COLOURS THAT FAN OUT SUBJECTIVITY

MALLARMÉ, IRIGARAY AND LIZ COATS

BRIGITTE CARCENAC DE TORNÉ

A quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire, selon le jeu de la parole, cependant, si ce n'est pour qu'en émane, sans la gêne d'un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure .

What good is there however, in the wonder of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near disappearance in the play of speech if, without the inconvenience of a close or concrete recall, the pure notion does not emanate .

Mallarmé

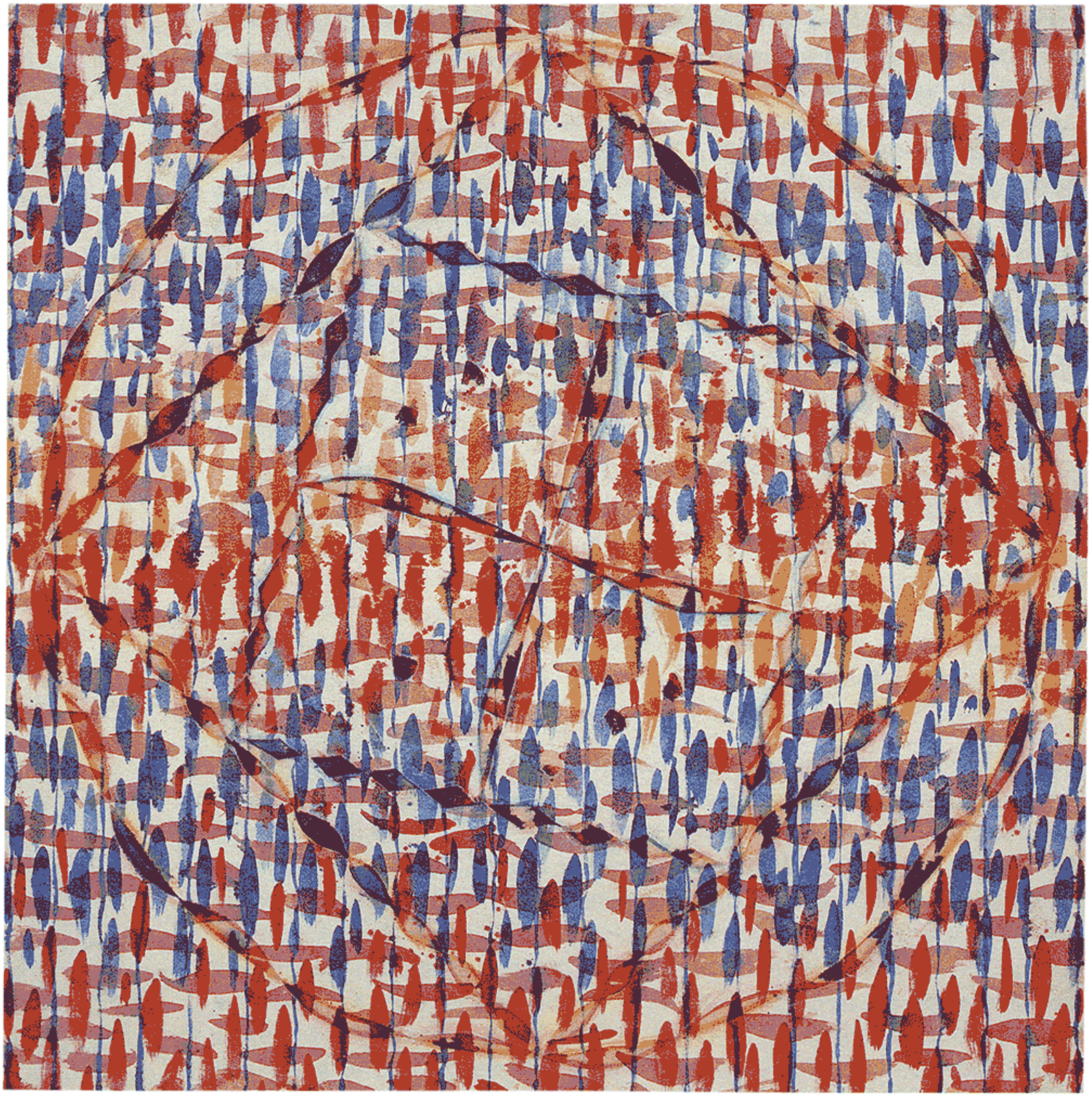
Thus in 1892, Stéphane Mallarmé ponders upon art. As he reflects, both undeceived and exacting, he assesses the bounds of his art practice, and sets a tone which one century later does not ring oddly for us.[1]

As one lends an ear to the sentence, how does it resound in the contemporary context? Just as Mallarmé's writing gains fullness from being read in the form of its original language, so the Mallarmean project does not sacrifice materiality to an essence — as if to achieve purity meant dismissing what had preceded or would follow it — as in a Platonic or another metaphysical perspective. What is 'pure' about the notion is not a founding principle before or *after* nature, that is to say beyond it. Rather it is an emancipation at work within matter, the possibility of sparking an energy, to maintain a tension, a sustained oscillation between materiality and meaning. Art confronts and challenges chance; bringing together the scattered series of incidental significances into a simultaneity. Art re-orients them into a whole perception. "A dice-throw never will abolish chance." In this statement, Mallarmé expresses faith in the ability of art to counteract chance by producing a coherent, complete form.

