

JOE TILSON WORDS AND IMAGES THE NOTEBOOKS

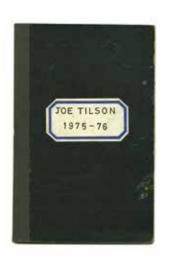
ALAN CRISTEA GALLERY

JOE TILSON 1970-1







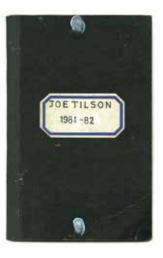






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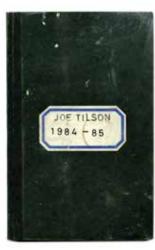


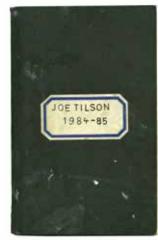






























WORDS AND IMAGES THE NOTEBOOKS

I first met Joe Tilson within a few months of leaving university in 1969. I had just been employed as an assistant at Marlborough New London, the branch of the Marlborough empire that dealt in the publication of limited edition prints by living artists. Joe Tilson was contracted to the gallery. A stream of highly innovative prints, in which he sought to break every printmaking convention, poured into my inexperienced hands. His subject matter was contemporary, his techniques were revolutionary, his materials mundane, his attitude iconoclastic. In principle he was the archetypal Pop artist his work was 'of the moment', transient and overtly political. Indeed no artist's work was more political than his.

Pop artists intentionally dealt with the transitory, the fashionable and the superficial. Tilson and his contemporaries, most of them graduates from the Royal College of Art, enjoyed a love-hate relationship with a world in which the commodity became king.

And then he gave it all up, and it was no sacrifice at all. In 1970 he and his wife, Jos, moved to an old rectory in Wiltshire. Why? The answer lies in the work. Those so-called Pop Art works by Tilson lasted all of 5-6 years. Look further back to the wooden reliefs that he made in the late fifties and early sixties, to the images of ziggurats that immediately precede the political works. Wood is one of the oldest materials known

The ziggurats were made centuries ago. For Tilson, the appeal of the transient was itself transient. Technology may progress but human nature does not change. Politicians and policies come and go. Fashion is momentary. In his words: When man had mainly to contend with nature $it\ now\ emerges\ that\ all\ the\ attributes\ of\ nature$ – violence, unpredictability, implacably hostile -'red in tooth and claw' etc etc are really those of human nature (or man's interpretation of nature)

- So that the history of Western thought ending in the empty materialism of Capitalism and Communism must change direction if there is to be any worthwhile future for man on earth. We must understand our own nature more deeply and our place in the total environment of the planet earth.

He sets out to find through Art his place on earth and to contribute to the sum of human artistic achievement through a personal commitment to his own work; a commitment informed by cultural history in its myriad manifestations. Art comes from passionate convictions – and lacking a society which is integrated; with commonly shared views – the passionate conviction can now only be personal.

Both these quotes come from his very first notebooks dating from 1970-71. He is now onto his 42nd. The course was set 46 years ago and persists. These documents were never meant to become public, but the temptation to make them so is irresistible.

The reader will make of them what he or she will. For me they are expressions of the most profound liberal humanism. They are a tribute to human artistic achievement in its broadest sense and they are completely non-hierarchical. The aboriginal Alcheringa are as important as Greek philosophy. These notebooks quietly chronicle, through his words and those of other writers dating back through the centuries, the power of Art to make sense of the world we inhabit. More than anything else, they are resolutely affirmative and positive.

I should stress that these documents are by no means compulsory reading. Just as you don't need to read Van Gogh's letters to his brother, Theo, in order to appreciate his paintings, you don't need to read Tilson's words or those of Virgil or Pound or Joyce, to enjoy his pictures. But you won't be disappointed if you do.

ALAN CRISTEA





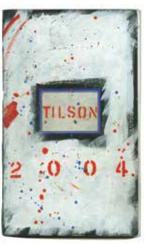












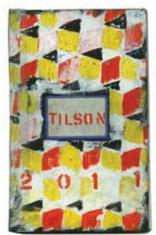




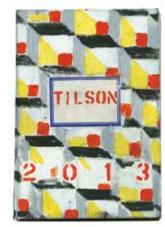












JOE TILSON IN CONVERSATION WITH HELEN WATERS **18 DECEMBER 2015**

Helen Waters Joe, what made you start to keep notebooks?

Joe Tilson A trip to Germany. I went over in July 1970 to discuss a possible project for Strassenkunst Hanover and saw the Easter Fire Wheel in the Historisches Museum there. I thought of letters burned into wood and of wooden objects slowly covered with lichen, moss, ivy - or objects that had words on them that slowly disappeared... later I made wooden ladders that had the words inscribed in them from a poem by Schwitters, who lived in Hanover. It was an exhibition dedicated to Schwitters - he was an artist I was very strongly influenced by. At that point I came back to London, opened a notebook, divided it into four and wrote 'AIR, WATER, FIRE, EARTH'. I also picked up ideas from Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. I found in this structure there were relations to other things, for example: summer, autumn, winter, spring; the division of four goes on through everything. I wrote all these ideas

HW And this drawing of the four elements appears in the notebooks?

JT Yes, in the sense that the notebooks lead up to it. Images start to emerge, and the use of the stencil, and so on, and gradually the objects start to appear. I am interested, as James Joyce was, in numerology, rather than mathematics; the belief that numbers have a magical significance. Joyce starts, as I do, from Pythagoras and Plato's Timaeus. The four elements, the four seasons, the four evangelists, the seven days of the week... it's all connected with number symbolism...

HW So the notebooks enable you to work out your ideas?

JT Yes. When I think of something it goes in the notebook and then from the notebook come other ideas, and drawings start to occur and from the drawings come the works.

HW But it also works backwards, as a way of recording finished artworks as well...

JT Yes, it's turned into that, much more in recent years. Calling them notebooks is correct; calling them journals is incorrect as they are not full of writing - they are full of quotes from other people and in the end they are now a record of what I did during that year..

HW So now they are looking back whereas before they were looking forward?

JT No, they are running parallel. They record what I am doing. But you do see drawings occurring as well in the book that then turn into works. There are ideas also: here is a floor in Venice from which the patterns then occur in the works. So it still works in that way...

HW The trigger for beginning the notebooks was a visit to Germany and the concept of the four elements that you wanted to work through... what did you do before that?

JT Before that were the paintings that are currently on display at Tate Modern (The World Goes Pop) which were shown in the exhibition Pages and then there was Alchera at Marlborough.

HW So the *Alchera* show at Marlborough was in 1976 and the notebooks began in 1970?

JT Yes, so that show was the culmination of 6 years' work. It also metamorphosed into works inspired by our visits to Greece and Greek art because it was dealing with the Platonic solids and the labyrinth and the use of Greek words.

HW Did you know Greek before you started doing this or did you teach yourself?

JT No, no, I learnt Italian and spent a lot of

time in Italy and also learnt French and a bit of Spanish. I was only drawn to Greek because of Plato and the use of the four elements. I also use Greek words...

HW Yes there are a lot of words throughout your notebooks... and in your art.

JT Yes – inserted. This is what I picked up from James Joyce: they are inserted into a static object which doesn't move. It is not a work which exists in time - it's not like the cinema, or a book, where there is one chapter after another. In *Ulysses* there's this scene on the beach where he talks about 'the ineluctable modality of the visible' - a curious phrase. What he means by that is this... he puts it in German: nach einander which is diachronic - one thing comes after the other; and *neben einander*, which is synchronic where everything is seen at once - and that's painting! My work is absolutely and totally synchronic, is totally involved in the static, there's no time involved. You can look at it and start wherever you want - in the corner, you can shut your eyes, you can think about it... and this is a fundamental difference between my work and the cinema or the tradition of narrative.

HW Although you are referencing images from history in your work, which will encourage people to make stories. People like narrative – they see an image and a word and they will automatically try and make a connection between them. You may not want them to do it, but they will try!

JT The meaning of the work is within the spectator. There is no such thing as the meaning of the work abstracted in space, the meaning only comes when the spectator looks at the painting. Until then it is just an object. When you look at it – the meaning is in you, not in it, because you are interpreting it.

HW People are bringing their own memories and their own experiences to the work.

