

Jaime Gili's *Loop* is demonstrative of the importance of repetition within the artist's practice; with these new paintings he revisits old designs and sharp geometric constructions with a focus on colour. The title of the show refers to various recurring elements of Gili's painting practice; the paintings stem from designs made by the artist up to two decades ago, ideas that have not been realised until now. The title also references looping narratives in Gili's personal and family history – his father's diaries from the 1960s were fundamental to the conception of this exhibition. Jaime Gili Snr fled from Francoist Spain and ended up in Venezuela in 1968, a time in which Venezuela was a very rich nation. Today, half a century later, Venezuela is one of the poorest nations in Latin America and since 2014, it is estimated that over 6 million Venezuelans have emigrated. With this exhibition Gili is attempting to make sense of this downward spiral and subsequent diaspora. There is a mirroring (or looping) in this family story: Gili's father crossed the Atlantic from Europe to Venezuela and eventually his son would make the reverse journey, settling in London.

Gili Snr's arrival in Venezuela coincided with a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Caracas as a City. As part of these celebrations, the local authorities funded an ambitious public project, entitled *Imagen de Caracas*. A team, assembled by painter Jacobo Borges, was granted intellectual and artistic freedom to represent the history of Caracas in a technologically ambitious environment. The show took place within a purpose-built pavilion, and consisted of films, a recorded script, a musical score, and actors performing in the space during the screenings. Ultimately, the authorities were not happy with the show

and despite its vast budget *Imagen de Caracas* was closed prematurely. This fleeting (and somewhat poorly documented) event represented a significant point in the history of Venezuelan arts.

These contextual narratives have been combined with Gili's studio practice both to create the paintings and to conceptualise the installation of the show. For this exhibition Gili has painted four shaped canvases which are suspended in the middle of the space, forming an irregular 'cube' or parallelepiped. The 'cube' was designed to emulate the shapes that were hung within the pavilion at *Imagen de Caracas* as part of its internal design. Furthermore, Gili's colourful, shaped canvases and carpeted gallery floor reference the aesthetic of 20th century international fairs and Expos, in which Venezuela often participated.

On February 25th, as an extension of the exhibition, there will be an audio-visual presentation in the gallery space. Titled *Loop Pavilion*, this event will present both archival and new content edited by Jaime Gili, in collaboration with three generations of Venezuelan artists, including Jacobo Borges. *Loop Pavilion* will mirror the ambitious framework of the 1968 event, immersing the gallery space in music, recorded speech, and video footage. While *Imagen de Caracas* possibly represented a conscious movement away from the current of geometric abstraction, Jaime Gili brings the tradition back to the fore for this exhibition. *Loop* marks a significant moment in the archival afterlife of this pivotal event, presenting a contemporary response, centred around abstraction, and anchored in a vastly different context, both temporally and geographically.



Loop 1 (A578), 2021
Acrylic on canvas
130×250 cm, 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ ×98 $\frac{3}{8}$ in



Loop 2 (A587), 2021
Acrylic on shaped canvas
230×220 cm, 90 $\frac{1}{2}$ ×86 $\frac{5}{8}$ in