This framework corresponds closely to that of the study in which Luce Irigaray reflects on the dynamic of colours in the psychoanalytical context.[2]

1 *Stéphane Mallarmé first published this as 'Divagation première, relativement au vers', in* ***Vers et prose****, Hachette, Paris, December 1892. Republished with other new articles in* ***La Revue Blanche*** *under the title 'Variations sur un sujet'. Mallarmé commented on this series in which paragraphs alternated with blanks on the page: "An essay trying a report, which gives space with lapses, to what is topical". (nb. The translations in this essay are mine or modified by me.)*

2 *Luce Irigaray, 'Les couleurs de la chair',* ***Sexes et***



Liz Coats

THE FISHERWOMAN & THE GARDENER: THE MIRROR

1990

pigments and acrylic medium

on cotton canvas

107.0 x 107.0 cm

Photograph: Tim Marshall

Courtesy: the artist and

Annandale Galleries, Sydney

Parente's, *Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1987, pp. 167-179. (nb. All the quotations, with the exception of footnote 27, are from this essay. The translations are mine.)*

For her, colours produce a momentum in the development of subjectivity which equates with the creative process in painting.

Since 1975, the non-figurative painter Liz Coats has been engrossed with colours. She recently exhibited a new series of paintings, *Cicadas,* in which she explores the resonance of colour in unison or in counterpoint. Finding a rhythm of intervals on the surface and in the layering, the pulsations of colour set free in their efflorescence, reveal a deep and lively space.

THE ELUSIVENESS OF THE FORM . . .

Let us return to Mallarmé's sentence. Starting with a juxtaposition (fact/nature) implicitly posing what is natural and factual as indiscernable from the outset, he suggests then, that a vibration originating in nature works towards its own exhaustion and conveys or leaves us ultimately with an exhaustive yet intuitive knowledge.

As for the perception of a form, from the order of nature to that of art, he conceives of it as a vibration which persists in its transposition to its near disappearance. If there is an oscillation between physicality and meaning, the vibration is received and felt by the listener or the viewer, who is party to this exchange. Thus Mallarmé follows the analysis undertaken by Kant.[3] A form is real or perceived as such, inasmuch as during the time we look, it alternatively takes shape, loosens and loses itself; a folding and unfolding movement. Such a process of differentiation within the form itself, actually unsettles the 'subject' — that is to say, the fiction of permanency and homogeneity in who ever listens or looks at the form. 'Perceiving' here means that the 'subject' is eroded, altered, divided, summoned and dismissed in the viewer who, relinquishing control, is brought through his/her own materiality into the becoming of the form itself.

3 *Immanuel Kant,* ***The Critique of Judgement****, transl. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, Classics Series, Indianapolis, 1987.*

This hypothesis is confirmed by Mallarmé who also regards the erasure of the author of a work of art as a necessity:

> The pure work implies the 'elocutory' disappearance of the poet who leaves the initiative to words [which are] mobilised by the clash of their unevenness; they are lit up by their mutual reflections, like a virtual trail of fires from gems, replacing the perceptible breathing in the ancient lyrical 'inspiration' as well as the personal, the enthusiastic direction in the phrasing.[4]

4 *Mallarmé, op. cit.*

Contemporary writers and philosophers — and particularly French ones — are receptive to the architectural vastness of Mallarmé's conception. His writing has an hermetic splendour which, the reader should not forget, sounds for the native French speaker like a refined but uncanny language. Yet in his *oeuvre ouverte* ('open work') any understood meaning is felt as well, it touches the

The undertaking of psychoanalysis is precisely, like poetry, to allow a *full speech* (*la parole vraie*) in which the same momentum embodies the physicality of drives and the flicker or vantage point of a realisation. At this point, I briefly recall what psychoanalysis is in its practice. It is the precise and comprehensive experience, in a unique and personal way, of the non-coincidence between consciousness and the Unconscious. They are not opposed, that is to say complementary, because for the Unconscious, consciousness is actually its non-sense, irrelevant, and vice-versa. The elaboration of a subjectivity stems from this 'contradiction' which is what Hegel defined as a 'subject' — "That which can hold within itself its own contradiction".[10]

In a process lasting sometimes five, seven or more years, and which in the early stages entails a partial withdrawal from outer commitments as one goes more within oneself, the necessity to say in the session whatever comes to mind makes one realise that we are much less 'speaking' than 'spoken through'. What was/is repressed comes back through speech, gestures and dreams. Conscious thoughts appear more clearly to be repetitive and relative; the ego is progressively acknowledged as a knot in order to maintain itself, to resist and *not* to change.

Drives and traumas swirl or sneak into the sessions; they are not answerable to time. For the Unconscious, present, past or future are not distinct. Archaic patterns, re-actualised in an *actual* context, surface in speech and dreams. But it is less the content of what is said, expressed emotionally and physically, than the *punctuation* of the speech — a recurring swaying rhythm which can be discordant, syncopated, even broken, in spite of the patient's awareness. It indicates that there is for each individual a specific bind or articulation between repression and desire. This punctuation exposes as ignorance what poetry's vibrations struggle with and resolve: the dilemma and bond between presence and absence.

As the progressively (and at times painfully) withdrawn energy (from costly and rigid defenses) is re-invested into a more fluid economy, it allows more openness, interaction with others, and creativity.

This work is done with the often silent collaboration of an analyst who listens and must be able to create the possibility for the patient to *hear,* in this work on transference as it occurs, what comes from her/himself and the other. Therefore, as Irigaray remarks, sound prevails over light, which becomes subsidiary. The effect is that another production of meaning takes place:

> The speed of sound and light are not at all the same. It seems that psychoanalysis plays with the challenge: subjecting the quickest to the slowest. Light, in fact, goes then into the service of sound: everything must be said, everything must undergo

10 *The term 'subject', which is now equivocal in philosophy because of its association to rationalism, remains relevant in the psychoanalytical context. I make the distinction here between a subjectivity becoming its own mystification and the psychoanalytical experience of subjectivity as formation of the Self gaining access to her/his own desire, implying conjointly the realisation that one is actually 'subjected' to the law or the order, symbolic or not. I refer to Lacan and this corresponds also to the distinction made by Jean Luc Nancy in* ***Who comes after the subject?****, Routledge, New York, 1991, between "the metaphysics of the subject" and "a singular* ***unum quid****, less present to* ***itself*** *than present and exposed* ***to*** *a history, an event, a communauty, an oeuvre, or another 'subject'". Such notions as "pre-individual singularities and non-personal individuation" suggested again by Deleuze in the same book, allow us perhaps to think more freely about the processes of individuation.*

> an articulation through sound, therefore psychoanalysis is the exercise of *patience*.[11]

11 *Irigaray, op. cit.*

In this 'very particular modification of perception', as Irigaray qualifies it, the question is what can be gained or has to occur in this process — in other words: what does sound give to us that we cannot get through light's vibrations? In a collection of texts analysing the influence of Paul Klee's work on his musical compositions, Pierre Boulez makes a simple, interesting distinction.[12] For him music is perceived as a pulsation which the composer can make regular or irregular, expand or tighten at will. Each pulsation is lodged in an instant which, however, is not renewed. It is by relating this instant to another that a continuity can be seized in what he calls 'a constructed global vision'. Conversely, in a painting, presence is encompassed in its totality and actuality — afterwards contrasts, oppositions and structures are explored.

12 *Pierre Boulez,* ***Le Pays Fertile: Paul Klee****, Gallimard, Paris, 1989, pp. 84-89.*

In the psychoanalytical process then, privileging sound initiates a momentum, a capacity to relate emotions and events together, actually giving the impulse to produce visual images and dreams in which colours pulsate as a living tissue — a flesh. As Luce Irigaray reminds us, dreams, for Freud, are the royal way to the Unconscious.

If the process fails however, the patient . . .

> loses the accuracy of his/her sensory perceptions and contrasts. Everything becomes *grey* [an undifferentiated zone]. As these perceptions and contrasts are the site for the possible existence of a subject in his/her present and history . . . [if they are absent, then what takes place is] . . . a driven wild speech, without 'I' (always reliant on perceptions), a system of arbitrary forms of which the content is very problematic.[13]

Concluding with this point she says: "If the patient runs the risk of becoming idiotic, it is because of sensory deprivation and [the consequent] lack of appropriateness of speech to sensation and perception".

13 *Irigaray, op. cit.*

Her reflections on the ratio of sound and light in psychoanalysis allow us to go a step further. As in music, where Boulez said "one *relates* one instant to another", to rely on sound is to develop the ability to bring together that which is distinct and heterogeneous, thus constituting a global vision which did not actually pre-exist.

Colour bursts or sweeps into consciousness and dreams as the original ground and element, as the physical vibration transposing itself into a notion: it is an important part of their significance. For Irigaray, the colours irrupt into the session to ease the imbalance between the pre-eminence of sound and visual sensory deprivation. Colours act as a driving force in the bringing together of

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signs and memories which occur via what is heard and said. She then raises the main question:

> What to do with the difference in the transmission and the perception of sound and light? *To paint.* What is at stake in painting is to spatialise, to give perception its own space and to allow time to become simultaneous (following Klee's expression). This is also what is at stake in dreams . . . The purpose is to assist the patient to enable him/her to represent his/her perceptions and to create for them a perspective in space/time . . . The patient can then make room for a 'shot', a framing for simultaneity, a depth of field, etc . . .[14]

14 *Irigaray, op. cit.*

For the patient then — between sound and light, speech and images, and from the resonance of meaning back to the tangible vibration of matter — a continuum is formed by colours. They actually form the web of what is gathered through sound, and by spanning the various creative processes, colours appear to accompany, in the sense of 'basso continuo', they 'enlighten' experience.

Colours herald the presence of a lively exchange. For Irigaray an essential balance has to be kept between "natural rhythms that are silent and melodic", and other rhythms which are often "noisy". The latter "run the risk of wearing away the coloured properties of matter, of perception, of dream, of painting". If a rhythm happens to be imposed from outside "the colours of matter could be abolished". At this point she concludes: "a balance has to be found between hearing, looking and touching, sound and light. This is performed by colours".

Colours, as vital tissue, irrigate subjectivity and resonate in all areas of sensibility and perception, from sound to light. More decisively for Irigaray, "the question of the flesh appears to be related to that of colours".

TO IMAGINE IS TO GIVE TO ONESELF — AND TO THE OTHER — TIME, SPACE/TIME . . .

