

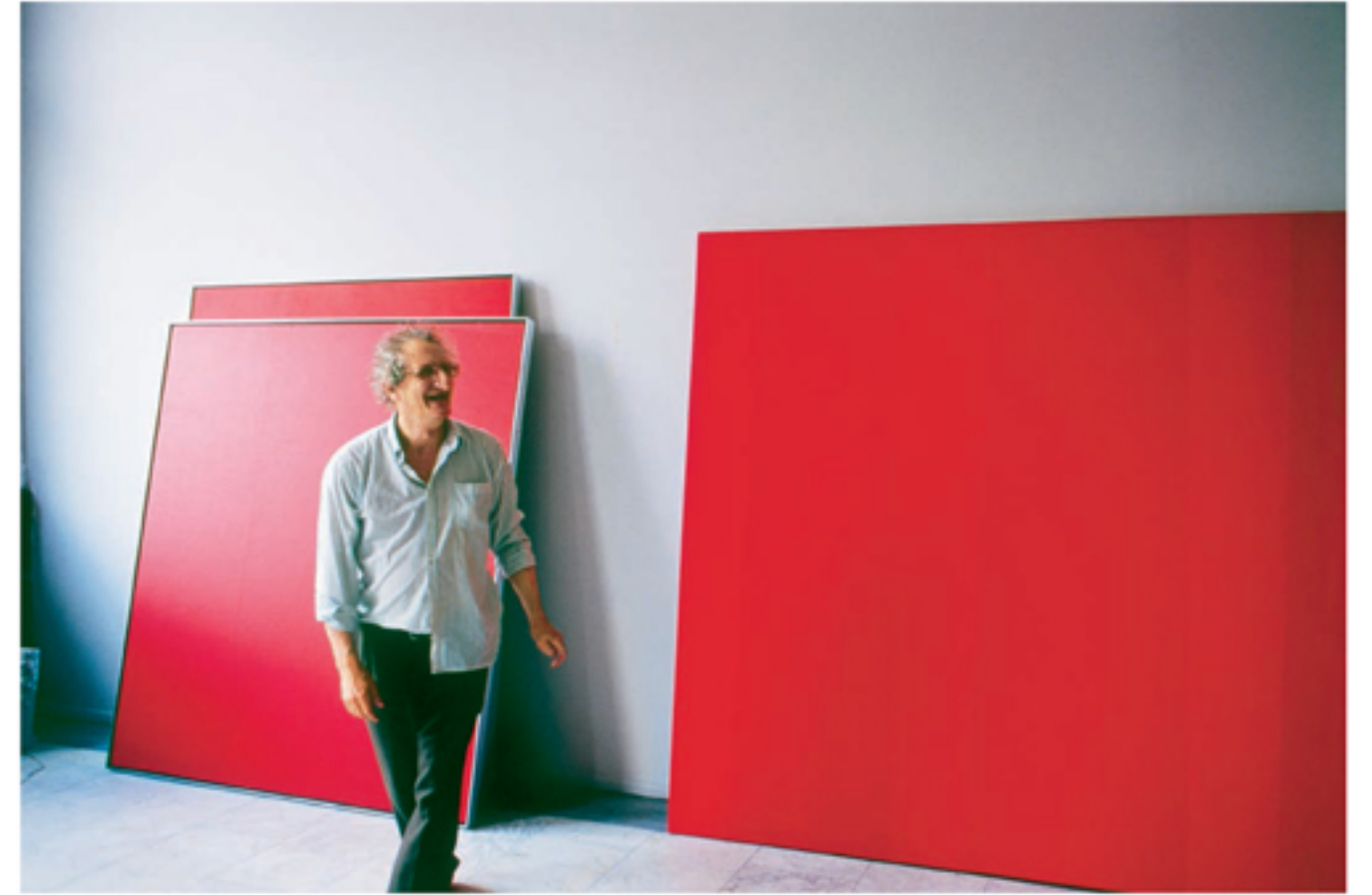
PREFACE

James Lahey must often dream about painting. Whenever I talk with him it's clear that the subject is never far from his thoughts, and the scope and depth of his practice, of his questioning, probing experimentation and polish, is evident in everything he does. Among his teachers in the studio course at York University in the early eighties were four senior artists of renown, Ron Bloore, Bruce Parsons, Tim Whiten and Hugh Leroy, each then producing work that was among the finest of their careers. While the Toronto art scene was booming with activity across the range of both new media and innovative approaches to art making that had proliferated throughout the past decade and a half, painting, imagined to have been near death in the early seventies, was particularly vibrant. Just how vibrant was amply evident in the *Toronto Painting '84* exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario a couple of months after Lahey's graduation from York. Featuring the work of 32 artists of note ranging from the likes of Graham Coughtry, who by then had been painting in the city for more than thirty years, to Marc De Guerre, who had held his first solo exhibition just the year before, it represented a virtual cornucopia of directions for a young painter.

I first met Lahey about a decade later. The *Bone Paintings* he was showing then were arresting, combining a kind of austere high realism with measured, geometric colour fields. Then came *Cloud Portraits*, large, atmospheric, entirely life-like recollections of cloud forms, images which soon were matched up with fields of carefully considered solid colour in what he called *Rood Screens*. The *Ocean Pictures* appeared next, seamlessly blending photo-realist images with large passages rich with evidence of the painter's hand. The work, clearly, was all about the métier, how the craft, the traditions, the role of virtuoso skills, colour, form, and ostensible "subject," all conjoined to produce "meaning." There was no evident reference to precedent, although I recall feeling at the time that there was a distant, formal relationship to the work of David Bierk, a Peterborough-based painter with whom Lahey shared a studio building from late 1998 to the spring of 2001. He may at some level have been addressing such a concern with the *David Series* of 1999, small landscapes in no way related to Bierk's imagery painted entirely with pigments salvaged from Bierk's discarded palettes.

