

Forbes

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Forbes

Enchanting El Museo Del Barrio Gala Honors Late Artist And Arts Patron Tony Bechara



Karla Harwich, Chair of the Board of Trustees at El Museo del Barrio, speaks at El Museo del ... [More](#)
PETER ZWOLINSKI/BFA.COM

Amplifying fellow artists such as Carmen Herrera and Leon Polk Smith, generously donating to arts organizations, and drawing from myriad art historical references to hone his inimitable approach to color theory, Tony Bechara created an impact in all facets of life and career. The highly educated, Puerto Rico-born, New York-City based artist who died in April on his 83rd birthday, was honored last night at the glamorous annual gala for **El Museo del Barrio**, where he served as Chairman Emeritus.

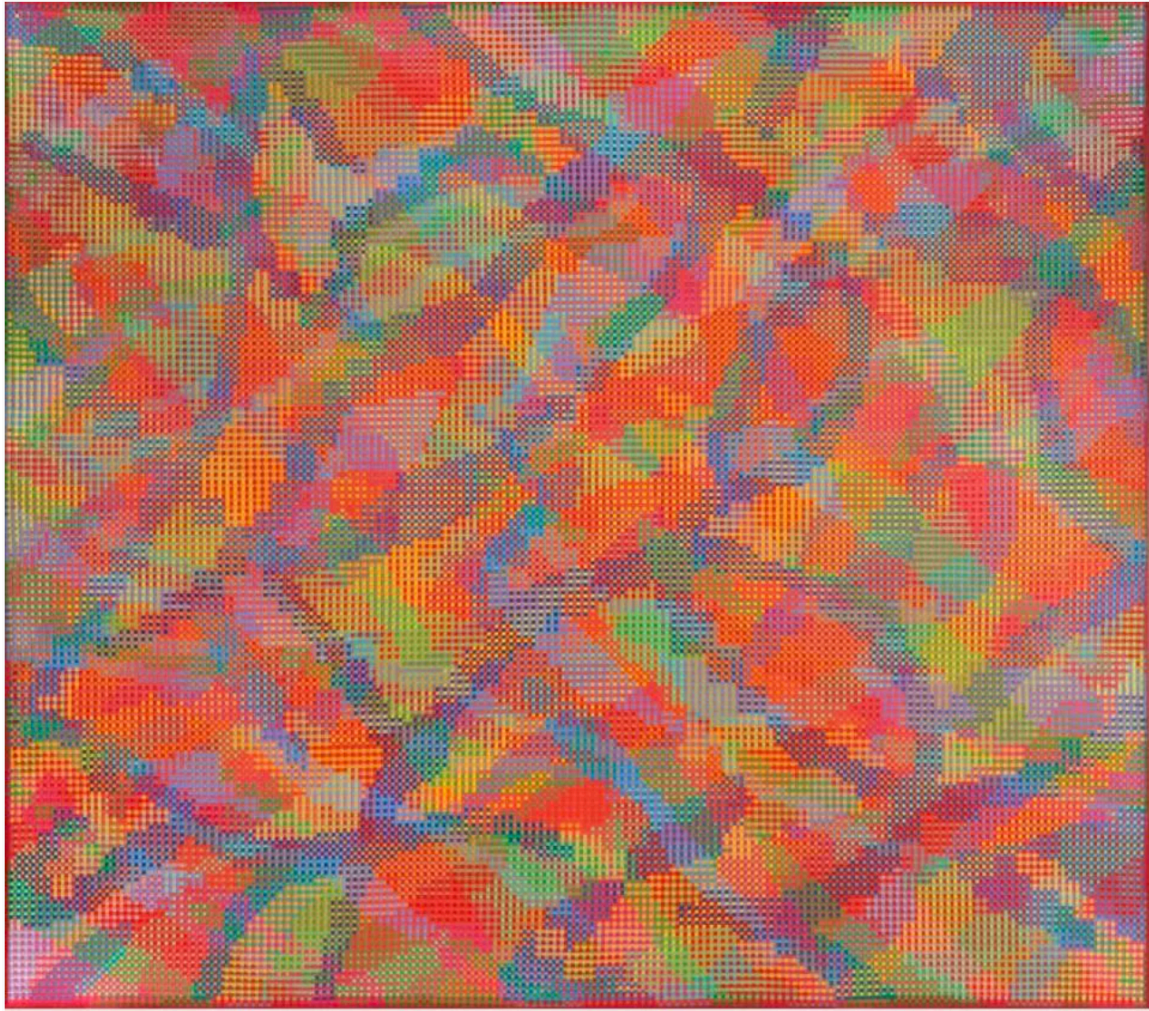
The joyous event raised \$1.1 million to support exhibitions, educational programs, and the preservation of the permanent collection of the oldest museum in the United States dedicated to Latino art and culture. The East Harlem museum spans pre-Columbian Taíno art to contemporary works, with a focus on Puerto Rican artists and the Puerto Rican community in New York.



Tony Bechara
PHOTO BY MAKU LOPEZ, FOR LISSON GALLERY

“Like so many of you here tonight, I held a deep admiration and respect for Tony—his vision, his generosity, and his unwavering dedication to El Museo and our community,” Chair of El Museo Board of Trustees Karla Harwich, told the well-heeled crowd filling elegant mid-century modern restaurant, **The Pool**, to feast on exceptional seafood in the landmarked Seagram Building in New York City.

Bechara’s singular art borrowed from the palettes of Henri Matisse (bold, emotional) and Édouard Vuillard (warm and muted) and the meticulous Pointillism of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, while looking beyond France for inspiration from crafters and weavers, abstraction, and the intricacy and vivacity of Byzantine-era mosaics in Ravenna, Italy. Last June, **Lisson Gallery** announced it is representing Bechara, following his inaugural solo exhibition with the gallery.



Tony Bechara Tyger, Tyger 1976 Acrylic on canvas 188 x 208 cm 74 x 82 in Collection of El Museo del ... [More](#)
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Making an impact far beyond his artistic practice, Bechara was a tireless advocate for artists who risked marginalization. His creative leadership and enduring influence of art and culture helped to grow El Museo’s national and international reputation. He served on the boards of several leading cultural organizations including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Instituto Cervantes, and Studio in a School. He joined El Museo del Barrio’s Board of Trustees in 1993, became co-chair in 1997, served as Board chair from 2000 to 2015, and was named chairman emeritus in 2016.

“Tony’s legacy will continue not just through what he created on canvas—but through what he built for generations to come. We miss him deeply. And we celebrate him with immense gratitude and love tonight,” said El Museo Executive Director Patrick Charpenel.



El Museo Executive Director Patrick Charpenel speaks at El Museo del Barrio's 2025 Gala
PETER ZWOLINSKI/BFA.COM

Born in 1942, Bechara spent most of his life in New York City. He attended Georgetown Law School and New York University, and studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and the New York School of Visual Art. His work is featured in public and private collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, El Museo del Barrio, and Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

“Tony’s life and legacy will always be an inspiration to all of us. A devoted advocate, leader, beloved by everyone. He was relentless with his passion for many different cultural organizations. Tony loved his community, this city, and this museum. It is one of the many things we have in common,” U.S. Senator Charles Ellis "Chuck" Schumer, D-New York, said via video.

Puerto Rican opera soprano [Larisa Martínez](#) sang, Cuban-American [Richard Blanco](#), the fifth inaugural poet of the United States, shared a poem, and Sotheby’s led an auction of more than 25 artworks from preeminent Latin American and Latinx artists and world-leading galleries. Guests indulged in specialty cocktails from [Dobel Tequila](#), and a toast with Dobel’s newest limited edition Extra Añejo release, [Dobel Atelier Animales Endémicos Edition](#), showcasing six hand-painted bottles inspired by native Mexican species: axolotl, jaguar, monarch butterfly, and dwarf jay.



Dobel Tequila at El Museo del Barrio's 2025 Gala, including Dobel's newest limited edition Extra ... [More](#)
PETER ZWOLINSKI/BFA.COM

This year's gala was chaired by: Estrellita and Daniel Brodsky, Victoria Espinosa, Agnes Gund, Harwich, Karla Martinez de Salas, María Eugenia Maury, Yolanda Santos, and Désirée von la Valette. Other notable attendees included: artists Candida Alvarez, Coco Fusco, Claudia Peña-Salinas, Lee Quinones, and Ruben Toledo; author Daisy Auger Dominguez; curators and collectors Estrellita and Daniel Brodsky; model and actress Juana Burga; New York City Council Member Tiffany Cabán; El Museo del Barrio's Executive Director Patrick Charpenel; New York City Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs Laurie Cumbo; Argentine model Valentina Ferrer; Guggenheim Museum Curator Naomi Beckwith; Ford Foundation Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum Thelma Golden; Principal Dancer at the American Ballet Theatre Isaac Hernandez; film director and activist Paola Mendoza; Dominican models Hiandra Martinez and Lineisy Montero; Mexican actor and Mauricio Martinez; Latino activist Henry Muñoz; curator Carlos Picón; philanthropist and author Jean Shafiroff; designer Stephanie Suberville; Museum of Arts and Design Chair Emeritus Barbara Tober; artist and architect Jean-Pierre Villafañe; museum director Julián Zugazagoitia; New York State Director of Latino Affairs in the Executive Chamber of Governor Kathy Hochul, Sophia Zayas; and El Museo Interim Chief Curator Susanna Temkin.

LISSON GALLERY

The New York Times
25 May 2025

The New York Times

Tony Bechara, Painter Who Championed Latino Artists, Dies at 83

He turned away from a potential career in the law or international relations to produce abstract paintings, and he headed El Museo del Barrio.



Tony Bechara painting in his studio in 2018. One critic compared his works to “optical confetti.” Maku López, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Tony Bechara’s parents didn’t believe he could make a living as an artist. So he majored in philosophy and economics in college and earned a master’s degree in international relations. He started law school, too, but in his mid-20s he found his true passion as a painter.

Returning to New York from Paris, where he had studied history at the Sorbonne, he enrolled in the School of Visual Arts in 1967 and began painting black-and-white figurative imagery.

Animated by the chaos of the city's streets, he graduated to painting kaleidoscopic grids that he meticulously mapped. He was embraced by critics and invited to exhibit in museums. He became a patron of the arts and of fledgling Latino artists and, for 15 years, led El Museo del Barrio, a showcase of Puerto Rican art that he expanded to encompass works from all over Latin America.

Mr. Bechara died in a Manhattan hospital on April 23, his 83rd birthday. A spokeswoman for El Museo del Barrio said the cause was heart failure.

From 2000 to 2015, Mr. Bechara served as chairman of the board of the museum, on Fifth Avenue and 104th Street on the edge of East Harlem, where many newcomers from Puerto Rico originally settled. (Barrio is Spanish for neighborhood.)

His mandate was to broaden the museum's collection and exhibits beyond the barrio to include art from Latin America and the Caribbean. That expanded purview prompted some local critics to complain that the museum was neglecting its primary focus on Puerto Rican culture.



Mr. Bechara, center, in 2017 at a gala for El Museo del Barrio at the Plaza Hotel. He was chairman of the museum for 15 years. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times



Mr. Bechara worked to broaden the museum's collection and exhibits beyond the Barrio to include art from Latin America and the Caribbean. Patrick McMulan courtesy of El Museo del Barrio

“If the criticism is that we’re not an ethnocentric gallery, then that’s fair,” [Mr. Bechara told The New York Times](#) in 2002. “But our ambition and our mission demand that we become a world-class museum, open to all people.”

He explained that the museum's educational mission extended to students at East Harlem schools, and that works by Puerto Rican artists, himself included, represent some 60 percent of the paintings and sculptures in El Museo's biennial survey of Latino art.

Mr. Bechara also served on the boards of the Brooklyn Academy of Music; Instituto Cervantes; Studio in a School, which integrates the arts into classroom education; and the cultural journal *The Brooklyn Rail*.



"Our ambition and our mission," Mr. Bechara said of El Museo del Barrio, "demand that we become a world-class museum, open to all people." Hagi Suka. Courtesy of El Museo del Barrio.

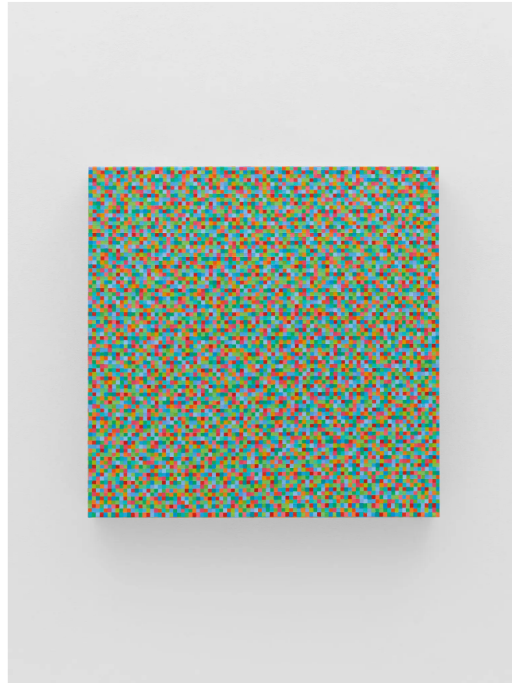
After he emerged as a promising talent in the 1970s, he nurtured and promoted other artists, among them [Carmen Herrera](#) and [Leon Polk Smith](#).

"They are an extension of my commitment to art, like unfinished murals in which I work during the night." he said in an interview with [AzureAzure](#), a bilingual cultural guide, in 2015.

His paintings, which one critic compared to “optical confetti,” were inspired by the paintings of Titian and Tintoretto; Byzantine-era mosaics; Islamic tiles and calligraphy in the Alhambra in Spain; and 19th century post-Impressionist French pointillist painters like Georges Seurat and Paul Signac.



A 2008 work by Mr. Bechara called “Ohne Titel.” Tony Bechara, Courtesy Lisson Gallery



Another work by Mr. Bechara, from 2023, titled “Random 28 (Green version).” Tony Bechara, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

They consisted of thousands of quarter-inch quadrangles.

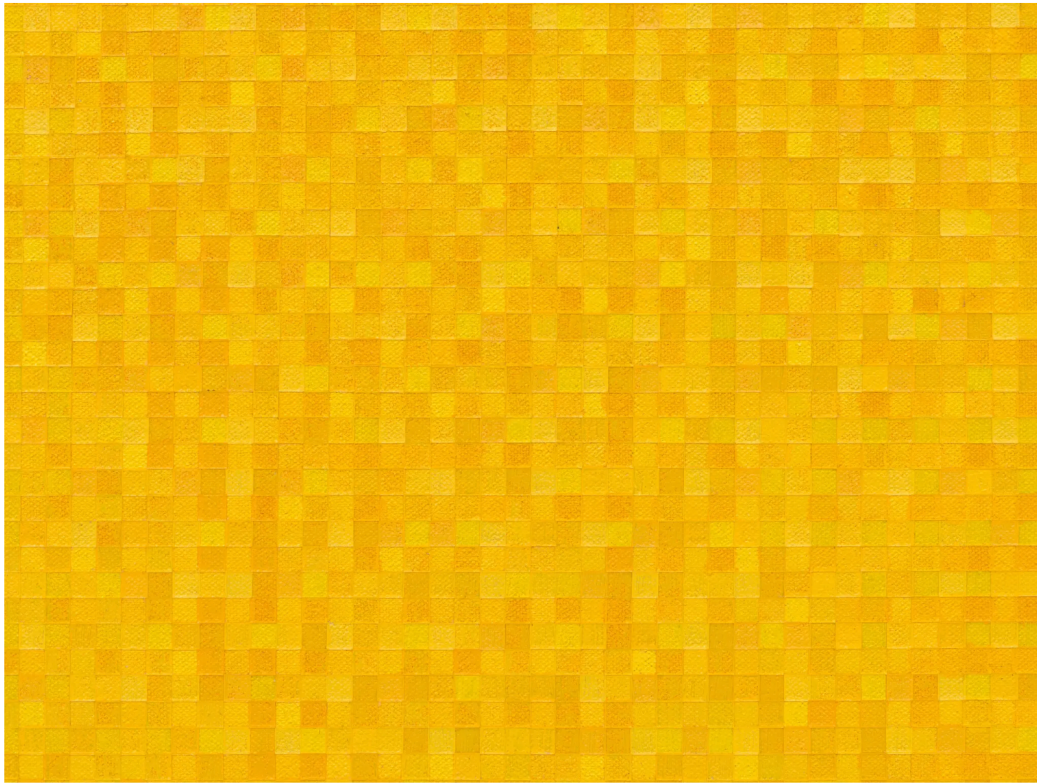
Beginning with a palette of 125 colors, Mr. Bechara used acrylics, which added a dimension that evoked weaving and basketry.

He produced “shimmering eloquent compositional arrangements developed by chromatic concentration of the squares to form abstract configurations,” Grace Glueck wrote [in The Times in 1979](#).

