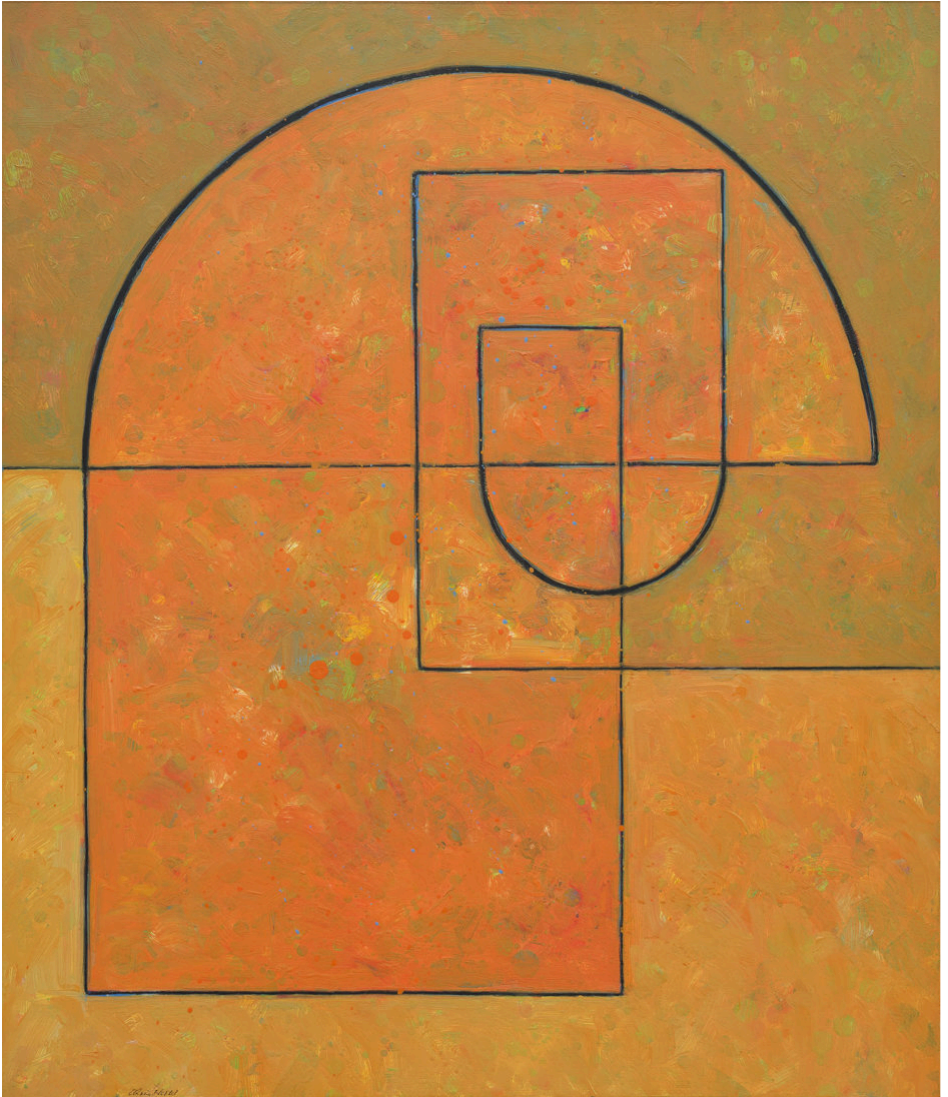


CHRIS NEILD



Taking A Line For A Walk

Chris Neild

Taking a Line for a Walk

I'm a little surprised to be exhibiting abstract paintings. Previously I have mainly painted landscapes though they have become more and more abstracted through the years...over the journey.

While scratching round...wondering...looking...searching...for a new subject after my last exhibition, the phrase from Swiss artist Paul Klee, 'A drawing is simply a line going for a walk' gave me a playful starting point.

