



Hilarie Mais  
*Rain*, 2001  
oil paint, wood, 180 x 243 x 4 cm

Courtesy the artist and KRONENBERG MAIS WRIGHT  
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Artwork photography: Mike Terry



"Each work is the first and only work. In that moment, it stands alone." (H. Mais, personal conversation, July 2022)

Practising since the 1970s, Hilarie Mais is a leading example of expanded abstraction. Working in New York, Mais was influenced by Russian and English Constructivism and American minimalism. A move to Australia in 1981 was a conceptual turning point for Mais' practice, which straddles the relationship between painting and sculpture and the slippages between two- and three-dimensional space.

Mais responded to the diversity and fecundity of Australian plant life and began her ongoing exploration of the grid. The Modernist grid became fertile ground on which to explore growth systems found in nature, such as Fibonacci or Golden Mean sequences. Mais does not replicate these sequences precisely but rather adopts their counting sequences as the basis to each structure.

Mais' approach to the grid takes an autobiographical impetus. Her first grids referred metaphorically to barriers and points of transition. Despite this, Mais resists a narrative reading of her work – whatever her starting point, each work must become autonomous.

The warp and weft of *Rain* 2001 relates to an unexpected relationship to textiles (Mais was influenced by Annie Albers while working in London), as their organic boundaries convey evidence of their making. Harmonious blues and greens are washed over and slowly built up to produce a fugue of colour.

The scale of the works refers to Mais' own bodily scale, spread-eagled as in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. The shallow relief produces the optics of depth structurally and with the use of shadow. As in all her works, there is handmade evidence of the brush and the hand of the artist.

Influenced by the male-dominated London art world, the active feminism of New York and a strong, talented ecosystem of women artists in Australia, Mais refers to her approach as feminising the grid. In doing so, she subverts its formalism. Mais does not consider this focused interrogation as restrictive – stating instead that "constraint is a freedom; restraint is focus." (Mais, as quoted in Wright, 2017, p. 37)



#### Sophia Halloway

Sophia Halloway is a writer and art critic based in Sydney. Her work has been published by Art Monthly, Art Almanac, Island Magazine, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, the National Gallery of Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and others. In 2020, Halloway was shortlisted for the 7th International Awards for Art Criticism.

#### References

Wright, W. (2017). Hilarie Mais in conversation with William Wright. In B. French and M. Sellers (Eds.) *Hilarie Mais* (pp. 37). Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney.