

An aerial photograph of a city street grid, showing a dense pattern of light-colored concrete or stone blocks and dark asphalt streets. The grid is slightly tilted, creating a sense of depth and perspective. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

HARRIET MENA HILL
Mapping the Grid



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EAGLE GALLERY **EMH ARTS**



Travelling Altar I 2005
oil on gesso, 40 x 61 cm
The Chapter House, Worcester Cathedral

'The seat of the soul is there, where the outer and the inner worlds meet.'

~ NOVALIS (Georg Friedrich Philipp Freiherr von Hardenberg) 1772-1801

BY CONSTRUCTING demarcated spaces traversed by open-weaved structures, Harriet Mena Hill paints unlikely image-symbols of emotionality and inner feeling. Human mental states are invariably related to art because art offers basic techniques for organising or disrupting meaning. Throughout time art has been the channel for knowing the known, imagining the unknown and, more recently, for unknowing what is known.

Hill acknowledges a fundamental human tendency. By establishing potential spaces in our minds, we allow ourselves to anticipate places we will visit and to imagine territories where it is less easy for the body to go. These latter, inner landscapes have helped mankind to grasp theories of religion, objectify anxieties and examine the mystery of existence. People unconsciously map aspects of their lives and this spatial knowledge gives shape to abstract ideas and enables these ideas to be communicated in relative terms.

Hill's paintings appear to pursue that type of reasoning. By depicting generically familiar but inscrutably unnameable environments, they invite the viewer's imagination to surf territory beyond direct experience. Crisscrossing the picture plane are shade-inflected beams whose extent exceeds the boundaries of the image. This fretted network brings to mind impressive historic domes and breathtaking spans achieved by modern engineering. Such canopies, invariably seen from below, echo as an inner vault whatever entity the sky borders – one world abutting a perceived other.

The ivory-like translucence of Hill's complex tracery seems co-extensive with the perimeter of the painting itself, that part conceded by the artist as a threshold with the world the viewer occupies. In contrast with this almost featureless white materiality is the luminescent 'void' glimpsed beyond. Conceived as bottomless tones of orange or blue, its aerial, southern serenity occurs in the majority of Hill's grid paintings in recent years. Whether background or foreground, its relative position to the viewer is, like scale and

depth, never fully disclosed. Sometimes, Hill depicts a single light falling on the intertexture of diagonal crossbars. Is its source within the image or behind the viewer? Perhaps it emits from the viewer like a traveller's torch guides tentative forward progress. Conceivably, this colouring may not be a panorama beyond the apertures at all but merely a ceiling fresco. As questions multiply, a desire to investigate emerges as a distinct sensibility in Hill's work, its strange magnitude.

If, as Immanuel Kant had asserted, the laws of space are known to the mind because they are of the mind, then the intricate space Hill imagines will connect with knowledge within us from birth. Like the galaxy we inhabit, which burst forth into matter from a tiny, pressured point in infinity billions of years ago, we, ourselves, originate in space.

No wonder, therefore, that we attribute so much to its meaning and no century interrogated space as rigorously as the twentieth century. Since Einstein, space and time can be mathematically combined into one conceptual object, so-called 'space-time', which is bent and twisted around Earth's planet as it rotates. Space has also been secularised, with 'inner space' fragmented in numerous practical, intellectual and scholarly ways: geographical (public, private, abstract), psychological (perceptive, personal, phobic) and political (national boundaries and delineations of identity).

'Outer space' is now the laboratory of advanced science. But for far longer it harboured the foundation stories and essential myths of races and creeds. Elijah, according to the Old Testament, sped through space on a fiery chariot; Jesus and his mother ascended bodily to the high region that Christians call Heaven; and many aboriginal traditions cradle in spatial metaphors the notion of release from local limitations into spiritual transcendence.

Hill's barriers, however, complicate such ascents. Their purpose is not clear; their significance is left to the viewer. Possible uses are as symbols (of scruples, anxieties, prejudices that frustrate a hoped-for advance) or to slow, shield, distinguish, enclose, obscure, sieve and reward. A way through here is closed off there and although clear forward trajectories exist, these slender channels make one's own burdensome physicality apparent. At which point the realisation arises that the body is maybe the obstacle and not the visible structures. For barriers, read boundaries.

