

The image shows a large-scale abstract painting with a complex, layered composition. The color palette is diverse, including deep blues, purples, greens, yellows, and earthy browns. The brushwork is dense and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The painting is displayed on a wall, with the edges of the canvas visible. The text 'Rotem Reshef' and 'ARCADIA' is overlaid in the center in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Rotem Reshef
ARCADIA



Rotem Reshef

ARCADIA

OCTOBER 6, 2019 – JANUARY 26, 2020

Rotem Reshef: *Arcadia*

October 6, 2019 – January 26, 2020

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Arcadia, 2018-2019, two scrolls, each diluted acrylic and mixed media on canvas
Blue scroll, 2018-2019, 7 x 75 ft. (2.1 x 22.9 m)
Green scroll, 2019, 7 x 29 ft. (2.1 x 8.8 m)

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Michele Wije, Associate Curator, Katonah Museum of Art with Rotem Reshef

Can you talk about your choice of the title of this exhibition, *Arcadia*?

The site-specific painting installation, *Arcadia* was inspired by the greenery and the calmness of the picturesque scenery that surrounds the Katonah Museum of Art (KMA). My work often deals with the tension between beauty and what disrupts it, the temporary existence of nature and short-lived bodily actions that left their marks on the canvas's surface. The title refers directly to Nicolas Poussin's 17th Century masterpiece, *Et In Arcadia Ego*, which ambiguously hints at the presence of death, loss and the temporality of life, within an idyllic place that suggests tranquility and harmony with nature.

Please discuss scale and color in your work.

My painting and installation work is often large in scale, and is an outcome of my practice as an action painter. I aim to create a gestural painterly presence in a given space, and working on a large scale allows me to create a visual world I can literally be part of with my entire body, and so can the future viewers. By working with diluted acrylic paint and no brushes, and by imprinting natural sources such as vegetation, and unnatural materials such as sheets of plastic or clothing, I compose paintings that take the viewer inside the work – large enough to encompass most of his or her field of vision and even their whole presence. That way, the artwork is not just perceived intellectually as an art object, but emotionally as an overlapping artistic experience in which one may be immersed. I work in a tradition of expressionism and ambitious scale that is perceived as mainly dominated by male artists throughout the centuries, while women artists were expected to work on a small scale, both physically and in their ambitions. This encouraged me to identify with the daring women artists that came before and to deliberately take space that until quite recently was avoided by most others.

What do you consider when making a site-specific installation? How does your decision process differ from making non-site-specific work?

To date, my site-specific installations have consisted of either large scrolls of unstretched canvases, or, in the case of outdoor murals, large prints that cover the whole facade of a building. They always take into consideration the measurements of the given space, the height of the ceiling and the general energetic flow of composition in the space. Also, it is sometimes, but not always, created with the gallery space and the surroundings where it is being presented in mind. The context of the building, the atmosphere, the vegetation and the energy are all important considerations. I decide whether I am interested in creating

a harmonious experience for the viewer, or whether I want them to be alert. At times I incorporate a political statement – such as in my *Time Traveler* pieces (2017-2018), and other times I create more of a contemplative space for the audience to walk in, as in *Control | Release* or *Phantom Stream*, (both 2016). In the case of the outdoor murals I consider my interaction with the surroundings and the artistic statement I would like to make. Although each canvas could stand by itself regardless of the specific installation, the work brings a larger meaning as a whole.

Please explain the control / release relationship in your painting. How does this materialize in your installation for the KMA?

Control | Release, the title of my first painting installation in 2016, sums up my process-based practice. I work with diluted acrylics, and with a canvas that is laid on the studio floor. The watery paint creates pools of colors and shades on the surface of the canvas, but also runs and drips. I have always been fascinated by the transparency of the liquid paint that reveals many layers, and its tendency to move around. Over time, I eliminated the minimal use of brushes and extended the release part of the control. Keeping in mind the “will of the paint” and aspects of collaboration with the materials, I developed different techniques, letting the paint “do its thing” while finding ways to control and direct it. I love the fact that I'm not working towards a specific outcome. My aim is not to produce something that imitates life, but to create something that did not exist in the world before.

