



Pierre Skira

Interview with
Michael Peppiatt

Pierre Skira

new pastels

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Pierre Skira

Michael Peppiatt

Pierre Skira still works in the same studio at La Villette in the north of Paris where I first began visiting him and seeing his work in the late 1970s. You turn off a busy, colourful boulevard lined with African fabric shops and halal butchers into a quiet courtyard. The ground-floor apartment where he and his wife Gisèle live would look quite anonymous if it didn't open out, suddenly, into a large, high-ceilinged atelier that gathers every ounce of the day's pale sunshine from the vaulted skylight running overhead.

It is mid-afternoon. Skira's latest, large pastels have been propped against the studio walls, awaiting collection for his forthcoming show in London. Their velvety surfaces absorb the slowly fading autumn light, then release it in shafts of celadon blue, citron yellow and olive green.

A long table in the middle of Skira's studio displays hundreds of pristine or half-used sticks of pastel laid out in every conceivable shade, like a large alphabet of colour. They come from the ancient firm of Roché which once supplied Degas and Whistler with their pastels and is still going strong, producing over one thousand nuances to choose from. The vast range of powdery colours emanating from Skira's pictures and his pastel-laden table invades the whole studio space, hanging like a tinted dust in the air, simultaneously veiling and revealing.

Skira and I have been looking from picture to picture for a long while, silently absorbing the intricate drama of tone on tone and the shades that surface from the underlying strata of delicate pastel. But the light is disappearing; the colours slowly withdraw into themselves and sink into the deepening shadows. Now that there is nothing more to see, the time has come to talk.



MP: Pierre, we've known each other for a long time but I'd find it difficult to resume your whole path as an artist.

PS: Well, that's not surprising since I've had lots of ups and downs, like many other artists trying to find their way, their voice, their truth. But then I've always felt like an outsider. I was born in 1938 and after war broke out I was brought up like a refugee all over the place, in the Swiss mountains, in Brittany, in Paris. My father was the publisher, Albert Skira, and people think that I had this privileged background. It's true that I got to know all sorts of people, that I spent a whole summer as a kid with Picasso and met Matisse and Giacometti and a lot of the Surrealists. But my upbringing was chaotic, sometimes there was money and often there was no money, my father was always absent, I almost never saw him, and I was packed off to boarding schools where I always got into trouble. So I turned into a kid with lots of problems, trying my hand at this and that and never really settling, until I began to paint, mainly under the influence of Vedova and Franz Kline, and other artists I admired like Mondrian. But I was always questioning and

doubting my own worth and my quality as an artist. I didn't know much about anything at the time, and certainly nothing about figurative painting, although I'd heard there was a kind of war between figurative and abstract. And then I met a couple of figurative painters whom I grew very close to, and I decided to abandon abstract art and devote myself to figuration.

MP: So how did that develop?

PS: Well, I thought if I was going to go figurative I should go the whole hog and focus on the visible world and paint what I saw. And by chance an Italian friend of mine whose wife had a small publishing house in Milan asked me to do a picture, a still life, of books as a present for her. I needed the money, since I was leading a very solitary life in Paris and I had no career to speak of. So I composed a pastel with books – the subject rather annoyed me because it made me think about my own background – and once I'd done it I decided I'd never do still lifes like that again. But oddly I got hooked on the theme, and around that time another friend introduced me to seventeenth-century still lifes, as well as the literature and music of that extraordinarily civilized period which I began to explore and collect books about it until it seemed really familiar. So gradually I found a new home, the 17th century, that took me in and allowed me to escape the horrors and confusion of the 20th century where I'd felt very unhappy. And for over thirty years I stayed in that world, making pastels of old books and fruit and skulls. I found my truth in my work and became absolutely myself. Nothing else really existed outside.

MP: Then how did you start to change and go back to abstraction? It didn't happen overnight....

PS: Well, it did actually! I suddenly realized about three or four years ago that I'd abandoned something very important that I'd had as a very young man. A kind of marvellous freedom where I had no need of a subject and where I was totally in control of what I did. And I knew it wasn't something I could get back into in little steps. I might not look it but I'm actually an impetuous person and I just leapt back into abstraction.

MP: Didn't that make you feel completely disorientated?



PS: On the contrary! I discovered an old passion that had never gone away. Most of the still lifes I'd been doing of books were very sombre, with dark objects on a black background, and I'd been conscious that whenever I could fit in a dash of bright colour I was much happier. But here, suddenly, with abstraction, I had a whole world of colour and no constrictions. Where I used to be able to introduce just a touch of red, I could now do a whole great spread of red!

MP: Aren't you making it sound easier and more spontaneous than it really was?

PS: I'm not saying it was easy. First of all, it was leap into the dark, if you like, a kind of 'salto mortale', because I didn't know what I was going to find. And then of course there are all kinds of different problems in abstraction. You never really know where you are going. It's a very demanding discipline, you have to feel on top form because you simply can't get into it if you're feeling a bit under par. Because I use pastel, I only work by natural light, so I start early in the morning and I let the colours speak to me. I don't know what I'll be doing in advance, but I build various areas of the composition up layer by layer, using a special fixative

each time to stabilize the pastel, and I let the colours talk to each other as I build them up, especially at the dividing line in the composition where they meet. That's where I get very excited because it's a crucial coming together, and if that doesn't work the whole painting doesn't work.

MP: Does that mean that you sometimes have to abandon a picture completely?

PS: Yes, of course. Often I manage to save a picture by reworking it, but there are some that have become too clogged to recoup and I wash everything off and start again. Each painting is totally different. Some have very dominant personalities. Others are quite timid. That one over there, for instance, reminds me of a pale sky with clouds, and as I was finishing it I thought, well if that's the way you want to be, if you want to look like a cloud, I'll leave you just as you are! The paintings take on a will of their own. And the materials don't always have the effect you expect. One stick of pastel, even if it's exactly the same tone, can be harder or lighter than another. And I react to every tone. A particularly light, transparent yellow can make me feel exalted whereas a dull one might depress me. I'm constantly thinking about the work in progress, even when I go out to buy the newspaper and particularly at night. I often lie there in the dark, wondering how I might take a particular picture forward, and suddenly I realize I have to reduce one of the forms, take it down a bit, then the whole composition will work. You must do things like that when you write?

MP: Yes, I often leave a phrase or a whole paragraph that's not right for a day or two, then come back to it with a bit of distance and, if I'm lucky, I see right away why it's not working.

But then, with a picture, how do you know when to stop? Particularly when there are so many elements, so many layers of colour, in play. At what point is a picture finished?

PS: Oh, that's very clear: the moment it takes leave of you. When it's got everything and doesn't need you or your gaze or your interference any more. When it's taken on a life of its own and simply tells you to scram!

