

We Never Find the Answer

In her eighth decade and with a fifty-year painting career under her belt, Tess Jaray is about to have her first solo show in New York. She talks to **Emma Geliot** about making sense of pattern and process, and looking for answers.

Tess Jaray's form of abstraction, use of pattern and recurring motifs is instantly recognisable. The painting process isn't overt, allowing the colour and shape to exert a powerful presence, without the distraction of textural brush markings. Her work is seen in galleries as paintings or prints – she has been exhibiting regularly since the 1960s – and in an impressive number of public realm commissions, particularly in the '80s, '90s and the first decade of the 21st Century. She was a pioneer at the Slade, where she was the first female member of the teaching staff, and taught there for over three decades, having been a student there in the early 1960s.

I visited her North London home and studio, where she was feeling anxious about where she might be allowed to smoke in New York City. In her work space, I was immediately hit by the subtle power of her work, so much of it in one room, each exerting a kind of force field that extends out in front of each painting.

Emma Geliot: Despite the physical flatness of your paintings, they often generate a kind of optical depth, or the colours disturb and disrupt the visual recognition of a flat plane. How would you describe that illusory space?

Tess Jaray: This is the most difficult question to answer. In fact it can't really be answered, because you're asking, what makes a painting? I'm not sure that many artists have made successful paintings that are completely flat. When they do, it brings up that old question, is a painting an object? Can it simultaneously be an object and an illusion? Although painting hasn't been viewed as a 'window' for some time, something to be looked into and through, perhaps since American Abstract Expressionism, a rectangular format of almost any shape or size is a convention whereby we separate the surface away from the world, simultaneously suggesting a glimpse into another one. It still seems rather miraculous to me that we are capable of creating new worlds within just a simple rectangle. And also, the fact that there are still people who are interested in this must show a need of some sort. Perhaps it's because our own world is not enough for us.

It's very difficult to say what the illusory space is for that very reason: it's illusory. Creating new space within a rectangle is a very exciting thing to do. Even though it's not really possible to paint on a flat surface in any way without creating space of some sort, to find a way of giving it believable presence and meaning is something else. To see an indefinable space emerge from the process of painting is a thrilling and promising moment, but it has to be shaped, organised, controlled in such a way that it's given meaning. And, of course, it's not 'meaning' in the sense that it means a *particular thing*.

And this in itself can succeed or fail: a mystery in painting may be rich and evocative, or it may be muddling and confusing, and leave the viewer unsatisfied.

