

UNTITLED, 1969, [131 x 122 cm]

## The tension between surface and drawn mark

I have difficulty working—beginning is never easy for me. If what I am after is a force of clarity, a blindness of insight, I am after it in the decisive moment of a beginning. Clarity and beginnings are related for me. In working what remains of clarity is always only its residue, in the way that words (these words) are but the discarded skin of snaking thought.<sup>1</sup>

—ROMANY EVELEIGH

Approaching creative expression as a problem of language struggling to give form to perception, Romany Eveleigh's paintings and works on paper attempt to capture something of that moment of being in the world when understanding registers in advance of intellect, before words are engaged to fix the boundaries of thought. Nascent in the rich, layered abstract paintings that the artist made in the 1950s, this attitude manifested most directly in the late 60s when Eveleigh made a work that offered "a new possibility, an opening and a beginning" to what has since become a near singular preoccupation with beginnings in themselves.<sup>2</sup>

*Untitled* (1969) [p.46] referenced a mono-printing technique that the artist had devised in the early 1950s and developed over the following years in her painterly pursuits.<sup>3</sup> The surface was built of viscous white printer's ink layered over black painted ground, with the fronts inscribed, while still wet, with thumb and brush strokes, superficial scratches and thinly drawn lines. With this new painting, Eveleigh introduced two strings of tiny, circular marks into the linear and rectangular shapes that constituted the principle symbolic system of her work until this point—one that runs across and the other down the canvas. As with the others in the series, the elaborate surface preparation and the subtractive approach to mark making contrived to reflect the deliberation that pre-exists creative expression, but in this case the repeated calligraphic-like circles introduced suggestive new conceptual dimensions to the artist's project.

The script-like qualities of the circles initiated an investigation of the artistic mark compared to textual modes of expression that would engage the artist's interest for the next decade. Equally if not more significantly, their repetition announced a new metaphysical orientation in Eveleigh's work that remains intact to this day. An initial gesture imagines a return; a repeated gesture seeks identity and difference within the system of meaning within which it occurs. More, repetition reveals difference, and the idea of *making* difference suggests that the labour involved in

1. Romany Eveleigh, "Prologues to What Is Possible: A Collaboration between Romany Eveleigh and Susi Bloch," 391, *International Artist's Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 1990, and reprinted in this volume, p. 87.

2. Romany Eveleigh, in conversation with the author, August 10, 2016.

3. See *Untitled* 1969, pages 46

creative expression is equal in value to processes of ideation and so underscores the role of the body and of time and circumstance in creation. In different ways, using varied methods and mediums, Eveleigh’s task since *Untitled* (1969) has been to understand the relationship of mind and matter: of consciousness as it derives from language and through an embodied relation to the world.

In the works that followed, the circles multiplied—exponentially and in a very particular way. The twelve paintings comprising *Pages* (1972), the three that make up *Tri-Part* (1974), as well as *Half-8* (1975), *Untitled* (1976) and *P says P* (1977) scored the circular motif into the paint and printer’s ink amalgam as columnar masses running down the vertical axes of the paintings, as if to suggest lines of notation collecting on a page.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly the allusion of the circular marks to text was intended, although it is equally apparent that this seeming similitude was something of a ruse. Giorgio Agamben, for one, has argued that the opacity of these would-be textual inscriptions function to turn attention to the receptive nature of the artist’s ground.<sup>5</sup> Comparing Eveleigh’s thickly layered surfaces to the wax covered tablets used by scribes in the ancient world, Agamben reminds us that Aristotle associated embryonic forms of thought with these early writing surfaces. “Thought, is, in potentiality, all the things which it knows, but before it thinks, it is none of them ‘like a tablet upon which nothing is written’.”<sup>6</sup> For Agamben, the works are not concerned with writing, but the vast possibilities for transformation given rise in reflection.

