

An abstract artwork featuring a complex composition of layered, textured elements. The background is a mix of bright yellow and light blue. Overlaid on this are various shapes and textures: a large, dark, almost black, irregular shape on the left; a vertical, textured, brownish-grey rectangular element in the center; and a white, irregular shape on the right. The artwork is heavily splattered with paint, including black, white, and brown. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and layered depth.

# STEWART GEDDES

Letting String Fall

C L O S E



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19 October - 30 November 2024

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## Preface by Freeny Yianni

Creative Director & Founder of CLOSE

Working with Stewart Geddes for the exhibition 'Letting String Fall' at CLOSE has been a journey of exploration. Born out of a mutual respect for our work, I as a curator, nurturer of artists legacy, owner of CLOSE and the obvious connection with the West Country and its artists special relationship with Land. This has given rise to an opportunity of contextualising Geddes paintings and displaying them in our gallery set in a rural landscape, in contrast to the city environment they are driven by. The artist title Letting String Fall – came about from reading an Edwardian poem which explored the condition of improvisation as, 'Letting a kerchief fall'. The replacement of kerchief with string drew in all sorts of ideas, not least the Dadaist absurdity of recording the imprint of a one metre piece of string dropped from the height of one metre and other metaphors.

We have created a digital catalogue with a text by James Russel, Curator, Trustee of the Royal West Academy and friend of the artist. Russel's essay was inspired by a series of dedicated visits to Geddes studio in Bedminster, Bristol.

Adelaide Damoah, a performance artist and writer who has known and respected the artist's work for several years, will conduct a Q&A with Geddes at the Private View of the show's opening night. The transcription of this will be added once the event has taken place.

These elements have come together seamlessly, and have enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of these until now, silent paintings. Geddes abstract works give back in their visual capacity but ask questions about context, meaning and the ideas that engender them. Such is the nature of abstraction, until we iterate and discuss, analyse and decode the work. A salacious activity which breathes life and confidence to both creator, curator and audience. Art can flourish in a collaboration of minds. Contributors feed the thought process and grow the meaning aside from the artist's initial intentions. As the adage goes, the poem that the reader reads might not be

the poem that the poet wrote. In Geddes' case the work is inspired by the semi-conscious state, so to broaden the language with other voices is to grow the engagement with his work. This was my intention for the show.

Art references and influence are key to Geddes who is a knowledgeable art historian, and so we have chosen to set aside a small gallery which celebrates artists who have been important to him. Terry Frost, Basil Beattie, Albert Irvin, and Braque among others will be shown. Our further intention again is to build a broader picture of the painter, including acknowledging his background in the unique culture of British Art School education, both as student and then tutor.

*"These paintings connect to the dimensions of my body and engagement with a surface. Typically, 3 feet square to 5 feet square, as they lay flat, just off the ground, they enable me to reach out to beyond the centre and drag a brush laden with paint across its surface.*

*I begin with a palette; a cluster of colours; and activate the blank square with a meandering linear gesture and amorphous pools of colour. Once this playful and speculative first draft is done, a dialogue begins, and counter movements and rhythmic checks-and-balances are introduced, until somewhere down the road, resolution is found. I've always liked Picasso's maxim of, "I don't seek, I find"...*

*It seems to me that semi-consciousness is a legitimate and useful state from which to make the work."*

- Stewart Geddes



Citamor, detail



## Paint-spattered Nikes

An essay by James Russell

The floor of Stewart Geddes' studio is covered in paint, blobs and drips and speckles of grey and green, and elsewhere a bright splash of magenta or red. In the midst of this chaos a square canvas lies flat on top of four paint-spattered plastic crates. SG has clearly been using paint with abandon in this place for a long time, engaging his canvases from above. Around this central area, however, the studio is orderly and clean. Glass bowls lean against the wall, drying. A mop stands in the corner. On a long table, containers of Golden acrylic paint stand alongside jars of immaculately clean brushes. The sink, SG says, is used a lot.

Radio 3 plays quietly as SG, a compact figure in paint-spattered Nikes, moves easily around the room, making coffee. This is his space, ordered and calm. Light falls from the high windows onto the paintings displayed on the walls, squares and a rectangle, two perhaps finished, others work in progress. The painting lying flat in the middle of the room may have been worked on periodically over weeks or months. The painted surface resembles torn paper on a billboard with dark lines wandering across it and small patches of fresh green and yellow pigment. Not patches: pools. These are still wet, having just been applied the day before. SG is waiting for them to dry and, as long as I'm in the studio with him, so am I.

