



# Polar Approaches

THE ORGANIC PROCESS OF PAINTING | BY DONNA CEDAR-SOUTHWORTH

Susan Calloway is always on the lookout for artists. “But there’s a big gap between looking for and finding artists I like well enough to represent,” says the D.C. gallery owner.

So why is abstract painter Matthew Langley generating so much excitement? “For the same reason many of my abstract artists are appealing,” says Susan. “I try to show original art that is both fine—genuinely produced by artists using beautiful materials and techniques and who know what



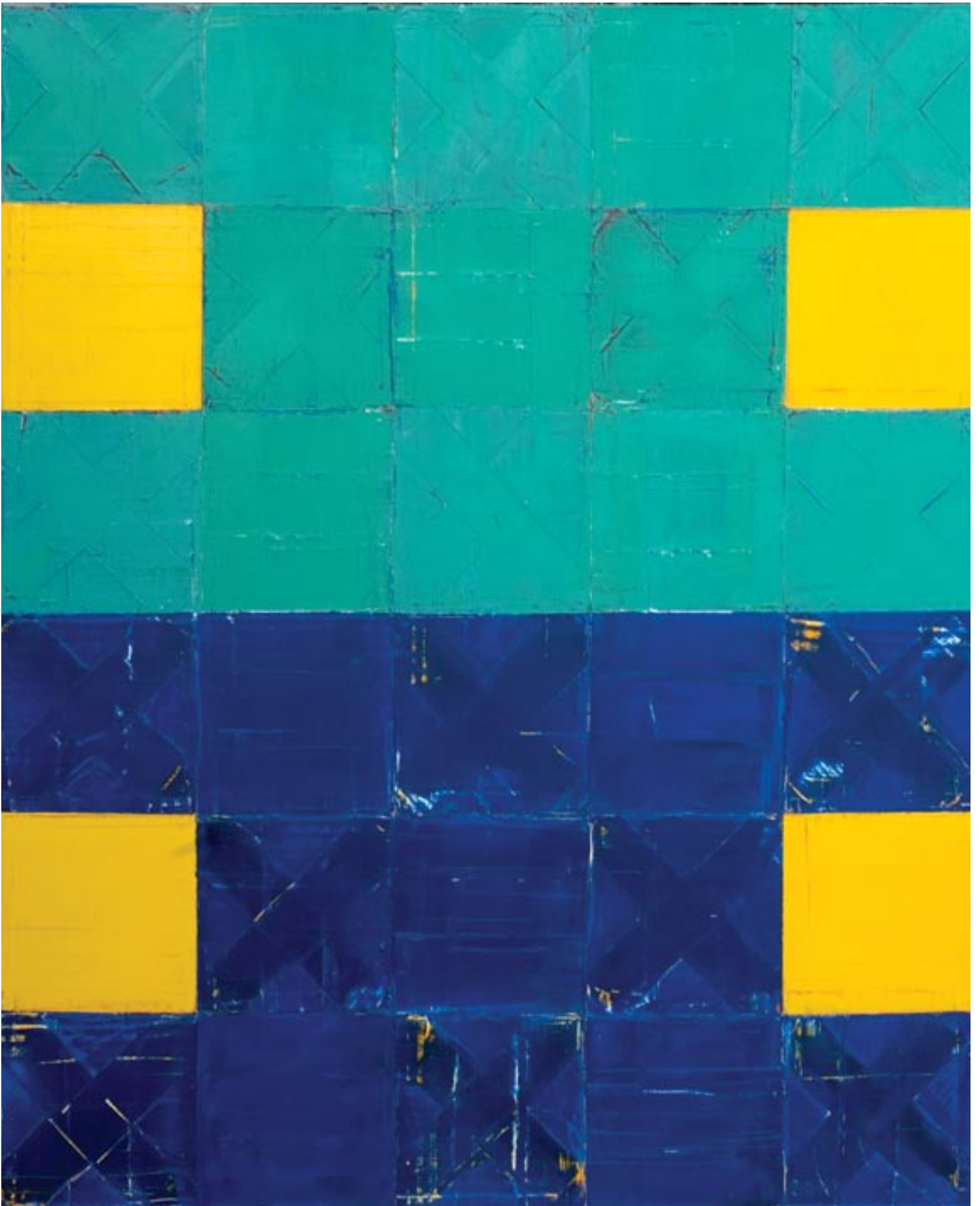
Matthew Langley

they’re doing—but which is also something beautiful to look at. Matthew’s paintings are just exquisitely wrought; his works on paper are so beautifully made, you’d never know they are composed of multiple pieces. And the grid is, I think, something that’s just universally appealing.”

