

RON JANOWICH

GERMANS VANECK

# RON JANOWICH

PAINTINGS 1986

2 OCTOBER—1 NOVEMBER 1986

ESSAY BY STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

GERMANS VAN ECK

420 WEST BROADWAY NEW YORK NY 10012  
212-219-0717

# MODERN PAINTINGS

Ron Janowich is sitting in his studio. The room is filled with canvases piled six deep, leaning with their fronts turned to the wall. A sketch after Rembrandt of a man with a hat is pinned up. The painter's table is heaped with tubes of pigment, palette knives, brushes. Other paintings in various states of incompleteness are hung around, waiting to be addressed—and they are addressed with the deliberation that Colette advised to an author friend who must write, “slowly, tractably, patiently. . . .”

The painter is talking about space—not more room to paint in, but space in the paintings themselves. He is saying that he is after a *new* space, a *new* way to look through the grid of abstract marks deployed on the canvas. “It is interesting,” he says, distinguishing his syllables, “to think about making space now that we’ve broken [Clement] Greenberg’s idea that pictures have to be really flat. Some abstract painters are making illusionistic space, *drawing* it, suggesting perspective and deep recessional areas as if the picture plane were a window again—only the forms are vaguer than in figurative paintings.

“But I want to make it new through the material of the paint itself, using transparency, contrasting values and hues and layers of marks to get a perceptual depth that is physical not illusionistic.”

*The new, the abstract, the grid.* . . . these words evoke Modernism’s particular means to break old forms, to rupture styles of the past and invent expressions of the time. They are striking words today amid the exegesis of art that claims that originality is a spent issue. Or it never existed. *All art is replication, copying.* But in the painter’s studio, the Post-Modern discourse of the impossibility of authenticity and invention is quieted. The grid is not seen as the prison of repetition, but as the structure on which the original takes form—a genetic structure out of which the organism of painting mutates, responding to its (historical) environment.

The painter’s works are spun from their lineage: the materiality of Process Art; the small gestural marks of Cézanne anticipating a more abstract painting; the shaped canvases describing the painting-as-object; the black oil medium that the painter loves so much for the brilliant highlights, the transparent drawing and lucent darknesses of Rembrandt; the grid.

Now the painter is making a new space; engaged by aesthetic curiosity, will and pleasure “to enlarge the experience of viewing the object.” There is a small mark in the center of the diamond canvas, *Night Fear*. It is a composite color of opaque gray glazed with olive green and crimson. Diminutive though it seems, it is the painting’s anchor. The

mark’s flat sheen announces the closure of the object’s surface. Standing before it, the eye moves into the picture, fixing marks on different levels of the focal plane. Other marks vary in opacity and translucence, strategically employed to prime the sense of elevation and depth.

Mondrian’s diamond paintings are vaguely recollected here. Here too the array of horizontal and vertical bars are carefully asymmetrical, weighted in this case to the left. Yet the painter eschews Mondrian’s “pure relations.” The work is not about a straight and tilted square nor is its space defined by two rigidly interlocking planes nor is it reduced to a palette of primary colors, black and white. Its geometry, like its planar identity and hues, is various—based perhaps on collage: piled, sorted, positioned, polymorphous, rigorous and fluid.

*Night Fear*’s intense rust-colored ground is veiled in transparencies of a near black. The brush is loaded, making expressive, broad strokes down the surface, marking the trajectory of the image. The diamond is figured with an implied rectangle crossing its upper half. And the rectilinear form is again interrupted, overlaid with another diamond whose black sits back in the painting and then is inflected by grayish streaks that pull the eye’s focus up to the skin of the painted object.

The construction of this space simply grows with the size of the work. Because the painter depends on the cognizance of the viewer to sense that space in these paintings is made by the actual assemblage of marks in varying values and hues without much support from drawn illusion, scale becomes a means to increase the spectacle of light and depth. It is a way of engaging the spectator through sheer physical proportions that enclose the viewer’s gaze within the measure of the canvas. In *Wheat Sea*, a six-sided form recedes, dark brown against the reddish amber immensity of the field. The field is above and below the viewer, exceeding the eye’s range right and left.

Here we drift in the pleasure of the material, visual thing. We forget its cause. The adroitness of the painter’s touch, the choices, the intellect and training—even our own connoisseurship, our knowledge of art, our analysis means nothing. Only the reflection of the glaze, the suspension of amber pigment in luminous, dense, granular, almost sculptural relief stretching to the edge of our vision so that we are wrapped by this sensualism . . . only this matters. This sensualism reduces ideas to an expression of form.

