Juan Bolivar
Geometry Wars

Published by John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton on the occasion of the exhibition:

Juan Bolivar: Geometry Wars
John Hansard Gallery
1 July – 31 August 2008

Project organised by Ros Carter
Publication designed by Adrian Hunt
Installation photography by Steve Shrimpton

John Hansard Gallery
University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK
www.hansardgallery.org.uk
tel: +44(0)23 8059 2158 fax: +44(0)8059 4192
email: info@hansardgallery.org.uk

Printed by BAS, Romsey
Distributed by Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, UK
ISBN: 978 085432 893 2

The John Hansard Gallery is supported by Arts Council England and the University of Southampton.

UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Juan Bolivar
Geometry Wars

To My Family

John Hansard Gallery

Acknowledgements

In 1985 I returned from a college trip to London. I was at the time living in a small town in the West Midlands undertaking a B/TEC in Art and Design. Upon my return I announced to one of my tutors that, whilst visiting The National Gallery, a "shower of light" had struck me when standing in front of Seurat's painting, *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) and, not only that, but that immediately afterwards I had decided to become a painter.

Naturally, Steve my tutor took his time to find a suitable answer to such a declaration. He quietly replied: "yes - it's a cracker" and proceeded to explain the basic principles of 'pointillism' and 'chromoluminarism', which he believed accounted for the "shower of light" I described.

I would like to thank Steve Payne, my first tutor, for introducing to me some of the mechanisms behind a painter's alchemy. Steve was an amiable, intelligent, quietly confident artist, and he exemplified the type of artist I would one day hope to become. Although I have not seen him for over twenty years, we still occasionally exchange Christmas cards and I often think of him.

Having made my decision to become a painter I spent the next years squeezing large tubes of paint into buckets and wrestling my way through modernism. First, at Central Saint Martins and then, for what seemed an eternity at the edge of the world, in London's E3, E9 and N4.

In time the tubes got smaller and the paint got flatter and little else changed until the new millennium, when I decided to undertake postgraduate studies. I would like to extend my thanks and acknowledgement to the academic staff and fellow class of '2001-03' students at Goldsmiths College, for providing me with the challenges and critical framework which served to contextualise and develop my practice during this crucial period and, in particular, Gerard Hemsworth, for encouraging me to take the road less traveled in my practice and for showing me that the only shortcut is the unknown.

Most of the work in this exhibition is new. However, the ideas and dialogue were initiated last year at EAST International 2007 and I would like to thank Lynda Morris and the selectors, Matthew Higgs and Marc Camille Chaimowicz, for giving me this opportunity.

I would also like to thank the Lucy Mackintosh Gallery in Lausanne, Switzerland, for their constant support, encouragement and friendship. Over the past years, friends such as Lucy and Cyril have become like an extended family and nucleus. I would like to mention a few people whom I've met over the years: Pamela Richardson, Kevin Smith, Karl Marrow, Jo Hargreaves, Chris and Chrissey Allan, Leon Woolls, Nick Dawes, Katherine Lubnar, Justin Hibbs, Imogen Stubbs, David Ben White, Eamonn Maxwell, Cyril Taylor, Michael Ashcroft, Julian Hughes Watts, Kaavus Clayton, Garth Lewis, John Copnall, Mark Vaux, Dan Sturgis, Richard Kirwan, Tim Allen, Adrian Searle, Matt Davis, Eddie Farrel, Lawrence Leaman, Itamar Martinez, Carlos David, Peter and Cassie Liversidge, Lee Maelzer, Fabio Almeida, Gina Tornatore, John Greenwood, Christina Niedenberger, Brent Stewart, Max Hymes, Hattie Lee, Christopher Packet, Miho Sato, Piers Secunda, Sam Herbert, James Hopkins, Matt Franks, Sheena Macrae, Dallas Seitz, Anthony Gross, Richard Priestly, Milika Murito, Diann Bauer, Andrea Medjesi-Jones, Shezad Dawood, Greg Rook, Gunther Herbst, Sonya Park, John Stark, Richard Wathen, Lucas Golding, Andrew Grassie, Julie Verhoeven, Andy Hsu, Ian Monroe, Sarah Baker, Isha Bohling, Heidi Stokes, Mandy Lee Jandrell, Doug Fishbone, Neil Zakiewicz, Hiroe Komai, Mathew Gooding, Clare Gasson, Laura White, Giles Perry, Richard Livingston, Chris Roberts, Mauro Bonacina,

Stuart Gough, Zebedee Jones, John Richert, Mike Stubbs, Jost Munster, Richard Ducker, Wendi Dallanegra, Danny Connely, Rae and Ian Baily, Martin Hands, Dave Weston, Michael Cove, Hazel Stamford, Sam Sampson, Allan de Jong, Joe Faulkner, Piers Clemmet, Daren Watson, Sheila Braine, Karen Camkin, Jafe Bowers, Joe Asser, Georgina McNamara, Darren O'Brien,Yuki Miyaki, Martin Maloney, Simon Trought, Gemma de Cruz, Dave and Jim from Timpson Signs, Jason Mackie, Sandy Lee, Golden Artist Colours and all the staff at John Jones and Cornelissen. And, especially, I'd like to thank Karen David, without whose help, comments and enthusiasm throughout this project, many of the paintings in this exhibition would have remained as post-it note scribbles buried beneath books in 'the cabin'.

If you've got this far, there is no doubt that this will seem like the longest list of acknowledgements that you have ever read. The reason is simple. If you get a calculator and type in 2008 and then subtract the figure at the beginning of this small essay, you may get an idea of what all this means to me. For that reason I cannot begin to thank enough Stephen Foster and Ros Carter at the John Hansard Gallery for their invitation to do this exhibition, and all who have helped to organise, install and document it: Julian Grater, Charlotte Agius, Liz Jones, Jenny Lopez, Naomi McGrew, Joel Papps, Eloise Rose, Val Drayton, Ronda Gowland, Ratna Bibi, Vic Anderson and Steve Shrimpton, and Adrian Hunt and Suhail Malik for producing this catalogue and writing the introductory essay respectively.

Thank you all.

Juan Bolivar, 2008

Contents

i.

Stephen Foster
Introduction

Juan Bolivar's paintings operate within the twin primeval impulses of schematisation and figuration that lie at the root of all graphic representation. On the one hand, the desire to create representational images through the simplest and most economical mark-making is as fundamental to human activity as that of verbal communication, and actually precedes it. This is evident both in Palaeolithic cave paintings and in the earliest schematic face drawings of young children. At the same time, the apprehension of the most abstract of images will tend to be interpreted figuratively, however vague or economical the information. Building on this phenomenon, *Geometry Wars* addresses the tension between figurative representation and 'pure' abstraction.

We are all familiar with visual riddles such as the simple line drawing that can be read either as a vase or as two faces in profile. The two readings can never be comprehended simultaneously, and we switch, backwards and forwards, from one to the other. However quickly we switch, the current reading always excludes the other. Similarly, the apprehension of any mark making becomes figurative representation, and then as an abstraction. Either or, but never the two simultaneously. Bolivar playfully addresses this phenomenon by referencing the most serious issues of formalist painting, whilst teasing us with the dumbest of schematic representation.

An earlier body of work consisted of paintings of faces, each composed of basic geometrical shapes, painted in a flat, colour-field style. With their muted colour and simple geometrical components, these paintings resemble huge 'fuzzy felt' portraits, and the degree to which details of personality are read into the barest of signs is remarkable. Once the impulse to interpret two dots as eyes has occurred, more detailed interpretations follow, quickly resorting to the stereotypical. The subject suddenly displays a swarthy complexion, for example, followed by a dodgy haircut and untrustworthy glances. Bolivar does not like to refer to these paintings as portraits, but rather describes them as 'facialities'. They are imbued with humour, possibly because the viewer becomes aware of gentle teasing in terms of bringing two such apparently incompatible readings together. Humour invariably results from the unexpected collision of the seemingly incompatible.

However, humour in the paintings that make up *Geometry Wars* has receded whilst other elements move to the fore. The muted palette has been further reduced to a near monochromatic grey. Implied imagery tends towards the paraphernalia of war, whether through medieval castellation and armoury, bunkers, watchtowers and warships, to figures vaguely reminiscent of satellite receivers and futuristic craft. Just as he prefers the term 'facialities' over portraits, he might in these prefer 'representationalisms' over landscapes. The dumbness of the imagery remains, but is somehow bereft. Objects are anachronistic, useless, broken and patched up.

The humour in these paintings is downplayed because previously it had a tendency to dominate and obscure. These paintings work best when they are bipolar, and where neither reading dominates, like focusing on the head and tail of a flicked spinning coin. It is all about maintaining balance. The imagery contained within the works in *Geometry Wars* provides a grid within which the paintings' formal qualities reside. Whilst we may enjoy the dumb imagery of narrative gently undermining the rather po-faced intellectualism of formalist painting, at the end of the day, these are unremittingly beautiful paintings that are best enjoyed at a purely intuitive level.

Geometry Wars is the latest in a long line of John Hansard

Gallery exhibitions that explore issues of figuration in abstract painting. It stretches as far back as *Nicholas May* (1990) and includes *Chance, Choice and Irony* (1994), *Gerard Hemsworth* (1999), *New British Painting* (2003/04) and *Patrick Heron, Jonathan Lasker, Katie Pratt* (2006). We are extremely grateful to Juan Bolivar for making a valuable contribution to this long-standing exploration.

ii.

Juan Bolivar
A Fly in the Ointment

A Fly in the Ointment

Meaning:
A small but irritating flaw that spoils the whole thing.
www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/fly-in-the-ointment.html

There is a scene in the film *The Fly* where a scientist undergoes a terrible accident involving himself, a teleportation machine and a fly. As a result of this accident, Dr. Delambre emerges from the teleporter, fused with the fly as a bizarre hybrid. His body now has the head of a fly and he has lost one hand and gained a claw-like, fly extremity. Incidentally, I am referring to the often overlooked 1958 original version, directed by Kurt Neumann and starring Vincent Price, not the 80s gore-fest remake, directed by David Cronenberg and starring Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis.

At this point in the original film we don't see the scientist's head. It is covered with a black cloak. He is unable to speak but appears to be calm as he proceeds to communicate with his wife Helene, who is becoming aware that something has gone terribly wrong, as he slips typed notes underneath the laboratory door, explaining how she must follow his every instruction in order to help him. The scene is a dark, tragic, science gone wrong as a lesson to humanity, sci-fi tale. Or is it?

