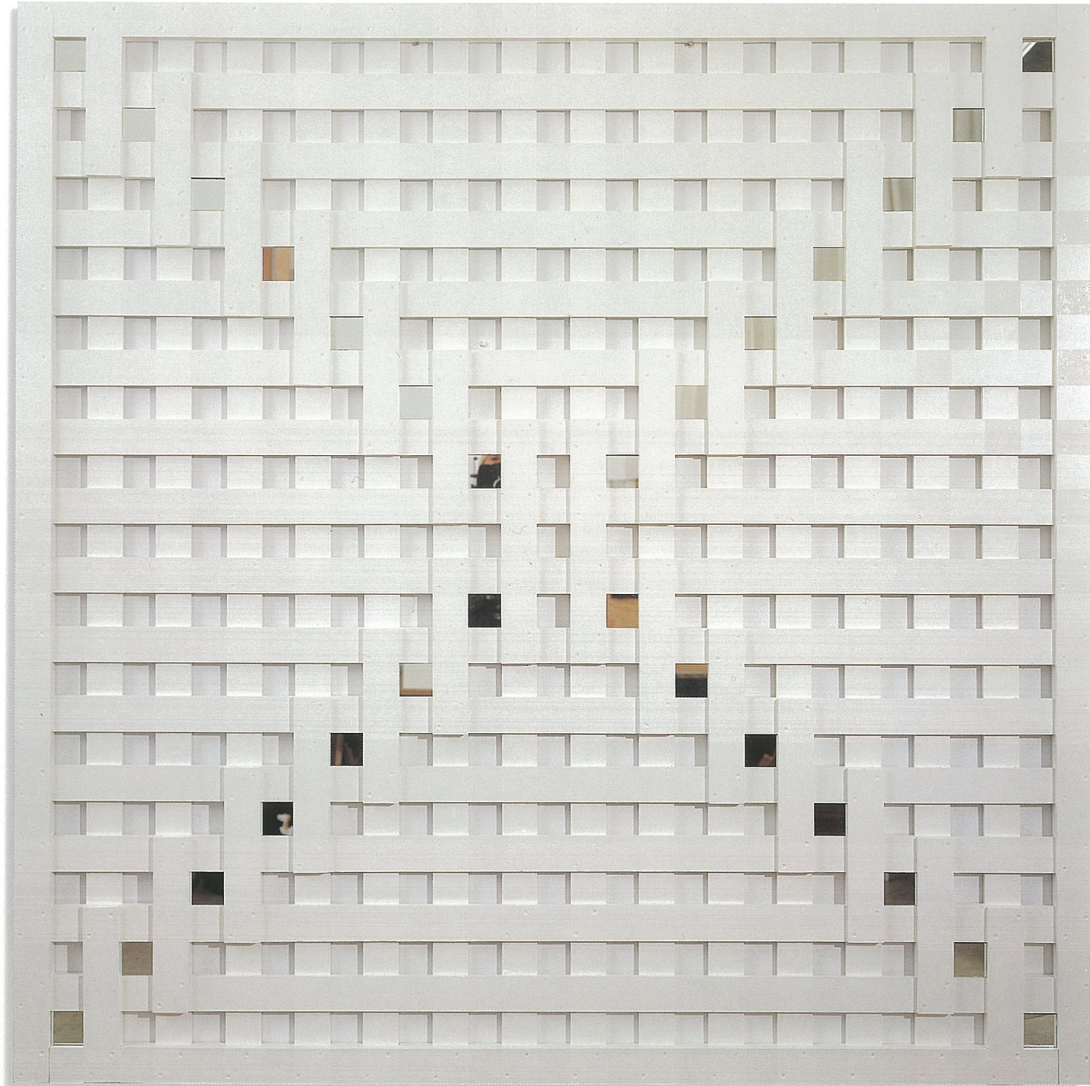


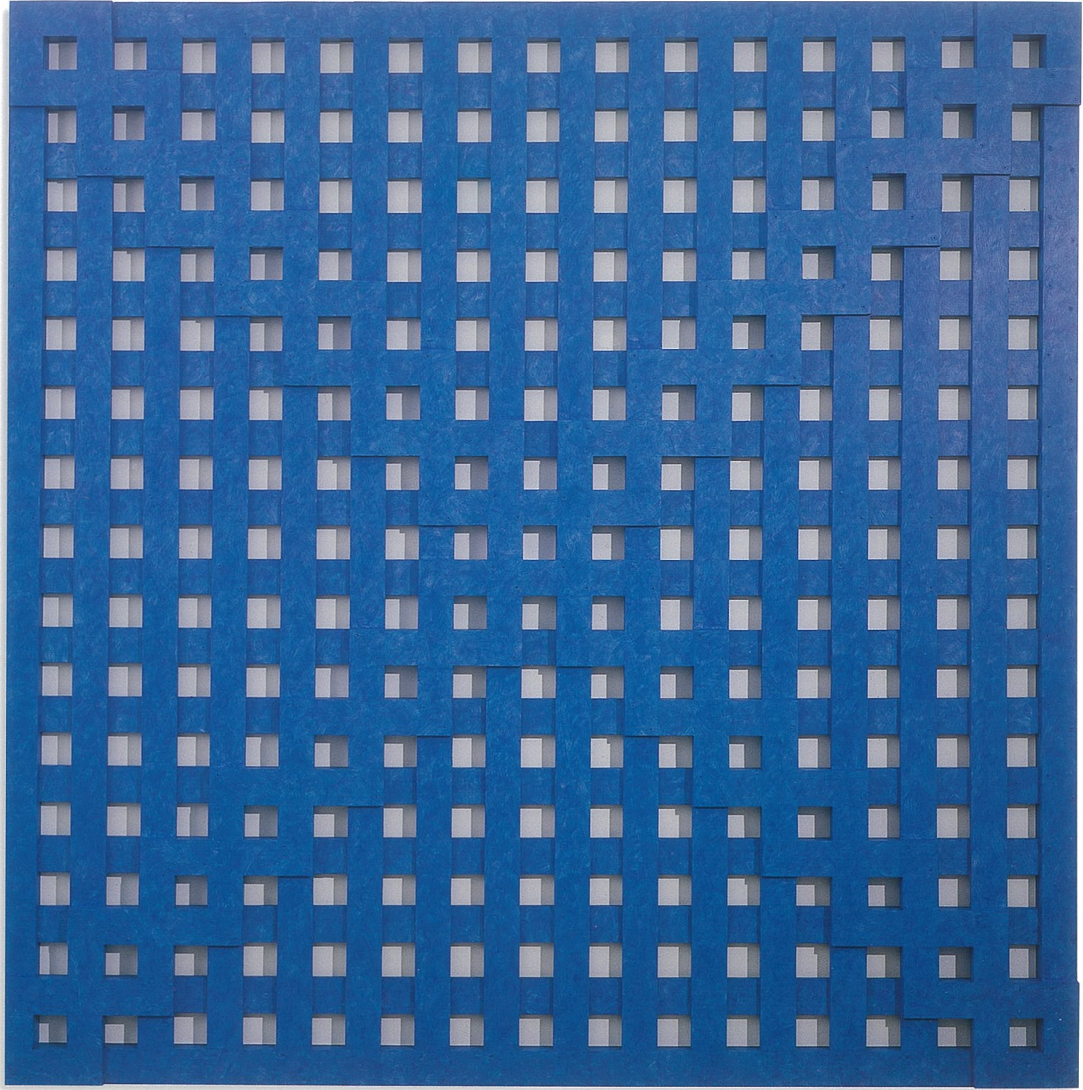
Hilarie Mais

In Side: an Exhibition in Two Parts

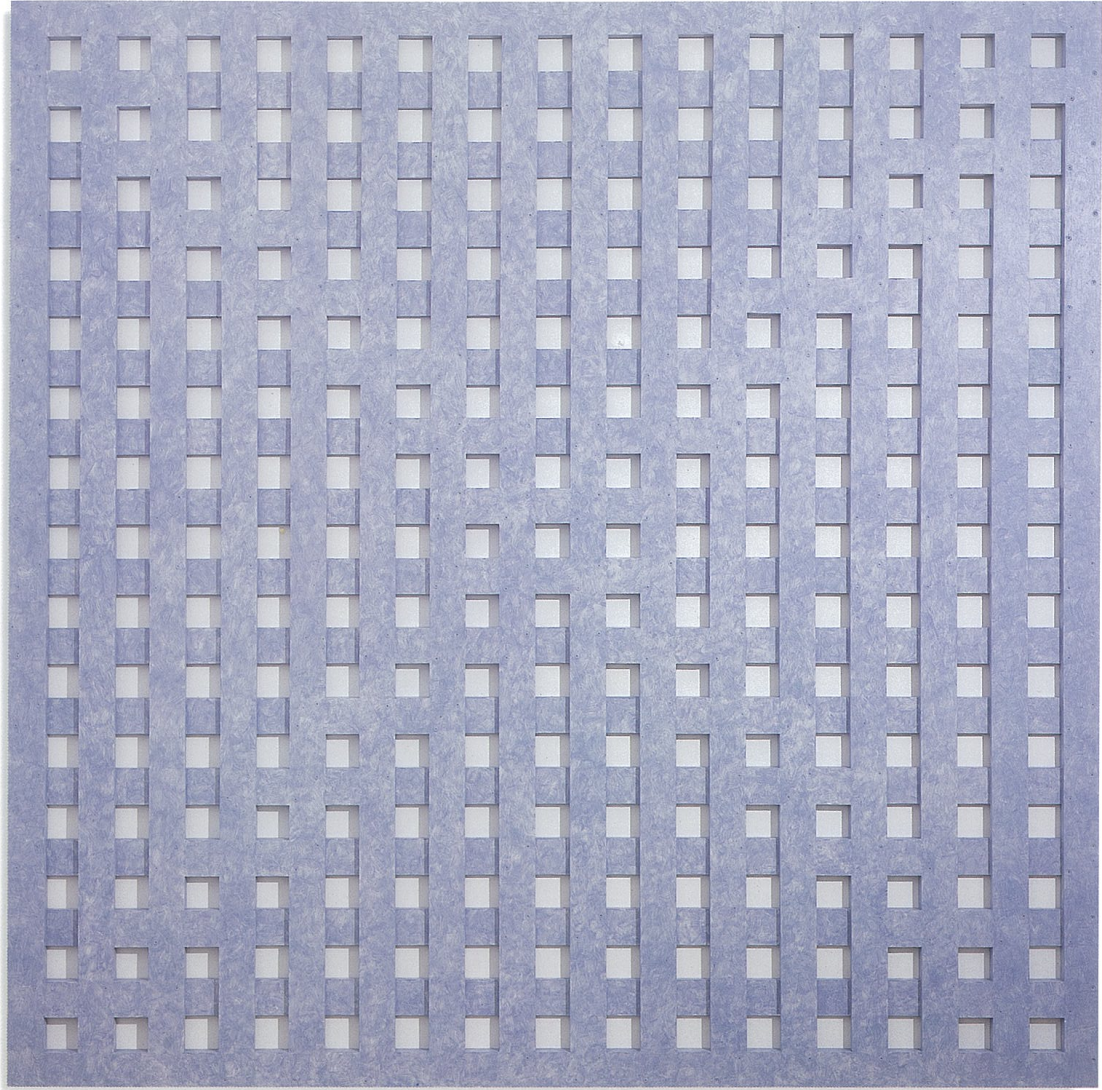


30 August – 21 September 2002

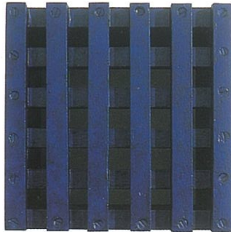
S H E R M A N G A L L E R I E S



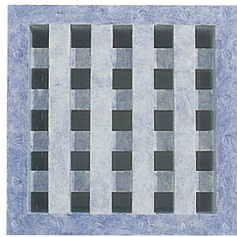
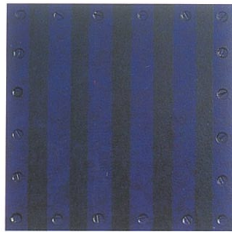
Divide #1 2002 oil on wood 203 x 203 x 5 cm



