ROBERT HUOT

PAINTING AS OBJECT, THE 1960'S

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In the early 1960s, painting found itself at a critical juncture. Grappling under the aegis of post-painterly abstraction and Clement Greenberg's essentialist theories, this secular medium was losing ground to sculpture, which was growing into the so-called expanded field. Yet, at the same time, a more radical redefinition of the pictorial medium was already underway. Robert Huot, born in 1935, emerged as one of the first artists of his generation who, while steadfastly engaged with painting's raison d'être, simultaneously eschewed the formalist strictures of its established conventions. Beginning in 1962, Huot devised objective structural principles, employing geometric ratios to generate meta-images that gradually relinquished the painting's iconic surface, turning instead to its physical properties and spatial configurations. Operating at the confluence of hard-edge abstraction, minimalism, and conceptual art, Huot's shaped canvases, multi-paneled works, and sensuous sculptural paintings exalted the latent potential that abstraction contained in its seeds. In this context, it is imperative to reconsider how Robert Huot's approach to painting not only offered unique perspectives on the medium's transformation but also provided an unassuming yet pivotal contribution to the broader constellation of postwar American painting.

In 1965, Donald Judd compared Robert Huot's pictorial objects to the works of the influential painter Ellsworth Kelly, an association that placed him squarely within the emergent critical discourse.[1] That same year, Barbara Rose included him in her landmark article "ABC Art," which provided the first defining framework for minimalism.[2] From this moment onward, Huot quickly garnered recognition. He participated in major exhibitions, such as *Systemic Painting* (1966), curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim, in New York City; *The Art of the Real* (1969), by E.C. Goossen at MoMA, in New York City; and Modular Painting (1970) at the Albright-Knox Gallery, in Buffalo, New York. Yet it was in 1963, during his time as a student, that Huot's trajectory was decisively altered. In January 1963, he collaborated with his classmate Robert Morris and La Monte Young on the performance *War*. In designing his costume, Huot found a new way of displacing the passive, traditional role of painting, relegated for so long to the wall. He created an unusually shaped canvas composed of two-tone wooden strips that he wore as a shield onstage while performing at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. This gesture, momentous in its simplicity, turned painting into something radically new: no longer framed, fixed, or confined, it became mobile, mutable, free, and performative. It was ready to go to war against the rigid orthodoxy of modernist doxa.

Huot's assault on painting initially began with disruptive visual strategies, particularly focusing on perceptual discontinuity and peripheral vision. His early *Division* (1962) introduces internal delineations that articulate, within the same pictorial field, heterogeneous elements such as pop collages and expressionist brushwork. In *Blue, Red* (1962), Huot boldly engaged with Clyfford Still's rhetoric to create a binary, contrasting composition. However, instead of the "box-like cavity into the wall"[3] that Greenberg identified in the easel painting, Huot expanded the stretcher twice the conventional depth, reinforcing the work's object-like presence. To further emphasize this shift toward physicality, Huot used tape to cover the sides, reinforcing the painting's three-dimensionality. In *Yellow, Red* (1962), he covered the surface with an all-over field of frenetic stripes, whose pattern historically evokes, as Michel Pastoureau has argued, a mark of disorder and transgression associated with prisoners, sailors, convicts, and slaves.[4] Repetitive and uniformly applied, this structure fatigues the viewer's eye with its relentless repetition, annihilating any sense of depth and escape—an impression reinforced by the painting's thickness, which mirrors the width of the stripe and seems to intrude into the viewer's space.

Huot also embarked on non-compositional experiments. In the imposing tricolor *Untitled* (1963), the pattern is directly borrowed from a design observed on a truck. This appropriation echoes the transfer-like strategies employed by artists such as Ellsworth Kelly and Leon Polk Smith since the 1950s, reducing the creative act to two steps: the selection of a preexisting form from the real world, followed by its immediate transposition, without alteration or interpretation, onto a two-dimensional surface using pictorial tools. However, in this work, the scale of the motif forces it to extend around the canvas's edge, drawing attention to the

physicality of this thick, imposing painting and transforming a traditionally frontal experience into one that compels the viewer to move and engage with the work from multiple angles. Similarly, in simultaneous experimentations, Huot shifts attention from the center to the painting's periphery. In *Blue and White* (1963), the motif loops around the edges, while in *Green, Red, Blue* (1963), it emerges from the margins of the surface. This engagement with lateral space would later be embraced by New York–based artists such as Jo Baer, César Paternosto, and Richard Smith, who similarly redefined the canvas by activating its edges as integral compositional elements.

Still, the culmination of Huot's experimentation with painting offered the medium its liberation from the quadrangular frame and its release from wall-bound subservience. This was already evident in an earlier series of three-dimensional painted reliefs that bear no image or information beyond their sheer presence in space. In *Red Cross and Blue with Red Waves* (1962–63), the motif is built with assembled wood, transcending the flat, rectangular nature of traditional painting. In *Andean Cross* (1964), suspended from the ceiling, the stretcher itself adopts the shape of a cross, uniformly covered with blue monochromatic fabric. *Barnie* (1962), a slender, vertical red wooden rod, two inches by two inches by five feet, hanging from the ceiling, epitomizes Huot's departure from conventional painted panel while affirming painting as an independent object asserting its own spatial presence. Though it may initially resemble sculpture, the work subtly references the iconic pictorial zip of Barnett Newman, who would later become his friend, maintaining a distinctly painterly quality. Inspired by his teacher George Sugarman, an American sculptor known for his assemblages of vibrant colors, Huot's objects exemplify what he termed "anti-sculpture sculpture."[5] His works negate traditional sculptural conventions while expanding the definition of painting beyond its own support to assert a new, capacious presence.