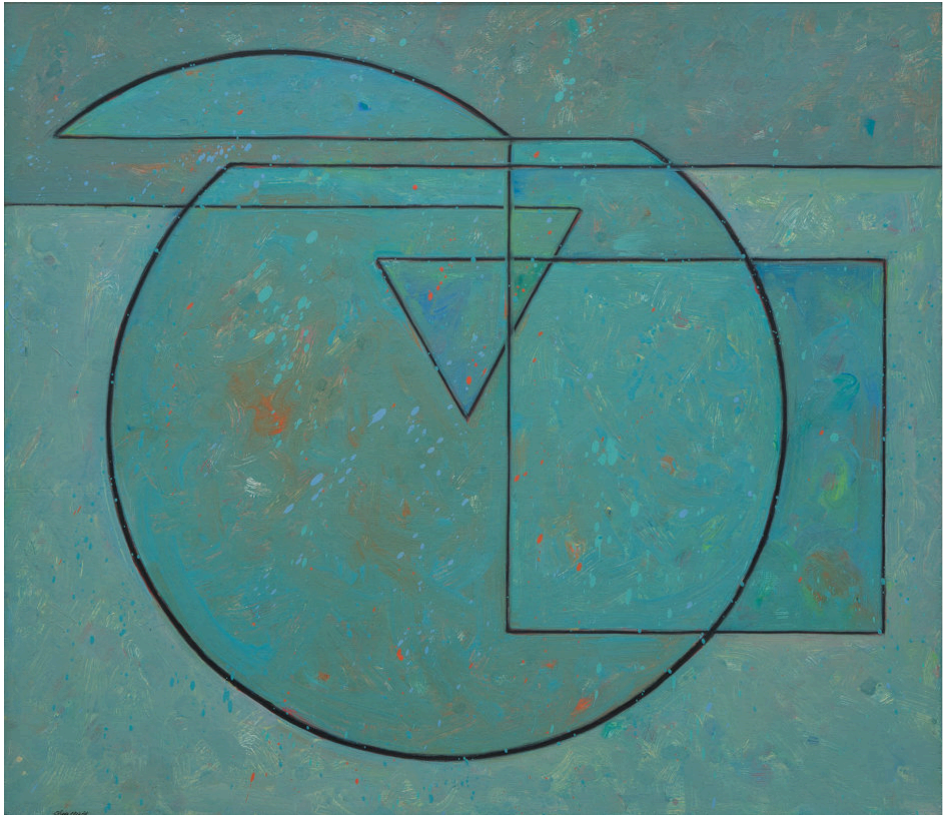
I began using a continuous line that starts at one edge, wanders around making shapes as it crosses over itself then ends at another edge.

I gravitated to simple geometric shapes – circle, square, triangle...I don't know why. Perhaps because they are fundamental shapes in the geometry underlying the world around us.

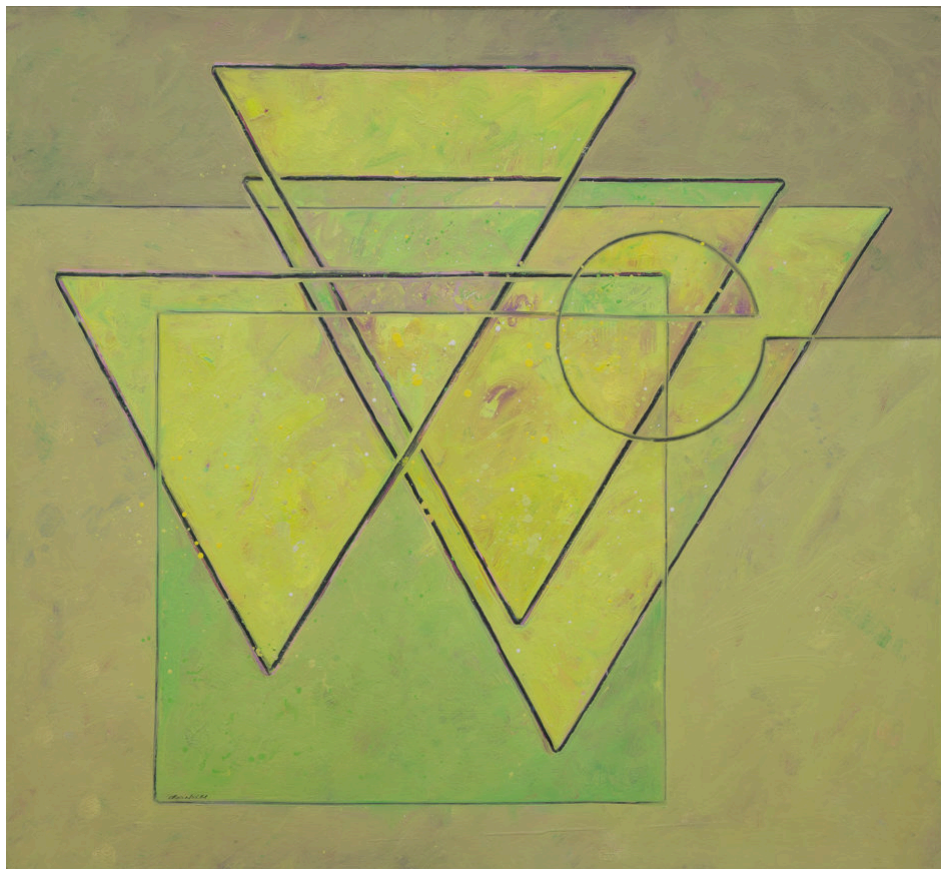
I draw freehand – no ruler or compass – because I don't want exact shapes. Even when full, the moon is never a perfect circle. Like the earth it is an oblate spheroid – slightly flattened at the poles. And the rare straight lines in nature tend to bend or wobble a little. So, I want my shapes to be more organic than mechanical.

It is how the shapes feel and critically how the relationship between the shapes feels that is important.

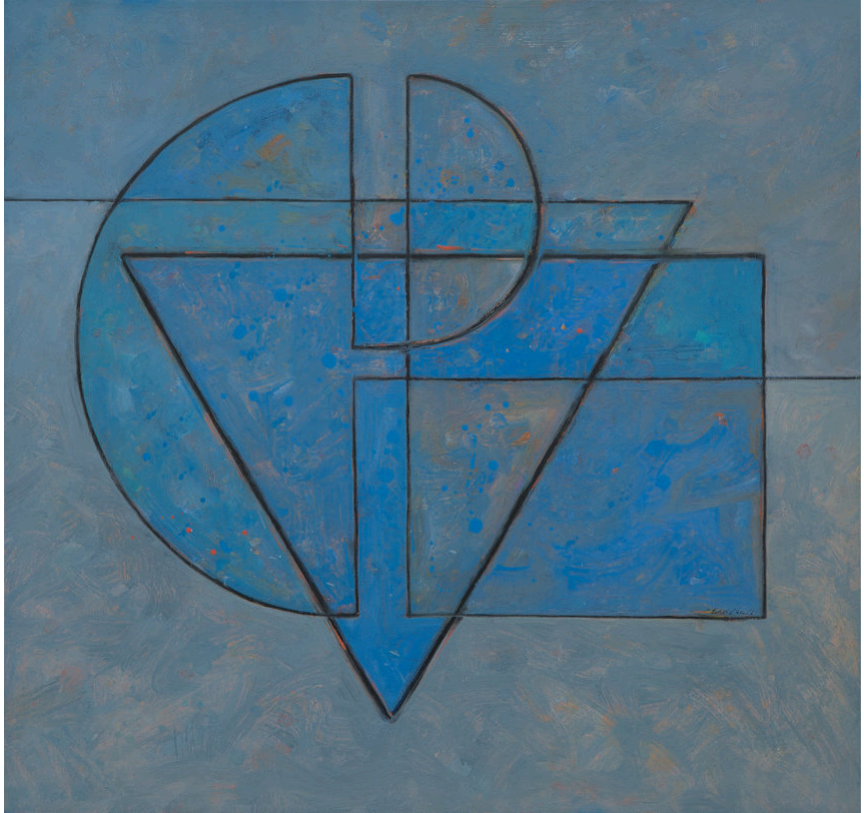
Once that is settled...once the composition is settled...I feel free then to play with the paint - randomly, loosely. The paintwork is there as a companion and a support for the walking line.