Recently, I was watching this film whilst making the work for this exhibition. I have seen this film before and I wasn't really paying much attention when suddenly I noticed something unusual – a line in the film which took me by surprise and stopped me in my tracks: "Fetch me a bowl of milk laced with rum." Well, there's nothing unusual about a man wanting a stiff drink after having a bit of a shock, such as finding you suddenly have the head of a fly. The question is, why 'milk laced with rum'? Sure, this could be the scientist's favourite tipple, a 'hot toddy' of milk and rum, but that didn't seem right. He would have clearly asked in his written instructions for this drink to be warmed. But I don't think that is what he meant. The answer is simple. The man wants the rum... and the fly wants the milk.

I couldn't help laughing. I started to wonder if this film was some kind of comedy 'noir' and decided to do some research, but the more I looked, the funnier the film became. Lines from the film started to jump out like quips from a *Carry On* movie. "Did your brother (Dr Delambre) ever experiment with animals?", or when Dr Delambre is asked by his wife of the whereabouts of their family pet cat (missing after a teleporter experiment), he replies "Into space ... a stream of cat atoms", as if *Monty Python's* John Cleese had written the script.

I tried to rent the movie. I needed to see it again but nobody seemed to stock this 1958 sci-fi classic; however, I found some clips on 'YouTube'. Most of them show the moments just after his demand for milk and rum. And again, it is all strangely comical. The scientist is seen shuffling around wearing a black cloak over his head, as his wife desperately tries to communicate with him. He grunts and stomps, occasionally writing messages on the lab's blackboard or typing them with one hand. I don't know why I found this amusing. To tell you the truth, I felt a little guilty that I couldn't respond to it otherwise. But even right at the end, after the scientist takes his own life in order to protect humanity and end his own nightmare by placing his head and arm under an industrial press, I found myself thinking – what is an industrial press doing in a lab like this?

The film ends with the realisation that Helen Delambre was not crazy after all. That she was telling the truth. We find her husband's other hybrid half caught in a spider's web screaming "Help me! Help meeee!", more Mini Mouse than Spider Man, and his previously missing head now stuck to a tiny fly, about to be eaten by a large spider in the same web.

I don't think any of this was intended to be seen as comedy when the film was made. There is no evidence or mention of comedy in reviews or descriptions of the film. "Based on a Short Story/ Tragedy/ Crushed Head/ Ballet/ Laboratory Accident", these are some of the key words that crop up, but not comedy. So why do I now find this film amusing? I'll never really know. What I do know is that whilst the film may not have changed since it was made in 1958, maybe the way in which we view the world has changed.

I am not suggesting that 'dark humour' or 'tragicomedy' are solely modern phenomena, unbeknown in the 1950s or before. But I am suggesting that their status may have shifted from 'genre' to a 'condition'. A condition of our times where 'tragicomedy' seems to be at best a necessity and at worst a bad habit.

A few years ago I saw a documentary about Jonny Kennedy, a man who suffered with a terrible genetic condition called Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB) and died in 2003, aged thirty six. It meant that his skin literally fell off at the slightest touch. Prior to his death he filmed a documentary where he shared his story with the world. It was a heart breaking tale of his tenacity and determination to grab a slice of life. At one point he was meeting the celebrity model Nell McAndrew, who was running in a charity fund raising event when, moments after she walks away, weeping with tears full of pain and empathy for him, he turns to the camera and says "...they always fall for it" – no doubt pretending the whole thing was just a caddish stunt to pull the girls.

More recently I heard a man, suffering with the mind degenerative Alzheimer's disease, reply to a journalist on television, asking him about his fears of this disease: "…the future ... forget about it" and again I wondered whether this 'joke' was intentional. Another example is of

the Chinese man, Huang Chuncai, in Channel 4's recent series *Bodyshock*, suffering with Neurofibromatosis (NF), who described himself as 'lucky' when winning at cards, despite a 25KG tumour engulfing his face, so much that his head melted into a large mass spilling over beyond all recognition, onto the very table where he played cards with friends. And at that point I realised that all these men made comments such as these, not as accidental or gratuitous one-liners, but as deliberate weapons, intrinsic to their survival in the face of enormous adversity.

Tragedy is not exactly a new thing. Nor are tragic events new. But, maybe we have never laughed so much in between the two. Perhaps this 'condition', this form of self-defence, is no longer the prerequisite of extreme cases or circumstances such as these men's, but one which we have adopted, as we collectively share our fears and experience tragic events through the World Wide Web, satellite communication and daily newspapers. As one. Perhaps more than ever we feel a little confused and we just don't know whether to laugh or cry as we face the world, shielded only by our very own 'silver screen' of *Frasier*, *Will & Grace* and *Friends*.

I have heard stories of women in certain parts of the world who add the poison of scorpions to their children's milk, so that they will become immune to the poison as they grow up. Protected by embracing their fears. And I wonder if the sorbitol in our diets has hooked us equally to cope with our world. And our fears.

iii.

Suhail Malik
Measure for Measure

As you approach the speed of light, space shrinks and time stretches. Well, not for you but for someone else who would be looking at your fantastically accelerated kinetics and gauging it according to their own much, much slower-moving measures. For you, it would all still be one metre and one second as you have always known them. You wouldn't know the difference. At least, so says Einstein in his theories of relativity from about a century ago, observing the basic stipulation his whole theory turns upon: that the speed of light – 300,000 kilometres per second, give or take – is constant, whether you are stationary or are moving. Imagine if it wasn't: you are going at close to the speed of light and switch on a torch, pointing it in front of you at a startled fox (curiously also travelling at the same high speed, which is perhaps why it is startled). Because you are close to the speed of light anyway and it would not go that much faster than you, it would take much, much longer for the torchlight to get to the fox. The fox could slip away before you saw its startled face. You might just be left with its sly grin and wink, hovering long after it had gone, a distant cousin of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat. Similarly, the light from your face would take a while to hit the mirror you hold out in front of you to check your lipstick, by which time you may even have moved away, taking the risk of a slightly misapplied line. Images, light and information would be in the retardation Dan Graham gave to the mirror function of live video monitors in *Time Delay Room* (1974): two rooms with two monitors next to one another, one of which shows what happens in front of it – you watching – from eight seconds before. The second monitor in each room shows what is happening in the other one in real time. You then have a time delay for the 'present' room's self-imaging (a retardation of real space from itself) and live, near-instant images (real-time contracting space) from the other room, and you have this twice. We don't need to get into the details of Graham's piece here other than to note that he posits eight seconds as the 'outer limit of the neurophysiological short-term memory that forms an immediate part of our present perception'. If you were moving at something close to the speed of light and it took four seconds to get to the mirror in front of you (and so four seconds for the light to get back to your retina, never mind internal brain-processing time) then your lipstick application or any other image-based activity would be constantly hovering at the limit of short-term memory of what Graham proposes to be our lived present. It would be a visual equivalent to hearing feedback as you try to speak yourself into the future of your phrase, retarded, interrupted, defeated by the way your immediate past catches up with you and trips you up, immediately transmitted words muddling your here and now of language and expression. A chronic visual interruption, a near impossibility of ever getting your lipstick just right. No, for Einstein the speed of light is always the speed of light no matter how fast you are going (unless it is the speed of light itself). Light will not get in the way of the image, nor of itself. And the consequence of this is that space and time become very mutable – not the space and time of perception in relation to memory and consciousness that Graham messes up in his piece but their real, (im)material physicality. It does so because if speed is a distance traversed in a certain amount of time, then as the speed gets closer to the speed of light the distance travelled in a fraction of time obviously increases (300,000 kilometres per second is obviously a lot more – 100,000,000 times more – than the three metres per second or so you might do in a brisk walk on a chilly

spring day). If the speed of light is constant however, then at close to the speed of light it is not that more and more distance is covered in shorter and shorter amounts of time, otherwise you would end up either in the optical feedback noted above or go faster than the speed of light, which is prohibited (in a vacuum). The constancy of light's speed requires rather that, when measured from another (stationary) position, either distance itself starts to shrink, so that for the stationary observer space itself (as measured) takes less time to cover or, equivalently, that time expands so it takes less time (as measured) to cover a certain distance. And of course it is not one or the other, but both. Light then always travels at the speed of light, which is a constant speed, no matter how fast you are going, because distance covered shrinks and time taken expands such that, as you approach the speed of light, it covers the same amount of distance in the same amount of time as it did when you were stationary (up to the speed of light itself, when distance shrinks to a point and time dilates to infinity); just that distance and time are now different to what they used to be (for someone else, not for you). And, just to add to the mind-melt of these results, the contracting of space and the dilation of time does not just take place for the one going fast as far as the stationary onlooker is concerned, but also the other way round since, of course, the stationary onlooker is going relatively fast from the point of view of the one who was initially said to be moving. (You know this from when you are on a train and you find yourself parallel to another train travelling momentarily at the same speed in the same direction such that it looks to you as though you are both stationary; you compensate for this, reminding yourself that both trains are moving, and that the Earth remains stationary. No such reassurance in Einstein's theory.) It gets even worse (or better, as you wish) if you are to think about moving at non-constant speeds. If you are falling through space you accelerate downwards because of gravity. As you fall you think about the constancy of the speed of light. Being constant, it does not accelerate with you. Rather, for someone looking at your hapless descent, the contraction of length (not that of the distance between the ground and you hurtling towards it, full of glee and trepidation, but that of space itself) and the dilation of time (not the eternity of fear as the ground rushes up to you but that of time itself) are intensifying as you go faster and faster. Put the other way, gravity (associated with mass) is this 'intensification' of space and time to a point where there is no length and infinite time – the black hole you will never reach because, alas, the ground is in the way and the earth just isn't massive enough. There is a spatial three-dimensional analogue for this point: the poles of the earth where all the longitudinal measures meet. Similarly, in accelerated frames of reference – such as your plummeting to the ground under gravity – space and time curve for the one who observes, as theirs does for you, towards the limit of a zero-point with a perplexingly infinite mass. With Einstein, that is what gravity is: the curvature of space-time.

For all its contractions, dilation, curving and warping, space-time remains a continuum up to the point of space-time saturation of the black hole. It bends, stretches, shrinks and even twists but, through all this, retains its fabric integrity. Length, time, mass and their measures are subject to geometrical transformations. (Einstein's theories, for all their challenge to physical common sense, are but theories of geometrical transformation of the fabric of space-time.) Space-time and measure are not stable. Geometric instabilities can also be seen in

Juan Bolivar's art and though they are obviously distinct from the cold dramas of Einstein's relativity theories, they nonetheless call up similar startling challenges – if, that is, they do not propose a different kind of geometrical appreciation altogether. Bolivar's paintings are made of the simplest two-dimensional geometrical shapes – regular rectangles, triangles, circles and so on – combined to form quasi-images, nearly fully-formed or perhaps over-formed cousins of 'proper representations' of odd spaces, or particular views on standard objects: an abstracted ship, a broken hut, the space of a stairwell. But the geometry of the compositional element gets in the way of the images ever falling over to the side of full representation, preferring instead to hover, by more than a fraction, on this side of the abstraction art has had to contend with since Malevich's *Black Square* of 1913 or 1915 (already an ambiguity at this apparently most definitive of punctuation points in art, the black square being a full stop in some typeface of giants). Unlike the pristine version or ideal of Malevich's degree-zero art, or Mondrian's relatively florid intersecting strips and segmented squares, Bolivar's geometrical objects and what they depict are, however, of a world that is a bit wonky, unstraight, off. Sometimes unhinged. What is paradoxically depicted in the paintings' precise and perfect, or near-perfect, geometrical shapes are equivalents of the historical cracks and misalignments that these ideals of modernism have historically become: the warped stretcher, the flaking and cracked paint, the colour separation of the surfaces; the fragility of the material decomposition of their purposeful purity. This absorption into the elements of composition of Bolivar's paintings of the wonkiness of the historical mis-shaping of the ideality represented by the black square, puts them into another configuration of space than that of the ideal space of geometry shared by the Einsteinian insistence on the integrity of space-time. The chance processes of historical decay are the constituent re-idealized forms of Bolivar's paintings but these elements attest to the leakages and involutions of ideal geo-space, the historical refutation of the ideality of geometry whose only equivalent in Einsteinian space-time is the black hole. The space that Bolivar's paintings propagate (and propagate themselves along) is then a picture equivalent of the black hole that is the limit-condition of the space-time continuum in its geometric consistency and smooth self-referentiality. While the geometrical and surface tidiness of Bolivar's paintings present a simulacrum of an ideal space, they no less attest to the degradation of the physical idealism of the spatio-temporal continuum through its rupturing and leaking, as much as the wearing out of its historical idealism through the well-known depredation of material processes called aging. This is space as it would be if a flat Euclidean plane of geometry were constituted by a proliferation of black-holes rather than monotonically flat space, by chance rather than continuity.

If geometry is in general the account of shapes, spaces and manifolds that presume a smooth continuity of surfaces then, confounded by chance and leakage, the shapes, lines, areas and depicted volumes in Bolivar's paintings conduct geometry wars, as the show title tells us. Not the war of otherwise stable geometrical elements with one another, as per the computer game, nor of one kind of geometry against another (Riemannian against Euclidean, to return momentarily to the Einsteinian transformation), but a war with geometry itself and one conducted on its plane. Such a war is at once a war with measurement as the standardizing gauge of ratios of

length, time, mass and so on. This is in fact an old struggle renewed, since measurement has a long and arduous history, bound up with the changing determinations of what constitutes the grounds for a stable unit. In its metric convention, the unit of length was decreed not long after the French Revolution to be the metre. But this unity was itself split and unstable at its beginning, being defined by the French Academy of sciences in 1790 as the length of a pendulum that would take one second to go from one side of its oscillation to the other. Recognizing that this definition could not produce standardization enough since the period of the pendulum varied with local gravitational effects (height above sea level, mountain ranges), the definition changed in 1791 to be the length of one ten millionth of the line along the curvature of the Earth from the Equator to the North Pole as it passed through Paris. The Earth rather than time became the final reference point for spatial measure. The determination of what this length actually was required a seven-year expedition, led by Delambre and Méchain, to as far afield as Barcelona to Dunkirk. From this vast enquiry, representing a universal ambition, a standard platinum bar defining one metre was inaugurated in 1799 in Paris. However, this authoritative measure of the metre was not quite right according to its definition since the explorations that determined its length overestimated the flattening of the Earth at the poles. Consequently, this second, meridional attempt at the metre was in fact one fifth of a millimetre shorter that it should have been. Despite this errancy in the length of the metre, the manufactured length became the standard and the Earth's circumference through the poles via Paris was more than it should have been – forty million metres – by definition. Since 1983, all references to Earth and other unconstant, variable or contingent elements have been removed from the definition of the metre: it now relies on the speed of light as, per Einstein's theories of relativity, the universal constant. The metre is the distance travelled by light in a vacuum in 1/299,792,458 of a second, that very small number being of course an inversion of the very large distance that light travels in one second (just under seven and half times the wrongly-measured polar circumference of the Earth). The great advantage of this definition is that the metre will stay resolutely and constantly the same metre no matter how fast you are going, accelerating or decelerating for anyone looking from any frame of reference. Well, nearly. Because what a second is – defined in 1980 as the duration of 9,192,631,770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the Caesium-133 atom at rest at absolute zero – depends upon measurements being taken locally to those oscillations, in what is called the proper time of the system. There are two variants to consider here. First, the relativistic problem that though such a definition is also light-based (since the oscillation of this very cold Caesium atom is electro-magnetic radiation, as light is), the definitional oscillation and its duration will warp for another observer moving past or around the atom and the more so the closer that movement is to the speed of light. These effects can however be accounted for by relativity theory, presuming the local continuity of the space-time frame of reference. The second variation is, however, harder to accommodate. When the conditions of local continuity are irrevocably ruptured and leaky, ridden with a set of chances that they cannot circumscribe because the region of time measurement is punctuated by black hole-squares that do not permit of the constitution of a local time, there

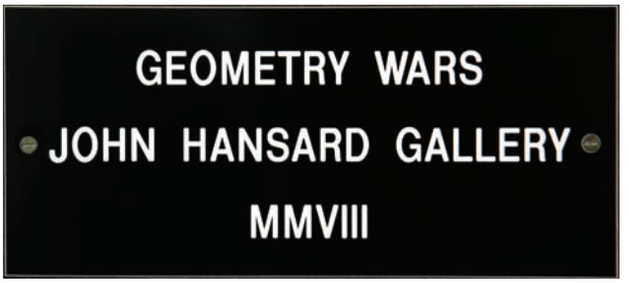
cannot be any assurance in the authority of the standard second nor then of the metre. Light is no longer the consistent and reliable source that will get you out of the indefiniteness you are then cast into by history. There is only the arbitrariness of any measure, disconnected from a self-consistent geometry. In these bereft conditions, and in the z-axis perpendicular to the plane of the paintings, Bolivar constructs two attempts at measures that will see us through to anything that might conceivably allow you to work your way around such a disjointed space-time. Here is another go at the metre, given an authority of weight and solidity, as is the revised and reformulated kilogram. But perhaps these aren't quite right for what the standard measures must now be. You might expect them to be a bit off, a bit skewy: they are after all perhaps only sketches and try-outs for a finished-off version that will take its place somewhere in prestigious authoritative institutions, discarded remnants that won't quite make the final cut; prototypes, as Bolivar calls them. But how could you know? Unable to assume a consistent manifold or the conceptual idealism of geometry, there is no stability here, no constancy that will allow the task of making measure to come to a rest. There can be only off-casts, try-outs, attempts and abortions of measure. If it was Duchamp who opened up measure to the dimension of chance in art with the *Three Standard Stoppages* (allegedly dropping onto a canvas surface three one metre pieces of standard tailor's thread held parallel to it, gluing down the resulting curved lines to form putatively arbitrary shapes redescribing the metre – the 'metre diminished' as he put it – that would form constituent elements of his subsequent art production), the *Geometry Wars* Bolivar conducts across the planar surfaces of the paintings and the volumetric-massy space of his prototypes hybridize the aleatory redeterminations of Duchamp's conceptual abstraction with the cracking and suppurating residues of Malevich's pictorial abstraction. This not so much redescribes the standard measures as to make palpable a spatio-temporal leakage and dehiscence that exposes the final, intrinsic arbitrariness of measure and that which is measured, the unsteadiness of the spatiotemporal manifold and the unreliability of geometry. And this through the perverse order of a constrained lexicon of proto-idealized shapes and spaces. This is a war waged against a geometry that has always encapsulated regular shapes into an ideality that claims to circumscribe them, a war fought for an inconsistent geometry.

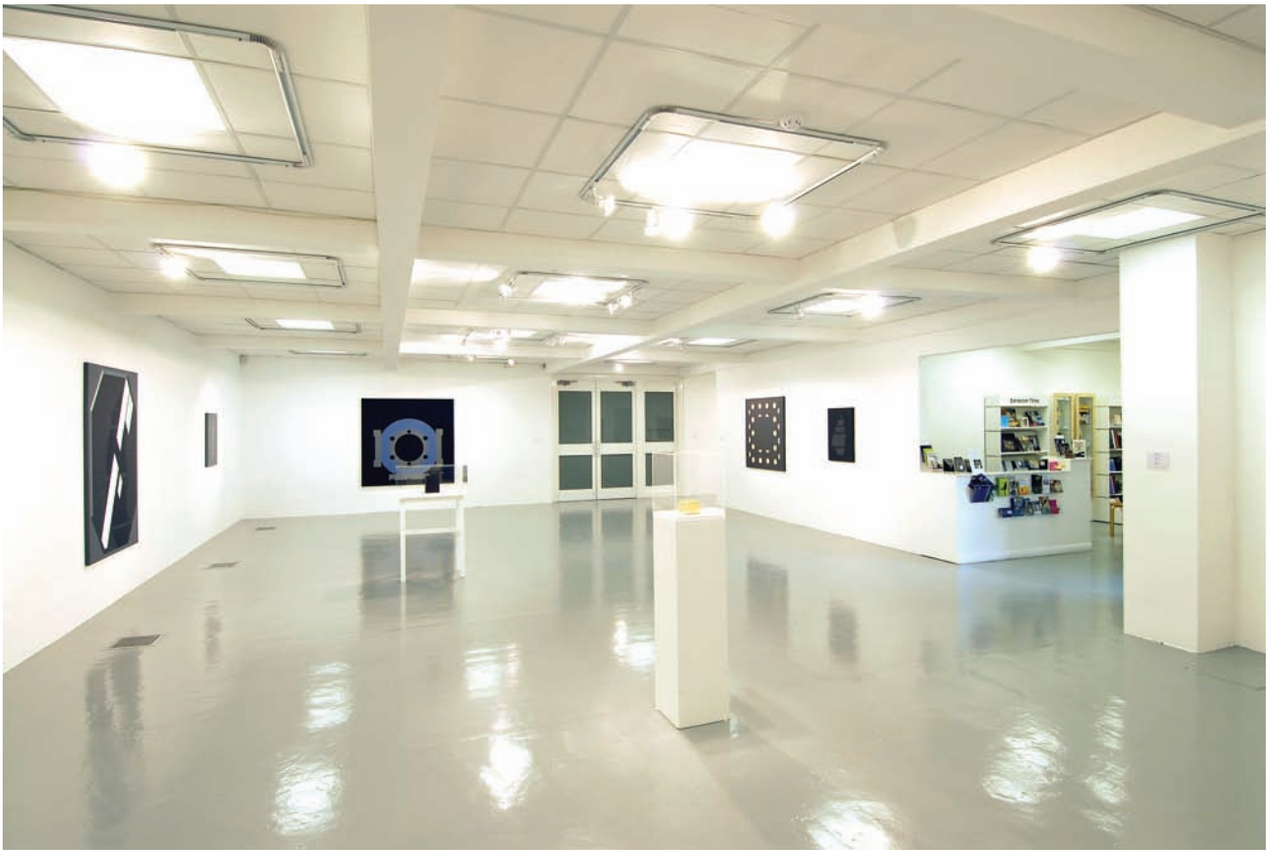
iv.

