

CHRISTOPHER  
WINFIELD



# CHRISTOPHER WINFIELD

## A SUBTLE EDGE

Christopher Winfield has never known a life without art. He is the beneficiary of an uncommonly creative, mid-century American upbringing. From childhood, artistic activity surrounded him as a daily event. He saw his father, Rodney Winfield, a prestigious stained glass artist, jeweler, painter, and sculptor work through the flow of his ideas, solve creative problems, and bring his artistic concepts into being.

As a youth, Winfield learned many of the practices he witnessed by working as his father's apprentice. Soon he excelled at repoussé, the technique of hammering silver from the reverse into low relief, and could successfully replicate his father's designs. He shaped and sanded colored glass for the elder Winfield's stained-glass commissions, which along with windows in many synagogues and churches included the celebrated Space Window in Washington, D.C.'s National Cathedral. These early experiences grounded him in both the integrity of craftsmanship and dedication to one's personal vision. They also honed his eye to color, balance, and proportion—the essentials of good composition and design.

Winfield's first forays into painting were small figurative pieces in a visionary mode, but he soon understood that this work arose from his father's influence, and that his own voice lay somewhere very different. At Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he studied art and earned his degree, Winfield became intrigued with exploring surface over content. He found that his loosely painted backgrounds were of more interest to him than his apparent subjects, and he began to develop these for their own sake.

University level art education of the 1960s and 1970s highlighted the philosophies and methods of two seminal figures whose ideas shaped a generation of artists, Winfield among them.



The flat plane of the canvas was of paramount importance, while descriptive, illusionistic perspective painting became almost irrelevant. Renowned German artist and teacher Hans Hofmann developed his "push-pull" system that used color, form and texture to shape the interplay of foreground-background space on the canvas. In contrast, the equally distinguished artist and Bauhaus educator Josef Albers addressed the challenge of the picture plane with simple arrangements of geometric forms, manipulating color intensities and relationships to generate tension and movement, and to vary their emotional effect. Albers' twenty-plus year project of prints and paintings called *Homage to the Square*, underscores the limitless possibilities of his concept. Both of these approaches directed Winfield's explorations as he developed his own work.

During this period, Winfield became aware of Southeast Asian art through his discovery of a book on the Ajanta Caves, which had a galvanizing effect on him. The caves, now a World Heritage Site, date primarily from the fifth and sixth centuries CE and are located in the state of Maharashtra, India. Carved into riverside rock cliffs and fashioned as prayer halls and monasteries, they house monumental Buddhist sculptures and paintings crafted with exceptional care and devotion. The book revealed images of beatific beings now only partially visible through their eroded pigment. The contrasting solidity of cave wall to the tenuous painted surfaces revealed to Winfield the possibility of a new, more permeable spatial reality, that might be achieved with paint. Deeply intrigued, his interest in Asian Art grew to encompass the geometry and patterning of tantric art, and the precisely



composed formality of Tibetan thangkas. That the intention of these paintings is not descriptive but transcendent—meant to foster meditative or awakened states of consciousness—was of equal interest to Winfield.

Without doubt, Winfield found resonance with the geometric stillness and clarity offered by Albers' squares, and with Hofmann's push-pull aesthetics. As an art student, he was also the beneficiary of another extraordinary group of genre-defining American artists who advanced a wide range of abstract styles in the post-war years. Mark Rothko's expressive swaths of color, Ad Reinhardt's muted semi-monochromatics, Larry Poons floating ellipses, and Ellsworth Kelly's shaped color fields were among the most significant to Winfield. But ultimately, the influence of Asian art redirected him away from the more familiar canon of Western

painting. Although the prescribed, diagrammatic Asian artwork to which he was drawn might seem the polar opposite of mid-twentieth century abstraction, in their mutual avoidance of traditional illusionistic scene painting they are oddly comparable. Ultimately, the suggestion of indefinable spaces and the non-ordinary reality in tantric and Tibetan art is a path Winfield chose to investigate further.

Winfield's paintings describe just such visionary environments: dream architecture comprised of armatures inhabited by circles, squares, and triangles, and constructed of meticulously applied layers of paint. His attraction to geometric form had already emerged in his student days as a device for harnessing the expansive energy of his canvases. Interestingly, tantric art too makes use of geometry for its purity and structural clarity.



