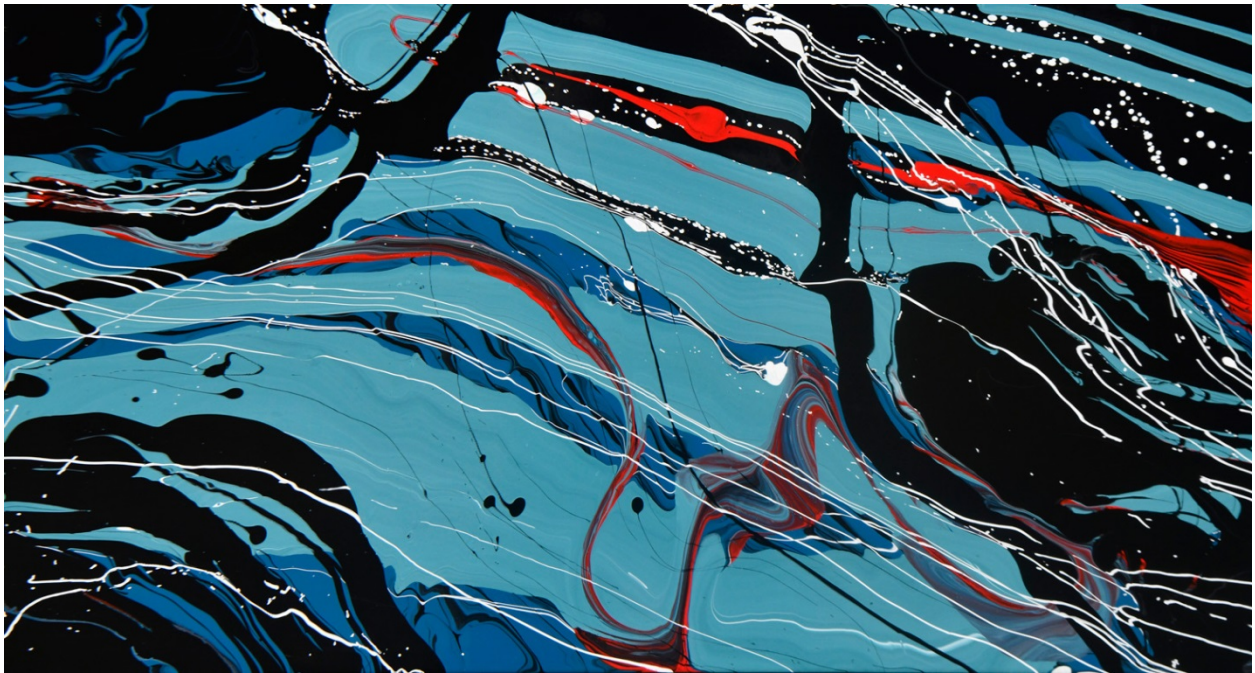


Music Works

Spelman Evans Downer

Creating a series of abstract paintings that result from responding to music is an on-going process that I have been experimenting with for the last 30 years. I usually embrace the improvisational aspects of making these works in-between bouts of creating intricate geographic and geologic painting compositions that have always been the mainstay of my painting practice. This music/visual art concept has been important in the history of Modern Art and its path to abstraction. I still remember studying art history at Stanford University and being shown the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky who was a pioneer in the development of an abstract art whose paintings were directly inspired by music. His many "Compositions" and "Improvisations" are landmarks of Modernism.



Big Summertime 2007

24" by 36"

enamel on panel

This Fall, 2020, I renewed my study of Kandinsky. As I re-investigated the arc of his painting history, I came across many references to his friend and colleague, Paul Klee. Then, I discovered a book entitled *Paul Klee Painting Music* by Hajo Duching. The main idea that I have learned from this book is that both Klee and Kandinsky realized the structure of a painting composition can be informed directly by music principles. Intervals, proportions, divisions, repetitions, rhythms, and especially colors, are among the numerous aspects that are common to both visual art and music.



Thinking About Paul Klee and Music in Visual Art

12" by 30"

art stix and oil on panel

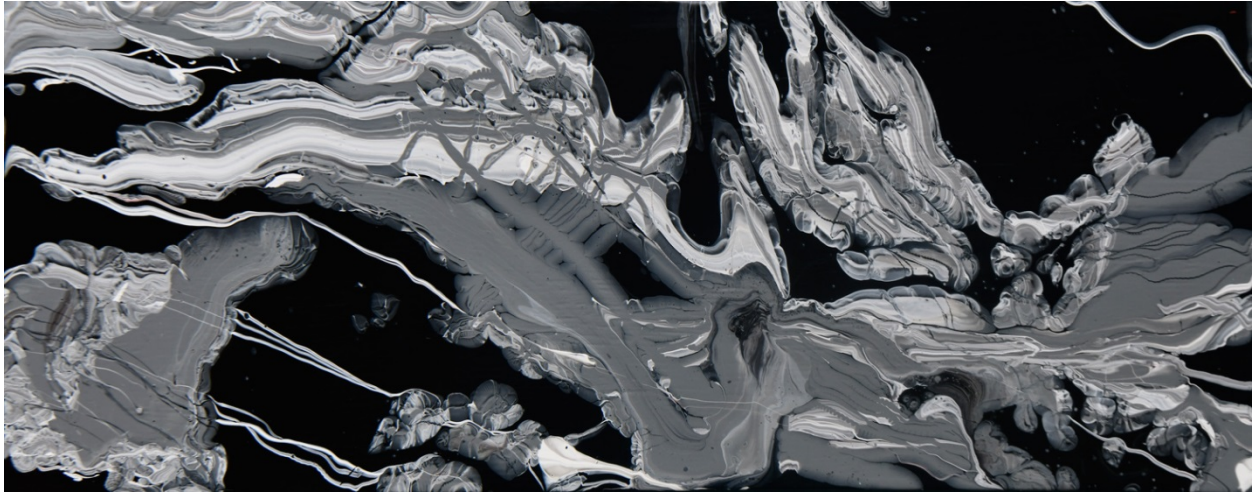
As I read, I confirmed that I had, in many senses, been using music all along, not necessarily as a direct subject for my art, but listening to music as a way to insure I painted in a rhythmic manner. I had always listened to music in my studio as I painted. Since I am, as much as possible, a full time visual artist, I have had the opportunity to hear vast amounts of music for years and years, be it vinyl LPs, eight track tapes, cassette tapes, reel to reel tapes, CDs, radio, satellite radio (I was an early adopter in 2001), and now internet platforms. You can most likely play any known recording on YouTube. In addition, you can very likely discover live recordings by your favorite artists. I recently switched to unlimited data on my smart phone and I now do not hesitate to play long hours of live music recordings from my phone into a high fidelity sound system that I built into my studio years ago.



Coltrane 2007 #3

24" by 24"

enamel on panel

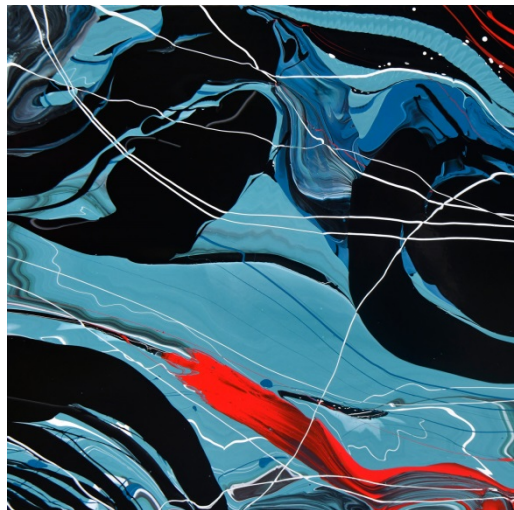


Mingus 2007

12" by 36"

enamel on panel

I always was aware of the usefulness of music as a practicing artist to keep the flow going. The rhythms of the brush strokes were always important to me. You can certainly see these brush stroke rhythms, I think, in all my paintings. It was the reason why I could not stop a painting just anytime to go somewhere; the rhythm would be broken. If you did stop and came back later, you would end up painting a slightly different rhythm/feel, and the newer work wouldn't quite match the first passages.



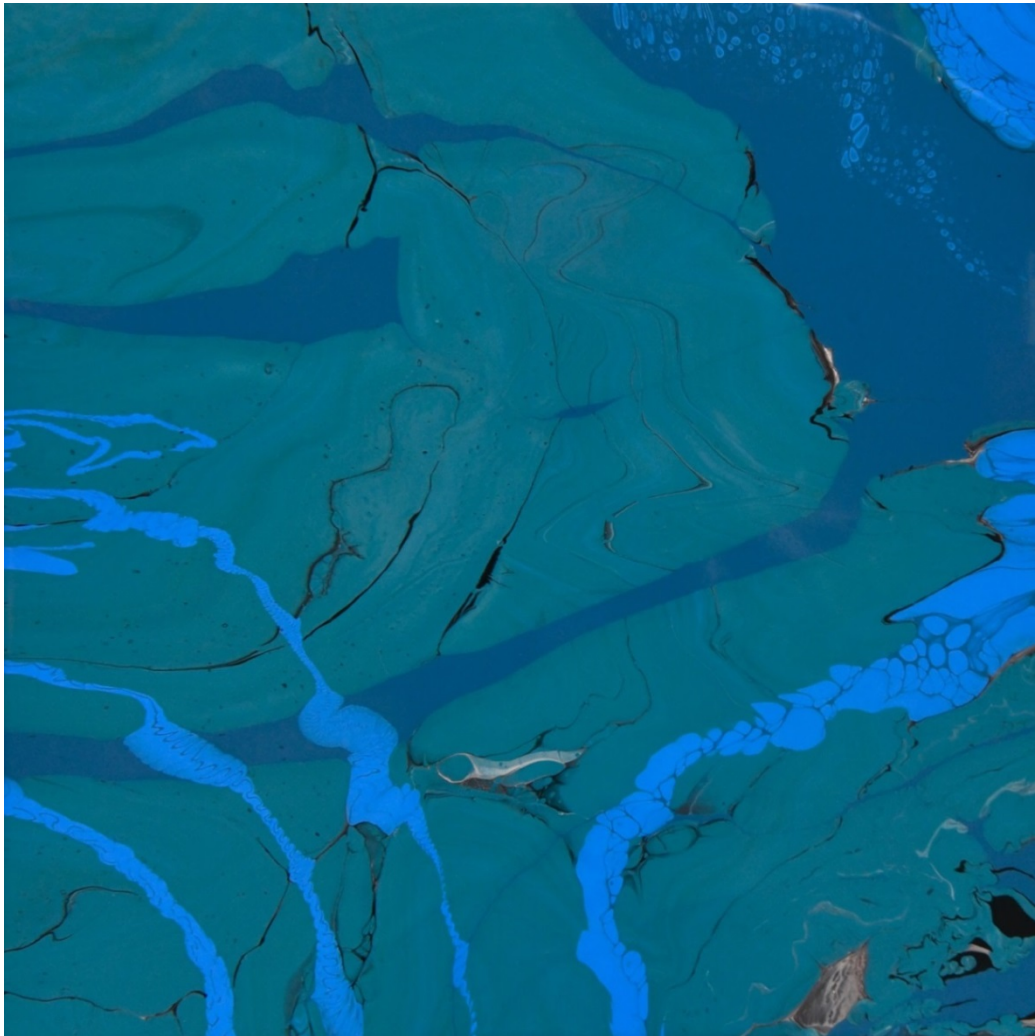
Chet Baker 2007 #3

24" by 24"

enamel on panel

As I became obsessed with being a full-time painter, I began to use the idea that music could inspire and give special forms directly to my visual creations. By the 1990s, when I was competing in the New York art world, I started making music studies. This work accelerated throughout the 2000s, especially when I was in my Alaska studio during the summertime. In 2007 I made paintings while listening to many of my favorite jazz recordings by the likes of John Coltrane, Charles Mingus and Chet Baker. That summer I did