Discussing the appearance of the circles in *Manifesto* (1986), a large-scale composite collage produced during the same period of time as the *Pages* works, Angela Grauerholz has also argued that the textual aspect of this project might aim towards other symbolic ends. For Grauerholz, though the repetitive circles that Eveleigh has shaped into column-like formations inspire thoughts of the graphical organization of print production, their illegibility is equally, if not more, significant. As she suggests, the work is purposely mute. The ‘text’ means to visualize the limits of language.<sup>7</sup>

The inception of ideas is embodied differently in the *Manifesto*, not etched in wax but changing, as evidenced by the alteration and decay of the work’s materials over time. Raw newsprint and blueprint paper substitute the layered canvas

4. There are only twelve works that bear the *Pages* name, though since all the aforementioned works approximate the look of a printed page, the artist often refers to larger series as the *Pages* works.

5. Giorgio Agamben. “Pages: For the works of Romany Eveleigh.” In *Romany Eveleigh - Opere - 1966—1986*. Rome: Canadian Cultural Centre in Rome, 1986, and reprinted in this volume, p. 83

6. Ibid.

7. Angela Grauerholz, “Manifesto, declaring what?” in this volume, p.31

8. Romany’s intellectual community during this period included writers Patrizia Cavalli and Alice Ceresa, Michèle Causse, Monique Wittig among others.

9. Romany Eveleigh in Gilbert Reid, “Romany Eveleigh,” *Romany Eveleigh - Opere - 1966—1986*. Rome: Canadian Cultural Centre in Rome, 1986, and reprinted in this volume, p. 81

of the earlier works. Looser, oval gestures made with correcting pencils and mimeographed circular marks supplant the indexical inscriptions of the *Pages* paintings and the self-containment of individual elements that gave the former project a serial configuration explode in the latter’s sprawling and dynamic composite form. Surely the blueprint processes used to copy the ‘script’ in *Manifesto* and the correcting pencils applied to draw emphasis on its individual pages approximate the material practices involved in the arts of publication. Nonetheless, the instability of these things also speaks to the historical and measurable dimensions of communication.

Sometime in 1973, Eveleigh made a one-off drawing that predicted the energies and material interests of the *Manifesto* project, signaling an important move within the artist’s work toward a more direct reflection on the physical and social dimensions of knowledge. *Untitled* (1973) [p. 59] used pen to inscribe the circular motif directly on the open double-page of a plain newsprint copybook. With the page being an actual rather than metaphorical object, the circular gestures repeated between the lines of the exercise book plainly allude to the rote processes involved in learning and the investment of the body in the acquisition of language and the expression of ideas.

Eveleigh’s social and artistic groups at the time included Italian feminist writers and members of the French feminist movement whose interests were in devising an *écriture féminine* (a literary and theoretical consideration of the relationship between bodies and texts, specifically female bodies and texts) and inventing a literary form that expressed women’s unique experience.<sup>8</sup> The potential correspondences between Eveleigh’s visualization of the repressed energies that give shape to creative expression and the writer Michèle Causse’s thinking about the appearance of the feminine within language must have been appreciated by the author as she used one of the *Pages* works to illustrate the cover of her 1975 book *L’encounter des femmes* [p. 250].

That Eveleigh’s works consider the ways in which language is embodied has been evident from the start. The exacting preparation of her inked and painted canvases from the 1950s onwards produced particularly sensuous surface effects. In fact, the artist has spoken about the elements of these works in distinctly corporeal term, as ‘skins’ of luminosity and darkness.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the excessive repetition of tightly cramped circles in the *Pages* works makes the laborious and potentially

painful production method palpable. Whether or not these works capture an experience that is specifically feminine is debatable, but it is certain that they represent a position in the world that is marginal and resistant in relation to dominant modes of discourse—to language itself—a position that the artist has assumed with both purpose and great wit. Unquestionably, the indecipherability of Eveleigh’s text-like inscriptions makes clear that the linguistic system she has fashioned functions on a level outside of rational thought, instead expressing the energies of a body coming to terms with the workings of the mind. Additionally, to write ‘between the lines’ of the page, as the artist has done in her untitled drawing work from 1973, is akin to reading between the lines of a text: to read or write between the lines is to assume an oppositional or, at least a speculative attitude to what is found or put upon the page.

