

BLACK SILENCE



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LU CHAO

rosenfeld porcini



## BLACK SILENCE - LU CHAO

In the dimension of space, I look around in vain to see an ending, either up towards the sky or down onto the ground.

In the dimension of time, I again search for the finishing line, either through the past or towards the future.

It's like the no-boundary quantum cosmology presented by Hawking and Hartle in the early 1980's, which proposed that the boundary condition of space is that it does not have one. Hawking also suggested "the universe's existence is simply the natural laws of cooperation within one tribe which is in accordance with their observations".

Maybe, the reason behind our constant attempt to identify a boundary for the universe and to find a kind of logic for things happening or an answer to a phenomenon, is our own limitations. As human beings we will all pass away and conceiving that our time in this world is limited we are confronted with the enigma of whether or not humans can exist in other forms after death.

In the same way, acknowledging that many aspects of our daily life escape our understanding - such as the uncertainty principle in quantum physics -, we have to admit that our epistemic logic might be incomplete.

Therefore, when a limited being seeks answers in an unlimited space, it would encounter indefinite possibilities, each single one of them offering infinite room for learning.

Thanks to my mother, I was accidentally "forced" to draw every day since I was four years old. I couldn't go to bed if I hadn't finished my drawings. As a result, I gained the substantial ability to communicate through painting. Painting became one of my languages and part of my life, one of my ways of self-expression and even one of the channels to get to know the universe.

In modern days painting has ceased to be mainstream. Both during Rembrandt's time and later on when the canons were again overturned

by Picasso's revolution, painting had been repeatedly marginalized. Back in 1839, when the academic painter Paul Delaroche saw the process of daguerreotype, he commented: "From today, painting is dead." In 1917, when Duchamp presented the urinal elevating it to the category of art, it seemed that all media in art, painting above all, were doomed. Later in 1965, American minimalist Donald Judd once again stated: "It seems painting is finished." But reality instead seems always so unpredictable.

Why are there still so many voices restlessly seeking more possibilities in painting long after all these masters became mere names in history? Perhaps it is because of the fundamental capacity of humans to express through images, which existed long before characters were introduced.

The hieroglyphic characters were more than often nothing but an abstract elaboration of elements derived from the symbols in primitive society. In doing so, the mystery and the straightforward sensibility of symbolic languages were also lost.

In the light of this, I wish for my painting to establish a form of communication that's not based on languages but on emotions, through which all answers become more open and the interaction with viewers does not exist only in the very actual moment, but it can be extended to memories and future projections. Personally, I don't want to give an answer through my painting as much as I want to express a feeling.

The artwork is not finished until the viewers have formulated their own understanding and interpretation of such feelings. In the meanwhile, I'd rather not spend too many words to help deciphering my paintings. They will have a longer life in this world than mine so they will have to learn how to communicate on their own.



## 1. THE QUESTIONING EYES



Before I was 19, I had been studying the western painting system. The entire teaching system in the middle school of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts is more like an assembly of impressionism and the socialist oil paintings of the Soviet Union. In conjunction with China's national socialism, a great number of very interesting painters were born. In general, the whole of my learning process, the position of me holding a brush and my way of observing objects were all connected with western painting from the start. In the library, I often found myself gazing at a catalogue which had one self-portrait of the 55-year-old Rembrandt (1606-1669).

The artist pictured himself as the Christian apostle Paul. The reason why this painting affects me is complex. I am magnetized by the technique and brushwork while also deeply attracted by the questioning of his eyes. Unlike most artists of his time; instead of being merely the tool to record the looks of royal families, Rembrandt always suggests some kind of confusion or even rebellion. Such differences caused his life to be like a roller coaster. Reading his biography and holding his catalogue in my hands while observing how one brush stroke joins another, I found myself wondering how could I use more of the warm colors to make the dark element become more transparent, just like the teacher had said? How can I deal with the bright part so that it's precise without being too plain? How can I handle the cool grey area, which is between the scalp and hair root, in a way that assures a natural transition as much as possible? Still today, whenever I pick up a brush, the instinctive position that my body takes reflects the training I received during that time. Human muscles have a memory of their own which allows them to react quicker than the brain does while painting. Such memory has lived in my body for 25 years so far. Another force that drove me to keep looking at this painting was a strong curiosity towards the artist's life. How could such a master end up destitute at middle age? Also, why did he leave so many self-portraits behind at the end of his

life? In my mind, I can still see his eyes in that picture today. Back in the 17th century, Rembrandt had started to raise questions via his paintings. Through his eyes, I have seen the doubts he had towards the world, towards himself and the relationship between human beings and the world. The self-portrait series also displayed his view of the universe. The painting became more open and it became more important to raise questions than to give answers.

## 2. FROM THE DIMENSION OF ART TO THE DEPTH OF PAINTING



By coincidence, in the same year, I came across the huge catalogue "Art Works of The Song Dynasty" which got me instantly mesmerized. Before this encounter, although I had studied traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, I had never been exposed to such a sense of mystery and uncertainty. For the first time I discovered the name Ma Yuan. As I recall, back then I didn't have enough fundamental knowledge to digest the pictures in front of me or to categorize them within my understanding of painting. However, drawn in by such powerful curiosity and intimacy, I started to try copying these works. I have to admit though that my misconception of these ancient paintings definitely outweighed my comprehension. But that didn't stop me from appreciating those artworks. Therefore when my other classmates were copying the portrait paintings by masters from the west, I preferred painting after the ancient trees and distant mountains, which were full of mystique and beyond my understanding. Through the process, I didn't even use watercolors but acrylics and oil paint, which, at school, were instead indicated for the study of western painting. I was trying to comprehend, from the paintings, perspective, the connection of density, and the relationship between ink shades. Although it was a kind of experiment, now I would consider such behavior a mistaken understanding. In the same way, wasn't contemporary art in China a misunderstanding of the art in the west? Perhaps, in painting there is no such concept as "mistake" in as much as usually mistakes bring bigger possibilities, like in real life, where transformation and revolution take place due to peoples' mistakes. And who knows, maybe a few decades later, the capacity to make mistakes

becomes the only one advantage humans have against universal artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, I was deeply drawn to these ancient paintings, in which the presence of time, tangled with space, made it very challenging to interpret as a whole. Ever since then, besides carrying on my normal schoolwork, I would also continue copying these paintings in order to gain a better understanding of them. Almost in the same period, contemporary art in China witnessed a small climax of its own which didn't last for long. Although at school we continued our routine lessons of sketching, the topics discussed after school were all centered on China's contemporary art, which sometimes - if more visits had been paid to the library to read foreign magazines - could have extended to western contemporary art. However, the relationship between the former and the latter was unknown at that time and it was common knowledge that these were two parallel systems. It is fair to say that Impressionists were the first ones who enriched the spectrum of art by emboldening the use of colours in painting. The Fauvists, after them, attached more emotions to the two-dimensional nature of painting. Later on, cubism and futurism further explored notions of time and space in painting. The artists during that period, including Dali and Duchamp, all strived to keep changing the language of painting. There is no exaggeration in using the word "revolutionary" to describe the diverse nature and beliefs of art schools throughout western art history. Just as in the past there were many different art schools for painting, today art has become a very big tree from which many branches grow. Sculpture, photography, performance, painting and so on are all together, the results of the exploration and extension of the word "Art". If Art is viewed as the horizontal and vertical axes, then without doubt these different branches of art are a big contribution to extending its horizontal dimension. In the future art will have to dig further into its depth in order to expand the existing horizon. Therefore, I choose only one black colour when creating a piece of art as I want to see how the painting can unfold its narrative with the simplest material used. In the meantime, I am also exploring the sense of layers and richness in the color of black - the most complicated yet also the simplest colour. Black marks the start and the end of everything. During my observation of this colour, I came to understand that "progress" and "accuracy" is meaningless in a painting. The things that truly make one a master of painting could be "chance" and "coincidence". For instance, the painter Muxi (1210?-1269?) from the southern Song dynasty, used such precise brush strokes in his paintings that one could almost hear the rubbing sound between the brush and the paper. His painting wouldn't have achieved this "eternity" if he hadn't captured the full sensitivity of this contact.

### 3. THE RELIGIOSITY AND CEREMONY IN PAINTING



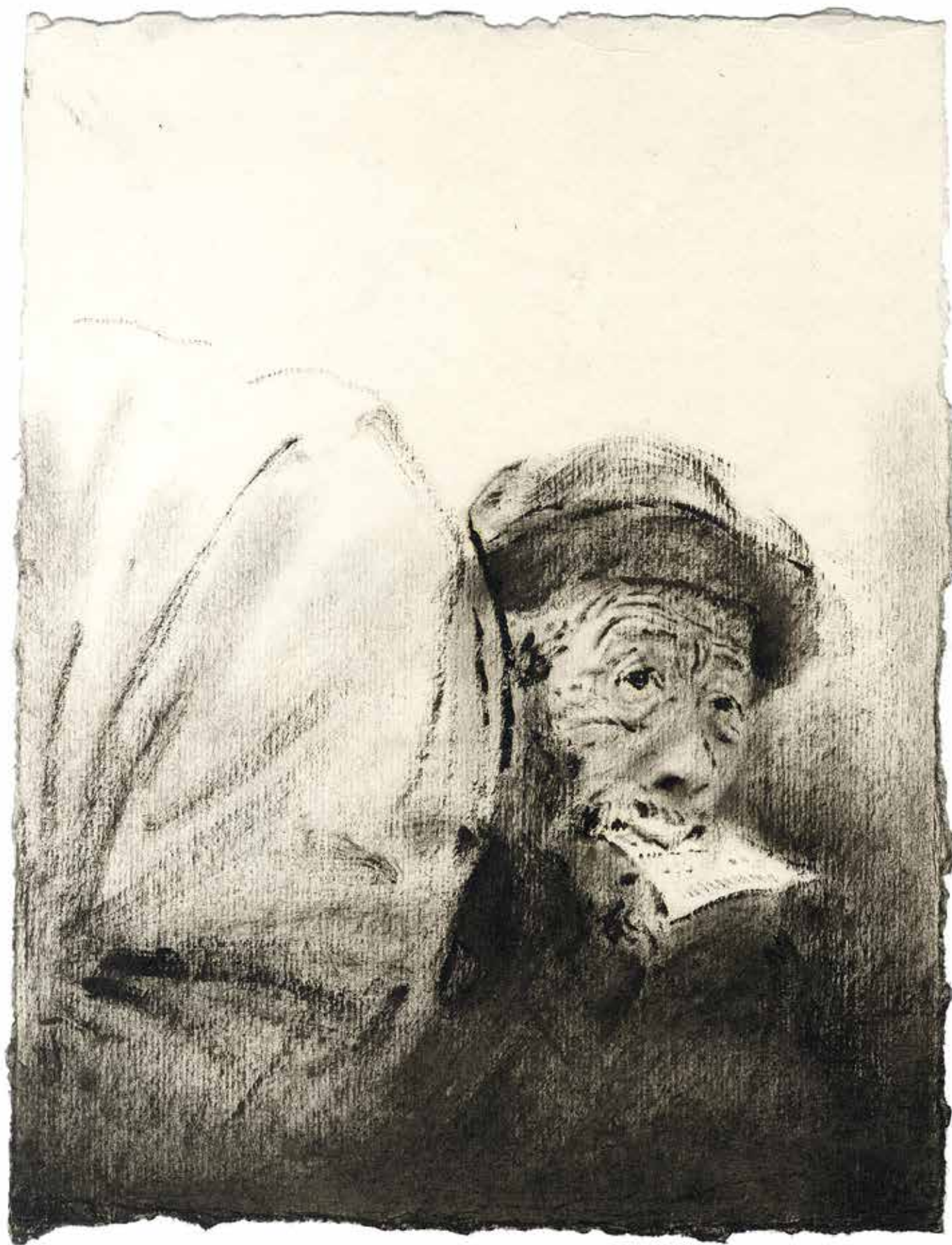
The people in my paintings are from my real life because it gives me an unexplainable sense of security to only draw people I've met and things I've experienced. This is an age in which humans have a very complicated relationship with religions. Regardless of the age, human beings need faith and religions since, no matter what, no one can explain and prove where the human race is from and where it will end. But in different times people believed in different religions. In the past, more people may have believed in Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, while now more people put their faith in freedom, money and science. I believe nothing is more surreal than the real world now. The reality often reminds me of Bruegel's (1525-1569) painting, where absurdity seemed to have become the most reasonable condition of the world. His painting allows us to gaze upon this ridiculous world and the unspeakable sense of mystery and ceremony in life, which doesn't only consist of control and being controlled, but also of doubts and praise. Although being an atheist myself, I believe that there is a power beyond human society and I wish to capture the connection between human beings and such power through my paintings. It's a complex relationship and it can mean a completely different thing to each person. The relationship between humans and the universe and between humans and their inner selves can be such a big topic that we won't comprehend it in our lifetime; alternatively it can be a trivial discussion that we come across. It is because of such mysteries that I have always been full of awe and respect towards the world. It brings me great pleasure to turn off all the lights and face the darkness whilst feeling the silence in my heart. Within that silence there is fear, curiosity and awe. This black silence is the relationship between human beings and the unknown force that I try to describe through my paintings.



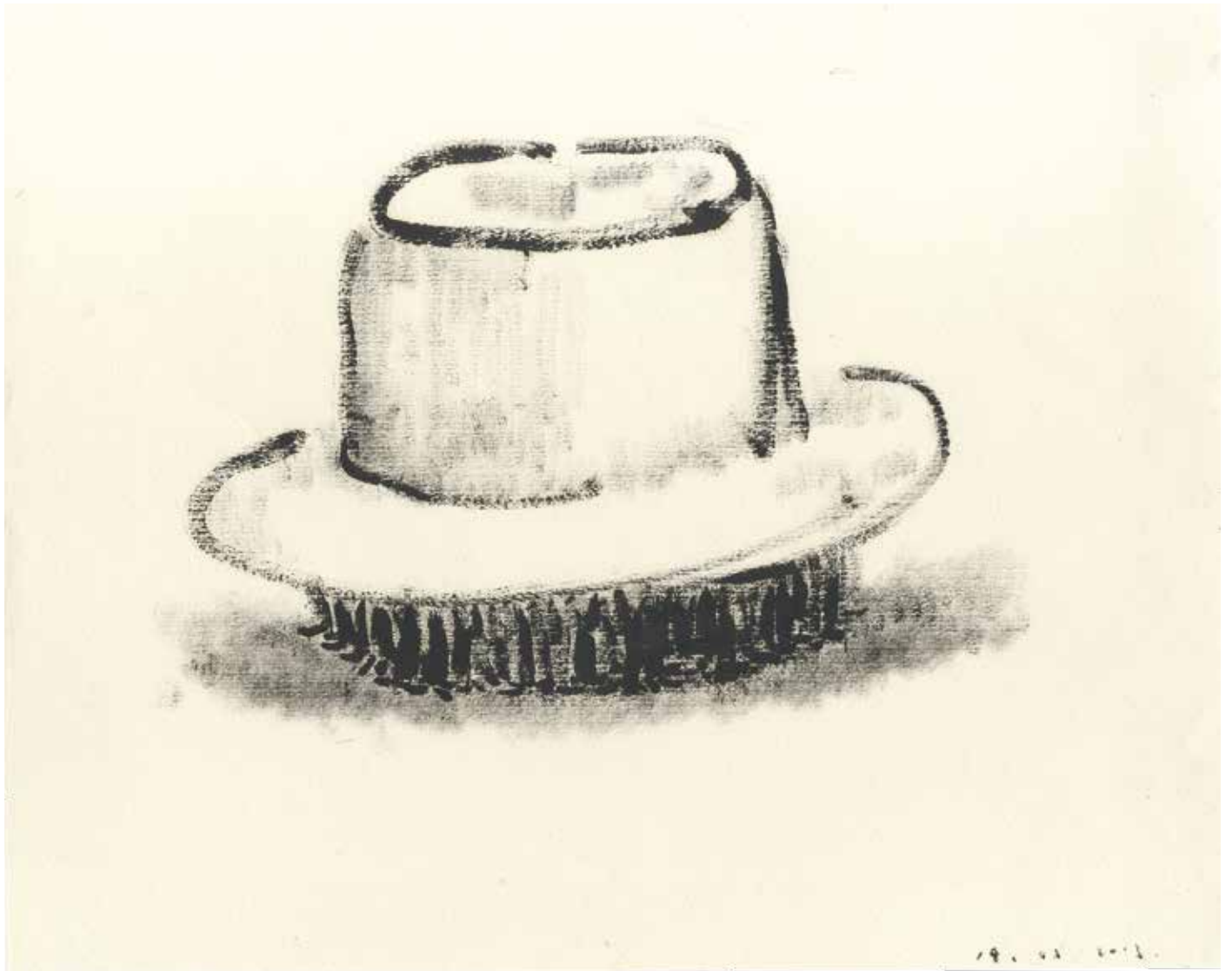












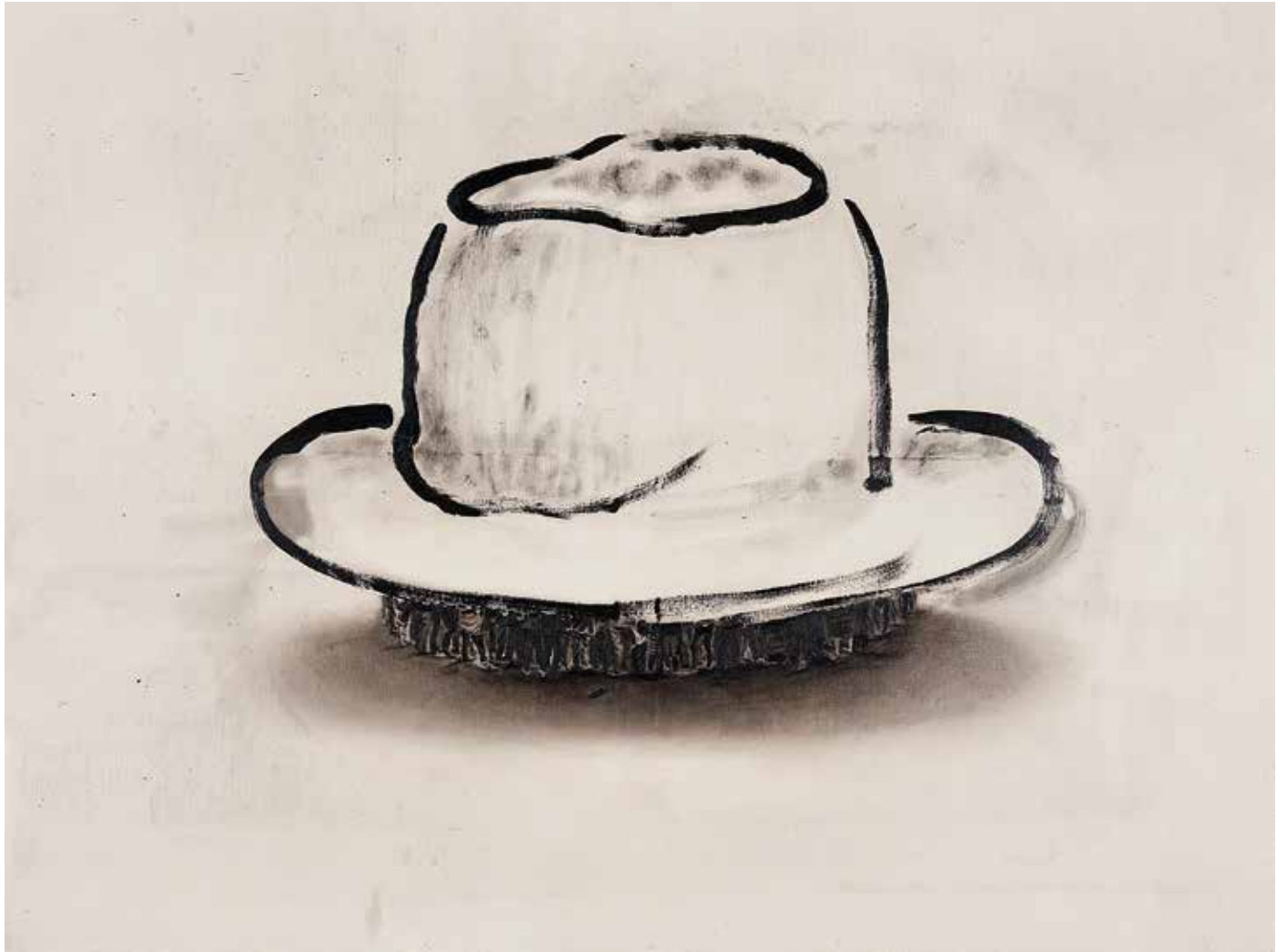










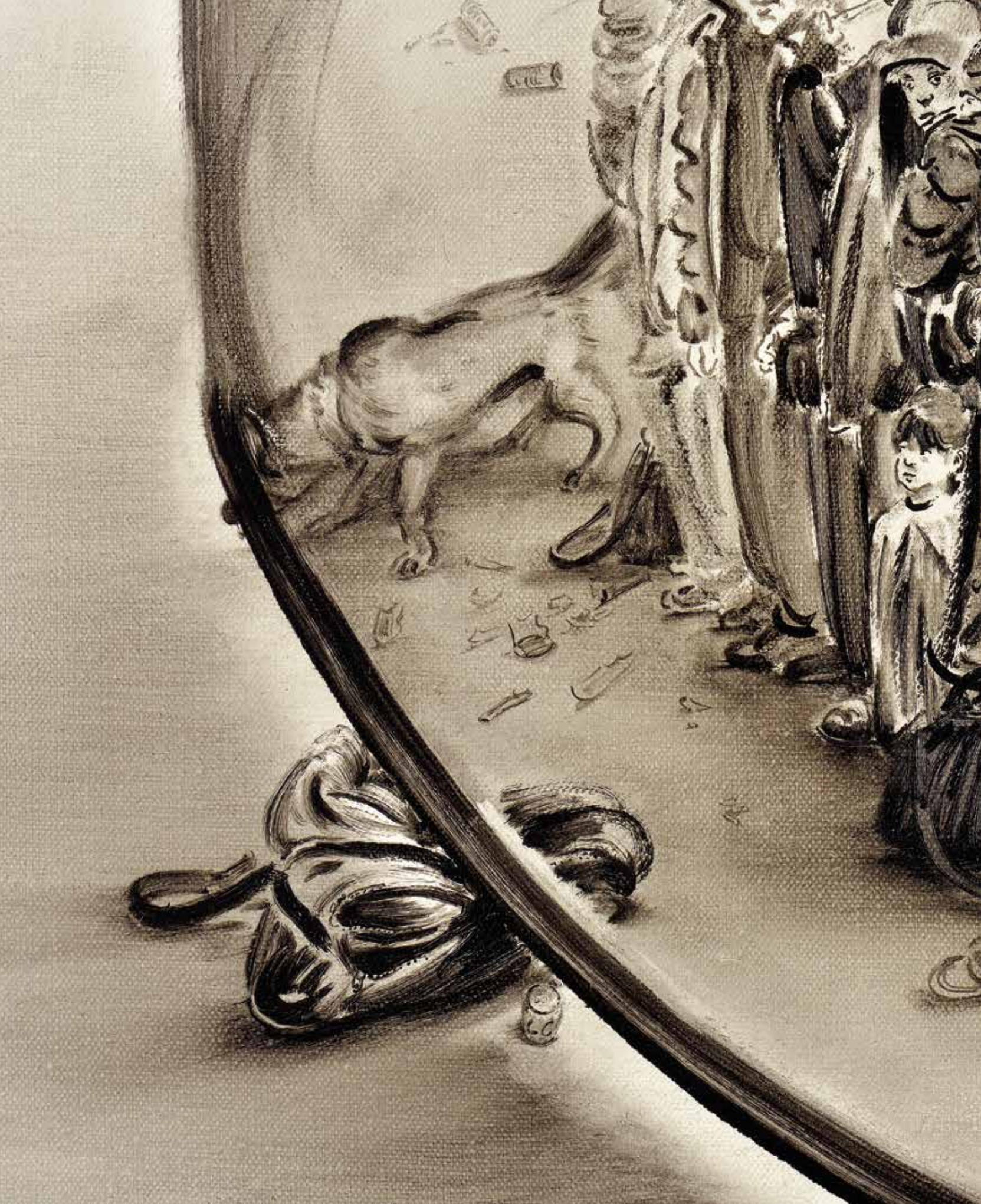










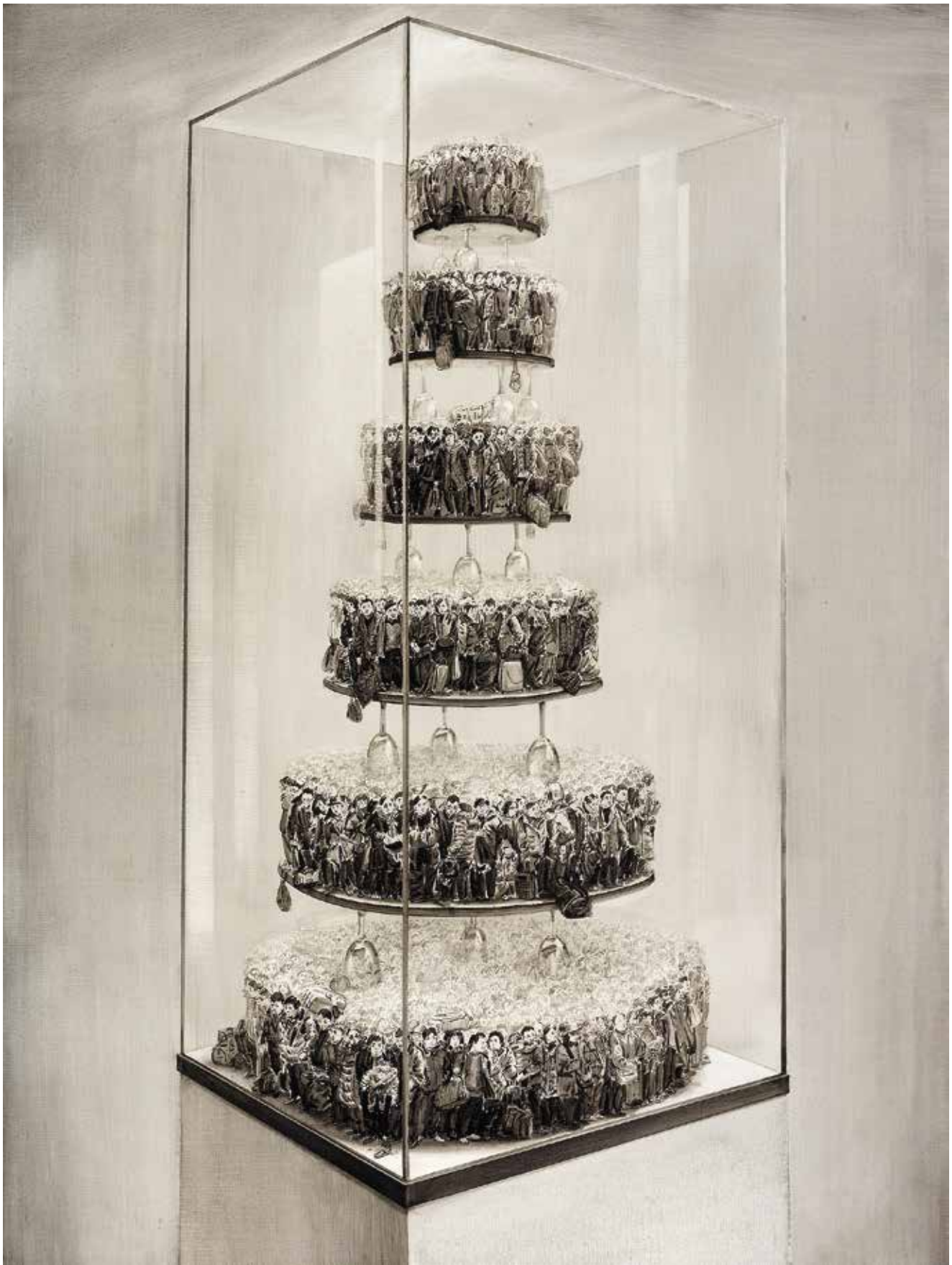






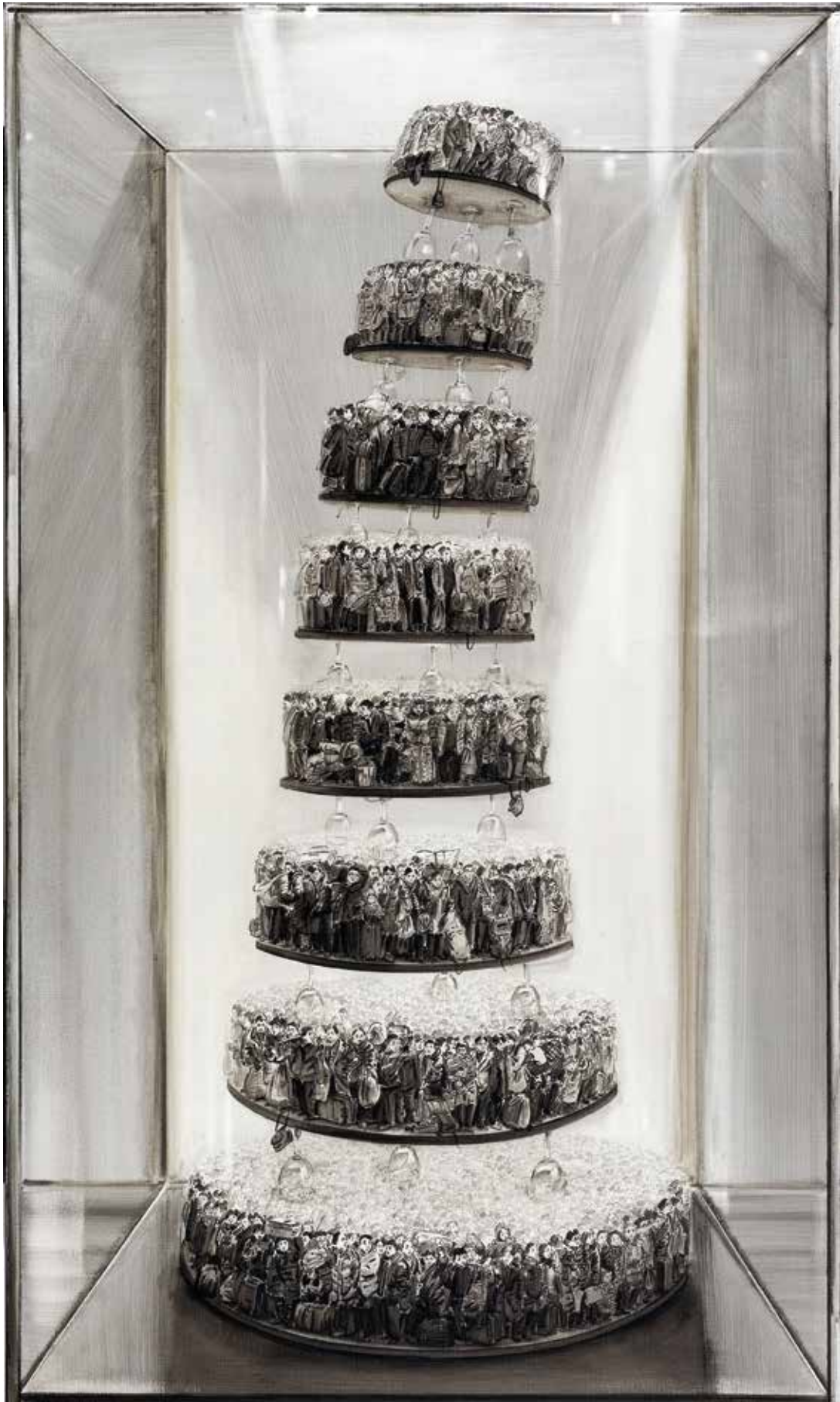




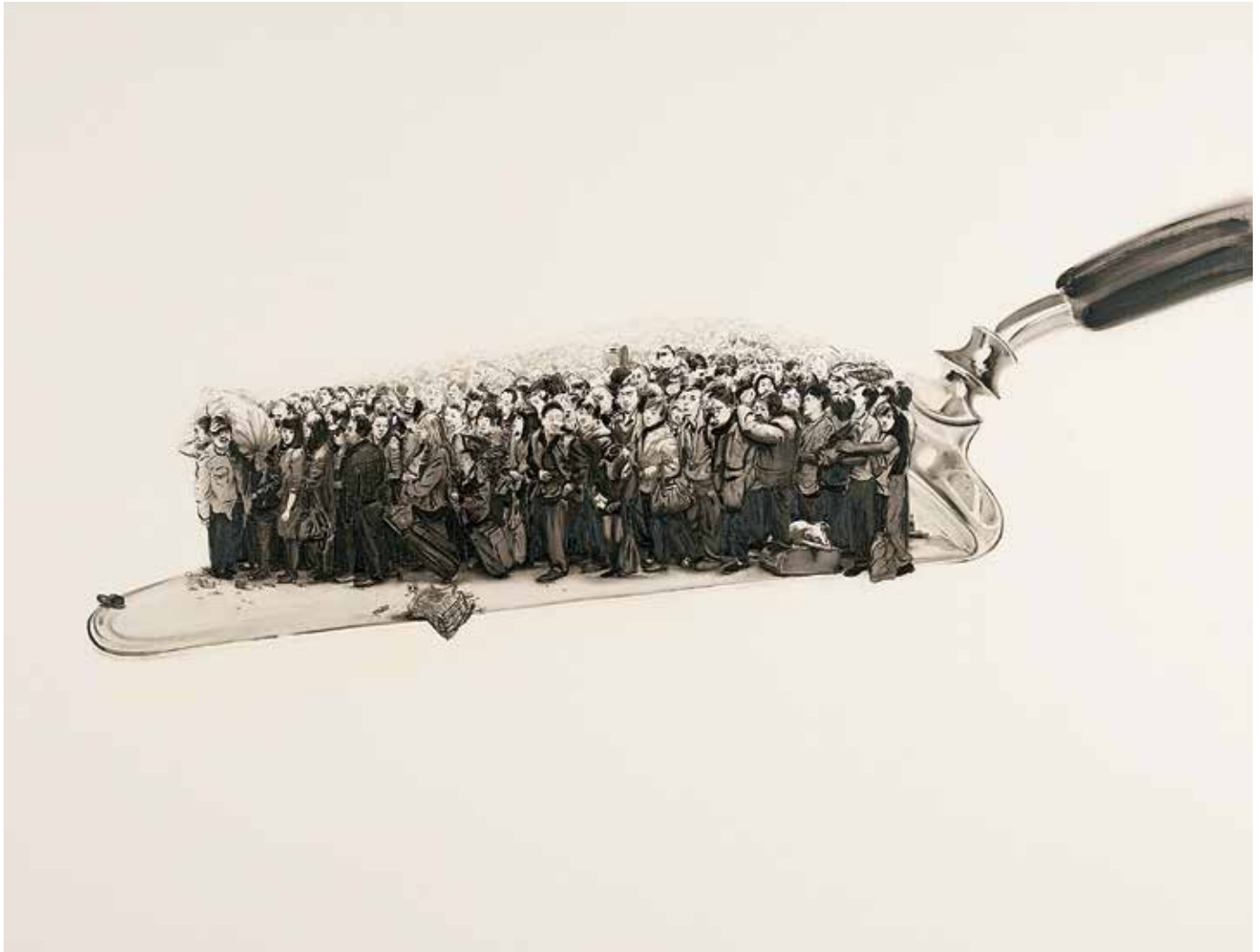


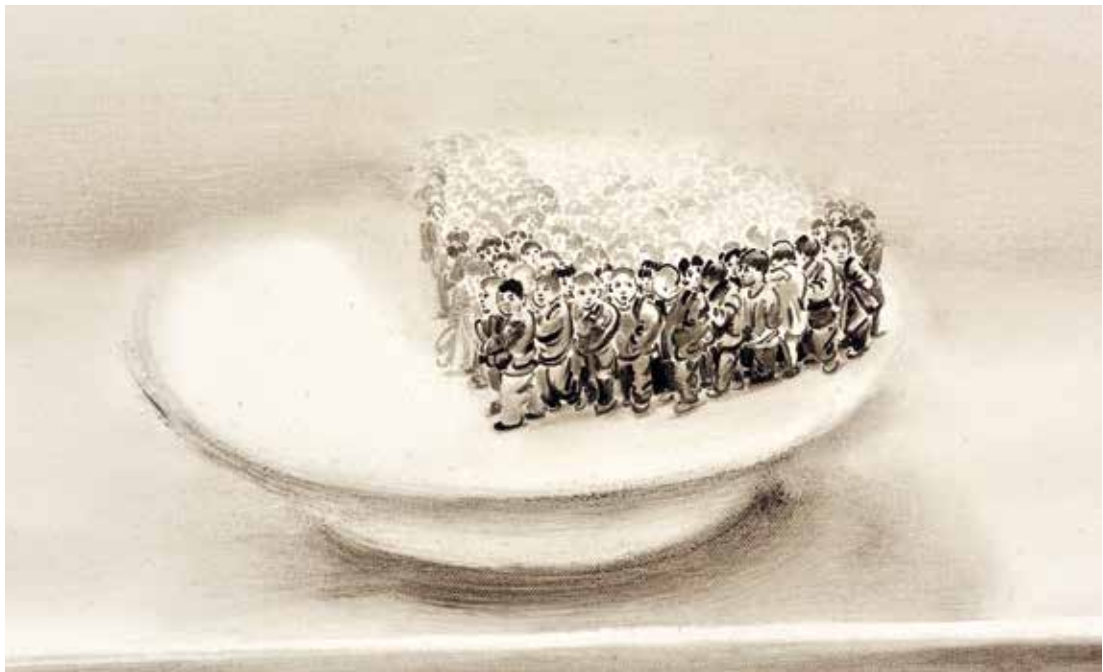


























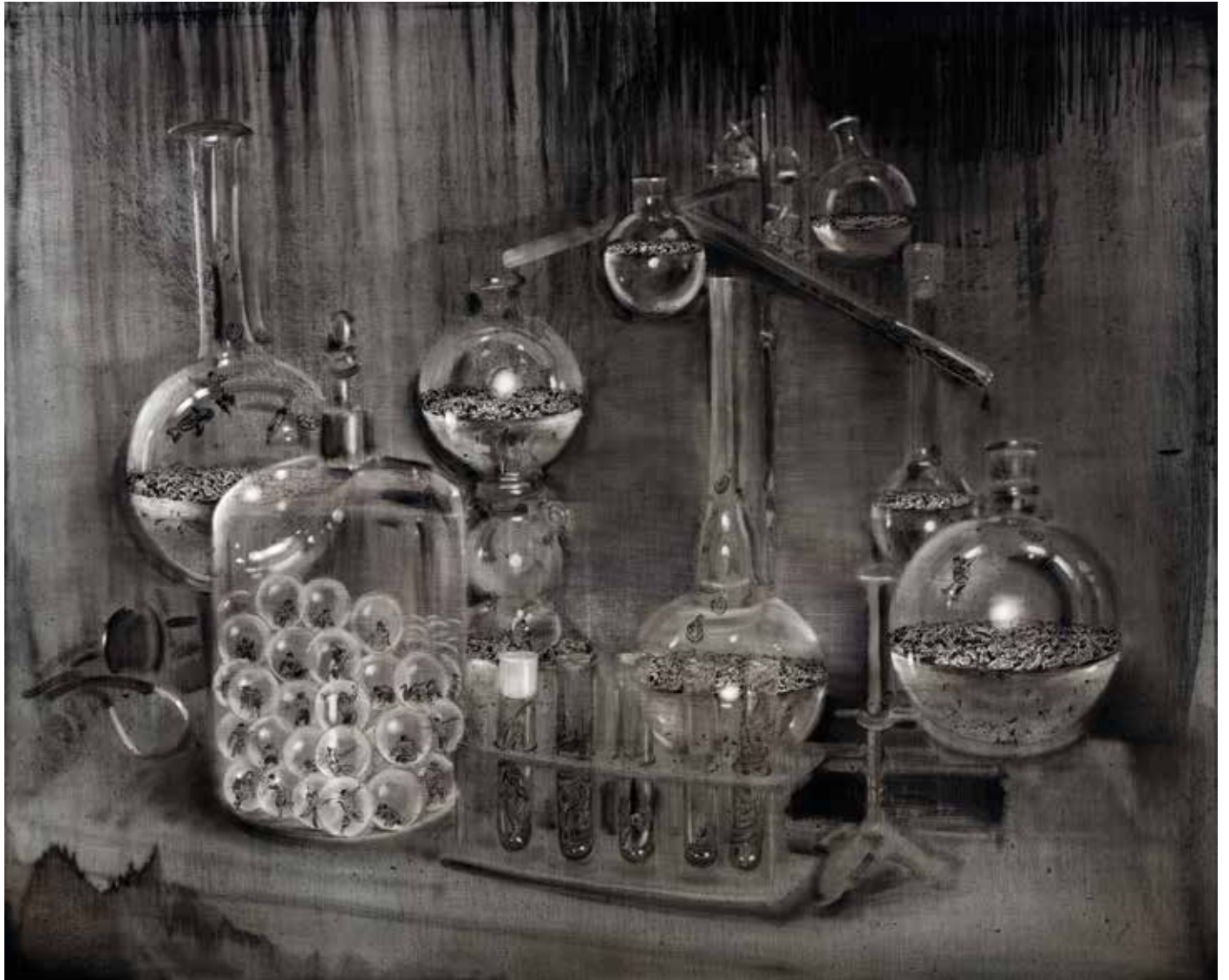






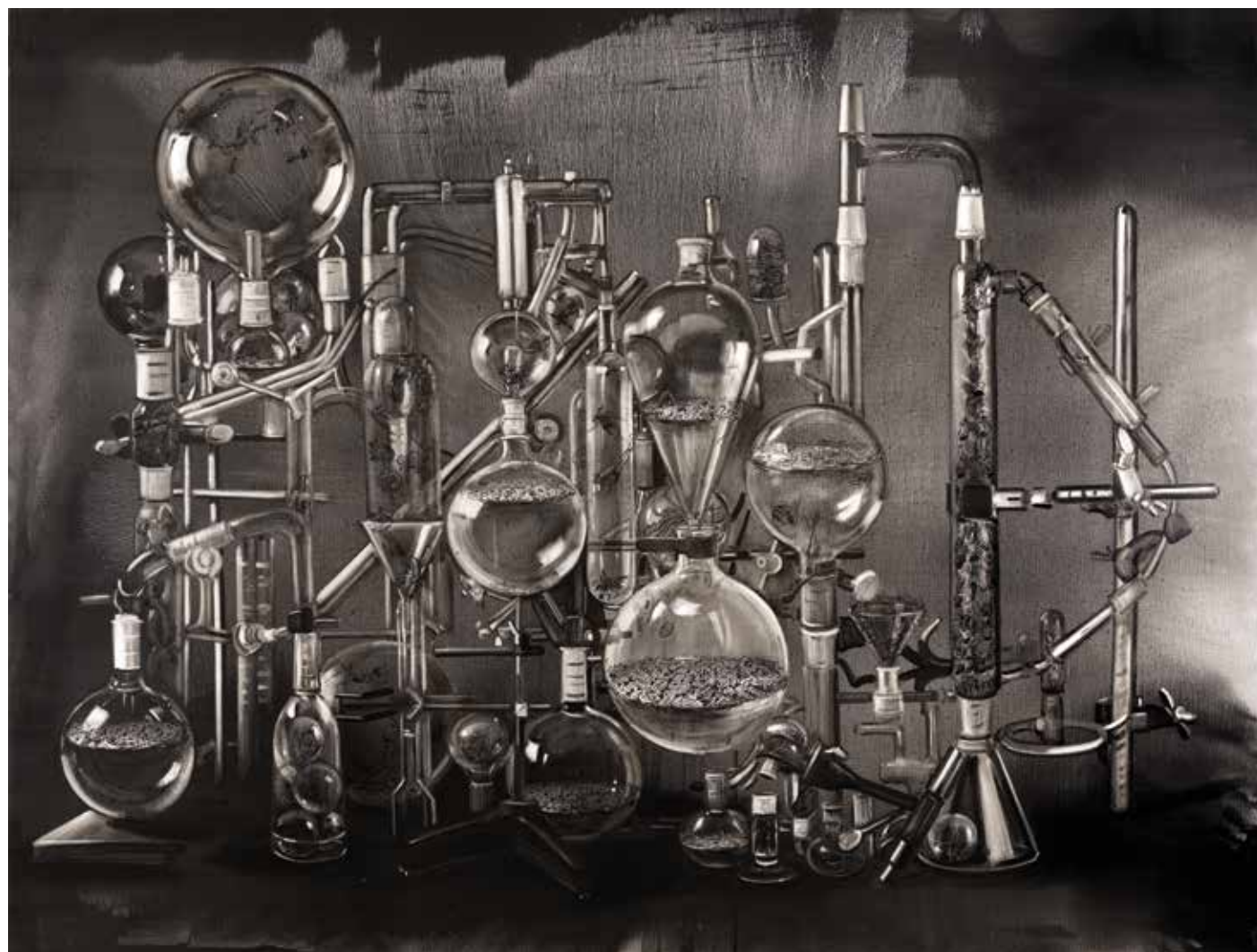
























## LU CHAO AND THE UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

All three of the religions which have dominated the history of Western civilisation are centred around an idea of a God who promises benevolence and forgiveness if believers carry out his commandments, his precepts and adopt a 'moral' way of life.

In the 1960's Jean Paul Sartre definitively put paid to the idea of a world ultimately controlled by a benevolent God and postulated the view that, in fact, man was completely alone in the universe. This far more pessimistic vision of existence was adopted by other philosophers and many artists across multiple disciplines. It also fitted into a world which was still reeling from the cumulative effect of two devastating world wars and the horrors of the Holocaust. This appeared to be an end point of a certain view regarding man's place in the world. A being at the mercy of everything and everyone with nothing but a surrounding emptiness to comfort him.

