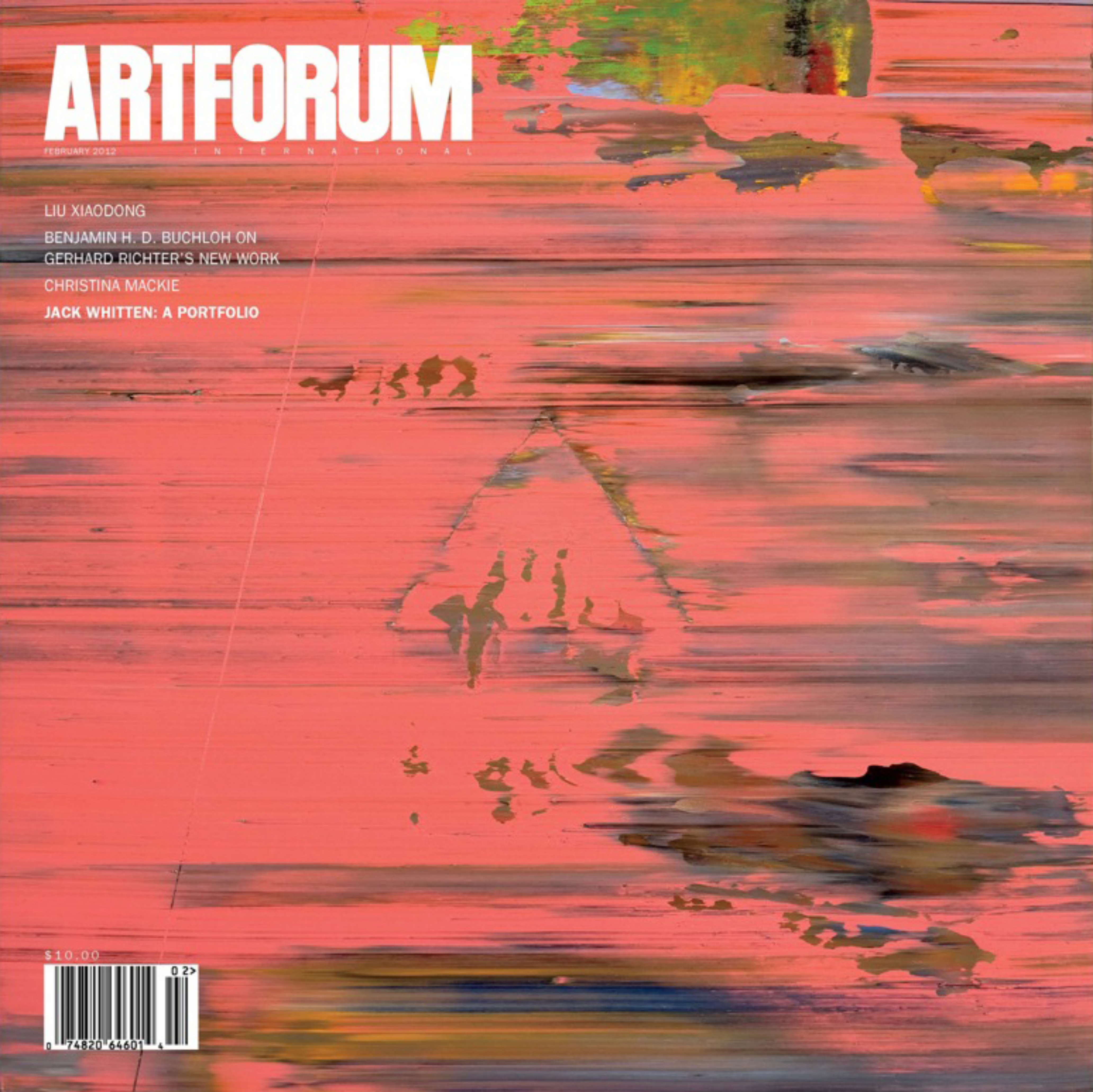

ARTFORUM

INTERNATIONAL

FEBRUARY 2012

LIU XIAODONG

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH ON
GERHARD RICHTER'S NEW WORK

