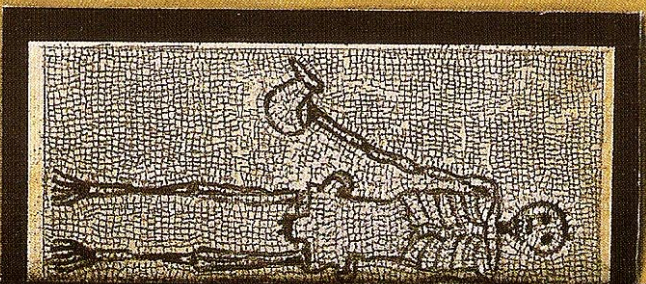


ADMIT ONE

Laurel Farrin







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Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center
Buffalo, New York

April 22 - May 27, 2006

In a way, the longer I consider the paintings of Laurel Farrin, the funnier they get. They are not filled with overtly comical gestures, but almost everything about them seems funny after awhile. Funny as in full of good humor. Funny in their recognition of pathos and absurdity. Funny in their balance of the elegant and the awkward. Funny in the manner of someone persistently throwing you a nod and a wink, deliberately trying to let you in on the joke.

Farrin's use of *trompe l'oeil*—while sometimes used to highlight objects painted on top of the ground—is largely about layering a false canvas upon the real one. It is one among many modes Farrin uses to undercut certain assumptions about painting. In this case, the false precept of the canvas as flat when it actually always remains a fabric surface, filled with an endless variety of textures and forms. Farrin's *trompe l'oeil* remains convincing at every distance, maintaining the painterly lie even on close inspection. And there is a palpable pleasure—another sort of funny—in the artist's deft use of deception to speak to a truth about the surface being worked.

Farrin's faux canvas effects are often the dominant field in her paintings and are rendered in muted or neutral tones. In this way, the paintings are made to appear purposefully banal. This ordinary aspect undercuts another long-held assumption about painting—its locus as a repository for visual beauty. Which is not to imply that Farrin's works contain no beauty—quite the contrary—but they are pushing the character of visual allure around the canvas and toying with it in specific

ways. It is almost as though Farrin is interested in testing the staying power of beauty, in the face of particular manipulations. Can it be convincingly ordinary in appearance and still contain some painterly rapture?

It is no surprise, in this context, that much (sometimes much more) happens at the periphery of Farrin's works. Sometimes it is a flat, graphic pattern that trails down along the side of a work. Sometimes the flat abstraction spills from the edge into the main body of the work. Sometimes the edge work is depicted as a reveal, suggesting an entirely different painting beneath the one we are observing. Farrin's use of the periphery is both a formal and metaphorical device, suggesting that meaning (or even just pleasure) is not always found in the most obvious place.

A sense of slippage often accompanies this peripheral play, as though forms are sliding on or off the work, revealing (or perhaps concealing) themselves. Even in those paintings on paper where the edge is a vertical line cutting directly through the center of the work, there remains a sense of this space as peripheral. Dead center, it nonetheless contains all the same elusiveness as those elements painted along the literal edge.

One might almost think of the works as coy; reluctant or uncertain about just how much of themselves to reveal. And yet, everything we need to know remains directly before us.

Even as the works allude to their own hidden dimensions, they do so in front of our eyes. They are as sly as they are coy. Both are integral parts of the lively deceptions that Farrin uses throughout her work. Is there texture or flatness? Is there banality or allure? Is "it" happening here

in the center or over there by the edge somewhere? There is an ever present duality at work, elements pushing and pulling each other in gentle opposition.

This duality is a direct device in some works, where shapes or images are sometimes doubled or paired. Subtle distinctions in the means of doubling can create distinctly different effects. Two ticket stubs tucked into a vertical line several inches apart look companionable while two FRAGILE labels laid atop each other look far more intimate. Two flat phosphorescent blobs hover a hair's breath apart from each other, full of desire but a little awkward and tentative. Two green blobs—more textured, three-dimensionalized, and visibly touching—seem to enjoy a more relaxed, certain, and verdant rapport.