“For every painting, I first use the one-quarter-inch masking tape to create the grid, dividing the surface across equally,” he said [in an interview](#) in 2023 with Phong H. Bui, The Brooklyn Rail’s publisher and artistic director.

“It begins with taping one layer on the whole canvas vertically,” he said, “then proceeds the same horizontally. The next thing is to apply the selected color with a small brush, then remove the tape.”

“What I love,” he continued, “is the degrees of surprise every time; to take each layer of tape off the canvas is to reveal new worlds of optical symphony.”



Mr. Bechara's 2019 painting "20 Yellows." He used acrylic paint, which added a dimension that evoked weaving and basketry. Tony Bechara, Courtesy Lisson Gallery



An untitled 2025 work by Mr. Bechara. Tony Bechara, Courtesy Lisson Gallery



Mr. Bechara's 2024 work "Color in Motion III" made of acrylic on wood. Tony Bechara, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Art News
23 April 2025

ARTnews

Tony Bechara, Painter Who Wrangled Randomness, Dies at 83

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

April 23, 2025 4:52pm



Tony Bechara.

PHOTO JARED SISKIN/PATRICK MCMULLAN VIA GETTY IMAGES

Tony Bechara, an artist who was beloved in New York for his intricately crafted grid paintings and for his patronage of El Museo del Barrio, died on Wednesday on his 83rd birthday. His death was confirmed by El Museo del Barrio, which did not state a cause.

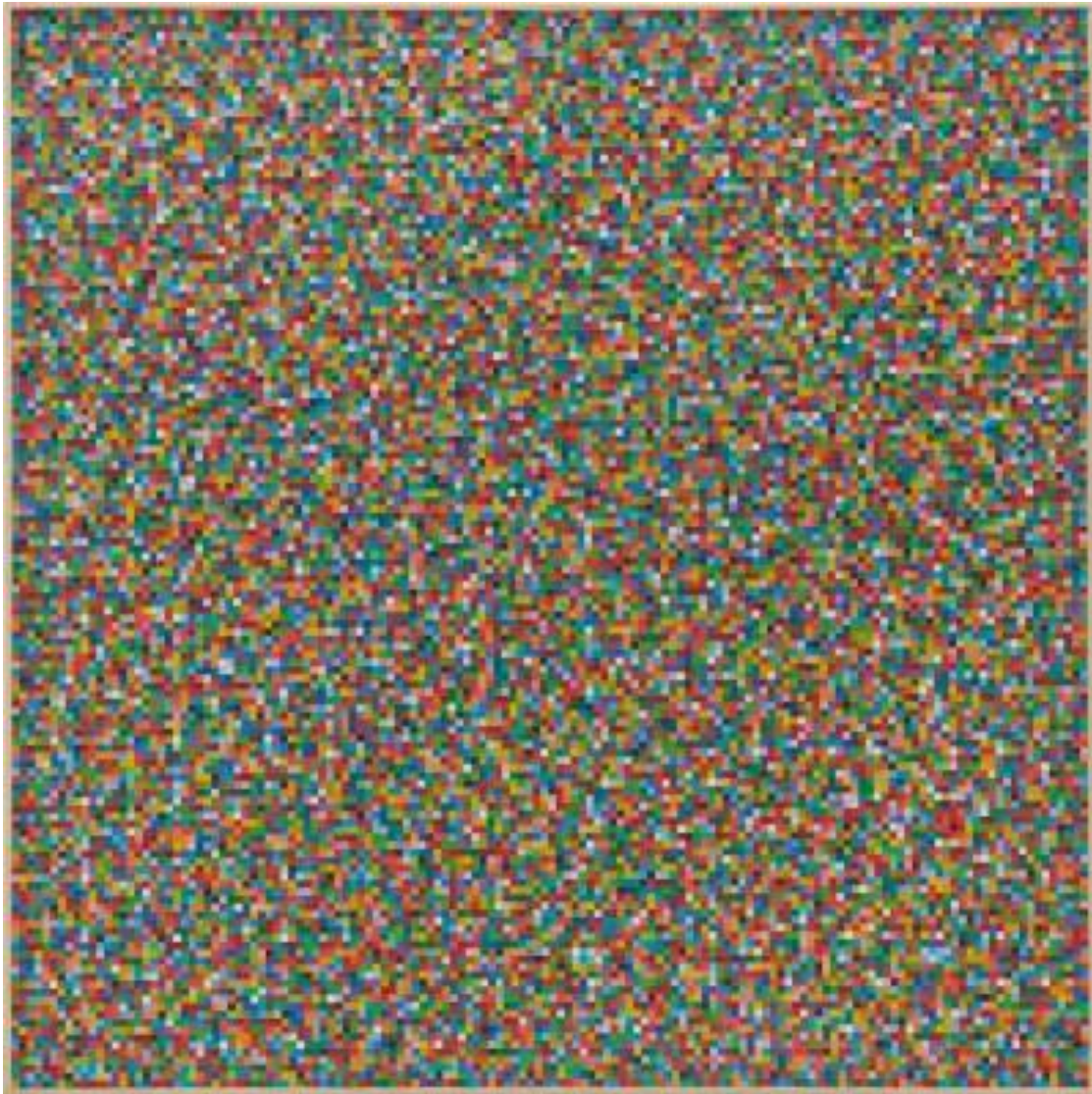
Since the 1970s, Bechara repeatedly painted multihued grids using a method that was as rigorous as the concept behind it. His mind-bending, eye-popping canvases sought to understand abstract notions such as randomness and controlled chaos, and though perhaps less famous than other works in the medium by his New York colleagues, these works have since emerged as some of the most cutting-edge painterly experiments done in an era when painting was commonly pronounced dead.

But Bechara's contributions to the city's art scene extend far beyond what can be shown in galleries and museums. For 18 years, he was board chair at El Museo del Barrio, a museum that specializes in Caribbean and Latin American art, and he was also a trustee at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the *Brooklyn Rail*.

He also was instrumental in stoking greater interest in the work of the painter Carmen Herrera, one of his friends, prior to her death in 2022. When Herrera received a Whitney Museum survey in 2016, Bechara was among those thanked in the credits for it.

Bechara considered his patronage of arts institutions and his promotion of other artists a part of his practice all the same. Of those activities, he **told *Azure***, "They are an extension of my commitment to art, like unfinished murals in which I work during the night."

By day, he worked on his paintings, which he made via a process that involved repeatedly taping and un-taping his canvases, then filling in various areas with brightly colored acrylic. Thousands of quarter-inch squares result, nestled together to form vast grids.



Tony Bechara, *125 Colors*, 1979.

©TONY BECHARA/COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Speaking to his friend, *Brooklyn Rail* editor Phong Bui, he once **described** his process this way: “It begins with taping one layer on the whole canvas vertically, then proceeds the same horizontally. The next thing is to apply the selected color with a small brush, then remove the tape. Repeat this same process on the unpainted squares one more time vertically, then horizontally, then apply the last layer of colors. What I love is the degrees of surprise every time; to take each layer of tape off the canvas is to reveal new worlds of optical symphony.”

This symphonic aesthetic differentiated Bechara’s work from contemporaneous Minimalist experiments made during the 1970s. Whereas those works were cold and unfeeling, Bechara’s art is overflowing with color. It also slyly finds ways of exceeding its rigid structure, with some squares slightly growing past their frame and others flowing onto the sides of his canvases. Critic John Yau recently noted that Bechara’s process “undermines any sense of stability that we associate with a grid.”

To contemporary eyes, these paintings look like computer screens, with each square acting as something like a pixel. But Bechara started producing the grid paintings during the early 1970s, at a time when they would not have had that connotation. At the time, he instead believed his paintings would help him understand the nature of perception.

“Since I have the grid as a structure,” he told Bui, “I trust each painting to tell me what to do, how to be more random, or less random. It is always the surprise element that I find alluring.”



Tony Bechara, *Abstract Composition*, 1970–71.

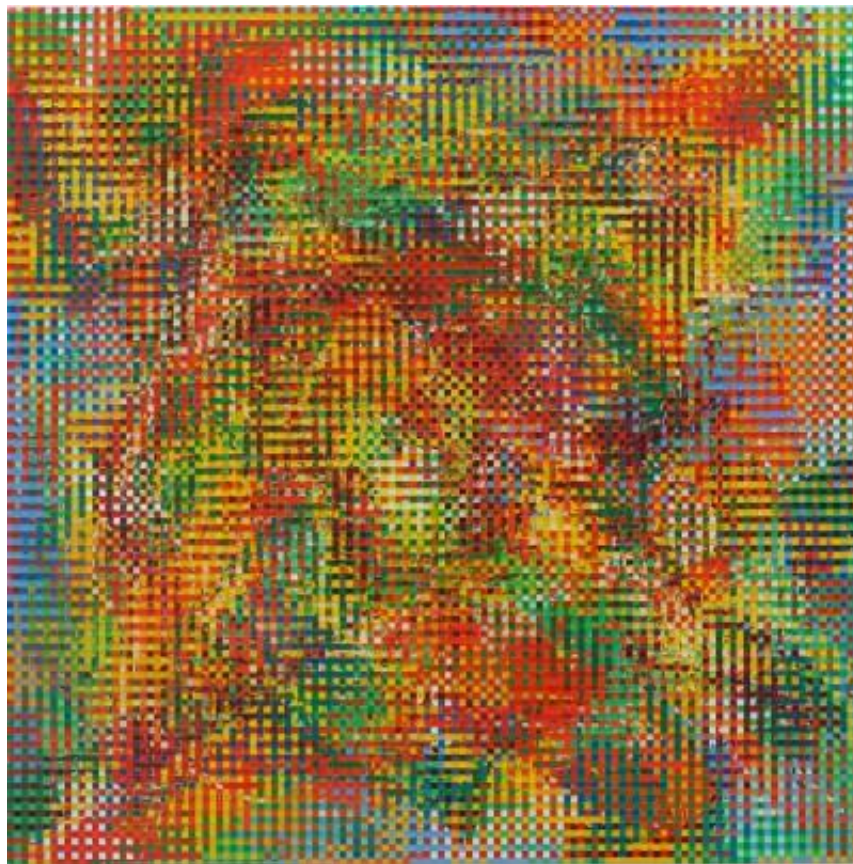
©TONY BECHARA/COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Tony Bechara was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1942. His mother hailed from Majorca, Spain; his father, from Beirut. Bechara attended school in San Juan, then was sent by his parents to prep school at the New York Military Academy. At his parents' urging, he studied philosophy and economics as an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, then re-enrolled as a graduate student. His parents "didn't believe I could make a living being an artist," he told the *Brooklyn Rail*, noting that they really wanted him to become a lawyer.

Bechara successfully persuaded his parents to then let him spend two years studying history at the Sorbonne in Paris, then to let him travel across Western Europe. He returned to New York, attending NYU's international relations graduate program.

Then he started drifting toward art, initially creating figurative paintings in his spare time. Ultimately, in 1967, he enrolled at the School of Visual Arts, where his professors included painters such as Robert Mangold and Malcolm Morley, as well as the art historian Lucy Lippard. Inspired by Italian Neorealist movies, he started to paint black-and-white figurative imagery, and he even thought briefly of becoming a filmmaker himself.

He grew interested in opticality, and his focus sharpened towards sights seen and works experienced: paintings by Titian and Tintoretto viewed in Italy; Post-Impressionist works by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac encountered in France, along with the color theories of M. E. Chevreul that inspired them; mosaics and calligraphy seen at the Alhambra in Spain. He was thus on his way to painting his grids.



Tony Bechara, *ohne Titel*, 2008.

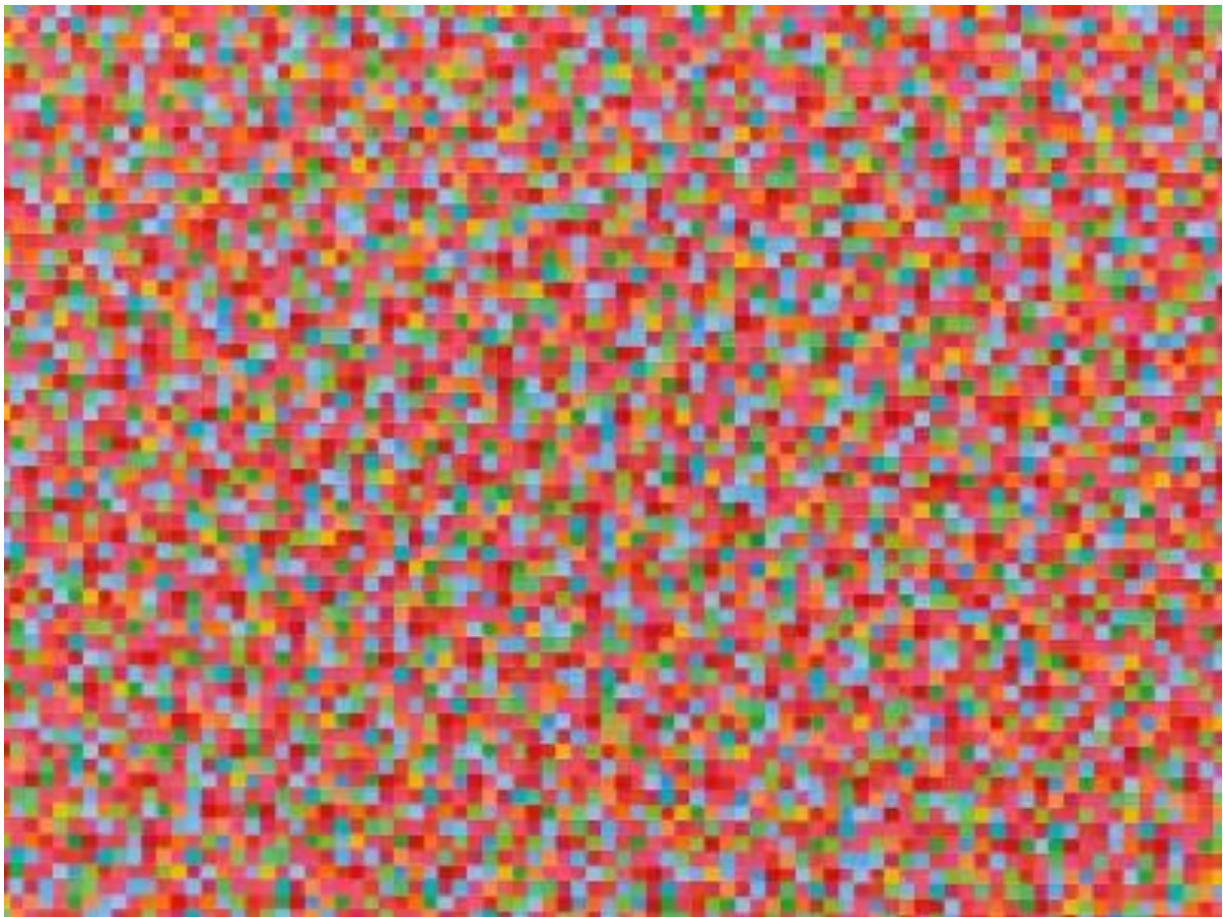
©TONY BECHARA/COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Those grid paintings began showing up in some prominent places. Bechara appeared in the 1975 Whitney Biennial. Then, a decade later, he was given a solo show at El Museo del Barrio, which had never before mounted an exhibition of abstract art.

Bechara became chair of El Museo del Barrio in 1996 and helped steer the museum through a period when it faced criticism. Some in the surrounding neighborhood claimed that, in expanding its purview to increasingly center on Latin America, the institution had stopped caring as much about Puerto Rican art, its initial area of focus. Bechara dismissed those claims, **telling the *New York Times***, “If the criticism is that we’re not an ethnocentric gallery, then that’s fair. But our ambition and our mission demand that we become a world-class museum, open to all people.”

He weathered a different kind of controversy in 2013, when Margarita Aguilar **filed a complaint with the New York State Division of Human Rights**, claiming that she had faced discrimination when she was let go as El Museo del Barrio’s director. In her initial lawsuit, Aguilar claimed Bechara had said she and another staff member were “acting like hysterical women” when Aguilar tried to fire an employee. Bechara denied this, and the lawsuit was ultimately dismissed.

Although he left his post in 2016, Bechara remained a key figure for the museum, donating \$1 million in 2019 in support of its curatorial and education departments.



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Red version)*, 2023.

©TONY BECHARA/COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

“I had the honor of working my entire tenure with him at El Museo del Barrio and could have not dreamed of a better and more caring Chair than Tony,” Julián Zugazagoitia, the director of El Museo del Barrio from 2002 to 2010, told *ARTnews* in an email. “He was both visionary having the greatest aspirations for El Museo. He was always encouraging and allowing for risk taking when needed, yet careful in planning and patient when essential.”

