

Project Space

# OTHO BRANSON PAINTINGS

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# OTHO BRANSON: PAINTINGS

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Curator  
February 8 – March 30, 2025

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE

American University Museum

2



Otho Branson in his studio, October 29, 2024.

# Otho Branson: Paintings

By Phyllis Rosenzweig  
Curator

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The velvety grisaille and brilliantly colored patterns that Otho Branson distributes across the surface of his paintings hint at an underlying organizational system, but the elements of that system may not be immediately discernable.

Branson described his process this way:

*Through the use of symmetry and color, I create patterns.*

*The process begins with a shaped picture plane (a square or rectangle), a structure (using a grid or symmetry), and the organization of color (using primary hues, neutrals, and their values).*

*My paintings try to achieve an equilibrium of parts and of the whole. They can be read in parts or in their totality and in different configurations. Their reading creates a dynamic environment (patterns generating patterns, kinetic and everchanging).*

—Otho Branson, *Artist's statement*

Hemphill Art Works Press Release, November 2020

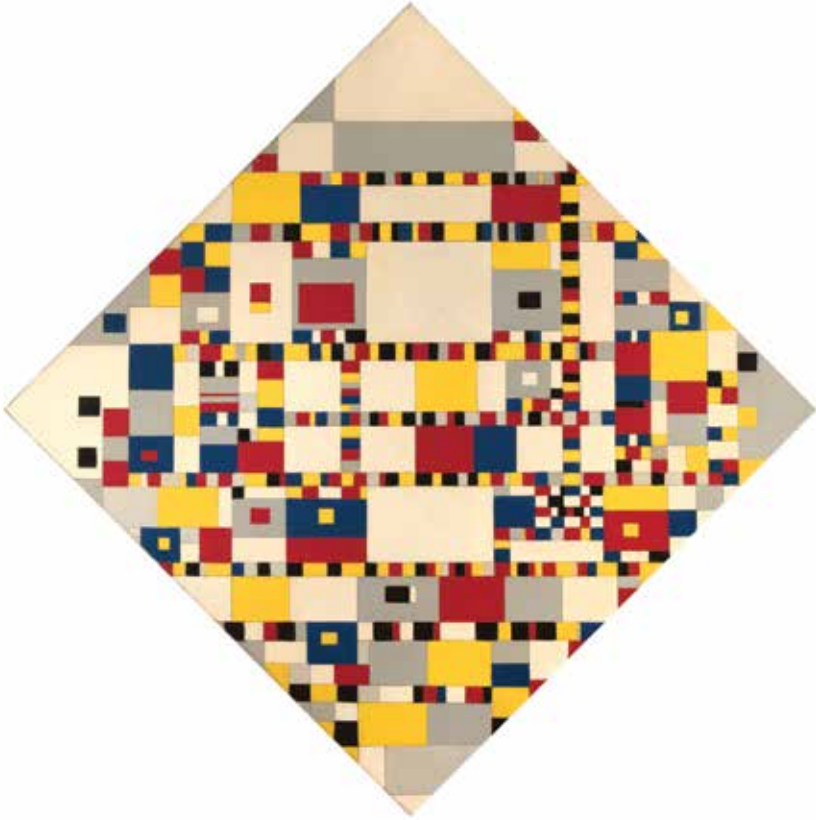
Aside from a few years in the mid-1960s, when he attended the Philadelphia College of Art, Otho Branson has lived and worked in Washington his whole life. He was born in 1943, in Freedman's Hospital, then the main hospital serving Washington's Black patients and grew up in Northeast DC. His father was a lawyer; his mother a teacher. He attended the original Fairmont Heights High School in Maryland, just outside the District, where his mother taught in the mathematics department, and where the art

educator, Leroy Gaskin, supported his thoughts about becoming an artist. He studied at the Philadelphia College of Art from 1963 to 1967 with Larry Day and Marvin Bileck.

Returning to DC in 1967 Branson joined the lively, diverse, multi-generational art community then loosely gathered around Dupont Circle. The monolithic influence of the Washington Color School had begun to fade by then (Morris Louis had died in 1962, and Kenneth Noland left DC the same year), although Gene Davis remained an influential presence as an exhibiting artist and as a teacher. Sam Gilliam lived and worked in nearby Adams Morgan. Martin Puryear, who Branson had known since high school, no longer lived in DC but remained an influential presence.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, an eclectic group of younger artists, including Michael Clark (now Clark V. Fox), Carroll Sockwell, Allan Bridge, Lucy Clark, Kevin MacDonald, and many others, whose work ranged from expressive figuration to pure abstraction, were creating a vibrant cohesive group coalescing in the neighborhood.

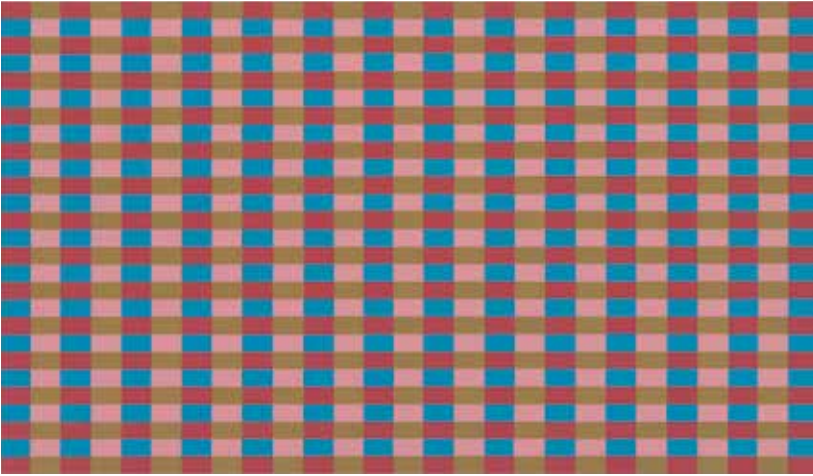
4 Pre-Metro, pre-gentrification Dupont Circle, with its affordable rents, inexpensive restaurants, and congenial and gritty bars such as the legendary Benbow, was the home or a gathering place for many of these artists. It was also the locus of a cluster of lively galleries, such as Henri, Jefferson Place, Max Protetch, and others, some squeezed into spaces in converted townhouses. Along with nearby institutions such as the Phillips Collection, The Washington Gallery of Modern Art, and The Corcoran College of Art and Design, and American, Catholic, and Howard Universities, and Harry Lunn's prestigious downtown art bookstore and gallery, they supported the work of this diverse group of DC artists and exhibited work by nationally and internationally known artists as well.<sup>2</sup>

Branson, whose early figurative paintings were already distinguished by a remarkable use of color, continued to draw from the model in group sessions at Mark Clark's studio, but he also studied Mondrian, absorbed the examples of Gene Davis's paintings, and was drawn to the conceptual practices and serial forms in the work of artists such as Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, and Sol LeWitt. By 1970 Branson had processed these various influences and arrived at his signature grid framework and distinctive repeated color patterns.



Otho Branson, *After Mondrian Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1971–1986. Oil on canvas, 27.875 x 28 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Branson has said his approach to composition is not strictly mathematical, but it is process driven. He begins each painting by drawing a root rectangle or square on a sketch or model and divides that shape into smaller, repeating geometric units to form a grid. He then overlays the units with colored Japanese washi tapes which he moves and recombines to experiment with color placement. Branson transfers the grid to a final paper support or board, mixes acrylic pigments to correspond to the tapes and, following his model, applies the colors sequentially, one color at a time, to the masked off units of the grid. He applies the paint to each unit with a foam brush in three strokes: one horizontal, one vertical, and a horizontal again, resulting in surfaces that are rich and tactile.



Otho Branson, *2016-10-16*, 2016. Acrylic on Panel, 24 x 41.625 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian, QuickSilver Photographers LLC.