JT Yes. Artists can say 'it means this, or it means that', but for me the meaning is within the spectator – they'll make up their mind.

HW Obviously place is very important to you. You divide your time between London and Italy, and between two distinct places in Italy: Tuscany and Venice. I am sitting in the studio here in London and looking around at the paintings stacked against the wall and I can see places in these images, particular places.

Can we talk about how place influences you... you take your notebooks with you, don't you, when you travel?

JT Yes, I do. I think place has an influence on you whether you like it or not. Where you live, every day you wake up, you see colours, things around you and it gradually gets into the work. So living in Venice I am constantly looking at my surroundings; Jos takes me on lots of trips to churches and therefore the place is automatically in the work after that. While Jos measures the churches (she makes small terracotta sculptures of them), I draw them and then they end up in the paintings and prints. So place is totally connected with experience. The other thing about Venice of course is the light. It's incredibly bright, and that gets into the work. The recent work is all connected to the last 12 years in Venice and equally connected with Tuscany which is also very brightly lit. Many of these works are painted in Tuscany but conceived in Venice...

HW ...so they do feed into each other...

JT Yes. We are in London at the moment, but I am not painting London; I am painting Venice. Back in the 1970s they were all country works in *Alchera*... here were the trees we planted, here were the vegetables we grew, a lot of relationship to Wiltshire and nature.

HW You moved to Wiltshire at the same time as you started the notebooks...in 1970.

JT Yes, we moved to Tuscany and to Wiltshire in the same year. We bought this very old rectory with a lot of land and Jos started growing our own food.

HW And you were there 30 years?

JT Yes, that was the background to Alchera.

Just prior to that, we were living in this big house on Campden Hill with a garden and Jos was just beginning to garden and we were very connected to ecology and what was going on in America through the Mother Earth News magazine.

It was a time of revolution. I went to Prague and experienced the Prague Spring just before the Russian tanks came in; Paris and London were very revolutionary – it's hard to imagine now. But we were very political and connected with all of that, but also receiving information from America about going green and ecological issues, which of course now is very fashionable, but at the time in 1968-69, nobody had ever heard of it.

So we then decided to split from the political scene of London and put our ideas and ideals into practice: growing your own food, making a life connected to nature and disconnected from the war in Vietnam and the politics of the period. So it was a very different life based on ideologies imported from the States.

HW And that must have influenced your work then?

JT Yes, that's what it's all about. It goes from London politics and Pop Art and then turns into ecological art. Although we didn't call it ecological art back then.

HW Has anyone ever called you a land artist Joe?

JT (laughs) no, but I always have been, in a way. Funnily enough the last work I made in the *Pages* exhibition at Marlborough was called *Ecology: Fire, Air, Earth and Water*. I remember calling it that and I went to the desk and this very intelligent, upper class girl looked up and asked: 'what's ecology?'.

HW I imagine it was quite a new word back then?

JT Absolutely, no one had ever heard of it.

HW And ecology is an incredibly politically-charged subject nowadays...

JT Yes, my work is always political in some way, and usually deeply unfashionable.

HW Before 1970 when the notebooks began and you were making the paintings for the *Pages* show, how did you work out your ideas then? Did you keep sketchbooks? Do you remember?

JT No, I think I just worked on paper, I would draw things out, mainly I just did them - they are very much 'made'; it's very much about getting out a saw, cutting wood and putting things together with screws, very hands on. It all comes out of Picasso and those wonderful early collages made of bits of wood - in that period 1907-08 he invented the first constructed sculpture so the division between carving and modelling was pushed to one side. Along came constructed sculpture which now dominates everything! People don't understand when you tell them it was invented - they think it has always been like that. I think that contemporary art nowadays mainly comes out of Surrealism and the division then was between Picasso and Cubism which leads towards painting and abstraction; and Surrealism which is a literary art form which leads to everything we have today. Today's art is

mainly factory-produced fun fair art. Art is now entertainment, which is what everybody wants, but it's not what I am engaged in. Neither was Picasso, Matisse or Cézanne. Painting is now outdated.

HW But is that what you consider yourself to be primarily – a painter? Because to me you have always made art in all sorts of media.

JT I bear full responsibility for the rot: Pop Art and its involvement in consumerism, which I totally disagree with - I wish I hadn't done it. The politics is good: when you see those paintings again at the Tate - they are good, they are very strong, but I don't think that I changed anything. If the aim of political art is to change anything then I think it's a waste of time - it hasn't changed anything really. And Surrealism has always been there in the background so I've fed into that idea of not doing just painting, but doing something else. My art was transgressive. Transgressive back then meant going against something academic; transgression now is impossible. Transgression nowadays would probably be to paint a two-inch square watercolour!

HW Anything is possible in art now isn't it!?

JT We have now arrived at a rather academic situation where everyone thinks they are being transgressive, but they are not – they are being conformist!

HW Can we talk about your relationship with printmaking – you've made prints for many years, haven't you? When did it start?

JT It started with lithography at the Royal College of Art. Two old boys ran the print department and Leon Kossoff and I went there. They gave you a big block of stone; you ground the previous image of the last painter off the stone and then made your painting on the stone, from which your prints were made. I made lithographs of bull fights. Then I was working on things connected with photography and suddenly screen printing occurred and I thought, 'that's it, I could really use that!' Suddenly I was away! I worked with a printer called Chris Prater, who I consider to be my first printer - he was a genius. It was a great period. Hockney and all the others were doing prints for the ICA print project...

HW What about printmaking since then... do you tend to make prints when you are in a

particular place, or at a particular time – do you separate out painting and printmaking or work on both concurrently?

JT Many techniques have come and gone since I have worked on prints for the last 45 years. I remember going to make a print at the Royal College in 1963 and the men who ran it saying, 'you can't print that mate it'll moiré!'. What they meant by that was the half-tone dots would overlap and do things that they – the printers in the trade – wouldn't want. I said, 'I don't care if it moirés. I have come from outside, asked by Robin Darwin, the Principal of the RCA - I am not a student'. 'Oh dear', they said, but they were forced to print it.

HW So did they think that it was unsuccessful then?

JT Totally. They wouldn't have let a student do it.

HW How long did you work with Chris Prater?

JT About 25 years. I started doing collage and multiples, for example printing on shiny metal put in an actual envelope folded and made into a multiple edition. That's very transgressive printing! I decided at that point I would do all the prints that no one else thought was a print. The printmakers' council told the Marlborough Gallery to withdraw the works of Kitaj, Paolozzi and Tilson as 'these are not original prints'. There was a list of things they said you couldn't do. There was a huge discussion at the time about what was an original print. So for example, I decided to make each print different, as they wanted all prints to be the same; you weren't allowed to draw on prints, paint on prints, tear the paper, crumple and fold the paper, print on both sides of the paper, make a hole in the print, burn the print... - so I did all that! All those prints were really avant-garde at the time!

HW You have divided the exhibition into five themes: *Alchera*; *Greek*; *Le Crete Senesi*; *Conjunctions* and *Venice*. Can we talk briefly about these subjects? The first is *Alchera*. Why did you decide on that title?

JT I picked up the name *Alchera* as an overarching title like the *Cantos* by Ezra Pound or *Finnegans Wake* by Joyce. I didn't want to make the title too specific – I wanted it to be all-embracing – the idea of the Australian Aboriginal dreamtime. It's a poetic title to cover a lot of territory without being too committed. I worked for many years on the objects that come

from *Alchera* as it's a very rich theme.

HW Then we move to *Greek*...

JT This comes from Plato and the labyrinth. I started to think about Greek mythology and the connections with the earth. Demeter is mother earth and Persephone is her daughter, who is taken under the earth and when she reappears up come green shoots - it's Persephone, spring and the flowers returning to earth, so it's Greek mythology as the basis of ecology. I like the idea not only of Father God in the sky, but also of Mother Earth. So it's deeply concerned with the feminine. I spent several years on the *Greek* theme which was then followed by the Crete Senesi. These are the hills around Siena that I had first seen in 1949 and revisited in 1956. when I made a series of paintings in my studio at the British School at Rome that I cut up and made collages from and my first wooden relief. So it was a theme that I knew very well when I returned to painting them in 1992 and the following years. They were exhibited at the museum of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in 1995 and I painted the banner for the Palio the year after. They were also exhibited in Milan, Macerata and London, and in 1994-95 I made a series of prints. So in a way, printmaking is always parallel to the painting - I've always done the prints of the things that I was involved with in the painting.

