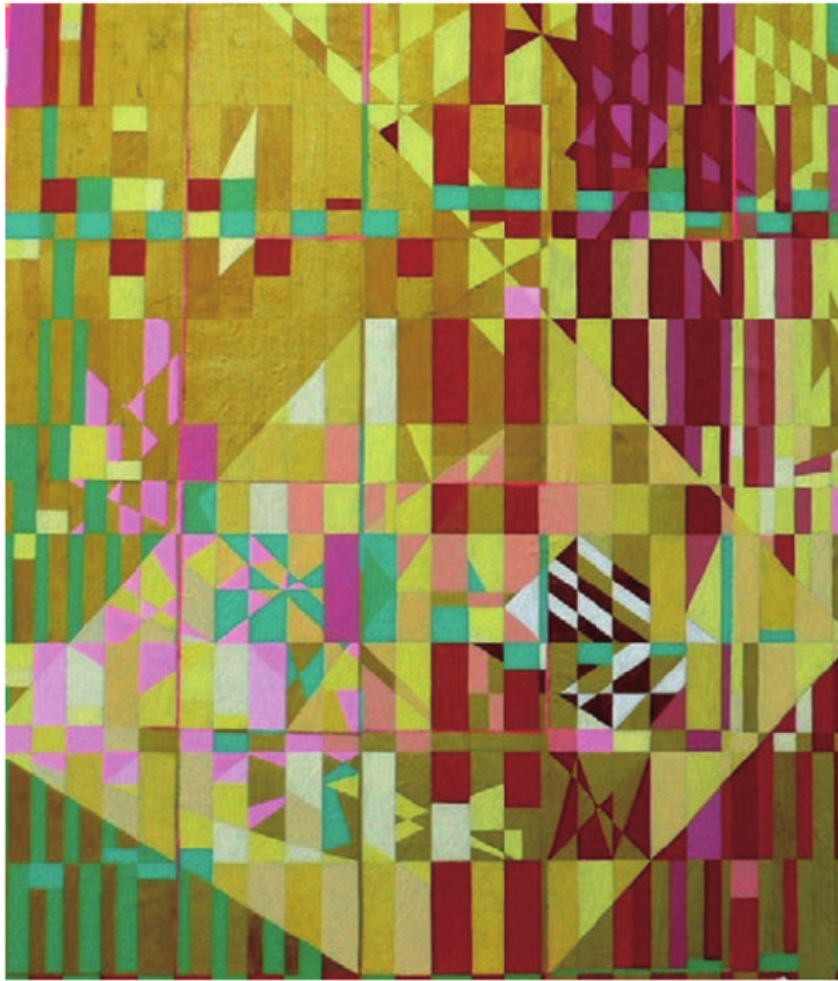


Chris Cook Artworks 1997 - 2014





Changes Series (Untitled 12), 2014, collage, acrylic on board

Chris Cook by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

I met Chris Cook when she was a student at the Royal Academy School in London, she was working with an idea about the sublime but found no mileage in landscape or its colors. We talked about other kinds of color, and ended up talking about the ubiquity of red in Hong Kong, where Chris told me that if you went to buy a plastic bucket or anything else it would likely be red, and soon after that she began to make the work that filled the room with paper hangings each painted a different shade of red (p.20, 24-25).

That work, which situated the viewer in a space redefined by a concatenation of reds which could not be seen as a whole, allowed her to find a way to work with accumulation as much a subdivision. I think it also gave her an idea about what kind of intensity she wanted her work to have, or with which she wanted to work. The instability that she developed with the red installation paintings turned, in the course of her subsequent return to the stretched canvas, into something like the opposite. Now the paintings are quite small, the viewer can certainly see them all at once, but to see them is to get lost in them.

Changes Series (Untitled 12) for example is a painting which at first seems straightforward—albeit in a manner not quite recognizable—and immediately becomes nothing of the sort. What I might perhaps describe as the illuminated shape or area, approximately a lozenge but irregular, seems at first to define the painting. It is connected to the top, by a line that turns well before it reaches the bottom. There is space around it and, broadly speaking, the painting as a whole is based on red-green complementarity. As soon as one starts to look, though, one begins to see the painting as if it were made of almost nothing but exceptions to whatever rule one thought one had seen: diversions, irregularities, the implication of another geometric scheme beneath or beside the one that one thought might give a key to the whole. Transparency is used to mislead, were one to be searching for simple logic, as in the bottom left of the painting where some shapes just get lighter as they enter the brighter light of the approximate lozenge, other

shapes change their shape and also their color. What happens at the top right of the painting is very different from what happens at the upper left, and this soon makes one realize that the whole right hand side is organized, or works, differently than the left, the movement from the left-middle of the top that produces the outline of the lozenge turning out to be one that differentiates as much as it unites the two sides. It is at that point, possibly, that one becomes most engaged with the red/violet and bluish green/yellowish green variety that keeps parts of the painting apart from one another while maintaining a consistent light throughout the whole.

I feel a great deal of commonality with Cook's paintings, and could also point to others of her generation with whose work hers might be seen to have something in common, in some instances for obvious reasons but more generally because she uses generic, geometric shapes and makes work at once complicated and subtle. I think, though, it more important here to address the singularity of her work. Abstract or nonrepresentational painting, as a kind of art, is now a little more than a hundred years old. Cook and others treat it as an ongoing practice, indifferent to the many attempts to declare it dead on account of we find it very much alive. I think, moreover, that the geometric is such a basic way of working that it is in practice possibly the only actually international painting there is. In part this is because abstraction's genealogy is so all over the place on account of its internationalism, it cannot really ever have or have had an original center or place of origin, like for example Surrealism. My friend Rex Butler, a professor at the University of Queensland, has drawn attention to the similarity between some Australian and some Californian abstract painters of the fifties, who coincidentally looked to Kandinsky where those in New York did not such thing. An international tendency with representatives on either side of the Pacific, but whose participants were mutually unaware of each other. Linked also I should think by the coincidence that the light in Brisbane is pretty similar to the light in California.

Cook's work is almost certainly best seen if one pays attention to what it is about in that is not quite like other paintings with

which one might compare it, and this is what is so exciting about the kind of paintings she makes. Abstract painting is an instrument, its components are pretty straightforward, what people do with it that separates their work from others all the more visible because of the similarities that a shared set of terms make obvious. The red lacquer reference is a thing of the past but I think that what has replaced it, as in the painting discussed here, are kinds of transparency that have as much to do with the translucent light of screens as anything else, which association is for me heightened by this painting's palette. The way the top of the painting works, particularly Cook's use of the upper right, is semiologically fascinating and the action at the top's relationship to the lozenge shape is, I think, unlike anything I've seen in any other painting. It is semiologically fascinating because it frustrates any reading of the painting that doesn't see the upper right as having a significance as a zone of complication, quite at odds with the western tradition of reading from the upper left and as such a significant frustration of it, particularly when one proceeds from there to the rest of the painting, and the place of the movement from the center upper left of the line that joins the perimeter to the lozenge.

The majority of the younger painters I know make smaller rather than larger paintings nowadays, not least because big has become so continuous with bombast. Cook's paintings of the past couple of years or so may in my view be said to involve the viewer in a more developed relationship between repetition and incident than her earlier works, and perhaps are becoming more specific with regard to what kind of surface(s) and space(s) she wants paint to invoke.