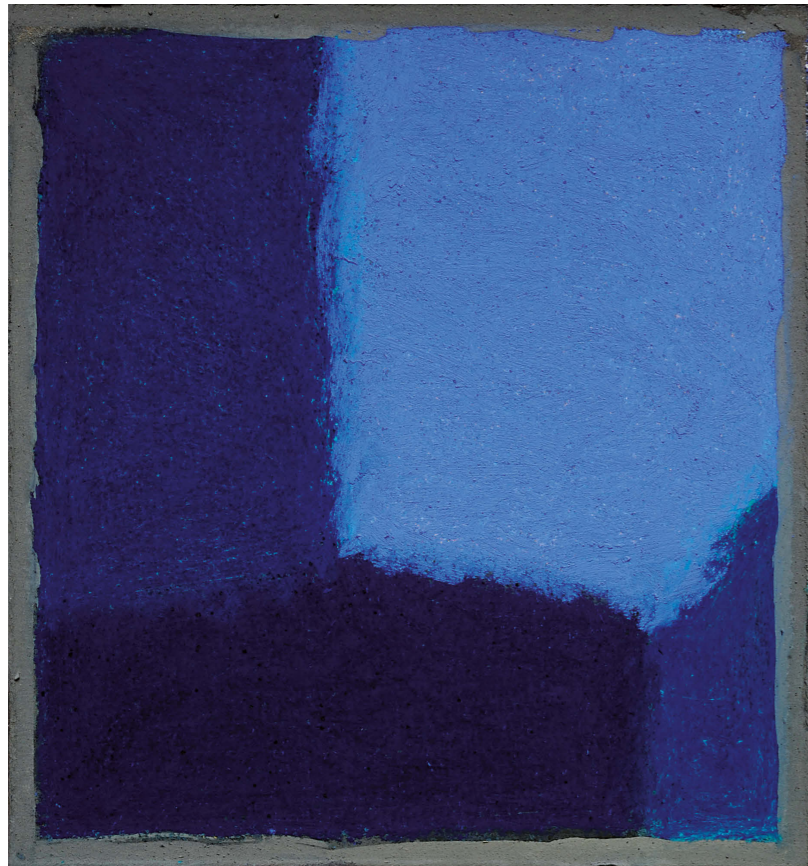
November, 2015

Série Baruch 360

pastel on board

140 x 122 cm / 55.12 x 48.03 in





Série Baruch 379

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



Série Baruch 388

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in

Série Baruch 373

pastel on board
52 x 50 cm / 20.47 x 19.69 in





Série Baruch 391

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



Série Baruch 376

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in

Série Baruch 362

pastel on board

140 x 122 cm / 55.12 x 48.03 in



Série Baruch 365

pastel on board
97 x 97 cm / 38.19 x 38.19 in



Série Baruch 364

pastel on board
97 x 97 cm / 38.19 x 38.19 in



Série Baruch 364

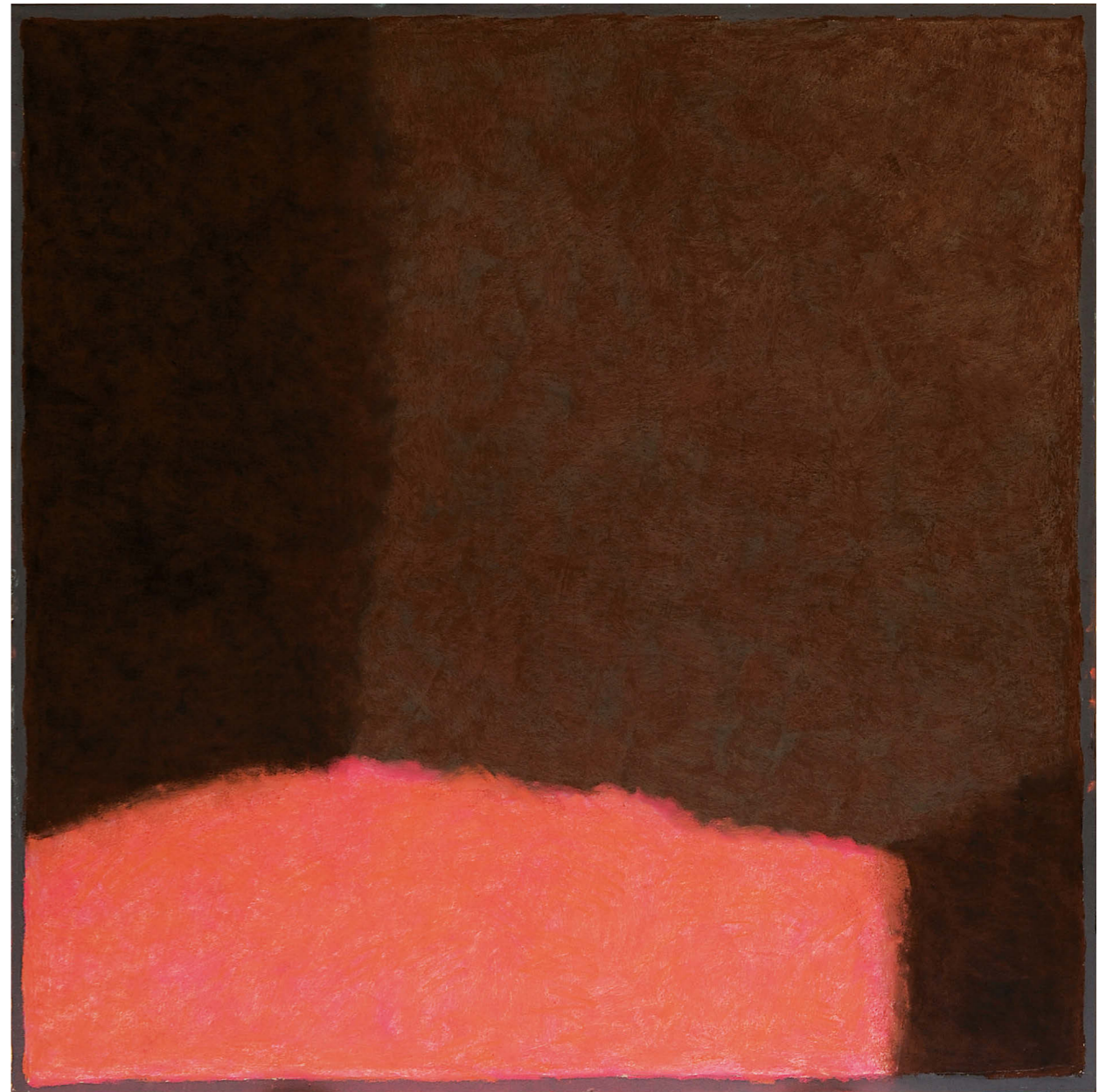
pastel on board
97 x 97 cm / 38.19 x 38.19 in





Série Baruch 363

pastel on board
97 x 97 cm / 38.19 x 38.19 in





Série Baruch 380

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



Série Baruch 382

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



Série Baruch 384

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



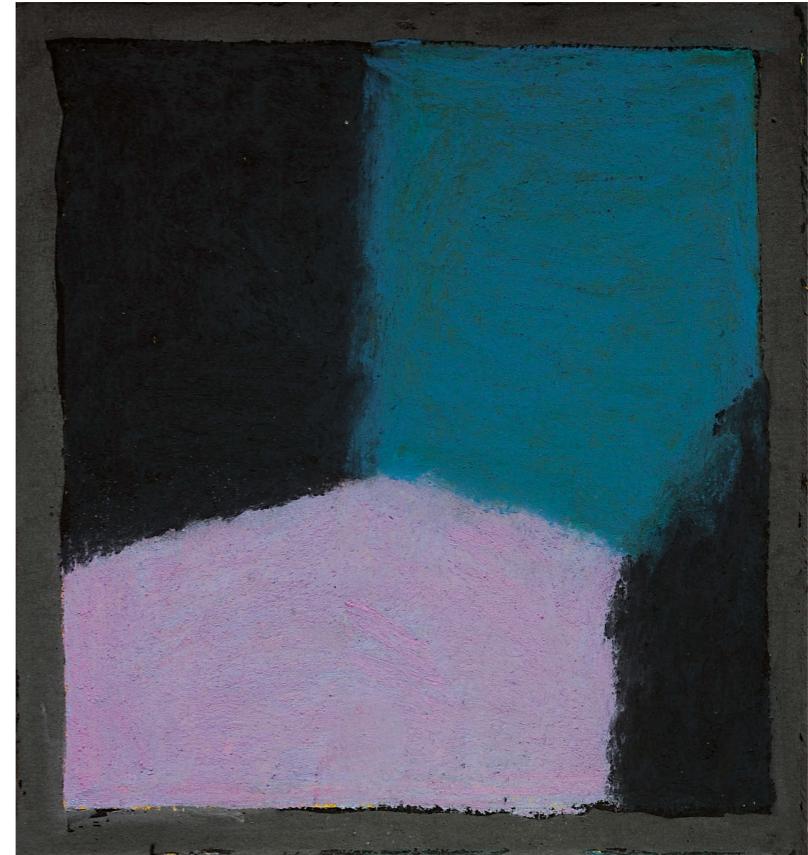
Série Baruch 385

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in



Série Baruch 377

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in

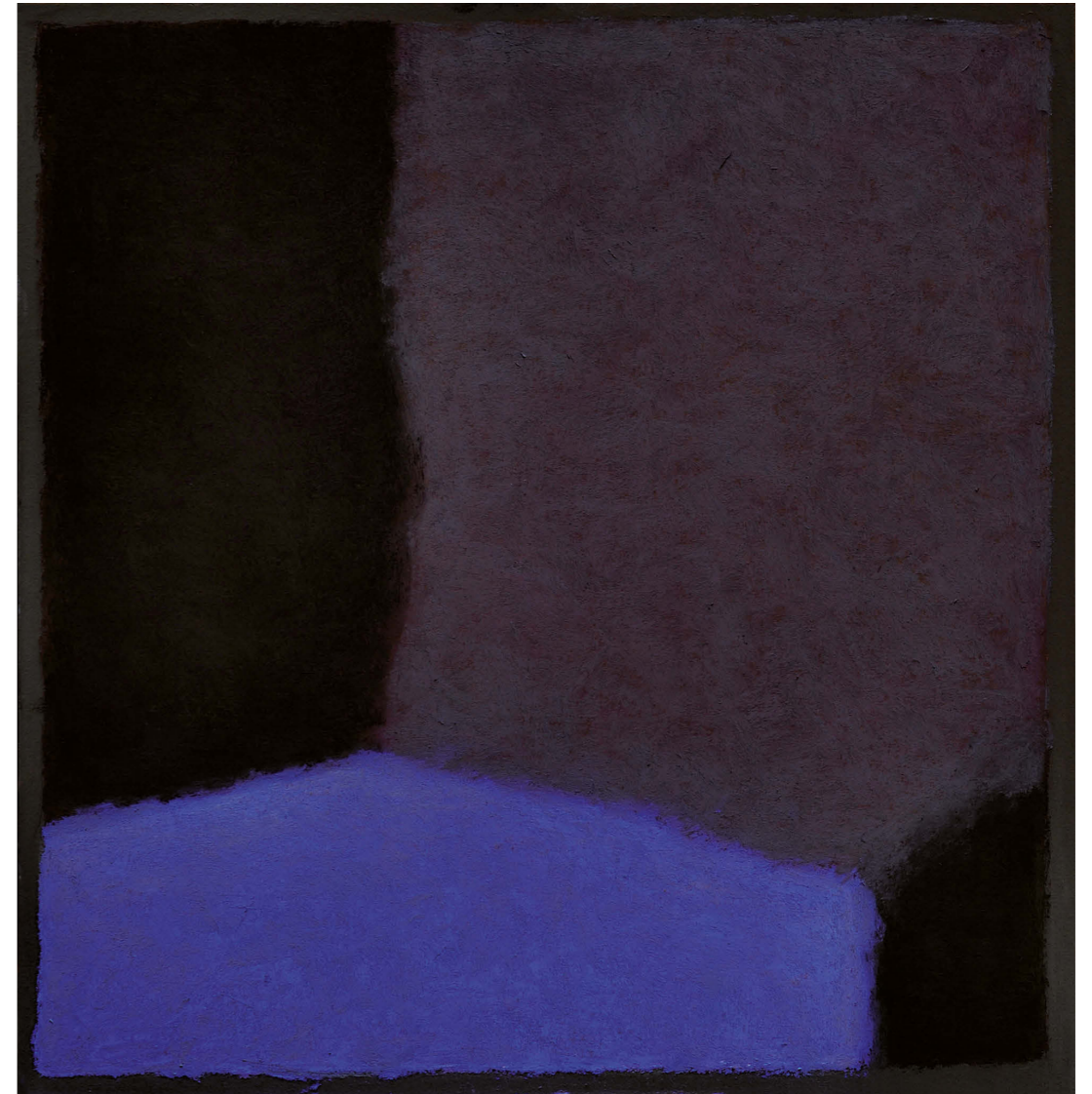


Série Baruch 383

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Série Baruch 372

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Série Baruch 386

pastel on board
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Série Baruch 387

