

An abstract black and white artwork featuring numerous vertical white drips of varying lengths and thicknesses against a solid black background. The drips create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a waterfall or a series of rain streaks. The overall effect is dynamic and textured.

YEOH CHOO KUAN

STREAMING MOUNTAIN

YEOH CHOO KUAN STREAMING MOUNTAIN

10-30 January 2019



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STREAMING MOUNTAIN

Yeoh Choo Kuan
Kuala Lumpur, October 2018



Photo by Chin Kok Puah, 2017

As a Malaysian Chinese with a background in Western art, the foundation of my art practice is inclined towards Eastern aesthetics. Growing up without a traditional or formal training on Chinese ink, the influence of the ideology is introduced through illustrations found within a neighborhood Chinese temple I had frequently visited as a child. It was a visual language used to narrate stories from Buddhism.

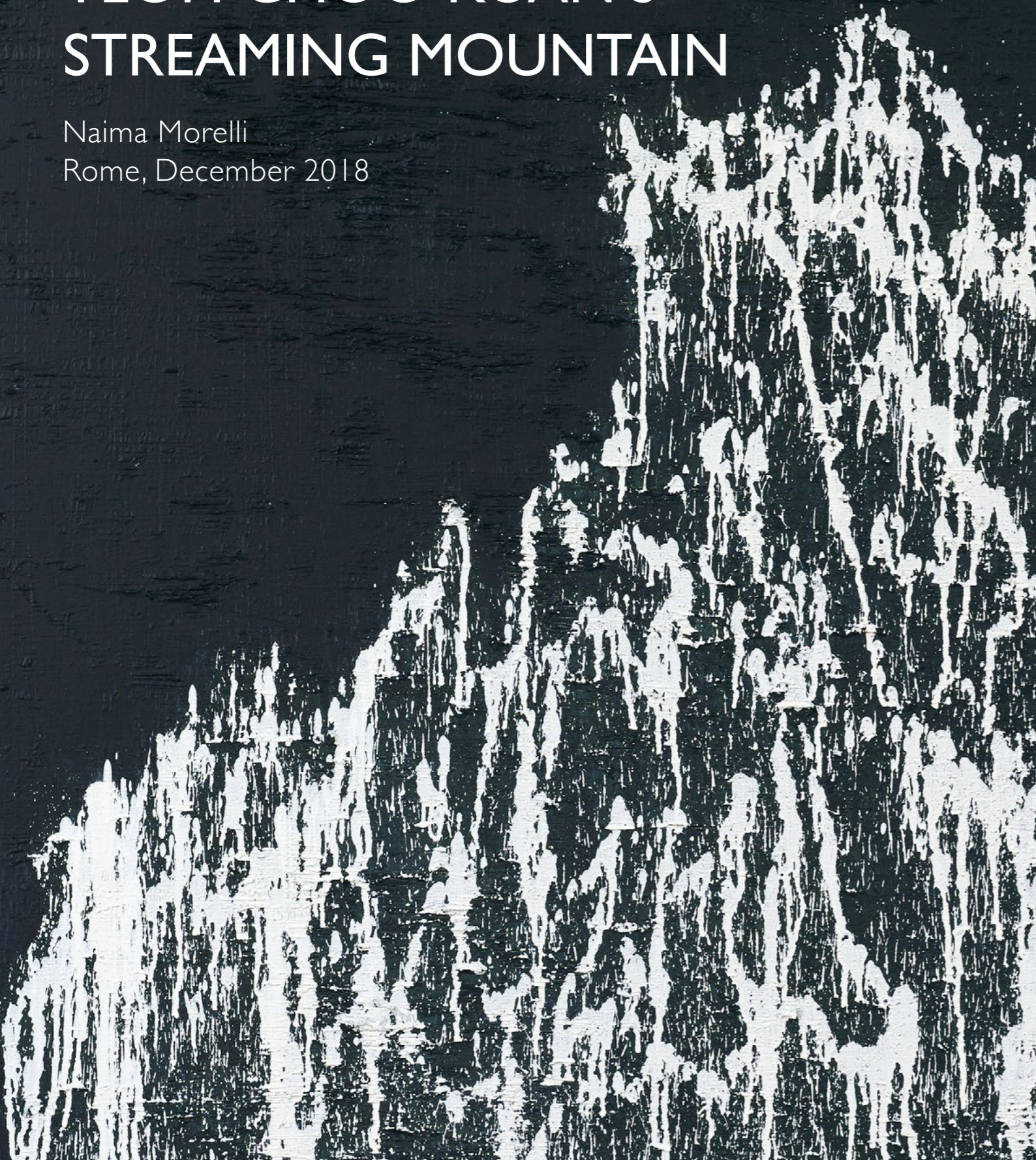
One of my fondest memory was of a “*Diyu*” (realm of the dead or “hell” in Chinese mythology) illustration book I used to pore through after tuition at the temple. “*Diyu*” is typically depicted as a subterranean maze with various courts to which souls are taken after death to atone for the sins, which they had committed while alive. Each court deals with a different aspect of atonement and different punishments; most legends claim that sinners are subjected to gruesome tortures until their “deaths”, after which they are “restored” only for the torture to be repeated. I remember the conflict in me as I read these texts while enjoying the images of the brutal naked bodies, for many years in the temple I had immersed myself in this emotional wander between positive and negative.

I see this recurring experience as the primary influence that might have contributed to a series in my practice that focuses on violence and flesh. “*In the Flesh*” (my first solo exhibition inspired by the violent aestheticized movies) and “*Live Leak*” (the second show which examines the act of looking at another’s pain through media), have both led me to take a deeper look into my admiration toward “*Diyu*” illustrations. Tortured figures meted out in various levels and chambers are often depicted in a landscape setting similar to traditional Chinese “*Shan Shui*” (mountain and stream), which I soon realised the uncanny resemblance whenever I look at traditional Chinese landscape paintings. It inspired me to paint my “*Shan Shui*” as a judgment court, rendered in monochrome and sequestered panels tucked between “*Yin*” and “*Yang*”, black and white, ascent and decay, literati and vulgar, pushing and tugging.

“*Streaming*” means “*Liu*” in Chinese, as in the painting process of slow dripping technique that acquires a “*sense of time*” in the state of fluxility. “*Mountains*” is “*Shan*” in Chinese, an allusion to the unyielding and construction of value. “*Streaming Mountain*” is a body of work measuring from the struggles within our value systems, reconfigured for new compatibility and extends my imaginations toward our future.

FAITH IN MYSTERY: YEOH CHOO KUAN'S STREAMING MOUNTAIN

Naima Morelli
Rome, December 2018



There is one traditional story that goes that when someone gets bitten by a snake in a forest, they can be assured that a plant that would serve as antidote is nearby. Whether this is truth or a myth, the story serves as an illustration that every problem comes bearing its own solution. We are born in a world full of struggles, war and violence, but we also have the solution to find peace and harmony within ourselves.

This idea is precisely what artist Yeoh Choo Kuan explores in his latest series "Streaming Mountain". His interest in the duality of the human experience is exemplified by the black and white nature of the "Streaming Mountain" paintings. In his metaphysical explorations the artist was nourished by a rich imaginary from around the world, first of all the philosophy behind the Tai Ji symbol, which encompasses both its monist (wuji) and its dualist (yin and yang) aspects. Throughout the years the artist allowed his conception of the relationship between opposites to shift quite a bit. In the beginning to him it was only black or white, and then it was all black and white. "Streaming Mountain" can be considered the visual for a further progress in his reflections, as he realized that eventually black is white, and white is black.

In this alchemic transformation, the life experiences of the artists were a major generator. While not apparent a first glance, Choo Kuan's works reflect the dark places of his own life. But more than darkness itself, the art stands for the remedy the artist took to get out from these shadows. It was the research of the antidote in the forest, in the valleys, in the streams what made him.