Loop 3 (A582), 2021
Acrylic on shaped canvas
290 × 130 cm, 114 1/8 × 51 1/8 in



Loop 4 (A579), 2021
Acrylic on shaped canvas
260 × 130 cm, 102 3/8 × 51 1/8 in







Reflections in a Shattered Mirror
Adrian Locke

The Venezuelan poet Adalber Salas Hernández described Jaime Gili's *Dark Paintings* as 'a geometry in ruins'.¹ This seems an apt description for when I look at these works the first image that comes to mind is the extraordinarily climatic scene of the 1947 Orson Welles film *The Lady from Shanghai* which takes place inside the hall of mirrors of a fairground in San Francisco. Here nothing is tangible, as the reflections distort and disarm the protagonists searching for one another. As shots are fired the images, so clear and sharp, shatter before our eyes into fragments. Although one geometry is destroyed it is replaced by another; out of the ruins a new geometry emerges with endless possibilities. The energy this creates, the rupturing of the image, is startling and unsettling creating and sustaining tension.² The Uruguayan painter José Pedro Costigliolo (1902–1985) captured a sense of the shattered in his work. Yet the clean geometric forms that float on the canvas, radiating outwards, seem to be contained within a zero-gravity space in which they glide weightlessly (fig. 1). Gili, however, forgoes the cleanliness and precision of Costigliolo, favouring a more organic surface. As the artist admits "I don't apply paint with excessive care" meaning that he avoids the pristine edges and defined colour separation of others that have influenced his work. Artists such as Alejandro Otero (1921–1990), Carlos Cruz-Diez (1923–2019) and César Paternosto (b.1931) come to mind. Gili continues adding that "painting should not be restricted to the canvas".³ In this way Gili breaks free from the limits of the frame allowing his work to continue beyond, challenging the formal constraints of geometric abstraction. "Utilising his own form of disrupted grid, which uses inflected brushwork to critique the history of geometric abstraction as ideologically pure or mathematically precise, Gili creates a multi-layered work in both meaning and appearance".⁴



Yet, like Otero, Cruz-Diez and Paternosto, Gili responds to the space in which he places his work. The surrounding architecture, whether internal and external, is a fundamental consideration. As the art historian Mónica Amor has observed “it is characteristic of Gili that he will, when not intervening directly into architecture, treat the gallery space as a stage upon which to experiment with installation design”⁵ (fig. 2). Here one can think of the careful consideration Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) gave to the positioning of his work within a space, where nothing was left to chance and the dynamic of the installation and the relationship between the works and the environment within which they are displayed is of equal importance, creating a new way of seeing.

Elsewhere Gili states that it is as if at the beginning of the creative process he has thrown a stone into the middle of a pane of glass. He then collects the shattered pieces of glass that are scattered across the studio and constructs with them.⁶ This analogy reflects the notion of a bomb thrown into a Cruz-Diez as noted by curator Jesús Fuenmayor in an interview with the artist. Fuenmayor, later in the same conversation, corrected his analogy to one of an outbreak

Fig. 1. José Pedro Costigliolo
Rectángulos y cuadrados CLXIV, 1976
Oil on canvas, 120×120cm, 47¼×47¼in
Artwork © José Pedro Costigliolo.
Image © Essex Collection of Art from Latin America.

of implosions within the work rather than a single explosion created by an external force.⁷ Either way, what is important to recognise is that there is an inherent energy within the work, one which seems on-going, resonating with each subsequent implosion as if without end. What curator Sacha Craddock has elsewhere referred to as a ‘blast’.⁸ Those acts – throwing a stone, a bomb exploding, a blast or a series of implosions – are violent, creating intense and unpredictable ruptures of the whole capturing the force and energy of Gili’s work. It is like a form of combustion that disrupts the concept of geometric abstraction. Although shattered it has not been destroyed. The remnants are collected to create a new dynamic. In a sense it is a process of metamorphosis. As curator Pablo León de la Barra noted they are “geometric explosions.. there is an intention in the geometry, in the shapes and the colour, to also come out of the canvas”.⁹ The shockwaves of the work ripple outwards beyond the canvas into the space beyond.

The concept of fragments, what we might call the shattered remains, is echoed by Gili’s description of the pieces of a perfectly broken mirror that reflect what is behind him, that is his memory.¹⁰ The Mexican author Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012) wrote a history of the Spanish speaking world to coincide with the five hundredth anniversary of Cristobal Colón’s chance landing in the Americas in 1992

