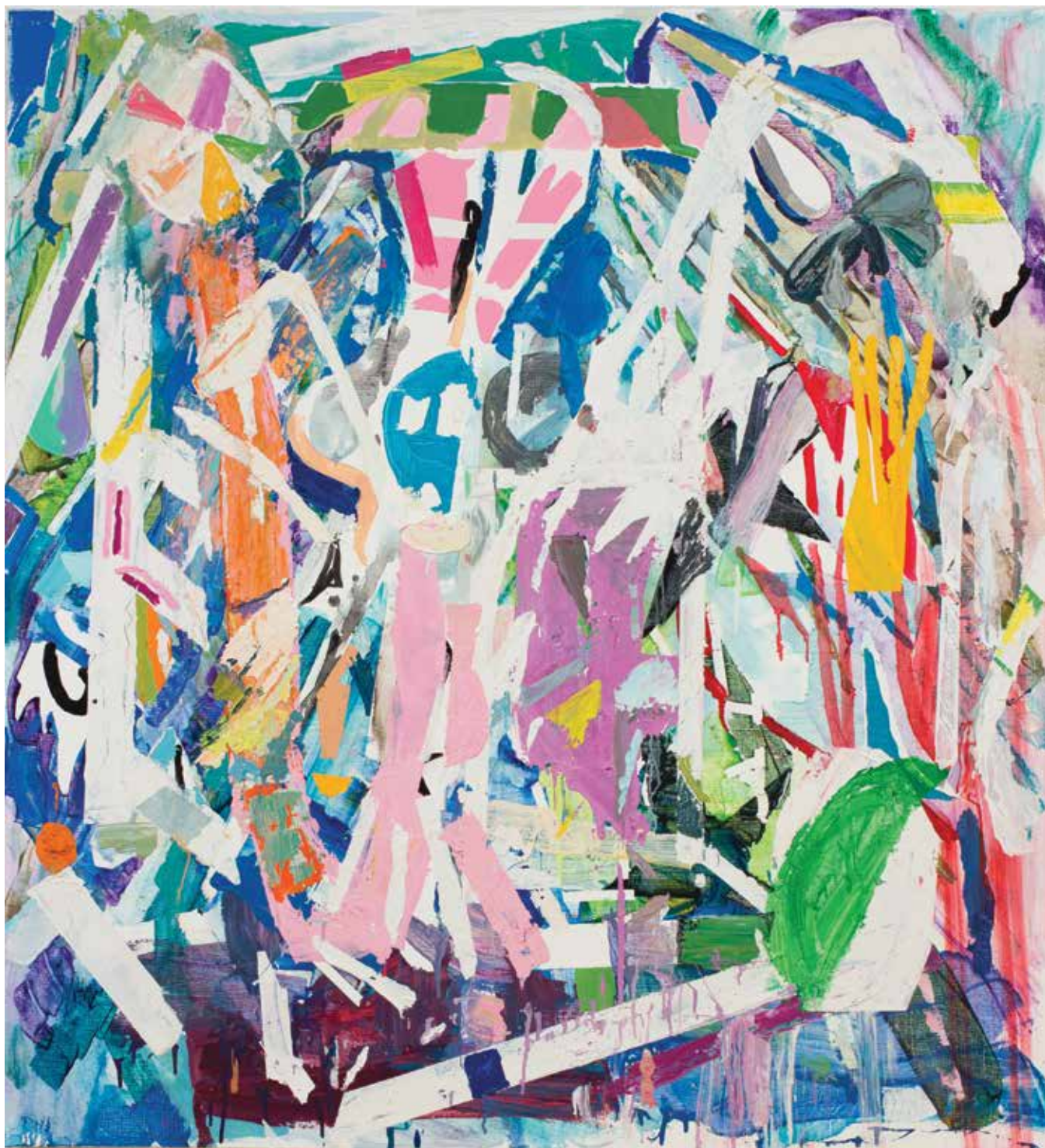









Phantoms and Fragments, 2015
Oil and Flashe on canvas, 48 x 44 inches



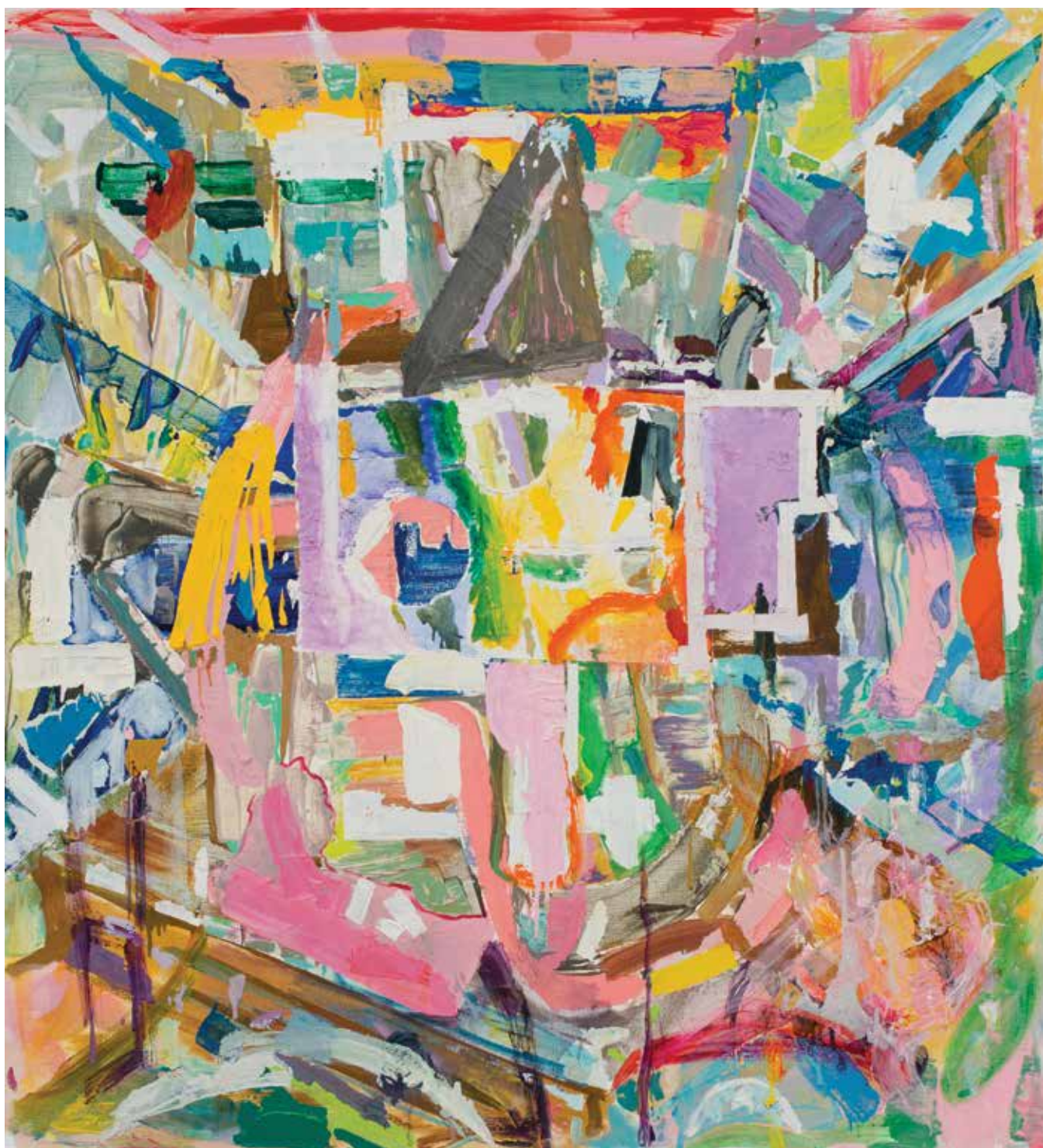



Hacked, 2014
Oil on canvas, 76 x 70 inches






Party Favors, 2015
Oil and Flashe on canvas, 48 x 44 inches





Pie Chart Fanfare, 2015
Oil and Flashe on canvas, 48 x 44 inches





Wheel of Misfortune, 2015
Oil and Flashe on canvas, 48 x 44 inches





Chronic Disassembly No. 18, 2015, Flashe, acrylic, paper, 20 x 14 inches



Chronic Disassembly No. 3, 2015, Flashe, acrylic, paper, 20 x 16 inches



