

MEL PREST
THE GOLDEN HOUR

SCHNEIDER MUSEUM OF ART

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SOUTHERN OREGON UNIVERSITY, ASHLAND

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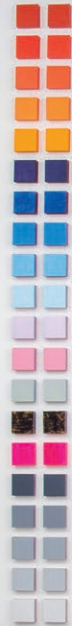
Southern Oregon University is located within the ancestral homelands of the Shasta, Takelma, and Latgawa peoples who lived here since time immemorial. These Tribes were displaced during rapid Euro-American colonization, the Gold Rush, and armed conflict between 1851 and 1856. In the 1850s, discovery of gold and settlement brought thousands of Euro-Americans to their lands, leading to warfare, epidemics, starvation, and villages being burned. In 1853 the first of several treaties were signed, confederating these Tribes and others together—who would then be referred to as the Rogue River Tribe. These treaties ceded most of their homelands to the United States, and in return they were guaranteed a permanent homeland reserved for them. At the end of the Rogue River Wars in 1856, these Tribes and many other Tribes from western Oregon were removed to the Siletz Reservation and the Grand Ronde Reservation. Today, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon (<https://www.grandronde.org>) and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians (<http://www.ctsi.nsn.us/>) are living descendants of the Takelma, Shasta, and Latgawa peoples of this area. We encourage YOU to learn about the land you reside on, and to join us in advocating for the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous people.

Foreword

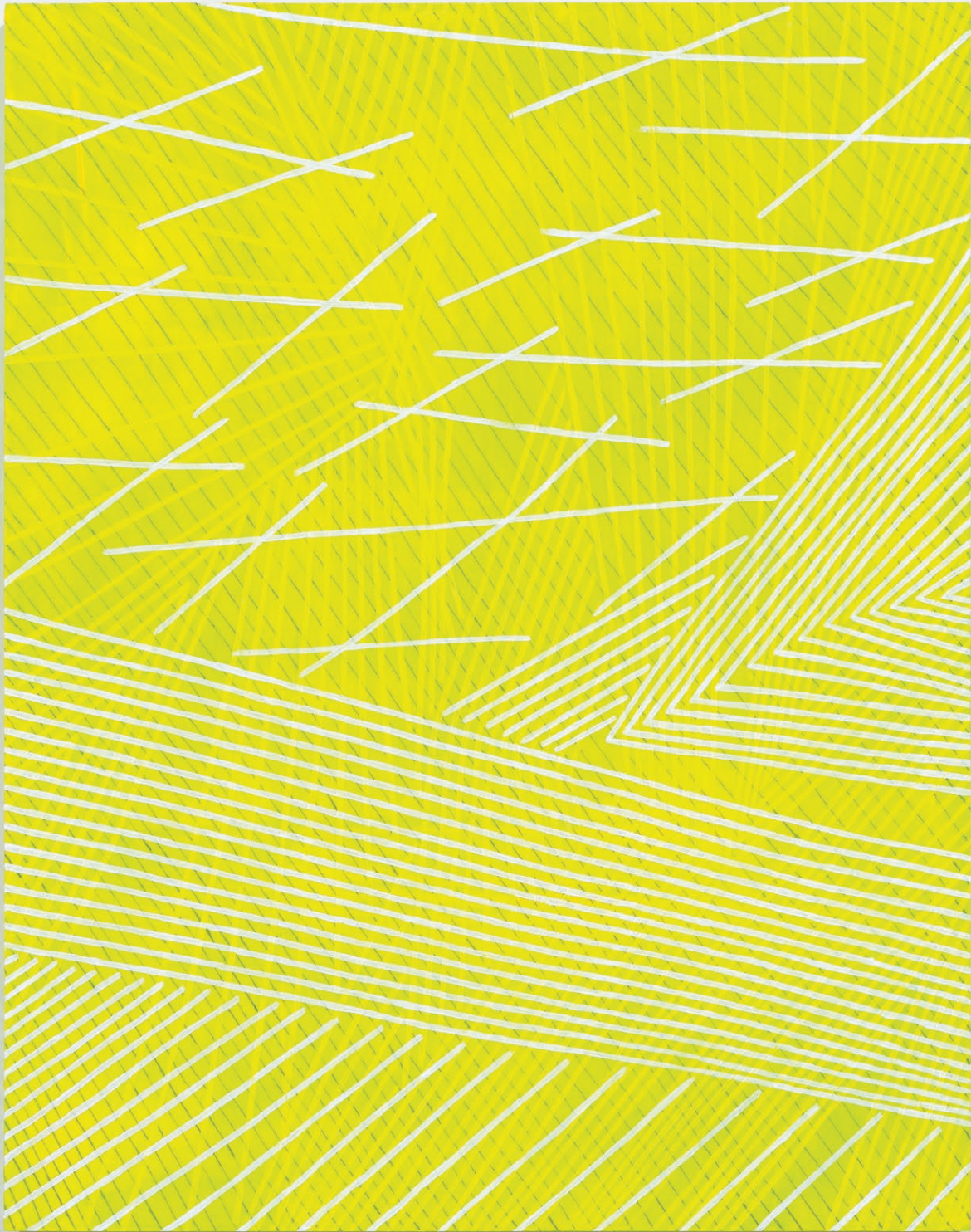
by Scott Malbaurn
Executive Director
Schneider Museum of Art

We are pleased to present “Mel Prest: The Golden Hour,” a solo exhibition in our Main gallery by San Francisco, California-based artist, Mel Prest. This exhibition is on view concurrently with Prest’s curated group exhibition “Sensate Objects,” in our Heiter and Treehaven galleries. Beyond making personal artwork, artists are known for wearing many creative “arts-worker” hats. This can span from working in and running arts organizations, curating exhibitions, and publishing art writing. Mel Prest is such an artist. With international exhibitions of both her personal abstract paintings and curated projects, we are delighted to share Prest’s many talents. The exhibition is accompanied with an essay by John Yau, a New York-based writer of poetry, fiction and criticism. Yau is a Professor of Critical Studies at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University).

I would like to thank Mel Prest for sharing her wonderful works with our audiences, John Yau for his thoughtful words, our Museum Preparator and Gallery Manager, Maureen Williams, Museum Office Manager, Emily McPeck, our student staff and Museum Council; Cindy Barnard, Roberta Bhasin, Sandy Friend, Mary Gardiner, Vivian Stubblefield, Oregon Center for the Arts Director, Dr. David Humphrey, catalog design by David Ruppe and printing by CDS, Medford, Oregon.







Mel Prest, *More Thought Work*, 2014, Fluorescent and phosphorescent acrylic on wood panel

Artist Statement

by Mel Prest

The Golden Hour refers to the hour before sunset and twilight, at the end of a day. The sun's rays stretch longer, illuminating everything with a final burst of enchanting light before sinking behind the horizon. For me, the shift from day to night feels like transition from exuberance to stillness; both vital states of being.

These paintings are inspired by nature, which is always changing. I observe the magic of fleeting color phenomena like mirages, rainbows, the movement of the sky and the ocean. Color is something I feel rather than observe and record precisely from nature. Color is important to me as it transmits sensations; I want my colors to taste like a flavor, feel like a touch or waft like a scent. My colors are often inspired by wildflowers and watching the sky.

I highlight these ephemeral moments in my paintings by using fluorescent, metallic, or phosphorescent paint and mica that flickers, glows or is shadowed in different light conditions.