In the latter part of the 1960s, Huot expanded his exploration of the objecthood of painting, delving into the "imagistic" and the "actual" materiality of the painting's support. In *Grey* (1968) and *Pink T* (1968), he developed multi-panel compositions based on modular systems that played with slight asymmetries and misalignments. This discontinuous strategy probed the perception of the visual equivalence (or disruption) between the represented image and the object itself, as well as between the painted surface and the physical dimensions of the painting. In other series, such as *T's Nylon* (1968), he simply stretched a section of woven ballistic nylon with no further intervention, forgoing painting it. On the translucent surface, there was nothing to see except the underlying structure of the stretcher. In *Stretched and Leaning* (1968), he pushed this reduction even further, rejecting the conventional method of hanging. He left the piece leaning against the wall, its half-rounded edges emphasizing its direct connection to physical space. Reminiscent of Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920), Huot's work boldly suggests that painting, now recontextualized as a new kind of ready-made, no longer requires artistic intervention. His friend Hollis Frampton observed that Huot took "an acute personal interest in the question: How much may be discarded and a work of art still remain?"[6] Indeed, Huot's reductionist approach stands as a radical redefinition of painting's constitutive parameters, compelling the viewer to reconsider what endures when everything extraneous is discarded: color, pattern, technique, and support.

Robert Huot extensively exhibited in the years following 1964, when he was propelled to the front of the burgeoning New York art scene with the early minimalist exhibition *8 Young Artists*, organized by E.C. Goossen at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, alongside his friends Carl Andre and Robert Barry. Between 1964 and 1966, he obtained four solo exhibitions at the Stephen Radich Gallery in New York City, all particularly acclaimed by American critics, and participated in more than a dozen collective shows throughout the decade.[7] Yet, by the late 1960s, disillusioned by what he perceived as the "art world's increasing commercialization" and what he called the "lack of political awareness," Huot had turned away from the gallery and museum scene.[8] His last project was in collaboration with Lucy Lippard for the inauguration of the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City in October 1968, for which he co-organized the exhibition *Benefit for the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam*, bringing together fourteen artists, including Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Ryman. Over the course of the decade, in favor of conceptual and dematerialized proposals, his paintings gradually shed their sculptural quality and ultimately dissolved into the architectural space, nearly disappearing. Like his art of this period, Huot retreated—in 1969, to an old farm in central New York, with his then wife, Twyla Tharp, to begin a new experiment in life, which led to his diary films and diary paintings. Huot's exploration of the nature of painting qua painting was thus as much an anti-formalist critique as it was political. By seeking to overturn the painting's subjugation to traditional conventions, he dismantled its weary unity, thereby granting it new freedom.

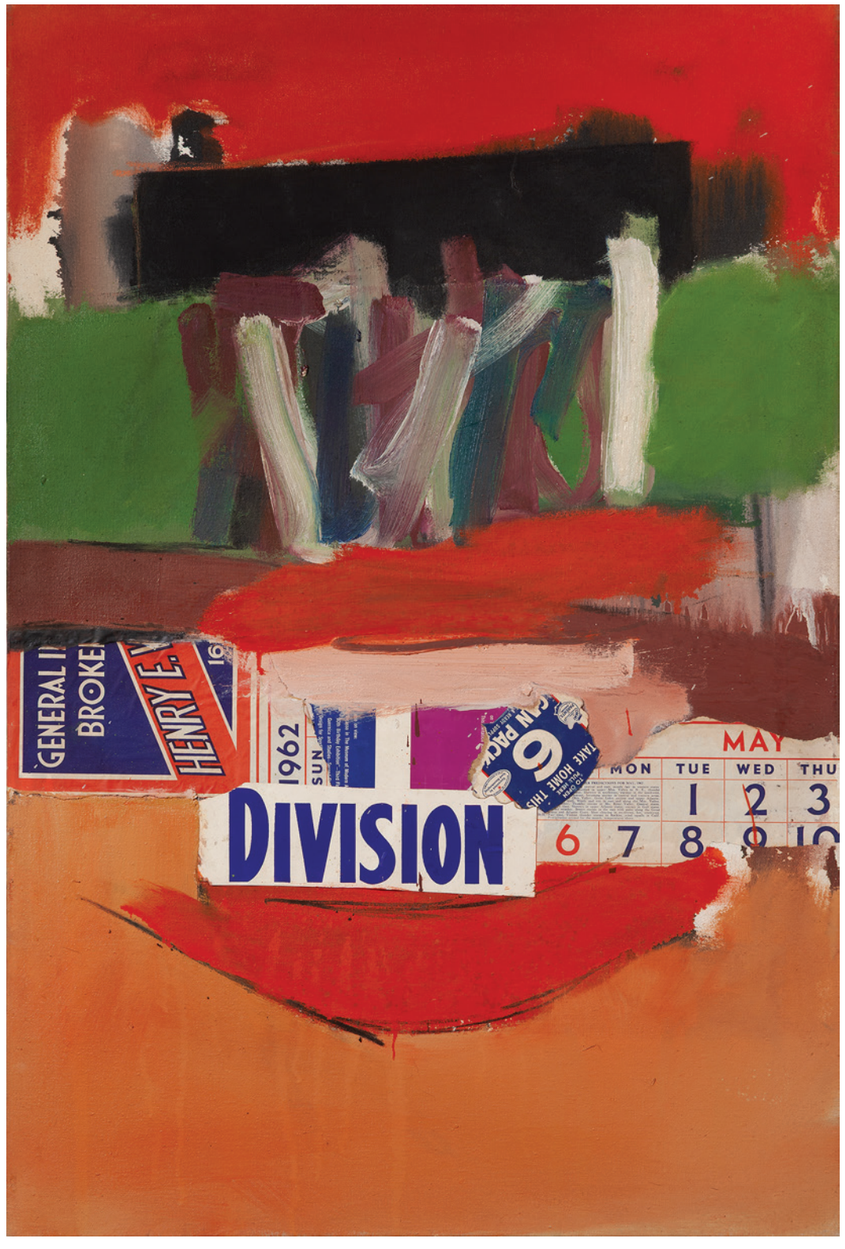
For Robert Huot, painting was never a static pursuit but a site of rupture and reinvention. While contemporaries such as Jo Baer, Robert Mangold, and Frank Stella remained within the confines of pictorial abstraction, Huot continually pushed beyond the boundaries of the medium, fostering a dialogue with performance, sculpture, and architectural intervention. His practice enacted a radical mutation of the painted format and contributed to the ebullient and volatile energy that characterized the 1960s New York art scene. Yet, despite his significant contributions, Huot remains largely overlooked in the academic discourse, and his work is absent from broader discussions of the era. By forging a practice that not only destabilized the pictorial panel but also stood as a crucial missing link in the often partitioned narratives on post-painterly abstraction and hard-edge, minimal, and conceptual art, his work offers an invaluable nuance and a renewed perspective on the commonly told history of postwar American art. By revisiting his oeuvre, we open the door to a more nuanced, multifaceted understanding of the period, one that demands renewed attention and deeper reassessment.

