

milan mrkusich

six journeys

cover: **journey one (second version)** 1986

acrylic polymer on canvas 1915 x 5588 mm

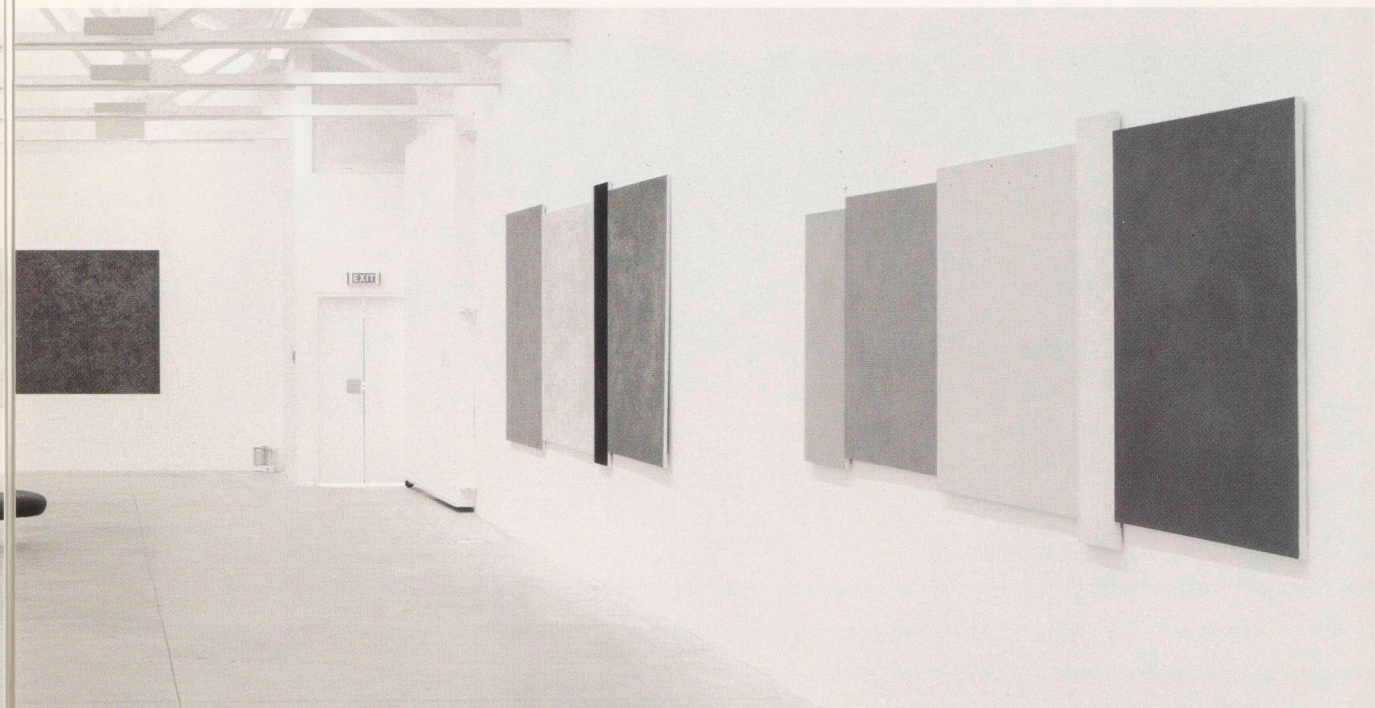
chartwell collection, waikato museum of art and history, hamilton