In Winfield's work, geometric forms provide focus and movement and are the exclusive operators in his compositional arrangements. Using a protractor and ruler, Winfield always begins his paintings by drawing a grid with a pencil or sometimes a pin. Frank Galuszka, artist and Professor of Art at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has written about the artist, and suggests that this grid gives an important "underlying implication of stability to each painting." The square format of most of Winfield's work further grounds and contains its dynamic energy. As he paints, a dialogue unfolds in which he adjusts proportion, orientation, and color until the piece evolves to its final resolution.

Color is the major force of Winfield's work, determining mood and mystery and revealing or obscuring details. He is attracted to ranges of

purple and orange, and these choices dominate the majority of his paintings. He often uses the two together with surprising and powerful effect. Mixing and preserving his colors with care, he may obsessively build up as many as twenty or thirty thin layers of paint in order to achieve the precise result he is after; his eye for minute variations in tonal range is exacting. The painting, *Untitled*, 2012, 40 x 40 inches, is a superb example of this command. This work draws the eye into an illusory landscape that shifts between foreground, middle ground, and background, delineated by elusive purple triangles that emerge from a deeply shadowed ground. The play of small, brilliant tipped squares and triangles in subtle variations of red, orange, and light purple rise and fall with a musical fluidity—is it over? into? under? or through?—the thick shadow behind, and the orange glow below.



The placement of each small shape contributes to and supports the whole with a flawless, asymmetrical balance.

In a tour-de-force of complex multi-dimensionality, his fiery painting *Untitled*, 2012, 40 x 40 inches, reveals rows of triangles, (or upended, two-toned squares), which rise, float, subside, and dissolve, corralled by the interplay of myriad brilliant persimmon, marigold, tomato, and mango oranges. Deep stripes of velvety ruby and purple bisect and anchor an otherwise combustible field. Subtle indications of a triangular chevron pattern together with a Southwestern desert tonality recall Navajo blanket designs. But Winfield has devised a multi-dimensional atmosphere in flux that no Native American weaver has likely ever contemplated. Like *Untitled*, 2012, above, this painting demonstrates his impressive

comprehension and control of illusory space, capturing the eye with an almost hypnotic force.

A distinctive shadowy half-light pervades many of Winfield's paintings. In the darkly mysterious work *Untitled*, 2014, 40 x 40 inches, Winfield expertly manipulates color to draw the eye into what first seems a singularly uniform zone. But once focused on the impossible blueness of the two obvious squares, a larger purple rectangle arises behind them, joined by a barely visible purple border. The opposing rich magenta edge, rimmed by an infinitesimal streak of electric violet, reveals an enticing dream doorway. Frank Galuszka's observation that, "every distinction between shapes or colors is a distinction between luminous spaces," acknowledges Winfield's expert handling of color and form to realize this compositional magic. At the other extreme, Winfield may suffuse



a canvas with an abundance of light. The painting *Untitled*, 2005, 40 x 40 inches, floods the eye with the rich antique glow of saturated gold, punctuated with a granite-like bar of blackish red and purple, while *Untitled*, 2015, 24 x 24 inches, displays a more lurid edge, its harsh light bleaching away its color. Even the touches of purple and red seem depleted, unable to withstand the onslaught of the intense surrounding hue.

Winfield has developed his singular style over many years as a working artist. In addition, he is an important gallerist whose critical eye hones in on authentically exciting artists, many of whom he works with closely. Yet throughout his exposure to the intense rivalries of the art world, he holds fast to his own iconoclastic ideal. Unlike much Western art, his paintings are neither narrative nor are they

