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nikholis planck

deirdre smith

Nikholis Planck: 18 x 24

Deirdre Smith

There is a tendency to clutter things up, to try to make sure people know something is art, when all that's necessary is to present it, to leave it alone. ...

What I tend to do is see something, then re-make it and re-make it and re-make it and try every possible way of re-making it. If I'm persistent enough, I get back to where I started. I think it was Jasper Johns who said, 'Sometimes it's necessary to state the obvious.'¹

-Bruce Nauman

In the late 1960s, stemming from a notion that whatever he did in his studio could be or become art, Bruce Nauman made a series of films in which he performed mundane, repetitive actions, descriptions of which served as their titles. Works like *Stamping in the Studio* (1968), and *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-68) are shot from a single, partial angle with the artist performing the same activity for durations sometimes close to an hour, slowly coming in and out of frame. Watching a "studio film" is both amusing and excruciating. There is a sense that you could stop after 30 seconds or 30 minutes and have an unchanged experience.

While the films were obviously a physical and mental challenge for Nauman, rather than engaging them through a narrative of performance art, one of the more interesting ways to interpret the studio films is as metaphors for art making and studio practice in general. In them, Nauman meticulously contemplates, rehearses, and performs repetitive and sometimes frustrating acts, the product of which most people will look at for less than a minute. Sound familiar? There is so much more in each video than will be

seen or understood by its viewer, and yet it would seem that Nauman is accepting of this fact. The "failure" of the studio films as something to watch is incorporated within their making. It is irrelevant whether or not anyone sees the whole video, or enjoys doing so. Rather, they present a challenge to conventional artistic practice in the studio, and exist as their own model of practice.

Nikholis Planck makes paintings and works on paper, but Nauman's films feel a relevant starting point to a discussion of Planck, whose work also articulates a strong relationship to process, practice, and repetition. As with the studio films, the display of Planck's work aims more at the presentation of an approach to art making than a grouping of discrete artworks. Describing his efforts in the studio as, "quick, gestural (also pathetic and meandering)," Planck is constantly in a state of making and remaking. With a background in printmaking and zines, Planck's paintings and drawings often develop through the use of leitmotifs. However, whereas before the artist worked directly in the production of multiples, he has recently turned to what might be called multiples without originals. Picture a group of paintings done in black with white text that reads, "18 x 24" (a reference to his preferred format of canvas and paper). In a descriptive sense, they are identical; when actually looking at them, their differences become obvious. At the same time, it is impossible to give weight or arrange them in a way that is not mostly instinctive. Whichever came first is unimportant. Just as you might watch Nauman walk 5 or 15 times around the perimeter of the square, you might look at 5 or 15 versions of a Planck canvas.

Planck derives inspiration from broad art historical references, contemporary practices, as well as his own previous work. The artist will take

18x24

18x24

18x24

up an image in one painting, then use it as a transition to his next piece, making the same image over again in a new way. It follows that Planck prefers the liquidity of a painting in progress to a final statement. On this subject the artist writes, "I am more convinced about the actual act of appropriating rather than what is appropriated – I am more into the act of having painted rather – or even the actual painting – while the painting still stands, its role not valued..." He has stated similarly of his art as a whole that it is, "not necessarily about a well-developed body of work, but more about the actual practice of trying to have a well-developed body of work."

