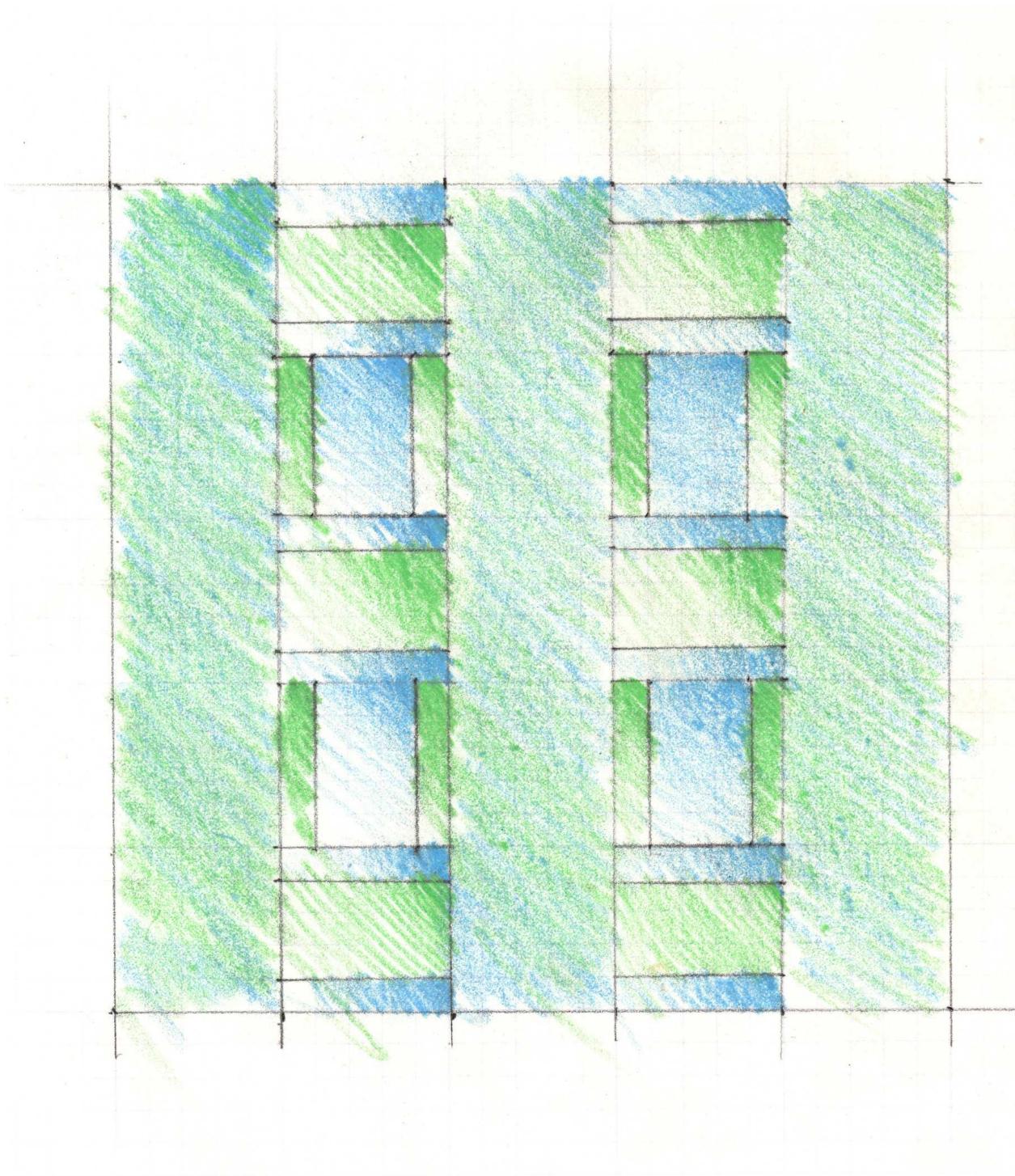


Bonnie Bronson

Grids

**Randal Davis
Kassandra Kelly**

BONNIE BRONSON



Bonnie Bronson
Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [blue-green boxes] 1987
Graphite & colored pencil on paper, 7 x 7 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Grids
Bonnie Bronson

Randal Davis
Kassandra Kelly

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Designed and photographed by Randal Davis.

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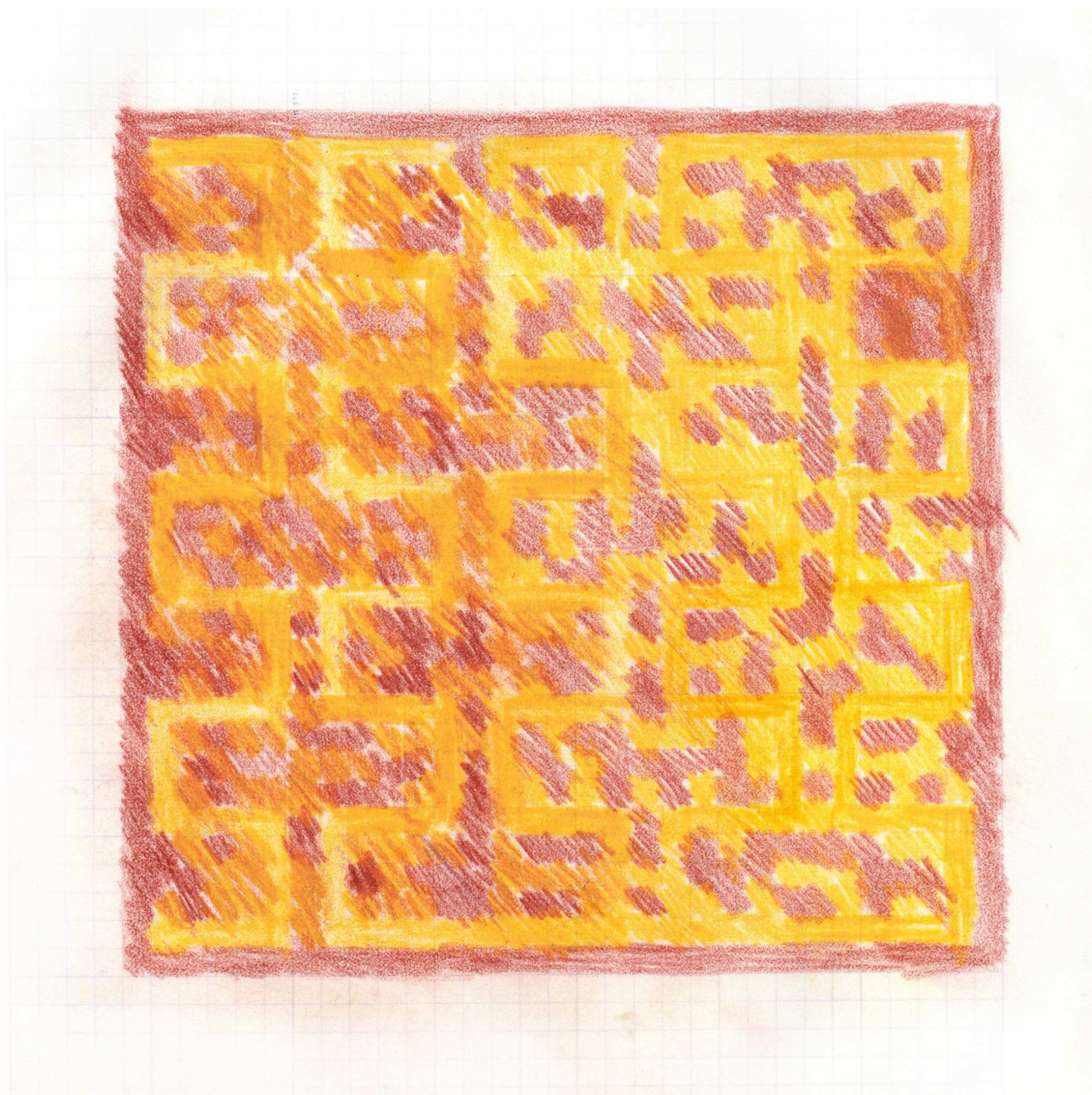
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"What Remains" copyright Kassandra Kelly, 2014.

