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Weinstein

ALAN WEINSTEIN THE ONTARIO STUDIO: FIVE DECADES



*Funding for this book was made possible
by the generosity of Rick Archbold, Rick Feldman,
Lynn A. Johnston, and Paul Zinn.*

Alan Weinstein

THE ONTARIO STUDIO: FIVE DECADES

The Bruce County Museum & Cultural Centre is proud to present this publication in honour of the retrospective of paintings by artist, Alan Weinstein, whose studio in Teeswater, Ontario, has been his anchor for five decades.

*Cathy McGirr
Director, Museum & Cultural Services*

Bruce County Museum & Cultural Centre
2018

Alan Weinstein

An Interview

by Nina Barragan

Nina Barragan: Can you speak first about how the exhibition, Alan Weinstein: Five Decades, came to be? Was it your thought to have it cover fifty years?

Alan Weinstein: It was. When the Bruce County Museum proposed a show, I envisioned a sequence of paintings that would celebrate five decades in the Teeswater studio.

NB: You've been a prolific artist. The inventory book of your work has 1,700 images. How did you decide what to include here at the museum?

AW: That was tough. The exhibition is a *précis*, a brief overview. Chapters had to be omitted. Selecting works to suggest the movement of ideas became a tight-rope walk, a challenge: to be as thorough and complete as possible in a limited physical space.

NB: You were born in Toronto. How did you come to live in Bruce County?

AW: When we returned to Ontario from Saskatchewan in 1969, we looked for a property and bought our Teeswater farm. We lived there year-round for a decade and our first three children were born in the Wingham hospital. Ten years later, when I accepted a teaching position in the States, we continued spending summer months in Teeswater. Time in the barn studio, uninterrupted by classroom responsibilities, became regular, reliable, intense, concentrated stretches of productivity. Ever since, this annual immersion in The Bruce continues to be the touchstone of my studio life.

NB: Many artists, once they find a personal language that works for them and their audience, seem to stick to it. Shifting out of their comfort zone becomes nearly impossible. I don't believe this is true of you. As with all painters, your work is loaded with recurring themes and obsessions—helmets, scissors, chairs, woods with people and chairs, woods alone. You don't seem to stay in one place longer than it takes to work the fixation, moving it out through your head and hands. You're in continual motion, pursuing new themes, new ways to draw, to texture, new ways with colour and black, yet the viewer witnesses the decades evolving organically from one to the next. Does this make sense?

AW: Of course. Part of the big picture is the artist's determination to 'get it right', to be pushed onward toward the unimagined end by the conviction that 'it's not right yet', to be pushed by the engine of one's drive, the belief, experience, frustration, anger that there is an answer if only one digs deeper, reaches higher, gets rid of the offending stuff, moves ahead, refuses to be beaten, doesn't give up. When I am at an impasse, I eventually stop. Days or weeks or sometimes months can pass before that "aha" moment, when I finally know, "for certain", where to take up the challenge again. And that, of course, is a new beginning. The artist is his own and only relevant critic. Once, in Picasso's studio, a visitor looking at one of his "Weeping Woman" portraits said, "Oh, I could never live with that painting in my living room!" Picasso replied: "I didn't paint it for your living room." Pretty clear. Cezanne had 70 sittings with Vollard, working on his portrait. Finally, Vollard said, "Enough. It's just fine as it is, except for the spot of unpainted canvas on the hand. When will you paint that?" Cezanne replied: "When I find the right colour." Monet, at the end of his life, was known to visit his work in museums and to surreptitiously pull out of his coat a tiny pocket paint box, to "touch up" a painting. Again, pretty clear. Artists are compulsive.

NB: Tell me about the place of drawing in your work

AW: It is at the artist's center, it is our natural voice. That doesn't mean we are born with it: no, our drawing grows over time. And yet our instincts are innate, the instincts of our graphic voice. Habits are learned slowly, with exposure, and with role models. But what's inside is already there, from the get-go. A student once asked the architect Frank Gehry how she would be able to find her own style as an architect. In response, he projected large images of all his students' signatures onto the classroom screen and said: You can see, the distinctive voice is already visible inside each autograph: your job will be to pull the voice out and explore it. I can see that. In my work, whether I am using a pencil, or ink and a stick, or paint and a brush, or a razor knife for my free-hand cut-paper or cut-canvas works (*Fig. 4*), it's all drawing. In 1960 at the Louvre, I recall a seminar in which a museum curator explained categories of drawings: a gesture drawing, a study to explore forms and volumes, studies of details, or surfaces, compositional layouts, academic "finished drawings", drawings from the imagination, etc. Good start. But think Picasso: How many more categories could one construct? The remarkable truth is that some artists have a voracious appetite for drawing. I have a poster from the Rodin Museum, a pencil sketch of a dancer. In a corner is the inventory stamp indicating #4420 (from the museum's collection of 7,000 works on paper). The piece is unsigned: it was never meant to be owned or displayed, it is simply part of his studio ephemera. I get it.

NB: In University, did you have a formal art education with studio classes?

AW: No. My undergraduate school had no creative arts program in the late 50s, but I painted in my dorm room, made woodcuts, and chiseled limestone blocks I found near the botanical gardens. I went to extra-curricular night classes in painting and life-drawing, whenever they were offered.

NB: Didn't you consider switching schools?

