jHΩ1:), 2018. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in.
The Abrishamchi Family Collection.

Jacqueline Humphries: jHΩ1:)

On view Sept 18, 2021–Jan 2, 2022

Large Print Gallery Guide

wexner center for the arts

A Guided Walkthrough of *jHΩ1:)*

with artist Jacqueline Humphries and guest curator Mark Godfrey

Mark Godfrey: Jacqueline, this exhibition brings together works from the last seven or eight years of your practice, but it's also a response to the Wexner Center and to Peter Eisenman's building.[1] Can you say a few words about how you and I have conceived the installation of the paintings before we get into what viewers can see in each room?

Jacqueline Humphries: With architecture this unusual there were two ways to go: either install walls to make it a more conventional exhibition space, or meet the building where it is and then exceed it, which is the path that we ultimately chose. We tried to truly understand the building, to work with it and embrace all its idiosyncrasies (which are not just quirks or oddities, but highly considered architectural decisions). Our aim was to install the paintings in ways that visitors would never otherwise see them—it will likely be the first (and last) time that art is hung at the Wexner Center in this way.

GALLERY A: SILVER, X, AND BLACK LIGHT PAINTINGS 2013–15

MG: In front of us are two paintings, *31/13* and *41/14*—some of the last of the silver paintings that you made in 2013 and 2014. This body of work primarily used black and a silver-based paint. Can you describe your approach

to creating those two key pigments? What's special about both the black and the reflective silver paint?

41/14, 2014. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in.
Collection of Maurice and Paul Marciano.

JH: To the eye they read as opposites: black absorbs light and silver reflects it to the maximum degree. But there are further differences in their physical properties that made using these two elements very productive for me. I have my colors custom mixed, and the black paint is extremely dense, almost claylike. The silver paint, which I make in the studio, is light and fluffy—like whipped cream. Used in combination, those physical properties have allowed me to create very particular effects.

MG: When you move around the silver paintings they change appearance because of the different ways light

is reflecting, so the paintings become an active presence in the room. How does the responsive quality of those painted surfaces relate in your mind to other types of viewing experiences: to the computer screens, cinema screens, and phone screens that are synonymous with the world we live in?

JH: The paintings really do change their aspect depending on the lighting conditions: it's almost as if they have the capacity to turn on and off in different light. The silver pigment can go very dull or it can be the purest white, and those effects are unpredictable.

MG: One of the silver paintings has a square interior frame, which follows the contours of the painting's support and directs attention to its center. What draws you to the frame as a compositional strategy?

JH: Articulating a frame is a good way to start. It's a way of declaring the surface—declaring the space where painting can occur. And frames are also closely tied to my thinking about screens and the glut of viewing devices that surround us. They started appearing in my work when my identity as an abstract painter began to dovetail with this new reality of proliferating screens, and I had to ask myself what kind of image I should commit to a painting in a world full of moving images that are constantly replacing each other. I wondered how I could capture that fleeting reality of screen viewing in a painting—a medium that has a long-standing

commitment to a more permanent, more significant image.

MG: Your paintings display a dense variety of marks and mark-making strategies: paint can be applied with a brush or layered on with a scraping device; some of the marks are made through a stencil; and the stencils themselves are often made by tracing one of your previous brushstrokes or drips. The use of a stencil means that the marks on the canvas are mediated, rather than direct. What led you to that idea in the first place?