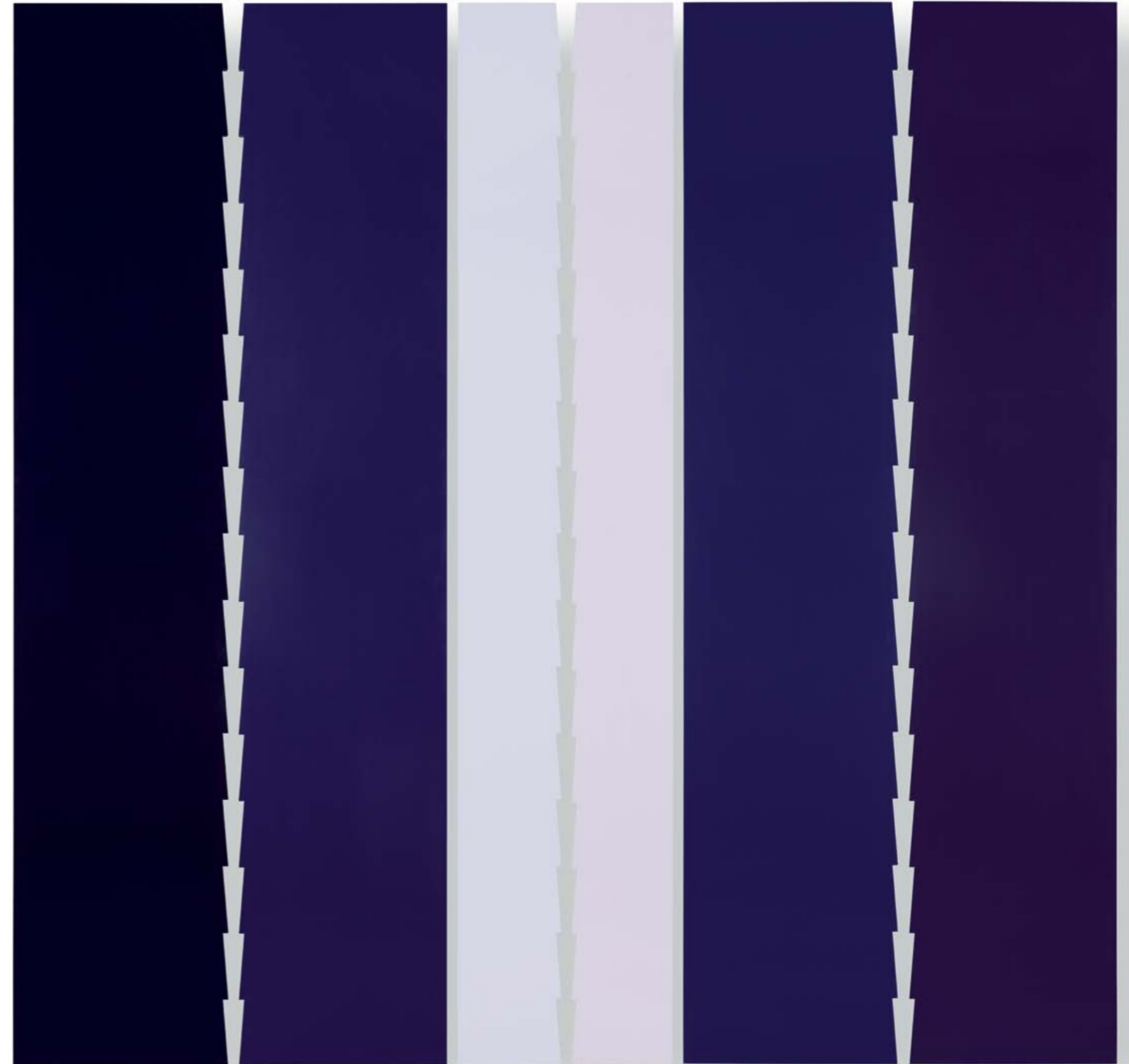
Why does all this matter? Perhaps because painting acts as a metaphor, and so, possibly, at some distant and obscure level, helps us understand our relationship to the world.

EG: How has your work evolved over the decades? Would you say that there have been pivotal moments, or has that evolution been more organic?

TJ: Both, really. Looking back, it's astonishing to me to realise in what an organic, or even apparently logical way, the work has developed over the last 50 years. Like a ball of string unraveling very slowly, almost every work has developed out of the previous one. But of course you can't always see that, as so many have been rejected or discarded along the way. And sometimes I lose the end of the string, a bit like Ariadne's thread, and it takes a lot of finding again. There is also the 'leap in the dark' that most people have experienced, where solutions assert themselves seemingly out of nothing. Interestingly, many scientists have spoken about this, and they are very careful to use reason and logic in their work, so it's not just the 'creative imagination' running riot. There have also been, on rather rare occasions, times when some way of dealing with what might be called formal devices have suddenly appeared. I can clearly remember, for instance, somewhere in my early twenties, dividing a canvas with a line across the centre, horizontally, and then painting diagonals either side of that line, and suddenly the canvas became space. And doing something very similar when I first looked at the plans for rebuilding Centenary Square. I just took a pencil and divided the space in two, I don't think anyone realised that I'd never confronted a plan ever before in my life...

EG: What do you need around you when you are starting a new work?

