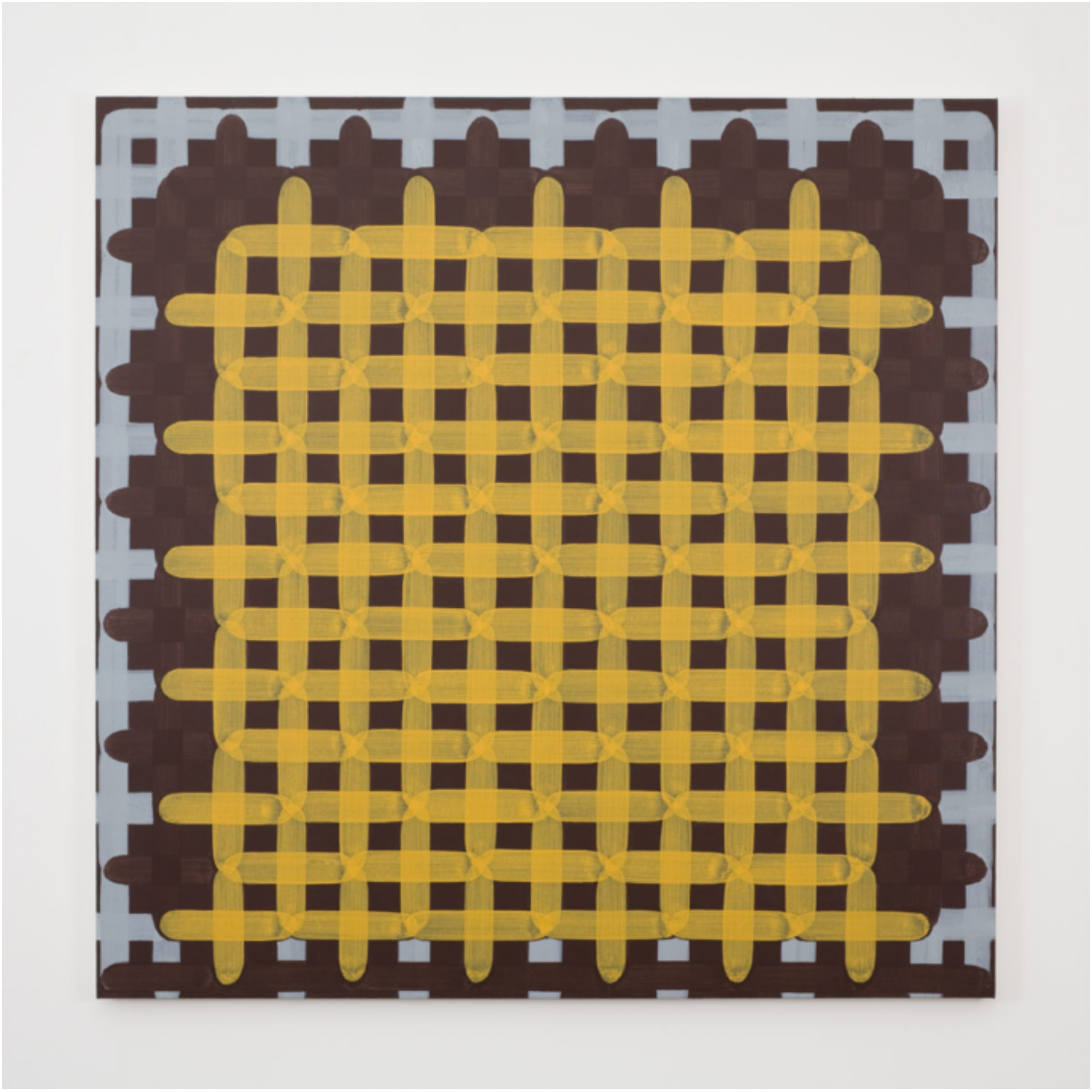
HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

# Beer with a Painter: Dan Walsh

"Twenty years ago, you wouldn't be caught dead being called a colorist."

