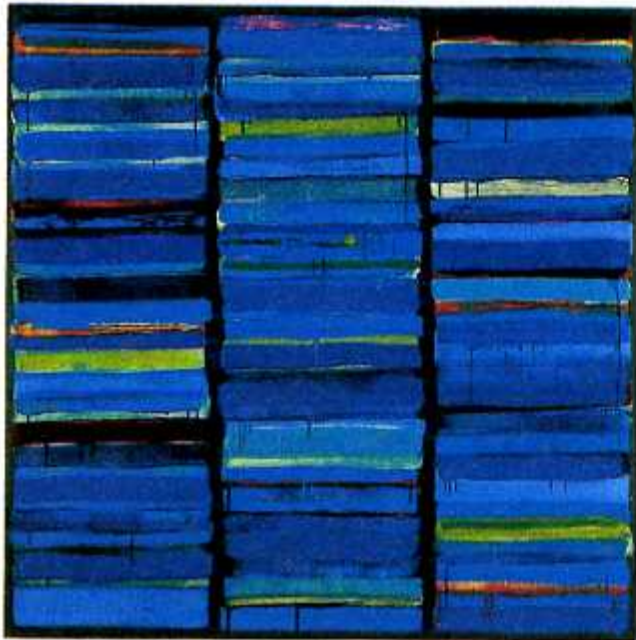


Material Witness: Silken Surfaces in Wax



By Joanne Muttera

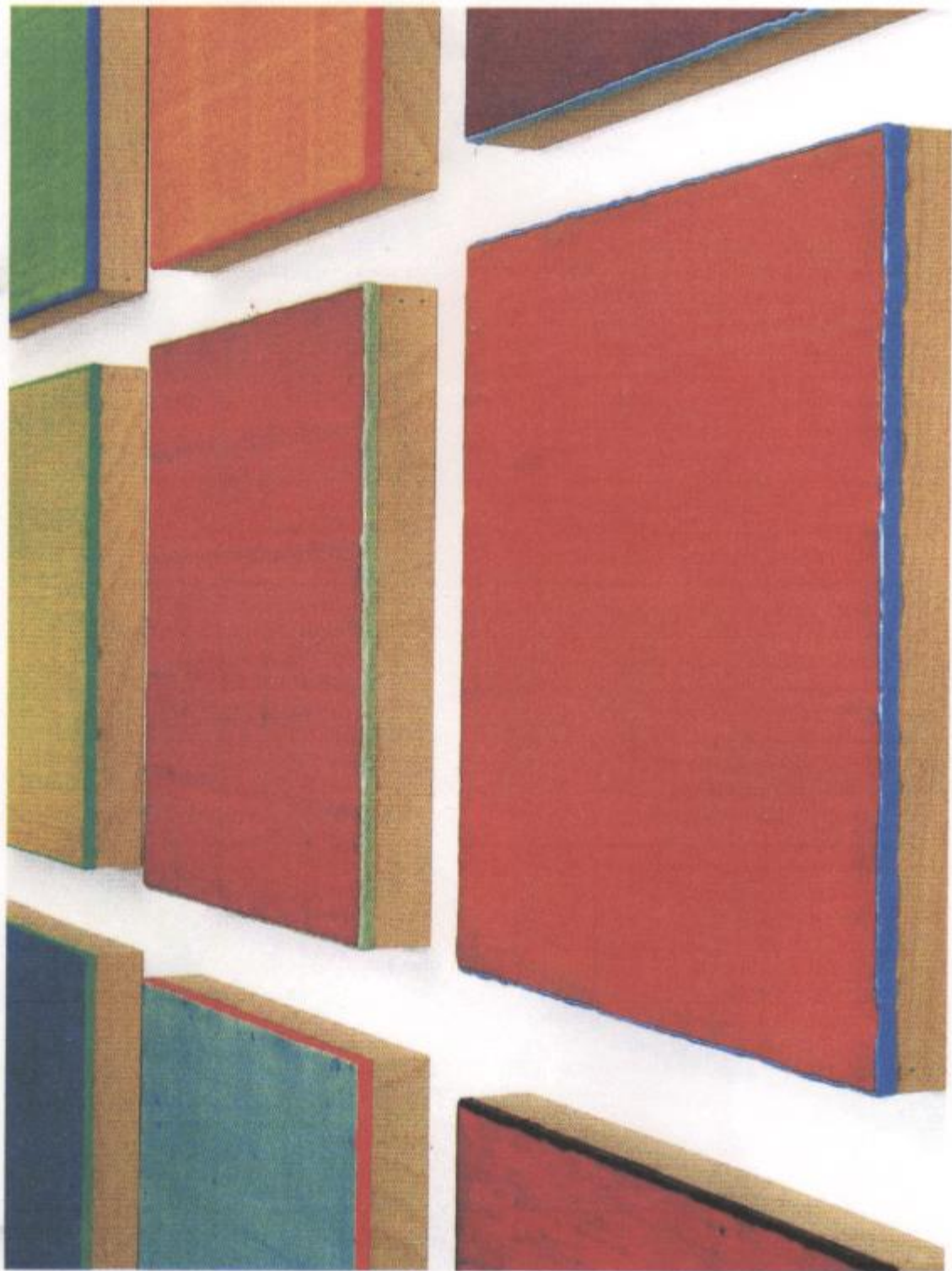
I have always loved silk taffeta. I'm particularly fond of the iridescent variety in which a color-crossed warp and weft create a shifting field whose hue is satisfyingly impossible to pin down. I say this as the weaver I was and the painter I am.

My current series of small paintings in encaustic, *Silk Road*, engages the same kind of chromatic mutability. To be honest, taffeta was not on my mind when I set to work in the studio. I was just thinking about how to develop color through layers on the surface of a painting rather than as hues mixed on the palette and applied. My goal was a series of reductive color fields that initially appeared monochromatic but in fact were the result of many layers of color, some as disparate as green and coral, which coalesced retinally. Applying

the layers at right angles using a stiff bristle brush created an echo of strokes in both directions, and I introduced intentionally grainy, doupi-
oni-like elements to intensify the trail of the brush—my way of maintaining a subtle grid within the field. I describe my work as “lush minimalism,” and these waxen color fields are as sensuous and as reductive as my work has yet been.

Once the first couple of paintings were completed, it became clear to me that the series had a distinct textile sensibility. I don't necessarily intend this quality in my work, but it almost always asserts itself. It's a familiar presence. Though there is nothing of the crisp hand and obstinate rustle of taffeta in these paintings, their mirage-like mien has the same pleasing inconsistency and for largely the same reasons, although it is the rustle of the eye over and through the surface that creates the chromatic shifts. Looking back, it was probably presumptuous to have titled the series after a trade route that spanned two continents, several centuries, and some 5000 miles, but since I was limning each painting with a hue designed to make the eye jump from painting to painting on a modest visual journey of its own, *Silk Road* prevailed.

My longtime reliance on the minimalist grid contributes to the warp-and-weftness of each painting. With its exquisite order, the grid gives me the freedom to work within its confines or to break free of its constraints. Whether strong or subtle, the vertical and horizontal—either as an organizing principle or as compositional elements—are evident in all my work. As an artist who comes from a textile family on my mother's side, I often wonder if it was my immersion in fabric early



ABOVE: JOANNE MATTERA *Silk Road* Studio view.

OPPOSITE: JOANNE MATTERA *Cielo (Uttar 269)* Encaustic on panel, 48" x 48", 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Arden Gallery, Boston.

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on that led me to the grid since, obviously, the right-angle crossing of threads is the structural heart of woven fabric. If I might slip onto the couch here for a moment, I'll recount a childhood memory: sitting on the floor unraveling a small square of taffeta with a straight pin so that it evolved into fringe and then devolved into two piles of threads carefully separated by color into crosswise and lengthwise units—and then trying to put them back together.