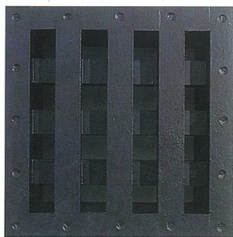
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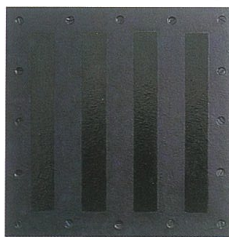
Simile: Night Variations #6 2002
oil on wood
21 x 21 x 13.5 cm each

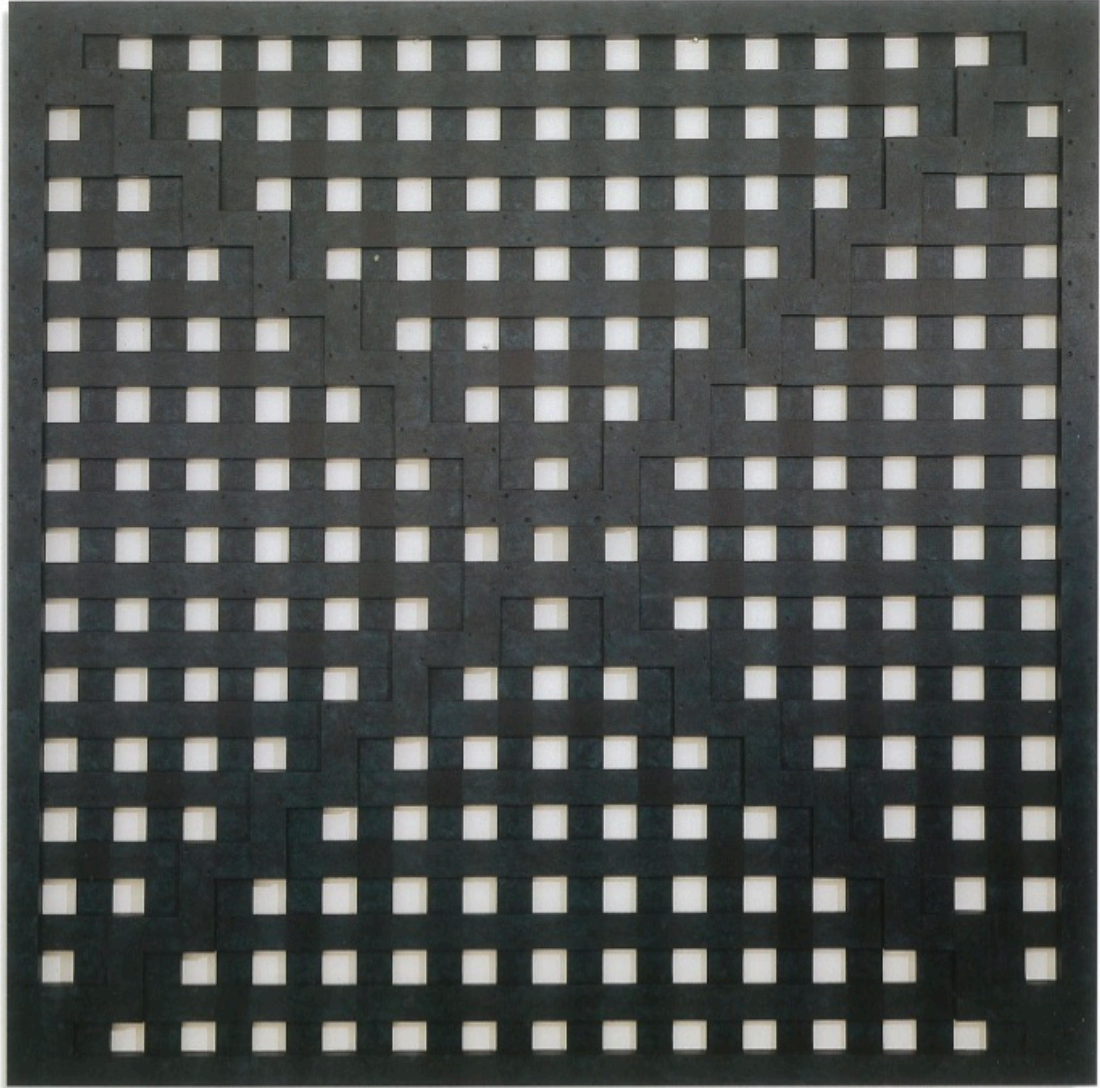


Simile #4 2002
oil on wood
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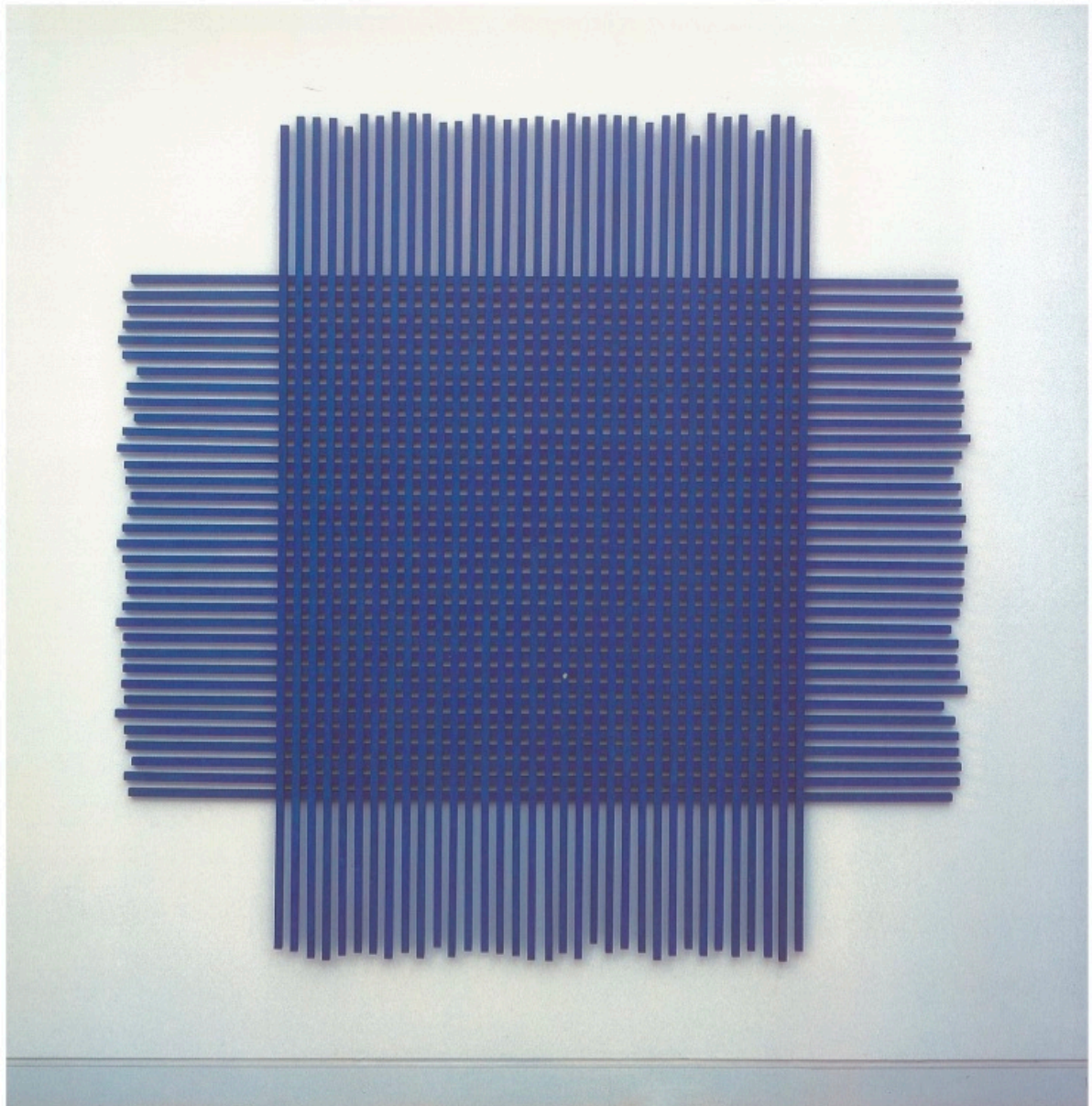


Simile: Night Variations #4 2002
oil on wood
27 x 27 x 15 cm each





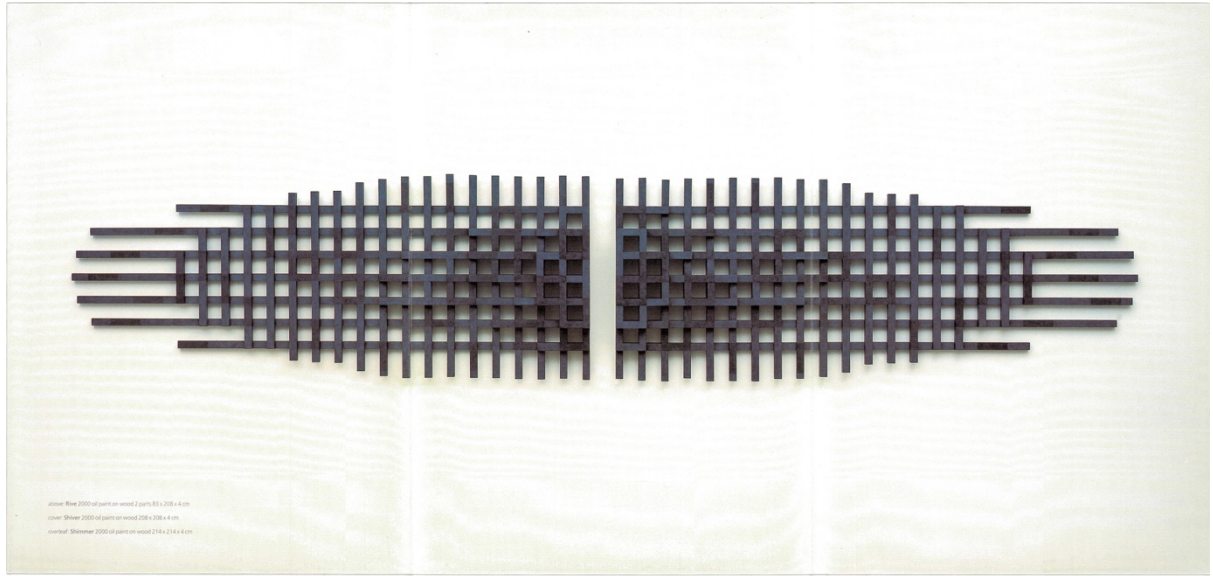
Divide #2 2002 oil on wood 203 x 203 x 5 cm