JH: I had been making hand-cut stencils for many years as a tool for generating marks. For instance, I might trace a drip from a painting, cut a stencil of that form, and then reapply it somewhere else on the painting. I was
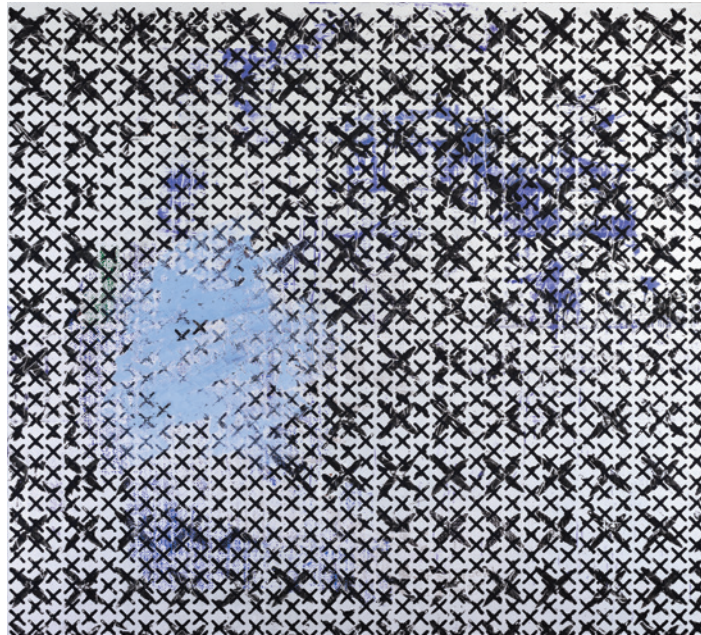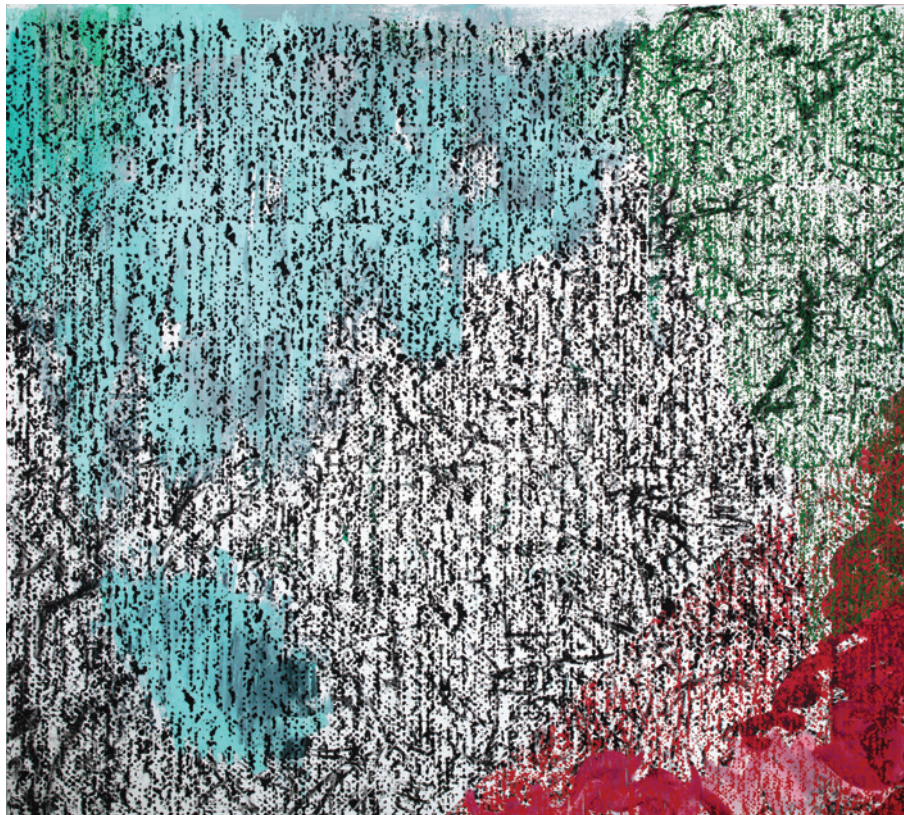

Xx, 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Sascha Steven Bauer, New York.

very interested in the idea of painterly marks that could reproduce themselves, not always directly originating from the artist's hand.

MG: Opposite the silver paintings are three works in which you used stencils made from repeated Xs. How do these relate to the frequently expressed impulse in painting's recent history to continue painting while canceling it?

JH: Any art student who gets interested in abstraction makes an X painting—it's an act of negation, which is also just a heightened version of the negation that's inherent in all abstraction. It has the imprimatur of

[///], 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in.
The Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Collection.

radicalness and refusal. But my engagement with the X motif is more playful, because clearly nothing is being refused here. Instead it's a profusion of these stenciled Xs—an outpouring of them that uses repetition and excess to undercut the seriousness of the gesture.

MG: At the far end of the gallery is *[///]* (2014), an extraordinary painting that has an allover field of marks made from a stencil based on a scan of the weave of an unpainted canvas—as though the canvas is depicting itself. Why were you interested in that kind of doubling, turning the surface materiality of a painting into the image that can occupy it?

