JOHN EDEN
WATER & TIME

19 – 21 MAY 2023

Kolbusz space

John Eden - *Vision unalloyed*

(Aimee Dodds, April 2023)

A bending and tender haziness worn away; snags and eddies transported and dissolved into rivulets. Sediment segmented into gullies that quiver and shimmer, colours and aerosols flecked, splayed, sprayed. John Eden's paintings in *Water and Time* [Kolbusz Space, May 2022] are honest, unfettered without being naïve. They include flat and vacuous shadowed spaces that seem to sway and gape; they are full of lines that meander, stretch and impede each other.

Art critic Jerry Saltz once said that English painter Francis Bacon (1909-1992) "may be the only artist sharing a name with one of his main subjects, meat."[1] I contend that we may have found a second in Kalamunda-based artist John Eden. An Eden – a place of pristine or abundant natural beauty (named so after the biblical paradise) is precisely the content of John's latest body of work. Yet at the same time, this series of paintings is entirely devoid of the romantic sentimentality, demonisation or attempts at enforced naturalism that often accompany works of landscape. As Waldemar Kolbusz notes in an email to me, 'whilst there's a great urgency and sloppiness, they're just so quiet and reverent.'[2]

Reverent indeed, with the flipside marks of the artist's pensiveness visible – these works are categorised by pools, puddles, drips; flimsiness and transparencies of colour; flatness of surface; layering of materials and distinctiveness of mark-making. There is a visually identifiable precision of execution matched by a spontaneous immediacy to their imagery. Their lines may flee and falter; yet their impression stays. They have weight without heaviness, tensity without tightness and a presence created largely through absences, in the acts of removal, of undoing. The artist paints mostly with the forgiveness of acrylics, armed with a brush in one hand and an eraser in the form of a spray-bottle in the other.

These paintings begin with drawings of *place*, from photographs taken by the artist. Specifically, a place just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. A mountainous place, full of valleys, sheer gorges, plateaus, expanses. *Karijini* – meaning 'Hilly place'. It too, is a place created through absences – in this case, erosion, where geological materials are worn and transported by natural forces such as wind or water.

Made up of shale, chert, dolomite; the strange linguistics alone hint at the alien-ness of this place. Karijini is incredibly remote, physically difficult to access, removed from most of our day-to-day lives and quotidian existences, known to us mostly as a tourist attraction. Karijini is too a geological rarity, situated in the Pilbara Craton, one of only two pristine Archean (formed 3.6-2.7 billion years ago) crusts on the

[1] Jerry Saltz, 'Sacred Monster,' 2009, writing for Bacon's centenary exhibition. Published in *Artnet* after an earlier version in The New York Magazine where Saltz has been critic since 2006. See http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/francis-bacon5-27-09.asp

[2] Email to the author, February 2023.

entire Earth.[3] It is part of the realm of the unfamiliar - marketed as a retreat, an escape. To us it is monolithic, incomprehensible; its magma red peaks and valleys on brochures underscoring the shared impression we have of it as magnanimous. Of course, for the
Banyjima, Kurrama and Innawonga Aboriginal people, whose ancestors' occupation of Karijini dates back more than 30,000 years, this place is both entirely sacred and entirely familiar, firmly entrenched in their everyday lives.[4]

This is a landscape that can only be experienced through certain perspectives – the Traditional Custodians warn that airplanes and drones should not fly directly over above Karijini's gorges or springs.[5] There are parts of the park inaccessible and off-limits to the thousands of visitors and tourists that make the pilgrimage every year. Recreation and play (including swimming in the waterholes) is intended to be matched with respect; no boisterousness, yelling discouraged. Karijini is a dangerous and volatile place. The gorges have claimed lives; temperatures reach extremes across all seasons; carcinogenic blue asbestos is present amongst the sheer rock gorges; and, as I write this essay, many of the park's access points are closed due to flash flooding and dislodged boulders.

This place is approximately 1400km away from John's home and studio in Kalamunda. He first visited Karijini in 2021. *Cala* meaning "fire," "home," "district" or "settlement," and *mun-da* meaning "forest" or "bush" in local language. The 'total fire ban' sign that glows and offsets the town's entrance as I drive to his studio serves as a stark reminder of both our landscape's immense destructive capacity and its fragility. Perhaps this location too informs Eden's unique reverence for site. Eden moved here from England and has lived and worked as an art teacher in Kalamunda since the early 2000s. He speaks of his time at Karijini with a great sense of respect and wonder, and openness.

The strangeness and brilliance of this series of works is compounded, partially because in them Karijini is not immediately recognisable. The compositions give us loosely ordered chaos – they are details, carefully selected sections of rock that are linearly balanced and symmetrical. They offer us no horizon line or orienting point in space, and whilst the paintings are apprehended at eye-level, their measure is deceptive and uncertain. Eden points to a particular rock that he suggests is in actuality about 4m high on a human scale, condensed here to a half-metre rectangle on the canvas. Various shapes and formations - cubist, trapezoidal and rhombille emerge, jutting and receding from the viewing plane. These are real places, but they are no longer locatable.

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[3] Archean - From the Greek word αρχή (archē), meaning 'beginning, origin'. Presently there are 4 Eons as defined in Geological Time Scales – Hadean, Archean, Proterozoic, Phanerozoic. Artist Leonardo Da Vinci was among the first to dispute the idea that the biblical myth of 'deluge' was responsible for placing down fossil deposits, and suggested they were covered over by movements of the earth itself. The *Geological Time Scale* as defined at present was only settled on 110 years ago, in 1913. Currently, we have four defined Eons, and as of April 2022, 10 defined eras. For more, see
https://archive.org/details/ageofearth00holmuoft/page/x/mode/2up

[4] Fire stick farming by Indigenous peoples diversified the plant and animal species at Karajini and determined the non-human lifeforms that can be found there. For more on Indigenous culture and requirements to visit, see
https://www.karijiniexperience.com/things-to-know/cultural-awareness/

[5] Ibid.

In the absence of a contained perspective, we re-orient visual pleasure as the organising principle of the work and attend instead to the affective potential of the paint itself. The extension of Eden's drawings to the edges of the canvas releases us from looking at landscapes as hermetically sealed discrete objects or something to be conquered – here, there will always be the portion which escapes. The persistent north/south orientation of these paintings implies expanse, further-ness, rather than a contained and containing compositional box. Something here is intangible, amorphous, without a referent. The artist cites painter Idris Murphy (b.1949) who says the square is 'less romantic' than the rectangle.