Speaking about flesh and colours might lead one to believe that such experiences are identical for each individual. Beings of flesh we are, but this means either woman or man. Irigaray speaks about the flesh always in relation to others. In the background there is a break in the rhythm, a change in tempo, initiated by sexual difference. In Western societies the feminine is still undermined and distorted. Processes at work in thought and languages fundamentally pose feminism as the negative of masculine — 'what is lacked to be a male'. Keeping this in mind, the following criticism by Irigaray takes on another dimension:

> The forms that convey the meaning have become arbitrary in our cultures. This arbitrariness cleaves the subject from his/her body. The meaning ought to express the body and the flesh and not to sever itself, to separate from it. The spatial

representation of the body, of sensual pleasure and sensibility bears a necessary relation to colour.[15]

15 *ibid.*

In cultures where there is a religious tradition of the incarnation of the divine . . .

Art privileges colour, melodious singing, gestures, figurative symbols. Colour is not given by forms. To some extent, the incarnation of the divine, of man, of woman cannot be figured without colours. The signs of writing want to hold back, contain and repress blood, whereas painting and colours try to express it.[16]

16 *ibid.*

Reflecting on years of psychoanalytical practice, Irigaray observes that colours are as well, a "carnal matter" as well. Because of the diversity of their specific vibrations, they offer a multiplicity of combinations which cannot be reduced to binary oppositions or complementary groupings. With colours there are "many nuances, variations and scales of value, from one extreme to another without breach. Even the so called fundamental colours are three or four, not two — blue, red, yellow and possibly green; if in opposition or complementary, they are distributed triangularly or quadrately". This distribution of value is particularly interesting with regard to what Irigaray calls "sexual economy". She directs our attention to the fact that sexual difference is the varying resultant of variable parameters:

. . . in the individual there is always the pole of gender or sex and the pole of generation . . . the genealogical sedimentation with its past, present and future;

- gender or sex as the regenerative force;
- gender or sex as morphology and identity.

Two forms of memory are in tension in ourselves:

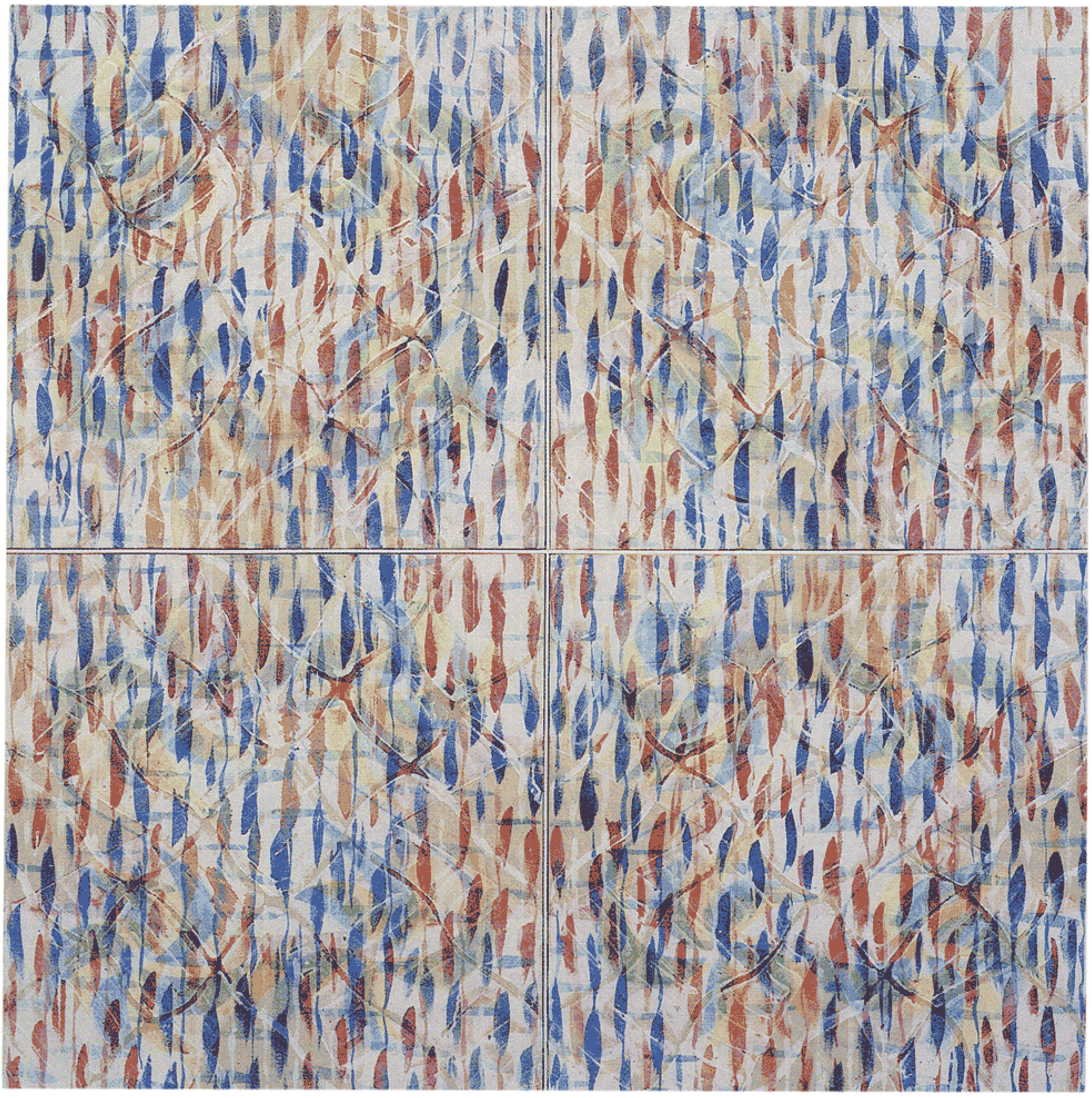
- the genealogical memory, always bisexued
- individual memory, which is monosexued.

