

Imre Bak

(b. 1939, Budapest, Hungary)

acb

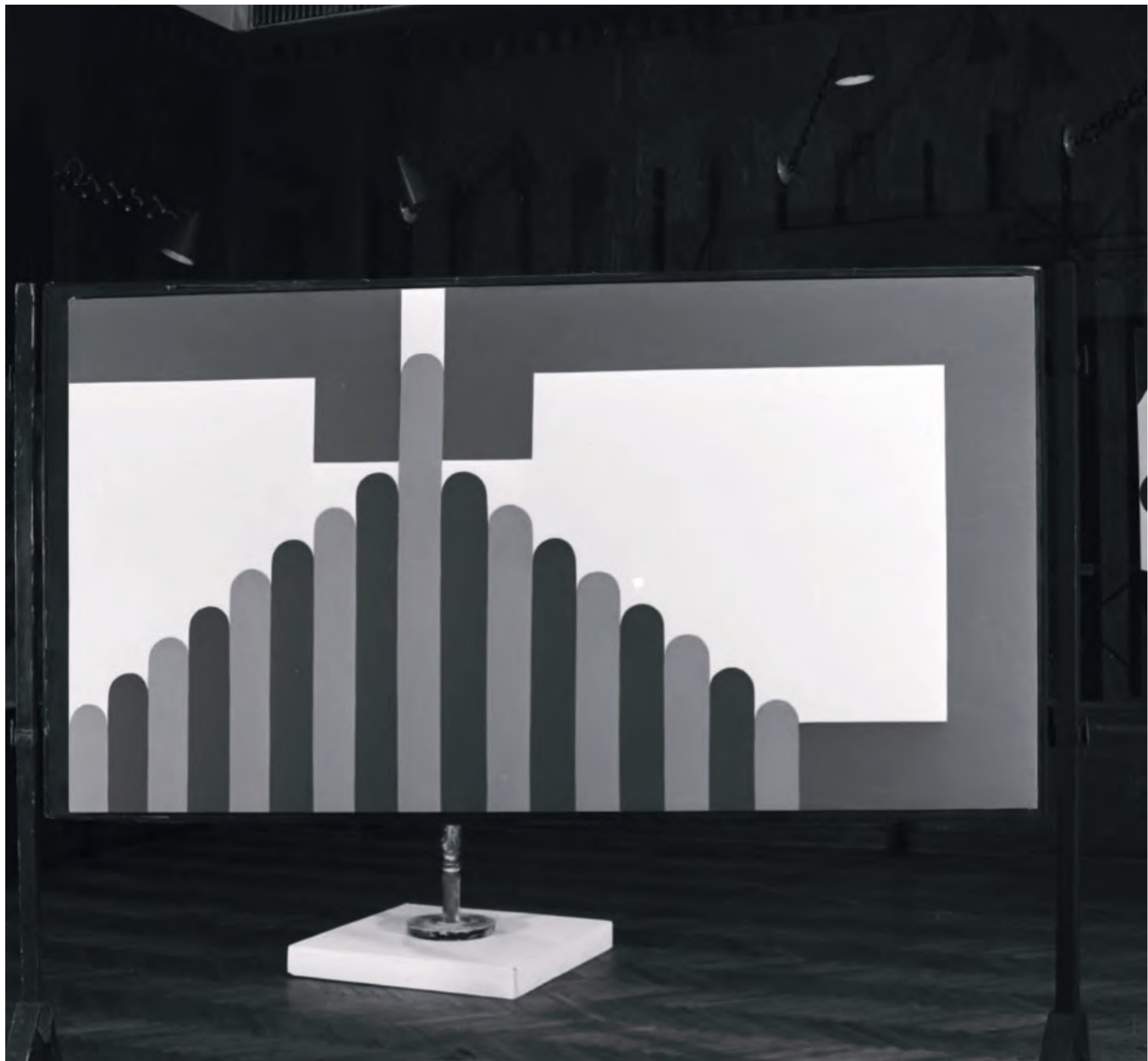


Previsualisation of acb's booth at Survey section.



Imre Bak in 2019. Photographed by Éva Szombat

Imre Bak is one of the most important Eastern European representatives of geometric abstraction, whose painting had a significant influence on the younger generations of Hungarian artists. In the early 1960s, his first works showed resemblance with the lyrical abstraction of the École de Paris, then, from the mid-decade on he turned towards geometric painting becoming one of the first Hungarian artists of post-painterly abstraction, hard-edge, color-field painting, and shaped canvas. Besides the inspirations by his contemporaries (especially by Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, and Georg Karl Pfahler), his paintings produced during this period were also linked to certain Hungarian modernist art traditions, that gained inspiration from Béla Bartók's music program. In the early 1970s, a significant turn occurred in Imre Bak's art: he moved away from painting and turned to creating photo-and paper-based conceptual works and environments in which he analyzed the relationships between image and sign, visual phenomena and meaning. Around 1974 he then returned to painting, and his works thereafter were a synthesis of his early hard-edge painting and the semantic structures of his conceptual works. Affected by the influence of postmodernist thoughts in the early 1980s, his artistic vision underwent considerable change as his work absorbed a whole range of new elements from a great variety of sources: from the decorative models of Art Nouveau, the codes of futurist design, surrealism and the idiom of the Hungarian avant-garde art of the 1940s. While gradually returning to more simple geometric compositions, a decade later he began a series of large-scale architectural cityscapes. In recent years, he returned to the more abstract approach of his earlier years, focusing on spatial dimensions in abstract compositions that have been, again subjugated to deconstruction and revision; Situation, his latest series from 2020, was presented at Art Basel OVR: 2020.

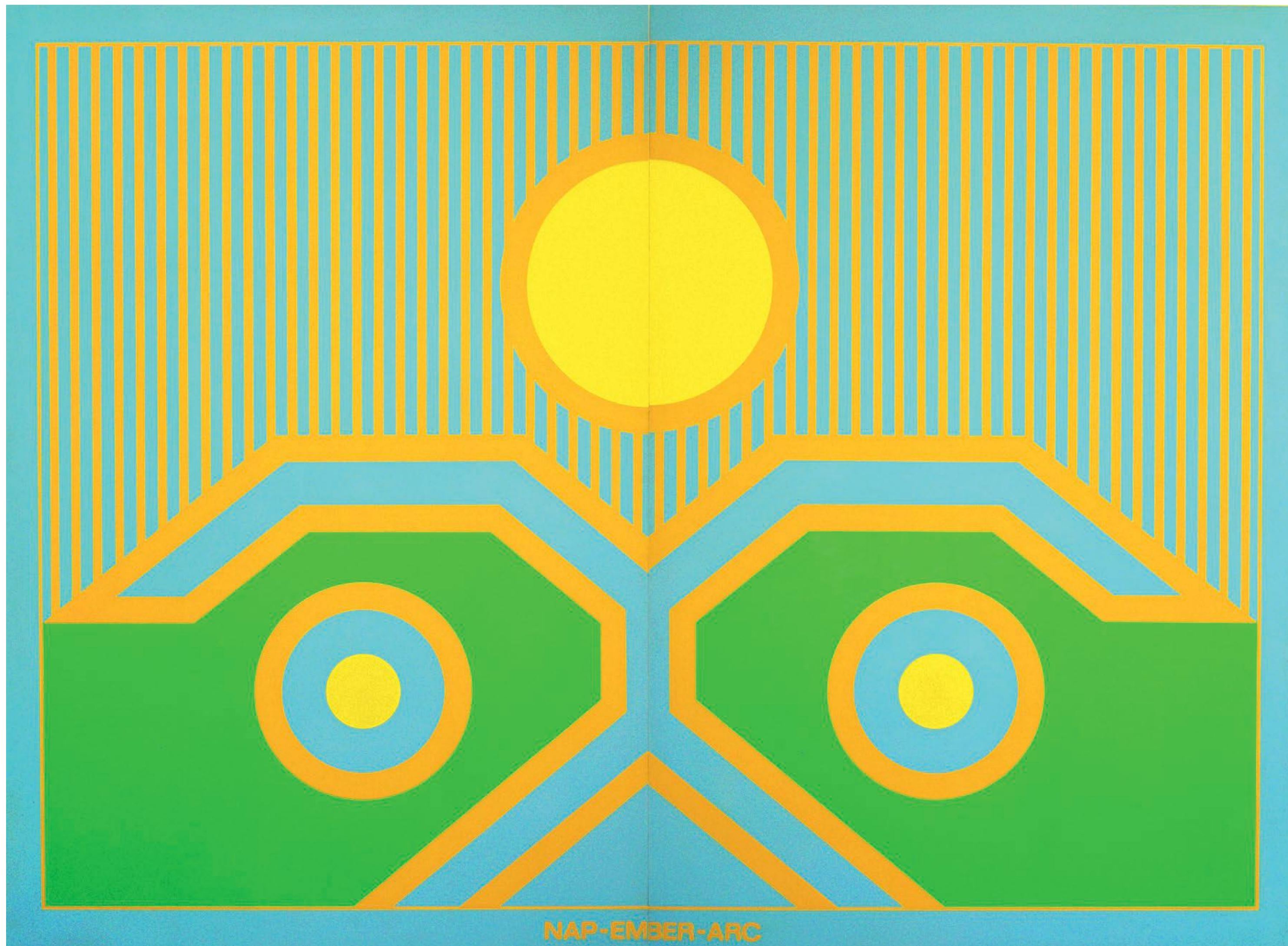


Blue Frame, 1968. Exhibition view of the legendary *Iparterv* show in Budapest, which got shut down by the authorities. Collection of Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



Stripes, I, 1968. acrylic on canvas, 135 x 240 cm / 53 x 94 1/2 in
Collection of Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

In 1968, simultaneously with the first *Iparterv* exhibition, Bak had his first important solo show at the Galerie Müller in Stuttgart. Later, in the works he showed at the Folkwang Museum in Essen (1971), colors had already completely disappeared and had given way to structure, opening new perspectives for conceptual approaches and thinking.



Sun-Man-Face II, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 220 × 300 cm / 86 2/3 × 118 in | Collection of Tate

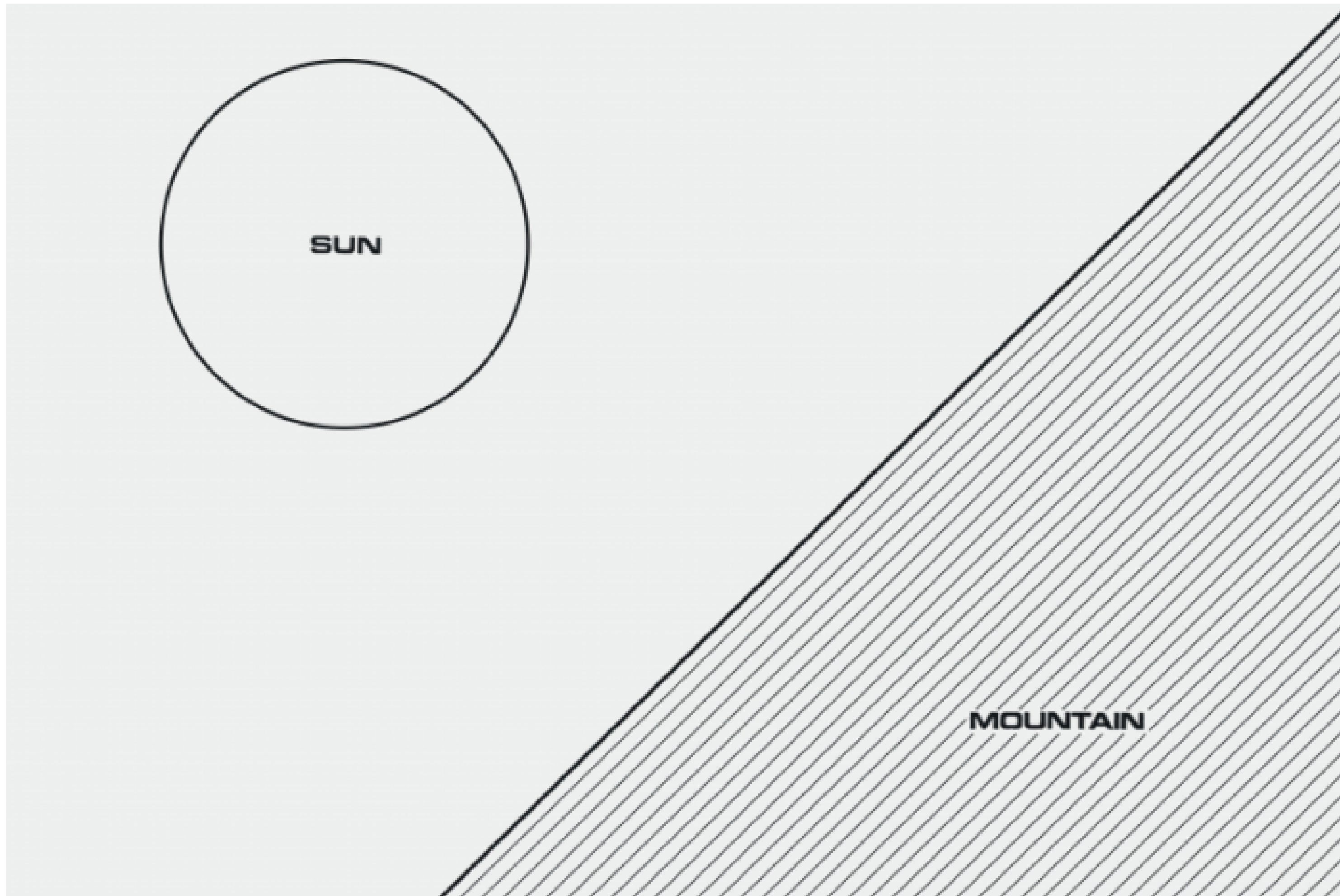
From 1972, Bak began to investigate the connections and contradictions between visual form and linguistic expression. He stopped painting for a few years and began to create photo- and paper-based conceptual works and environments, in which he analysed the relationships between image and sign, between visual phenomena and meaning. In these works inspired by structuralism, which also reflects on semiotic and epistemological problematics, Bak created a complex system of formal and semantic analogies and parallels.