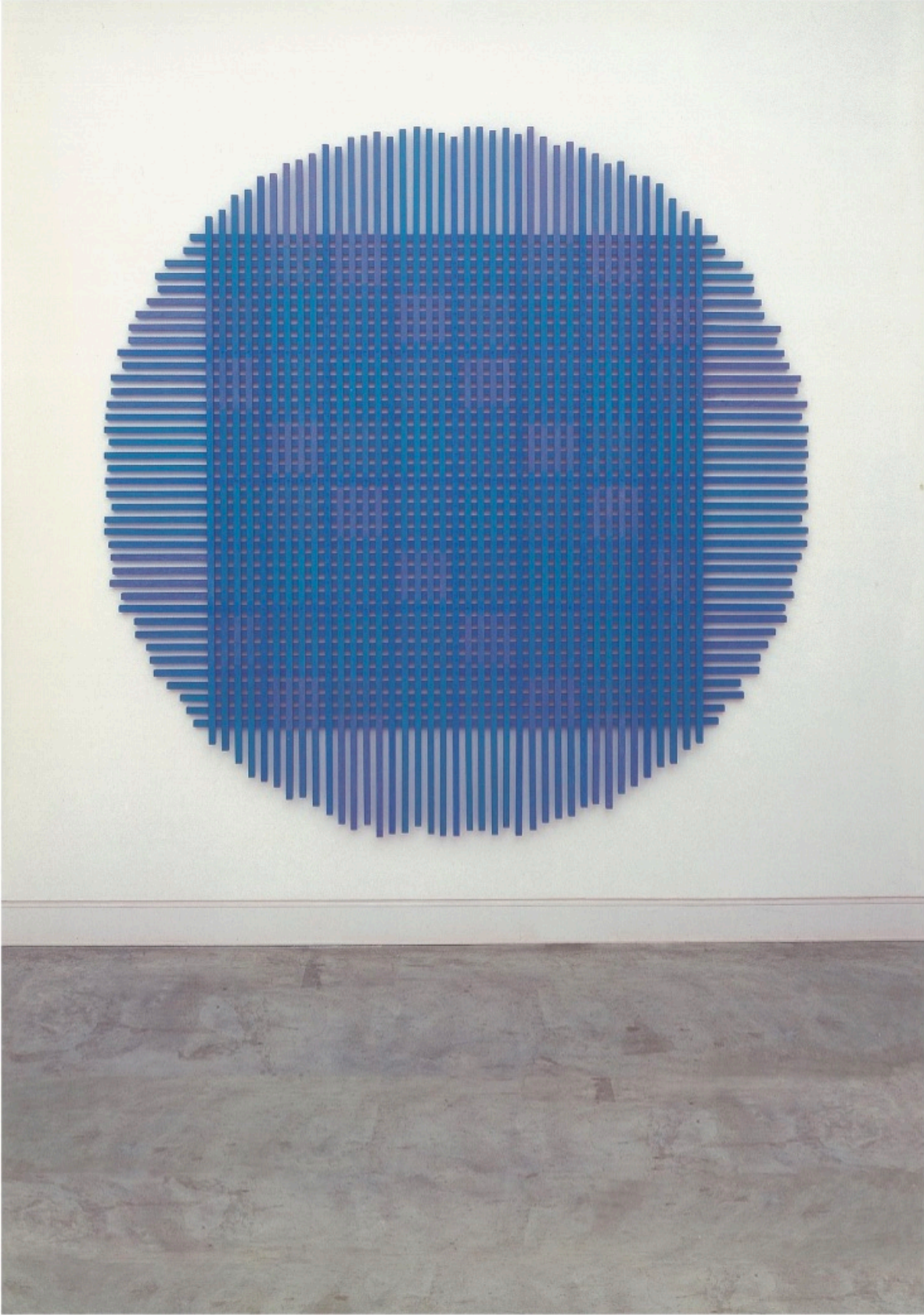


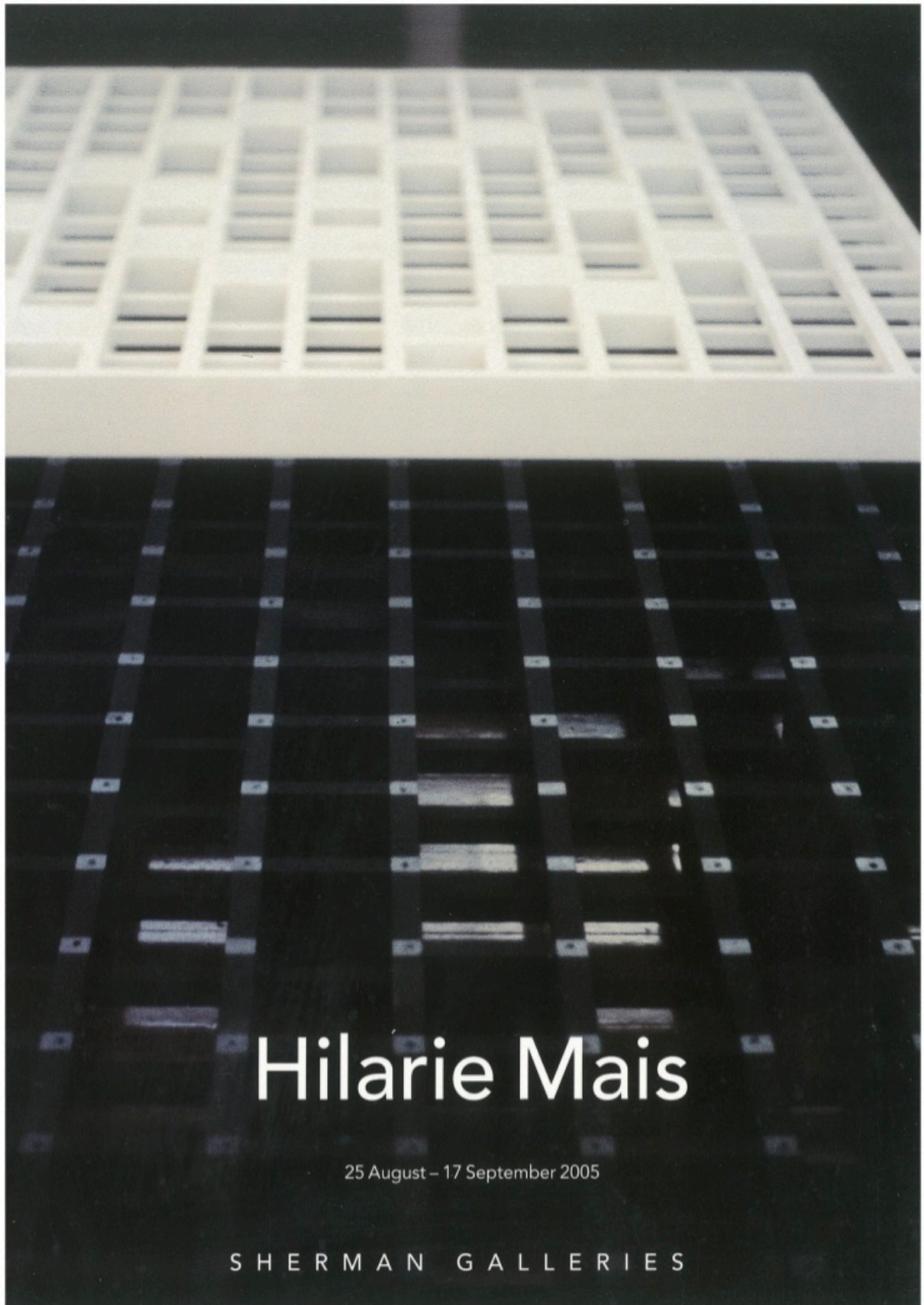
Hilarie Mais

1 June – 24 June 2000

S H E R M A N G A L L E R I E S



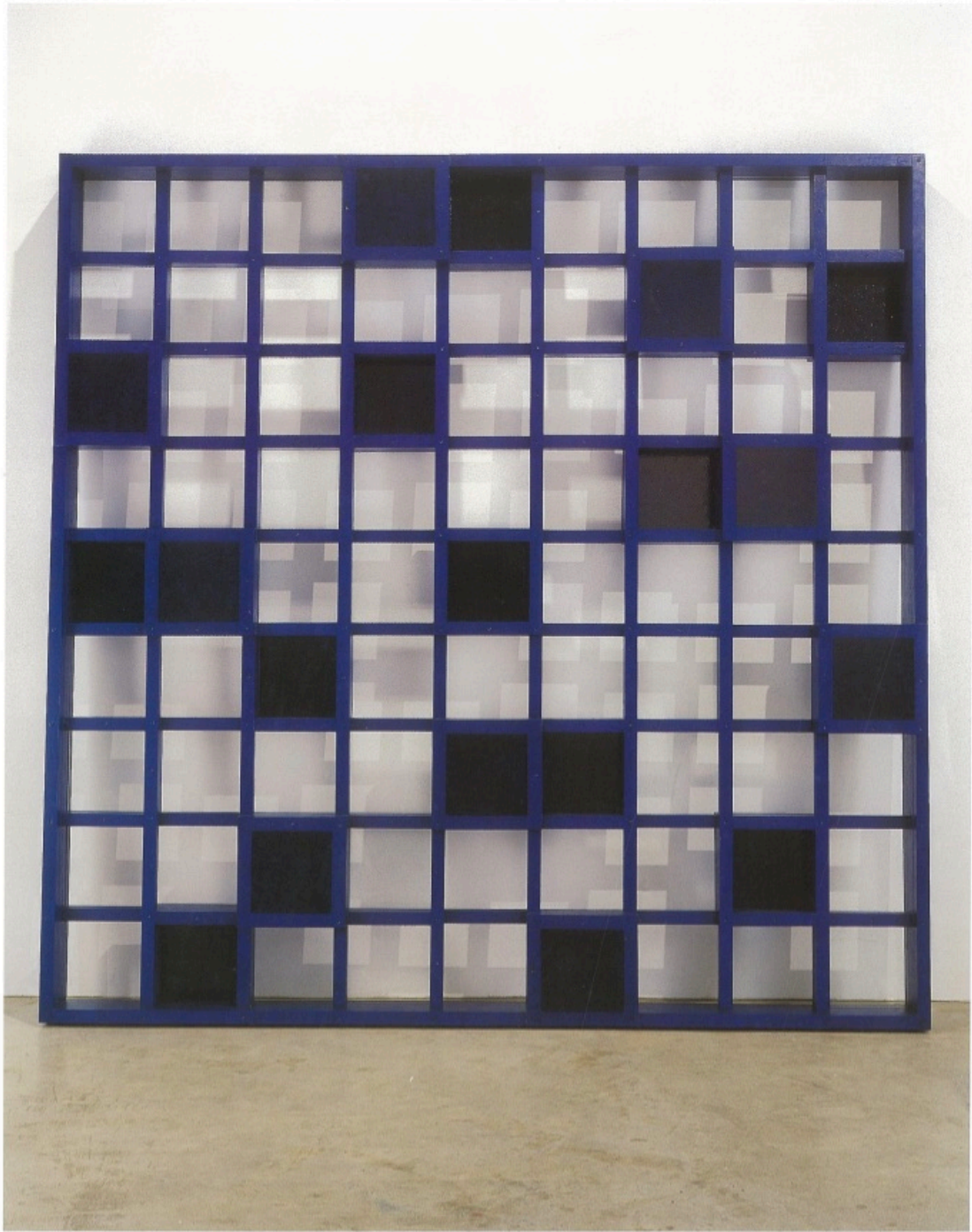




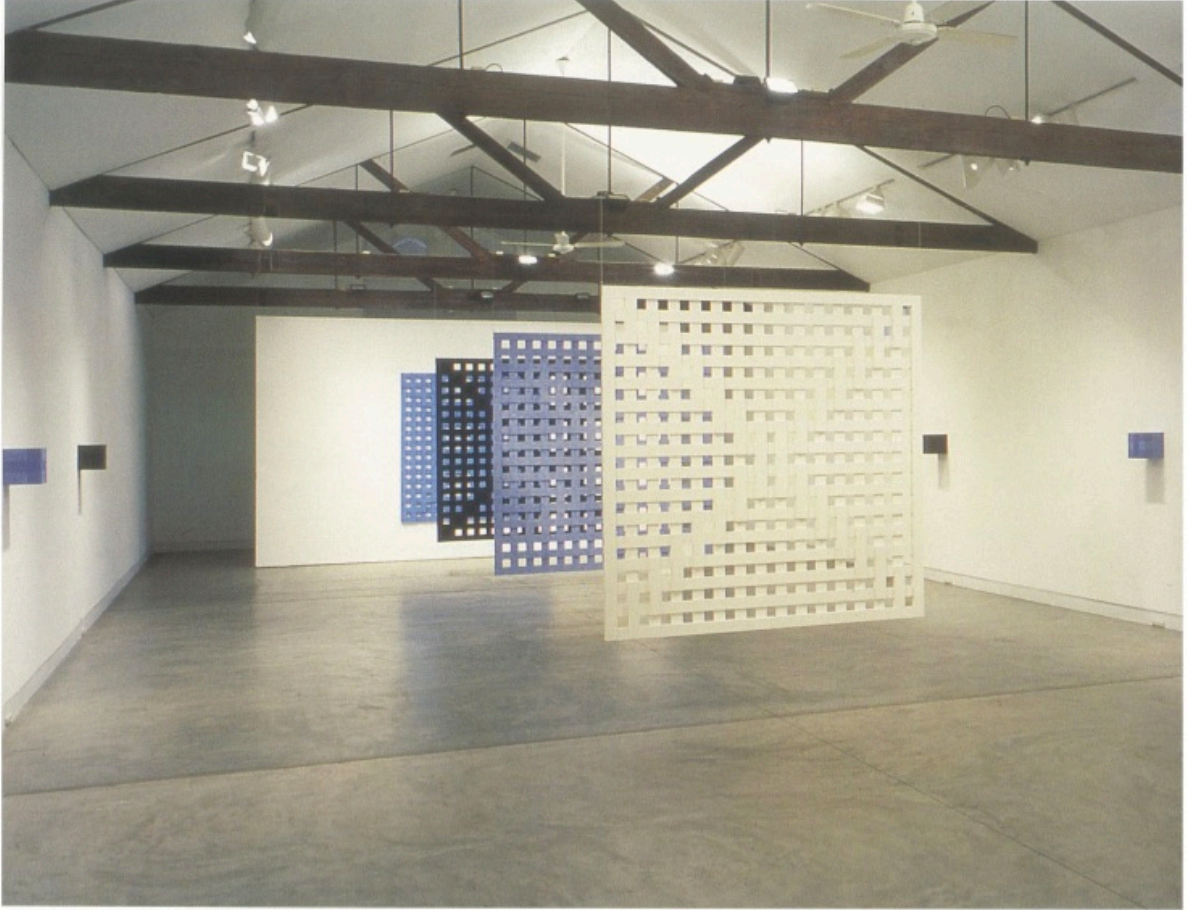
Hilarie Mais

25 August – 17 September 2005

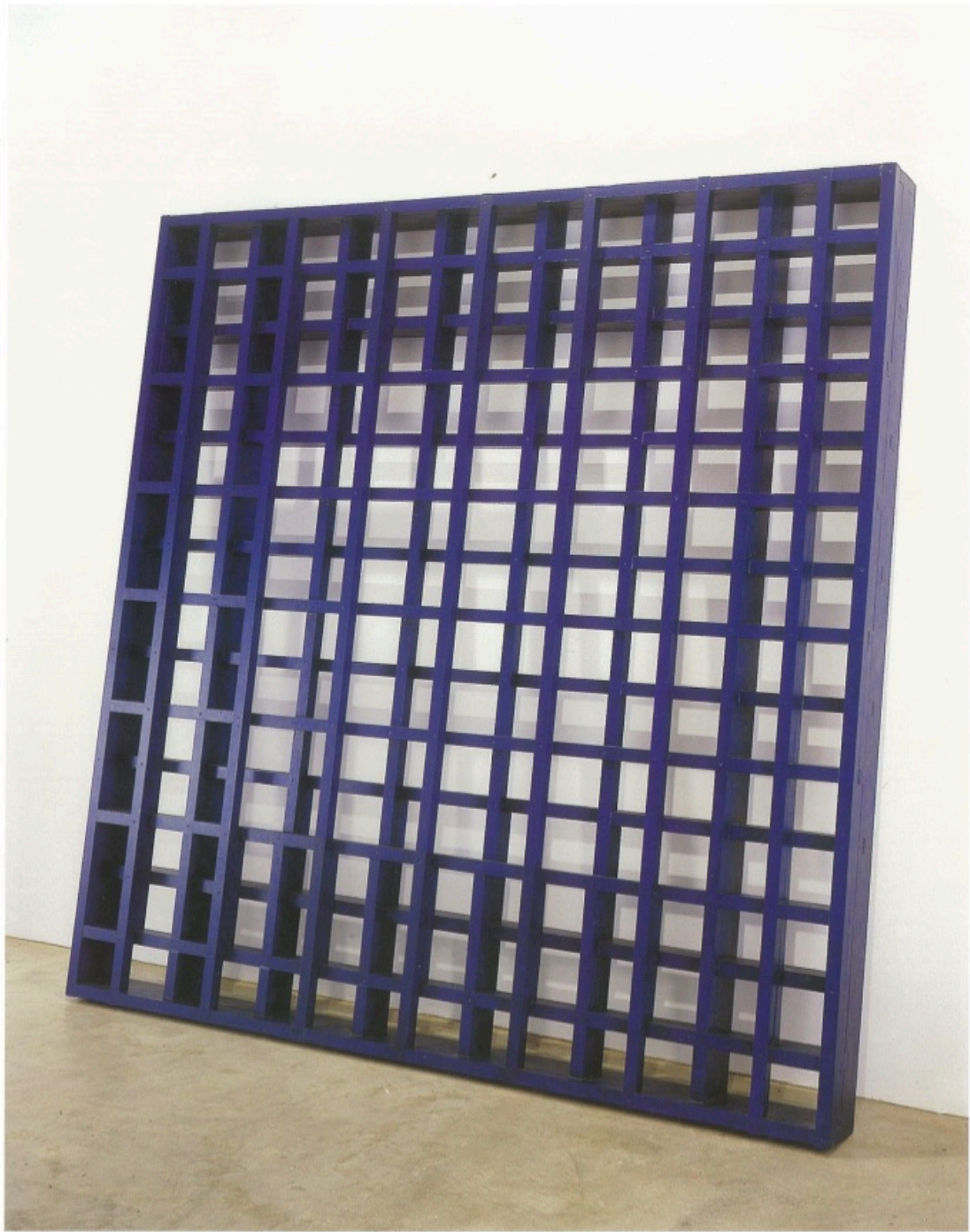
SHERMAN GALLERIES



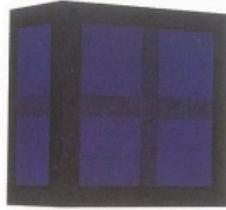
GRID VI 2004–05 oil paint, wood, glass 202 x 202 x 14 cm, courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney



Installation, 'In Side: Divide', 2002, from the exhibition 'Hilarie Mais: An Exhibition in Two Parts', Sherman Galleries Goodhope and Hargrave, 2002



GRID V 2004 oil paint on wood 203 x 203 x 15.5 cm, courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney



Hilarie Mais

All artistic discoveries are discoveries not of likenesses but of equivalences, which enable us to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality.¹

Equivalence is at the heart of artistic discovery and is communicated through the abstract system of language, whether visual, musical, aural or written. In systems of equivalence, an object is a set of instructions or a mapping for something else as well as being an entity in its own right. Equivalence is a favoured descriptor in Hilarie Mais's lexicon. Her works hover in the interstices between two and three dimensions, the planar and structural, between such modernist categories as painting and sculpture. Her systemic approach, through structural process and painting, establishes a 'dialectic of resistance'.² Mais explains: 'I'm interested in that duality, the push and pull between those two states ... real and unreal, structure and illusion.'³ The works in this exhibition reveal shifting subtleties, the shades and ambiguities of difference and similarity.

Hilarie Mais has taken the grid – American minimalism's emblematic symbol – and, through the use of contradiction and paradox, invested it with language. Her British artistic and intellectual base, the influence of constructivists such as Kenneth Martin, and investigations into recursive systems within which repetition leads to paradox and change, are fundamental to her practice. The impact of feminism, which she encountered in New York in the 1970s and early 1980s, its concern for re-establishing the 'relation of experience to discourse' that was denied by the 1960s minimalist aesthetic, is an important, motivating factor in her development.⁴ For Mais, the resolution of these two powerful influences found expression in something akin to a fugue; a meta-system of structural and conceptual complexity that incorporates many voices and many viewpoints. The distance of Australia from the 'centres' of New York and London created a space where these multiple viewpoints, sometimes in conflict, at other times converging, can be seen and interpreted within her work.