CHRISTINA MACKIE

JACK WHITTEN: A PORTFOLIO

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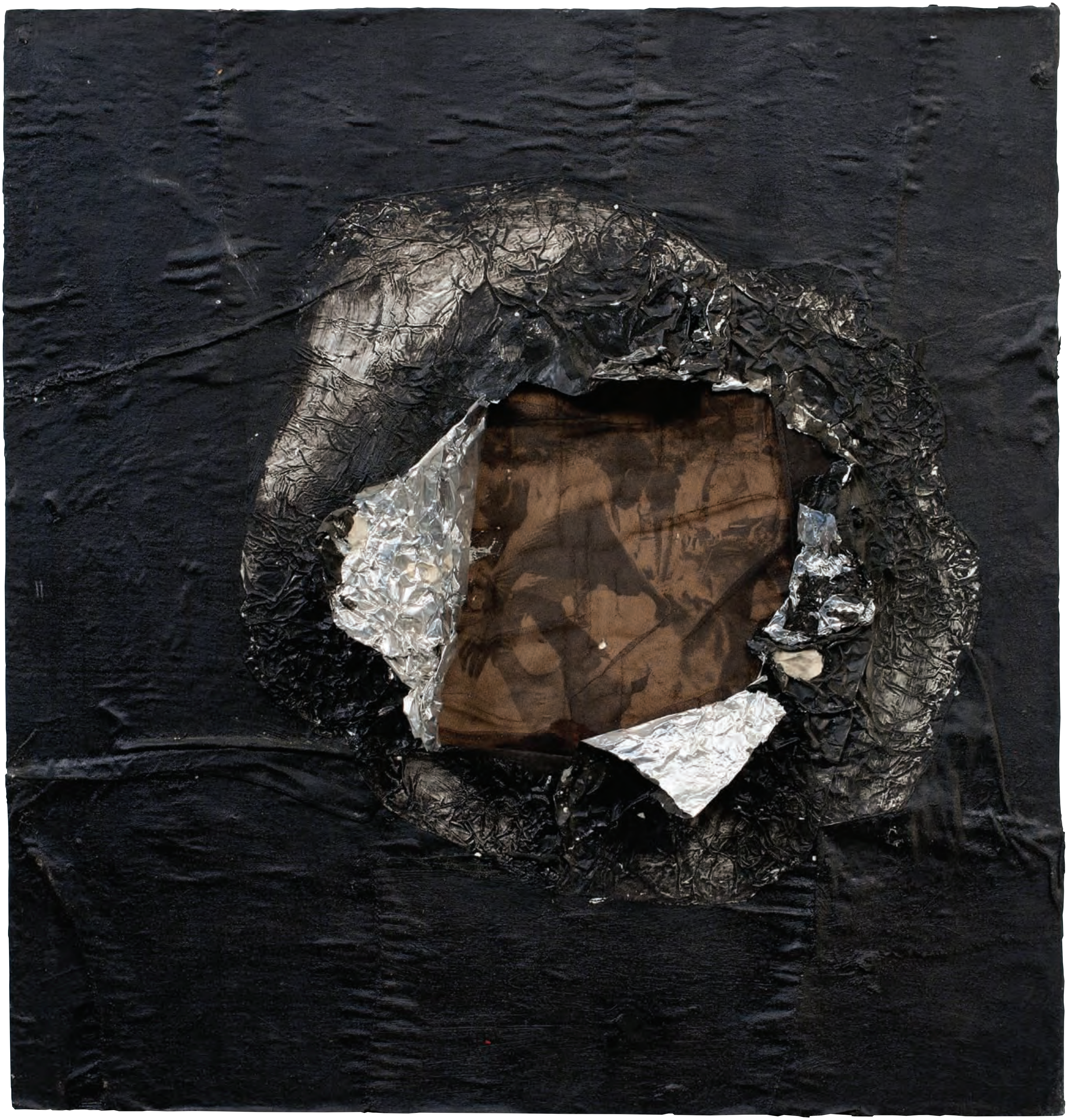