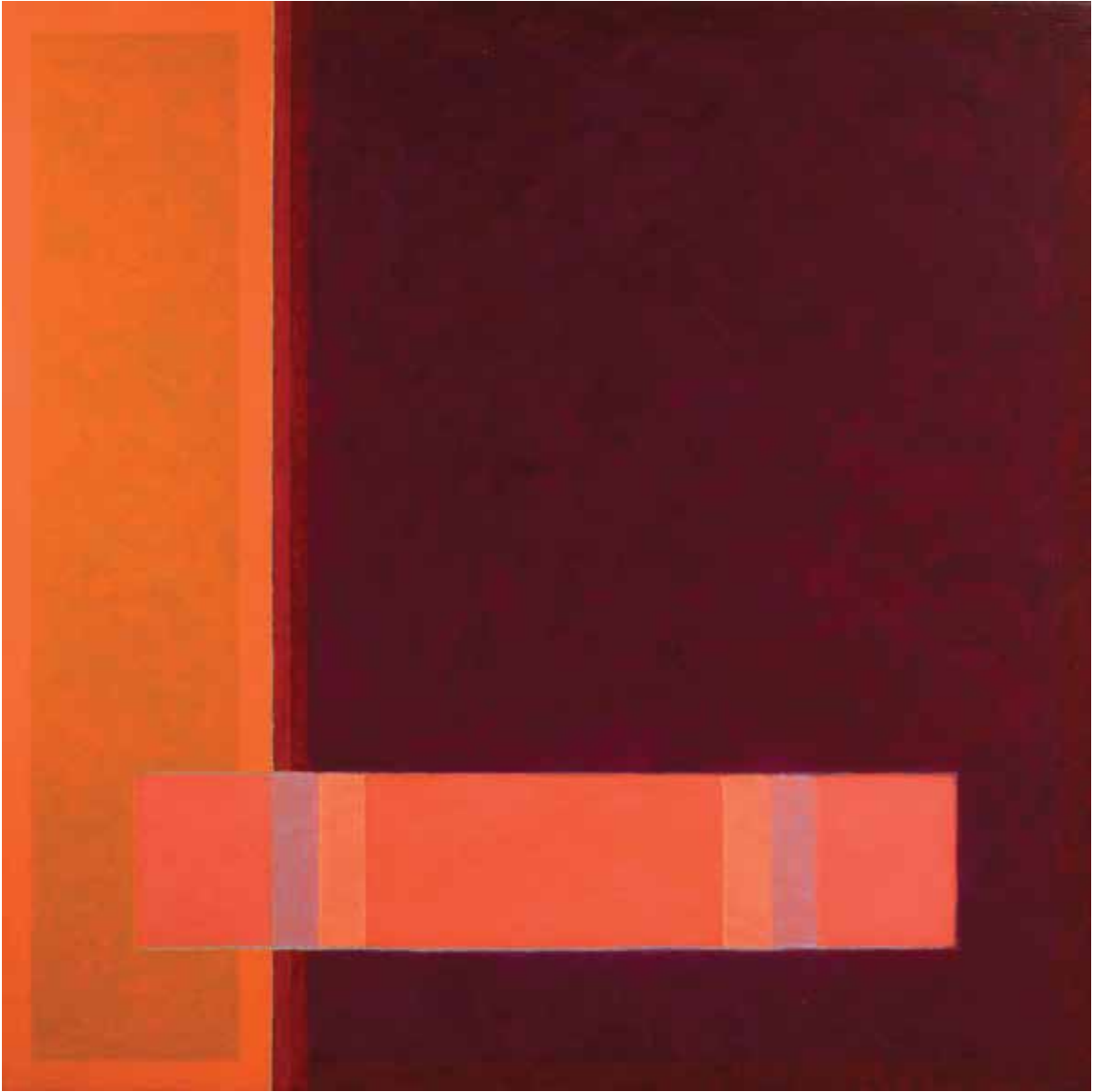
purely abstraction or interpretive expression. With Josef Albers' color studies at his back, Winfield drives Hans Hofmann's push-pull methods into new territory, uniting a supremely refined color sense with meticulously layered and orchestrated compositions. He devises personal, non-objective landscapes—outward manifestations of interior dreamlike realities—that invite immersion and quiet contemplation. In this way, his paintings are akin to the Tibetan thangkas and tantric paintings that attracted him long ago. He has followed their ancient lead, blending them with the tenets of mid-twentieth-century abstraction to achieve an endlessly fascinating, thought-provoking, and beautiful conclusion.

