

NADIA HAJI OMAR

ASCENSION

NATURAL SELECTION

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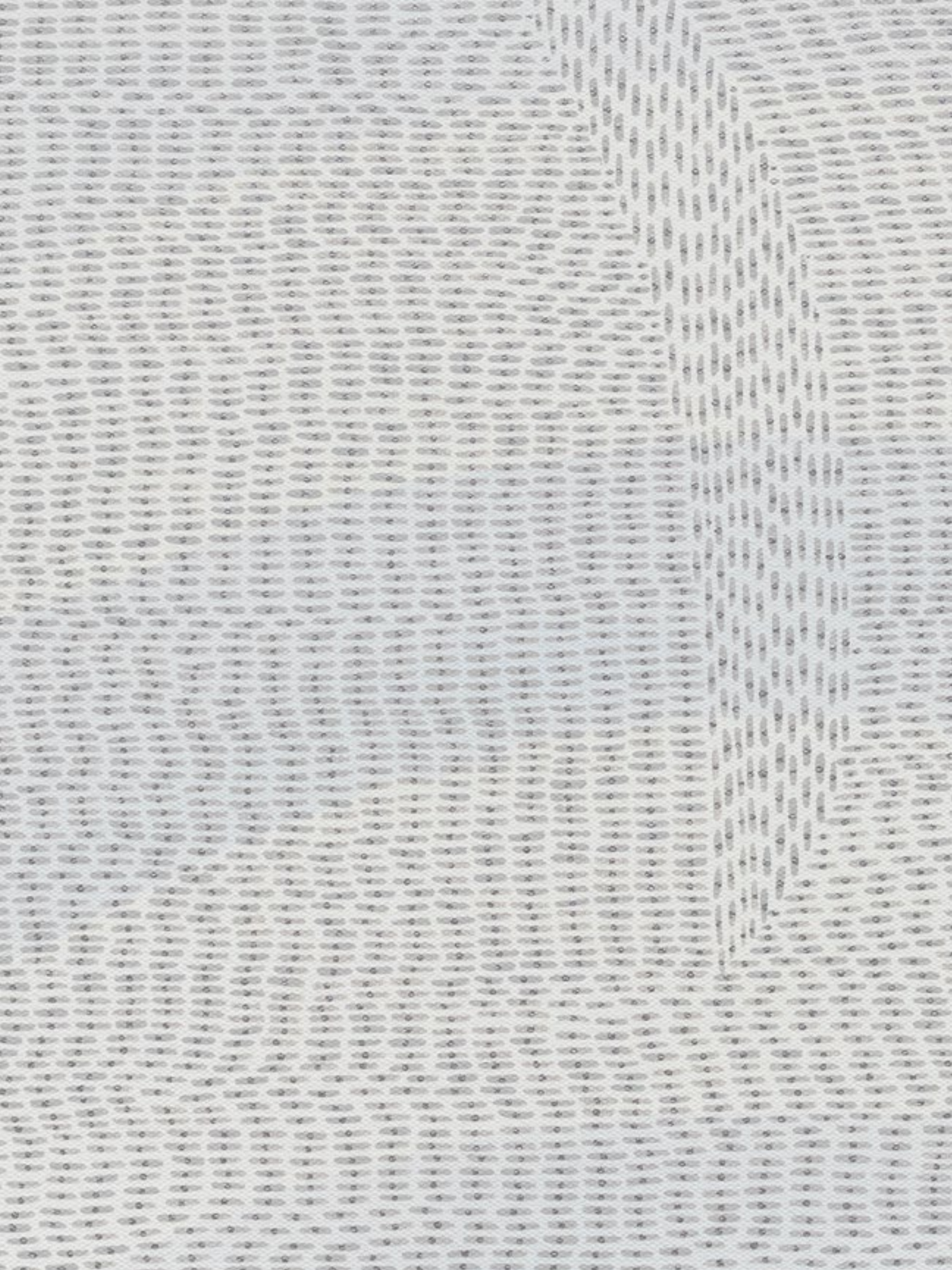
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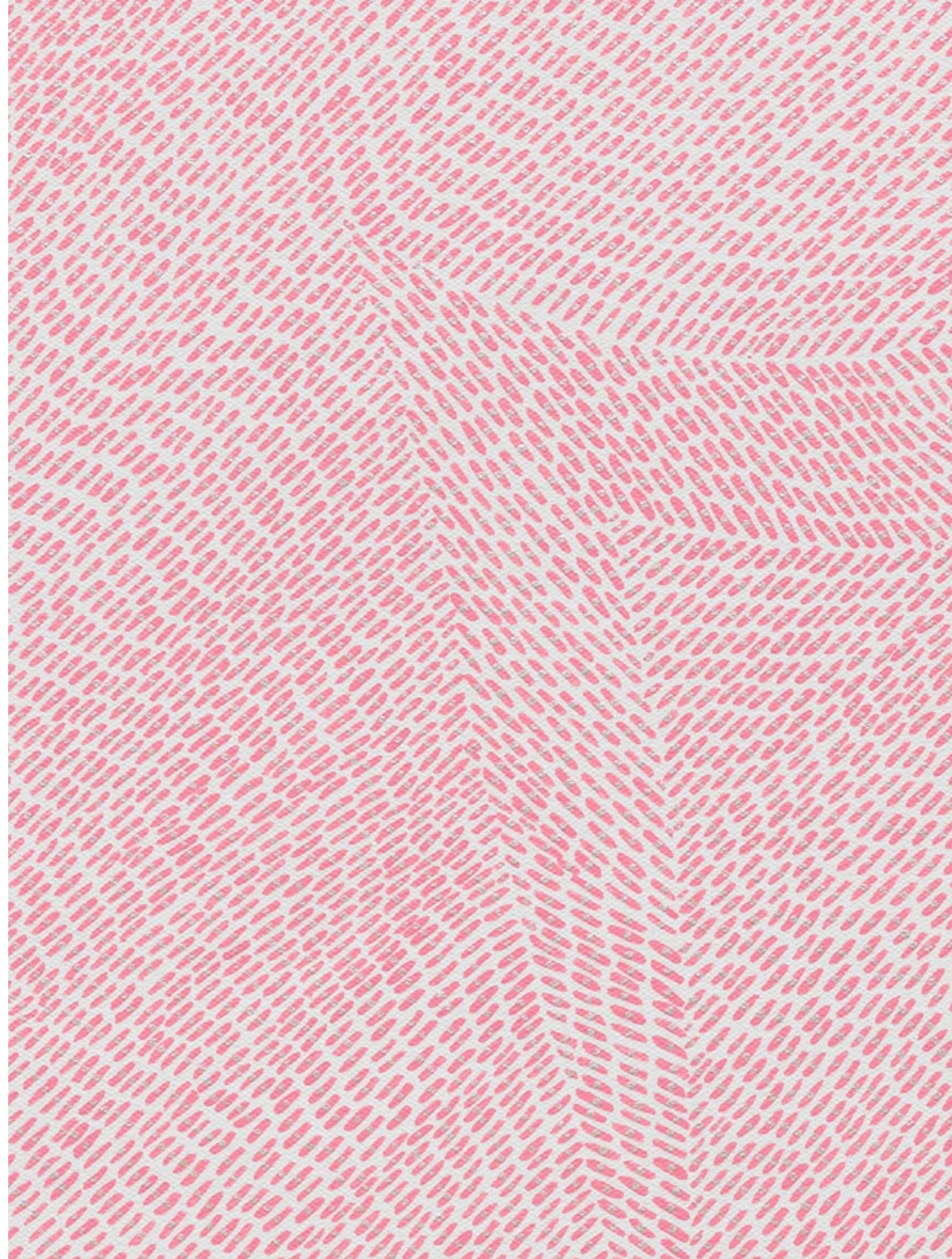
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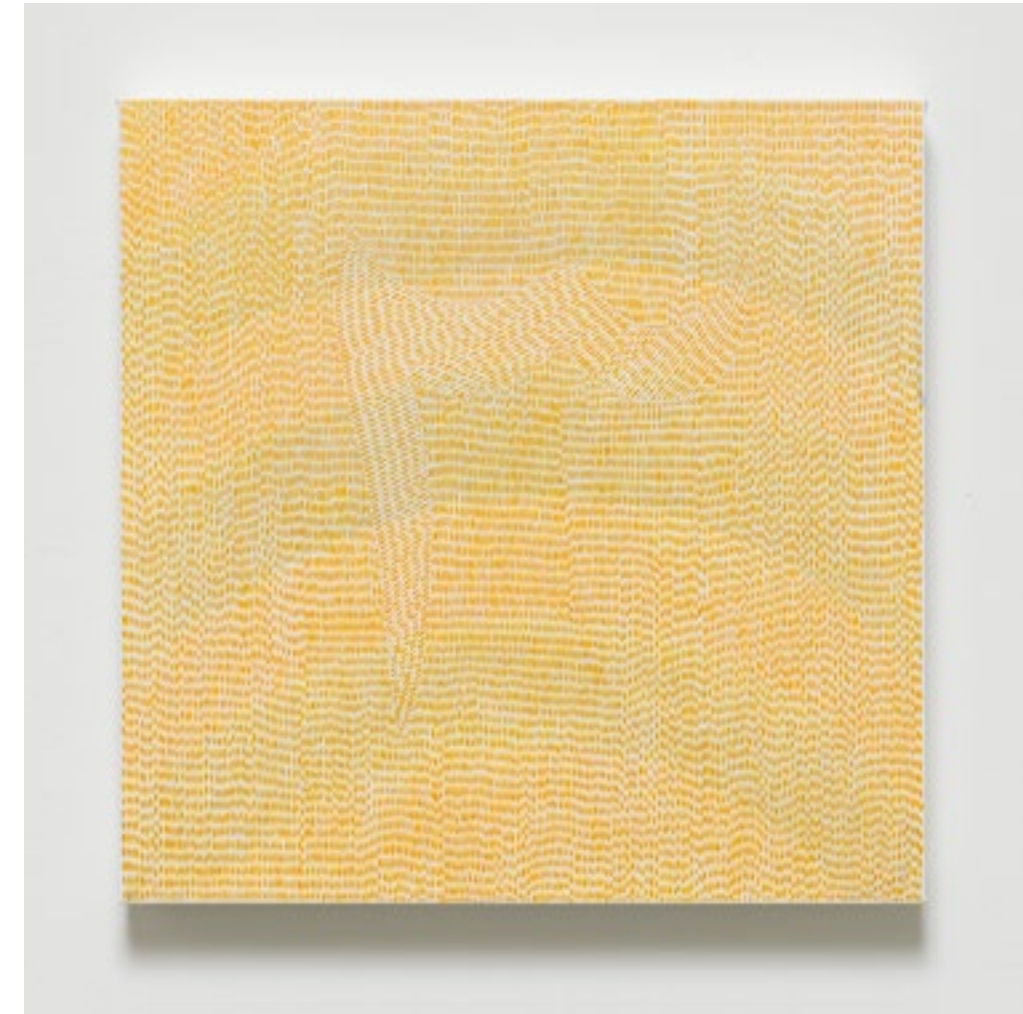
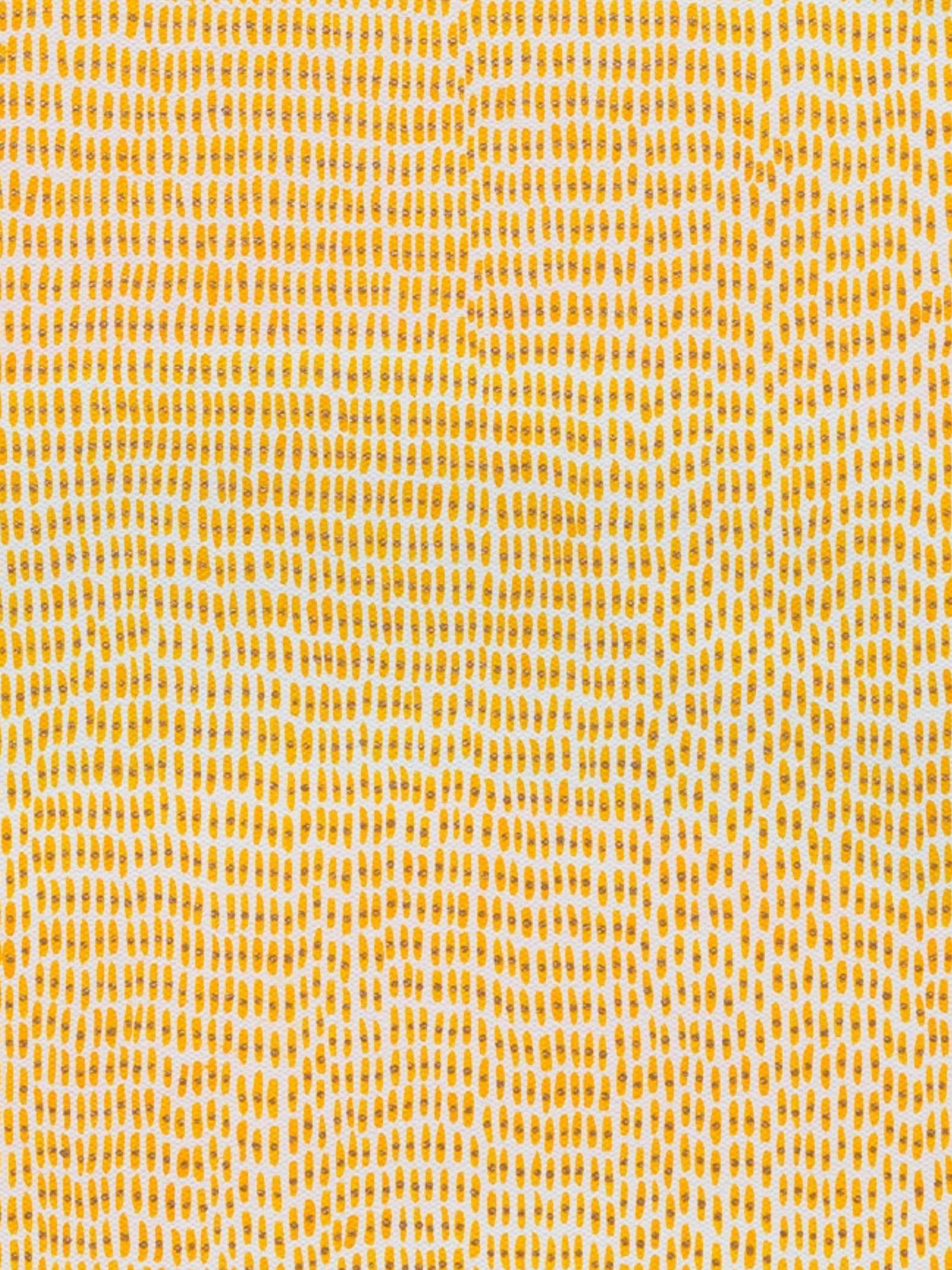
# ASCENSION