It was in Australia that Mais's distinctive personal style matured. She proceeded from icons and spirals to the grid as a formal device for investigating non-mimetic systems of representation, the latter's repetitive matrix revealing endless diversity of form. Mais's approach to her work is intuitive. Her working method is 'not the imposition of a "system" so much as an evolutionary coming to understand the system within'.⁵ The grids emulate recursive systems characterised by layers of complexity that are nevertheless made from very simple units. The inherent oscillating quality of Mais's grids reveal the recursive functions in visual language: the shimmer of the painted surface, the changing shadows in the depths of the grid structure and the fragmented and dissociative reflections of mirrors and glass surfaces. The works are powerful evocations of perceptual shifts revealing the 'similarity in differences' and the 'differences in similarities'.⁶

Mais's grids – suspended, projecting, leaning or floor-based – intervene in the viewer's space. While this exhibition represents the culmination of a new integration of parallel investigations that have been present in her work since 1986, the three large works – *Grid V*, *Grid VI* and *Island: Divide* – continue a series of investigations into notions of self-perception that began with the

ceiling-suspended works in the artist's 2002 Sherman Galleries exhibition.

The inclination to greater depth within the grid matrices alludes to the inclusion of small, boxed grid-forms as the basic units of construction that appeared in Mais's *Arrivals* exhibition in 2000, extending from earlier transitional research works entitled *Portraits*. These are the first major works to incorporate boxed constructions. Like sentinels, a selection of the smaller, boxed works establish a beat, a pulse that is played out like a fugue in the three large works across the gallery space. 'Movement ... is experienced in the reading of intervals or in the proportionate development of like units.'⁷

Island: Divide, the only work in this exhibition not displaying Mais's signature shimmering blue hues, is a duality work and, being floor-based, is closer to the physical way in which Mais works and thus to her process of investigation. The reflective surfaces in this work – mirrors, glass and the subtle use of gloss paint – are visual puns on the concept of representation, as is the mirror-reversal principle in the use of black-and-white grid formats. Surfaces that reflect the space around the actual work capture fleeting moments of the viewer's presence, producing a distorted depth of field and a constantly changing experience of the work.

Grid V and *Grid VI* follow a trajectory from the first grid. The central core remains, though the whole grid structure has the depth and projection of the independent, closed, box-constructions, which now function as the fundamental building unit. These grids have a more physical presence, less like a painting frame. Their depth and bulk and the use of reflective surfaces create a rhythmic extension and recession into and out of the work, invoking a dialogue across the gallery space.