The Conjunctions are quite specific. I was very interested in doing small paintings of the things that were there in Tuscany – the butterflies, the birds, the plants, and so I painted a very small painting of a butterfly and then I added another small canvas with a word on it. I liked the idea of conjoining them; it's very like opening a book – an image and a word. Books have pages, and pages are something I have always worked on. Then I thought, 'well it's alright but it's a bit small', so I decided to make a larger panel into which the two smaller paintings were inserted.

HW So the central images come first and what I call the border comes afterwards? How do you decide on the border?

JT It is to do with the impact and meaning of colour, of making it more about painting. Its meaning is purely visual.

HW And the patterns aren't necessarily connected? For example, with the *Venice* prints you have the patterns of the floor tiles found

in the churches, but here they don't have an architectural connection?

JT No they're just inventions; invented grids and other motifs, which again have played a part throughout my work.

HW So the *Conjunctions* came next and keep coming and going. And then *Venice*?

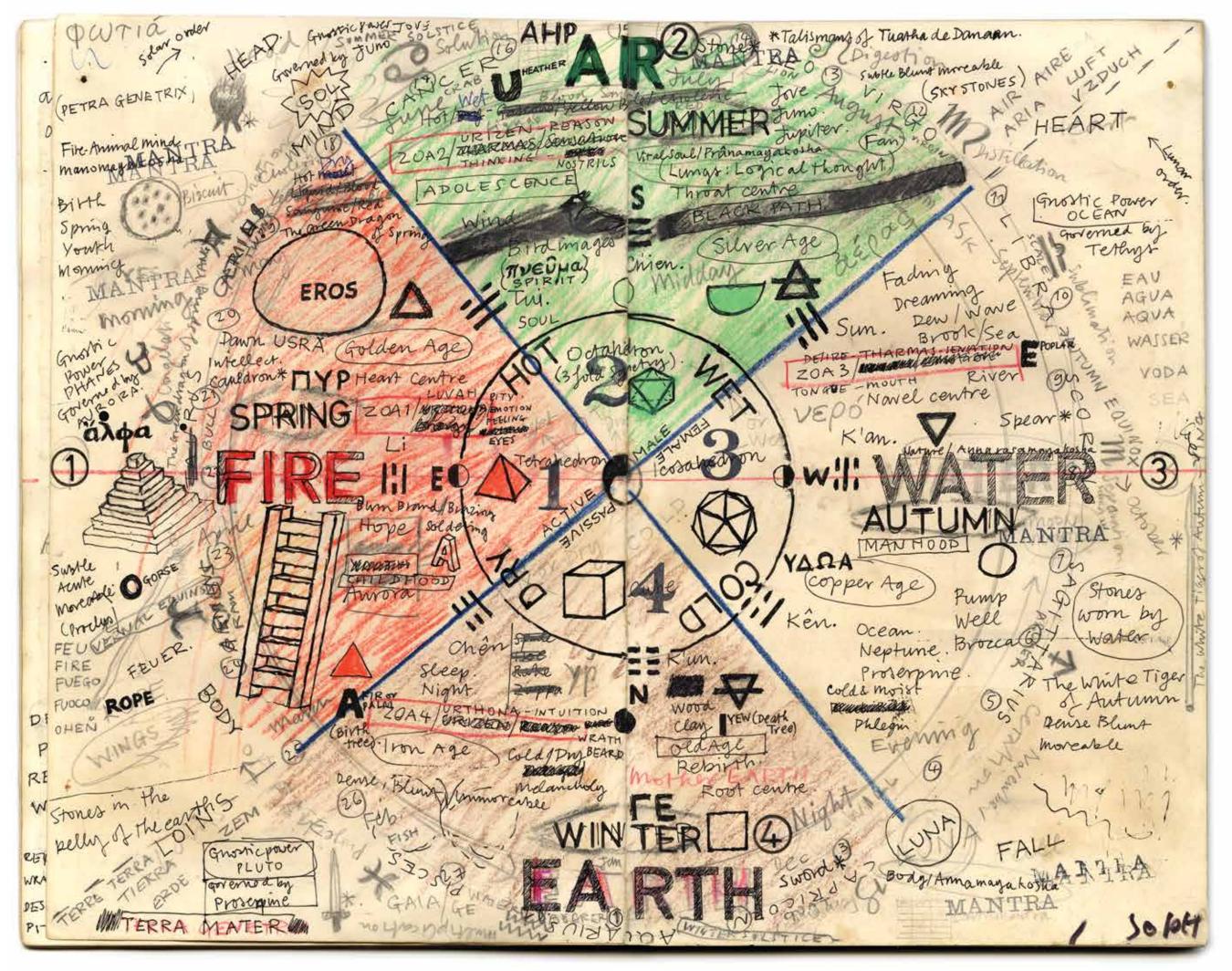
JT Yes, then I used the same structure for the *Venice* paintings so the grapes and the birds are replaced by Venetian architectural subjects.

HW When did you move to Venice?

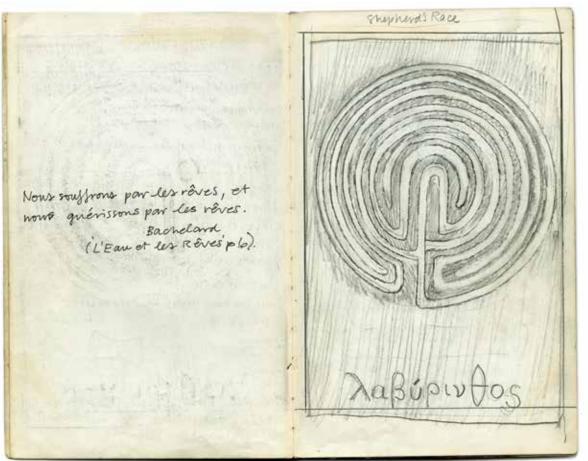
JT Again, I have a long history with the place. I first went there in 1949 specifically to look at the mosaics in St Mark's and then on to Cefalu to look at the mosaics there. Jos and I met in Rome and we got married in Venice in 1956. Then I exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1964 and we have been there pretty much every year ever since, eventually buying a house and studio in 2004. So we've always been in Venice.

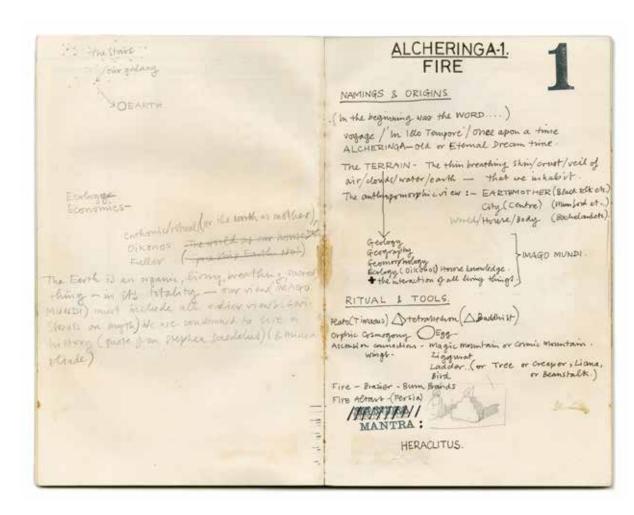
HW What's next for you Joe?