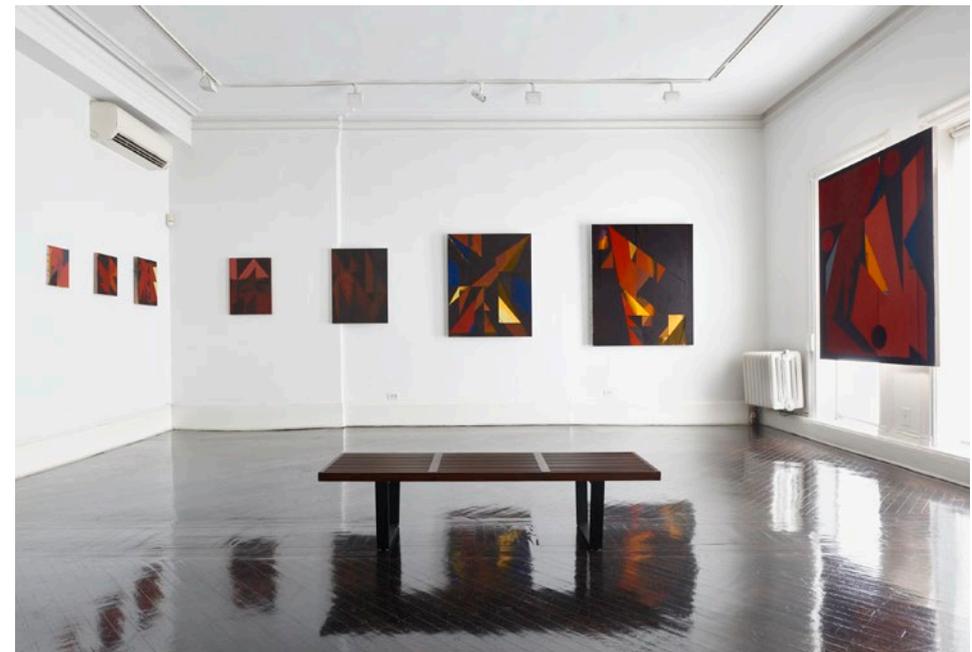


Fig. 2. Installation View of *MONTE* at
Aldo Chaparro Studio, Mexico City, 2020
Photo Carlos Baeza

and titled it *El Espejo enterrado* [The Buried Mirror]. Fuentes speaks of “unearthing the buried mirror of cultural identity that will reveal to Latin Americans their forgotten spiritually authentic history”.¹¹ This optimistic, somewhat romantic, idea is certainly contentious but the work of Gili, it seems to me, suggests that the buried mirror Fuentes refers to is no longer whole but shattered, suggesting instead a fragmented and disjointed history that is proving hard to piece back together. One, furthermore, that lacks clarity as if its ability to reflect has been tarnished by the act of burial and exhumation. What we are left with is a painstaking process of reconstruction. Reflection is, after all, a powerful, loaded term with multiple readings among which is memory. In his painting Gili speaks of a layer being succeeded by another and another, creating depth.¹² A metaphor that can be connected to the act of remembering, successive memories helping construct the whole. Ultimately, Gili says “my canvases are composed of hundreds of rapidly executed small projects”; thus these fragments, these small individual projects, are placed together to create the finished piece.¹³

Memory is clearly important to Gili. The imprint of Venezuela in general and Caracas in particular has had a lasting impact on his work. He reflects on the fortuitous event that led to him being born in Venezuela, rather than Chile or Brazil, a consequence of which company responded first to his father’s unsolicited letters seeking employment. On his father’s arrival in Caracas in 1968 the city was still celebrating the 400th hundredth anniversary of its foundation with a multi-million dollar extravaganza. Those were the days when Venezuela was drunk on petrodollars, a founder member of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC], and money seemed to flow like water from its vast crude oil fields, the largest such reserves in the world. Indeed the decade from 1968 to 1978 – during which time Gili was born – was one of richest in the country’s history, a time when people were wealthy enough to coin the phrase ‘so cheap I’ll take two’. Those heady days are now a distant memory when compared to the current tragic reality of the country’s shattered economy.

