

# NABIL NAHAS



In a 1973 interview with Etel Adnan in *el-Safa*, Nabil Nahas was asked, “is painting for you an object, a work, or an image?”<sup>1</sup> At the time, Nahas was a young artist who had just completed his BFA at the Louisiana State University in the United States, and was showing his work at Centre d’Art in Beirut<sup>2</sup>. It was his first solo exhibition, and it predated his formative MFA years at the Yale School of Art. Although the show attracted several critical responses, it has curiously not made it into any of the recent biographies written on the artist. There may be a myriad of unexciting reasons for this exclusion, but it is likely due to the fact that Centre d’Art, which shut down in 1975 with the Lebanese Civil War, has since fallen out of memory. It remains, however, a relevant episode of Nahas’s long career, even if only for his sophisticated response to Adnan’s philosophical question – an idealist declaration which is resonant in his contemporary artistic practice:

painting situates itself, for me, in the interaction between the Idea and the thoughts that are connected to the Idea. I am speaking in terms of the canvas: painting IS the Idea, if you will; all the formal relations [relations plastiques] which compose it are the ideas, the decisions, and the steps from which it is composed.<sup>3</sup>

This early pronouncement is retroactively decisive for the emergence of a key structural feature in Nahas’s work: the fractal. The fractal is a mathematical object, in which every component part identically corresponds to the whole. As a mathematical unit, the fractal is a conceptual object, and does not actually exist in nature, though many fractal-like objects can be found in nature. The fractal in Nahas’s work appears in two registers: the first is that of the individual part, which is a formal and methodological elaboration of (concrete) ideas – i.e. his artistic process is naturalistic, yet it does not produce a mimetic representation of nature. The second is that of the whole, wherein the general structure of the fractal appears to the viewer as the (abstract) Idea. Here the artwork is grasped as transcendental and singular.

The story of the fractal, now well-known to those familiar with Nahas’ artistic trajectory, emerged out of formal experimentation with starfish in the 1990s. Nahas encountered masses of starfish that had littered the seashore near his residence in Southampton, New York, in the aftermath of hurricane Bob in 1991. He collected the starfish and introduced them into his paintings. Concerned about the longevity of the echinoderm, he soon realized that acrylic paint could be an adequate casting agent. Using silicone, he proceeded to make molds of the starfish and fill them with numerous thin coats of acrylic paint, before mounting them on canvas. He then mixed pumice into the paint and achieved a lava-like texture with which he layered the surface. Eventually, as Nahas’s practice developed, the starfish was no longer a prominent feature, and his works were thereafter dubbed ‘fractal paintings.’

<sup>1</sup> Etel Adnan asks Nabil Nahas, “Le tableau est-il pour vous un objet, une oeuvre, une image?”, in Etel Adnan, “A partir de demain, au Centre d’Art Nabil R. Nahas: Déjà un univers entier.” *el-Safa*. January 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Centre d’Art was a prominent gallery space founded by Brigitte Schehade, the wife of the poet Georges Schehade. It largely exhibited prints by Surrealist artists in the Schehades’ circle, such as Max Ernst and André Masson.

<sup>3</sup> Nahas responds to Adnan’s question: “le tableau se situe, pour moi, dans l’interaction entre l’idée et les pensées qui se relie à l’Idée. Je parle en termes de la toile: le tableau EST l’Idée, si vous voulez; toutes les relations plastiques qui le composent en sont les pensées, les décisions, les étapes qui l’ont composé”.

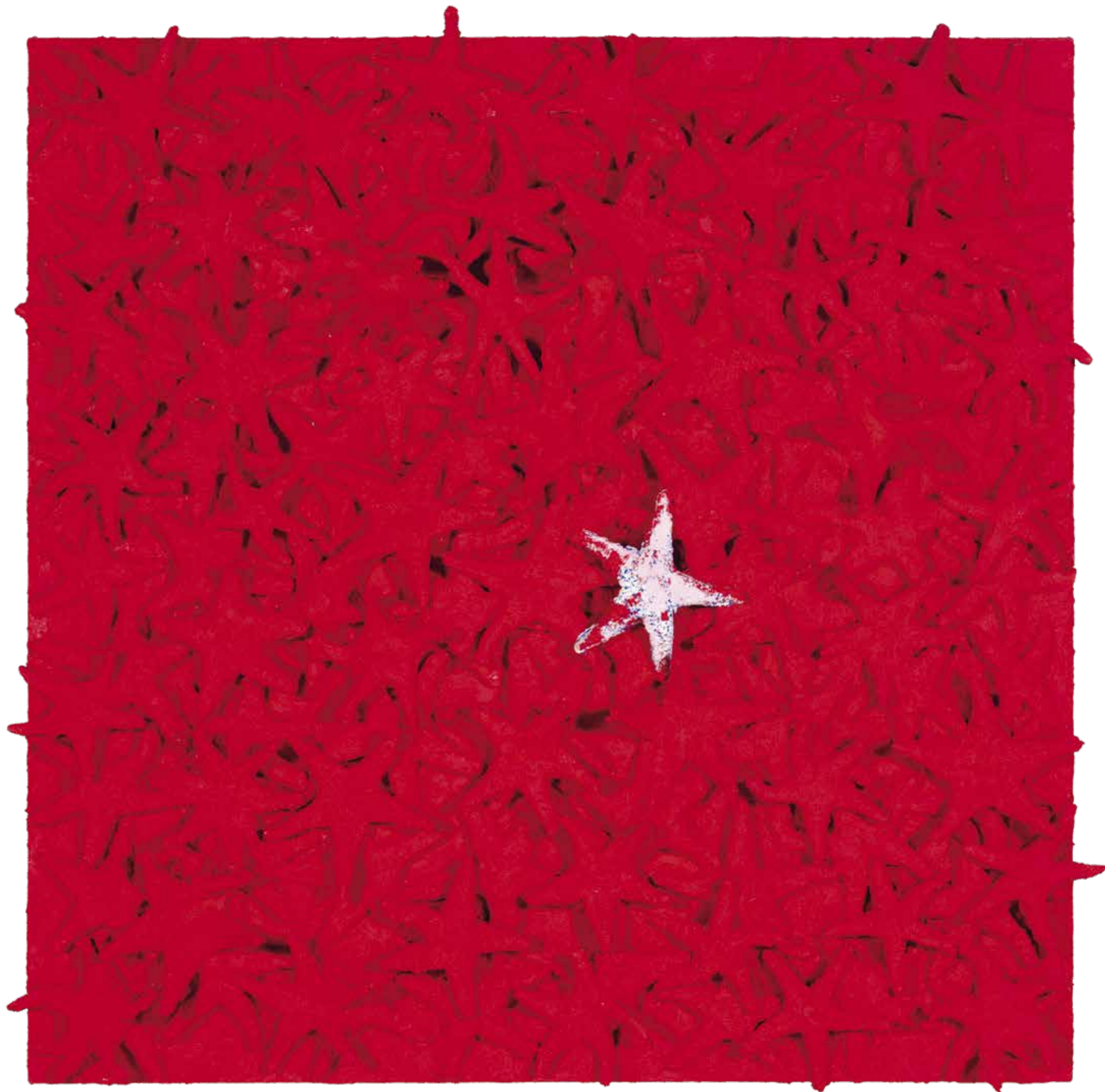
Unlike mathematicians who devise fractals conceptually, whether mentally or through algorithms, the fractals in Nahas's painting are contingent upon his artistic process. They are, in the first instance, inspired from fractal-like forms in nature. The fractal in Nahas's practice bears a likeness to objects in the world, but only after having undergone a process of abstraction. His work is anti-mimetic, and yet naturalistic. Rather than beginning with the concept of a fractal and then devising it in paint, the final result of Nahas's paintings – the texture of the surface of his canvases – resemble natural forms, like eroded limestone and coral reefs. Nature does not appear in this work as its representation, but in the logic of its form.

Nahas's work simultaneously presents and represents the grand idea of 'totality', which sublates within it each moment that it has subsumed, wherein each stage is partial. The distinct yet repetitive moments are composed developmentally, giving rise to its totality as the product of the process, which preserves all of its stages as elements in a total structural logic. This logic is found in both the individual parts and in the whole. The fractal both constitutes and is constitutive of its whole structure. As such, it concurrently constructs (presents) and expresses (represents) it. In other words, every moment in the fractal composition is self-referential and at once represents the whole structure.

The fractal, part and whole, in Nahas's work is analogous to the geometry of nature in its laws, processes, and overall logic. Each work is composed through the execution of the boundless interweaving and enfolding of different moments that constitute differential and variegated compositions, while always yielding a singular artwork. In gesturing from the finite to the infinite, Nahas alludes to a Sufi transcendentalist aesthetic, wherein the sublime in both its natural and architectural forms is evoked (think the Islamic architectural feature of the *muqarnas*), and the elasticity of scale between the part (micro) and the whole (macro) is preserved.

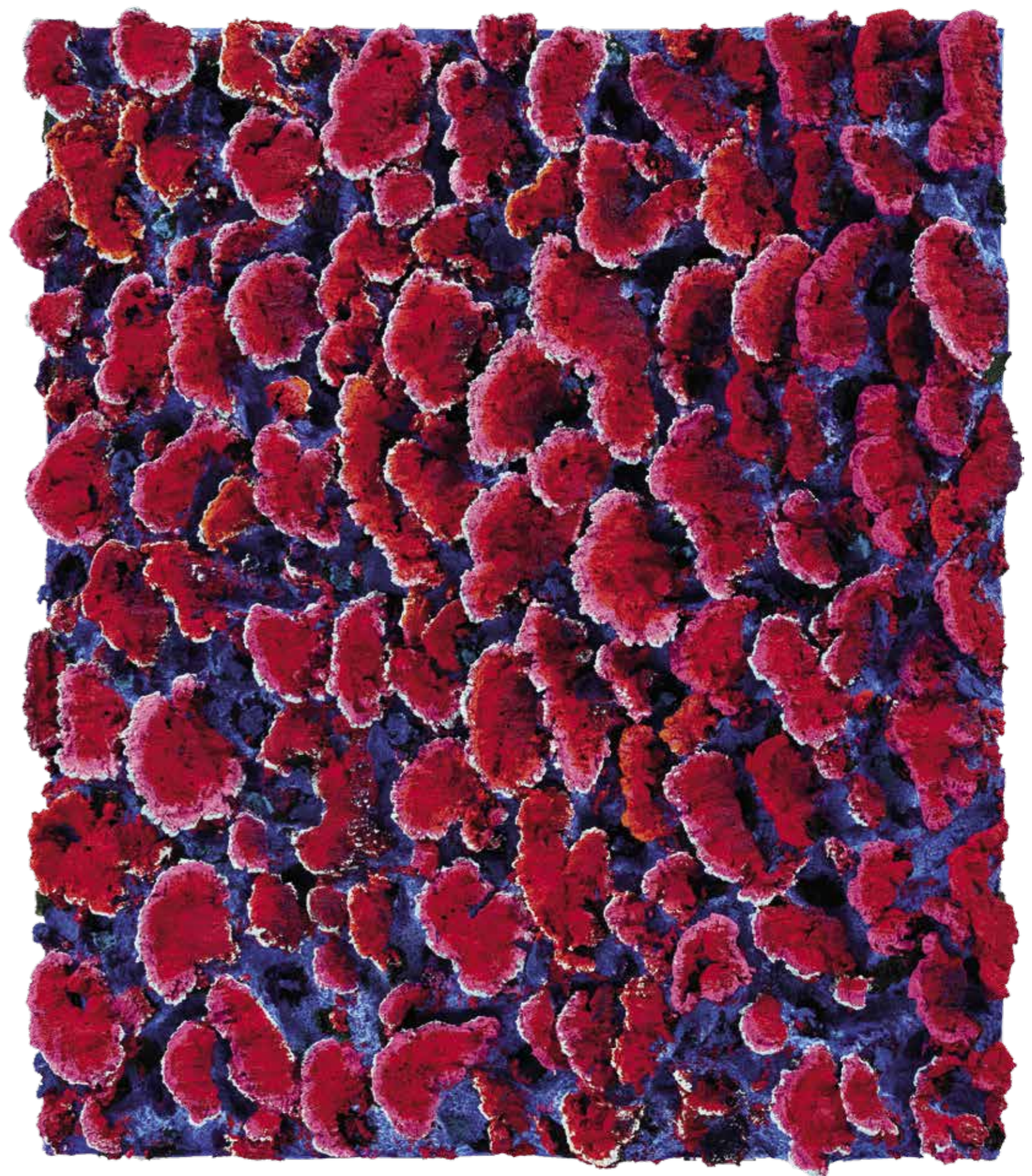
Andrea Comair and Natasha Gasparian  
Beirut, 2019





