stepping

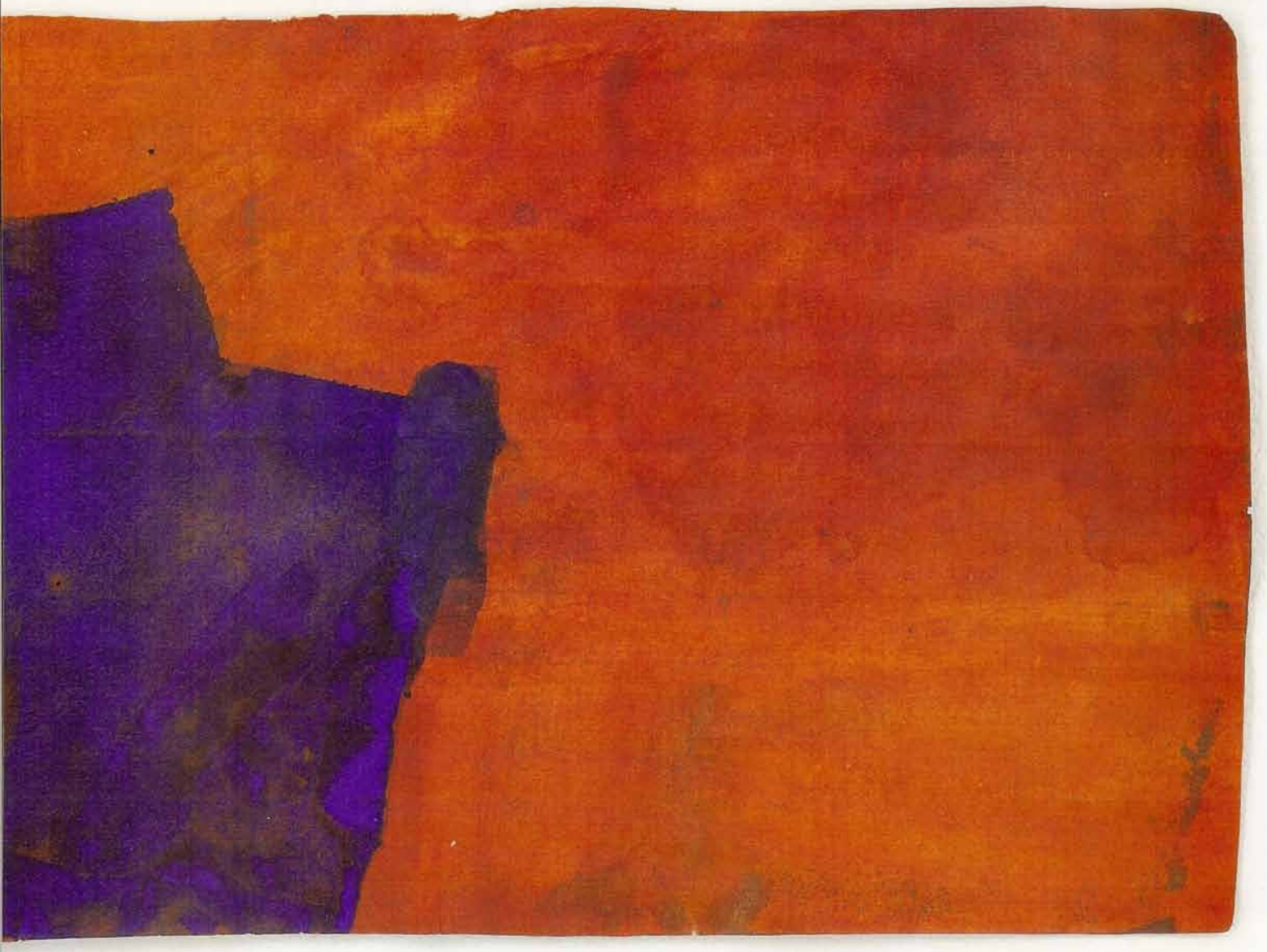
IN SUZAN FRECON'S PAINTINGS, PURE FORM AND COLOR COALESCE, AND ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR

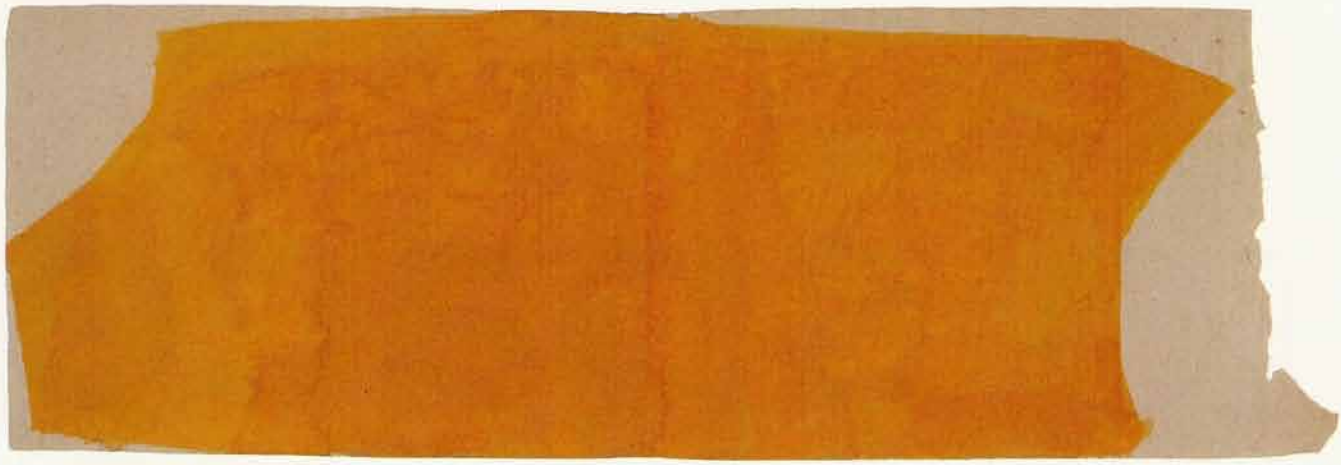
Paintings can be heavy with meaning—think of the imposing biblical, mythological or historical themes of many a Renaissance or Academic tableau. Sometimes, they're just heavy—consider the sheer bulk of a football-field-sized Barnett Newman canvas or a mixed-media Thornton Dial assemblage bulging with everything from welded-metal machine parts to baby dolls under thick crusts of paint. By contrast, the abstract and minimalist painters who splashed, scraped or smudged washes or traces of color on their canvases called attention to a dichotomy between the solid physicality of their materials and the apparently ethereal nature of what they had conjured up with them. Think of Robert Ryman's white paintings, Agnes Martin's subtle grids or Cy Twombly's scatterings of scribbles on vast white or light-gray fields.

Similarly, the now-you-sense-it, now-you-don't heft of the American artist Suzan Frecon's paintings plays

By Edward M. Gomez

into space





an incessant game of hide-and-seek with another essential aspect of these otherwise very solid abstract works, whose irrefutable mass and presence bring to mind those long-ago discussions—held during the heyday of abstract expressionism, geometric abstraction, shaped canvases and minimalist sculpture—about a painting's status as an object with a sculptural character. The other vital aspect of Frecon's paintings, with their uncluttered compositions of simple shapes set against richly colored grounds, is the mysteriously heightened, aura-like sensation that they convey to the viewer.

In part, that sensation is purely optical, as a viewer's eye recognizes the rhythm of a perceptual tug of war between Frecon's half-moon, curved or pointed shapes in what appear to be her paintings' foregrounds and the broader expanses of color that make up her backgrounds. Or are her "backgrounds" actually precisely defined shapes in the foregrounds, set against colors that appear to be backgrounds? Another sensation Frecon's canvases evoke is one that has long characterized some of the most moving works of abstract art of any style or era—that is a sense of transcendent, even spiritual uplift that comes with a viewer's total absorption in one of her straightforward but beguiling images.

Previous spread: Suzan Frecon, *two blues, orange*, 2007, watercolor on agate-burnished old Indian ledger paper, 9 1/8 x 20 3/16 in. This page, from top: orange q, 2010, watercolor on Indian ledger paper, 9 1/2 x 28 1/8 in.; Suzan Frecon in her New York studio. Opposite page: Suzan Frecon, *soforouge*, 2009, oil on linen, two panels, 108 x 87 3/8 in. overall.

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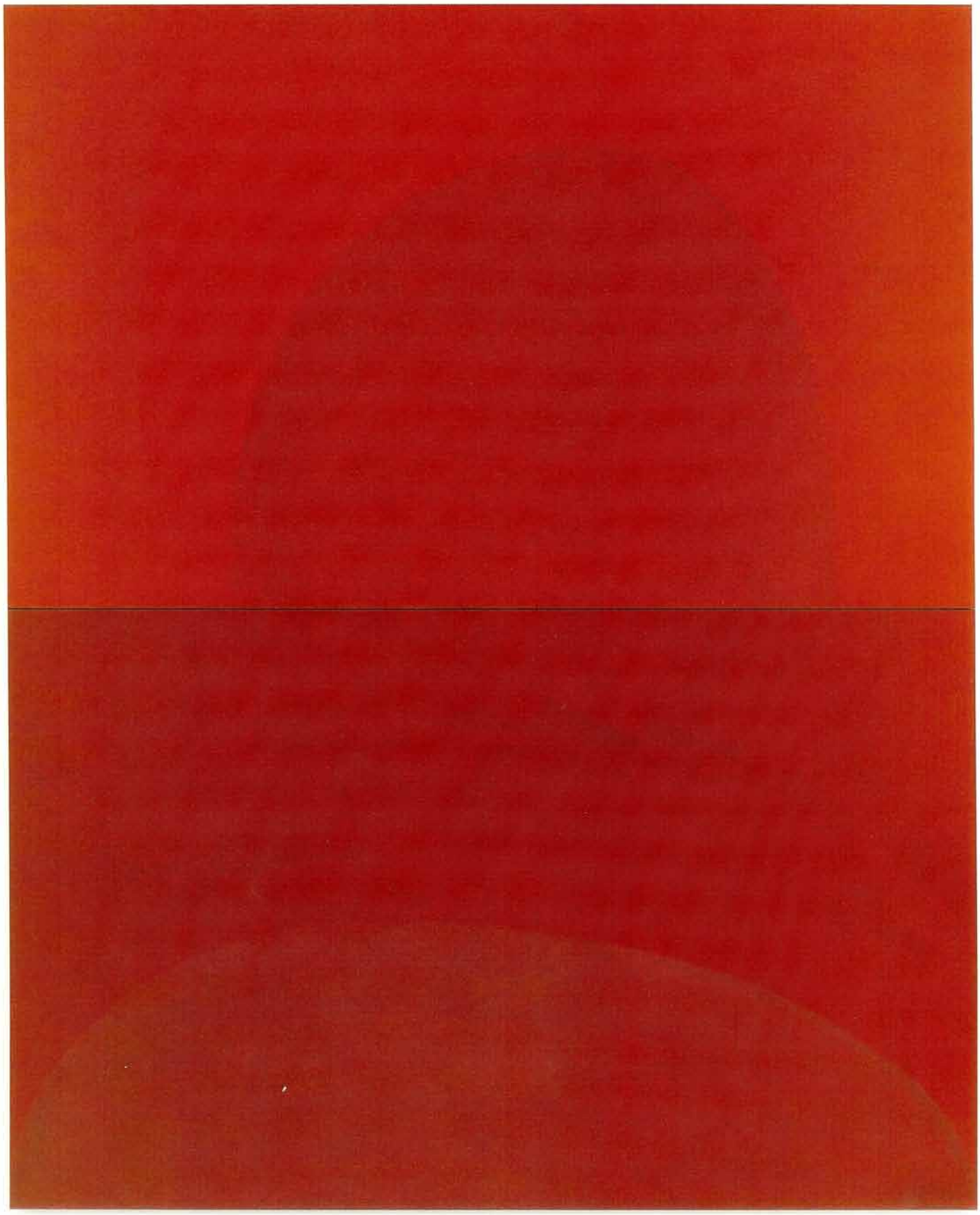


"I like that you can feel as though you're stepping right into the space of the painting with a canvas this large," Frecon observes during an interview at her New York studio, where a nine-foot-tall picture in progress hangs on a wall, catching sunlight from south-facing windows. The room is one of two modest workspaces Frecon maintains in a nondescript building in what is left of the garment district in midtown Manhattan. She explains that she has come a long way to become the maker of such large-scale, enigmatic images whose many small and medium-size companions share their rich colors, dynamic-static sense of pictorial space and visual allure.

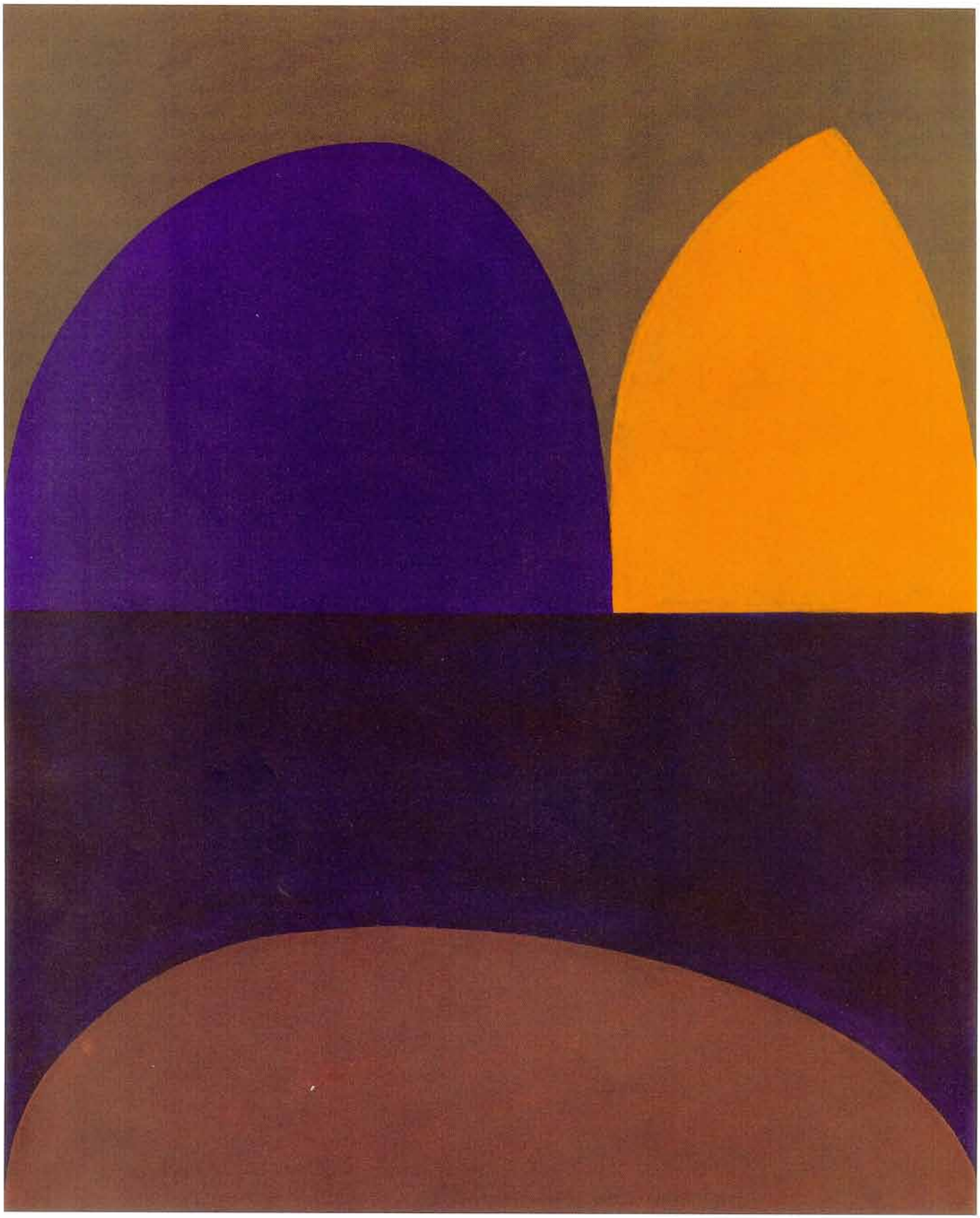
Born in 1941 in Mexico, Pa., a small community in the southeastern part of the state, Frecon earned an undergraduate degree in fine art from Penn State, where she also focused on art education and French because, as she explains, her parents did not want her "to end up unable to survive, in an artist's garret." Still, she recalls, "From the start, I did not want to compromise by going into art education or commercial art; I wanted to be a serious painter." To realize that goal, she figured, her study of art would have to take her far beyond her routine classroom viewings of slides of works by Renaissance and modern masters, and of such 1950s contemporaries as Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn. So, setting off for an undergraduate semester abroad, with a base in Strasbourg, Frecon gained a point of entry to the museums and cathedral towns of Western Europe, where she eagerly sought out the masterpieces she had read about in books. Later, she was a student at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris for three years.

Of her first-ever encounter, in Venice, with a Cimabue oil painting of the crucifixion, she says, "When I saw the real thing, it overwhelmed me, and I understood right away why it was so important." She responded to the play of light on its surface, the structure of its composition and its physical presence. Later on, Frecon says, in such paintings she also later recognized affinities with the work of such modern artists as her contemporary David Novros, a maker of irregularly shaped, monochromatic canvases that communicate powerfully through pure color and form.

"I was thrashing around the figure in my painting," Frecon

EDWARD M. GOMEZ

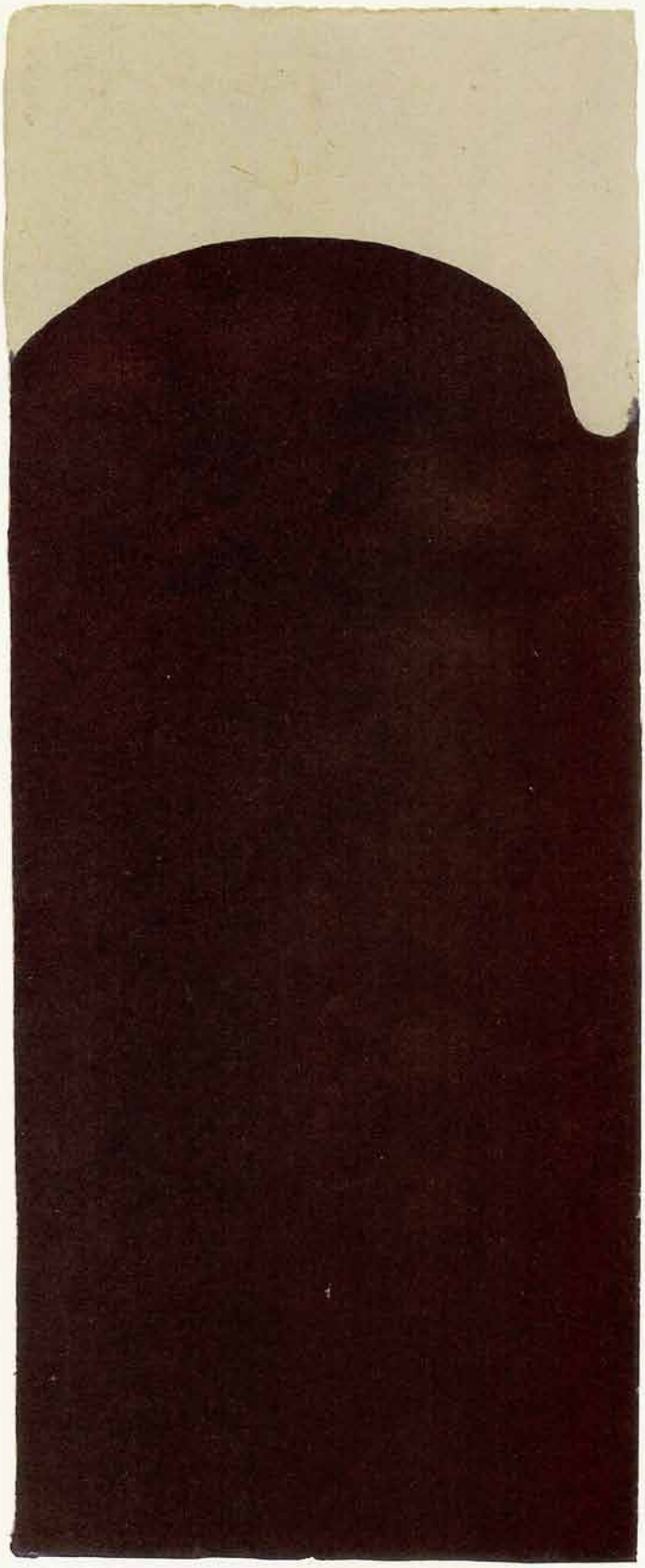
This page and opposite: Suzan Frecon in her studio with materials and reference sources.



recalls, "but after I returned to the United States in 1967 and, later, moved to New York, I threw it out." At the time, minimalism was on the rise. It was championed by such pioneering artist-theoreticians as the critic and sculptor Donald Judd. This new, non-movement movement, Judd wrote in one of his most influential essays, "Specific Objects" (1965), recognized that the "flat and rectangular surface" of conventional painting was "too handy to give up," and that "[s]ome things" could "be done only on a flat surface." But, Judd noted, the minimalists enthusiastically embraced the fact that "[t]hree dimensions are real space." He added, "That gets rid of the problem of illusionism," and spelled "riddance," as he put it, to "one of the salient and objectionable relics of European art." Judd wrote: "Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface."

Frecon, like some of the artists of her generation whose work she admires—Robert Mangold, a maker of monochromatic, shaped canvases, and the late Fred Sandback, who created sculptural forms using little more than stretched lengths of colored yarn—assimilated some of minimalism's sensibility and concerns but also mapped out her own aesthetic path. She explains that she has long been as interested in what she calls the "empty space" of a composition as she has been in its "full space." Ideally, she says, in her work, "I want them to work together." The space a painting represents as well as the actual space it occupies have long seemed to be key aspects of Frecon's works. John Davis, the veteran New York dealer who now runs a gallery in Hudson, New York, presented one of Frecon's first solo shows in the early 1980s, when his gallery was located in Akron, Ohio. "With one huge, 20-foot-long painting and several small ones in my little gallery, Suzan created an environment you couldn't help becoming immersed in," Davis recalls. "At that time, she was painting gradations of a strange blue, each section meticulously applied to the canvas. Emotionally, the experience was very moving."

Frecon speaks about the "structure" of a painting, referring to its shape as an object and to the function that shape fulfills in enclosing or framing an image. She notes that the proportions of her own canvases, even her smallest ones, "are precisely worked out so that they generate a certain relationship" between the elements of a composition. For some time now, she has used the millennia-old mathematical proportion, the Golden Mean, to produce visually satisfying measurements for her canvases. Meanwhile, Frecon labors over each new image she creates, paying close attention to the expressive character of her palette (she never uses black), producing preparatory sketches and even mixing her own oil paints herself. She uses a variety of vividly colored



This page: Suzan Frecon, *vertical indigo on small format*, 2010, watercolor on Indian ledger paper, 16 1/2 x 6 3/4 in. Opposite page: *cathedral series, variation 8*, 2011, oil on wood panel, 29 5/8 x 24 in.

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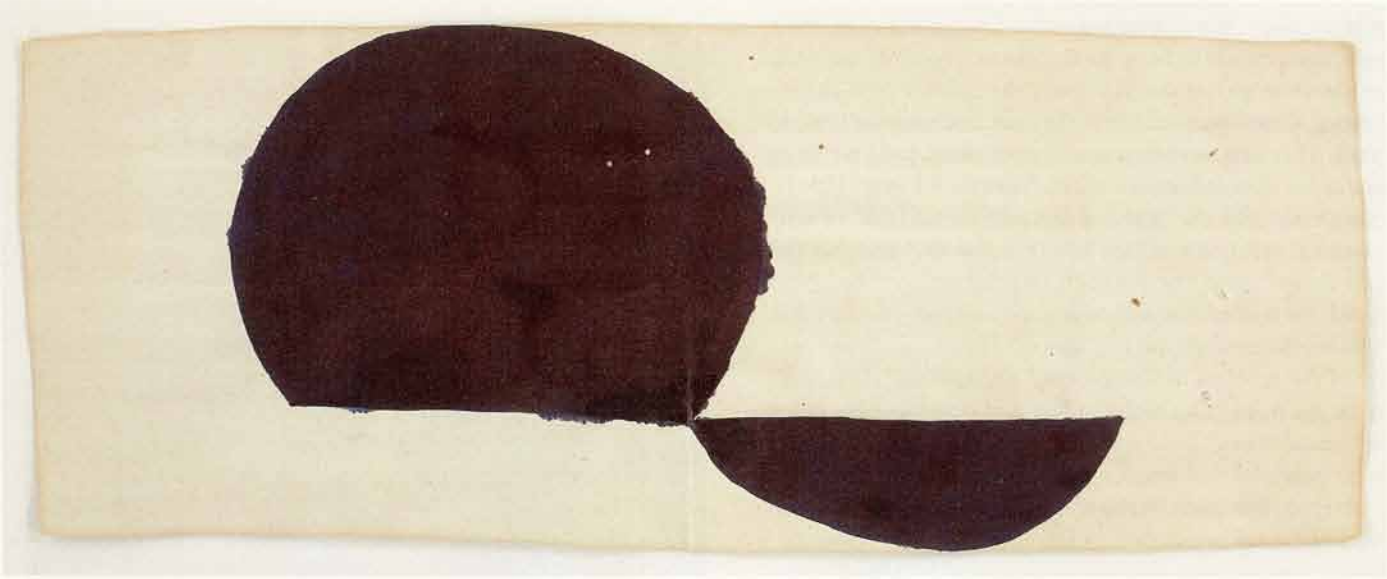
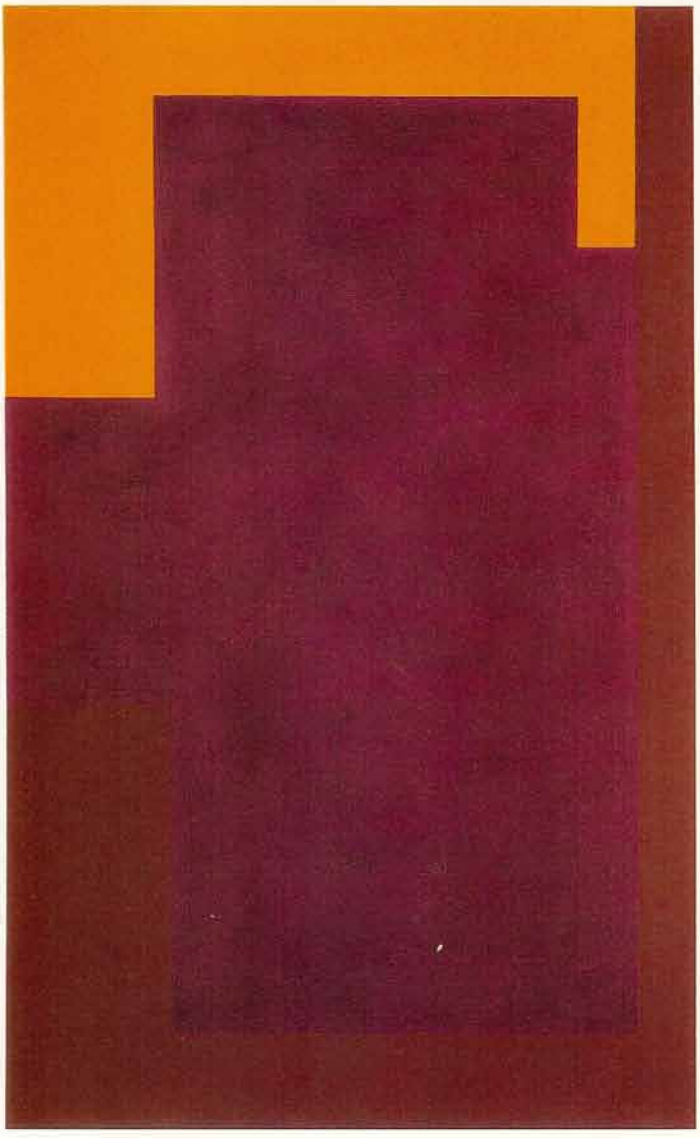




pigments, including iron oxides and ultramarine. "I worked for years to get those shapes just right," she says, pointing to a small painting in her studio of two dark, blood-red, chubby crescent forms that appear to be riding piggy-back, set against a rich indigo background. Frecon notes that the two shapes are equal in area.

"I look for my structure to hold my art," she says. "I build a painting—the ground, the format, the size, the relationship between the forms within it that are generated by the outside form. Color is a concept, which I usually think of first." Speaking generally, Frecon notes that "painting has so much craft and virtuosity" associated with it. With that remark, though, she could be referring more specifically to her own scrupulously hands-on approach, which has resulted in the hard-to-photograph, luminous qualities of her oil-on-canvas works. Light reflects off their surfaces, with their varied sheens, even as it seems to emanate from deep within them. Frecon's slow, deliberate art-making processes have produced paintings whose solidity belies their evanescent air. Look closely at them, and become lost in the depths of their saturated colors. Look again, and be transported as those same planes of color seem to gently lift away from their moorings.

Frecon's watercolors, on Indian rag paper, are materially less complex, but with their asymmetrical compositions featuring long, lazy rectangular shapes or circles with their tops or bottoms lopped off and voluptuous, arch-forming curves, they exude some of her paintings' harmoniously off-kilter vibe. That kind of energy, she says, "is what art gives you; it's the art in a painting." It's the same compelling, unnamable quality Frecon has found in the diagram-like paintings of the early

This page, from top: Suzan Frecon, *indigo composition,* 2006, watercolor on agate-burnished old Indian ledger paper, 9 1/5 x 25 in.; *vertical purple forbidden enclosure,* 2005, oil and linen, 87 1/2 x 54 1/8 in. Opposite page: Painting materials in Suzan Frecon's studio.

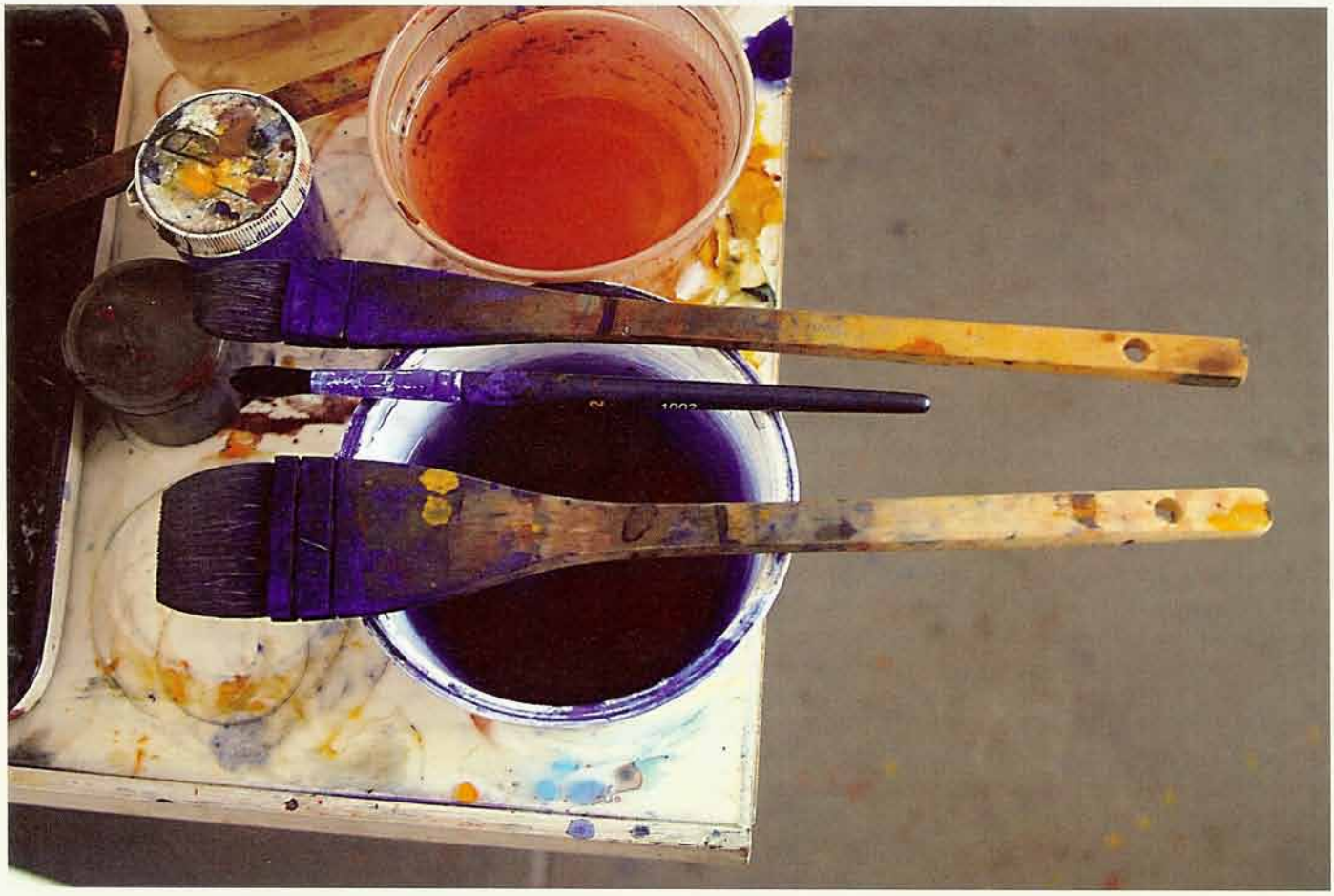
abstractionist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), a Swedish mystic and artist, as well as in abstract Tantric painting, a centuries-old tradition in India. However, she has never tried to imitate such art forms. "I look at everything abstractly," Frecon says, adding that "the story" any artwork refers to, meaning any obvious or suggested narrative content, "gets on my nerves."

In *The Life of Forms* (934), a classic treatise about the material and other characteristics of works of art, the French art historian Henri Focillon asked, "These forms that live in space and in matter, do they not live first in the spirit? Or rather, is it not really and even uniquely in the spirit that they live, their external activity being nothing more than the trace of an internal process?" Frecon's paintings are good examples of the kind of restless, soulful energy that might be seeking to express itself in tangible, visible form. Or maybe they are creations more in the spirit of one of Bram van Velde's famously confounding pronouncements. Van Velde, a Dutch-born painter associated with Europe's post-World War II abstract-art tendency known as *"art informel,"* observed: "What I paint is beyond painting." Another of his cryptic *bons mots*: "I paint the impossibility of painting."

Somewhere in such modernist koans may reside clues to a deeper intellectual appreciation of work like Frecon's, but as the San Antonio-based dealer Lawrence Markey notes, alluding to her craftsmanship, discipline and avoiding-the-limelight ethos, "What struck me immediately about Suzan's art was its authenticity. Here was a painter who was steadfastly pursuing art." (Markey showed Frecon's work routinely starting in the early 1990s, when his gallery was based in New York. Today, she is represented by David Zwirner in New York.) Given that so much art product today comes from artists who simply send their designs out to be fabricated for them, "the focus and authenticity of Frecon's practice," Markey says, inevitably touches those viewers "who take the time to stop and look" at her paintings.

As Frecon herself stated in an interview in the catalogue of an exhibition of her work that was shown at the Menil Collection in Houston and at the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland in 2008, "I think the nature of oil painting is slow, and I like that slowness, because the larger result of visual art...[is that it] takes you some place you haven't been before." She added, "This is what I want in my paintings—this indefinable, suspended feeling." Perhaps recognizing that the art she had created over nearly five decades was as hard to pin down as those who had long examined it had suggested it was, she recalled that it was Cézanne who had written, more than a century earlier, "Talking about art is almost useless."

Echoing that thought in her New York studio on an early-spring afternoon, she offers a succinct assessment of her solid-ethereal, singular art. "The reality," Frecon says decisively, "is the painting itself."



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