I paint many unruléd and overlapping lines in three colors. This creates the appearance of a handwoven mesh or an undulating soft geometry of shifting space. Upon viewing, the visual effects are different, person to person. The feeling of slipping time and optical confusion remind the viewer that you are seeing something unknown reveal itself, become a painting in front of you.



About the Artist

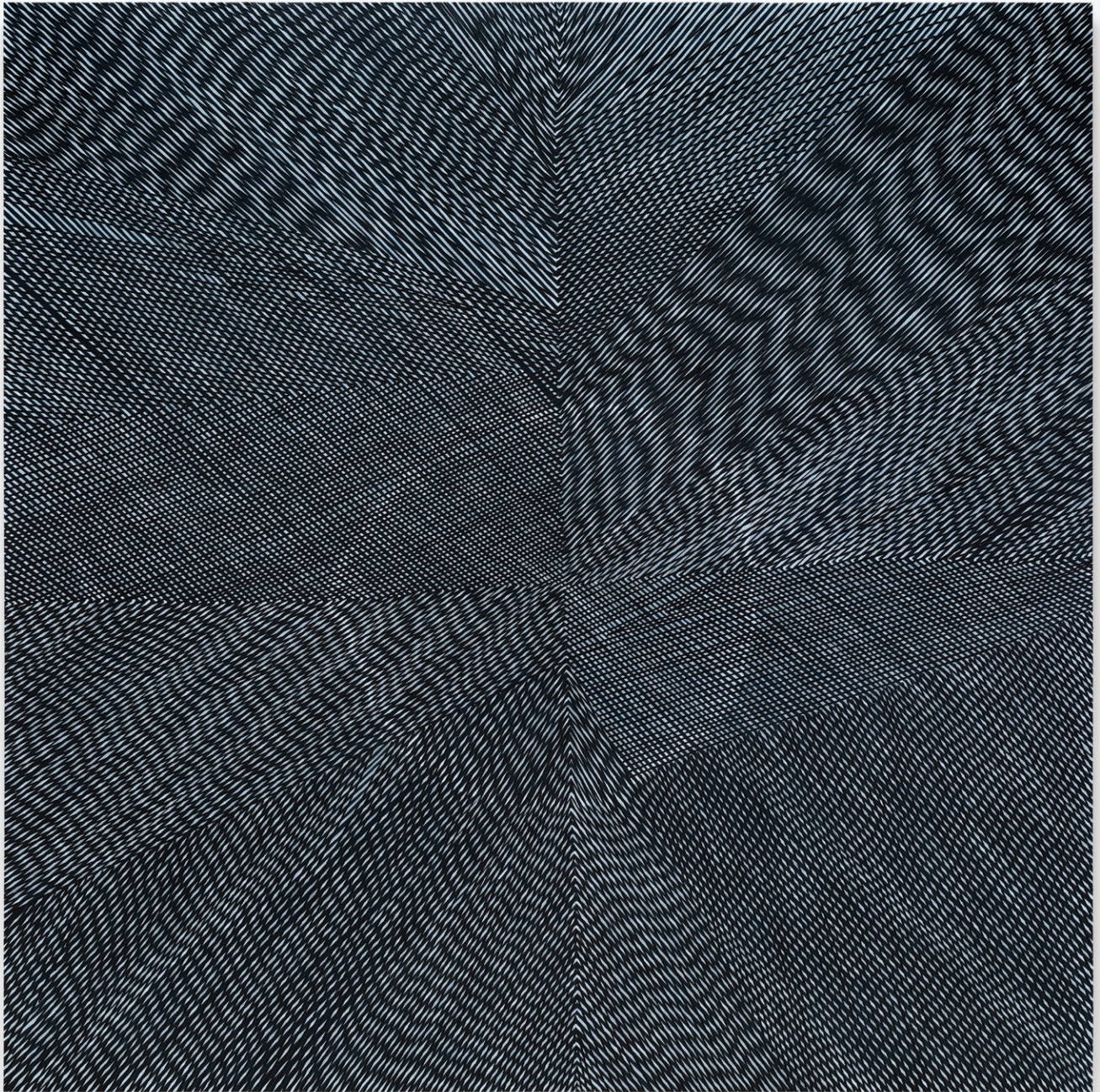
Mel Prest is an American abstract artist whose work is focused on color and perceptual visual relationships. Prest's work has been exhibited internationally including: The Drawing Center, New York; The Weatherspoon Museum of Art, Durham, NC; IS Projects, Leiden, The Netherlands; McKenzie Fine Art, New York; Saturation Point, London, UK; Nakaochiai Gallery, Tokyo. Prest has been awarded residencies at: Ragdale, The Sam and Adele Golden Artist Foundation, Willapa Bay, The Wassaic Project, The MH deYoung Museum, Vermont Studio Center. Her work is held in collections at Apple; The Berkeley Art Museum, The Crocker Museum of Art; Kaiser Permanente; Marin General Hospital, The Mills College Art Museum, among others. She is represented by Galleri Urbane, Dallas, TX and K.Imperial Fine Art, San Francisco, CA.

Prest received her BFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design and MFA from Mills College in Oakland. Prest has taught at Mills College, San



Francisco State University, San Francisco Art Institute and adult education courses at: City College of San Francisco, San Francisco Art Institute, California College of the Arts and Root Division. A longtime adjunct arts instructor, she is now a program developer for City College of San Francisco Extension. Mel is an advisory board member of Root Division, a non-profit arts organization in San Francisco and served as a board member from 2012–2014. Prest served on the advisory board of The Art Monastery Project, Calvi della Umbria and Labro, Italy from 2007-2010 and on the artist advisory board of Trestle Gallery in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York from 2012–2021.

As an independent curator, Prest has organized shows in Los Angeles, San Francisco and the Bay Area, New York, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich and Zagreb. She is also a founding member of Transmitter, a collaborative curatorial gallery initiative in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Mel Prest lives and works in San Francisco, CA.



Mel Prest, *Summer Penumbra*, 2021, Acrylic and mica on wood panel

Essay

by John Yau

Mel Prest is a perceptual abstract painter who works in, as well as extends the line of thinking about the relationship between observation and color that originated with Georges Seurat, the first artist to rigorously study theories of color and optics, and how the eye sees. Color theory and optics have continued to play an important role in painting, as evidenced by the art of Josef Albers, Bridget Riley, and Richard Anuskiewicz (Anuos-kay-vitch). More recently, artists such as Anoka Faruqee, who teaches at Yale University, and Sanford Wurmfeld, Robert Swain, and Gabriele Evertz, who are key members of the Hunter Color School, have continued to engage with color theory and, more importantly, developed a personal visual language in the medium of paint that enables them to pursue their particular interests.

What this diverse group share is a meticulous approach to the phenomenology of color, and Prest is no exception. What distinguishes them from each other is the particular conceptualization they have developed over time. In Prest's case, this actualization is limited to the use of three colors, which are applied with a brush and do not rely on masking tape to get a crisp hard edge. Also, in contrast to many other artists, who are investigating color relationships, Prest is focused on tonal nuance rather than sharp contrast and juxtaposition. Finally, and I think this is what separates her work most of all, she is interested in what she calls "slipping time and optical confusion." In the paintings of Seurat and Anuskiewicz, the optical shimmer and vibrations emanate from still forms and fixed geometric structures. This does not happen when we look at Prest's paintings. In her agitated, flickering world, everything seems to be moving, shifting, and reconfiguring.