The vision Lu Chao puts forward in 'Black Silence' is actually a combination of the two philosophies. His world view insists that there can never be a definitive answer to either idea and, as a consequence, each of us will find his own interpretation to the great questions of what or who governs the universe, if anything.

In some paintings man is completely alone negotiating the mysteries of nature, whilst in others there is a God like presence who appears to be controlling our actions.

The essential difference in both visions is not whether there is or isn't a greater 'presence' in the cosmos but more how each of us reacts in totally different ways to the possibility of this idea. Whether the huge back hole is a manifestation of nature or the work of a greater entity, our individual reactions are the only concrete proofs

possible. This complex, open, narrative, was not immediately apparent in his earlier works. All through his life and in his so far brief, but extraordinarily dense career, Lu Chao has been concerned, above all, with power and how ordinary people are totally impotent in dealing with it. When he was a young child growing up in China, he would notice how, when he travelled on the buses on his way to school, he would be endlessly looking up at the adult world towering over him and realise how small and insignificant he actually was.

This experience fuelled the narrative of his 'cake' paintings. These works whether they featured a four or five tier wedding cake, a carefully cut slice of cake, a whole cake shop display, a cake covered by a glass dome etc., would always feature human beings standing crammed together as if they were preparing to leave for some unknown destination. Never would anyone be seen breaking rank as if in awe of the mysterious, Mephistophelean, hidden power which exerted its silent control over their destinies.

This passive vision of a desperate humanity with no apparent power to decide its fate has obvious parallels in the tragic destiny of the thousands of migrants flocking to Europe from Africa and parts of the Middle East in our contemporary world. Yet it is a condition which has been part of the story of humanity ever since people began gathering together to form human societies.

Chao's concern with the damning effect of terrestrial power on normal human beings carried a clear reference to his experiences growing up in Chinese society. However, after some years spent in England, which has become his second home, he now feels that what was true in China



is, for him, true also in our more apparently free Western world.

The 'cake' paintings, notwithstanding the underlying darkness of their theme, also contained a certain lightness both in the predominant use of white in the backgrounds and in the witty observation of some of the characters. Over the last couple of years however, Lu Chao's narrative has undergone a profound change. From looking at the effects of terrestrial power on human lives, he has begun examining the idea of whether an extra-terrestrial force exists and how we, as individuals respond to it. The tiny figures, often found in groups, inevitably recall the world Gulliver discovers when he awakes and finds himself tied to the ground, unable to move and surrounded by hundreds of tiny Lilliputians. The difference is that Lu Chao's equally small people are faced by the unknown and the unseen. They are confronted with a massive black hole leading to almost certain oblivion ; an oppressively impenetrable black ball balanced menacingly over their heads; or they are perilously suspended on a wafer-thin wire. The large hands manoeuvring the wires on which tiny human beings are trying to balance themselves feel like that of a puppet master. The image recalls God's creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, yet that vision was of a benevolent, loving God, giving Man the gift of life whereas

Chao's 'God', if he actually exists, is neither benevolent nor malevolent.

Yet, even in the increased drama of these recent paintings, he has not lost his lightness of touch. The many tiny characters which inhabit these paintings are involved in a multitude of actions from openly expressed fear, to characters dancing in a circle or doing athletic somersaults in open defiance of any danger.

This though, is not his only narrative. Alongside the works mentioned above, he has also consistently made paintings where his



extraordinary ability as a caricaturist has been given full rein. His human heads inhabit forests, museums and art fairs amongst various other subjects. They make up antique columns, hang from branches, grow from the ground and make up all the art at the art fair. A wide gamut of physical features differentiates each of them illustrating the artist's unique ability at acute observation. They may vary in size yet there is an overriding sense of democracy underlying every character. No head is given special importance. Each is drawn to perfection and with an extraordinary economy of gesture. The tone has become lighter, joyful and life affirming.

Although until now I have concentrated on the richness of the artist's narrative, his concern with form has always been foremost in his mind. Brought up in the tradition of ancient Chinese ink painting, his mission has been to take inspiration from the ancient masters and reinvent, in a contemporary way, the language they made so renowned. He has a deep knowledge of the ancient art of his country and the extraordinary economy of those masters' brush strokes is a clear inspiration for the way he works.

Moreover, he paints exclusively in black and white and with each successive picture he is consciously pushing new ways of broadening his abilities with his chosen language. Although his earlier works, notwithstanding their brilliant inventiveness and observation, used a white dominated tone in their balance of black and white, this new body of paintings has radically changed that. Dominated by an increasingly daring use of black, Lu Chao has created a 'Gesamtwerk' where the content and

the form go hand in hand, each reinforcing the other to create a 'total' art work. The white fights with the black, on occasions being engulfed by it, thereby reflecting the very different reactions of his characters to the dramatic reality they are confronted with. Many of the paintings in our exhibition are a tour - de - force in what he is able to achieve with his extraordinary use of black. It is not just a knowledge of the ancient art of his country with which Chao is familiar but he has absorbed a great deal of the great western masters as well. His voracious appetite is not, however, limited to art history but also to our contemporary world. Yet no contemporary fashion or trend veers him even slightly away from his chosen path.

Lu Chao is an artist with an intensely moving and highly dramatic story to tell us about our world today. Even more importantly, his paintings put each of us in the role of part creator because he leaves us the space to enter into his world and create our own interpretation of the fundamental questions of how we treat our fellow man, but also how we need to negotiate the many minefields governing power, both known and unknown.















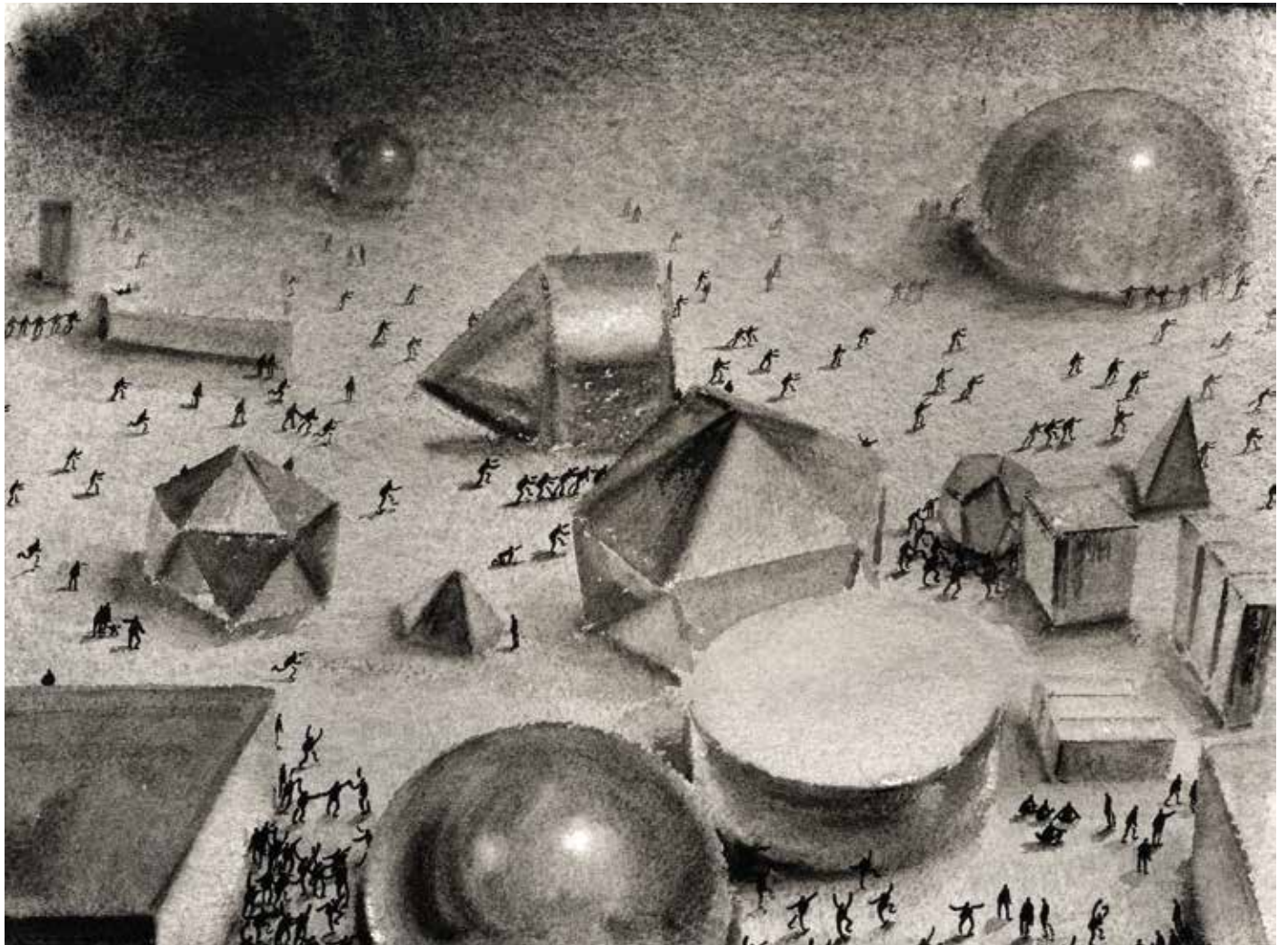






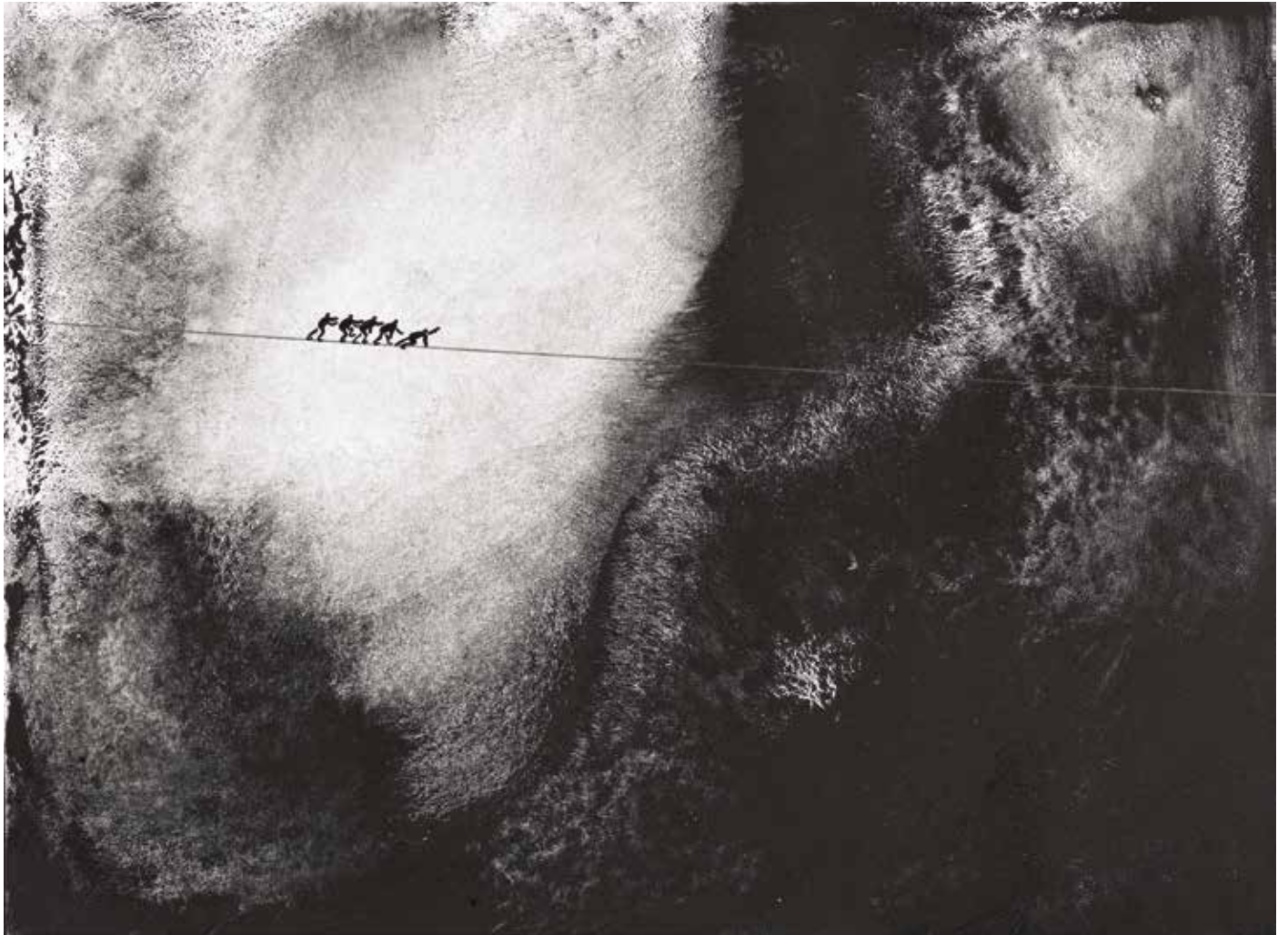


































































































## LU CHAO: WANDERING IN THE STRANGE

*"...the image is not a matter of beauty. Rather, it is a matter of a certain tension in the look. An image draws the look, draws it in. This tension of the image is time. In time, I come before what is coming; I come right up to a thing that comes up to itself. I come, in other words, right up to the coming of the thing. What we call an "artist's work" is nothing other than the organisation of this experience."*

Jean-Luc Nancy Multiple Arts P215

Imagine a meeting point or visual conference consisting of Chinese Classical painting, Existential philosophy, Japanese Manga comics, stage settings for the plays of Samuel Beckett, Goya's small ink studies, the drawings of Philip Guston and you might grasp the visual and conceptual trajectory of Chao Lu's paintings.

On the level of the deepest abstraction the work appears to probe the difference between conceptions of emptiness and nothingness. One-moment things are captured with an electric like short hand; the next visual attention slows in a series of stop-starting motions captured within a visual field. It is as though the image itself is being jerked into its reality as a focus of comprehension. We are being lead into a world or a series of world in which panic and serenity are interchangeable. A theatre of the absurd still has a logic that imposes an order within its unfolding and as such it attempts to provoke a moral impulse but these paintings are bereft of logic capable of giving rise to such provocation. Instead we might have to discover if these depictions are alien and thus remote, or intimate and close. This act of having to take measure, first of space and then of image will be the outcome of moral orientation or its lack. In simple terms it is hard to know where we might be in relation to the unfolding moments for this brings us close to the question of having a secure ground or not. Do we simply shuffle backwards and forwards, laugh one moment and grimace the next? This indecision

can extend indefinitely but we are not being granted a space next to the indefinite and this implies the immanent proximity to being pressed into decision.