Matthew’s work at the 7th Annual Transformer Auction, held last fall at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, got noticed fast and received bids right from the beginning. His

Above: “Flair, 2008,” acrylic on paper, 15” x 18”

Opposite: “Celebrated Summer, 2006” oil on canvas, 60” x 50”





*“What I paint are ‘paintings,’ they’re not pictures of objects. What interests me is not representing other things, but the work itself. The paintings are really about being paintings. My work tends to be what it is.”*

—Matthew Langley

solo show, which opens on January 28 at Susan Calloway Fine Arts in Georgetown is bound to create even more D.C. buzz.

The Fairfax County native feels fortunate. “I’ve had a lot of success of late, really starting from last year with the show I had in Chelsea, New York,” says Matthew. “Is it being in the right place at the right time? Is it working hard? Is it a combination of all those things? Probably.”

Matthew has immersed himself in art since attending Annandale High School. Growing up, he was keenly aware of the renowned Washington Color School and its refined, clean, pristine look. “I love it, but seeing that compared with the ’80s neo-expressionists and Italian avant-garde—this roughly handled paint and quick, expressionistic works—there was that ‘of the moment’ kind of ‘oomph.’ So in my formative years, I kind of had these polar approaches—this kind of really rough approach to working with things—with this super refined kind of palette. And the more I look back on that, that’s really where my work has come from.”

While earning his B.F.A. from the Corcoran, Matthew was influenced by instructors Robert Stackhouse, Gene Davis and Terry Braunstein who believed in the process of painting. “One of the best things I learned at the Corcoran was how to stay in the studio,” says Matthew. “You can show someone tools and talk about their work, but you need to stay in the studio and work every day, to continue exploring what you’re doing and to find ways to work with yourself.”

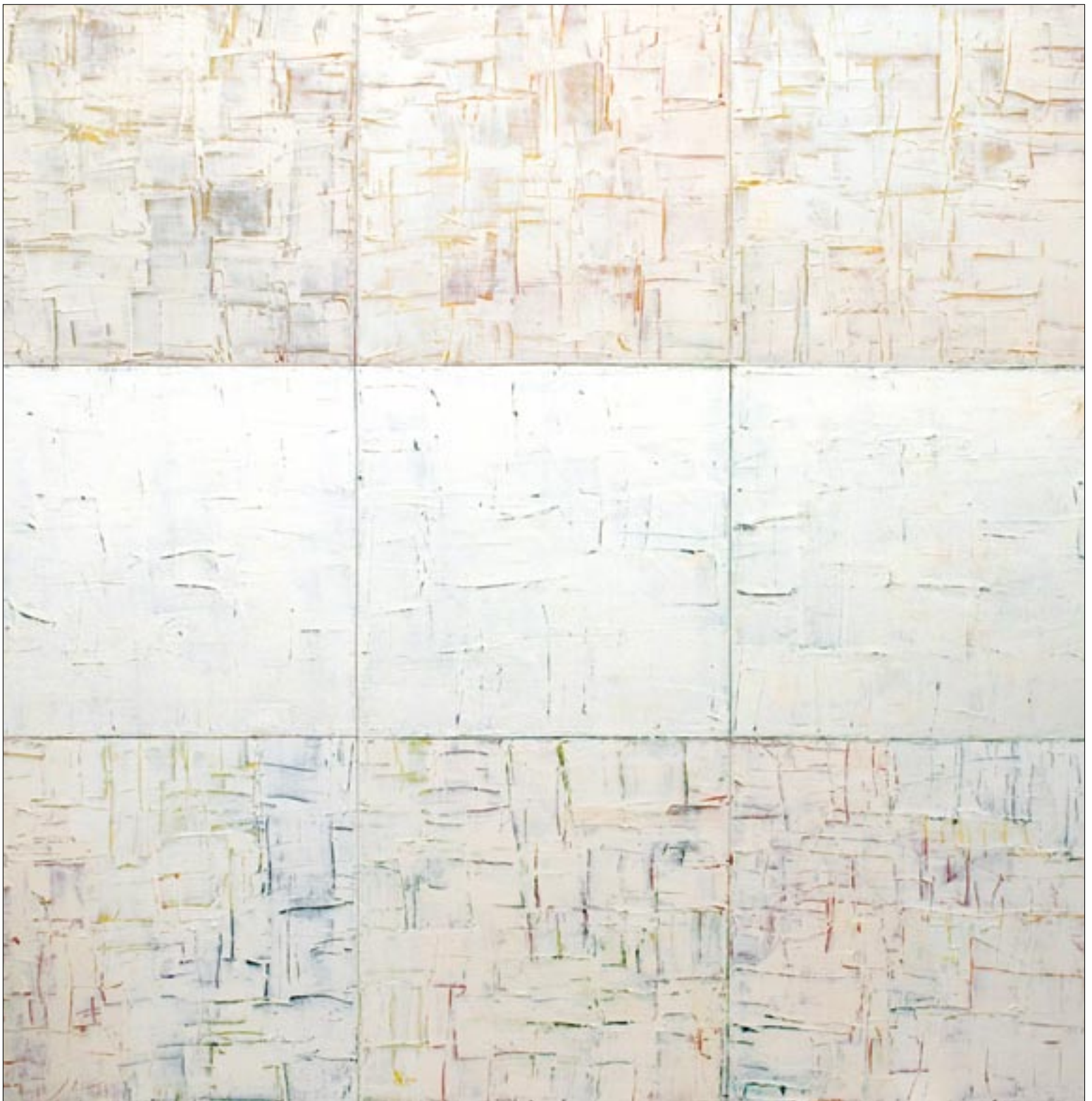
Matthew is not interested in being a representational

