

Geordie Greig

Sarah Raphael's surprising foray into abstraction marks an about-turn by an artist easily bored by standing still

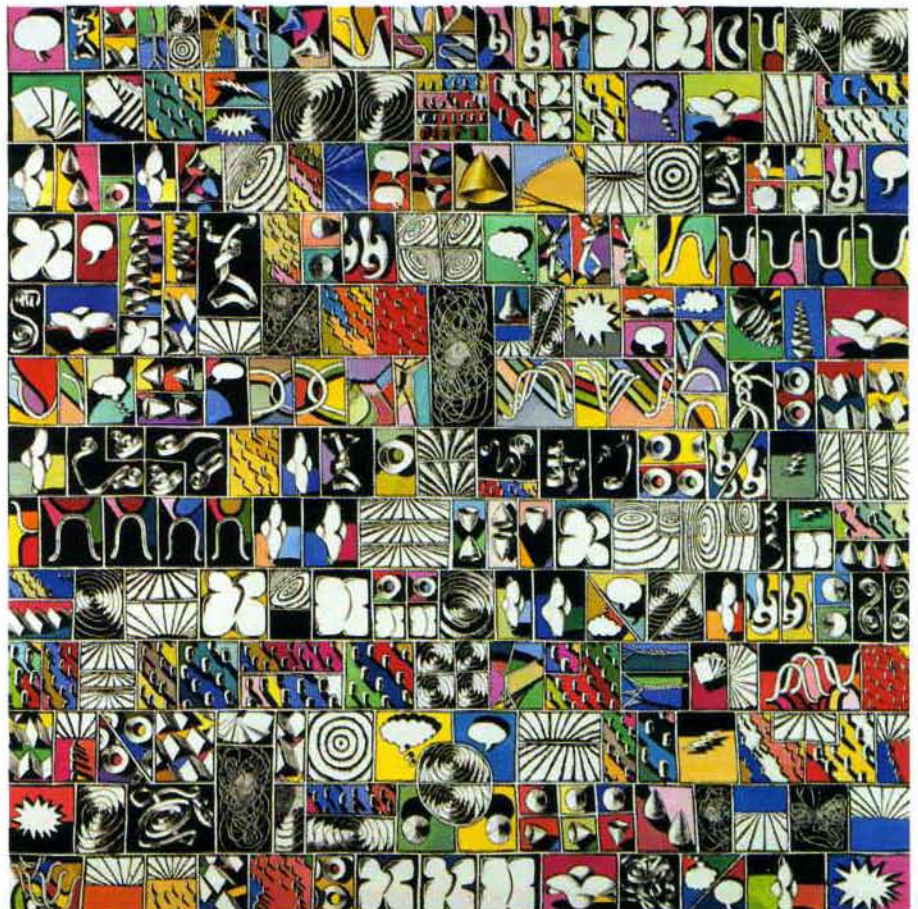
# Empty Speech Bubbles

**A** blinding migraine meant Sarah Raphael could barely leave her sick bed for almost eighteen months. Courageously and cleverly, she turned this to her professional advantage by making comic-strip paintings on which she could work just a little bit at a time. She could manage only short periods of work before the pain became too much. This meant that large single-image pictures were too demanding. Her new, detailed and painstakingly constructed works constitute 'Strip!', her first exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art, which opened last month to critical reactions of surprise and acclaim.

The surprise was that this was a new, unforeseen phase in the career of one of Britain's most celebrated young women painters. Her reputation during the last ten years has been built upon her startling portraits, reminiscent of early Lucian Freud, followed by a series of evocative, naturalistic Australian deserts. She had been swept along on a tidal wave of praise by a powerful clutch of critics and writers, including William Boyd and Clive James. Now the poet, Andrew Motion, has put his weight behind her with a celebratory foreword in the catalogue for her new show. What no critic expected was that Raphael would produce pop art for the 1990s.

Her large, playful, colourful pictures, consisting of hundreds of tiny panels, were produced during and after her pregnancy with her third child, Rebecca. Aged 38, Raphael juggles the pressures of the all-consuming schedule of a professional artist with those of a mother raising three young children, sometimes painting throughout the night when the children are asleep. During her illness, the nausea and pain were so tyrannical that she relied heavily upon the painkiller Pethidine. It was no ordinary headache. Any noise, light or movement was torture. It was in these difficult circumstances that she experimented with comic-strip art, a notion that had been swirling in her head since she was very young.

When her family lived in Rome, she read bright, jazzy, Italian strips from the age of four. Later at boarding school in England her



Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 1*, 1996–7, acrylic on paper on canvas, 183.5 × 183.5 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)