\ (waahid), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
16 x 16 inches (40.64 x 40.64 cm)



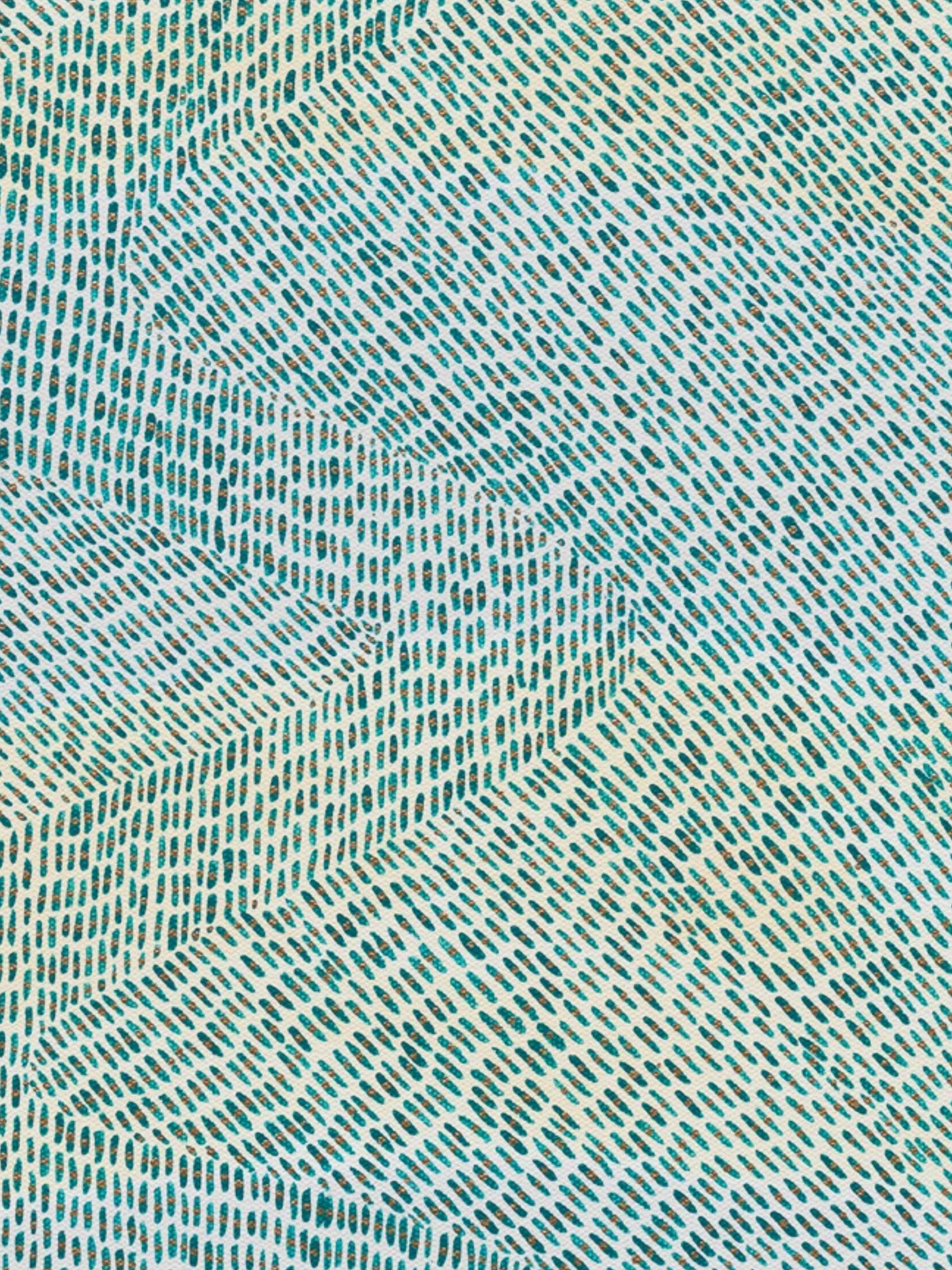
ۛ (ithnaan), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
16 x 16 inches (40.64 x 40.64 cm)

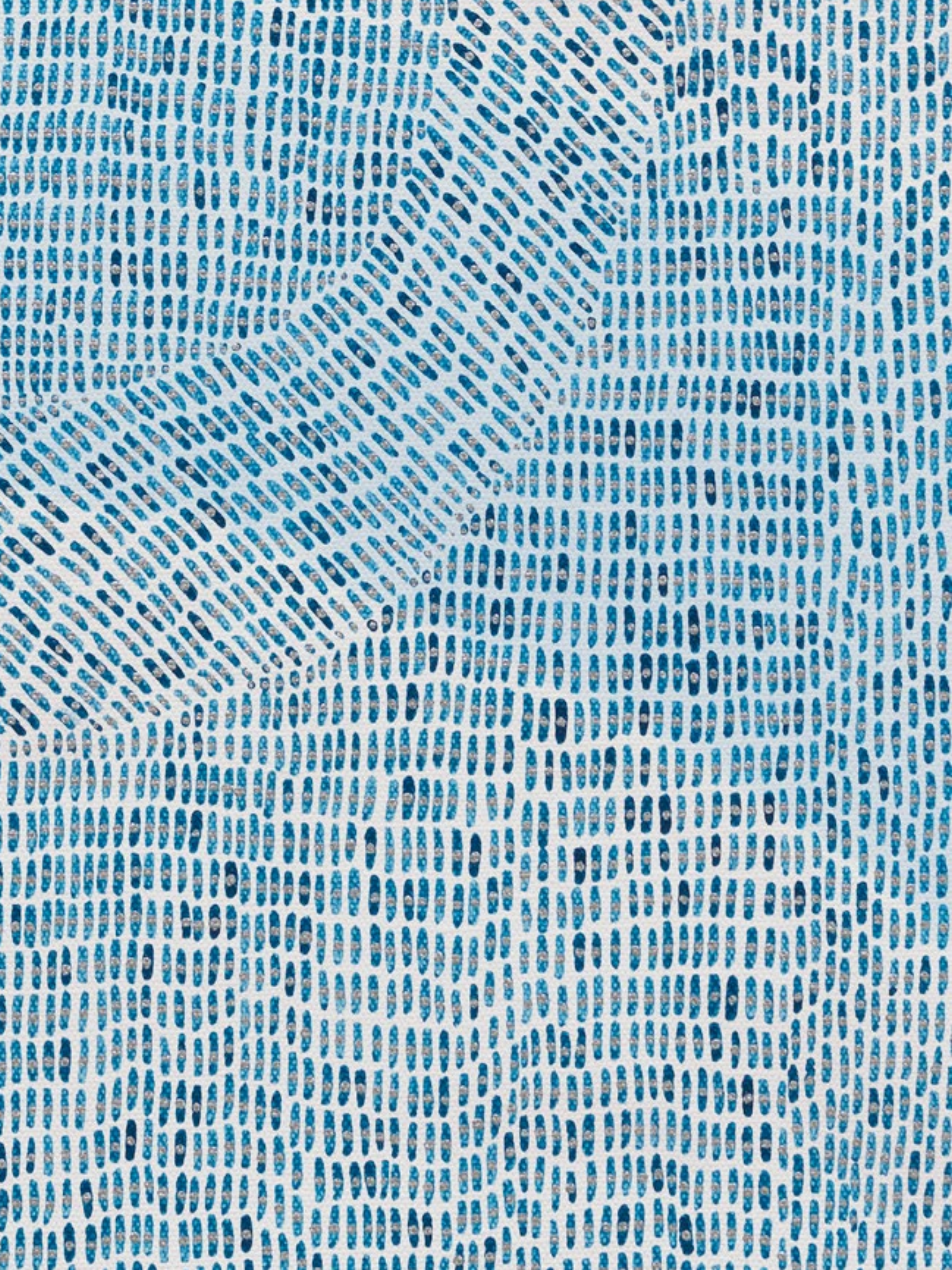


r (thalaatha), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)



ε (arba'a), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)



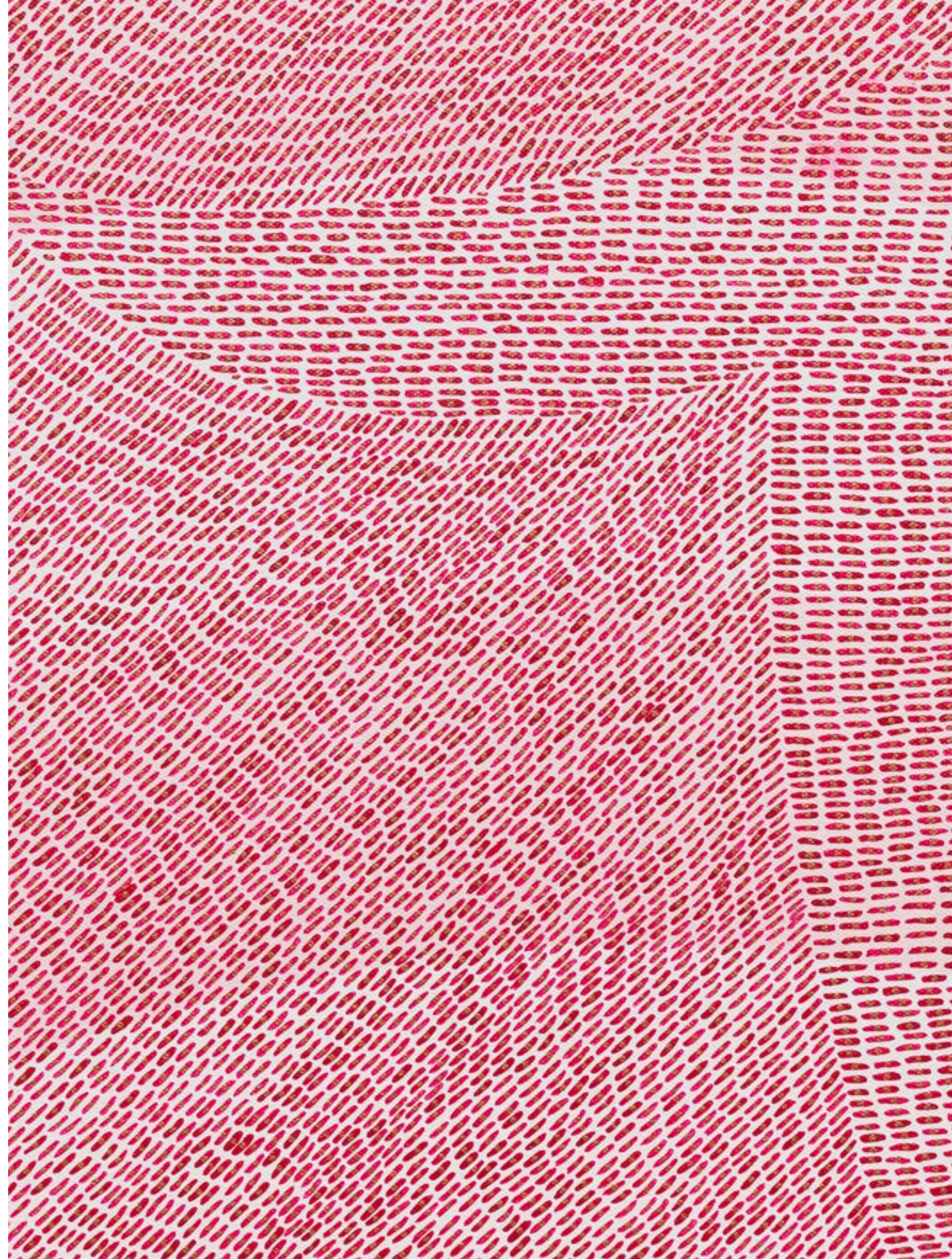


◦ (khamsa), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
24 × 24 inches (60.96 × 60.96 cm)