*Untitled* (1973) was an important transitional work for Eveleigh. Bringing the calligraphic logic of the *Pages* project into orbit with the material interests that gave shape to the *Manifesto* in 1976, the drawing also defined the conceptual parameters of the works that followed in the 1980s: collage, painting and cut-out projects addressing the materiality of language through art works that adopted the ‘page’ as a site for this philosophical and aesthetic investigation.

The 1973 cahier drawing offered a conceptual point of departure for *Fra le Righe* (1980) [p. 97], an extended collage series and an artist’s book and it also gave these works their title. *Fra le Righe* translates from Italian into English as “between the lines.” Comprising more than fifty individual elements, each gather slivers of plain and lined newsprint paper which, when cut into rectangular and linear shapes and pasted into quadrangular formations, approximate the words, sentences and paragraphs found on the pages of a book. Though thematically consistent with previous explorations of printed modes of expression, *Fra Le Righe* distinguishes itself in one very important way: there was nothing actually ‘written’ on the pages.<sup>10</sup> To replace the indexical modality of the hand-drawn mark with the more symbolical processes of selection and arrangement that lie at the heart of collage is to shift attention away from the individual and her relationship to the spoken word—from language as it is assumed, understood or spoken—toward the dynamics of the material and cultural forms through which the individual speaks.

All surface, the physical dimensions of these collaged pages were carefully considered, with paper chosen for its vibrant capacities and its ability to change.

10. The circular motif would never appear again in Eveleigh’s work, though different painting series produced in the 1990s do return to repetitive mark making using short dashes or lines to mark the surface instead of circles. The difference signals a shift from using the gesture to approximate language, to engaging gesture as a notational system concerned with definitions of space. See especially the *Tag* (2005) series as well as individual paintings *Stargazer I* and *Stargazer II* (2001-03).

11. Romany Eveleigh in Gilbert Reid, op. cit.

12. Romany Eveleigh, “Prologues,” op. cit.

13. Susi Bloch, “Prologues.”

As Eveleigh has noted, newsprint, “like all things, but more visibly...is perishable... [it] changes colour, giving so many tones, shades.”<sup>11</sup> In 1980, the coloration of the found materials comprised hues of white and off-white, with the pale blue lines on the copybook fragments providing a subtle contrast to the rest. Even though new or almost new at the time of sourcing, because of the nature of the newsprint, the paper would have already begun its inevitable fade. Pieced together, the subtle variations in the paper’s pigmentations showed the differences in tone, texture and tenor of each paper’s source and so said something of the complexities of language and possibilities for contradiction and transformation that exist within each instance of articulation. Today, the collages have grown darker making the differences between elements less intelligible, but every bit as tangible and affecting. Now, almost uniformly brown, even the lines from the copybook are barely distinguishable from the darkened ground. An extension of and allegory for the speaking subject, the works reveal the changing of circumstances and of selves as we move through time and history.

Gesture reappears in the project that followed. And here too Eveleigh returns to the precise preparation of her ground. Bookend to the untitled 1973 drawing, the *Febo* series (1982-1984) [p. 111] engaged the exercise book for its resonance as an aid in processes of socialization. Unlike the repeated circularity of the calligraphy in the earlier works, the gestures in this series of drawings are linear and not uniform, but tentative and taut. Indeed, the marks never fall between the lines, but cut across them. Equally distinctive, the exercise book page upon which these marks rest is made rather than found. The first and only time that Eveleigh has taken recourse to illusion in her work, the artist created the ground for the drawings using a watercolour wash to simulate the organic qualities of inexpensive copybook paper, and pale blue ink to define the lines.

In conversation with art historian Susi Bloch, Eveleigh described the cahier pages as sites “of latent expectation, solicitation” where “a contract is drawn up,” with the penciled element being an expression of the “carrying out of that contract... that we are not free not to begin.”<sup>12</sup> Though this might be said of any and all writing surfaces, the lined exercise book is especially forceful in this regard. Still, unlike the artist’s comparatively **dutiful response to the petition of the cahier** in the 1973 drawing, her rejoinder in the *Febo* series is to refuse compliance. The extraordinary character of the mark making in the *Febo* works, contrived, as Bloch notes, by “making the right-hand behave as if the left,”<sup>13</sup> aims at giving form to

“originary intentionality,”<sup>14</sup> to leave a mark that might suggest something of the immediacy of brute perception and the body’s uninhibited, unhabituated response to the world.

