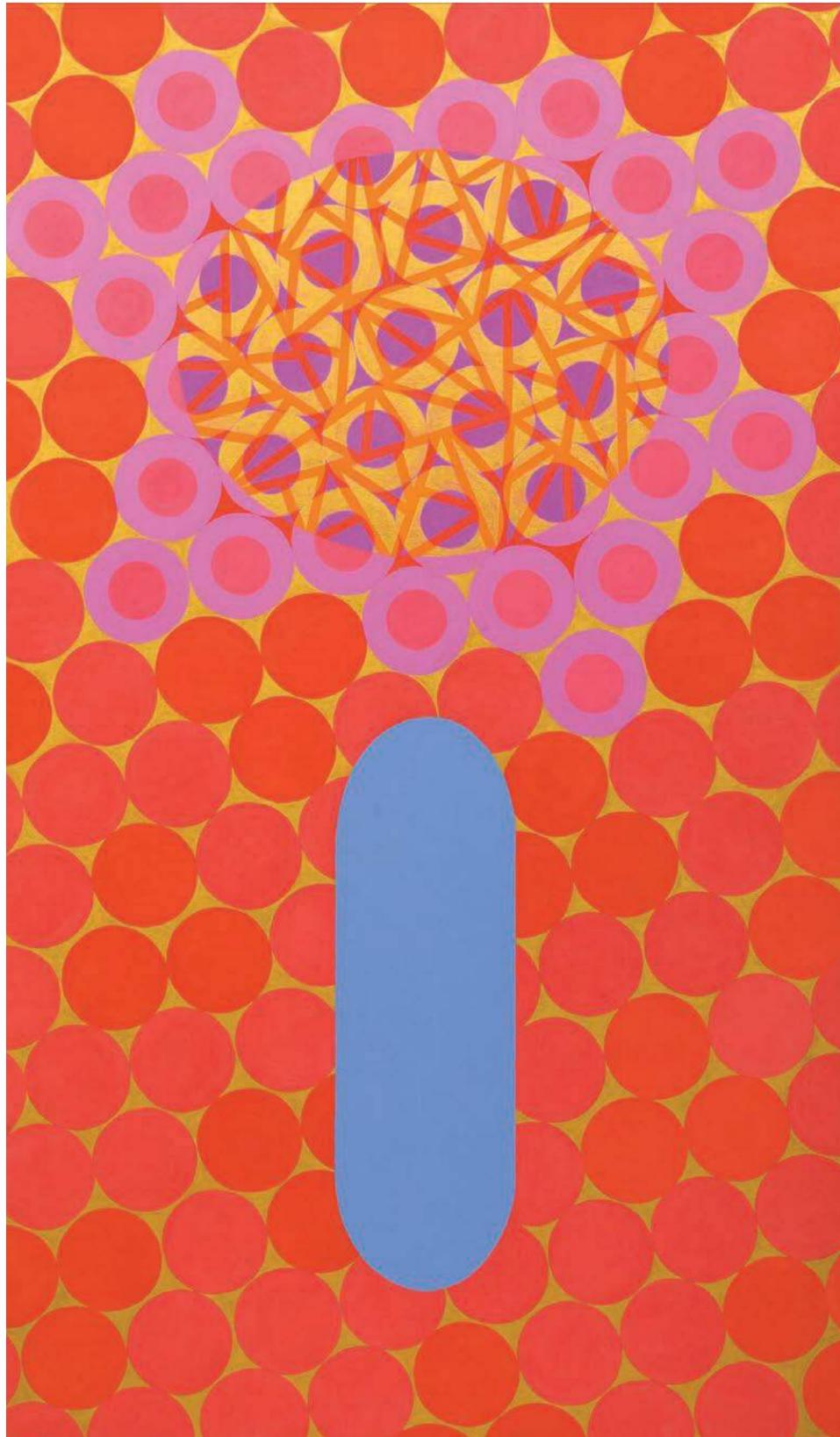


CLOSE TO THE LINE



MARI RANTANEN

KIRSTEN REYNOLDS



Rantanen, **There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in #7**
(Figure1)

CLOSE TO THE LINE

GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION THROUGH A PERFORMATIVE LENS
SEPT 5 - OCT 12 2019

MARI RANTANEN

KIRSTEN REYNOLDS

CURATED BY **BARBARA O'BRIEN**

HOUSATONIC MUSEUM OF ART

THE EXHIBITION CLOSE TO THE LINE: GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION THROUGH A PERFORMATIVE LENS

proposes a (re)interpretation of geometric abstraction by the artists Mari Rantanen (b. 1956) and Kirsten Reynolds (b. 1972). Founded in the early twentieth century in Europe, with proponents such as Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), geometric abstraction rejected the perspectival space of painting as a "window," creating instead a flattened space in which line, color, and pattern combine to make compositions devoid of a clear connection to the natural world. The constructed reality of the work of art—whether a painting, print, sculpture or theatrical set—took primacy over a replication of the "real."