As Salas Hernández goes on to say Gili’s work presents us with a peculiar kind of ruin, that offers a paradoxical testimony: not of what has been, but of what never was. Not a country in the past, but an unrealised country, a country that never happened at all.¹⁴ In a way we find



ourselves in a fictional world, an amplified visualisation perhaps of the village Macondo created by Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014) and which first appeared in his novella *La hojarasca* [Leaf Storm] in 1955. *Cien años de soledad*. [A Hundred Years of Solitude] published in 1967, set in the same fictional village, follows the fortunes of the Buendía family in Macondo and is nothing, after all, if not about memory. There is something rather fitting about the visualisation of leaves in the forest that the title of the Colombian author’s story conjures. Gili’s work, with its play on light and shadow reminds me of looking into the tropical forest where depth and perspective can be elusive. The different shades of green and brown which appear in Gili’s *Dark Paintings* are reminiscent of the forest, where shafts of sunlight penetrating the canopy create kaleidoscopic views and play visual tricks where paths appear and disappear and spaces open and close before your eyes (fig. 3). Indeed, Gili, reflecting on a text by the Brazilian artist and curator, Carla Zaccagnini posted for the 34th São Paulo biennale *Faz escuro mas eu canto* [Though it’s dark I still sing] (2021), reflects on the absence of panoramic

Fig. 3. Installation View of The Dark Paintings at Henrique Fariá Fine Art, New York, 2018 Photo Arturo Sánchez



Fig. 4. Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton and Lawrence Alloway
An Exhibit, 1957
 Installation view at the ICA, London

views for the inhabitants of the Amazon.¹⁵ Yet there is no need for indigenous Amazonians to access such all-encompassing views for they have learned to see into that sea of green, to interpret that apparent sameness, and successfully navigate their way through what Gili has called ‘the uncontrolled growth of the tropics’.¹⁶ I am reminded of *an Exhibit*, 1957, an experiential work by Victor Pasmore (1908–1998), Richard Hamilton (1922–2011) and the art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway (1926–1990), that was constructed in the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne in 1957 and then shown at the ICA in London. This collaborative ‘environmental construction’ meant “that there is no longer any advantageous space – inside or outside the frame – for the spectator to occupy”¹⁷ (fig. 4). Likewise, Josef Albers’s (1888–1976) play of light, shadows, and recesses to create ‘abstract’ images which are in fact literal representations of buildings, places and spaces. The issue, it seems to me, is not about looking but rather about ways of seeing; when we, as outsiders, look into the Amazonian forest we see sameness whereas a Yanomami can readily identify the differences and find their way through the trees with ease.

The play of light is an important element in Gili’s work and was extremely significant in the building of the University of Caracas under the watch of Carlos Raúl Villanueva (1900–1975) whose scheme brought together art and architecture as an indivisible whole. As noted by Amor “Gili’s work is both nostalgic and optimistic. It harks back, as he himself has admitted, to *the* most important experiment with the synthesis of the arts in the post-war period: Carlos Raúl Villanueva’s Ciudad Universitaria (University City) in Caracas”.¹⁸ Villanueva’s abiding principle was a synthesis of the arts which also incorporated an ambition to unify indoor and outdoor space as well as incorporate natural light.¹⁹ The notion of a complete art permeates the work of Gili, the presentation of an exhibition with its holistic presentation that includes spatial relationships and colour schemes. The work is essentially presented as one single piece, like an installation and appears conceived as such. Art historian Paco Barragán refers to this in Gili’s work as *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art].²⁰ As de la Barra states “the paintings always have a physical presence in the space, a spatial presence – although they are not three-dimensional, they create space and are in dialogue with the surroundings... you [Gili] took painting out of the canvas first, and then also paintings out of the walls”.²¹ As Barragán has said “the ‘nomadic’



character of his life – Caracas, Barcelona, London – which shapes and nourishes his artistic practice and that search, or rather *ricorso*: a return to concerns and matters that constitute the roots, contradictions and conflicts of artistic and social order of his native Venezuela”.²² The challenge that Gili faces is how to make tangible those roots, contradictions and conflicts of his past, to visualise them. What we are left with are the fragments of a broken mirror which reflect and refract the complexities of memory in a dynamic and unresolved way. When describing Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbarn* (fig. 5), Gili said that “it has something of a parallel, organic, unending kind of work”.²³ Unintentional perhaps, but these words seem to me to succinctly and accurately summarise Gili’s own work.

