

CHARLIE SHEARD
Pure Abstractions
Colour, Drawing, Materiality



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Pure Abstraction #20, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm

Pure Abstraction, Colour As Substance

Αλάθεια θεων όμόπολις
μόνα θεοις συνδιαιωμένα

Truth is from the same city as the Gods; she alone lives with the Gods - Bacchylides

In his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the Romantic poet John Keats famously writes that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”¹. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger describes the nature of the relationship between Truth and Beauty. Heidegger says that “Truth is the unconcealedness of that which is” and that Beauty is the appearance of Truth in the work of art.² Since Truth is the revealing of itself, the arising of Truth and Beauty is not a fixed matter of fact, but rather a *process* or an *opening*. I relate this opening to the way in which Heidegger defines the word *phenomenon* in his central text *Being and Time*:

the Greek expression φαινόμενον, to which the term ‘phenomenon’ goes back, is derived from the verb φαίνεσθαι, which signifies “to show itself”³.

By further elaboration of etymology, Heidegger is able to relate the following meanings: “to bring to the light of day, to put into the light, that wherein something can become manifest, visible in itself”⁴. He concludes that “the expression ‘phenomenon’ signifies that which shows itself in itself, the manifest”⁵. Truth and Beauty occur in their own revealing; this is the manifest to which Heidegger refers, and this is the nature of the true work of art.

The conditions described above are contingent to all works of art, but abstract painting is specific in being solely devoted to the cultivation and expression of these conditions. Abstraction, which is rooted in German Romanticism and nineteenth century Symbolism, is the mystical branch of the art of painting, in which the processes of painting are understood to be profound ends in themselves. Prior to Abstraction, painting in the West was focused on Nature (representation, the model, narrative). Abstract painting is also deeply engaged with Nature, but not with any specific or literal aspect of the natural world. Kandinsky, whose language of forms is the basis of all non-geometric abstract painting, makes this clear: “the abstract painter derives his ‘stimulus’ not from some part or other of nature, but from nature as a whole, from its multiplicity of manifestations, which accumulate in him and lead to the work of art”⁶.

I am prepared to go further than Kandinsky: not only is Abstraction an investigation into the nature of painting, abstract painting is (or can be) an expression of Nature itself, that is, an expression of Nature within human culture. Such an arising of Truth and Beauty within the abstract painting is a materially



Tiziana Manga, 2008, oil and acrylic on linen, 198 x 214 cm

embodied mystical process, a kind of oracle. This places Pure Abstraction in direct contradistinction to much contemporary art, in contradistinction, that is, to the kind of visual art which manifests the materialism of our product-driven culture. The product on offer here may not even be the “art”, but the “artist”. Irony, cynicism and extreme self-consciousness characterise such “art”, and these are anathema to the practices of Pure Abstraction. In fact, abstract painting originally arose from the necessity of responding to eighteenth and nineteenth century developments in materialism. In his seminal text of 1912, *On The Spiritual In Art*, Kandinsky conceives of Abstraction as an antidote to such developments⁷.

In the art of painting, meaning *is* materiality. Another way to say *materiality* is to say *the beauty of things as things in the world*. The opposite of *materiality* is *materialism*, which is a belief in the value of things as ideas. The true work of art has no value as an idea. The work of art does not *illustrate* ideas either, although it may embody them; in the true work of art, meaning is indistinguishable from means. This is especially true of Abstraction (“absolute painting”), because it is such an extremely pure form. Since the practice of abstract painting is a bringing forth of that which arises *materially*, the serious abstract painter is deeply concerned with painting *materials*, and with their corollary, technique. *Technique* includes manipulation of colour, drawing and materiality, and also the idiomatic use and development of artistic forms. Although a grounding in historical practice and the use of historical forms is prerequisite, everything must be reinvented from scratch, in the present, if there is to be any possibility for Truth and Beauty to arise within the work at hand, the abstract painting. The key to this possibility is *drawing*, the process wherein the artist’s own physical bodily experience is transmitted into the work.

In his eight-hundred page poem *The Cantos (The Songs)*, Ezra Pound juxtaposes a recurring hymn to the ancient deities of Nature (Demeter, Aphrodite, Artemis, Dionysos) against a tragic account of human history. In Canto XLVII (“The light has entered the cave. Io! Io!”⁸), Pound equates the mystery of artistic creation with human sexuality and the fecundity of nature. His light imagery reaches incandescent intensity later in the poem: “In the light of light is the *virtù*,”⁹ he writes, (by *virtù* he means *creative power*¹⁰). In a parallel text, Pound gives the following account:

*The unmixed functions, in time and
in space, without bourn.
This unmixed is the tensile light, the
Immaculata. There is no end
to its action*¹¹

The visionary register of such passages is related to the phenomenon that Heidegger has already called “to put into the light”. The ancient Greek poet Euripides also describes these conditions in his late play the

Bacchæ, an account of Dionysos as manifestation of divine source and of ecstatic human union with Nature. In these texts, Euripides, Heidegger and Pound all describe the ecstatically materialised modality of the Dionysian artwork.

The Pure Abstraction of Kandinsky and his New York followers is a Dionysian art, made on unexpected juxtapositions, shifts of register and sudden illuminations; it is an art of new connections between old things and of revelations (“things did not turn out the way we expected”¹², sings the Chorus at the close of the *Bacchæ*). The greatest expression of the Dionysian artistic imperative is Athenian Tragedy. The New York Abstractionists were explicit in their stated intention to restore ‘the tragic element’ to painting¹³. In ancient Greek tragedy, the reality and inevitability of death is faced head-on and unflinchingly, which is the essence of the tragic element. It allows for the phenomenon of the arising of Truth and Beauty within the work of art, and it accounts for the moods of the paintings, sculptures and poetry of the ancient Greeks. These moods of deep seriousness are the moods of abstract painting as defined here. They are the sad and complex moods of mortality, and they embody the unity and continuity of all experience in ecstatically materialised form.

Charlie Sheard 18 March 2014

The inscription is Bacchylides’ “Fragment 57”, from: Loeb 461, *Greek Lyric Volume IV*, David A. Campbell, Harvard University Press, 1992, p302, translation p303

¹ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, 1820, John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, second edition 1977, penguin, p344

² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translation Albert Hofstadter, Harper and Row, 1975, p81

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*, translation John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Blackwell, 1962, p51

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, “Abstrakte Malerei” in the Dutch periodical *Kroniek van hedendaagsche Kunst en Kultuur*, (Amsterdam), April 1936, translation in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, Da Capo Press, 1994, p789

⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art (Über das Geistige in der Kunst)*, second edition, Munich 1912), English translation in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, as above (6), p114-220

⁸ Ezra Pound, “Canto XLVII”, *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, Faber and Faber, 1937, p38; p238 in the standard collected edition of 1975

⁹ Ezra Pound, “Canto LXXIV”, *The Pisan Cantos*, Faber and Faber, 1949, p11; p429 in the standard collected edition of 1975

¹⁰ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, University of California Press, 1993, p367: 87

¹¹ Ezra Pound, “The Unwobbling Pivot”, 1947, in *CONFUCIUS*, New Directions, 1969, p187

¹² πολλὰ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων, / πολλὰ δ’ ἀέλιπῶς κραινοῦσι θεοί· / καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ’ οὐκ ἔτελέσθη, / τῶν δ’ ἀδοκῆτων πόρον ἡῦρε θεός. (Lines 1388-1391 of Euripides’ Βάκχαι, from Gilbert Murray’s Oxford text of 1913). English text is my own.

¹³ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, Thames & Hudson, 2000



Pure Abstraction #34, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm

Pure Abstraction #29, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm



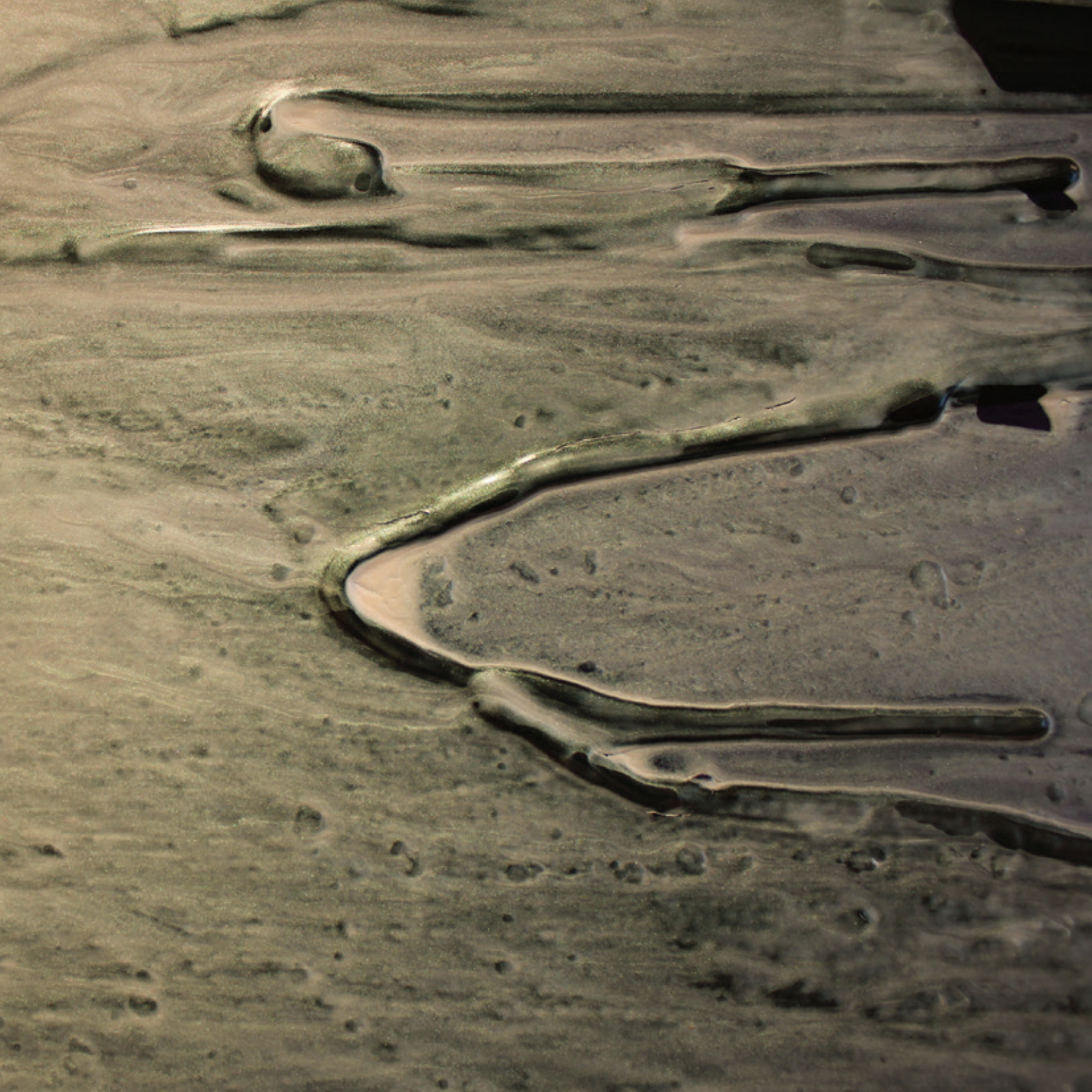
Abstraction (DT #1), 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm
Abstraction (DT #2), 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm



Abstraction in acrylic mediums, carborundum, chalk, slate, acrylic paint scraps, three strips of raw cotton with stitching, 2007, 214 x 198 cm



Aition 6 [The Beauty of K.], 2012-2013, acrylic on polyester, 198 x 214 cm (details opposite and inside covers)





Pure Abstraction #55, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm

Pure Abstraction #59, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm



Pure Abstraction #3, 2007-2010, mixed media on raw linen, 214 x 198 cm



Aition 4 [to the Byzantines], 2012-2013, acrylic on linen, 214 x 198 cm



Pure Abstraction (China #4), 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm
Pure Abstraction (China #1), 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm



Pure Abstraction #7, 2007-2011, mixed media on sealed raw linen, 214 x 198 cm

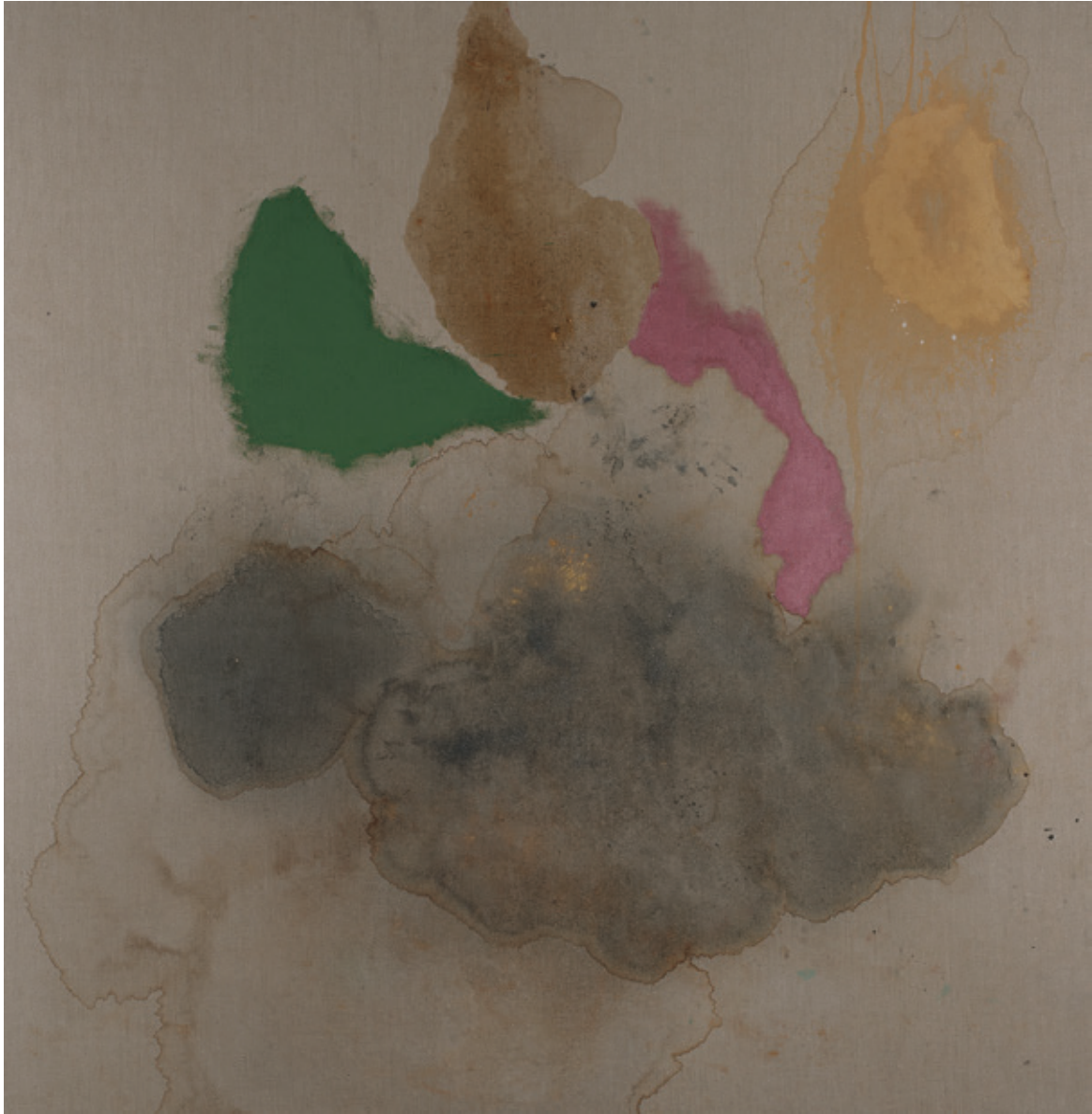


Pure Abstraction #8, 2006-2011, oil on linen, 198 x 214 cm



Pure Abstraction #63, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm

Pure Abstraction #68, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm



Pure Abstraction #2, 2006-2010, mixed media on raw linen, 214 x 198 cm

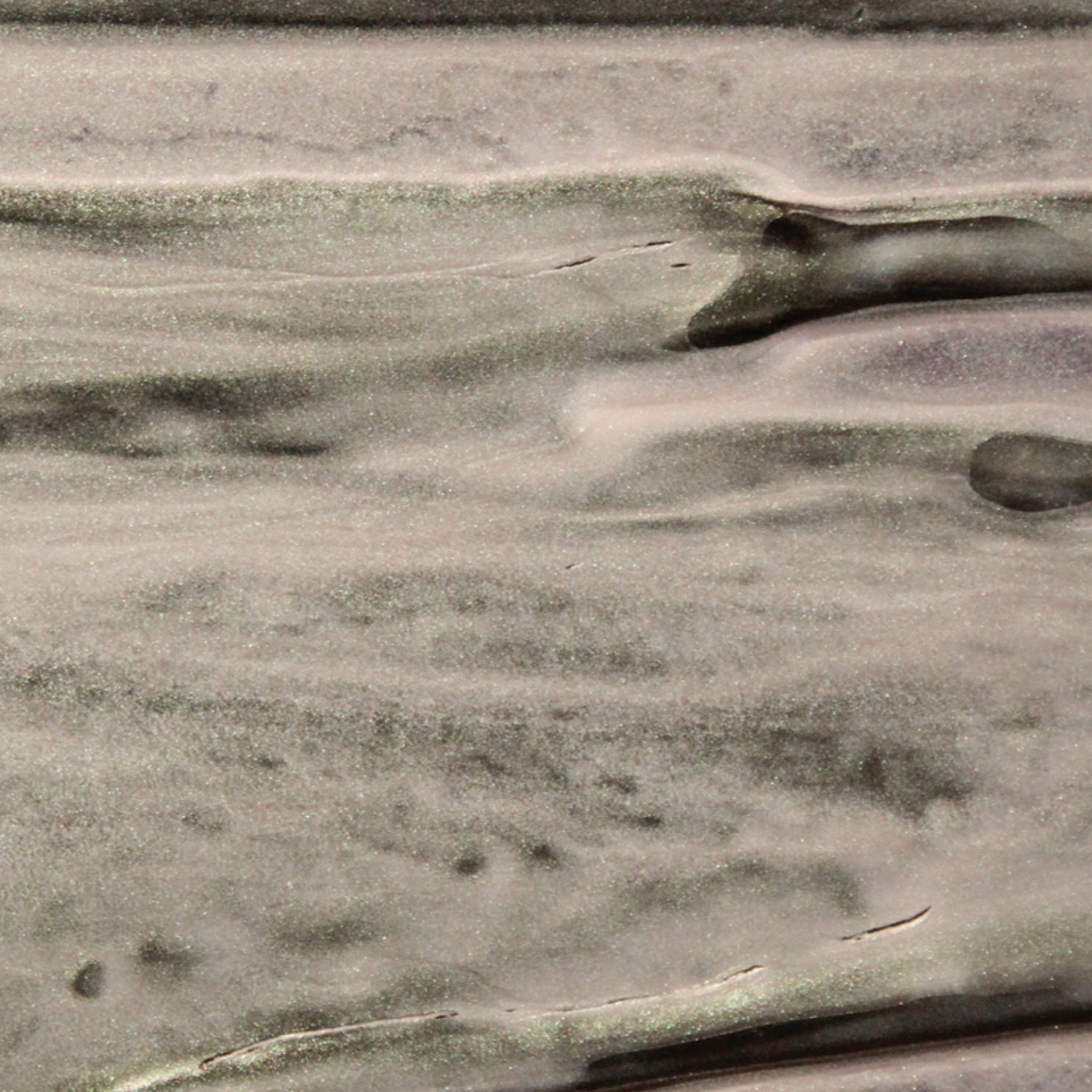


Pure Abstraction #72, 2013, charcoal on handmade cotton paper, 50 x 65 cm
COVER: *Aition 4 [to the Byzantines]* (detail) 2012-2013, acrylic on linen, 214 x 198 cm

Charlie Sheard *Pure Abstractions – Colour, Drawing, Materiality* exhibition 24 April to 17 May 2014

Charlie Sheard was born in 1960 and is one of Sydney's most well-known abstract painters. He has been exhibiting for thirty-five years. For further information please visit www.charliesheard.com Charlie Sheard is represented by Olsen Irwin Gallery, Sydney

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