

Sabri Idrus

POWER

NOW AND THERE

CONTENTS

Foreword Jasdeep Sandhu	<u>2</u>
Motif, Materiality, Multivalence: Sabri Idrus' "Wings" Louis Ho	<u>4</u>
Acknowledgements	<u>23</u>

FOREWORD

by Jasdeep Sandhu

2

Three years ago, we presented a solo show by Sabri Idrus at our previous gallery on Hill Street, featuring his vivid abstract pieces that captured audiences through their mesmerizing, unending patterns and whirls—forming the distinct body of work Sabri has become renowned for. Last year, we revealed new additions to his oeuvre in yet another solo exhibition, wherein Sabri explored plays on light and dark, manifesting their exquisite contrasts and connections on canvas.

Watching his works evolve through these years, I have seen Sabri catapult to mastering the perfect balance between chance and control. Recognized for employing a mix of unconventional materials in his abstract pieces, Sabri allows his varied mediums to meet and flow organically. Yet, every decision in his painstaking process—from the choice of medium to the application of each layer on canvas—is grounded in intention and purpose. This combination of choices for each work then results in a unique, absorbing harmony of colors, lines, textures, and fluid movement.

Another important milestone in his oeuvre, *Power – Now and There* stems from this distinct practice of Sabri's, yet unveils new directions and expansions on his experiments with materials and art making. Sabri builds on even more layers of mixed media on each canvas—extending the time and labor dedicated to each, playing with fresh forms and combinations. A continuity with Sabri's strong focus on the artistic process, the exhibit shows a clear self-awareness of his power and infinite limits as an artist, a reflection on the constant conflict

between when to continue or finish a work, and a search to locate the shifting place of each piece both in time and space—as reflected in the subjective words, “now” and “there”. Power, to Sabri, is thus something inherent to his work and day-to-day practice, with every decision in the painting process rooted in the artist’s will and power of his mind.

Going even further, Sabri turns not only to his power as an artist, but to the vital role of the audience in

encountering his works. He offers no didactic way of seeing and interpreting each piece. Instead, Sabri implores audiences to examine their complexity and capacity to evoke a diversity of meaning. At the heart of this exhibition, Sabri compels audiences to take part in his creative process—that of constant evolution and of limitless possibility.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Louis Ho for dedicating his time and expertise in writing for this show.

Motif, Materiality, Multivalence: Sabri Idrus' "Wings"

Louis Ho

4
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There is that celebrated moment in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* when Cameron – played to near befuddled perfection by Alan Ruck – encounters Seurat's Neo-Impressionist behemoth, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, at the Art Institute of Chicago. He becomes mesmerized by the figure of the child in white, in the middle ground, who is holding the hand of her mother, or perhaps a female minder. The camera then cuts back and forth between Cameron's expression, in equal parts rapt immersion and existential angst, and the face of the painted figure; with each switch, it pans ever nearer to its subjects, till it is focused squarely on Ruck's eyes, and an extreme close-up of the young girl's face. The latter is revealed, by the camera's proximity, to be little more than a muddled mix of brush strokes, an oval sea of blue, ochre and flesh tones – its confusion of chromatic tonalities, the viewer is made to infer, a reflection of Cameron's state of emotional *sturm und drang*.

Seurat's Pointillism, as John Hughes lovingly deconstructed it, encapsulates the tension between the image and its making, between motif and materiality, picture and process. The tableau is articulated by minute strokes of the brush, the semiotic integrity of the whole fracturing, upon closer inspection, into a

Page 6:

Information

2018

Acrylic on canvas

180 x 240 cm

Page 7:

Gaze

2018

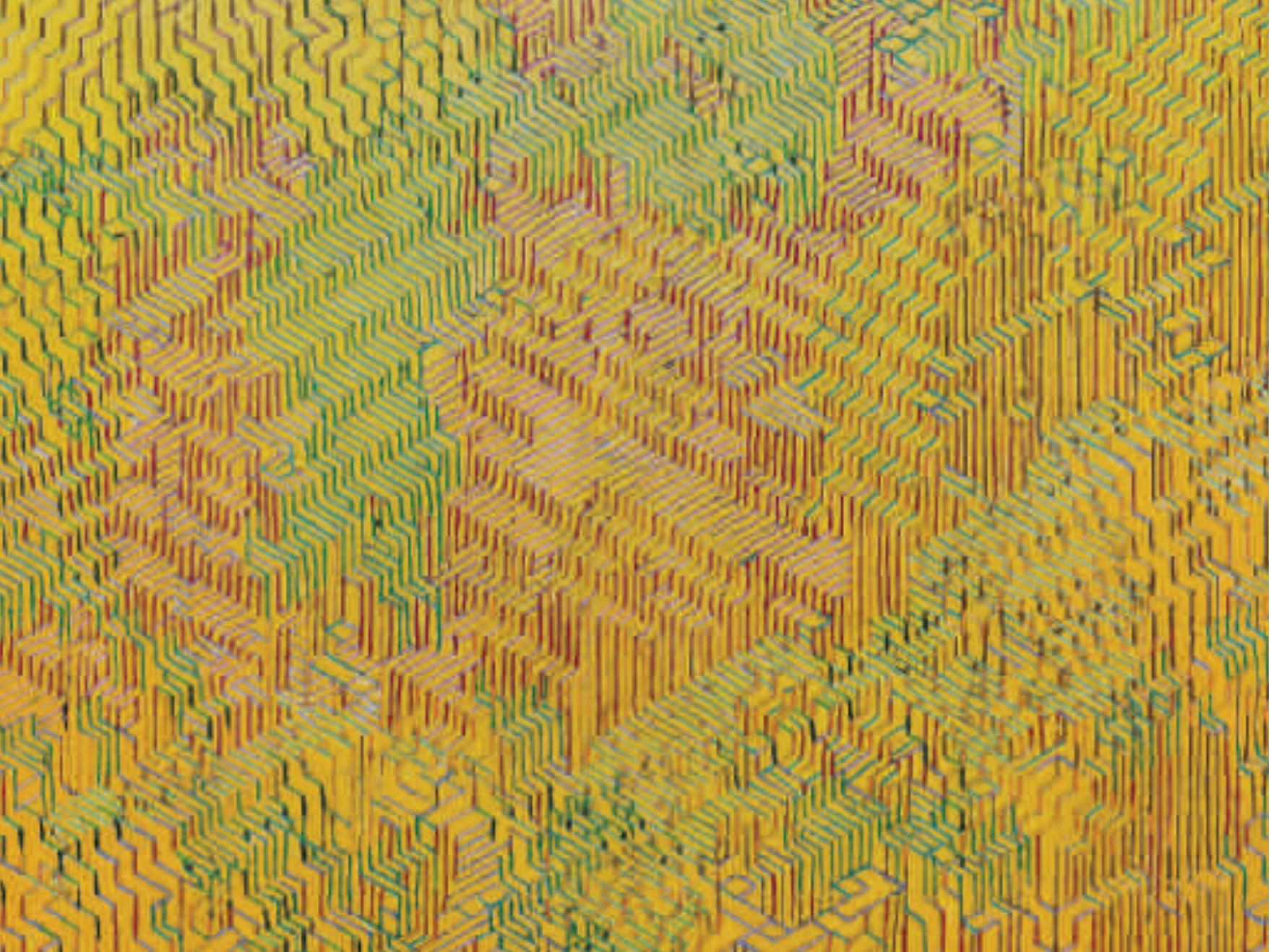
Acrylic on canvas

180 x 240 cm

plane of painterly gestures. In like manner, embedded in Sabri Idrus' latest series of works is a generative ambivalence, a matrix of competing ontological modes: the subject matter as a naturalized image, a visual rendering of the external world, and as a premeditated work of art, an obstinately material composition – oscillating between the poles of surface and design, suspended, like the visage of the child in *La Grande Jatte*, between painting and paint. Take *Wings* (2018), for instance: measuring some 1.5 meters tall and 3.6 meters across, the work is a massive portrait of the titular phenomenon. The pictorial field is dominated, on a pitch-dark background, by a series of curved arcs radiating out from either side of a core of irregularly shaped dots, the scene resembling nothing so much as astrophotography, Hubble shots of jewel-hued nebulae shimmering in the silent void of interstellar space. The evocation of astronomic and galactic entities, however, belies the overt reference of the title. The subject

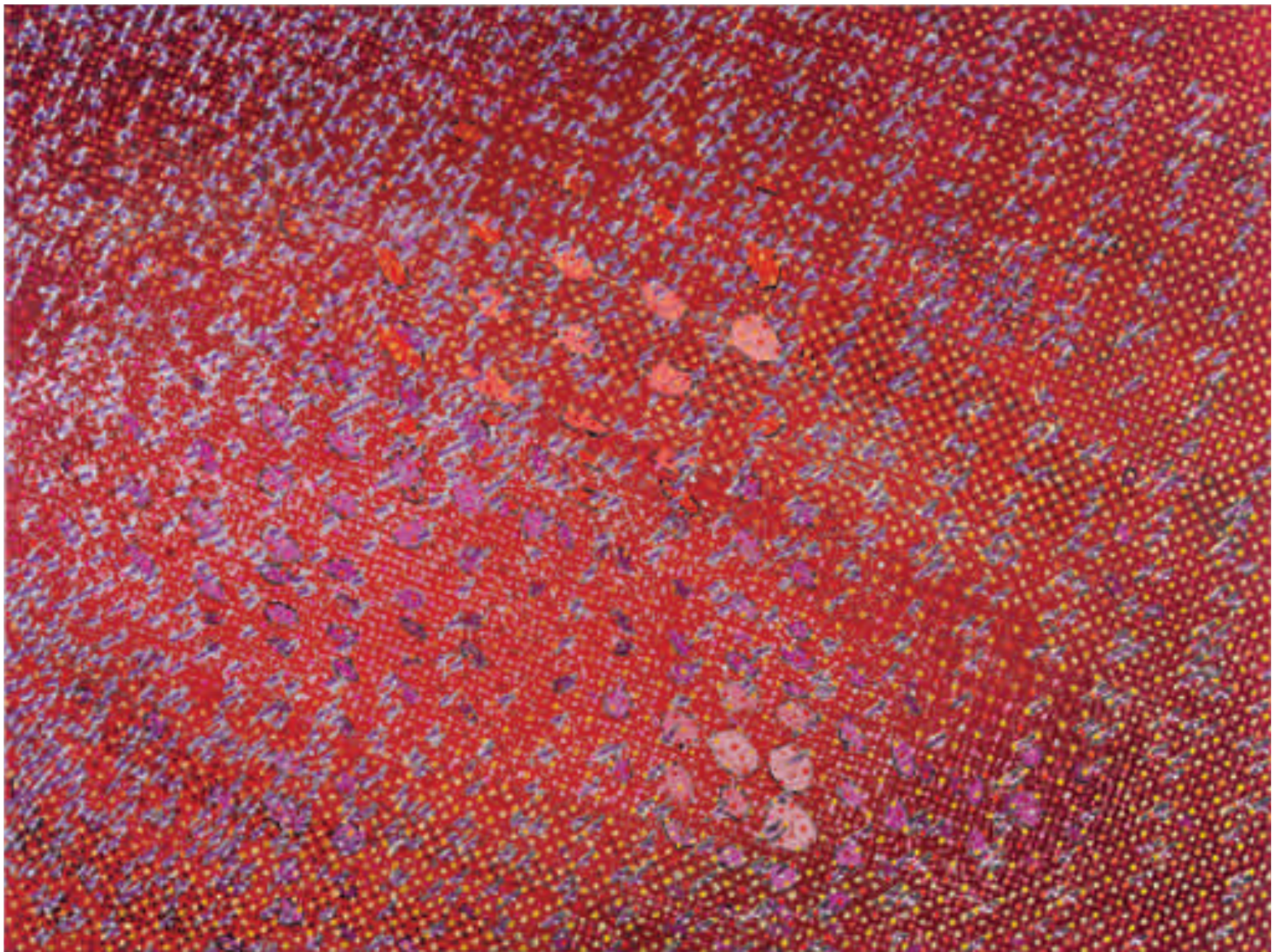
of the painting is religious in nature, according to the artist: the radiating lines are really an abstract rendering of a single pair of the six hundred wings of the archangel Gabriel, or Jibril, as he is known in the Quran. As Sabri remarks:

From a collection of hadith in Musnad Imam Ahmad, Abdullah Bin Mas'ud said, "The Messenger of Allah saw Jibril in his original shape having six hundred wings, each wing filling the side of the horizon, with a colourful array, and pearls and rubies falling from each wing as much as only Allah knows." However, it is an abstracted version of a landscape. The image is composed of several layers, of mountainous or hilly landscapes, drawn especially from visits to Mekah over several years ... What is seen is only one of the hundreds of wings, although what is described as half a wing could cover the earth end to end, with the earth fully covered in darkness beneath the angel's wing.¹









Here, then, imbricated within the abstraction of the image are really a number of referential strata, one set within the framework of the next like a concentric series of Russian dolls. At the most immediate level are visual suggestions of the intergalactic atmosphere; conceptually closer to home, however, are textual sources, Quranic allusions that channel the artist's own Muslim faith, and interest in narratives of angels and prophets.² Yet, beneath that, operating at a level not accessible to the naked eye – i.e. not optically apparent, or indiscernible simply by looking at the work – are the photographic origins of the image, which was based on the artist's own experience of the undulating desert terrain around the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Just as crucial to the significance of the piece, however, is its materiality: the painting embodies – and exceeds – its various originary moments and interpretive paradigms with a set of particular material practices, monumentalizing both subject matter as well as its own textural nuance, confronting the viewer with the haptic specificities of its presence. Beyond the immediacy of its content, in other words, *Wings* is an almost sculptural work. The grain of the paint alternates between the coarse, gnarled tactility of the black background and the preternaturally smooth surfaces of the three-dimensional dots and islands of colour that, rising from the sea of black, comprise the larger image, the relief of the varnished, thickly impasted skin of the painting possessing the heft and sheen of, say, certain sorts of plastics.

The process of production here perhaps bears some explication. As the artist relates it, the works in the present series, which includes *Wings*, often begin life with a grid of lines rendered on the canvas that is primed with beeswax, with the lines being set at a thirty-degree diagonal.³ Against this the order of the grid, he maps out both positive and negative spaces, areas to be coloured and to be left blank. The former is then filled in with flecks and specks of colour – Sabri's paint of choice is acrylic-based – producing the sculptural dots and islands of colour, resembling tiny hills of *bedak sejuk*,⁴ that will eventually take on visual life as the painting's final image. A repertoire of different tools is utilized for this portion of the proceedings, including ketchup bottles and icing pipes, a process generally encompassing the application of at least fifty different hues. After the paint has been applied, the first of two sanding procedures takes place: using an industrial, hand-held belt sander, the uneven and spiky bits of the paint dots are filed down to create flat, smooth contours. (The artist notes that he often recycles the paint powder from the sanding, mixing it into the paint used for other paintings; the particles result in a graininess of texture.) A second layer of paint is then applied, with a palette knife, to the entire surface of the canvas, filling in both the blank spaces as well as covering painted areas, with as many as twenty to thirty layers of paint sometimes applied here, after which the second and final sanding down transpires, producing the big reveal – the patches and spots of colour that constituted the first layer of painting now emerge to form the pattern that will compose the tableau,

which is, in effect, a cross-sectional document of its own making. Finally, a layer of varnish is laid on as a sealant, and to lend the work a sleekness of finish.

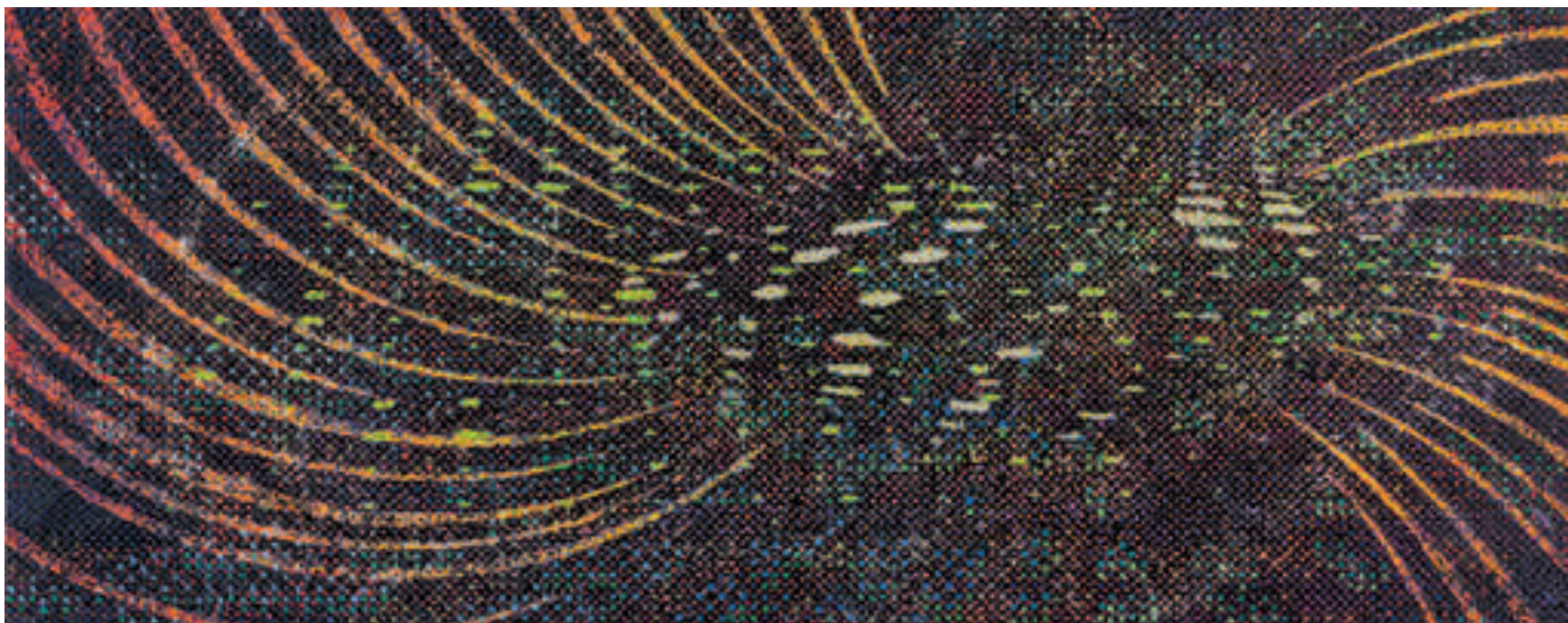
A processual record, a genre of materially-oriented abstraction, and an image caught between visual referent and narratorial allusion – to return to the opening moment of the present essay, *Wings* is, not unlike Seurat's figure, a multivalent matrix, generating various modes of meaning. It may not be unhelpful at this juncture, perhaps, to understand the work within the theoretical paradigm of Peircean semiotics. C. S. Peirce's oft-cited semiotic system is based on a (broadly) tripartite typology of different signs: icon, index and symbol. It is the first two sign-types, the icon and the index, that concern us here. Of the former, Peirce had this to say: "Most icons, if not all, are likenesses of their objects." Or: "... firstly, Likenesses, or, as I prefer to say, Icons, which serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves ..."⁵ Later, he qualified the concept in a more specific fashion: "An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line."⁶ In other words, likeness, as it concerns iconicity, is not predicated on actual existence; rather, the resemblance may relate to completely imaginary objects or to ideas (e.g. geometry) instead. An icon, then, while largely premised on verisimilitude, may operate without gesturing at any particular object existing in reality.

Page 8:

Sparkle
2018
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 240cm

Page 9:

Afterglow
2018
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 240cm



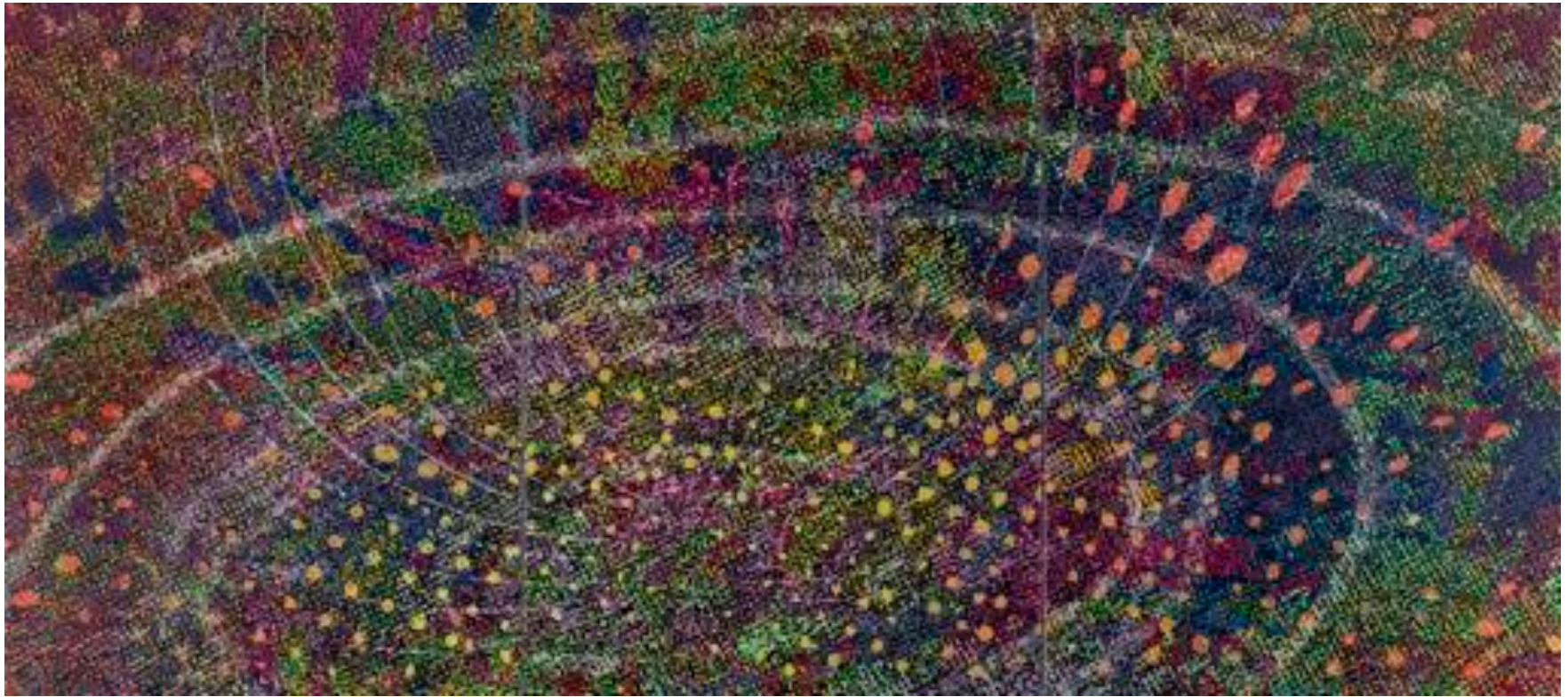
12

Wings

2018

Acrylic on canvas

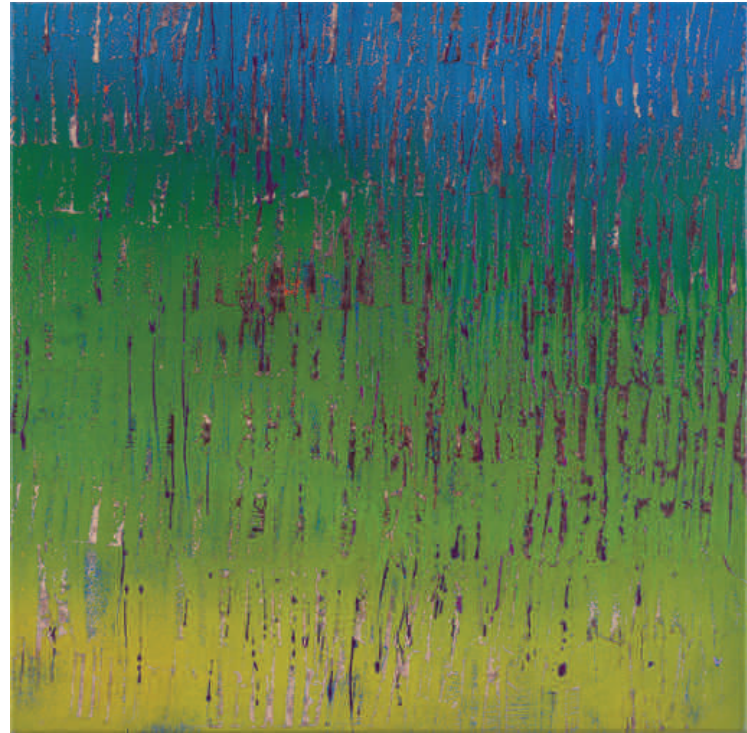
147.32 cm x 365.76cm



Birth
2018
Acrylic on canvas
198.2cm x 441.96 cm (triptych)