Chronic Disassembly No. 4, 2015, Flashe, acrylic, tape, paper, 20 x 16 inches



Chronic Disassembly No. 7, 2015, Flashe, acrylic, paper, 20 x 16 inches



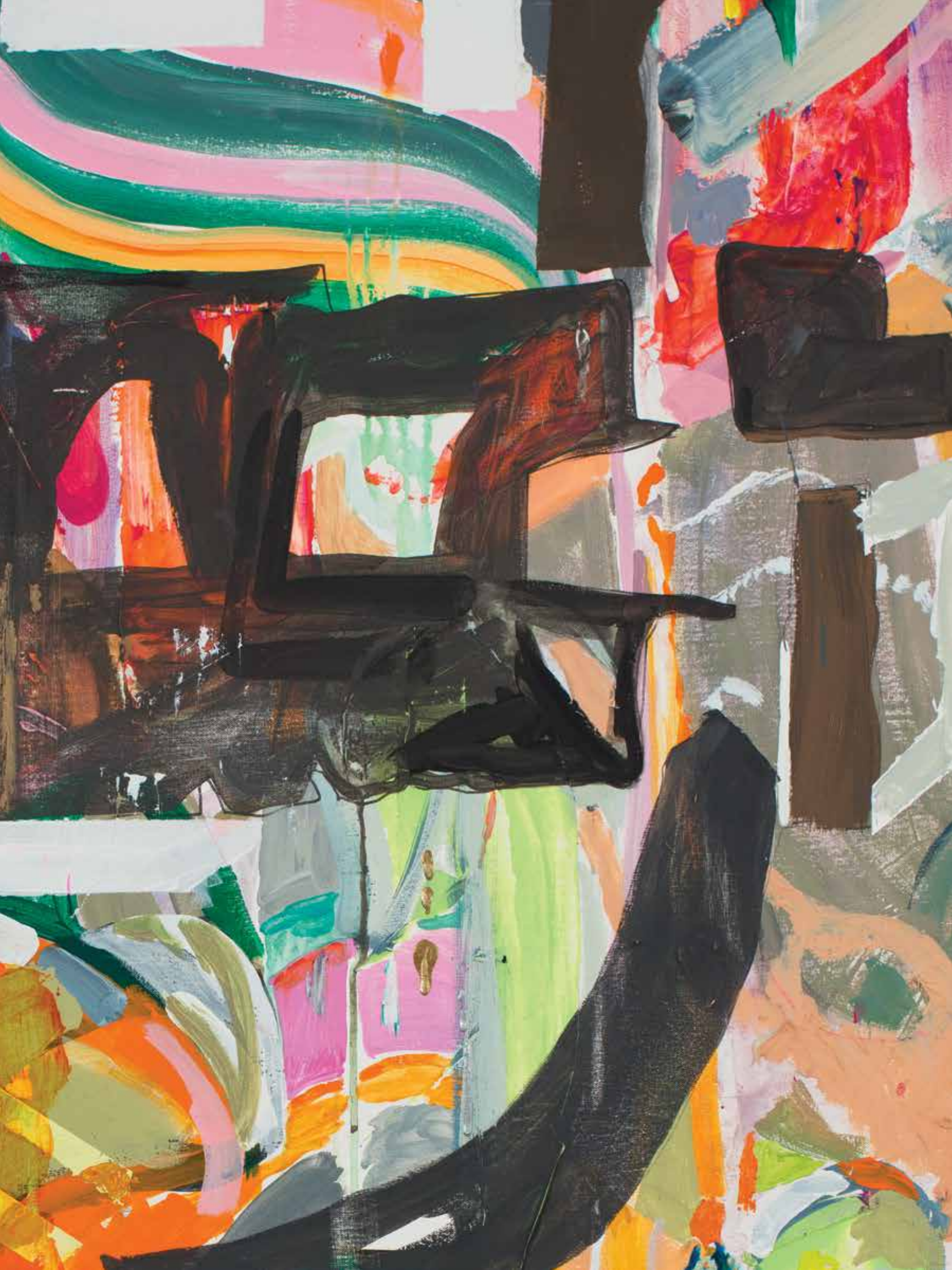
Sunrise Sunset Die Cut, 2016

Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 70 x 62 inches





► *Sunrise Sunset Die Cut* (detail), 2016





Wilt, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Parallel Devices, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Remainder in the Field, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Domain, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