JH: I'm very interested in both the conventions of looking at painting and how to disrupt them. Typically a person would stand in front of a painting to look at it, but I began to think, what if the viewer *were* the painting? If a painting looks out at the world, what does the painting see? That's obviously a theoretical proposition, but then I had to confront it visually, so my solution was to make a painting and then stencil the canvas over top, as if the whole surface of the painting were inverted or flipped in on itself.

MG: Opposite this work there is a painting (Ω, 2015) made from laser-cut stencils that came about after you had researched the computer game *Dwarf Fortress* (2006). What interested you in this game's graphics?

Ω, 2015. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in.
Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg.

JH: *Dwarf Fortress* creates complex (and quite beautiful) landscapes from fields of keyboard characters in different configurations. There are no rendered graphics, yet it achieves incredible variety from this limited array of letters and numbers. It's very inventive and has a cult status within the ranks of serious gamers; there's an almost sublime quality to the visuals it produces from this mundane tool kit.

This was a transitional painting for me, because it marked a shift from working with a single allover pattern to abutting different patterns within a single painting. That move opened up a different morphology in my use of the stencils—a layered look that created compositional

interest out of different combinations and densities and gradients.

That work is also one that brought me more fully into the technological realm. The stenciled motifs I had used up until this point were fields of dots or repeated Xs—predigital marks that belong to a long history of high abstraction. *Dwarf Fortress*, though, embraces the keyboard as the generator and the content of the game, and making paintings from those characters was a way for me to acknowledge the keyboard as the space where life happens now.

MG: This gallery also contains an angular gallery-within-the-gallery, a wedge space that we constructed to house some of your black light paintings. How did it first occur to you to paint with these fluorescent pigments and to show them under black light?

JH: The appeal of these pigments is obvious—they're colors that make their own light. Painters have long been interested in capturing certain qualities of light, and Day-Glo colors allowed me to treat painting as a light source in a very literal way. No one had thought to make high art with these materials—to make serious abstract paintings in black light colors. I wanted to channel the experience I had visiting the Rothko Chapel, but to ask what would happen if I turned that sacred space for painting into a nightclub.[2]

GALLERY B: EMOTICONS AND EMOJI 2014–18

MG: The dense group of paintings installed in Gallery B features another quotidian element you've introduced to high abstraction: the emoticon. Emoticons derive from keyboard communication, text messaging, and so on. What prompted you to bring the emoticon into your arsenal of tools for making abstract paintings?

JH: The period of my work surveyed in this exhibition coincided with me spending a great deal more time on an iPhone. The sheer volume of engagement that occurred with and through a keyboard increased dramatically, and that started to seep into the paintings. Those elements of text message and email communication started sticking to the work, and at first it was jarring. I thought, "I'm an abstract painter, what am I doing making emoticons icons on my paintings? They have no place there." But it was as though the world in its degree of abstraction had so far outpaced abstract painting that I had to confront that new reality.

