

The background is a complex abstract composition. On the left, there are several overlapping rectangular and trapezoidal shapes in shades of light green, pale yellow, and a vibrant orange. A vertical orange bar is prominent. On the right, a large light blue area with visible brushstrokes is separated from the left by a thin black vertical line. Below this, there are horizontal bands of yellow and red, and a larger light blue area at the bottom right.

WASSEF BOUTROS-GHALI
A Retrospective

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

WASSEF BOUTROS-GHALI

A Retrospective

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Cover Image: *Summer*, 2002
Back Cover Image: *Untitled*, 2014

A NEWFOUND ABSTRACTION

by **Rebecca Anne Proctor**

Inside the main space of Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai dazzling abstract compositions, vibrantly colored and highly architectural in structure, yet calm and gentle in appearance, aligned the walls. These alluring abstractions by Egyptian painter and architect Wassef Boutros-Ghali are inspired by not only the unrelenting sunlight of the artist's North African homeland, but nuanced observations of daily life, mythology and references to dreams. They are otherworldly. Titled *Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective (1965-2016)*, the exhibition, which took place from October 3 to November 5, 2025, marked the late artist's first exhibition in the Middle East.

Born in 1924 into a family of politicians in Cairo, Egypt, Wassef Boutros-Ghali was drawn to the arts as a child and as early as 12 years old demonstrated natural talent as a draftsman. While his brother Boutros Boutros-Ghali followed the family's long history of involvement in politics, becoming an Egyptian politician and diplomat who served as the sixth secretary-general of the United Nations from 1992 to 1996, Wassef set aside his family's political legacy and devoted himself to a career in architecture and a prolific pastime of painting. While his brother was an architect of the Camp David Accords, Wassef served as a technical consultant for the environment and urbanism with the United Nations, executing buildings in Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Sudan, among others.

While Wassef trained as an architect and worked as one his entire life, painting was his first love. The artist, who passed away in March 2023 at the age of 98, painted up until his death.

"He was the one out of the family that was the least interested in politics and far more interested in the arts," recounted his son Teymour Boutros-Ghali. "Around the age of 12, his father arranged for him to take art lessons with a teacher in Cairo. This is where he began his drawing, largely classical in style, using a charcoal ink pen."

At the time, it wasn't considerable socially acceptable for an Egyptian man of such a prominent political family to become a painter, and so Wassef became an architect. He did love architecture and the first building he created, "recounts Teymour, was an apartment building in Giza where his family move to after it was completed.

"To reduce Wassef to any one title would be to miss the essence of who he was," writes Teymour in the foreword to his *catalogue raisonné* published in 2025 by Skira and edited by Lesley Campoy. "He was a Renaissance man in the truest sense: an architect, artist, poet, businessman, mathematician, historian and philosopher. He read voraciously, thought deeply, and engaged joyfully with both the arts and sciences."

Wassef's paintings are akin to vivid geometric forms in space—in many ways they resemble modernist architecture. They reflect both Egyptian landscapes and constructivist compositions, including the essence of figural representations, buildings beaming with sunlight alongside canvases capturing the beauty of the desert and the sea. While Wassef's art charts everything in abstract terms from politician revolutions and upheavals to relocations in Rome, Italy, and a move to New York in 1971 followed by years in Connecticut, the United States, his canvases remain buoyant and uplifting, richly evocative and sensitive to the people and landscapes around him.

While from the 1950s to the 1970s modernist architecture flourished in the Arab world, Egypt during the same period was not particularly known for its contributions to the development of abstract art. Wassef's contemporaries, such as Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar (1925-1966) reinterpreted folkloric and religious themes as well as mysticism, while Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989) created heightened canvases comprising her politically charged and surrealist compositions. During the same period, the renowned Mahmoud Saïd (1897-1964) became renowned for his portraiture portraying both the wealthy and poor of Egypt alongside his evocative landscapes.

Wassef stands out, underlines Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in the *catalogue raisonné*, for his approach to abstraction that was rare for the time.

Until 2019 very few people knew anything of Wassef's art. He was known for his career as an architect. "He never intended to promote or sell his work," said Campoy. Yet when she found herself in his studio during a visit to Cairo, amid hundreds of breathtaking works roduced quietly over the last few decades, she asked her father-in-law what he was planning to do with them. He shrugged as if to say he had no set intentions. His art was a private, passionate project. After she told him that his work

deserved "to live out in the world." He simply replied: "Well, if you would enjoy that, you can have it." And Campoy did.

Through various connections, she met Rhona Hoffman, a long time Chicago-based gallerist, who, enraptured by Wassef's work after a trip to Cairo, decided to bring a few paintings to Art Basel Miami in 2019, marking the first public display of his art. Wassef became the star of Rhona's booth. It was just the beginning. Since then, his work has been showed in numerous international art fairs, including The Armory Show in New York, Art Basel in Paris and Miami, Frieze Masters and Abu Dhabi Art. In late 2020, Albertz Benda Gallery in New York gave Wassef his debut gallery exhibition. This was followed by a retrospective at Hoffman's Chicago gallery the following year and most recently, a retrospective and book launch of the recently published *catalogue raisonné* at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. Leila Heller now represents Wassef through her galleries in Dubai and New York.

While Wassef will be remembered greatly for his architectural contributions and the many lives his buildings have shaped, his paintings, now discovered and, as Campoy noted, "living out in the world," provide a sense of everlasting beauty and the hopeful spirit of endless possibility.

"I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't paint," said Wassef at the age of 96 years during a conversation with curator and author Glenn Adamson, published in the *catalogue raisonné*. "It's interesting—I've reached an age where I have seen a lot, by definition. But even if I had always lived in the same city, in the same room, I would have seen a lot. It is a consolation to find that I can still express myself on the canvas. It is a feeling that I can now say goodbye."



Diamond, 1978
Acrylic on canvas
44h x 36w in. / 111.7h x 91.4w cm



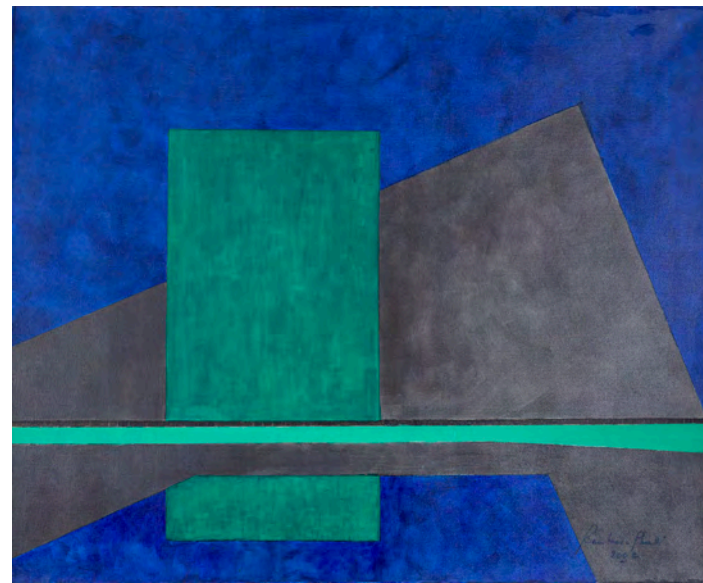
Untitled, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
22h x 26w in. / 55.8h x 66w cm



The Chinese Spoon, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 46w in. / 116.8h x 116.8w cm



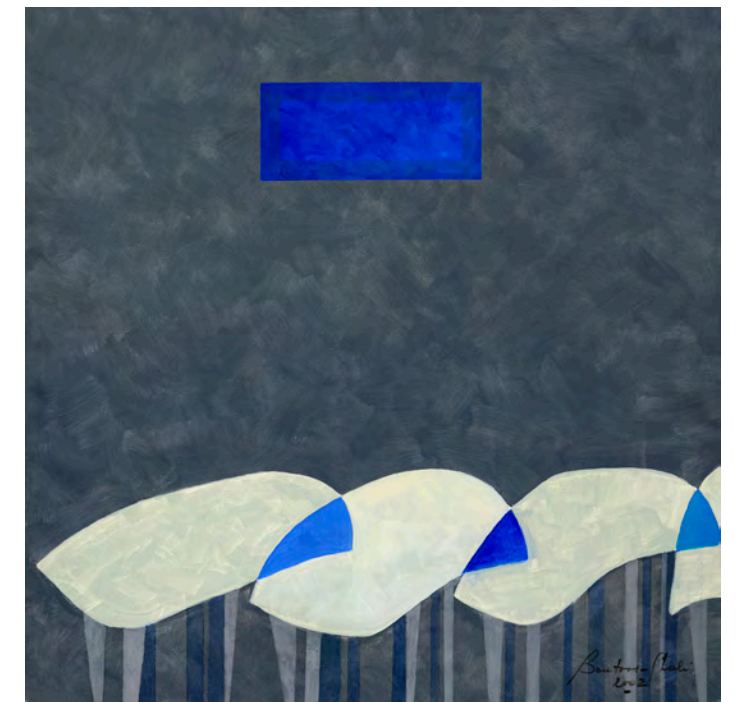
Eruption, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
30h x 30w in. / 76.2h x 76.2w cm



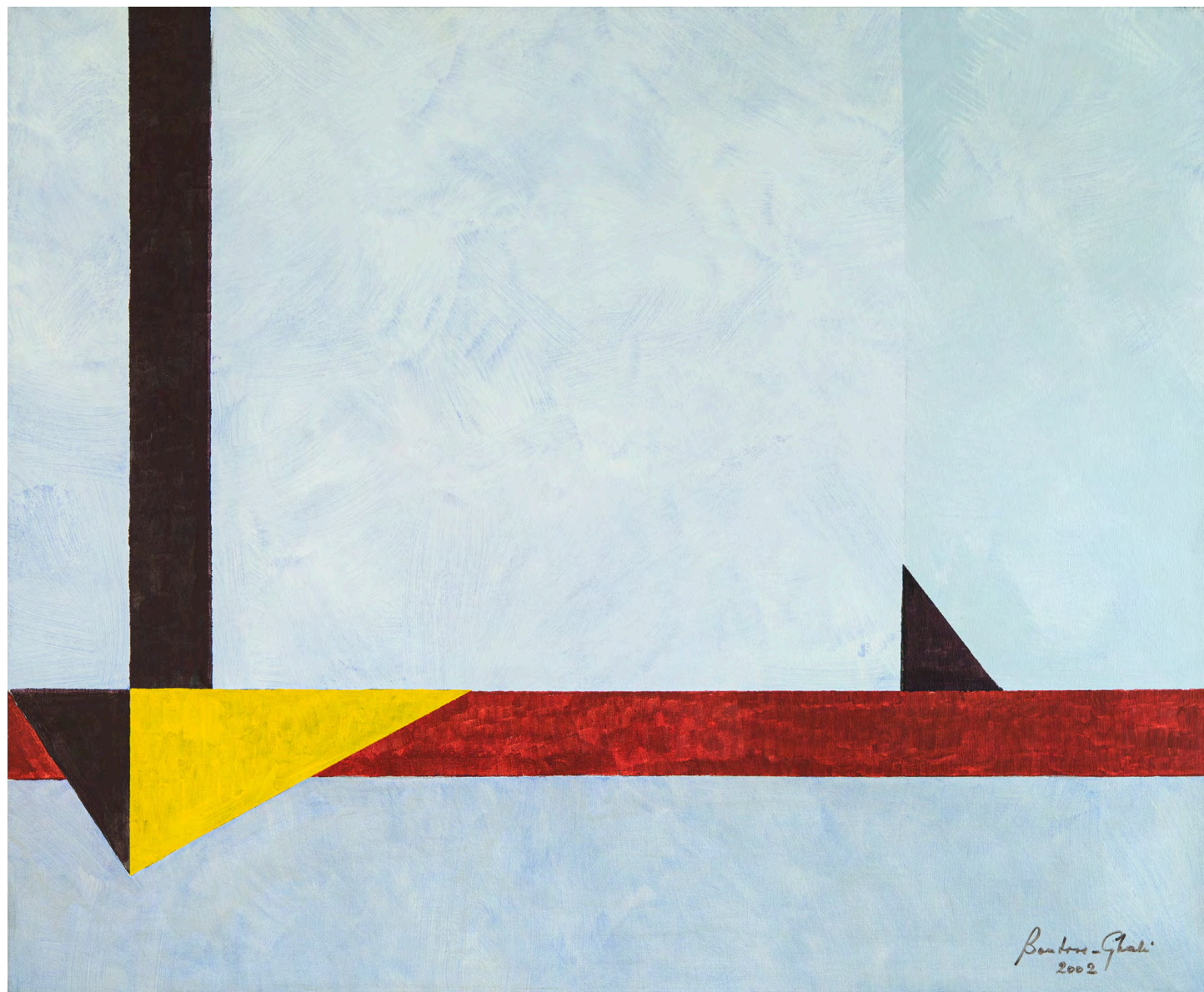
Horizon XII, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
38h x 46w in. / 96.5h x 116.8w cm



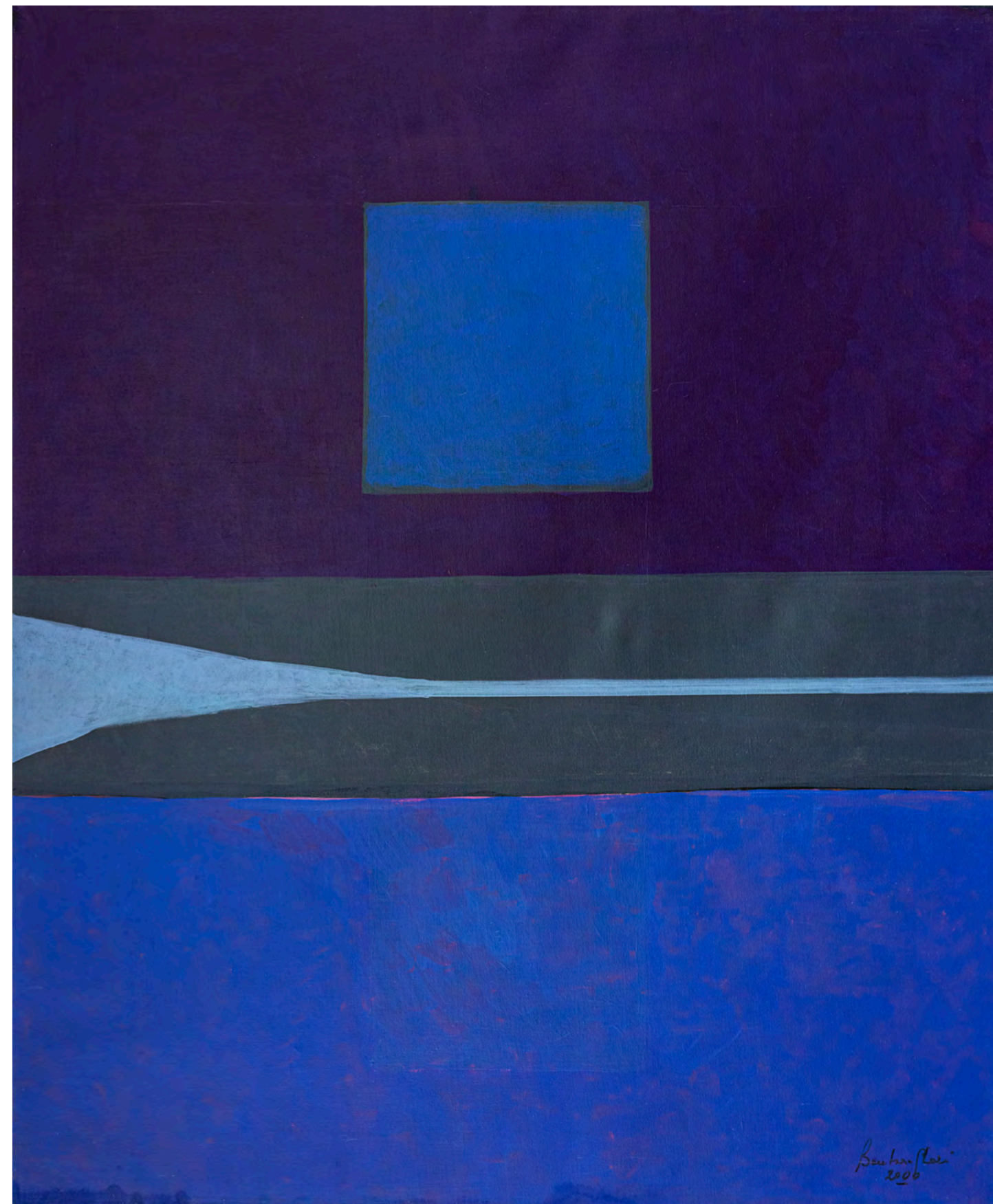
Last Spring, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
54h x 54w in. / 137.1h x 131.7w cm



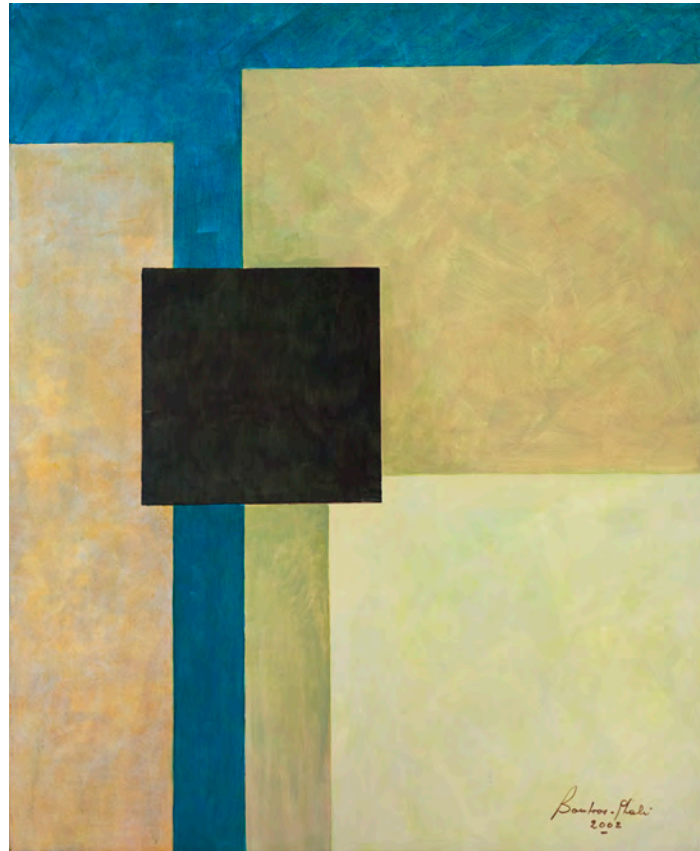
Le Troupeau (The Heard), 2002
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 46w in. / 116.8h x 116.8w cm



Summer, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
38h x 46w in. / 96.5h x 116.8w cm



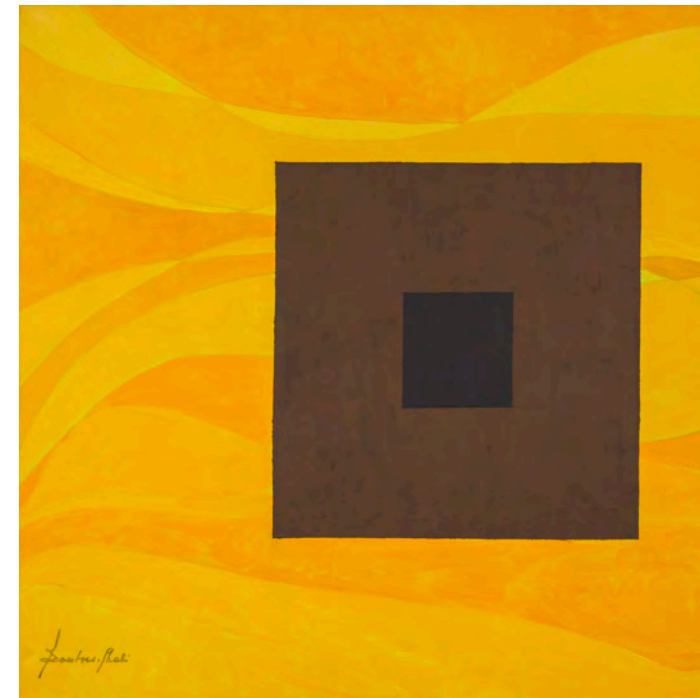
Night, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



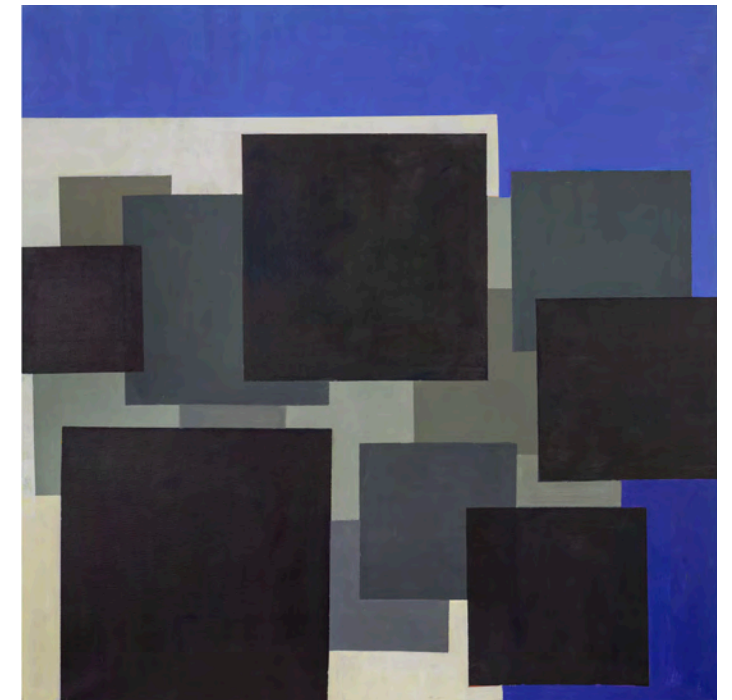
The Black Square, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



Red Shape, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
65h x 55w in. / 165.1h x 139.7w cm



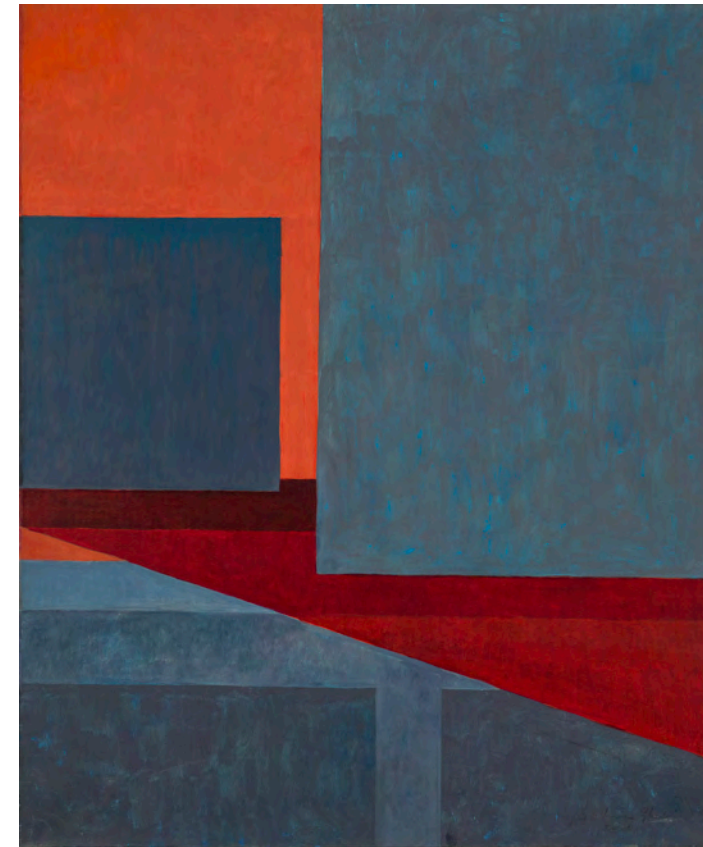
Square in a Square, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
38h x 38w in. / 96.5h x 96.5w cm



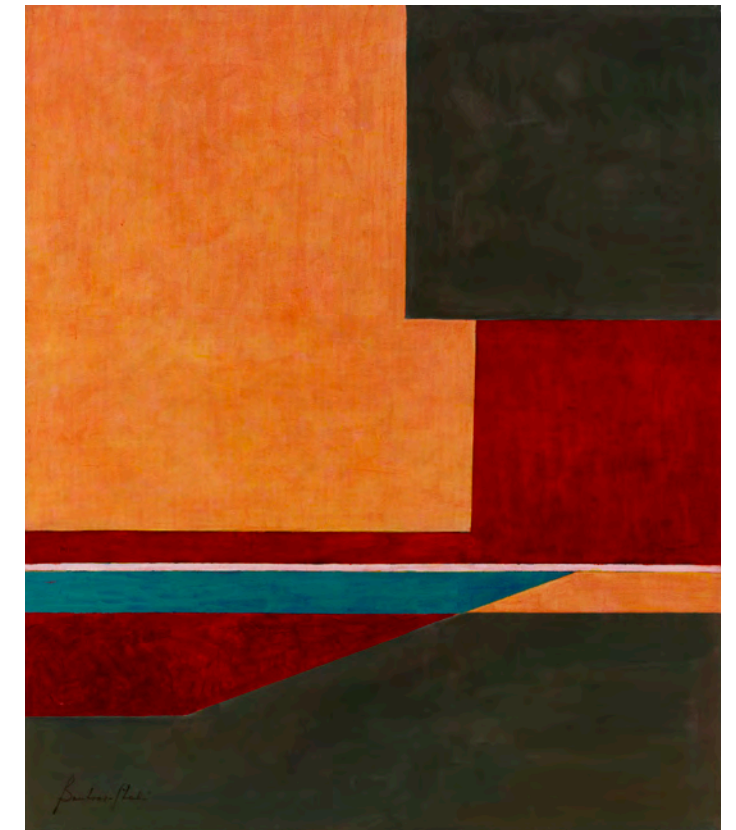
Square Rain, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
54h x 54w in. / 137.1h x 137.1w cm



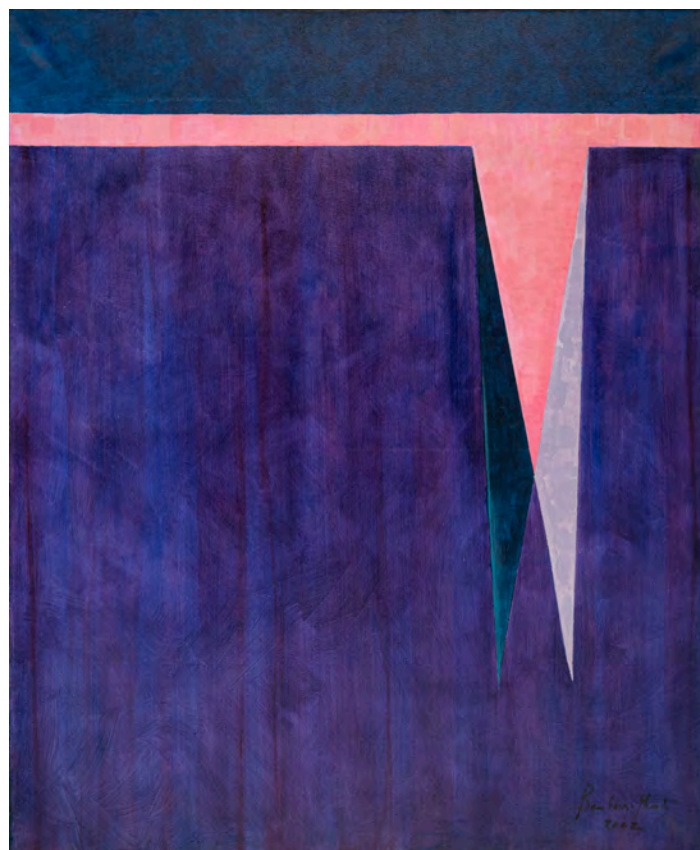
Love, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
79h x 52w in. / 200.6h x 132w cm



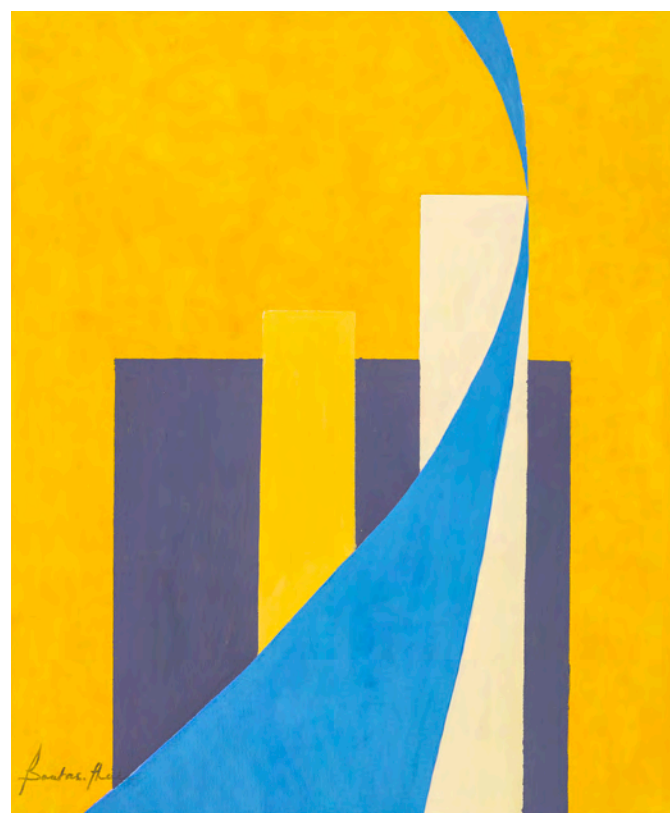
The Maze, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



Untitled, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



Untitled, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



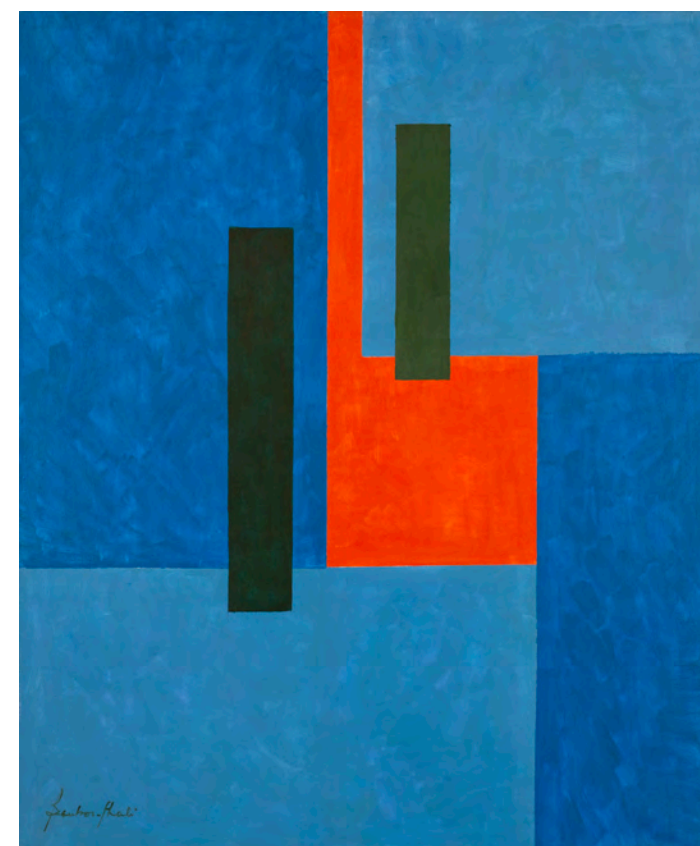
Untitled, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
33.5h x 27.5w in. / 85h x 69.8w cm



Shadow of the Red, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
27.6h x 27.6w in. / 70.1h x 70.1w cm



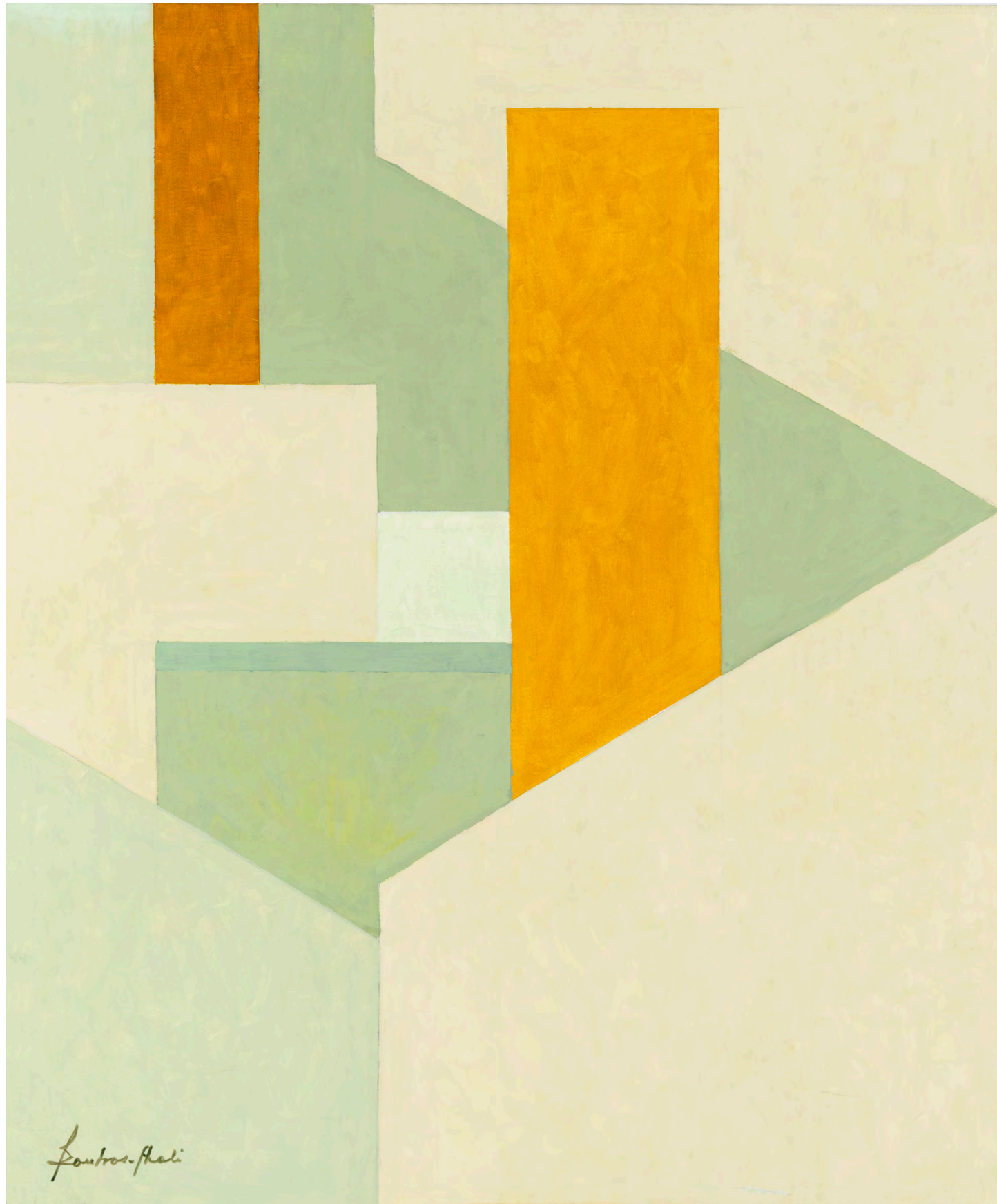
The King, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
54h x 54w in. / 137.1h x 137.1w cm



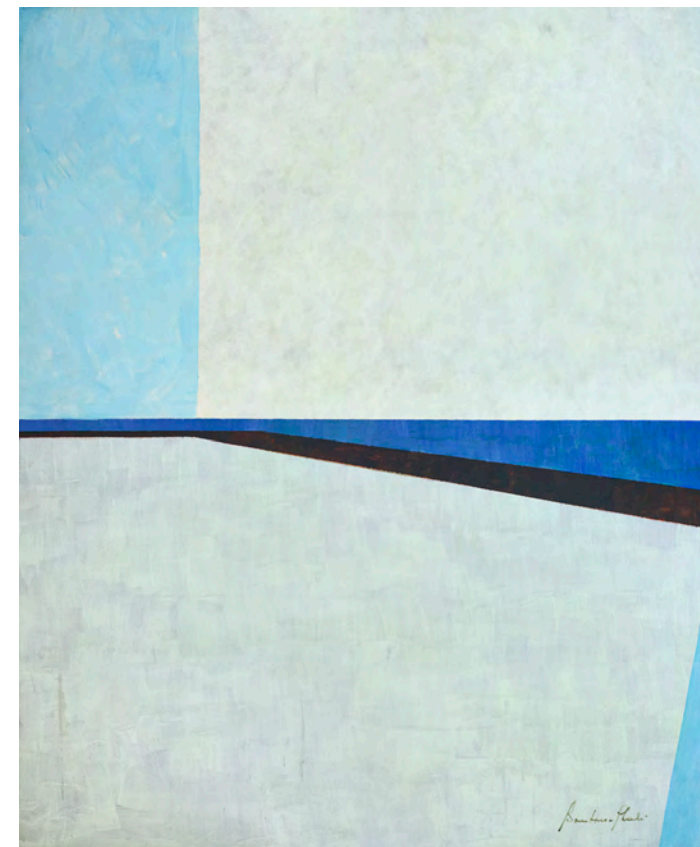
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



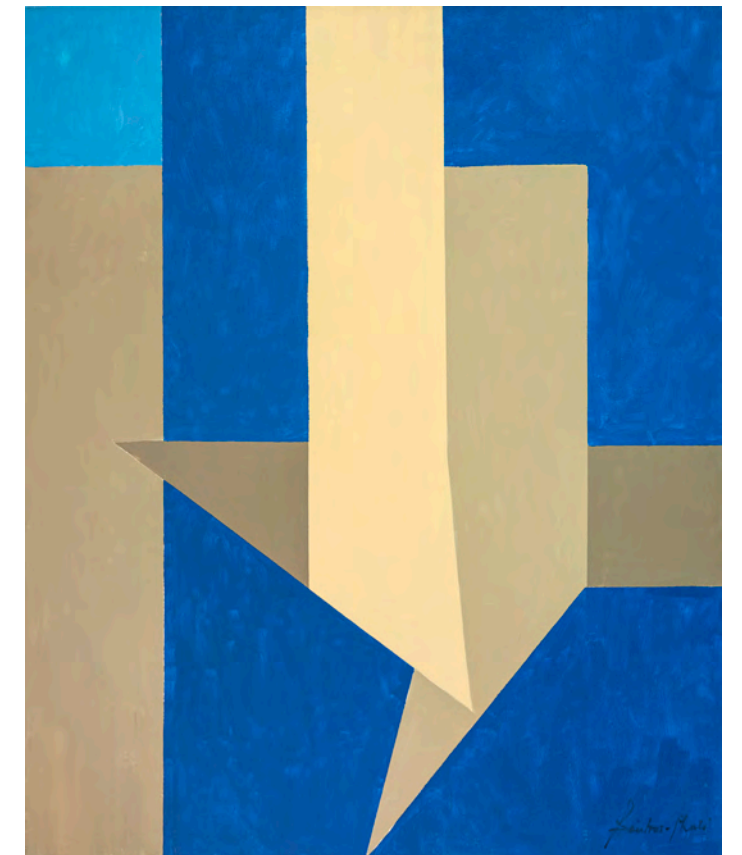
Untitled, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 46w in. / 116.8h x 116.8w cm



Untitled, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



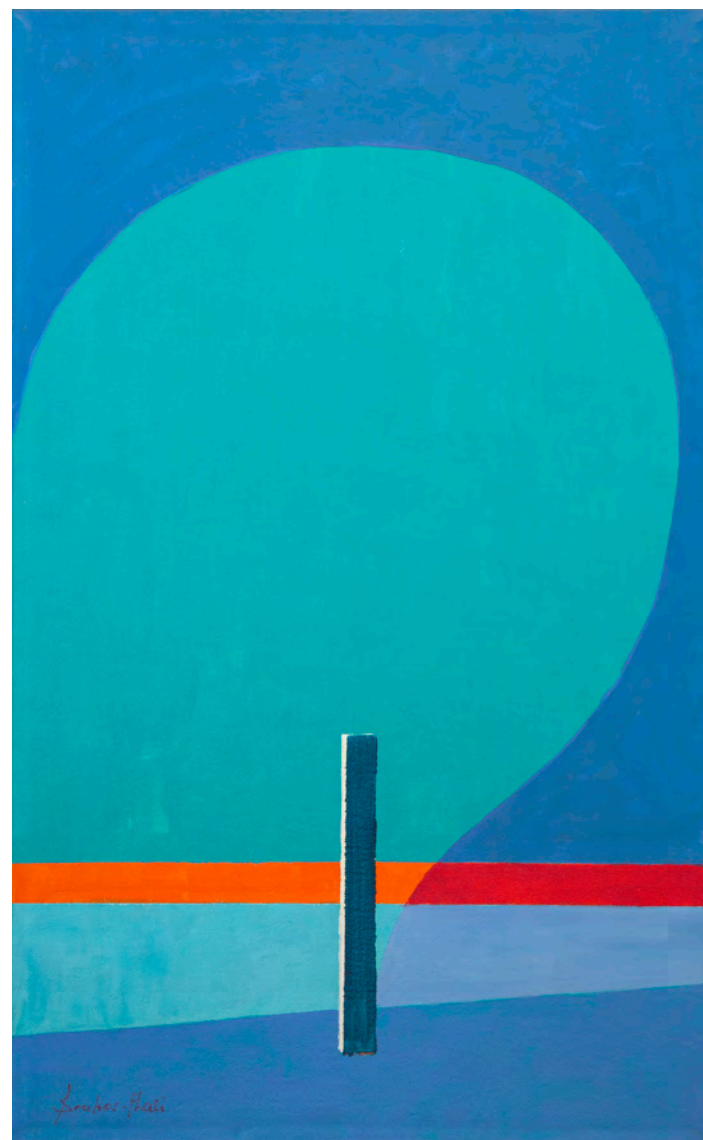
Untitled, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



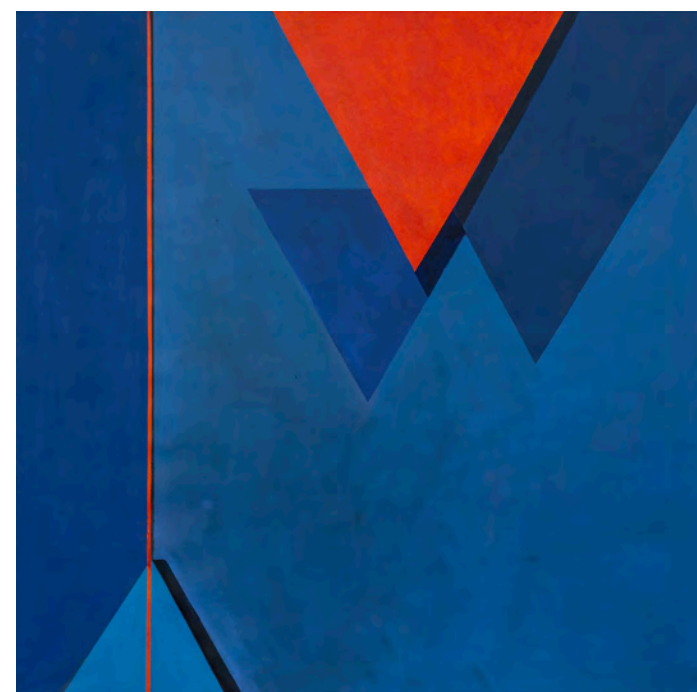
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



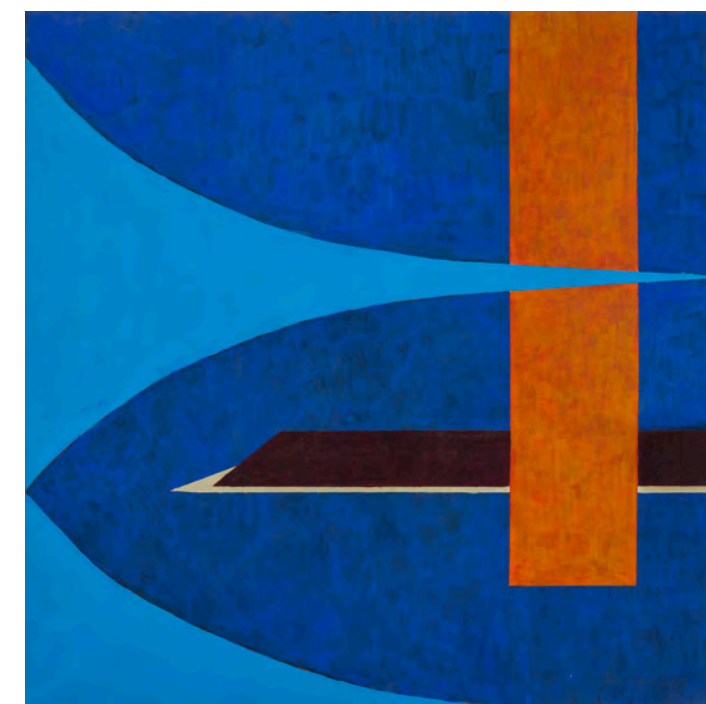
Untitled, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
28h x 22w in. / 71.1h x 55.8w cm



Untitled, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
32h x 20w in. / 81.2h x 50.8w cm



Untitled, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 46w in. / 116.8h x 116.8w cm



Untitled, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 46w in. / 116.8h x 116.8w cm



Untitled, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
46h x 38w in. / 116.8h x 96.5w cm



Untitled, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
38h x 38w in. / 96.5h x 96.5w cm



Black Shadow, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
65h x 55w in. / 165.1h x 139.7w cm

WASSEF BOUTROS GHALI

1924 - 2023

Born in Cairo (1924–2023) to a political family, Boutros-Ghali pursued art from a young age, training under Jaro Hilbert. He initially chose architecture but later dedicated himself to painting, merging structural precision with lyrical color harmonies.

As a U.N. consultant, he worked on urban projects across the Middle East and Africa while deepening his artistic practice. Political upheaval in 1963 forced him to experiment with Chinese ink drawings, shaping his later style.

Moving to New York in 1971 revitalized his approach, shifting his focus from figurative improvisations to bold abstraction influenced by Rothko and Reinhardt. Larger canvases and vibrant acrylics became his signature. A return to Cairo in 1985 provided uninterrupted freedom to refine his meticulous yet expressive compositions.

Boutros-Ghali continued to paint until his passing on March 15, 2023, at the age of 98.

CV

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective and Catalogue Raisonné launch; Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai
- 2023 Wassef Boutros-Ghali: Echoes of Creativity; albertz benda gallery, Los Angeles
- 2023 Wassef Boutros-Ghali; Arts Club London; curated by Wedel Art, London
- 2021 Wassef Boutros-Ghali /LEVANTE; Christine König Galerie, Vienna
- 2021 Wassef Boutros-Ghali: Paintings 2000 - 2016; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
- 2020 Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective; albertz benda gallery, New York

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 Expansive Change: Distortion as Dialogue in Modern and Contemporary Art; Leila Heller Gallery, New York
- 2024 World Builders: Artist as Architect; Leila Heller Gallery, New York
- 2022 Exhibition N°120 (maybe); Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris

ART FAIRS

- 2026 Art Basel Doha; Leila Heller Gallery, Doha
- 2025 Abu Dhabi Art Fair: Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai
- 2024 Abu Dhabi Art Fair: Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai
- 2021 The Armory Show; albertz benda gallery, New York
- 2021 The Armory Show; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, New York
- 2021 Frieze Masters: Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Albertz Benda Gallery, London
- 2020 The Armory Show: Rhona Hoffman Gallery, New York
- 2019 Art Basel Miami; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Miami

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Barjeel Art Foundation, Shariah, UAE
Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL

SELECTED PRESS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2025 Al Qassemi, Sultan Sooud, Introduction, Catalogue Raisonné
- 2025 Vally, Sumayya. "Abstraction is an Ancient Technology," Catalogue Raisonné
- 2025 Adamson, Glenn. "A Conversation with the Artist," Catalogue Raisonné
- 2025 Honarpisheh, Donna. Title TBD, Catalogue Raisonné
- 2021 Gyimesi, Jenna. "These Retirees Were Just Artists in Waiting," AARP, July, 2021
- 2020 Hawa, Kaleem. "Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective," Brooklyn Rail, December 20, 2020
- 2020 Clavarino, Elena. "Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective," Graydon Carter's Air Mail
- 2020 MacAdam, Barbara. "Imaginary Geometry: Wassef Boutros Ghali's Art," New York, NY
- 2019 Grosso, Caroline. "Art Basel Miami Beach 2019: The Ultimate Guide to What to Do and What to See," L'Officiel USA. December 7, 2019
- 2003 El Chiaty, Wafika. "Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective," Cairo, Egypt.

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