In my installation at the KMA, I used natural materials from the Museum's surrounding area to create my own imaginary landscape. The *Arcadia* scrolls were the result of a long process that included picking the materials, placing them on the canvas, choosing the paint and pouring it, letting it sink in and then peeling off all materials from the canvas and revealing the imaginary forest that came to life. Choices were made in all stages of the process, yet the outcome is always full of surprises.

Historically a scroll invites the idea of a narrative. Do you consider your work to have a narrative sequence?

I do think that there are hints about narratives and themes, even if I don't necessarily intend them to be there. I believe that working with scrolls dictates this idea in an inherent way. The scrolls suggest duration and an extended experience of art viewing, so it does unfold itself in front of the viewer and there is perhaps a beginning, middle and end, as in story-telling, but the scrolls do not dictate the starting point, nor, since painted on the floor without top or bottom, a definite orientation. Each viewer can choose where they want to start and finish because I keep the artistic experience open ended, without being constrained to a specific theme or story.

When I was a child we used to play a version of the surrealist “Exquisite Corpse” game –

one person drawing on a piece of paper, folding it and then allowing the next person in line to continue, while only seeing the end of the previous drawing. My scroll paintings are somewhat like that, creating an overall story that is being revealed. They are keeping a secret that unfolds only when they are unraveled.

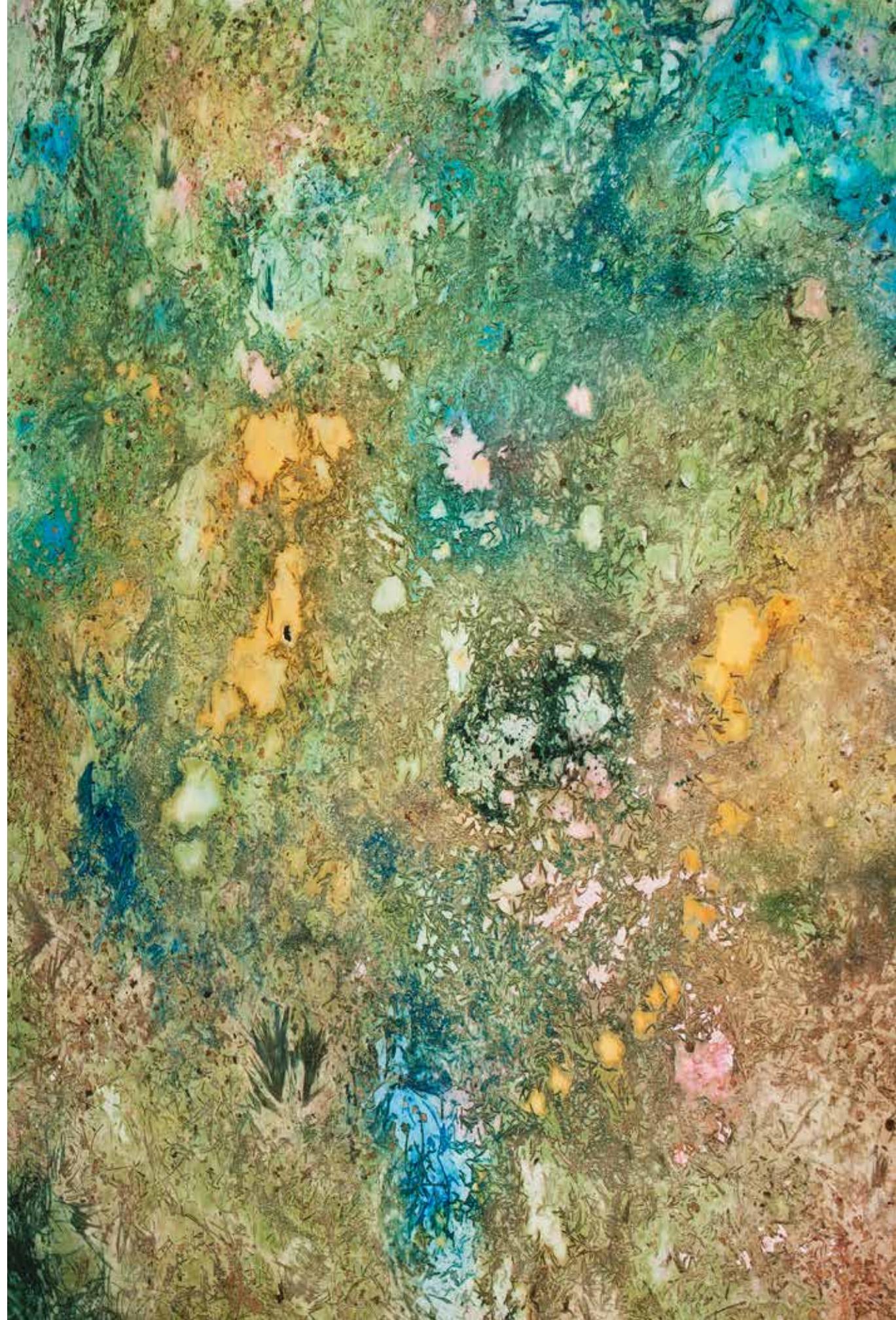
The materials I am using – collected in the streets around my studio or in places I go – can be interpreted as a reaction to my environment, or more generally to our environment and our relation to nature. Thus, another narrative I can mention is the use of plastics which are toxic materials that harm the environment and contribute to global warming and climate change, but in my work become the creators of beauty and richness. Perceiving my paintings as “fossils” or “ghosts” brings the element of temporality, or a nature morte, which adds a level of narrative and art-historical context into the work. And finally, being a woman artist and the traces of my body movements are also a narrative that can be considered.