That said, there aren't any other paintings quite like these, as will be obvious to those who look at them with paintings they think similar in mind. To return to the internationalist theme, in Britain her work might find itself compared with the work made by the team of Emma Briggs and Matthew Collins, who use pattern and geometric shapes and on occasion colours not unlike Cook's. In America there are a host of people with whose work hers might be compared, and it would include Rebecca Norton's work, some of Shirley Kaneda's and also some of mine. That is to say that she works in a field which is not

confined to a single generation and its enthusiasm's, or, and this is much more important, to a shared definition of painting or any particular kind of painting. Unable to see Cook's work except in photographs for the past few years, I have been careful not to say too much about what I can only imagine in regard to how these works sit in a space. Likewise, I have not pursued with her any questions about content. However, from what I can see and do know, it is clear to me that her work should be of interest to anyone engaged in making or thinking about abstract painting. Cook's early work often pops up in my conversations with other artists, now the more recent work will as well.

© Text by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Los Angeles, June 2014.



This book covers some of the artwork I have created since 1998, when I first graduated from De Montfort University in Leicester, UK, followed by my post graduate studies at the Royal Academy School in London between 1998 and 2001, through to the present date with work produced at my studios in London and Hong Kong. I hope this book will give the viewer an insight into my work; how my work has developed and evolved throughout the years and how colour continues to be the main focus throughout my work.

I was born and brought up in Hong Kong, leaving there for Britain over 20 years ago. When I first moved my mind was full of childhood memories of growing up in Hong Kong; my favourite novels, street food, the summer heat, the noise, the crowds, constant building works, temples, my own particular upbringing and the inevitably suppressed emotions growing up in a Chinese culture. Becoming an artist was not something I envisaged though I was keen to find the sort of freedom that was not available to me in Hong Kong, and to take the opportunities to further my knowledge and experiences in life.

