

PLOUGHING HIS OWN FURROW

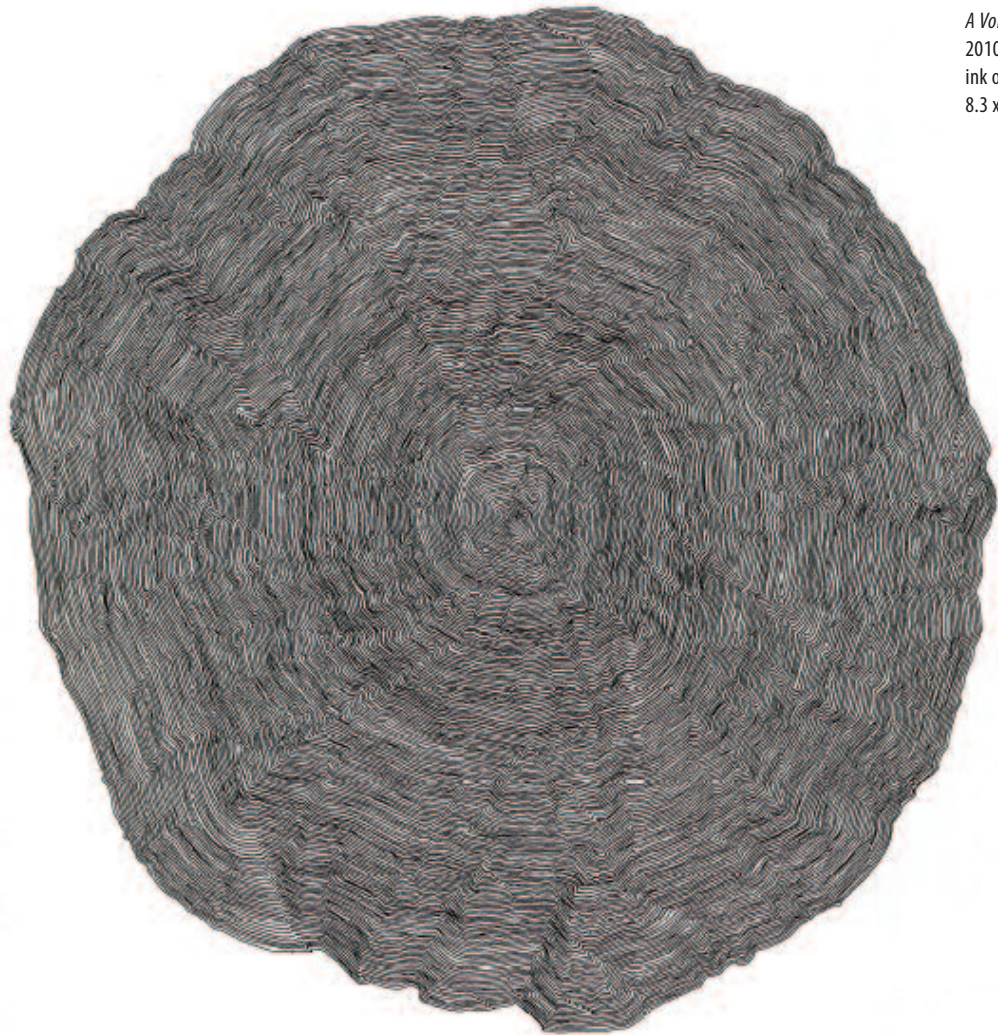
Carlo Keshishian's compulsive drawings tap into the universal soul

By DAVID MACLAGAN

I first came across Carlo Keshishian's work on the Outside In website a couple of years ago. It struck me, and still strikes me, as having a remarkable intensity. Textures that look like coral reefs or cross-sections of giant trees turn out, on closer inspection, to consist of thousands of miniscule marks: sometimes dots, sometimes densely-packed letters, sometimes closely synchronised blocks of line. It is almost as if the marks are compacted, under some obscure pressure, so that there is a wealth of compressed invention; yet these are sometimes quite large works, that have taken months or years of

Cosmogony, 2013
oil paint on canvas
7.9 x 7.9 ins., 20 x 20 cm





A Voiding

2010

ink on card

8.3 x 11.7 ins., 21 x 29.7 cm

sustained application to achieve. So it is no surprise to find that Keshishian sometimes works for hours at a stretch (as with many artists, music is an important accompaniment): he told me that to begin with time goes slowly, but that it then accelerates once he is well into the process.

