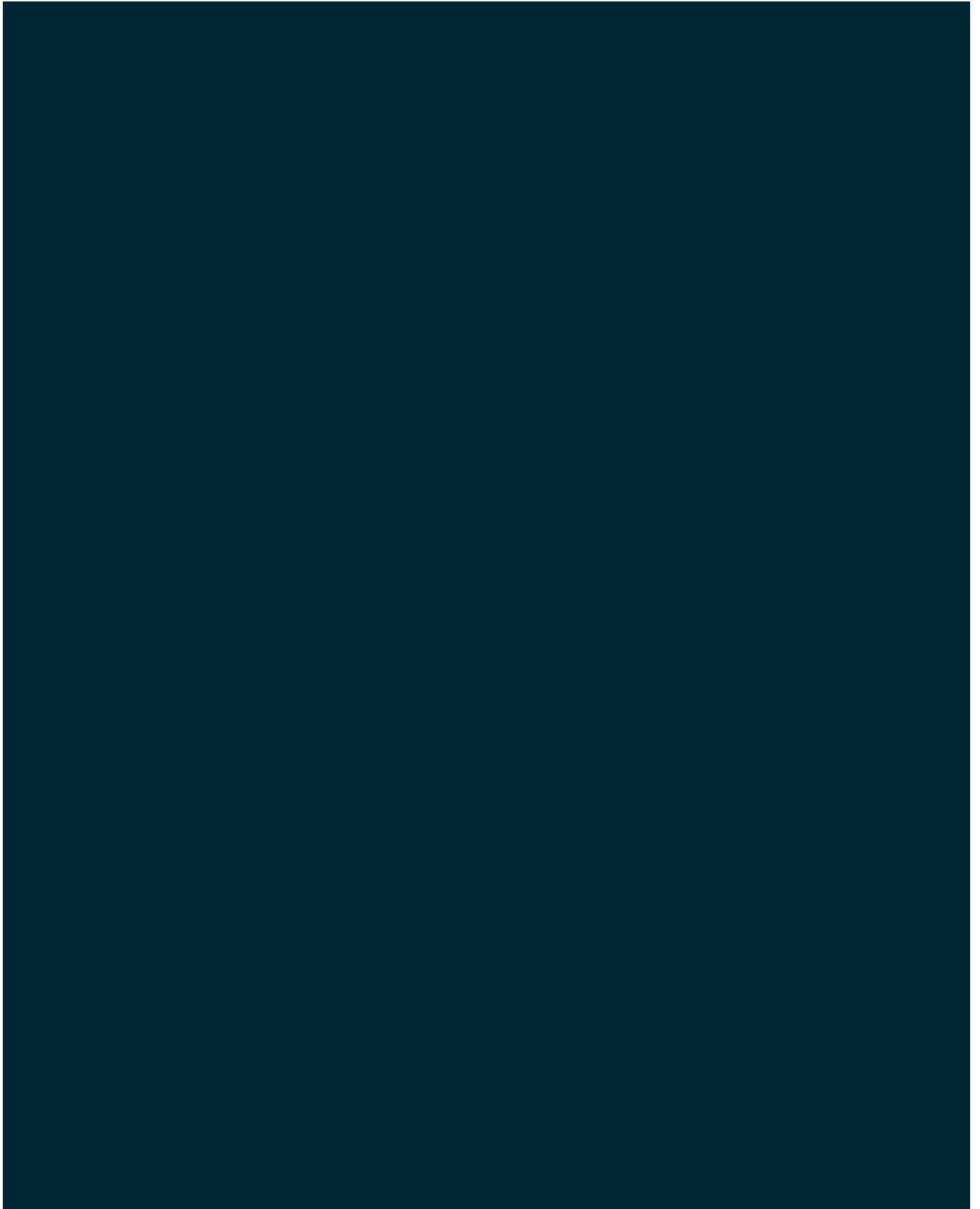


An abstract painting by Ellsworth Kelly, featuring a composition of bold, flat colors: bright green, dark navy blue, and vibrant blue. The shapes are organic and overlapping, creating a sense of depth and movement. The painting is set against a white background that has a subtle, irregular border, suggesting it might be a reproduction of a physical artwork.

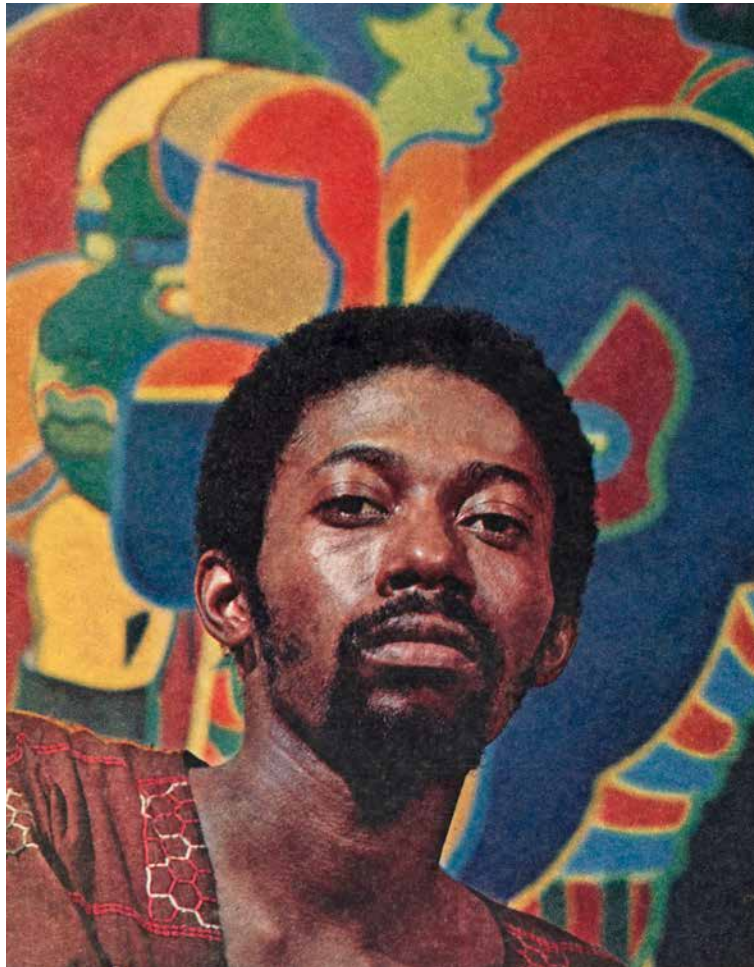
ELLSWORTH AUSBY  
SOMEWHERE IN SPACE

Paintings from the 1960s and 70s



**eric firestone gallery**

40 Great Jones Street New York, New York 10012 646 998 3727



# ELLSWORTH AUSBY SOMEWHERE IN SPACE

Paintings from the 1960s and 70s

Essay by Jessica Holmes

Eric Firestone Press  
2021



## Acknowledgments

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Eellsworth Ausby in his Williamsburg studio, Brooklyn, 1978. Photo by Blaise Tobia for the CCF CETA Artists Project. © Blaise Tobia, 2021.



## Ellsworth Ausby: Somewhere in (the Poetics of) Space

by Jessica Holmes

*The two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth. To designate space that has been experienced as affective space . . . does not, however, go to the root of space dreams. The poet goes deeper when he uncovers a poetic space that does not enclose us in affectivity. Indeed, whatever the affectivity that colors a given space, whether sad or ponderous, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened. Poetic space, because it is expressed, assumes values of expansion.*

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*<sup>1</sup>

Twin zigzags of painted canvas command the wall onto which they are affixed. The two sharp-edged, meticulously cut swatches are painted an amber color, and crackle with vitality in their irregular brushstrokes, as hints of pale green underpainting threaten to peek through the more flaxen areas of honey yellow. If poetic space assumes values of expansion, as Bachelard says, moving beyond space designated as affective, then artist Ellsworth Ausby's untitled painting from 1975 surely hits this mark. The piece fairly buzzes with dynamic energy, infused with the confident hand of an artist exquisitely attuned to the poetics of space.

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Untitled, detail, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 109 inches

Ellsworth Ausby (1942–2011) was born and raised in Portsmouth, Virginia. His artistic inclinations developed early, and by his teenage years his interest in making art blossomed. He left home at age eighteen and went north to New York City, where he completed high school at Erasmus Hall High in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Enrolling at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, Ausby earned a painting degree in 1965; he was among the first graduating class of four-year students. During his time there he studied under the abstract expressionist Richard Pousette-Dart, a denizen of the New York School, and George Ortman, whose geometric abstractions and hard-edge painting style had an exceptional impact on Ausby. His artistic training took place during a profoundly turbulent period in American history. With the Civil Rights Movement at the forefront of the nation's collective psyche, the young Black artist came of age.

