

Rudik Ovsepyan

*Magaxat* | Survey (1976 - 2023)

“...two suns on opposite horizons  
one dark, the other blazing.”

—Gregory of Narek (Նարեկ), Prayer 30, *Book of Lamentations* (Մատենան որբերգութեան)

RUDIK OVSEPYAN

***Magaxat* | Survey (1976 - 2023)**

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REISIG AND TAYLOR CONTEMPORARY

*Magaxat* is a historical survey of paintings, prints, and sculptures by Rudik Ovsepyan (b. 1949: Leninakan, Armenia). The timeframe of the exhibition is 1976 – 2023. Certain phases and bodies of work are omitted from this survey in order to observe, through connected isolations, specific turning-points and unique experimental techniques that appear most crucial in the transformation toward Ovsepyan’s current material abstraction.

Ranging from the bucolic landscape sceneries that formalized his former career as a Soviet artist to his current material-focused, process-driven works in abstraction, the exhibition recovers autobiographical traces of Ovsepyan’s evolving practice across multiple languages, multiple countries, and multiple decades (spanning 47 years). Displaying personally and historically significant works from each period of dwelling in a different place—Armenia (USSR), Germany, and the United States—this first historical survey of Ovsepyan’s work focuses on transitional phases of his oeuvre. The selected works demonstrate an anticipatory or consequential relation to the irruption of his singular mode of abstraction that emerged in the wake of the 1988 Spitak earthquake in Armenia. In particular, the exhibition includes transitional works from his *Red* series (1988-92), produced directly in response to this traumatic event, as well as new and unseen works from his time in Germany and the United States. Ultimately, this driving work in abstraction caused him to be banned as a Soviet artist, and motivated him to immigrate to Germany, and then the United States, in order to continue his insurgent practice.

The title of the exhibition, *Magaxat*, the artist’s transliteration of the Armenian “Մ ա գ ա ղ ա թ” (‘Magaghat’), or “parchment,” into Latin script, is taken from the name of one of the metamorphic series of painted/sculpted paper works included in the exhibition. Coupling irregular, tattered-seeming edges with the sinewy yawn of paper mummified in oil and wax, the artefactual materiality of the surfaces in this series remembers the leathery parchment scrolls of a medieval manuscript. Embedded within and strung across the rigor mortis of the material, illuminated patterns of symbols and letters are threaded into a grid and glyphically carved into the paper, suggesting the supple furls of a scroll and the eroded reliefs of a stone tablet through the same contradictory (but harmonious) form. Illegible, or nearly so, but demanding to be interpreted and read: the flesh of each *Magaxat*, of each “parchment,” forms a record of a body—a language, a technique, a trauma, and a transmigration. Encountered again and again, this formation of a record through materials and symbols, of holding the imprint of a body and its writ(h)ing, appears as a minimal activity of each work presented in the exhibition.

Centrally positioned (between 2005-06) along the timeline of the exhibition, and uniquely situating a metonymic reference to Armenian manuscripts (produced on parchment) while remaining directly uttered through the material itself (“parchment”), *Magaxat* names a constant tension between material and symbolic registers throughout Ovsepyan’s work. A material symbol, and a symbolic material. Holding this tension, the exhibition asks: is the work a message or an image (or both)? An artefact or an artifice? A sacred object or a worldly—even *cursed*—image? An incorporation or a figuration (or a signification)? A writing or a sculpting? Or, materially and theoretically, what is a record (of a body) and how is it formed? And, how does this record-keeping demonstrate or keep track of—and *resist*—patterns of territorial governance, political persecution, imperial distribution, (an)aesthetic regulation, and economic discipline of bodies? Collectively, the works begin to respond to these critical questions about power and the relations of identity, history, language, catastrophe, and exclusion through metropolitan structures of organization and displacement.

