



THE  
DRAWING  
CENTER

99

Sean Scully

*Change and Horizontals*











Timothy Taylor Gallery  
London, UK  
January 13–February 11, 2012

Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art  
Middlesbrough, UK  
March 2–July 8, 2012

Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea  
Rome, Italy  
March 14–June 9, 2013

The Drawing Center  
New York, NY  
September 26–November 10, 2013



Sean Scully

*Change and Horizontals*

*Curated by*

Joanna Kleinberg *and* Brett Littman



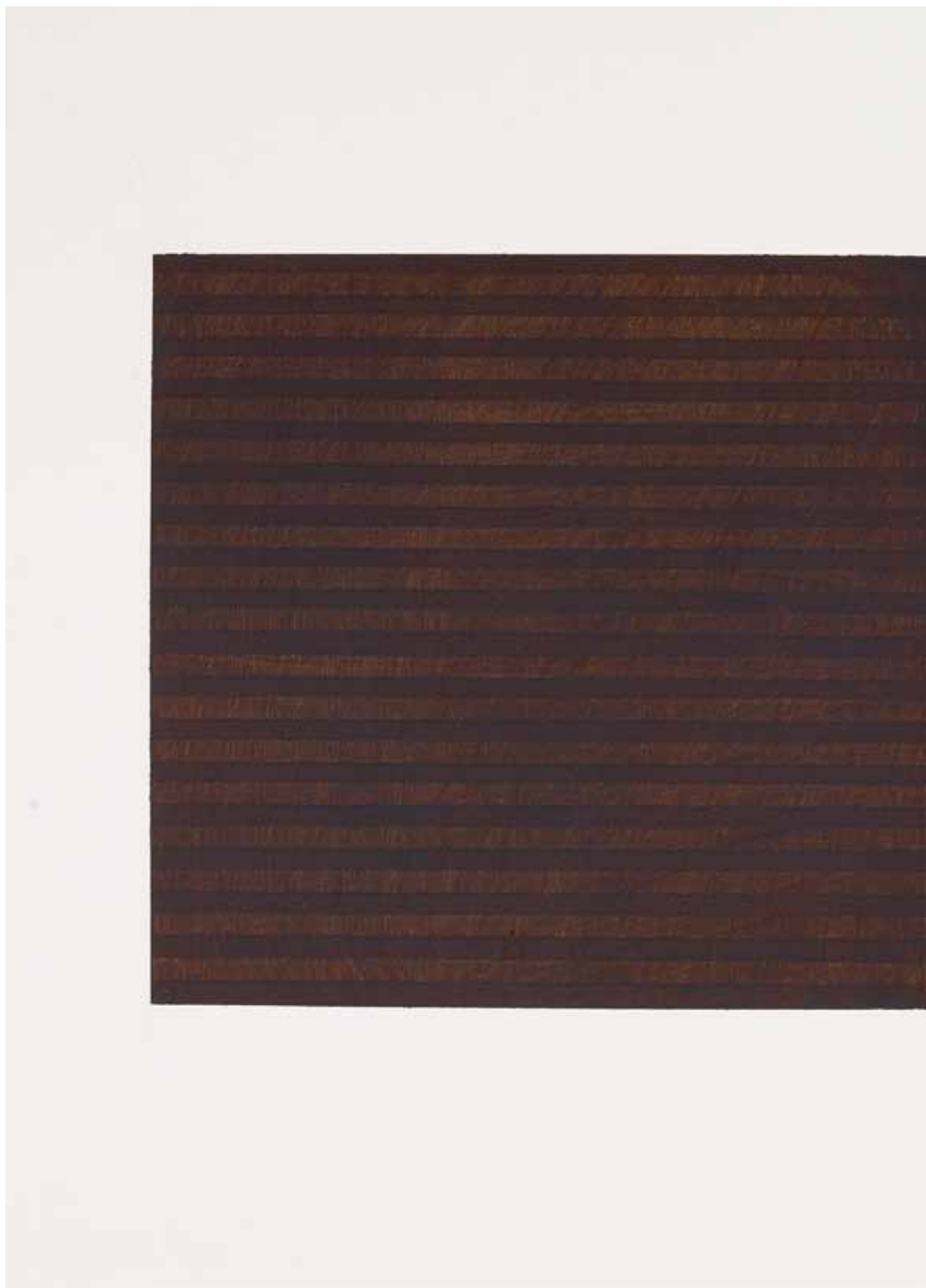




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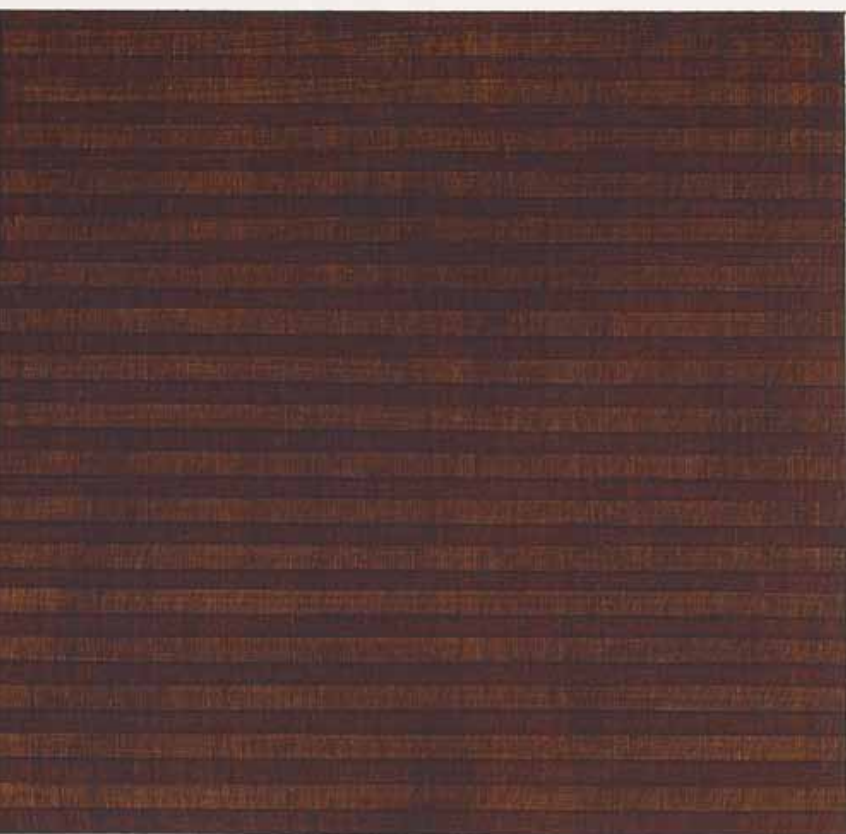
*Essay by* Joanna Kleinberg *and* Brett Littman  
*Story by* Colm Tóibín