Upon his graduation from SVA, Ausby immediately launched himself into New York's vibrant, multifarious creative community. He nurtured significant relationships with a number of other Black painters, such as Joe Overstreet and Gerald Jackson, who were actively working in New York at the time. Together, they formed a loosely affiliated group called Eclipse, which was given an exhibition at the Pan Am Building in the late 1960s, and another at the Loeb Student Center at New York University. Despite this, Eclipse disbanded after a short time chiefly because, as Ausby recounted in an interview with art critic Judd Tully, "It was very difficult to keep a group of artists together, particularly Black





Ellsworth Ausby, *Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 89½ x 41½ inches



*New Black Artists*, 1969 exhibition at Brooklyn Museum, New York. Ausby's *Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, 1969, is displayed alongside *Imperialism*, 1968. Photo courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Photography. New Black Artists. [10/07/1969–11/10/1969]. Installation view



Ellsworth Ausby



Exhibition pamphlet, *Recent Paintings: Ellsworth Ausby*, 1970 exhibition at Cinque Gallery, New York

artists, because it was extremely difficult to get any exposure or show space on the collective basis.<sup>2</sup> Also important to Ausby's formative years of painting were his friendships with musicians, who he noted had a "significant influence on my art."<sup>3</sup> The drummer Rashied Ali was Ausby's close confidante and one-time roommate; John and Alice Coltrane, Jackie McLean, and Archie Shepp were also friends. "The writers were alive and writing. The poets were poeting. The musicians were making music," Ausby told Tully of that period in New York. "It was a pretty healthy time and I enjoyed it."<sup>4</sup> Alongside these comrades and acquaintances, Ausby synthesized the conceptions of space recurrent in hard-edge painting with the

cadenced tempos or metered staccatos of improvised jazz, evolving his own artistic vernacular that sought to reach something beyond, to approach poetic space. His output in the 1960s was mainly figurative, though geometric from the outset. *Ancestral Spirit* (1969, plate 13) is representative of Ausby's work during that decade. The tall painting depicts a human-esque form, albeit one composed of straight-edged shapes: the head and torso are rectangles while the figure's bottom half is made up of a pair of pentagons and a triangle. The being projects a distinctly regal presence, perhaps conferred by the crown-like shape that hovers above its head. The bright colors in this work would come to be a hallmark

of Ausby's art. The title reflects his interest in both his African heritage and the contemporary artwork of the African diaspora. He shared this interest in the cultural heritage of Africa with many of his peers, who were likewise plumbing the continent's rich and diverse cultural offerings for connection, meaning, and inspiration, especially in light of the contentious political moment in America, in which they were maturing. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Black Americans had begun to contest the bigoted policies, structures, and frameworks that compelled them to live in a society that consistently denied them equal protections under the law while hypocritically espousing its egalitarian principles throughout the country and

around the world. By the time 1970 rolled around, the veneer of America's equitable milieu, which was really only a fragile façade to begin with, had been shattered by the stone of social unrest. That year also marked a turning point in Ausby's career. He was given his first one-man show, at Cinque Gallery, the legendary gallery in New York co-founded by Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Ernest Criclow, which championed contemporary Black artists. It was around this time that Ausby began to move away from figuration and toward abstraction. He also began to forgo stretching his canvases, instead preferring to staple finished pieces directly to the wall. The flux in Ausby's aesthetic between 1969



Ausby in front of *Dig That*, 1970, at the opening of his 1972 two-person exhibition with James Phillips at the Peale House Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Photo by Bruce Elliot Hirsch, courtesy of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Archives

and 1970 becomes evident in the current exhibition's juxtaposition of works. The dimensions of two untitled pieces, along with *Spirits Revisited #1*, all from 1969 (plates 10, 11, and 12), approximate those of *Ancestral Spirit*. The paintings are still on stretched canvas, but Ausby had begun to free his compositions from the constraints of representation, instead making room for spatial considerations. The variously patterned expressions cut across each canvas at a vertical diagonal, so that the works are infused with a distinct kinetic sensation.

In *Moving It*, *Dig That*, and *Passing Through* (plates 4, 7, and 18), three large paintings made the following year, one observes an even more definitive shift, most prominently in Ausby's use of the unstretched canvas. All three compositions are bisected by a horizontal line that runs across the center, which draws the eye

across in the same way, as opposed to the previous year's more vertical orientations. The landscape orientation is underscored by the forms rendered along each painting's equatorial line. The three works share a sense of movement akin to reading a sheet of music, albeit one composed of paint. The repeating forms that appear on each canvas are similar, though not identical, to one another, much as waves in an ocean are simultaneously alike and distinct. Ausby's patterns likewise develop an oceanic rhythm that contributes to the distinct musicality of these paintings. A final, significant aspect of these works is the artist's daring, innovative use of color. In *Dig That*, for instance, a field of marigold yellow is anchored along its center by lavender shapes rimmed in an electric lime green. The rolling, berry-colored forms of *Passing Through* streak over a sky-blue background, while



Cover for the catalog of *Contemporary Black Artists*, a 1971 exhibition held at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the catalog entry for *Untitled*, 1970, a painted wood sculpture by Ausby featured in the show

cloud-like contours of a more muted plum frame the canvas's central action, evoking, perhaps, a quick-moving summer thunderstorm. *Moving It*, meanwhile, seems to draw on the color schemes and motifs of traditional African textiles in its vibrant melon greens and pungent tomato reds. Ausby's deft synthesis of color, the use of hard-edged shapes, and irregular canvases, as well as allusions to his interests in both music and traditional African arts had begun to coalesce into a distinctive understanding of space.

Synchronous with the large 1970 paintings, Ausby also made *Totemconstruction* and a similarly configured untitled work (plates 8 and 9). Falling somewhere between painting and sculpture, the butterfly-esque structures hang from the wall and optically read as two-dimensional works when one faces them head-on. However, if the viewer approaches each of the works



*Untitled*, 1970, Painted wood, 82 x 24 x 24. Lent by the artist.

*Untitled*, 1971, 20 x 16 x 16. Lent by the artist.

from an angle it becomes clear that they are not flush with the wall's surface; rather, the central escutcheon of each form protrudes via a small support structure built out from the bottom. This was not Ausby's only foray into working in three dimensions that year. He also constructed a large untitled wood sculpture (plate 19) that was exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art's landmark 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. Later, this sculpture became, in Ausby's words, a "catalyst for production," when he was commissioned by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) artist program (a federally funded relief program that helped employ working artists during the 1970s recession) to arrange and organize a multimedia performance event, in 1978, entitled *InnerSpace/OuterSpace*.<sup>5</sup> It's a remarkable confluence of Ausby's





Dancers in Ellsworth Ausby's studio rehearsing for *InnerSpace/OuterSpace*, a multimedia performance piece directed by Ausby and featuring his sculpture, New York, 1978. Photo by Blaise Tobia for the CCF CETA Artists Project. © Blaise Tobia, 2021



*Afro-American Abstraction*, 1980 exhibition at P.S.1, Long Island City, New York. Ausby's *Space Odyssey*, 1980 is displayed alongside works by Melvin Edwards. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

interests that these earlier sculptural experiments became the inspiration for an even more sophisticated exploration of temporal space, with *InnerSpace/OuterSpace*—that is, of dancers moving through and making use of a given territory, set to time and music.

Throughout the 1970s, Ausby continued his practice of stapling the canvas directly to the wall, and also reimagined the rectangular canvases themselves. Works from the middle of the decade, such as *Shabazz* (1974, plate 5), articulate just how far he was willing to push his forms. A reference to an ancient and regal Black tribe, which members of the Nation of Islam believe established the first populations in Africa, the title was also the surname that Civil Rights leader Malcolm X adopted after his conversion to Islam, and is widely understood as a designation of power and

strength. Composed of several intricately cut pieces of canvas, *Shabazz* has winged shapes that make up flanks that mirror one another, so that as the viewer gazes at the work, it seems to struggle against itself in opposite directions, with only the central, horizontal strip of canvas holding it in place.

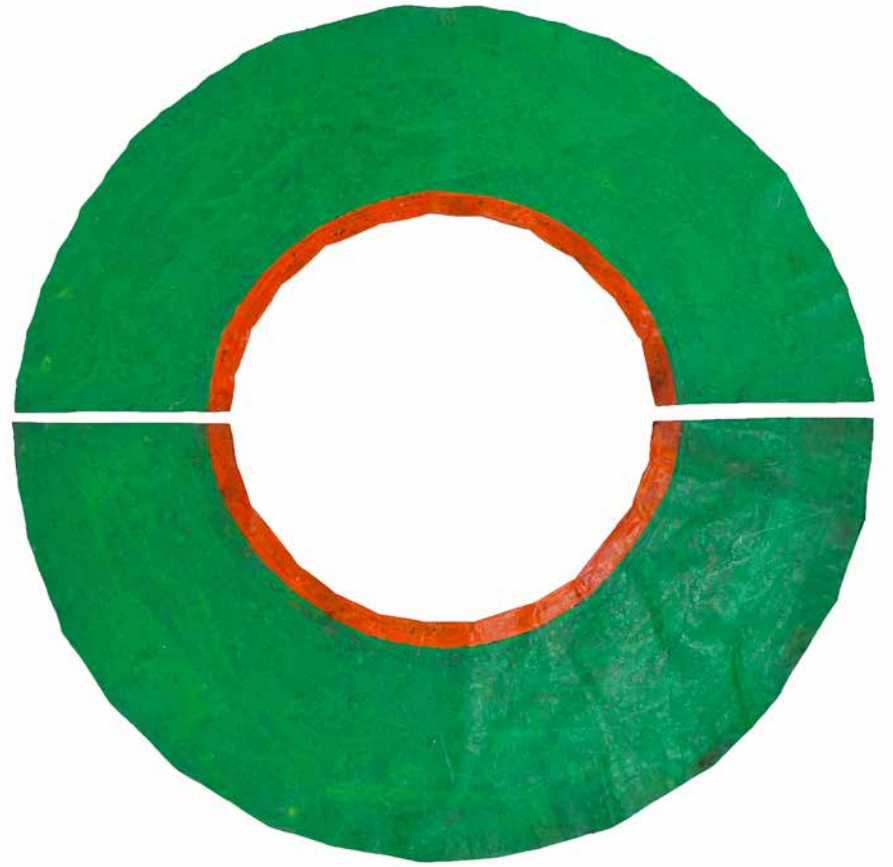
As the 1970s drew to a close, Ausby's conceptions of space continued to evolve. In 1980 he made *Space Odyssey* (plate 14), a significant work in his oeuvre which was exhibited in *Afro-American Abstraction*, a landmark survey shown at P.S.1 that same year. It was partially inspired by the mystical Sun Ra, whom Ausby had known in the mid-1960s, when the avant-garde musician and his band, the Arkestra, played regularly at the legendary East Village club Slugs' Saloon, which the artist also frequented. Ra—who claimed to have