artist. “What I paint are ‘paintings,’ they’re not pictures of objects. What interests me is not representing other things, but the work itself. The paintings are really about being paintings. My work tends to be what it is.”

Matthew’s breakthrough piece, “Celebrated Summer,” was the first of his large-scale, grid-based pieces. Each image in this series begins with a gessoed canvas, over which Matthew creates up to ten layers of oils mixed with a wax-based medium. This technique enables him to build up paint quickly and add a sumptuous, textural quality to the piece. Matthew likens the grid device to the “engineering dictum” of tackling a problem by breaking it down into smaller, more manageable tasks: “You have this really large expanse you’re painting—how do you define it? How do you demark it? How do you give people entrance into it? The grid allows me to use that entire surface but focus on smaller sections of it at a time.”

Starting with only a basic roadmap in mind, Matthew prefers an “organic” painting process, which fosters improvisation. “The colors that actually make the grid are the underpainting. Often the scoring will drive how heavily I work the top surface.... It never goes straight through to the canvas.” Wielding a concrete trowel to hack away at the surface in varying degrees, Matthew gives the viewer something more to explore. “The colors are coming from underneath and showing themselves in a way that are a little bit less expected,” he says.

Matthew’s smaller-scale paper works begin with acrylic



on large sheets of paper, which he then cuts into squares and reassembles into a new piece. He glues the pieces down archivally, creating a defined edge without the benefit of a mat or frame. His use of the grid in this medium is quite different than in his large-scale oil canvases. “In a painting, I’ll be working on something, and I know it’s going to be side-by-side to something else,” he says. “But a gridded paper piece might have 18 to 24 pieces, and I have no idea where those pieces will go until I put it all together.”

Matthew’s “divergent strategies” are central to his art. “On one hand,” he says, “I physically am removing paint, and on the other hand, I’m constantly layering up more paint in an effort to include it. In making the painting, I apply the paint with a brush, and then I’m taking it off with the scraper. So for everything I’m putting down, I’m also taking off.”

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Matthew Langley  
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*Above: “Sidewalking,”  
oil on canvas, 36” x 48”*

*Opposite, left: “Central Reservation,”  
acrylic on panel;  
and Everybody Knows,”  
oil on canvas, 30” x 40”*