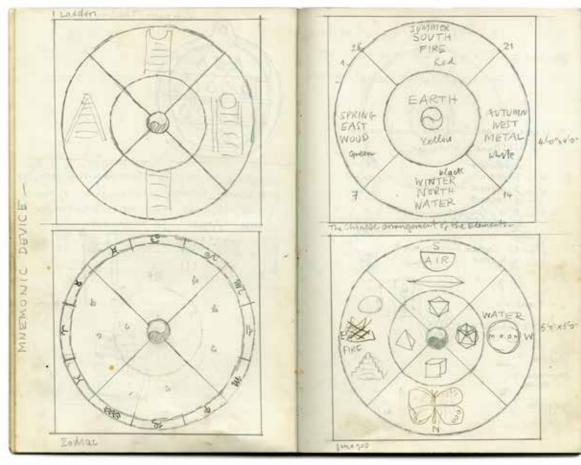
JT You draw, you paint, you make. It is a bit like religion, it's a bit like becoming a monk. You give your life to it. It is more than a profession. It is not something you get up to vaguely. It is something that possesses you day and night, all the time, which can be a negative, but also a positive. You don't then need to think, 'what am I doing here, what is it all about?'. You are in the middle of doing it. So it is good. It's not a choice that you yourself actually make. I think it is something that is imposed upon you. Picasso made this famous remark: 'Art makes me do what it wants me to do'. I don't think, 'what am I doing next?' it just comes, it just springs out of thought and feeling. Your hand moves and then these things appear. And then you think 'Christ, did I do that!?'.





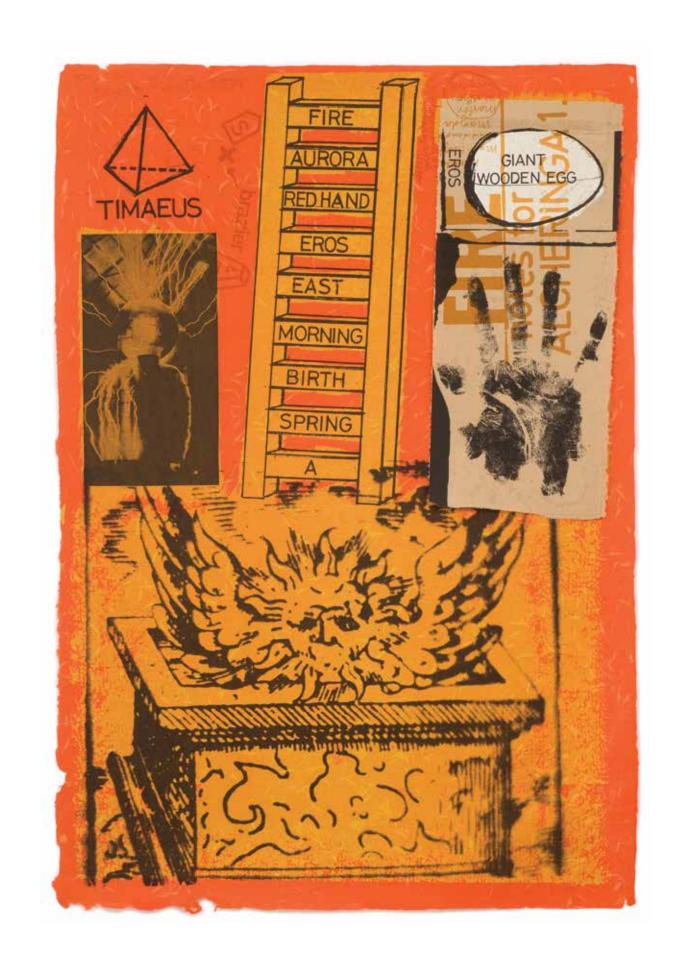






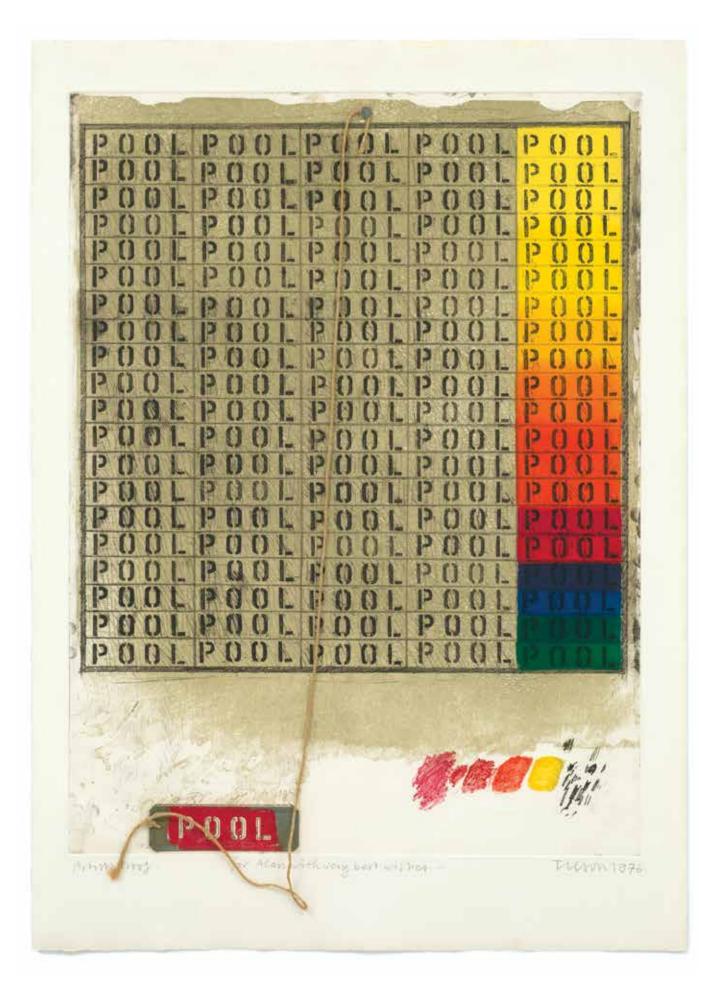
Notebooks 1972-73



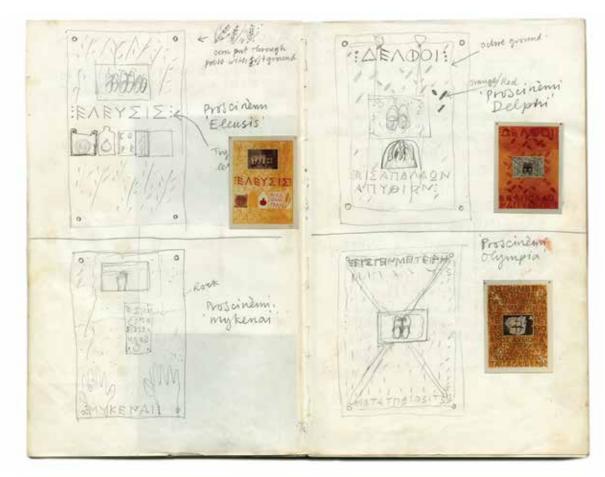


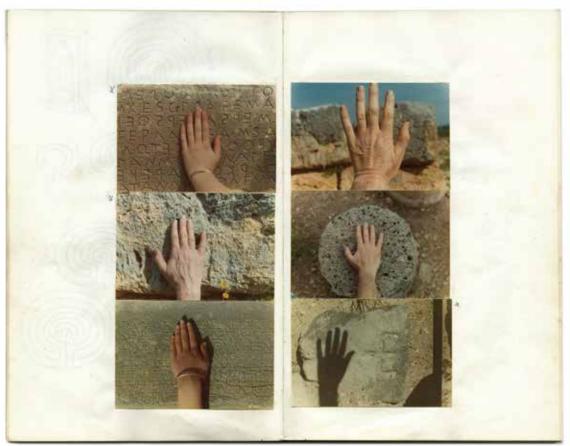
1. Alcheringa 1, Fire, 1971 Screenprint and collage on Japanese paper 98.0 x 67.0 cm, edition of 70