—Helaine Glick,  
Curatorial Advisor

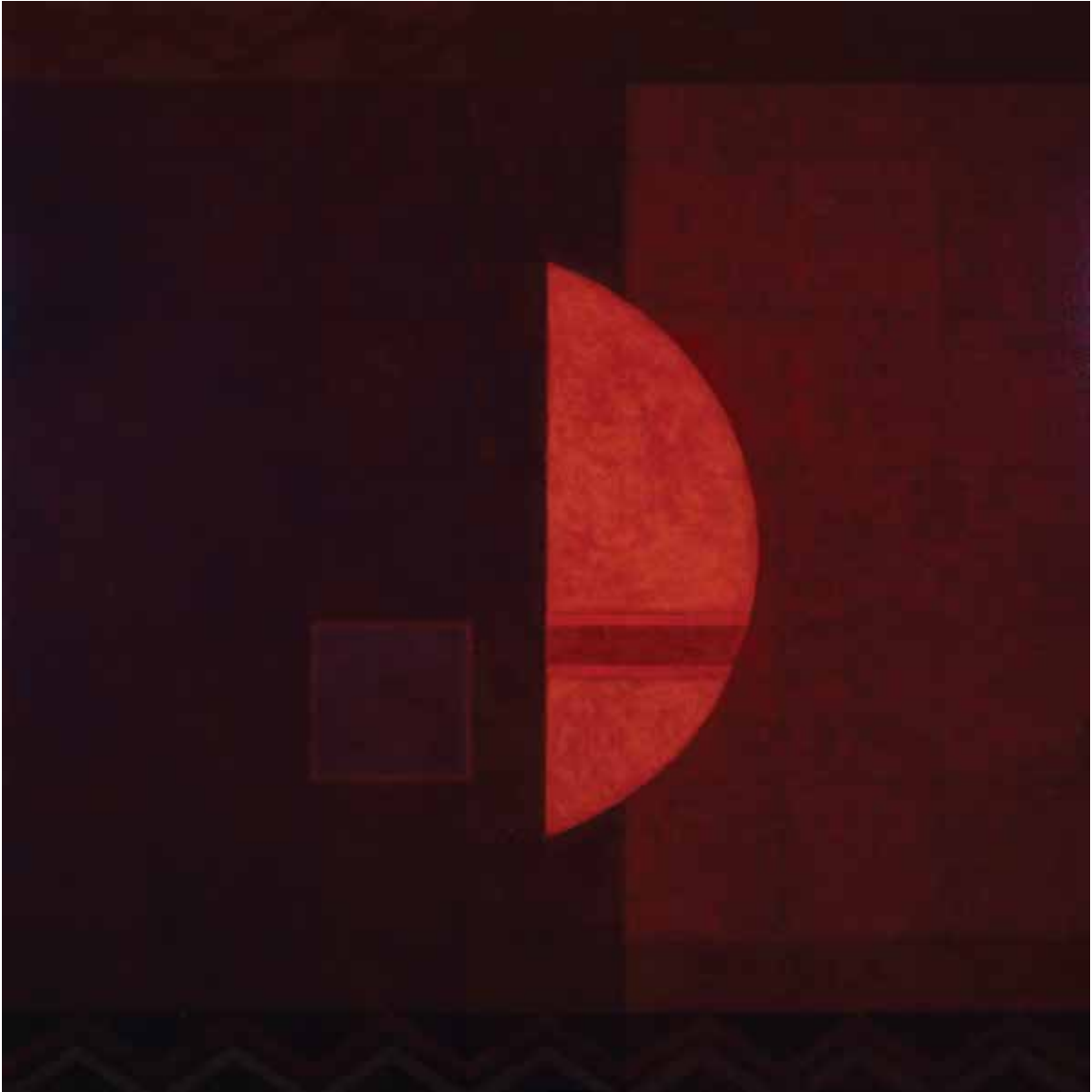


**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches

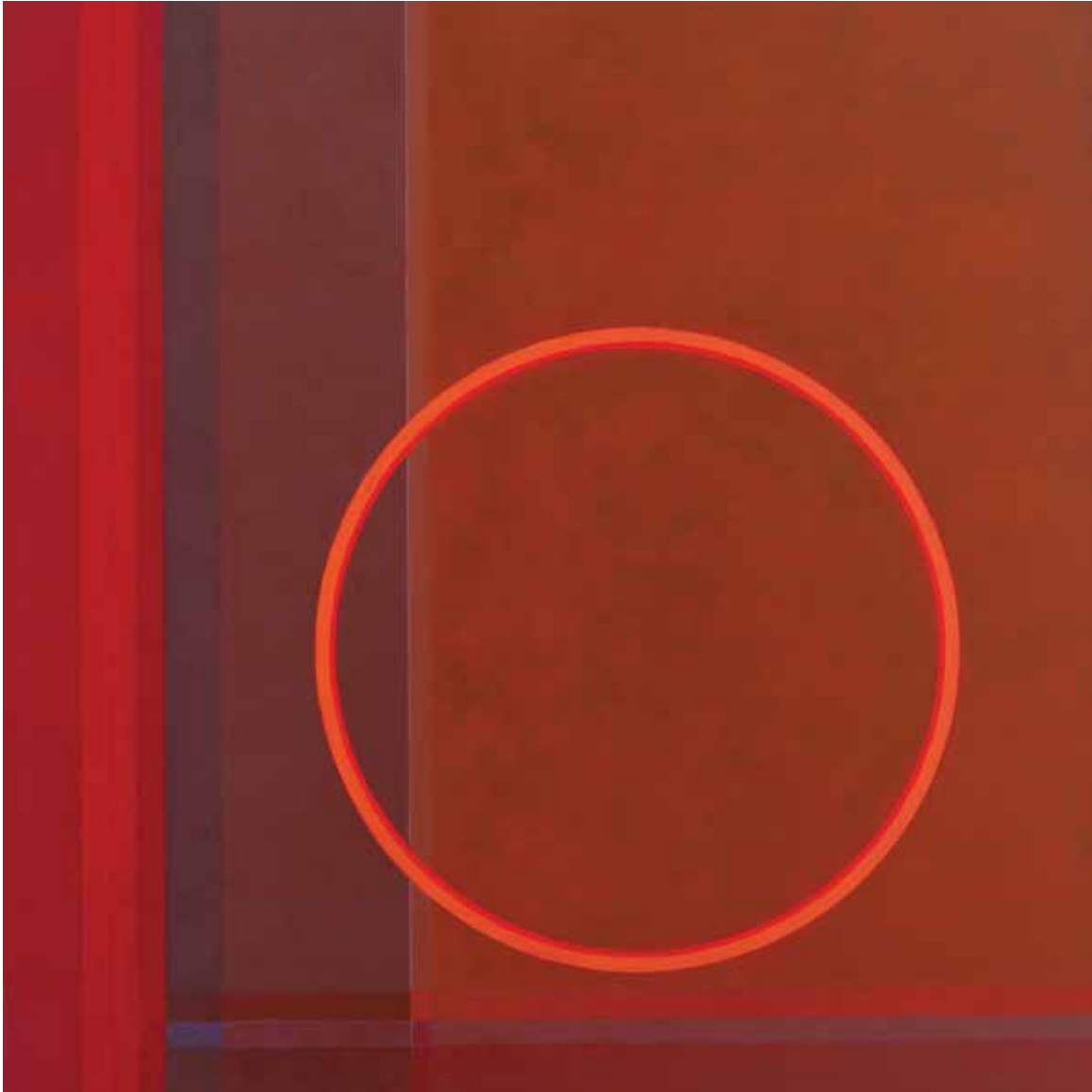




**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches



**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 42 x 42 inches



**Untitled**, 2012, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches  
Collection of Sam and Coralee Linder



**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches



**Untitled**, 2014, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches



**Untitled**, 2012, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches  
Collection of California State University, Monterey Bay



**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches



**Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 42 x 42 inches





**Untitled**, 2013, acrylic on canvas on board, 36 x 36 inches  
Collection of Monterey Museum of Art



### **Artist Statement**

For the past three decades, my painting interests have kept me happily working within a specific focus. Using only a vocabulary of geometric shape and pattern, which I paint freehand, I build up and sand thin layers of color to gain an organic but careful precision in my work. I add narrow edges of contrasting color to help the shapes breathe and emerge from the background spaces.

Within the painting's shallow meditative space, structures feel real yet never physically solid. I want the viewer to be immersed in a space that is at once both active and completely silent, and frozen in time.