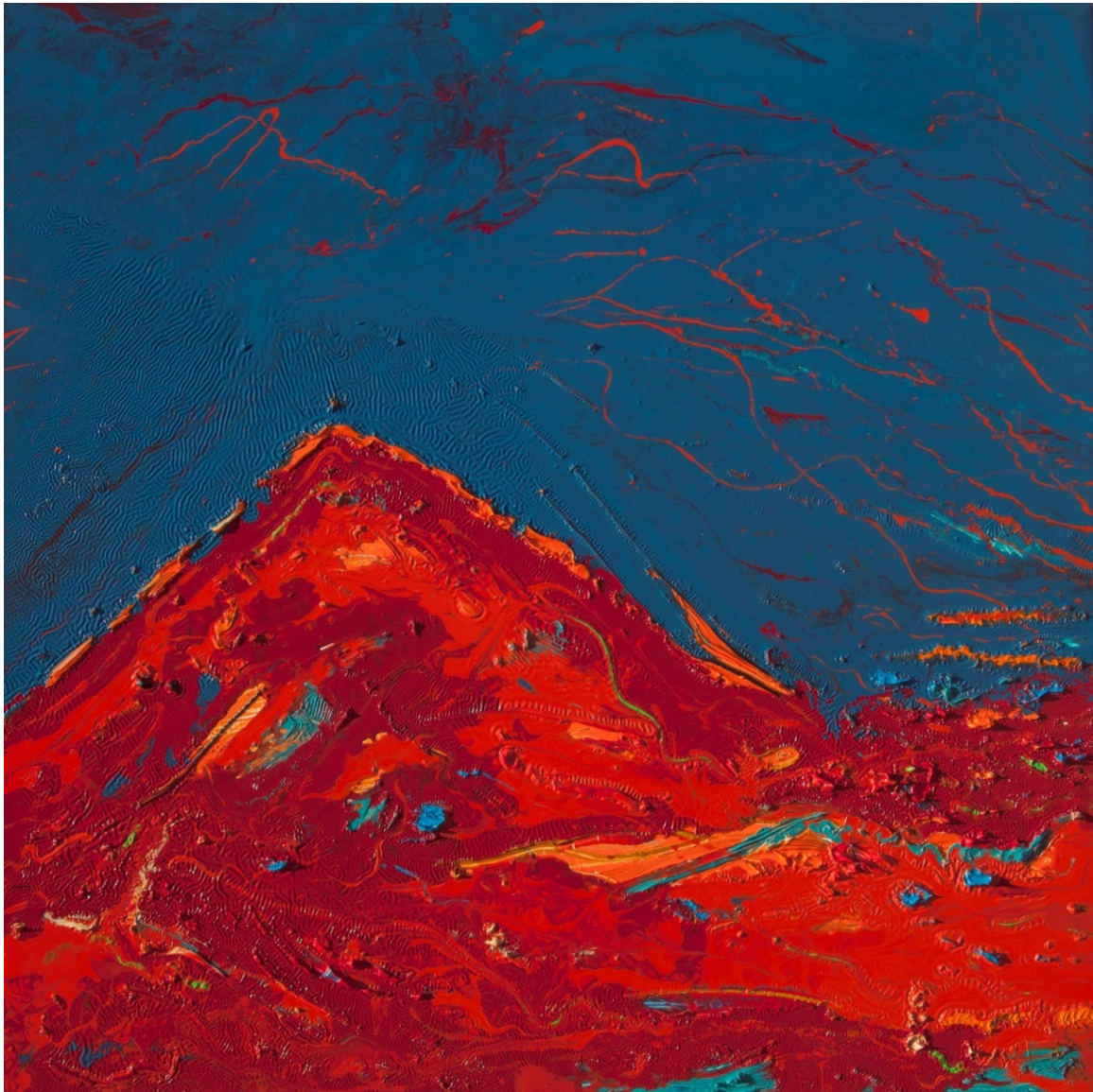
abstract compositions while listening to *Summertime*, a favorite tune written by George Gershwin and recorded by Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday among many others. In addition to my passion for jazz, a music whose very nature embraces improvisation, I often favor the jam bands and musicians that play extended spontaneous instrumental music.



For Eric Clapton, Live-Cream, Tales of Brave Ulysses, Dancing Through the Turquoise 24" by 24" enamel on panel

In 2008 I read the biography of Eric Clapton and resolved to get out my old Cream cassette tapes to see if I could somehow harness this music into something unique pictographically. "For Eric Clapton, Live Cream, Tales of Brave Ulysses, Dancing Through the Turquoise" is a turning point painting for me. The lyric about "dancing through the turquoise" had a special significance in that I live on a turquoise colored river; The Kenai. I named my place "Turquoise Bend" based on the color of the large river in the front yard. I love the semi-precious stone turquoise and also associate the stone and its color with the desert where I spend my winters in Joshua Tree. That summer I realized I could not only respond to the

rhythms and textures recorded in the sound of the music, but I could, in addition, channel words in the songs and reference geographic places mentioned in titles and lyrics. That same summer I also painted to the *Electric Ladyland* album by Jimi Hendrix. I have recently re-investigated this pioneering recording.