Where the untitled copybook drawing from 1973 considered how human expression is shaped by repetitive practices, the *Febo* series strove to liberate the artist’s hand from customary movements. As before, repetition remained a strategy although the repeated elements were no longer concerned with the perfection of the stroke, but rather an attempt at differentiating each gesture, each utterance from the last. Even the simulated copybook pages were different from iteration to iteration. Though all quite realistic, no two look the same. Echoing the character of the newsprint that the watercolour is meant to replicate, each of the more than eighty *Febo* drawings was made to reflect the different ways in which material ages.

While the *Febo* series can be said to mark the beginning of Eveleigh’s return to painting, *Tearouts* (1986) [p. 125], a series of twelve lined paper ‘drawings’ marks the end of the artist’s experiments with paper. The last project to use lined paper, the series makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to Matisse’s cutouts by tearing abstract shapes from the sheets of a yellow writing pad. Unlike Matisse, however, Eveleigh abandons the cutout in favour of the curious remainders left behind. The art work doesn’t take shape in the material taken away from its source, but in the act of taking: figure and ground are one here. The intelligibility of the artist’s gesture and the physicality of material support are mutually dependent.

If Eveleigh has sought a point of beginning in all of her works, exactly what constitutes the beginning of intention has never been clearly defined. Is it the layering of ink on paint in the *Pages* works, as the artist prepares her ground, or the gesture of inscription that marks the inauguration of the artist’s voice? Is it the compilation of elements in the *Manifesto* or the writing on the surfaces that make the art work? Is it the collection of paper or the collaging in *Fra le Righe* that founds the artistic gesture? If the beginning in *Febo* was constituted in “the tension between surface and drawn mark,” in *Tearouts* it is the literal meeting of surface and gesture, matter and mind.<sup>15</sup>

Although the *Febo* project plainly marks a coming back to painterly interests, *Prologues to What is Possible* (1984-88) [p. 137], the series of works that followed,

most definitively inaugurated Eveleigh’s return to painting as a primary pursuit. The first time Eveleigh worked with oil paint in nearly two decades, the *Prologues* paintings are clearly indebted to the discoveries made with the paper works, but one sees the signature style that would come to define Eveleigh’s later paintings prefigured here as well: a palette of earth tones with subtle variations in colour and an unevenness of density achieved through multiple applications and removals of paint, surface effects attained by techniques of scraping and rolling, and the unconventionality of the marks by ‘making the right hand behave as the left.’ More significantly, as the art historian Barbara Rose has observed, the works are approached as site, place, field of exploration, rather than as the result of an image or plan imagined in advance.<sup>16</sup>

*Prologues to What is Possible* takes its name from a rarely anthologized Wallace Stevens poem, borrowing something of the imagery and, most certainly, the intent. Imagining the mindset of a subject caught in a meditative state, the poet sets a lone voyager in boat carried forward toward a world that, though travelled before, is unknown at the point of departure. Stevens’ poet-explorer repeats a journey taken previously, spurred by the conviction that in each rehearsal he will find something that is new and different, something true to the particularity of each passing.<sup>17</sup>

The blue-grey ground of Eveleigh’s *Prologues* can be seen to approximate the changing colours and intensities of the sea upon which Stevens’ boat set’s sail, but more profoundly it is the commonality of themes in the poem and the principles guiding the artist’s work that make the poetry and painting forge a connection. Eveleigh travels the same route as the voyager in the Stevens poem, seeking a point of understanding that is unique to the time and place of each of her explorations, a modality of being that is “at a central arrival, an instant moment” removed from anything that has gone before. This is to arrive at a beginning.<sup>18</sup>