In both paintings, the edges of the works are outlined. These painted rules are the sign of the object. They frame the compression of physical, painted space; the horizontal

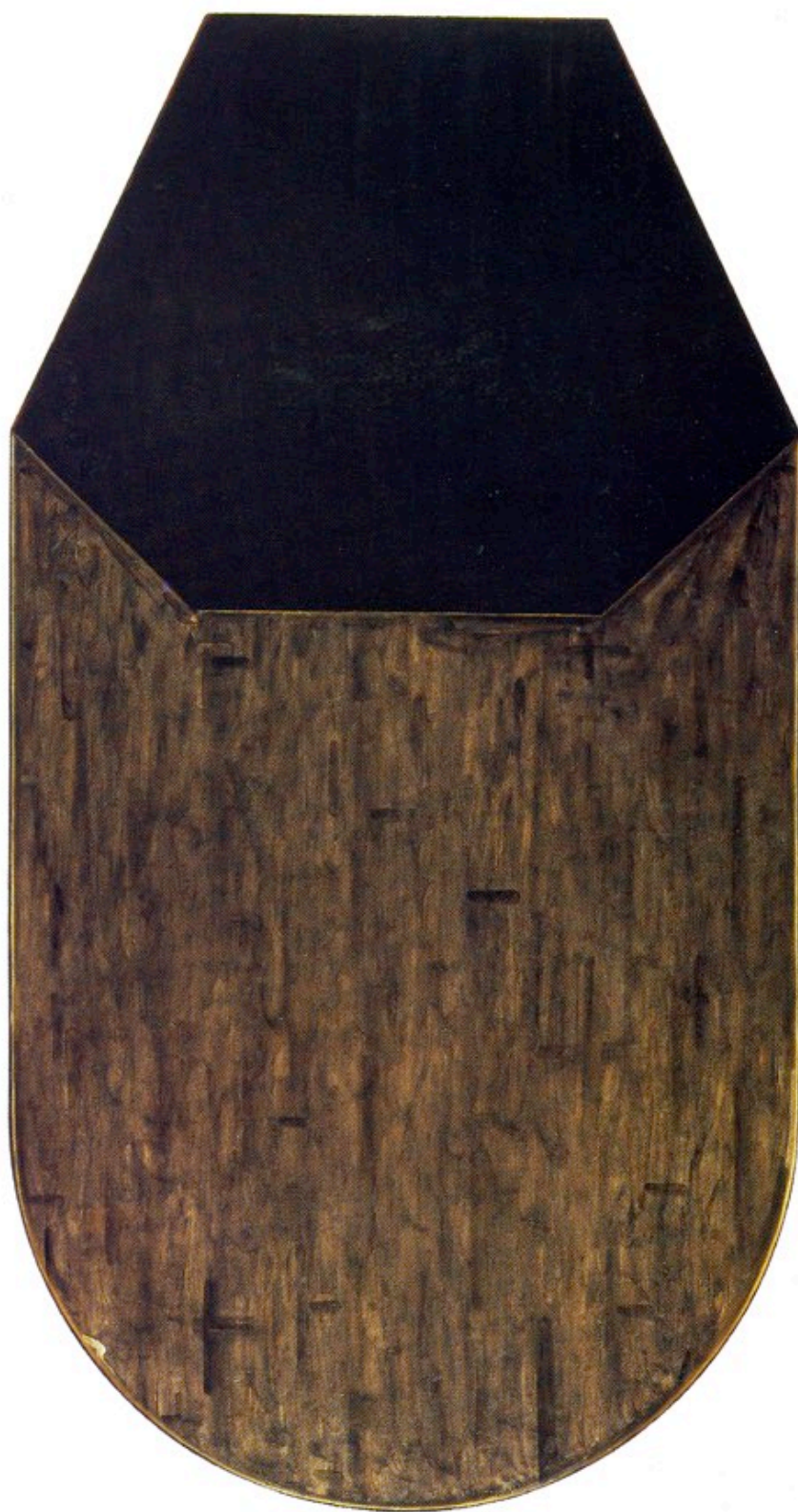
and vertical marks concentrating into mass; the series of planes amassing a composite, sensuous density. They emphasize the shaped *thing*, the aesthetic vessel which does not reproduce the world but generates its own inflections and occurrences—a painting machine looping its own visual energy. These borders denote both the limit of the object and its coextension, its physical presence and its impetus to draw the viewer in.

