

Liner Notes: After Some Paintings by Enrico Riley

Zack Finch and Enrico Riley

Years ago in college, Enrico and I played music together in a band. When the music was happening, it was because we were listening to each other and able to respond on the fly. I've continued to listen to his visual work as closely as possible in the years that have elapsed since then, and to learn from Enrico's deeply receptive capacities as an artist. So I was happy, if a bit intimidated, when I was asked to add some verbal accompaniment to some of his recent paintings. A number of these pieces are based on familiar notational systems, such as musical scores, astronomical star charts, and the divinatory hexagrams of the *I Ching*. It strikes me that by using such documents as source material, by effectively transcribing transcriptions, Riley gives his viewers the room to improvise some possible meanings—logical, lyrical and technical (scribal)—of transcription itself.

Here's a possible definition for transcription, based upon sitting with Enrico's work: transcription aims to construct a code that is perfectly *analogous* to the original script. Analogy stresses a special kind of likeness, based on proportional similitude. Its ideal rigor is therefore quantitative, as in Aristotle's analytic method, though the likenesses of analogy are also inevitably poetic, as in Plato's assertion in the *Timaeus* that fire is to air as earth is to water. But analogy also possesses a third dimension, which Enrico's paintings make me follow: it can picture the *structure* of some other reality that we can never behold, as in, say, the proportions of the axes of the Christian cross. Medieval theologians believed that the scaffolding of a perfectly formal reasoning was tantamount to a proof of the existence of God. As if we could draw close to the unknowable by fixing the ratios of what we *can* possibly know.

Enrico's work approaches the unapproachable by taking the formal measure of "the already known." "Composition number 2" departs from the source data of a specific musical score, and in the course of developing a systematic approach to the transcription of its elements—assigning colors for acoustic pitches, rectangles for chords in the bass clef, and squares to illustrate melodic changes in the treble clef—it offers a stable visual analogy for something that cannot be held fast. *Sound—*

Written notes were called *neumes* in medieval musical writing, a term evidently related to the Greek word *pneuma*, meaning the breath of God. So the relationship between the phenomenality of language and the transcendence of what it aspired to incorporate has been part of scribal consciousness from early on. At issue in transcription are the aspirations, or im/possibilities, of stating the ecstatic, of lending a spirit its square notation, of bringing eternity's *nunc stans* into view. With the strict accuracy of the scholastic scribe, Enrico's paintings connect the ratiocination of analogical reasoning with the exhilarating proof of a world well beyond reason.



Composition number 2 (2007)
oil on canvas on panel, 48 x 47"

Enrico's paintings may make us think of the modern jazz score, whose simplicity stands in contrast to the overweening detail found in a lot of classical music notation, whereby the composer tries to control the outcome of each performance. Both modern jazz and modernist abstraction downplay the reproducibility of intentional meaning in favor of infinitely variable interpretations. Because it diagrams only "the changes," the chord progression and the essential melody line, a written jazz score has a Platonic feeling about it. A kind of compromise between oral and written traditions, the jazz score is a document of possibilities, rapt in waiting.

Sight-reading "Composition number 3" from left to right and top to bottom, as we are accustomed to reading a written page, the basic tone is formed by the blue and yellow square-rectangle combinations along the left hand side. All of the departing melody lines are tethered to these starting blocks, and will resolve there as well. The orange figures kind of feel like complementary or passing chords, and the green squares, particularly the darkest one on the far right side, incite moments of sudden instability, like a dominant 7th chord, eager to be resolved. Treating the painting as an analogue to a musical score, the canvas indeed looks like a progression of substitutions, not unfamiliar to the logic of displacement that is jazz. If I had to give this piece an alias, I might dub it "Brilliant Corners," because the pockets of space around every angle put me in mind of the jaunty urban clarities of Thelonious Monk.

The referent of sheet music, however, doesn't need to dictate our movement. When we give up the ghost of the musical score, the piece opens up. It reorganizes itself under various new aspects, as different subsets of elements become pronounced, the result of same-color groupings, or any number of geometrical relations. It becomes clear that Riley is thinking fluently across the whole canvas. The area of greatest gravitational pull is probably the upper right quadrant where, since the rectangles have disappeared, a rising arm of squares is allowed to form an exhilarating arpeggio—the Big Dipper of the piece. Now it's the color orange which orchestrates the field, rather than blue and yellow, which have faded: the lone orange square near the middle, buffeted by empty space, presides like a pole star, creating a radiant constellation with the four other orange squares wheeling around it. And now I see my metaphors have changed completely, from the score to the sky. With Enrico's work, one tries as many keys as he has and finds they all work.



