



CLOSE
VALUES

The Legacy of Karl Benjamin

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ON THE COVER:

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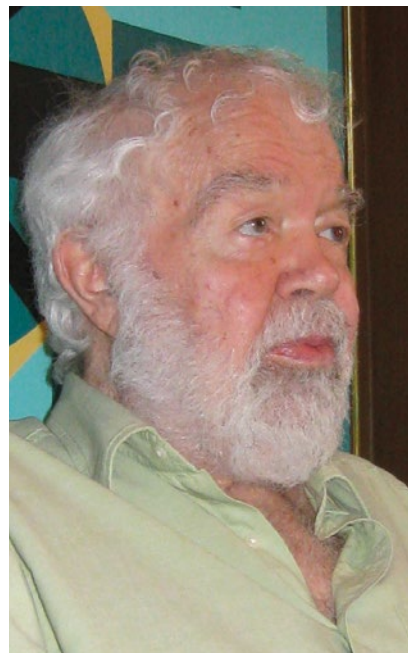
Oil on Canvas, 1967

48" X 48"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Gretchen Fassbinder

Karl Benjamin (1925 – 2012)



BORN in Chicago, Karl Benjamin began his undergraduate studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in 1943. Interrupted by service in the U.S. Navy during WWII, Benjamin resumed his studies at Southern California's University of Redlands in 1946. Graduating in 1949 with a B.A. degree in English literature, history and philosophy, Benjamin began his career as a teacher with no intention of becoming an artist. However, his relocation to Claremont, California in 1952, shortly after he began "playing" with paint in 1951, galvanized his sense of his career path.

Though Benjamin continued to teach in public schools and later to great acclaim, as Professor Emeritus for Pomona College, the artist's work blossomed amid the extraordinarily lively art, design and architecture scene in Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century. Numerous gallery showings of his work during the 50's culminated in 1959 with Benjamin's inclusion in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's ground-breaking exhibition, "Four Abstract Classicists: Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley and John McLaughlin."

The exhibition garnered national attention for the artist, along with the creation of a moniker for Benjamin's meticulously orchestrated color and form: Hard Edge Painting. Subsequently, Benjamin's work was included in the traveling exhibition, "Purist Painting". The Whitney Museum of American Art (NY) went on to feature Benjamin in their exhibition, "Geometric Abstraction in America" (1962), while the Museum of Modern Art (NY) also included work by the artist in their watershed show, "The Responsive Eye" (1965).

Benjamin was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts Grant for Visual Arts in both 1983 and 1989. His work has been featured in numerous museum exhibitions and is included in the public collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Modern Art, Israel; Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Seattle Art Museum, WA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, among others.

"You can look at these electrifying paintings forever and always see something different."

David Pagel

"I can think of no other artist whose paintings exude the joy and pleasure of being an artist with more intensity than Karl Benjamin's . . ."

Dave Hickey

Louis Stern Fine Arts is the exclusive representative of the estate of Karl Benjamin.

Foreword

KARL Benjamin was part of my artistic awareness as early as 1985-6, when, as a graduate student, I did a thesis documentary on his friend and fellow geometric painter, Florence Arnold. I was an expressionist painter at the time, but was familiar with Islamic geometric art and design. I understood geometric art as more than “pure abstraction,” and wanted to find out how geometric painters themselves thought about it. Flossie, who had her thoughts, introduced me to Karl, who had his. As I got to know Karl, I found his attitudes especially appealing. His approach was deeply spiritual and filled with joy. He didn’t read any symbology into his forms and compositions, but simply generated his paintings – the play between tonalities, the rhythm of the shapes—out of the joy he derived from everyday life.

I really got to know Karl through Richard Reynard, Mt. San Antonio College’s leading art historian and a close friend to many of the leading artists in the Claremont-Pomona area. Richard brought me to the luncheon group centered on Karl, Sam Maloof, and Harrison McIntosh—three very different artists working in very different disciplines, but good friends who mutually admired one another’s achievements.

For five years Richard and I discussed a way of honoring Karl on the Mt. San Antonio College campus. Karl never taught here, but he was a good friend to Mt. SAC, personally close to any number of its faculty and available to its students. Richard suggested we recreate several of his triangle pattern paintings as mosaic murals at the gateway to our visual art complex. Karl loved the idea and gave us his blessing.

Now, after Karl’s passing—and Richard’s—the question is how to honor a beloved figure like this, especially one who has been internationally recognized and become a fixture in art history books. We have decided to recall the man and the artist we knew personally, by showing work from four decades that he’d given or sold to friends and family, many of them also our neighbors in the Inland Empire. As widely known as he was, Karl Benjamin was most comfortable close to home, and that’s where these paintings come from and are now seen.

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK . . .

Beth Benjamin for her tireless efforts to help coordinate this exhibition, the following lenders for their generosity in sharing their collection; Beth Benjamin, Beverly Benjamin, Bruce Benjamin, Steve Comba, Glenn and Anne Davenport, Gretchen Fassbinder, Dennis and Denise Garcia, Crispin and Kirsten Gonzalez, Cricket and Norm Harth, Allison Jones, Bob and Kris Jones, Casey Jones, Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman, Catherine McIntosh, Leifin Nelson, Andy Paris, Julie Paris, Tony Paris, Danny Shain, Mark Schoeman and Laurel Tucker, Peter Frank for the elegant essay and continued support, The Mt. SAC Associated Students for their continued generosity in funding, President/CEO; Dr. William Scroggins, Vice President of Instruction; Dr. Irene Malmgren, The Board of Trustees, Dean of Arts; Dr. Sue Long, Ed.D., The Staff at Maintenance and Operations, Television and Broadcasting, Printing Services, Marketing and Communication, and Campus Events, and finally the Art Gallery Staff; David McIntosh and Cynthia Orr for their everlasting team efforts and professionalism.

Fatemeh Burnes
Director and Curator of Exhibitions
Mt. San Antonio College

A Note from the Public Art Chair and Arts Division Dean

A PRIVILEGE I enjoy in my role as Dean of The Arts is the opportunity to meet some of the world's greatest artists and their families. One of my fondest memories is that of meeting Karl and his wife Beverly, an introduction made possible by retired Mt. SAC faculty and member of our Public Art Advisory Committee, Richard Reynard. It was through Richard's work on our Public Art Committee that our idea of this grand mosaic project of Karl's work was born.

To begin the project Fatemeh and I went to the Benjamin home to see Karl's work, and discuss which pieces would be used as the centerpiece for our major public art project that, once completed, will be eight 6' X 6' mosaics of Karl's work. As we spoke about the project, Karl seemed genuinely touched that we wanted to take on a project of this magnitude featuring his work. I, on the other hand, was amazed at this genuine and generous man who welcomed us into his life: a life filled with many roles; artist, teacher, husband, father, and dear friend.

How fitting that the paintings on display in "Close Values" represent a collection that has graced the homes of Karl and Beverly's family and friends. What an honor to share this personal experience as a community, and to honor Karl with such an intimate collection of his work.

Finally, there are many to thank for making this very special collection of Karl Benjamin's work available to the art community and those studying the arts here at Mt. San Antonio College. In particular Fatemeh Burnes, our Gallery Director and Curator, who developed the brilliant concept for this exhibition. To Karl's wife Beverly and daughter Beth, for serving as advisors in bringing this body of Karl's work together, work that has never before been available for public viewing.

And, to the family and friends who so generously loaned their treasured pieces for display at the college. Our art gallery staff, David McIntosh and Cynthia Orr, for their ongoing dedication and numerous contributions that begin at the earliest stages of the process and end only after the exhibition is closed and the artwork returned. Once again, art critic Peter Frank has captured the essence of the show in a way that will serve to mark it in time for all time.

And finally to our institution's leaders, who consistently demonstrate their belief in the vital contributions of art on a college campus. Dr. Irene Malmgren, Vice President of Instruction, Dr. Bill Scroggins, our President/CEO, and our Board of Trustees, thank you for your ongoing support of the fine and performing arts programs at Mt. San Antonio College.

Sue Long, Ed.D
Arts Division Dean
Mt. San Antonio College

Fatemeh Burnes in conversation with Beverly and Beth Benjamin

- FB:** Well thank you both for having me over. It is so emotional sitting at this table and looking out the window at Karl's studio, surrounded by his art which has changed several times over the years. Thank you for agreeing to sit and talk with me about Karl specifically due to the intimate nature of this exhibition. Knowing that Karl was a family man, how do you feel, Beth about your father having been an artist?
- Beth:** Well it was always in my mind, my father was an artist, I mean I felt very proud of that. I knew that I lived with this and it was so much a part of his daily life that it was just part of the ground of my being. I don't remember ever feeling like I was supposed to also paint, but my creativity ran more to writing and anything we ever did, dad was always so open to. That is what I remember most about my dad, is that he was so present and so interested in everything that I did.
- Beverly:** I'm remembering when I taught for a little while and he took care of Beth from 18 months to pre-school, they would take walks and study all the flowers and they were warm pink and hot pink, lots of colors that she knew, but when she went to the book store, Mr. Briar's bookstore, she would look at the post cards that were always artists because it was a book and art store, and she would point out, this is a warm white, this is a cool white and she was two! So Karl had a lot of influence on her regarding art before she could even read!
- FB:** Beth that easily explains your wonder of nature. I always associate how nature is a part of you. How else did Karl influence or impact your life?
- Beth:** It is hard to put that into words because I feel like everything I am is because of my dad. It was hard for me socially in elementary school, I had started early, I had skipped a grade, I was always a little off kilter with my peers. Teachers liked me, but it was a private school which made it difficult to be socially odd. My dad was so supportive of everything that I was which didn't have to do with him as an artist but rather with him as a person and because of that it didn't get to me, being an "odd ball" the way it might have.
- FB:** Do you think he helped you as an individual to think outside the box?

- Beth:** Yes definitely. He influenced my politics, my reading choices and openness to anything. He was a big supporter of reading and literature and also compassion and empathy with other people.
- Beverly:** He used to encourage her reading. She started reading when she was almost three, she would read the newspaper and Karl encouraged her, saying if you read James Joyce all the way through, I'll buy you any book you want from Mr. Briar's bookstore.
- FB:** Do you think he may even have influenced you by redefining relationships?
- Beth:** Yes, I'm not sure specifically how, but very much I was influenced in relationships by him. He was very open to people, he listened, in general he appreciated people and their diversity, very open to people of all sorts. We went through the civil rights era together and then I was a hippie, I never knew him to be anything other than interested and supportive in who I was and really other people, he was a friend to my friends also. It just struck me as interesting after I left town in 1967 to go away to college, so many of my friends still stayed friends with my dad. Partly because some of them were interested in art, but some of them it was just because they liked him and kept coming around.
- Beverly:** He enjoyed being with them all through his college teaching life. He maintained very close relationships.
- Beth:** He was like his mother in that way, she kept relationships with her students until she died.
- FB:** Do you think this had to do with his creativity and as a result his depth of sensitivity?
- Beth:** I don't know. When I think about being an artist, I think about wanting everyone to get out of my space, so I could have it more quiet, but my memory of being a child in his art environment was that I was always welcome. We were always welcome in his studio and to go visit his artist friends with him.

FB: He included you in his creative life and creative process.

Beth: If he was out in the studio, it didn't mean we weren't supposed to go out there.

FB: The door was open. Now do you ever think of your father Karl, not the artist, if you had to separate Karl the person from Karl the artist, did such a person exist?

Beth: Sure! He was definitely not a house husband by any means, I think he could fry an egg if needed, but in my lifetime, mom went to work and then did all the household chores. He went to work and then out to the studio.

Beverly: and garden . . .

Beth: Yes very much a gardening person, I got that from him and my grandmother, his mom. He inhabited this house as much more than an artist. There was an accessible part of him, he was here, watched baseball, listened to jazz, and we had people over.

FB: He did those typical things dads do.

Beth: When he wasn't teaching, he wanted to be home in his studio.

FB: Was it difficult to be an artist's wife Beverly?

Beverly: It would have been if I didn't have all my own projects.

FB: You contributed so much. I remember Karl would speak so proudly of you and the work you were doing and your involvement.

Beth: You were both going to be writers originally right?

Beverly: We started out thinking we were going to get our MFA in creative writing, but Karl never had the same sense of urgency with writing as he did when he discovered painting.

FB: What year did you two meet?

Beverly: 1948 and married in 1949, we amazed everyone, especially his mother that we stayed together so long. His mother had said to some friend, 'I would never have believed it.' They thought of me as a pretty wild woman taking their little boy down the primrose path. Karl was pretty shy, he needed a little aggression.

FB: You mentioned Karl's mom and his love of gardening. Tell us a little more about Karl's upbringing?

Beverly: Well I can see some major strands in his personality, influenced by family. His mother was in a PhD program at the University of Chicago, when Karl was born. She almost finished her degree in botany and biology and taught high school in Chicago where they lived. She took the L across the whole city every day to teach at SENN HS. His mother's love of botany made it very natural for Karl to be botanical. He was a gardener when I met him, we were both students, but he was, in addition to the GI bill sending him to school and supporting both of us, doing landscaping. Karl re-did his parents' old Victorian house in the Redlands, when they moved there. Karl's father was a resident physician and during the depression it was hard for him to be independent and on his own, so it was like the old fashioned stories of getting paid in chickens for medicine. His father quickly went from being a family physician to specializing in pathology, so he ran a lab. He did the autopsies for the Valentine's Day murders. That job had a demand for precision, hygiene, cleanliness, and you could see this influence on Karl and how he kept his studio. I mean you could go into Karl's studio at any time in his life and the floor would be clean, immaculate, all his leftover colors were wrapped in saran wrap packages. Another influence in Karl's life was his grandfather on his mother's side, he was a cellist, I called him the second cellist because he didn't like to play solos, and he would get very ill when he had to play a solo, so he was third cello in the Chicago symphony. He started in Austria and when he came to this country, it was with a very wealthy philanthropist who brought the whole orchestra first to Philadelphia, then to Chicago. His grandfather was a profound influence in Karl's life because he played at night, so he was with Karl all day long, when Marie was teaching and Benny was at his residency. Karl even started music lessons when he was very tiny, leading a little orchestra at school when he was 18 months, we have a picture of him conducting. So the whole idea of music, harmony, color, mood, chords, and jazz abstraction, right at the beginning. I remember Karl saying to people, "you don't ask Beethoven what he meant by his 3rd symphony. Just listen to it, hear it." It seemed natural to me that abstract art was what he chose to do.

FB: It is interesting with his means of expression, using such an abstract visual language; did you talk with him about his choice in style?

Beth: I regret this now, as he didn't much talk about it with me. Later in life, and I envy his students because I look at his paintings now and wonder what was he thinking about when he painted that? Or how did he do that?

FB: You must have just believed and accepted it.

Beth: I grew up with the changing of the styles. When he started out he would paint what he was interested in, try and imitate a painter that he liked, so he would go from the cubist, to landscapes, then all the way to his final works. We talked about the triangle ones and the systems or techniques of how he was doing that.

Beverly: You know he picked up a brush and painted for the first time because he wanted a Jean Miro for behind the couch, so he painted one and he found for the first time in his life he totally lost a sense of time and isn't that how you kind of know you're an artist? When he started painting it was in 1951, when Beth was just a baby, so she never understood that paintings were supposed to be about things she saw in the outer world.

FB: So you had that exposure, it was part of your life and how you learned.

Beth: I never had a dad who didn't paint so it was part of my normal.

Beverly: As a family we had nicknames for his paintings; "the Japanese Red Sun," "the Hopi Symbol of Life," "the Jumping Lady" which can look like Marilyn Monroe or Groucho Marx like an optical illusion, two people at once. All the paintings were given these nicknames by the family.

FB: His paintings, his work is at such a high level of visual thinking and problem solving, he was probably writing and re-writing them all of the time.

Beverly: I don't think he would have ever said it was problem solving, I think how he visualized it was, I want to see how this will look when it is done, which is problem solving in a way, but he would not have put it like that.

FB: Would you say it is fair to see some of those architectural influences in his works from where he was raised?

Beverly: That would come later when we moved into this house.

FB: Hoping to talk a bit about his career, being a Claremont artist did he ever feel he needed to leave the area for his career? Did he need to travel or was he a true regionalist?

Beverly: No our poor children grew up with no trips or vacations. Karl had to be right here in case the paint got dry. I mean he had everything on a schedule. He would work 3 to 4 paintings at the same time because he never would use any materials Rembrandt wouldn't have used. He just didn't like to be away from it because he had to teach to earn a living for us; we didn't even question it really. He was gone 40 hours a week, so when he was here, he was painting. We did take some trips once the kids were grown, to England and Greece. I think he traveled enough in the war; he was on B17's as a tail gunner. He never wanted to talk about the war, but would write a letter for any of the kids' friends to help them stay out of the draft during the Vietnam years.

Beth: When you two would visit us in Santa Cruz, dad was always real relaxed actually. I remember being impressed, it seemed like he was having a good time, he wasn't tapping his fingers wanting to go home to work, he could let go. That was after he got year round school, when he was still teaching elementary, there were six weeks off in between and he really liked that, he could come up to the farm and see the seasons change.

FB: It is fair to say Karl was very into being present, wherever he was, his studio, with his family, with his children, on vacation, teaching. Maybe you could share some stories of Karl with his contemporaries.

Beverly: We had a pretty tight artist group and we had dinners every month. The first group was Roger Kuntz, Doug McClellan, Tony Ivins, who was both a painter and a potter, and Paul Darrow. When Karl started at Pomona College, we shifted a bit socially and we developed a second group, where we would get together with a foreign cookbook and round robin. First Darrow called us "the Ugly Women's Club" after a town in England called ugly. Then we switched to "F.D.G." or Fancy Dinner Group, there were some artists in that group, but mostly just good friends. We didn't socialize a whole lot; I do know that Karl had a group that would meet for lunch on Fridays.

FB: I went to those over at Walters restaurant, that is how I met him. Actually I met him through Florence Arnold, I did my thesis on hard-edge painting and was working with Florence, who was an excellent hard-edge painter. She introduced me to Karl and then Karl and I had many conversations about Flossy. Are there any other specific stories that stand out to either of you?