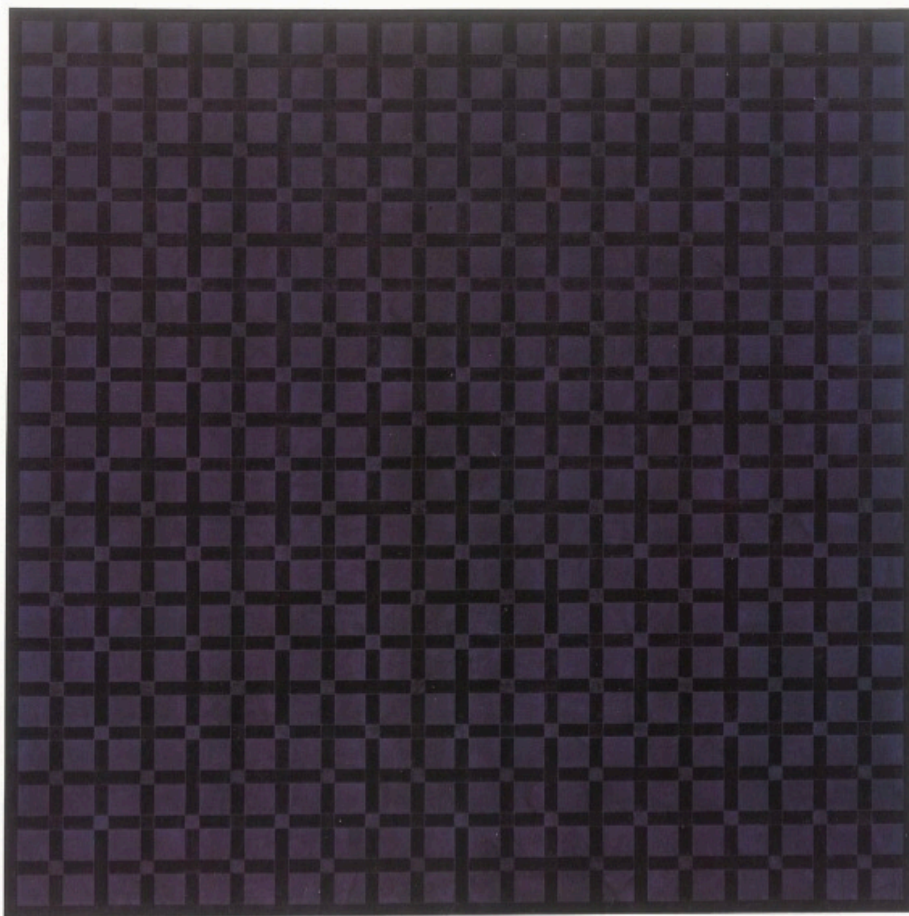
The play of many layers of complex concerns within the apparently simple grid format – whether formal, conceptual or instinctual – exemplifies Mais's mature work. For this artist, expanding the expressive vocabulary of a particular idea within a limited field 'is also the most liberating because it is endless'.⁸

Anne Sanders

Anne Sanders is currently a doctoral candidate in Art History at the Australian National University and also a freelance writer

- 1 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1960, p. 345
- 2 In discussing Mais's work, Andrew Montana offered this observation of 'a dialectic of resistance'; conversation with the author, 15 May 2005
- 3 Hilarie Mais, interview with the author, 7 May 2005
- 4 Susan L. Stoops, Introduction, *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the 70s*, exhibition catalogue, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1996, p. 9
- 5 Hilarie Mais, email to the author, 30 August 2004
- 6 Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory*, Alec Tiranti Ltd, London, 1954, p. 10
- 7 Andrew Forge, Introduction, *Chance and Order: Drawings by Kenneth Martin*, exhibition catalogue, Waddington Galleries, London, 1973, p. 12
- 8 Hilarie Mais, interview with author, 7 May 2005

above: *SENS I 2005* oil paint on wood 27.5 x 27.5 x 15 cm
courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

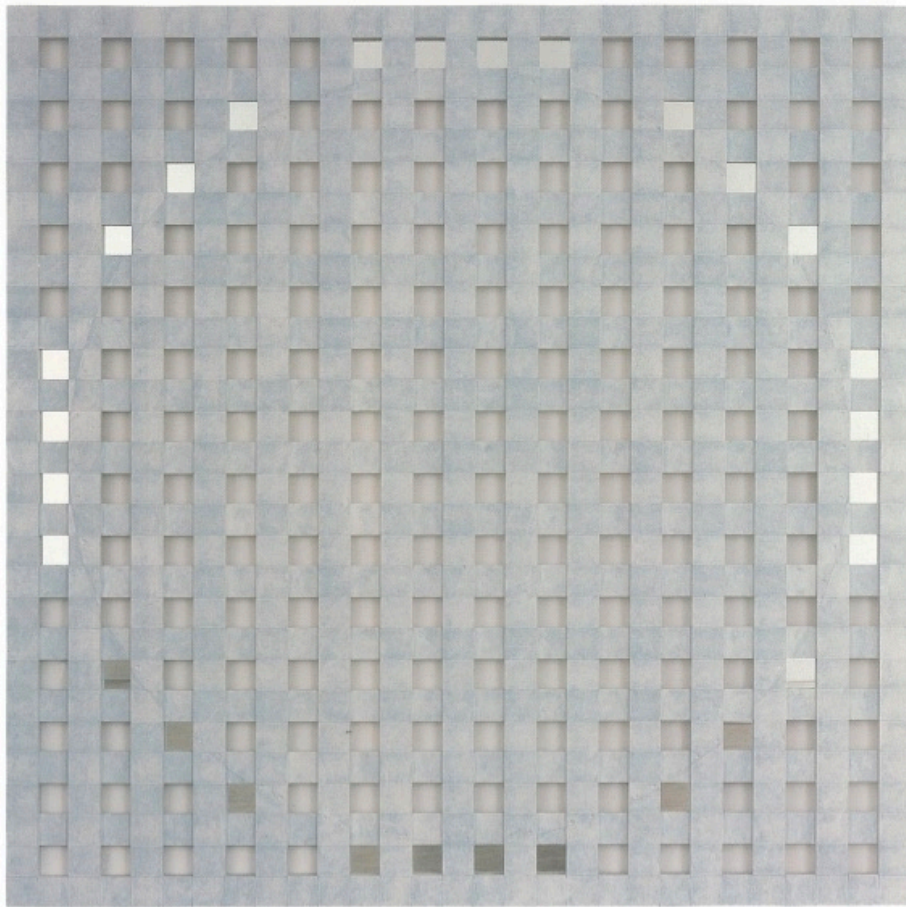


NIGHT VOLUMES II 1997 oil on canvas 190 x 190 x 6 cm

Hilarie Mais

1–25 October 1997

SHERMAN GALLERIES ♦ GOODHOPE



MIRRORED WHITE: HER CYCLE I 1997 oil on timber with mirror 189 x 189 x 4 cm

INTRODUCTION Nick Waterlow

I am looking at Anne Loxley's monograph on Hilarie Mais and am struck by two things. Firstly a work of 1971, titled *The Artist*; it consists of a mannequin, naked from the waist down with the upper body concealed by a rectangular canvas, standing on a stairway, and is at the same time provocative, alluring, inviting and enigmatic concealed private. Secondly the maturity of the wood, steel and paint, sometimes with canvas, sculptures made by Mais in her early twenties is palpable. A lineage recognising British Constructivism and the likes of Kenneth Martin, as well as the thinking behind British sculpture opening up the floor and wall as a base, is apparent, but these are works already with their own developed presence.

It is quite clear in conversation with the artist that, once at art school, it became apparent that here was a way of communicating with the world, involving the whole complex process of making objects, which could become a complete way of living. Mais's working life has spanned three continents, initially Europe then North America and more recently Australia where she has lived since 1980. Each experience has added to the density and complexion of her practice, which remains dominated by the play, the tension between the real, the tangible and the illusory, the imagined, brought to fruition by a consummate understanding of a structure that is vigorous and tight yet flexible and light.

Crucial to the core of this oeuvre is also the lived experience. Mais first went to New York in 1976 and in 1980 worked as a visiting artist at State University of New York at Purchase, in a vast studio originally created for Alexander Calder. There she made a series of steel works coated in tung oil *Clasp, Washboard, Code, Key*; this sequence was titled *Weapons*. They might indeed be domestic weapons, they hint even at torture, menace is within them, they possess their own sense of history; yet they are strangely, persuasively, personal. One senses that they are evocative of how and what the artist was feeling and thinking about in response to living in New York at that time.

The new experience of Australia, particularly by contrast with New York, placed the artist in contact with a fecundity of nature not witnessed elsewhere. Pregnancy consummated this world of pollination, out of which painted wood works such as *Seed* of 1983 emerged, resembling a ripe half-open fruit or vulva set in a circular receptacle. Mais talks now about how that time, the overt state of femininity, caused her to fully understand that being female, beyond being an artist, signified separate functions quite different to the male.

There were other significant works to emerge from these experiences. *Past Imperfect* 1984, dealing with memories, consisted of five painted wood elements placed on a wall; two spirals, one blue classical and European, the other red spiked and primitive, denote infinity, an open orange form a symbol for feminine shyness and discreetness, two interlocking black triangles pierced by a circular motif derive from feminist artist Miriam Schapiro's *Big Ox*, and in the centre of this activity is a light green oval poet or author's tablet. Autobiography also informs *The Waiting* 1984, two interjoining complex mauve painted wooden spirals culminating in little fingers, made in relation to awaiting the birth of her first child. *The Waiting: Sequel* 1985, seen earlier this year at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861-1996*, consisted of two blood red painted wood circles filled in with semi-circular struts between which is a much smaller circular red and blue element with spiked wooden radiating protrusions.

This was to prove the final work in a remarkable series, both beautiful and horrifying, infinite and finite, imagined and experienced, symbolic and animate, arcane and revealed.

Doors, Thoughts: The Maze, a tour de force, that was part of the 1986 Biennale of Sydney, introduced the grid structure that was to become a pivotal icon in succeeding work, but here it was surmounted by nine colourful and resonant presences, 'which set up a dialogue between "timeless" or archetypal forms and the implied contemporary psycho-sociological context of the maker/viewer. The contraposition of the grounded human scale central element, the "Maze" (also *Doors*) with the

floating celestial configuration of the other elements, ("thoughts") affirm the binary nature of experience: on a social plane, constraint – liberation; on a personal plane, order – imagination; on an organic plane, death – renewal.'

Grids were the basis for three works, that I also remember with fondness, from the 1988 Australian Biennale *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c1940-1988*. And now in this Spring of 1997 I am looking at objects in preparation that link in many different ways with those from the past I have been casting my mind over. But they also differ. *Night Volumes* 1997, is a conversation piece with a square, ultramarine and Paynes Grey painted maple (Mais's staple timber) grid leaning on the floor close by a canvas of exactly similar proportions and almost similar painted structure, the former a 'real' as in constructed presence, the latter an illusion mirroring the other. Whereas *The Artist* had engaged both these elements here they are separated yet reliant on relationship. Mais speaks of her work aiming, in sculptor David Smith's words, at 'hitting a note' or an emotion, in the way that composer Erik Satie was also able. And *Night Volumes* reminds of nights with her second daughter, dark velvety colours outside, volumes, things repeated when you're blind. And more broadly of seeing and the revealing of a different surface; what you see is not necessarily what exists. As dyslexia engages learning a word through the beauty of its shape and the sound it makes as opposed to reading it, so Mais' works require an understanding in their totality.