His works from this period are of central significance within Bak's oeuvre. They offer a multi-layered reading of the interdependence of signs and meaning that the artist has further explored in later decades. The archaic and archetypal forms, along with mythical allusions, are also indicative of Imre Bak's ethnographical and anthropological interest that can be traced back to the artist's thorough study of archaic motifs appearing on archaeological finds from Hungary and other parts of the world. The endeavor of exploring the possibilities for (to quote the artist) "activating vision", as well as the nature of "creative vision" and perception, characteristic for ancient cultures, their visual vocabularies and belief-systems, is also complemented by the artist's diverse activities as an educator and theoretician.



Imre Bak's works from the late 1960s and mid 1970s at the artist's solo exhibition at acb Gallery, 2019.

Bak created shapes which were built from basic forms and carried multiple meanings. These visual elements could be regarded as landscapes, stylized figural compositions or portraits as well, while also retaining their originally abstract character. Nonetheless, they confirm Arturo Schwarz's conclusion with reference to Imre Bak's art, whereby "abstract art is, in reality, no abstract at all". This group of works is of central significance within the oeuvre, as it offers an incredibly multi-layered manifestation of the questions of sign and meaning, which the artist, in later decades, consistently explored and studied.



Sun-Mountain, 1972

„It is commonly known that the perception of a given phenomenon is not identical with itself. To put in another way, things look different in our minds than what our senses tell us. It is obvious that passing phenomena and things in a hurry, and carrying out a thorough, attentive inspection complemented by a mentally active and meditative work will result in a completely different impressions and experiences. Elaboration of an active technique of seeing and its application in everyday life helps us in a more substantial experience of our existence”.

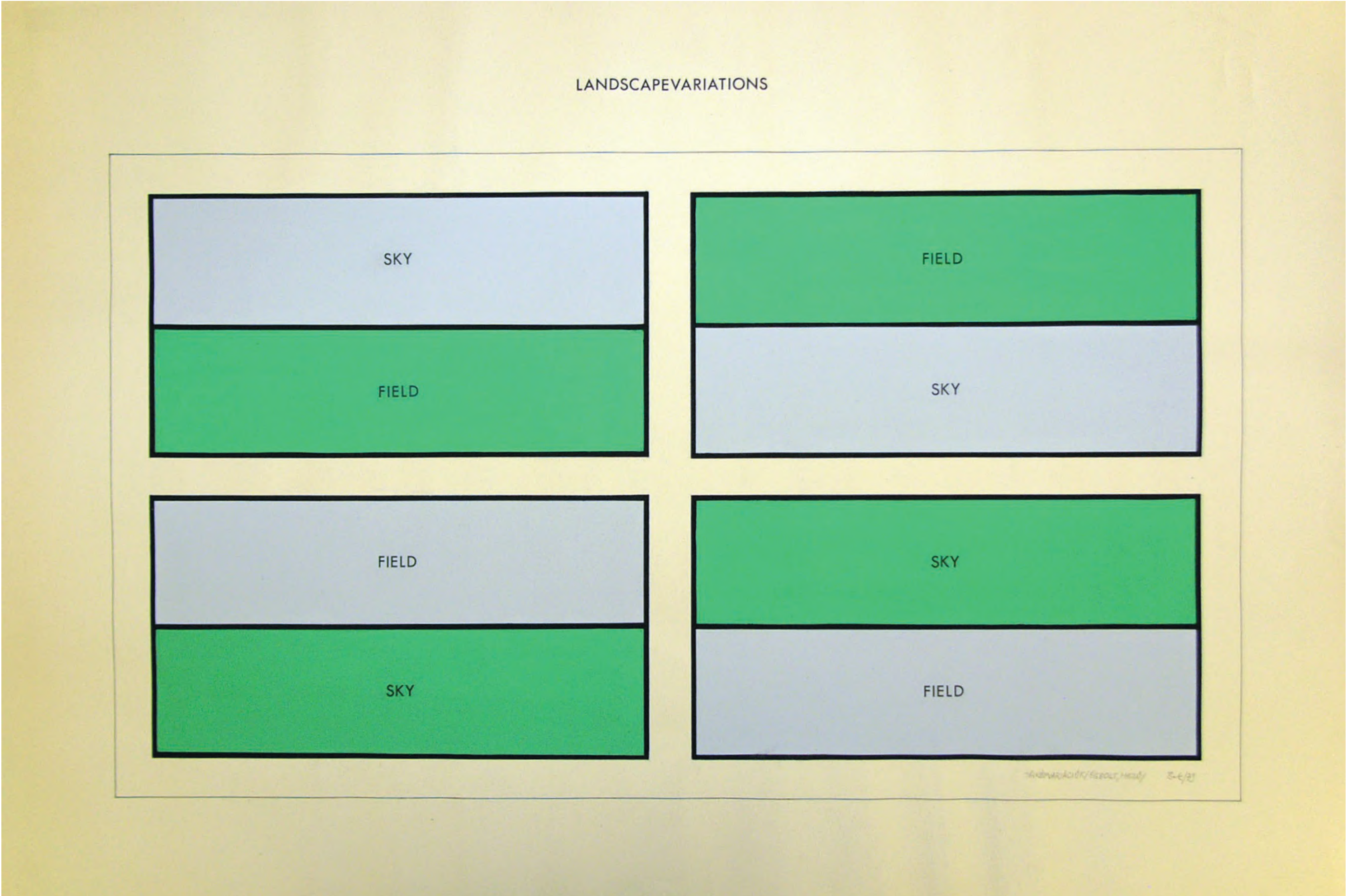
Imre Bak: *The Creative Vision*, in: *Do it Yourself!* - artist book, 1973

