



LARGE PRINT

GIORGIO GRIFFA:
PATHS IN THE FOREST

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GIORGIO GRIFFA: PATHS IN THE FOREST

For almost sixty years, Giorgio Griffa has explored the potential of painting in a practice that is both rigorous and lyrical. Griffa (born in 1936 in Turin, Italy, where he lives and works) paints with diluted acrylics in pastel colors on unstretched, unprimed canvases. These are tacked to the wall for display and folded for storage, a memory of which persists in their creases. Griffa values “the intelligence of materials” and views his paintings as neither representational nor abstract, but as material realities.

“Impersonal marks that belong to any hand, with thousands of years of memory” are Griffa’s subject; he follows and blurs the lines of drawing, counting, and writing. Griffa “interrupts” his paintings before they are finished because, “in the meantime, life

has moved on,” an idea he credits to Zen Buddhism. Like the artist himself, each work remains vital: “Leaving the work incomplete means symbolically omitting that final point, which, like the period at the end of this sentence, fixes it in the past.”

To date, Griffa has made thirteen cycles, or loose and connected bodies of work, each with its own compositional idea. He calls these “different pathways through the same dark forest.” The forest, for him, is a symbol of the unknown. But it also exemplifies Griffa’s ecological ethic: his commitment to growth and change, difference and interrelation, vitality and intelligence. There is no single path for him, nor intention to escape; the unknown is a place to dwell, in pensive darkness and exultant light.

Giorgio Griffa: Paths in the Forest is organized by the Clark Art Institute and curated by Robert Wiesenberger, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum, former curator of contemporary projects at the Clark.

This exhibition is made possible by the Edward and Maureen Fennessy Bousa Fund for Contemporary Projects and the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture under the Italian Council program (14th edition, 2025), with the aim of promoting Italian contemporary art internationally. Additional support is provided by Margaret and Richard Kronenberg. Support for the catalogue is provided by Michael Alper and Bruce Moore.

All works in the exhibition are courtesy of Fondazione Giorgio Griffa, Turin, and Casey Kaplan, New York.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1936 Giorgio Griffa is born in Turin, Italy, where he continues to live and work.
- 1958 Earns a degree in law. Alternates between legal practice and painting until his retirement from law in 2001.
- 1960 Studies painting in private courses; makes figurative paintings for the next seven years.
- 1967 Exhibits at Galleria Christian Stein in Turin alongside painters associated with Arte Povera, a Turin-based movement committed to the use of everyday or “poor” materials.
- 1968 Begins working on unstretched, unprimed canvas, making simple marks in acrylic paint. These works will become known as the *Segni primari* (Primary signs) cycle. First solo show at Galleria Martano in Turin.
- 1969 Solo exhibition at Galleria Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin. Its founder would establish Sperone Westwater in New York, a gallery that featured both Minimalism and Arte Povera.
- 1970 Solo exhibitions at Sonnabend Gallery, New York—Griffa’s first in the United States—and Galerie Sonnabend, Paris.
- 1976 Begins the *Contaminazioni* (Contaminations) cycle, in which different types of marks interact on the same canvas.
- 1978 Participates in the 38th Venice Biennale.
- 1979 Begins the *Alter Ego* cycle, paying homage to artists who have influenced him, from Agnes Martin and Henri Matisse to Allen Ginsberg and Philip Glass.
- 1980 First exhibits work from his *Frammenti* (Fragments) cycle. Participates in his second Venice Biennale, where he debuts his *trasparenze* (Transparencies) cycle.
- 1983 Introduces the *Segno e campo* (Sign and field) cycle, in which large fields of color appear for the first time.
- 1991 Introduces numbers in his work with the cycle *Tre linee con arabesco* (Three lines with arabesque).
- 2005 Publishes *Post Scriptum*, a book of his writings and drawings.
- 2012 Casey Kaplan gallery in New York begins to represent Griffa and will stage regular exhibitions of his work.

- 2015 Coordinated Griffa exhibitions open in Geneva, Bergen, Rome, and Porto.
- 2017 Griffa participates in the 57th Venice Biennale.
- 2018 Camden Arts Centre in London presents a major retrospective of Griffa's work.
- 2019 Two new language-based cycles emerge: *Sciamano* (Shaman), which features phrases of unknown origin, and *Dilemma*, which presents opposing sides of a philosophical idea.
- 2022 The Centre Pompidou in Paris dedicates a retrospective to Griffa and acquires a substantial group of his works.
- 2024 Fondazione Giorgio Griffa opens to the public in Turin. Griffa publishes *Tredici cicli di pittura / Thirteen Cycles of Painting*, in which he describes his work to date.
- 2025 Palazzo Ducale in Genoa opens a major Griffa retrospective.
- 2026 Griffa's first museum solo show in the United States opens at the Clark Art Institute.

Sessanta frammenti (Sixty fragments)

1980

Acrylic on canvas

The artwork in this corridor, which is configured differently with each installation, belongs to Griffa's *Frammenti* (Fragments) cycle, begun in 1980. "These fragments," he explains, "are not the remains of a broken whole, they are not archaeological finds, pieces of something once united. On the contrary, they are born one by one, like our perceptions." For the artist, fragmentation describes the state of modern scientific knowledge amid infinite complexity, a departure from Newton's fixed and rational universe.



Rosa (Rose)

1968

Acrylic on canvas

This never-before-exhibited painting marks Griffa's defining shift beyond representation. *Rosa*, in Italian, refers to both the flower (rose) and the color (pink); from left to right, the painted marks suggest a bouquet of roses, a simplified rendition of the same, and finally diagonal lines in black, green, and pink. Lines have occupied the artist's attention ever since.