The exhibition title **Close to the Line** also refers to the visitor's experience at the Housatonic Museum of Art: the scale of the building, large and organized around a geometry of forms, is one that sometimes matches and sometimes overshadows the scale of the human figure. The works of art by Rantanen and Reynolds, installed in the Burt Chernow Galleries, are first experienced from a distance as objects of great confidence, ambitious in scale and pattern, palette and composition. Reynolds created two architectural installations, **Switchback** (2019; fig. 6/front cover) and **post** (2019; fig. 8), in a direct, site-dependent relationship to the scale and dimensions of the museum galleries. Offered the opportunity to have paintings respond to the significant scale of the Housatonic Museum architecture, Rantanen created a new, large-scale triptych, **Aesthetic Ecstasy and Uncertain Universe** (2019; fig. 7). Both of these artists build with canny awareness upon the history of geometric abstraction, but they are also aware of and responsive to the triangulated relationship of the work of art, the architecture of the space, and the viewer. The works of art become bridges using color and light, scale and pattern to invite a physical experience in real time as a counterpoint to the often-cerebral experience of looking at and intellectually apprehending art.

The experience of the viewer is activated immediately upon entry into the back gallery. The open grid and sweeping curves of Reynolds's **post** rises dynamically to the gallery ceiling, framing and engaging with the glowing exclamation-point forms of Rantanen's **Aesthetic Ecstasy and Uncertain Universe**, a triptych some six feet high and ten feet wide. The painting fills one's sight to the edge of peripheral vision, while the sculpture makes us aware of not only the edge of our sight, but the reach of our arms, the length of our stride, and the limits of our imagination. This is more than a simple counterpoint of ambitious works by two proven artists; it is a moment of theater, resetting our expectations about what "looking at" a work of art might mean.



Varvara Fedorovna Stepanova, **Death of Tarelkin**, 1922, acting apparatus. Scene from Vsevolod Meyerhold's production of *Tarelkin's Death*, Moscow, 1922. (Figure 2)

Switchback incorporates a yellow platform—an outcropping—that extends from the perimeter of the already significantly scaled sculpture; it is an invitation to the viewer to come closer, to stand on and in the work of art. The glowing undertones of gold in Rantanen's **There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in #7** (2017; fig. 1) create an aura of light and color; they heighten the drama of a moment in which the viewer becomes an actor in the narrative of the work of art.

As the exhibition curator, I connect the practices and goals of the artists with that of the museum. Two current fascinations of my own merged in these curatorial selections: first, with geometric abstraction and the emotional energy that it can hold; and second, with a long-standing interest in the performative—from the perspective of the maker, but also to expand the expectations and experiences of the viewer. Both artists, as well as Museum Director Robbin Zella, gave generously of their time over the course of more than a year to conversations that fueled the exhibition now on view. A record of my first meeting with each artist to discuss the exhibition is here included; first Reynolds, then Rantanen.

The atrium of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, was an ideal location in which to meet and talk with Kirsten Reynolds. The Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed glass and steel cathedral to art offers a lobby that is a dynamic art-filled place, but perhaps unexpectedly is also a relaxing space for conversation and engagement. There is no feeling of being "inside" or being "closed in." Rather, one is held gently in an envelope of light reflected off the adjacent Boston Harbor.

Exploring the dynamic relationship between place and space, between object and engagement, between sculpture and architecture is one of the central pursuits of Reynold's practice. After a flurry of emails, we met on a brilliant, blue-sky day, in September 2018. Reynolds brought samples of the laminated strips and faux wood surface treatments that are a part of her sculptural vocabulary. We took a careful look together at the architectural floor plan of the Housatonic Museum galleries, as the challenge and inspiration of creating new, site-dependent sculpture moved the conversation excitedly forward. Reynolds has a history of creating art that is rigorous and playful, theoretical and experiential. Her initial ideas for this exhibition were ambitious, and the opportunity to create a new architectural installation posed its own challenges. Since that conversation, nearly a year has passed and the exhibition *Close to the Line* has come to fruition with the premiere of *Switchback*.