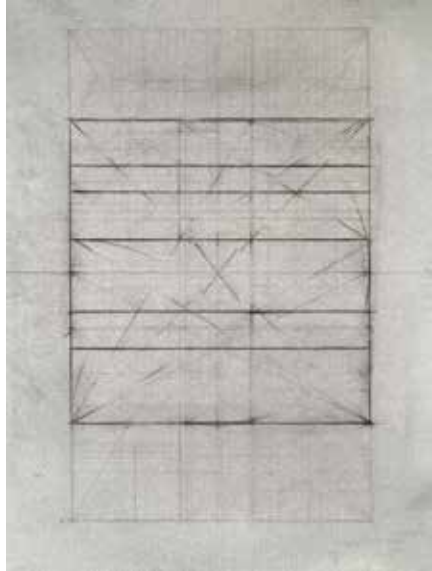
6

Branson generally composes his paintings according to the principles of dynamic symmetry, in which a rectangle is bisected by a diagonal whose length then determines the ratios by which succeeding geometric forms are created. The term was first used by Canadian-American artist Jay Hambridge to describe the patterns he found in Greek vases and was popularly taught as a system of design in art schools beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Somewhat related to the progression of numbers in a Fibonacci sequence, fractals, and the Golden Section, dynamic symmetry is said to create relationships of organization and harmony. It is thought to provide the principles underlying traditional architectural structures, the organization of Renaissance, Romantic and much of modern western painting, and proportions found in nature (such as the relationship of fingers to hand, leaves to branches, etc.) In recent work, Branson also applies principles of dynamic *equilibrium*, a term used in chemistry, biology, and ecology to describe a system in which forward and reverse actions are in constant but equal motion until they reach a state of stasis or equilibrium.



Branson uses washi tapes to approximate color relationships according to the Munsell Color System. Created by the early twentieth-century painter Albert H. Munsell to bring order to the study of color, the Munsell Color System mathematically measures the properties and numbers the variations of hue (color itself: the primary colors red, yellow, blue), chroma (brilliance or saturation) and value (light to dark). Based on scientific measurements of human visual perception, Munsell's system is so accurate it was adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1930s for use in soil research. Like dynamic symmetry, Munsell's color theory also became a staple of art and design education in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

The systems that Branson incorporates in his work suggest a way to consider how art has traditionally been taught in the United States. That these systems also have equivalents in mathematics, chemistry, biology, and in the evolution of textile design, raises questions about relationships between science and art, and patterns made by humans and those found in nature.



Preparatory sketch by Otho Branson.



The Artist's worktable.

However, Branson's concerns as an artist are formal ones. His paintings belong on a continuum of a history of modern western abstraction, from Russian Constructivism to Mondrian, the Bauhaus to Sol LeWitt and beyond, in which artists have constructed visual vocabularies of geometric forms and elemental colors. Within this conceptual framework Branson creates paintings that are instantly recognizable and, as records of his decision making and thought processes, deeply personal.

Based on permutations of rectangles and squares and progressions of primary or muted colors, Branson has generated a seemingly endless variety of possibilities within the self-imposed restrictions of his practice. Defined by ordered combinations of color and complex formal structures, his paintings are visually and conceptually rich. This exhibition is the first museum survey of his work.



The Artist's studio.

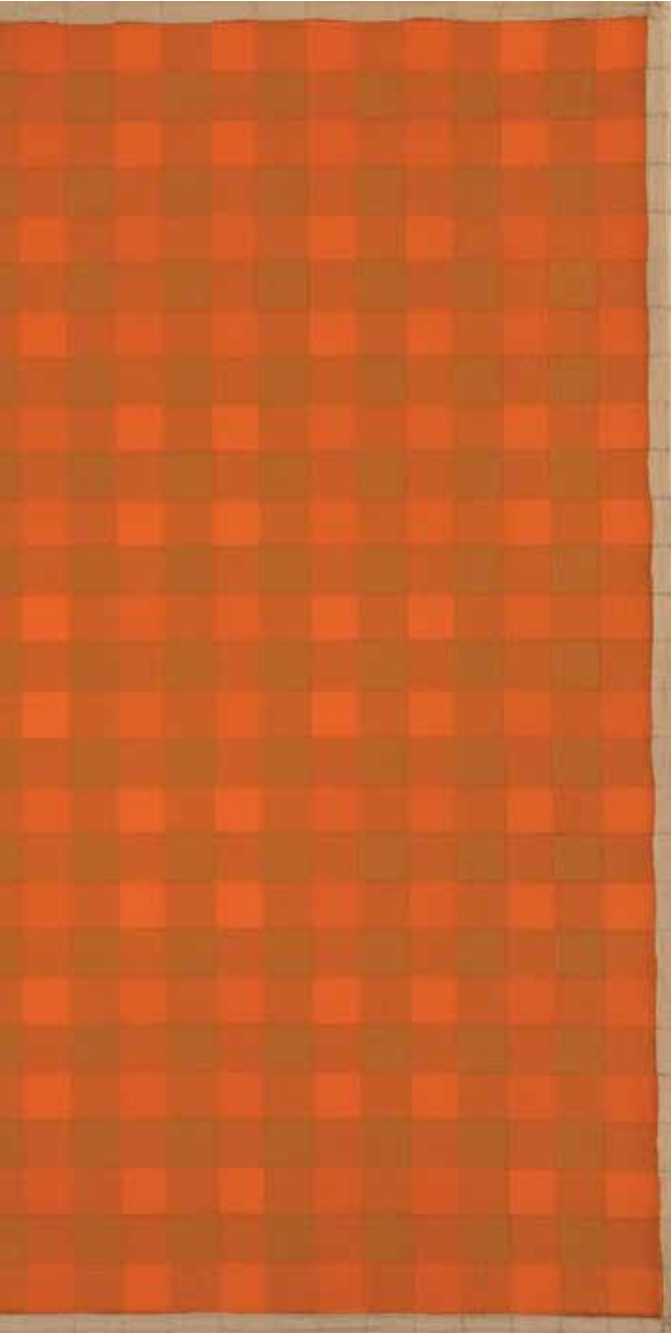
## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Martin Puryear, who was then a student at Catholic University, was also working in the Woodridge Library on 18<sup>th</sup> Street and Rhode Island Avenue, Northeast (the building has since been torn down). According to Branson, Puryear noticed him because he was the kid who kept checking out all the art books. They have been friends ever since.
- <sup>2</sup> The art scene in DC evolved during a period when dramatic events were unfolding in Washington and throughout the United States, including demonstrations against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and escalating violence against Civil Rights activists. The traumatic assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 was followed by a massive and destructive uprising in DC along the 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor not far from Dupont Circle.
- <sup>3</sup> See Jay Hambridge. *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press, 1920). Albert H. Munsell, the *Munsell Manual of Color*, originally published in 1929, has appeared in many iterations since then. Branson discovered Hambridge's book when he was in high school. Munsell color theory was part of the curriculum in basic design instruction at the Philadelphia College of Art.





Otho Branson, *Untitled [Orange Squares]*, 1972-1975.  
Oil on canvas, 28 x 28 in. Courtesy of the Artist.





