

CHARLES THOMAS O'NEIL

2009-2013



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RECENT WORK 2009-2013



PREFACE

O'Neil works in a manner akin to "stream of consciousness": a fluid process reminiscent of the push-and-pull strategies of Hans Hoffmann paintings. Abstract forms and markings evolve and ultimately emerge into exquisite and unique compositions. In this organic process, the artist finds his forms through trial and error—in his words, a "survival of the fittest." In this way the viewer is exposed to the "history" of the painting—pry to artistic decisions typically made alone in the studio.

O'Neil's work focuses on the fundamental relationships between figure and ground. Reflections of light on the painted surfaces reveal complex veils of color which complicate the rigorous geometric underpinnings of his compositions. The completed painting is always the result of finding a balance between unity and confusion, the static and the dynamic.

The sophistication of O'Neil's method of layering also recalls the delights and subtlety of fresco painting. His paintings find light from within the layered, scratched, and rubbed surfaces and expose wonderful details very much in line with the traditions of earlier painters like Cy Twombly and Mark Tobey. However, O'Neil's markings emerge as his own articulate and abstract languages—a visual discourse that I have watched mature over the past several years. Avoiding a pedantic narrative, O'Neil's paintings seduce the viewer until one is wholly absorbed into the physical beauty of his ethereal world.

LOUIS GRACHOS

Executive Director, AMOA-Arthouse, Austin

TOM O'NEIL

Tom O'Neil is on a quest. For over twenty years he's produced abstract work that runs the gamut from minimalism to academic abstractionism to automatic writing, all of it funneled by a debate between formalist leanings and his natural instinct towards an expressionistic self-exploration. His dueling interests produce work that shifts between cool shape-making pop-abstraction and the introverted landscapes of his psyche; by corralling these dynamic styles in the past few years he's crafted a new aesthetic, coming to terms with his dual intents and producing his most potent, captivating work yet.



Work in progress, March 2013

This recent flowering has come under the guise of a single question: *is there a there there?* He's made the phrase a mantra, and repeats it as he explores his studio, hopping from his worktable – a messy wood block of paint, chalky pens, bleach, gloves, and all variety of scratch-making tools – to one of the many pieces he's actively engaged in. The phrase comes, loosely, from Gertrude Stein, who said “there is no there, there,” in reference to her childhood home in Oakland, but O'Neil claims the phrase as the possibility of possibility. *Is there a there there?* He removes the comma when he says it, zooming through the question to avoid Stein's negative answer. Unlike representational artwork, abstractionism cannot strive towards a fidelity outside the artist's intent. Often, success seems up to the viewer, and the product becomes a result of the debate between artist and audience; in this environment, the search can lose its direction, sometimes even its purpose. Accomplishment seems like magic. *Is there a there there?* Tom asks his paintings, me, himself: is there a place I'm heading, an end to this journey? Or is it a mirage in the desert?

Born in 1966 in New York City, Tom O'Neil left the Rhode Island School of Design to apprentice with the fresco painter David Novros, who taught him to see a painting not as a flat image but as an object on the wall – that the backing's texture and thickness, the scratches of a carved-away decision, even the three-dimensionality of the brush strokes themselves were all equal players in the final product. He took this early lesson to heart, and has devoted his career to capturing the whole of the painting process, not just the topmost layer of the framed canvas. So, adopting the colors of Santa Fe, his home at the time, O'Neil began hand-crafting his own wood and copper backings and producing dense, dreamy work, emphasizing the roughness of his hand-

making. The content, inspired by idle musings and a landscape-based aesthetic curiosity, was the process itself, and each successive mark and color was a response to what came before. As he progresses through a painting, he considers himself a listener: waiting for the painting to ask him a question, and then responding. When the painting is quiet, he moves onto the next one. As with life, his paintings are messy and occasionally doubtful, and he's careful to keep these markings apparent to capture the experience not only of crafting but of the process of decision-making and happenstance that constitutes human experience.

In 2007 O'Neil produced *Possibilities and Advantages*, an exhibition at the Linda Durham Contemporary Gallery in Santa Fe. He presented an unedited series of diary-entry paintings, elevating his work from the soft dreamscapes that dominated his early career to an unfiltered psychological journaling; the paintings featured scribbled notes and sketches of childhood objects and memories, and the emphasis on process relayed a fervent engagement with the physicality and emotionality of his art. O'Neil's work up to this point had set the stage for *Possibilities*, and with this show he'd found the most direct bridge between his inner world and the audience. *Possibilities* haunts the viewer with truths we may not articulate, but distinctly feel.

A few years beforehand, O'Neil and his family settled in their new home, a quiet farmhouse between the bucolic trees of Stockbridge, Massachusetts – a far cry from the open heat of New Mexico – and by the time *Possibilities and Advantages* opened he'd moved there full time. Here, in the white light of his new studio, O'Neil set out to redefine his formalist aesthetic. His goal, unlike in *Possibilities*, was to define a new vocabulary for his picture plane and give his search new language to explore. In 2009, he brought *Flipside* to New York City.

Flipside emphasized bold, bright shapes, clear subjects, and backgrounds that served to emphasize the canvas, not obstruct the subject. "Untitled (#2568)" (O'Neil never titles his paintings, but numbers them sequentially, starting at 1000, which can make each painting, taken alone, seem like a page torn out of a long, morphing notebook) is a prime example: its subject, a friendly orange squiggle, topped with another orange dot, floats atop a relatively clean collage of colors, from a peppy yellow to a stripe of black to a planetary blue. O'Neil's characteristic scratchings are visible, but they do not take our attention



O'Neil studio, Stockbridge, MA



"Untitled (#2568)"

from the subject. Unlike the note-taking in *Possibilities*, there are no lines whatsoever – shapes relate to shapes, colors to colors, without borders to define or subvert them. This is Pop O’Neil, its abstraction clean and easily digestible, its eager colors constantly focusing our attention on the surface.

O’Neil had spent much of his career crafting an intimate, even sacred space for the audience. *Flipside*, aptly titled, presents the other side of his wheelhouse: formal and cool, even detached – O’Neil as crafter, not diarist. Right before the show, O’Neil produced work for a retrospective on Abstractionism at the Berkshire Museum, sharing walls with John Shaw and Rupert Turnbull, among others. We can see that inspiration in *Flipside*: regimented, intellectual work, contained within the picture plane and referential only to itself. He admires these painters – his artistic forefathers – but his reverence does not wholly translate into method. Deep down he is too personal an artist, too much a part of the work, and too ambitious: he wants to capture more than the canvas. O’Neil used *Flipside* to experiment with formalism, widen his palette, and streamline his shapes and painting strategies; it was time to use this new vocabulary to speak more personally to his search.

In 2010 he debuted *Standing on the Peel* at Simon’s Rock, his first show in the Berkshires. The work still has the strong, color-and-shape focus from *Flipside*, but he’s reintroduced his humor, a hint of line, and a teasing disinterest in strict formalism. His work flits with representation in its abstract subjects, each an icon that defines the painting. In *Peel*, O’Neil plays with these icons, shoving them into corners while backgrounds bubble up to the surface; this exploration of shape and color once again reveals process. *Standing on the Peel* is instructional, both for us and for O’Neil: if *Flipside* was a new take on surface, *Peel* was proof he could incorporate his emotional, psychological self to this new aesthetic.

Over the next two years O’Neil worked to incorporate what he’d done in *Flipside* with an increasingly open sense of psychological abstraction, in which he let himself follow personal whims. After *Peel*, he took time for his wife and two children, time to find where his life had brought him, and what this might mean for his art. “*Untitled* (#2648)” comes from this period of experimentation, and asks us, too, to take our time. At first, the subject: a bulbous white shape emerging from the



[installation view]
“*Standing on the Peel*”
September 10 – October 22, 2010
Liebowitz Art Gallery
Bard College at Simon’s Rock
Pittsfield, MA

bottom of the frame to settle just off the middle of the square picture plane; immediately this shape is disempowered by a series of lines striping through it, creating a diminishing echo within, distracting us, and lessening its iconic value (to our delight). The color of the lines take us out of the shape altogether to focus on the rich gray background, thick as stew. As we explore, it becomes clear that the subject was not placed atop but formed by the background.

Other things pop out at us: a series of arrows rising up the subject, as if bleeding through the background; the hint of another, perhaps identical shape, nearly kicked by the gray out of the painting entirely, further reducing our interest in these icons. By making a painting in which the purported subject serves to bring our attention to the whole of the image, he's shown the power of his alchemical explorations. Still, the painting is small, less than a foot wide or tall, and O'Neil examines it like a reminder he's written. Indeed, "Untitled (#2648)" is one of a series of 10"x10" paintings he's always making – it's a sketch, an experiment, but it marked his readiness to make something incredible, to enlarge this boldness to a canvas fitting his skill and vision.

Against a white wall, a shocking, caribbean blue stripe is encapsulated by a band of bright orange. Through this blast of color the other layers that together comprise "Untitled (#2729)" surge forward. First, a curved white lip which holds the icon and brings our attention to other white stripes on the other vertical wall of the painting, creating containers of content within the image; both outlines are filled with a sketchpad of colors and brushstrokes, a trend that continues, unlined, in the upper edge of the painting. Lining the entire right side of the canvas is a vertical strip of watery red and cream, a hint at pop or perhaps Japanese watercolor, literally overwhelmed by the dominating, scruffy black that anchors our gaze. We might think the jutting right side is an uncovered element from an earlier work, and the effect is somewhat like catching two slides stuck in a projector, yet the neon icon's placement – binding this disparate element in with the rest of the painting – challenges us to accept the collage effect in total.

Describing this work is tricky: its serendipitous success reveals, with careful viewing, a lattice work holding its elements in place, and though its process is still improvisational it is anchored by a sure purpose. As he circles his latest paintings, each grand and gorgeous,



"Untitled (#2648)"



"Untitled (#2729)"



"Untitled (#2728)"