"When I was nine I took the No217 bus to school every day. My school was far from home and sometimes I waited for the No217 bus for half an hour because I could not get on, as the buses were always full of people. Sometimes I could not get down the bus because adults surrounded me and they were too tall to see me. It was as if I was always on the edge of disappearing. At the time I was in Grade 3 in a primary school and I liked drawing but my teacher said I should study mathematics and English in order to get a job in the future. However I did not agree with her because I thought that her advice meant disappearing in another way. Drawing was a resistance to this fate although I never thought like this at the time."<sup>1</sup>

Imagine that if behind every image is knowledge of the world suffering from the dull inevitability of the various modes of accumulation; wealth, power, serialized lives, poverty, boredom, images and indifference. Guy Debord called this the 'spectacle'<sup>2</sup> but does such a concept still have the critical edge to illuminate the mechanisms of its relentless progress. There are several forms of 'long march' being spliced together in these paintings, with each of the marches containing their histories into one another through switching remembering and forgetting. Rather than mounting a mode of historical critique, this work propels itself far from such a coastline of exact moments and takes us instead into a nether

1 Chao Lu Notebooks... quotes from these notebooks are spaced between the entire commentary.

2 Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle Detroit 1977  
"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." Debord's description of the spectacle comes from a bleak assessment not only of consumer society but a condemnation of the infiltration of images into every facet of social life. It is the idea of the total occupation of social life by the commodity that is the characteristic starting point for the understanding of the spectacle.



world emptied of the forces that are mounted into the vector we have traditionally described as history. In the past this notion of a nether world would evoke the space of myth but this is not mythic space. It is a space not of recollection but oblivion instead. We have a world or worlds sinking back and weighted by all the accumulations that have stretched out within the serialization of life. Rather than a search for the origin of the world we have a stage of its ending in extinction, the paradox of what is the future haunting the present.

"When I grew up, I learned that China contained 1,400,000,000 people. It is extremely stressful to do anything in China because so many people want to do the same thing at the same time. I am used to being in crowds and part of being in crowds is the sensation of being lost within them."

At the heart of existential philosophy is the belief developed by Martin Heidegger that the human being is not a thing but a peculiar kind of nothingness in which things can present themselves in order to "be." Identities are invented in order to cover over this groundlessness. Anxiety invariably prevails as a mood that reveals this condition of nothingness lying at the heart of existence. Within the Buddhist tradition all things arise moment to moment without causation and hence from emptiness (*sunyata*). Everything appears out of emptiness and goes back into this condition thus: "Emptiness does not fail to illuminate and illumination does not fail to empty."<sup>3</sup> In everyday speech we tend to conflate emptiness and nothingness but they are quite different things. It is the process of opening out the nature of this difference that forms the secret heart of this project.

"One morning in 2010 I took the tube to college and as I looked downwards towards the second floor of the station I was shocked by all the crowds waiting to get into the platform. I had the feeling that everyone looked the same and then I was overwhelmed by the sense that what I was seeing were not real people at

all. What I saw instead was only black dots squirming together."

In the Western political tradition Giorgio Agamben<sup>4</sup> argues that life is split into two main categories, 'zoe' or the biological fact of having life and 'bios' or the political life. This split leads in turn to the production of 'bare life' that is the in-between of these two categories. When conditions such as states of exception start to occur then invariably laws to protect individuals are suspended creating a 'threshold space' in which the rule of exception is indistinguishable from the rule of law. Although Agamben utilizes the figure of the refugee and prisoners in the Camps in order to work through the implications of the way that spaces of exception regulate the relationship between biological and political life, these paintings depict spaces in which all ethical measure has been stripped away as opposed to being purely spaces of exception. This is not just a post-political condition rather a fusion of political nihilism and existential disaster in the process of mutation.

"When I see thousands of people together there is the sense that I am not really seeing anyway. Each face disappears into a blur of impressions but when I observe an individual face we not only notice exact details but also imagine all kinds of narratives that inform such an appearance. Each face expands and contracts according to what we see, what we remember and what we imagine. The face is the most complex surface that we encounter. It appears to reveal and conceal without a gap appearing between these two moments."

This is the graveyard of the spectacle with all the signs of mass culture with all its lurid colours and images bleached out. The eye has no light relief and this is reinforced by the monochromatic surfaces of the paintings. Cracks might start to appear in many of the scenes depicted opening out a void beneath appearances and at times it is difficult to know if the occurrences recorded are either comic or tragic. Subjects appear on the one side as atomic

3 See Fung Yu-Lan The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy Google Books P153

4 Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life Stanford 1998

like entities, masks or even short hand caricatures all bereft of autonomous signs of subjectivity. There are signs of theatre but is removed from the respective scenes are the signs of speech acts. If it is a theatre, it is mute theatre as there is no agency seemingly capable of the act of speech. A half consciousness of forgetting pervades or even drifts across space. Consciousness is not only marked by this condition, it has dissolved into it. The idea of the spectacle is based upon a principle of reality in which images multiply in ways that suffocate subjective encounter. Within this schema, the world is replicated under the sign of the ever new and with this a corresponding loss of reflection and memory being implied. This leads to an image of the world filled by a super abundance of appearance but emptied or drained of essential depth. Subjects are then transformed into a vast serialised network unable to record any form of difference, let alone manifest resistance. Boredom in turn seeps into all relationship and becomes the medium of a special form of unity that in earlier critiques was termed reification<sup>5</sup>. Abstraction and reification form an unyielding bond yet rather than attempting to formulate a critique of the spectacle, these paintings enact the impossibility of release. It is not the treadmill of the world being turned over into more and more obscure modes of refining the power of the spectacle but its excess transmuted into void. Our eyes wander galleries becoming labyrinth, join forlorn huddles of bodies, scan over atomised beings scattering this and that way, grids filled with faces that form patterns, views of clusters drawn together in panic, discrete things suddenly manifesting in gigantic scale until we are entangled in all the various knots of a fading reality principle. Something looks back but we cannot see ourselves seeing. We are caught in a network of blind spots.

"Empty does not mean or stand for nothing. Rather it means everything but we cannot see it."

5 For a commentary on the concept of reification see Georg Lukacs History and Class Consciousness MIT 1972

The persistent employment of the mask as a device relates to the impossibility of a face standing for its own reflected truth. It is not so much the idea that the mask serves to disguise an essential persona but rather it stands in the place of the disintegration of substance. Connected to this is the sense that there is no plot or even nothing to act out, for this would imply narrative accumulation or resolution.

Rather than a drama we are left to drift within a world that has become detached from itself. Is this all a bad dream in which we are being asked to awake? Are we being paced on the edge of figures that are ciphers of unfigurable desires?

Freud advanced the idea of dreams as the "inability to express" which is different from the Romantic conception of the unfigurable. We are not receptive of works of art in the same way the view the visual images of dreams. The former are tangible the latter transient. With the vision of the work of art, "vision is rent between seeing and looking and the image is rent between representing and self-presenting: within this there is something which cannot be grasped". Georges Didi-Huberman advances the idea that "the visual event of the painting happens only starting from this rend<sup>6</sup> that, before us, separates what is represented as remembered from everything that presents itself as forgotten." In opening to the dimension of the visual, it is necessary "to close our eyes before the image," to be stripped bare in 'not-knowledge'. Thus the vanishing point of knowledge is 'not-knowledge.'

"I like Mu Xi's work because the brush marks are very open. It is as though we are placed in close proximity to the accidental. This is one of the most beautiful things in this world because it is beyond the capabilities of human design. It simply releases a force or exceeds itself."

6 'Georges Didi-Huberman Confronting Images Penn State 2005 The rend functions in dreams as a motor force between desire and constraint but in doing so opens out the figure. Didi-Huberman develops an understanding of the image of the figuring of the figure. The image is a paradox, acting as a constraint that holds to a dilemma between knowing and seeing.



In 'Maurice Blanchot The Refusal of Philosophy' Gerald Bruns states that: "Thinking with respect to philosophy is evidently on the side of impossibility: that is, thinking, like poetry, can be thought of as a refusal of philosophy."<sup>7</sup> This notion derives from Heidegger who talked about thinking wandering "in the strange" and as such does not bring knowledge or endow us with the power to act because within thinking, as indeed in art, nothing holds still and as such is the maintenance of an excessive opening. Art and thinking find their condition in their response to strangeness (or infinity) and this manifests in the form of interruption or separation. Blanchot called interruption "the relation of the third kind" because places things outside every relation, a space without a place, the 'il y a'<sup>8</sup>. These paintings precisely record this sense of space without place and this in turn is linked to the vertigo of the imagination. We might imagine a character wandering this way and that, peering into various scenes along such a journey. All optical certainty has gone array in this journey and falling into confusion as if this character has remember in the twilight of the world with all the different optics distorted by technological exaggeration. Cinematic widescreen is thus conflated with the intimacies of close up encounter (face to face) and then these close ups followed by scanning that restores distance. Next blurry images drawn from dream space are linked to the eruption of the active imagination in a series of shifts that defy visual logic or comprehension. This is not so much connected to the process of fragmenting space and image in order to grasp a deeper totality but something closer to a world breaking down or descending into a series of fragments relating to a vast array of switching mechanisms. This is propelled by an imaginative desire to leave behind the twentieth century with its dream of mass

society. In turn the invisible figure of desire is itself being traced into the respective scenes. We are being given over to the 'crack up' of this desire or dream, step-by-step episodes which capture the slow motion view of its future in the making as disintegration.

"Whenever I stand at a very high point and overlook people walking in different directions I just cannot believe that it is an image of the real world. I am interested in this experience of a threshold where uncertainty overtakes our perceptual apparatus and we are no longer certain about what we are seeing."

In his book 'The Writing of the Disaster'<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot states that: "The disaster is related to forgetfulness- forgetfulness without memory..." (WD3) furthermore 'We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future- that which is yet to come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future to which to think it.'" (WD1) In part the disaster is a form of interruption preventing the transition of past into future, because nothing can follow from it because it is impossible, a limit experience or a draining of subjective apprehension that "turns us into no one." As impossibility there is nothing that takes place beyond it, it leads to no alternative, as is the case with the dialectic, rather it is survival without a different future. This presentation of the disaster all points towards a complex understanding of temporality that resists modernist templates. Can we have an artwork that presents a process of arrival that will never be able too take place? This is not so much the disordering of temporality but its passage beyond representational schema that secures exact relationship through which a perspective of its knowledge can be composed.

9 Maurice Blanchot The Writing of the Disaster Nebraska 1986

7 Gerald L. Bruns, Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy John Hopkins 1997 P105

8 This is a term employed by both Levinas and Blanchot. In 'The Writing of the Disaster' Blanchot states: "The il y a is not anything, but neither is it nothing: it is being from which everything has been withdrawn: being without substance and without light." (P59) It relates to a state that is interminable like insomnia in which the arrival of the day appears impossible.

"We always desire to find a form in order to frame or name everything in the universe but it does not mean that there should be a form as an outcome of this process of desire."

In 'Memories of a Dog,'<sup>10</sup> the artist Daido Moriyama captures the existential condition of a society dominated by a conception of temporality informed by a nihilistic conception of the world. It is a view that opens out a perspective that is governed by serialized repetition of the same: "People live the immediate present. If one has an instant of awareness of being alive, it is nothing but the immediate present. We no longer have any feel for the past we have lived. When people realize that the time they supposedly lived through actually has no substance and that there are no means of self-verification, they tend to be seized with fear and an unspeakable apprehension about the excessive uncertainty of it all. In the end it leads to awareness that even living in the present moment is ambiguous. Because we are living our everyday lives does not mean that we are constantly aware of being alive, nor does it mean we have a definite tomorrow. In the end human existence has essentially nothing to rely on. The scenes I am certain I saw some thirty years ago could just be something that I am convinced that I saw in my own memory, and it is possible they were imaginary scenes to start with. With a completely transformed landscape before me, I am suddenly aware of how forsaken my life is, and how it is not possible to verify to anyone else the scenes that I once saw."

"What is behind the fog? I am looking closely at a painting of Ma Yuan trying to see what evades me. What is most distant or remote set my desire in motion. I want to see but I cannot see. This is when desire starts. I start to think that desire is hidden behind the fog."

There are a series of black panels mounted in antique European frames. The surface is composed out of a

thick layer of resin that create a reflective surface. It is as though mirror and void are conflated into a single condensation of a threshold experience. I am not certain if they form an interruption to the image or if they stand as an indication of the purest state of the image, an image of a black hole as opposed to an abstraction of the absolute

"Infinity is something we may wish to portray or represent but it evades us because we are simply finite beings and thus draw our measure from this realm. We might have the desire to frame or represent everything in the world and experience such desire as infinity but this is simply illusory. Infinity is partly the feeling that there is always something that exceeds us; that is untouchable and unseeable."

Art is outside of the world and yet this remoteness might remind us of a reserve found in the heart of interiority. Art threatens to end because it stages conditions that remind us of this possibility but then this is the source of its vitality. Art exceeds itself at this threshold.

Jonathan mile

Tutor Critical & Historical Studies painting  
(research)

