



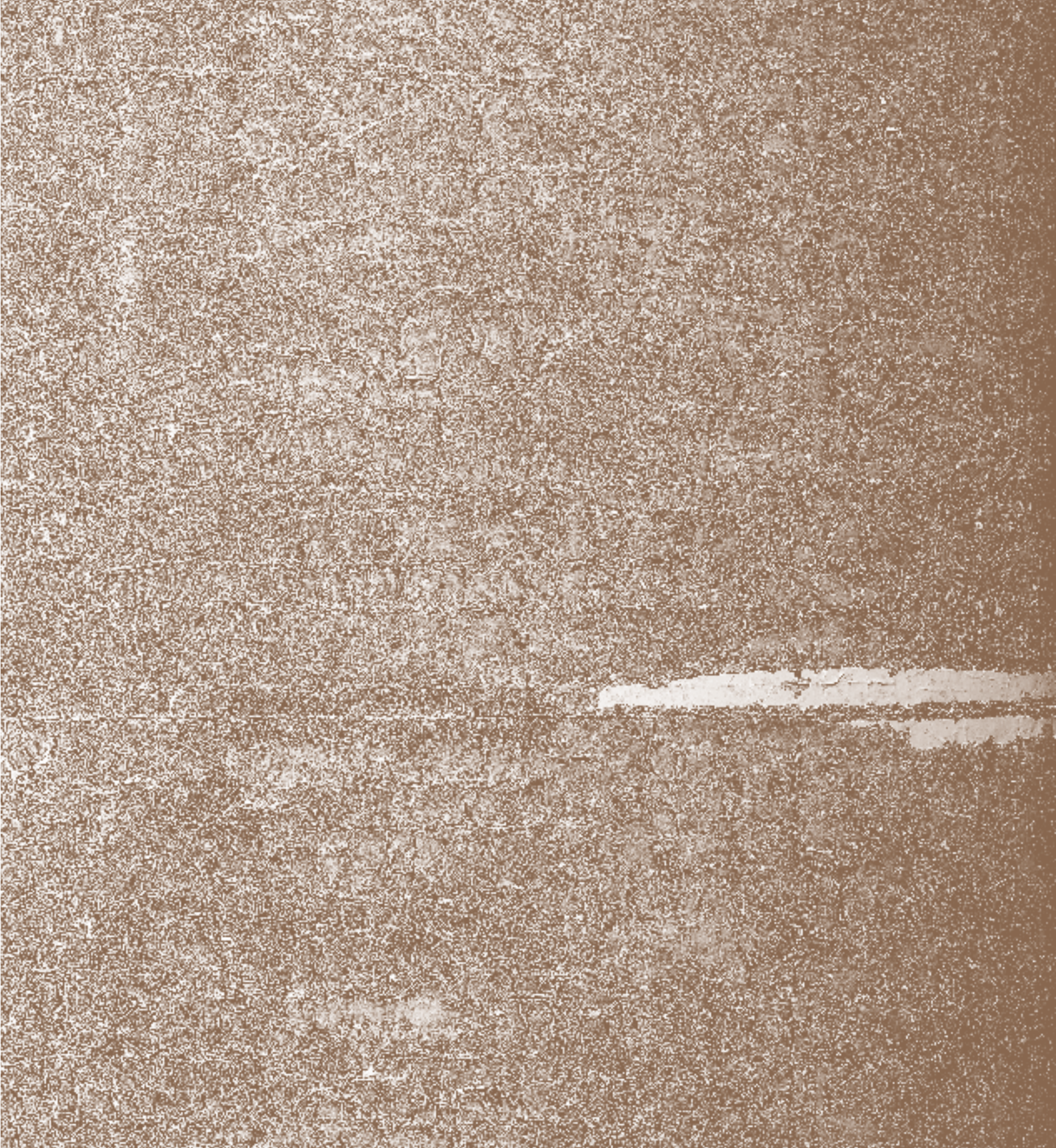


SU XIAOBAI

Beneath a descending moon ,  
breathing



How to best be amiable is how I approach my practice.