Consequently, illusionism does appear in the painter's work, though it is not a primary device. In the horizontal painting *Aurora*, the central form is a shield-like element drawn with sides curving outward so that it vacillates between impressions of convexity and flatness. The painting's extending panels seem to stretch the form, giving the effect of a more shallow depth, while smoke-colored shadows painted "beneath" the shield contrive its forward movement. The halo of *Requiem* has the same effect on its yellow disk. And the eccentric black hexagon atop *Nemesis* apparently allows the viewer a downward glance into the vessel, though its lower part suggests no volume at all. Such signs of flatness and depth are endlessly joined and repeated in the cycle of the viewer's gaze.

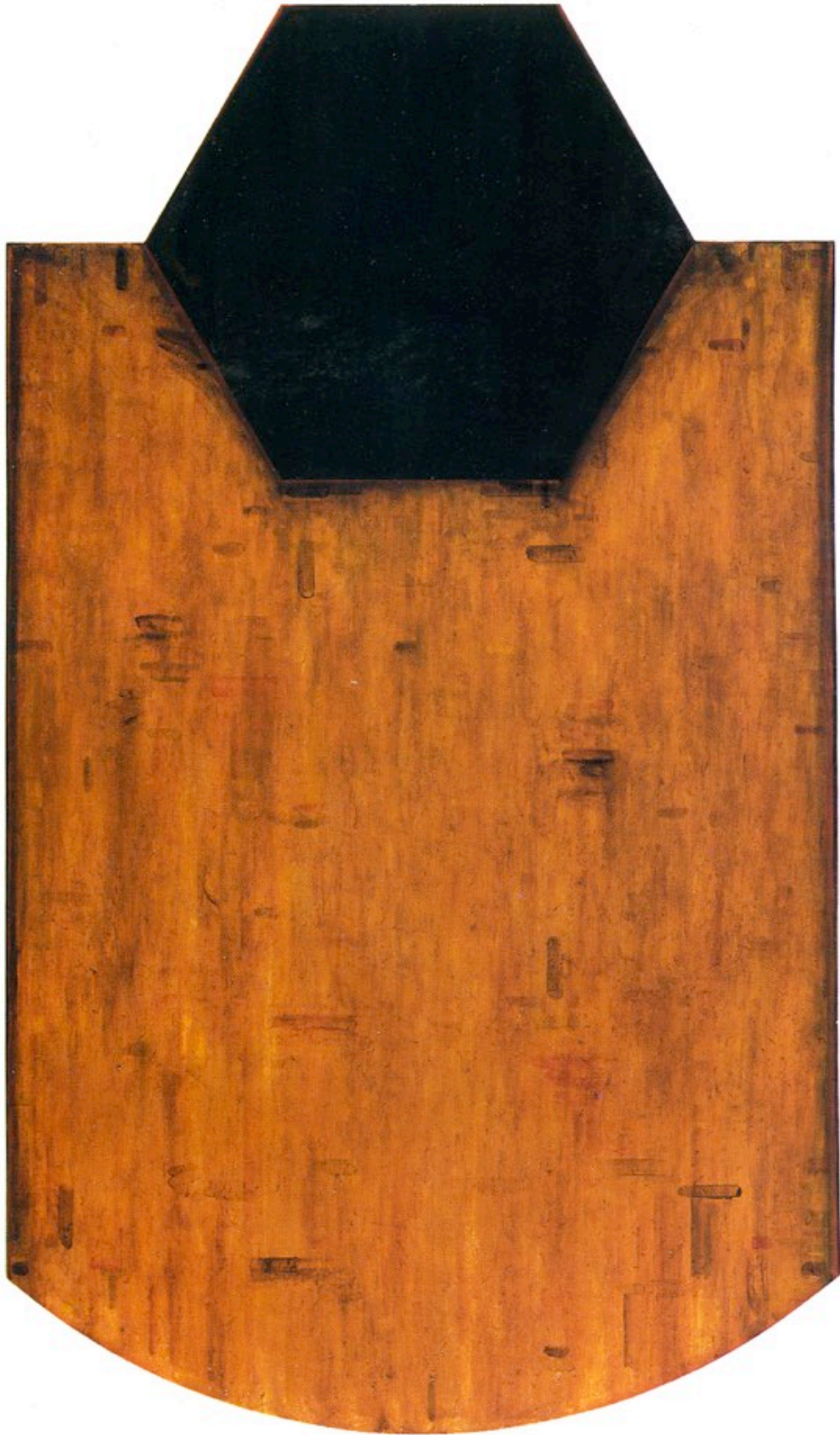
Perception itself is the subject of these representations: the refraction of the gaze off the painted surface, the interaction of colors, the play of light and dark and their properties of space. Made for the spectator's slow discovery of their parts, these Utopian objects lie within the Modernist sensibility not of political shock and the will to renovate society, but of a fundamental desire for invention.