Beth: I remember really well at Scripps, all around the seal court pond and courtyard, they had a summer art fair and I remember how fun that was running around with other kids while your parents socialized.

Beverly: Karl went to a lecture by Clement Greenburg. Karl persuaded him to come over and look at his paintings, so it was after 11 pm by then and Karl always had a bottle of whiskey here. They talked for a long time and Greenburg said, "Karl you are a master painter, but you can't paint here, Claremont is not somewhere you can paint. You've got to be in New York or where there is action and argument over what art is all about and communication where artists learn from one another." Karl then said to Greenburg, "Well look, what did you just tell me? I'm a master painter and that is all I need." Karl loved to tell that story. Karl was a really nervous type and was content because of his lifestyle being organized, with his home, studio and garden.

Beth: I never quite realized until later when I came down to take care of him that he actually was a nervous guy, in ways that didn't come across.

FB: He was centered by how his life was orchestrated. Would you say he was a romantic and/or a sentimentalist?

Beverly: Yes. Both. He was abstract and very intelligent.

Beth: Dad considered himself a lyrical painter.

FB: I found him to be such a poet, sentimental and kind. He was very compassionate. How he expressed himself visually in his art was very poetic, the light and color and their relationship. Working full time, making art to the level and magnitude that he created, and the relationship he had with his family, and friends, and students, the way he was regarded, he was on all the time, he was a very charged active busy and present type of person. You mentioned he was very interested in humanity, how did he encourage his children or family, did he believe in making significant impacts or changes politically or more humanitarian, how did he go about it?

Beth: He had a very "vanilla" elementary school teaching experience and he was always in some conflict with the principal because he was a really hip guy and at some point he got involved in the teachers union and was the grievance guy for AFT and that became a real vibrant part of his life, real different than what he had with his teaching before. He was also very active with the Peace and Freedom party. He had friends who were candidates, but he never ran for office.

Beverly: He was on the city commission for garbage, trees, and the cemetery. He had the TV always on, it was before CNN, we were watching during the assassination of John Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy. We watched Nixon and Watergate unfold. We had Black Panthers coming to our door for donations and Karl was finding all he could give. Karl had a TV in his studio and he prided himself that he could listen to jazz or watch TV, watch the fights; it was a big thing watching the fights, as well as baseball. He had an incredible memory; he could remember the scores of games in the 1930's! Games he would watch as a boy with his uncle.

FB: Although he was confined to the studio, diligently making his work, he also really lived outside of himself. He didn't travel, but was so open and connected to the world by being interested in current affairs.

Beth: You say he was busy at painting. It was the time when he wasn't busy, I mean when he stopped painting, I think 1995 was the last, I remember saying to him, and 'doesn't that bother you that you aren't painting anymore?' He responded, 'it was always the one thing I didn't have to do. I had to support a family. I had to take care of the garden. I had to keep the house in order. I always had an idea in the morning that I wanted to go put some paint on and then there weren't any more coming.'

FB: I remember when I visited him the time he wasn't painting, he did spend time looking at his paintings reprocessing them.

Beth: When he was actively painting he was not interested in paintings he had done before and so it was sort of like you didn't want to look at an old girlfriend because you were in love with this person. So when he stopped painting he loved to sit and look and think how did I know how to do that in 1952?

FB: He would take us a few times in the back storage room where he kept his paintings and would pull out a piece and show surprise at his own work and with enthusiasm say, 'well let's look at these!'

Beth: It seems to me that he would have an idea that he wanted to express and he would get it done so that he could see what was going on there, but by that time he already had the next ones in mind.

Beverly: He would have two to three that were drying and needed a second color and that is what motivated him to paint. Getting up and figuring out what he was going to paint that day was a real part of him.

FB: It seems for Karl, life was about relationships on many different levels and the need for expression. In wrapping up this conversation, Beth you are back here in Claremont, involved with the city, involved with the arts, do you have anything briefly to say about your involvement back in your father's world in a different way?

Beth: I have a real fondness for that era when I was a kid and for those artists who were friends of my parents, it was more that than the art itself that led me back. Catherine McIntosh and Alba Cisneros got me on the board of Fine Arts Foundation. I have this interesting honor to be in the world of a lot of older people. I transitioned into a different role in society. It is fun to be involved in Claremont as an adult. When my dad was still alive I kind of minimized my community responsibilities.

FB: Thank you for making those differences and giving us this time. It was really fun to talk about Karl; his presence is really felt here. I have to end on this story of Karl. One time I came here to visit and it is my nature to bring a gift of food when I come to someone's house. I told him I was going to bring some food, he wasn't feeling so well. When I arrived he grabbed my hand and took me in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator he said, 'look do you think I need some food, you know I like to eat, and I have all I need in here.' He was funny and delightful even when he didn't feel well. Karl made things feel so light.

The Artist at Home

by Beth Benjamin

Around four o' clock on school days,
I could hear the old green Chevy bump
over the railroad tracks
a mile away,
as my dad drove home from his day in sixth grade.
I'd prick up my ears
and put on the kettle for his mug of instant coffee.
He'd sit and visit, leaf through the mail, and head out to the studio.
Finally he could pick up the brushes
to see how he could get that purple right
before we called him in to dinner.

He liked the kids at school enough that he didn't do much
technicolor dreaming in the classroom.
Flirting with the girls, teasing the boys
everybody loved him
(except the principal who suspected people who could think).
The rules said they had to "do art".
My father said
"No cars, no suns, no mountains.
just see what the colors do with each other
and no new paper till you fill up that one."
He played them music
and everything was concentrated and timeless
and all were artists 'til the bell rang.

After dinner, my sister and I did dishes.
He went out the glass door
across his groomed lawn,

back to the studio
under the boughs of the camphor tree
he'd planted in the summer of '55,
drawn by the unfinished canvas
where the paint was dry enough to invite its neighbor
and see what conversation they would have.
My sister and I were always welcome
to sit and watch or talk or read
My little brother had a harder time.
no reader then, not yet a reggae drummer,
he squirmed on the brown naugahyde stool and kicked the rungs,
no aid to a painter's concentration.

I loved the smell of turpentine,
the blue ceramic vase of brushes,
the cubby stacked with smooth metal tubes
Alizarin crimson
Cadmium yellow
Mars black and Thalo blue
charcoal lines sketched on stretched linen,
waiting for the man's beautiful choices.

One year for Christmas I monogrammed his paint rags,
embroidered his initials on squares of old pillowcase.
They lie there still, folded on the shelf
long after he's stopped wiping brushes.

November 2008

Benjamin's Benjamins: A Painter's Own Selection

by Peter Frank

KARL BENJAMIN'S art has become world renowned, as has his critical role in the emergence of southern California as a site of artistic ferment. But Benjamin the man was less a public figure than a private one; conscious as he was of the art of his time, he always addressed himself most readily to colleagues, friends, and family rather than to any larger "art world." Even the most rigid of his geometries display peculiar color combinations and clever, unpredictable compositions more typical of an intimist than a polemicist. The works Benjamin sold, traded, and gave to the people closest to him, not to mention those he kept for himself, comprise a private and diffident heart to his well-known oeuvre. The works in this exhibition are arguably those the artist most valued and wanted to keep close to him, the personal revelations and triumphs of a modest, un-showy individual who had all but backed into the limelight of contemporary artistic discourse.

Benjamin, who died in 2012, first came to international prominence as one of the four "Abstract Classicists" brought together in 1959 to identify a new, distinct trend in painting coming out of southern California. Curator Jules Langsner recognized qualities of formal clarity, compositional simplicity, and coloristic verve—all expressed in a precise but not rigid geometric vocabulary—shared between Benjamin, John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, and Frederick Hammersley. The youngest of the quartet, the Chicago-born Benjamin was also the least well known and most isolated from the Los Angeles art scene of the time. He was also essentially self-taught, discovering on his own the eye-stimulating properties of contrasting colors laid side by side, for instance, or the rhythmic possibilities of the grid.

As an auto-didact, Benjamin ran himself through a variety of styles early in his career, ranging from the representational to the geometric and organic abstract. The variety in his work for much of the 1950s betrays a broad familiarity with European pre-war modernist practice; equally, he was clearly responsive to the syncretic modernism of mid-century America, a cultivation of art and design practices that relied equally on the straight line and the curved, the rainbow palette and the earthen. But Benjamin's native sensibility, given permission by the art of the elementary school children he

taught, showed through from the first. Whether painting a stylized building or an eccentrically sectioned rectangle, he favored crisp contours, simple but rhythmic compositions, and flat, bright colors (although as often as not close in hue and value to their neighbors).

As Benjamin hit his stride in the later '50s, he gradually suppressed his more decorative impulses and shed all direct reference to the outside world—although titles given many of his canvases from this period indicate that his compositions derived from landscape space (much as did the work of Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg). From the 1960s onward Benjamin was wont to work in series defined by their formats, some starkly minimal, others densely patterned, still others heraldic or asymmetrical almost to the point of destabilization. What animates all these compositional strategies is the vivacity of color and color relationships. Even when Benjamin quieted his palette down to browns and blacks, he determined ways of making the almost-invisible shades vibrate against one another.

This bespeaks a sense of animation, even play that maintains throughout Benjamin's oeuvre. Having discovered for himself the effects of color and shape on the human eye, Benjamin wanted to stimulate that easily fooled organ into thinking it sees what it isn't really seeing, and to make an aesthetic of this perceptual conundrum. In this, Benjamin unwittingly joined an international circuit of mid-century artists who were less interested in making pictures or objects than in providing visual experiences. By time the Op Art phenomenon reached its apotheosis in the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 survey "The Responsive Eye," Benjamin and his fellow Abstract Classicists were regarded as integral to this global movement.

Fooling the eye was not Benjamin's primary goal, however. Rather, he sought to determine an art of color and shape (which Langsner had identified as "one and the

same entity”), one that dignified the mind with its clarity even as it tricked the eye with its optical buzz. In this, Abstract Classicism anticipated not only Op, but the hard-edge painting with which New York painters turned away from abstract expressionism in the early 1960s. Indeed, the now-ubiquitous term “hard-edge” was first applied (in London) to the work in the Abstract Classicism show. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles itself, Abstract Classicism proved an early manifestation of the finish/fetish movement, with its smooth surfaces, lucid forms, and elusive optics. Benjamin and his cohort realized in paint on canvas what younger artists came to realize in sculpture fashioned from industrial materials.

By the end of the ‘60s, Benjamin’s approach had outlasted its fashionability. For the next several decades, true to his aesthetic direction, he would labor, if not in obscurity, then in relatively low-key circumstances. This suited Benjamin perfectly; he relied not on the approval of the art scene, but on the appreciation of his fellow artists and the community they provided. No longer an art-world darling, he became an “artist’s artist,” an instructor and mentor (he taught at the Claremont Colleges from 1979) deeply respected and loved by the artists who knew him and the art people who lived near him. In his last decade Benjamin saw his art return to prominence as an historical phenomenon. But this final touch to his career was simply the validation Benjamin and his friends all knew would come.

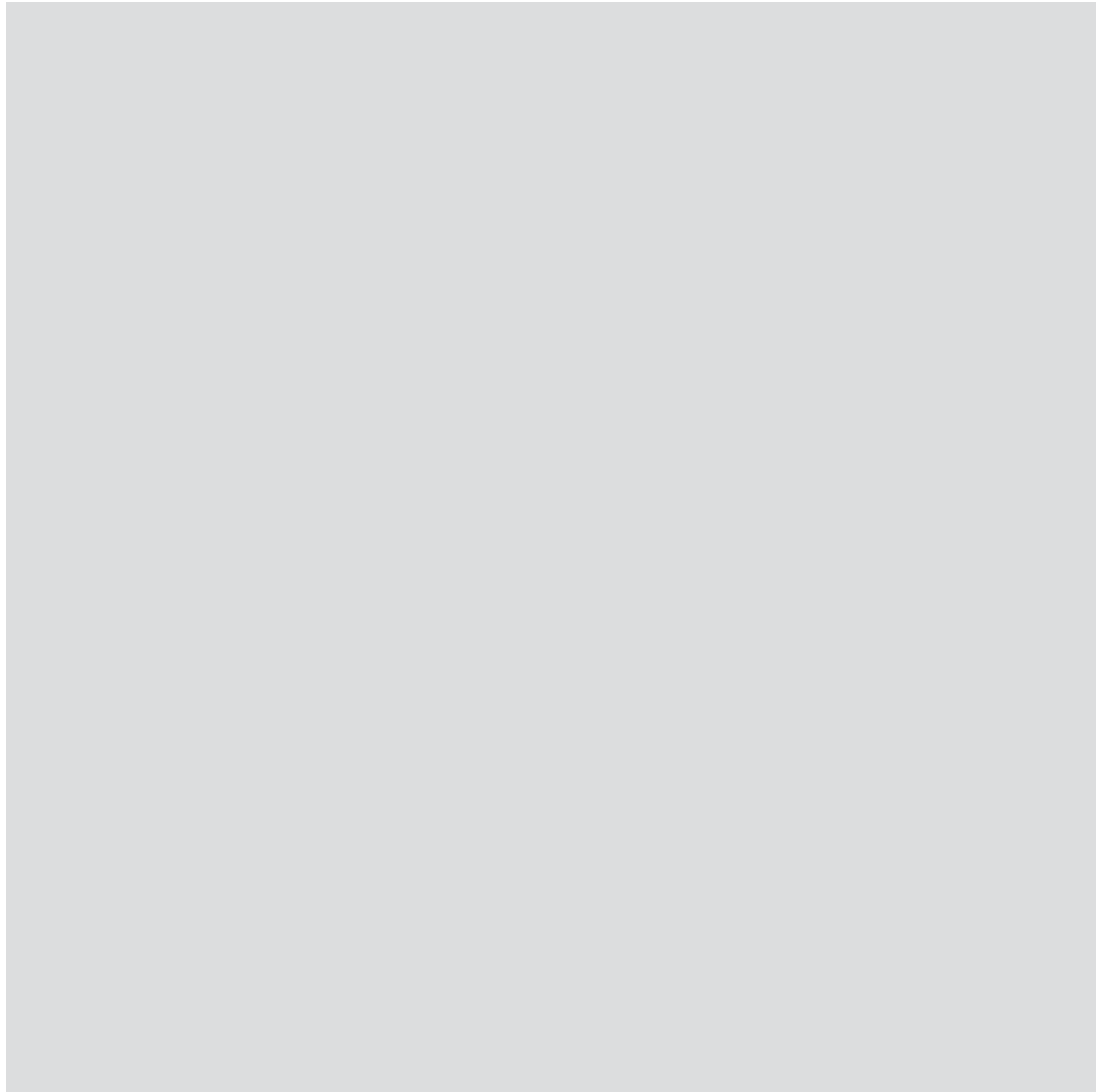
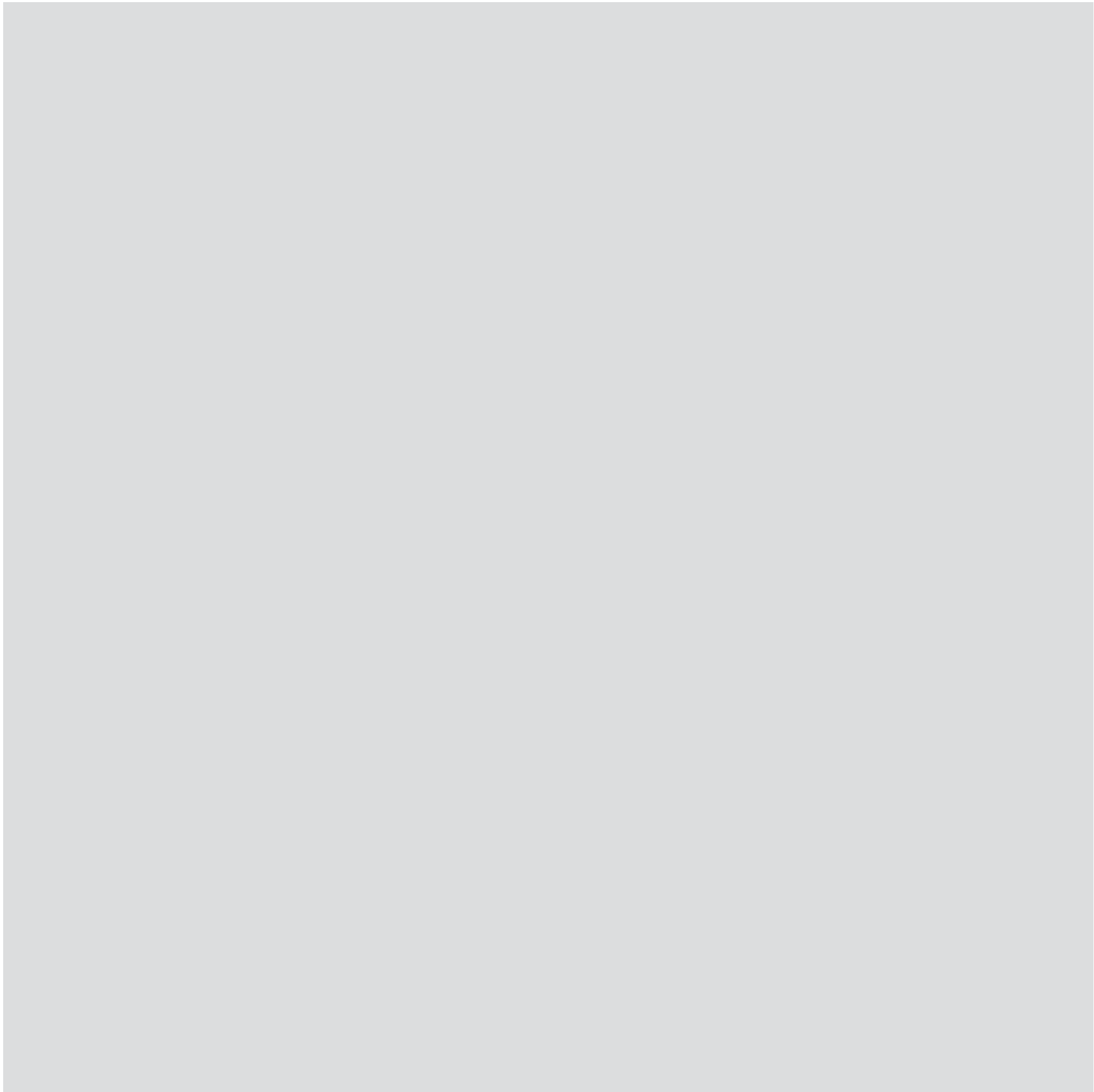
The selection of works here emphasizes the odd, the quirky, the unpredictable, certainly in the context of Benjamin’s characteristic practice. Even the later paintings on view, derived from various series Benjamin exhibited in Los Angeles and elsewhere, are enlivened by an extra touch of idiosyncrasy—a color combination rare in his oeuvre, or a compositional format that he didn’t carry forward. Some of these, older and newer, are the “pieces that didn’t sell,” that didn’t quite fit the audience’s idea of what a Benjamin “looks like.” Others are works that Benjamin kept for himself for various reasons—as early experiments toward the definition of specific series, for instance, or as variations on formats that particularly tickled him. And, of course, the paintings he sold or gave to the people close to him, figuratively and literally, constitute a distinct sub-genre, one in which you sense a feedback dynamic between Benjamin and the people most frequently looking over his shoulder.

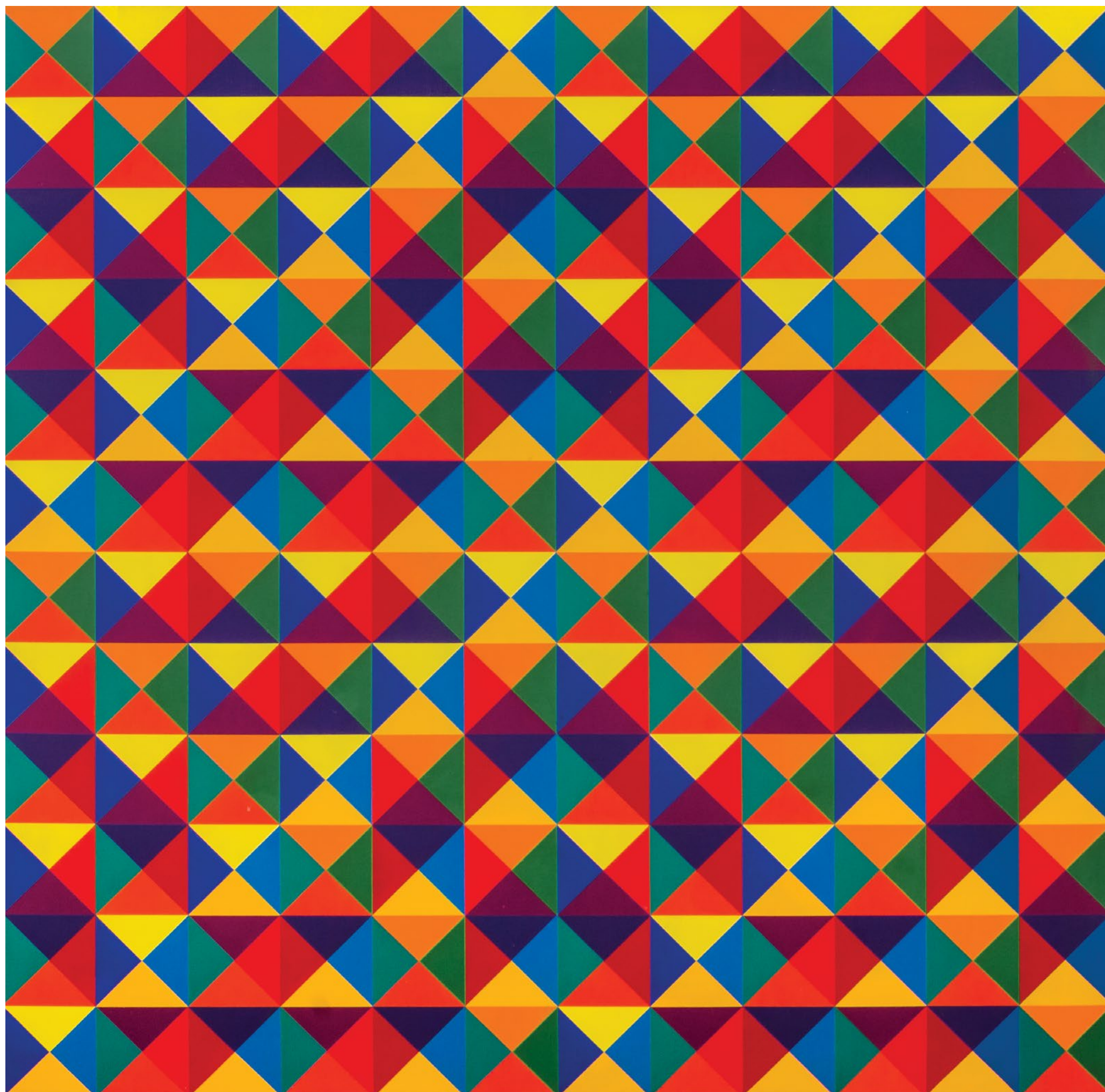
Most artists leave behind a legacy like this—a legacy within a legacy, as it were, the molten core of the firmly formed world that is the artist’s overall body of work. In Benjamin’s case it underscores the richness of his supposedly constricted style. He was known for switching out patterns and compositional schemes quickly and surprisingly, for trying out widely disparate motifs, but all the

while concentrating consistently on vibrant colors and color relationships and always making sure there is a rhythmic snap to his compositions. This selection does not contradict that image of Benjamin, but it does show how disparate his motivic language, and his color decisions, could be. Benjamin was never afraid to take risks, but here he comes off as a lively experimentalist—within his own manner, of course, but still revealed as a hungry, adventurous sensibility. Nothing here should confuse anyone familiar with Benjamin’s art, but the surprises are many.

Karl Benjamin was one of the “grand old men” of Los Angeles modernism—and equally one of the “grand old men” of the artistic archipelago that stretches from Pasadena to Riverside. He was a fixture in the Claremont area, and paterfamilias equally to artists who live and work in the area or who just passed through. If he enriched the history of art with his no-nonsense, yet witty, painting, Benjamin enriched the Los Angeles basin, particularly its eastern end, with his no-nonsense yet warm and sensitive presence. The art in “Close Values” is where the Benjamin curators and art historians know meets the Benjamin the neighbors and family knew. This is the stuff that didn’t fall far from the tree—and yet in some ways fell farthest.

*Los Angeles
August 2016*





#7

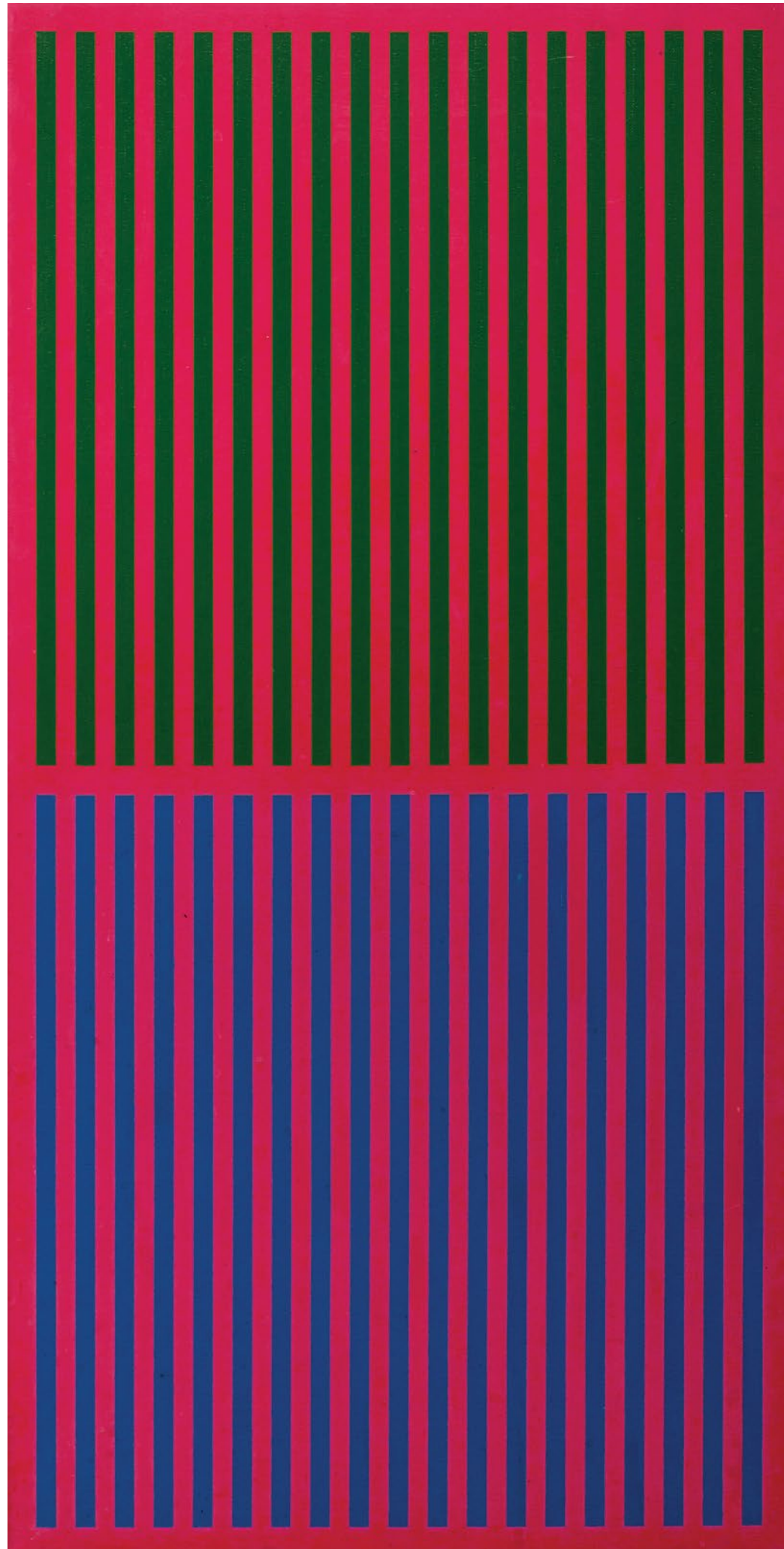
Oil on Canvas, 1968

52" X 52"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Allison Jones

THIS painting plays a starring role in my earliest memories. For the past thirty years, it has taken up the lion's share of the wall space of my family's living room, in the home my parents bought the year before I was born. When I came onto the scene, Grandpa Karl's triangle painting was there, defining what color and shapes meant to my infant brain. From serving as a backdrop for homecoming photos to unwitting victim to childhood spills, this painting is nothing short of home to me. I have spent countless hours watching how the repeating sequence of triangles, squares, and diamonds would shift like a kaleidoscope as the light changed over the course of a day. Now that he's gone, I feel closest to my grandpa when I'm next to this old friend of a masterpiece, and can almost hear his voice chiming in about what I'm up to.



#33

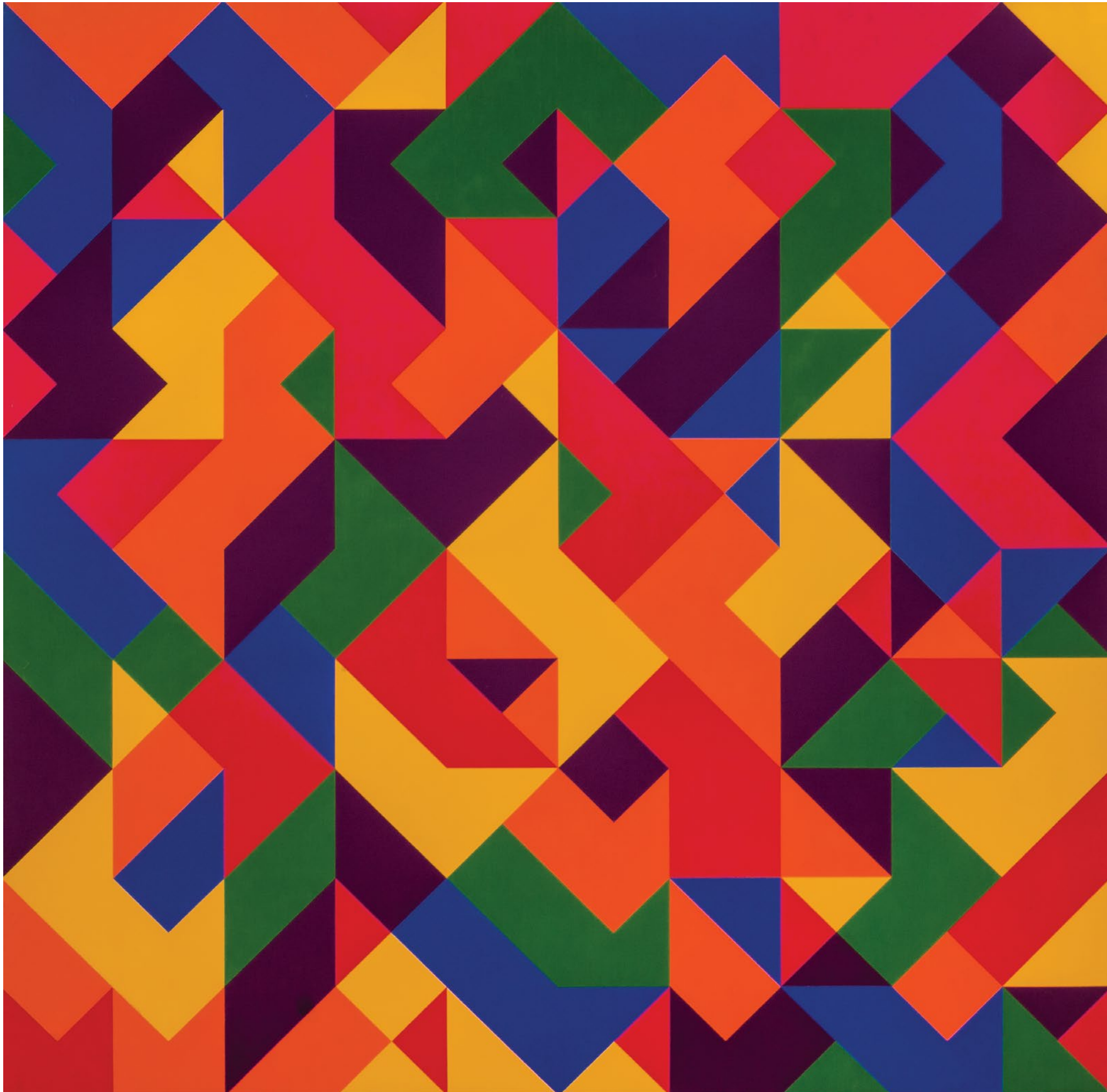
Oil on Canvas, 1976

41" X 21"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bob and Kris Benjamin Jones

THIS is a study of color and its direct effect on its neighbor. The field being one color reading two ways.



#15

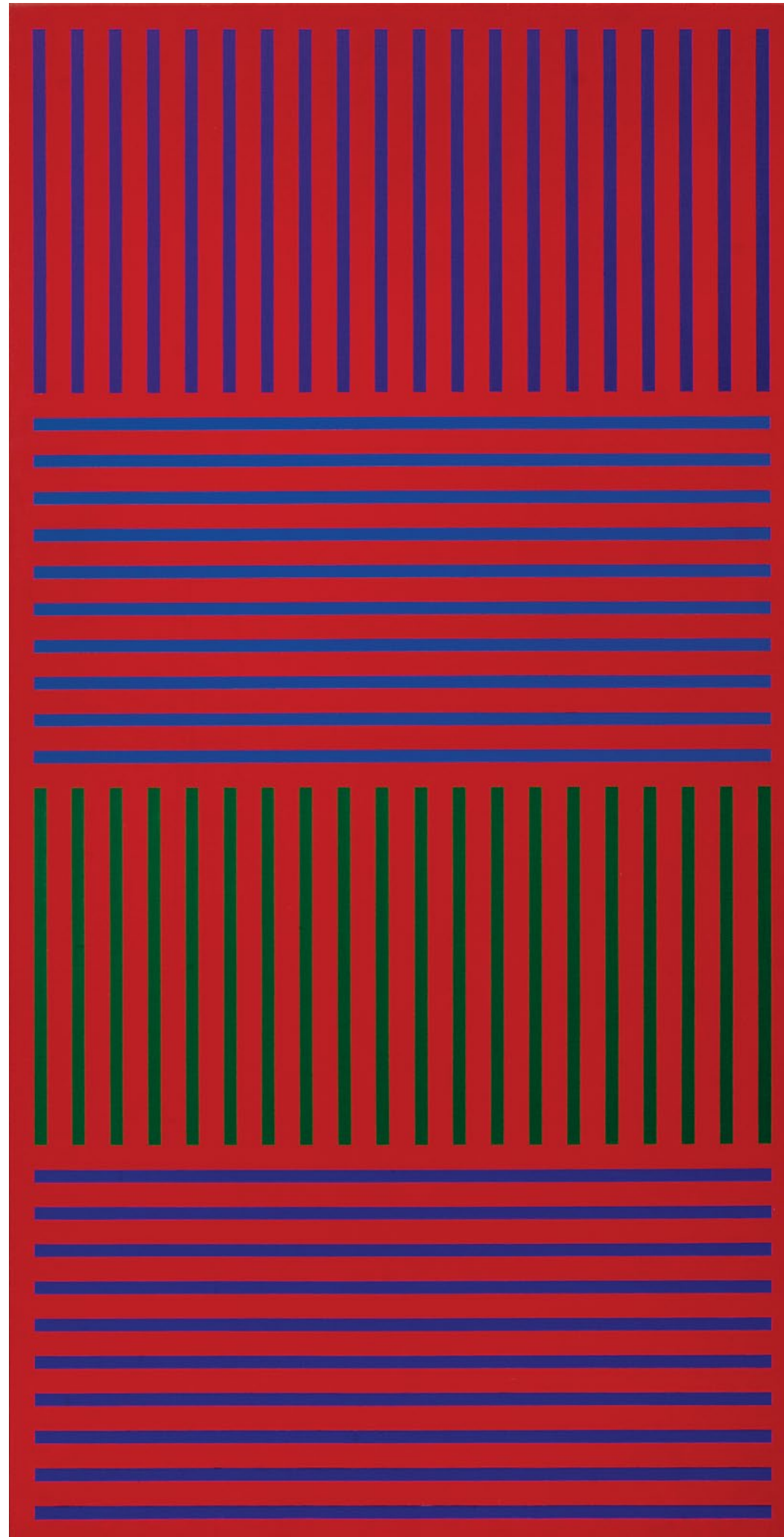
Oil on Canvas, 1968

50" X 50"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Steve Comba and Kim Nykanen

KARL was a generous person, as a painter and a person, but you wouldn't think that the Internal Revenue Service would be a partner in one particular expression of his generosity. Artists generally get the short end of the stick when it comes to charitable giving: only able to deduct the "cost of production/materials" when they donate one of their own works to a public institution. However, if they choose to donate artwork by others, then they can receive the fair market value of the work. For many years, and to the benefit of many institutions, Karl did just that. Acquiring, through trade, the work of artists both established and aspiring and gifting those works to museums. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement—the museums received notable additions and the artists gained stature for being added to the museums' collection. It's the "trade" part of this equation that was most remarkable. For those of us deemed worthy by Karl for this transaction we received a benefit greater than just the pedestrian facts of charitable gifting strategies: we received a painting by Karl Benjamin. To be able to choose a painting, to keep, under his generous gaze was an amazing experience. On the day my wife and I went to his studio, he sat in his living room while we shyly selected various works from his studio across the yard, assuming that if I were to select based upon "value" that I was in way over my head. After selecting several smaller paintings, which Karl refused, we took a chance and selected #15, 1968, from a series that Karl was well aware of my fondness. It was a big reach; one we felt had no chance of success. Karl gave us a "thumbs up." I could speak to the art historical importance of Karl's contributions, to his painting's aesthetic accomplishments, but to me, it personifies the man. When I view the painting from the comfort of my home it reminds me of him. It's exactly like sitting with him, in his living room, talking about art, friends, and family.



#7

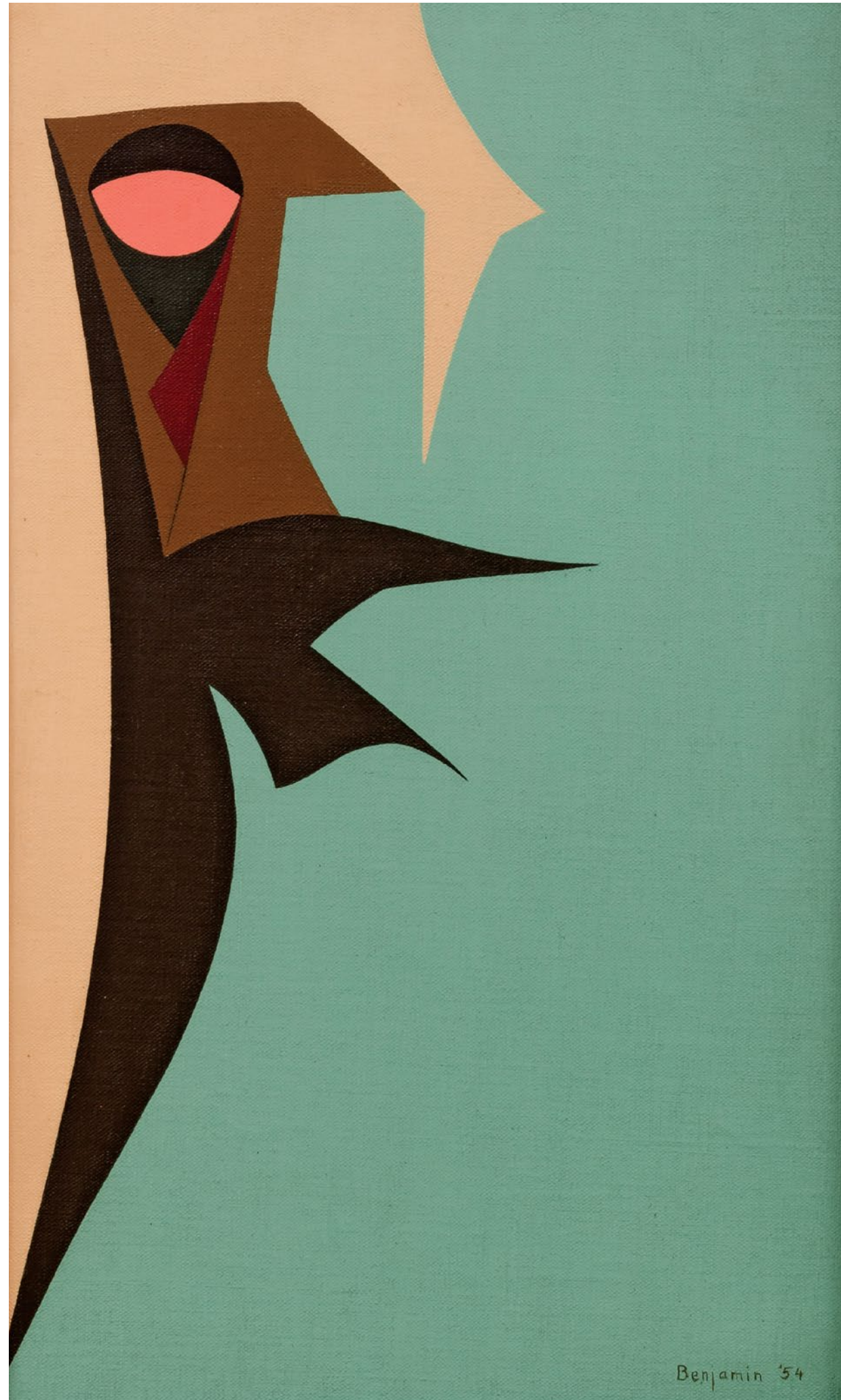
Oil on Canvas, 1976

63" X 32"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Tony Paris

HERE are my thoughts about Karl and this painting. Karl was my uncle. We became quite close during the early 1970's while I was living at boarding school minutes from Karl's home. I spent many weekends with him in his studio while he painted and we watched baseball and football together as he had a TV in the studio. It was during this time that Karl was creating this style of painting of colorful lines and geometric shapes. We became great friends during this time and continued the rest of our lives. I like to look at this painting for several minutes as the lines begin to move and come to life the longer one views it. Karl's studio and home were my sanctuary for these many key years of development.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1954

22" X 14"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beth Benjamin

I SEE two completely different images in this painting. My mom says they thought of it as a bird mask, like the many African sculptures in their home. I also have always thought of it as a veiled Arabian princess with a pink face, and her arms in black robes stretched out into the blue desert sky. The painting is one I remember from the very first Claremont house we lived in before I was five, so it has a dream-like presence for me.



#12

Oil on Canvas, 1964

48" X 48"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Leifin Nelson

THIS painting given me by my grandfather represents the moment when life is stopped for reflection. After many months of seeing #12, 1964 floating above KB's head at his usual seat at the dining room table, I realized the remarkable symmetry and the power of the single octagon/circle in lighter tone that you see here. I see a present wrapped carefully within a cross, a complex shape showing how a square can roll smoothly along. This wheel of light smoothes the rough edges, allowing a square peg to fit within the round hole of an infinite look at our existence. The halo as it shimmers over Karl's head at the table where we always ate, is a fusion of color, form and simple earthly memories that I will never lose. In hopes that we can all round our corners and soften our lives even in a hard edge world, I share this light, alongside other examples of his vision to simply create beauty and encourage the search for our own humanity. May we all learn to bring together colors that sing, and words that illuminate hope for all the ways people live. Knowing Karl is still in our hearts, still in front of his creations, and still feeling color as music, fills me with hope for my world and the one we leave for our descendants, no matter the perception of our times. Peace and tranquility, Leifin Nelson.



#2

Oil on Canvas, 1967

48" X 48"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Gretchen Fassbinder

BECAUSE we were good friends with the Benjamins and had admired Karl's paintings (and admired both Beverly and Karl too), Karl used to drop by on his way home from school and visit. One day Karl and I began talking about trading my husband John's pottery and Karl's paintings. We were both excited about the prospect. Now I have this gorgeous painting and Bevi has several pieces of pottery, as do the Benjamin children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. What a treat!



#6

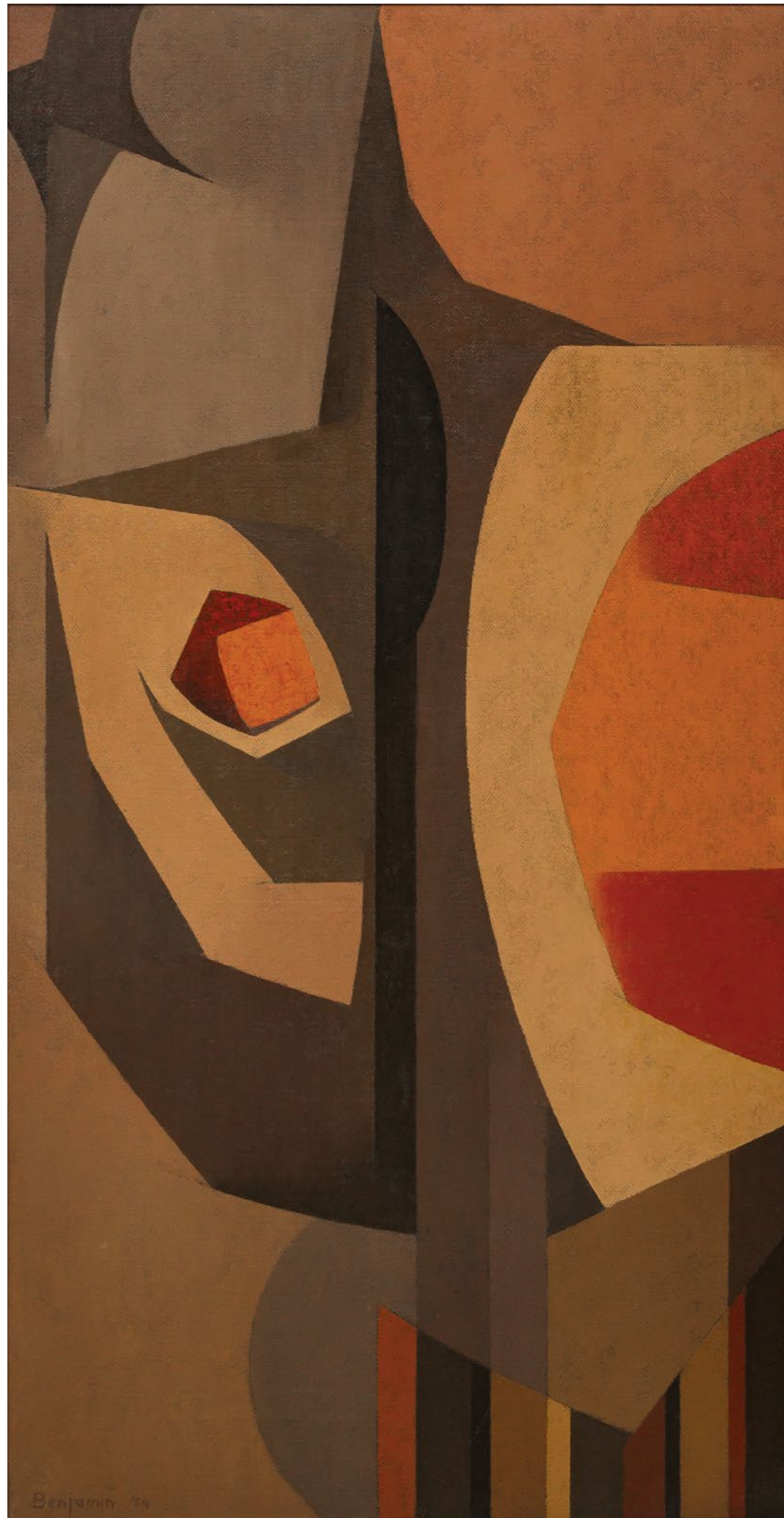
Oil on Canvas, 1988

30" X 24"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bob and Kris Benjamin Jones

THIS painting reminds me of a handsome lady in a 2-piece at the beach at sunset.
Quite exciting.



Untitled

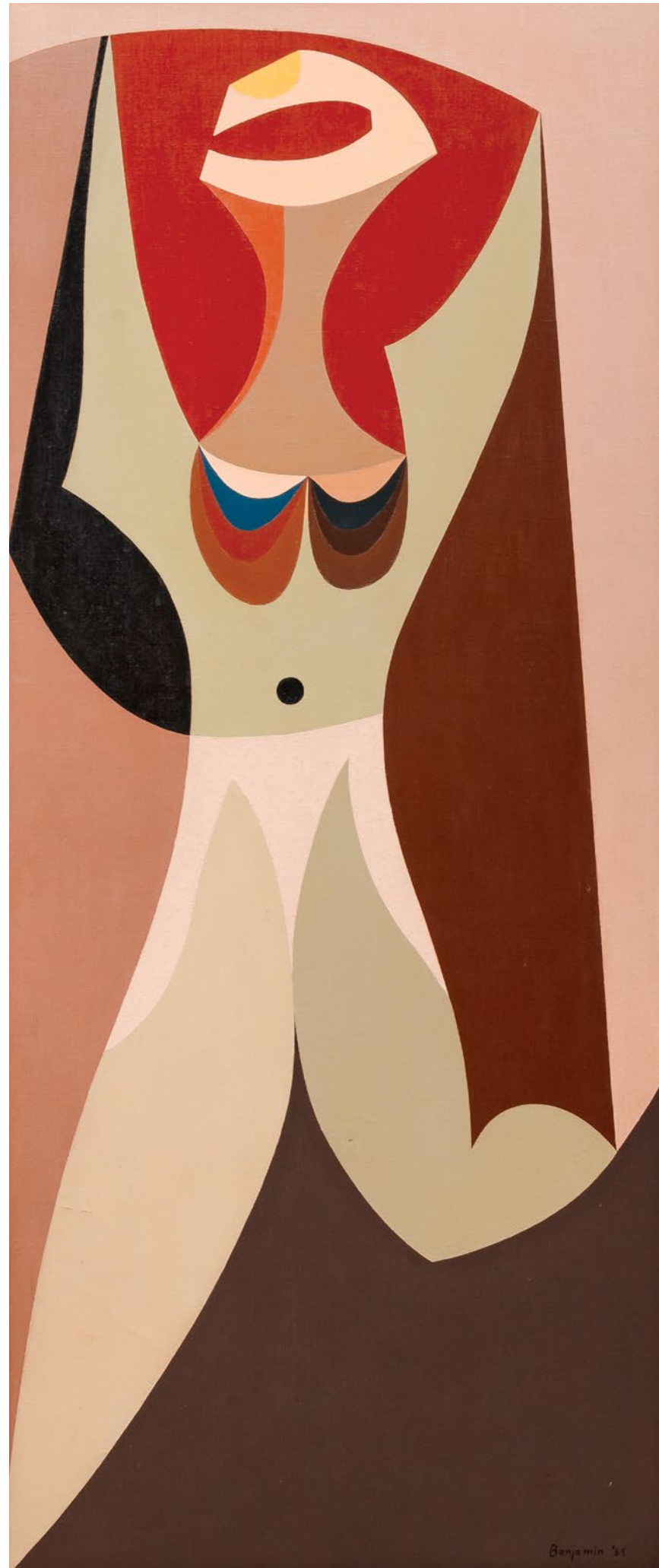
Oil on Canvas, 1954

50" X 26"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Glenn and Anne Davenport

BEFORE Karl Benjamin joined the Pomona College art department, he taught at one of the elementary schools in Chino a school at which I also taught. We carpoled together for many years trading stories of our early lives and even sharing accounts of our night time dreams. Karl was of course painting seriously during non-school hours and on all weekends. All this occurred shortly after I had completed the building of the house my family and I lived in for over fifty years. Having accumulated several building skills, Karl and I arranged to trade paintings for laying floor tiles and several garden projects. In this way my family was able to have and enjoy several early Benjamin paintings.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1955

50" X 22"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Glenn and Anne Davenport

BEFORE Karl Benjamin joined the Pomona College art department, he taught at one of the elementary schools in Chino a school at which I also taught. We carpooled together for many years trading stories of our early lives and even sharing accounts of our night time dreams. Karl was of course painting seriously during non-school hours and on all weekends. All this occurred shortly after I had completed the building of the house my family and I lived in for over fifty years. Having accumulated several building skills, Karl and I arranged to trade paintings for laying floor tiles and several garden projects. In this way my family was able to have and enjoy several early Benjamin paintings.



Construction

Oil on Canvas, 1953

50" X 26"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Marilyn Thinger-Tallman

I WAS a freshman in high school in 1950 when my brother-in-law Karl began painting. On occasional weekends all through high school I would spend hours sitting in his studio in Claremont watching him paint and talking. I believed he was the wisest man I had ever known. A few times when he and my sister wanted to get away for a weekend I would babysit with Beth their first child, and later, Kris too. For payment they gave me my choice of one of his paintings. This was one of my favorites. (I called it "dogs at the circus").



Stalice

Oil on Canvas, 1954

28" X 22"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Marilyn Lhinger-Tallman

THIS painting was another high school babysitting "payment". I love the early abstract look of his early work as he moved from a realistic representation toward the geometric forms of his mature paintings. As a teenager I would talk with him in his studio and outside in the garden and watch him stretch his own canvasses and make his own frames. For many years he did these himself rather than trust anyone else to get it right. He was a perfectionist. It shows now in the still excellent condition of his canvasses.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1957

31" X 41"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Marguerite McIntosh

HISTORY of two 1957 paintings by Karl Benjamin owned by the McIntosh family
Harrison McIntosh and Karl Benjamin came to know each other in the early 1950s when they both studied design with Jean Ames at Scripps College. They were among a group of exceptional young men who used GI Bill funds to study art at Claremont Graduate School after WWII. Marguerite and Harrison built their home in Padua Hills in 1958. It was designed by architect Fred McDowell in a style similar to the home of fellow artist Karl Benjamin. As a house-warming gift Karl offered the McIntoshes two of his recent abstract paintings and in return Harrison gave two of his ceramic pieces to the Benjamins. Over 50 years later, Karl and Harrison are gone, but their artworks still live side-by-side in these two homes.



Red Sun

Oil on Canvas, 1955

27" X 38"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Marilyn Thinger-Tallman

AFTER my first husband and I were married, we loved visiting my sister and Karl. We both fell in love with this particular painting. We offered to buy it but Karl was very reluctant to sell. It represented the time spent on the roof of Bud's Bike Shop drinking beer with his friend and watching the California sun sink beyond the horizon. He also said that there was someone else who wanted to buy it. It took about two years, but we wore him down and it was ours.



#19

Oil on Canvas, 1988

30 ½" X 24 ½"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Danny Shain

I AM a painter and Karl was my teacher. When we met, I was a nineteen year old community college student. One day a friend and I drove up to Claremont from Fullerton to see a show at Pomona College. After the show, we wandered upstairs of the gallery and into a painting class that we later learned was Karl's. The whole upstairs had this wonderful feeling; bathed in natural light, the smell of drying paint, and this kind of open energy that filled the whole space. Hanging on a wall were five or more abstract paintings that were just color and shapes. They were each comprised of a grid of squares that echoed the shape of the canvas. Each square was of a carefully painted patch of color that modulated the surrounding patches and gave each painting an underlying organic unity. This was the mid-eighties, and there was not a decapitated doll's head in sight. No neon paint.—Just these straight forward and understated abstractions. My friend and I felt like we had wandered into a temple for painting. There was such a quiet elegance to this place, and it was a feeling I would soon associate with Karl. He was generous and treated his class like a garden, cultivating a space for growth and a faith in intuition. I soon learned that the geometry of his painting was held together by an intuitive sense of color and space. He would feel his way around a painting and help you discern the rightness of a work by the felt relationships within them. We became friends in school and remained ones in all the years after. Karl made my education possible, and he helped me to find my job out of college. He was generous in ways that prove incalculable and his friendship has been a pleasure of eternal reward. The painting you see is a piece of that friendship.



Organic Forms

Oil on Canvas, 1957

48" X 36"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Andy Paris

THIS painting was the first thing anybody saw upon entering our house. It was purchased and hung long before I was born. Perhaps it is the first thing I saw in my life, it is so very ingrained into my earliest memories, going beyond mere feelings of either joy or sadness. Its effect is total. It is my family. A Family Crest. But I have a different name for it. Fred Flintstone's House Burning Down will always be known by me as the singular most important defining work of art in my life. It always made Uncle Karl laugh when I called it that but he liked it.



#13

Oil on Canvas, 1987

30" X 30"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bruce Benjamin

MY father first brought to my attention the musical quality of this painting. It hangs behind my drum stool in any house that I live in. It suggests a series of symmetrical and even squares and gives this appearance when I strike my crash cymbals.

View from old Victor Hugo

Oil on Canvas, 1957

27" X 48"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bob and Kris Benjamin Jones

THIS is a sea scape view from the bluff above Laguna beach at the site of the old Victor Hugo's Restaurant very near the present day Laguna Art Museum.





#17

Oil on Canvas, 1988

30" X 30"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bruce Benjamin

MY father saw me admiring this one day and knowing I had quit smoking, said, "Why don't you take that painting as an incentive." I told my friend Joe K, Ed Kienholz' nephew, the story, Joe said, "If I ever catch you with a smoke in your mouth, I will help you crate that painting up and we WILL be sending it back!" More incentive. Today I can report I am smoke free . . .



#10

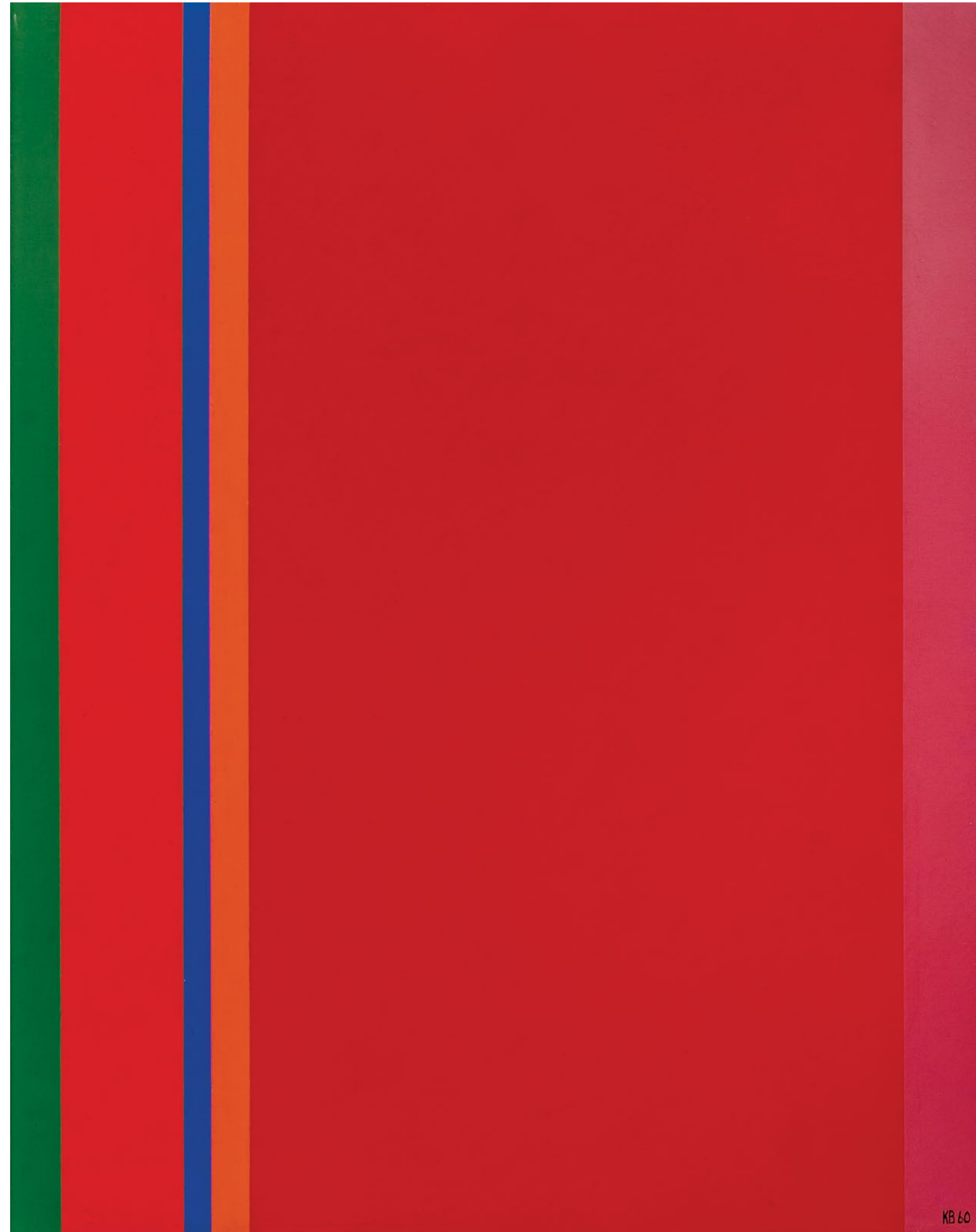
Oil on Canvas, 1984

30" X 30"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Crispin and Kirsten Gonzalez

THIS painting was in trade for a ceramic wall sculpture made by my husband Crispin Gonzalez. Exact details have faded into our history. The plaque has hung on the outside wall by the sliding door of Karl's studio for many years. The painting has graced our life for just as long.



Untitled

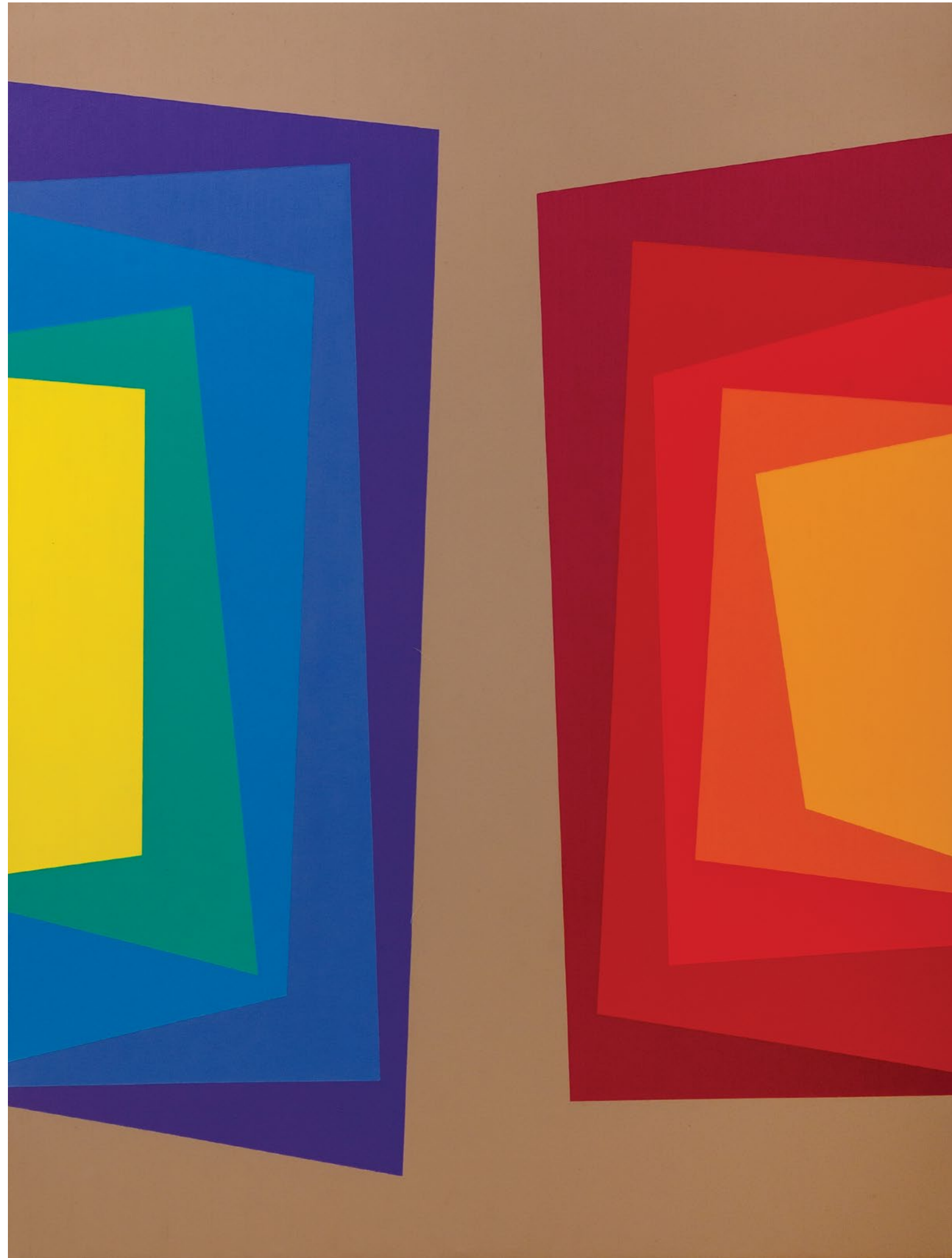
Oil on Canvas, 1960

29" X 23"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Julie Paris

MY mother was Karl's only sibling and I am my mother's only daughter. During my earlier years, in the late fifties and sixties, I can remember attending shows of Karl's with my parents in wonder. His expansive use of color and design was very impressionable on me. My mother, Ruth, was one of his greatest fans, not just because they were very, very close, but because she admired and was in awe of his talent and work. I was fortunate to be able to know my Uncle Karl until the end of his life. My mother was not as lucky, as she passed away at the relatively young age of 51. Living in the Los Angeles area, I was fortunate enough to continue the legacy of gathering for lunch at Karl and Beverly's home on 8th St on a regular basis. One day, after eating our usual deli fare, we were in one of our familiar reminiscent conversations about the earlier paintings of Karl's that were so near and dear to me, as they were to my mother and father. At that moment, Karl said why don't we take a look at some of my paintings from that period? I didn't hesitate as we proceeded to his studio to pull out the many beautiful paintings from throughout the years. One in particular, caught our eye. I said, "This is a painting I think my mother would've loved." With that, Karl picked it up and said, "I'd like you to have it." Needless to say, I was overwhelmed and hesitant to accept such a gift. He was insistent. I treasure that particular day and the lunch we shared, not only because of his generous offering, but because of the many moments we shared about our family and longevity together. I am honored to be have been his niece and the daughter of his beloved sister.



#2

Oil on Canvas, 1995

40" X 30"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beth Benjamin

AFTER my dad died, we each chose a painting. I have some of his earliest ones, and wanted to have one of the last. He continued rocking out with the same shapes that repeat over the years, but in different color realms. The colors in these last few paintings he did remind me of lifesavers, I almost want to lick the canvas, they are so clear and sweet. He was a real sugar lover, so it reminds me of that part of him too.

#11

Oil on Canvas, 1984

30" X 60"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beverly Benjamin



O.T.C. doesn't just mean Over the Counter, but also Over the Couch. Karl originally started to fill the need of a painting for a special place in the living room by attempting a Juan Gris. Later he rebelled against the idea of painting as decoration by refusing to paint horizontal works. This is one of the few that is most intriguing. Yellow and orange—find the pattern?



#1

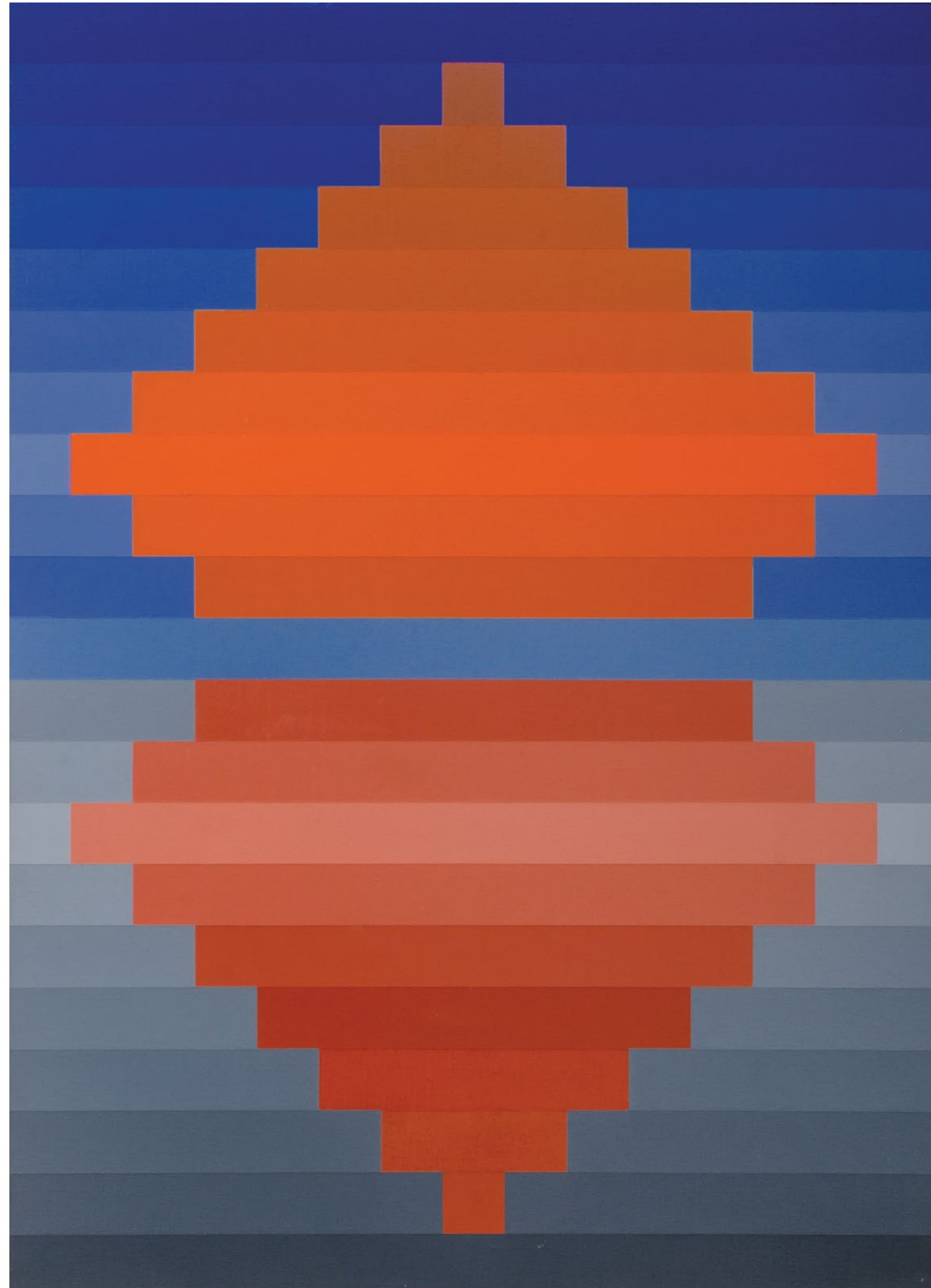
Oil on Canvas, 1995

41" X 31"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Casey Jones and Mike Schwartz

MY first memory is standing in my crib in the tiny bedroom in our tiny house looking up at a rainbow of bright colorful vertical bars. Twenty some years later, I was stopped in my tracks when I walked into Karl's house to find the exact colors that were etched into my memory. This painting, one of the last my grandfather painted, holds the same colors and similar vertical shapes. The complexity of this jagged rainbow reminds me of the journey I have taken growing up, simple and clear as a child then transforming as time goes on and the path changes without warning. Now, every morning, Mike and I wake to see this beautiful rainbow from our big bed in our big bedroom and we feel comfort and love and inspiration to start our day.