The gender as sex is always a transgression of genealogy and its colours. Memory is a memory of each individual history; it is also a genealogical memory.[17]

17 *Irigaray, op. cit.*

The problem is, in fact, that in Western cultures which have repressed the feminine-maternal genealogies, the consequence is that there are forms which "find their balance in an artificial play of contradictions (the two poles contained in one)". For Irigaray however, colours play freely: "they express the possible sexual connections, changes and returns [*passages*] from one sex to another, the mediation between them". Yellow appears to be one such mediation between colours and 'sexued flesh' — sometimes transmuted as gold or green. These remarks lead her to assert that:

[There is] in each sex a whole range of tones of which the accords, the mediants, the harmonics, remain always to be discovered or found again forming a balance within the individual as well as in relation to another being . . . There are of course the contrasts between colours, their relationship continuously balances their qualities — from the coldest to the hottest, from the fastest to the slowest, from the



Liz Coats

MAGNETISM 4 *1991*

pigments and acrylic medium

on cotton canvas

144.0 x 144.0 cm

Photograph: Tim Marshall

Courtesy: the artist and

Annandale Galleries, Sydney

> high- to the low-pitched. These properties constantly oscillate between tension and balance; between masculine and feminine genders as well. [But far from being] found only in signs and signifiers already coded, sexual difference corresponds also to the possibility of having perceptions and creations [for males and females] which are different.[18]

18 *ibid.*

This leads Luce Irigaray to suggest that: "woman should change sounds into colours and man, colours into sounds". Between them the fan unfolds.

Mallarmé and Irigaray respectively elaborate on vibrations and colours: the webbing within which we weave sense. I now propose to present aspects of the work of Liz Coats. This is not to imply that art works and theoretical ones are referential, rather that they originate in the same experience. As a philosopher, I have learned from Liz Coats' paintings. For me, her painting finds a balance between the intensity of personal involvement and the careful release on the canvas of elaborate structural relations between colours; opening horizons beyond any passion for theorising.

Striving for emotive content and colour as structure
Liz Coats

> Reflecting on the feeling of energy moving in the body I do not feel a liquid flow. Perhaps there is resistance but I sense a multitude of points combining in variable pulses in a continuous circulation. I experience a dynamic space which sits behind form and language, a space which surrounds me, is within me, and in which I can move. I can find no adequate verbal container or constant visual image to describe this dimensional space. It is a felt experience which guides me to apply colour as structure and to construct surfaces as containers for light. At an energetic level, a completed painting presents a complex of structure and flux which is beyond verbalisation.[19]

19 *Liz Coats, interview,* ***Transforming Art****, Vol.4, No.1, Nigel Hoffmann, Sydney, 1992.*

For Liz Coats sensation is, as well, a complete process of meaning; a versatile adventure of the self. One is introduced to the experience of a tangible 'space and time'. This is finely enacted in a delicately wrought, melodic play with colours.

For earlier painters such as Cézanne or Matisse, colours and their resonance of strong and complex vibrations, successfully challenged form; ultimately transcending it as the shades and brushmarks freed a space for their expansion. Liz Coats refers to her work as 'abstraction', but certainly not in the sense of a work devoid of sensibility and emotion. It is abstract in the sense that it leaves behind and dismisses a form which would be predetermined:

> The way I work is to follow a strict discipline of repetitions of structural/colour layers without trying to describe or illustrate anything beyond paying attention to the evolving possibilities of the work itself. From the beginning of my work as an artist

my intention was simply to keep the painting alive. What I began to discover was that it was not the type of imagery emerging, nor its density, but that with a certain persistence of working with the surface and a process approach — where one makes choices in a consecutive and considered way — one can bring forth emotionally powerful and tensioned forms. Ultimately, it was the patterns of energy which emerged out of the layering process which impressed me. I knew that this could only be achieved by slow and indirect means; that this quality was apart from drawing on iconographic skills and related in part to the maker's emotional and physiological balance. Somehow in the intensity of the work, it became a private investigation into the cohesion of matter.[20]

20 *Coats, op. cit..*

The painter's attention is applied to what happens before matter takes shape. She works at a level at which matter vibrates; not yet a form, but a pulsation of energy, of air as the least inert element. A predetermined design — a grid for example — is but a preparatory ground for what will emerge from and between the colours themselves. It seems to me that this way of proceeding corresponds with that tradition of which Cézanne's work is the most expressive. Cézanne firstly drew upon what he called the 'geological stratum'. As colours, progressively applied, set up a new rhythm, 'they gave way' to another dynamic unleashed by the latter. As Liz Coats says . . .

