




Michelangelo Russo

# CARTONI

containers contained





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The works in **CARTONI** are the patient result of a years-long process of refinement.

Fifteen years ago, Russo began experimenting with encaustic painting as a way of disrupting his practice. These early investigations proved fruitful; Russo soon retired his acrylics and oils, having decided to dedicate himself to the modern study of the encaustic technique which has provided a fertile methodological and philosophical baseline for his subsequent work.

Encaustic paint combines heated beeswax with pigment. In Roman-occupied Egypt in the late 1st century B.C. the technique was used by the Greek painters of the Fayum mummy portraits. Among the earliest known surviving painted portraits, the Fayum portraits were death masks, intended as *'passport photos'* as John Berger noted, *'for the dead ... on their journey to the kingdom of Osiris'*. Some possess a remarkable vitality. This partly owes to the use of encaustics. For even when viewing them in reproductions we can admire their ingenious use of beeswax, how it endows a subject with some of the luminous translucence of human skin. Looking at the best of them, we almost expect them to blink.

Indeed, the Fayum portraits offer a possible origin point for wax-based verisimilitude, a tradition that in the present arrives not at Madame Tussauds nor Barbie, nor even at sophisticated medical prostheses, but at sex toys, like luxury love dolls. In their eerie lifelikeness, the wax also grants the portraits' deceased something more like the everlasting life they sought (in the most literal sense) when they swept their skirts beneath them and sat in the light of the painter's workshop to offer up their image - and with it, their soul - to eternity. Russo's intent - a word we turn over and over, like a stone in our hand, as we look at these works - clearly differs from that of the ancient painters.

The works in **CARTONI** achieve their own startling effect, tightly bound to the contemporary condition. For years, Russo's interest has moved steadily away from figurative representation. By attuning to the imperfect patterns of nature (leaves are not symmetrical, nor honeycombs), he's opened himself to the possibilities suggested by accident and duly integrated these into his practice.

Initially, the works in **CARTONI** seem to posit nothing. They are non-representational and, though rugged, are serene. No violent abnegation (of obligation, of form, of tradition, of intelligibility - of any - or everything) is discernible in their abstract surfaces. They simply are. Looking at them, one could justly presume their maker had dramatically deprioritised anything like textual intent. But the eloquence of these pieces will not be lost on the sensitive observer. Most urgently, far from being drained away into nothingness, their intent will be easily located, passionately expressed in the methodology and materials used to create them.

The works in **CARTONI** are made from entirely sustainable resources. Along with encaustic paints, they are made mostly of salvaged cardboard - the kind the delivery boxes used to carry fresh fruits and vegetables to the market are made from. Detritus, in other words - everyday materials that would otherwise end up as refuse.

Russo does not plan a piece's composition. He simply glues one piece of cardboard to a canvas, and lets that initial, decisive act suggest a way forward. A work thereby develops organically and responsively, and any regrettable placements must be admitted and worked around as part of the final design. Once a canvas has been painted, Russo blowtorches away his brushstrokes as best he can. This erasure of the authorial hand is crucial to my own appreciation of these works. In its way, it allows us to encounter the works in **CARTONI** as we might meet some strange form in nature, or the artworks of an ancient culture whose creators' names and concerns have been lost to time.

We live in a rampantly imperialist culture, one that would seek to colonise Mars before addressing the earthly crises currently threatening our humanity and our planet - pollution and climate breakdown, mass incarceration, egregious wealth disparity... as if cutting and running into the cosmos would be enough to *save our souls*. Human lives are more visually cacophonous than ever before. Screens have become so integrated into the social fabric that we are now advised to regularly quarantine ourselves from them, for the sake of our mental wellbeing. In our cities, ads wave and beckon to us from digital billboards, like a scene from Blade Runner. The average person spends three-and-a-half hours per day on their smartphone alone.

There is something quietly radical about a body of work that bears little trace of its author, much less tries to convince the observer of anything. Once it cools, the encaustic wax lends a lambent, almost lunar quality to the finished works in **CARTONI**. Looking at them, I think of these words Anaïs Nin wrote in her diaries: *'We are going to the moon - that is not very far. Man has so much farther to go within himself.'*