It is the possible porousness of these boundaries that is fascinating. Writing in the 1920s, Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher and critic, set out the concept of co-belonging; of in with out, exteriority with interiority, private with public, of past and present with future. His principal symbol of this idea was the passageway, the urban arcade of *fin-de-siècle* Paris – the habitat of the *flâneur* – a sort of dream world of 'aesthetic immersion' that leads towards an awakening, when something denied in the past, or a potential not fulfilled, is recaptured.

Without beginnings and endings, labyrinths such as Hill depicts are often cited as metaphors of cities or, more accurately, of people's experiences of cities. Benjamin was acutely interested in how urban knowledge is acquired and how it relates to the acquisition of other realms of knowledge. In his writings on Berlin and Naples, he referred to crossing thresholds, standing on the edge of a void and to his impotence before the city. These cities were simultaneously metaphors for other actions and states of mind where exchanges of knowledge take place.

Taking the significance of 'porosity' further in 1996, the British artist and theorist, Victor Burgin, wrote of space as the 'psycho-corporeal boundary' that indicated the fragile state of the body. For Burgin, porosity is 'the pre-Oedipal, maternal, space.... In this space it is not simply that the boundaries are "porous", but the subject itself is soluble. This space is the source of bliss and terror, of the "oceanic" feeling, and of the feeling of coming apart; just as it is at the origin of feelings of being invaded, overwhelmed, suffocated.'

Neither Burgin nor Benjamin treated the spiritual dimension that interests Hill, and Hill makes no allusion to either theorist. None the less, their separate ideas about the spatial relationship that humans give their own sense of existence seem to converge in imagery that is, on the one hand, very postmodern and, on the other, intensely historical. For in the actual world of the early twenty-first century, borders (social, political, cultural) are sliding and vanishing, inconvenient to the movement of international capital. As a direct consequence, identities of all sorts are undergoing the anguish of dissolution, simultaneously willing and resisting their anticipated disappearance.

Yet fascination with a power behind the natural world, and the search for precarious images of its presence, was the great gift bequeathed by nineteenth-century romantics to modernism. Caspar David Friedrich embodied the pursuit in the far horizon and the silent, thoughtful gaze while, as Mark Rothko much later made clear, a few colours and shapes can shoulder the full load of a spiritual experience, its astounding sublimity and the prospect of unity.

Hill materialises the phenomenon as miniature altarpieces, deriving particular emotional and intellectual satisfaction from their practical function. These objects, resonant with medieval piety, were intended for small chapels or for use on journeys by a single devotee or a small group, and often consisted of a single-panelled devotional image protected by doors, also decorated, that folded over it.

History has been kinder to portable altars than to their permanent equivalents. Over centuries, the latter have been unfixed, dismantled and dispersed to be aestheticised into cultural documents stripped of context. Personal shrines, however, were complete in themselves as catalysts that activated prayer and self-reflection through association with place and the memory of ritual.

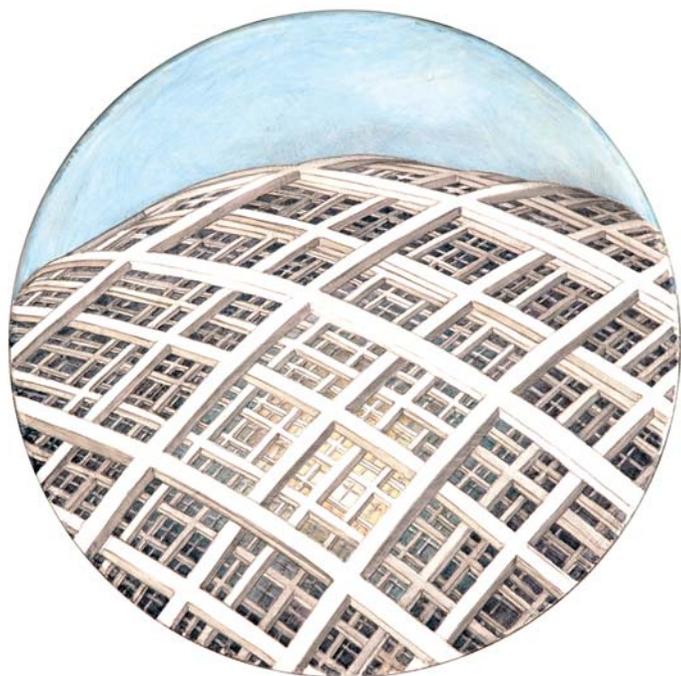
Their spiritual space was carried within them, therefore, hinged as a portal to wider potentialities. Hill has no denominational use in her choice of model; the reference facilitates enquiry into beliefs beyond the self. Vestiges in titles and the rounded arch that frames some panels are not wholly outmoded survivals. Indeed they may imply genius. For, in spite of today's fascination with participating in vivid, gratifying spectacle, more guidance is sought from and hopes confided to the digitally-empowered portable monitor than to most once-hallowed institutions.

Hill cedes a precious place to her audience. Receptivity is the condition of being an artist; by encouraging slow looking in a fast world, Hill makes that condition available to others. These paintings derive their significance from collaboration between maker and receiver, significance that is not so much shared as specific – bespoke, even – to each person who gains visual and mental access to them.

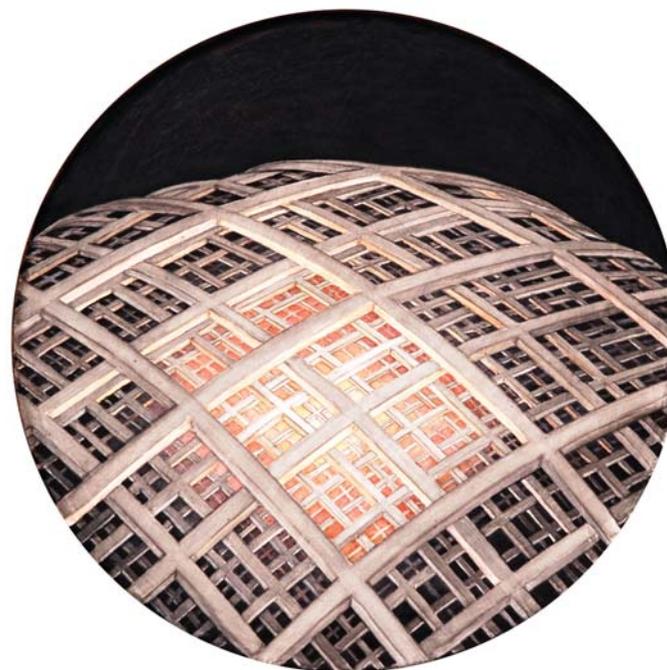
MARTIN HOLMAN 2012



Passage III 2012
oil on gesso, 30 × 60 cm
The Chapter House, Worcester Cathedral



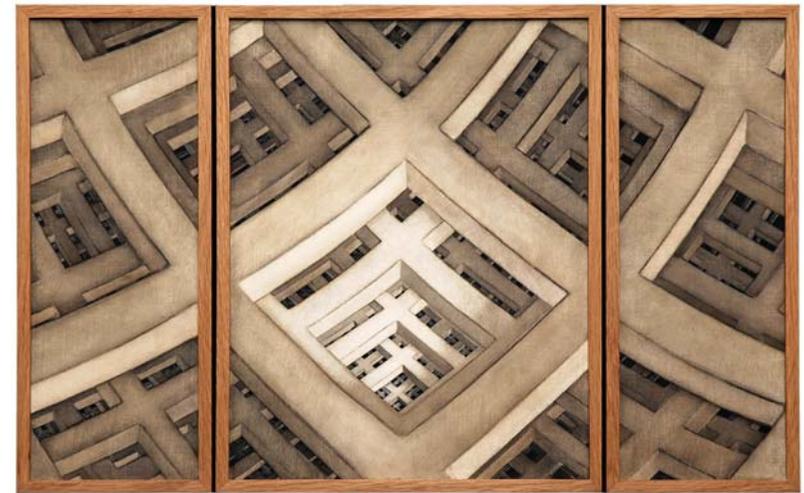
Day 2011 [detail]
oil on gesso, 22.5 x 23 cm