Chris Cook, Hong Kong, March 2015



Stamford Arts Centre 1997



Stamford Arts Centre 1997

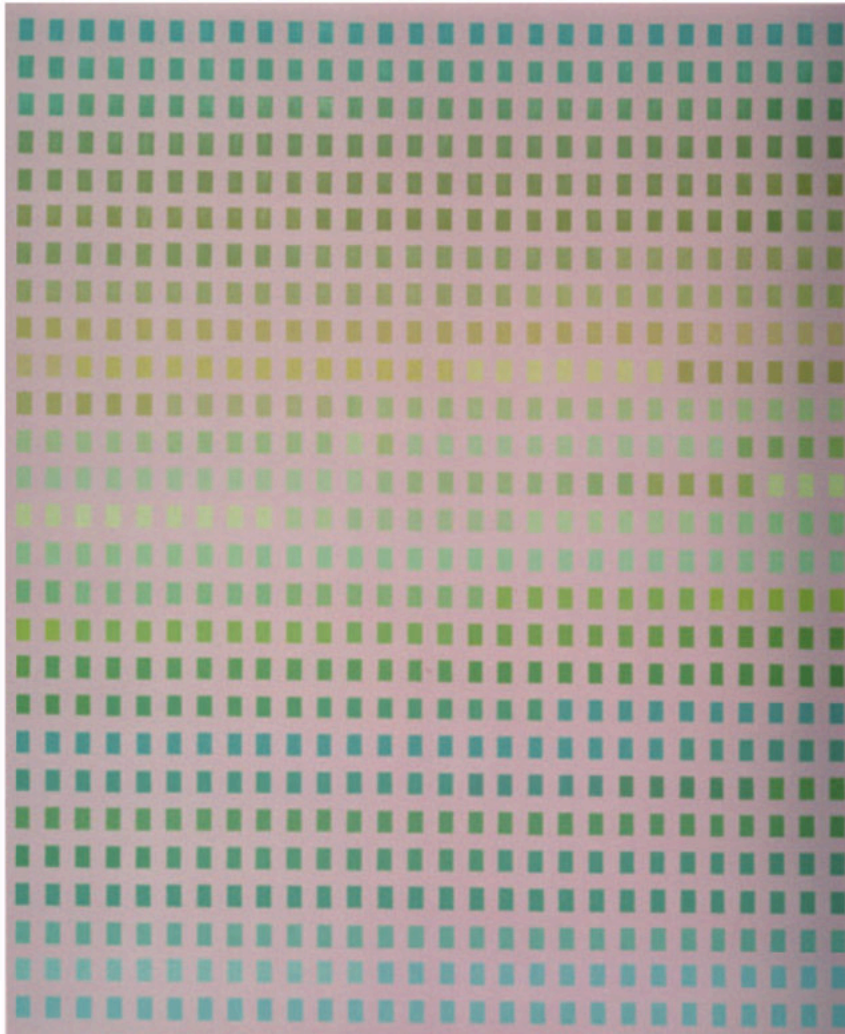


Night Sound, 1998, oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm

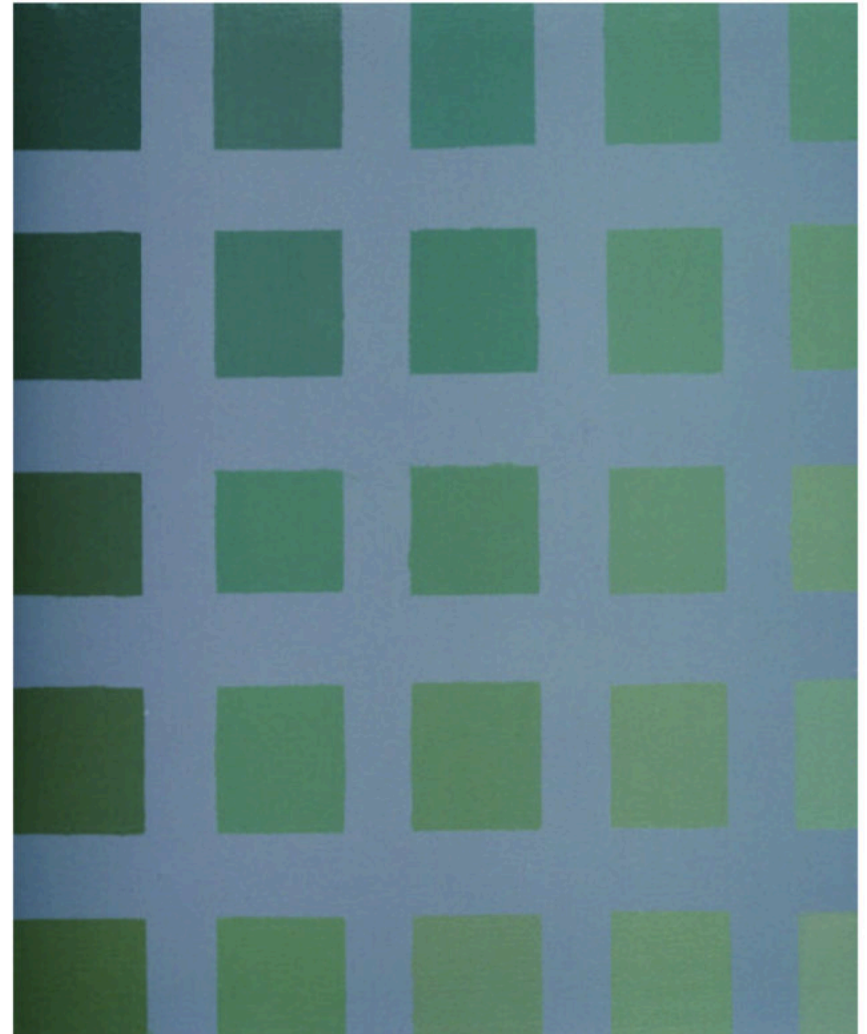
Early Work

My earliest work was heavily influenced by those memories of growing up in Hong Kong. Not only of how certain colours were used in objects and buildings, but also of the sounds and smells of places which remained vividly in my recollections. This is reflected in the paintings which were exhibited at Stamford Arts Centre, UK, 1997 (p.10-11); how memories are weightless, shifting, overlapping and sometimes rather blurry. The paintings were made up of loose square and rectangular shapes with fuzzy edges floating on the painted surface and overlapping each other. Layers of thin oil paint were applied to create a sense of transparency and a shadowy effect, reflecting on how memories come and go, and shifting from moment to moment. A limited range of colours, two to three, were used to create different sensations and rhythms. The large scale used was to create something that was bigger than the human body in order to overwhelm and envelop the viewer. The work gradually developed into something more hard-edged with a definite grid structure. **Night Sound**, 1998 (p.12) was created after a summer trip to Hong Kong. I wanted to convey a sense of hustle and bustle as well as sleeplessness. Sleepless nights spent observing other buildings nearby, with many apartments still lit deep into the night, resembling, from far away, stacks of TV screens. This work was my first attempt to use the grid format as a structure to compose a work and to allocate colour in such a way. The painting was made up of repetitive squares of varying size overlapping each other. Instead of having a focal point, the colours were dotted round the painting so that one's eyes had to move with the colours to try to find a sense of the work.

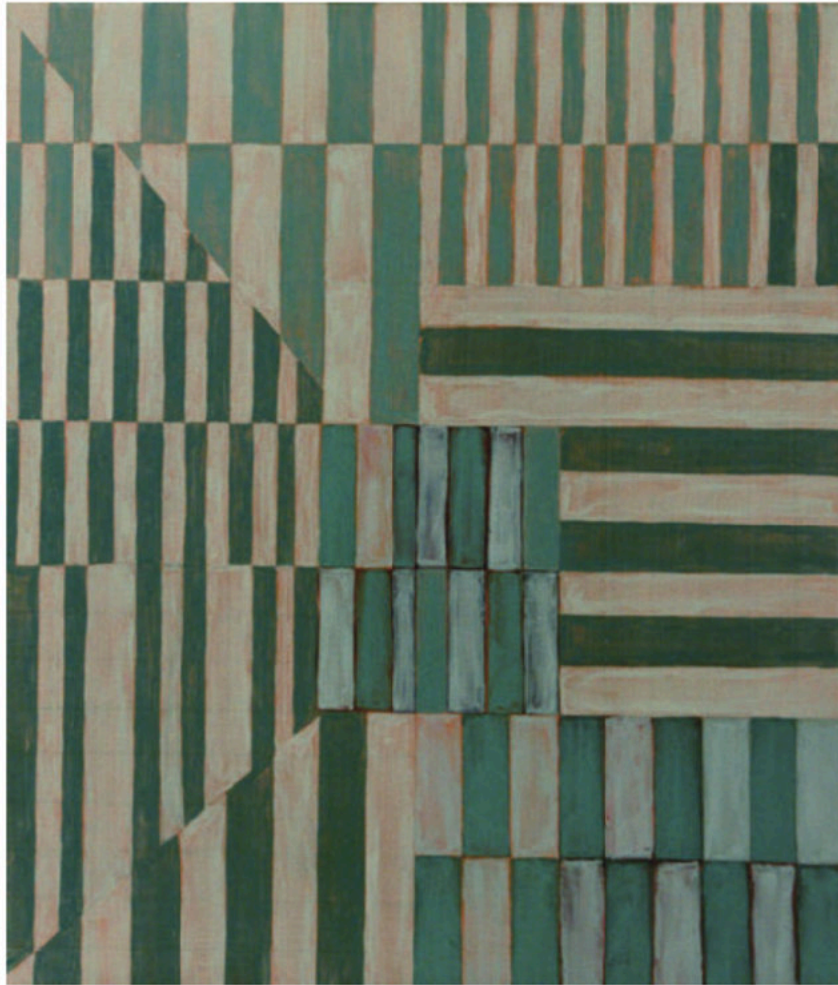
Eventually I created a body of work which explored the grid structure as well as certain juxtapositions of colour (p.14-15). A major influence at that time was Bridget Riley, with whom I had had a tutorial with at Leicester and was certainly someone to whom I looked up to and took inspiration from at the time. Though I was interested in how she used colour in her work, I soon realised I was becoming less concerned with painting in such a mechanical and precise manner.



Light, 1998, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm



Untitled, 1998, oil on canvas, 25 x 20 cm



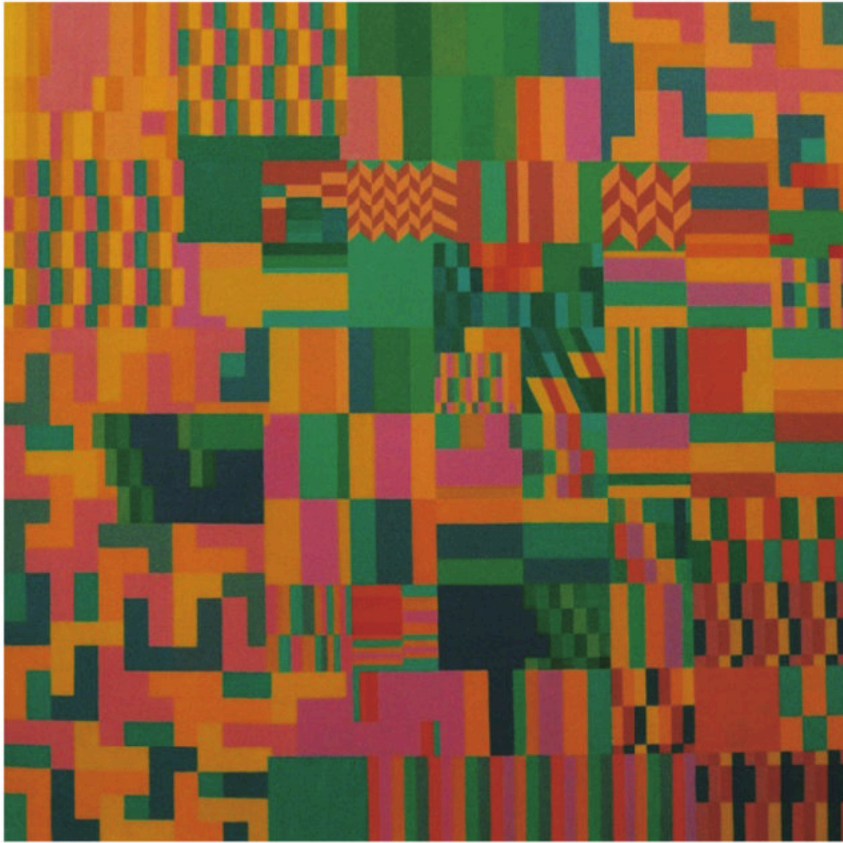
Untitled, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 45 cm

The Royal Academy years

For the first year of my post graduate studies at the Royal Academy School in London I continued with the use of a grid structure and juxtaposition of colours as an anchor. I was and still am attracted to the perception of colour from memories rather than from reality. Equally I am still fascinated to see how colours change their properties (their hue, tone, intensity, rhythm) when they are juxtaposed with each other.

In that body of work (p.18-19) I noticed how some colours kept resurfacing, and their specific hues reminded me once again of the colours of objects from my past. The jade green painted walls, a pinkish orange colour found in the curtain, salmon pink and gold colours in various ornaments from home. This not altogether harmonious mix would easily come through from my subconscious and would emerge in my work without intention.