***Lost in Conversion*, 2016**

Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 69 x 62 inches

Detail shown on pages 50-51

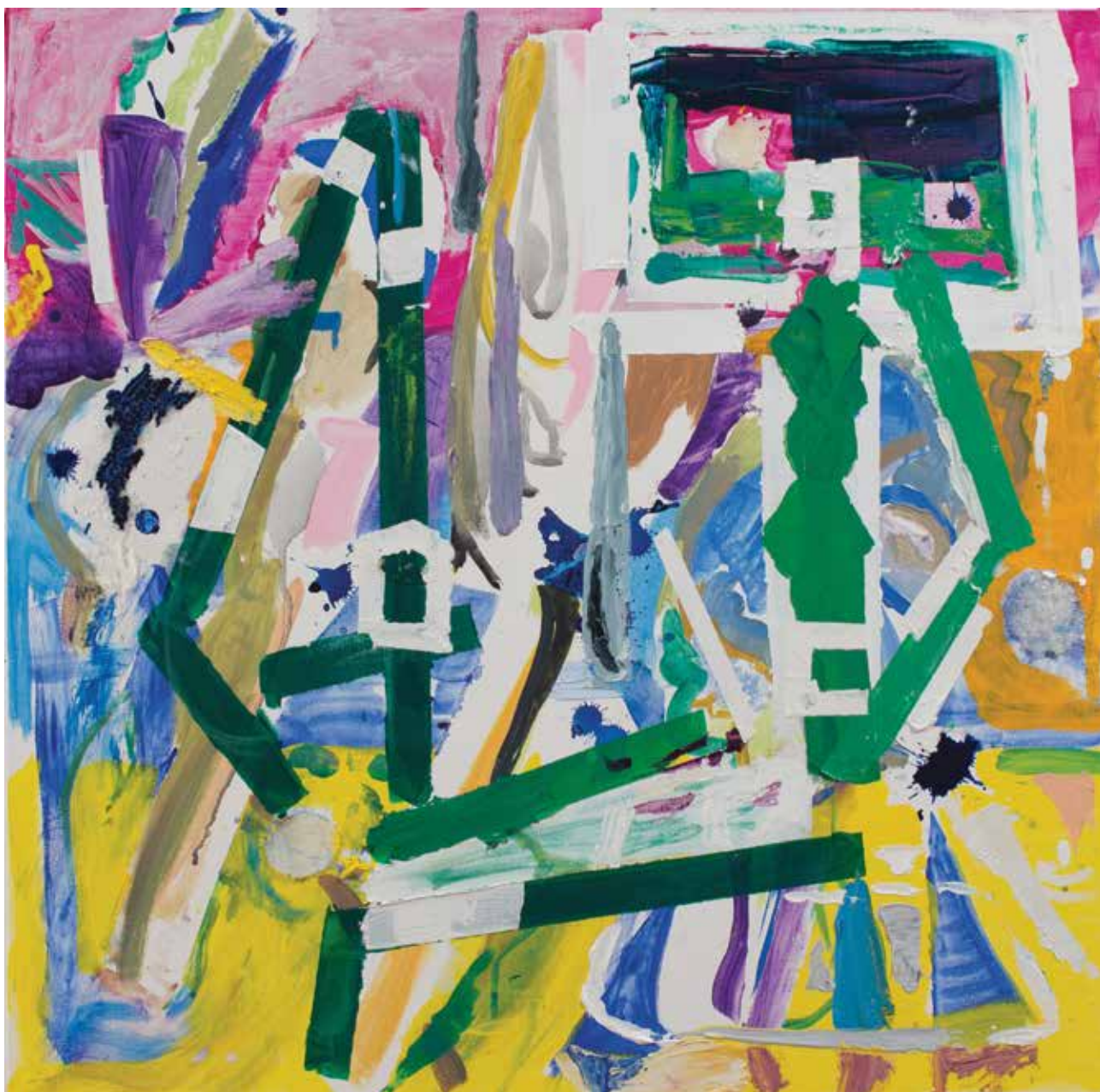








Tumbler, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches
University of Maine Museum of Art Collection