These characteristics are partly the result of Prest's openness to the digital world we live in, and during the past two years when these paintings were made, the isolation, uncertainty, and feelings of disruption and dislocation caused by COVID-19 and

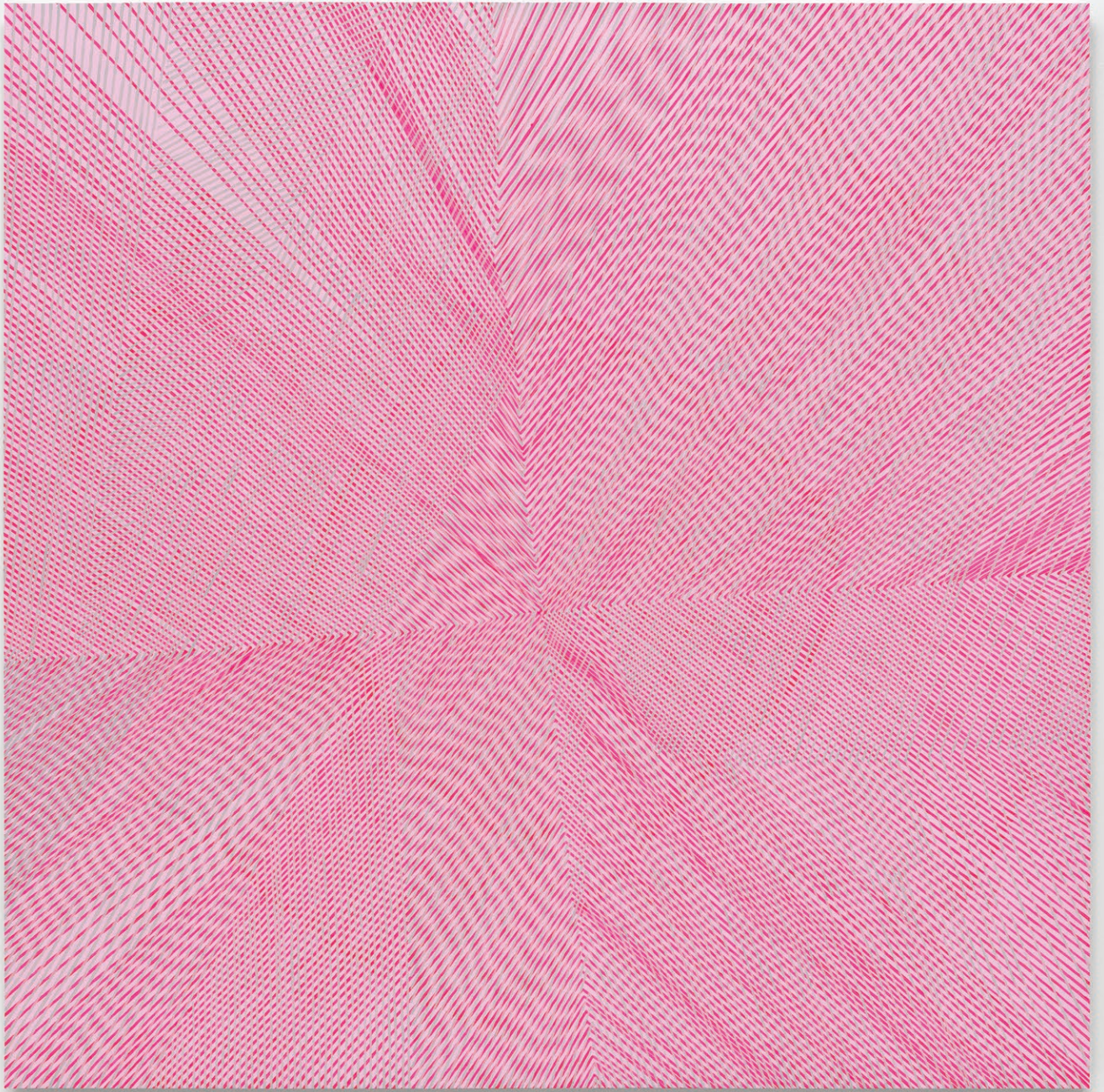
a worldwide pandemic. As an artist who is, by her own words, “inspired by nature, which is always changing,” the flow of time seemed to have altered in myriad ways as COVID-19 spread throughout the world. With warnings such as “practice social distancing” entering our everyday vocabulary, many of us became wary of others and lived in social isolation; we turned to our computer screens to stay in touch, learn the news, and watch sunsets in far-off places. The other inspiration was the use of artificial colors and materials such as mica and metallic paint, which caused the colors she used to fluctuate.

Prest has titled this exhibition of paintings done during the pandemic, *The Golden Hour*, which refers to that stretch of time between sunset and twilight. As Prest sees it, “the shift from day to night feels like the transition from exuberance to stillness; both vital states of being.” The poet Dylan Thomas referred to this transition as “the dying of the light.” For artist and poet, the awareness of mortality and time slipping away becomes more acute as they watch darkness fill the sky.

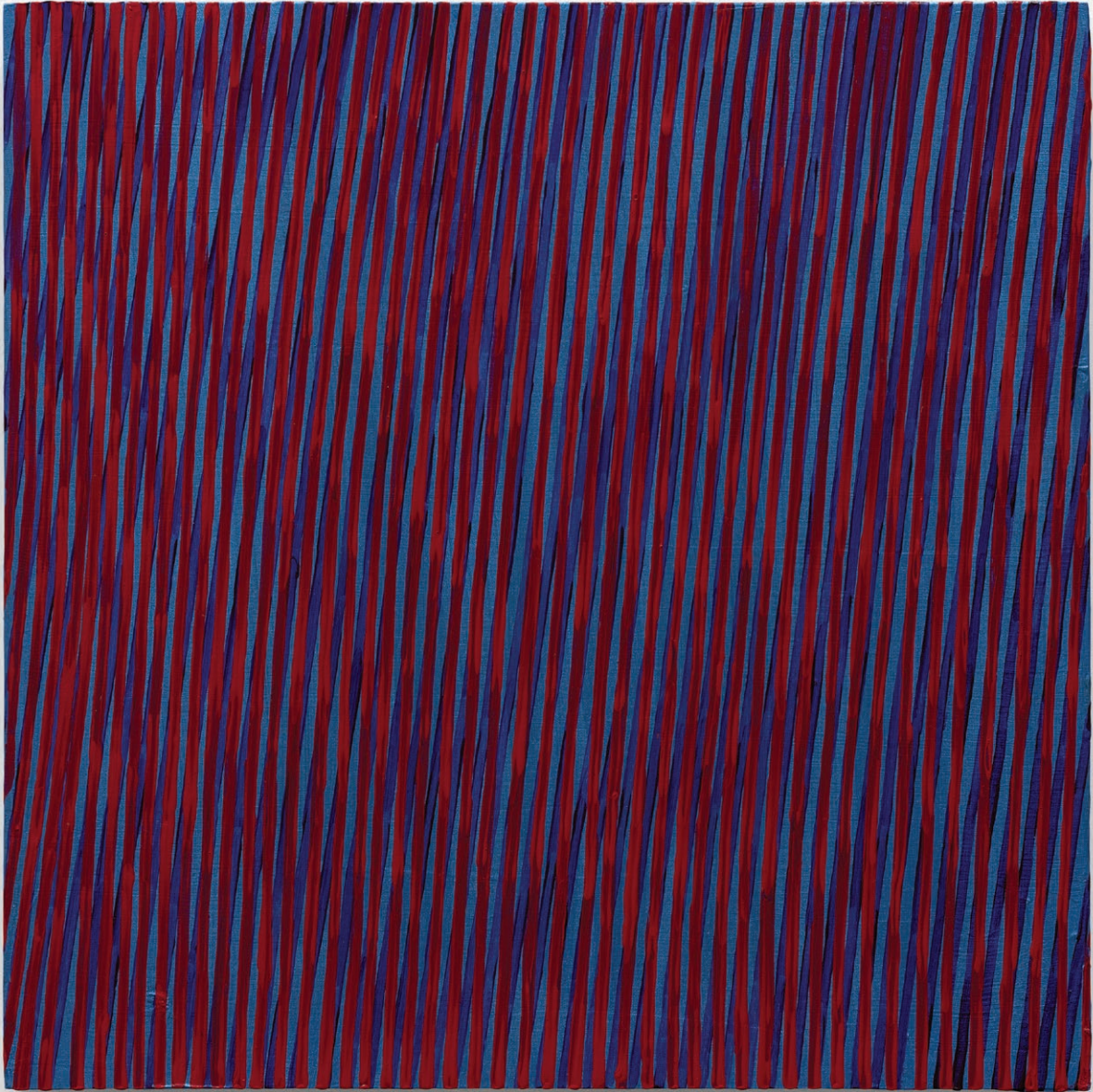
Prest’s interest in the unnamable sensations color and color combinations can stir up in her inspires her to intuitively mix colors. The different kinds of acrylic she uses – including fluorescent, metallic, or phosphorescent colors, sometimes mixed with mica – stretch paint’s possibilities.