Where the standard page format of the *Prologues to What is Possible* series and the awkwardness of its markings find conceptual and formal precedence in the *Febo* works, the layered surface and inscriptive process even more insistently recall the aesthetic dimensions of the artist’s paintings from the 1950s and 1960s. In the mid-eighties, Eveleigh began to spend time in New York and her circle of friends was comprised of artists and art historians, rather than the poets, writers and philosophers who constituted the mainstay of her peer group in Italy, and so it

14. Eveleigh, “Prologues.”

15. Ibid.

16. Barbara Rose, “Romany Eveleigh, Painting as Presence.” In *Romany Eveleigh*. Galleria D’Arto De Serpenti: Rome, June 1996, and reprinted in this volume, p. 93

17. Wallace Stevens, “Prologues to What is Possible.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1952, pp. 330–331. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3847898

18. Ibid.

is not surprising that the artist would return to embrace the formal vocabulary of painting at this time.<sup>19</sup>

Completed between 1990 and 1993, the first body of paintings made after the *Prologues* were almost all large—human scale, as Rose has noted—and exhibited a more explicit interest in space and geometry than any of the artist's previous works. Eveleigh's physical relationship to the canvas would have changed as the dimensions of her structures grew, and this new, more expansive orientation could explain the sectioning off of these paintings into zones of action. Approached as physical sites, the compositions were built with blocks of colour and balanced by nascent organic shapes. The drawn elements are changed too. More tentative than before, they seem to have been put in place to cling to the more substantial things that surround them—to the chrysalis shape in *Metamorphosis* (1993) [p. 160] or to the edge of a cliff-like form in *Scapa Via* (1993) [p. 161].

At the same time, Eveleigh's thinking about 'beginnings' shifts to exhibit more measurable concerns. In the paper-based works, beginnings were approached as illusive and intangible moments of ideation, sought in the interstices between perception and speech. Though still conceived as dynamic, beginnings are imagined here as locatable, with marks deployed as mapping devices tracing the shifts and emplacements of thought. The shaky lines that appear in *From Here to There* (1992) [p. 158] and *Map* (1992) [p. 159] are the most overt in this regard. The titles would seem indicative of the artist's reasoning in this new production. Paintings like *Scapa Via* (1993) (to 'take off' in Italian) and *Departure* (1991) reinforce the notion that the clarity that Eveleigh has long pursued might manifest most dramatically through movements in and across space. Later titles imply the same: *Nomad* (1995), *Approach*, (2001) *Rendezvous*, (2001-3) and *To* (2007).

Though Eveleigh's practice had long been dedicated to an exploration of the dynamics between figure and ground, drawing and painting, in the 1990s the artist's project evolved to consider this relation in spatial terms. Alternating between smaller scaled 'study' series and the production of larger-scaled works, Eveleigh's practice has since made use of the gesture in a game of limitations where lines are drawn up in a contest over the division of space. In the works that follow, Eveleigh engages the line as a means to chart and orchestrate movement even more directly.

19. Eveleigh's social circles included art historians Susi Bloch, Barbara Rose and Diane Kelder, and the painter James Bishop, with whom she shared the studio he kept in New York.

The gesture in *Parameters* (1993-94) [p. 163], an extended series of fifty smaller works made immediately after this new painting series (e.g. *From Here to There*, *Map*, *Scapa Via*, *Departure*, etc.), takes on a more consciously architectural and geometrical character, with squares and blunted straight strokes carving territories and pathways in a muddy, dark brown ground. Eveleigh's surface also changes with *Parameters*. The palette has become more minimal and the paint application more spare. In parts, it all but disappears. Understood as an attempt to define the threshold beyond which the painterly evocations might be ruined by overstatement, the sparseness brings to mind the short stories of Lydia Davis, a writer for whom Eveleigh has great admiration. And, like Davis's audaciously brief fictions—sometimes just a sentence or two—the artist's paintings are reduced to a point of pure essence.