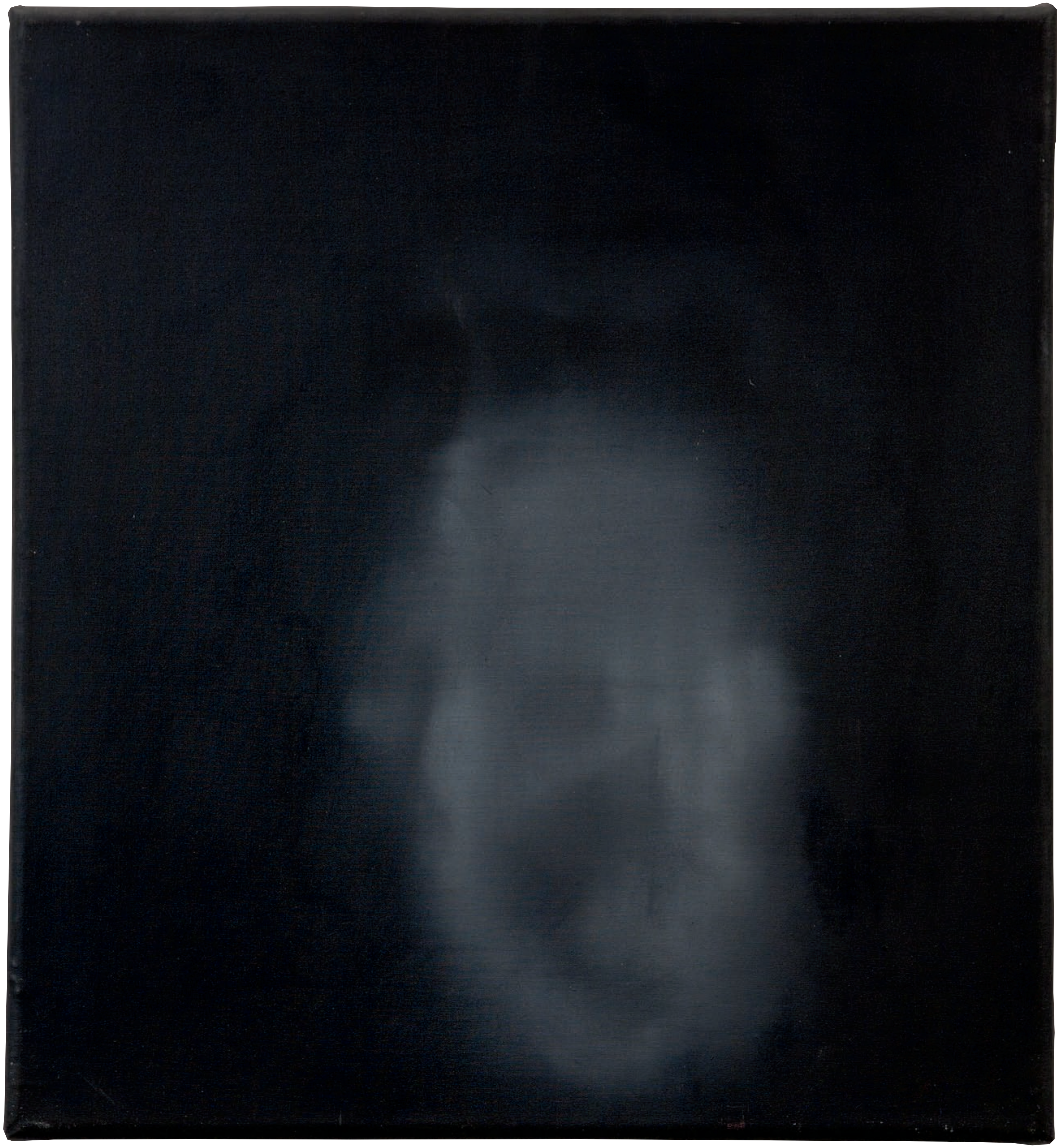
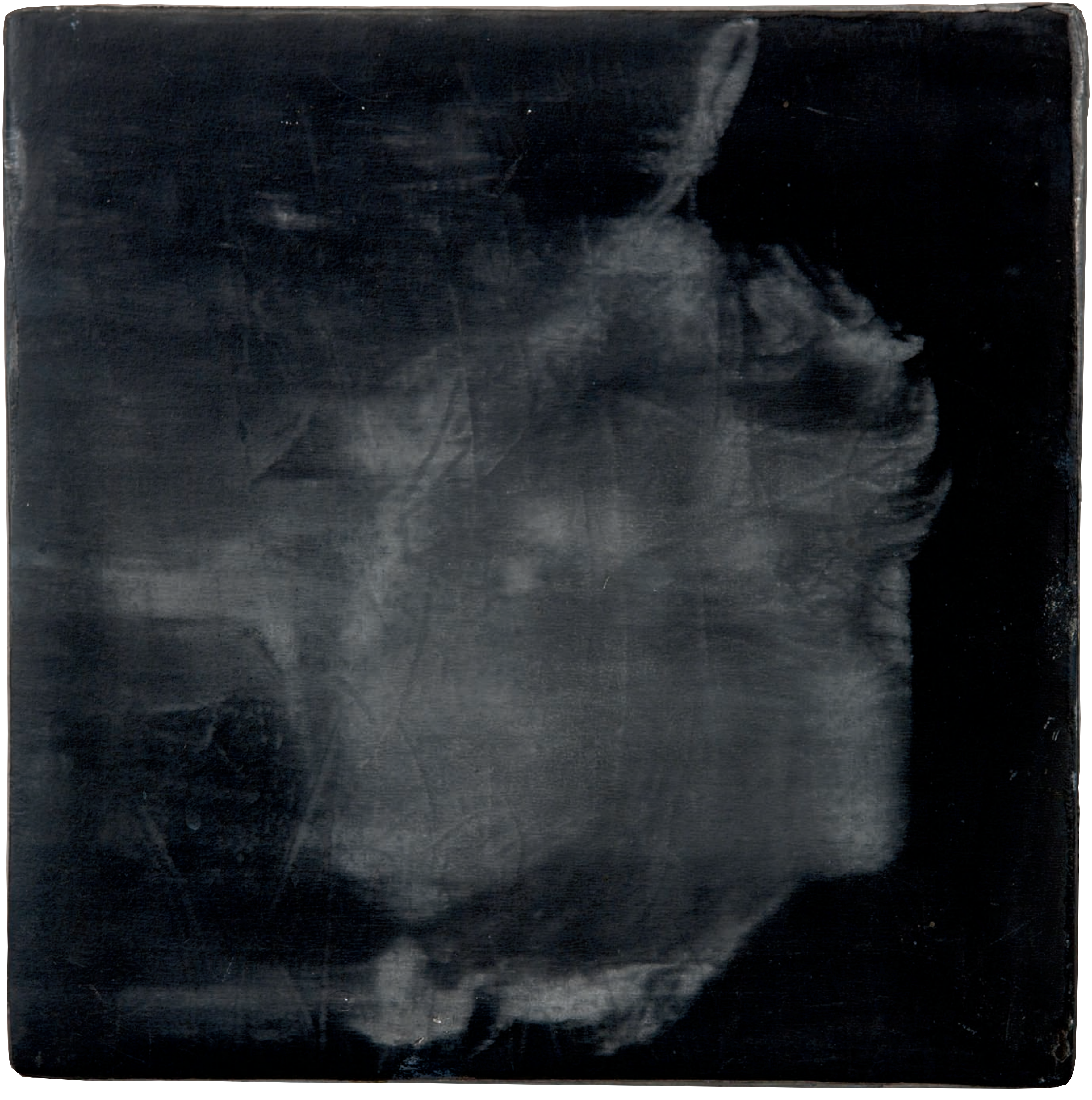
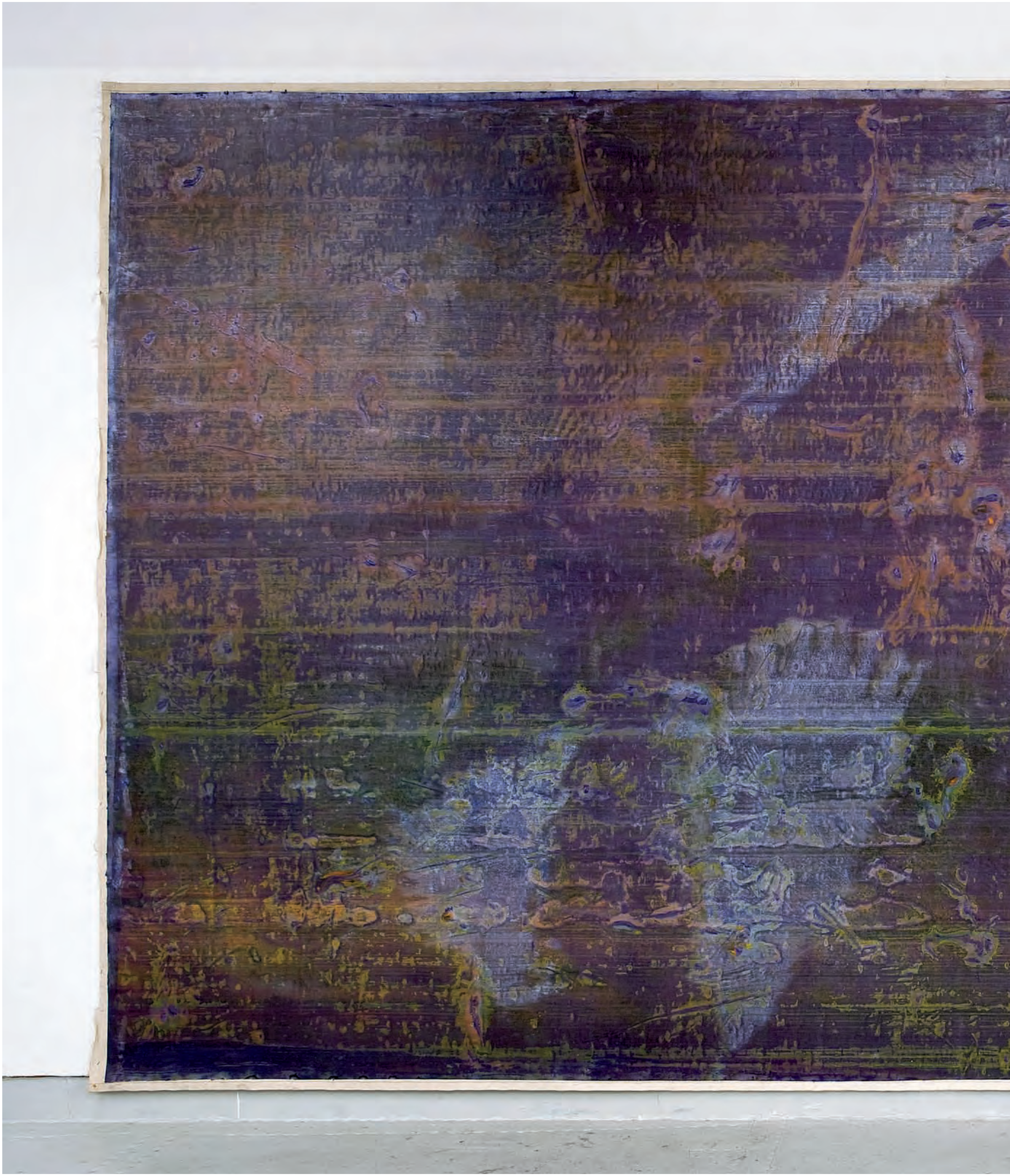
Jack Whitten

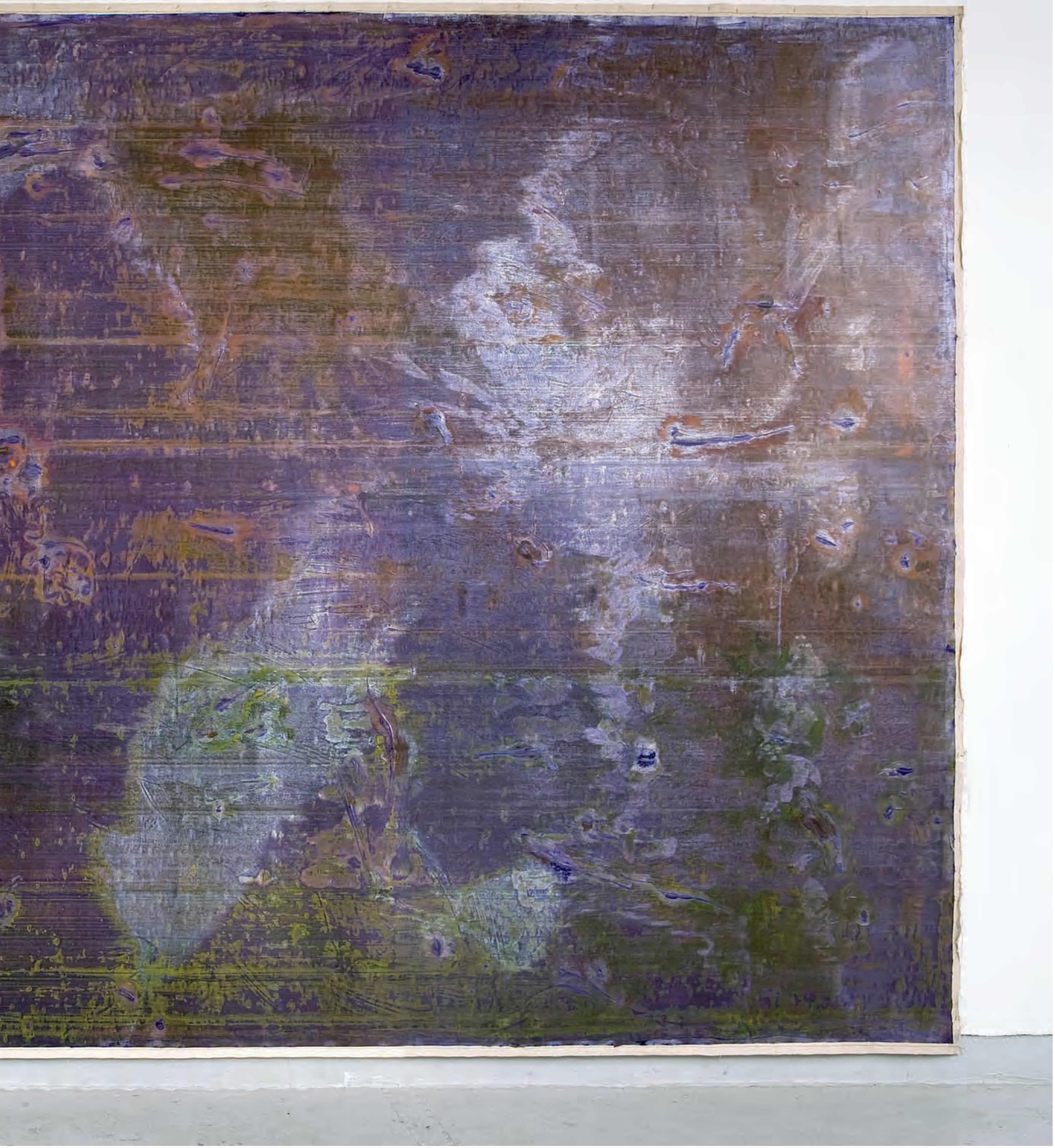
PORTFOLIO

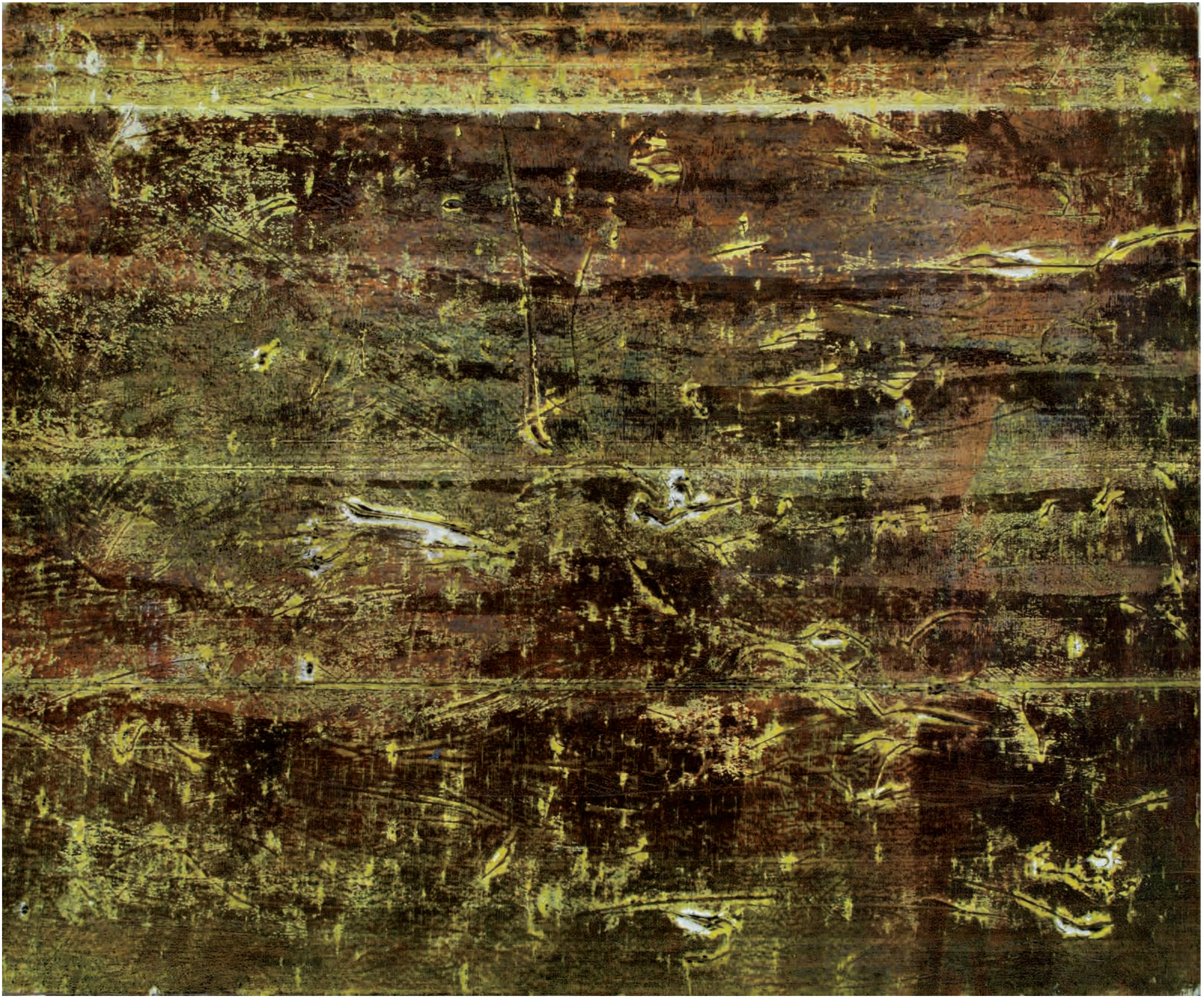


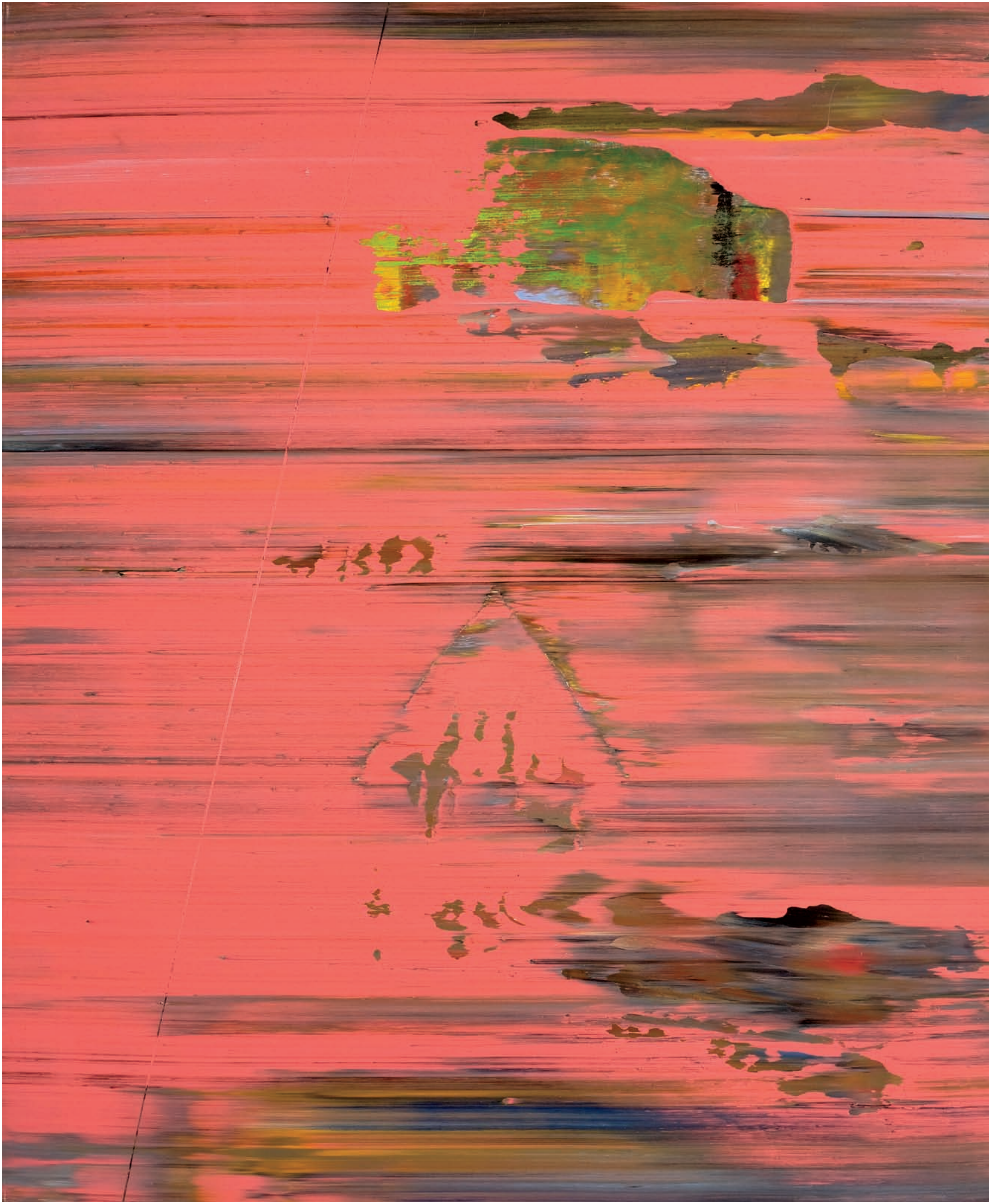


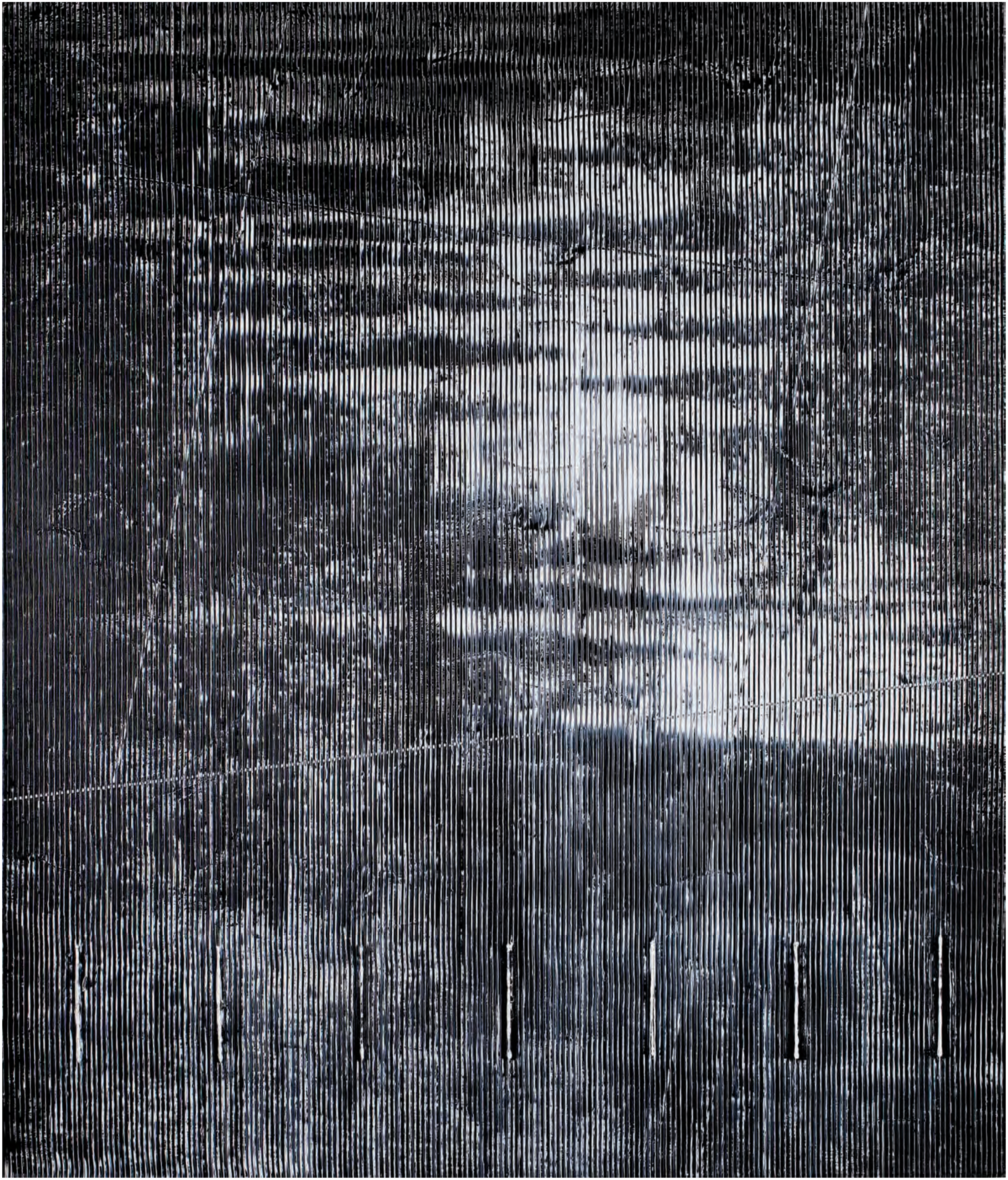


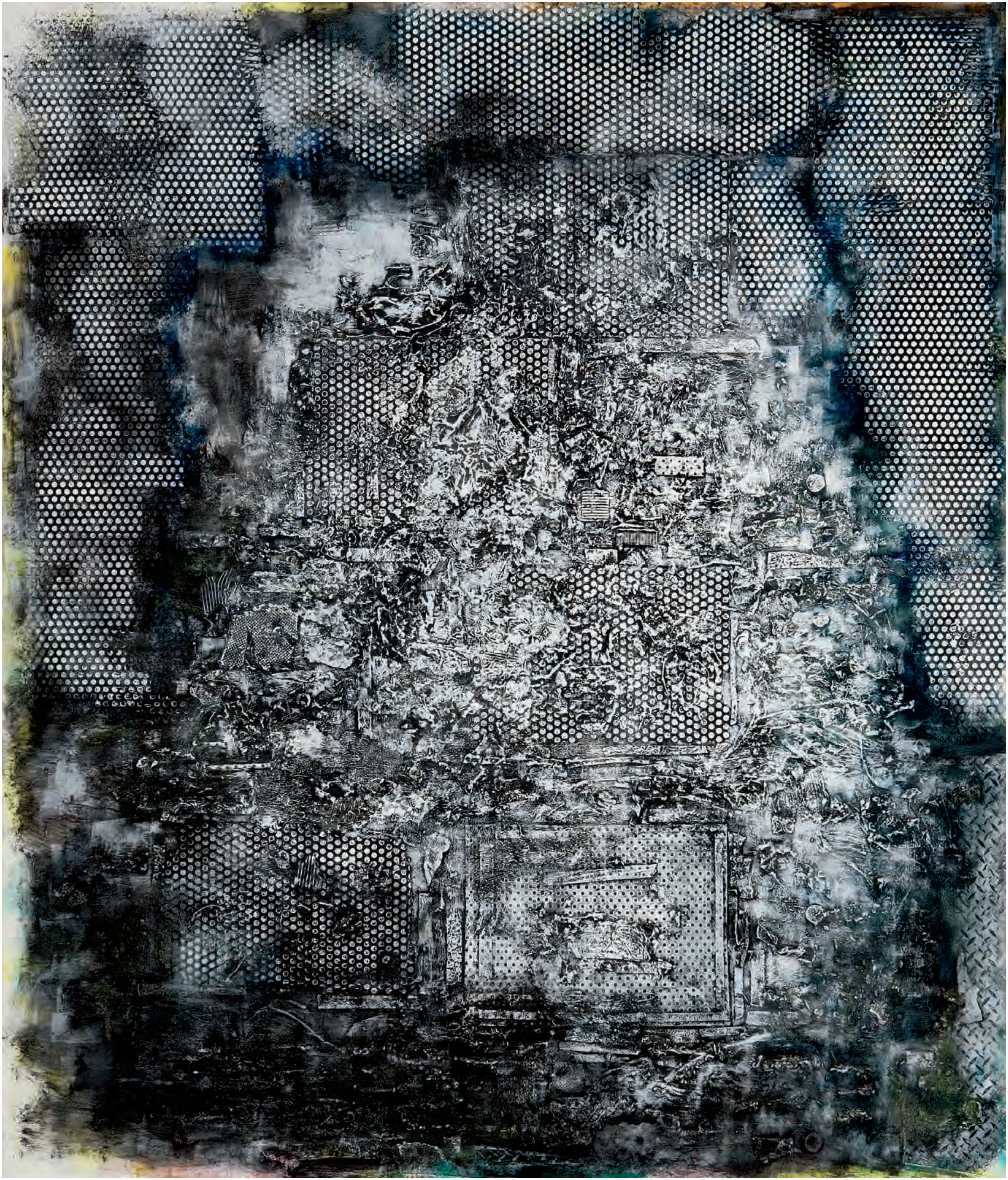


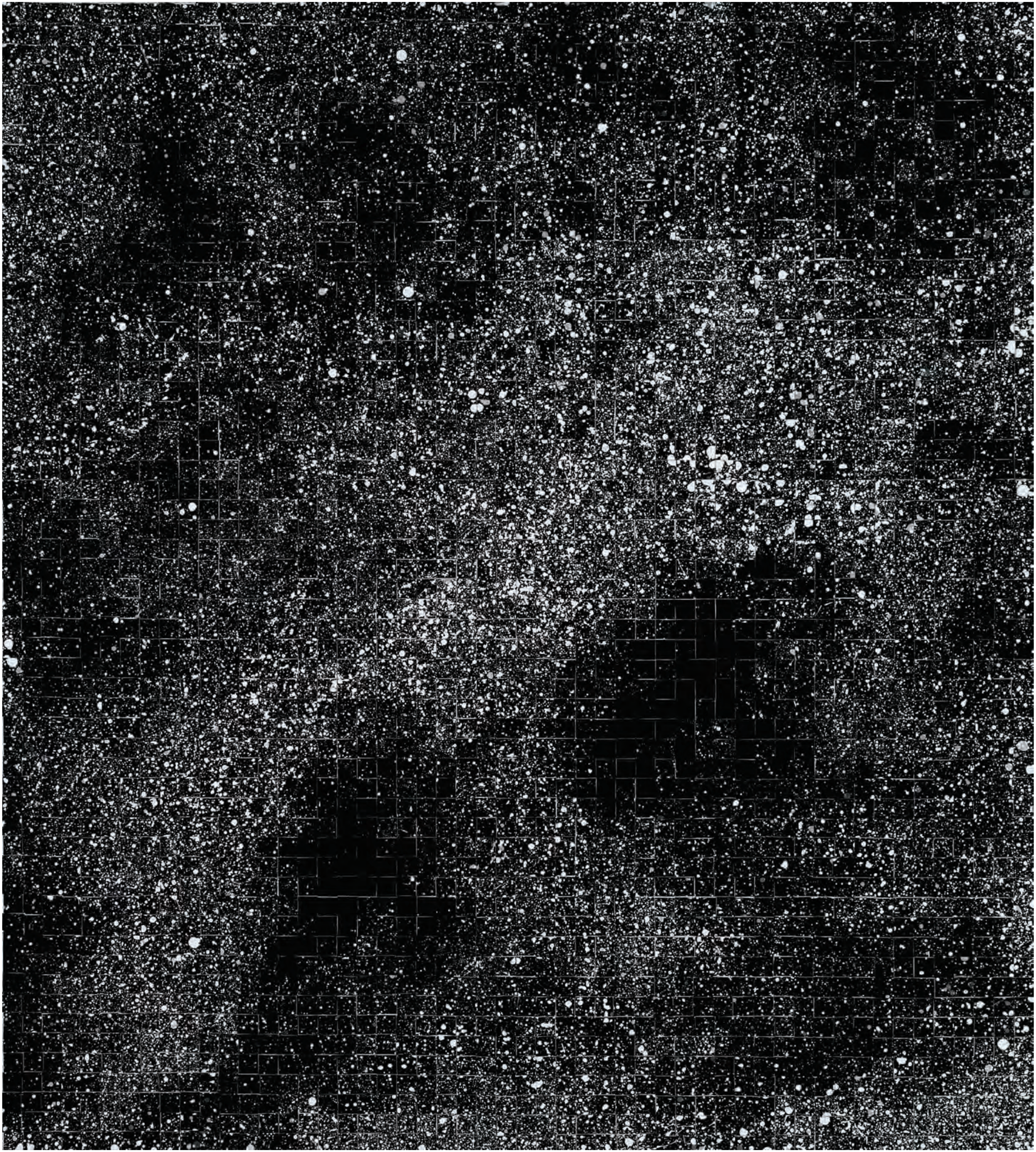












WHEN DOES AN IMAGE END? At the edge of the screen, we might say, or of the stretcher or the page. But none of these answers has ever seemed to satisfy Jack Whitten. His work eludes the perimeters we know. It conjures something else: infinite extension, scanning, even searching.

The modernist grid, of course, implied such extension: its vertical and horizontal lines always iterable, potentially continuing beyond the limits of a given picture, as if that picture had merely zoomed in on a larger array. Beginning in the 1960s, though, Whitten came to understand that other kinds of movement were possible too—ones the grid could not map—and he began to introduce techniques of imaging that were often the first of their kind.

In *Birmingham 1964*, the artist punctured a painted foil support from behind and so declared the picture resolutely three-dimensional. Yet unlike the slashes of Lucio Fontana or of the *décollagistes*, the rupture here reveals a single aperture, neat and vicious. Through it we see another layer, a sheer stretched stocking, and through that, a newsprint photograph of Birmingham police attacking civil rights demonstrators, the reproduction etiolated as if it, in turn, opened onto a suppurating wound, an endless punctum.