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In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).

Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde"



Bonnie Bronson
Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [gold labyrinth] 1987
Graphite & colored pencil on paper, 7 x 7 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Randal Davis

Found

This folio of ten mixed media drawings were packed together by the artist, confirming what is otherwise apparent to the eye, that they comprise an integrally related series. None of the works are dated or titled. It is probable that they were made in 1985-86, based on some clear similarities to dated sketchbook materials, and more general similarities in palette effects to the subsequent 1987 designs for the *Nepali Carpet* project.

The paper stock is of consistent type but the overall sizes varied considerably and eccentrically, suggesting that they were perhaps originally executed on larger sheets and cut apart. All seem to have been hung in the studio (pinholes), most in different horizontal and vertical orientations. The numbering of the works was not done by the artist and should therefore be thought arbitrary, though an evident convenience. So too are the axial orientations, unless explicit from the pin marks, a point amplified in "About the Grid."

The drawings are identical in size and basic structure; the image area is 6 inches square, divided into 16 equal squares. These smaller squares are, in nearly every case, filled by a circle, typically of the same diameter as the square. There is some variation here, though, as *II* and *VI* use circles quite smaller and there are instances (*IV* in particular) of the demising square interrupting the circumference.

Additionally, half of the series (*IV, V, VI, VII, IX*) offset multiple diamond shapes, incised in black ink, against the generally muted color pencil field. These sometimes do not affect the background (*IV* and *IX*) but may also contain radical changes in palette (*V, VI, VII*).

Most of the series (*I, II, III, V, VIII* and *X*) are all-over compositions, meaning that the similarity between any two adjacent of the 16 squares is likely very high (and, conspicuously, the diamond shapes do not occur). A corollary to this is that when one or more of the compass quadrants (NW, NE, SE, SW) is devoid of incident, a diamond shape is likely to occur at or very near the center of the 4 x 4 grid. Again, these, and other ramifications of the internal structures of the series, will be continued in "About the Grid."

The variation in sheet sizes might point to the fact that they had never been framed; there is, in any case, no record of them being exhibited in Bronson's lifetime. The *Grids* series was first shown in December 2010 at Winestock in Oregon City. Selections from the series were subsequently seen in *Works 1960-1990*, the Bonnie Bronson retrospective presented at Pacific Northwest College of Art in September 2011.

Kassandra Kelly

What Remains

When the *Grids* series was shown in December 2010, it was the first public exhibition of Bonnie Bronson's artwork in many years. Bonnie, my stepmother, died in 1990 in a climbing accident on Mt. Adams. Although influential and much loved at the time of her death, she had more or less slipped from view by the time Randal Davis began working with her archive and discovered the small trove of watercolors we called *Grids*.

We wanted to show the work in Bonnie's hometown, and at Winestock, a wine bar owned by Sarrah and Carlos Torres, a place Bonnie would have loved. What I found most remarkable about seeing the exhibition was not how much time had passed since 1990 but how little. The series looked immediate and alive, the colors and ideas full of questions. I felt that night and still feel is that Bonnie's engagement with her artwork continues, and the (brief) passage of time has only clarified the questions.

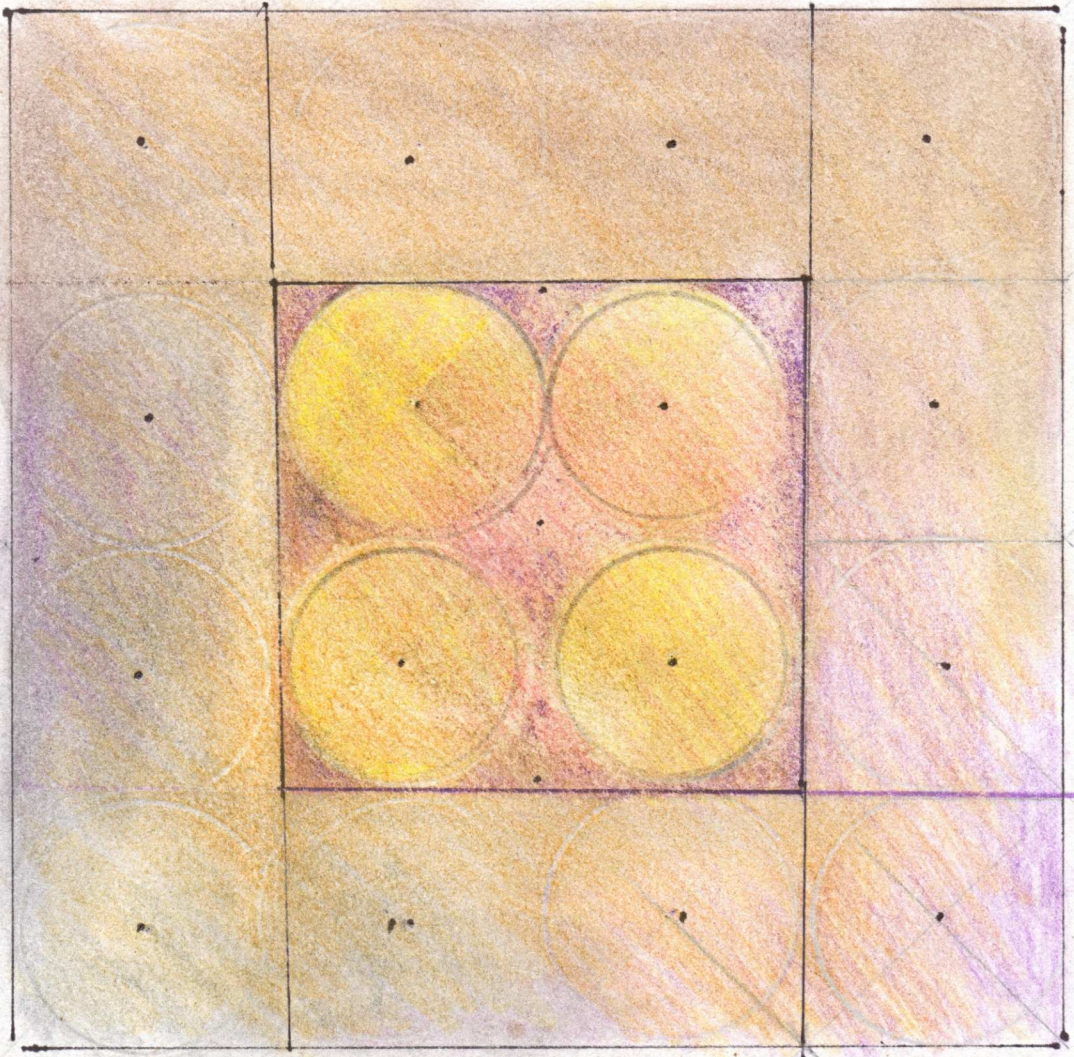
As the child of artists, chronology has always been my guide to understanding my parents' work. But I had never seen the *Grids* series, or if I had, the work must have seemed part of a whole and nothing new. Appearing as it did in 2010, *Grids* was both complete and completely unknown, challenging me to look at Bonnie's work from the middle out.

The exhibition at Winestock was the first of three events to bring Bonnie's work back into public view. The second was a major retrospective at the Pacific Northwest College of Art and the third a small show of early work at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery, both of which took place in 2011.

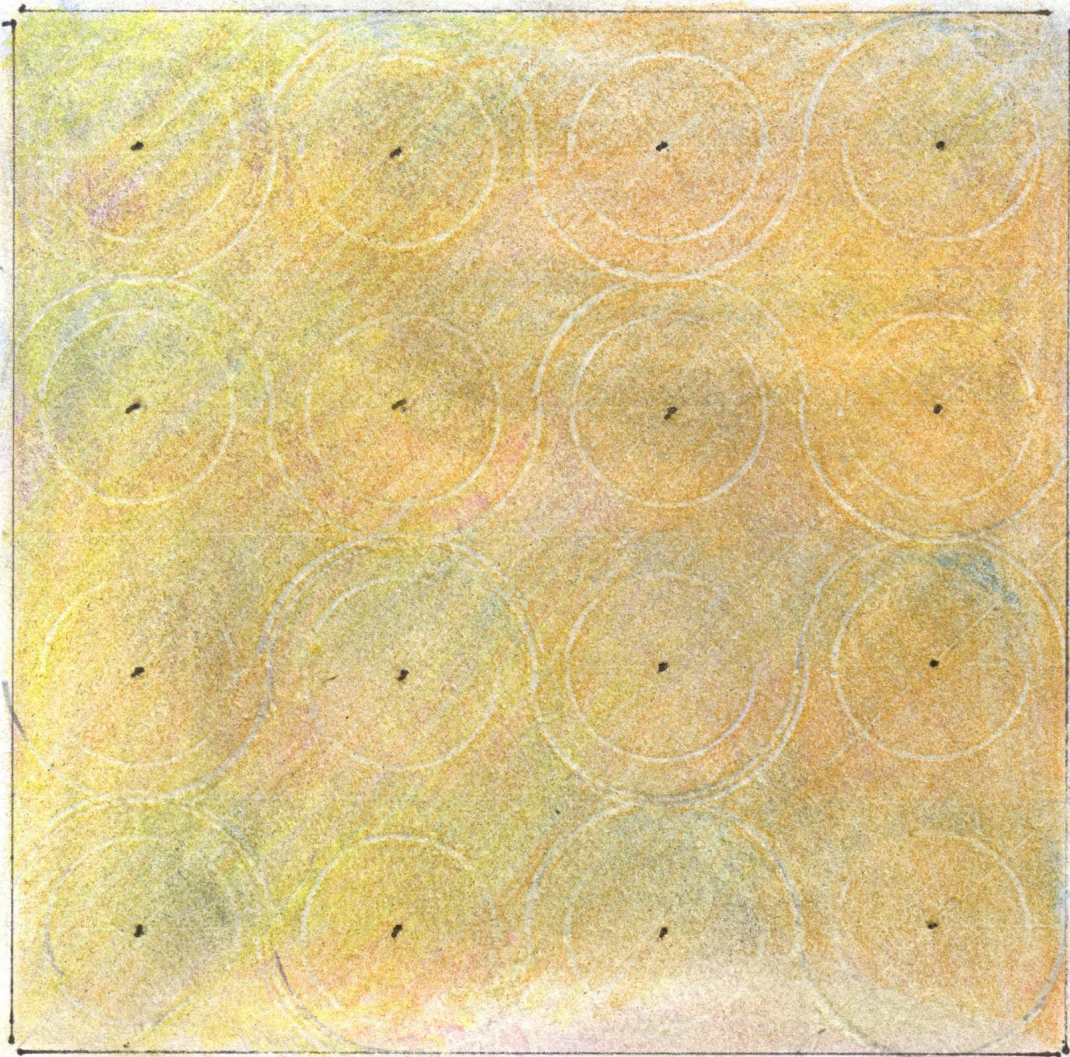
Since 2010, Winestock closed its doors after six good years. Works from the *Grids* exhibition were purchased by collectors from the Winestock show, some of whom knew Bonnie, but many who didn't. Randal continues to reflect on Bonnie's work and place it in a critical context, and this publication is a way to keep the series complete and the dialogue alive.

Bonnie herself is best known as the inspiration for the Bonnie Bronson Fund and its annual fellowship award to an artist living and working in the Pacific Northwest, created in 1991 as a memorial. Yet most people who receive the reward will know more about her tragic death than her artwork. While I understand this is the nature of time passing, I enjoy how *Grids*, created some time in the 1980's, opened Bonnie's work again, in a way that was unexpected, surprising, and beautiful.

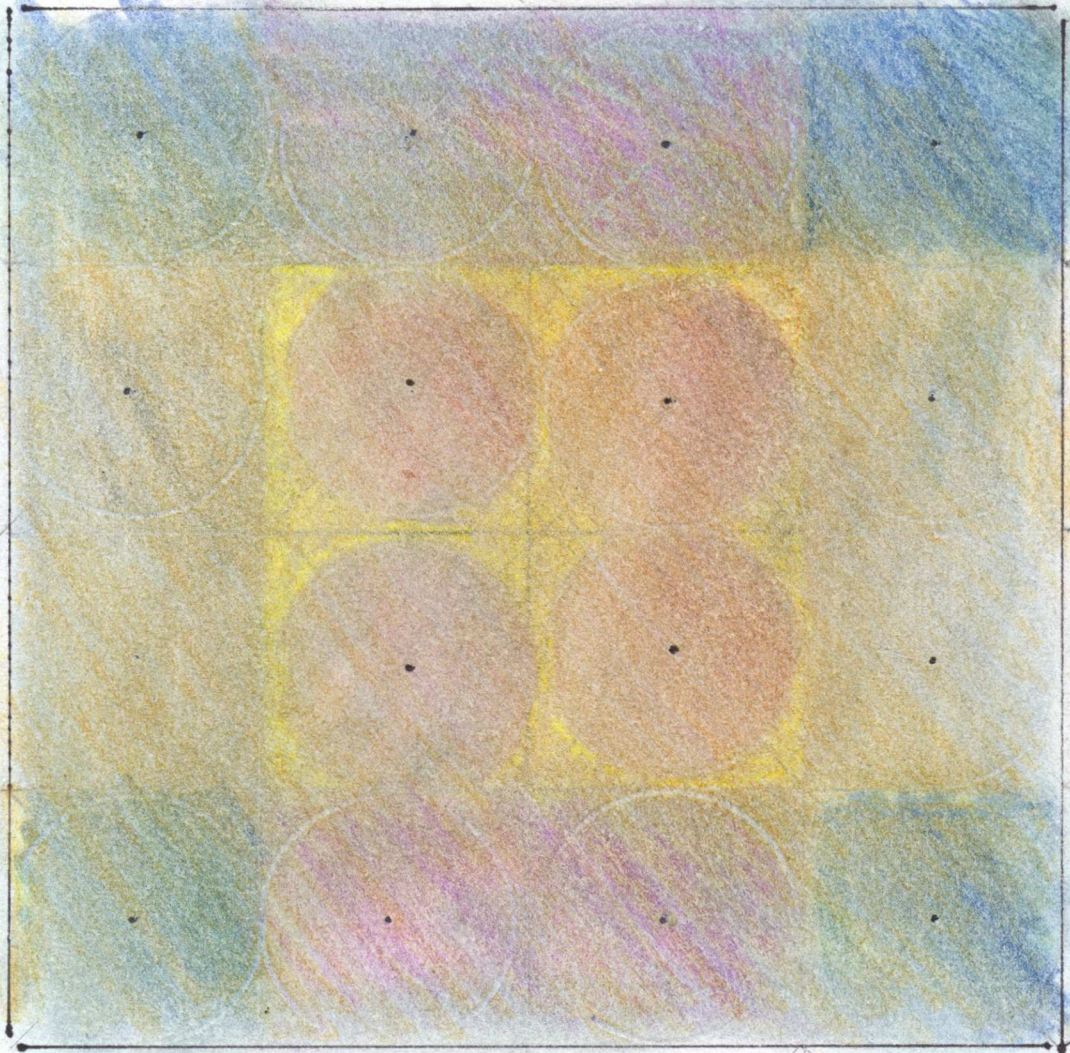
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled I [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson



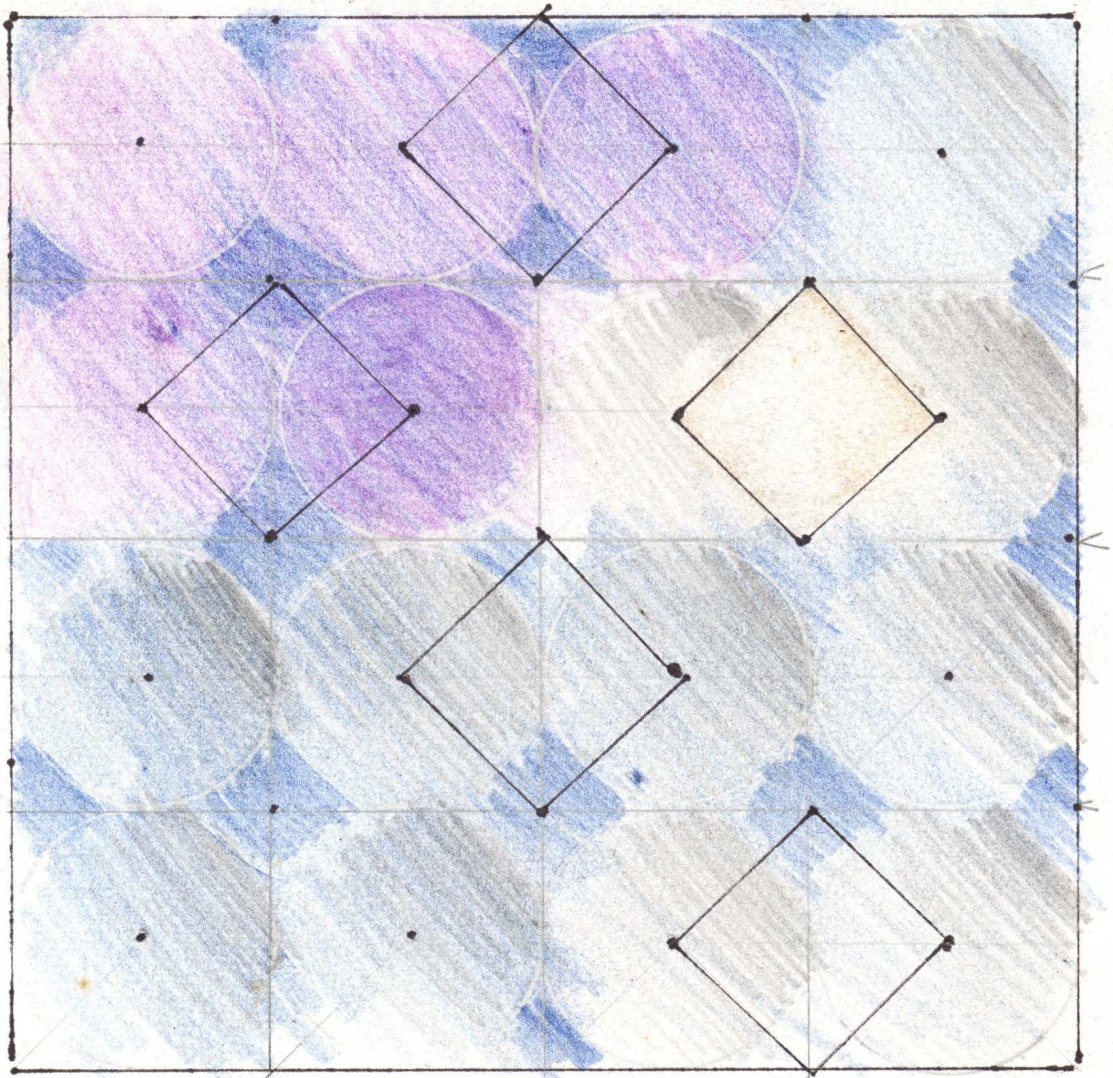
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled II [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Steve & Gail Ossowski



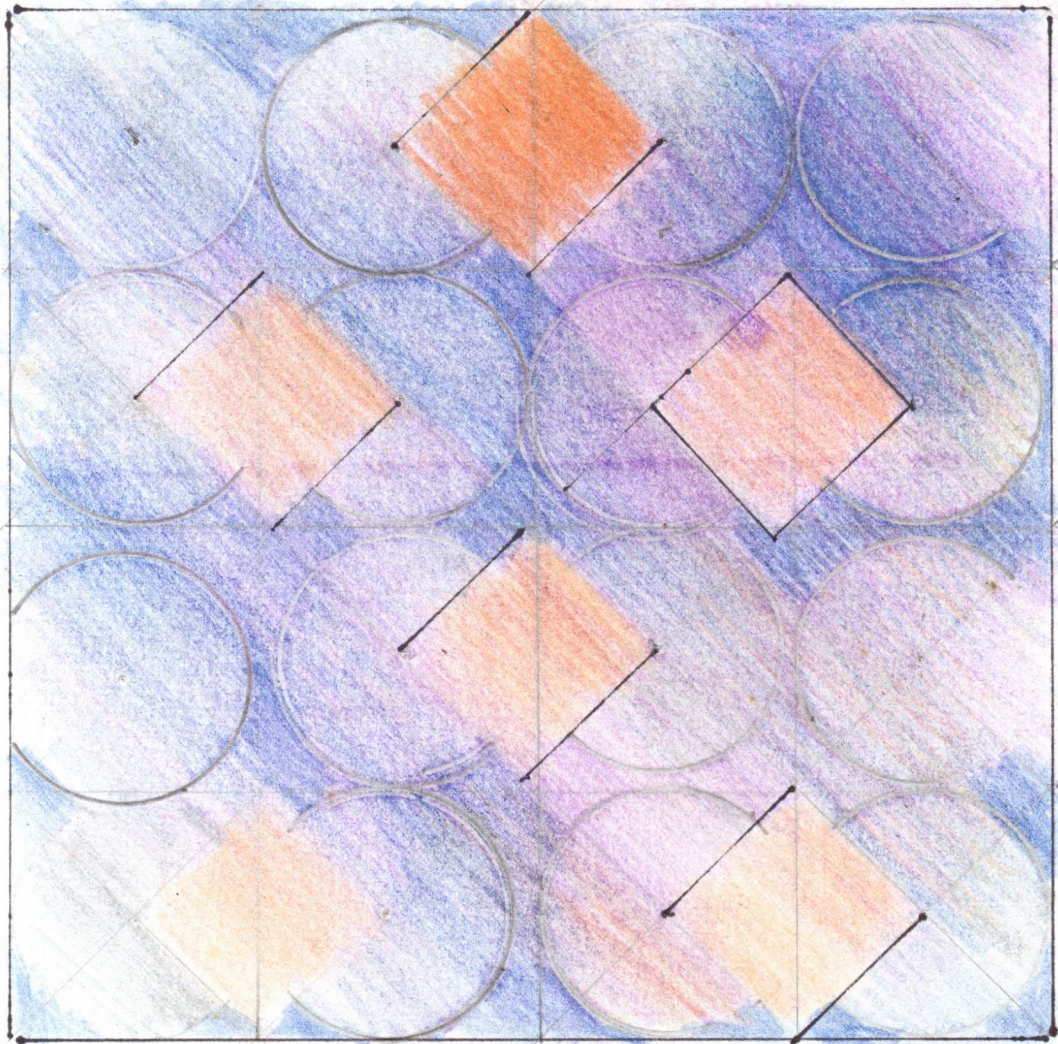
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled III [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Susan Hammer