MG: The paintings in Gallery B feature a range of colors: purples, mint greens, blues, yellows, reds. However most of your paintings have a maximum of three colors. You're not known as a colorist, but this array of paintings is quite striking. How do you approach color choices?
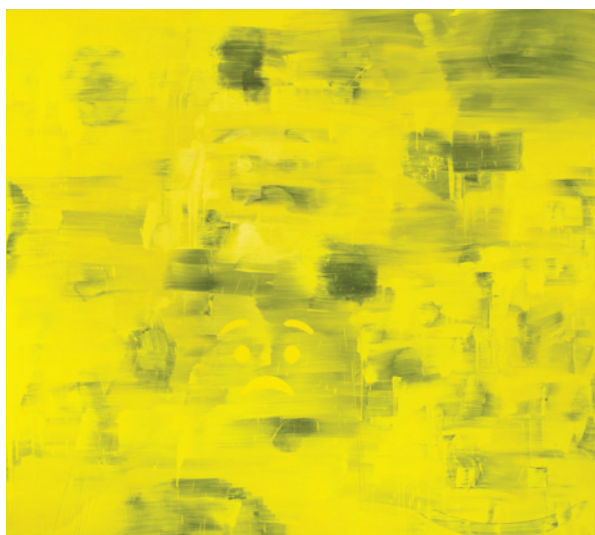
JH: You're right to point out that within a given painting the palette is fairly limited—I tend toward some version
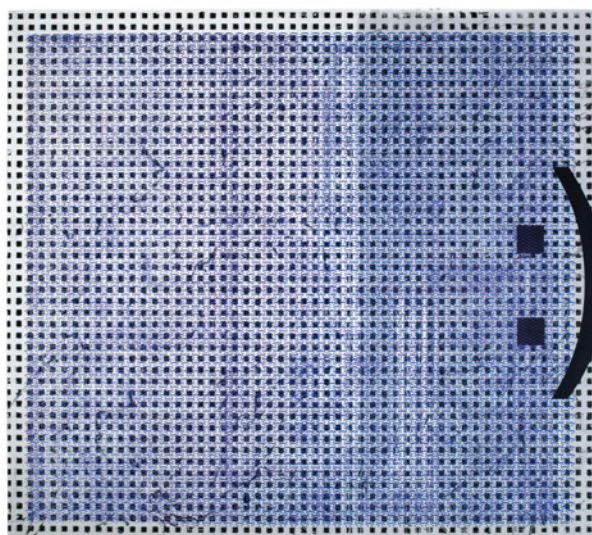
:):):), 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Daskal Collection.
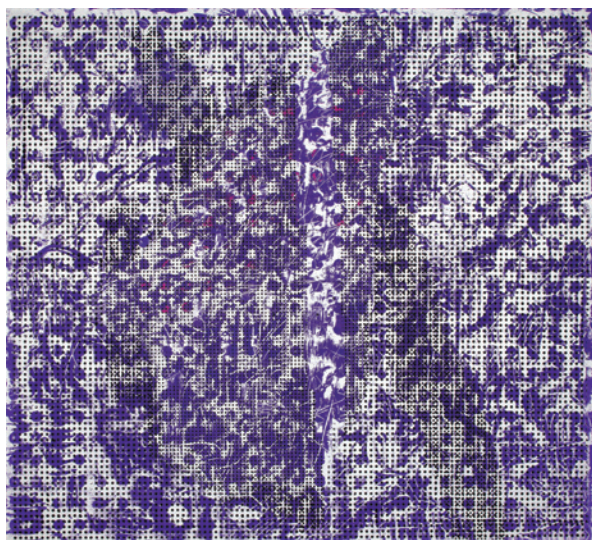
:::, 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Private collection, New York.

😟:), 2017. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Barasch Carmel Family Collection.


:):(, 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Michael Fuchs.

of the monochrome. Partly that's because I don't paint shapes, so there's no bounded space for separate colors to inhabit, only a field.

I hate blue but I use it all the time, because it does something no other hue does—it's insistent and passive-aggressive, but also disarmingly pretty and tied to the natural world. It's verboten for an abstract artist to make a purple painting, but I find myself doing it. Purple has a poisonous quality, like something tempting but toxic, and acid yellow is another evil-seeming color I keep coming back to. I'm less interested in the identity or associations of a given color than in what it *does*, how it behaves on the canvas. I choose colors that work on and in the painting in specific ways.

GALLERY C: ASCII AND CAPTCHA CODES 2018–21

MG: In Gallery C we see a new phase of your technical experimentation with stencils: ASCII paintings. As I understand it, you take photographs of your previous paintings—for example *31/13* (2013)—and those images are then turned into ASCII code, which renders every value in the older painting as a keyboard character, as seen in *sysysyo/* (2017).[3] Then stencils are generated from those characters and paint is pushed through the stencils onto the canvases. What was your interest in using ASCII code to create new paintings out of existing ones?
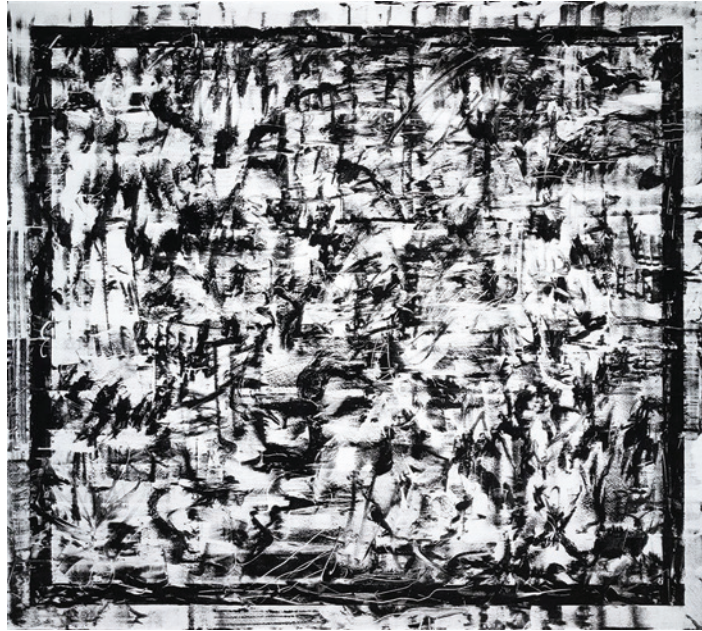
31/13, 2013. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in.
Udo and Anette Brandhorst Collection.