“Tony’s passing is an extraordinary loss for El Museo del Barrio and for the entire arts community,” Patrick Charpenel, El Museo del Barrio’s current director, said in a statement. “He was a force of nature. His vision and leadership helped pave the way for what El Museo is today, and his legacy will continue to inspire generations to come.”

In recent years, an unprecedented level of attention was paid to his art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired its first Bechara painting in 2023. The next year, he joined the roster of Lisson Gallery.

All the while, he continued painting. Asked about his late-career work in 2015 by *AzureAzure*, he said, “As I create my work, I am obsessively driven to the search for the divine accident ... what we call a Eureka moment ... that unknown path that, as poetry or song says, is only found as you walk through it.”

LISSON GALLERY

Hyperallergic
25 April 2025

Puerto Rican Painter and NYC Arts Advocate Tony Bechara Dies at 83

His more than 50-year career balanced a meticulous abstract practice and a passionate commitment to underrepresented artists.

Maya Pontone April 25, 2025



Tony Bechara painting in his studio in 2018 (photo by Maku López, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Painter and printmaker Tony Bechara, whose passionate support for artists helped mold New York City's cultural landscape, died at his home on Wednesday, April 23, on his 83rd birthday. The news of his death was [announced](#) by Lisson Gallery, which presented a [solo exhibition](#) of his work last January.

A pioneering visual artist whose [50-year practice](#) balanced exuberant spontaneity with measured precision, Bechara spent most of his life residing and working in New York. He was widely recognized for his fervent support of historically underrepresented artists, many of whom were his peers, like Carmen Herrera and Leon Polk Smith, and his advocacy for Latine arts and institutions such as El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem.



Tony Bechara, "Abstract Composition" (1970-1) (© Tony Bechara, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1942, Bechara initially traveled to Washington, DC, to study law at Georgetown University, where he received his Bachelor's degree. Uncertain about this career trajectory, Bechara subsequently traveled to Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne for a year while becoming immersed in the city's arts and culture landscape. It was there that he developed a passion for painting.

Back in the United States in the early 1960s, Bechara enrolled at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, developing a painting technique defined by a system of controlled chaos. Through experimental automatic painting techniques and meticulous premeditated grid-making, he explored the never-ending possibilities of color.



Tony Bechara, “Carib” (1973) (courtesy El Museo del Barrio)

In addition to his art practice, Bechara was an active member of New York’s Latine and Latin American arts community, serving on the board of several local arts organizations including the Studio in a School, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and El Museo del Barrio, where he was board chairman for 15 years. He was named chairman emeritus in 2016 and remained a vital force at the museum, donating \$1 million in 2018 to the institution’s endowment to support its curatorial and education programs. In a 2015 interview with *AzureAzure*, Bechara described this cultural patronage as akin to “artistic projects”: “They are an extension of my commitment to art, like unfinished murals in which I work during the night.”

Patrick Charpenel, executive director of El Museo del Barrio, said Bechara was “a catalytic presence in New York’s art world.”

“His own artistic practice was groundbreaking, and his deep commitment to championing overlooked artists helped expand and diversify the canon of art history,” Charpenel said in a statement to *Hyperallergic*.



Tony Bechara, “19 Reds” (2015) (courtesy Parrish Art Museum)

Throughout his lifetime, Bechara’s dynamic compositions were spotlighted in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including *Ten Puerto Rican Artists* (1970) at the Brooklyn Museum, the 1975 Whitney Biennial, and *The Shaped Field: Eccentric Formats* (1981) at MoMA PS1.

Today his work can be found in the collections of institutions such as Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, El Museo del Barrio, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Parrish Art Museum, whose Executive Director Mónica Ramírez-Montagut described Bechara as “a role model of all that can be accomplished in a life.” Earlier this year, Bechara gifted his painting “19 Reds” (2015) to the museum’s collection.

“His legacy lives on in the vibrant and pulsating geometry of his paintings,” Ramírez-Montagut told *Hyperallergic*, “and in his unwavering commitment to uplifting artists and the creative community.”

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Artforum

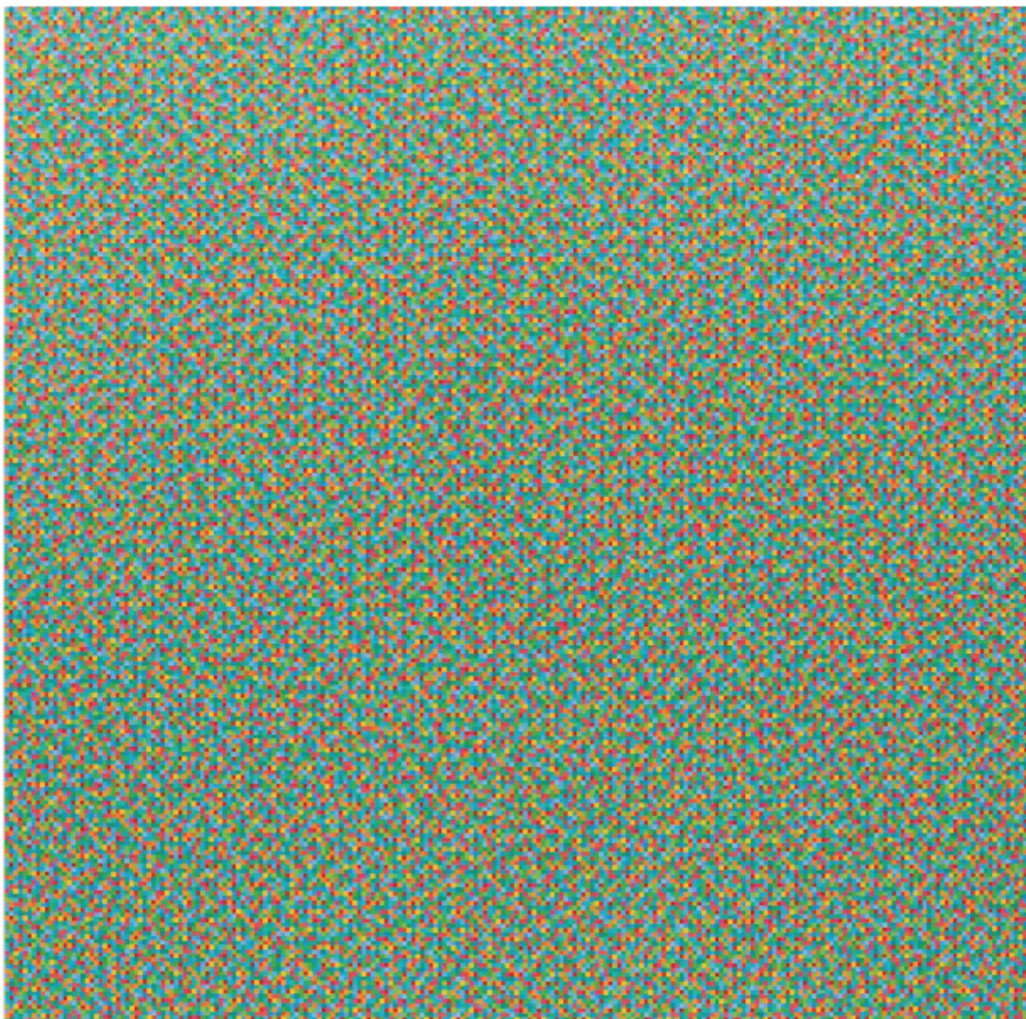
1 April 2024

ARTFORUM

Tony Bechara

Lisson Gallery | 508 West 24th Street | New York

By Davida Fernández-Barkan ☒



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Green version)*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60".

His art appeared in the Whitney Biennial in 1975, was the subject of a solo show a decade later at El Museo del Barrio, and was exhibited at MoMA PS1, the Museum of Modern Art's outpost in Long Island City, Queens.

His works are in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City; the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn.; the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass.; and the Museo de Arte in San Juan, P.R.

A book by Mr. Bechara, "Tony Bechara: Annotations on Color Schemes" is scheduled to be published this year.

Antonio Jose Bechara was born on April 23, 1942, in San Juan. His mother, Rosa Margarita Martinez, was from Majorca, Spain. His father, Francisco Bechara, who was of Lebanese descent, operated a limestone quarry and was a developer.

Mr. Bechara is survived by a sister, Maria Rosa Bechara Escudero. His wife, Judith, and two brothers died earlier.

After graduating from the New York Military Academy, he earned a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and attended Georgetown Law School (his parents wanted him to join the family business). He persuaded them to let him study at the Sorbonne and returned to New York in 1967, where he received a master's degree in international relations from New York University and enrolled in the School of Visual Arts.

Mr. Bechara passionately championed painting and its pre-eminence in the art world.

"As long as there are color pigments, and the fact that no technology ever can substitute this old practice, which has existed since cave paintings, way before language and the written words were invented," he said, "painting culture will always be with us."

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Tony Bechara's first solo exhibition with Lisson Gallery followed a curious format. The far end of the 508 West Twenty-Fourth Street space was reserved for a single canvas: *125 Colors*, 1979. Like the eight other works on view, it featured a grid of differently hued squares, each one a quarter inch in length and width. On one adjacent wall were three paintings larger than the central composition; on the other were five smaller ones. The palette of the pieces on the two flanking walls, each made in 2023 and variously titled *Random 28 (Blue version)*, *Random 28 (More Yellow version)*, *Random 28 (Red version)*, and so on, was more restricted than that of the central work, as they offered up only the titular number of hues, with the namesake shade dominating each canvas.

Bechara realizes his colored grids through a process he characterizes as “painting blind”: Using vertical and horizontal strips of quarter-inch tape to divide his canvases into masked and unmasked squares, he first paints the uncovered spaces. The artist then hides these sections to work on the rest of the composition. Employing a predetermined method that bars him from viewing the whole canvas while he paints, Bechara limits his own agency in the creation of the optical effects that interest him. It is no accident that he began to develop this approach—which he says produces “pixels”—during the 1970s, when computer technology began its steady march into everyday life. In 1974, tech firm Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems (MITS) conceived the Altair 8800, the world's first commercially viable personal computer. Three years later, consumers could choose similar machines for the home released by Apple, Commodore, and Radio Shack—aka, the “1977 Trinity.” Of course, the digital operating systems that promised to perform calculations at a previously unimaginable rate and scale became a threat to human labor, eliminating vast swaths of the workforce.

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

These techno-economic shifts also complicated the labor of artists. That Bechara was not the only one to work with the systematized colored grid during the postwar period (Gerhard Richter and François Morellet readily spring to mind) is only further evidence of the computer's inescapable psychological impact. Industrialization and its ready-made tubes of paint that no longer required mixing had led Marcel Duchamp to supplant craftsmanship with choice, as Thierry de Duve famously discussed in the pages of this publication almost forty years ago. Likewise, computer automation forced artists such as Bechara to find a way back to human agency, to the hand. Each square in his grids is painstakingly executed. Many are imperfect—they do not align impeccably with one another, and pigment often creeps into a neighboring square; it sometimes peels off the surface. The acrylics Bechara uses gives his edges a dimensional quality, emphasizing associations with textile weaving or basketry. The artist meets the preprogrammed system with idiosyncrasy and defect: in short, with humanity.

What historical conditions encourage a reinvigoration of the colored grid now? Although artificial intelligence has been around since the 1950s, it became impossible to ignore in 2023. From university classrooms to the halls of the US Congress and even the social media accounts of art museums, anxiety about human redundancy has never been higher. This anxiety might be mapped onto the greater control that Bechara seems to exert over the various versions of *Random 28*: Instead of granting each of the colors in his predetermined formula an equal opportunity to land on the grid, he emphasizes various permutations of blue, red, yellow, and green—to dazzling effect. Each jewel-toned sea Bechara crafts gives way to a scintillating field of optical confetti as the viewer gets closer to the work's surface. There is much hand-wringing about technology's new capabilities, yet Bechara's art suggests the potential for opportunity rather than obstruction.

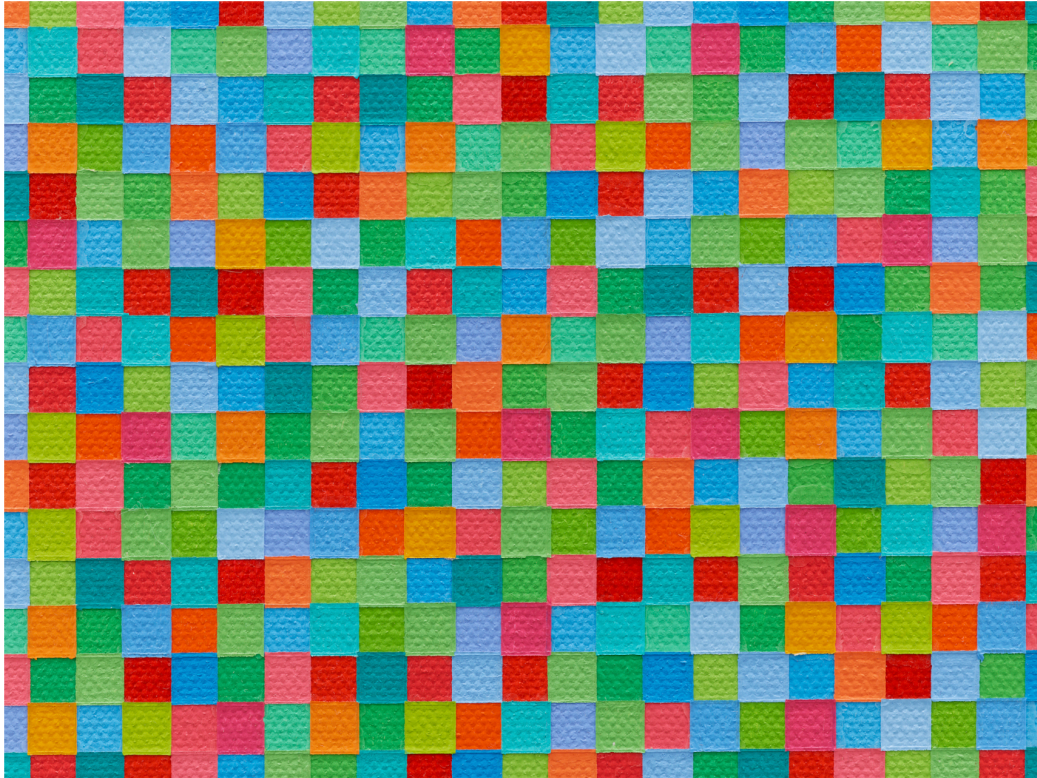
LISSON GALLERY

Hyperallergic
14 February 2024

HYPERALLERGIC

Tony Bechara Creates Chaos With Grids

Bechara's grid paintings are dazzling, engaging, and unsettling, since they undermine any sense of stability that we associate with a grid.



Tony Bechara, "Random 28 (Green version)," detail (2023), acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 inches (all images © Tony Bechara, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Tony Bechara is the least-known member of a loosely affiliated group of abstract artists who developed a meticulous approach to the phenomenology of color. Centered in New York around Hunter College, where Sanford Wurmfeld, Gabriele Evertz, Vincent Longo, and Robert Swain taught for many years, this group (active since at least the mid-1970s) has long been interested in color theory and issues of perception, going back to Josef Albers and Georges Seurat. One reason they have flown under the radar can be extrapolated from the art historian William Agee's observation of Wurmfeld's *Cyclorama* projects, an immersive experience in which the viewer is surrounded by color:

A generation of art, permeated by conceptualism and theory, has devalued the power of the visual; like color itself, as well as art, painting that provides visual pleasure has been seen as too easy, too simple, lacking in “intellectual” depth. This is wrong, for it fails to understand that the mind and eye, the intellect and the senses, cannot be separated, and in fact are inextricably joined in one thinking, feeling body. Sensory intelligence and visual intelligence are fundamental to our being. The visual is profound, for it is how we see and thus how we comprehend the world.

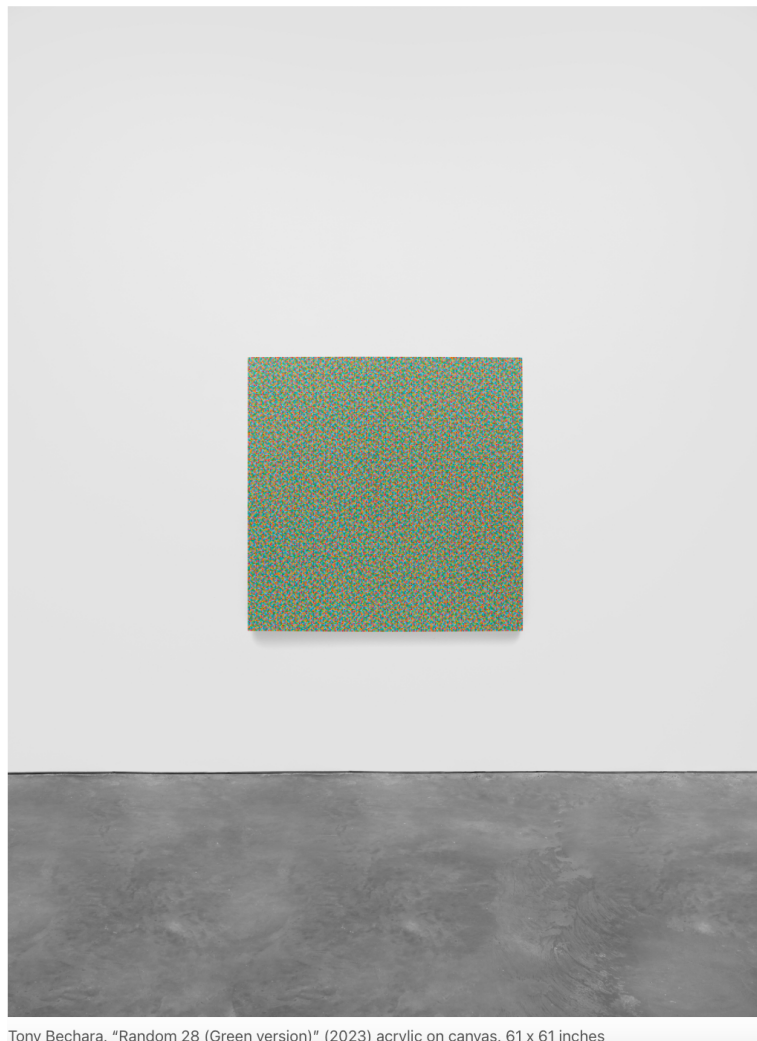
Although I knew of Bechara from conversations I had with Wurmfeld, I was not prepared for what I encountered in his self-titled debut [exhibition](#) at Lisson Gallery. Working in acrylic on square canvases ranging from 24 by 24 inches to 61 by 61 inches, he divides the entire surface into quarter-inch squares in which he paints one of 28 colors. The colors can shift tonally or sharply. By taping off each vertical line of squares after he has carefully filled every one in, he seamlessly combines rigor and randomness. The result is dazzling, engaging, and unsettling, since it undermines any sense of stability that we associate with a grid. It is the latter aspect that I think is the artist’s contribution to optical, perceptual painting.



Tony Bechara, "Random 28 (Red version)" (2023), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

Bechara begins a painting by determining the number of colors he will use to fill in the grid. Because he covers the previously painted areas with tape (a process he calls “painting blind”), viewers can discover no underlying pattern to the artist’s color choices — which kept this viewer looking and looking.

While all of the exhibition’s seven paintings dated 2023 have a 28-color palette, each one is rendered in a specific set of colors, indicated by the title. (The show also includes one painting from 1979.) For example, the proportions of one color to another can change, as in the identically sized “Random 28 (Red version)” and “Random 28 (Green version).” This phenomenon is evident at a considerable distance from “Random 28 (Red version),” yet as you move closer, the blues, greens, yellows, and oranges become more assertive. The red remains dominant, but not as decisively.



Tony Bechara, "Random 28 (Green version)" (2023) acrylic on canvas, 61 x 61 inches

The sheer number of squares in each painting, and the range of colors Bechara achieves with a predetermined palette, is likely to bring computer screens and pixels to mind. However, his colors and hues are of various saturations. In contrast to most painters interested in color and perception, his paintings are cacophonous, almost shrill. Their lack of order may not be comforting, but it seems very true to our current world situation. Change and rupture are embedded within the works. In those he's done a on a deep stretcher, the painting continues around the sides, making it clear that we cannot see the entire work at once, refuting the principles of Minimalism.

Born in Puerto Rico in 1942, Bechara is in his early 80s. This exhibition seems to be the tip of the iceberg in a career that spans at least 40 years, as the early painting, "125 Colors" (1979), demonstrates. His interest in a dissonant visual experience sets him art from Op artists and many of his peers working in the same vein. He seems to want to test the viewer's ability to visually comprehend his work while initiating a dialogue between the eye and mind about the limits of perception. By embracing the inevitability of chaos and disorder in his paintings, even as he works with rules and boundaries, he brings the subject of mortality into his art.

My one disappointment regarding the show is with Lisson — as a gallery with deep pockets and a publisher of many exhibition catalogues, more should have been done for Bechara's debut exhibition there. A major survey and deep study of the artist are long overdue.



Tony Bechara, "Random 28 (Blue version)" (2023), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

Tony Bechara continues at Lisson Gallery (508 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 17. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

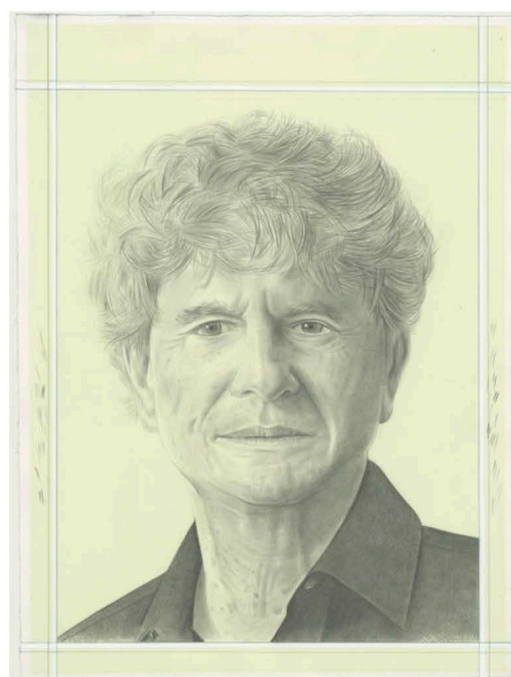
LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
13 December 2023

BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

Tony Bechara with Phong H. Bui

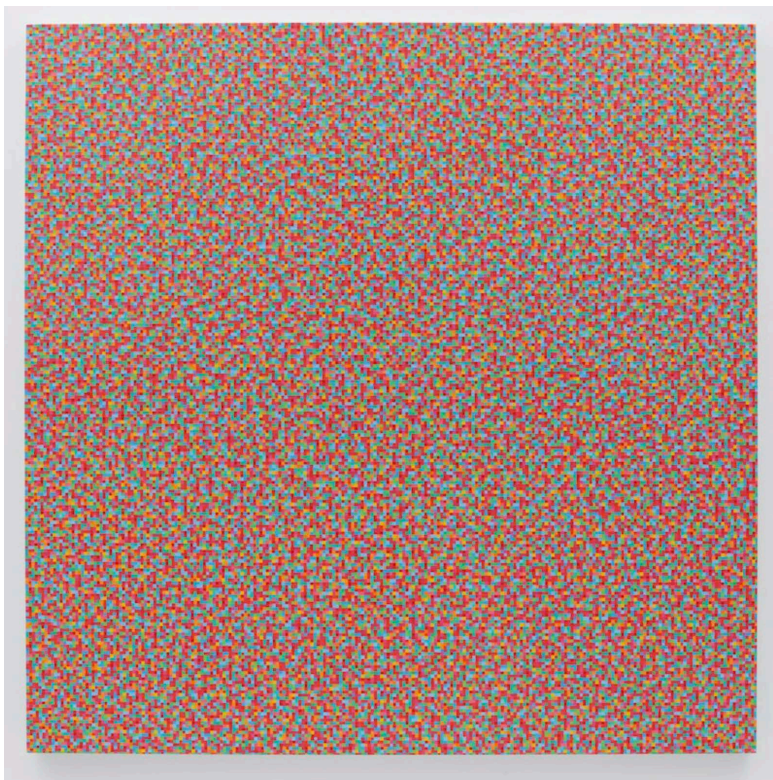


Portrait of Tony Bechara, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

If the notion of privilege depends solely on our origins, what then shapes our directions, from which our lifelong vocation follows, remains a mystery. For many the mere drive towards the season of fruition requires a singular focus on what they make as personal gestures that substitute as merits for their creations. For others, the distance between the private and the public is an unbridgeable chasm that becomes the pretext which dictates how they live their lives. We all know how delicate this balance can be. There are those who must follow their hermetic lives, protecting their solitude to make the work they desire, and those who possess both pleasures: of being solitary in the studio and social in one's cultural life.

ON VIEW
Lisson Gallery
January 11–February 17,
2024
New York

As a personal confession, for the longest time it has been difficult to maintain the fragility of this balance between what I do on a public front: from being a publisher of the *Rail* while curating, writing, and perpetually contributing to many institutions and nonprofits I am deeply involved with; and the need to nurture my private sphere as an artist. It was indeed during the Trump presidency and the pandemic that such boundaries, which had consumed much of my doubt and belief in what I do on both fronts ever since the *Rail* was founded in October 2000, were eliminated. In full disclosure, it was true that I had forged friendships with many during this period, more than I had in the last decade, but it was Tony Bechara's clarity and philosophy of life that had a significant impact on how I see mine. My friendship with Tony was tightened partly because of our shared history. We're both invested board members of Agnes Gund's legendary Studio in a School; with Tony being philanthropist/cultural worker extraordinaire, from being a beloved board of trustee of many institutions, including BAM, Museo del Barrio, and the *Brooklyn Rail*, to having advocated for the visibility and credibility of many artists he had championed for years such as Carmen Herrera, Leon Polk Smith, among countless other overlooked artists, I try to do the same with the *Rail* as platform from which many artists journeys are shared in great depth. We're both immigrants—he was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and I in Hue, Vietnam. And lastly, with luck and reverie, I'm grateful to Tony for his clear path that has inspired me to love my own. On the occasion of Tony's one-person exhibit at Lisson Gallery, I paid a lengthy and pleasurable visit to his studio near Union Square to talk about his life and work. The following is an edited version for your reading pleasure.



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Red version)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Phong H. Bui (Rail): In knowing the complex, interesting and long journey you have taken, born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, from an educated business family: your mother Rosa Martinez Vicens, her side has roots in Majorca, Spain, and your father Francisco Bechara, in Beirut, Lebanon; from having studied at Georgetown University both as an undergrad and grad student, for two years at Sorbonne University, only to return to study two more years at NYU. Can you first share with us such a history? How did all those experiences arrive at an apex of clarity, from which your pursuit to be an artist was determined?

Tony Bechara: It's true that I have an unusual history, including deep roots in Mediterranean culture, but I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where I grew up for most of my youth, and my family is still there. I went to early school in San Juan, before my parents sent me to prep school in the states at the New York Military Academy. Francis Ford Coppola, Fairleigh Dickinson Jr., Stephen Sondheim, and unfortunately Donald J. Trump, are among those who have also gone there. My parents then sent me to study philosophy and economics as an undergrad, then studying law afterward at Georgetown University, too many schools I am afraid, partly because my parents would not send me money unless I was in a proper school. They deeply admire artists but didn't believe I could make a living being an artist. Instead they wanted me to get a BA in business, then a law degree, then go back and work for the family's business.

Rail: The usual story, of course! What next?

Bechara: I knew at some point that I didn't want to become a lawyer, so I left at the tail end, then somehow I was able to convince my parents to let me go to study French history for two years at the Sorbonne, then spending a year traveling extensively in Spain, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe to see art at various museums, architectural landmarks, and so on. Then I was encouraged to return to New York City to attend another grad school for International Relations at NYU, while at the same time, due to what I was exposed to during my travels in Europe, I began making figurative paintings at night and on weekends while thinking the whole time about the prospect of being an artist.

Rail: Which was what compelled you to enroll at SVA (School of Visual Arts) between 1967 to 69?

Bechara: Yes, for two years, and it was an incredible place at that time. One on hand, I was studying under photorealist painters like Joseph Raffael, Malcolm Morley; Pop artists like Steve Gianakos; abstract artists like Robert Mangold and Raymond Hendler; I was also taking anatomy classes with Burne Hogarth, the illustrator of *Tarzan* comic strips, and an amazing art history/critique class with Lucy Lippard. On the other hand, there were visiting artists like Richard Serra, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, and others, who were Minimalist and Post-Minimalist artists, and they too had an impact on my early thinking. And then I took classes with a few among the third generation Ab Ex painters like Michael Lowe, Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg, just to name a few. It was very exciting in all, partly because it was during this period that I underwent a tremendous change in my work—from being a figurative painter to an abstract painter. I mean I was making paintings of the figures in landscapes, painted in a chromatic palette of black and white, from multiple perspectives, referencing everything cinema, from cinematic angle, cinematic feeling to cinematic power rather than the way we would pictorially paint in describing a narrative in painting. In any case, those paintings were made in part because I was interested in neorealist films, new wave films, social realist films, which were mostly shot in black and white, documentary-like structure in order to capture the poverty, the rawness of what was happening in the post-WWII period, from the forties leading to the sixties, often made on locations with non-professional actors, or mixing up professionals and non-professionals together in their castings, from Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), Giuseppe De Santis's *Bitter Rice* (1949), Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Juan Antonio Bardem's *Death of a Cyclist* (1955), as well as other now-classics films by Nasiga Ōshima, Yasujirō Ozu, especially Satyajit Ray—

Rail: Whose life was changed by Jean Renoir when his 1951 *The River* was being filmed in Calcutta. It was Ray who helped Renoir in location scouting. And prior to meeting Renoir, Ray was a young local ad executive, a book-cover designer, and a lover of cinema. Having spent some time with the master, Ray decided to pursue filmmaking as a lifelong vocation.

Bechara: That's right. I, too, thought of becoming a filmmaker, but I realized it would require collaborating with countless people and a long production, etc., etc. After having spent time alone seeing works of art in various museums in Europe, especially the experience of seeing the mosaic masterpieces at the various sites in Ravenna, Basilica di San Vitale, Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, or Mausoleo di Galla Placidia, for example, then having seen the ornamental calligraphy, filled with amazing cursive and kufic writings, and the tile patterns at Alhambra in Granada, all of which were made with such precise geometrical calculations, and the facts that they were hybrid styles, blending characteristics from both Western and Eastern influences in architectural motif and design, and so on, had made me realize

how much I appreciate my solitude and how the hand labor of making things became so apparent that a life devoted to being a painter was far more appealing than being a filmmaker.

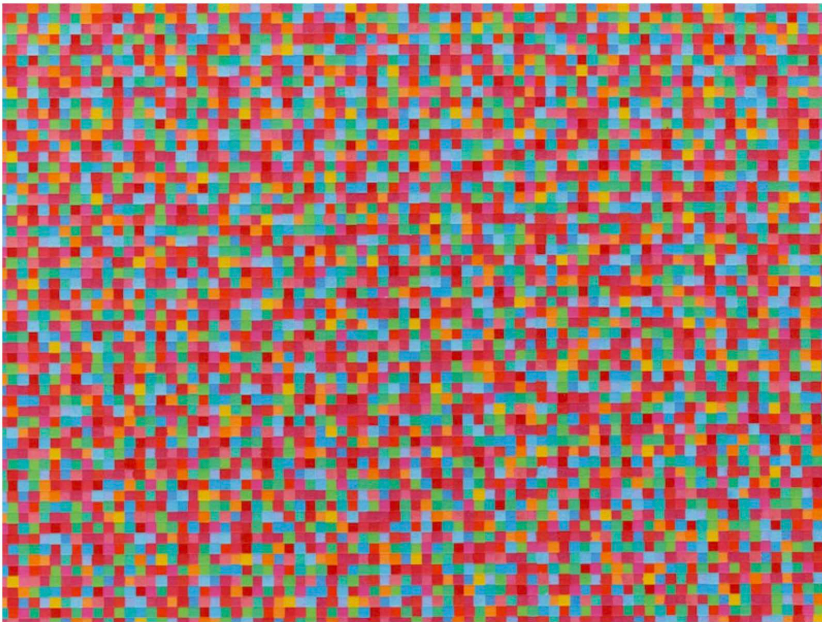
Rail: Super understandable indeed. Were you able to transform those experiences into what you were making while you were a student at SVA?

Bechara: Not until the second year. The first year was a great struggle in trying to figure out how to make paintings with figurative elements and gestural abstraction. I should add I was working as an assistant to Philip Pavia, an Ab Ex sculptor and the founder of the Club, on the weekend, as well as bartending every Friday evening at the second version of the Club, which Philip was trying to recreate on eighth floor of a building on Broadway and 13th Street, not far from his studio, next door to Grace Church, where he would walk to work from his home on Great Jones Street.

Rail: As Philip, in my interview with him for the *Rail's* February/March issue in 2001, told me the Club really got started in the late fall of 1948, which was a significant year in that de Kooning had his first one-man exhibit of the "Black and White" paintings at Charles Egan in April; Gorky died three months later. In fact, the Club, which was founded right across from Hans Hoffman's school, began its first gathering with a memorial panel for Gorky, which went on operating for a good seven years until 1955, then the leadership was passed on to our late friend Irving Sandler, who ran it for another eight years, from 1956 to 1962.

Bechara: Exactly! For having also published *It Is* magazine, even though there were only six issues in its seven years of existence (Spring 1958 to Autumn 1965), it was very influential. Philip had wanted to restart the Club again around 1967, which lasted maybe only two years. It was wonderful, but those that came were mostly artists from the second and third Ab Ex generations, including Milton Resnick, Alfred Leslie, Elaine de Kooning, Pat Passlof, Michael Goldberg, among others. Still, I learned so much about their struggles, the art they each made, and their community. I also enjoyed all the dramas, including one incident when two or more got into a fight, then all the sudden the music was turned on, then everyone rushed to the floor dancing with joy.

Rail: [*Laughter*] Okay, but how the hell did you manage going to school at SVA full-time, working on the weekend for Philip, plus bartending every Friday night at the Club, while keeping up with schoolwork, never mind making a breakthrough in your work, and so on?



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Red version)* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Bechara: When you're young, if you feel inspired enough by someone else, depending how open you are, sleep was never a problem, because I was so excited about everything. I was so curious about what was going on in the New York art world at the time.

Rail: 1967, the year you returned from France, which was the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the national protest against the war in Vietnam, and interestingly it was the very year, among other social unrests, *Artforum* moved from LA to New York, with Philip Leider, being the chief editor at the time, and its inaugural issue in New York, featured three important essays, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," and Sol Lewitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."

Bechara: I remember them all, of course.

Rail: Which essentially added fuel to the ongoing and intense debate between Formalism and Minimalism. But as we all know, it was sculpture that dominated the art world—painting was put on the back burner, which precipitated the first claim of "the death of painting." What were your feelings at the time?

Bechara: My feeling was it was silly, even though the ones who joined this claim were very aggressive. Some of my professors did rally after this claim. For they told me painting is dead and should be dead. I also remember in my response to them very clearly that maybe that's why I'm interested in it, because everyone thinks it's dead. As long as there are color pigments, and the fact that no technology ever can substitute this old practice, which has existed since cave paintings, way before language and the written words were invented, painting culture will always be with us.

Rail: Amen.

Bechara: As I said earlier, SVA was an incredible place in those days. I remember how, by absorbing all the challenging yet useful criticism from my professors, I was able to reconnect to my eureka moment of having been moved by seeing those mosaic masterpieces at the various sites in Ravenna, and Alhambra in Granada, as well as Baroque painting and architecture, including Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1516–18) in the Basilica di Santa Maria dei Frari, or say Tintoretto's *Miracle of the Slave* (1548) at Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, both of which in some ways are very similar in so far as the energy is equally dispersed instead of creating a hierarchical structure, from which the focus of our viewing experience is predetermined. Everything I saw on this trip rushed back as a culminating point that led me on a route to the universe of pixelation that I'm doing now except then it wasn't called "pixelated pixel" then.

Rail: This was when your golden grid was deployed.

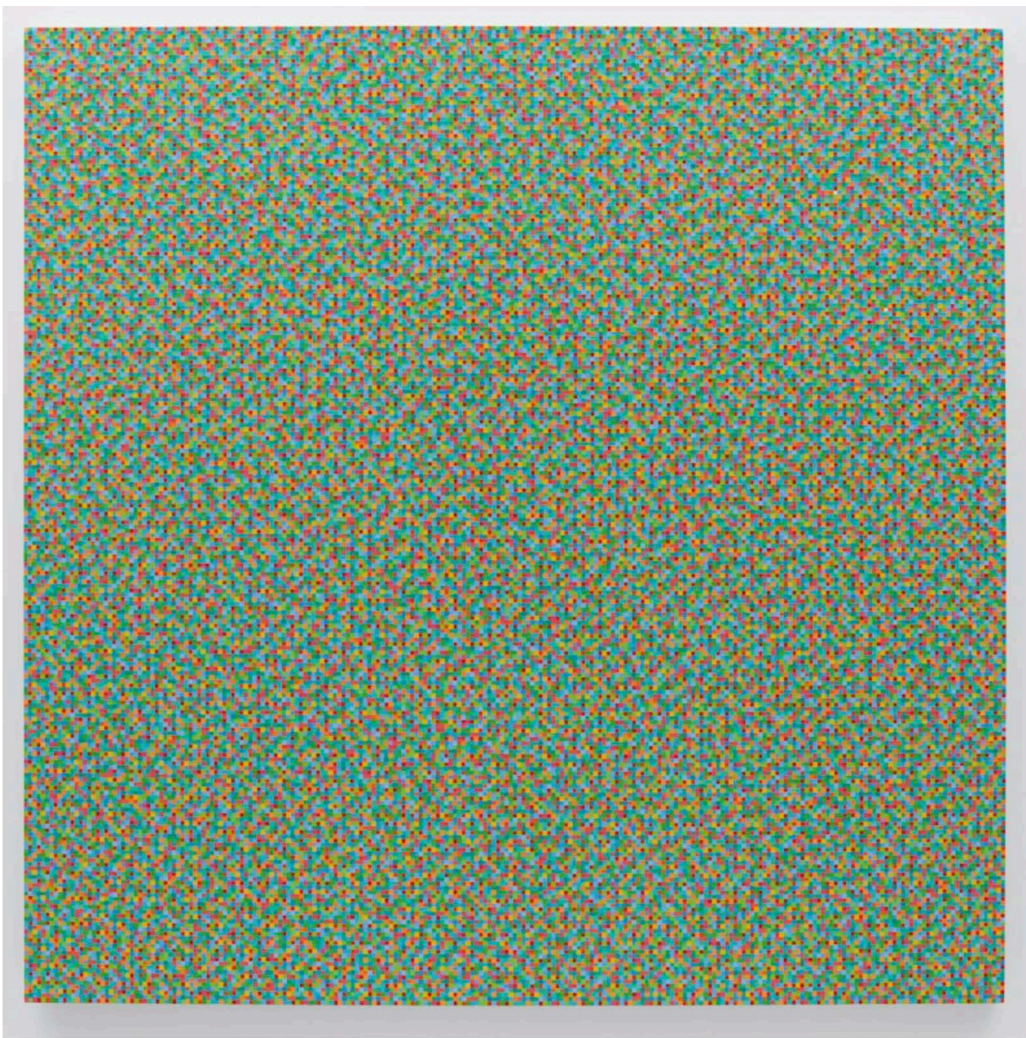
Bechara: Yes, as I'd said, it was in the middle of my second year at SVA, which was also at the same time when I became so fascinated with color, and the mixing of color which soon led to my interest in different optical effects, that in turn led to the psychology of color, then ultimately gave way to my obsession with color theory, from Isaac Newton's color wheel, including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet reflected onto the wall through a glass prism, as demonstrated in his book *Opticks* (1704), to say Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810) which made some adjustment to Newton's theory, especially with the new phenomena such as colored shadows, refraction, chromatic aberration.

Rail: One can say while Newtonian theory of color is more scientific based, Goethean theory includes emotional responses to colors.

Bechara: That's right. Also, I spent lots of time looking at pointillist paintings by Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Henri-Edmond Cross, while continuing to read other books on color, including Michel Eugène Chevreul's classic *The Law of Simultaneous Color Contrast* (1839), Richard Paul Lohse's *New Design in Exhibitions* (1953), Johannes Itten's *The Elements of Color* (1961), and Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color* (1963).

Rail: The latter two taught at the Bauhaus.

Bechara: Exactly, although in Itten's work there's an affinity to mysticism, which became a conflict with Walter Gropius who wanted the Bauhaus focusing on making objects for mass production.



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Green version)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Rail: Holy cow Tony! You really have your interest in color under your thumb. My question now is how does each painting get made, where does it begin?

Bechara: For every painting, I first use the one-quarter inch masking tape to create the grid, dividing the surface across equally. There are four stages of taping. It begins with taping one layer on the whole canvas vertically, then proceeds the same horizontally. The next thing is to apply the selected color with a small brush, then remove the tape. Repeat this same process on the unpainted squares one more time vertically, then horizontally, then apply the last layer of colors. What I love is the degrees of surprise every time; to take each layer of tape off the canvas is to reveal new worlds of optical symphony.

Rail: And each painting is painted with acrylic, not oil, on raw or unprimed linen, am I right?

Bechara: Yes, because oil, which I love, takes too long to dry, and it doesn't react well to being covered and uncovered by masking tape. Whereas with acrylics, each layer can dry overnight, while remaining very resilient. As far as how the selection of colors is chosen, each is determined by certain groups

of colors I have painted already in my sketch book, which I have hundreds of by this point. I should also add that despite the popularity of William C. Seitz's exhibit *The Responsive Eye* at MoMA in 1965, Op art was never treated very kindly by many New York intellectuals like Tom Hess and Harold Rosenberg who hated it. Hess referred to it as a "chronic international disease" and Rosenberg called it the "Premature Echo," for example.

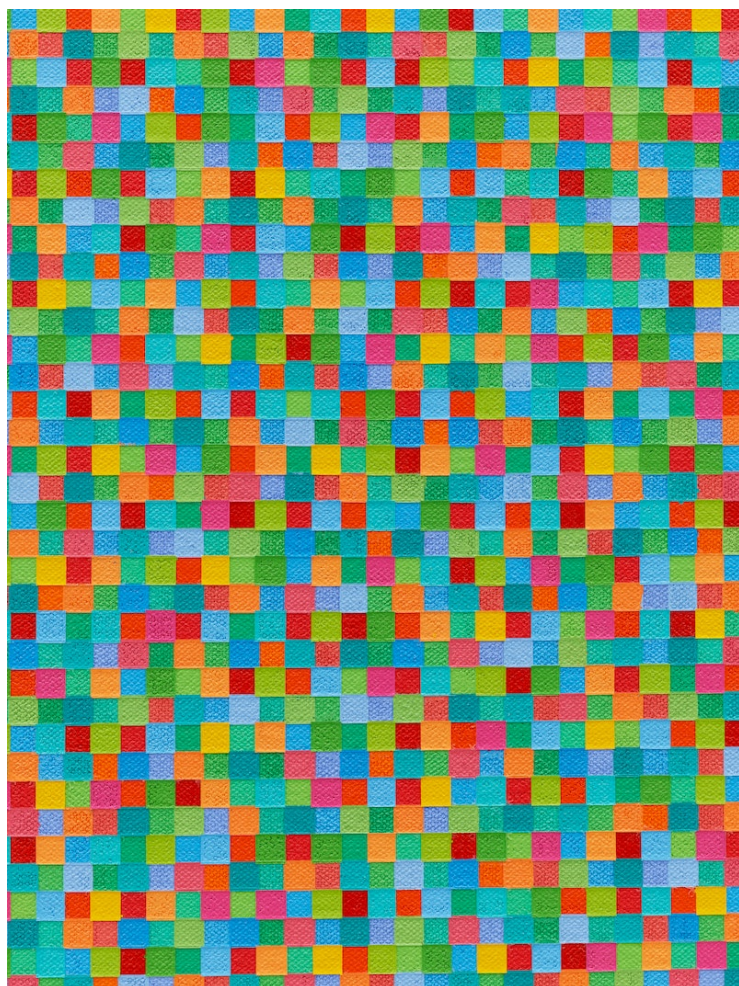
Rail: The exhibit caused the then *New York Times* chief art critic John Canaday to write an overwhelmingly positive review, and Mike Wallace responded similarly in his TV show at the time.

Bechara: And it's true that many artists in that show are being reconsidered in the past few years, including Max Bill from Switzerland, Bridget Riley from England, Piero Dorazio from Italy, Julian Stanczak from Poland, Victor Vasarely from Hungary, both Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto were from Venezuela, among many others. It was a world-wide phenomenon to say the least for those who were fascinated by the psychology of optics, by the neurological reactions to colors, and how colors affect us physically and emotionally. There's no need to defend it now, but essentially *The Responsive Eye* was an international exhibit and New York was not ready for when it was shown at that time. To prove the point, in 2016, Jorge Daniel Veneciano, the former director of El Museo del Barrio, curated an exhibit response to *The Responsive Eye* called *The Illusive Eye*, an international survey on Kinetic and Op art, which offered a broad intellectual context for Op art and geometric abstraction, one that goes against the grain of formalist art history, featuring many artists from Europe, mixing up artists from America, and Latin America, for example Ernesto Briel from Cuba; Lygia Clark from Brazil; José Pedro Costigliolo from Uruguay; Omar Rayo from Colombia, Norberto Gómez from Argentina, just to name a few.

Rail: Which garnered so many reviews, from *New York Times*, *Observer* to *Artforum*, and so many others. In fact, I loved seeing your work representing Puerto Rico in the exhibit. Holland Cotter praised Carmen Herrera's "Black and White Paintings," which overlapped with her one-person exhibit at the inaugurated Lisson Gallery in Chelsea in the same year. How would you describe your first mature paintings in reference to the grid and to color?

Bechara: It was thrilling I must say in having discovered the grid as a perpetual structure and the color "pixels" as fields of different moods, or temperatures, if you like. In some cases, certain subtle vibrations can be achieved by a monochromatic color, various shades of red in a painting entitled *Red Skin*, painted in 1971, which literally referred to the skin of the red color for example. In other cases, a painting entitled *Carib* (1982) the

color selection is wider and richer in its spectrum while the scattered distribution is far more vibrant. I'd say some can be very calming while others are unpredictably wild and vivid, like *Tyger Tyger* (1975), which was inspired by William Blake's famous poem "The Tyger," which was published as part of his *Songs of Experience* (1794). I just love the framing of symmetry that suggests the artist himself is making sure all the proportions of his project are correct.



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Green version)* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Rail: Do you think growing up in Puerto Rico, a tropical marine environment with unpredictable and extreme weather, which can be super dramatic, from one beautiful calming minute to a thunderous pouring rain, has some effects on how you subconsciously relate to your color sensibility?

Bechara: Definitely. *Tyger Tyger* is a good example, because instead of the orthogonal structure, what we see is a network of curvilinear forms bursting with kinetic energy, moving with speed outward from the central axis. While it's true that I've always been mindful of how to maintain the balance between the given structure of the grid and the color selections from the outset, which refers to one side of my restrained sensibility, and the permission to welcome

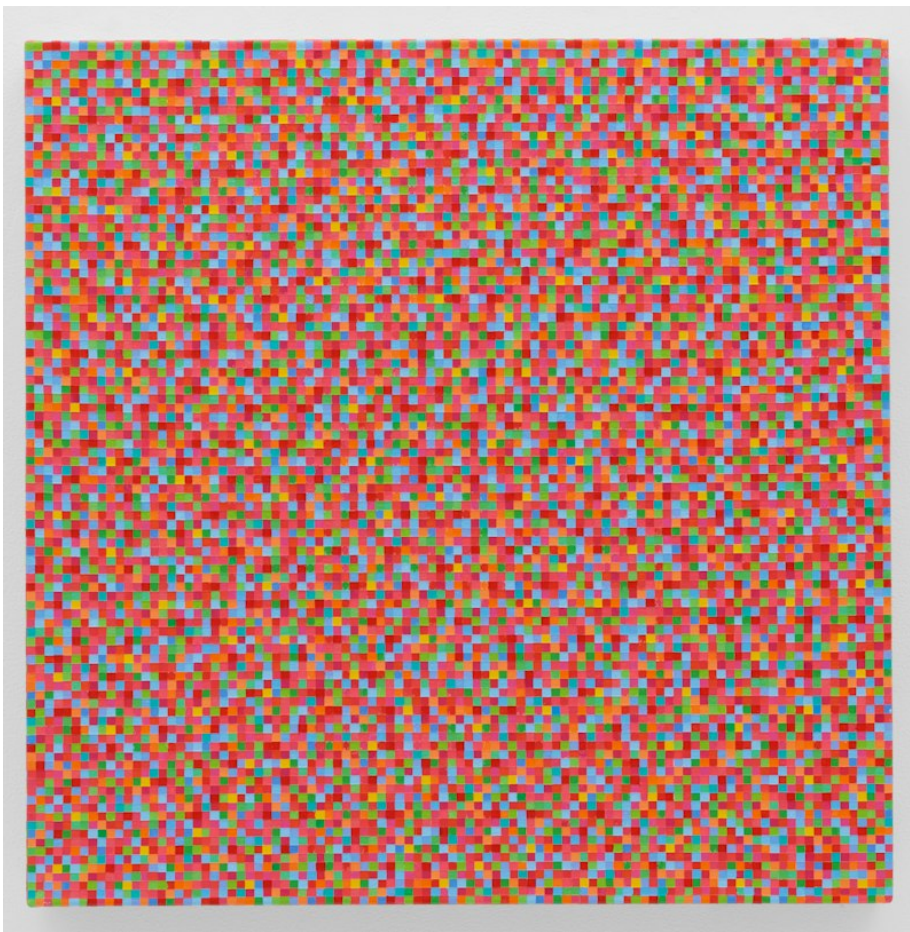
spontaneity, chance operation, surprise occurrence that relates to my other unrestrained side. I've learned to enjoy this delicate balance by trusting what the paintings ask me to carry out.

Rail: Is it fair to say that while most American Minimal artists who had deployed the grid in the sixties and seventies, whether it's true or untrue in the direct reference to their inherent Puritanical roots, the collective aspirations as it seem was aimed towards minimal expression, whereas artists elsewhere, from Europe, Eastern Europe to Latin America, for whom the grid was simply a structure from which they each can explore differently, in different directions as we spoke in the international emergence of Op art—I mean one can think of you as a maximal Minimalist, instead of say being a draconian Minimalist.

Bechara: It's true in both cases, but who would care about being given a label? I mean, once you're boxed in or framed by an art historical analysis, it can be detrimental to simplistic reading of the work. Take Leon Polk Smith, for example, whose work I've been admiring for a longtime. In fact, my studio on 19th Street was once his studio. What I meant to say is Leon was born near Chickasha, a year later Oklahoma became the 46th state in 1907. His parents were products of Cherokee extraction. While it's true that Leon's early works had strong reference to Mondrian's and De Stijl's reductive aesthetic say in the early forties, in his mature works by the mid to the late fifties, it would be too easy to place his work in the context of his two peers say Ellsworth Kelly and Myron Stout. I'd emphatically say Leon's personal use of flatness yet dynamism in his abstraction is undoubtedly related to Kiowa ledger drawing, tipis, not to mention the flatland of the Great Plains, among other subtle references to his early roots.

Bechara: That's right! [*Laughter*] I feel all artists are sensitive to where they came from, their roots, their first homes, just as much as how they adapt themselves into new environments. Carmen's abstraction is directly related to her deep interests in asceticism and architecture, whereas in Leon's case, the underlying explorations of identity and race in his abstraction may or may not be revealed.

Rail: Super true Tony. Can you describe your interest in entropy, randomness or disorder?



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Red version)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Bechara: First, while entropy as an idea which refers to the notion of randomness or disorder, if it is tied to our aesthetic responses, especially to the made objects as opposed to natural objects, then our sensual or sensory perception, including our sense of seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching—

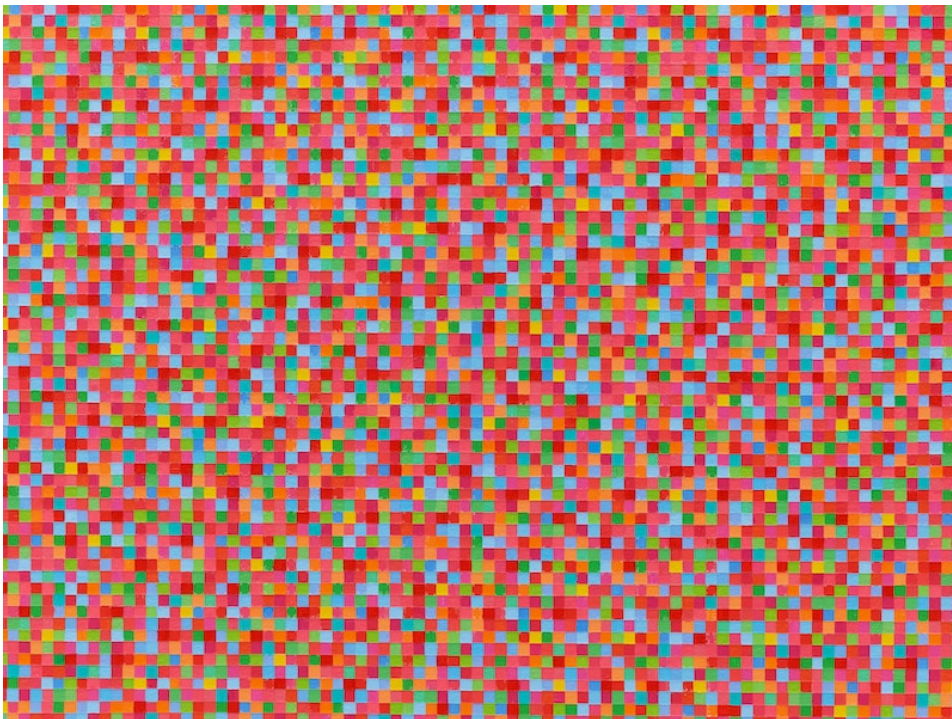
Rail: Plus, the two lesser-known senses, vestibular and proprioception, which are connected to our sense of touch, especially the vestibular sense involves movement and balance.

Bechara: Yes, all of which led me to think that there really is no such thing as randomness. It's just a point of view, a perspective, which led me to use the concept of randomness as a tool. Since I have the grid as a structure, I trust each painting to tell me what to do, how to be more random, or less random. It is always the surprise element that I find alluring.

Rail: So, you surrender to this process, as Georges Braque once said, “In a painting, what counts is the unexpected.”

Bechara: Yeah, it's the randomness that I could control, what is otherwise known as controlled chaos. Do you remember Dr. Alexander Fleming, who in 1928, after having returned to his laboratory from a holiday, discovered a

mold growing on a Petri dish of Staphylococcus bacteria on his desk? He immediately noticed the mold seemed to be preventing the bacteria around it from growing. He realized the mold itself created a self-defense chemical that could kill bacteria. That was how penicillin was discovered. I think that the moment, the so-called accident, is very much part of the creative process. Not only in science, but in art, among other fields. It's proven so many times while you're looking for A and suddenly you ended up with B, and B would lead you to C or D or F and that's the direction that you would follow. For, in my experience, the philosophical meaning of an accident is just fascinating.



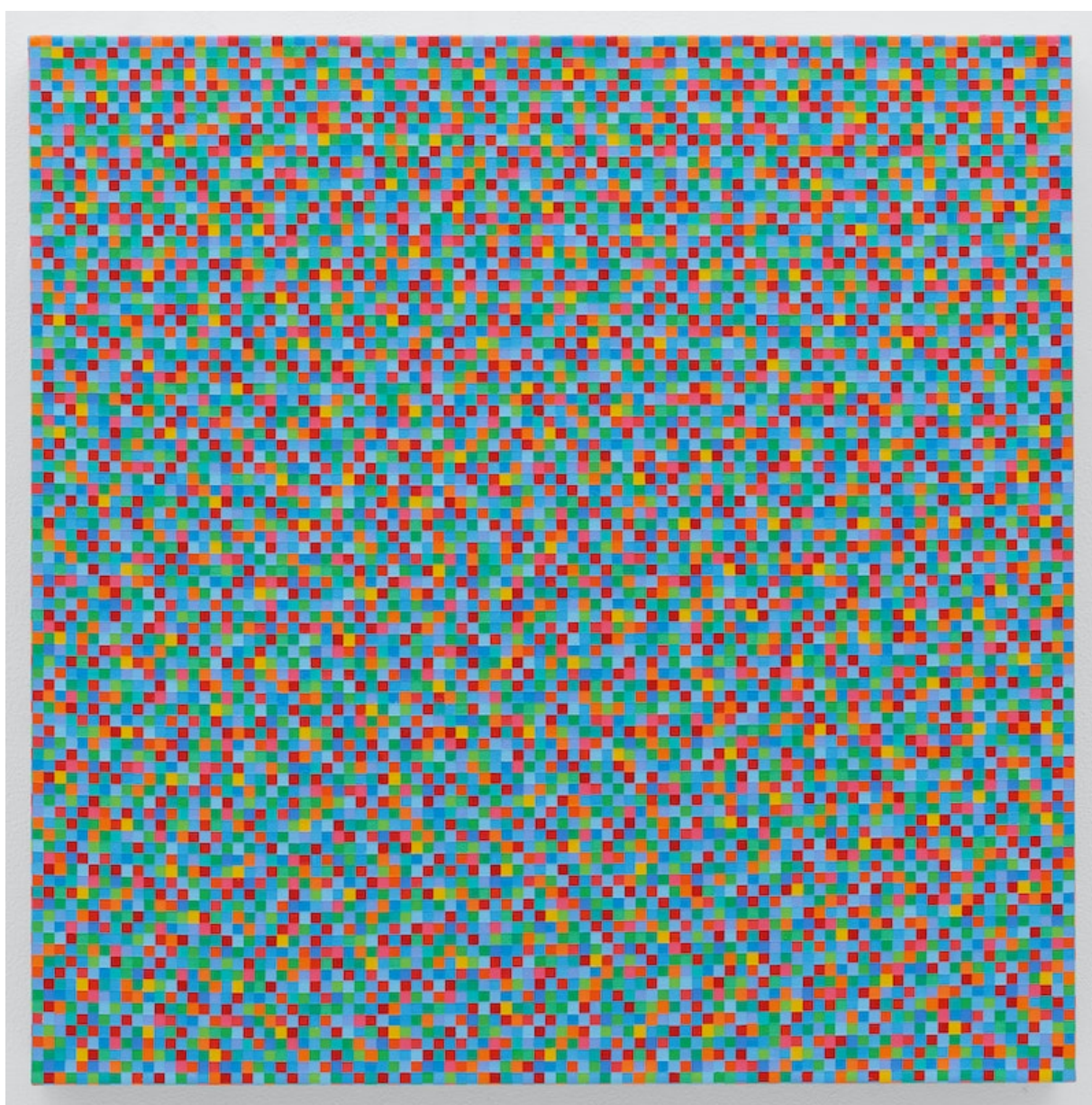
Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Red version)* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Rail: Yes, indeed, and the key work is philosophy, which means to love wisdom. At any rate, I have noticed two additional things about your work: One, you've painted on various configurations, from vertical, horizontal, triangle to tondo, diptych, among others—not just square, although square seems, as this exhibit indicates, to be the predominant preference. Two: most, if not all of the four sides in the small paintings, 24 by 24 by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches *Random 28 (Red version)*, *Random 28 (Blue version)*, *Random 28 (Green version)*, and *Random 28 (More Yellow version)*, were painted as a continuous surface, whereas in the bigger ones, 60 by 60 inches, *Random 28 (Red version)*, *Random 28 (Blue version)*, *Random 28 (Green version)*, and *Random 28 (More Yellow version)*, their sides were left unpainted. What are your thoughts on these two decisions?

Bechara: Well, it's a matter of scale, don't you think so?

Rail: That was my next question, in fact!

Bechara: It's as much a pragmatic response as a psychological one in how we all can read what's right in proportion and what looks amazing with the right scale. This is to say with the increments of one-quarter-inch squares in the grid, which is considerably small on a painted surface of 60 by 60 inches format, it therefore doesn't require the four sides to be painted. Whereas with the small canvases, the 16 by 16 inches with the sides being $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches, the perennial Renaissance window into which to go into another world seems trivial, so, instead, to have the painted surface continuing onto the four edges of the canvases just feels right to enhance the painting's objecthood.



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Blue version)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Rail: Definitely. In fact, not only the physical object-ness of the painting is enhanced, so is its tactility. In other words, the urge to hold the painting, to touch the painted surface is very strong. My late friend the great painter Thomas Nozkowski referred to this scale as “reasonable-sized painting,” which essentially implies that the urge to tuck the painting under your arm is irresistible.

Bechara: [*Laughter*] I should also add, in addition to the issue of scale versus proportion which we had just talked about, I must be very mindful of how the optics of color activation gets deployed. For I’d started painting in the late seventies with a strict selection of 125 colors, distributing in an infinite number of small squares, accentuating the all-over-randomization of the painted field of physical perception, which I kept making throughout for the longest time with the emphasis on discovering small eureka moment each time each layer is painted with the same process of taping, painting, and un-taping, and so on.

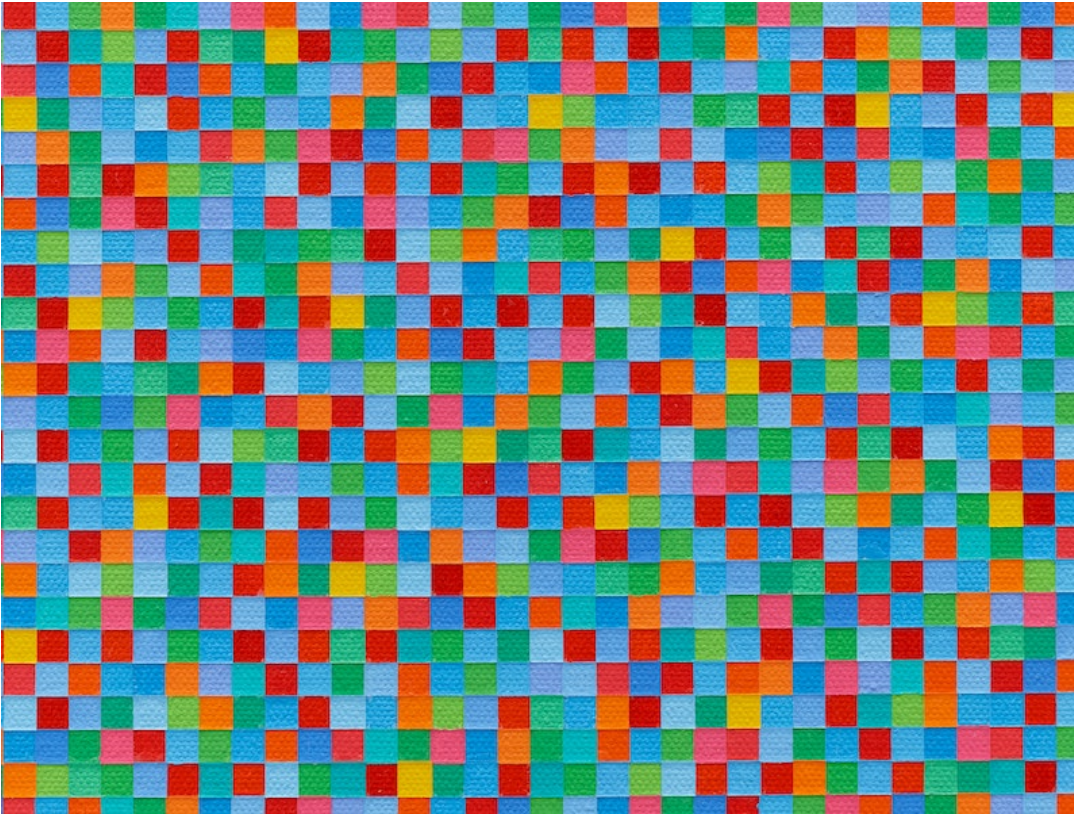
Rail: Which applies to the monochrome paintings as well.

Bechara: Yes, it can be a totally different visual experience in that at times our primary perceptual data can appeal to our eyes to different degrees before the specificness of color is seized upon, especially in the case of perceptual abstraction, which is far more intense, partly because it remains to be an unexplored place located between the cornea and the brain. As we know, each color has its own value, its own intensity, and chromatic implications. So, when I’m using 125 colors that exist as shades and as tints within the color wheel, it’s similarly applied with say 36 or 34 shades of cadmium red, 36 shades of magenta, 25 shades of black, not to mention the various degrees of surfaces, from matt, semi-gloss to glossy. This is to say the retinal impact of the 125-colors-palette paintings with their optical flickers, color sensations, or vibrations, and so on, would have far more loud, disorienting effect than say the monochrome paintings, which is very calming.

Rail: So, one can say while the experience in the former is akin to being in a symphony, which requires over eighty musicians, the latter is like chamber music, composed of no more than two or six musicians at the most.

Bechara: That's a nice analogy. Yes, I do often think of music and the notion of structure or composition, which refers to a variety of organizational elements such as units of rhythm, melody, variation, or repetition.

Rail: That makes sense. As you repeat the process, painting with a small brush on each square at about two inches separation in some cases, or to three- or four-inches separation in others, say especially with the 28-color paintings, dividing between 6,000 to 7,000 pixels, how would you describe your own sense of variation as opposed to repetition?



Tony Bechara, *Random 28 (Blue version)* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. © Tony Bechara. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Bechara: I should mention that the decision of making paintings with twenty-eight colors was made only in the last three years, at the beginning of the pandemic. I do relate my paintings to music, especially with twelve-tone serialism of Anton Webern and Alban Berg who led to minimalist composers like Steve Reich, Terry Riley, or Philip Glass, all of whom have deconstructed the serial tradition. By, for example, generating a variation of sounds may appear like the original musical score but is never the same, they create a repetition of a specific melody that takes the original musical score and either repeats it so that it is the same, or repeats it so that it is primarily the same but is transposed so that it starts on a different note. I also love Sufi dance,

also known as the “dance of being,” which has deep roots in Islamic spiritual and mystical tradition. And often the dance is accompanied by music composed of repetitive songs and melodies, which were meant to generate an atmosphere conducive to meditation and spiritual elevation. The idea is to get the dancers carried away by the repeated movement, while at the same time focusing on their breathing and the repetition of sacred phrases.

Rail: Therefore, they would feel the dissolution of their individuality, leading to a fusion with the divine presence.

Bechara: That’s correct. This is the space and place I’d like to be, and what I make is the synthesis of all things we’ve spoken about. It’s a new beginning for me, as I realized I’ve made lots of paintings at a consistent and steady pace. It’s exciting to share them with our community, especially at this moment in time.

Contributor

Phong Bui

Phong H. Bui is the Publisher and Artistic Director of the *Brooklyn Rail*.

LISSON GALLERY

Arte al Dia

10 April 2010

arte
aldía

Tony Bechara

Petrus, San Juan

BY MANUEL ÁLVAREZ LEZAMA | APRIL 08, 2010

Tony Bechara (Puerto Rico, 1943) is an interesting combination between an icon of New York's Hispano-American society he studied at Georgetown University School of Law and the University of Paris (Sorbonne) ; he is a member of numerous and important boards of directors, and he is currently the chairman of the Board of Directors of El Museo del Barrio - and a dedicated painter within the field of Kinetic Abstraction and Op Art.



This refined artist began his career at the end of the 1970s and his works were quickly incorporated in distinguished private and public collections. Bechara has exhibited his recognizable works in the United States, as well as in Latin America and Europe. He has been invited to show his mystic and provocative compositions in venues ranging from El Museo del Barrio, when it began to gain momentum, to the Whitney Biennial.

Although Bechara has been a painter since the late 1970s, he has recently decided – and this does not imply it has been the first time – not only to make himself better known in his native Puerto Rico, but also to claim his well-deserved space in the art history of an island which has proved to be so rich in the field of the visual arts during the past three decades.

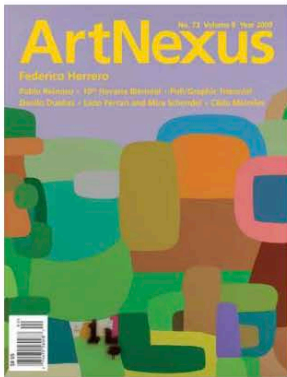
Apart from the intrinsic lyricism present in each of Bechara's compositions, what has immediately aroused the public's interest is the way in which he creates them. It is very simple. In the first place, this meticulous artist is naturally a poet within the field of abstraction, specifically as a firm believer in the aesthetic possibilities of Kinetic Art and/or Op Art, always exhibiting not only an extraordinary virtuosity for the combination of colors and the creation of «experiences» which are extremely pleasant and challenging due to their rhythms and spirituality but also his desire to experiment; and in the second place, what characterizes his work is his patience, since each of his paintings is careful and painstaking game/sacrament that demands an incalculable number of hours from the artist. Bechara, who recently showed his work at the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico, and participated – represented by Petrus Gallery – in Scope 09, reveals that he is familiar with and draws upon both the work of artists such as Piet Mondrian and Victor Vasarely and the proposals of the School of New York, Chuch Close or the Latin American kinetic artists (Cruz Diez, Soto, etc.), or the Puerto Rican artist Luis Hernández Cruz.

In the past few years, however, Bechara has reached a charming maturity and his compositions are increasingly less «mechanical» or too intellectually calculated and reflect, rather, the life of human beings from an existential point of view (the seasons of our lives), or also express the evolution, the harmonies of our planet (which we continue to jeopardize).

LISSON GALLERY

Art Nexus
June/August 2009

ArtNexus



Elizabeth Jobim y Tony Bechara Lehman College

ArtNexus 73
Arte en Colombia 119
May - Aug 2009

An exhibition by two artists in the double exhibiting space section at the Lehman College Art Gallery introduces the spectator to a duet of individualities that connect without merging with each other. *Grand Canyon* is the title of the exhibit by Tony Bechara that is presented on the left wall of the exhibiting space. This vibrating interplay among white, gray, and black generates an evocative resonance because the author does not wish to represent scenes. This large-scale triptych, rendered by Bechara with the dynamic multiplicity of touches and tones that characterize him, create a zone of abstinence, of quiet conversations, profound and tranquil, that continually resonate against the variety of colors used in the works on the opposite wall. *Geometry and color* are part of Bechara's work; they are the skin of a conceptual aesthetic body.



Tony Bechara and Elizabeth Jobim. View of the exhibit, detail.

Tony Bechara expands the use of the grid, expresses the richness created with contrasts, the exploration, and the surprising effect of an organicity of matter, which is also an attribute of the installation of three smaller shaped canvases titled *Geometry and Color* that hang on the facing wall. There, these three paintings – respectively shaped as a rectangle, a triangle, and a circle – compliment the three square frames of the opposite wall. Formalism and geometry are the components of this artist's pictorial development. The vibrations of the primary and secondary juxtaposed colors increase a kinetic sensation in the spectator who observes Bechara's paintings, although it is important to stress that he nourishes from a conceptual approach to the analysis and use of color. This was also evident in other exhibitions and was observed in the *Minima Visibilia, Tony Bechara Grey Paintings* exhibit at the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico, which took place nearly concurrently with this exhibit. The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation supported the exhibition.

Bechara builds bridges among the diverse authors who have created paintings of light and color. He is not confined to the well-known Latin-American kinetic current, or to the guidelines set by British artist Bridget Riley, nor to the compositional pattern of the grid and its alterations. On referring to composition, one must remember the subtle references to rocky surfaces to which both artists resort. Bechara does this evoking the *Grand Canyon* – that nevertheless does not discard the possibility of an urban reading. Elizabeth Jobim references the mineral element through the display cabinet that shows aspects of her artistic process. Located at the side and separated from the rest of the site-specific pictorial installation, the display cabinet presents the spectator with mock-ups/mini-paintings by Jobim, as well as drawings, sketches, and rocks. This excellent grouping of elements is both motivating and didactic, two indispensable aspects to consider in a place dedicated to teaching; something that Susan Hoeltzel, the gallery director, always bears in mind as she curates the exhibit along with Claudia Calirman.

Having already introduced both artists, it is time to point out that because of the layout of the exhibition space, the gaze cannot help but contemplate the works of both artists at the same time. The grey, dynamic, and checkered tunnel and the enclosed reverberations give way to the release of light generated by Elizabeth Jobim's paintings. This artist celebrates the great pictorial gesture with tones of blue. Her large abstract embrace is also readable as something urban that is, nonetheless, not representational or descriptive. *Endless Lines* is the title of a work with which Jobim draws the spectator closer to her experiencing lines, something achieved through a movement that also does not seek to interpret or represent. Her painting accentuates the width and length of the movement executed. Matter flows in the color blue set over white. The paintings become an installation with the enveloping participation of the gallery space. This Brazilian artist who lives in Rio de Janeiro studied the space to create this site-specific installation. The points of contact between the paintings as they touch laterally offer a sensuous rhythm that inhabits the use of cold colors. This is perceived as inside-out and vice versa. The planes, the straight, significant but non-representational lines, indicate movement. In a context of flat inks and uncommon fractional forms, large-scale canvases interact with others in a discourse aided by their lateral proximity. They are like masterful gems, faceted ancient stones. Jobim takes us through spaces that envelop us but that also is beyond our reach.

Like a magnet, the intense light in *Endless Lines* draws the spectator to the Gallery's interior. The installation occupies an intensely illuminated space. The duo of colors used by Jobim establishes a formal contrast that is nearly like the tracing of an architectonic plan. Both exhibits are infused with a contemporaneous ritual. Both create a passage, like a path toward a dispossessed altar that is not religious, but rather visual and inhabited by stones from ancient cities. Jobim and Bechara master the controlled and vibrant gesture as if these were part of a special dance from which light emanates in a life-affirming fashion.

GRACIELA KARTOFEL

LISSON GALLERY

Primera Hora

13 February 2008



Para el artista Tony Bechara, el arte es una experiencia, tanto para quien lo crea como para aquel que luego la observa. Por esta razón, no espera por la inspiración para comenzar a pintar, pues, según afirma, las ideas llegan en la medida en que nos enfrentamos a ese acto de la creación.

Es precisamente ese interés de que el público experimente su obra lo que lo lleva a presentar su primera exposición individual en la Isla. Pues aunque anteriormente sus obras se han presentado en colectivo en varios museos de la Isla, es la primera vez que se presenta individualmente en su tierra. Su exposición, Obras Recientes, se exhibe en Galería Petrus en Miramar.

Artista polifacético

Durante sus años de estudio, Bechara no contemplaba la idea de ser artista a manera de profesión, sino que siempre fue una inquietud que al final llegó a materializarse. "De Puerto Rico me fui a la Universidad de Georgetown para hacer mi bachillerato, luego comencé la escuela de derecho, pero en el segundo año me di cuenta de que mi vocación era en el arte. De ahí dejé las leyes y me fui a París a indagar más sobre esta inquietud. Estuve unos años, pero luego me fui a Nueva York y fue ahí donde comencé realmente mi carrera como pintor. Mis títulos y grados en la universidad fueron en economía, en filosofía y en literatura. Sí es cierto que tomé cursos de artes plásticas y he trabajado con algunos maestros, mi aprendizaje es básicamente autodidacta", relató.

Sus pinturas han llegado a varias ferias y bienales de arte, como la feria Art Basel en Miami, además de Lima, Washington, Múnich y México, entre otros. De igual manera, su obra se ha presentado en el Museo del Barrio en Nueva York, el Whitney Museum of American Art, el Boulder Fine Arts y el Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de California. También pertenecen a las colecciones permanentes del Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, del Albright Museum y Aldrich Museum.

Sin embargo, su carrera en el mundo del arte no termina ahí. Actualmente, Bechara se desempeña como presidente de la Junta de Directores del Museo del Barrio, al igual que es miembro de la junta del Instituto Cervantes, el Brooklyn Academy of Music y el Studio in a School, todos ellos en Nueva York.

El arte como vocación

Una vida dedicada al arte requiere tiempo, esfuerzo y, sobre todo, vocación. Es ese deseo de ser artista, de entregarse a la expresión máxima de las ideas de las que padece desde su cotidianidad, lo que lleva a Bechara a entender que “en ninguna otra profesión me hubiese sentido feliz”.

“El arte es indispensable para el ser humano. Es sentir una curiosidad por lo que no es prescindible, como las ciencias o los negocios. Entonces, en algunos esa curiosidad es más grande. Yo siempre he tenido esa curiosidad por crear. En el arte me arriesgo, y aunque no siempre salga bien, por lo menos sé que estoy haciendo aquello que verdaderamente quiero hacer”, señaló.

Aunque actualmente reside en Nueva York, Bechara entiende que su obra está ligada de manera irremediable a Puerto Rico, razón que lo hace afirmar con orgullo su procedencia. “Yo soy de aquí, fui formado aquí y mi familia también es de aquí, por lo tanto, todo lo que yo haga es parte de mí, de mi esencia puertorriqueña. Por definición mi obra es una obra puertorriqueña”, apuntó.

Arte abstracto lleno de pasión

Las pinturas de Bechara son cargadas de colores que delatan una intención precisa, la expresión más profunda de un ser que convive sentimentalmente con cada una de las particularidades que le rodean. “Una buena obra puede nacer de observar los colores

que hay en la naturaleza, o del accidente de un derrame de varias pinturas. De esa forma te puedes percatar de que ahí también hay arte, y te das cuenta en el mismo momento en el que estás creando. Así se va construyendo una obra”, comentó.

“Mi trabajo evolucionó a base de la configuración de colores y de píxeles. El mosaico, además, me generó mucha curiosidad por esa exploración de colores, de posibilidades ópticas y ver cómo eso influye en nosotros. Me gusta cómo dicta situaciones emotivas diferentes y te da una nueva información cada vez que lo miras”.

Para esta exposición, Bechara busca “que la gente mire lo que hago sin tomar una decisión estética, sin decir si es malo, o bueno, o bonito. Lo que quiero es que el espectador lo experimente, que lo presencie, que se atreva a mirar esta configuración de colores con diferentes aspectos geométricos. Sólo quiero que le afecte y que se pregunte lo que siente.” señaló.

La exhibición de Bechara consta de alrededor de una veintena de obras en las cuales se trabaja la pintura, sobre todo el acrílico sobre lienzo, aunque en ocasiones utiliza el óleo o el papel para formar un collage. La misma se presentará, desde hoy, en la Galería Petrus, localizada en el #726 de la calle Hoare, esquina calle Las Palmas, en Miramar.

Para más información, pueden comunicarse al 787-289-0505.

LISSON GALLERY

Primera Hora
27 March 2008



Del 28 al 31 de marzo, el arte latinoamericano se dará cita en Miami. Cerca de 80 de las mejores galerías de las Américas y España expondrán sus colecciones en la sexta edición de Merrill Lynch Arteaméricas, la cual tendrá lugar en el Miami Beach Convention Center. Está prevista la participación de galerías provenientes de Argentina, Puerto Rico, Estados Unidos, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, México, Bolivia, Uruguay, Perú, España, Haití, Panamá, República Dominicana y Venezuela.

La feria será un lugar propicio para el encuentro entre coleccionistas, curadores, críticos, artistas y amantes del arte que desean conocer las nuevas propuestas que marcan el rumbo de la creación artística en la región. Se reunirán en un mismo recinto obras de grandes maestros, artistas consagrados y jóvenes talentos. El público asistente podrá disfrutar de los trabajos de más de 400 creadores entre los que destacan: Wifredo Lam, Rufino Tamayo, Jesús Soto, Fernando Botero, Lygia Clark, Joaquín Torres-García, Tony Bechara, José Bedia, José Pedro Costigliolo, Eduardo Chapela, Bastón Díaz, León Ferrari, Carmen Herrera, Kcho, Félix Ángel, entre otros.

Otras galerías asentadas en Miami y en Nueva York también presentarán la obra de artistas puertorriqueños como es el caso de Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts, de Miami, que expondrá fotografías de Carlos Betancourt cargadas de un alto contenido crítico e irónico. Por su parte, LatinCollector de New York incluirá dentro de su propuesta obras del reconocido artista Tony Bechara, maestro de la abstracción, quien trabaja a partir de la combinación de minúsculos cuadrados de color, creando una composición que produce en el espectador la sensación de encontrarse ante un lienzo rico en texturas, colores y movimiento.

Para mayor información consultar: www.arteamericas.com

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LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
24 October 2008

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

At Lehman Gallery, Getting a Feel for the Abstract



Share full article



OPTICS Tony Bechara's triptych *Grand Canyon*, left, and Elizabeth Jobim's installation at Lehman Gallery.
Lehman College Art Gallery

By Benjamin Genocchio

Oct. 24, 2008

It goes without saying that abstraction was prominent in 20th-century art. From early modern movements like De Stijl and Suprematism to Abstract Expressionism, artists experimented with the possibilities inherent in nonrepresentational imagery.

These days, the pendulum of fashion has swung back toward figuration. Then there is the popularity of new media, especially film and video. But two exhibitions at Lehman College Art Gallery remind us that wonderful abstract art is still being made.

One show is by the Brazilian artist Elizabeth Jobim, the other by Tony Bechara, an American. There is little linking their work, beyond an enthusiasm for irregular geometry. Both artists make paintings that are never entirely what they seem to be.

“Elizabeth Jobim: Endless Lines” is a single, site-specific installation. The work consists of two dozen massive painted canvases placed side by side along the walls of the main gallery. Painted blue lines and geometric forms blend from one canvas to the next, creating a kind of architectural environment that envelops the viewer.

Ms. Jobim is influenced by music partly, no doubt, because she is the daughter of the bossa nova musician Antonio Carlos Jobim. It is clearly visible in her work here, with her alternating combinations of thick and thin lines and volumetric geometric forms frequently resembling musical notes arranged on a page.

Ms. Jobim uses ultramarine blue paint rapidly applied with rollers to the canvas. Up close the pictures look unevenly painted, with spots and stains and shifting levels of luminosity. But stand back and the varying surface textures and saturation of the paint create a sense of undulating rhythm; the lines begin to vibrate.

It is always tempting to look for representational imagery in abstract art. Ms. Jobim’s paintings can remind you not just of music scores but also of an urban skyline or even the outline of industrial machinery. Yet fundamentally, this installation is all about relationships of space, line and form. It is classic geometric abstraction.

Geometric abstraction is also the basis of Mr. Bechara’s work, which is based on a grid structure. But he gives it a twist, creating the illusion of rapid movement and depth through fields of tiny squares of colors in ever-so-subtle variations. The end results are optical paintings that convincingly suggest pixilated television imagery.

The large-scale triptych “Grand Canyon” (2007) is the centerpiece of the Lehman exhibition. It is an impressive work, though perhaps not shown to its best advantage here in a low-ceilinged room of relatively little light. Part of the beauty and allure of this kind of optical art is the way in which the surface patterns catch and reflect light.

But no matter, for the picture is pretty amazing. Standing in front of “Grand Canyon,” you immediately feel small, confronted with a vast, contemplative panorama in a limited range of colors black, white and several dozen extraordinarily subtle shades of gray. It is like lying on your back in a field at night and staring up at the stars.

The exhibition also includes Mr. Bechara’s “Geometry and Color” (2008), an installation of three smaller shaped canvases a circle, a rectangle and a triangle all covered in the artist’s signature, pixel-like squares. These canvases are more colorful and ornate, with patterning that suggests motifs used in fabric and interior design dating back to the 1960s.

At the same time, the surface texture is rough and uneven. Look closely and you will notice paint pooled in places. Colors also seem to fuse. While Mr. Bechara’s method is based on a rigid geometry, the overall effect is much more organic. His little squares of paint are reminiscent of tessera, the squares of stone or glass used in making mosaics.

Detractors often say that abstraction is maddeningly oblique. On a literal level they are right, for most abstract art doesn’t mean or say anything in particular. But these paintings by Mr. Bechara and Ms. Jobim remind us there are other ways in which abstraction can be appreciated. It is not so much about thinking, as looking and feeling.

“Elizabeth Jobim: Endless Lines” and “Tony Bechara: Grand Canyon,” Lehman College Art Gallery, Lehman College, 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West, Bronx, through Dec. 15. (718) 960-8731 or www.lehman.edu/gallery.

LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
19 November 2007

The New York Times

ART REVIEW | PINTA

Bulletins From a Bustling 'Undiscovered' Land



By **Holland Cotter**

Nov. 19, 2007

It's a little embarrassing to watch the New York art world "discovering" Latin American modernist art year after year, as if forever only half-aware of its existence. And it's depressing to know that the Museum of Modern Art, which could have been collecting widely in the field for decades, had to wait for a windfall in the form of a gift collection to deal with this material in a serious and committed way. We are, after all, talking about the art of a continent and a century, not just a fad from yesterday.

No surprise then, given the circumstances, that the city is only now getting its first fair devoted to Latin American art. And no surprise to anyone familiar with this art that the fair, called Pinta and installed at the Metropolitan Pavilion on West 18th Street through tomorrow, looks as good as it does.

With just 35 galleries, Pinta is a big event in a small package. The layout, by the architect Warren A. James, is stylish and airy. In general a less-is-more sensibility prevails. For once, a fair looks like an art exhibition, not a job-lot display. And when a booth is crowded, the pieces can be blamed, as is the case at Appetite, a gallery with branches in Buenos Aires and Brooklyn that shows young artists working in an accumulative mode.

A 1952 sculpture in clear plastic by María Freire at Sammer Gallery Miami is exemplary of the soaring utopianism of a heady era. And something like this spirit survives into the present in paintings by Fanny Sanin and Tony Bechara at Latin Collector, of recent date but in classic abstract geometric style.

Pinta, the Contemporary Latin American Art Fair continues through tomorrow at the Metropolitan Pavilion, 125 West 18th Street, Chelsea; pinta-art.com.

LISSON GALLERY

Art Nexus

September/November 2003

ArtNexus



Tony Bechara

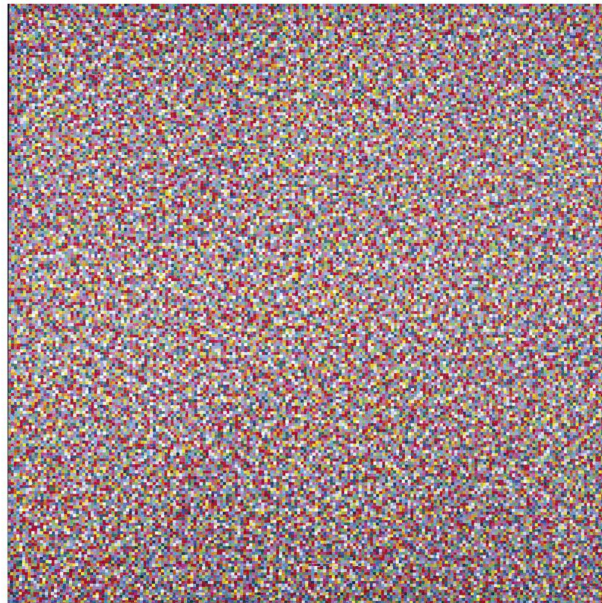
Latin Collector

By: Charmaine Picard

ArtNexus 50
Arte en Colombia 96
Aug - Nov 2003

Tony Bechara's recent paintings explore the opposition between controlled propositions and accidental effects. As a strategy, Bechara's formal and conceptual approach sets up an interesting opposition between the mathematical rigidity of the modernist grid and the incorporation of chance elements on the canvas.

Of the eleven new paintings exhibited, six incorporate the terms "stratagem" and "random" in their titles. Stratagem is defined as an operation—usually an artifice or trick—designed to outwit or surprise the enemy. Paintings such as *Stratagem in Grey*, 2003, pay a debt to Op-art creating a three-dimensional design that both recedes and advances in space. In this case, the trick is played upon the human eye, which perceives a star-shaped motif superimposed upon similar three-dimensional patterns. This type of meticulously-controlled imagery can be contrasted with paintings like *Random: 125 Colors*, 2003 where Bechara integrates coincidence and chance in his application of repetitive geometric forms and colors. The end result is an intricate and dazzling matrix of contrasting color and chromatic vibration.



Tony Bechara. 65 Colors, 2003. Acrylic on canvas. 50 x 50 in (19, 6 x 19, 6 cm).

Bechara's work does not signify; instead, the artist is interested in the way the viewer interacts and responds to the painting. How we distinguish between randomness and controlled proposals, and how pure light and color are perceived by the brain are fundamental aspects of the work. Bechara plays with our visual perception: some works are concerned with color theory and the eye's response to it; others investigate the psychophysiology of pattern discrimination and how the mind creates meaning from visual fragmentation and abstraction. Less concerned with figuration and narrative than with gestalt effects —Bechara is fascinated by the viewer's desire to attribute meaning by translating his abstractions into recognizable patterns and shapes.

Works such as *Yaller* and *White Out*, both from 2002, introduce a more monochromatic palette into the mix. The subtle gradations of modulated color create a moiréd effect generating the illusion of a three-dimensional space rich in texture and recessional depth. Bechara's geometric patterns incorporate the human touch into the equation lending a painterly and expressive gesture to the systematic severity of the underlying framework. The result is a sensual and often decorative effect that integrates subtle imperfections and random surprises.

Among the many art historical influences he cites, Bechara includes the Pattern and Decoration movement of the mid-1970s. Artists associated with the group, working mainly in Southern California, challenged the taboo against decorative arts and drew inspiration from a range of sources including Islamic, Celtic, Byzantine, and Navajo arts. Bechara, himself, was influenced by the fifth and sixth-century mosaics at Ravenna and this association becomes clear when you compare his intricate geometric patterns of small repetitive squares of paint to the elegant pieces of tesserae used to create pictorial elements in the Churches of San Vitale and Saint Apollinare. To the contemporary viewer, Bechara's monumental grids of color and light appear like a matrix of computer-generated pixels, and it is precisely our desire to see meaning and to create analogies that most intrigue the artist. The influence of high modernism by artists such as Piet Mondrian, Joseph Albers, and Jesús Rafael Soto, among others, is also discernable in Bechara's canvases, which rely heavily on formalist assumptions regarding the autonomous nature of the painting and the disinterested contemplation of the viewer.

Bechara's painstaking process and systematic application of paint offer insight into the artist's analytical mind. His rigorous exploration of perspectival illusion and chromatic tension emphasizes movement and dynamism while investigating psychological effects on visual perception. By mixing the precision of science with the expressive potential of decorative art, Bechara creates a complementary amalgam that appeals both to the intellect and to human emotion.

CHARMAINE PICARD

New York Times
21 December 1997

The New York Times

ART

ART; Color, So Much the Essence of What Happens in a Painting



By William Zimmer
Dec. 21, 1997

COLOR is to painting what words are to writing -- almost. Some paintings are more colorful than others, and for his show, "Colors: Contrasts and Cultures," at the Discovery Museum in Bridgeport, the curator Benjamin Ortiz has rounded up some especially peacocky examples. Still, color is so much the fabric of almost any painting it is hard to separate it out for meaningful analysis.

It is words that come to the rescue. This writer incessantly complains about the amount of verbiage in most art exhibitions these days. It gets in the way of the essential experience of looking. But in this show, what many of the artists have to say about color, sometimes poetically, might be taken as the essence. At the least they provide a handle for making critical distinctions.

Mr. Ortiz has included several artists whose main concern is optical effects, which are frequently retina jarring. The major Op artist Richard Anuszkiewicz is represented by a high-keyed shaped canvas, "Spring Rainbow," and credits his inspiration to "the Impressionists, neoimpressionists and Josef Albers." He adds what the viewer senses, "Color function becomes my subject matter and its performance is my painting."

His cohorts here are Victor Vasarely and Nicholas Krushenick. In a related way, Tony Bechara's vibrating surfaces resembles the pixels of a computerized image. In "Still Life No. 5," he has abstracted an arrangement of fruit and flowers beyond recognition.

The show is not without firm allusions to nature. Alberta Cifolelli's "Blue Cloud" is a panoramic landscape, while Ellen Hackl Fagen conjures up autumn leaves. Deborah Muirhead's large canvas seems to represent quiet water Whistler-style. This painting proves that black, white and grey are colors, too.

"Color: Contrasts and Cultures" is at the Discovery Museum in Bridgeport through Jan. 4.

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LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
24 August 1990

The New York Times

Review/Art; New Jerseyans Examine the Road to Uniqueness



By Andy Grundberg

Aug. 24, 1990

Ordinarily showcases for artists of a particular state or region are uneven affairs, lacking a theme, stylistic consistency or both. Such is not the case with "A Force of Repetition," an exhibition at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton that is subtitled "Contemporary Arts: The New Jersey Context." The 19 artists in the show all live or work in New Jersey, but they have more in common than that.

Mostly they share an urge to examine the territory between multiplicity and uniqueness, which is expressed in terms of pattern, reproduction and stereotype. For Tony Bechara, this quest takes the form of large canvases filled with tiny squares of paint, which from a distance simultaneously resemble Op Art and the visual static of an empty television channel. Adam Simon, another painter, fills his canvases with smile faces. The eerie dissonance of their dislocated grins is magnified in Mr. Simon's "Missings," in which the word "Missing" is inserted above each smiling face.

For other artists, repetition is less about patterns than about history. Robert Mahon's series of photographs called "Variations on the Pencil of Nature" refers to art history, reproducing William Henry Fox Talbot's landmark pictures as marvelous, out-of-focus blobs. Pamela Vander Zwan's three "Icon" triptychs use cartoons, news photographs and other popular-culture artifacts for their imagery, but their structure is derived from early Renaissance altarpieces.

Willie Cole's inspired multi-media works seem to take their cues from a combination of Western and African precedents. In front of canvases patterned with the burned-in traces of a clothes iron are rudely constructed, make-believe ironing boards. Standing on these boards are totemic figures assembled from pieces of demolished clothes irons. The figures resemble tribal sculpture, but the ironing board and the disjunctive effect of the overall assembly evoke the Dada spirit of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Mr. Cole's objects are the strangest and most compelling of the 86 artworks in the exhibition.

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New York Times
28 June 1985

The New York Times

ART: AT THE WHITNEY, MICHAEL HEIZER WORK



By **Grace Glueck**
June 28, 1985

ALMOST wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling, Michael Heizer's single work "Dragged Mass Geometric" occupies the main gallery on the fourth floor of the Whitney Museum, Madison Avenue at 75th Street, so fully that there's hardly room for the viewer.

A huge hulk of linear forms and cubic volumes, it's a cleaned-up, schematic view of "Dragged Mass," a messy outdoor piece that he did 14 years ago for the Detroit Institute of Arts, in which tractors dragged a 30-ton granite block back and forth over the ground. The movement displaced 300 tons of earth, fulfilling its mission to produce an "impressive" pile of dirt, some 8 feet high and 40 feet long. The earlier piece - no longer extant - was one of the more citified of the mammoth earth works that the multitalented Heizer has been doing since 1967, mainly in the desert lands of California and Nevada.

The truth is that Heizer is a master of landscape-size imagery. He's at his best when moving earth and rock into vast configurations whose interest comes from the tension they create between human artifact and that made by nature. But seen against his larger conceptions, his smaller works are not nearly so convincing.

His show at the Whitney, through Sept. 1, overshadows the concurrent one around the corner at Xavier Fourcade, 36 East 75th Street (through Sept. 14), in which more portable, take-home objects are presented. There are several wonderful things here, to be sure. One, using 50 photographic prints arranged in a large circle, recapitulates the 500-foot circle Heizer imprinted on a dry Nevada lake bed in 1970 by means of motorcycle tires. Another is a pair of etchings, made from scrap-metal pieces embellished with additional markings, that recall in flat scheme a large-scale sculpture called "Platform" commissioned by the Oakland Museum in 1980.

But most of the small-scale sculpture here looks bland in light of his larger works. Several drawings, based on silk-screen reproductions of photographs of large works, are too prettily punched up with high chromatics and tricked out with notations, scribblings, brush strokes, etc. Less gimmicky, but not too engrossing either, are "texture" paintings made by tracking rollers impregnated with black pigment over canvas. By and large, the Fourcade show tends to prove that Heizer's own instincts, which are to stay away from work of comfortably salable size, are quite correct. Scale is his metier. Also of interest this week: Tony Bechara (Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street): Ancient mosaics, Islamic tiles, pointillism and what he calls the "controlled chaos" of New York City's streets are among the sources for Tony Bechara's gridded paintings. Seen up close, they're composed of tiny squares of color, created by overlaying the canvas with quarter-inch tape, then applying pigment. Backed away from, their busy surfaces become shimmering, eloquent compositional arrangements developed by chromatic concentration of the squares to form abstract configurations. In "Night Music," for example, a particularly beautiful work, surges of bluish reds and blacks emerge from the particolored ground to produce a kind of floral - well, vibration; one hesitates to call it a pattern. Arrhythmic intensities of black, red and blue give "Thunder" its stormy feeling. And sometimes the

squares form a dense overall surface lyrically patterned by the play of light alone, as in the free-standing three-part panels of "Three Graces."

Ranging over five years, this selection of Bechara's work gives the museum, devoted to the art of Caribbean peoples, its first exhibition of abstract art. It's a scintillating choice. (Through Aug. 31.) "Social Studies" (Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 152 Wooster Street): Work by six "socially involved" artists gives this small show its title, though not a good deal of coherence. The mix is too loose, and with each artist represented by only one item, the overall impact is diffuse. Sue Coe weighs in with one of her lurid tabloids, "Vigilante," a white hoodlum shooting down two black youths on a subway platform. Eric Fischl suburban-baits as usual in "Birth of Love," a fleshy, sullenly lighted poolside scene in which a youth lays explorative hands on a leering woman. Bill Woodrow's "Call of the Wild," made entirely from car hoods, is a savage sculptural fantasy in which a bearlike creature, beaten into a flat rug, barks into three microphones. And then there are contributions by Jenny Holzer and Leon Golub.

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LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
26 January 1979

The New York Times

Art: Puerto Rican Show in Bronx



By **Grace Glueck**

Jan. 26, 1979

TAKE six painters with roots in Puerto Rico and a Manhattan base, and show how their work reflects the cultures of these two lively cays. That's the premise of "Bridge Between Islands," hatched by three local institutions, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Henry Street Settlement, and El Museo del Barrio.

Nicely mounted at the Bronx Museum, "Bridge" serves rather well as an excuse for an ethnic show, and demonstrates indeed that the visual language of the artists - Olga Abizu, Tony Bechara, Eloy Blanco, Mama Dimas, Evelyn Lopez de Guzman and Jorge Soto - has been shaped in varying degrees by their bicultural heritage. Certainly the Hispanic elements are here: an overall richness and intensity of color and some specifically Caribbean imagery. Also abundantly evident is mainstream New York, reflected in modes ranging from Abstract Expressionism to hard-edge, seasoned by the influence of such artists as Frank Stella, Hans Hofmann, Robert Rauschenberg, and even computer-generated patterns.

But the kind of exposure that the show provides is perhaps more important than its premise. All six artists are in mid-career, but little known on the scene; their work for the most part has been visible only in other ethnic contexts. This exhibition, however, gives each a mini-retrospective of paintings going back to the 1960's and the work, on view in a depth of five or six pictures each, holds interest that I suspect would be lost in the shuffle of a big group show.

For me, the most interesting of the six is Mr. Bechara, whose exhibition begins with a stylish, mock-Renaissance portrait of the 1960's, "Woman in Red Hat." Now he does modish big-grid paintings, in which the rigidity of the grid, a net of tiny color-outlined squares, is broken by the swells and diminutions of patterns formed by the chromatic intensity of the squares themselves. Both the earlier works and the more recent ones are impressive.

With a few exceptions "Bridge" does not startle; the work has obviously not been chosen for avant-gardism. But it is alive and absorbing and can well be taken on its merits, ethnic or not. The show stays at the Bronx Museum through Feb. 18, then appears at the Museo Del Barrio in Manhattan Feb. 27 through April 1. You get to the County Courthouse, which shelters the museum in its rotunda, by subway via the IRT (Woodlawn Line) or IND (D Train) debarking at the 161st Street stop (Yankee Stadium). The museum is open from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. Monday through Friday, and on Sunday afternoons from 12:30 to 4:30.