

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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FOCUS ON YZ KAMI

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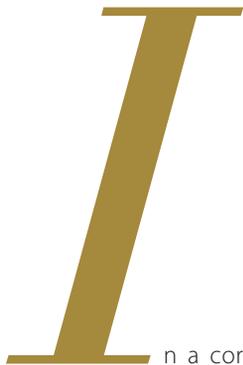
VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE
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STEPPING BACK AND *COMING* *CLOSER*

Rahel Aima offers a contemporary take on YZ Kami's meditative practice.

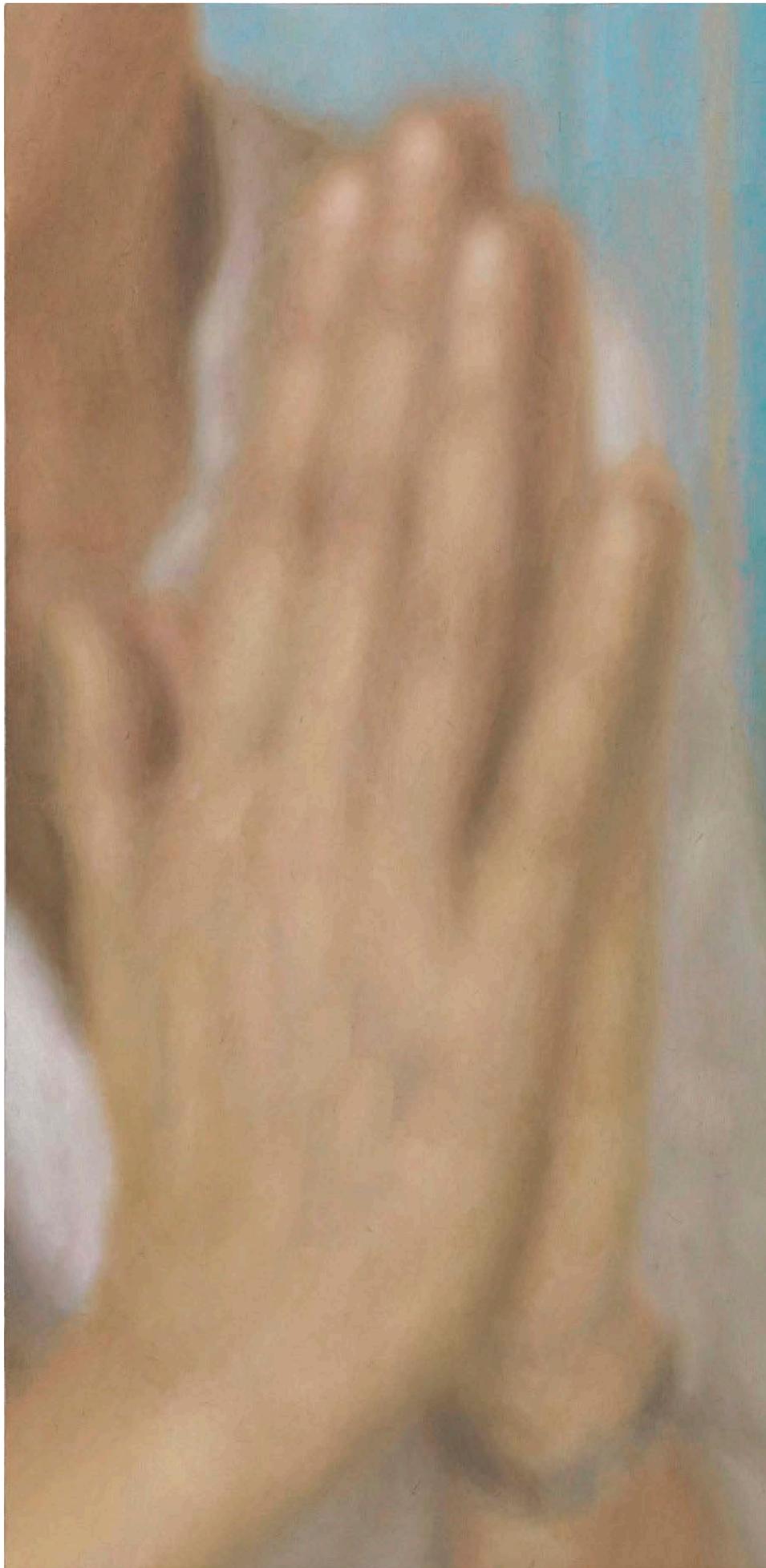


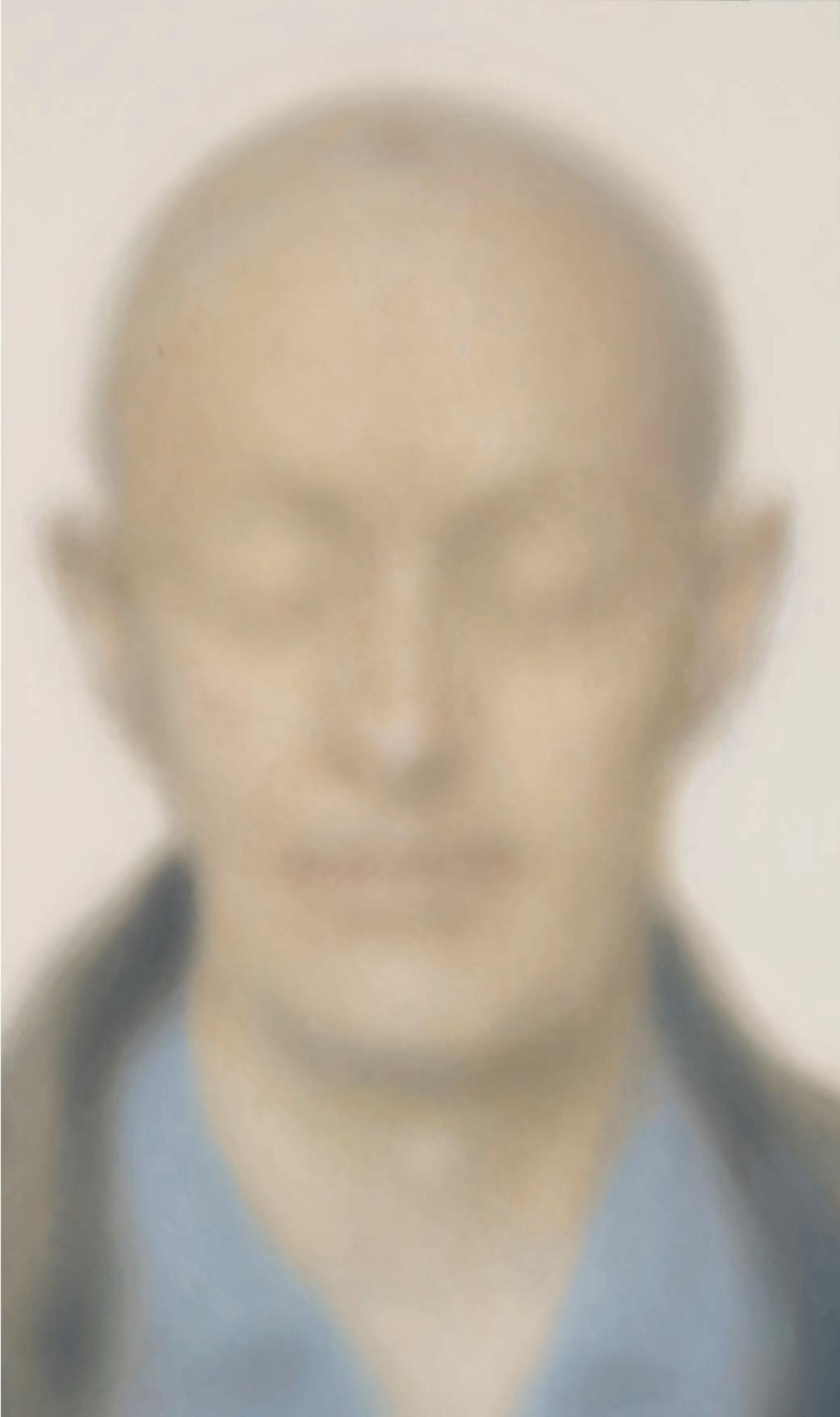
In a corner of YZ Kami's solo show at Dubai's Leila Heller Gallery are two palms pressed together in supplication. The hands are rendered in soft focus, with the redoubled, *sfumato* quality typical of his *oeuvre* and they are joined by three more oil portraits done in the same style. Kami cites the ancient Egyptian Fayoum mummy portraits here, yet the subjects make none of the direct, almost defiant eye contact of that tradition. A brunette woman doesn't avert her gaze so much as look past you, her eyebrows quirked in thought; a bald man closes his eyes as a smile plays at the corner of his mouth. He is praying or meditating, perhaps, or simply lost in introspection. Only *Paul* (the others are unnamed as *Untitled*) meets the visitor's gaze, even as the mysteries behind his eyes remain vacuum-sealed away, begrudging only the barest modicum of access.

Back to those folded hands. They recall the iOS 🙏 or prayer hands which used to boast a little yellow sunburst of light before losing them in its most recent redesign. And perhaps it's strange to bring up emoji in the context of what is primarily a painting show, yet in their resemblance to sweetly blurry photographs – what was once a thin smear of vaseline on the lens and is today most likely an overzealously applied filter – the portraits of *White Domes* feel

oddly, if anachronistically, very digital. The subjects' faces are entirely unremarkable and their clothes, where visible, are nondescriptly normcore. The palette is subdued, featuring the sallow blues and beiges and greys of the kinds of paint swatches people aspirationally amass when thinking about redecorating. They are atemporal without making any superfluous gestures towards timelessness. They exude all the intimacy of an everyday office, elevator or metro interaction – a tacit mutual agreement to keep their inner lives private, and to respect personal space – which is to say, very little. They ask that you step back not one or two but several metres, to a remove at which you can fully appreciate their monumental scale and, perhaps by squinting just right, bring their features into focus.

At the same time, there is a careful tenderness to the portraits, the kind of anonymously contoured familiarity borne of distance. A shopkeeper you might see each morning as you cross the intersection on the other side of the street perhaps, or a woman you see a couple times a week from across the metro platform, or that one man from accounting. Hung on immaculately white walls in an expensively industrial space, the paintings appear to float untethered in either space or time. They are interspersed with the titular paintings of white

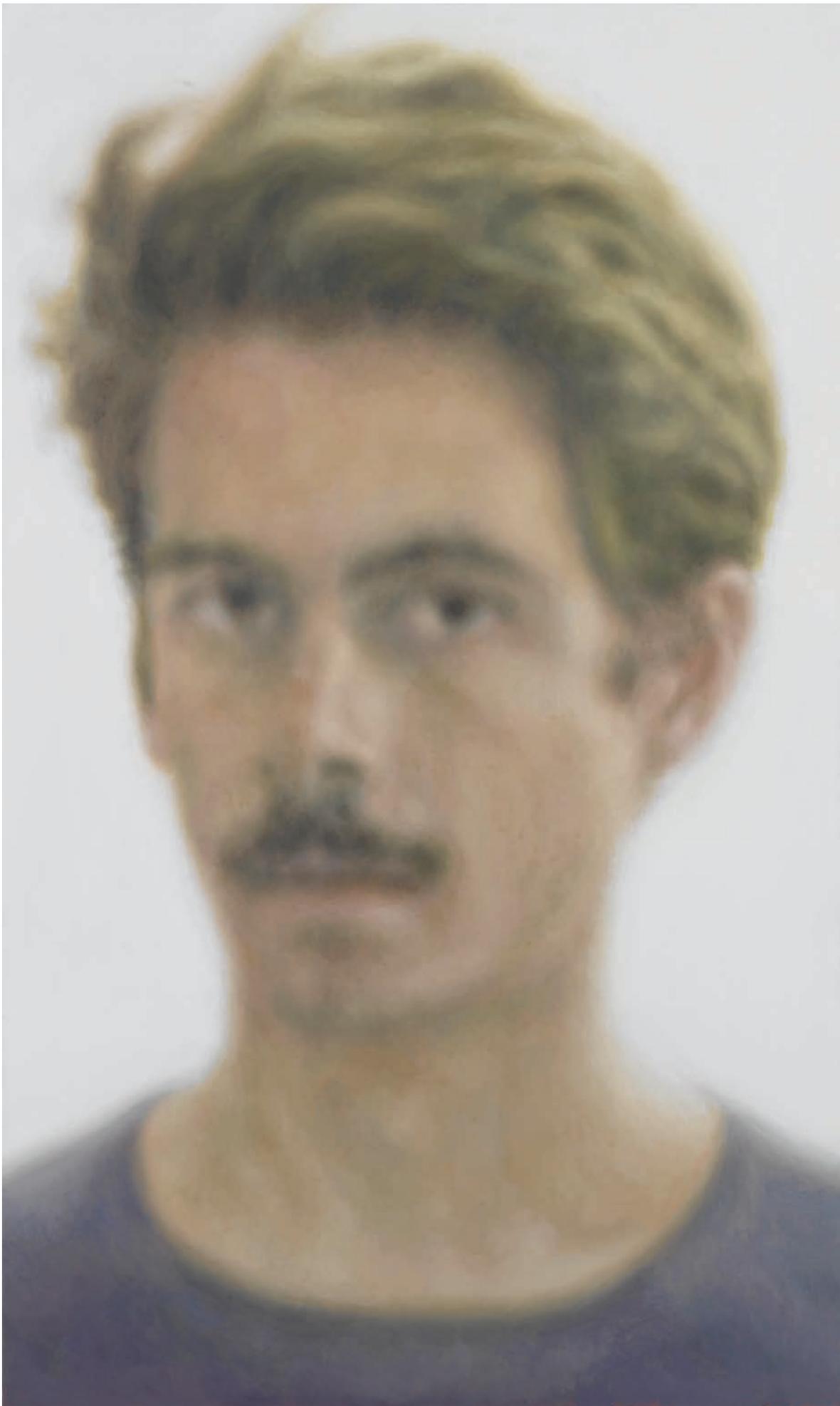




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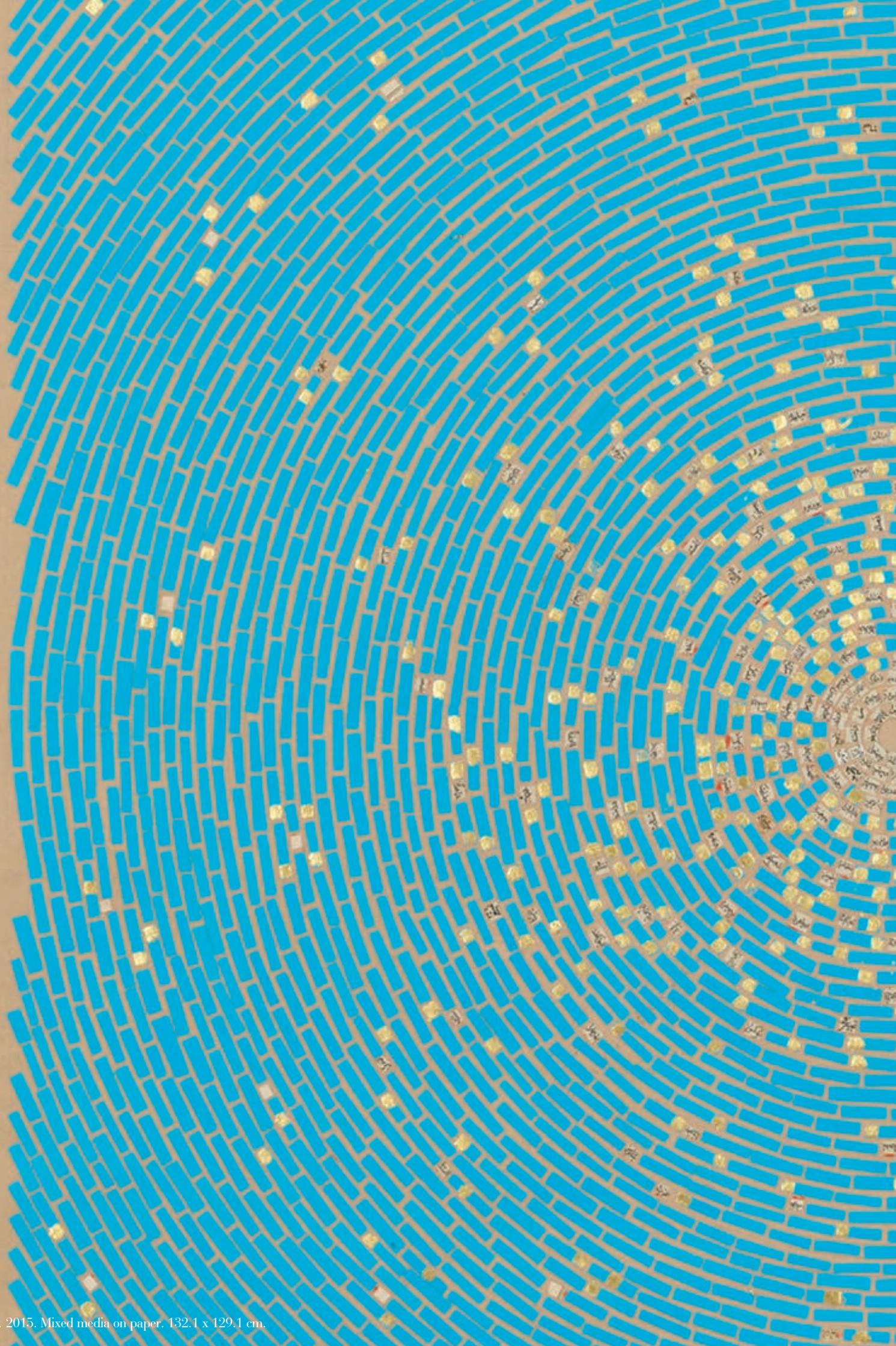
REVIEW

Paul. 2015. Oil
on linen. 228.6 x
137.2 cm.

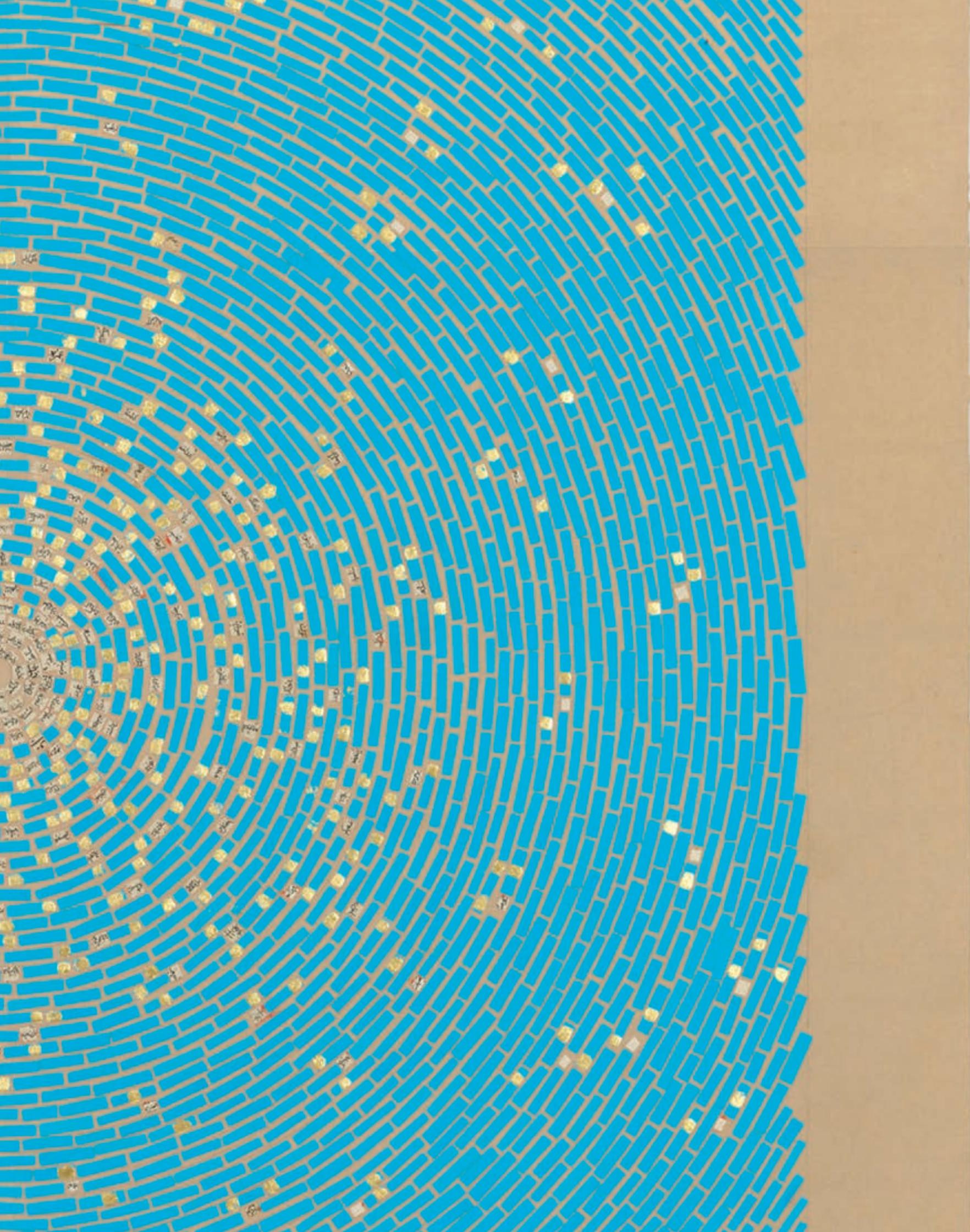


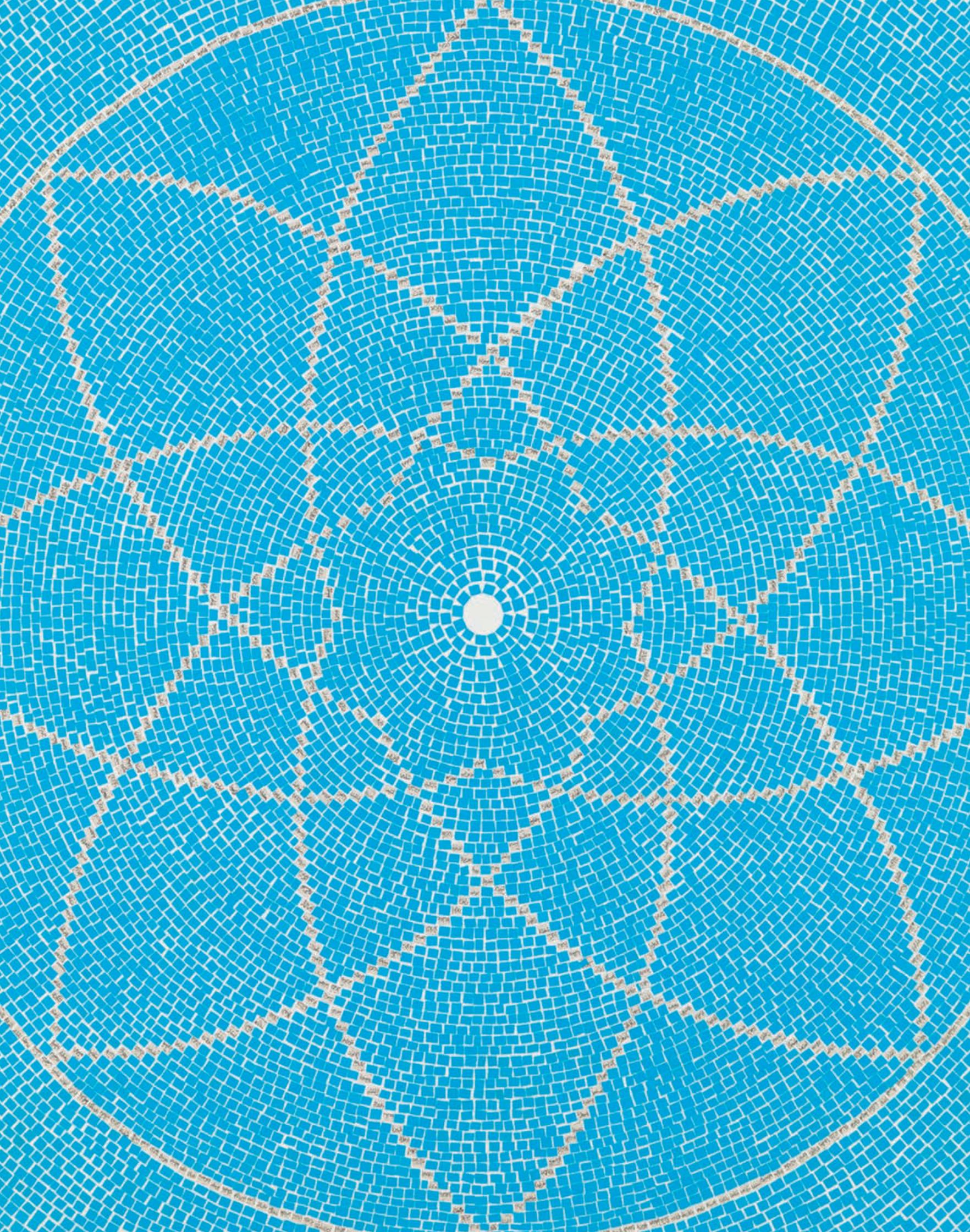






(Detail) *Endless Prayers XI*, 2015. Mixed media on paper, 132.1 x 129.1 cm.





Facing page: (Detail) *Endless Prayers IX*, 2015. Mixed media on paper. 158.8 x 124.5 cm.

Photography by Rob McKeever.
All images © courtesy YZ
Kani, Gagosian Gallery and
Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.

domes that lend the show its title, albeit somewhat uncomfortably, in a manner that recalls the mandated mingling of an office party.

Like that prayer hands emoji stripped of its showy rays of light, *White Domes* is suffused more with a sense of contained spirituality rather than any overt broadcasts of piousness or religion. Despite the white-on-white starkness, the space remarkably manages to feel tranquil rather than clinical; the gorgeously marbled skylights certainly help. There's a lovely peacefulness un beholden to any specific religious, spiritual or mystical tradition; you might instead see in it a modishly ascetic spa retreat, or perhaps a Pinterest board of what your new, decluttered life could be like. Even as the portraits ask you take several paces back, the *White Dome* paintings invite you to come in closer. The neatly block-stamped acrylic or inked concentric white circles collapse at the centre of each square canvas into a pulsation of white light (some iterations are more luminous than others). There is a uniformity in the pattern which the artist links to mandalas and Sufi conceptions of ceilings and heaven, as well as the divinity and infinity he sees as residing within each person. One might also liken them to meticulously grouted penny tiles or the careful masonry of an exposed brick wall, but at any rate their aggregate whirling portal effect remains the same. Only *White Dome I* differs significantly here in adding a central landing strip replete with an inescapably door-like denser white rectangle.

In the second gallery, a floor installation of Rumi quotes is less instagrammable sunsets and feet on the beach, more a meditation on love. Despite a trio of skylights overhead, the long, narrow room has a

decidedly funerary air, in which the aforementioned Fayoum portraits would not be amiss. Taking the domes series as a floor plan, the block prints become soapstone bricks with each concentric circle inscribed with a verse from the poet's *Book of Shams-e Tabrizi*; at the centre, a decidedly more earthly mound of salt. It is bracketed by another white dome facing off against its binary opposite, *Black Dome* (this one in gesso), each corresponding to a stage in the alchemical Magnum Opus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, blackness – *nigredo* – is codified here as chaos, putrefaction and a spiritual death, through which the alchemist must pass before journeying towards the light – an awakening – and being purified in the second whitening stage of *albedo*.

Finally, the third stage of *citrinitas*, or yellowing, which corresponds to the transmutations of silver into gold, and of the white, lunar consciousness into a yellow, solar one. It enters at stage right with *Gold Dome I*, articulated in gold leaf upon linen and as shining, shimmering, splendid as the name suggests, and continues in the smaller mixed media *Endless Prayers* series lining the walls of a third room. Here, the masonry is comprised of gold leaf, bright turquoise, and text fragments – prayers and poetry – printed on rice paper. The infinite repetition of the domes gives way to careening spirals and scatter plotted explosions, as if their centres can no longer hold and are forced to regurgitate matter back out into the world. 'Saleable works,' my notes say, and this perhaps is the real alchemy.

White Domes ran from 9 March–25 April 2016 at Leila Heller Gallery. For more information visit www.leilahellergallery.com