“As I mentioned earlier [Béla Hamvas] wrote a very interesting and for me important analysis of Hermes Trismegistus. I also learned from him about analogies, that we don’t have to see two opposing poles like black and white, good and bad, but a chain of analogies. For instance, what does a circle in a chain of analogies mean: from the sun to the south, to the male, and so on... I learned this from Béla Hamvas. And in concept art, I made similar analyses in small concept books.”

Imre Bak – in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Bookmarks - Revisiting Hungarian Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, 2018, Koenig Books

“The rule of analogy is expressed in the *Tabula Smaragdina* ascribed to Hermes Trismogestos: “That which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below” This rules in the sacred Chineese scripts, as well as in the Vedas, in Kabbalah, at the puthagoreans and at Heracleitos. What is below is nothing else than what is above – the life of the material is the copy of the cosmic life, ad the cosmic life is the mirror of the spiritual life. I will not understand things if I seperate them and I define them individually, but when I see their correlations and how they stand in a continuous line leading to the origin.”

Béla Hamvas (1897-1968), philosopher

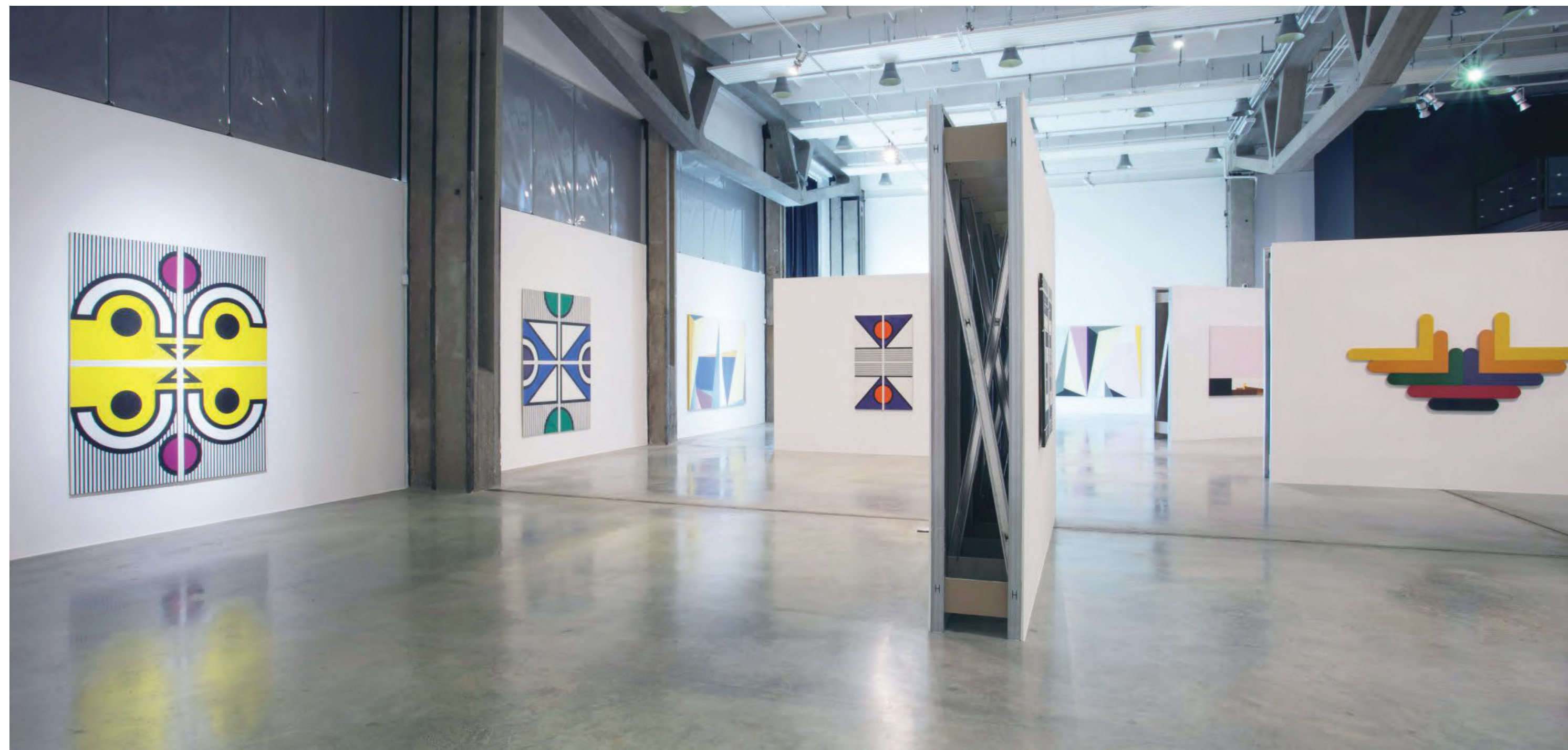


Landscape Variations, 1973

“The use of signs (systems) in forms of synthetic vision was symbolic, or to be more precise, model-like. It is not to be confused with the use of signs from the early 20th century, which was abstracted from the actual visual phenomenon to a varying extent. While, there, the process - the concrete “abstraction” - took place for the sake of activating the visual signs and systems, in the former case, there is permeability (synthesis) between the specific phenomenon and the general sign that contains its laws. The synthetic sign incorporates the concrete (not by reminding us of it - that is to say, being associative - but by being analogous with it). Here, the sign, by retaining its abstract purity, leads back to the concrete and helps one see the law in it [...] It appears that, in our efforts to create an active, synthetic vision, tradition can serve as a useful source; the creation of signs and sign systems that utilize the sign- and system-related peculiarities of the various forms of synthetic vision can signify a path leading to developments in the quality of vision”. Imre Bak