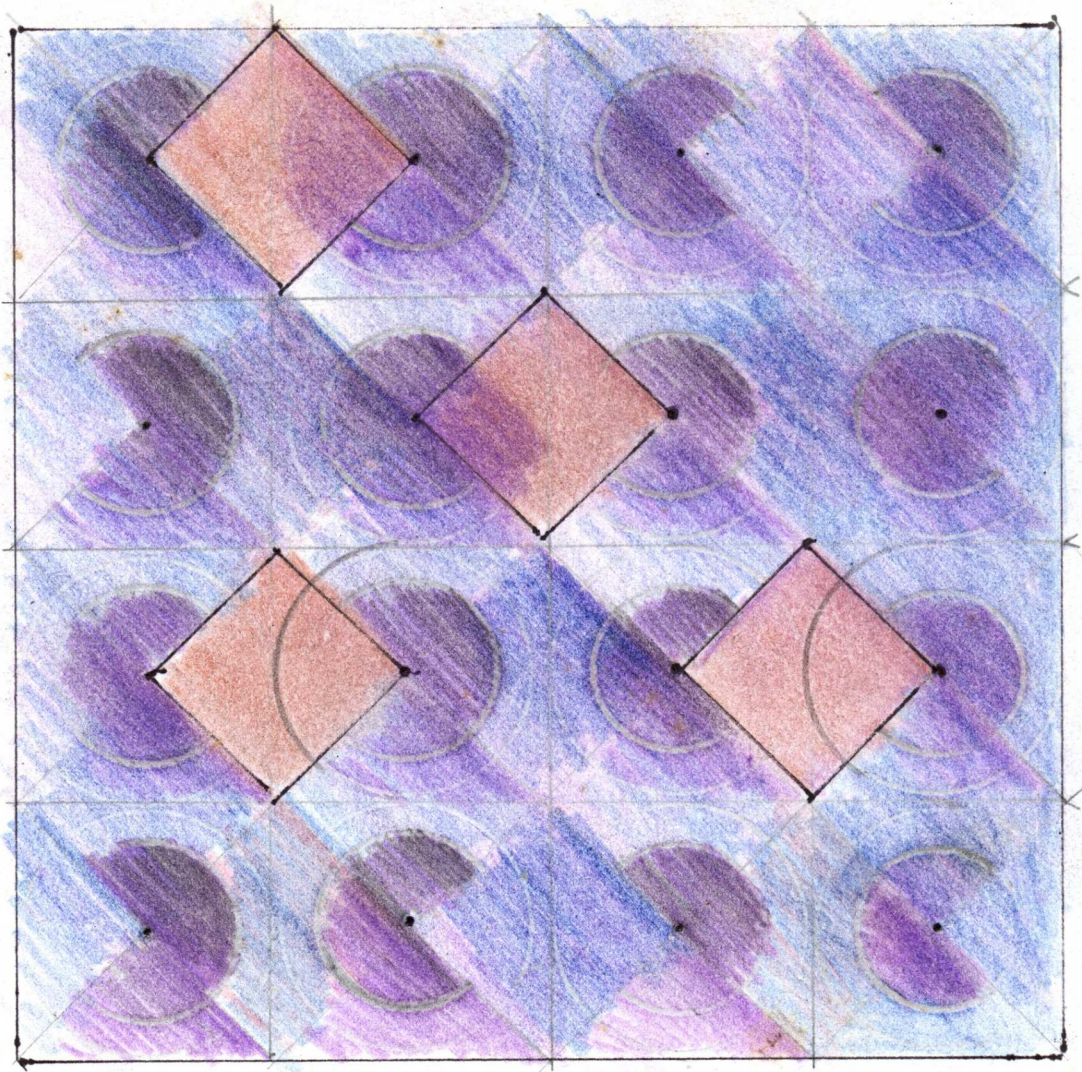
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled IV [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson



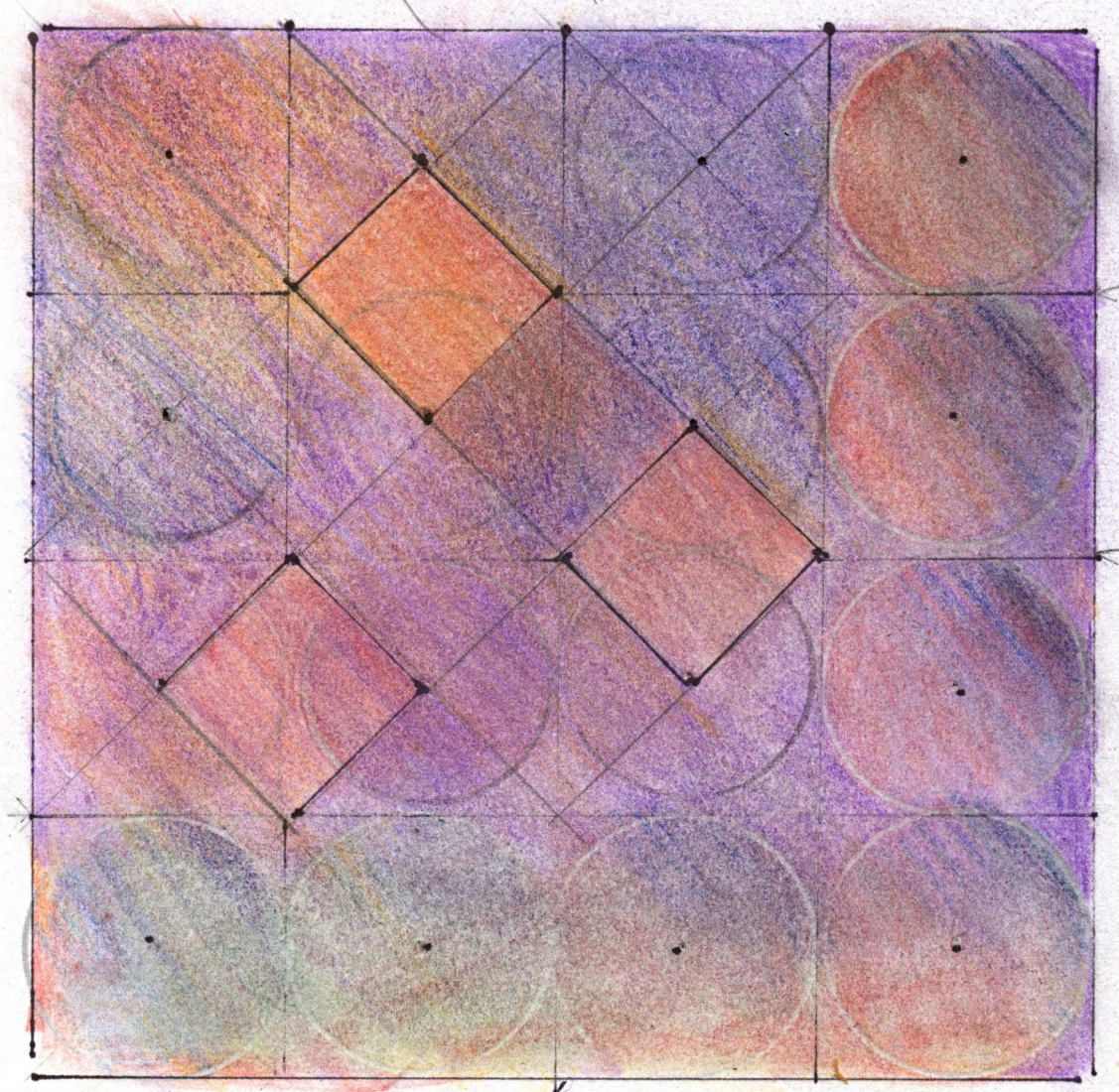
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled V [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Ted & Elaine Molskness