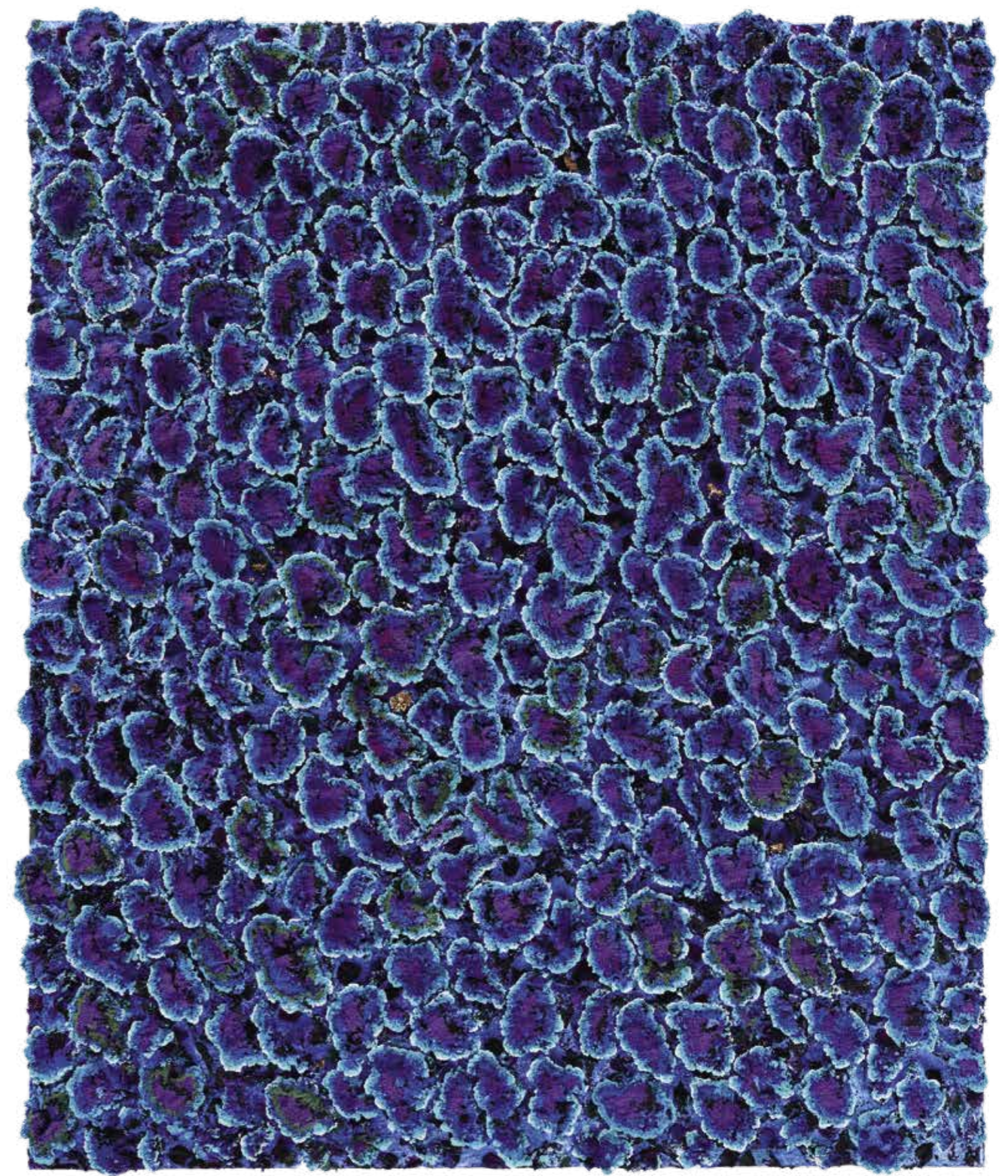
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 150 x 150 cm (59 x 59 in) | 2019



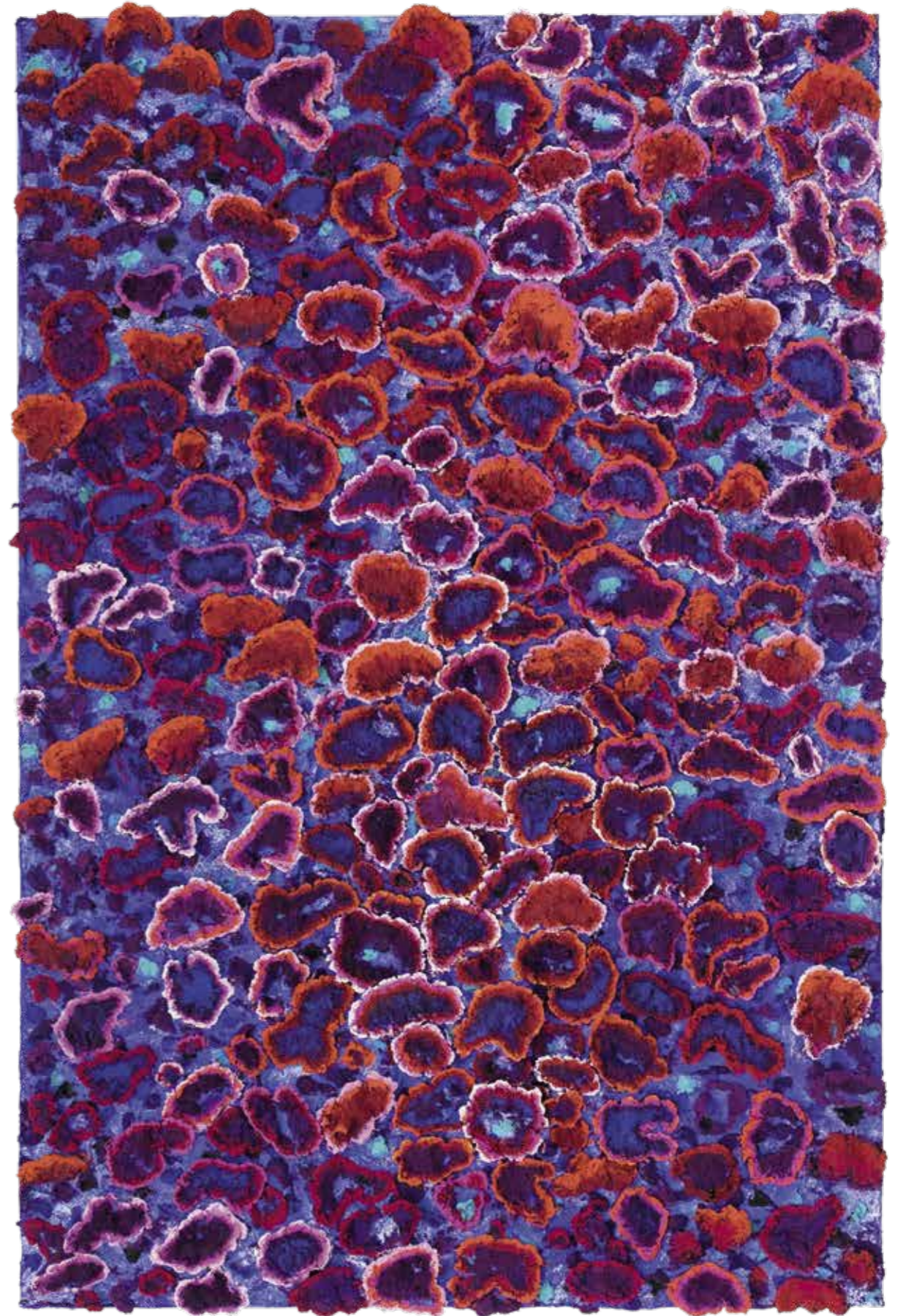


Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 83.8 x 71.1 cm (33 x 28 in) | 2017

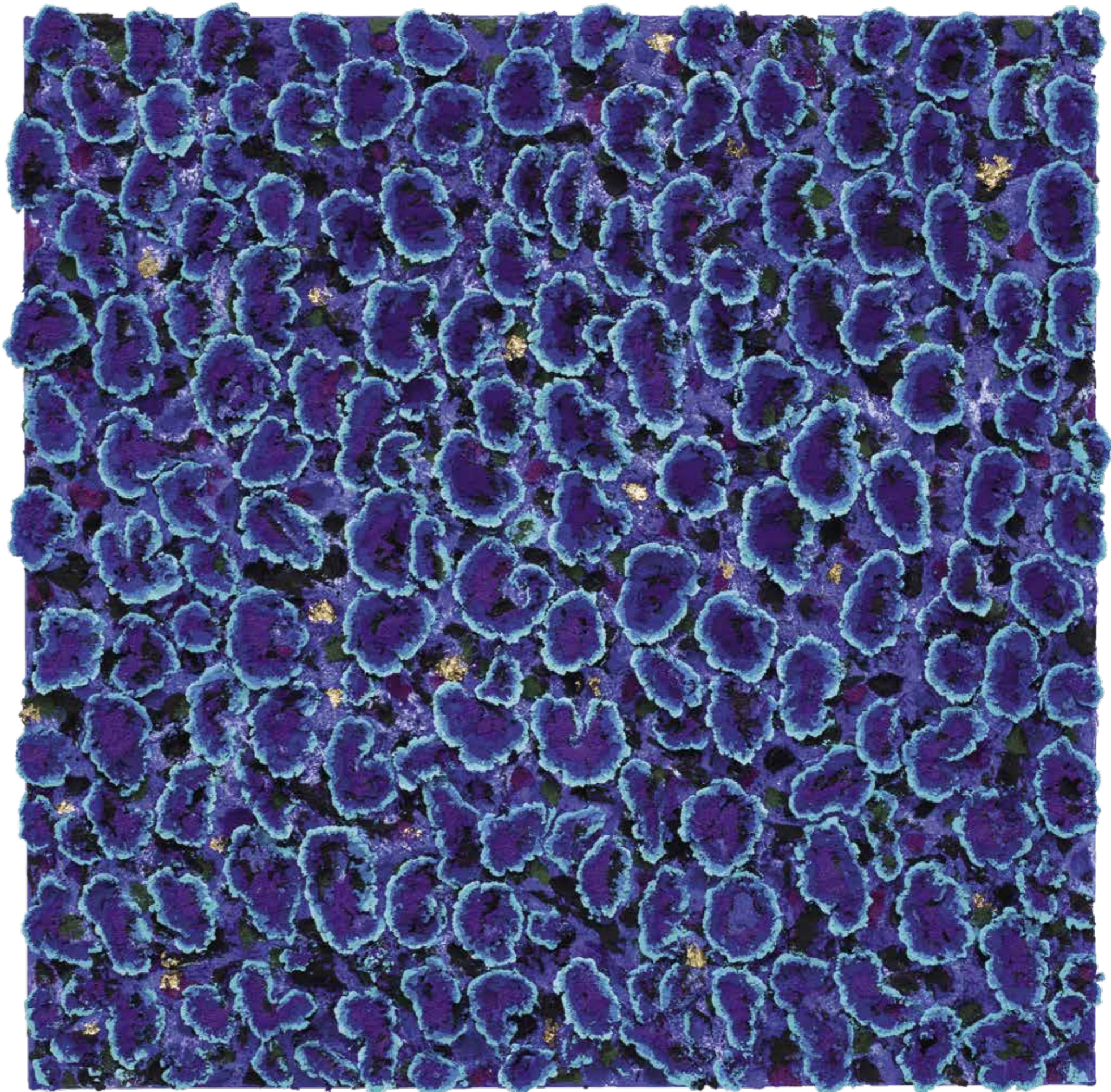




Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 182.9 x 152.4 cm (72 x 60 in) | 2017



Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 182.9 x 121.9 cm (72 x 48 in) | 2017



Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 121.9 x 121.9 cm (48 x 48 in) | 2017

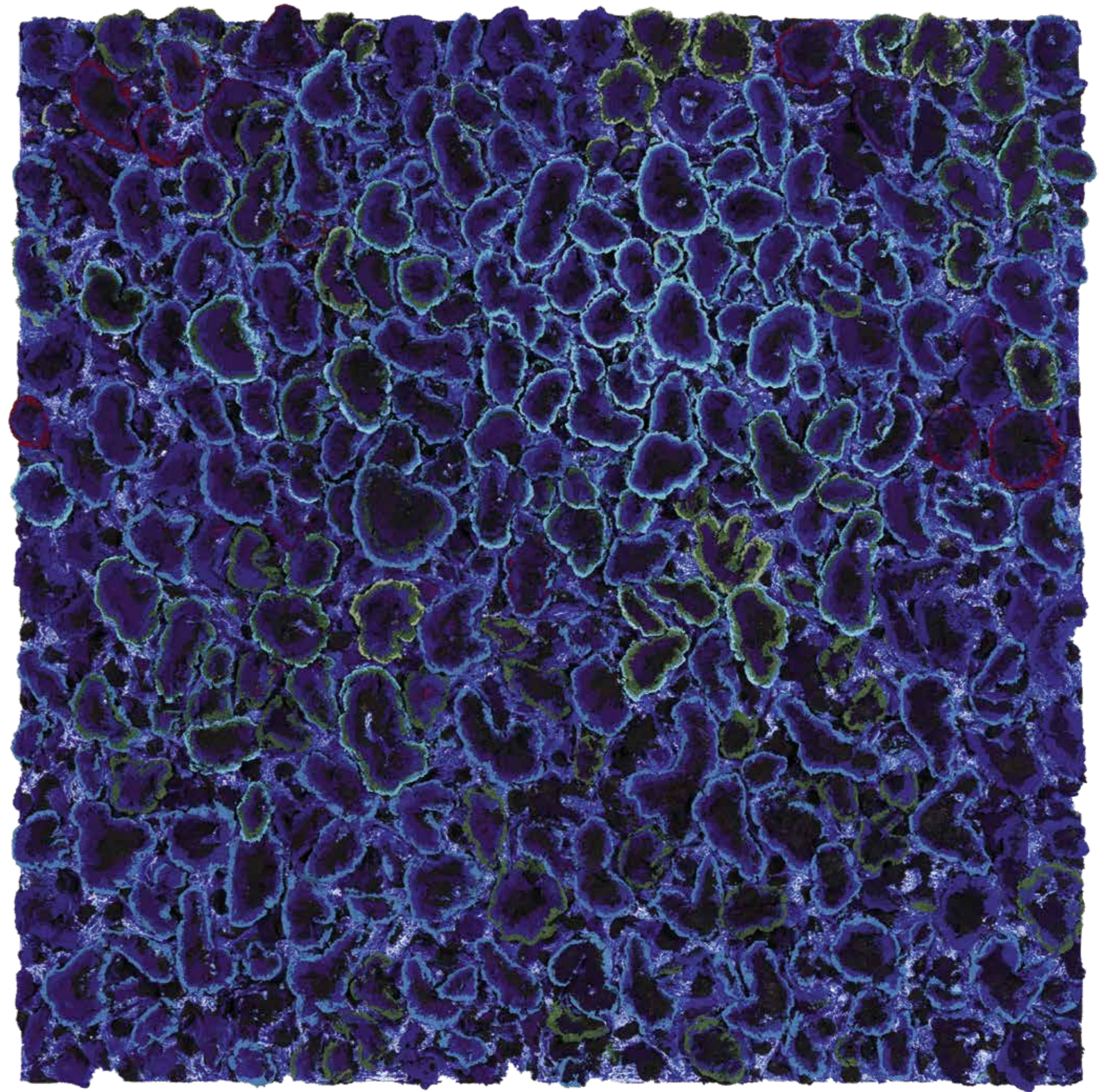




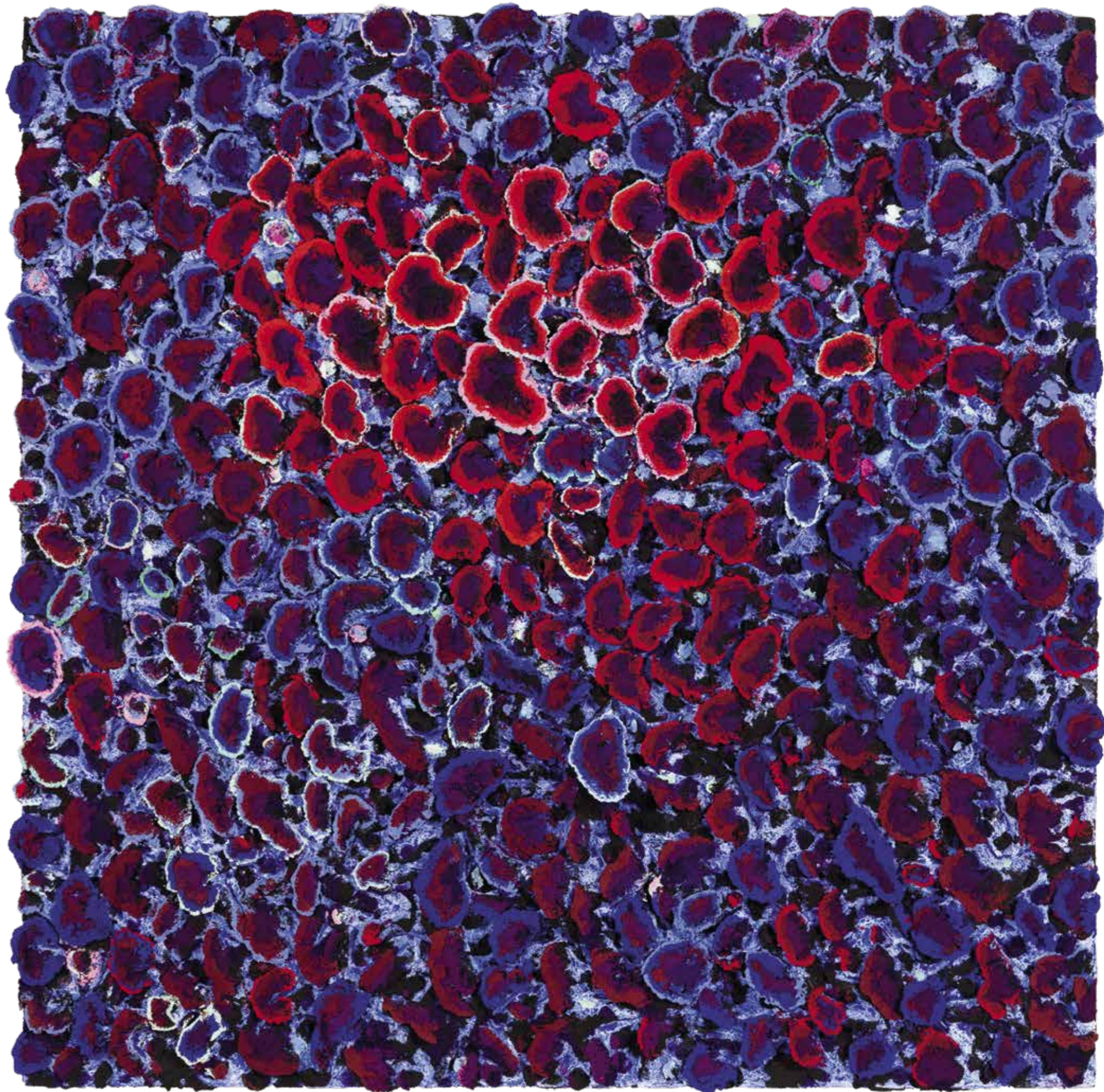
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 160 x 120 cm ( 63 x 47,3 in) | 2019



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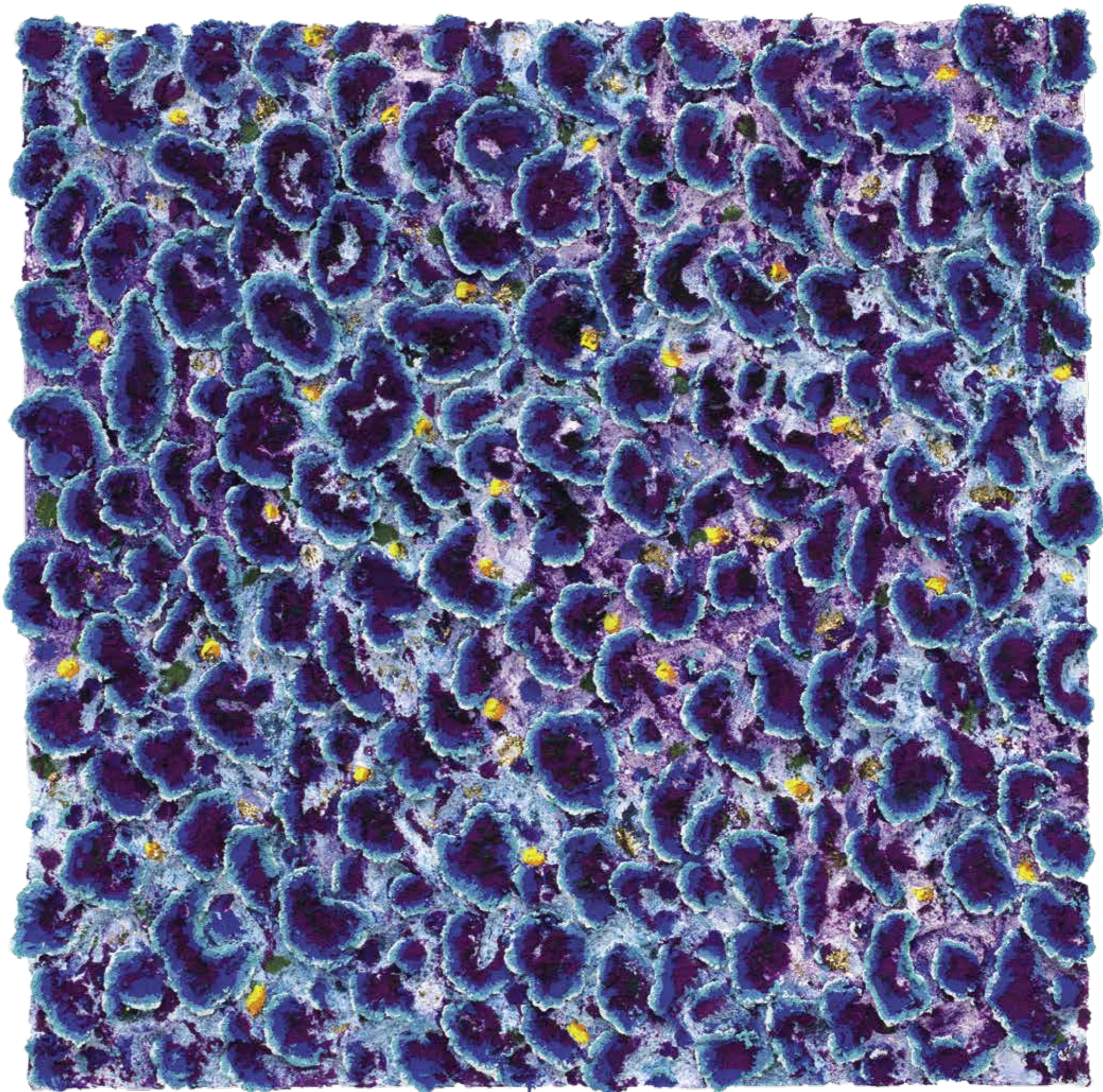


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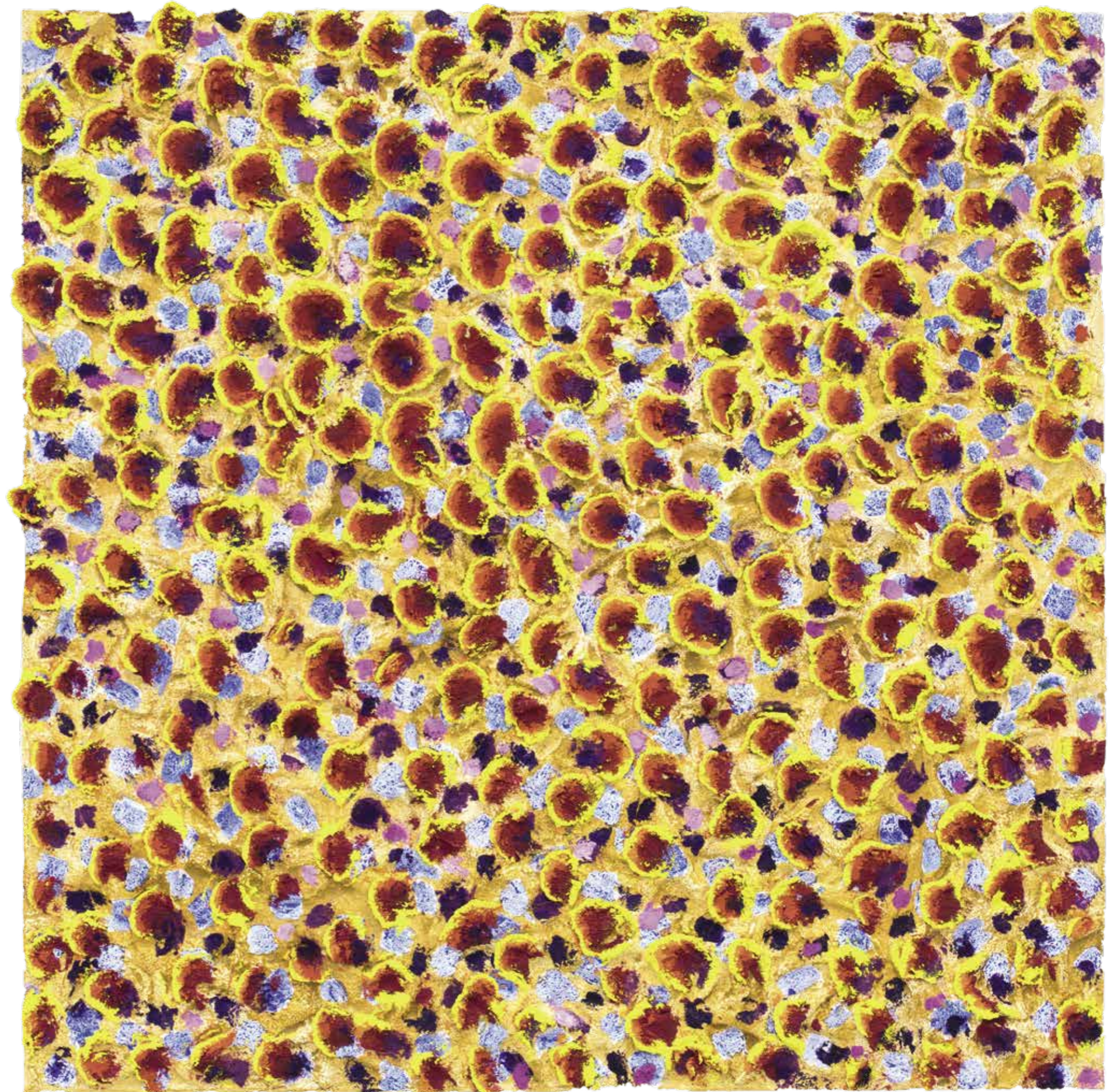




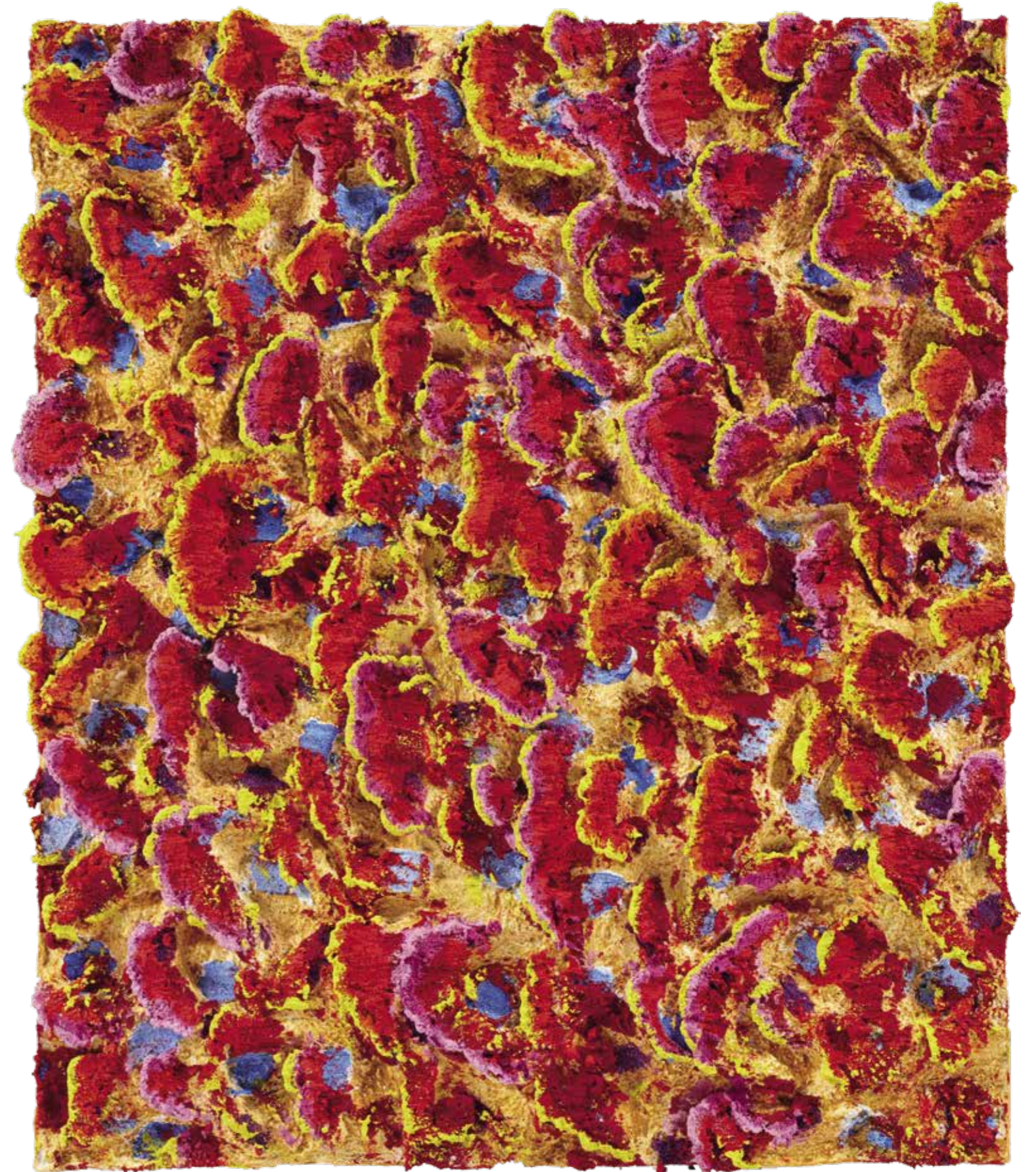
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 121.9 x 121.9 cm | 2017



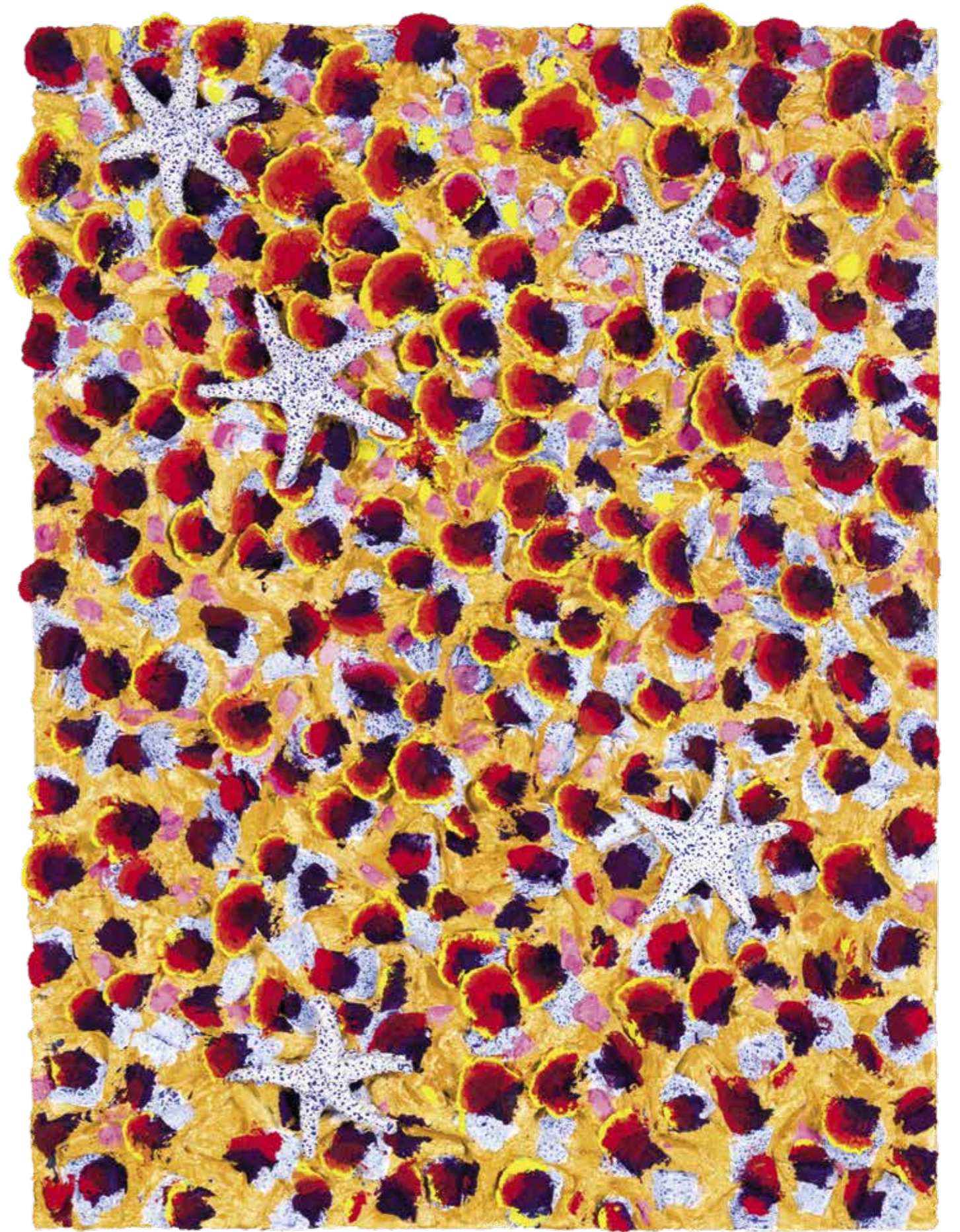
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 83.8 x 71.1 cm (33 x 28 in) | 2017



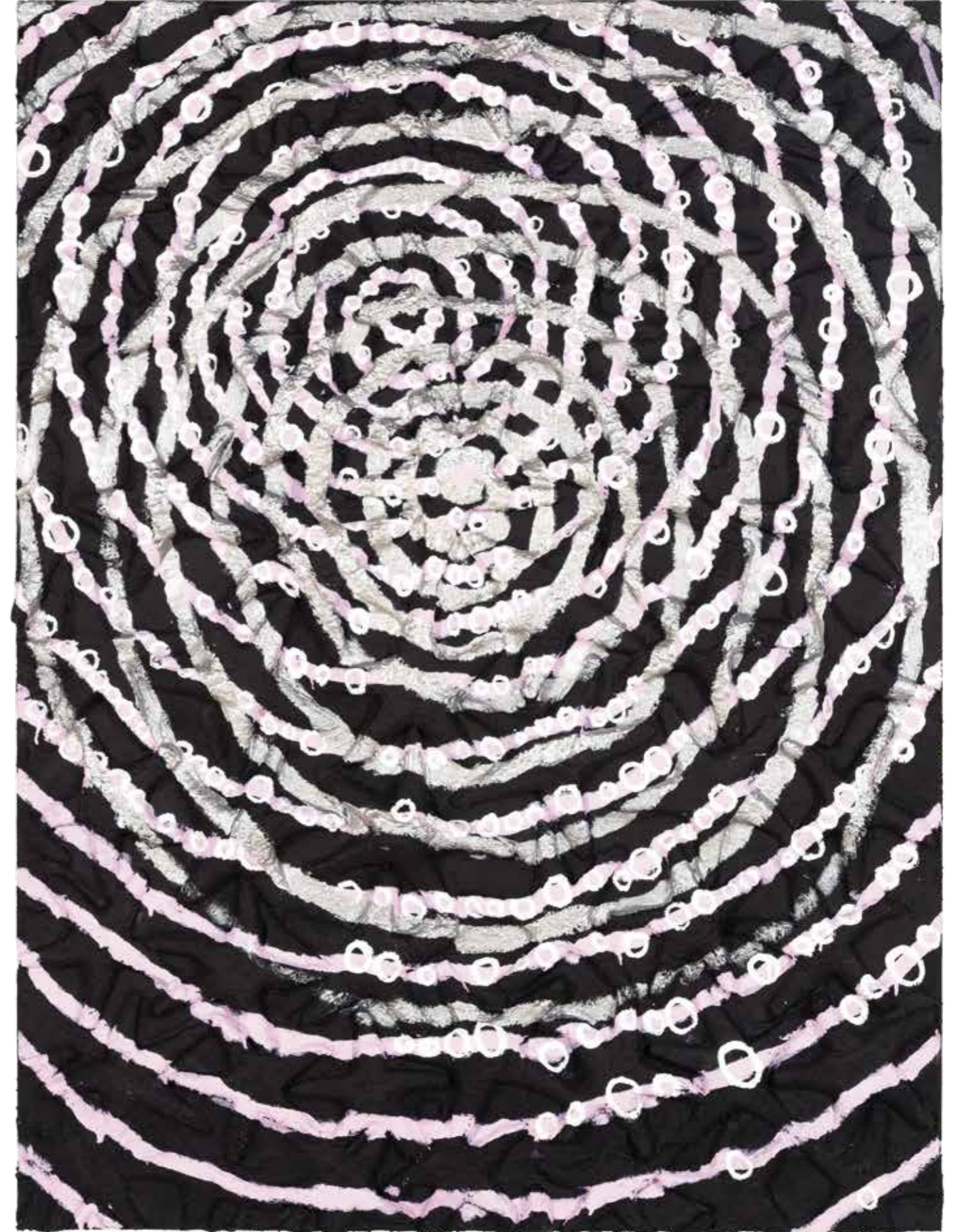
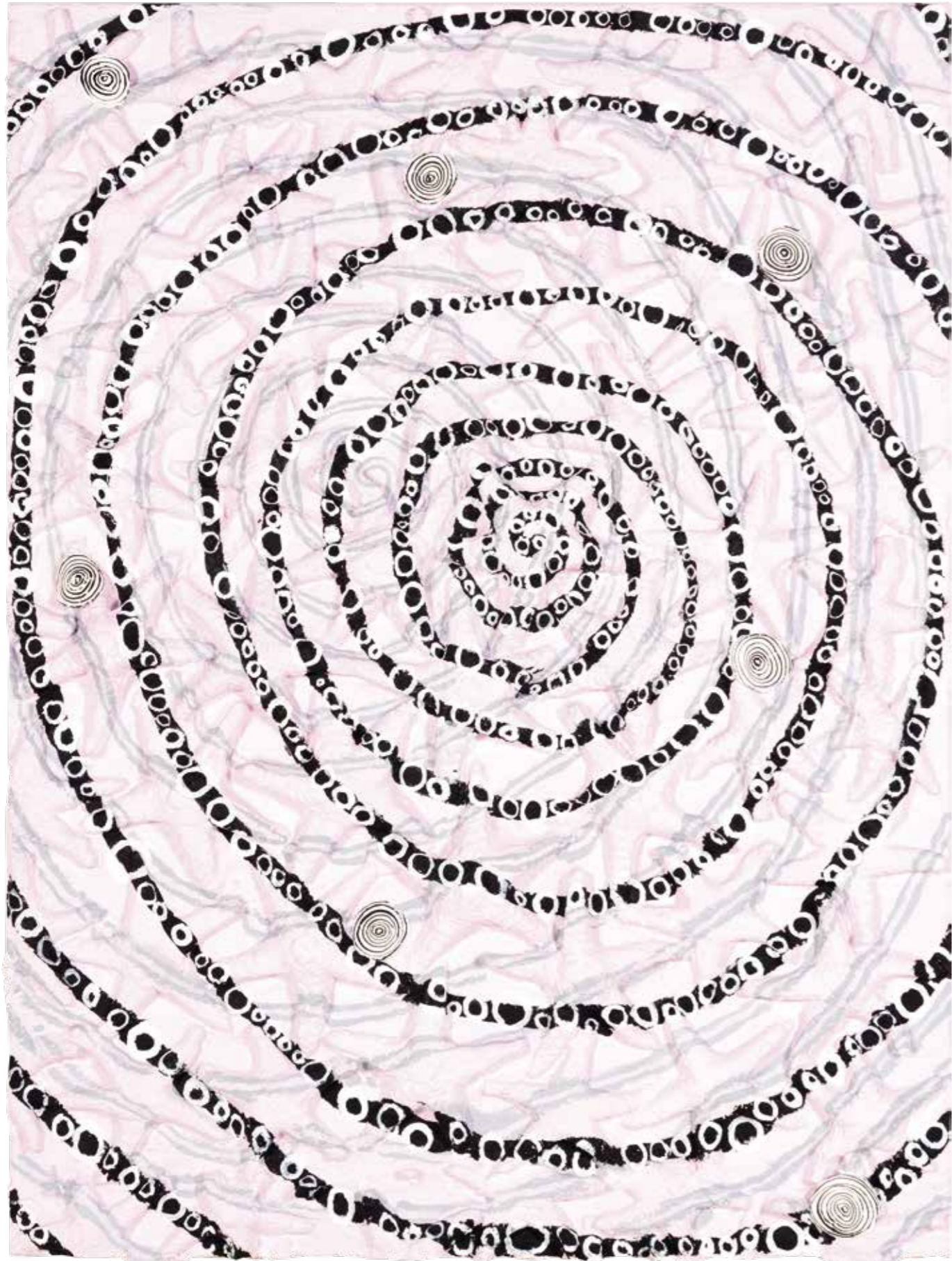
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Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 83.8 x 71.1 cm | 2017

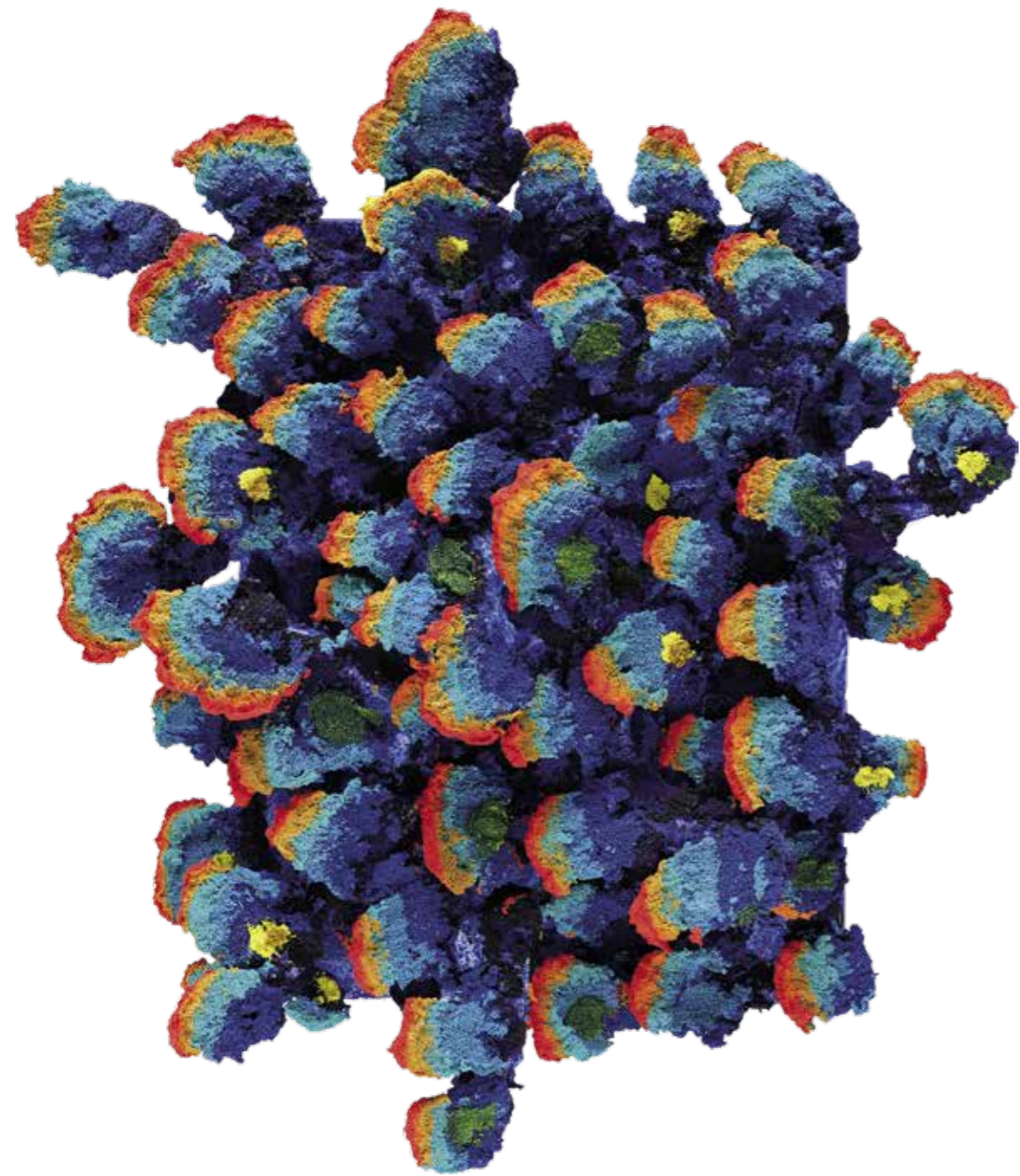


Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 160 x 120 cm ( 63 x 47,3 in ) | 2019

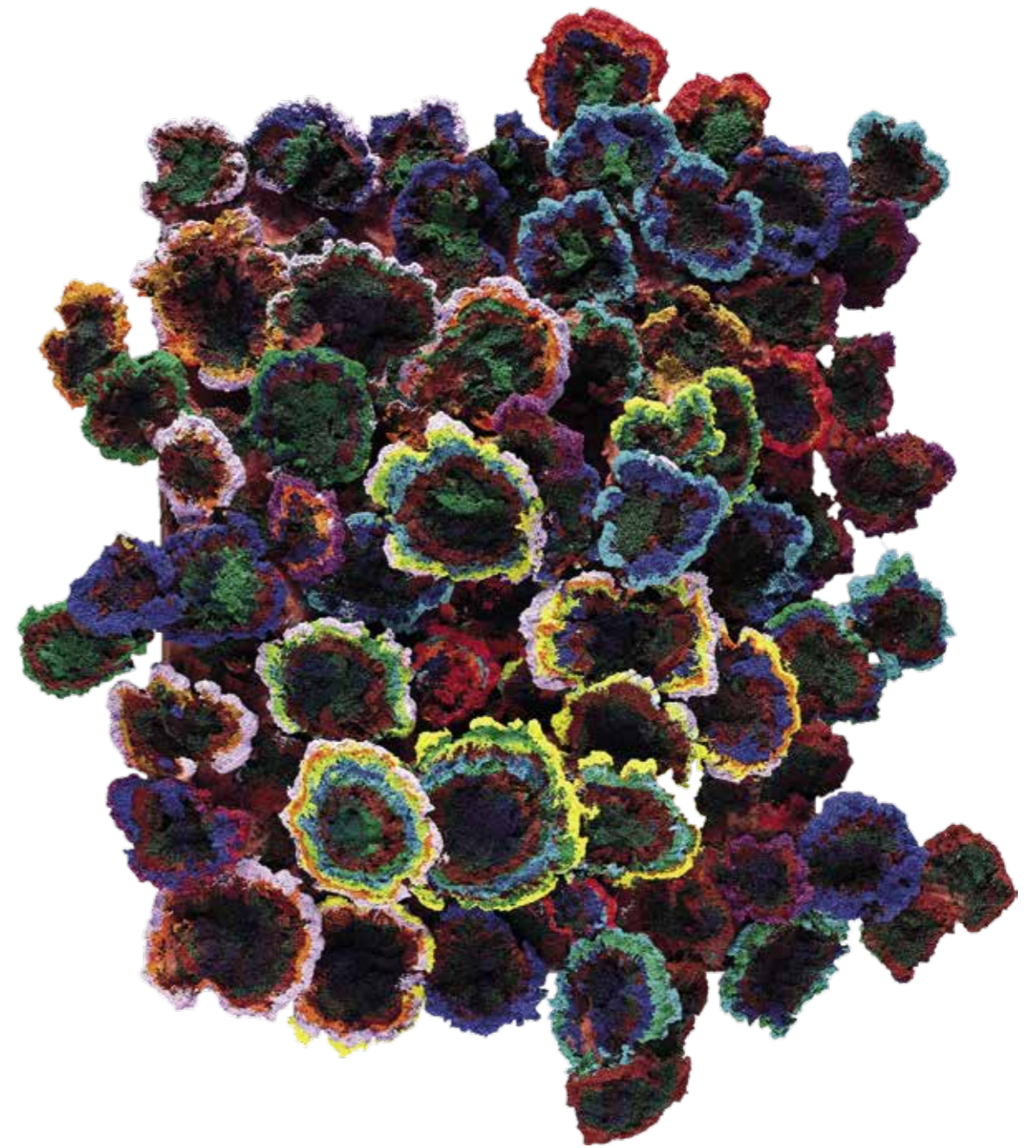




Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 160 x 120 cm ( 63 x 47,3 in) - each | 2019

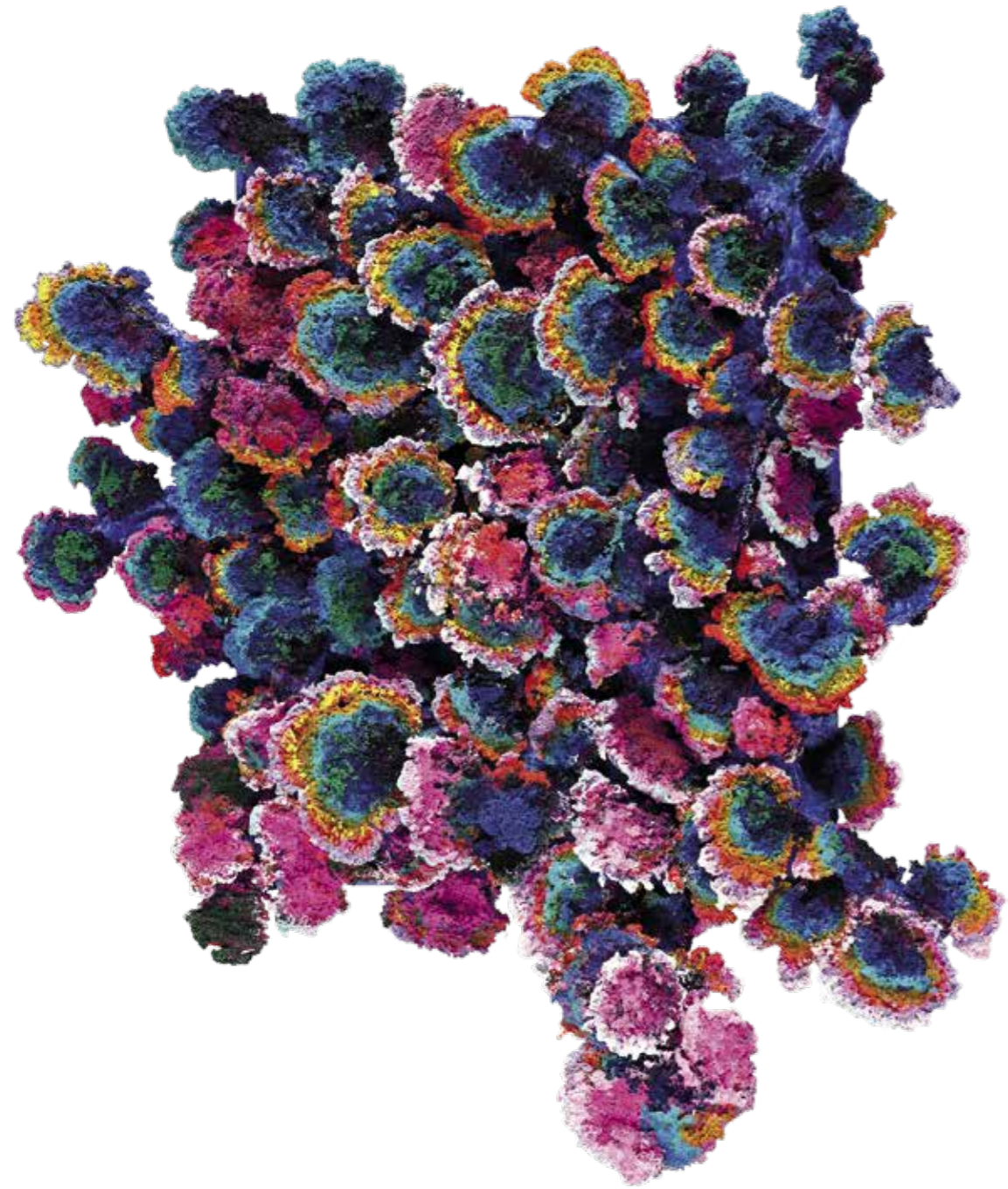


Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 50.8 x 45.72 cm (20 x 18 in) | 2018

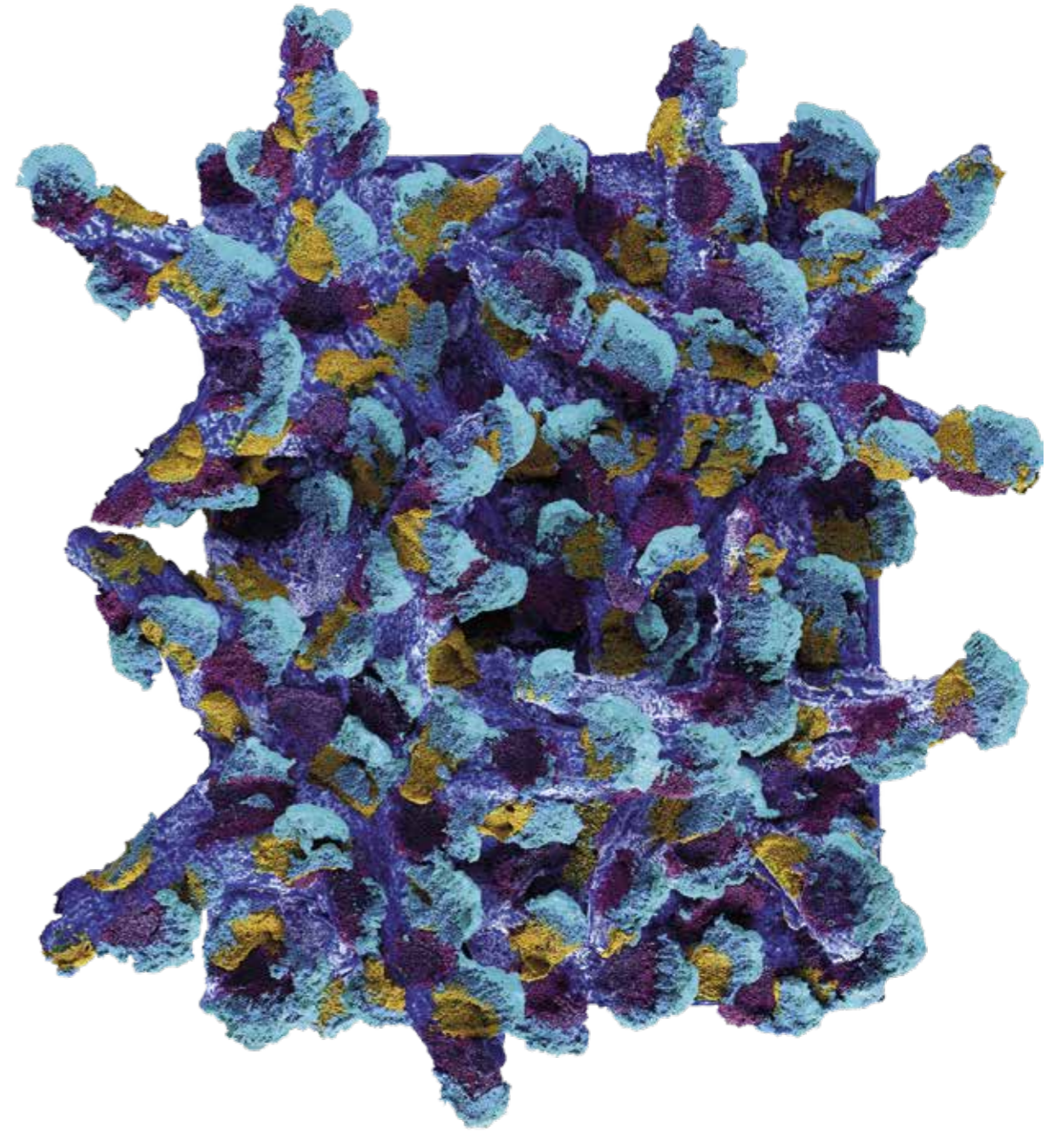


Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 48.26 x 43.18 cm (19 x 17 in) | 2018

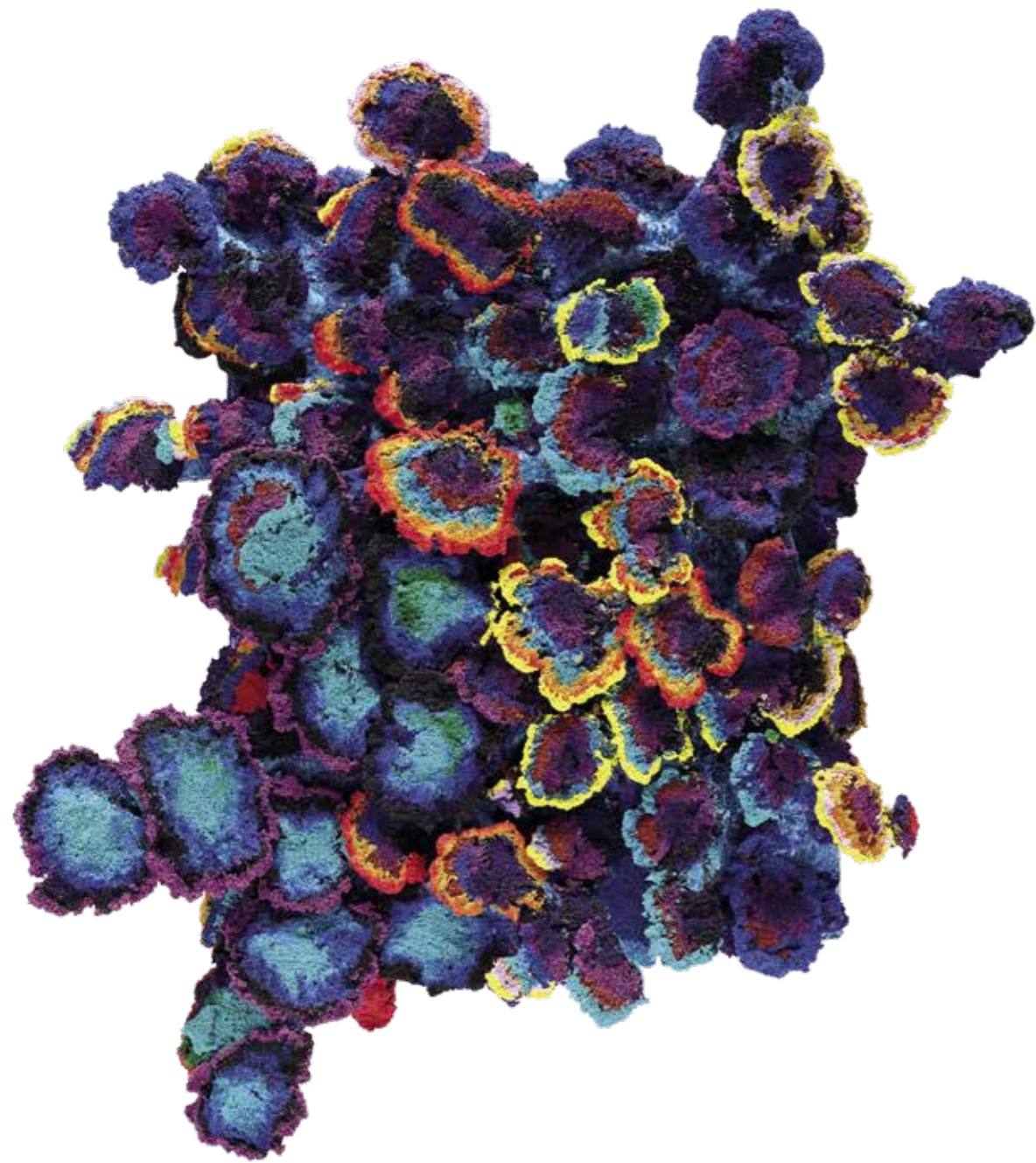




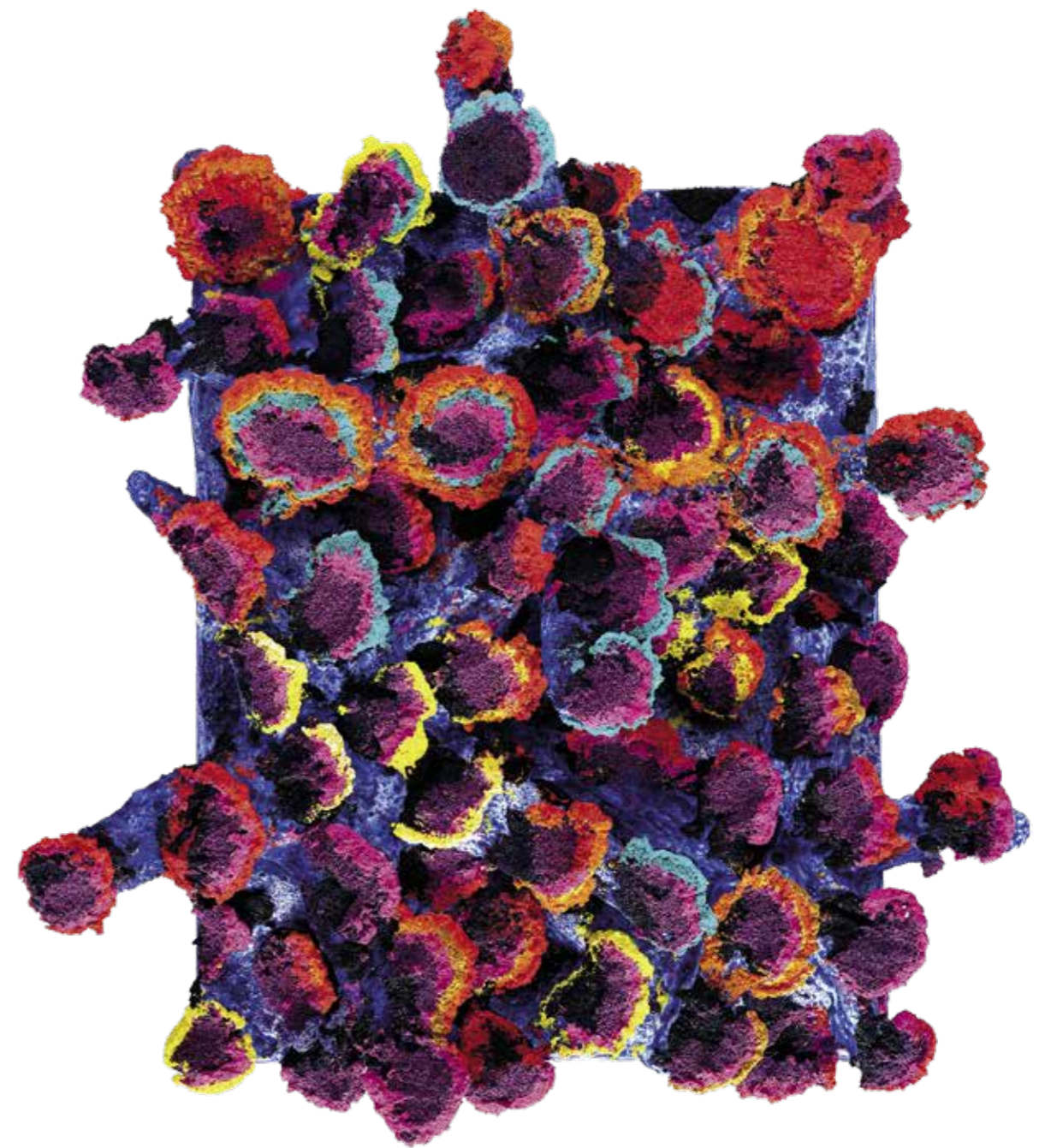
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 53.34 x 50.8 cm (21 x 20 in) | 2018



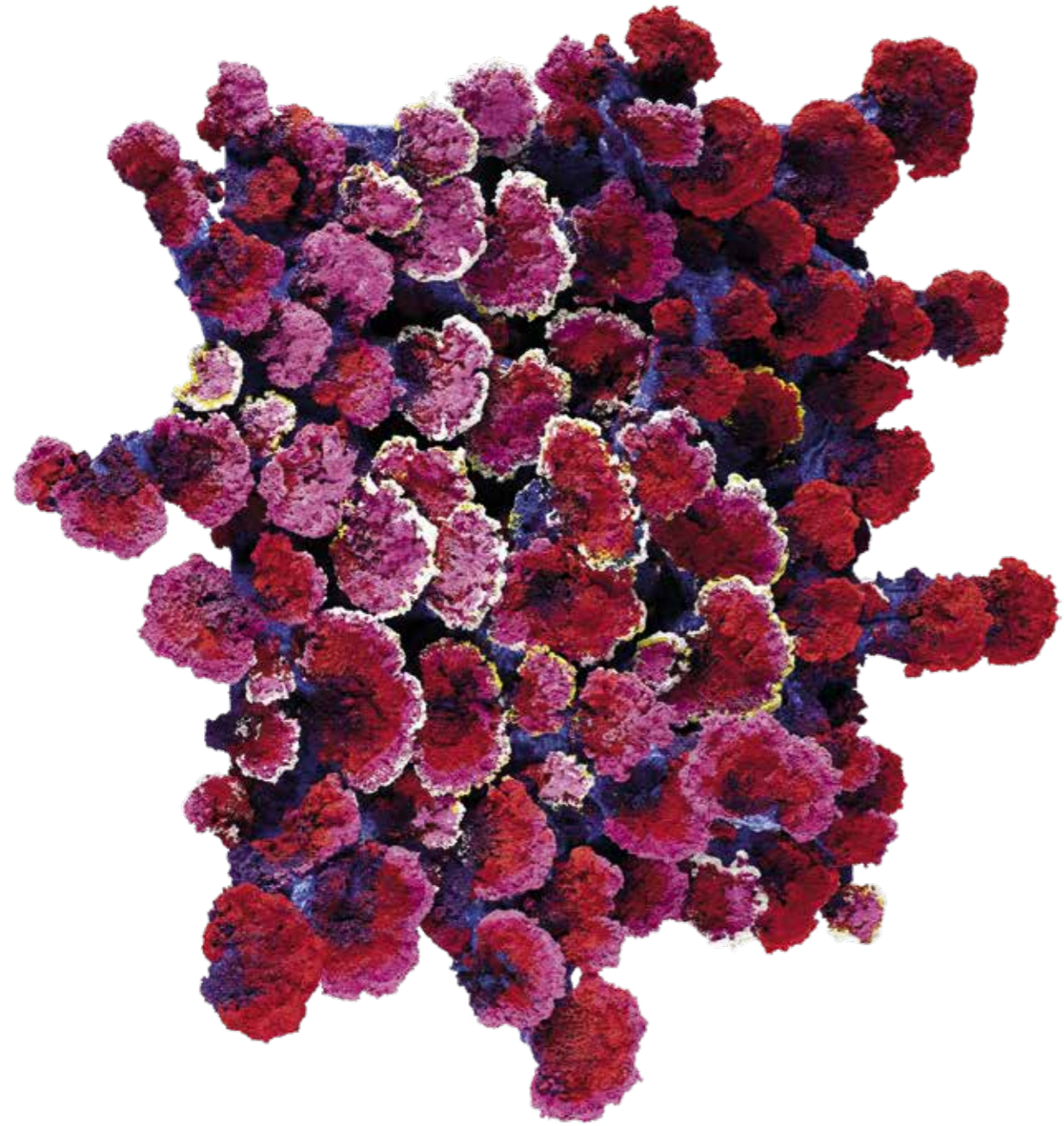
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 40.64 x 40.64 cm (16 x 16 in) | 2018



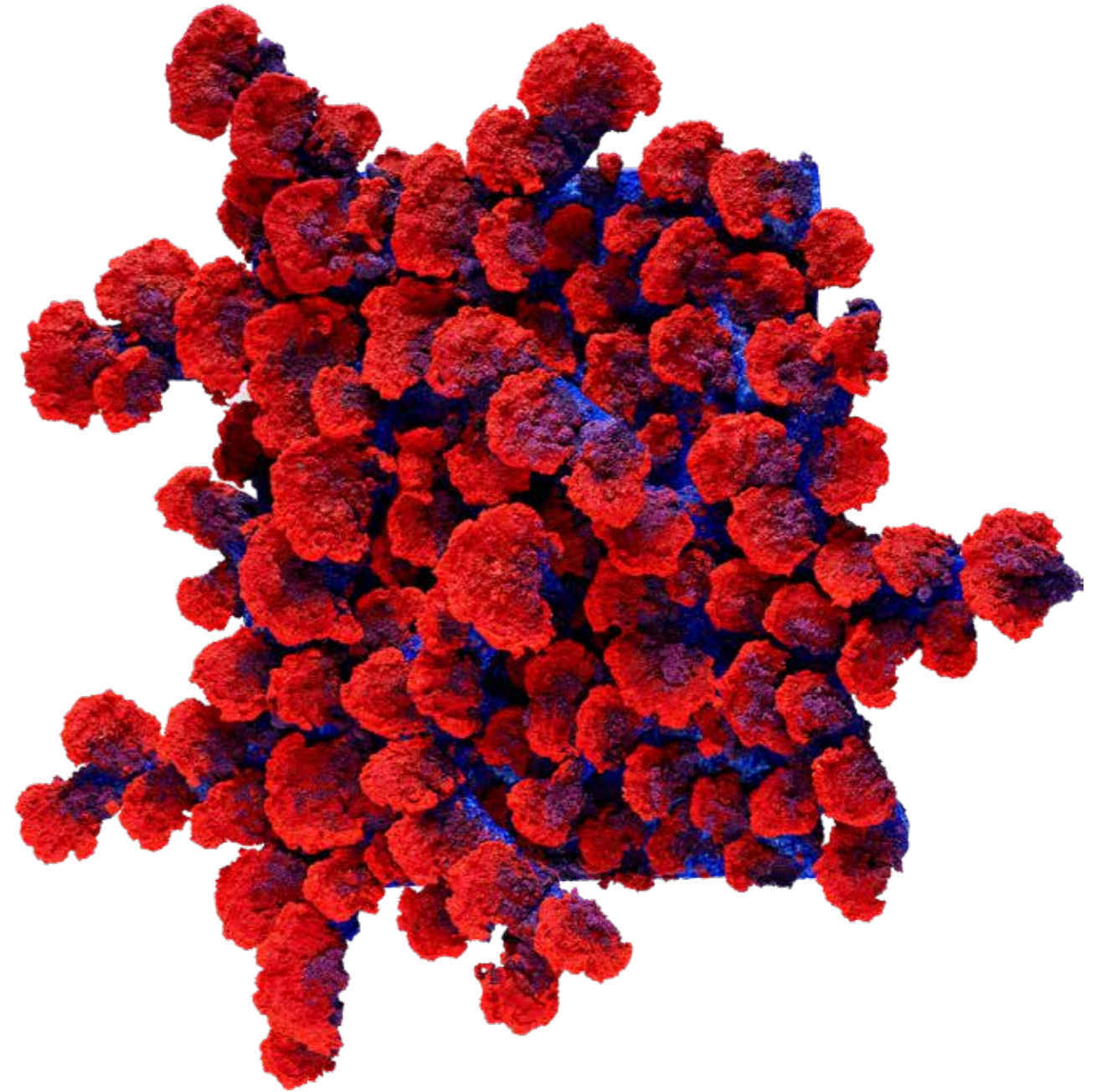
Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 50.8 x 45.72 cm (20 x 18 in) | 2018



Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 45.72 x 43.18 cm (18 x 17 in) | 2018



Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 48.26 x 48.26 cm (19 x 19 in) | 2018



Untitled | Acrylic on canvas | 53.34 x 53.34 cm (21 x 21 in) | 2018



Untitled | Acrylic on wood | 17.8 x 12.7 cm (7 x 5 in) - each | 2005

Untitled | Acrylic on wood | 17.8 x 12.7 cm (7 x 5 in) - each | 2005

# NABIL NAHAS

## Biography

Born	1949 Beirut, Lebanon Lives in New York City
Education	1971 Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, BFA 1973 Yale University, Connecticut
Awards	1980 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant 2013 National Order of the Cedar for services to Lebanese culture

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

1973	Yale University, Connecticut Yale University Chemistry Dept; mural
1977	Ohio State University, Ohio
1978	Robert Miller Gallery, New York
1979	Robert Miller Gallery, New York
1980	Robert Miller Gallery, New York
1987	Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
1988	Galerie Montenay, Paris Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
1994	Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, Colorado
1997	Sperone Westwater, New York (catalogue)
1998	Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, DC Milleventi, Milan
1999	Sperone Westwater, New York
2002	25th Bienal De São Paulo
2002-03	J. Johnson Gallery, Jacksonville Beach, Fl., 8 November 2002 – 3 January 2003 2005 Galerie Xippas, Paris, 23 April – 28 May Sperone Westwater, New York, 5 May – 25 June
2009	“Nabil Nahas: untitled (trees),” Galerie Tanit, Munich, Germany, 23 January – 28 March
2010	“Nabil Nahas. Cedrus Libani: Roots and Memory,” FIAF Gallery, New York, NY, 1-29 May “Works 1970 – 2012,” curated by Vincent Katz, Beirut Exhibition Center (BEC), Beirut, Lebanon, 22 June – 22 August (catalogue)
2011	“Palms and Stars,” Lawrie Shabibi gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 13 March – 13 April “Nabil Nahas,” Ben Brown Fine Arts, London, England, 13 October – 3 December (catalogue)
2013	“Nabil Nahas,” Sperone Westwater, 5 April – 4 May (catalogue)
2013-14	“Nabil Nahas,” Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE, 17 November 2013 – 9 January 2014
2014	“Nabil Nahas: Phoenix Dactylifera,” Ben Brown Fine Arts, London, 13 October – 14 November (catalogue)
2016	“Nabil Nahas: Recent Works,” Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon, 20 May – 30 July (catalogue)
2018	“Nabil Nahas: Untitled. Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong,



## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1977 "Art on Paper," Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 13th Weatherspoon Annual Exhibition
- 1979 "Paintings on Loan from Private Collections," Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York "New York Now," Phoenix Museum, Arizona  
Basel Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland
- 1980 "Subject Space," Pratt Institute Gallery, New York
- 1981 Studio Museum of Harlem, New York
- 1983 "Twentieth Century Art From the Metropolitan Museum," Queens Museum, Queens, New York
- 1987 "Razzle Dazzle," SSC&B Worldwide Advertising, New York  
"Art against Aids," Benefit Auction organized by Livet-Reichard, New York
- 1988 "American Baroque," Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
- 1993 Edward Thorp Gallery, New York
- 1994 Brian Gross Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1996 Sperone Westwater, New York
- 1997 Galerie Tanit, Munich  
"What's Hot," Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, DC
- 1999 "Group Exhibition," Sperone Westwater, New York
- 1999-00 "Souvenirs: Collecting, Memory, and Material Culture," The Museum Guild Hall, NY, 9 October 1999 – 9 January 2000
- 2000 "Arte Americana; Ultimo Decennio," Museo d'Arte della Citta di Ravenna, Ravenna, 8 April – 25 June (catalogue)  
"Le Temps Fractal," Galerie Xippas, Paris, 17 June – 29 July
- 2001 "Painting Abstraction II," New York Studio School, New York, 24 May – 30 June  
"Green on Greene," Sperone Westwater, New York, 1 November – 15 December (catalogue)
- 2002 "American Fractals," Blanden Memorial Art Museum, Fort Dodge, Iowa, 20 January – 17 March (catalogue)  
XXV Bienal de São Paulo 2002, 23 March - 2 June, São Paulo, Brazil.  
"Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture," American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, 4 March – 7 April  
"Blobs, Wiggles and Dots, Webs and Crustillations," The Work Space, New York, 17 May – 12 June
- 2010 "BARAKAT: The Gift. Contemporary Art from the Middle East and Africa," curated by Gaia Serena Simionati, Stux Gallery, New York, 3 June – 11 September
- 2011 "Glasstress 2011: Collateral Event of the 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia," Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti; Berengo Centre for Contemporary Art and Glass, Campiello della Pescheria, Murano; Wake Forest University, Casa Artom, Venice; organized by Adriano Berengo, 4 June – 27 November
- 2012 "Glasstress New York: New Art from the Venice Biennales," Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), New York, 14 February – 10 June  
"New Acquisitions," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
"Glasstress Beirut," curated by Adriano Berengo, Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, (catalogue)
- 2012-13 "Encounter: Royal Academy in the Middle East," Cultural Village Foundation – Katara, Doha, Qatar, 6 December 2012 – 6 March 2013
- 2013 "Murano><Merano: Glass and Contemporary Art," Merano Arte, Merano South Tyrol, 8 June – 8 September
- 2014 "ZIPORA FRIED / BASIM MAGDY / NABIL NAHAS / DANI TULL," On Stellar Rays, New York, 18 May – 21 June
- 2015 "Summer Show," Leila Heller Gallery, New York, 9 July – 12 September

- 2011 Nazhand, Nazy. "Middle East Report," artnet.com (artnet magazine), 24 May 2011. Hackett, Kathleen. "Looking to the Past." Elle Décor. April 2011, 152-159.  
"Nabil Nahas Unveils The Artist Within." arabwomennow.com, 25 November 2011. "Checkbooks on the Ready: Art Basel Miami 2011." artcritical.com, 27 November 2011.
- 2013 Tan, Dion. "Video: Nabil Nahas's Nature on Display." artinfo.com (ARTINFO), 4 April 2013. Pisen, Tabitha. "Nabil Nahas." bombsite.com (BOMBlog), 4 April 2013.  
Donoghue, Katie. "Nabil Nahas: Process and Perception." Whitewall Magazine (whitewallmag.com), 30 April.  
Lindemann, Adam. "Nabil Nahas show at Sperone Westwater." Adam Lindemann (adamlindemann.com).  
Mazza, Lorenzo. "Murano-Merano. Il vetro e l'arte contemporanea," ArtsBlog.com (Arts Blog).  
Zehil, Sylviane. "Les <Etologies> de Nabil Nahas pour Bernardaud dans les vitrines de New York," L'OrientLeJour.com (L'Orient Le Jour).  
Nabil Nahas. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Sperone Westwater, 2013.  
Donoghue, Katy. "Nabil Nahas." Whitewall, Summer 2013, 114-119.
- 2014 Nabil Nahas. Exhibition catalogue. Dubai: Lawrie Shabibi, 2014.  
Nabil Nahas: Phoenix Dactylifera. Exhibition catalogue London: Ben Brown Fine Arts, 2014.
- 2016 Sand, Olivia. "Nabil Nahas." Asian Art Newspaper, February 2016, pp. 2, 4, 6.

## Theatre Work

- 1988 Designed sets for "Occasional Encounter," Jennifer Muller Dance Co.

## Public Collections

- The British Museum, London.  
Colby Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.  
The Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan.  
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.  
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Education City, Doha, Qatar  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA.  
Tate Modern, London.  
Vorhees Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

SALEH BARAKAT GALLERY

ساليه باركات

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Design by Carol Chehab

Photographer: Paul Hennbelle and Farzad Owrang

Printed by Salim Dabbous Printing Co. sarl | Binding by: Baayno Bookbindery

Exhibition: 13 September - 24 October | 2019

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