Gerard Elson,  
Melbourne, July 2019

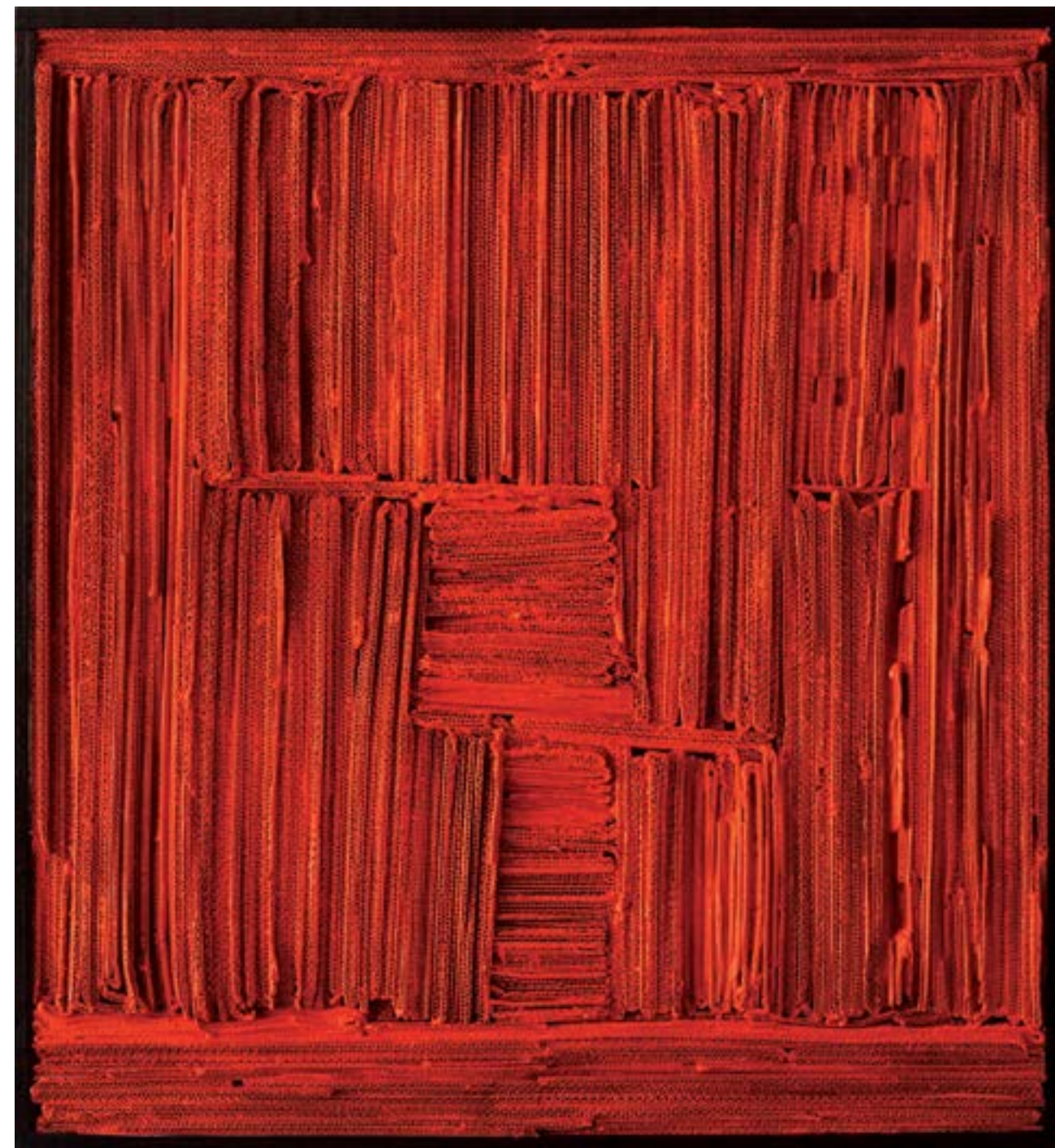
Opposite: **CARTONE neUtRO |L| 2018** (detail)  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 123 x 110

Cover: **CARTONE veRmigliO |M| 2019** (detail)  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 60 x 50  
collaboration with Jennifer Jabu





**CARTONE bianco |L| 2017**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 95 x 88



**CARTONE aRanciO |L| 2017**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 95 x 88





“... Sono per me Landscapes liberi, ampi, desertici, fasci di onde che vibrano tra piani accostati, si aggregano in blocchi che disegnano patterns appena variati ma che compongono la Fisionomia, su cui vibra il Colore, s’incrosta la Materia, si apre lo Spazio da percorrere, tracciare, conoscere ...”

“... They are free landscapes - wide and deserted - bundles of waves that vibrate between adjoining planes, they aggregate in blocks, designing patterns making up the physiognomy on which the color vibrates, the matter becomes encrusted. The space on which to run, to trace, to learn is now open ...”

**Raoul Ravenna**  
Roma, June 2019

**CARTONE PURO |XL| 2018**

Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 134 x 123





**CARTONE neUtRO |L| 2018**

Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 123 x 110



**CARTONE neUtRO2 |L| 2018**

Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 125 x 112



A fascination with surface is central to Michelangelo's work. In this, his work resonates with the legacy of post-war Italian aesthetics, especially that of Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana.

Curiously, the rich Italian narrative that immigrated to our shores following the Second World War did not really embrace fine art practice. As such, Michelangelo's aesthetic makes an important and largely under-represented contribution to contemporary Australian art.