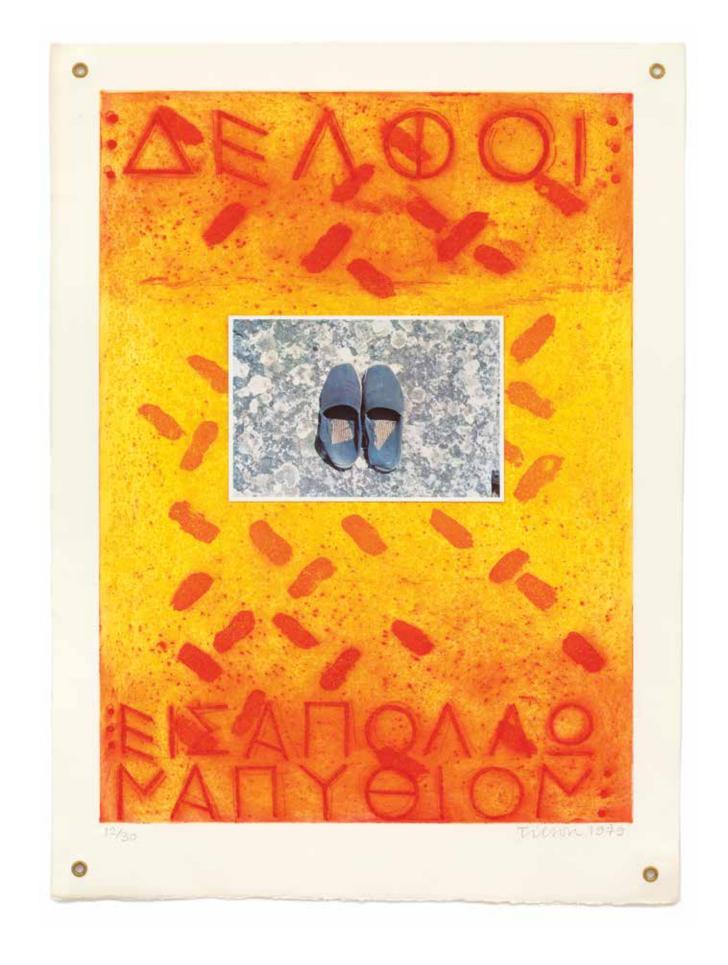




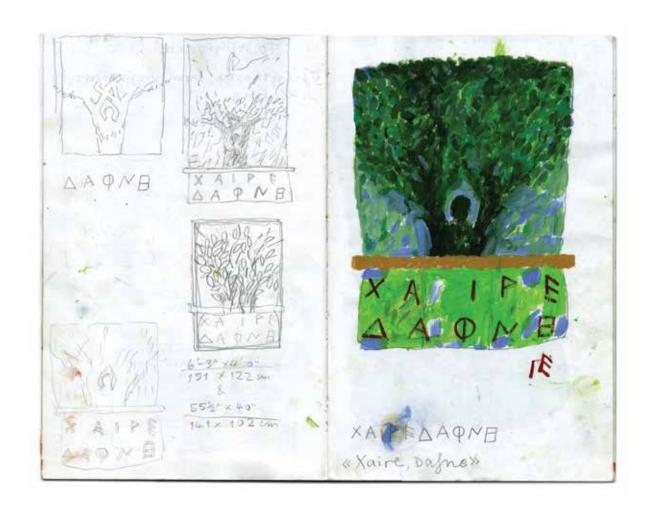


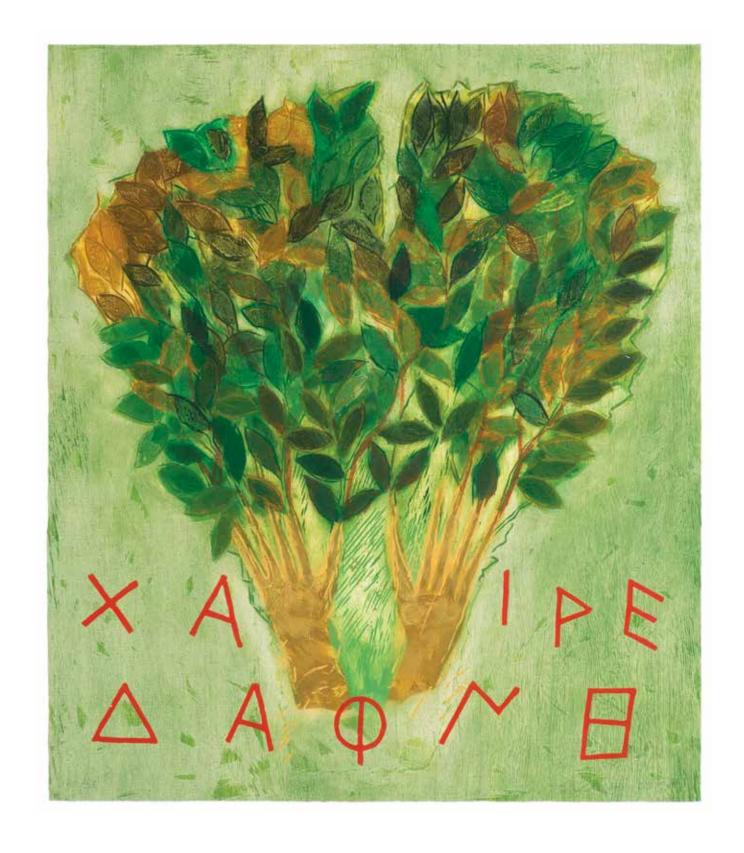


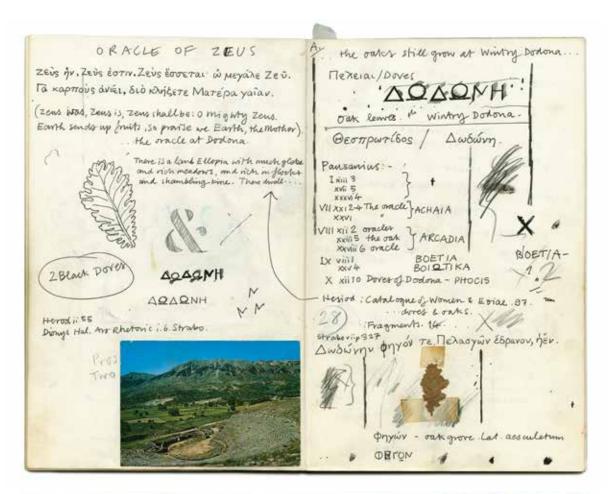


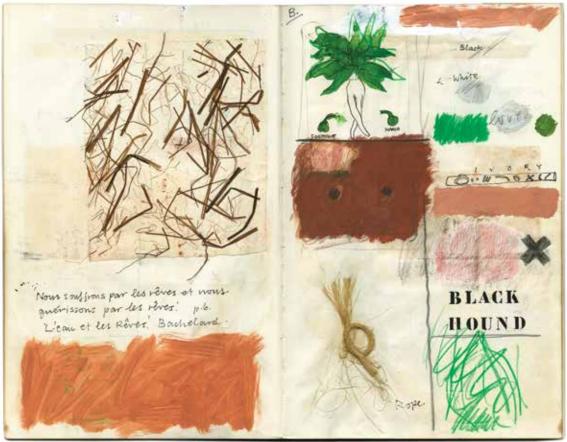


5. **Proscinemi, Delphi,** 1979 Soft-ground etching, aquatint and collage 94.0 x 68.6 cm, edition of 30