When you display your work, how do you decide what part of the painting you reveal to the viewer?

Preparation for an exhibition is a chance for me to see the scrolls open to their fullest all at once, as opposed to in the studio where I work on them in segments. The parts of the scrolls that will be revealed or concealed are influenced by their size, by the space limitations, and by the parts of the canvas I would like to expose in a given exhibition. I try to see which parts are the most interesting in terms of light, scale and the general composition of the installation. I already know in advance that the scrolls are probably not going to be displayed fully, which adds to the mystery and to my desire not to reveal an entire story all at once. This potential is most interesting to me, since the same scrolls create different configurations and offer different experiences in various venues, depending on the specific circumstances they are brought into.

By allowing the canvas to be hung on the wall and cascade to the floor, you disregard the confines of space. Can you please talk about this choice of display?

Although it is conceived in the studio, my installation work takes form at the exhibition venue, where it really comes to life based on the space. Each time this happens in a different way. The way that the scrolls alter the space is crucial to the perception of both the artwork and the way people move in the space. Each installation therefore becomes a unique environment for the viewer. The scrolls break down the rigid angles and corners of the gallery and thus suggest fluidity and continuity. The goal is for the audience to forget about the “white cube” gallery space, to enter a world that takes them away from a concrete reality and into the realm of their own imagination and artistic adventure and to expand their sense of time and place.





Previous essays on your work have emphasized the physical process as the key that guides the making of your paintings. You've also been described as a "process-based" artist. So, let's begin with this central component. Describe your process for creating the body of work for *Arcadia*.

Arcadia is made of two scrolls of paintings. A longer one, the blue scroll, 75 feet long, that was made in 2018-2019, by imprinting different vegetation from the city of New York, and the shorter scroll, the green scroll, "only" 29 feet long, that was made with plants I collected from the surroundings of the museum.

Both canvases were made by creating an imaginary plant-based world, using different kinds of branches, leaves, coniferous tree needles etc., and by imprinting them with diluted acrylic paint onto the canvas.

Indeed, this process is very important in my work, in all of its stages – from collecting the materials, to working in the studio, to when and how the work is displayed, and how it can be shown again, in a completely different manner elsewhere.

The duration of the painting process on each section of the canvas, creating the new composition with the existing plants, painting it, peeling off the plants, revealing the canvas once again and connecting the new segment with the existing one – all take time and hold the memory of the materials and the process. The evolution of it, the metamorphosis, the duration of its creation and consumption, how it is never the same when conceived and later perceived, are all part of it being "process-based."

You had spent some time gathering organic materials from the grounds of the Katonah Museum of Art. What items did you collect and what role did they take in your paintings?