ʔ (sitta), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
24 x 24 inches (60.96 x 60.96 cm)





v (saba), 2019  
Acrylic and dye on canvas  
30 × 30 inches (76.2 × 76.2 cm)



Nadia Haji Omar: Ascension, curated by Mary Birmingham, Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Gallery, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ, September 27, 2019 – February 9, 2020, courtesy of Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, photo by Etienne Frossard



Nadia Haji Omar: Ascension, curated by Mary Birmingham, Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Gallery, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ, September 27, 2019 – February 9, 2020, courtesy of Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, photo by Etienne Frossard



# NADIA HAJI OMAR'S VISUAL TERRITORIES

by Mary Birmingham

Nadia Haji Omar is well known for intricate works that explore visual territories of language and place. The artist—whose heritage is Sri Lankan, Indian, and Syrian—was born in Australia, raised in Sri Lanka, and educated in the United States, and this multi-cultural background informs her work. Her study of Sinhalese, Tamil, Arabic, and French led to an ongoing formal and conceptual engagement with these languages in her art practice. She often combines linguistic characters with imagery suggesting landscape, maps, and textile patterns as she attempts to “define something indefinable through abstraction.”

*Ascension* is a series of paintings on canvas representing the seven levels of heaven—a concept common to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Haji Omar has based each of the seven paintings on one of the levels of heaven as outlined in Islam and has chosen a color palette that suggests a quality describing each one: The first level of heaven is made of water; the second, of white pearls; the third, of iron, pearls, or dazzling stones; the fourth, of brass or white gold; the fifth, of silver; the sixth, of gold or garnets and rubies; and the seventh, of divine light or emeralds.

Her process is meticulous and painstaking. Using fabric dye to stain the background of each canvas, Haji Omar creates a basic pattern of seven ascending, arced bands, subtly delineated by two alternating colors. She covers each dyed surface with a layer of densely repeated marks—short lines painted in acrylic, uniform in size and color—and embellishes them with dots of metallic paint. Each painting features a single Arabic numeral from one to seven, set within the field of marks. (These numerals also serve as the paintings’ titles.) Haji Omar constructs the numeric shape by changing the direction of the painted lines, orienting them in one direction for the background and a different direction for the characters, while keeping the colors consistent. The contrasting patterns and reflective metallics create fragmented and shimmering surfaces that allude to the infinite.

Haji Omar created the paintings in *Ascension* for her recent solo exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, where they were installed sequentially from right to left. The paintings gradually increase in size from the first to the seventh. Viewers following their path around the gallery metaphorically “ascended” through the layers to reach the seventh heaven.



While working on the *Ascension* paintings, she also made a series of thirty-two ink drawings titled *Natural Selection*. Although these works on paper differ from the paintings in their initial source of inspiration and medium, they share a common formal organization—a single, central shape placed within a field of repeated tiny marks.

A deep investigation of color and form, *Natural Selection* responds to a painting Haji Omar completed in 2015, *Deep Sea Topography*. Revisiting the earlier work, she isolated and extracted thirty-two of the small, white shapes that populate the painting’s map-like surface and arranged them in a loose grid. She repeats this gridded pattern on each drawing, selecting one of the shapes to render at a much larger scale. Viewed as a whole, the grid resembles an alphabet from some ancient indecipherable language.



Haji Omar composes the drawings by employing the same repeated mark—a small, dashed line that she applies over and over, embracing the natural variations and imperfections of this process. Each unique drawing utilizes a different color for the background, the grid, and the highlighted shape. She creates the forms by varying the color and direction of the lines—vertical dashes for the backgrounds and horizontal ones for the individual shapes. This reductive system of mark making suggests the uniform stitches of hand embroidery or the binary structure of weaving—activities involving rhythmic and repetitive hand movements that are often meditative.

As in the *Ascension* paintings, the patterns established by the opposing colored marks produce optical effects that trick the eye. Some forms appear to float in layers over others, yet a closer look reveals that the backgrounds and the individual shapes exist on the same plane, like interlocking pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. In some drawings, the interaction of color causes visual vibrations that nearly overwhelm the eye, much like the effect of bright sunlight on water.

Haji Omar acknowledges that her work has always been deeply connected to her dreams, and having grown up on the island of Sri Lanka and currently living in coastal Rhode Island, it is not surprising that she often dreams of water. In the language of dreams, water symbolizes deep emotions, the subconscious, and spirituality—ideas that play central roles in her work. One has only to look out Haji Omar’s studio window onto the watery expanse of Mt. Hope Bay to understand its omnipresent influence. She is often captivated by the play of sunlight dancing across the water’s surface and sometimes captures this phenomenon with her cell phone camera. The shimmering, mutable expanse of sea mirrors the sky, with tiny points of light suggesting the glimmer of heavenly stars. Haji Omar’s use of painted metallic dots on the surfaces of the *Ascension* paintings helps approximate this dazzling visual effect.

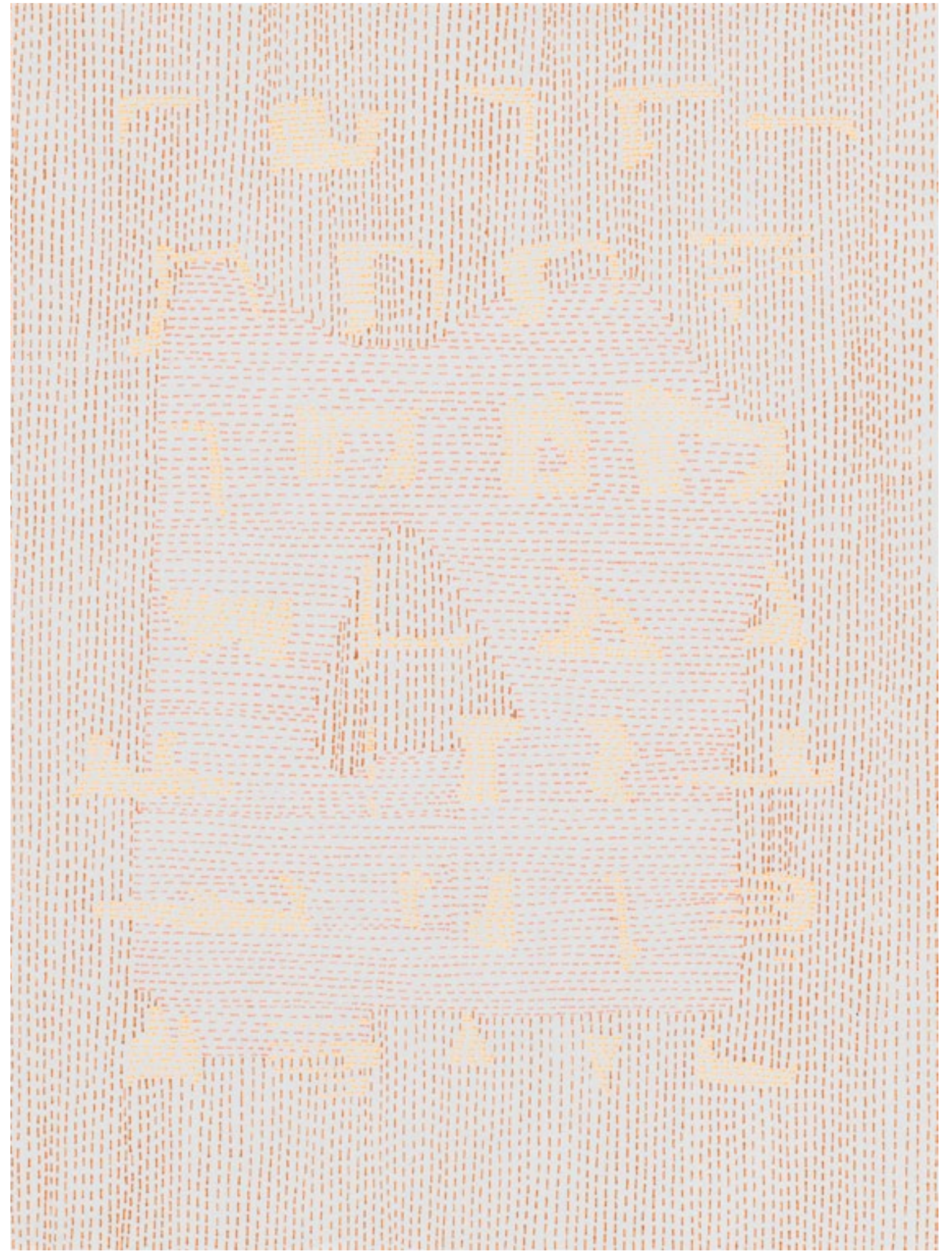
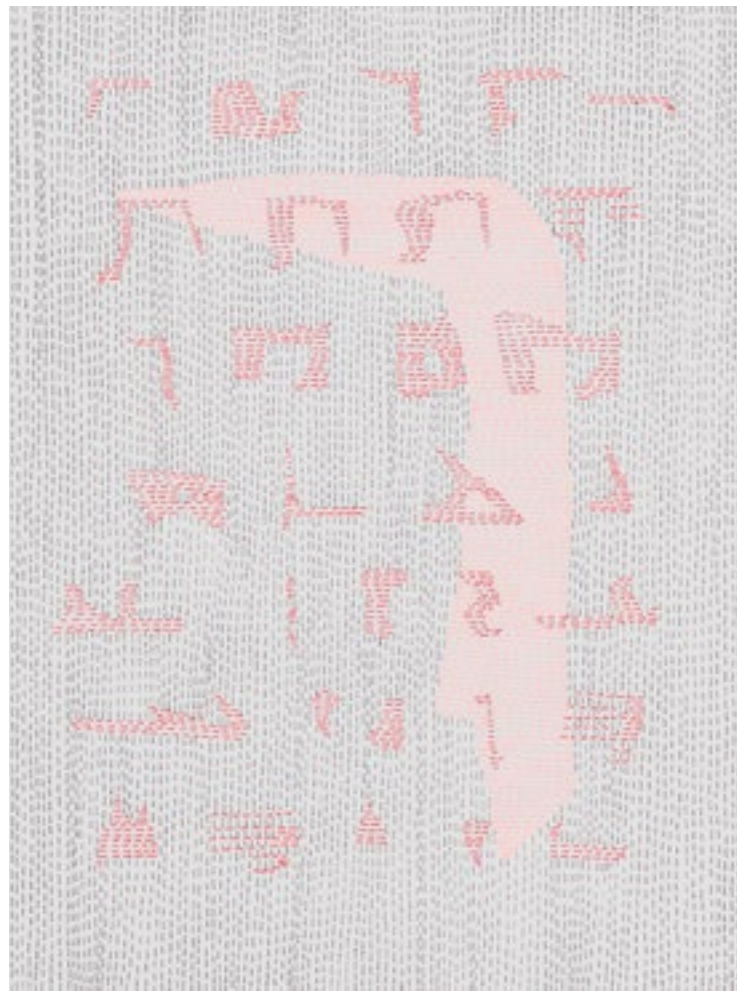
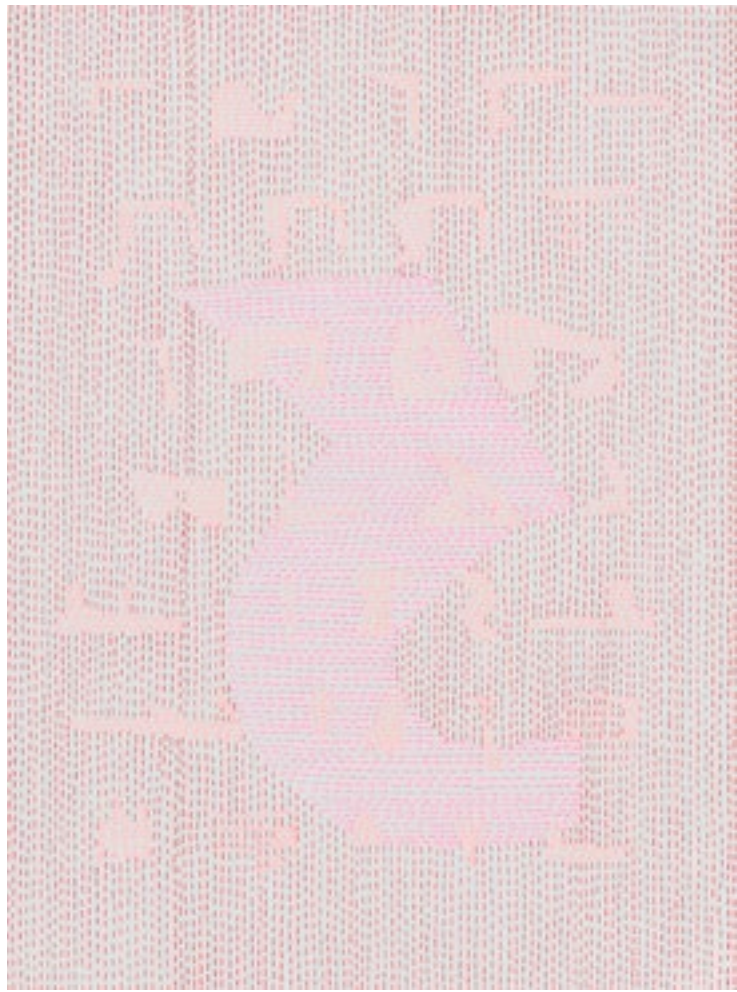
Thinking metaphorically, perhaps we should view the sea as a kind of two-way mirror that provides a conceptual link between these two bodies of work. If the *Ascension* series directs our eyes and thoughts toward the heavens above, *Natural Selection* suggests a deep dive into a personal and enigmatic space below. This series is particularly self-referential, not only looking back to *Deep Sea Topography* for imagery, but also concentrating each drawing on one shape pulled from its own internal grid. The paintings and drawings navigate different but equally compelling visual territories. *Natural Selection*, with its inward focus, offers a contrasting viewpoint to the paintings in *Ascension*, which look out toward infinity.