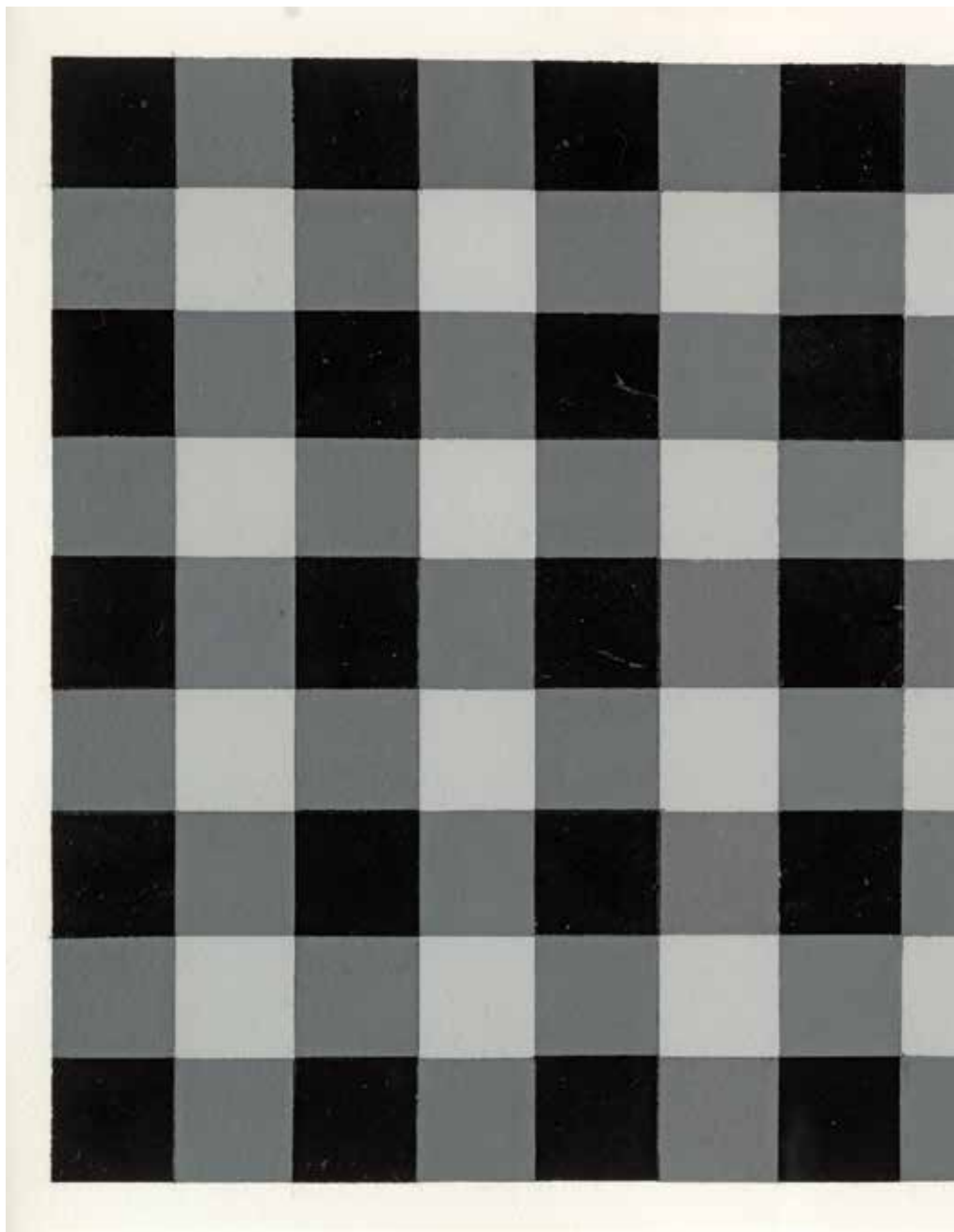
Otho Branson, *Untitled [Horizontal Grey Stripe]*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 28 x 28 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.



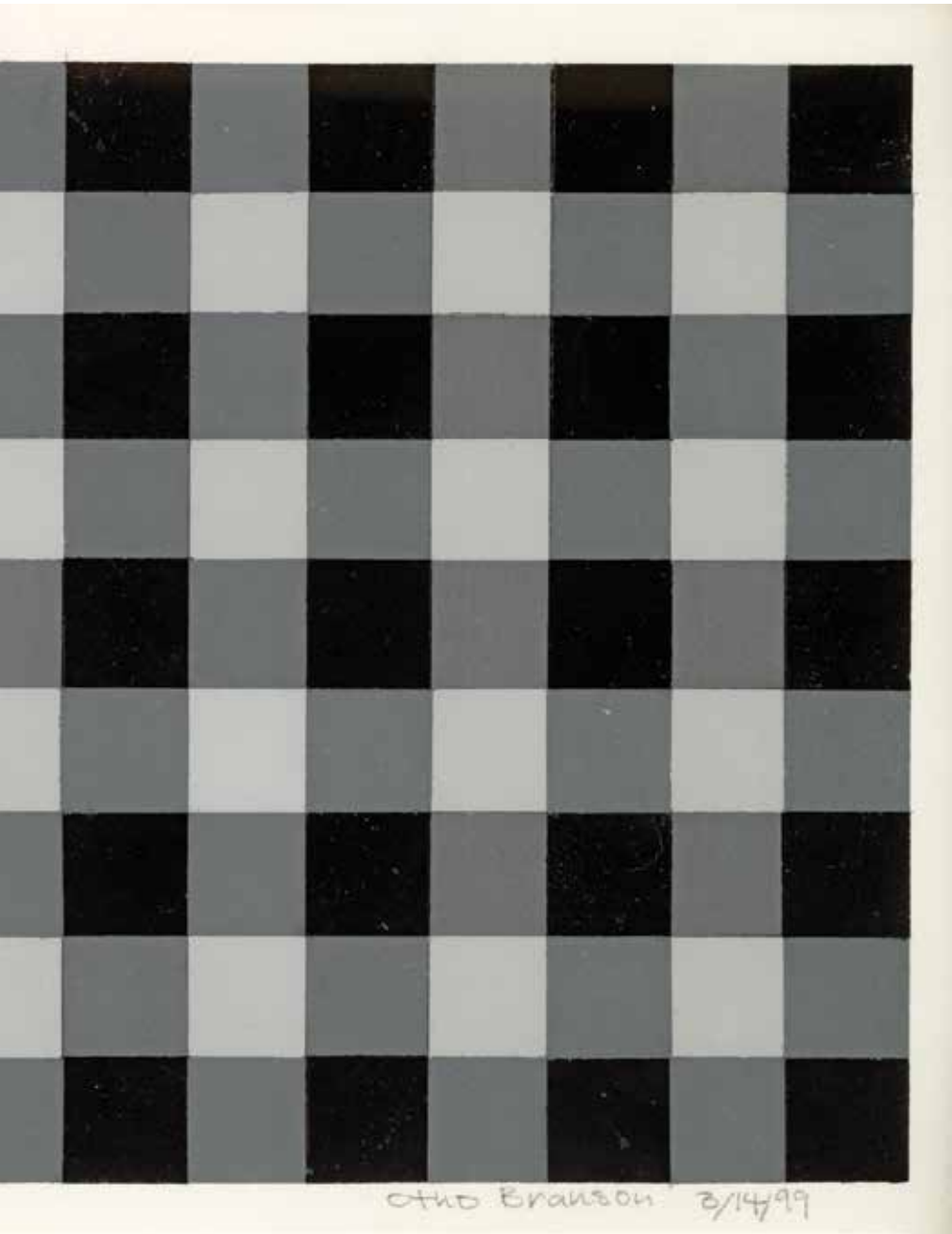


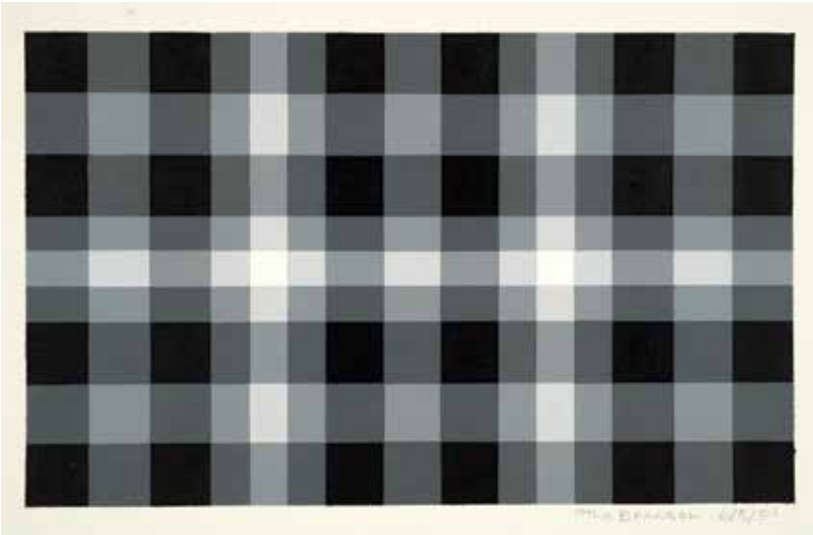
Otho Branson, *Untitled [Colored Squares]*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 14 x 14 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

16

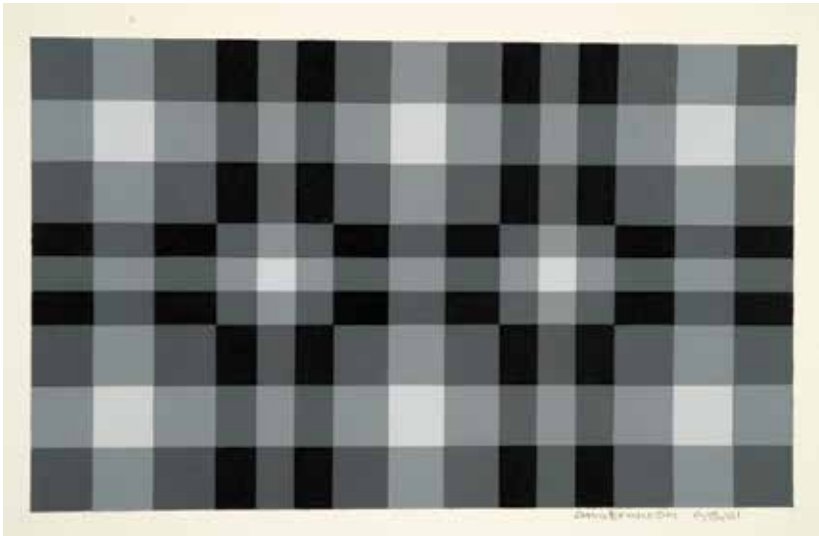


Otho Branson, *3/14/99*, 1999. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16 x 20.5 in. Private Collection.



