



John Noel Smith







John Noel Smith  
*Pandect Series*

Hillsboro Fine Art  
*20th Century & Contemporary Art*





## The Overall Picture

John Noel Smith's paintings tend to be generally self-assured and emphatic, regardless of scale. Yet the best of them are also tinged with a certain equivalence or disequilibrium, while nonetheless retaining their own blunt elegance. This is as true of his recent works as it has been of his work over the past three decades and more. For many years, especially those he spent living in Berlin, between 1980 and 2002, Smith was primarily concerned, as he has repeatedly stated, with questions of identity and, in a fundamental sense, of language. These are, of course, characteristic concerns of the exile, whether voluntary or involuntary. Given that he largely cleaved to an abstract idiom, in spite of the nascent figuration with which he was surrounded on his arrival in Germany, these concerns were of necessity articulated obliquely for the most part. Now and then, however, a series of paintings was pursued – Smith has usually worked in series – in which the central motif or underlying compositional stratagem signalled these themes more directly. Chief among these are the 'Knot' paintings of the early 2000s, in which the eponymous motif, signifying complicated connection, also contrives to resemble a fleur-de-lis and, more pointedly, a three-leaved

shamrock, as well as the several series of 'Ogham' paintings that preceded these works. The stacked vertical columns made up of short scored lines, which typify the 'Ogham' paintings, suggest the kind of ostensibly universalising sign system to which many artists from the 1960s and 1970s were attracted, while at the same time alluding to a form of early Irish notation that is culturally and linguistically specific. Both the recourse to multivalent motifs in the 'Knots', on the one hand, and the deliberately inconclusive shuttling between the general and the particular evidenced by the 'Ogham' paintings, on the other, are of a type. They are consistent with Smith's deployment, at once instinctive and strategic, of what might be termed an 'emblematics of estrangement'.<sup>i</sup>

It is interesting to see how his work has evolved over the seven years since he resettled in his native Ireland. Certain continuities are evident, of course, including a characteristic chromatic intensity and a pronounced physicality in paint-handling, both of which are tempered by a preference for dry, almost fresco-like surfaces. On an initial viewing of this most recent body of work, the most obvious development is a marked increase in compositional complexity. Even in the smallest of these new works the painting tends

to be divided into three or four more or less discrete rectangular sections abutting each other along a horizontal axis that can easily be imagined to be extendable. (In conversation it becomes clear that the artist conceives of some of these paintings, at least, in the notional form of a wrap-around composition somewhat akin to a serpent biting its own tail.) Some of the differentiated quadrants in these pictures command their own individual stretchers, especially in the larger works, while others vie with their neighbours for stretcher-space. In keeping with such compositional complications, Smith's consciously limited formal lexicon has also been significantly augmented. Previous bodies of work have used, in addition to the knot motif and the 'ogham'-related markings already noted, a rudimentary checkerboard pattern, as well a teetering, Brancusi-like column made up of segments of alternating colour. Lately, a number of new compositional building blocks have been added to the mix. Two of these predominate: the monochrome canvas, or expanse of canvas, and the all-over, cross-hatch pattern. Both of these carry significant art-historical ballast. If the monochrome is, in some ways, the *ne plus ultra* of a form of painterly abstraction that tends toward 'flatness', cross-hatching

is a traditional graphic means of adding depth or volume to an image. Yet we might note that, in a series of paintings begun in the early 1970s, Jasper Johns effected a crucial *detournement* of this cross-hatch pattern, so that in his hands it came instead to signify, however contrarily, a peculiar form of painterly flatness. While this Johnsian echo in Smith's work is far from strident (it is also accompanied by echoes of early Malevich, not to mention the Mondrian of *Pier and Ocean*, 1915), something of this antecedent gesture's inherent perversity is carried through in Smith's painterly concatenations.

During a studio visit in preparation for writing this essay the artist and I discuss one of the more formally complex of the new paintings. He is at pains to contest a reading of this particular work - as he has refuted previous readings of his work in general - in terms of either disjunction or fragmentation.<sup>ii</sup> In the course of arguing for the underlying formal unity and cohesion of each individual painting, he describes their typical constitution as comprising a 'flotilla' of elements. The image is an intriguing one, not least because the artist's formative years were spent by the sea, growing up in Malahide in the early 1950s. (In addition, one of his jobs



before making the decision to become a full-time painter, was as a clerk in a shipping company.) As it happens, on two occasions in recent years Smith has reached for this same image of the 'flotilla' in order to elucidate aspects of his practice. In an interview with Patrick T. Murphy in 2002 he suggests that his work typically deals with 'a flotilla of interrelated ideas'.<sup>iii</sup> He elaborates further, in more obviously formal terms, in a recent interview with Aidan Dunne, which is worth quoting at some length:

My intention is to set up the whole field of the canvas as a coherent structure, every part exercising the necessary pressure on the other. My stratagem is to shift the emphasis away from a single dominant idea to a flotilla of interrelated fluid concepts, which add up to a *Gesamtbild*, one which is about potential cohesion and lucidity as opposed to fragmentation and incoherence, hopefully recovering a sense of integrity in the process.<sup>iv</sup>