“In the mid-1970s, Imre Bak combines Hamvas’ notion of archaic vision with structuralist semiotic research, as well as the latest findings in ethnography and anthropolgy. [...] The concept of creative vision gives way to the idea of synthetic vision. During the course of his pseudo-scientific visual game, Bak analyzes formal systems related to ancient and medieval archeological finds: he reduces, abstracts, stylizes them, he breaks them down into their components and reconstructs them. He creates various configurations of meaning while combining different semi-abstract structures and systems of form.”

Dávid Fehér, art historian in *Imre Bak: Timely Timelessness - Layers of an Oeuvre*, 1967-2015, published by Gallery of Paks in 2016.



Solo exhibition of Imre Bak: *Actual timeless. Layers of an oeuvre*. Gallery of Paks, Paks, Hungary, 2016



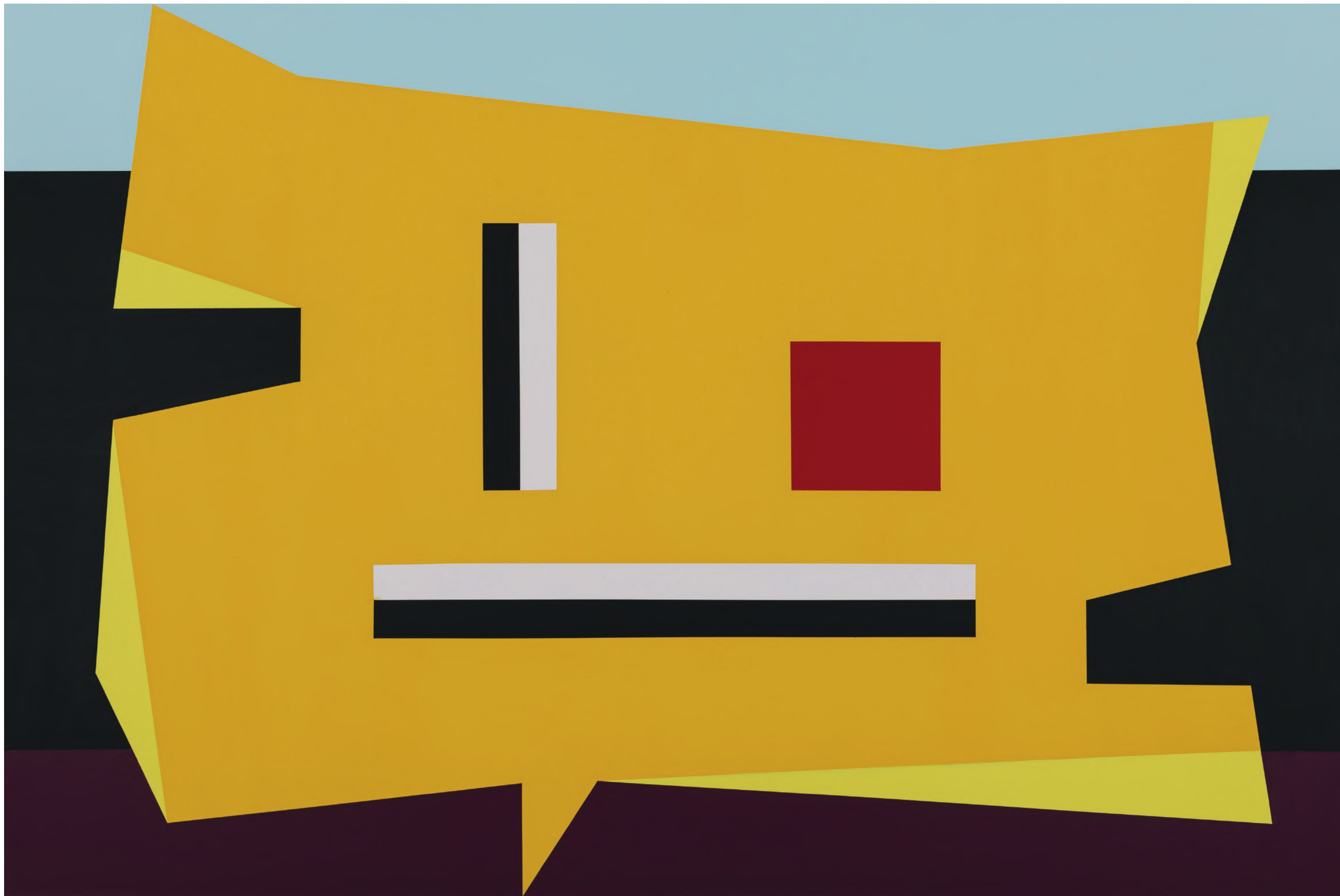
Reflection, 1976. Presented at acb's booth at Art Basel Miami Beach.

Imre Bak's works produced in the first half of the seventies can be described as landscape analysis. [...] His offset and photo collages also reconstructed and reorganized the vistas of natural, rural and urban landscapes. Bak creates a cunning system of mirror-reflections and similarities, while joint planes produce geometric compositions built on vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. In the second half of the seventies, Bak returns to paintings, also putting to good use what he had learned in connection with his conceptual works. The series entitled *Reflection* (1976) consists of enlarged version of the motifs and illustrations found in his 1976 conceptual book. While paintings are the result of structuralist semiotic analysis with a conceptual perspective (while also conveying archaic-mythical contents), they do show kinship with the phenomena of so-called signal art (for instance with the works of Kumi Sugai), and are thus connectable to the tendencies of post-painterly abstraction and "post-pop". Dávid Fehér, art historian in *Imre Bak: Timely Timelessness - Layers of an Oeuvre, 1967-2015*, published by Gallery of Paks in 2016.



The Well-known Story III, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 200 cm

After synthesizing the outcomes of hard-edge painting, local tradition, conceptualism, semiotics and research on vision, Imre Bak consciously shifted towards a more flamboyant, vivid visual style in his works, as he detected the new tendencies of Heftige Malerei and Trans-Avantgarde emerging on the international scene. He found an authentic language using one of the ultimate visual-ideological trademarks of postmodernism, which coincided with Bak's program that relied on old masters and which always kept a dialogue with painting's fundamental ideas, the problem of innovation and continuity; Bak piles up visual references, borrows art historical icons, quotes styles, cites old masters, appropriates design, architecture, permutes his deteriorating motifs in vibrant compositions. The works still bear an ancient, metaphysical character, while they harmonize with the joyful manner of postmodernism. The visual references as icons from the past get dynamized on the painting's surface.



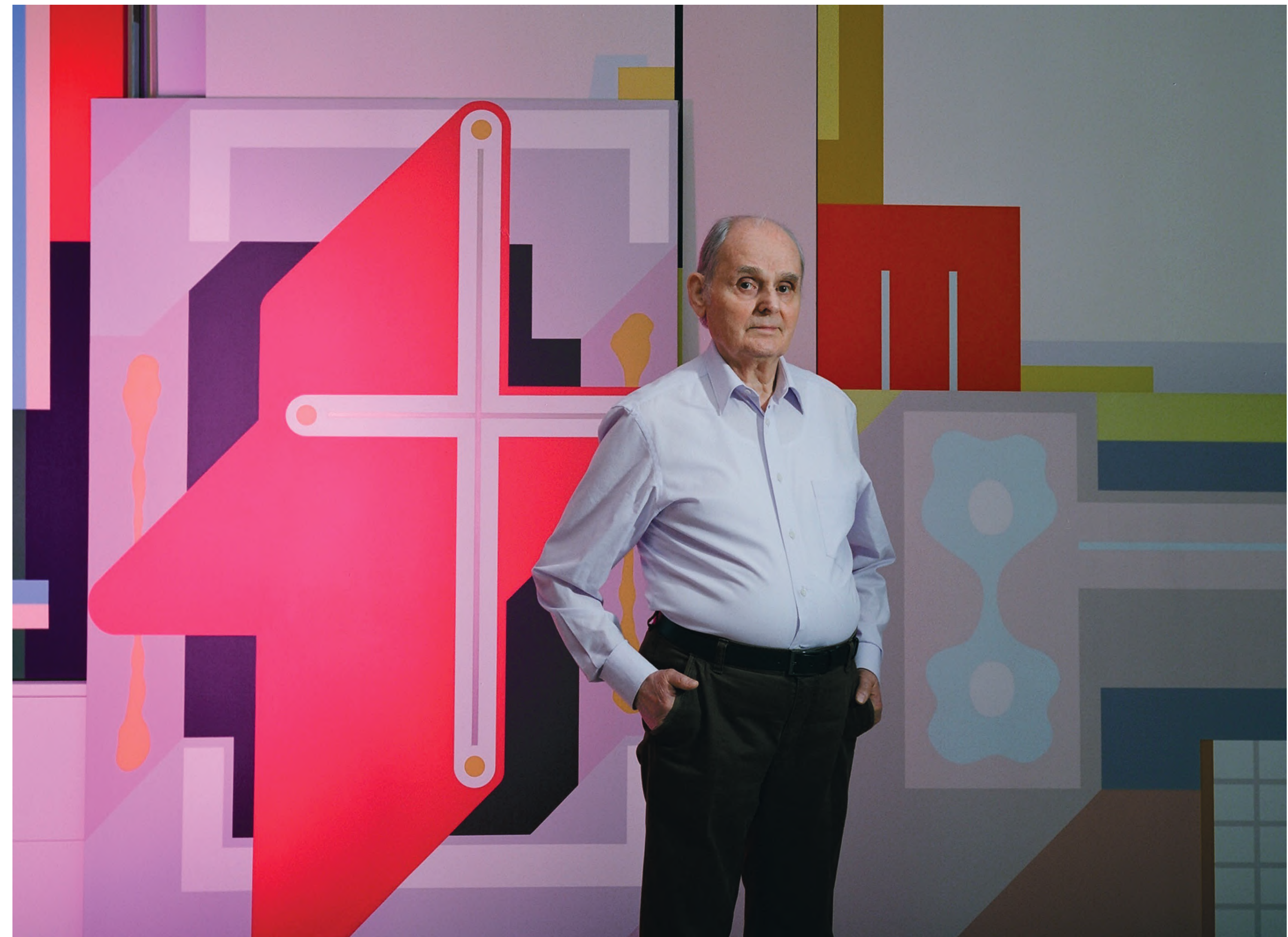
Imre Bak: *Situation*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 200 cm

The newest paintings of Imre Bak reflect his meditations and ideas on our current times.

As in the turbulent '80s, following the decades that Bak characterized as his own modernism where stability prevailed, a similar change of tone is to be detected now. Bak's recent series *Situation*, presented at Art Basel OVR:2020, deconstructed the previous cycle of paintings and opposed their balance and harmony. Monolithic structures got loose and the logic of fragmentation, uncaniness, deformation and mundane associations became primal experiences. In many ways, Bak keeps on reiterating the dialectics of his own visual periods and frameworks that succeed each other. These alternating frameworks are pieces of one painterly program that never ceases to be open to what is ahead of us and to what we inherit from the past. The program admits these visual and theoretical, hermeneutical processes as neverending quests of humanity.