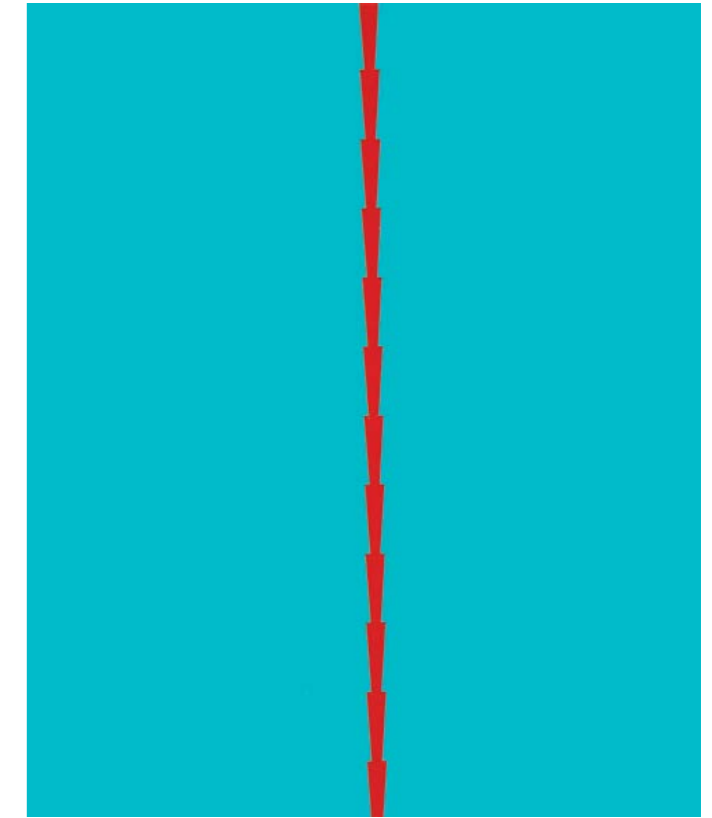
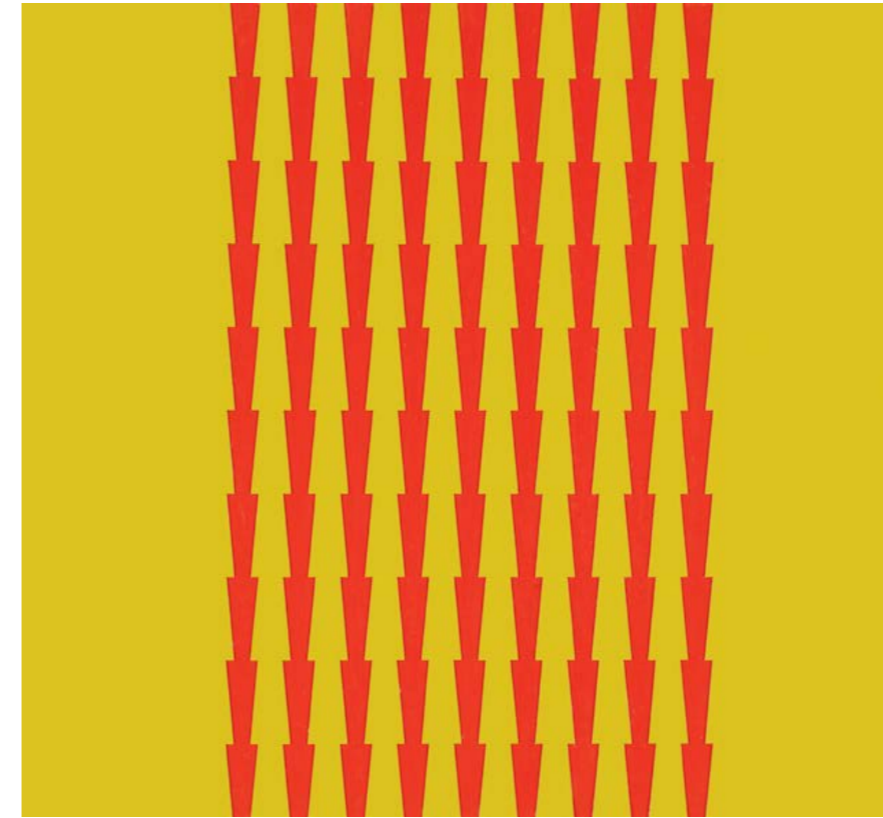
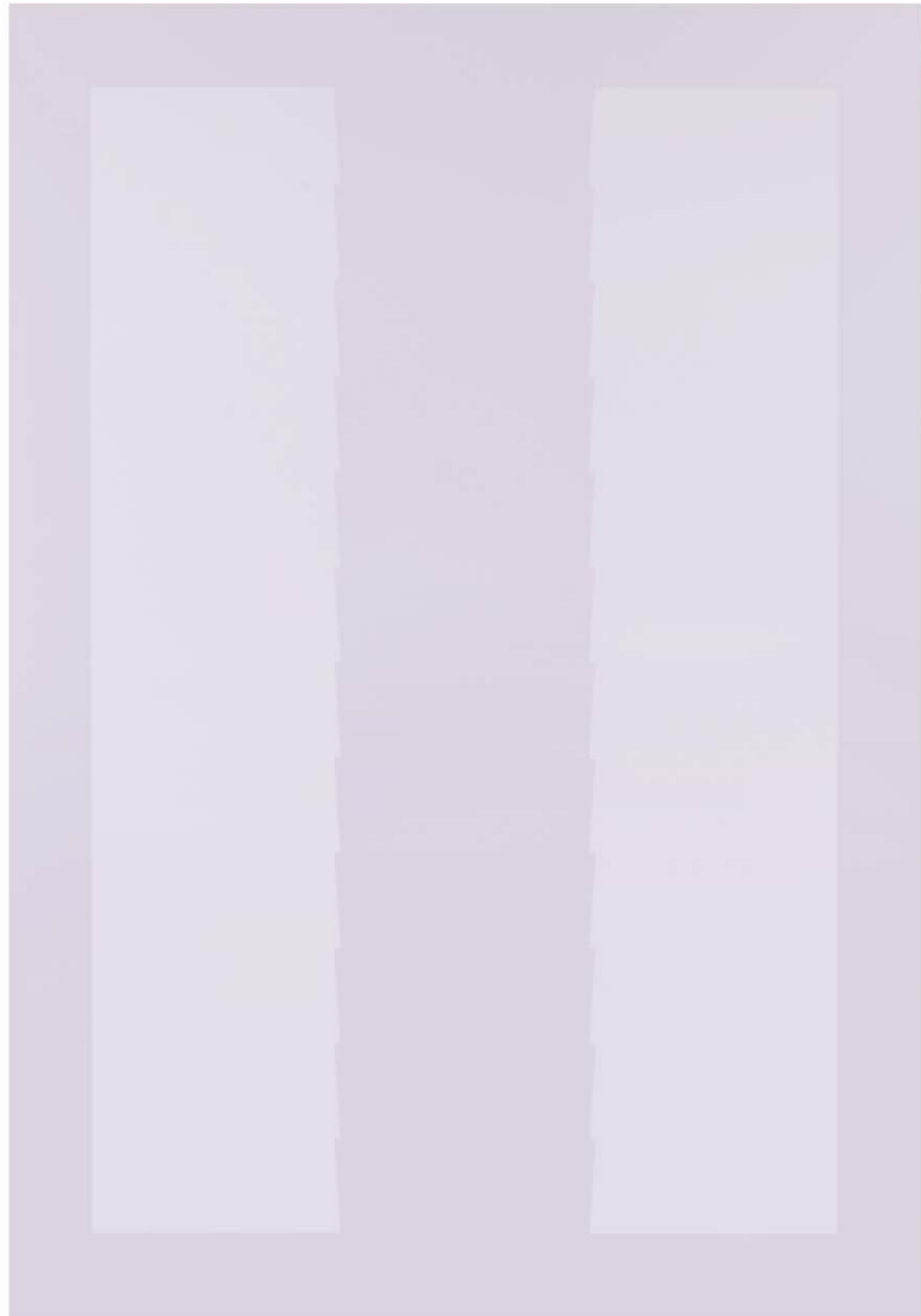
TJ: As little as possible apart from the materials that are needed for the work. And this depends on what stage the work is at, so it's paper and pencils – B to 6B – and coloured pencils, drawing mat, rulers, rubber, compass, drawing board, scrap paper, good paper, acrylic paint, oil paint, mixing oils, cleaning oils, turps, various kinds of brushes, containers, rags, water-spray, a clean surface for mixing, a large surface for painting, overalls (very hard to find the right ones), music, coffee and cigarettes within reach. The most important thing of all is comfortable working shoes. When they wear out, roughly every ten years, it's a disaster. You did ask... →