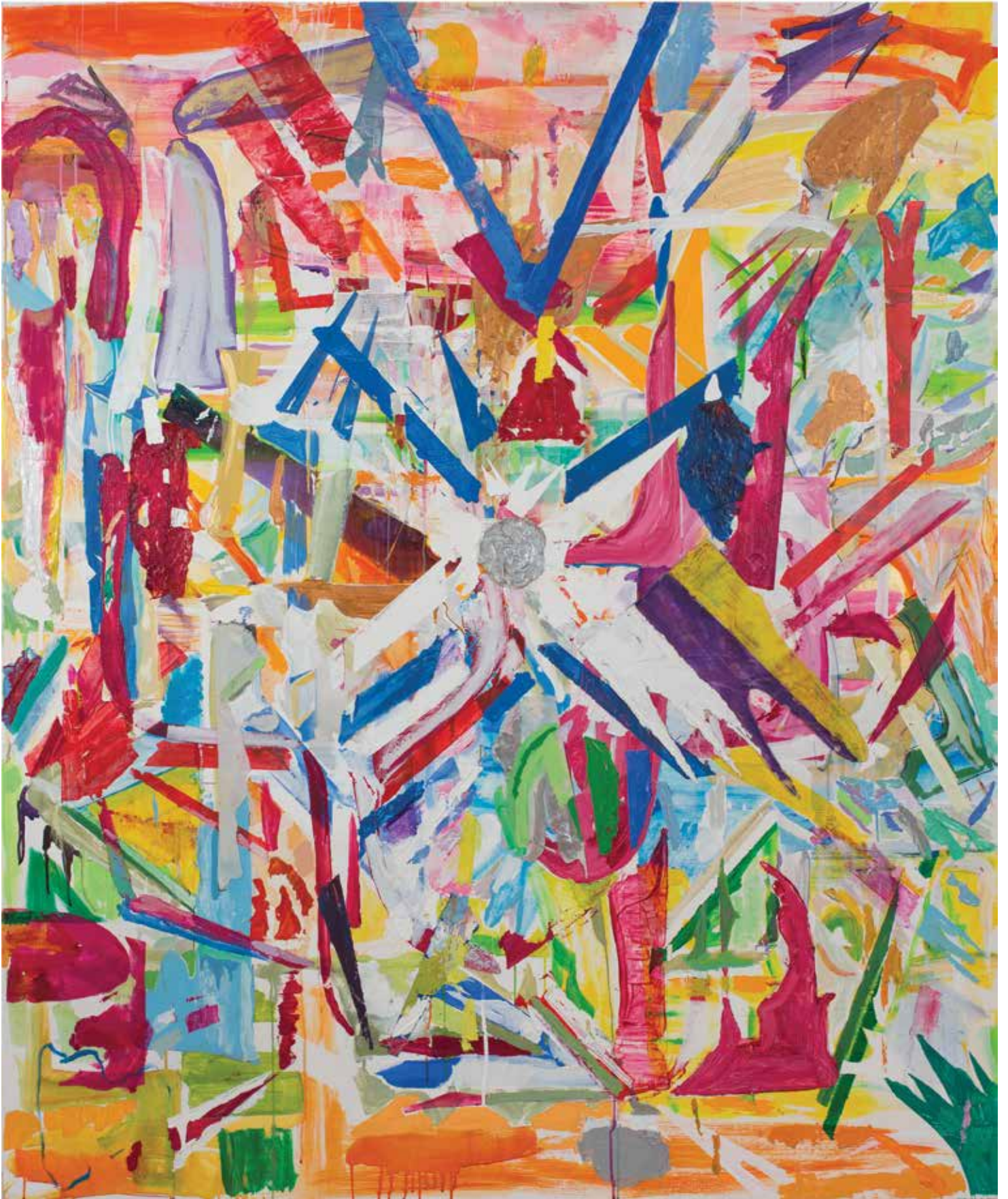


Assembly, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Traveler, 2016

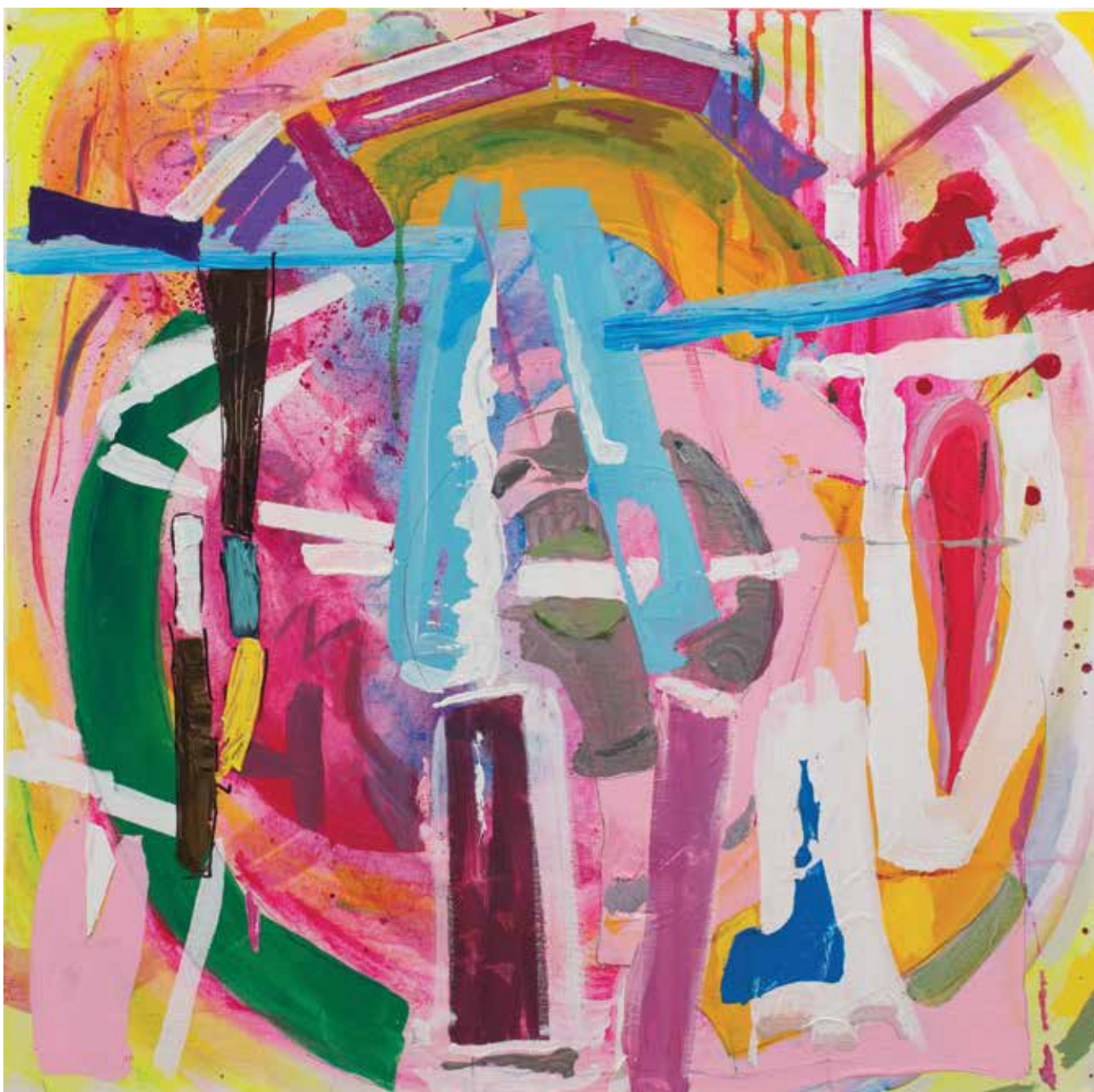
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 76 x 63 inches





► *Traveler* (detail), 2016





Turning Tables, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Sighting II, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



***Surplus Mound*, 2016**

Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 76 x 70 inches






Prism Logic (With Features), 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Scribe, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 24 x 24 inches




Searching for Radials, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 76 x 63 inches



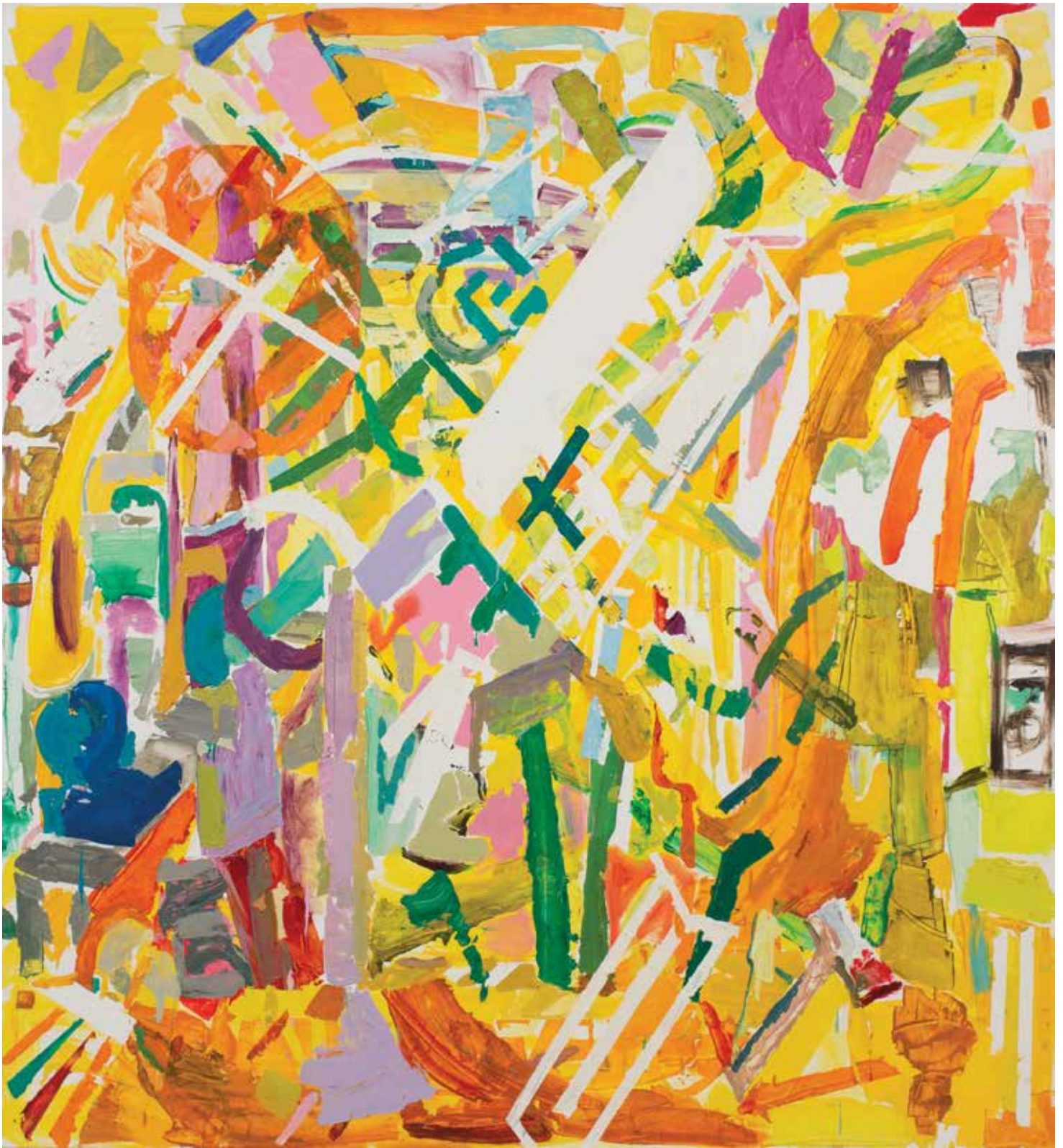


▶ *Searching for Radials* (detail), 2016





Blind Country, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 76 x 63 inches