According to Reynolds,

"For the recent work, I've been thinking quite a bit about Mondrian, both early abstraction and later abstraction, as well as Russian constructivists—graphic -design, sculpture, installation and theatrical productions—in terms of the construction of space(s) and the push and pull between presence and absence. In both cases, the link is to the architectural, spatial construction, not the color."²

The open two-by-four grid construction of **post**, while painstakingly conceived and obsessively constructed, suggests a carnival-like world that has been temporarily built only to be dismantled and moved to another small city. This life in the moment gives the sculptures a performative energy and impulse. The theater of these deceptively simple and playful forms echoes the theatrical set created by the Russian Futurist Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958) for Vsevolod Meyerhold's 1922 production of **Tarelkin's Death** (fig. 2).

As explained by art historian RoseLee Goldberg, the collapsible furniture designed by Stepanova "realised some of the tenets set out in the Futurist manifestos of almost a decade earlier, for Fortunato Depero had called for a theatre in which 'everything turns—disappears—reappears, multiplies and breaks, pulverizes and overturns, trembles and transforms into a cosmic machine that is life.'"² The experience is one of not just viewing or receiving the work of art, but of being in the midst of an action.

For Reynolds, these two architectural installations are departures in very specific ways:

My earlier work was much more exuberant with large areas of color and multiple contrasting patterns. The recent work is more restrained as I've continued to experiment with the relationship between presence and absence. The increased application of white, juxtaposed with traces of patterns, is as much about revealing as it is concealing."³

The performative element of Reynolds's art is revealed in the non-functional nature of the framing, which holds no finished wall, and the curving sweep of arcs above and aside the viewer, painted with a pattern of cyclamen red and lavender-tinged pink. "In the current pieces," Reynolds wrote, "the pattern has become so enlarged and abstracted that it's hard to read as pattern anymore."⁴ The vivid yellow of the outcropping—a stage, of sorts, upon which the viewer can stand—draws one in like the warmth of the sun. The broad expanse of this platform offers an invitation to engage, a sort of suggested choreography for the viewer to be/come part of the theatrical performance. Regarding the mix of colors Reynolds uses, she says:

"They are intended to be playful colors, related to the Japanese pop aesthetic, a bit like Takashi Murakami. However, I'm interested in pairing those intense, saturated colors with some that are washed out or darker to create a palette that feels off-kilter, like the vivid turquoise blue star pattern against the muted brown background in post."⁵

Reynolds paints a faux wood grain pattern on the surface of the two-by-four supports in both **Switchback** and **post**. This trompe l'oeil gesture, a long-standing part of her visual and conceptual vocabulary, heightens the relationship of the sculpture to theater, putting a high-brow mask onto the more modest unfinished pine



Edvard Munch, **The Kiss (Kiss on the Shore by Moonlight)**, 1914. Oil on canvas, 30.31 x 39.37 inches. Image courtesy Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston. Credit: ©2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (Figure 3)

It is the Monday after Thanksgiving 2018 when Mari Rantanen and I meet in the grand atrium of the New York City Library on 5th Avenue and 42nd Street. The crowds are large, soaking up the grandeur of a sparkling Christmas tree located among the arches of the dramatic Beaux Arts architecture. A sense of drama, excitement, and theater permeates the holiday scene. We look for a quiet place to talk, settling finally at a long table of highly polished wood in an elegant book-lined research room on an upper floor. Tones must be kept to a hush, which is a challenge as we excitedly discuss her new paintings. I have worked with Rantanen before; I curated pieces from her 2014 **Portrait** series (paintings on oval canvases in which a single, abstracted letter represents a woman artist) into an exhibition of work by a dozen contemporary painters from Finland. The portraits offered an homage to many of the abstract painters who had influenced Rantanen's practice: Hilma af Klint, Yayoi Kusama, and Sonia Delaunay among them.