had, as a young man, an out-of-body experience that temporarily transported him to Saturn—had a profound connection to space, and notions of the infinite. Like many of his 1970s paintings, *Space Odyssey* is comprised of a number of cut canvas forms stapled to the wall, but this work stands out for its especially complex construction. It sprawls across the wall in an impressive sixteen feet in length. Though abstract, its composition alludes to the extraterrestrial: a close reading of the piece might suggest images of UFOs in the popular imagination, or even the vague outline of Saturn itself. Poignantly, a lone, circular dot of canvas, which is affixed to the wall about two feet below the rest of the composition, completes *Space Odyssey*. The small piece feels as if it orbits the larger forms, drawn to it as gravity draws the moon continually

around the earth. Ausby would continue making works he titled *Space Odyssey*, or that otherwise refer to the cosmos, throughout his career. This includes the spectacular public art project he was commissioned to make in 2004, a stained-glass triptych that graces the Marcy Avenue MTA station in Brooklyn. But it was here, at the tail end of the 1970s, that Ausby began even more grandly assuming the values of expansion, and broadening the vocabulary of his poetic space.

#### Notes

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 201.
- 2 Judd Tully, unpublished interview with Ellsworth Ausby, July 26, 1978.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.

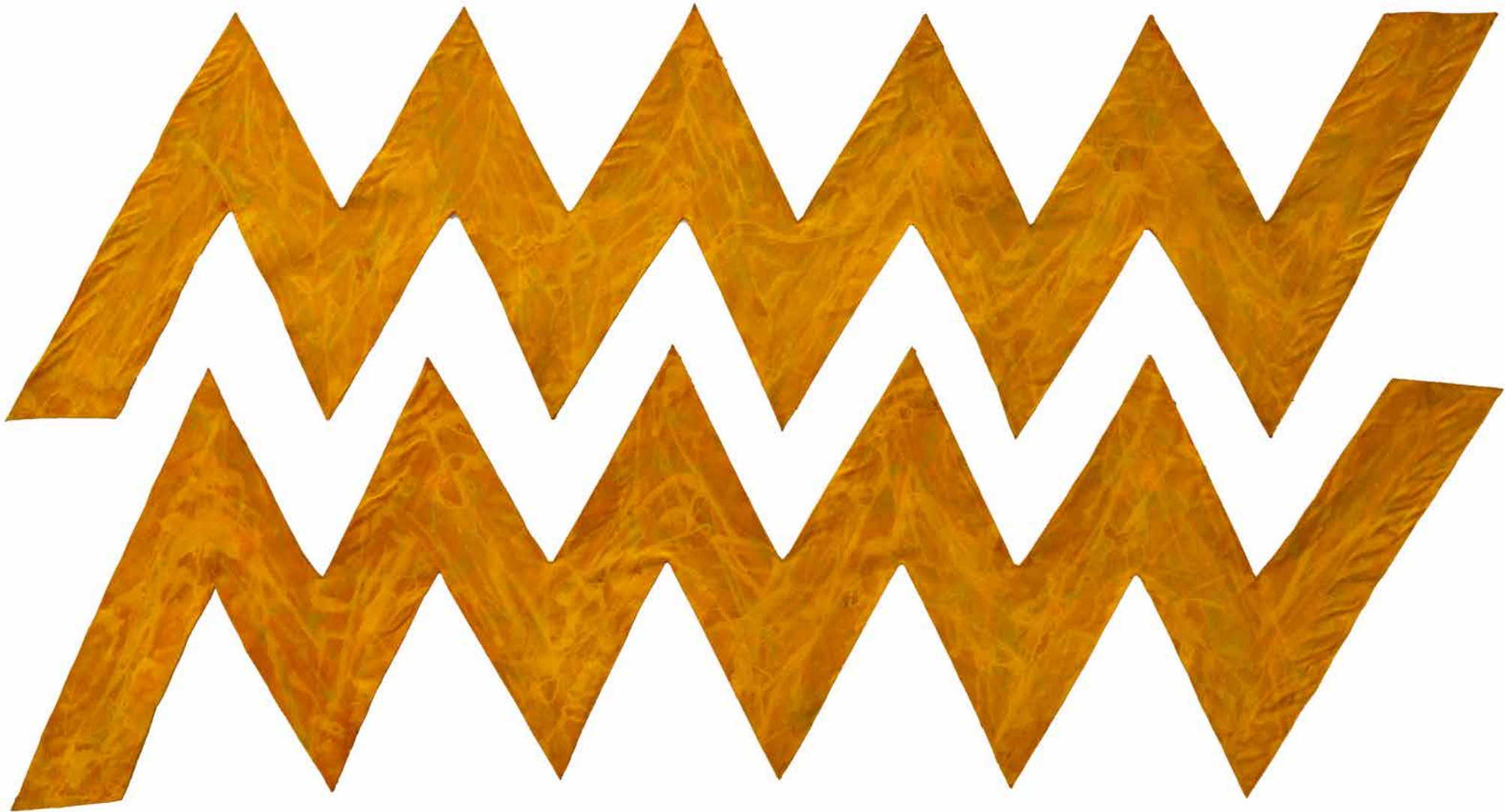


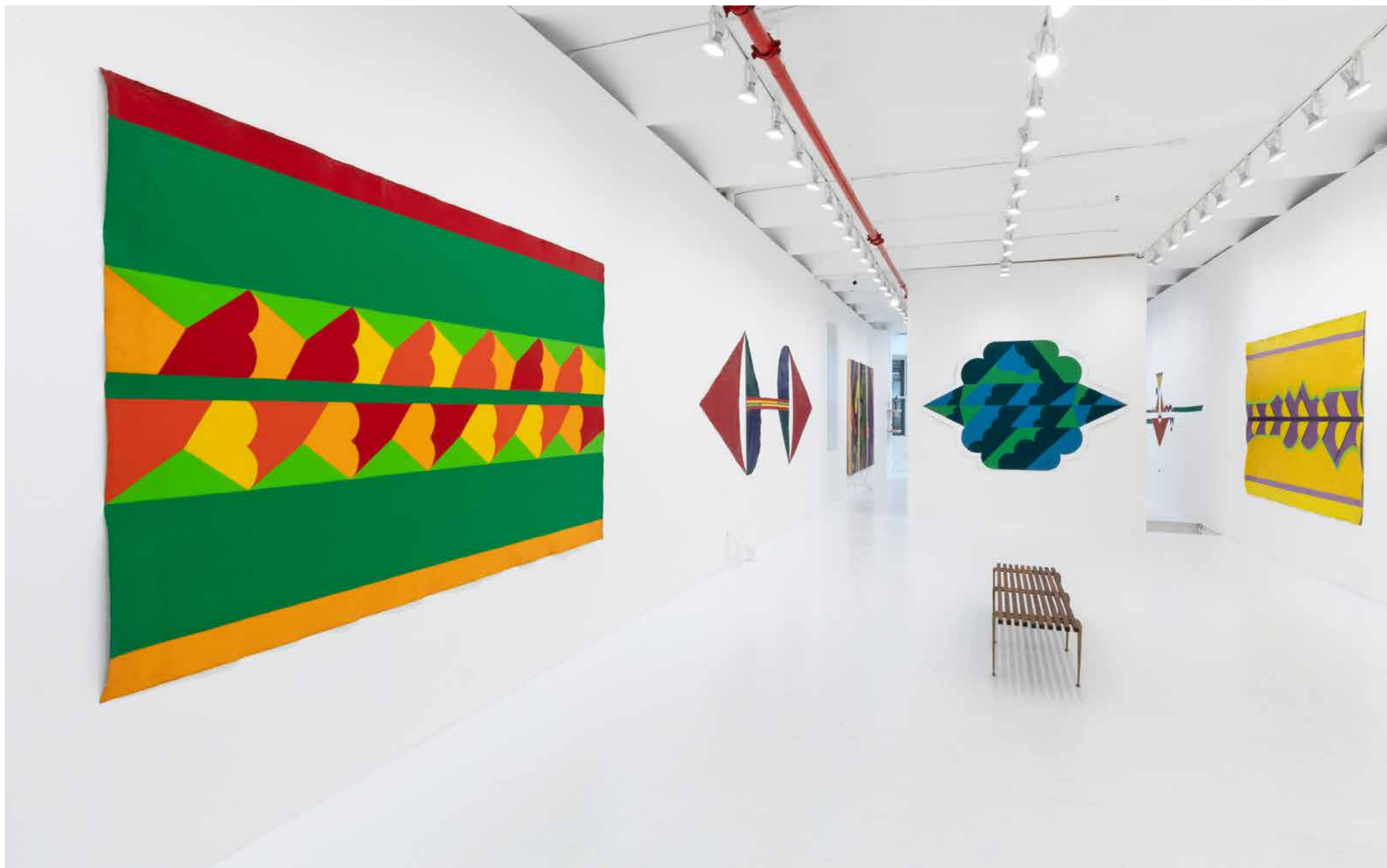
1

**C. REFLEXION** 1975  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
65 X 65 INCHES

2

FOLLOWING SPREAD  
**UNTITLED** 1975  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
66 X 109 INCHES