> I think his work is much more radical than most people realise . . . he was actually seeing light spectra, painting colour in light. At the same time his extraordinary discipline and respect for the painting tradition kept him grounded and connected to the outer form of the images he was constructing. He ties this intense and prolonged experience of the nature of light to images in the natural world. At the same time the colour marks are moving and vibrating and collecting and associating in a way that is quite detached; . . . Colour is structure; it is detached from the fixed edge of things so that objects are not solids . . .[21]

21 *ibid.*

and further —

> Cézanne leaves it to the viewer to come to conclusions about the nature of the adherence of the parts to the whole and the gatherings of energy which might hold them together. With the fineness of his observations on the nature of matter, he cannot afford to let go of attention to the outer form of the containing structure for a moment, lest he lose the holding tension of all the parts.[22]

22 *ibid.*

Starting with a structure, initially minimal and geometric, Liz Coats moves towards rarefaction — a complex and sustained process; an unfolding expansion of colour. The spaces between the strokes of colour become ambivalent; 'white gaps', pushing through from the grid, cause vibrations between the colours — emulating, or enhancing, the gradation of dissonance and/or resolution. This relates less to consciousness alone than to the body, an organic *and* emotional articulation in the painting. In doing so, the artist at

once dissociates herself from an 'abstract' work in which form is stripped of subjective qualities. On the contrary, she overrides what is incidental, anecdotal or formal, in order to make possible a polyphony — flares of colour, a burning energy where . . . "the painting emerges as recognition rather than memory. Art which is coexistent in its responsive capacity without being illustrative".[23] As Irigaray has stated, a similar preoccupation to let the energies flow, or re-flow, exists in psychoanalysis.

23 *ibid.*

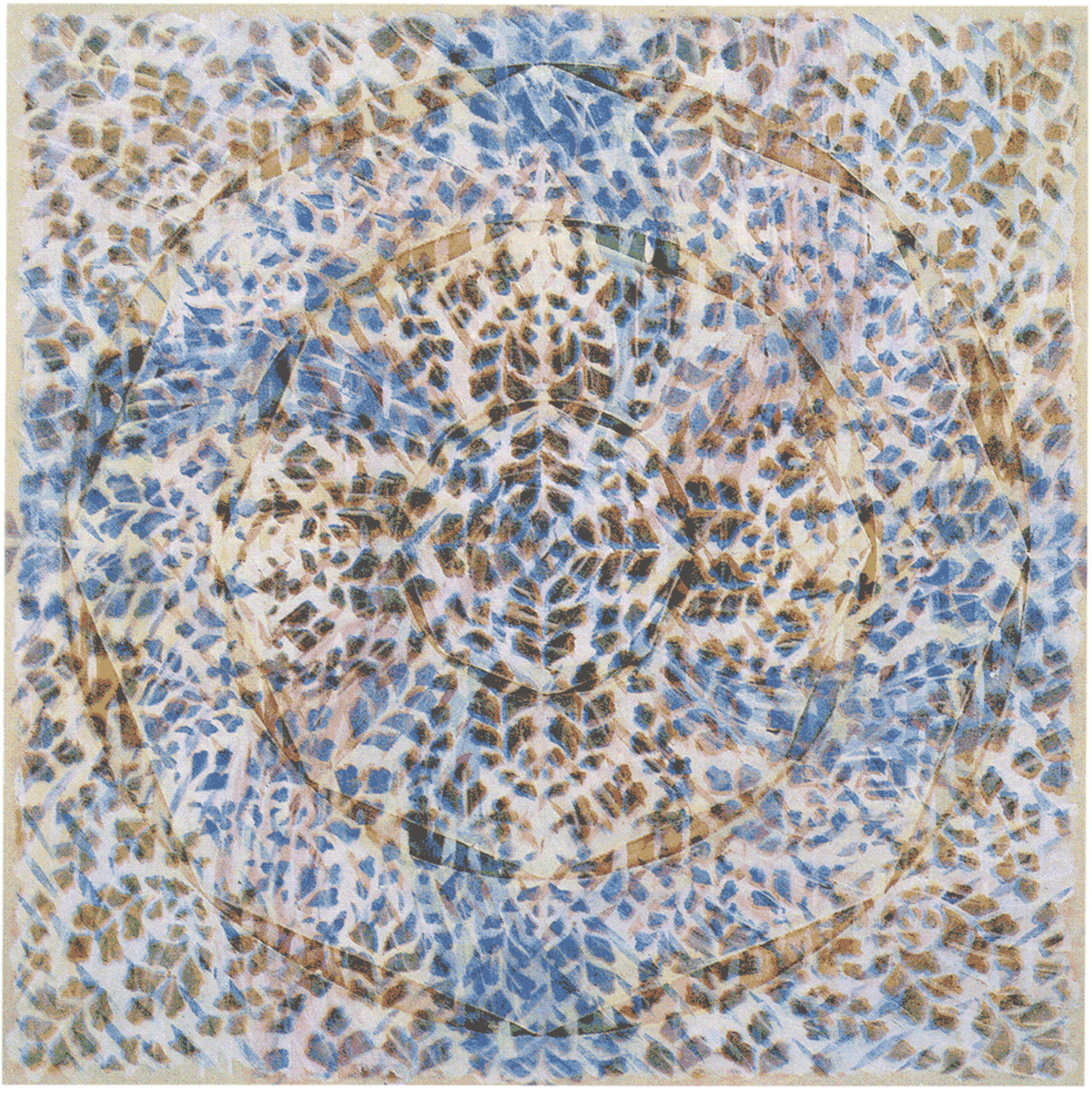
As each painting progresses, each new brushmark of colour — added to the canvas in response to all the others — balances volatility into elaborate harmonies, creating further momenta. The artist pursues the elusiveness of colour; the fanning out occurring within the overlays, dares each tone and hue to hold its own space. The grid still radiates from beneath the strokes of colour and spirals out, discreetly towards the viewer. The pulsations reach the eye, open up and expand into *contemplation*.