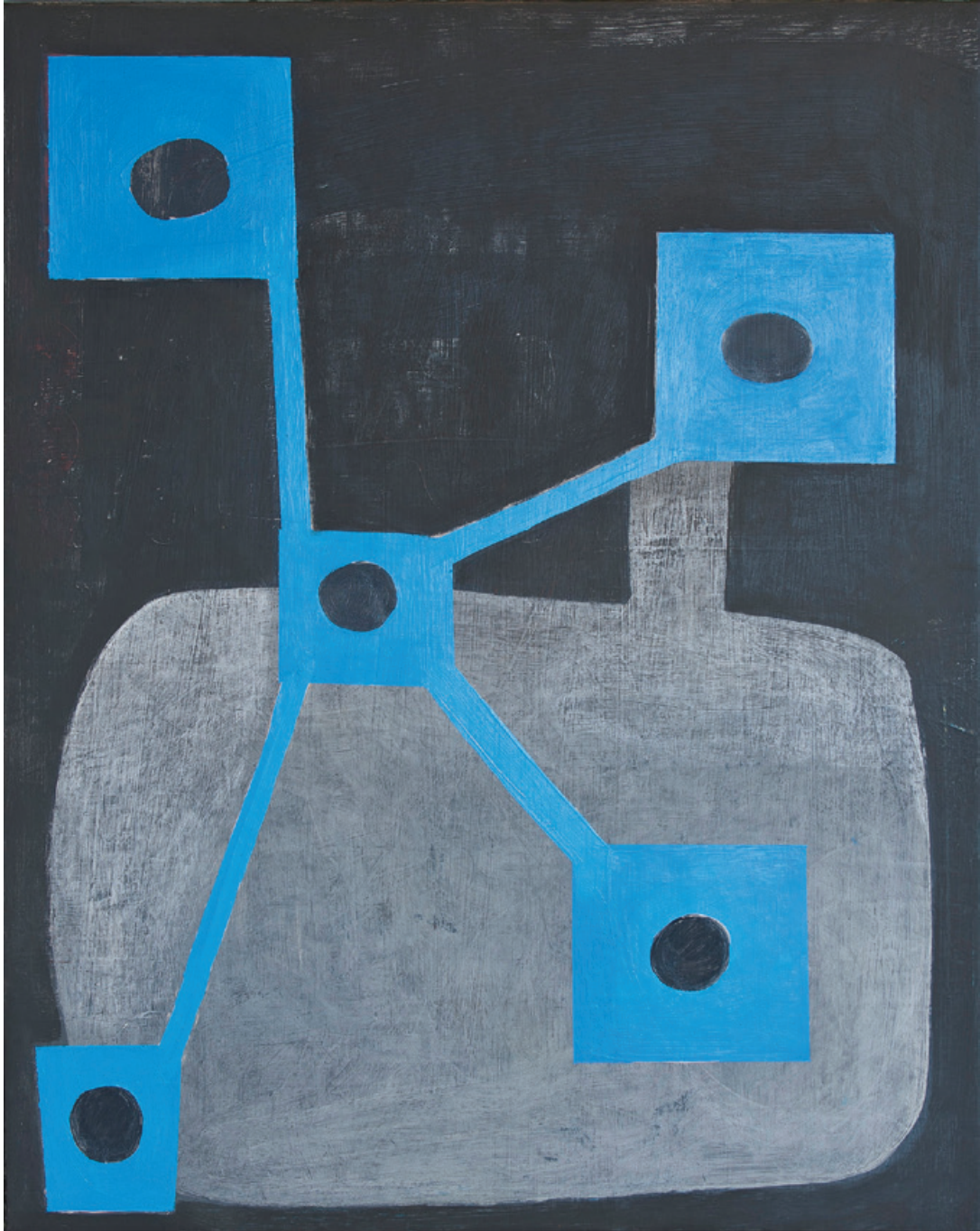
his laser focus seems altogether more commanding than the O'Neil that produced his earlier, dreamier work. He's about to finish "Untitled (#2728)," a massive canvas (66"x66") he's been working on for over ten years; hulking above O'Neil's not insignificant frame, its transformations are apparent in the thickness of paint on the canvas and the way in which colors swim with infinite, palimpsestic considerations. As with "Untitled (#2729)," the painting is both serendipitous and architectural, personal and pop. It's tough to describe this work because it's alive, dynamic and personal to the viewer; it requires a beholder, not a describer. This is mature work, an accomplishment born of many years of artistic struggle and an uncompromising desire to push towards there, wherever it may be, whatever it may prove.

It would seem Tom O'Neil has found the skill to nimbly balance the dichotomy of his ambitions. His newest work boldly sweeps across grand canvases, hopscotching the bright icons we can latch onto with rich and layered seas that speak to time and duty to the painting's surface, that tell the story of the search. Is there a there there? he asks; he still does not know what 'there' is, and will never know – that's not for life to answer – but he's moving towards it, allowing his canvas to speak to him and us, and to revel in life's tricky dualities. It's funny, by questioning 'there,' wherever, whatever it is, you eventually look back at where you were, and what it was that brought you to up to the present. Just as his paintings number up one on top of another, Tom O'Neil's art is, at its best, an accumulation of his career, a whole made up of its parts. "Untitled (#2729)" has over fifteen-hundred paintings in its blood, guiding its contribution to the search. This search will never be over; all we can hope, over time, is to improve our methods, to see what next wall can be broken, what new path may be blazed. Tom O'Neil is making great strides. It's thrilling to follow his quest, wherever it may go.