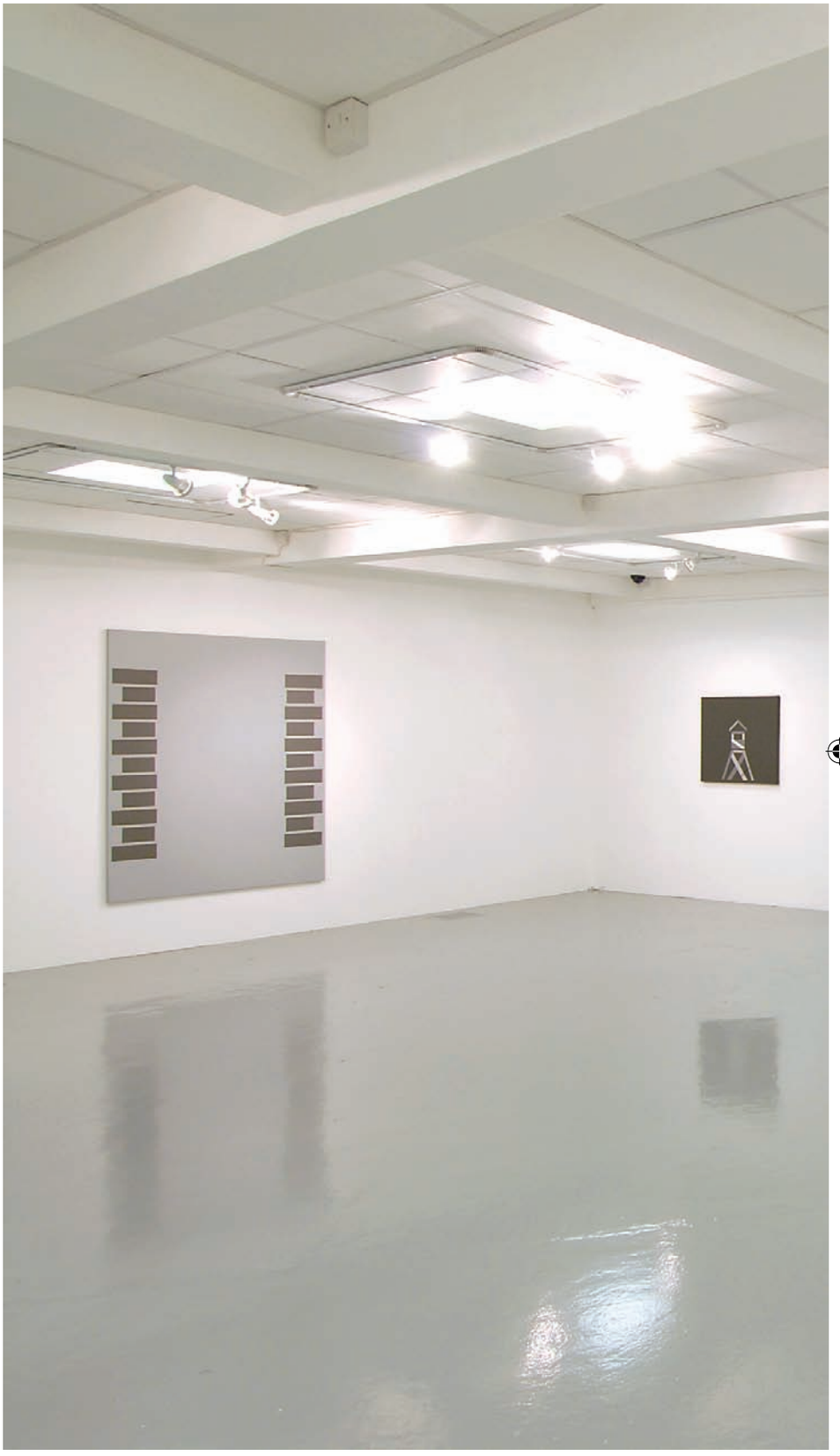
Images

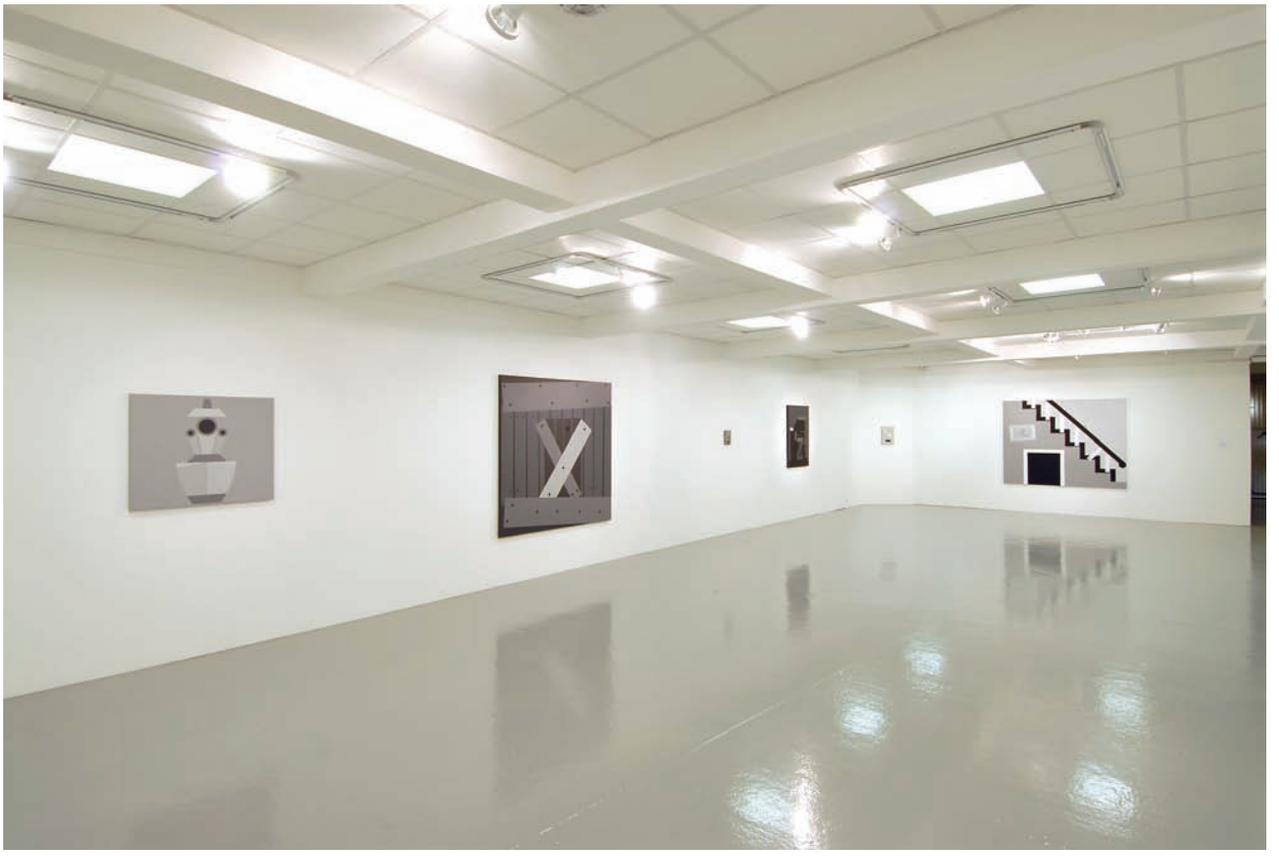
Installation photographs
Juan Bolivar: Geometry Wars, John Hansard Gallery
1 July to 31 August 2008

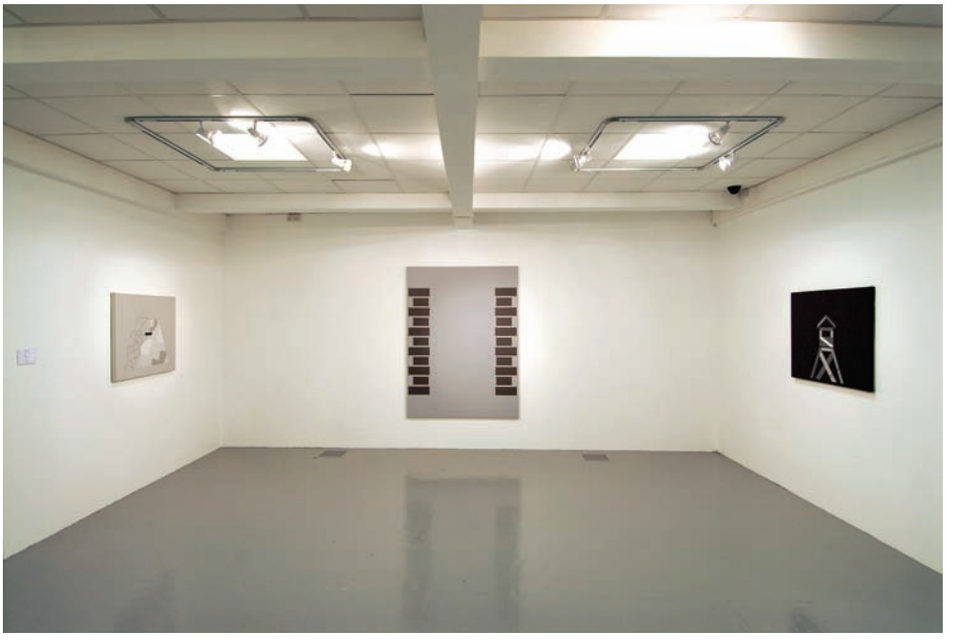
Works
All works by Juan Bolivar. Acrylic on canvas unless otherwise stated. Dimensions in CM. Collection of the artist unless otherwise stated.