Farrin is playing with the relationships of things to each other and these subtle distinctions draw out the pathos inherent in relationships—what works, what doesn't, what we desire, what we fear. Much like life, it's not always clear what's most important. Is it the trompe l'oeil ground or the snappy graphic laid against it? Often, it's the ambiguous middle ground—the space and tension between these elements—that lingers longest. There is a buoyant uncertainty about it all, a rhythm within Farrin's works that feels satisfyingly real precisely because it embraces its own awkward moments, its right to remain irresolute.

Irresolution resolved through ambiguity with a visual beauty that is both blatant and surreptitious—that's funny too.

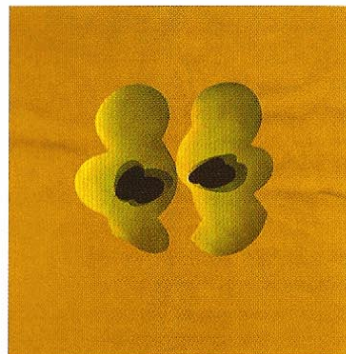
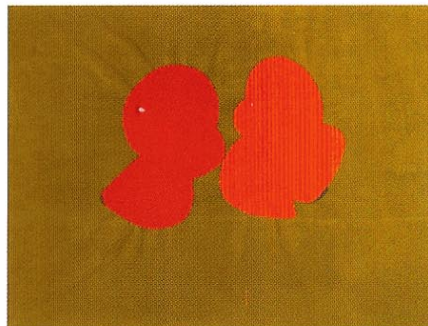
John Massier
Visual Arts Curator, Hallwalls

MISSED KISS

oil, acrylic on canvas
30" x 40"
2002

TU TU

oil, acrylic on canvas
20" x 20"
2002



BI-POLAR SPIN

oil, acrylic on canvas

54" x 54"

2002

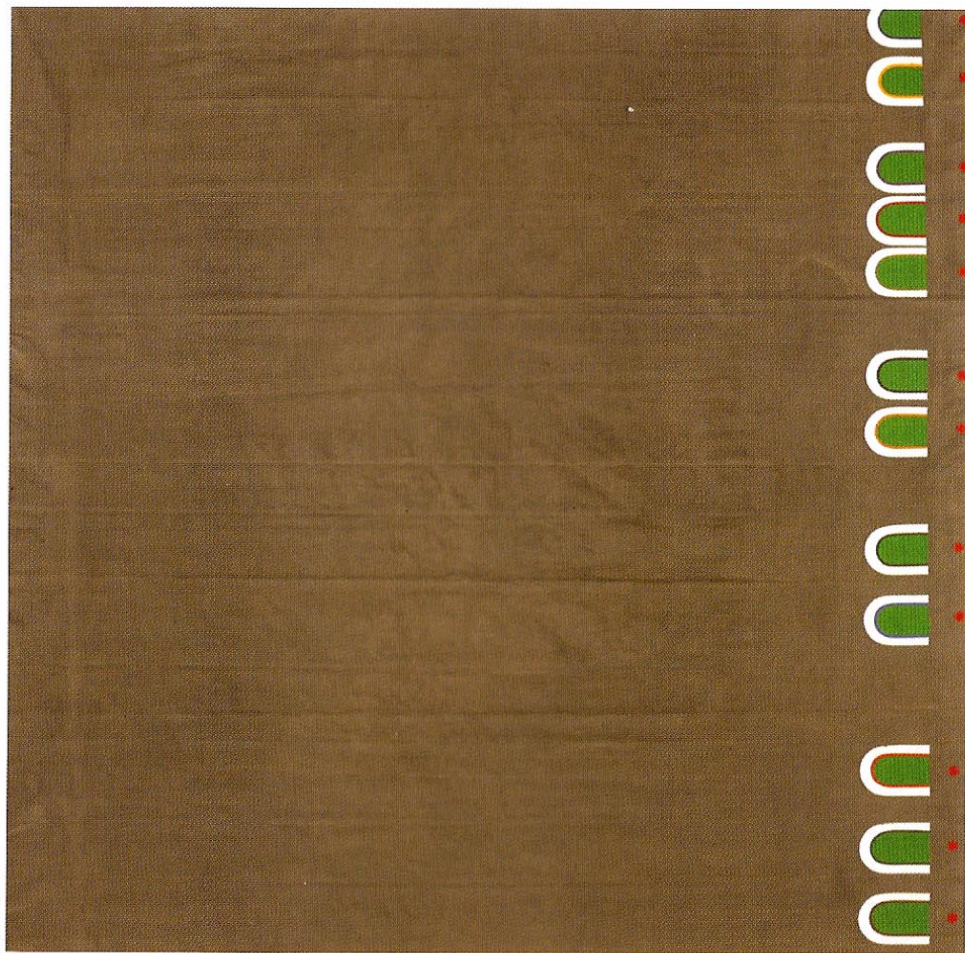


O.T.B.