back cover: **journey six (achromatic)** 1988 -89

acrylic on canvas 1829 x 6096 mm

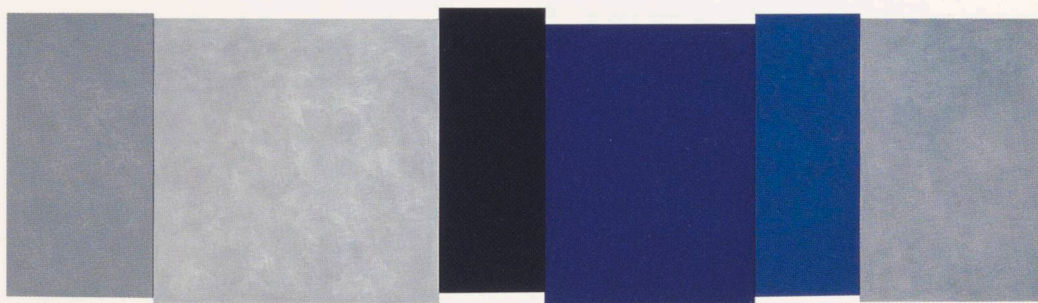
auckland art gallery collection



journey two (second version) 1988

acrylic on canvas 1448 x 5029 mm

collection of the artist



And upon this simple system of many colours is based the manifold and infinitely varied investigation of all things.¹

one In the event, we don't start at the beginning, but with a revision. *Journey One* is here in its second version: not a false start, but a reconsideration. Just as Milan Mrkusich's *Journey* paintings run backwards and forwards in the chronology of their making, they reference across the five decades of his oeuvre. There are journeys to the paintings as well as journeys from them. We find apparent precedents for the *Journeys* at various points in the body of Mrkusich's work: in the relief works of the late fifties and early sixties, in the mystical impulse of the *Elements* and *Emblems*, in the structured atmospheres of the *Corner* paintings, in the constructivist explorations of the works of the late seventies, in the edges of the *Area* paintings, and elsewhere besides. It was this consistency of approach that T. L. R. Wilson defined in 1985, when he stated that "all of Mrkusich's work is best understood in terms of the largeness of his whole production."² Relating the *Journey* paintings to Mrkusich's whole production, however, it becomes clear that while they represent a consolidation of his practice until that time, they also mark a radical rethinking of its terms.

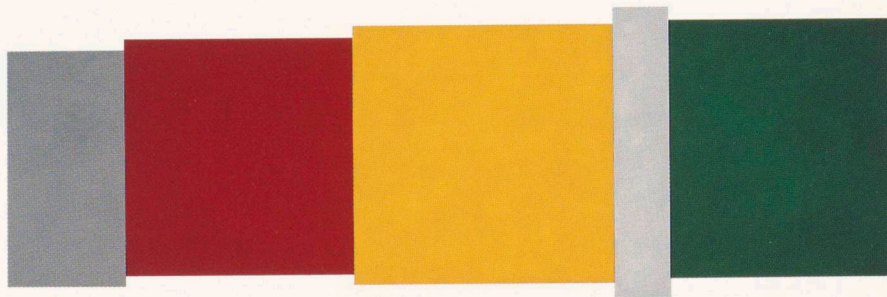
1. C. G. Jung 'The Visions of Zosimos' in R. F. C. Hull (ed.) *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* vol. 13: *Alchemical Studies*. Princeton N. J. Princeton University Press, c. 1967, p. 59.

2. T. L. R. Wilson 'Some introductory notes on meaning and method' *Milan Mrkusich: A Decade Further On*. Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1985, p. 15.

journey three 1986

acrylic polymer on canvas 1371 x 4177mm

collection of the artist



two "I do not choose my colour," Mrkusich wrote in 1985. "Colour is not mine alone. Colour just exists. Achromatic and chromatic colours are material facts."³ Acknowledging the materiality of colour, Mrkusich also acknowledges its subjectivity, its openness to the possibilities of interpretation, its relativity to different cultural values. It is this sense of possibility that the *Journey* paintings embrace, perhaps more fully than any previous body of Mrkusich's work. It is these possibilities that they opened up for work which followed: the *Chinese elements* of 1989, the *Alchemical spectrums* of 1990. Contrary to the specific nature of these works, the *Journeys* travel through many possible symbologies of colour, without resting firmly upon any. If we look for meaning in Mrkusich's colours, we find it to be like the colours themselves: what initially appears as pure and absolute is in fact highly nuanced, tempered by sensibility.

