The background features a complex, abstract geometric pattern. It consists of numerous overlapping, irregular lines in white and a light, dusty blue color. These lines form a dense, interconnected web of shapes, including triangles, quadrilaterals, and polygons of various sizes. The overall effect is a textured, crystalline or molecular structure. The background color is a solid, bright yellow.

NABIL NAHAS

NABIL NAHAS

Works 1970-1980

Harbinger of things to come

Nabil Nahas spent the first ten years of his life in Cairo where he was deeply impressed by the profusion of complex geometric ornaments in Arabic architecture and décor. His first adult contact with Arab Islamic art took place in 1971-1972 at the Islamic galleries of the Metropolitan Museum in New York where he would visit while in the Yale graduate program. It was the beginning of a lasting fascination. The canvasses he painted in 1971, still an undergraduate at Louisiana State University, were exhibited in Beirut in 1973 two years before the start of the war in 1975-1976. They displayed so many scaffolding-like structures that in my review at that time I likened him to a carpenter of sorts.

In 1976, the London Islamic exhibition, a landmark event in itself, initiated the vogue of Orientalism in painting and sculpture. Simultaneously, a strong emphasis was put on Arabic geometric ornament through the publishing of several books on its supposed construction processes as well as on its assumed cosmic and spiritual meanings.

Was Nabil Nahas aware at the time of this unexpected rehabilitation of ornament? Or was it pure coincidence or synchronicity, a case of vibrating in tune with the times?

In any event, one of the first pictures he made in New York in 1977 displays in the background a large classic geometric arabesque over which stands out an equivocal construction in sharp straight outlines, such as a sketch or architectural drawing, which may be perceived alternately as a two or three dimensional device. That canvas, like all those painted in the period 1977-1980, exhibits a clear, transparent space where no chiaroscuro effect comes to obstruct the luminous interplay of figure and ground.

Did he use the background arabesque to posit unambiguously his cultural and pictorial identity? Its flatness was consistent with the prevailing esthetic of Minimalism and Field Painting which banned any three dimensional illusion. But not its complexity. Both schools advocated direct, clear, and simple images. It was already a first departure from the book. The second departure, the three dimensional design, confirmed that Nahas was setting himself outright against or outside the mainstream. He started as an outsider, and he is still one.

Whatever the case, in the next canvas, over the yellow and white vertical stripes of the background, a crystalline configuration materializes in wiry straight lines, calling to mind the projection in two dimensions of a four-dimensional polyhedron. This notion of a fourth dimension was introduced in modern painting, specifically in Cubism, by Braque and Picasso, following café conversations with a mathematician friend.

Soon, the graceful outlines begin to thicken, shaping pyramidal structures and truss sections, sequences of interconnected triangles used in architecture as supporting structures, the triangle being the polygon that best tolerates stress and strain.

Nahas is not interested in building useful, load-bearing structures. He is not an architect; he is a painter who has a keen awareness of the disorder of the world. So, far from building cohesive and coordinated structures, his triangles shape, contrariwise, structures in space involved in a dynamic unraveling process of deconstruction, dislocation, and dispersion. Transparent constructions of different scales and proportions built on several virtual planes nested into one another or partially overlapping, and more or less tilting in every direction. So that, despite their discomfiture, we fully perceive the unraveling structures one through another in a kind of Empyrean clarity and Olympian calm, calm of spirit and clarity of mind.

From canvas to canvas, between 1977 and 1981, slim lines turn into multicolored beveled segments of frames which, in turn, are subjected to a broadening and enlarging effect, as if moving from panoramic shots to close-ups in a cinematic zooming-in process.

As the segments escape on several levels and directions beyond the canvas borders, pyramids, trusses and triangles unravel into angled frame segments in a tangle of increasing intricacy and incongruous promiscuity. Engrossed in this geometric orgy of sorts, the beleaguered viewer, in turn, is subjected to destabilizing visual strains and stresses which still more increase the hectic effect and perpetual motion of deconstruction.

The eye of the beholder is simultaneously summoned by several motifs of various scales and orientations, so that to scrutinize those paintings is to become involved in an inner process of deconstruction producing, through other means, the effects of perplexity and uncertainty sought after by the Sufi masters of Islamic geometric ornament.

Here, the effect is even more pronounced, to the extent that we are witnessing both a kind of continuous dispersive collapse, and a suspended, indefinitely postponed dissemination. This might have been, knowingly or not, the reflection in the consciousness and practice of the painter of the disintegration of the Lebanese state, which was going on at the very same period.

Soon, in an untitled acrylic canvas of 1979, the collapse was to become a shower of broken and fragmented segments turning eventually into crumbs, while the color black, so far absent from the palette, begins to invade the canvas and high definition geometry begins to give way to increasingly palpable brushstrokes in some sectors of the surface.

In the 1982 pictures, black paint and painterly texture eventually outweigh the clarity of graphic painting: on night beaches, debris and trash pile up pell-mell. Straight lines have disappeared, replaced by curvilinear patterns and forms, while chiaroscuro comes into play with bursts of moonlight on tiny square shapes, confetti falling from the sky, much like the leaflets dropped by Israeli planes over Beirut just before the start of the 1982 invasion.

Thus, each new canvas is not merely a variation on a theme, but an unprecedented development, a transfiguring amplification heading both further and elsewhere. The process is conducted with a masterly hand by Nabil Nahas who controls the tiniest details. Everything is calculated, measured, gauged by a brain that leaves nothing to chance. Even the 1982 nightly pictures with their seemingly random accumulations have nothing fortuitous, obeying strict ordering instead.

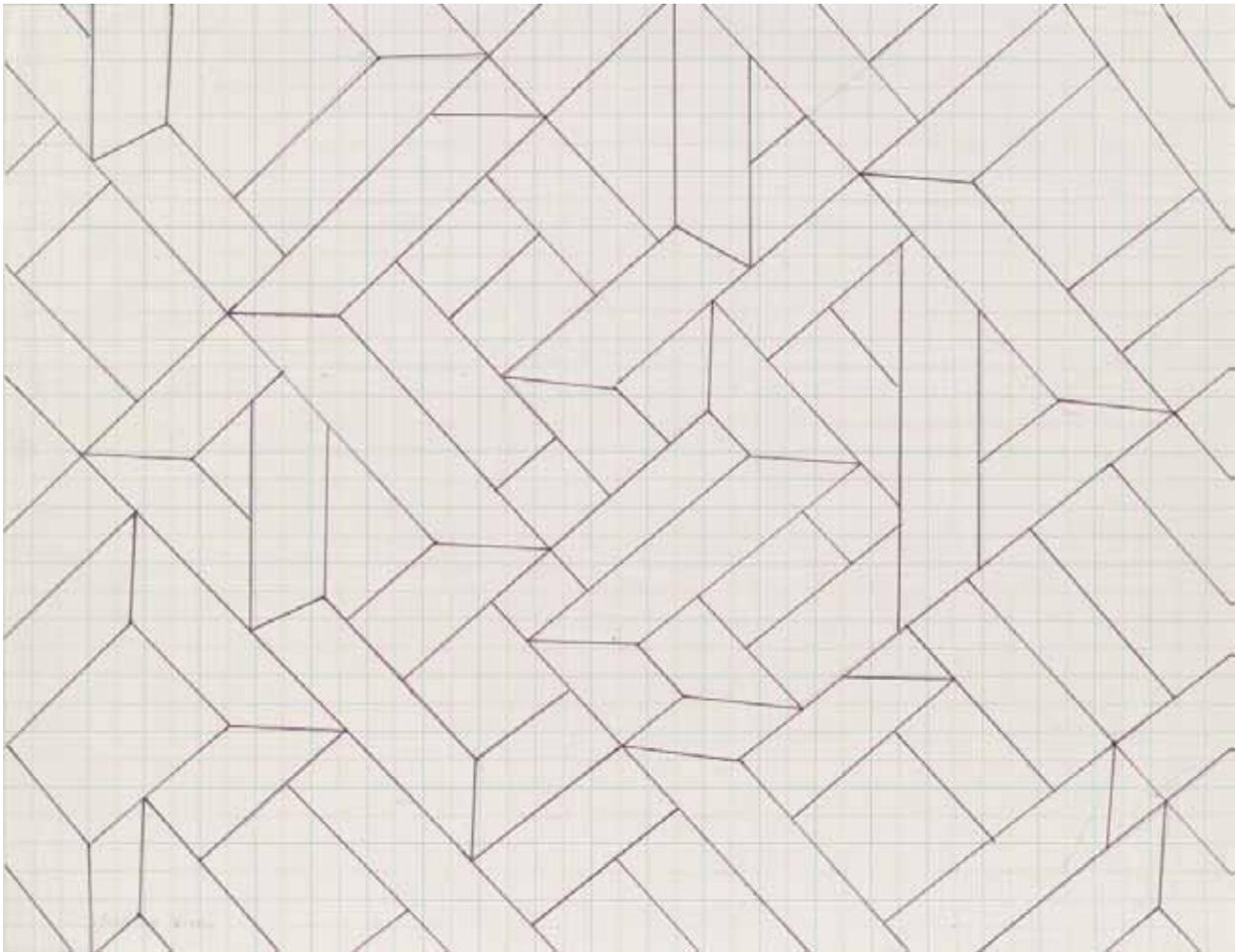
From the first to the last picture, as though the choreography were orchestrated beforehand, an invasive and irreversible entropy process is at work, a proliferation of chaos already predicted in the second 1977 canvas, *Chaos and Gaea*, where the precarious balance between such an unlikely pair, far from furthering Gaea by establishing a harmonious civilized earth, eventually promoted a lethal disorder at the expense of a human order in which each member would live peacefully with all the others because he would know his exact place and function in the overall social scheme. This was the ideal of geometric ornament where each polygon falls into place in harmonious interaction with all the others, and this is, on the far side of Asia, the Confucian ideal of the good life and ordered society that is currently enjoying a remarkable revival, winning over the hearts and minds of millions of people.

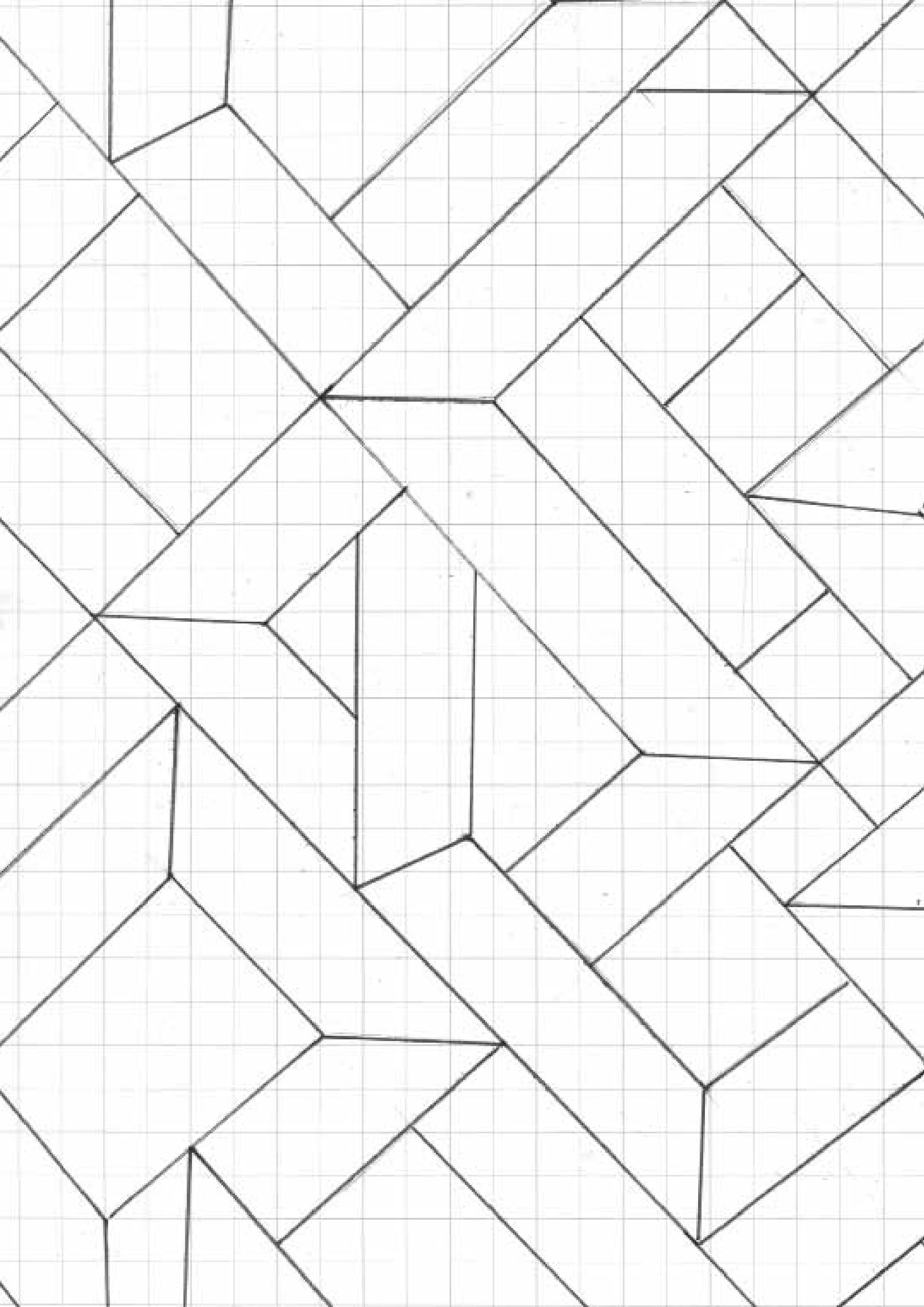
If the black period was a transitional phase and not an ultimate conclusion, since Nabil Nahas proceeded on his way through a number of new, invigorating series with cosmic connotations, what the Arab world is now experiencing, in its outrageously perverted spring, resembles more to the 1982 black beaches littered with rubble than to the 1977 luminously outlined patterns. Black light has triumphed over white light, like in the subsequent 1982-1983 "Lamentations" series.

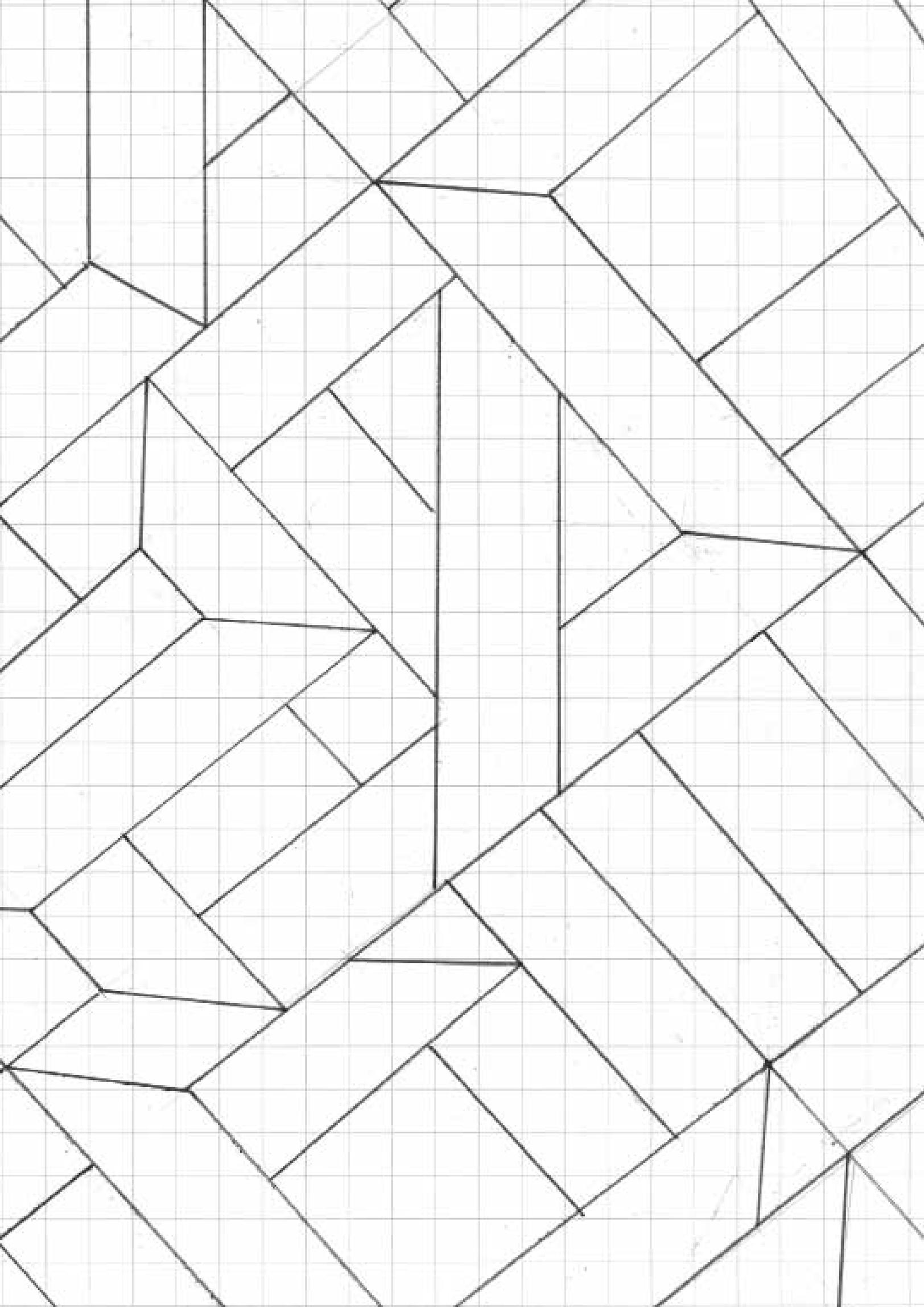
It is a law of nature: the night must inexorably end. Meanwhile, the night is deepening, daylight is late to spring up, and watchers on the walls cherish broken hopes. Until when?

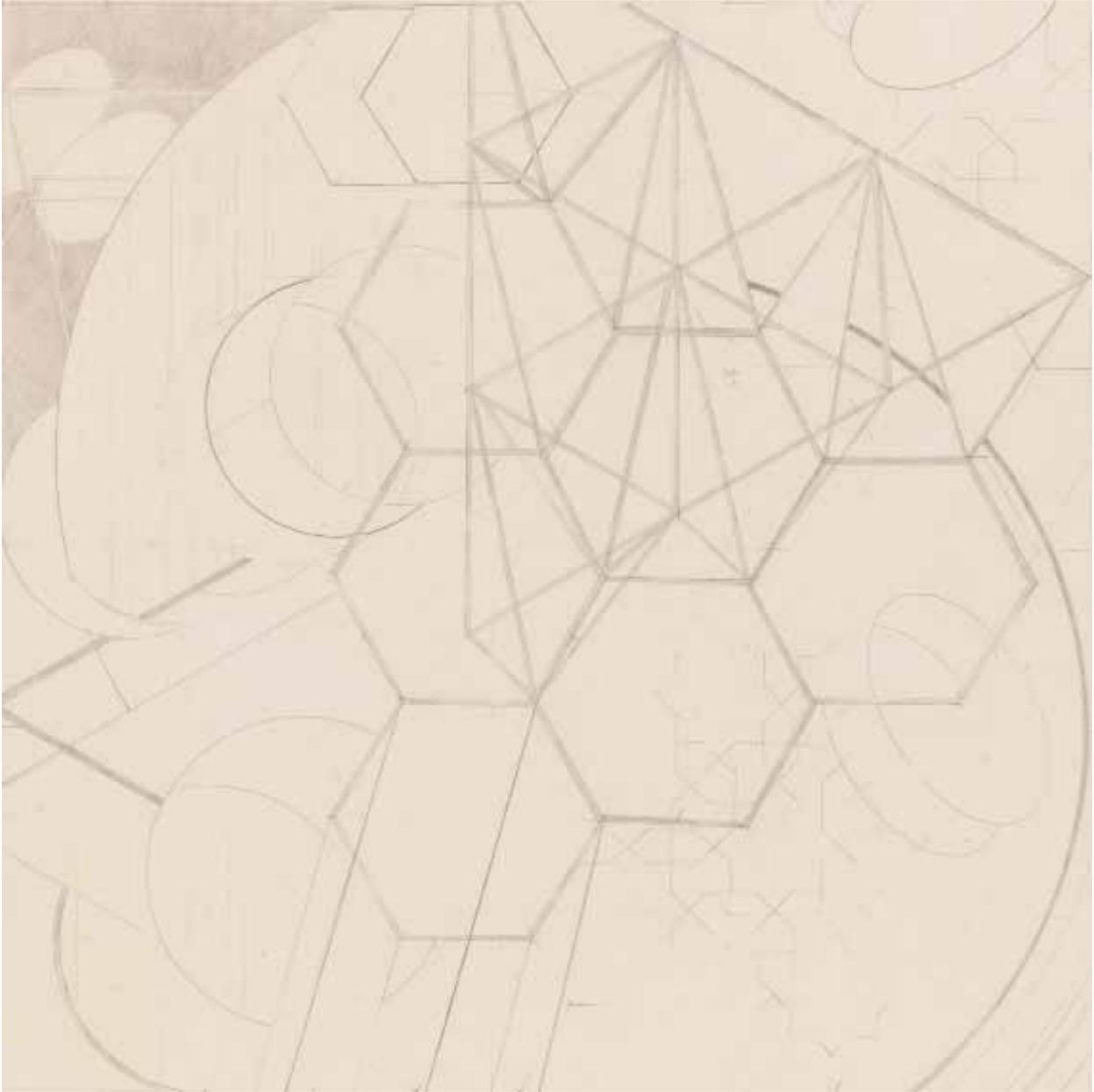
In a strange way, paintings made more than thirty years ago with almost purely formalistic intent, suddenly seem perfectly relevant to our current situation. Unwittingly, painters function as harbingers of things to come. If only we could decipher on time the signs of disruption and disaster they so innocently wave before our blind eyes.

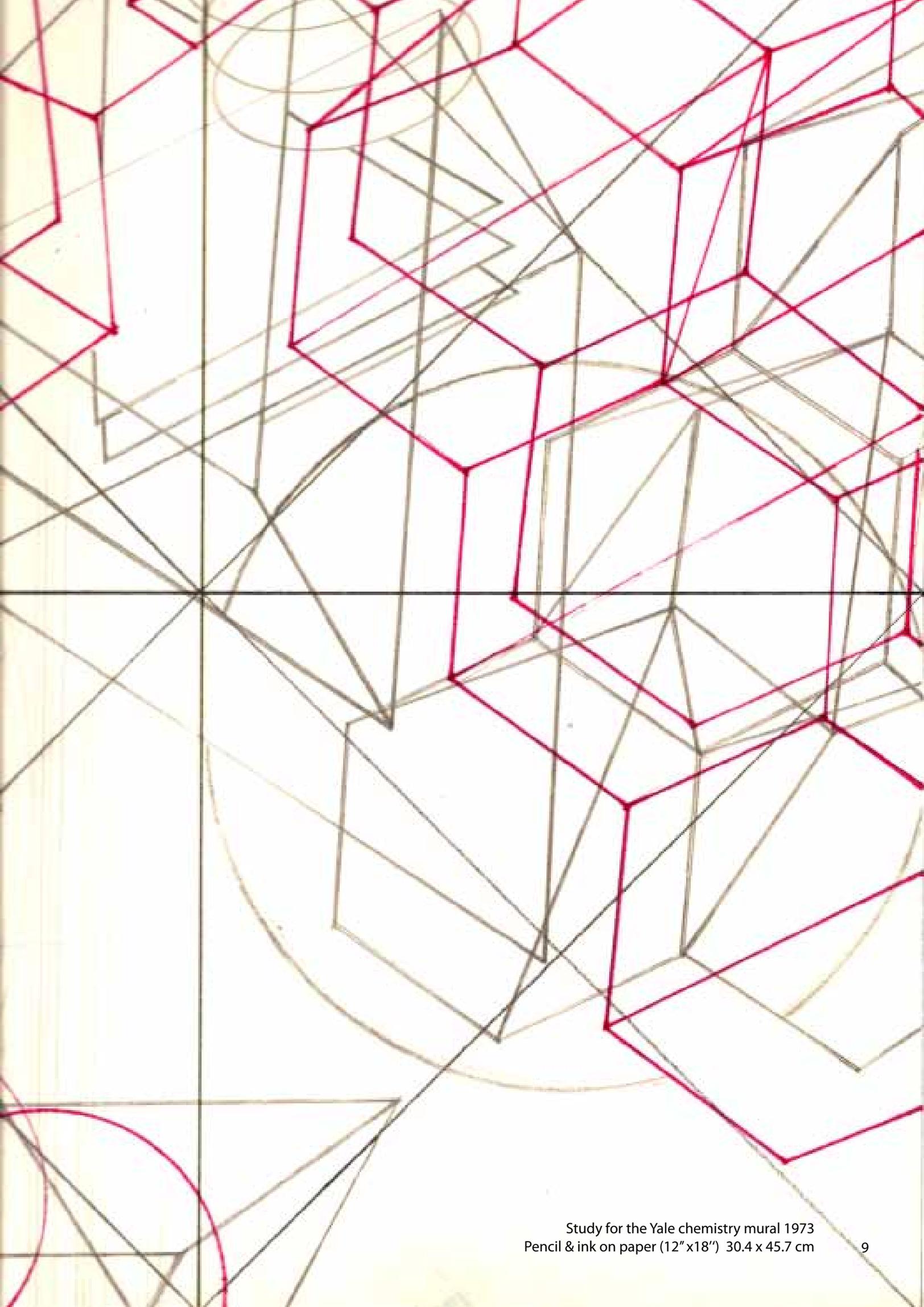
Joseph Tarrab











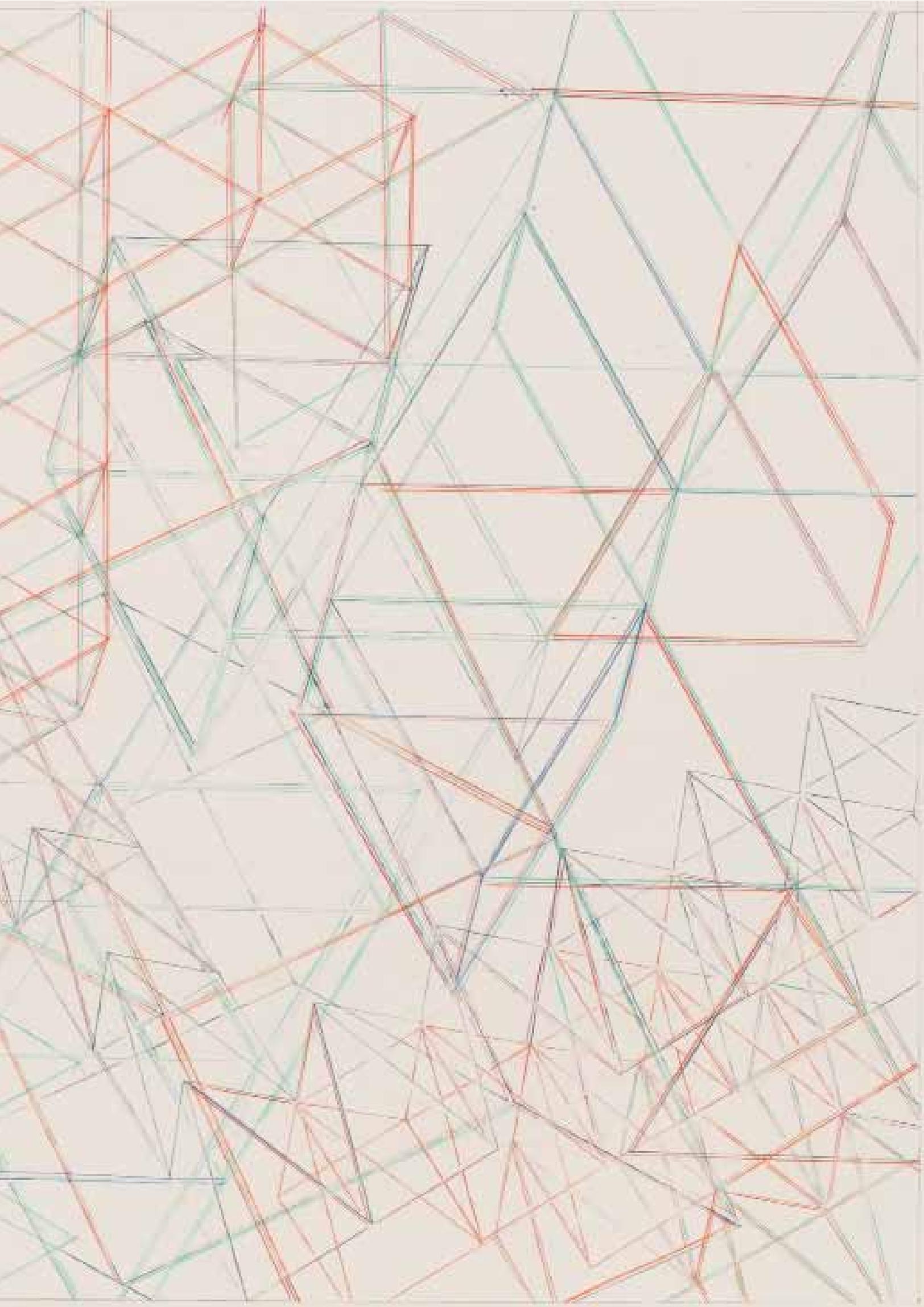
Study for the Yale chemistry mural 1973
Pencil & ink on paper (12" x 18") 30.4 x 45.7 cm

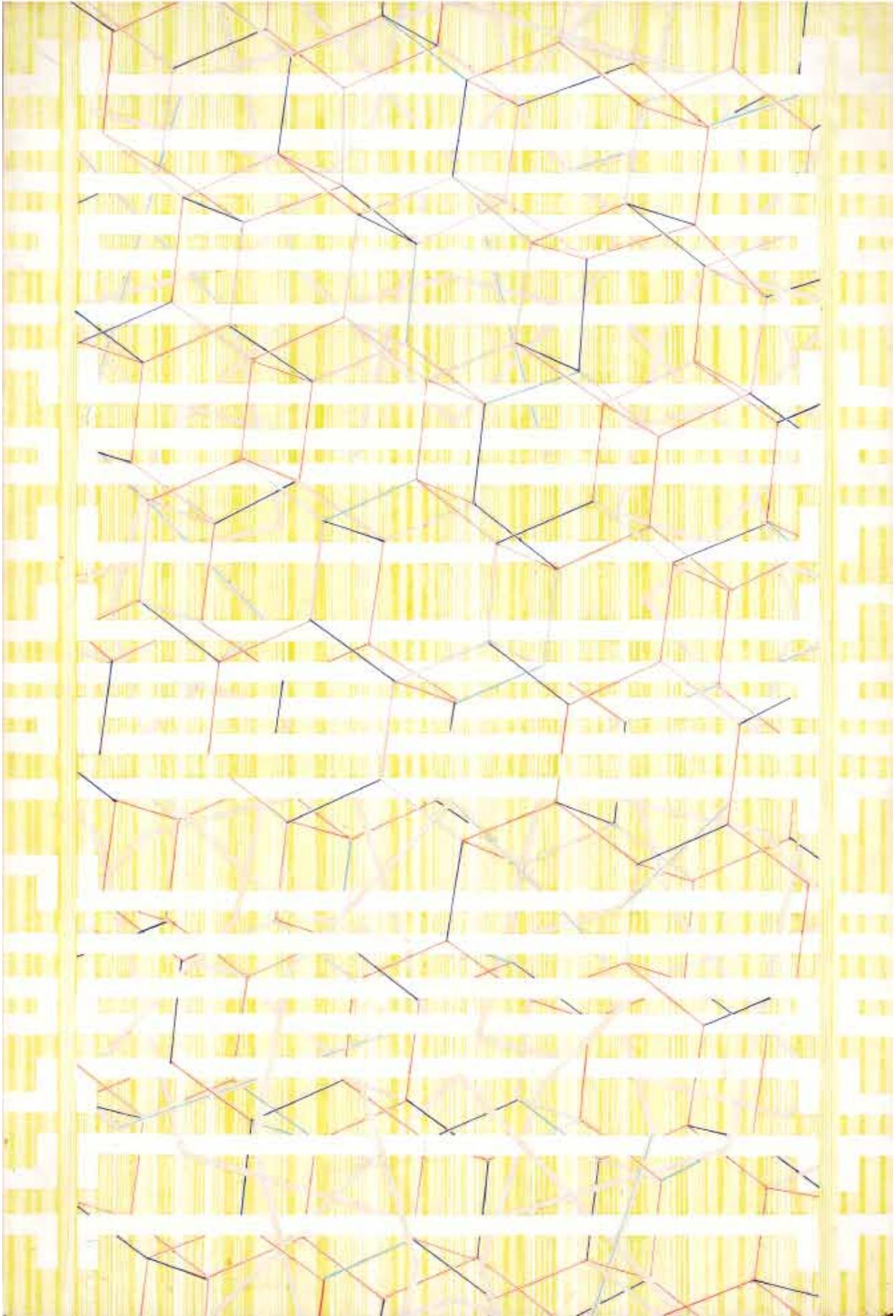




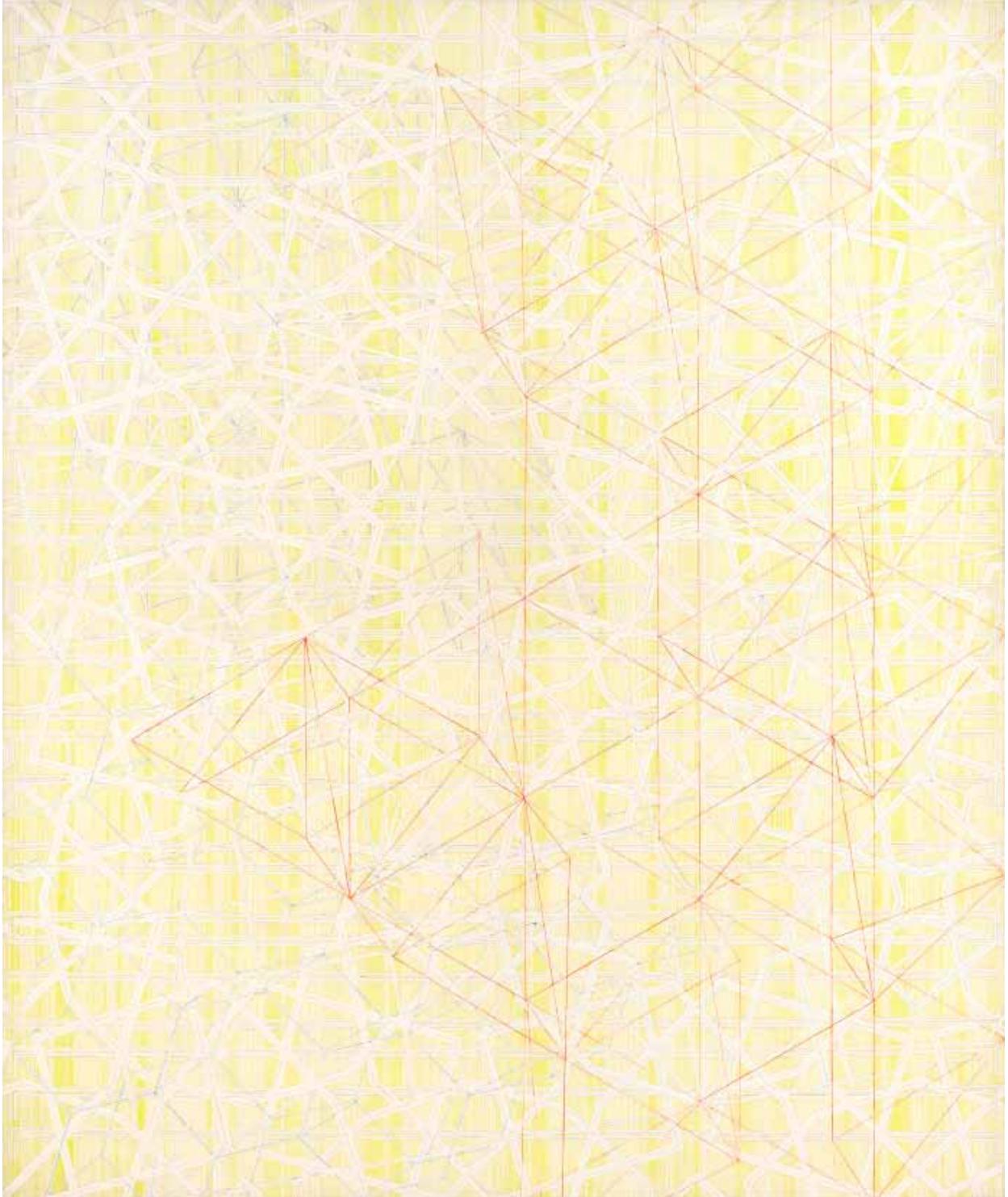


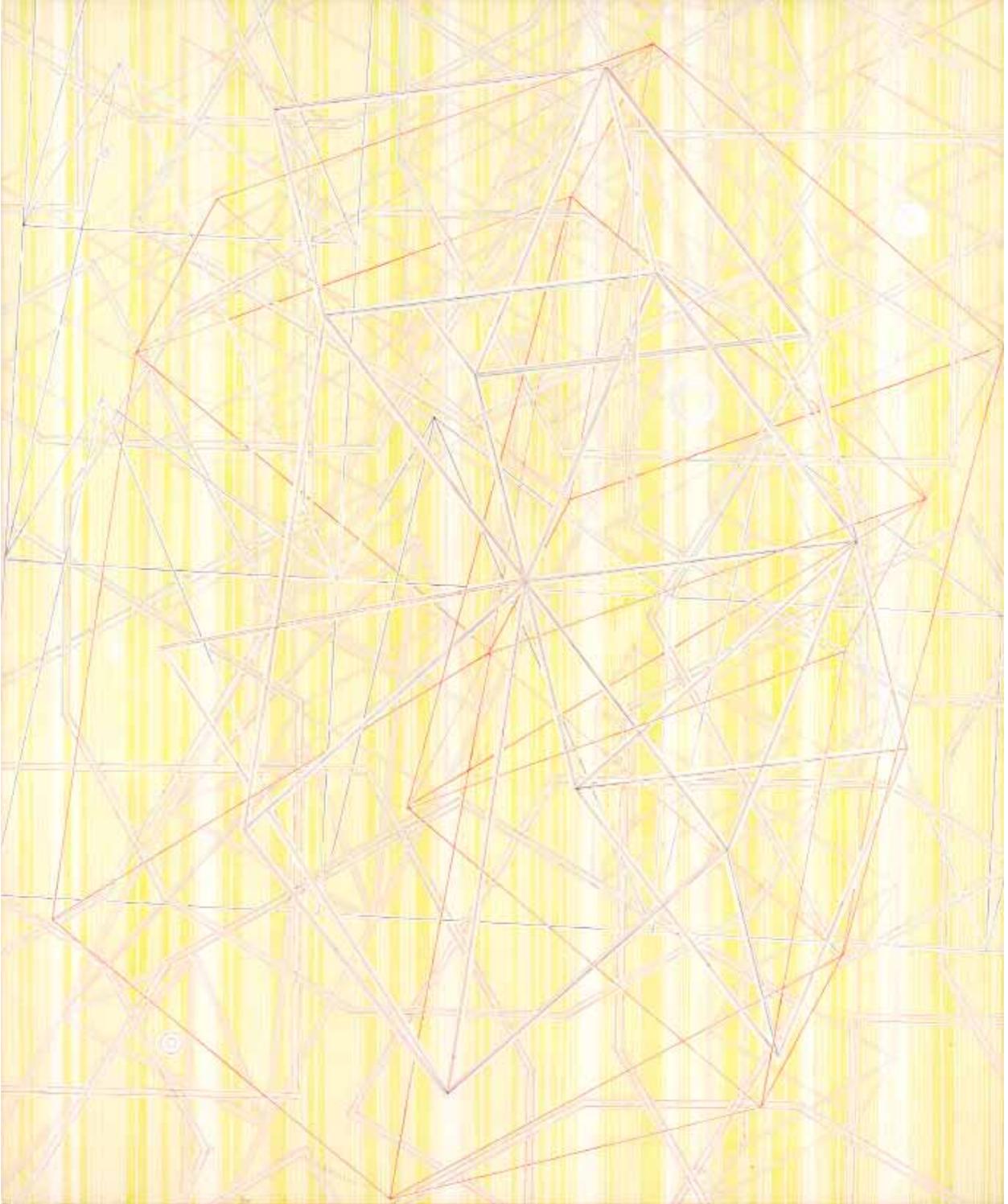


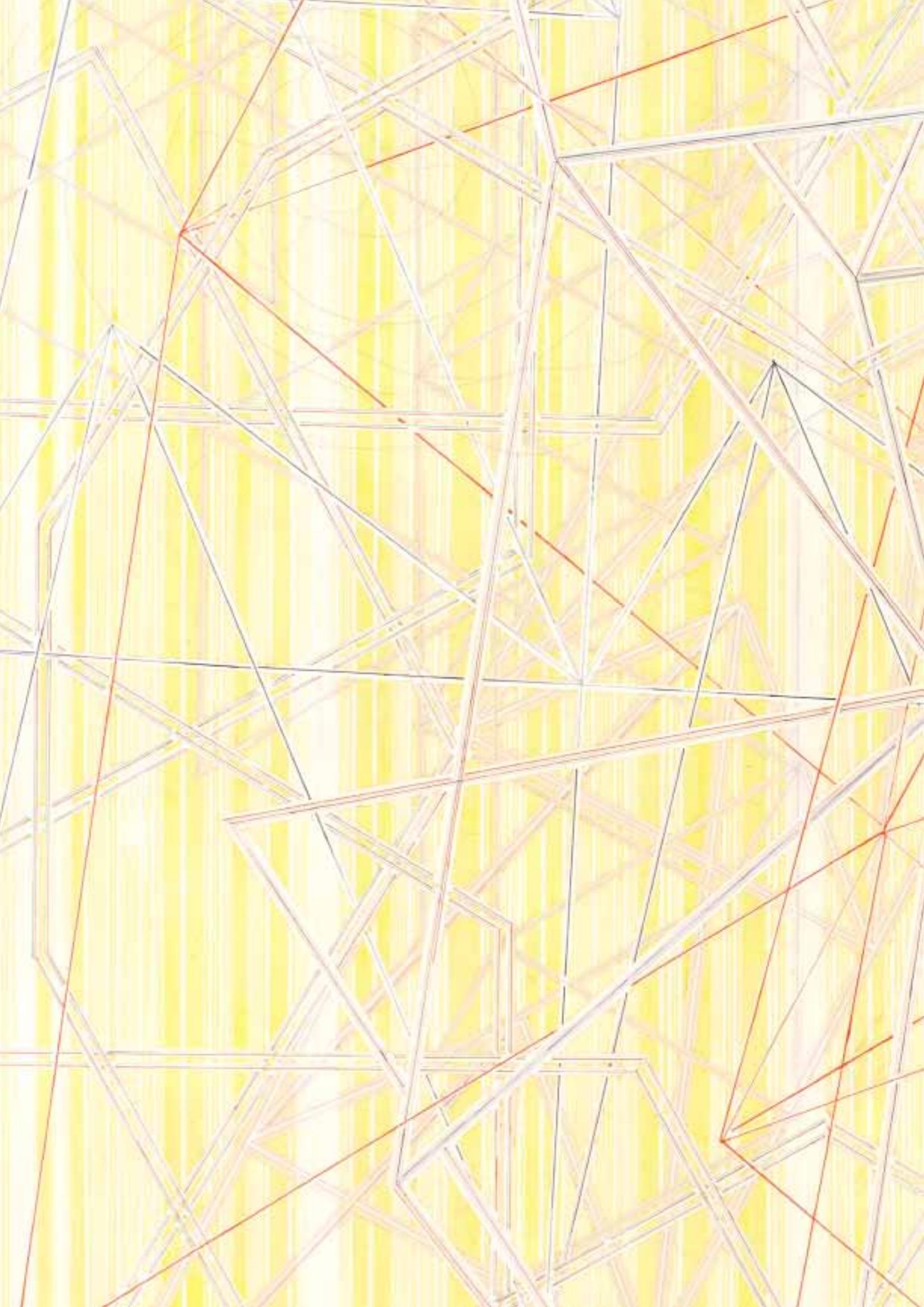


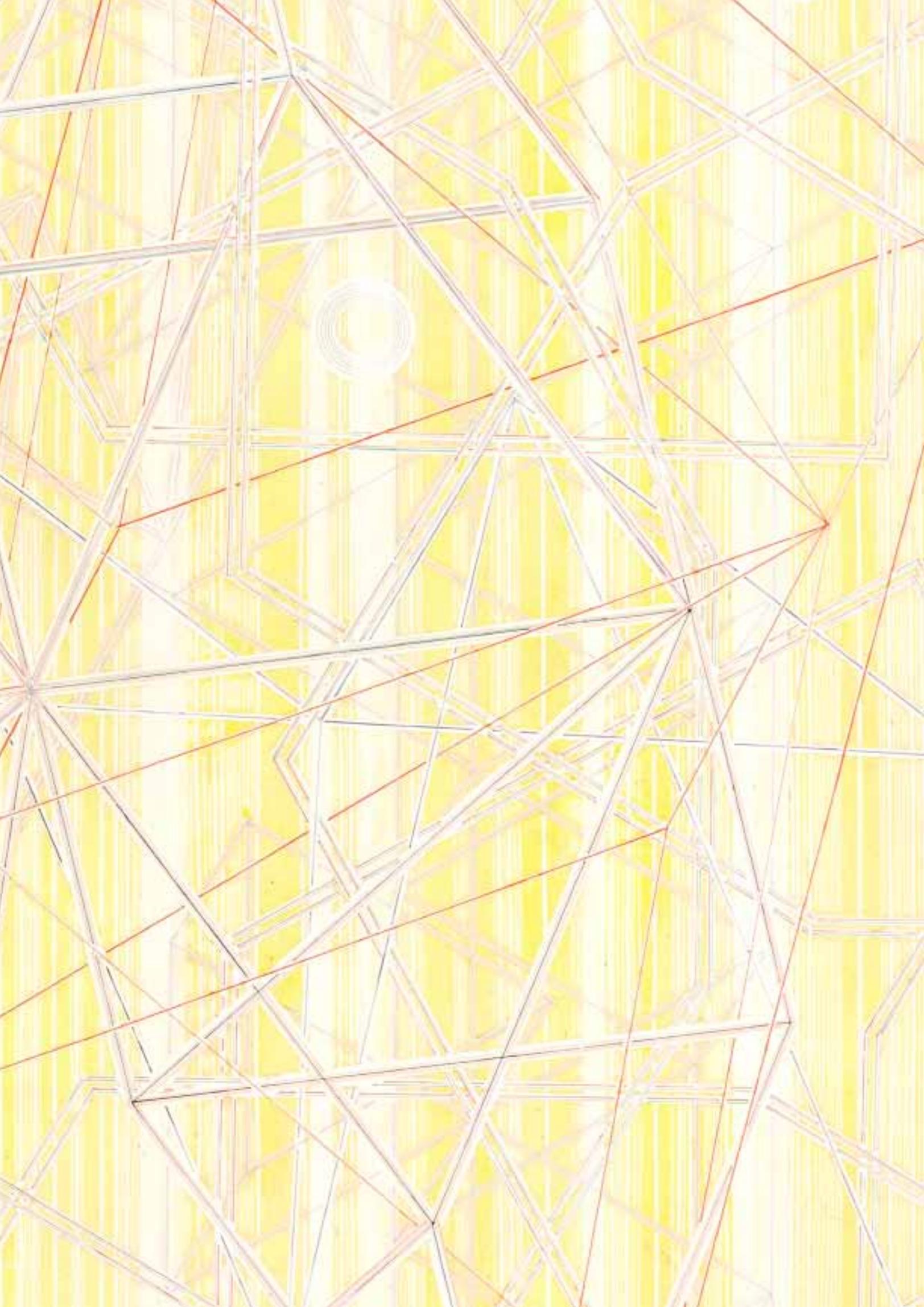


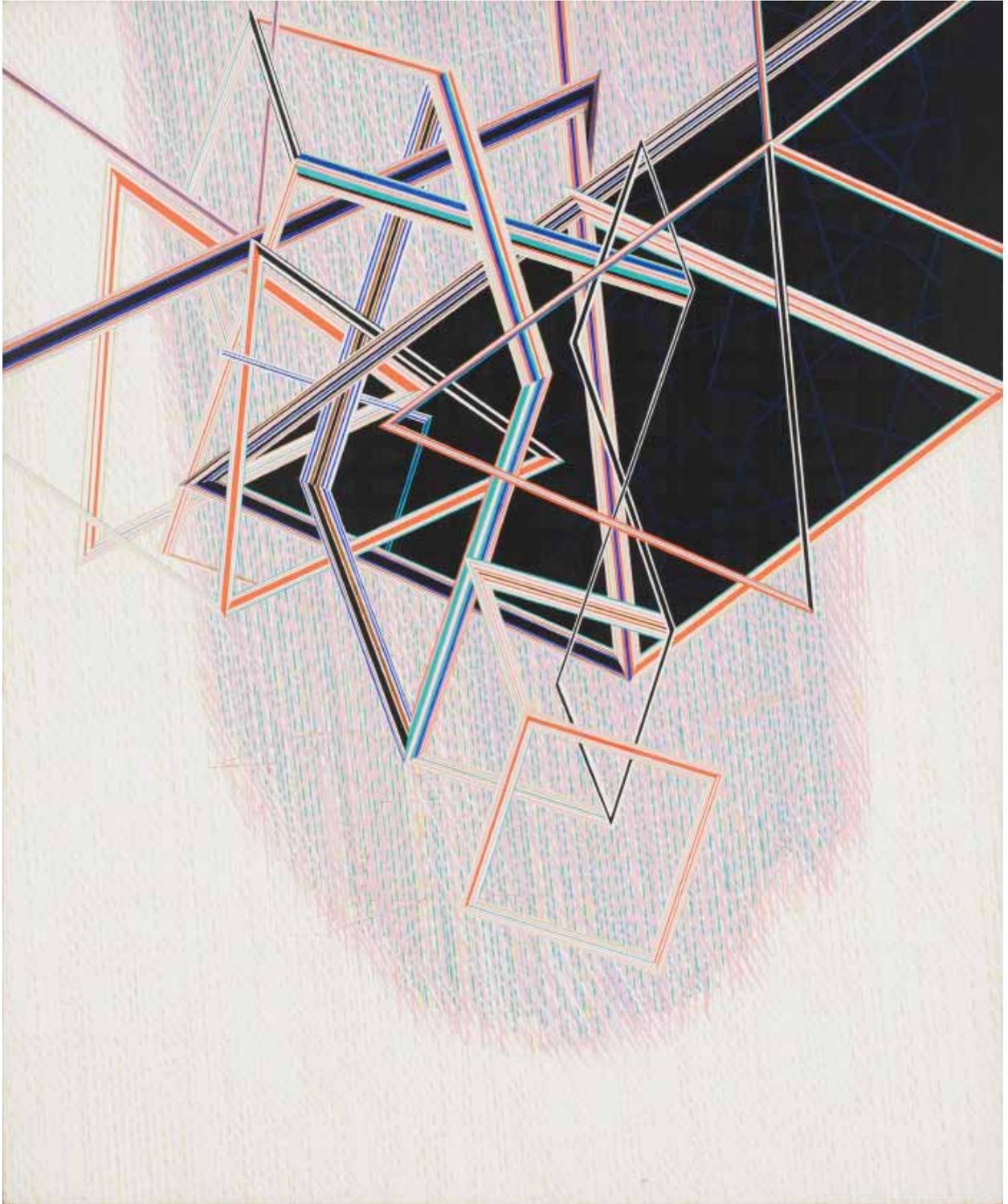




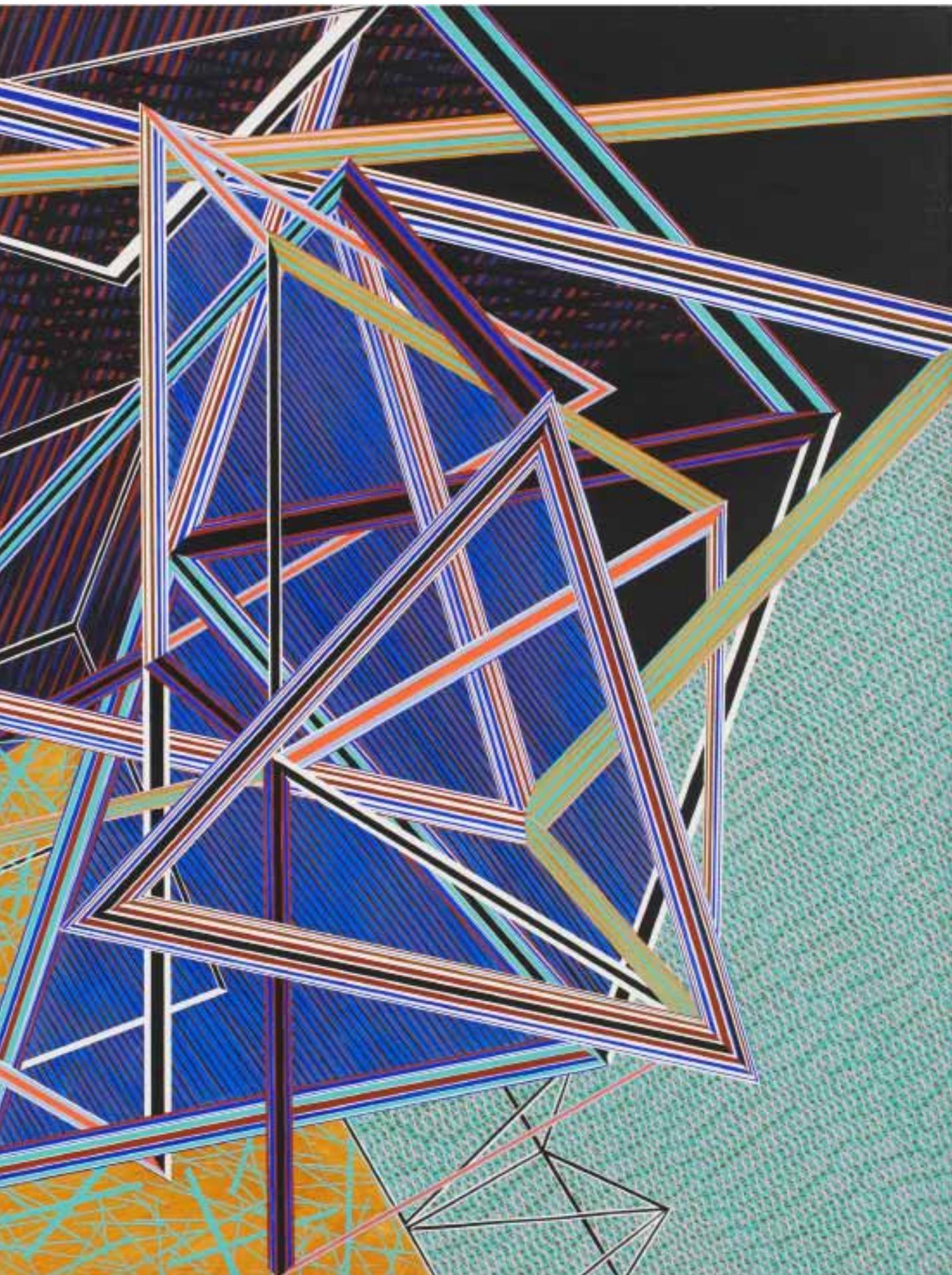


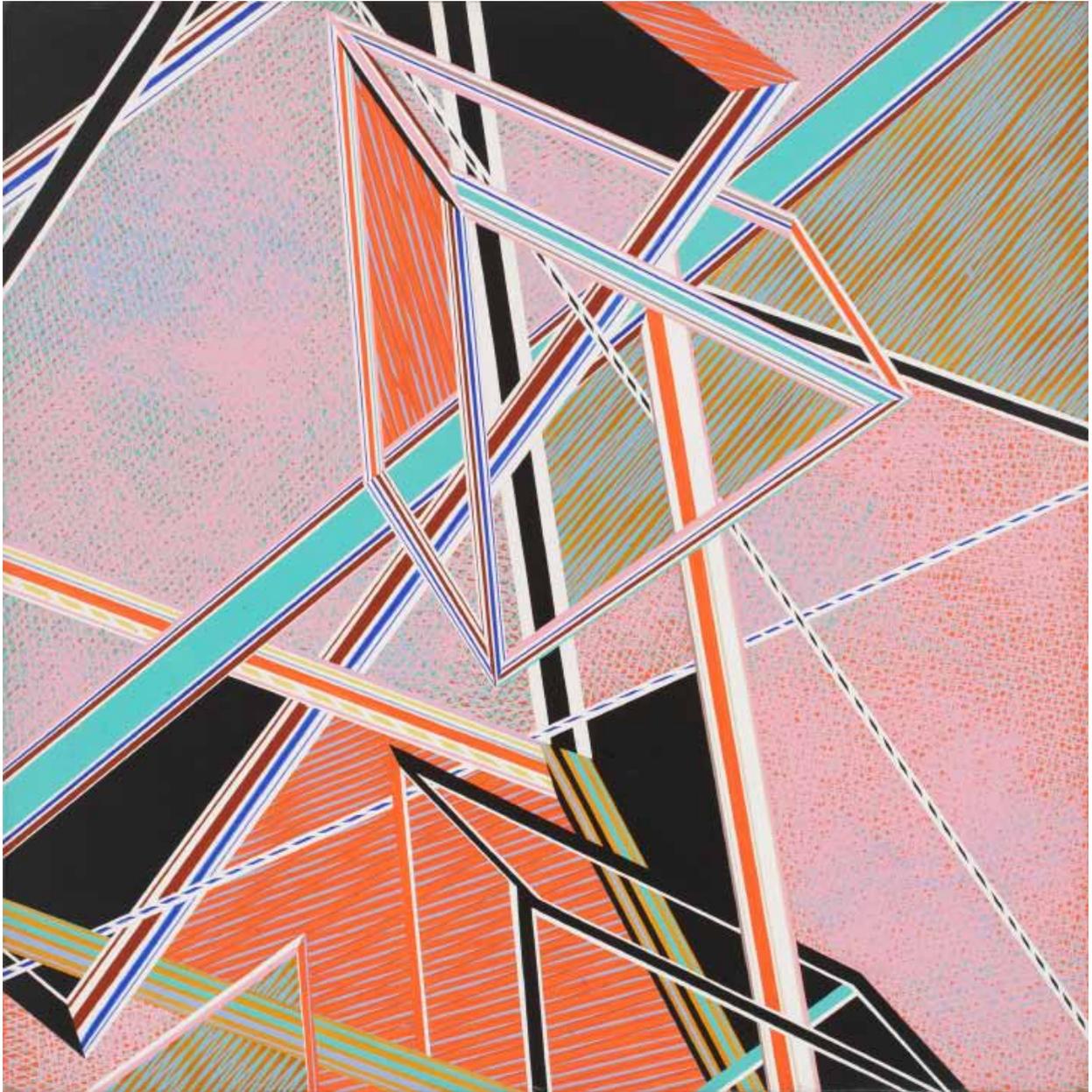