The initial conversation piece or diptych was *Bearing Effigy* 1994, now in the collection of the Art Gallery of NSW. 'A stretched canvas hangs on the wall mirroring its sculptural twin which leans against the wall. As a mirror's reflection imperceptibly distorts its subject, so the painted reflection reveals subtle differences. The blinking interplay between painting and sculpture, sculpture and shadow, seem to investigate the cusp between presence and absence, confirming the ineffably shifting nature of perception'.² *Mirrored White: Her Cycle* another larger (the artist never works beyond the scale of the body) two part work in this exhibition is almost white with a partially hidden circle in each element, manifested by small mirrors in the construction. *Night Echoes*, a lightish watery blue wooden tondo, is also present; the life cycle first found form at the time of her first child's birth and now returns as she enters womanhood. The other pieces, whether in conversation or independent, that charge this space remind us that the self-referential can still effectively and evocatively cohabit with a classical modernist framework.

'Growth, creativity, transformation ... this cluster of associations has been alluded to by Hilarie Mais in her interlocked spiral sculptures of the 1980s... Convergence towards a central focus – the still centre of self in the midst of flux... This art springs from the body as well as the mind, from an holistic awareness of the essential unity of the two'.³ These observations lead me to other real and imagined presences; Agnes Martin, Louise Bourgeois, *Vetruvian man*⁴, the portal, gates, barriers, entrapment, the door, labyrinth, trapped shadow, the artist's communing and strong physical engagement with each constructed piece, complex conversations rigorously resolved, an acute understanding of the binary nature of life within which the real and the illusory are dependant on each other.

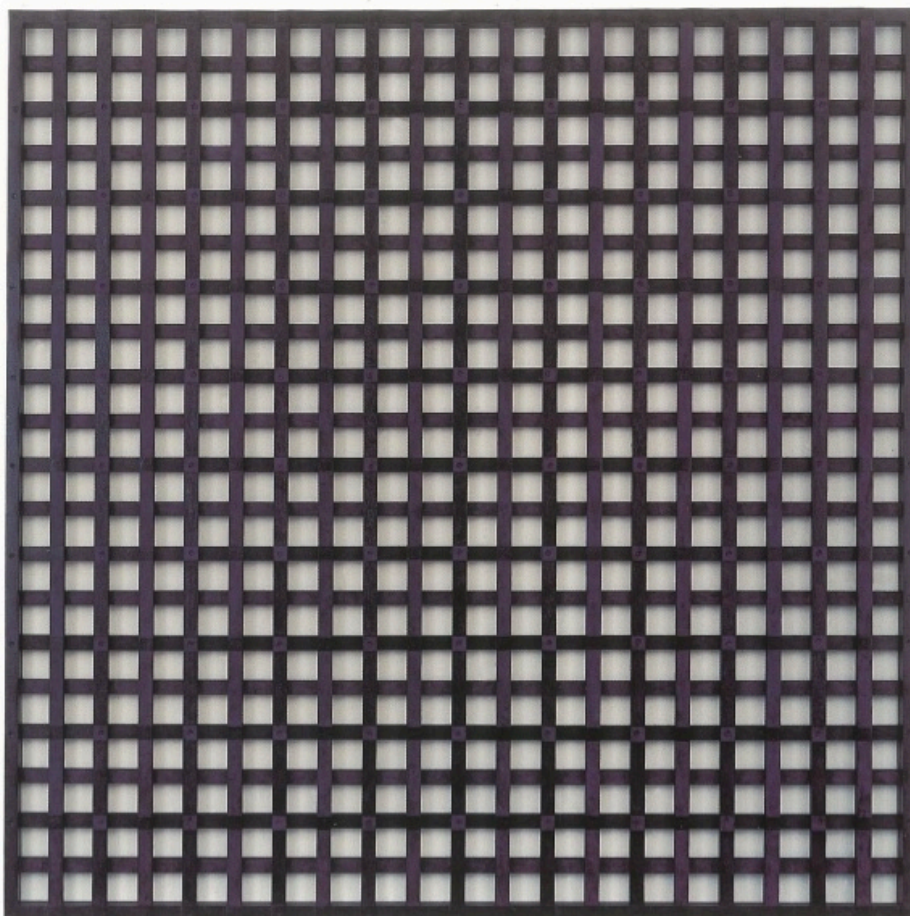
Hilarie Mais speaks of a tantric mandala... the beginning is the end... the end is the beginning. I have known and been engrossed by her work for seventeen years; it continually restores my faith in the possibility of an artist still alighting on language both modest and lean, both supple and resilient, that will always be sufficient to express a life fully and intricately led and for its duration. This is exactly what the artist herself realised when still at art school; that her odyssey still grips us is a tribute to a body of work that continues to share its existence with ours.

1 William Wright, 'Hilarie Mais', *The Biennale of Sydney 1986: Origins, Originality + Beyond*, 1986, p. 184

2 Anne Loxley, *Hilarie Mais*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995, p. 21

3 Extracts from Margot Osborne, *Poetics of Immanence*, Public Domain Art Projects, Adelaide, 1993, unpaginated

4 Hilarie Mais, discussions with the author, 21.8.97 and 29.8.97. Other points within this essay emerged too from these talks.