Fig. 5. Kurt Schwitters
Merzbarn, 1948
Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

- 1 Adalber Salas Hernández, *Ensayo en sombra: Notas sobre The Dark Paintings de Jaime Gili*, exhibition catalogue, Henrique Faria Fine Art, New York, 2018, p.45.
- 2 The Brazilian film director Guilherme de Almeida Prado was inspired by Welles’ film and other film noirs of the period to create his own version *A dama do cine Shanghai* (1987).
- 3 *Jaime Gili: Las tres calaveras*, exhibition pamphlet, Periférico Caracas, 2006. No page numbers.
- 4 Benet Spencer, ‘Imagining Architecture: The Phase I Project’, pp.16–29, in *Phase IV: Intersections Art/Architecture* (curated by Benet Spencer and David Waterworth), exhibition catalogue, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London, 2020, p.20.
- 5 Mónica Amor, ‘Dark Silence’, in *Jaime Gili: the Dark Paintings*, exhibition pamphlet, Henrique Faria Fine Art, New York, 2018. No page numbers.
- 6 ‘Gili vs Fuenmayor’, *Jaime Gili: Las tres calaveras*, exhibition pamphlet, Periférico, Caracas, 2006. No page numbers.
- 7 ‘Gili vs Fuenmayor’, in *Jaime Gili: Las tres calaveras*, exhibition pamphlet, Periférico Caracas, 2006. No page numbers.
- 8 Sacha Craddock, ‘Jaime Gili’, exhibition pamphlet, Jaime Gili: Jerwood Artists Platform, Jerwood Space, London, 2003. No page numbers.
- 9 ‘Conversation between Pablo León de la Barra and Jaime Gili’ in *Jaime Gili: Repetition*, Booksfromthefuture Summer School, London 9–20 July, 2012, p.13.
- 10 ‘La Brousse: A Conversation between Axel Stein and Jaime Gili’ as part of the exhibition *MONTE*, Aldo Chaparro Studio, Mexico City, 2021. No page numbers.
- 11 <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/26/home/fuentes-mirror.html?scp=147&sq=new%2520york%2520times%2520history&st=cse>
- 12 ‘Conversation between Pablo León de la Barra and Jaime Gili’ in *Jaime Gili: Repetition*, Booksfromthefuture Summer School, London 9–20 July, 2012, p.13.
- 13 ‘Conversation between Pablo León de la Barra and Jaime Gili’ in *Jaime Gili: Repetition*, Booksfromthefuture Summer School, London 9–20 July, 2012, p.21.
- 14 Adalber Salas Hernández, *Ensayo en sombra: Notas sobre The Dark Paintings de Jaime Gili*, exhibition catalogue, Henrique Faria Fine Art, New York, 2018, p.42.
- 15 Correspondence #1 04 Feb 2020: <http://34.bienal.org.br/en/post/7411>. The biennale was curated by Jacopo Crivelli Visconti, Paulo Miyada, Carla Zaccagnini, Francesco Stocchi and Ruth Estévez.
- 16 ‘La Brousse: A Conversation between Axel Stein and Jaime Gili’ as part of the exhibition *MONTE*, Aldo Chaparro Studio, Mexico City, 2021.
- 17 Jeffrey Steele, ‘On the Status of the Space Frame’, pp.166–171, in Penelope Curtis and Keith Wilson (eds), *Modern British Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2011, p.171.
- 18 Mónica Amor, *Jaime Gili: the Dark Paintings*, exhibition pamphlet, Henrique Faria Fine Art, New York, 2018. No page numbers.
- 19 See Adrian Locke, ‘Venezuela’, pp.126–128, in *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014.
- 20 Paco Barragán, ‘Gesamtkunstwerk Jaime Gili’, in *Jaime Gili: Everything is Borrowed*, exhibition pamphlet, Alejandra von Hartz Gallery, Miami, 2009. No page numbers.
- 21 ‘Conversation between Pablo León de la Barra and Jaime Gili’ in *Jaime Gili: Repetition*, Booksfromthefuture Summer School, London 9–20 July, 2012, p.11.
- 22 Paco Barragán, ‘Gesamtkunstwerk Jaime Gili’, in *Jaime Gili: Everything is Borrowed*, exhibition pamphlet, Alejandra von Hartz Gallery, Miami, 2009. No page numbers.
- 23 ‘Conversation between Pablo León de la Barra and Jaime Gili’ in *Jaime Gili: Repetition*, Booksfromthefuture Summer School, London 9–20 July, 2012, p.5.