Mary Birmingham is the Curator at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit, New Jersey

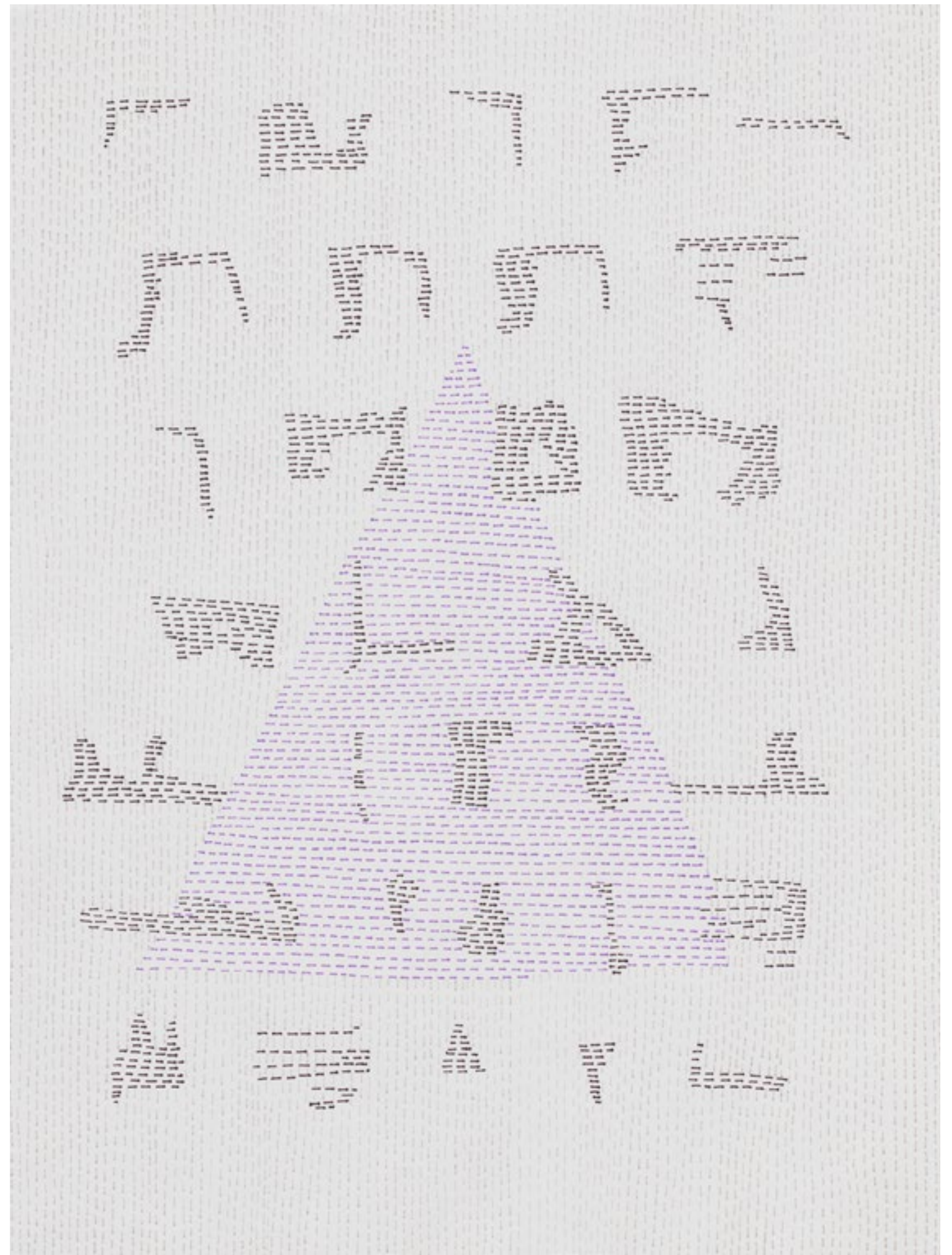
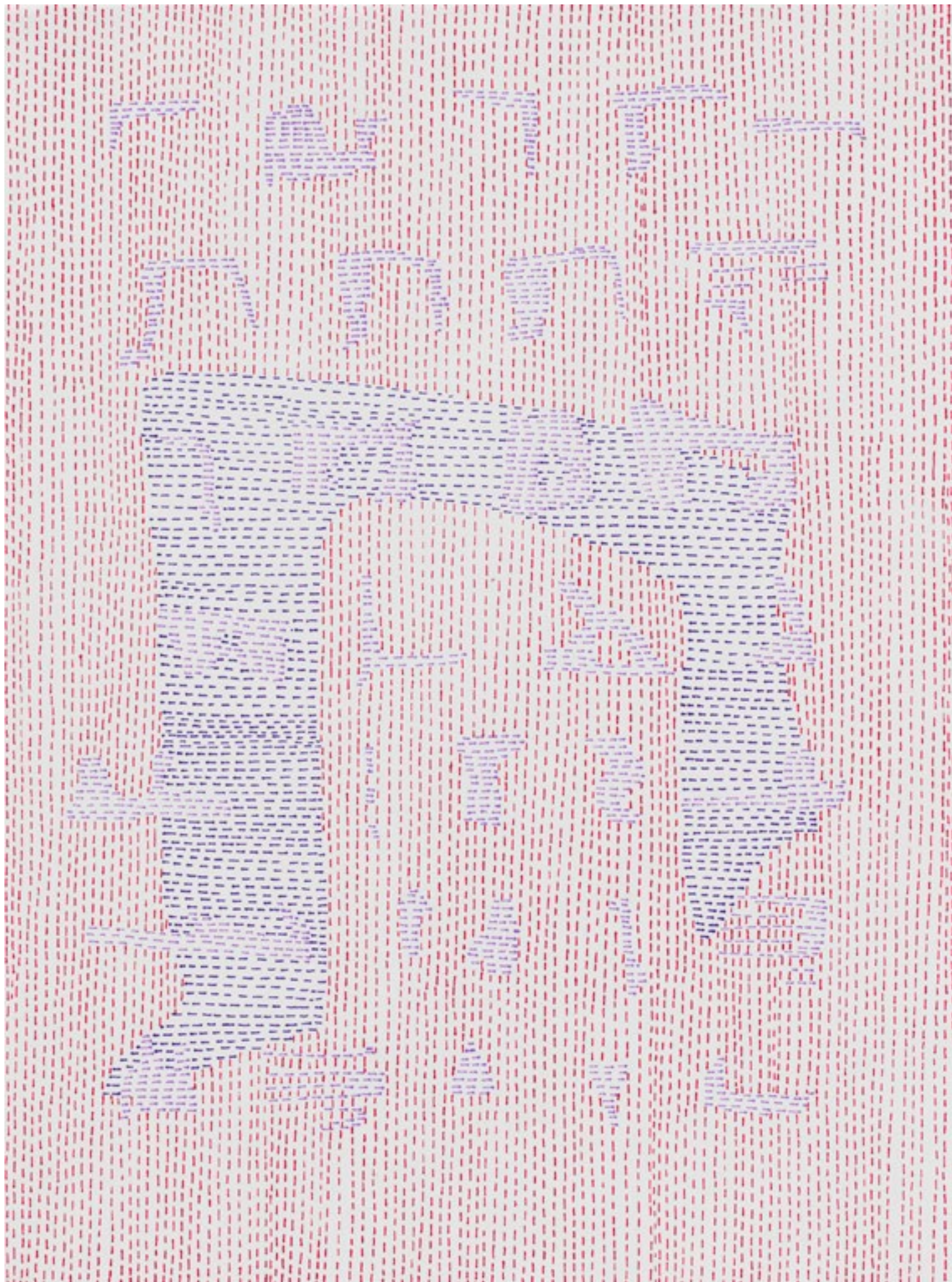
Bottom Left Artwork: Fol 35b Mohammed’s Paradise, Miniature from ‘The History of Mohammed’, 1030 (gouache & gold on vellum), Persian School, (11th century) / Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France / © Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images