Waiting is an important part of SG's process. At any one time he may be working on ten or fifteen canvases, never knowing how long it will be before a painting 'insists' – a word he chooses carefully - on having something done to it. Often, he will be working on one painting when he perceives a way forward with a different work. This might involve the addition of a single flowing stroke or the wholesale covering of the paint surface with a broad brush.



Potential catalysts for a painting are legion. SG might have been struck anew by the colours in Picasso's variations on *Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe*, or by a bubble gum wrapper on the pavement; magenta against grey. The process begins with an unprimed canvas, possibly dampened with water so that the first layer of acrylic paint soaks in like an undercoat. SG works out the initial palette, mixes paint to the right colour and viscosity and sets to work, applying paint either in what he calls a 'meandering linear gesture' or simply in 'amorphous puddles'. His approach is playful. He's part conjuror, part voyager. After a while the painting begins to assert its independent existence and a dialogue begins; the goal is not to create a work that looks a particular way but to achieve what Patrick Heron called 'the delicious independence of the hand from the brain'.

'I can't put into words how moving those moments are,' SG says, 'pushing beyond a limit in myself. I look at a painting and know I couldn't do what I've just done, consciously.'

The pleasure with which he talks about his work is remarkable given that he has been making art in one way or another at least since he started primary school. When he turned six, all the presents he got related to painting or drawing. 'I was the artist,' he recalls. 'I was their artist.'

He remembers being about seven or eight when an art-loving teacher put on a slide show of paintings by Seurat and some of the Impressionists. 'I remember,' he says, 'looking at surface of water painted by Monet and thinking that's what water's like... and at the same time he was using these great big slabs of paint. The paint was still paint but it was also water. That made a big impact.'

SG's father worked in a papermill and brought home as much paper as the budding artist could use. Nobody in the family had ever been to art school, and when he left school and went to do his Foundation year at Canterbury, he assumed he would then train to be a graphic designer because he had to get a job. When he found himself falling in love with Fine Art his family were totally supportive. He studied at what was then Bristol Polytechnic (now the University of the West of England) where he was taught by Paul Feiler and Michael Canney.

It was the latter who brought Albert Irvin down to talk about his work and SG seized the opportunity to meet him. They talked for twenty minutes, but it was twenty years before they met again when SG, who was now living in south London, happened to notice one of his paintings through the front window of a house. This turned out to be the home of Irvin's daughter Celia, who introduced them, launching a friendship that culminated in SG curating a glorious Albert Irvin retrospective at the Royal West of England Academy in 2018.

After graduating from Bristol Polytechnic in 1983, SG pursued simultaneous careers as painter and teacher. The latter a role was important to him, both in the contribution he could make, but was also nourishing for his own practice. Throughout this extended period he painted constantly, first finding success as a plein air landscape painter (often focusing on urban landscapes) in a loosely Impressionist style. A decade after leaving art school, however, he realised that this approach wasn't enough. At the time he was talking to his students about Peter Lanyon's multiple-perspective paintings, works such as *St Just* (1953, Tate) in which the Cornish painter conveyed his experience not just of looking at a place but of moving through it.

SG was living in London at the time and one day found himself in the long, curved street behind The Oval cricket ground. Protruding above the wall that encircled the ground were the backs of chairs and heads of spectators, whose applause periodically filled the street. Realising that he needed to find a way of conveying his experience of this place and moment more fully, he decided to approach the subject as Lanyon might have and make an abstract painting. A door opened into a world he has been exploring ever since.

Today SG retains his disciplined work habits, commuting across Bristol to his Bedminster studio. The journey takes him through the Avon gorge, where the young JMW Turner clambered with his sketchbook, and where the river's extreme tidal range can conjure anything from an expanse of brimming silver to a trickle of water between great banks of silt. Then it's straight into the city streets, a landscape of tagged shopfronts and billboards. SG loves this about Bristol, the proximity of Romantic beauty and urban grit.

These worlds collide in SG's paintings. As an artist he has always gravitated towards the urban, loving in particular the 'accidental art' of torn posters and ripped bills, but the deep British Romantic tradition has a hold on him too. Recently he found himself at an impasse with a painting ('Citamor', 2024) that had become too bright and too complicated. As it hung on the wall he realised what was required. He took it down and using a broad brush, he covered most of the surface in thick strokes of black. Instinctively again, he then took a squeegee and partially removed some of that black, allowing the red beneath to gleam through. With brighter paint remaining in the top left corner, the painting now had the feeling of dramatic Romantic landscape – like a John Piper mountain – something SG had certainly not planned.



Feeling on another occasion that the painted surface of a work had become too universally glossy and hard-edged, SG 'put the mop on it'. Acrylic paint can remain porous even when dry and by applying water judiciously SG broke down the hard edges of paint, allowing soft, feathery borders to develop between areas of contrasting colour. Other improvised techniques he uses include the dispersal of marble dust into wet paint, giving a gritty texture. Uneven thicknesses of paint, meanwhile, create an interesting, varied surface for subsequent layers.