oil, acrylic on canvas

52" x 53"

2003



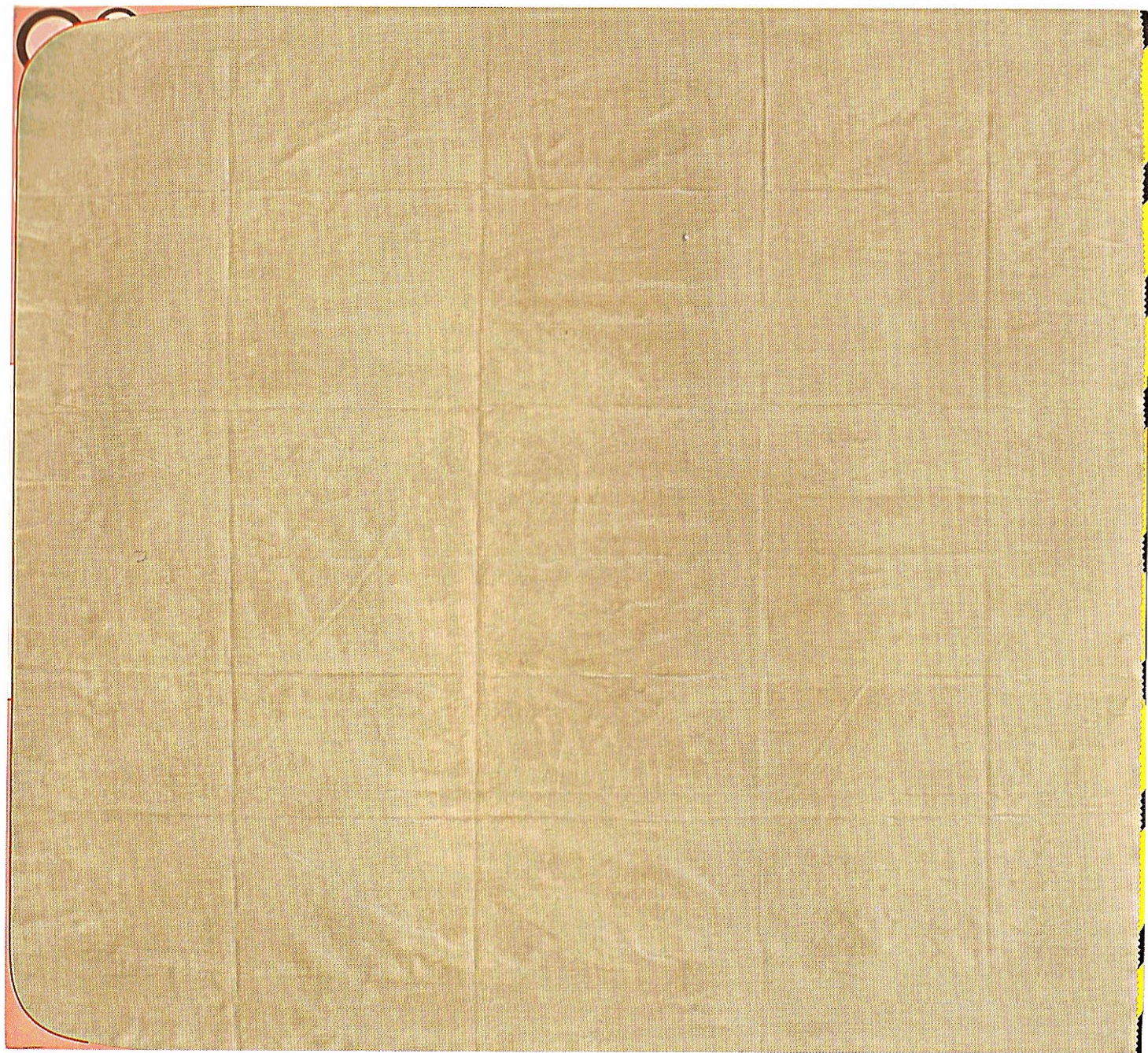
HER CAUTIONARY TALE

oil, acrylic on canvas

52" x 52"