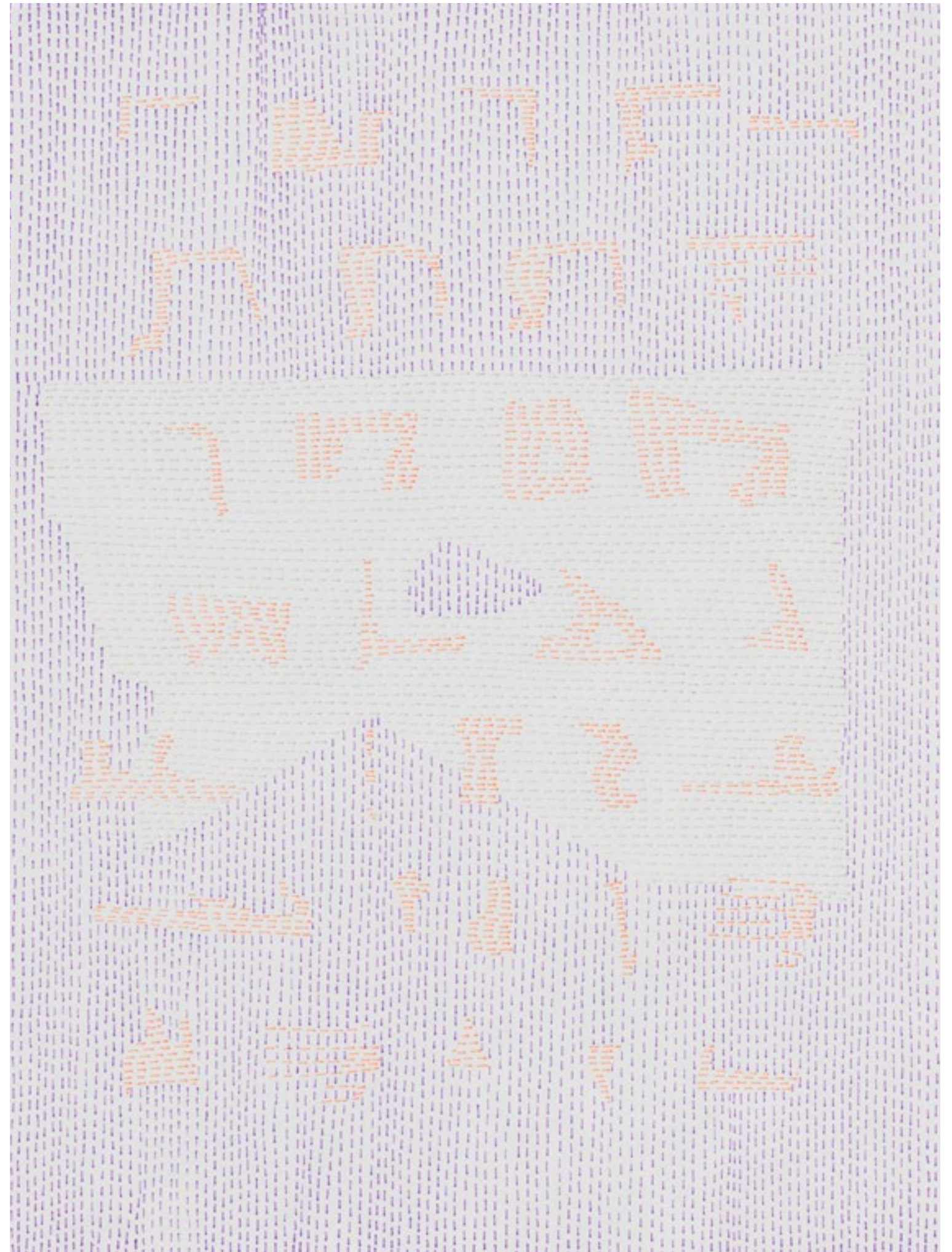
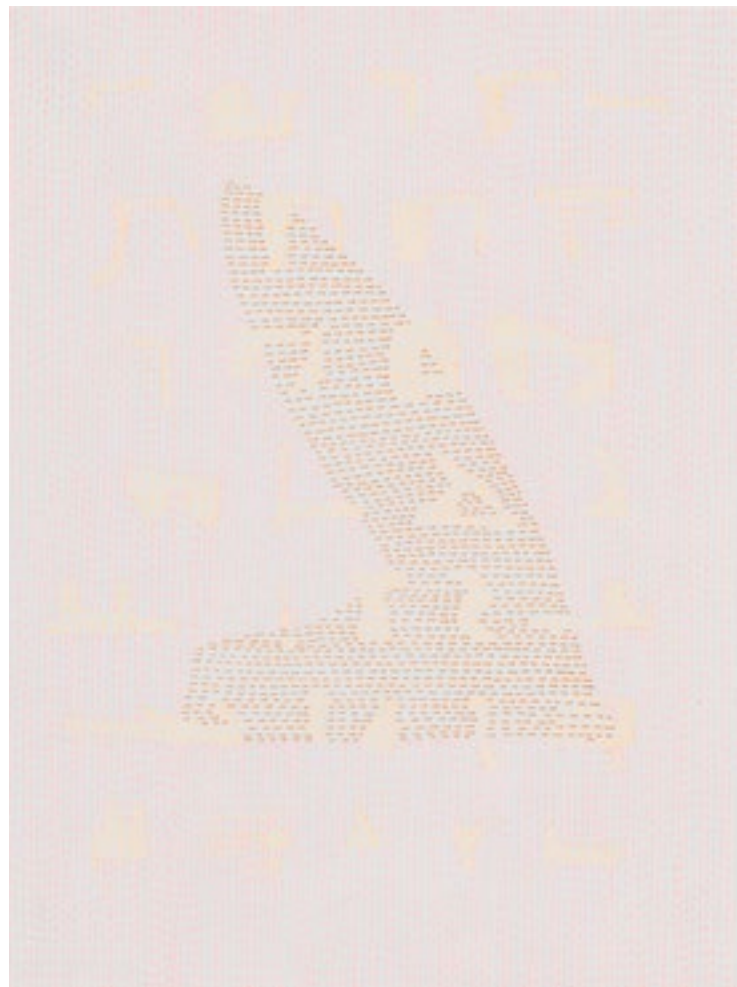
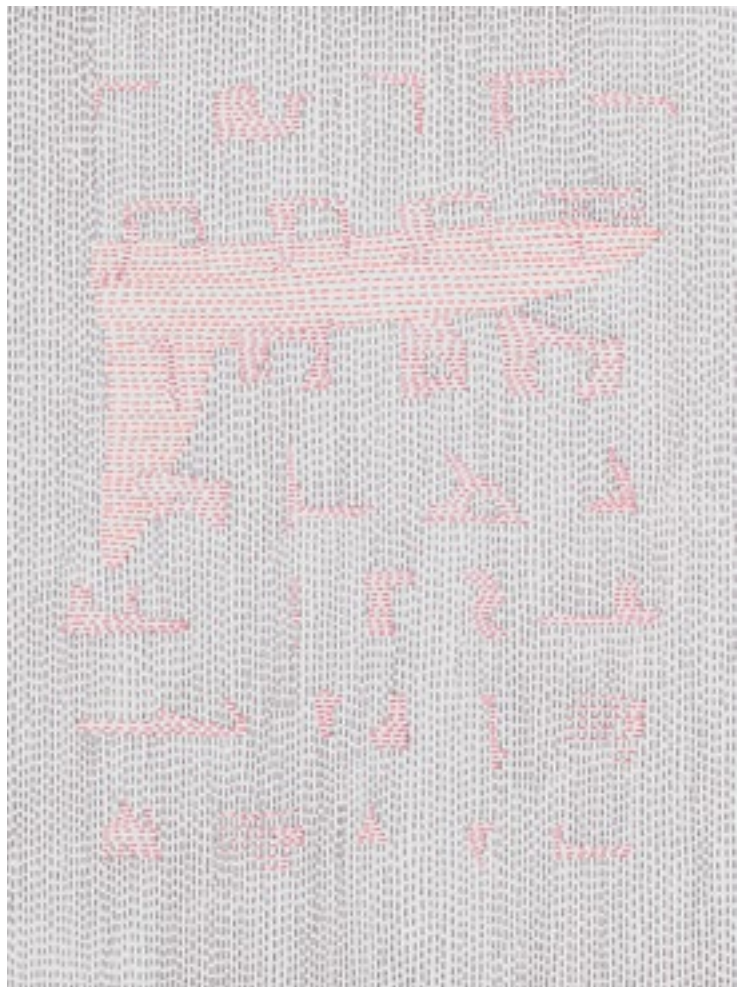
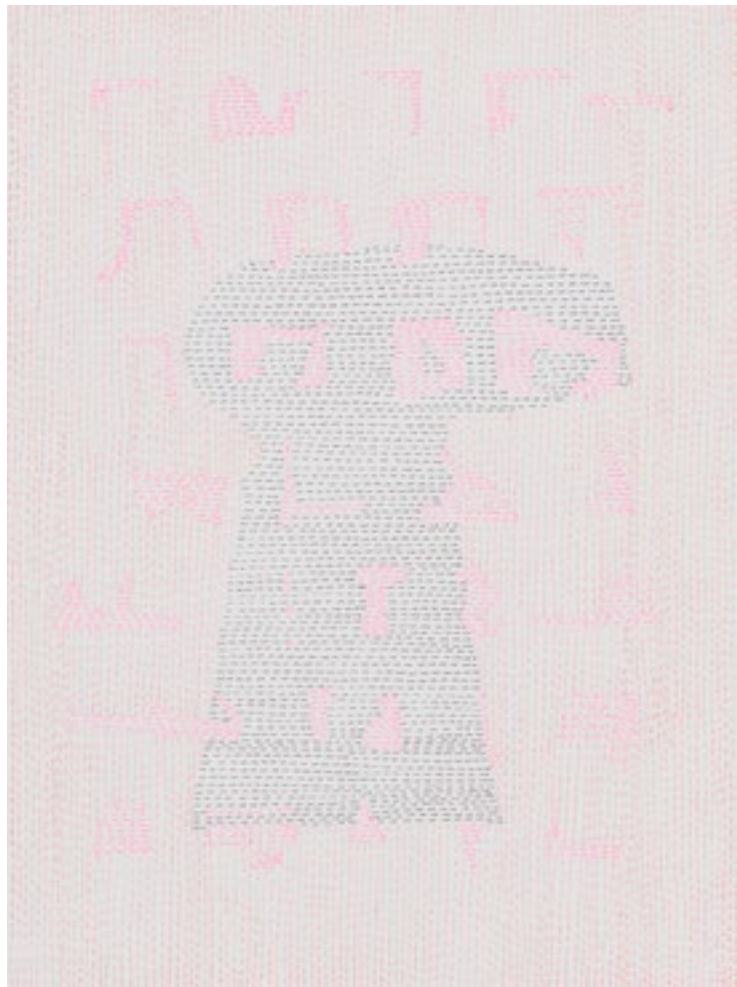
Top Right Artwork: Nadia Haji Omar, Deep Sea Topography, 2015, Acrylic, dye, and ink on canvas, 18 x 14 inches (45.72 x 35.56 cm), photo credit: Jeffrey Sturges