10 Moriyama, Daido *Memories of a Dog* Nazraeli Press 2004 P122





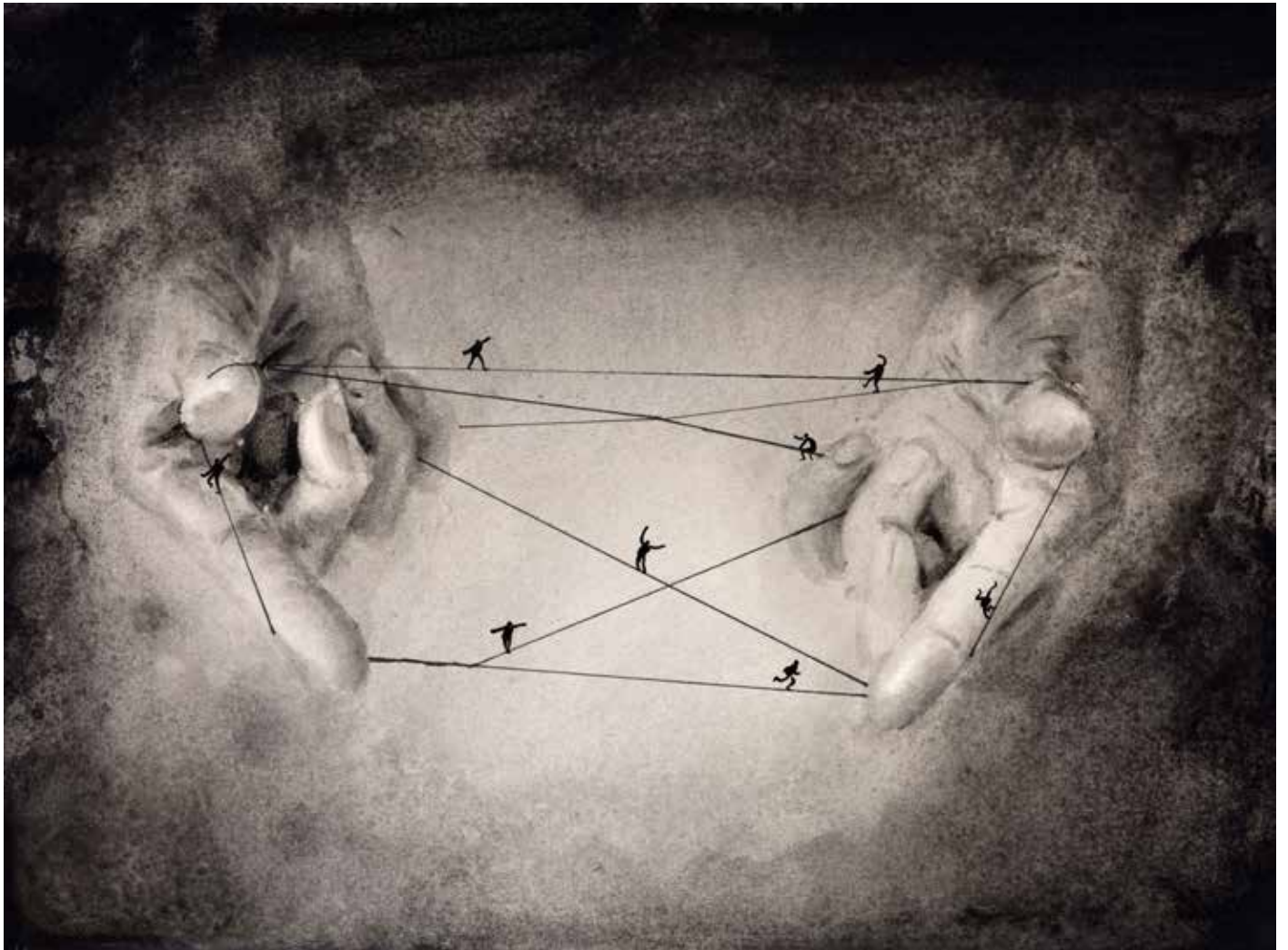


















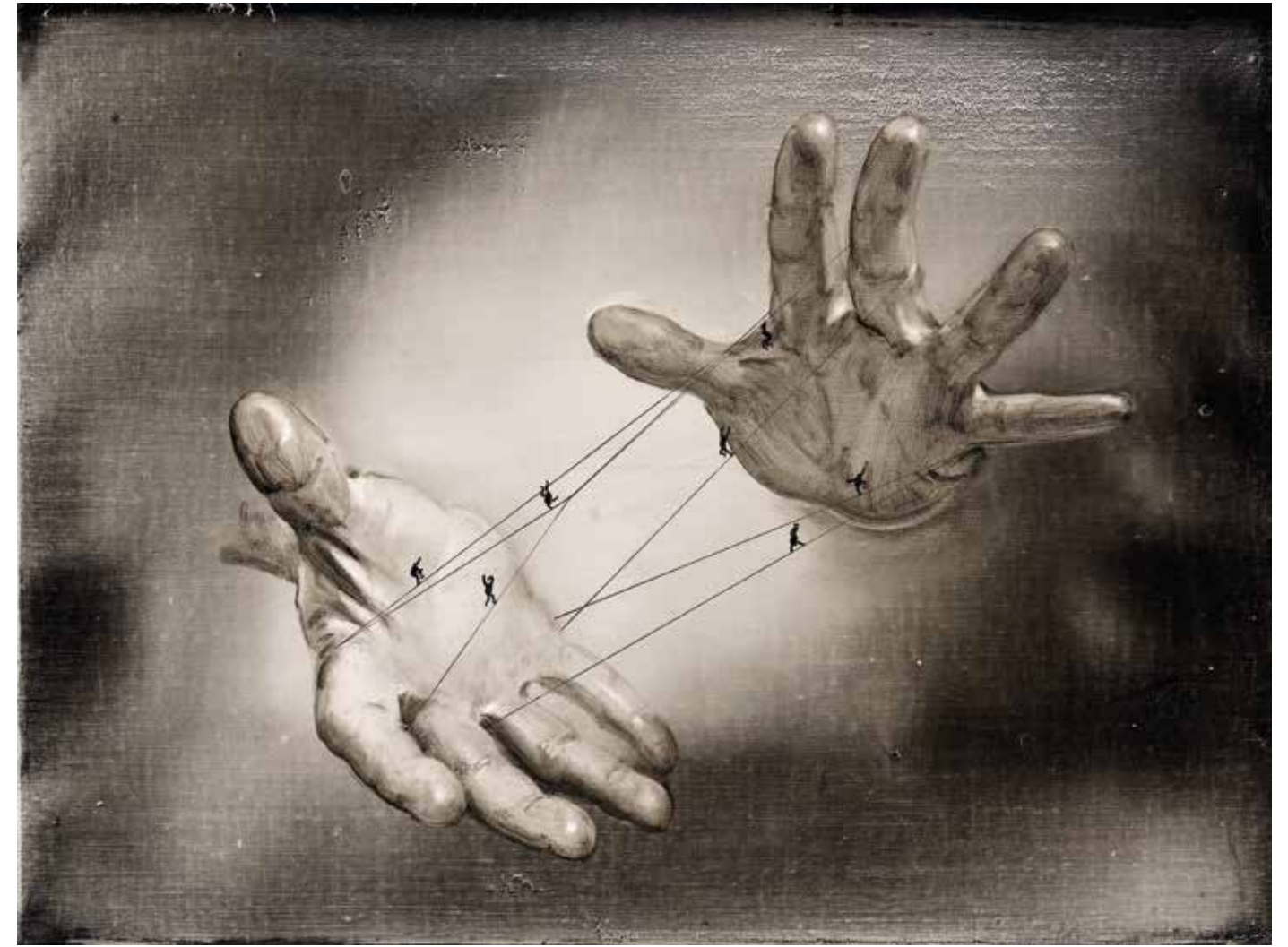






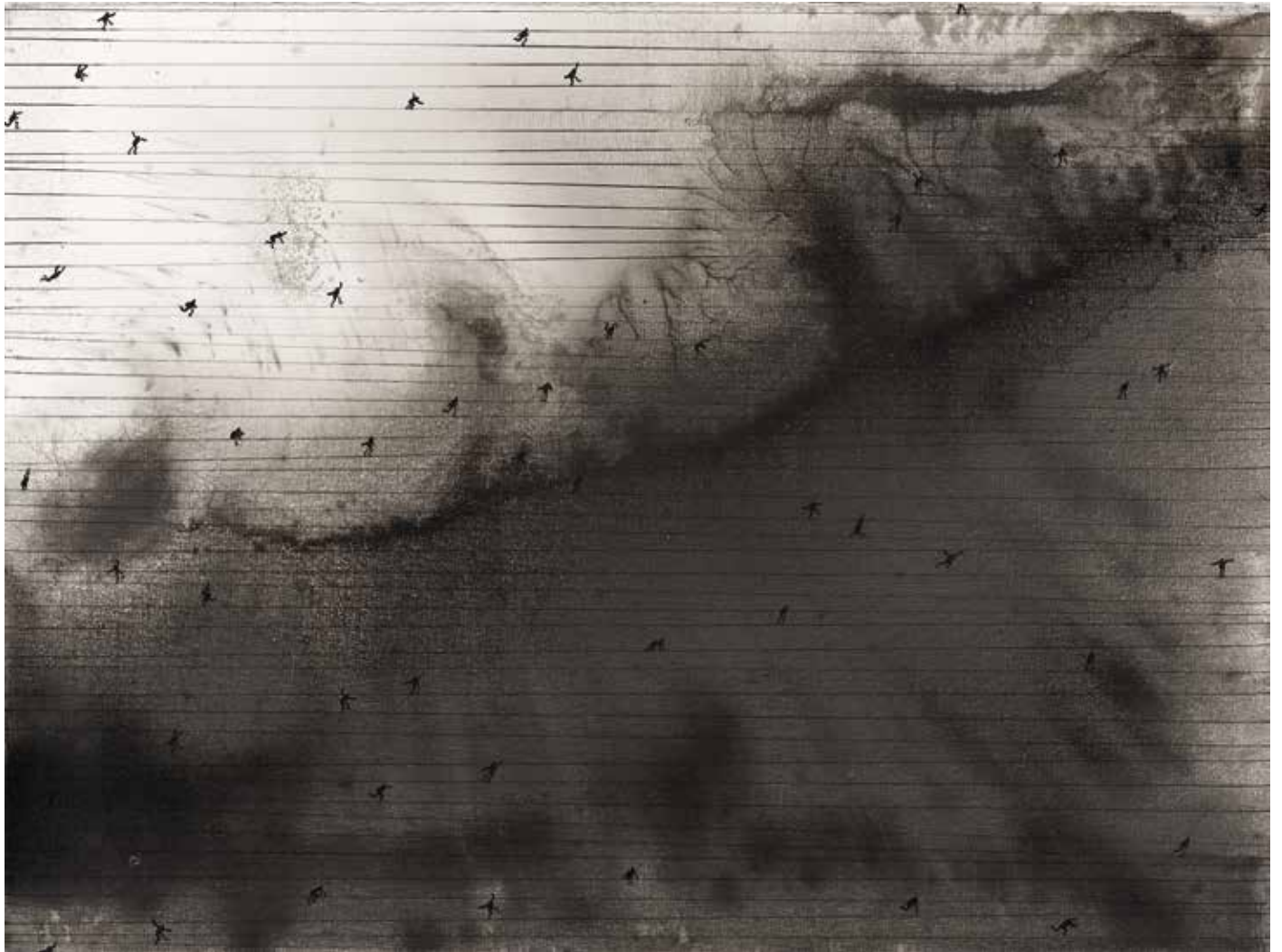




























## ART L INTERVIEW WITH LU CHAO

Art.L: Throughout all your solo exhibitions, from 'Black Forest' to 'Black Mirror', and from 'Black Light' at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris to 'Black Box' at HDM Gallery in Beijing, and now the latest solo exhibition 'Black Silence' at Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery in London, I observed that black and white has been the main aesthetic in your paintings, is there a particular reason for this colour choice? What about the title 'Black Silence'? Does it hold any special significance for you?

Lu Chao: Actually, there is a connection between all of my 'Black' solo shows. 'Black Forest' in 2013 shows some of my thoughts on Chinese society. 'Black Mirror', the second exhibition, is my perception on society. 'Black Light' is the imaginary exploration of the unknown world and events surrounding me; a reflection of my curiosity. 'Black Box', on the other hand, shows my reverence towards the unknown. The title, 'Black Silence', evokes an uncanny, yet beautiful sentiment. I am not quite sure what it is actually. The answer is very obscure and I'd like it to stay that way. And of course, everyone is welcome to have their own interpretation towards it.

Art.L: Similarly, during the exhibition you held at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris, your paintings received many compliments and comments about their revealing mixture of absence and presence, solitude and togetherness, chaos and order – and all of these relate to Zen. When we look at a piece of work from the East from a Western point of view, there is often an unavoidable prejudice in associating it with Zen. What are your thoughts on such preconceptions? Could you also say something about your views on Zen ideologies? Are there any connections with your paintings? Some say your

paintings have a sense of traditional Chinese ink aesthetics. Were you influenced by any particular works from that tradition?

Lu Chao: Whilst Zen has always been one of my interests, I don't actually know much about it and it was never my intention to integrate any of its ideologies into my paintings. I really like the Song and Yuan dynasties' traditional ink paintings and have studied and imitated those paintings for a long time. I love how those works were created. You immerse yourself in nature and at the same time you disappear in the the landscape. The one standard I have for selecting materials for my paintings is that they have to make me feel like I am writing a diary. I am very attached to my work. In fact, no matter if it is the western oil painting tradition, the eastern traditional ink painting tradition or modern and contemporary art, they are all influences on my practice. I can't tell which style or movement is more important. I only pick subjects and themes that help me express myself. I don't want to be restricted in any way. I don't like to define my work in any sense, at least not until I have completed it.

Art.L: In your paintings, the figures are presented in a variety of spaces with metaphorical settings; a palace, a forest, a tree, a column or a glass container. All these bizarre combinations result in a surrealistic composition. What kind of world/worldview are you trying to present through these paintings?

Lu Chao: I love such fantasy-filled settings. They appear to be mysterious but generally beautiful. I don't believe that we will ever truly comprehend

this world. We probably will get to know most of it, but our understanding will never be complete. I'm not religious, but I respect all religions. I believe there is a power stronger than human kind, and in my paintings, I often try to express this sentiment. I don't want to struggle to understand this world. Sometimes such bewilderment maintains our reverence for life.

Art.L.: Do you think your works show more pessimism or optimism? Many viewers reveal that they experience a mixture of emotions when they look at your works. Whilst some are unsettling and depressing, there are also some heart-warming scenes when we take a close look at the details – like a family of three standing all together.

Lu Chao: All I want to paint is the world I see. So I guess, it is a mixture of optimism and pessimism. The reality is way more complicated than what we perceive, sometimes the harder it is to understand, the closer we might be from reality.

Art.L: Your works seem to be very calm, elegant and alienated (?), what motivated you to develop such characteristics in your painting? Is it something to do with your personality? What is your state of mind when you paint?

Lu Chao: I guess every painting is a representation of the creator. You may be able to lie, but your works will not. I prefer to paint in a quiet place and whilst I'm working, I don't usually listen to music, because I need to keep to my own pace.

Art.L: Your sketches are interesting too, They mainly depict some suspended plants and subtle shadows. What are the differences in expression when you work on your sketches and paintings? What is your state of mind when you draw these sketches?

Lu Chao: I need a quiet space when I work on my sketches. My sketches tend to be more detailed, capturing fine lines and minute features. I've seen Liu Xiaodong's sketches. The lines are very fine in comparison to the expressionistic brushstrokes in his oil paintings. I always remember professor Zhan Jianjun told him that, "We go deep into the details to reach a vast and extensive realm". And that's probably why I always treat my sketches as a learning process – learning from the mystical structure in nature. For example, the longer we stare at a stone, the more details we observe. It is a magical experience. And as time passes, I'm not even sure what I am looking at anymore. Sketching is also a process to improve my technical skills. Occasionally, I do a few sketches as a form of meditation. The serenity helps me focus on my oil paintings.

Art.L: Everyone knows the topic 'Crowd' plays a significant part in your work. Did your experience differ when you stood amongst the crowd in Europe and back in Asia? Is there a change in perspective and mood?

Lu Chao: I remember when I first arrived in London, I tended to walk towards the crowd on purpose. I was curious to find out if the crowd in England is as overwhelming as it is in China and it turns out that it isn't as packed as what I experienced back home. But the one exception was the Notting Hill Carnival. That was the first time I saw a mass of people in the street. Interestingly, back in China, everyone moves in the crowd rushing to work, but in England, you often see people gather around for drinks and parties after a long day at work. From then on, I just love observing these differences in every human being. There are many distinct differences between each individual. But then again, you will be surprised to find out that there are a lot more similarities than differences in all of us. For instance, we will never be able to avoid growing old and facing our death. We all struggle to get through everyday because we never have sufficient time.

Art.L: What are your educational experiences in China and England? Are there any disparities? What are you looking for in the West?

Lu Chao: It is simple. Fine Arts School Affiliated to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Central Academy of Fine Arts itself taught me the skills, and in London, I learnt how to put these techniques into practice and express my ideas. The strongest difference I felt is knowing what you want to paint is more important than making a perfect painting. Also, now that I am in England, I have developed a strong sentiment as a Chinese citizen. Sometimes, situations appear where I can see with more clarity my country's culture and history now that I am an outsider in a foreign land.

Art.L: What are your thoughts on working with galleries in London, Paris and Beijing? Do the spectators understanding towards your paintings vary between these places? Are there any memorable experiences worth mentioning?

Lu Chao: They all have their advantages and disadvantages. But I would say I am pretty lucky. All of the galleries I collaborate with are experts in the field. Their professionalism allows me to focus all my energy on my painting. Every audience comes from a different background, so the understanding towards my painting is different. That's the most exciting part of painting for me.

Art.L: Artists are often asked to name a few artists they like or are inspired by. In a previous interview, you mentioned Rembrandt, Jeff Koons, Liu Xiaodong, Titian, Corot and many others. They are all have a different style and represent different art movements. Could you talk about what exactly you like about them? Are there any other styles or schools you admire?

Lu Chao: I respect a variety of artists with their own style of practice. There is beauty in every

practice. I'm not sure why, but probably because I can sense the sincerity in the work. For example, I am always captivated by Rembrandt's self-portrait done in his later years. Unlike other artists of his time, he constantly questioned the purpose of painting. His conflicting thoughts regarding the meaning of painting is also shown through his self-portrait. In his portrait paintings, his eyes are not just beaming with confidence, but also fear and anxiety. I always get emotional when I look at his work. Many people criticize Jeff Koons for commercializing art, but the cleanliness and perfection in his work impresses me. The constant shift between reality and illusion is also intriguing. As for Liu Xiaodong, I believe many can observe the sincerity in his work. I vividly remember him saying, "As long as you keep painting, at the end, everything will come out naturally". I've never thought about the styles and schools I want to be associated with. If I can truly express myself, that's enough. In reality, the more I paint the more possibilities I feel, and the more I want to continue exploring. I believe that all definitions and classifications come only after a work's completed?