Deeply influenced by the intricately structured miniatures of Armenian illuminated manuscripts (as well as the

ornate patterns of Armenian rugs), each of Ovsepyan's works contains at least a single strand that strays back to traditional Armenian artforms. However, at the same time, and with equal force, Ovsepyan's work springs from the attributes and corporeality—or the particular vulnerability—of the material itself. Among the (more recent (2000-)) mixed-media works from the *Labyrinth*, *Zaun*, and *Magaxat* series, the material process is focused on paper. In earlier works, such as the oil/tempera paintings of his landscape sceneries and his *Red* series, there is still an emphasis on material, but in terms of the locality of the oils and the autochthonous pigments used to produce the works. Followed as a progression, the survey demonstrates a gradual evolution from (1) either realistically, impressionistically, or expressionistically *representational*, studied paintings of places and people (including state works); to (2) process-driven works inspired by traditional Armenian artforms; to (3) the *automatic*, material *and* process-driven works derived from the qualities of the material and autobiographical relations between texts, objects, or structures. (4) In-between and along each of these phases, techniques borrowed from printmaking recur as interventions between the textual, imagistic, and material dimensions of the work. (The exhibited “Russian Still Lives,” produced in Germany (1998-99), are exemplary culminations of his experiments with printmaking.) However, Ovsepyan's oeuvre is, fundamentally, more cyclical than linear, and he repeatedly returns to prior modes of production through new or evolved attitudes or means.

Forming a type of psychic and physical cut in his practice, where he begins to incisively work-through the trauma and displacement of the 1988 Spitak earthquake in Armenia, the *Red* Series emerges in the immediate aftermath of this catastrophic event. The destruction was especially widespread among the hastily-built Soviet-era apartment buildings in the northern industrial regions of Armenia, where Ovsepyan had been living with his family. He lost his business, his studio, and his home. (Ironically, many blamed the poor-quality Soviet construction on the so-called “Era of Stagnation” brought about by Brezhnev's leadership—this is the same Soviet leader that was depicted in an honorary mural by Ovsepyan years earlier.) These expressive and contemplative, but ultimately unconsciously-rendered, flattened scenes with hagiographic figures, manuscriptive letters, and religious imagery, display the symbolic space of Ovsepyan's nightmares as slivered and collapsing fields of urban form seen through the red haze of memories glowing with unforgetting. It is with the *Red* works where a polyphony of personal experience, collective memory, and historical iconographies begins to occur as the primary process of Ovsepyan's abstraction. (Markedly, these are the first works to include letters, texts, and symbols.)

Paradoxically, despite the intrinsic, unconscious, and deeply personal motivation behind the works, the *Red* series works extrinsically and referentially with the influences of medieval Armenian illuminated manuscripts in his practice. This folding of reality, reference, memory, and process suggest Ovsepyan's method of work reveals the system within which he is already caught-up. For example, the religious-symbolic imagery and figuration of these works make reference to the famous 10th century Armenian poet Gregory of Narek, and, aesthetically, the form and color embody overarching motifs embedded in works by Armenia's most celebrated medieval manuscript artist, Toros Roslin (1210-70). (Notably, among the various state, museum, and gallery exhibitions of his work that were presented while he was living in Germany, there was an exhibition—eponymically titled *Roslinrot* (1998)—of works from his *Red* series. Namely, this exhibition displayed affinities between the manuscripts of artist Toros Roslin and Ovsepyan's *Red* paintings.)

However, as with all of his work, these narrative or historical references are carried and produced by underlying, fundamental relations of the materials. The red paint for the *Red* series, made with a custom blend of oils sourced in Armenia along with the ancient *vordan karmir*—or, “worm's red”—pigment sourced from the Armenian cochineal insect (a cochineal native to the Ararat Plain), infuses raw materials from his homeland directly into his work. Once plentiful along the Armenian/Turkish border, this red pigment was widely used in medieval illuminated

manuscripts in (historical regions of modern-day) Armenia and Turkey, and is metaphorically tied to Armenia's industrialization throughout the Soviet period: this insect is now endangered due to the Soviet agriculturalization of the salt marshes required for the insects to reproduce. Ovsepyan's use of this red pigment performs a re-recording of an Armenian historical materiality before it is lost, extinct, or forgotten. Yet, despite its local ingredients, this recipe for blending pigment, tempera, and oil was crafted through the artist's extensive study of the techniques of European masters, with a particular focus on Rembrandt. Locally sourced but globally, and historically, cultivated. This tension between place and material is a perennial relation throughout all of Ovsepyan's work. By focusing on the material as an elementary source that must be reflexively incorporated into the work, revealed references appear as secondary, reflective divinations from the process and resulting relations, and not as projected appropriations or citations. Ovsepyan works with a material as a cryptic, nearly forgotten language lodged in a particular place in time—and then begins to read and re-write this language through his own cipher, reconstructing a wor(l)d from a single fragment.

Without knowing the specificity of the materials or techniques, each *Red* piece presents itself as an awakening to a dream within someone else's nightmare. Familiar symbols are evacuated and hushed, but nonetheless recognizable despite their displacement to estranged primitive structures: presence and absence; line and color; warp and woof.... The red signals a dazzling ceremony in the night; a hazard, a violence—a loud command with a blurred voice. Burning red with a simultaneous sense of ecstasy and lamentation, geometrically partitioned scenes that formally reference heavenly miniatures of illuminated manuscripts are found bent, broken, and smoldering—each painting presents a place and a people in mourning, but on the verge of salvation. At first, each scene may seem to be a depiction of a celebration or sacrament, but this is only a symptom of the “all-knowing” perspective granted to viewer: with everything in view, everything appears in place. At a distance, the apparent completeness of the perspective suggests intention and ritual. But then the startled lines, split figures, and slivered architectures give way to profound sense of *displacement*, of a population shaken, a place in ruins. In particular, with *Untitled* (1991) and *Gregory of Narek* (1989), the manuscriptive—omniscient, paneled (two-dimensional)—views of destroyed façades are presented as divine, but now *fallen*, perspectives, revealing collapsed buildings and razed rooms with their exterior walls shorn away.

Though, this segmented, lineated perspective is not restricted to architectures—figures (as in *Sacrifice* (1992)), objects, and symbols are also slivered and broken into discrete, cubismal regions along a non-orientable, mobius surface. (Letters, however, remain palimpsestically layered into the ventral plane of the surface regarded as an erased page.) The recurring, ambiguously gendered figure in three of the red paintings (all but *Still Life* (1992)) is the artist's avatar, his autobiographical envoy, adorned with an equivocal disguise that signals a haloed saint, a Marion pose, a mummified corpse, and a fallen idol at one and the same time. This is the figure of the poet, the artist, and the sacrifice. With *Sacrifice*, this figure fills a dramatic archway with a deconstructed anatomy suggestive of the placeholders of the Holy Trinity, but in a fallen or altered state: a sacrificial lamb, a wingless angel, a rising light upon the altar in a palace-turned-cave. Constantly shifting with each glance, the figure speciates itself somewhere between a bird, a fish, a mother, and a messiah, constructing an alienated totem that seems to forget its origins in the same moment it recalls them. While this shifting-surface of the subject occurs only figurally at this point, this anticipates the metamorphic material abstraction, and the attention to surface structures, in later works.

Naïvely placed along the timeline of Ovsepyan's artistic development, these works combine the brightly-colored scenery of his early landscapes and figurative works with his evolving tendencies toward geometric or puzzled abstraction. Paradoxically—or at least antagonistically—positioned themes of building, memory, and (dis)order

become the fundamental elements of his abstract work produced from this series onward (1988-). However, it is certainly possible to see how Ovsepyan's focus on order, structure, de(con)struction, and line precipitated in earlier works as well. In the two studies from 1976-77—one, a painting of his studio, the other a portrait of his family—as well as in the 1976-77 portrait of his wife, there is an evident continuity of a loosely patterned, seemingly stitched, geometries and folded/crumpled perspectives that result in a flattened scenes that sustain depth literally, through layers and texture, rather than with perspective along a projective plane. (The point-at-infinity of the projective plane becomes a puncture at the place of the observer, extrinsic to the work, and not “within” the surface—but is nonetheless coded along the lines.) With these three works, as with the works of the *Red* series, figures, objects, and buildings are all intersecting along the same plane, connecting along crossing lines: creating scenes where everything appears encased or embedded in a filmic membrane, producing distance as a sequence of alternating colors or shapes.

Further, these works also evidence the continuity of the autobiographical tendency of his practice: working from life through memory (and history). He paints—and, later, deconstructs—the people, the places, and the objects that surround him. In the included landscape scenery painting from 1977 titled *Vinter Jajur* (made with tempera on paper), the autobiographical dimension is explicitly represented. Jajur is the name of the village where Ovsepyan is from. This work is characteristic of the type of painting he was encouraged to produce throughout—and after—graduating from the State Academy of Fine Arts in 1974. He began painting these types of rural sceneries when he would return home on break from university during the change of each of the seasons. Leading up to officially becoming a Soviet artist in 1982, Ovsepyan participated in several juried group exhibitions throughout the USSR. These scenery paintings, which cycled into more and more abstract with time (as seen in the other three works from 1976-77) are what secured his membership through the jury's repeated approval of these works.

Moreover, Ovsepyan claims that the scratched, lineated texture of the tempera in these sceneries—and especially the snow-cover of the winter scenes—motivated his interest in more sculptural and dimensional techniques of “painting” found in his recent abstract works. Initially, however, his first phase of abstraction—seen in the *Red* series and earlier studies (1976-77)—emphasizes the lines more so than texture; producing stitched geometries, manuscriptive-minutresque tableaux, and non-orientable planes. Always studying his own work, Ovsepyan appears to be energetically influenced by his own prolific and unrepentant mode of production. Effortlessly, but industriously, his work springs—wakes—from his work (in the wake of his work...). His work continually cycles. He is constantly moving from one series to the next, always exhausting a particular way of working until it comes to be folded into the next phase. And although each series or body of work has its own peculiarities, it is clear that, sequentially, the central matter of his work is simply the passage of time (and space) consumed by making them.

This sense of preserving lost or passing time comes clearly into view in his “mummified” works, eternally resting between here and hereafter (as with the *Zaun* (or “Fence”) series). These *Zaun* pieces, mummified, like the *Magaxat* works (2005-06), with a waxy, oily green-brown coating, construct a “fence” with the rows of stiffened threads running across embalmed paper. Lines against flesh: after all, a fence is a structure that holds a body (back)—and that is precisely what these works embody. A fence with the body of a mummy. Or, a skin as a fence. After all, we only know time is lost when we find it preserved: an aftermath. The three most recent works in the exhibition, all part of the *Zaun* series, and each titled *Ancient City*, display the aftermath of a massive catastrophe, like an earthquake. Viewed from above, each work presents an “ancient city” at various stages of destruction with the corded, sinewy borders of the frontier squeezing the city shut—or prying it open. A lost city bound by flesh. These works make clear that the religious imagery of the *Red* series is developing a symbolic language to negotiate boundaries between destruction and resurrection. Mapping borders between worlds upon the bodies of his work, his art forms a record of a life of displacement.

Emerging prior to the *Zaun* and *Magaxat* series, the *Labyrinth* series, and particularly the largest of the series, *Labyrint* (2002), also binds its vocabulary to traces of movement, bodies, and loss—but in a way where “the passage of time” is recorded, and therefore recovered, through an individual’s memory. With *Labyrint*, the newspaper layered on the canvas is left exposed enough that headlines and fragments of text from English-language newspapers remain legible, while the central “labyrinth” is meticulously constructed with pieces of unsolved puzzles and a single cut-out image that appears to be a vague art historical reference. Mounted on the wall, it is possible to see each *Labyrinth* piece as a broken window—shattered glass. Perhaps this refers-back to the earliest versions of these works created in Germany as part of his *Holocaust* series (1998-99), recalling *Kristallnacht*. (These works examined shared histories of violence between Armenia and Germany.) With each phase of Ovsepyan’s practice, he seamlessly folds one place into another, one history into another, through the act of his memory recorded on a surface.

Consuming the refuse of his immigrations—cardboard, newspaper, found objects—his work builds the home he was never permitted to have (using his remains). (In his most recent bodies of work, he incorporates pills leftover from his wife’s work as a nurse as elements in his collaged pieces.) Moreover, his waxy, mummified pieces—such as the *Zaun* series—reach even further into the annals of the Armenian diaspora, recalling the ancient historical connections between Armenia and Egypt. With his works forming these tide pools of temporal and migratory connections, his oeuvre always encounters itself as a simultaneous event of memory and history. Again, this synchronic moment between personal life, (bodily) remains, and historical context is the primary process of Ovsepyan’s work.

Although much of Ovsepyan’s life has been initially guided by histories of Armenian statelessness, personal displacements, and extrinsic politics of his artwork as a Soviet artist operating with a double practice (one of the state, one of his own), *intrinsically*, the political dimensions of his work are much more subtle and nuanced than a simple rejection of socialist realism or a concerted insurrectionary strategy. In his words, “I only work.” Observably, it is precisely the abandonment of this double practice, when he begins to make only what he wants, and stops taking payments for political murals or propaganda paintings—and, rather, enters the market through his “true” artwork—that his work truly becomes political (as a radical, non-state and anti-market, form of *work*). In other words, his *politicized* art was not political, but, rather, dogmatic, representative, and simply fulfilling a professional duty (a form of *labor*). This is verified by the fact that it was his abstract work, not his explicitly politicized state work, that led to the political problems with his practice. Therefore, political stakes that emerge from his work are a consequence of the frictions the work itself finds with the surrounding world, and less an intended program of the artist. The politics of aesthetics, the resonances of his artforms, are already-there in the material of the works: their bodies threaten the orders they usurp. The work overtakes the labor. His artwork archives, threads, and molds—an activity of recording a body’s movements without the funneled commentary of a representation, a remark, or a revision. Ovsepyan’s practice is one of presentation, demonstration, and preservation of civilizations’ refuse and societies’ fragments, recovering and re-remembering the rejected, cast-out, and the set-adrift along the margins of the continually shifting limits of empire. He builds his view of a stateless metropolis through a hagiography of humanity’s faults, beginning with the ancient strains of Armenian material culture and carrying that history every place he passes-through.

While Ovsepyan is nearly an outsider to his own context, he was, to some degree, inspired by well-known Armenian predecessors like Minas Avetisyan and Arshile Gorky; and, it is certainly possible to see their influences in his early abstract landscapes and studies. In fact, Avetisyan was from the same village as Ovsepyan, Jajur, and painted many landscape sceneries of this place. Ovsepyan also painted many landscape sceneries of Jajur, and



was, eventually, similarly pulled towards expression and abstraction through this mode of painting. However, despite this connection, his paintings remain highly idiosyncratic. Even these early works are readily distinguished from Avetisyan's through Ovsepyan's obsession with line and texture, and ultimately structure and de/construction, more so than color and representative nature (as is found in Avetisyan's paintings). In terms of preceding (Soviet) movements that cast a shadow on his work, it seems his use of nonrational lettering and scription in his work continues features of the Zaum movement. And the geometrization of spaces, objects, and figures coinciding with lettering and symbols recalls essential features of Russian (Cubo-)Futurism. Though, to give a sense of the range of affinities with his work, his most recent sculptures and collages, obliquely, but most closely, remember the painted/found-object assemblages of American artist Thornton Dial. Yet, what is more crucial to observing the wake of Ovsepyan's work is to recognize a total transformation of abstraction as mode of artistic production that, following Kandinsky, is focused on the concrete and the im-/mediate—and extending this through the contemporary positions of the archival, the relational, the environmental, the textual, and the autobiographical. Abstraction, for Ovsepyan, is a material process of uncovering synchronicities between formal, physical, psychic, visual, hereditary, and linguistic relations.

Performing the subject of the painting or sculpture through material techniques and automatic processes, each work produces an artefact of Ovsepyan's lifelong movement through filmic residues or membranes of (passing) time and (changing) place. This is evident across all of his work, and particularly in his paper works consisting of newspaper clippings, crossword puzzles, musical scores, recycled cardboard from his moving boxes, and litter collected in his neighborhood. Perhaps this assembling of interstitial items begins with Ovsepyan's work as an antiques collector and restorer in Armenia (a business that was destroyed by the earthquake). It seems each found object included in his pieces finds a path through the people and places from which it falls away. The title (*Magaxat*), too, performs this bodily task of demonstrating a path through space, time, and language: peculiarly spelled and unreadable for most, written between languages in the wor(l)d the artist has made by the contours of his displacements. A word—a record—that familiarizes whatever it states in the signing of its estrangement, handing-over the sheer materiality of the letters. Like the edges of a labyrinth that only occur to record (or dis/orient) the movements of a body, the exhibition realizes the recurring constellations of letters, lines, borders, topographies, and lacunas of Ovsepyan's oeuvre as a collective composition of a body rendered through its dislocations.

Ultimately, there remains something to be said about the economy of Ovsepyan's work—and of the broader contexts, consequences, and implications of his historical position as a Soviet, Armenian, German, and American artist. Economically considered, it seems relevant to consider a quiet critique of consumerism strangely coupled with a celebration of the potential for beauty—and connection—through the power of work, of transforming material with a body (and tracking a body's transformations with material). Almost all of his works created in the United States are made from recycled materials, much of which are collected by his neighbors and brought to him. This serendipitous community collected around his practice through this simple, environmentally conscious activity reveals the relational character emanating from his work. Not only does he construct and deconstruct the semiotic, symbolic, and imaginary relations embedded in societies and exorcised by his works, but he also builds an open social practice bound to the source materials. Regarded as this vortex of relation between bodies, Ovsepyan's primary medium is the in-between, the gaps between moments in space and time. Consequently, it is ineffectual to consider Ovsepyan's work through any particular nation-state frame; instead, it is better to find his identity where he encounters himself: at the limit, on the edge of civilization (with a bird's eye view). In the words embedded in the center of the white *Labyrinth*, this exhibition works with Ovsepyan's ability to provide a view of “the every sense of...” all the oppositions embodied by an artwork: two suns on opposite horizons/ one dark, the other blazing.”



*Vinter Jajur*, 1977. Tempera on Paper.  
(15 1/4 in. x 15 1/2 in. Image, 16 1/2 in. 17 1/2 in. with Border)



Untitled, 1976-1977. Tempera and Ink on Paper.  
(15 3/4 in. x 10 1/4 in. Image, 17 in. x 12 in. with Border)



Untitled, 1976. Tempera and Ink on Paper.  
(15 1/2 in. x 10 in. Image, 17 in. x 12 in. with Border)



Untitled, 1976-1977. Tempera and Ink on Paper.  
(15 1/2 in. x 10 3/4 in. Image, 26 1/2 in. x 19 1/2 in. with Border)



Untitled, 1991. Tempera, Charcoal, and Pastel on Paper.  
(15 3/4 in. x 11 in. Image, 16 1/2 in. x 12 in. with Border)



*10 Century Poet (Gregory of Narek)*, 1989. Red Series. Oil on Canvas.  
(39 3/8 in. x 29 3/8 in.)



Untitled, 1991. Red Series. Oil on Canvas.  
(31 5/8 in. x 27 5/8 in)

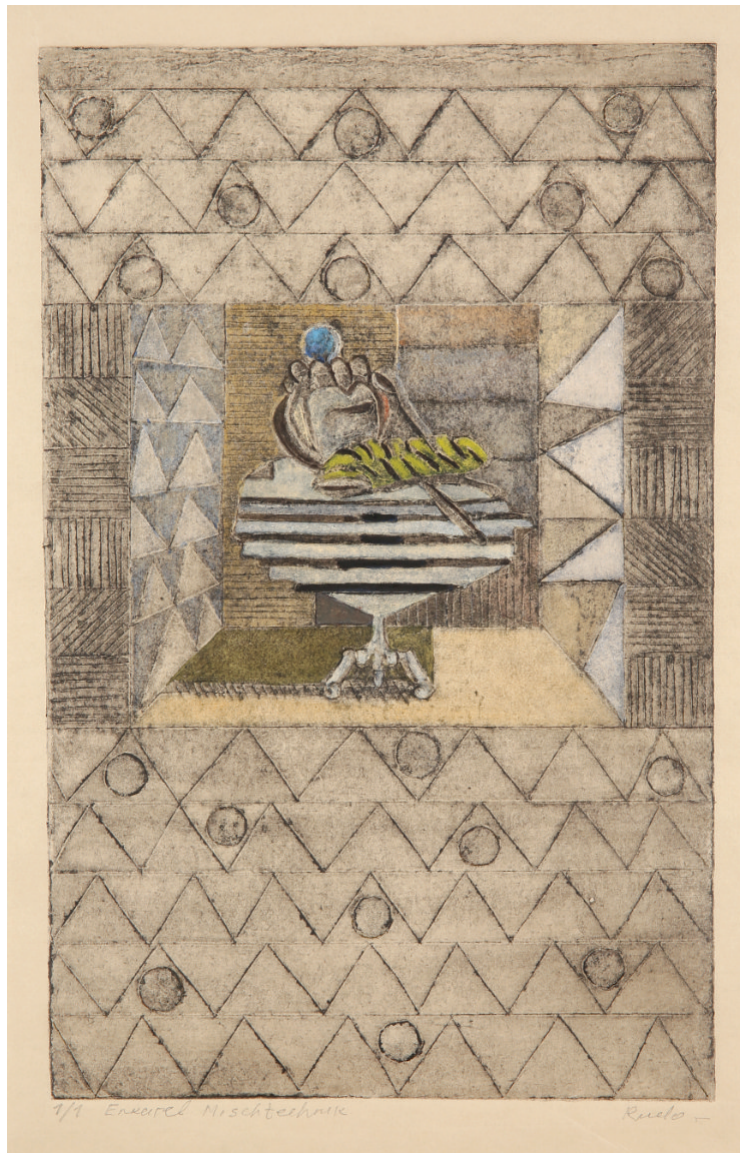


*Still Life*, 1992. *Red Series*. Oil on Canvas.  
(38 in. x 30 in.)





*Sacrifice*, 1992. *Red Series*. Oil on Canvas.  
(45 in. x 29 in.)

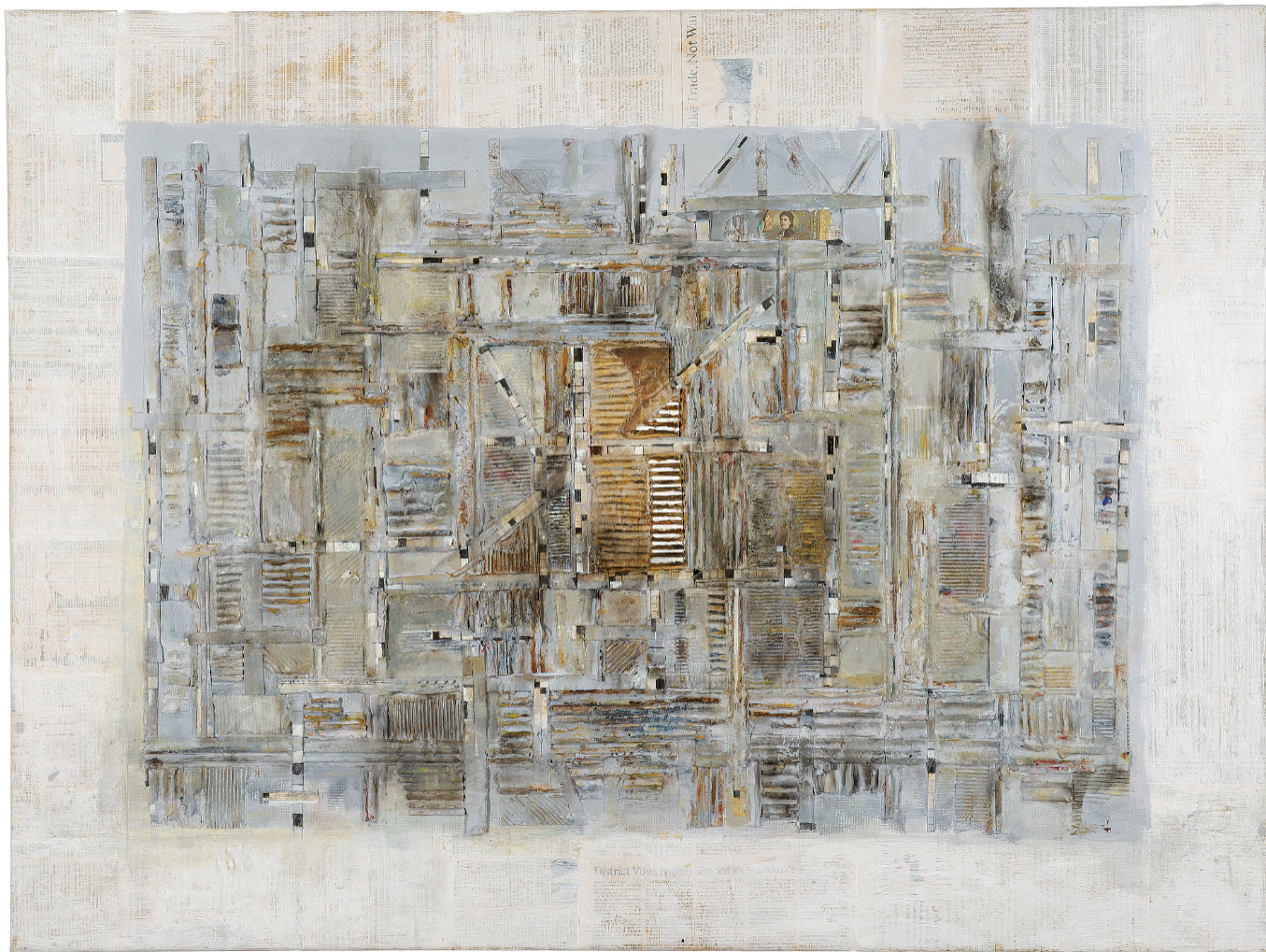


*Enkarel Mischtechnik*, 1998-1999. Mixed Media and Tempera on Paper (Print).  
(12 1/4 in. x 8 in. Image, 18 1/2 in. x 12 in. with Border)  
1/1 Print



*Stilleben*, 1998-1999. Mixed Media and Tempera on Paper (Print).  
 (12 in. x 7 1/2 in. Image, 21 in. x 15 1/4 in. with Border)  
 1/1 Print

*Stilleben*, 1998-1999. Mixed Media and Tempera on Paper (Print).  
 (12 in. x 7 3/4 in. Image, 18 1/2 in. x 12 in. with Border)  
 1/1 Print



*Labirint*, 2002. Mixed Media (Oil, Cardboard, Wax, Newspaper) on Canvas.  
(35 1/2 in. x 47 1/2 in.)



*The Every Sense Of...*, 2003. Mixed Media (Tempera, Wax, Thread) on Cardboard.  
(18 in. x 17 in.)



Untitled, 2008. *Labyrinth Series*. Mixed Media on Cardboard.  
(17 in. x 14 in.)