3

**UNTITLED** 1971  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
72 X 104 INCHES

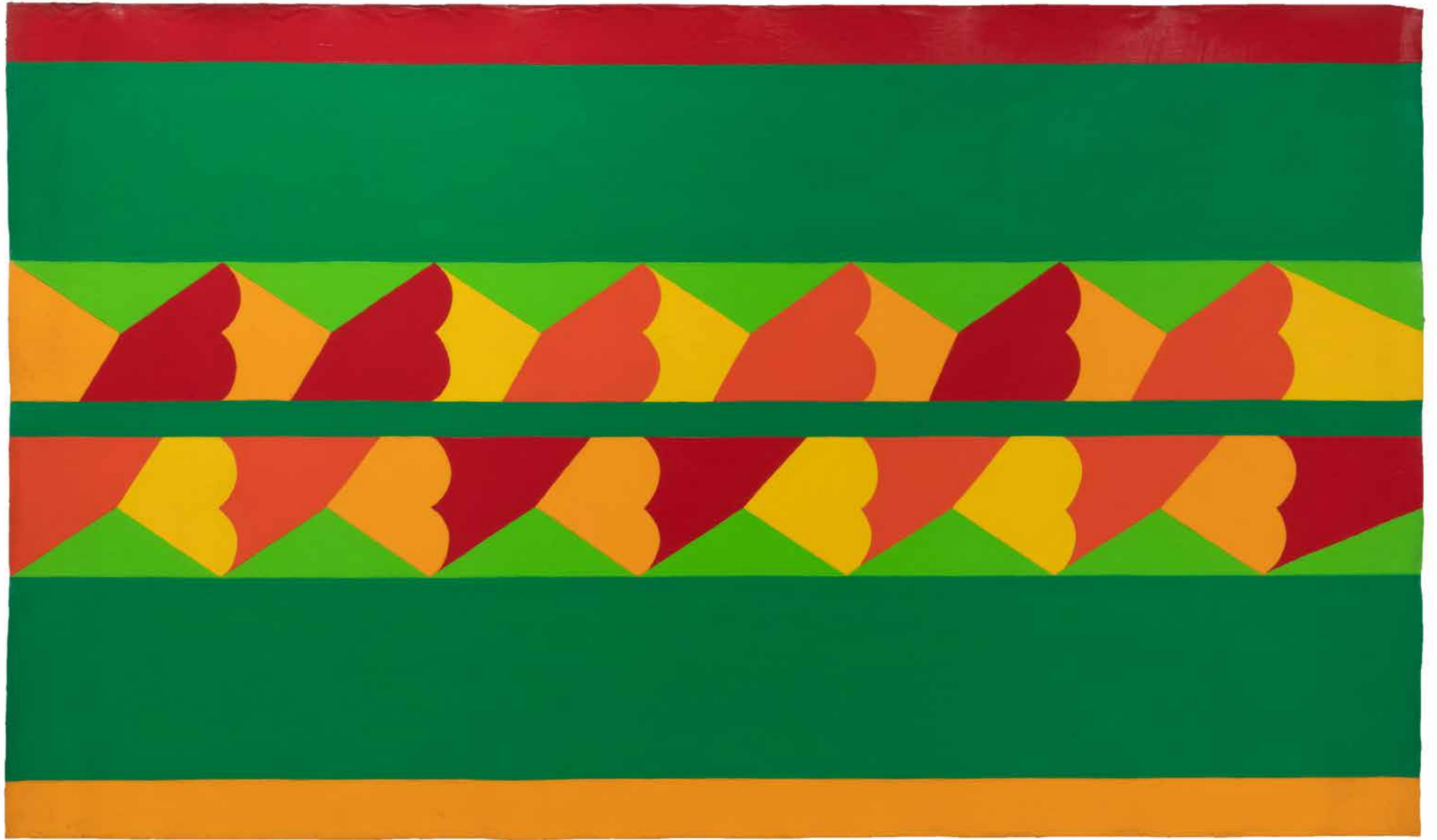
4

FOLLOWING SPREAD  
**MOVING IT** 1970  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
71 X 121 INCHES

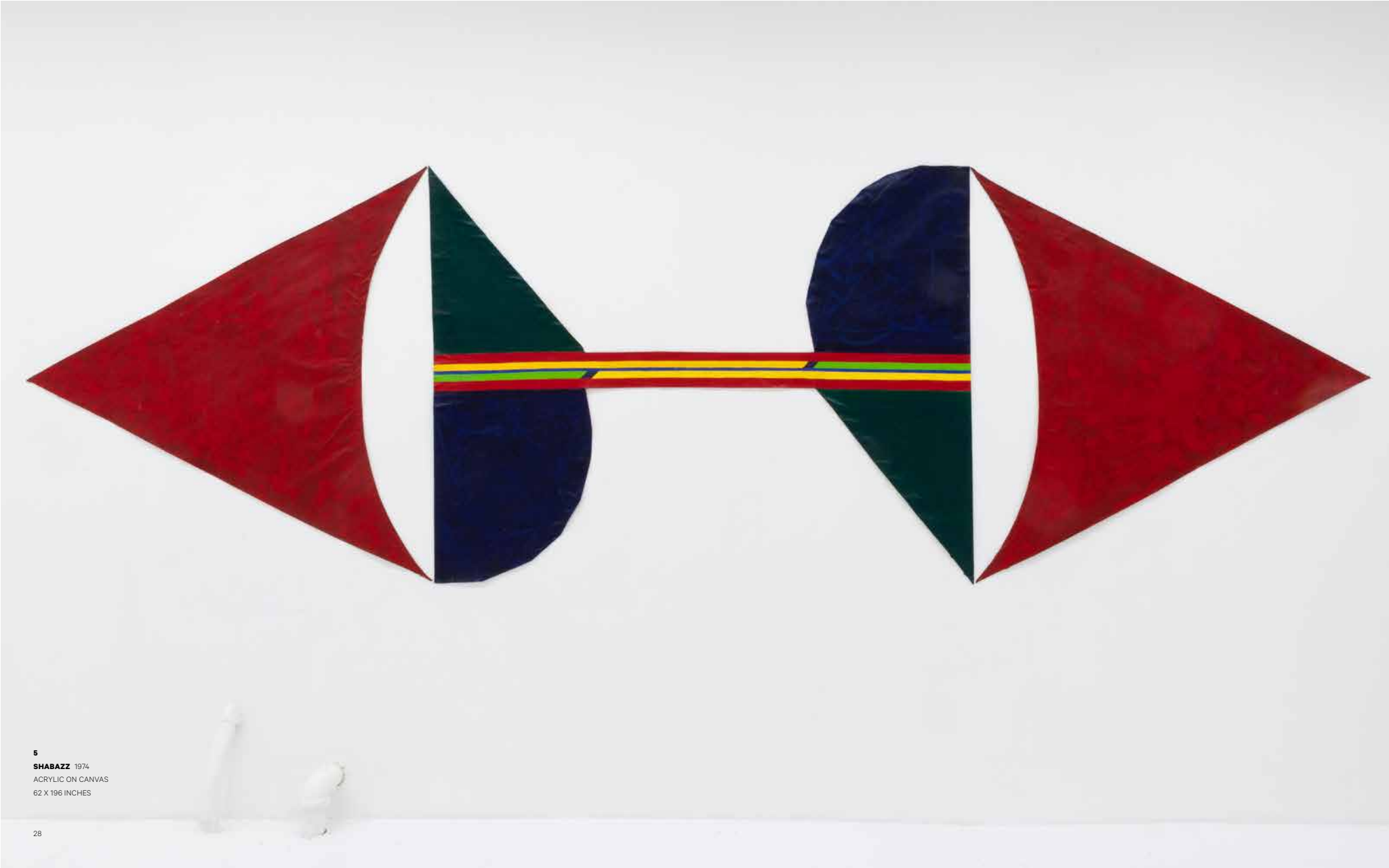
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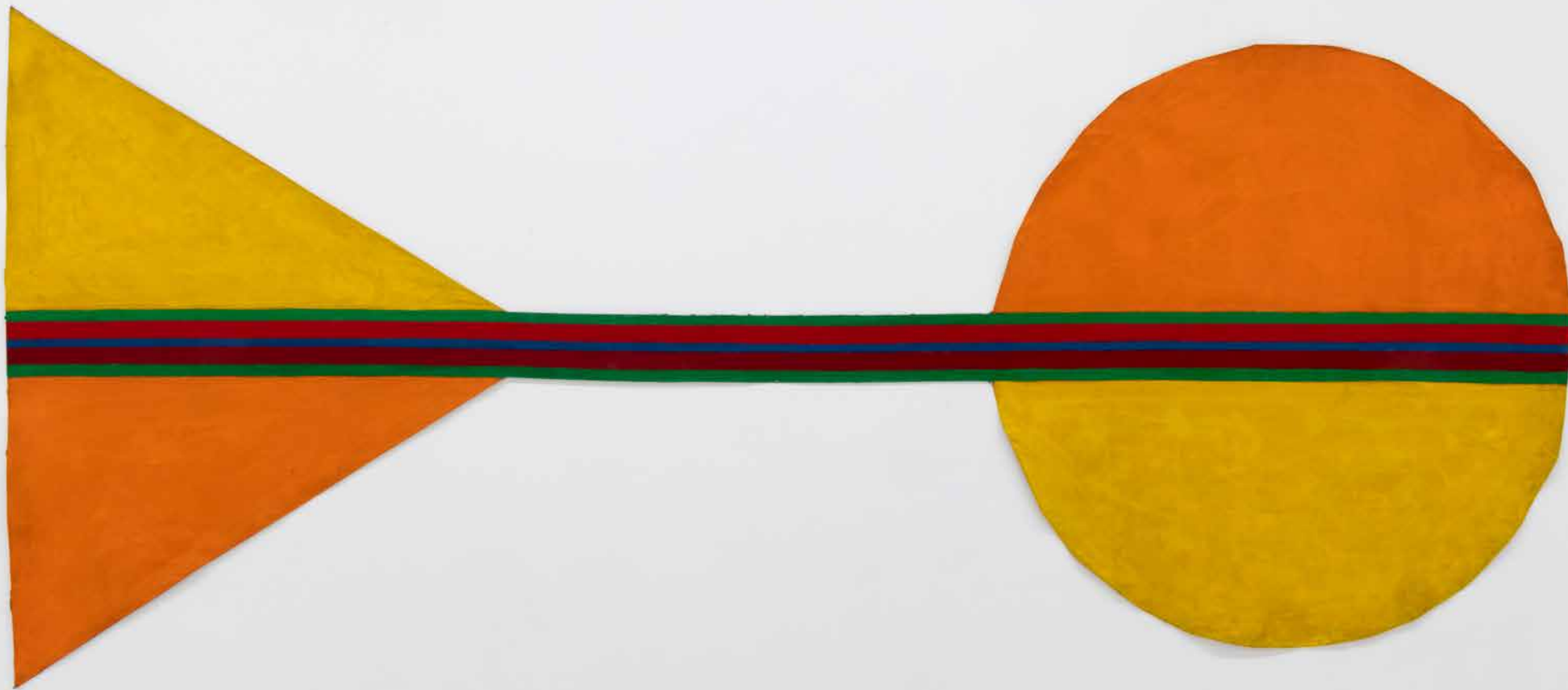