From his earliest mark-making experiments on painted images to his gestural abstractions, he explored themes he felt close to him. Hidden trauma, domesticity, sexuality, the human body, nature, death and the subconscious. While these topics are seemingly diverse, they are tied by a red thread, which is violence.

The first sparkle of fascination towards the topic is to retrace in Choo Kuan's childhood memories. These point to the neighborhood Chinese temple, and the figures of Diyu. This is the realm of the dead or "hell" in Chinese mythology. The Diyu is typically depicted as a subterranean maze with various levels and chambers where hideous and - dare I say - creative, tortures take place. The representation of these mangled body in a spiral of cruelty was provoked strong sensations in him, sparking deviant fantasies.

Once again, the antidote came with the poison. It was the Buddhist philosophy to give him a remedy and help him not get lost in that strange engrossment. However, an inner battle between an attraction towards violent images and the search for transcendence stayed with him over the years. To deal with it he started articulate it through art: "I learnt to see my individuality," he says "it emerged from the struggles and eventually configured a thin, yet also a firm boarder line between two worlds."

Through his works, he was able to share his experience, spark discussions and even elicit moral judging from the viewers. However, the artist himself doesn't hold any judgment when tackling these charged themes. In his opinion more judgement doesn't help: "I am just a cruel tyrant within my art empire, getting individual to dive into one's own visceral through art, which might actually do some good," he says.

The non-judgmental attitude was particularly evident in his solo "Live Leak" presenting Yeoh Choo Kuan's exploration of violence in mass media. The show displayed scarred tactile surfaces of peeled and coagulated paint in wooden box frames. Each work referenced recordings of violent events from around the world, found on the video sharing website LiveLeak.com. The only clear reference to his internet inspiration was in the title of the paintings.

We can already see in this series another element that we find today in "Streaming Mountain". That is the narrative behind the abstraction which is only hinted to, and never overtly revealed. Choo Kuan himself doesn't see as important that the viewer will understand the conceptual discourse behind his art. What mostly matters to him is whether the viewer could ride the energy in the painting and get lost for a little while. "The rest is optional. We are already restless with the overflowing information," he explains.

To convey this energy, the violent underpinning really impregnates the style characterized by highly textured stokes, which he defines "fleshing abstraction". This is a painting technique which manipulates the materiality of paint in violent gesture. It is through the act of painting itself that the violence drawn in from visual materials, current events, and landscapes gets translated into pure abstract form. Abstraction becomes the means to transcend the feeling and thought.

The coexistence of opposites so near and dear to the artist's art

is found in his method of construction and deconstruction. This is the way he gets to abstraction. It starts with need to construct something good in terms of colour, composition, layering, and then "abusing it" and "torturing it". In his own personal Diyu, Choo Kuan would slice, peel and stab the canvas, to turn it the lovely into the hideous. Flowing from decision to decision, always with an eye on the final stage, this is how carries out the 'destruction process'.

For the "Streaming Mountain" series the artist first did the textured surface, executed in the same violent gesture as previous work, and only then pour the paint onto it. The paint run and splashed in interesting directions and endowing the painting more depth of expression. The artist describes the pleasure watching the paint dripping amongst the texture as "caressing my old wounds".

"Streaming Mountain" brings the energy of Choo Kuan's fleshing abstraction into traditional Chinese landscape, the shan shui paintings. Literally translating as "mountain-water", the word shan shui is a Chinese abstraction of natural landscapes in brush and ink. First arising to prominence during the 5th century, in the reign of the Liu Song dynasty, shan shui painting was later characterized by a group of landscape painters producing large-scale landscapes. They favoured the representation of mountains, seen as sacred places in China. Chinese's naturalism has mystical connotations; these painters made clear to the viewer that to them nature was the homes of immortals, a doorway to the heavens. The philosophical interest in nature shared strong references to Taoist imagery and motifs, as well as Daoist symbolism. It showed how small was human presence confronted to the vastness of the cosmos.

An element which drew Yeoh Choo Kuan in was certainly the interest of those landscape painters in the patterns or principles that underlie all phenomena, whether natural and social. This translated for traditional paintings in the highly structuralized nature of their genre. This of course was remixed and personalized in Yeoh Choo Kuan's abstractions. What we can see in the "Streaming Mountain" series, is that Choo Kuan's retained the subject of mountains and streams from shan shui painting. Another element he took from tradition is that the image he created didn't correspond to reality, but was a representation of his thoughts about nature. In fact shan shui painting is not an open window for the viewer's eye; it is rather an object for the viewer's mind, a vehicle of philosophy. Hence the black and white refusing any realism or likelihood.

While shaking up the rigid structure of shan shui paintings, Choo Kuan also retained some of its most important components. The first rule in shan shui is that the pathways should never be straight, but meander like a stream. The artist indeed deepened the landscape, mimicking the patterns that nature creates through melting paint. The second element which we can also find in "Streaming Mountain" is the presence of a threshold, which symbolically provides a special welcome. The threshold can be the mountain, or its shadow upon the ground, or its cut into the sky. But perhaps the stronger element that tied Yeoh Choo Kuan's conception to that of shan shui is the presence of what has been called "The Heart". This is the focal point of the painting and all elements should lead to it. The heart defines the meaning of the painting. Again, this is a technical feature as well as a symbolic one.

Interestingly enough, the artist never received a specific, formal training in Chinese ink painting. However, in the beginning he was largely influenced by its aesthetic. The philological part set in during his years at art school, where he learned about the Taiwanese aesthetic scholar Jiang Xun. His book "A Contemplation on Chinese Art", was for Choo Kuan's a seminal text. This is the book from where he discovered his Malaysian Chinese upbringing culture in relation to Chinese art. In that framework he could consider the shared values of Malaysian and Chinese and how they would express the similar identities. The book made a relatable introduction for him to enter from a personal point of view and later branch out to the large knowledge structure of Chinese art. He started seeing Chinese art forms from an aesthetic perspective that also incorporates personal experience, cultural reflection and social criticism.

With the show "Streaming Mountain" the artist is determined to contribute in advancing the discussion traditional Chinese art, which he feels is quite stale at the moment. As a third generation Malaysian Chinese artist, he silently shares his questions with the viewers: What is our contemporary stance in relation to this traditional art form? Is there anything I could inherit from the Chinese art developments since the 70's? Can I model it according to my local context? How can we enrich and connect to the Chinese art discourse?

Another point to highlight is how the works are organized in the show. Many are put next to each other in a single piece, which multiplies their individual meaning. These installations activate more dynamics between the blacks and whites, materializing another dimension. Some of the paintings in Streaming Mountain are shown as installations, or set in a room in an immersive way. The idea for the presentation was already formed in the mind of the artist while he was working at those pieces, with Richard Koh's gallery space in mind. Others, like the impressive 2 meters by 20 meters installation scroll, lived in the imagination of the artist right before the installation, having been painted in many sections due to the limited studio space.

In the series, the biggest challenge for the artist was the aforementioned inclination towards the metaphysical approach instead of straightforward visual narration. Indeed, in all the works from "Streaming Mountain", we can feel a strong tension. Again, this is due to the highly personal content which is made evident the titles of the works, which hinted to the "behind the scenes" like it was for "Live Leak". Quivering mountains are called "Goosebumps Under My Gut", melting landscape have the peremptory tone of "Finit hic, Deo". A double panel of juxtapositions of blacks and whites gives the feeling of gasping for air, and it is aptly called "Last Breath".