Fortune Shredder, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 76 x 70 inches





► *Fortune Shredder* (detail), 2016





Lessons in Building No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



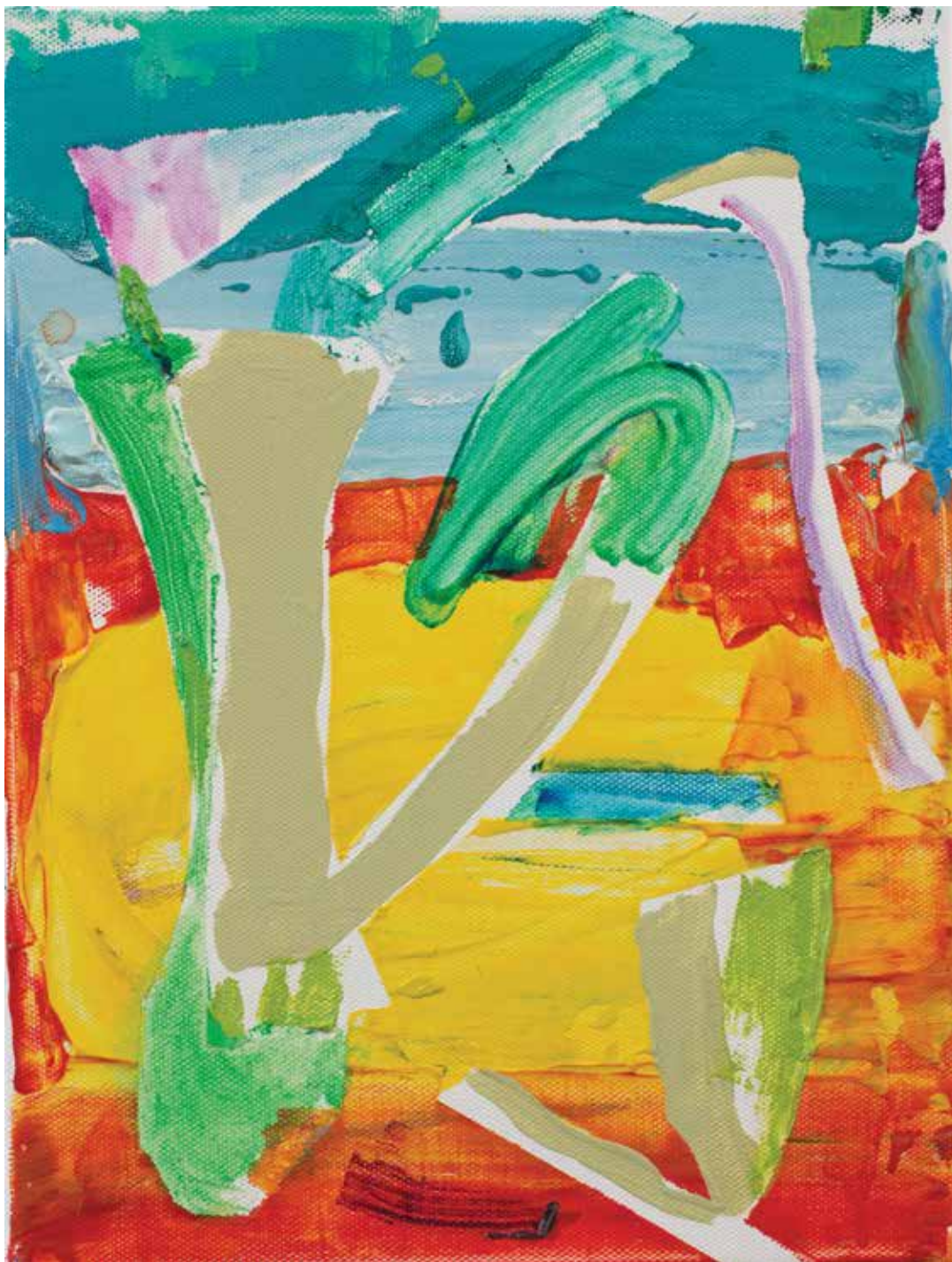
Lessons in Building No. 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 2, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 6, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 8, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 7, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 10, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 11, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 12, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 13, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



Lessons in Building No. 14, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 15, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 16, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 18, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 19, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 21, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 22, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 23, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 24, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 25, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



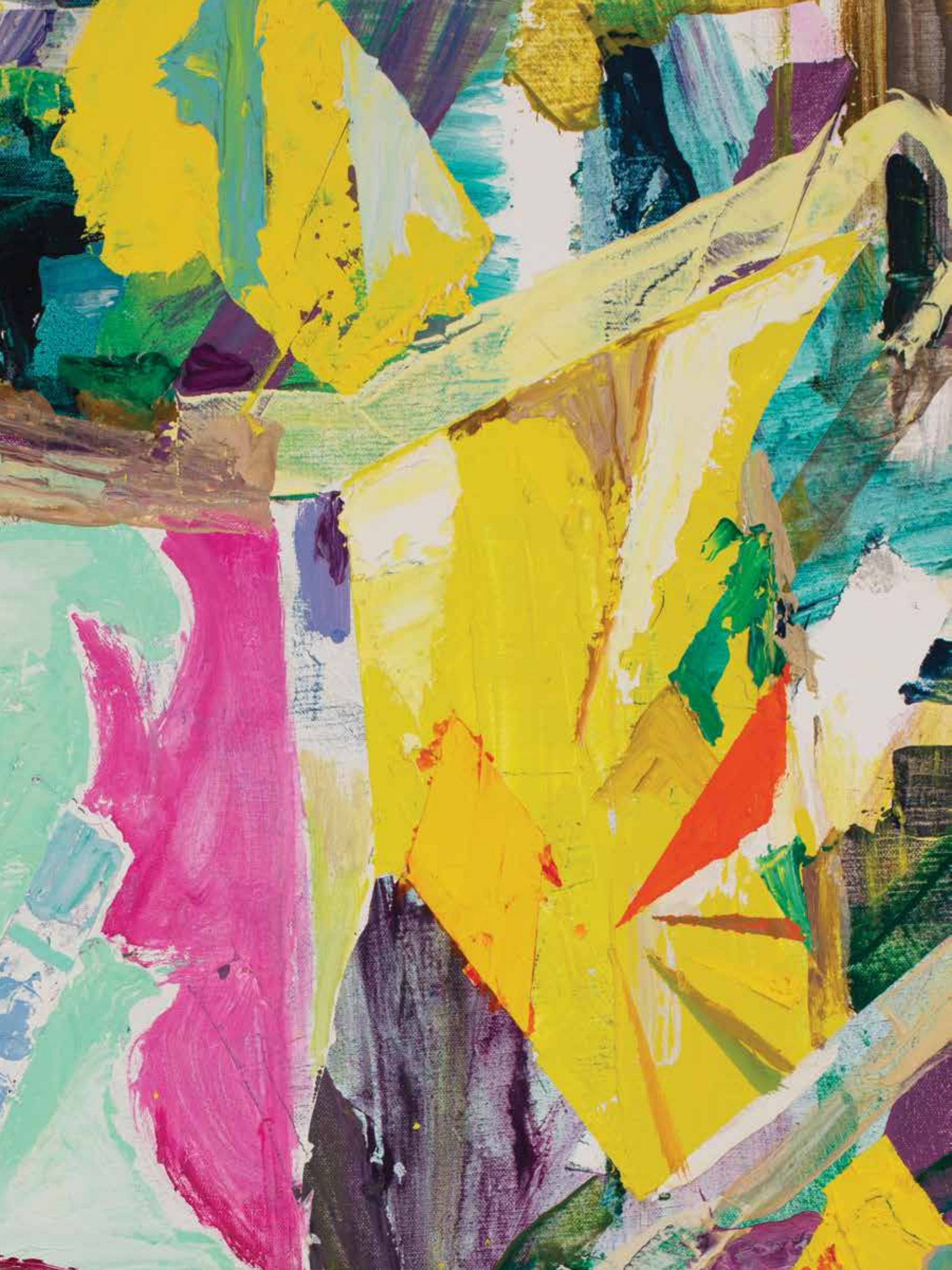
Lessons in Building No. 26, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 28, 2016
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Lessons in Building No. 29, 2016, Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 14 x 11 inches