When I started to work on the *Arcadia* green scroll, I knew it was going to be juxtaposed or opposite to the *Arcadia* blue scroll which already existed. I wanted to bring the forest which surrounds the Museum into the building. I'm enchanted with nature, and love turning nature into art, and also using art to reinterpret nature – from its most specific textures of leaves and branches to conceptualizing a broader picture of nature's state in an industrialized world. Once nature is being transformed into its envisioned depiction in my artwork, it's as if I am extending nature's potential by creating a scenery that didn't exist before. The artwork derives from nature, depicts remains from nature, yet takes nature into an imaginary new place via the artistic creation process, emphasizing the tension between the natural and the artificial.

The first time I went to the Museum's back yard, it was full of branches that had fallen from the trees. I collected needle tree branches as well as acorns and even weeds. I was looking for the plants that would allow me to create my personal reflection of the KMA's grounds. I rarely cut living plants, and mostly collect vegetation that lays on the ground.

Coming from NYC, where one is not allowed to collect even dead plants from the ground of any public parks, it was like getting to nature's amusement park – I could get as many plants as I wanted. The second time I came to the Museum, a couple of months later, the ground was clear of branches. I went farther back, beyond the Museum's perimeter, looking again for different branches that would enrich and deepen the textures on the canvas once imprinted.

In past work, you have incorporated synthetic materials such as plastic to make marks on your canvas. What influenced you to work with natural materials for this project?

The Katonah Museum of Art is surrounded by nature and I wanted to bring the power and beauty of the outside into the Museum. Even more so, once we decided that the blue scroll would be on view, presenting a nature-like scenery in blues, purples, golds and bronzes, I knew that I had to juxtapose it with the breathtaking green of the surrounding environment to create an experience of nature in different times of day, different seasons, carrying varied atmospheres and moods from the world that surrounds us, into the microcosmos world I wanted to create inside.

My previous work (mainly from 2015-2018) dealt with everyday materials that I encountered in the studio, or on my way to and from it. Plastic sheets and bubble wrap are materials used for packing and storing paintings, but they are often “left out of the picture.” There was something magical and inspiring in using these humble materials to create complex textures and marks. On many occasions, these marks seemed very organic and leaf-like, or resembled beehives, as if asking at times for a reference from “the real thing.”

About two years ago I started to explore imprinting vegetation on the canvas. It opened many new directions, both visually and thematically. To me, the “fossil” or “ghost” paintings are somewhat like drying flowers in an album, saving the memory of something very beautiful, leaving its future of natural growth or death behind, and charging it with new life. Using natural materials is almost the opposite of using plastic. Nature is a glorious place to start. Using branches and leaves, I am able to create new, organic and nature-oriented scenery by using complex and beautiful natural materials that take the work to a new level.

What I am creating is a “second immortal life”, a new synthesized-organic world with internal logic and beauty, made of ghost images of nature. This time I could not only create a visually organic-like painting, but an organic-based painting that explores each branch and needle and its ability to produce rich organic imprints and textures.

How long do you let the materials sit on the canvas? How do you decide when to lift the materials off the canvas?

It varies, from a few days to a few weeks until the paint is dry. Some materials block the air more than others, and without air, the paint does not dry. I check the paint to see whether the imprint is interesting and complex enough for me. Though I'm using transparent layers of paint, it is hard to tell what mark is left on the canvas while the plants are on it. However, as long as the plants are in place, I can add paint and enrich the image. I may add paint several times, but once the materials on the canvas are peeled away, it will be much harder to create more imprints with them.

Your canvases are unstretched, can you explain your thinking behind using a large infinite canvas?

The unstretched canvases give the composition the breathing space to expand as much as it needs, instead of limiting it to a specific measurement. There is a kind of freedom and power in working on a large scale, and it allows me to open up the vast space instead of confining it to a smaller one. After the painting is done, I can decide how I want to display it, whether in a full form and length, or in a fragmentary manner. Since I prefer my creative process to be free from limitations, and evolve without rigid expectations or plans, an unstretched canvas suggests a broader field on which to experiment.

The large, “infinite” canvas allows the image and the narrative to develop, enabling it to grow and deepen, and extends the options for displaying the artwork afterwards.

At what point do you know a painting is finished?