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in

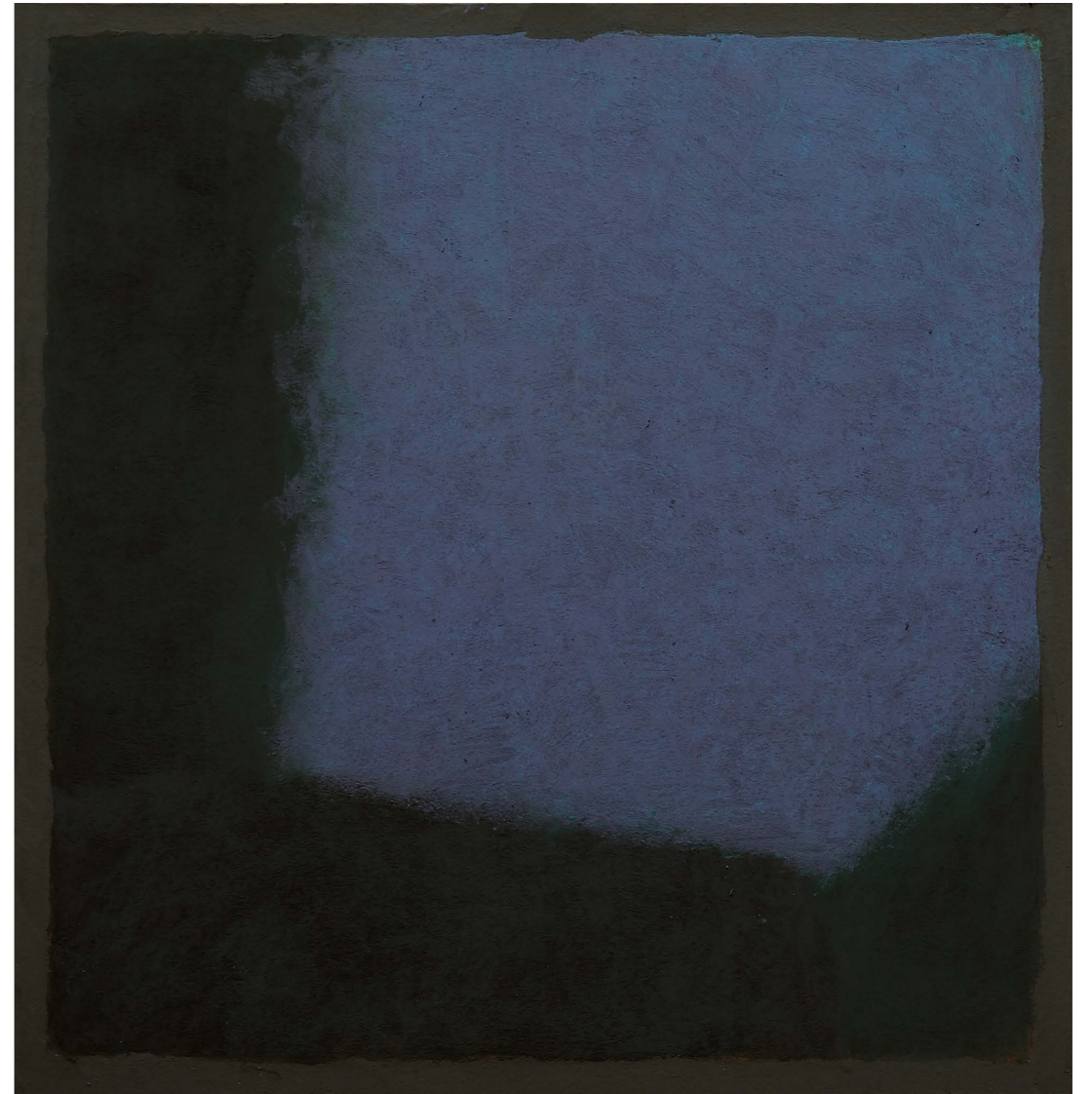


Série Baruch 390

pastel on board
14.5 x 14 cm / 5.71 x 5.51 in

Série Baruch 370

pastel on board
52 x 50 cm / 20.47 x 19.69 in





Série Baruch 399

pastel on board
25 x 25 cm / 9.84 x 9.84 in



Série Baruch 375

pastel on board
25 x 25 cm / 9.84 x 9.84 in

Série Baruch 367

pastel on board
97 x 97 cm / 38.19 x 38.19 in



Pierre Skira

Born in Paris on the 12th May 1938.

Lives and works in Paris.

Solo exhibitions

1963	Librairie des Ursulines, Paris	Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou, China (with G. Jeanclos)	
1964	Galerie La Roue, Paris (with Robert Lacoste and Breyten Breytenbach) Galerie Claude Levin, Paris Vout Vuyk Gallery, Hilversum, Netherlands Espace Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands	Quingdao Museum, China	
1965	Cultural Centre of Gdansk, Poland	2002	Maison des Arts, Le Grand Quevilly, France
1973	Galerie du Dragon, Paris		Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris, (<i>Tondo</i>) Marieschi Gallery, Milan, Italy
1974	Transart Gallery, Milan, Italy	2005	Artur Ramon Gallery, Barcelona, Spain
1975	Galerie du Dragon, Paris	2006	Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris (<i>Bleus</i>)
1979	Maison de la Culture, Orléans, France Galerie du Dragon, Paris	2007	Galerie Jérôme Ladiray, Rouen, France
1982	New Style Gallery (w. Nieuwenhuisen Segaar), The Hague, Netherlands	2011	Artur Ramon Gallery, Barcelona, Spain
1986	Ditesheim Gallery, Neuchâtel, Switzerland	2012	Galerie Menus Plaisirs, Paris
1987	L'Autre Musée, Brussels, Belgium	2012	Musée de Soissons, Soissons (<i>CŒuvres croisées – Pascal Quignard-Pierre Skira</i>) Espace Muraille, Geneva
1990	Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris	2013	Galerie de Bayser, Paris
1992	Salon de Mars, Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris	2013	Espace des Dominicaines, Pont-Lévêque, France
1993	FIAC, Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris (stand with G.Jeanclos)	2013	Galerie Paul Prouté, 2015
1994	FIAC, Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris (<i>Les Septante</i>) text by Pascal Quignard		
1995	L'ARC Scène Nationale, Le Creusot, France FIAC, Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris		
1996	Musée Antoine Lécuyer, Saint-Quentin, France		
1997	Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris		
1999	Institut Français Tel Aviv, Israel Marieschi Gallery, Monza, Italy		
2000	Contini Gallery, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy		
2001	Museum of The Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China, (with G.Jeanclos)		