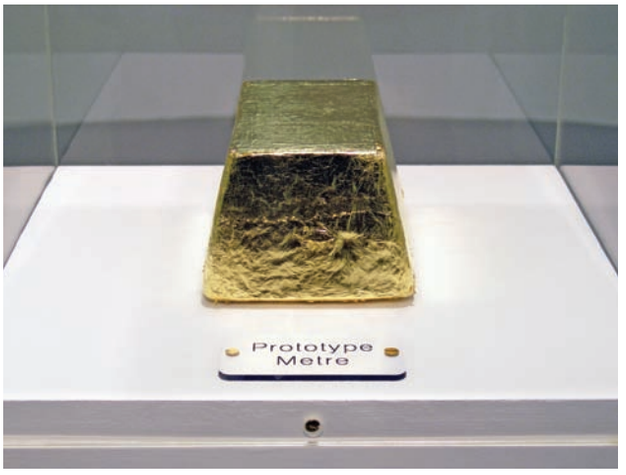

GEOMETRY WARS
JOHN HANSARD GALLERY
MMVIII





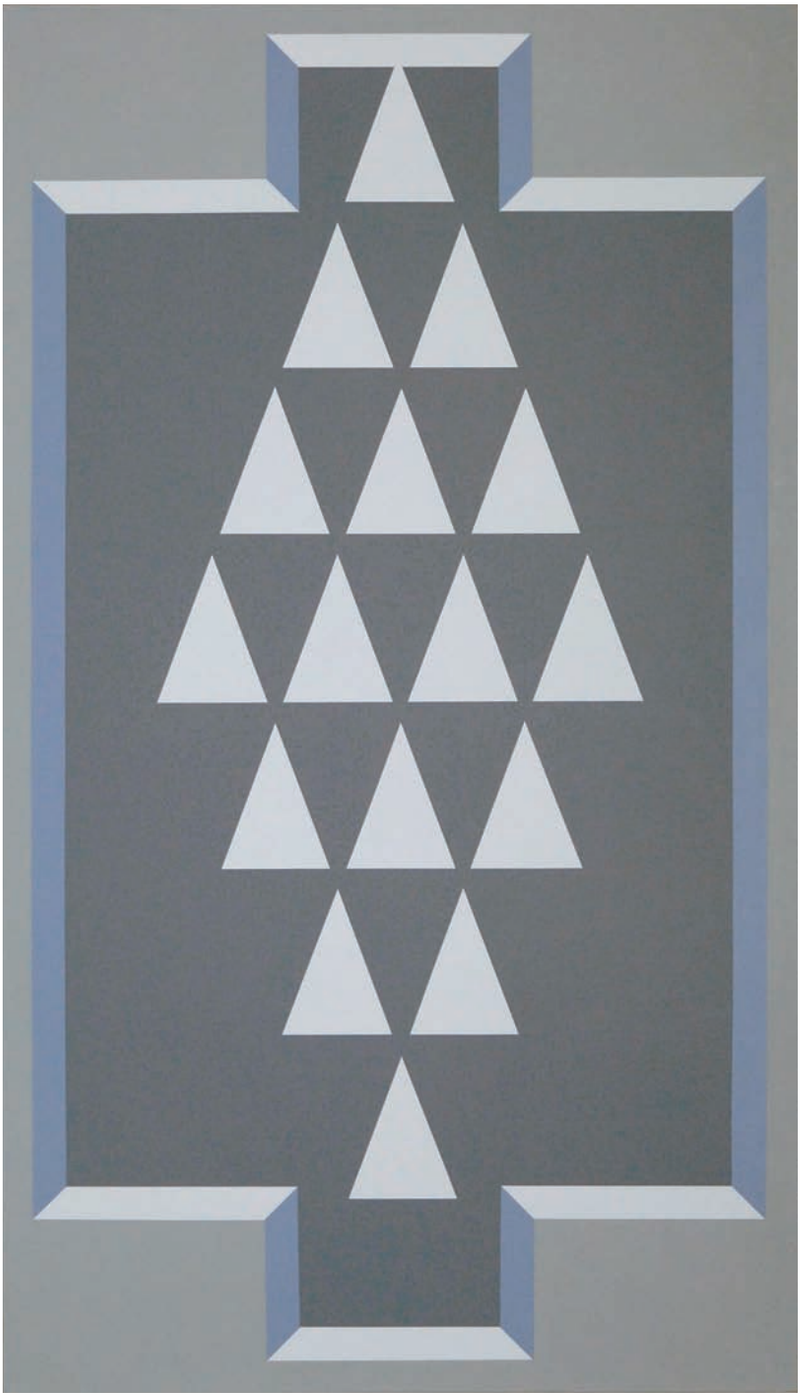




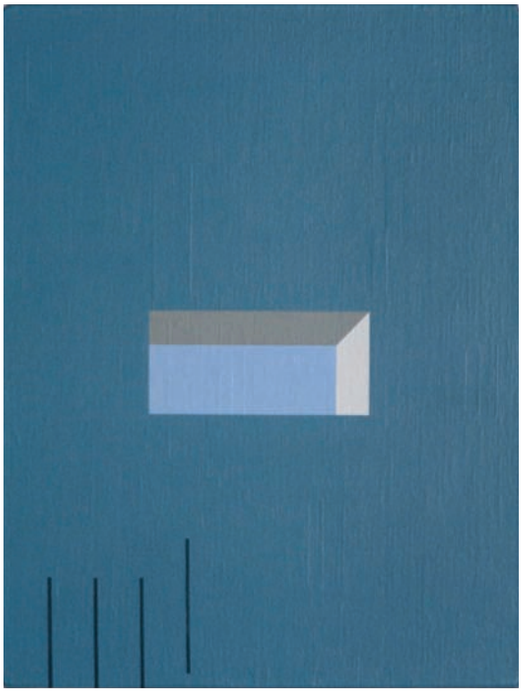


Prototype Metre
2008
Cast iron and gold leaf

Geometry Wars
2008
168 x 97



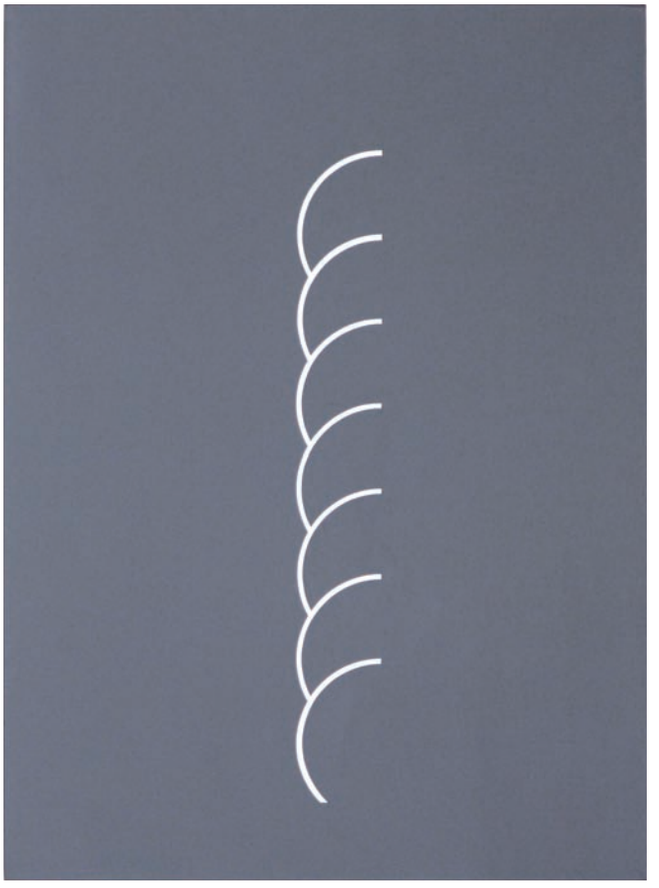
Time and Space
2005
41 x 31
Private Collection



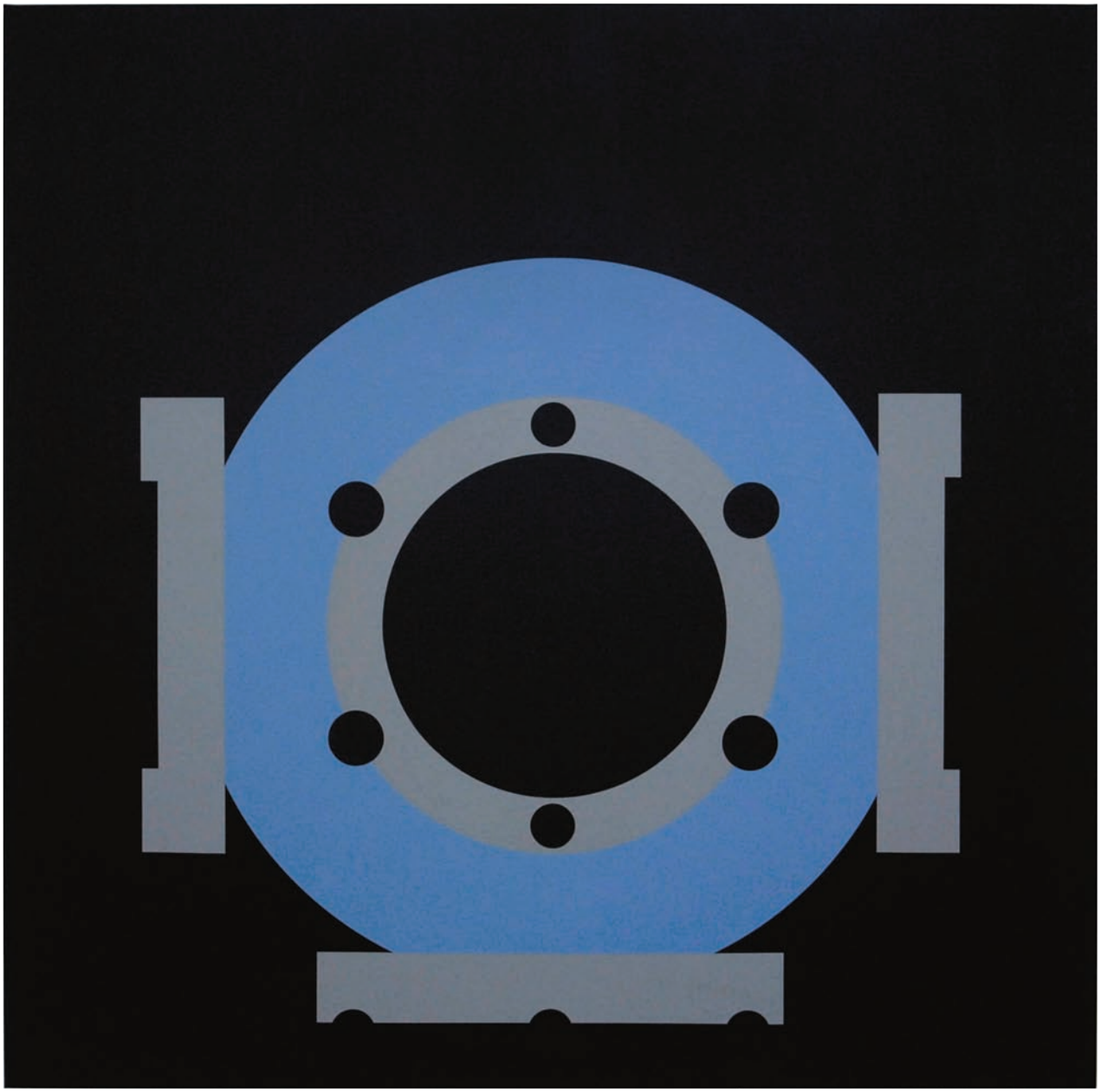
Prototype Kilogram
2008
Cast iron, concrete and blackboard paint