The play between mono- and poly-chromatic scales is also the play between the perceptible *and* the imperceptible. This play — 'space-time' — refers to her process of painting, which is the slow gathering of colour into the fullness of one moment; a moment unleashed when viewed.

The skilled composition of medieval rose-windows (which Liz Coats sees as 'images of the heart', of emotional expansiveness operating somewhat 'as mantras) with their carefully devised shapes and patterns and the distribution of complementary/oppositional values, induce definite and deep emotions within those who come to stand in their light. One could say that there is a correlation between such elaborate and colourful visual orders and specific emotional qualities — as if together, these two aspects can create a sense of wholeness and, ultimately, make one *realise* it. If one speaks of the 'undecidability of the form', like Kant, as embodying this experience, then the paintings of Liz Coats are situated at such a threshold, between inside/outside. We become within ourselves (if we do not turn our backs and run, not to be scathed or shaken . . .) the vibration of the colours — and so absorbed, we 'quiver'.

I use the word 'quiver' here with reference to two painters — Cézanne and Leonardo da Vinci. Cézanne, it is said, 'quivered' before each stroke, poised for a long time with his eyes 'glued' to the motif, before finally making with his brush, a steady stroke upon the canvas.[24] As for Leonardo, one of his pupils said that he appeared to tremble the whole time when he set himself to paint. Such 'quiverings' as these do not pertain to nervousness or some other such affliction. Instead, it seems to indicate an overall movement of a world which 'sways' or fluctuates: by getting out of his/her usual depth and striving to hold 'the whole of space and time', the painter 'moves', thus accompanying the

24 *Joachin Gasquet,* ***Ce que Cézanne m'a dit****, Berheim-Jeune, Paris, 1921.*



Liz Coats

CICADAS B1 *1992*

pigments and acrylic medium

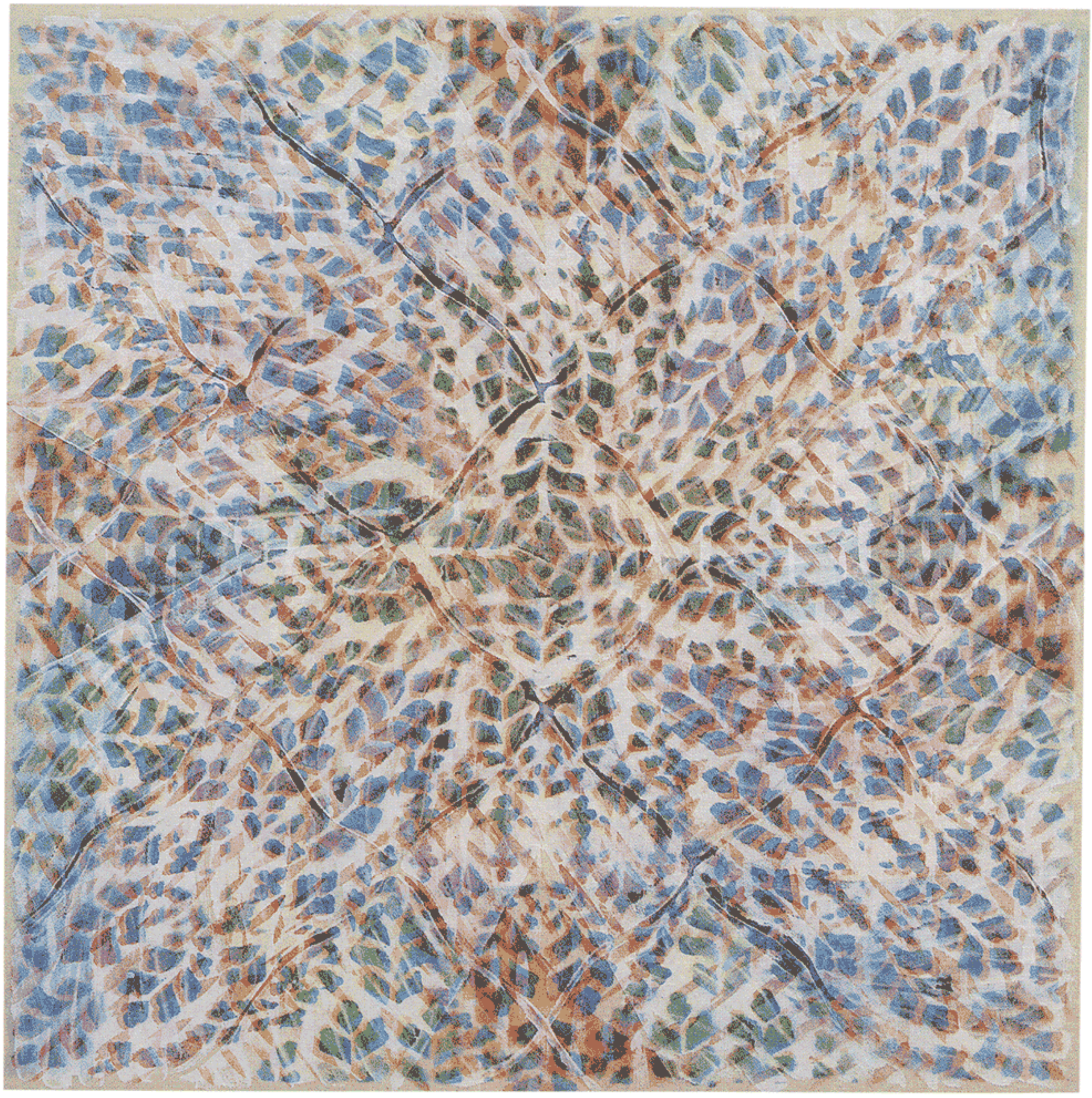
on cotton canvas

112.0 x 112.0 cm

Photograph: Tim Marshall

Courtesy: the artist and

Annandale Galleries, Sydney



Liz Coats
CICADAS A3 *1992*
pigments and acrylic medium
on cotton canvas
112.0 x 112.0 cm
Photograph: Tim Marshall
Courtesy: the artist and
Annandale Galleries, Sydney