This seriousness of vision is matched with a *playfulness* and joy in the rotation of the square canvas to a diamond shape, as Eden spins one around in the studio. The strange angularity of the diagonal edge is an unusual and *dare-I-say* ultimately fun manoeuvre. It almost edges towards *scopophilia* – in the original sense, of pleasure-in-looking, without the moralistic or egotistical implications that the oft-preferred *voyeurism* implies. Laura Mulvey infamously identified the position of the spectator revolving around our 'pre-existing patterns of fascination'[6] and whilst she referred to cinema (the moving image), I think the same way of seeing applies here. I am just old enough to recall when *Play School* (the Australian children's television show) added the diamond window to the existing three viewpoints (of a circle, square and arch shapes) that allowed for forays into more exotic and esoteric worlds. This move was met with some controversy– "Just gonna say it - the arch is the only good Play School window" reads one headline, and "What your favourite Play School window says about you" teases another.[7] Despite the solid efforts of abstract painters in the '60s in using such unconventionally shaped canvasses to emphasise flatness, we still aren't quite used to this diamond perspective, this way of looking or of having-our-looking-outlined.

Eden says "I used to make pictures of things. Now I make things we call pictures." In these representations, Eden has found his voice. The Karijini paintings are worked but not laboured over, usually completed in one-to-three sittings. They are visually delightful, expressive as well as measured, as attuned to feeling and memory as they are to imparting skilful depiction. Eden is a mountain biker and trail runner, and I can't help but wonder if the whirring speeds he reaches have informed his way of visualising and recording – moving-though-space, colours flashing, the solid lines of trees shifting and echoing, come the indicative pause at a particularly picturesque grotto or abandoned site. In feeling-for-place matched with abstract emphasis, he most closely recalls the abstract/figurative approach popularised by Australian painter Fred Williams (1927-1982) who 'absorbed the work of (Paul) Cezanne, (Henri) Matisse, and the Cubists.'[8] So too absorb this approach did Eden's father, who was the highly regarded British landscape artist Max Eden (1923-2011). Eden Sr met Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp and Marc Chagall, knew Dali

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[6] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', originally in *Screen* 16:3, Autumn 1975. https://ia802801.us.archive.org/4/items/visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema/Laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema.pdf

[7] The persistence of outrage at this idea is evident in articles as recent as 2021; see entertainment website Pedestrian TV https://www.pedestrian.tv/entertainment/just-gonna-say-it-play-school-arch-window/ and online magazine Mama Mia from 2015 https://www.mamamia.com.au/play-school-windows/. The arched window also has its own unofficial Facebook page.

[8] National Gallery of Australia, *Infinite Horizons Fred Williams* https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/fred-williams/

personally from time spent in the Spanish artists' commune of Cadaquez.[9] He too, was an art teacher, and shared an exhibition with John in 1991.

Remarkably, John Eden began painting in this manner only recently - in 2020, due to a period of quarantine isolation. Writing 20 years before the onset of Covid-19, cultural critic Rita Felski noted that "To be suddenly deprived of the rhythm of one's personal routines… can be a source of profound disorientation and distress."[10] Eden speaks of an immense anxiety during 2020 and of a nine-day period before he could bring himself to create. A sense of dislocation and maturity is profound in the work. A holiday or voyage, as one may take to Karijini, is oft also a disruption of the rhythm of personal routines, but one that is knowingly chosen. Something else is at stake here in these works, more a haunting. The paintings in *Water and Time* contour, fracture and undulate; themselves created in a time of upheaval. In turn, they demand looking over time. To gaze (from the French *le regard*) means to have respect, to look extendedly, to consider with care, to connect. Eden's way of painting is an *antidote to* and *synthesis of* the maelstrom world of constant flux we otherwise inhabit.

The artist himself refers to his paintings by way of 'degrees of attachment versus detachment to the images' they represent. He achieves his shakier lines literally from a distance, by using a long brush armed with additional armature, choosing unpredictability. Eden champions the whim of chance, enforcing self-imposed parameters regarding colours – he picks them often at random, mixes occasionally, and hates muddiness. The layering results in occasional tonal irregularities and shadows, aided by the smudge of charcoal. Occasionally he draws with found charcoal and a cricket ball – its leather skin another one of those universally-known-in-our-lives but entirely-taken-for-granted means of structured enjoyment, here employed differently.[11] The act of smudging, of erasing with water, of spraying aerosols add a slurring uncertainty to the edges of Eden's shapes and lines and evince an affinity for surface. Compositions elongate and disappear, rivulets swerve, abseil and rumple across the canvas. The marks here have valency; they are visual chords rather than notes, beset with a vividness and interiority that is entirely genuine.

At the heart of all of these works is a love for drawing. Returning to Saltz, who says, 'if you can write, you already know how to draw; you already have a form of your own, a style of making letters and numbers and special doodles.'[12] And yet, drawing is no longer an entirely pragmatic skill – cartography (incidentally Fred William's idea of the 'only universal mark') is entirely redundant since the advent of GPS; faithful representations of scale and perspective superseded by the camera. Those two supposed immediate and

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[9] Information from John Eden and *Artists in Britain Since 1945* by David Buckman, from Art Dictionaries Ltd, Sansom & Company. For more see https://artuk.org/discover/artists/eden-max-19232014

[10] Rita Felski. 'The Invention of Everyday Life' in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, NYU Press, 2000. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=865460