Silver
2008
168 x 122

Baguette
2006
72 x 50

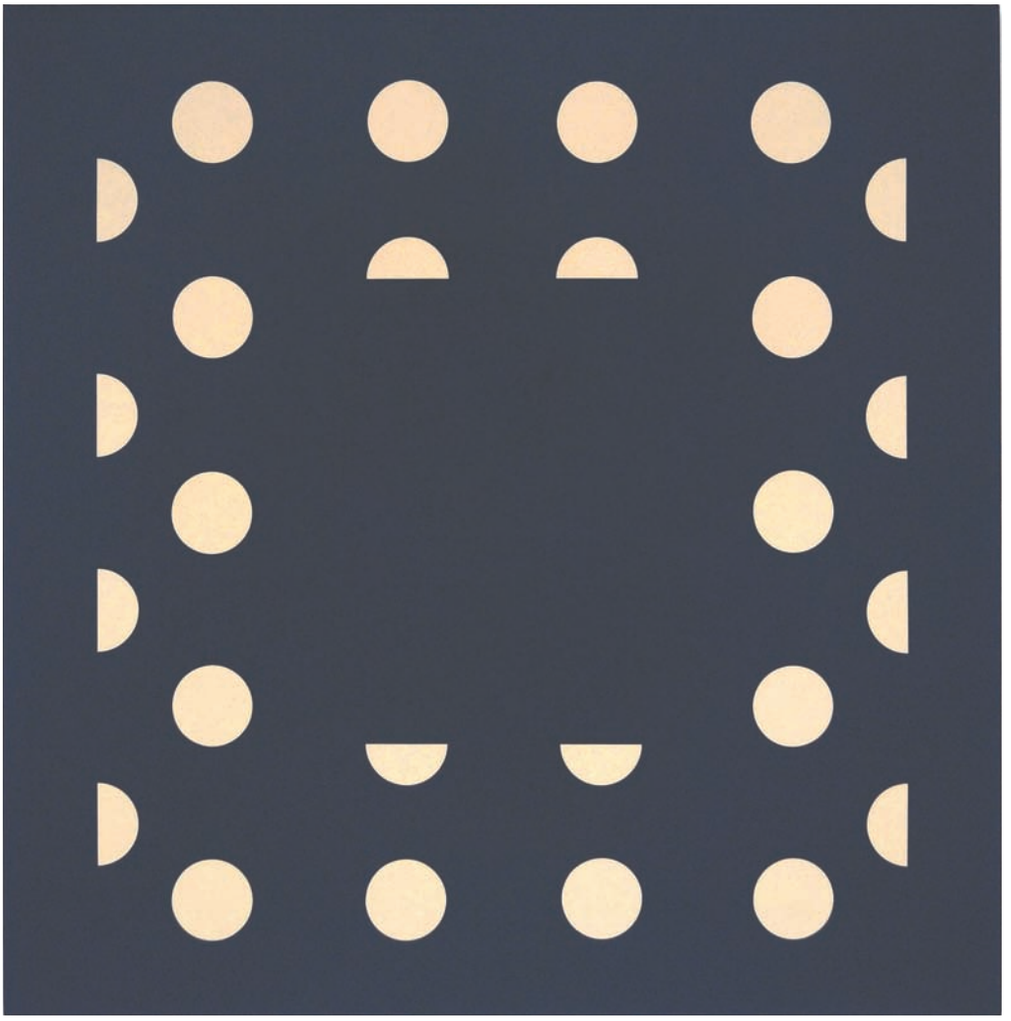


Bell
2008
165 x 166



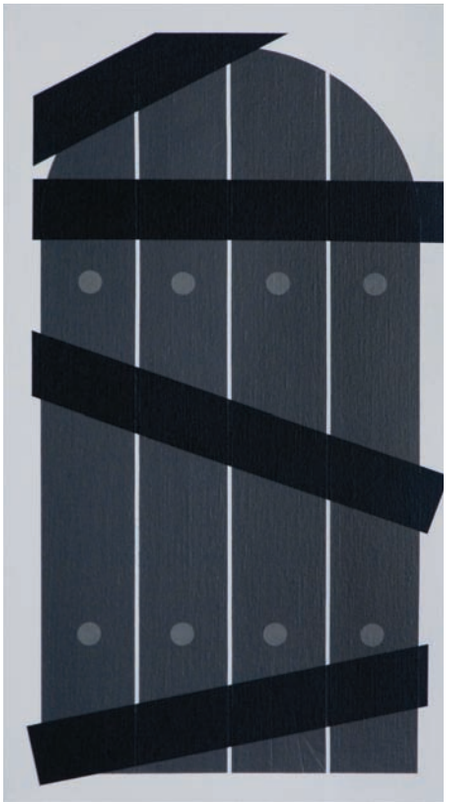
Octopus
2006
72 x 50

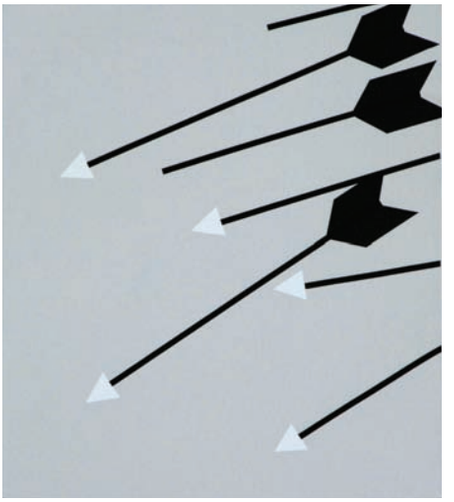
Horror
2006
122 x 122



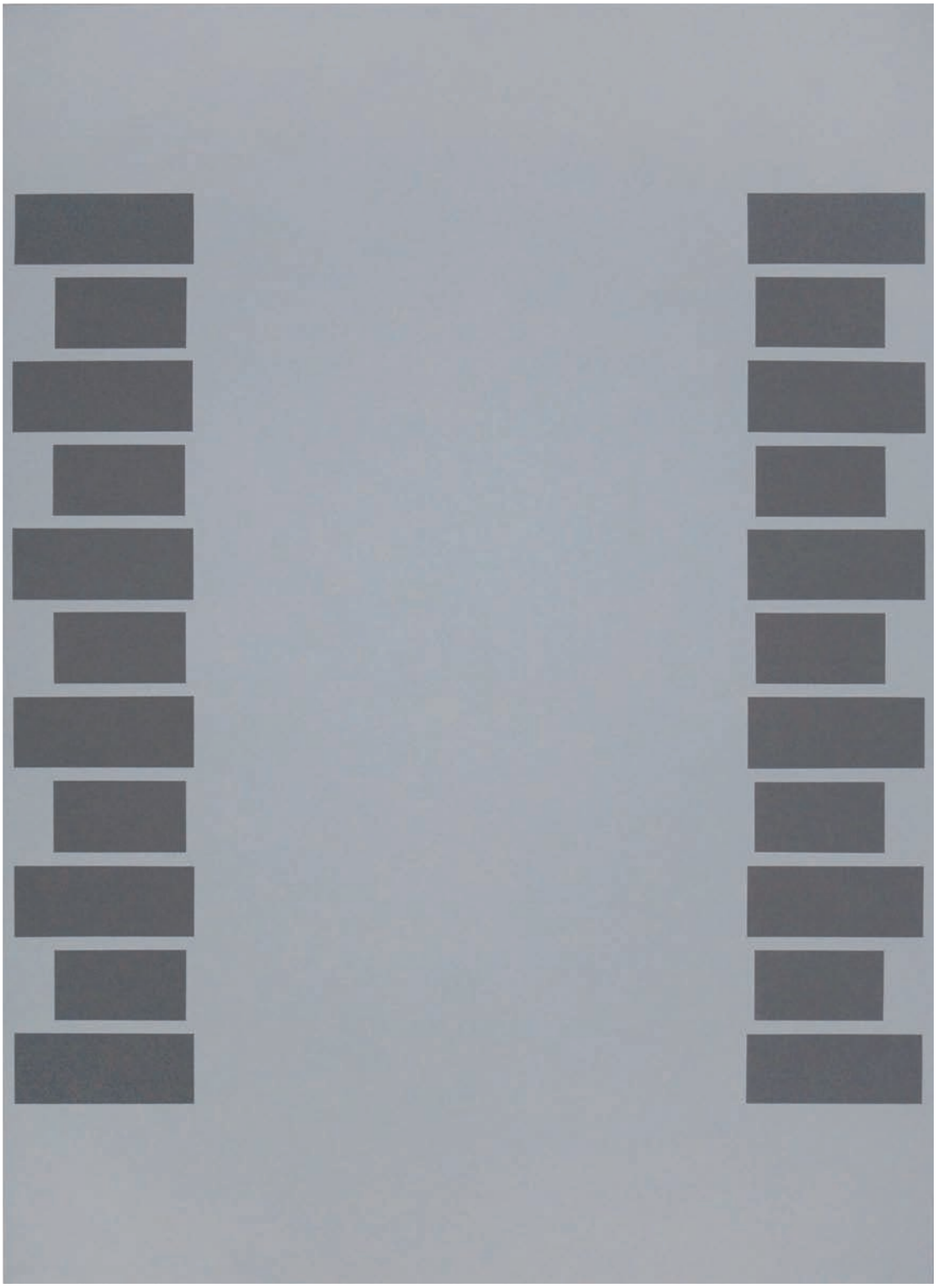
Rapunzel
2008
66 x 36.5

Broken Arrow
2008
36 x 30



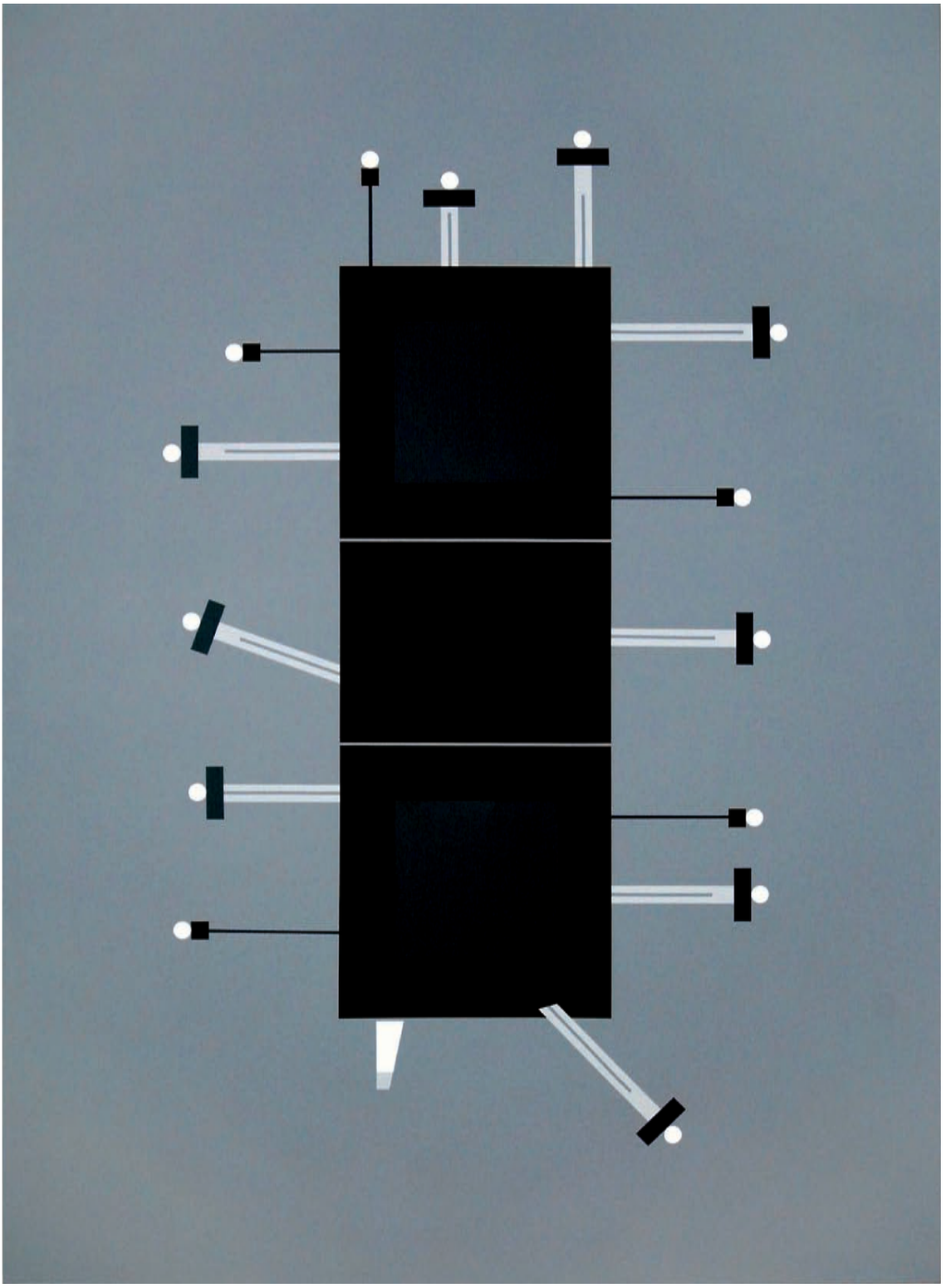