For Prest, color is as much a feeling as something seen and experienced. In her paintings, she uses a pared-down vocabulary of straight lines to connect an outer phenomenological reality with an inner world that exists before words, before the act of naming takes place. How does one convey the different facets of awe that we experience daily, from wonder to dread and veneration? That was the challenge Prest faced while making these paintings during the lockdown. Could she stay true to her tracking of color experiences while recognizing the feelings she experienced during a pandemic?

Light changing and passing time are alluded to in the titles Prest has given her paintings: *Burst* (2020); *Cloud Flow* (2021); *Summer Penumbra* (2021); *Sky Diamond* (2022); *Firefly* (2022); *Double Rainbow* (2022). When I asked Prest about her colors, she told me “all the colors are mixtures so I am just writing what’s the closest color.”



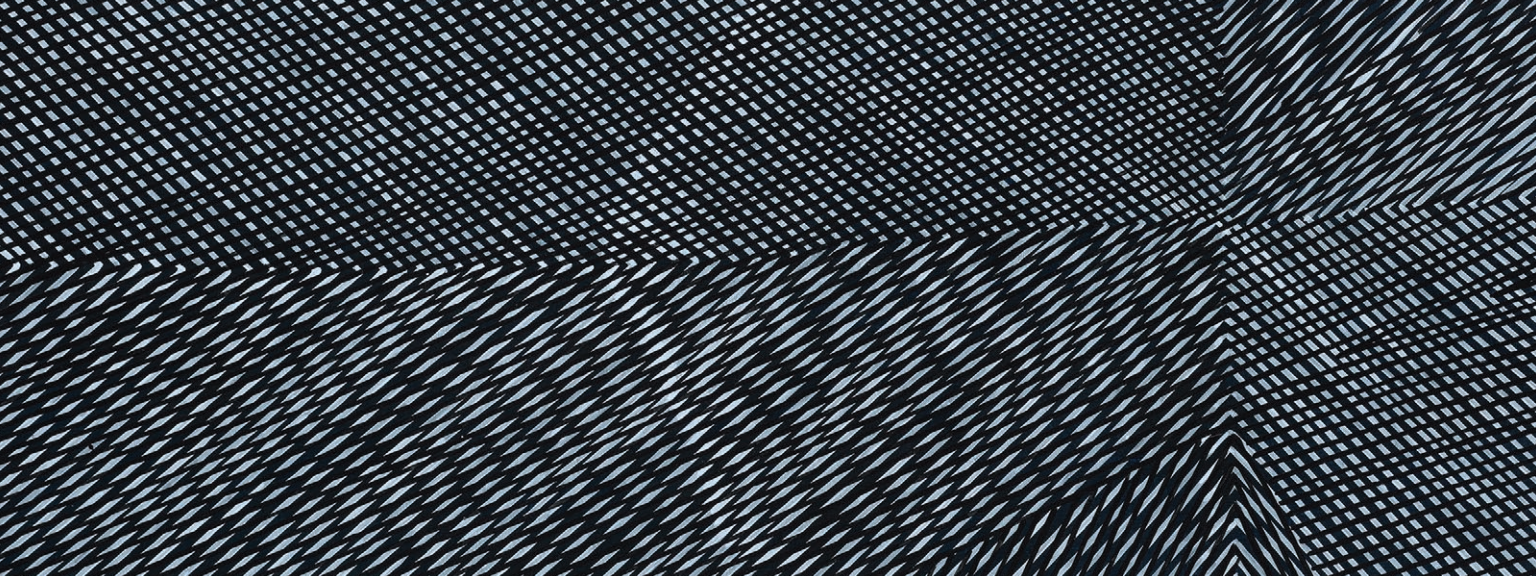
Mel Prest, *Burst*, 2018–2020, Acrylic and fluorescent acrylic on wood panel



Mel Prest, *Against the Moonlight*, 2021, Acrylic on wood panel

In *Burst*, the earliest painting in the exhibition, the viewer is likely to read the title multiple ways, which is likely the artist's intention. Knowing when the painting was made, viewers are invited to consider all the different ways it connects to the pandemic. At the same time, Prest's adherence to the limits she has set for herself (three colors and hand-painted lines) conveys her desire to go beyond the personal or "I" to something larger, a visual experience in which the viewer is visually wooed to both see and reflect upon what is being seen. By doing this, Prest uses an impersonal vocabulary of lines and monochromatic ground to meld her private experience of light and time passing into a commonplace experience because, as she knows, even what is called a second-hand experience is not the same for everyone.