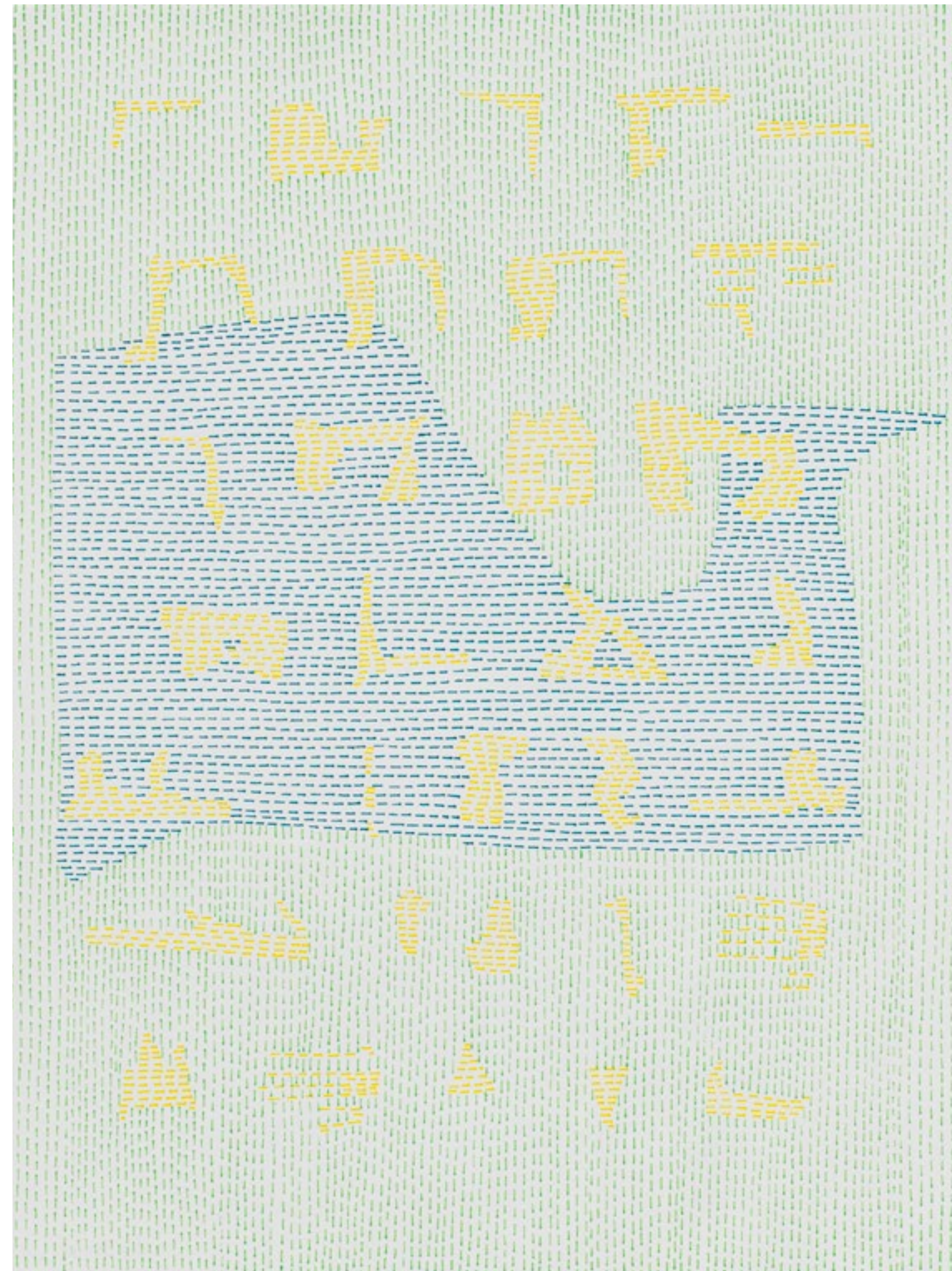
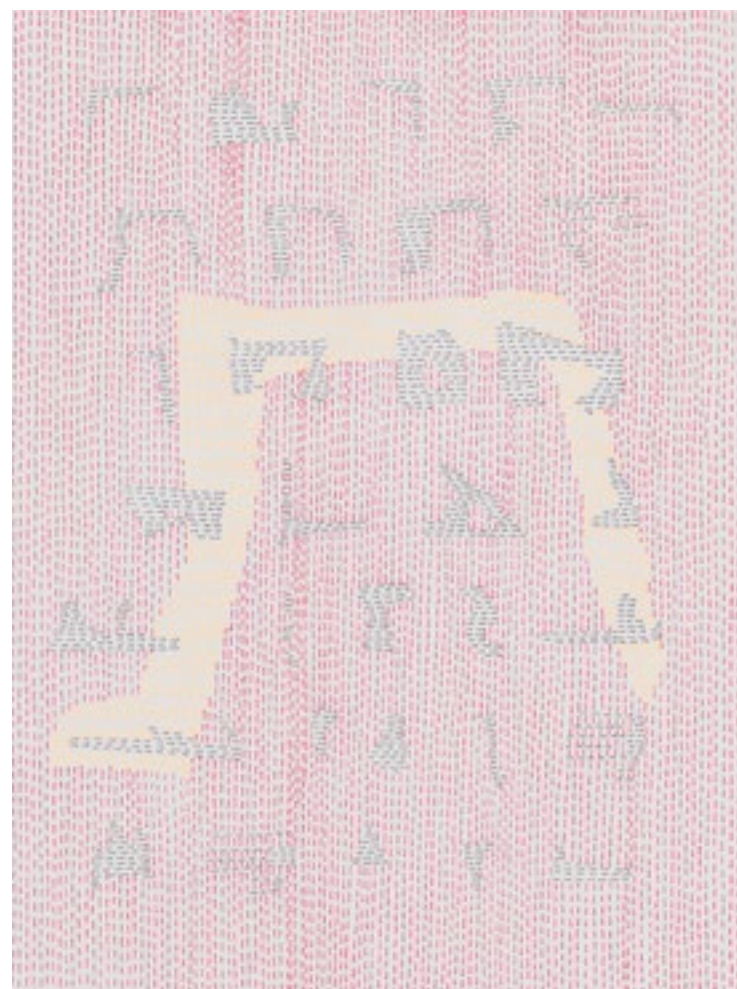
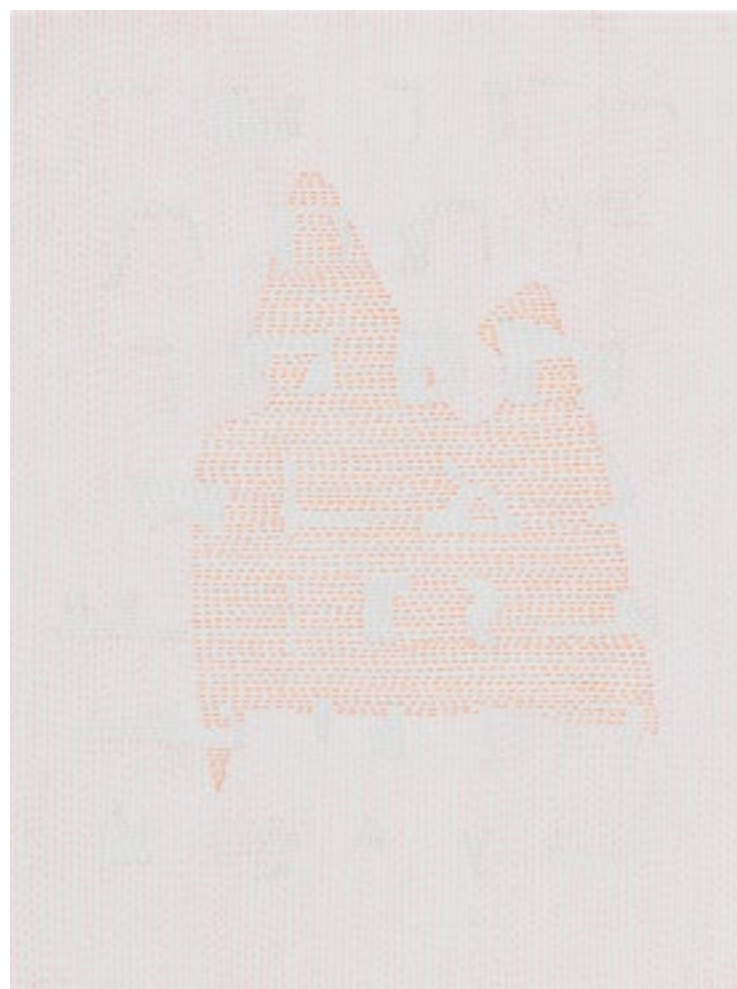
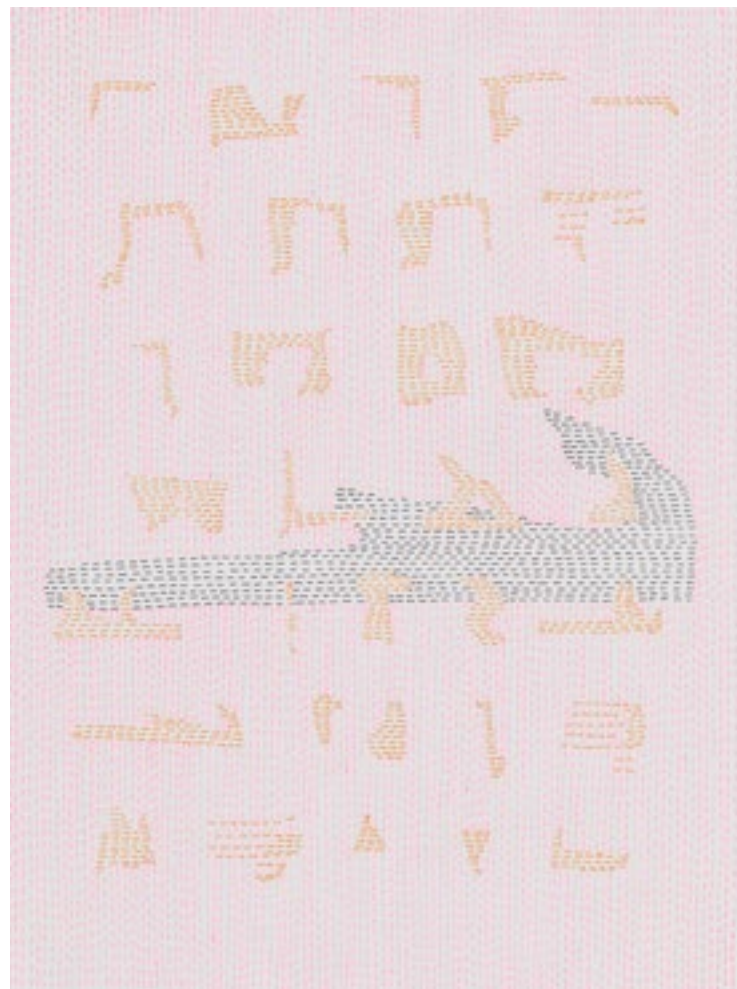
# NATURAL SELECTION

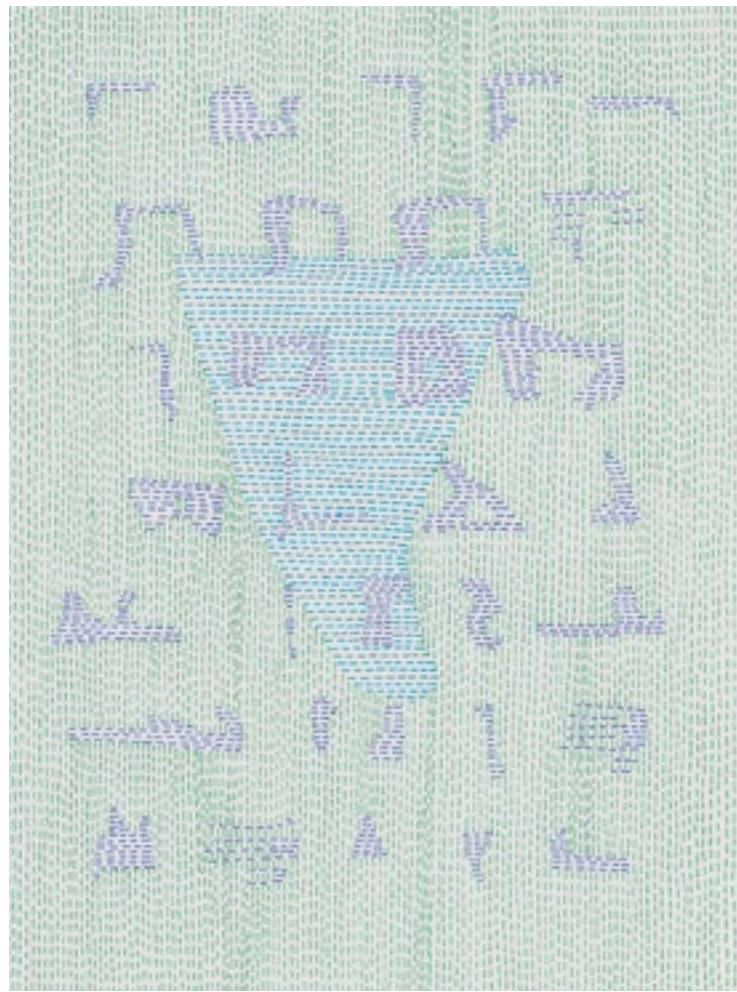
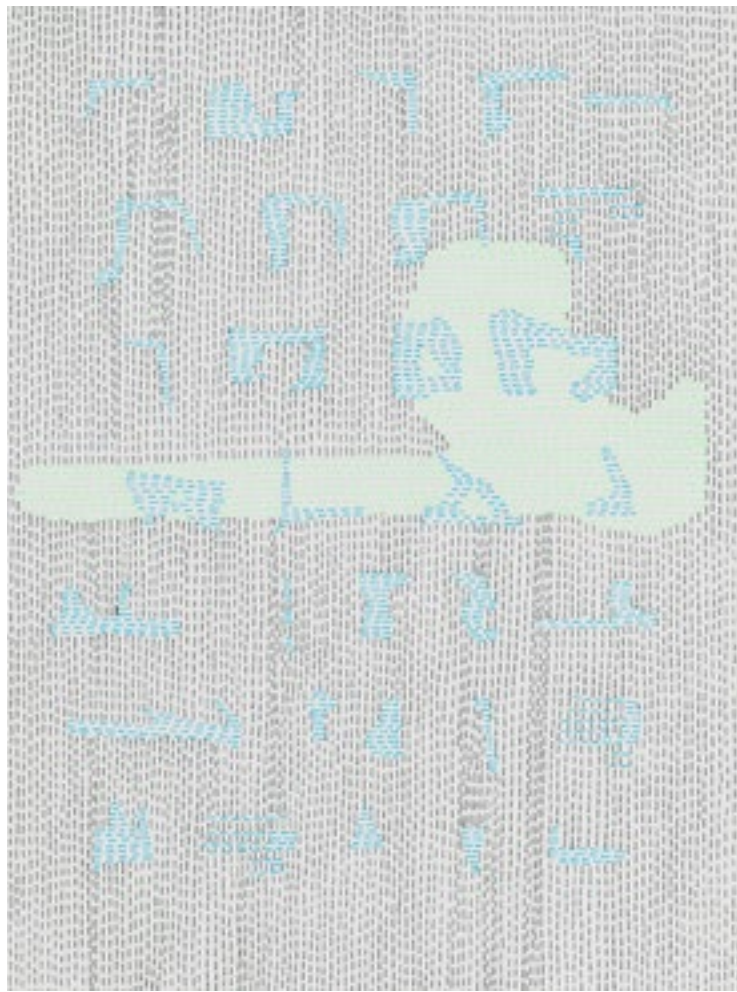
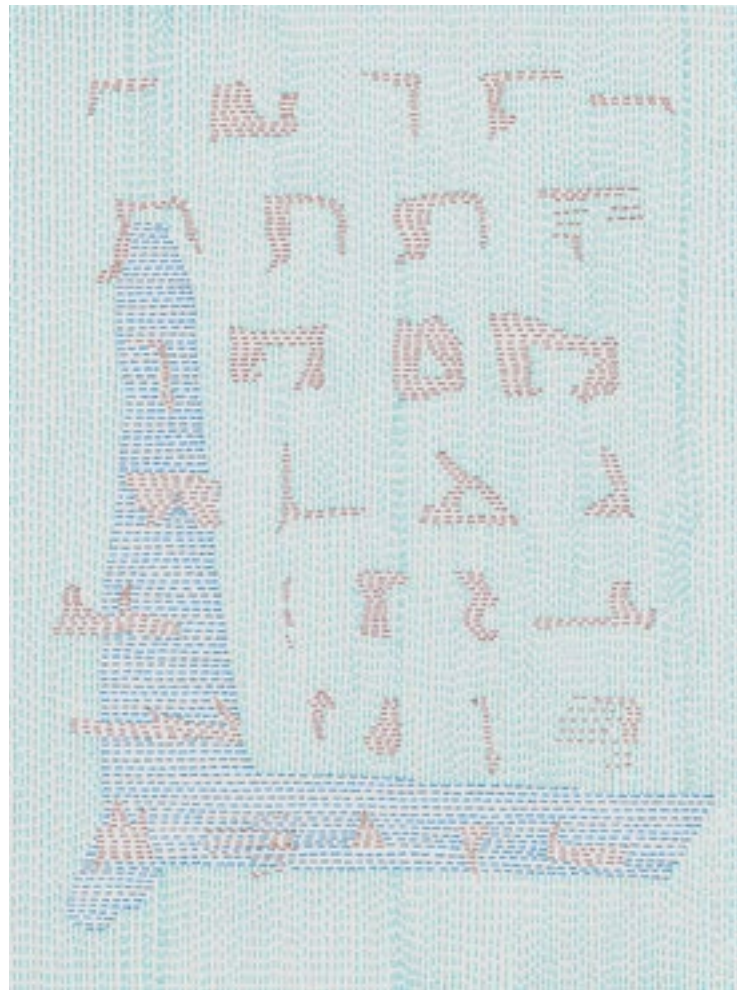