This then led me to focus on colours that are omnipresent in Chinese culture such as jade green, salmon pink, gold, and particularly red. The colour red represents happiness and good fortune in Chinese culture, as opposed to in the West where it is more associated with passion and even violence. I was interested in how red has been used both in profane objects and sacred environments in Hong Kong, as well as examining the various emotions it could convey. When I was growing up, there was a company which made plastic household objects that bore the name Red as its brand name (I recently saw an advertisement from the company and realised that it is still going). Red, especially the brighter hue, is ubiquitous in Hong Kong and it was a colour I most disliked as a child. In my mind, it represented cheapness and vulgarity, as I always associated the colour with plastic buckets and chairs. In addition I was an involuntary temple goer when I was a child. Despite my general disliking of the colour red, I somehow found comfort from the deep red interior of most Taoist temples in Hong Kong. Being surrounded by a room which was primarily deep red, I remembered feeling a sense of tranquility and peace.



Beat, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm



Circles, 1999, oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm



Installation at Royal Academy School of Art show 2001, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable

Red

For my graduation show in 2001 I took the idea of using mainly red and decided to see just how far I could take it (p.20, 24-25). Instead of painting on canvas, I painted various shades of red on strips of paper and hung them from ceiling. I used my own body height and width for the size of the paper as a starting point, then the paper was painted with many layers of acrylic paint, flatly and carefully, until the right intensity of the colour was achieved. Once painted, I would carry the piece, like a body, off the table and lay it down on the floor to dry. I still remember the care I took and the posture I used to lift off the paper as if carrying a sick or injured person.

The hanging paper was light yet strong, and when one walked among the work it created movement and required one to move one's own body (eyes and feet) when seeing the work, connecting it more closely and physically to one's own body and its immediate environment. Other colours such as green and grey, were used to redirect one's gaze. The way of hanging the work from the ceiling was inspired by how space was utilised in Hong Kong.

The next two exhibitions I had in London, 'Ten Days' and 'Tonic' in 2002 and 2003 respectively were based on the idea of using red in various shades to create a temple-like atmosphere as well as conveying a sense of impermanency.

For the exhibition 'Ten Days' the gallery space in Morley Gallery, London, was transformed into a red room with intensely painted hanging paper with a variation of reds. A red carpet was laid to ensure the completeness of the enveloping redness (p.30-31).

The exhibition also included some paper folding sculptures which were directly based on the paper offerings used in temples (p.27, 29). These were based on the experiences of having to spend endless hours at weekends folding 'offering papers' for the temple my mother attended. These would vanish in seconds as they were tossed into a furnace and went up in smoke before our eyes. When I was making the paper objects for the Morley exhibition, I had already been fascinated

by their complexity and variety; perhaps even more so considering the time spent on creating something quite elaborate for just a short life span. Those elegant and richly created paper objects seen in temples are works of art in their own right. However, in that environment they are simply seen as practical objects with a function, and I therefore wanted to remove them from their origins, and put them into a gallery space, and to question what makes an object art. I painted each paper with layers of paint to create the desired hues and laboriously cut the paper into equal sizes before folding them. I was trying to create a sense of transience and maybe even convey a certain futility in the work by spending a huge amount of time creating something which only lasted for the duration of the show. At the end of the exhibition, everything was discarded.

In many ways the following exhibition 'Tonic', 2003 was more successful than the previous installations in terms of scale and the mood it conveyed. The gallery space was a long room with natural light through the ceiling. The suspended paper hangings, with various shades of red, were overlapping each other (p.32-33). There was a subtle difference in the relationship between the viewer and the work in this piece. Unlike my previous work which allowed the viewer to walk around and even behind the work, the viewer would realise that they could not 'enter' the work as they got closer to it.

Creating this installation took me back to my earlier work about memories, and how those memories were built up with many small and individual elements. Instead of painting on large and strong paper, this work was done on very thin and inexpensive newsprint, rather like the quality of the Chinese "offering" paper. I liked the idea of using something cheap and turning it into something elaborate and beautiful.

In 2004 I was invited by London-based photographer and writer Michael Freeman to create a piece of work based on 'architectural space' for his book *Meditated Spaces* (2005) (p.34-35, 37-38).

I transformed my Bethnal Green studio into a room for contemplation, to express my emotional feelings at this time. I wanted to create a space that could convey a feeling of serenity and fragility. The studio walls were covered with red hanging banners, and the floor and windows were

covered with semi-translucent Chinese paper to diffuse the natural light as well as separating the interior from the exterior.

The red banners were painted individually before being joined together to form a large scale banner. They were painted in a range of powerful and intense reds and hung from the ceiling to the floor. The overlapping paper banners transformed the interior into gently moving and fragile walls. Colourful paper sculptures were displayed on a shelf, also covered with paper, at the end of the room.



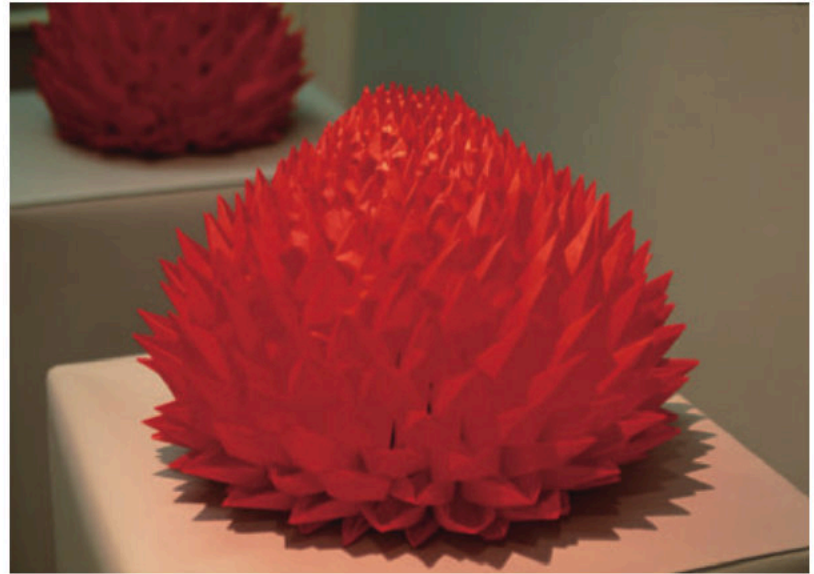
Installation at Royal Academy School of Art show 2001, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable



Installation at Royal Academy School of Art show 2001, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable



Installation at Morley Gallery, London, 2002, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable



Lotus, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable



Installation view at Morley Gallery, London, 2002



Installation view at Keith Talent Gallery, London, 2003



Meditative Spaces, acrylic on paper, installation at Bethnal Green Studio, London, 2004