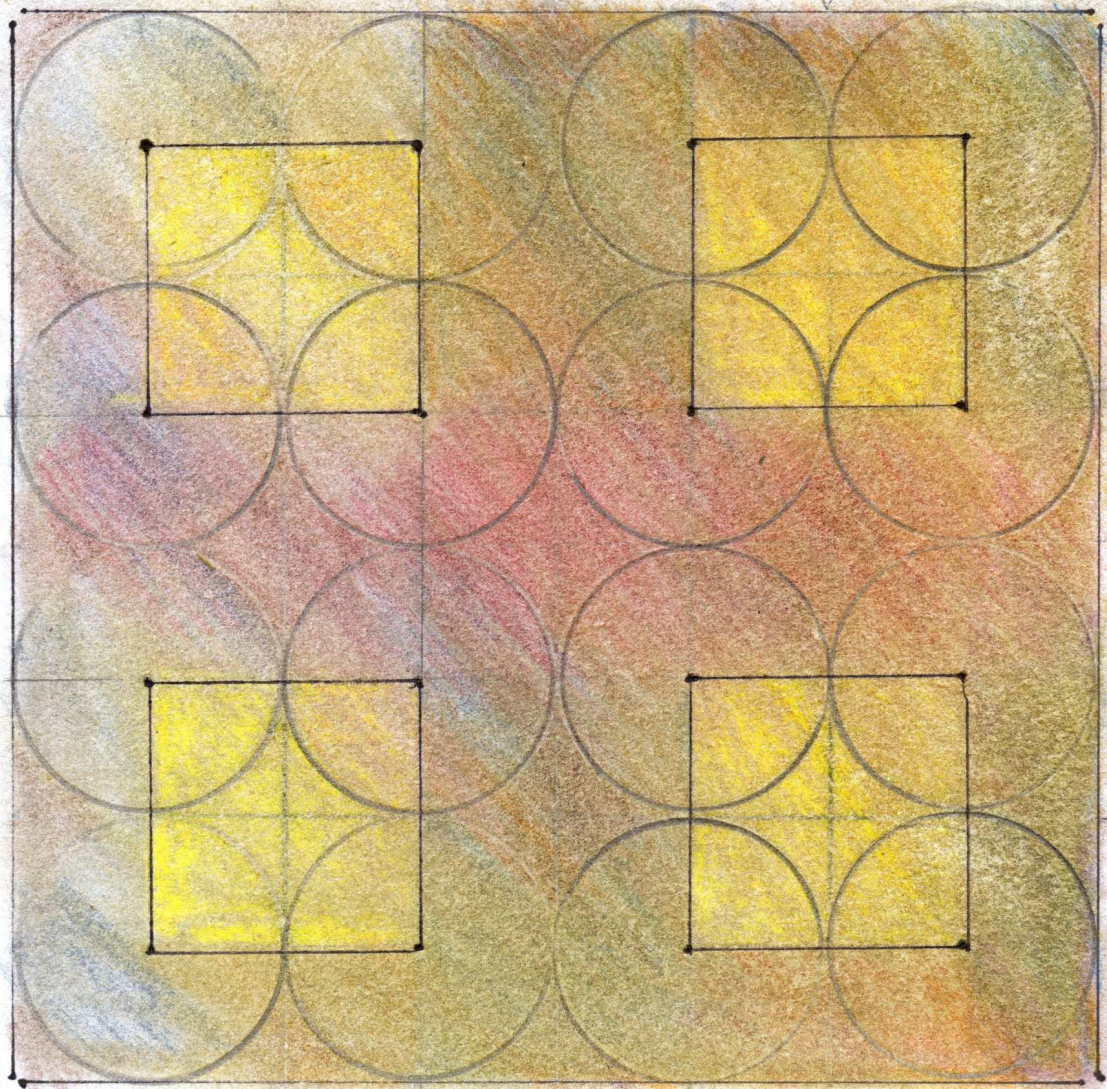
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled VI [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Keith & Teresa Chipperfield



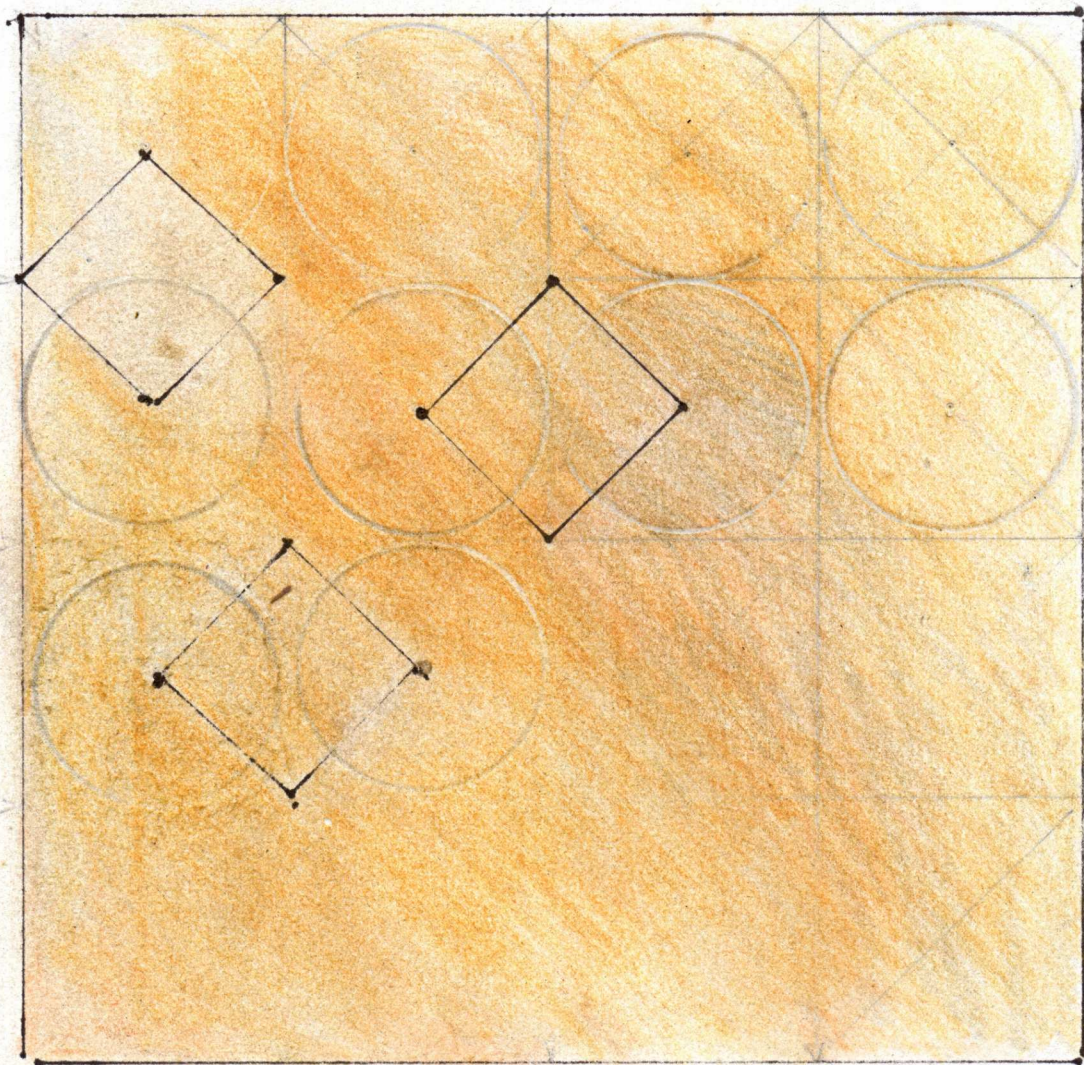
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled VII [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Carlos & Sarrah Torres