Perhaps because I was writing a book about doodling, it came as no surprise to discover that his early work had stemmed from compulsive doodling at school (he was sent to a school for pupils with learning difficulties). These early works have a restless, happenstance feel to them: words, faces and patterns compete with one another, as if in some visual equivalent of background noise. But where other doodlers might have left off, it is as if Keshishian could not or would not stop; in fact, he was told to do his doodles on separate bits of paper from his class work. Sheets of words followed, in something like a colourful version of a stream of consciousness, with letters expanding and shrinking to fill the available space, but still easily legible. These are almost the raw ingredients of his later work, but they are still too close to the surface, perhaps more like private graffiti.

In 1997 Keshishian started a 2-year B-Tech (Bachelor of Technology) course in Art and Design at West Thames College: this was the point at which he began to turn his classroom doodles into larger works. At this point his drawings were still largely based on writing. A work like *Picture Worth 1000 Words* (1998–99) was written/drawn

directly onto canvas, as were his early “Diary” drawings. They could be seen as a peculiar form of transcription: in fact, the text for his later “Diary” drawings (2010 onwards) was written first on a PC and then drawn, changes in the colour of the computerised text enabling him to keep track of where he was and avoiding it getting too far ahead of the drawing. Obviously the dense furrows of text in the drawing are far less easily legible: it is almost as if these diary entries, which are quite frank descriptions of events in his life, have been buried or obscured; or rather, they are there, but the process of their inscription have turned them into something like pictures of writing (and behind that, of the thinking represented by it).

This gives us an insight into how Keshishian uses carefully rationalised techniques, but introduces into them some kind of irregularity or disturbance. A good example is his spiral drawings: as the circular line winds its way out from the centre, slight kinks in it are progressively amplified, until they start to interfere with its orderly progress (the artist may then decide to bring them back into line). It is almost as if the drawing process magnifies the inherent flaws in even the most logical sequence; or as if following what looks like the utterly opposite path to the spontaneity usually associated with automatism paradoxically ends up leading in the same direction.

There was then a hiatus in Keshishian’s art production.

Unobtainable Realms

2013

ink on canvas

70.9 x 70.9 ins., 180 x 180 cm



After doing a music and visual arts course at Brighton, Sussex, that finished in 2002, and which relates more to his recent activities as compiler of jazz programmes for radio, it was several years before he resumed painting and drawing. A few years later, in 2009, he acquired the studio apartment in which he now lives. At this point he made contact with the Running Horse gallery in Beirut, which began to show his work and eventually offered him a one-man show.