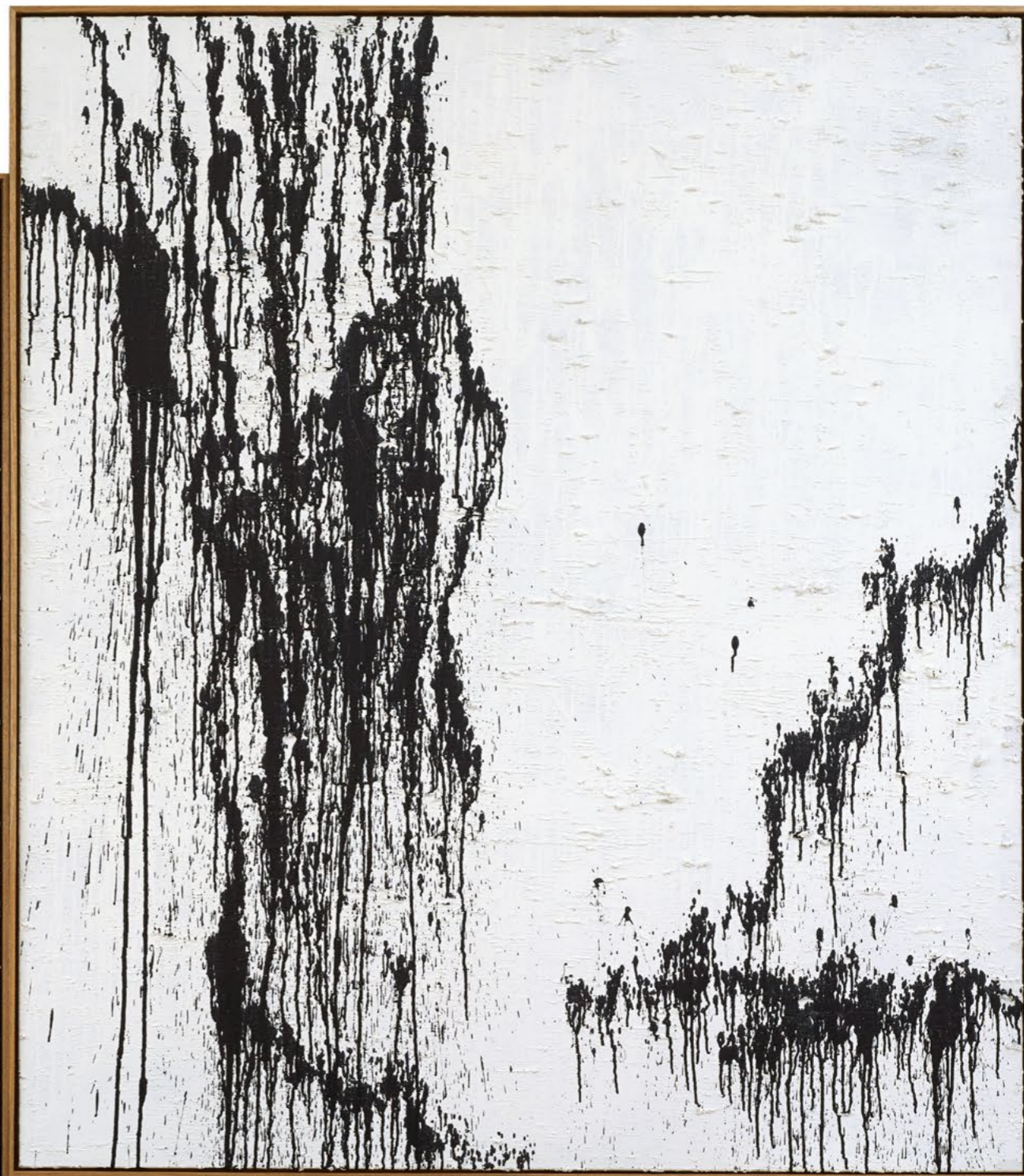
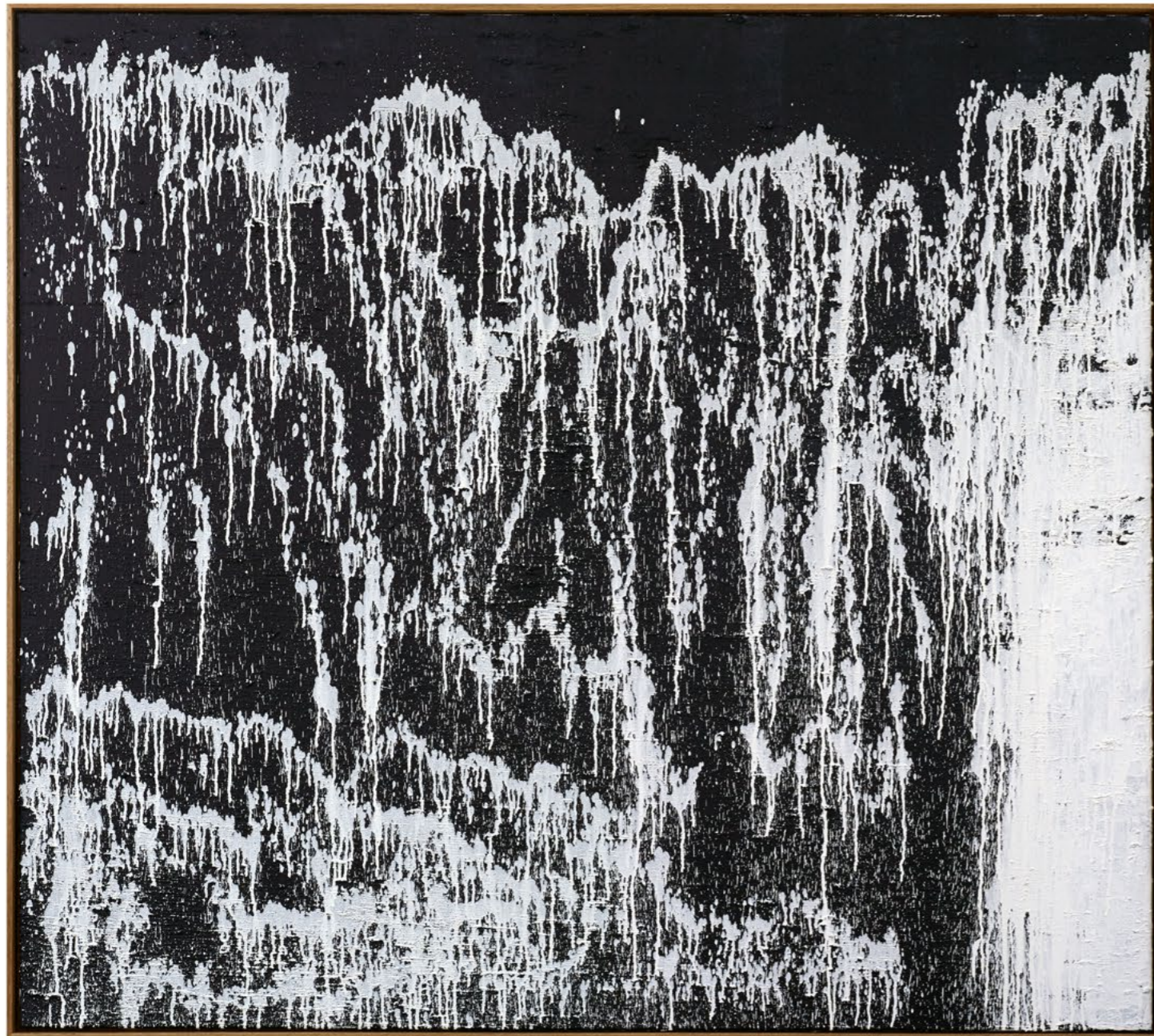
We can look at the artworks of "Streaming Mountain" as a powerful contemplation of the unknown, a conceptualisation of what the artist has seen and learned about the human nature, exemplified in the purity of form. Yeoh Choo Kuan worked in a delicate balance between imagination, spontaneity, impulse control, and bravery, flowing down his own personal mountain, encountering snakes, finding antidotes. "Sometimes it hits in an unbelievable way, sometimes it misses us and put us back to zero," says Choo Kuan. "It is all about putting my faith in mystery."

WORKS



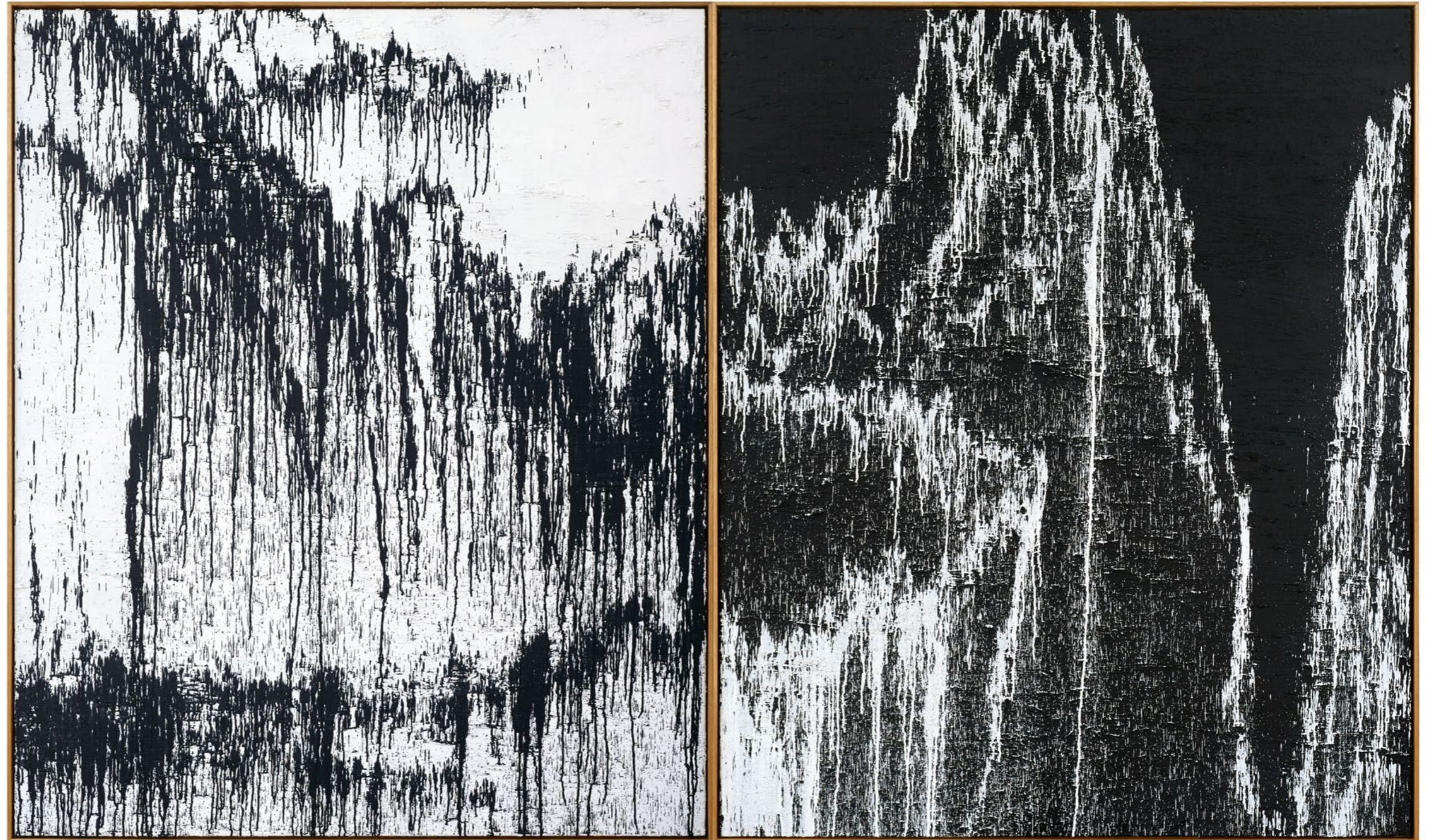
Extreme Prejudice

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 121.5 x 105 cm; 134.5 x 148 cm, 2018



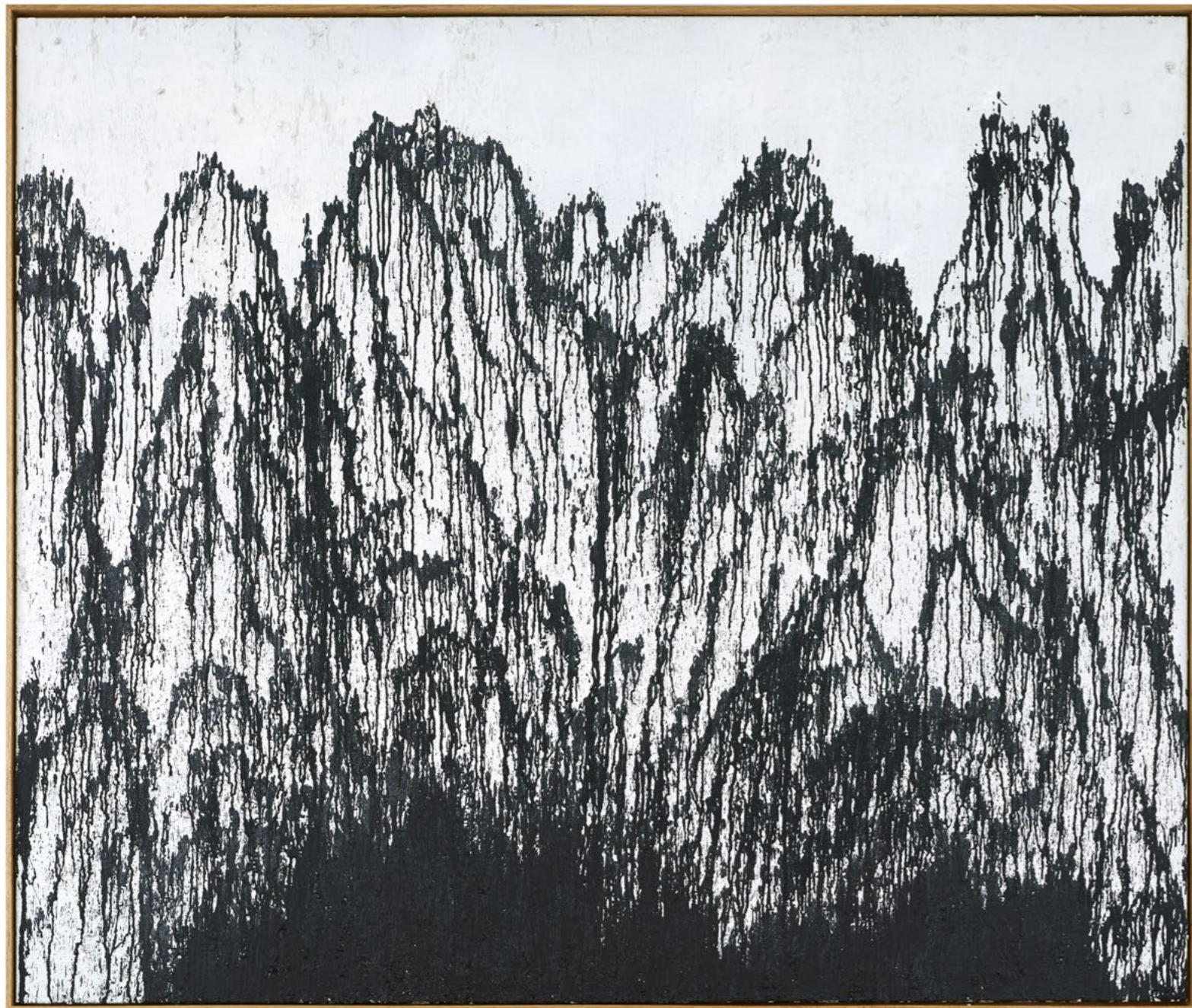
Practical Tragic

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 153 x 183 cm; 170 x 150 cm, 2018



