



Paul Fabozzi

Data Walks



Paul Fabozzi

Data Walks

November 3–25, 2006

Paintings:

Gallery Siano

309 Arch Street

Philadelphia, PA 19106

Installation:

Carbon 14

126 North 3rd Street

Philadelphia, PA 19106



Grand Central to Asser Levy #1, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2006

Ordinary Wonder

by Charlotte Bacon

Marionette strings that attach not to puppets but to scraps of geometry. Sharp, bent lines that imply a spiraled migration or the slim silhouettes of architecturally improbable skyscrapers. Trapezoidal scrimms of color flung on top of black ladders that could be windows or segmented sails. Miniature lawns next to cobbled sidewalks sheared of all imprecision. We could be looking at bridges designed by fantastically mathematically inclined insects; violins of the future that double as blueprints for impossible radios; musical notation developed by someone as passionate about poetry as he is engineering; maps of a city for an animal that can navigate in four dimensions.

And those are just the paintings. The silvery bits of steel might be snowflakes from another galaxy or tools to pick the most delicate of locks. The rusted fragments could almost be metal runes found in junkyards for spaceships or remnants of the harps of Atlantis. The book of drawings, with its sensual shadows and precise modeling, calls to mind scraps of DNA without a single double helix in sight: the drawings echo the genetic code, in that we feel we're seeing fragments of our own weird biology, deep patternings that blend the fated and the random.

Paul Fabozzi's recent work evokes and marvels at the worlds of music, math, nature, and landscape, but it is professionally, scrupulously abstract, which is to say it rejects anything as laborious as an identifiable object, place, or event. Instead, these angle-strewn creations are invitations into multiple interpretations and elastic possibilities. They insist on refuting a way or a method of watching them and even when you read what Fabozzi has written about them—that they are distillations of walks through New York City, composed from fragments of photographs snapped on these walks, sly calculations of the numbers of steps taken, distance traveled, and time spent on these purposeful stridings through the city—they press a viewer beyond a single interpretive grid. They cleverly use the shapes of the urban landscape that gave rise to them to slice that very grid wide open and create surgical, artistic dissections and reconstructions of those experiences.

But why explode the walk in the first place? What is gained from the refusal to represent directly? Fabozzi's response might be that even if he had chosen to make a sidewalk look like a sidewalk, a building like a building, this central problem still exists: given what we know about physics and contemporary social experience, we'll never agree on exactly what a sidewalk or building looks like or means. Louis Kahn wrote that a street is a room by agreement, and while Fabozzi might concur, he appears to add his certainty that we won't agree on just how that room is used and to what end. We're never exempt from the responsibility of how our vision evolves and the limits or horizons it presents.

Those ideas could have led to work that feels distant, caught in cold certainties that enshrine the nihilistic. But Fabozzi's work is just as light-strewn, open, and inviting as

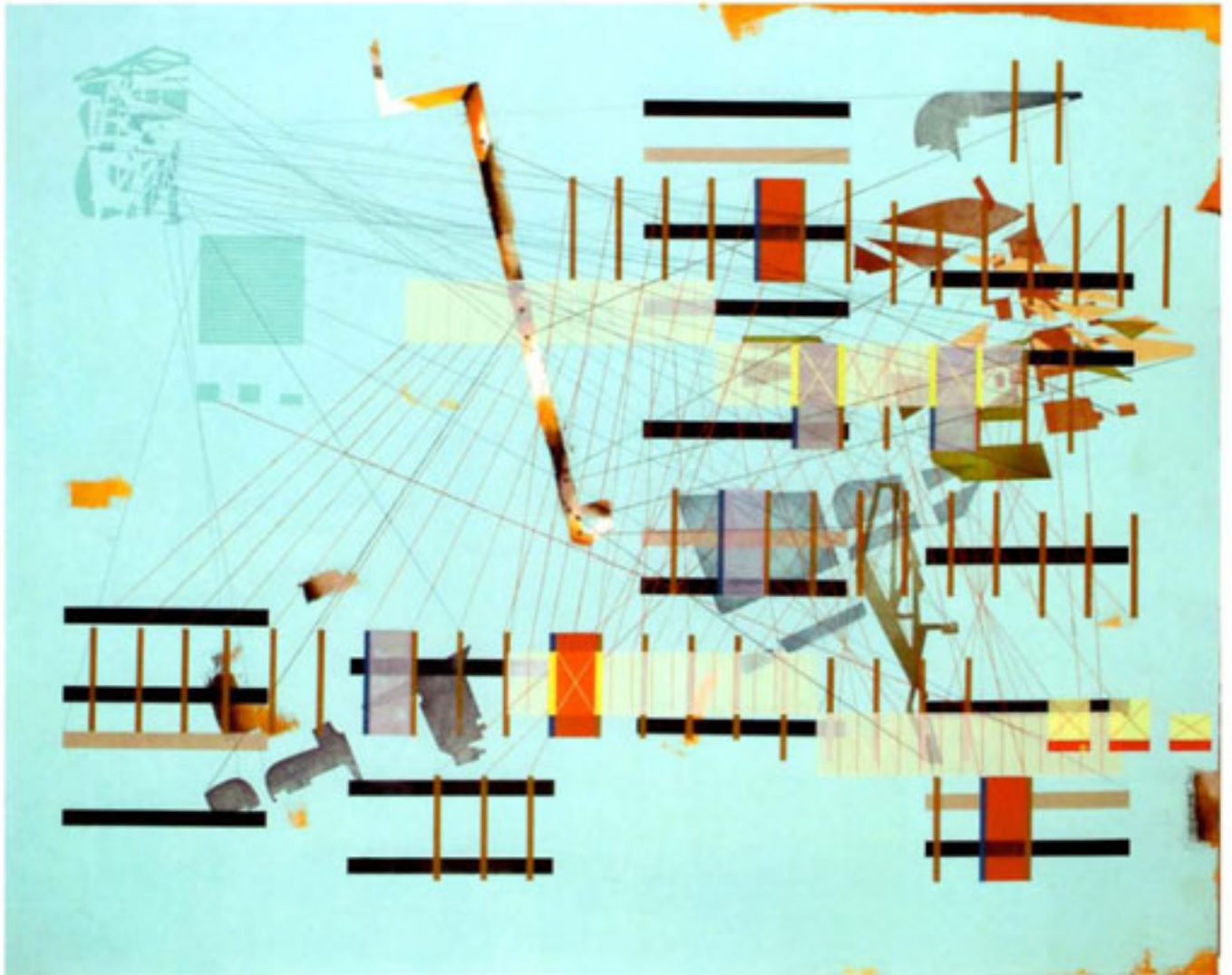
it is impersonal and severe. Italo Calvino's character Mr. Palomar comes to mind as a way to try to capture the mood of this work. Calvino's protagonist sets himself the task of deciphering some of the apparently simple and certainly common phenomena—a wave, a woman's breast, a ray of sun—and each time, the complexity of the experience defeats his ability to understand it. "The swimming ego of Mr. Palomar is immersed in a disembodied world, intersections of force fields, vectorial diagrams, bands of position lines that converge, diverge, break up." Yet something nebulously solid is at his core: "But inside him there remains one point in which everything exists another way . . . : the sensation that you are here but could not be here, in a world that could not be but is."

A world that could not be but is. For this viewer, that is what Fabozzi's work suggests most pressingly. Worlds that could not be but are—in an array of lines, colors, and shapes that his walks have allowed him to collect and re-create.

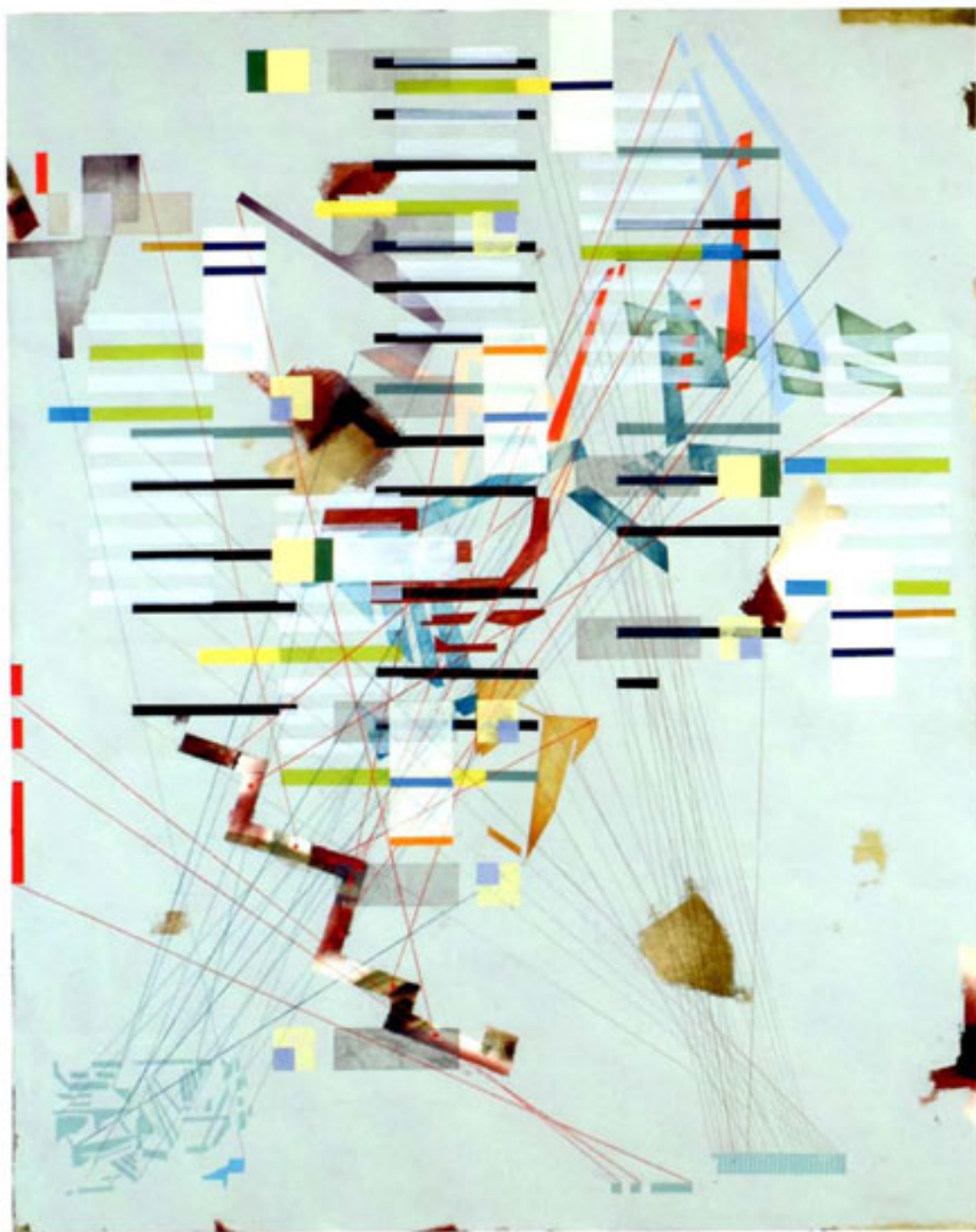
Like Mr. Palomar, who, for all his fuss about how to observe the world, still can't resist its sensual pull, the "splendid speckling," as he puts it, Fabozzi's work, even inside the hard-minded clarity of its abstraction, speaks also in the vocabulary of pleasure. In the paintings, washes of pink and blue and yellow. The small, layered flares of paint that slide along the edges or corners. The graceful and alluring compositions. This is work about the ephemeral nature of experience and cities and motion that is meant to last. This is work about the impersonality of place and even bodies that still has the heft of a distinct person in a body behind it, making it, imagining it into being.

That's why this collection of work conveys such light to me: they are personal in their impersonality, playful in their seriousness about the difficulties they suggest. They are frozen, pinpointed moments about the warm, frantic, impossible rush of life and air as they move past and through us. They tell us in their rigor and their linear toughness that anything, everything could happen during the simplest of moments—a walk in the park. So watch out. Watch it. Whatever it is, it's right there, walking past you, inside you, beside you. This is work that makes you breathe and, even better, pay attention to that breathing, to its orderly, ordinary wonder.