Obliquo rosa (Pink diagonal) (1)

Segni orizzontali viola (Horizontal violet signs) (2)

Verticale viola (Violet vertical) (3)

Segni orizzontali azzurro (Horizontal blue signs) (4)

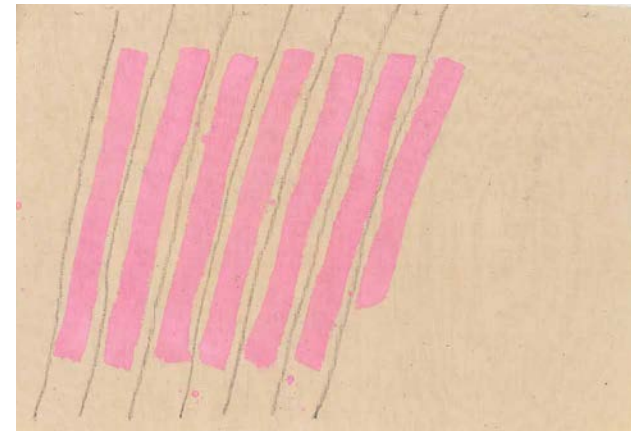
Verticale rosa (Pink vertical) (5)

Obliquo rosa chiaro (Light-pink diagonal) (6)

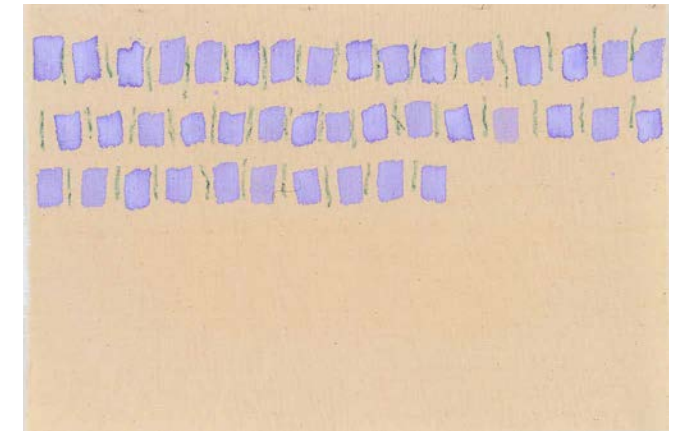
1970

Acrylic and pastel on canvas

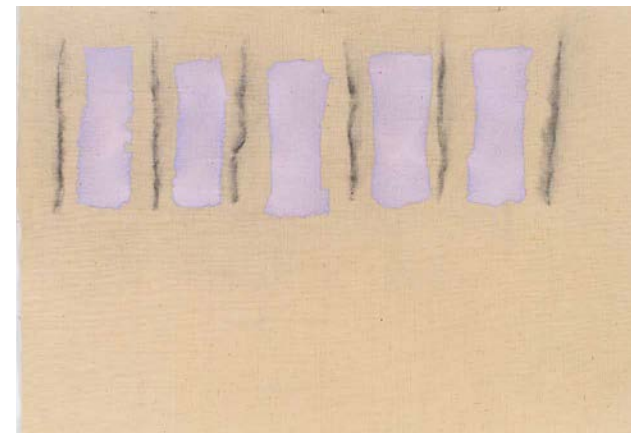
These paintings exemplify Griffa's first mature body of work, the *Segni primari* (Primary signs) cycle, begun two years earlier. The Italian word *segni* means both "signs" and "marks"—things that stand for other things and the traces of gestures. In each work, the artist repeats simple, directional brushstrokes, interspersed with drawn pastel lines, and interrupts the pattern before the canvas is filled. Then as now, Griffa is interested in the unconscious variations that emerge from strict repetition, the distinctions between color and line, and the interaction of pigment with canvas.



(1)



