



# WHY PATTERNS?

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19/10 - 18/11/2018

Curated and text by Martyn Simpson and David R Watson

**No 20 Arts**  
20 Cross Street  
London N1 2BG

### Cover front and back:

Biggs & Collings,

**Ten Curtains of Fine Twined Linen 3** (2018), Oil on canvas, 90 x 100 cm.

Emma Biggs & Matthew Collings

Noel Forster

Michael Kidner

Richard Kirwan

Anna Mossman

Márton Nemes

Sachiyo Nishimura

Brigitte Parusel

Charley Peters

Michal Raz

Martyn Simpson

Caroline Streck

Daniel Sturgis

David R Watson

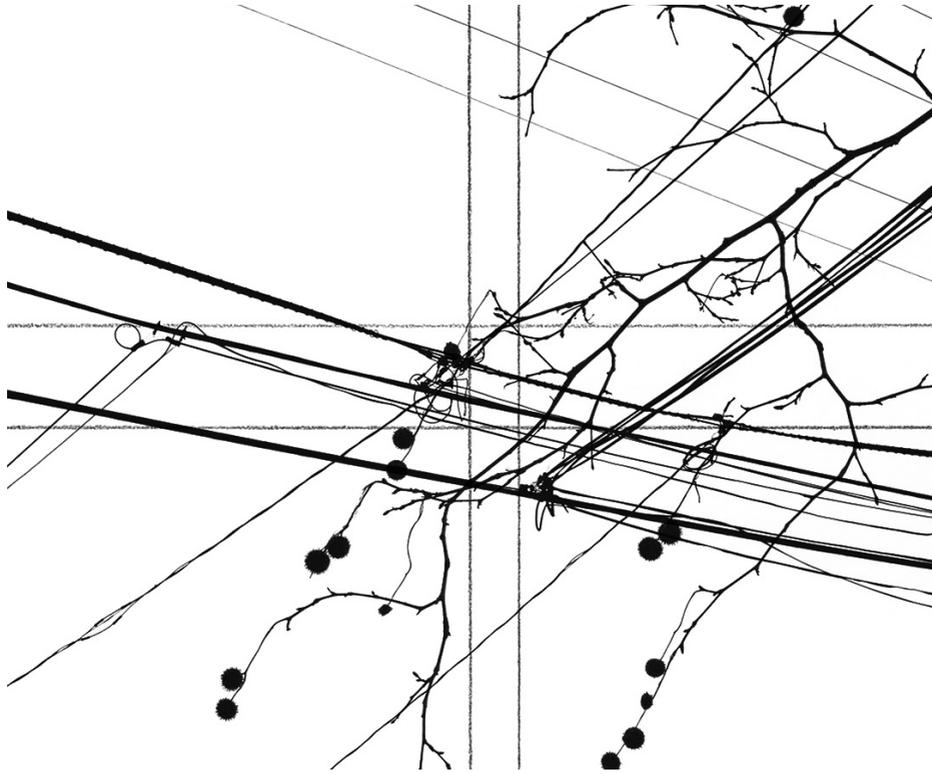
# WHY PATTERNS?

## **The re-emergence of pattern in current painting, photography and sculpture**

Neuroscience and cognitive psychology tell us that we are 'pattern seeking animals'<sup>1</sup>, that pattern is what we use to order and make sense of the world; it is pre-linguistic, hardwired and fundamental. As children we are taught through repetition and pattern, which aids recall but, just as crucially, engenders delight. It follows that, if we are hardwired to find patterns, we are also adept at making patterns, that creating order satisfies us - gives us pleasure. If we respond strongly to pattern, craving repetition and order, there is nevertheless a fine line to be negotiated; simple repetition rarely satisfies us any more than does total randomness. Delight, it is said, is found somewhere between boredom and confusion and all the artists here flirt with those conditions, each investing pattern with their own quirks and obsessions, enjoying confusion and overload; kitsch and camp; austerity and blankness; pleasure and irritation.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Shermer, 2000



Sachiyo Nishimura,  
Detail of **B-W Series (2)** (2018), Giclée print photograph, 31 x 33 cm.

