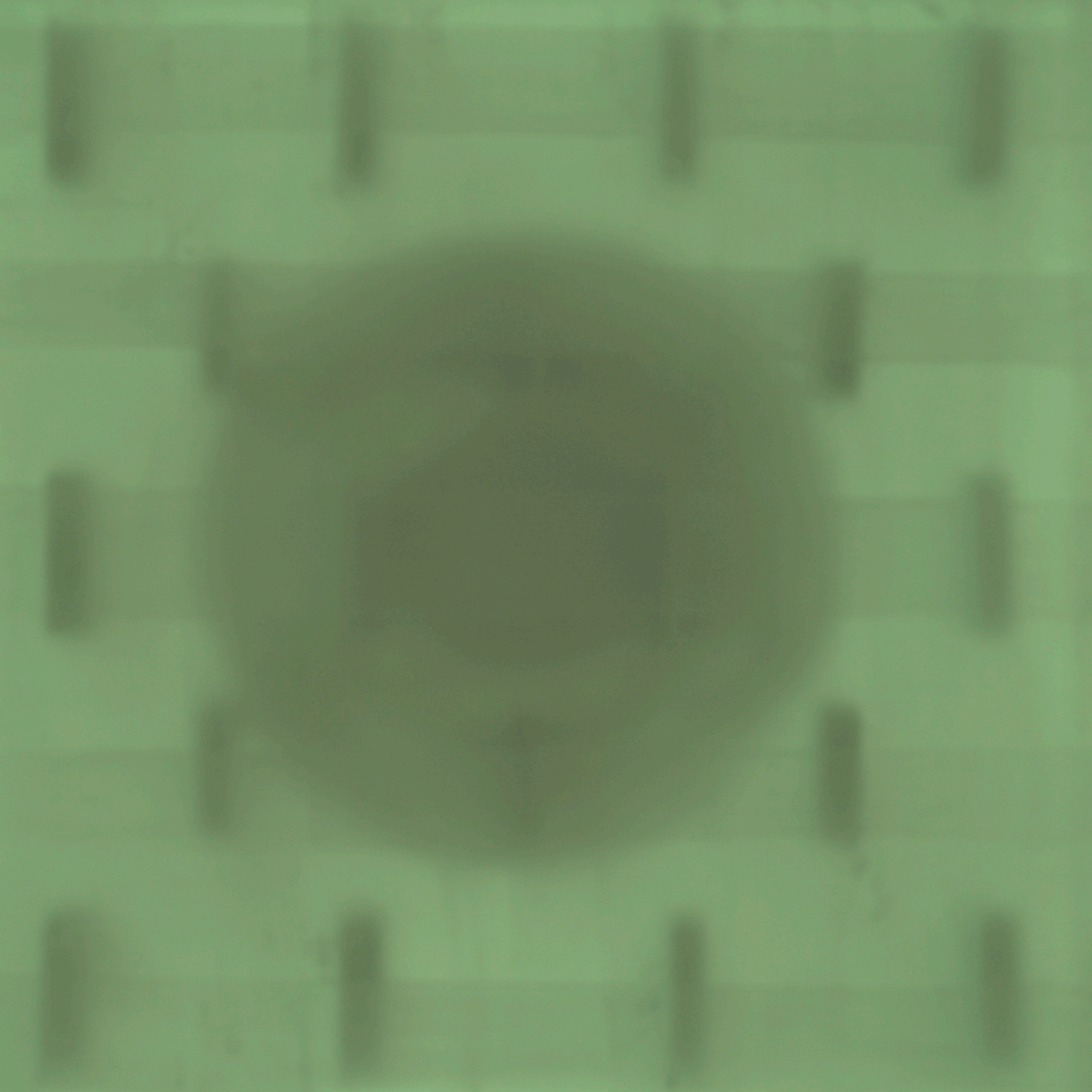


mckay otto/  
light n dark





“Eternity with its worlds  
-the past and future-  
is in ourselves or nowhere”  
-Susie Kalil

(light n dark)  
ever expanding ever no.03  
21" x 21" [53x53cm]  
© 2016 (cover)

“We find ourselves suspended in a dimension in which normal logic seems to be absent: everything appears uncertain and illusory, clearly defined yet animated by shifting points of reference.”

It's been said that we never really forget anything, and all our pasts lie deep within us, waiting for a stray sight or smell to bring them to the surface again. Memory is more than looking back to a time that is no longer. It is looking out into another kind of time where everything continues to grow and change with the life that is in it still. And yet, what is a timeless moment? What instant is without date or duration? Most of us would have to admit that we have known peak moment, which seemed to lie so far beyond time that the past and the future melted away into obscurity. Lost in a sunset; transfixed by the play of moonlight through a forest of trees; caught and held still-bound by the crack of thunder echoing through mists of rain. We dream of traveling through the universe – but is not the universe within ourselves? We may sense spirit as eternity or as vast nature finding their way into our lives. Eternity with its worlds – the past and future – is in our self or nowhere. Each of us journeys

alone into this world and it is our nature to seek out belonging. For there is always some magnet that draws our eyes to the horizon or invites us to explore behind things and seek out concealed depth. We know the real nature of things is hidden deep within them. When we enter the world, we come to live on the threshold between the visible and the invisible. This tension infuses our lives with longing.

The world outside falls away in the presence of McKay Otto's paintings. We are able to remember an experience we may have lost touch with (but must have once known). Our sense of identity is transformed; we no longer feel bound to physical or material reality and begin to feel expansive, as if there are new dimensions to be experienced. A new reality unfolds; the contemplative comes alive. Otto's recent series of works convey the unsettling quality of a captured moment in eternal flux. In these shifting, destabilized visual fields,

everything contends with, interrupts and invades everything else. By questioning the systems of order we impose on the world, Otto breaks down social and intellectual hierarchies and reintroduces the play of intuition and lyrical metaphors. Accordingly, the art becomes a spiritual endeavor, which delves into the essence of being. These works suggest such states by allowing us to let go of ideal, analytically derived conceptions of ourselves. In doing so, we recognize an essential fact: our steadfast attachment to systems of order, yet our equally prevalent need to escape the very order we demand. Otto moves us into a visceral key, enabling us to address the most primal of human concerns: the difference between outer and inner worlds, between transcendence and metamorphosis, between impermanence and permanence, a mixture of what vanishes and what remains. The philosophical questions that emerge from these compositions deal with the mystery and enigma of our identity and existence, our solitary state in the world, our limits in space and time, our desire for the infinite. We find ourselves suspended in a dimension in which normal logic seems to be absent: everything appears uncertain

and illusory, clearly defined yet animated by shifting points of reference. Toward that end, Otto's works engender a counterposition between “here” and “hereafter,” between interiors and exteriors, in a play of architectonic spaces, planes and frames of labyrinthine effects. Throughout, reverie and geometry are tied together in the evocation of mood. Clearly, Otto works on at least two levels: constructing a painting in which shape, color, light and space form a set of unique relationships, independent of subject matter, while at the same time capturing and preserving the physical and emotional overtones aroused in him by visual experience. Accordingly, Otto fuses precise observation with geometric rigor and painterly sensuality. No thoughtful viewer can examine the recent paintings without reacting to their electrifying vortex of energy. The more we look at Otto's surfaces, the more they reveal a dizzying sequence of gridded vertical or horizontal spatial disjunctions. They quicken the pulse, making us aware that there is no one place to stand before the vaporous white grounds and razor-edged “strokes,” no perfect vantage point from which to take in the superimpositions of intoxicatingly radiant





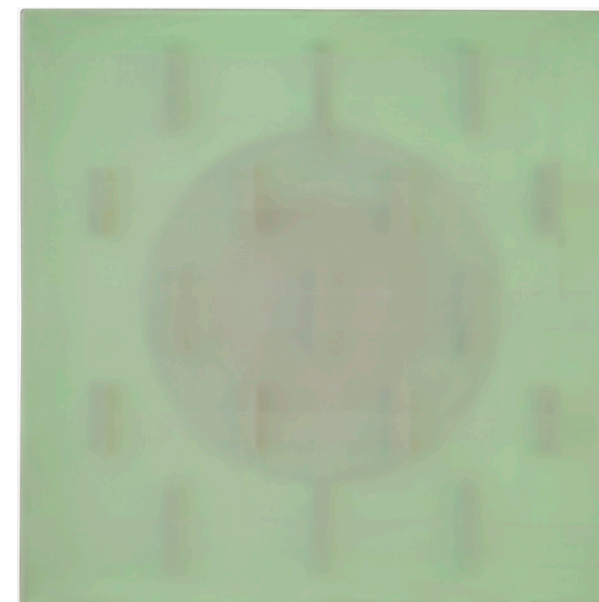
(N light)  
ever expanding ever no.02  
21" x 21" [53x53cm]  
© 2017

hues. Some of the areas of color seem to overlap, while others touch, but they do so without recourse to any overarching system or hierarchy. Still, the spatial "rhythms" in each painting are as essential to Otto's compositional units as sequence, interval and accumulation. For Otto, the intricately structured horizontal and vertical field is a

playground where he questions and baffles the viewer's perceptual habits. Sets within sets converge and band to form a complex and expansive field of ambiguities between what is known to reason and what is actually perceived. Like music, the field engages the viewer's actual time; it cannot be grasped or retained in a moment. Rather, it can be experienced and comprehended only gradually.

Within a single painting, Otto structurally melds control, whimsy and randomness. Layers upon layers result in a depth and luminosity that holds the entire surface in stasis, transforming it into a vibrantly transparent membrane. The forms that occupy the evolving field are integral with it – below it, fused with it, immersed in it. Horizontal white washes of acrylic drape like a fine veil, bleed evenly as they flow. The method produces vertiginous spaces only slightly tempered by the seepages and rivulets that aspire to pull attention back from the depth to the surface. Still, Otto manages to take an unabashedly beautiful cobalt blue or fading orange and make it float as if it were as light and ethereal as air. Like nature, ever in flux

yet soothing in its permanence, Otto's process stimulates a tension between change and constancy, those variations of hand and mind which record a moment in time and our awareness of the act of painting itself.

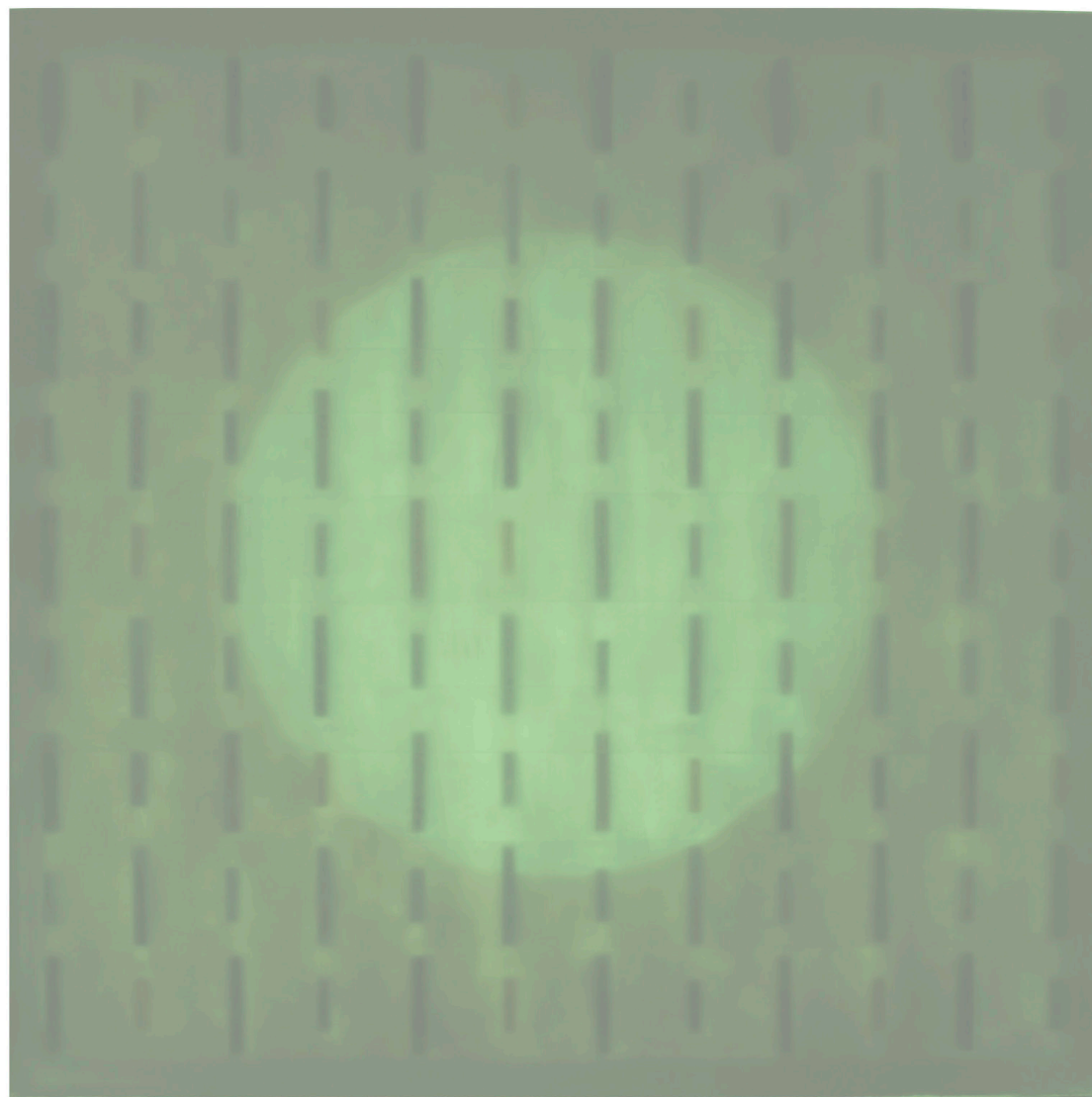


(N dark)  
ever expanding ever no.02  
21" x 21" [53x53cm]  
© 2017

Faced with Otto's meticulously crafted works, we see ourselves as part of the environment, connecting with everything, continuing forever. At the very least, the series divines the presence of an expressive force that moves us to think about our memories and blind spots, our feelings and follies. All of the paintings retain the immediate marks of the hand that formed them as well as the traces of time. Otto creates a kind of light box by stretching special nylon canvas over wood panel and leaving a few inches of space between the materials. Fluorescent paint transforms the glowing, glassy atmosphere into a seamless web of almost mystical clarity. Otto conjures fields of fluctuating depth, playing off ambiguities of negative and positive space - they're tricky to describe, alternately acidic, juiced-up, confectionery, hushed, velvety, precious like a jewel-box. The continuous changes and shifts put one in mind of Buddhism's belief in the transitory nature of all things and that the world is made up of appearances. The issue, nevertheless, is how we pay attention to things in the world. Within



(n light)  
 ever echo the unknown ever  
 60" x 60" [152x152cm]  
 © 2016



(n dark)  
 ever echo the unknown ever  
 60" x 60" [152x152cm]  
 © 2016

Buddhist meditation there is a persistent focus on cultivating one's capacity to be present with things as they are, to cultivate an ability to see each being, each moment as though for the first time and to recognize those various states of consciousness. As life speeds up and further complicates our experience, we should value any opportunity to be still, to let the mind rest, to allow seeing to take place. There is almost a deep sense of quiet in an Otto painting, of breath both held and released. Through hard thinking and tough labor, he pushes each work – and us – into slightly unknown territories. Always working in tandem with his obsessiveness, however, is a lack of inhibition, an almost wide-eyed innocence that has made him unafraid of pushing and expanding his concerns even further. The obvious artist to invoke in connection with Otto's work is Agnes Martin, not only because of their shared insistence on repetitive mark-making, but also their use of delicate grids torqued just out of perfect geometrical alignment to create the effect of a quiet visual vibrato. Martin's grids provoke a startling sense of luminosity, as though light were emanating from those dead fields of paint. It's this quality of resplendence that

leads some to speak of her penciled lattices as "venetian blinds," an image that conveys the notion of light radiating from behind a barrier forward into the eyes of the perceiver. They seemingly hover away from the surface of the painting, becoming like so many particles of dust floating in beams of sunlight and giving us the sense that we can actually see "the air." As it happened, Otto met Martin in New Mexico during the final years of her life and was one of only two artists mentored by her. According to Otto, Martin predicted he would spend the rest of his life going beyond what it took her fifty years to accomplish. Yet pay enough attention and Otto's holistic language of abstract truth and uncompromising beauty are rewarding enough to make comparison beside the point. Although the overall effect of Otto's paintings is poetic, the aim is that of a universal world view, an all-encompassing order, an archetypal structure. The ordering principles at the heart of Otto's work are those of balance, equilibrium, and binary opposition. In his paintings, there is a constant interplay of polarities – light/dark, positive/negative, warm/cool, plus/minus, unity/multiplicity, male/female, heaven/earth.

"There is a hypnotic quality to these paintings that has an effect similar to that of Mondrian's studies of piers and shifting waters."

The enduring question of how we respond to the world as a physical and spiritual environment establishes the leitmotiv. Flowing associatively, Otto's perceptual fields traverse a strange yet hauntingly familiar terrain that evokes the realm of dreams, memory and the imagination – those often subliminal layers of human experience in which the potential for renewal resides. To discover who we are and what the nature of our being is, we must go beyond our experience in time to where it ceases to quicken memory and space is everything. Toward that end, Otto creates vaporous spheres into which we can peer and beyond which are hints of the infinite. There is no single, unitary center to be found in this expansion. Rather, the implied center is everywhere and nowhere. Still, Otto's complex matrix constitutes a vast intercommunication of parts; any given part is always referring to another part from an entirely different strata.

But more important than any specific decoding of all these elements is the organization as bands of intersecting paths, segments and interchanges. Otto's recent paintings engender crystalline worlds-within-worlds that serve to locate or "place" us, however shakily or provisionally, providing us with a visual equivalent for an internal state. Otto reaches out to all edges of a painting, demonstrating his will and determination that every part of the work be alive, involved, touched. His ritualistic mode of expression suggests a distinct compulsiveness, a fusion of edgy certainty with a firm certitude, and the need to grasp and anchor the ephemeral. At the core of Otto's approach to painting is the mark. His razor-edged vertical and horizontal marks can be seen as an attempt to preserve and embody a certain kind of physical motion.





note: changes views from left to right



(N light) left, front and  
right views previous page  
(N dark) current page

ever pure ever  
60" x 60" [152 x 152 cm]  
© 2016

At the same time, the works suggest that all marks, however self-contained, are part of something larger and perhaps unknowable. In any case, mark making connects him to the very nerve of his universe by becoming the conduit of his messages and visions.

All of the works display a kind of meditative outspokenness, an artist conversing with himself on what to do next, then making that conversation his further subject and style. Typically, Otto's titles come after the fact, evoked by effects emerging from the work – ultimately, they are about illumination and insight, pure perception and awareness, a light on the “imperceptible”, prolonged imagination, love, happiness, flight. To all intents and purposes, the titles form their own poetic meters, inducing associations with both past and future, of even some long-ago projection of possible futures. The linguistic twists are no doubt intentional, mirroring the formal ambiguities the artist sets up, yet thwarting any intent on our part to pin down or narrowly define the meaning of Otto's work. His paintings recall a certain quality of light,

a certain movement or sense of change. More often than not, we feel light itself, in and through the shifting hues, or we feel movement and the perceptual change we recognize as the signs of the world – but without the pressures to understand why. Significantly, Otto's paintings seem to reflect the dilemma of contemporary life: there is the desire for the sublime, but too much knowledge of our failures to believe completely in obtaining it. Nonetheless, Otto isn't after the easy fix, nor is he interested in viewer's who fail to provide their complete and undivided attention. Out of the utter simplicity and seeming banality of his strategies, Otto extrudes visual richness. All of the works slide back and forth across our visual field, creating an odd cross-eyed sensation. Our immediate environment seems in flux; the paintings move. By so obviously considering how the eye moves across a painting's surface, Otto focuses on material decision-making and, through it, on the poetics of seeming to display the mind in operation.



Handwritten musical notation on a single staff, featuring a series of notes and rests in black ink. The notation is written on a light-colored background.

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(N light) left side previous spread  
(N dark) right side previous spread

ever appear ever  
80"x 80" [203 x203]  
© 2016

To scrutinize 'ever pure ever' is to have your attention shift to the space between your body and the work's variously translucent surface, which ranges from icy invisibility to mysteriously warm reflectivity. Here, bands and rhythms of vertical "strokes" shift from blue to green. The interaction between colors is most intense when one hue borders on another. The razor-edges not only maximize this relationship, but when placed vertically, the shifts are perceived as horizontal spreads of colored light. Generally migrating from side to side, the white streaks of pigment laid over the haze of marks and hues suggest flowing currents of air. In terms of immediate visual impact, the palette dazzles; the composition pulses; and the more closely we move toward its surface, the more it appears to be a mirage. Equally mesmerizing are 'ever expanding ever no.02' and 'ever echo the unknown ever', in which vertical and

horizontal bands bounce our eye - along with the solar plexus – back and forth between soft yellows and mellow oranges, jittering across all sorts of tertiaries, including lavender, aqua and silvery gray. Despite the array of unnameable colors whose fuzzy penumbras spill over into one another, Otto's exquisite abstractions never lose control, their bands always maintaining a rhythm as wildly vibrant as they are smartly orchestrated. There is a hypnotic quality to these paintings that has an effect similar to that of Mondrian's studies of piers and shifting waters. Indeed, one of the pleasures of Otto's work is its appropriate looseness. He knows just how much to blend a tone or manipulate the arrangement of bars and dashes so that the composition remains both structure and satisfying complex of rhythmic marks.

Similarly, in the darkness, 'ever pure ever' reveals an intensely sensory effect; the circle begins to pulsate as stuttering marks that resemble DNA samples, and seismo or cardiographic readouts. Our eyes slide across the myriad surfaces, seeking a hold but finding none, further

enhancing the feeling that sensory data are always fleeting, disappearing. In any case, the paintings become playing fields where multiple events organize, dissolve, re-form and coalesce. Instinct and accident collide with geometry and structure to produce a kind of hybrid language. Delicately applied and invisibly blended, colors seem at times to radiate deep within or about to vaporize, and at other times like crinkled skin. Moving back and forth between abstract thought and sensuous physicality, Otto confounds the translation of his work between perception and cognition, between seeing and knowing. A shape seems recognizable only for an instant before transforming into another related form: a square becomes a circle, the circle becomes a horizontal band, the band leads the eye dreamily back into the depths only to discover razor-edged "rhythms" that cancel the illusion and re-announces the surface. Slowly, we unravel the playful complexity of the crossings of illusion and literalism.

Vision buzzes, bounces and zips compulsively between structural alignments and radiant shifts as though tracking sight lines through an orchard. In some works, the structures and patterns read schematically as force fields or energy maps of interlocking charges. Others glow like cellular formations in the process of splitting and growing on a backlit slide under a microscope. In 'ever appear ever', vanishing red, orange, yellow, and lime green vertical marks, horizontal "rhythms" are layered to complicated, spatially illusory effect, creating a tunnel-like view that sucks our gaze in toward a white ovoid hovering in space. The entirety is rendered in colorful phosphorescent paint that, when the lights are turned off, fairly glows in the dark. To be sure, the painting has a strange, but unblinking, animist power. The effect is psychically thrilling; it is like a portal into another world.



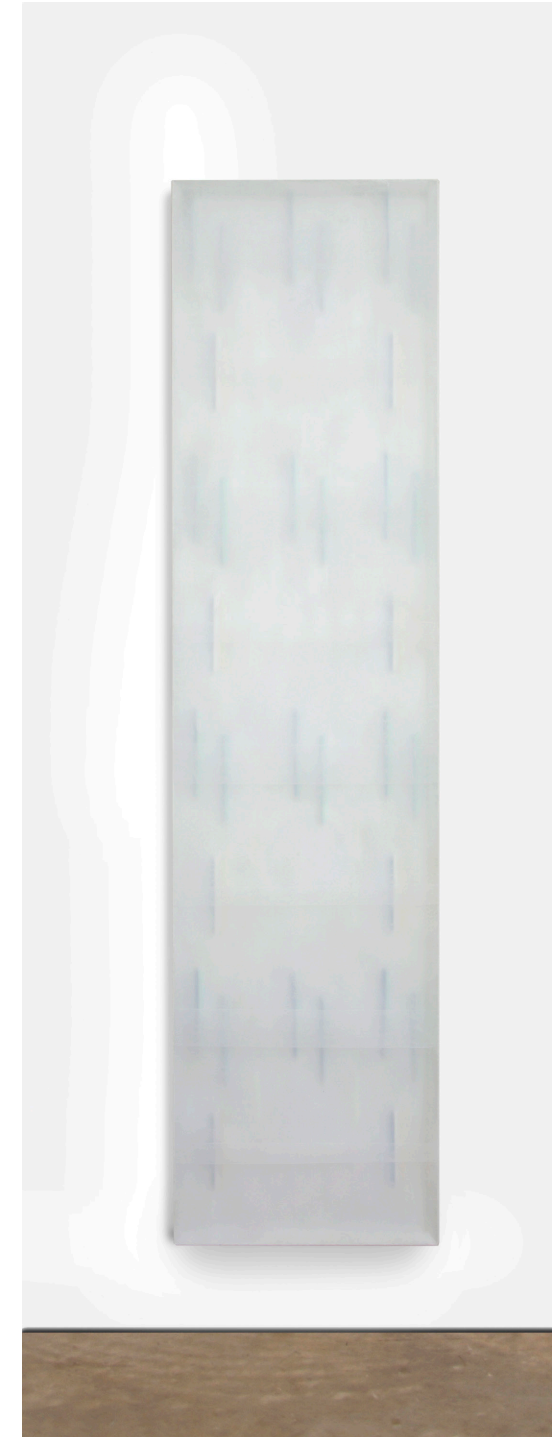
“Layers upon layers result in a depth and luminosity that hold the entire surface in stasis transforming it into a vibrantly transparent membrane”

For Otto, the real secrets of color lie not in a physical structure that yield to analysis, but in the human mind that perceives it. As a group, Otto's new works allow us to measure the way that one person's experiences and sensibilities have been expressed in visual impulses. If anything, they are evolving into a more active collaboration between stroke and form. By the same token, image and paint mirror each other in layers of dark, light and reverie. Such intensity isn't achieved so much through mastery of technique as by a courageous hand. These works breathe life – our own fugitive lives – as well as a physical awareness of ourselves within a broader realm of cultural associations and personal desires. Wishing to function where art and life intersect, Otto

shows us that the structure and poetics of vision can merge in a kind of secular wonder. The lovingly crafted works embody Otto's intuitive yet meticulous visual language – a language that continues to evolve. Throughout, he aims for an inclusive abstraction that is expansive in its physical presence, an abstraction charged with referential and metaphorical forms that engage the imagination and invite us to look again. He only asks us to shed our preconceived notions regarding art and vision. For Otto invokes the revelation of light itself. We feel the presence of light inhabiting the works much as we experience the light in a lucid dream. We sense the color generated inside us that connects to the light within.

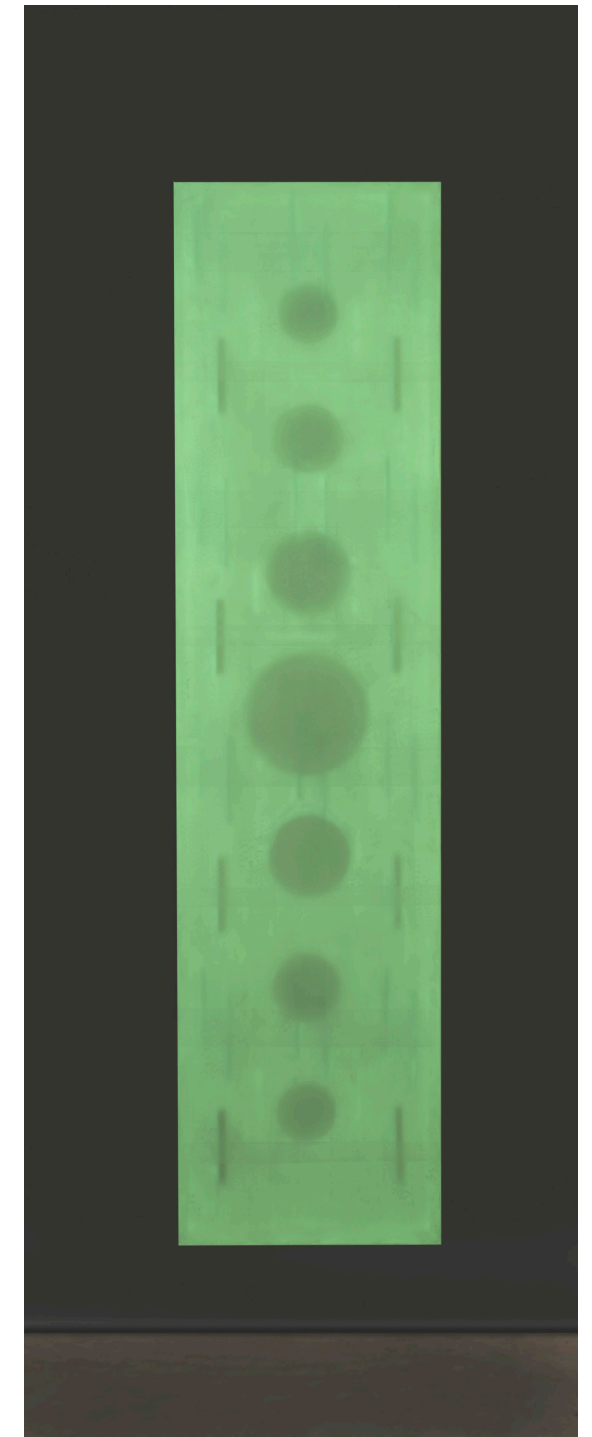
-Susie Kalil

mckay otto / ever 2012  
revised 2017



(N light) left side  
(N dark) right side

ever well being ever  
21"x 84" [53 x 213]  
© 2015-16



“We come to live on the threshold  
between the visible and invisible”  
-Susie Kalil

ever