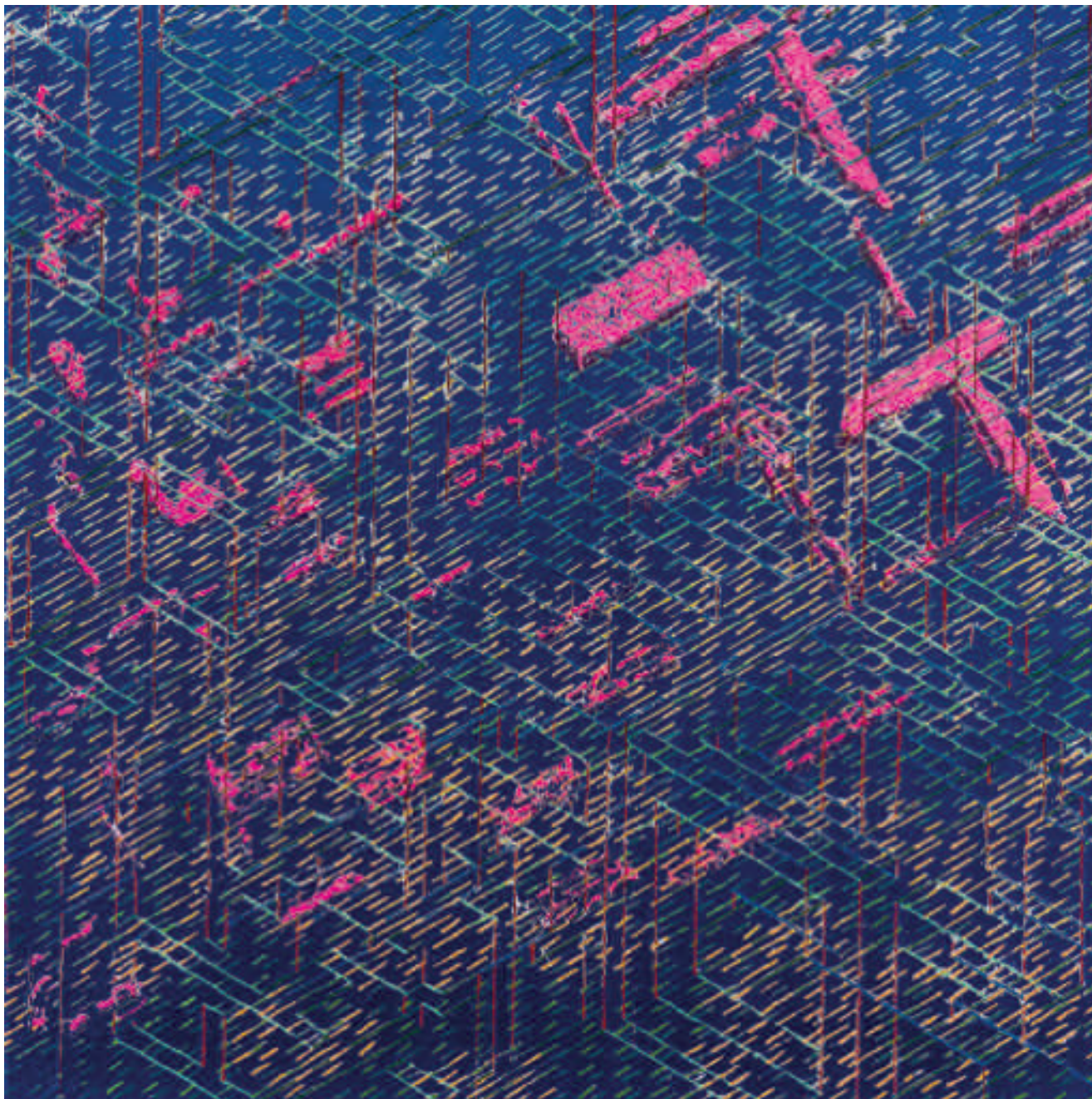
Dawn
2018
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cm



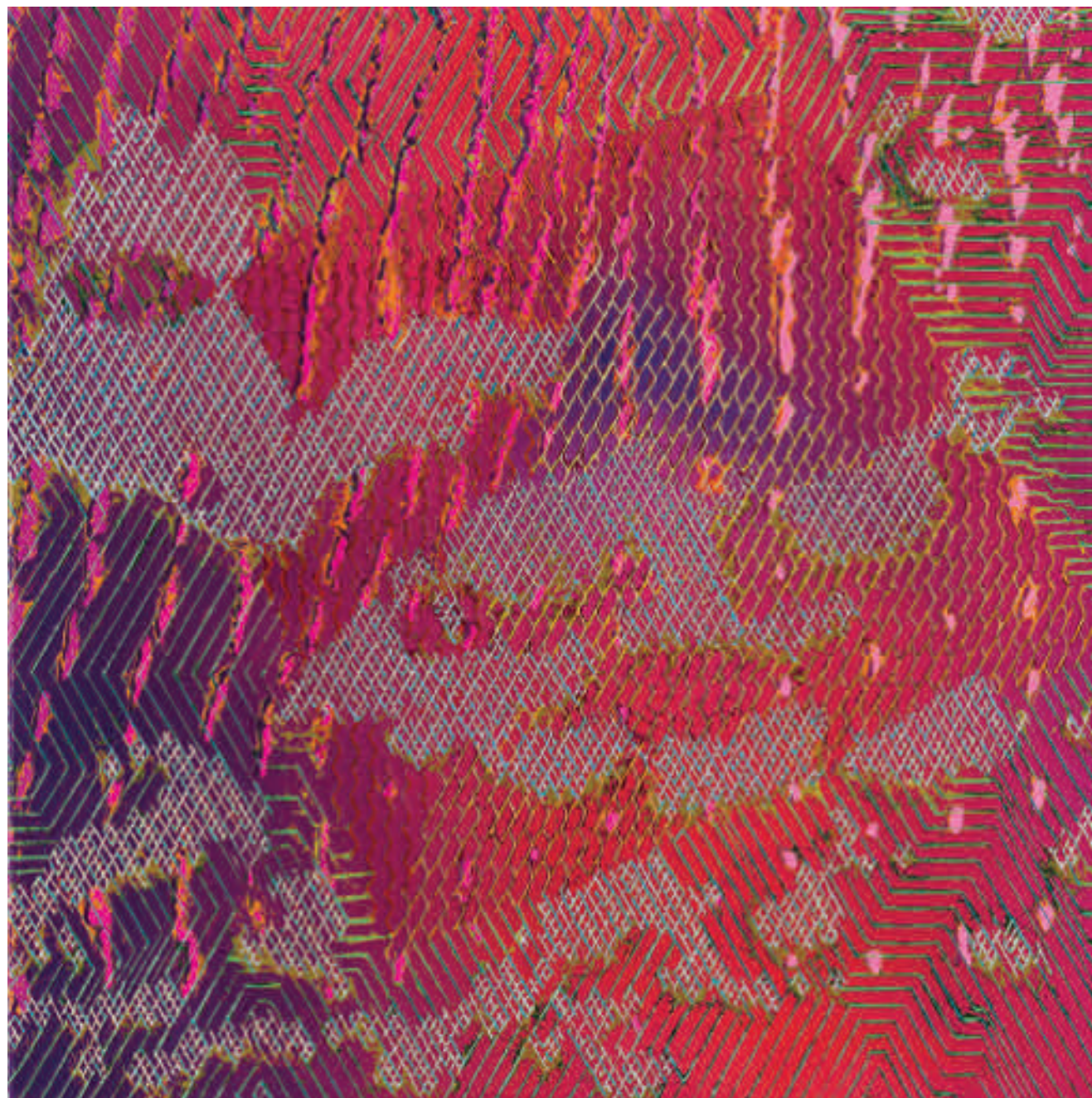
Forest
2018
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cm