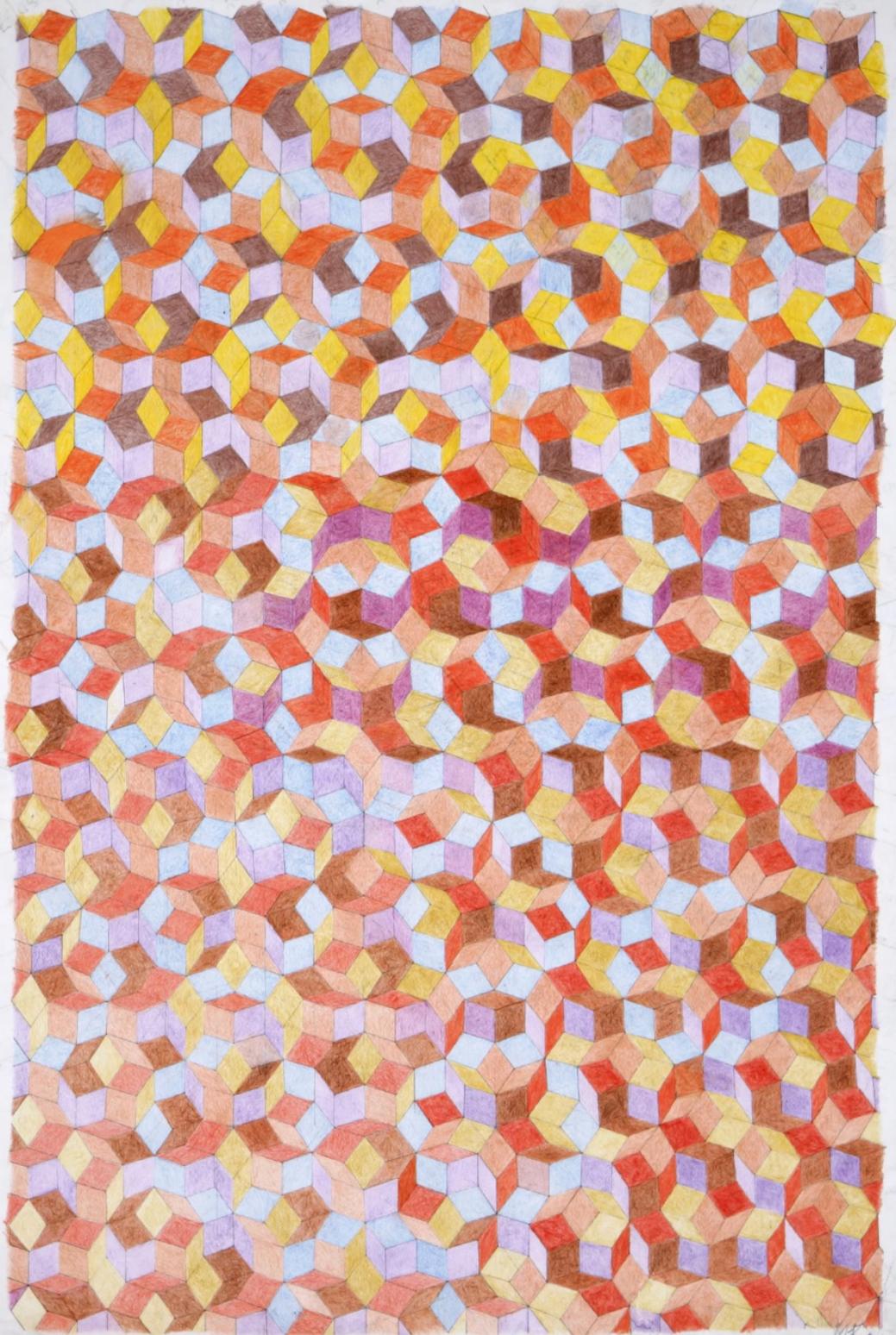
“Why Patterns?” asked Morton Feldman in the title of his 1978 composition for Flute, Percussion and Piano. He gave some sort of an answer when he observed that: “The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organisational procedure more advantageous than another, perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others.”<sup>2</sup> For Feldman pattern was a non-hierarchical way of making music. But just like the artists in this exhibition he did not simply use pattern as a palliative, he used it to stretch our ideas, risking incoherence with extremely slow tempi as well as testing the limits of his audience with near silent pieces that lasted up to six hours.

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<sup>2</sup> Morton Feldman: Essays, ed. W. Zimmermann (Cologne, 1985)

Something else that is strikingly contemporary about Feldman is the way his music exists in a temporal space separate from the real world, much as techno and other dance forms strive to. Time in Feldman’s later music does not move forward the way it does in everyday life; his music does not go anywhere (at least not in the sense that a symphony or sonata is dialectical, or a jazz improvisation moves from the simple statement of a melody to increasing complexity), it does not resolve itself. In the visual arts pattern works in the same way, covering a surface with a perpetual ‘now’, that does not lead into the pictorial space, nor imply anything outside its bounds. Pattern does not resolve itself, offers no final meaning or narrative, it simply continues to the bounds of a container that is essentially arbitrary. Patterns happen (quite literally) on the surface of things denying “depth” in both the philosophical and physical sense, which is, perhaps, why pattern (through its association with decoration) got such short shrift from high modernist theorists. In one sense then pattern is the perpetual contemporary as well as the immemorial historical; whilst there have been cultures that do not make pictures, there have none that do not make patterns.

For Feldman pattern was both a sensual and an intellectual construct and so it is for the artists in this show; for some pattern is an overt subject of their work, for others it is an emergent property that results from their practice, the pattern being as much in the process as the artefact produced. In other words: some are pattern seekers; some are pattern makers.



### Pattern Makers: systems, objective procedures and obsessions

Underlying the work of several of the artists and exemplified in the work of the under-appreciated British OP artist **Michael Kidner** (1917-2009), is the importance of systems and pre-determined procedures. Often the artist takes a structural principle and explores it through variations and within pre-set limitations. They do not make decisions so much as run experiments in which the process determines the outcomes free from aesthetic choices. This quasi rational approach appears to have mathematics and a certain logical positivism at its root, but it might also point to irrational obsession: after all the systems themselves are arbitrary in the strictest sense. One is reminded of the behaviour of characters in Beckett's plays who cling desperately to meaningless repeated activities in the face of existential emptiness. It is interesting to note that Beckett collaborated with Morton Feldman and is even the title of one of the composer's later pieces: "For Samuel Beckett".

The 1960s and 70s were a heyday for systems aesthetics and Kidner was one of its earliest and most consistent exponents, working at the interface of optical effect and systemic structure. His interest in mathematics and chaos theory, for example, underpinned works that combined procedural rigour with great sensuousness of outcome.