Geliot, Emma. "We Never Find the Answer: Interview with Tess Jaray," *CCQ Magazine*, June 2017.

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EG: Do you resist classification with and/or comparison to other artists within identifiable movements, or are you happy to align yourself within those movements?

TJ: If only that were possible! Probably most artists feel, at least at certain times in their lives, that they are the only artist in the world. But we are all utterly linked to each other and to the time we're working in. Quite often it's possible to look at someone's work and date it to within a year or two. There really does seem to be a zeitgeist. After all, no one works in a vacuum, and we are all profoundly affected by the time we live in, and what's happening around us. Quite often, an artist with a long career can be seen to appear similar to other artists, and then later on that disappears. That doesn't mean to say that one is not affected, often at a really deep level, with art that goes back millennia. Art is a river; it constantly changes and yet remains the same. I've forgotten which ancient Greek philosopher said life is in constant flux and, as artists are condemned to reflect life, their work will also always be in flux. We tend to condemn those who repeat themselves, and accuse them of never moving.

So, personally, I must accept that I am part of identifiable movements, and even though I long to make something that would hold its value into eternity, I also know that this is more or less impossible, except for a handful of great geniuses – and perhaps eternity seems to be getting shorter by the moment – at the same time, it's always interesting to see that you can be attempting something very similar to other artists, and yet the results can be completely different, if the spirit of the artist comes through.

EG: How'd your public realm commissions relate to your studio painting practice? Do the inevitable constraints of working to the commissioner's agenda cause frustration or provide a useful framework for finding creative solutions?

TJ: It's much easier to work within constraints. The choices are inevitably limited for most public commissions, so if it is already decided that the materials you have to use are brick and stone, and that there is a precise limitation on space, and also on time, then really you are halfway there. Much of it is common sense, and if the context is taken into consideration, which it inevitably must be, then with a bit of imagination and perhaps some vision, it's all much simpler than having to pull something out of thin air, which making a painting can sometimes feel like. With a painting you can only move forward, not back, and you can never repeat yourself. The problems with public commissions are usually the human ones: everyone involved, commissioners, architects, designers, builders, all have their own ideas as to how something should be done, and that can be quite challenging.

