

GILES
ALEXANDER

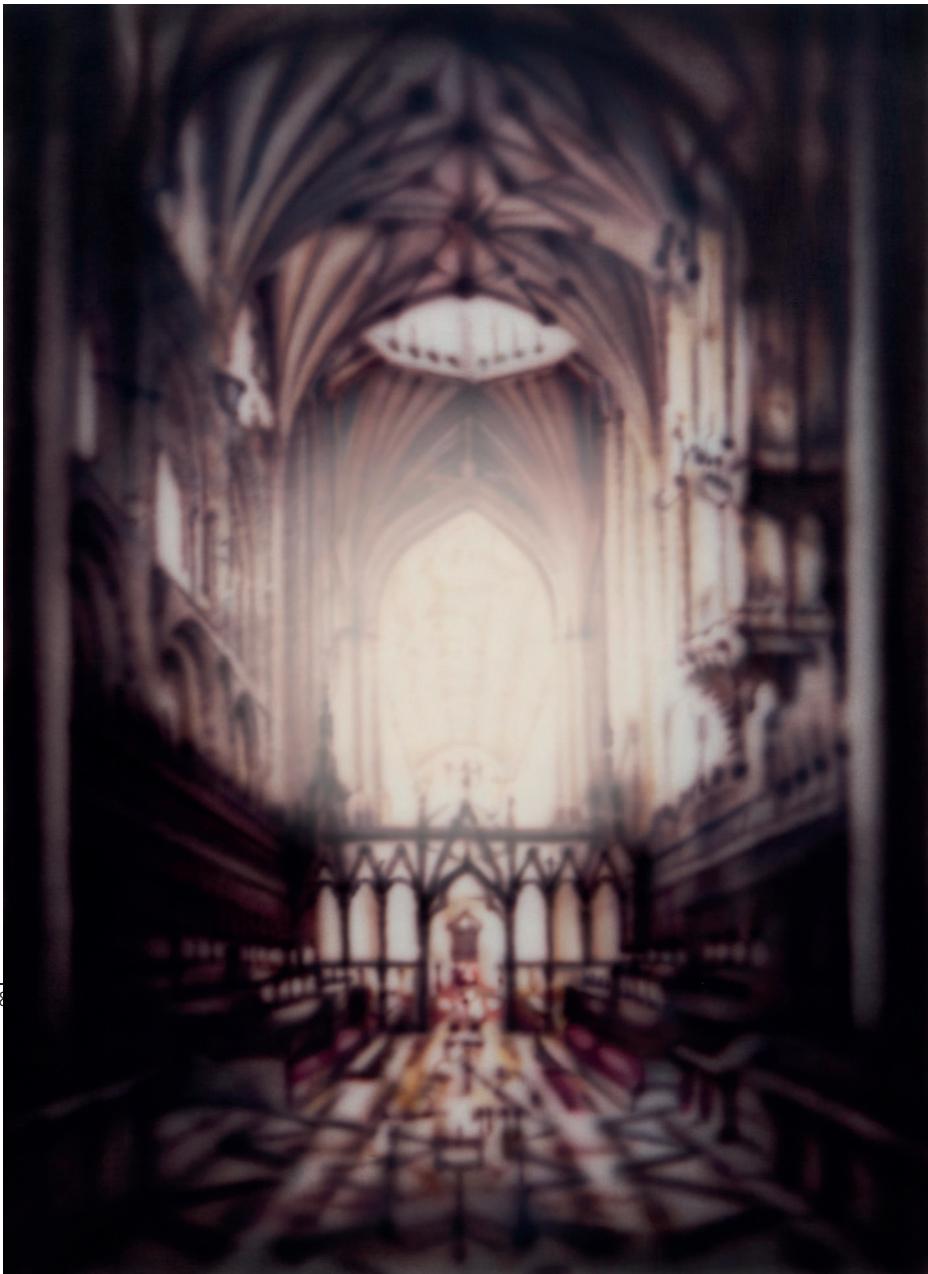
A Certain Fuzziness

NO MATTER HOW FAR GILES ALEXANDER'S PAINTINGS TAKES US INTO THE UNKNOWN, THEY ALWAYS HOLD THE PERSONAL AT THEIR CORE.

Story PETER HILL
Photography CRISSIE HALL



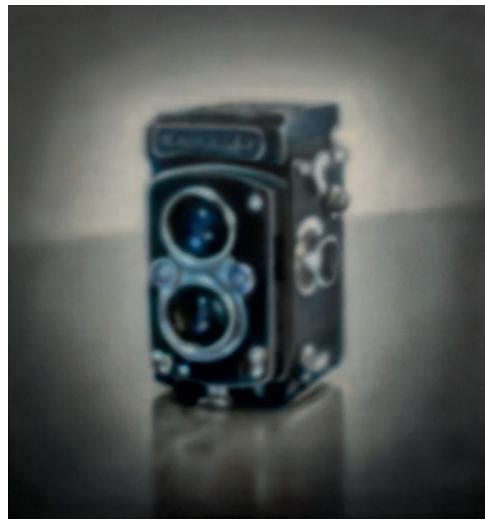




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Some artists, for instance Rubens, Seurat, and Australia's Jon Cattapan manage to combine abstraction and figuration within the same canvas – as did Turner; others have long periods of one style before switching to the other – Peter Booth and Philip Guston, for example, or switching materials – paint to sculpture – as did the mid-career Linda Marrinon, or from neo-expressionist painting to screen-based installation in the evolving works of Susan Norrie. And a very few – Richter, Andy Warhol, Louise Weaver, and Giles Alexander – progress abstract and figurative careers simultaneously. In the hands and intellect of Richter we witness a

tightrope walk between absolute precision (the portraits of his daughter) and pure chance (squeegeed grids of electric colour). In between, lie Richter's monochrome, grainily-painted images of the Baader-Meinhof group. These often appear slightly out of focus, as do most of the paintings in Giles Alexander's new series of air-brushed paintings, collectively titled *The Still Vague Vault*, and breaking away from his previous resin-coated works.

MARS Gallery is an appropriately named venue for Giles Alexander to be exhibiting his new canvases, given that many deal with far away planets and vast distances of space. In works like *Baby steps*, 2021, he

references planetary landing craft that look as fragile and as complex as a stick insect. But that is only half the story. Having taken us to those distant galaxies beyond which black holes form and collapse in on themselves, he transports us back to Earth – but to equally awesome (in the proper sense of the word) structures: cathedrals, Renaissance chapels and bell towers, the Reading Room of Victoria's State Library, and the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation Synagogue.

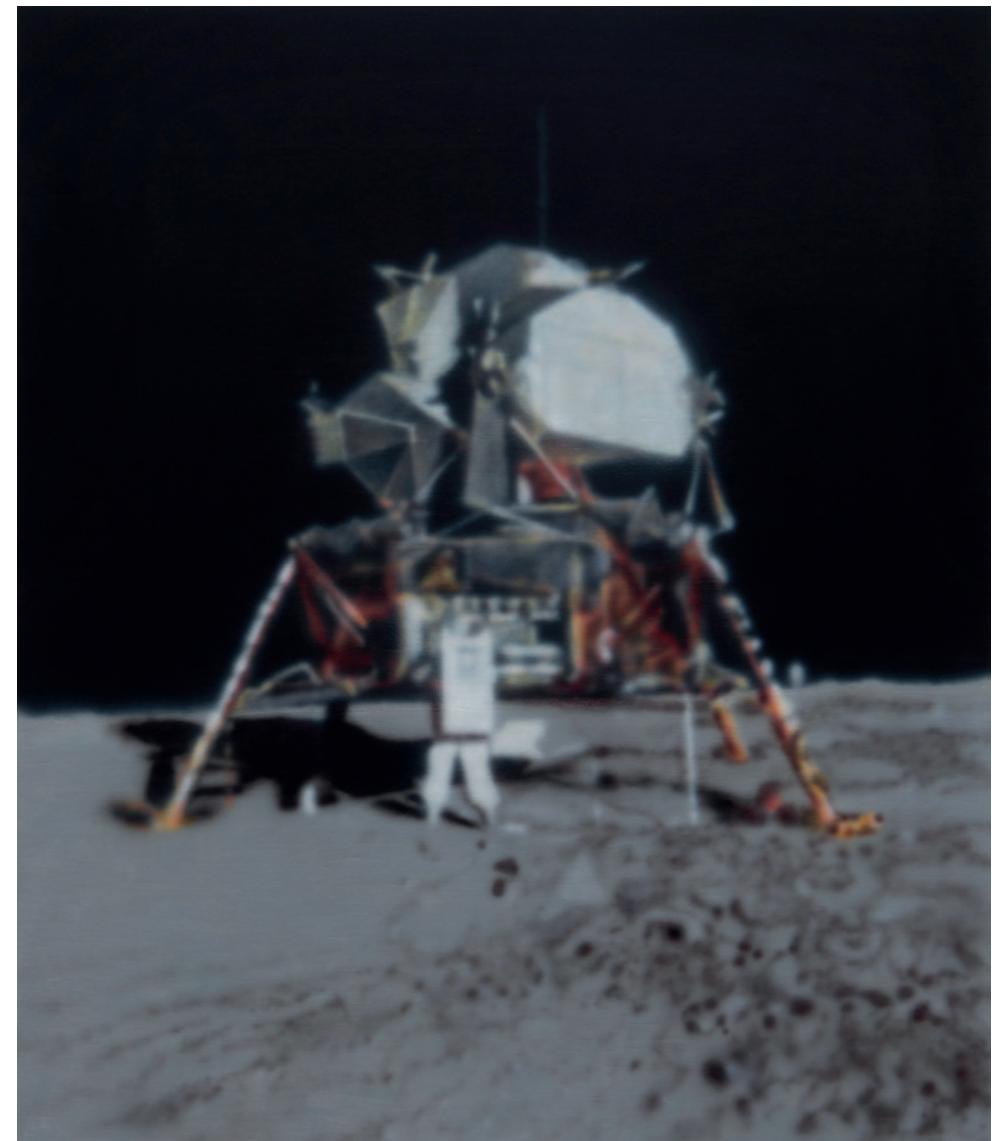
In between the macro and the micro we have the everyday human scale of objects – the old-fashioned camera (*20th century lyre*, 2021). “My beloved little Rolleiflex.

“There are new technical frontiers to conquer, new ways to parse the past and the future”

It's a bulletproof mechanical camera," as Alexander will tell me later. "I collected it when working at Christie's in South Kensington, back in the nineties" – every object tells a story. And the human skull in *I was so much older then..., 2021* – its contents, the human brain, implied by their visual absence – is one of the most complex lumps of matter in the entire universe.

Grappling with the yin and the yang of the humungous and the minuscule, Ashley Crawford writes in the catalogue to this exhibition: "Alexander, it would seem, is determined to investigate any and all aspects of what may be described as a 'hyperobject,' a term coined by Timothy Morton to describe events or systems that are too complex, to massively distributed across space and time, for humans to get a grip on . . . How else can we tackle the object depicted in *Where the senses fail us, reason must step in, [2021]*? Is it a massive, mysterious planetary orb, or a minuscule viral germ?" This painting, which from a certain angle also looks like an eyeball carved in marble, is one of the largest in the show. It also illustrates the intriguing ambiguity in much of Alexander's work.

I was beginning to reach these conclusions towards the end of two long and enjoyable phone calls – between Sydney's locked-down Inner West, and the only slightly less restrained Strathbogie Ranges, in the heart of Ned Kelly country. Tantalisingly, it was at this end-point in both exchanges that Alexander slipped in two important influences on his work that we had not previously touched on.



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The first call ended with us both enthusiastically critiquing that great equivocator between abstraction and figuration, Gerhard Richter – prompted by Alexander's battle-cry-like pronouncement, "I am a Richterite!" The second call ended with his homage (and my agreement) to the prescience of the English painter Turner; how he straddled two different eras, just as we are wobbling between similar tectonic plates of history. When I ask him who else is up there with Turner and Richter, he replies,

"I'm as turned on by the likes of El Greco . . . or Bellini. It's truly the craft of painting that excites me. That's not to say that all I ever look at is old-world painting, but as a painter I'm attracted to them because they knew their craft inside out. So much of that

knowledge has been lost. And I'd include Richter in there as a modern equivalent."

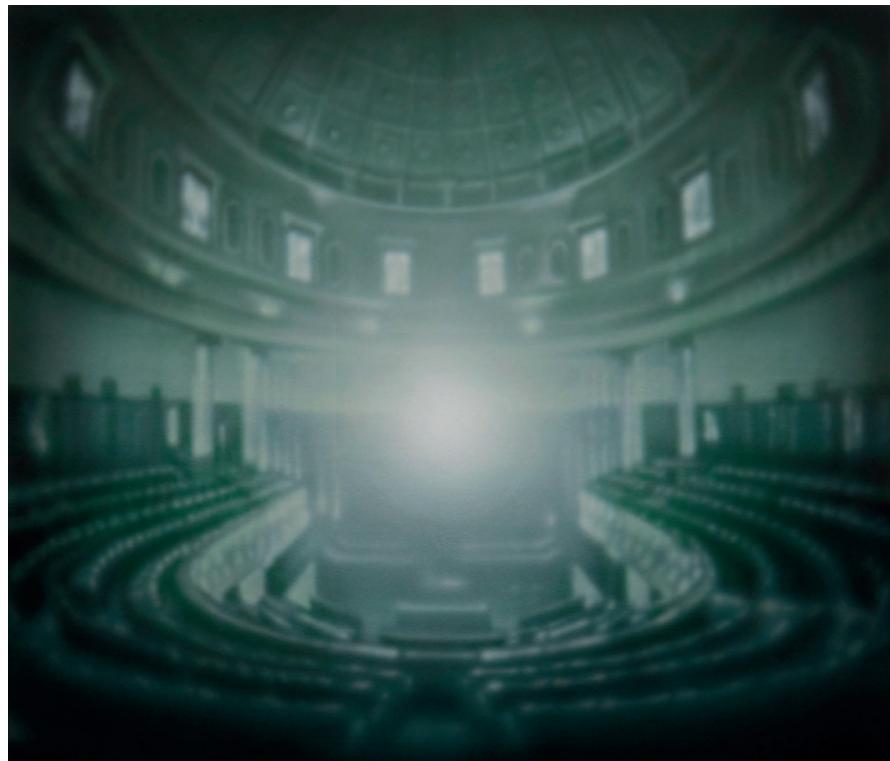
Turner is different. "He was all about atmosphere," Giles speaks quickly down the line, a sense of wonder never far away. "He portrays the elements cloaking the man-made world – the newly plastic world of metal and glass. Maybe this particulate pigment spray that I use in these new works, emitted from the air brush nozzle, somehow speaks to a sense of the dissolving grand narratives

01 *If you love somebody, set them free*, 2021, acrylic on cotton, 117 x 87 cm

02 *I was so much older then..., 2021*, acrylic on board, 50 x 45 cm
03 *20th century lyre*, 2021, acrylic on board, 70 x 65 cm

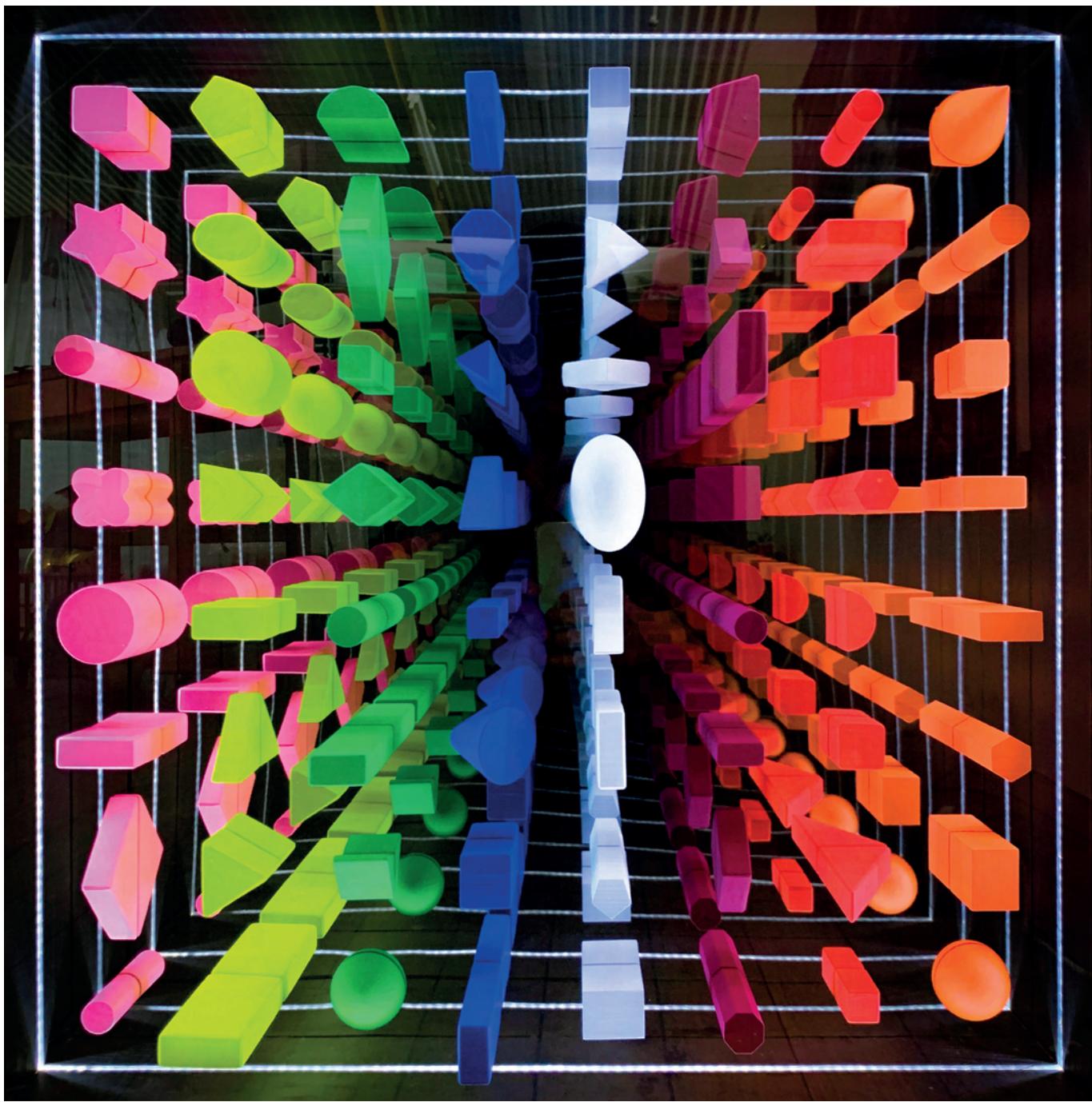


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| 89

of today's tumultuous world. Like him, I feel the passing of history before my eyes. Combined with a diffuse desire for materialisation that is inherent in a gaseous process." And if this sounds like planets forming and cooling, that may be very close to the truth. I asked him how hard it had been to give up the resin works that he was becoming known for, and reminded him of the phrase Tim Dean used in an early catalogue essay about Alexander "battling dust like NASA."

"Tim wrote that about ten years ago when I was for a long time covering my work

in a deep luscious resin which set up this reflective, deep, ambiguous space to the work. It's a horrible bloody process. It's stressful, it's physically demanding, and I'm not ruling out that it won't crop up in my work again. But I have to say I really enjoyed banishing that technique from this body of work. It operates in reverse to the technique I've just described."

In a previous conversation he had explained to me how he would complete a whole batch of paintings over many months, and at the last minute, before the exhibition opened, would pour the resin over them.

"What Tim was talking about was when I was wrestling in a spray booth with pouring the resin, and you can't have even the tiniest speck of dust contaminating the surface. It's stressful, and it's smelly, and it's noxious. And the resin is very heavy works. Some of these each weighed 80 to 100 kg. You're mixing these up in hot environments with breathing apparatus on – which we've all become used to now with COVID-19. You are conscious of the air. You don't want to stir up the air or you stir up the dust from wherever it is hiding."



90

"By contrast, with these new works, it's just acrylic paint sprayed onto canvas through an airbrush. It creates a super matte surface. It's almost like velvet. I said to a friend recently, 'you can almost feel it stroking your eyes, in a really physical way.' We are so used to looking for hard edges, and through them anchoring our view. This way of working kind of denies you that. There's no hard edges, no reflection, but a certain fuzziness."

Michael Hills summed up our *Zeitgeist* well, and Alexander's Janus-headed place in it, when he wrote in the catalogue to his last Sydney exhibition at Olsen Gallery: "The world is burning and demagoguery is on the rise; meanwhile, this exhibition has emerged from under the pall of a pandemic. Conditions are right for millenarian thinking. It is all going down the drain. Yet Giles remains sincere. Old churches still seem wonderful, as do the stories of astrophysics."

There are new technical frontiers to conquer, new ways to parse the past and

the future, from Renaissance chapels to rather big Hadron Colliders. With the vision of William Blake, combined with the "anything's possible" philosophy of Elon Musk, he reels off the future challenges and the past seedbeds: "The ancient religious power structures . . . the steady progress of reason . . . the timeless orbits of the heavens . . . exploration into brave new worlds . . ."

Yet there are very real emotions behind all of these works. Take the Bob Dylan-influenced *I was so much older then*, 2021, with its kicker of an ending, unsaid in the title, "I'm younger than that now."

"This has a couple of connotations," he tells me. "Firstly, the idea that maybe with age and wisdom comes a sort of release. Like spending years and years refining a traditional oil glazing technique, and then embracing the power of letting go that came with picking up the airbrush, and at the same time letting go of the resin. Secondly, that primordial, inevitable realisation of your own fate when you lose a close constant in your life. The

age-old *memento mori* represented by the skull. *If you love somebody, set them free*, 2021, is a painting of Ely Cathedral in Cambridgeshire, England and the title is from a song by Sting. I was standing at that precise spot in the cathedral, my father's favourite, when I got the call telling me they were turning his life support off . . . It was through my father, an architect, that I developed my 'humanist appreciation' for the religious edifice . . . Recognising the hand of the mason and engineer, rather than of 'the Lord'." □

@gilesalexander

EXHIBITION

The Still Vague Vault
4 November – 4 December 2021
MARS Gallery, Melbourne

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- 04** Baby steps, 2021, acrylic on board, 70 x 60 cm
05 God painting God, 2021, acrylic on board, 60 x 55 cm
06 Few are those who see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts, 2021, acrylic on board, 60 x 70 cm
07 Spectral geometric building blocks, 2019, acrylic, wood, mirrors and LEDs, 85 x 85 x 11 cm

Courtesy MARS Gallery, Melbourne, and Olsen Gallery, Sydney

ARTIST PROFILE

Marlene
Gilson

Brett
Graham

Isaac
Julien

Giles
Alexander

Jumaadi

Genevieve
Felix Reynolds

Jonathan
Jones

Dean
Bowen

Christopher
Zanko

Bronwyn Bancroft

CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES

by Brad Buckley

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