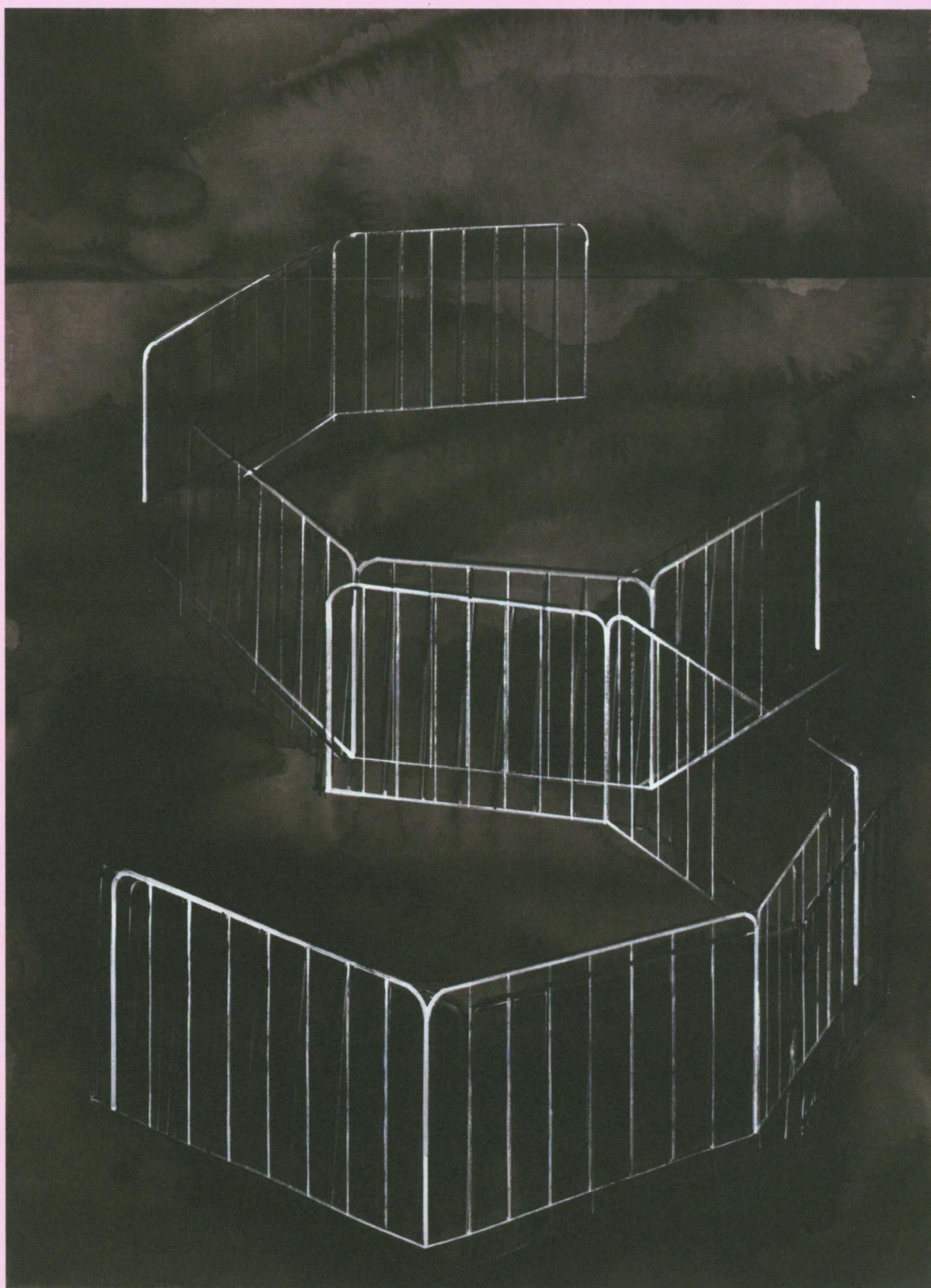


Sreshta Rit Premnath, *The Pot Calls  
the Kettle Black*, no. 5, 2020





# SRESHTA RIT PREMNAATH

## *Zone of Nonbeing*

ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

Srestha Rit Premnath's installation *Kettling* (2021) pivots around a cluster of plaster-coated thin rectangular foam pieces sandwiched between steel frames. The lower half of each sheet of foam is cut to resemble two legs and meant to be a proxy for a human figure. Similarly sized steel frames, a few of which have reflective emergency blankets stretched taut over them, jut out from each end of this precariously held together group of objects. Overall, there are four discrete "zones" of unequal negative space for a viewer to inhabit.

The title of the installation points to a technique used by police to corral bodies through an orchestrated confinement. It came under scrutiny during the protests that took place nationwide in the United States—and quickly spread worldwide—after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the materiality and scaling of the serially repeated units of steel frames in the work are based on photographic research Premnath conducted on barricades used by police. His drawings lean toward more explicit engagement with the mechanics of kettling, but in this essay I want to address the controversial control of bodies by focusing on the indeterminate and immaterial spaces—what I refer to as "zones"—of his installation.

To begin, Premnath engages in a classic minimalist strategy to produce artworks that are human in scale and thereby not threatening. Thus a viewer, as Robert Morris puts it, is aware "that he himself is establishing relationships as he approaches the object from various positions."<sup>2</sup> The art historian Michael Fried adds useful traction to Morris's statement: viewers "stand in an indeterminate, open-ended . . . relation" to literalist works, but this also means that subjects are "distanced by such objects," which is not unlike being "crowded, by the silent presence of another person." In this way, "the experience of coming upon literalist objects . . . can be . . . if momentarily, disquieting."<sup>3</sup> Fried's thoughts are helpful in registering the potentially disquieting aspect of a viewer's encounter with *Kettling*. For instance, whereas the steel frame units that shape negative space do not trap viewers, they do not provide complete freedom of movement either. Moreover, there is decidedly "a silent presence" of other bodies both explicitly in the form of anthropomorphic sheets of form and implicitly in the zones that viewers can inhabit that can arguably engender the possibility of feeling "crowded."

The writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty are instructive in further examining the zones of *Kettling*. He describes flesh as the chiasmic intertwining of viewer and viewed, seeing and seen—a "coiling over of the visible on the visible"—that is characterized by the interpenetration of subjects and objects in the world, like the interweaving of woof and weft in fabric.<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the interconnections between subjects

1. Valerie Bauerlein and Scott Calvert, "What Is Kettling, the Police Technique Used In George Floyd Protests?" *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2020; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-kettling-the-police-technique-used-in-george-floyd-protests-11591721558>.

2. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture 2," *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966): 21.

3. I am, of course, perversely invoking Fried, given his antipathy for minimalist work. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23; repr. in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 128.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 140.



and subjects, which include what we might conventionally refer to as objects, always already embodied. The abstracted human forms of *Kettling*, which lean or press against one another and dramatically slump over the steel frames, are reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's notion of intertwining. In another example, viewers can see parts of their own bodies reflected in the blankets.

Premnath decided to utilize foam and blankets in his work after having seen them in widely circulated images of United States Customs and Border Patrol detention facilities, where they are used to process and house migrants arriving along the Southwest border.<sup>5</sup> Of interest to him is how the "thin foam mattress and emergency blanket are provided to *support* and *cover* the body."<sup>6</sup> In a speech in which she examines the Arab Spring, which loosely refers to uprisings across the Arab world in the early 2010s, the philosopher Judith Butler provides a link between phenomenology and politics in implicitly channeling Merleau-Ponty. She writes provocatively, "My body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the 'between.'"<sup>7</sup> One way of thinking about the entangled foam sheets, the blankets that reflect viewers' bodies, and the zones is that they all bring into being an in-betweenness, but one refracted through the lens of politics.

Merleau-Ponty's invocation of "chiasm" as the literal crossing of optical nerves at the base of the brain is instructive in further considering phenomenology and the zones. He signals that a moment of vision includes an implicit reference to the invisible: the optic chiasm produces a blind spot where the optic nerves coincide with the retinas. That is to say, Merleau-Ponty makes invisibility just as much a condition of perception as visibility. He suggests that one becomes flesh only at the very edge of one's perception and can do so only under the press of the invisible and imperceptible.

How, though, do we articulate invisibility in Premnath's work? For sure, we can take it to refer to the lack of presence of bodies that typically are excluded from the public sphere, which is (un)marked as white, male, and heteronormative. From another angle and outside the public sphere, who has no choice *but* to be visible? That is, invisibility is not an option for all subjects. Martinique-born French philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon wrote eloquently about how the man of color is denied a bodily sense of location, a "zone of nonbeing."<sup>8</sup> It is a body whose access to even its materiality is shaped by its racialization and its gendering, given he is denied manhood.

Through thinking about intertwining, in-betweenness, and the body as the fulcrum between the visibility and the invisibility of flesh—which admittedly I only sketch out in this short essay—I argue that both the nuances of architecture of control as well as of race inferred by the title of *Kettling* materially manifest themselves.

5. These images began to go viral after the United States Customs and Border Patrol facilities became overrun following former Attorney General Jeff Sessions's announcement of a "zero tolerance policy" for illegal entry across the Southwest border. See United States Department of Justice, "Attorney General Announces Zero-Tolerance Policy for Criminal Illegal Entry," April 6, 2018; and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "New Temporary Facilities in Texas and Arizona Expand CBP Holding Capacity," August 6, 2019.

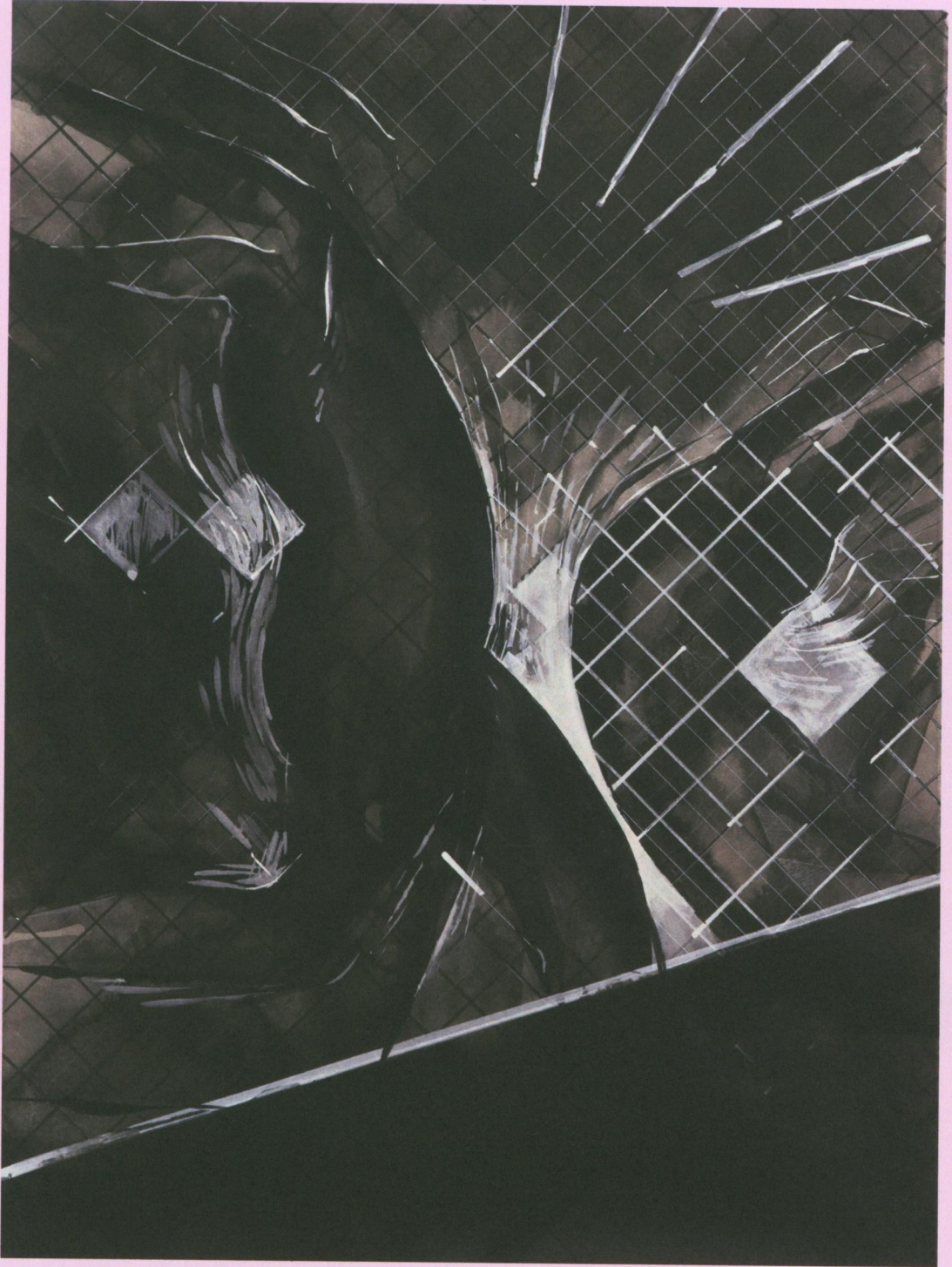
6. Emphasis in original. Email to the author, November 15, 2020.

7. Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" *transversal*, September 2011; <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.

8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967), 8.

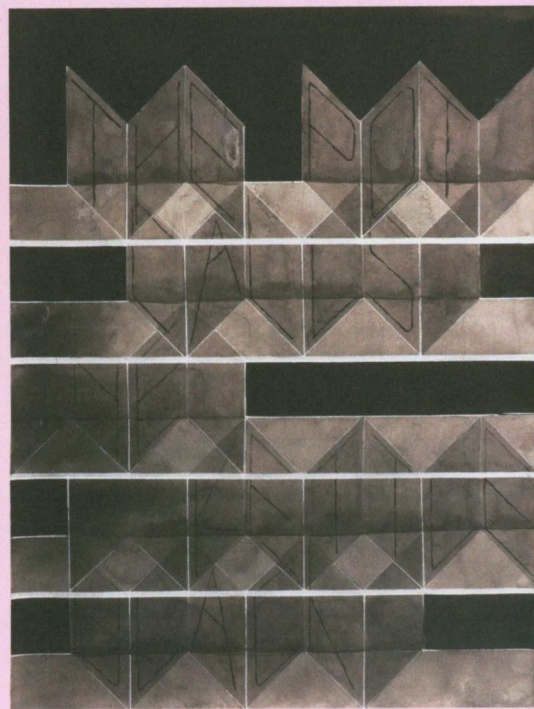
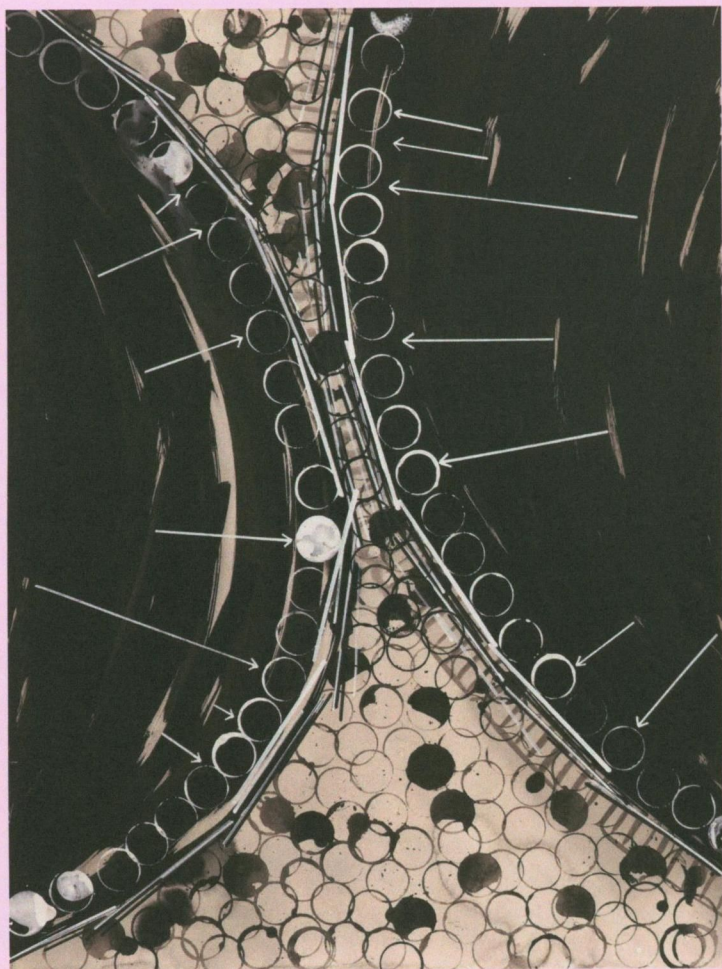


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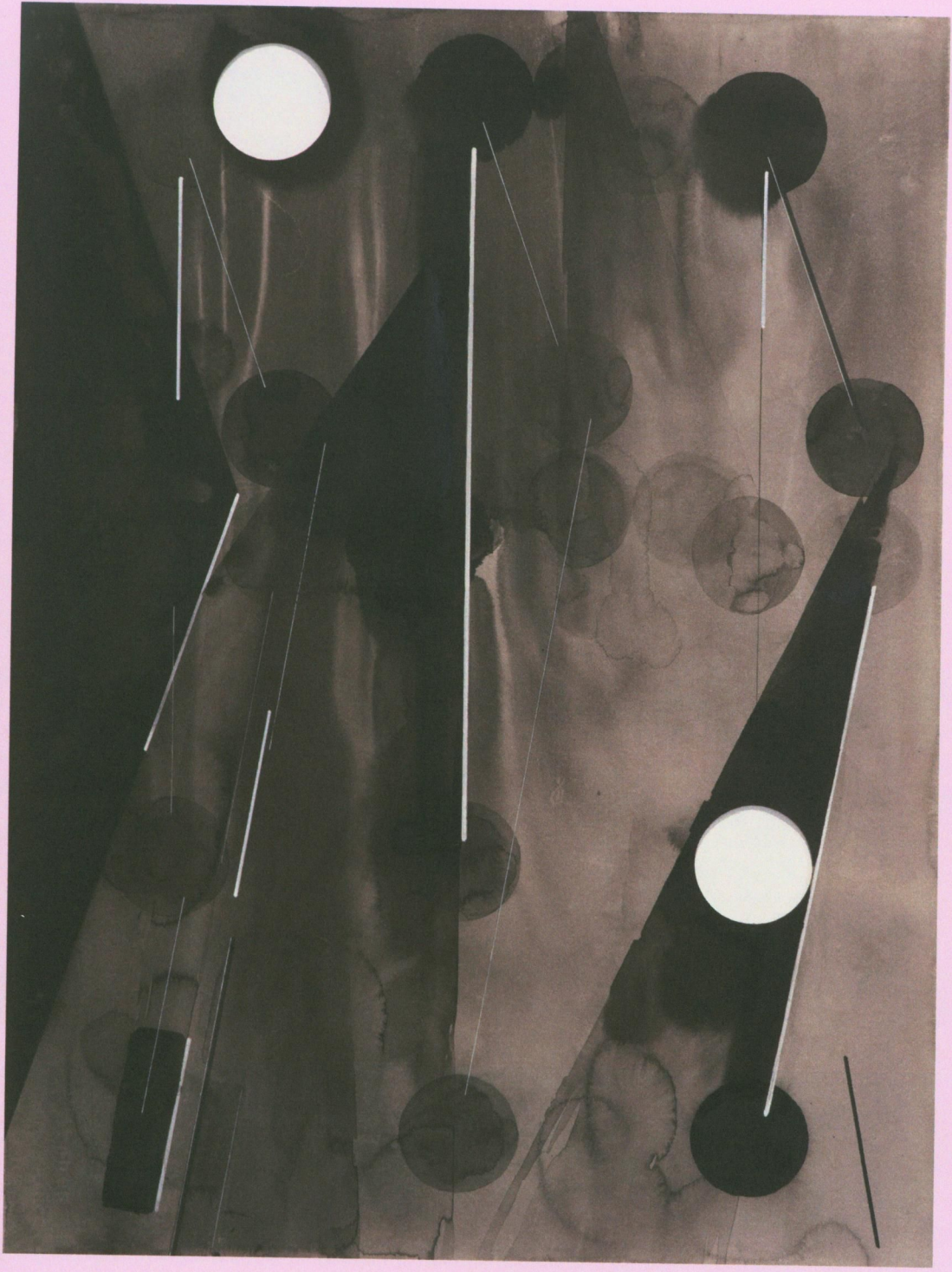




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