© Photography by Michael Freeman

(Images on p.34-35, 37-38) Installation view 2004



© Photography by Michael Freeman



Meditative Spaces, acrylic on paper
© Photography by Michael Freeman

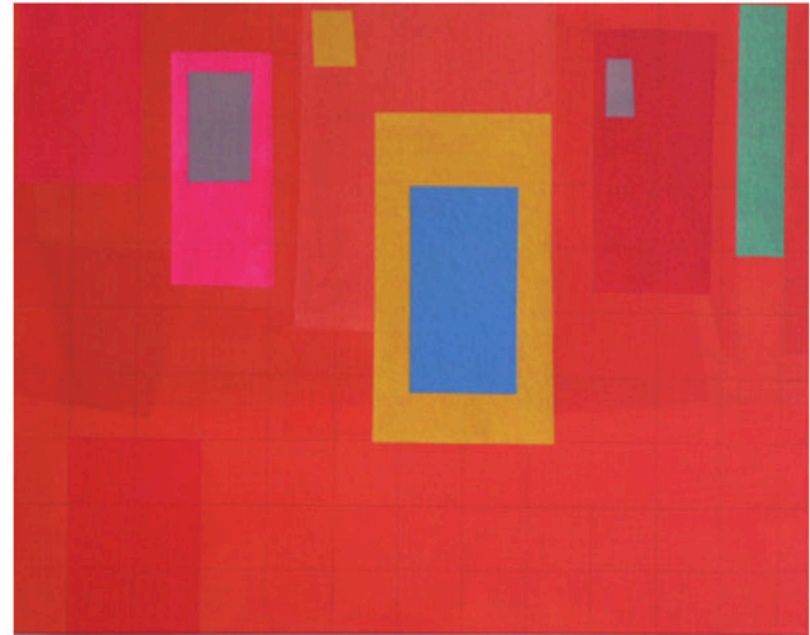




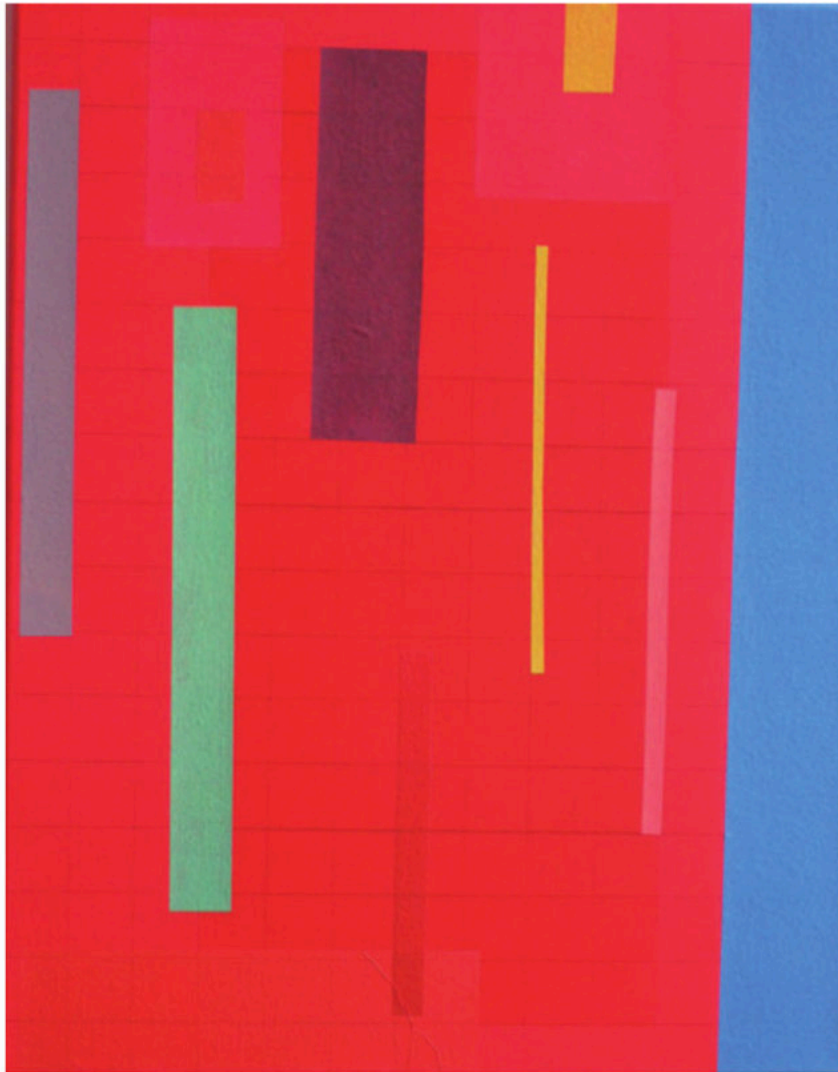
View of **Studio Interior Series**, 2010, collage, acrylic on canvases, dimensions variable

Canvas, colour, collage

After a short sabbatical from painting, which served to replenish my reserves of creativity, I picked up again the thread of working on paper. I moved back to working on canvases after a long time, which were like concentrated versions of the former large-scale banners I had done before. Mixing painting and collage I had in mind Matisse, especially his *Red Studio 1911*. Matisse is one of the artists I would return to again and again during this period when I wanted to explore how colour and space work in a pictorial setting.



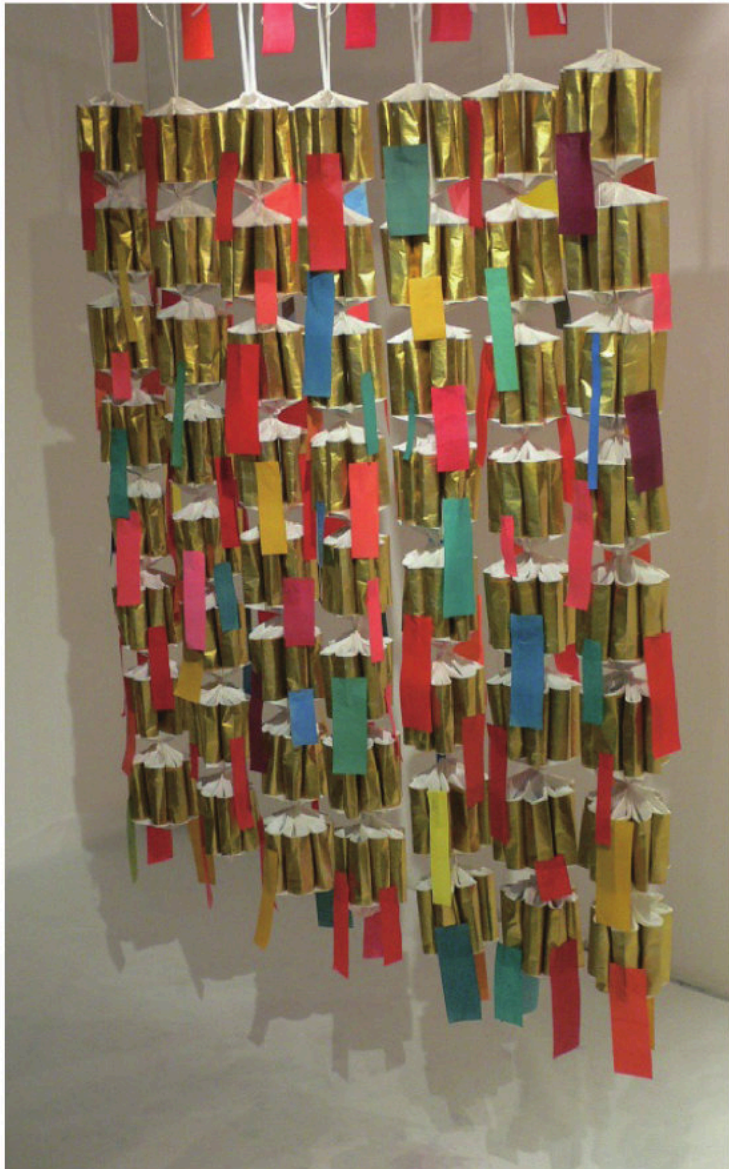
Studio Interior Series, 2010, collage, acrylic on canvas, 35 x 45 cm