2003





DOUBLE FRAGILE

oil, acrylic on paper

15" x 22"

2004

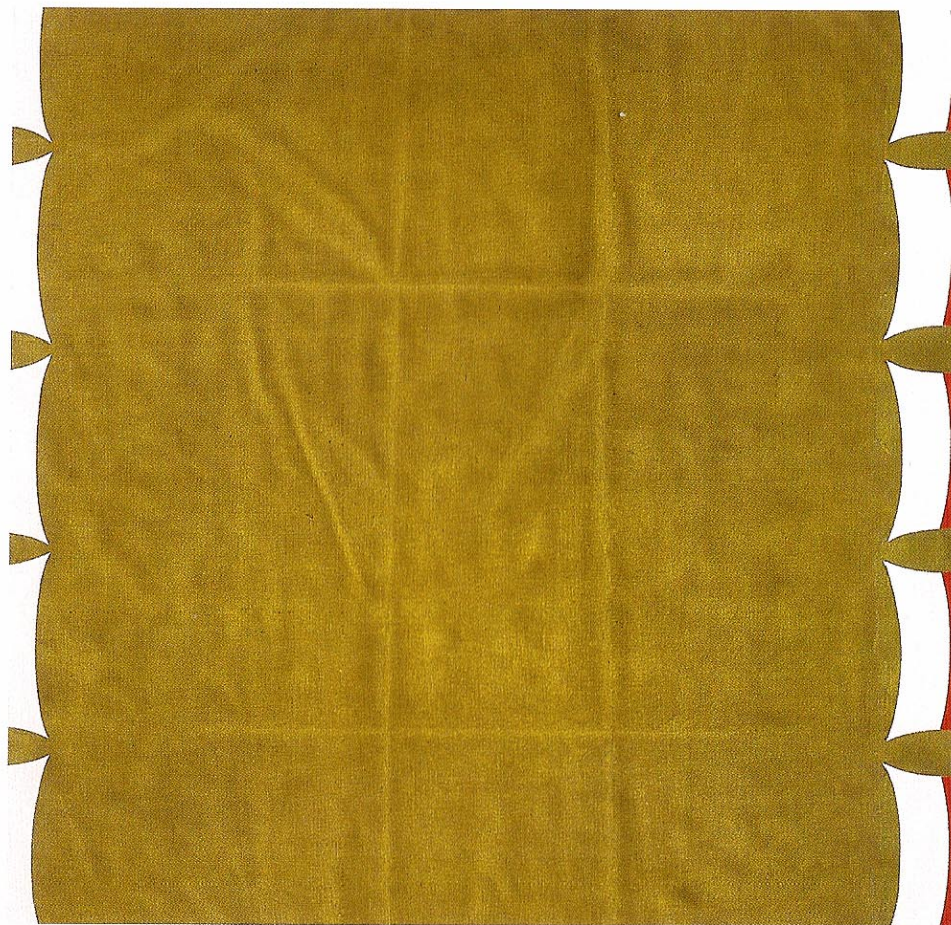


PRAIRIE SCHOONER

oil, acrylic on canvas

22" x 22"

2004



Let's start with the obvious metaphor. Let's say that a painting is a mind, that the canvas is a blank slate on which scenes or objects or abstract shapes and colors come into being. These images are the thoughts of the painting, and in Laurel Farrin's work we can see a variety of these images.

At a point in the history of painting when all the objects that could ever be painted seem to have been painted, what she paints are flashes of an ephemeral world seen as if from the corner of the eye.

There's a skeleton from Pompeii, part of a tiled floor perhaps, sometimes shown intact, and sometimes broken up into pieces. There's a girl in a pink dress from an old postcard, and there are ticket stubs and name tags and the grids of color taken from Mondrian.

All these things are part of the world of objects she creates. They're all part of a world of thought, about culture and color, about language and identity and about the act of painting itself.