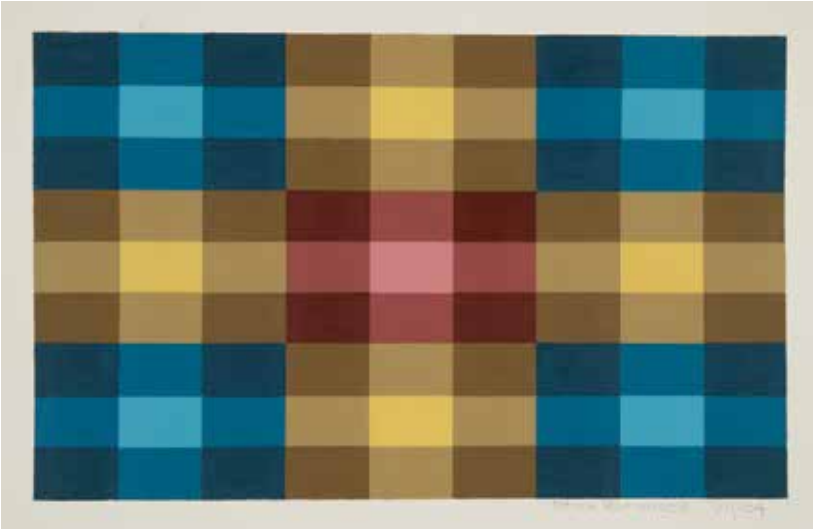


Otho Branson, *Untitled #1*, 6/5/01, 2001. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16 x 20.5 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

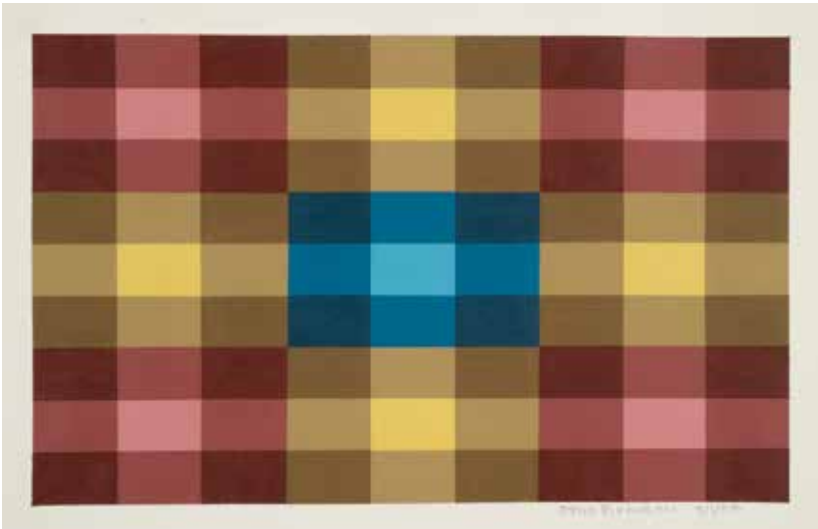


Otho Branson, *Untitled #2*, 6/15/01, 2001. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16 x 20.5 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

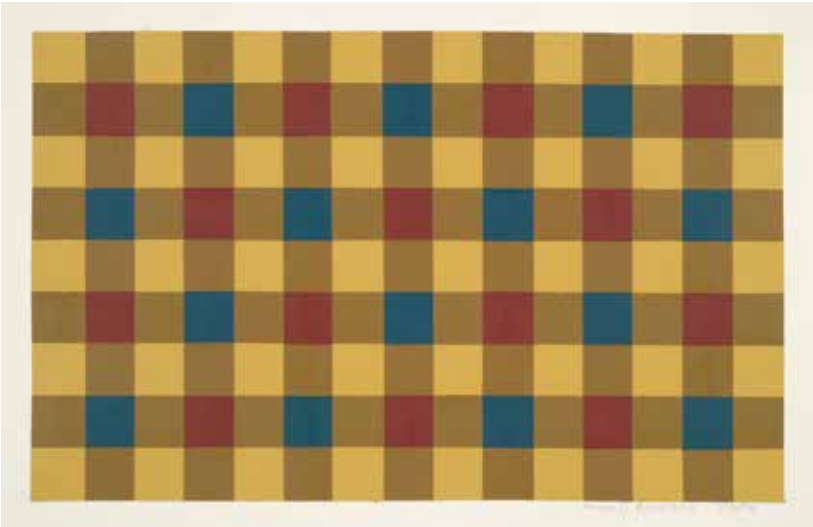
20



Otho Branson, *2004-07-11*, 2004. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16.25 x 20.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

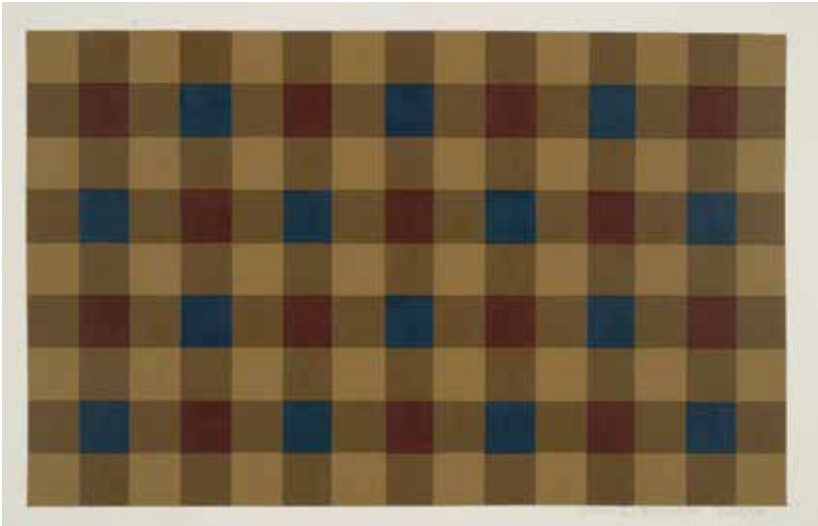


Otho Branson, *2004-08-01*, 2004. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16.25 x 20.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.



Otho Branson, *2006-07-16*, 2006. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16.25 x 20.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.