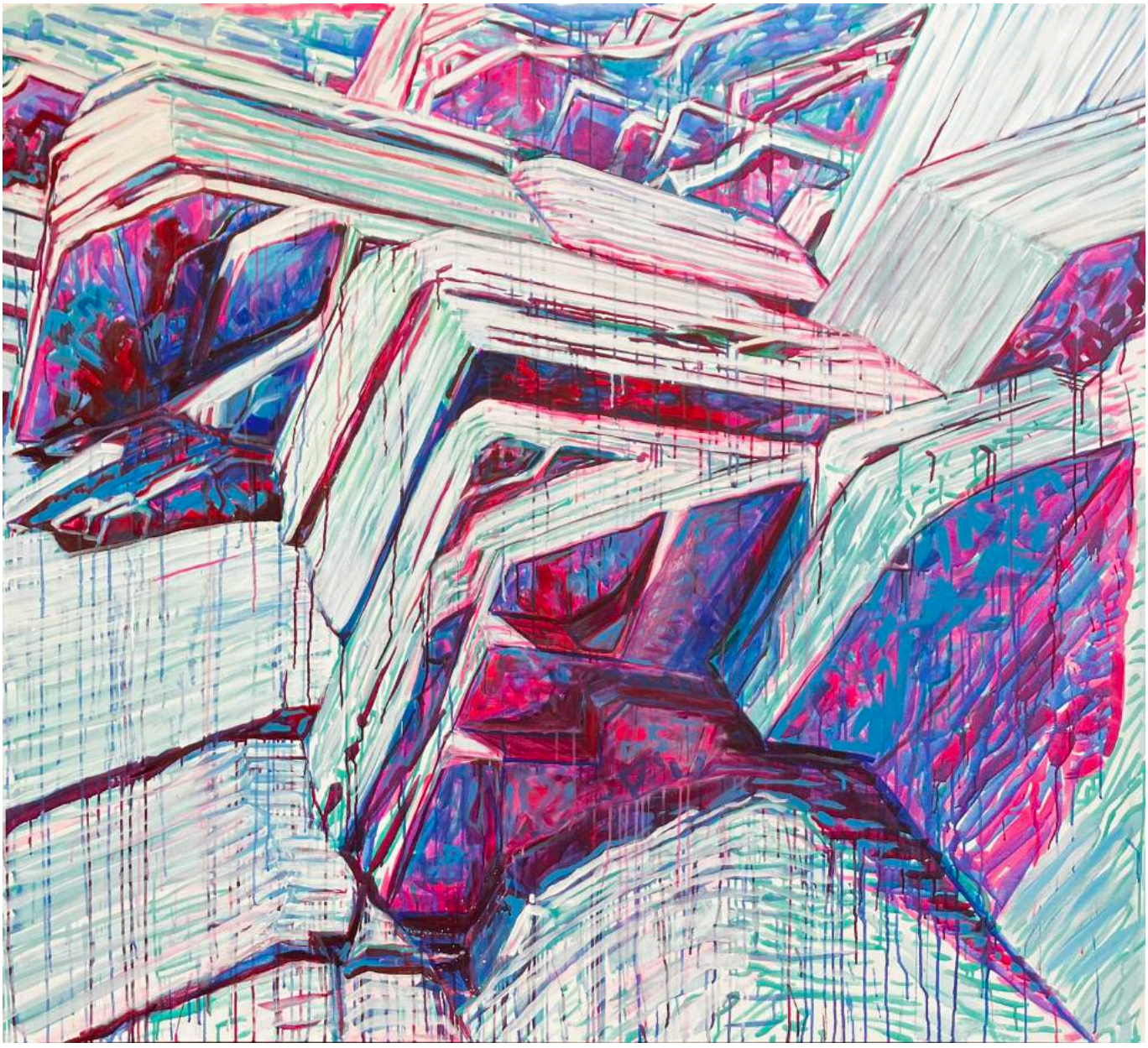
[11] The sport of cricket is believed to have originated as a children's game as early as the 13th century, with the ball once presumably a stone. Cricket is the national summer sport of England, a distinct colonial import to Australia, and despite appearing endless and very boring on the surface, is in fact a game of highly considered strategy that relies on use of time as well as skill.

[12] Jerry Saltz, originally published in *How to be an Artist,* 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/jerry-saltz-how-to-be-an-artist.html

direct tools which always accompany our holidays or journeys into unfamiliar territories; and yet, aesthetically speaking, now offer us very little. Not so John Eden, who moves past mere visual literacy into sense-making and gives us something else – vision, unalloyed.

And so, despite the implied impasse inherent in its lack of pragmatism and the very word itself [*to draw* is both to pull closer, to take out and to be at a state of even-ness] – we remain attracted to the unpredictability, directness and immediacy of drawing. In drawing, the act of production and its result are connected, inseparable, owing purely to the artists' hand. Drawing, like playing cricket or watching TV or going on holiday, simply, is part of our everyday lives, entirely self-evident and entirely puzzling. Eden's drawings both 'promise and withdraw symbolism and actuality.'[13] His work plays out observations and memories in a to-and-fro between *attachment to* and *refusal for* representation. *Water and Time* is what made Karijini, and water and time is what makes these paintings. The result is a pensive, playful and entirely unpretentious body of work from a most promising artist.

[13] For more on the interaction between abstract and figurative modes of representation, see https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-23/death-and-the-found-object



John EDEN. *A Design For Life,* 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 180CM. A$ 3,500