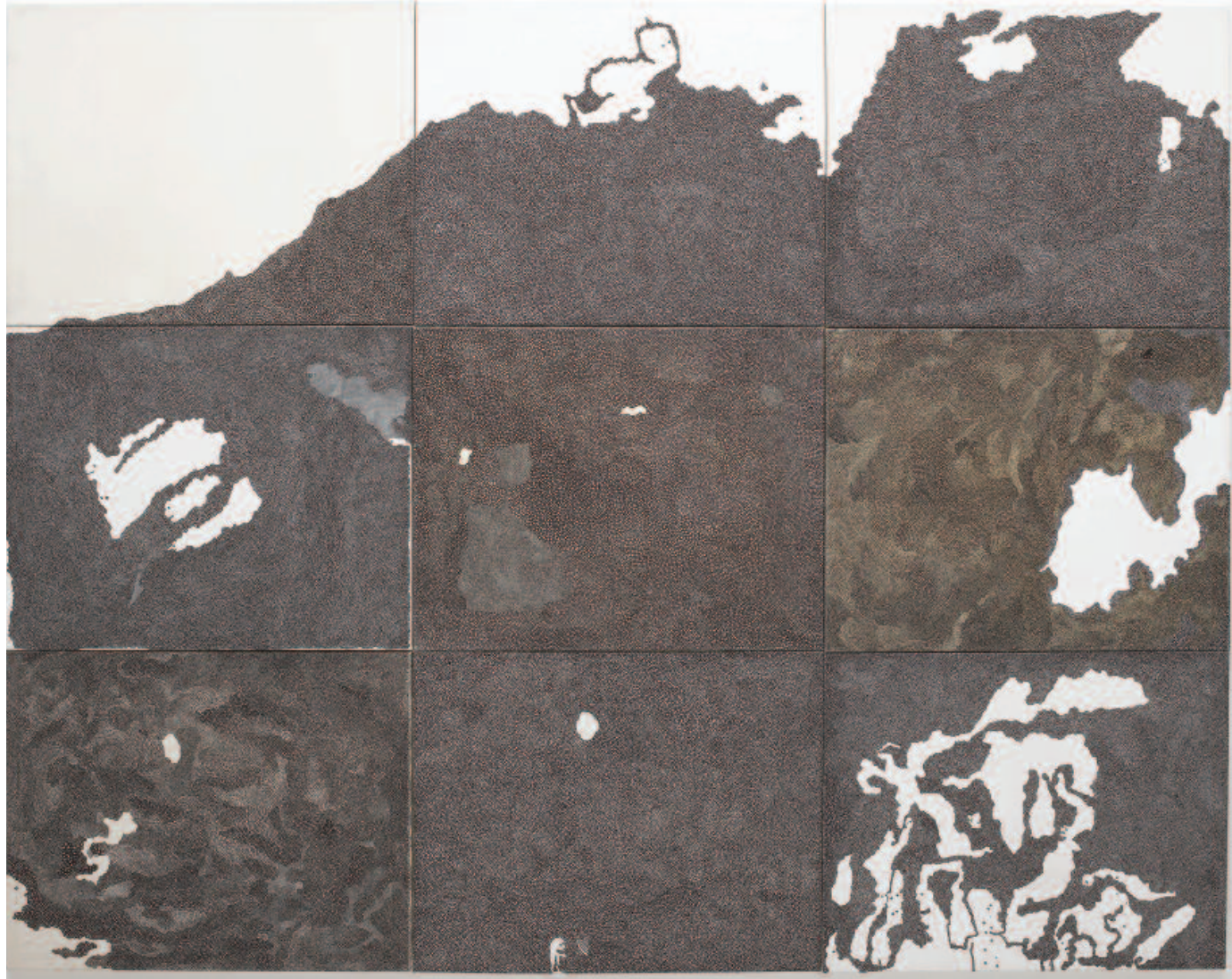
Although Keshishian had thought of showing his work to a few galleries, he was put off by what he saw as their nonchalant attitude towards art. In 2008 he saw a notice (in *Raw Vision*) advertising a competition run by Outside In and felt that theirs was a more sympathetic approach, since they aimed at helping marginalised artists get their work recognised and exhibited. It turned out that he was one of the six artists chosen, and in 2010 he was offered a one-man show by them in the Otter Gallery at Chichester University. He was also trained to lead workshops for Outside In artists, to help them promote their work, which he has done with an admirable degree of success.

All of this means that even if Keshishian could be called marginalised (at least to begin with) he is not an outsider artist according to the traditional criteria. In addition, he is well aware of what is going on in that field, in terms of exhibitions and publications, and even has a small, but impressive collection of his own. However, like many other

similar artists (Unica Zürn, Marc Lamy or Hans Scholze, to name only a few) his work seems to be created in an intense solitude (as Joel Lorand says, “It is the very meaning of creation to be singular.”) In some ways this is no different from the isolation of many artists in their studios: one is alone with the work, surrendering to the process of its creation. But there is a sense in which such artists, no matter what the nature of their contacts with the art-world might be, belong to a kind of solipsistic anti-tradition and are a law unto themselves.

