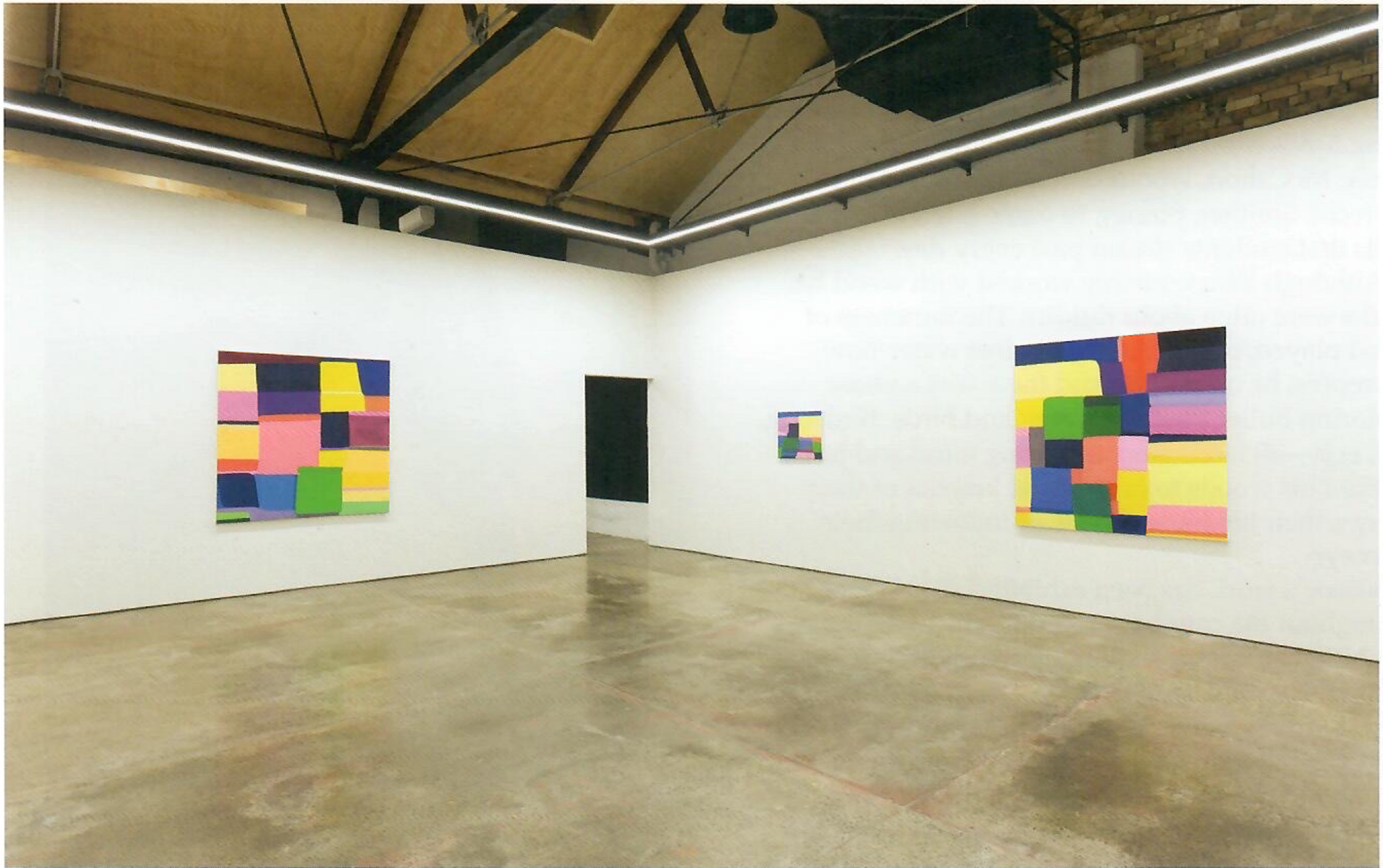


# Exhibitions



## Auckland

### Michael Morley *After the War*

Sumer, 6 March–13 April

MICHAEL DUNN

Michael Morley's exhibition of paintings at Sumer Gallery is called 'After the War', although he tells us nothing about this title. He may allude to his belief, found in the accompanying catalogue notes, that the optimism which came with the development of abstraction in the early twentieth century has eroded, leaving us in a kind of artistic limbo. His abstract paintings present as patches and bands of colour brushed onto the canvas in a direct, spontaneous way. They butt up against one another creating a sequence of contrasts and harmonies of colour, of tone and scale. We can see brush marks and edges where one application of paint and colour abruptly ends, and another begins. In all eight paintings the canvases are mainly organised into various-sized rectangles coded to a specific colour such as yellow, green, or pink. Bright colours are often dominant giving a decorative and zingy effect. In format the canvases are often square or approximately square and do not have discernible subject matter or create an illusionistic space. All the action seems to happen close to the viewer which adds to their impact.

Morley tells us in his catalogue notes: 'I can't imagine image anymore.' Indeed, he eliminates titles and dates of execution in the catalogue. By doing so he prevents the intrusion of subject matter and associations with the natural external world. But by eliminating titles altogether Morley leaves us with a dilemma. Where do we begin to discuss them and how? He has meditated upon what the meaning of his paintings can be if subject matter and titles are removed. In his notes he asks, 'What if painting's only refuge now is the unimagined?' He thinks of the unimagined as 'solid form without context or a way to understand it'. Morley is a musician as well as a painter and has contemplated relationships between the art forms. For painterly composition, he imagines a tabula rasa—an open slate devoid of history—as a starting point and for music, silence. He would like the works to be freed from convention and expectation and to achieve their own identity.

Despite these ruminations, I found the imagery accessible and even familiar in the arrangement of related coloured shapes.

They spread across the surface roughly in alignment with the vertical and horizontal axes of the canvas as happens with some European formal abstraction, for example in Paul Klee.

After looking around the show it is easy to see a family likeness between the canvases even though no two are identical. Morley employs a palette of primary and secondary colours as well as black, but no white. There seems to be an intuitive placing of the colour blocks with tilting and irregularities in their positioning giving a vitality to the works. There is some bleeding of colour between colour patches and some curved edges that suggest spatial depth. Morley is clearly very aware of the abstract painterly traditions from which his works evolve but achieves a fresh and forceful impact on the viewer. By avoiding geometric precision in the forms, and using apparently random patches of colour, the paintings have the unlikely association with a patchwork quilt. Morley has managed, whatever the theory behind the works, to create decorative and lively paintings.

By eliminating titles, he has made it hard for the reviewer to identify specific paintings for individual mention and therefore my comments are addressed to the show in its entirety not to any one of these untitled works.

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(above) Michael Morley's *After the War* at Sumer, March 2024  
(Photograph: Jake Braid)