ROLAND OBEDIN-SCHWARTZ

April, 2013





UNTITLED (#2603)
2009, oil on panel, 30 x 24 inches



UNTITLED (#2604)

2009, oil on panel, 30 x 24 inches



UNTITLED (#2606)
2010, oil on panel, 14x 11 inches

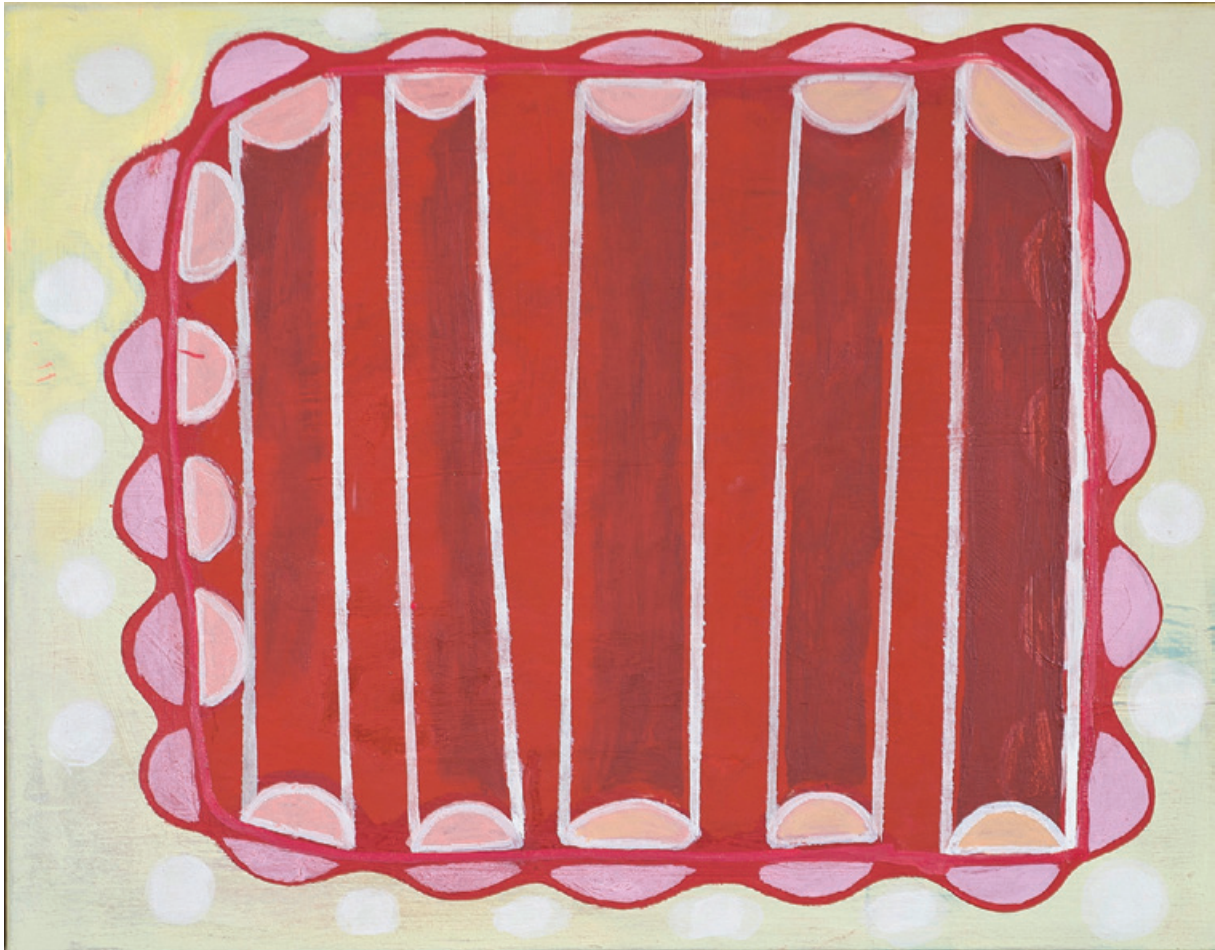


UNTITLED (#2605)