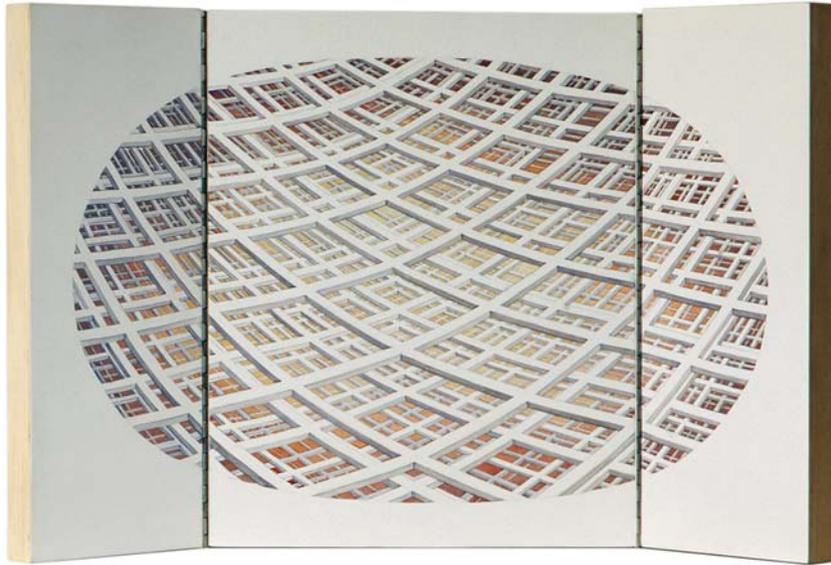
Night 2011 [detail]
oil on gesso, 22.5 x 23 cm



Altar 2007
oil on gesso, 50 × 81 cm

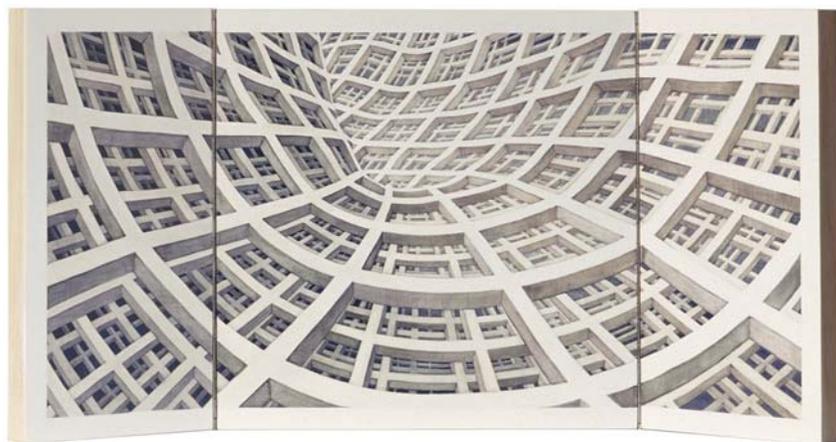


Travelling Altar III 2007
oil on gesso, 37 × 59 cm

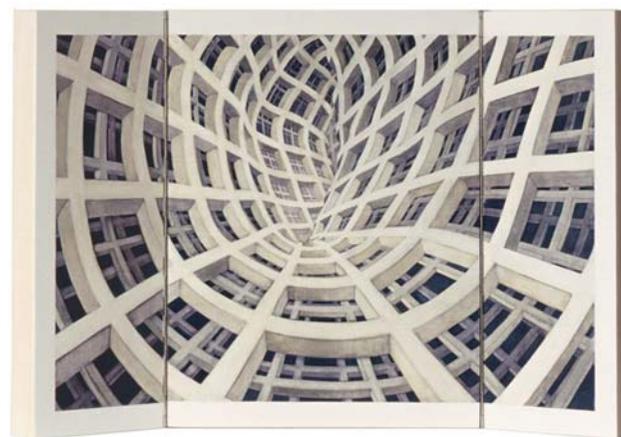


Plasma Field 2009
oil on gesso, 50 × 80 cm [detail right]