AW: Yes, I did. I wondered whether I had made a mistake, whether I should transfer to an art school. A friend in the Print Room of the library was empathetic and suggested a chat with the artist, Ben Shahn, who lived nearby in Roosevelt, New Jersey. I knew who he was from his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. And so, I did visit him. He was the first "real" artist I ever met. He was a figurative painter, social activist, teacher, father with kids my age, highly acclaimed, low keyed: totally reassuring. He asked: How are your professors? Extraordinary. I've never met teachers like them. How are your classes? Fabulous. I can't believe what I'm learning. How are you satisfying your need to make art? I paint in my room every day, sometimes make woodblock prints, go to life drawing once a week. We talked for an hour. Then he said, I'll give you the same advice I give my own children. Stay where you are, do what you are doing. Lead your double-life. Things are changing. In the future there will be no place for uneducated artists. I understood that. So, I stayed. I chose art history as my major so that I could spend Junior Year in Paris at the Louvre. I painted in my room in Paris, too.

NB: Printmaking was an important part of your early career. When were you first exposed to the disciplines?

AW: I learned a little about prints in art history classes, enough to buy two I found in book stalls in NYC as a sophomore (a Goya and a Whistler). But the revelation about me and printmaking came in graduate school, in classes with Professor Mauricio Lasansky. I devoured the intricacies of the techniques, the layered, sequential processes. They were a counter-balance to the slippery fluidity of painting. And the black ink was so clear, so... black and white. At that moment in time, the early 60s, there was a print renaissance in the art world. Prints were gaining in stature as an art form parallel to, not beneath, painting. I relished it. In the couple years of grad school, I saw that printmaking could bring out in me aesthetic explorations that were different from those of canvas and paint. I loved it. (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2)

NB: Do you think printmaking influenced your painting?

AW: Yes, I think it released it, released painting from the role of having to be all things, visually, to me. I clearly had a graphic sensibility and curiosity that print techniques could enflame. I let it. Printmaking was the other side of the coin, of my coin. At that time, the field was leaning towards making more possibilities for the intaglio print than the West had made for it traditionally; artists were moving away from the book tradition, wanting to make big statements, works meant to be framed and hung like paintings. That's not Rembrandt's legacy, not Dürer's, not Callot's or Goya's. But it is Lautrec's, it is the tradition of large scale 19th century commercial lithography. This was the moment when intaglio printmakers said, we can do that too! And I wanted to.

NB: And yet, eventually you returned to the art of the book with *The Egyptian Man*, a *livre d'artiste* with 6 of your etchings, (Fig. 7) and with your *Garden of Eden* book of drawings, (Fig. 3)?



Fig. 1. *Chieftain*. 1987. Relief print, 40 x 30".



Fig. 2. *Infanta*. 1973. Intaglio and relief print, 43.5 x 21".

AW: I love books. In college, I saw etchings presented as books—Goya, Piranesi's *Prisons*, Rouault's *Miserere*—to be studied like a text. That alternate world engrossed me. Decades later, at a public event, you read aloud your short story, 'The Egyptian Man'. Something clicked for me: I visualized the story at once as a crisp suite of classical, traditional images, a foil to the drama of emotions in the text. Years later, in 2000, *The Garden of Eden* book crystalized in a similar, sudden moment of clarity—a way to formalize the images I'd been mulling over and working on for months, a way to create a new "whole", an inevitable entity, complete in itself. And there have been other series of 'story drawings' over the years, like *The Book of Esther*, (Fig. 6) in the late 70s.

NB: So, for the first three decades of your career, you were simultaneously a printmaker and painter?

AW: Yes. When we lived in Europe for a couple years after grad school, I only painted. Then, in 1966, we moved to Saskatchewan where I'd accepted a job teaching printmaking at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus. I worked on prints at nights in the University's empty print room, and painted on my non-teaching days in my University studio. Three years later, in Teeswater, we turned the upper level of the barn into studio space, and insulated a large horse stall in the barn basement as a room for the etching press. The next ten years were loaded with life: house renovations, three children, teaching at Guelph and for Georgian College, exhibitions in Kitchener, London and Toronto.

NB: In the 70s you began life-size drawing/paintings on paper—Hooded Figure, Witness, the Processional series and Musicians series. Where did those themes come from and how did they originate?

AW: In the late 60s and early 70s, many of my prints centered on a helmet, concealing a face, hinting at the unseen. My paintings at this time were also of helmeted figures, warriors shielded by armour, often full length. But I had never worked on "big" drawings, and I now began to pin large paper to the wall. Starting in my comfort zone, with the helmet, I glued on additional sheets of paper to expand the figure downwards, to "grow" the images. And so began the procession of individual figures in three suites of drawing/painting/collage on paper, *Processional* ('72), *The Musicians* ('73), and *Bearers of Burden* ('76).

NB: I remember you working on *The Musicians Tapestries*. Your studio was humming with exhilaration and intensity. Seeing those original *Musicians* paintings during your preparation for this exhibition, I was suddenly reunited with old friends. Can you tell us their story?

AW: In 1975, in Teeswater, I received a letter from the Saskatchewan Arts Board, announcing a competition for "a major work of art in a sculptural medium" to enhance a 26 ft by 19 ft wall in the newly built Saskatchewan Centre for the Arts, a competition open to anyone with connections to the province. Such an opportunity was very rare. Still is.



Fig. 3. *Garden of Eden*. 2001. Ink drawing, 11 x 15".