For us spectators, this can result in a feeling almost of trespass or eavesdropping, which is why such work is often described as being the expression of a ‘private world’. Yet, as with diaries, this privacy is fundamentally ambiguous: the fact of its material realisation, whether in words or in marks (and the two are intimately entangled in Keshishian’s work) means that it no longer belongs exclusively to the person who made it. However, privacy, and the secrecy associated with it, as Josh Cohen points out in his recent book *The Private Life: Why we Remain in the Dark* (London: Granta, 2013), “are not about the concealment of something already known, but something more like the envelope of something unknowable. Some art has a peculiar capacity to suggest this.”

In Keshishian’s case, this is complicated by the way in which some of his work, through titles like “The Intricacies



previous page:

The Void II

2001-2007

Ink on canvas

8ft 4in x 6ft 7in, 252 x 201 cm

right:

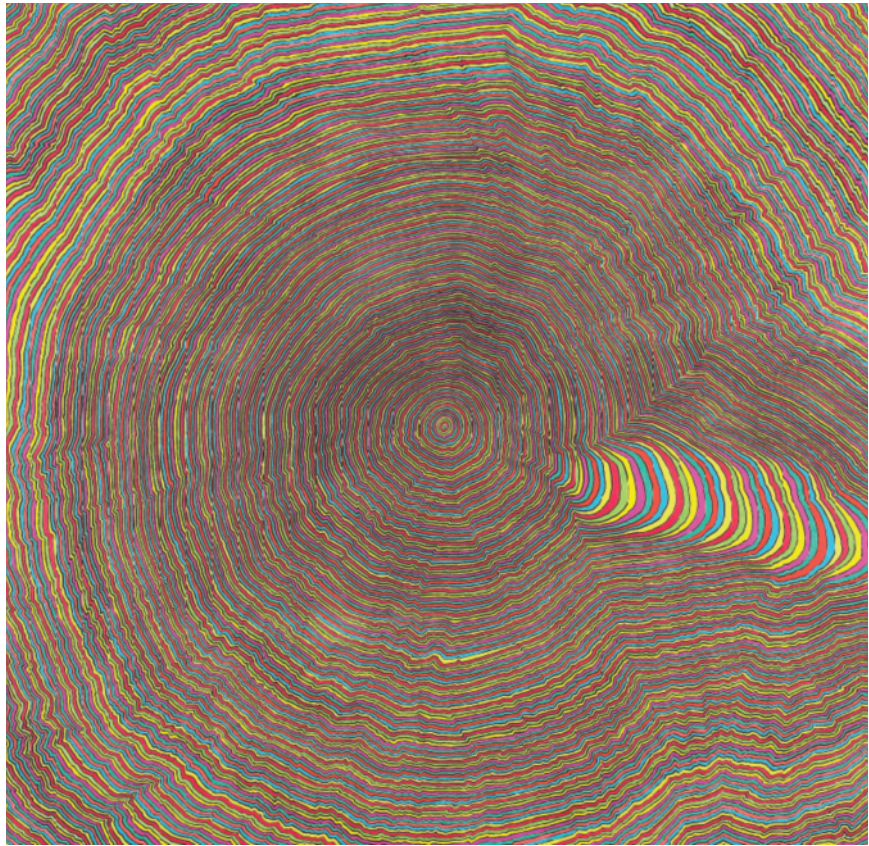
Transmogrification (Lapse/Stray)