Lidded Circle No 2 (2024), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 61 x 70 cm



Fourteen Equilateral Triangles No 3 (2022), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 64 x 69 cm



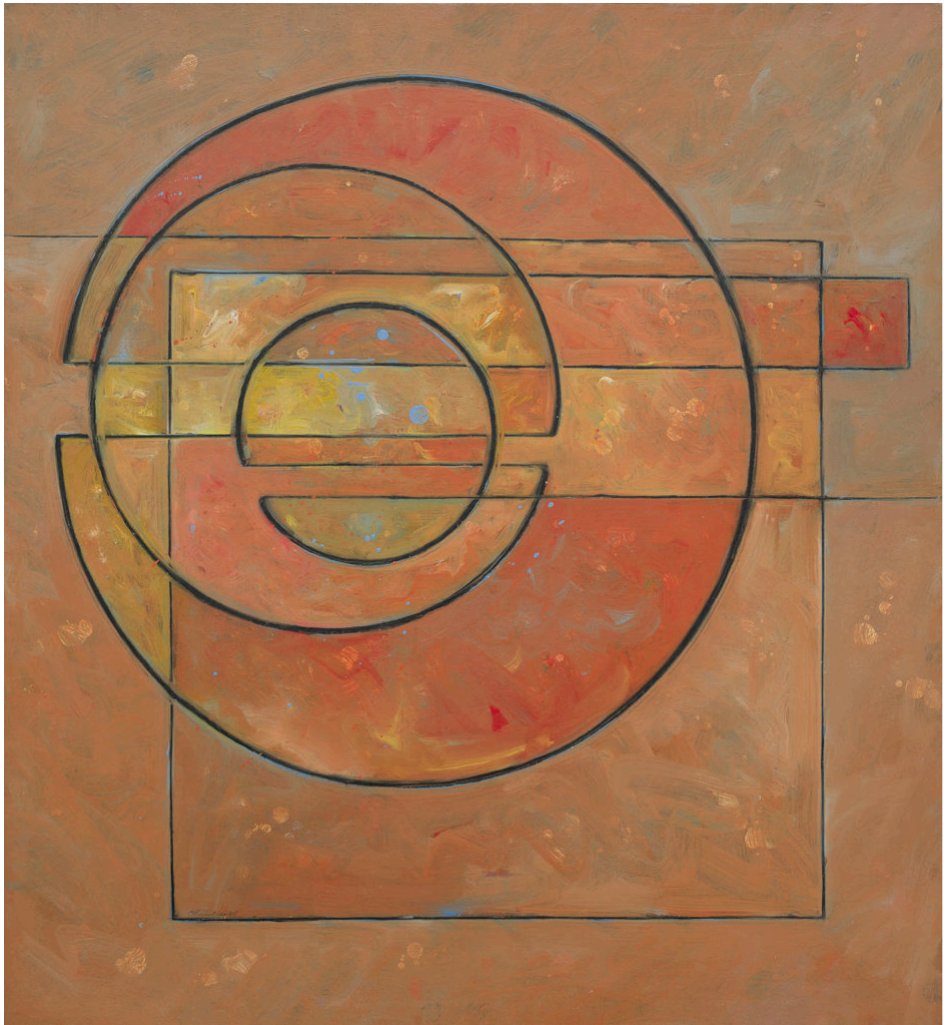
Blue Arrow (2022), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 55 x 58 cm