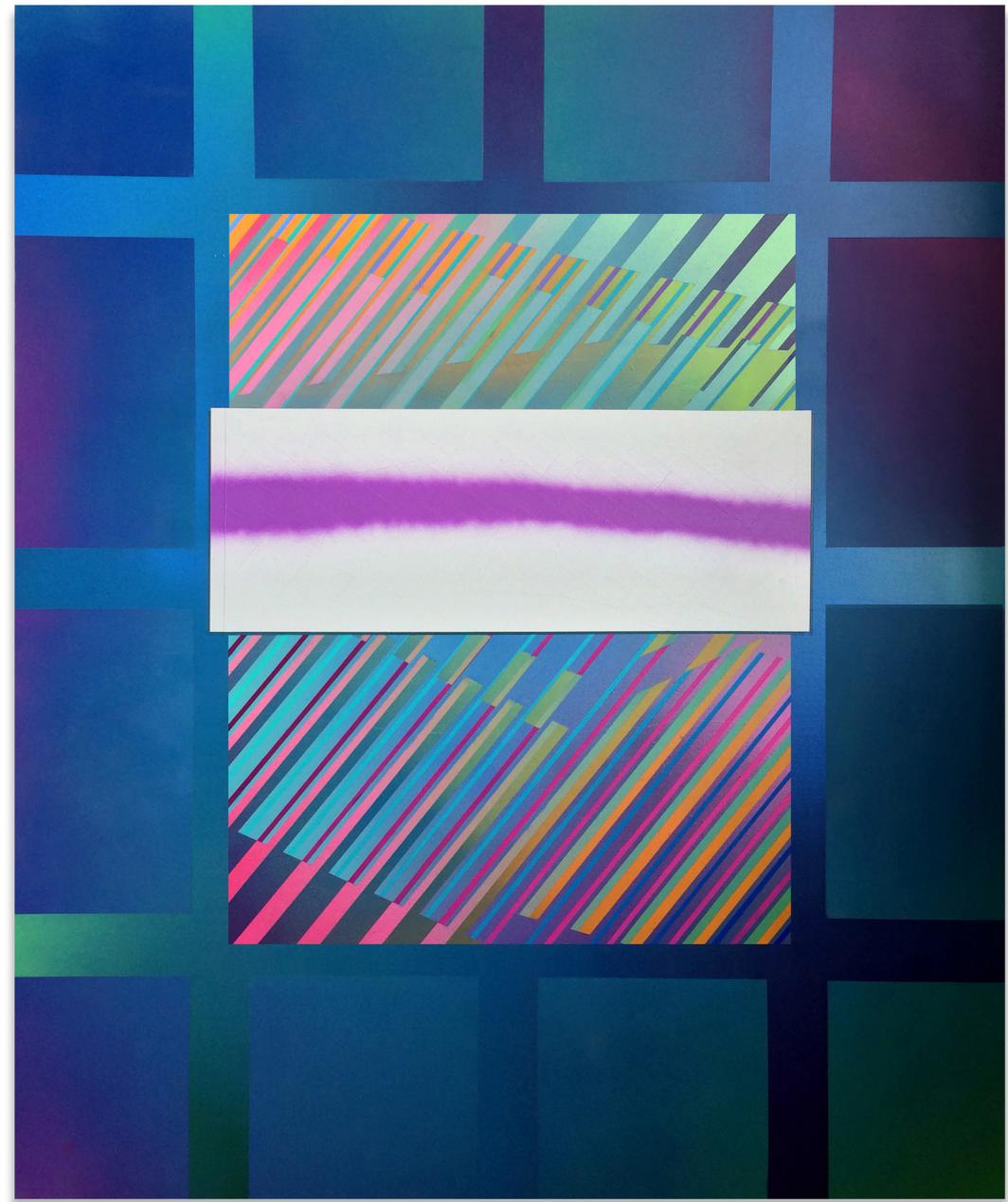
Michael Kidner,  
**Bubbles** (2004), Mixed media on paper, 84.5 x 59 cm.  
© Estate of Michael Kidner, courtesy Flowers Gallery, London & New York.



Such an approach is followed by **Anna Mossman** whose drawings develop in groups over an extended period. Underlying grids are hand drawn, creating structures that are systematic and measured, but also subject to human error and the inconsistencies of the materials employed. When mistakes occur, they create a disrupted pattern; the eye scans and occasionally alights on these moments of disturbance. Thus, her works are anchored in a craft tradition that separates them from, for example, the precision of computer-generated images to which they might bear superficial resemblance. The works shown in this exhibition use repeated diagonal structures set within a square to support layers of very dilute pigment built up over a period of time.

At first sight, **Charley Peters's** paintings also appear to be informed by a digital sensibility, yet they remain inherently painterly. Suggesting the modelling of planes and structures in digital rendering, the works play with the optical principles such as directional light and the faceting of surfaces and forms of non-specific objects and spaces. The compositions are both legible and inscrutable; using devices such as trompe l'oeil and the regularities of perspective to achieve an illusion of nothing in particular.

Previous page:  
Anna Mossman,  
**IL12** (2015), Watercolour and pencil on paper, 56 x 77 cm.



Charley Peters,  
**WYSIWYG** (2017), Acrylic and spray paint on panel, 100 x 120 cm.



**Caroline Streck** works with starting points such as grids, stripes and chevrons - referencing architectural and urban environments - but employs a more obviously improvisatory idiom, where the looseness of the brushstrokes narrates the making of the painting and its struggle to hold itself together. Motifs are overwritten in a kind of argument between minimalism, op-art and pop, but the resultant visual cohesion is compelling. In a similar fashion, despite the underlying geometry and sense of rational organization of his work, **Noel Forster's** (1932 - 2007) paintings are resolutely handmade and employ gestural brushwork within grid-like, but slightly eccentric patterns. His densely packed patterns at first seem easily apprehended, but on closer inspection reveal subtleties and variations of structure that result from his engagement with the materials of his craft and suggest an intuitive or empirical working out of visual problems on the hoof as it were.

Caroline Streck,  
**Ice Palace** (2016), Oil on canvas, 170 x 120 cm.

Next page:  
Noel Forster,  
Detail of **Untitled Circle** (1996), Oil on canvas, 152 cm.