- Roxane Ilias

Roxane Ilias is a doctoral candidate at Université Paris-Sorbonne. Her dissertation explores the redefinition of the tableau and the birth of painting objecthood after the Second World War. She has held curatorial positions at Dia Art Foundation, New York, and Centre Pompidou, Paris, and her work has been published by the Centre Pompidou, *Cahiers du Musée d'Art Moderne*, *Cahiers de l'Ecole du Louvre*, *Hommes & Migrations*, and more.

Endnotes

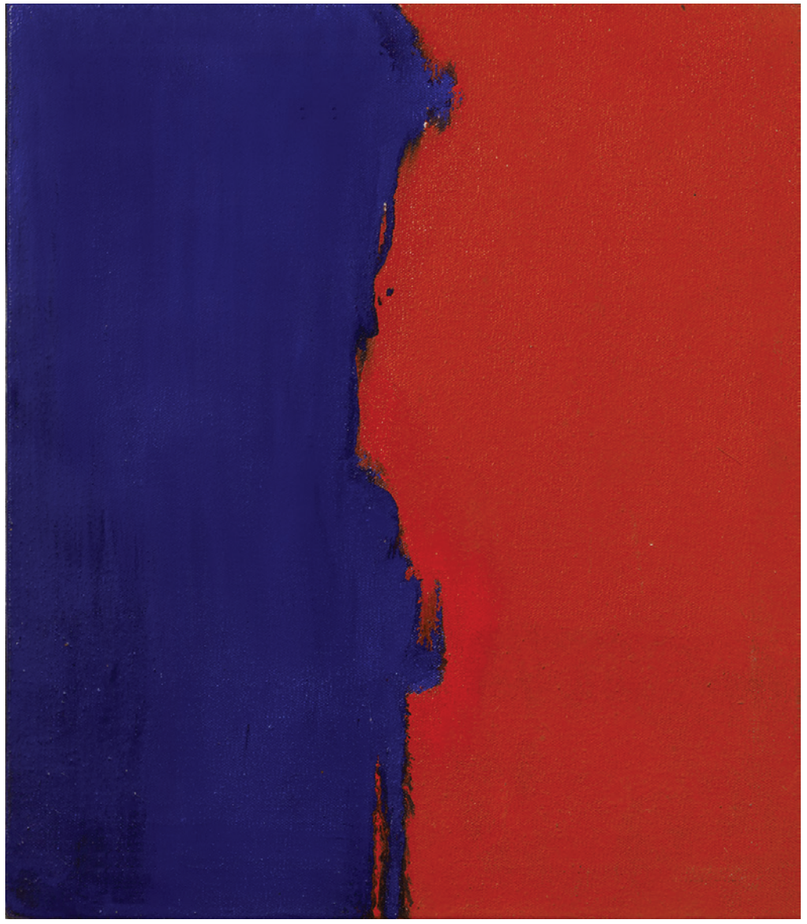
1 Donald Judd, "New York Notes," *Art International 9*, no. 4 (May 1965): 65.
2 Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," *Art in America* 53, no. 5 (October–November 1965): 57–69.
3 Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," *Partisan Review* (April 1948).
4 See Michel Pastoureau, *Rayures: Une histoire culturelle* (Seuil, 2021).
5 *Robert Huot: Paintings*, Boulton, Guy, editor.; Murray, Mary E. (Mary Elizabeth), 1960- writer of supplementary textual content.; MacDonald, Scott, 1942- writer of supplementary textual content.; Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute. Museum of Art, host institution. 2019.
6 Hollis Frampton, "A Note on Robert Huot's Diaries." Text written to accompany an exhibition of Robert Huot's paintings at the Paula Cooper Gallery New York January 1973" (Paula Cooper Gallery, January 1973); reprinted in Hollis Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* (MIT Press, 2015), 290.
7 For instance, Michael Fried wrote that Huot's solo exhibition at Stephen Radich in 1964 was "among the strongest on show in New York this month" in "New York Letter," *Art International* 8, nos. 5–6 (Summer 1964): 82.
8 Quoted by Grace Glueck, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Room," *New York Times*, April 27, 1969.



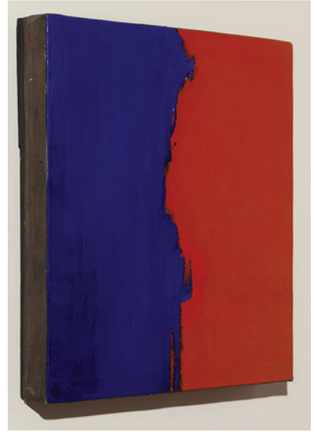
Division, 1962
Mixed media, collage and painting on canvas, 36 x 24"

Pfizer Lab, 1962
Mixed media on canvas, 14 x 18"