A connection to the emotional power of abstraction—the energetic dialogue of color, pattern, dynamic composition, and scale—is the discipline that drives Rantanen's nearly four decades of studio practice. Her practice, the "making" of the paintings, all acrylic paint and pigment on canvas, is considered and laborious. To capture the light in this vivid palette, she has been working with the same technique since the 1980s: "I mix [dry] pigments with acrylic medium; gloss medium for gold and matte medium for other colors. I mix the paint and use it like any acrylic paint thinned with water. I get more intensive color and beautiful surface that way."⁶ Rantanen begins her paintings with a single color, painted thinly as a stain, in the tradition of Morris Louis (1912–1962) and Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). The color soaks into the canvas creating a watercolor-like depth. The pattern and color applied on top of the stain is "more physical, more thickly painted. It has a presence that creates a light together."⁷

Rantanen has a major new work in mind this day—a triptych for which she made sketches while at her home in Sweden. The iconography builds upon a powerful, abstracted form—a column with softened edges, connected visually to a single orb set against a field of zig-zagging parallel lines. When I first see the completed triptych, it is in the spring of 2019 in Rantanen's East Village studio. "This large form," Rantanen states, as she gestures towards a central geometric motif, a slim column adorned with a single orb, "comes from an Edvard Munch painting of a couple kissing by the lake with a moon reflection."⁸ The Munch painting to which she refers is **Kiss on the Shore by Moonlight** (1914; fig. 3), which combines a sexually charged narrative with austere abstraction. A close look at this painting shows the strong connection—formal, conceptual, and emotional—to Rantanen's paintings. The narrative of the Munch painting is made obvious by the title, but it is the reduction of the human figures, to no more than two columns of light and dark pressed up against one another, that takes abstraction to a place of high emotion. The reflected light of the moon is a slim, self-contained column of white against the blue of the water. The kiss itself is the culmination of a tryst in the moonlight, made nearly invisible by the abstraction of the bodies, faces, and setting. All aspects of the painting suggest a theatrical set with dramatic lighting that could not possibly exist in nature. This sense of the dramatic, of the theatrical, of the implication that we as viewers are part of the "action" is a signature element of works by both Munch and Rantanen.

Moonlight is a theme to which Munch returned many times, in prints and paintings. The moon is a character in a drama that unfolds repeatedly; it illuminates, it witnesses, it perhaps even activates the energy of the scenario. It is a simple, geometric orb that holds enormous emotional and formal power.

The energy suggested by the moon and its shadow is not only emotional, but highly charged physically. While the common perception of Munch is as an artist whose paintings are angst-filled, Munch has a long-standing history of painting the moon, reflected as a deep, slim column and a trio of horizontal strokes against the dark waters as part of an ecstatic narrative as in **Dance on the Shore** (1902) and **Moonlight** (1895). Directly inspired by this imagery, Rantanen translates the moon and its reflection into an essential part of her artistic vocabulary. This powerful awareness of how abstracted form, choice of palette, and the seeming "capture" of light in a work of art all impact the viewer is an important influence on Rantanen's paintings.

The imagery of the moon and its reflection, literally upended, first appears in Rantanen's 2017 series of paintings with the overall title **There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in**:

When you turn that form around you get the exclamation point—the moon casting the shadow on the water. There is fear in that painting. The kiss is dangerous. Something is happening. That is how I felt in the world. This was sometime around the time of Trump and Brexit and ideas of how the world would be a better place for us seemed to be crumbling around. I felt an emergency. It was hard to find any hope.⁷

That Rantanen adopted this title based on a song by Leonard Cohen emphasizes the importance of light, itself, in her paintings—an emphasis that took her in another direction, as well:

"This is the first time I am painting empty space; painting around the form and not the form, and there became an empty space. I was listening to music in my studio and feeling despair. My call has always been to make paintings that deliver optimism—the sensual, delicious side of the world. "There's a crack in everything" is from his [Cohen's] song. I am trying to get the light and see the light in these dark times. I don't think I've ever made paintings that are so spiritual. They become for me about wanting to create big color fields without a lot of pattern. (My earlier work was completely filled, patterned.) I suddenly needed to leave space—a space to heal."¹⁰



Frank Stella (American, born 1936). **Lac Laronge III**, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 162 inches (274.32 x 411.48 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1970 (K1970:8). © Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy Albright-Knox Art Gallery. (Figure 4)

Rantanen imbues geometric abstraction with theater, humor, angst, and joy:

"Much of my artistic practice has been as an artist who wants to create spaces for emotions, generate positive energy, organize the chaos, and break the system. I want to bathe in the color. The color is the light and space. The forms are performers in the space; they make the narrative. The color carries the emotional power and measures the temperature of painting. The forms carry the intellectual structure. The background/foreground color combinations activate the light. It is important to me to give the forms a meaning; I do not want them just to be patterns. I start with the forms and place them in the painting; it is an intellectual process. Then I add the color. I start with an intellectual idea—drawing and subject matter—and end with the emotional painting process. For me, without color there is no life."¹¹