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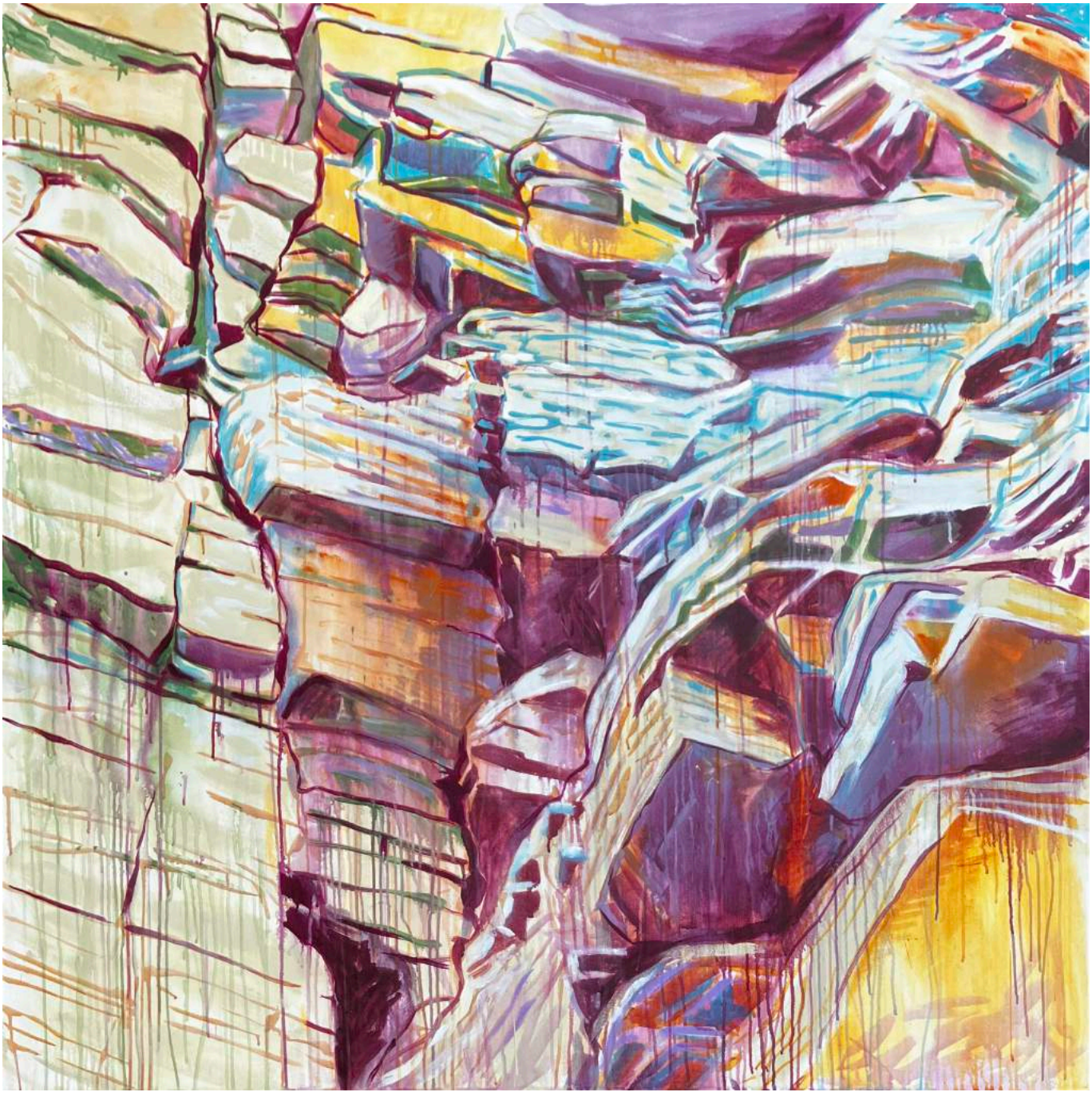
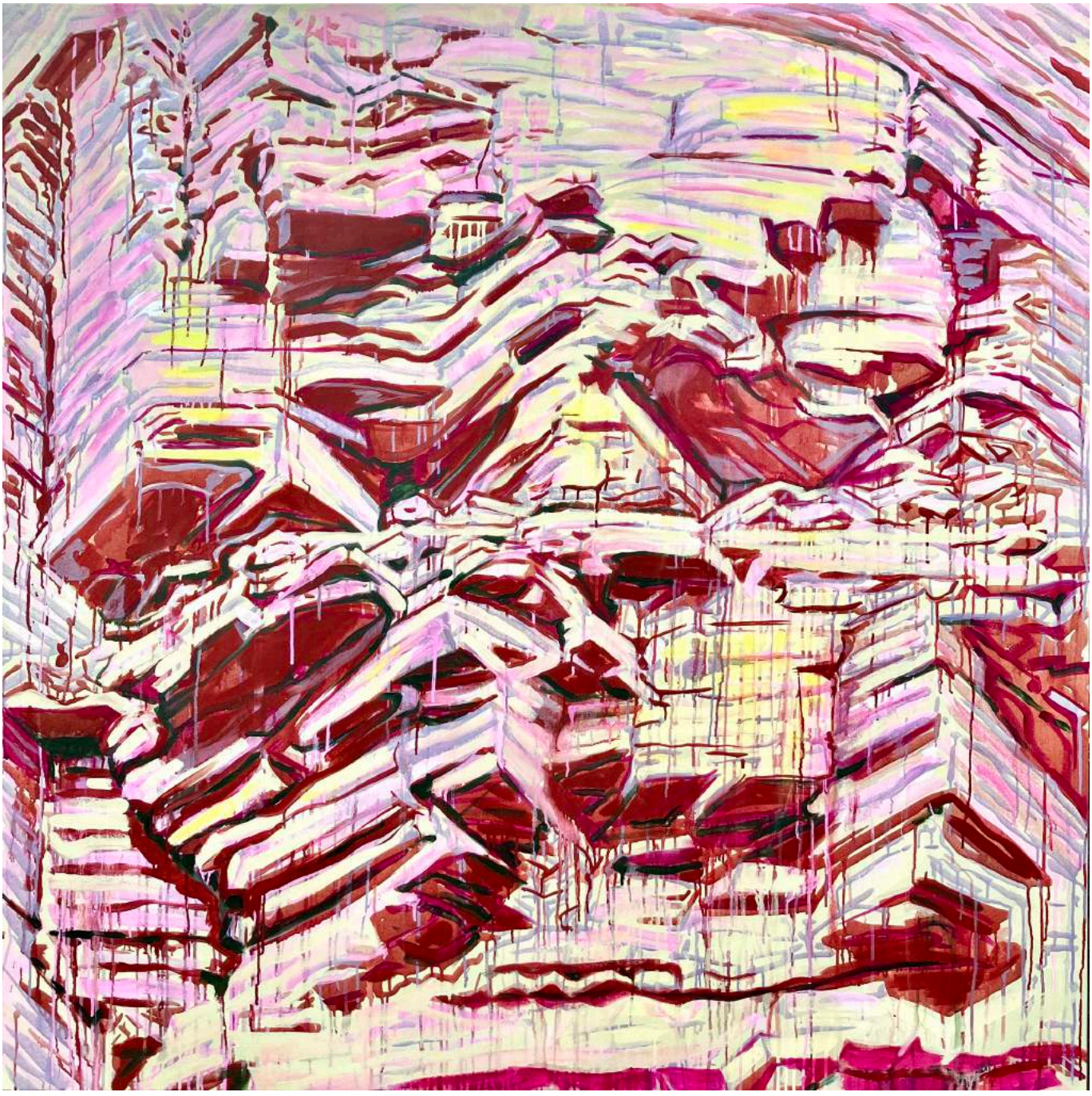
John EDEN. *Breath Away*, 2023. Acrylic on raw canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800



John EDEN. *Beauty Thing,* 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800