Thomas Berding: An Interview

The painter and Oakland University Art Gallery Director Dick Goody discuss Berding's early models and influences, the viewer, art books, and an evolving studio process that pivots 'between the known and the unknown.'

Dick Goody: Just to give us some history, what did your paintings look like when you first started out in college, and what was the word on painting at that time?

Thomas Berding: My work as an undergraduate student tended towards invented figuration. Like many young artists, my paintings were made in response to my environment and the works I saw and studied. Looking back, it's clear the figure was really an armature on which I hung the exploration of painting ideas as well as a sense of place, as I had absolutely very little interest in anatomy and the like. I investigated a lot of ways of getting the figurative image into a painting without direct observation. For one series, I rented 35 mm documentary films from the public library. I would project them on a painting surface, stop the film, and frantically sketch the most telling contours of the figures before the film could burn in the heat of the projector bulb. This served as a point of departure for a whole series.

As an undergraduate, the first art history course I took was History of American Art. Early on, I looked at the precisionists and other artists who abstracted from the built environment. This made a strong impact on me as did early modernists like Stuart Davis and Marsden Hartley. I also studied German expressionist painters, mostly Beckmann, and trips to Chicago and New York allowed me to get my first full view of the work of Dubuffet, Pollock, de Kooning, Krasner, and Matta — all of whom knocked me out.

"...it's clear the figure was really an armature on which I hung the exploration of painting ideas... I had absolutely very little interest in anatomy."

I went to Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) for graduate school and my paintings became increasingly process-oriented. Utilizing a more abstract language, I started to further explore the space between representation and abstraction. Much of my focus was about aligning my studio behavior with my vision. To do this I had to challenge certain studio habituations and develop new approaches, though I was not then and still am not, what one might call a systems-based painter. It was at graduate school that critical reading also entered my consciousness. Jean Baudrillard was in the air. Neo-Geometric Conceptualism, which included artists like Peter Halley, Philip Taaffe, and Ross Bleckner, was generating a lot of discussions, as was the work of Schnabel and Salle. Guston had a near-iconic status among painting students then at RISD. He provided a model for how one might bridge abstraction and figuration as well as psychological and sociological content. He broke down walls, it seemed, not as an end in itself, but out of the necessity of his idiosyncratic vision.

DG: When we orient ourselves in front of one of your big paintings from the last five years, there's a supposition that the entry point into the work is not immediately obvious. I like that because it's something of a puzzle and there's going to be some work involved on the part of the viewer. But there is pleasure in this because the paintings themselves are cooperative in the way that a painting by Matisse could be said to be, and yet, of course, the paintings are not actually figurative, but their abstraction is lush and engaging, if a little cagey. This is going to sound odd, but what if we could put one of your paintings on the outside of an interstellar spaceship, and then someone on the other side of the galaxy, at some point, will have to decipher humanity solely on the basis of what this one Tom Berding painting looks like? Because the one thing I feel is intuitively true is that we are looking at devices or a visual version of data or decoy data. So my question is, should we look at abstract painting, or your abstract painting, as something to be categorized, decoded or deconstructed?

TB: Any viewer of my work is actually asked to play a role that is in some ways is akin to the alien in your story. By that, I mean the

paintings do aim to create a new image in the world where one might feel at least in some manner that they are navigating something for the first time. There is an extroverted figuring going on and a constant making and unmaking of various systems of abstraction and fragments of visual culture in the work. The life of these paintings ultimately depends on the ability of the viewer to enter into the decision-making inside a work and to see in accordance with it, not just look at it. This is not an entirely closed system and I expect one may be able to build or infer a larger worldview, for the paintings themselves are but a small corner of a larger picture or field of reference.

While my paintings are not literal translations of the reference material I use, the paintings of the last five years have indeed been made in response to sources like the ones you intuitively feel are in the work. This includes screen-based and two-dimensional schematic constructions that visualize this making and unmaking of the world, such as explosion views common in assembly manuals, flow charts, diagrammatic schemes, encrypted texts, and screen-based symbols, among others. In addition to their form, these sources also have conceptual appeal, including how their already abstract, graphic, and ideogrammatic form symbolizes thought processes or encoded representations that are often further concealed when removed from their original context or when key information is altered.

Along with informing my selection of source materials, these notions of encoding and decoding, and building and disassembly are also at play in my working process. So in the course of painting, I might fluctuate between depicting the disassembly of a certain abstract form to feeling I am disassembling the very space or language of the painting itself.

This complication of abstraction and representation and the handling of abstraction as both a reference and a process provide me a big space to work in. In this material and imaginative wrestling with how things fit together or come apart within the context of the painting, I often reverse-engineer my own thinking and processes. I might invert a form, enlarge or repeat parts, place them in a new context or bring fragments together in new ways. There is a learning inside the paintings that takes place. The interplay between an encoded or encrypted experience and an intelligible one is at the center of the work and I think serves not only as a description of the various subjects evoked by the paintings but of the dynamic within my studio.

Finally, I think it is worth noting that encryption, or the turning of readable text or subject into code, and playing with the idea of

“It is more of an intuitive geography... indicative of other systems or cosmologies.”

“It is hard for me to imagine a landscape not marked or marred by humans. That certainly comes into my work.”

readability and visualization, are deeply embedded in the history of abstraction across various cultures. Also, in our era of mixing and translating systems, customs, and languages, the use of analogy, proxies, and surrogates has arguably never been more prevalent as a way of situating ourselves in the world. With that also comes decoys and masking, halted speech, starts and stops, as well as what's lost, amplified and enacted when put into the language of painting. So, while I can't tell you exactly how a work is to be experienced, I am certainly interested in both the read of forms and the characterization and disruption that materiality provides to such readings.