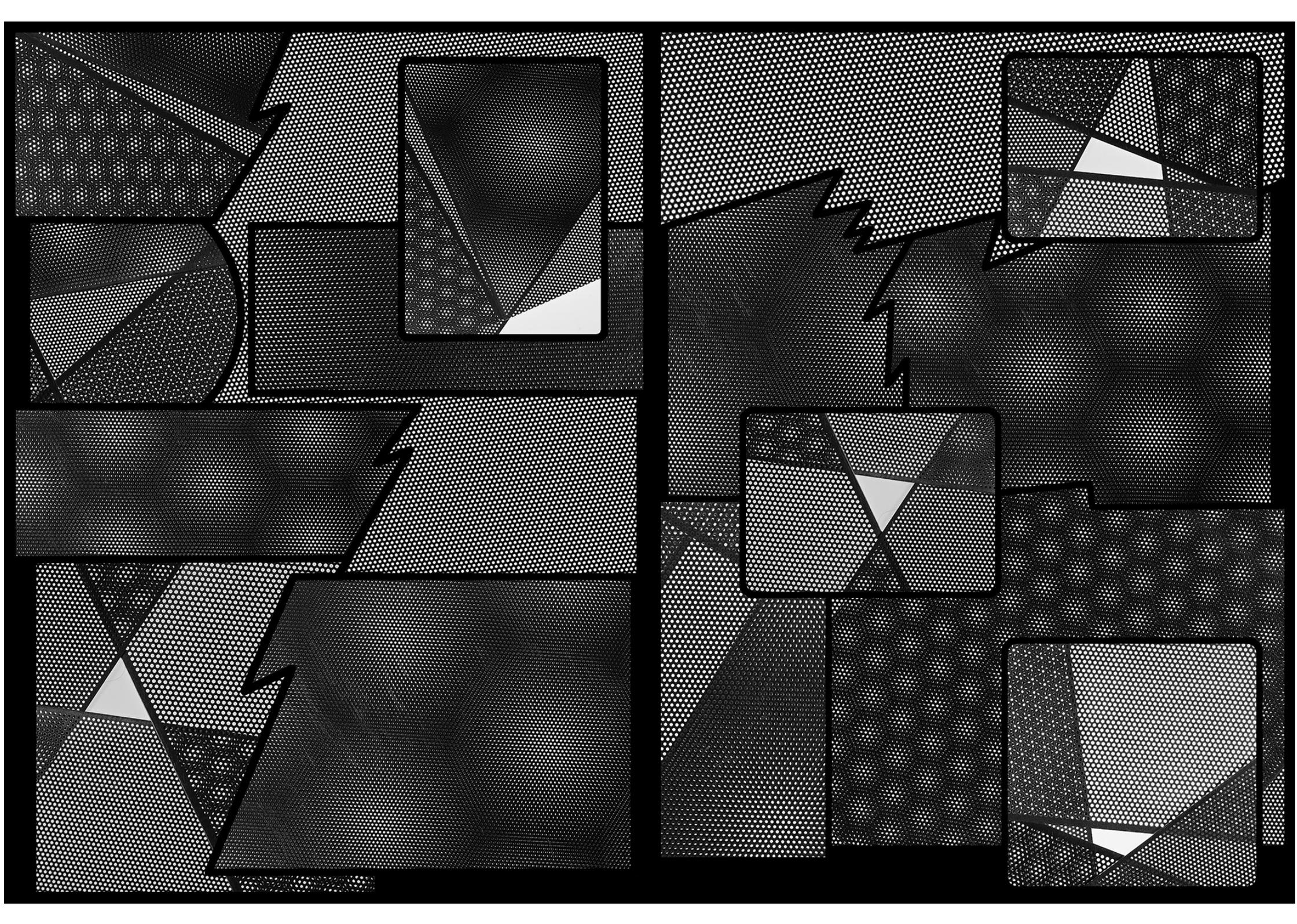


In her sculptural pattern making **Brigitte Parusel** seems to negotiate a line between rational procedures and intuition. Her starting points are flat motifs derived from so-called 'Sacred Geometry', although the mystical associations are not relevant to her work. She is interested in exploring the patterns spatial and structural potential. Scored into and cut from sheet metal the patterns are transformed in forms and containers of volume. A transformation is achieved whereby the motifs themselves are folded and creased, with each fold understood as part of the story of the work's manufacture. We follow the stages until the narrative eventually loops back to the initial fold creating patterns within patterns.

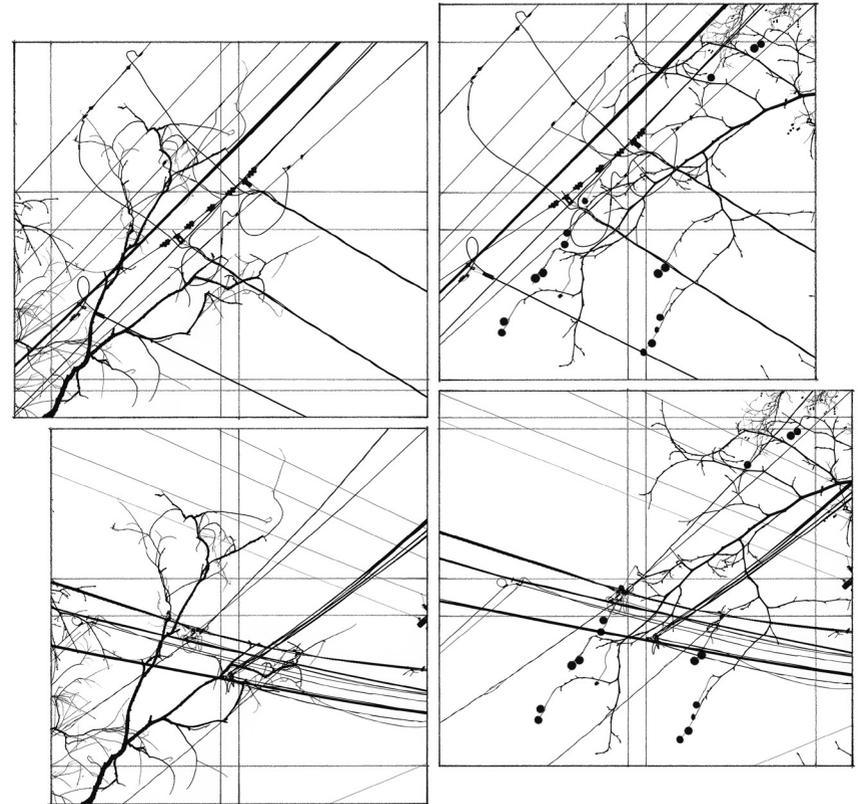
### **Pattern seekers: found phenomena**