The budget was \$40K, of which \$8K was the artist's award. (My teaching salary in Regina had been \$8K: this was a huge deal, a rare event.) Six months before this, I had mounted an exhibition of twelve 6 ft paintings with cut-paper, *The Musicians*. I saw my musicians as a perfect match for the Centre's wall. But how to utilize them? I'm not a sculptor. Could I slip through a crack in the door? As in any architectural competition, there was an open period to ask questions of clarification which would be answered and published, so that there would be no privileged information. I posed this simple question: "Would fabric be considered a "sculptural medium?" A few weeks later, the answer came: yes. Green light. My vision was a tapestry with musicians. For several months I worked out ideas. Many plans, until I got it right. (The inventory of tapestry drawings and paintings numbers over 50.) After two preliminary stages of submissions, I won the competition, and then spent all fall developing the half-scale paintings to be re-created as tapestries. I researched weavers and workshops in Canada and around the world, and in January 1977, I travelled to the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne, Australia, for six weeks to give aesthetic input into the translation of my works into wool. The weaving took nine months. In December of 1977, the *Musicians* Tapestry was unveiled at the Saskatchewan Centre for the Arts. A two-year journey.

NB: I believe they were a turning point. Tell me how they influenced your work, and how they changed you as an artist?

AW: It was a real shift of gears. My young art was always "domestic" in size. Paintings were a traditional scale for a house. Prints, if not bookish in dimensions, were similarly domestic: meant to be seen from very close—inches—or feet. But the Saskatchewan wall had several viewing distances, from 45 ft and closer. I'd never had to conceive art seen from a variety of viewpoints. The initial drawings imagined a single wall size piece, like a medieval tapestry. Over the months that followed, the concepts grew into a quartet of varying sizes, visually playing with, and off each other. By the end, the project changed the way I saw myself. Now I was an artist capable of more than before, making images that could come alive from a distance, developing a way of drawing with paint that was new for me, becoming inventive with composition, letting colour sing publicly, as it never had for me.

NB: Tell me what you did after *The Musicians*.

AW: That is a curious moment. My eyes and mind were so dilated from the public scale in my thoughts, and the kinetic way of working on the large paintings of the *Musicians*, I instinctively needed a break. I retracted, narrowed my focus and began a yearlong flood of small drawings illustrating the *Book of Esther* for a series of prints. The prints never happened.

NB: When did the Ontario landscape enter your painting?

AW: Very late! I had never been a landscape painter. By the early 90s my imagery was fixated on family groups in interior spaces. Over a couple years, the canvas sizes got bigger, and the colours and compositions were intensified



Fig. 4. *Allegory*. 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36".



Fig. 5. *Trees*. 1999. Acrylic on paper, 36 x 24".



Fig. 6. *Haman and the King*. 1977. Ink drawing, 15 x 16.75".



Fig. 7. *Justin grew from a shy child...* 1988. Etching from *The Egyptian Man*, 8 x 12".

and simplified. In the summer of 1995, once again I needed a release, this time, from those concentrated studio images. And now, the greens of the woods and the fields became a visual magnet. Twenty-five years earlier, after moving to our farm, we had the rolling land planted in a reforestation program. Now we saw stands of pine and walnut. I painted outdoors for the first time, and began to see "subjects" outside of my studio. My art found a new direction. The search, over the next couple years, was to create a visual vocabulary for exploring these new interests, filling sketchbooks with ink and pencil drawings, struggling for a diction to call my own. Finally, in the late 90s, a sequence of 3 ft woods drawings took my imagery through a determined journey, starting with sumi ink calligraphy and ending with black, thick acrylic paint and ox-hair brushes. (Fig. 5) And then, finger drawings—hands on! (Fig. 8) The quiver was now filled. The results were the folding screens and expansive landscapes of the next few years. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 8. *Finger Woods with Figures*. 2002. Ink drawing, 22 x 30".

NB: In the 90s, you began to attach stretched canvases to each other to expand a composition, both the size and content of a painting. You have called them variously divided canvases and joined canvases. Where did that concept come from?

AW: The moment is clear. I had completed a vigorous, small study, a painting—trees, with a couple walking in front. The next day, looking with fresh eyes, everything seemed cramped, tight, the forms not free. And I suddenly recalled a little 17th century drawing, Jordaens, maybe. A portrait. As the artist drew, he ran out of room when he got to the top of the head. So, he stopped, glued an extra piece of paper to the original, and then completed the drawing, allowing it to grow into its new space. Brilliant! Remembering that image was an "aha" moment for me! I took two pieces of wood the width of the work, covered them with canvas, painted the upper one sky blue and the bottom one earth brown, laid them above and below the painting and, voilà, the forms had space to breathe! And so, it started: the playfulness began, and has continued as a serious component of my visual vocabulary. By 2010 there were frieze-like murals up to 20 ft long.

NB: It's not easy making a living as an artist. I imagine this is a subject of interest to young people wanting to make art their life's work. What advice do you have for the young artist?

AW: Have your priorities in order. "Be yourself: everyone else is taken." Only YOU can leave YOUR artistic legacy, no one else. If that is your goal, you will work things out. How many hours of sleep do you need? The rest of the day is for your life and for your art. Your "legacy of art" is separate from your livelihood: very few artists pay bills from the sale of their work. The Douanier Rousseau had a government job (customs officer). Van Gogh had a brother. I taught, and ran an art gallery. Whatever it takes. The job is the job. The obsession is your own art. You will figure out the details.

Nina Barragan is the pen name of Rocio Lasansky Weinstein. Her three books of fiction are: No Peace at Versailles, The Egyptian Man, and Losers and Keepers in Argentina.

