

TEMPLE OF THRESHOLD

ALBERT YONATHAN

11 February 2011

A stylized, cursive handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Albert'.

Albert Yonathan



Temple of Threshold

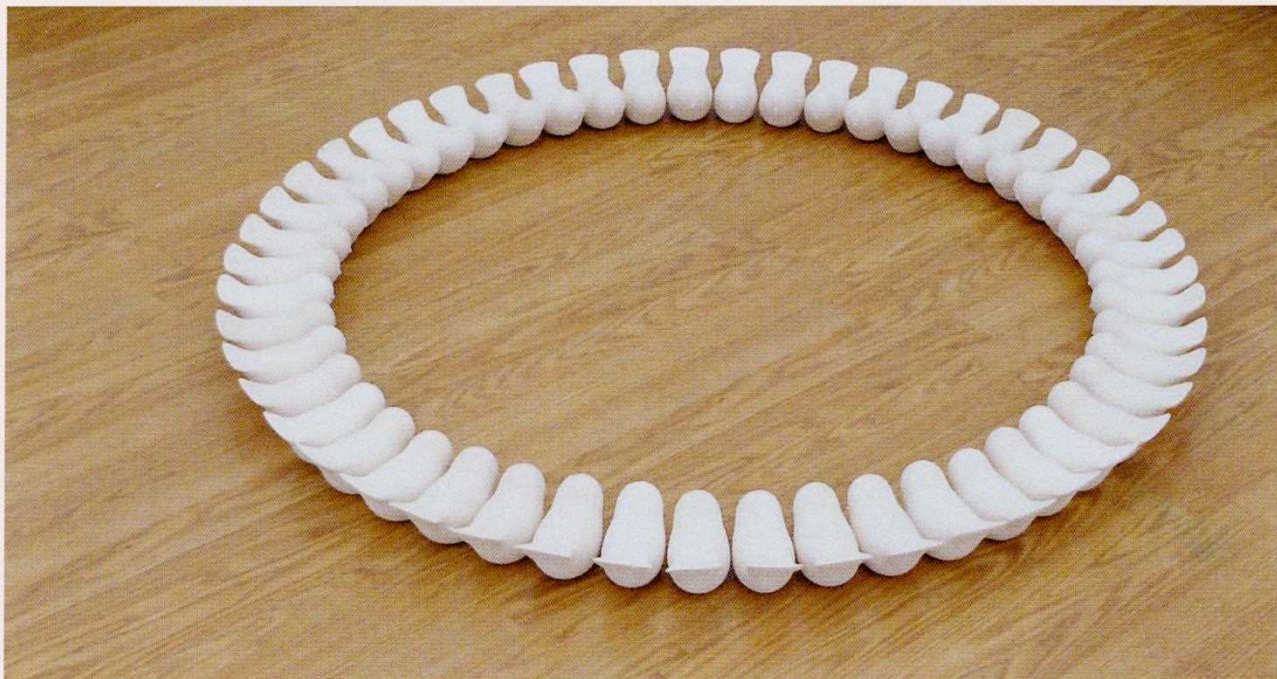
Agung Hujatnikajennong

Throughout history, there have been a myriad of adages on the connection between art and spirituality. One of the common truisms tells us that all art is essentially spiritual, and an artist is always a 'spiritualist'. This is so because the art practice is a manifestation of the artist's most private, unseen and, perhaps, incommunicable inner thoughts and feelings. True, all art is an expression of internal motives of the maker. And generally, art can be a vehicle to discover the essence of or deepest values in life.

Despite all presumptions, however, we should still acknowledge that the discourses on art and spirituality vary in different times. Today, contemporary art practices have drifted away, inasmuch we can no longer speak of a single artistic direction. At the same time, studies concerning 'human spirituality' have also continued to evolve with the recurrence of different movements and thoughts. In the twenty-first century, we actually live in a situation where the task to connect spirituality with art is even more complicated than before.

In this essay, I make an effort to delve into the spiritual aspects of the works by Albert Yonathan, a young Indonesian artist. While I am aware of the problematic issues related to the relationship between spirituality and art, I deliberately sidestep the traps of discussing deeply about particular spiritual/religious schools or faiths. The framework of understandings I use here is general, yet useful, especially to forge the relationship between spiritual and socio-cultural aspects of art practices. This exhibition by Yonathan represents, on the one hand, the artist's understanding of the ultimate reality in his own idiosyncratic way. Yet, on the other hand, his work can also be seen as an artistic exploration of and visual response to the daily surrounding of social situations.

Albert Yonathan had been formally trained as a ceramic artist. Along the way he has moved beyond the strict borders of the



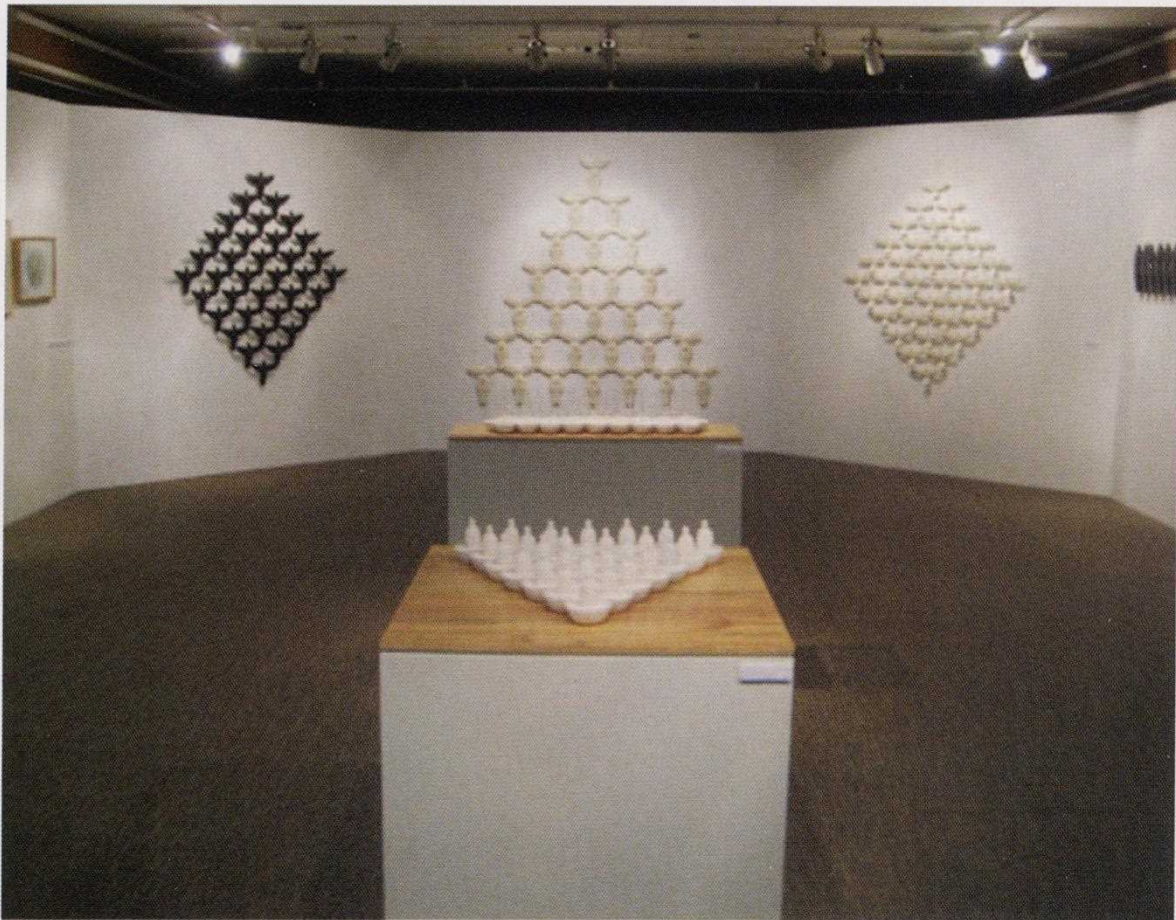
The Nature's Assembly

2008
middle fired ceramics,
slip casted
Dimension variable

*Installation view
at the Bandung New
Emergence V.2,
Selasar Sunaryo Art Space,
2008*

discipline, even though he keeps a clear penchant for ceramics as a medium, which is based on his deep, personal passion. Although Yonathan is really mindful of the problematic positions of ceramics throughout the history, in which the medium is often overlooked or even discarded in the Fine Art paradigm, his overall philosophical comprehension of the medium has infused his body of works with a definite conceptual quantity. For years he has developed his own unique and pensive approach toward the material. According to Yonathan, the process of building and casting three-dimensional forms out of the amorphous, natural clay represents impalpable transformation. The specific process of making ceramics has made him aware of the matter of unseen powers in the process of human artistic creation. From mud processed into clay, then molded or cast with bare hands into shape, and finally fired to become a sculptural object that could encode meaning through human craftsmanship and perception—the transformation always involves a totality of both man and nature's power.

