

Introducing:

DAVID KOWALSKI

bo.lee gallery

What is your background as a painter?

I was born in Germany in 1979. My mother, an artist herself, was Dutch and my father is German with Polish ancestors, hence the name Kowalski. I started painting when I was 17, coming to it first from hip hop and graffiti culture and then from a fascination with old Japanese aesthetics and minimalism. It was all very abstract in that period and nothing really worked out, so after a relatively short while I gave up, frustrated. I felt unable to add to the perfect nothingness of a blank canvas.

The following years were spent working various jobs, thinking, reading, learning Buddhist meditation, and spending time in nature. The forest was my biggest teacher (very German romantic!). But I was missing the creative outlet, a practical way, a form of communicating my experiences. The philosophical thoughts and the silent contemplation were ultimately frustrating without that. At the age of about 27 I came back to painting. I felt a strong pull and made the conscious decision to give myself at least 10 years before deciding if I felt it was working. By myself and very slowly I began to learn the craft of painting.

You fell ill in 2009. How has this affected your painting?

When I fell ill I wasn't able to work anymore or paint very much - about half an hour a day. However, I was able to adapt to a mental state in which everything revolves around painting and by doing this I became more and more able to paint what was in me. My situation hasn't changed a great deal, but I am now able to paint for around 2 hours a day. The process is slow and therefore a painting usually takes a couple of weeks to complete.

I'd suggest that many artists would consider such a significant reduction in their ability to work a very serious problem, but you appear to have adapted your practice to make it function for you. After close to a decade working this way, how do you now view these restrictions?

You can only be creative with what you have anyway. It's about perspective, structuring one's life and energy around the creative process is enabling and keeps me sane. Restrictions became assets. I can take my time, and having time on your side is invaluable. In cognitive behavioral therapy I learned the pacing technique which involves alternating between activities and rest, not allowing either to get too prolonged, which is perfect for painting. I had the tendency to overwork my paintings, now I can reassess during the frequent stops. My two cats help by teaching me how to take it easy as well.



Im Tal II
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm

Your paintings have a sensitive, matt surface which perfectly compliments the minute subtlety of the brushwork. Their physicality must be important to you.

In the planning process I spend a lot of time searching for reference material online to give substance to the ideas I visualize, then often combine found photographs digitally and draw into them. After the first couple of painting sessions however, those photos are discarded and I begin to return to the initial vague imagined image of the idea.

Building up a painting in lots of thin layers creates a softness and a depth that I am interested in. As a painter I don't necessarily want to be too prominent. Often I paint so thinly that even I can't see what I've done, but the surfaces build up over time. Sometimes I go too far and have to come back with thicker paint, or I might wipe out my brushstrokes, but now I know my painting process throughout and can place the paint with confidence.

I paint on cradled panels because I want a smooth surface. They are small so that I can tackle the whole painting in every session. I like the intimacy of a small work - it can disappear somewhere in a corner. I want the viewer to step close and have a personal encounter with a painting, making a connection that unfolds slowly.

In the final layers of the painting process I use a medium mixture which contains cold wax to achieve a matt finish. The paintings become more of an object and absorb light, complementing the soft edges and contrasting the more realistic, photographic attributes. Paintings are indeed physical objects, even if my surfaces appear flat, all those layers create density.

The works are almost exclusively black and white, or more accurate would be to describe them as grayscale. What is the significance of this choice?

The grayscale painting is usually a learning tool or used for underpainting. I like the faded colours of dusk and dawn, or of a foggy landscape. This translates to me to the transient states of the mind, like how one sees the world just after waking up, before the usual filters of our thoughts have kicked in. I also like its simplicity. I don't use black though. I mix my greys with colours. It's a balancing act between cold and warm tones (and of course light and dark), to get to a neutrality. In reducing stimuli, there are no hard edges either, I feel like the attention shifts and quiets down a bit, subtleties can become more powerful. It's introverted art.

You have described some of your paintings as 'episodes' in a story, and the richly atmospheric imagery is certainly filmic at times. Do your series' have a distinct narrative or theme?

Yes, my inspiration often comes from the books I read and the television series' I watch. The feeling of a good idea or a strange atmosphere might stay and grow in me, maybe become something new. Those media are ultimately our cultural heritage, we humans are storytellers, for better or for worse.