Whitten devised an equally haunted take on screen printing in his "Head" series of 1964. He stretched and sized cotton canvas and left it to dry, forming a sturdy surface onto which he smeared vague shapes in black and white acrylic paint with a flat scraper blade. While the paint was still wet, he laid a piece of blank mesh—a very fine textile such as silk or rayon—directly on top and pressed it into the viscous paint, then scraped off the excess. The result was a thin layer of acrylic trapped between two supports. The veiled and abraded image in the underpainting captures a ghosted movement, its future-anterior quality recalling spirit photography and infrared video alike.

Acrylic was an ideal material for Whitten's experiments. It is plastic and synthetic and lithe. The artist tested numerous binders, pigments, and emulsions, working with engineers and manufacturers such as Leonard Bocour, who famously customized the evanescent Magna for Morris Louis. By 1973, Whitten was pushing the pliancy of acrylic to the limit. For a work such as *The Pariah Way*, measuring some seventeen feet across, the artist constructed a giant neoprene squeegee. After building up layers of paint and letting them dry, he put down a watery layer of acrylic and pulled the squeegee across in one continuous motion. Thus "processed," as Whitten described it, the painting produced a dizzying, quasi-photographic blur, a decade or so before Gerhard Richter used similar devices to achieve the same effect.

Once the acrylic was left to solidify for a week or more, Whitten usually came back with a razor-sharp carpenter's plane and shaved away any remaining relief, exposing areas of paint underneath. He often had forgotten what lay below, so surprises abounded. And in works such as *Pink Psyche Queen*, 1973, Whitten exchanged the squeegee blade for a two-by-four, smearing the paint across with a lone three-second pull. Rather than building up passages of paint, he instead placed objects (wire, sheet metal, pebbles) *beneath* the canvas so that when the wooden implement was dragged across, negative shapes appeared as if in relief, subsumed in an even more dramatic halation—a stunning dromological haze.

It all came down to one pass. Pictorial incident was leveled in that stroke. But if many artists at the time had similarly reduced artistic gesture, submitting it to lugubrious gravity or tensility, Whitten's operation pointed to faster forces: radar, cathode ray, satellite, electron beam, hydrogen bubble chamber, inkjet. These technologies were all undergoing active development in the '70s, and Whitten was well aware of their impact. In 1974, he took up an artist's residency at Xerox Corporation. Working with the company's printers, cameras, and engineers, Whitten dabbled in the particularities of Xerox's dry electrostatic printing technology. Dry pigment, or toner, needs no binder or emulsion or darkroom but is set with heat. Whitten experimented with suspending toner in acrylic, but the carbon powder (today, polymers are used) was too dry to hold up well in the medium. He then applied toner directly to canvas or to paper with a flat scraper blade, essentially "drawing" with the implement, and used heat lamps to set the images. Yet because the toner was so sensitive—the slightest movement resulted in a mark—any gesture might cause a random stain or particulate scatter. The ensuing black-and-white registrations were, as a consequence, powdery, blurred, and stuttered, resembling folds, or jammed paper feeds, or alien textures seen in the raking "light" of the electron microscope.

Having purged color from the equation, Whitten transposed these strategies to purely abstract black-and-white acrylic paintings in various formulations, now constructing grayscale layers of paint that he raked over with different tools: Afro combs, brooms, flat sheet metal notched with 1/8-inch serrations. Works such as the "Gamma Group" series of 1975 induce moiré patterns or a lenticular refraction; they connect the physical pull to the parallel electronic or digital act, the line-by-line raster scan. Finally, they suggest what Whitten learned from Xerox: that he could go far beyond the indexical trace, just as xerography is not limited to one-to-one transfer (as is a silkscreen or a squeegee's stroke) but is capable, of course, of zooming out or enlarging, cropping or roving, scrolling or dragging. And above all, the Xerox was from its very inception seen as communicable: as an image that could be sent.

Whitten's works thus figured not only transcription but transmission. Later, he would bend and mold acrylic so as to suggest topological surfaces that defy boundedness or orientation; or he would tessellate the work into acrylic tiles that could be organized like a raster grid. These maneuvers stayed at the level of material analogy or iconic likeness (the works do not actually deploy video, for instance). But in committing to the strict parameters of acrylic, Whitten was able to foreground the structural link between material substrate—plastic, polymer, fiber optics—and immaterial network, the very link upon which information and experience still depend. And if these optical gyrations prefigure many different kinds of images and screens seen today, to fetishize such prescience is beside the point. For the artist's discoveries of certain strategies at certain historical moments should not be swept up in illusory notions of strict linear progress but rather seen for the singularities they are.

It is for this reason that attempts to delimit Whitten's work, to fit it into a story—whether that of systems art, de Kooning, Lower East Side painting, bebop, or of African-American abstractionists such as William T. Williams, Sam Gilliam, Joe Overstreet, and Ed Clark—feel inadequate, even if all these milieus play a part. Rather than responding to his social and artistic context with depictions or words, Whitten looks to their mediation and dissemination. Instead of showing or talking about subject matter, Whitten engages the very instruments that would prove most adept at controlling content and shaping subjects. In his works from the 1960s through to the present—nine of which are published for the first time here—Whitten asks just how far the image can go.

— Michelle Kuo

Page 185: **Jack Whitten, *Birmingham 1964***, aluminum foil, newspaper, stocking, and oil on plywood, 16⅝ x 16". All photos: John Berens.

Page 186: **Jack Whitten, *Head VII*, 1964**, acrylic on canvas, 23⅛ x 21¾".

Page 187: **Jack Whitten, *Head IV Lynching*, 1964**, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 11".

Pages 188–189: **Jack Whitten, *The Pariah Way*, 1973**, acrylic on canvas, 9' 2" x 17' 3".

Page 190: **Jack Whitten, *The First Loading Zone*, 1973**, acrylic on canvas, 59¾ x 72".

Page 191: **Jack Whitten, *Pink Psyche Queen*, 1973**, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 60".

Page 192: **Jack Whitten, *Gamma Group I*, 1975**, acrylic on canvas, 83¾ x 72".

Page 193: **Jack Whitten, *Sanctuary*, 1986**, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 82".

Page 194: **Jack Whitten, *The Messenger (for Art Blakey)*, 1990**, acrylic on canvas, 58 x 52".