Light
2018
Medium
102 x 178 cm



Imagine
2018
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 180cm



Dynamic
2018
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 180 cm



Grid 1
2018
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cm

The second sign-type, the index, is predicated on existential contiguities between sign and object. As commonly understood by art historians, the painterly gesture, qua index, is a trace of the artist's hand that emphasizes its own processual or constitutive nature, rather than being an image grounded in naturalism. Peirce remarked that "an index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant."⁷ Elsewhere, Rosalind Krauss has observed of the index: "As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents ... Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical

signs of objects ..."⁸ As signs that exist "along the axis of a physical relationship", indices are marks (like footprints) that act as material indicators of their origins (the foot that made it). One of the primary mechanisms of the semiotic process here, then – Peirce identified several more – is that of cause and effect.

It is in the confluence between the iconic (representation) and the indexical (referentiality) that *Wings* locates its multivalence. Sabri's abstract visuality, while jettisoning the sort of iconic specificity afforded by representational mimesis – he does not portray wings as they are commonly depicted, instead choosing to build his image from images of other phenomena (landscapes, in this case)⁹ – also function here in the way of indexicality. While retaining the vague visual form of the object described – the branching arcs broadly suggest the spread of wings – the work simultaneously stands as a document

of the process of its own production, the textured three-dimensionality of its surface both embodying and complicating the image. In other words, its iconicity is embedded in, yet fragmented by, the artist's modes of making and materiality. That famous painter of black squares, Ad Reinhardt, declared in 1943: "It is more difficult to write or talk about abstract painting than about any other painting because the content is not in a subject matter or story, but in the actual painting activity."¹⁰ Here, in the case of the image interrupted by the traces of its own physical production, the energy and the authority conveyed by the sculptural shape of paint, as indexical signs, complicates the impression of stars and planets and wings and angels and topographies, in the iconic register, restoring to the otherwise abstracted subject on the surface of the canvas denotative and connotative multiplicities, a multivalence pivoting on the twin spokes of motif and material.

ENDNOTES

¹ As conveyed through the artist's manager and partner, Norhana Yunos, in two e-mails, dated October 5 and October 7, 2018.

² In the words of Norhana: "Sabri has always been interested in the religious text as stories and myth. Truth of these texts depends on the readers's personal beliefs. The religious connotation cannot be separated as the references do come from religious texts. He is aware that he is usually drawn towards texts and stories of angels and prophets." As conveyed in an e-mail, dated October 7, 2018.2018.

³ The artist has mentioned, in conversation, that he suffers from a form of distorted vision, where he sees at an oblique angle, and the world appears to him diagonally. The skewing of the composition of the present paintings, then, mirrors his particular optical perspective: "He [Sabri] has said what is significant about this composition is its off-centredness, to take the viewer's eyes away from the usual focus on the centre. It has the effect of a fisheye lens, some form of distorted and expanded image. As it is when you look at a framed object, your eyes automatically look at the whole picture and aims at the centre of the image. In most of his works, he tries to challenge this." As communicated in the e-mail of October 7, 2018.

⁴ This was inspired by the artist's grandmother, who was fond of *bedak sejuk* as a beauty product.

⁵ Qtd. in T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press, 2007), p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), p. 70.

⁹ In conversation, Sabri has remarked of his habit of taking pictures of various natural phenomena, which later serve as the visual bases of his paintings: clouds, skylines, horizon lines, urban surfaces, and landscapes.

¹⁰ Ad Reinhardt, "Abstraction vs. Illustration" in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 49.