Eveleigh was conversant with the post-painterly abstraction of the New York school of painters and the rigorous austerity of the minimalist painters that followed, and her work shares something of the simplicity and openness of these approaches to abstraction. The artist's methods are distinct because of the expressive dimensions she teases from her chosen materials and the means used—the ways in which her works play up the thingness of canvas and the presence achieved by the deliberations of her mark making. Though true of all of Eveleigh's work, a restrained sensuality became especially evident in the series of large-scale paintings made between 1993 and 1997, as well as the two smaller-formatted projects produced around the same period of time: the *Miniatures* (1997) and *Nomad* (1999-2001) series.

This period of production represents another turning point in Eveleigh's practice, a movement toward poetic concision achieved through reduction. Like the *Parameters* paintings, these works are nearly monochromatic, but they are significantly lighter in tonality, the larger paintings, especially so. *Untitled* (1993) [p. 170], *Without Day*, *Without Night* (1995) [p. 171] and *Nomad* (1995) [p. 172] reduce the surface to a subtle play of shades of white and off-white. The relative absence of colour in the palette is further condensed in the areas where Eveleigh has brushed the white away. *Echo* (1995) [p. 173], *Three* (1995) [p. 174], and *Untitled* (1997) [p. 175] achieve the same effects using shades of blue-grey. In all, the work of surface reduction is evident. Traces of the artist's efforts remain an essential aesthetic element of these paintings. So too, the density of the figurative marks is eased here, noticeably. Fewer, lighter and more dynamic than the lines of

*Parameters*, the strokes define the artist's presence within the space differently—they are softer and almost always made on a diagonal. The drawn gestures do not so much lay territory claims within these fields of colour as they trace a quiet, reflective passage across them.

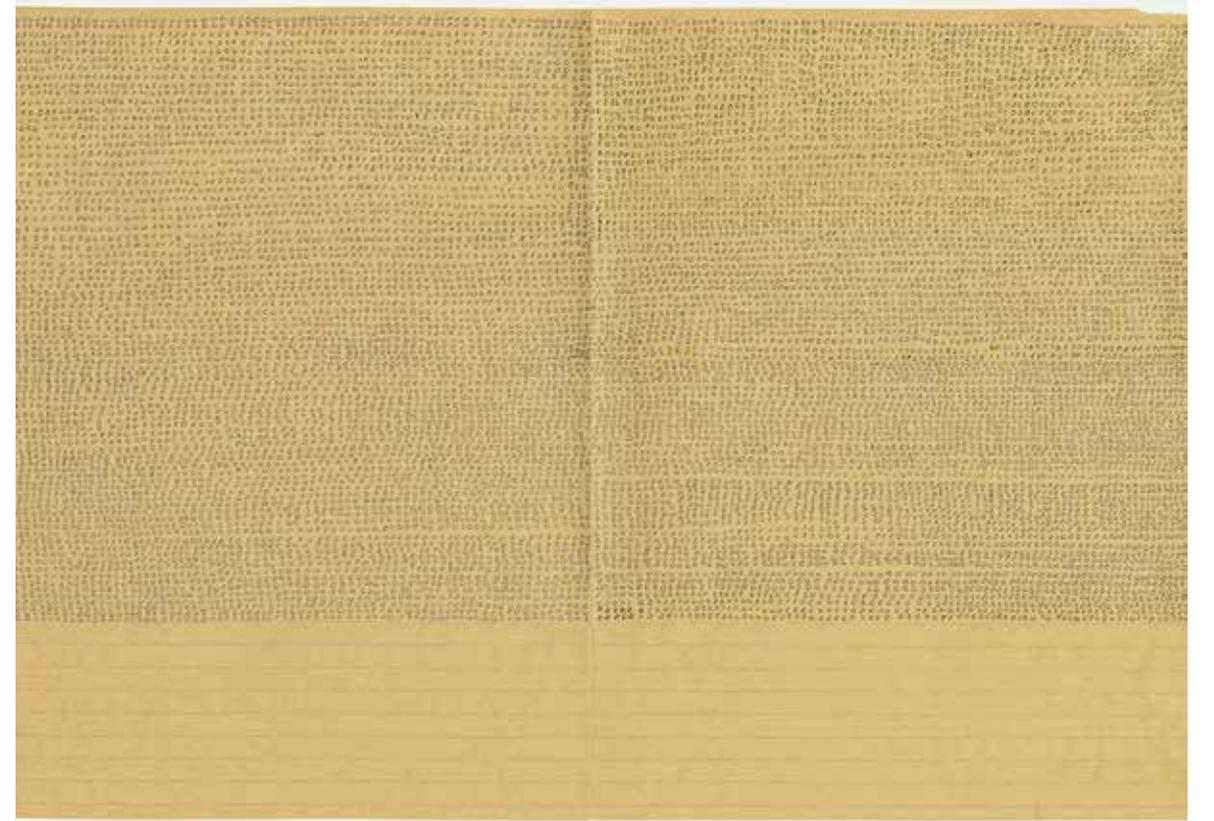
Sharing a palette of variations in whites, blues and greys and an appreciation for the exacting function of the drawn line, the smaller *Miniatures* or *Nomad* series might be considered studies for these larger works, were they not completed after the fact. The differences between small and large works are telling. The paint application is thicker when the scale is reduced and the lines are proportionally larger, appearing more rigid and severe. Even more significant is the serial nature of this production. Recalling the differentiating purpose of repetition in Eveleigh's work with circular marks in the 1970s and 1980s, the sequential approach in *Miniatures* and *Nomads* might operate in kind—as a means to register historical transformation. In each of these projects the same repeated elements recur to define changing relations between component parts. Fluctuations in physicality and in intentionality record different movements in space and time.