Despite the talk of lost authorship, of endless replication, of the reduction of all art to commodities, and its partial truth, the painter is sitting in his studio. He has before him the object of his making. He sees a way to make a new space, and he puts one brushstroke next to another, filling the planes slowly and tractably. Patiently, he remarks that a little more work must be done just there. There is a little more to do to complete the pleasure of the painting.

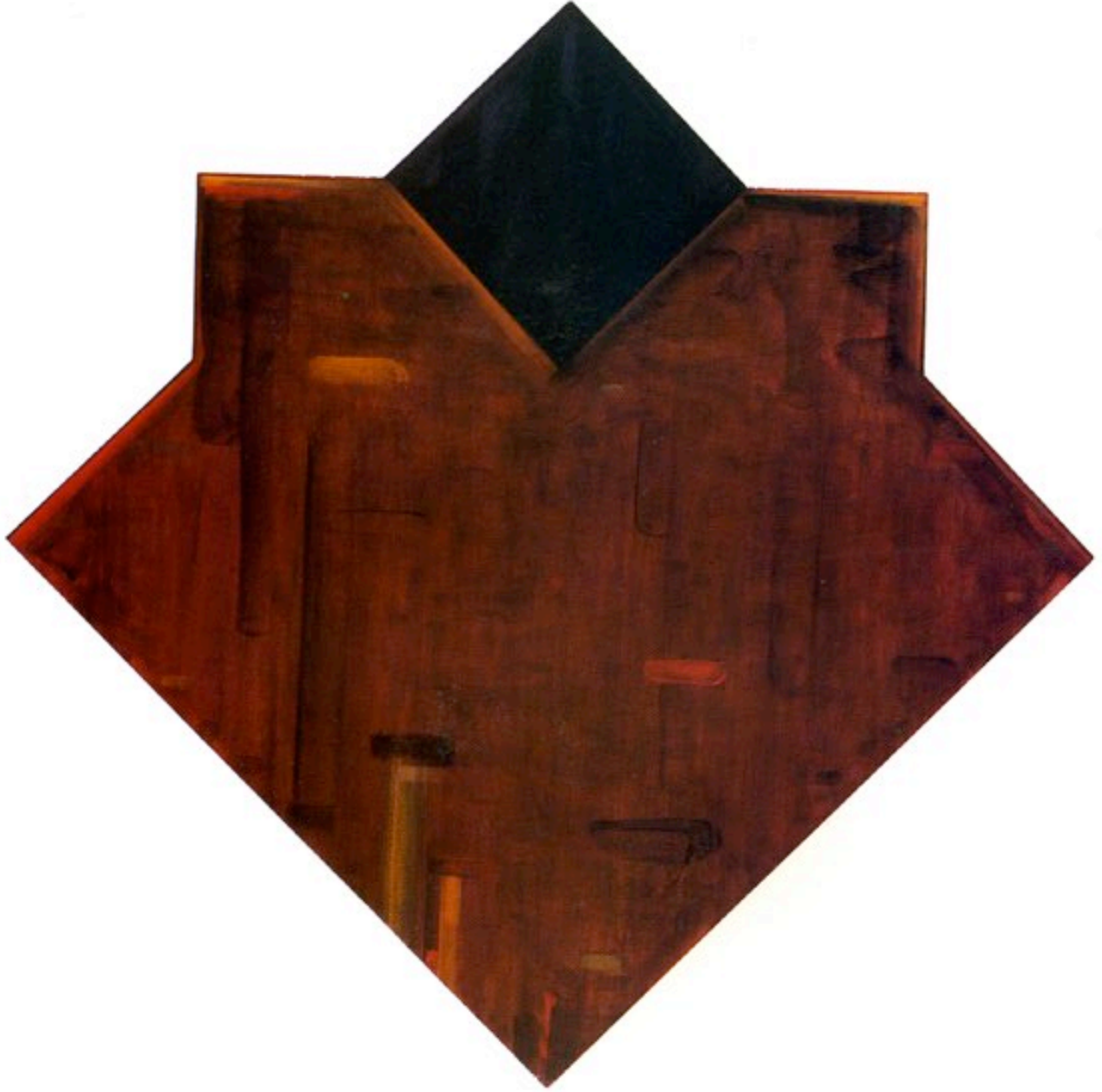
**Steven Henry Madoff**



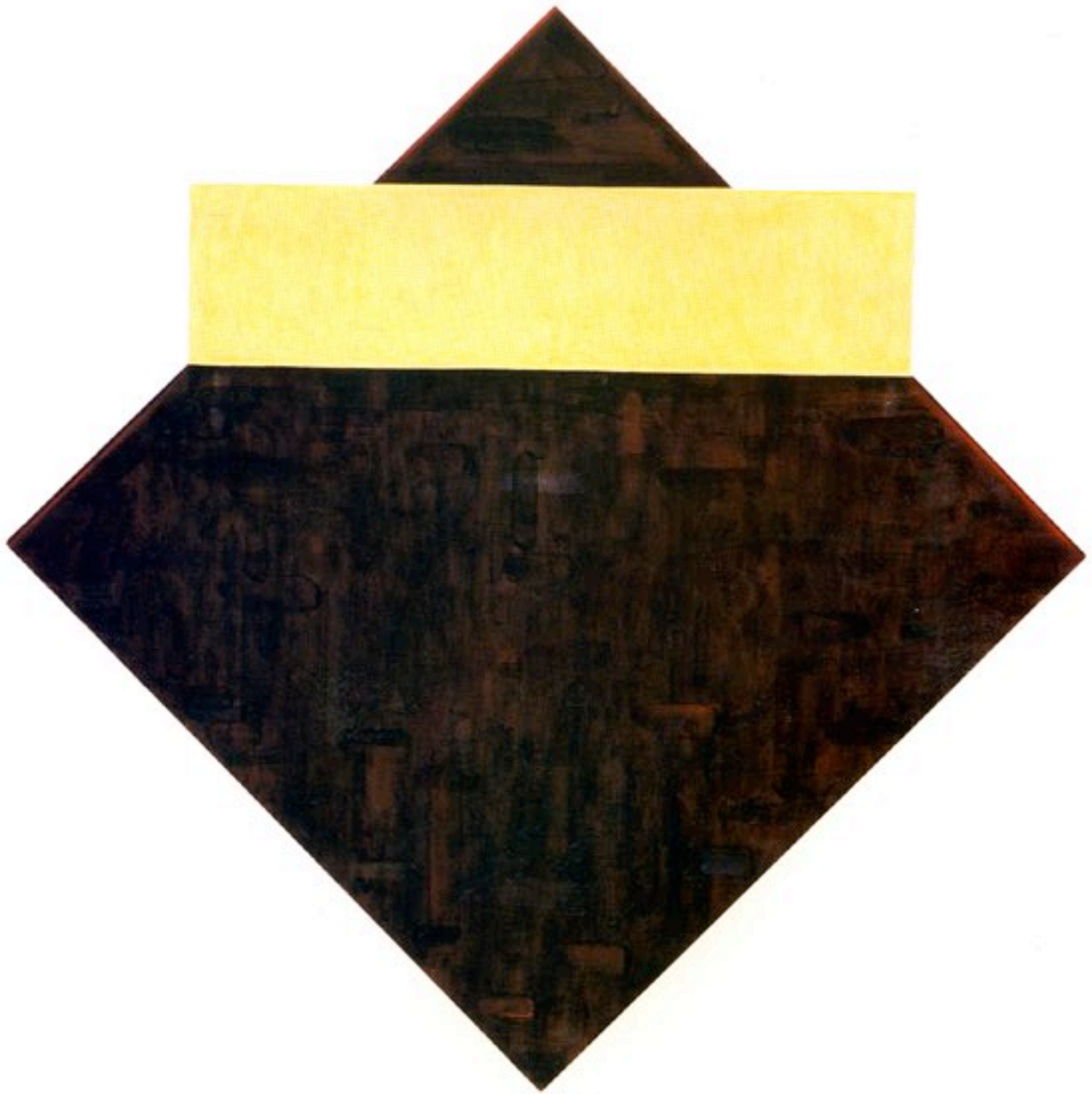
Nemesis, 1986, black oil on linen, 107½ × 57 inches