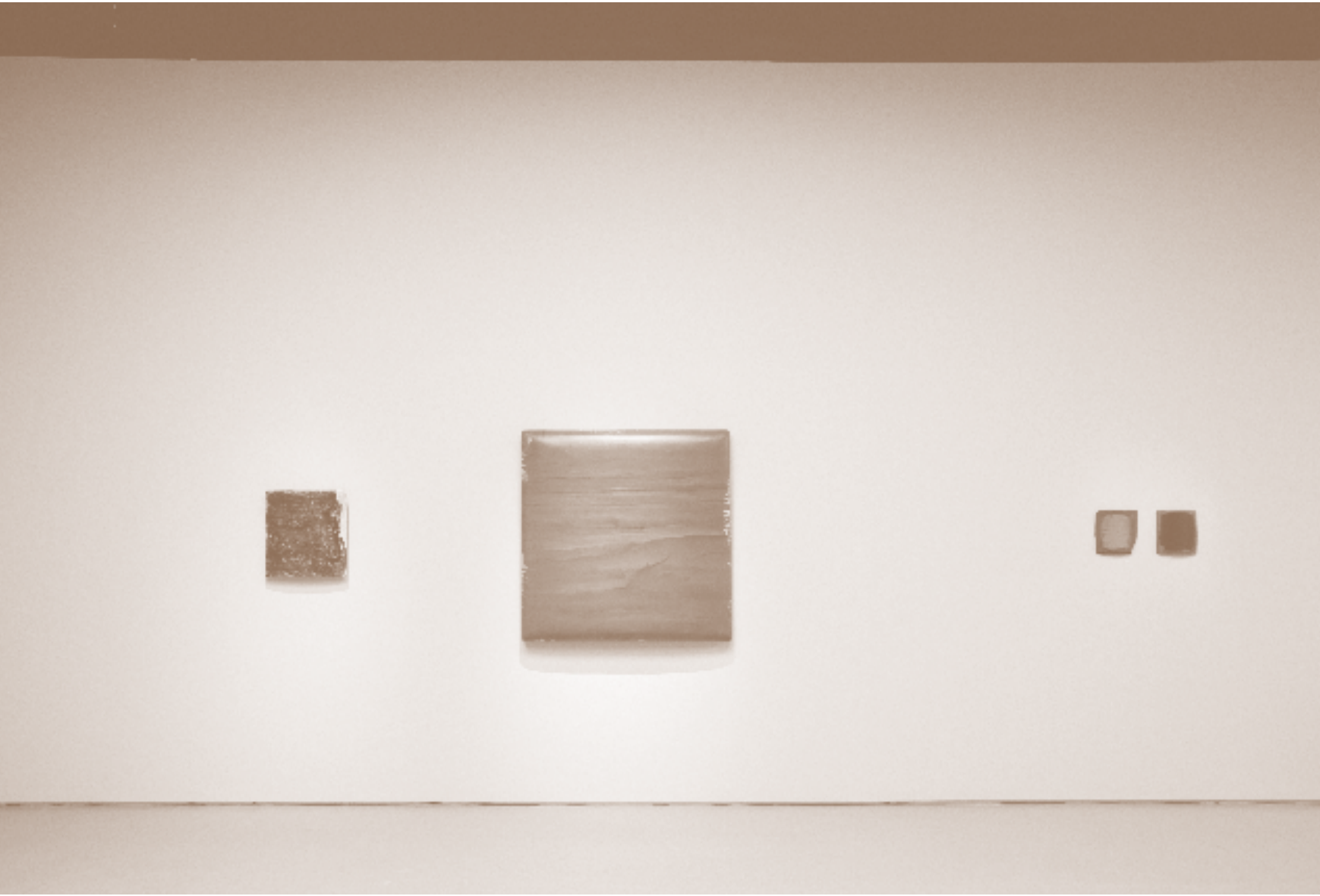


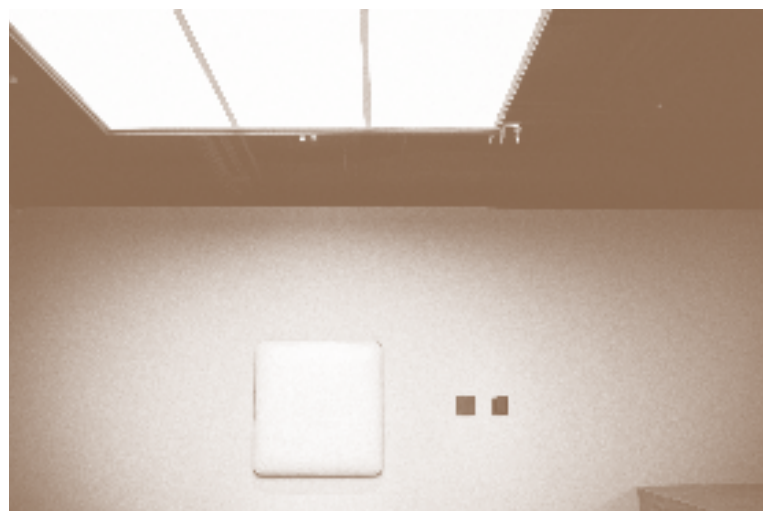


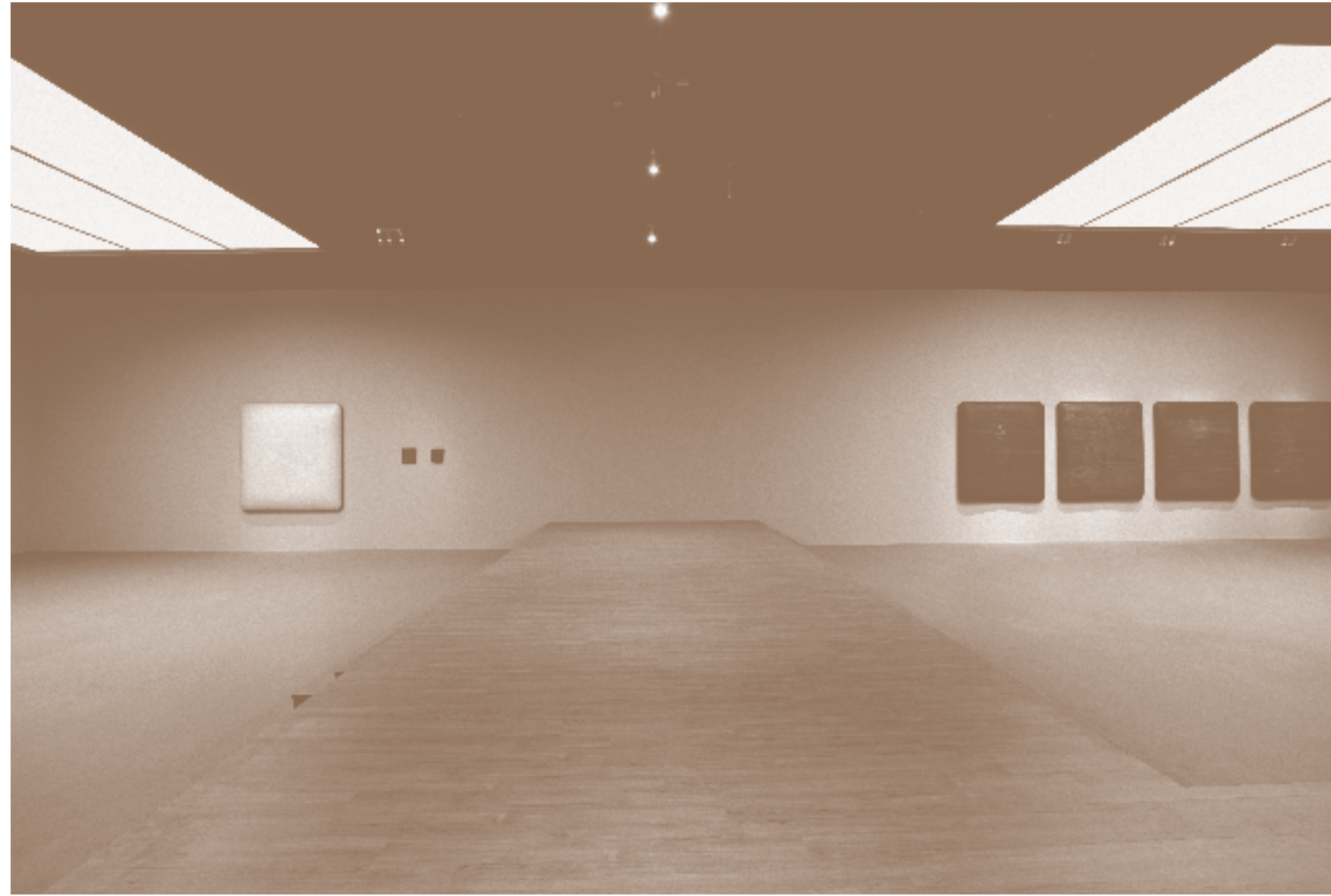
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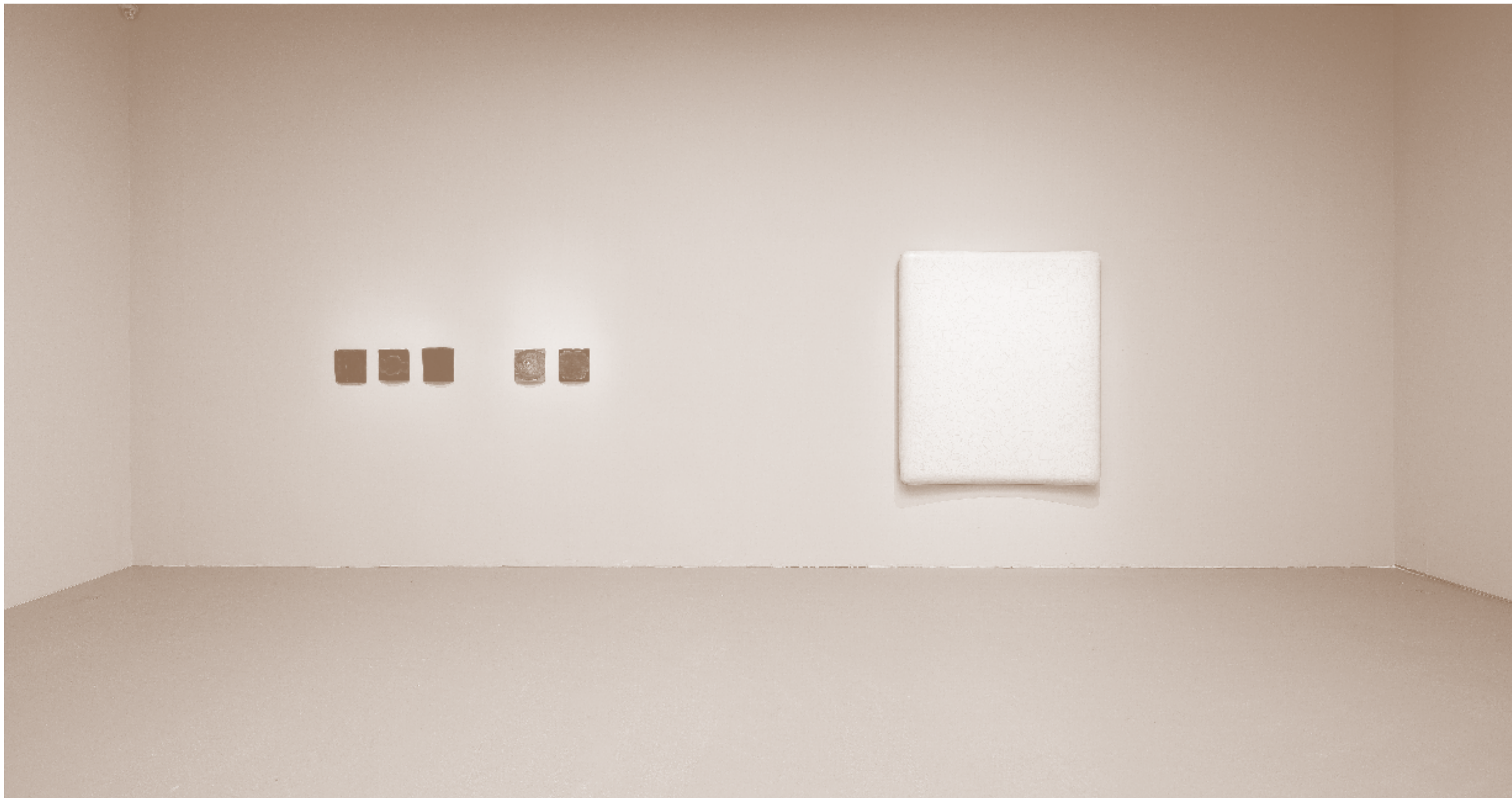