2010, oil on panel, 14 x 11 inches

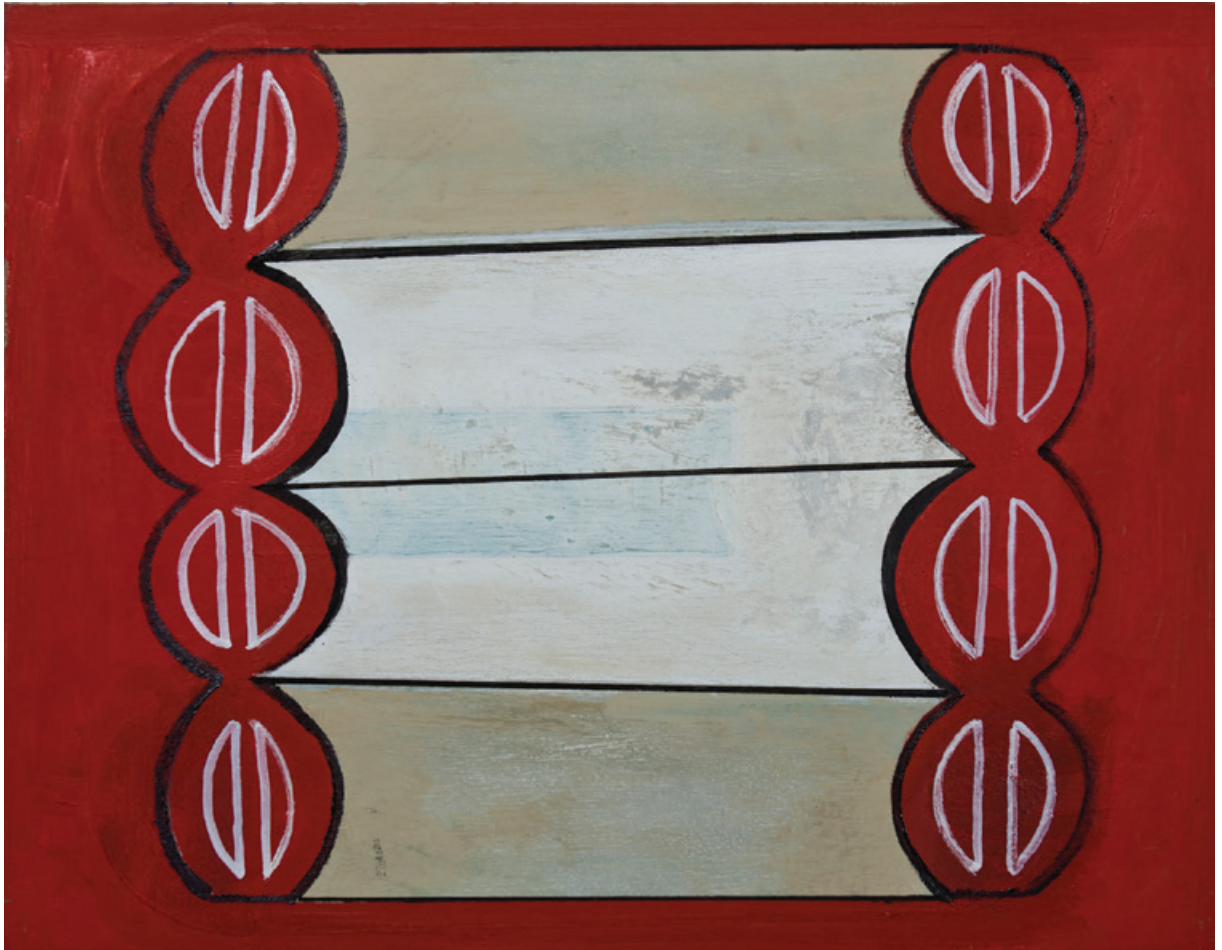


UNTITLED (#2609)
2010, oil on panel, 14 x 11 inches



UNTITLED (#2607)

2010, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



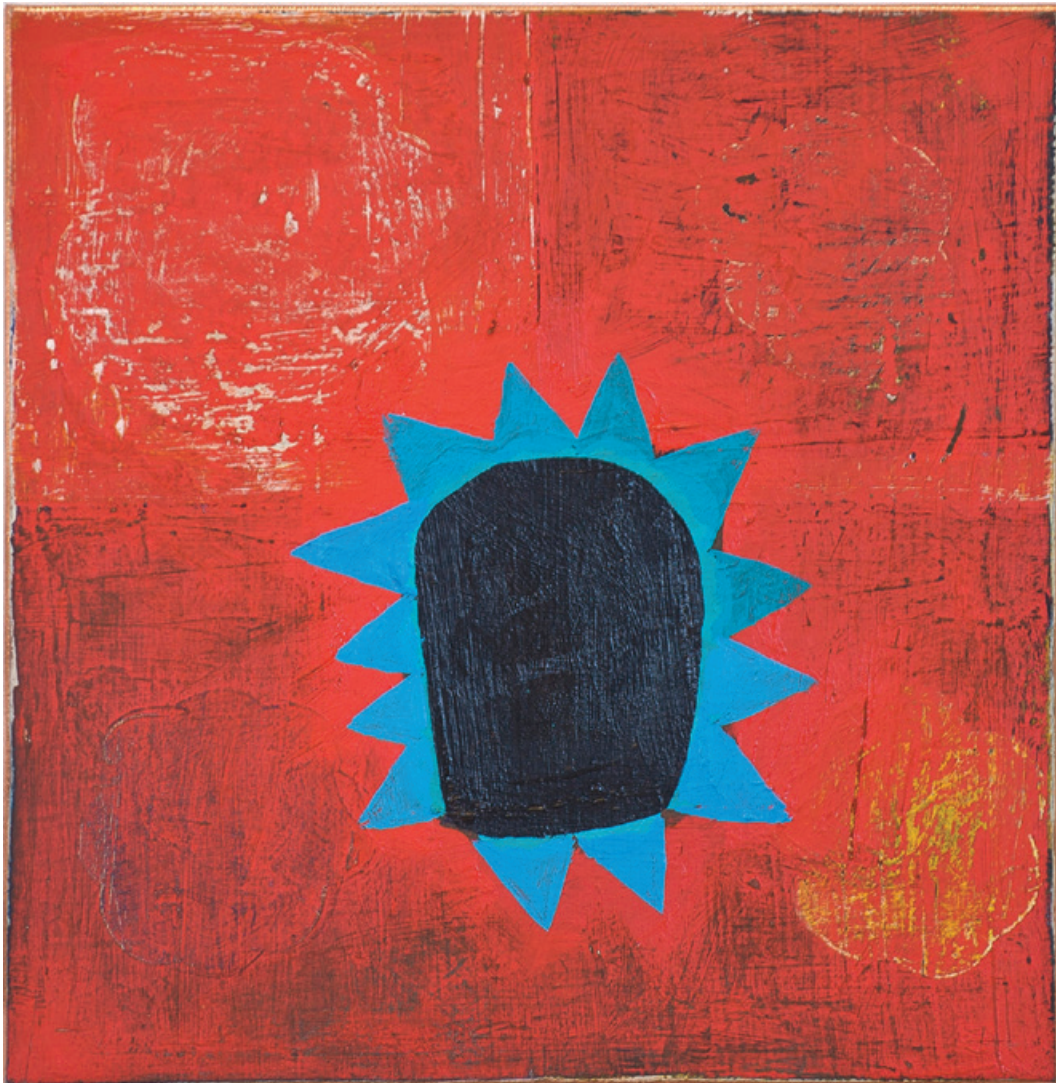
UNTITLED (#2641)