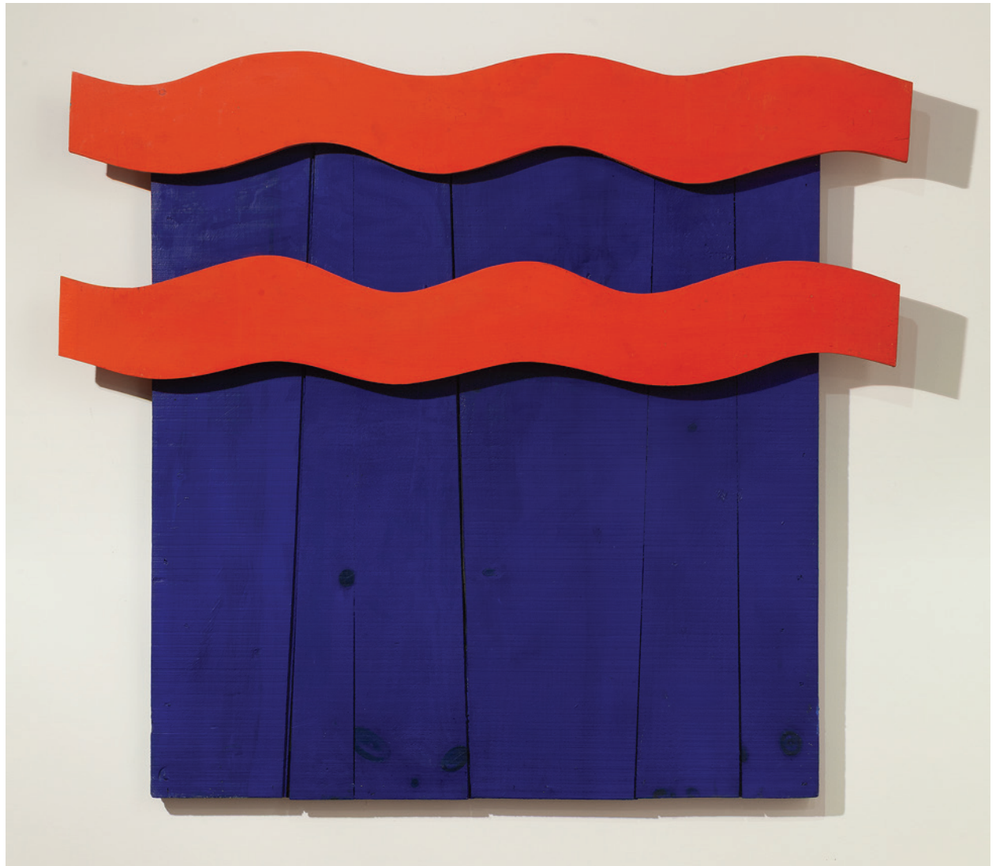
Red, Yellow, 1962
Oil on canvas, 14 1/2 x 12 3/4"



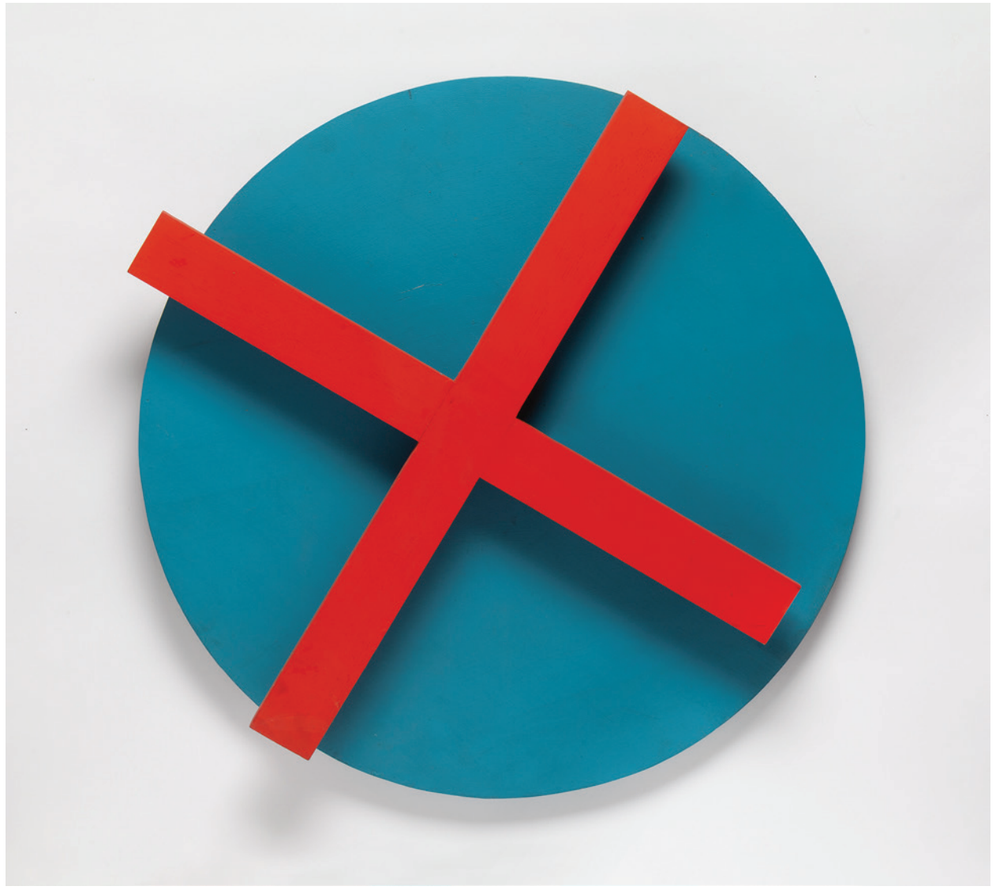
Blue, Red, 1962
Oil on canvas, 14 1/2 x 12 3/4”