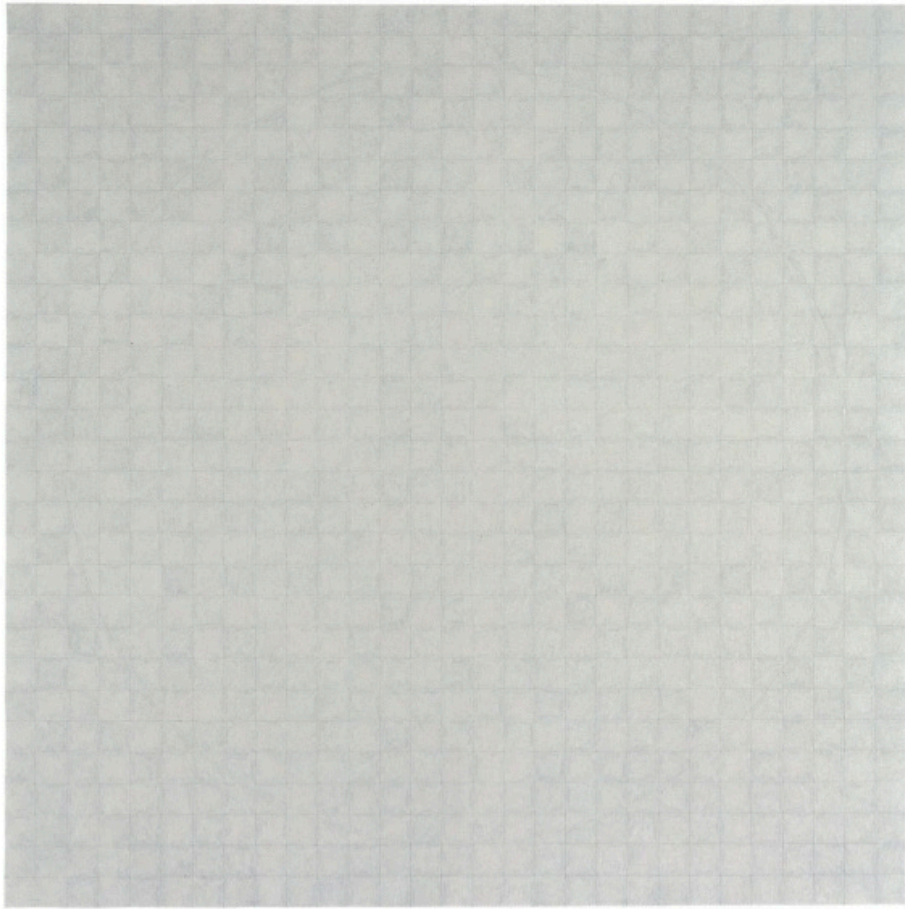


NIGHT VOLUMES I 1997 oil on timber 190 x 190 x 6 cm

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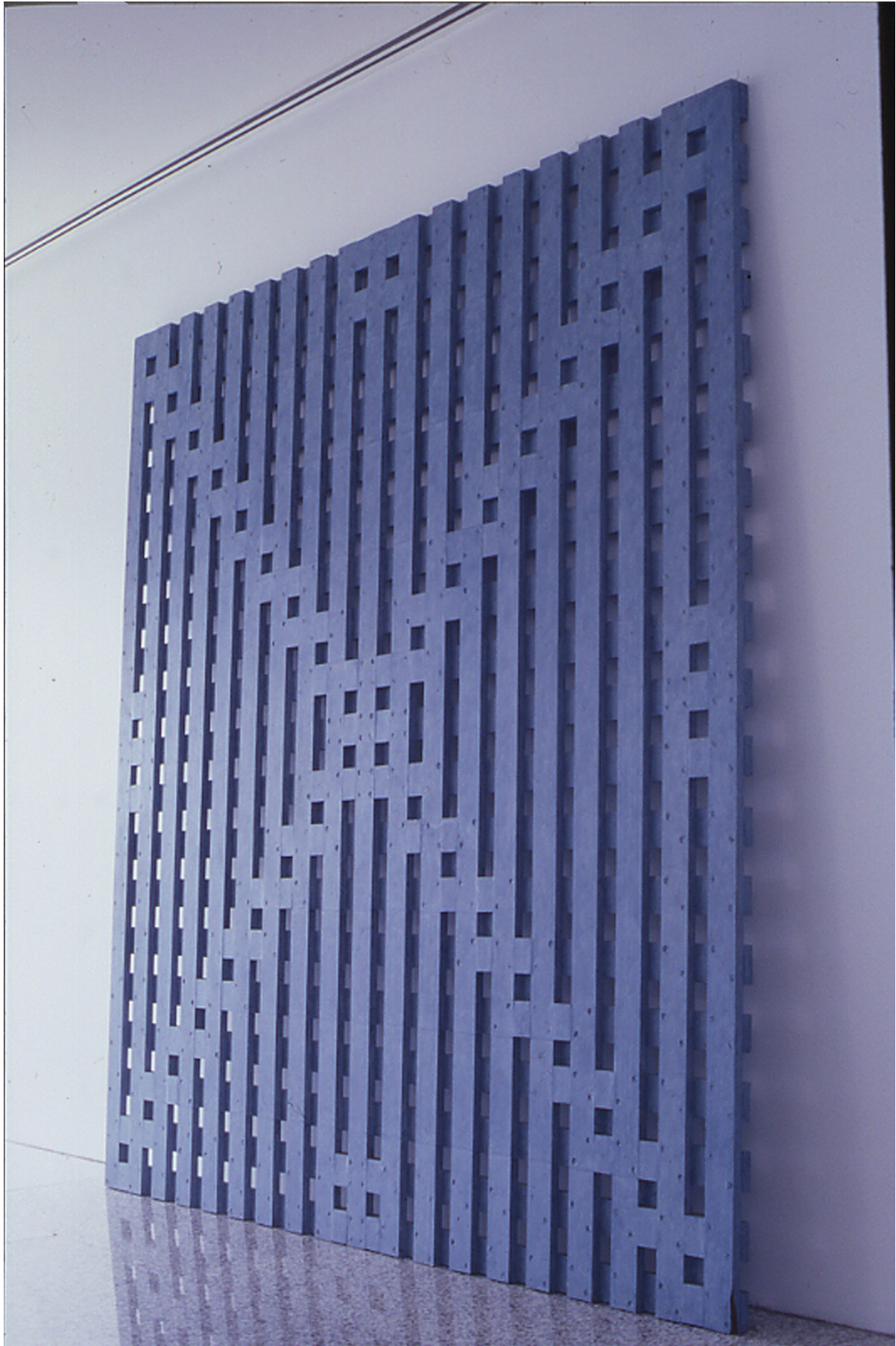
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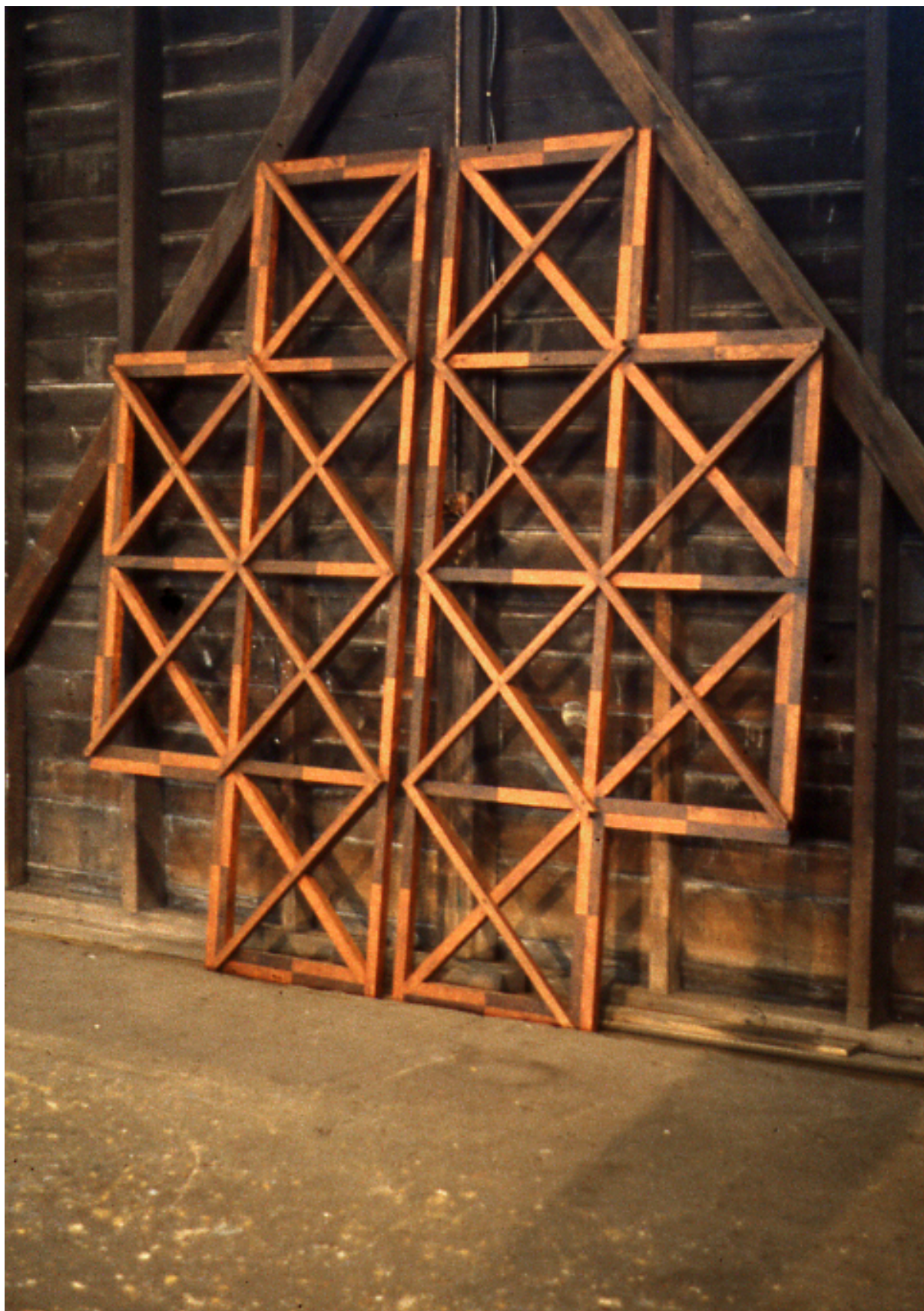
MIRRORED WHITE: HER CYCLE II 1997 oil on canvas 189 x 189 x 4 cm



Hilarie Mais. Washboard 1980 (Weapon series). Steel, 37 x19 x 10 cm. Photo: Jessica Maurer



Hilarie Mais, Gaea, 1988



Hilarie Mais, *Echo*, 1991, Installation view *Dissonance*, *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art*, Artspace/Pier 4-5, Walsh Bay, Sydney



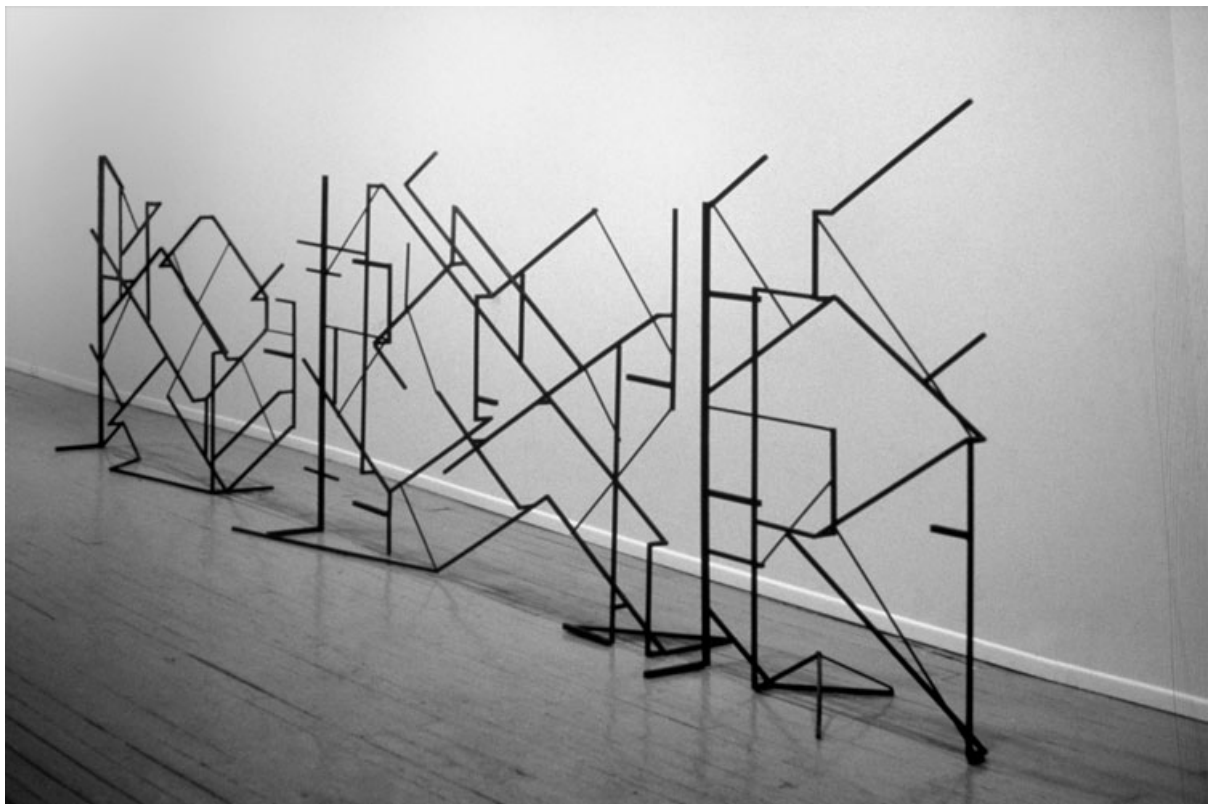
Hilarie Mais. Seed, 1983. Oil on wood, 27 x 27 x 8 cm. Photo: Jessica Maurer



Hilarie Mais. The Waiting, 1985. Oil on wood, 124 x 182 x 4 cm. Collection GOMA, Brisbane



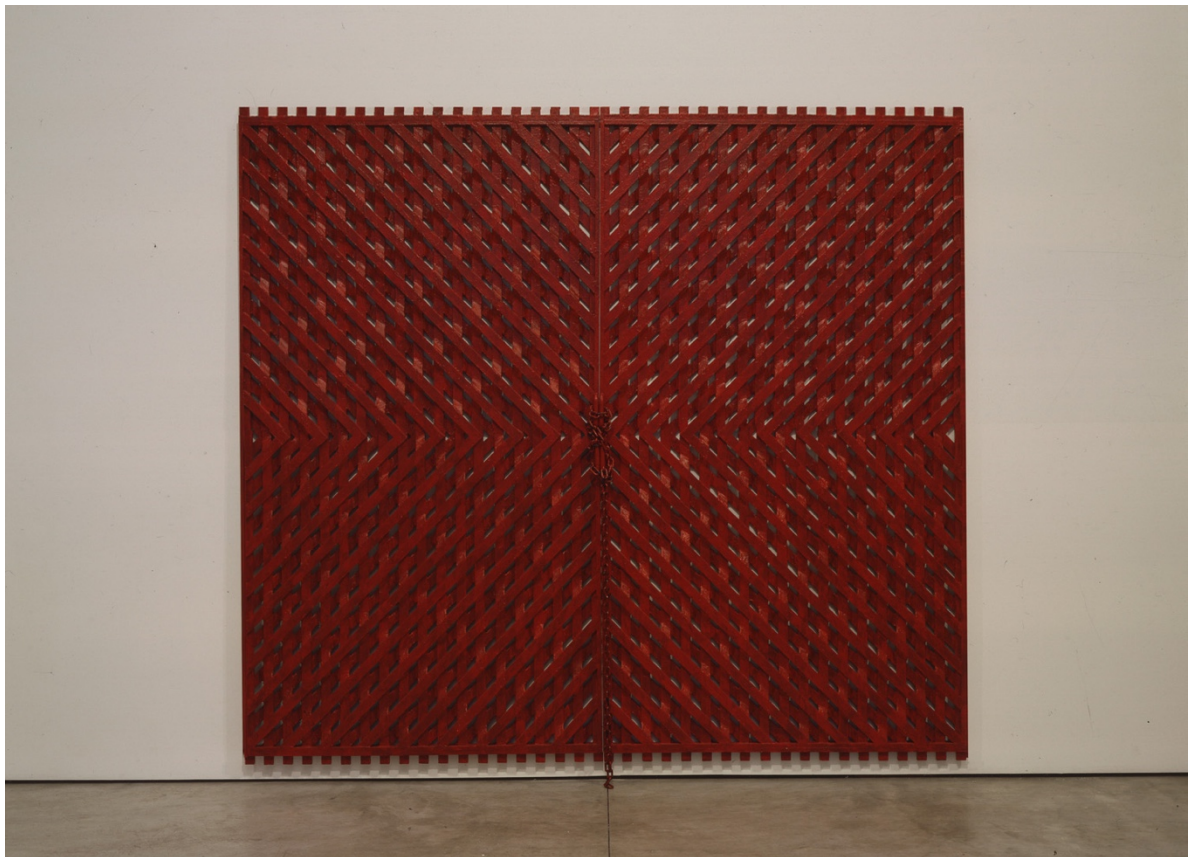
Hilarie Mais, *Echo*, 1990, 2 parts: each 19 x 410 x 7cm, synthetic polymer paint on wood, Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Loti Smorgon AO and Victor Smorgon AC, 1995