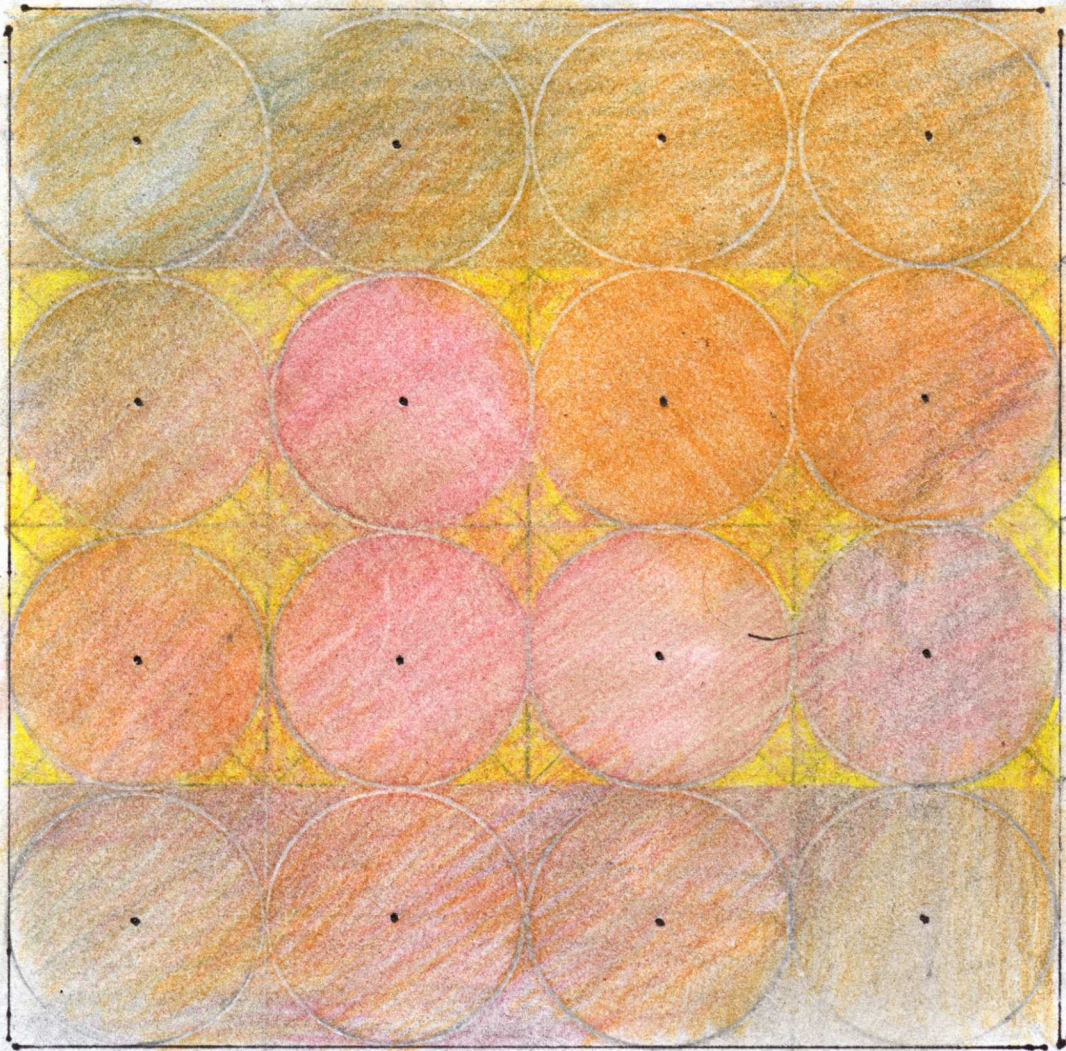
Bonnie Bronson
Untitled VIII [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
Collection Steve & Gail Ossowski



Bonnie Bronson
Untitled IX [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson



Bonnie Bronson
Untitled X [grids] 1985-1986
Colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 6 inches
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson



Randal Davis

About the Grid

As a means of structuration, the grid, loosely or more precisely constituted, was an almost constant presence in Bonnie Bronson's work, appearing in the quadrature common to her Abstract Expressionist paintings of the early and middle 1960s, and remaining in her last works.

Lucy Lippard's 1972 essay on the grid, "Top to Bottom, Left to Right" might have been written with Bronson in mind. "The grid," she wrote, "is music paper for color, idea, state of mind." She continued, in an exposition that bears quotation at length:

It is a standard measure. It repeats the traditional shape of the canvas itself. It implies, illogically, logic and harmony and unity, and is therefore all the more interesting to alter or destroy, no matter how slightly. It is a handy but potentially overemphasized instrument by which to control the void that is the beginning of a canvas, a way to violate the ominously blank surface.... For the artist proving him- or herself against order, its perfection is temptingly despoilable. For those uninterested in form, it provides an undistracting armature for content or material. For those emphasizing nuance or emotion, it provides a safety valve.

I'm not altogether convinced that Bronson was "proving herself against order," whatever that might actually mean, though Lippard's cataloging of other possibilities is the more persuasive, but that is, perhaps, finally the point – that Lippard was mapping the grid as a space of potential, much as Bronson used what she called the "modulars" that quite literally in-formed virtually all her mature work.

The underlying 4 by 4 modular structure of the *Grids* series is at once the common feature of the series, yet it is at times hardly visible, an armature almost completely obscured by dense washes of color, or overhung with competing geometries of circles and diagonals. What is extraordinary about these small works is how thoroughly they ring the changes on what might otherwise seem highly restrictive; the bilateral symmetry of the basic structure will obviously favor the kaleidoscopic tilings found in *Untitled I, III and VIII*. But this modesty of scale does not seem intrinsic to the more diffuse fields of, say, *Untitled II, IV or IX*.

Several years after Lippard, Rosalind Krauss took up a similar set of concerns from a methodology less conspicuously holistic and more concerned with systemic constraints. Put simply, Lippard's likening of the grid to "music paper for state of mind" would seem to suggest a relative lack of constraint on this notional music. Krauss, however, was considerably more incisive, noting that "what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom."

Where Lippard found an interiorization, a “repetition” of the rectilinear canvas, Krauss saw a different reflexivity, one in which the grid, “if it maps anything...maps the surface of the painting itself.” Thus Krauss, in apparent opposition to Lippard, regards the grid as a closed, not open, system, declar[ing] the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic.”

Yet it is not quite so simple. That reflexive mapping suggests to Krauss two different phenomenologies, the “centrifugal” and the “centripetal.” In the former, “the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric....compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame.” The latter operates “from the outer limits of the aesthetic object inward....[as] a re-presentation of everything that separates the work of art from the world, from ambient space and from other objects.

The remarkable formal variety of the *Grids* series might seem somewhat *contra* Krauss’s sense of the “extreme restrictions” imposed by the grid. Even so, her model of the centrifugal and centripetal goes a long way toward understanding how Bronson used those constraints as a generative device.

Take, for example, the embedded square of *I*; the central 2 x 2 is differentiated from the 12 bordering elements by its saturated background and high-keyed circles. The border, on the other hand, is quite more diffuse and muted, the circles in fact represented by, in one of the astonishing instances of virtuoso draftsmanship that occur throughout the series, an absence.

Despite the fact that *I* has many characteristics of an all-over composition, its clearly demarked centrality signals an intrinsic finitude. I have no hesitation in regarding it as a centripetal composition. It is also worth noting that, even though the formally similar *III* reverses some aspects of *I* (the border now appears in front of the central structure and there is a suggestion of a central 2 x 4 horizontal band) a certain completeness still obtains.

The questions raised by *II* could hardly be more different. Closest to monochrome in the series, *II* certainly meets Krauss’s stipulation of a part of an “infinitely larger fabric” – the matrix could as easily be 400 x 400 as 4 x 4. A formal device unique to *II* assures this most centrifugal of the series, a sinusoidal wave wrapping around the circles of each row, which simply cannot be understood as other than an indefinite extension beyond the border of the work.

The example of *VIII* is one of undecidability; I find this less a refutation of Krauss’s taxonomy than an apposite comment on the instability of any opposition. Like *I*, *VIII* is premised on the embedded square. In this case, the inset squares mediate the underlying grid by being built on half-steps. They are, finally, 1 x 1, but built as $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}$.



Bonnie Bronson
Landscape through Window 1986
Lacquer on steel, 48 x 36 inches or 36 x 48 inches
Installation variable, shown in all axial positions
The Estate of Bonnie Bronson

To effect this change, Bronson had to displace the formal basis of the series; the 4 x 4 matrix is here not defined by squares, but by circles. And yet, despite this fascinating departure into a kind of visual polyrhythm, *VIII* remains resolute in its bilateral symmetry. If this implies completion, so too is it an explicit instance of tiling, a marking of its extensibility. In this way *VIII* might be said to oscillate between the centripetal and the centrifugal.

Considered side by side, *VII* and *IX* might be seen to comment on Krauss's distinction. Like *I* and *III*, they are formally near-equivalents, both using 3 diamonds to mark a 3 x 3 "T" shape. But there are differences. The shading of the diamonds in *VII* is basically consistent with the surrounding cells where they are treated in *IX* as if transparent; the sense of embedding in *VII* is reinforced by the relatively more central positioning of the "T" shape, where the notional overlay of *IX* appears to be slipping off the edge of the grid.

The ten drawings of the *Grids* series are, I think an important part of Bronson's *oeuvre*. Diminutive size notwithstanding, they show Bronson at the height of her powers as a virtuoso colorist and are works of considerable formal invention. While they command attention on their own terms, they also stand in particular relation to other major series and projects of this period.