Charlotte Bacon is a novelist. Her next book, *Split Estate*, will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



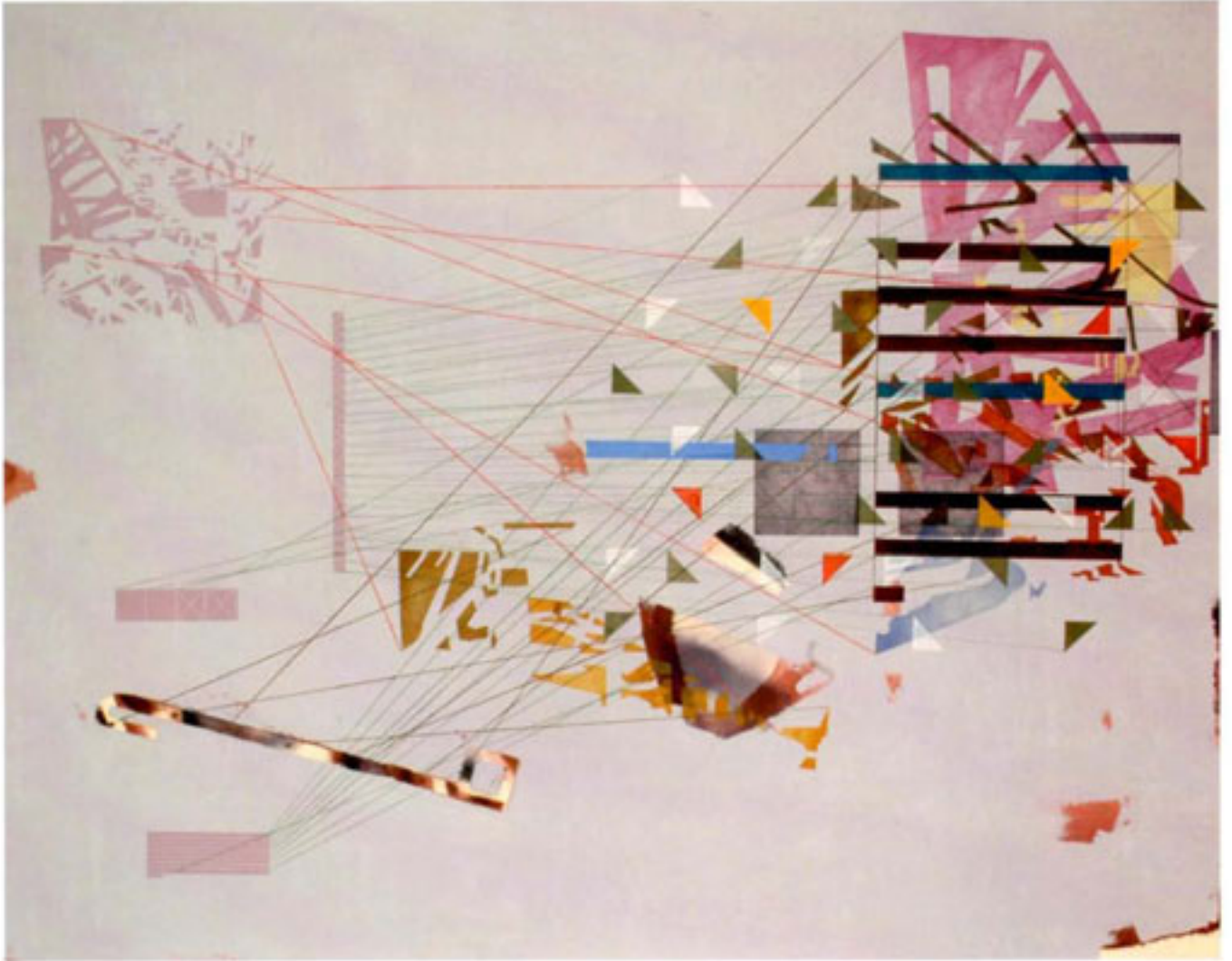
Astoria #3, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 2005

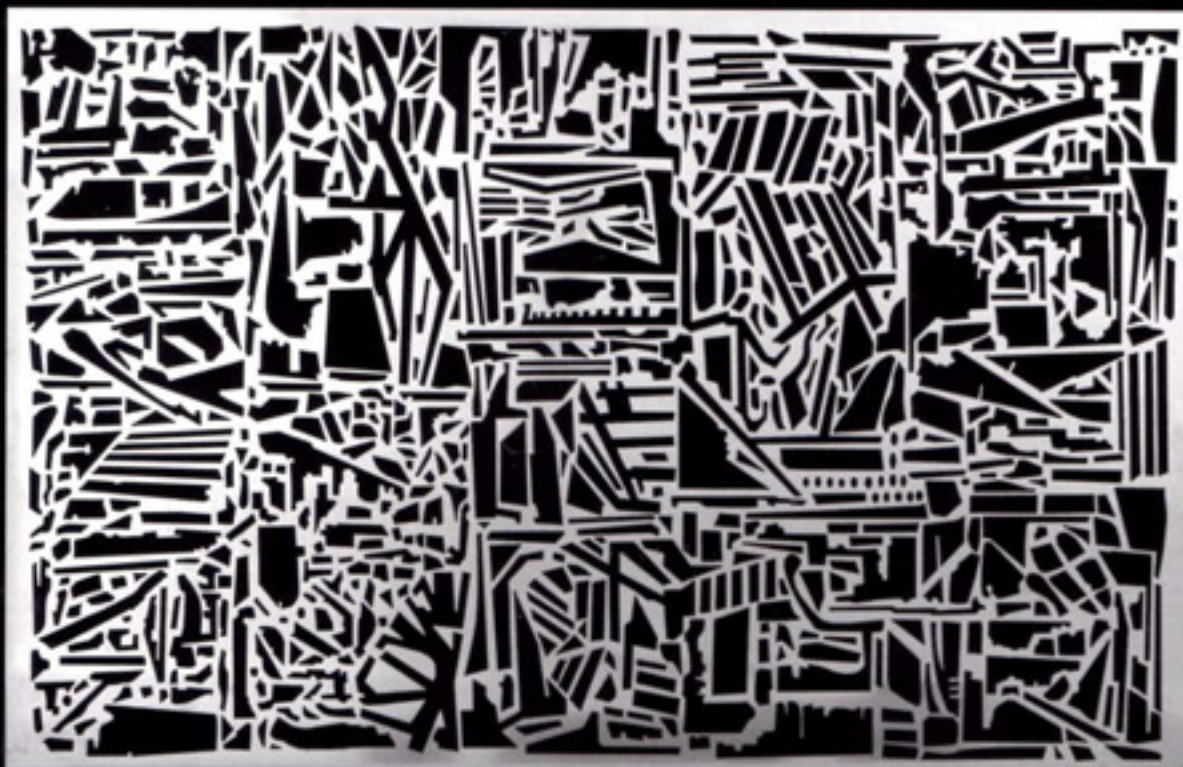


Midtown #1 (Queensboro Bridge to 42nd Street), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2005

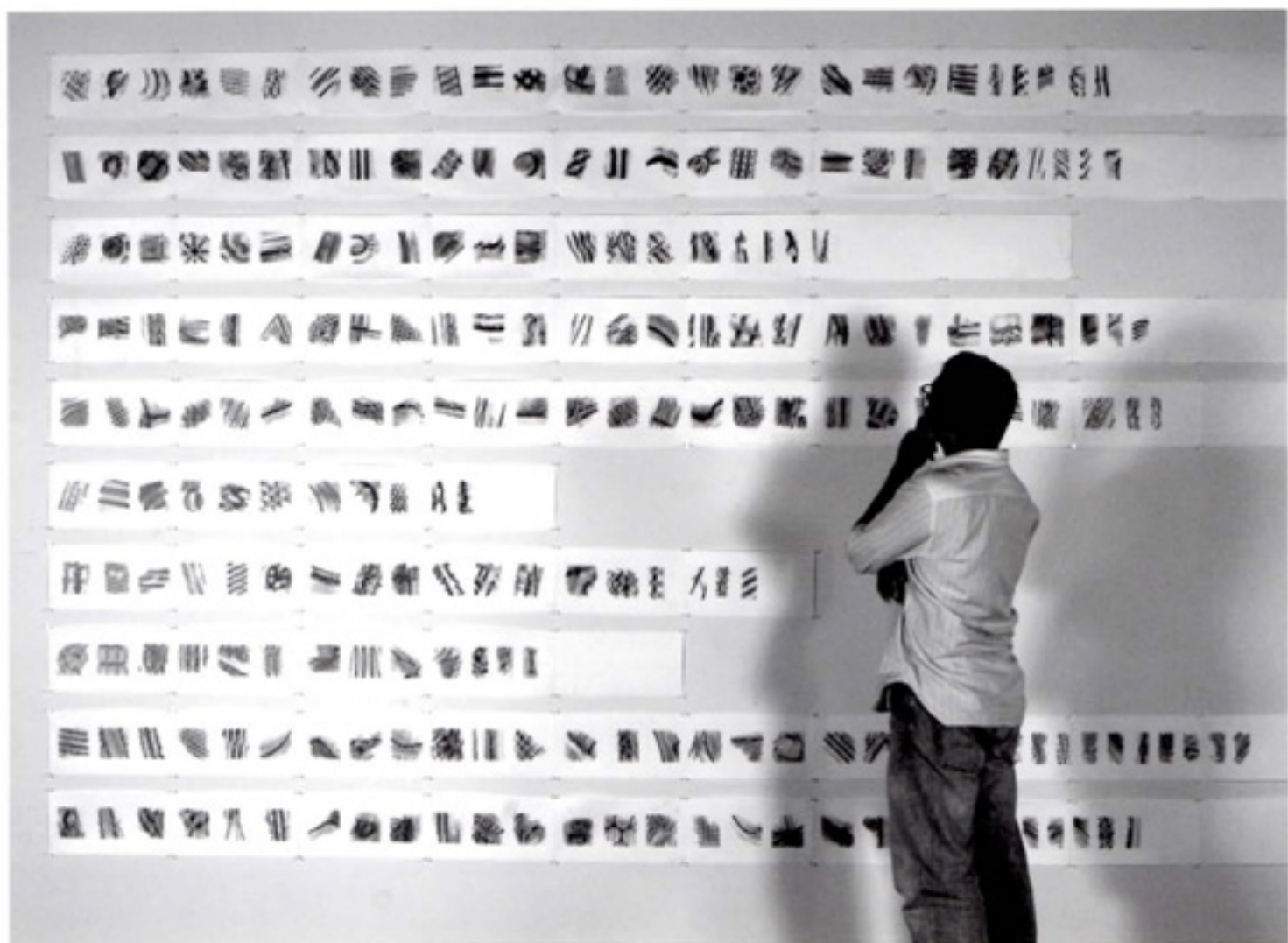


Fifth Avenue #1, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2006



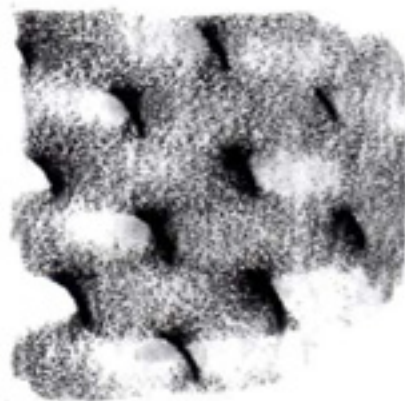
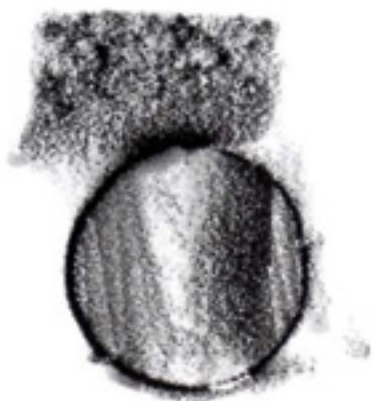
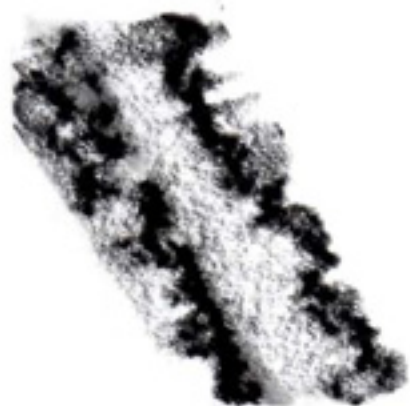


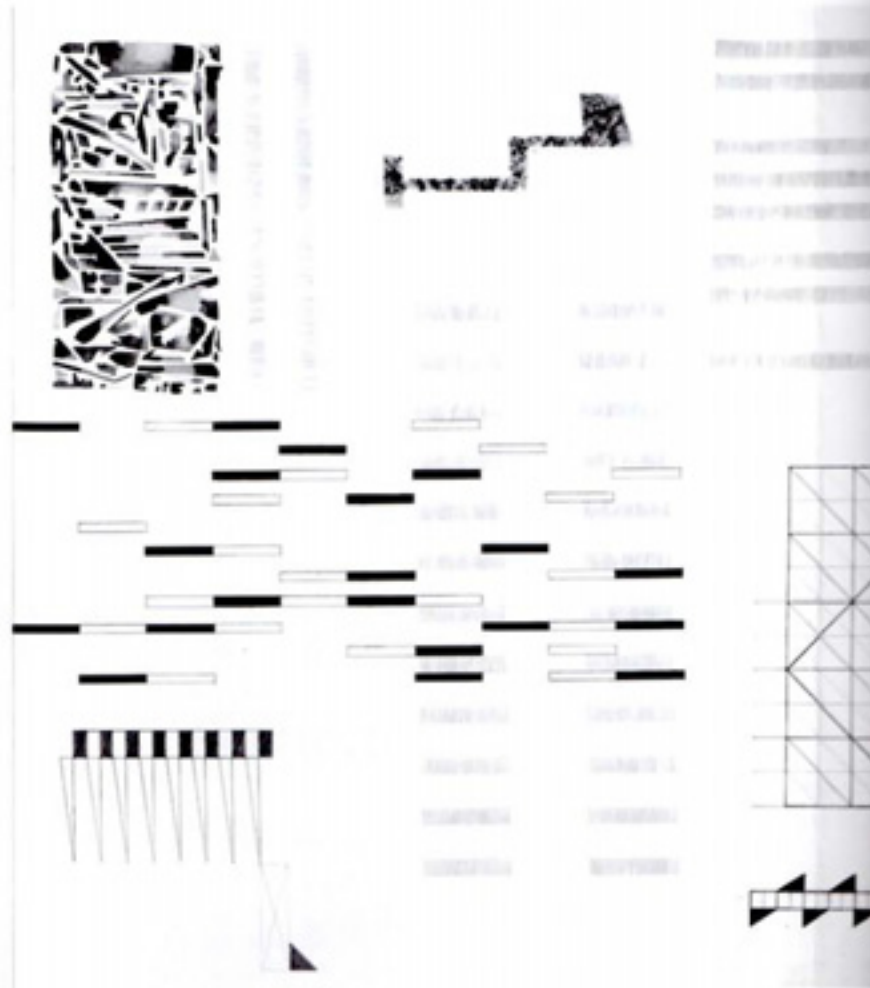
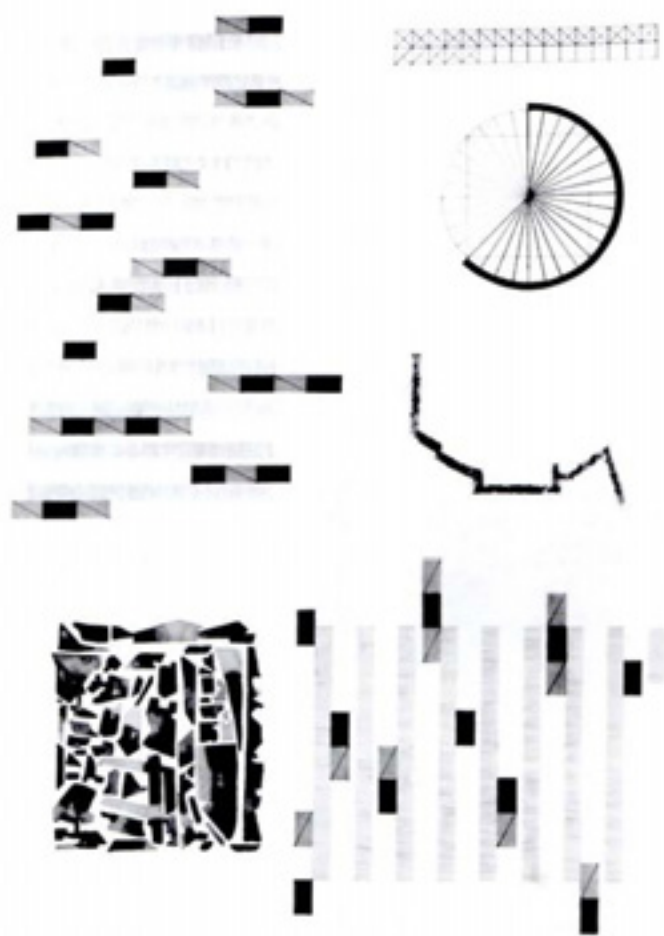
Local Shapes #1, stainless steel, 20 x 30 inches, 2006



Paul Fabozzi in his studio with *Distance Rubbings* (nine accordion-fold drawings, graphite on paper, dimensions variable, 2006)

Opposite page:
Distance Rubbings (details)

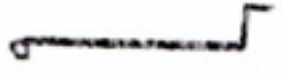




Data, graphite and wash on paper (bound in an accordion-fold hardcover book using bookbinder's board and fabric), 30 1/2 x 220 inches, 2006

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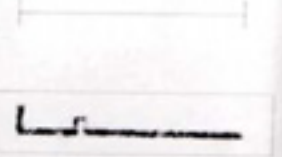
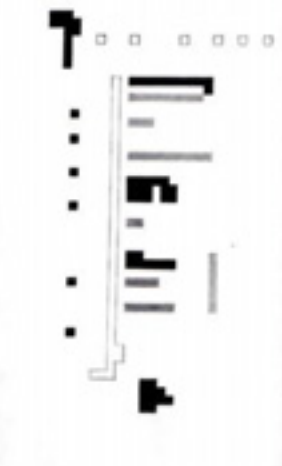
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1. The first part of the document is a technical drawing of a rectangular object with a grid pattern and a diagonal cross (X) in the top-left corner. This drawing is located at the top left of the page.

2. Below the drawing is a large block of text, which appears to be a list of items or a table of contents. The text is arranged in a vertical column and contains several lines of illegible text.

3. The middle section of the document features a large, complex technical drawing of a mechanical assembly. This drawing is located in the center of the page and shows various components and their interconnections.

4. To the right of the central drawing is a vertical column of text, which likely provides a description or list of parts for the assembly shown in the drawing.

5. The bottom section of the document contains a large, complex technical drawing of a mechanical assembly, similar to the one in the center. This drawing is located at the bottom of the page and shows various components and their interconnections.

6. To the right of the bottom drawing is a vertical column of text, which likely provides a description or list of parts for the assembly shown in the drawing.





Top:
Steps, etched clear extruded acrylic (photographed against a black background), 48 x 96 inches, 2006

Bottom:
Steps (detail, photographed in the studio with Grand Central to Asser Levy #1 visible behind and to the left and Midtown #1 visible behind and to the right)

A Conversation in the Studio

Interview by Jeremy Sigler

JEREMY SIGLER: So . . . what is it that originally attracted you to the idea of walking?

PAUL FABOZZI: It's something that I've always done when I've wanted to focus. I move through space and take in an intense array of sensory perceptions. The act of concentrated walking is something I've been interested in and have built upon for a long time. In the same way that you would learn how to draw a little bit, then learn how to draw a little better, and then as your skills develop you advance your methodologies, I think I've done the same sort of thing with walking since I was young.

SIGLER: You've mastered the art of walking in a sense?

FABOZZI: I'm not sure I would say I've mastered it, but I take it very seriously as a method of understanding myself and the world around me.

SIGLER: When you go back to childhood, do you mean that you were aware of walking as a poetic activity as a child?

FABOZZI: Yeah. I have memories of being quite young—who knows, maybe as little as seven or eight—and wanting to get out of the house and go out by myself and walk. I lived in a small city, not in a suburb, so it was the kind of place where you could walk around and see a lot. Also, during that time in our culture, kids who were quite young could go out and walk by themselves and really explore. Parents didn't necessarily know where they were going. Whereas it is amazing to think about how situated kids are today.

SIGLER: Yeah. Walking could be thought of as a subversive act—just to stray.

FABOZZI: I remember doing this early on. Then going to Europe and spending a lot of time in Italy during college really honed those skills, because I was in a foreign place and knew that the best way to understand it would be to walk it. Those experiences started to solidify something that I wanted to think about very seriously.

SIGLER: Was this after you lived in Philadelphia?

FABOZZI: Before I lived in Philadelphia I spent two different semesters in Italy—one in Siena and one in Cortona—and traveled to a lot of other cities in Europe, like Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, and Munich. More recently, during the past ten years or so, I have spent part of each summer in Rome. For me Rome is the ultimate walking city. In Rome, walking allows you to feel this intense accumulation of human experience.

SIGLER: Does this put you historically in touch with the wandering impulse of the modernist bohemian? I'm thinking of someone like Baudelaire, who decided at some point: "I'm going to basically wander around and become a kind of critic of everything that I see."

FABOZZI: I remember the first time I read *Paris Spleen*, his prose poems about Paris in the nineteenth century. It made a tremendous amount of sense to me—this idea that the poems were vignettes that came about from the experience of walking. There's a reason why Baudelaire thought it was necessary to write about, and valid to write about, walking in nineteenth-century Paris. Haussmann's redesign of Paris opened up the old medieval city and created different kinds of physical space and, by extension, social interaction. Baudelaire sensed how that opening up made wandering an existential act—the idea of walking in the city as a way to find yourself.

- SIGLER:** But also as a place of diversity and unpredictability—that as you move through the city, a certain number of collisions in space and time are going to disorient you and take your breath away.
- FABOZZI:** And that's why you do it. That's it right there. It's about losing yourself in order to have a better understanding of yourself when you're done. It is about going out into the world and confronting it and seeing it—not watching it on a screen—and at the same time trying to see how you fit in or don't. I like your notion of "collisions in space," going out into the world and walking around. That's messy. It puts you in a vulnerable position. You're not going to be able to put the experience in a box. You're not going to figure it out. You're not going to have an answer for it. You're barely going to be able to read it. It's a whole different kind of intake, and one I don't think we're necessarily trained to understand or even want. We want things codified and situated. I'm not sure that we've given ourselves the language we need to have a meaningful relationship with our surroundings.
- SIGLER:** That's why I called walking an art form before. Because I presume that to be engaged with your environment and to find something of interest in this kind of experience takes skill, and that it is not just something you're born with—the skill to, how shall I put it, be stimulated by the world.
- FABOZZI:** You have to work at your relationship with walking. And I don't do it because I've mastered it. I do it because I haven't mastered it. I continue to want to force myself to concentrate. For me it is one of the hardest things to do—just to concentrate, really concentrate. Sometimes I walk down the street and I'm so caught up in what I need to do later that day or in two weeks that my feet aren't even touching the ground. I don't even really know where I am and I have no idea that I am breathing because I'm more in a mental space than I am in a physical space. That's not concentrating.
- SIGLER:** Right. So if you can up the ante, in a sense you're increasing your potential to take in information. It seems, from these paintings, that you put a lot of energy into the idea of being able to bring this walk back and make something happen on the canvas. And then I imagine your approach is no longer the approach to walking, but the approach to painting. How does that transformation occur? That seems like a really difficult bridge. It's not like you're just pouring your guts out on the canvas. I mean, these are very orderly. There's obviously a kind of strategy to how to get this information down.
- FABOZZI:** Right. Because what I end up working with is very defined.
- SIGLER:** And objectively can you say what that is?
- FABOZZI:** I have photographs and numbers. That's what I have. And the photographs, I deconstruct them a step further: I take them, print them, put tracing paper over them, and pull shapes out of them. I pull these pieces out like pixels. It's this idea of taking information. The walk is analog. It's the flow of experience. But what I deal with in the studio is information. I'm saying, "Okay. I'm going out with this intensity of focus on the perception—the physical and emotional perception of the walk—but when I get back what I have are these artifacts. For example, documentation of 1,657 steps, 1.5 miles, 59 minutes, and a whole bunch of photographs. I have my materials and I try to build. At this point I'm setting up a tension between experience on the one hand and information on the other.
- SIGLER:** I see, but at some point you shift perspective to a kind of topographical concept. I mean, you're mapping, right? You've taken the world and shifted the axis from the perspective of being on the ground, walking around with this camera and this pedometer. The camera is always at eye level, your eye level, looking out at the horizon, either near or far. And yet with these paintings, you get the feeling that you're looking down on something. Do you feel there is anything to that?
- FABOZZI:** Well, one of the reasons I like working with data is because I don't want to pictorialize. So maybe that is where the shift in perspective comes from. And maybe that's why I feel like I have to mess with the photographs a bit—because they're the closest thing to some kind of

representation of the environment. By pulling pieces out instead of working with the whole image, I feel like I might be able to open up other opportunities, other ways of exploring, other ways of getting at the experience besides making an image of what it looks like. In other words, I want to be honest about the fact that my consciousness is perceiving these things in this way. I am not a neutral depository of sensory impulses. None of us are.

SIGLER: So it's not like these maps represent the location. I mean, it's not like I could look at this and find my way through it, right? Because for some reason when I look at these paintings, I start to get this sense that even though they're so fragmented and abstract there would be a way to put the pieces together and arrive in this place, to solve this puzzle. And I guess that's what holds these paintings together—this idea that there is some sort of core experience.

FABOZZI: Yes. At the same time that all I have are shapes from photographs and numbers, it still was forty-five minutes, or an hour, or an hour and fifteen minutes of being very conscious of color, atmosphere, time of day, and place. And I think that when I'm making a painting, even though I'm forcing myself to use this data, I am trying to get back to that thing I remember most about it. It's a flash. It's a quality. It's not material in the physical sense so much as it's a shadow, but it's a shadow I want to hold on to.

SIGLER: Right. It's a synthetic *déjà vu*.

FABOZZI: It's about memory. It's about trying to hold on. I go out and have this experience and when it's over I'm left with this stuff. How do I take this stuff and squeeze it to the point where I feel that I have my hands on something—that the experience isn't just over, that I'm not just one more step toward death—but that I'm actually able to hold on to something and remember it.

SIGLER: Well, you know, historically that would seem like it has been a part of painting back to Cézanne. I think about him painting a mountain and getting into this language of representation, and it being very evident that the final painting is not about a mountain. It's about the process of painting. It is about the time spent doing it.

FABOZZI: Yeah. Cézanne used geometry to break down the landscape into a consciously human and at the same time flexible pictorial language. I have tried to do the same. In other words, shapes and numbers give me the freedom to let the experience come through the process of painting.

SIGLER: You said there are going to be two shows. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the work in the second show.

FABOZZI: Sure. At the same time that I was working on the paintings and drawings for the show at Gallery Siano I was given the opportunity to create an installation at Carbon 14. And that was perfect because while I was making these paintings I was thinking about if I could take each individual group of data—the paths for all nine walks, for instance—and use that as the information for one piece. It never made sense to me to just make other paintings with that data, but dealing with other kinds of materials excited me. So that's got me working with stainless steel, Plexiglas, and some of the other things that we're looking at. The walks started as moving through space. Looking at a group of paintings on a wall moves you through the space in another way. But the installation lets me present the viewer with an altogether different experience of my collected data.

SIGLER: So you're thinking about the viewer, then, going on the walk and navigating the work? I mean, to a certain extent the walk through the gallery space becomes another conceptualization of the walk.

FABOZZI: The motivation for me is not about making something that people can walk through. That's just the end product. The real motivation for me is figuring out how I can take these groups of data and squeeze them some more, keep squeezing them. I've been working with these same nine walks for three years. What happens if I keep working with this same data?

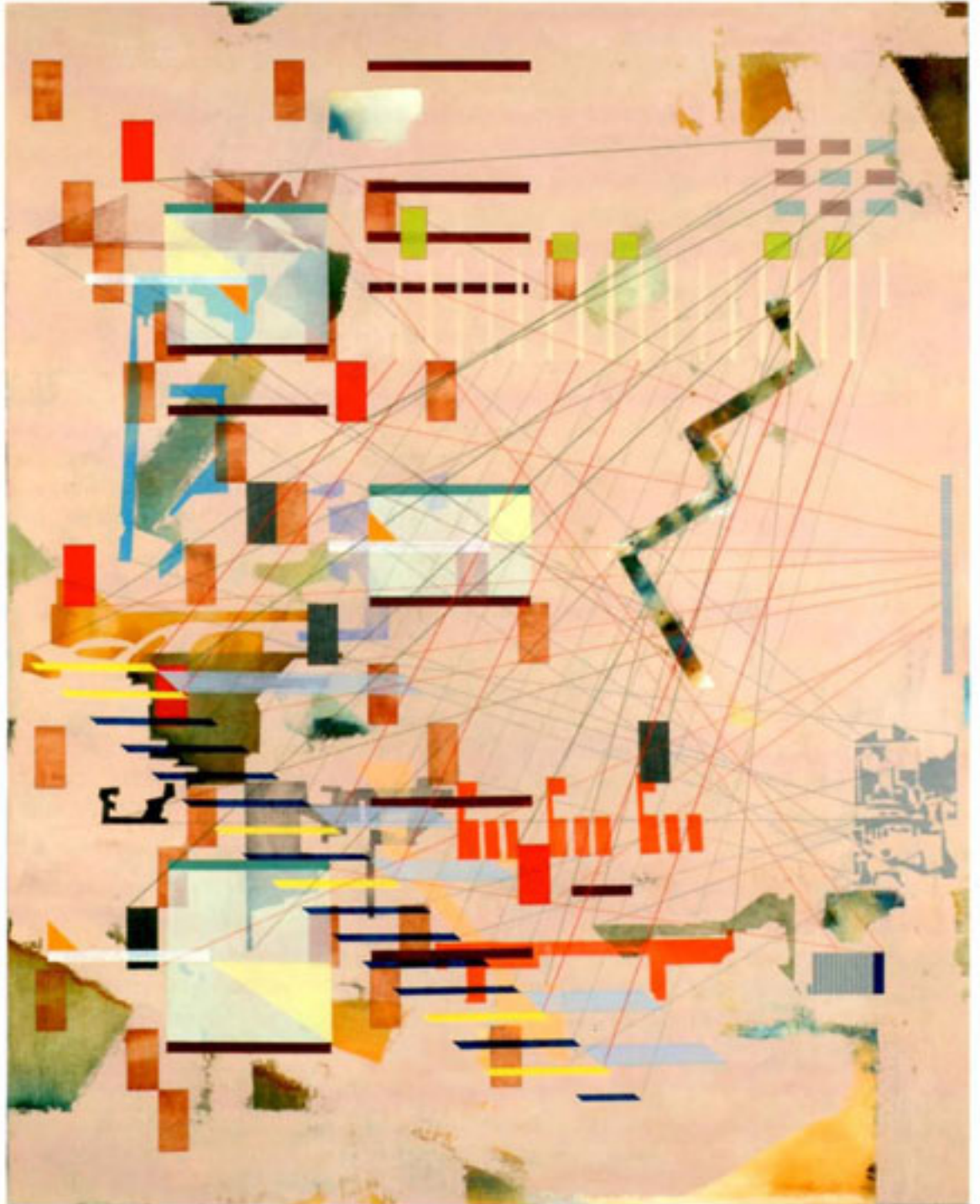
SIGLER: When you say "squeeze" do you mean squeeze like you would hug a body or squeeze like you would wring out something?

- FABOZZI:** Well, it is a caress, for sure, but at the same time there's something a bit more aggressive for me. Maybe that's the intellectual part of seeing how far I could push it. Maybe that's the wringing out. Could I get all the water out of it, that thing?
- SIGLER:** In that regard, and I don't mean to just drop names, but suddenly I'm thinking about Jasper Johns.
- FABOZZI:** Yeah.
- SIGLER:** I'm thinking, you know, he's always done that. He's always recycled things and kept getting distance out of them.
- FABOZZI:** Yeah. One of the most memorable experiences I've had being in a museum in New York since I moved here in 1993 was at a certain point in Johns's retrospective at MoMA. He was working those same shapes, numbers, and letters over and over again. I remember going through room after room down the central hallway and then you kind of had to turn the corner into this larger room. There was a moment in that room where he had worked these shapes to the point where it was so manic and so intense it ripped my head off. Because at a certain point it was not the numbers at all—it was him. I've thought about what that made me feel like while I've been working on this.
- SIGLER:** That being said, I'm a little fearful for you about getting away from painting because painting in a sense has gotten you into this mess. And what I mean by that is you're now a mature painter. You could probably look back at your history and say, "Well, you know, now I've gotten into this whole thing by, essentially, making painting."
- FABOZZI:** Right.
- SIGLER:** It seems like a real daring move to put this information down, but not to put it down in or on a painting. And I'm wondering . . . what now? Does this open up a kind of Pandora's box of material and potentialities that is daunting?
- FABOZZI:** I'll have a better answer for that after the installation is up, but right now I would say it is just as likely that this experience will make me a better painter than it will a non-painter.
- SIGLER:** Why is that?
- FABOZZI:** This experience might very well have a way of bringing me back to painting from a different place. It's like going traveling. You go to a country that you've never been to before and you sort of strip stuff away. And when you come back home to the thing that's familiar, it looks different to you, and maybe you experience it on a deeper level. Keep in mind that the paintings came first. The installation works off of the paintings.
- SIGLER:** Well, not to argue with you on this, but to me the walk comes first.
- FABOZZI:** No. You're right. I would agree with you there. I mean, really the walk leads to drawing leads to painting leads to installation.
- SIGLER:** Yeah. And if I were to look conceptually at the work from the most puritanical, reductive perspective, or the most minimalist perspective, I almost just want to see the walk be the walk—and not have to confront an object at all. But that's the poet, I guess, in me thinking about the relationship between your inner experience and your expressed experience.
- FABOZZI:** But even as the poet, you're going to try to construct a language for experience aren't you?
- SIGLER:** Well, no, poets don't actually do anything. [Laugh] They just think that occasionally they'll crank out a little poem, but in fact they don't really do anything. [Laugh]
- FABOZZI:** You know, for me, the complexity of trying to make it is what's interesting. I wish I could just leave it alone, but . . .
- SIGLER:** Well, that seems like that manic thing you were describing with Johns—that scratching it and squeezing it a little further.

- FABOZZI:** Yeah. I don't know if it's a little bit perverse, but I get pleasure out of holding this piece of steel that is a shape taken from a photo from one of these walks. I've painted that shape a lot of times. I've traced it a lot of times. There's something oddly satisfying about getting it cut out of steel and having it in my hand. You know . . . I've traced and drawn and watercolored and stenciled these shapes to the point where they are etched in my mind.
- SIGLER:** You know each one.
- FABOZZI:** Yeah. And now I have them in stainless steel. And I can think about the buildings possibly that they came from, but the great thing is—I guess the thing that I'm trying to push for—is they become just the shape. At what point do they become just the shape? Do they have to be made in steel to do that? Do they have to get to this point?
- SIGLER:** So maybe this whole process is actually a way to disintegrate these environments . . . to have them, in a way, disappear.
- FABOZZI:** Maybe. Or again maybe it is a way to memorize them.
- SIGLER:** Like you described Rome. Maybe this is not a way to experience the Rome that you experience when walking, but a new way to put this material in a place where it can really be yours.
- FABOZZI:** Yeah. It's about turning it into language, visual language, and trying to own it.
- SIGLER:** And do you feel that, over time, the long-term trajectory of this body of work is to cover a lot of terrain?
- FABOZZI:** What I've been interested in up to this point is places that already mean something to me—that are already etched in my experience. New York City is the place where I live. I did a big project about Rome before this—the place that I return to every year. I'm not sure what is going to happen next though. Honestly, I've been thinking more lately about scale than I have been about new locations. What I'm trying to do is construct the language for talking about experience and about being in place and space. And once you have a language, a flexible language, you can go anywhere, but then that place will also change the language. That's the exciting thing—looking for the kind of places that are going to both utilize the given language and expand it.

July 2006, New York City

Jeremy Sigler is a poet and the Associate New York Editor of *Parkett*.
His next book, *Crackpot Poet*, will be published by Black Square Editions.



Chelsea #1, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 2006

Paul Fabozzi received his BFA from Alfred University in 1989 and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1993. His paintings and works on paper have been included in numerous solo and group shows throughout the United States and Europe, including exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, G.W. Einstein Company in New York, the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, and the Künstlerhaus in Vienna, Austria. His work is included in many private and public collections, including the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), Fidelity Investments, the University of Pennsylvania, the Forest City Commercial Group, and the San Diego Museum of Art. Awards include a 2005 fellowship in Printmaking/Drawing/Artists Books from the New York Foundation for the Arts. He edited an anthology of writings on contemporary art—titled *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art Since 1945*—published by Prentice-Hall in 2002 and is currently the chair of the Department of Fine Arts at St. John's University in Queens, NY.

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Front Cover:
Steps, etched clear extruded acrylic (photographed in the studio with *Grand Central to Asser Levy #1* visible behind and to the left and *Midtown #1* visible behind and to the right), 48 x 96 inches, 2006

Back and Front Covers:
Local Shapes (detail), preliminary digital drawing, 2006

Photography: Michael Marfione
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