### **Debt & Inspiration**

The Triton Museum of Art for this opportunity; my father; my wife; the masters who painted the Ajanta Caves; Tibetan and Indian Tantric Art; true masters of light—Mark Rothko and James Turrell; all the artists past and present whose work has kept my gallery a temple of creative energy and kept my love of the visual language alive and well; Gary Smith for giving me my first one person show; and the true patrons of the arts in the Monterey community, Barbara and Bill Hyland.

I thank you all.

—Chris Winfield



**TRITON**  
MUSEUM OF ART

## Public Collections

Monterey Museum of Art, Monterey, CA  
Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA  
Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA  
Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA  
Community Hospital of Monterey Peninsula, Monterey, CA  
National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, CA  
California State University Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA

Front Cover: **Untitled**, 2013, acrylic on canvas on board, 48 x 36 inches  
Collection of Michael and Jan Praisner

Inside Front Cover: **Untitled**, 2005, acrylic on canvas on board, 72 x 24 inches  
Collection of BNH and WGH

Page 1: **Untitled**, 2005, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches

Page 2: **Untitled**, 2012, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches

Page 3: **Untitled**, 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches

Page 4: **Untitled**, 2014, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches  
Collection of Jim and Marilyn Hebenstreit

Page 5: **Untitled**, 2014, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 x 40 inches

Opposite Page: **Untitled** (detail), 2015, acrylic on canvas on board, 72 x 72 inches

Unless otherwise noted, all paintings courtesy of the artist.