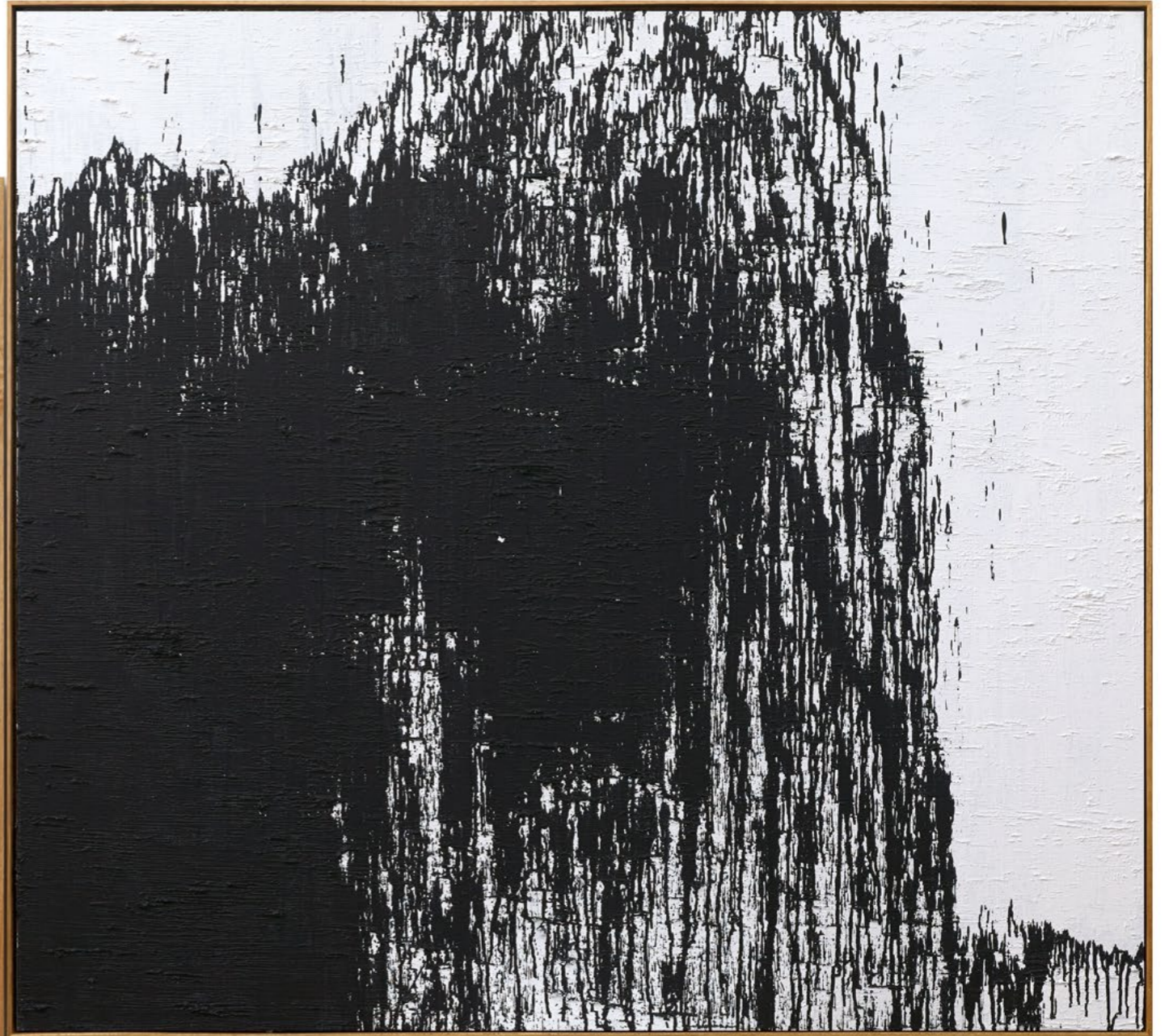
Side by Side

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 183 x 183 cm each, 2 panels, 2018



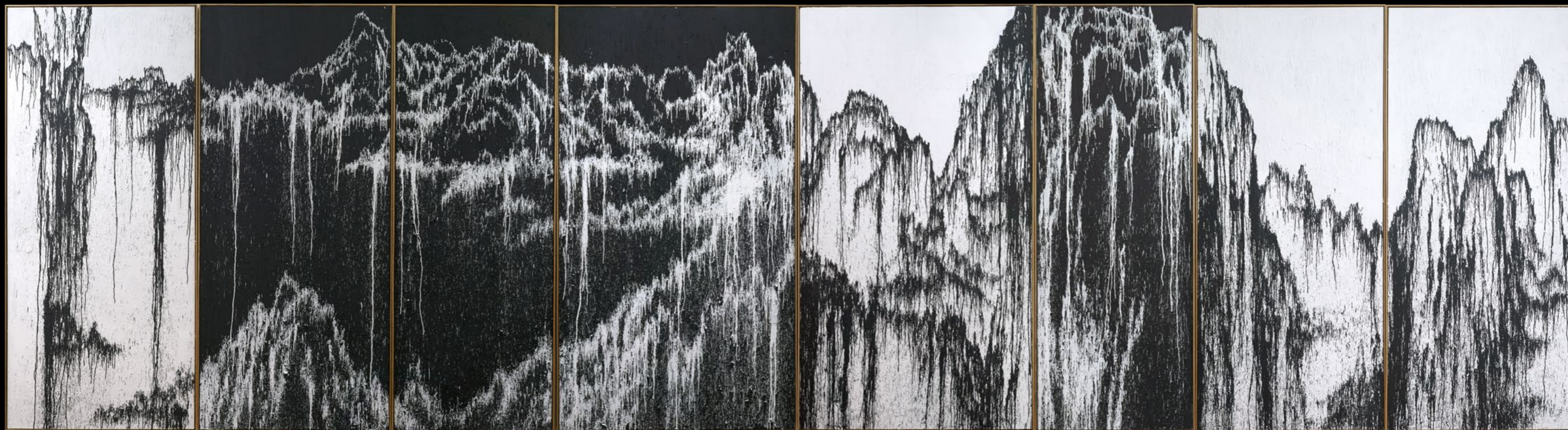
Join Us On the Other Side

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 153 x 183 cm; 76 x 121.5 cm, 2018