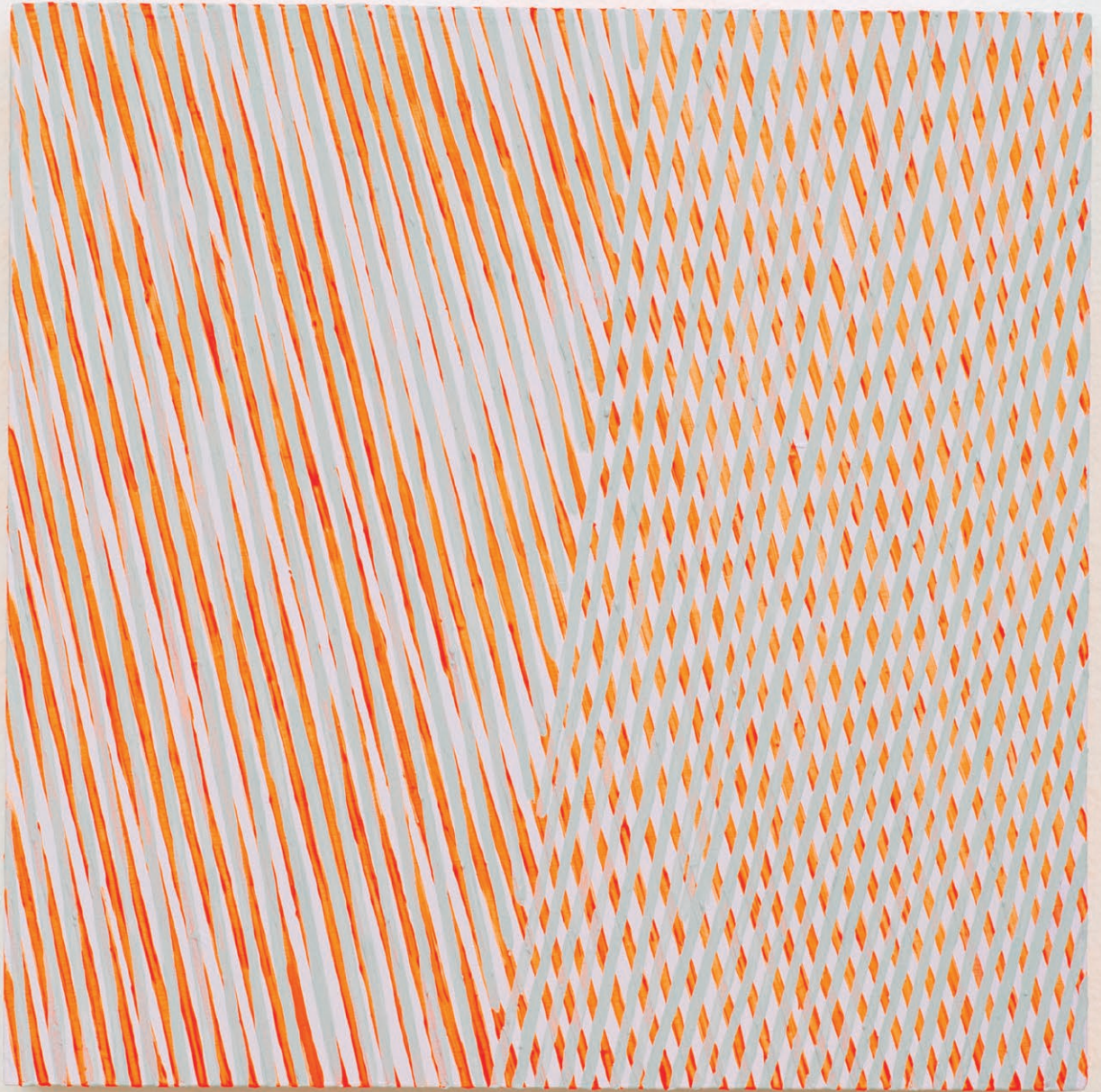
The three colors in *Burst* are a mixture of pale pink/ cadmium red & white for the ground and fluorescent pink and a cool, pale gray for the two sets of lines. Once she prepared the ground, she divided the painting's square into four equal squares. The fluorescent pink lines extend out diagonally from the dividing lines, making an abstract burst within the square. As the painting is physically two inches thick and juts forward from the wall, viewers soon discover that Prest is as attentive to the sides of the painting as she is to the surface. She wants to join the physical painting with the visual and not have a purely optical experience. For her, the visual is not separate from the haptic. By working on the painting's sides, Prest also wants the viewer to move around when looking at the work, to understand that it is an object, a thing, while becoming aware that one's body is inextricable from seeing, and that every view we have is partial. By making a work that can never fully be seen, Prest rejects the view that the artist or author is an all-knowing deity presiding over the world that they have created. Rather, she recognizes that knowledge is partial and that we will never fully experience the breadth of reality.



DETAIL: Mel Prest,
Summer Penumbra, 2021,
Acrylic and mica
on wood panel

In *Burst*, after applying the ground and a set of lines in a tonally related pink, she adds a third layer made of gray lines. Done in groupings, these parallels are set at different angles to the pink lines. In contrast to the uniform direction of the first set of lines, the gray lines follow no obvious pattern. The combination, which is enhanced by the fluorescent pink lines, destabilizes the composition as well as transforms the painting into a constantly changing optical experience. Both the order of the pink lines and the disruption of the gray lines interact and become inseparable. Additionally, as each line is painted by hand, the density of the color and the width of the line vary enough to further impact the painting's order.

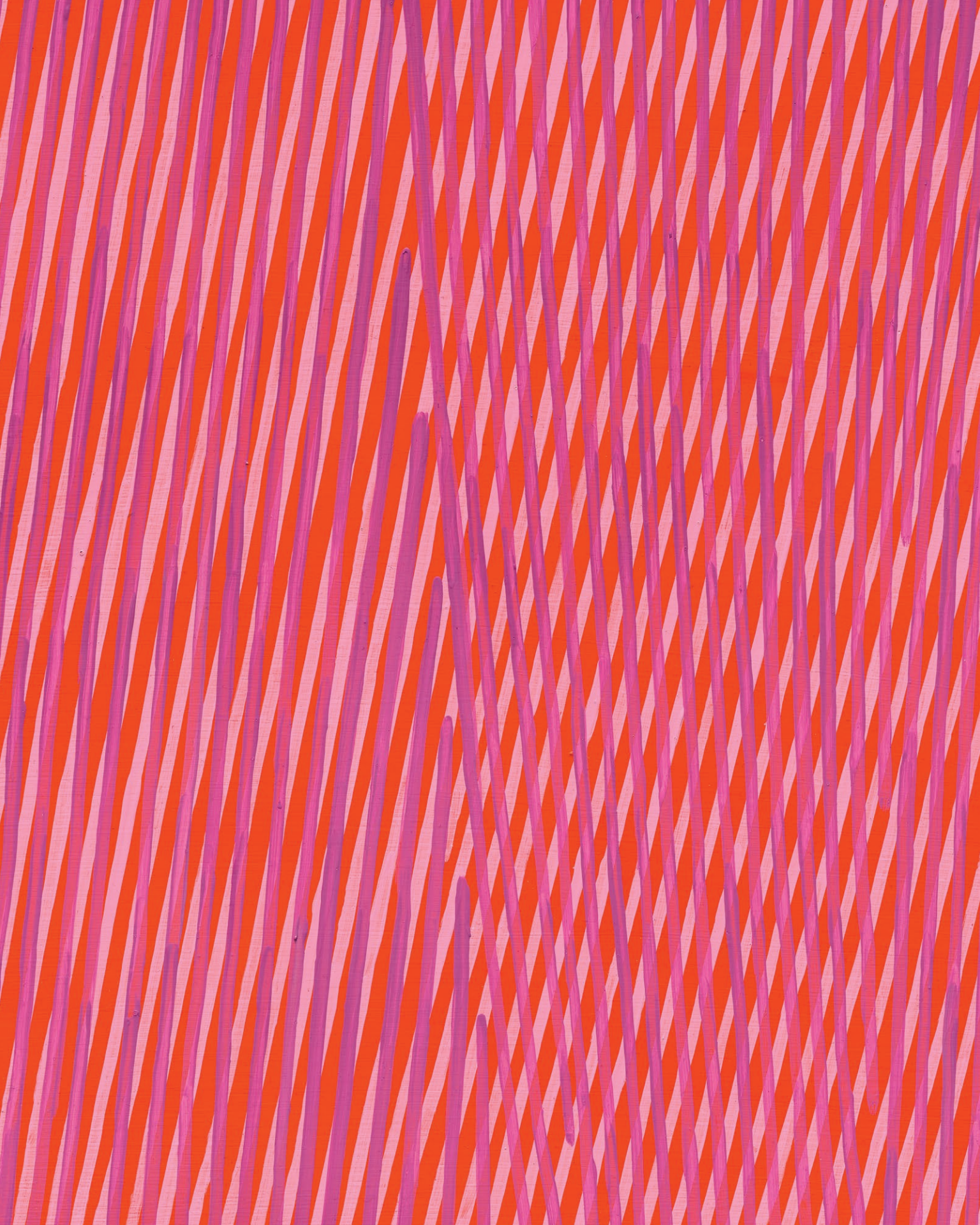
According to the online dictionary, Merriam-Webster, a penumbra is a “space of partial illumination (as in an eclipse) between the perfect shadow on all sides and the full light.” The colors Prest used in *Summer Penumbra* are “black made with raw umber and ultramarine plus mica (ground) and mid cool gray (top lines).” The use of mica in the ground makes it glitter and change. The combination of ground and lines crisscrossing at different angles makes it impossible to discern what is the figure (lines) and what is the ground. The painting interlaces light and dark, causing a confusion, which pulls the viewer further into the painting. We are apt to find ourselves trying to disentangle the composition in order to discern how it was made. As in the other paintings in the exhibition, we become lost in the looking.