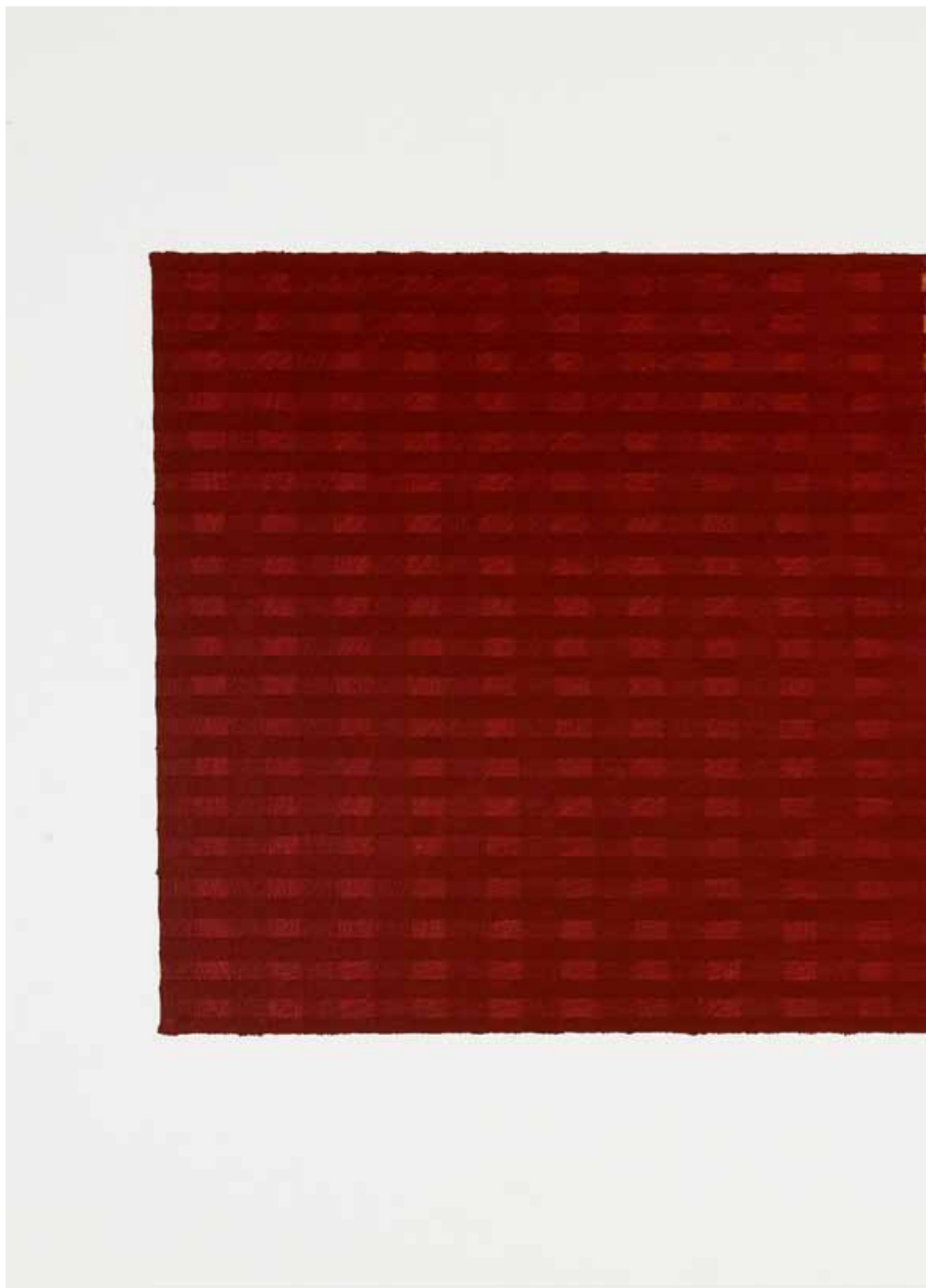


PL. 1  
*Change #5*, 1975



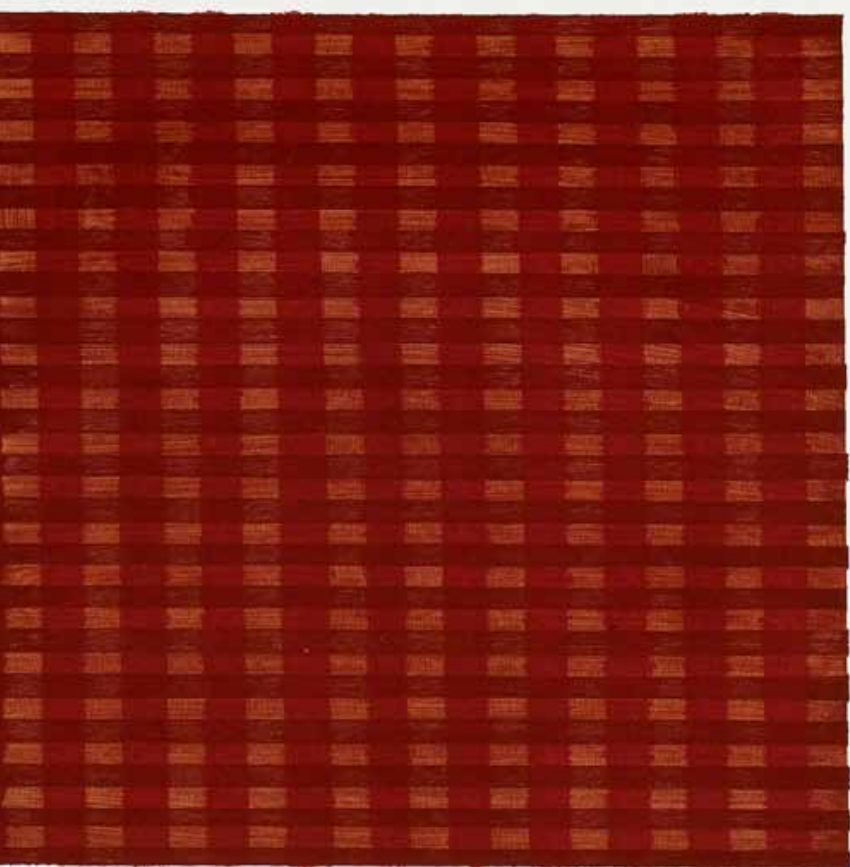






PL. 2  
*Change #7, 1975*





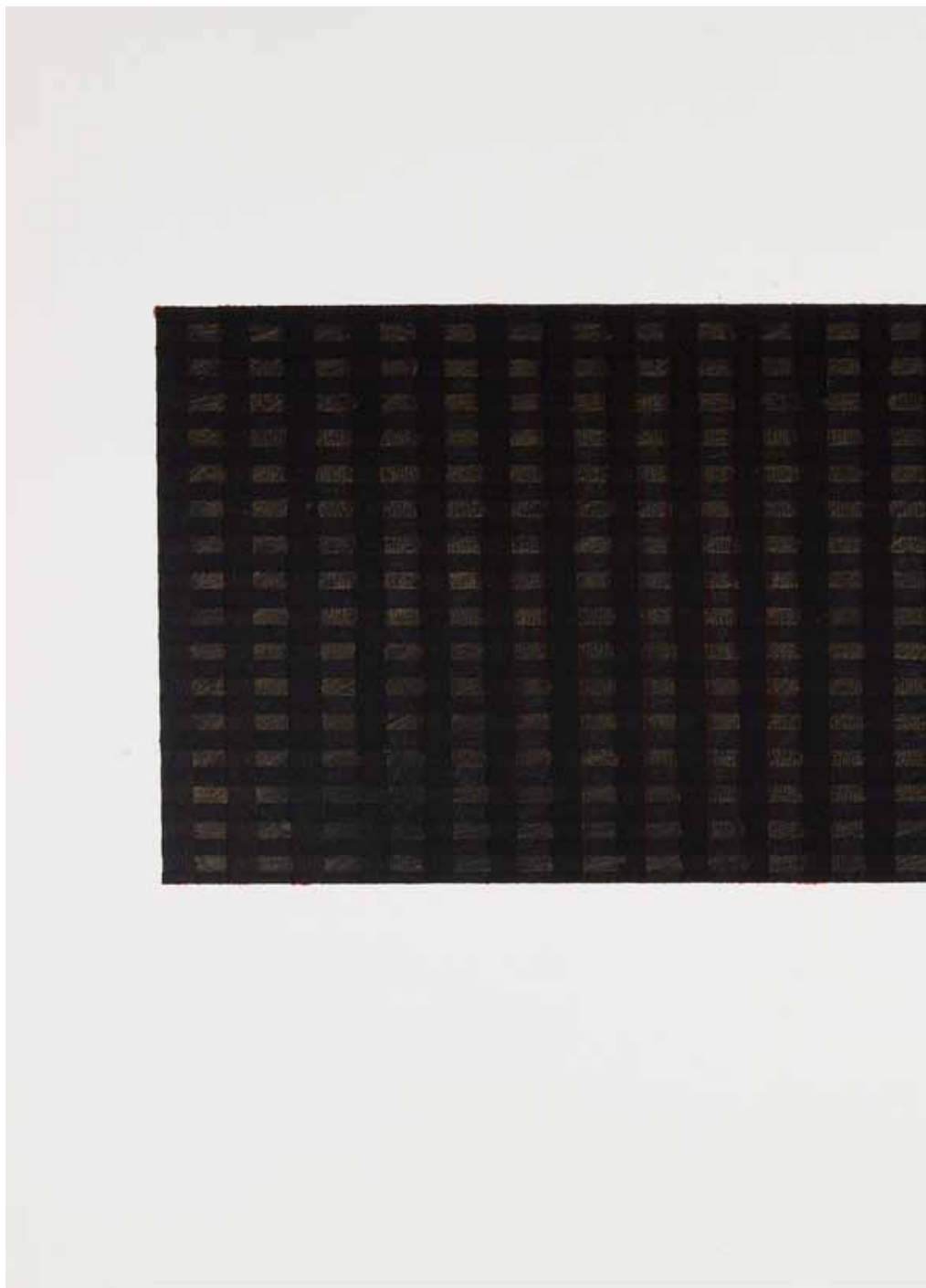






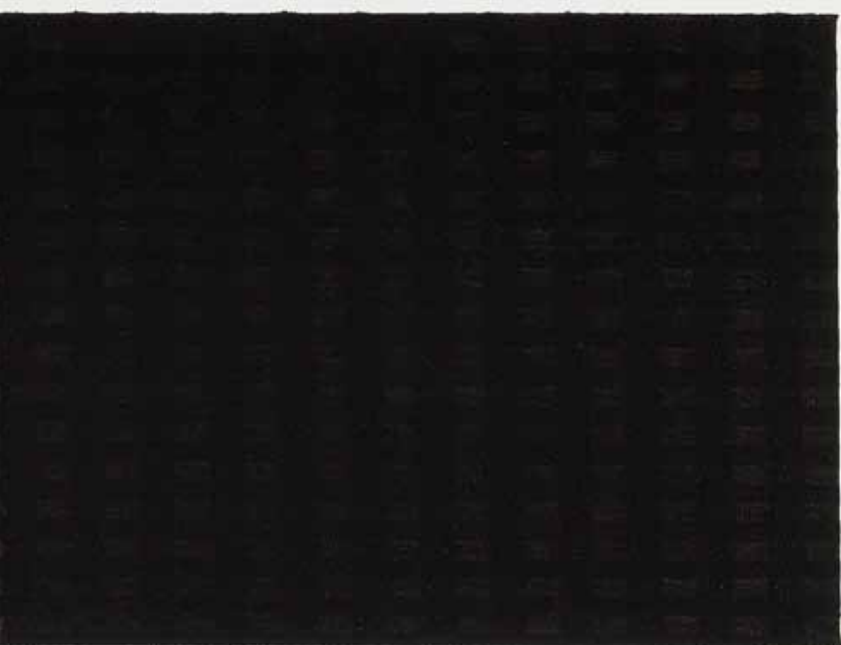




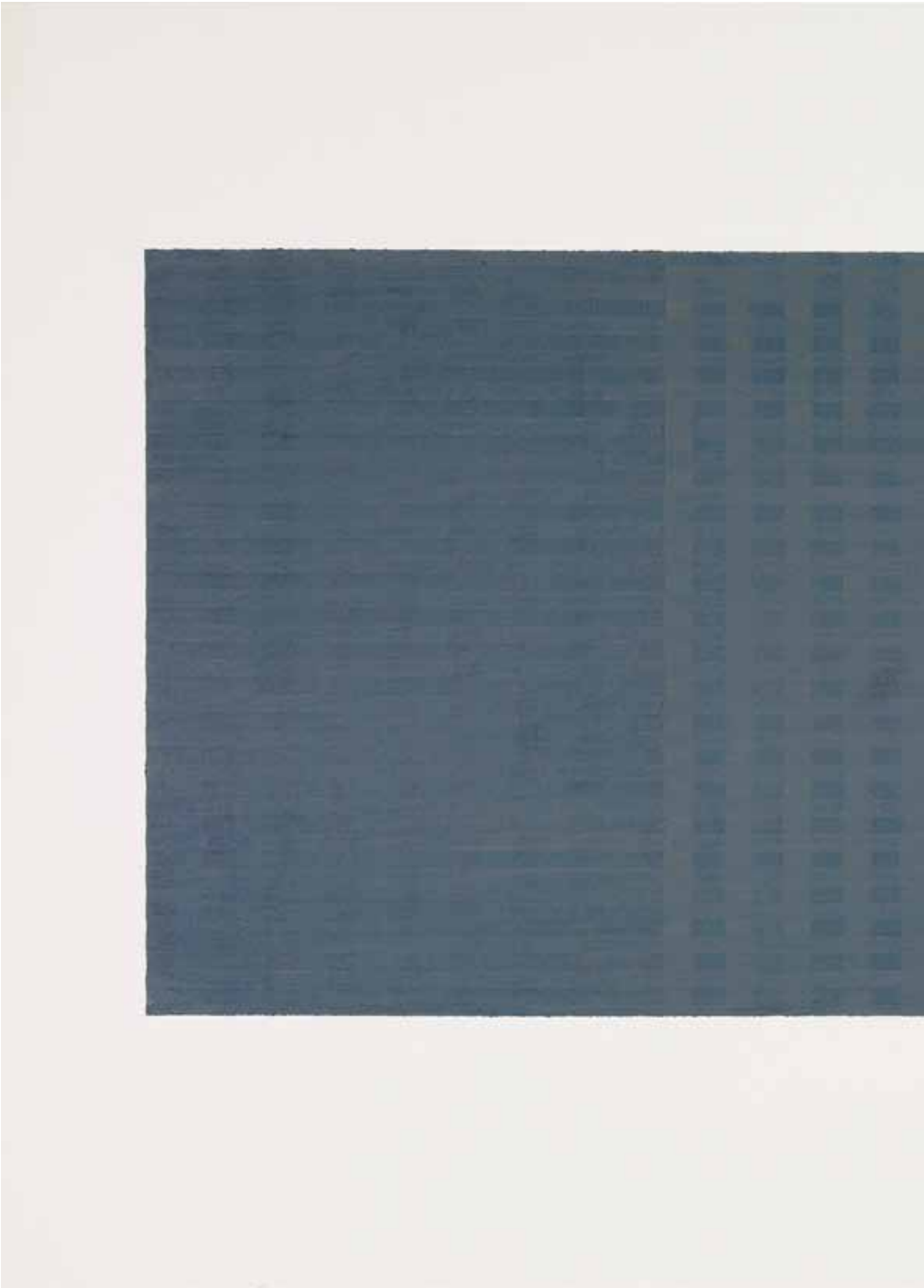


PL. 3  
*Change #8*, 1975



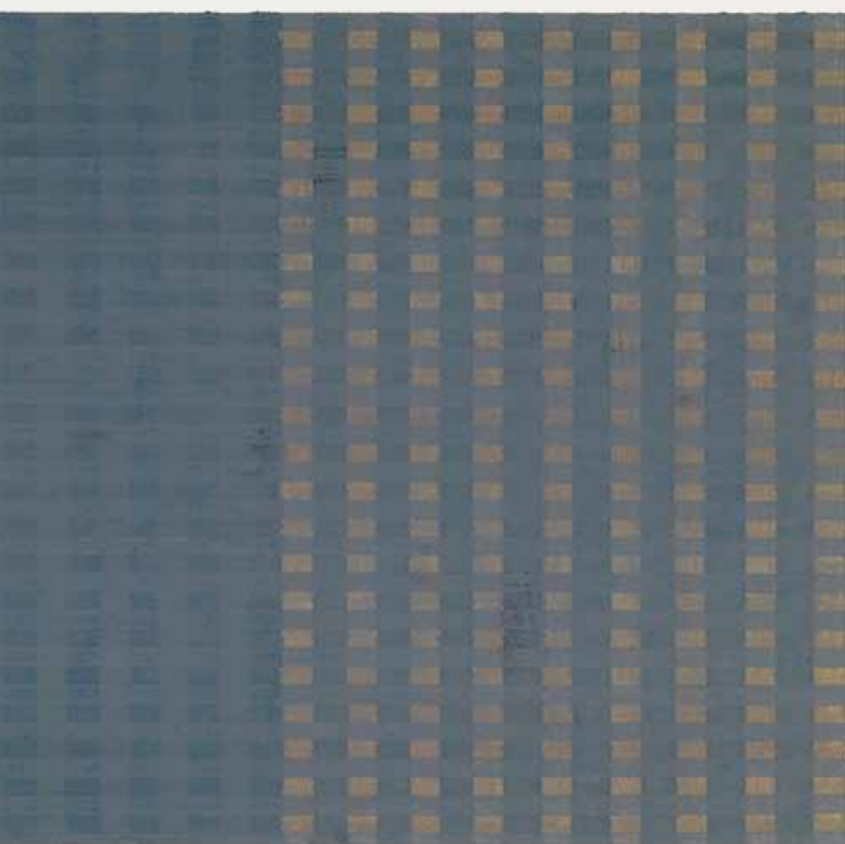






PL. 4  
*Change* #22, 1975





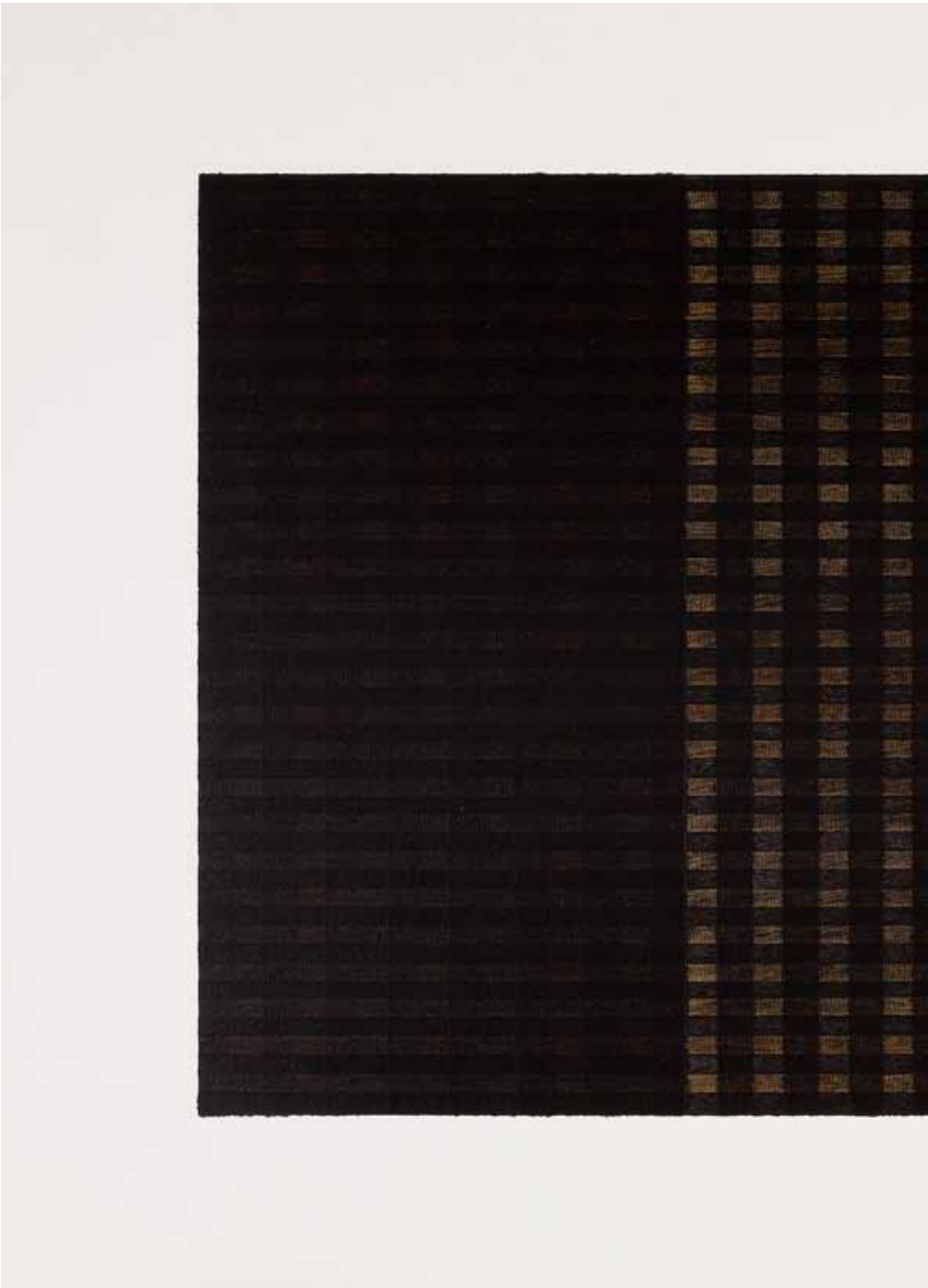










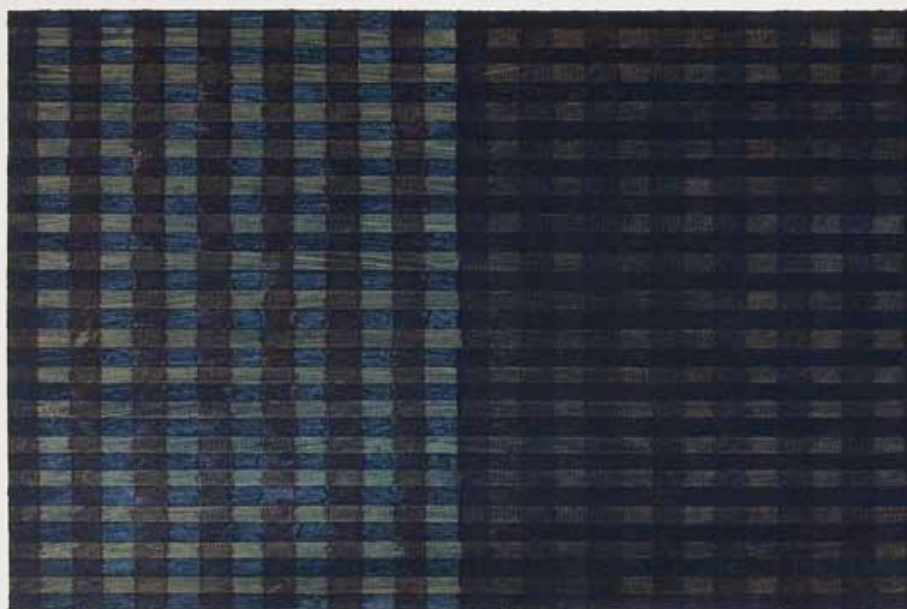


PL. 5  
*Change #24, 1975*









PL. 6  
*Change #35, 1975*



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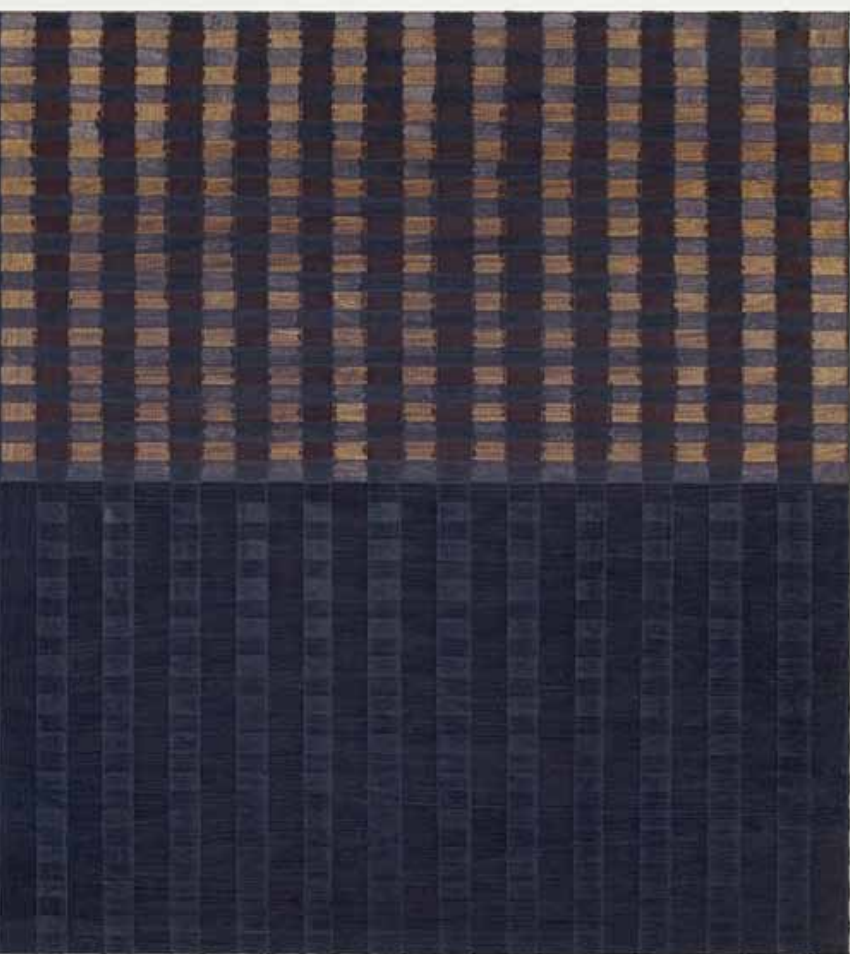






PL. 7  
*Change #42, 1975*

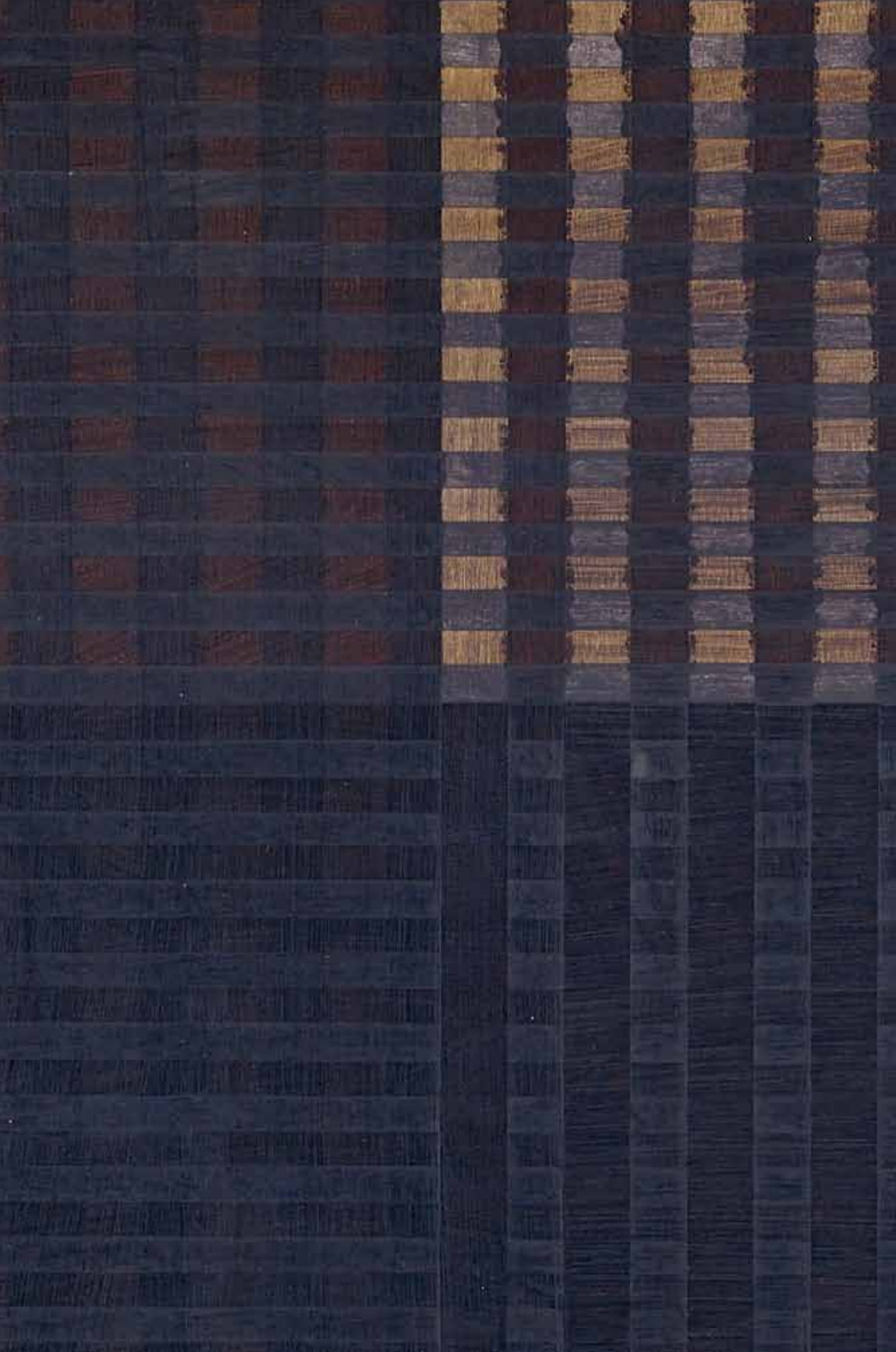














# Change and Horizontals

Joanna Kleinberg *and* Brett Littman



*People tend to think of abstraction as abstract. But nothing is abstract: it's a self-portrait. A portrait of one's condition.*

—SEAN SCULLY, ZURICH, MARCH 2006<sup>1</sup>

Sean Scully re-imagines the history of abstraction as an art rooted in experience, one that seeks to purify how we encounter the world—“something felt and something seen,” as he has said.<sup>2</sup> To this end, his work stages an intense dialogue between color and form, but color that is always rooted in a particular place, and form that manifests the self.

In addition to painting, Scully has produced a number of works on paper that both paraphrase and diversify the ideas in his canvases. After a fateful trip to Fez and Marrakesh in 1969 he became enthralled with the sensual and tactile appeal of the Moroccan striped textiles, Islamic architecture, and the way that the Mediterranean light reflected off the buildings' facades. He began exploring the possibilities and limits of grid structures and surface textures through the use of household masking tape, acrylic paint, and ink on paper. Combining the rigorous structural control of the grid with the expressiveness of color, Scully's self-described “paintings on paper” are inspired by the profiles, hues, and vistas that he happens upon.

Scully's drawings clarify his relationship to the high Modernists and how he has been influenced by the self-sufficiency of their formalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Florence Ingleby, ed., *Sean Scully: Resistance and Persistence: Selected Writings* (London & New York: Merrell, 2006), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 54.



He credits Piet Mondrian with “trying to make work that [was] spiritual and profound through the use of the horizontal and the vertical,”<sup>3</sup> and he traces this line of thinking back to the observed world, through details of landscapes, street plans, subway maps, and architectural structures. Mondrian’s penultimate work, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43), takes an uncharacteristic stab at illustrating piano boogie by replacing the black grid that had long governed his canvases with predominantly yellow lines that intersect at points marked by squares of blue and red. These atomized bands of stuttering color create paths across the canvas that suggest the city’s grid, the movement of traffic, blinking lights, and jazz’s syncopated beat. At the same time, the image is carefully calibrated, its colors interspersed with gray and white blocks in an extraordinary balancing act. It is a composition of likeness, one that uses varied and similar forms in equivalent opposition to create a single, active texture. Mondrian’s use of non-modular repetition in these late works marks a substantial victory over the idealism of geometry and a turning outwards toward the world itself.