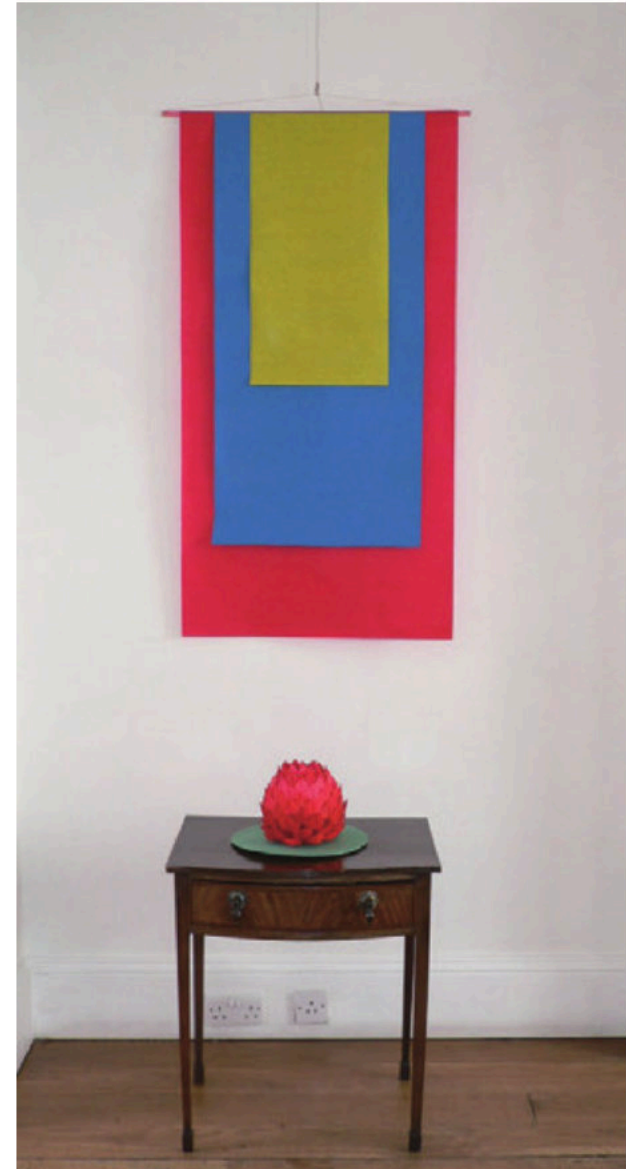
Studio Interior Series, 2010, collage, acrylic on canvas, 25 x 20 cm



View of **Studio Interior Series**, 2010, collage, acrylic on canvases, dimensions variable



Ephemeral, 2010, acrylic on paper, C & G Artpartment, Hong Kong



Installation at Troubadour Gallery, London, 2010, acrylic on paper



Installation view, Tai Tong Lai Chee Valley, Hong Kong, 2010, acrylic on wood, dimensions variable



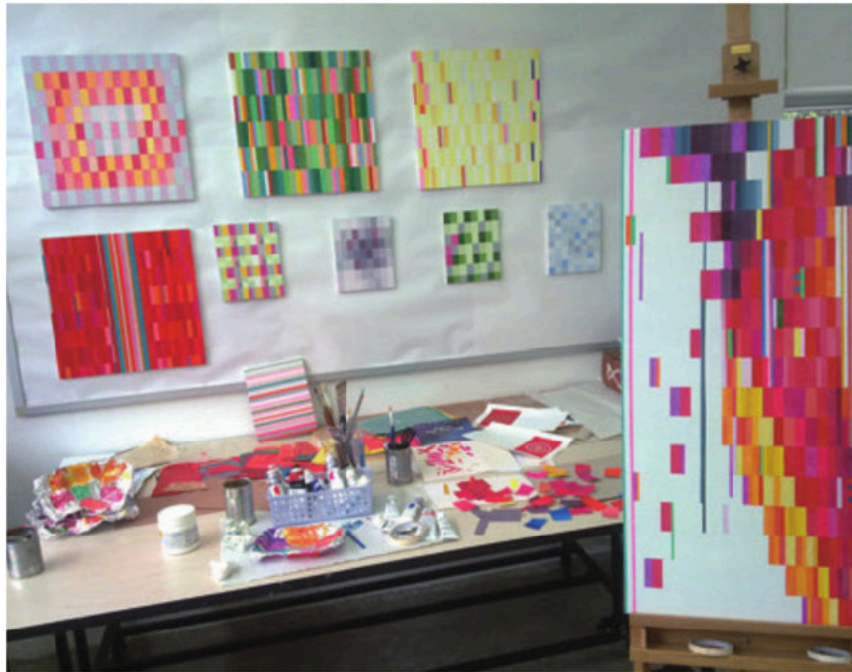
Studio, Hong Kong 2013

Repetition; geometrics, shapes, colours

The last two years have seen my work take a new direction, although using repeated geometric shapes and colour to create both order and chaos in the work has, in some ways, taken me through a full circle back to my earlier work from over ten years earlier. A grid is a great tool to construct a painting as it gives me a basic structure in which to divide the painting into equal space and to organise colour. I am fascinated by the instability of colour and how it changes its properties when it is juxtaposed with another colour. Equally I am intrigued by how flexible and practical a grid structure can be though one might associate it with rigidity. There are a lot of contradictions and exceptions involved in my work; as the painting is divided into equal squares or rectangles initially I would then break the 'rules' and expectations to cause confusion in the work. By doing that I am usually the first person to get lost in my own painting. The paintings done in 2013 were more straightforward compared to those completed in 2014. They get smaller at the same time they are more intense and complex. This body of work is titled the 'Changes' series as the paintings indeed change from moment to moment without prediction as they were painted. The word Changes also refers to the Chinese divination book of *I Ching* which I have read and practiced in the past.

I see my recent work as a set of 'visual problems' which I have deliberately created and of which are not always resolved as such. I would start a painting with a basic grid structure, however when the direction of the particular painting seemed to start to get predictable, I would then change the structure of the geometric shapes and colours in order to create irregularities. Similarly when the painting got too chaotic, I would then introduce some order to compensate. Ultimately, the colours need to work together as a whole.

At the time of writing I am currently based in Hong Kong and my recent work has in many ways been inspired by my immediate environment as in the past. Apart from using reds and the colours