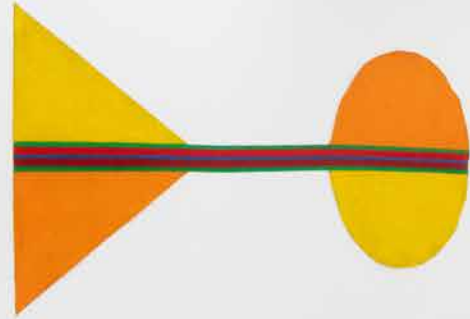


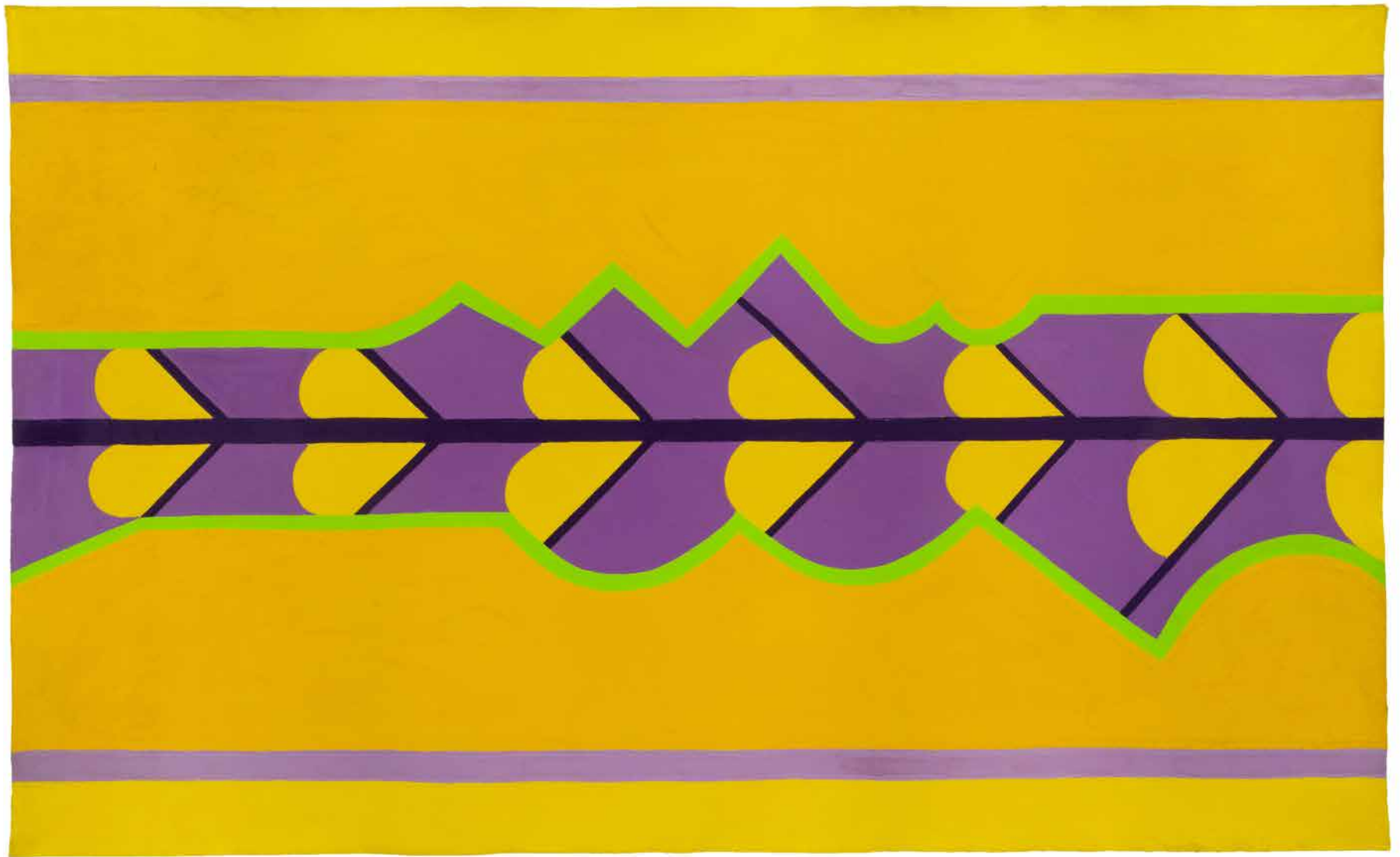


5  
**SHABAZZ** 1974  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
62 X 196 INCHES



6  
**UNTITLED** 1974  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
59 X 131½ INCHES





7  
**DIG THAT** 1970  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
71 X 116 INCHES