If pattern making is often a rational and hermetic process whereby a set of abstract procedures generate their own outcomes, other artists in the show seek and find patterns as though they are collages of observed phenomena. **David R Watson's** photographs play with found patterns, specifically moiré effects that result from overlaying sheets of perforated metal. A variety of optical results are achieved by simply varying the orientation of the overlapping perforations. A further found element lies in his use of the layouts of cartoon pages from the likes of "2000AD"; rather than compose his images he simply grafts them onto found arrangements. The photographs are at once highly detailed pictures of the surface of the metal sheets and unstable optical phenomena that resolve themselves differently depending on viewing distance. The works continue the artist's preoccupation with the relationship between photography and drawing.

Next page:  
David R Watson,  
**Trelodal Scitenoia** (2018), Direct to media UV print on dibond, 105 x 102 cm.



Of course, photography is in many ways the sine-qua-non of discovering visual interest and order in a chaotic world and this is at play in the photography of **Sachiyo Nishimura**. Working from quotidian parts of the built environment such as power lines, train tracks and overhead cables she brings out the inherent graphical quality of these phenomena by recomposing them into photomontages. Heavily cropped elements are assembled under a unifying grid creating images that are at once abstract patterns and recognisable framings of the real world. Cables, wires and rails are metaphorically untangled and restructured under an autonomous aesthetic purpose that distances them from their origins and yet points to the interconnectedness of these ubiquitous networks.



Sachiyo Nishimura,  
**B-W Series (2)** (2018), Giclée print photograph, 31 x 33 cm.



**Martyn Simpson** also delights in revealing pattern within the apparently random. His works, produced by outlining and filling in the fibres found in sheets of OSB (Oriented Strand Board – a ubiquitous and cheap building material), yield a dense opticality that hints at pictorial depth whilst remaining resolutely flat. These found patterns are used in two complementary ways: sometimes the sheets are cut and assembled into furniture-like units that recall minimalist sculpture, at other times the boards are left uncut and simply propped or leaned casually in a space, emphasising in the informality of their display, their found quality. There is something close to the haptic in his meticulously executed pieces which are like visual textures, uniform in effect yet composed of non-repeating units: they fascinate and invite the eye to caress them.

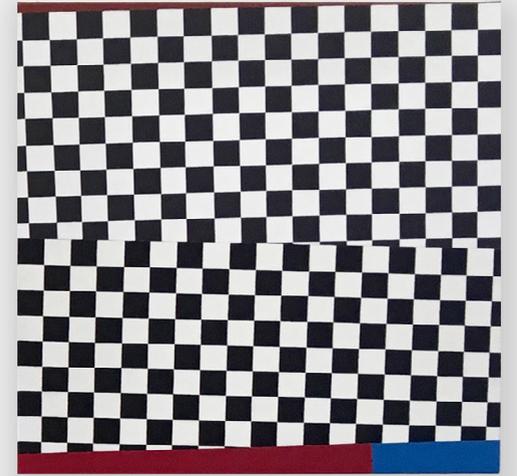
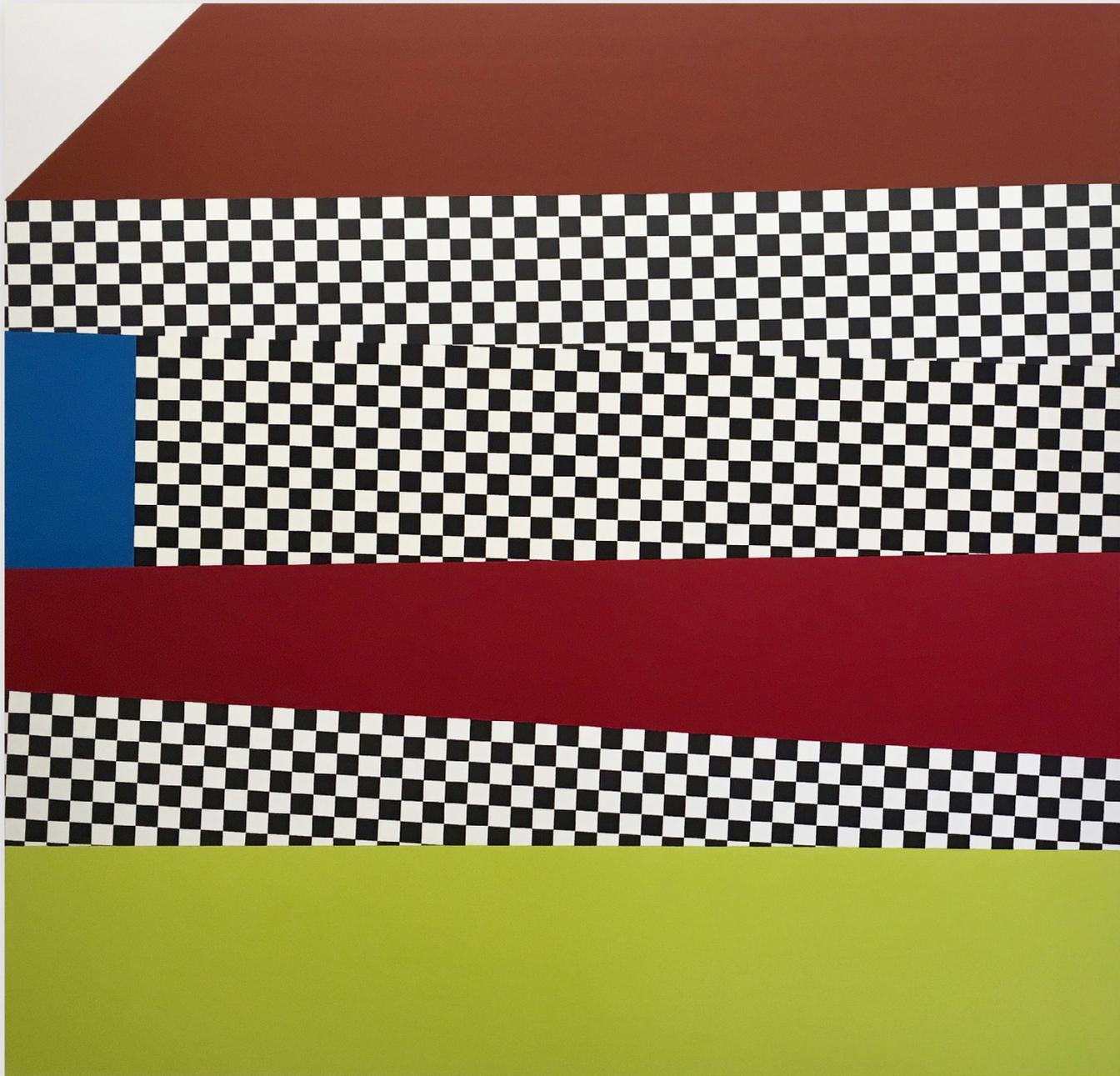
Martyn Simpson,  
**Sharpie Grisaille: Long Thin** (2016), OSB, Sharpie marker pen and correction fluid, 152 x 52.5 cm.

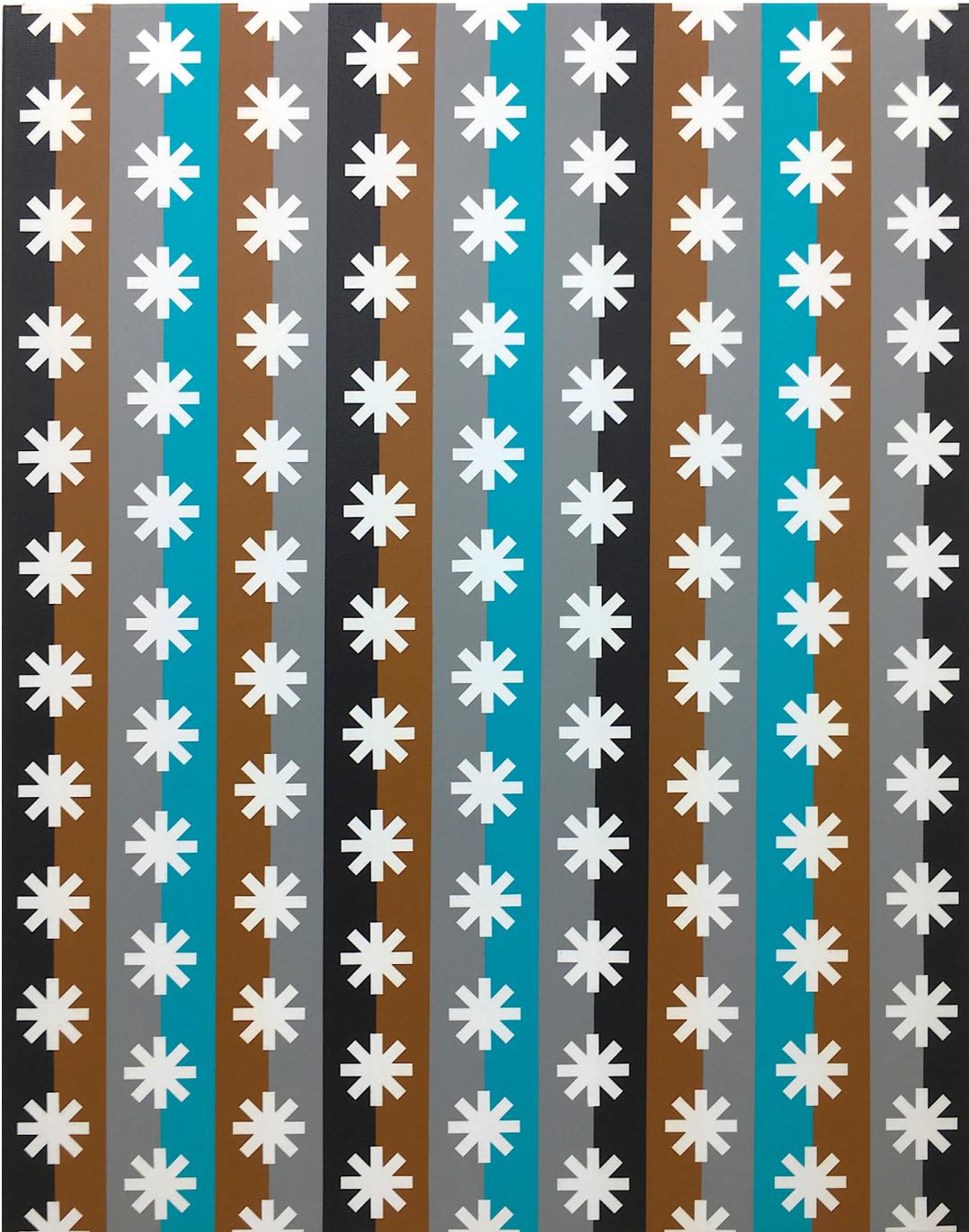
### Gaming the system: decoration and excess