DG: This list of things like systems, customs, analogy, proxies, surrogates, decoys and so forth — it's really a list of content. It's part of your supply chain, and the way you organize content is in some ways cartographic. How do geography and geometry feature in the work? I ask because a map is an amalgam of signs and sometimes looking at your work, a powerful sense of landscape emerges.

TB: I hope a sense of geography comes through in my work not because it is referenced as a discrete subject, but because my work involves a sense of continual mapping, charting or sorting. It is more of an intuitive geography taking place, where within the paintings' layers and spaces there are attempts to locate and create routes that function not only formally but which are also indicative of other systems or cosmologies.

Growing up in a city, I had very little sense of any landscape not marked by human presence. My first real memories of the landscape were in a few acres of woods near the house I grew up in. It was bordered by a large railroad yard, a dump filled with building materials, and a factory which repaired semi-trucks. It was a scarred space, filled with remnants from and largely bounded by the built environment. It was also a bit magical — untamed and unsupervised. It is hard for me to imagine a landscape not marked or marred by humans. That certainly comes into my work.

DG: We were talking not long ago about the Francis Bacon quote: “You see, painting has now become, or all art has now become completely a game, by which man distracts himself. What is fascinating actually is, that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to become any good at all.” Do you have a similar position and do think that the game is getting more difficult?

TB: To create a new image on its own terms, not simply a representation of something existent, has a difficulty built into it. That said, the age of pluralism also offers unique challenges and possibilities. “What shall I paint?” and “how shall I paint it?” are questions that are much broader in their scope now. Several generations ago in more monolithic cultures and eras, there were dominant narratives and the onus was more on how shared stories were depicted. Painting itself is also situated on a broader spectrum of ways an artist may work today. Visual and material culture also no longer functions as just a backdrop or resource for the artist, but often is front and center in an artist’s conceptual and philosophical gestures and at times even becomes the media. All of this demands a certain level of generosity and a change of expectations on the part of the viewer. This is something Bacon faced in his post-Duchamp lifetime, but it has increased exponentially since. The choices are surely greater as a result, and with that can come paralysis on the part of a maker and overload on the part of a viewer. The “game” is not really a singular affair any more, as it seems there are actually many different games being played simultaneously by artists. So I suspect the real question regarding the increasing difficulty of the game is rooted in the fact that the playing field is not even commonly agreed-to. Like much of our experience, which in many ways is more fluid and boundless than ever as a result of technology, it is also a world that is suspect to being more self-curated, filled with more games, willfully blind to each other.

“The “game” is not really a singular affair any more, as it seems there are actually many different games being played simultaneously by artists.”

DG: How has the history of painting inserted itself into your painting practice?

TB: Like many, I was largely educated with a determinist view of art history where modernism was viewed as a reductive and essentialist quest for pure form, with postmodernism being a response or corrective to that perspective. There were a lot of territories implicitly made off-limits to artists by these meta-narratives. However, I have always been much more interested in the complicating aspects of those storylines, including the interplay between classifying systems and individual behaviors, and the conflation of various systems inside a painting, including abstraction and representation. Like many painters working today, my practice has (to borrow Du Bois’ term) a “double consciousness” built into it. For abstraction functions not just as an operative language, but if one is conscious of its history and the

abundance of abstract signifiers one confronts daily, the abstract also exists as an image, a reference. There are many views of abstraction one works with as a painter, including those which draw from contemporary visual culture and those which play with more widely held art historical narratives. One might also say history is always plural.

Of course, charting influence, history and intention is complex, whether on a macro or individual level. Consciously or not, we often apply the insights that hindsight (or history) affords us and falsely, even unconsciously, ascribe those insights to the artist, creating a false perception that the artist knew where they were headed all along. It is a transposition of the present on the past, a notion deeply embedded in the construction of history. Among the most important things I realized when I was a student was that while knowledge of critical models and historical narratives is invaluable as a general orienting device, building specific creative working methodologies which animate conversations in the studio and stir one’s abilities to bring in a range of influences is crucial. Ultimately, artists work where they can and larger narratives can take one only so far.

DG: Narratives, yes, we all live within the bounds of a constructed narrative. How does narrative play out in your work?

TB: In general, the imagination has a way of reshuffling the categorical and even the sequence of influences that might be part of one’s own narrative construct. In my studio, a certain work by de Kooning may be present in my thinking at the same time as explosion views of an industrial part or a wiring diagram from a ’75 Chevy Camaro. There is typically not an order to their existence per se, but rather a co-mingling. That is what I try to be true to – locating myself through a comparison to other features in the world and visual culture. On an individual level, the act of making seems to be much more an act of poetic echolocation than an authoritative declaration or imaging of something preconceived. If there is any narrative the paintings spring from or suggest, it is this tale of the chronic making and unmaking of the world in the face of the fragmented sources one has to work with, including art history itself.

“...de Kooning may be present in my thinking at the same time as explosion views of an industrial part or a wiring diagram from a ’75 Chevy Camaro.”

DG: I tend to think that an artist's biography is a good way to begin to understand the work, but I couldn't, when looking at your work, figure out where your story fit in until you said that growing up you worked in the family laundry business, and then something clicked. The paintings are about labor, about effort and work; is that true?

TB: As a child, the family's laundry business was my first introduction to the world beyond school. The repetitious quality of the work, the industry of the operation, the various assembly-line systems in play, and overall character of the environment made a lasting impression. I was aware I was involved in a larger cycle of life and commerce, something elemental and very physical. In the face of seemingly endless work, we fought boredom with acts of defiance, imagination, and humor; a very working-class existence.

While locating direct equivalencies between working at the laundry and my current work are difficult for me to establish, the paintings are the result of an "open" painting process in which many things can happen in the course of working a painting — including nothing at all. This is truly privileging the pivotal role work plays as a generative force, not just as a means to articulating something already known. Labor and concept exist in such a way that they connect, play, and sometimes battle in the same space. The working of the painting seems in some self-reflexive way to always be a subject.

DG: Labor is a given. It's implementation. It's necessary. But how necessary is concept? I think the most exciting thing about being an artist is the discovery that's involved. You balance discovery with the implementation. Conceptuality wasn't a word that was used before a certain time in the middle of the twentieth century, at least that's my view. Could you envision painting as being non-conceptual?

[There is a] "useful quote from Kant... It goes something like, "thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

TB: For many years, tucked in the corner of my studio where I pin up information on vendors, supply lists, and other information useful in running a studio, hung an equally useful quote from Kant on an index card largely faded by the sun. It goes something like, "thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." While the quote floats free from its original context, I reference it because it has been a guiding mantra for years and may also be the most direct way of addressing your question. The question you pose has a postmodernist dialectical quality built into it, which for the most part is not something my practice is built on, for it always seemed to close down what are much more interesting questions to me as a maker, including how the embodied experience of making interplays with the

reflective and projective nature of the intellect. What is perhaps a more approachable subtext of your question is the relative position of concept to the experience of the art object, the relationship between form and concept inside making, and whether concept is the master of form.