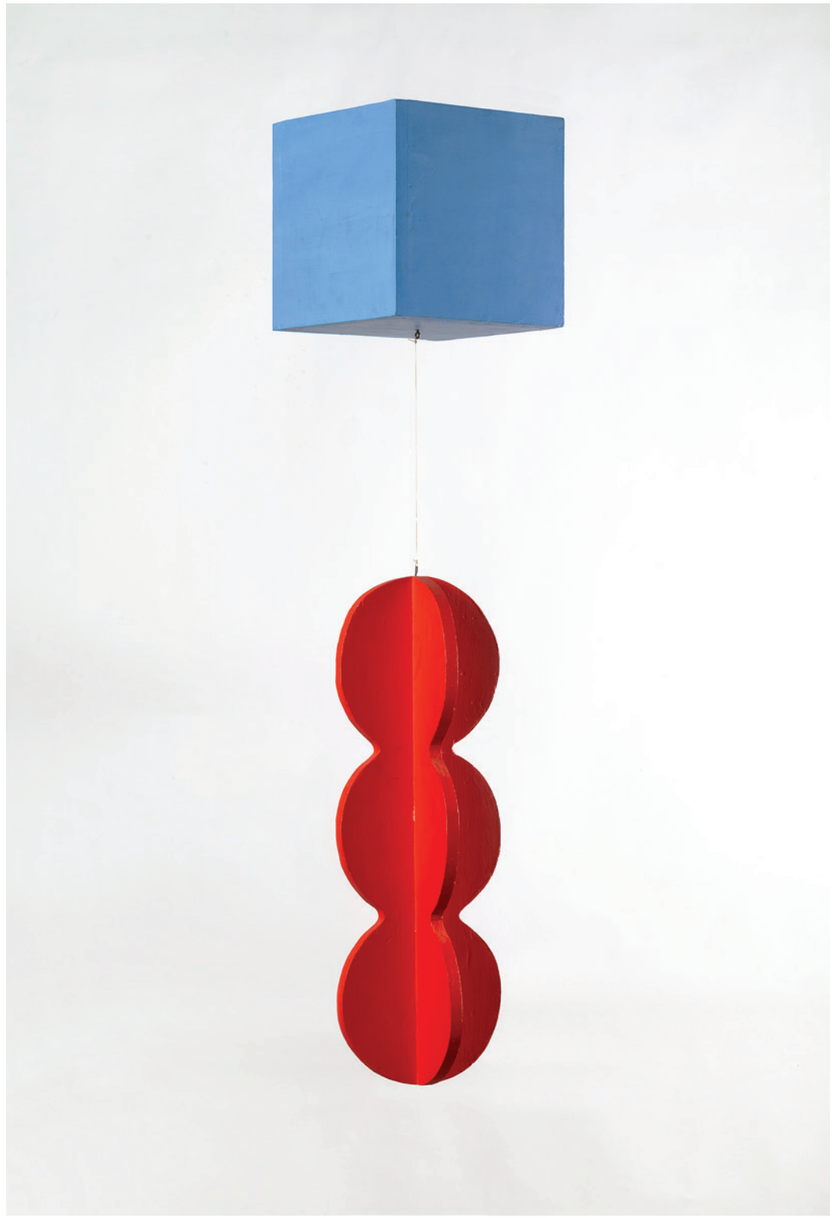
Barnie, 1962
Oil on wood, 66 x 1 3/4"



Red Wave, 1962-63
Oil on wood, 36 x 38 x 3"

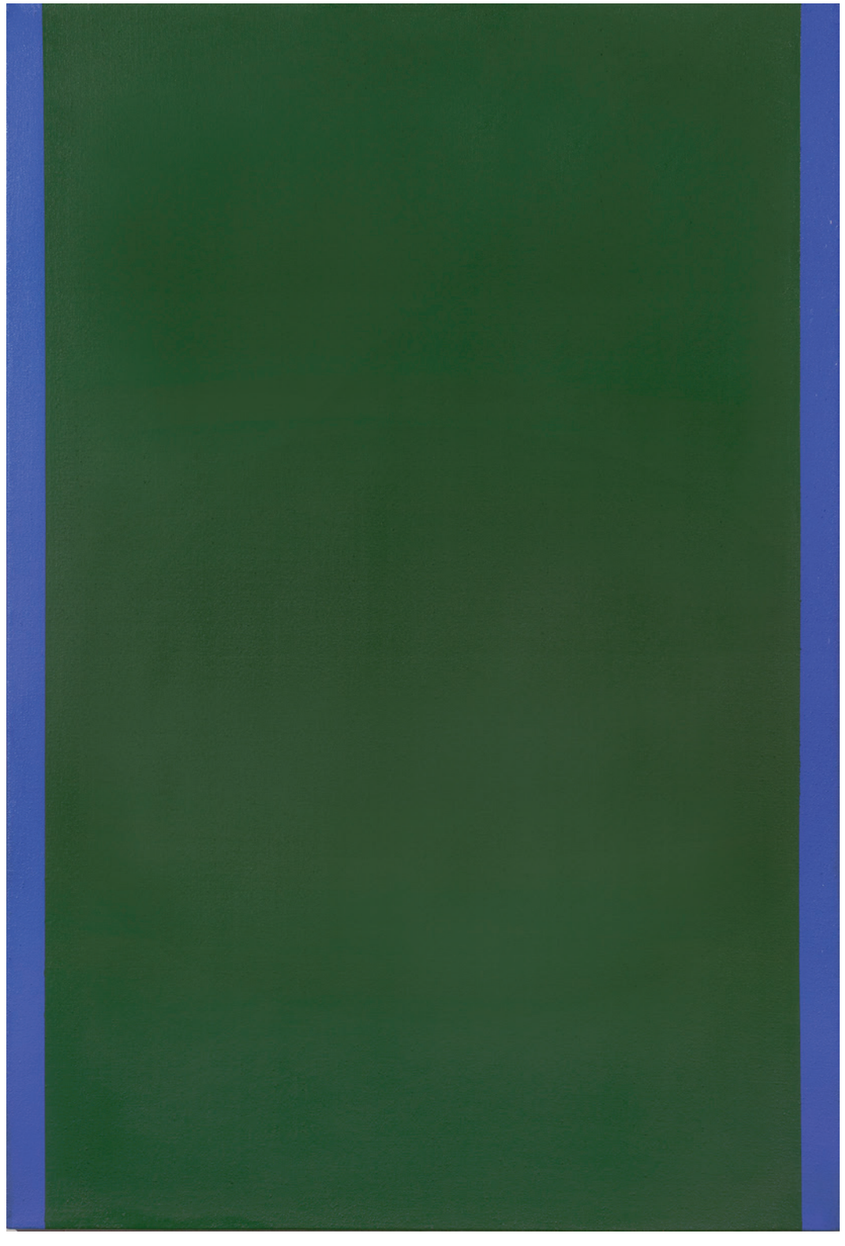


Red Cross, 1963
Oil on wood, 28 x 29"



Opposites, 1962
Oil on wood, 56 x 12 x 12"

Blue and White, 1964
Oil on canvas, 28 x 18”