In his most recent work Lahey is responding directly to a precedent, to a towering figure in the history of Canadian art, the Montreal-based painter Guido Molinari. He had the good fortune to meet Molinari and to spend meaningful time with him before the painter's death in 2004. He had admired his work since his student days at York, and the pure colour elements in much of his own painting touch directly on the *plasticien* principles promulgated by Molinari since the mid 1950s. Lahey has made it clear that these recent paintings are in part a tribute, in part a response to a challenge. While at first glance they appear to be remarkably clever copies of the master's work, it soon becomes apparent that they are pure Lahey, richly but subtly layered, exquisitely crafted, charged with meaning in every detail. Even the Molinari branded colours in short time reveal themselves to be unlike anything he would have produced. These paintings embrace the chromatic theories of the master, but deliver an experience of remarkable warmth and fluidity that far surpasses emulation. As in all of Lahey's work, but perhaps never so effectively as here, the paintings address theory, technique, sensibility, content, scale, and the elements of beauty. Most importantly, though, each piece is understood as a singular object that resonates deep consideration of every possible aspect of its form and circumstance.

DENNIS REID
Chief Curator, Research
Art Gallery of Ontario



Guido in his studio 2001

After this first meeting I was able to visit Guido in his studio a number of times and was lucky enough to have him visit me in mine. He showed me the work in his collection and I showed him the work in mine.

I acquired a second “quantifier” in 2001; this one was much larger than my first and red. It lives with me in my studio and I look at it with tremendous affection each and every day. In the early fall of 2003 I visited Guido for the last time. We talked a lot about painting, about abstraction and representation. He showed me some of his techniques, and urged me again to consider the challenge of working on the “point”. I promised I would and have attempted it a few times; twice with cloud works and twice again with flower pictures. Unfortunately I never had the chance to show these attempts to him, but somehow I knew that they were not exactly what we’d discussed.

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So, I’ve been thinking about the “point” for almost 6 years now and I decided this past fall to undertake the pieces from this series. Unlike earlier attempts, these are not rotated squares. Rather, these are rhombus canvases; an equal sided parallelogram featuring 2 equal and opposite oblique angles and 2 equal and opposite acute angles. I have decided to focus on Molinari’s mutations from the 1960s as an initial source; from that first childhood encounter with his magic, a dotted line to that world of wonder back then, and forward to a promise made to giant who gave me some of his time, when he didn’t have to. This series of rhombus abstractions are my attempt at the fulfillment of that promise.