Ambitious scale, preoccupation with the visual interplay of geometric pattern, and a dramatic palette of color combinations not found in the natural world connect both artists to the paintings of Frank Stella (b. 1936). Paul Vogt, former director of the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, contextualizes Stella as a major representative of Post-Painterly Abstraction: "Toward the end of the 1950s, a number of American painters, reacting against Abstract Expressionism, began to deemphasize the emotional overburdening of pictorial materials. Colors lost their expressive connotations, and formlessness was replaced by an almost aggressive assertion of basic, or 'minimal' form."¹² The dynamic composition of Stella's **Lac Laronge III** (1969; fig. 4) pushes up against the edges of the picture plane, emphasizing to the viewer an awareness of distance from or nearness to the work of art. The arcs of movement of Reynolds's **post** suggest a balance formed from the center of a centrifuge, stabilized by its own force and holding the viewer in its gravitational pull. In **Lac Laronge III**, the large intersecting geometric forms offer a suggestion of looking from two simultaneous vantage points; that of "at" the painting and "above" the shape, which gives it the echo of Reynolds's model for **Switchback** (2019; fig. 6). In **Same and Different and Terms of Progress #1** (2019; fig. 5) Rantanen, like Stella, abuts repeated, monolithic forms—wide ovals and small orbs—to create a field of emphatic, synthesized forms that replicate, but never duplicate one another. The wing panels in Rantanen's **Aesthetic Ecstasy...** are related but not duplicate images, each using the same palette of bronzed orange, deep lavender, pale sky blue, and a "moon" of minty green. The columns are filled with shapes that recall the thought bubbles of cartoons, or an idea balloon over the head of person in a drawing, adding humor and an implied narrative to the abstract forms.