Group exhibitions

1962	Galerie Creuze, Paris (<i>Donner à voir 1 et 2</i>)
1964	<i>Art et Révolution</i> , Alger, Algeria
1965	Biennale de Paris, Jeune Critique, Peintres du monde, Paris Galerie Le Soleil dans la tête, Paris
1967	Biennale de Paris (<i>Prix de peinture</i>), Salon de Mai, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France
1972	Grand Palais, Paris (<i>31 artistes suisses contemporains</i>)
1975	Galerie du Dragon, Paris
1977	CNAC, Paris Festival d'Automne (<i>Papiers sur nature</i>)
1979	Museum Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile <i>Nouvelle Subjectivité</i> , Brussels, Belgium
1980	Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil

1986	<i>Pastels français contemporains</i> , Paris
1990	<i>Soixante dix ans de peinture en France</i> , Fête de l'Humanité, Paris <i>Carte blanche à Pascal Bonafoux</i> , Brive, France
1991	Tokyo Art Fair, Galerie Patrice Trigano
1993	Miami Art Fair, Galerie Patrice Trigano, <i>Ateliers à Paris</i> Forni Gallery, Bologna, Italy
1994	<i>Eloge du pastel</i> , Galerie Krugier-Ditesheim, Geneva, FIAC
1997	<i>Hommage à Aragon</i> , Fête de l'Humanité, Paris
2000	<i>Paris sous le ciel de la peinture</i> , Mairie de Paris, Salle St Jean
2004	<i>Vanités contemporaines</i> , Brussels, Belgium <i>Vanités Contemporaines</i> , Clermont-Ferrand, France <i>Nouveaux regards sur le pastel</i> , Saint-Quentin, France
2005	<i>Les Adieux de Jean Le Gac</i> , Beauvais, France New York Art Fair, Galerie Patrice Trigano
2006	<i>Le Pastel</i> , Espace des Feuillantines, Pont-Audemer, France, <i>Book printed by René Tazé</i> , Mairie du Xè arrondissement, Paris.
2007	<i>Quatre pastellistes : Jean Le Gac, F.Barbâtre, Pierre Skira, Irving Petlin, Saint-Quentin</i> , France, Foire de Bâle, Galerie Jan Krugier, Switzerland. FIAC, Galerie Jan Krugier, Paris <i>Le Paysage</i> , Espace des Feuillantines, Pont-Audemer, France
2008	Basel Art Fair, Galerie Jan Krugier, Switzerland
2009	Basel Art Fair, Galerie Jan Krugier, Switzerland
2011	<i>Musée Ephémère</i> , La Roche Guyon, France

Publications on Pierre Skira

Collaborations:

Bouche au miroir de son verbe, 1963. Text by Guy Olivier, engravings by Pierre Skira
Ouvrages, 1963 Lithographs. Editions de la Fédération Nationale des Travaux Publics, Paris.
Les Septante, 1994. Text by Pascal Quignard, pastels by Pierre Skira. Ed. Patrice Trigano, Paris.
L'Amour conjugal, 1995. Text by Pascal Quignard, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. Patrice Trigano, Paris.
Le Tombeau de Robertson, 1999. Text by Jérôme Prieur,

engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. La Pionnière, Paris.
Conversation Pierre Skira et Pascal Bonafoux, drawings by Pierre Skira. 2000. Ed. Tandem, Brussels.
Traité d'incertitude, 2002. Text by Patrick Mauriès, drawings by Pierre Skira. Ed. Le Promeneur, Paris.
Ecrit au café, 2002. Text by Patrick Mauriès, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. La Balance, Paris.
Tondo, 2002. Text by Pascal Quignard, pastels by Pierre Skira. Ed. Flammarion, Paris.
Petite danse macabre, 2002. Text by Dominique Janvier, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. La Balance, Paris.
Caprices, 2004. Text by Jérôme Prieur, drawings by Pierre Skira. Ed. La Pionnière, Paris.
Les Confessions de Jean-Jacques Bouchard, parisien. 2004. Text by Jean-Jacques Bouchard, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. Le Promeneur, Paris.
Pierre Skira, 2005. Text by Patrick Mauriès. Ed. Le Promeneur.
Deux anges de l'oubli, 2007. Text by Gérard Macé, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. La Pionnière, Paris.