John EDEN. *Gold Road,* 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800

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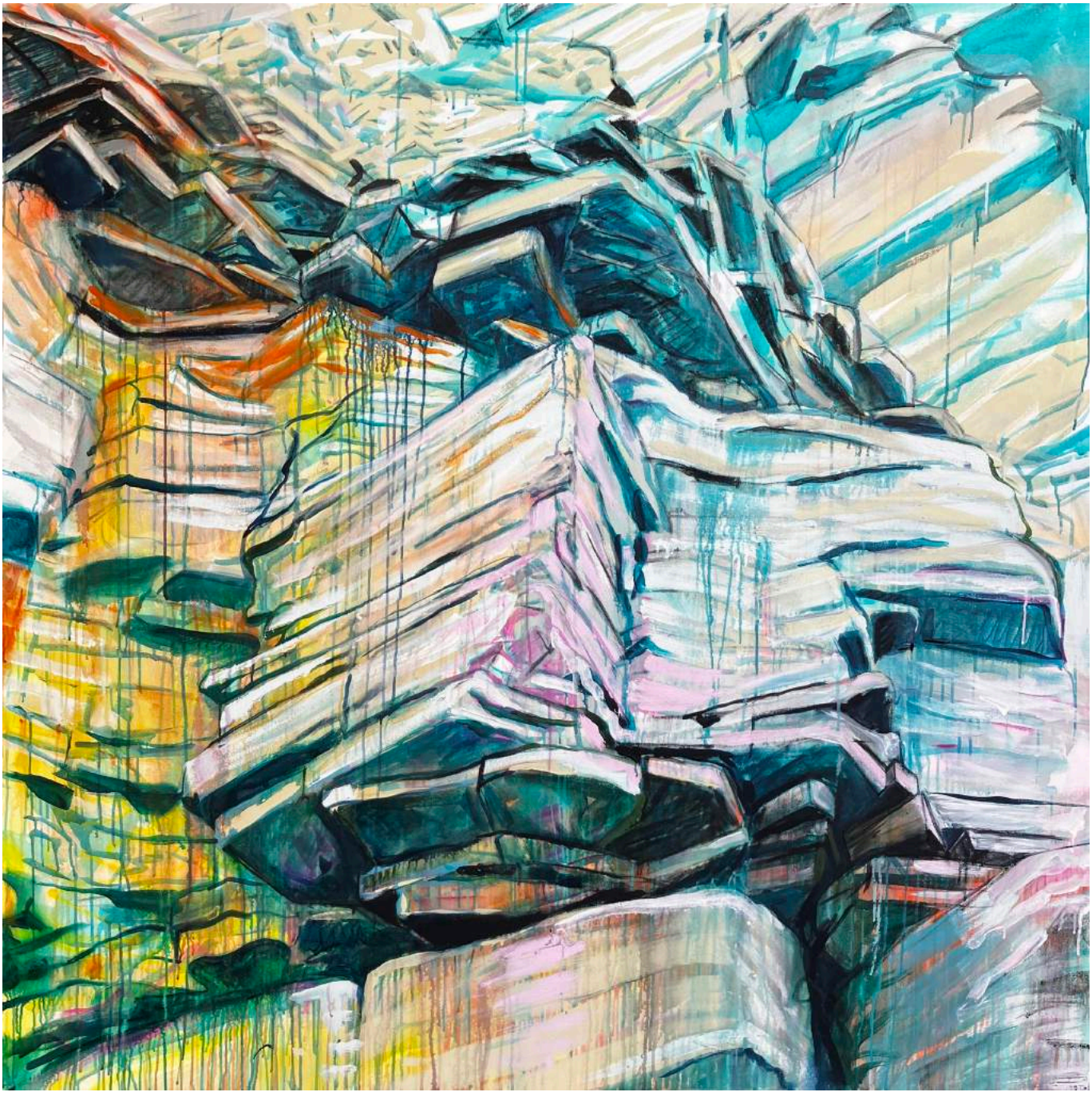
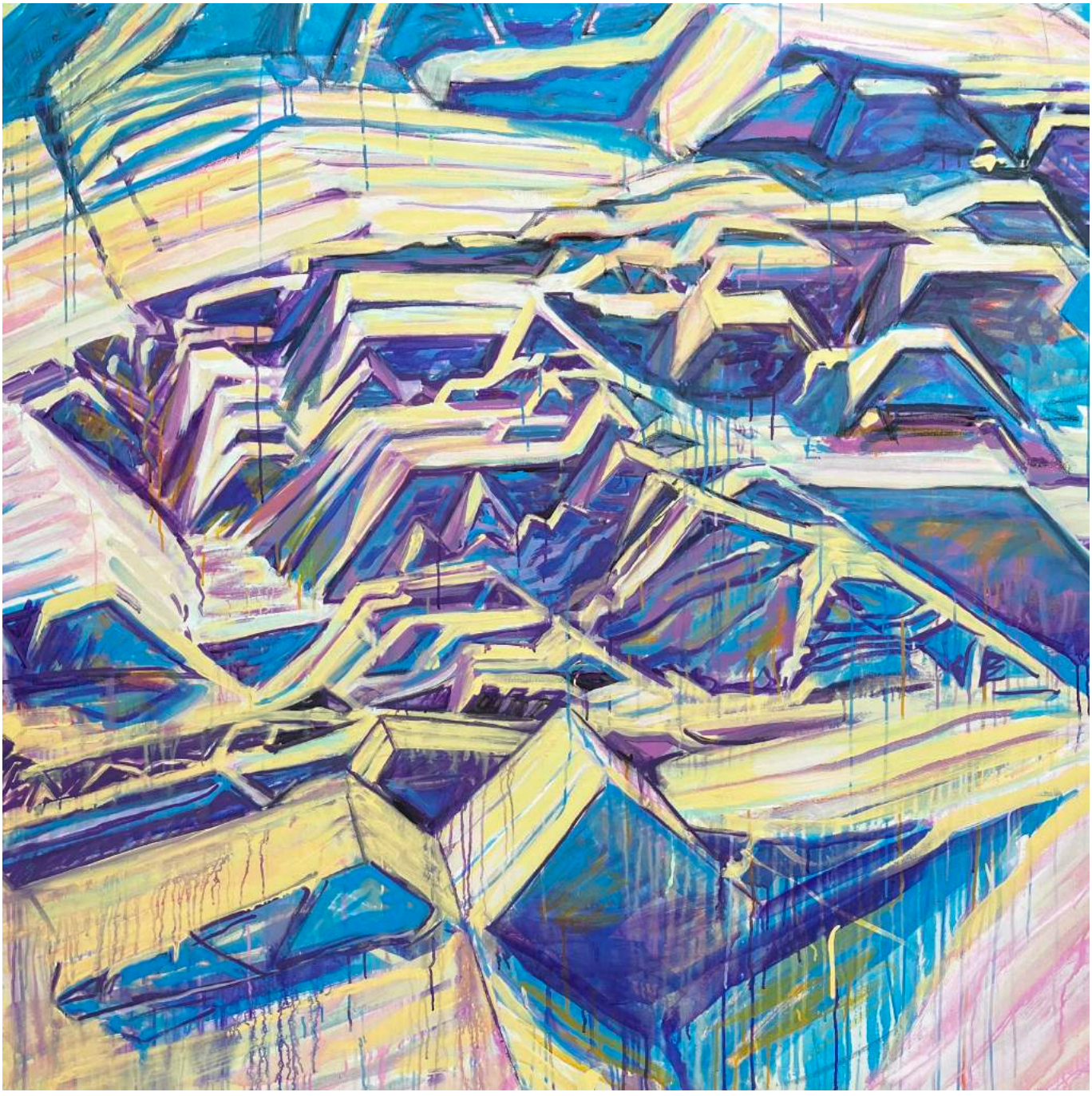
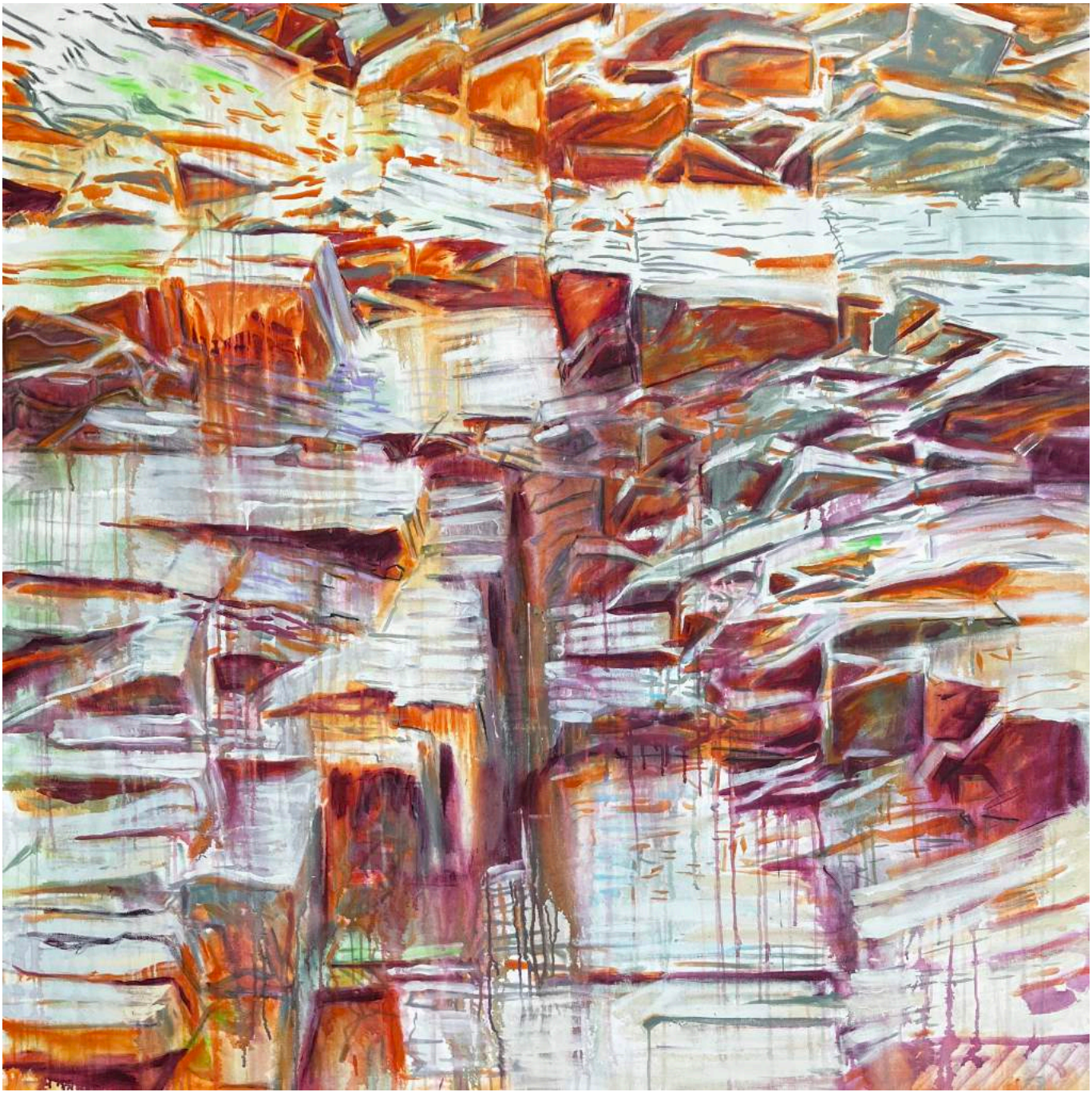