Another striking precedent to Scully’s approach can be found in Ellsworth Kelly’s multi-paneled painting, *Window, Museum of Modern Art Paris* (1949), which was modeled on the large exterior windows of that museum. Kelly’s desire to pursue elementary forms drawn from the careful observation of his surroundings became ever more present after this encounter: “Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made, and it had to be made exactly as it was, with nothing added. [...] I could take from everything; it all belonged to me: a glass roof of a factory with its broken and patched panes, lines of a roadmap, the shape of a scarf on a woman’s head, a fragment of Le Corbusier’s *Swiss Pavilion*...paper fragments in the street.”<sup>4</sup> While High Modernism withdrew from mimetic representation, its later variants, such as Mondrian’s New York works, and Kelly’s abstractions, abound with resemblances.

Scully shares Kelly’s sensibility and similarly defines the parameters of his own visual world through a radical reduction of existing struc-

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3 Ibid., 18.

4 Quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954* (New York: Prestel & Washington, DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1992), 14.



tures and sites. Take, for instance, *Change #24*, one of the artist's earliest drawings of a densely pigmented and tightly-bound lattice that evokes the train tracks of industrial England. Recognizing that our perceptual experience is achieved through a practical familiarity with the world, Scully conceives of an abstraction that juxtaposes the purity of geometry with the associations implicated in one's memory and visual perception.

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Irish-born and London-raised, Scully grew up in what he describes as the city's "gray, hard, spiritually empty"<sup>5</sup> southern boroughs, an industrial area punctuated by circuitous roadways and railways of overlapping steel girders, structures that would define his artistic idiom. After receiving a B.A. in Fine Arts from Newcastle University in 1972, Scully was awarded a fellowship to Harvard University where he worked through a period of Minimalist-inspired abstraction, limiting himself to the vertical and horizontal line, with diagonals featuring occasionally as a contrasting element in paintings like, *East Coast Light I, II, III* (1973), a series dedicated to New England's bright skies. There, binding canvases and papers with masking tape, Scully focused on creating geometrically precise forms with reductive color palettes. The process of rubbing and fixing the tape was different from other picture-making techniques: color was applied by pushing it directly onto the surface with a spoon or with the fingers. For Scully, the procedure, in which discernible fluctuations in the hand, color order, and ruled gestures exhibit a real sensitivity to material, involved a greater degree of tactility than painting ever had. With a renewed belief that the "surface [should] constantly affirm and insist on the human presence,"<sup>6</sup> he developed an atavistic and highly-personalized approach to mark making.

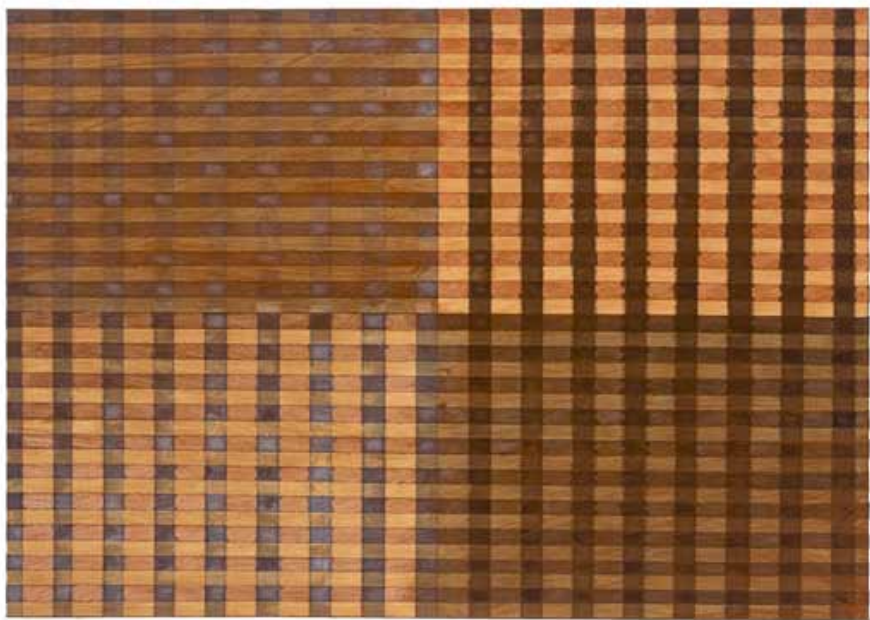
Though he eventually returned to London, Scully continued to hone this ascetic vocabulary in the series of drawings and paintings titled *Change* (1975). In well over fifty works completed in a single month

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5 David Carrier, *Sean Scully* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 41.