sysysyo/, 2017. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in.
Collection of the artist.

JH: I thought, what if I could make a stencil the size of the painting so that the painting just gets stenciled? One day my assistant Peter Granados showed me an experiment, a painting of mine that he had generated in

ASCII code. We have a highly collaborative relationship where I will ask for solutions to an idea I have and then he will go hunting; he'll come up with 15 different possibilities and I'll take some and reject others.

The ASCII approach seemed like a risky thing to do: the painting generates itself through a digital code that's automated and retranslates itself. I liked that you could make an ASCII [version] of a painting and then email it to a friend—taking this big, heavy, 10-foot object and reducing it down to lines of code. You could transmit it to the other side of the world and then turn it back into a giant painting. It took a lot of trial and error to arrive at a strategy for the ASCII paintings that I felt was visually interesting, parsing all the decisions that are still left for an artist to make within this automated technique (the types of characters chosen, the font, how many lines per surface, the density). There are still a number of subjective choices that you can make within this highly limited set of options.

MG: Also in this room are a series of smaller paintings. Most of the works that we've discussed in the exhibition so far are quite large-format paintings, but you do work on multiple scales. What do you find compelling or useful about working on a small painting? Is it an exercise for testing larger ideas, or are these artworks in their own right?

JH: I don't make studies, so each small painting is an independent work. But I certainly have a lot of ideas about the set of procedures that might constitute a painting, and I can experiment much more easily with new approaches on a smaller canvas.

MG: The painting on the far wall in this gallery, *jHΩ1:)* (2018), incorporates CAPTCHA, a type of ubiquitous code

Isolated CAPTCHA code from *jHΩ1:)*

we use to authenticate ourselves online and prove that we're not robots. CAPTCHA codes appear in a number of your paintings, and this one features your initials and the Greek letter omega. What drew you to CAPTCHA as a painterly motif, and why personalize it in this way?

JH: I had made a mistake in that painting and needed a fix for it, and the idea to use CAPTCHA was swimming around... Like the screen or the emoticon, it was another element that was of this world and part of my daily encounters with the digital. I started playing with this idea of making my own CAPTCHA—they are quite attractive with their distorted letters. CAPTCHA is a

new-looking thing that has a practical purpose, and once it stuck to the painting I knew it belonged there.

This particular code is my logo: *jHΩ1:)*. That's me and the things I love. Omega stands for last things, last paintings—an obsession that dates back to my time as an art student, when painting was supposedly dead but we were all still competing to make "the last painting." And then of course the smiley emoticon, which is my favorite symbol. It's become a kind of avatar of mine (or the frowny).

MG: This painting also demonstrates how you combine things that would seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, the ASCII code has autogenerated a new painting from a previous one, but on the other, the large red scrawls connote immediacy. That combination of opposites—mediation and gesture—seems to be generative for you.

JH: It is! Engaging with ASCII was a real challenge artistically because it meant leaving everything behind that I loved about painting—leaving painting itself behind. But there was still a nagging desire to drag some of what had been lost back into the paintings and to force it to coexist with the approach that succeeded it. I could work as though I'd made enough paintings, I'd made enough gestures; now I could just make stencils or ASCIIs of them and generate new paintings on canvas out of all the things I already made.