Approaching one of SG's paintings for the first time, the viewer is bound to initially notice the overall composition and mood of the work: those broad meandering lines in grey or magenta or white, the areas of scuffed and scraped colour, the contrasting dark and light tones. This initial survey may be satisfying, but these paintings reward a longer viewing process, one that mirrors the time invested by SG in making the work. There is such variety in colour and tone and gesture. Neighbouring passages of paint may be smooth and glossy, or gritty, iridescent or matte. The experience of looking changes with hour and season. These are paintings to live with and within.

*James Russell is an author, art historian and curator who specialises in Modern British Art. He is a trustee at the Royal West of England Academy of Art and a lecturer for the Arts Society.*





Stewart Geddes in his studio | Image credit: Anne Purkiss



# TOOKEL

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

122 x 122cm







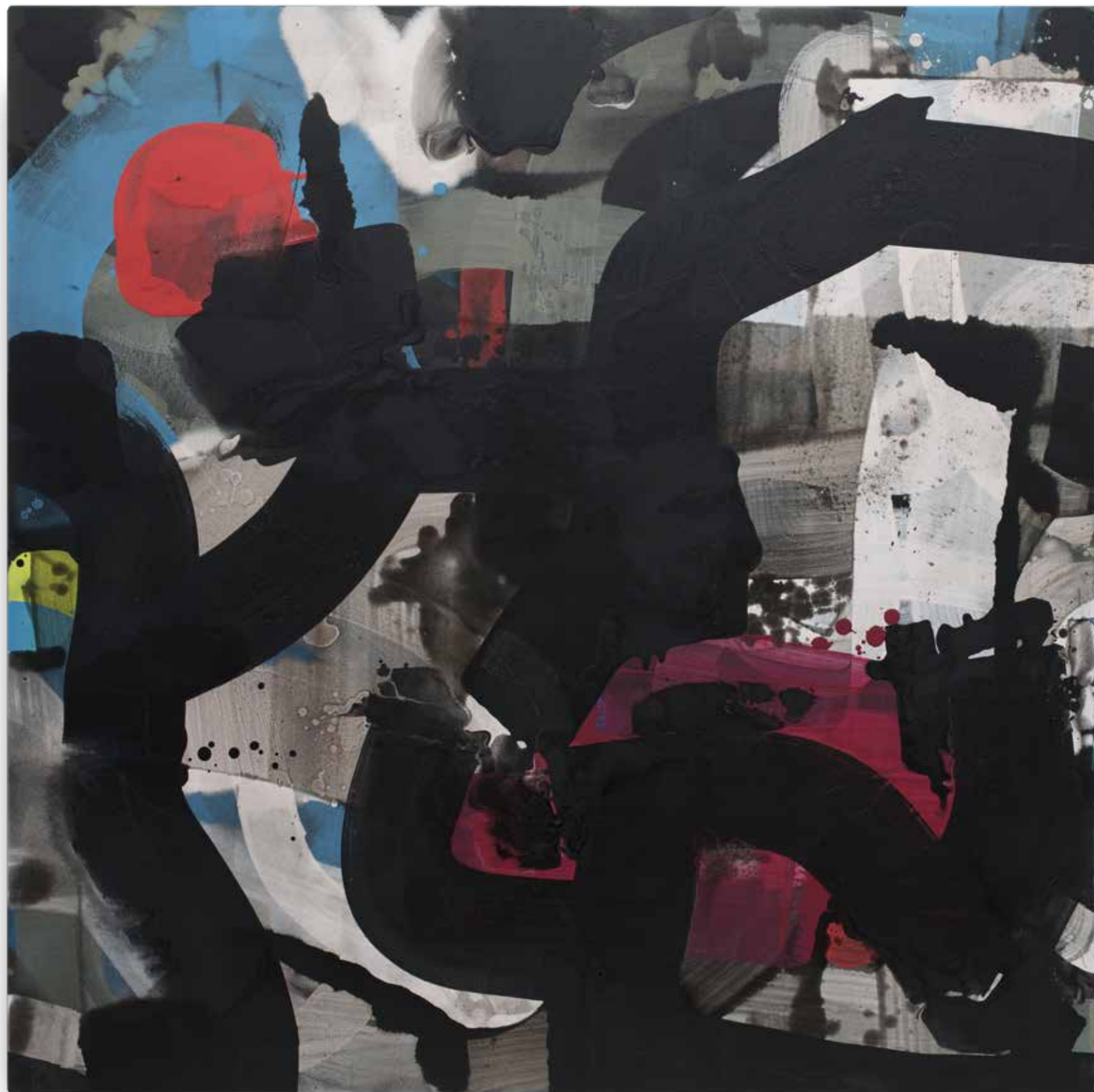


# SOREPPO

**2023**

*Acrylic on canvas*

140 x 140cm









# NHOJREYRE

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

140 x 140cm









# KIAPEKO

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

140 x 140cm





# ILIAE

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

122 x 122cm



# EIDEGEIL

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

160 x 160cm





# TSERAF

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

125 x 125cm









# NAIRAD

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

140 x 140cm





# PTEOSSACI

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

40 x 50cm





# CITAMOR

**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

122 x 122cm









# THOGIL

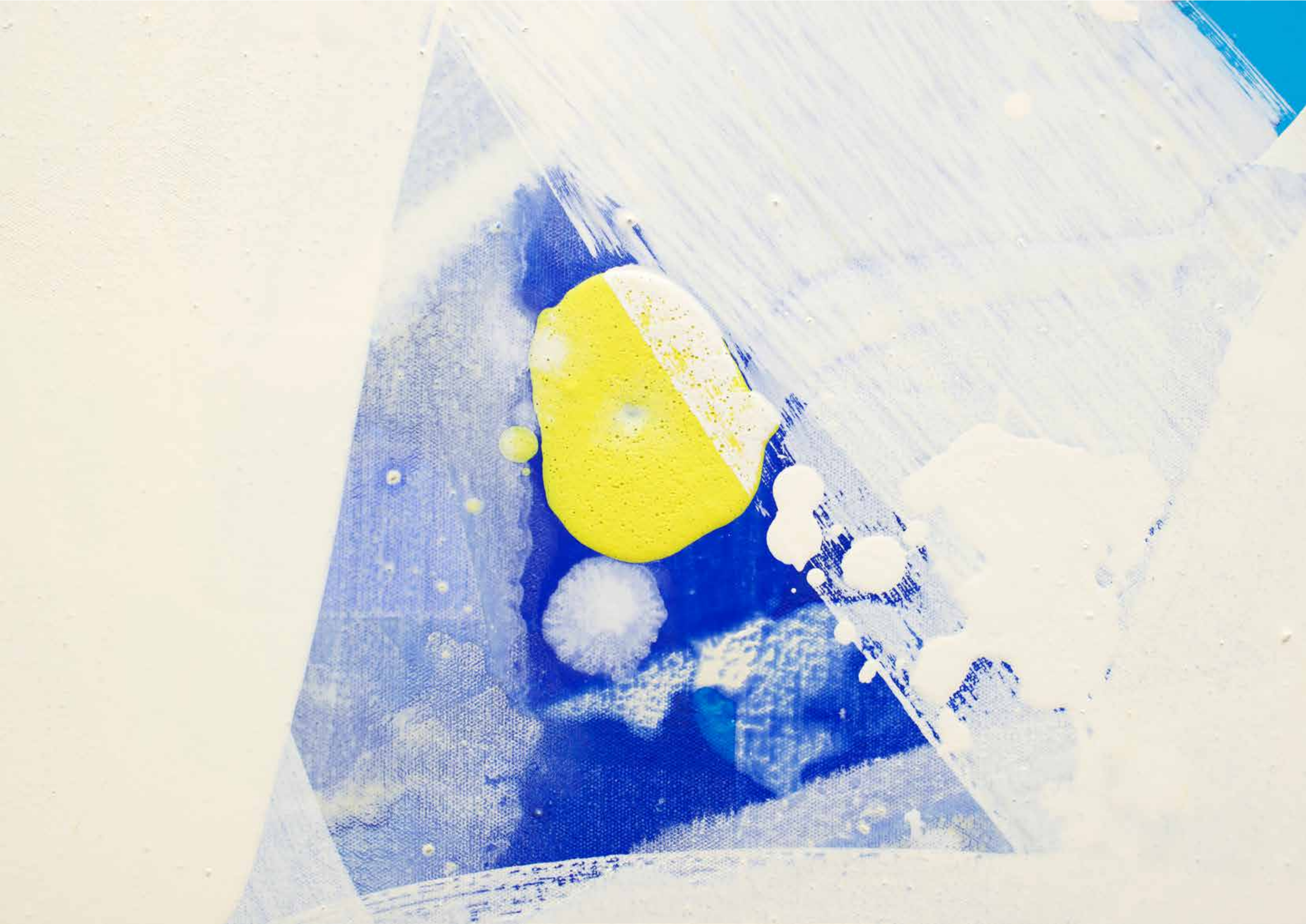
**2024**

*Acrylic on canvas*

140 x 140cm















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