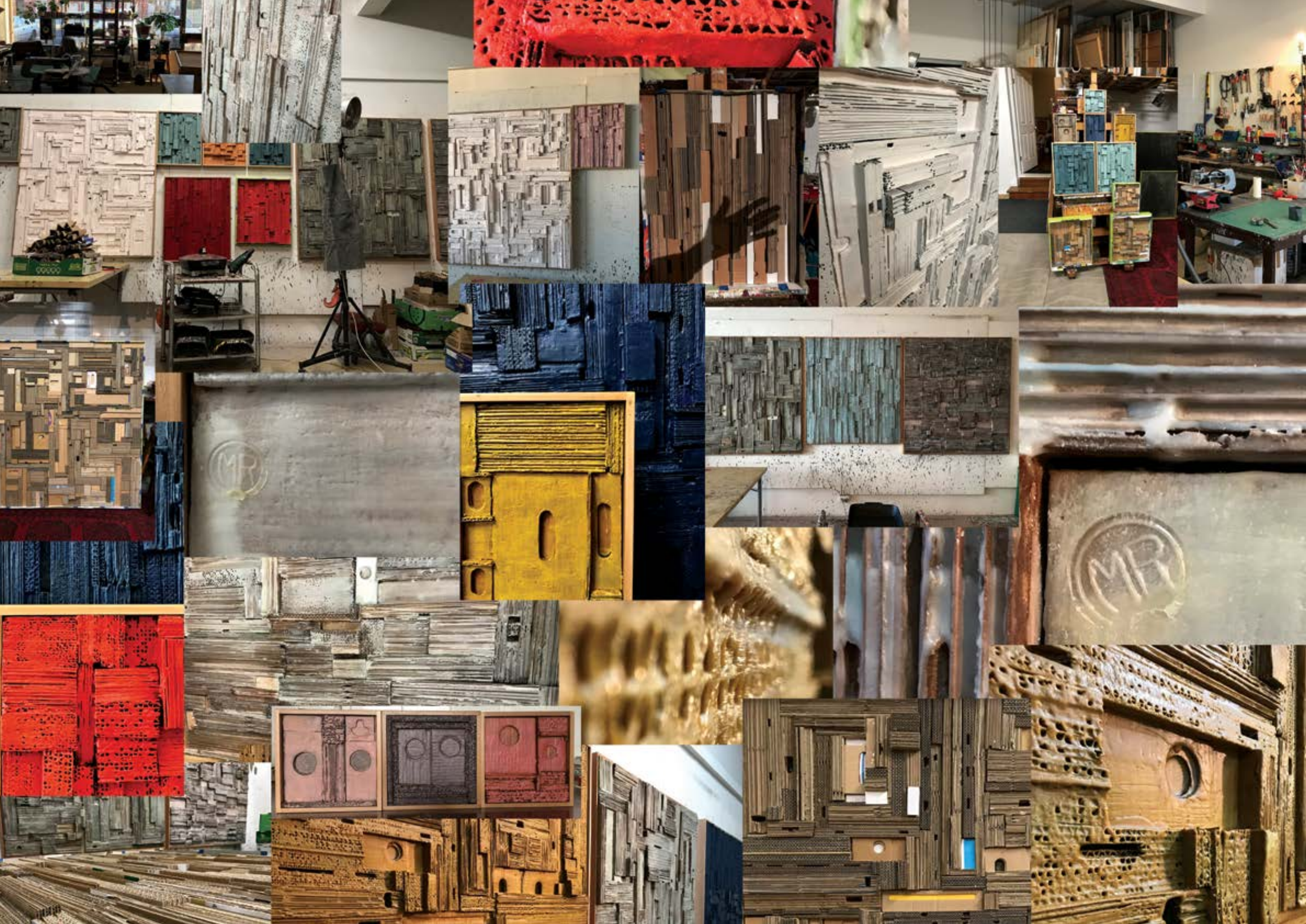
Michelangelo's use of reclaimed/repurposed materials clearly defines him as a contemporary artist, as does his re-investigation and use of ancient techniques.

**Adrian Spurr**  
Melbourne, May 2019



**CARTONE giallo |L| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 125 x 112

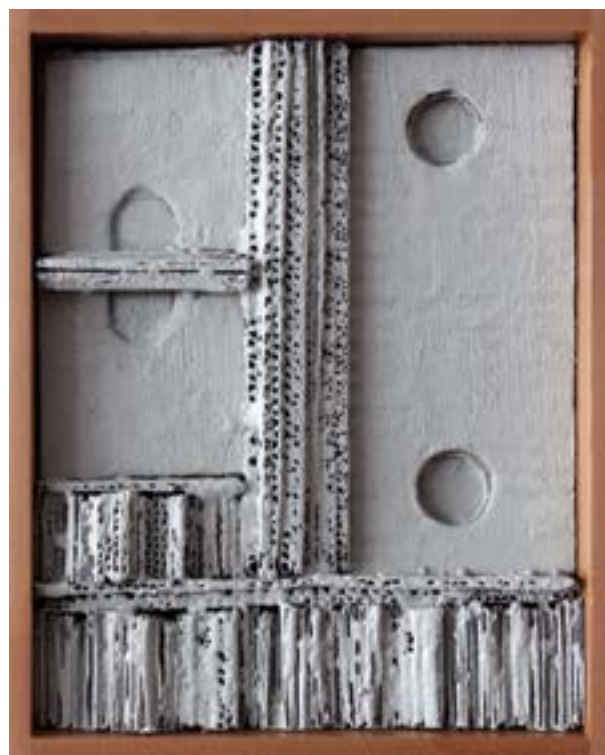








*Top left:* **CARTONE veROneSe 2 [XXS] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel  
cm. 25 x 20



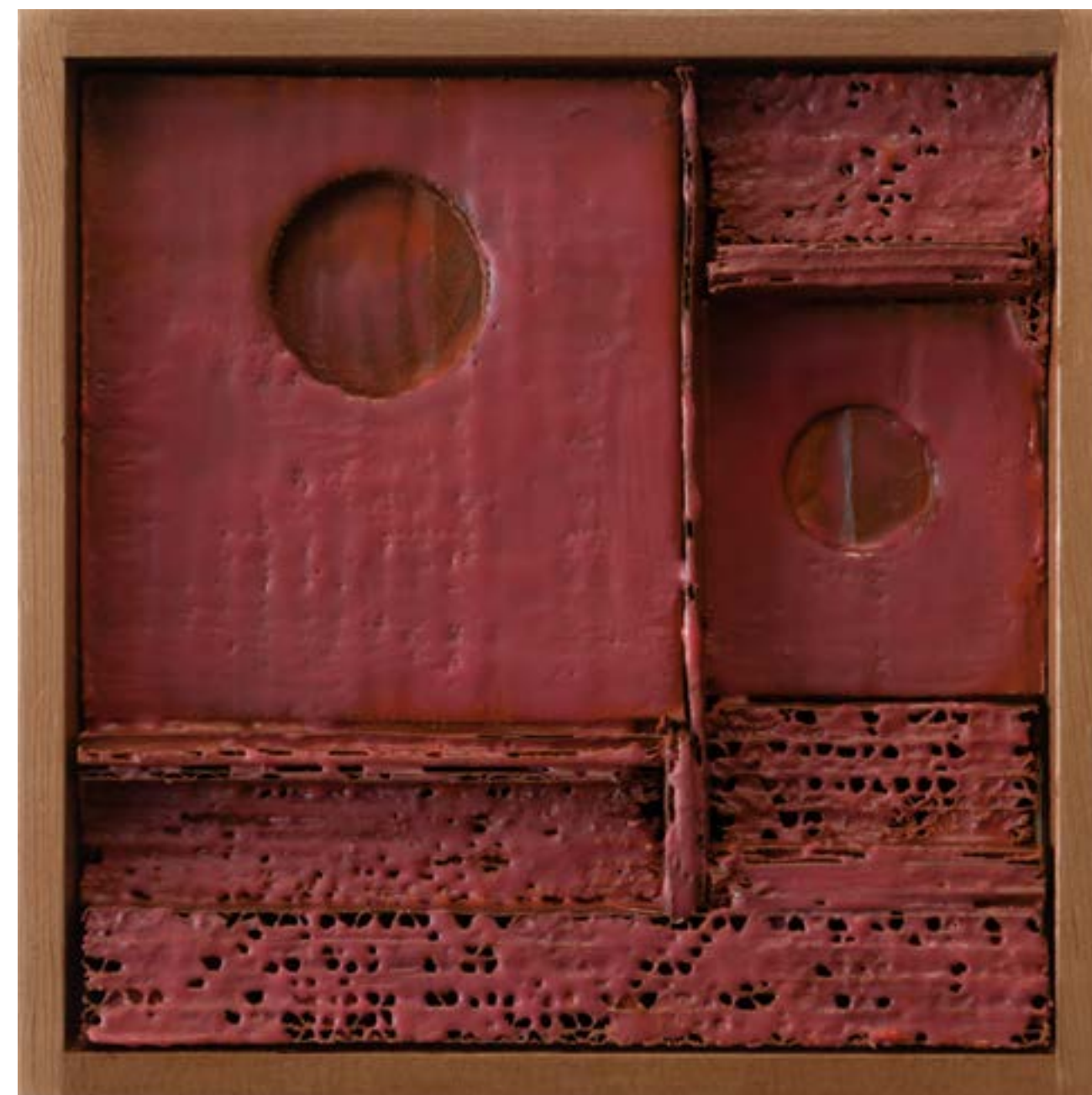
*Top right:* **CARTONE gRigiOchiaRO [XXS] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel  
cm. 25 x 20



*Bottom left:* **CARTONE ROSa [XXS] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel  
cm. 20 x 20



*Bottom right:* **CARTONE notte [XXS] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel  
cm. 20 x 20



**CARTONE ROSa antico [XXS] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 20 X 20



Cardboard is a familiar, everyday material, ubiquitous in industrial and commercial processes. But when artist Michelangelo Russo recycles it as a *prima materia* in his new series entitled *Cartoni* (Italian for cardboard), the poverty of cardboard assumes an almost mythic aura.