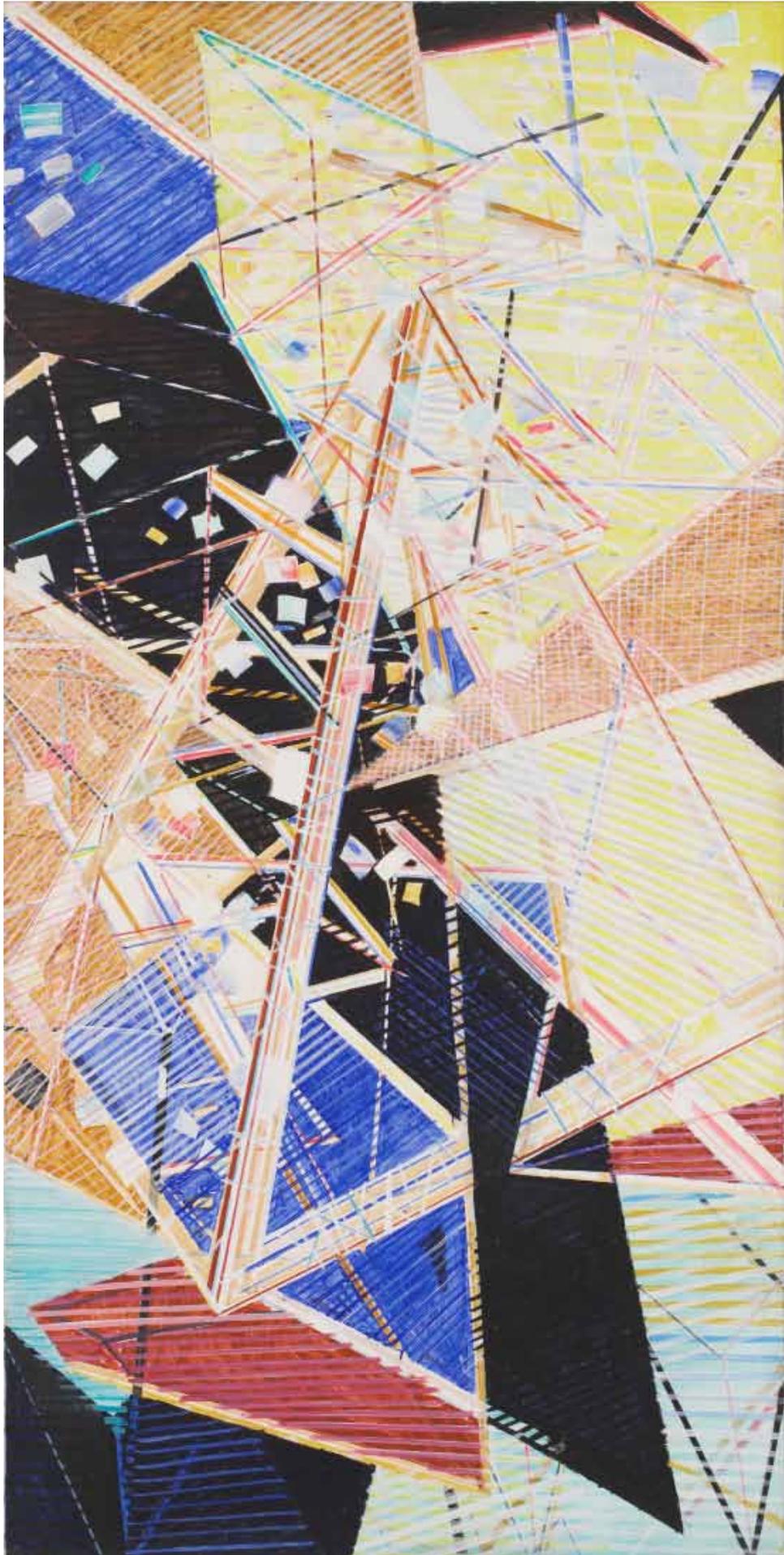












Untitled 1981. Acrylic on canvas (96"x48") 244x 122 cm

Born in Beirut in 1949, Nahas earned his M.F.A. at Yale University in 1973, and divides his time between New York and Beirut. His most recent solo museum exhibition was "Perpetual Energy" at the Beirut Exhibition Center in Beirut, Lebanon (2010). Nahas represented Lebanon in the 25th Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil (2002), and his work was included in "Glasstress 2011," a Collateral Event of the 54th Venice Biennial, and in "Glasstress: New York" at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York (2012). Nahas's work is in museum collections, including that of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar; Flint Institute of Arts, Flint; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Nahas had his first solo show at Sperone Westwater in 1997 and subsequent exhibitions in 1999, 2005, and 2013.

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