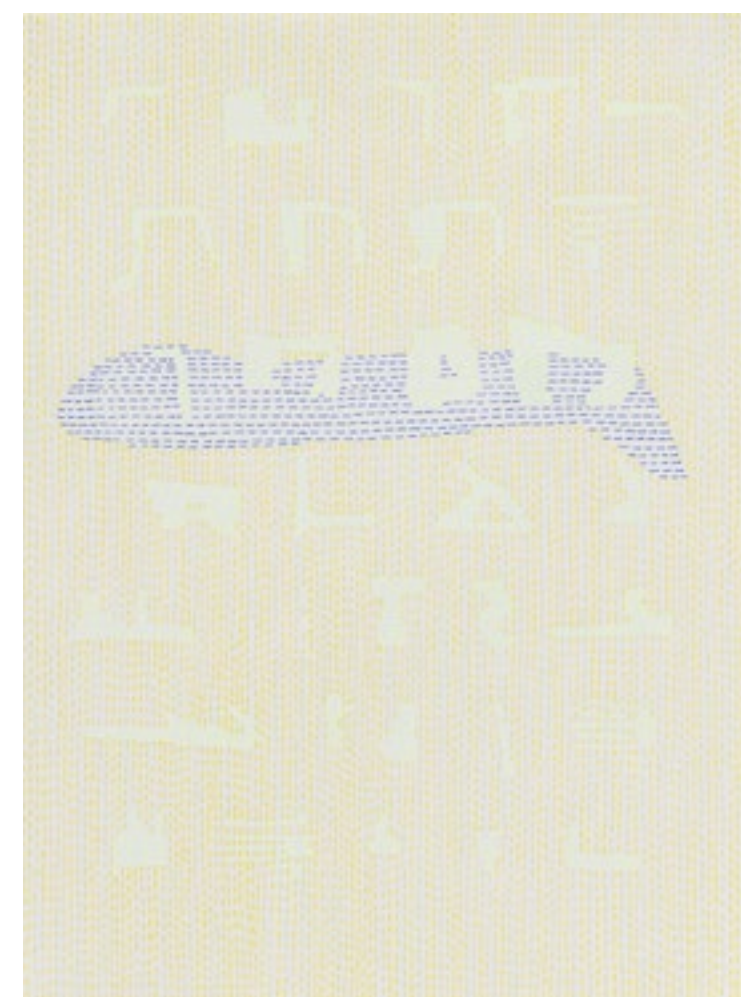
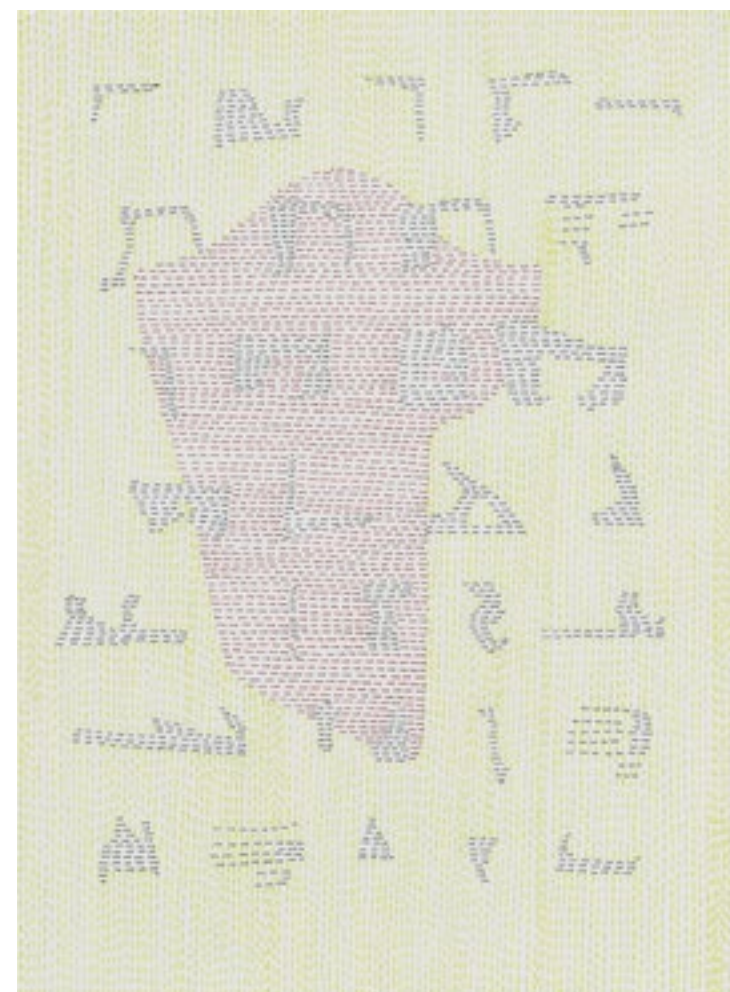
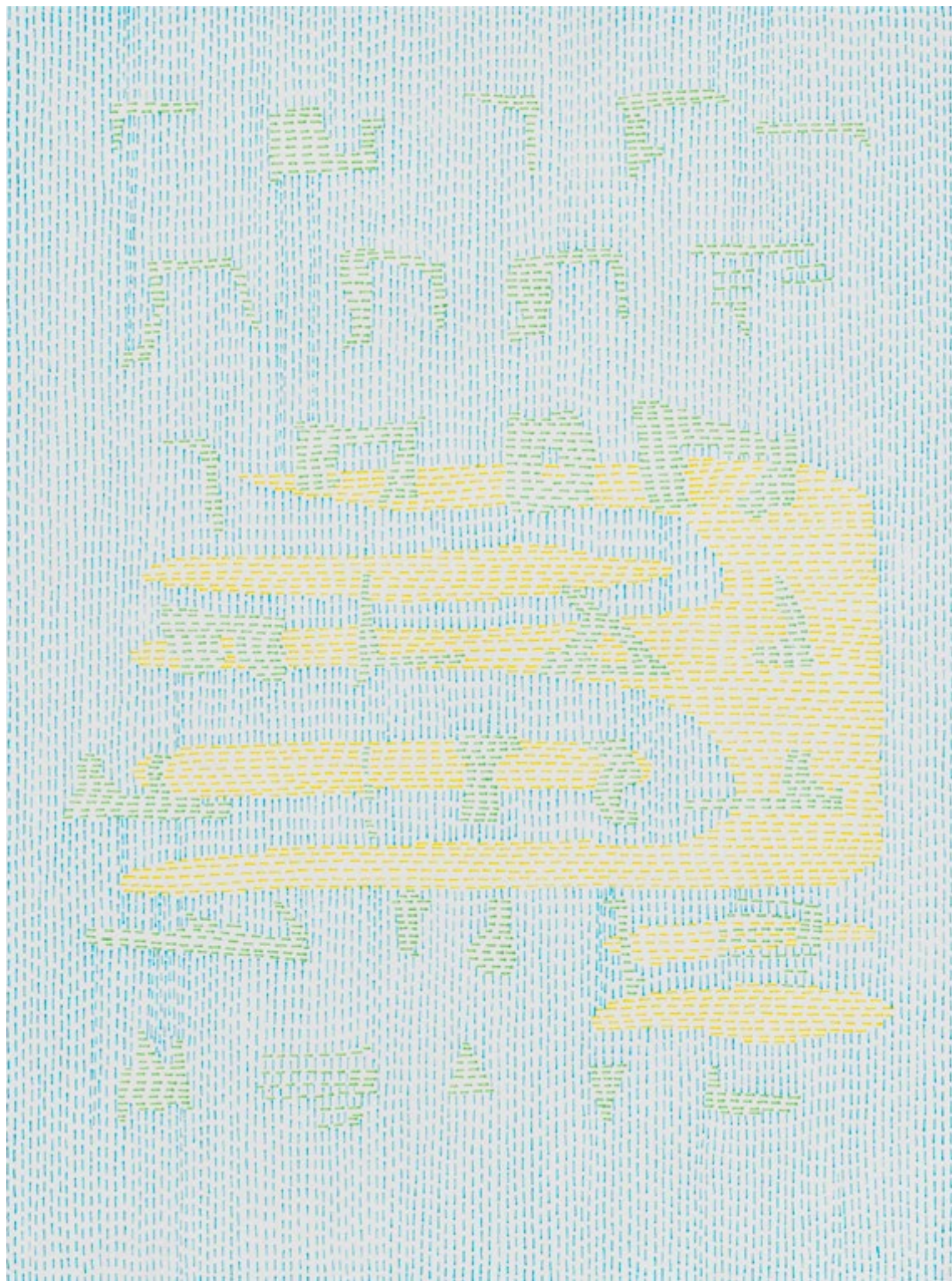


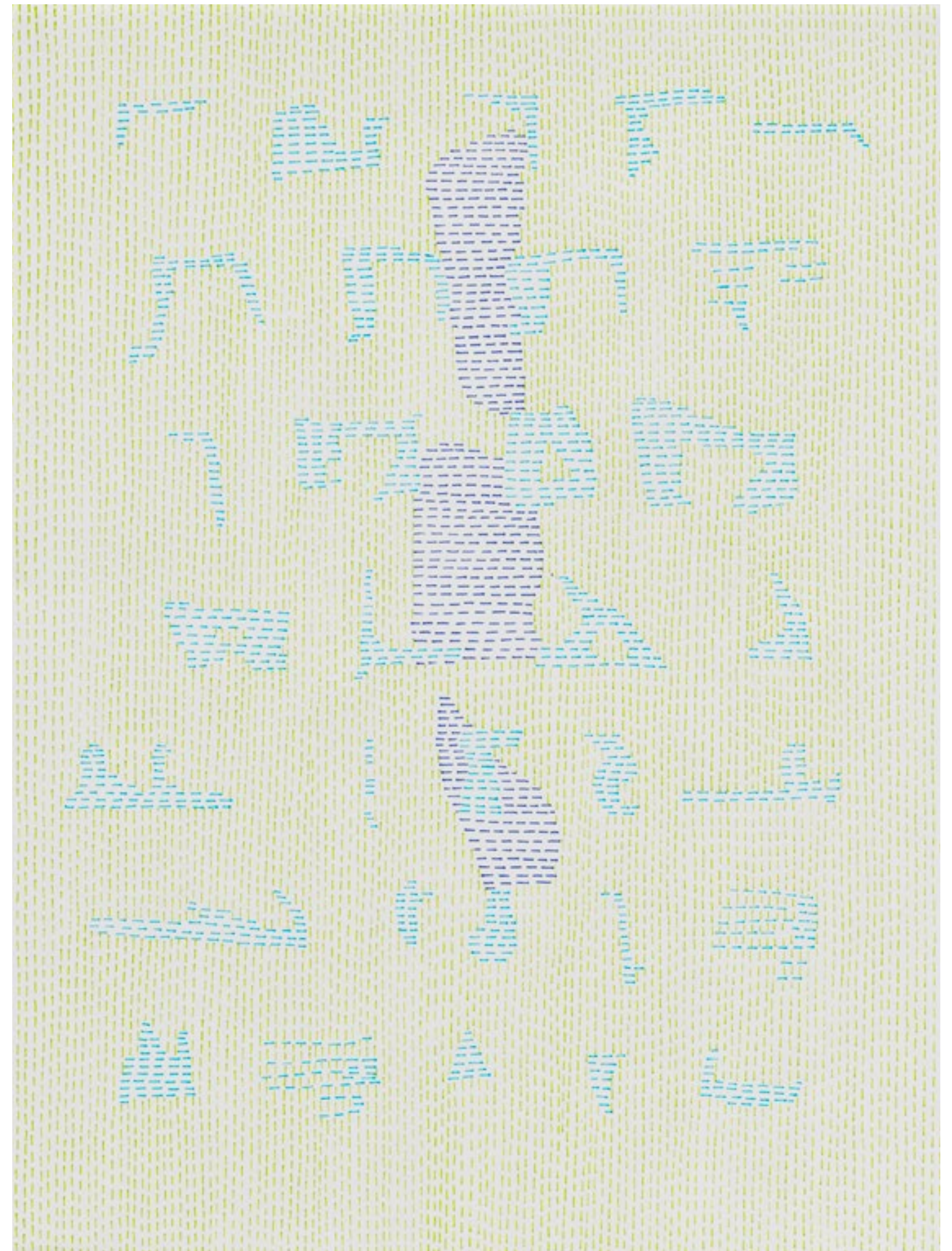
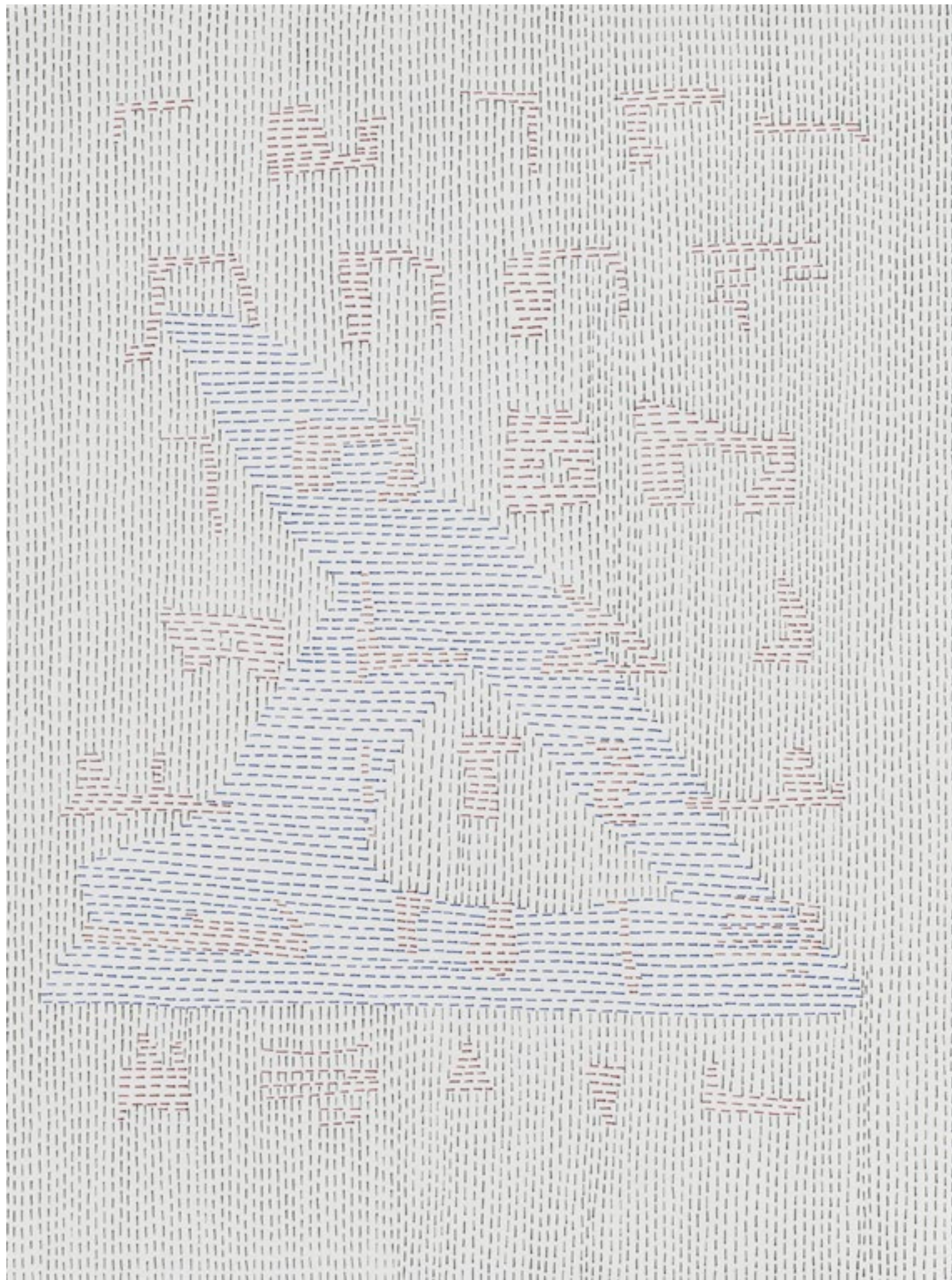












