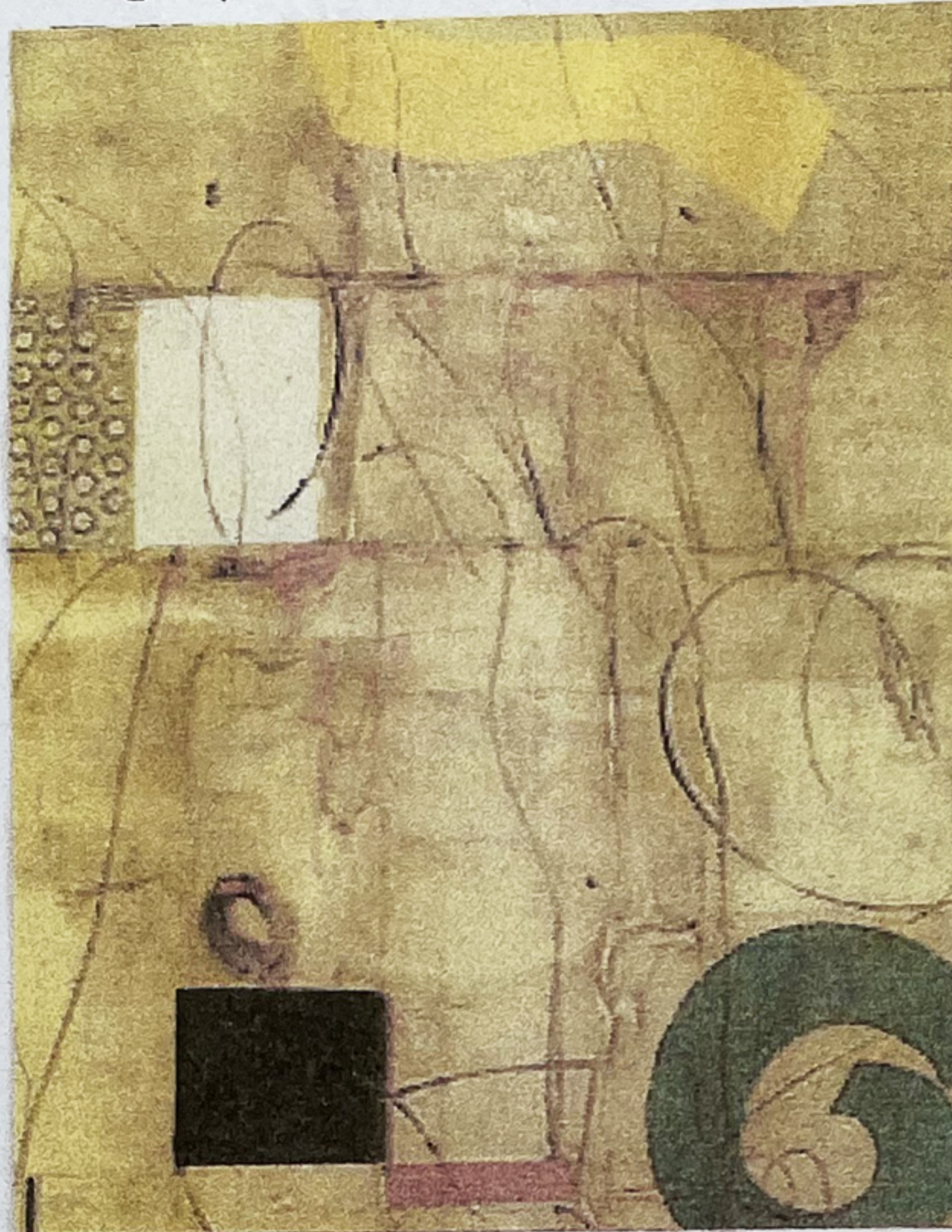


Michel Alexis

@ Stephen Haller Gallery



Michel Alexis, MA00-021, 2000. Mixed media on canvas, 78 x62 inches. Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

Evocations of past and present collide in Michel Alexis' dense, minimalist paintings whose all-over surface incisions and glowering, translucent color patches border on the baroque. Deeply embedded in the work is the artist's interest in the symbolic nature of sign symbols; specifically those tools that either allow or disallow for communication. Focusing here on the short-circuit, Alexis utilizes the most prominent devices for communication in our increasingly visual culture -- those of image and text -- and manipulates them in ways that ultimately cancel each other out.

This begins with the titles themselves, which refer to specific dates such as "February 12, 2001." The dates are random, and have no real significance. Alexis then builds up sensually appealing surfaces from collaged layers of rice paper, gesso and oils that resemble sacred parchments or crumbling stone walls from antiquity, onto which a vaguely textual calligraphy is incised. These markings, in concert with the dates, are also imaginary. Like imagination itself, however, their foundation is fixed in reality; they are fragments of real words and alphabets whose end result is a subconscious writing. These "texts" resonate with mystery, evoking archaic languages as well as contemporary pattern motifs and automatic "writing" (think Cy Twombly viewed through a microscope); and, like ancient graffiti or post-modernist hieroglyphics, are indecipherable.

The patches of translucent color floating on the surfaces are seemingly random. But they actually serve to stop the evocation of communication through the centuries by anchoring the work resolutely in the present. As opposed to the cyphers that only allude to interpretation, the inclusion of the colored shapes presents not a written but a visual dialogue centering on 20th century abstract iconography that is easily able to be "read" today.

In his previous oeuvre, Alexis appropriated the texts of Gertrude Stein as metaphors for the ways in which words can be manipulated to appear conversant while articulating nothing. Alexis here carries this notion of futility forward by dispensing altogether with the transmission of actual text in favor of insinuating only its residual obscurity of meaning. When all other modalities for communication have been rendered useless, what remains falls within the sensory plane; the lush surfaces that invoke gesture and invite touch.

Joyce B. Korotkin