Mel Prest, *Sparkling*, 2022, Acrylic on wood panel

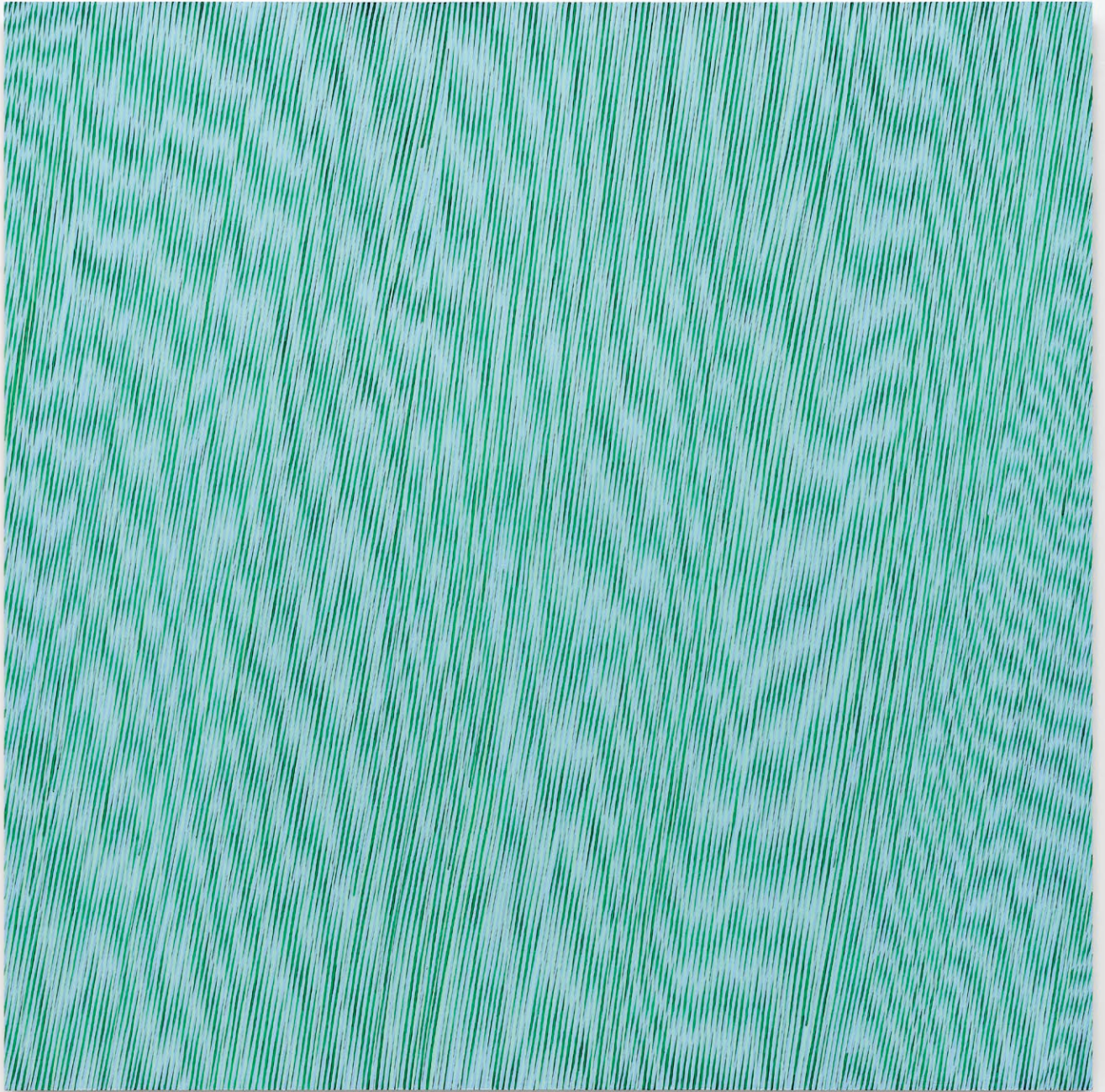


ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL):
Mel Prest, *untitled*, 2022, Acrylic on wood panel



This is one of the keys to Prest's paintings—the feeling of being both lost and mesmerized, of trying to discern an order that proves elusive, of experiencing a state of constant fluctuation and ephemerality. These fluctuating states separate Prest from her predecessors as well as conveys her implicit criticism of their use of fixed structures. By making a painting that is structured (lines) yet constantly changing in unpredictable ways, she reminds us that nothing made by humans is permanent, and that what we are subject to are change and time. And yet, rather than making a painting in which the optical vibrations are tightly controlled, Prest pushes her work into a domain in which she accepts chance and the unexpected. She has defined a very different path from the one taken by her predecessors. Her work speaks to our daily apprehension while reveling in the pleasures of light and shadow, natural and artificial colors. We are invited to consider the joys of ephemerality—that which cannot be possessed.

JOHN YAU is a poet, critic, publisher and freelance curator. His latest monograph, just out from Rizzoli, is titled: *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*. He also has written monographs on *Thomas Nozkowski*, *Catherine Murphy*, and *Liu Xiaodong*. His latest book of poems is *Genghis Chan on Drums*. His reviews appear regularly in the online magazine, *Hyperallergic*.

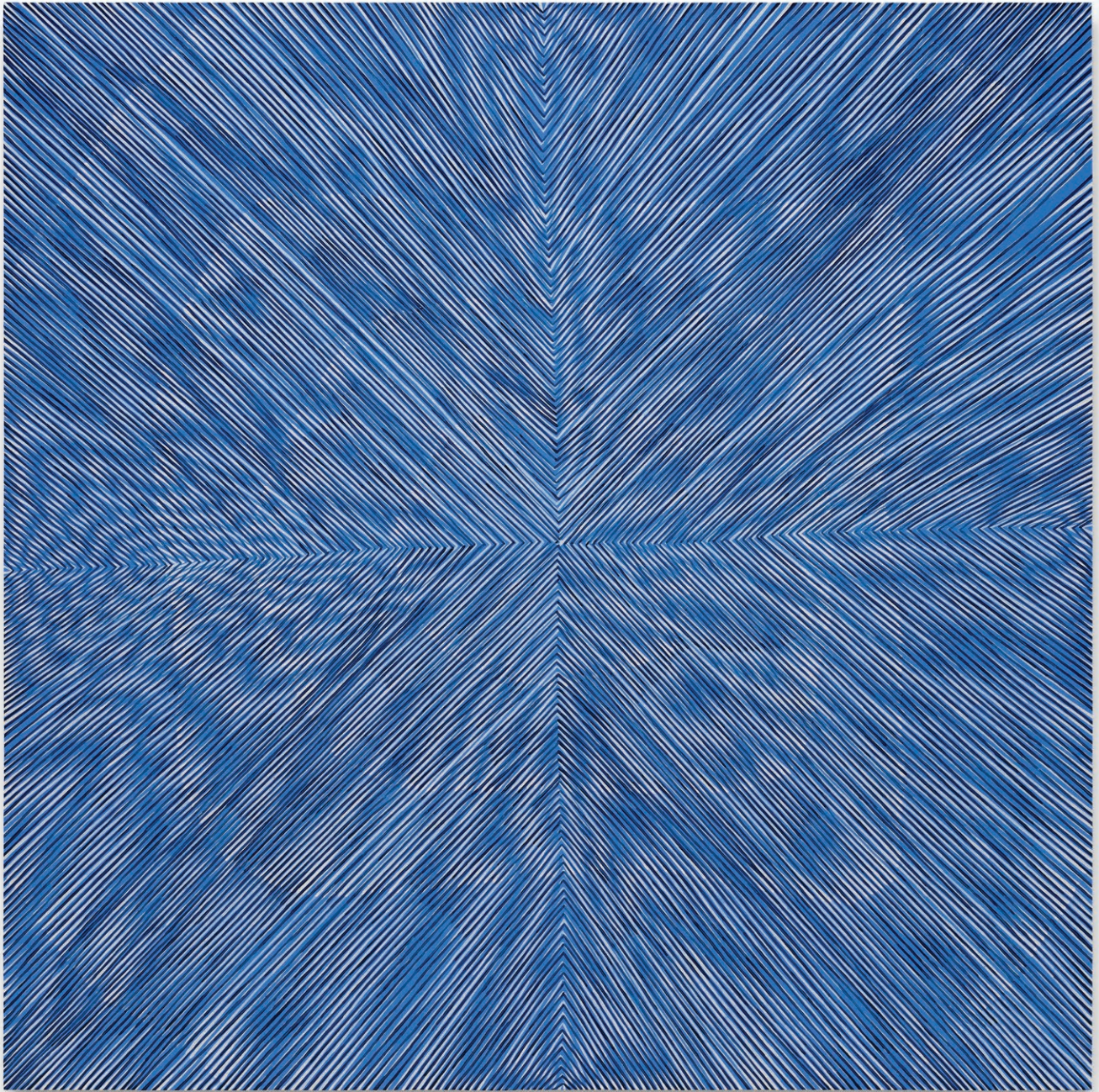


Mel Prest, *Fireflies*, 2022, Acrylic, phosphorescent acrylic and mica on wood panel

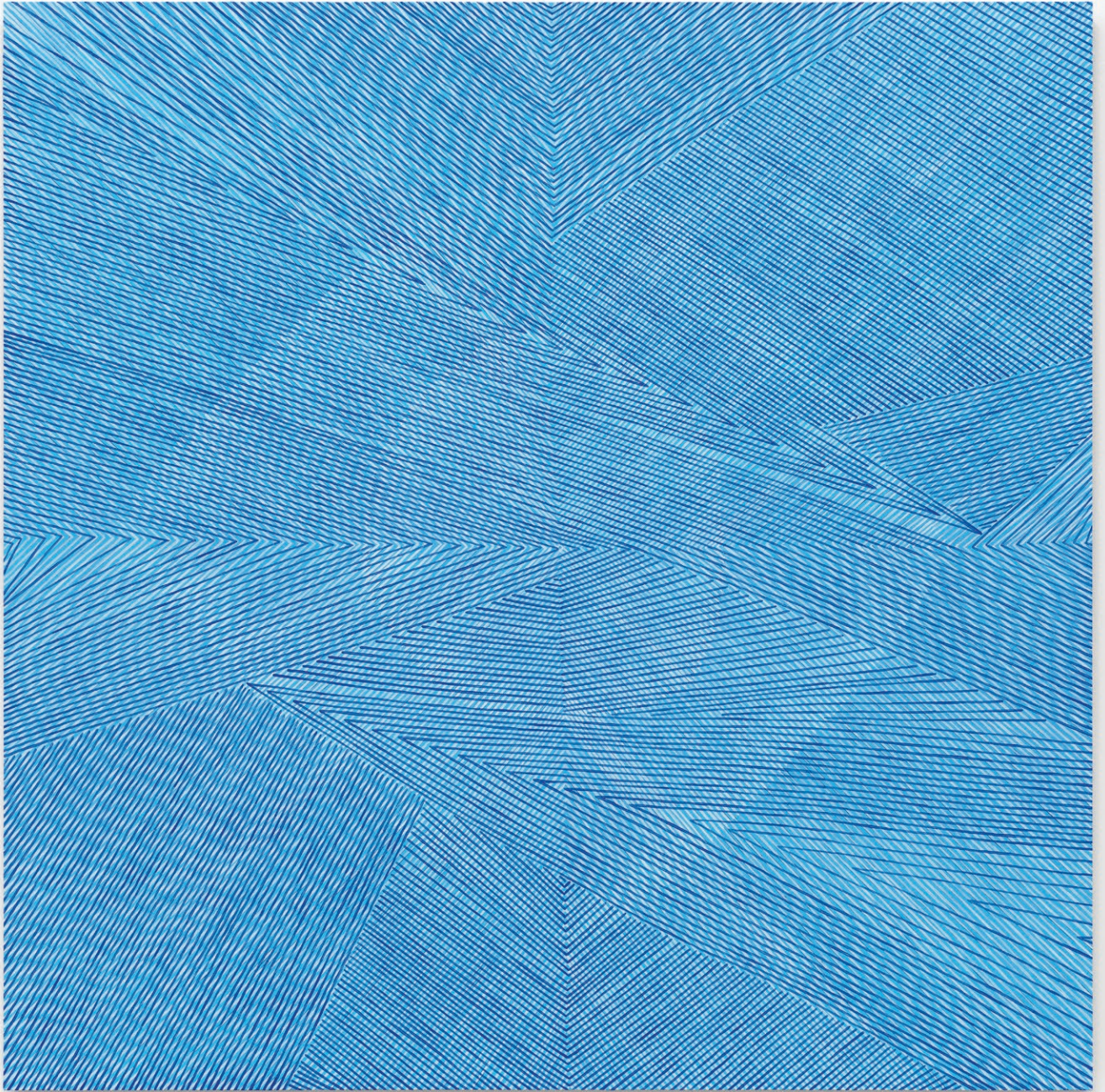


LEFT (DETAIL) AND RIGHT:
Mel Prest, *Double Rainbow Ladder*, 2022,
Acrylic, fluorescent, metallic, mica
and phosphorescent acrylics
on wood panels

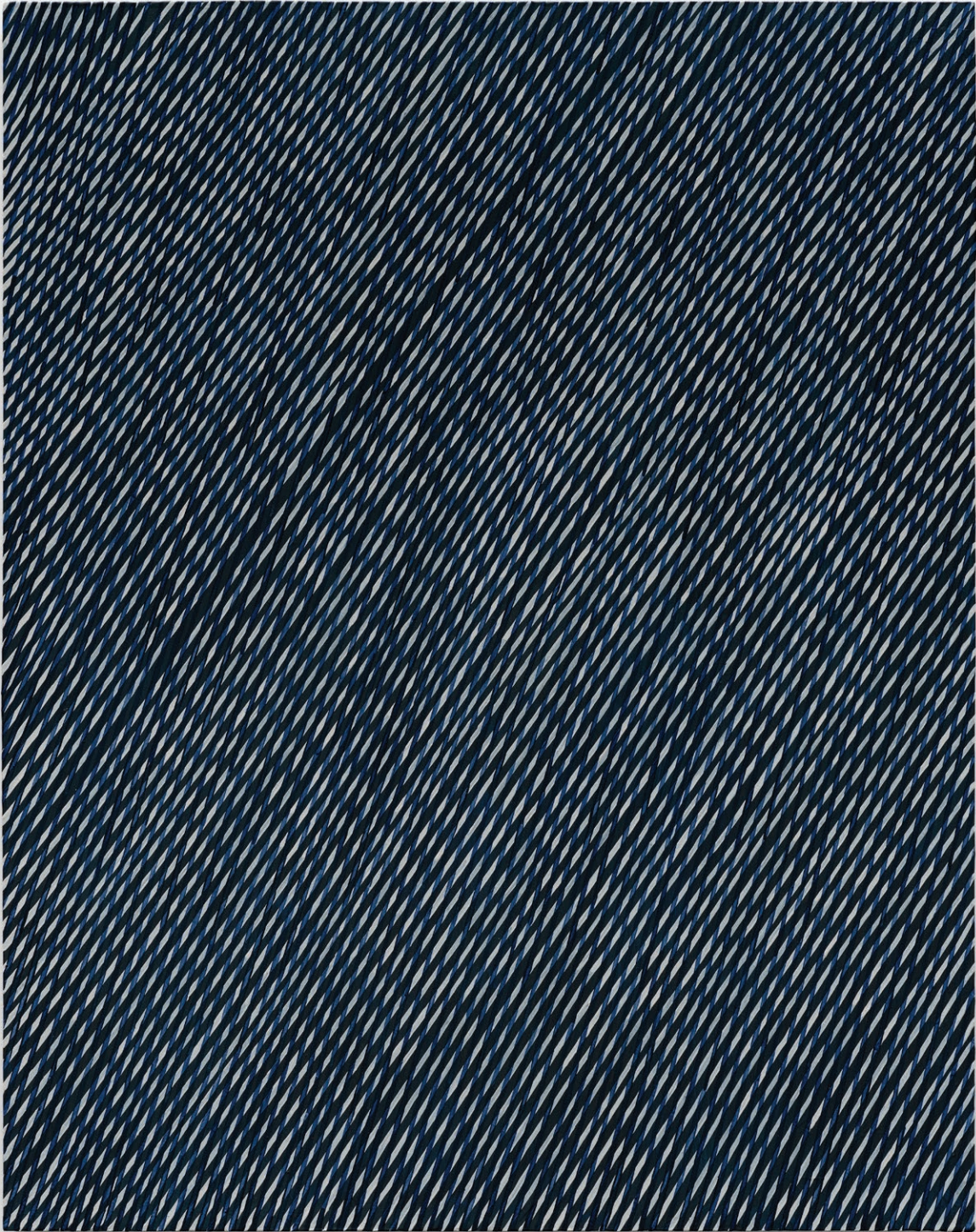




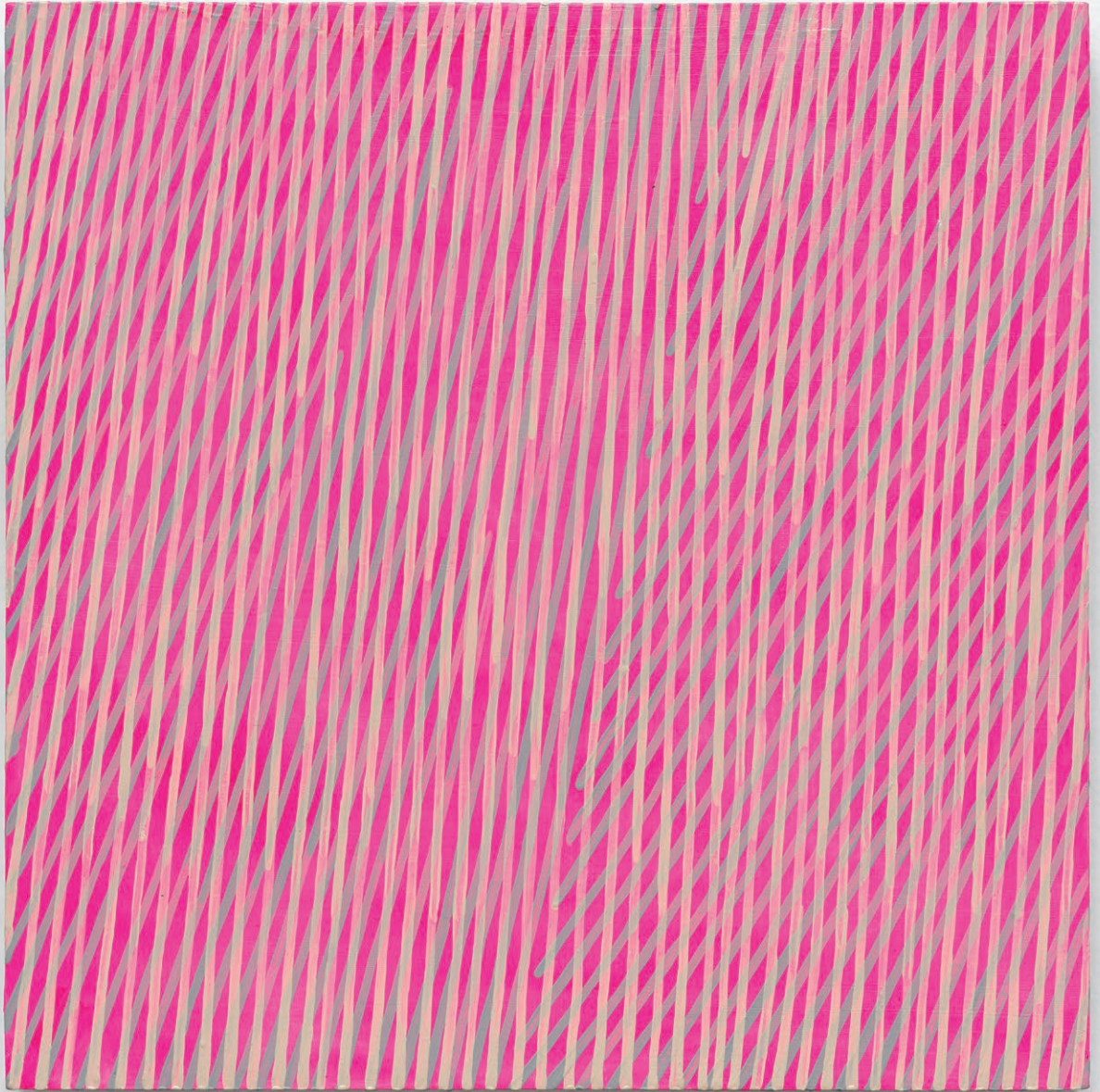
Mel Prest, *Cloud Flow*, 2021, Acrylic and mica on wood panel



Mel Prest, *Sky Diamond*, 2022, Acrylic and mica on wood panel



Mel Prest, *Omega Fata Morgana*, 2014–2021, Acrylic and mica on wood panel



Mel Prest, *Rose Winds*, 2021, Acrylic and fluorescent acrylic on wood panel



Mel Prest, *More Thought Work*, 2014,
Fluorescent and phosphorescent acrylic on wood panel



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COVER

Mel Prest, *Burst*, 2018–2020, Acrylic and
fluorescent acrylic on wood panel