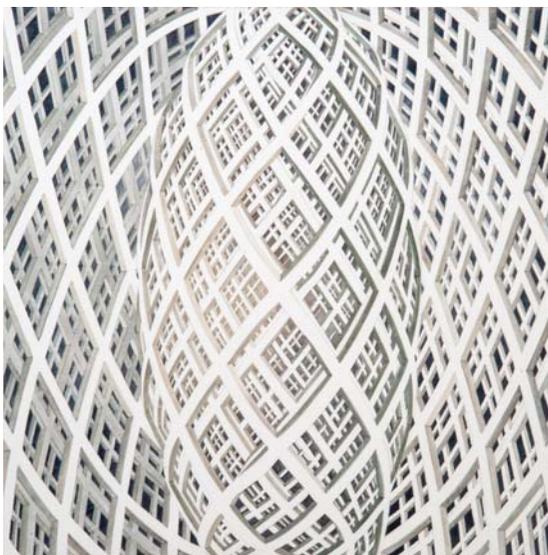




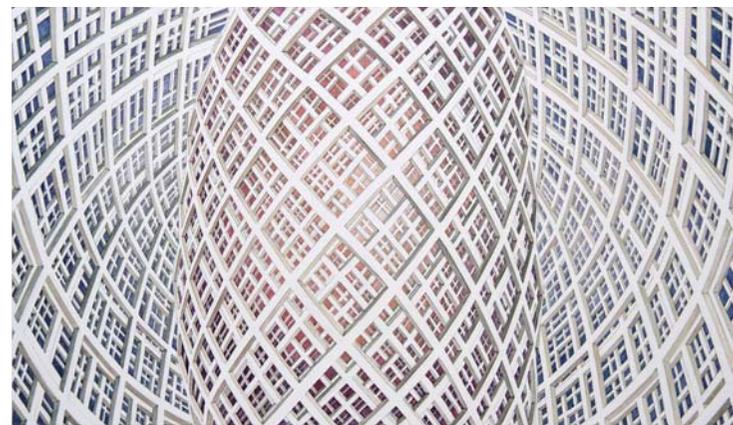
Passage I 2012
oil on gesso, 40 x 81 cm



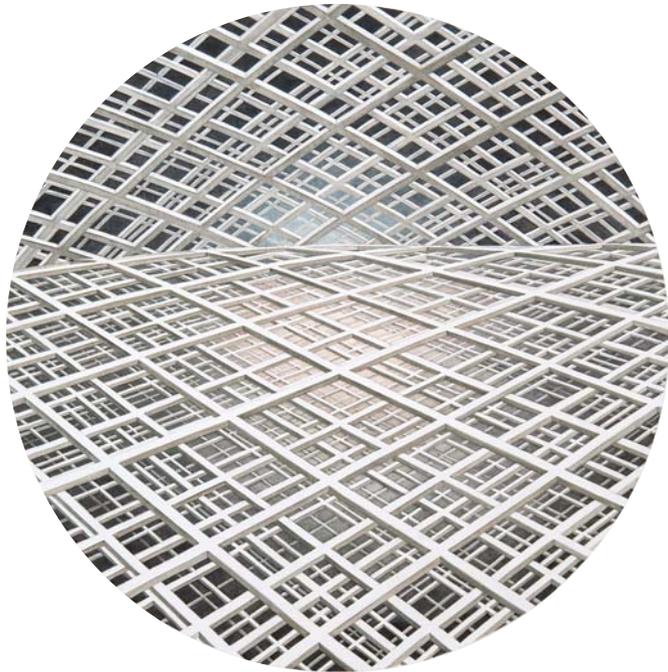
Passage II 2012
oil on gesso, 40 x 61 cm



At the Still Point I 2014
oil on gesso, 40 × 40 cm



At the Still Point II 2014
oil on gesso, 30 × 50 cm



Pale Burn 2013
oil on gesso, 50 × 50 cm

HARRIET MENA HILL

- 1966 born London
 1984-5 Camberwell School of Arts & Crafts, London - Foundation
 1986-7 Camberwell School of Arts & Crafts, London - BA Hons Painting
 1986 Stage Painter *Run to Earth* - London Contemporary Dance Theatre