6 Ingleby, 28.





PL. 8  
*Untitled*, 1975

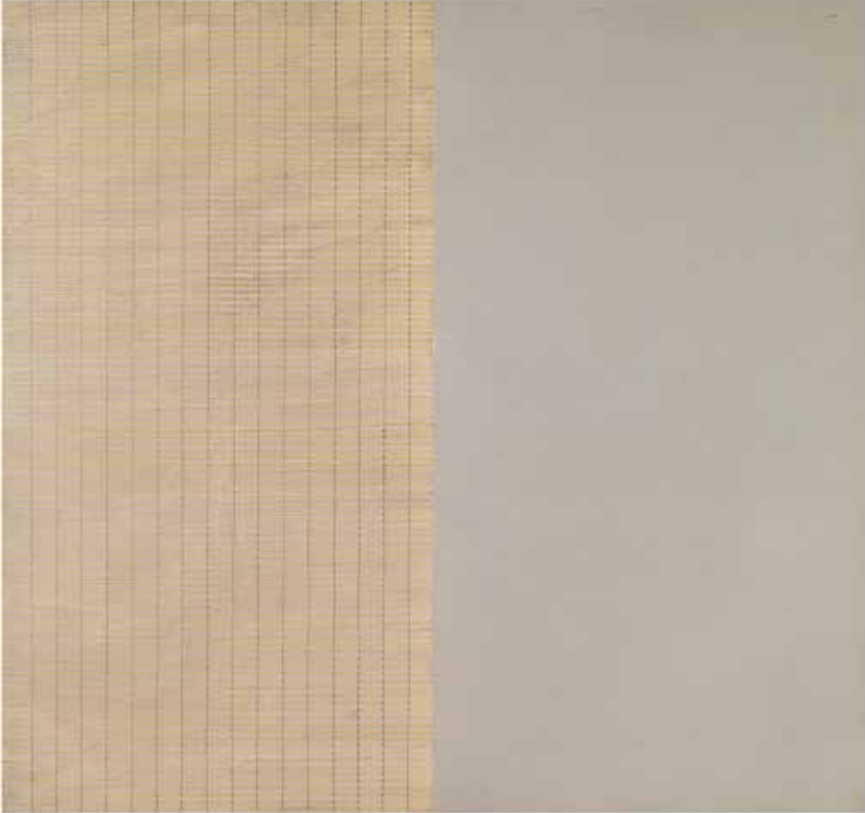


and executed in a small, cramped kitchen, he experimented with brooding blacks, greens, blues, and other earthy acrylics applied to the ubiquitous, hard-edged tape grid. In one small-format drawing, *Change #8*, firmly-laid tape outlines, ruled gestures, and dark tonalities are eerily redolent of the city's smoldering gray haze and built-up horizons. Similarly, in *Change #5* and *Change #7*, somber verticals and cross-hatched tiles suggest a three dimensional infrastructure. Although in the arrangement of interlocking bars there is a certain sameness to the drawn abstractions, the layered matrices of lines and exaggerated right angles gradually reveal infinitesimal shifts in format, palette, and patterning. Like his artistic predecessors, Scully recognized that using the same motif again and again opened up emotional depth and interpretative range. This short yet productive period illustrates the artist's confident evolution as he pushed his gestural architectonics in new directions.

While in London, the work underwent a stylistic rupture with what Scully has identified as a "transitional" drawing, *Untitled* (1975), an image of loosely intersecting bands of burnt sienna and rust-colored tape arranged in four even quadrants. The visual effect becomes fully manifest in the *Horizontals* series, which was completed later that year upon Scully's arrival in New York City, where he lived in the painter Robert Natkin's apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Though similar in scale and orientation to the *Change* drawings, these works exhibit lighter, luminous tones with more intricately layered strokes of ink, graphite, and acrylic. Indurate forms give way to idiosyncratic delineations in both the drawings and paintings alike, including *Grey Red Grey* (1975), which is composed of delicate red lines of tape interlaced on a semi-unprimed canvas. In *Horizontals #6* and *Horizontals #8*, alternating, close-laid horizontal bands expand to reflect the city's street grids, and the nuanced paper surfaces suggest architectural constructions and interplays of filtered light cast in between towering skyscrapers and surrounding bodies of water.

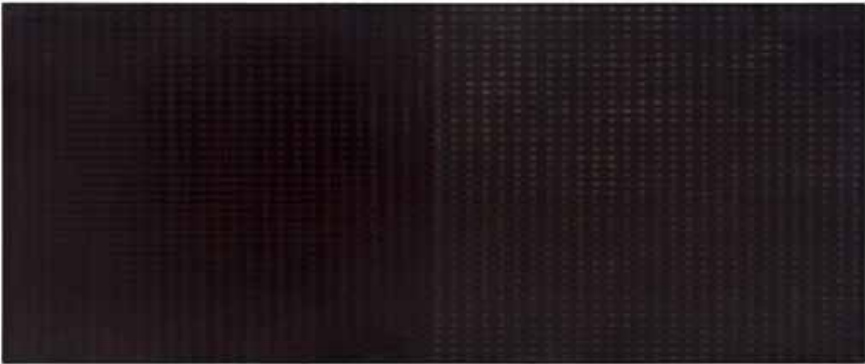
Manifestations of place are fundamental to these drawings, just as location plays a key role in the artist's life and oeuvre. Scully's move to New York City marks a breakthrough to a period when he became





PL. 9  
*Grey Red Grey*, 1975





PL. 10  
*Change #1*, 1975



more keenly engaged with the tones and textures of the metropolis that surrounded him:

When I left London for New York, I also broke the grid...my grid...became uncrossed. It seems psychologically loaded. I left Europe and the order of Europe, and I went to New York where there were no stabilizing verticals in my work. They simply disappeared. I took out the vertical...what I was left with was the horizon. And so I could begin my journey along it.<sup>7</sup>

Though tension remains in the works' linear iterations, the austerity of the *Change* drawings mellows to become more expressive. Neutrals (fluctuating between transparency, translucency and opacity), in works such as *Horizontals #1* and *Horizontals #3*, replace the dark monochromes and clean-lined stripes of London. The softer edges are more easily susceptible to the imperfect movement of the artist's hand, a necessary extension of his state of mind and change in habitat. For Scully, the experiences of the landscape and travel have fueled a thinking-out-loud creativity that is recorded in his notebook pages from 1974–75. Each sketch in these more than fifty pages are suggestive of Scully's working method: he gets an idea, jots it down on any available surface, from newspapers to paper doilies to notepads, and then sees if it works before applying it to a larger scale. These pages reveal subtle, incremental changes, some of which directly correspond to elements in the works on paper.

Shown together for the first time in over thirty years, the exhibition of Scully's *Change* and *Horizontals* drawings offers The Drawing Center's audience a rare opportunity to reevaluate the artist's exceptionally singular aesthetic. Part drawing and part painting, these works ply a narrow course between the two mediums. They combine an intimate scale and handmade quality with an allover surface and intensity of color that reflect more painterly concerns. These images appear unbound by stylistic restraint and hint at the fecund years of geometric abstraction that follow. His painting's development parallels that of the early drawings: it achieves a radical reduction of content and a refined repetition of geometries. By the 1980s,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 78.



the familiar post-and-lintel arrangement overwhelms with subjectivity—lines appear more rough-edged and free-wheeling, and the juxtaposition of colors are much bolder and earthy, like freshly turned soil or rain-soaked clay.

In this display of sixteen works, Scully's core concern for line and color in relation to place, conveyed through and by his consistent use of acrylic, ink, graphite, and masking tape, confirm his status as one of the most discerning and inventive of abstraction's contemporary practitioners.