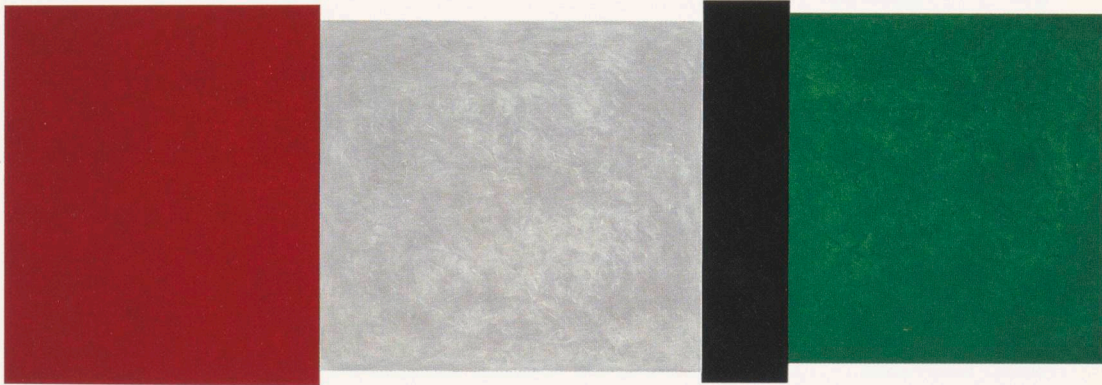
three Outside of his architectural commissions, the *Journey* paintings are amongst the largest works Mrkusich has made. Scale is used in the works to take us further than the eye can see, to stretch beyond the field of vision. That said, the scale of the *Journey* paintings is defined pragmatically - the longest work being the length of the longest wall in Mrkusich's studio, the largest individual panel the furthest his arm can reach across a horizontal surface. Thus defined by physical circumstances, the *Journey*

3. undated letter responding to questions by T. L. R. Wilson. Auckland Art Gallery Research Library.

journey four 1987

acrylic on canvas 1852 x 5280 mm

courtesy of the artist and sue crockford gallery, auckland



paintings engage the viewer in a profoundly physical way. It is an impulse that Mark Rothko sharply articulated: "I realize that historically the function of large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however [...] is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human."⁴

four In their apparent irregularity of arrangement, the *Journey* paintings would seem to undermine Mrkusich's longstanding commitment to neutral structures in his work - rational geometries of grids, lines and circles. Such devices have functioned to provide compositional stability - an armature, as Peter Leech has described them⁵ - to hold the painting to its ground. Abandoning such interior architecture, the *Journey* paintings expand beyond the field of vision, are built into space. At the same time, Mrkusich remains pragmatically committed to the materiality of painting, to its rectangularity, structuring the works relative to the incremental increases of standard size stretchers. In the *Journeys* Mrkusich achieves a series of expanses and intervals, of motions and pauses that might best be analogised to musical structure. Carrying this further; the organisation of negative space in the paintings produces patterns, doubles, inversions and reflections, an elaborate game of balance played along the upper and lower edges of the works.

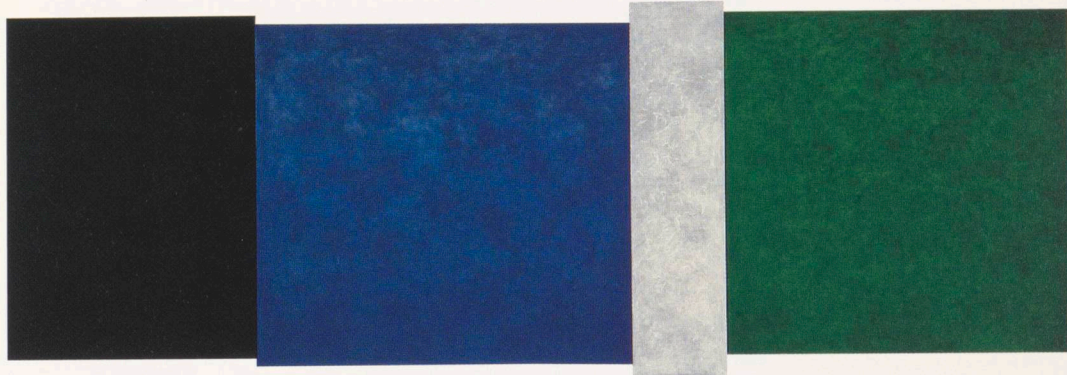
4. Mark Rothko: 1903-1970 Tate Gallery, London, 1987, p. 85

5. Peter Leech 'Milan Mrkusich: The architecture of the painted surface' *Art New Zealand* 19, 1981, p. 38

journey five 1987

acrylic on canvas 1825 x 5185 mm

courtesy of the artist and sue crockford gallery, auckland



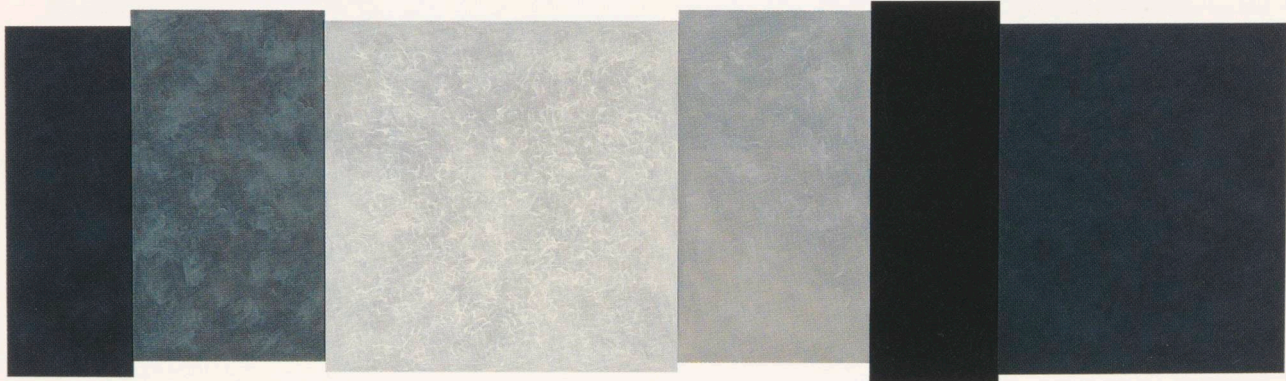
five What hasn't changed in the *Journeys* is Mrkusich's skill as a technician of surface. Each *Journey*, each individual canvas, is marked by a different character: the density of the paint, the thinness and number of layers from which it is built, the width of the brush, the mobility of the artist's hand and the visibility of the gesture. These surfaces produce what Peter Leech has characterised as the defining feature of Mrkusich's work: Depth in flatness.⁶ These depths, however, escape the confines of the individual canvases. They expand beyond the meeting of edges, beyond the ends of the painting, further, again, than the eye can see.

six The *Journey* paintings are the product of a lifelong investigation into the possibilities of abstract painting. They are Mrkusich's own journey, the product of intelligence and skill, reflection and refinement. As viewers we are invited on this journey, a route of contemplation, silence and understanding. This has always been Mrkusich's task: to investigate the immaterial through the material, to offer to us the viewer what he himself has discovered. As Meyer Shapiro wrote in 1957: "It is primarily [in this art] that such contemplativeness and communion with the work of another human being, the sensing of another's perfected feeling and imagination, becomes possible."⁷

william mcaloon

6. Peter Leech. op cit. p. 37

7. quoted by Donald Kuspit 'The Spiritual in Contemporary Art' *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1895-1985* Los Angeles, L. A. County Museum of Art, 1986. p. 314



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