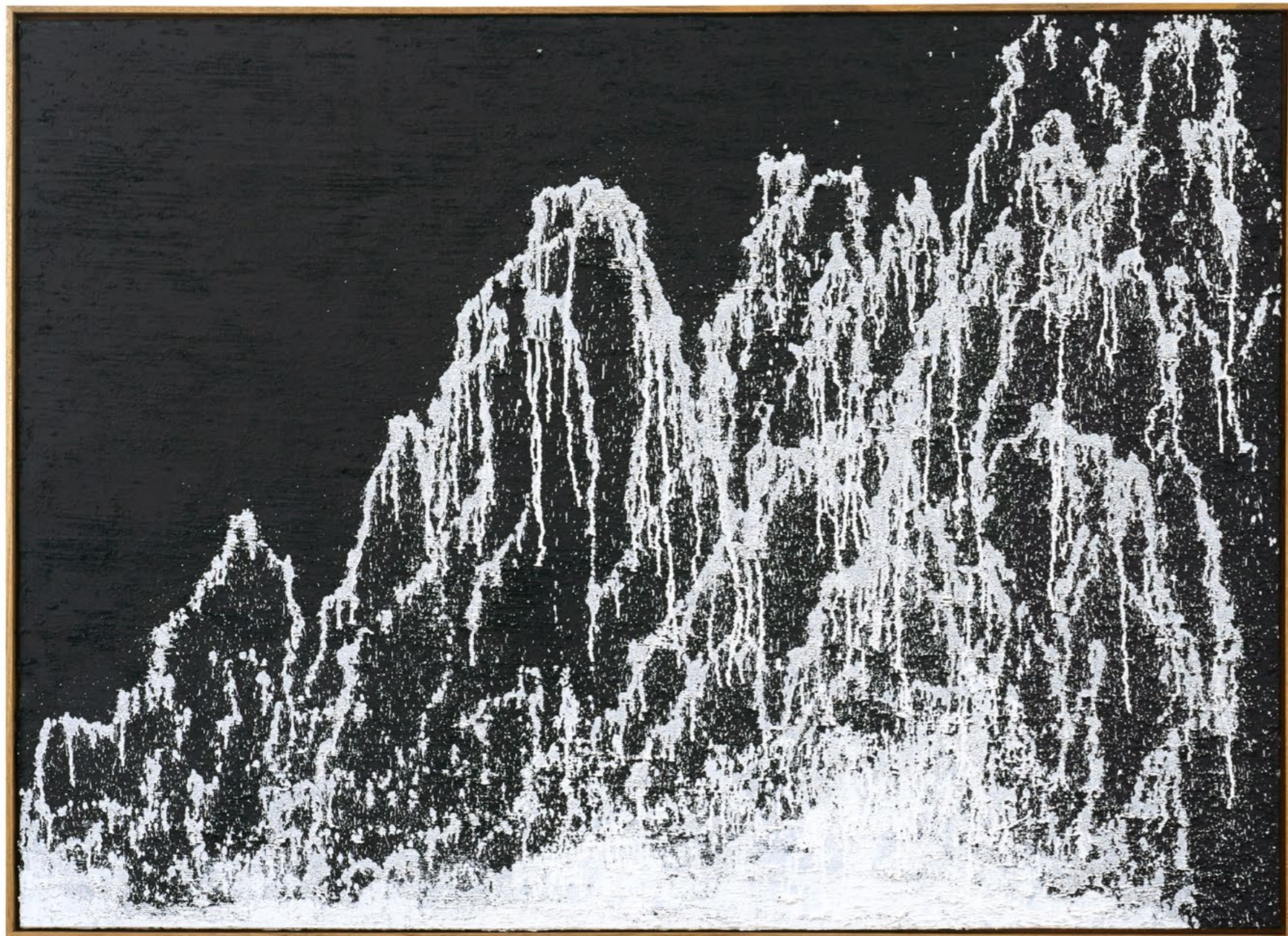
Midnight Project

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 121.5 x 76 cm; 148 x 134.5 cm, 2018



In the Beginning It Was Only Black or White

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 980 x 270 cm, 8 panels, 2018

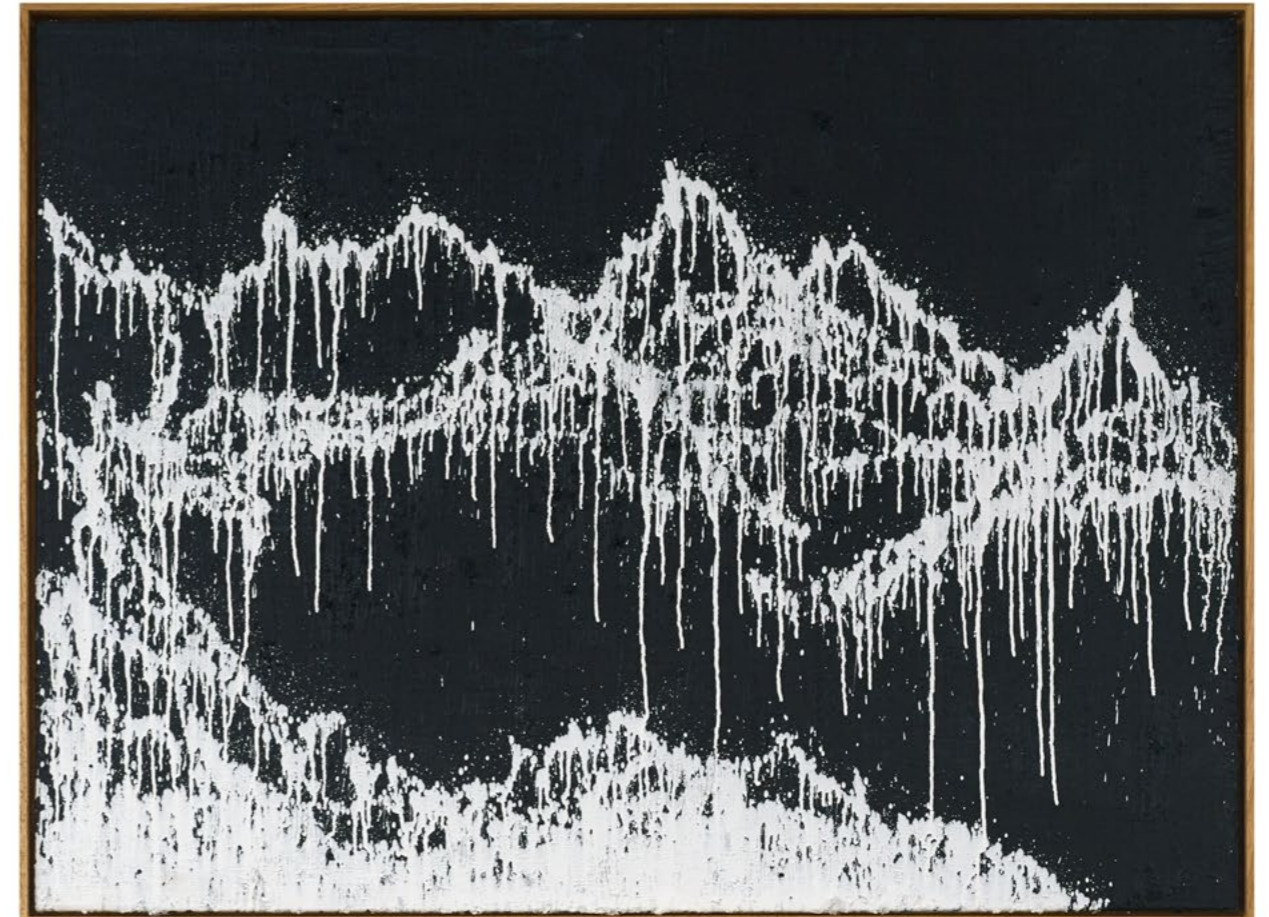


Ready to Off

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 115 x 160 cm; 120 x 89 cm, 2018

Mind Trick

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 89 x 120 cm; 105 x 121.5 cm, 2018





Finit hic, Deo

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 134.5 x 148 cm; 120 x 89 cm, 2018