A painting is finished when I believe I shouldn't add anything to it or think that from now on I can potentially “damage” it. Sometimes, adding more layers would block the existing image or break the harmony of colors and cause the composition to lose its balance. I don't believe in only one solution for a painting, but I do think that it could be really hard to correct an overly-painted painting, especially when it is all made with transparent layers. Saying that, I make a distinction between the painting itself and the scroll that is meant to be displayed in an installation form. Then it can be presented in an “unfinished” form, revealing only selected parts of it, so even if a painting IS finished, it might not be experienced AS finished.

How does your work relate to the abstract expressionist women artists of the *Sparkling Amazons* show?

My work is very much action-based, gesture-driven and Ab-Ex related. It is common to think about male painters such as Pollock and de Kooning when mentioning Action Painting, but the women artists featured in *Sparkling Amazons* are no less important or

revolutionary. If we think in an art-historical perspective, women painters were very rarely credited or even given any stage to create and show their work. If they did succeed, it was often measured in relation to their male peers. Nevertheless, the *Sparkling Amazon* painters are unapologetic, gestural and demand space for their presence. They competed with their male colleagues and were not shy to display their ambitions. They were expressive, original and confident. They created wonderful art and paved the way for women artists like myself who can relate to all of the above.

I can find the dots that connect me and my art to each of the artists in the exhibition. The scale, the bodily gestures, the use of striking colors and dissolving paint, the artistic vision and uplifting beauty, the relation to nature as a source of inspiration, being creative and daring to explore and investigate painting as a means of personal expression and as a form of art in an innovative manner.

We would like to believe that there is a gender equality, not only in art but in all realms. But most of us know that this is not the case. Yet, what women today can do, and what I, as an artist who is a woman can achieve and aspire to, is based on the foundations of the groundbreaking artistic and personal achievements of the sparkling Amazons.

You have mentioned that Helen Frankenthaler is an influence, please talk about this.

One of the images I constantly have in mind is of Helen Frankenthaler from 1956, sitting on and surrounded by her blue paintings of *Mountains and Sea*. The size of her canvases, her use of liquid diluted paint, its fluidity, the staining, the color fields... I can relate to it and am constantly inspired by it.

Helen Frankenthaler's use of diluted paint to create airy compositions, layered tonalities and transparencies, and in general to bring a certain delicacy and softness to a "macho"-sized artwork and specifically the Ab-Ex genre, speaks to me in a very intuitive way. She embraced a unique, some could say "feminine" style, while doing it ambiguously and in large formats, as a means of declaring that there is also a strength and presence in softness and nuances, that painting can be subtle, and still fierce. These are qualities that I aspire to convey in my work.

Who are your other artistic influences?

I am influenced by many things, including artists and everyday experiences I see, feel and encounter. I work in the field of art, a field that is led by, and admiring of, its male artists. I try to make work that is unexpected from a woman artist of a certain age or demeanor.

An artist that has a direct influence on my installation work is Katharina Grosse. Her unconventional use of space, and the way she broadens the perception of what a painting is, freely playing with volume, expression, nature, scale and site-specificity – really helped

transform my work from the two dimensionality of a painting on the wall to an all-encompassing approach of how a painting can be experienced and manifested.

My work was mentioned lately in the context of Sam Falls's and Claudio Parmiggiano's works. While I do see a certain resemblance, I don't think my work is inspired by theirs, but rather we might be inspired by similar techniques – such as the photogram, or thematically by nature morte.

Sam Gilliam takes the canvases and turns them into an object in space and an object that creates space. He has been constantly creating for so many years and never follows any conventions. I recently saw his new works on paper at the Flag Art Foundation and while knowing some of his techniques from personal experience, I was fascinated by their outcome.