2010, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2622)

2010, oil on metal, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2630)

2010, oil on metal, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2648)

2011, oil on panel, 10 x 10 inches

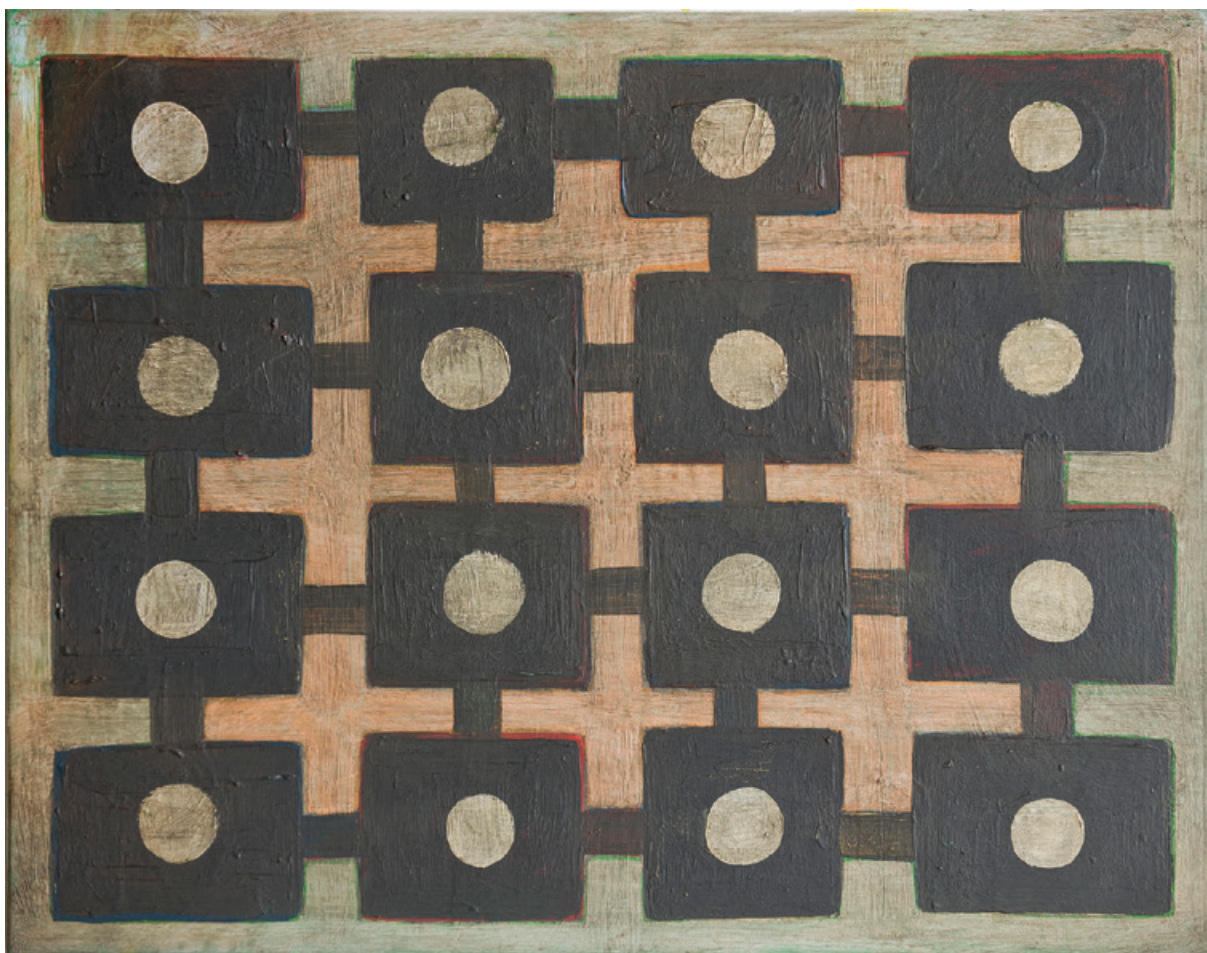


UNTITLED (#2649)
2011, oil on metal, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2666)

2011, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2705)

2011, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2656)

2011, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2657)

2011, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2658)

2011, oil on panel, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2662)
2011, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2700)

2012, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 inches



UNTITLED (#2701)
2012, oil on canvas, 48 x 96 inches





UNTITLED (#2704)
2012, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2708)

2012, oil on panel, 8 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2710)
2012, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2720)

2012, oil on canvas, 30 x 26 inches



UNTITLED (#2712)
2012, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches

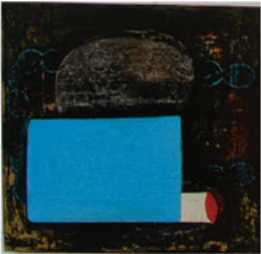


UNTITLED (#2714)

2012, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2715)
2012, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2711-2719) installation view
2012, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2703)

2012, oil on panel, 8 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2702)
2012, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2721)
2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 40 inches