Art.L: Do you ever want to paint abstract work?

Lu Chao: Yes! As long as it can communicate my emotions, I am fine with any forms and medium.

Art.L: When you are drawing the crowd, do you think you are one of them, or are you viewing them from above as an outsider?

Lu Chao: I am one of them of course. I even imagine every little black figure to be a representation of myself. When I draw a large crowd, I try to recall and be objective in illustrating every single face I once saw when I stood amongst the crowd.





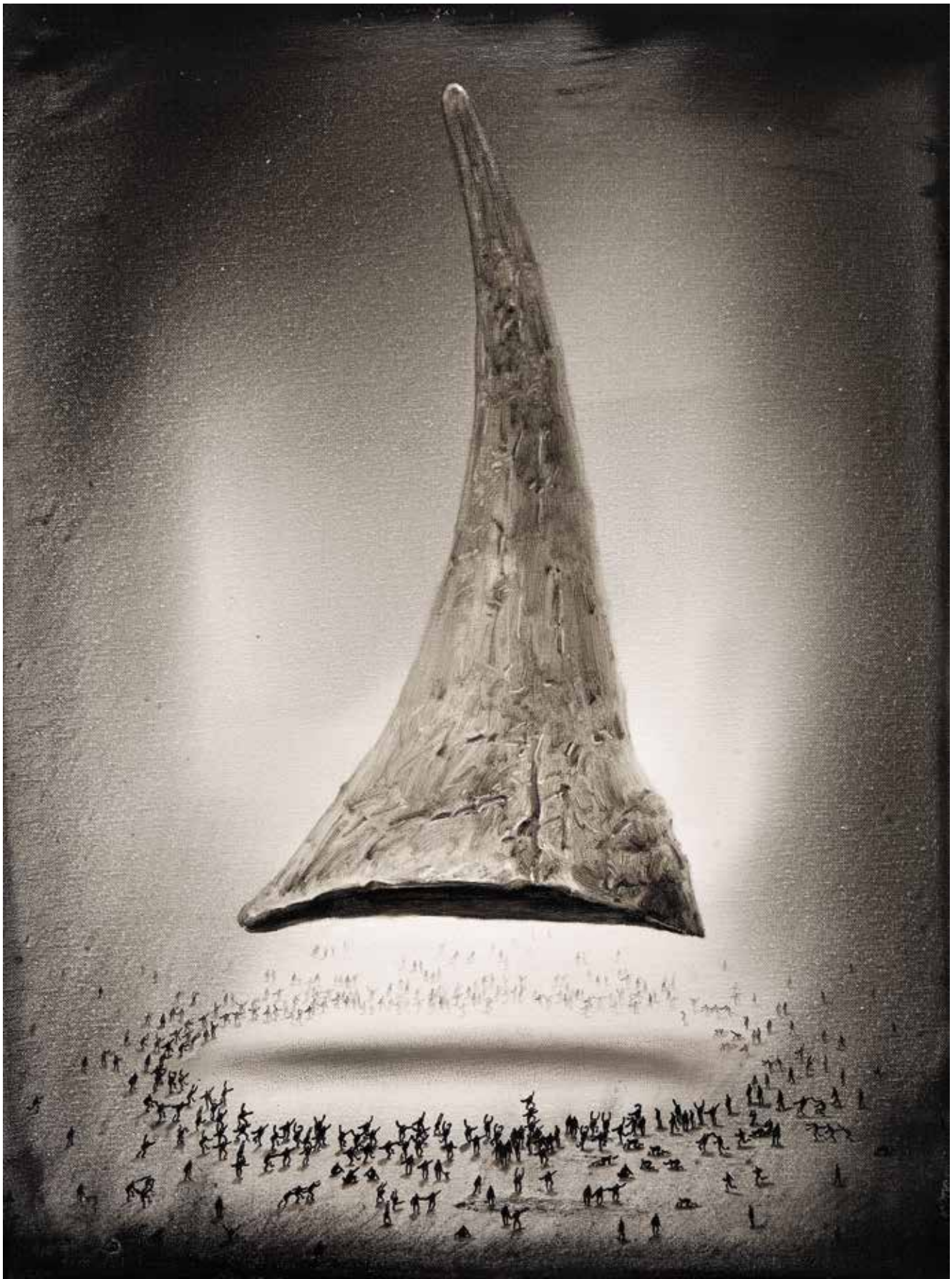






















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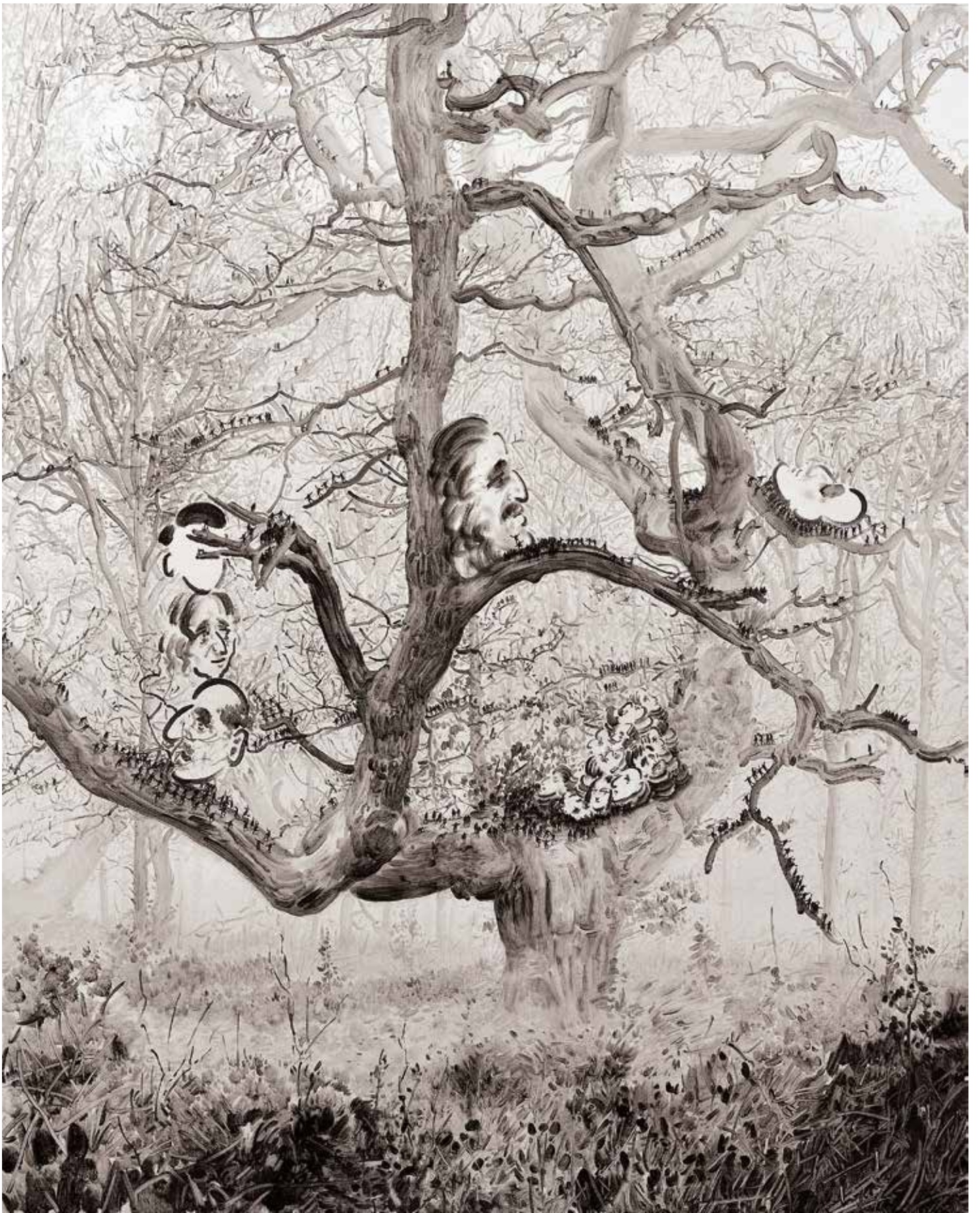
























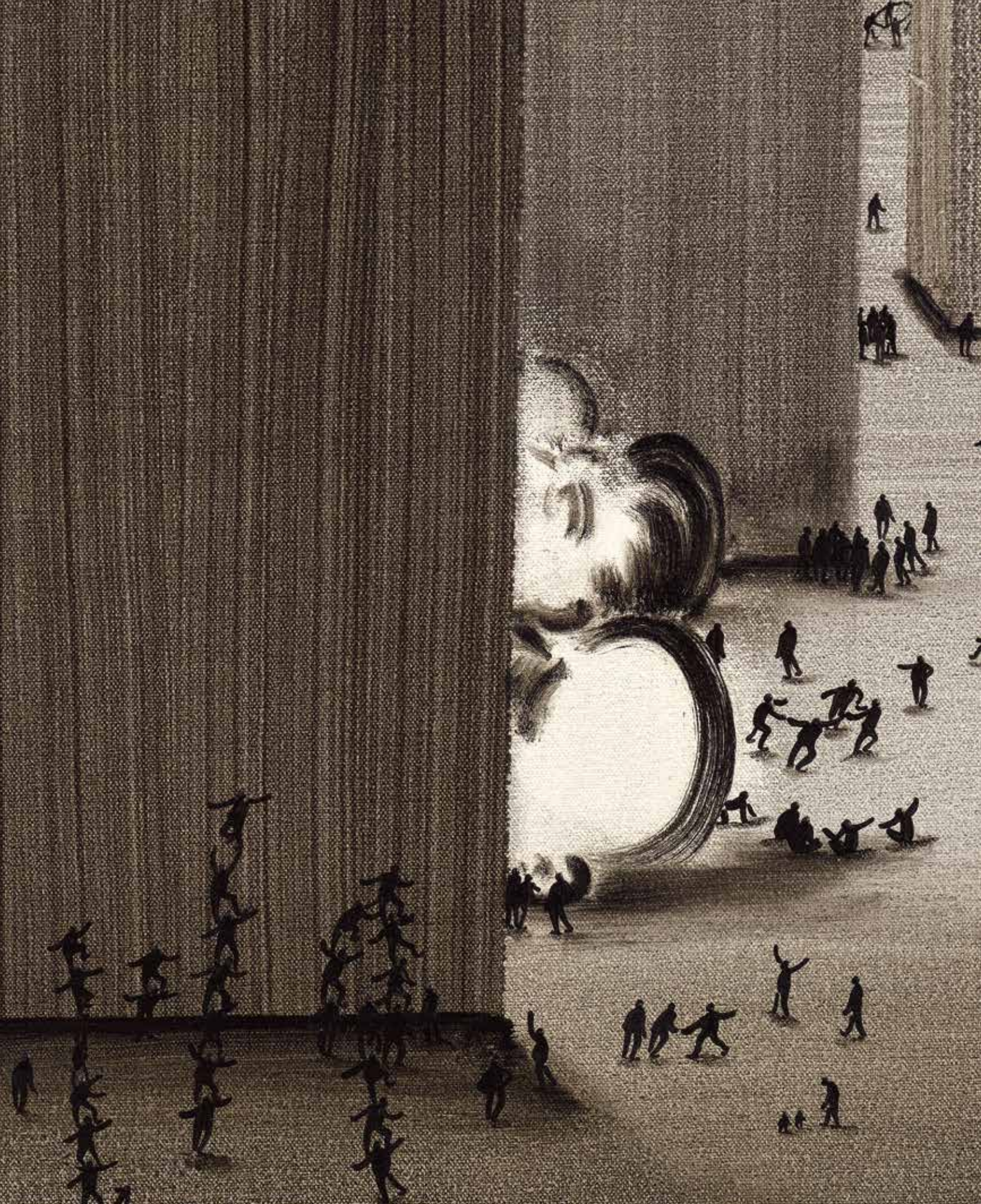








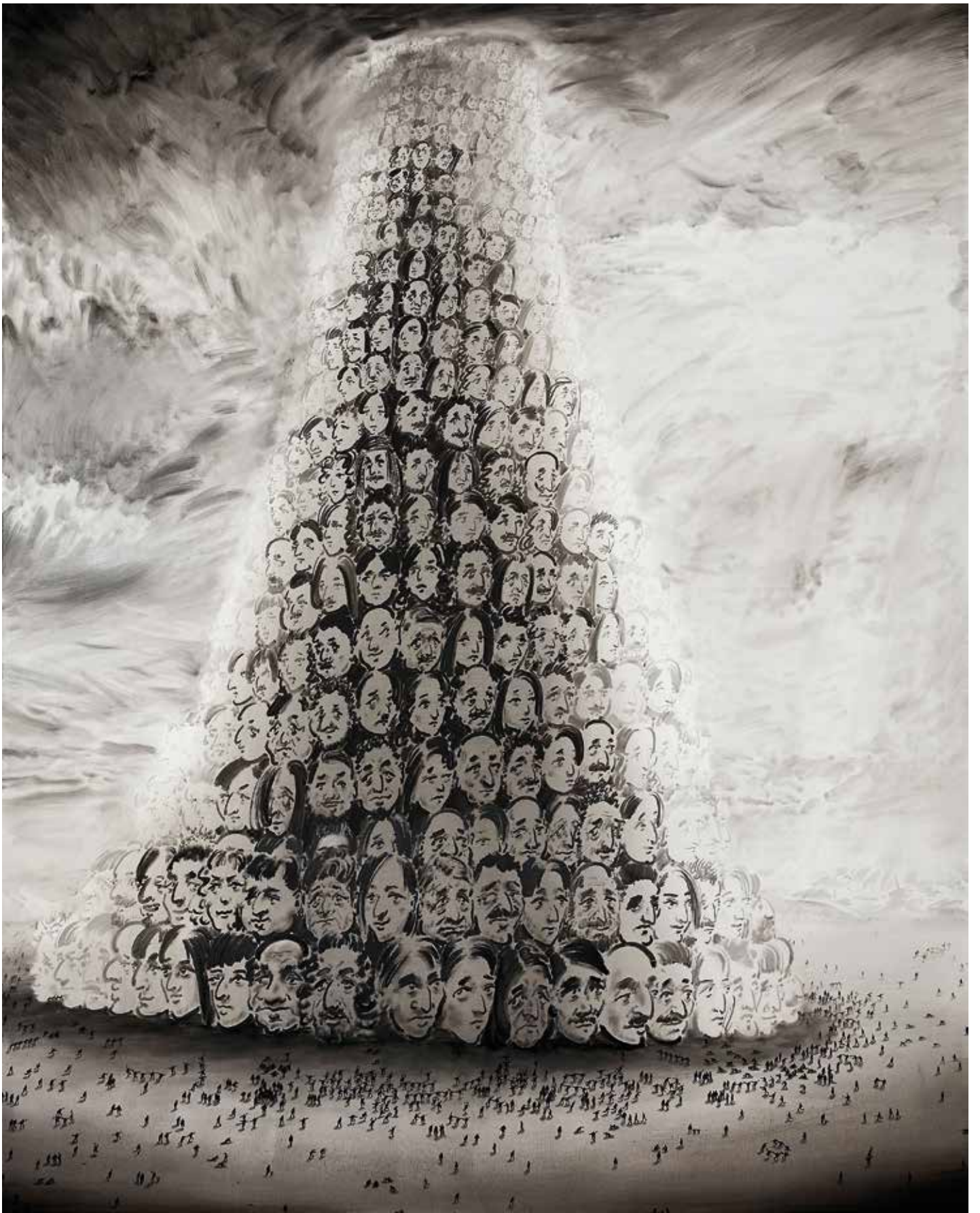
























Spring Festival Travel No.1, 2012  
oil on paper  
20×16cm



Balance No.2, 2016  
oil on canvas  
160×95cm



Hat, 2013  
oil on paper  
35×28cm



A piece of cake, 2014  
oil on canvas  
190×250cm



Crowded People No.1, 2015  
oil on paper  
35×28cm



Cake Shop, 2015  
oil on canvas  
121×91cm



Crowded People No.2, 2015  
oil on paper  
35×28cm



Triangles in Circles, 2015  
oil on canvas  
150×120cm



Hat, 2013  
oil on canvas  
90×120cm



Cake Cabinet No.1, 2016  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm



Black forest cake, 2015  
oil on canvas  
200×150cm



Container No.2, 2017  
oil on wood panel  
59×37.5cm



Monument, 2015  
oil on canvas  
160×120cm



Container No.1, 2017  
oil on wood panel  
59×37.5cm





Container No.3, 2017  
oil on wood panel  
59×37.5cm



Dark Matter No.2, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
23×31cm



Laboratory No.4, 2015  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm



Dark Matter No.1, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
23×31cm



Laboratory No.5, 2017  
oil on canvas  
190×250cm



Balance No.2, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
23×31cm



Black silence, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
23×31cm



Men on Wire No.3, 2016  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Free Fall No. 4, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