Alan Weinstein had his first one man show in 1961 at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto. Since then, he has been given solo exhibitions in museums and galleries in Canada, the States and Australia. He has participated in juried, invitational and group shows nationally and internationally. Born in Toronto in 1939, Weinstein was educated at Princeton, BA, University of Iowa, MFA, and the École du Louvre. He has taught at the Universities of Saskatchewan, Guelph, and Texas at San Antonio. Weinstein's work is represented in public collections across North America and abroad, including museums in Vancouver, Regina, Winnipeg, Kitchener Waterloo, London, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Binghamton, NY, Eugene, OR, Austin, TX, Sioux City, IA, Bradford, England, and Melbourne, Australia. Commissions include The Musicians Tapestry, 26 ft by 19 ft, Saskatchewan Centre for the Arts, Regina, and synagogue arks for Seattle, WA, Iowa City, IA and Fort Bragg, NC. His paintings and prints have received awards and honors in shows in the United States and Canada over the last fifty years. He maintains studios in Iowa City, IA and Teeswater, ON. He is married to author, Nina Barragan. They have four children.

ALAN WEINSTEIN THE ONTARIO STUDIO: FIVE DECADES
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Design: Chris Irvine

Photographer: Diego Lasansky

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Printer: Cedar Graphics, Iowa

Front cover: see colour plate 12, *Autumn Grove* (detail)



Fig. 9. *Gazing Figures in Woods*. 2002. Acrylic on canvas folding screen, 6 x 8'.

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1. *Muffled Figure*, 1970, oil on canvas, 24 x 24". Like most of the paintings of the early 70s the focus is a single figure, enveloped, hooded, armoured. In this portrait, only the nose reveals the human presence beneath the layered sensuality of the painted surface. The prints of the period are often helmeted, such as: Flutist, Conquistador and Toy Soldier in this exhibition.



2. *Birdman*, (from Processional), 1973, acrylic on paper, 57 x 24" (not in exhibition). Beginning with Witness and Hooded Figure in 1971, the life-size works of the next few years are a parade of costumed, single subjects. Mysterious wrappings and accoutrements suggest a sober humanity, with roles unknown. The titles of the fifteen paintings in this suite, hide more than they tell, for example: Yoked Man, Judge, Weeping Figure.



3. *Musicians Tapestry*, 1977, installation photo, Saskatchewan Centre for the Arts, Regina, Sask., wall size 26 x 19'. This ambitious project was inspired by the suite of 12 works on paper, The Musicians, exhibited in Kitchener-Waterloo, ON in 1973. The developed themes became the half-scale paintings in this exhibition, canvases that were sent to Australia in 1977 and transposed into cartoons for the tapestries.



4. *Attendant*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 77 x 50" (not in exhibition). In the early 80s, the mask enters Weinstein's vocabulary: by itself, mounted as a monument, or carried by an attendant as an honored object. In 1984 the artist painted a succession of attendants alone, without their masks, like statues, draped in sweeping movement of active colour.



5. *Mask*, 1986, acrylic on paper, 74 x 25". This work, from a mid-80s series, is articulated with free-hand, razor-knife cut painted paper. Precedents for the application of cut shapes to a painted surface appear in Processional and the Musicians (mid-70s) and in the canvas additions to the Musicians Tapestry paintings, 1977.



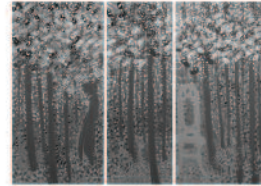
6. *Interior/Exterior with Two Figures*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60" (not in exhibition). The masks and pedestals of the 80s lead to the Monument series, static figures in the presence of architectural structures. Here, the landscape space is ambiguously transformed by the floating floor of tiles.



7. *Family*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 46" (not in exhibition). Clean colour fields of recent years are unexpectedly activated by a pulsating atmosphere of meticulous, small brushstrokes. The figures, solid and calm, are now imbedded in a breathing matrix of moving light.



8. *Woman and Child*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 36". The interior space and the stark silhouettes of this hieratic image are charged with colours that encourage strong emotional responses.



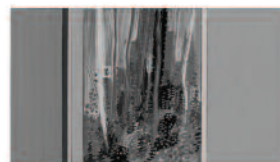
9. *Chair in Woods*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96", private collection (not in exhibition). This triptych format is subtly tongue-in-cheek with a central panel which is not a central image. The trio of canvases presents an intense, vibrant world in which a single, sinuous tree trunk is balanced by the delicate proportions of the solitary Thonet chair, a mysterious, suggestive pairing in a dense illuminated space.



10. *Interior*, 1996-2000, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 144". Painted over five summers, the 12 ft canvas embraces the dominant themes of several years of aesthetic fixations. The layering of the pentimenti is clearly visible and creates a resonating world.



11. *Blue Garden Screen*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96", private collection (not in exhibition). Mounted as a screen, these linked canvases create a three-dimensional presence. Standing in the space of the folding panels, we find ourselves inside the artist's world. The sequenced paintings are precursors of the frieze compositions of the next decades, works as large as 20 ft long.



12. *Autumn Grove*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 42". The joined folding screens led to complex paintings in which the subject is expanded by additions of canvas and canvas covered wood. This fascination with peripheral colours as they impact the viewer's reading, eventually inspires large scale compositions such as Summer Woods, '06, Orange Woods, '07, Aegean Dawn, '07 and Spring Woods, 2008, (pl.13).



13. *Spring Woods*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 108" (not in exhibition). Spring Woods is a descendant of the Garden Screens in its absence of a central focus. The eye is kept in motion absorbing figures balanced by tree shapes, panels of pure colour and intricate arrangements of verticals.



14. *Orange Trees*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 24". The kinetic enthusiasm of free-hand drawing with a sharp blade into canvas, energizes the trees that dominate the paintings of recent years. The exuberance of colour parallels the exuberance of line.



15. *Origins*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 108". The Garden of Eden is revisited in this icon of beginnings. The male and female evoke prehistoric forms that reflect our need to give presence to the voices of silence that precede the knowledge we acquire.



16. *Cave Graffiti*, 2017, acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30". The determined freedom of this exploration of primal imagery has been Weinstein's drive in recent years. The raw simplicity of medium and line bring urgency and conviction to this new direction.



1. *Muffled Figure*. 1970. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24".



2. *Birdman* (from Processional). 1973. Acrylic on paper, 57 x 24" (not in exhibition).



3. *Musicians Tapestry*. 1977. Installation photo, Saskatchewan Centre for the Arts, Regina, Sask., wall size 26 x 19'.



4. *Attendant*. 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 77 x 50" (not in exhibition).



5. *Mask*. 1986. Acrylic on paper, 74 x 25".



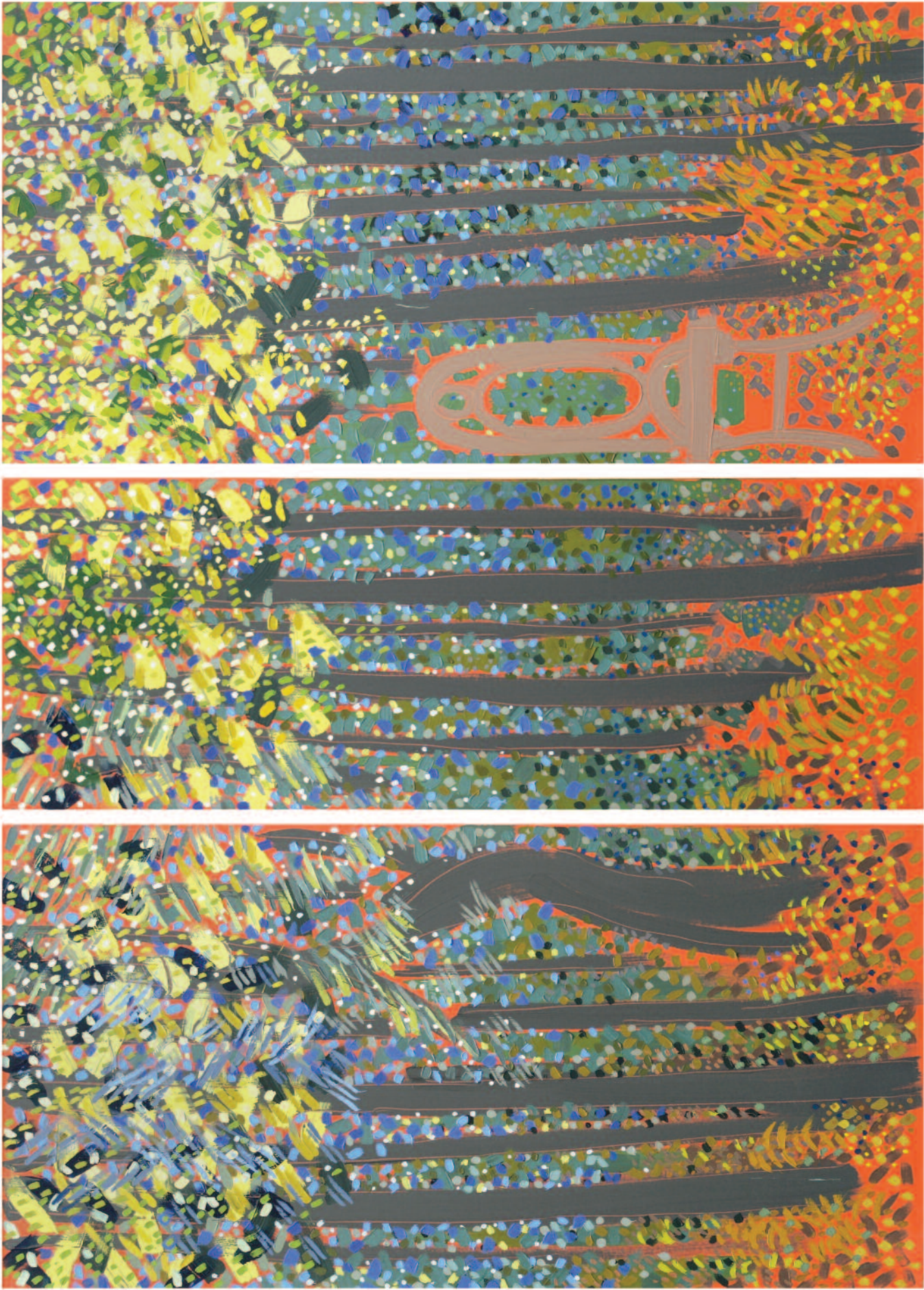
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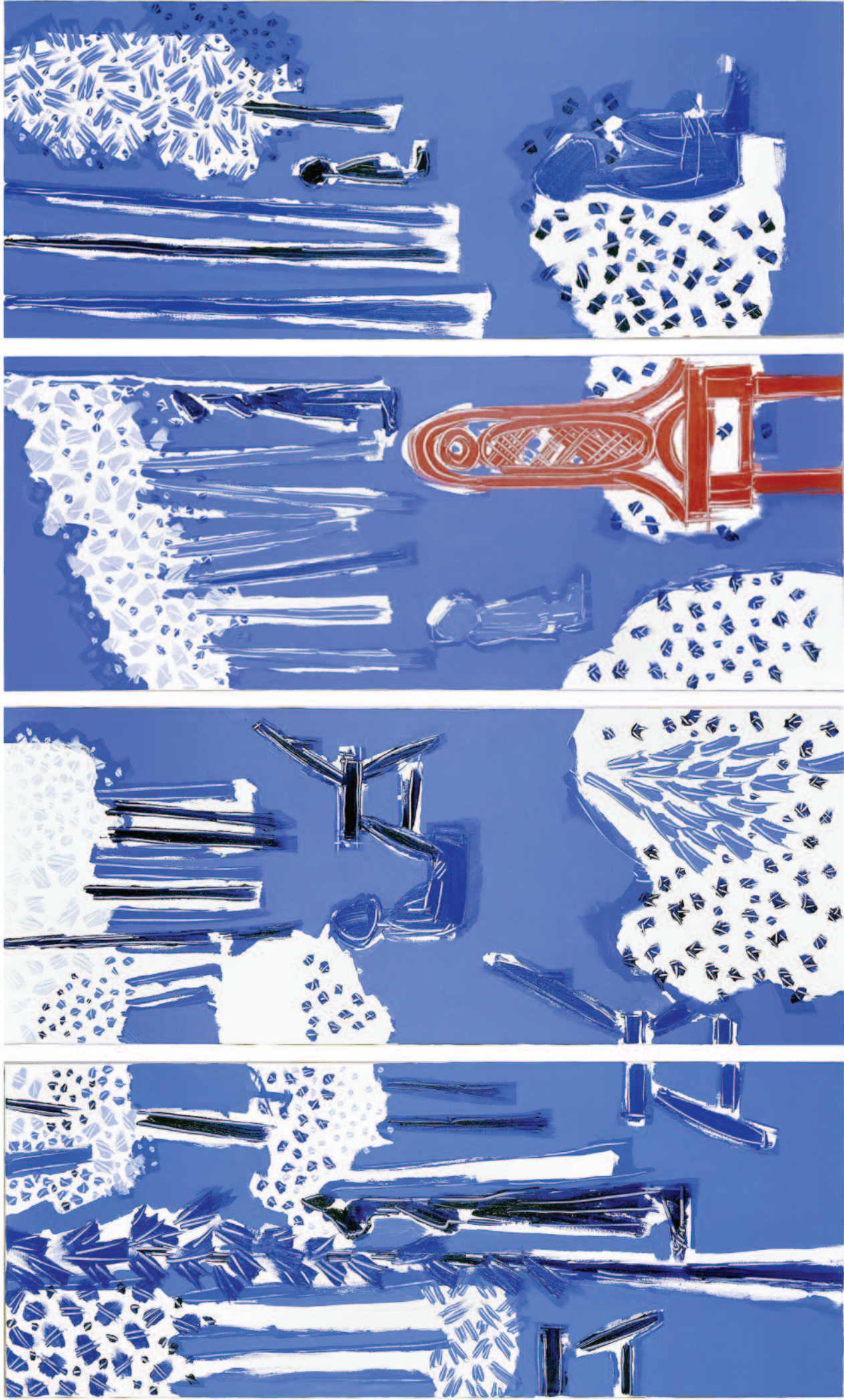
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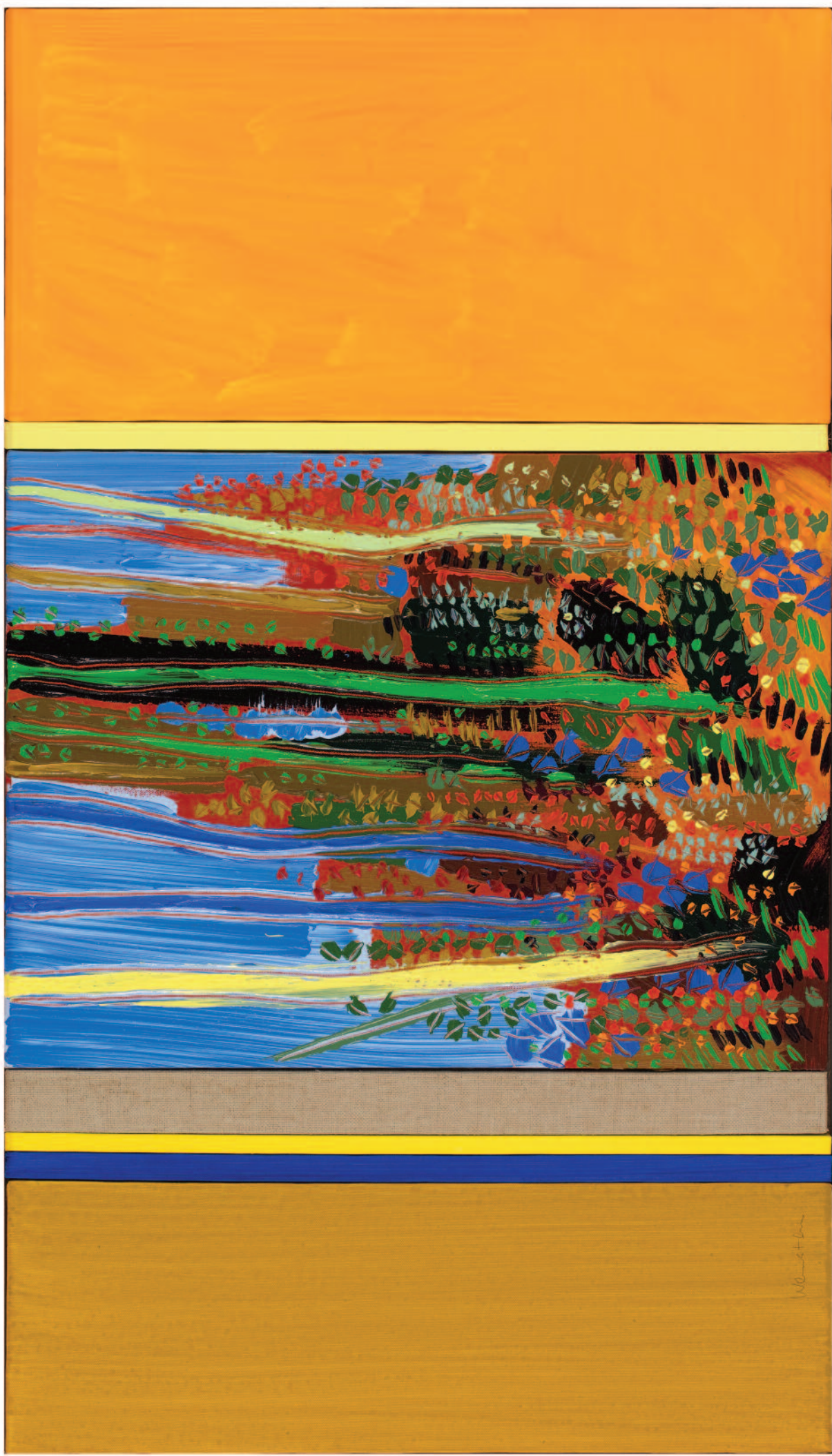
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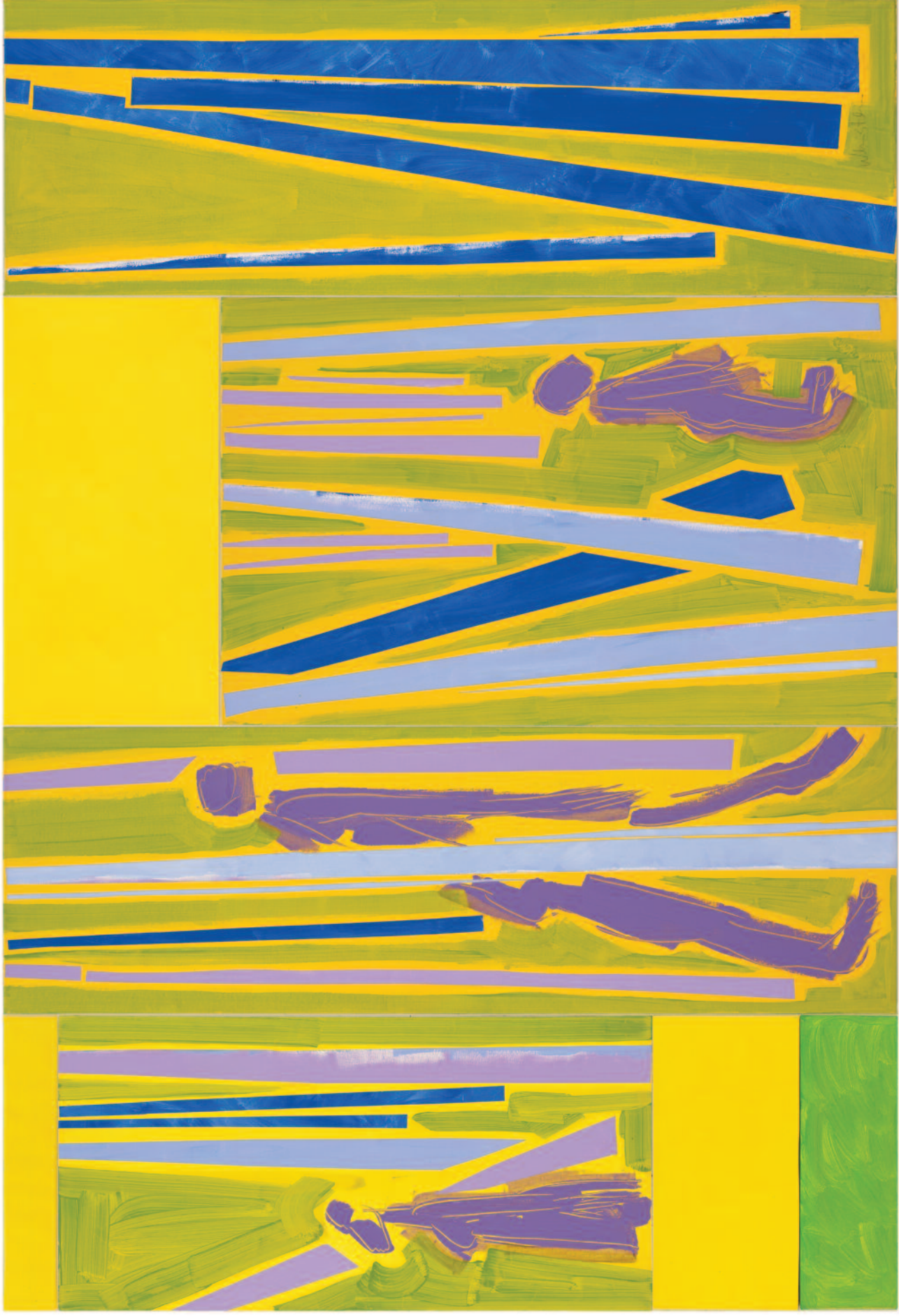
10. *Interior*. 1996-2000. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 144".



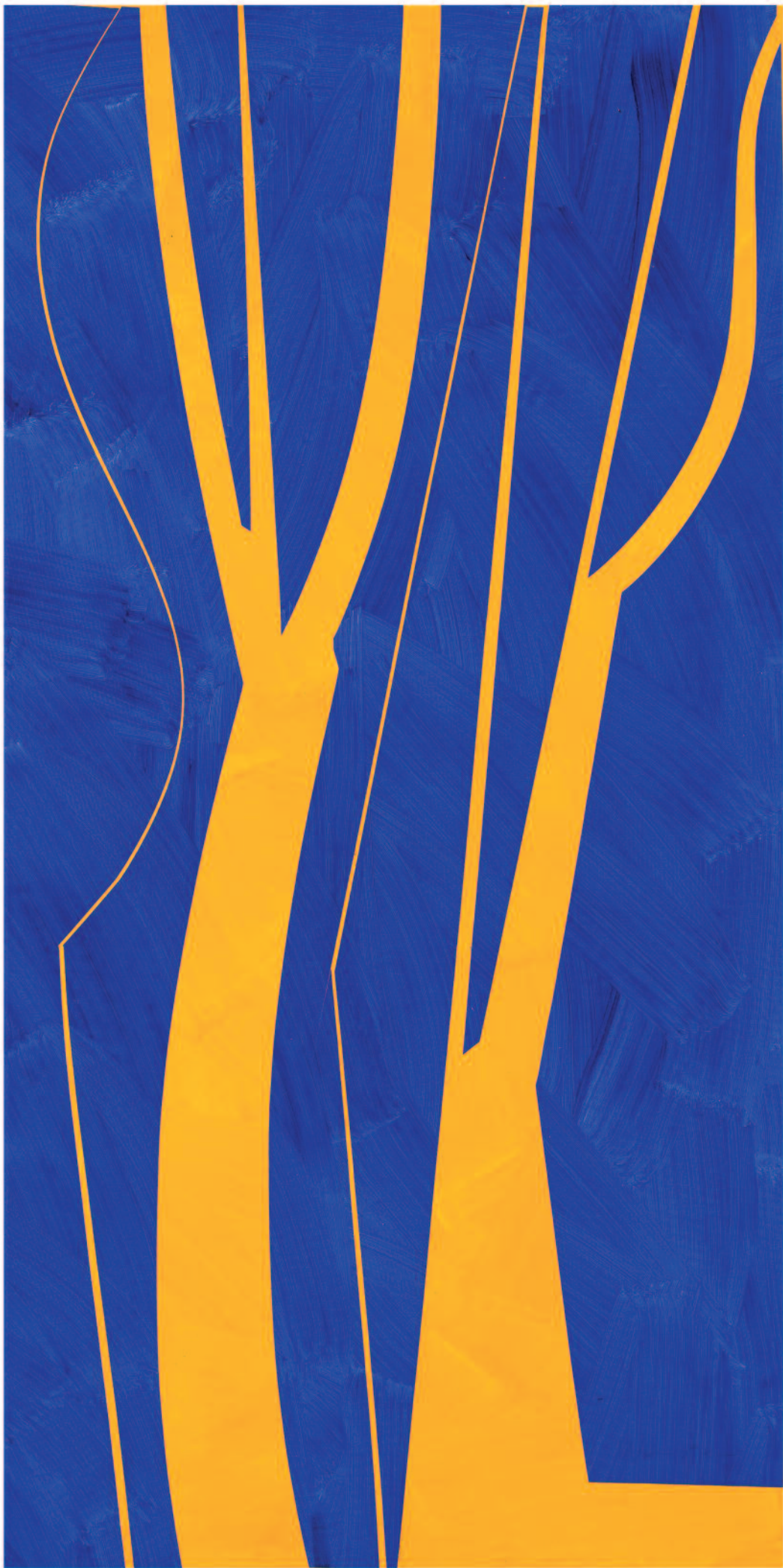
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14. Orange Trees. 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 24".