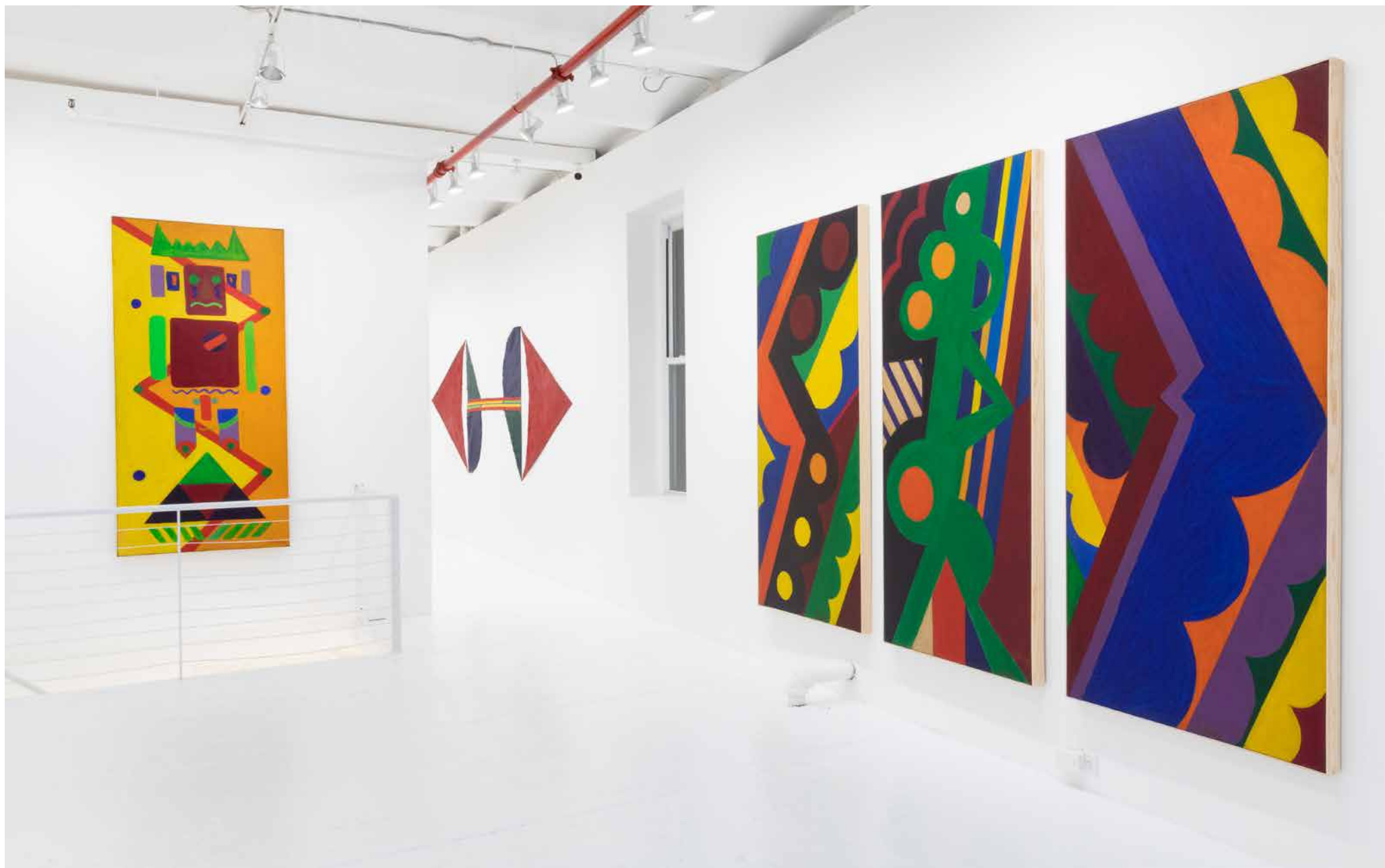




8  
**TOTEMCONSTRUCTION** 1970  
ACRYLIC ON BOARD ON WOOD  
24 X 30 X 7 INCHES



9  
**UNTITLED** 1970  
ACRYLIC ON PAPER ON BOARD  
16 X 36 X 8 INCHES



10

**UNTITLED** 1969  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
89½ X 41½ INCHES



11

**UNTITLED** 1969  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
89½ X 41½ INCHES



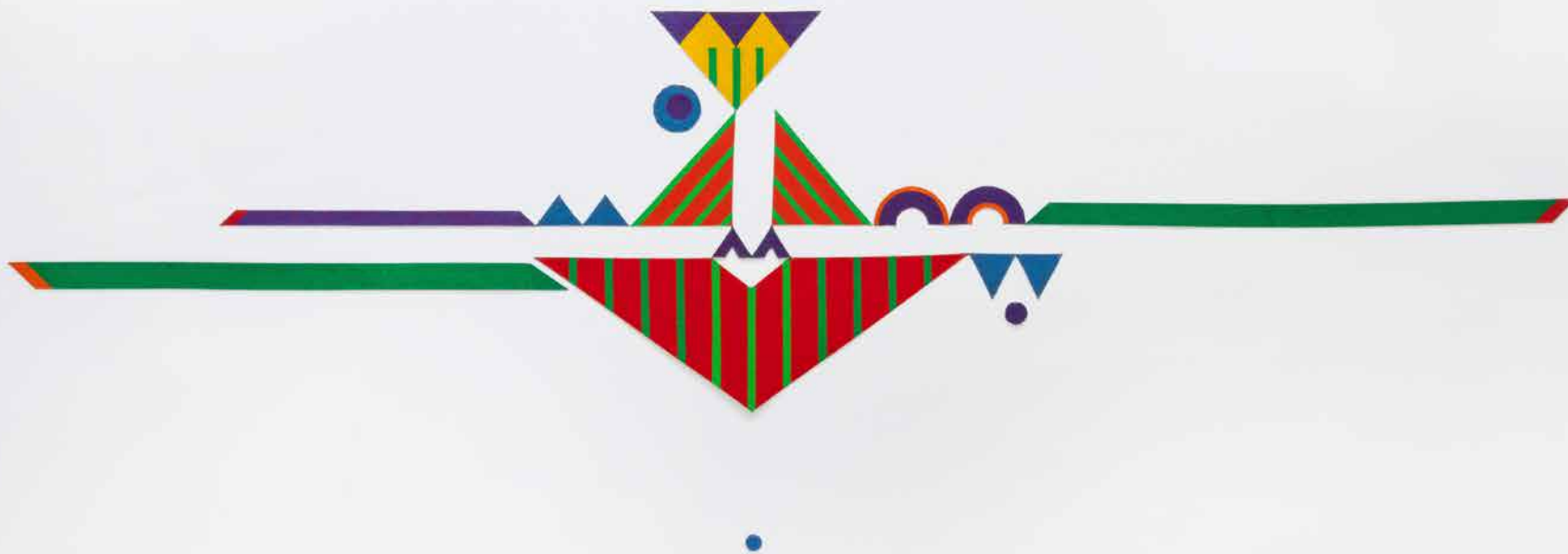
12

**SPIRITS REVISITED #1** 1969  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
89½ X 41½ INCHES



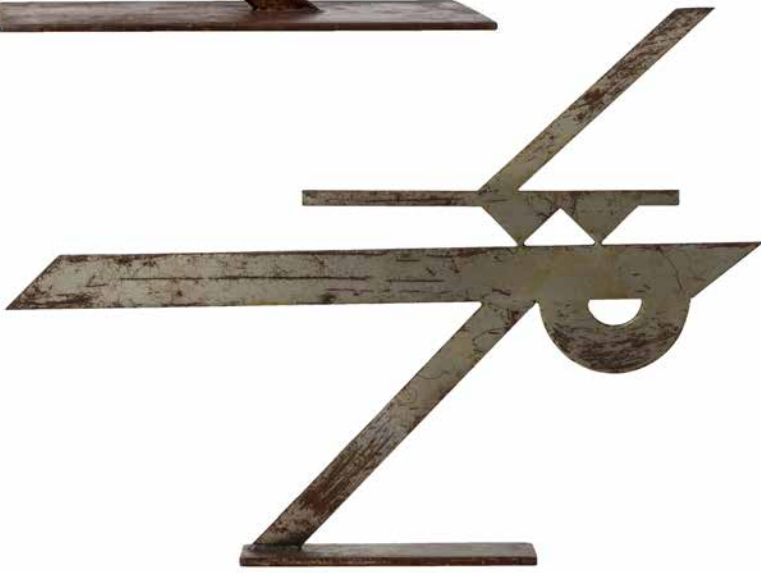
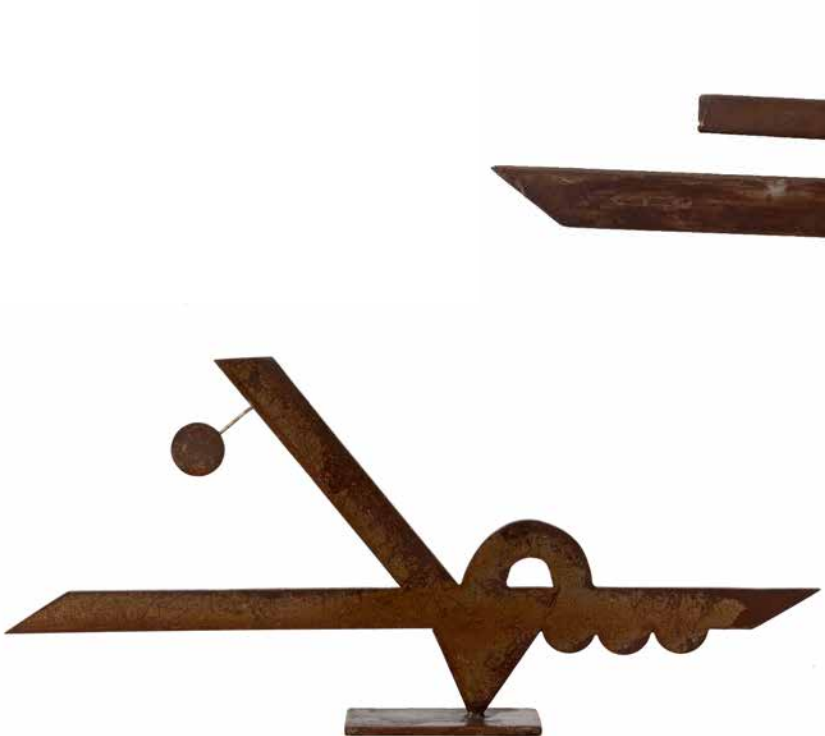
13  
**ANCESTRAL SPIRIT** 1969  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
89½ X 41½ INCHES