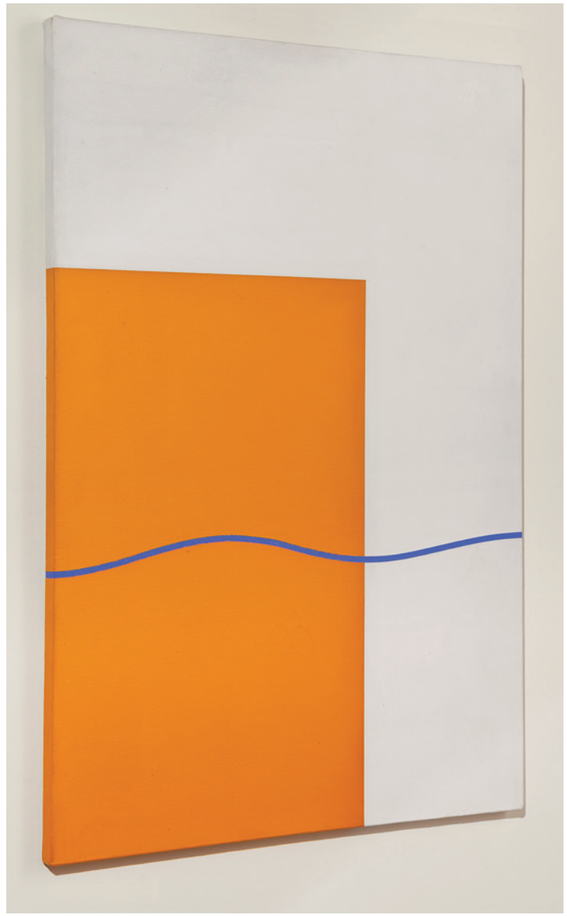


Green, Blue, 1964
Oil on canvas, 32 x 22"

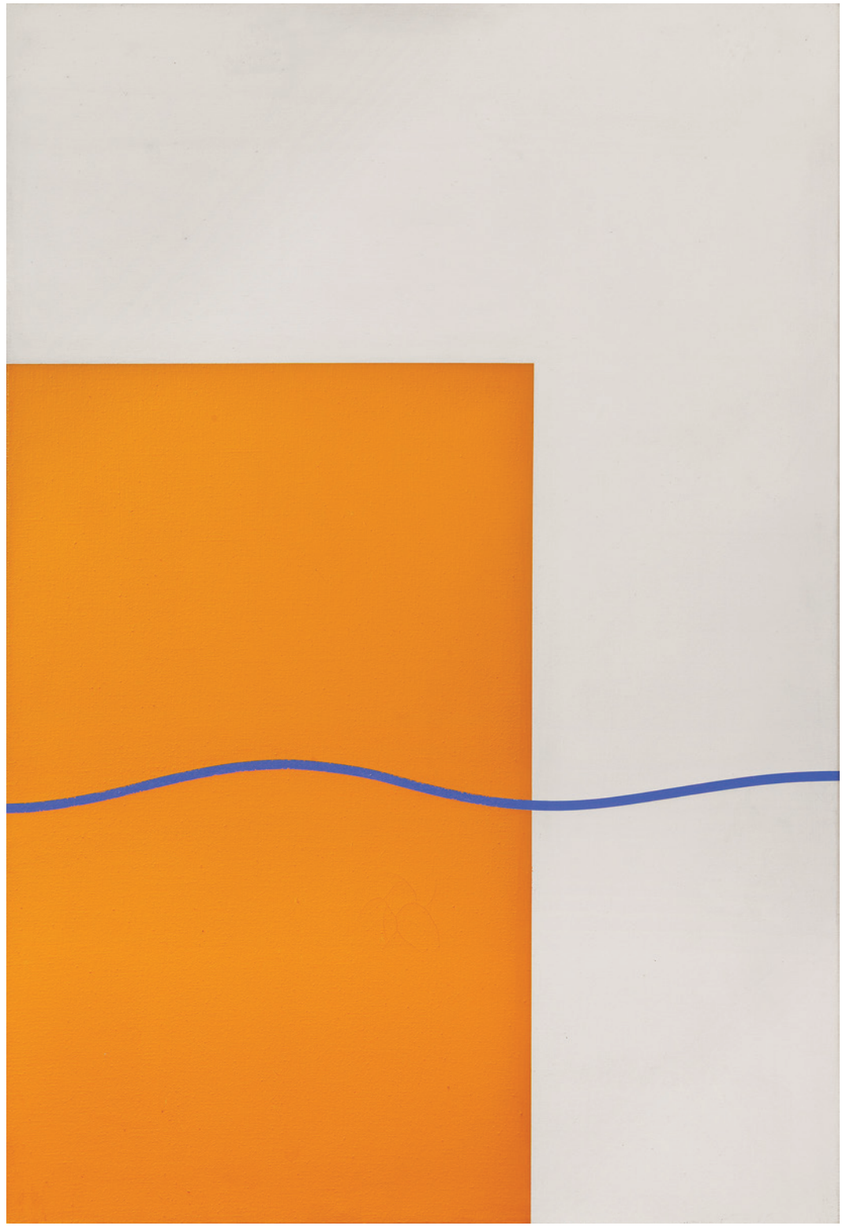
Detail

Blue and White, 1963
Oil on canvas, 17 x 13"