A435D, 2017
Acrylic on wood
6 × 4.5 cm, 2 3/8 × 1 3/4 in



left
A434B millennial cuadrante, 2017
Acrylic on laminated MDF
8.5 × 7 cm, 3 3/8 × 2 3/4 in

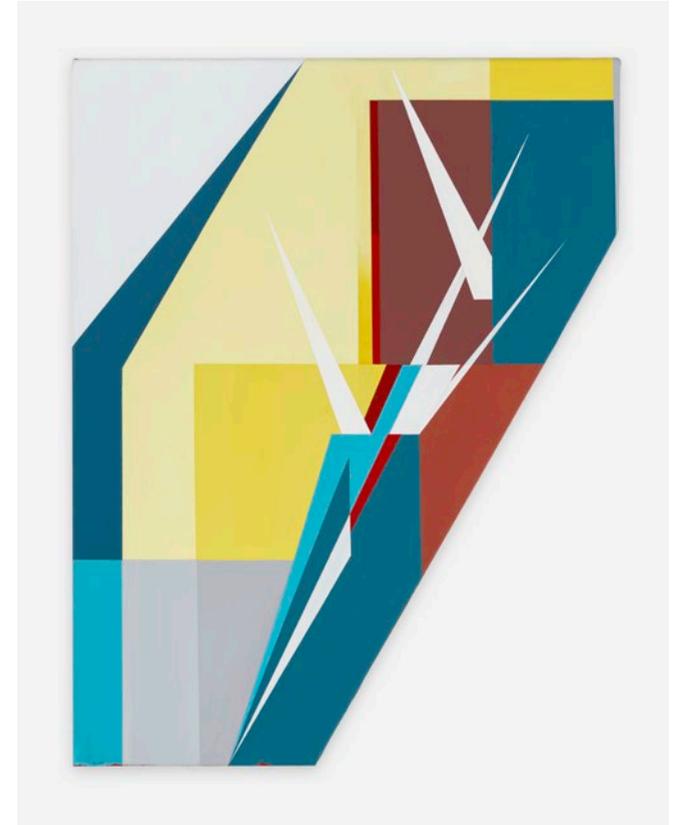
right
A437 C millennial quadrant variation, 2017
Acrylic on laminated MDF
8 × 7 cm, 3 1/8 × 2 3/4 in



A431 millennial cuadrante, 2017
Acrylic on laminated MDF
12 × 10 cm, 4 3/4 × 4 in



Small Loop (A590), 2021
Acrylic on shaped linen canvas
103×61cm, 40½×24⅛in



Small Loop (A588), 2021
Acrylic on shaped canvas
80×60cm, 31½×23⅝in



Chances are (A581), 2021
Acrylic on canvas
115 × 90 cm, 45 1/4 × 35 3/8 in



Long Retrieve (A580), 2007–21
Acrylic on canvas
198 × 129 cm, 78 × 50 3/4 in



A583, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
45 × 40 cm, 17 3/4 × 15 3/4 in



A547, 2020
Acrylic on linen
45 × 40 cm, 17 3/4 × 15 3/4 in

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artists' estates; supports contemporary Latin American artists; and
introduces historical and contemporary Latin American art, not shown
before in Europe, to a global audience. This mission is centred around an
exhibition programme at CBP's gallery space in Bermondsey, London.

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