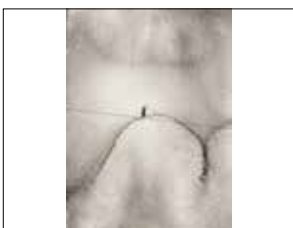
Man on Wire No.6, 2016  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



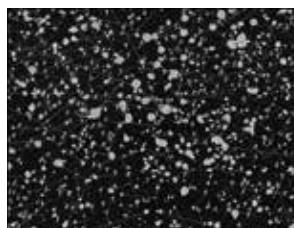
Free Fall No.5, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
23×31cm



Men on wire No.7, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×200cm



Balance No.1, 2017  
watercolor on paper  
31×23cm



Code No.1, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Code No.2, 2017  
oil on wood panel (22 pieces)  
300×600cm appx.



Black Star No.4, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×120cm



Sink Hole No .3, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×200cm



Sink Hole No.4, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Free fall No.3, 2017  
oil on canvas  
60×45cm



Funambulist No.5, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



Funambulist No. 4, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



Balance No.4, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



Balance No.3, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



Funambulist No.5, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60 cm



Funambulist No.4, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Funambulist No.6,  
2017 oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Balance No.3, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Balance No.2, 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Balance No.1 , 2017  
oil on canvas  
45×60cm



Elsewhere No.4, 2016  
oil on canvas  
150×120 cm



Relic, 2017  
watercolour on paper  
23×31cm



Forest Art Fair No.2, 2015  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm



Black Ceremony, 2017  
oil on canvas  
60×45cm



Relic No.2, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×200cm



Black Light No.5, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×500cm



Life collection no.3, 2016  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm



Black Light No.3, 2016  
oil on canvas  
210×160cm



Babel, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150×120cm



Lines with Dots, 2016  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm



Center of a Circle No.2, 2017  
oil on canvas  
60×45cm

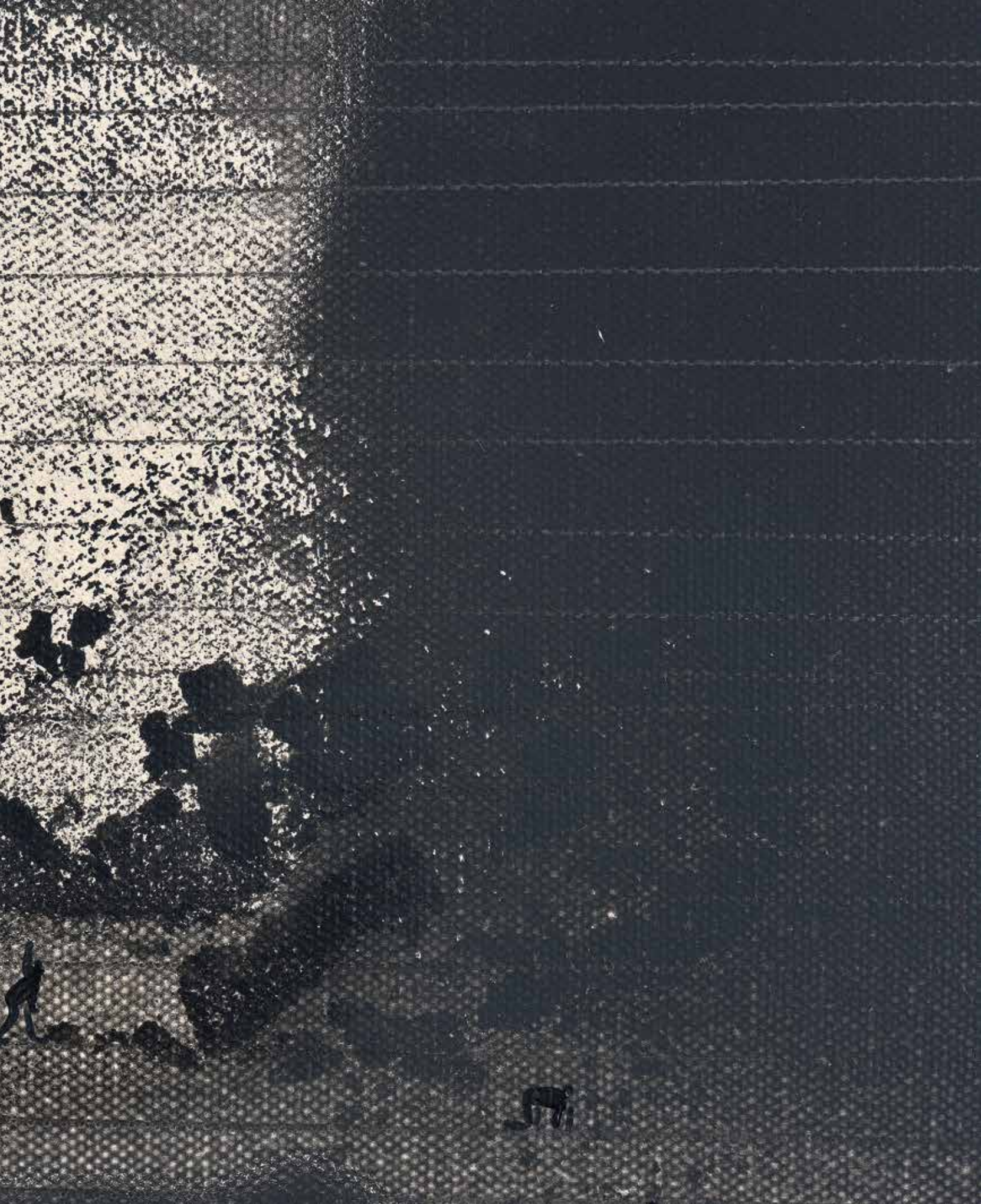


Elsewhere No.2, 2016  
oil on canvas  
120×150cm









## LU CHAO

1988

Born in Shenyang, Liaoning, China

2014

MA Painting, Royal College of Art, London, UK

2012

BA Oil Painting, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China

Solo Exhibitions

2017

Black Silence, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, London, UK  
Black Box, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Beijing, China

2016

Black Light, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, France

2015

Black Mirror, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Art Basel Hong Kong, China

2013

Black Forest", Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Beijing, China

Group Exhibitions

2017

Art Basel, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Basel, Switzerland  
After the Deluge, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, Venice, Italy  
Art Basel, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Hong Kong, China  
Art Geneva, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Geneva, Switzerland  
Salon du Dessin, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Beijing, China  
The Figure in Contemporary Art, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, London, UK  
All Happens after Sunset, Moca Shanghai, China

Art Paris, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, France

Art Dallas, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, Dallas, USA

2016

Across Divide, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, London, UK  
Painting as Strait Gate, Hive Center of Contemporary Art, Beijing, China

Huangyu Collection, Museum of contemporary art Chengdu, Chengdu, China

EXPO Chicago, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, Chicago, USA

Aurora, Soka Art Center, Beijing, China

The 'Monogatari' of Blackness, Mingo, Shanghai, China

Art 021, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Shanghai, China

Art Shenzhen, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Shenzhen, China

Zuna Maco, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico

2015

Art Brussels, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

Around Drawing, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, London, UK

Cos Moscow, Rosenfeld Porcini Gallery, Moscow, Russia

Art 021, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Shanghai, China

Art Taipei, Forbidden City Gallery, Taipei, China

Elsewhere, Lychee One, London, UK

CIGE, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery, Beijing, China

2014

Saatchi New Sensation Shortlist, Victoria House, London, UK

Life and Hope, French Institute, Beijing, China

A New Circle, Forbidden City Gallery, Shanghai, China

River Light RCA Studio Summer Exhibition, RCA Studio, London, UK

Royal College of Art Graduation Exhibition, Royal College of Art, London, UK

London Design Festival 2014, Mint Gallery, London, UK

RCA Secret, Royal College of Art, London, UK



SOHO Art Festival, London, UK  
Art Brussels, Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery,  
Brussels, Belgium

2013

The Others, Hanmi Gallery, London, UK  
Open Work, London, UK  
Drawing Now Art Fair, Le Carrousel du Louvre, Paris,  
France  
2013 Art Brussels, Brussels, Belgium  
RCA Secret, Dyson Gallery, Royal College of Art,  
London, UK  
New Figuration: Chapter 1, Hadrien de Montferrand  
Gallery, Beijing, China  
Multiculturalism is Dead, Bethnal Green Church,  
London, UK  
Royal College of Art student show, Royal College of  
Art, London, UK

2012

Works from Students at the Royal College Of Art,  
Royal College of Art, London, UK

2011

Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Snow Mountain Music  
Festival, Lijiang, China  
Group Show, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing,  
China  
Enigma, Up Space, Beijing, China

2010

Giant Cup Today National Art Students Awards, Today  
Art Museum, Beijing, China  
Wolf Wears Sheep Skin, Up Space, Beijing, China

Awards

2014

Painter-Stainers Gordon Luton Award, Royal College of  
Art, London, UK  
Solo Award Runners Up, London, UK  
RCA Studio, London, UK

2013

Lucy Halford Bursary, Royal College of Art, London,  
UK

2012

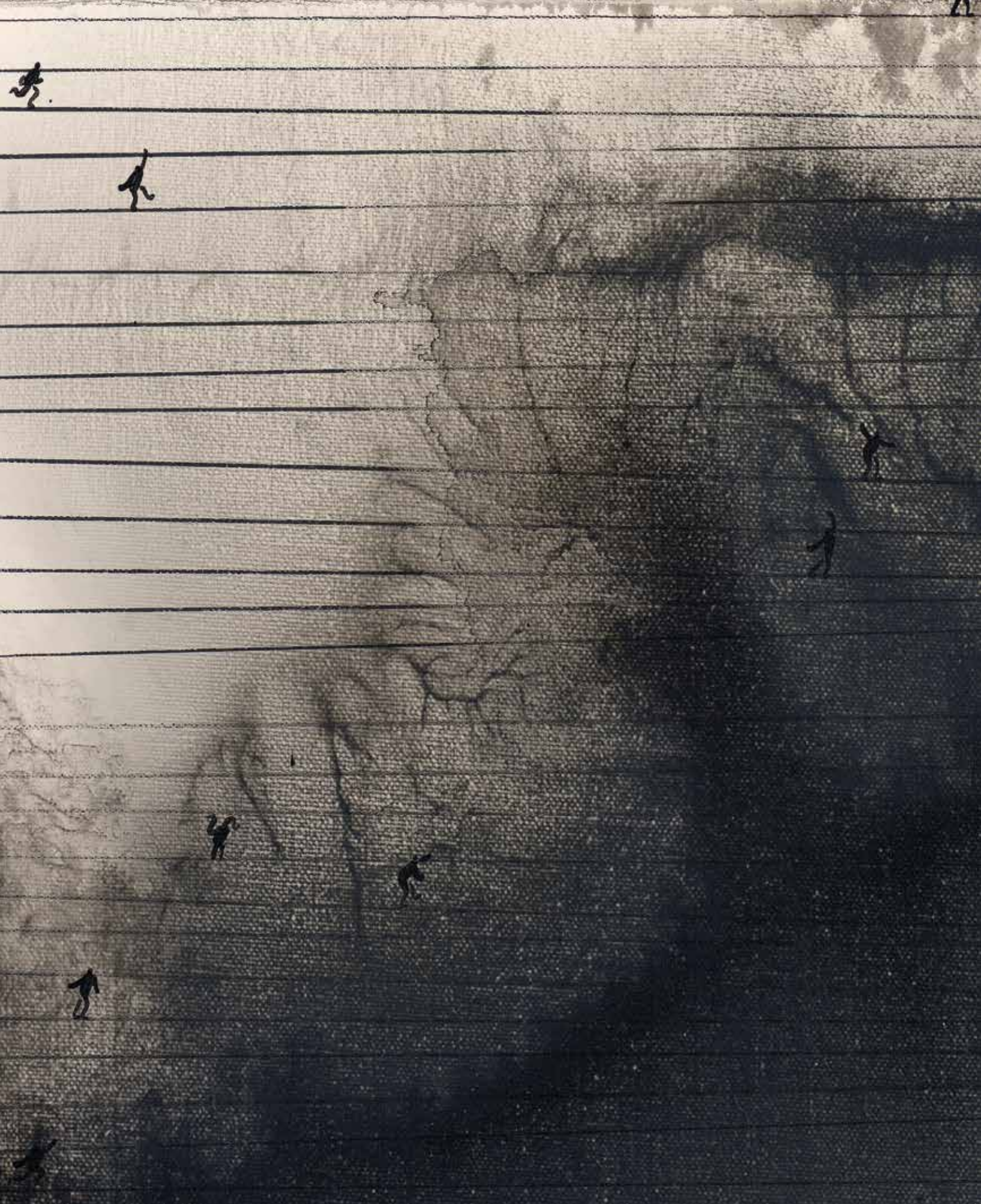
Best Creative Awards, Central Academy of Fine Art,  
Beijing, China

2011

Excellent Sketching Award, Central Academy of Fine  
Art, Beijing, China

2010

Silver Prize, Giant Cup Today National Art Students  
Awards, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China



published by rosenfeld porcini, London 2017

curated and organized by: Ian Rosenfeld and rosenfeld porcini gallery

catalogue and exhibition coordination: Ian Rosenfeld and Simonetta Sancristoforo

texts: Lu Chao, Ian Rosenfeld, Jonathan Miles, Art L

design and creative direction: Salvatore Morelli & Milagros michilli, milagro adv srl, Italy

photography: Fabio Speranza

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printed in Italy xxx

catalogue binding by xxx

First edition of 1000 copies.

rosenfeld porcini  
37 Rathbone Street  
London  
w1t 1nz  
t+44 (0) 20 76371133  
[www.rosenfeldporcini.com](http://www.rosenfeldporcini.com)

ISBN 978-1-909564-02-2