John EDEN. *Know How,* 2023. Acrylic, spray paint, paint pen and charcoal on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800



John EDEN. *Permanent Record,* 2023. Acrylic, paint pen and charcoal on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800



John EDEN. *Without Pause,* 2023. Acrylic, spray paint, paint pen and charcoal on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800

John EDEN. *End Of,* 2023. Acrylic, paint pen and charcoal on canvas, 160 x 160CM. A$ 2,800

John EDEN. *Gold Road Study,* 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100CM. A$ 1,600

John EDEN. *Break of D,* 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100CM. A$ 1,600

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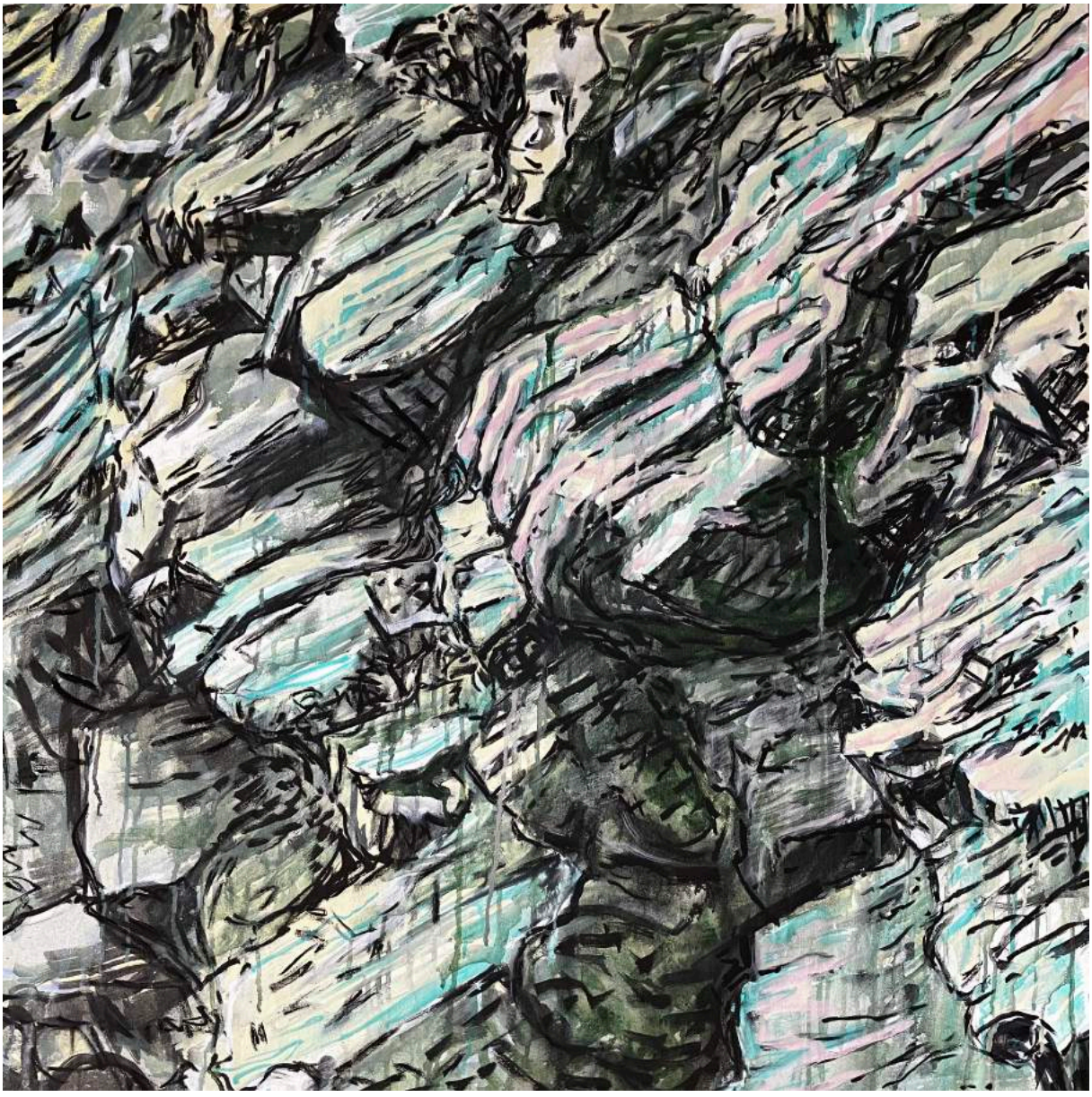
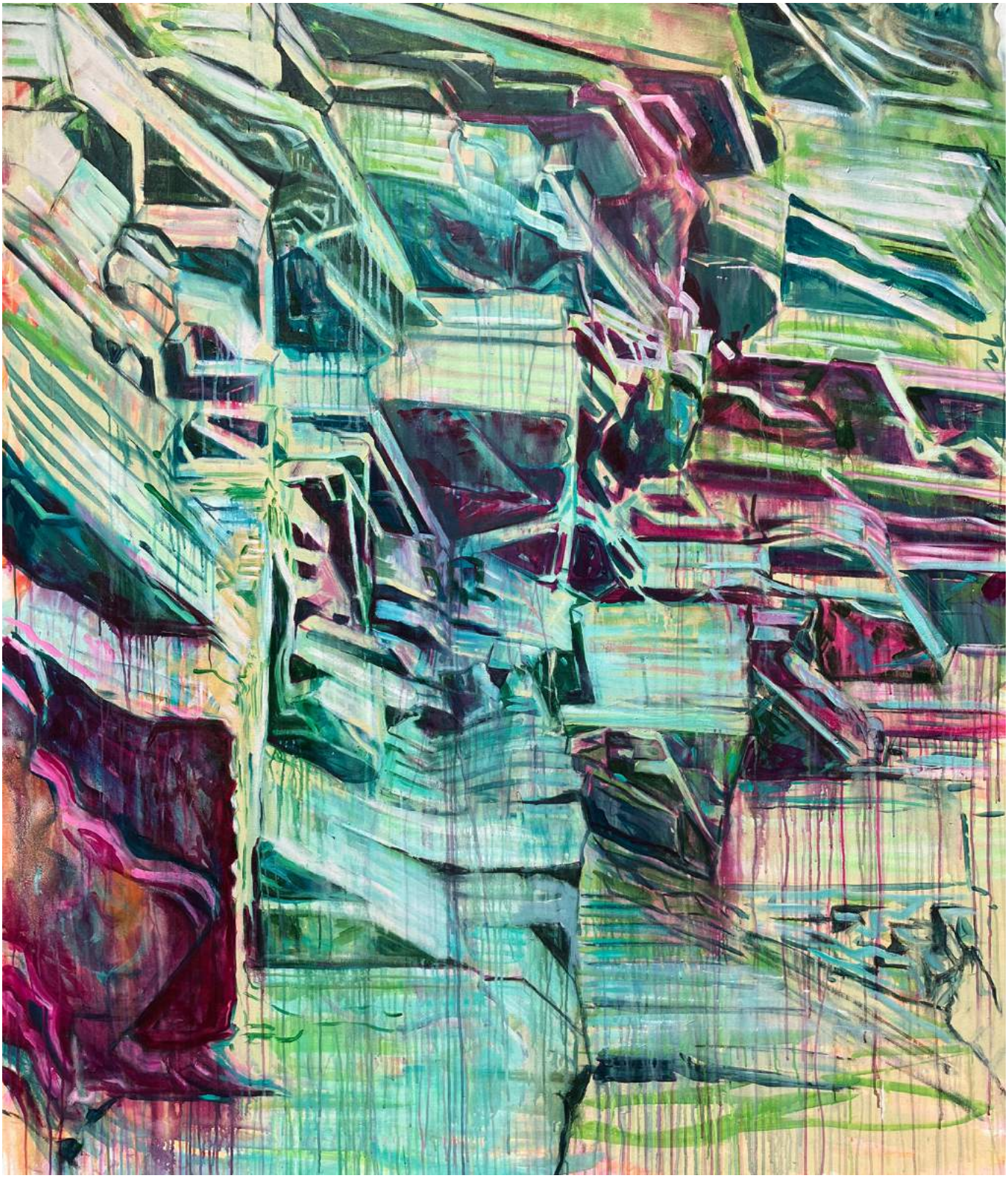


John EDEN. *Silly Thing,* 2023. Acrylic, paint pen and charcoal on canvas, 100 x 100CM. A$ 1,600

John EDEN. *4 of Diamonds,* 2023. Acrylic, spray paint and paint pen on canvas, 91 x 91CM. A$ 1,200

John EDEN. *Rabbit Hole,* 2023. Acrylic, paint pen, spray paint and charcoal on canvas, 91 x 91CM. A$ 1,200



John EDEN. *Long Story Short,* 2023. Acrylic, spray paint and charcoal on canvas, 192 x 160CM. A$ 3,800

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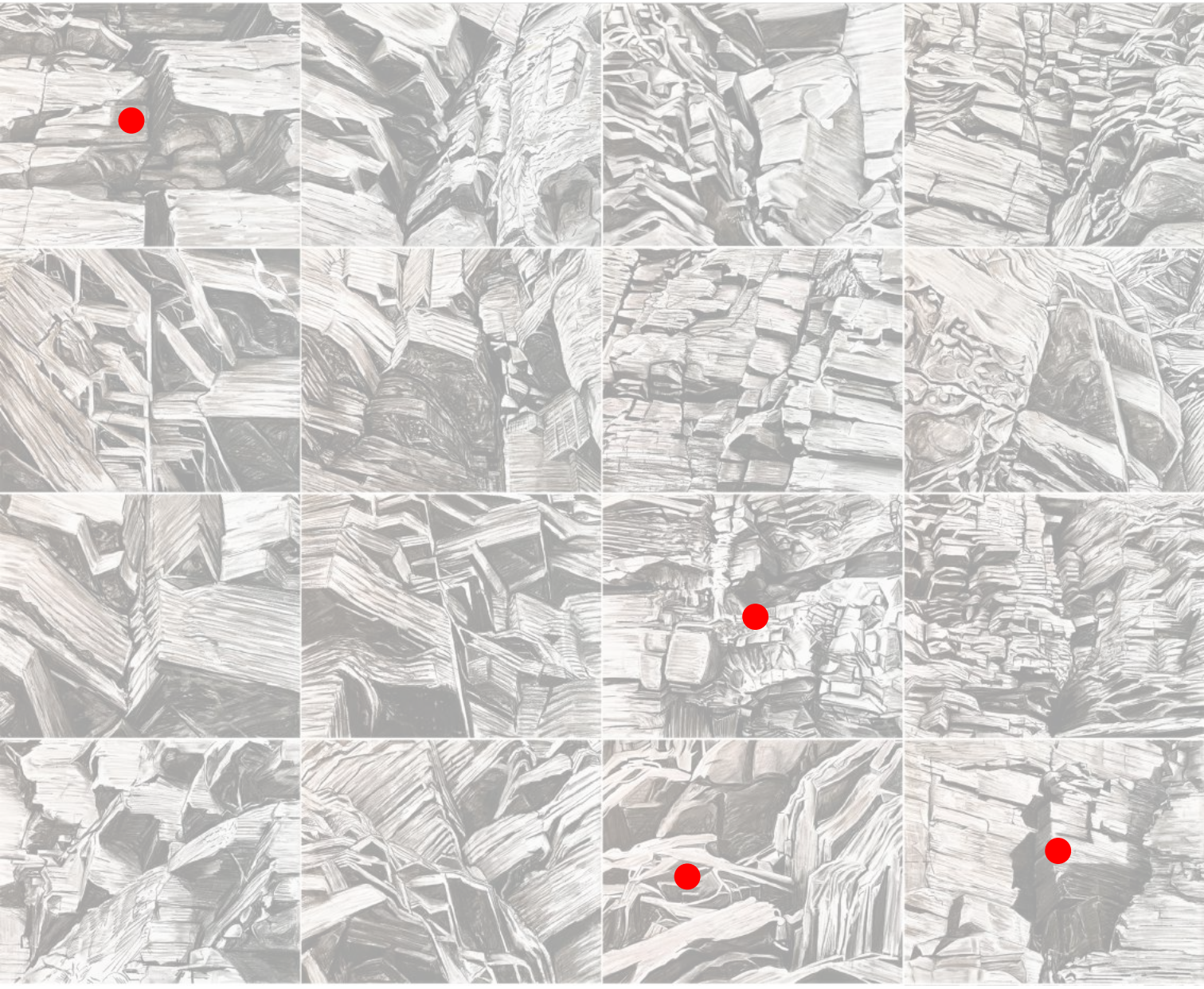
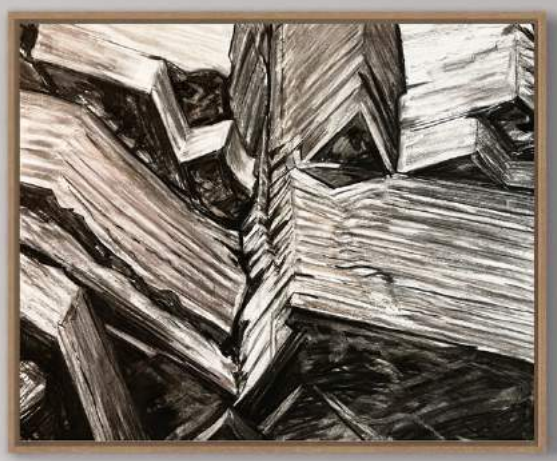
John EDEN. *Dreaming 13 - 28,* 2022. Charcoal and cricket ball on paper, 56 x 68CM. A$ 600 each *framed*



John EDEN. *Dreaming (detail) 21,* 2022. Charcoal and cricket ball on paper, 56 x 68CM. A$ 600 *framed*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John EDEN. *Dreaming (detail) 28,* 2022. Charcoal and cricket ball on paper, 56 x 68CM. A$ 600 *framed*

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KolbuszSpace respects and acknowledges the Whadjuk Noongar people past, present and future as the traditional carers of the land where the space is situated, and supports their hopes for the future, the positive role arts can contribute to this, and the wellbeing of all of us together.

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