14  
**SPACE ODYSSEY** 1980  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
72 X 192 INCHES

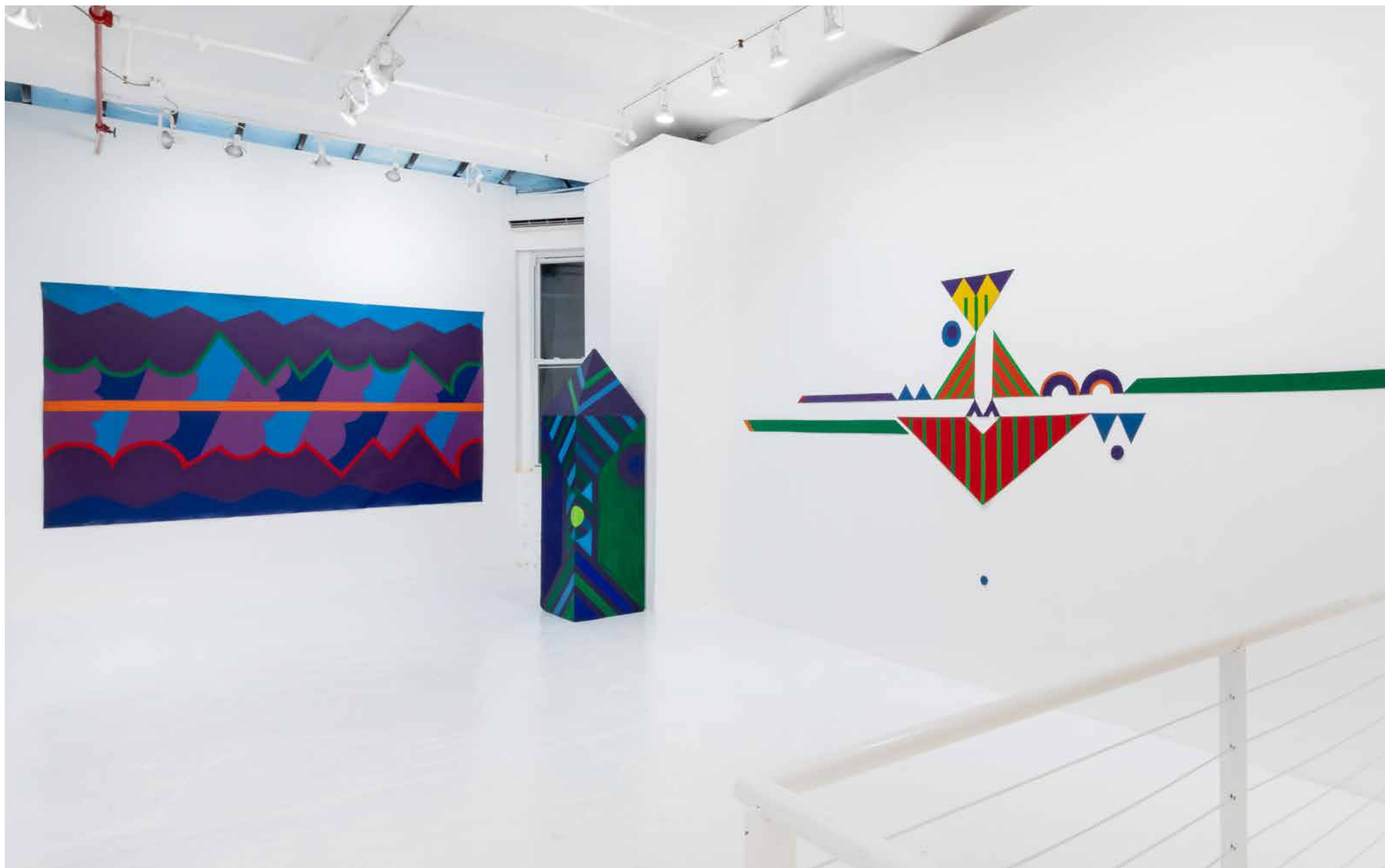


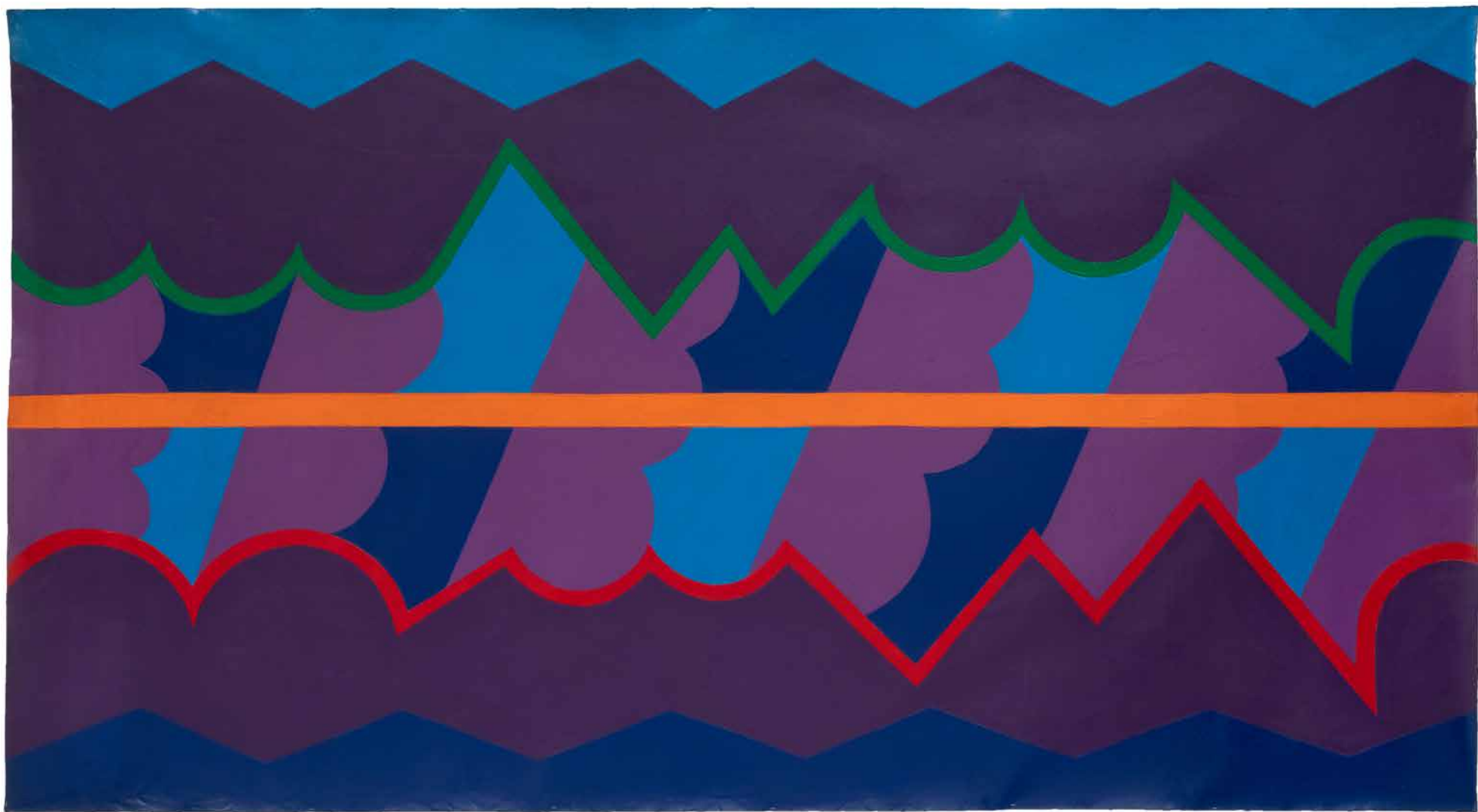


15  
UNTITLED 1976  
STEEL  
7 X 15 X 2 INCHES

16  
UNTITLED 1976  
STEEL  
14 X 30 X 6 INCHES

17  
UNTITLED 1976  
STEEL  
10X X 14 X 13/4 INCHES







18

PRECEDING SPREAD  
**PASSING THROUGH** 1970  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
71½ X 131 INCHES

19

**UNTITLED** 1970  
PAINTED WOOD  
82 X 34 X 24 INCHES



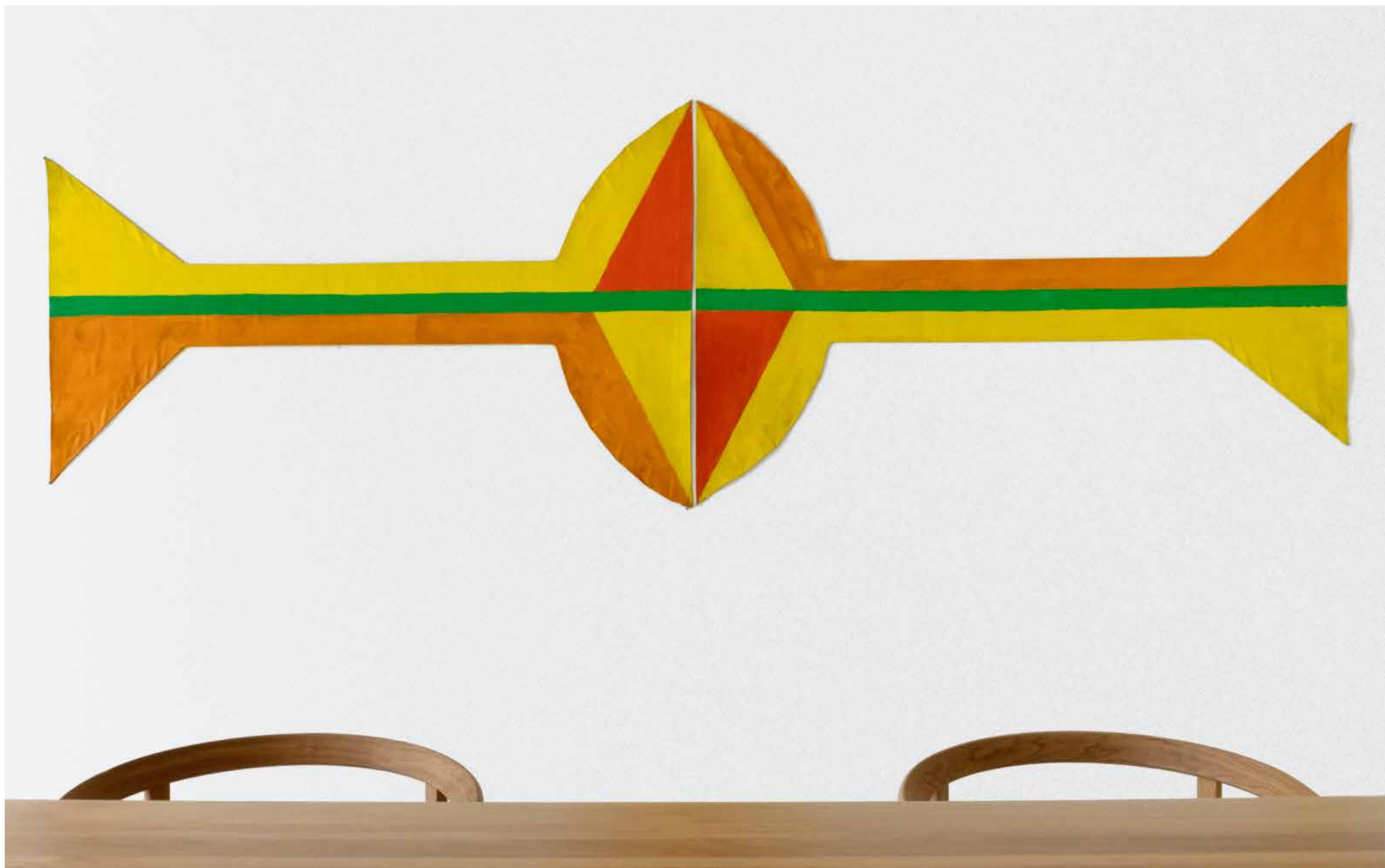


20  
**SUNRISE SUNSET** 1974  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
67 X 99 INCHES



21  
FOLLOWING SPREAD  
**UNTITLED** 1974  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
37 X 124 1/2 INCHES







**Ellsworth Ausby** b. Portsmouth, VA, 1942; d. 2011

**EDUCATION**

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY  
School of Visual Arts, New York  
American Art School

**SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2021 *Ellsworth Ausby: Somewhere in Space*, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York, NY
- 2012-13 *Our Ausby*, Corridor Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2003 *Family* (with wife, Jamillah Jennings), Corridor Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 1998 Passaic County Community College, Paterson, NJ (Two-person show with Jamillah Jennings)
- 1984 *Ellsworth Ausby: new works*, Pratt Center Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 1982 *Ellsworth Ausby: Recent Paintings*, Cayman Gallery, New York, NY
- 1978 *Inner Space Outer Space*, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY
- 1975 Soho Center for Visual Arts, New York, NY
- 1973 37 Broadway, Brooklyn, NY  
Artist House, New York, NY
- 1972 *Ellsworth Ausby and James Phillips: Paintings*, Peale House Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- 1970 *Recent Paintings: Ellsworth Ausby*, Cinque Gallery, New York, NY

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 2019 *The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection*, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
- 2016 *Abstract Expressions: Selected Works from the New Jersey State Museum*, The College of New Jersey Art Museum, Trenton, NJ
- 2015 *Lasting Legacies: Ellsworth Ausby, Xenobia Bailey, Honey Kassoy and Olga Kitt*, Longwood Art Gallery, Bronx Council on the Arts, Bronx, NY
- 2014 *I Kan Do Dat*, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, NY; Skylight Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; Salena Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2004 SONYA Group Show, Robert Lehman Gallery, Urban Glass, Brooklyn, NY
- 2000 *Blackness in Color: Visual Expressions of the Black Arts Movement (1960 to present)*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
- 1999 *Black New York Artists of the 20th Century: Selections from the Schomburg Center Collections*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY  
*Montage of a Dream*, Kansas City Jazz Museum, Kansas City, MO
- 1995 Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, Reichhold Center for the Arts, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands  
*African-American Printmakers: WPA to the Present*, Gettysburg College Gallery, Gettysburg, PA

- 1987 *With and Without Acclaim*, Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ
- 1984 Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS  
Port of History Museum, Philadelphia, PA  
The Arts for Living Center, New York, NY  
*Afro-American Art in Atlanta*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA  
The New York State Governor's Office, New York, NY
- 1980-84 *Afro-American Abstraction*, MoMA PS1, Queens, NY; Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; The Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA; The Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, TN; The Art Center, South Bend, IN; Laguna Gloria Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, WA; Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH
- 1979-80 *Rock Paper Scissors: An Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints and Painted Tiles*, PATH 9th Street Station, New York, NY