As an artist, both too much and not enough thinking in preparation for painting can get in the way of discovery. For me, much of the sourcing and specific conceptualization happens in response to actions inside a painting and I need to leave room for that to occur. Inside a work, I frequently use disruptive strategies if a painting settles too early into a kind of formulaic logic. In this way, there is a decidedly performative character to the way I conceive of the whole activity of painting.

The discussion between pure form or pure concept thus seems like a dead end, but I do appreciate and understand the question's reference in a certain way. When I came of age as an artist, the dominant critical theory was built on interrogating the notion of originality to the point that simply working in the media of painting ordained one as marginal, if not delusional. The critical gesture at the center of such a formulation was actually an a priori dismissal of what might be possible in experience and the creation of rigid equivalencies between inert materials and belief systems. Painting got it bad. It was also a formulation which in many ways was just as essentialist in its ideological construction as those a generation before which championed pure form. It surely seemed to be a case of "meet the new boss, same as the old boss" in that any approach which saw only pure form or pure concept seemed to neglect the most compelling and paradoxical aspects of the studio and viewing experience.

DG: One thing that strikes me about your paintings is that there is something earnest going on — in the sense that the modernist tradition tends to be serious and about being serious — especially in your early work. But in your paintings from the last few years, there's this other thing going on, too. When I use the word 'decoy' to describe some of the forms you employ, I use it because there are some blind alleys, some false starts, some sleights of hand, and all of this has a bite to it. Could we agree that your work is not academic (if it ever was) and that there is a sardonic edge to it?

TB: For me, academic implies the paintings relate to concept or history in a way that supposes a fixed body of knowledge, clear methodologies, and expected outcomes. Such relationships are in direct conflict with how I work and conceive of painting. I have found that a vitality results when there is a pivoting between the known and unknown, and a process of doing and undoing. As for my earnestness, it lies in my appreciation for the role labor plays in my studio and a deep respect for the modernist project which was largely that of artists looking to question and extend the scope of painting and deconstruct the mechanics of language itself. This included looking beyond optical representation as a focus and examining the function art played in society. At the same time, the years in which I grew up and began to work as an artist were the beginning of the postmodern period and brimful with artists using ironic tropes where mediated culture was the

dominant informant and modernism was already being termed “the failed project.” Part of what you call a sardonic edge is really, I think, a knowingness inside the work of how it might be viewed, especially in response to its borrowings from expressionist and abstract painting histories. It is really a wink to the viewer and the first viewer is, of course, oneself. In a way, the paintings are filled with various “notes to self” inside their making. It is not a put-on, but an authentic shift in voice, probably revealing that though I am a great fan of many modernists I am, at the same time, aware of my critical distance from their project. It is about finding poetry in the interplay between this earnestness and distance and results in what I can only call an ‘impure’ approach. So ultimately, one might surmise, my earnestness lies in the belief that I can customize my language without having to swallow whole the ideologies that shaped either the modernist or postmodernist periods. In this way, painting is not an “either-or” proposition. Rather, it is dialogical in its nature, aiming to picture something not quite settled.

DG: When you say not quite settled that’s interesting because your early work looks completely settled, i.e., as we discussed once, the objects in these paintings feel like they’re “stuck in the mud.” How did move from that level of certainty, or if not certainty that sense of incarceration, to this less-settled, freer stance, which frankly possesses a precocious optimism – kind of like the older you get, the younger you get?

TB: Part of what your observation recognizes in the work is surely something that has come from many years of working. It is learning to accept that if I see or feel something in the studio, someone else might as well. In our age, that could very well be termed optimistic, or at least hopeful.

In regard to the changes in my work over time, I would offer that the thinking inside those early works is now being worn on the outside. Those earlier works were involved in the constant burial and retrieval of forms. As such, the paintings went through many phases which are now entombed inside the paintings, some of which actually hint at the work I am now making. It is not just where the earlier works ended up, but the thinking inside of them that was important.

I have always been interested in the depictive and enactive aspects of painting. How this interest manifested itself started to change around 2006. This is when I began what became the Future Present series. In this period, I started to look at how I might bring a different temporal character and range of surfaces into the paintings. I began by examining my own studio process and came to develop approaches where early moves in a painting could also be visible in the final picture. At around this time, I also began to harvest more images from the internet and started to further explore the idea of the post-industrial landscape. This led to using a more saturated, nearly toxic color palette, and a greater use of schematic and geometric forms. The use of more controlled edges and a heightened use of flat color was certainly a shift away from the embedded surface and organic character that had dominated previous work. The work’s implied tense

changed as a result, and from there new ideas about schematic and diagrammatic representation started to make their way in.

DG: What sort of books excite you in the context of painting?

TB: I tend to read in fragments, bits and pieces, and jump around quite a bit. As far as art writing, I am interested in critical writing which unpacks the experience of painting and offers a skillful interpretation of works and histories. Of contemporary writers, Richard Schiff writes in a way that really opens the encounter with artworks and what is revealed through that. The writings of Arthur Danto have a clarity and speculative quality that I greatly appreciate and at times take issue with. Thomas McEvilley’s writings have a similar lucidity and his book *Art and Discontent* poses critical questions about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Barry Schwabsky, Raphael Rubenstein, and Katy Siegel are all contemporary writers and critics who also get to some meta-questions in deft and readable fashion. Finally, I find interviews with and writings by certain artists (whatever their media) can often afford insight typically not available from other perspectives.

I must also confess, I am also interested in how non-art writing is a resource and often think about how various kinds of text map onto the work. This can range from symbols on a keyboard to assembly instructions on putting together a mechanical part to a book I may be reading on technology and the workings of the brain. The transferring of one language mode to another can help me re-frame a problem and activate a response inside a painting. Some are surprised by this, but like many artists, I am often looking for a way to reset my approach and find a fresh way to come at this thing, this new sensation one is creating.

DG: What’s next for you?

TB: I feel there is much work to be made by digging deeper in the spot I now occupy. In the last several months I began a new series of large paintings, which is pushing the range of material and symbols in the work. I am also always collecting and sorting new source materials. Like any artist, one just hopes one knows when to extend a conversation in the studio and when to shorten it. In general, I am more tuned in to reacting to events, albeit ones that I have staged, than forecasting futures.

“In general, I am more tuned in to reacting to events, albeit ones that I have staged, than forecasting futures.”



The Berding Memorandum

Thomas Berding

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Biography

Thomas Berding was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and received a Bachelor of Arts from Xavier University and a Master of Fine Arts from Rhode Island School of Design. Berding's paintings have been recognized with awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and NEA/Mid America Arts Alliance. His work has been the subject of recent solo exhibitions at the University of Maine Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, and The Painting Center in New York. Over his career, he has exhibited his work at many venues, including the David Klein Gallery, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Rochester Institute of Technology, Indiana University, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Savannah College of Art and Design, and Rhode Island School of Design Museum, among many others. Thomas Berding currently lives and works in East Lansing, Michigan, where he is Professor of Studio Art at Michigan State University.

The Berding Memorandum

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