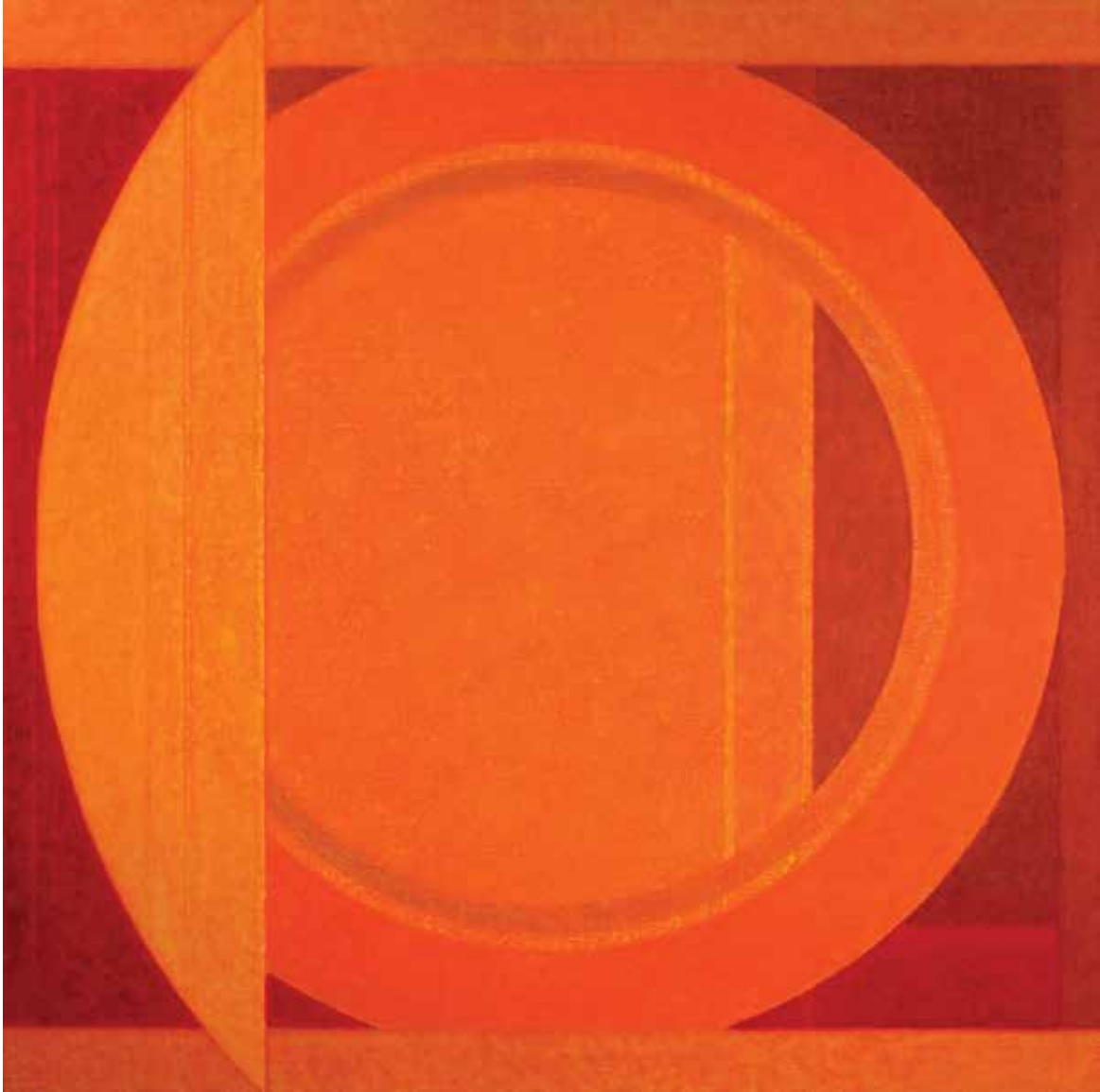
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**Untitled**, 2008, acrylic on canvas on board, 24 x 24 inches  
Collection of Elizabeth Barlow and Stephen McClellan