The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Voodoo Chile 2020 #2

36" by 36"

oil, enamel, and drawing on panel



Miles Davis, Tutu 2020

16" by 24"

oil, enamel, and caulk on panel

I have done many music paintings every year since. I have an appreciation for jazz, and feel the improvisational aspect of this American music lends itself particularly well to my experiments with gesture, rhythm, and color. It helps that I have studied drumming and percussion. I see similarities between playing rhythms with drum sticks and making paintings with brush sticks. I have renewed my interest in playing music after studying both Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Two of my all-time favorite painters, I learned, were both accomplished musicians. Recently I was listening to the Miles Davis classic recording *Kind of Blue*. I picked up on the sound of the percussion played by Jimmy Cobb. He was using "brushes" on the snare drum. I have ordered some wire brushes and look forward to playing drums and cajon with them, and I figure I'll be doing some paintings with them as well. I have utilized texture creating tools in my work for years. The parallels with painting and music are myriad.



Music Room 1980

28" by 20"

watercolor on paper



***Les Elements Confederes* by Chu Teh-Chun**

In the summer of 2020 I had another revelation about music and painting. Sotheby's Asia sold the master work *Les Elements Confederes* by Chu Teh-Chun whose work I had never seen. Here was a huge and absolutely magnificent pentptych painting that had been inspired by Beethoven's Symphony # 9. Chu Teh-Chun, I was to discover, was a pioneering artist who combined Chinese brush painting traditions with avant-garde French Modern Art. Both of these genres have been instrumental in my personal development and I have been inspired anew to make music works. The most influential studio art class I ever experienced was an elective class I took while in graduate school at San Francisco State University in 1981; Chinese Brush Painting. I have re-studied the precepts of Chinese Brush Painting and am making music works that utilize just enamel paint rapidly applied with brushes or sticks.



The Zen of Music

36" by 36"

enamel on panel



Thinking About Chu Teh-Chun and Listening to King Crimson #1

15" by 24"

enamel on panel

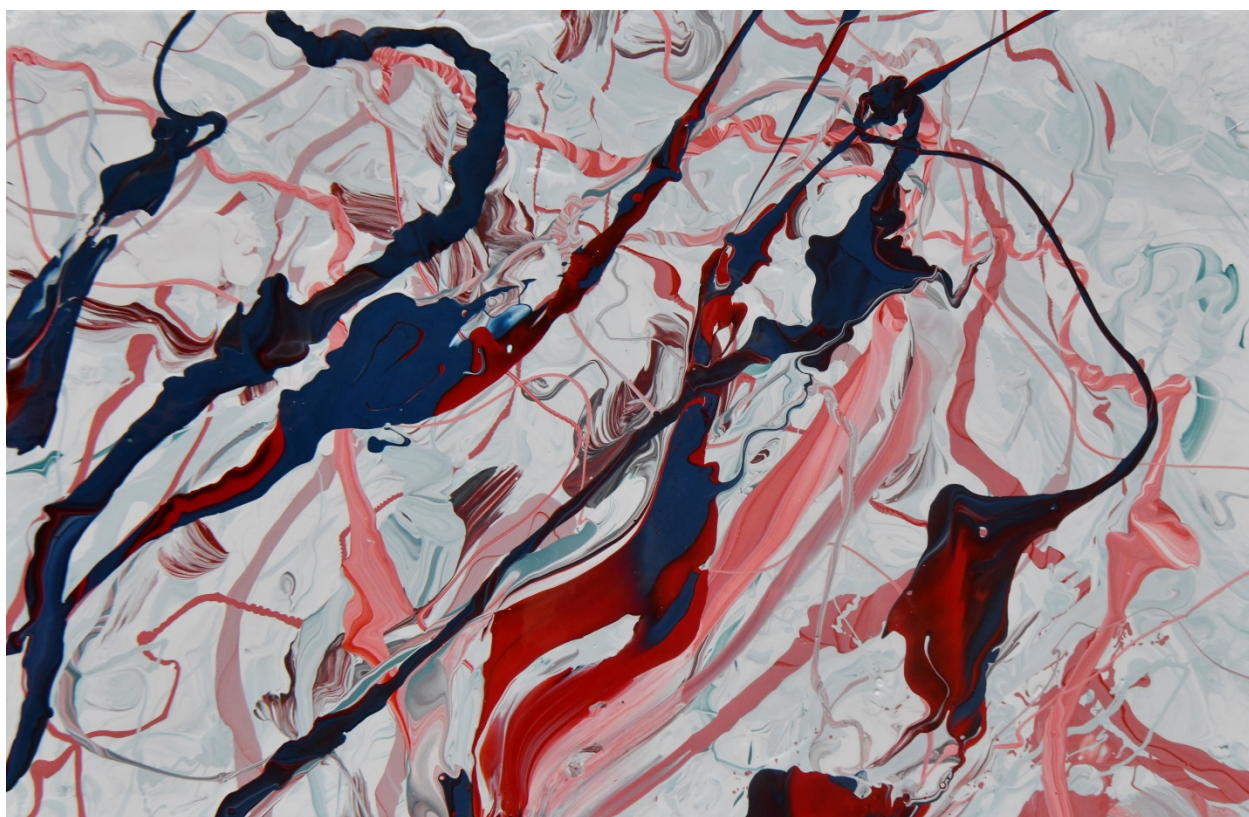
This emphasis on the use of just enamel stands out from my other landscape/map based works where I do use enamel, but I combine it with oil impasto and increasingly different kinds of modeling paste to create topographies. Using this relatively thin liquid enamel only, I began using big frayed brushes and the sides of stirring sticks to drip and throw the paint to the rhythm of the music. Along the way I discovered a unique way to "cast" the paint. I have studied and worked with both Pollock's and DeKooning's ways of paint handling for 25 years now, and the paint handling that they pioneered I have adapted and modified to my own expression. I experienced a eureka moment this summer when I realized my hands were creating stunningly new paint skeins by literally *casting* the paint. As a consummate fishing guide, and a fly fisher since I was eleven years old, I suppose it was only a matter of time before I discovered my novel way to "action paint". When I dipped my paint sticks into containers filled with swirled striated paint colors, cast and simultaneously flipped my wrist, I saw the magical creation of what I call "candy canes". Take a close look at the next two paintings and you will see striped peppermint, turquoise, black, and red twisted colors dancing to the music.



Learning How to Cast Turquoise Candy Canes-2020

30" by 42"

enamel on panel



Learning How to Cast Candy Canes 2020 #1

24" by 40"

enamel on panel



Thinking About Chu Teh-Chun and Listening to King Crimson #3

30" by 26"

enamel on 3 panels

For my music taste, the English, and since the 1980's, part American group, King Crimson has always been near the top of my playlist. Since their first album (1969) all the way to today they have consistently taken me places with their sonic journeys. They have a very cinematic sound, with a

unique ancient vibe, played using both acoustic and electronic instruments. Recently I played their composition *The Sheltering Sky* on YouTube, then looked for live versions, played a few of them from concerts around the world, then saw down the list of recommendations an a cappella version. By someone I did not recognize; Petra Haden. She sings all the parts played by the band. Layer on layer. I had discovered a sublime version of what Klee had termed polyphony.

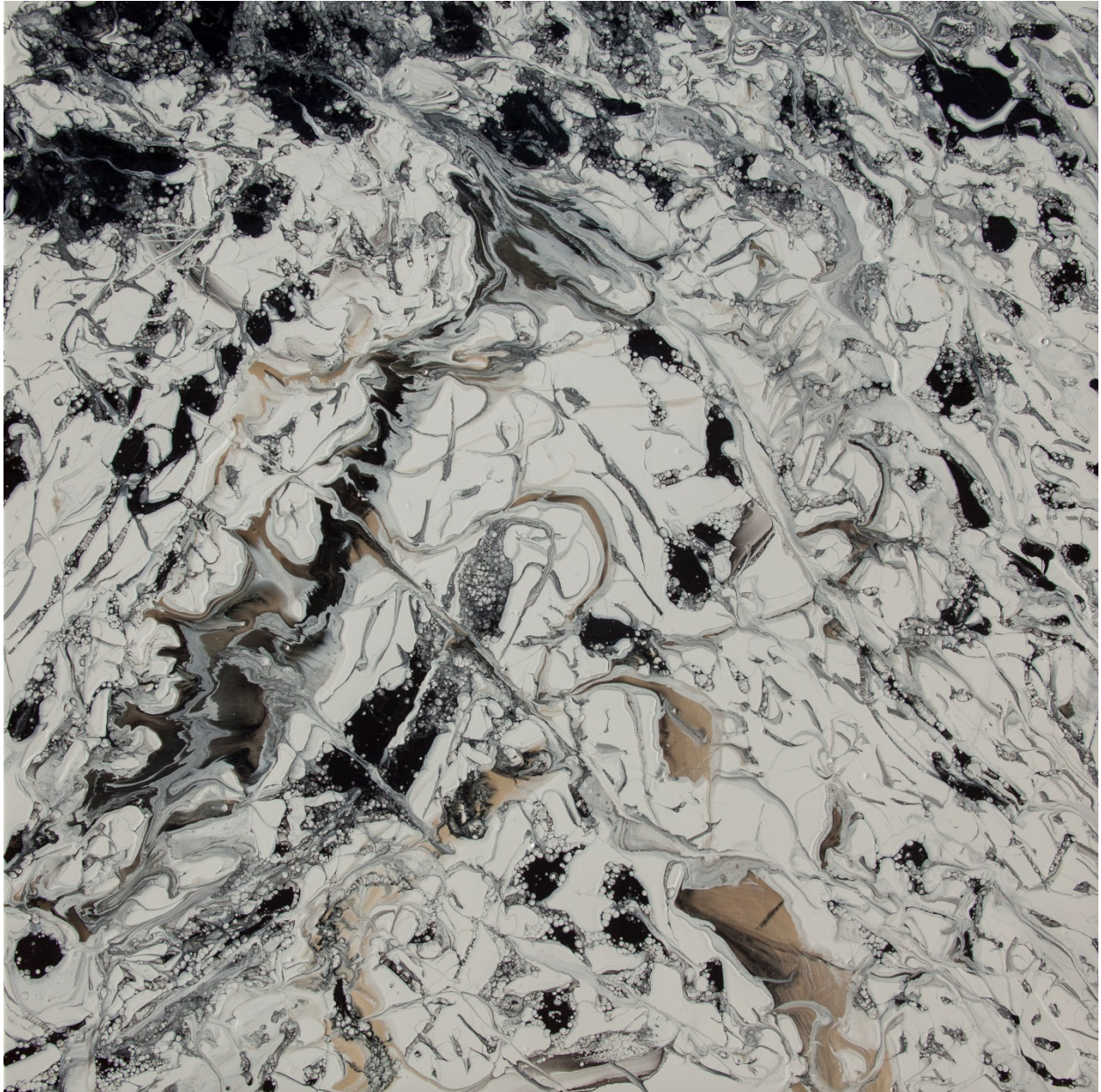


Petra Haden Sings Crimson #2, The Sheltering Sky

24" by 36"

acrylic on canvas

Over the recent holidays I had the time to thoroughly read *Willem de Kooning; A Way of Living* by Judith Zilczer. The large format book has spectacularly detailed illustrations and presents a deep investigation into the Dutch American master's entire practice. I have studied his work closely for many decades and was fortunate to see many of his works in person while I was in the New York area during the 1990's.