PL. 11  
*Horizontal #1*, 1975

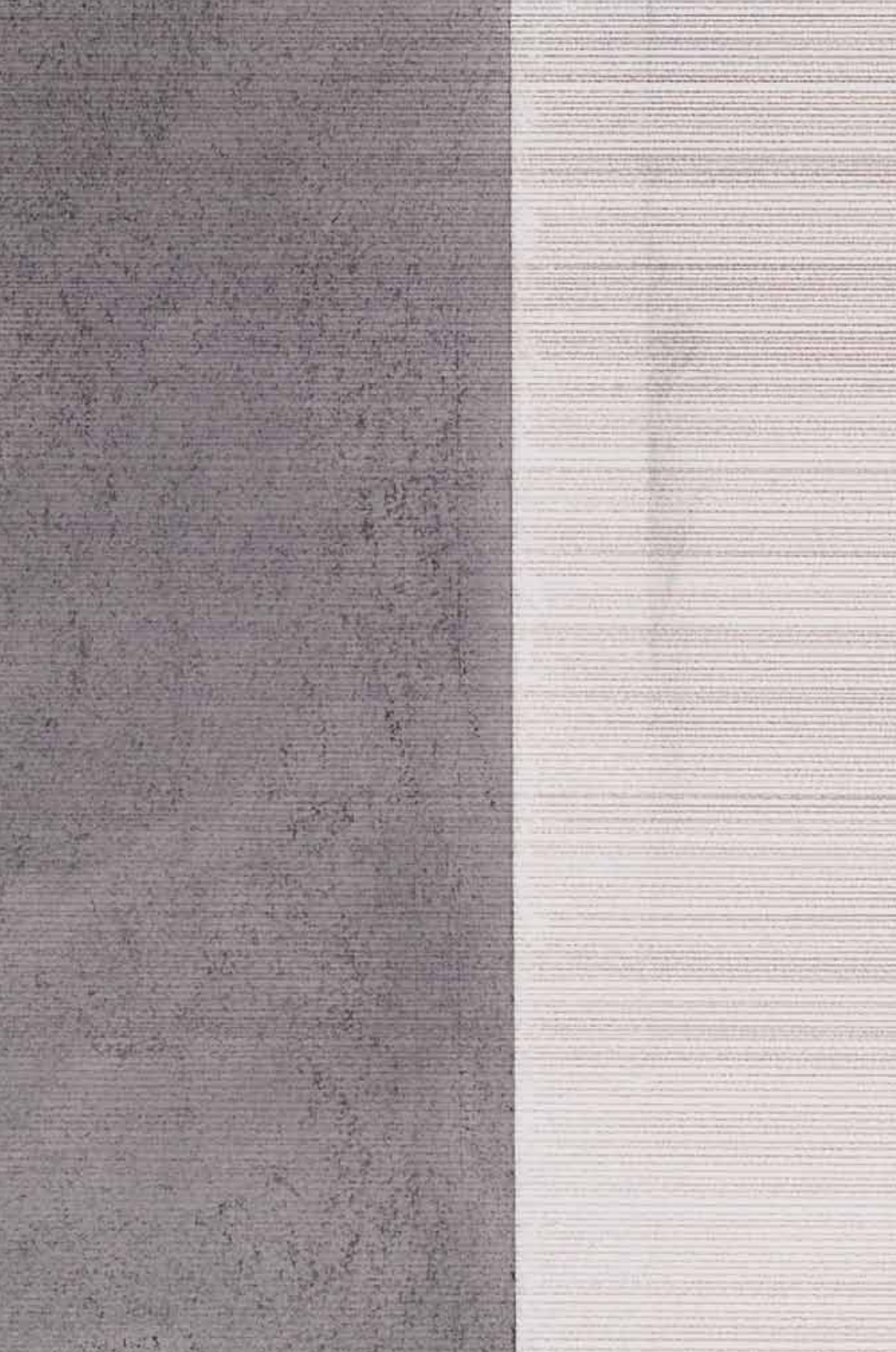
















PL. 12  
*Horizontal #3*, 1975









PL. 13  
*Horizontal #5*, 1975











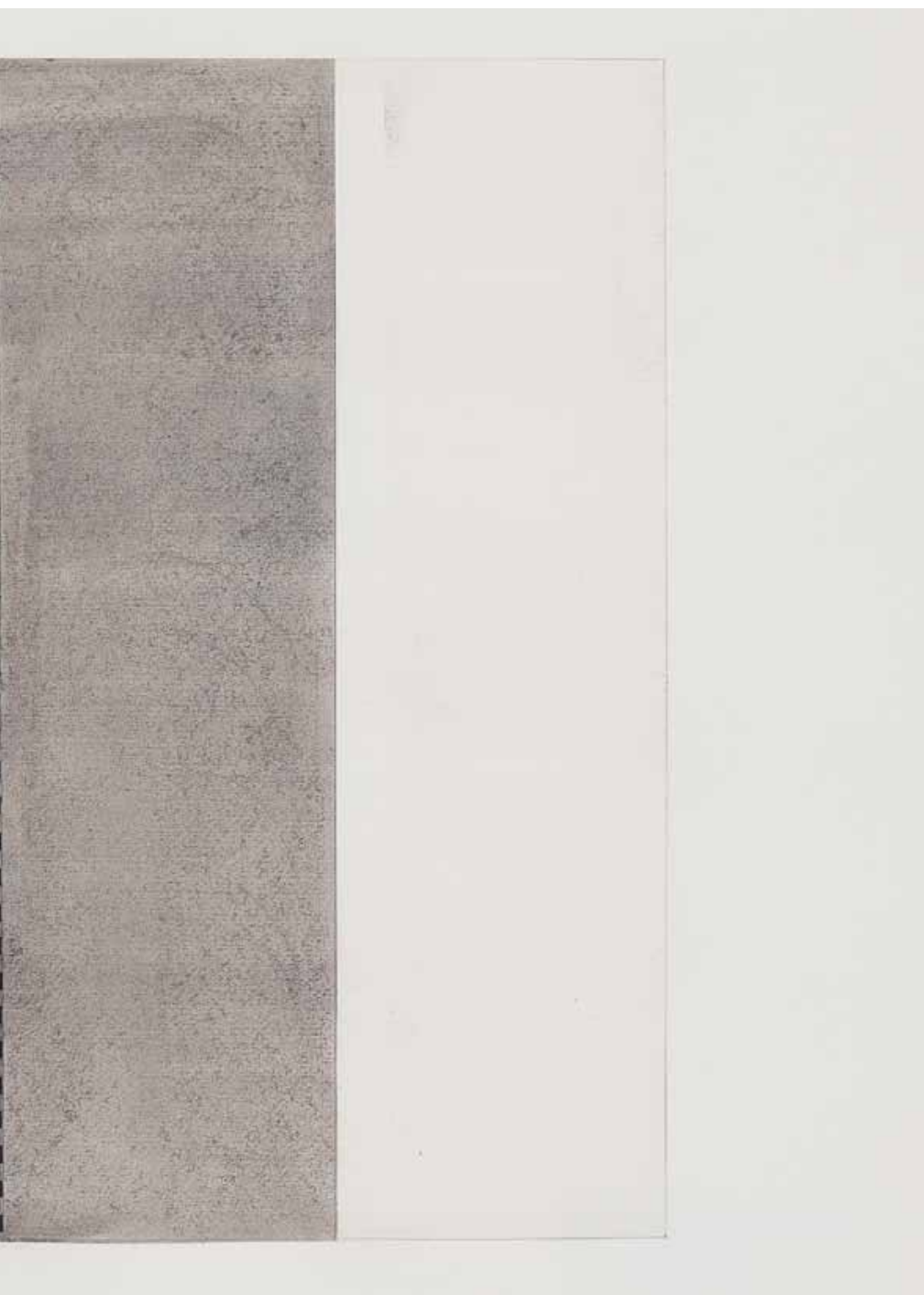






PL. 14  
*Horizontal #6*, 1975









PL. 15  
*Horizontals #8, 1975*









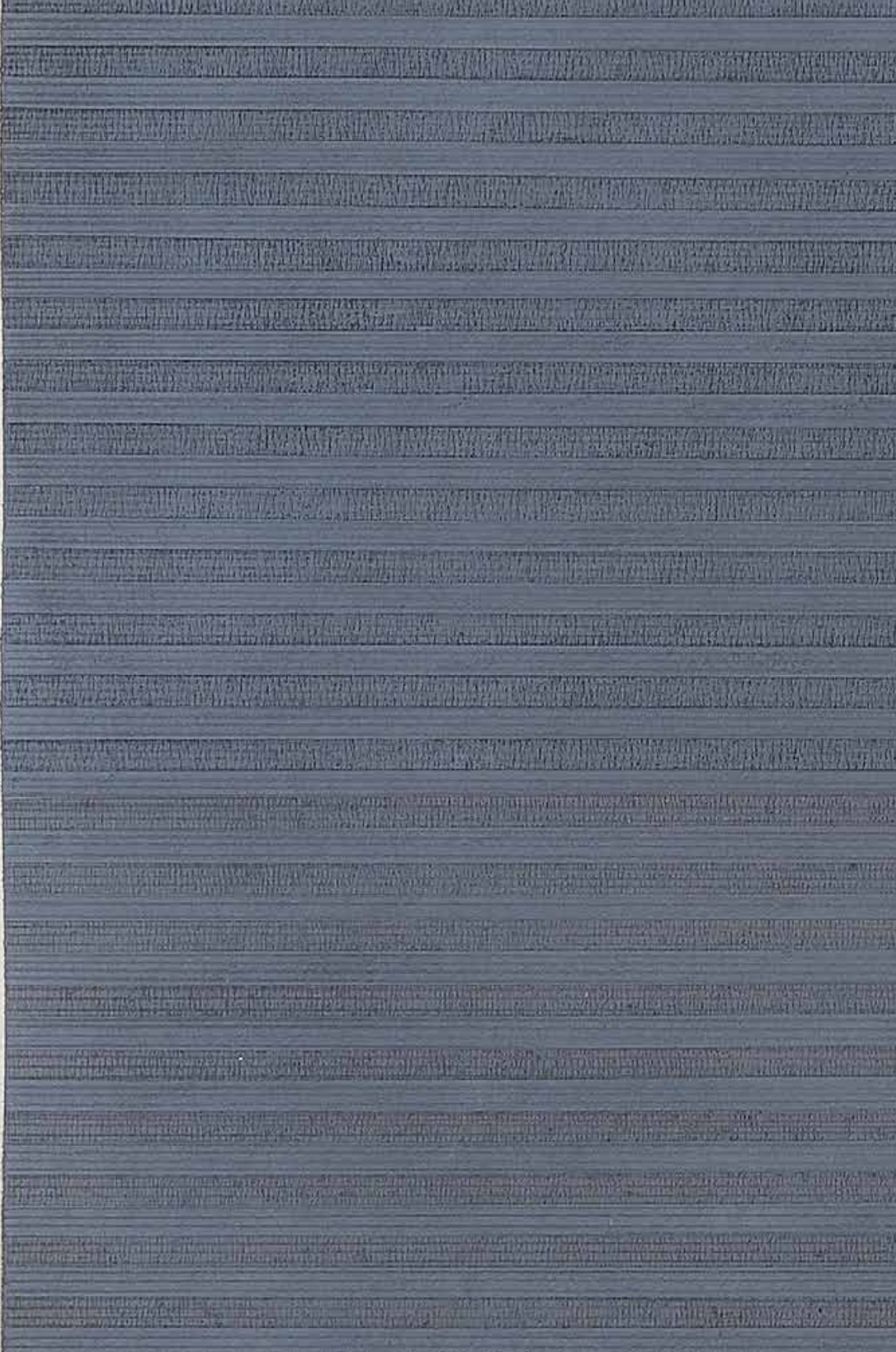
PL. 16

*Horizontals #10, 1975*















## Audition

Colm Tóibín



She watched from the front window as Phyllis reversed her car, navigating the narrow space with efficiency. She was not expecting her, but thought it might seem friendly and welcoming if she went and opened the front door and stood there waiting for her.

'Now, I won't come in,' Phyllis said. 'I hate people who drop in without warning and I have no intention of barging in anywhere unannounced.'

'You're very welcome,' Nora said.

'All I wanted to say to you is that there's going to be a new choir in Wexford, and there are going to be auditions. I don't know what they are planning to do, but it'll be a marvellous experience and I know the choir-master and he's very good and so I am in automatically. Now I spoke to Laurie O'Keefe and she says that she is ready to prepare you so that you can have a few pieces ready. For the audition.'

Nora nodded. She did not want to say that both Fiona and Aine had gone to Laurie O'Keefe for piano lessons and they had both come home after the first lesson swearing never to return. Nora had avoided Laurie on the street a number of times in the year afterwards, but did not think she had seen her since.

'Is she not....?'

'Quite,' Phyllis said. 'She is not for everybody, yours truly included. But if she likes you, she's very good, and she's very fond of you.'

'She doesn't know me.'

'Billy her husband does, or so he said, and they both insisted that they would do anything for you. Don't ask me now to go into the details of what they said, but they were full of enthusiasm when I mentioned your name.'

'What would I do?'

'Call over to her and make an arrangement, and maybe just let her



hear your voice. And then maybe you could learn two or three pieces for Wexford.'

'Would it take long?'

'Well, knowing Laurie...'

Nora wondered if she should make a quick decision and ask Phyllis to tell the O'Keefes that she was desperately busy, or ask to her avoid them for a while if she could. As she hesitated, she saw that Phyllis was watching her carefully. She did not know what to say and wished she could be more decisive.

'Don't leave it too long,' Phyllis said. 'I wouldn't like to offend her, she seemed so enthusiastic. She is very talented, you know, or she was. I'd say she finds the town a bit dull.'

Nora remembered a night in the new Assembly Hall of the Presentation Convent when Maurice and herself and Tom had gone to a fund-raising concert for the St Vincent de Paul Society. Laurie O'Keefe was conducting an orchestra, Nora could not think where the players came from, but many of them were adults. As Laurie's conducting style grew more vigorous and expressive, Maurice and Tom began to laugh quietly and she had to nudge Maurice in disapproval, knowing that the people all around in the audience would have noticed him. Half-way through the concert Tom had to stand up and make his way to the toilet, all the while silently shaking with laughter. Nora had given Maurice a fierce look before he had to follow Tom. Neither of them returned to their seats. Afterwards, she remembered, she had found them both standing sheepishly at the back of the hall.

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Before Phyllis left, Nora agreed that she would make contact with Laurie O'Keefe, but over the next few days, as she postponed doing so, she wondered why she was so open to sudden visits from people who seemed to know better than she did how she should live and what she should do. She supposed that Phyllis was trying to help her, but wondered also if it might be a good idea to keep her door closed to all new-comers, spend her time making sure that Donal and Conor were well looked after, and letting thoughts of Maurice come



to her at will throughout the day, and allowing them linger until they might fade of their own accord.

As she imagined singing, and pictured Laurie O'Keefe giving her a note, or a key, and asking her to sing, memories of her mother came vividly to her, especially of her mother's singing voice, so proud and confident on high notes. Her mother was ready to let her voice ring out. Even when her mother was old, she remembered, Nora was able to distinguish her voice from the other voices in the choir in the cathedral. And she loved it when people told her that when her mother was young her voice could fill the whole space and people would come to eleven o'clock mass to hear her.

She had not thought about her mother since the days when Maurice was dying and she knew that she was facing into a life alone with the children. In that great sleepless time she remembered half-thinking that her mother was close by, or waiting for her somewhere, or that her mother knew a prayer which would work and change things. She had an image now of her mother as a calm hovering force there in the hospital room. She smiled to herself at a memory of her mother, when asked which of her sons-in-law she liked best, replying that she liked them all and liked Maurice more than Nora. And it was almost true, Nora remembered. She almost did.

And since her mother was the one from the family who died closest in time to Maurice, then it made sense, or at least it made sense in those days in the hospital, that her mother would want to be there, be close to him. Her mother had gone ahead of him by only seven years. In her urge to be as far away as she could from that time in the hospital, Nora had kept her mother out of her mind since then; her mother's dream-presence had not pursued her into the life without Maurice she was living now.

She waited until she was downtown a few days after Phyllis's visit and, having walked up Weafer Street to the Back Road, she realised that she was close to O'Keefe's house. For a second, she wondered if it would be best to turn and walk home and go there another time, but she steeled herself, thinking that if she did it now, then it would be over. She did not know what to expect. Laurie O'Keefe, she knew,



had lived in France; Nora was sure that she had been a nun at some point. She was Billy's second wife. The first wife was dead and the children from that marriage were grown up and gone. There was something about his first wife which Nora could not remember; she had been frugal, she was sure of that, and vaguely remembered hearing that she had always gone to seven o'clock mass on a Sunday so that no one could see how badly dressed she was, and how poor she looked, despite the fact that her husband had a good business. She pushed open the gate which led to the O'Keefes' house, noticing how well-tended the garden was, and how shiny all the windows of the old house were and how unusual, almost grand, the house looked. Billy was retired now, she knew; he had owned an insurance company, or been involved in insurance, and she also knew, as she knew so much about people in the town, that he went each evening at the same time for a bottle of Guinness in Hayes's in Court Street, following the same route each time, a walking-stick in his hand. As she went up the steps to the front door of the house, she remembered something which Maurice had once told her – Billy hated music, or so he said, and he tried to have the room where Laurie played and gave her lessons sound-proofed, and he wore ear-plugs whenever there was a threat of music in the house. It was the sort of detail which Maurice loved.

When Billy opened the door to her he immediately asked her in, holding back a Labrador dog by the collar. The hallway was wide and dark, with old pictures on the wall. There was a smell of polish. Billy began to call downstairs for his wife but as there was no reply he shut the dog in the room on the left and began walking down the creaking staircase to the basement, motioning to Nora to remain in the hall. 'She never hears me,' he said, and seemed amused at the idea.

While Nora waited, the dog began to bark. Soon, Billy O'Keefe appeared again. 'Come down,' he said. 'She says you are to come down.'

He led her down the narrow book-lined staircase and into a small tiled hallway which had some coats hanging on a set of hooks. He opened a door in a bright space which had clearly been added to the back of the old house. Laurie O'Keefe stood up from the piano.



‘Now, Billy will make us tea, unless you want coffee,’ she said. ‘And biscuits, Billy, the nice ones I bought.’

She smiled at him as he closed the door.

‘It’s only a baby grand,’ she said, as though Nora had asked her about the piano, ‘and of course I have another one there, just a plain old upright, for the students to bang on.’

There was no other furniture in the room except a few old chairs. There was a rug on the floor and sheet music strewn about. The walls were painted white with prints of abstract paintings hanging at different heights.

‘We’ll have our tea in here,’ Laurie led her into another room which had a sofa and easy chairs, a large stereo record player and speakers and a large case from floor to ceiling full of records.

‘No one has any pity for a woman married to a man who is tone deaf,’ Laurie said. ‘No one!’

Nora did not know what this meant, or if she was expected to reply. ‘You know, there is something we have been meaning to say to you,’ Laurie went on. ‘I almost wrote you a letter when we sent you the mass card but then I thought no, I’d say it to you when I saw you.’

They both sat down on the two armchairs. Nora looked out at the garden for a moment and then back at Laurie.

‘We were driving down from Dublin, we’d been away. Oh cousins and nieces and all that! And then we were driving back into the town and it was such a lovely day and all the traffic was stopped. I don’t know how long we were stopped in Blackstoops. We thought that there might have been an accident. It never struck us that it was a funeral. I don’t know why. And eventually when I saw people walking I pulled down the window and I asked someone what it was. Oh we were shocked when they told us. We knew Maurice was sick. But we were very shocked. And Billy said how good Maurice had been to his boys in school and what a great teacher he was. And we thought then that if we could do anything for you...’

‘You are very kind,’ Nora said.

‘And then Phyllis said...’

‘I’m not sure my voice is up to much,’ Nora interrupted.



‘There is no better way to heal yourself than singing in a choir,’ Laurie said. ‘That is why God made music. You know I had my own troubles. Coming out of a convent at fifty and hardly a friend in the world. And it was the choir that got me started again. That was the one thing I had, my voice, and the piano, although I trained first on the harpsichord. That was my first love.’

Billy came into the room with a tray.

‘And this,’ Laurie said, pointing to Billy, ‘I suppose will be my last love.’

‘Do you mean me, Laurie?’ he asked.

‘I do, but you can leave us now. We have things to talk about.’

Billy put his finger to his lips and smiled at Nora and tip-toed out of the room.

‘You know I sang for Nadia Boulanger,’ Laurie continued, ‘and one thing she said was that singing is not something you do, it is something you live. Wasn’t that wise?’

Nora nodded, doing nothing to indicate that she did not know who Nadia Boulanger was. She tried to remember the name so she could mention it to Phyllis.

‘But I do have to get a feel for your voice before we set to work. Can you read music?’

‘Yes, I can,’ Nora said. ‘Not well, mind you, but I learned years ago at school.’

‘It might be best to start with something you actually know.’

She went into the other room and came back with books of sheet music.

‘Drink your tea and look through these and pick one you are familiar with. I’ll go into the other room and play the piano. I can’t think what to play, but something I love that I know from memory and maybe the sound will warm us up. And I don’t have a pupil until four so there is plenty of time.’

Nora wondered what had caused her to be in this strange house with this strange woman who could not stop talking. If there were a door out of this room into the garden, she thought, she would be tempted to go now, slip out as the piano music began to play, and walk slowly



down the garden path and into Weafer Street and along the Back Road to her own house, and never go out again.

She sipped the tea and put down the cup and rested her head against the back of the chair. The music Laurie was playing was too fast and cluttered, she thought; whoever wrote it had put in too many notes. It was a virtuoso piece, and she realised that Laurie was showing off and felt almost sorry for her that she would need to do this. It could hardly be what she did for relaxation. If Maurice were alive now, she would delight in telling him what had happened and he would say how right Billy O'Keefe was to have ear-plugs so that he would not have to hear, as his second wife, the former nun, pounded the piano. Imagine being married to a former nun who played the piano! She could hear Maurice's dry tone and see the look of pure amusement on his face.

She flicked through the books of sheet music; most of them were German songs she had never heard of, and she wondered now if Phyllis had given Laurie the impression that she knew more than she did. When she came to a book of Irish songs, they seemed all too silly and old-fashioned and stage-Irish, songs that no one sang any more. At the bottom of a pile were a few single sheets with some of Moore's Melodies. She looked at 'Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms', but thought it was too stilted. Then she found 'The Last Rose of Summer'; she began studying the notes and humming the familiar tune when Laurie returned to the room.