Composition number 3 (2007)
oil on canvas on panel, 45 x 44"

"A picture represents a possible situation in logical space."
Ludwig Wittgenstein, 2.202 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

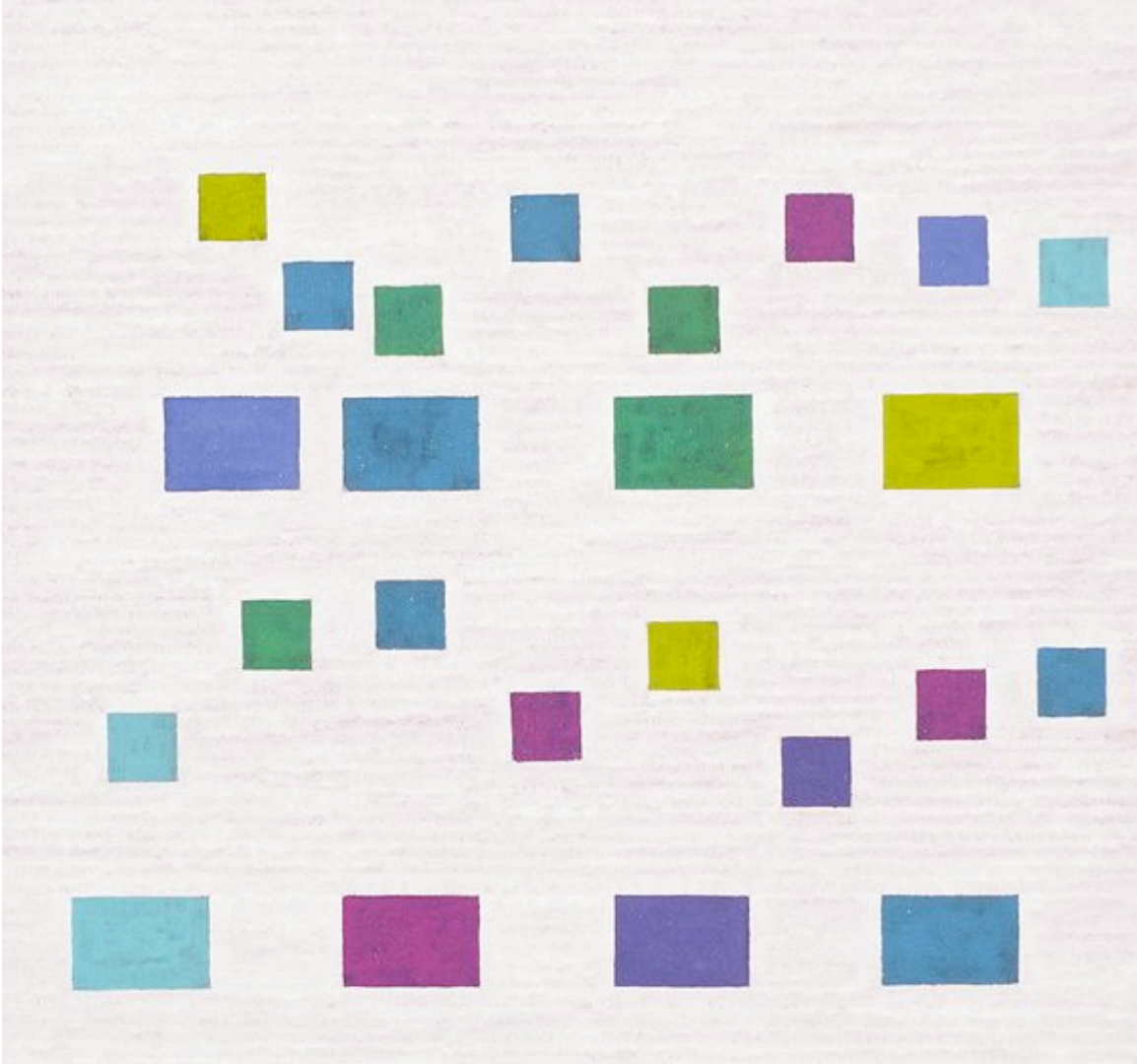
The felicity of every phrase hinges entirely on itself, by the balance and reciprocity of its melodic and rhythmic parts: the happiness of exactitude. An aphorism's power is somewhat aphasiac. One forgets what came before it—what made the possible actual. "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what's mystical," Wittgenstein wrote about the poetry of logical notation. Each phrase must be a well-tempered scale. I think of Miró's mobiles, the levity of things lifted up off the ground, the levity of the possible. In "Perfect Love," through the blooming of vernal color, the bottom melody appears to be an inversion of the top: a reflecting pool of opposites. If this painting were a poem it might be an epithalamion.

The five-line staff has receded from view in Enrico's musical pieces. But in its place, in the background, are the tiny whales. The variation with which these little ribs or ridges are textured, allows the pink hues of the under-painting to filter through, bespeaking a river flowing underneath the ice, or the quivering sentience of light reflected by water. These echo patterns are the reminders that something is flowing, impossible to contain save in fleeting moments. A painting is a vow. There's nothing higher to swear on than this moment.

But the now of the painting was a long time in coming. It often seems like Riley paints with a brush that is infinitely small. The painstaking precision yields a world that has been sized up and rescaled until utterly ripe, at which point the fruit is left to hang in the boughs. It weighs next to nothing.

Before making these paintings, Riley spent several years making figureless white paintings, listening to the Mascoma River outside his studio on the fifth floor of the old brick mill in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

"All love is mathematically just, as much as the two sides of an algebraic equation."
R.W. Emerson, "Compensation"



Perfect Love (2006)
oil on canvas on panel, 22 x 24"

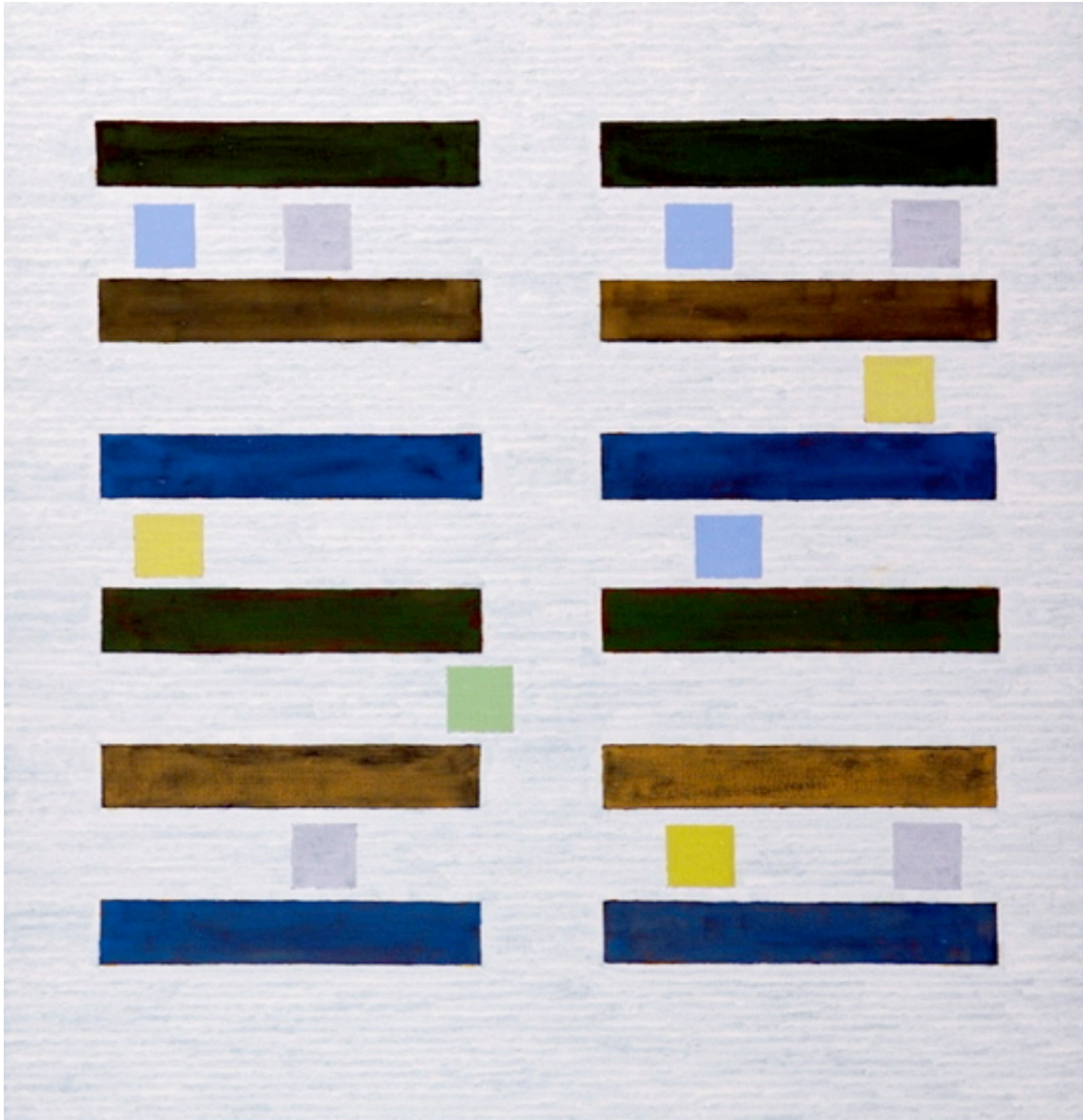
As a child, Enrico had been deeply impressed by the fact that every of his father's record albums was exactly the same size. Perhaps the love of the *collection* is the child's first intimation of the philosophical obsession with set theory. Baseball cards, stickers, Russian dolls, colored money, all types of tokens—aspiration toward “the complete set” recognizes its most pronounced, perhaps unreachable peak, as Mallarmé understood, in the twenty-six letters of the synoptic alphabet.

This is not the “rage” for order of the artist wresting from the world an ideal symbol or system. It is rather the happiness of the child who finds the world breaks down easily into *things*—manageable, palpable types of things, which can be held fast and even interpreted. The coins landed *this* way. To be complete, a painting must feel like it's achieved that sense of fate and unavoidability, even if what it *says* rhymes like a nonsense poem or is opaque as a foreign oracle.

The Chinese *Book of Changes*, one of the oldest living methods of transcription, seems like an inviting source for Enrico's aesthetic, which converts entropic randomness into symbolic order. The complete set: sixty-four hexagrams guarantee a reduction of all the world's chaos and ambiguity into a single definite image, so simple it stands upright like an omen, or beacon. Users of the *I Ching* form a hexagram by dividing forty-nine yarrow stalks according to a series of precise instructions, or by tossing three coins six times in a row, in order to be given a pair of trigrams which, when set into vertical relation, provide an answer to whatever question you might have asked.

That answer is only a beginning. The vertical authority of the six double bars in *Triplet* are meaningless unless they are interpreted. The lighter toned squares do just that, climbing up or down the totemic image like it's a ladder, or a capital letter at the entrance to the dark woods of a children's story. I feel like an ape inspecting the black monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The image is magnetic, it appears like a judgment. But what's been decided? *K'un: The Receptive...*

“The person in question is not in an independent position, but is acting as an assistant. This means that he must achieve something. It is not his task to try to lead—that would only make him lose the way—but to let himself be led.”



Triplet (2007)
oil on canvas on panel, 34 x 35"

The figures in Enrico's "Dove Constellation" are discovered using star charts' transcriptions of the night sky. Drawing lines from particular star-points, he makes new constellations, turns them into positive shapes, then coordinates them on the canvas-cum-aviary—a group of flying wedges, hyper-animated stars, enlivening a sense of free-dimensional space. Most of the angles of these "stars" are acute ones, lending each arm a sense of wingspan, putting the negative space on alert, like spurs close to flesh.

I think of these figures as caricatures of figuration, with features so exaggerated that they make a comic impression when looked at for a while. The jagged, internal crooks feel like the mouths of silhouetted cartoon creatures: they are almost talking to each other. They could be singing or disagreeing. One never knows what birds are doing!

The freewheeling cluster of seven "stars" flouts the anxiety of image-making, the long boring hours at the draftsman's table, though that tedium remains evident in the background's highly textured, rather beautiful off-white monotony. *Absurdio ex nihilo*: out of the vacuum of interstellar distances, eccentric plenums pop up. Emptiness becomes solid as quickly as a solitary child finds imaginary friends in the ivy. A constellation warms the sky, populates the dark. The child's love of paper airplanes is enfolded here. This jagged conference of the birds—

After long Pythagorean silences, "Dove Constellation" affirms that freedom exists within the fixed conditions of the firmament. The artist who works through transcription's givens discovers it within a hair's breadth of necessity. Astrologically, Enrico's sign (he was born in October) will always be The Scales. Though this would appear to be the least spontaneous of the zodiac's terms, the Libra knows freedom consists in the very faintest of *corrections*:

A makeweight flying to the void,
Supplemental asteroid,
Or compensatory spark,
Shoots across the neutral Dark.

R.W. Emerson, "Compensation"



Dove Constellation (2008)
oil on canvas on panel, 49 x 50"