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

- 2015 - 2017 MFA, Creative Practice, Transart Institute, Plymouth University, United Kingdom
1995 - 1997 Fine Art Studies, Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara, Malaysia (Uitm), Malaysia
1990 - 1991 Diploma In Graphic Design -Mensa Design School, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

AWARDS

- 2015 - 2017 The Transart Social Change Award. Transart Institute, Berlin and New York.
2014 Malaysia Open Show, Juror's Award. National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia
2011 UOB Art Award – Special Mention, Malaysia.
2004 BMS04/The Young Contemporary Art Award (Painting Category). National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SELECTED RESIDENCIES

- 2015 - 2017 Transart Institute, Low Residencies, Berlin and New York.
2013 - 2014 19th Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia –Australia Visual Arts Residency, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia.
2013 Artist in Residence: University of Technology and Life Sciences in Bydgoszcz, Poland.
2010 Artist In Residence, Hegarbudhi Community, Bandung, Indonesia
2009 Artist In Residence Poland – University Of Arts, Poznan, Poland

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 TRANSFORMATION AND DARKNESS. E-Tay Gallery, New York, USA.
MATTERS AND MANIPULATIONS, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
2015 RECOVERY PLAN. Gajah Gallery, Singapore
GAJAH GALLERY FEATURES SABRI IDRUS, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
2012 ANTARA. Taksu Gallery, Singapore
2010 MUFAKAT: SPACE FOR THE PUBLIC. The Painting Garage, Bandung, Indonesia
2010 MASA SERIES: A REDUCTION PROCESS. Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2009 IN TRANSIT. MALAYSIA-POLAND. Aula Gallery, University of Arts, Poznan, Poland

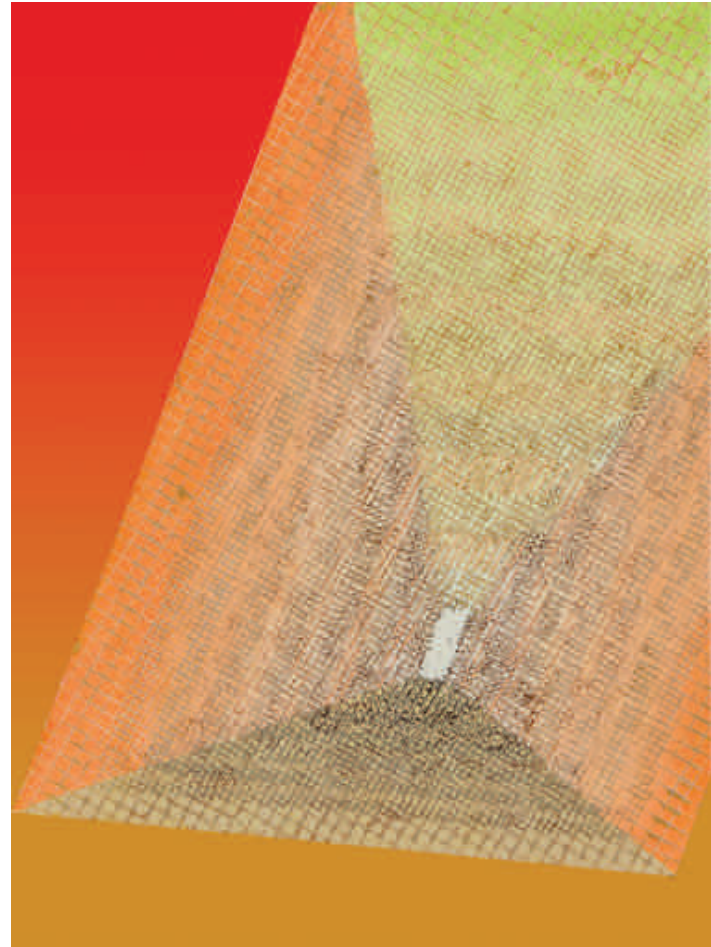
- 2006 KERONCONG SERIES: A NEW FORM OF PHYSICAL LISTENING. Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2004 LOREK-LOREK. THE CREATION OF LINES. Townhouse Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1999 THE SEARCH OF THE UNCERTAINTIES. The Painting Hall, Selangor, Malaysia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 Di Antara Itu & Ini, Fergana Art, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Power, Play & Perception, Gajah Gallery & Tabularasa Studio, Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Rupa-rupa (Nya), Fergana Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2017/2018 The Unreal Deal: Six Decades Of Malaysian Abstract Art, Bank Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2017 Transart Group Exhibition, Uferstudio, Berlin, Germany
Reunion 50, Segaris, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2016 Bantul Art Summit, Gajah Gallery Yogyakarta, Indonesia
2015 Prudential Eye Zone, Art Science Museum, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
Loose Affairs, SomoS, Berlin, Germany
2014 Eye Zone (curated exhibition-Malaysia Eye), Start Art Fair 2014, Saatchi Gallery, London
Prudential Malaysia Eye, White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
Open Show, National Visual Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Malaysia-Australia Visual Arts Residency, Disruptive Nature: Sabri Idrus (Malaysia) + Habitat: Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy (Australia), Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia
2013 Water: A group exhibition by Sabri Idrus, Budi Agung Kuswara, Jigger Cruz & I Made Arya Palguna, Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
UTP STANZA, University of Technology and Life Sciences , Bydgoszcz, Poland.
2012 DUA: Sabri Idrus & Tony Twigg, Taksu, Kuala Lumpur, Peninsular & Islands, Taksu, Singapore.
2009 Malaysia-Poland Cultural & art exchange, Pyzdry & Lagow, Poland.



Kuasa 1
2018
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 150 cm



Kuasa 2
2018
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 150 cm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the artist, Sabri Idrus and his team at Tabularasa Studio for their hard work, including the thoughtful design of the exhibition catalogue, coordinating artist interviews and email correspondences with our guest writer, Louis Ho. At Gajah's outstanding curatorial team for their diligent work to accomplish the successful idealisation of this project.

POWER: NOW AND THERE
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Organised by Gajah Gallery

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Louis Ho

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