HALLWAY: PROTEST SIGNS 2018–21

MG: In the next small room, there are a group of protest paintings. All of these were done during the Trump presidency, but that wasn't the first time that you've made work called protest paintings. As an abstract painter, how do you understand your relationship to the world of the street, the world of placards and banners and protest slogans?

**JH**: The first protest signs I made were during the George

Untitled, 2020. Oil paint on Aqua-Resin, 50 x 20 ⅜ x ¾ in. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

W. Bush presidency in the run-up to the Iraq War, and I returned to them during the Trump years when politics were all-consuming. The relationship between abstract painting and activism has a few different historical threads: the revolutionary zeal of [Aleksandr] Rodchenko and El Lissitzky one hundred years ago, when abstraction was compatible with radical politics, but also Daniel Buren's move in the 1970s to have people walk through the streets bearing placards with his signature stripes—stand-ins for painting—as if to acknowledge those utopian claims for abstraction had been exhausted. Both stances had validity in their own time, and neither feels adequate to where we are now. There's an ambivalence to my protest paintings that tries to expand on how we conceive of the placard or picket sign as a cultural form.

GALLERY D: LOGOS AND WHITE NOISE 2020–21

MG: As we continue up the ramp, we see on the window wall a new development for you: a multipanel painting. The work has a buried or almost secret CAPTCHA image based on the word WEX, in reference to the founding donor of the Wexner Center whose businesses included Victoria's Secret. The painting comes out of your thinking about brands and logos, and the economic and institutional conditions that are in place for paintings to be displayed today. After working with keyboard characters, emoticons, and CAPTCHA codes in your paintings, what made you turn toward the graphic logo?

JH: It offered a way to more fully acknowledge the entirety of the situation. We can't pretend that I am alone in my studio painting away and that's all there is to it. I'm working toward an exhibition, and that exhibition is happening in a space, and that space has funders. The painting was made with an eye to that context, and if it
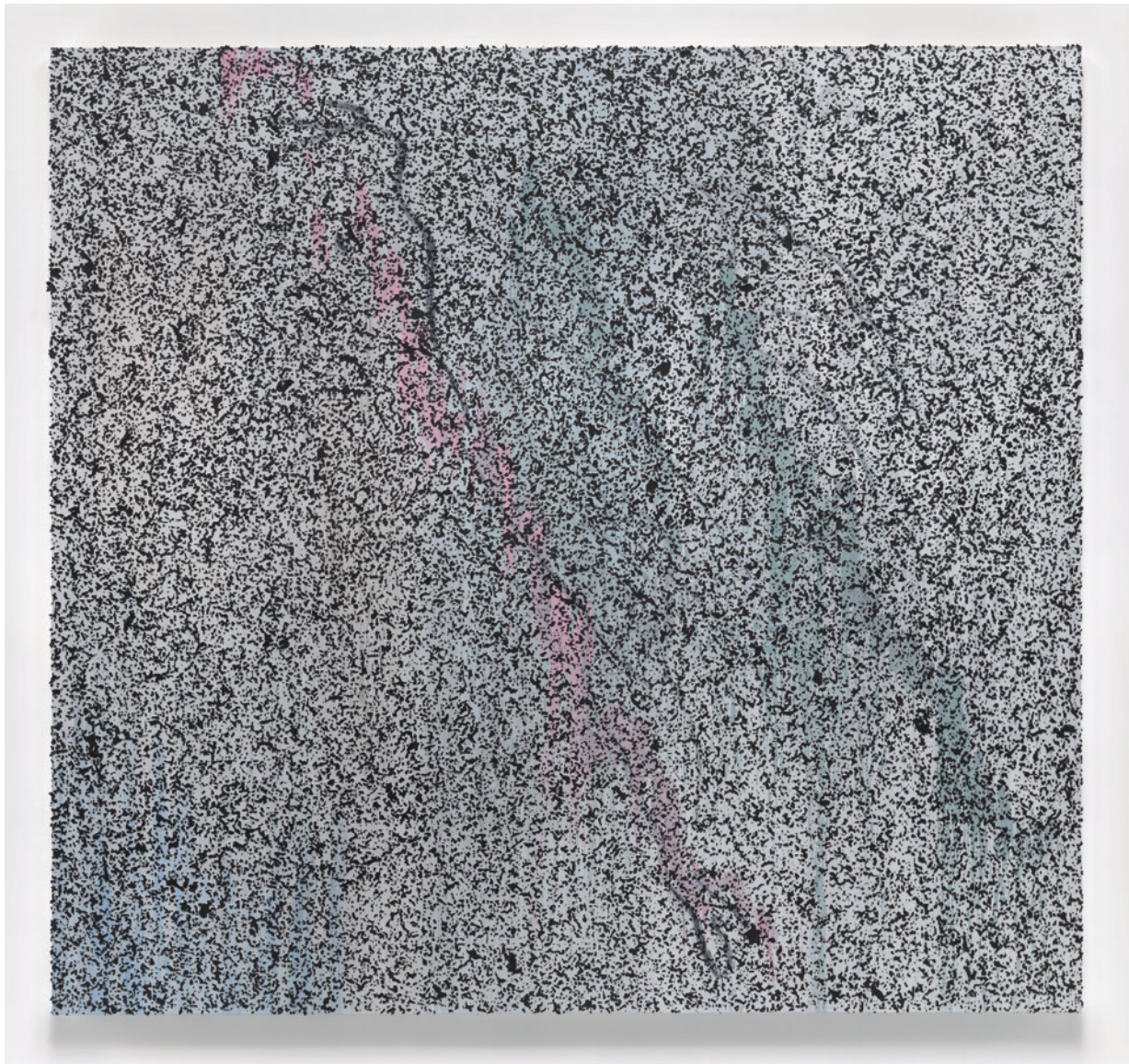
Untitled, 2021. Oil on linen, 90 x 96 in. Private collection. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