2012-13

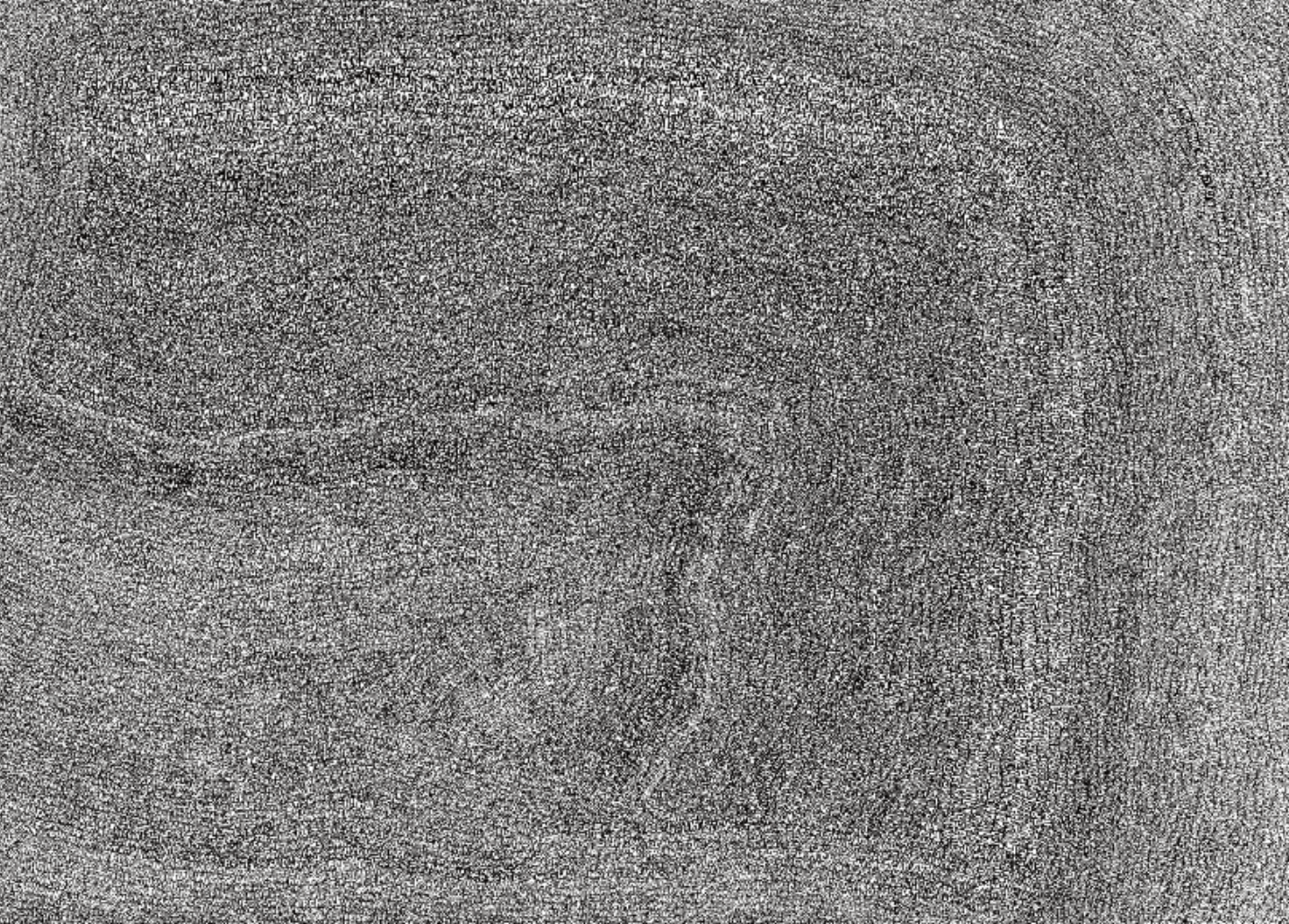
ink and acrylic paint on canvas

5 ft 10 ins. x 5 ft 10 ins., 180 x 180 cm

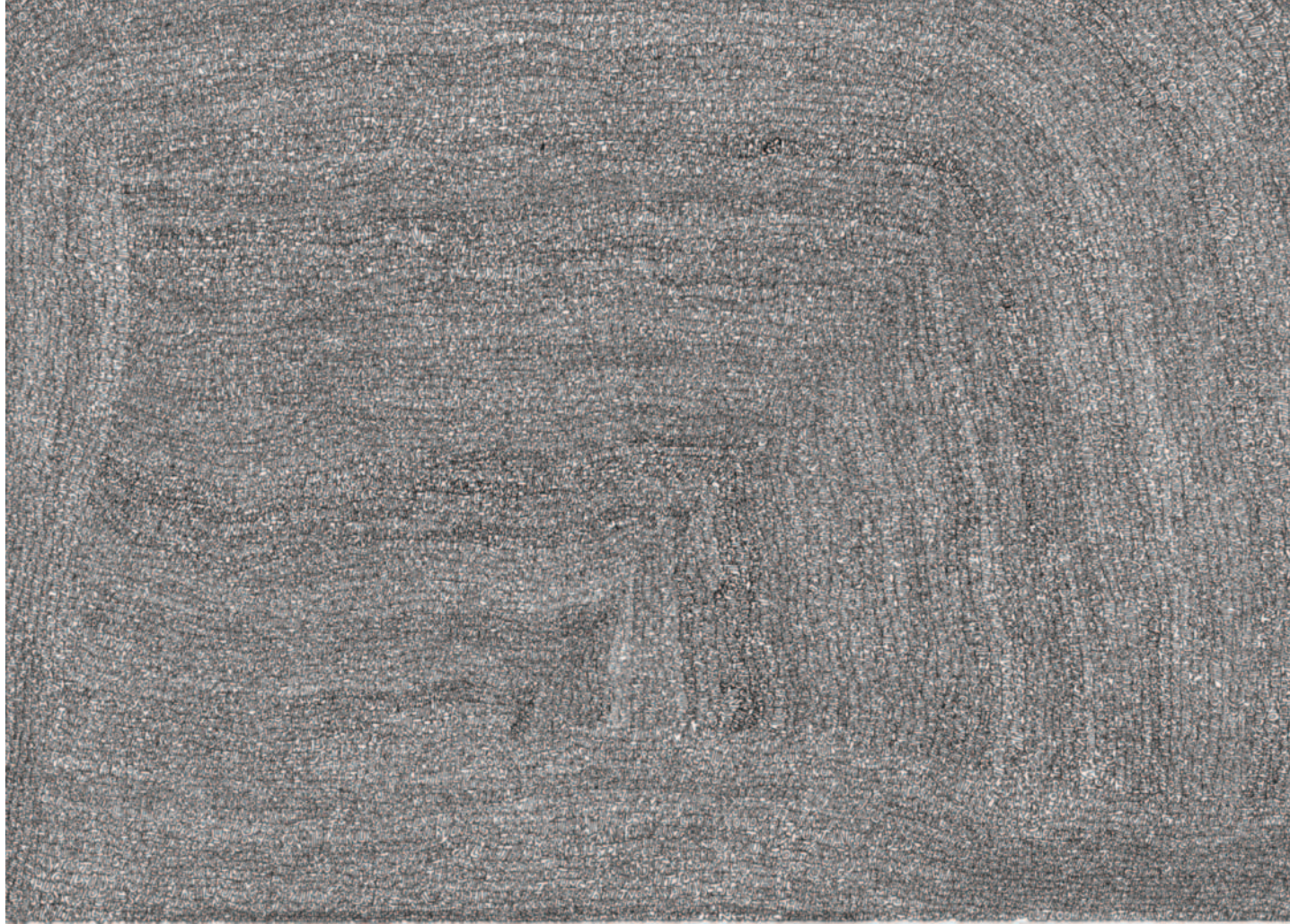
of Carlo's Brain" (see *Raw Vision* #82) or the "Diary" series, issues a seductive invitation and at the same time keeps the spectator at a distance. His painting and drawings – it is often hard to draw a line between them, so to speak – present us with a painstaking elaboration that is fascinating and almost addictive (*The Void II* took several years to complete). This is not just a protective screen, it is the obstinate and insistent presence of the work itself, and of the relentless, slow-motion business of its creation asserting itself. I get the impression that Keshishian knows he is submitting himself to this, so that what might be labelled "compulsive" or "obsessive" is actually a kind of surrender. In this sense he could be called an "insider" rather than an "outsider" artist.



David MacLagan is a writer, artist, and retired art therapist and university lecturer. His recent books include *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace* and *Line Let Loose: Scribbling, Doodling and Automatic Drawing*.



Diary, April 2011 – November 2013, ink on card, 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm



Diary, October 2010 – March 2011, ink on card, 11.7 x 8.3 ins., 29.7 x 21 cm