For Yonathan, the whole process of ceramics-making, which often results in unexpected and surprising outcomes, is always an interesting subject to reflect upon. For instance, he sees the changes in the glaze coloring or the heating induced cracks, which are often considered a failure, as something that epitomizes a rupture in the process towards harmony. For him, any failures during the ceramics-making could happen, when artistic intentions, which belong to the world of ideals, human deeds, which are always susceptible to mistakes, and nature's characteristics and conventions, which demand obedience, are altogether disconnected. Even though the formal curricula at his



university has provided him with all scientific explanations, he tends to understand the ceramics process as something related to a bigger, more fundamental phenomena. The direct and tactile encounter with all natural materials and substances in ceramics-making has also made him think more and more about the relationship between man and nature.

*Installation view of
Liminal Being exhibition at
Japan Foundation,
Jakarta, 2010*

From his particular recognition towards the vast concept of nature, Yonathan has instigated the creation of a visual idiom, which he developed from the shapes of living creatures: human, animals and plants, or, sometimes, a combination of the three all at once. Learning from the process of gradual transformation in ceramics, he is interested in the idea of 'liminality', namely a state of transition at the boundaries, which exists in many forms and phases of life. Further, he associates the liminal stage with a force that exists in the moment of changes, and at the same time regulates life into order and balance. Relating this abstract term to spirituality, he once stated, "I am also using the term 'liminal' as a stage that can alter man into a spiritual being. In that particular phase, man can see and realize things beyond the visible."¹

¹ Interview with the artist, 7 December 2010.

During the last two years, Yonathan artistic exploration has also traversed into different mediums, such as drawing, installation and performance. Despite his versatile ability, Yonathan stresses that the visual idioms he creates are always deeply imbued with his interest in symbols, especially spiritual and religious symbols. There, we might find ambiguous characters, such as a figurative sculpture of a man with a pair of wings on his head, or a humming bird with leaf as its tail. But it is precisely the ambivalent look that he wants to emphasize in his drawings and installations. In creating the 'characters' of his works, Yonathan is also inspired by the story of 'liminal beings', which coexist in many different cultural myths, legends and narratives. For instance, we can cite the Centaur in Greek mythology, which is depicted as half-horse and half-human. Or in Islam, epitomized by Al-Buraq, a winged horse brings the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and back in one night.

For his installation work, Yonathan usually starts with working on a single three-dimensional clay module. Then, he duplicates it with a casting technique, and after that, he arranges the modules repetitively in certain geometrical patterns. His work often appears in arrangements of many ceramic cast modules in geometric outlines, such as a triangle, a circle, a hexagon or a square. Related to the repetitive geometrical patterns, which appear in some of his works, he has been deeply inspired by the patterns used in different religion-related practices. For instance, in the work *Crystal Temple for the Solitary Mind*, or *Somewhere in Between*, he partly adopts arabesque patterns, which are known for its infinite repetitions of geometrically abstracted forms, modular structures, repeating lines and complicated mathematical visual compositions. Yet apart from the arabesque, he also draws inspiration from the pattern in the mantra or chanting "Om/Aum" in Hindu prayer, the practice of *dzikir* in Islam, as well as from the dots seen on Aboriginal paintings.

As already proven by different spiritual and religious traditions, Yonathan believes that a highly intense repetition can bring us to a certain state of liminality and sublime experience.

Curator Asmudjo Jono Irianto claims that Yonathan's use of repetitive arrangements is a deliberate strategy that alludes to the position of 'decorativeness' in contemporary art.² During the modernist era, decoration was often considered faulty. However, Yonathan's choice to present repetition does not aim at presenting a particular religious practice, nor does he use it as a mere empty pastiche ornament to attack the modernist principles. It could be said that he creates his own symbols to tell his own narrative.

Other than objects resembling living creatures, Yonathan also arranges repetitive modules that are inspired by certain structures, columns or architectural forms. He wants to create a space, or a miniature of space, which refers to a place for worship. As seen in the site-specific installation *Cosmic Labyrinth*, the repetition of three-dimensional modules creates a distinct atmosphere. Relating to this particular work, Yonathan has been intrigued by the spiritual practice in ancient pagan culture, which has been reinvented and revitalized in modern times by a contemporary American Christian sect.³ He believes that the recurrence of particular practices proves that human spirituality has a universal structure.

This exhibition highlights the tension between the 'religious' and the 'spiritual', particularly in the contemporary society of Indonesia. By 'religion', I refer to any major belief system that comes with a fixed

² Asmudjo Jono Irianto, *Cosmic Mantra*, curatorial essay for Albert Yonathan's solo exhibition at SIGlarts, Jakarta, 13 – 28 February 2010.

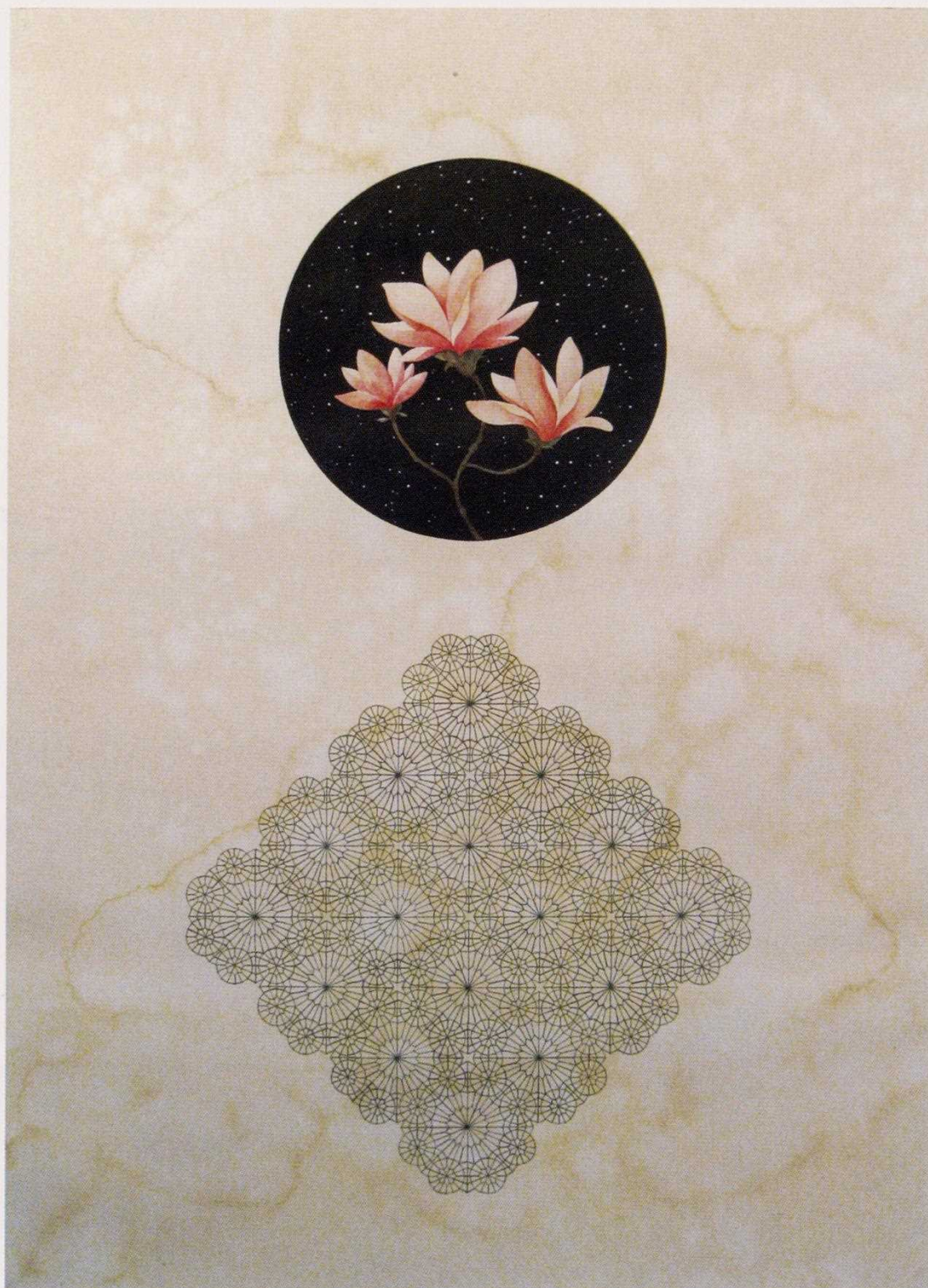
³ Interview with the artist, 7 December 2010.

⁴ James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 1 – 2.

pattern of rituals, liturgies, calendars of holy days, prayers, obligations, credos, pilgrimages, and so on. By 'spirituality' I mean something more private. Although in many senses it can be part of religion as well, the 'spiritual' is often subjective, largely incommunicable and sometimes unrecognized. To simplify somewhat, while religion tends to be social and public, spirituality is often personal.⁴

In the foremost part of Yonathan's work, the artist tends to deal with particular religious teachings in a rather indecisive and obscure way. The way he stresses the universality of spiritual life and the way he makes use of ambiguous symbols somehow signifies the current situation in Indonesia. After the political reform started in 1998, when the powerful military repressive government was toppled, religion has become more and more an 'institution' that regulates social life. As a consequence, myriads of religious symbols, which were invented and preserved in different societies to bring religious adherents closer in unity, have become the strongest icons that determine personal or personal identity. Interestingly, Yonathan's liminal symbols and ambiguous work in fact moves away from showing particular iconinc religiosity. Although we can always read his work as merely a spiritual stance, we can also detect his critical stance towards religious fanaticism, and his stand to consider all of us as spiritual creatures.

Agung Hujatnikajennong

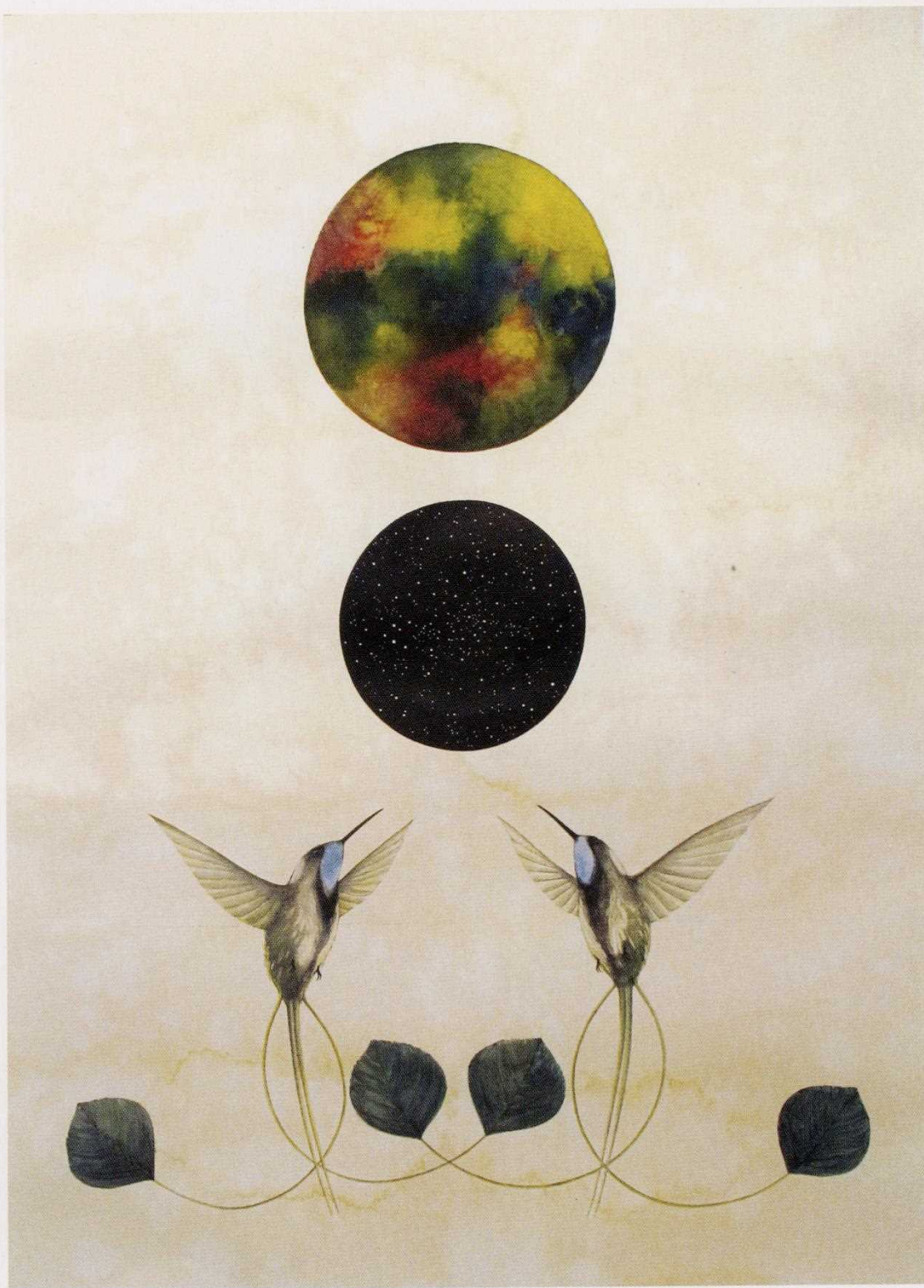


Somewhere in Between

2011

watercolor and ink on paper

74 x 55 cm



Aerial

2011
watercolor and ink on paper
74 x 55 cm

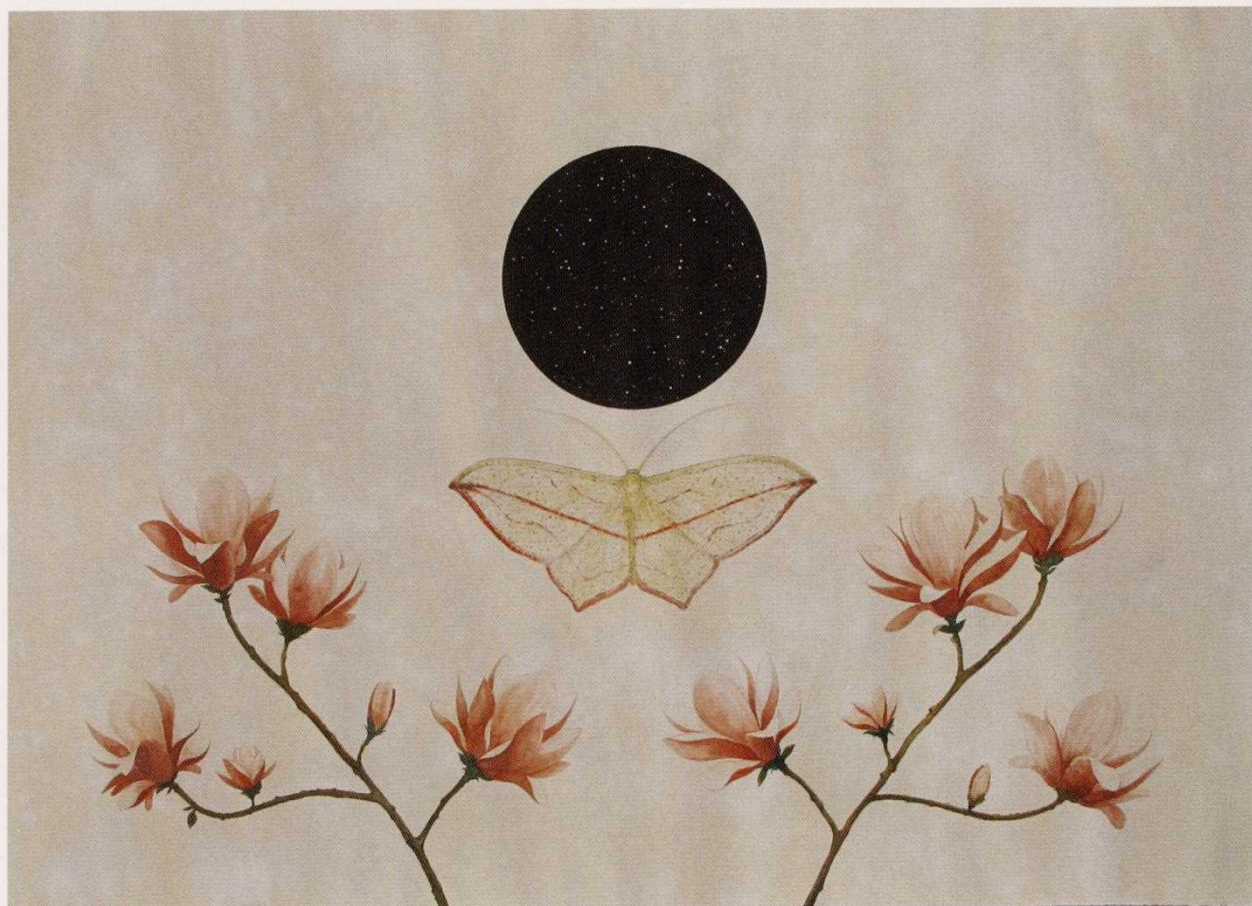


We are All Visionaries, and What We See is Our Soul in Things

2011

watercolor, ink, and silver paint on paper

74 x 55 cm



Ethereal

2011
watercolor and ink on paper
52 x 72.5 cm

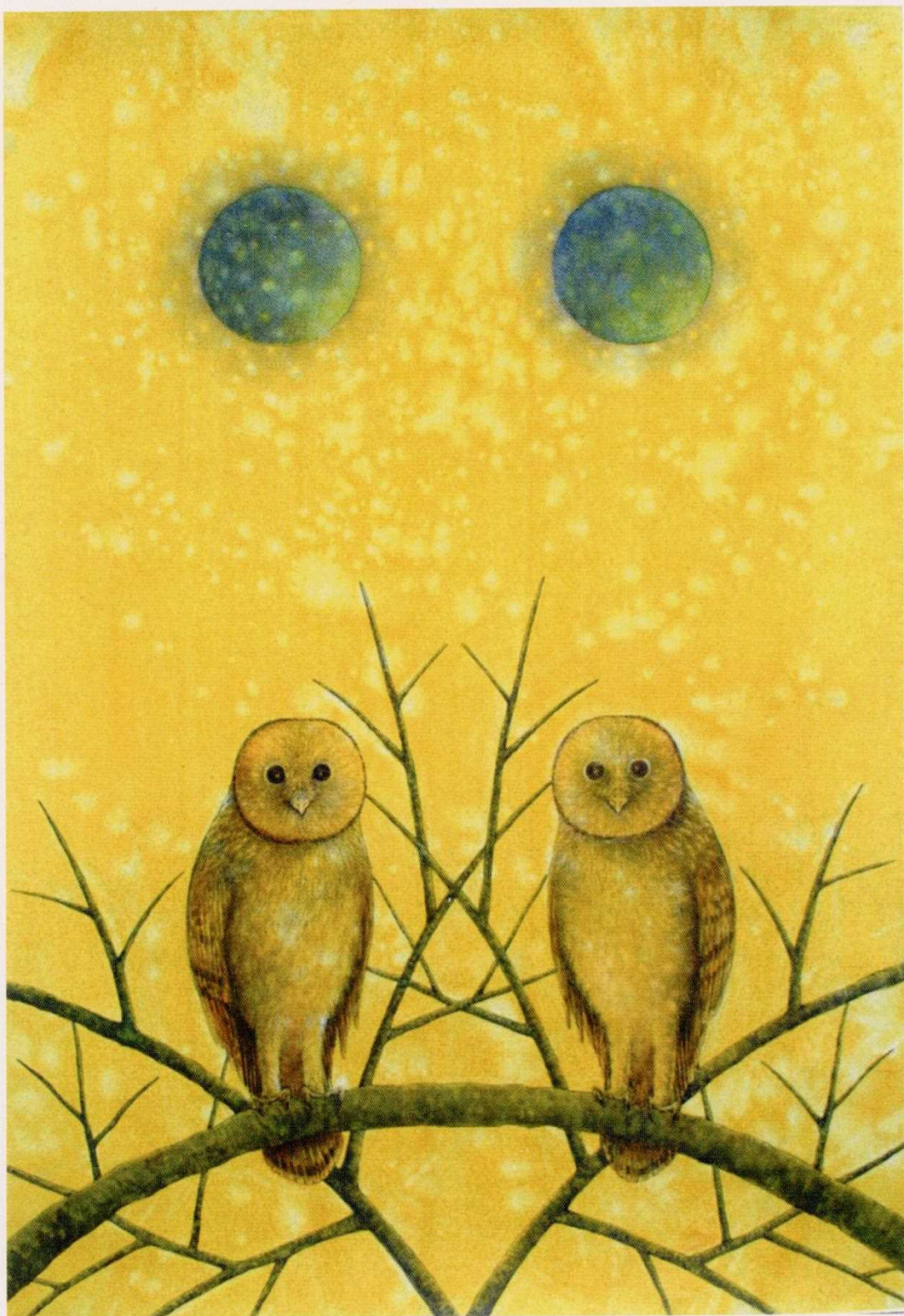


Sun Dance

2011

Watercolour and gold paint on paper

57 x 77 cm

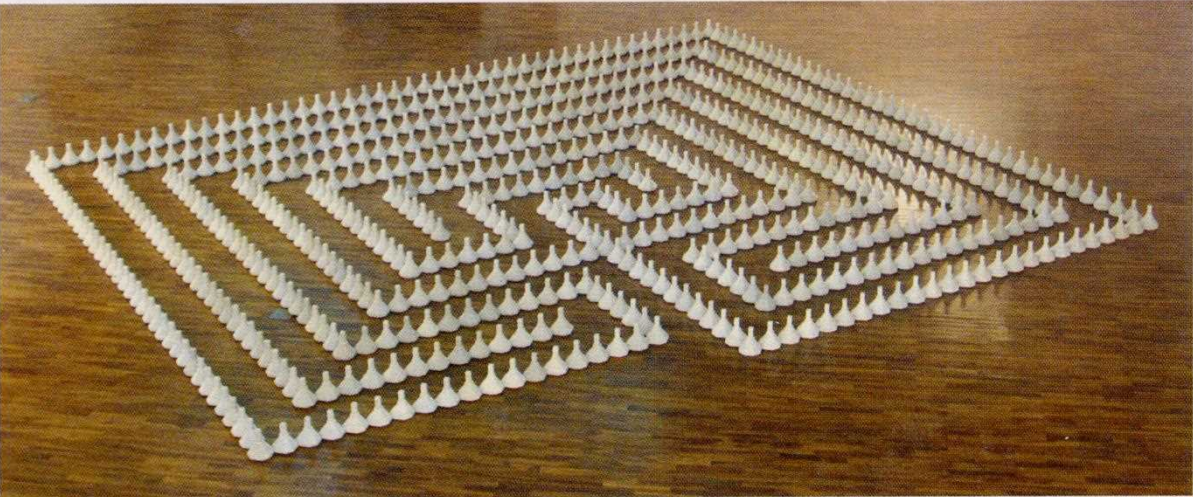


Doppelgänger – Double Walker

2011
gouache and pencil on paper
57 x 43 cm

Cosmic Labyrinth

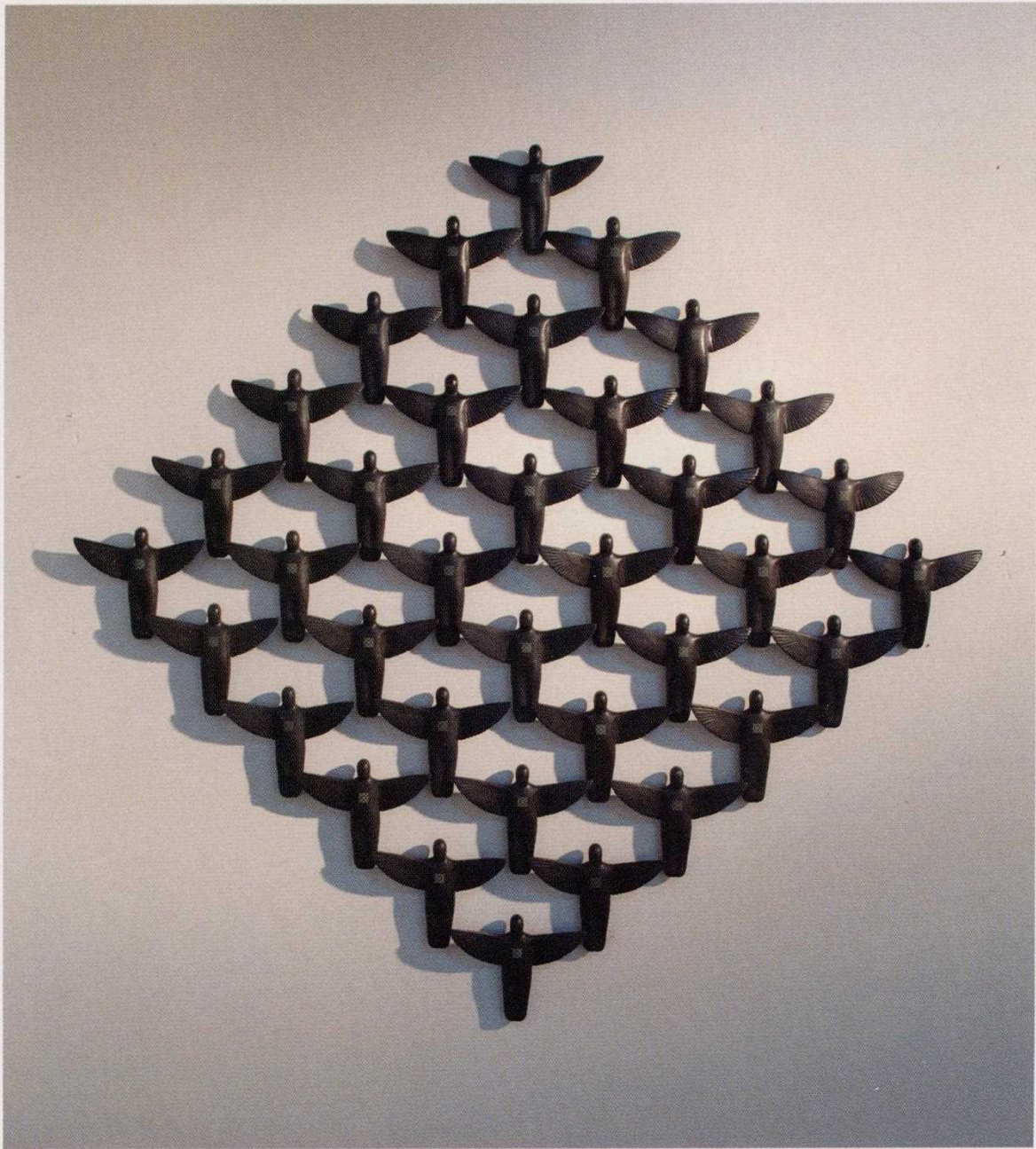
2011
glazed middle fired ceramics, slip casted, installation and performance
Dimension variable





Symmetrical Flight

2010
glazed middle fired ceramics, decals, slip casted
120 x 120 x 15 cm

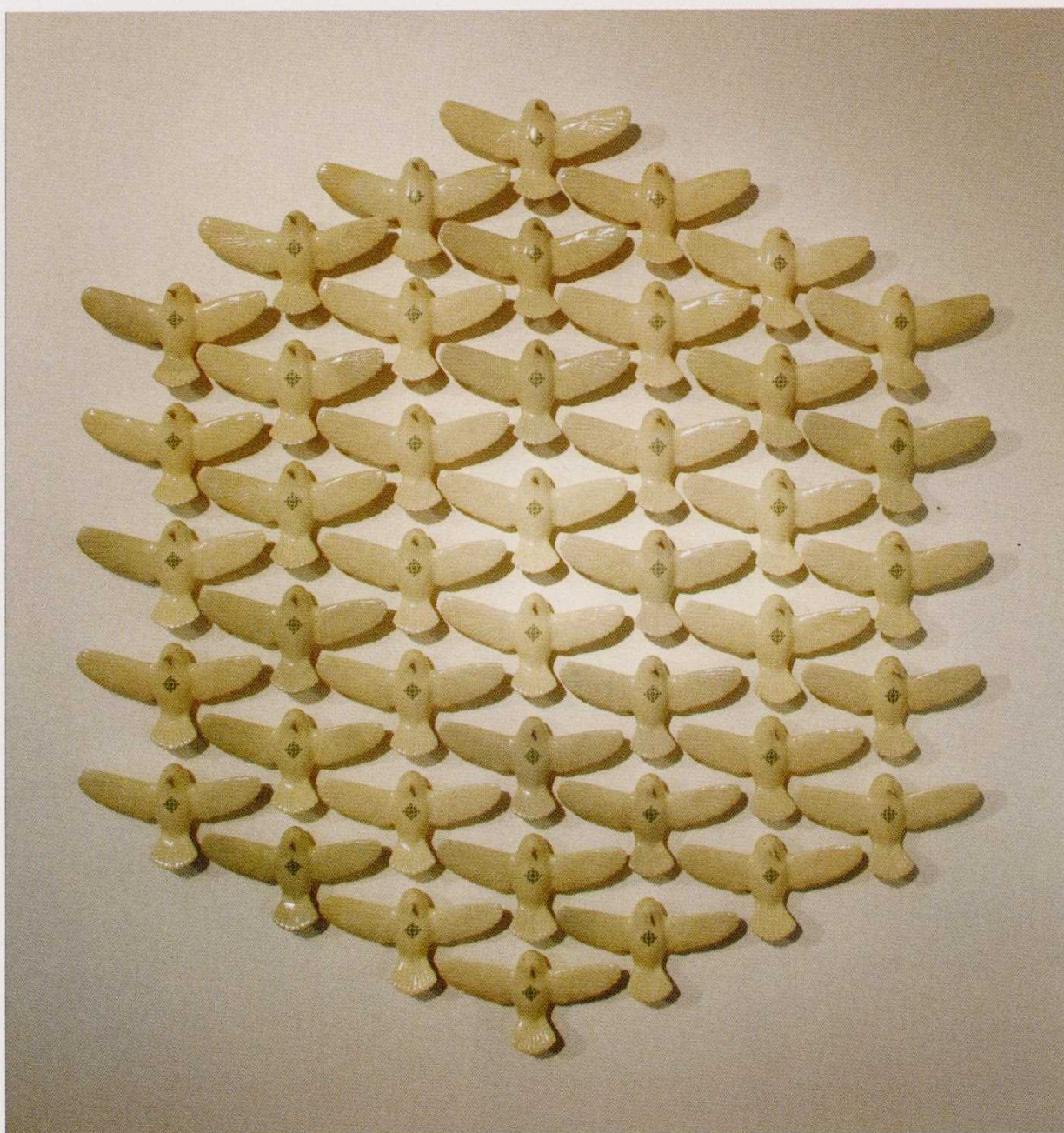


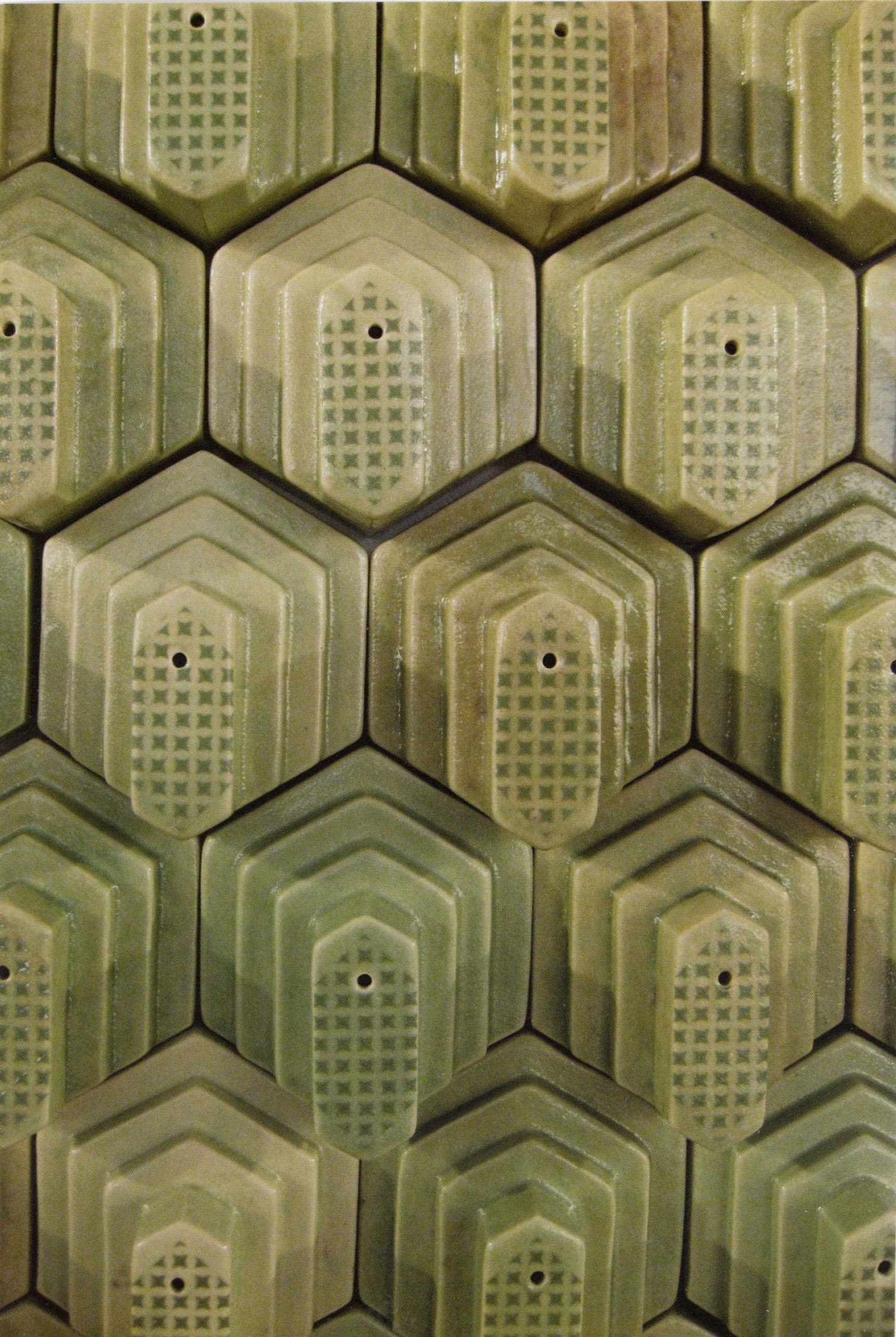
Serenity

2010

glazed middle fired ceramics, decals, slip casted

110 x 152 x 20 cm



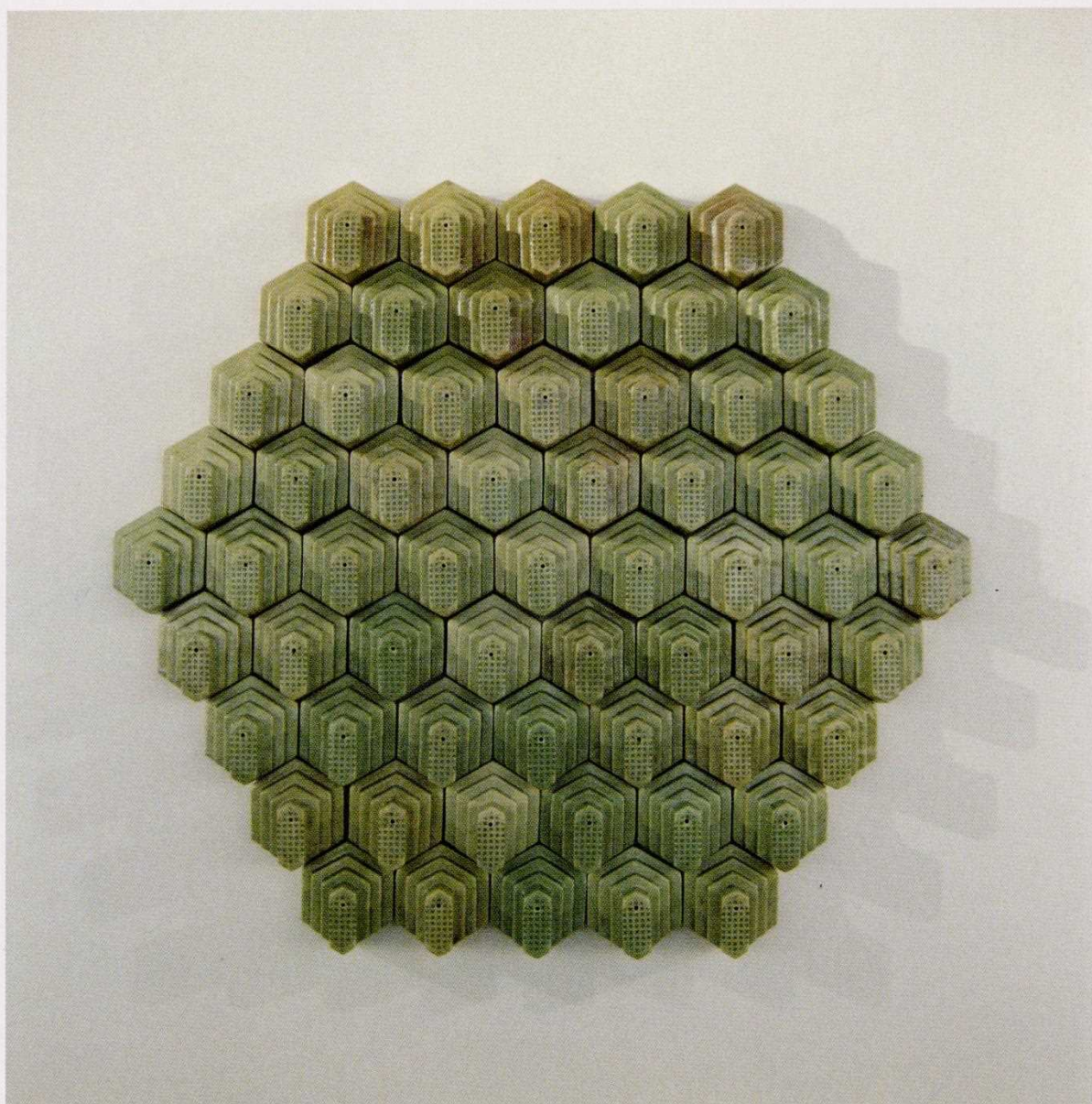


Silent Union

2011

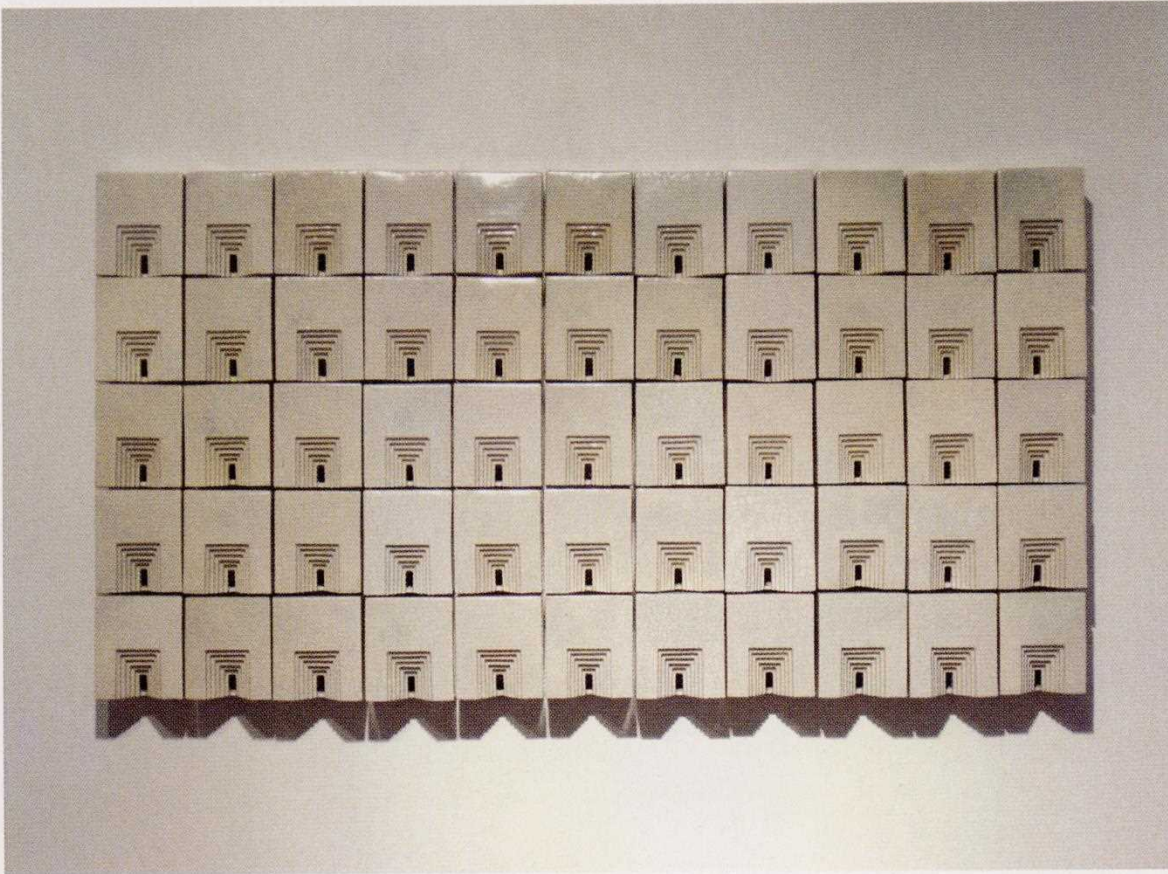
glazed middle fired ceramics, decals, slip casted

120 x 104 x 16 cm



Silence Obstruction

2010
glazed middle fired ceramics, decals, slip casted
110 x 152 x 20 cm

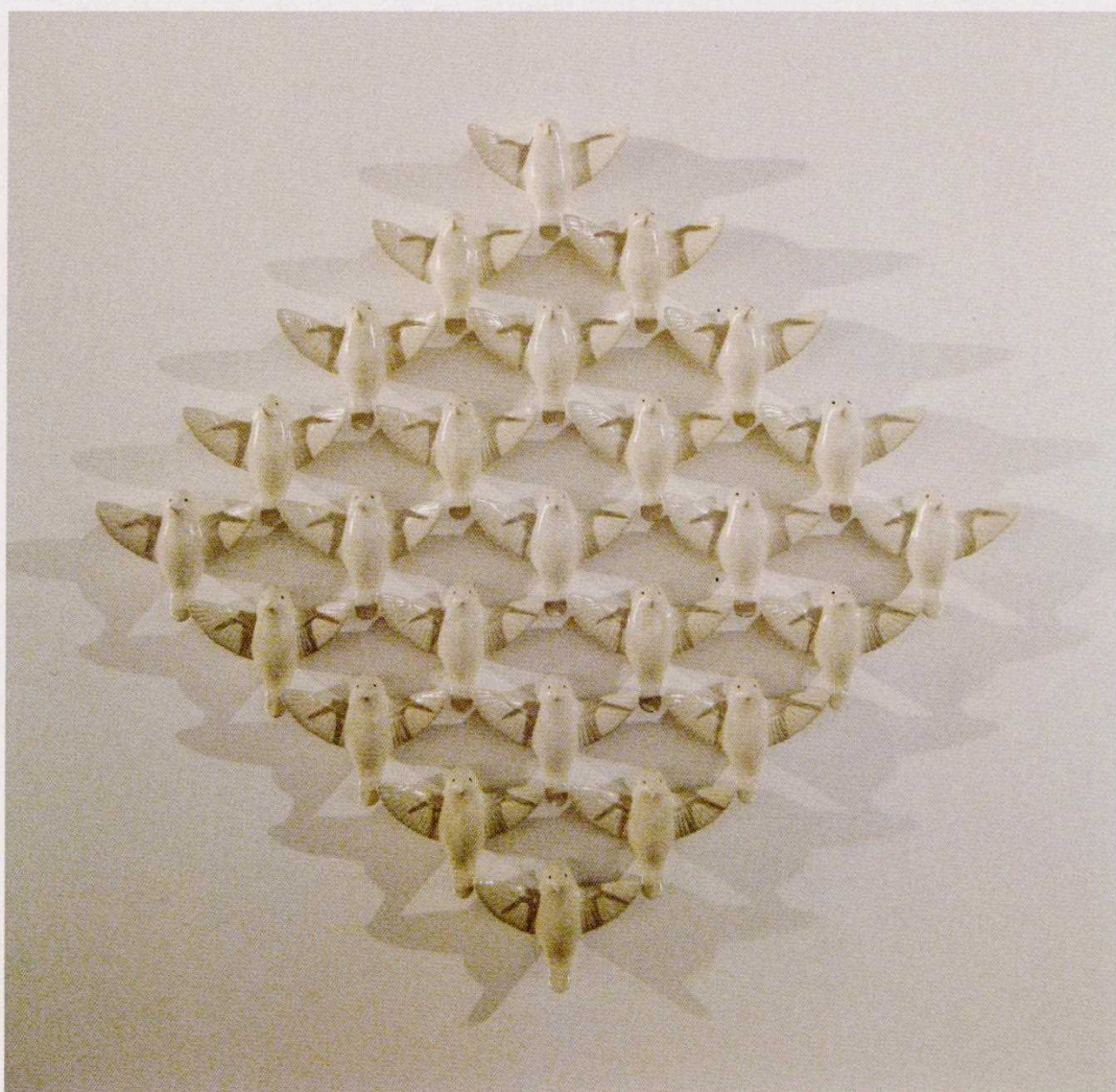


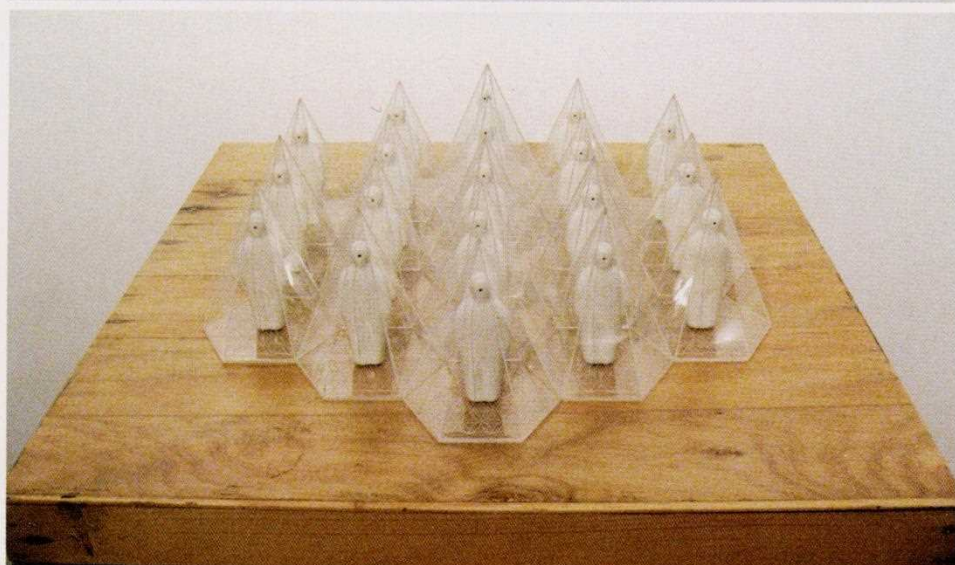
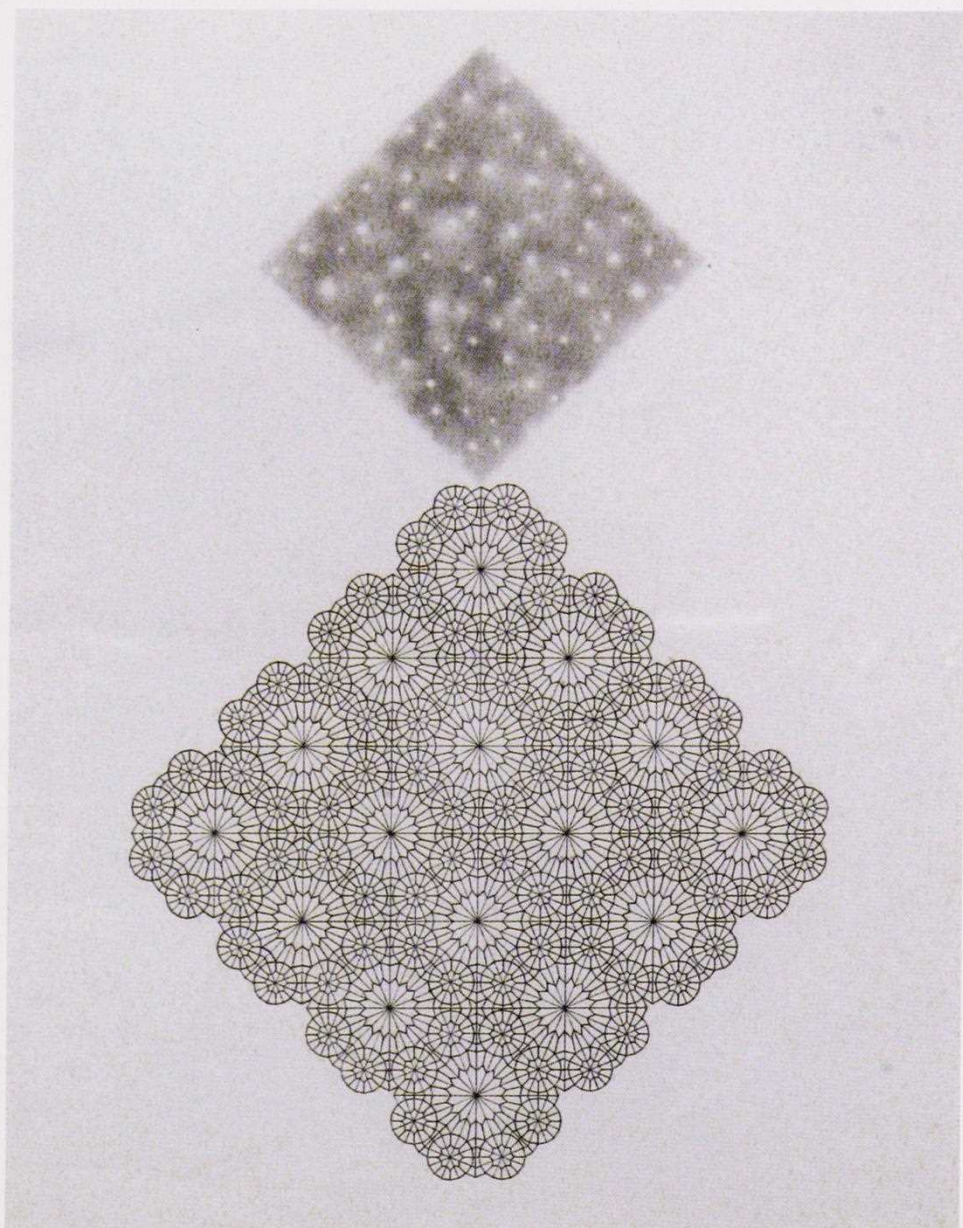
Blissful Flight

2011

glazed middle fired ceramics, decals, slip casted

85 x 85 x 15 cm





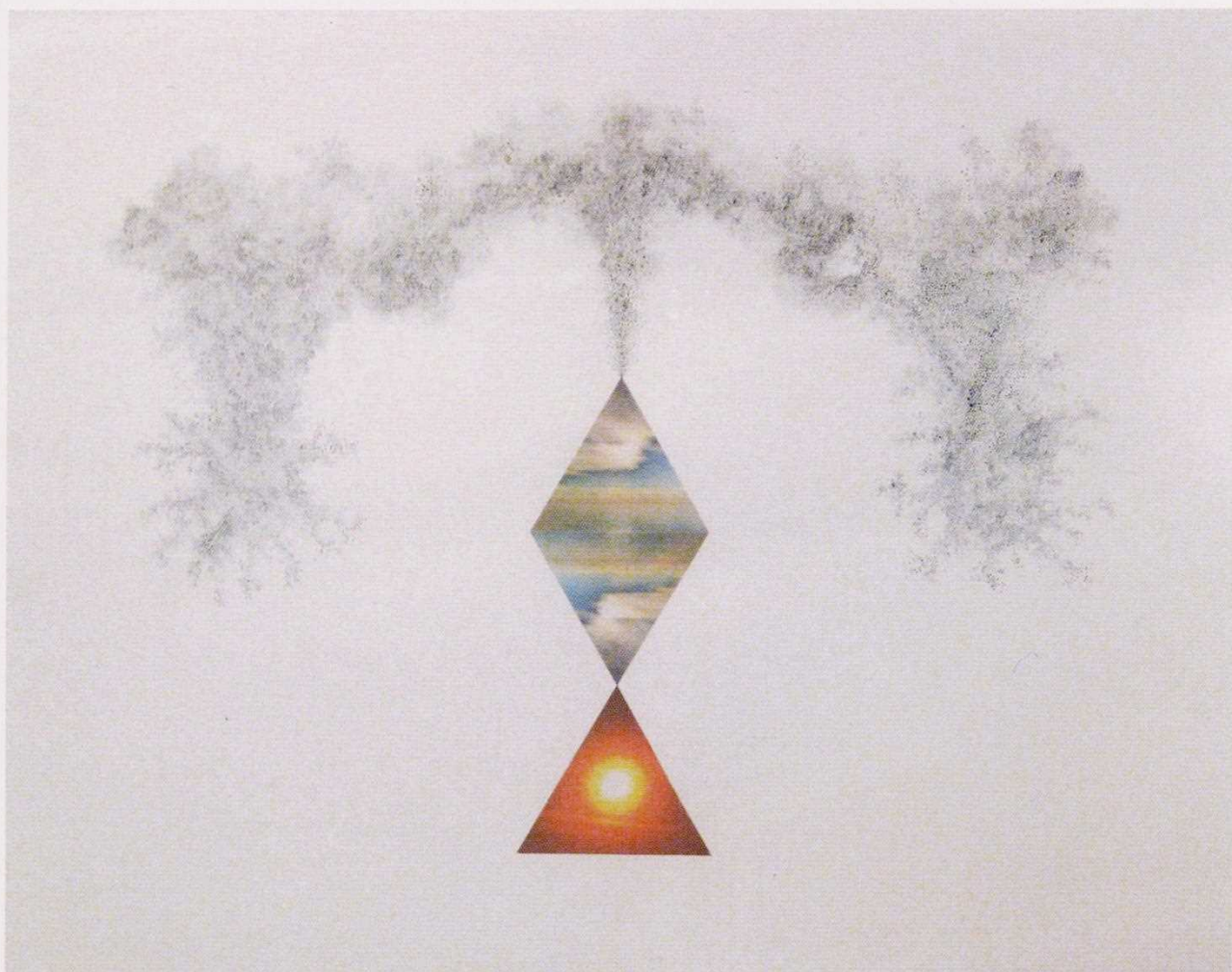
Crystal Temple for the Solitary Mind

2011

glazed middle fired ceramics, acrylic

43 x 43 x 13 cm





Array of the Cosmic Energy

2011

glazed middle fired ceramics, glass

20 x 60 x 15 cm



ALBERT YONATHAN

born in Bandung, 17 June 1983

currently lives and works in Bandung, Indonesia

EDUCATION

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 2002 – 2007 | Visual Arts Program, Faculty of Visual Art and Design,
Bandung Institute of Technology, majoring in ceramics (BFA) |
| 2010 – present | Master Program, at Faculty of Visual Art and Design
Bandung Institute of Technology, majoring in visual arts |

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2011 | TEMPLE OF THRESHOLD, Valentine Willie Fine Arts, Singapore |
| 2010 | COSMIC MANTRA, SIGIarts, Jakarta
LIMINAL BEING, The Japan Foundation, Jakarta |
| 2009 | I AM A BIRD NOW, Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Koka city, Shiga prefecture, Japan |

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2011 | 1001 DOORS - REINTERPRETING TRADITIONS, Ciputra World Marketing Gallery, Jakarta |
| 2010 | HALIMUN THE MIST, Lawang Wangi Art & Science Estate, Bandung
15 x 15 x 15 #3, Soemardja Gallery, Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung
CRITICAL POINT, Edwin's Gallery, Jakarta
TRIBUTE TO S.SUDJOJONO, PLATFORM3, Bandung |
| 2009 | Bandung Art Now, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta
REVISITING THE LAST SUPPER, CG artspace, Jakarta
CONTEMPORARY ARCHEOLOGY, SIGIarts, Jakarta
SURVEY #2, Edwin's Gallery, Jakarta
WE'RE ALL MILLIONAIRES, A.O.D Art Space, Jakarta
POST, Place Gallery, Richmond, Victoria, Australia
CROSSROADS, Bungoro Ware House Gallery, Shigaraki, Japan
JAKARTA CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC BIENNALE #1, North Art Space – Ancol, Jakarta |
| 2008 | BANDUNG INVASION, Galeri Canna, Jakarta
BANDUNG NEW EMERGENCE VOL. 2, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung
HIMPUNAN SENYAP, Emmitan Fine Art Gallery, Surabaya
APOCALYPSE NOW!, ARK Galerie, Jakarta |
| 2007 | DEMI MAS(s)A, Indonesian National Gallery, Jakarta
INNER OBJECT, Potluck Cofeebar and Library, Bandung
Neo-Nation – Biennale Jogja IX, Jogja National Museum, Yogyakarta |

RESIDENCIES

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2009 | JENESYS Programme, granted by The Japan Foundation, at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Japan |
|------|---|



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EXHIBITION DATES

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11 am - 7 pm

Sunday

11 am - 3 pm

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