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Once In A While, I Am An Outsider of Life
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Introduction

Once in a while, I become an outsider. This might be due to my inborn awareness of our eventual departure that would one day take place. Hence, at times, I retreat and keep distance from the world. The moment of detachment makes me see my surroundings from a stranger's perspective in which things would be free from their given values. And as someone who paints, I observe, allowing things to be there on their own while pondering over, inevitably associating them with myself. The remoteness leads me into a zone where the world emerges from distant observations of all. Thus, a chair being there is no longer for me to sit but a particle of life. With its presence, it projects to me my understanding of living.

On the other hand, from the general point of view, we seem to live in a fast digital time that is cloaked by multiplicity, for the world has become a place that is constantly transforming. And when fully immersed in the outside world, occupied with external activities, we tend to forget that we are living. Nevertheless, the moment of detachment returns at intervals. We thereby recall that all changes, attempts and achievements, be it technological, political or economical, may seem to be in separate fields pursuing disparate goals, but most fundamentally, they all serve and revolve around one common subject which is our being. This subject follows and occurs to us especially when we are faced with challenges and crisis that urges us to look back at ourselves. It is vital, as it is the foundation that essentially connects us with the world we are born in. Hence, following such a track of thinking, I would be interested in asking on an ontological level: what is it for us to be.

In response, I would like to answer the question accordingly in two parts, involving Taoist and Heideggerian philosophy, as in my opinion Taoism in an abstract language responds to the meaning of life – what is it to be, while Heidegger looks into being in an analytical manner discussing how we live in this world – how is it to be. And most importantly, as our existence is an unfading topic in art, the embodiments of this theme in artworks are hence to be discussed, with both Taoist and Heideggerian aspects of understanding of being elaborated and reflected in varied artworks.

Moreover, as an artist who mostly paints, I am interested in bringing out visually the imagery of being on canvas. With my distant observations of surroundings, I depict the presence of reality that we are closely in connection with and that is composed of all elements, including ordinary objects, human figures, daily scenes and so on and so forth. Capturing the fragments of those, I tend to deliver my interpretation of life in a painterly language, by interweaving the significant and the insignificant, while simultaneously pondering over the meanings of being.

Along the River

Residing in a dynamic world that operates diversely, we live underneath the veil of multiplicity and ephemerality. Societies may differ and cultures may vary. Reality as well seems to undergo rapid transformations. Nevertheless, I am aware that behind the veil hides something that is unchanged and that is rooted in all things. And for me, this would be the "oneness" that lasts through the intricacy of space and time. In the heart of oneness lies the nothingness that originates and eliminates, which constructs a primary part of life. Both of them persist endlessly, sheltering, allowing us to continue to be. But, what is this oneness that is shrouded in the multiplicity of our time? And what is for us the nothingness that lies in the essence of everything?

If we begin with Heraclitus, we might stumble upon the river that he drew across our feet. " 'All things are in flux,'"[1] we might also be told, and "one cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition…"[2] The river was once recognized by Confucius on the eastern edge of the planet. In the coincident overlapping of history, he made this poetic remark. "The master, standing by the river, said: 'That which goes by is like this, without stopping day and night.'"[3] It flows unswervingly into the far distance in the time of earthly vicissitudes where the oneness is submerged. We might not be able to step into the same river twice, for its water runs continuously in flux. Nevertheless, the consistency of its flow remains. It is in the consistency that the oneness resides. "In the One the many find their unity. Thus, in the One 'the way up and the way down is the same,' 'good and ill are one,' and 'it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old.'"[4] Everything thereupon dissolves into one, in the flux of Heraclitus, running in the infinity of time that is resembled by the river of Confucius.

And Zhuangzi who reached the same river two hundred years later captured the unchanged dynamic of the flow. In the language of Taoism, there exists the Way of being. All things go in accordance with their nature and thus take their spontaneous courses; following the Way differences vanish and opposites merge.

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1 Samuel Enoch Stumpf, James Fieser, *Philosophy: A Historical Survey with Essential Readings*, (New York: McGraw – Hill Education, 2020), p. 12.

2 Charles H Khan, T*he Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary,* (London: the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 53.

3 Confucius, ChiChung Huang, *The Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu): A Literal Translations with an Introduction and Notes*, trans. ChiChung Huang, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 105.

4 Stumpf, Fieser, *Philosophy: A Historical Survey*, p. 15.

All comes from and becomes one. And underneath the surface of transient multiplicity lives the Taoist Way of unity. Therefore, he said:

> Thus, it is that there are roof-slats and pillars, ugliness and beauty, the peculiar and the extraordinary. All these by means of the Tao are united and become one. To make a distinction is to make some construction. But construction is the same as destruction. For things as a whole there is neither construction nor destruction, but they turn to unity and become one.[5]

If we continue the journey further, considering the thoughts of Zhuangzi, we will see the river of oneness in the immensity of time flowing towards a horizon that is outlined by Laozi who opened up the dimension of nothingness transcending our vision. "Heaven and earth and ten thousand things are born of being. Being is born of nothing,"[6] said he. In the domain of Laozi, I believe, the multiplicity derives from the oneness. And the oneness originates from the nothingness that is unfathomable and indefinite. All according to him turns into nonentity and the river in the end vanishes behind the horizon line.

Thus, if we zoom out of our daily reality for a broader view and step out of the constraint of time for a moment of contemplation, we may find ourselves in the end meeting behind the horizon, in the realm of Laozi. Living through the turbulences of life, we may also become aware that the nothingness is eventually a part of or perhaps is always ingrained in our being that is subjected to a beginning and an end. The mortality being an innate part of an individual's existence in comparison to the longevity of the universe is palpably trivial. And human beings, who endure a rather limited life span, may seem to enjoy the freedom of leading their life by taking initiatives and choosing one's own path. Nevertheless, looking from a wider perspective, don't we see ourselves living, without exception, under the reign of the universal law that as the oneness merges and unites? Albeit the master of the present that connects the dots of time, aren't we in the end all floating along the river of Heraclitus that flows constantly towards "the nothing"?

Perhaps then, situated in a grander spectrum, we need to overturn the previous conclusion of determining the nothingness only as the essential element that constitutes our being. It is wise to step back for a clearer picture in which we may find ourselves being a part of and as a result also consisted of the nothingness that brings out both the insignificancy and the potentiality of being. According to the school of thought on nothingness, Laozi said: "Heaven and earth aren't humane. To them the ten thousand things are straw dogs."[7] His words indicate the absence

5 Chuang-Tzu, Fung Yu-Lan, *Chuang-Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang*, trans. Fung Yu-Lan, (Berlin: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing Co., Ltd and Springer-Verlag GmbH, 2016), p. 13.
6 Laozi, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. Ursula K. Le Guin, J.P. Seaton (Contribution by), (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1997), pg. 55.
7 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 8.

of sentiments in the void of nonexistence. In the universe, all is regarded as the "straw dogs" that are used as ceremonial objects to be discarded at last, which suggests metaphorically the nullity of being.

Adhering to the oneness, all beings and non-beings are equalized in the nothingness. Be it a plastic spoon or an antique shrine, both are of same importance. Such equality consequently accentuates the insignificance with which everything is as well of same unimportance. Thus, the indistinguishable quality of the nothingness does not glorify or deglamorize. It discloses our reality as how it is, for the world inherits its own nature and things are thusly what and how they are. This in turn creates an open ground where endless possibilities could rise. In Taoist thinking, the formless is the expansive, following such a thread, I would suggest the insignificant is then the comprehensive that could lead to the potentiality of being. In the nothingness that unifies us, we live, for we travel along various tracks to seek full possibilities of life while drifting along the same river that carries us to the other end. And this as my understanding concerning the meaning of existence is essentially integrated in my practice of art.

Reflection of the River in Works of Art

In Photography

If we shift from philosophical theories to art, along Heraclitus' river we may find Hiroshi Sugimoto capturing the oneness in his photographs of seascapes. For him, lands morphed throughout time while seas stayed unstirred. He articulated: "Although the land is forever changing its form, the sea I thought, is immutable. Thus began my travels back through time to the ancient seas of the world."[8] Along his journey, the sea of today reveals to us its primordial image in prehistory, which uncovers the oneness that persists throughout the river of time.

In his quiet and atmospheric stillness of seascapes, the water continuously unfolds. Such persistence transcending temporality is visualized in one photographic composition by Sugimoto that distills transiency and variety, with the sea remaining true to its elementary form in which lies at the center merely a horizon, dividing the high and the low, unfurling the near and the far. The seascapes titled after their geographical locations, may be taken in different parts of the world, nevertheless sharing one composition, are no longer discernible. As Michael Fried wrote: "Topographically there is no difference at all between one 'Seascape' and another: this follows from Sugimoto's decision to seek the same elemental motif through the entire series and to frame it identically."[9]

Therefore, the oneness of the seascapes is not only embodied in a temporal manner, unveiled in the image of the ancient sea, but also is made manifest in a spatial sense, with the seascapes all over the world recognized as one, demonstrating the consistency of space. And interestingly, such idea of oneness that lasts throughout space and time was long ago advocated by Parmenides who insisted that the "… entire universe consists of one thing, which never changes, has no parts, and can never be destroyed."[10]

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8 Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Plates" In: *Hiroshi Sugimoto*, ed. by Nancy Eickel, Deborah Horowitz, and Amy Wilkins, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cants Verlag, 2010) p. 109.
9 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art AS Never Before*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 296.
10 Stumpf, Fieser, *Philosophy: A Historical Survey*, p. 15.

Carribean Sea, Jamaica, Hiroshi Sugimoto, photography, 1980

Though Sugimoto's "seascapes" is imbued with the notion of oneness, his series of "theatres" looking beyond that seems to bring into the open a space of void that lies ahead of Laozi's horizon. In the photos, rows of empty seats are arrayed in the hollow halls of secluded cinemas, facing the central screen where the blankness inhabits. And the screen is the only light source in the theatres, illuminating the stage in the cast of its afterglow, which further leaves the rest submerging in a layer of duskiness. No audience is present, and what's on display is purely a rectangle of whiteness.

By applying a significantly long shutter speed Sugimoto condenses an entire film into a still image, as he recalled: "One afternoon I walked into a cheap cinema in the East Village with a large-format camera. As soon as the movie started, I fixed the shutter at a wide-open aperture. When the movie finished two hours later, I clicked the shutter closed."[11] Therefore, the void that eventually surfaces is not mere emptiness but the nothingness that encompasses all, including its opposite end – the fullness. The majority of this series, as Luts Koepnick suggested, with the lavish interiors of the theaters serving as a frame and no veiwers appearing in the photos, draw in front of us a window.[12] He wrote: "Baudelaire understood windows as screens of imaginary transport. Rather than merely framing the real, windows energize the imaginiation, they stimulate the mind's eye to make up stories and tell legends about the world".[13] Thus, I think, outside the photos, residing in reality, we become the audience responding directly to the movies that are played in the space located in another dimension, as if we are then seated in one of those empty chairs, alone, gazing into the screen.

And for the viewers, those movies concentrated into a blank screen are veiled by its mysterious glow, which invites us to project our stories of joy and pain while envisaging possibilities of life. Nevertheless, they further uncover our existence in the form of voids, exposing life as the meaningless in which we see through its totality by reaching the comprehension of nothingness that brings us to both our beginnings and ends. Sugimoto's theatres, I believe, screening "nothing", become the gateway that leads to nihility through which we look at the fullness and as well the emptiness in life. Portraying symbolically the narratives of life as the void, the blankness projected in Sugimoto's theaters lays the consistency between "the existing" and "the non-existing". As a piece of white paper that informs nothing, the empty screen on one hand stands for the beginning, fresh and unwritten, allowing room for the richness of life to grow, while on the other hand, its vacantness forms the foundation that acknowledges the end of such fullness, letting all things fade, vanish and come to a close, bringing life back to its unwritten state.

11 Sugimoto, "Plates" In: *Hiroshi Sugimoto*, p. 77.
12 Luts Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 2014), p. 59.
13 Koepnick, *On Slowness*, p. 59-60.