I am the great-granddaughter of Giulia Primavera, a weaver who lived and died in Ortona, Italy; the granddaughter of tailors who immigrated here; and the niece of a dressmaker and a lacemaker, Lena and Antonina Misci, my beloved unmarried aunts, who shared with me everything they brought from or learned in the Old Country. Under their tutelage, I learned to knit, crochet, embroider, sew, and weave. We even used *bisnonna* Giulia's domestic linens, a rustic bird's-eye damask, in the kitchen—though I didn't learn until I was older that these dishcloths and towels had been intended as Antonina's dowry.

I would also venture that the textile sensibility in my work is pronounced because my artmaking material is so, well, material. Encaustic paint—pigment suspended in a medium of beeswax and natural resin—is my primary medium. Wax would seem the antithesis of cloth, but because it is applied when molten, there is a fluidity that anyone working in fabric can understand. That fluidity is gone the moment the wax cools, of course; then it's anything but pliable. Wax will crack if it's stressed, a situation perfect for batik, but not so for painting. Encaustic also requires a rigid substrate (I use quarter-inch birch ply) rather than canvas. But you'll relate to the materiality of wax in these terms: brilliance, hand, liquidity, luminosity, sensuousness, translucence.

When cooled and hardened, the wax surface remains relatively soft, so it invites all manner of textural incursions. While the paint in *Silk Road* is straightforwardly applied, in other series I have exploited the medium's invitation to abrade and incise it. Clay trimmers let me scrape the topmost layers in my *Uttar*

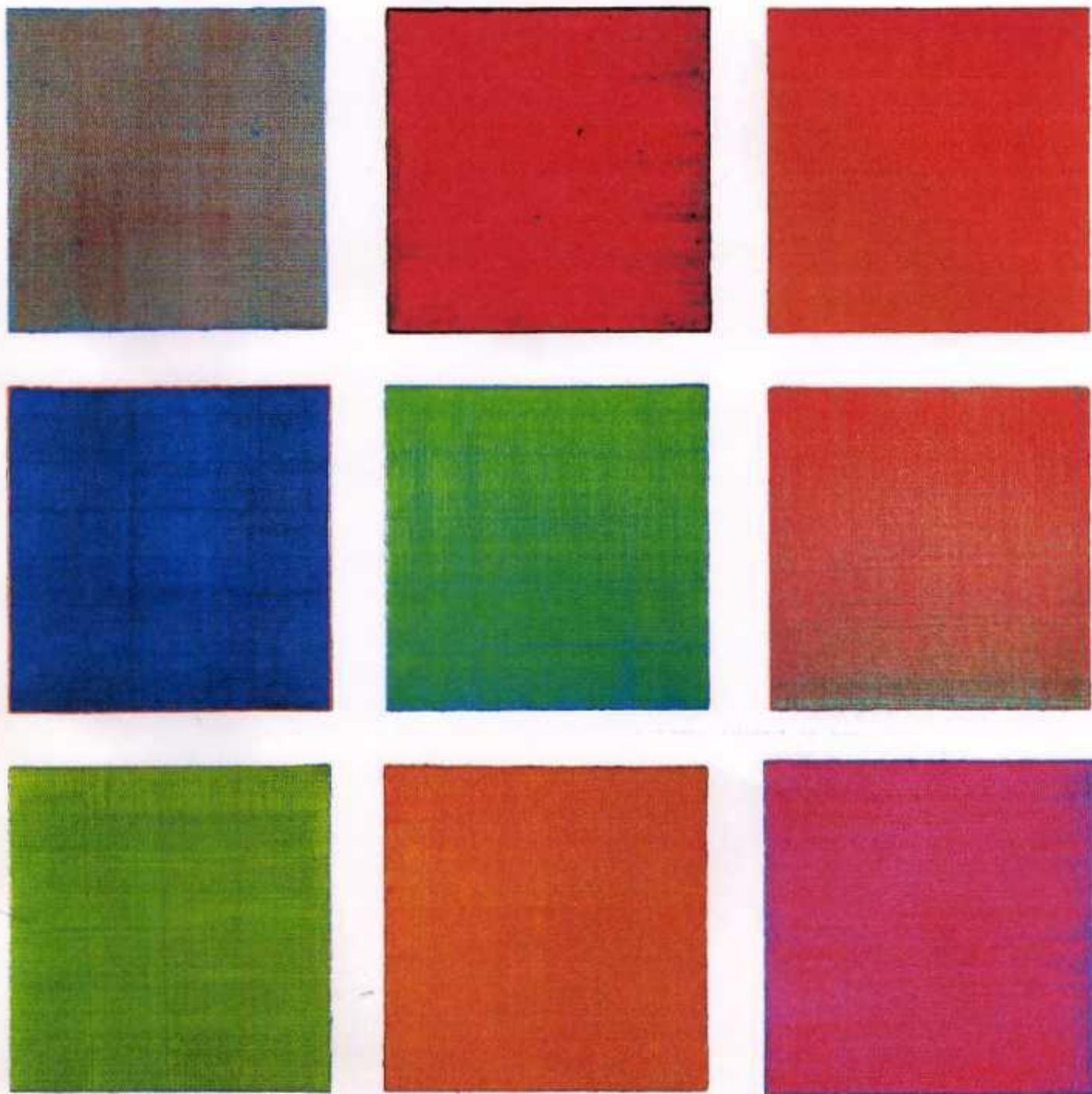
series, an ongoing opus begun late in 2000 that now numbers close to 300 small and mid-size paintings. Geometric abstraction is what I'm after—typically a square or rectangular element that is organized and repeated across the picture plane—but as I'm stacking and layering, scratching and rubbing, I am aware of how like patchwork each painting is in both surface appearance and visual construction. (Non-textile folks, by the way, make reference to the “doorways” or “checkerboards” they see in my work.)