S#3

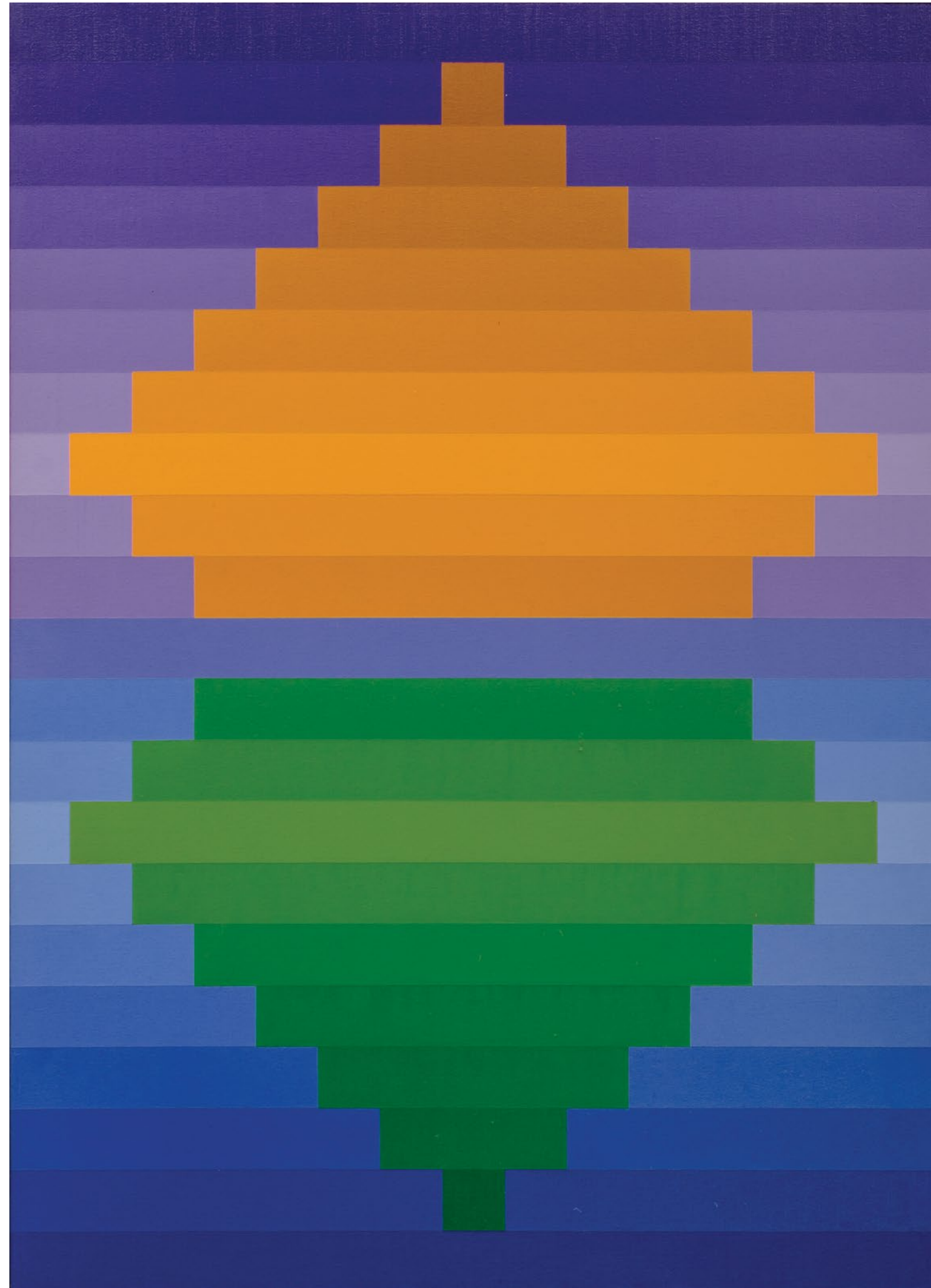
Oil on Canvas, 1983

32" X 22"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bruce Benjamin

ONE of my very favorites, it will always remind me of my journey to South Africa, when I recorded a fine album with some Zulu and isiXhosa musicians .It is featured on the back cover of the CD "Payday" Kwanzamo Roots Rockers and I included Claremont son Chris Darrow and other excellent musicians on the project. These colors are prominent on the beaches of Jeffrey's Bay in the area of South Africa I visited. Orange flowered succulents that blended with the sea like this wonderful painting.



S#1

Oil on Canvas, 1983

32" X 23"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beth Benjamin

WHEN I asked my dad for a painting when I moved away from the commune into my first real home with nice clean white walls, he gave me this. He said it reminded him of the green springtime, the orange of California poppies and blue caenothus blooming, and me because I love the flowers. We called the series Three Mile Island, because it reminded him of the cooling towers at the nuclear power plant which was in the news those days. For me, it is the shape of a Buddhist stupa reflected in a lake.



Buds Bike Shop

Oil on Canvas, 1953

24" X 29"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beverly Benjamin

WHEN I saw this painting that Karl made very early in the 1950's, I knew he was a real painter. Our family had lots of bikes to keep running so we spent a lot of time at Bud's, the only bike shop in town at that time. I remember riding on Saturday mornings with my friends the Harters to have breakfast at all the different local airports. Karl stayed home in his studio to paint, as usual. The building on the left is now a parking lot.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1955

30" X 10"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Beverly Benjamin

WHAT do we see first . . . Groucho Marx or Marilyn Monroe?



Poppies

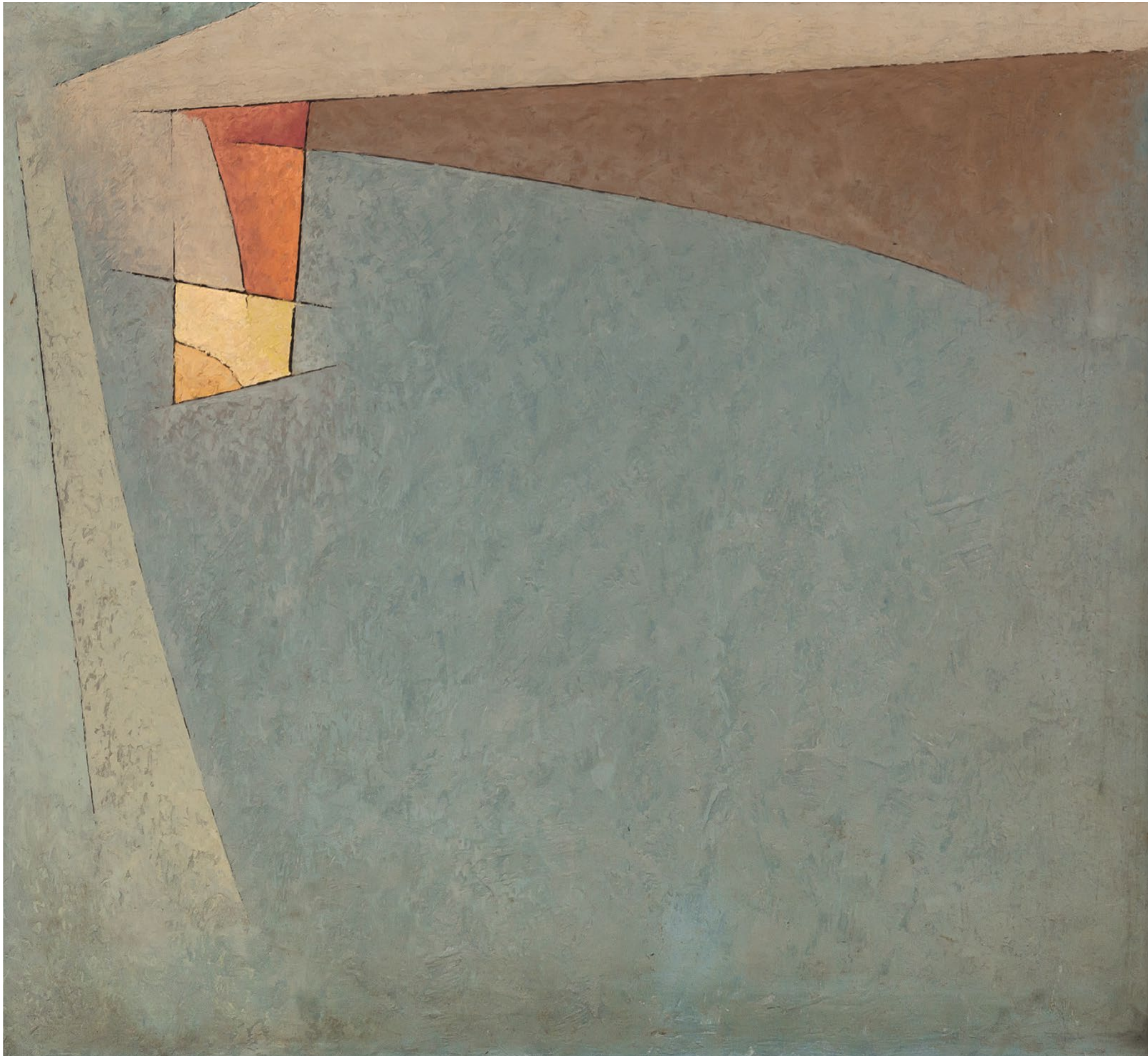
Oil on Canvas, 1954

24" X 20"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bob and Kris Benjamin Jones

THIS painting was at our grandparents' house in Santa Barbara. It was one of all of our favorite paintings because it reminds us of Karl's mother Marie (Granny).



Blue with Yellow Spot

Oil on Canvas, 1954

23" X 23"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bob and Kris Benjamin Jones

WE see this as a companion painting with the Poppies and was featured at the Pasadena Art Institute exhibit of Karl's in 1954. It is a transitional painting between figurative and abstract.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1962

24" X 12"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Evan Benjamin

"GRANDPA PAINTS" was 27 when he painted this piece and I was 29 when I got the opportunity to call this painting my own. I chose this piece of work because to me it represents a time in his life in which he was still finding himself as a painter as we all are trying to find ourselves in our twenties. It doesn't resemble the sharp edge that he is known for, but what would be the start of a beautiful painting career. It shows how much change can happen in one's lifetime. —*Evan Lincoln Benjamin*



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1951

16" X 20"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Bruce Benjamin

THIS is the one I picked after Karl passed over. My reasoning was that after a life time of "hard edge" snapping at my neural pathways, I wanted one with a soft edge. (Karl never liked the term Hard Edge; he said "What is a soft edge?") Juxtaposed with the bulk of the majority of his many other works, this fits the description, if only for me.



Untitled

Oil on Canvas, 1961

22" X 17"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Glenn and Anne Davenport

BEFORE Karl Benjamin joined the Pomona College art department, he taught at one of the elementary schools in Chino a school at which I also taught. We carpooled together for many years trading stories of our early lives and even sharing accounts of our night time dreams. Karl was of course painting seriously during non-school hours and on all weekends. All this occurred shortly after I had completed the building of the house my family and I lived in for over fifty years. Having accumulated several building skills, Karl and I arranged to trade paintings for laying floor tiles and several garden projects. In this way my family was able to have and enjoy several early Benjamin paintings.



#5

Oil on Canvas, 1995

48" X 48"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Mark Schoeman and Laurel Tucker

WE bought our house on 9th Street in 1998 and were thrilled to learn that the iconic artist Karl Benjamin lived directly across the alley. We had enjoyed gazing at his work years earlier when it was showcased at Some Crust Bakery, and now we learned that the Benjamins also made delightful and hospitable neighbors. Mark headed over to their house shortly after we'd moved in to inquire about purchasing a painting. Karl informed him that his paintings were not sold to friends, but might be hung on friends' walls as "loaners." Karl looked at the screen of bamboo lining the edge of our property and told Mark that as long as we kept the bamboo healthy, we could hang one of his pieces on our wall. He loved to watch the green leaves shimmering through the high windows of his studio. Karl carefully selected one of the brightly colored, triangular "quilt" series that we had admired long before and then hung it in our dining room. There it lived happily with us for nearly a decade, becoming almost another family member. It appears in many of our family birthday and dinner party photos. After some time, Karl asked if he might borrow the canvas back for an upcoming exhibit in LA. It was exciting to see "our" painting on the wall of a prominent art gallery. It was subsequently sold, much to our dismay. However, being a man of his word, Karl invited us over to select another work. Together we fished through stacks of canvases, which was quite an honor and privilege for us! We lugged one across the alley, and then another, trying several of them on the wall. Finally Karl looked at "#5, 1955" and declared that we had found the right one. It's much more somber and subdued than the first piece, but then, it expresses another side of the artist. We are fortunate to have had the pleasure of living with not one, but two of his beautiful canvases. We still get the occasional phone call or email from across the alley reminding us that the bamboo needs some water. We look over at our Karl Benjamin and smile.



#7

Oil on Canvas, 1963

43" X 31"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Dennis and Denise Garcia

I MET Karl when I was at graduate school at CGU in 1974. He was one of my advisors, along with Roland Reiss and Ted Kersie, and later Michael Brewster. When I opened Chrysalis Gallery of Fine Art in Claremont in 1985, I contacted Karl to see if he would be interested in having his work there. We soon became friends and corresponded with each other while I lived in Claremont and later after I moved to Sonora Calif. He sent me many letters of his time at Pomona College and announcement cards and booklets of his exhibitions. In short, Karl to me became that older brother and mentor in my pursuit of my own work. I got this painting at Patricia Myeda's estate sale many years ago—it was damaged so was to be discarded, but they'd sell it for cash only so I left my wallet and went to the bank to get money to pay for it. After I bought it and took it to show Karl, he asked how much I paid for it. When I told him, he looked surprised, then burst out laughing, then he fixed it for me.



Laguna Seascape

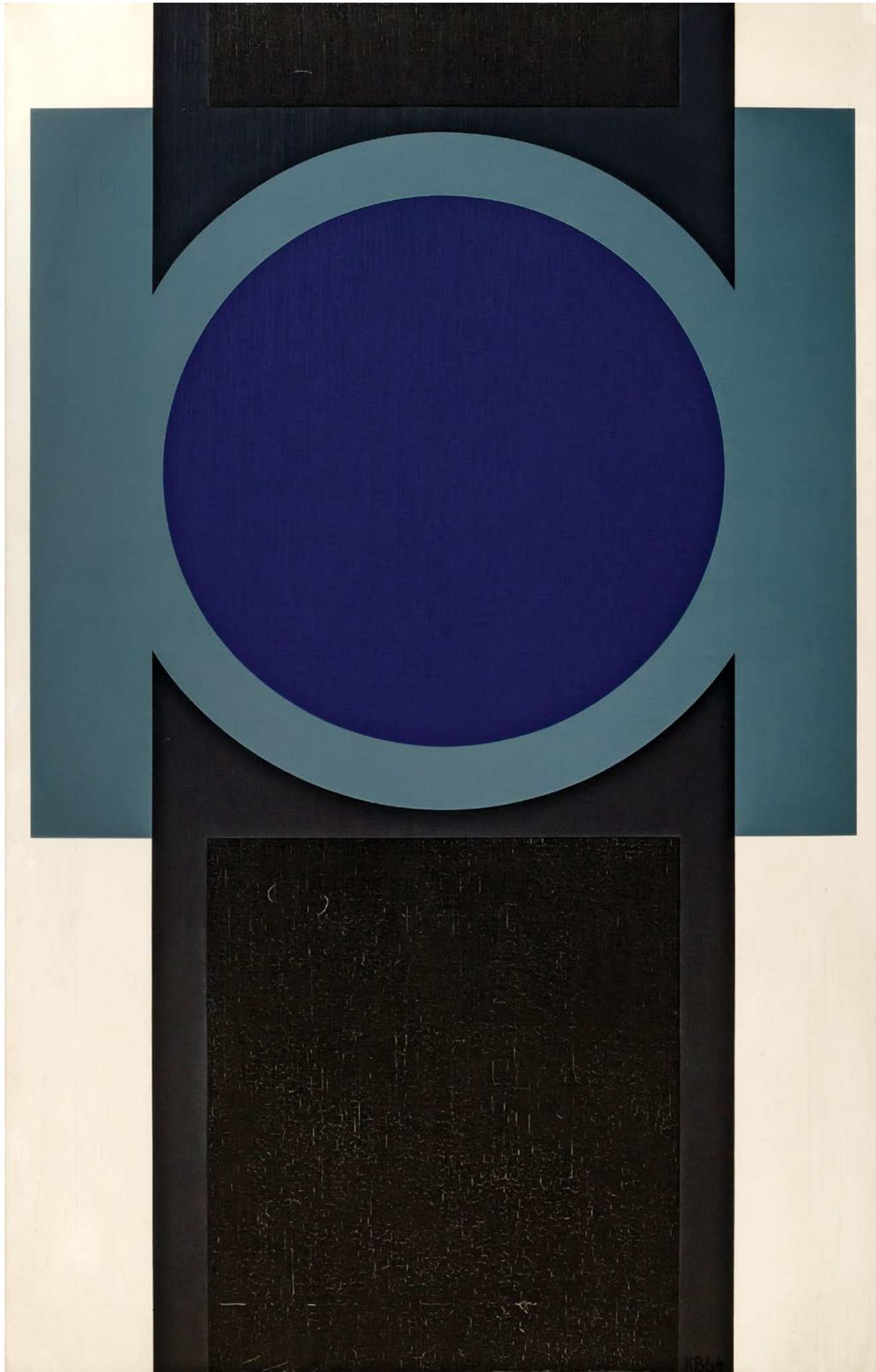
Oil on Canvas, 1956

24" X 30"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of The Estate of Norman Hines