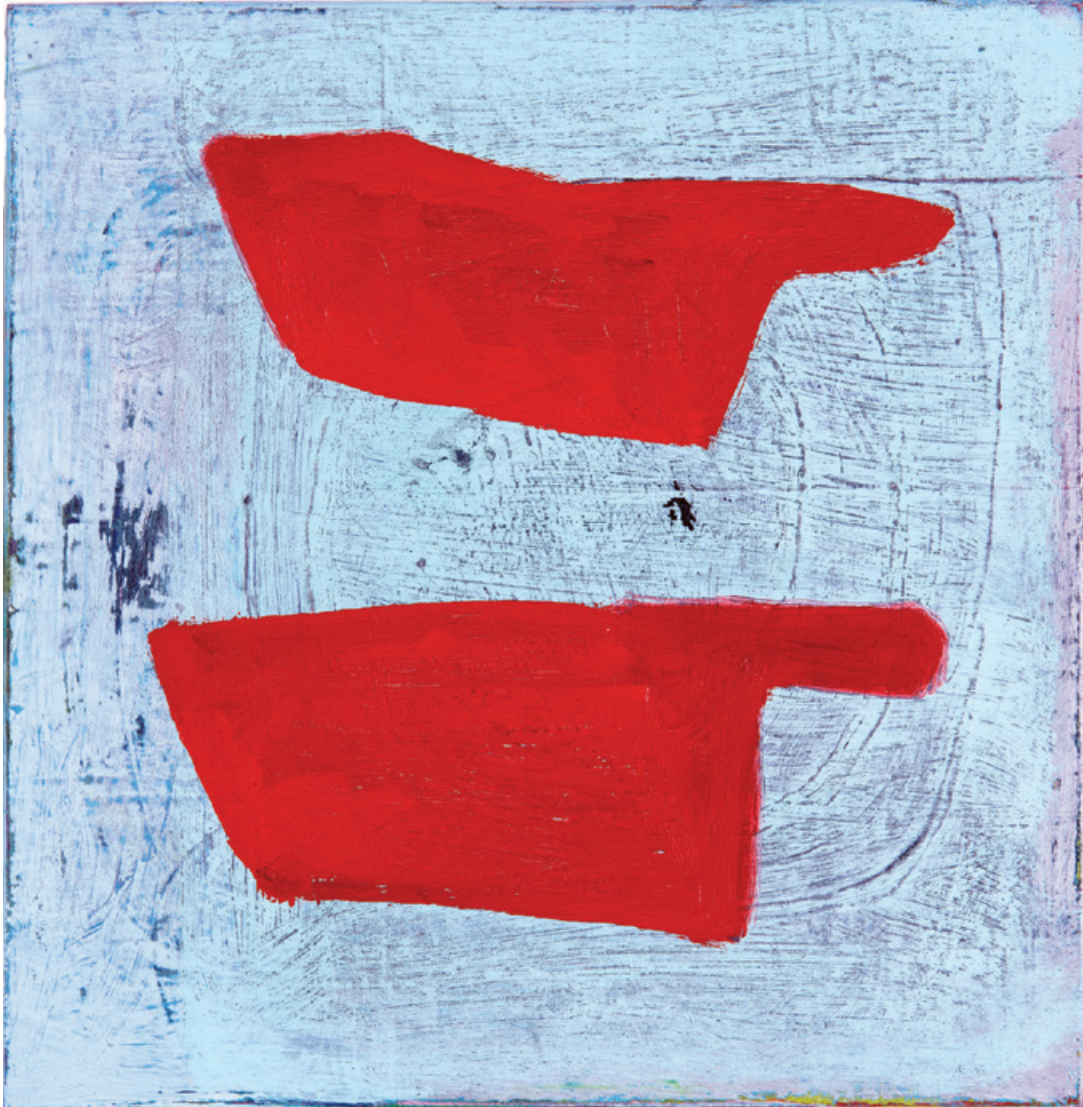


UNTITLED (#2730)