By the end of the millennium Eveleigh's renewed painting practice had fully evolved. The larger paintings had grown even lighter than before—in density, if not hue. With shades of olive, grey, brown applied over yellow and white ground, the palette itself is primarily dark, but Eveleigh's technique of brushing the paint away has created a surprising and stunning luminosity and an uncanny sense of depth. There is an uncommon delicacy to the artist's gesture in these works. Lines the width of a hair hover over the luminous ground to breathtaking effect. With the surface buffed to reveal a mere hint of light below and the finest lines added as counterpoint, works like *Approach* (2001-3), *Pomeriggio* (2001), *Summit* (1999), *Star Gazer I + II* (2001-3) and *Scrim* (2001) achieve something very close to a state of perfect equilibrium, an exquisitely pitched communion between figure and ground.

In 2009, following the theft and presumed destruction of a large number of art works from the previous ten years, Eveleigh began reworking some of her earlier projects. Beginning with the *Febo* series, the artist remade thirty of the fifty works that were lost. Initially concerned that these replicated pieces would lack authenticity in the absence of the originating impulse, Eveleigh reasoned that the essence of her work lay in the process—whether of creation or recreation—rather

than the thing itself. Just as the original *Febo* drawings spoke to ideas about the creative act, about beginnings, initial attempts at 'speech' or the unfolding of a 'thought' conveyed through gesture, the copied works expressed these same ideas through the process of making. Eveleigh's reflections on the remaking process not only explain the principles of this particular project but speak to the philosophy underlying her work as an artist more generally: "The character of that precarious, near-inchoate moment between ideation and articulation remains the inspiration of these works, and also represents their own creative condition. Creative expression is always at least once removed. Thought and action, reflection and expression, the past and the present are all joined in the present moment, in creativity and in action."<sup>20</sup>

Today, Eveleigh is living in Rome where she maintains a studio to paint, continuing to take up themes addressed in previous work, though differently. The work is quieter; the palette paler in tone and the paint application has grown even sparser than it was at the turn of the millennium. Noticeably, the spirit with which the artist approaches the work is lighter and more buoyant as well, as works like *One Liners* (2017) [p. 211] attest. The creative energies fueling the artist's present work have a different intensity than those that drove previous explorations. Though Eveleigh's near singular quest to arrive at the 'moment of beginning' persists, it is oriented otherwise, with the moments she inevitably discovers appearing more fleetingly than they did before—arriving and disappearing in the blink of an eye, sensed as much as seen.



UNTITLED, 1973, [29 x 44.5 cm]