Seven
2006
186 x 140



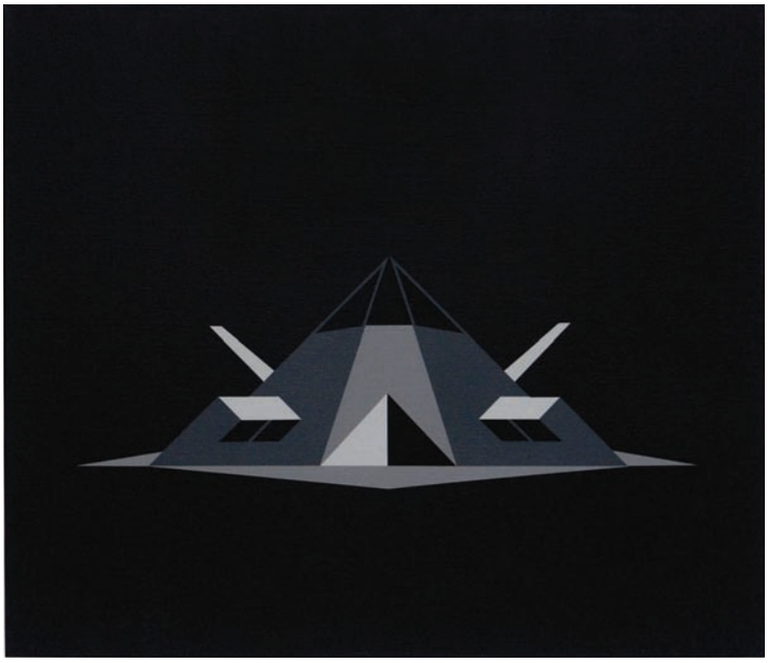
Hero
2008
20 x 15
Private Collection

The Great Suprematist
2008
190 x 140



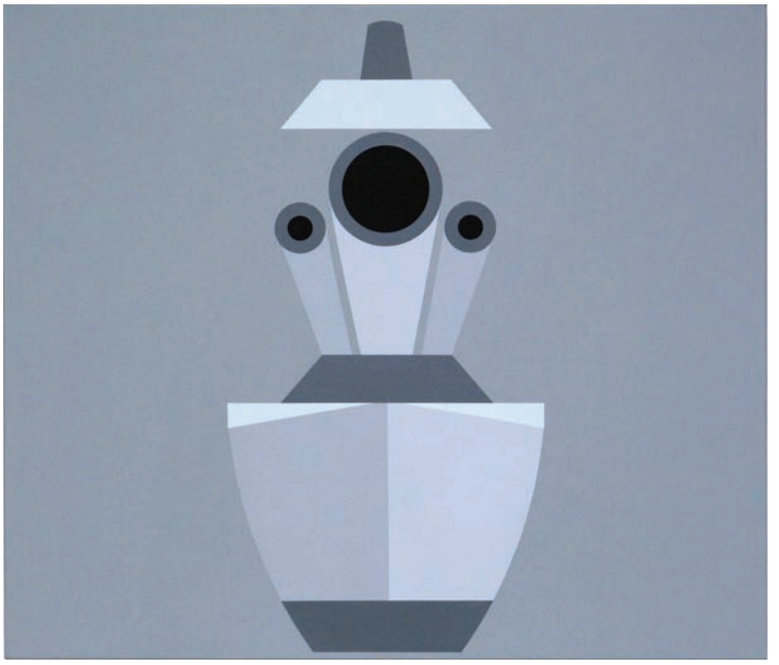
Hermit
2008
165 x 166

Shack
2008
108 x 69

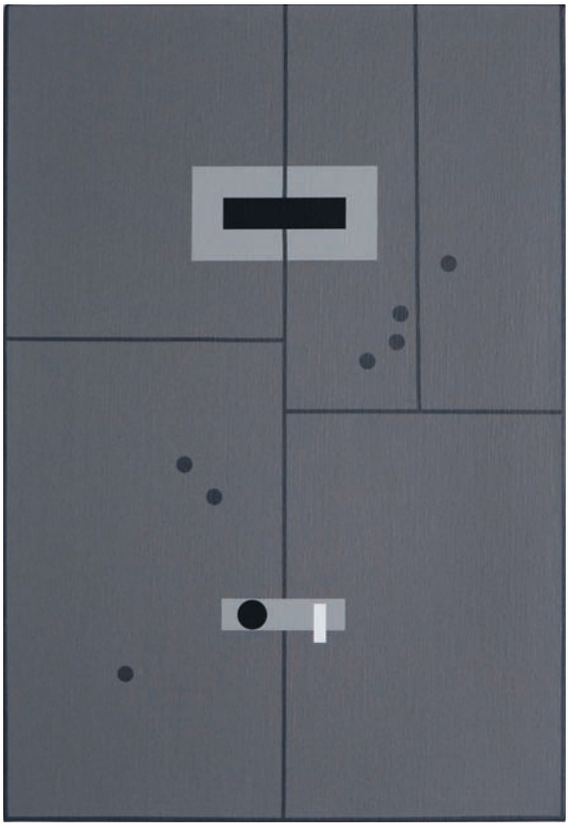


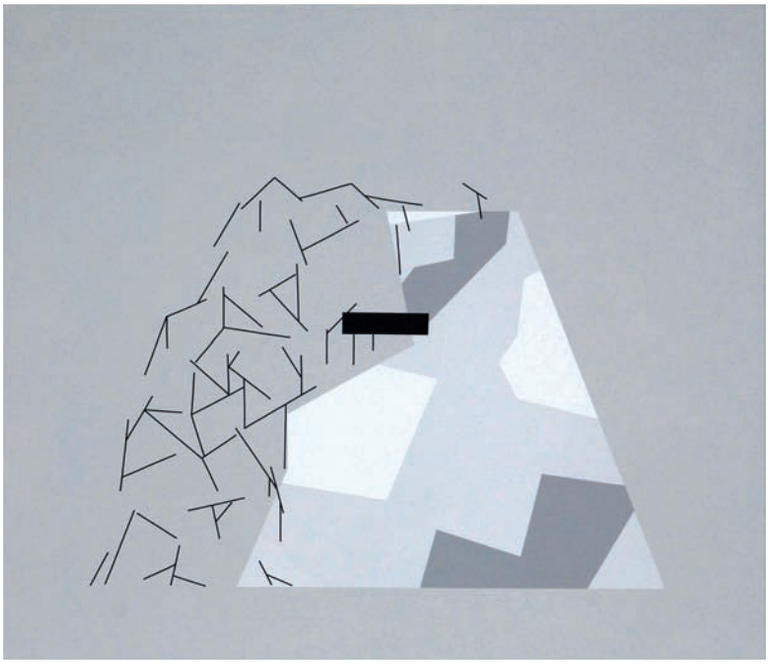
Knight Rider
(after William Blake)
2008
76 x 89