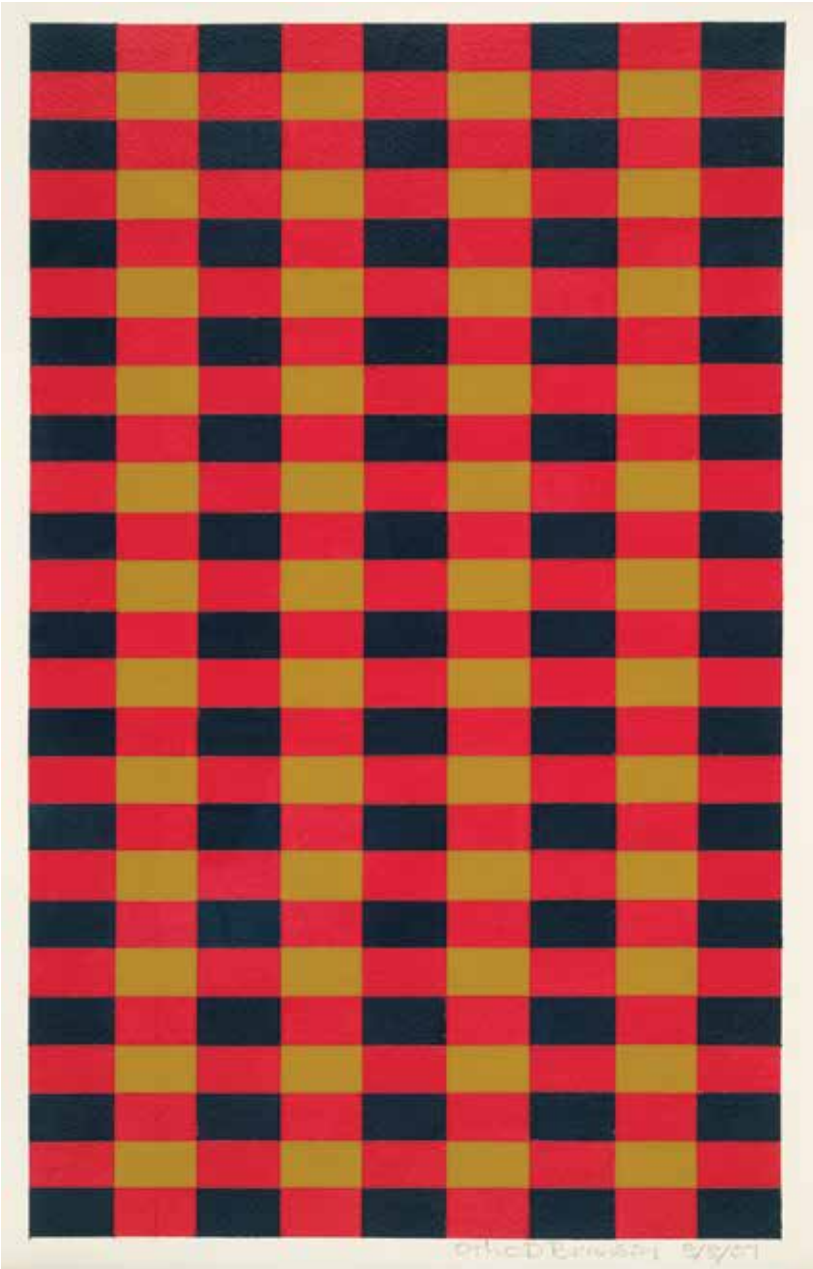
Otho Branson, *2006-07-23*, 2006. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16.25 x 20.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

24

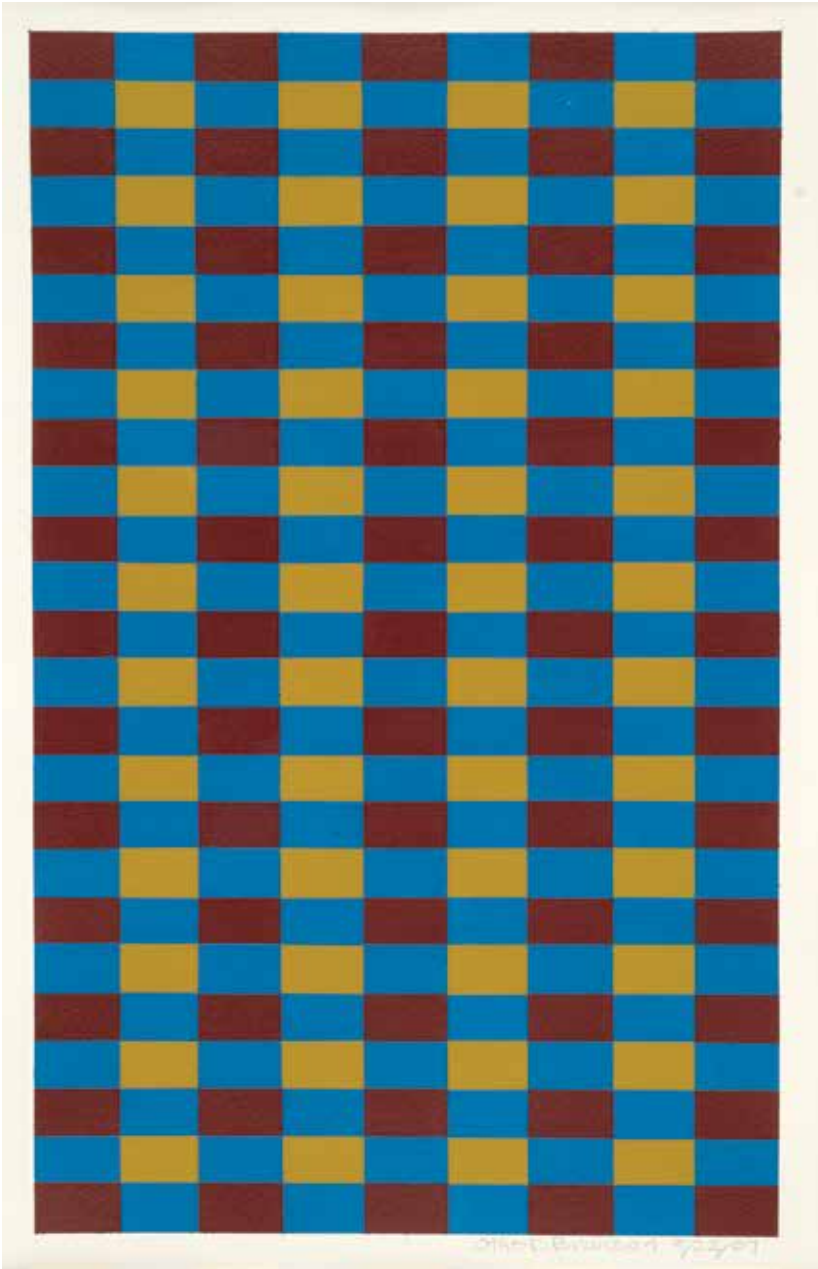


Otho Branson, 2006-09-04, 2006. Acrylic on Arches paper, 16.25 x 20.25 in.  
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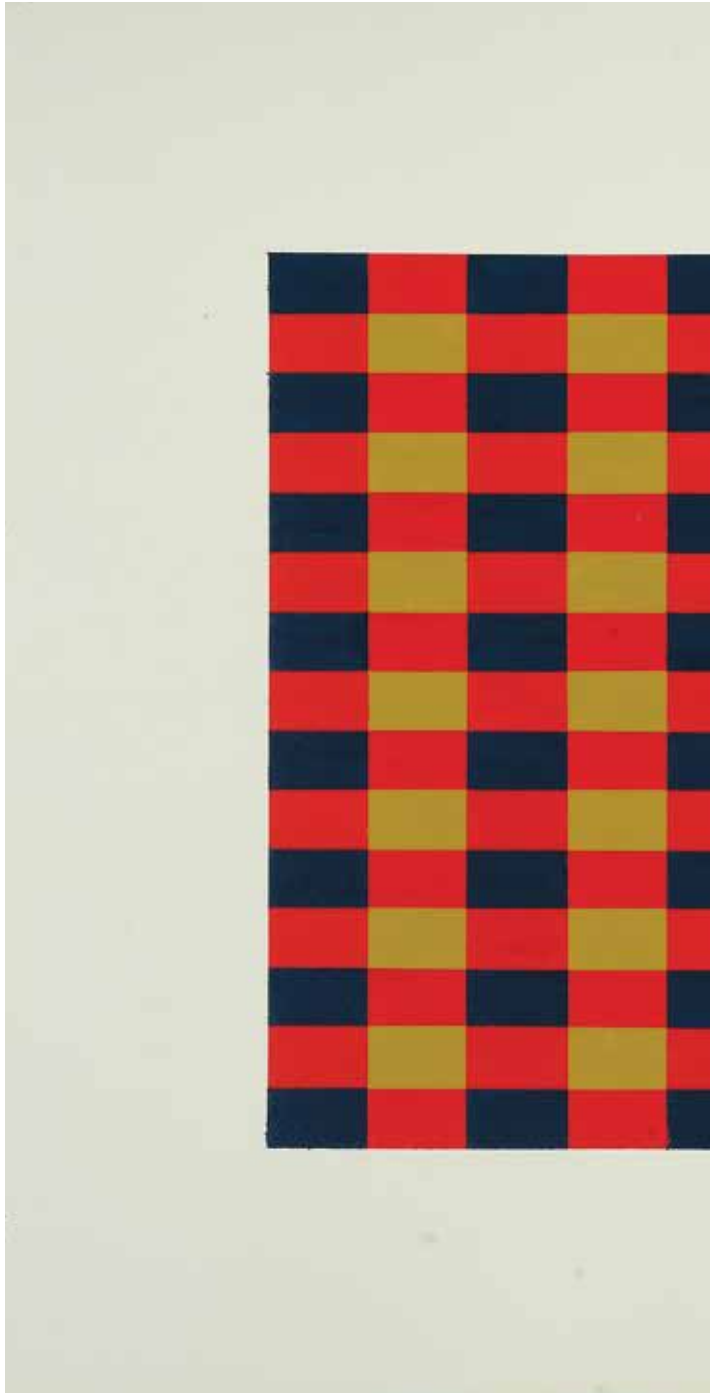