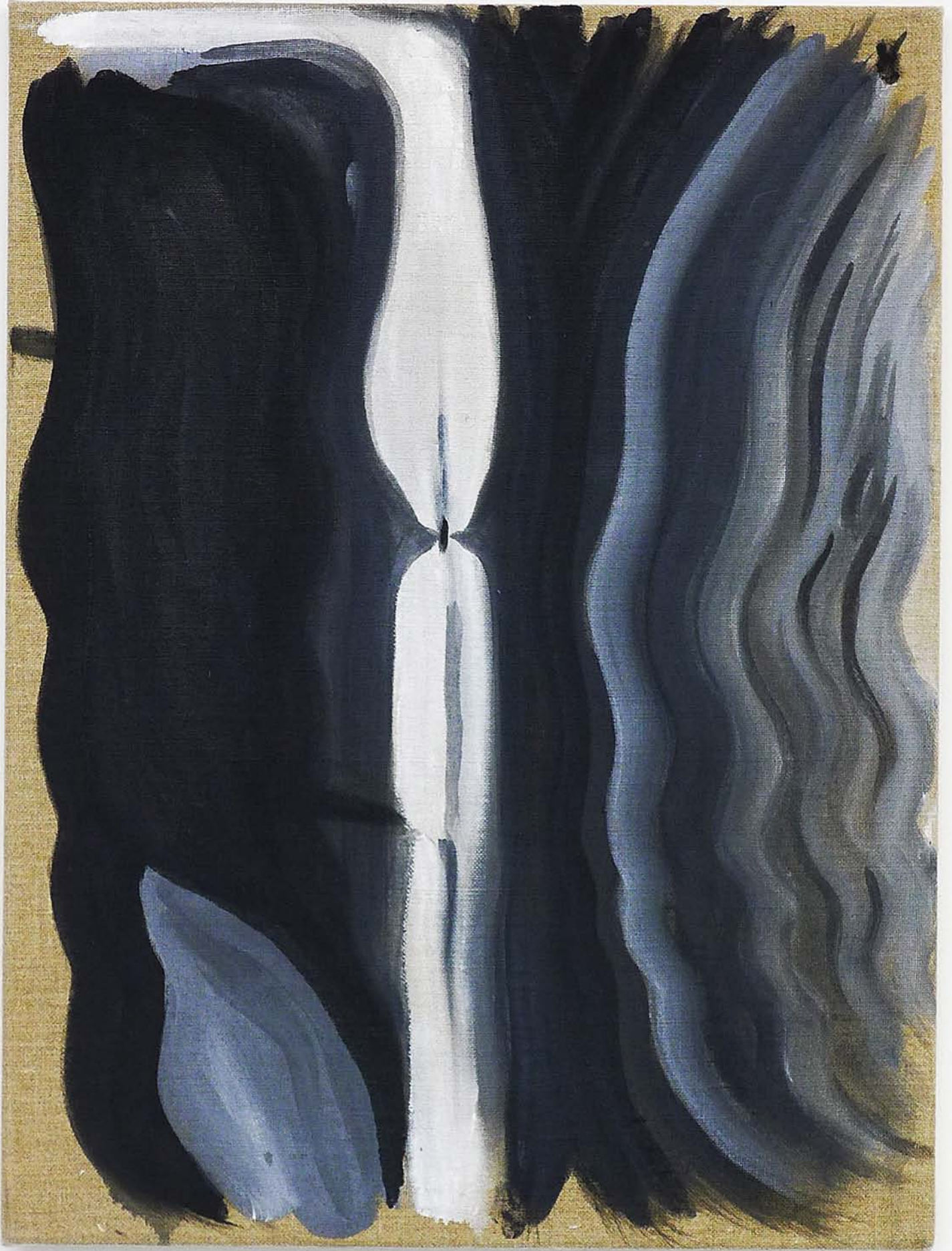
Examples of Planck's recurring images in painting and drawing include, a candle, the outline of a face in profile, a figure study cropped and turned on its side, and a garbage can. Within a series of paintings, these images may shift from reduced, but recognizable representations, to abstractions that can only be identified as such in the context of a group. These transitions are achieved through Planck's process of painting and repainting the same image, as well as of photographing his own works in the studio to create framing contexts for future canvases.