Top Gun
2008
76 x 89



Iron Man
2008
66 x 46

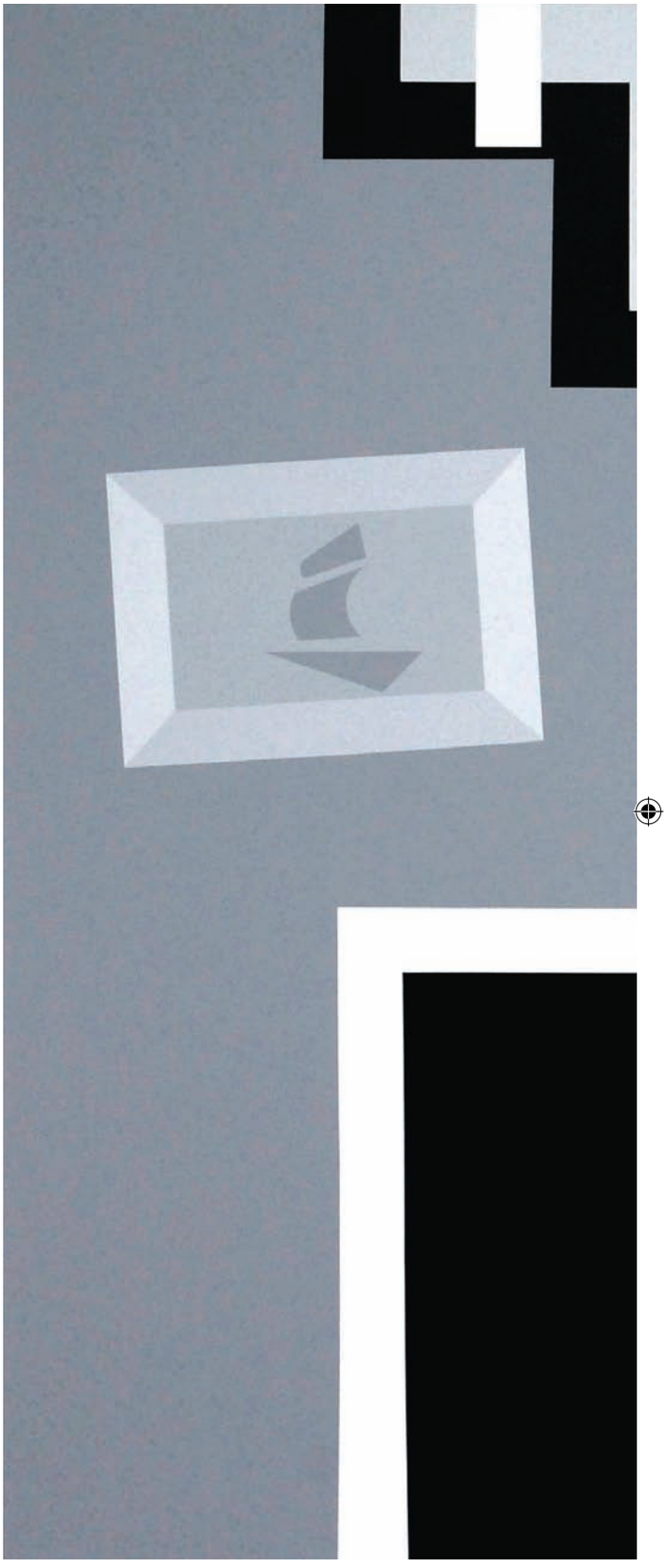




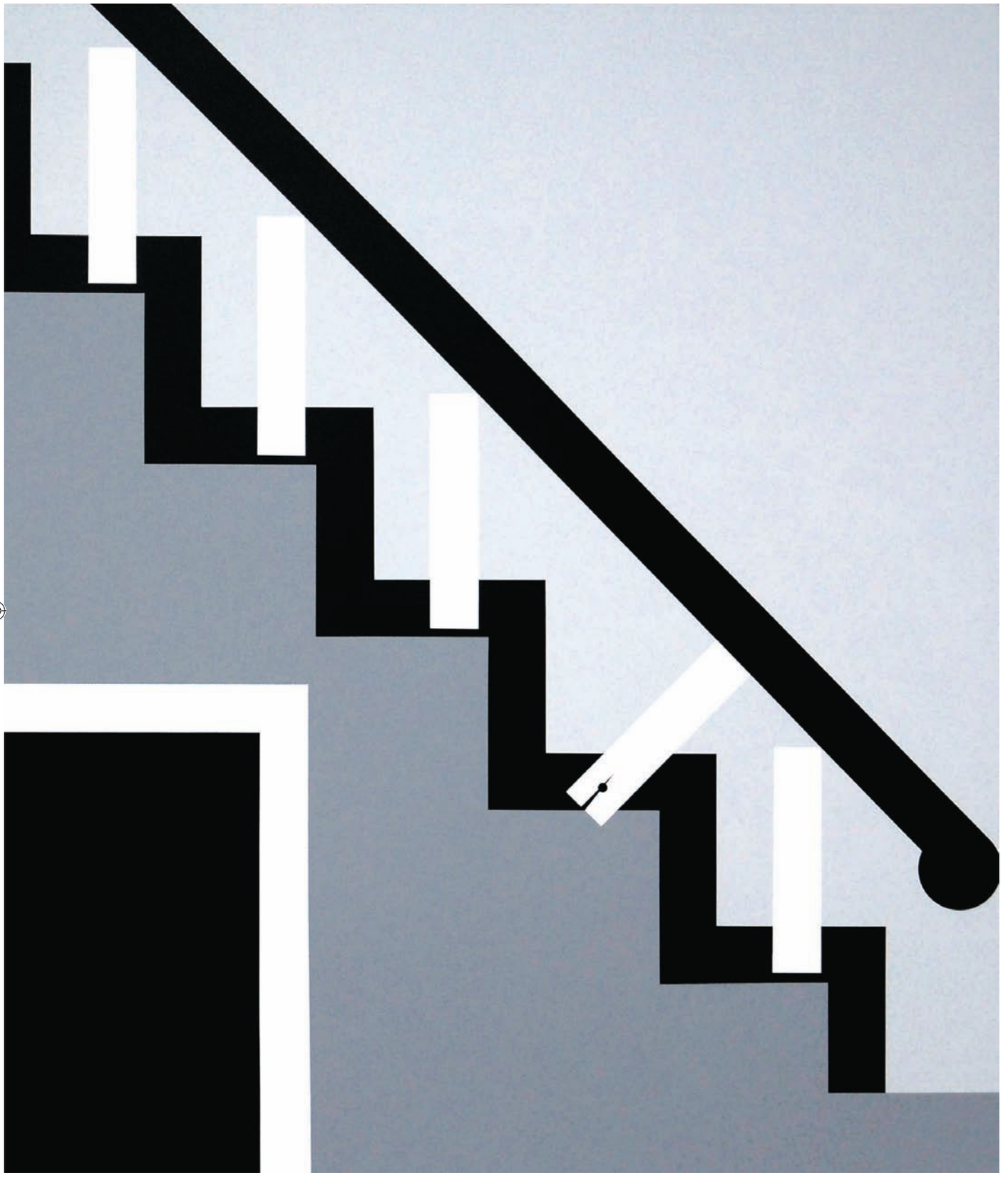
Mont St Victoire
2008
76 x 89

Baywatch
2008
76 x 89

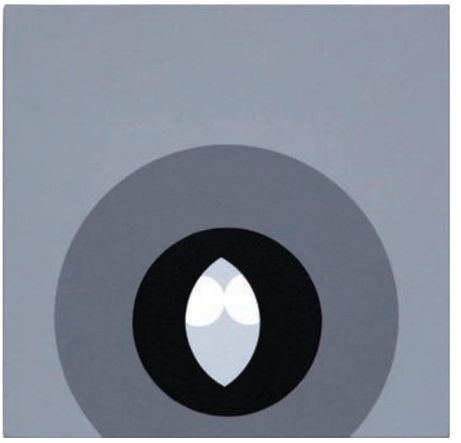
No. 18
2008
36 x 25.5

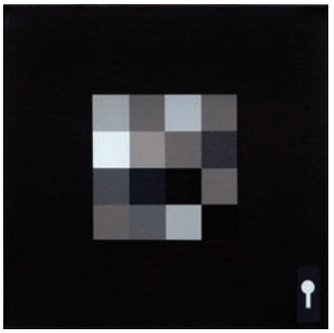


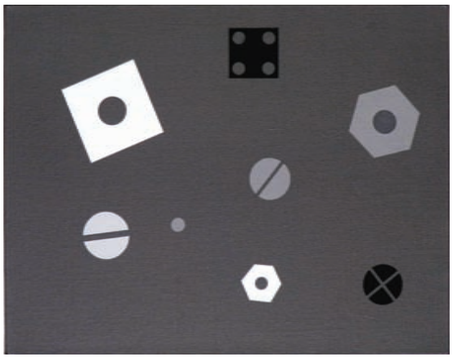
Raft of the Medusa
2008
158 x 193

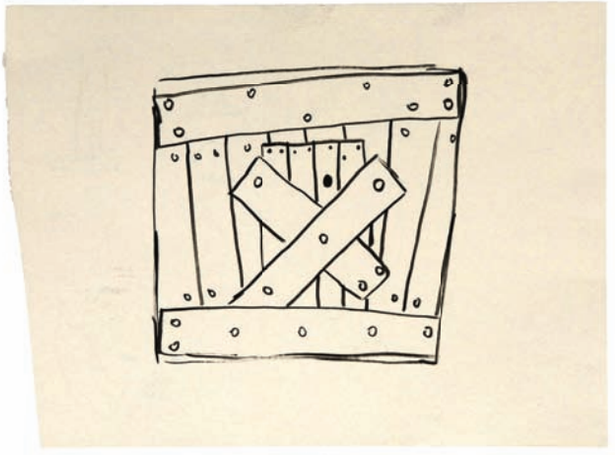


Hoodie
2008
38 x 39









Safe
2008
36 x 36

Spare Parts
2008
36 x 46

Hermit
2008
Felt tip marker on paper

Colour Study and *War Drawing*
1978
Pencil and crayon on paper

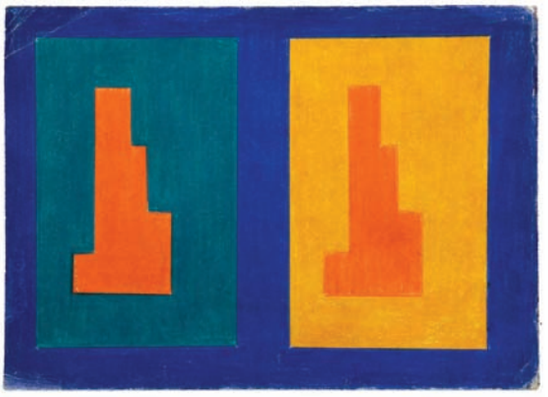


Photo: Karen David

Juan Bolivar

Born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1966, Juan Bolivar's paintings deal with the language of abstraction and formalism. They make a direct reference to our familiarity with hard-edge and colour-field painting, reconfiguring this stylistic appearance in order to evaluate the nature of abstraction and cognition.

In 2007 Bolivar was selected by Matthew Higgs and Marc Camille Chaimowicz for EAST International. He co-curated *Eau Sauvage* at Lucy Mackintosh Gallery in Lausanne, Switzerland and *Eau Sauvage part II* at Fieldgate Gallery in London, his thirteenth exhibition as curator. His work is part of the UK Government Art Collection, the University of the Arts Collection and Goldsmiths, University of London, where he graduated from in 2003.

Suhail Malik

Suhail Malik is Course Leader, Postgraduate Fine Art Critical Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London.

John Hansard Gallery

The John Hansard Gallery is part of the University of Southampton and one of the UK's leading public galleries of contemporary art. Stephen Foster has been Director of the Gallery since 1987.