This alone would be enough to make her paintings interesting, but Farrin, in choosing one image over another and one color over another, is implicitly questioning that act of painting. We can sense her ambivalence, her awareness that what she's done to the painting — the thought of the artist — is merely an addendum to the original mind of the painting.

Although she does, in fact, show us objects, she also shows us that mind. In almost all her work, in the background behind the objects, is the unpainted canvas before the objects of thought existed.

She takes the raw material of the cloth canvas, with its folds and creases and textures, and then paints those folds and creases with the same care that's evident in rest of the painting. By painting the blank canvas to look like a blank canvas, she's creates an illusion, an illusion of purity before thoughts appear as images, before the hand of a human being got involved.

As if the cave painters of Lascaux had not only painted the objects of their desire, but had painted desire itself, Farrin shows us both the objects of the mind, as well as the mind before those objects existed.

By acknowledging that the objects are thoughts, and that there's a place without thought, without the imposition of the mind's meaning, her paintings point to the place where meaning comes from, the unsullied emptiness before the paint is applied.

The images that populate her paintings — the skeletons and girls in red dresses — are born out of emptiness, and out of that emptiness the world we know has meaning.

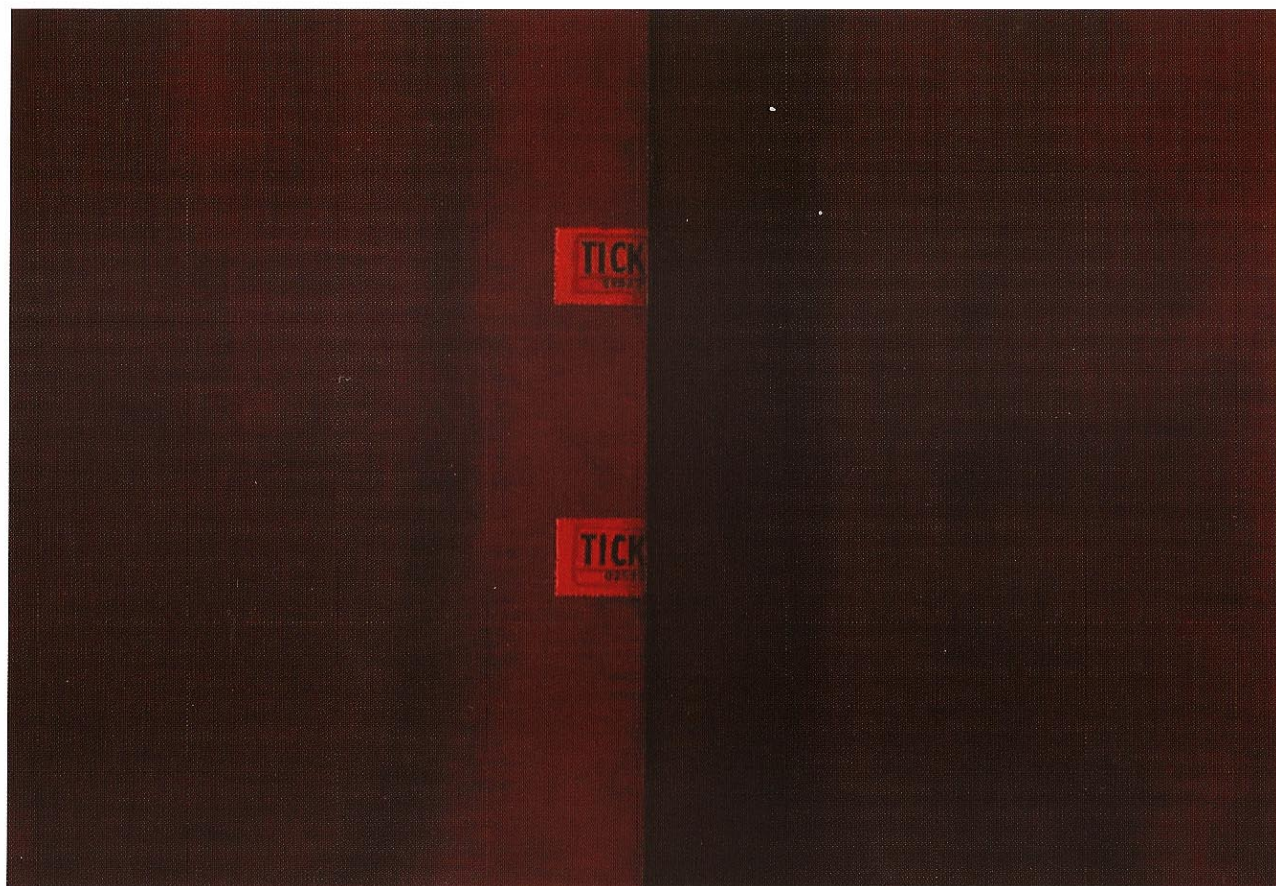
John Haskell is the author of *I Am Not Jackson Pollock*, a collection of short stories, and *American Purgatorio*, a novel.

