

PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE



IT'S REALLY ABSURD TO MAKE...  
A HUMAN IMAGE, WITH PAINT, TODAY,  
WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT...BUT  
THEN ALL OF A SUDDEN, IT WAS  
EVEN MORE ABSURD NOT TO DO IT.

WILLEM DE KOONING

In 1989 Imi Knoebel painted his first *Grace Kelly Portrait*. For a painter whose fundamental vocabulary is colour and whose approach to the architecture of the object tends towards the rectilinear and obdurate, making a painting that captures the gentle contour, beauty and elegance of American actress Grace Kelly seems a curious proposition.

But Knoebel shared Matisse's desire to "make colour sing" and in his unlikely juxtapositions of pigment, all held within the proportions of a conventional portrait painting, he conveys so much more than the apparent restrictions that geometry and colour might allow. For Imi Knoebel is a highly sensual painter, one of character and emotion. He gives colour voice, the most communicative of characteristics.

His *Anima Mundi* works continue something of this ambition. Intimate head sized chromatic studies of the face. Though the essential architecture of each is the same, the emotional temperature of each gridded arrangement is profoundly different as one face is from another. And despite the absence of any gentle linear contour, Knoebel gives colour form and volume.

More particularly his *Face* works begun in 1994 open the picture plane further to reveal a deeper, partially hidden structure and character. Seeing these faces for the first time they have recognisable coordinates that we quickly apprehend. The map of any face is broadly shared and yet each is remarkable and unique. This animated series of Knoebel's, makes this idiosyncrasy and range apparent.

Like Knoebel, Tomislav Nikolic, has a deep knowledge and appreciation of colours capacities to elicit emotion. Though Nikolic approaches his painting motivated by explorations of colour alone, I have long felt that his paintings operate as de-facto portraits, radiating personality – sometimes sensuous and demure, occasionally wilful and belligerent. Nikolic uses the classical vertical proportions associated with portraiture but unlike Knoebel whose juxtapositions of colour are sharply delineated, Nikolic's transitions are diffuse. Colour leaks through a succession of porous boundaries and merges, building one thin layer upon another until the pigment has the desired density and depth. Nikolic's occasional use of dramatic frames, fully implicated in the structure of the work are more than a nod to history painting and portraiture especially.

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They may be less about dignifying the work or the sitter, rather they part of their outfit. Frequently Tomislav's works are informed by his emotional responses to other artworks. Despite being stirred by other paintings Nikolic's own works communicate deeply held emotions and inevitably reveal more of his own temperament, albeit in a range of accoutrement.

Ceara Metlikovec's new works continue her systemic investigations of the cadence and depth of the body's rhythms. Beyond our pulse we have a deeper modulation and tempo. These inflections are as individuated as any aspect of our physiology. In a sense they measure us, an existential meter of our being.

It continues to astonish me the sensuality and range that Metlikovec achieves with a vertical band of graphite. Pressure added and the surface deepens, held back and the mark is restrained and ghostly. These works are in a sense the most intimate portraits of our actuality.

Metlikovec begins by establishing a field for her procession. This zone is akin to the repeated territories that Agnes Martin mapped out, into which she could describe her experience of the relentless horizon. And like Martin the fanaticism that one imagines might support such endeavours dissolves in the unfolding sensuality. There is little doubt that Metlikovec operates most happily when she is in the "zone". Nourished by the narcotics of Radiohead and 16th century Sikh Mantras she is capable of maintaining the extraordinary concentration and feel that make these works so arresting.

If Metlikovec collects data on our deepest oscillation, then Umberg's dense monochrome captures the very faintest, perhaps last signal. As quiet and apparently devoid of light as one can imagine, Umberg's black paintings gather the last grains of light and insist that we must look with more than our eyes.

In the exhibition *Points of Orientation*, we twice exhibited a small black painting of Umberg's alongside a beatific Burmese Buddha. The two apparently distinct objects quietly mirrored each other. If one looked at the Buddha it would reappear in the Umberg in a kind of magical merging of form and spirit across the space. This mystical transference affirmed that Umberg's works operate as existential portraits of extraordinary potency.

It has always been Umberg's capacity to re-sensitize us, to remind us of our own resonance and form that is his special gift. The careful assembly of carbon pigments together with the very specific nature of the support bestows the object with an uncommon presence that is registered in a truly visceral way just before it confirms our eventual absence.