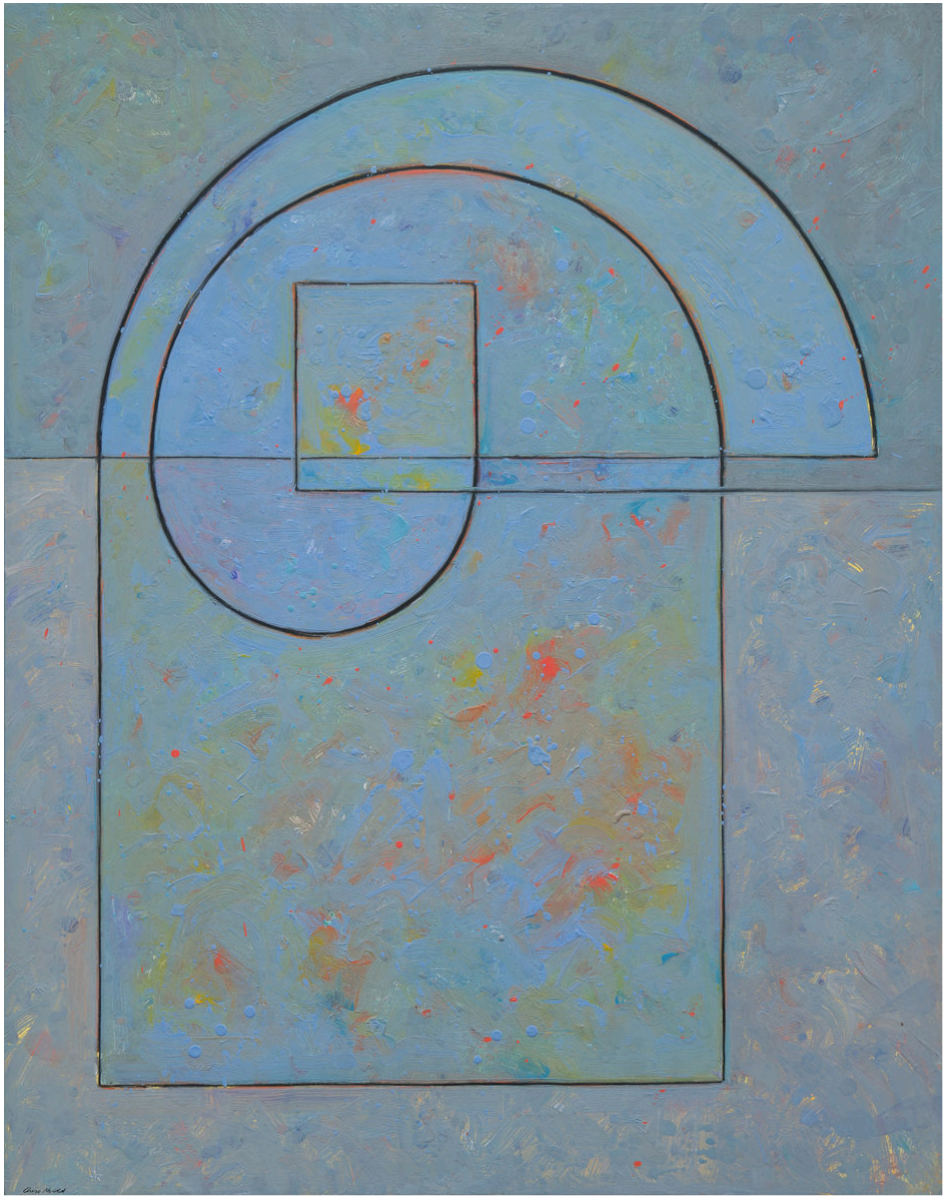
Abstract



Duet in Yellow (2023), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 61 x 93 cm



Off-centre (2022), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 66 x 61 cm



Three Semicircles (2024), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 76 x 60 cm

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS NEILD, NOVEMBER 2024

Birth, School, First Job

Chris was born in Melbourne in 1948, the middle child and only son of a senior public servant. Never quite fitting in at school, Chris landed a job at the age of sixteen in the motor registry department of the Commonwealth public service. He recalls:

'We served customers till 4pm, but after we closed the doors there was actually no work to do until we knocked off at 5:10pm. I remember in my first week, after 4 one afternoon, sitting on the counter and swinging my legs, waiting till 5:10. One of the big bosses walked past and gave me a *look* and I, being an arrogant 16-year-old, gave him a *look* back. A little while later my immediate boss came up to me and said you can't just sit on the counter you have to sit at your desk and look like you're working.'