bears the stamp of my own artistic being, that can also be commercialized into a kind of a logo. The brand name also satisfies my desire to contaminate the vaunted purities—the exalted status—of abstraction.

MG: As we move into one of the final spaces, we see something else that you're doing in this exhibition that you haven't done before, which is to project a kind of animated light show onto a painting. The painting, *Untitled* (2021), derives from a stencil depicting TV interference, and the light projection on top of it is also based on interference patterns. Can you talk about the evolution of this new idea? We've already discussed the black light paintings that generate their own light, but projecting onto a painting is a new thing.

JH: I'm working with white noise patterns in this work, which harks back to the idea of the painting as a light source. I thought, why not use the motifs within the painting as the actual lighting to exhibit the painting? White noise is like TV static—it moves. So the canvas is animated to create a narrative of the painting lighting itself.

MG: There are many abstract artists who don't offer points of connection between their interests in form, color, materiality, and the everyday world outside an art gallery. But in your practice, there are so many links to the world of anyone who has a smartphone—anyone who looks at a screen, plays a computer game, verifies

they're not a robot, and so on.

JH: My starting point is abstraction, and that's a visual tradition that has had a bad rap for being alienating or aloof. I feel it's my job to bring abstraction into a renewed confrontation with the actual world, rather than hermetically fulfill some private desire to be [Kazimir] Malevich today, which is impossible. Malevich is sealed in time; I can't access the conditions which enabled those paintings.[4] But I see threads that tie what he achieved to the world I'm living in and sharing with others. I try to make those connections felt in highly tangible ways and to evoke the more personal, psychic states that define how we all live with these very new demands on our attention.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Notes

1. Peter Eisenman partnered with the Ohio-based architect Richard Trott to design the Wexner Center; together, they submitted the winning proposal for Ohio State's Center for the Visual Arts Competition in 1982–83.

2. A nondenominational chapel located in Houston, Texas, the Rothko Chapel holds 14 abstract paintings by artist Mark Rothko, who created this body of work specifically for the octagon-shaped building. Commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil, the chapel was completed in 1971 not long after Rothko's passing; it's open to the public today as a space of contemplation and prayer.

3. The ASCII character set contains 128 characters, including the numbers 0–9, upper and lowercase letters from A to Z, and the special characters available on a standard QWERTY keyboard (*, $, #, etc.). To translate an image into ASCII code, a computer program first renders it in grayscale, then assigns a character for each light/dark value—for example, a darker value might be rendered with the letter R, and a lighter value, with the symbol /.

4. In 1915–16, Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich exhibited his first fully abstract paintings, including *Black Square* (1915), at his one-person exhibition *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10* in Saint Petersburg.