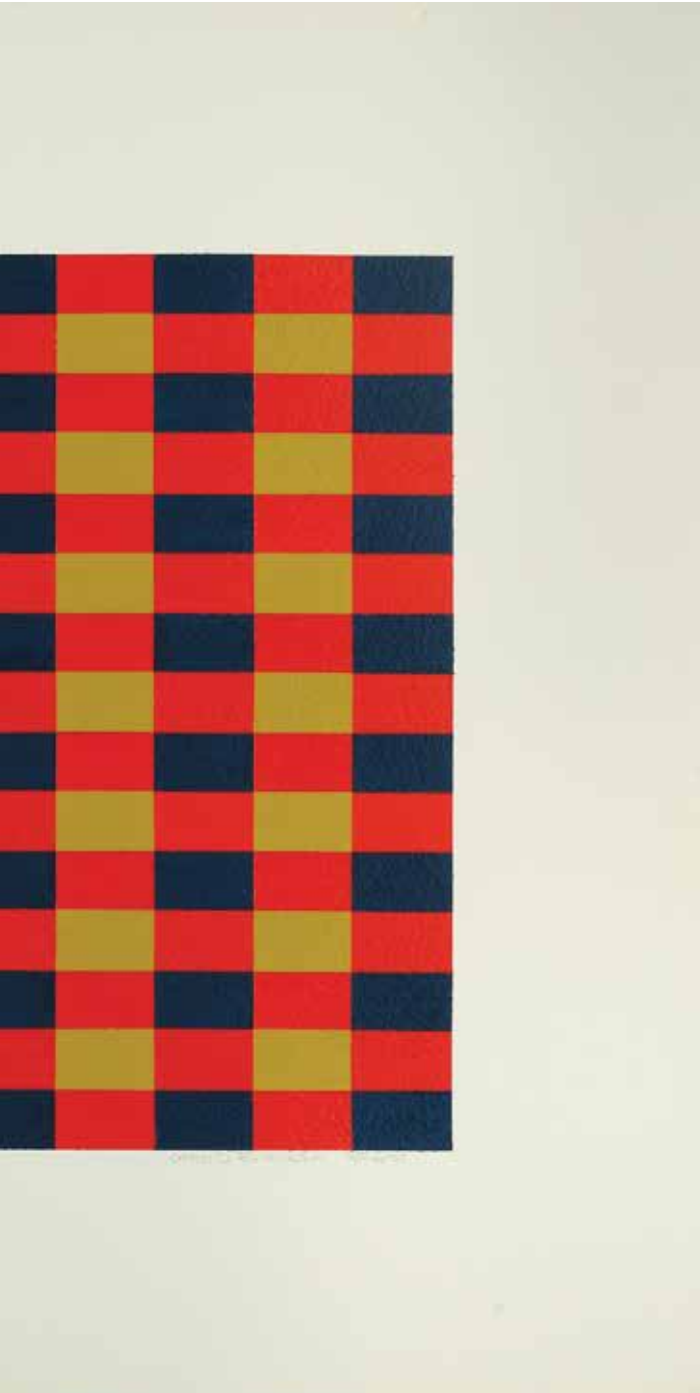
Otho Branson, 2007-08-08, 2007. Acrylic on Arches paper, 20.25 x 16 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.



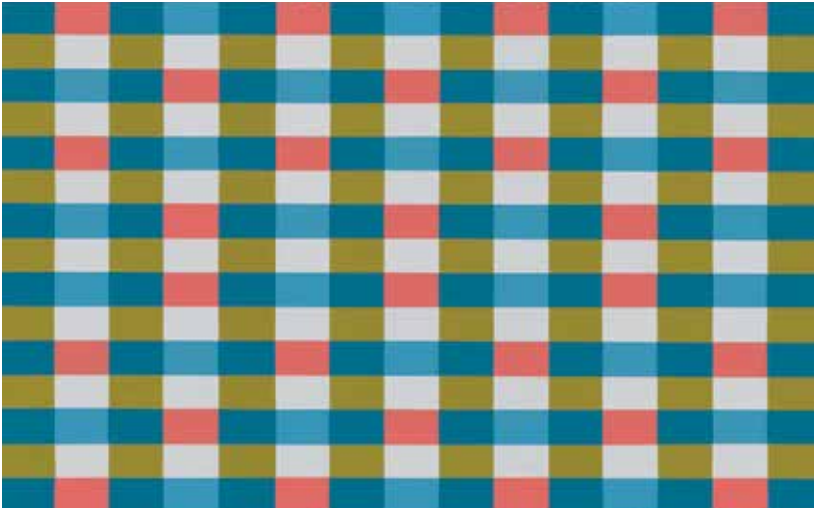
Otho Branson, 2007-08-22, 2007. Acrylic on Arches paper, 20.25 x 16 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.



Otho Branson, *8/26/2007*, 2007. Acrylic on Arches paper, 22.75 x 22.5 in. Courtesy of Hemphill Artworks.