Russo's work has frequently dwelt upon the faultline between structure and formlessness, dense abstraction and the void, action and emptiness, microscopic and macroscopic perspectives.

In *Cartoni*, the cardboard's formal minimalism of parallel lines and modern geometries is challenged by an encaustic process utilising beeswax, damar crystals and dry pigments. The encaustic process, developed in ancient Rome, was prized for vivid colorization and rugged endurance. The collision of these elements is three-dimensional and highly textural, a shadowplay of space and structure.

The 'external' flat surfaces and 'internal' corrugated cross-sections of the cardboard are both utilised in the work's construction, none of the original 'box' is discarded; instead, the inherently vulnerable material is embalmed in wax and pigment resulting in a micro-maze of rigid fluidity, pine needles fossilised in amber.

The repurposing of the cardboards leads to a reconceptualised 'box been boxed'. The container contained. The gradations suggest a quadrilateral mandala, fossilized libraries, secret police document shelves or a stock room at the local supermarket, architectural constructions both mega and micro-lithic.

And yet traces of commercial/industrial utility linger, the sense of a forgotten masonic code speaking to us in a language both enigmatic and strangely familiar.

The metaphysical depth in Russo's work is often founded in the physicality of the work's construction. Here, meditative consciousness is focused yet caged, reflecting chaos bound by structure, time frozen in an instant's passing, tensed to escape.

**Hugo Race**  
Melbourne, May 2019



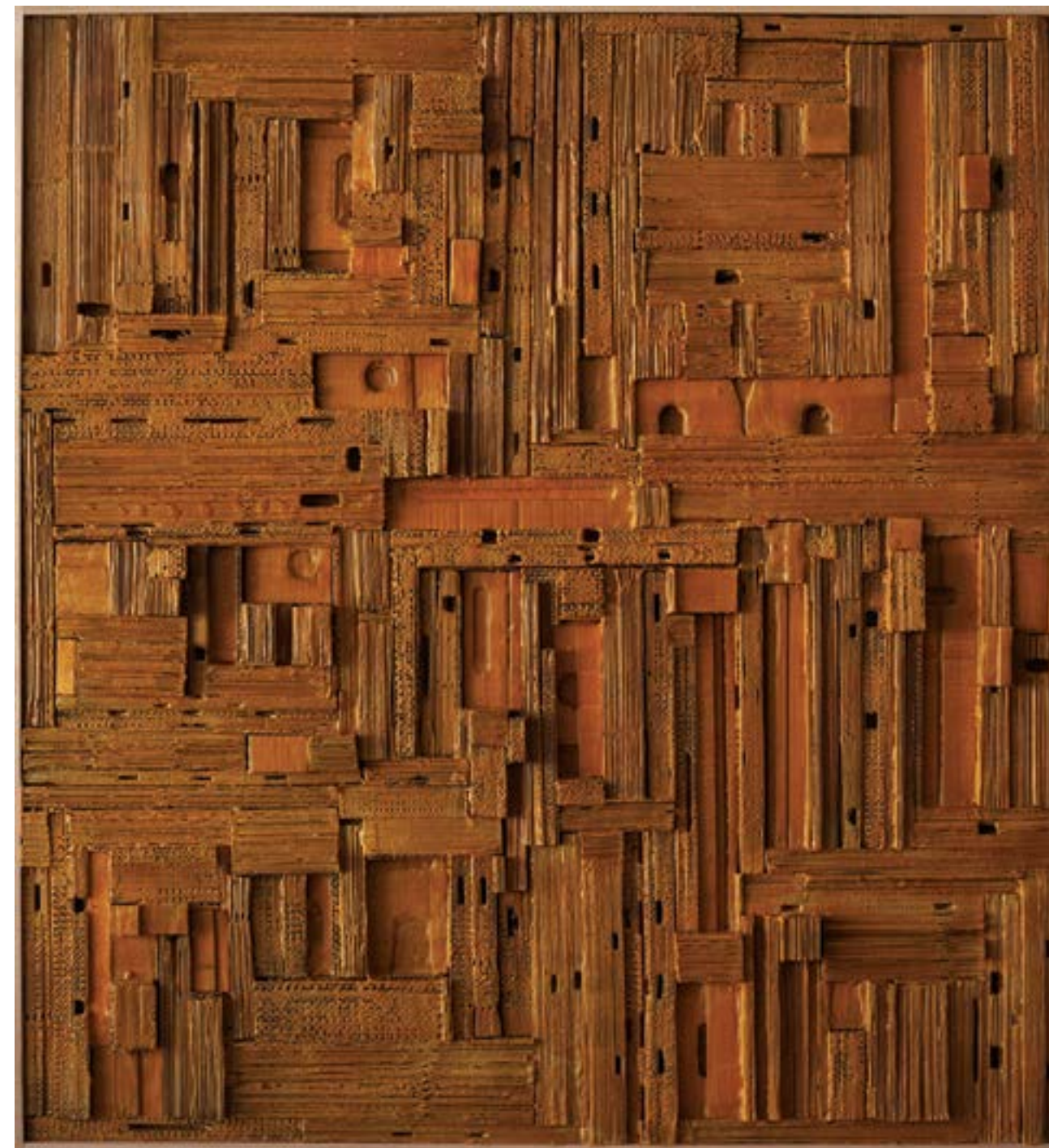
**CARTONE pOlveRe [XL] 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 134 x 123  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu





**CARTONE verOneSe |XL| 2019**

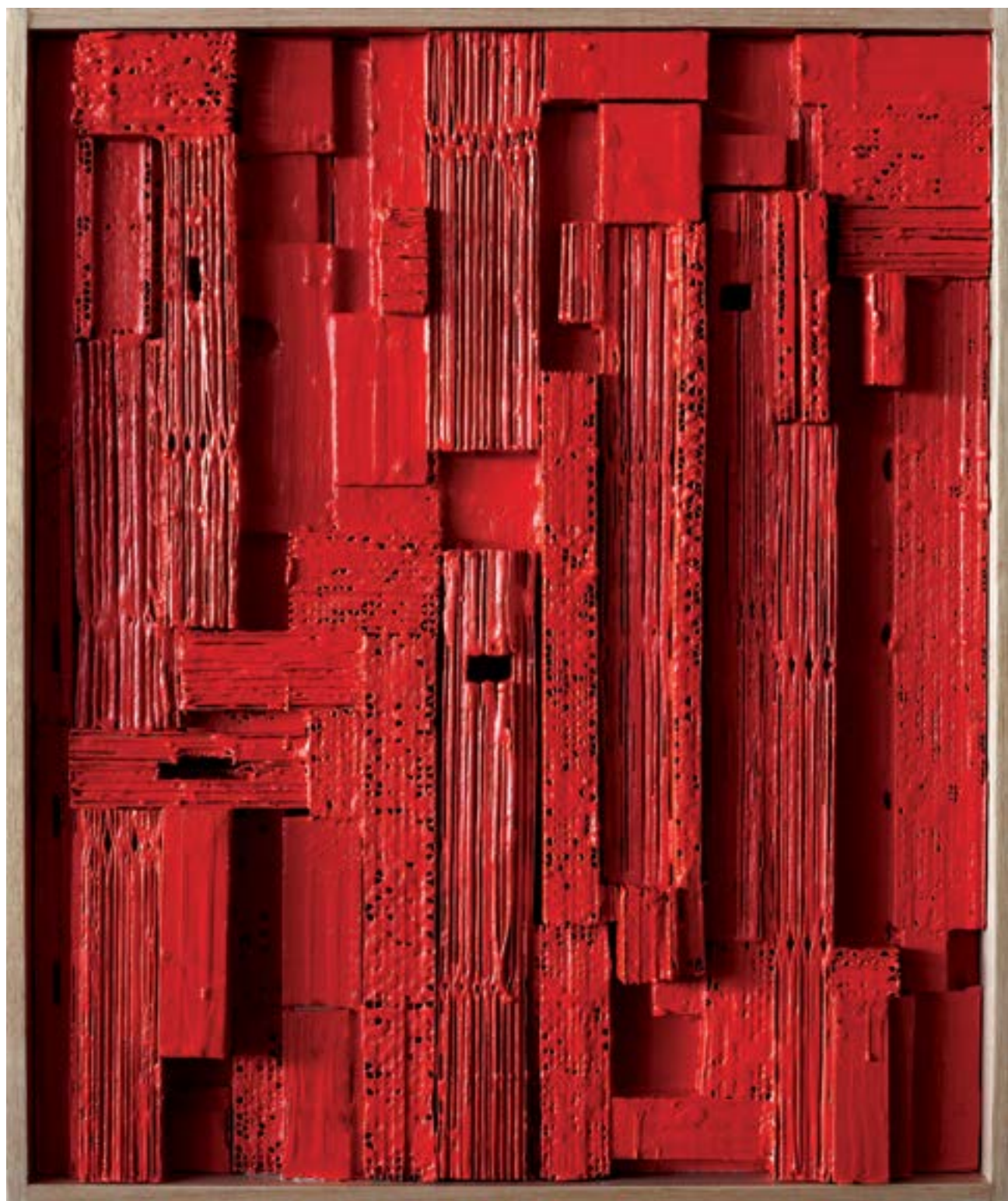
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 134 x 123  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu



**CARTONE azO |XL| 2019**

Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 134 x 123  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu

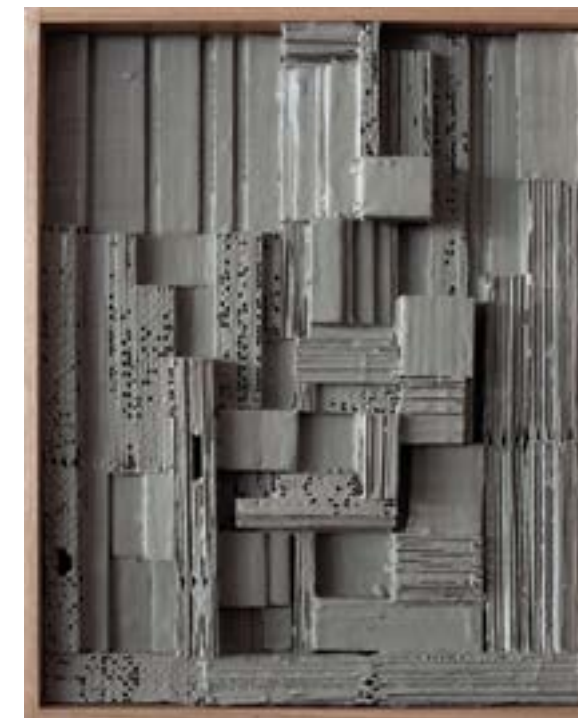




**CARTONE verMigliO |M| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 60 x 50  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu



*Top left:* **CARTONE hawaii |S| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 50 x 40  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu



*Top right:* **CARTONE Seal |S| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 50 x 40  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu



*Bottom left:* **CARTONE diamond |S| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 50 x 40  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu



*Bottom right:* **CARTONE cideR |S| 2019**  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel cm. 50 x 40  
Collaboration with Jennifer Jabu





Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2016 *Bestie e D'intorni* at Bird's Gallery, Melbourne.  
2010 *Silence* at Anita Traverso Gallery, Melbourne.  
2007 *Petals and Thorns* at Anita Traverso Gallery, Melbourne.  
2005 *Wax* at Silvershot presented by Artefact, Melbourne.  
2002 *Iso* at Goya Galleries, Melbourne.  
2001 *Michelangelo Russo* at Goya Galleries, Melbourne.  
*Reticoli* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
2000 *Gold* at Goya Galleries, Melbourne.  
1997 *For the Love of Orange* at A.R.T. Gallery Eden, Melbourne.  
*Souvenirs Grids and Scars* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
1996 *Paintings by Michelangelo Russo* at Foy & Gibson Gallery, Melbourne.  
1993 *Malerei Fotografiche* Emulsion und Acryl auf Linewand at Pillango Gallery, Berlin, Germany.  
1991 *Askartaz* at Babylonia, Berlin, Germany.  
1988 *Africa Musica e Legna da Ardere* at Grigio Notte, Roma, Italy.  
1977 *Michelangelo Russo* at Galleria il Punto, Campobasso, Italy.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2018 *Chromaotopia* at Tacit Gallery, Melbourne.  
*Diaspora* Co.As.It., Melbourne.  
2017 *Chromatopia* at Tacit Gallery, Melbourne.  
*Ritratti thirty one Italian artists from Victoria* at Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Melbourne.  
2016 *Moth to the Flame* Salon Hang, Melbourne.  
2009 *Cut + Collate = Construct* at Anita Traverso Gallery, Melbourne.  
2007 *The Only Constant* at Anita Traverso Gallery, Melbourne.  
2004 *Arte di Ritorno* at Sala dei Chierici, Biblioteca Berio, Genova, Italy.  
2003 *Seta: Traditions and Visions* at Exhibition Building, Melbourne.  
2002 *Art Fair* at Exhibition Building, Melbourne.  
2001 *Smoulder* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
2000 *Quattro* at Chiara Goya Gallery, Melbourne.  
1999 *11th Incontro Annuale* at Spazio Viola, Pavia, Italy.  
1998 *Christmas Show* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
1997 *Boys in Town* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
*10th Incontro Annuale* at Spazio Viola, Pavia, Italy.  
1996 *Christmas Show* at Art House Gallery, Sydney.  
*Inaugurazione Spazio Viola* at Spazio Viola, Ciego de Avila, Cuba.  
1995 *Red Ribbon* at Palazzo Tursi, Genova, Italy.  
*Darbo Gelsomino Negri Russo* at George Paton Gallery, Melbourne.  
*Songlines from Distant Lands* at Cathedral Room ANZ Gothic Bank, Melbourne.  
1989 *5 Artisti da Pescara* at Galleria Cesare Manzo, Pescara, Italy.  
*Animals* at Universita' Occupata, Pescara, Italy.

Many thanks to:

Tom Alberts, Louise Blyton, Selena Buckingham, George Cociglia, David Coles, Mariella Del Conte, Gerad Elson, Kim Hii, Jennifer Jabu, Sean Maneaud, Cath Prechelt, Hugo Race, Raoul Ravenna, Renato Ravenna, Adrian Spurr.

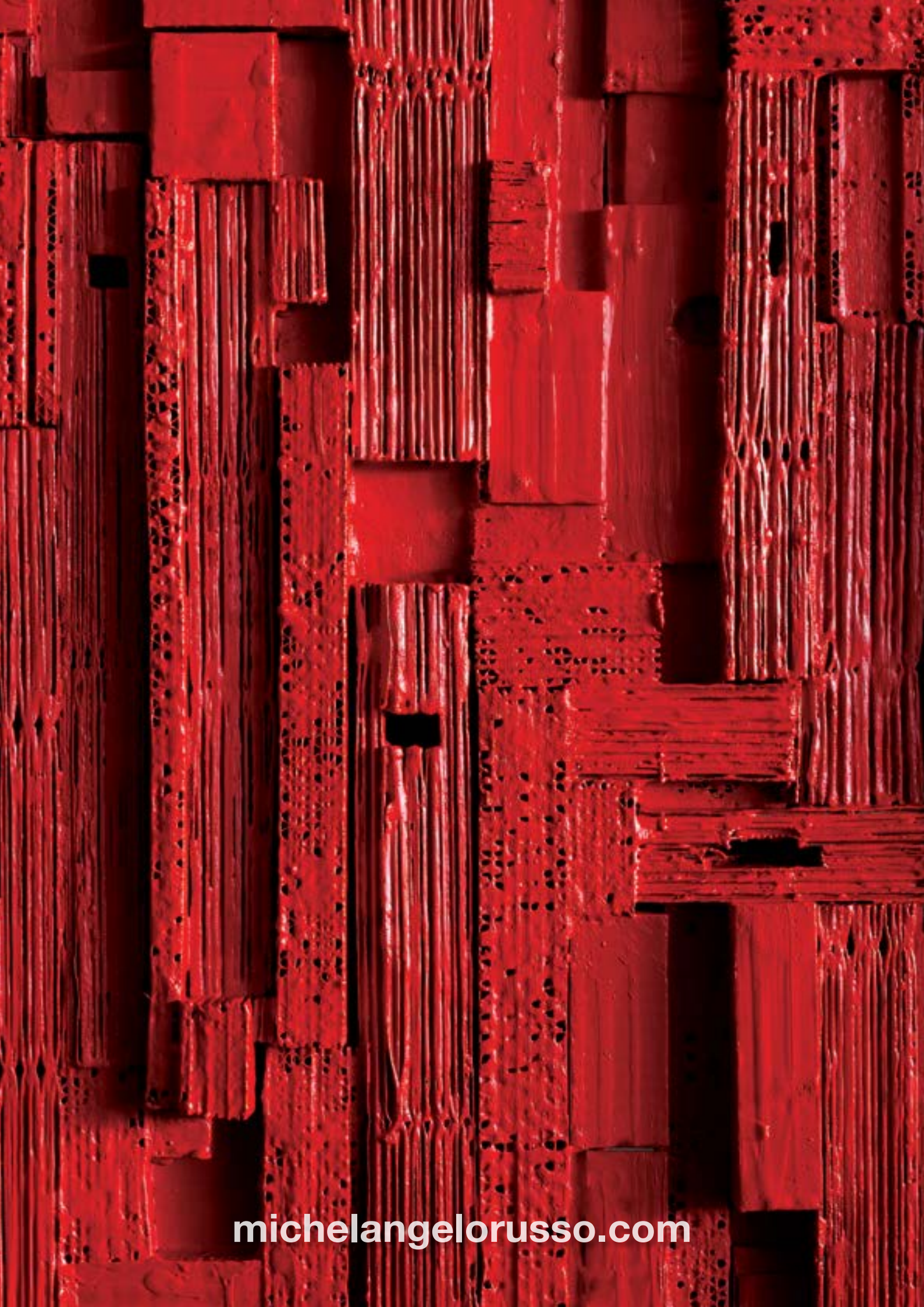


Opposite: **CARTONE hawaii [XXS] 2019** (detail)  
Encaustic on cardboard on wood panel  
cm. 20 x 20



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[michelangelorusso.com](http://michelangelorusso.com)