Wheat Sea, 1986, black oil on linen, 103 × 59¼ inches

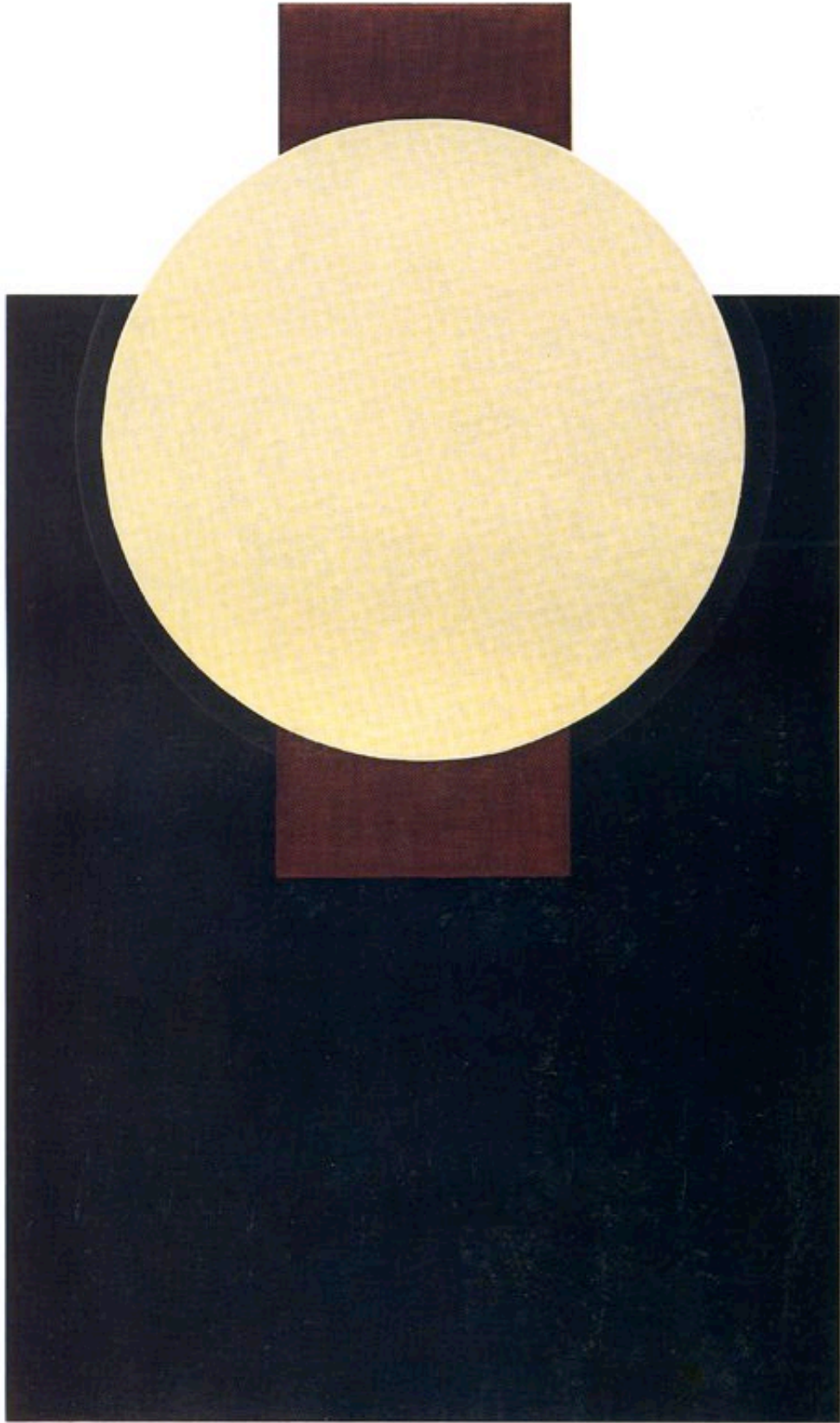


Night Fear, 1986, black oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches



India, 1986, black oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches





Requiem, 1986, black oil on linen, 102 × 60 inches