TICK TICK

oil, acrylic on paper

15" x 22"

2004

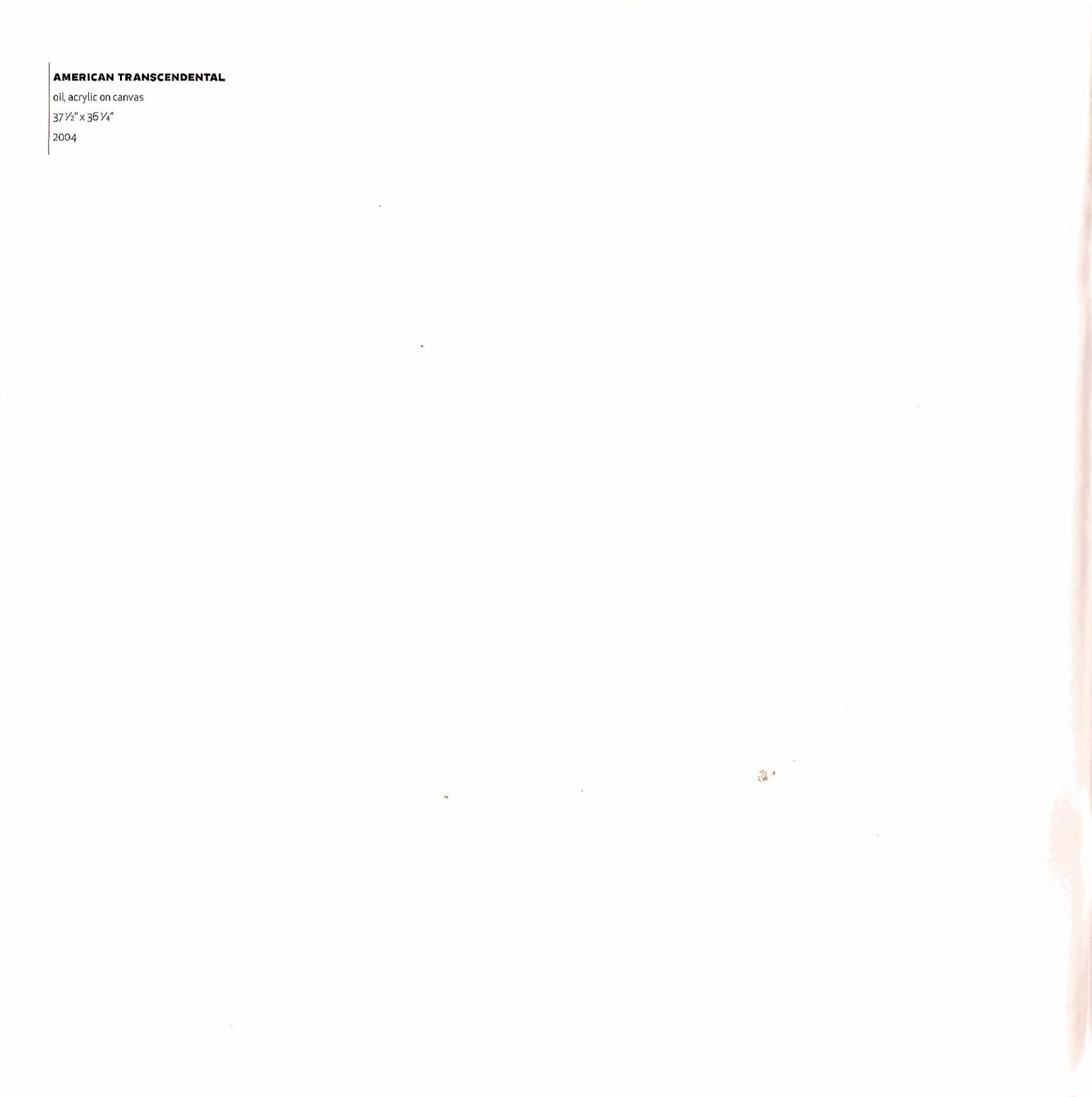


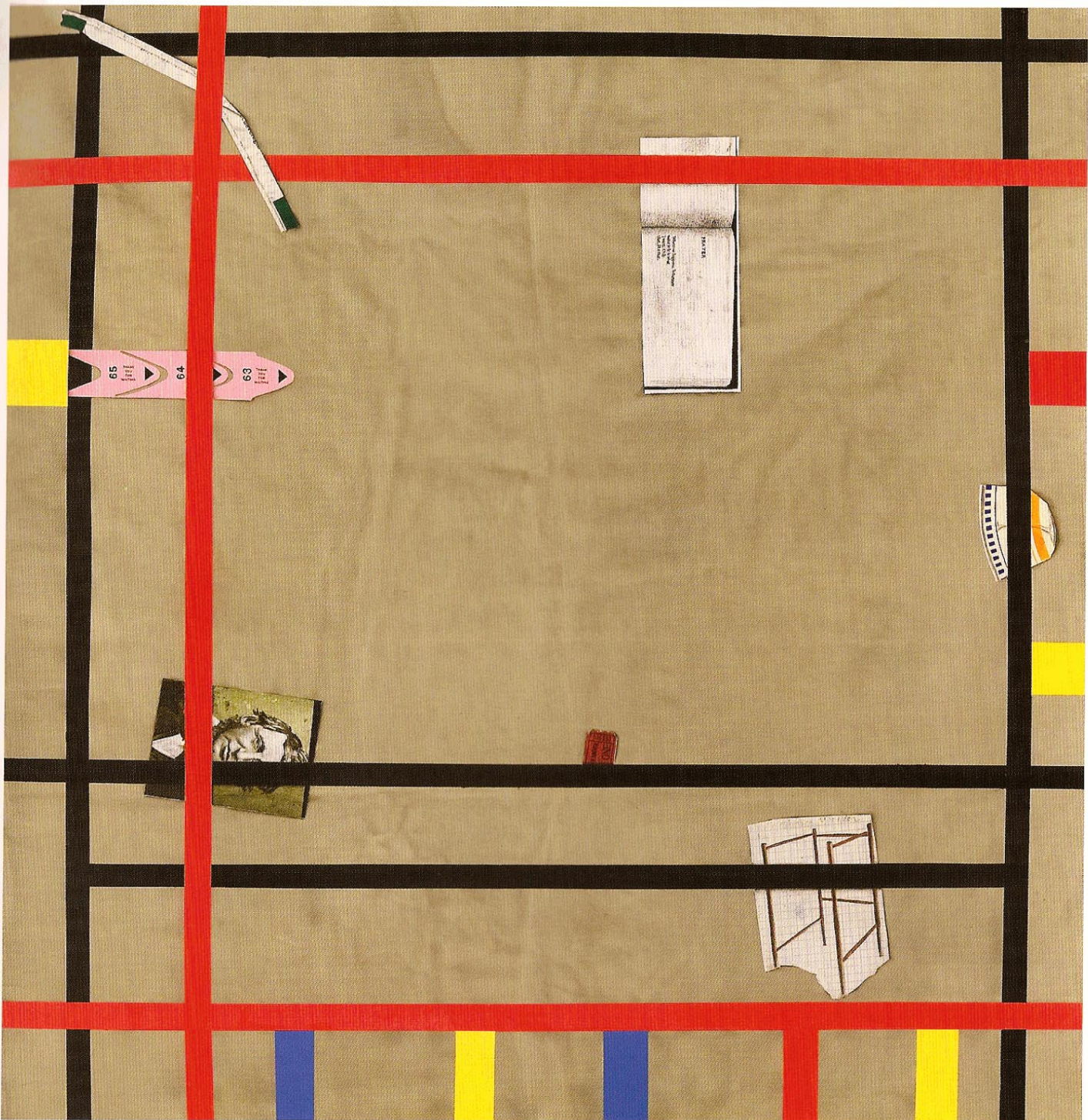
AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTAL

oil, acrylic on canvas

37 1/2" x 36 1/4"