“I have an imprinted practice for a long time, regarding the way I should deal with my work independently from my daily circumstances. If I work, the world disappears for me, but against my will it still infiltrates my images. This effect is now much more powerful, first of all it effects my nervous system. And this circumstance makes me go into defense mode: art is art – it is not an illustration of our everyday, even if this situation in which we are now has an exceptional scale. I have been thinking for a long time, like Santarcangeli wrote, that art has the following function: „The artwork assumes the awareness of death, the biggest horror of all, and it is born in order to conquer the horror of this unknown terrain.” So this situation strengthens the pristine function of art for me. I always had “fanaticism” for work; this helps me get through tough situations. This is a not a faith in my own importance. I believe making art is the duty of my life, and I want to execute it trustworthily, whatever the circumstances are. “

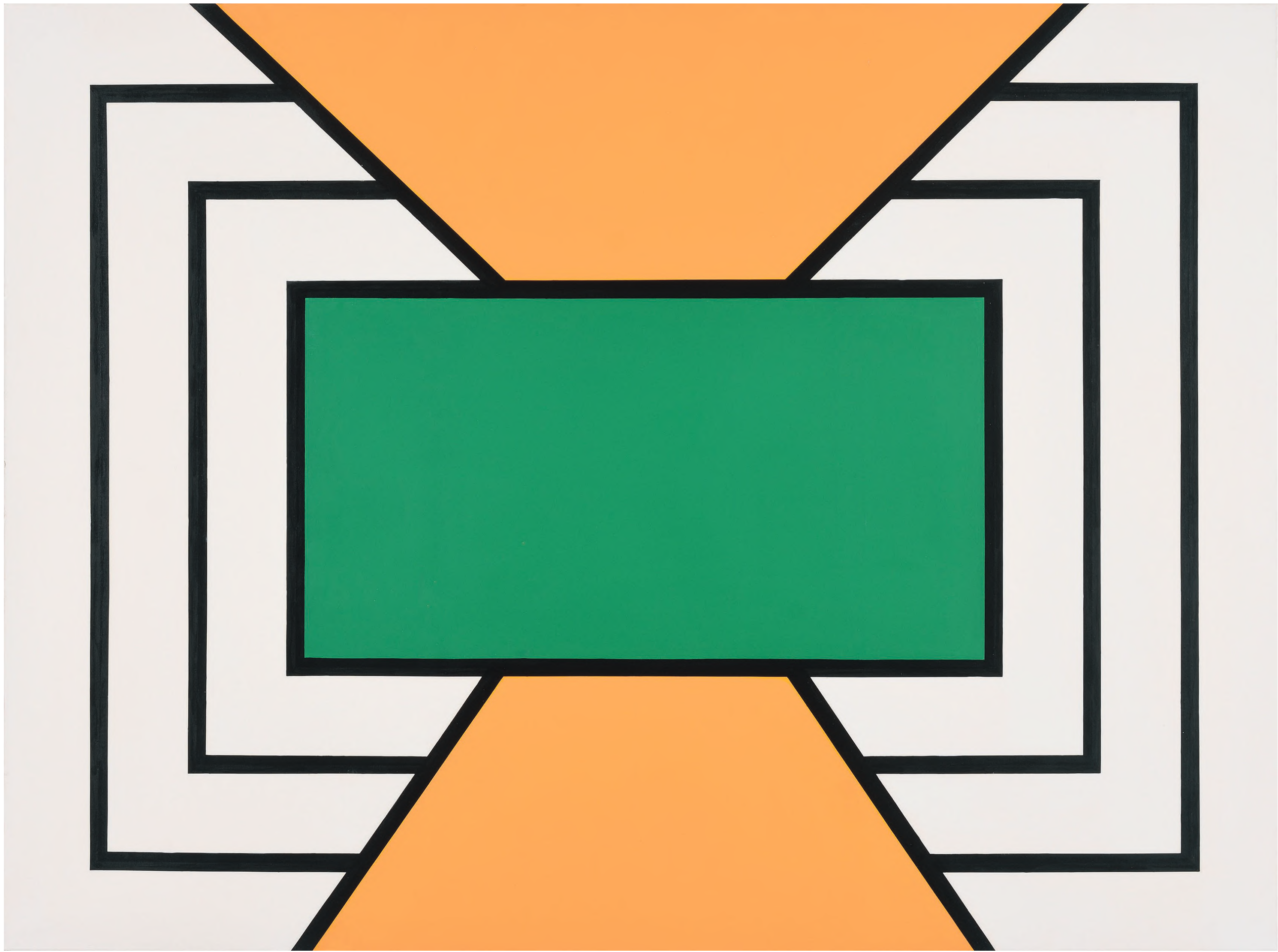
Excerpts from the interview with Imre Bak during the first lockdown made by Nóra Winkler in her interview-series *What drives you?*, 2020



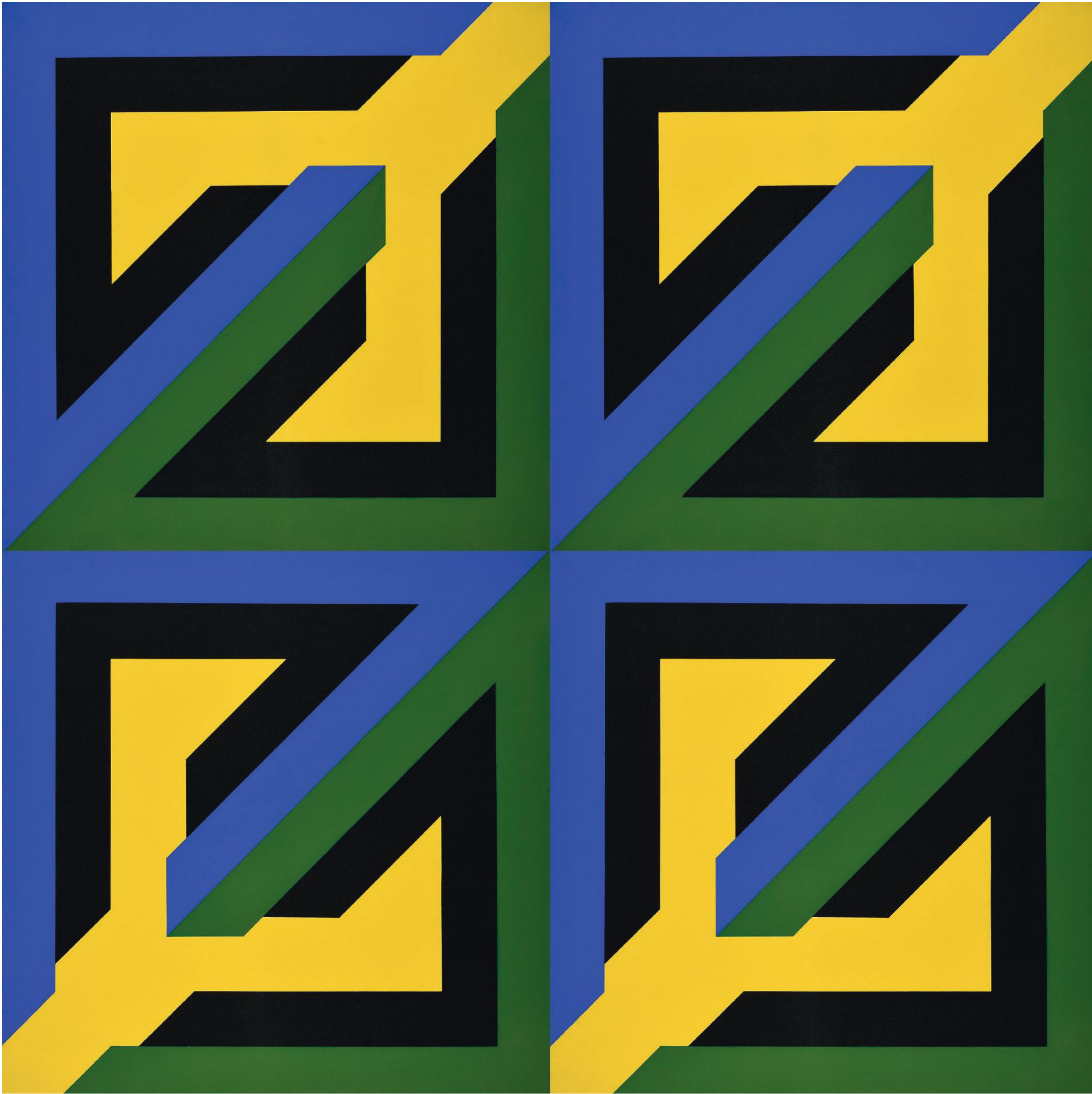
Imre Bak in 2019. Photographed by Éva Szombat

Works presented

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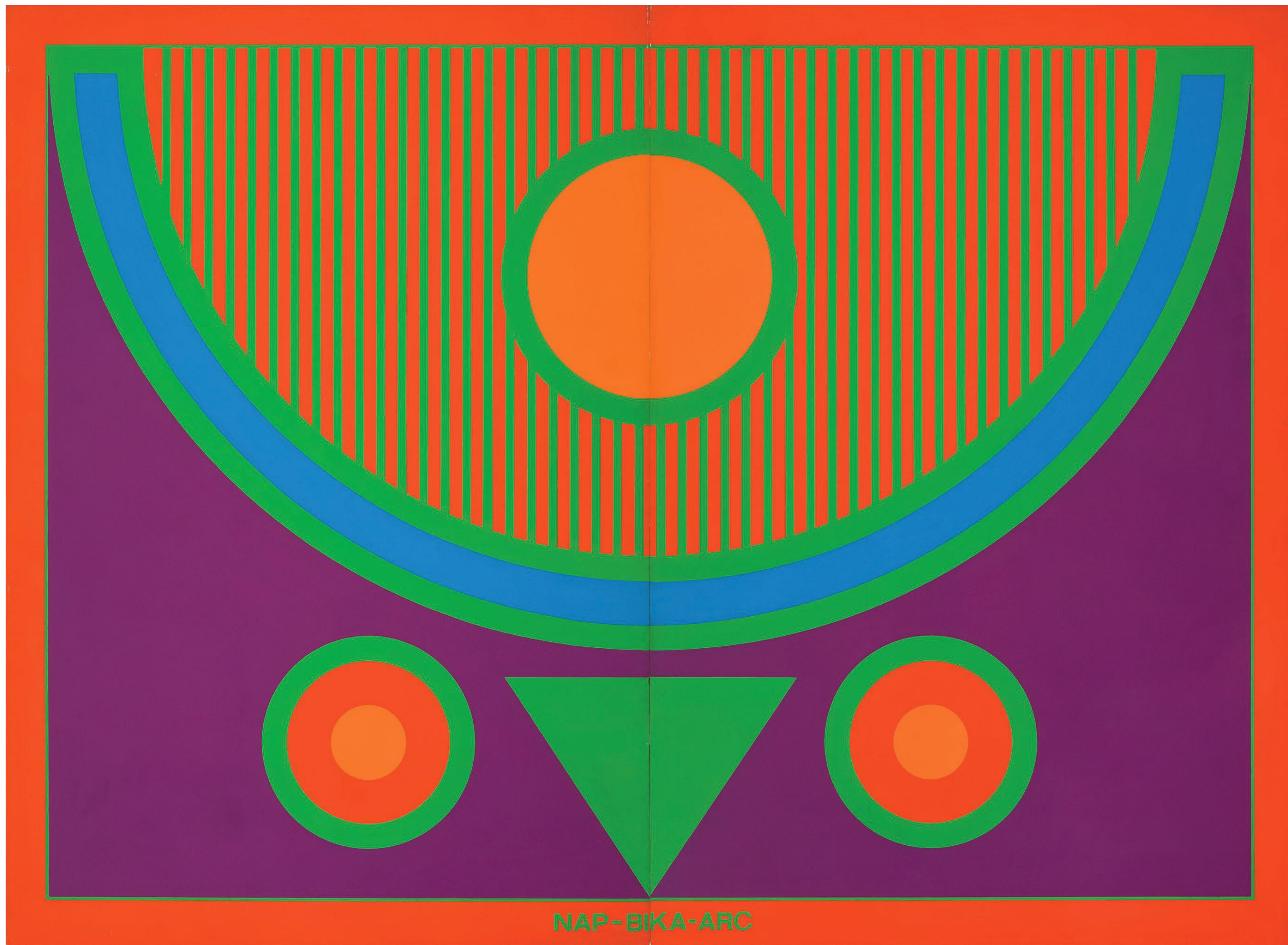
Feast, 1976
acrylic on canvas
150 × 200 cm



Picture of Four Parts, 1970
acrylic on canvas
260 × 260 cm



Reflection III, 1976
acrylic on canvas
220 × 160 cm



Sun-Bull-Face, 1976
acrylic on canvas
220 x 300 cm

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