Jennifer Samet October 10, 2020



Dan Walsh, "Grotto" (2010), acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 inches (© Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

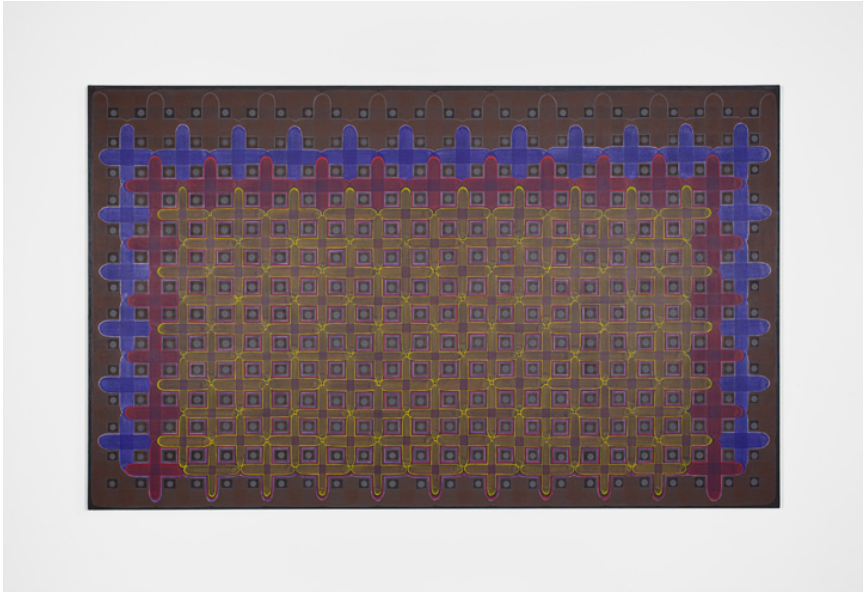
I met Dan Walsh on the North Fork of Eastern Long Island, where he now lives and works. His studio is housed in a complex of single-story spaces designed more for commercial than creative production — and it is not as integrated with the outdoors as the location might suggest. It makes sense, then, that Walsh is not influenced by referents from the natural world, but rather by other art. His studio has a feeling of concentrated energy: a place where internal mechanisms, tools, and the process itself are the guiding forces.

Walsh's work has long been based on a diagrammatic or grid matrix. It is a minimalist paradigm, but the paintings don't settle into a purist, regimented framework. He uses a pared-down vocabulary of forms, like the lozenge or a fan-shaped brushstroke. The ways in which these shapes shift, rotate, and turn are playful and curious. There is an undercurrent of nervous energy, with subtle modulations to the grids that make the paintings relatable and human, as if actively posing the question of how each mark and square will come together.

Dan Walsh in his studio (2018) (photo by Jack Newton, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

He makes his paintings in passes, allowing transparencies and layers of paint to build upon each other, and forms to develop and shift. During our visit, Walsh shows me several of his artist books. Seeing each page in a deliberate sequence sheds more light into how his work functions. The process of turning each page focuses our perceptual energy, as if we have become a mirror for the artist's process. The seductive complexity and depth of the paintings is communicated through time.

Dan Walsh was born in Philadelphia in 1960. His work has been exhibited at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City; the New Museum, New York; the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Nice; the Speerstra Foundation, Lausanne; and the Kunstverein Medienturm, Graz. His prints and limited-edition books were the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Cabinet des Estampes in Geneva, Switzerland. Walsh was included in the Ljubljana Biennial, Slovenia, the Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art, France (both 2003), and the Whitney Biennial in Spring 2014. In 2016 he collaborated with his sister, Lexa Walsh, for a two-person exhibition entitled *Both Sides Now* at the Williams College Museum of Art. In 2019 Walsh was the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands, co-organized by Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht. He is represented by Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, where he most recently had a solo exhibition in January-February 2020.



Dan Walsh, "Roebling" (2011), acrylic on canvas, 55 x 90 inches (© Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

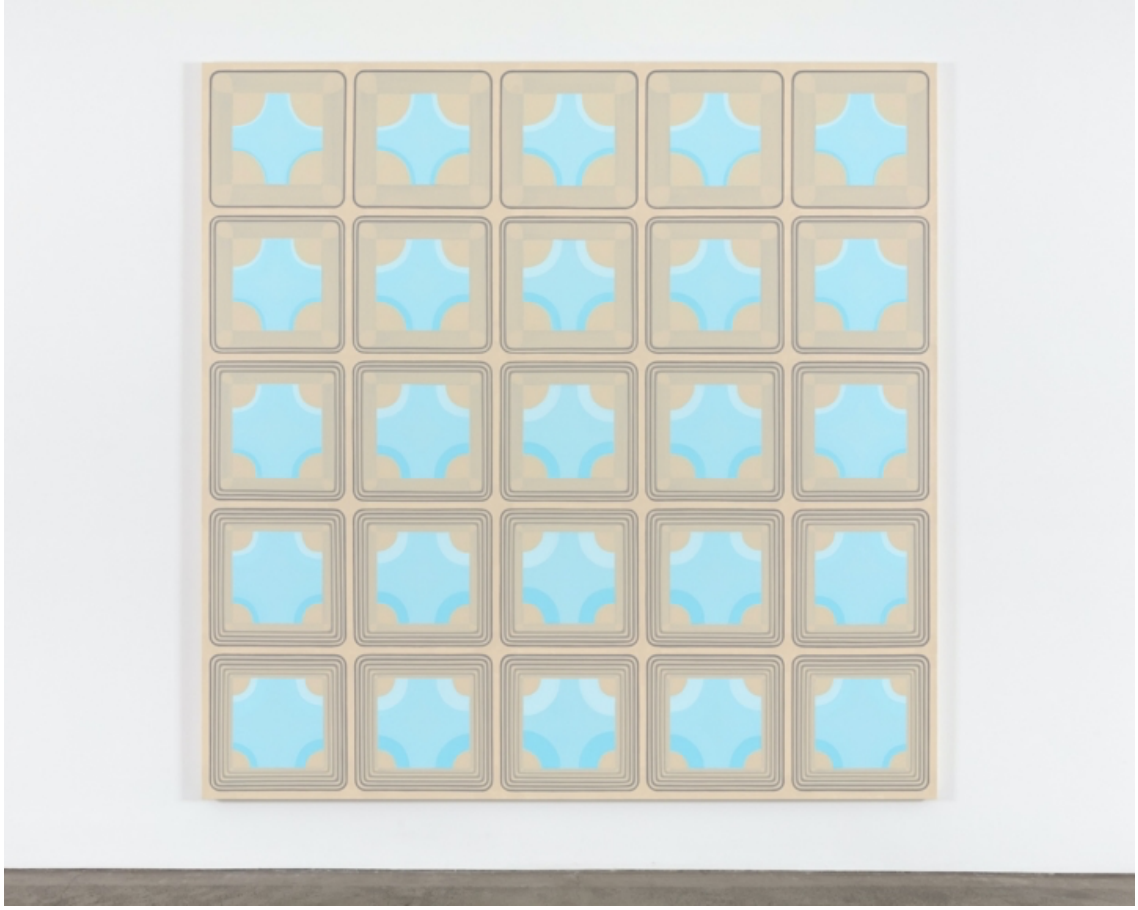
**Jennifer Samet:** *Where did you grow up? Did you make art as a child? Were there formative experiences looking at art that you recall?*

**Dan Walsh:** I grew up in Haverford, Pennsylvania. I came from a massive family, with 14 siblings. It was very competitive and sporty. There wasn't a lot of time for any kind of nurturing. I was just trying to keep up with everybody. But we had a lot of fun.

I drew a lot when I was young, and I knew I was good at art. I took art classes in high school. We had an abandoned garage on our property where I was always building and tinkering. I was into music and looking at record covers. I painted a large copy of the Yellow Submarine image on my wall. But it was not until I was 17 or 18 that I started to really look at art. The Barnes Foundation in Merion was 15 minutes away. I went often. That's where I first learned about art.

I went to New England College in southern New Hampshire to study forest management. I wanted to be in nature. I was a terrible student, but I took art classes. The teachers were impressed with my work. They said they thought I should go to an art school, so the next year I worked on putting together a portfolio. That is exactly what one needs – someone to say you are good at something. I am really grateful to those teachers.

Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) was a great experience for me. Gerald Nichols and Larry Day were my biggest influences. Day was a classic old school painting teacher. Nichols pushed me to experiment. By my senior year, I was committed to painting. I was aware that I probably wasn't going to make any money at it, so I thought I better get my Masters degree so I could teach. I went to Hunter College for my MFA.



Dan Walsh, “Expo I” (2018), acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

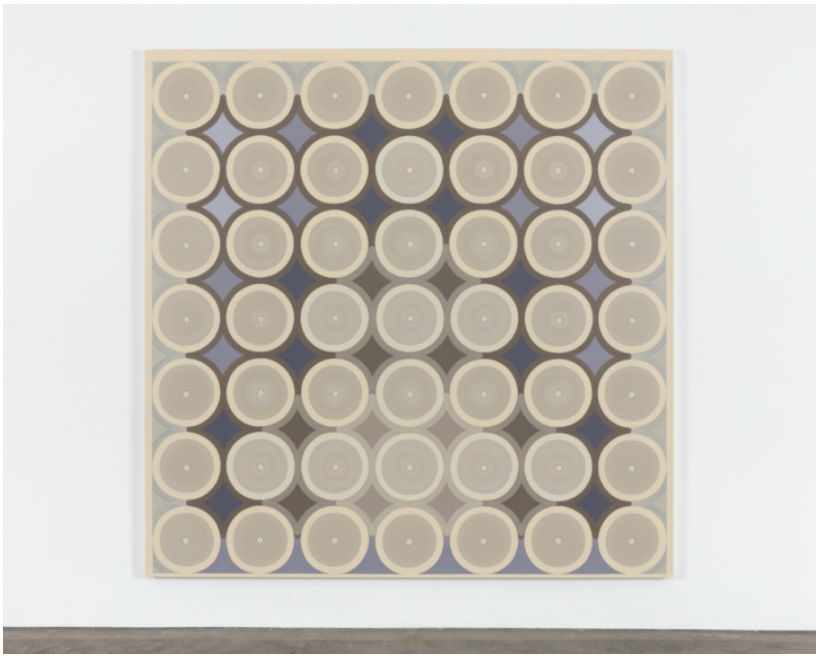
**JS:** *Can you tell me about your experience there, and your early years in New York City?*

**DW:** Hunter was a good fit for me. The faculty was full of color painters at the time, and I was making de Kooning- and Matisse-influenced all-over paintings, so I got some attention. Robert Swain was my thesis advisor. I didn’t know there would be so much writing for our seminars and thesis. That was a difficult but great thing for me: trying to articulate my thoughts. It was 1983 and ’84, and Postmodernism had arrived. It was funny seeing the older faculty having to teach, or work in, this new theory. They certainly tried. They gave us plenty of reading to do on the subject.

I started doing construction jobs and working as a super while I was in school. I began to realize I had an aptitude for electrical work. That went a long way; I was making some solid money and had control of my hours. I was able to work 4 days a week and paint the rest of the time. I was offered some teaching jobs, but I was making three times as much in construction.

My early years in New York was a tough time, but looking back you glorify or romanticize it. I lived in Williamsburg, near the Williamsburg Bridge at Berry and South 5th. There were a lot of young artists, and we all bonded together. Almost all the artists were living in empty lofts that they had agreed to renovate themselves. That was the deal — if you renovated, you got a 10-year lease. I did the electrical work on my second loft, and we brought in an electrician to check my work. She looked at my work and offered me a job that same day. So by 1988, I was a full-time electrician.

A lot of people connect my artwork to my being an electrician. I like the idea of the painting being a plan for something else. A model is not talking about the past. It is talking about the future, in the sense that you might execute or use it. But it exists in a suspended state: neither past nor future. It is a present state.



Dan Walsh, "Expo II" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

**JS:** *How did you go from the all-over paintings into geometric abstraction? Were there artists who influenced you?*

**DW:** I was working for my aunt in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1981 or ’82. The *Stations of the Cross* (1958–1966) by Barnett Newman was on view at the National Gallery at that time. The paintings were shown in a rotunda gallery — an odd installation. I saw the show about 30 times throughout that summer. It was a big influence on me moving toward a more geometric abstract language.

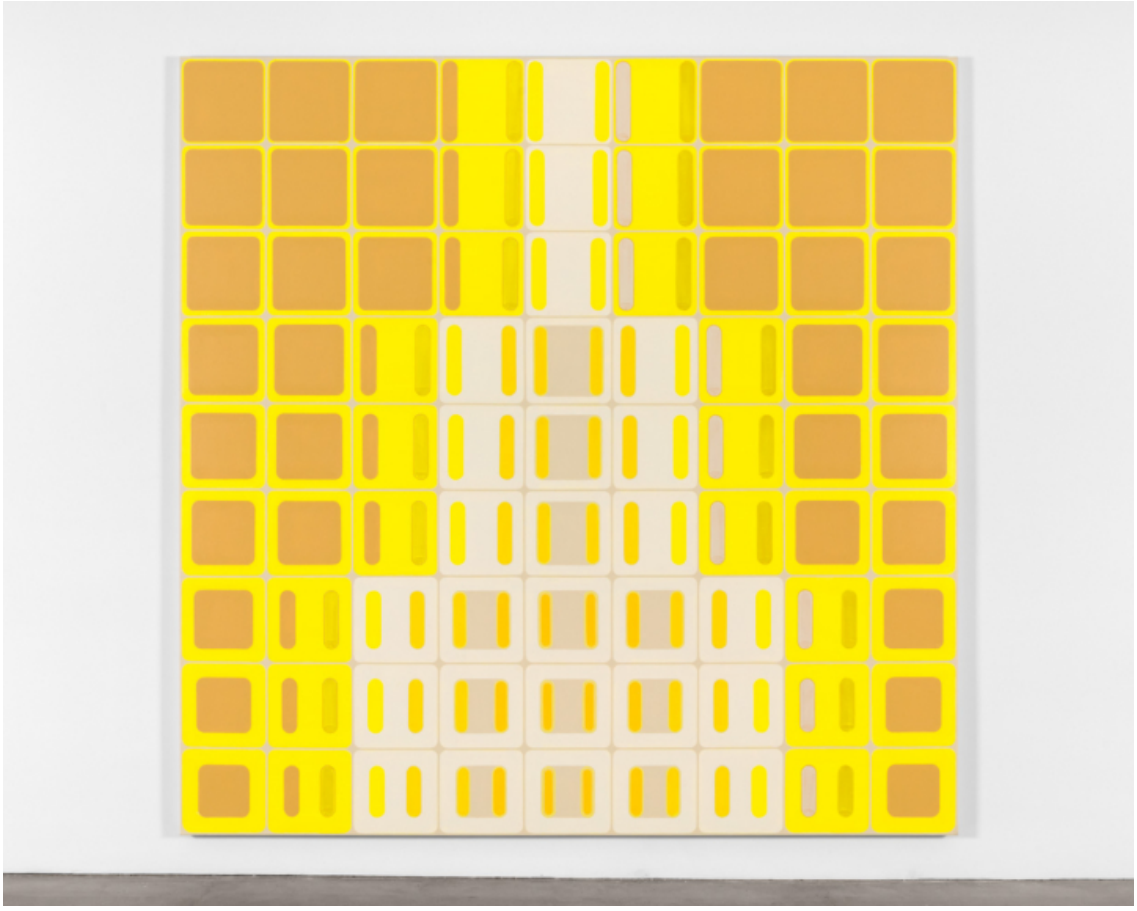
By 1990, I had totally simplified and decided I wanted to slow it down and have more of a minimal, psychological read of the paintings. Along the way, I was processing the work of Robert Ryman. By 1992-93, I was making diagrams on a white background.

In 1994 or ’95, I was having a catalogue made. I was complaining because the reproductions of my white paintings were never as white as the laminated paper. That bugged me. I had even gone to the trouble of painting gallery walls off-white, so that my paintings would look whiter. I started thinking about old-fashioned tipped-in plates. I thought that could work. I suggested to a friend and fledgling publisher that I could make miniature versions of the paintings on off-white paper. He said, “I’ll publish that book.” I depicted the paintings sitting in architectural environments using letterpress lines. That is how I got started on making books.

Into the 2000s, I started to fill my surfaces with marks. The mark-making became more fluid and I was getting into transparency. There was some articulation and specificity that I had stumbled into. As these marks came together more, I started thinking about textiles, and how things fit together with sewing and weaving.

I became interested in the idea of marking time — a neutral but aware position. I always consider myself to be in a passive position, where the viewer has to enter the painting. The paintings invite you to come and read them, as opposed to telling a story through a narrative.

On the one hand, I am aligned with a kind of American, straightforward ideology. “Here it all is in front of you.” That is the tradition of an artist like Donald Judd, whom I admire so much. But on the other hand, I don’t believe in the dictum “It is what it is.” I think the painting can offer a more nuanced give and take with the viewer. The painting is alive and a vehicle for your visual thinking.



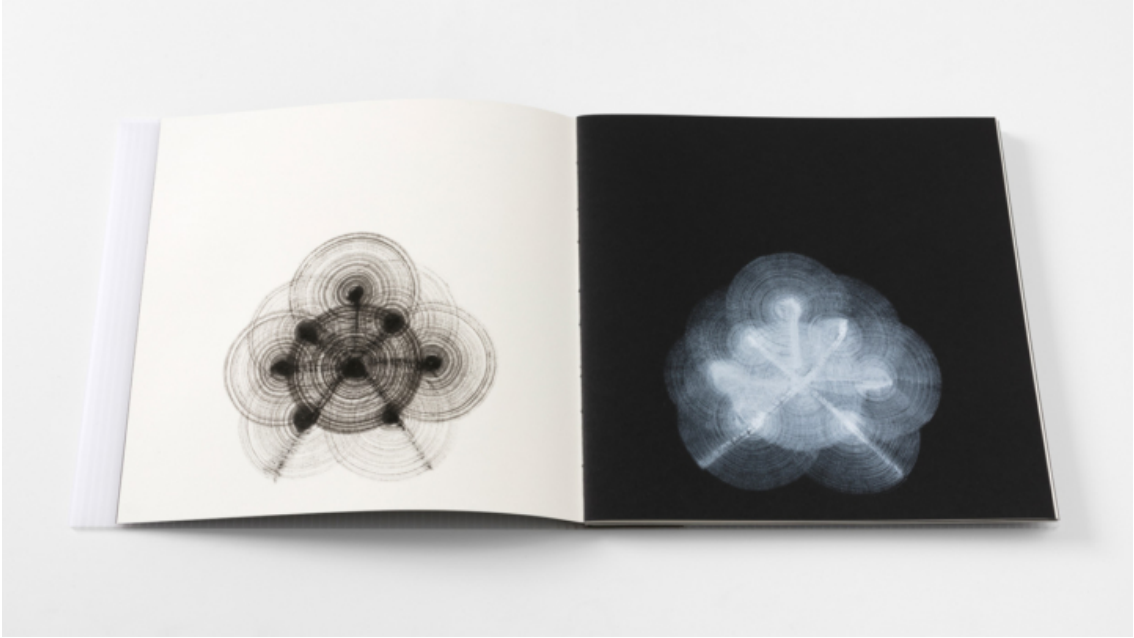
Dan Walsh, “Expo III” (2019), acrylic on canvas, 110 1/4 x 110 1/4 inches (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

**JS:** *How would you describe the intersection with Op Art in your work?*

**DW:** Optical art for optic’s sake is not of interest. But I’m all for using optics to trigger the eye into certain kinds of rhythms, patterns, or depth. I’m trying to use the syntax of painting and optical activity to prompt a psychological read.

I had this great book called *Enlightened Visions*. The ideas behind how Tibetan mandalas functioned made sense to me; it folded into my dialogue. With my early work, I was thinking about how you could interact with the painting, like taking the blocks and moving them around — its use value. Later the content became more transcendental.

I think of the paintings as meditative for me, but hopefully also meditative for the viewer. With Tibetan mandalas, you are trying to keep your mind in the present while looking at something. There is a quality of vibration and opticality. Le Corbusier called a house a machine for living. I think of the paintings as a machine for looking, and for seeing.



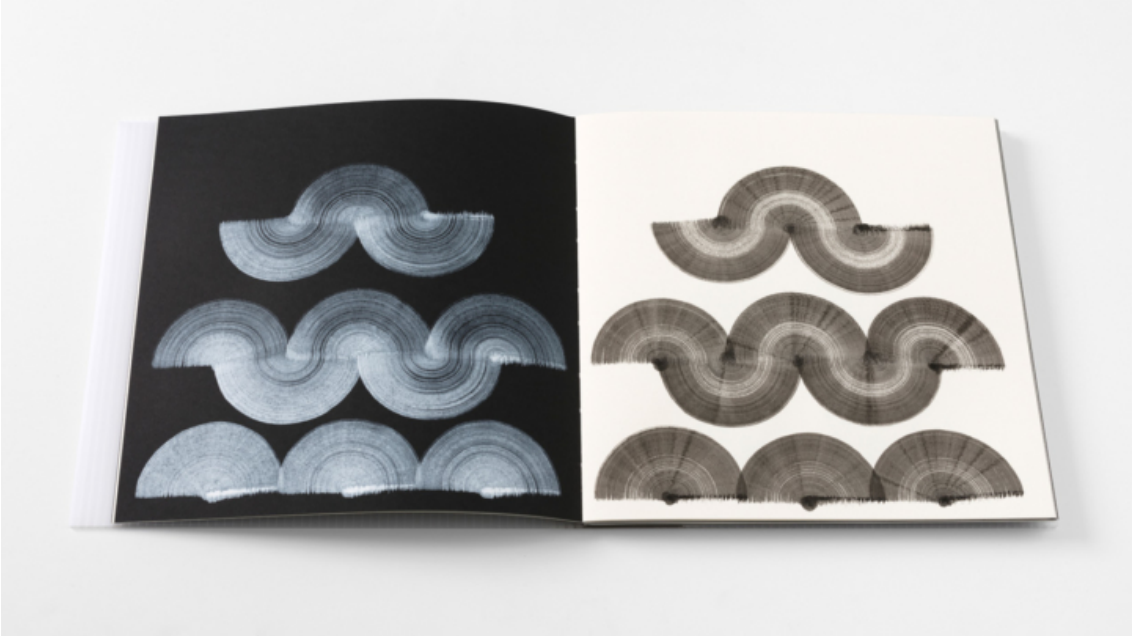
Dan Walsh, "Black and White" (detail, 2017), ink on colorplan paper, 44 pages, 12 x 12 3/8 inches, edition of 25, + 3 APs (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

**JS:** *What attracted you to the grid format? How has it changed over the years?*

**DW:** I always gravitated towards the grid because it was a user-friendly matrix. It avoided the narrative and celebrated the present moment of looking. My sensibility is ultimately involved with the history of painting and the history of beauty. However, I still want my work to show an awareness of why I am there, and how I am there. The grid is useful in that regard. It allows me to exist in a specific place in painting.

Now, after all these years, I have tried making discreet changes to the grid, using algorithms and equations to play around with the space more. The paintings still fall into the grid format but they are getting more complicated. The paintings have more natural expression and more color.

The paintings always have an internal logic. Everything looks logical, even if they are made with less than logical means. I am accepting that, and trying to let the logic reveal itself to me. In the past, I made big statements about how everything is determined. Therefore, my paintings should be determined. I always executed my paintings, top to bottom. For survival, I have had to loosen up on that theory.



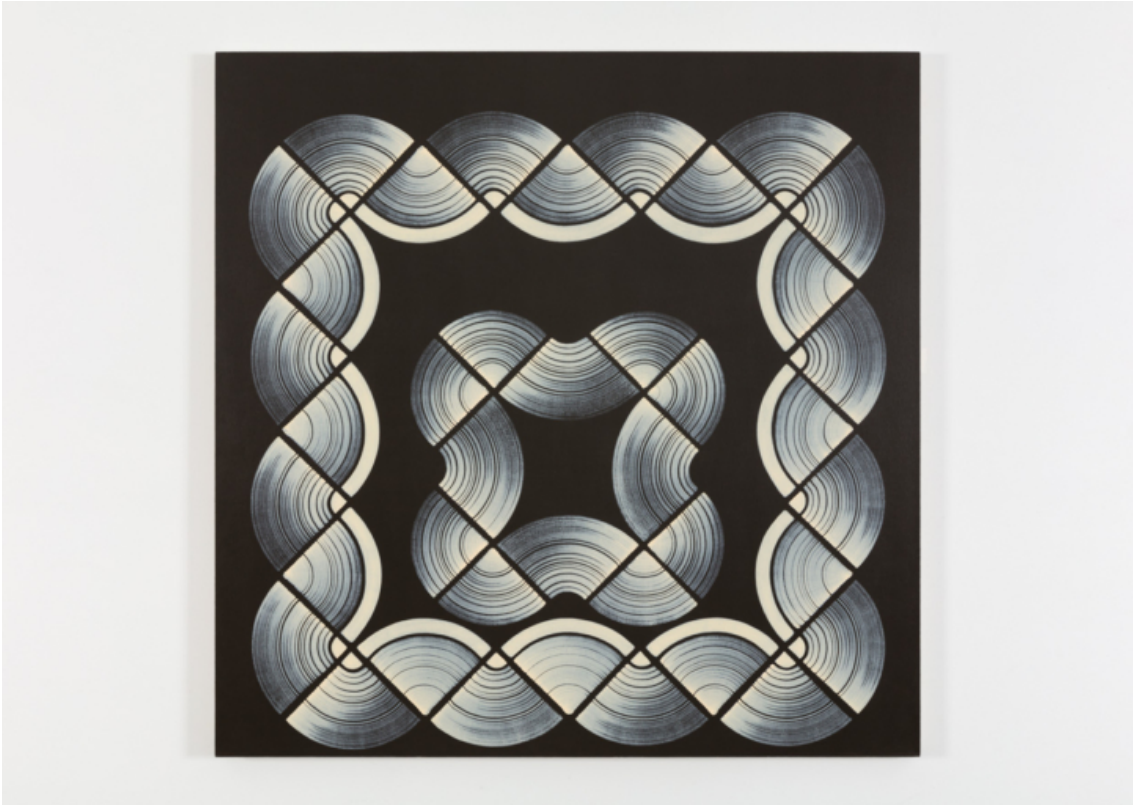
Dan Walsh, "Black and White" (detail, 2017), ink on colorplan paper, 44 pages, 12 x 12 3/8 inches (30.5 x 31.4 cm), edition of 25, + 3 APs (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

**JS:** *You said recently that you are a "closet colorist." Why do you say that?*

**DW:** Color is so tricky to pin down and call logical. That is why programmatic color worked for me. To keep the painting from becoming too expressive, I would tend to use programmatic colors: the regular primary triad, the secondary triad, and black, white, and gray. But yes, I've always been a closet colorist.

There are some people who are real colorists. You can tell a mile away that Watteau is a great colorist. Picasso was more of a tonal painter, whereas Matisse's work is about an orchestration of color. De Kooning was much more of a colorist than Pollock.

Twenty years ago, you wouldn't be caught dead being called a colorist. That would mean you were not being critical, that you believe in ideals that had no part in serious contemporary painting. As painters, we are always negotiating these things, and how far you can go. I wanted a position, but secretly wanted to see beautiful color. Also, I have to entertain myself. I'm not going to just define what good painting is, and go to the same place every time. I want to stay interested.



Dan Walsh, "Record I" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 inches (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

**JS:** *How has your palette changed? How do you get color ideas now?*

**DW:** I look at everything for color, but recently I have been looking at Paul Klee or Matisse or Agnes Martin. For a while now, I've been making some paintings using the spectrum of browns. Adolph Gottlieb has that covered. He is so good. I love his palette. I have used colors in his paintings as the starting point for mine.

I am also influenced by Gottlieb's use of different permutations: the changes in the images which recur in his paintings. They are repeated and organized within a skewed or uneven grid. My favorite paintings use the same image, but with different crops or rotations of it. One example is his painting "The Eyes of Oedipus" (1945).

**JS:** *How has this idea of permutations manifested in your work? It seems related to ideas you explore in your artist books.*

**DW:** I am interested in the idea of similar imagery and different looks at it. I'm trying to use my vocabulary of lozenge strokes and fan strokes to get a lot of variety out of those moves.

I have tended to work in pairs. I would do two paintings and take them to a point, and then I see how different they can be. I am starting with the same structure and letting them take different journeys.

Dan Walsh, "Record II" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 inches (photo by Steven Probert, © Dan Walsh, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

A book usually shows two pages open and it lends itself to progression beautifully. Years ago, I thought of the book as a series of diptychs. It made me think about looking at different images next to each other, or in progression.

In my book, *Black and White* (2017), each image has a circular motif in the signature center, as a kind of punctuation throughout the work. As the book develops, you see more imagistic associations. However, they are all made with one dip of the brush in ink. It is kind of like the ABC's of what my brush can do. Getting the right amount of ink on the brush was the hardest thing. The book was so technically challenging that I asked my wife Laura to help me. She would take away the sheets when they were done. We set up trays all over. I was averaging about three images a day before I went insane. One little mistake, and it becomes a test proof.