The notion of mirroring appears more straightforward in Matthew Allen's highly burnished graphite paintings. Little larger than a face these dark yet reflective works feel like an ancient tarnished mirror. Like a mysterious reflective pool they invite us to peer into and through the surface at close range in search of traces of light and form, particles of recognition.

The consideration that Allen gives to the "tailoring" of the object and the relationship between this metallic meniscus and the wall is vital. Sitting proud, with their edges and neat linen folds clearly visible we are reminded that Allen uses the intonation of painting but is careful to avoid any obvious biography of gesture. Despite this restraint, much like Metlikovec's repeated actions we know that Allen has worked closely and intimately

with his materials and these highly finessed surfaces have absorbed his energy.

Helmut Federle's painting has never not been about portraiture. His paintings carry a poignancy and delicate humanity in their compositional arrangement and hushed tones. Within each major series his Basics on Composition and Cornerfield paintings share unifying principles that underpin their structure, though this continuity feels deeply ceremonial rather than serial.

Federle's painting practice is largely itinerant, its slowness a function of a commitment to reflection and an interior life that sublimates ego in favour of a more illuminating picture of humanity.

*Cornerfield Painting XXII (to Sen No Rikyū 1522–1591)*, 1995 banishes self-pride with its modesty and adjustment and denies flourish and autobiography in favour of humility and directness. At first look the colours in Federle's work first appear to be drawn from nature - the diffuse greens and cool greys appear to recall a subdued northern European landscape quality dampened by the last light of day. However there is another aspect to these tones, a deeper symbolism attached more to melancholia and interiority. They gently assert the profundity of a softly spoken sensation and cognition. The complexity of the horizontal band of modulated greys is terminated by the authority of the darker vertical. Its journey across the composition checked by the closure that the darkness brings.

The symbolic fundamentalism of Mondrian's late geometric works, whose heritage is also the northern European landscape, is replaced by a more rustic essentialism. In *Cornerfield XXII (to Sen No Rikyū)*, Federle gives us a truly romantic portrait, not merely of nature but of the intersection between life and death itself. The celebrated Tea Master Sen No Rikyū committed seppuku at the end of a refined tea ceremony over which he had presided. The last ritual was the dramatic horizontal cut he inflicted upon himself to restore honour and dignity.

In scale and proportion Geoff Thornley's *A3* feels like a 15th century portrait. The work might be an abstraction of Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady (Smeralda Brandini)* complete with its fine supplementary border echoing the framing device Botticelli used to insinuate the real into the pictorial. Its subtle tonal range and translucency, its blush and anticipation suggest bodily intimacy. In Thornley's work there is a sense that we are looking through layers of skin, complete with its vascularity and warmth. This painted dermis with its sublimated gesture, the veiling and containment of the layering is intrinsic to his work. The body of the painting comprises a series of delicate membranes that collectively protect a deeper vulnerability.

Sam Harrison has long been committed to exploring the human psyche through the analysis and description of the human form. Harrison makes drawings and woodcuts, sculptures in both plaster and bronze that are carefully observed portraits. In *Untitled (Self Portrait)* Harrison veils his own face, largely erasing his specific contours and replacing them with the fall and folds of the fabric. However, to those who know Sam it remains

EVERY PAINTER PAINTS HIMSELF  
COSIMO DE MEDICI

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unmistakably him. The cloaked head takes on a slew of newer and disconcerting implications from *Veronica's Veil* to the horrifying images made public of prisoners in Abu Ghraib. The implications of restraint and possible violence are not new for Harrison - his work often conveys introspection and psychological weight. In his new work this feeling is intensified by knowing that the sensory deprivation suffered by the figure also ironically leads to a compensatory hyper-sensitivity and awareness.

Winston Roeth is less a painter of colour than one of sensation. Like Knoebel colour is the currency of his work though his approach to working his material invests his paintings with a highly specific feel. Roeth's colours have a tonality and resonance – you can hear the colour – again as Matisse desired Roeth wants to “make colour sing”.

*Scarlet Portrait* is inflamed with presence. The interior red is held in place by the cool border but it presses and swells against the internal edges. This colour doesn't just have personality it has a volatility and attitude. The scale and proportion of the painting are that of an orthodox portrait whose sitter has an exotic, even precocious character.

In talking with Roeth about colour and its complex behaviour, he describes how it will, with time and encouragement, levitate away from the surface of the support. Like the floating figure of Rama (page 26) the body of colour assumes a weightlessness - zero-gravity=“enlightenment”?

Jan Albers trained as a painter at the Dusseldorf Kunst Akademie though from the earliest moment he realised that he was not going to be a painter in the conventional sense. There would be no fine cedar stretchers nor any carefully folded linen corners. Rather than offering pictorial space, Albers' objects jut out from the wall coming out to meet us. Their faceted forms caught between Judd and Picasso can be elegant or unruly, carefully formed or hewn with a chainsaw. Having broken the figure down into flat planes Albers takes the Cubist paradigm and reverses it. Like metallic origami these figures are folded neatly and then expand visually, morphing into new and mercurial characters.

In 2016 I suggested Coen Young's *Studies for a Mirror* play on our narcissistic urge to locate ourselves. He is acutely aware of our desire to find recognition and comfort in the embrace that reflection offers. By denying us that pleasure he reminds us of the transience of the image and in the works deeper connection to enshrouding. Like the gauzy imprint on *Veronica's Veil*, we are given little else but traces, a faltering hologram.

Given that paintings usually set out to either describe or establish form, Young's pursuit of its absence draws connections to the work of Günter Umberg. As different as the materiality of Young's work is from Umberg's, the manner in which they both seem to paint themselves out of the work in an attempt to express existence, feels consequential.

Each of the works in this exhibition are made with distinct obligations and yet they share a curious delphic relationship to the body or more particularly the face that belies their abstracted character. Freed from the need to describe the sitter they in effect substitute for them. And as much as they achieve this, works such as Allen and Umberg, Young and Nikolic tempt our own vanity, allowing us to project ourselves into their frame, inferring for the viewer that these may just be portraits of them.