Avalon Theater, Catalina Island, Hiroshi Sugimoto, photography, 1948

In Painting

In the field parallel to photography, the void is as well drawn. Painting transmits its visual power by depicting and constructing. If we take a look at Mark Rothko's work "Blue and Grey", we will see that in an abstract and quietly expressive tone the void is shaped. His painting consists of three predominant colours – the grey, the blue and the greyish white. The grey being the background is dark and airy, slightly bluish, filling the entire canvas. Upon the background, two rectangles with blurry edges float in identical hues, one being the faintly greyish white and the other deep marine blue. Vertically aligned, sharing the same width, they impressionistically suffuse the canvas, bringing into being a misty sense of stillness that allows us to slide into the thoughts of our own selves. The white is above the blue, cloudy, obscuring the grey underneath. Containing an indistinguishable slice of greyness, it occupies moderately over a half of the canvas. The white glides, forging a sense of unreality.

The other rectangular shape appears in the below, vaguely outlined by slightly darker blue, gravitates, levitating the white. Both are present in their atmospheric imageries of the void, completing each other with subtleties. The blue grounds the entire painting with serenity layered in the calmness of its colour and the heaviness of its measurement. It weighs, balancing the white, taking half of the white's dimension on the canvas. Thus, with its density and gravity, it finalizes the construction of nothingness, accommodating the multiplicity in the abstraction of its non-narrative form. And the entire work in its illusive expression with each element silently composed delivers a sublime sense that shrouds its nearby space. It surrounds and overwhelms us with the quietness of its colours and the massiveness of its size. Being in front it, we feel strongly connected to the painting that frees us, leading us to the nonexistence's end.

Even though Rothko brings out the presence of void in a spiritual and non-narrative manner, Gerhard Richter conveys the conception of nothingness using a different approach. Unlike Rothko, he paints the specific and the tangible in a photo realistic way, which contributes to form the narration of reality. Nevertheless, we could still find in his works the traces of abstraction that simultaneously seeks to diminish the illustrative quality of the images he constructs.

The photo paintings of him containing a wide range of subjects portray being underneath blurry surfaces. Be it a human, an object, a scene or a landscape, all in his works seems to be indefinite, cloaked in mist. The mechanism of blurring by eliminating precision and details reconstructs the appearance of reality, transforming it into impressions of existence. Being obscured, evened out, discrepancies in reality are obliterated in such an abstraction, evoking a sense of neutrality.

Blue and Grey, Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 1962

Thus, everything becomes equally important or un-important, real or unreal. This neutrality is as well embodied in the thematic choices Richter made for his works, portraying not only representative figures such as Werner Heyde but also trivial and seemingly banal objects as toilet paper. In Gerhard Richter's photo paintings, the significance or insignificance of being lies in all kinds of subjects that in the contemplation of nothingness are equalized as mere ordinary existence. And this quality of evenness could further be found in many of his paintings with the use of grey, as Richter said:

> Grey. It makes no statement whatever; it evokes neither feelings nor associations: it is really neither visible nor invisible. Its inconspicuousness gives it the capacity to mediate, to make visible, in a positively illusionistic way, like a photograph. It has the capacity that no other colour has, to make 'nothing' visible. To me, grey is the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape.[14]

As far as I'm concerned, for Richter, grey makes everything nothing and nothing everything. Simultaneously in his act of erasure, the disappearing brings forth the present and becomes thus the revealing. His photo paintings as a result unveil being on an ontological level by veiling the surface of reality.

The Chair, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Toilet Paper, Gerhard richter, oil on canvas, 1965

14 Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter Doubt And Belief In Painting,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), p. 247.

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Werner Heyde im November 1959, als er sich den Behörden stellte.

Mr. Heyde, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Nonetheless, the nothingness as the absence that Richter manifests in the indifferent grey and the act of obliteration is not complete negativity or denial. Being the formless, it doesn't outline, hence leaving space to contain and expand. It is "Two things, one origin, but different in name, whose identity is mystery. Mystery of all mysteries! The door to the hidden,"[15] according to Laozi. From my understanding the nothingness thus doesn't stand only for "zero"- a closed circle, but also implies what it is not - what's out of the circle.

The relation of such duality and unity is fundamentally entrenched in traditional Chinese paintings. Leaving-blank, the visualization of nothingness, allowing parts of the paper to stay untouched, is considered more than just a gesture of simplifying. As François Jullien put: " By hollowing out the fullness of the drawing, the emptiness left vacant on the silk or paper makes the undifferentiated foundation-fount of things appear (returning to the primordial stage of 'there is not')."[16] And in Chinese paintings, the vacant hides the visible, thus disclosing what's hidden underneath the surface of depiction.