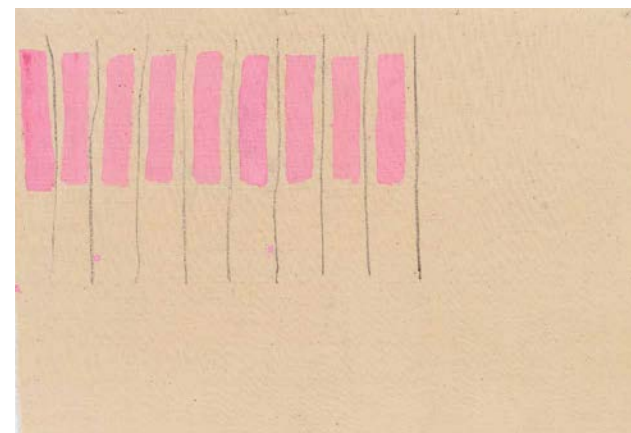
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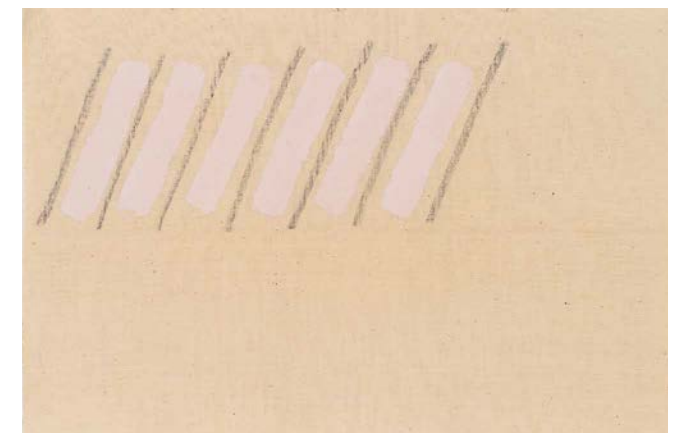
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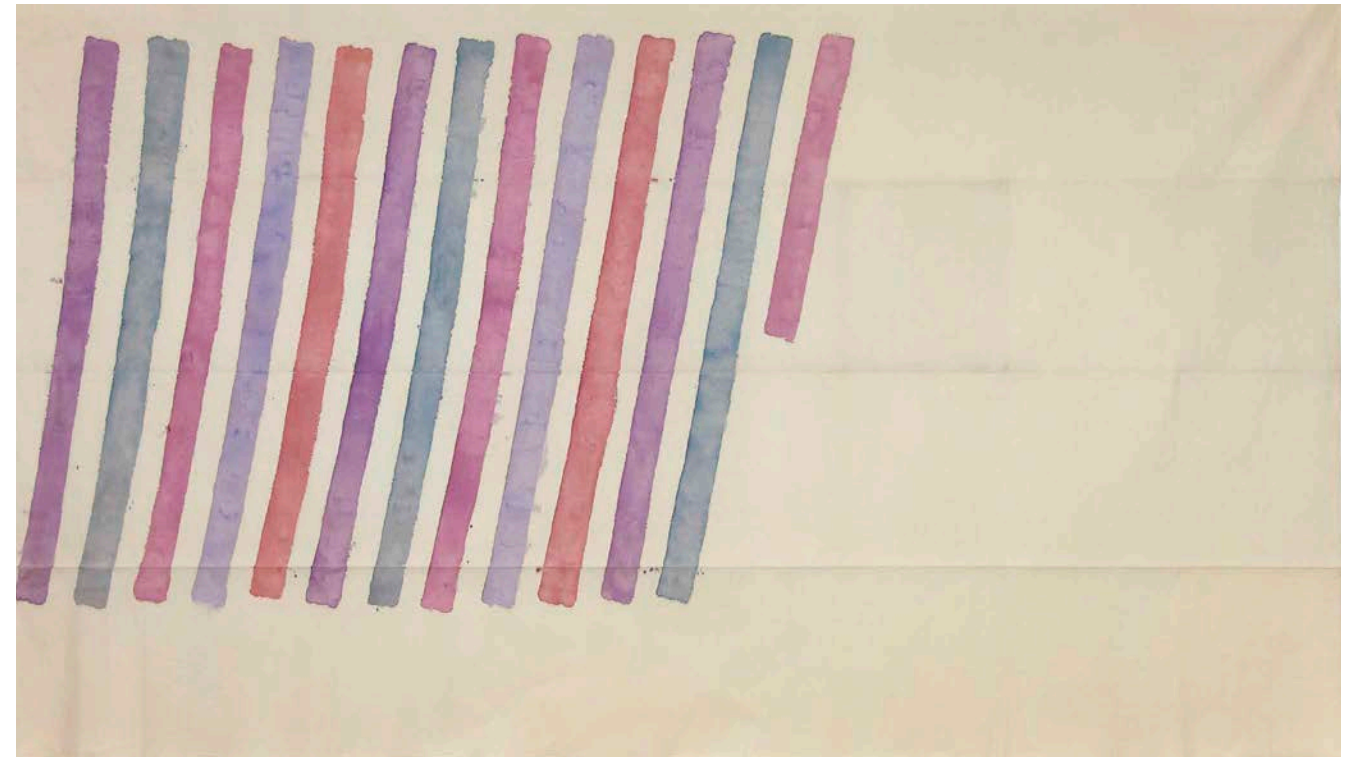
(6)

Obliquo (Diagonal)

1976

Acrylic on canvas

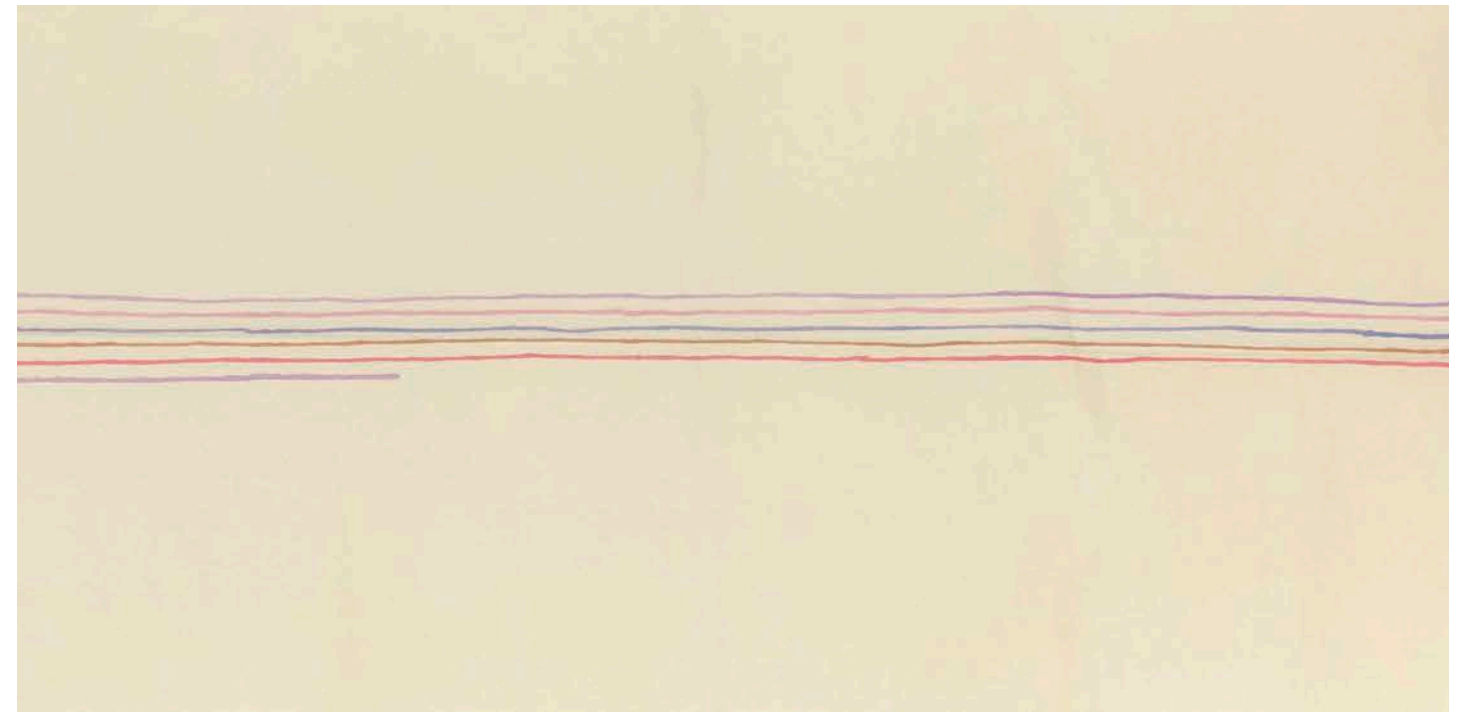
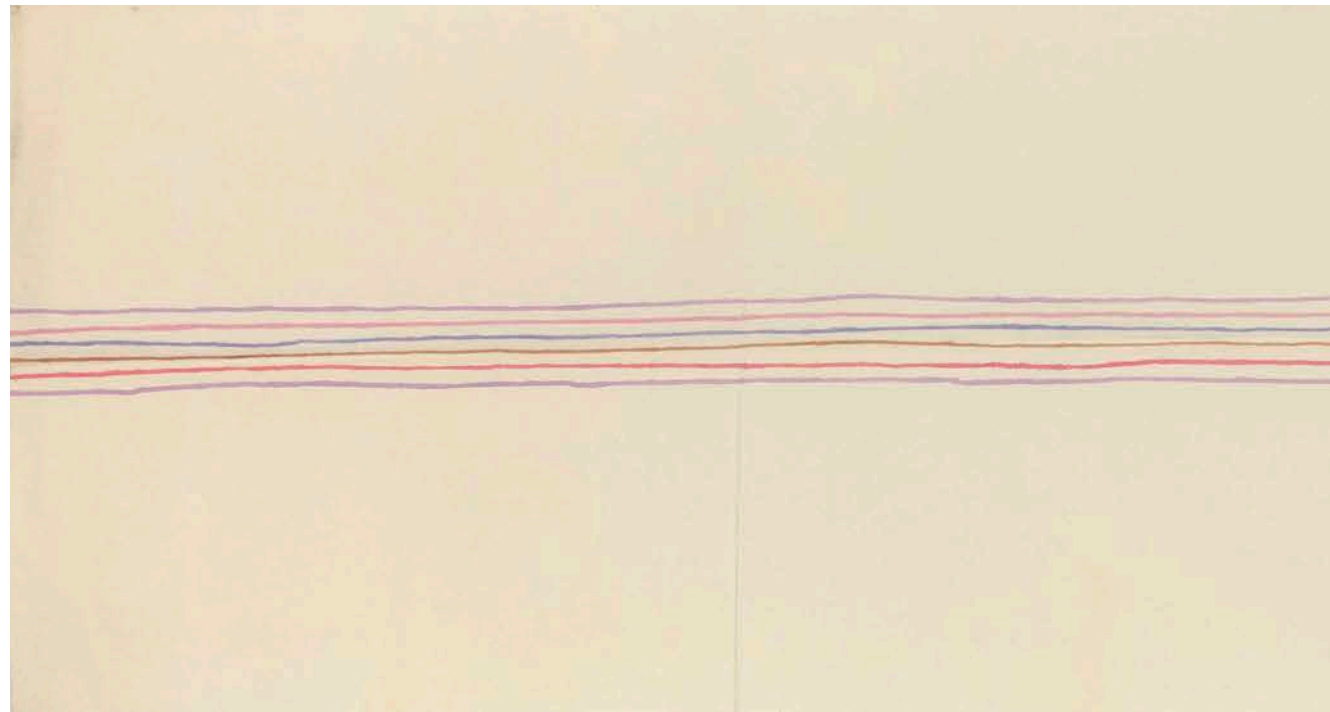
Griffa paints on the floor so that his acrylic medium, heavily diluted with water, can soak in rather than run and so that he can walk across the surface as he works. Folding his canvases for storage, both a humble ceremony and a pragmatic system, emphasizes the specific qualities of the cotton, linen, hemp, or jute. Different fabrics behave differently; their creasing is a function of gravity and time.



Linee orizzontali (Horizontal lines)

1973

Acrylic on canvas



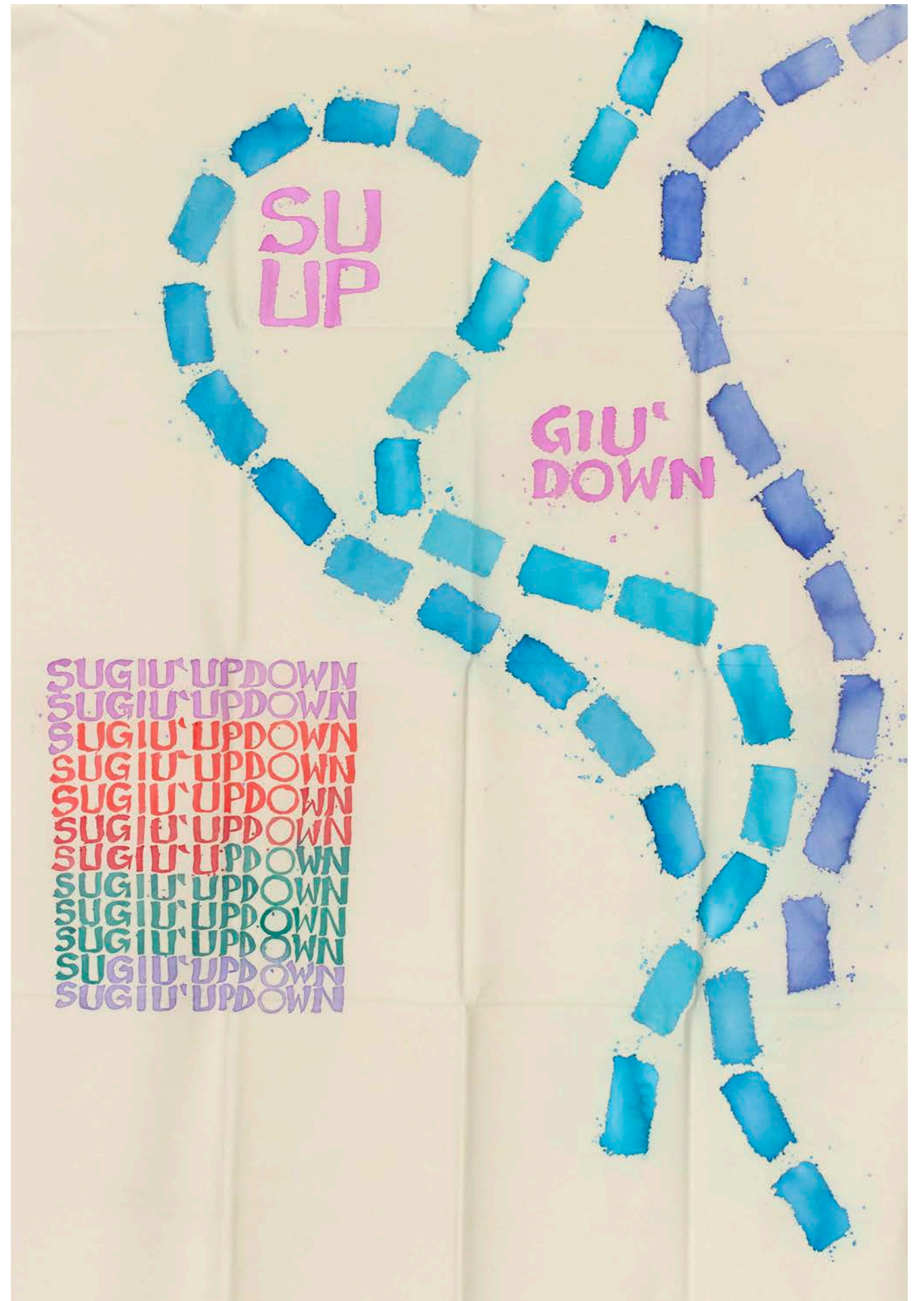
Sugiù (Updown)

2020

Acrylic on canvas

In the *Dilemma* cycle, begun in 2019, Griffa represents opposing sides of a basic question, whether philosophical or compositional; in this case, it is up or down (*su* or *giù*). With lines and language, he offers an ambivalent answer.

“I should admit that even my painting is probably a series of unresolved dilemmas that find their solution in vital action rather than in reasoned argument.”



Tre linee con arabesco n.1534
(Three lines with arabesque no. 1534)
1995
Acrylic on canvas

In the early 1990s, Griffa began the cycle *Tre linee con arabesco* (Three lines with arabesque), in which he develops variations on the titular elements. “The arabesque [here a looping purple curlicue] is the line that always goes forward and always comes back,” he explains. “It is both today’s linear time and the circular time of the ancients.” With this cycle, Griffa introduced Arabic numerals into his paintings, numbering each sequentially; the painting here, number 1534, reflects Griffa’s prolific output.



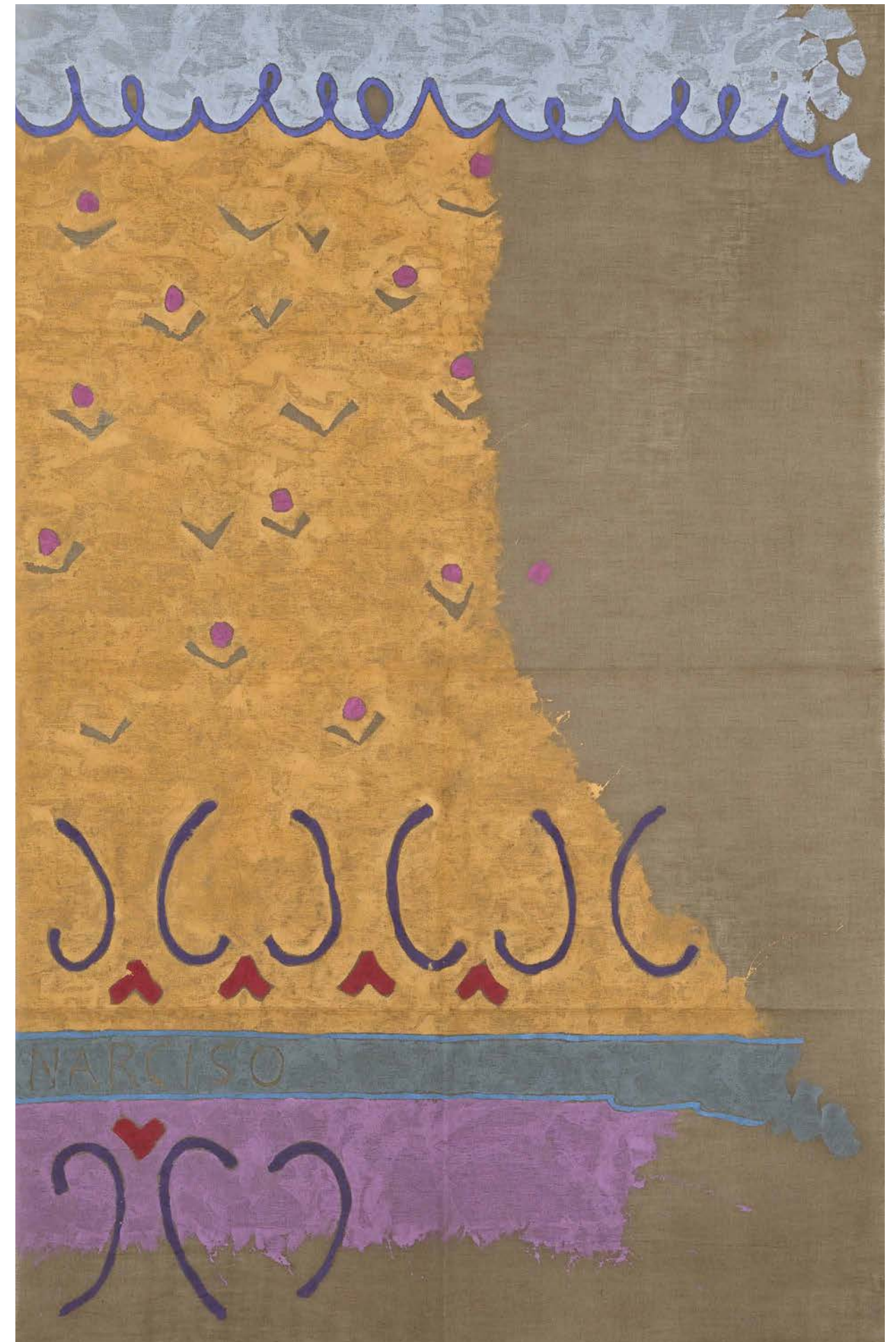
Narciso (Narcissus)

1986

Acrylic on canvas

Here Griffa alludes to the Greek myth of Narcissus, in which a beautiful youth falls in love with his own reflection, dies of sadness, and is replaced by a flower that takes his name (also known as a daffodil). The story has long been considered a metaphor for artists' attempts to capture fleeting beauty in an image.

This work belongs to Griffa's cycle *Segno e campo* (Sign and field), in which he juxtaposes large areas of color with rhythmic marks. An admirer of Henri Matisse and Islamic art, Griffa has written: "Decoration can be structural, because it, too, draws on rhythm, a means of knowledge."

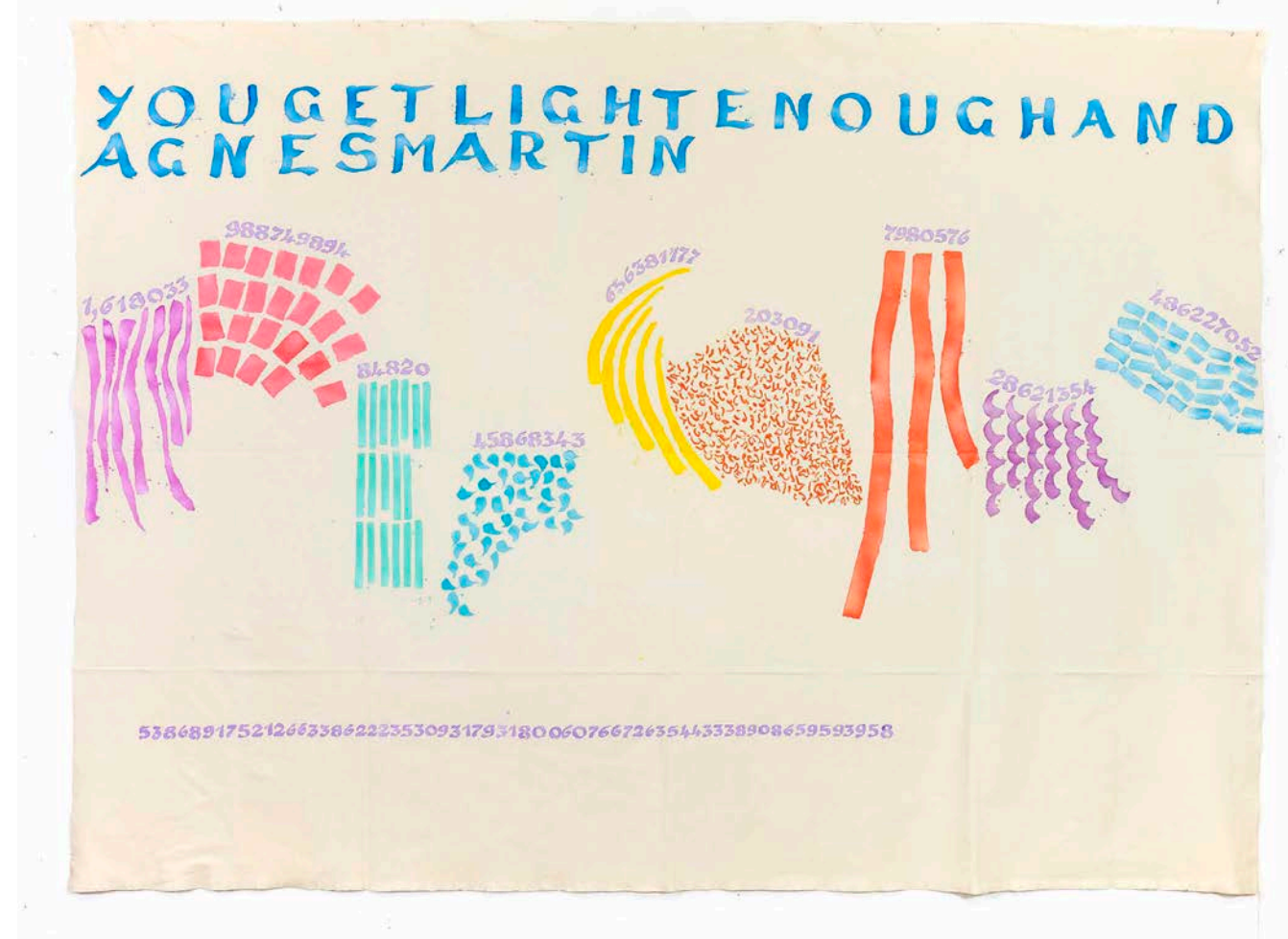


Campo rosso (Red field)
1990
Acrylic on canvas



Canone aureo 958 (Agnes Martin)
(Golden ratio 958 [Agnes Martin])
2016
Acrylic on canvas

The golden ratio, also known as the “divine proportion,” is an irrational (infinite and nonrepeating) number that begins 1.618.... For Griffa, it symbolizes the unknown, which he considers the domain of art. The golden ratio became the subject of its own cycle of paintings starting in 2008.



Griffa made this painting for the 2017 Venice Biennale. The quotation on the canvas, from an essay by the painter Agnes Martin titled the “Untroubled Mind,” reflects a spirituality indebted to Zen Buddhism. Lightness and luminosity, mindful presence and disciplined practice, are central to Griffa’s approach. In addition to his “anonymous marks,” Griffa has paid homage to artists he considers formative in a cycle he calls *Alter Ego*, begun in 1979, to which this work also belongs.



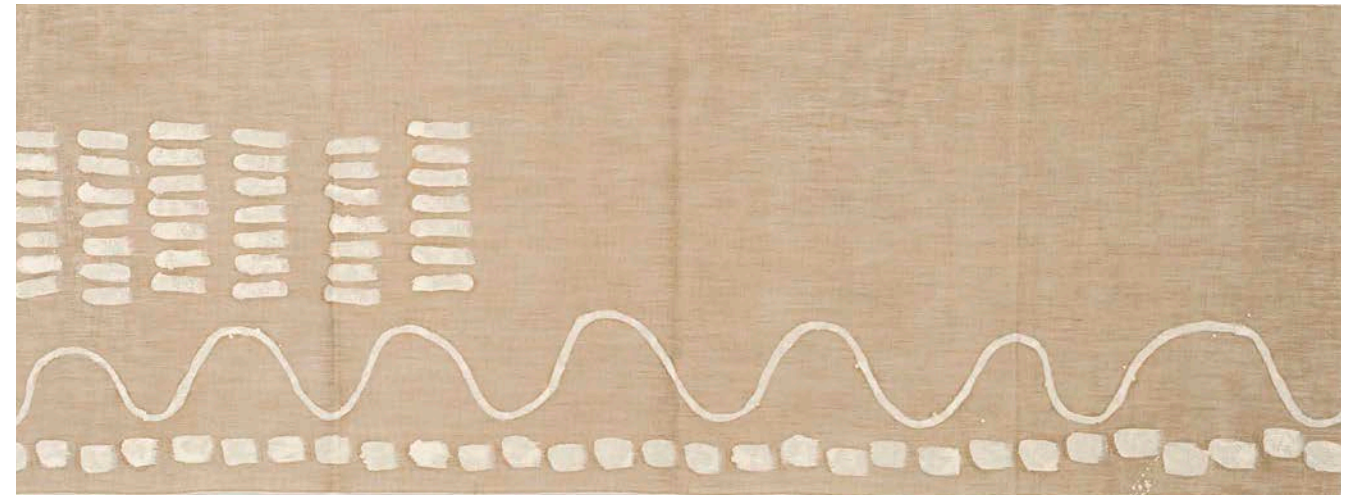
Tre segni bianchi (Three white signs)

Quattro segni bianchi (Four white signs)

1981

Enamel on canvas

For most of his career, Griffa lived in the countryside and kept his studio in downtown Turin. One summer, however, he painted from home and was so overwhelmed by the colors of the landscape that he made these rare works using only white paint.

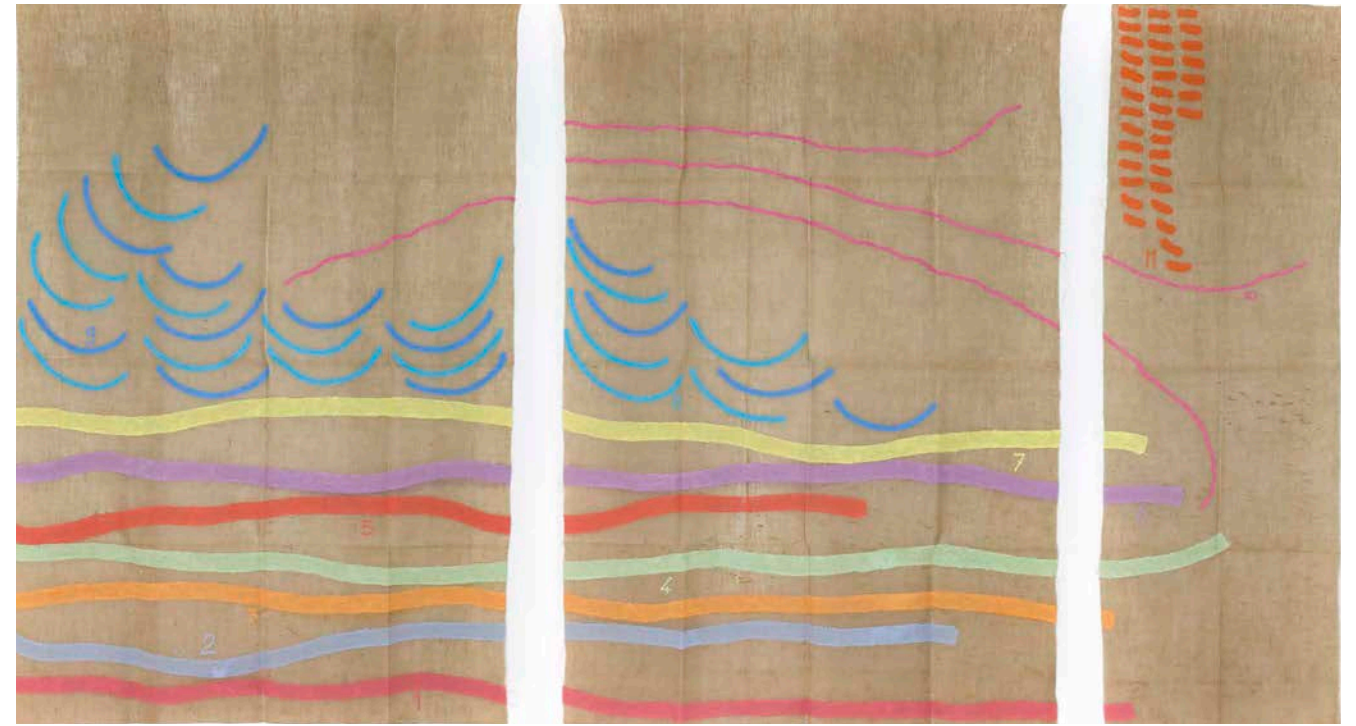


Undici segni (Eleven signs)

1999

Acrylic on canvas

In Griffa's *Numerazioni* (Numbering) cycle, of which this painting is an example, he numbers each mark in sequence to reveal the work's construction (in this case, beginning with the long brushstroke at the bottom and ending with the shorter ones at upper right). Already in the 1970s, the Italian critic Maurizio Fagiolo observed of Griffa's work: "Faced with an artist who has decided that artistic conception is never immaculate, the critic is mute. What use is there in X-raying an X-ray?"



On the Road

2025

Acrylic on canvas

Since his youth, Griffa has been influenced by the culture of the United States, whether in the form of jazz, Beat poetry, or Pop Art. In this painting from his *Alter Ego* cycle, Griffa pays homage to Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel of the same name, and its characters' countercultural pursuit of freedom. Roads and paths, always winding and never complete, figure prominently in Griffa's imagination.



Caro Piero (Dear Piero)

2008

Acrylic on canvas

An unusual example of Griffa's *Alter Ego* cycle, this painting radically reimagines Piero della Francesca's famous *Flagellation of Christ* (see below). For Griffa, the Renaissance painter and mathematician's work represents the pinnacle of linear perspective, a hierarchical system of spatial order. Griffa sees the stability, even serenity, of Piero's scene as an artifact of a time when humans regarded themselves, and the Earth, as being at the fixed center of the universe. Despite this, Griffa notes, "the work remains present for us" and is one of "indescribable beauty."



Piero della Francesca
(Italian, c. 1415/20–1492),
Flagellation of Christ, 1459–60.
Tempera on panel, 26 1/2 × 35 7/8 in.
(67.5 × 91 cm). Galleria Nazionale
delle Marche, Urbino

To see another work by Piero
della Francesca (*Virgin and Child
Enthroned with Four Angels*, c.
1460–70), please visit gallery 9 in
the Museum Building.

Kaddish

2024

Acrylic on canvas

Phrases from Allen Ginsberg's epic 1961 poem, dedicated to the memory of his mother and named for the Jewish mourner's prayer, appear here on twenty-two pieces of gauzy fabric (known as tarlatan). The work belongs to both Griffa's *Alter Ego* and *Transparenze* (Transparencies) cycles, the latter of which debuted at the 1980 Venice Biennale. The sheets are layered, as Griffa notes, like parts of a symphony.

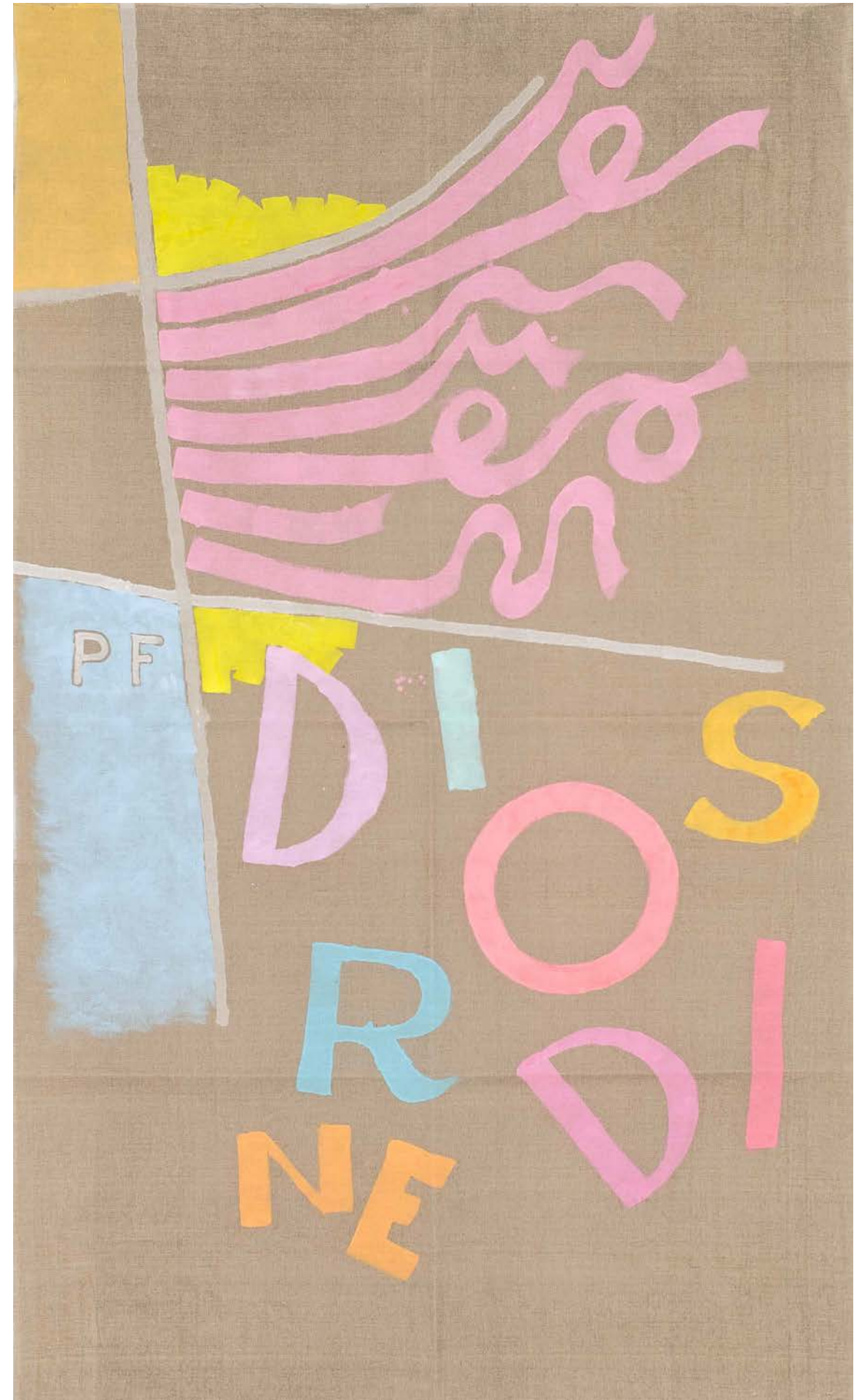


Disordine PF (Disorder PF)

2025

Acrylic on canvas

Griffa's most recent cycle is dedicated to disorder, a phenomenon measured by scientists and known as entropy. Rather than fearing chaos and the unknown, Griffa embraces change and renewal. As he has written, any disorder "will constitute a new order, which in turn contains elements of disorder, which go on to constitute a new order—and so on and so forth without end."



A red circular sign with white text. The text is arranged in four lines, centered within the circle. The background is white.

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