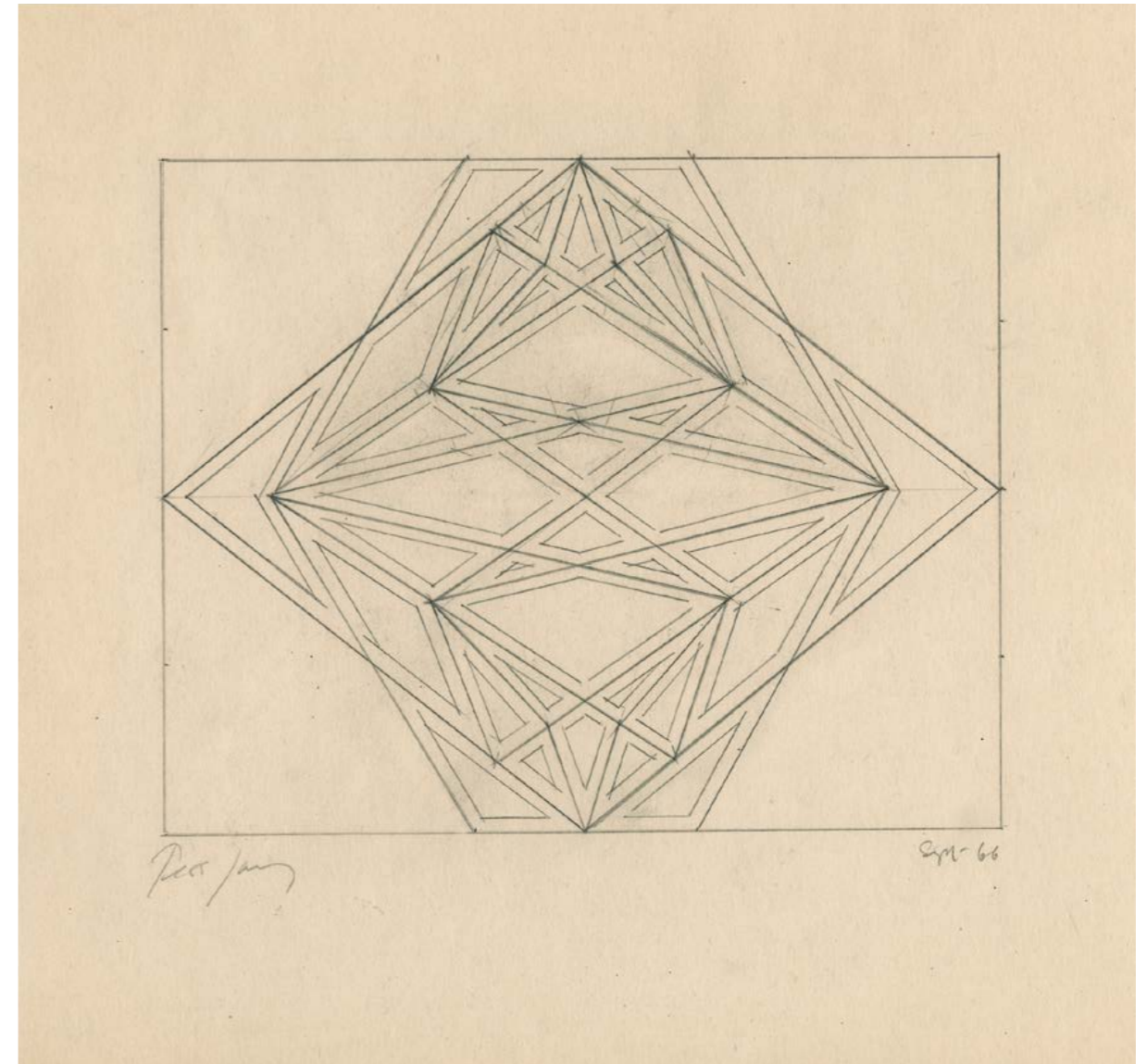
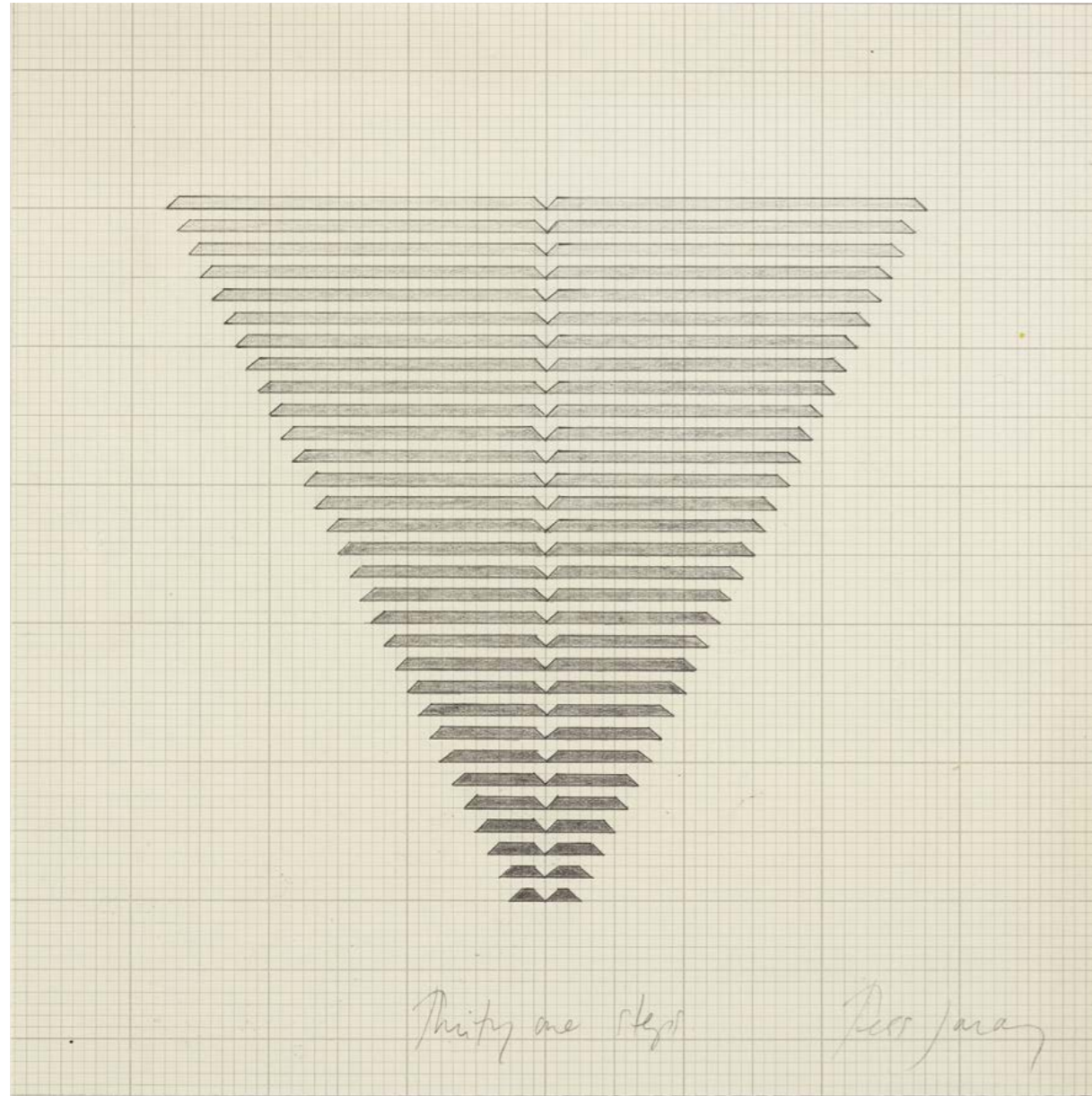
The answer as to how commissions actually relate to studio practice isn't that clear to me, other than that the aesthetic is of course the same, therefore the philosophy. The advantage in the studio is that you must take complete responsibility. No one can tell you that you are getting it wrong, at least not until a work is completed and shown and then of course many critics are waiting to do just that.