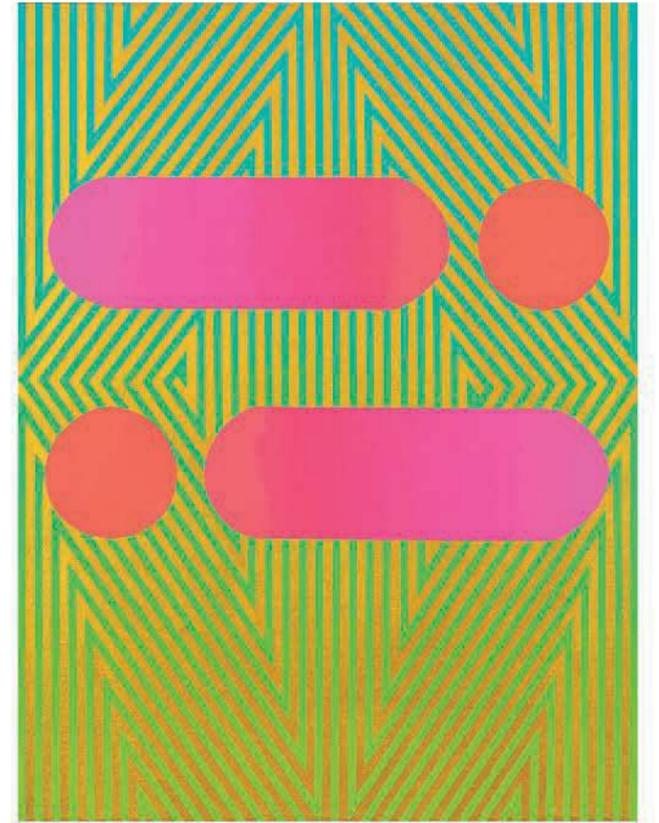
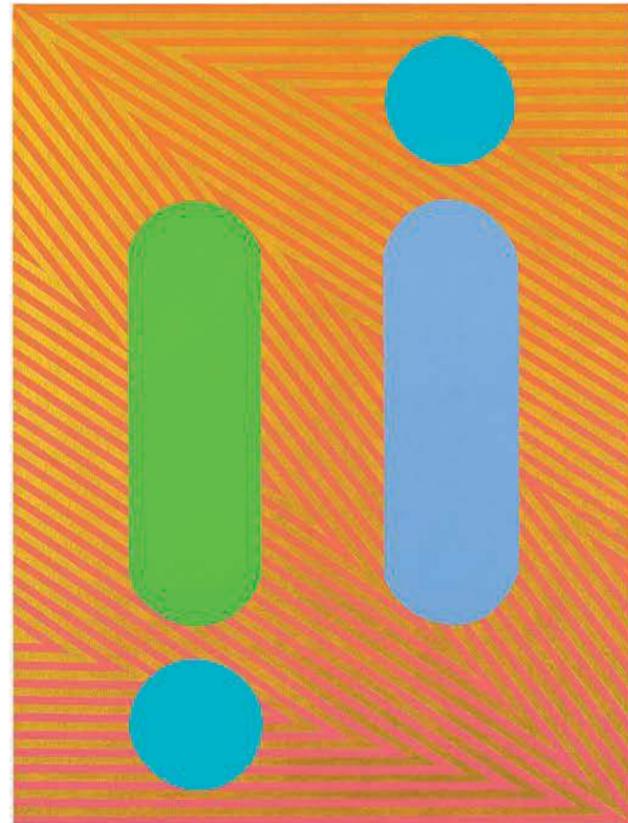
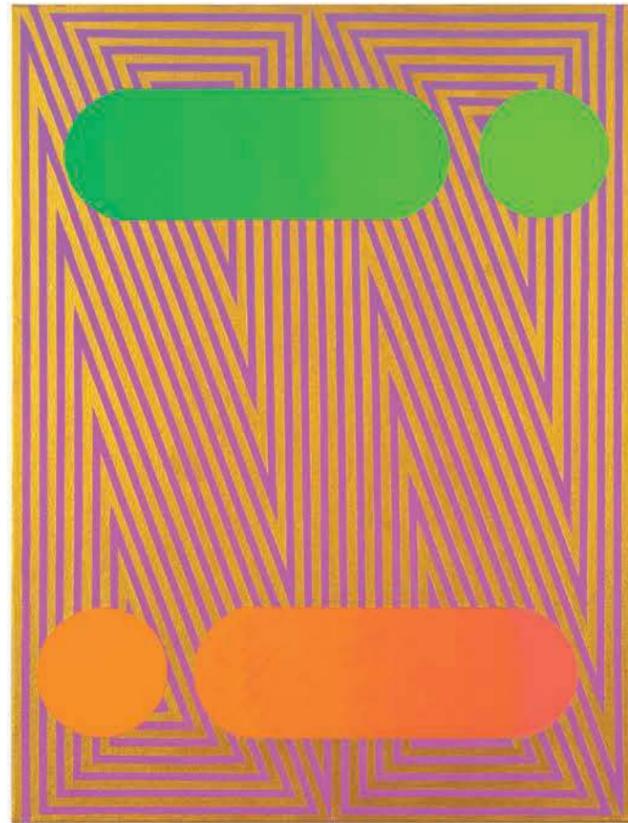
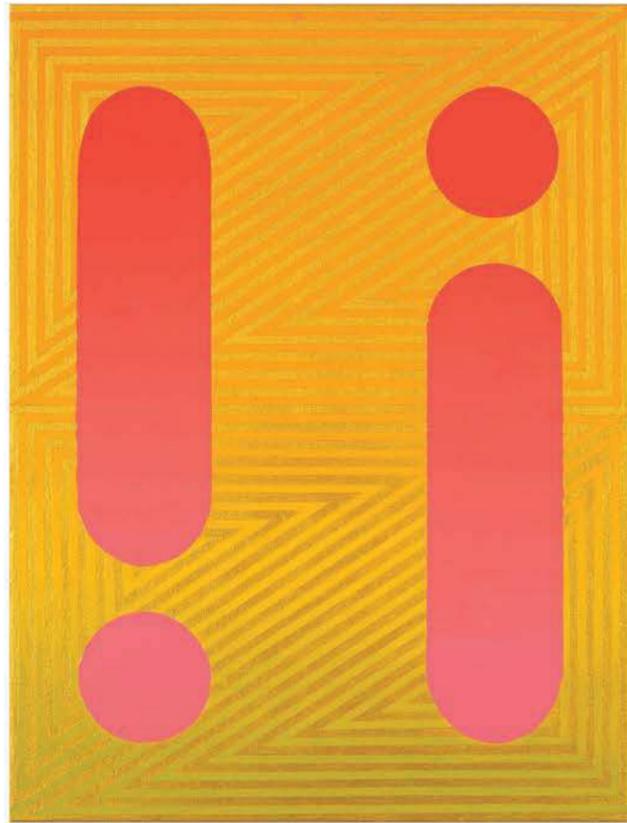
Finally, all of the works on view create a bridge to the viewer. As viewers move through the galleries, they become witnesses to how the forms, patterns, light, and scale shift in relation to their gaze, their stance, their mood. Rantanen and Reynolds are both investigating a 21st-century version of geometric abstraction that makes the case for reimbuing the form with emotional resonance, of building visceral and experiential, as well as intellectual connections between the artist and the object made; between the object made and the viewer.