JAMES LAHEY

TRAFFIC AND MUTATIONS: A SELF-PORTRAIT

In 1971, American art critic Harold Rosenberg wrote a provocative article titled *Shall These Bones Live?: Art Movement Ghosts*. His question, “when is an art movement dead?” appeared at a time, as he noted, when the spotlight was in constant motion to reveal the next big thing. This condition led him to state that art history as “a schedule of continuous advances en masse is a fantasy of the historian,”¹ and analogous to “a series of blackouts ... [and that sometimes] all movements are in the dark and the spotlight is vacant.”²

A new candidate for the spotlight was suggested, when Museum of Modern Art curator William Seitz organized *The Responsive Eye* exhibition in 1965 while Pop Art was still at centre stage. Seitz threw a wide net around a range of practices that embraced hard-edge and geometric non-objective painting—works that sidestepped a figure-ground relationship that is characteristic of the vast majority of art through history—to focus on a chromatic and perceptual/optical language. The popular press term was Op Art; Pop minus a P. The shortcoming of the exhibition was that Seitz’s net was cast too widely over divergent artist agendas. Looking alike is not thinking alike. One of the artists scooped up in the Seitz net was Montreal painter Guido Molinari. As the spotlight continued to shift forward through art history, Molinari continued his own “responsive eye” undeterred by curatorial prescriptions. Nearly 45 years later, Rosenberg’s question remains relevant as contemporary artist James Lahey sits at a different precipice.

Lahey has written that *Guido’s Rhombus* is an homage to Guido Molinari, but that it is also an embarkation from what Molinari offered—as a problem to solve in his own way, and as individualist solutions to perceptual problems in art that have been generated for close to a century. Why do artists take up these challenges? Rosenberg speculated that “content in art that goes beyond decoration derives not from the nature of specific art movements but from the relation of artists to them. An art mode, new or old, is for the creative mind essentially a point of beginning.”³

Lahey chose the rhombus form as the vehicle for his point of beginning. After tests with watercolours—which Lahey called “maps”—he began with 17 divisions per canvas as a starting point (the term division rather than “stripe” is deliberate). He read and listened to what Molinari had to say about colour but did not look at his work during the process so as not to be inadvertently influenced, nor to appropriate Molinari’s palette. Lahey used colours that he was “passionate” about, and as he elaborated:

The colour combinations I’m using accumulated on their own through trial and error. The sequences and pattern have a mathematical combination that varies from one work to the next. So the palette [and] the colour combinations grew, as a sequence demanded increased variation. Currently there are 16 colours at work in the series. I didn’t know it was 16 until I counted, but no single work to date has the entire palette. A colour would be added to a canvas and then carried over. This is how the sequences grew from 17 divisions at the outset, to 20, 21, 25, and 27; 32 division paintings are being “mapped.” In theory there is no end to the sequence, but for now there are 16 colours, or notes, like music: there is a rhythm, a beat and tempo.⁴

Although the *Rhombus* sequence is cumulative, Lahey’s system is not dogmatically serial—it is open to deviation (traffic and mutations), as the combination of 16 colours and multiple divisions open up a mind-boggling number of possible works. Nor is there a rigid approach to the production order to the paintings.

After 17 divisions, he moved to 20 divisions, then 25 and 27, and back to 21. The divisions follow the line of the rhombus edge, but shift to the vertical axis for the 27 divisions. The canvas sizes are identical for the 27 and 21 divisions works but the “pure math” adds 6 more divisions on the vertical, hence adding to the works’ overall complexity. Choices are the artist’s prerogative because it has to work visually—the logic of seeing. Lahey stated that “it’s not a film or a building so you can change your mind without consulting someone else about their feelings.”

The work may in turn, be easy to “look at” because there is an ordered system and because easy is a hallmark of our times.⁵ Yet Lahey’s work is laborious and physically demanding. He is battling against a reality—we are not perfect beings, nor are our tools, yet there is the necessity for a precision of paint and the line. Lahey devised an aluminum ruler-tool, and while using masking tape as a guide for the layout of the lines, it cannot show its presence. The residue must be carefully cleaned afterwards without damaging the integrity of the paint. There is also an exactness and stability in the stretcher and how the canvas is stretched over the rigid plywood backing.

The installation at Museum London underscores the challenges to many of the conventions of gallery engagement and presentation. The Centre Gallery space at the Museum is a “flow space,” conceived with a dual ceremonial-social function, and punctuated with skylights and other features, including interior openings, a balcony and a projecting curved concrete staircase. The walls were bare poured concrete at the outset—the neutral cladding appeared afterwards—and only a single “focus” wall touches the floor plate. In short, it is not a “contemplative” white box space. Likewise, Lahey’s activated colour sequences offer no rest for the eye, and the rhombus form is more demanding and destabilizing than the (inevitable) reading of pictorial space in a square or rectangle. The scale of the rhombus may be “felt” as a body space akin to Da Vinci’s c.1487 *Vitruvian Man*, with the top and bottom point as head-to-toe, and left-to-right as arms outstretched. But this is only one possible reading. *In situ*, the paintings enter into architecture and become architectonic. A formative 20th century example of geometric abstract paintings is the so-titled *Proun* work by Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky, done in the 1920s. They were—as he postulated—at the intersection of painting and architecture, but diagrammatic in form. Although El Lissitzky achieved a dimensional-space form in 1924, it could only exist installed. Lahey’s *Rhombus* works live to fight another day.

Lahey’s practice is multi-faceted, as is his “preferred” subject matter: landscapes, oceans and lakes, skies and clouds, and flowers. He often undertakes a salvaging process: concurrently reworking the residue of his palette for an image into something else (his 2003–2007 *Index* paintings for example). He has repeatedly said that the difference between these works is only a degree of separation. If they are an affirmation of what we see, they also pose the question of what do we know, and what do we choose to believe.

The inclusion in this book of a sequence of Lahey’s recent American flag paintings, titled *Made in USA* (the term is an FTC regulated trademark), points to the visual traffic in his practice. There is no mistaking the reference, and it has been used in art and design to both praise and question American “core values.” Jasper Johns’ great audacity in 1955 was to reduce the flag to pure painting, first in colour, and then, in a subsequent work, to white monochrome. Lahey’s reasons for painting the American flag are both formal and personal, that is, neither to celebrate nor to demonize. The sequence of flags billowing and collapsing reveals a geometric pattern of the three colours and two elements (stars on a blue field and stripes), and like the *Rhombus* works, engage a sense of wonder about the world rather than level the playing field between “stripes” of a different order. The flag paintings are, then, a reflection on what art is and what it can be, by what an artist chooses to portray.



Made in USA 2004–2009
Oil, alkyd and ink on canvas. Each: 72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)

American artist Robert Irwin, reflecting on his own “passage” from painting to “situations,” noted that at different times art has had different roles—as an illustrator of text, and as a process in which social and political action could be engaged. He stated that “all of those things are very meaningful, but I got back to the question why art in the overall scheme of things? It seems to me, the key role is the continual development and extension of the human potential to perceive the world.” Once he had taken a position on perception, Irwin concluded, “it changes all the rules of the game for what you do and how you do it.”⁶ This echoes a statement by artist Michael Snow: “I make up the rules of a game, then I attempt to play it ... if I seem to be losing, I change the rules. Beyond the rules lies radical art.”⁷