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15 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 3.
16 François Jullien , *The Great Image Has No Form, On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 84.

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Mists on the Mountain, Shit Tao, ink and wash painting, 1707

In the painting "Mists on the Mountain" by Shitao, the landscape is partially veiled by the invisible fog that appears "effortlessly" as the blankness left on the paper. The land is mostly plain with a few light strokes lying horizontal, indicating us its ungraspable vastness. The trees in the grandeur of the vacantness freely scatter, bringing themselves to the fore. And the mountains fading in the descending mist that surrounds the hillsides reveal only their peaks and feet.

In such a way, the void draws out the essence of the mountains by obscuring their bodies, letting their inherent nature, be it the physical magnificence or the spiritual relevance, surface from unseen. And with mountains and trees rising from the blankness that suffuses the paper, the depiction of the full scenery makes manifest the openness of sky and earth, bringing forth the universe's spontaneity.

2

Dasein

If the nothingness is both the origin and the destination of all, what sits then in between? And if the ultimate reality is exposed as a piece of blankness in Hiroshi Sugimoto's theaters, what then conceals it? In the abstract void of reality, I'm curious to find out what the narrative of our existence would be. After all, we live among tangible entities that bear manifold individual qualities. Each intertwines and correlates with another, forming a diverse world where we reside and where different modes of being exist. In other words, setting aside the oneness and the nothingness, we live in a dynamic dimension of multiplicity.

But in such a world, how are we as human beings situated? And how is it to exist? Martin Heidegger in his search for answers introduced the notion of Dasein. Simply meaning "being there", Dasein in the midst of the multiplicity, defines the being of humans. Among all beings, Dasein is distinctive as human beings are able to "(a) operate in their everyday activities with an understanding of Being and (b) are able to reflect upon what it means to be." [17]

Due to its unique ability of understanding and reflecting, Dasein relates to the world by engaging with its surroundings in three modes. The first is "readiness-to-hand" in which entities are taken as equipment in daily tasks such as cleaning, cooking, repairing, etc. And in the process of tasking, Dasein is unaware of the existence of the entities as independent objects while losing as well the awareness of its own being when engaged. "Presence-at-hand" is the second mode where entities are treated as independent objects for reflective studies while their functionality is removed. And the last one is "un-readiness-to-hand". It speaks of the situation in which entities are malfunctioning when involved in "task-oriented" activities and thus are in the stage between "readiness-to-hand" and "presence-at-hand".

In everyday life Dasein determines the ways entities are involved. It decides how to engage with and relate to its surroundings. A pen can be used as a tool for writing, but also for other purposes. Thus, Dasein chooses a path to be. Alternatively, the possibilities of Dasein are connected to the ways that entities are involved based on Dasein's understanding and choice making. Dasein therefore dwells in a world constituted of interwoven networks in accordance with the three modes mentioned above.

Although "I" have the ability to take an initiative and choose a path of being, the "I" is not always singular. Dasein in a broad sense represents "they" whom the "I"

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17 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, article on Martin Heidegger, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/ (accessed 20 November, 2019).

blends with. In another sense, "they" are composed of all the "I"s. And to each individual, "I" am myself, but also one of them, which creates a sense of community and belonging. "I" come from a certain cultural background, speak a specific mother tongue and am rooted in particular ethnicities. This conversely influences the way Dasein relates itself to the world, and thereupon how it chooses to be. "I" share the world with "them" whom the "I" is a part of. Hence, Dasein dwells not only in the relational networks between Dasein and its surrounding entities, but also in between Dasein and "they"- "others".

Besides Dasein's relations with the outside world, "Care" – another Heideggerian term fundamentally structures Dasein on three levels. "Care" in the first place involves "throwness", for we are placed into the world that is somehow or other related to us. In daily reality we find ourselves always situated in circumstances, which directs us to different states of being. Therefore, "throwness" further renders and is the prior transcendental condition for the moods we are in. Dasein dwells continuously in moods, as Heidegger put " In attunement, Dasein is always brought before itself. It has already found itself, not as perceiving oneself to be there, but as one finds one's self in attunement."[18] And reversely, moods disclose how the world is to us.

