

TRANSFORMATION AND COLOR
ANTHONY POON
A PIONEER OF SINGAPORE ABSTRACTION

GALLERY MISSION

Established in 2000, Sundaram Tagore Gallery is devoted to examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures. We focus on developing exhibitions and hosting not-for-profit events that encourage spiritual, social and aesthetic dialogues. In a world where communication is instant and cultures are colliding and melding as never before, our goal is to provide venues for art that transcend boundaries of all sorts. With alliances across the globe, our interest in cross-cultural exchange extends beyond the visual arts into many other disciplines, including poetry, literature, performance art, film and music.

sundaram tagore gallery

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GALLERY MESSAGE

We are honored to present this solo exhibition by Singapore master abstractionist Anthony Poon (1945–2006). Commemorating the tenth anniversary of Poon's passing, *Transformation and Color: Anthony Poon, Pioneer of Singapore Abstraction* pays tribute to the artist's great contribution to the visual arts across four decades, not only within his native country and the Southeast Asia region, but also in the wider world.

Poon's predilection for geometric abstraction, op-art, and color field theory was honed during the years he spent at Byam Shaw School of Art in London (1967–1970) and another year dedicated to printmaking at the Bradford Regional College of Art. During this period, visual art expression was undergoing rapid changes in the West—the very foundations of color, theory and form were being shaken up by new practices and practitioners. It is clear that during Poon's first forays into the abstract during his time in the UK that he was deeply immersed in this new aesthetic milieu, at the precise moment it was gaining purchase within Western contexts. His ensuing works upon his return to Singapore, particularly the masterful *Waves* series, display an almost archaeological investigation into the very nature of painting. He pioneered new concepts of form, void and spatiality, and transformed the structural plane of the canvas. The paintings, maquettes and sculptures presented in this exhibition help us to understand Poon's single-mindedness in extending this methodology and the deployment of his own meaningful line of aesthetic questioning. We are privileged to have a foreword in this catalogue penned by the eminent art critic and historian T. K. Sabapathy, which further allows us to revisit and reconsider the spectacular visual legacy of Anthony Poon.

This exhibition exemplifies the mission of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which is to examine the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures, and encourage critical and aesthetic dialogues. I am very grateful to the estate and family of Anthony Poon for entrusting us with an exhibition that allows us to further these inquiries.

Sundaram Tagore
June 2016



FOREWORD

A number of aims propel this exhibition of selected works by Anthony Poon, chiefly from the artist's estate; a handful are derived from private collections. I highlight two of these aims.

The first and most apparent of them is to relook closely and comparatively at two categories or groups of pictures, each developed as a series. They are known as the *Kite* and *Waves Series*.

The former emerged in the 1970s while the latter was advanced concurrently, although it attained fruition in the following decade. Not surprisingly there are interconnections between the two with regard to the treatment of color, the devising of picture formats and thinking on compositions. Together the *Kite* and *Waves Series* mark high points in Anthony Poon's practice as a painter; together they, and several other kinds of pictures affiliated with them, distinguish his works from his contemporaries in Singapore and in the region of Southeast Asia. The twinned series constitute the pulse of the present show.

They have received considerable publicity and commentary at the time they were produced—i.e. the 1970s and 1980s. They were seen as heralding new methods and values in painting, and interpreted as exemplifying abstract principles in modern art in Singapore. In these respects, Anthony Poon's works are upheld as exemplary and significant when delineating critical or historical accounts of the modern in Singapore's art. I have dealt with some of these discussions in an earlier publication.¹

The works on display at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery Singapore span the decades that matter in this artist's oeuvre; they also signal continuing, persistent interests in dealing with color and constructed picture surfaces beyond these decades and into the 1990s. There is more. When we pursue thoughts on this artist along this vein, we could point to crossovers from picture surfaces that are raised in relief formations to designing,

positioning curvilinear planes in actual space and as sculptural forms. In other words, we could cultivate ways for relating pictures and sculptures—which is one of the aims in this show—without implying that they are indistinguishable. Or that one (sculpture) is necessarily a parasitic outcome of the other (pictures). Relatedness need not diminish distinctiveness.

For those who have seen and recall *Light & Movement Portrayed: The Art of Anthony Poon*, an exhibition mounted by the National Gallery Singapore in 2009, beholding a number of pictures and sculptures shown here will strike as familiar. In Anthony Poon's art, family resemblances amongst his creative productions are deeply impressed and unmistakable. Even so, their reappearance enables revisiting the familiar and scrutinizing it differently. This is rewarding. Such expectations are facilitated by the exhibition's scope and its staging.

For those who are encountering this artist and his work newly, there are prospects in this exposition for appreciating a highly developed, methodical treatment of color and systematic approaches to composing pictures that are distinctly modern. In these regards, Shuyin Yang's essay in this publication will prepare grounds for approaching works displayed here.

Whereas the 2009 show represented Anthony Poon's practice and art historically (biographically) and projected it onto a national scale, this is a modest, focused, tightly knit exposition. The works are few; each is installed virtually as a hallmark creation, inviting and yielding to sustained viewing. Each is displayed discreetly and yet within sight of another so as to propose comparability. Hence, when we see one composition and proceed to look at another nearby yet a little apart, we gain insights into connectedness as well as into being separate.

When it is necessary, as in the showing of maquettes, studies for projects are placed in a linear, unbroken arrangement. They are hung close to one another along an entire length of a wall so that we observe the germination and crystallization of visual schemes. In doing so we gain inroads into appreciating processes entailed in visual thinking and procedures for executing or making. We wish to examine studies close at hand and minutely. The display of maquettes satisfies some of these expectations.

I draw attention to a second aim in this exhibition. It is to claim for this artist and his work an exalted status or to reassert for him and his art such a status. Hence Anthony Poon is declared as “pioneer of Singapore abstraction.” This may well be an eye-catching, attention-grabbing gimmick. Although I think it is propagated with serious purpose.

I have an aversion to this word “pioneer” for many reasons. I will deal with only one such cause and as it is related to the present occasion.

The term “pioneer” does not really advance thinking along historical perspectives, illuminatingly. On the contrary, it tends to close circuits of enquiry and thwart research. The term isolates and identifies a person as marking a finite, nominal, even hegemonic origin, cause or beginning. Human actions are rarely measured in these terms. Historical reckoning tends to yield multiple wellsprings and varied sources when appraising initiatives, commencements, inaugurations and first moves—all of which are highly prized in creative practices and work. What is more, such wellsprings and sources may well feature as competing, colliding and colluding with one another in shaping an artist’s practice.

Enough is known of Anthony Poon’s beginnings, his entries into worlds of art, the consolidation of his practice and the significance of his art to acknowledge that attempts to regard him historically will need to

deal with comparative examinations of practices of artists who are his contemporaries; artists who advanced kindred and different interests in abstract principles and those who resisted or bypassed such interests. This is, undoubtedly, a huge task. It is unavoidable if expectations from appraisals that are historically aligned are to be met.

The 2009 exhibition did not attend to this. How might a modest exhibition such as the one at Sundaram Tagore Gallery deal with it while steadfastly and exclusively focusing on Anthony Poon? How might seeing a handful of works by Anthony Poon, as displayed in this gallery, prompt viewers to discern, imagine, other worlds, historically? If questions such as these are to be fleshed out, and they are interesting and important, they have largely to be borne by the recollected lives of each and every visitor to this exposition.

T. K. Sabapathy
June 2016

Sources:

1. Sabapathy, T. K., “Thoughts on Interpreting Anthony Poon’s Painting Practice,” *Light & Movement Portrayed: The Art of Anthony Poon*, National Gallery Singapore, 2009, pp. 10–29.



RECONSIDERING THE PAINTING PRACTICE OF ANTHONY POON

YANG SHUYIN

This present time in 2016, ten years after the passing of Anthony Poon, appears to be an appropriate juncture in history to re-appraise his career and practice. Sufficient time has passed to consider his extant works objectively and also orient them against the chronological backdrop of Singapore and Asian art.

This exhibition, *Transformation and Color*, was born out of interest in the relatively modest visual awareness of Poon's painted works today, even within the Singapore context. Despite his remarkable achievements, numerous public commissions, and institutional honors, Poon's paintings—even the dimensional canvases—tend to be experienced from flat images in art publications or studied within school curriculums, rather than beheld in person; there has been no significant effort to return these works to the public eye despite his well-received and important retrospective, *Light & Movement Portrayed*, at the National Gallery of Singapore in 2009. Occasionally singular works are featured in group shows, such as the Cultural Medallion retrospectives or historical surveys of Singapore art, but there are few opportunities to view Poon's paintings as a group, within a consistent and coherent framework. This is somewhat surprising given Poon's extraordinarily focused oeuvre and the progressive contemporaneity of his visuals, created from the late 1960s to mid-1990s, which continue to appear bold and refreshing even today. The exhibition title, *Transformation and Color*, seeks to highlight two important facets of Poon's practice: namely the transformative element

constantly present within his practice—from the alterations of line, shape and form to the engineering achievement of his three-dimensional paintings; and the final movement to freestanding sculptures and mobiles—as well as the artist's enduring preoccupation with color experimentation.

Early Influences

The catalyst for Poon's artistic journey can be traced to two key periods in the 1960s: his initial training at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) in Singapore and his subsequent stint at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London.

Of his output from the NAFA period, art critic and historian T.K. Sabapathy comments:

“Formally and iconographically, they bear the hallmarks of pictorial schemes associated with NAFA and as stemming from practices of artists who were also its teachers. Poon replicates and absorbs aspects of these and then goes on to internalize them for his purposes, thereby producing pictures that, on one hand, bear explicit kinship with prevailing visual systems and, on the other, assert distinctiveness sufficiently. In both instances his productions are historically inscribed. In these productions too, Cheong Soo Pieng looms hugely and formatively.”

Within this analysis, Sabapathy picks up on an important aspect: the weight of influence of this “prevailing visual system” during the 1960s, within which style Poon’s painting instructor, Cheong Soo Pieng—a first-generation artist of the Nanyang School—was considered a titan. (In a 1967 review, Choy Weng Yang observes that Poon’s works pay homage to Cheong Soo Pieng, as well as “Ben Nicholson and Marc Chagall,” and Choy considers Poon to be a worthy inheritor of the Nanyang mantle). Indeed Poon’s early works from the mid-1960s bear numerous features cultivated by Soo Pieng’s mode of execution: stylized genre scenes; blocky, cubist forms; dense color and impasto; and a rough and ready application of paint to canvas.

However, the importance of NAFA was not only as a visual system, but also in the exertion and transmission of a certain cultural and mental stimulus on the young artists it nurtured. This transmission bore the weight of issues such as migrancy, identity, and the necessity of narrative painting, if not in explicit subject, at least in terms of cultural mannerisms even within the abstract.

We can anticipate that Poon’s later evolution into Greenbergian post-painterly abstraction, while not an outright rejection of the Nanyang mandate, showed a significant mental as well as visual shift, with the former perhaps being more difficult than the latter, because it implied a process of “unlearning” the prevailing ethos of the time and exiting the ubiquitous influence cast by Soo Pieng and his generation. Unlike a number of Poon’s peers who were also influenced by new Western methodologies during the 1960s and '70s, but eventually drifted back toward subject-oriented and calligraphic painting, Poon remained dedicated completely to hard-edged abstraction, which defined his career and also reveals his utter conviction in its underlying principles.

The initial departure from the Nanyang School aesthetic is revealed in the output of Poon’s London period—monumental shaped painting such as *Inverted Y*, *Twi Forma* and *Va-Tri Forma*—collectively known as the *Kite* series, and even earlier experimental shaped canvas works of presently unknown whereabouts, which are documented in studies, maquettes and old photographs.

Poon’s tenure at the Byam Shaw School of Art has been hallmarked by its emphasis on the formal foundations of drawing and painting, as well as cohesive inquiry into aesthetics, form, and the “superb functional logic of machinery and man-made forms.” Both curator Joanna Lee and T.K. Sabapathy mention Poon’s tutelage under Maurice de Sausmarez, the principal of the school of drawing and painting at Byam Shaw. Of Sausmarez’s teaching style, Sabapathy observes: “The purpose was to broaden the parameters of art studies relative to swiftly changing economic, cultural and technological forces, and to stimulate reflexivity at all levels of creative practice.”

Comparing this to the earlier tendencies espoused at NAFA, Poon was a young artist in flux between two extremes and the negotiation of this position is evidenced within the production of the *Kite* paintings. Lee points to the incorporation of science and technology, writing: “the historic moment of man’s flight to the moon enchanted Poon into the *Kite* series of aerodynamic shapes on shaped canvas.” At the same time, it has been speculated that the *Kite* works were also inspired by the motifs and color schema of the brightly patterned batik kites from the Southeast Asian region. This perhaps can be understood as the last vestiges of a Nanyang School preoccupation where the lingering onus of imparting some form of cultural import from one’s localized region was perhaps the final mental threshold that Poon hurdled. In either case, the *Kite* series was a great breakthrough for Poon, catapulting him to the forefront of art experimentation in both the West and East.



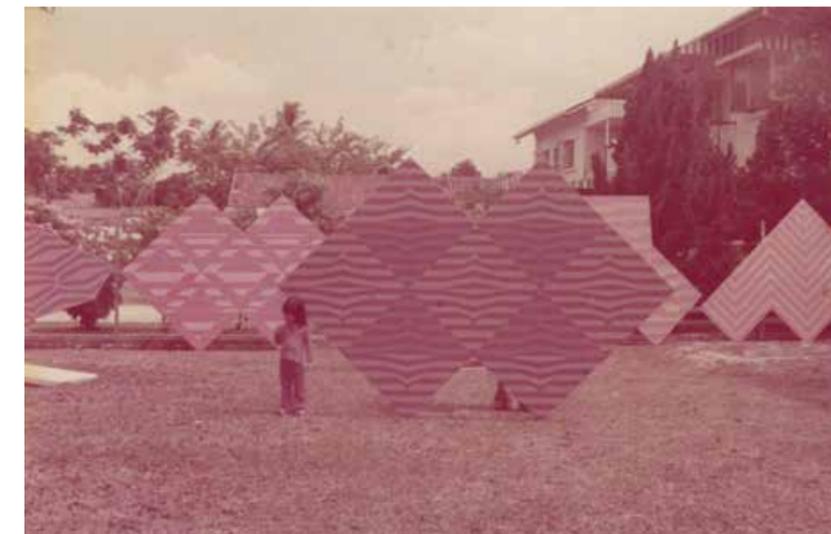
Yeo Hoe Koon, Anthony Poon, Goh Beng Kwan and Choy Weng Yang (first, third, fourth and fifth from left) at the opening for *Shape Canvases*, Alpha Gallery, 1971

Working Method

Poon’s meticulous nature, emphasis on design and draughtsmanship, and fully conceived working process have also been ascribed to his time at Byam Shaw, which trained him in an almost regimented process of art making. Understanding this process lends great insight to the almost pedantic perseverance Poon displayed in later years, in patiently and systematically exploring the various permutations on his chosen brand of visuality. We can observe this by tracing the development of a yellow *Kite* work circa the late 1960s.

In the initial study on graph paper, Poon plots the sketch to scale (1 inch to 1 foot) and calculates the number of stretchers that would compose the overall shaped canvas, including where each square should be anchored to the next. He proceeds to designate each strip with an assigned color: “lemon yellow,” “brilliant yellow,” “golden yellow,” or “golden yellow and white.”

Next, Poon would assemble a maquette in painstaking detail. This miniature composition—again crafted to scale—was on painted and



Kite series shaped canvases in the garden of the Poon family’s first residence on Tosca Street after moving back to Singapore from the U.K., circa 1972

laminated plywood, mounted on a shaped black backing board so that the artist could examine the effects of the artwork against a neutral background.

Once the maquette was deemed satisfactory, the final work would be executed, appearing almost aerodynamic in physical properties as well as visually.

As Gavin Waddell observed in a 1977 exhibition review:

To be near one of Anthony’s paintings is to feel its ordered presence. He gives great consideration to the shape of the painting itself and then carefully gives completeness to the unit by relating the internal form to the external form. Care for shape has remained with him from the early days. His canvases were once large and mainly diamond or kite shaped. They appeared to float. From this series developed a number of paintings where a square was imposed on a rectangle and strong primary color used to determine various plane levels and create the illusion of space.



Violet Oon and Richard Eu at the Alpha Gallery opening, circa 1975–1978



Goh Beng Kwan and Teo Eng Seng (first and second from right) at the Alpha Gallery opening, circa 1975–1978



Interior at 291 Pasir Panjang Road, circa 1975



Interior at 291 Pasir Panjang Road, circa 1975

This aspect of floating or weightlessness is a feature which has been time and again ascribed to Poon's work, even the flat canvases, articulating the conundrum that a painting so densely colored and evenly partitioned and segmented, and with almost no form of visual expression other than uniform line and color, could nonetheless possess a certain quality that borders on the ephemeral. While I am unable to address this unique quality of Poon's creative process adequately within this essay, I would like to throw out a speculation that Poon's dogmatic mathematicalness could possibly have led him to intuitively create proportions of distinctive balance and harmony similar to the effects of the golden ratio principle (or golden section), applied by other artists and architects such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Le Corbusier and Seurat, and of which concept Poon would surely have been aware.

Color Field Theory

More than any other Singaporean artist, Poon investigated color field theory. The optical vibrations of color, subtle shifts in tension created through the blending of different hues which could evoke subliminal viewer response were of utmost importance to Poon. He was interested in investigating primary colors and uncovering how these reacted to the addition or subtraction of other derivative pigments.

While his *Kite* works adhered to the tenets of formal post-painterly abstraction, demonstrating straightforward and opaque swathes of color bound within strict, unyielding lines, Poon's *Colour Frequency Waves* paintings run the spectrum of color experimentation, and their gradated translucency emphasizes the undulating, oscillating nature of his wave forms.

In 1976, Constance Sheares curated the first major art exhibition at the new National Museum Gallery entitled *Colour*, featuring Poon, Yeh Chih Wei, Cheong Soo Pieng, Thomas Yeo, Teo Eng Seng, Goh Beng Kwan, Eng Tow, and others. In a related article in the *Business Times*, Sheares explains: "Whatever the style, whether figurative or nonfigurative, geometric or expressionist, surrealist or constructivist, the principal concern of the exhibition should be colour... [Anthony Poon is] deeply concerned with colour, and has progressed from working with hard-edge, geometric forms to more subtly modulated, curvilinear ones."

Theow H. Tow's comprehensive review *Colour Me Singapore* documents this occasion superbly, and of Poon's contribution to the show, which he terms a "mini-retrospective" due to the inclusion of four canvases ranging from 1969 to 1976, he comments:

Broad yellow, ochre and orange stripes cut horizontally across the painting, changes in the colour and the continuity of the stripes further delineate a concentric arrangement of a square within each diamond and an innermost diamond within each square. The relationship between the various forms in the composition is ambiguous. Since there is no centre of interest, the eye shifts from area to area, sometimes dazzled by the colour or puzzled by the stripes, sometimes settling on an area of interest, only to move on to another... Our attention thus vacillates between local area and general composition, and it is shifts like this that create the ambiguity that is a primary concern of the artist.

Yet in many ways, his engagement with color was a formalistic and rigorous pursuit, rather than the emotive journey of artists such as Mark Rothko. Poon established a pre-specified format for each individual painting and as Elsie Koh, writing for his 1978 solo exhibition, expresses it: "manipulate[d] the elemental grid repetitively in rigid cyclic order." A majority of Poon's artworks, especially from the late '70s onward, are titled after their color blends and structural composition. This naming convention is systematic; Poon derived his titles from technical color schemas, such as the codes used in the Liquitex paint color chart, and methodically worked his way through various combinations of the

correlating shades. There is a strong sense of artistic inquiry in his color experiments, but this interrogation is ordered in nature and precisely recorded for the artist's later reference, in keeping with the whole of his practice. Elsie Koh also comments: "[Poon] demonstrated the inadequacy of language to describe the precision of colour value... the challenge of colour [acts] in concert with the mind to create an intellectual statement."

Entry into the Waves

From the mid 1970s onward, Poon abandoned shaped canvases for regular square frames, and simultaneously developed a post-geometric form of abstraction which became his signature visual. Within the *Waves* series, and its corresponding *Frequency* paintings, Poon incorporated the appearance of undulating waves cast into simple and severe form. This format suited Poon's purposes admirably—it adhered to the logic and principles of op-art and hard-edged abstraction, but was far more flexible and soft; it was simultaneously uniform and orderly, while also stretching across the visual plane as a clean, unbroken and infinite line. Inspired by both science and nature, Poon harnessed the physical properties of radio frequency and ocean waves, channeling an unbounded sense of energy and flow into previously static works.

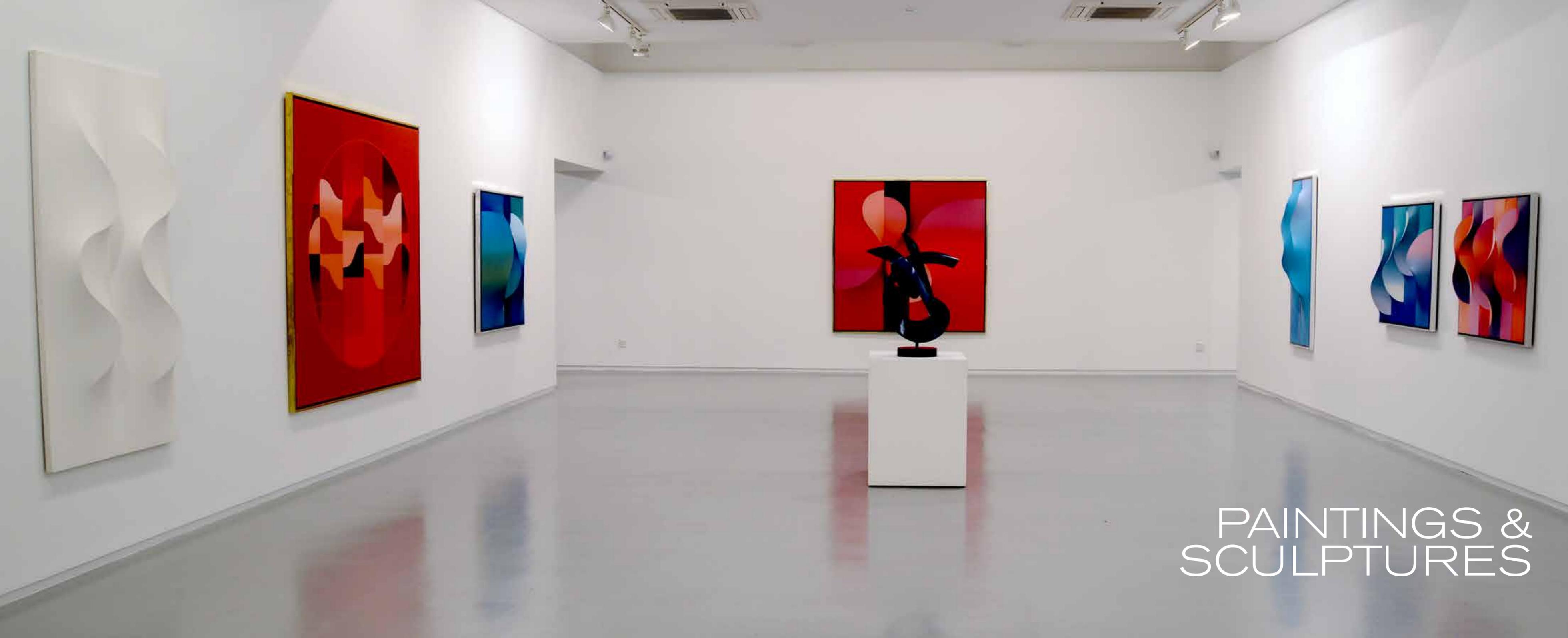
Joanna Lee notes: “The modular schematic of the *Kite* series is re-deployed, although now Poon’s approach shifts from hard-edge aesthetics and dense concentric schemas of geometric form to freer sensibilities... Yet this too is relative, as order and symmetry remain the operative logic. Poon’s interest in tonal values sees the development from the saturated flat surfaces of the *Kite* series to the bleeding of tonal values, thereby giving softer edges to his geometric forms.”

Possibly Poon’s most significant visual contribution was in dramatically altering the organic structure of the canvas and stretcher to create spectacular dimensional paintings, making him the first modern Asian artist to do so. Although his teacher Cheong Soo Pieng had engaged in spatial investigations within his metal collage reliefs and other experimental efforts, Poon’s transformation of a wall-bound painting to imbue it with the actual physical properties of optical illusion, instead of simply manipulating the base elements of paint and perspectival composition to create visual depth, was a breakthrough within the regional context. Poon’s accomplishment echoes the developments by the Italian modernists, such as Lucio Fontana and particularly Agostino Bonalumi, who coined the term “pittura oggetta” or “painting object,” where the canvas protrudes into space and transcends formal notions of painting. Structurally, Poon’s work recalls American artist Charles Hinman who developed a rudimentary type of painting armature in the 1960s. Unlike Hinman, however, who maintained flat color fields and solidly dense, angular masses with one rigid plane in juxtaposition to the next, Poon’s work, although coming at a far later stage in the late 1980s, is more lyrically engineered. When placed under the sculpting effect of light to illuminate the peaks, troughs, and subtle color blends, Poon’s three-dimensional paintings are billowing curvilinear constructions, which recall and additionally augment the “weightless” quality of his earlier endeavors.

Within the *Waves*, Poon provokes an almost ontological line of inquiry, evoking notions of space, time and ephemerality while preserving his focus on non-objective abstraction and cleanliness of line and form. His success in bridging the gap between paintings and sculpture to create meticulous hybrid canvases have paved the way for ensuing discourse on the role of materiality and spatiality within Singapore art, and contributed to the evolving nature of wall-bound works which anticipate the contemporary inquiries of today’s artists.

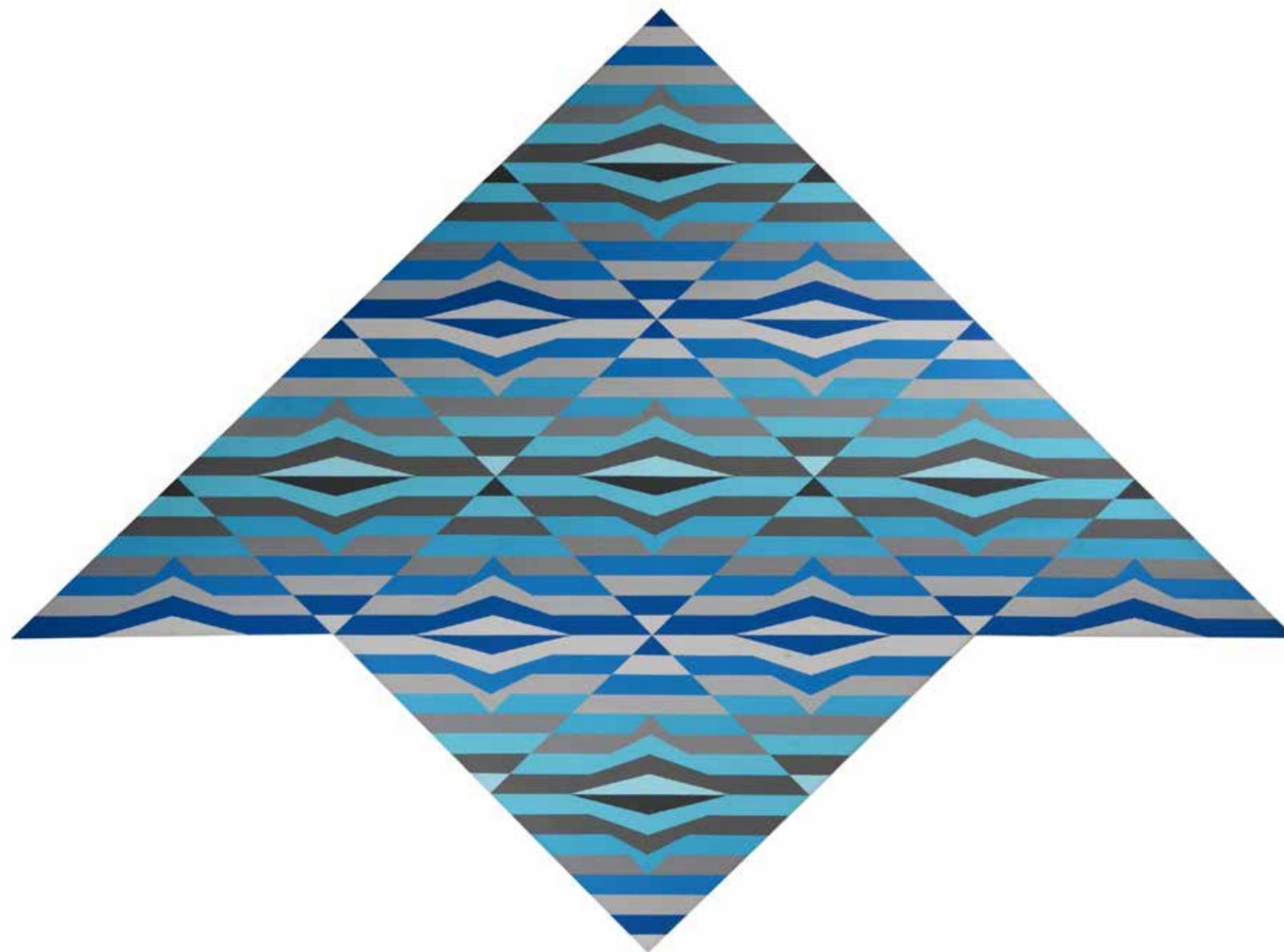
Sources:

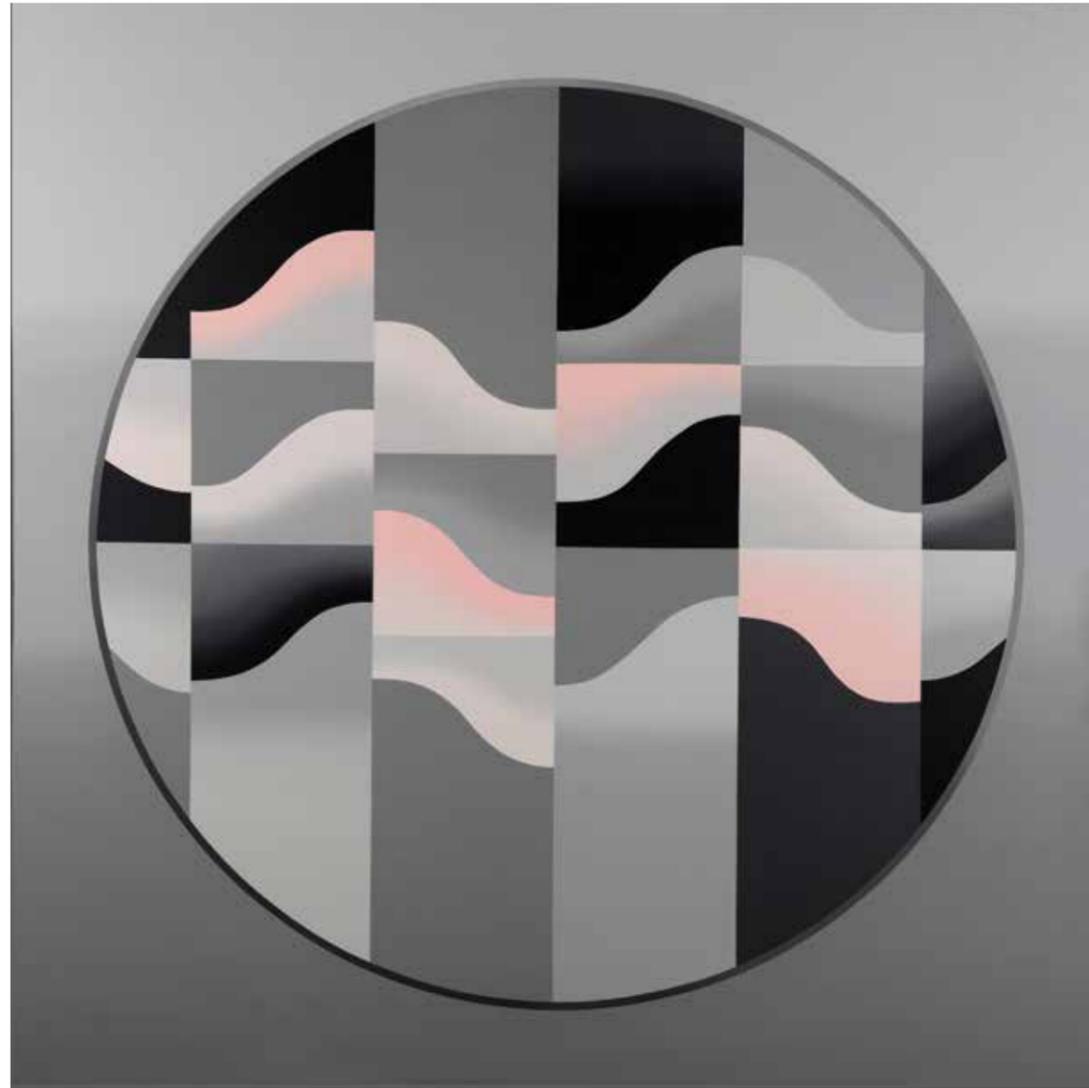
1. T. K. Sabapathy, “Thoughts on Interpreting Anthony Poon’s Painting Practice,” *Light & Movement Portrayed: The Art of Anthony Poon*, National Art Gallery Singapore, 2009.
2. Joanna Lee, “From flat to fold,” *Anthony Poon: Sculptures, Painted-reliefs, Paintings*, AP Fine Art, 2002.
3. Gavin Waddell, “Recent Paintings—Waves Series,” exhibition brochure, Alpha Gallery, May 1977.
4. Theow H. Tow, “Colour Me Singapore,” exhibition review, 1976.
5. Elsie Koh, “Colour Frequency Waves,” Alpha Art Gallery, 1978.



PAINTINGS &
SCULPTURES

Untitled, circa 1969–1971, acrylic on canvas, 88 x 116 inches/223 x 295 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon

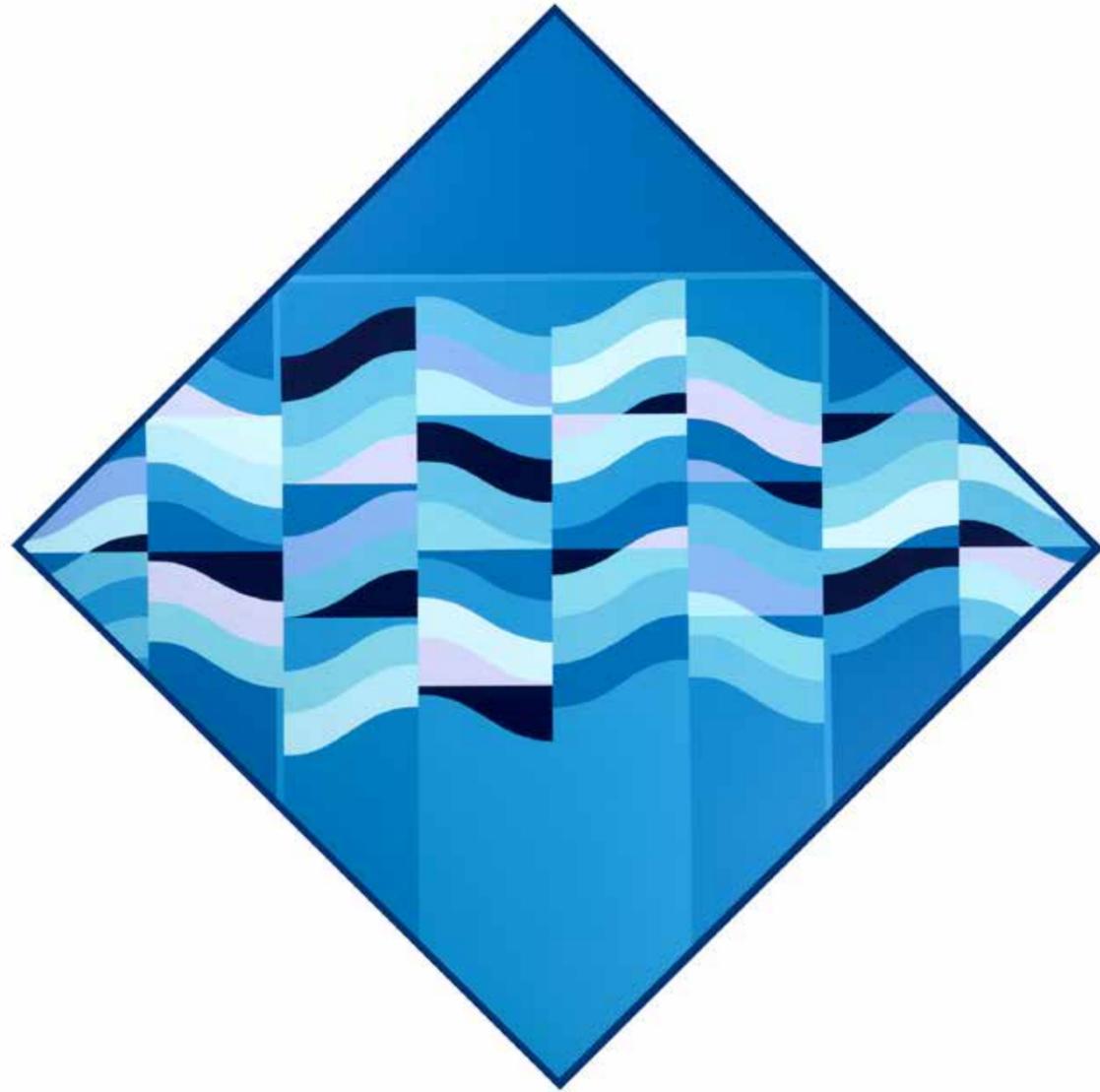




P on Grey on Circle, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches/182 x 182 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



OP on Red Circle, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches/182 x 182 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



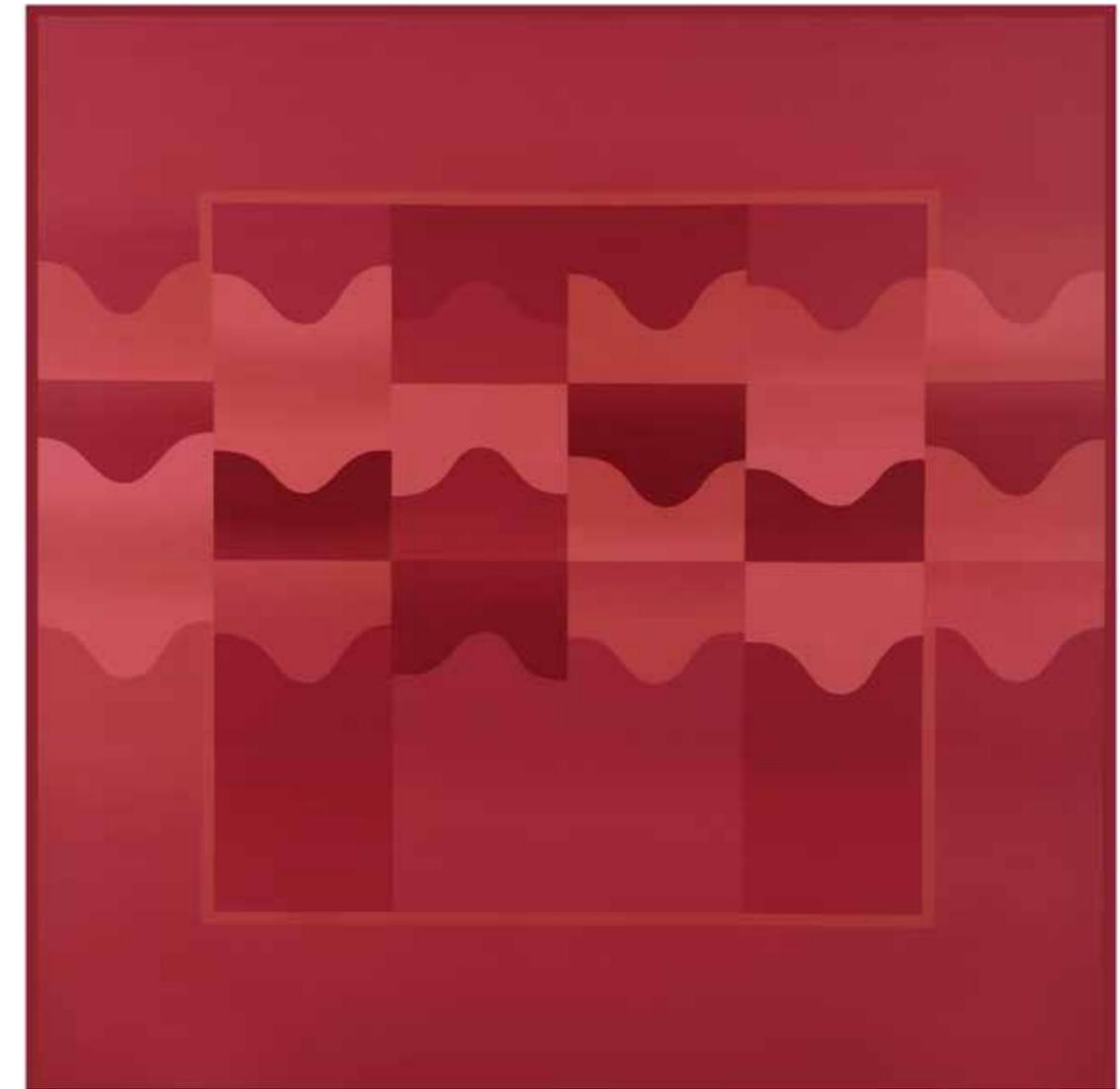
Blue Waves, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 56 inches/142 x 142 cm
Private collection, Australia



Green and Pink Waves, circa late 1970s, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 45 inches/115 x 115 cm
Private collection, Malaysia



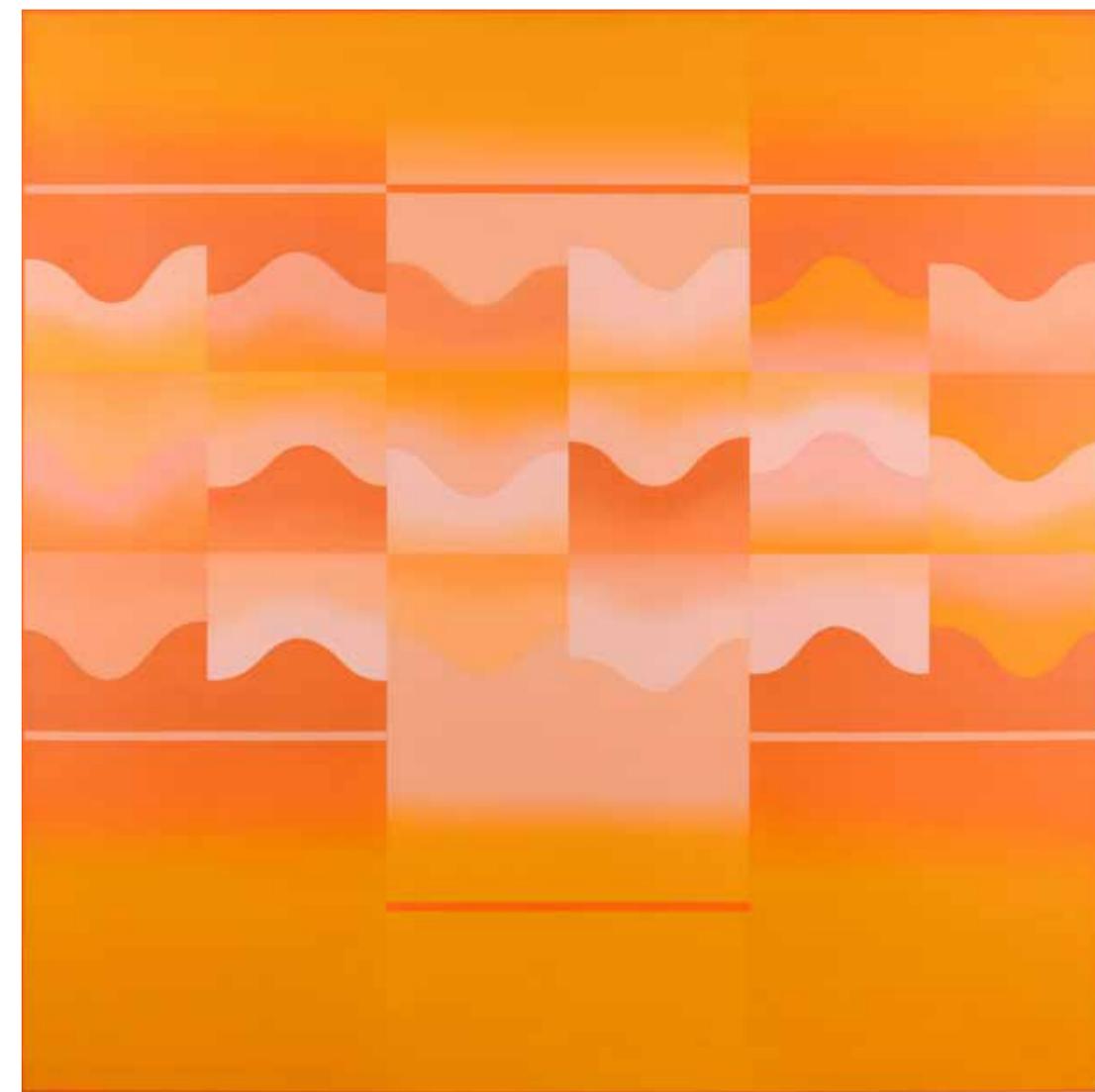
P Waves on Grey Square, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches/123 x 123 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



Red Chroma Waves, circa late 1970s, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches/123 x 123 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



Y-Rhythm Waves, circa 1976, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 46 inches/117 x 117 cm
Private collection, Singapore

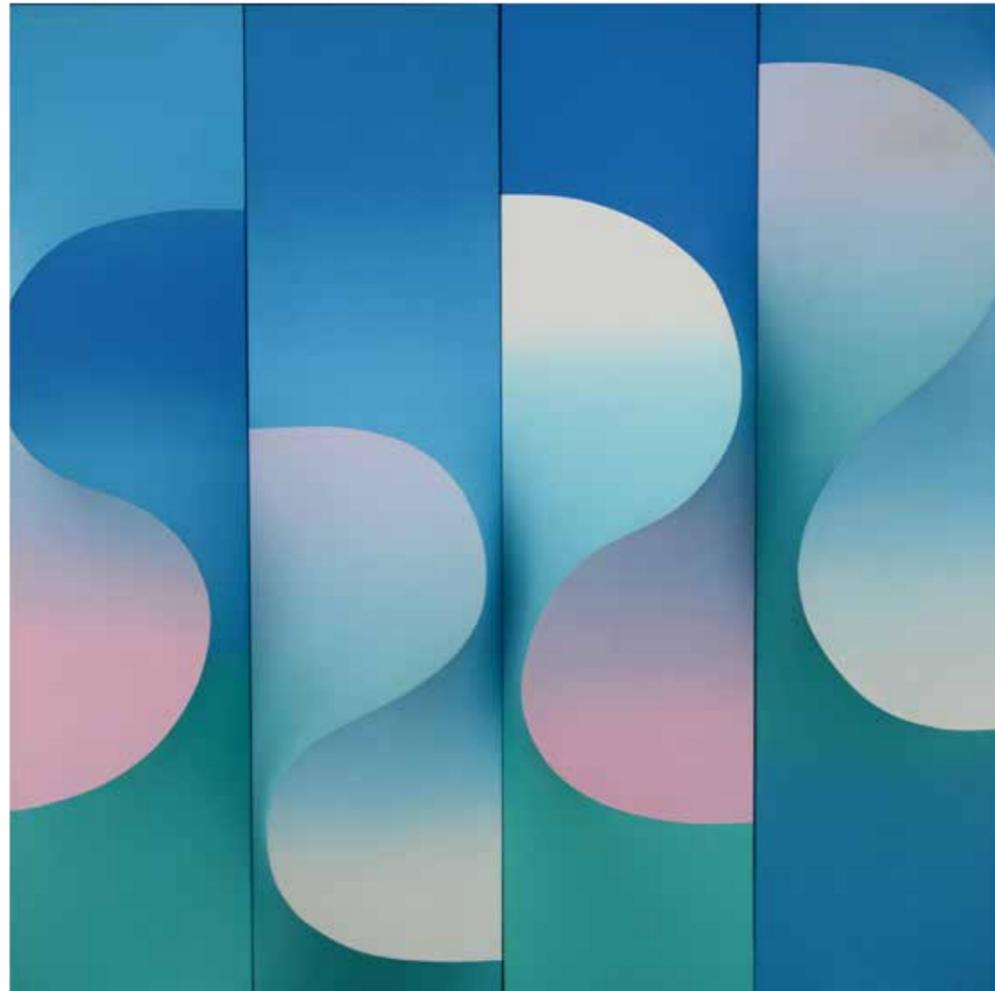


Y-P-2 Flo Waves, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches/182 x 182 cm
Private collection, Singapore

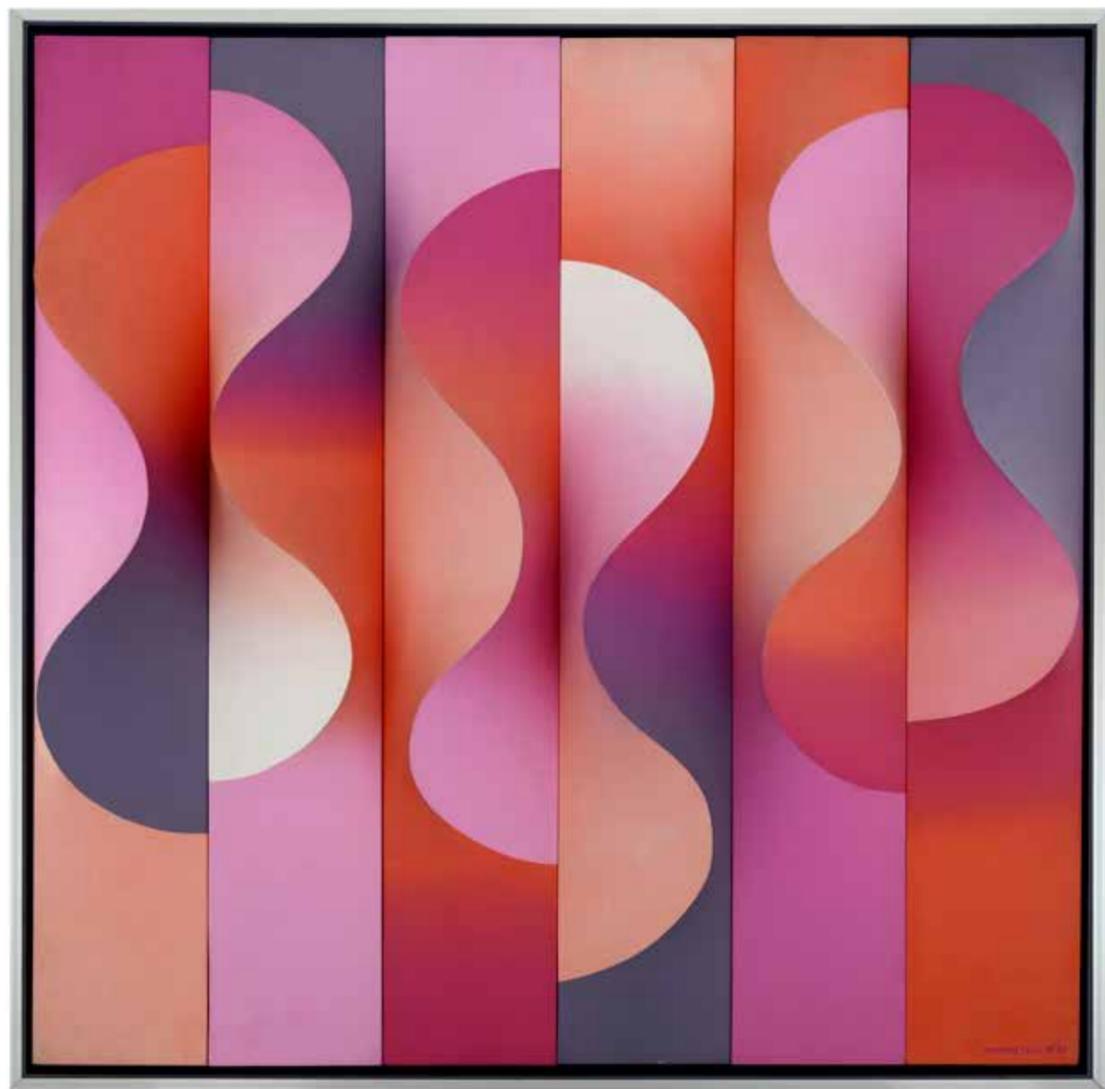


Untitled, circa 1991, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 26 x 6 inches/178 x 75 x 15 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon





Untitled (3D Blue Waves), 1989, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 x 5 inches/92 x 92 x 13 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



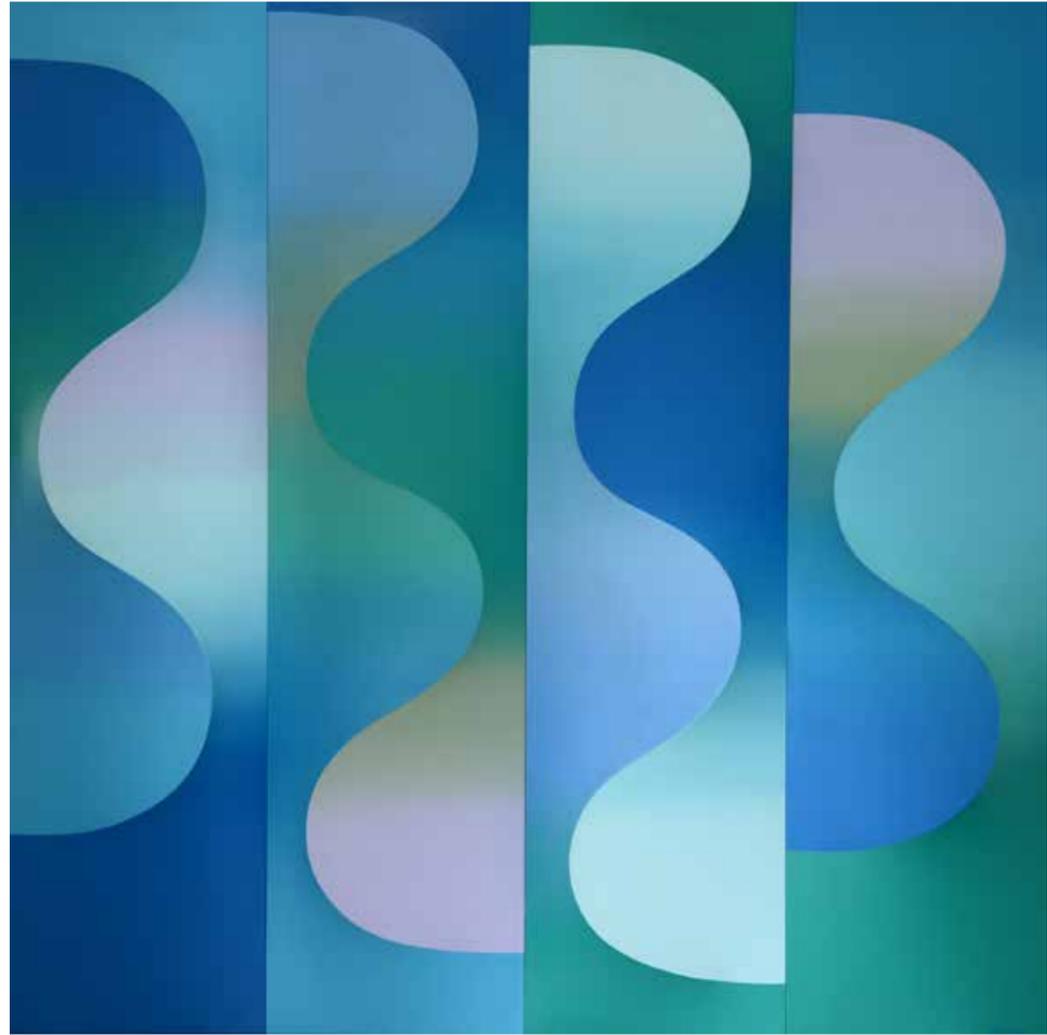
Re-PU6 on 6P Waves, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 34 x 34 x 5 inches/87 x 87 x 13 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon

P8-B7 on Verti-Waves, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 21 x 7 inches/152 x 52 x 18 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon

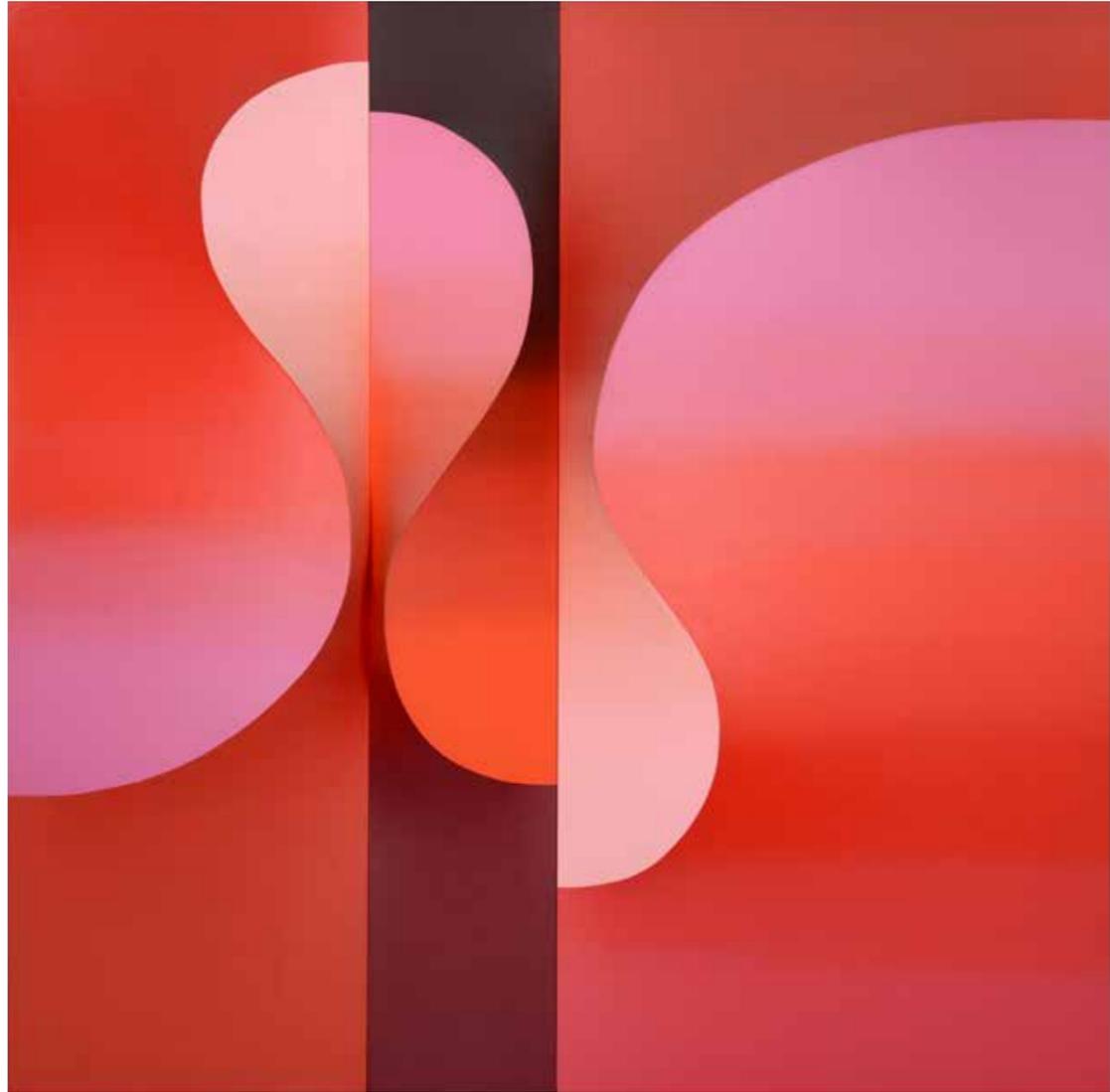




BA/6-P7-B on UP Wave, circa 1991, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 x 5 inches/123 x 123 x 13 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon

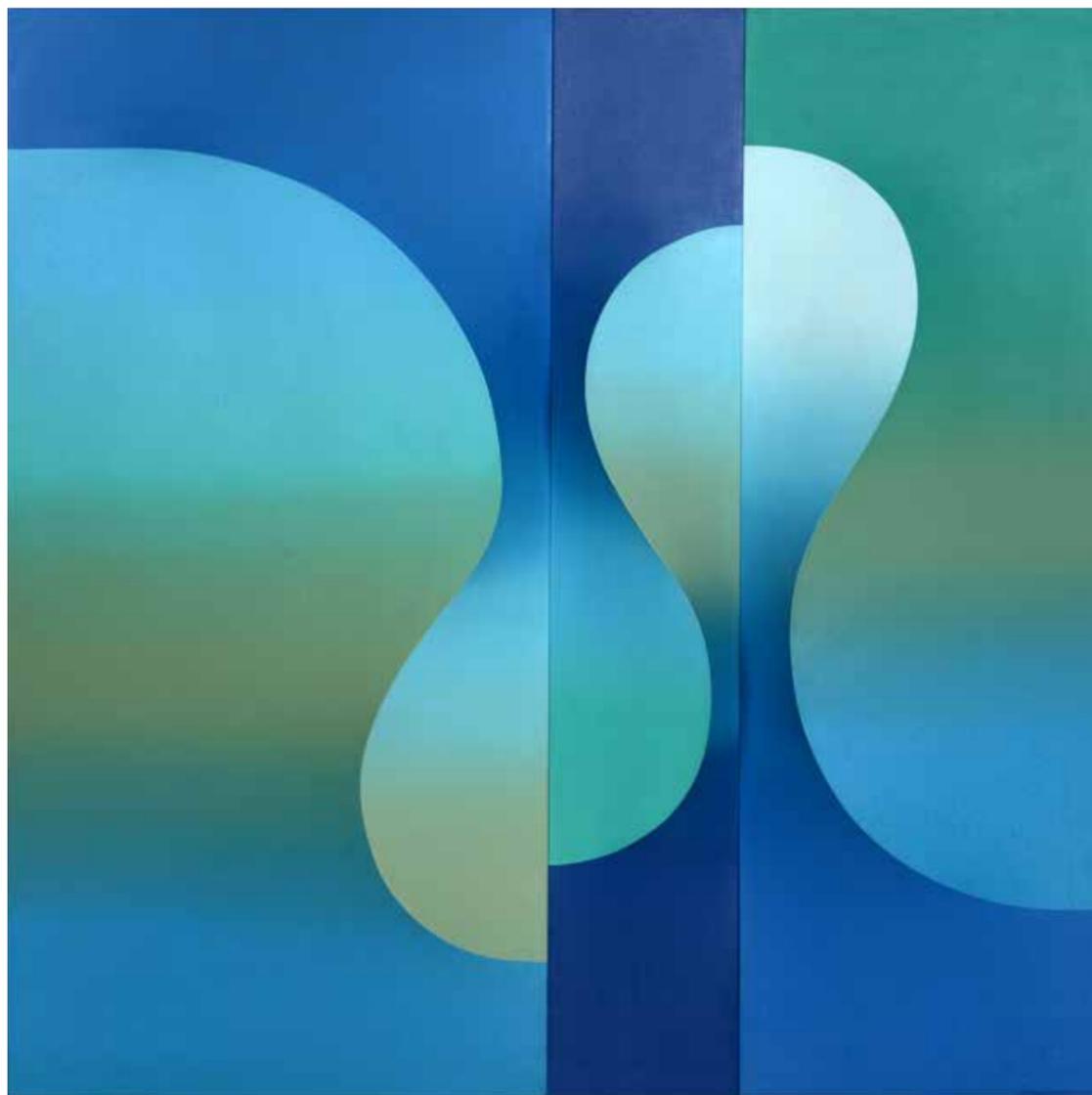


P7-W-B64 on 4P Waves, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 x 7 inches/183 x 183 x 17 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon



RP6-CR on 3P Waves, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 47 x 6 inches/120 x 120 x 15 cm
Estate of Anthony Poon





Untitled, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 47 inches/120 x 120 cm
Private collection, Singapore





Untitled, undated, painted steel, 27 x 18 x 21 inches/68 x 46 x 53 cm
Private collection, Singapore



Exploration, 1992, steel, 22 x 22 x 23 inches/55 x 55 x 59 cm
Private collection, Singapore



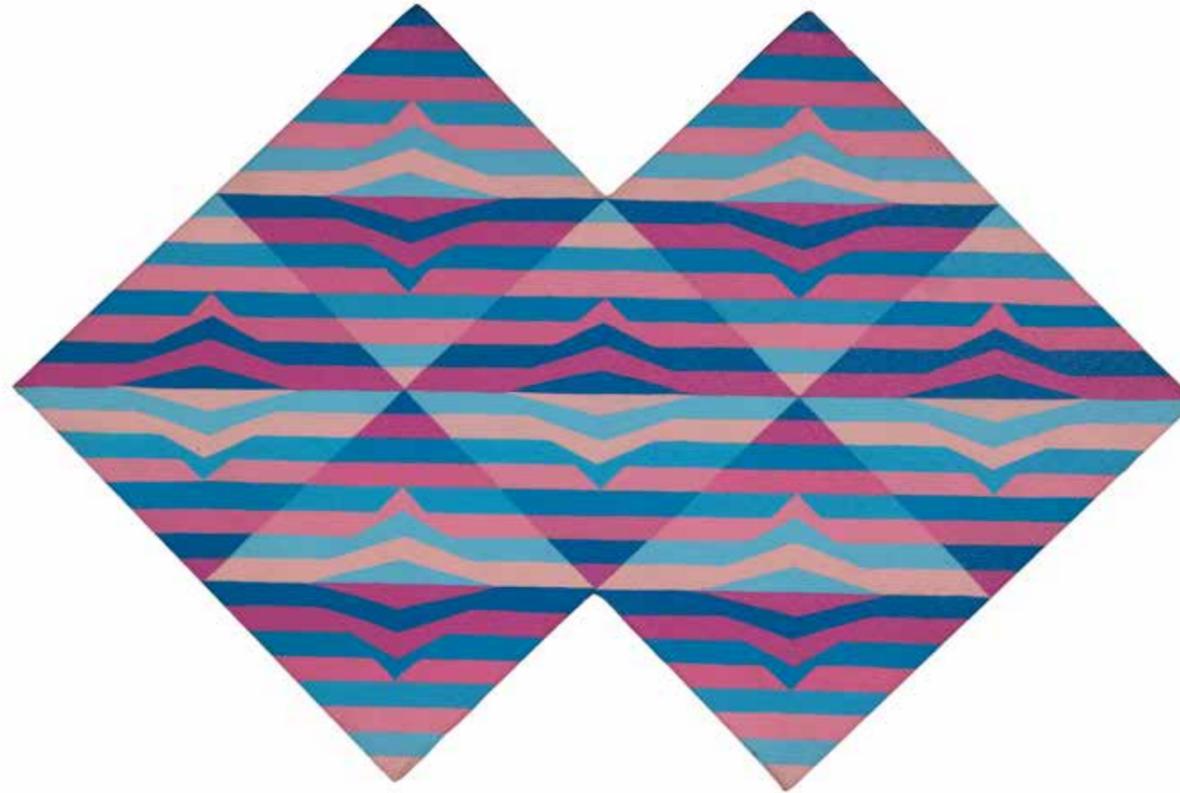
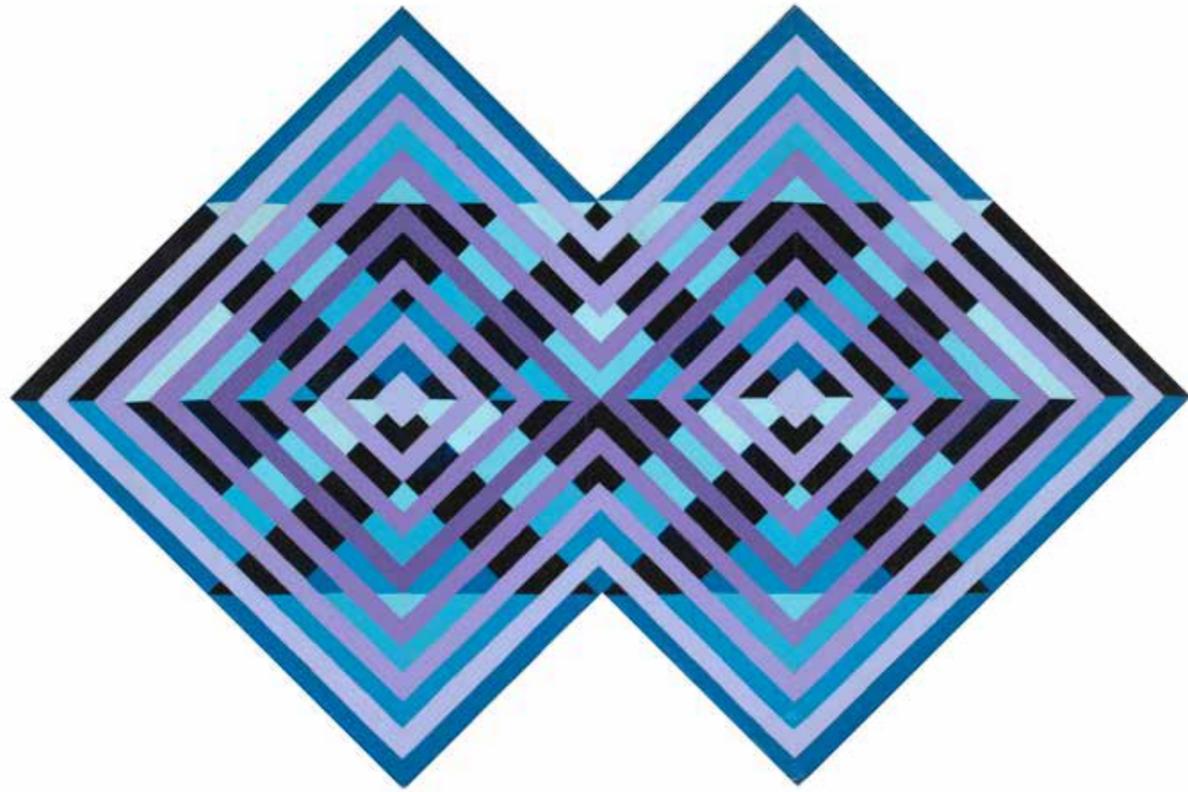
Progress, 1997, painted bronze, 23 x 31 x 23 inches/59 x 79 x 59 cm
Private collection, Singapore



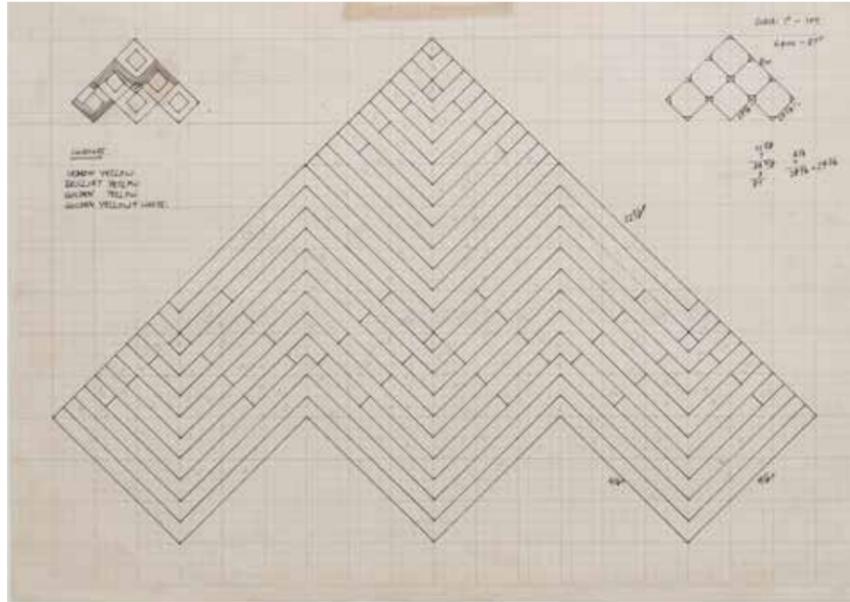
Growth, 1997, painted bronze, 28 x 29 x 16 inches/70 x 73 x 40 cm
Private collection, Singapore



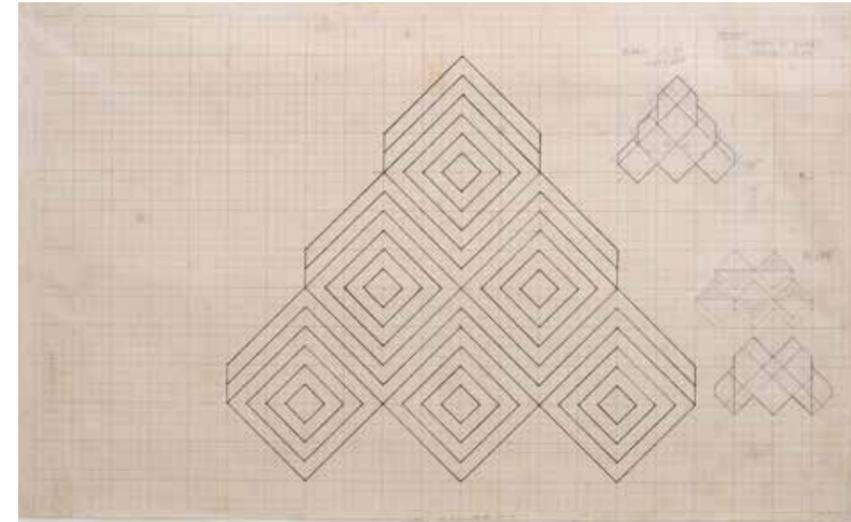
STUDIES &
MAQUETTES



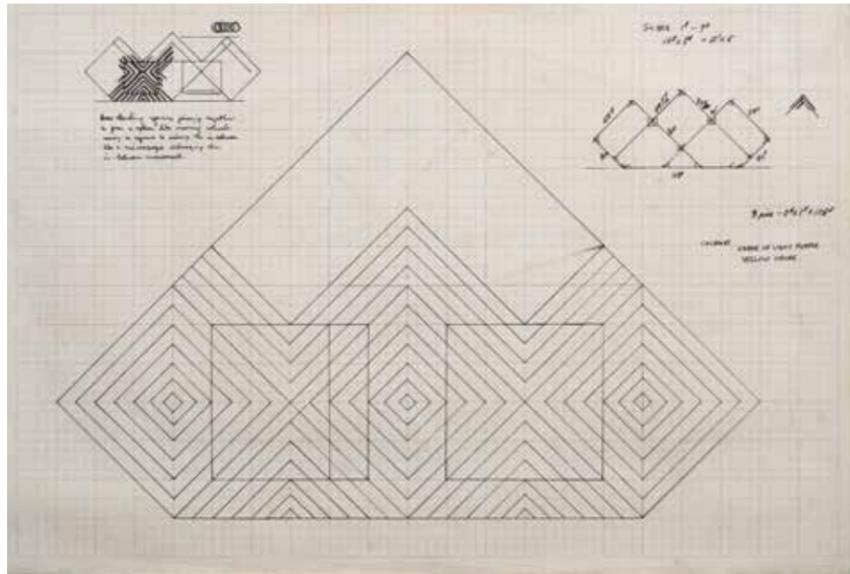
Left: *P Blue Squatri Formation*, undated, acrylic on canvas, 17 x 11 inches/43 x 29 cm
Center: *Rp-Blue Squatri Formation*, undated, acrylic on canvas, 17 x 11 inches/43 x 29 cm
Right: *Illu Squatri*, undated, acrylic on canvas, 17 x 11 inches/43 x 29 cm



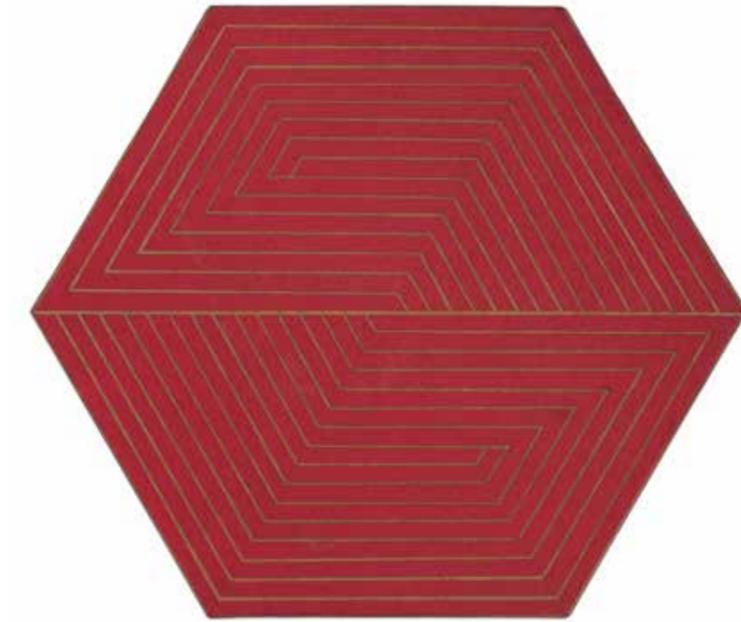
Left: Study for untitled (Yellow Kite), undated, pen and pencil on paper, 28 x 21 inches/72 x 54 cm
 Right: Untitled (Yellow Kite), undated, oil and laminate on hardboard, 24 x 18 inches/61 x 45 cm



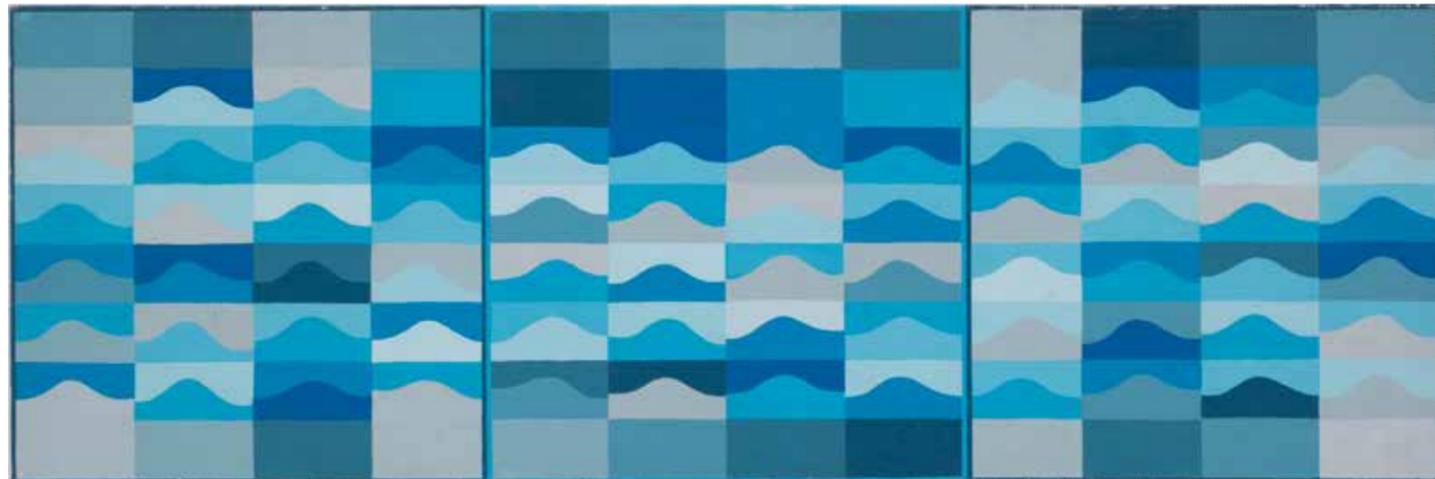
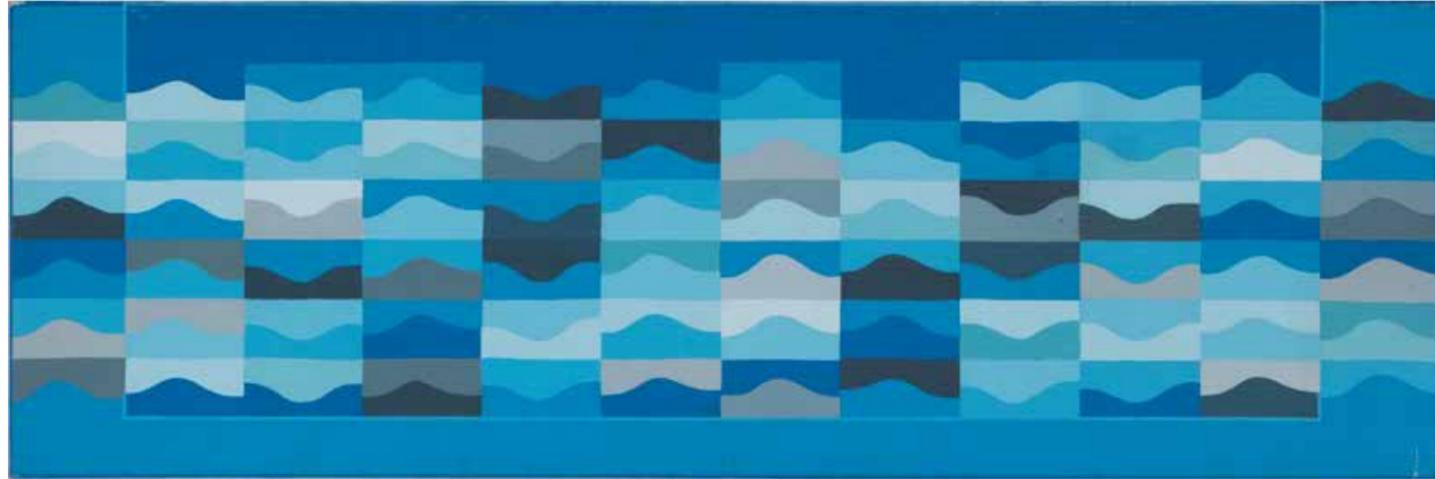
Left: Study for untitled (Awva), undated, pen and pencil on paper, 28 x 21 inches/72 x 54 cm
 Right: Awva, undated, oil and laminate on hardboard, 16 x 17 inches/41 x 42 cm



Left: Study for untitled, undated, pen and pencil on paper, 28 x 21 inches/ 72 x 54 cm
 Right: Untitled, undated, oil and laminate on hardboard, 24 x 18 inches/60 x 45 cm



Top: Untitled, undated, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 11 inches/29 x 29 cm
 Bottom: Untitled, undated, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 11 inches/29 x 29 cm



Top: Untitled, undated, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 8 inches/61 x 21 cm
Bottom: Untitled, undated, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 8 inches /61 x 21 cm



Untitled, undated, wood, 24 x 13 inches/62 x 32 cm



Red-Ri Waves, undated, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches/51 x 51 cm



Untitled, undated, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 16 inches/42 x 42 cm

TALKING ABOUT ANTHONY POON

The following is an excerpt from the gallery discussion *Relooking Anthony Poon* between art historian, curator and critic T. K. Sabapathy and Singapore Art Museum curator Louis Ho. The discussion, which was held during the 2016 Sundaram Tagore Gallery exhibition of Poon's work, was moderated by Shuyin Yang, the gallery's associate director.

Shuyin Yang: As an opening question, which qualities of Anthony Poon's work resonate the most deeply with you, as both of you have been involved in examining and considering his practice for some time?

T. K. Sabapathy: I approach these works with a deep familiarity with Anthony Poon whose works I have seen since the mid 1970s, when he was managing the Alpha Gallery and also staying in the house owned by [Datuk Seri Lim] Chong Keat in Pasir Panjang, which is where I first met him (I recall he made me a cup of tea) and these were the kinds of works he was beginning to devise and consolidate.

A number of matters strike me as being significant and interesting: the consistency of his visuality; the persistence with which he employs medium, material and the execution of his schemes, and the almost fussy care with which he executes his work. I don't think there are any works which Anthony Poon may have produced, however satisfactory they may have been for him, which have not been systematically and thoughtfully considered.

For all of that, because I use words like "care," "consistency," "systematization," these do not imply that they are dead things, that they

are neutral things, they are not. Each one has its own individuality within the general genesis of the schemes that he has produced. I do not think there is a single work here which is uninteresting for me.

Louis Ho: Let me start by saying I enjoy Anthony Poon's works: the cleanness, the linearity, the precision—and "precision" of course is an adjective which arises frequently when you talk about Anthony Poon—the care with which he took to plot out his compositions and canvases. The gallery has made the very pertinent decision of including maquettes as well as sketches from the estate in this exhibition. And the sketches are absolutely beautiful things. The modularity and repetition, again the cleanliness of the lines are impressive. But for me what is extremely interesting about Anthony Poon's works—more than just their formal qualities, and how they affect me on a personal level—are the readings and realizations which are possible here with regard to his practice.

For instance—and this has been mentioned on a number of occasions, I'm not sure whether by Poon himself or from commentators such as Constance Sheares when she was reviewing his work even in the 80s—the way Poon's aesthetic almost seems to mirror the transformation of Singapore itself and the development of the urban fabric here.

If you look at the catalogue for the 2009 retrospective by the National Gallery Singapore, *Light & Movement Portrayed*, there is a portion which compares the development of Poon's work to the development of the urban texture here in Singapore: the skyscrapers, the elevators, that build-up of the landscape in Singapore which mirrors the very formal aesthetic and rationalization of visuals which occur in Poon's work; the layout, the systems therein.

Going back to the sketches, they almost seem to remind you of maps and urban blueprints. For example in 1822, when the very first urban planning vision was made in Singapore, this is the sketch that accompanied the Jackson Plan, also known as the "Plan of the Town of Singapore," which displayed old Singapore in a grid format. You see here, over a century later, a certain resonance and likeness in Poon's work as well. For me, those sorts of connections are extremely interesting.

SY: T. K., just to connect Louis' point back to something you observed in your essay for the catalogue *Light & Movement Portrayed*, you mentioned that Anthony Poon's diligence in observing his surroundings and in trying to incorporate its urban or logical quality in his work was influenced by his time in London, under the tutelage of his professor Maurice de Sausmarez, which created a very deep legacy of environmental awareness in his practice. As he progressed into the 70s, do you think this was adequately realized in subsequent productions?

TKS: May I make a brief comment on his sojourn in London? It is quite important to recognize that he was in London during the time of the first wave of popular culture, in the late 60s and early 70s. It was a moment when the cult of being young was exonerated and celebrated. Prior to that you had to be at least 35 before you could make an appearance somewhere, so to speak. But here were thirteen post-pubescent human beings taking on the world.¹ I know this because I was there at that time too, roughly for about eight-and-a-half years. But it is interesting to note that Anthony Poon either turned away from that or was not too partial to that. I do not speak for the way he lived life in London, but I am talking about the intellectual and visual streams that he found conducive. And what he turned towards was a kind of—I'm going to use this term and will explain this shortly—a "design-based approach" to art. This was what he was taught: that things could be planned, calculated and devised,

systematically and incrementally, without in any way thwarting or blunting creative capacities. That the two endeavors of calculation and creativity were not incompatible with each other. One often assumes this to be the case, that to be creative is to be subjectively uninhibited.

So it was this stream that appealed to him, took root in his thinking and his whole psyche in approaching his creative practice. He's not alone, I know several artists in Southeast Asia who were in London at about that time who also began to veer in this direction, staying away from all those angst-ridden ways of expressing oneself, which were mythologized by abstract expressionism and its acolytes. And what we see here is a continuation of that. What is deeply surprising is its endurance in Anthony Poon's life, how it has sustained him throughout without a misstep.

His three-dimensional explorations were a way of releasing himself of the tyranny of the flat surface. I mean, he initially tried with constructed reliefs, and then said, "Okay let me get into actual space," and that's what happened with those three-dimensional works at that time. This is not only in terms of the planning, but also in the execution of the works. You wouldn't think that [the paint] was brushed on in any way, there is not any evidence of a hand at work. The surfaces are immaculate, as if the pigment just settled on the surface. These [techniques] are all resources that he picked up in London, but after a while they were no longer the resources of a student and became something else more masterful. We might ask ourselves, when we talk about influences and being affected by so-and-so: When do influences stop, and you become you? When do you begin to speak in a language that is yours, and no longer echoing and mimicking and quoting (unless you quote deliberately) someone else?

Earlier in your introductory remarks, you spoke about cross-cultural discourse. I would say that almost without exception, unless it is a coercive regime—and there are coercive regimes everywhere including where we are—most cross-cultural connections are by choice. And we'd like to assume, whether this is an illusion or not, in the creative sphere above all, choices are real. If we give this up, then we give everything up. It is the last bastion for these possibilities. So I think Anthony Poon's directions are by choice, he made his choice and stuck with it. I repeat myself, I am still astonished that it has sustained him for his entire life.

SY: In terms of contemplating his influences and also this perseverance in the influences he brought back with him from London, and persisted in for the next twenty-five years, how then would you reconsider this tendency from a historical viewpoint? Earlier we discussed "claiming" a visual and approximating it to the extent that it has become deeply ingrained in one's practice. How would you approach something like this?

LH: That's a good question. This is more of a personal observation, but I think it's really only Anthony Poon in Singapore art history who has made that movement into three dimensionality—off the canvas and into our space—so momentous. If you look around you at the *Waves* reliefs for instance compared to the flat canvases, the similarities are very apparent. But again just the mere fact of coming off the canvas—and it is not a very loud intrusion into our space, the space of the viewer, in the way that for instance Rauschenberg's *Combines* do—this very quiet movement off the wall, off the canvas, it is momentous and inspiring.

SY: What came up in my mind as you were saying that, the march of Poon's progress across the initial decade and half, was an extremely well-paced one, there was no sense of rushing into dimensionality. This is actually not a new principle in art making—the idea of the three-dimensional painting was birthed in the West during the mid 1960s; [Frank] Stella and other proponents were already working in this method. The fact that it took Anthony Poon until the late '80s to begin working [in this mode] indicates that he was biding his time, and he had worked on his flat canvases in a very measured and orderly nature, which reflects overall the schema and logic of his practice. One of the observations that came up during this exhibition was that he when he felt ready to approach the dimensional canvas, he was completely ready and he did not misstep. I am unsure of his experimental efforts, but certainly the results that we see here, none of them look like accidents or experiments; they all look fully realized.

I also wanted to move us into his practice of the 1970s. As we were discussing this exhibition, the connections that Anthony Poon had with his peers and the strands of his practice during his most productive years, T. K. brought up the efforts of other artists from a similar generation and how their abstract aesthetic has been lauded by present-day curators as the pinnacle of modern achievement during the 1970s, in Singapore. Considering there were other forms of practice at work, can we discuss this a little?

TKS: This is in reference to an exhibition by the Singapore Art Museum [SAM] in one of its earlier incarnations; it is titled *Singapore Modern* and the subtitle is *Art in the 1970s*. The exhibition took place in 2002. It is interesting that by the early years of the present century, the Singapore Art Museum was confident enough to frame what preceded in the earlier decades historically. We can read the manifesto with which this exhibition was put together, noting these keywords. Firstly, this exhibition is "a survey." Now, you don't survey today, you survey yesterday. Additionally their definition of modern art reads as: "abstract and semi-abstract art during the 1970s in Singapore." Bingo. You could not get a more affirmative and declarative statement: the modern in Singapore as seen by SAM in 2002 is equated with abstract and semi-abstract art of the 1970s. And lo and behold, Anthony Poon is mentioned, along with others.

During the late '60s and '70s in Singapore, and in all the regions in Southeast Asia, all these aesthetic combustions [the departure of the abstract from previous pictorial forms] were happening simultaneously, yet independent to one another. A messenger did not arrive from Jakarta to Singapore to say, "Hey, we've discovered a new way of making art." Abstract was *the thing* in the late '60s and early '70s throughout. And there was an alternative or a kind of cognate term for abstract, which was: non-objective. Or "non-objective abstract." This was not a privileged use [of the term]; it was used quite rampantly and prevalently.

Just a few examples of what I mean: Is the name Patrick Flores familiar to you? I requested Patrick send a transcript of a lecture he delivered two weeks ago. Interestingly, the title of the lecture is *The Demands of Abstraction*. It was a commemorative lecture that he gave. The subtitle to his lecture is *Exhibiting the Non-Objective in Manila*. It would seem—and of course I say "seem," as it is unlikely in Patrick's consciousness and scheme of things—that this was a kind of slippage. It isn't. That is to say, a slippage of abstraction and non-objective as if they are synonymous. They are not. Later on, Patrick takes great pains to explain the subtitle. He says in 1953 the first non-objective exhibition of art was held in Manila. And in a way, it was the inauguration of abstraction in the Philippines—possibly in Southeast Asia—as a way of thinking, of dealing with the world, of making art and of looking at art. In 1954, we switch over to Bandung, Indonesia. The faculty of ITB [Institute

of Technology Bandung] held an abstract exhibition at the Balai Budaya Cultural Hall in Jakarta. In a review by Trisno Sumardjo, he condemned ITB as the “laboratory of the West” as opposed to ASRI [Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia], which is the academy of art in Jogjakarta, as being the national school. [ITB] was an import from white Europe planted onto Bandung to perpetuate the dangers of abstraction. So, abstraction was not all light and enlightenment. It was resisted, and resisted everywhere simultaneously. And at the same time it was being inaugurated. And it was resisted from within, not externally inasmuch as the same time as it was being inaugurated from within. Was it different in Singapore? No. There is a famous diatribe by Chen Chong Swee condemning abstract expressionism as being degenerate, bourgeois art and expounding that true art was the art of realism and reality. So the antithetical pairing between abstraction and realism was a stream that ran right through many cultures. I could go on and multiply all these instances. Interestingly they all occurred in the early and mid-'50s. Something was happening in the 1950s in this part of the world. That sounds mysterious, but it is just a provocation. And when you consider the '50s in relation with the rest of the world, certain things begin to fall into place. The so-called division of the world into two spheres: the socialist sphere and the capitalist sphere. And then in 1955, in that very same controversial city Bandung, was born the non-aligned movement: the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung and so a third camp was devised.

Now I am not saying that artists were all talking about these [influences, within their practice] but these were tremors and vibrations which were felt by all spheres of professional activity including art. How art and artists represented these [pressures] may not be as directly, and as propagandistically as one may hope to see, but far more subtly.

One could make a case for Anthony Poon as also obliquely, indirectly, dealing with these kinds of issues which were going around, while sited in Singapore. All these works that Anthony Poon produced were largely consolidated after his return to Singapore, although their origins came before then. These are some of the aspects that one might want to consider: you think of Anthony Poon and then you begin to think of Anthony Poon in relation to others around him. Who were his contemporaries and what were they doing? And bearing in mind that he was the manager of Alpha Gallery for six or seven years, and Alpha

was seen as the platform for the “New Art.” If he was a manager, he was also fronting the artists. As a manager, who was he presenting? He must have also been developing the program. His connection with his contemporaries was very dynamic—not neutral or passive. To talk of Anthony Poon, is also to talk of his contemporaries. Then, his stature, in my reckoning, his position and his importance will be deepened and made that much more profound. And we do have information for this, it is a matter of putting it together if one is interested. There is always a tussle between the single biography and history as being made up of multiple biographies. When does the individual give way to a community of individuals? History struggles with that.

LH: Thanks for that T. K. This is something I'm deeply interested in with Anthony Poon's work: reading it in connection with broader social and historical forces. To go back to the your point of Poon consolidating his particular aesthetic in Singapore—having moved away from the early days when he was still a little beholden to others such as Frank Stella—and which development took place in the 1970s and '80s, we can mull over how the '70s and '80s were a turning point for our little nation. We achieved independence in 1965 and that inexorable move towards first-world status, which today is still pertinent to us as a nation. Is it possible to read Poon's work within that broader historical shift? That consolidation of capitalistic forces, nation building, all of these things.

SY: I think your question is pertinent to the founding of NAFA [Nanyang Academy of Fine Art] and the thought behind the art practice that stemmed from Singapore as an independent state, and the production generated thereby. Anthony Poon—even pre-London—is very much a product of this legacy or mentality [of maintaining a cultural singularity, nation building, and moving towards first-world status]. In *Light & Movement Portrayed*, T. K. wrote about the confluence of these factors coming together in Poon's early works: “Formally and iconographically, they bear the hallmarks of pictorial schemes associated with NAFA and as stemming from practices of artists who were also its teachers. Poon replicates and absorbs aspects of these and then goes on to internalize them for his purposes, thereby producing pictures that, on one hand, bear explicit kinship with prevailing visual systems and, on the other, assert distinctiveness sufficiently. In both instances his productions are historically inscribed. In these productions too, Cheong Soo Pieng looms hugely and formatively.”

TKS: In response to Louis' remark, how might we connect Poon's artworks with forces that shaped the world? It is an extremely vital question and one must try to answer it. Some of the matters that we have mentioned are criteria by which we can use to measure these connections. After all, Anthony Poon had completed one set of formal study here, at NAFA. He didn't arrive in London as an absolute rookie. That pedagogical system which London was beginning to develop at the time was becoming global by the '60s and '70s. London was regarded as a world city by virtue of many things—on par with New York, and even outshining Paris within the European context. These absorptions of resources and stimuli, at the time, were reverberating worldwide. You could say it was one of the high tides of the capitalist system, after the war and the reconstruction that was going on all over the world, particularly in Europe. London was bombed out of existence—it had to rebuild itself. And the kinds of intellectual and artistic resources, and ways of thinking were part of a currency that was beginning to circulate around the world. It doesn't mean that this currency was represented exactly the same everywhere. We are beginning to articulate those differences without sounding contrived or phony. But there is a second tangent to this: Singapore's attempt in the late '70s to also become a globally connected location or city. And that, chronologically or historically, coincides with Anthony Poon's return and consolidation here in Singapore. What I would refer to as his consolidation of artistic practice in Singapore in the late '70s, one could try to see how relatable it is to these [forces]. I'm not trying to say this relationship is a given matter: because there are high-rise buildings [appearing in post-independence Singapore], therefore these [paintings] are reflections of high-rise buildings. I think that's a piece of trivia. That's not saying anything significant. If you want to talk about systematization and systems, then we are talking about deeper structures and ways of drawing these kinds of analogies. One difference between Anthony Poon and the environmental and urban development [is that] these are images of splendor and there is nothing splendid about our urban environment; it's monochromatic and dulled to the sun. But these paintings are not. So maybe these are an antidote to what is around and he's saying, “I'll show you real vision”—as it should be in art.

Sundaram Tagore Gallery and the Estate of Anthony Poon would like to thank T. K. Sabapathy and Louis Ho for their kind participation in this discussion.

Notes:

1. A reference to the group of Singapore artists and art scholars who moved to Europe and North America to study art in the 1960s, including Poon, Goh Beng Kwan, Teo Eng Seng, Thomas Yeo, and Ng Eng Teng, among others.

SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERIES

new york 547 West 27th Street, New York, NY 10001 ▪ tel 212 677 4520 ▪ gallery@sundaramtagore.com
new york 1100 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10028 ▪ tel 212 288 2889
hong kong 4/F, 57–59 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong ▪ tel 852 2581 9678 ▪ hongkong@sundaramtagore.com
singapore 5 Lock Road 01–05, Gillman Barracks, Singapore 108933 ▪ tel 65 6694 3378 ▪ singapore@sundaramtagore.com

President and Curator: Sundaram Tagore
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Cover: *RP6-CR on 3P Waves*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 47 x 6 inches/120 x 120 x 15 cm

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