My first attempt at telling a story in paint was the Eiland series. It ended up being a three part series made up of forty two individual paintings and I worked on it for nearly 4 years. Then came Im Tal (In the valley) which is more like a short story. I recently started a new one that I am very excited about!

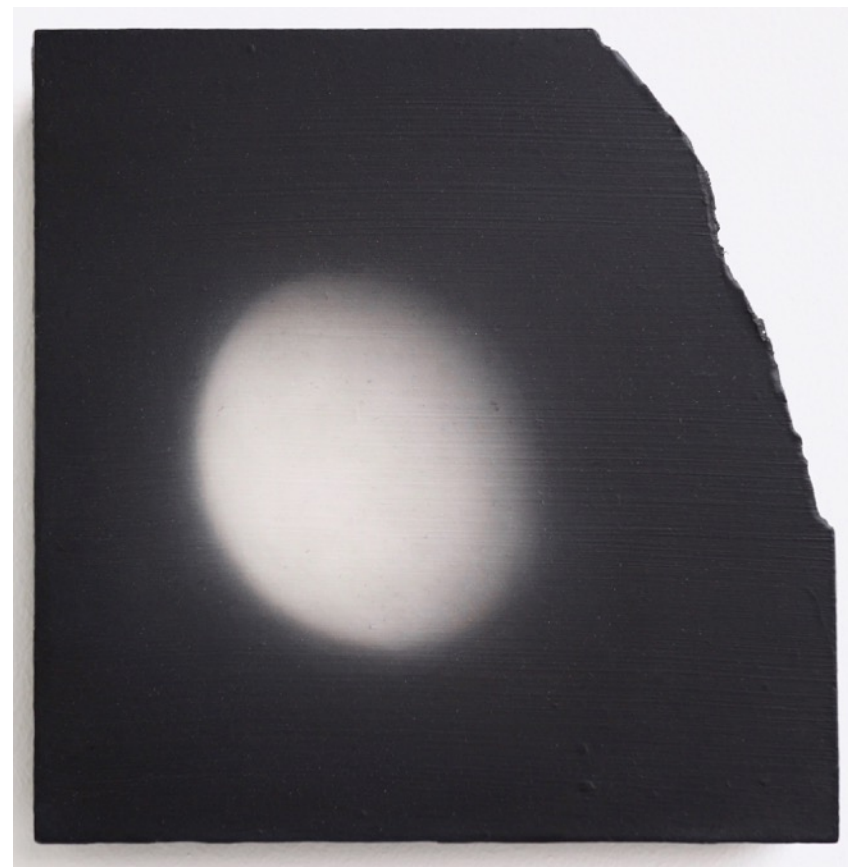
I think I should make it clear that those are stories, but I don't want to 'tell' them other than with the paintings. And honestly I only really know the story as paintings, I don't hide a secret narrative behind them. There is no real plot, they are more atmospheric storylines or dreamlike journeys. And whilst they hint at a story, at the same time the paintings work perfectly as individuals.

I do make little storyboards like a movie maker would do, but only so that I can make paintings from them. This enables me to be in a constant flow of progress, working on multiple paintings at once.

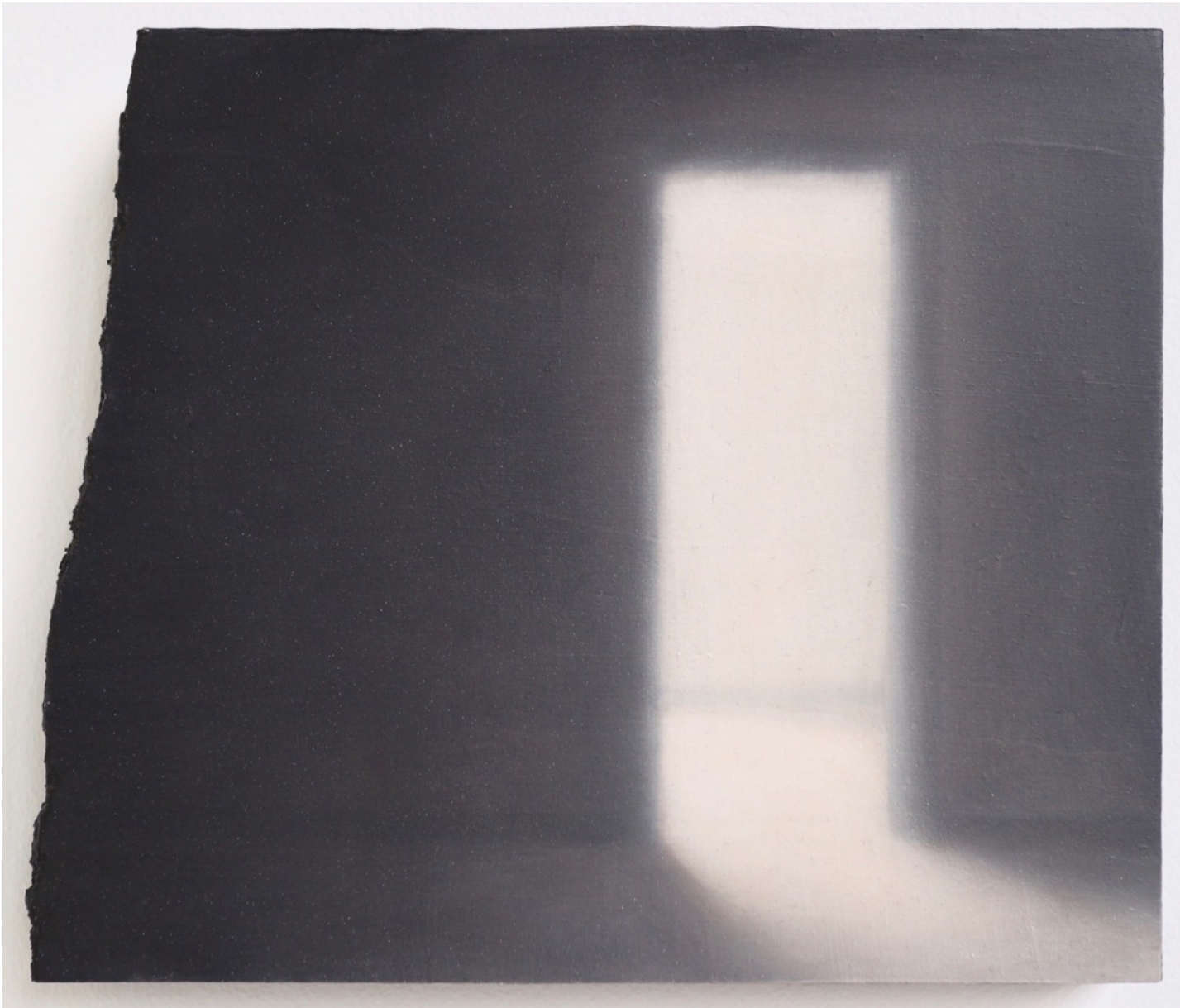
The series Raumzeit (Spacetime) is more like an essay. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, space and time are one - spacetime. I don't understand that at all, but I feel that it is important not only for astrophysics but for us as human beings. The paintings are my attempt to get a grip of that matter, to express the mystery this is to me. The usual illusionistic two dimensional painting panels are broken and nibbled at, to get to at least one further dimension, they are even more physical objects. Thinking, through painting, about the ultimately transient quality of time and space was a bit of a plunge into darkness, but I found it to be liberating.

How do you see your work continuing and expanding in the future? Are there any specific projects you would like to embark on or new things you want to achieve through the work?

Life is strange and painting can be even stranger. I want to explore that and find good questions to ask. I want to paint archetypal images that are personal as well as relatable. I want to tell mystery and science fiction stories. The series I am in the beginning of right now will combine colour with the grayscale and may be 6 to 8 paintings long. That's how far I can see right now, but it could also expand further. Other than that I have plenty of little hints of ideas. It's a process and as long as I stay right in the middle of it, which is all I want, there will be paintings as a result.



Raumzeit I
2017
Oil & wax on shaped board
15 x 15cm



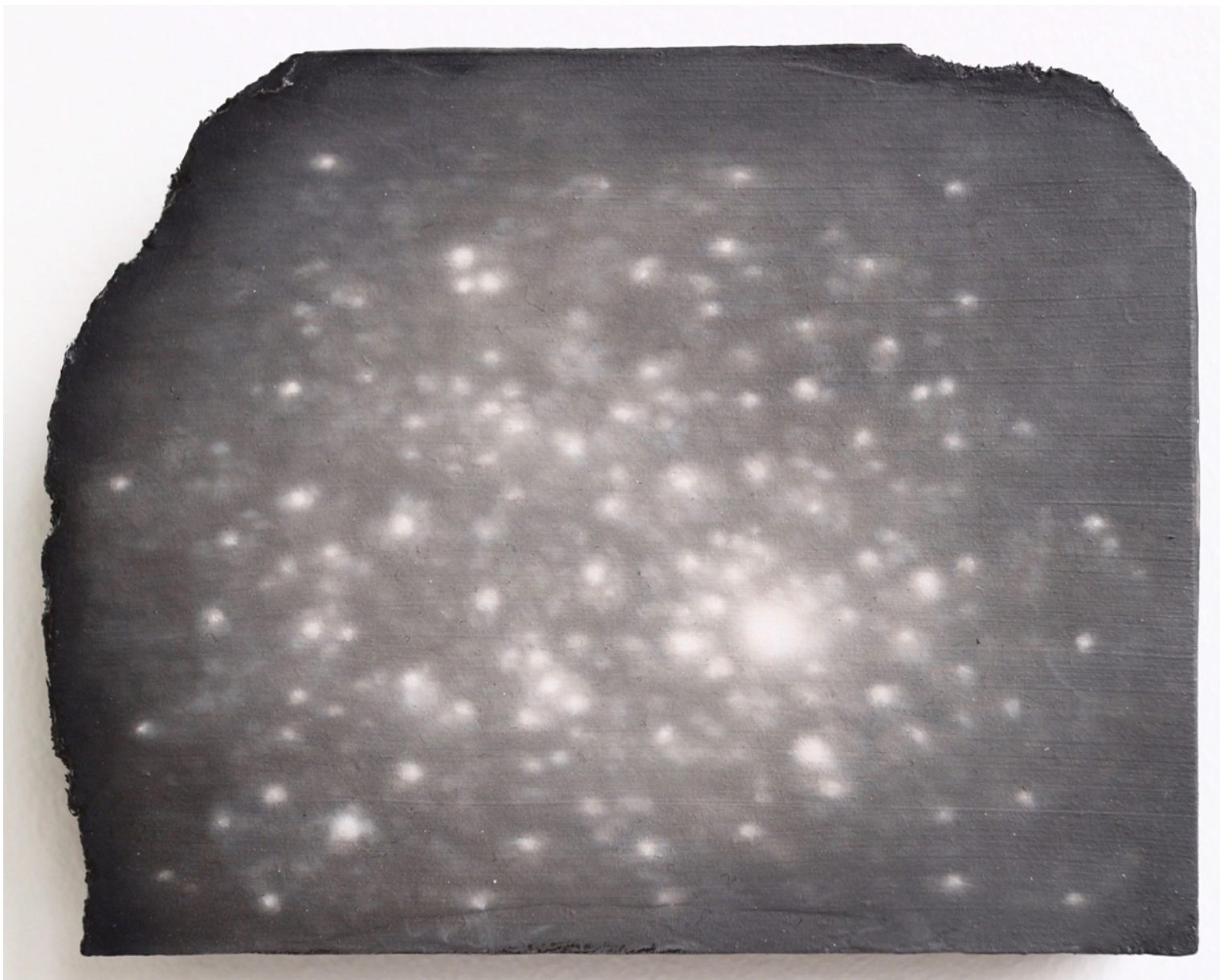
Raumzeit II
2017
Oil & wax on shaped board
15 x 22cm



Raumzeit III
2017
Oil & wax on shaped board
14 x 20cm



Raumzeit IV
2017
Oil & wax on shaped board
11.2 x 14cm



Raumzeit V
2017
Oil & wax on shaped board
10.5 x 13.5cm



Im Tall
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm



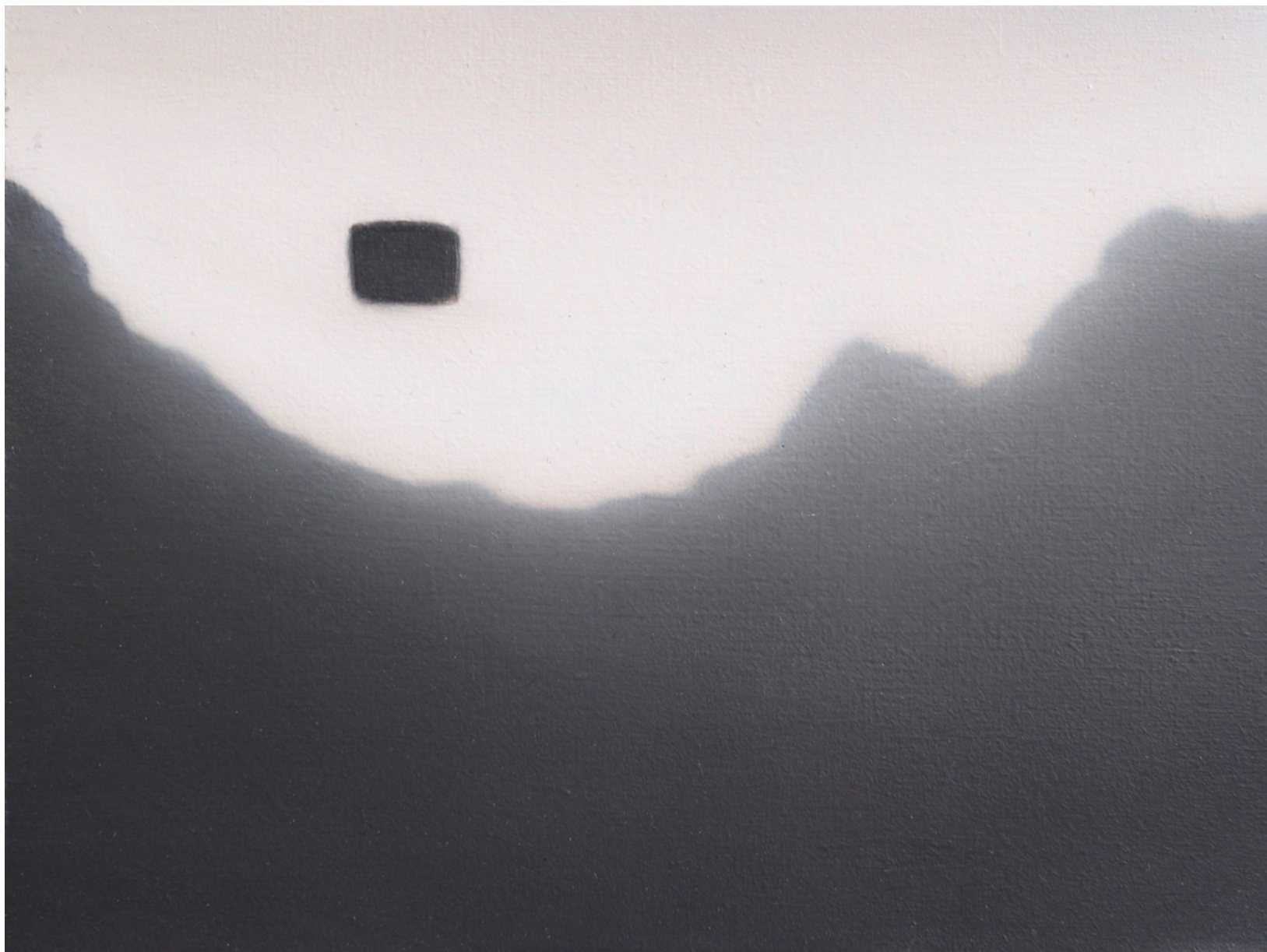
Im Tal II
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm



Im Tal III
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm



Im Tal V
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm



Im Tal VI
2017
Oil & wax on board
15 x 20cm



Eiland I - VI
2018
Oil & wax on board
18 x 24cm



Eiland I - XI
2018
Oil & wax on board
18 x 24cm



Eiland 3 - X
2018
Oil & wax on board
18 x 24cm



For further information or to register
interest in the works illustrated please
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