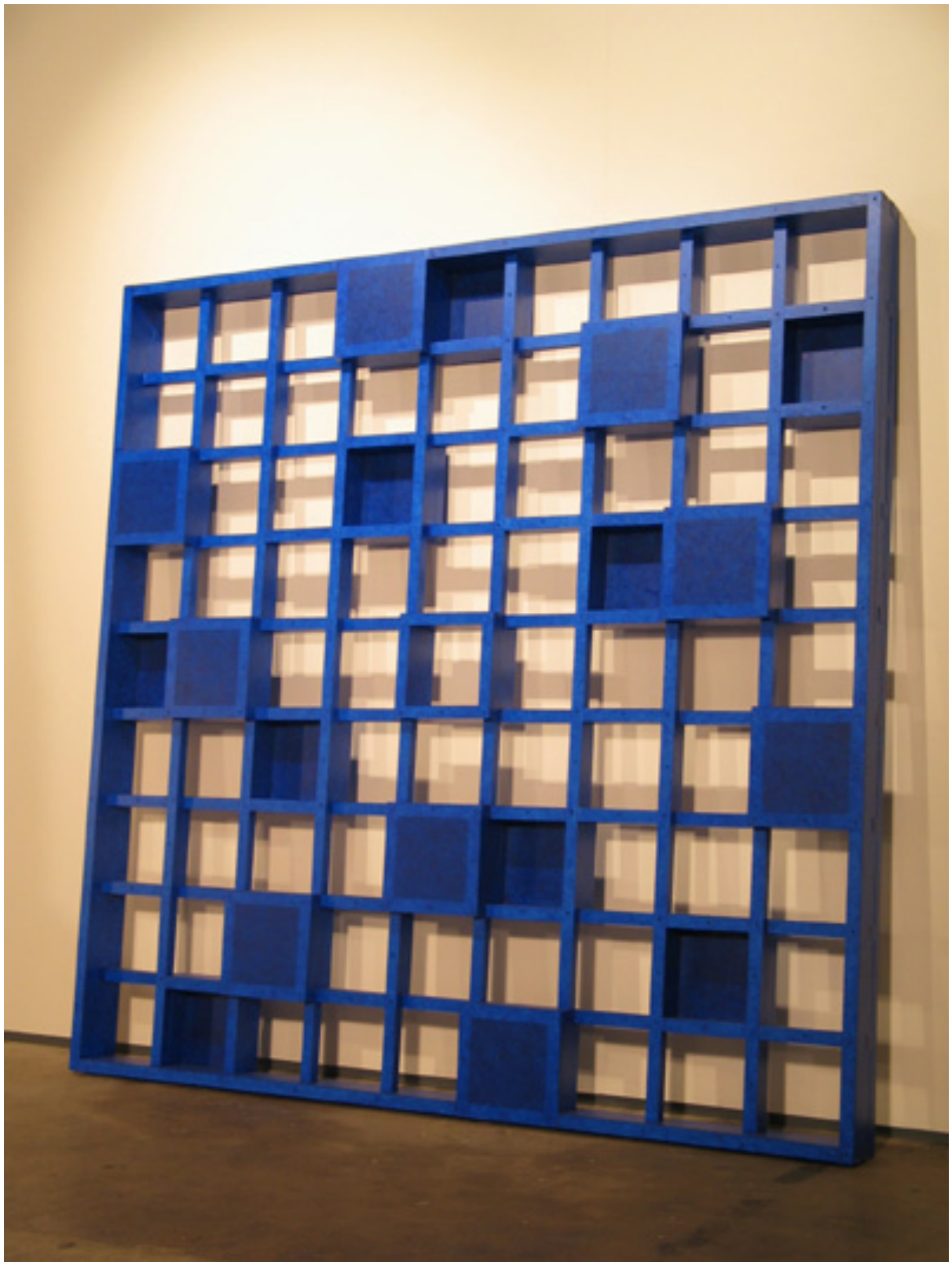
Hilarie Mais. *Fence*, 1979. Steel, 158 x 549 x 13 cm. Cunningham Ward Gallery, New York



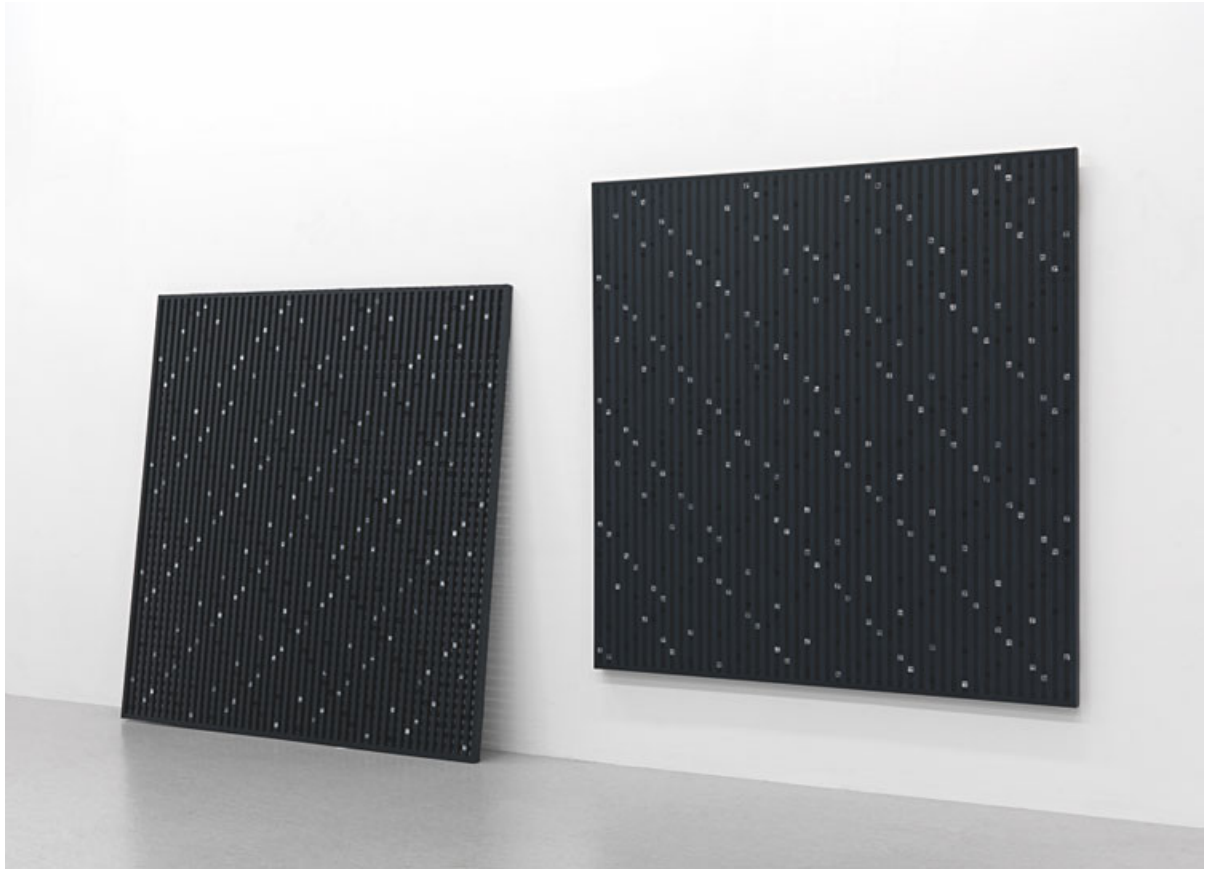
Hilarie Mais, Shake, 2012, Kronenberg Wright Gallery, Sydney



Hilarie Mais, Doors, the Maze, 1986, Collection National Gallery of Australia



Hilarie Mais. Grid V, 2005. Oil on weed, 203 x 203 15.5 cm. Photo: Jessica Maurer



Hilarie Mais. Rotation 3 (11), 2007 (Duality series). Oil on wood, 183 x 183 cm. Collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Hilarie Mais, Installation view, 2018, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria



Hilarie Mais. Installation view, 2018, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria



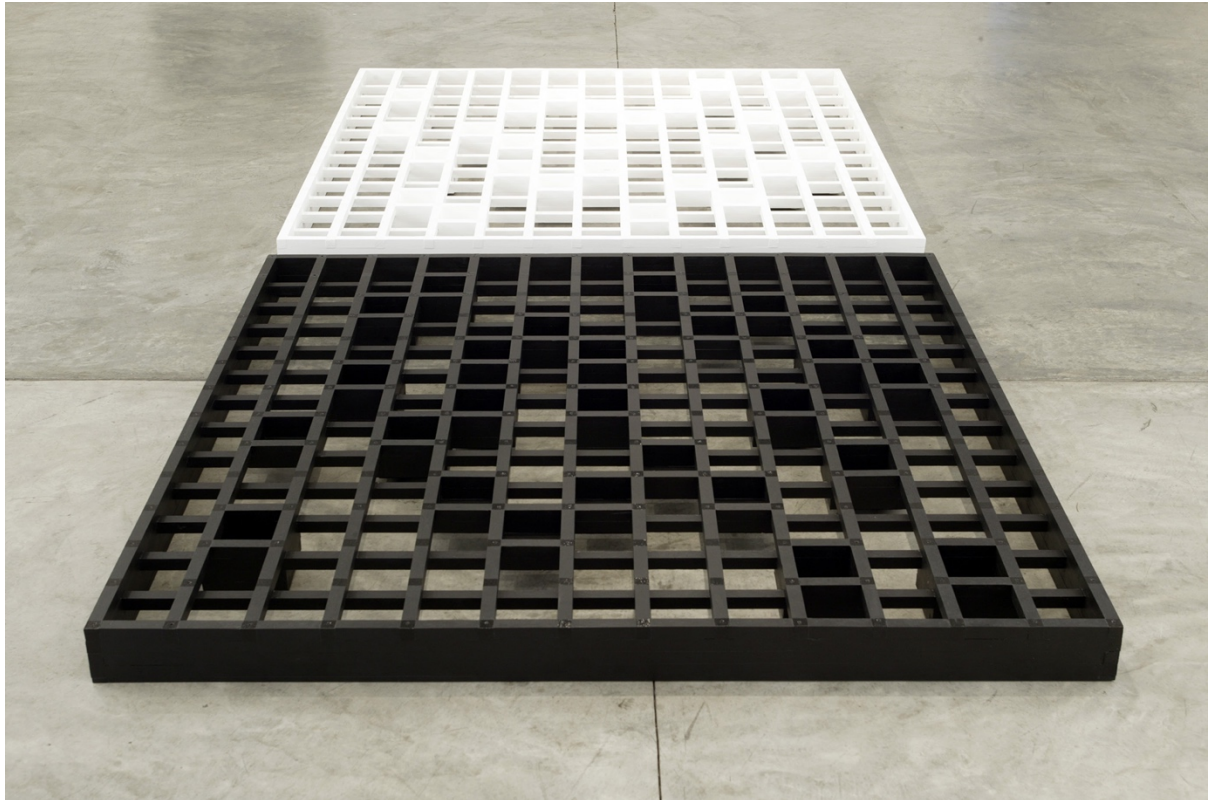
Hilarie Mais, Blue Angel, Rotation #1, Mist III, Mist II, 2017, MCA, Sydney



Hilarie Mais, *Tempus #2-#8*, 2017, MCA, Sydney



Hilarie Mais, *Nomad*, 2017, MCA, Sydney



Hilarie Mais, *Island Divide*, 2004, Installation view Hilarie Mais 1974-2004 Drill Hall, ANU Canberra



Hilarie Mais, *Grid Doors II* 1986, *Bearing Effigy* 1998, Installation view Art Gallery of New South Wales