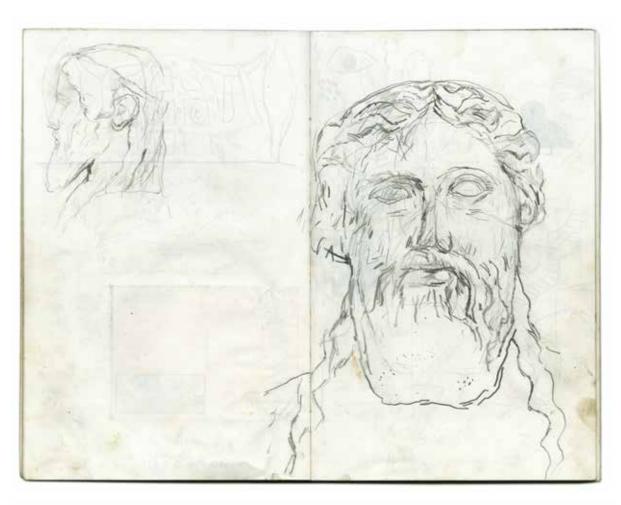




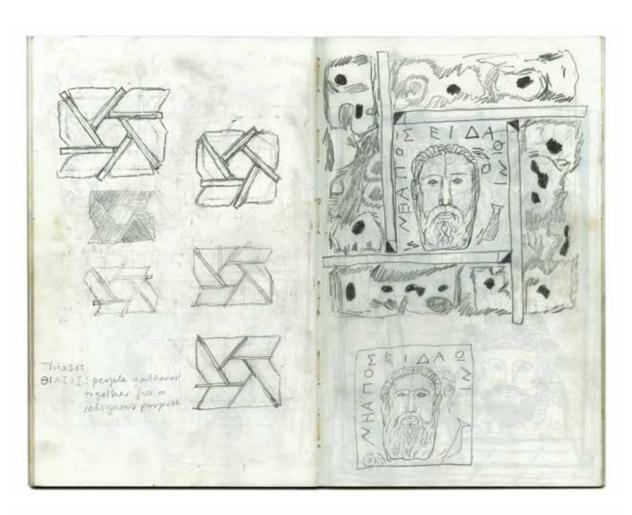


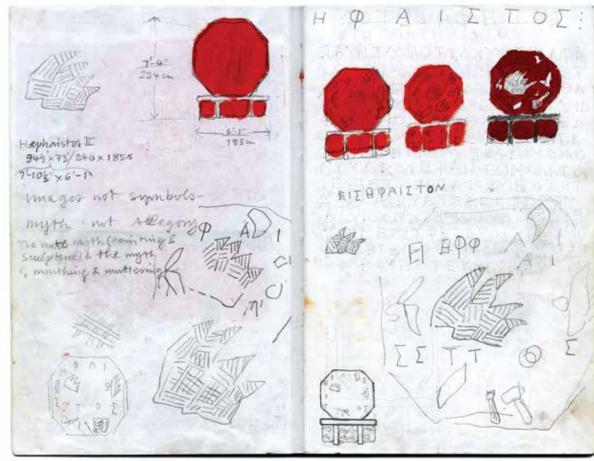


7. The Oracle of Zeus, 1981 Soft-ground etching and aquatint 120.0 x 136.5 cm, edition of 80





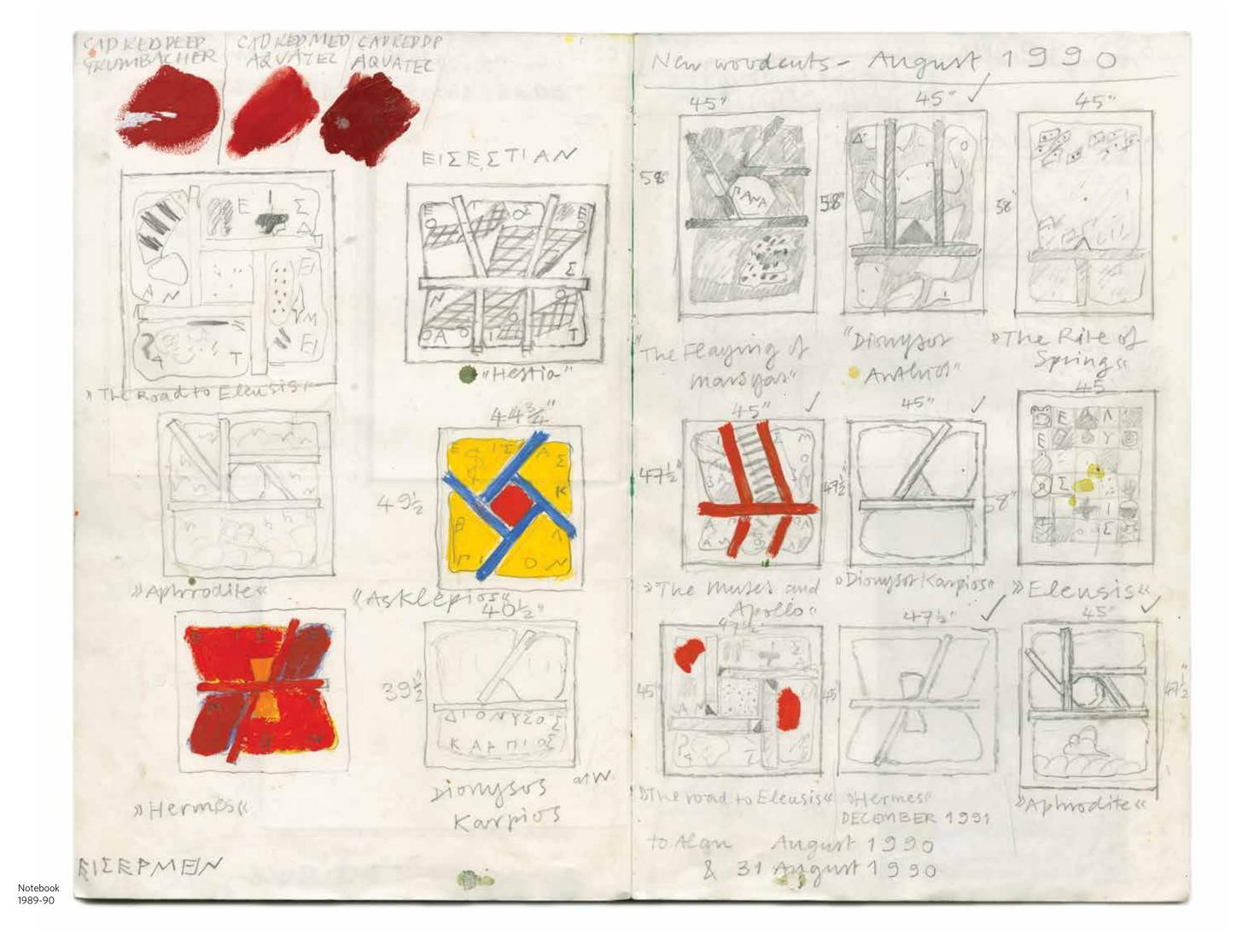




Notebooks 1983-84, 1984



8. *The Shield of Achilles*, 1989-90 Screenprint and woodblock with hand-applied silver leaf 122.5 x 93.0 cm, edition of 45