- Barbara O'Brien

Barbara O'Brien is an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was Executive Director of Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri from 2012-2017, after serving as chief curator of exhibitions and collections since 2009. O'Brien is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics.



Reynolds, **post**, 2019,
(Figure 8)



Rantanen, **Same and Different and Terms of Progress #1, 2019,**
(Figure 5)



Reynolds, **Switchback**, 2019,
(Figure 6)



Rantanen, **Aesthetic Ecstasy and Uncertain Universe, 2019.**
Collection of Paavo Turtiainen (Figure 7)

MARI RANTANEN

Born 1956 in Espoo, Finland. Lives and works in Stockholm, Sweden, Tammela, Finland, and New York City, New York. Fulbright Scholar, Pratt Institute, New York City; MA in Painting, School of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland; Professor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Stockholm, 1996-2005.

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Born 1972 in Richmond, Virginia. Lives and works in Newmarket, New Hampshire. MFA in Studio Art and Critical Theory, Maine College of Art, Portland, Maine; BFA in Art Video, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York; Vermont Studio Center Fellow; New Hampshire State Council on the Arts Grantee.

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END NOTES:

1. Kirsten Reynolds, email to the author, December 12, 2018.
2. RoseLee Goldberg, **Performance Art: from Futurism to the Present** (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 48.
3. Reynolds, Skype conversation with the author, June 21, 2019.
4. Reynolds, email to the author, December 12, 2018.
5. Reynolds, Skype conversation with the author, June 21, 2019.
6. Mari Rantanen, conversation with the author, November 26, 2018.
7. Ibid.
8. Rantanen, conversation with the author, April 22, 2019.
9. Rantanen, conversation with the author, November 26, 2018.
10. Ibid.
11. Rantanen, conversation with the author, April 22, 2019.
12. Paul Vogt, **Contemporary Painting**, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 94.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Housatonic Museum of Art is pleased to present the exhibition *Close to the Line: geometric abstraction through a performative lens* curated by Barbara O'Brien and featuring Mari Rantanen and Kirsten Reynolds. It has been a pleasure to work with all three in planning and executing this, our first show, since the closing of gallery in August 2018.

We are ever thankful to our funders Deborah Bachard and the Werth Family Foundation, the Housatonic Community College Foundation, and Housatonic Community College along with numerous individual donors who sustain the museum's exhibitions and programs.

Last, but not least, my deepest gratitude goes to the people that work side by side with the guest artists and curators to ensure that their vision is realized: Vincent Dion and Courtney Linderman for exhibition installation; Laura Roberts of Laura Roberts Marketing; and Michael Wasik, Graphic Design. A very special thank you is reserved for President Paul Broadie and our former Dean of Facilities Rose Ellis and her staff for the beautiful restoration of the Burt Chernow Galleries!

-Robbin Zella
Director, Housatonic Museum of Art

CREDITS

Editor, Michelle Bolton King

Designer: Michael Wasik

Photo Credits: Kevin Noble (for Mari Rantanen)

Photo Credit: Paul Mutino (Installation Photography)

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

MARI RANTANEN

Right to the heart #1, 2017, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Right to the heart #2, 2017, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in #6, 2017, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 70 x 36 inches

There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in #7, 2017, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 72 x 42 inches

There is a crack in everything that is how the light comes in #8, 2017-2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 72 x 42 inches

Aesthetic Ecstasy and Uncertain Universe, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 72 x 126 inches (3 panels each 72 x 42, 72 x 42, 70.25 x 36), Collection of Paavo Turtiainen

Golden Handshake 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 72 x 44 inches

The Point Being, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 70 x 36 inches

Same and Different and Terms of Progress #1, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 24 x 72 (4 panels each 24 x 18 inches)

Same and Different and Terms of Progress #2, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Thinking and Dreaming, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 70 x 38 inches

Truth and Beauty, 2019, acrylic paint and pigments on canvas, 72 x 42 inches

KIRSTEN REYNOLDS

post, 2019

Structure 1

Materials: plywood, pine, waterborne alkyd paint, oil base stain

Dimensions: 10' x 8'9" x 10'9"

Structure 2

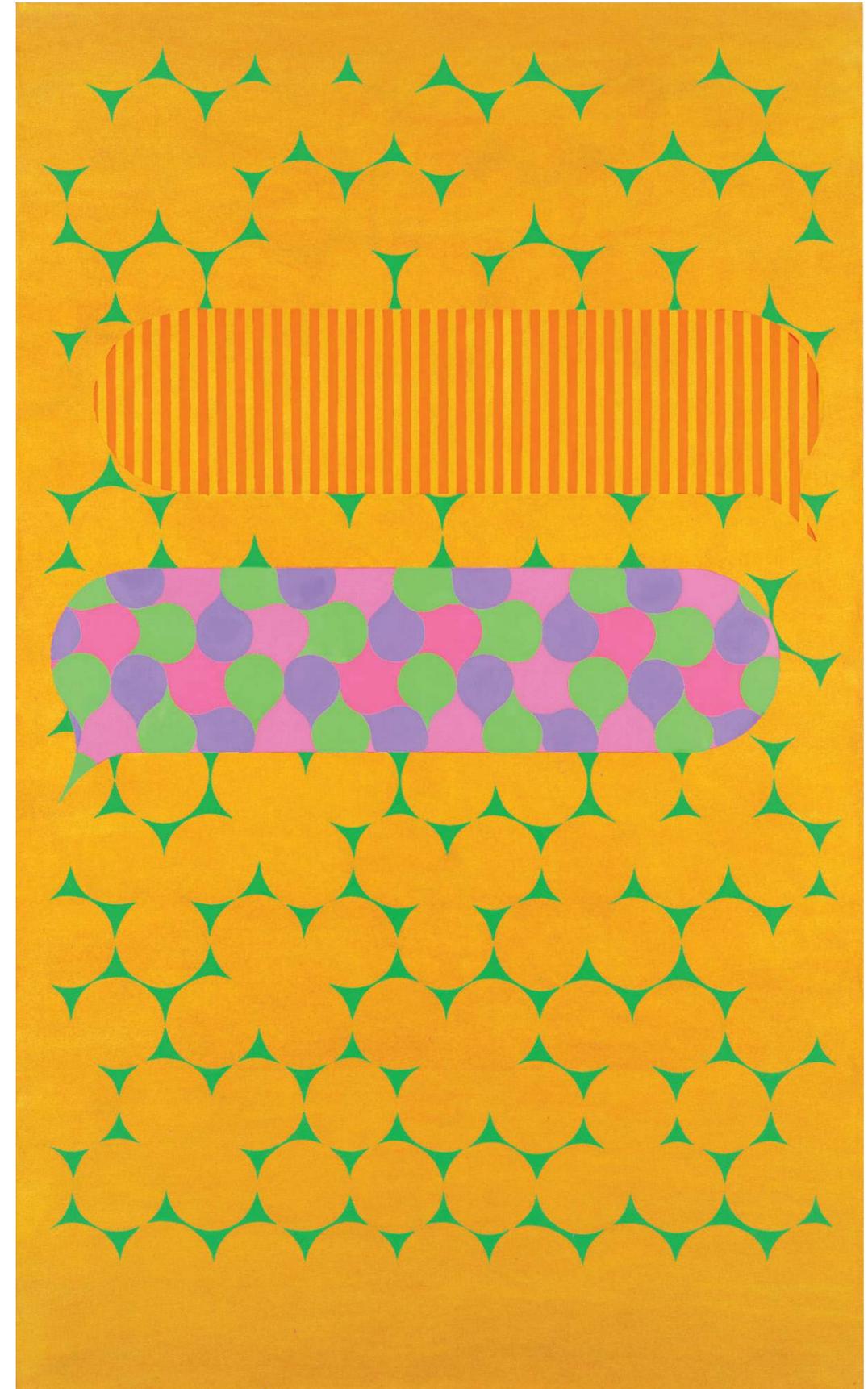
Materials: MDF, plywood, Formica laminate, pine, waterborne alkyd paint, oil base stain

Dimensions: 22" x 2' x 9'

Switchback, 2019

Materials: plywood, pine, waterborne alkyd paint, oil base stain

Dimensions variable: 10 ½' (at highest point) x 17' (at widest point) x 24' (at deepest point)



Rantanen, **Golden Handshake**, 2019

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