In Planck's treatment, recurring images often work emblematically. The candle, for example, may be immediately recognizable as a classic *vanitas* image, used to evoke thoughts of mortality and transience by painters throughout art history. Georges de La Tour's several versions of the "Repentant Magdalen" – a woman sitting before a mirror, skull, and candle – come to mind. The ubiquity of the candle image allows Planck to reference many things at once. The candle is its own *vanitas*, its own reference point for classical art history, and some amalgam of spooky, stoner rituals. All connotations are essentially equal here,

with Planck maintaining a relationship to these signifiers that is avowedly unprecious and non-hierarchical. Remember that another of the recurring signs is a garbage can. As Planck writes, "Each thing informs the next, from artist zines/books to collages to drawings to paintings in that order, mixed up from that order, and so on."

How does an artist like Nikholis Planck, so tied to the studio, process, and transition, approach the display of his paintings and drawings? How might one convey the spirit of such a practice, in a context so seemingly at odds with it? Returning to the "failure" of the early Nauman films that started this essay, two examples of Planck's strategies regarding the display of his work will close it:

In "The Function of the Studio," French conceptual artist Daniel Buren commented on what he called the, "unspeakable compromise of the portable work." For Buren, the conflict of the studio is its dual role as private space set up for the creation of art, and the place where critics, curators, and dealers are invited to select images for display outside the studio. Buren makes a claim that a work of art can only be "in place" in the studio. "The alignment of works on museum walls gives the impression of a cemetery: whatever they say, wherever they come from, whatever their meanings may be, this is where they all arrive in the end, where they are lost. This loss is relative, however, compared to the total oblivion of the work that never emerges from the studio."² Calling the status of the work that never leaves the studio, "total oblivion," bespeaks a strong desire on the part of the artist to be seen. Following the analogy of the cemetery, the artist is willing to sacrifice their work for a place in that cemetery. Subverting this inclination, Planck actually culti-



vates Buren's "oblivion" in his approach to display. "It's not about showing everything and in some cases it's better not to," he says.

In a group show in early 2012, Planck produced a series of collaged pieces featuring text, drawing, and photographs, and resembling blown up pages from his zines. Rather than doing a straightforward hang of these collages, Planck stacked them upright and leaning against a wall, thus obstructing the view of all but one of the pieces. This gesture asserts a commitment to the privacy of the studio, and the primacy of process. It also speaks to a narrative about multiples that is of constant concern to Planck. Akin to his paintings, each collage was different, though there were certain images and themes that would repeat. The stacking of the works suggests and thwarts the idea of linearity or progress between images. The images "build up" to one another, but can only be experienced as such as metaphor. Planck does not allow you to see or create relationships between the actual pieces, only their implied forms.

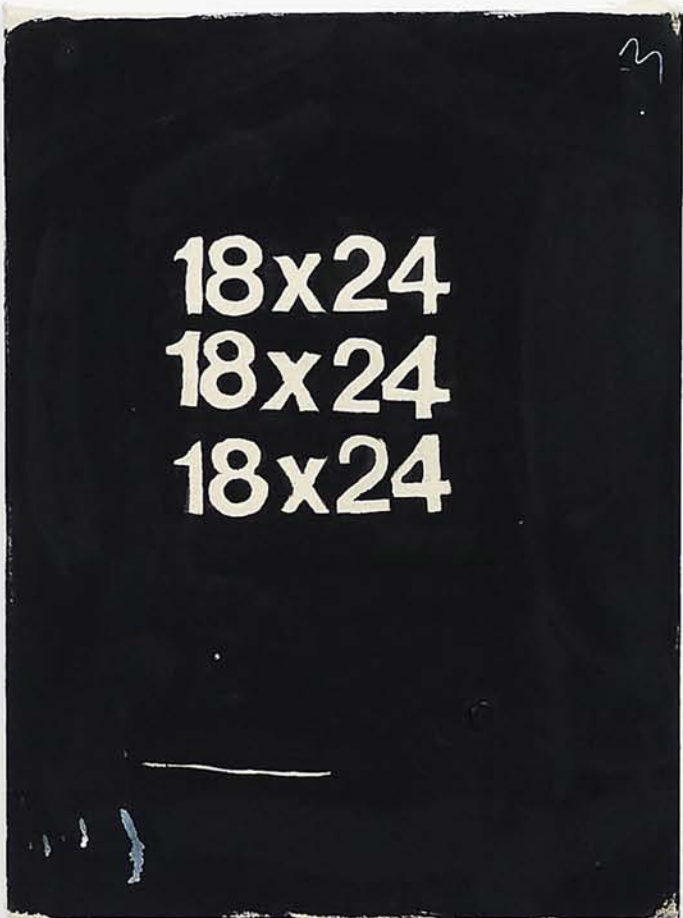
For his solo show at sophiajacob, Planck has crafted a work that repeats this act of stacking and obstructing, while also paying homage to a piece by the artist Robert Gober. For a 1992 exhibition at the Dia Center titled *site-specific installation*, Gober presented bundles of what looked like newspaper pages, but were actually photolithographs of newspaper pages. Referring to these pieces as "bales," Planck has undertaken his own bale piece. On sheets of 18 x 24 newsprint paper, Planck made a drawing over and over again in oil stick. Once the pages had sat together in his studio, the paper yellowing and the oil spreading out from the marks on the page, he folded the drawings in half and then stacked them. Planck has commented that in the Gober newspaper bales, "a multiple is not a multiple, but a compo-