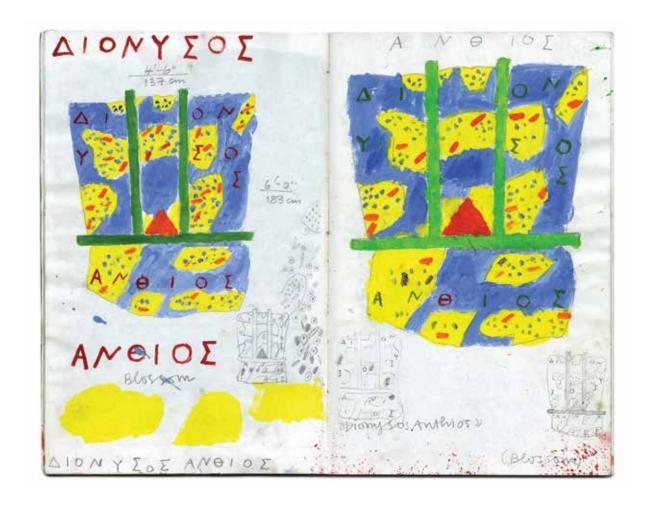








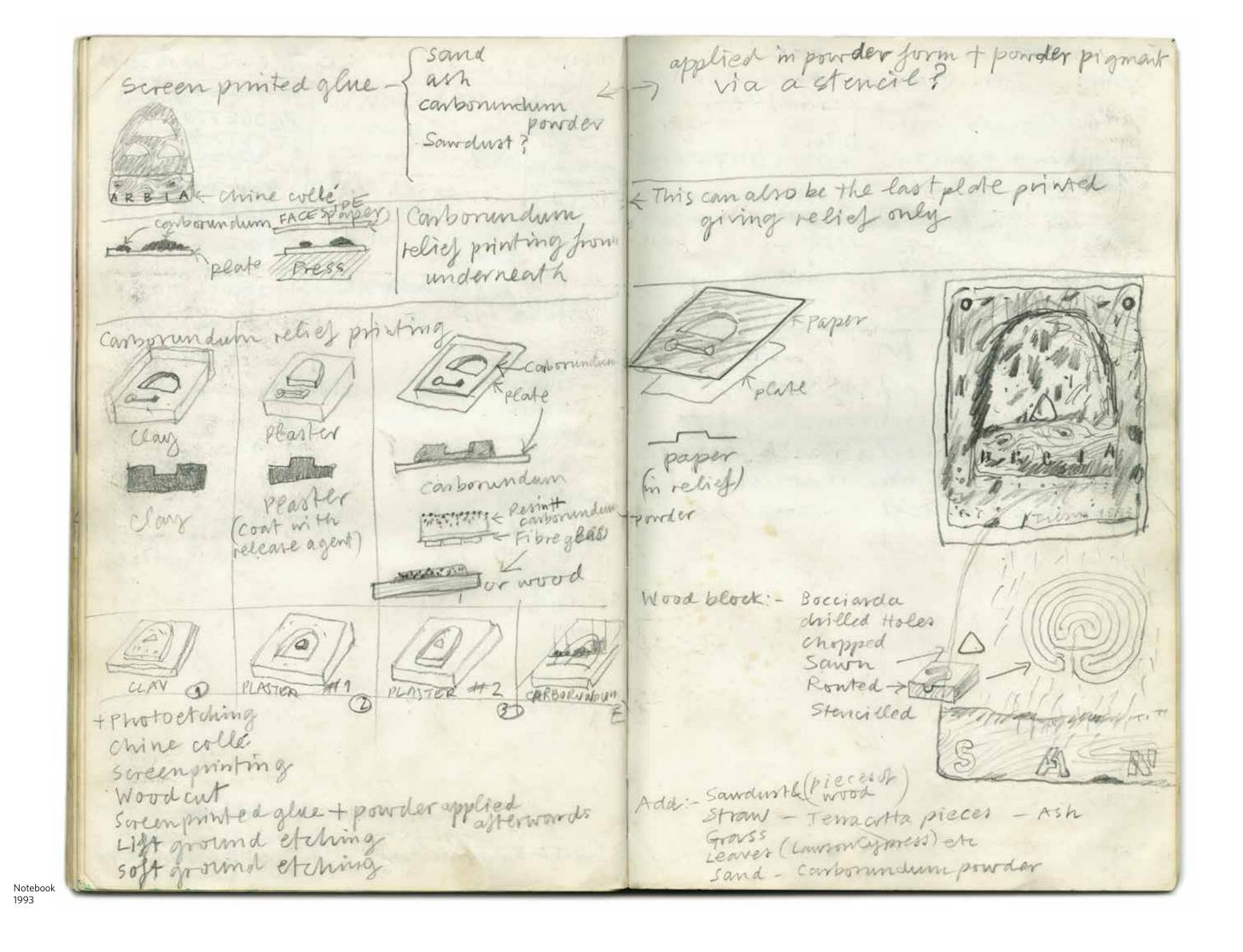
- 9. **Hestia**
- 10. Hermes
- 11. Artemis and Aktalon

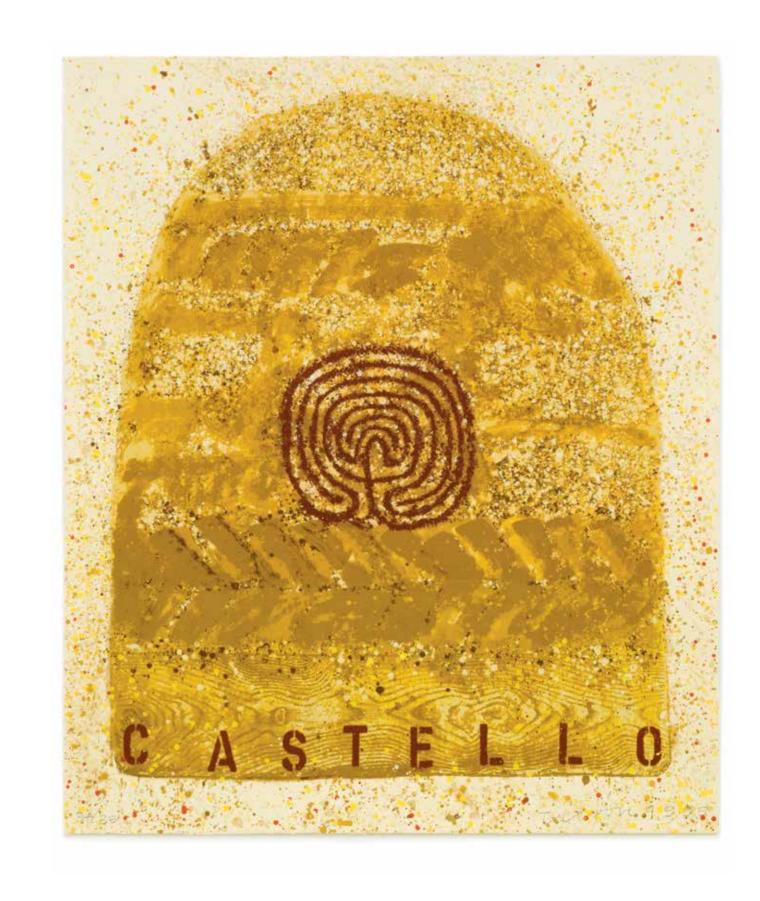




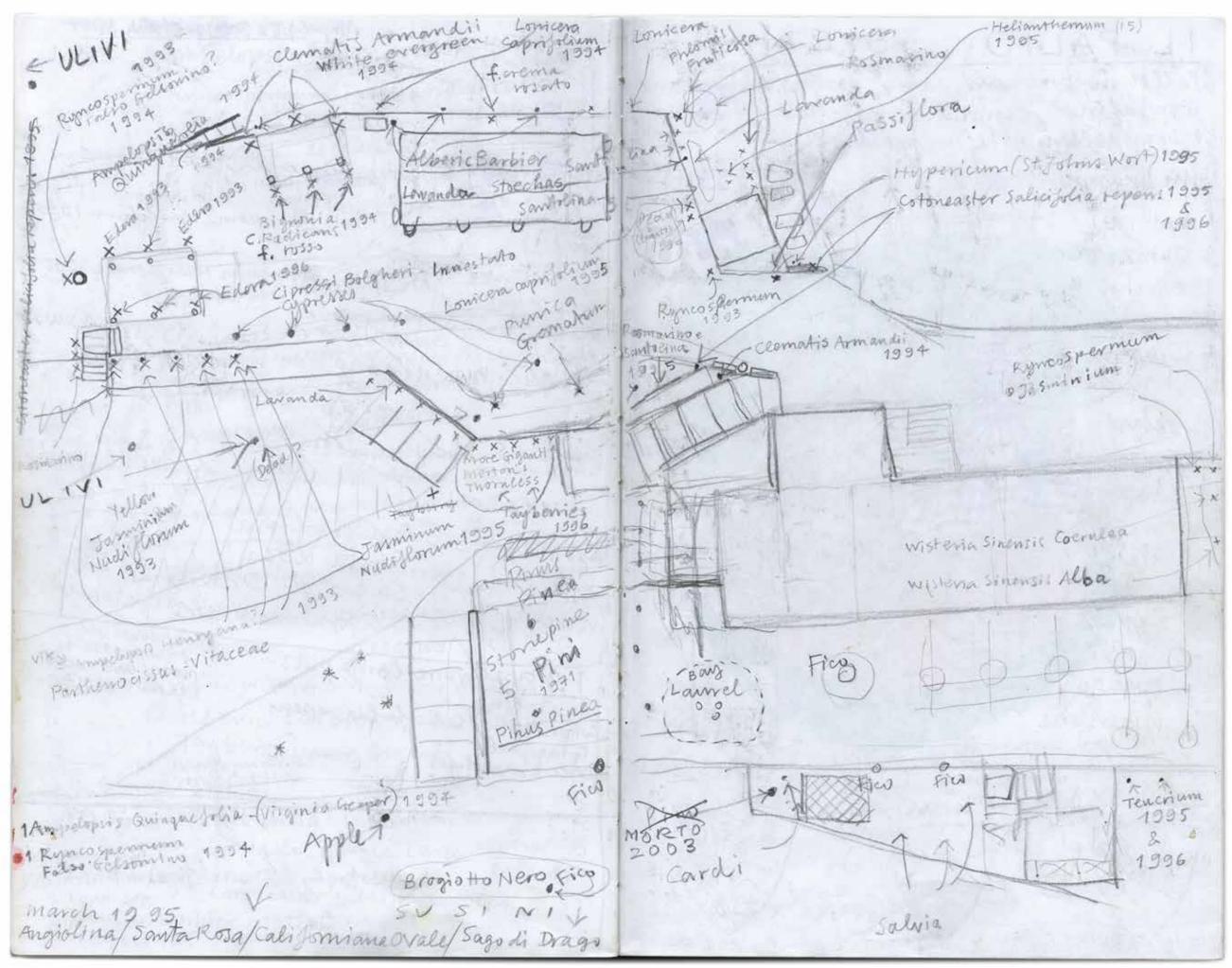
12. *Dionysos Anthios (I)*, 1990-91 Screenprint and woodblock 191.0 x 124.0 cm, edition of 45