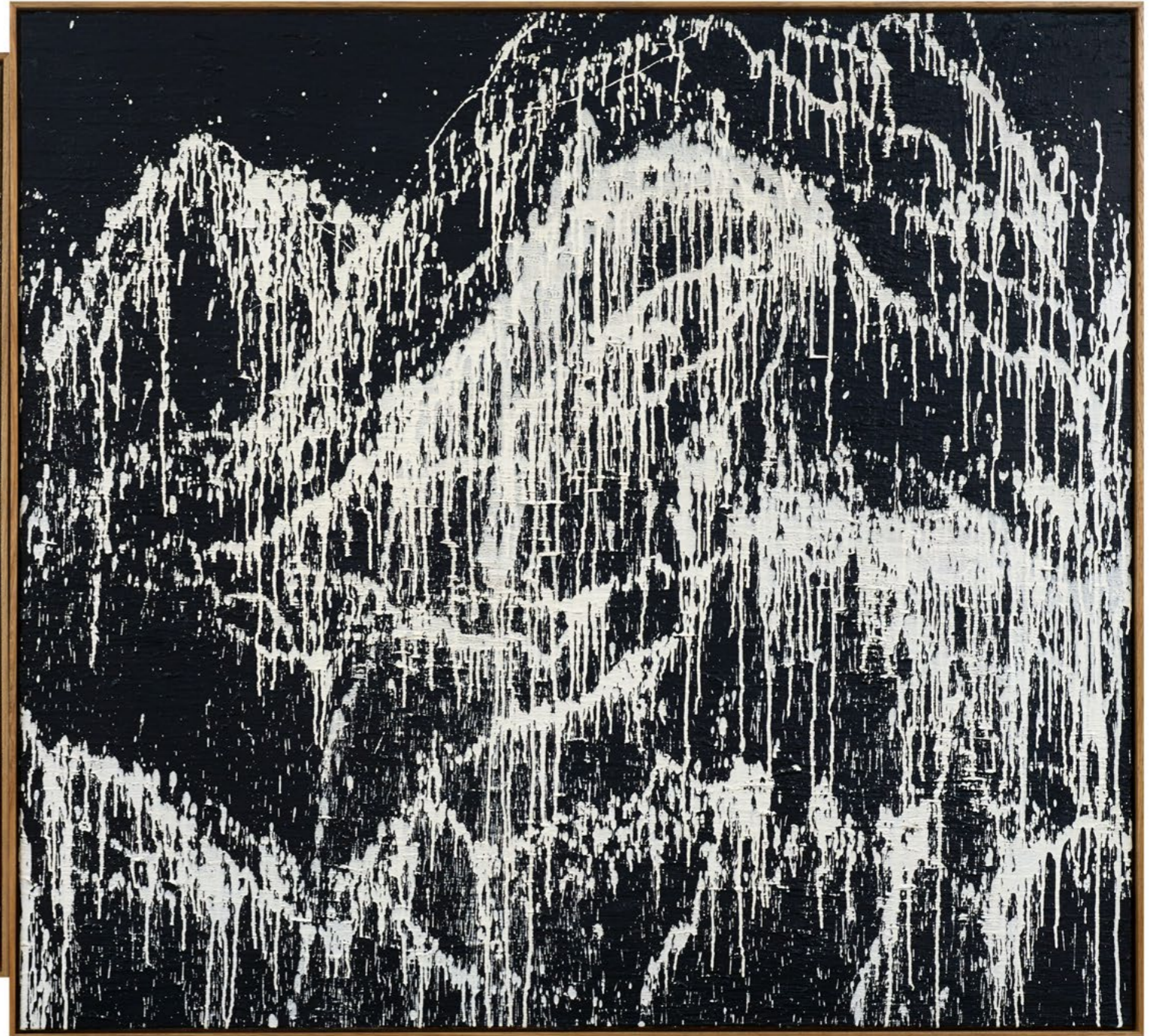
Last Breath

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 60 x 60 cm; 121.5 x 105 cm, 2018



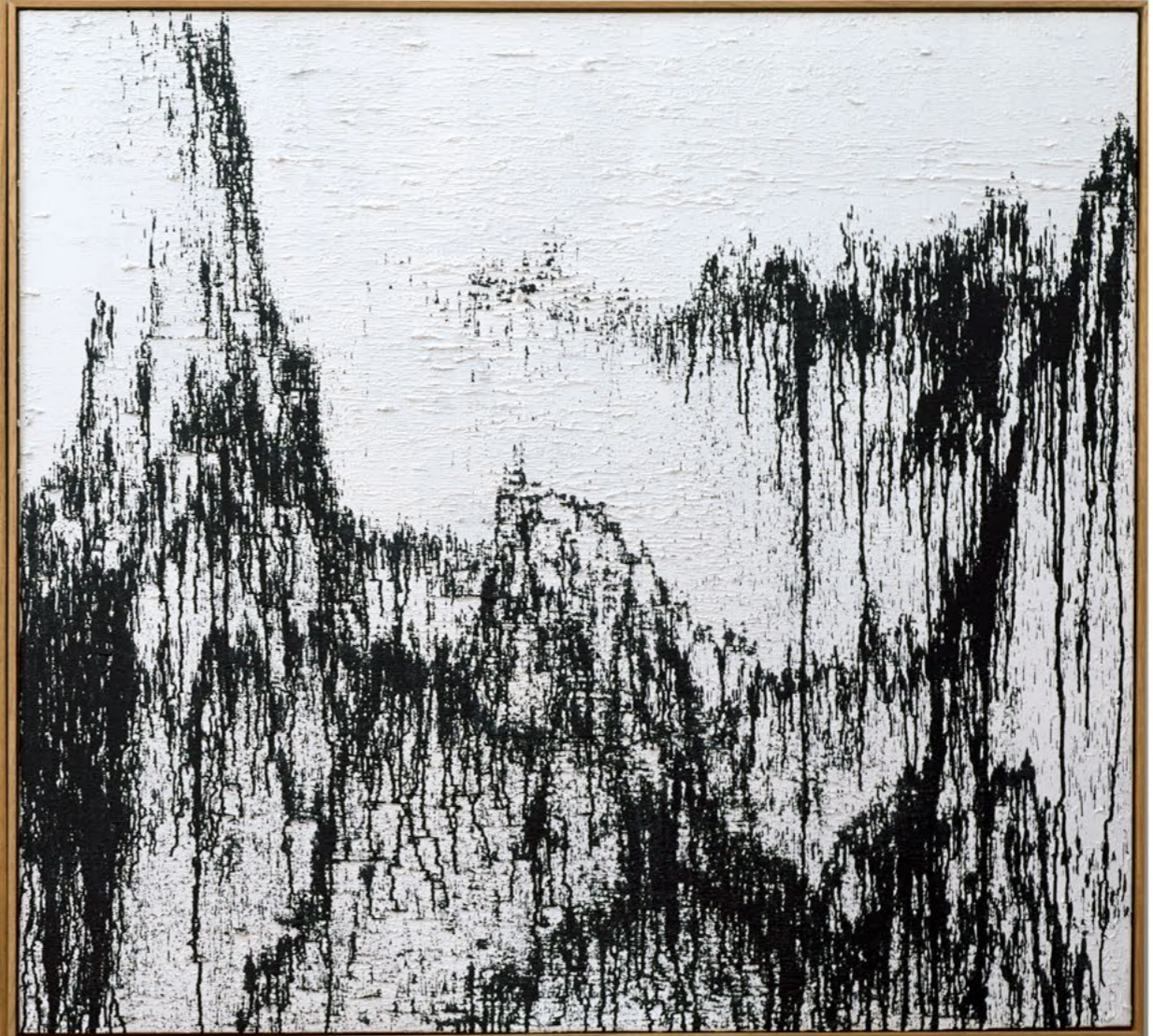
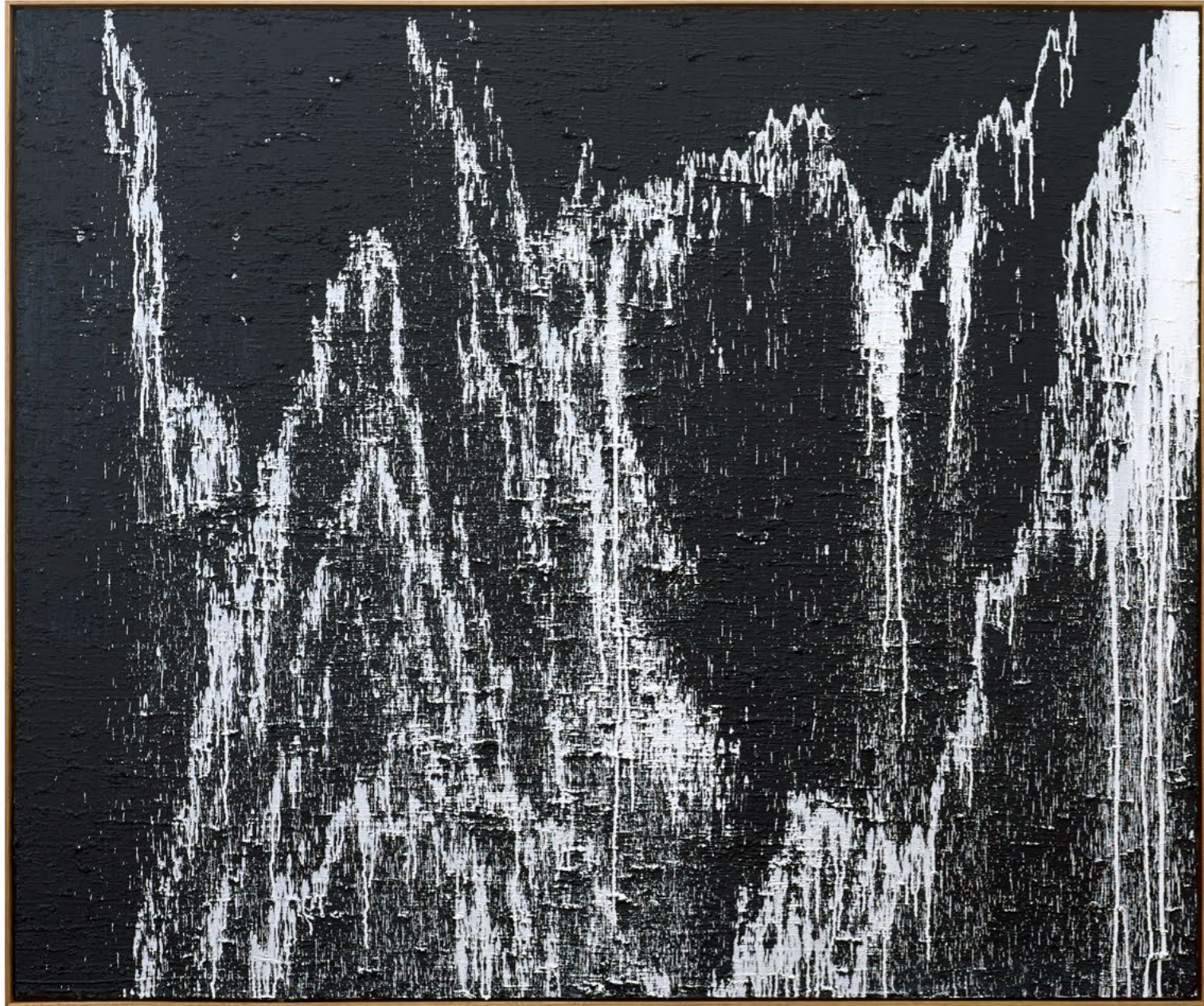
Goosebumps Under My Gut