SOLO SHOWS

- 1990 Duncan Campbell Fine Art, London
 1994 Eagle Gallery, London
 1996 The Fine Art Society, London
 2000 Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh
 2003 *Division and Unity* Eagle Gallery, London
 2008 *Sound & Echo* two person show with Terry Smith, Eagle Gallery, London
 2012 *Mapping the Grid* The Chapter House, Worcester Cathedral
 2014 *The Still Point* Eagle Gallery, London

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

- 1989 Intaglio Printmakers Gallery, London
 1990 The Hunting Group Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London
 1991 The Fine Art Society, Glasgow
An Open Reality Eagle Gallery, London - two person
 Prize Winner: *Evening Standard* New Discovery Art Prize
The Discerning Eye Mall Galleries, London
 1992 *Out of Italy* Eagle Gallery, London
 F.I.A.R. - selected by Mel Gooding
 Academia Italia, London and tour (Italy, France, New York, Los Angeles)
The Discerning Eye Mall Galleries, London
 Contemporary Art Society Market, Smith Galleries, London
 1993 *Art 93* Business Design Centre, London - Contemporary Art Society
Contemporaries Eagle Gallery, London
 1994 *Art 94* Business Design Centre, London - John Jones Gallery
SHELF LIFE Eagle Gallery, London
 Contemporary Art Society Market, Royal Festival Hall, London
 1996 *SHELF LIFE II* Eagle Gallery, London
 Fine Art Society, London
 1997 *Art 97* Business Design Centre, London - Eagle Gallery
 Fine Art Society Christmas Exhibition, London
 1998 *Art 98* Business Design Centre, London - Eagle Gallery
 Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh

- 1998 *Changing London* Eagle Gallery, London
 1998 *Evening Echoes - Ballinglen Artist's Residencies*, The Economist, London
Correspondences The Factory, London - Eagle Gallery and tour
 1999-2002 *Art 99-02*, Business Design Centre, London - Eagle Gallery/Ingleby Gallery
 2000 *STRATA* with Helen Ireland and Brenda Mayo - Eagle Gallery, London
 2001 *FAS Now* The Fine Art Society, London
 2003 Eagle Gallery, London with Matthew Burrows and Karen Bosy
 2007 *Cities and Eyes* The Peter Pears Gallery, Aldeburgh Music 2007
 2010 Contemporary Artists from the Collection, Fleming-Wyfold, London
 2012 *Panel Paintings* Eagle Gallery, London

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

- 1991 *Evening Standard* New Discovery Art Prizewinner
 1996 Ballinglen Arts Foundation Residency Award, Ireland

COLLECTIONS

British Land plc; The Government Art Collection; St Johns College, Oxford;
 Lord Gowrie; FIAR International; The Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation;
 New Hall, Cambridge

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 Geraldine Norman: *Independent*, 10 December
 Jane Norrie: *Art Review*, December issue
 Karl Renner: *Architects Journal*, 28 November
City Limits, 6 December
World of Interiors, November issue
 1991 Ian McKay: *Art Line International*, Vol. 5, No. 4
 Andrew Lambirth: *Artists and Illustrators*, No. 58
 1992 *Sunday Express*, 8 November
 1993 *Art Review*, XLV (June)
 1994 Mel Gooding: Exhibition catalogue (Eagle Gallery)
Royal Academy Magazine, Summer issue
 1995 Nicola Shane: Art Under £1000, *Art Review* (February)
Evening Standard, 17 August
 Imogen O'Rourke: *Marie Claire* magazine, September
 1996 Iain Gale: *The Week*, 25 March
Sunday Telegraph, December
 1997 Andrew Lambirth: *Independent*, 25 November
 1998 *Evening Echoes* catalogue
 Mark Currah: *Time Out*, March
 Andrew Mead: *Architects Journal*, 16 July
Correspondences - ISBN 0-9531793-5-4
 2000 Robert Clark: *Guardian Guide*, 12-18 February
 William Packer: *The Financial Times*, 22 February
 2003 Sue Hubbard: *Independent*, 13 May
 2007 *The Invisible City* - ISBN 978-0-9554046-3-4