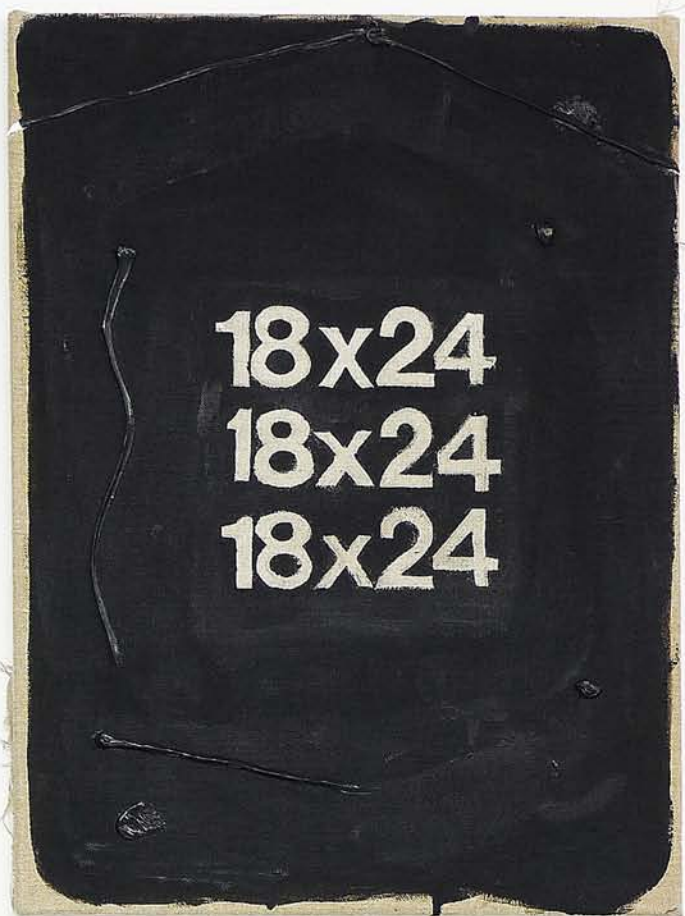
nent." Embodying this sentiment in his own bale piece, the relevance of the individual drawings falls away in the face of their status when combined and multiplied. Displayed alongside his explorations in drawing and painting, the bale is a befitting culmination of Planck's recent practice. Incessantly worked on, the images are in the end folded, stacked, and put away from view, only existing as units in something larger. More than any other individual piece, it manifests the artist's notion of, "trying to have a well-developed body of work."

¹ Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1988 (January, 1987)," *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005) 319.

² Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, eds. Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 159.