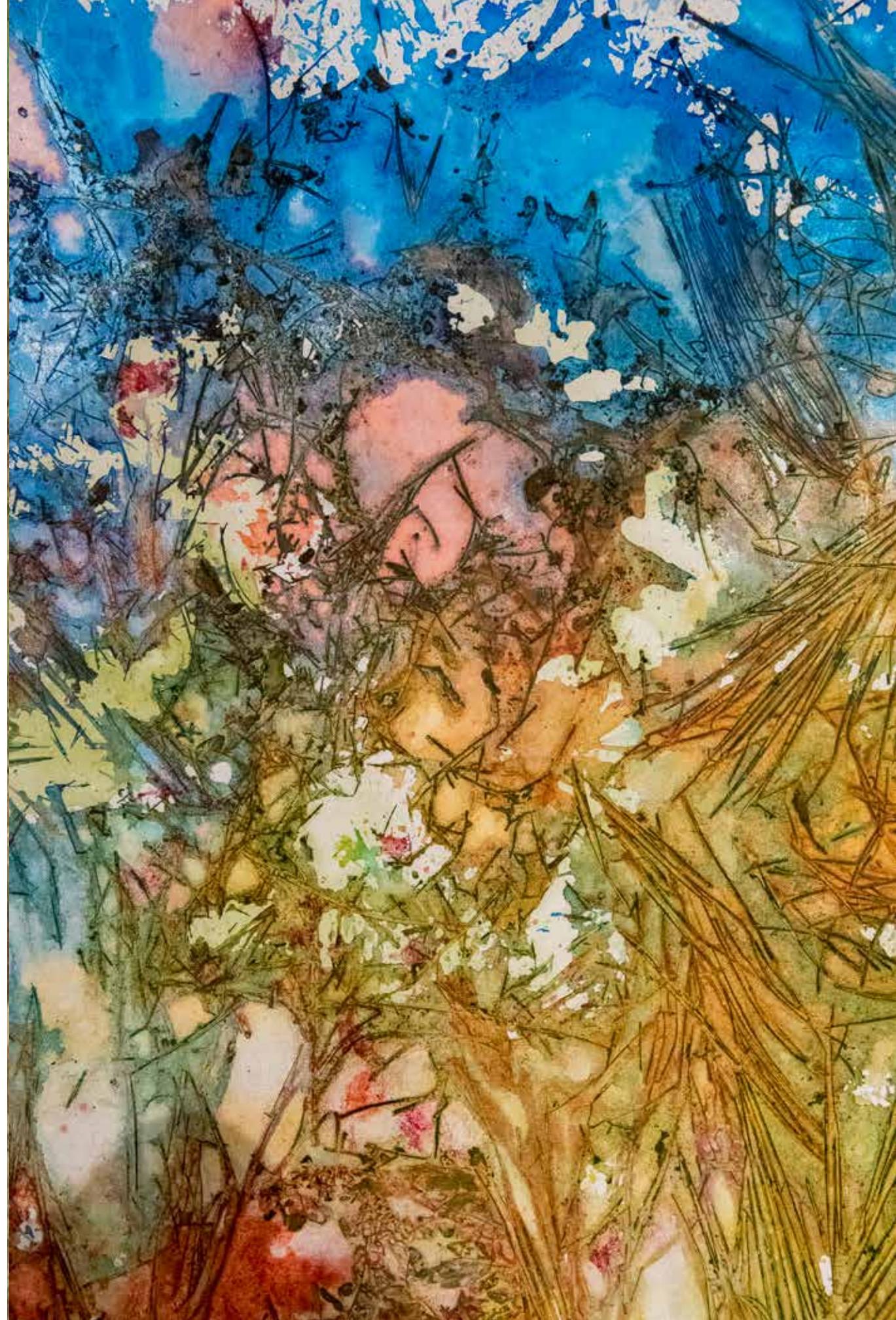
I can also mention James Turrell whose light art is doing exactly what I aspire to do, it creates a surrounding that draws the viewer into it, and by doing so, they lose their immediate contact with the real world and become one with the art.