renewal of perception itself. This is what Heidegger termed 'the call of the earth'[25] the acceptance that, at that very moment, everything can be put into question This is not a single cathartic moment, but space and time *being* the pulsation — the alternation of the world and oneself put into doubt, effecting a metamorphosis perhaps, when the whole is 'restored' only to become uncertain again. To sustain this challenge one needs conscious and, above all, unconscious memory to draw upon its resources; the richness of one's life experience — "The human being is forced to search deep into memory for the source of meaning", says Irigaray.[26]

25 *Martin Heidegger, "The origin of the work of art", transl. Albert Hofstadter,* ***Poetry, Language, Thought****, Harper & Bow, NY, 1971.*

26 *Irigaray, op. cit.*

Memory here, requiring the depth of sensory/sensitive experience, relates to fundamental 'moments of being'. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay *The interlacing — the chasm*, Irigaray in *The invisible of the flesh*, returns to the early moments of the actual experience of perceiving a colour.[27]

> . . . from the outside, the colour signals to me that it remains sovereign over the grip or the hold of my act of looking at it. Does it mean that the colour gives me more than if I were bending it to my formal decisions? Does it mean that colour pours out, expands, escapes . . . imposes upon me, recalling the most archaic in me, the *fluidity* . . . Colour resuscitates within me, all this former life which is even pre-conceptional, pre-objective, pre-subjective, this depth or background of the visible, where seeing and seen don't yet become differentiated and reflect each other without clear-cut positions for them.
>
> Colour bathes my look [*mon regard*] which sees it, perceives it more or less, modifies it in its visibility, but my looking can not outline it, create or bend it according to its decision. Colour constitutes a datum which escapes a subjective hold over it, and immerses again and always, the subject in an invisible site of the visible, a site that can not be mastered: hellish or celestial, prior or latter to an embodiment taking place in the duality subject—object. Colour, correlative to sight, far from being pliable to my decisions, demands that I see.

27 *Luce Irigaray, 'The invisible of the 'flesh', in* ***L' Ethique de la difference sexuelle****, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1984, pp. 146-147.*

This sustained regeneration of a primal experience with colour — the vibration of space/time — is what Liz Coats attempts to achieve in painting. In naming her recent series *Cicadas,* she recalls coming across a cicada about to emerge from its shell:

> I could see a small split opening in the dusty brown casing . . . Every change in the sequence could be seen clearly, while also seeming to be framed in stillness. One could easily imagine a liquid energy pulsing through the creature, forcing it to expand and change through every point of its body. Simultaneously it was changing colour from the inside with patches of light brown to limey green. Bumps on either side of the abdomen began to lengthen and unfurl into transparent and veined wings which extended beyond the length of the body. . . . I realised that it was entirely appropriate to connect this observation . . . with the paintings I was doing. I

> was also reminded of the experience of being enveloped in the massed sound of hidden cicadas in mid-summer — those swelling and receding waves of sound which penetrate the ears and body of even the most resistant person. Walking through these zones of sound in sunlit bush, the intense vibration resounds through one's body and touches against its very solidity. The dynamic particles of which one is made seem to surge to meet the sound in an autonomous exchange quite apart from one's will.[28]

28 *Coats, op. cit.*

The superimposition of colours (and this for a long time has been her technique) now results in transparent overlays which appear as flesh or skin irrigated underneath by a circulation of lively colours. Blues and reds are drawn together but in a movement that is barely perceptible, either infinitely slow or stroboscopic. The viewer is taken into a lasting and possibly infinite exploration. Within this shimmering foliage we can also feel the restful curve of time, that unpredictable arabesque recalling Heidegger's notion of 'the fold of being'. Liz Coats speaks about her work as a sort of mandala (meaning all those things with which one has connection in the world), but there is a playfulness of colour and a humour which pervades the canvas. The lightness of touch which, far from dismissing materiality for the benefit of an essence beyond our senses, allows the viewer to respond to, and interact with, each painting. Vividness is experienced in relation to the tension of enclosure, which actually intensifies the playfulness of matter. For Liz Coats, transparency is sustained or grounded in a very practical, but deeply personal, process.

Perhaps what Irigaray says about the rich possibilities in combining colours — how, versatile as they are, they can express variations in sexual difference, has some bearing here. In the transparency and polyphony of colours, and in the resonance of faded hues against major bursts of colour, there is a sense of what matter *is*, how first and foremost, it is energy.

What Cézanne regretted about the Impressionists was that their interest in sensation as the play of light and colour, missed the fact that sensation is not in the air, it is in the body. But what Cézanne meant by body, be it the body of an apple, was not something inert, but a living energy made up of the four elements and thus responding to the physical, *vibrant* beings that we are.

On this particular topic, the author is indebted to her teachers Henry Maldiney and Gilles Deleuze.

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