



Kristy Gorman
SHADOW WORK

Shadow work

From the earliest times the mirror has been thought of as ambivalent. It is a surface which reproduces images and in a way contains and absorbs them. In legend and folklore, it is frequently invested with a magical quality – a mere hypertrophic version of its fundamental meaning. In this way it serves to invoke apparitions by conjuring up the same images which it received in the past, or by annihilating distances when it reflects what was once an object facing it and is now far removed.¹

In her 1995 exhibitions *Lumen* and *Surfacing*, Kristy Gorman presented rooms of fragmented paintings and drawings configured in the shape of oval looking glasses amongst which apparitions of the past appeared.² Like Alice's looking glass, the surfaces of Gorman's paintings seemed to turn to gauze and mist,³ amongst which light and shadow enacted a game of revelation and concealment. At a distance the shadows were intangible, appearing merely as abstract shapes or smears. Only for the inquisitive viewer did they gain form and substance. For under close inspection, different shadows materialised and then disappeared as one veil fell and another parted, activated by the play of light across the paintings' surfaces.

These paintings conjured up apparitions of past mirrored glances, transporting the viewer into the intimate sphere of the dressing room of a bygone era where frills flounced and skirts swung. Within each painting a single aspect of clothing – a dancing ribbon, a twist of embroidery, a ruffle – was repeated over and over. With each repetition, a different aspect came to light – the fabric's pattern and texture, its structure and rhythms – as if the object was being visually caressed and explored by memory. An aura of nostalgia marked these paintings. The colours – black, creamy white and sepia brown – were those of old photographs, dog-eared and faded from years of handling from generation to generation, and exposure to sunlight and damp. In turn, Gorman's paintings were also faded and worn, in places almost threadbare like a favourite armchair. It is through these marks and the allusions to clothing that the presence of the body was implied. As in myth the souls had escaped these metaphorical mirrors, leaving only their material trappings behind.

Gorman became interested in the investigation of such trappings during a summer vacation spent cataloguing the textile collection at the Rotorua Art and History Museum.⁴ Making detailed drawings of the garments and filling them with tissue for storage, she began to notice that, although the wearers had passed to history, indelible traces of their lives remained embedded in the fabric of their clothes. Material was worn and patterns blurred where parts of the body routinely rubbed, under arms and around the cuffs. Buttonholes and seams were stressed. Released hems glowed

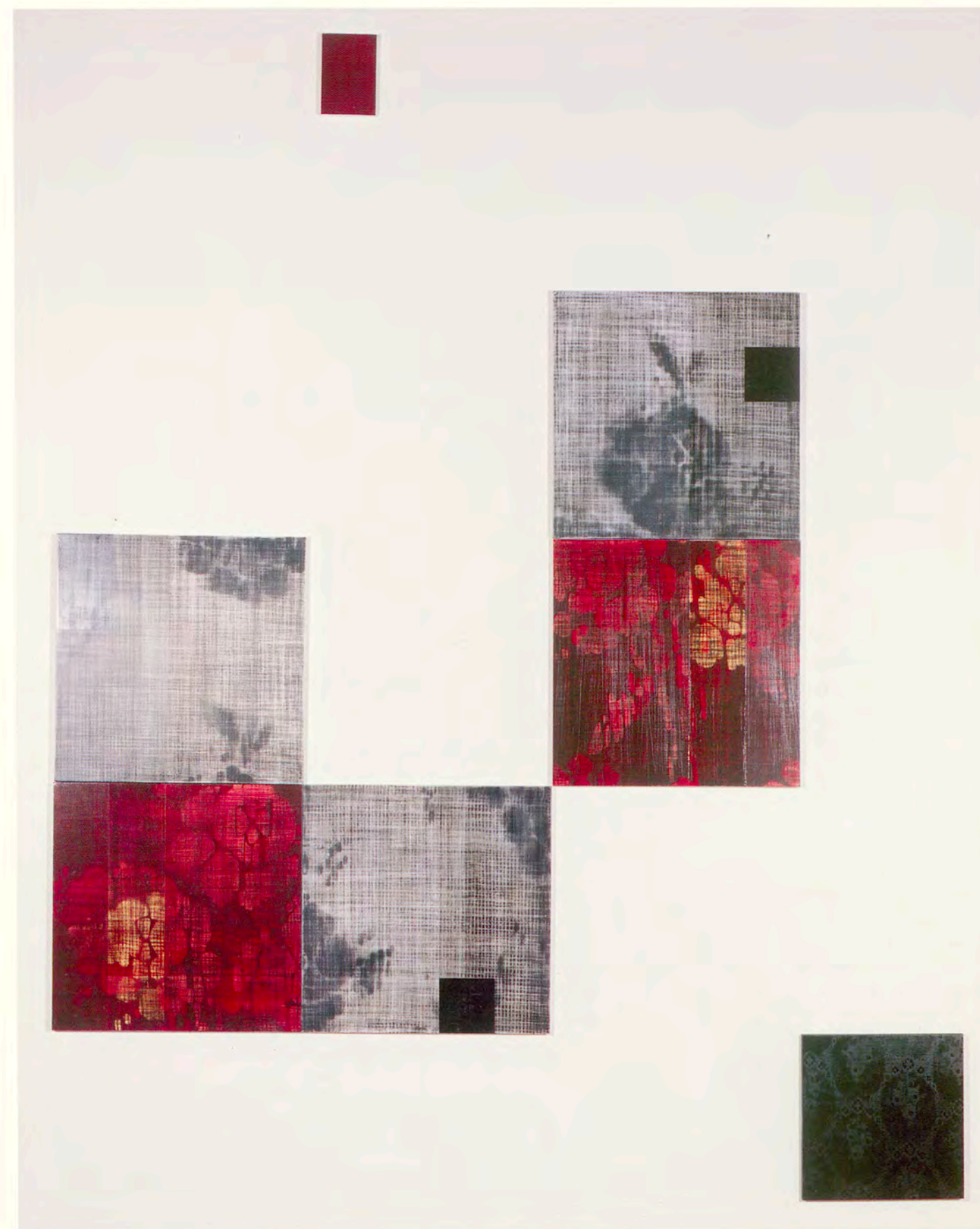
against faded material. Stains stubbornly clung. The fragrance of a favourite perfume lingered. Vestiges of persons other than the wearer also remained. The skill and patience of the maker's hands could be retraced in the cutting and stitching, in the detailed embroidery and the intertwined threads of lace, in the tell-tale pin marks, and the perforated tracks of tacking and mistaken stitches unpicked. Each impression, mark and smell provided shadows from which details of life stories could be imagined.

The piecing together of clues from these residues remains at the heart of Gorman's work. The remnants of small human histories capture her eye – a clean space on a dusty dresser which echoes the form of an object recently removed, the shallow indentation of a head in a pillow, graffiti sketched in a dewy veil of condensation. All signs of presence that so often go unnoticed, except in moments of crisis, loss or tenderness.

In *Shadow work* Gorman offers for investigation, like museological exhibits, collections of vague impressions to be studied. Like the garments that she handled, the stained and marred planes of her paintings beg to be explored. It is a process which Gorman has already begun. An amateur archaeologist, she excavates the surfaces of her own paintings, revealing memories of her own mark making.

Painting forwards then backwards, Gorman erases individual marks and entire layers through the processes of addition and subtraction, only to begin again. Just as carefully as layers of gesso, paint and images are built up, sections are stripped away with solvents and sand paper, or smothered by paint. Impressions of the past survive to haunt the future. Pentimenti, the phantoms of erased marks, resurface, disclosing alterations made to the composition as the artist worked. In *Corner painting*⁵ pentimenti trace the painting's serpentine motif, echoing its movement from the painting's depths to its surface.

While pentimenti accidentally provide an insight into an artist's process of decision making, a more conclusive method of revealing the complexities of a painting's surface is by the employment of light. While Gorman exploits the natural play of light across her matt and high gloss surfaces, her application of paint and spare choice of pigments imitate the powerful modes of light used in the art of conservation.



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The blue of *Corner painting* recalls the transformation of objects studied under ultraviolet light, which excites different types of fluorescence on the surface of a painting, revealing dirt and grime, and "improvements" made by wayward restorers or judicious moralists. The dark red of *Remnant* references the infra red rays of reflectography which delve deeper, exposing the changes made by the artist, areas of damage and repair, and even preparatory drawings. Gorman's scarred black and white panels give the illusion of x-rays of paintings – surreal compositions of interlaced ghosts, crisscrossed by the skeletal lines of the support. Although in actual practice these processes divulge the mysteries of a painting's depths, Gorman's painted imitations remain enigmatic. Seemingly unravelled, they are not resolved.

The paintings in *Shadow work* appear to have been ravaged by time. Paint is flaking and badly scraped, edges are worn, and panels seem to be missing, as if at some stage the works were disassembled, and now, decades or centuries later, fragments have been recovered and reconfigured like the shards of a broken vase. As in the fragmented paintings of *Lumen* and *Surfacing*, the square and rectangular panels of *Corner painting* have been arranged in the shape of a full length looking glass. A new type of intimacy, however, is created by its arrangement in what is often an overlooked part of a room – the corner. Its shape is reminiscent not only of a dress mirror, but of an opened locket, another container of memory. Indeed, the work seeks to contain the viewer, drawing the person in close until he or she is in its full embrace.

The shadowy images that move in and out of focus across the panels of *Corner painting* are evocative of life forms – strange plants, feathers, vertebrates – floating in resin, or fossilized in stone, where, like the bed with no sleeper, only the slight impression of the body remains. The images, however, are never complete. Despite the regimented edges of the square and rectangular panels, and the layers under which they are sealed, the images defy containment. They appear to slide off the edges into nothingness, like memories that slip just beyond the mind's reach. Their disappearance off the edges activates the white areas that lie between. These empty spaces, as with the unconscious, are brimming with unknown presence. In Gorman's work absence is as rich in meaning as substance.

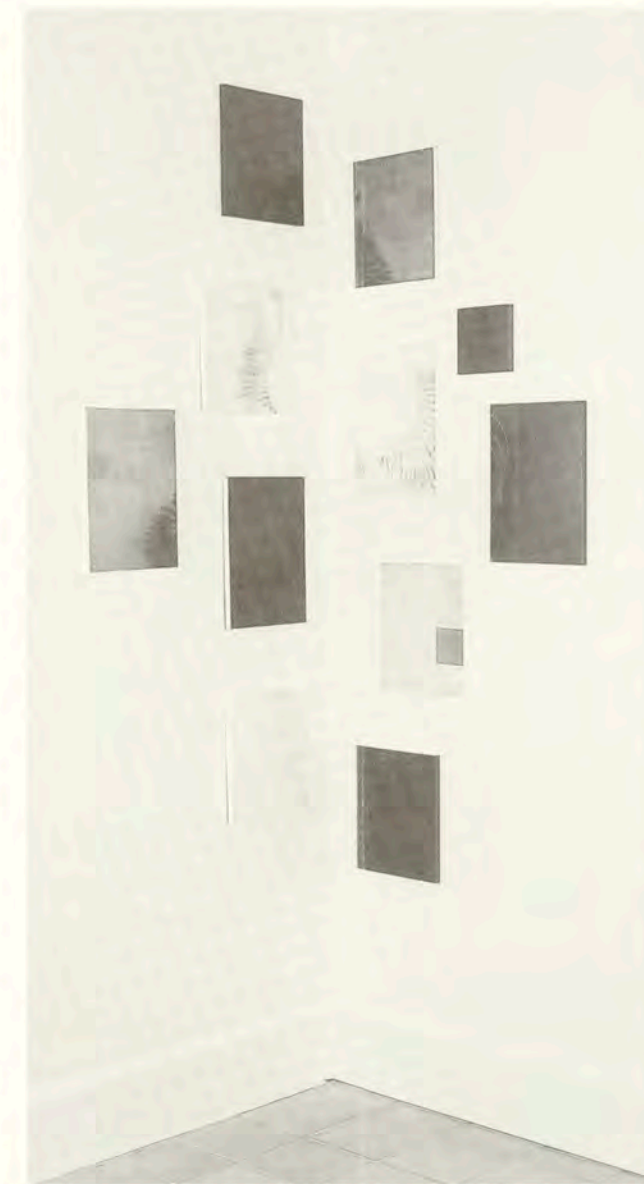
Another shadow joins those embedded in *Corner painting*. It is that of the viewer, whose presence is reflected in the surface of an empty black panel hung at head height, the size of a face. Absorbed by the mirror-like surface, all features dissolve in the panel's dark depths, reducing the viewer to a haunting apparition. Its presence recalls the tradition of memento mori, in which mirrors reflect not the present state of being but signs of things to come – the fading

of youth and the inevitability of death. The oscillating surfaces of Gorman's paintings correspond to layers of time. The present is found in the well defined, the past in the blurred and fading. The future is indistinct, foreshadowed by the present and past, but waiting to receive marks of its own.

Whereas the proportions of *Corner painting* are akin to those of the human body, *Remnant* and *Selva* are grander in scale and less intimate in nature. In these larger works the fragments are ordered along the lines of a grid, a tool used in the categorising of information and as a control mechanism, be it in an archaeological site squared for excavation or an embroidery pattern. The grid reflects a human desire for control, for everything, including history, to fit into a logical and cohesive pattern. Whereas history is often presented as seamless, Gorman's paintings bear witness to wide expanses of uncharted time. Linked tenuously to each other, the panels float in a sea of whiteness, into which some fragments seem prone to fade. The gray weave of *Remnant* is almost threadbare. Particles of *Selva* seem as though they could be wiped away, with the sweep of a cloth. Often in the search for history, evidence is destroyed. Material is also overlooked.

Both *Remnant* and *Selva* include two fragments that could easily be missed. One is high above the body of the work, out of human reach. The other is below, almost at skirting level. When the viewer stands in front of the work, this panel appears plain black. But when one crouches low, its surface comes to life, revealing the slightest impression of leaves and minuscule flowers. Shifting from the small panel to the larger ones above, connections form. The incomplete grid is a partial magnification, albeit blurred and obscured, of the pattern in this lowest rectangle.

The delicate and transient nature of signs of presence is most poignantly expressed in Gorman's *Undone drawings*, the existence of which is barely delectable against the whiteness of the wall. As their titles imply these drawings



Corner painting 1996

Claire Regnault

are comprised not of substance but of absence – of broken trails of perforations that converge in subtle patterns across white expanses of paper, like the marks left by unpicked embroidery or by the pins in a lace maker's pricking. As in her paintings the fall of light transforms these works, creating opposing effects. From one vantage point the tiny holes harbour darkness, creating faint shadows, from another the rough edges of the perforations reflect light, giving the illusion

of subtle Braille-like reliefs of glowing white on white. Move again and the perforations all but disappear from view, dissolving into specks on the wall. The forms they detail – flowers and butterflies – are as transitory in nature as their rendering. In one drawing, flowers decorate an oval, like an engraving on a locket. Whereas in *Corner painting* the locket opens to reveal its contents, here it is closed tight in a bid to preserve the memories within. A single perforated flower, however, resists containment and gently floats away, disappearing into the whiteness of the paper.

For all of humankind's efforts to preserve the past – in lockets, museums, history books and photo albums – so much more is lost, slipping, like Gorman's images, from recognition and fading from sight and recollection. Smells evaporate and colours fade. Pillows are puffed, sheets smoothed, surfaces dusted and polished, erasing old marks and beginning anew. Like the white spaces which surround Gorman's works, the erased past awaits the residue of the future to gather.

KRISTY GORMAN

1969 Born in Tapanui
1992 Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury
1994 Diploma in Secondary Teaching, Christchurch College of Education

Exhibitions

- *denotes solo exhibitions
- 1991 *On building bridges* Canterbury Society of Arts, Christchurch
- 1992 *Home and away* Ritchies Gallery, Christchurch
Embody Gallery 223, Christchurch
- 1993 *Women's lives* Robert McDougall Annex, Christchurch
Women's art Suter Gallery, Nelson
Young contemporaries Suter Gallery, Nelson
Nature show High Street Gallery, Christchurch
- 1994 *By invitation only* a postcard mailout exhibition, South Island Art Projects
Screen High Street Gallery, Christchurch
- 1995 *Lumen** Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch
Jensen Gallery, Wellington
A very peculiar practice City Gallery, Wellington
*Surfacing** Vavasour/Godkin Gallery, Auckland
- 1996 *Pins and needles* Suter Gallery, Nelson
*Residuum** Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch

Bibliography

- Justin Paton "Kristy Gorman, Andrea Gerbic" *Art New Zealand* 45, 1995. pp 45-47.
- Allan Smith "A very peculiar practice: a user's guide" *A very peculiar practice* City Gallery, Wellington, 1995.
- Jonathan Bywater *Pins and needles: eight Christchurch artists* Suter Gallery, Nelson 1996.

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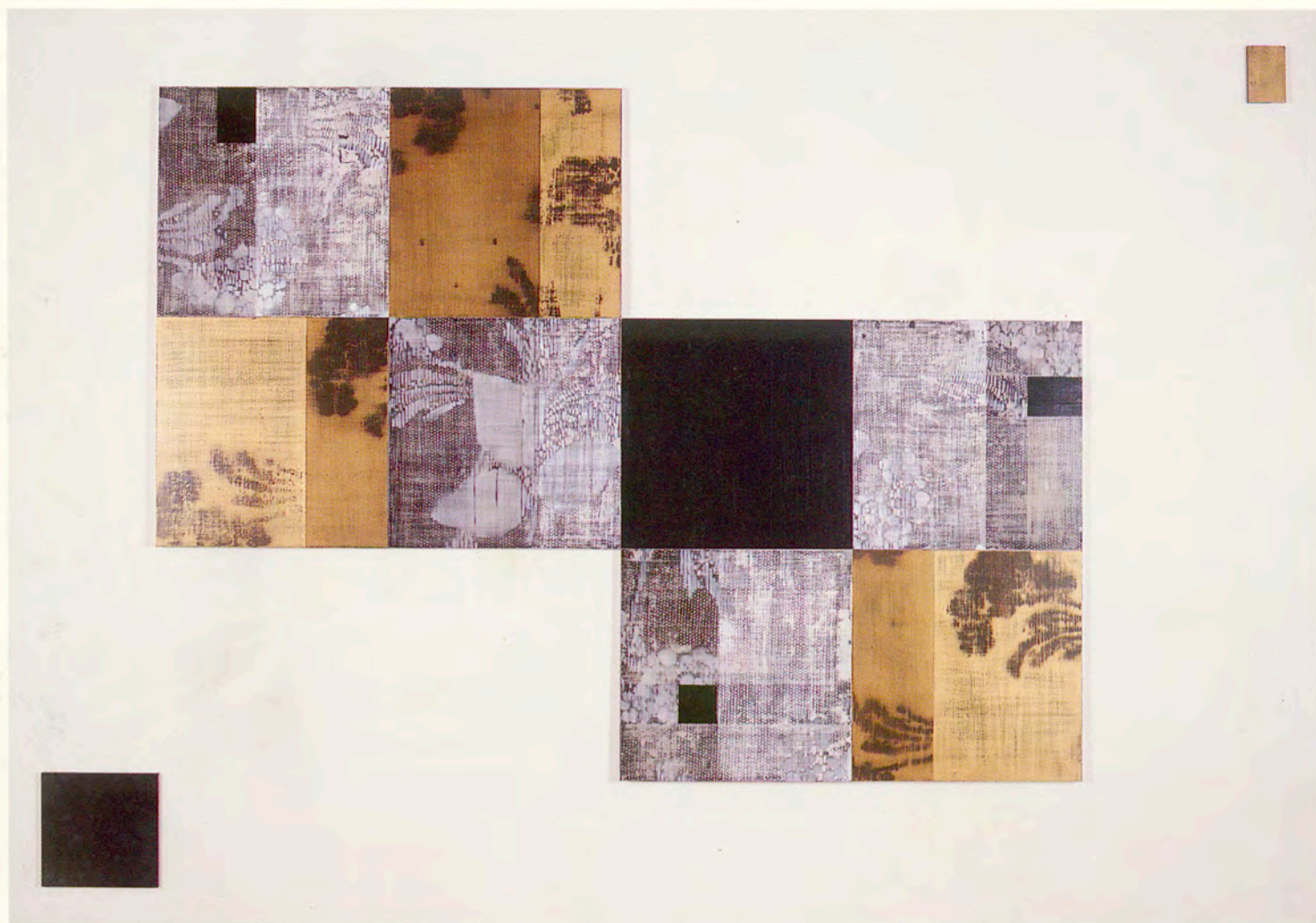
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- 1 J E Cirlot *Dictionary of Symbols* London, 1971. p 211.
- 2 *Lumen* Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch 1995.
Surfacing Vavasour/Godkin Gallery, Auckland 1995 (joint exhibition with sculptor Carolyn Menzies).
- 3 Lewis Carroll *Alice's adventures in wonderland and Through the looking glass* Oxford 1971. p 127.
- 4 Formerly known as The Bath House Museum.
- 5 *Corner painting* was first exhibited in *Residuum*, Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, 1996, as *Corner painting 1*.



◀ *Remnant* 1996

▲ *Selvage* 1996

▶ *Undone drawing* 1996 (detail)

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