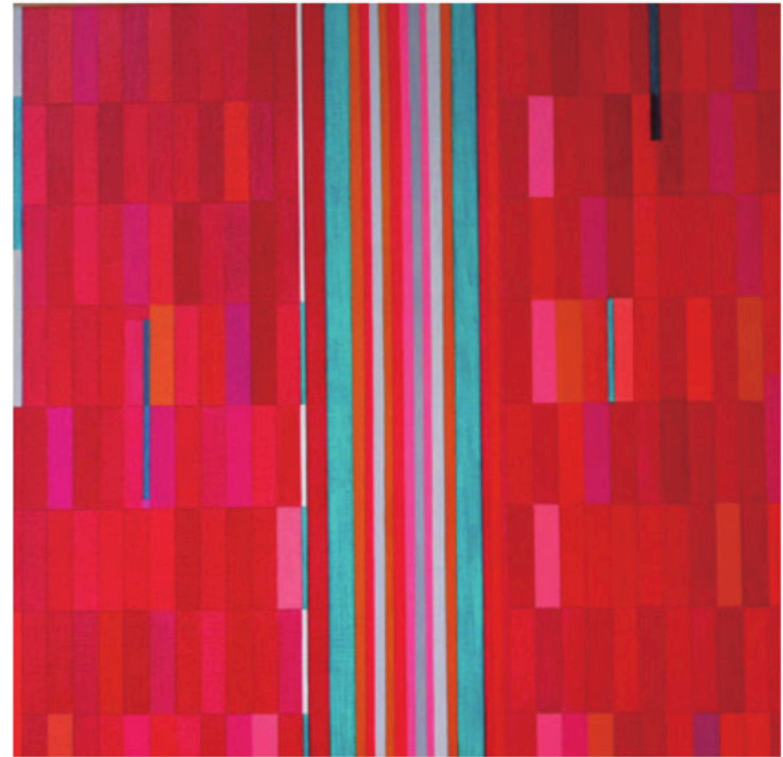
Studio, Hong Kong 2013

associated with Chinese culture, I have also introduced other colours I have seen from my travels in south-east Asia. A visitor to present day Hong Kong would immediately appreciate the crowded nature of the place and how every inch of available space is utilised. Driving along a freeway snaking through the urban environment one can be confronted with sheer walls of apartment blocks, forty, fifty, sixty storeys high, seemingly overlapping each other. From a distance they look like a gigantic installation of geometric shapes with rather grey and lifeless colours. Hong Kong can be an unforgiving city to live in, yet if one looks, one can still find beauty in such an environment.

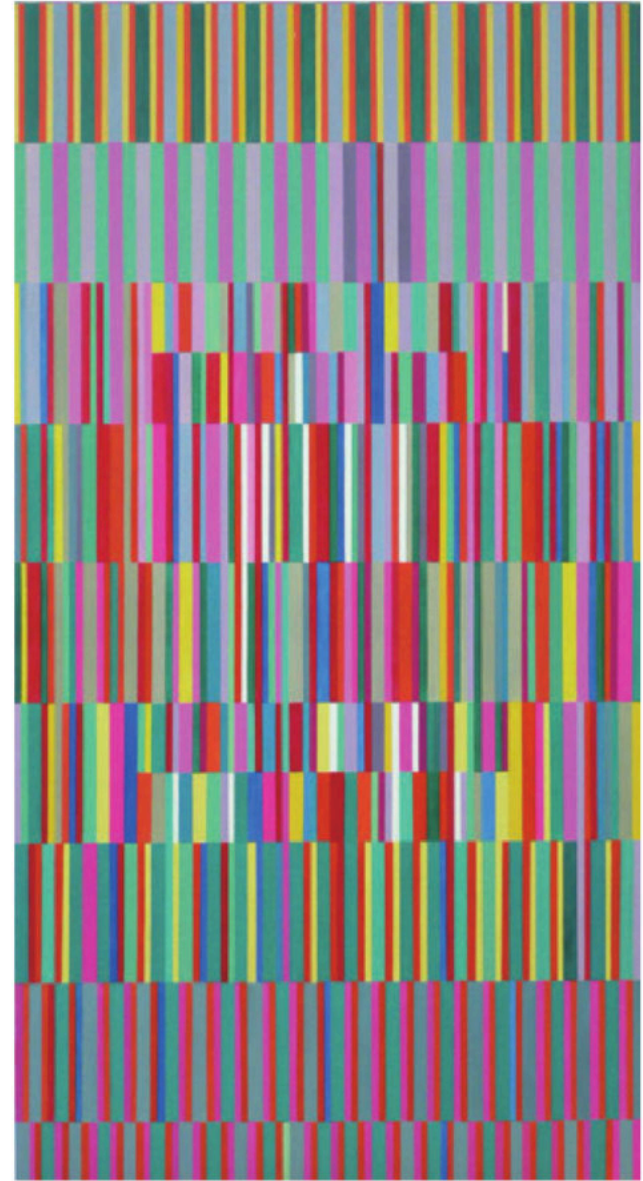
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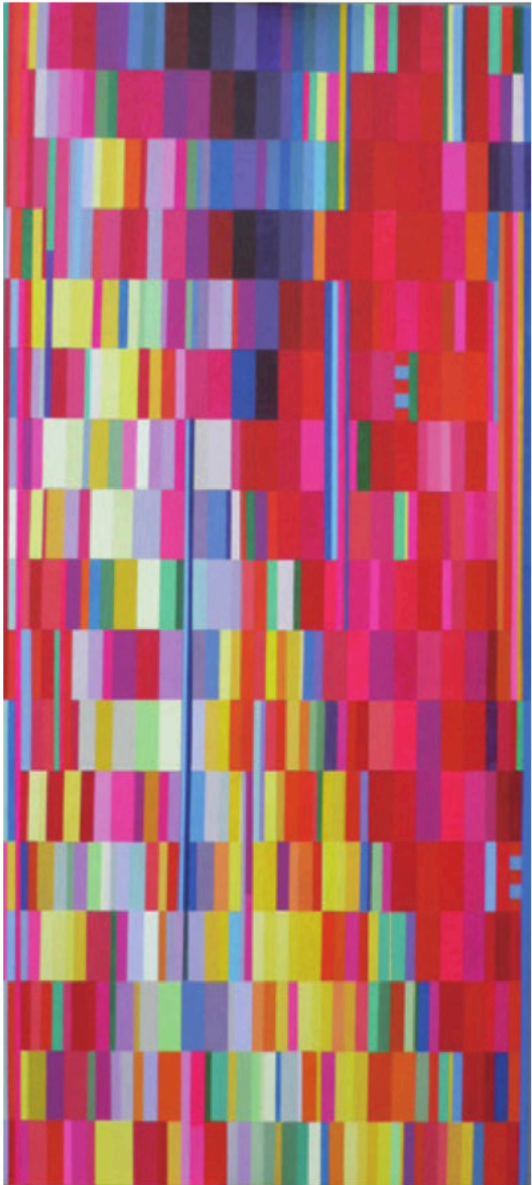
Changes Series (Untitled 6), 2012, acrylic on board, 45 x 45 cm



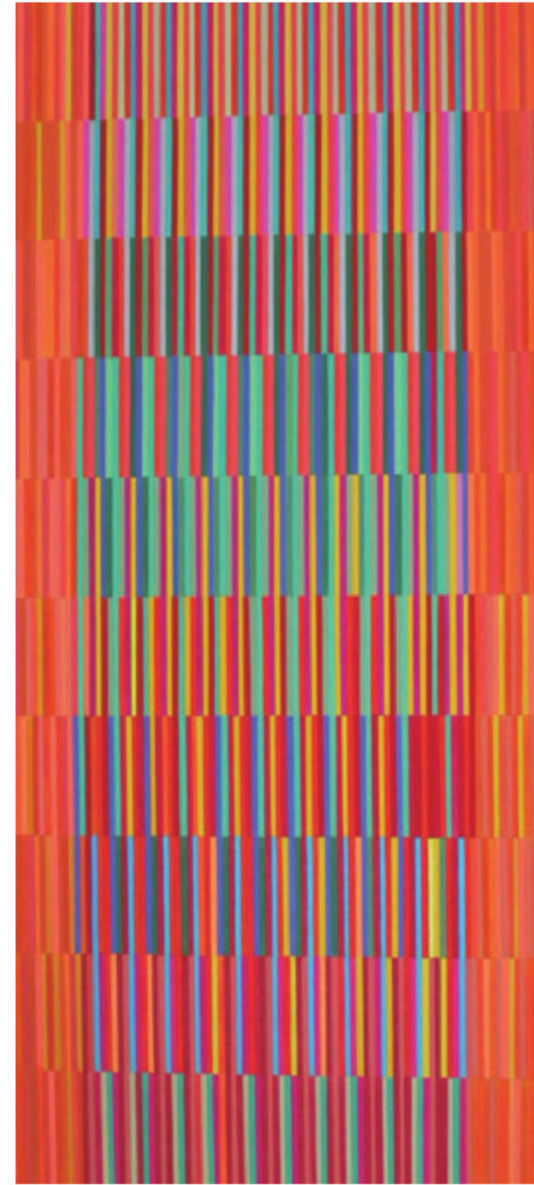
Changes Series (Untitled 5), 2012, acrylic on board, 45 x 45 cm



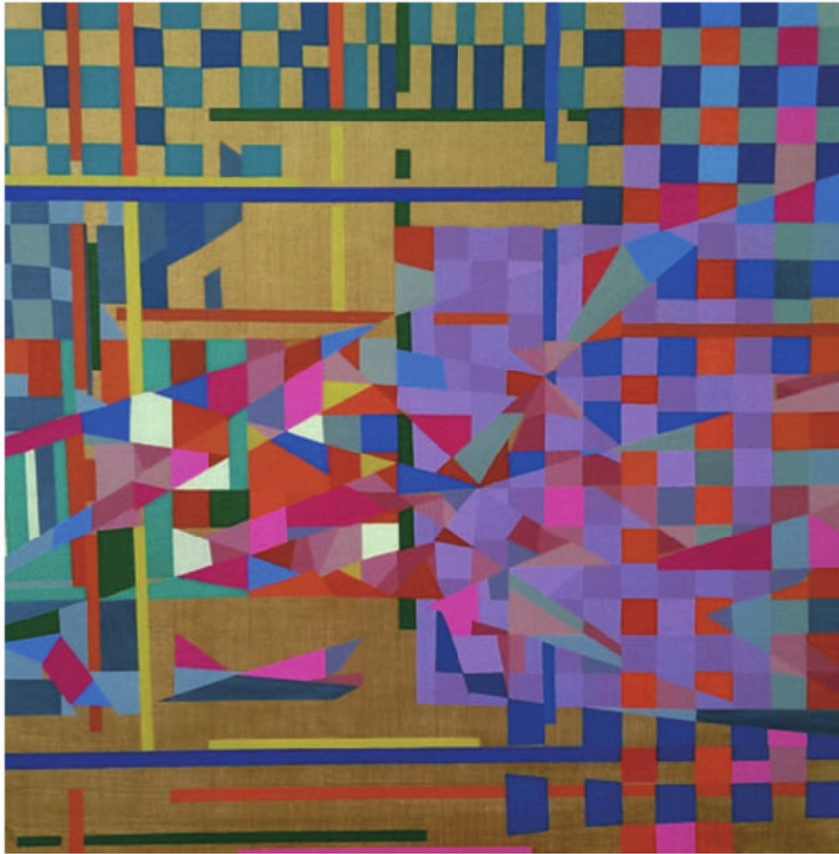
Changes Series (Untitled 8), 2013, acrylic on board, 100 x 45 cm



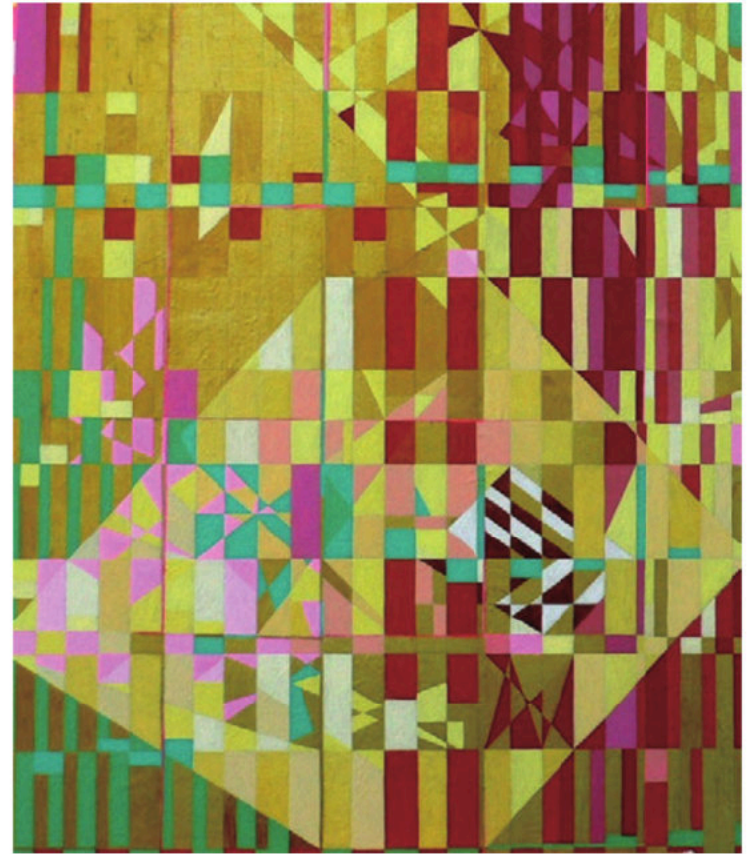
Changes Series (Untitled 7), 2013, acrylic on board, 100 x 45 cm



Changes Series (Untitled 9), 2013, acrylic on board, 100 x 45 cm



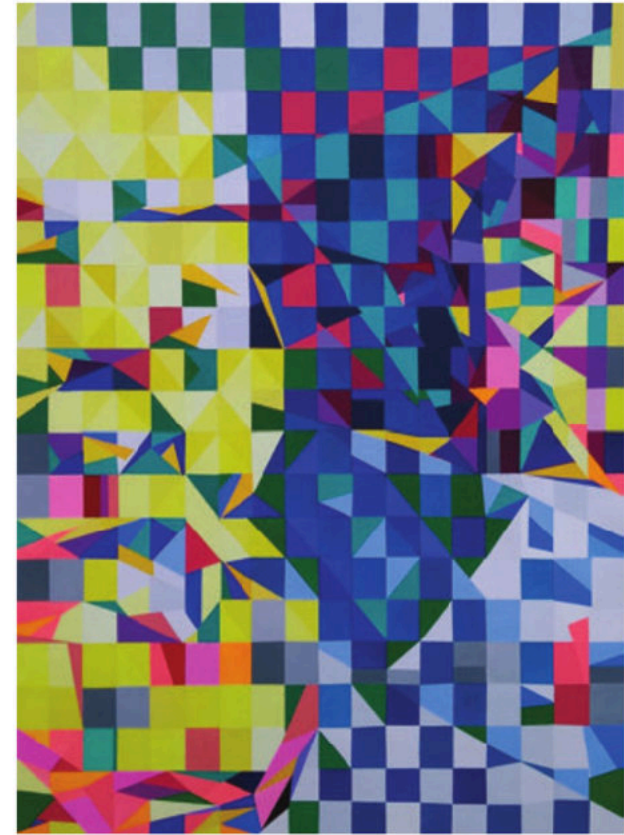
Changes Series (Untitled 11), 2014, acrylic on board, 45 x 45 cm



Changes Series (Untitled 12), 2014, collage, acrylic on board, 70 x 60 cm



Changes Series (Untitled 13), 2014, acrylic on board, 45 x 45 cm



Changes Series (Untitled 14), 2014, acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 cm

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Chris Cook was born in Hong Kong and has lived for most of her adult life in London. She has studied at De Montfort University, The Royal Academy Schools of Art and Imperial College London. She is currently based in Hong Kong.

www.chriscook168.co.uk

Chris Cook: Artworks 1997-2014

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