2004





POUR VOUS

oil, acrylic on canvas

60" x 60"

2006



MOSAIC

oil, acrylic on canvas

60" x 60"

2006

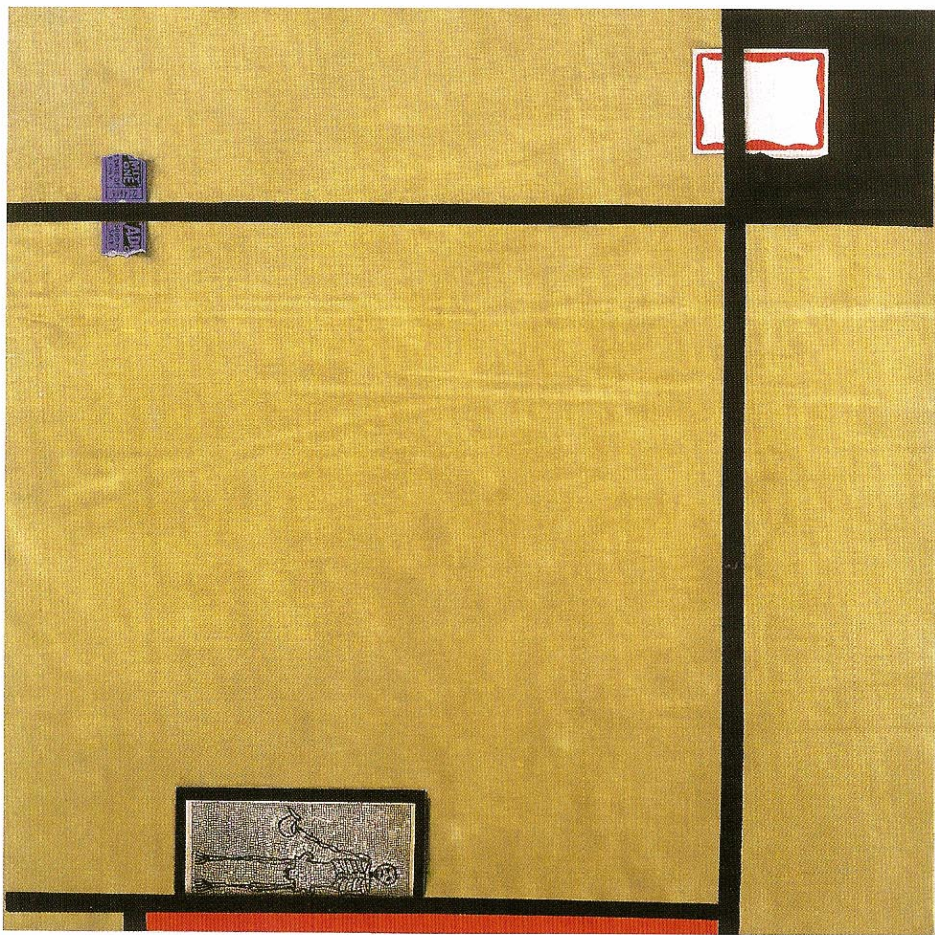


ADMIT ONE

oil, acrylic on canvas

22" x 22"

2005



Laurel Farrin grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and received an M.F.A. from the University of Maryland in 1993. Farrin has exhibited at the Roswell Museum and Art Center; the Corcoran Gallery of Art; Anton Gallery; and The Washington Project for the Arts, D.C. the Des Moines Art Center; the Sioux City Art Center; the Florida Center for Contemporary Art; Spaces, Cleveland, Ohio; The Gallery at Washington Square East, NYU, and The Albany Airport Gallery. She has had residency fellowships at the Roswell Museum and Art Center; Yaddo; The Millay Colony for the Arts, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and received an individual artist grant from the Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Farrin is an Associate Professor at the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa, and splits her time between Iowa City and New York City.



HALLWALLS
CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

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The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



Understanding what's important.

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