EG: And what about your writing – how does that fit into your practice?

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First spread, right page:
Aleppo - The Light Surrounded, Tess Jaray, 2016; paint on panel, 194cm x 200cm, all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Second spread, left page:
Citadel Light on Light, Tess Jaray, 2016; paint on canvas, 180cm x 125cm, all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Second spread, right hand page, left page:
Thorns 15 'Purple on Yellow', Tess Jaray, 2014; acrylic on metal panel, 24cm x 26cm all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

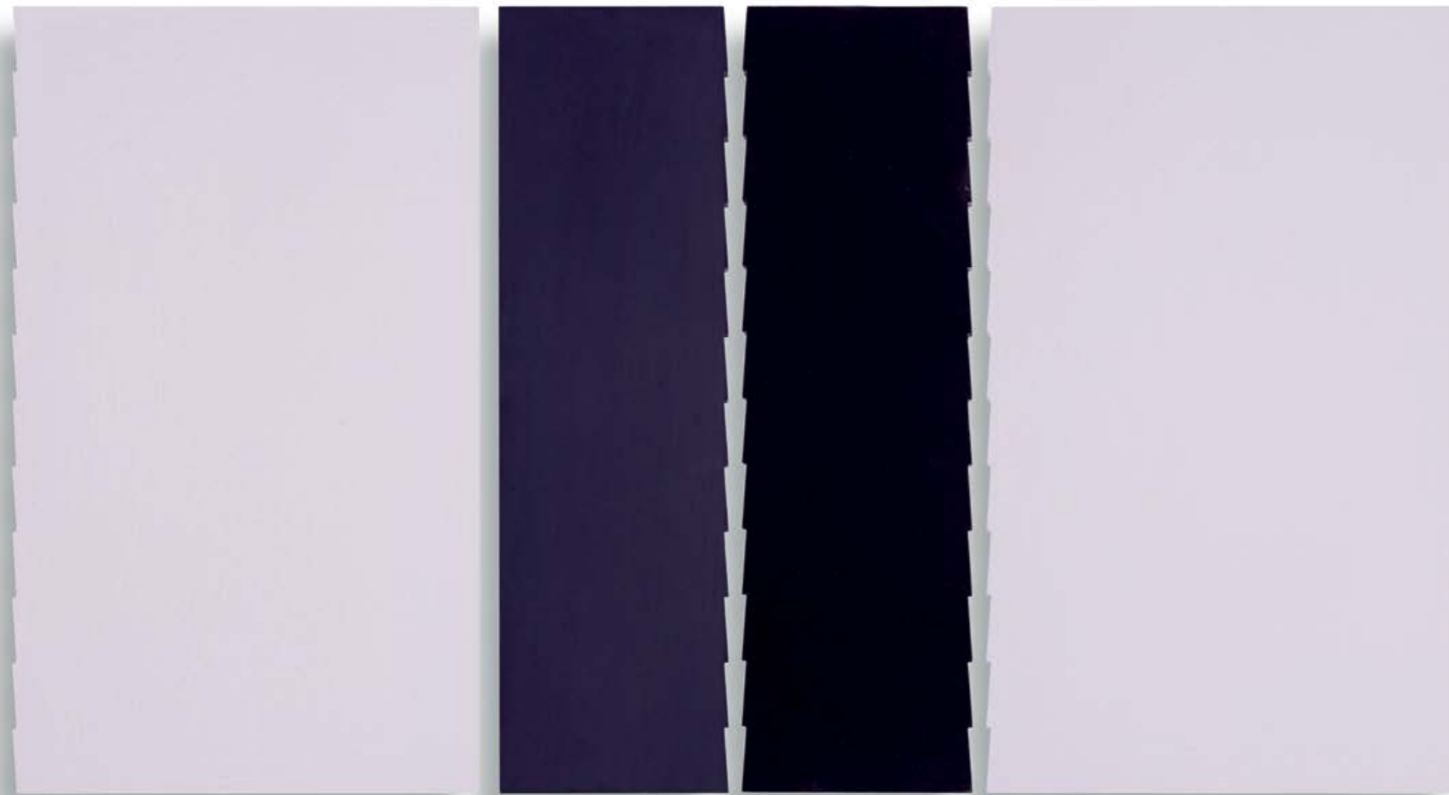
Second spread, right hand page, right page:
Thorns 16, Tess Jaray, 2014; acrylic on metal panel, 29cm x 24cm; all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Third spread, left page:
Study for 'Thirty One Steps', Tess Jaray, 1985; pencil on graph paper, 20cm x 20cm; all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Third spread, right page:
Study for 'Villandry', Tess Jaray, 1966; pencil on paper, 24cm x 25.4cm; all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Fourth spread, top left page:
Aleppo 3, Tess Jaray, 2016; oil paint on panel, 5 panels, 72cm x 197.3cm (overall); all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London