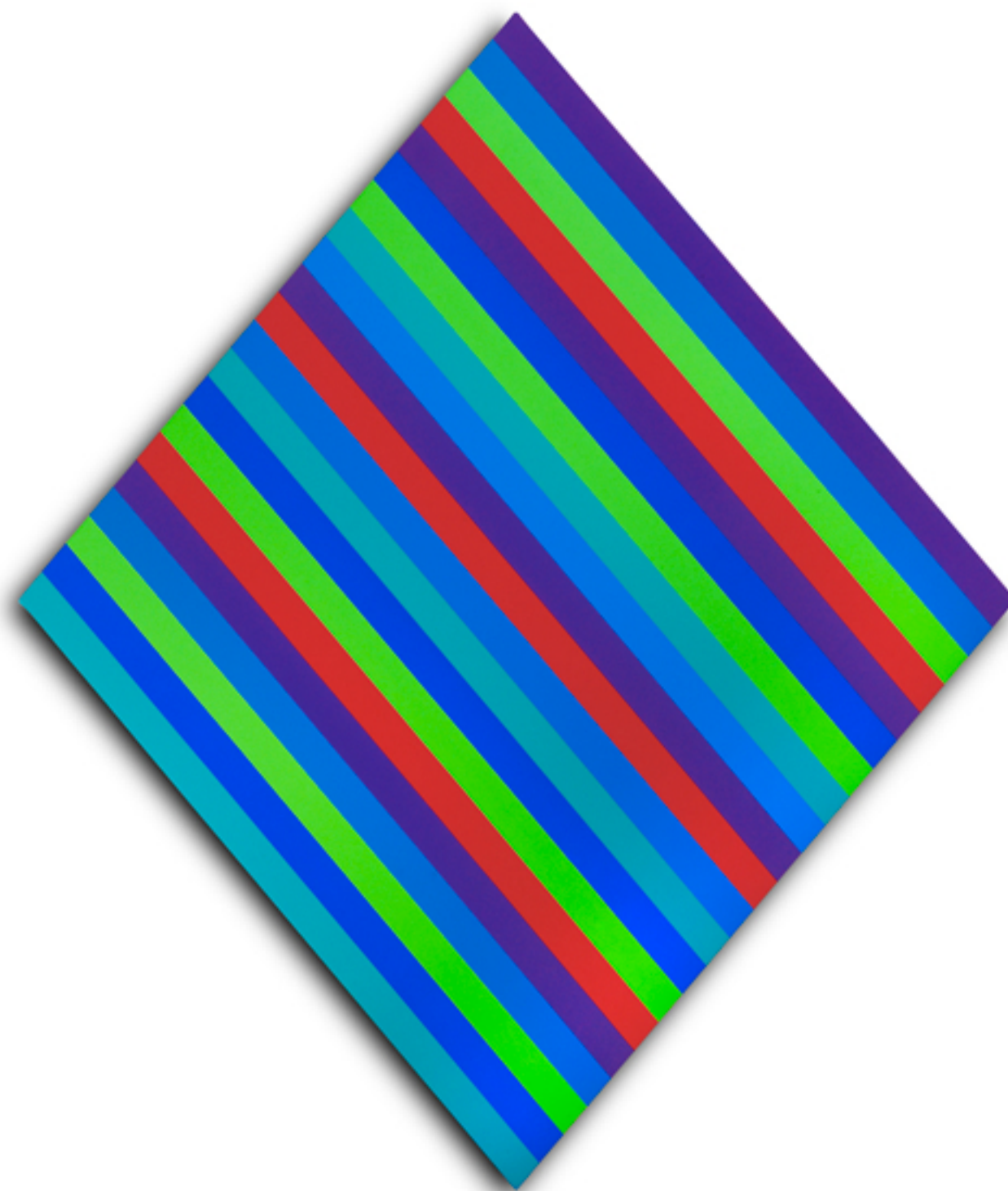
This book, through the placement of images and the rhythm of pages turned, expresses the seriality of Lahey’s work. The RGB Epson printing method for the nine tipped-in plates is true to the nature of the project and is a way to achieve the density and richness of colour—the “being and knowing”—rather than a replication or duplication. In *Guido’s Rhombus*, the eternal question is manifest in self-discipline, which leads to a constant re-examination and solution to a problem (of perception), for which there will be other solutions.

Lahey describes the *Rhombus* work as optimistic, and with reverence to the source and inspiration. But no one, not even the artist, can know this until it happens.

IHOR HOLUBIZKY
Curator of Art
Museum London

1. “Shall These Bones Live?” *New Yorker*, 1971, republished in *Art on the Edge* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1975), p. 230.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 228–229.
4. Lahey quotes from emails with the author, July 2009.
5. Difficulty in art is impressed upon us by authoritative voices that will “prove it to us.”
6. Robert Irwin, video interview for the exhibition *Primaries and Secondaries*, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2008.
7. Quoted in John Bentley Mays review, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 1 December 1984, p. 23.

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