Reading Tolstoy

Desperate to get out of home, he landed a job in Sydney, again in the public service thanks to his dad's connections, this time in the Department of Housing. There was even less work to do here:

'At times there'd be some work coming in and you would be reasonably busy but at other times there would be absolutely nothing to do. And you had to sit at your desk. So I decided I might as well read. I remember reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* at my desk — I think it took me about three days.'

Architecture Dropout

Not sure where to go next, Chris remembered that the one subject he had done well at — and enjoyed — at school was tech drawing. He recalls, in fact, being quite proficient at the freehand drawing of perfect shapes such as circles, squares, triangles, and rhomboids. He decided to enrol in architecture; the public service had a generous scheme that allowed him to attend classes three times a week whilst still being paid as a public servant. He loved architecture, but in the end he couldn't cope with the maths:

'I failed it once, and carried it over to the next year. But then I failed it a second time and they wouldn't let me continue.'

Discovering Art

Fortunately, though, he discovered an even greater passion:

'The architecture course had a freehand drawing class run by three artists... I loved it and was getting distinctions and high distinctions. We also did gouache paintings. I changed from architecture to art at TAFE. This was the first thing I really loved.'

Chris left the public service and enrolled in a 5-year art course: 2 years at Randwick TAFE followed by a 3-year Diploma of Art at a College of Advanced Education. His diploma was converted to a Degree in the early 80s.

Chris was also fascinated by the mystery of the creative process, which led him to develop and co-facilitate creativity and art workshops for many years, while continuing to explore his own art practice.

From Figurative to Abstract

Chris started off sculpting portrait heads, but found himself drawn back to painting. Initially his work was figurative and representational, but he gradually shifted to more and more abstraction in his work:

'In my early days of art school I was out painting landscapes and I thought: "I want to get a different angle on this... I'll make those shapes more geometric than they are."
And I really enjoyed that. I began to abstract the landscapes - I kept looking for the basic geometry and just kept following that through.'

A Lover of Landscapes

For most of his career, Chris has had a longstanding love affair with landscapes:

'It's a wonderful thing. A big wonderful thing. It's mysterious that it's even there. This very attractive thing. Rocks in particular. The solidness of the rocks. I was more interested in that than the foliage.

And when I did get into more of the trees, I preferred to get close to the trees so I could see the trunks. More so than the branches. The solid stuffiness of the trunks.'

Lost in the Wilderness

It's been a long time — more than fifteen years — since Chris's last exhibition. He was happy with the highly abstracted landscapes he produced for that show, but, as he explains:

'After that I didn't know where to go with it all. I didn't know whether to go back to representational landscapes or to push the abstraction. I was really lost with it for several years. And I kept trying things and I kept playing around with combinations of things and nothing was really working.'

He actually suffered quite severe depression during these years, the lack of creative inspiration and his mental health caught in a vicious cycle of stagnation. During those difficult years, the things that gave him most solace, apart from his family, friends, and faith, were three special gatherings he regularly participated in: a community choir, a men's group, and his much-beloved classics book club, which he has been attending for more than a decade:

'My favourite books are those long, satisfying nineteenth century novels that have a redemptive arc: Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Eliot, Hugo and Dickens.'

Remembering Klée

After this long lonely exile in the creative wilderness, Chris stumbled across something that would rekindle his own artistic redemption:

'I rediscovered this old book I've had at home for ages, a little drawing book by Paul Klée. In it he's got a chapter called 'Taking a line for a walk' and it felt like such a playful notion - I felt liberated by that... and I thought - I'll just play with this - I'll play with taking a line for a walk. Just for the fun of it, because I'm sick of trying to make serious paintings. I can't figure out how. I've got no idea what I want to paint. I couldn't imagine going back to representational landscapes because that just didn't interest me.