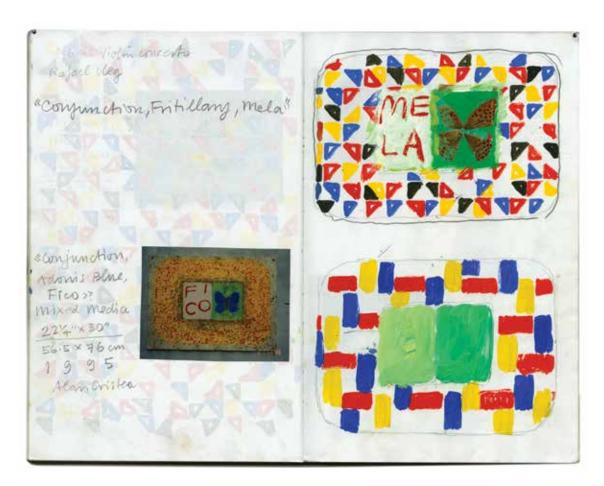


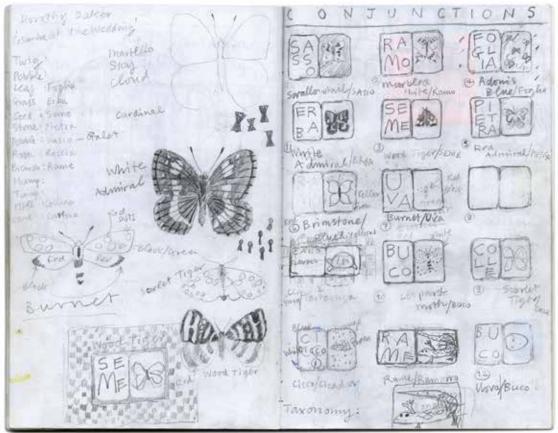




13. *Le Crete Senesi, Castello*, 1995 Screenprint with woodblock 127.0 x 106.6 cm, edition of 35





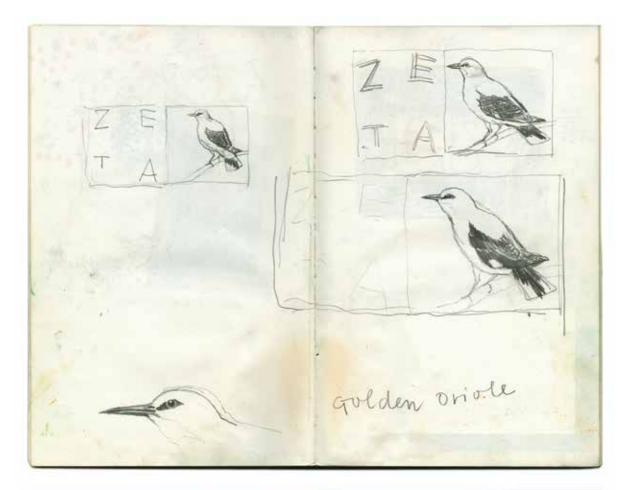














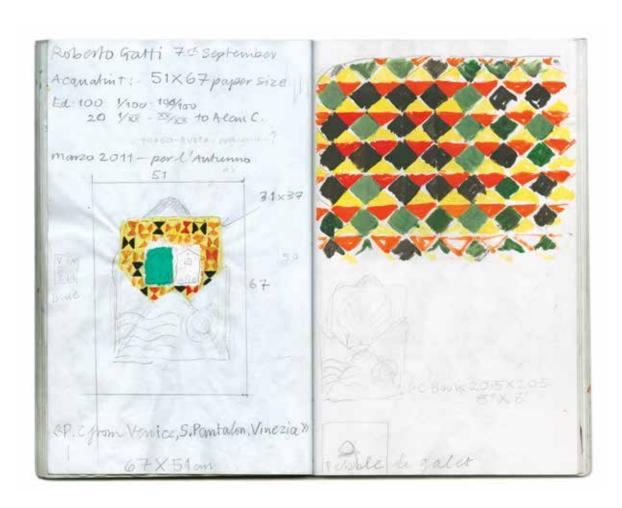


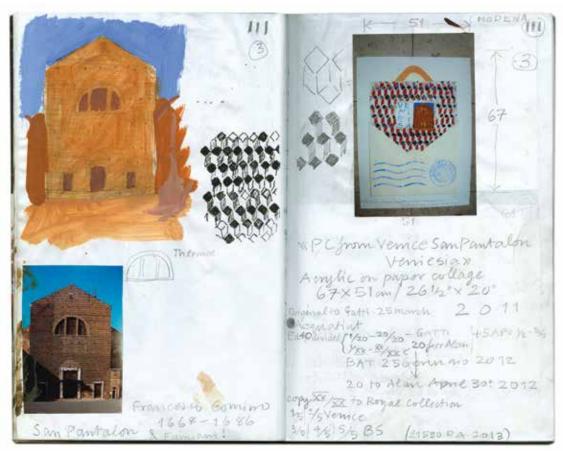
17. *Conjunction Oriole, Zitto*, 2001 Screenprint with woodblock 117.0 x 108.0 cm, edition of 30



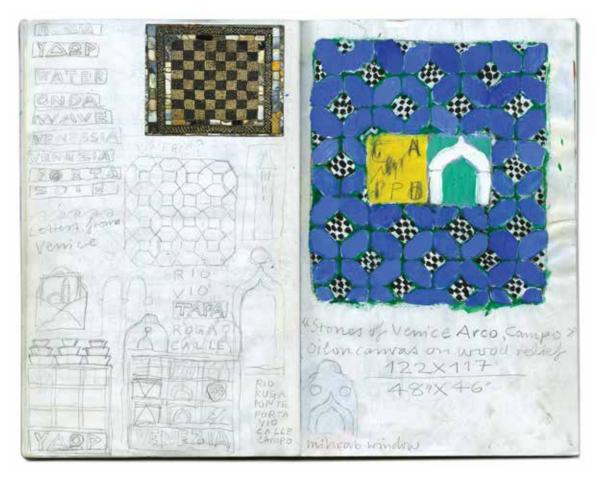


18. Finestra Veneziana Zita, 2012 Aquatint 155.0 x 104.0 cm, edition of 60









Notebooks 2010, 2011

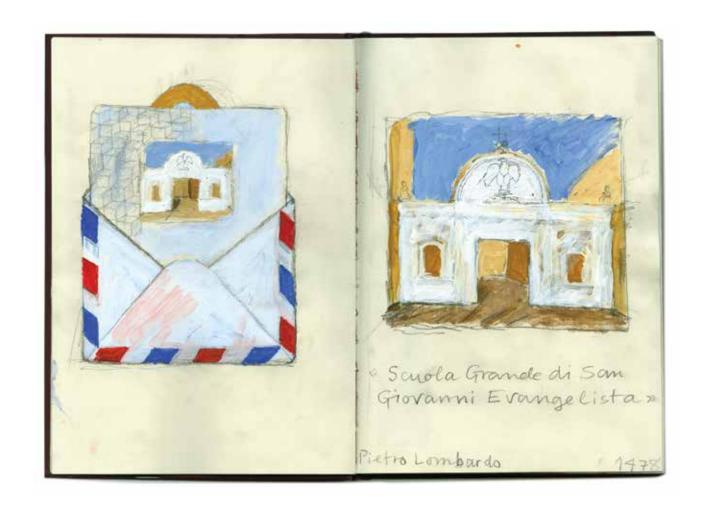


















24. The Stones of Venice San Zan Degola, 2015
Screenprint, carborundum and inkjet with hand colouring 100.0 x 100.0 cm, edition of 15 + XV

25. The Stones of Venice Santa Maria dei Miracoli, 2015 Screenprint, carborundum and inkjet with hand colouring 165.0 x 100.0 cm, edition of 30

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