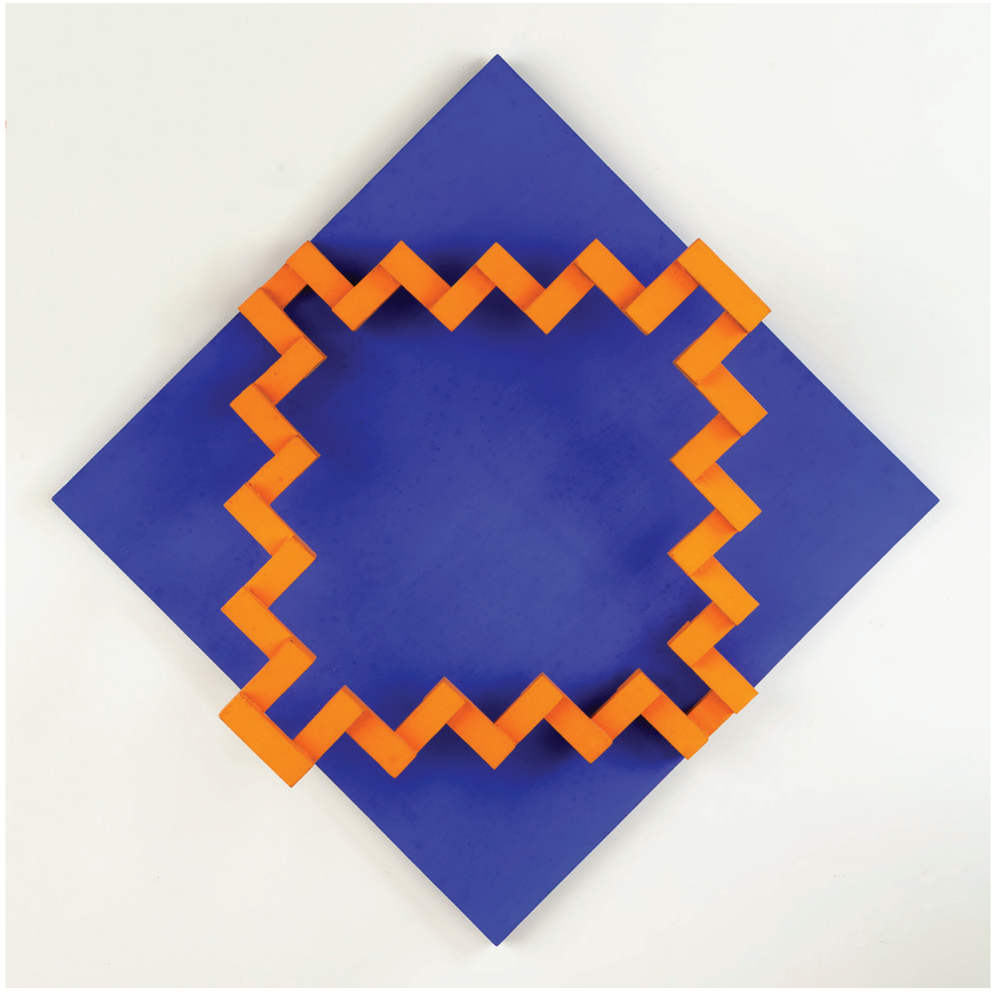
Red, Black, White, 1963
Oil on canvas, 72 x 55"



Side view

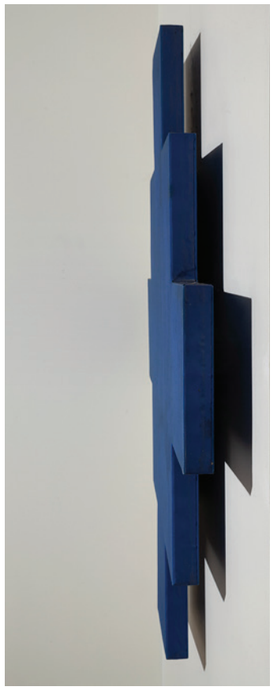


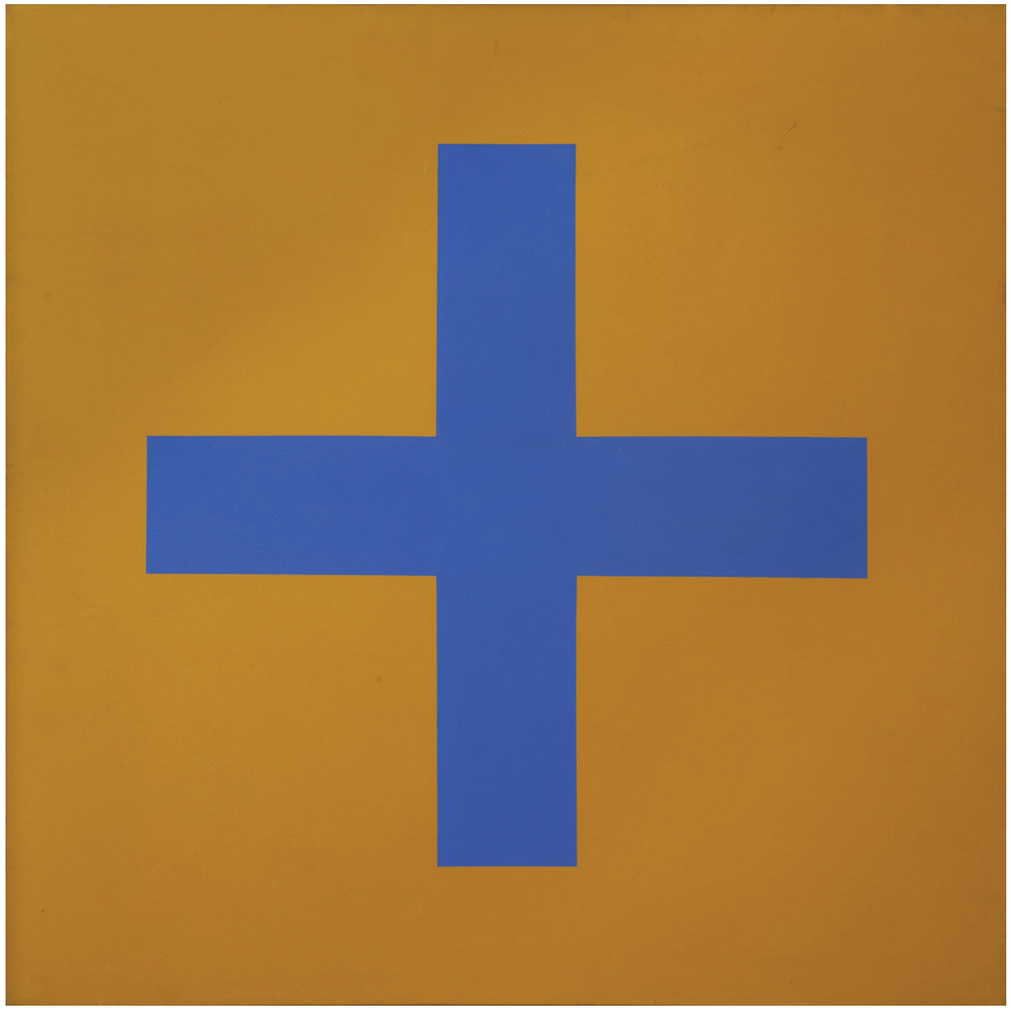
Blue LIne, 1964
Oil on canvas, 32 x 21"