Studying Early de Kooning Black and White Enamels and Listening to James McMurtry's Choctaw Bingo 2021 #3
36" by 36" enamel on panel

Of the many additional insights I was able to extract from reading this book, I want to close by stating the observation that not only did de Kooning make his practice about the life of the artist, in his case the act of painting, but in order to refresh and tackle on-going themes over long periods of time, he employed the strategy of alternating between bodies of work, going back and forth between figurative investigations and landscape derived abstractions. I see myself doing something similar going forward. I am deeply committed to my investigations of places, history, and landscape, always building on my signature aerial/satellite/map view of the world. My earliest work was expressionistic, but

realistic in conception and appearance from a distance. For many years I was proud to call myself a photorealist painter using an expressionistic painting style. Over time my style got looser and looser, and now I only occasionally use projection to help define compositions. Free-form expression, the completely improvisational aspects of how I approach the music works, is the perfect antidote to creating my exacting landscapes.



Frank Zappa, Black Napkins 2020

24" by 24"

oil and enamel on panel



The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Voodoo Child Slight Return 2020 #1

12" by 12"

oil and enamel on panel

I start by listening to certain music recordings, not at all concerned about what will happen. In fact, I prefer to freely improvise as I listen, letting the music take me wherever it does. I am aware that many of my music works appear similar to my geographies. Not all of them are done with the thinner enamel paint, as I am often inclined to paint some impasto passages with thick oil paint. Also, I embrace the creation of the fractal edges I get by letting the enamel paint form puckered edges as it pools against my oil impasto passages, and the way enamel wrinkles as it dries over time, techniques I have discovered by experimentation in my landscape works. Moving forward, always committed to evolving, I am inclined to follow Willem de Kooning's example of developing two subjects, alternating between landscape and music.

Spelman Evans Downer, February, 2021

Additional paintings;



Janis Joplin Blues 2006

12" by 24"

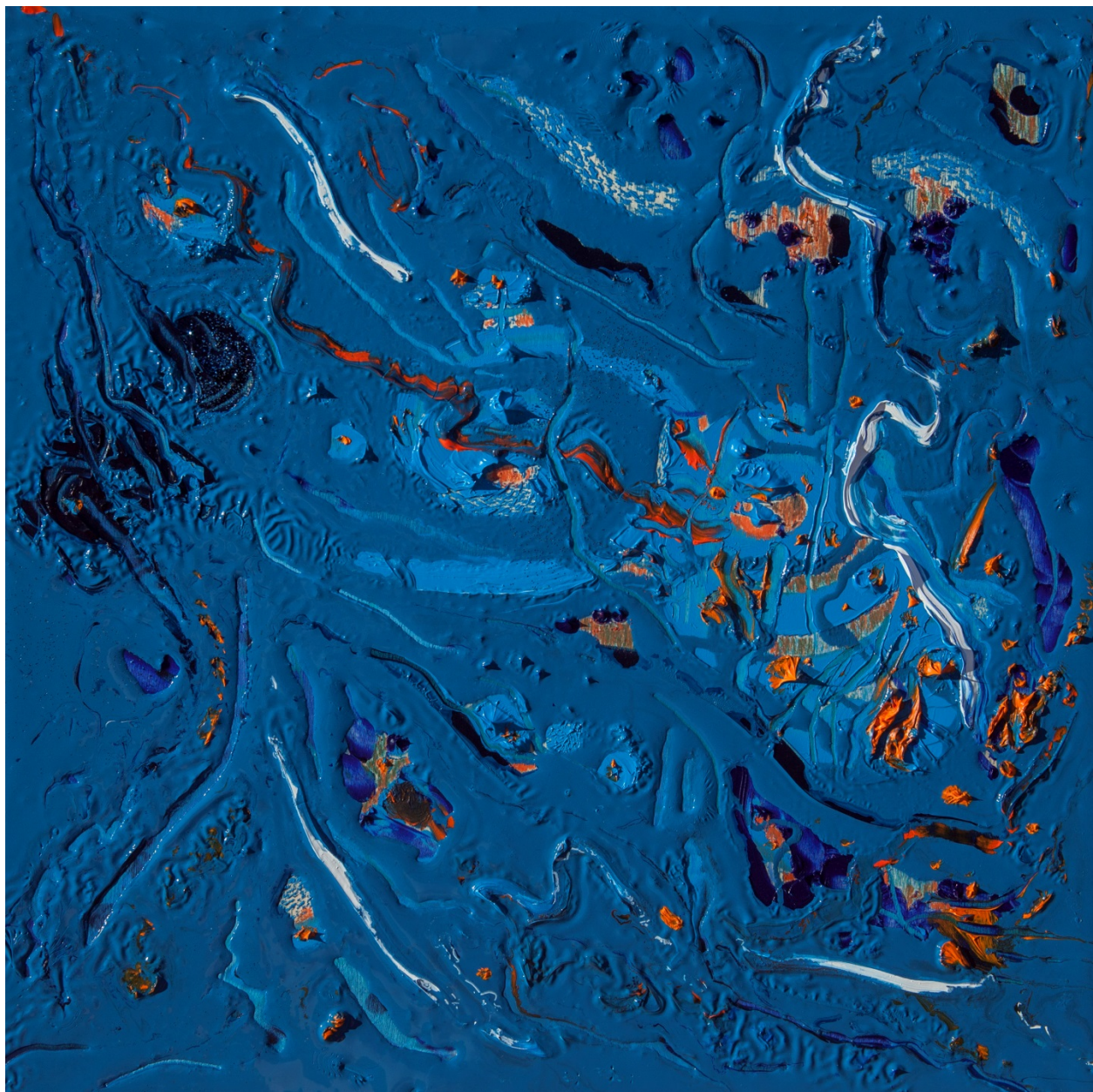
enamel on panel



Listening to Anoushka

12" by 36"