Andrew Jensen



GÜNTER UMBERG  
*UNTITLED*, 2010  
PIGMENT AND DAMMAR ON MDF  
38 x 36 CM

COEN YOUNG  
*STUDY FOR A MIRROR*, 2017  
ACRYLIC, URETHANE AND SILVER NITRATE ON PAPER  
220 x 140 CM

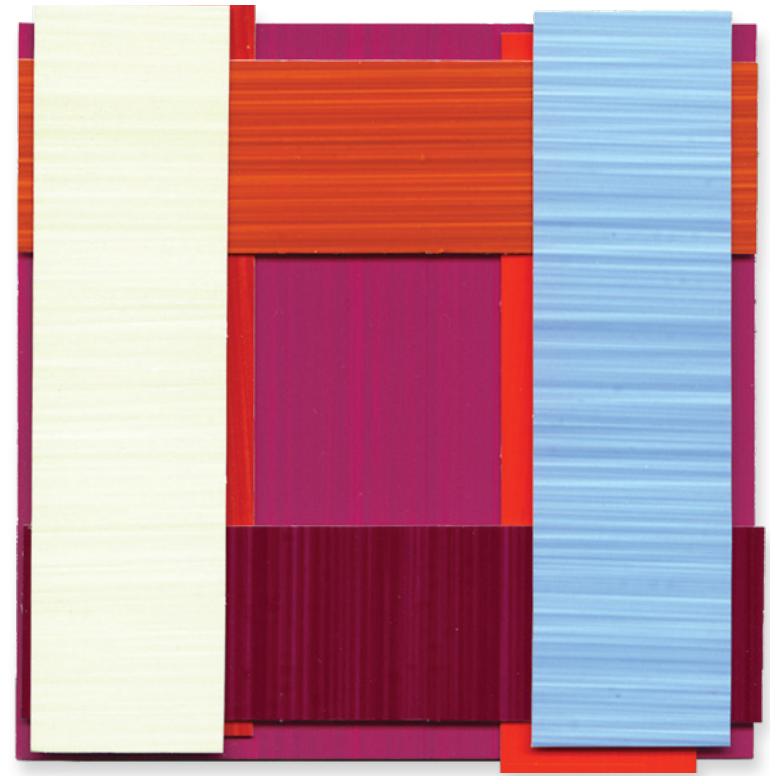


CEARA METLIKOVEC  
*INDIGO 14, APRIL 2018*  
GRAPHITE ON FABRIANO  
140 x 94.5 CM

JAN ALBERS  
*LILLustrE, 2018*  
CAST ALUMINUM  
ED. 5 + 2 AP  
40 x 30 x 20 CM



IMI KNOEBEL  
FACE 72 ED. 2003/2016  
HAND-COLOURED ACRYLIC ON PAPER  
36 x 36 CM  
EDITION 5 + 2 AP + 1



IMI KNOEBEL  
FACE 97 ED. 2003/2016  
HAND-COLOURED ACRYLIC ON PAPER  
36 x 36 CM  
EDITION 5 + 2 AP + 1



THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH  
*PORTRAIT OF MARY, COUNTESS OF HOWE*, 1764  
OIL ON CANVAS  
244 x 152.4 CM

TOMISLAV NIKOLIC  
*and my future's in the strangle hold of ever  
changing rules i don't intend to understand*, 2017  
ACRYLIC, MARBLE DUST, 24CT GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS AND WOOD  
215 x 165 x 11 CM

12.





HELMUT FEDERLE  
*CORNERFIELD PAINTING XXII (TO SEN NO RIKYŪ 1522-1591)*, 1995  
OIL ON CANVAS  
48 x 55 CM

HASEGAWA TŌHAKU  
*PORTRAIT OF SEN NO RIKYŪ*  
CALLIGRAPHY BY SHUN'OKU SŌEN  
INK ON PAPER



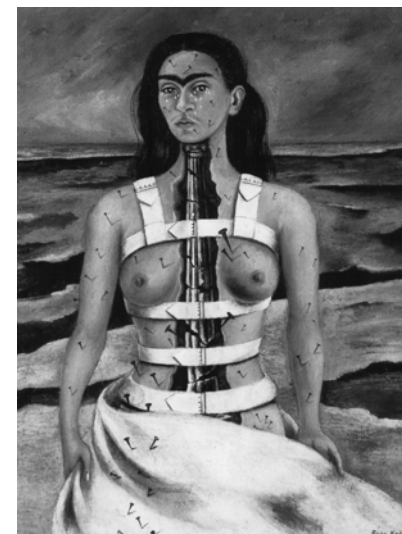




17.

CEARA METLIKOVEC  
*INDIGO 14*, APRIL 2018  
GRAPHITE ON FABRIANO  
140 x 94.5 CM

FRIDA KAHLO  
*THE BROKEN COLUMN*, 1944  
OIL ON MASONITE  
39.8 x 30.6 CM





ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN (ATTRIBUTED TO)  
*PORTRAIT OF A MAN*, c. 1464  
OIL ON WOOD PANEL  
32 x 22.8 CM

GÜNTER UMBERG  
*UNTITLED*, 2010  
PIGMENT AND DAMMAR ON MDF  
38 x 36 CM

18.



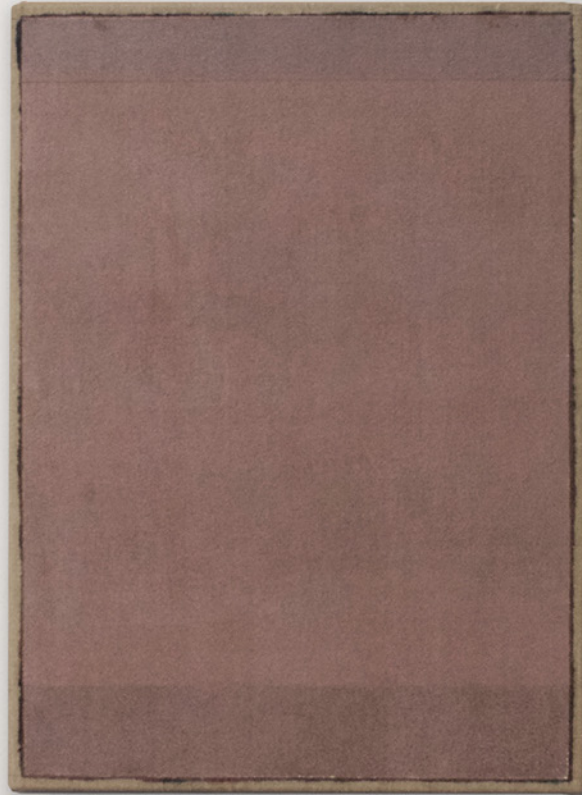
20.