- 1979 *Universal Units: Ellsworth Ausby, James Phillips, Alfred James Smith*, Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, Philadelphia, PA  
*Art Works*, Diane Brewer, New York, NY  
*Plane Frames: Abstract Painting*, Arthur A. Houghton Gallery, The Cooper Union School of Art, New York, NY  
*New York Artists: New Sensibilities*, 22 Wooster Gallery, New York, NY
- 1978 *New Visual Explorations: Ellsworth Ausby, Jim Phillips, Oko Pyatt*, Consortium Gallery, New York, NY  
*CETA Artists*, The Newhouse Community Gallery, Staten Island, NY  
*Wall Works*, Alternative Center for International Arts, New York, NY  
*FESTAC '77 Reunion Exhibition of New York Artists*, Henry O. Tanner Gallery, New York, NY  
*The Cultural Council Foundation Artist Project Exhibition*, Pleiades Gallery, New York, NY  
*New York Artists*, United States Mission to the United Nations, New York, NY  
*Small Works in Color*, United States Federal Courthouse, New York, NY  
*CETA Artists Mixed Media Exhibition*, United States Courthouse, New York, NY  
*Introduction to Contemporary Black Art*, West Court Garden, The Heritage Club  
*The First Water Presents Black Perspectives in the Arts*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Junior Museum Auditorium, New York, NY
- 1977 *Contemporary Black Art: A Selected Sampling*, Florida International University, Miami, FL  
*FESTAC '77: 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture*, Lagos, Nigeria
- 1974-77 *Contemporary Reflections 1973-74*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art

- Museum, Ridgefield, CT; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery AL; Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, CA; Kip Gallery, Indiana, PA; University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI; The Cummer Gallery of Art, Jacksonville, FL; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL
- 1974 *Directions in Afro-American Art*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
- 1973 *Millennium*, Philadelphia Civic Center, Philadelphia, PA
- 1971 *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
*Some American History*, The DeLuxe Black Arts Center and Rice University, Houston, TX; University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, TX
- 1970 *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
*Fifteen under Forty: Paintings by Young New York State Black Artists*, Gallery Museum, Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Saratoga Springs, NY; Reading Public Museum, Reading, PA
- 1969 *New Black Artists*, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; The Urban Center, Columbia University, New York, NY  
*Lower East Side Co-Operative Artists in Residence Festival*, Jacob Riis Park Plaza, Queens, NY  
Art Center Gallery, Stout State University, Menomonee, WI  
Tompkins Square Gallery, presented by Real Great Society and Eclipse, New York, NY
- 1968 Finch College Museum, New York, NY

**SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

- Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT  
American Embassy, Nigeria  
Menil Collection, Houston, TX  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY  
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

**TEACHING**

- 1979-2011 School of Visual Arts

**SELECTED COMMISSIONS**

- 2005 A Space Odyssey, Marcy Avenue Station, BMT Nassau Street-Jamaica Line, New York City Transit
- 1980-81 Space Odyssey, New York City College of Technology, Brooklyn, NY
- 1980 Space Odyssey, Howard Johnson's, Queens, NY

**GRANTS**

- 1983-84 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
- 1980 Creative Artists Public Service Fellowship
- 1979 CETA Artists Project Grant
- 1978 CETA Artists Project Grant

Ausby draped in a piece of *C. Reflection*, 1975,  
in his Williamsburg studio, 1978, Brooklyn.  
Photo by Blaise Tobia for the CCF CETA Artists  
Project. © Blaise Tobia, 2021



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Frontispiece: Ellsworth Ausby in front of his painting *Reptiles*, 1968.

Photo by Doug Harris, courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian  
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