enamel on panel



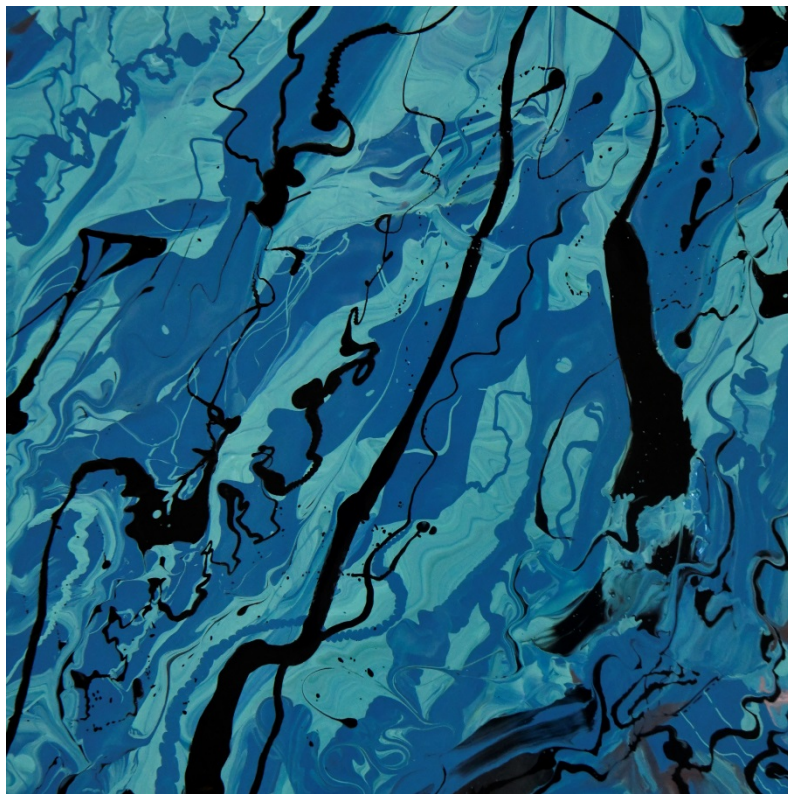
Blue Moon Billie Holiday

12" by 12"

oil and enamel on panel



Listening to John Coltrane, Blue World 2020 #2 24" by 24" enamel on panel



Listening to John Coltrane, Blue World 2020 #1 24" by 24" enamel on panel



Listening to B. B. King, Take a Swing with Me

24" by 80"

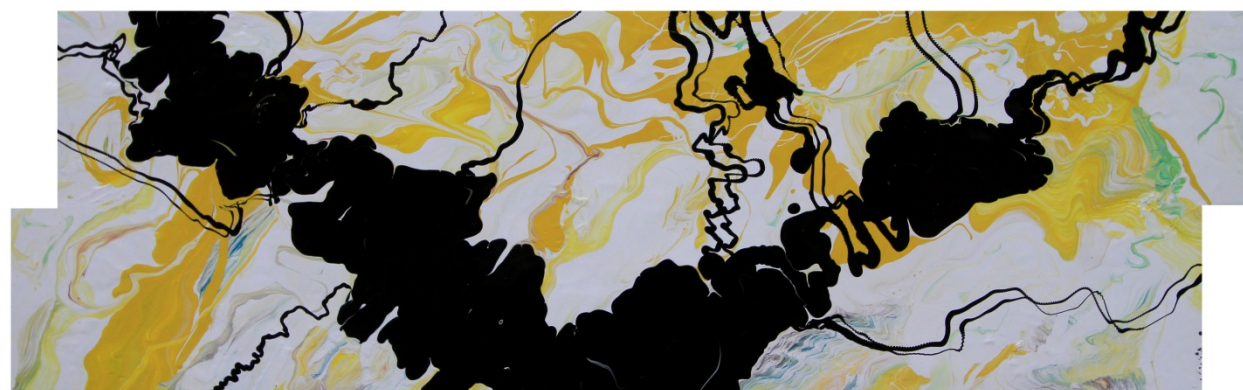
enamel on panel



Listening to Bobby Watson, Mohawk

16" by 48"