LAGUNA Seascape belonged to my husband, Norm Hines, who, as professor of ceramics sculpture at Pomona College for many years, knew Karl well, as a colleague and a friend. From 1981, when I came to Pomona as gallery director, I, too, knew and loved Karl. I don't know exactly how Norm acquired this wonderful painting, but my guess would be by trade. Whatever the case, we have always been thrilled to have it on view in our home. Marjorie Harth Hines



#15

Oil on Canvas, 1964

52" X 33"

Karl Benjamin

Courtesy of Crispin and Kirsten Gonzalez

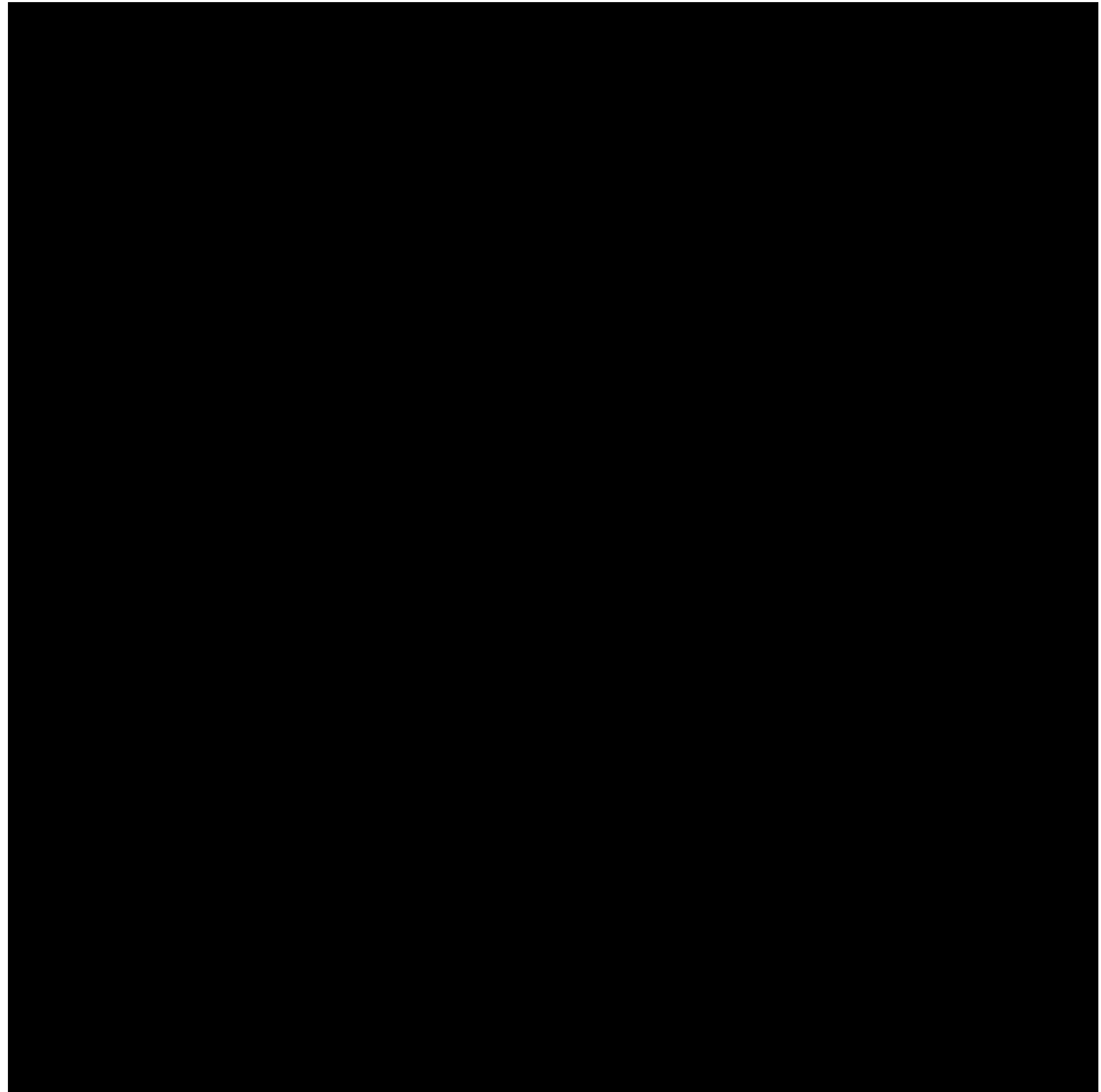
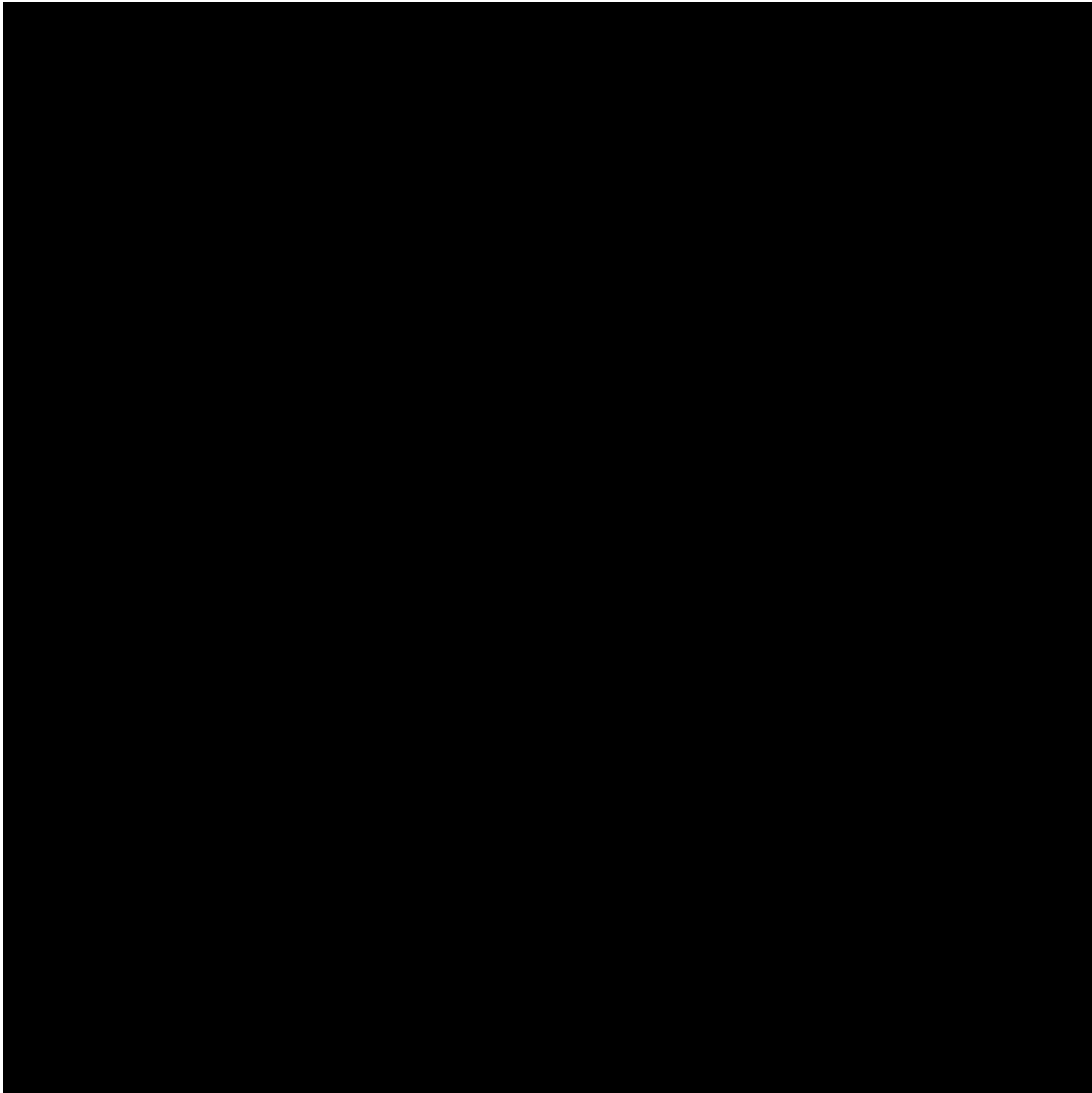
MY understanding of how we acquired this painting was told to me, I believe, by my husband Crispin Gonzalez. When we lived on Mills Avenue just south of Sixth Street in the late 60's, a large colorful sculptured pot of Cris's was displayed in our front yard. Apparently Karl drove by our house every day to and from the school where he was teaching at the time, and I was told he really hated that pot. But with time, apparently, his feelings changed, and one day he asked Cris if he would be willing to trade the pot for a painting. Cris said yes, Karl took him to his studio and told him "Choose anything you want except what I'm working on." And that is how we came to acquire this large, beautiful and serene painting by Karl Benjamin, which we have enjoyed and cherished these many, many years.

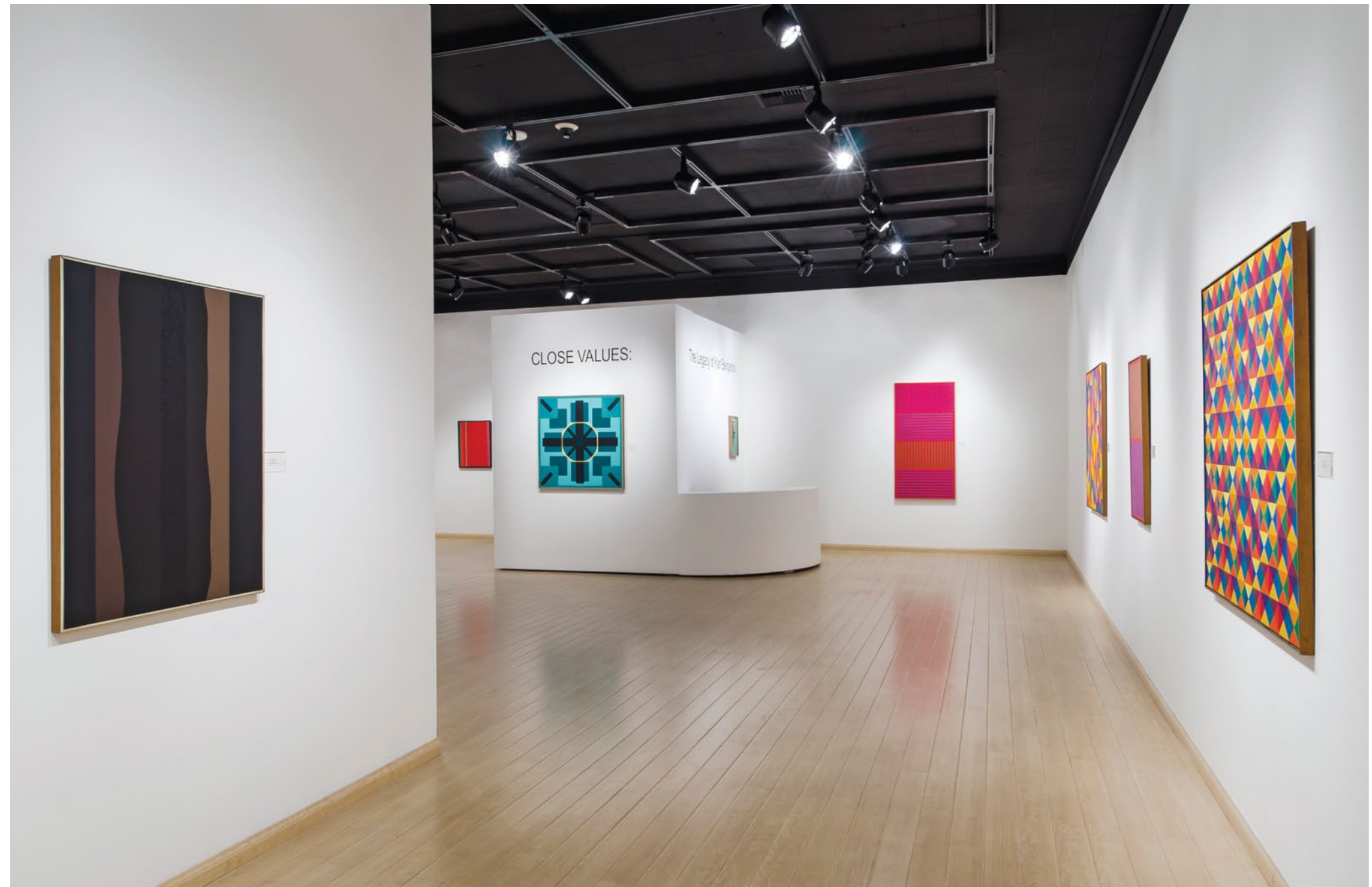
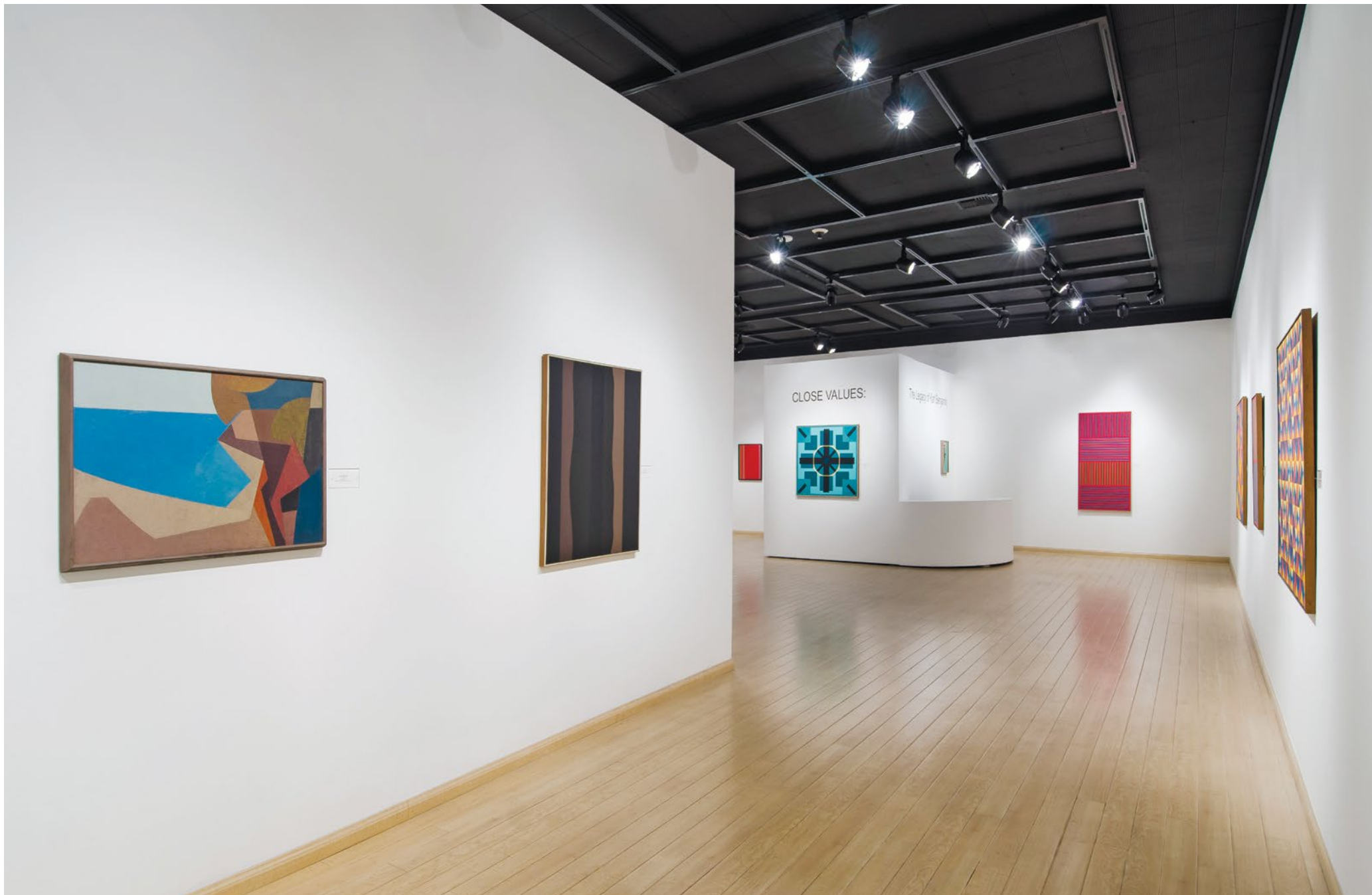
CLOSE VALUES—THE LEGACY OF KARL BENJAMIN © 2016

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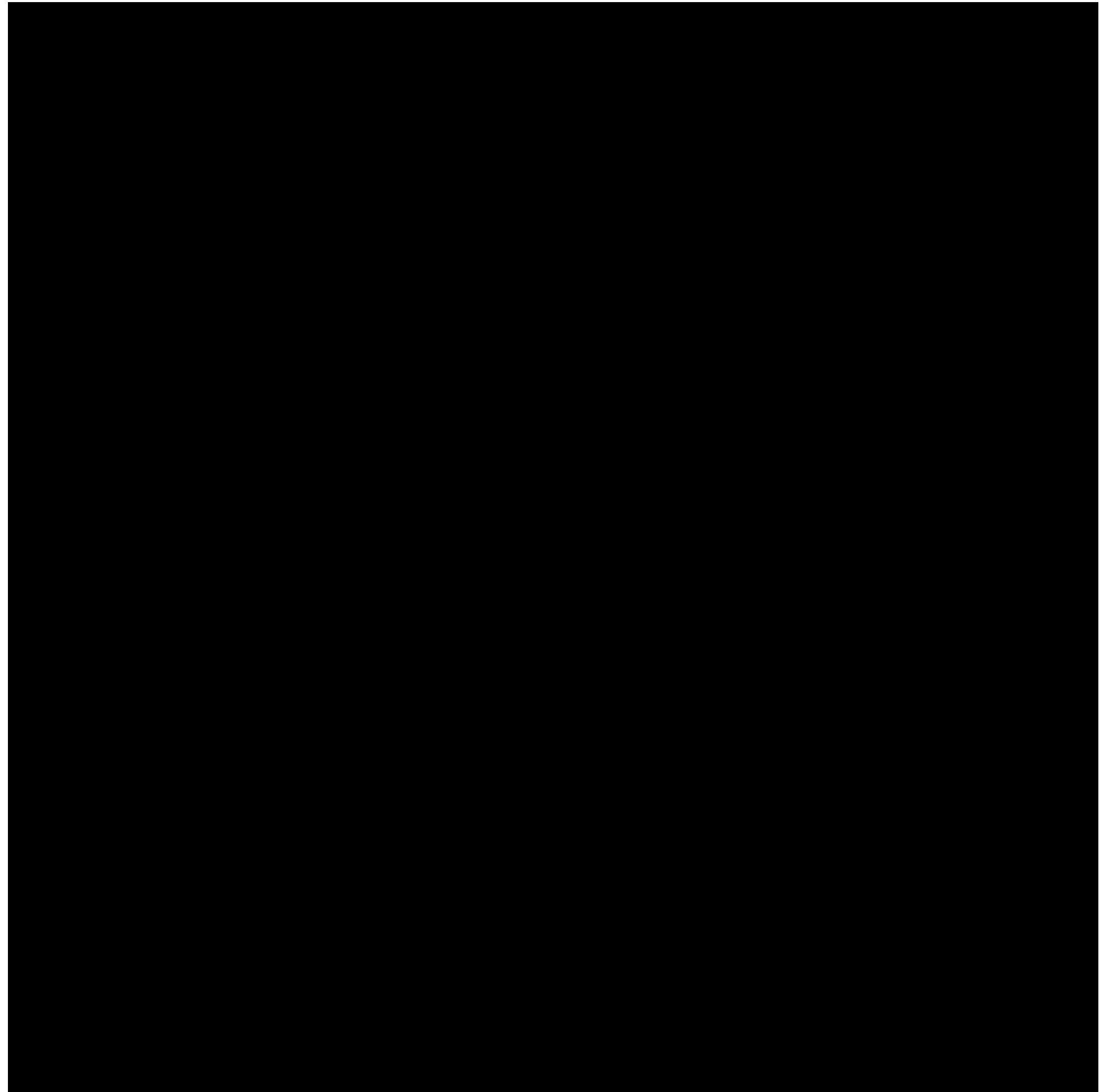
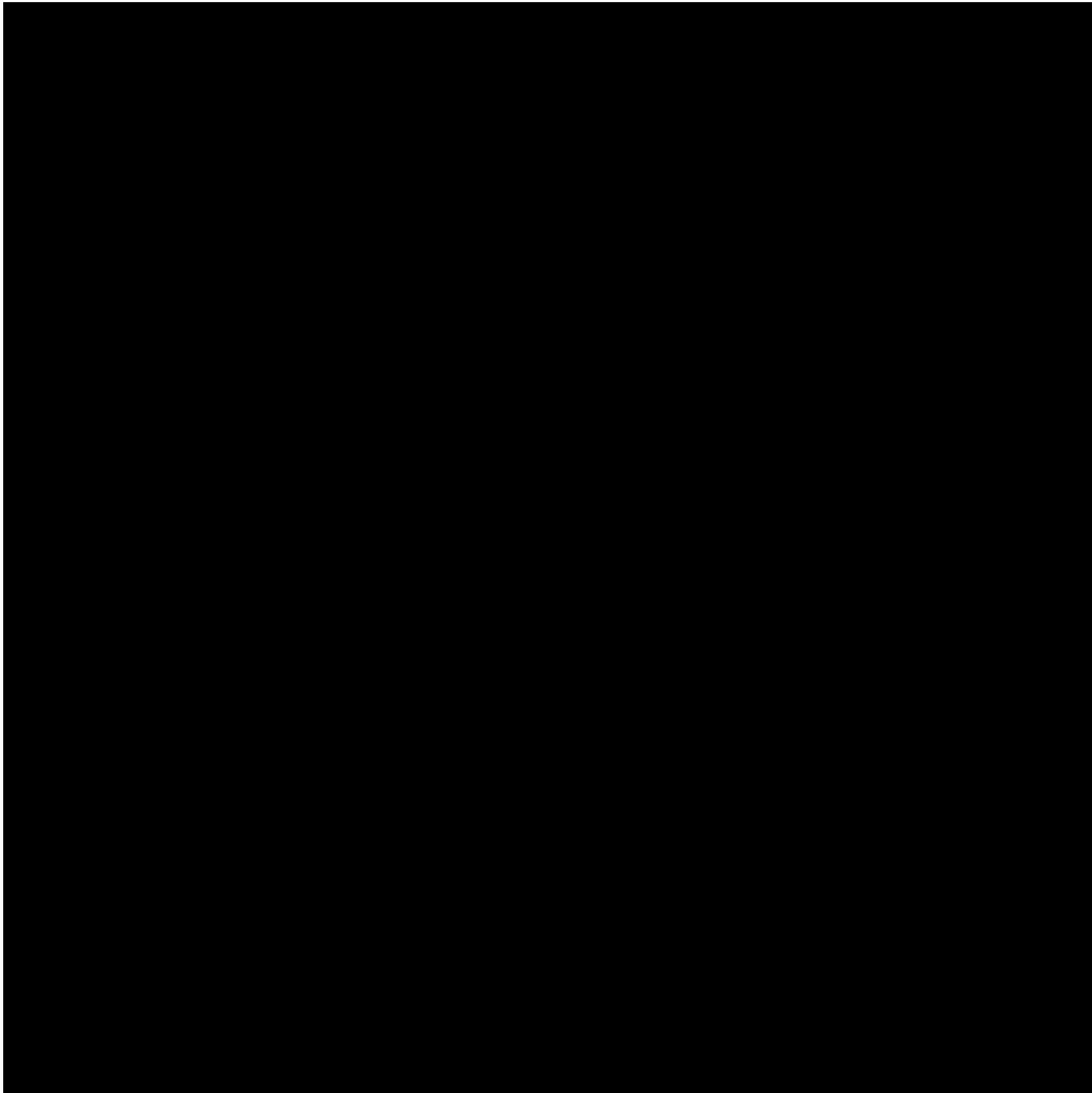
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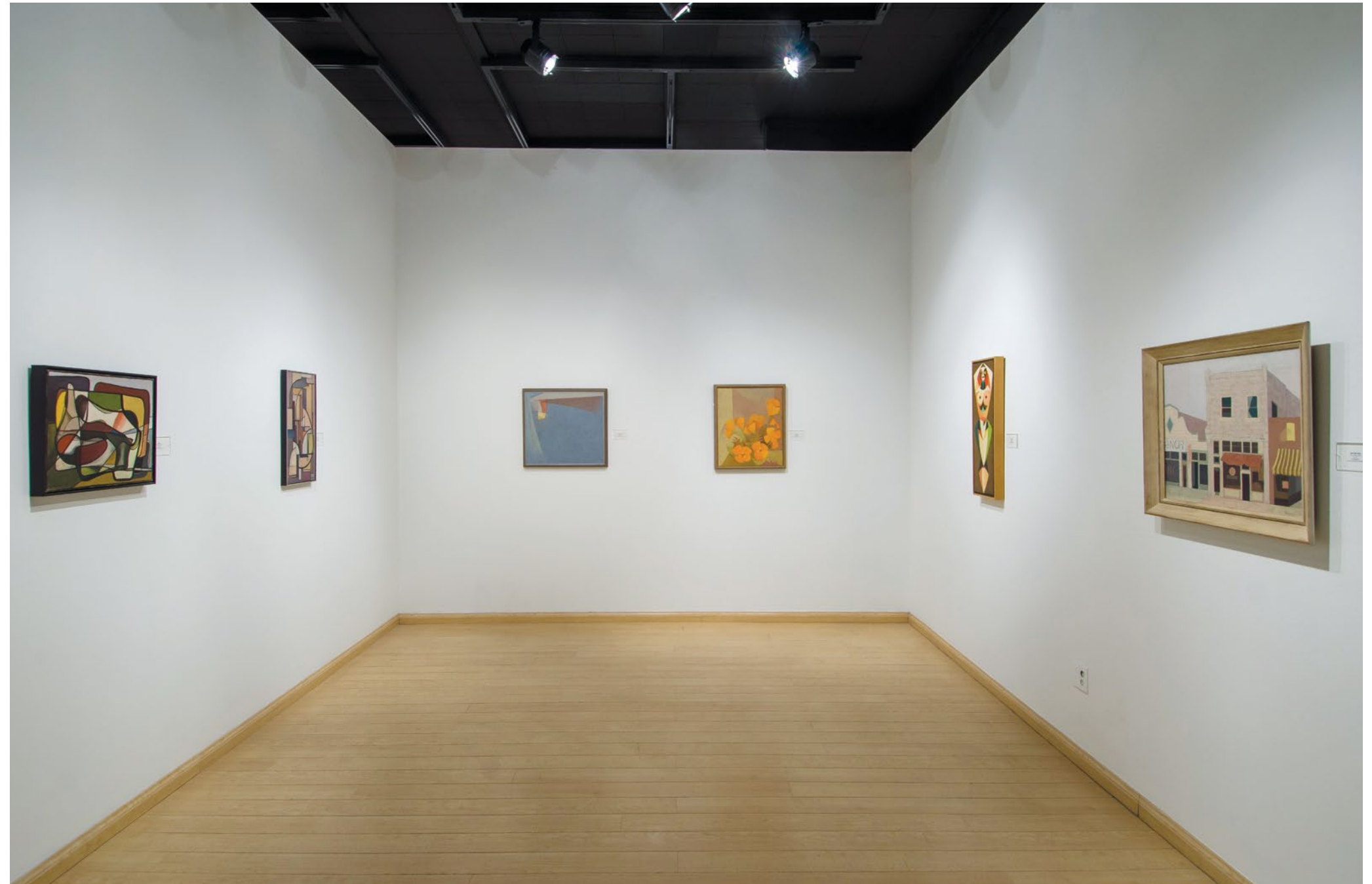




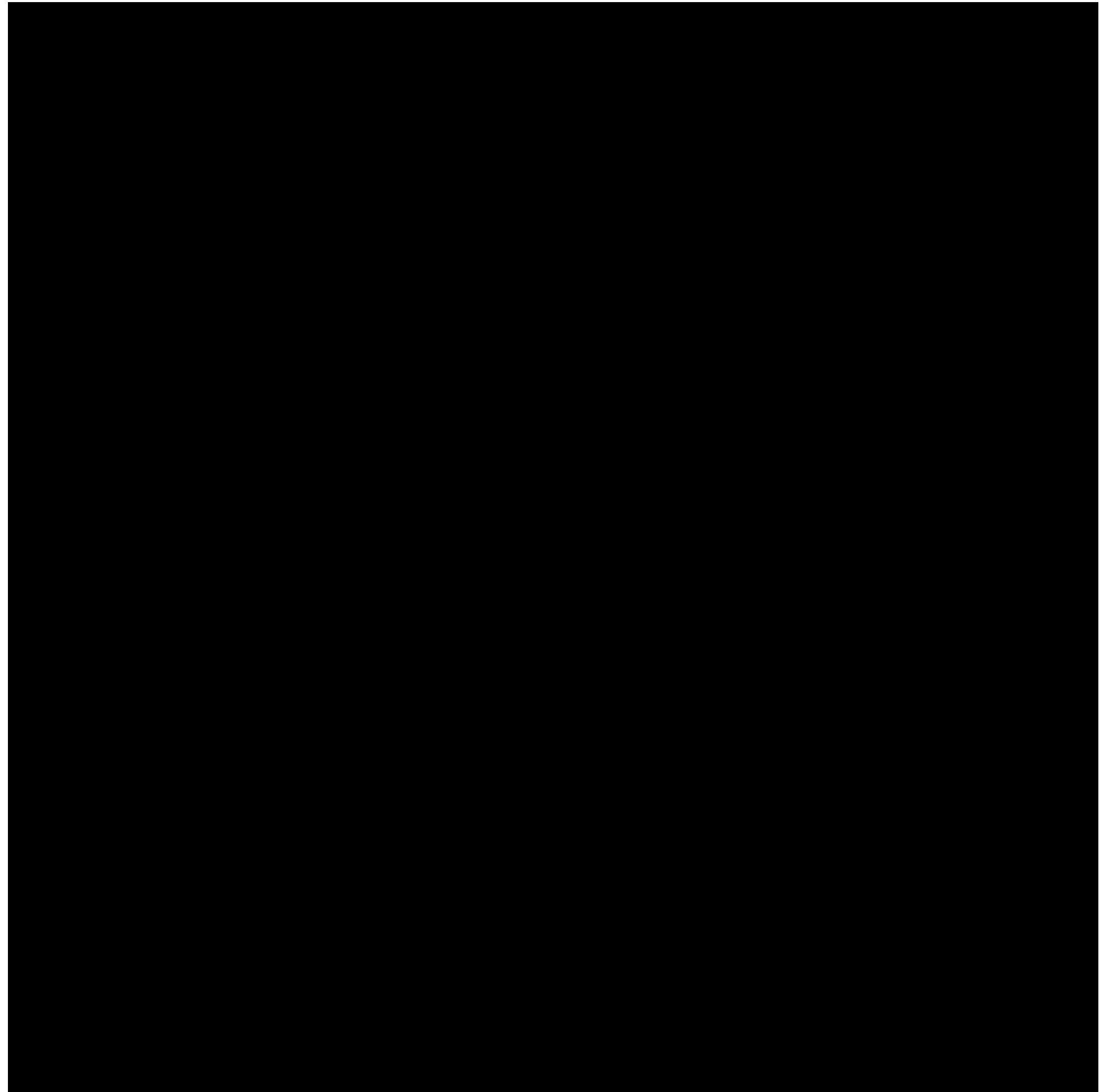
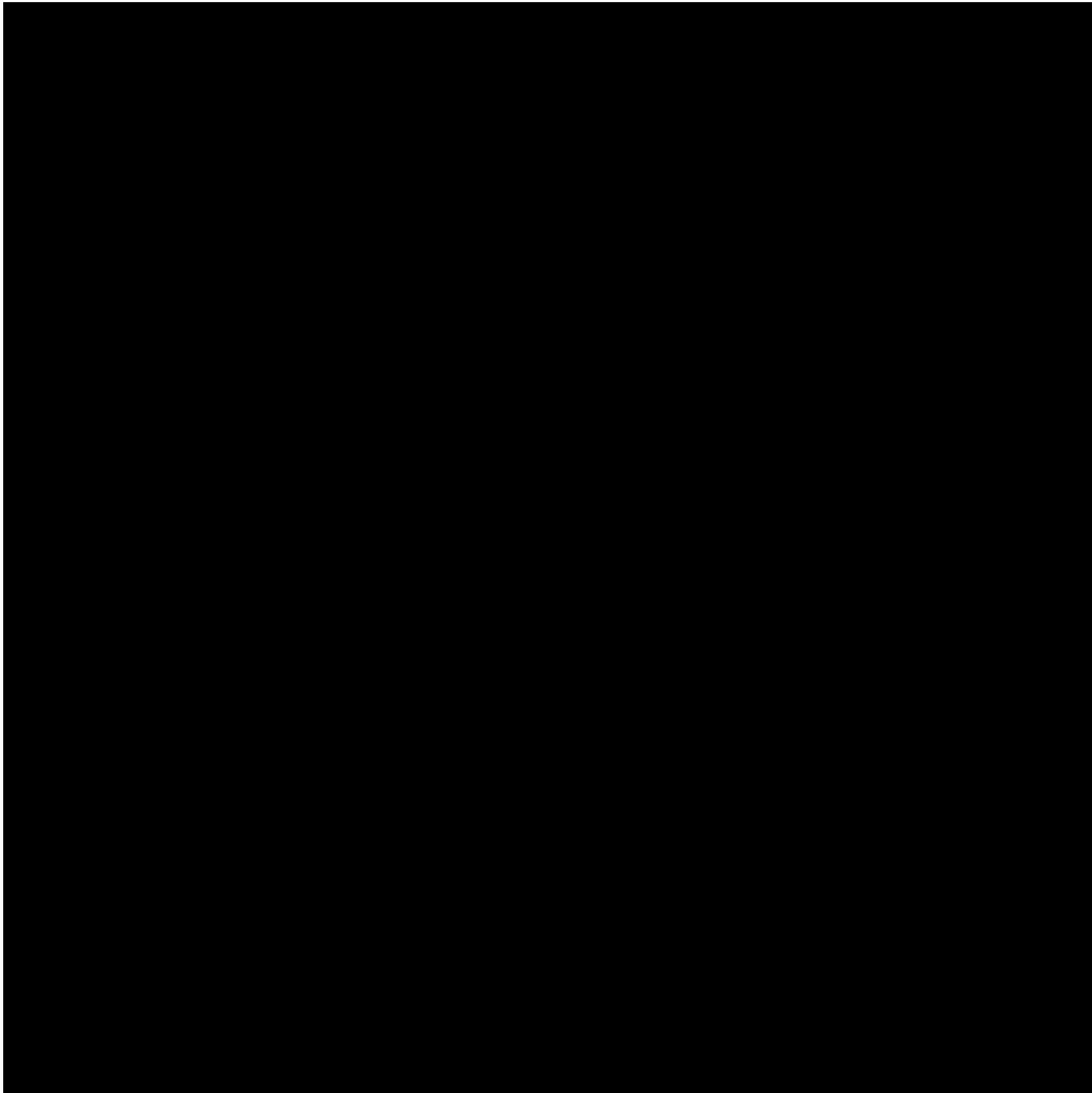


















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