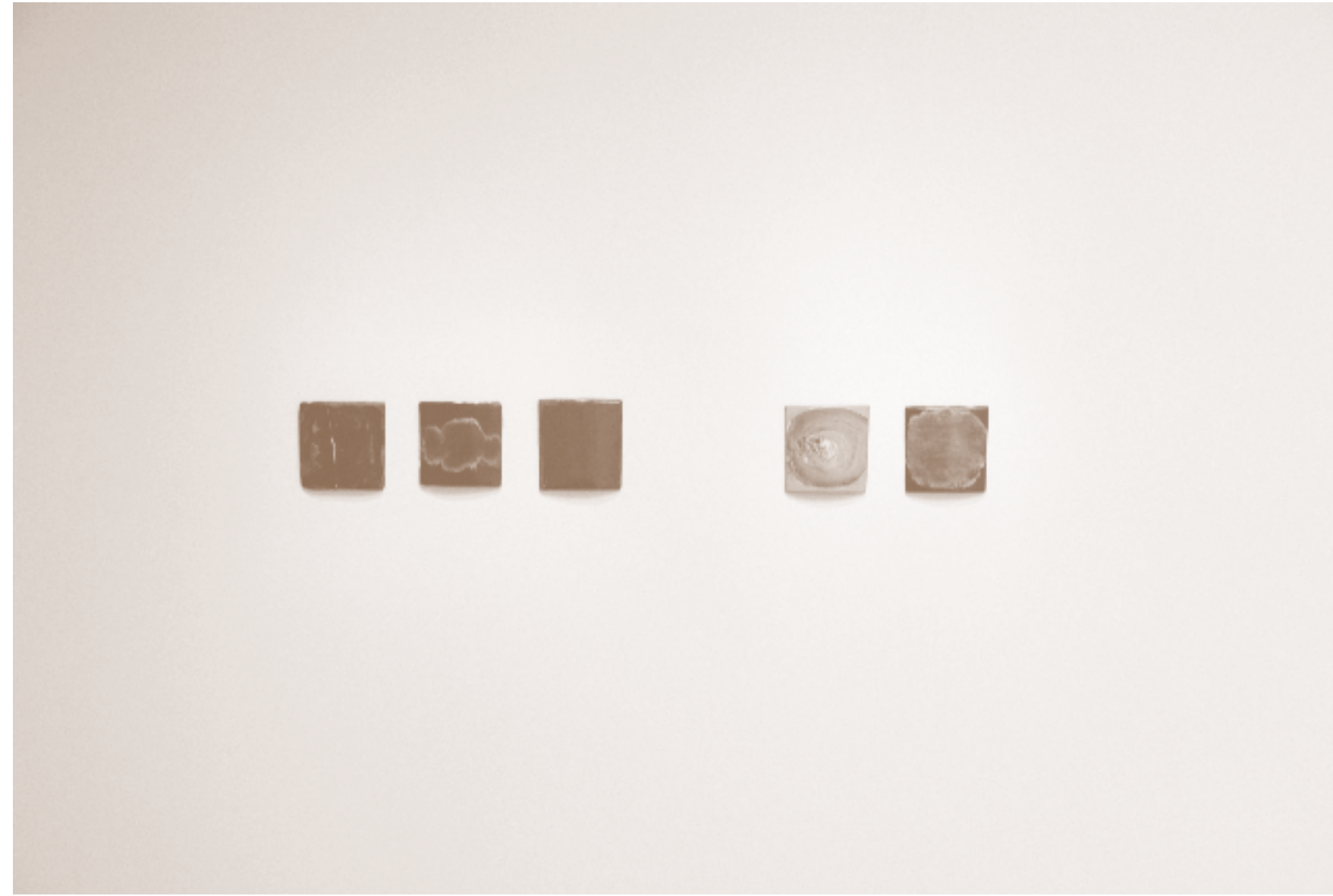






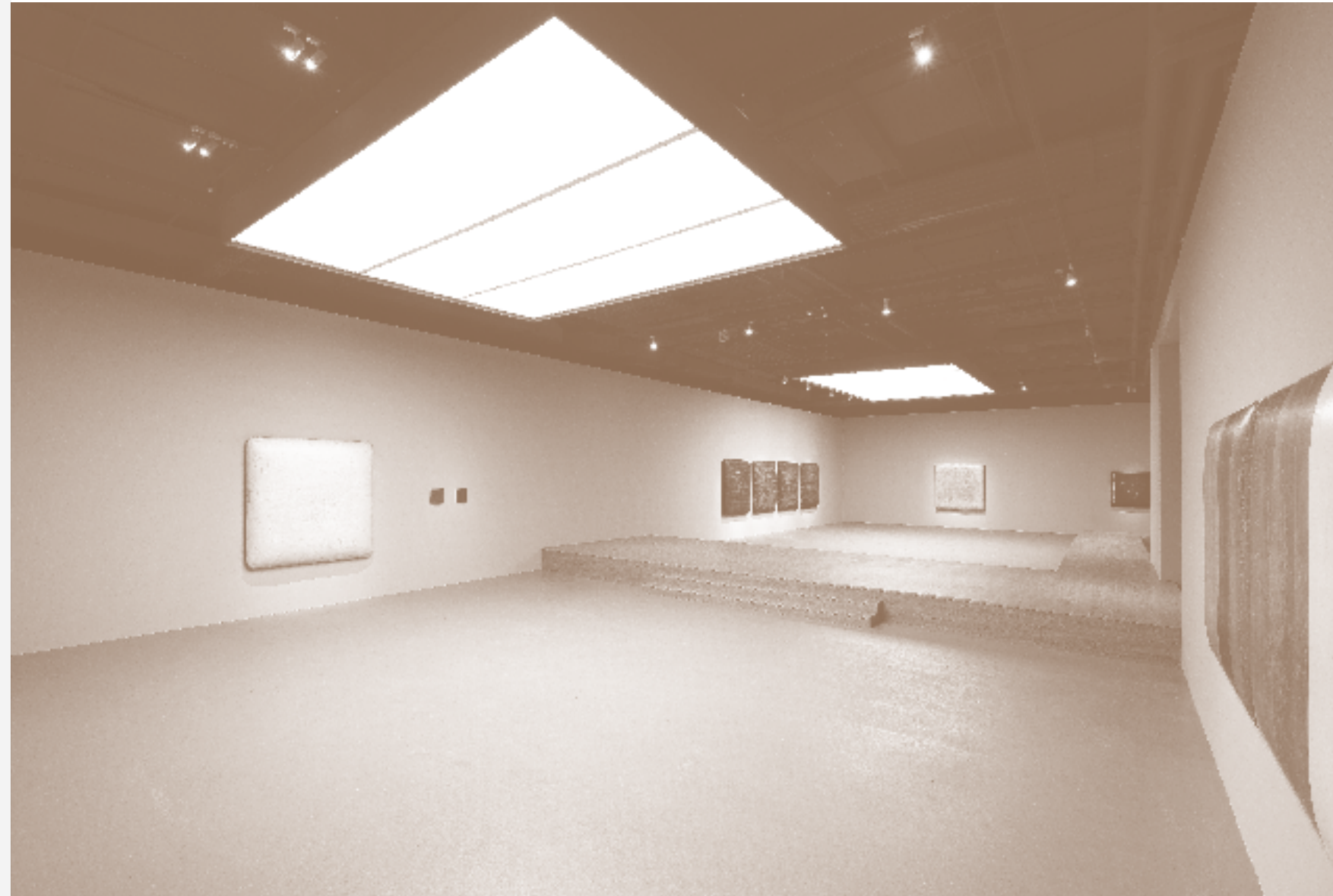




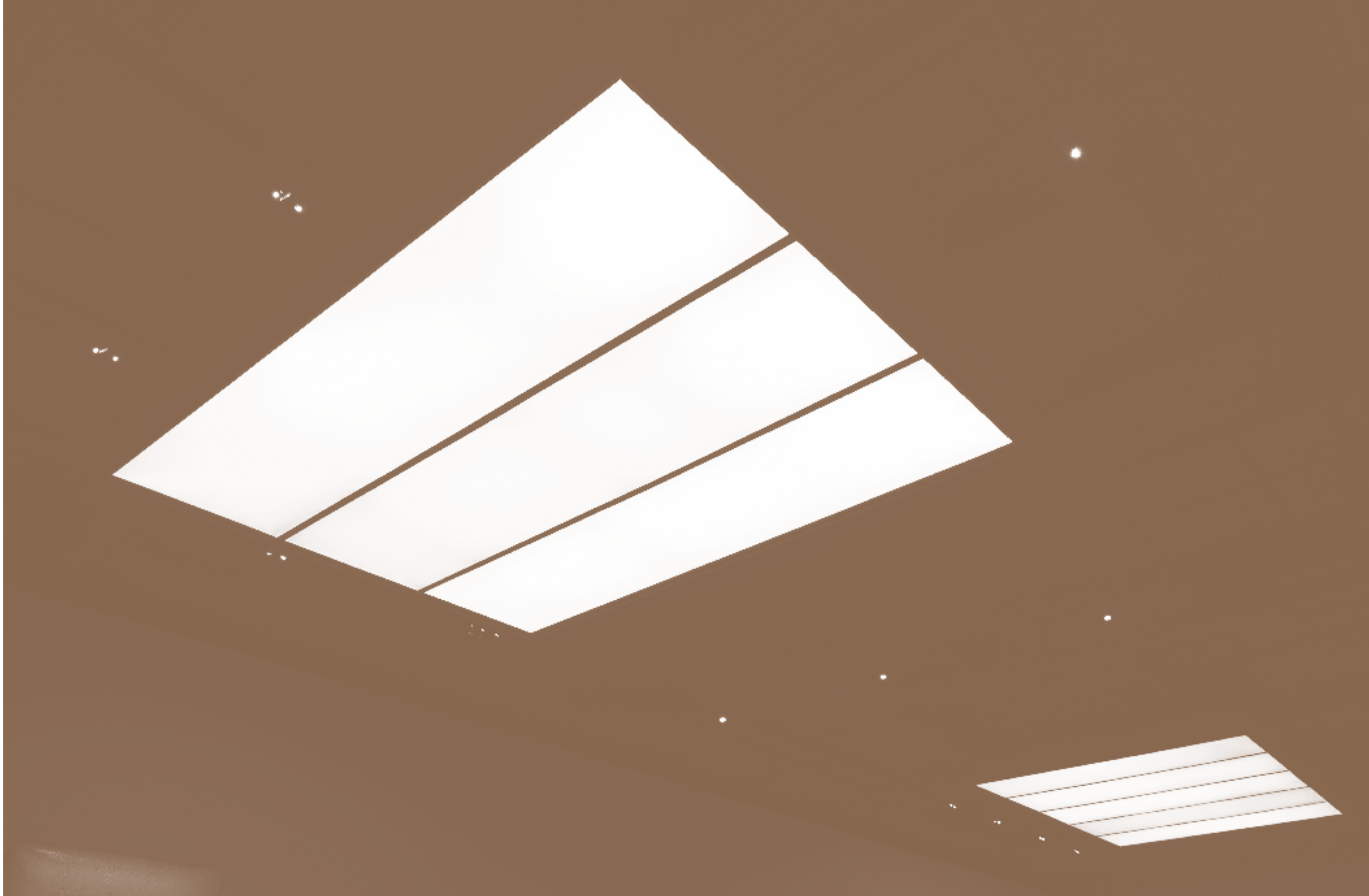




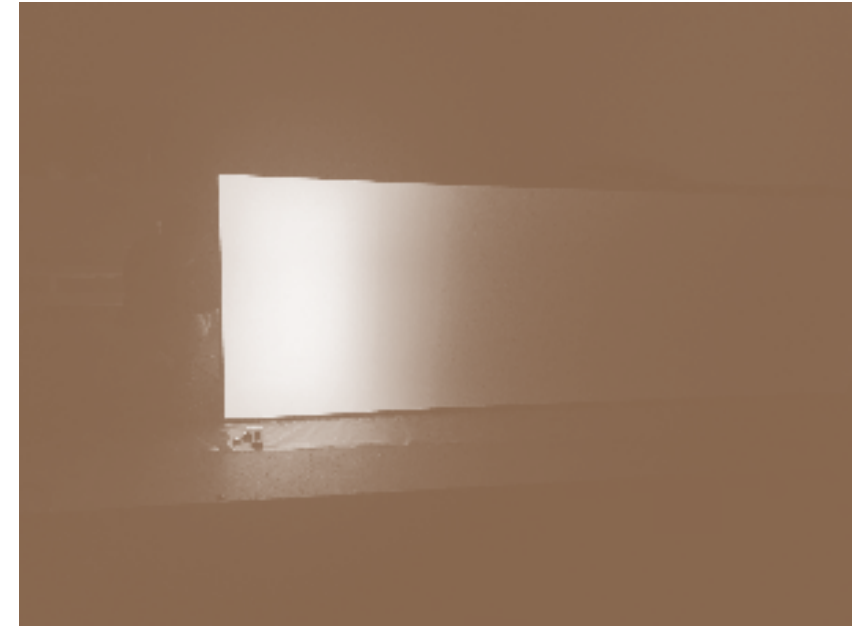












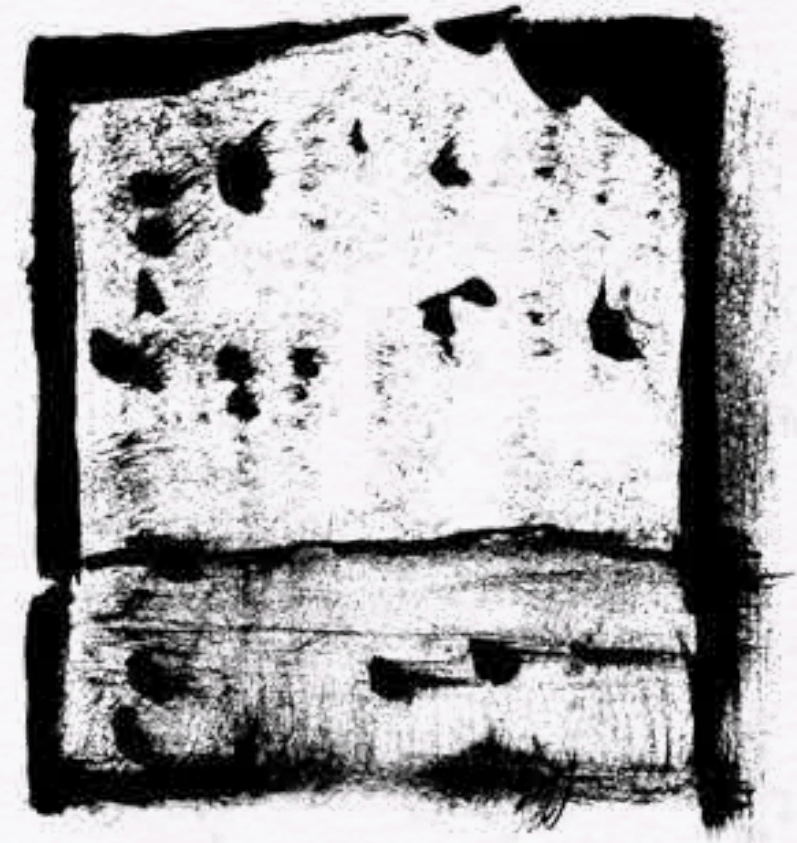


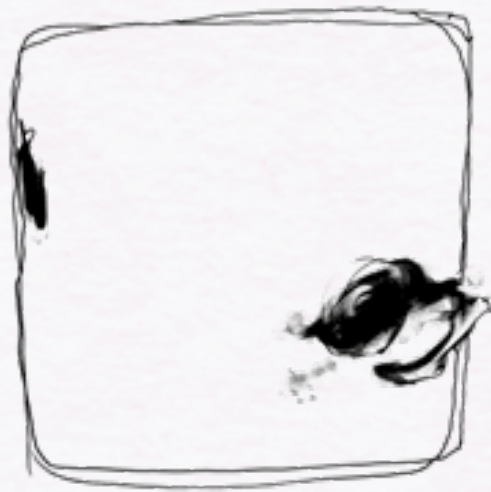












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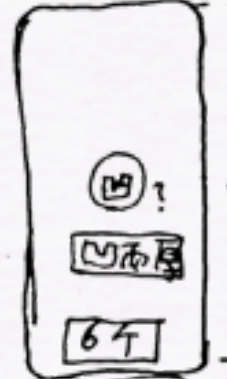
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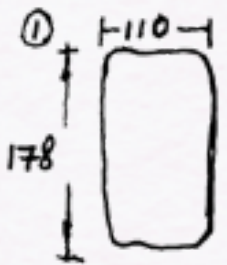
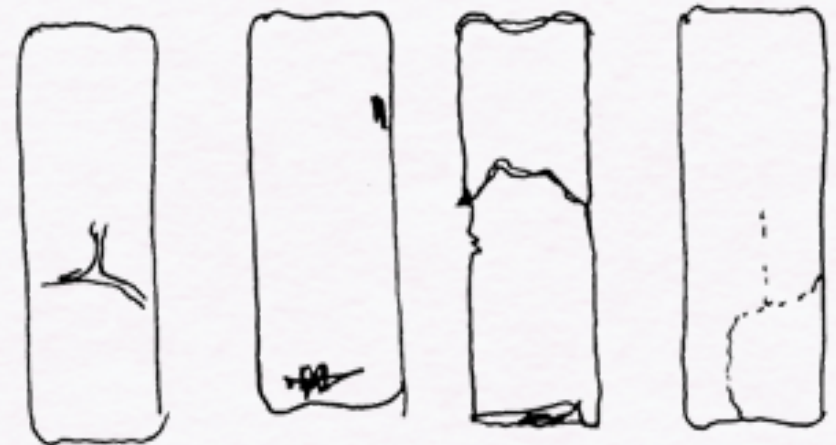
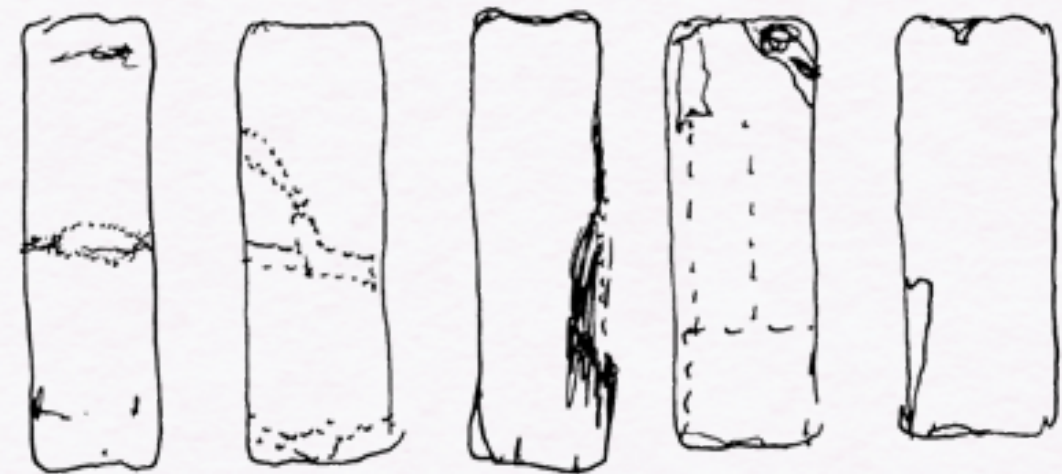


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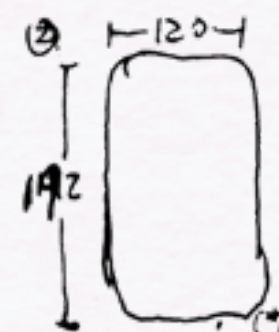
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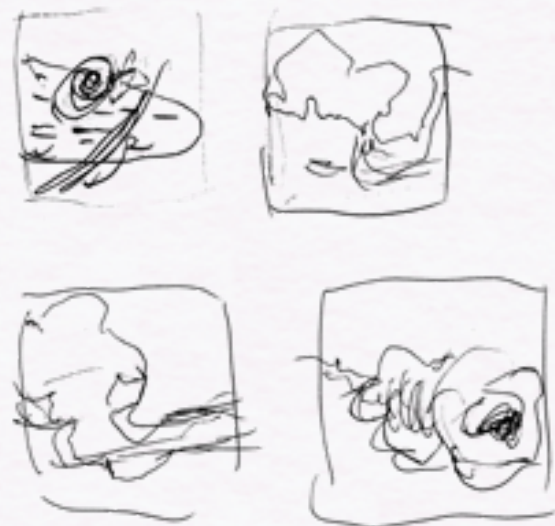


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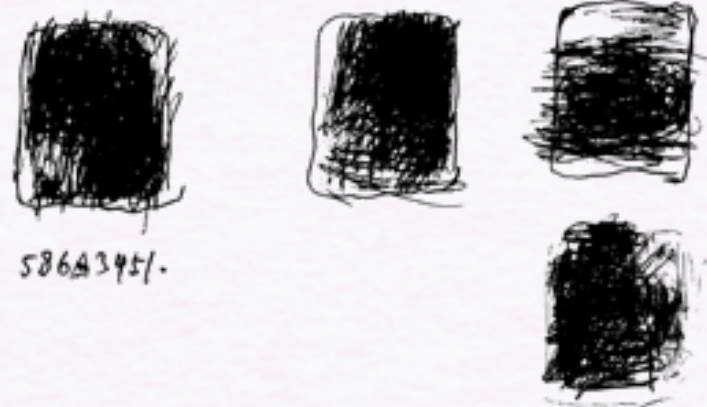








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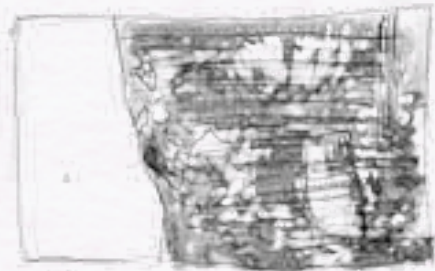