MATTHEW ALLEN  
*UNTITLED (FULL FIELD)*, 2018  
POLISHED GRAPHITE ON LINEN  
32 x 20 x 6 CM

AMENEMHAT III  
c. 1842-1795  
GREYWACKE  
46 x 18.5 x 25.5 CM



23.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI  
PORTRAIT OF A LADY KNOWN  
AS SMERALDA BANDINELLI, 1470 – 1480  
TEMPERA ON PANEL  
87 x 62 CM

GEOFF THORNLEY  
A3, 1998  
OIL ON LINEN  
58 x 40 CM



SAM HARRISON  
UNTITLED SELF PORTRAIT, 2018  
EDITION 1/3 + 2 APS  
BRONZE  
35 x 20 CM

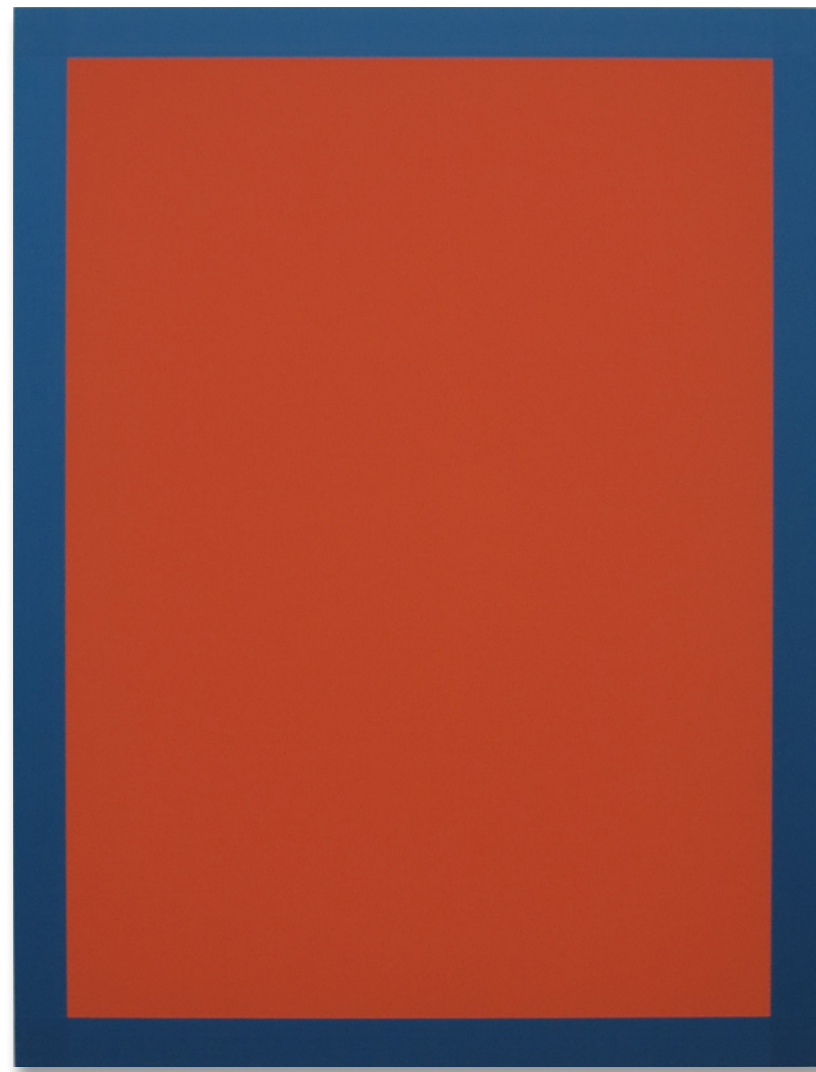
ARTIST UNKNOWN  
A HOODED CHINESE PRISONER IS STRANGL  
ED BY TWO EXECUTIONERS, 1850  
GOUACHE ON PAPER  
34.5 x 41 CM

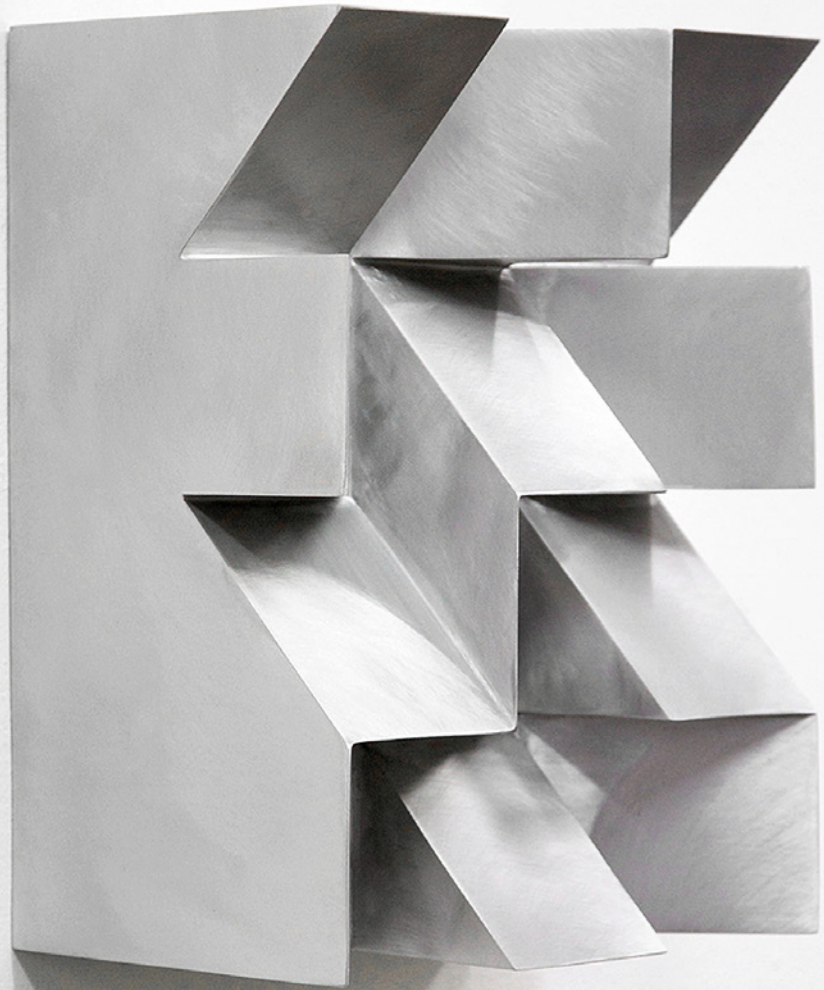




BASOHLI STYLE, PAHARI  
*THE PORTRAIT OF RAMA*, CA. 1730  
OPAQUE WATERCOLOUR AND GOLD ON PAPER  
14.8 CM x 10.2 CM

WINSTON ROETH  
*SCARLET PORTRAIT*, 2012  
TEMPERA ON DIBOND PANEL  
101 x 76.5 CM





JAN ALBERS  
*LiLustrE*, 2018  
CAST ALUMINUM  
ED. 5 + 2 AP  
40 x 30 x 20 CM

JUAN GRIS  
*HEAD OF A WOMAN (PORTRAIT OF  
THE ARTIST'S MOTHER)*, 1912  
OIL ON CANVAS  
55 x 46 CM





MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO

*NARCISSUS*, 1597 – 1599

OIL ON CANVAS

110 x 92 CM

COEN YOUNG

*STUDY FOR A MIRROR*, 2017

ACRYLIC, URETHANE AND SILVER NITRATE ON PAPER

220 x 140 CM

30.







GEOFF THORNLEY  
A3, 1998  
OIL ON LINEN  
58 x 40 CM

SAM HARRISON  
*UNTITLED SELF PORTRAIT*, 2018  
EDITION 1/3 + 2 APS  
PATINA ON BRONZE  
35 x 20 CM



HELMUT FEDERLE  
*CORNERFIELD PAINTING XXII*  
(*TO SEN NO RIKYŪ 1522–1591*), 1995  
OIL IN CANVAS  
48 x 55 CM

MATTHEW ALLEN  
*UNTITLED (FULL FIELD)*, 2018  
POLISHED GRAPHITE ON LINEN  
32 x 20 x 6 CM

PAGE 2. GRACE KELLY  
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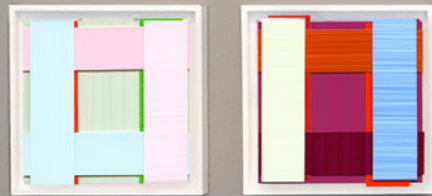
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