2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

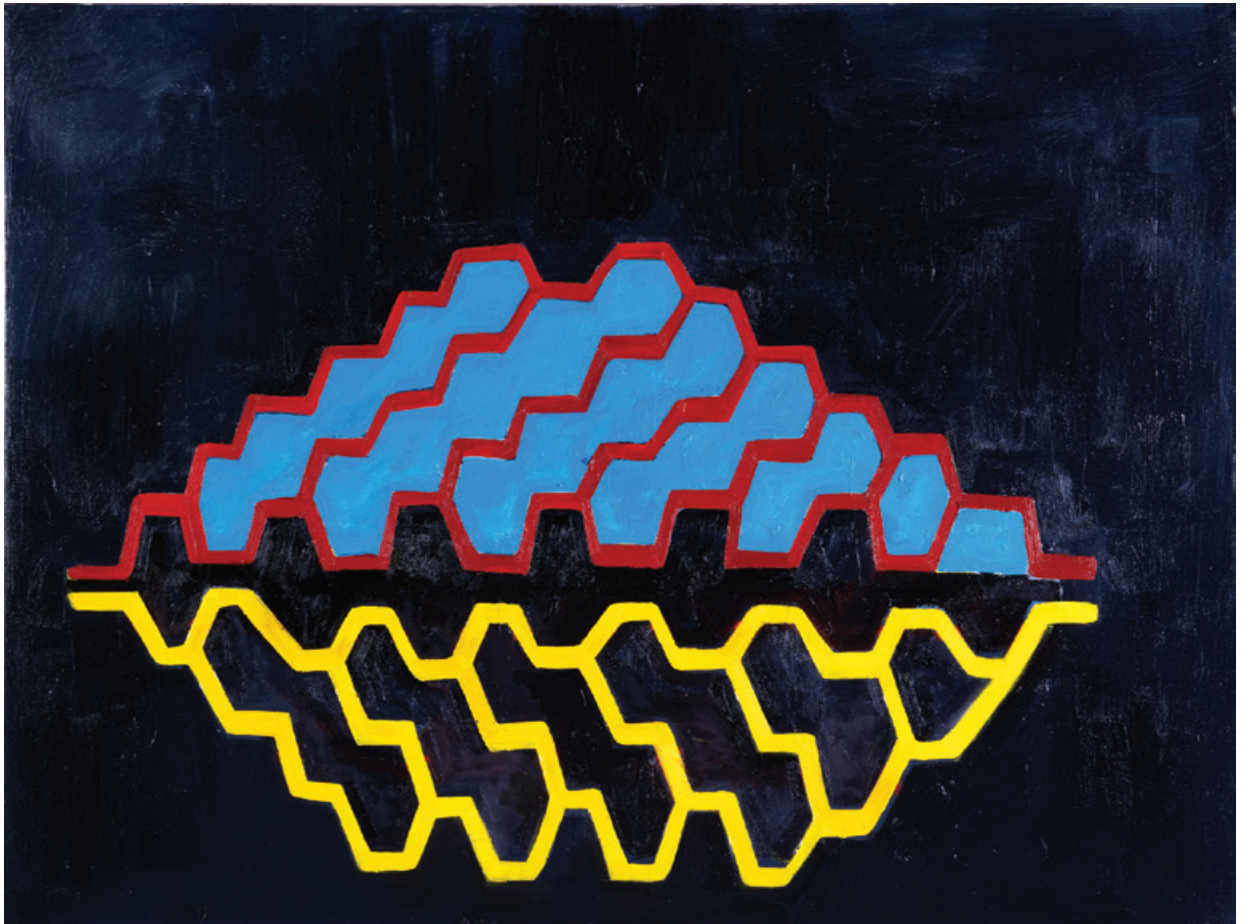


UNTITLED (#2729)
2013, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches



UNTITLED (#2725)

2013, oil on copper, 10 x 10 inches



UNTITLED (#2732)

2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



UNTITLED (#2734)
2013, oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches



UNTITLED (#2728)
2013, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 inches



UNTITLED (#2731)

2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches



UNTITLED (#2733)
2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches





TOM O'NEIL

Born 1966 New York, NY

EDUCATION

- 1984 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
- 1986 Apprentice to David Novros
- 1987 Apprentice to Red Grooms
- 1988 B.S. in Fine Art and Art History, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 "Standing on the Peel," Liebowitz Gallery, Simon's Rock at Bard College, Great Barrington, MA
- 2009 "The Flip Side," Lemmons Contemporary Art, New York, NY
Tremaine Art Gallery, Salisbury, CT
- 2007 "Possibilities and Advantages," Linda Durham Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
- 2006 "Transit," Lemmons Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 2005 "Recent Paintings," Linda Durham Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM
- 2004 "Recent Work," Lemmons Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 2003 "A Closer Look," Linda Durham Contemporary Art, Galisteo, NM
- 2002 "Moving Dialogue," Linda Durham Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 2001 "Narrative Elements," Linda Durham Contemporary Art, Galisteo, NM
- 2000 "Recent Paintings," Rule Contemporary, Denver, CO
- 1999 "Articulate Abstraction," Linda Durham Contemporary Art, Galisteo, NM
- 1998 "Remembering Abstraction," Megan Fox, Santa Fe, NM
- 1996 Megan Fox, Santa Fe, NM
- 1995 Megan Fox, Santa Fe, NM
- 1994 Roundabout Gallery, New York, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 "Double Vision," Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, MA
Knox Gallery, SoBe Art Club, Monterey, MA
- 2009 "Color and Form: The Language of Abstract Art," Berkshire Museum of Art, Pittsfield, MA
(two-person exhibition with Chuck Webster)
George Billis, Los Angeles, CA

- 2008 Lemmons Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 2000 Fair and Square, Governor's Gallery, State Capitol, Santa Fe, NM
- 1999 Rule Modern & Contemporary Gallery, Denver, CO
Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1997 The Reflected Spirit, Megan Fox, Santa Fe NM
- 1996 Chuck Levitan Gallery, New York, NY
- 1994 De Vorzon Gallery, Los Angeles, California
Lemieux Galleries, New Orleans, Louisiana
- 1992 Firestone Art Space, Santa Fe, NM

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Tim Kane, Times Union, "Color and Form' examines the impact of American abstract painting," Salisbury Magazine
- Dottie Indyke, Review, ARTnews, 2004
- Thompson Randall, Teri. "Visual Discourse," Pasatiempo, August 2001

CORPORATE AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

- Lawrence Benenson, Greenwich, CT
- Time Warner Inc. New York, NY
- Quad Ventures, New York, NY
- Altana, Bad Homburg, Germany
- Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, MO
- Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
- Asiel Corporation, New York, NY
- Smith Barney, New York, NY
- Paul Allen, Seattle, WA
- Brown Forman, Inc., Louisville, KY
- Cary Brown Interiors, New York, NY
- Susan Dupepe Interiors, Santa Fe, NM
- Maybelle Wolf Interiors, Pasadena, CA
- The Magazine, Santa Fe, NM
- Rosenthal, Zaretsky, Nieman & Company, Toronto, Ontario



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Cover: UNTITLED (#2730), (detail) 2013

oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches