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# THE LOVE OF PAINTING

Written by Joachim Pissarro  
with Mara Hoberman



The Artist in front of his studio  
at 25 Coenties Slip, 1965

## The End of a Decade : the '50s

The years between Pollock's quasi-suicide (1956) and the rise of the Pop phenomenon (1962) mark a cultural shift on the North American artistic scene. This short and intense period is essentially marked by antagonisms, tensions, and contradictions. There is a profound sense of anxiety at this moment – the apparent easy and transparent vocabulary of abstraction that took over the New York art scene after WWII belies a much deeper conundrum of conflicted artistic possibilities. And this creative confusion, in turn, reflects a conflicted world steeply engaged in the Cold War, divided between the consumerist euphoria of the Post-War economic boom and the abiding threat of a worldwide conflagration. The art world was similarly going through a great divide. 1959 presented a culminating point for these clashing vectorial forces. In many ways, Indiana's art – and the monumental series displayed at Gmurzynska – embody these rich and powerful currents.

Two opposite directions can simply be summed up: a drive to formalize and solidify the language of abstraction proper was hitting head-on against a more open, liberal-minded, experimental vision of art. The first direction aimed at cultivating abstraction for its own sake and defending it against the polluting and dangerous impact of 'expression,' or what one could call today 'user-friendly' interests. The other side saw that abstraction was one of several possible modes of expressing the concerns of the time, and that cultivating abstraction for its own sake was not a viable option.

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In the June 1959 issue of ARTnews, Ad Reinhardt wrote an important article: “Is There A New Academy?” echoing his previous article, “Twelve Rules for a New Academy” (published in May 1957 in ARTnews). In his 1959 essay, Reinhardt advocated the establishment of abstract art as the platform of a new academy: he pitted abstract art against any of its low forms of derivatives, explaining that abstract art ought not to be used for the low needs of architecture, design, or advertising. Real art, real abstract art (which he opposes to “extract art”) “cannot be ‘used’ in education, communication, perception, foreign relations, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Reinhardt advocated the formation of a new academy, at the core of which Abstraction would reign supreme, for it is “‘out of time,’ art made fine, art emptied and purified of all other-than-art meanings<sup>2</sup>

The same year, in contradistinction, Robert Indiana found himself at the nexus of a group of artists that included Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Jim Dine (among others), who all shared a common distaste for the academization of Abstract Expressionism. These particular artists all felt the need to leave academe to its own fate – and go out into the streets where life (including low life) could infiltrate and infect their art. They were responding, in effect, to Rauschenberg’s famous dictum: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)”<sup>3</sup> Many artists of Robert Indiana’s generation rejected the more linear and classical approach (advocated by

Reinhardt) to keep the street out of their art, or to preserve their art from the buzz or the smell of life at the edge of lower Manhattan.

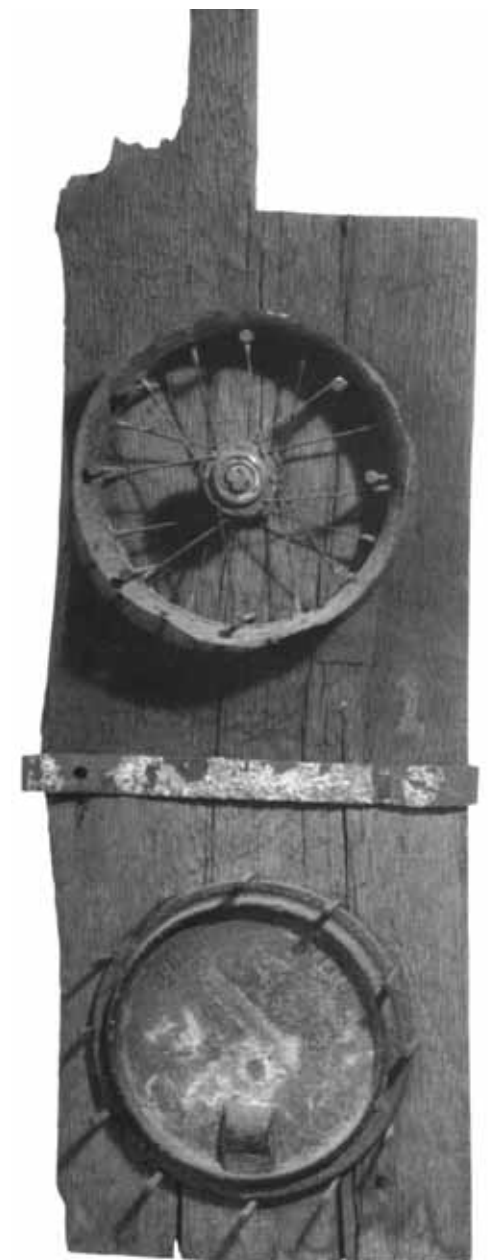
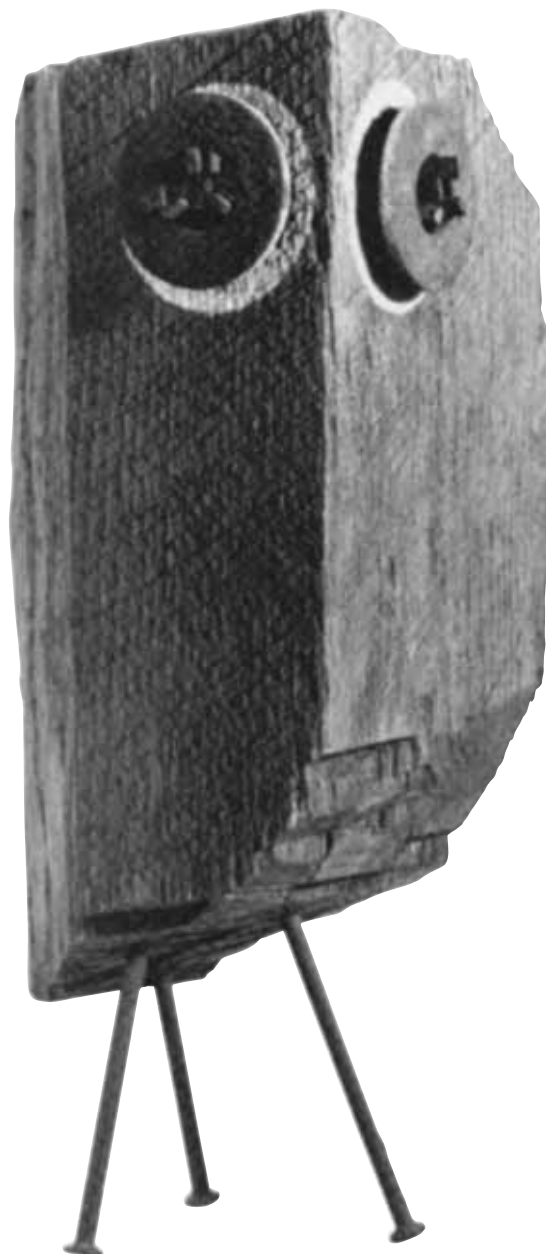
In 1959, paradoxically, Robert Indiana and Ad Reinhardt were both heavily engaged in abstract art. In many ways, at this particular moment, these two artists stood at the extreme opposite ends of the same pole. Indiana had very little to do with the haughty new academic system advocated by Reinhardt; worse, Indiana’s art dangerously threatened the core of the value system established by Reinhardt. His art was considered as “illegitimate.”<sup>4</sup> We shall now consider why.

In 1956 Robert Indiana moved to a studio at #31 Coenties Slip where his friends and neighbors included Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman, Agnes Martin, and Jim Rosenquist. This particular group of artists, in complex and oblique ways, allowed their art to absorb some aspects of the raw and rich life of this tiny street at the far south end of Manhattan. This now much transformed “slip,” a block away from the Staten Island Ferry, was “a three-block-long funnel-shaped space that opened toward the East River, facing Brooklyn and its beautiful bridge. At its wider end, closer to the river, was the small Jeanette Park, built in the 1880s, whose ginkgo and sycamore trees provided, along with the river itself, a welcome sense of nature in the city.”<sup>5</sup> Indiana had moved there (#31 Coenties Slip) after Kelly introduced him to a top-floor loft that had recently been vacated by Fred Mitchell. Youngerman couched, in negative terms, the positive

**GEM, 1961-84**  
**Mixed media wood assemblage**  
**180.3 cm, height**

**Owl, 1960**  
**Mixed media wood assemblage**  
**37.5 x 17.8 x 17.8 cm**

**Sun and Moon, 1960**  
**Oil and iron on wood panel**  
**88.27 x 30.48 x 10.16 cm**





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impact that ‘the Slip’ had on all of these artists:

*It was completely apart from the New York art scene. Down there, one of the things we were very conscious of, without talking that much about it, was the fact that we all knew that we weren’t part of the de Kooning/Pollock legacy in art, which was centered around Tenth Street... You know there’s a movie by Godard called Band of Outsiders... It was a bit like that.<sup>6</sup>*

Indeed all of the Coenties Slip artists partook in the wave of profound experimentation during the late 1950s. For Indiana in particular, 1958 was a critical moment in terms of personal development and the emergence of his signature artistic style. In the years just prior (1955–57), Indiana experimented with a range of painting and drawing styles including representational portraiture (a beautiful collection of line drawing portraits of Ellsworth Kelly exists in Indiana’s personal collection), etchings, as well as geometric abstraction. Indiana was systematically testing out ideas and styles en route to finding his true artistic voice. At the same time, Indiana was clearly uninterested in trolling stylistic trenches for his own practice. He seemed to be having as much fun in drawing a portrait of Kelly as in dabbling with geometric hard-edge abstraction motif. Indiana, already at this young age, appeared set on refusing to be boxed in any particular category.

But to be clear, it would be wrong to think of Indiana as an eclectic dilettante. Far from it. Looking back at his earliest works,

Indiana’s talent, sophistication, and determination are evident, but so is the artist’s laborious struggle to distinguish himself from his contemporaries, and, paradoxically, enable himself to develop his taste in polyphony, and his diversity of interests. From the time he was a teenager through to the present, Indiana has kept journals with copious notes about his daily experiences and his artistic inclinations and considerations. These journals provide great insight into the mind of the developing artist in the late 1950s. In his journals from this period, entries often describe Indiana’s fear of being, for example, “too Kelly” or too much akin to his other Coenties Slip neighbors.<sup>7</sup> His desire to define himself and make his own mark is acute. In one entry where Indiana describes Jack Youngerman, he wrote: “Here we’d be two neighbors who’d be working too much alike.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **New life: Indiana, the Cross, Stavros**

Indiana’s intense motivation to set himself apart (and find himself) comes to fruition in 1958 – truly a landmark year for the artist – in the form of a reawakening and rebirth. In 1958 Indiana took a part-time day job at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on West 112th Street, in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights neighborhood. Thus, the artist found himself commuting from the southern tip to the north end of Manhattan. At St. John the Divine, where he worked about a year, Indiana had the opportunity to read the proofs for Norman Laliberté’s and Edward N. West’s *The History of the Cross*.<sup>9</sup> The term “cross” is actually nowhere to be



**Orb, 1960**  
**Oil, iron, iron wheels**  
**on wood**  
**157 x 49.5 x 48 cm**



**Moon, 1960**  
**Wood beam with iron**  
**rimmed wheels and**  
**white paint and plaster**  
**198 x 43.5 x 26 cm**  
**The Museum of**  
**Modern Art, New York**  
**Philip Johnson Fund**



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found in the Greek version of the New Testament. The term used is the Greek word σταυρος (transliterated as '*stauros*,' rather than '*stavros*'); this term actually designates a pole, an upright stake, a pivot. (The T-shaped 'cross' as a symbol of Christianity, and of the crucifixion, was added later on, and is often attributed to the Constantine era that brought together early Christianity with Chaldean or Babylonian symbols of the Tammuz, the Sun God, whose letter 'T' was the symbol.)

It is interesting to dwell for a moment on this early historical description of *STAUROS* as a stake or a pole (rather than a cross, proper) because Indiana's incipient career as a sculptor featured a few single column-based sculptures: *Orb* (1960), *Moon* (1960), *M* (1960), and *Gem* (1961–84), to name just a few. One can, therefore, read in these early works a quiet reference – an homage, if you will – to the early history of the Cross. The 'Cross' in the sense of the Greek word *stauros* connotes a simple, unadorned vertical mast at which the martyrs were attached and hung. It is apparently only as a mistranslation of the Greek 'stauros' into the Latin 'crux' that the object of torture of Jesus turned from a stake or a mast (stauros) into the cross that we know. "The evidence is, therefore, completely lacking that Jesus Christ was crucified on two pieces of timber placed at a right angle. We refuse to add anything to God's written Word by inserting the pagan cross into the inspired Scriptures, but render stavros and xylon according to the simplest meanings... The passing of time and further archaeological discoveries will be certain to prove its correctness. Even now the

burden rests on all who contend for the religious tradition to prove that Jesus died on more than just a simple stake."<sup>10</sup>

Reading *The History of the Cross* had an enormous impact on Indiana and in fact inspired one of his most important early works, *Stavrosis* (1958).<sup>11</sup> This massive 44-panel printer's ink on paper was done on sheets of paper that Indiana found at the Coenties Slip loft (#25), which had at one point been a print shop. *Stavrosis*, which took Indiana nearly a year to complete, is a somewhat abstract depiction of Christ wearing the crown of thorns and flanked by the two thieves. Other symbolic forms such as the ginkgo leaf, avocado seed, and the orb – shapes that recur again and again Indiana's later work – also make their debut in *Stavrosis*. To use the artist's own words when describing *Stavrosis* in 2011, in the context of his impending exhibition at the Gmurzynska Gallery, this painting is: "very, very, related" to the series of paintings on plywood and Homasote from 1959.<sup>12</sup>

*Stavrosis* garnered Indiana (who was then still known by his given name, Robert Clark) his first offer to participate in an art exhibition. The invitation came in 1958 from Harold Rubin and Robert Kayser's Parma Gallery in New York, but Indiana refused.<sup>13</sup> Not coincidentally, 1958 was also the year that the artist changed his name to Indiana – thus marking his autogenesis. In a spiritual, personal and artistic sense, "Robert Indiana the Artist" was born in 1958. As Susan Ryan has pointed out in her illuminating book on Indiana: "*Stavrosis*, corroborated by the artist's synchronous name change, may reflect

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more than just identification with Christ as the artist/hero.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed!—*Stavrosis* is not only the seed for the 1959 series, which is shown for the first time as a complete set in 2011 at Gmurzynska Gallery, but its striking abstract forms (which are recognizable as Indiana motifs that come up again and again in later works) and symbolism (for example, ‘love’ and ‘purity’ as represented through form and composition) remain foundational common threads that interweave throughout Indiana’s whole career.

### **The 1959 Series**

Indiana has referred to these ten paintings—arguably the most important set of works he had produced, at the onset of *Stavrosis*—as “some of [his] first children.”<sup>15</sup> Considered within the greater context of Indiana’s oeuvre, these early works can be seen as a watershed moment within the artist’s career.

Interestingly, when asked why these paintings were never shown in New York, and why they arose little interest at the time they were made (and in subsequent years), Indiana today emphasizes the materiality of their support (Homasote, a cheap cellulose-based building material and raw plywood) as the reason why they were not acceptable: “Artists are supposed to work on canvas. It’s a touchy subject. Homasote was even worse than wood. Homasote was unspeakable!”<sup>16</sup> Indiana recalls that Leo Castelli manifested an interest in the 1959 paintings and that he was also getting attention around this time from Eleanor Ward (Indiana had his first show at the Stable Gallery in 1962),



**Detail of Twenty-One Golden Orbs  
(Twenty-First State)**





**THE AMERICAN HAY COMPANY**  
19th Century brass stencil  
45.72 cm diameter  
Collection of Robert Indiana

but the paintings on plywood and Homasote (the “woods” as Indiana sometimes refers to them) were never exhibited until 2010 when four were included in the “Star of Hope” exhibition at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine. Indiana believes they were ignored in 1959 because they were not considered “legitimate art.” At that time, painting on Homasote (or really any material other than canvas or paper at that time) was intolerable and wood was for sculpture, not for painting.

It is well known that Indiana’s early sculptures were born out of scavenging trips around the piers and abandoned warehouses near Coenties Slip. Indiana exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art’s seminal 1961 show, “The Art of Assemblage,” which featured similarly inspired works by Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray and Kurt Schwitters among others.<sup>17</sup> Although it was acceptable to use detritus and found ‘real’ objects to create sculpture, the art world still held a higher set of standards for painting. This distinction seems to have been internalized by Indiana as evidenced by the way he handled his assemblage sculptures versus his paintings from the same period. Sculptures such as *Owl* (1960) or *Sun and Moon* (1960) are inherently and intentionally quirky – they flaunt the unique imperfections of the found bits of wood and odd metal scraps. The poetry of Indiana’s assemblage sculptures lies in the fact that they are composed by rather than imposed upon by the artist.

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Indiana's paintings from the previous year, however, show signs of the artist beginning to enforce an intense precision – symmetry, geometry, hard lines and crisp edges – into his artwork. The contrast of crisp stenciled orbs and perfectly straight lines painted onto the raw and admittedly “imperfect” material of plywood and Homasote is dynamic and in many ways revolutionary. The concept of using found material as a support for geometric abstraction provides a crucial link between Indiana's early assemblage sculptures and his first stencil paintings done on canvas such as *The American Dream I* (1961) (which notably features Indiana's now iconic incorporation of words and numbers with geometric shapes and was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1961.) Although it is hard to imagine today (as artists now work in seemingly every medium – material and immaterial – and combination thereof imaginable), Indiana's hybrid sculpture/paintings (in addition to the ‘sculptural’ material, the intense verticality of the 1959 paintings relates them very closely to sculpture) were problematic in 1959 and their unclassifiable nature is, at least in part, why no gallery would ever have thought to show these works seriously.

It is often the case that an artist's greatest creative achievements are born out of a sense of desperation, which forces him to think and create differently. Other artists used Homasote instead of canvas, notably Robert Motherwell in the late 1940s, also out of the need for a cheap substitute to canvas. Indiana's 1959 series of paintings has everything to do with his

determination to make art, in any way he could, during a period of intense creativity and productivity. Despite the fact that he could not always afford canvas, Indiana was resolved to paint and so he turned to alternate materials including the very walls of his own studio (a Coenties Slip studio provided the Homasote for the 1959 series), which he tore down in order to create a surface to paint on. Although the scavenged materials were not Indiana's preferred choice (even now, looking back, Indiana admits he was a snob who would have much preferred to have been able to paint on canvas<sup>18</sup> the physical properties of the plywood and Homasote are absolutely integral to the overall impact of the series. Confronted with these paintings today, it is clear that they would not have the same emotional resonance or material quality had Indiana done them on canvas. They are, in fact, much better for the fact that they are not the traditional oil on canvas. The flip side to the dire circumstances out of which this series was born is that, precisely because of Indiana's meager finances, many of his earliest works were painted over to recycle materials for new works.<sup>19</sup> Of this early formative and prolific period, only the ten paintings presented in this exhibition still exist. Born out of necessity and an urgent desire to paint, the creativity and artistic sensibility emanates from this series in a palpable and earnestly experimental way. What Indiana came up with in 1959 are crisp, refined geometric abstractions – most notably arrangements of same sized circles – traces of which can be found in nearly all of his work done since. The main difference being, of course, that the 1959 series are,



**The American Dream #1, 1960-61**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**182.9 x 152.4**  
**The Museum of Modern Art, New York**  
**Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund**

as the artist notes with an innocence lost sense of nostalgia, “pre-word.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the stimulus that came from living and working amongst a group of highly creative and prolific artists at Coenties Slip in the late 1950s, Indiana was also highly influenced by the physical nature of his surroundings – especially the vestiges of stenciled and hand-painted signage left over from the 19th Century when lower Manhattan was a bustling shipping hub. Indiana’s experience in Coenties Slip also marks the beginning of a lifetime of exploring words and numbers in two- and three-dimensional artworks, for which he is now best-known. Abe Dulberg’s iconic photograph of Indiana standing in front of his studio at #25 Coenties Slip, clearly demonstrates how the large-scale painted signage covering the brick façade of his studio would have had such a great impact on the emerging artist. In addition to the painted signage, Indiana also came across abandoned stencils such as the 19th century brass stencil for “The American Hay Company” he found near his studio and which still hangs in a place of honor in the artist’s kitchen.

So how does Robert Indiana feel about the “pre-word” (another name by which he like to refer to the 1959 series)<sup>21</sup> paintings looking back at them over half a century later? While preparing for the first formal exhibition of the complete series of paintings, the artist expressed great joy in revisiting these works, which had been in storage for years. Indiana brought them out into his studio again to be restored and retouched in 2000/2001. This reunion gave



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the artist a chance to reconsider his earliest paintings in light of his entire ensuing body of work. In retrospect, Indiana says he feels he could have done more with the themes and forms explored in the 1959 paintings, and believes he did not do this because soon after completing the series, he found enough money to buy canvas and simultaneously “discovered the word.”<sup>22</sup> With a kind of nostalgic admiration, Indiana describes the 1959 series as some of his only works that are not “corrupted by language.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed one of the most remarkable qualities of the 1959 series is their intense purity. Beyond the simplicity of the shapes and the limited, but bold, palette of black and gold, there is a pervasive feeling of near religiosity that encourages meditation and contemplation on Indiana’s intimately coded symbolic language.

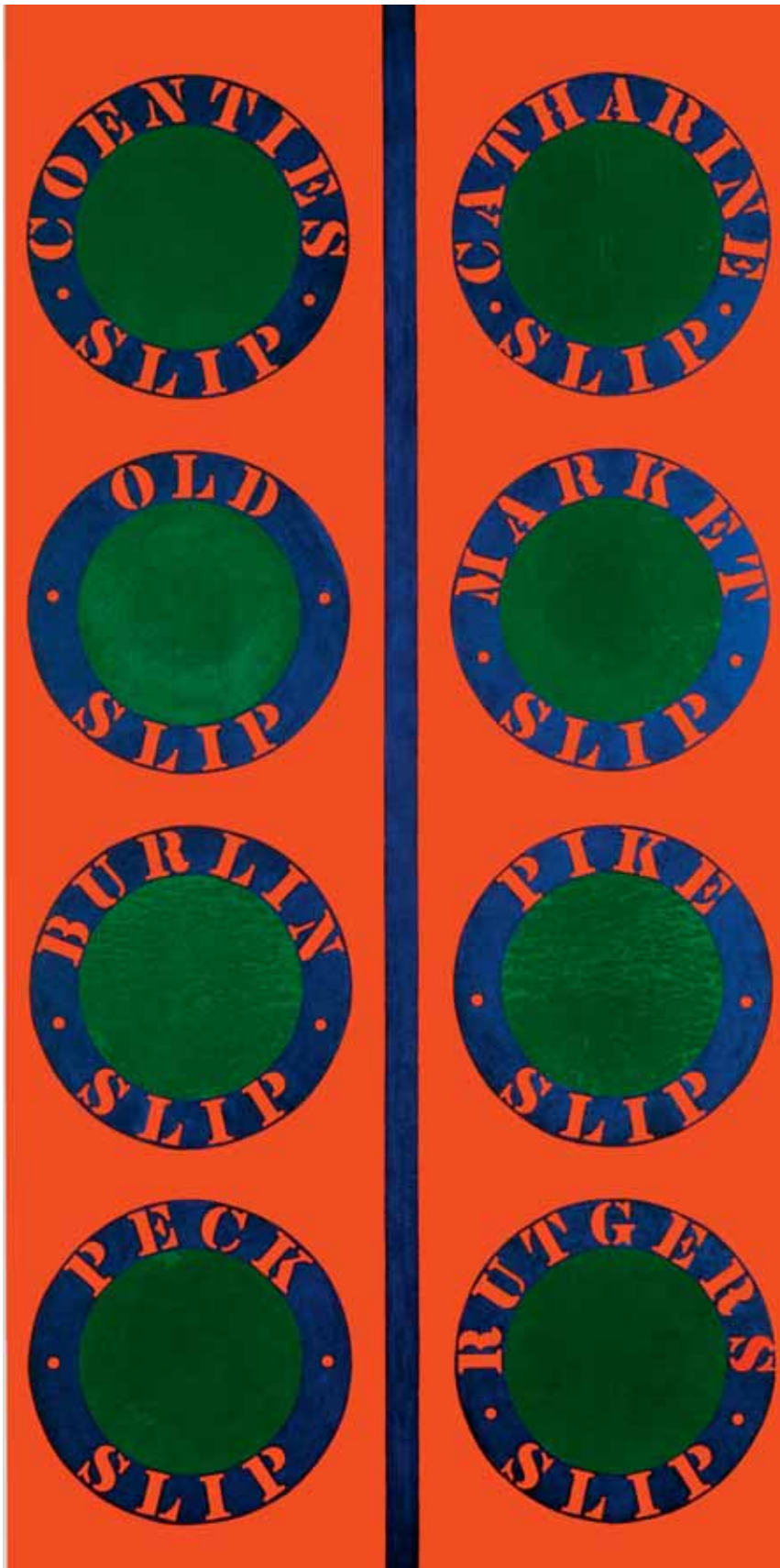
Indiana is not alone in recognizing the power and clarity of his early paintings. Not much has been written about the 1959 series, but when these paintings are mentioned it is often with a sense of reverence for their purity and for the striking link they provide towards more fully understanding and appreciating Indiana’s later work. As Bill Katz has pointed out, *The American Sweetheart* and *The Slips* (both 1959) were both originally unadorned circles painted on Homasote in oil, to which Indiana later added short words and the titles. Writing in 1991, Katz explains: “these two paintings are among the earliest indications of the revelations Indiana had on the journey toward his own truth. They reveal that, at the core, he is a formalist and a poet, and that his subjects

are geometry, identity, and memory.”<sup>24</sup> It is precisely this highly unusual combination (formal rigor/poetry) that places these works in a category all of their own. We almost need a new term. One could say that Indiana here is a maximalist minimalist: this series tells us the most with the least. This series of works continues to resonate so strongly with us today, precisely because they belong to no known category. Indeed, Katz is right: they return us through their purity, through the stark and simple shining beauty of the rhythmic beat of these golden orbs, disks and circles, to a pre-word state of humanity, to the most elementary state of humanity where love stands as the unfathomable pivot, or stake (the stauros) of all things. Love, a pure golden orb, the figure 1 – all echo each other as the primary elements of mankind. These paintings, majestically silent, tell us about the dawn of civilization: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”<sup>25</sup>

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## Notes

1. Ad Reinhardt, "Is There A New Academy?" in *Art-As-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 208.
  2. Ad Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules For A New Academy" in *Art-As-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 204.
  3. Robert Rauschenberg as quoted in Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (MIT Press: Massachusetts, 2002), 182.
  4. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  5. Mildred Glimcher, Indiana, Kelly, Martin, Rosenquist, Youngerman at Coenties Slip: January 16-February 13, 1993 (Pace Gallery, New York, 1993) 7-8.
  6. Ibid. 12
  7. Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000), 39.
  8. Ibid.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Appendix to *The New World Translation of the Bible*, p. 771.
  11. Ibid, 42.
  12. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  13. Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000), 42.
  14. Ibid, 43.
  15. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  16. Ibid.
  17. Indiana showed the sculpture *Moon* (1960) in the 1961 show at MoMA, "Art of Assemblage"  
Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *Wood Works: Constructions by Robert Indiana* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, D.C., 1984), 18.
  18. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  19. John W. McCoubrey in *Robert Indiana* (Falcon Press: Philadelphia, 1968), 9.
  20. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  21. Robert Indiana. Interview with Joachim Pissarro. Vinalhaven, Maine, March 12, 2011.
  22. Ibid.
  23. Ibid.
  24. William Katz in *Robert Indiana: Early Sculpture: 1960-1962* (Salama-Caro Gallery, London, 1991), 13.
  25. *Corinthians*, 13: 13.
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**The Slips, 1959**  
 Oil on homasote  
 243.8 x 121.9 cm

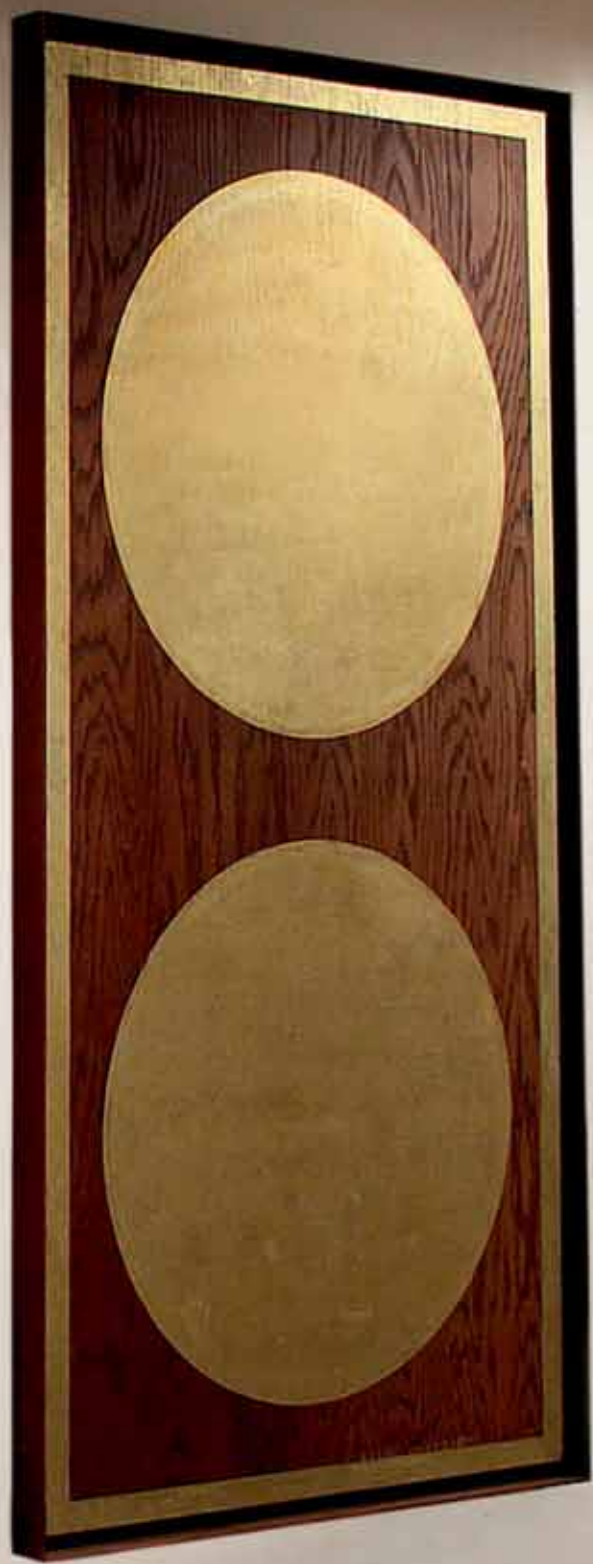


**The American Sweetheart, 1959**  
 Oil on homasote  
 243.8 x 121.9 cm









# PLATES



**Sixth State**  
**1959**  
**Gesso and oil on plywood**  
**82.6 x 61 cm**  
**Stencil signature on reverse:**  
**"Indiana/ 25/ New York/ 59"**

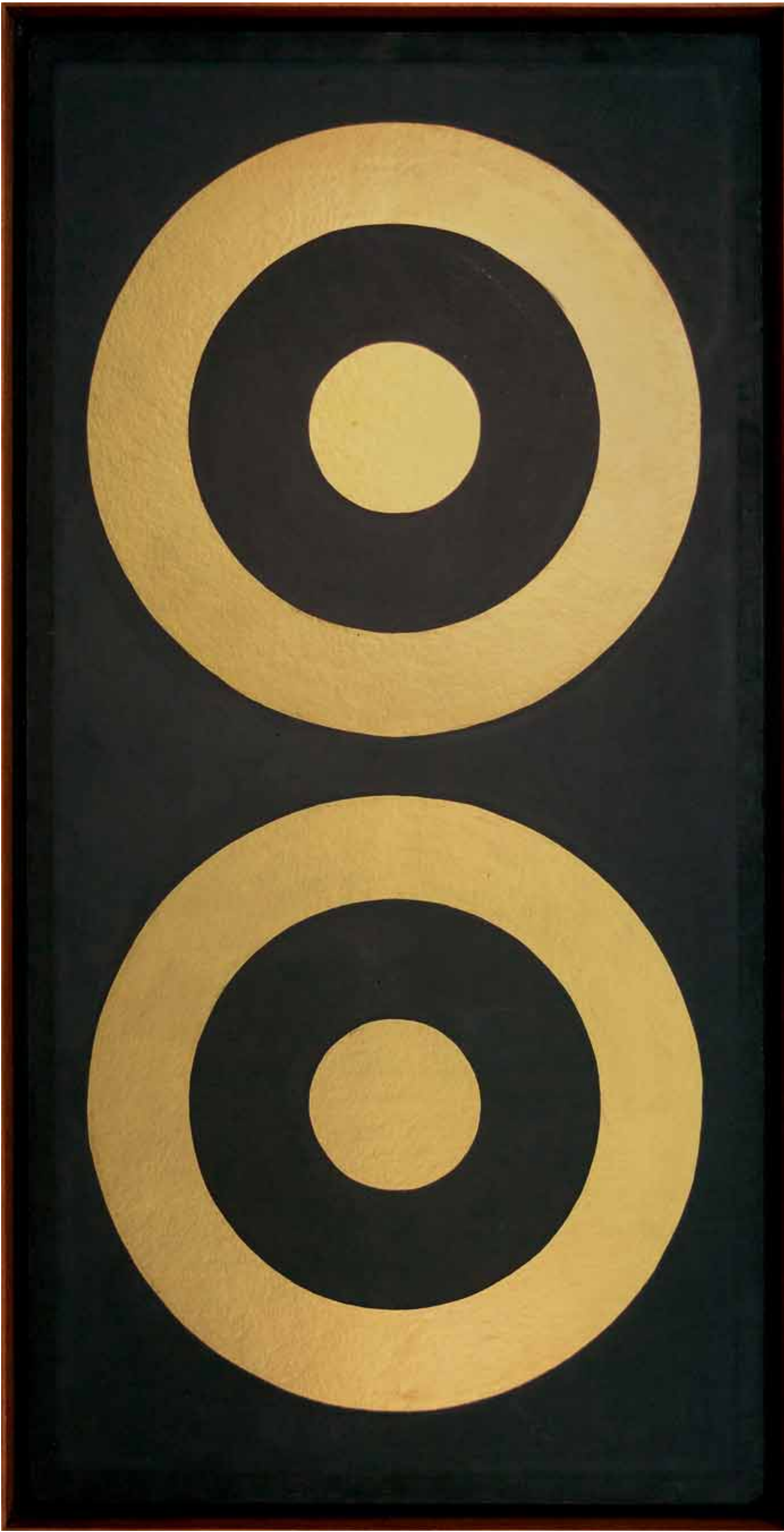
**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**

**Literature:**  
**"Robert Indiana," Institute of Contemporary Art at the University**  
**of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1968, illustration p. 11.**



**Golden Circles**  
**1959-2000**  
**Oil on homasote**  
**243.8 x 121.9 cm**  
**Double stencil signature on reverse:**  
**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 00/ Vinalhaven"**  
  
**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**





**Golden Orbs with Chevrons**  
**1959-2000**  
**Oil on homasote**  
**243.8 x 121.9 cm**  
**Double stencil signature on reverse:**  
**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 00/ Vinalhaven"**

**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**

**Literature:**  
**Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech," Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 80 (sketch and commentary on later lost painting based on present work)**

**Commentary:**  
**This work is graphically closely related to a lost painting from 1960 titled Eidolons, which is sketched in Indiana's diary in July 1960. Susan Ryan, in "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech" describes it as having "two circles over chevron rows of closely hued stripes that point up at the center of the painting, implying a bisecting vertical line. The title word, written along the alternating chevron stripes, refers to Walt Whitman's "Eidolons" from Leaves of Grass. More specifically, it evokes that poem's suggestion of the ultimate image (or portrait), the soul. As an eidolon or phantom image, in the context of this poem, the painting's title succinctly describes the lingering presence of the frontal portrait heads (also visible in certain orb paintings). Eidolons, though it was later damaged and destroyed, must qualify as a major attempt to ground a single repeating text in a "forceful" and "mysterious," minimally anthropomorphic image"**





**Golden Plinth**  
**1959-2001**  
**Oil on plywood**  
**243.8 x 121.9 cm**  
**Double stencil signature on reverse:**  
**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 01/ Vinalhaven"**  
  
**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**



**Twenty Golden Orbs  
1959-2001**

**Oil on plywood  
243.8 x 121.9 cm**

**Double stencil signature on reverse:**

**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 01/ Vinalhaven"**

**Provenance:  
The Artist**

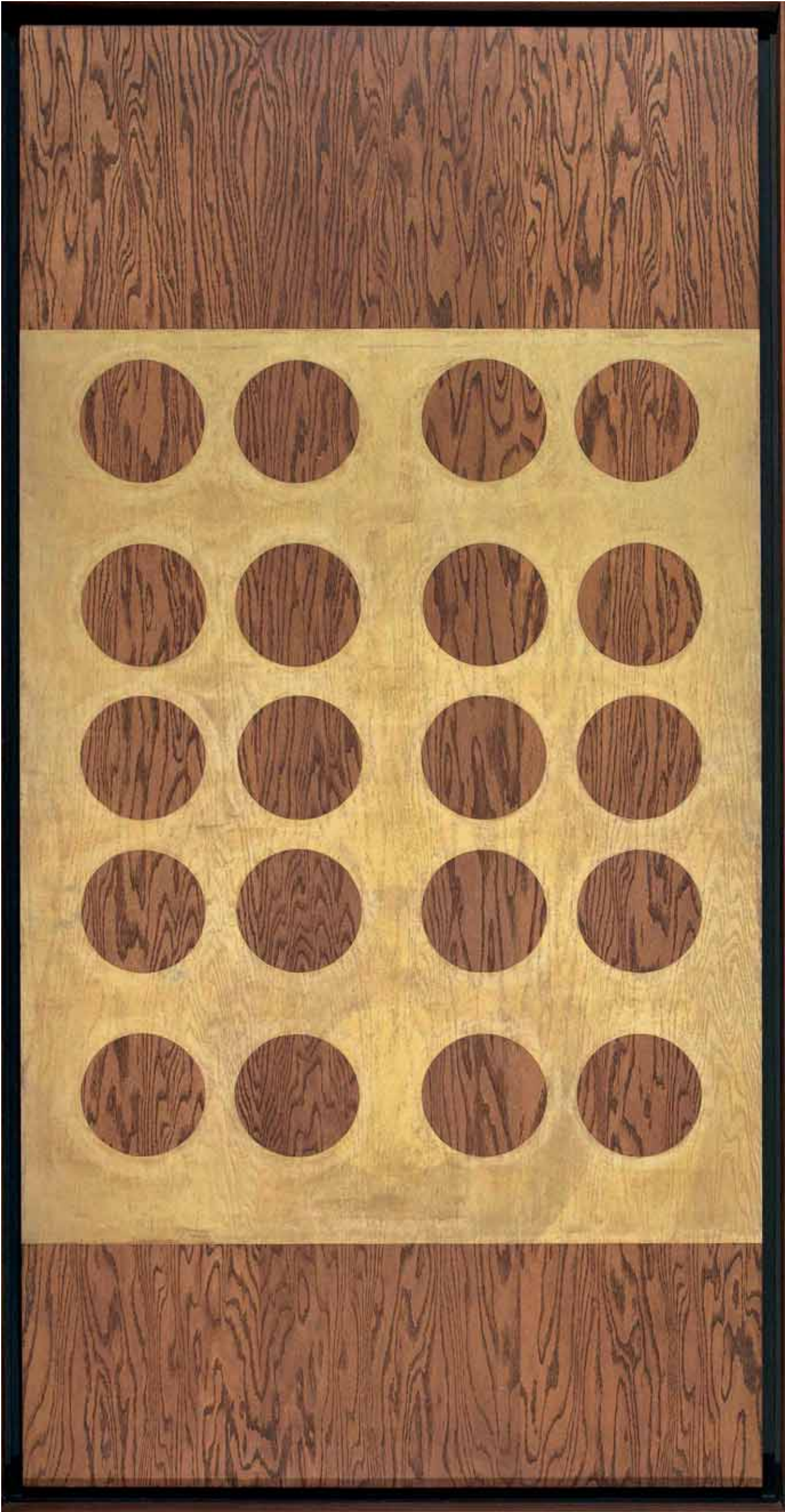
**Literature:**

**Carl J. Weinhardt Jr., "Robert Indiana," Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York 1990, illustrated p. 34 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost), p. 37; "Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana," Portland Museum of Art, Portland 1999, illustrated p. 34 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech," Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, illustrated p. 47 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); Simon Salama-Caro, Joachim Pissarro, John Wilmerding and Robert Pincus-Witten, "Robert Indiana," Rizzoli, New York 2006, illustrated p. 149 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost).**

**Exhibited:**

**"Robert Indiana and the Star of Hope," Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 123, color illustration p. 77 (with incorrect date).**





**Twenty-One Golden Orbs (Twenty-First State)  
1959-2001**

**Oil on plywood  
243.8 x 121.9 cm**

**Double stencil signature on reverse:**

**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 01/ Vinalhaven"**

**Provenance:  
The Artist**

**Literature:**

**"Wood Works: Constructions by Robert Indiana," National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C. 1984, illustrated p. 13 (1959 studio image); Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech," Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 48, illustrated p. 48 (1959 studio image and diary preparatory sketch); Simon Salama-Caro, Joachim Pissarro, John Wilmerding and Robert Pincus-Witten, "Robert Indiana," Rizzoli, New York 2006, illustrated p. 149 (1959 studio image)**

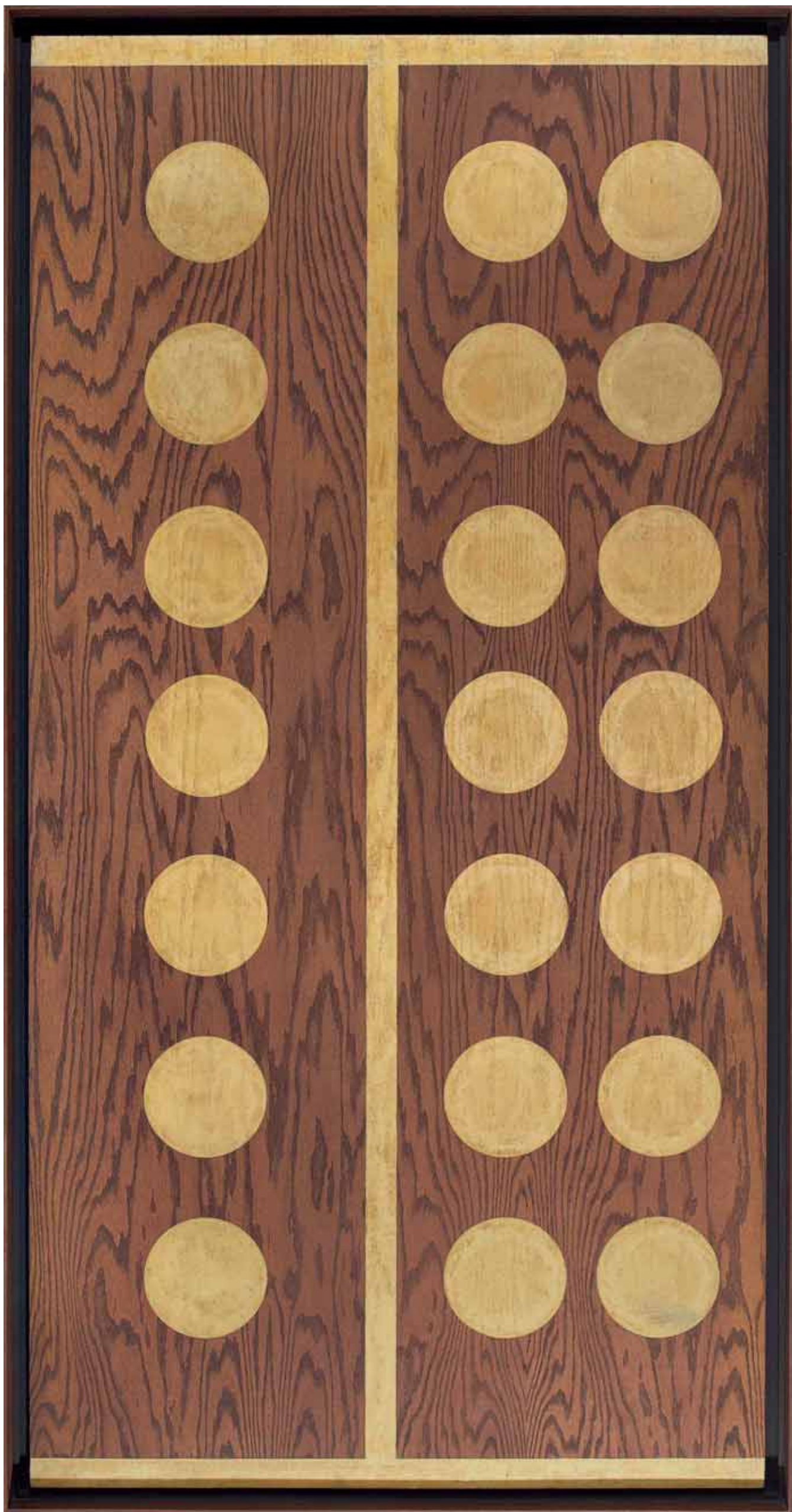
**Exhibited:**

**"Robert Indiana and the Star of Hope," Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 123, color illustration p. 77 (with incorrect date).**

**Commentary:**

**"This is what I have been wanting to turn to for some time, it coming essentially from the twelve orbs, or apostles, from my latest work, but stymied when I saw Agnes' new direction into circles. It comes from "STAVROSIS" and I think very really, in reearthink, from seeing Newman's show. It now seems all the more clear the direction I must take. The natural line down the length of the board I intend to use to set up a tension, not yet seen in my work."  
- Robert Indiana's diary, beneath a sketch for "Twenty-One Golden Orbs (Twenty-First State)", April 1959**







**One Golden Orb (Capital)**  
**1959-2001**  
**Oil on plywood**  
**243.8 x 121.9 cm**  
**Double stencil signature on reverse:**  
**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and**  
**"Robert Indiana/ 01/ Vinalhaven"**

**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**

**Literature:**  
**"Robert Indiana," Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1968, illustrated p. 11 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); "Wood Works: Constructions by Robert Indiana," National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C. 1984, illustrated p. 13 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech," Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, illustrated p. 48 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost).**

**Exhibited:**  
**"Robert Indiana and the Star of Hope," Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 123, color illustration p. 76 (with incorrect date).**



**Two Golden Orbs**

**1959-2001**

**Oil on plywood**

**243.8 x 121.9 cm**

**Double stencil signature on reverse:**

**"Robert Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 1959" and "Robert Indiana/ 01/ Vinalhaven"**

**Provenance:**

**The Artist**

**Literature:**

**Carl J. Weinhardt Jr., "Robert Indiana," Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York 1990, illustrated p. 34 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost), p. 37; "Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana," Portland Museum of Art, Portland 1999, illustrated p. 34 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech," Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, illustrated p. 47 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost); Simon Salama-Caro, Joachim Pissarro, John Wilmerding and Robert Pincus-Witten, "Robert Indiana," Rizzoli, New York 2006, illustrated p. 149 (1959 studio image of comparable work, now lost).**

**Exhibited:**

**"Robert Indiana and the Star of Hope," Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 123, color illustration p. 76 (with incorrect date).**





**Nine Golden Orbs**  
**1959**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**70 x 60 cm**  
**Stencil signature on reverse: "Indiana/ 2/ New York/ 59"**  
  
**Provenance:**  
**The Artist**





**Slip (Silver Plinth)**

**1959**

**Oil on plywood  
230.8 x 112.5 cm**

**Literature:**

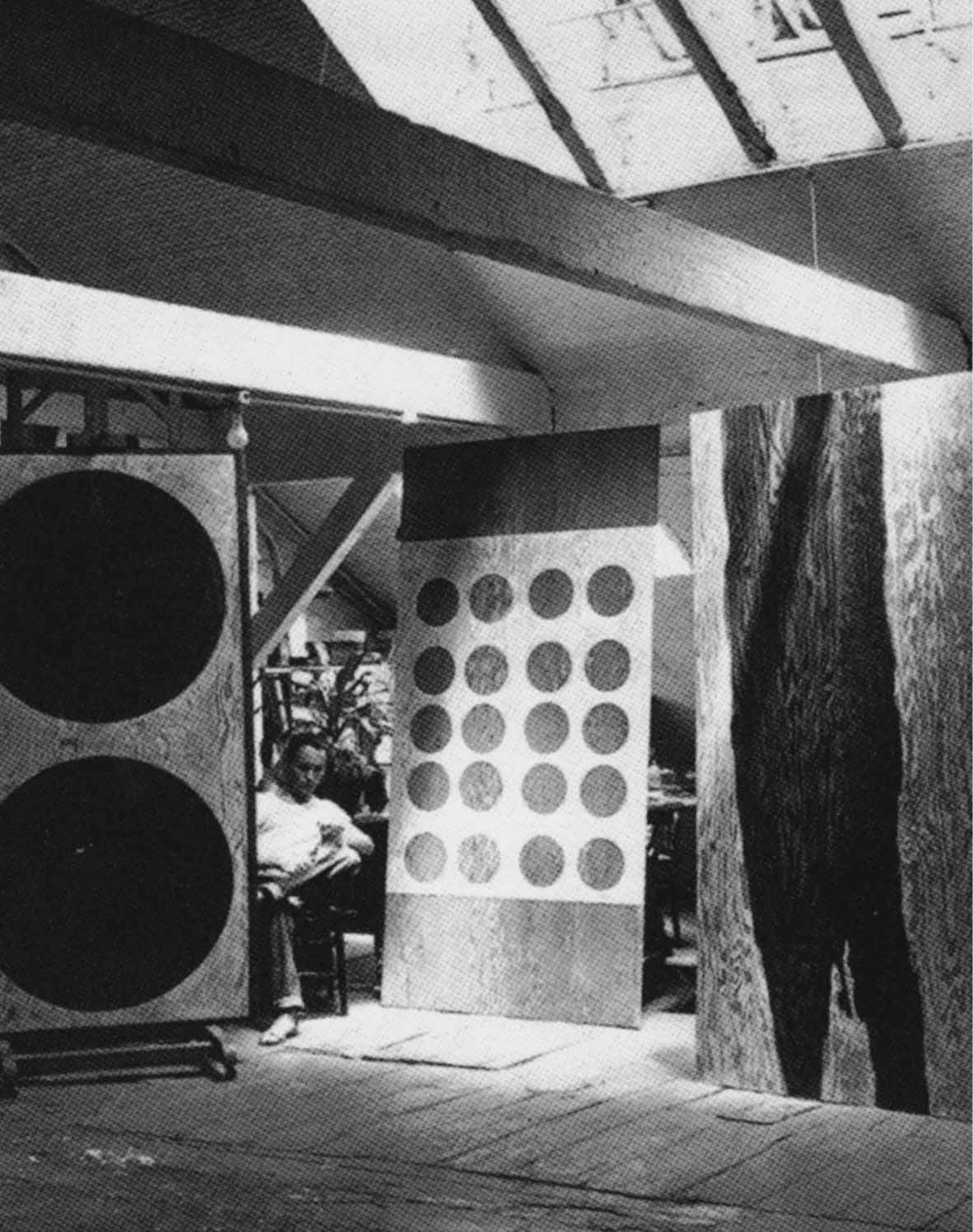
**“Robert Indiana,” Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1968, illustrated p. 11 (1959 studio image);**

**“Wood Works: Constructions by Robert Indiana,” National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington D.C. 1984, illustrated p. 13 (1959 studio image);**

**Carl J. Weinhardt Jr., “Robert Indiana,” Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York 1990, illustrated p. 37; Susan Elizabeth Ryan, “Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech,” Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, illustrated p. 48 (1959 studio image)**









**Literature on the 1959 series included in:**

**“Robert Indiana,” Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1968**

**“Wood Works: Constructions by Robert Indiana,” National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington D.C. 1984**

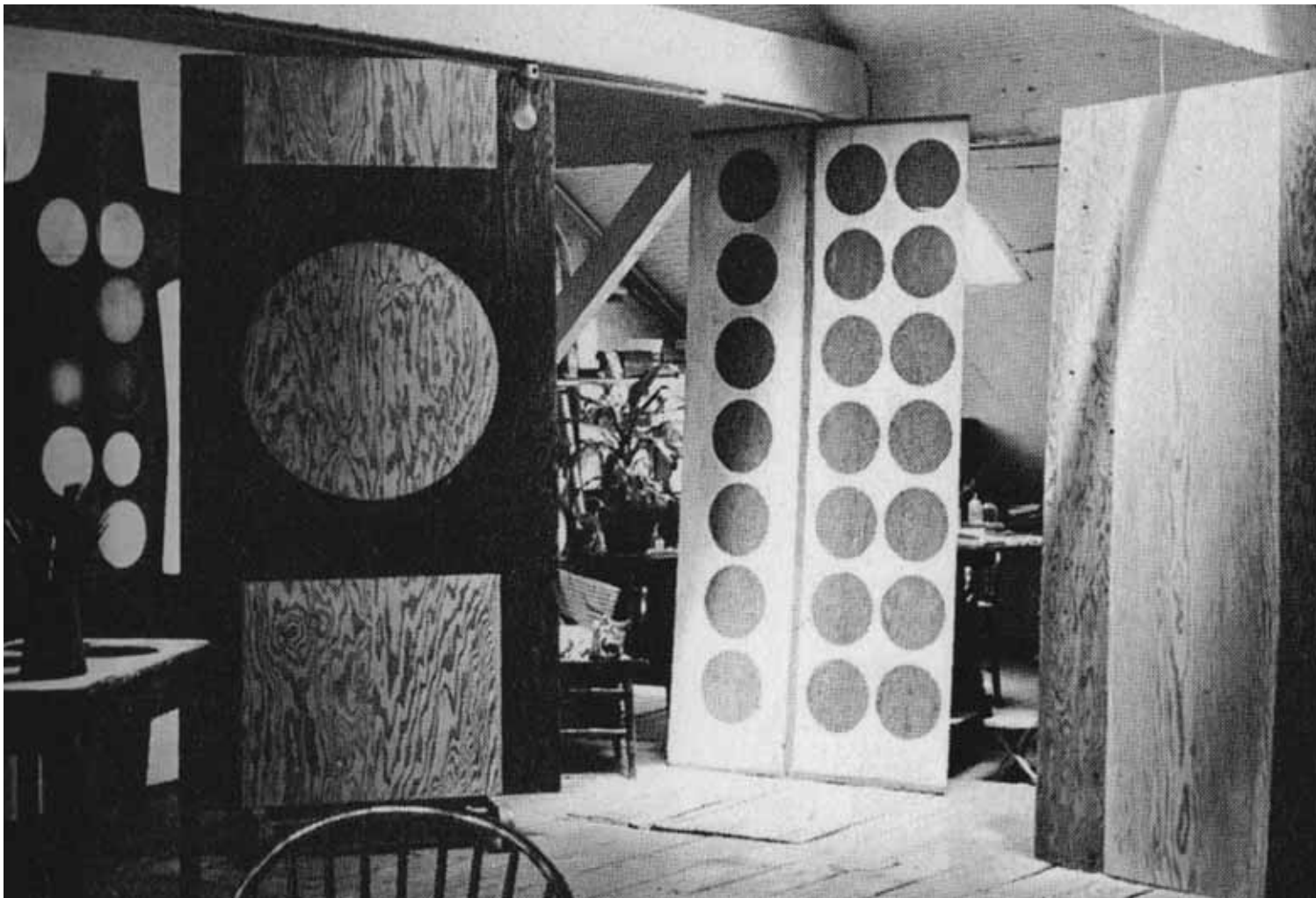
**Carl J. Weinhardt Jr., “Robert Indiana,” Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York 1990**

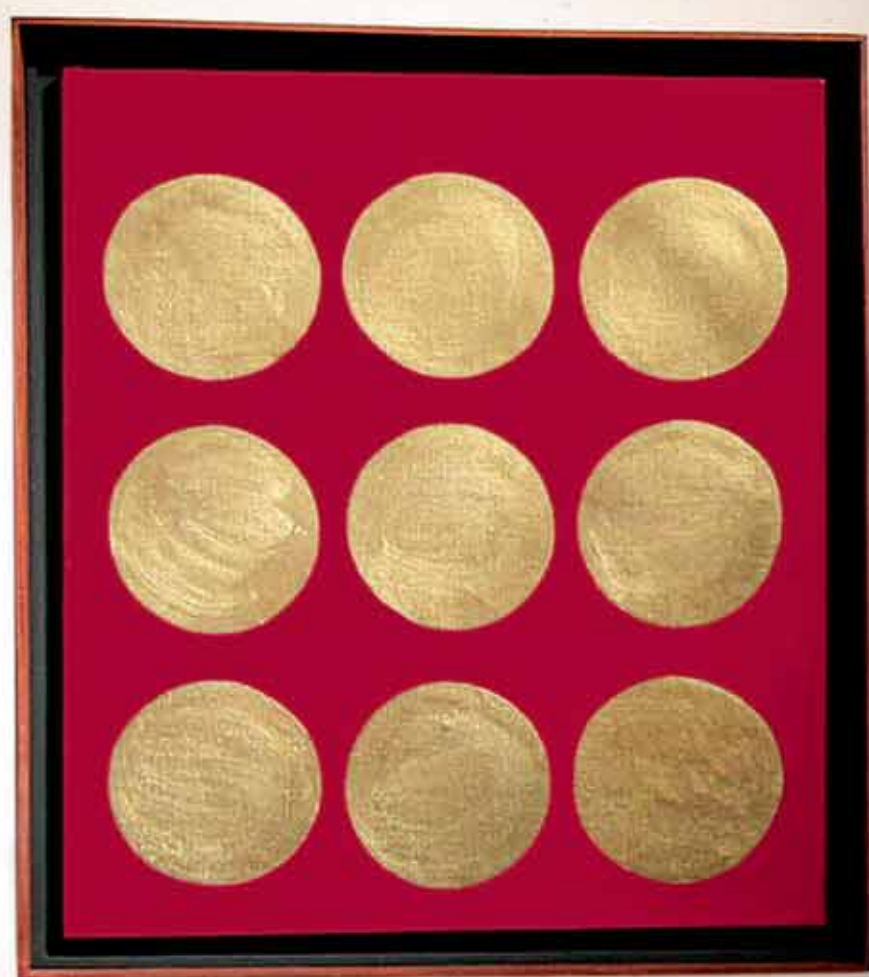
**“Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana,” Portland Museum of Art, Portland 1999**

**Susan Elizabeth Ryan, “Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech,” Yale University Press, New Haven 2000**

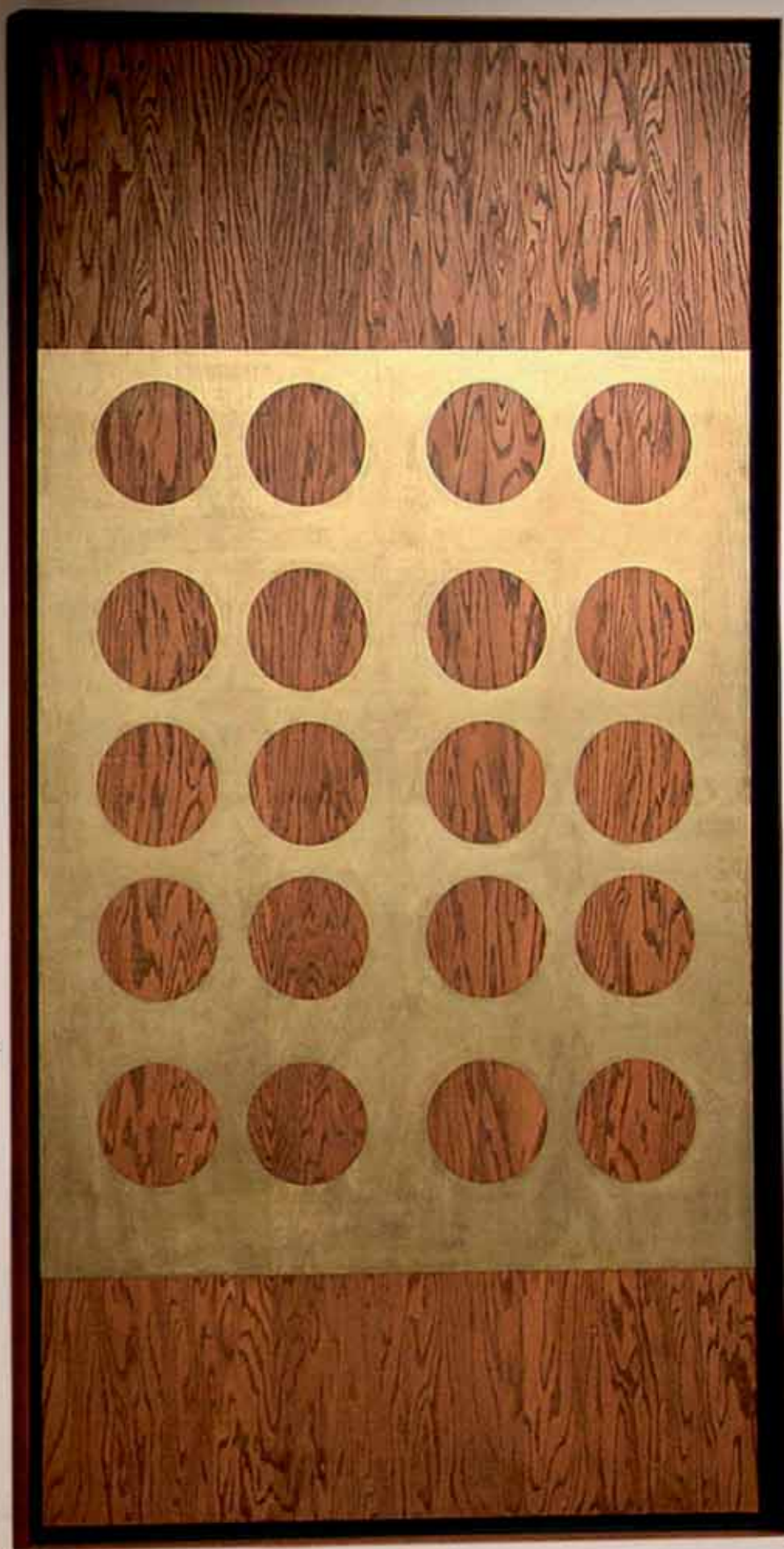
**Simon Salama-Caro, Joachim Pissarro, John Wilmerding and Robert Pincus-Witten, “Robert Indiana,” Rizzoli, New York 2006**

**“Robert Indiana and the Star of Hope,” Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010**





















# INTERVIEW

**JOACHIM PISSARRO INTERVIEWS ROBERT INDIANA**

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**INTERVIEW**  
**Robert Indiana/Joachim**  
**Pissarro, 2011**



**The Ginkgo AI (White White  
Black Gold), 2006**  
Oil on canvas  
45.7 x 30.5 cm

**Joachim Pissarro:** I would like to ask you about this body of work from 1959. How do you come to these paintings? They are so forthright, so direct, and so impactful.

**Robert Indiana:** You know what they are right?

**JP:** They are done on plywood...

**RI:** They are “pre-word.” That’s where my relationship with [Ellsworth] Kelly deteriorated—he didn’t think paintings should have words.

**JP:** So these are, as you say, “pre-word.” And at the time you share a studio with Kelly?

**RI:** We actually never shared a studio. We shared a neighborhood. We lived on Coenties Slip, two blocks apart. Kelly shared a building with James Rosenquist, Chuck Hinman, and Agnes Martin. Jack Youngerman was also a neighbor.

**JP:** In the past couple of years have you been thinking back on your earliest works, from the Coenties Slip period?

**RI:** As far as I’m concerned this [pointing to “The Ginkgo AI” paintings from 2006] is the final chapter to the paintings that you saw earlier [the 1959 series]. These should have been done a long time ago, but they are only quite recently done.

**JP:** So, recently you have been thinking back about the body of work that you produced in 1959.

**RI:** Just wrapping things up...

**JP:** And I noticed that in the chronology, the date on some of the works from the 1959 series is written “1959-2000” or “1959-2001.”

**RI:** Yes, they had to be restored.

**JP:** So it’s been, 40 years or so. There’s a gap of four decades and then you revisit these very early works. Let’s start here, I’m

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looking at this large work, which has echoes of the orb, ginkgo and avocado forms that we see in the 1959 series, as well as in the “Ginkgo AI” paintings from 2006.

RI: Yes. [This is] Stavrosis. I was working at the Cathedral at St. John the Divine when I made this.

JP: So Stavrosis is, in a way, what starts off the [1959] series?

RI: Yes, very related. Very, very related. Everything refers to The Bible. The twelve disciples, the crown of thorns, the chalice, the trinity, good thief, bad thief... I found this huge stack of paper in my loft on Coenties slip and, you know, one should not leave a stack of paper unmolested!

JP: So you crucified the paper! Tell me, if you don’t mind, about your interest in religion and how that has inflected your work.

RI: Well, this was a very important moment in my life because I was very poor and I answered an ad in the New York Times. I became a part-time assistant at the Cathedral [of St. John the Divine] typing letters. There was a gentleman called Pike [Dean James A. Pike] who was Dean of the cathedral and he had just been appointed the head honcho of California—Bishop of the Episcopal Church. And some of the Episcopalians were simply incensed. He was an ex-Catholic, a New York stockbroker, and he was also a divorced man. He was becoming a Bishop of their church! So in came this flood of nasty letters to Dean Pike and it was I who sat an electric typewriter and answered every one of those nasty letters, you see. While I working there I became acquainted with Cannon West (Edward N. West) who was doing a book on the “true cross” and that’s really what

spurned my interest in doing the Crucifixion—the revelation of what the cross really was and so forth.

JP: This is a fascinating and touching story. So how do you go from this, which was done for the cathedral...?

RI: No, no, the people at the cathedral couldn’t have been less interested in art. I did this all on my own. Not having the money for large canvases, I simply found all this paper and spent a long, long time—this is 44 panels in total—doing this work. It is dry brush: printer’s ink rubbed on paper.

JP: There is something very mystical about this series of paintings, I find.

RI: What is difficult for me, Joachim, is seeing all of these works and then realizing that they were all in the Stavrosis and that the Stavrosis has been done for a very, very long time but never really been properly appreciated.

JP: Well, why not bring this up in the Zurich show? There is such an obvious parallel between the [1959 series] and Stavrosis.

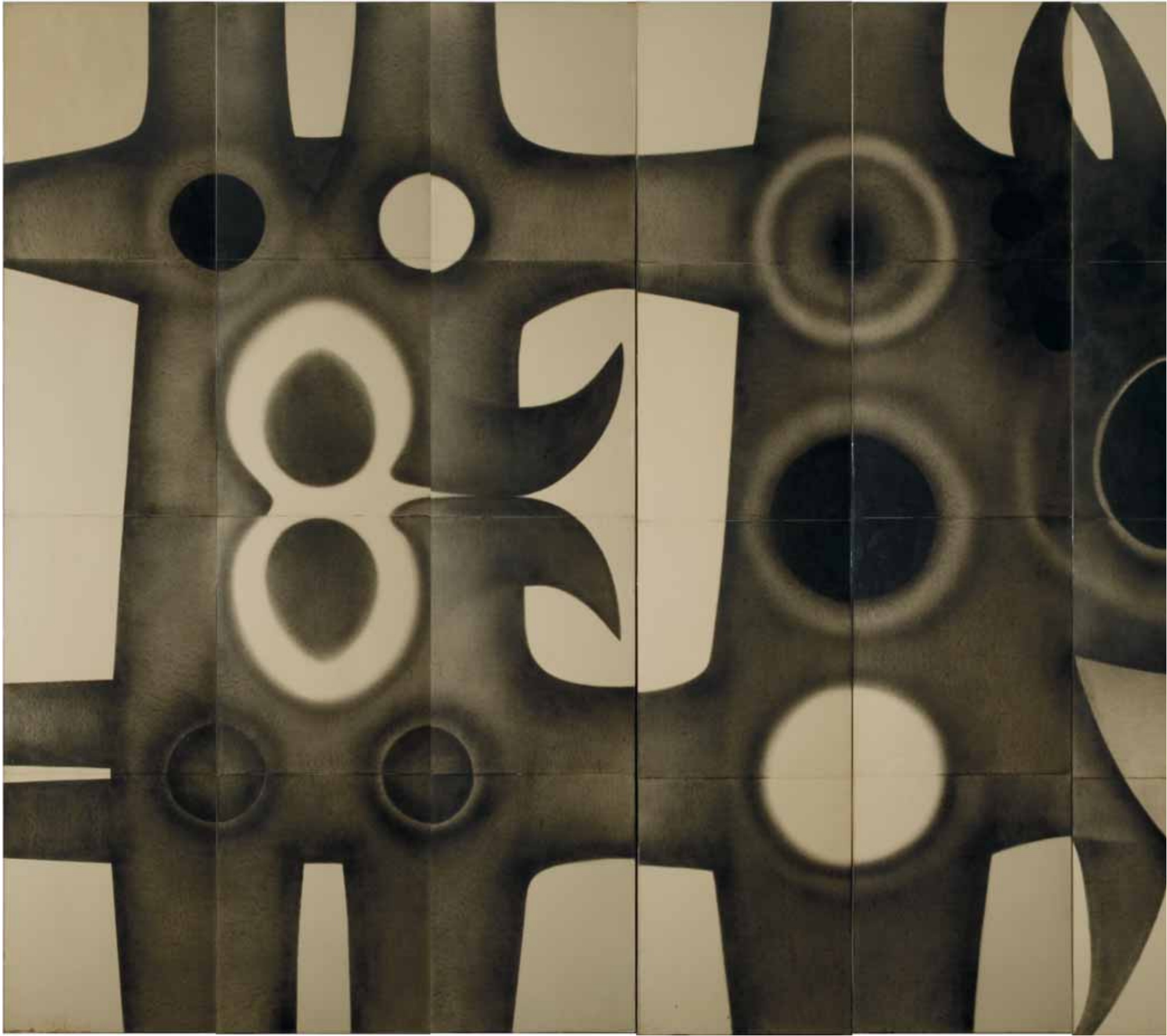
RI: I think I’ve always liked that painting [Stavrosis] more than anyone else ever has.

JP: I have a curious question to ask you. It is weird slightly, but would you not say that you are to the art world of this last half-century what Jesus Christ was to the history of religion. Jesus Christ incarnating love yet being persecuted. Jesus Christ being ignored or not seen, yet being all present. I am wondering, because this is a very important work in your life, and there you are in it.

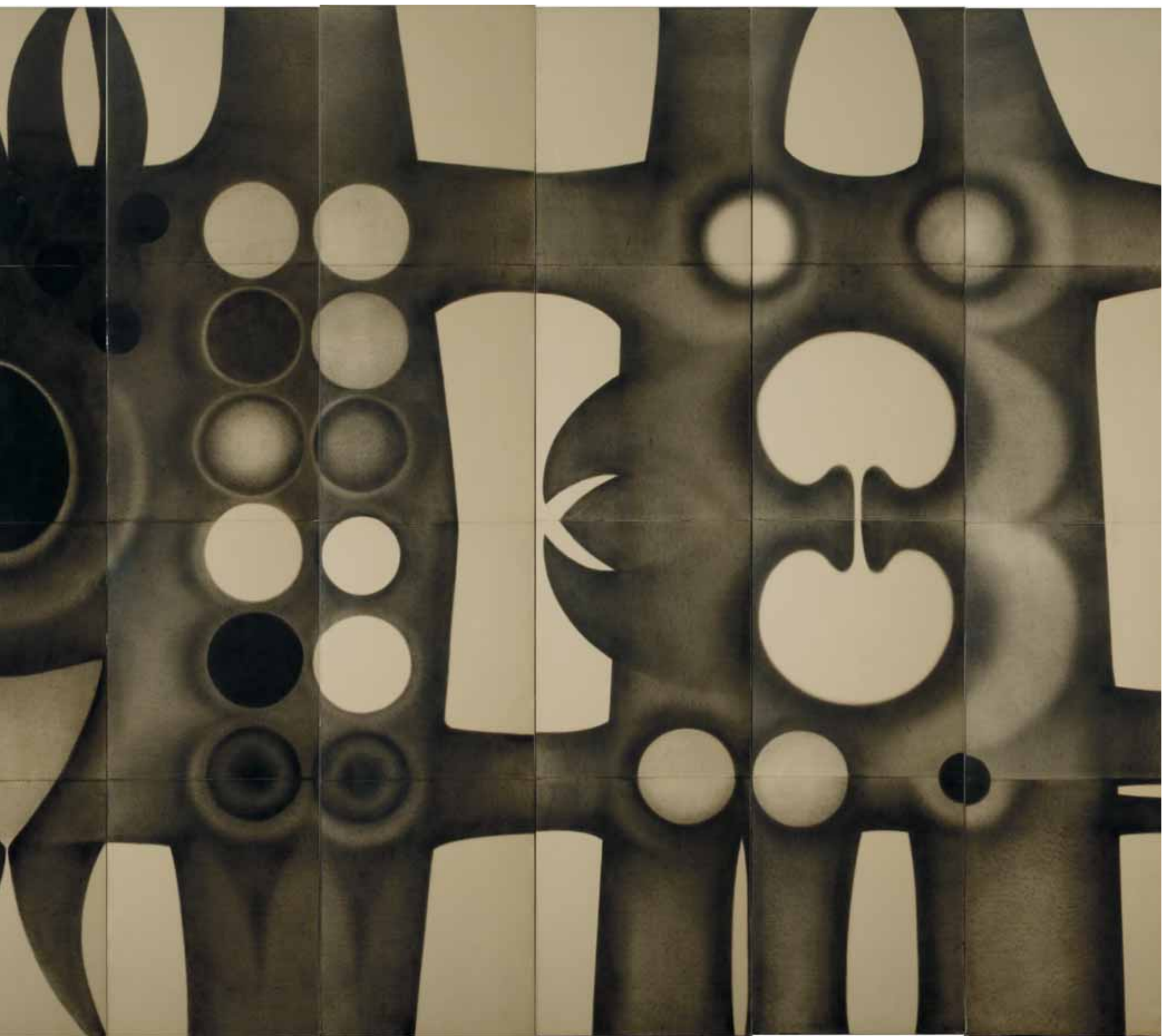
RI: [Silence for a moment] then... When I did Stavrosis I was not really thinking about love.

JP: So what is the relationship to the 1959 series? When I first saw these paintings in





**Stavrosis, 1958**  
**Printer's ink, dry brush on**  
**paper mounted on wood**  
**252.1 x 582.29 cm**



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**Zurich [in 2010] I was so far from thinking about the Crucifixion or any kind of religious themes. It's not embedded in those works unless you know.**

**RI: Obviously they are very closely related [to Stavrosis], but no one has bothered to make that connection. No one has ever expressed very much interest at all. The only person [at the time] who ever showed any interest [in the 1959 series] was, strangely enough, [Leo] Castelli. But because of the people involved we never became involved...**

**JP: Really? Did he ever mention the idea of giving you a show, or exhibiting them?**

**RI: No. Eleanor Ward stepped in and that same year she gave Andy [Warhol], Marisol [Escobar] and me our first one-man shows.**

**JP: So were the [1959] paintings ever shown in New York? At Eleanor Ward's or anywhere else?**

**RI: No, the "woods," as I like to call them, were never shown.**

**JP: Why was this? Did you decide not to show them? Or was there just not any interest?**

**RI: I think they were considered illegitimate.**

**JP: Because...?**

**RI: They're not on canvas. Artists are supposed to work on canvas. It's a touchy subject. Homasote was even worse than wood. Homasote was unspeakable!**

**JP: If I remember correctly, Motherwell worked on Homasote in the 40s. He didn't have much money either....**

**RI: Anyway, I think that was the case – that no one was very impressed at the time.**

**JP: Because it is a cheap material? An industrial material? What's wrong with Homasote? They look amazing today.**

**RI: It's building material. Not for an artist. I would have preferred canvas. I'm a snob too!**

**JP: But how do you feel about them now?**

**RI: I'm very fond of my first children. They are among my first children, you know.**

**They've been in various places, but mainly in storage, never shown. They used to be part of my walls on Coenties Slip. I simply tore down the partitions and painted them.**

**JP: So you tore down the walls of your studio to make art. That's incredible.**

**RI: And the plywood. I like wood. I spent a large amount of my life working with wood. Owl [1960] is my first wood. I was teaching children in Scarsdale and would bring them this sort of material to show them what they could do with found objects. I was teaching kindergarteners. And after three years I was nearly out of my mind!**

**JP: The strict verticality of the plywood and Homasote paintings – is that intentional?**

**RI: That is simply a sexual matter. I've never considered the horizontal to be anything but feminine and the vertical is masculine. I've never been comfortable with horizontals.**

**JP: The notion of the orb is very important to you around the moment of 1959.**

**RI: Yes, and it relates to love, of course. It had to do with the fact that I was very briefly, and not extensively, exposed to Christian Science. Of course in every Christian Science church there's only one thing—that phrase on the wall: "God is Love." And I converted it to "Love is God."**

**The one thing that impressed me that I learned in Christian Science was what the circle represented: life eternal. So it all started with that. Obviously I was obsessed at that time with what I called orbs.**

**JP: So, you do make a distinction within the series between orbs and circles?**

**RI: Positively.**

**JP: Orbs are full, circles are empty...?**

**RI: Orbs lend themselves to a sculptural**



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concept whereas circles tend to be not so sculptural.

**JP:** So you were thinking in terms of sculpture when you were making these works? [pointing to golden orbs with chevrons 1959-2000]

**RI:** He's sitting right there [Owl]. Does he not have circles for eyes?

**JP:** So you, unlike many artists older than you, or even artists of your generation who have a very strict conception of abstraction, have absolutely no fear—no inhibition—about going back and forth between representation and abstraction.

Representation and symbols—it's all one world. This is one of the things I find most fascinating about you.

**RI:** Remember my resistance to being called a Pop artist...I was never fond of that designation at all. Both Kelly and I were in shows related to formalism and I considered myself a formalist. As far as I am concerned that [pointing to One Golden Orb (Capital), 1959-2001] is formal. Not the least bit informal.

**RI:** The chevrons simply have to relate to my own military experience. For a year or two in the air force I was a corporal. And that signifies a corporal—the two chevrons. Later, I did a painting in relation to dead generals—an antiwar painting of mine—where the chevron motif came into play again. [In Memory of Dead Generals].

**JP:** I wondered if being in the army and the war in general influenced these works.

**RI:** It was three years of my life that I would rather forget. I could have done more with these themes, but then somehow I found money to buy canvas and then came along that nasty thing called “the word...”



**The Ginkgo AI (White White Black Gold), 2006**  
Oil on canvas  
45.7 x 30.5 cm

**CONCEPT**

**Krystyna Gmurzynska, Mathias Rastorfer**

**COORDINATION**

**Mitchell Anderson**

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**Abe Dulberg, Ron Kamrau, Steve Morrison**

**(courtesy the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine)**

**Courtesy Robert Indiana for documentary pictures**

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