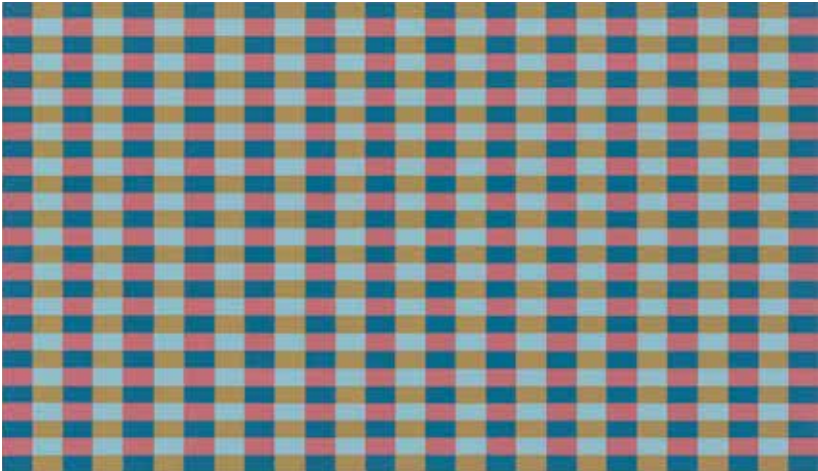


30

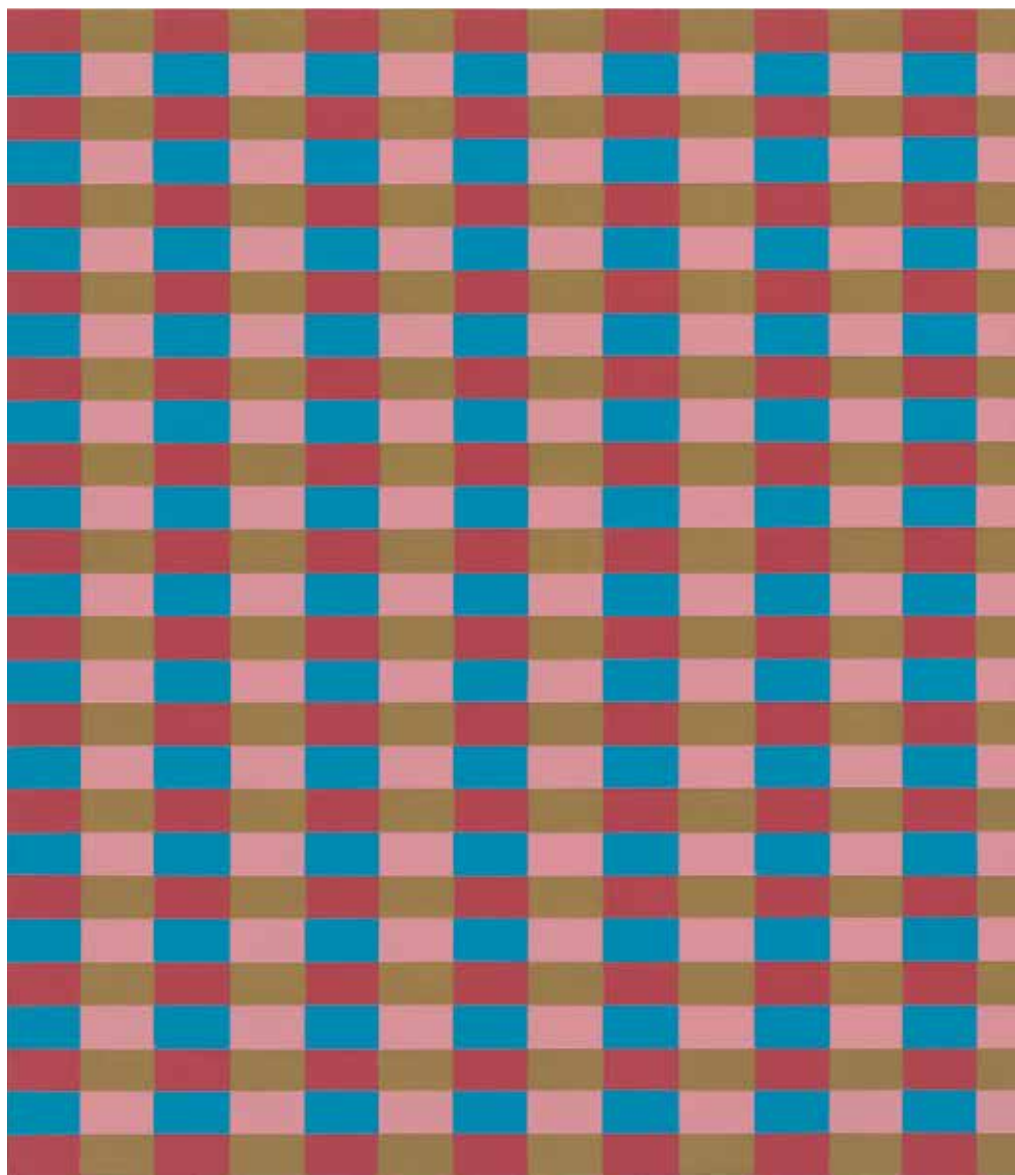


Otho Branson, *2014-10-26*, 2014. Acrylic on Panel, 14.875 x 23.875 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

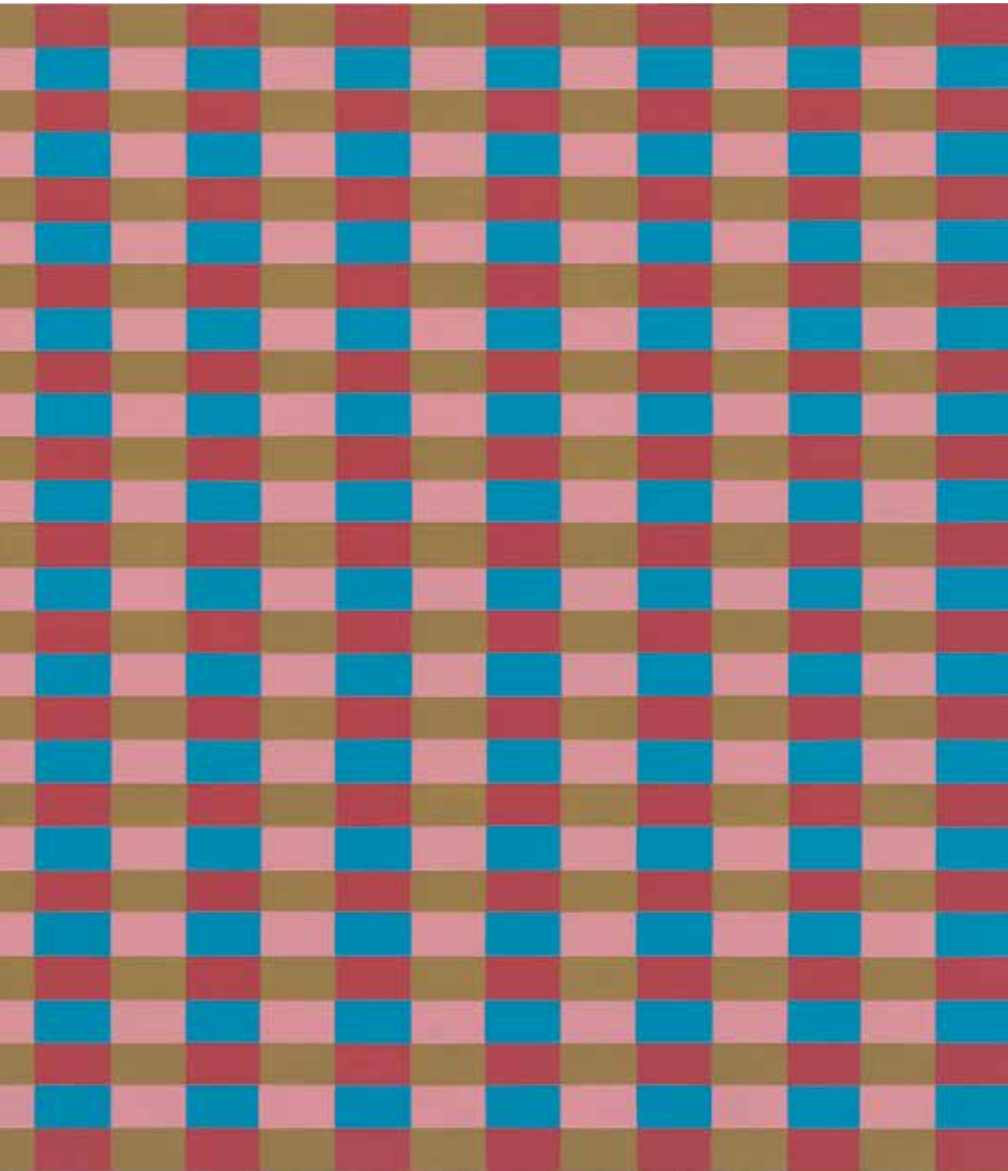




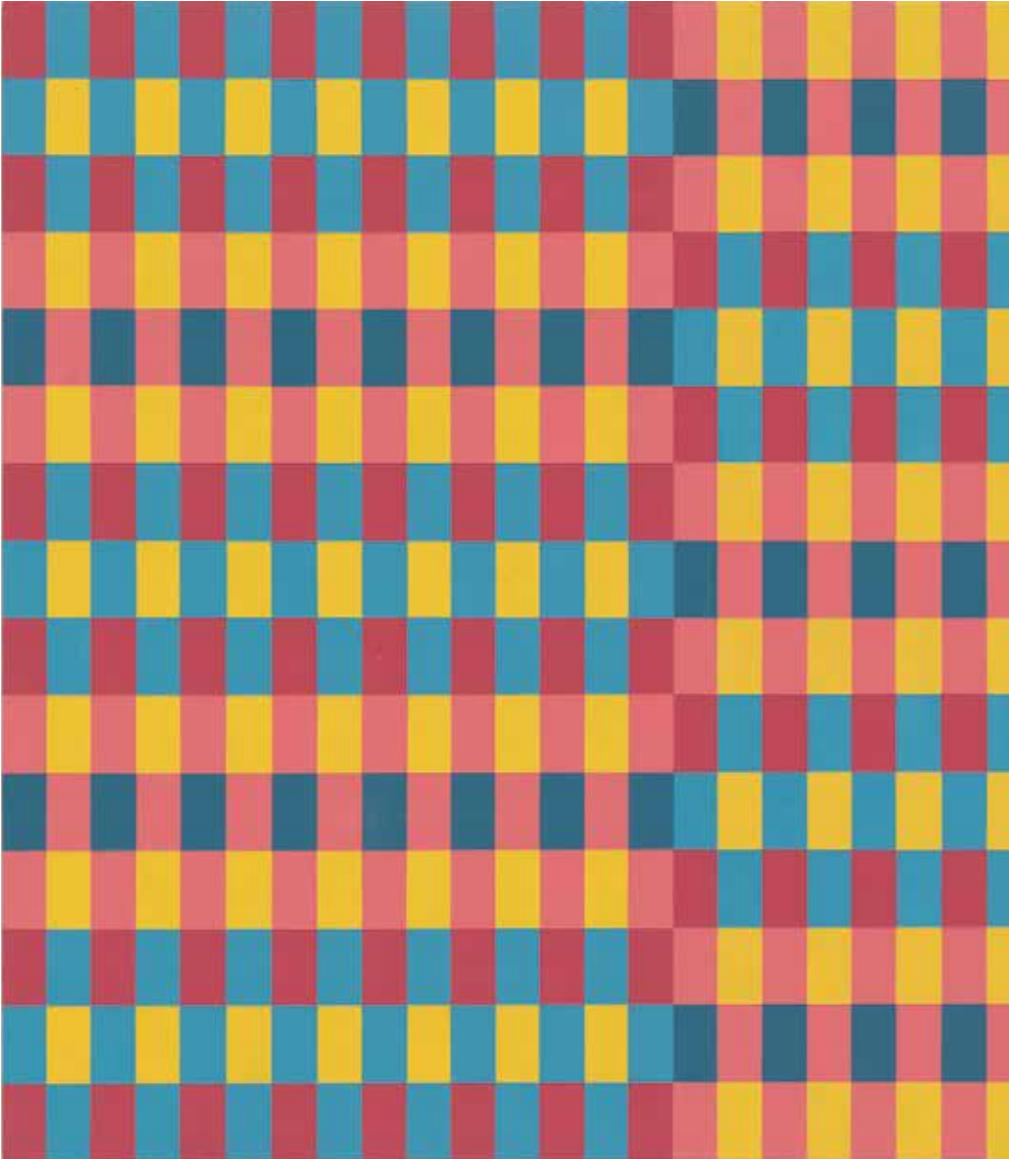
Otho Branson, *2016-09-05*, 2016. Acrylic on Panel, 24 x 41.625 in. Courtesy of the Artist.  
Photo: Mark Gulezian, QuickSilver Photographers LLC.