These lines I started taking for a walk.

I didn't expect them to turn into a group of artworks.

I was just playing with it.

And I felt free.

And I was purely doing them for myself with no thought of ever exhibiting...'

A Reluctant Exhibitor

Chris, now 76, still loves being in the studio but needed encouragement to come out of hermetic isolation and hold another exhibition:

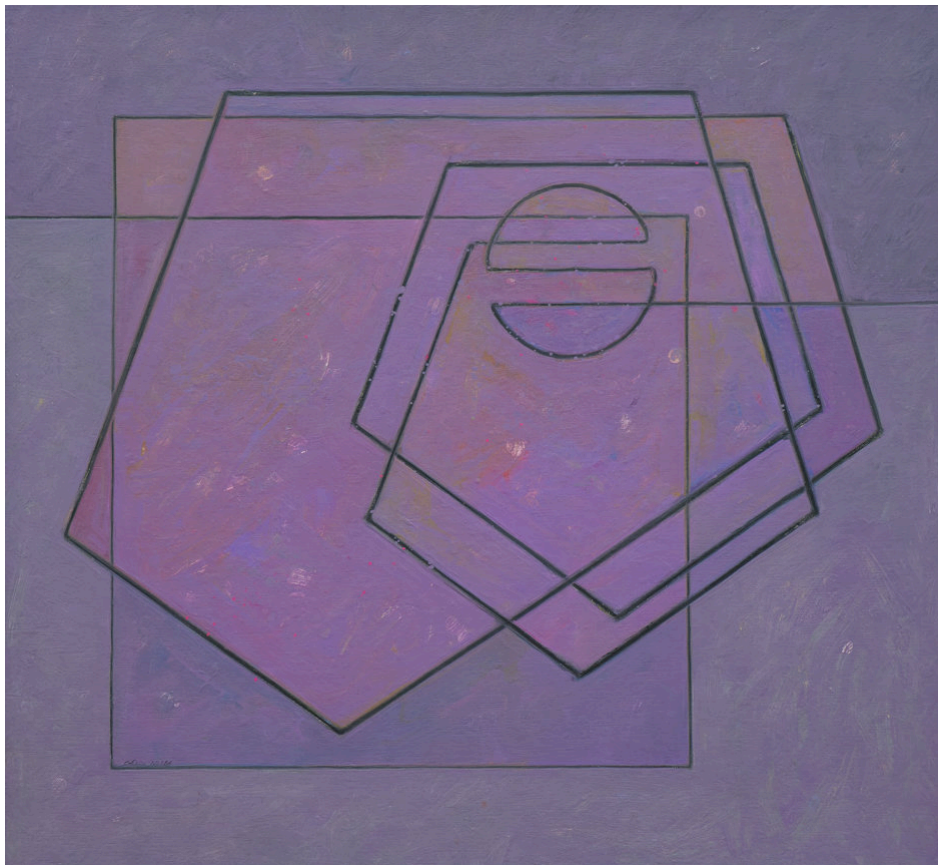
'I'm a little excited but still a little daunted. It feels right but part of me gets pissed off with the bother of it. To tell the truth I'd rather just be thinking about my artwork in the studio'

When a Work Works

Although Chris has been creating for almost 60 years now, he admits that nothing beats the elation of a piece coming together, an elation he was delighted to experience once again on many occasions as he worked on this series:

'When a work works, I get this enormous sense of relief... that I'm alright... I don't really know what's behind it... I feel like... I have a place in the world - something like that. Sometimes it lasts for an hour. Usually [laughter] not more than that.'

Interview by Warren Ward



Pentagon (2023), Oil and Charcoal on Board, 61 x 66.5 cm

A selection of artworks from the exhibition 'Talking A Line For A Walk'.

Exhibition dates

11 March – 22 March 2025



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