NADIA HAJI OMAR  
Born 1985, Melbourne, Australia  
Lives and works in Warren, RI

#### EDUCATION

2014 Master of Fine Arts, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY  
2007 Bachelor of Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2020 *Ascension*, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY, September 15–October 17, 2020  
2019 *Ascension and Natural Selection*, curated by Mary Birmingham, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ  
2018 *On the Wall: Nadia Haji Omar*, curated by Jamilee Lacy, Providence College Galleries, Providence, RI  
*Nadia Haji Omar: Ellipsis*, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY  
2016 *Nadia Haji Omar*, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY  
2015 *I Dream of Water*, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka  
*Easy Life of the Gods*, Achter de Boom, New York, NY  
2013 *It's Not Polite*, XVA Gallery, Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood, Dubai, UAE  
2010 *you animal*, The Warehouse Project, Colombo, Sri Lanka  
2008 *Sri Lanka: Creative Media in a Time of Conflict*, Avery Center for the Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY  
2007 *The Convalescent*, Thesis Show, Fisher Studio Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019 *The Edge Effect: International Open Juried Exhibition*, juried by Akili Tommasino, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY  
*Dot Conference*, curated by Kristen Lamb, The Yard, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, traveled to Room 83 Spring, Watertown, MA  
*Manifold*, curated by Melanie Kress, Bronx Art Space, Bronx, New York  
2018 *Smooth Muscle*, curated by Dominique Palladino, Sophie Parker, and KC Tidemand, Whitehaus, Oakland, CA  
2017 *Mis*, curated by Donna Troy Cleary, 184 Project Space, Brooklyn, NY  
*Drawer*, curated by Corydon Cowansage, Deli Gallery, Queens, NY  
2016 *[Old / New] Psychedelic Providence*, curated by Jamilee Lacy and sponsored by Providence College Galleries, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Chicago, IL  
2015 *Nadia Haji Omar / Bayne Peterson*, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY  
*Plus One*, curated by Melanie Kress, Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY  
*invisible visible*, curated by Dongsuk Lee and Adam Tyson, AD\*DS, Brooklyn, NY  
*Cello Conversations with Contemporary Sri Lankan Art*, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka  
*You Don't Bring Me Flowers*, curated by Quang Bao, 68 Projects, Galerie Kornfeld, Berlin, Germany  
2014 *Environs*, curated by Donna Troy Cleary, 184 Project Space, Brooklyn, NY  
*All together now!*, Breese Little Gallery, London, UK  
*Site/Displace*, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY  
*Emergency*, Breese Little Gallery, London, UK  
*The Last Brucennial*, Bruce High Quality Foundation, New York, NY  
*Emrupt*, Leigh Wen Fine Art, New York, NY  
*HOME FRONT*, second-year MFA exhibition, curated by Jovana Stokic, School of Visual Arts Gallery (Chelsea), New York, NY  
2013 *Abstract Intentions*, School of Visual Arts Gallery (E. 23rd Street), New York, NY  
*Influencers*, TRACX Gallery Space, New York, NY  
2011 *SRI LANKAN / CONTEMPORARY / FEMALE*, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka  
2007 *Small Works*, Soho 20 Gallery, New York, NY  
2005 *Bless our Cotton Socks*, City and Guilds of London Art School, St. Anselm's Church, London, UK

#### SELECTED PRESS

2018 Fricchione, Melanie, and Nadia Haji Omar, "Nadia Haji Omar and the Fluidity of Language," *Providence College Galleries Blog*, July 17, [pcgalleries.providence.edu/2018/07/17/nadia-haji-omar-and-the-fluidity-of-language/](http://pcgalleries.providence.edu/2018/07/17/nadia-haji-omar-and-the-fluidity-of-language/)  
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Saltz, Jerry, "See Nadia Haji Omar," "To Do: May 16-30," *New York Magazine*, May 14-27, p. 95  
Saltz, Jerry, "Three-Sentence Reviews: John Bradford's Electricity, David Hockney's Ephemeral Color, and 11 More Shows: Nadia Haji Omar," April 30, [vulture.com/2018/04/three-sentence-reviews-bradford-hockney-and-11-more.html](http://vulture.com/2018/04/three-sentence-reviews-bradford-hockney-and-11-more.html)  
Wolfe, Kristin L., "Spotlight New England," *School of Visual Arts Magazine*, Spring 2018, p. 38-9, [issuu.com/svavisualartsjournal/docs/vajournal-sp18-issuu](http://svavisualartsjournal/docs/vajournal-sp18-issuu)  
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2017 Willis, Dave, "MIS: A Group Show Curated by Donna Cleary at 184 Project Space," *Medium*, Oct. 27, [medium.com/@wileydavewillis/mis-a-group-show-curated-by-donna-cleary-at-184-project-space-7e64acf53ba3](http://medium.com/@wileydavewillis/mis-a-group-show-curated-by-donna-cleary-at-184-project-space-7e64acf53ba3)  
2016 Loudon, Sharon, "Art fairs: Satellite and NADA, 2016," *Two Coats of Paint*, Dec. 4, [twocoatsofpaint.com/2016/12/14459.html](http://twocoatsofpaint.com/2016/12/14459.html)  
Goldstein, Andrew. M., "The 27 Best Paintings of NADA Miami Beach 2016," *Artspace*, Dec. 2, [artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/art-fairs/the-best-paintings-of-nada-miami-beach-2016-54428#](http://artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/art-fairs/the-best-paintings-of-nada-miami-beach-2016-54428#)  
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2015 Simmons, William J., "Labor Day Shout Outs: Selected Shows Opening in New York," *Art Critical*, Sept. 7, [artcritical.com/2015/09/07/labor-day-shout-outs/](http://artcritical.com/2015/09/07/labor-day-shout-outs/)  
"Unconventional Beauty at Saskia Fernando," *Time Out, Sri Lanka*, Sept. 6  
2014 Wagner, Andrew, Kirsch, Corinna, and Whitney Kimball, "This Week's Must-See Art Events: Death to Normcore," *Art F City*, July 21, [artfcity.com/2014/07/21/this-weeks-must-see-art-events-6/](http://artfcity.com/2014/07/21/this-weeks-must-see-art-events-6/)  
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2013 "Abstract Intentions," School of Visual Arts Exhibitions and Events, June 6, [sva.edu/events/events-exhibitions/abstract-intentions](http://sva.edu/events/events-exhibitions/abstract-intentions)  
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Wolff, Rachel, "Artists You Need to Know Now (and Where to Find Them)," *Conde Nast Traveler Magazine*, March 18, [cntraveler.com/stories/2013-03-18/new-asian-art-artists-galleries](http://cntraveler.com/stories/2013-03-18/new-asian-art-artists-galleries)  
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2011 "Sri Lankan, Contemporary, Female," *Daily Mirror*, June  
2010 Samarasinghe, Sumaya, "you animal!," *The Sunday Leader*, Feb. [thesundayleader.lk/2010/05/02/you-animal/](http://thesundayleader.lk/2010/05/02/you-animal/)  
2008 Davis, Eleanor, "Bard College Students Present Symposium 'Sri Lanka: Creative Media in a Time of Conflict,'" July 11, [bard.edu/news/releases/pr/fstory.php?id=1581](http://bard.edu/news/releases/pr/fstory.php?id=1581)

#### PUBLICATIONS

2020 Birmingham, Mary, Nadia Haji Omar, and Kristen Lorello, *Nadia Haji Omar: Ascension / Natural Selection*, exhibition catalogue, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ, September 27, 2019–February 9, 2020, and Kristen Lorello, New York, NY (New York, NY: Kristen Lorello)  
2018 Haji Omar, Nadia, and Jamilee Lacy, *Nadia Haji Omar: On the Wall*, exhibition brochure, Providence College Galleries, Providence, Rhode Island, April 26–July 28  
Haji Omar, Nadia, and Kristen Lorello, *Nadia Haji Omar: Ellipsis*, exhibition booklet, Kristen Lorello, New York, NY, April 5–May 25 (New York, NY: Kristen Lorello)  
2017 *Elastic Magazine*, Issue 2: Doubles

#### AWARDS

2013–14 MFA Fine Arts Assistantship Award, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY  
2007 The Jane Fromm Yacenda Scholarship in the Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

#### COLLECTIONS

Capital Group, Los Angeles, CA  
Hallmark Art Collection, Kansas City, MO  
Morgan Group Development, LLC  
Providence College Galleries and Collections, Providence, RI  
RISD Museum, Providence, RI  
Soho House Art Collection

Published on the occasion of the exhibition  
NADIA HAJI OMAR: *Ascension and Natural Selection*  
Curated by Mary Birmingham  
Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ  
September 27, 2019–February 9, 2020

and

NADIA HAJI OMAR: *Ascension*  
Kristen Lorello, New York, NY  
September 15–October 17, 2020

Essay by Mary Birmingham, Curator,  
Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ

Designed by Mona Studio  
Edited by Nadia Haji Omar, Kristen Lorello  
All artworks by Nadia Haji Omar  
Photography of individual artworks: Jeffrey Sturges  
Photography of installation views: Etienne Frossard

With thanks to:  
Mary Birmingham, Melanie Cohn, Kimberly Fisher, Etienne Frossard,  
Wyn Kelley, Mona Studio, Bayne Peterson, Dale Peterson, Jeffrey Sturges,  
Visual Arts Center of New Jersey

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ISBN: 978-1-7346007-1-1