The third group of artists address the decorative implications and uses of pattern by sometimes playfully, sometimes ironically conflating elements of 'high' and 'low' cultural production into vibrant, even strident, forms of display. **Michal Raz** creates hybrid works incorporating elements of painting, collage and screen printing that deploy pattern in compositions of extreme visual density. The works utilize found patterns in the form of adhesive tapes and other printed matter alongside painted surfaces and computer-generated elements. Deploying gestures from Pop, Op and Post Painterly Abstraction, but too baroque to fit into any one of those categories, Raz's work is a meditation on sensory overload, defying us to find coherent signals in the noise competing for our attention.



Michal Raz,  
**Here We Go** (2018), Mixed media on cotton polyester, 170 x 210 cm.





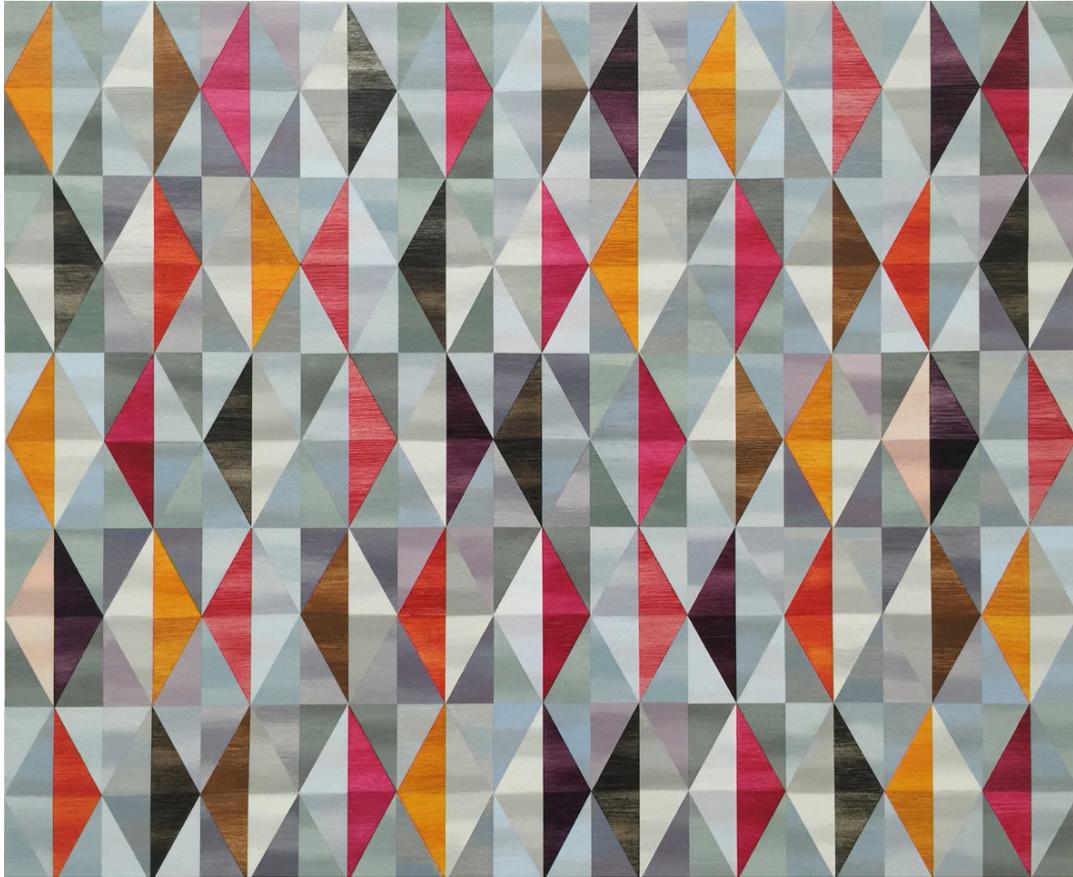
Richard Kirwan,  
**Flow State** (2018), Acrylic on canvas, 125 x 95 cm.

**Daniel Sturgis** takes an idiosyncratic approach to pattern, using key modernist tropes such as flatness and the grid, which he reinvests with an irreverent, almost rococo sensibility. The painting's candy store palette flirts with kitsch and playfully interacts with the rigorously conceived underlying structures, which are more complex and systematic than the pop-inspired presentation suggests. For Sturgis an off-kilter geometry and design-infused vocabulary can be seen to open up the language of abstract painting's dependency on order, harmony and certainty.

**Richard Kirwan's** works are in a similarly ambiguous critical dialogue with key elements of Modernism and in particular the purity of Modernist systems and aesthetic values. The paintings evince the rigorous flatness of Post- Painterly Abstraction and Minimalism whilst contaminating them with decorative motifs and elements that question definitions of 'high' and 'low' modes of cultural production. We are offered a clash of categories that confounds simple binaries such as serious/trivial or pure/impure. Kirwan is particularly interested in the contradictory, being simultaneously influenced by mutually exclusive or antagonistic theories of painting. Indeed he pursues painting despite asserting that: "painting exists in an increasingly sophisticated visual world that has little or no interest in the capability of painting in particular" and then countering this with "painting can beg, borrow or steal increasingly from the technologies that might be seen to marginalise such a historic, haptic activity".

Previous page:  
Daniel Sturgis,  
**Two Paintings** (2018), Acrylic on canvas, 152 x 152 cm / 55 x 55 cm.



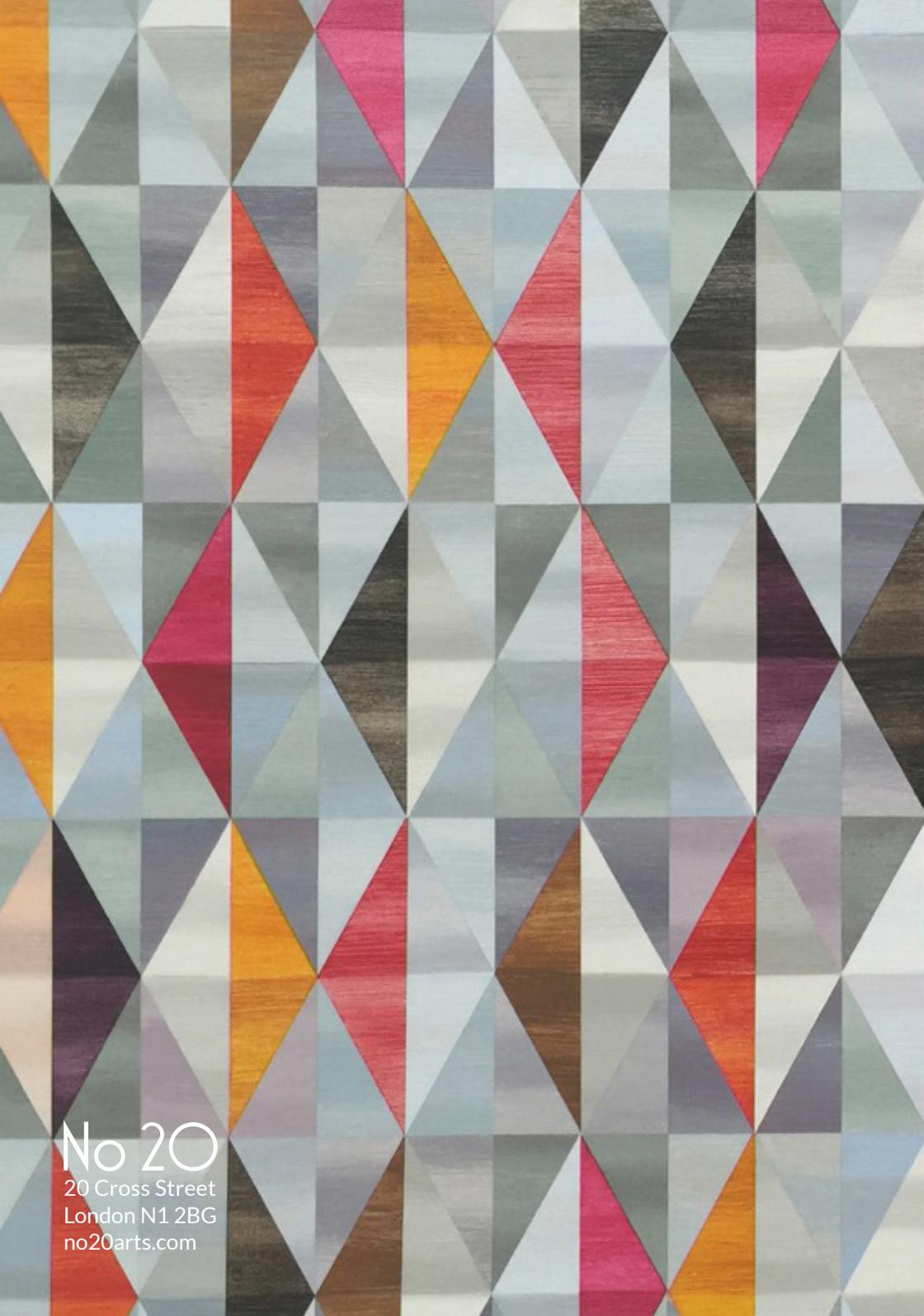


Hybridization and combining of high and low tropes is equally at play in **Márton Nemes's** category transient painting/sculptures. Some of the patterns are appropriated, such as the hi-vis transfers from emergency vehicles, whilst others are derived from an elaborate riffing on the parallelograms of wooden or welded steel 'stretchers' the substructures and supports of painting itself. The works look like they should be framing some kind of event, whether as backdrop to an illegal rave or the scenography for a nineties youth TV show. At the same time the very material anatomy of painting is examined and dissected until we're left looking at elaborate frames with only fragments of painted surface remaining.

For **Biggs and Collings** the system extends into a wider perspective wherein the very notion of pattern resonates as a social proposition. As they explain it themselves: "It might seem absurd and even self-contradictory to say pattern – a whole in which each element plays an equal part – will challenge a repetitive and imprisoning society". The very act of producing paintings collaboratively without a single unique author is vital to their practice since it implies that the non-hierarchical, that Feldman spoke of, can be deployed as a model for creative activity "with spontaneity balanced by order and division of labour".

Despite the diversity of the work all the artists here find fascination and endless potential in pattern as a way of thinking, making and finding. Morton Feldmann almost certainly had a specific answer in mind when he posed the question 'Why Patterns?' He was an avid collector of, and expert on, traditional Turkish rugs and as such had a very particular taste in the visual arts. He would probably not have wholly approved of the answers contained in this show, but we like to think he would have felt the question remains worth repeating and reexamining nonetheless.

David R Watson and Martyn Simpson



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