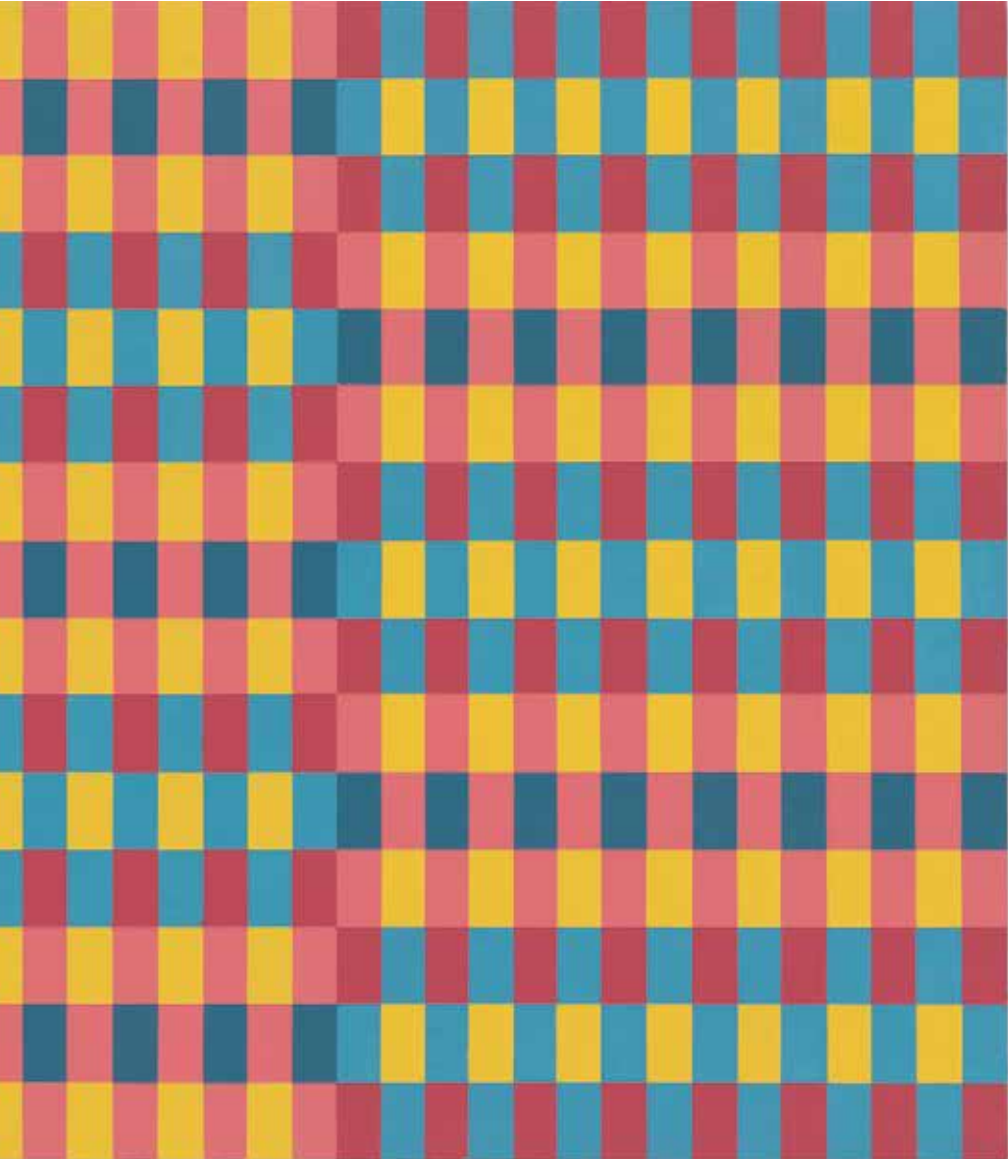
Otho Branson, *2016-10-16*, 2016. Acrylic on Panel, 24 x 41.625 in. Courtesy of the Artist.  
Photo: Mark Gulezian, QuickSilver Photographers LLC.



34



Otho Branson, *2017-04-01, 2017*. Acrylic on Panel, 24 x 41.625 in.  
Courtesy of Rogers Joseph O'Donnell, Washington, DC.  
Photo: Mark Gulezian, QuickSilver Photographers LLC.





Otho Branson, 2022-04-23, 2022. Acrylic on Panel, 18.0625 x 25.5625 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist.



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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### **Otho Branson**

Born Washington, DC, 1943.

Lives and works in Washington, DC.

### **Education:**

Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA, 1963–1967.

University of the District of Columbia, Washington, DC, 1988.

Corcoran College of Art and Design, Washington, DC, 2000.

### **Solo Exhibitions:**

O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York, NY, 2002, 2006–7.

Hemphill Art Works, Washington, DC, 2022.

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center,  
Washington, DC, 2025.

### **Group Exhibitions:**

*Erotic Art 96*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Washington, DC, 1996.

*5 + 5: Five Artists Select Five Artists to Watch*, Ann Loeb Bronfman Gallery,  
Edlavitch DC Jewish Community Center, Washington, DC, 2007.

*Summer Salon*, Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, DC, 2007.

*Select 2015*, WPA's (Washington Project for the Arts) 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Art  
Auction Exhibition and Gala, Artisphere, Arlington, VA, 2015.

### **Awards and Honors:**

Junior Painting Award, Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA, 1965.

Summer Scholarship, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI, 1966.

The Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, New York, NY, 2016.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am extremely grateful to Jack Rasmussen, Director and Curator of the American University Museum, for all the support he has given to this exhibition. It has been a pleasure to work with the staff of the Museum. My thanks, especially, to Beth Bright, Registrar and Kristin Howard, Publications and Marketing Specialist, for coordinating the many details of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue under pressing deadlines, and to Kevin Runyon, Preparator, and Hillary Rochon for designing the wall text. Thanks to Greg Staley, for his photography, to Vida Russell for the design of this publication and to Eglon Daley for his handsome framing.

I owe special thanks to George Hemphill and Mary Early of Hemphill Fine Art for facilitating several loans to this exhibition; to Martin Puryear, for introducing me to Otho Branson's work; to Christie Platt and Alan Wallach for their encouragement of this project from the start; to the lenders to the exhibition for their generosity and finally, of course, to Otho Branson, from whom I have learned a great deal about many things.

Phyllis Rosenzweig  
*Guest Curator*

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Cover: Otho Branson, *2007-08-08, 2007*. Acrylic on Arches paper, 20.25 x 16 in.  
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