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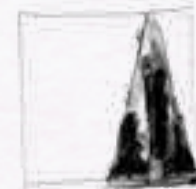
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The Keeper of Diaries: Su Xiaobai

Lin Yi-Hsiu



*In 1993, I discovered a pre-World War II elementary school in the countryside, on the border of Germany and Luxembourg. The school had two buildings, one of which I used as a dwelling and the other as a studio. Although it was remote, I always had friends who would drive over 100 kilometers to visit during the holidays. I wonder why they traveled so far to see me. Why did they care for me so much? Among these friends was a philosopher who was also a department head at the university. He said what attracted him was the dialogue we shared, which I found quite perplexing because my German was not as advanced or accurate as that of*

*a native speaker. I discussed this with my wife, and our conclusion was: "I have a limited vocabulary, and I put words where they don't belong." My wife is a German teacher, and sometimes we use German to discuss things that are difficult to express in Chinese. Even if I say something wrong, she doesn't correct me. She just smiles at me and says, "I can't correct you, because if I do, I may have to change every word, and the right words can't always adequately express your thoughts."*



## Strange, Foreign Trees

Su Xiaobai rarely talks directly about his work. Instead, he talks about the feelings and experiences hidden within them, especially regarding the minutiae of everyday life. “I like things that are peaceful, less profound and more vernacular,” he says. “The profound attracts and fascinates people, but that’s often the extent of its potential. When it comes to more common or quotidian matters, there is always room for growth and development.”