I noted above that a number of the drawings show signs (by way of pin marks) of having been hung in different axial orientations. For some, of course, such as the strict bilateral symmetries of *I* and *VIII*, the differences may be slight; in other cases it can greatly change the feel of the composition. The apparent indeterminacy of this aspect of the *Grids* series anticipates a property of the lacquered steel wall reliefs of the *Windows* series, works such as *Landscape through Window*, *Rinpoche's Window* and *Nepali Window*. *Landscape through Window*, one of the less geometrically complex of these works, takes on radically different aspects when seen in its rotations.

In *VIII*, one sees aspects of self-similarity and tiling, implying extensibility. The rotation of *Landscape through Window* also suggests a potentially indefinite recursion. At the same time, a frame, as given by the title, cannot but, in Krauss's terms, refer to "everything that separates the work of art from the world, from ambient space." Even more so than *VIII*, the potential of *Landscape through Window* points to an undecidability. Yes, the work surely calls attention to itself as a frame, but the very possibility of its differing orientations which cannot occur in the *same* space, therefore marks continuous variation.

Jean Claude Lebensztein asserts, “thinking the frame teaches us that everything is framed, visibly or not, even thinking itself.” He then asked: “But what does it mean to be interested in the frame? Where does this interest stop? That is to say, where does the frame stop?”

Bronson and her husband, sculptor Lee Kelly, were inveterate travelers, and Nepal was a compelling and frequent destination. On one of their trips, they met some local artisans and developed a plan to work with them in developing what became the *Nepali Carpet* series of 1987-1988. Working together and separately, they developed a number of designs. Less than one dozen were actually executed; few survive. The drawings reproduced here show several stages of the development of Bronson’s ideas, ranging from the impressionistic treatment of *Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [gold labyrinth]* which would seem, at best, very difficult to realize in a woven medium to the more specific *Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [blue-green boxes]*. Finally, there is, very close to an executable plan, *Drawing for Nepali Carpet 2 [purple]* – note references to color numbers.

The *Nepali Carpet* project is of interest in part because it was, for both Kelly and Bronson, somewhat *sui generis*; it is also a provocative comment on the questions of interiority and exteriority, boundaries and extensions, that have, one might say, bordered these notes. They were, finally, demarked – area rugs, not wall-to-wall. Thus one could walk around their perimeter, though one would have been as, or more, likely to walk through it.

The all-over nature of the proposed *Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [gold labyrinth]* could evidently be 2, 20 or 200 feet square; the border, the frame, is ambiguous. You could as well fall into it as try and swim out. *Drawing for Nepali Carpet 2 [purple]* is instead a kind of minimally dimensional architecture, proposing plazas and structures you can walk through and around without risking the envelopment, the abyss, of *Sketchbook Drawing for Nepali Carpet [gold labyrinth]*.

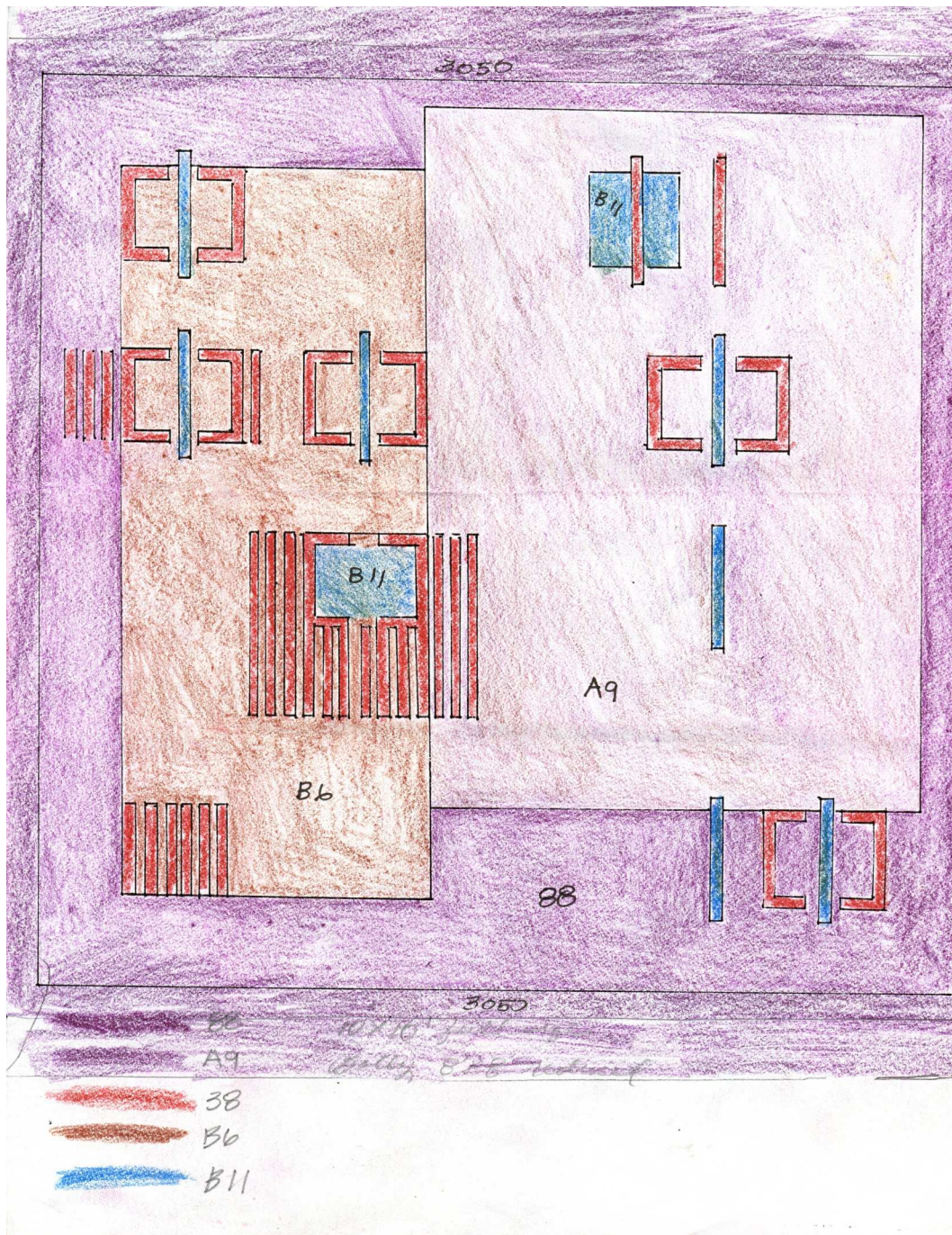
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Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” October 18 (Autumn 1981), subsequently collected in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

Jean-Claude Lebensztein, “Starting out from the frame (vignettes),” in Peter Brunette & David Wills (editors), *Deconstruction and the visual arts : art, media, architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Lucy Lippard, “Top to Bottom, Left to Right” in *Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1972).



Bonnie Bronson
Drawing for Nepali Carpet 2 [purple] 1987
 Graphite & colored pencil on paper, 10.25 x 8.5 inches
 The Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Bonnie Bronson

One of Portland's best known artists in the 1970s and 1980s, Bonnie Bronson (1940-1990) was recognized for her signature enameled steel relief sculptures and her collaborations on public art projects with husband, Lee Kelly. Her career lasted from 1964 to 1990, when she died in a mountaineering accident on Mt. Adams.

A Portland native, she attended the University of Kansas and the University of Oregon, before settling at the Portland Art Museum School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art) from 1959-61. She married sculptor Lee Kelly in 1961, and lived in the Portland area, primarily at their studio farm, Leland Iron Works, outside Oregon City.

Her work was shown in Portland and throughout the Pacific Northwest at, among others, Blackfish Gallery, the Fountain Gallery, the Art Gym at Marylhurst College and the Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Her work was the subject of solo exhibition at the Portland Art Museum in 1979 and a posthumous retrospective there in 1993. In the fall of 2011, her work was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition, *Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960-1990* at the Pacific Northwest College of Art and *Bonnie Bronson: The Early Years*, a selection of paintings and sculpture from the 1960's, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

For additional information about the life and work of Bonnie Bronson, write to bonniebronsonart@gmail.com or visit www.bonniebronsonart.com.