Personal publications:

La Nature morte, 1995. Text by Pierre Skira, Ed. Skira, Geneva.
Sémélé, 2003. Text by Pierre Skira and Nonos de Panopolis, engravings by Pierre Skira. Ed. Serendip, Paris
Les Orgues de glace, 2008. Novel. Ed. Viviane Hamy, Paris.
Bonbons et sucettes du monde, 2009. Tales. Ed. Viviane Hamy, Paris
De l'amitié, seminar Pascal Quignard, 2012, Sorbonne, Paris
Sémion l'aveuglé upcoming novel.

Catalogues

Solo exhibitions

Pastels by Pierre Skira, text by Max Clarac Sérou, Ed. Galerie du Dragon, 1973 Paris.
Totenschiff, 1975.
Huiles by Pierre Skira, text by Maurice Roche. Ed. Galerie du Dragon, Paris.
Pastels, Text by Pascal Bonafoux, Ed. Galerie Trigano, 1990 Paris.

Parce que la couleur est un cas de la poussière, 1997. Text by Jean-François Lyotard. Ed. Patrice Trigano, Paris.

La musique est finie, 1999. Pastels by Pierre Skira, text by Franco Moro. Ed. Marieschi Gallery, Milan.

Pastels, text by Paolo Rizzi, Ed. Contini Gallery, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, 2000.

Pastels de Pierre Skira, text by Jaume Vallcorba, 2005. Ed. Artur Ramon Gallery, Barcelona, Spain.

Bleus, text by Jean Clair, pastels by Pierre Skira, 2005. Ed. Patrice Trigano, Paris.

Pastels, text by Tzvetan Todorov. Ed. Artur Ramon, Barcelone, 2011.

Livres de silence, text by Patrick Mauriès, pastels by Pierre Skira, 2012. Ed. Galerie Menus Plaisirs, Paris.

Œuvres croisées, text by Pascal Quignard, pastels and text by Pierre Skira, 2013. Ed. Musée de Soissons.

Pastels, preface by Germain Viatte, pastels by Pierre Skira, Ed. Galerie de Bayser, Paris 2013.

Pastels, Ed. Espace Muraille, Geneva 2013.

Group exhibitions

Breyten, Lacoste, Skira, drawings, Galerie La Roue, Paris, October 1966.

Hommage à Imré Pan, Paris 1978.

Nouvelle subjectivité, text by Jean Clair, 1979. Ed. CNAC, Paris.

Exposition : 20 ans de la galerie du Dragon, Ed. Galerie du Dragon / China, 1990.

Carte blanche à Pascal Bonafoux, Théâtre de Brive la Gaillarde, France, 1991.

Paris sous le ciel de la peinture, 2000. Ed. Mairie de Paris.

Georges Jeanclos, Pierre Skira, 2001, Beijing, Canton and Qingdao, China.

Nouveaux regards sur le pastel, 2004. Ed. Musée de Saint-Quentin, France.

L'Art du pastel, 2008. Ed. Beaux-Arts Magazine, Paris.

Le Musée Ephémère, 2011, La Roche-Guyon.

Awards

1967 Prix de la Biennale de Paris

1997 Prix International d'Art Contemporain Duc de Valverde d'Ayala Valva, Monte Carlo

Films

1985 *Vie Coye*, Directed by Olivier Etcheverry (35mm, 26 minutes).

1995 *Magazine TV5*, Paris Lumière (13 minutes).

1995 *Exposition Pierre Skira*, Directed by Fanny Meiller, ARC, Scène Nationale du Creusot, France.

Radio Interviews

Broadcast *Agora*, Olivier-Germain-Thomas, France Culture, 1990, 1993, 2001.

Broadcast *Les Arts et les gens*, Pierre Descargues and Valère Bertrand, France Culture, 1990.

Works in public collections

Palais de l'Elysée, (1981, 1983) Paris

Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris

Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Poitou-Charentes, Angoulême, France

Mairie d'Antibes, France

Salvador Allende Museum, Santiago, Chile

Musée d'Art contemporain du Val de Marne, MACVAL, France

Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Musée de Nice, France

Musée de Soissons, France

Opera

2004 Set design for *Don Pasquale*, an opera by Donizetti, directed by Jean-Louis Martinotti, Berlin 2004.



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