Systemic Steps, 1964
Oil on wood, 51 x 51 x 9"

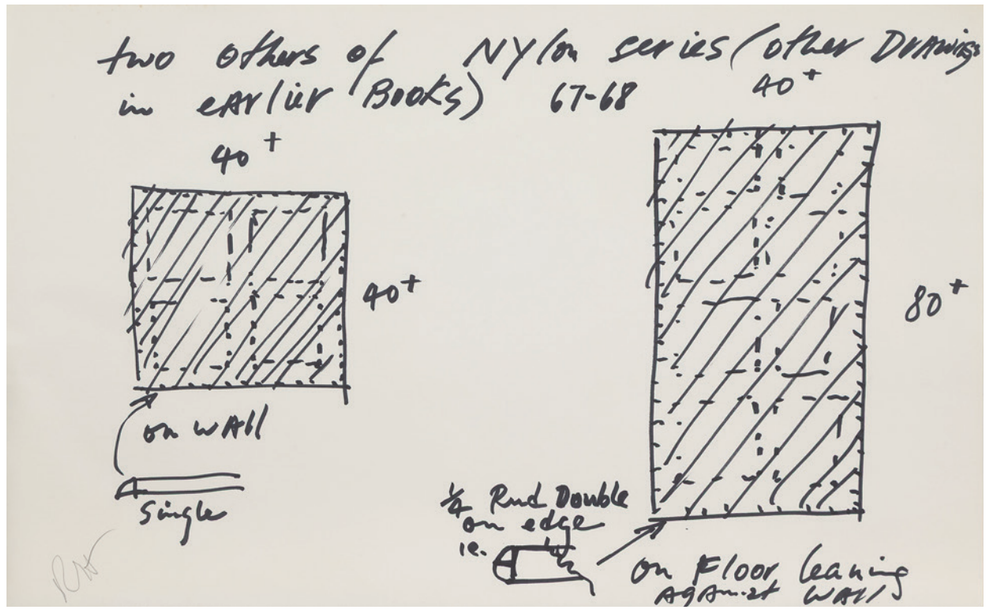
Andean Cross, 1964
Both over wooden frame,
50 x 50 x 1 3/4"
Exhibited:
LA MOCA; *A Minimalist Future*



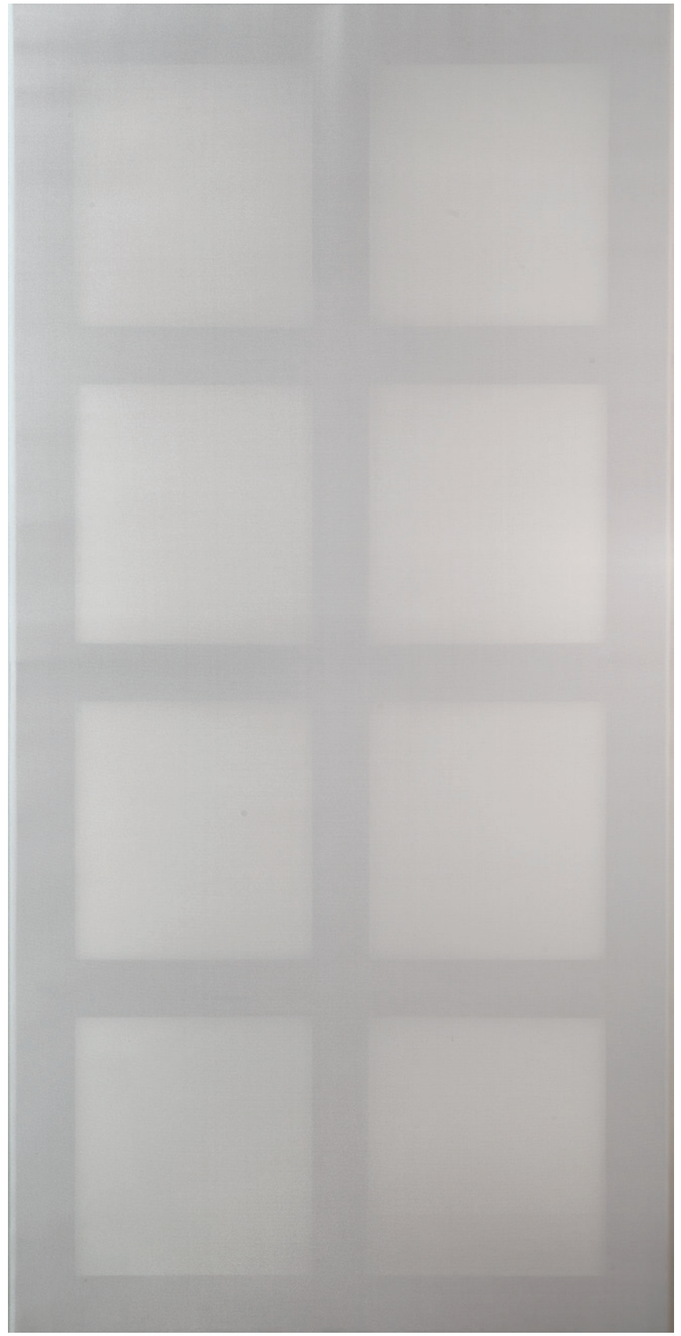


Blue Cross, 1964
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36"

T's Nylon, 1968
Nylon on painted stretcher, 40 x 40"
Exhibited: LA MOCA; *A Minimalist Future*



T's Nylon and Stretched and Leaning, 1968
Sketchbook drawing, ink on paper, 12 x 19"



Stretched and Leaning, 11968/2025
Nylon on painted stretcher, 80 x 40"

Pink T, 1968
Oil on two conjoined canvas panels, 60 x 20"

Grey, 1968
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60"

Above: *Andean Cross*, 1964
Cover: *Systemic Steps*, 1964

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