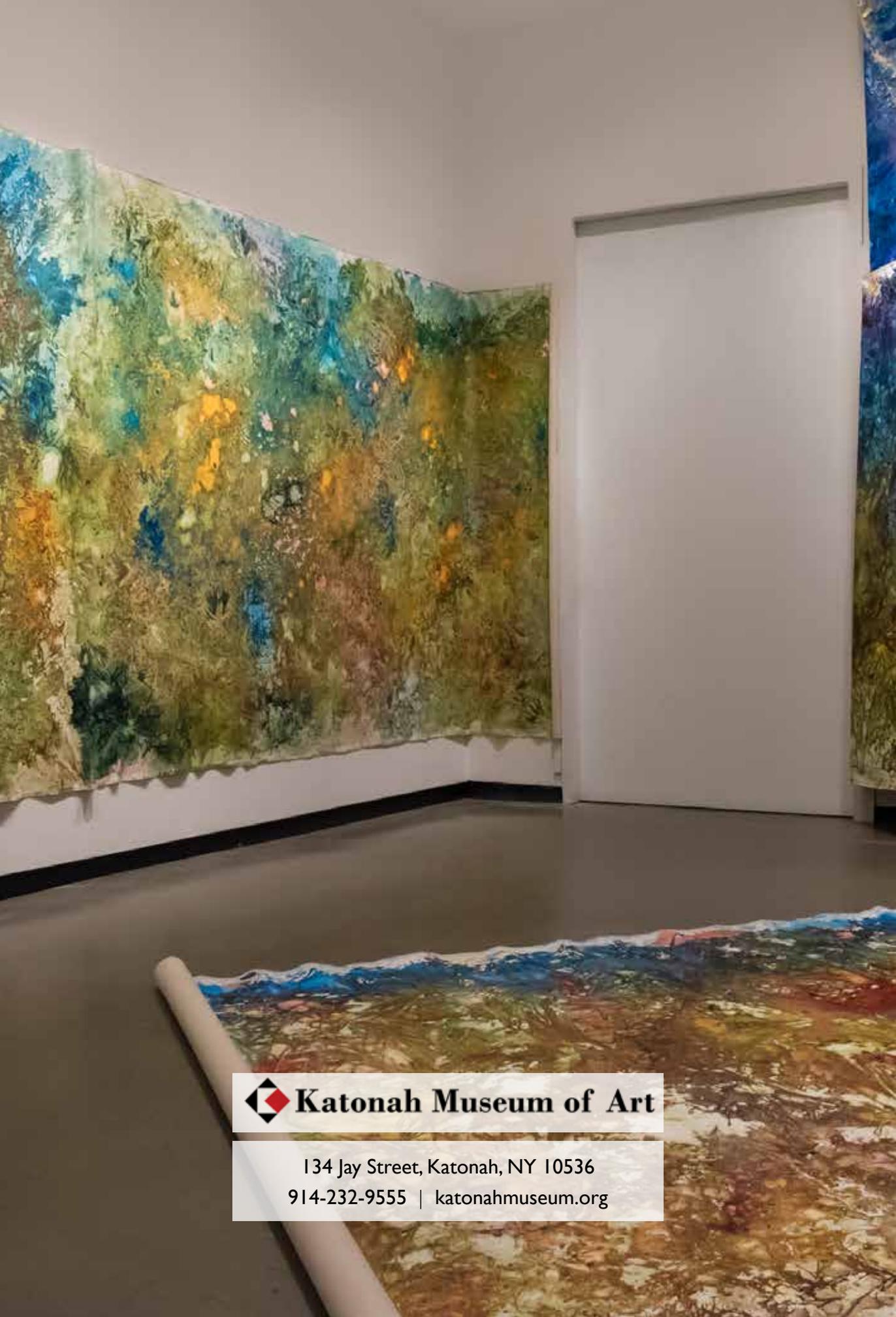
I love art that creates an emotional excitement, which makes me think and invites me to step into its world and find my way in it. It can be an installation or a painting, abstract or not, that presents an immersive emotional and sometimes physical experience, that I carry with me afterwards.



You're a global artist in the digital era using painting approaches from 50+ years ago. How do you see yourself in the context of contemporary art?

I see myself as using painting approaches that are perhaps a mix between those of the abstract expressionist generation, mainly the gestural attribute, but with a contemporary aesthetic when it comes to themes, relation to space, scale, ambition and awareness. My work takes into consideration the short attention span of the potential viewer in the Instagram era. I deliberately want to sustain the art-viewing experience to more than an image that is perceived on a flat screen for a split second. The tonalities, textures and large-scale compositions in my installations can't be fully experienced or understood on the screen, and in that way I am very much an artist who is dealing with the limitations of the current times. Finally, by incorporating natural and artificial materials from my close surroundings, I choose to reflect in my art the world beyond it, and its political, climate and ecological concerns.





 **Katonah Museum of Art**

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