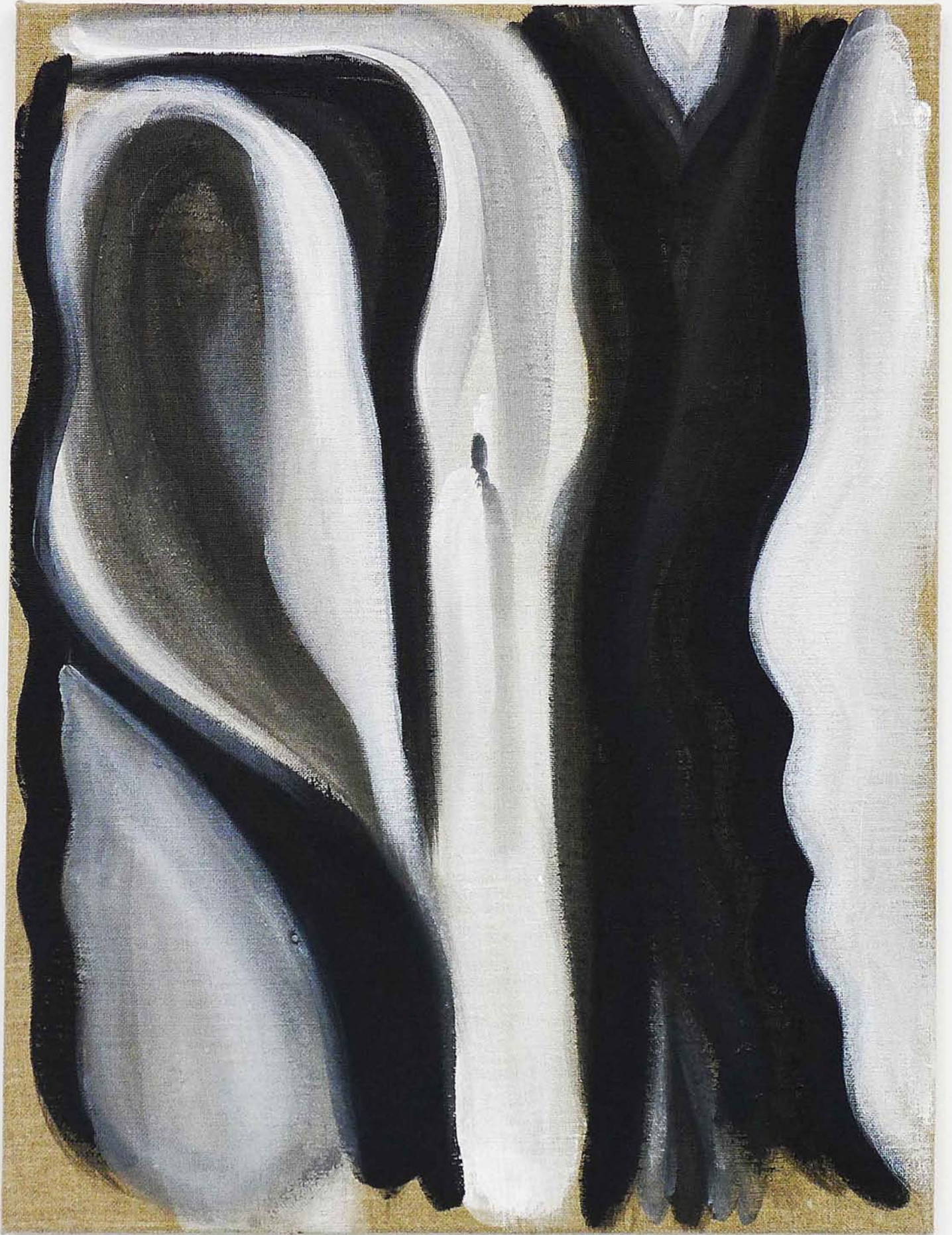












8x24
18x24
18x24

2000



18x24
18x24
18x24











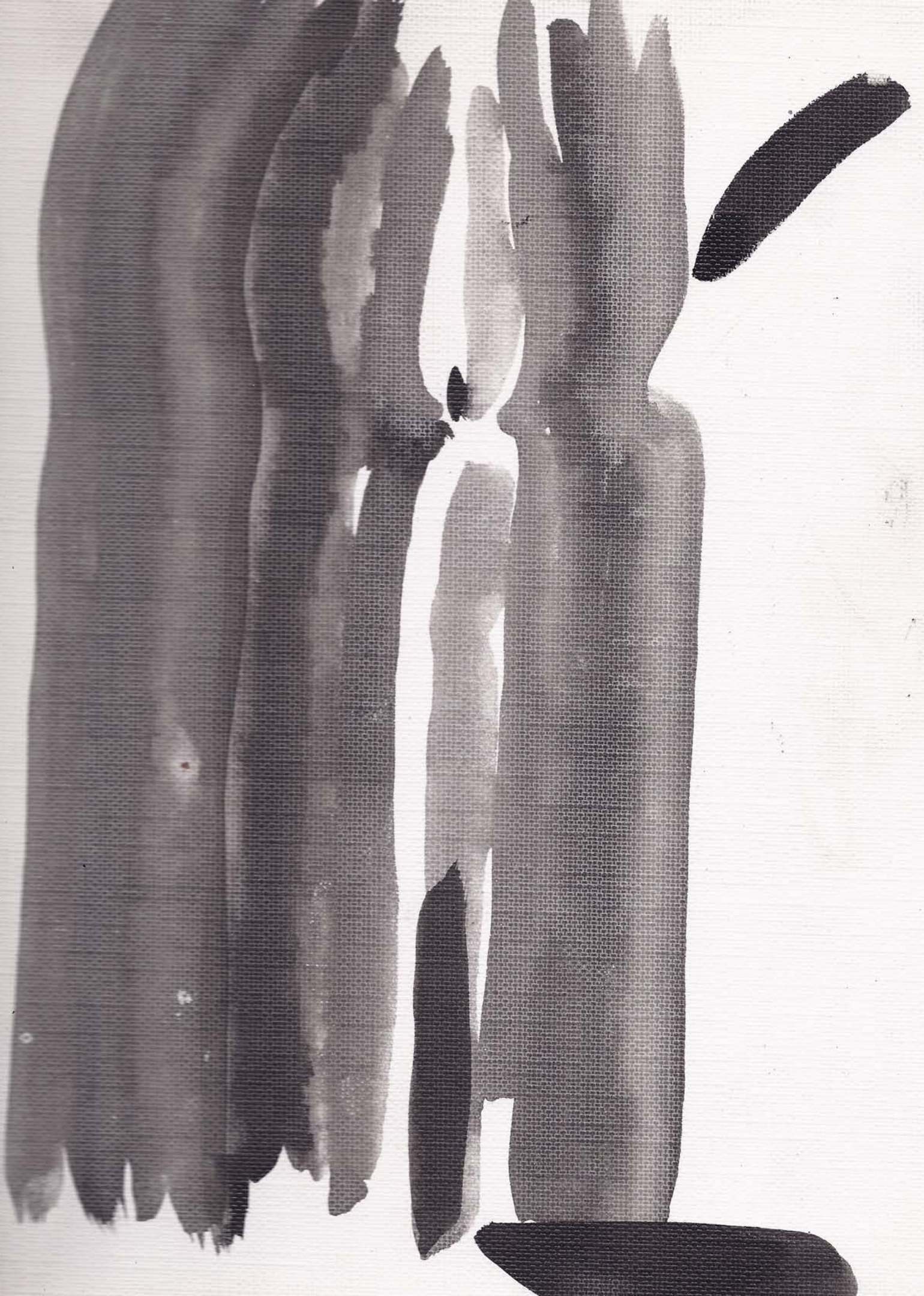






8x24
18x24
18x24

2000





18x24
18x24
18x24



All paintings:

Untitled

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

24" x 18"

2012

Sculpture:

Untitled (Bale)

Oil stick on newsprint with twine, wax

Dimensions variable

2012

All drawings:

Untitled

Sumi ink on paper

12" x 9"

2012