'You found something then?'

'Well, I found this.' She handed her the sheet for 'The Last Rose of Summer'.

'Yes, I had an old novice mistress from the Alsace and I don't know where she learned the phrase, but she used to call me the last rose of summer even if I was on time. Oh she was an old battle-axe. Close to God, I suppose, but an old battle-axe nonetheless.'

Laurie walked into the other room and sat at the piano. Nora followed her uneasily.

'Now this is very wrong,' Laurie said. 'And it's bad for your voice. We should do exercises to warm it up and not go straight into a song. But there's something about you now that might not be there in a while.'



I saw it when you came in the door. You have....'

'What?'

'You have been close to the other side, haven't you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't talk now. Let me hear your voice. Let me go through the melody first.'

She played and then stopped.

'I'm going to go down an octave and see where that takes us.'

Laurie played, concentrating on the music, slowing the melody down as she went along.

'I think I have it now. We really shouldn't be doing this, but your voice might never be as good as it is today. Let me play for a while again, and when I signal, then you come in.'

She held her hands over the keys but did not touch them. The silence in the room was so intense that Nora presumed it must really be sound-proofed. Laurie remained absolutely still as though immobilised by something. Nora felt uneasy, almost alarmed by the intensity of the silence, by the need Laurie appeared to have for high drama. Once more, she wished she were elsewhere and resolved that she would not come back here again; she would write to Laurie as soon as she got home to say that she had made a mistake, that she did not now want to join a choir.

Laurie gently touched the keys, working the pedals so that a new low sound came from the piano. She played very slowly, adding strange flourishes. And then she signalled and Nora, looking at the words of the song, began:

'Tis the last rose of summer  
Left blooming alone.'

She did not know that her voice could be so deep; and whatever way Laurie was stretching out the notes, she found herself moving much more slowly than she had meant to. She had no trouble with her breathing and no fear now of the higher notes. She felt that the piano was controlling her and pulling her along, and the slow pace meant that she gave each word its full weight. Because of the gaps



Laurie left, she felt that she was singing into silence; she was aware of the silence as much as she was of the notes. A few times she faltered because Laurie was adding flourishes and she was unsure what to do until Laurie lifted her hand and then swiftly lowered it to indicate that she was to end the lines more sharply and let the piano add the grace notes.

When the song was finished Laurie did not speak for a while.

‘Why didn’t you train your voice?’ she asked eventually.

‘My mother was a better singer always,’ Nora said.

‘If we had got you young enough....’

‘I never liked singing, and then I got married.’

‘Did he ever hear you singing?’

‘Maurice? No, he never did.’

‘And the children?’

‘No.’

‘You kept it to yourself. You saved it up.’

‘I never thought about it.’

‘I can train you to sing for the audition, and the choir will need contraltos, they always do, but I can do nothing more for you. You’ve left it too late, but you don’t mind that, do you?’

‘No.’

‘We can all have plenty of lives, but there are limits. You never can tell what they are. If someone had told me I’d be seventy and living in a town in Ireland with an insurance man! But here I am. And I know when we started a few minutes ago you didn’t want ever to come back here, but you do now. I know you do now. And you will, won’t you?’

‘Yes, I will,’ Nora said.

• • •

Over the following weeks, she went to Laurie O’Keefe’s on Tuesdays at two o’clock, sometimes dreading the thought of it when she woke on the morning of the lesson and dreading it even more as she set out from her own house to walk along the Back Road to Weafer Street. She hoped that neither Phyllis nor the O’Keefes had told people that she was learning to sing. There would be people in the town, including Tom and Peggy, who would wonder what she was doing taking



singing lessons when she should be looking for a job and minding her children.

For the first hour of the class Laurie would not let her sing; she made her lie on the floor and breathe, or stand and hold a note for as long as she could, or go up and down the scale. She concentrated then on the first line of 'The Last Rose of Summer', and Laurie made her not take in a breath after 'rose' as she had been doing, but carry on to the end of the line and then make it natural as though she were speaking or telling a story. She also gave her a German poem to learn by heart, and she worked with her on the meaning of each word and the pronunciation.

It was a way of spending Tuesday, she thought sometimes, a way of doing something new, getting out of the house into a hidden world, sound-proofed from what was really happening. It was almost easy. It was when Laurie propped the two small framed abstract paintings on the top of the piano and asked her to look at them, insisted that she do nothing except look at them, that the real change came, not in her voice, but in something else which she could not be sure about. 'No. You must look at them!' Laurie commanded. 'Look at them as though you will need to remember them.'  
'What are they?'  
'I brought them to this house,' Laurie said.  
'Who did them?'

Laurie smiled but did not reply.  
'Is it just a pattern?' Nora asked. 'What do they mean?'  
'You must look, that is all.'

Nora did not know about them. One had nothing but lines; the other had squares. The lined one was brown; the other was blue. Some of the lines were raised, as though embossed.  
'Don't think, just look,' Laurie said.

She could not be sure about the colours, as both were filled with shadow as much as colour. She looked at the shadows, studied the darker end of each of them, and then let her eye move from right to left, following a line towards brightness, or some beginning.



'Who did them?' she asked again.

'Don't ask,' Laurie said.

No colour was precise; she tried to look into each shade to see, but there did not appear to be enough light, even though the room itself was bright.

'What I want you to do now,' Laurie said, 'is sing and only look at the colours while you sing and don't think about the words or me or anything else. Make the sound from what you look at. Concentrate now!'

She played the introduction, so familiar to Nora now, on the piano and left a moment before she signalled to her to begin. When Nora wondered why she was doing this, she lost her concentration and had to stop.

'It's only sound you are making. That's all it is. Think of what's in the frame as a sort of sound. It's paint on paper; it soaked into the paper as sound soaks into space. Don't worry, just look. Let the colours guide you, clear your mind of everything else.'

• • •

When Nora left Laurie and the lesson was over, she felt free of her and looked forward to the six days ahead when she would not have to stand at the piano obeying orders. She met Phyllis by arrangement one Saturday in the lounge of Murphy Floods Hotel and asked her about Laurie.

'Either she knew everyone, including de Gaulle and Napoleon Bonaparte,' Phyllis said, 'or she knew no one and lived in a convent. And I can never work out which. And either it was a silent order in perpetual adoration, or they spent their time singing and chattering.'

'She makes me to all sorts of exercises,' Nora said.

'She is a law on to herself. And she landed on her feet. He built her those rooms and bought her the piano,' Phyllis said. 'And she really can play the piano. And one day I heard her speaking in French on the phone, so at least that part is true.'

'Why did you send me to her?'

'Because she asked me to.'

'What?'

'She says she saw you on the day of the funeral and she promised



that she would do anything for you if she could. She has a very good heart. I think all ex-nuns have good hearts, it's such a relief for them being out of the convent. Or maybe that's a wrong thing to say.'

'She makes me look at these two paintings she has.'

'While you are singing?'

'Yes.'

'She does that for very few people. Has she said yet that singing is not something you do, it is something you live?'

'She has, but she said that someone else said it first.'

'She told me one day that I could sing all I liked, but it would be no use. I didn't have it, she said.'

'Have what?'

'Something quite essential, she made that clear.'

Phyllis sipped her drink. She sighed.

'I don't have it,' she said. 'Whatever it is.'

• • •

When Nora returned to Laurie she was told to look again at the colours in the frame and try to imagine them coming into being.

'Not there at all, and then slowly there. Line by line, square by square, tone by tone. Emerging. Emerging.'

Laurie almost whispered these last words and then she watched Nora sharply as Nora looked at the shadows and the grades of colour.

'Memorize them as you would memorize words. And then move your breath along them.'

She went to the piano and played the introduction. Nora knew now to wait until the end of each line to breathe, and to follow the tone of the piano, soften and deepen as the keys did, and find a pace from the pace of the playing. Her singing voice now was much deeper than her speaking voice, and this led her towards a greater confidence as she led the voice vibrate darkly on end notes; she knew that she could go higher if she needed to. What she was working on now was tone. Laurie allowed her to change how she sang each time by varying the pace and changing where she softened her playing or left silence. She knew Laurie was checking regularly to see that she was



watching the colours, and she learned to trust Laurie's playing, its tact, its ability to respond.

She gazed at the colours made on the paper, the lines, the squares. As she sang, she concentrated hard on one small square of colour. Something began to seep out from it, or stirred within the depths of it; something she could see clearly for a second, and then when she blinked and looked back it had gone. Her eye moved along the lines, the grades of colour, the shades. When the playing stopped and the song had ended, Laurie did not move. Nora stayed still too and kept looking. In the silence of the room, she had a sense for a few seconds of what would happen in time to her and to Laurie and to the space they were in. It was not that everything would fade, or live on and survive in any way; rather, it struck her how they would all take their turn in the world, shadows within shadows, as Maurice had and her mother had done, as all who came before her had done, as she had just now moved from breath to breath, from one sound to another, from letting her eye gaze into the strangeness which lay between the paint and the paper, or within them, before Laurie stood up and said that they both could relax now, maybe have tea and listen to something on the stereo.

It was only after a month, when she had had four or five lessons, that she realised that the music was leading her away from Maurice. As they began work on the German song, sight-reading line by line, she saw that this activity was as far away from her life with him, and her life with the children, as she had ever imagined. But it was not merely that Maurice, like Billy O'Keefe, had no ear for music, and that music was something they had never shared, which pulled her away from him. It was the intensity of her time here; she was alone with herself in a place where he would never have ventured, or followed her, even in death. There were days when his having gone seemed part of the past, nothing more than that, and she was grateful, when the lesson ended, that Laurie often did not speak or ask her anything. They both let what happened fill the air of the basement room, echo against the white walls and do nothing more until the echo faded and Nora went home.

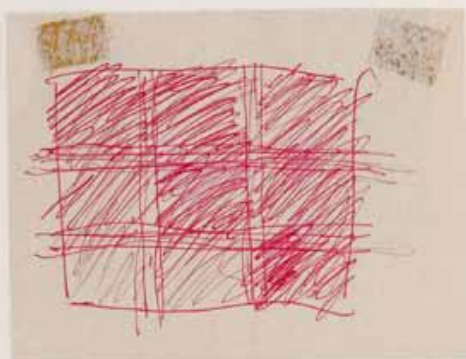
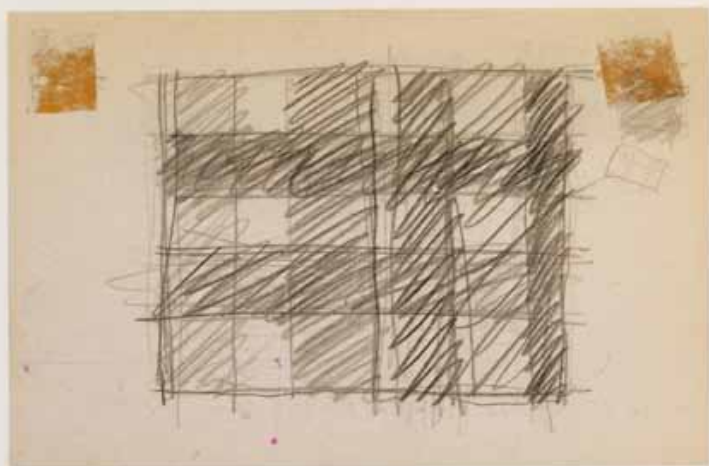




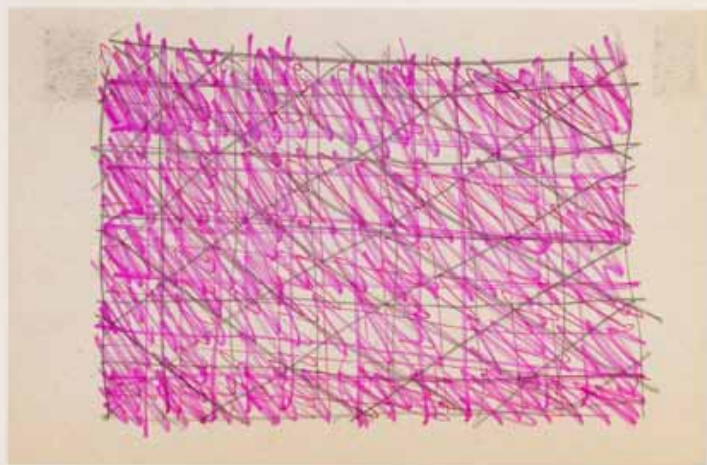
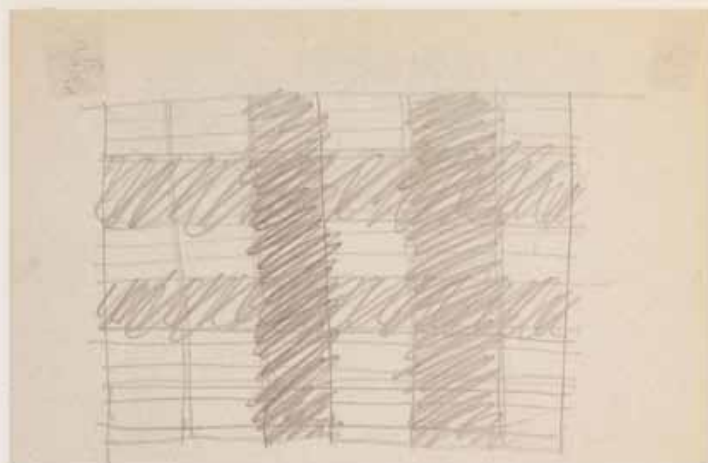


Selections from the Artist's Notebook  
1974–75





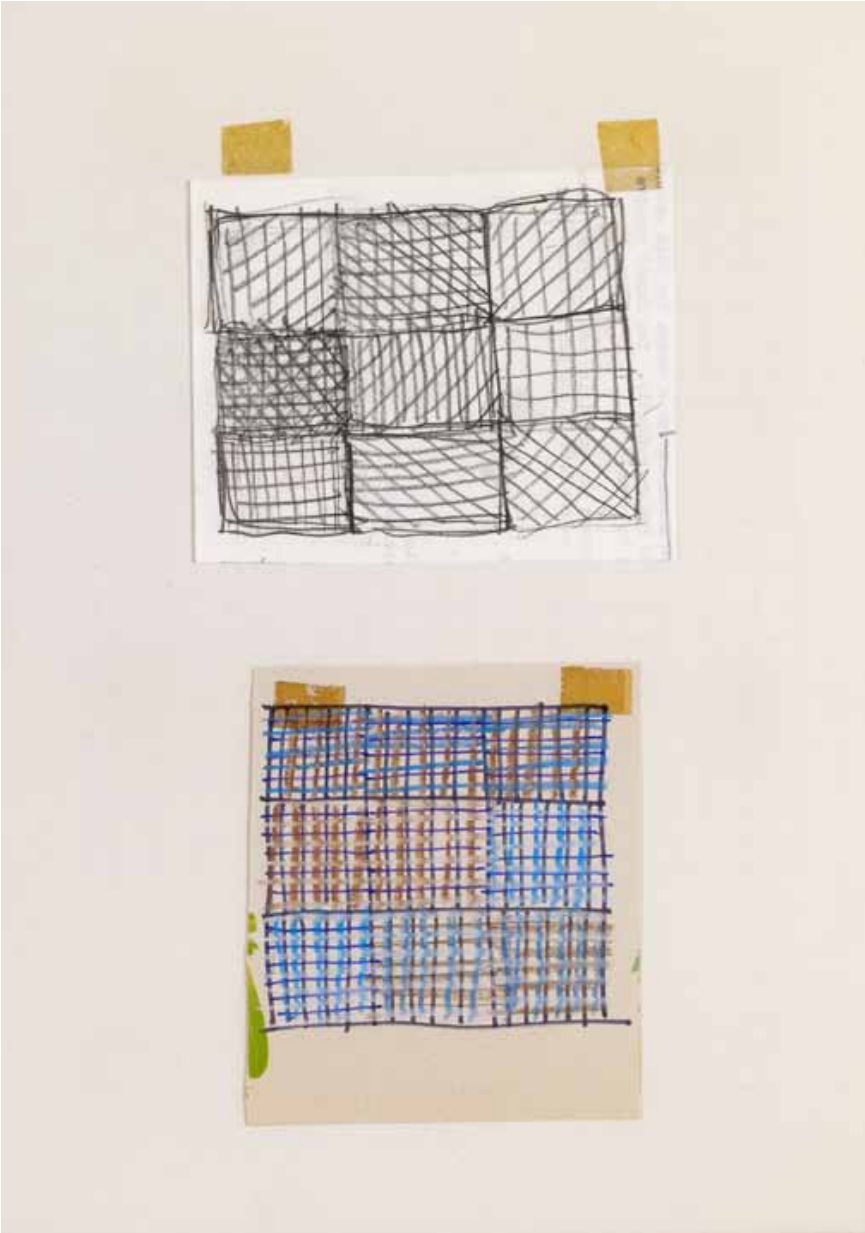




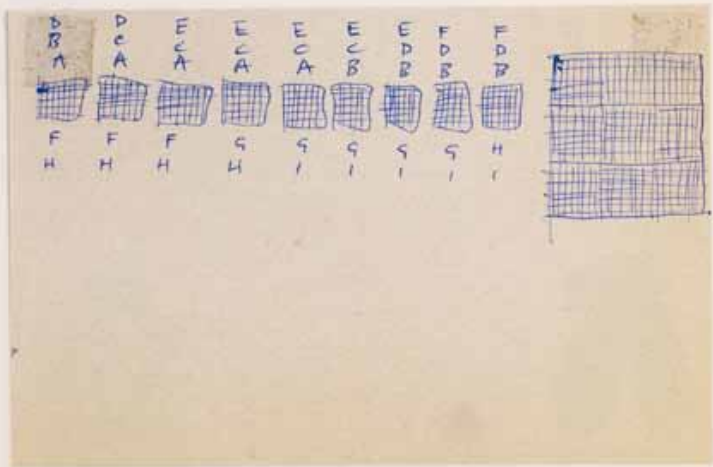
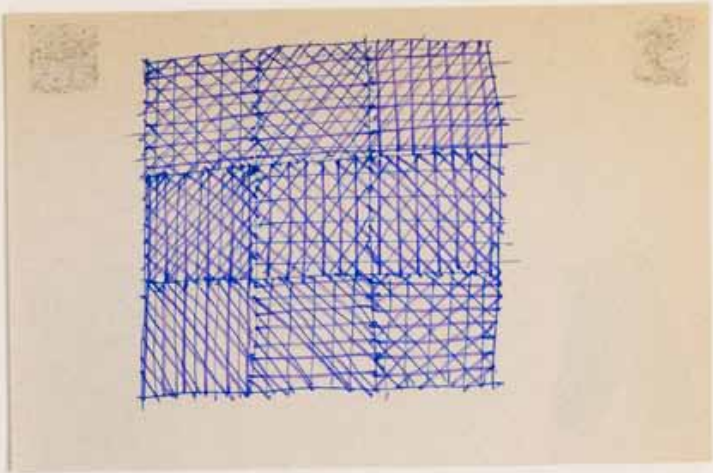