When talking about his past experiences in Germany, Su always beams with a radiance in his eyes. Apart from his days spent at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts, there was an old countryside elementary school which he bought in 1994 and transformed into the Linderan Manor. In addition to being his longest-used studio, it was also the cradle of innumerable creations and fond memories. When he was not renovating the manor or making art, Su spent a considerable amount of time planting trees in the courtyard, which was originally a school playground. A 1995 entry in his personal logbook reads: “46 years old. Plant trees in spring. 10 oak trees, 10 Bodhi trees, 30 beech trees, several ginkgo trees, red maple, white birch, and pine trees, over 40 various fruit trees, two rows of bushes lining the courtyard about 800 meters long.” Among these were seven ginkgo trees imported from China, described by some locals as “strange, foreign trees” that did not belong in this environment, but Su paid them no mind.

These ginkgo trees also offer a fertile metaphor for his practice. Born in 1949, Su Xiaobai went to study in Düsseldorf in 1987 at the age of 38, as an artist who had already matured in his artistic career. He often describes himself as having two traditions, one of the East and one of the West: “I am an Asian living in the West, but all my memories of my hometown, my childhood education, and the cultivation of my aesthetics are inseparable from me. And yet, the Western outlook on life, their social structure, even their changing values have also imparted a subtle influence on my spirit. These two forces intersect within me and shape who I am.”

Su says that before going to university, his deepest desire was to become an academic; but as his new life began in Germany, he realized that “the so-called academia is entirely different from what I had imagined.” In 1990s Germany, the art scene was completely immersed in the artistic philosophies of Joseph Beuys and neo-expressionism. Living in Düsseldorf, surrounded by great masters, Su was fascinated by these schools of thought, but he recognized that he must avoid them in order to create something original.

Delving into Su’s early body of work — which he produced prior to studying abroad, as well as before and after his graduation from the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts in 1992 — one will find that his figurative depictions of objects and symbols become more simplified over time. After settling into the Linderan Manor, he spent countless evenings alone in the placid countryside, creating abstract paintings with minimalist lines and washed ink. These works would become the prototypes of his later abstractions.

“Actually, I intentionally plan things out,” he states in his monograph, *Su Xiaobai 2005*. “When I was living in a European cultural environment, I created a small space that belonged to me, where I resided, and those who stepped into my garden couldn’t help but become immersed in it.” Su’s gradual transition from figuration to abstraction occurred during his decade-long hiatus in the countryside, and the distinct shapes which used to occupy his canvases slowly disappeared after 1997. The artist claims that such abstractions contain “everything, yet nothing.” “My paintings have no specific content, no particular direction, and no familiar traces,” he says. “I use my own language and methods to transform them, and I conceal the fine arts techniques I have learned to maintain an air of mystery. Personally, I find that the more subdued an object is rendered, the more moving it will be. The cultural vestiges, the sense of abstraction in my work — I see it all as a metamorphosis.”

Upon returning to China from Germany in 2003, Su was commissioned for a public welfare project in Fujian during which he encountered Chinese lacquer (*daqi*) and ancient tile (*guwa*). The artist was first attracted to the square shape of the ancient tile, then he marveled at the richness of its undulating curves and its functionality. “The feel of the tile varies from side to side; it has a waist and shoulders. Immediately, it subverted my perception of painting’s two-dimensionality.” These ancient tiles served as the inspiration for all of Su’s later paintings with curved edges. He coats the tiles with the ever-changing medium of lacquer and combines lacquer with oil paint to alter it further, rendering it thicker and denser, reducing its usual glossiness. These methods are reminiscent of what a philosopher and friend of Su once said, and where the charm of his work lies: “With a limited vocabulary, he puts things where they don’t belong.” Perhaps Su Xiaobai, whose practice pivots around lacquer, has grown in symbiosis with his newfound habitat, just like those ginkgo trees he planted among the Bodhi and beech trees.

## The ashes have not yet fallen, on-site

At the end of 2019, Su Xiaobai's solo exhibition *Beneath a descending moon, breathing* was held in the basement of the Taipei-based Tina Keng Gallery, where the artist has exhibited many times. Deviating from the layout of his past solo exhibitions, in which monumental wooden structures formed viewing chambers and corridors, curator Hsu Fong-Ray used only lighting and a single walkway to define the exhibition space. Before he began planning the exhibition, Hsu visited Su's studio in Shanghai twice. "While I was at the studio, I only did two things," the curator recalls. "The first was to work with the artist, wrapping tiles with linen, applying paint, and polishing the work's surface. The second was to sit in different corners of the studio, dazed, and observe changes in the environment and the interactions between light and shadows."

In 2005, Su chanced upon an old warehouse near his home in Shanghai which occupied 600 square meters with a 9-meter-high ceiling. It would later become his second longest-used studio, behind the Linderan Manor. Whether in Düsseldorf or Shanghai, Su can be found either at home or in the studio between the hours of 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. on any given day. There is no air-conditioning in his Shanghai studio, which is sweltering in the summer and frigid in the winter. As he paints, the artist's only light source is the natural light that pours in through the skylights. The intensity and color of the light that illuminates the studio, depending on the weather, fluctuates daily, much like how his lacquer paintings morph with the shifting relationship between the day's labor and the materials applied. After his first visit to Su's studio, Hsu Fong-Ray decided to recreate the studio's lighting conditions in the exhibition space. "The clues to the composition of Su's works are concealed in temporality and spirituality," the curator says. "Typically, when we talk about light, we are referring to the physical properties of light and how it illuminates an object. However, the kind of light that concerns Su Xiaobai is of a spiritual quality. How can we bring this into the exhibition? The spatial layout of an exhibition is not only a matter of visual perception, but how a work of art is contextualized." In the end, the curatorial team installed a light fixture with over 300 lighting modes in the exhibition space to conjure the natural light that suffuses the artist's Shanghai studio.

For the curator, space is to an exhibition what an artwork is to a narrative. In addition to having a light fixture that simulates natural light, the walkway that traverses the space and divides the exhibition into three sections further echoes the artist's state of being when he is at work. "In general, walls are erected in an exhibition to create a visual flow," Hsu Fong-Ray says. "This time, the viewer is transported back to the site of art making. When Su creates his large lacquer paintings, he first lays them flat on a wooden frame. Sometimes, to see a work more clearly, the artist stands atop a small ladder and observes the overall composition from different vantage points. We have replicated the experience of viewing from an elevated perspective, and created a space without walls in order to mimic the artist's working environment."

In some art reviews, Su's large-scale lacquer works are often attributed with elements of Chinese history and culture. "Why did he choose to use tiles? Why did he research objects from different dynasties and their intrinsic symbols?" Hsu Fong-Ray muses. "From a creative perspective, what Su aims to approach is not necessarily the sociocultural fabric, but rather the nuances of the cultures he has experienced which, when embedded in his work, transmute into an object that is intimately his own."

The inspiration for *Beneath a descending moon, breathing* came from the birthplace of Su's work. Following the curator's first trip to Su's Shanghai studio, the design for the exhibition's invitation card began to take shape. From Su's studio, Hsu brought back several polystyrene insulation boards, which the artist uses as the foundation of his works, in hopes that this substrate could serve as the starting point for the exhibition. "How does the spirituality of abstract art manifest?" Hsu contemplates. "If we are unable to approach the artist's original creative state of mind, we cannot know the meaning and significance of his work. The making of Su's lacquer paintings involves complicated procedures. The first step is to build the foundation (tile, wooden board, or polystyrene board). Then, Su applies lacquer, wraps the work in linen, allows it to dry, and sands it down. The process is repeated several times. Hours of arduous labor, day after day, crystallize into his work."