Fourth spread, bottom left page:
Aleppo 3B, Tess Jaray, 2016; oil on panel, 4 panels, 37cm x 69cm (overall); all rights reserved; courtesy Karsten Schubert and Marlborough Fine Art, London



TJ: It may be just an enjoyable extension. What I like about writing is that, unlike painting, it doesn't seem to matter so much, I don't mind if I fail, if I get it wrong, or if others don't read it. I write only about what I know or have seen or experienced, there is nothing imaginative about it at all. I have great admiration for those who write from their imagination, and I can't understand how they do it! And I only write when I have something I want to write about, whereas painting is not a bit like that. Painting is an obsessive activity, not what you would call an 'enjoyable' one.

EG: Would you say that the motifs that recur in your work are the result of a process of distillation, of seeing how much can be said with the sparsest of information?

TJ: Yes. That is more or less exactly what happens. Nothing must be there for embellishment, or for any reason other than serving a purpose.

EG: So then, can you describe your relationship with pattern? When female artists use pattern it is sometimes dismissed as a feminine device. Would you say that you are actively trying to challenge that cliché? Or is it just not important?

TJ: To some extent it is important, in that, as you say, the use of pattern in art has sometimes been used as a way to diminish women's art. But that's a very simplistic way of looking at it, because it's actually a very complex subject. You could even say that we really see the world, in part, as pattern. Because we're always framing things, indeed we can only see things framed, as we can only see a certain amount of what's in front of us at any one time. And any kind of repetition, any kind of rhythm or movement, infers pattern. So, it can be seen as the building blocks of the world around us, and artists and architects and builders throughout history have called upon it.

Why it has been deemed so necessary to us is a much more intriguing question than if I am trying to challenge the perception of pattern as female - which really doesn't interest me, though I am challenged to find the answer to why certain patterns seem to have been used in more meaningful ways

than others. The stripe, for instance, has become so ubiquitous in contemporary art that I recently asked my friend, the artist John Stezeker, if he thought that it was the nude figure of our times. His response was what he called the nakedness of the stripe, because it reveals the undercoat of a painting, which connects strongly with the idea of the monochrome as representing a purity in that primary coating. Which I'm not certain about, but you see how complex the question of pattern can start to get.

The use of repeated stripes, zigzags, diamonds, all come immediately to mind when I think of the architecture and monuments that go back thousands of years, so such pattern seems to be archetypes, that have emerged from our unconscious mind for millennia. And yet there are other patterns, using other motifs, for instance the rose, acanthus leaf, the fleur-de-lys etc., etc., which are often used yet don't seem to carry the same weight as, say, the square or the circle. How much does it have to do with cultural identity? And now that cultural identity is diminishing, what meaning does the repetition of a circle or a diamond have for us?

And when you think of the role that number plays in this, there are more questions that spring to mind. Is one of something as important as two or three of the same thing? What about ten? I remember being told, when I was a student, that we can perceive numbers of objects up to seven, after which it becomes a field of objects that are not so easily counted.

So, you see that my use of pattern in my work is really just asking one question after another. And each answer brings another question. Which no doubt is partly why we keep on going: We never find the answer—**CCQ**

Tess Jaray is at Albertz Benda, NYC from 20 April - 27 May 2017
albertzbenda.com

Tess Jaray New Paintings Marlborough Fine Art (in collaboration with Karsten Schubert), London 23 May-30 June 2017
karstenschubert.com

Aleppo and Thorns, Tess Jaray, Marlborough Fine Art, 25 May - 17 June 2017,

tessjaray.com