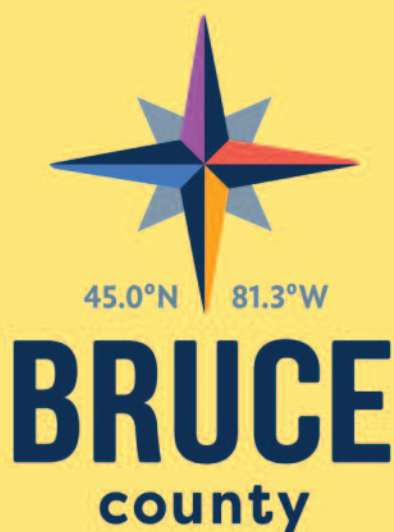


15. *Origins*. 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 108".



16. *Cave Graffiti*. 2017. Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30".

Paintings by Alan Weinstein (b. 1939, Toronto) in this volume span 50 years. Large colour plates trace the continuity and changes in his art and the metamorphosis of his formal preoccupations. The cut metal and plastic plates of his early prints inform the cut paper and cut canvas in the acrylic works of the 70s and 80s. Folding screens of the 90s lead to the pieced landscapes and the multi-paneled compositions of recent years. The energy of the late “cave graffiti” is the harvest of five decades in the studio. Nina Barragan’s interview draws on her insider’s perspective to shed light on the artist’s journey.



Be an explorer.