In *Vicolo*, a much less extensive series, I have skived out channels that reveal underlying layers of color, rather like a miniature and formal chunk of terrain. Sometimes I refill the channels only to scrape them back; other times I add new edge-to-edge brush strokes to build up the surface. *Vicolo* is the most sculptural of my paintings, the most topographic, yet creating those horizontal ridges evokes the repetitive physicality of weaving.

I studied painting in art school and spent the first decade out shuttling between paint on canvas and weft on warp. I even wove large-scale constructions out of canvas—some of them my old stain paintings. Between the mid-'70s and early '80s, my creative expression was strictly textile: geometric-pattern tapestry and then reductive drawings that relied on the linearity of thread for their mark. When I moved to New York in 1983, the paint pulled me back and the wax pulled me in, and that's where I have been since. But a medium is just a medium. I also say that about the wax in relation to more conventional paint. The medium is simply the means to an end. In my case the end is a reductive esthetic achieved with sumptuous materials.

So I'm an artist whose connection to textiles is as straight as a dart, a painter with a palette of material influences.

—Joanne Mattera, an exhibitor in the 9th Biennale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne (1979), was editor of *Fiberarts* (1981-83) and a senior editor at *Women's Wear Daily* (1983-86). She has shown her paintings throughout the US and had a solo show, *Silk Road*, at the OK Harris Gallery, NYC, in May 2007. Visit her web site at www.joannemattera.com.



JOANNE MATTERA *Silk Road Series*

LEFT TO RIGHT: TOP ROW: *Silk Road 24, Silk Road 75, Silk Road 92*

MIDDLE ROW: *Silk Road 11, Silk Road 63, Silk Road 87*

BOTTOM ROW: *Silk Road 9, Silk Road 50, Silk Road 86*

Encaustic on wood panels, each 12" x 12", 2005-07.