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 148 x 134.5 cm; 60 x 80 cm, 2018



Sunken Place

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 120 x 89 cm; 134.5 x 148 cm, 2018

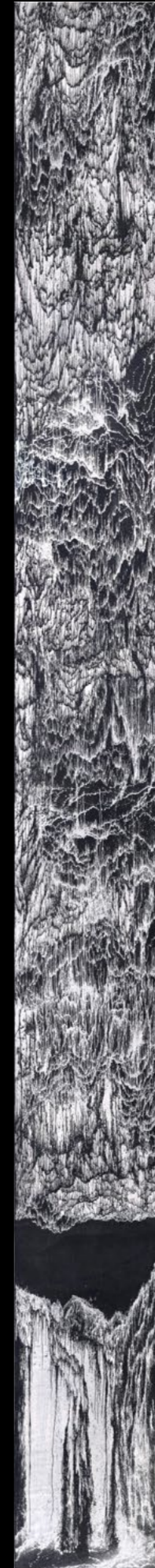


Horror has a Face

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 153 x 183 cm; 134.5 x 148 cm, 2018

Streaming Mountain

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 2000 x 200 cm, 2018



Installation view

Streaming Mountain

Acrylic and structuring paste on linen, 2000 x 200 cm, 2018



Yeoh Choo Kuan



Yeoh Choo Kuan (b. 1988, Malaysia) lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His work is an exploration of the possibilities through mark-making. He has explored a variety of themes including domesticity, sexuality, the human body, as well as death and the subconscious. His early autobiographical works illustrate the purging of unrest and hidden emotions left by traumatic experiences through mark-making on painted imageries. His approach had since shifted toward gestural abstraction with highly textured strokes, which is referred to as his self-coined “Fleshing Abstraction” - a synthesis of disintegration set in contrast as the tension and forces are weighted on the oil surfaces.

Informed by distinctive visual languages accumulated over the course, he is currently drawing inspiration from nature to discover the potential of landscaping and pictorial means.

Education

- 2010 Diploma in Fine Arts, Dasein Academy of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *Streaming Mountain*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2018 *Lights In*, Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok
- 2017 *Live Leak*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2014 *In the Flesh*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 *Private Sentiment*, House of Matahati, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2019 Public Artwork, ART STAGE Singapore, Singapore
- 2018 VOLTA 14, Basel, Switzerland
- Art Central 2018, Richard Koh Fine Art, Hong Kong
- The Modalities of Abstraction: Srihadi Soedarsono & Yeoh Choo Kuan*, Art Agenda, S.E.A., ART STAGE Singapore 2018, Singapore
- The Horizon is Just an Illusion: New Thoughts on Landscape, Our Artprojects*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 *The Artling Pop-up*, Artspace @ Helutrans, Singapore
- THE UNREAL DEAL - Six Decades of Malaysian Abstract Art, Bank Negara Museum and Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- VOLTA 13, Richard Koh Fine Art, Basel, Switzerland
- Art Central 2017, Richard Koh Fine Art, Hong Kong
- Art Stage Singapore 2017, Singapore
- 2016 *Malaysian Art, A Special Preview*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Malaysian Art, A New Perspective*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Art Central Hong Kong 2016, Hong Kong
- Art Stage Singapore 2016, Singapore
- 2015 China International Gallery Exposition (CIGE) 2015, Beijing, China
- Synthesis*, The Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
- I am Ten*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Art Central Hong Kong 2015, Hong Kong

Art Stage Singapore 2015, Singapore

Malaysian Art, A New Perspective, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Malaysia Art, A New Perspective, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore

2014 Art Taipei 2014, Taipei, Taiwan

Southeast Asian Pavilion, KIAF/14, Seoul, Korea

Arts Kuala Lumpur – Melbourne, Space@Collins Street Melbourne, Australia

Configuration, G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

MEAA, White Box, Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2013 50/50 (two man show with artist Zelin Seah), TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SAGER III (touring exhibition in 3 countries), HOM Gallery (Malaysia), Perahu Art Connection (Indonesia), Orange Gallery (Philippines)

Frame of Mind II, Orange Gallery, Bacolod City, Philippines

No Random Nonsense, Boston Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines

X Individuals- The Explorations, Art Accent Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Figuration Trajectory, G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Up, Group Exhibition, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Locals Only, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2012 *Young & NEW Part IV*, House of Matahati, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

A Meter Diameter, House of Matahati, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2011 MEAA, Soka Gakkai Cultural Building, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The Malaysian Rice Plate Project, KL Convention Center, Suria KLCC, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

INSPIRATION OF TOMORROW, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2010 NOW!, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Breakthrough, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Residencies

2017 Red Gate Residency, Beijing, China

2015 Rimbun Dahan, Selangor, Malaysia



Richard Koh Fine Art has been in operation since 2005 and is regarded as a pioneer for introducing contemporary art to Malaysia and the region. Promoting an adventurous roster of emerging and established artists, the gallery regularly mounts exhibitions locally and abroad with a commitment to emerging practices and challenging media.

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