This *Gesamtbild*, or 'overall picture', is thus imaged by the artist as a small fleet of disparate but co-ordinated vessels, each of which is assumed to convey its proper freight of meaning, however partial. Needless to say,

the various motifs and patterns juxtaposed within the bounds of an individual painting should by no means be taken to be semantically stable. Yet they bear with them the memory of previous usage, both within the particular context of the artist's earlier work, and in the broader history of twentieth-century painting. The accumulating stress in the statement just quoted on the notions of potentiality, hope and recovery serves to remind us of the destination on which Smith's (and any other artist's) various compositional gambits and devices ultimately converge. This is, of course, the individual viewer, whose accommodating receipt of all of a given work's aspects can never be comprehensively guaranteed. For the time being, it is some indication of the animating restlessness at the heart of John Noel Smith's painting that his return home has so far produced a body of work that is at least as adventurous and as aspirational – as 'provisional', in all senses of that word – as that produced during his many years abroad.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith  
September 2009

i See my earlier essay in *John Noel Smith: A Survey Exhibition 1992-2002* (Nissan Art Project, in collaboration with the RHA, 2002), pp. 11-14.

ii *Ibid.*, p. 15. iii *Ibid.*, p. 18. iv *Profile 26 – John Noel Smith* (Gandon Editions 2007), p. 22.



## No Limits: the paintings of John Noel Smith

As with all major artists, Smith's work lies outside timeframes, 'isms' and the humdrum of daily life. This is an artist who continuously undergoes self-review and an exploration of new possibilities.

So with each new body of work Smith finds new ways to deal with his concerns, but his distinctive vocabulary is evident. Choosing to make work in series, Smith utilizes a repetition of gestures that is a constantly perfected performance of creation. The *Pandect* series can be seen as an elaboration, a cartography of the artist's ideas and concerns, it is a comprehensive treatise on his work and by implication on painting and possibly aesthetics and art making in general.

Much has been written too about his affinity with the grid and all-over painting, but this is a distraction – rules to be broken. Clearly there is a consistent, coherent rich seam to earlier series; in works such as *Palimpsest* (page 10) and *United Field Painting* (page 11), paintings made

ten years apart and quite different in approach, we recognise the painter's language but it has moved to a different phase. Smith revels in revealing the underlying processes, there is no uniformity or resolute symmetry. If anything, Smith's paintings are elemental in the sense that they continue his examination of the basic components of painterly language; he emphasises rather than conceals the work of the brush, the painting becoming its own frame of reference.

In the period 1993-1997, Smith painted a series of works he titled *Palimpsest* (page 10); the works *Endless Painting* (page 6) and *North and South* (page 8) are also notable examples. The word 'palimpsest' comes through Latin from Greek (palin/ again and psao/I scrape), meaning scraped clean and used again. Today the term is also used in forensics to describe objects placed over one another to establish the sequence of events at an accident or crime scene. Historians too use the term as a description of the way people experience time, that is, as a layering of present experiences over faded pasts. The layers below, laid down, covered the scraped back to make the final image – the last and lost, traces of an experience not fully erased.

### ***Endless Painting*** (detail)

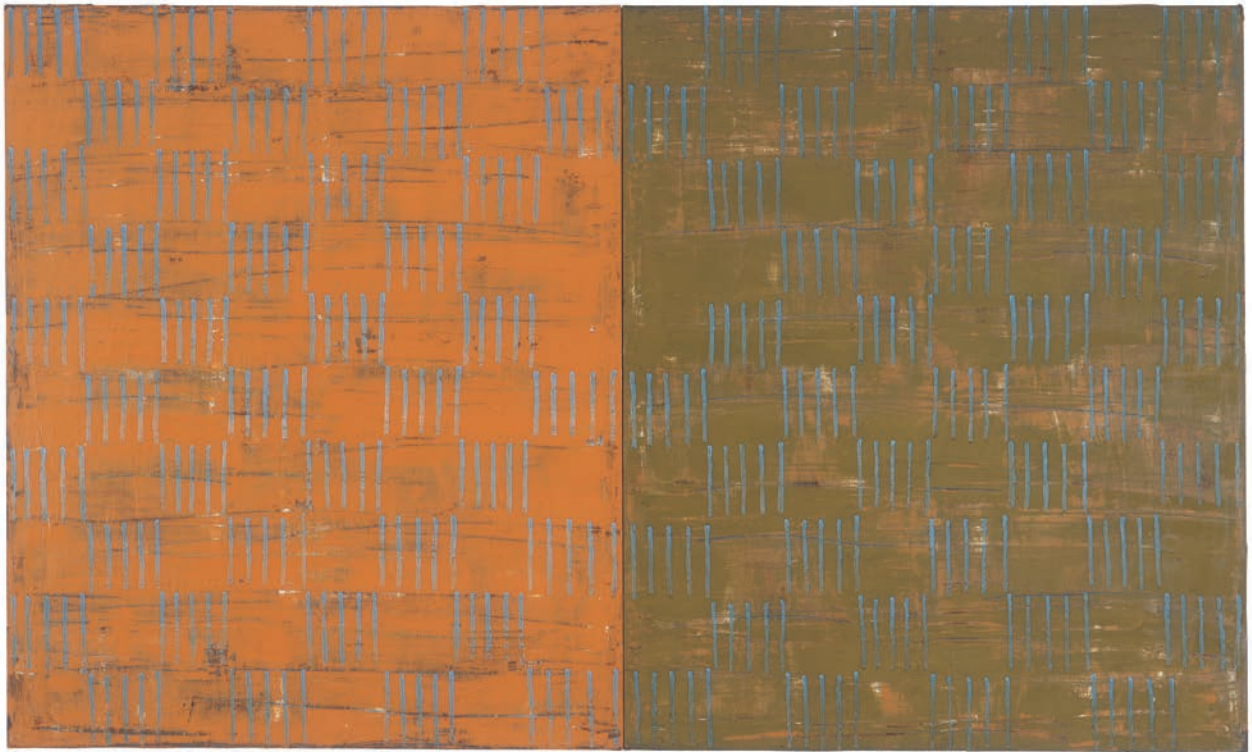
oil on canvas, 1993  
200 x 180 cm



Polyptychs have always been a feature of Smith's picture making (see *North and South*, a diptych from 1993), but this exhibition is unparalleled in that all of the paintings are triptychs. The triptych is of course a format that has been around since early Christian art and has been a popular standard for altar paintings since the Middle Ages. From the Gothic period onward, both in Europe and elsewhere, altarpieces in churches and cathedrals were often in triptych form - the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp contains two examples by Rubens. Although best known as an altarpiece form, Renaissance artists such as Hieronymus Bosch also often used the form, as have 20th-century painters such as Max Beckmann

and Francis Bacon. So Smith finds himself in good company in recognizing the potential of this format outside the religious setting; in the contemporary secular world too it imbues these paintings with an efficacious presence. The artist remarks:

"The *Pandect* series continues my interest in flatness not the flatness which deals with the integrity of the picture plane – a vertical flatness nor is it the flatness which can be called a planar flatness and can be read horizontally albeit presented vertically. In dealing paradoxically with a flatness that acts as a metaphor for something round, where all forms are presented simultaneously. These are not discrete rather they comprise part of a continuum



of interrelated forms, a web of intersections. The circularity of the works are emphasized by the simultaneous presentation of the forms contained within the triptych and polyptych format or construct.”

These works are about change, the transformation of the intractable into a formal event; in this way the *Pandect* series can be seen as an evolving idea rather than the aggregation of static concepts, where interlocking hierarchies exist simultaneously and feed or leak into the communal web of being. To advance his concerns he proceeds not with static concepts or singular ideas but rather develops a flotilla of fluid concepts. His approach recognises that the force of the world today lies not in communication but in the fact that in it all has become simultaneous.

Colour as always is used to wonderful end; in the smaller works (paintings that seem to possess a scale far greater than their dimensions), vibrant wedges and blocks of hot and cool colours jostle. The heavy buildup of paint retains the plastic fullness or sculptural quality we associate with this artist, and gives these wonderful paintings their imaginative and pictorial depth and enigmatic beauty.

### ***North and South***

oil on canvas, 1993  
180 x 320 cm

More material and tactile, surface and application have taken on even greater significance. This art seduces and challenges the viewer, ambiguous and dynamic, their richness only fully experienced after some time has been given them. They require our engagement and perception in their complex conception, we are compelled to work with the revelation played out within these anxious spaces.

Like that great innovator Olitski, Smith seems even more than ever to be asking questions by creating coherence from acutely disparate elements, challenging the notion of the integral image. Look for example at the central panel of the magnificent *Pandect I*, an area of gestural visceral expression, but the integrity of the whole exemplifies that unsurpassed assurance that permeates the intuitive moments. The field of colour is still present to some degree, but we must work harder for what have been referred to as his fields of ‘contemplative projection’. These paintings are not just matter, they stem from something deep within Smith, they are matter under the control of a brilliant artist. They defy us to read and learn their secret.

In truth, I know no other painter like John Noel Smith. He has painted for 40 years because he cannot help it, it is his means of articulation. He has never given in to changing fashions, but has remained true to himself. Few other artists have grasped the essence of painting as clearly, explored as successfully and insisted upon with more consistency than Smith. Aidan Dunne’s essay ‘A painter in his natural element’ (2007) opens with the line: “John Noel Smith is a brilliant painter” and I see no reason to disagree with this opinion. This painter shares some strengths





*Palimpsest*

oil on canvas, 1995  
240 x 300 cm

with a number of artists I have long admired such as Roger Hilton, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, Gerhard Richter and Pierre Soulages, but Smith's is a truly unique voice.



*United Field Painting*

oil on canvas, 2005

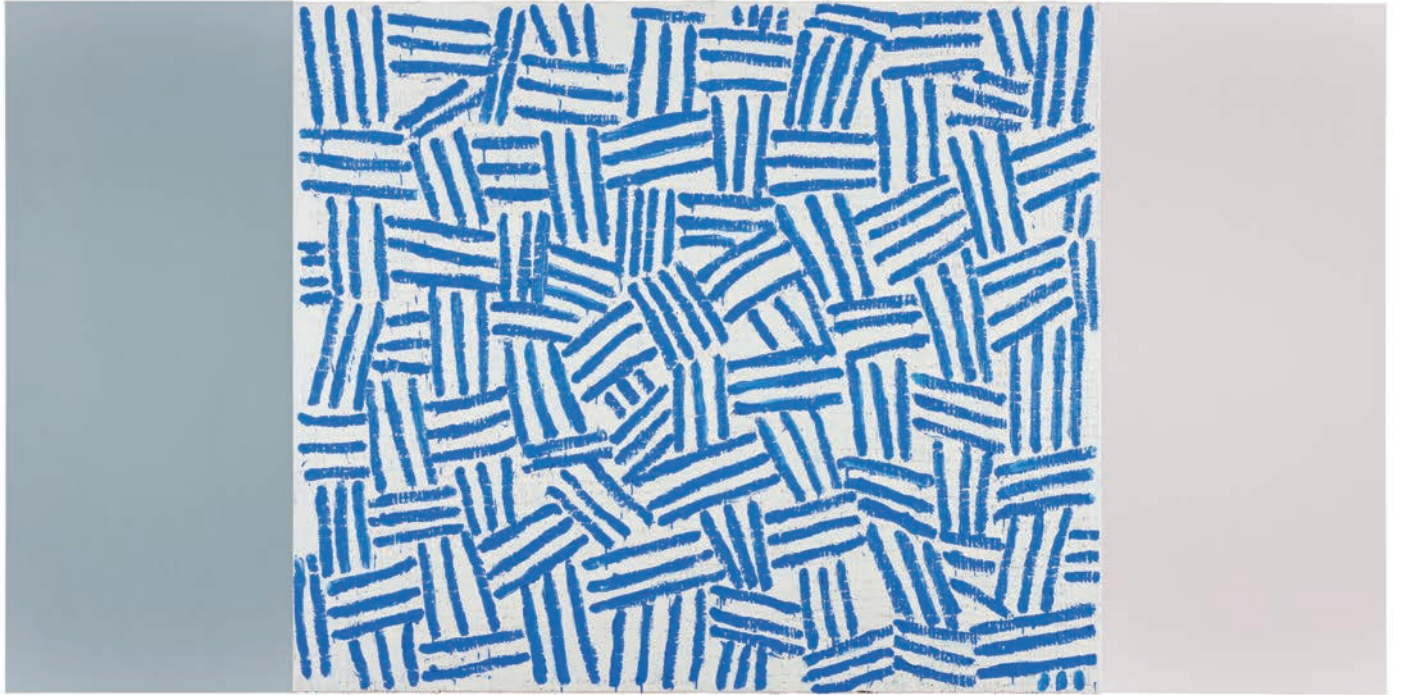
51 x 30 cm

Art and its place in our world has undergone enormous change, and at such a dizzying pace, that many question whether it is perhaps in danger of surpassing its very *raison d'être*; the work of this vital painter surely dispels any such doubts. These necessary works succeed in making plain the folly of Duchamp's prophecy that art would no longer be retinal but intellectual, Smith achieves both with surety. In different places, amid different periods of time, Smith's paintings will continue to retain the power to evoke interest and demand attention; an ongoing dialogue in which the works themselves become enriched by the changing socio-cultural meanings attributed to them. In this way they belong to and escape from their own time, helping to create the history they form part of.

*John Daly*

*Pandect I*

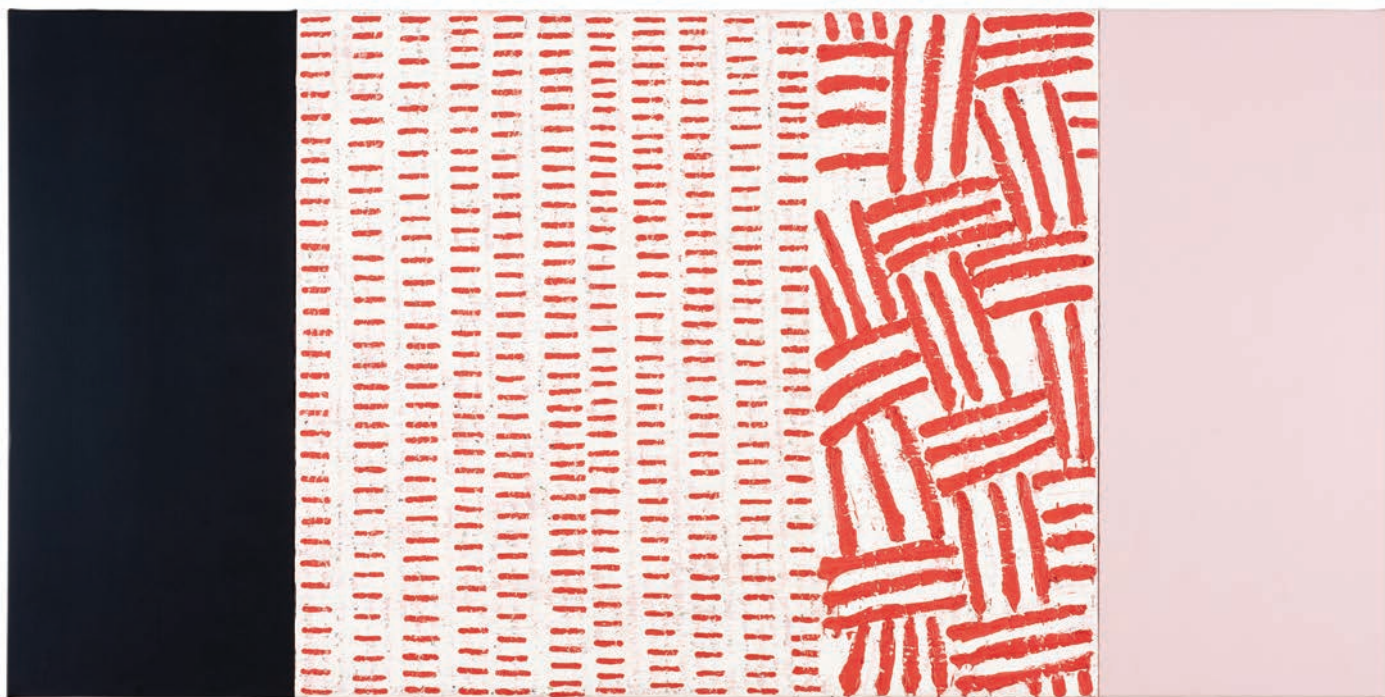
oil on canvas, 2009  
180 x 360 cm



*Pandect II*

oil on canvas, 2009  
120 x 240 cm

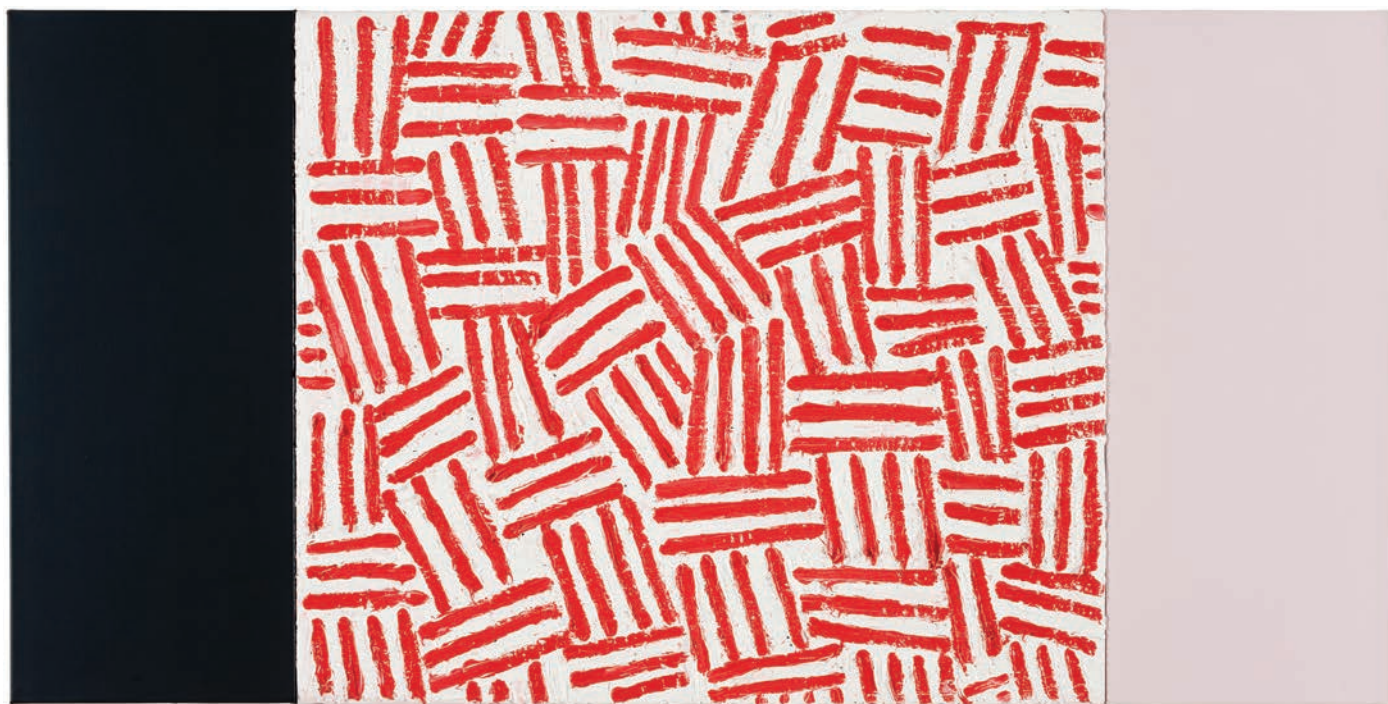




*Pandect III*

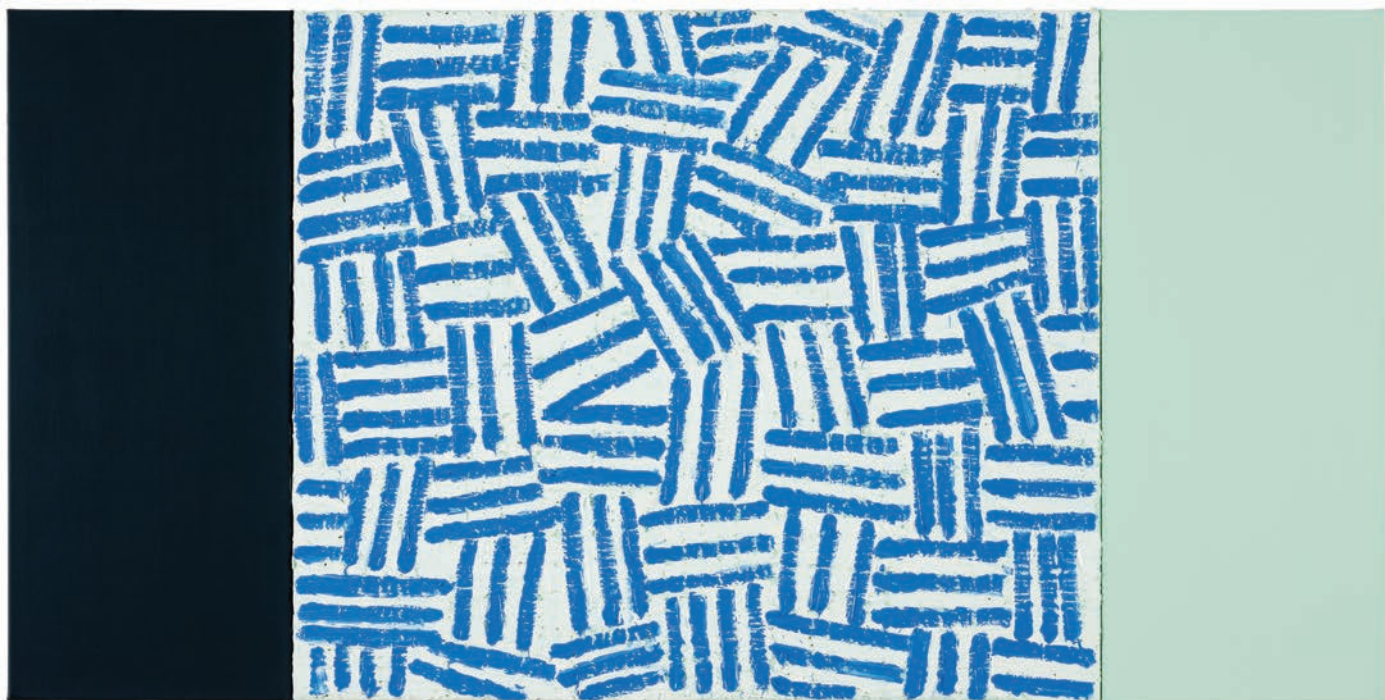
oil on canvas, 2009

90 x 180 cm



*Pandect IV*

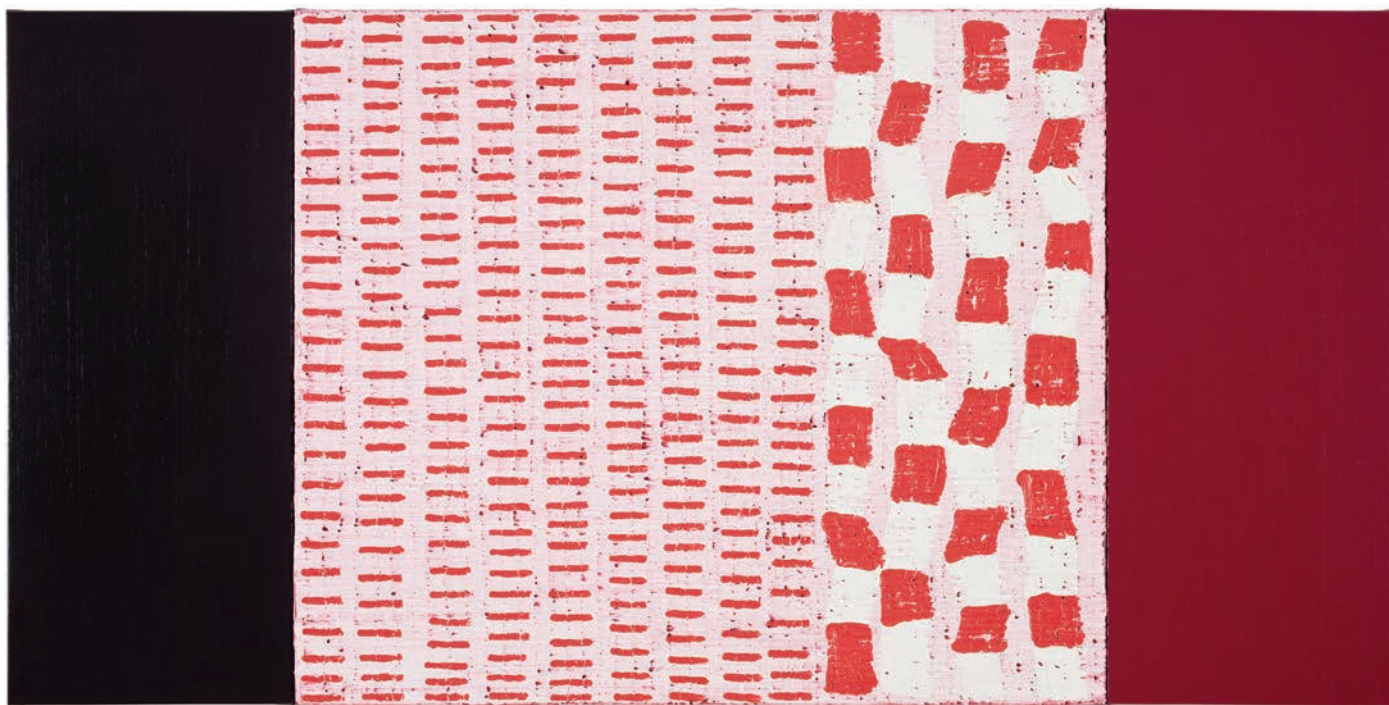
oil on canvas, 2009  
90 x 180 cm





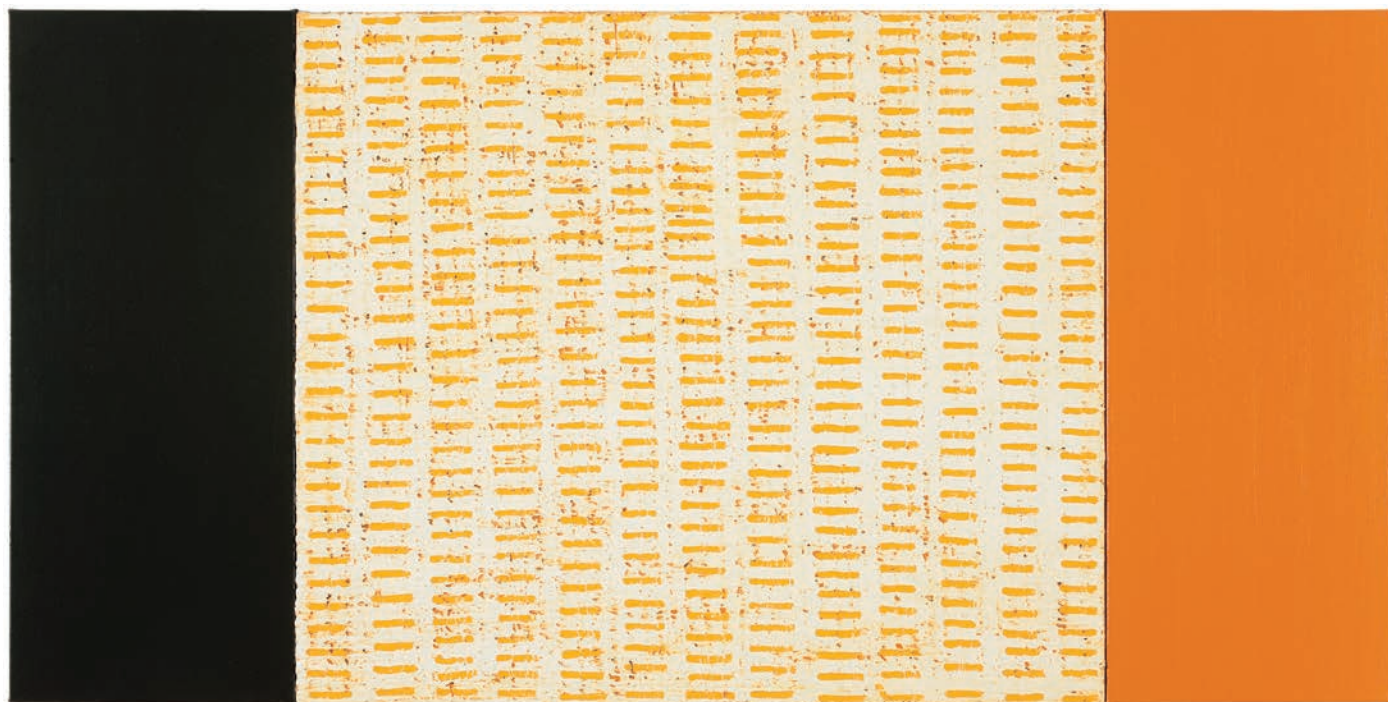
*Pandect V*

oil on canvas, 2009  
90 x 180 cm



***Pandect VI***

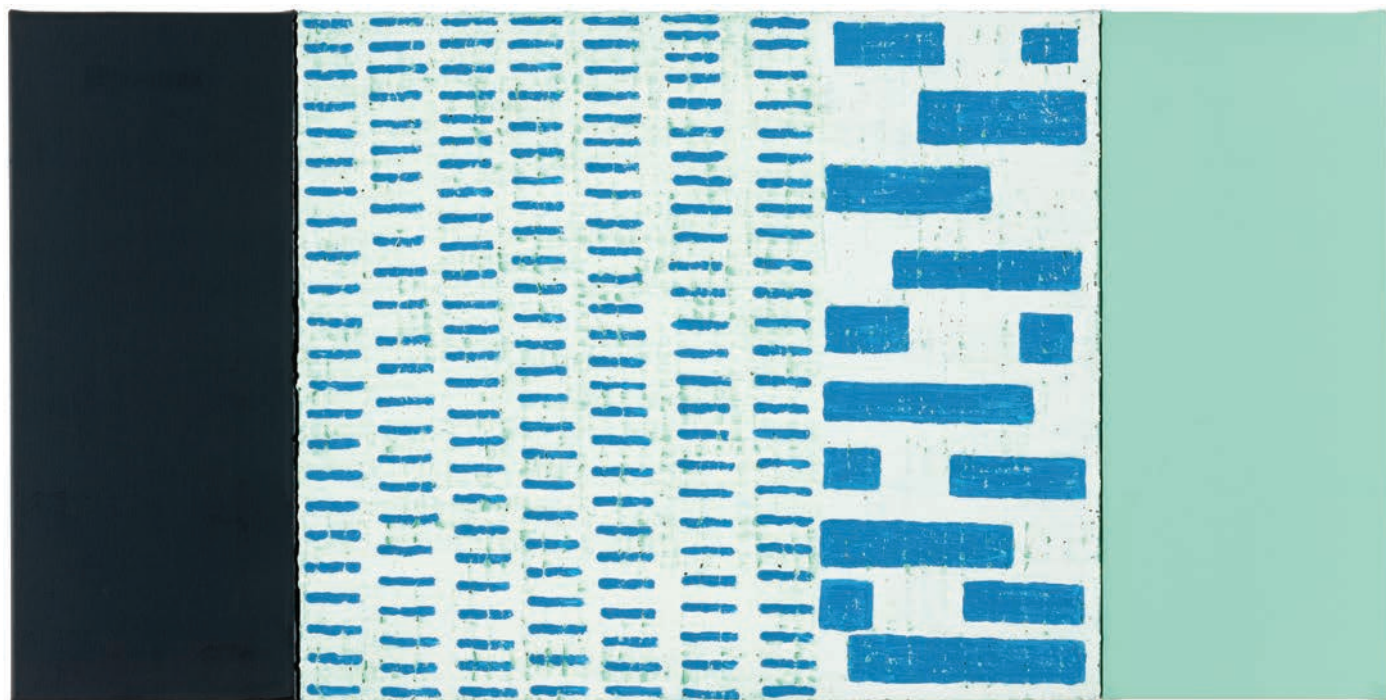
oil on canvas, 2009  
90 x 180 cm



*Pandect VII*

oil on canvas, 2009  
60 x 120 cm





*Pandect VIII*

oil on canvas, 2009  
60 x 120 cm



*Pandect IX*

oil on canvas, 2009  
60 x 120 cm



*Pandect X*

oil on canvas, 2009  
60 x 120 cm





***Pandect XI***

oil on canvas, 2009  
60 x 120 cm



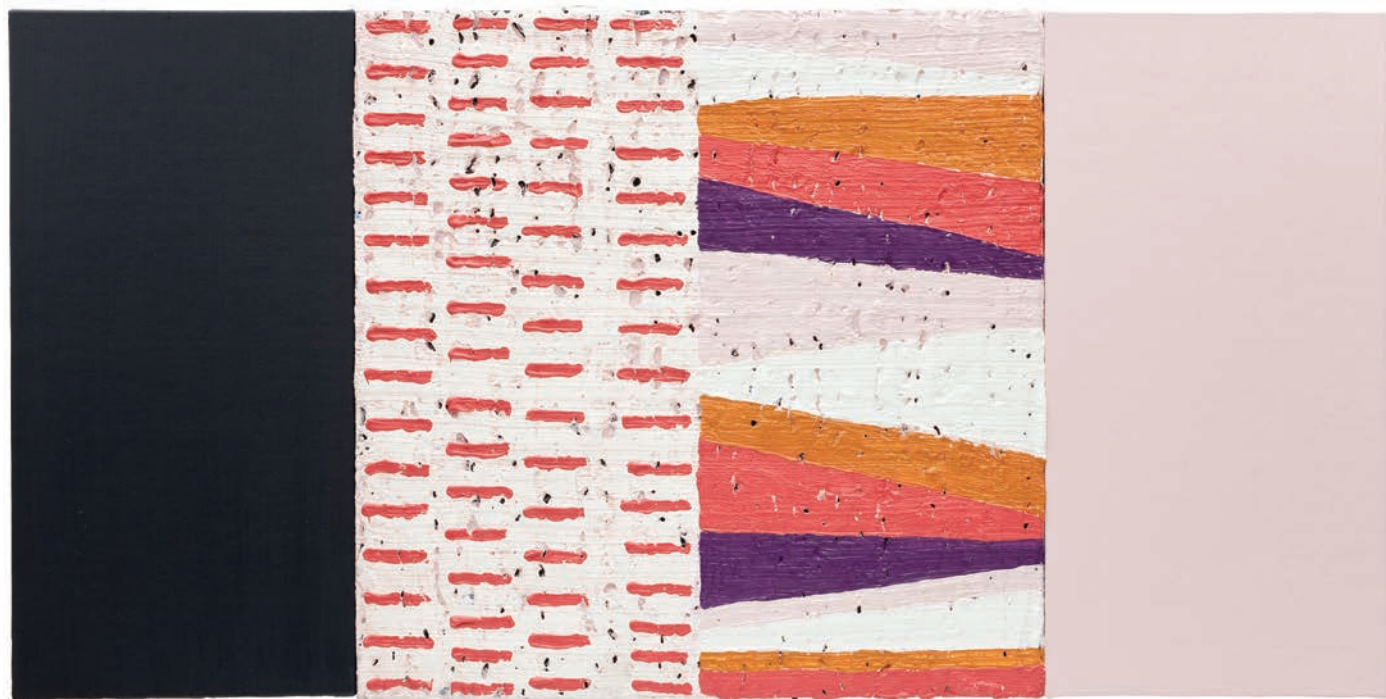
*Pandect XII*

oil on linen on panel, 2009  
30 x 60 cm



*Pandect XIII*

oil on linen on panel, 2009  
30 x 60 cm





*Pandect XIV*

oil on linen on panel, 2009  
30 x 60 cm



*Pandect XV*

oil on linen on panel, 2009  
30 x 60 cm



*Pandect XVI*

oil on linen on panel, 2009  
30 x 60 cm







Born in Dublin in 1952, John Noel Smith attended Dun Laoghaire School of Art followed by postgraduate studies in Berlin. He lived in Berlin for twenty two years where he was an important member of its vibrant art community, returning to Ireland in 2002. Long regarded as one of Ireland's foremost contemporary painters, this artist's work forms part of important public, private and corporate collections across the world.

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Pandect*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2008 J. Cacciola Gallery, New York, USA
- 2008 *New Paintings*, Wexford Vocational College, Wexford, Ireland
- 2008 *The Painted Path*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2008 Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2007 *Liliform*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2007 *Substrata* (with Sean Shanahan and Charles Tyrell), Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Ireland
- 2006 *Inaugural*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2005 *Éigse*, Carlow Arts Festival, Ireland
- 2004 *In the Time of Shaking: Irish Artists for Amnesty International*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin
- 2002 Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1997-2004 Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1996 Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1996 Galerie Grosskinski Brummer, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 1996 Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany

- 1994 Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
- 1994 Galerie Neher, Essen, Germany
- 1993 Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
- 1992 Galerie Biemolds, Groningen, Holland
- 1993 DIN Haus Der Normung, Berlin, Germany
- 1992 Galleri Leger, Malmö, Sweden
- 1991 Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
- 1991 Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden
- 1990 Royal Hospital Kilmainham, (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin
- 1989 Galerie Eleni Koroneou, Athens, Greece
- 1989 Galleri Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark
- 1989 Galleri Lars Bohman (Galleri I6), Stockholm, Sweden
- 1988 Gallerie Folker Skulima, Berlin Germany
- 1986 Galleri Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark
- 1986 Galeri Folker Skulima, Berlin, Germany
- 1985 Galeri Leger, Malmö, Sweden
- 1984 Galleri Wallner, Malmö, Sweden
- 1982 Peacock Theatre Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1980 Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, Ireland
- 1978 Project Arts Centre, Ireland



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Cover: ***Pandect I*** (detail)

oil on canvas, 2009, 180 x 360 cm