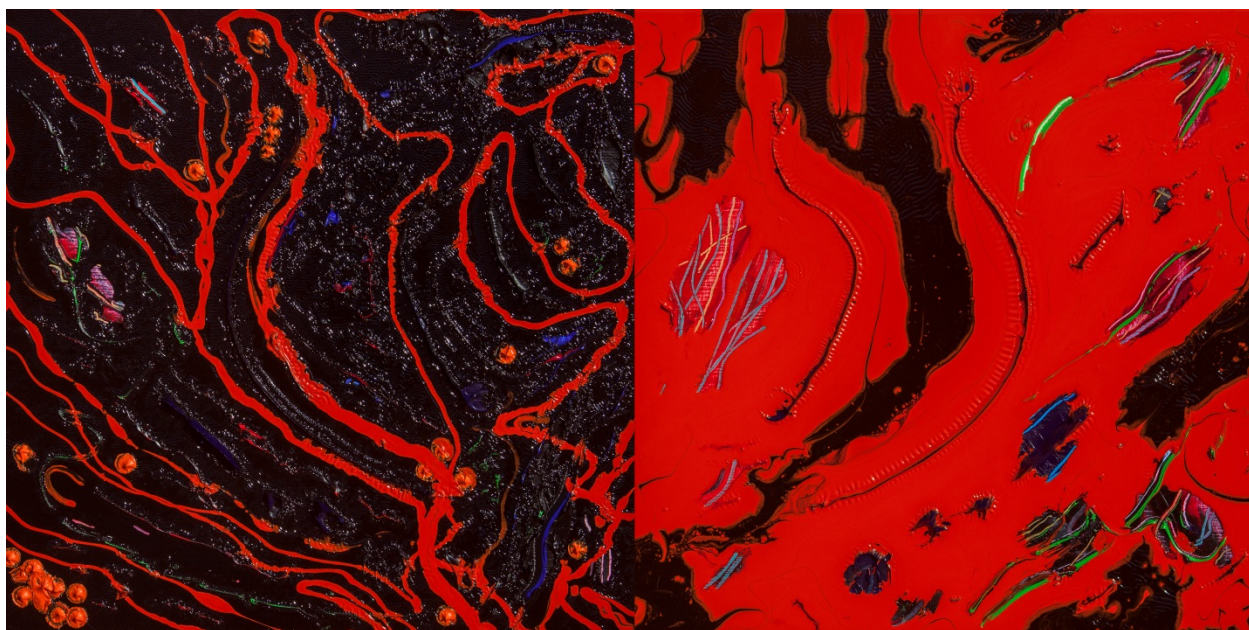
enamel on panel



Listening to Ravi Shankar 2020 #2

14" by 50"

enamel on 2 panels



Miles Runs the Voodoo Down 2021

18" by 36"

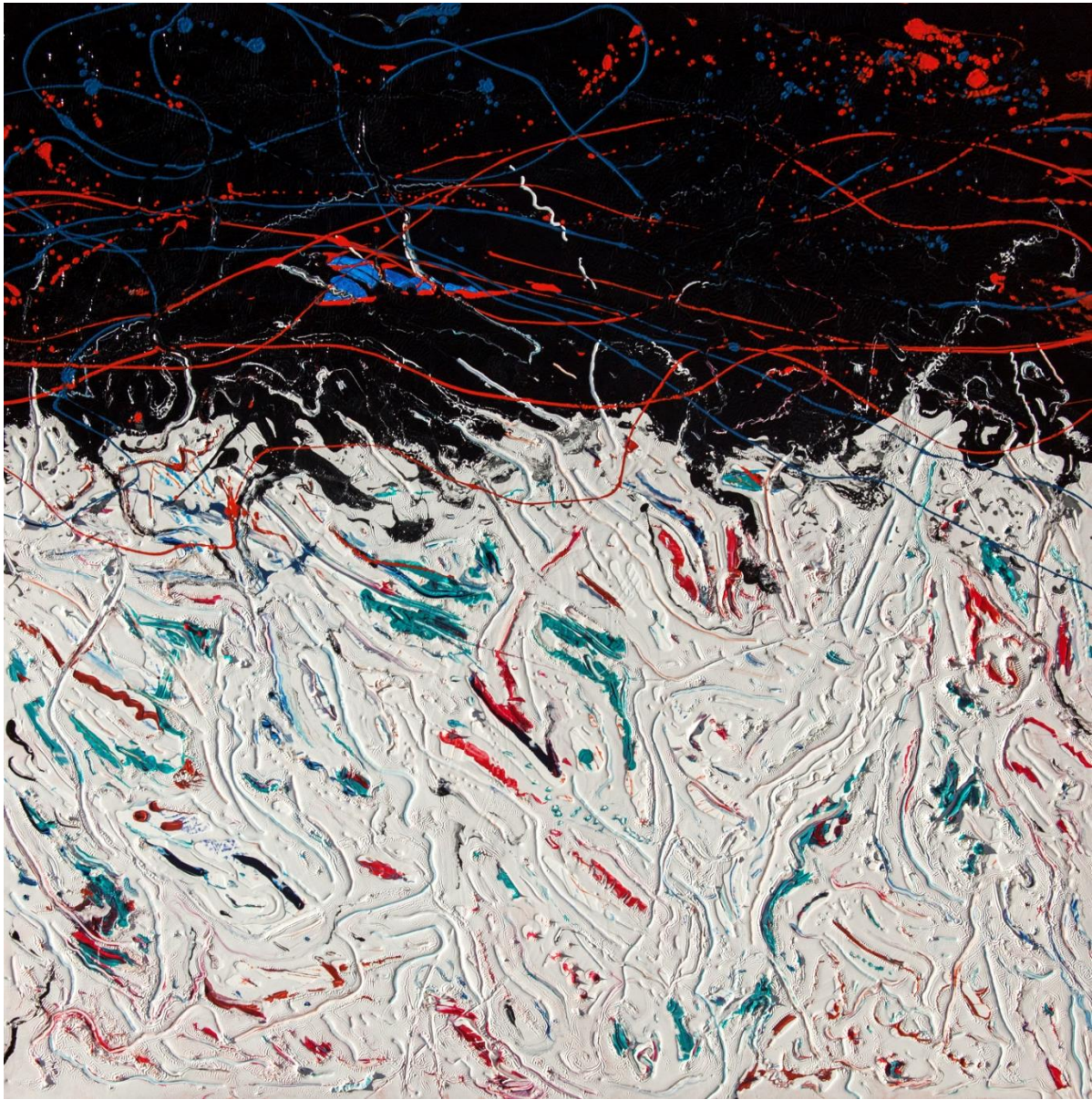
oil, enamel, and drawing on 2 panels



The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Voodoo Child Slight Return 2020 # 2

24" by 80"

oil, enamel, and drawing on panel



The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Star Spangled Banner 2020 #2

36" by 36"

oil, enamel, and drawing on panel