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The Still Point, Eagle Gallery

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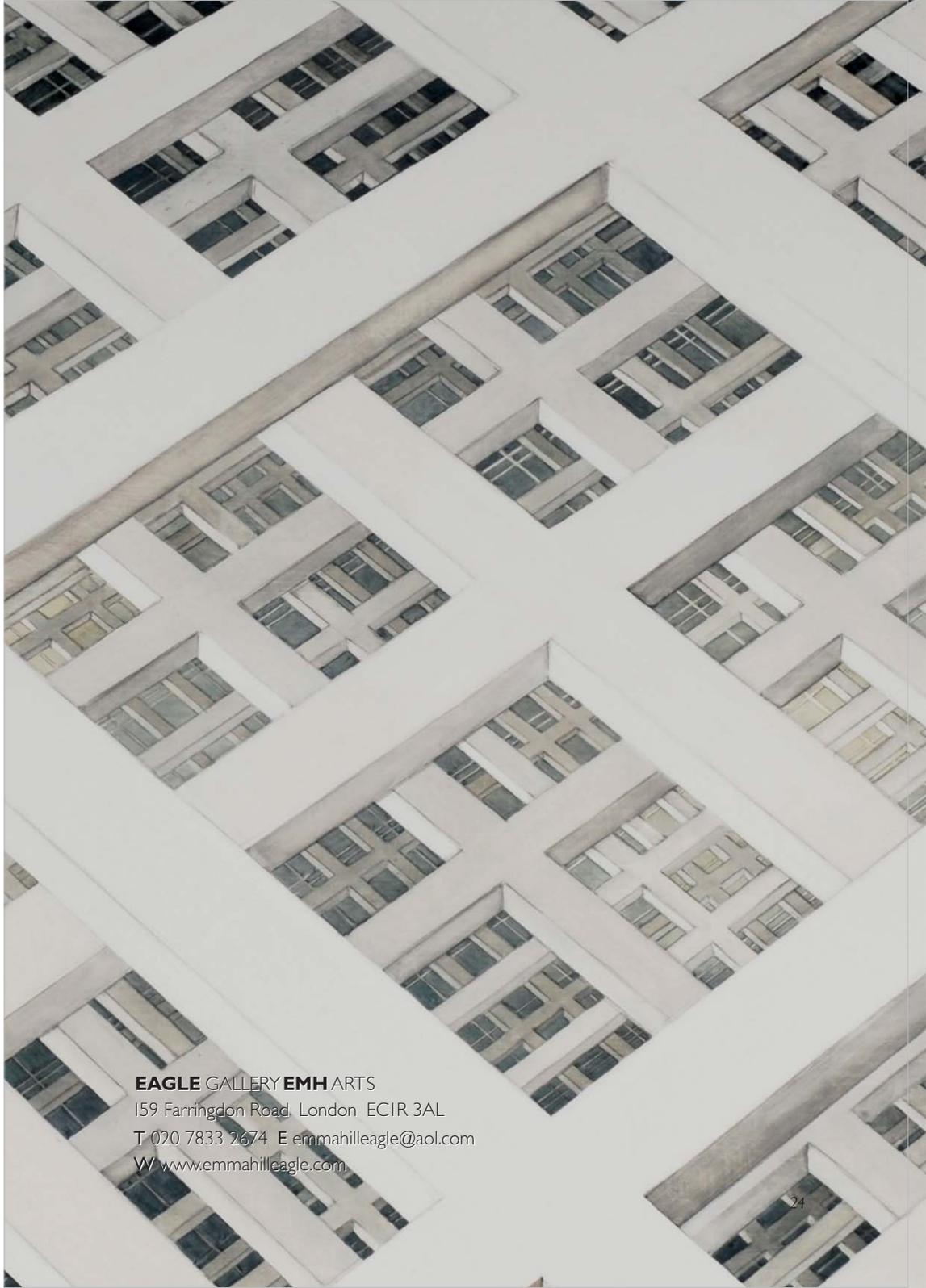
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Mapping the Grid 2007-8
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