Hsu believed that the polishing of these handmade invitation cards was a continuation of the artist's studio environment, "allowing the people who install the exhibition to enter into the critical process of art making." During the installation period, the gallery sent Su a short video of the exhibition team making the invitation cards. "In the video, I saw a group of people polishing the polystyrene boards," he recalls. "The ash had not yet fallen in the smoky haze. The scene was reminiscent of an industrial factory, and it was remarkably similar to the atmosphere of my studio. I have an education in art and art history, but I work like a laborer. My hands are rough and my shoes are splattered with paint. In the end, the exhibition hall echoes the space, lighting, and viewing experience of my studio, and the invitation card evokes the making of my work. Although I'm uncertain about what I want in my practice, I know that I want to be constantly working. I work nonstop every day, painting shapes no one has painted before, painting colors that I see in my dreams, using methods I have learned, giving up methods that have failed me, attempting methods that are foreign to me, searching every day for something new, something to look forward to."









2010年6月5日是一个值得纪念的一天。  
这天工作很忙碌，但很愉快。上午在办公室处理了一些  
琐事，下午去了一趟书店，买了几本书。在书店里，  
我遇到了一位老同学，他告诉我他最近在读一些  
关于哲学的书，这让我感到很高兴。我们聊了很久，  
直到天快黑了才回家。这一天过得真充实啊！













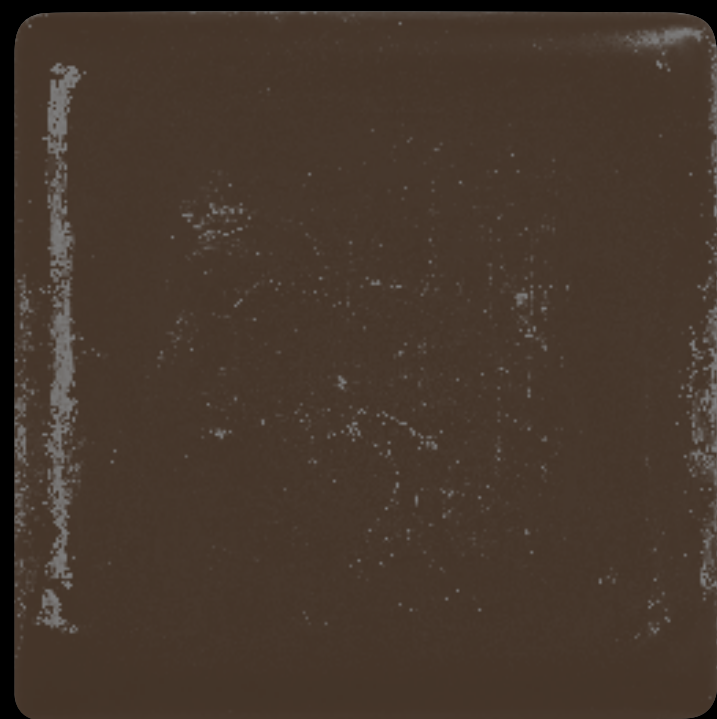








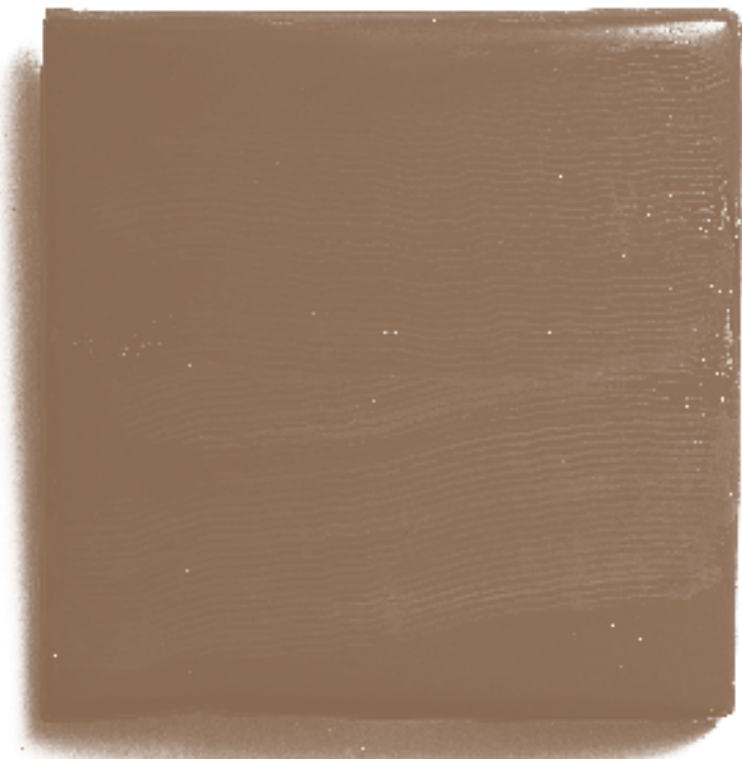








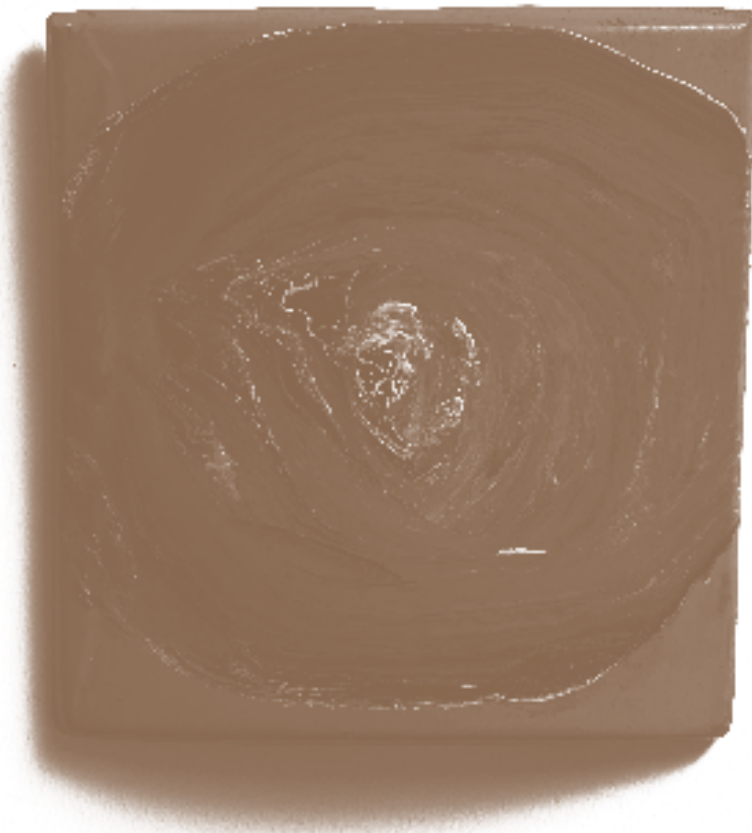




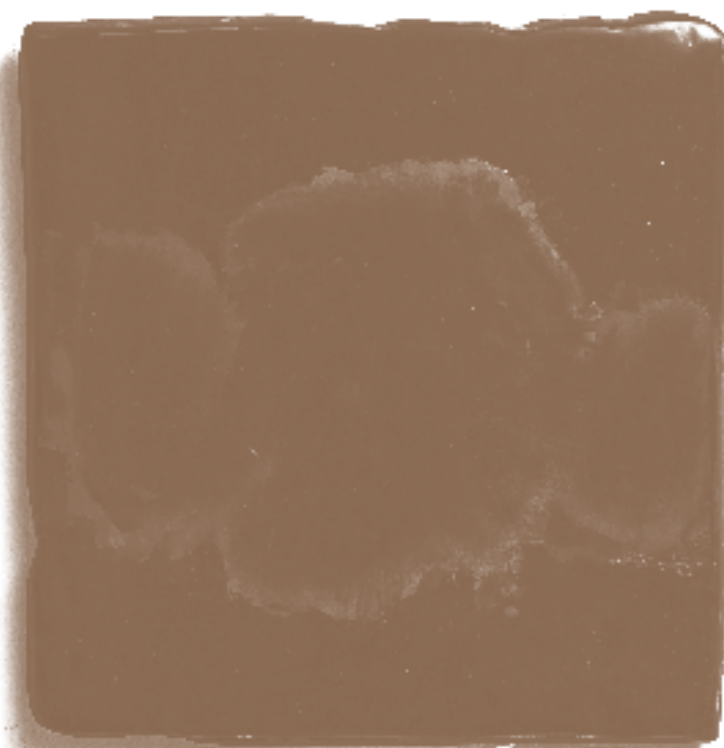
















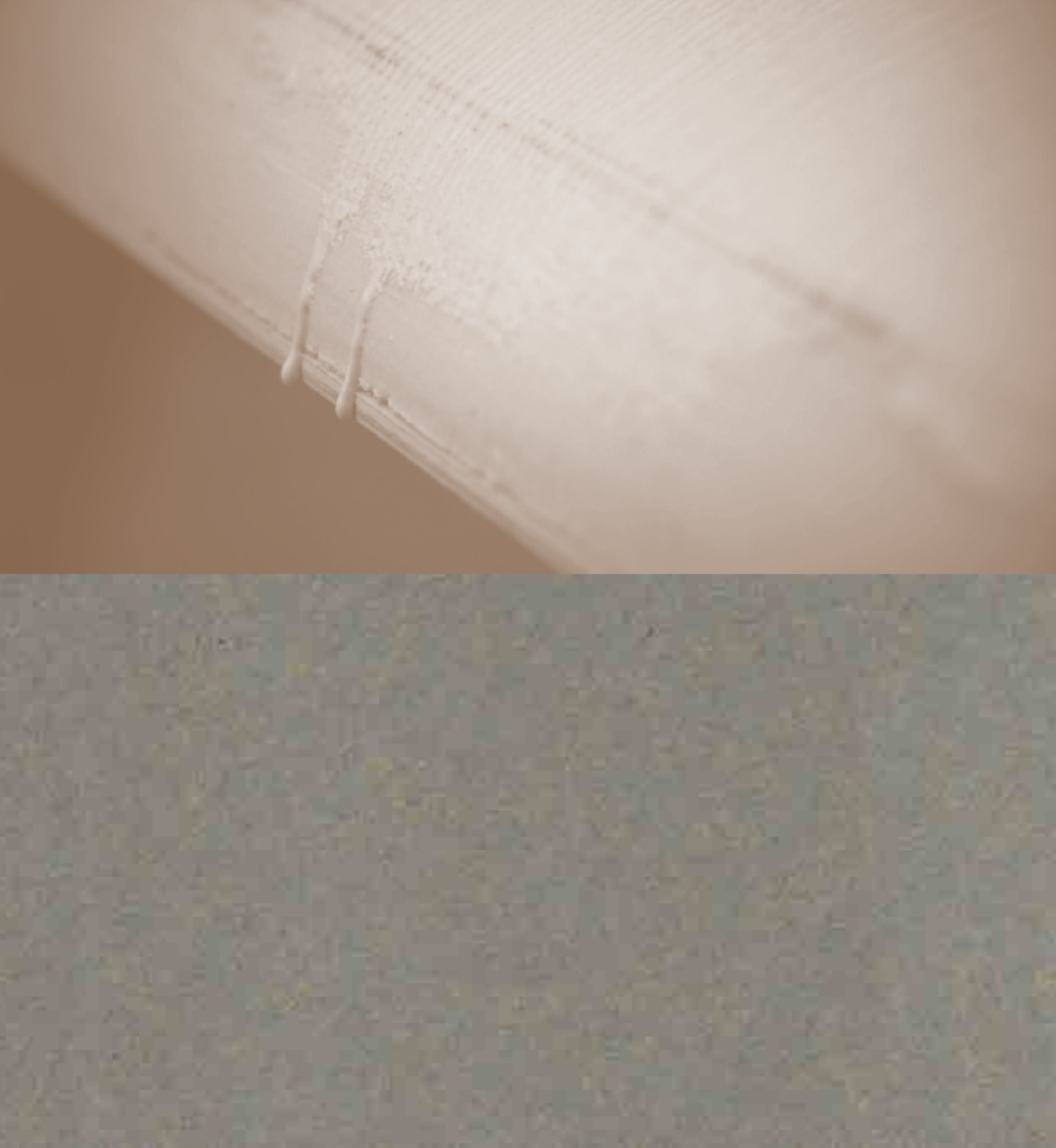












*As if making a large metropolitan mural painting,  
use that momentum to paint layer by layer, to scrape, to stain...  
To patch, lacquer, bore holes into, roughen, polish, outline, fill,  
applying foreign objects onto a layer that has already been painted...  
To be multifaceted, not seeking absoluteness or perfection.*

— Excerpt from Su Xiaobai's notebook



## Temporality

The making of a lacquer painting is a complex process, and each of Su's works takes at least three months to complete. Waiting for the lacquer to dry and for the change in materials to manifest takes time, so there are always three to five works being made in the studio at any given time. Su's most common technique is to wash away the last layer of paint, eliciting the textures and colors of the layers underneath. "I aspire to create paintings that are unique and inimitable," he says. "Every painting must be different. This is something I demand of myself, to invent something new as often as possible. If it comes to me in a dream, then I will create it the next day." On the computer desk in his Shanghai studio, Su keeps his creative journals, personal logbooks of daily tasks, rain flower pebbles collected from the yard, and several picture books of antique illustrations, stone inscriptions, and jade porcelain bowls — the artist always keeps a collection of these beloved art catalogues by his side. "I like all things involving time and heritage, like jade, lacquer, even pieces of paper (as in letters from early days of communication)," Su says. "I believe they all have stories, stories that have furtively strayed from the narrator's original intention."

During the 20 years Su spent in Germany, he never visited Italy. Now, he goes there to see the frescoes every year. "They are fascinating and inexplicably beautiful. The ancient techniques of *buon fresco* have long been lost, but if you look at the colors today, they have not lost any vigor or magnificence. We may not fully understand the stories they portray, but the vestiges remain, and to me that is what's most important."

The light in the studio fades and the artist's physical labor ceases as the sun sets. Every day, Su makes it into a habit to write two or three entries in his work journal during his breaks and before he goes to bed. "Technically, it is a diary, but I rarely document personal emotions," he says. "I only write about my creative process. If I only wrote in it once a day, it would be easy to slack off or become vague in my recollections, so I do it two or three times hoping to remember the specifics." In these diaries, the artist carefully delineates the different phases, processes, and motivations behind each work, and even the words or phrases extracted from the books he reads that serve as inspiration for the works' titles. On one page, a cirrus cloud is outlined in black ink, and a box outside the cloud anchors it as the sketch for a work.

Su points at the cirrus cloud and reminisces about how it caught his eye years ago in the early morning light percolating through the window. Although his diary is filled with work notes, remnants of the artist's personal life loiter in the corners of the pages. "The greatest challenge in my practice is creating vicissitudes, opulence, and a plethora of emotions with a single pigment," he says. "This is what I hope to achieve in my daily work, and I hope the viewer can pick up on these traces in my painting. Painting is a solitary labor. It is isolating; it requires thought. Of course, there is also a longing for reciprocation and warmth."

"Anyway, how to best be amiable is how I approach my practice," says Su.









一池光井 蘇笑柏畫展  
Beneath a descending moon, brushing  
The Paintings of Su Xiaobai

2019/12/07 - 2020/1/24

畫廊主 蘇笑柏  
Gallerist Liu Xiao Bai



發行人 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

耿桂英 TINA KENG

出版者 PUBLISHER

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Su Xiaobai had a batch of his old paintings destroyed a month before *Beneath a descending moon, breathing* opened at the end of 2019. When the Tina Keng Gallery's staff found out about this, the cut-up and shredded pieces of canvas had already been shoved into four big sacks. There was simply no fathoming this decision, but it was fortuitous that some of these fragments came into the gallery's possession. Now the remnants of those long-gone paintings have been mounted on the cover of this book, as a crisp memento of the artist's pure caprice.