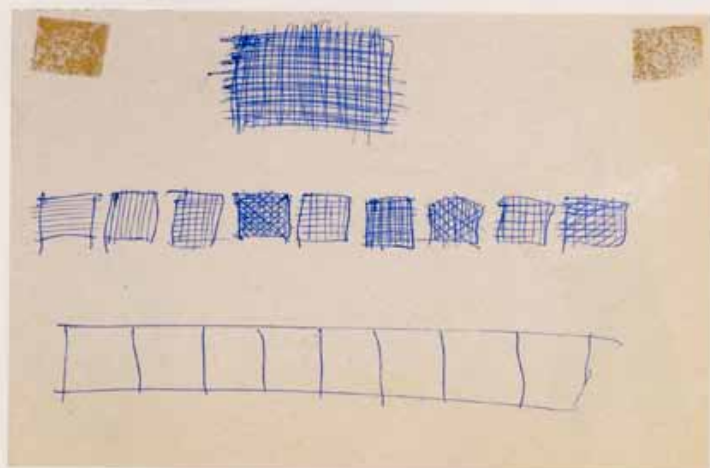




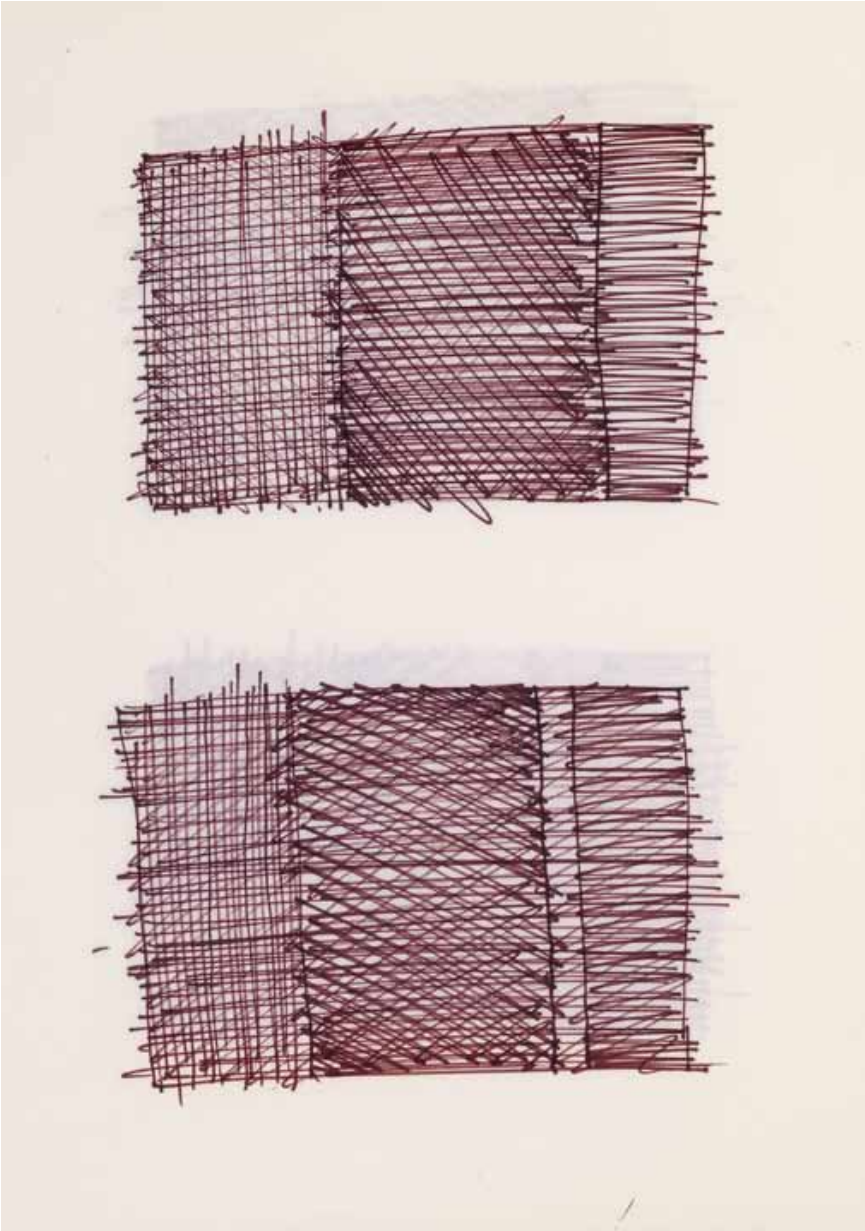




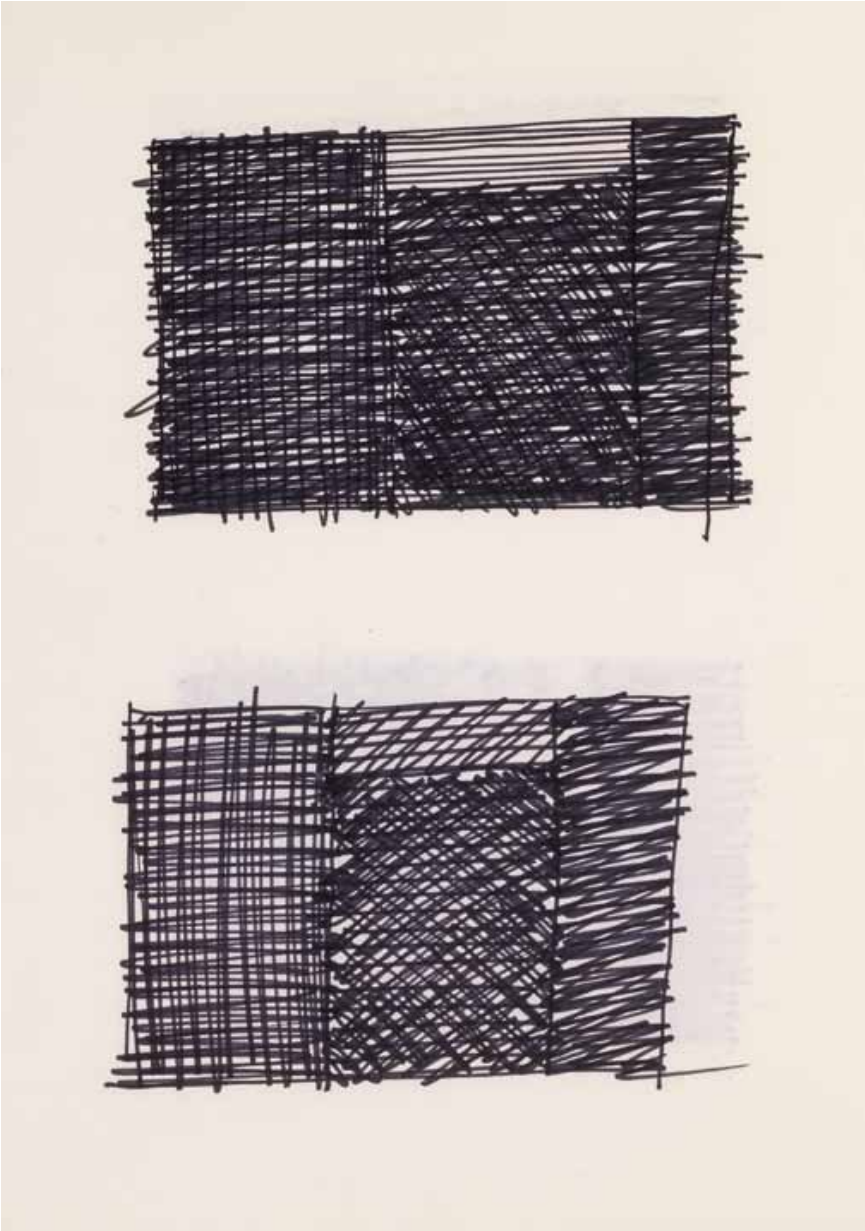




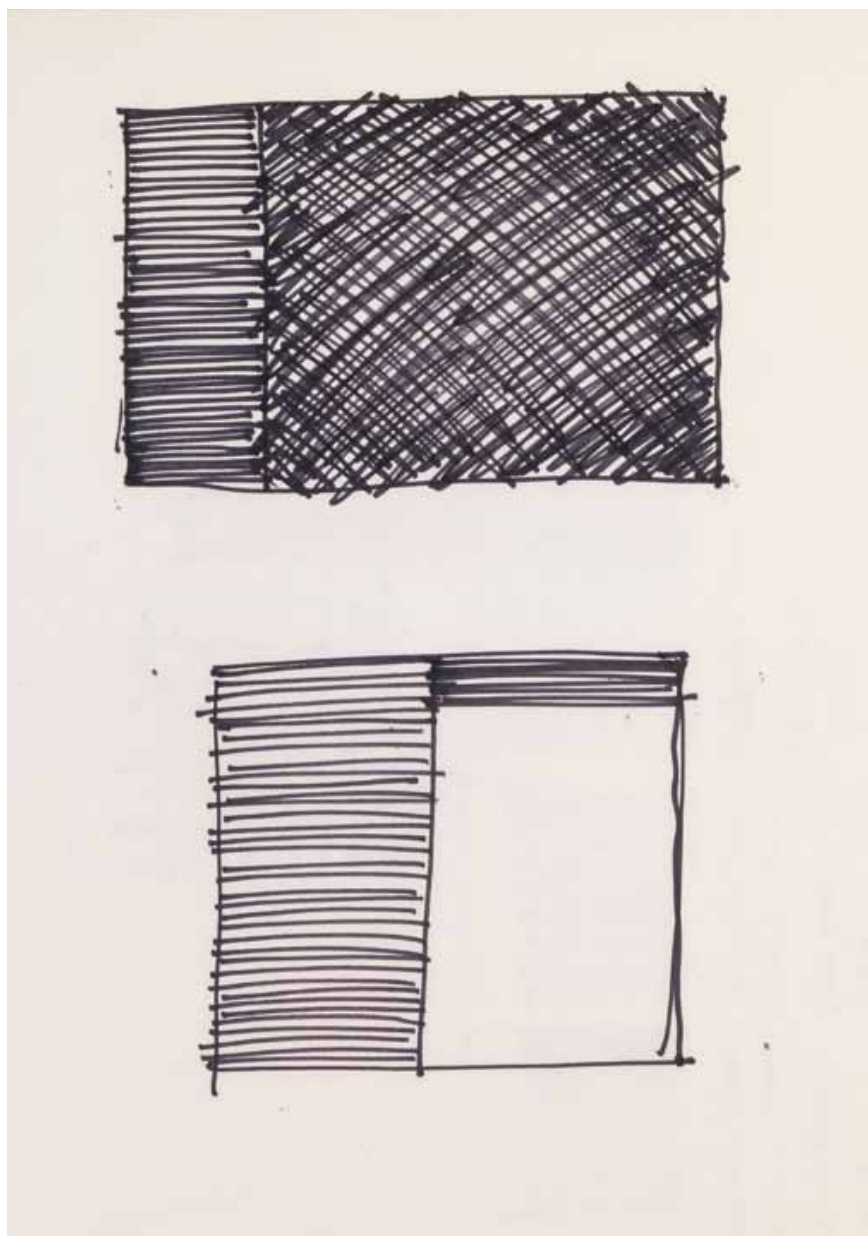




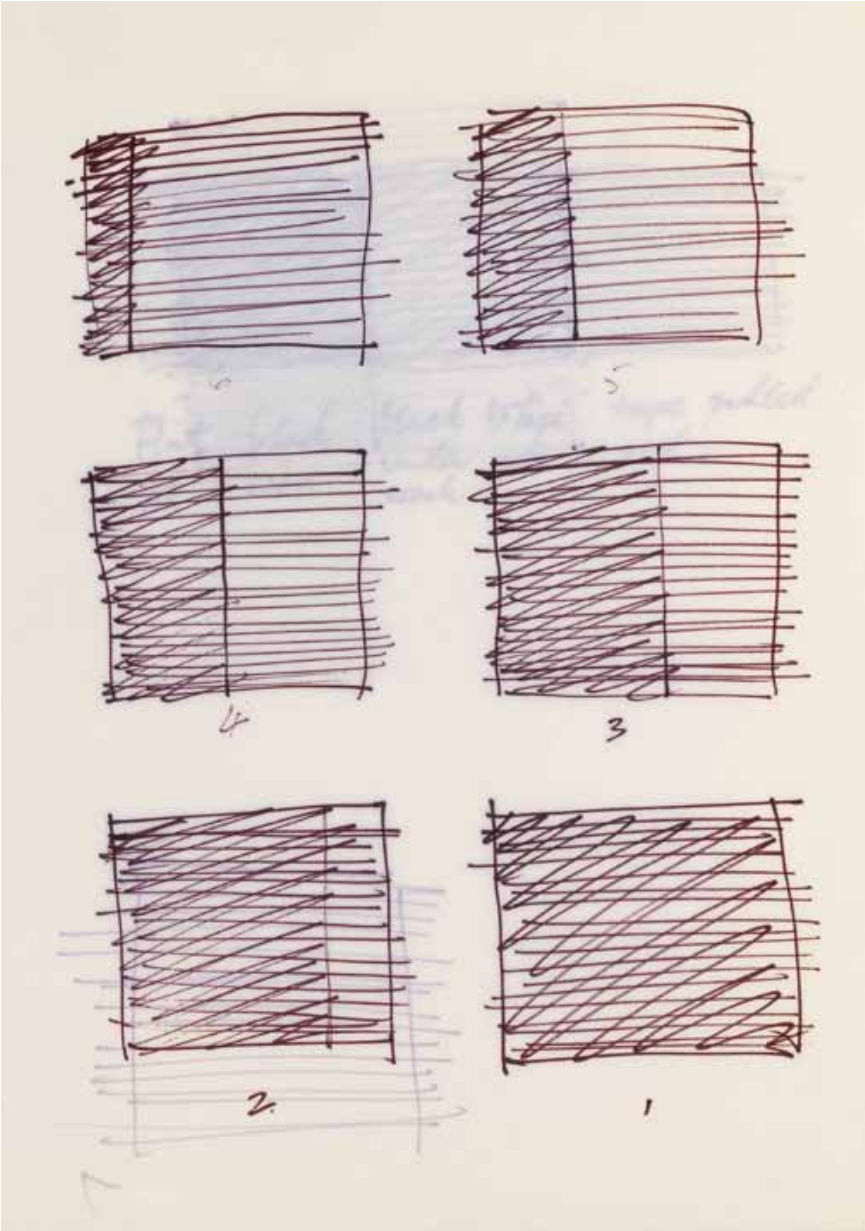














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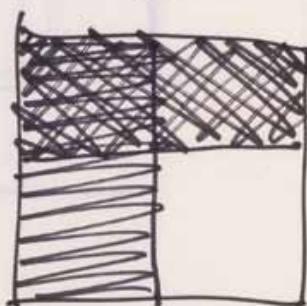
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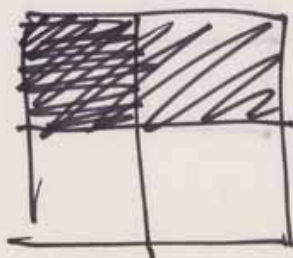
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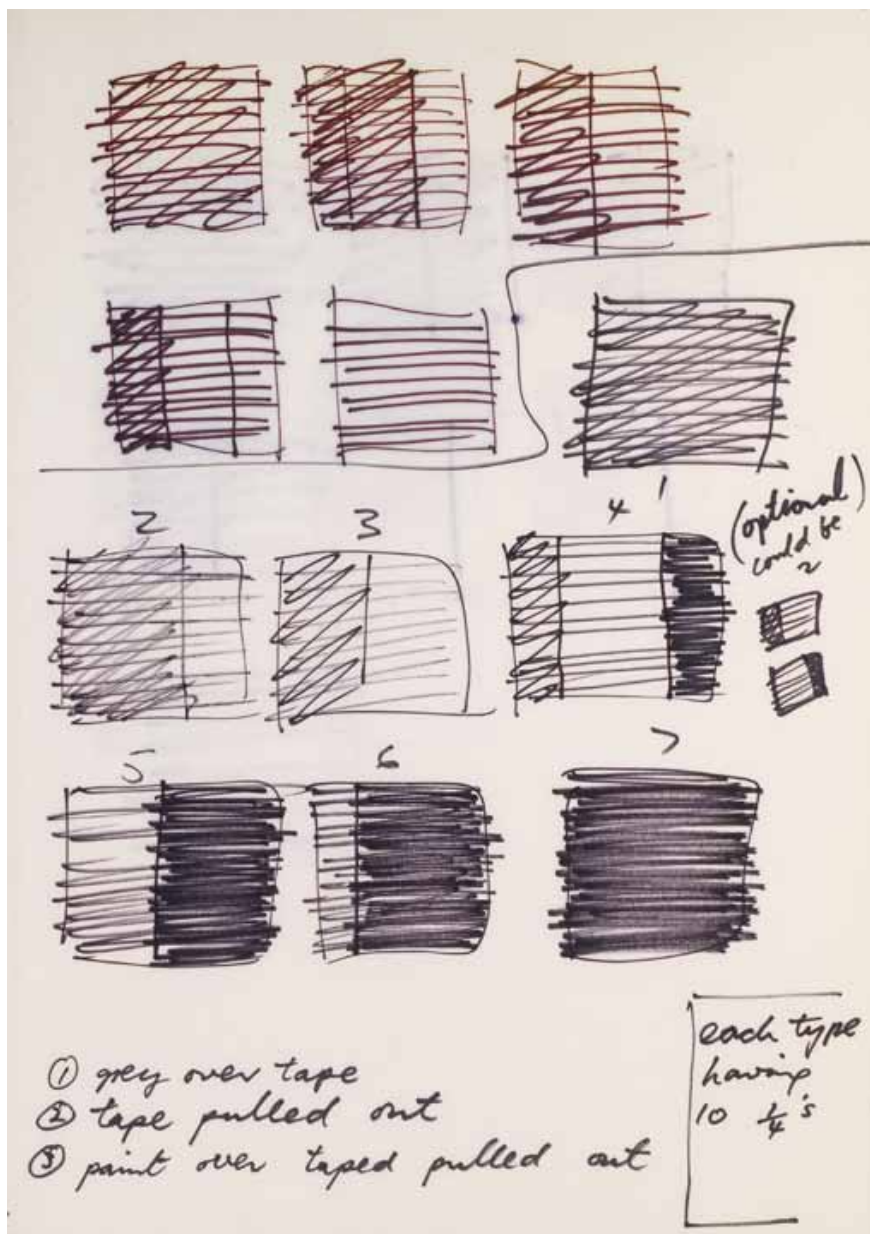
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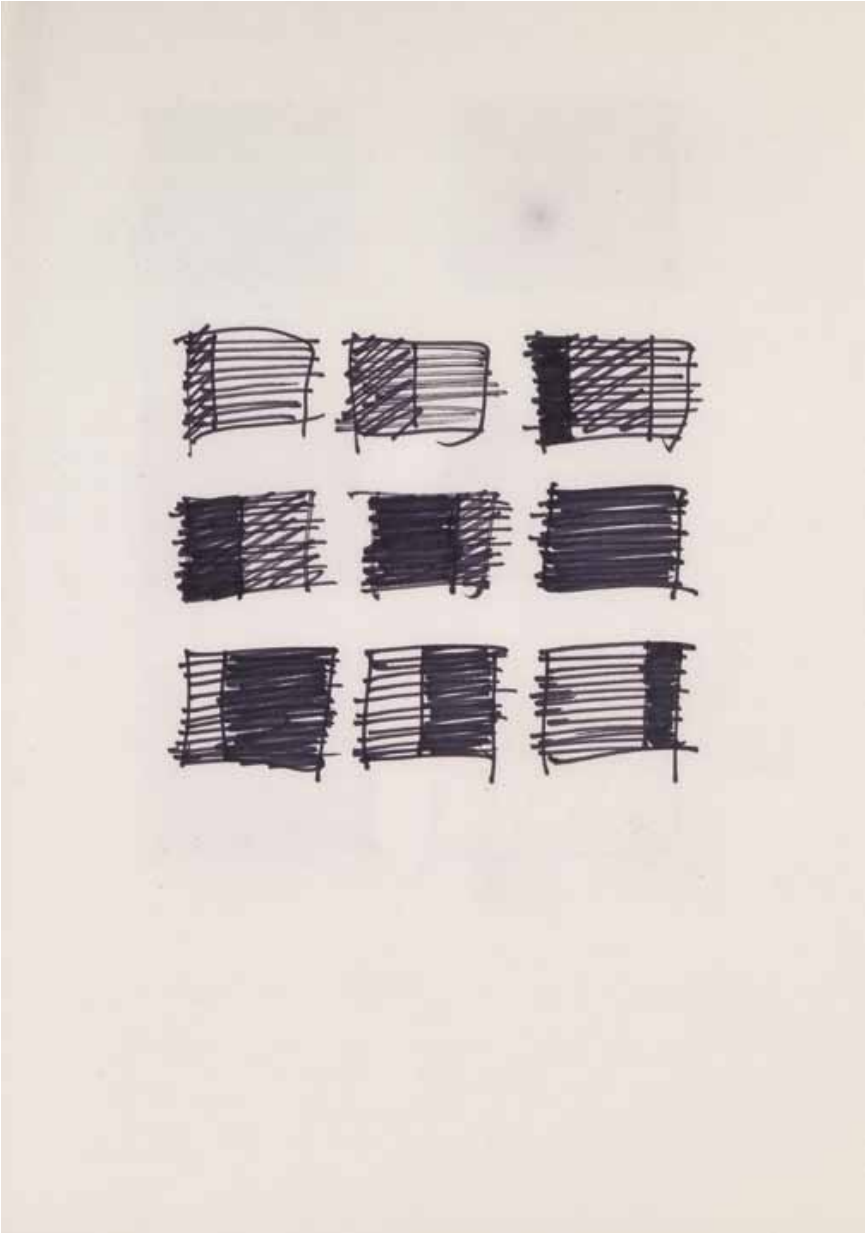
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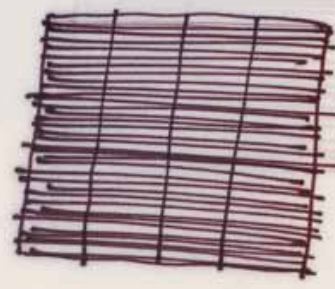
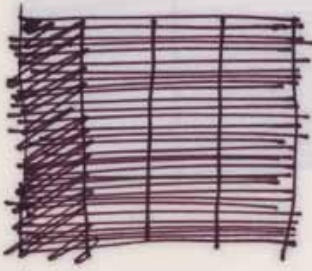
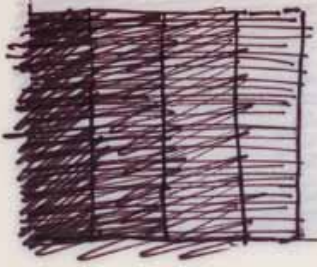












- ①. tape for left to right  $\frac{3}{4}$
- ② tape for left  $\frac{1}{2}$  - one cut seam
- ③ tape for left - two cut seams
- ④ 2 three cut seams



## LIST OF WORKS

PL. 1

*Change #5*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

23 1/3 x 30 1/3 inches (56.9 x 77.3 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 2

*Change #7*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 1/2 x 30 2/3 inches (57.5 x 78.5 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 3

*Change #8*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches (57.4 x 78.1 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 4

*Change #22*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

21 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches (54.8 x 77.4 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 5

*Change #24*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 1/3 x 30 1/3 inches (57 x 77.2 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 6

*Change #35*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 1/3 x 30 1/3 inches (57 x 77.3 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 7

*Change #42*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 1/3 x 30 1/3 inches (56.9 x 77.3 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 8

*Untitled*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on paper

22 11/16 x 30 11/16 inches (57.4 x 78.1 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 9

*Grey Red Grey*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on canvas

68 x 72 inches (172.7 x 182.9 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 10

*Change #1*, 1975

Acrylic and tape on canvas

40 x 96 inches (101.6 x 243.8 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 11

*Horizontals #1*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

21 3/4 x 29 3/4 inches (55.7 x 75.9 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 12

*Horizontals #3*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

22 x 30 inches (55.8 x 76.1 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York



PL. 13

*Horizontals #5*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

22 x 29 15/16 inches (55.8 x 76 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 14

*Horizontals #6*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of Judith & Barry Solar, Boston, MA

PL. 15

*Horizontals #8*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

22 x 29 15/16 inches (55.8 x 75.9 cm)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York

PL. 16

*Horizontals #10*, 1975

Acrylic, tape, ink and graphite on paper

22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of Rachel & Jim Solomon, Boston, MA

*Artist's Notebook*, 1974–75

Ballpoint ink and felt-tip pen on paper

Sixty individual pages

8 3/8 x 11 inches each (27 x 21 cm each)

Courtesy Neo Neo Inc, New York







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Joanna Kleinberg is Assistant Curator at The Drawing Center.

Brett Littman is Executive Director of The Drawing Center.

Colm Tóibín's novels include *The Master* and *Brooklyn*. He is a contributing editor at the London Review of Books and Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University.







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