The second layer of "care" is "Projection". It is our ability to act, react and project under different circumstances. Therefore it is towards the future, while "throwness" – being thrown into the world, represents the past. And the third is "fallenness" which describes the loss of self. Dasein lives among the others and "I" am one of "them." Hence, "fallenness" suggests the state in which one is deprived of his/her true self while following the "they". "I" live according to "them" and thus am no longer individually identical. "Fallenness" stands for the present and generates the notions of the authentic and the inauthentic self. An authentic self belongs to the individual "I" while the inauthentic integrates with the others. Nevertheless, an authentic self is not excluded from "them"; in other words, it always lives in relation to the others.

Following the idea of "fallenness", death to us may be considered an irrelevant event, as we are unable to genuinely experience it until our life comes to an end. It is not specifically relatable to the self in the inauthentic awareness of death, since we are informed of it only by coming across the demise of others. Thus death does not seem to be a part of us. Nevertheless, to an authentic self who acknowledges the limitation of its being, death will eventually be "mine", as Heidegger put: "Death does not just 'belong' in an undifferentiated way to one's own Dasien, but it lays claim on it as something individual."[19] It therefore affirms the end of my existence as an independent "I". Such realization consequently in the authentic mode of self triggers the mood of anxiety. And an authentic self is in this case anxious about its own expiration and temporality in time.

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18 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 132.

19 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 252.

Encountering the End in Works of Art

3%

In the practice of painting, the response towards death - the ambiguous end shared by all - is previously depicted by Luc Tuymans. Largely employing existing visual materials such as found images or Polaroid photos that are taken by himself, Luc Tuymans works with a broad spectrum of topics. His painterly themes range from human figures, nature, and daily scenes to interiors, architecture as well as banal objects. All the subjects he renders appear to be slightly out of focus. The obscurity may seem in the first place to be minor (if compared to some of Gerhard Richter's works). However, in combination with his Polaroid-like colour palette, it brings out a profound sense of uneasiness through which reflects both visually and thematically the world that we live in and the existential state of our being. In my opinion, if his portraits instantly remind us of the existing conditions we land in, his depictions of banality then, by illustrating the mundane objects, reveal the everyday triviality that we live with. They unmask the reality as what it is and we are all thereby inevitably parts of it.
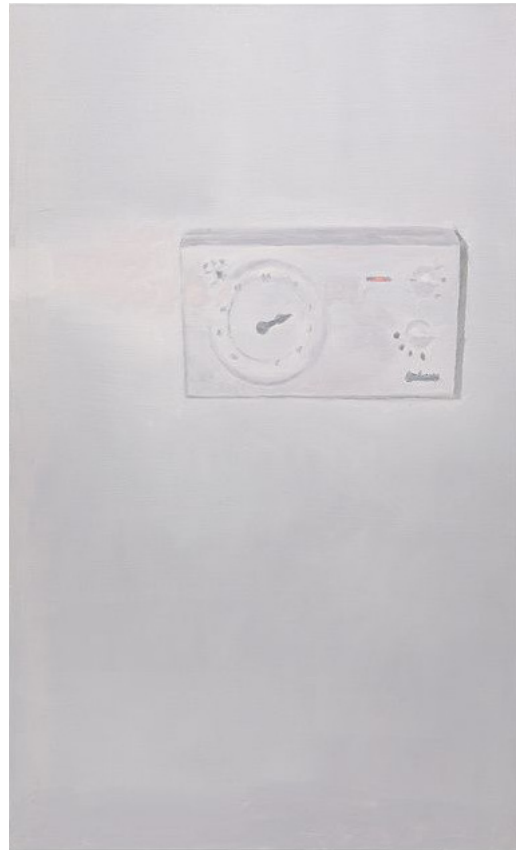
Timer, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2005

And coming back to Luc Tuymans' paintings on death - the end of being, we would find two portraits by him depicting the same figure. They are titled respectively "Twenty Seventeen" and "3%". Both are inspired by a Brazilian TV series in which the society is polarized and only three percent of the population lives wealthily whereas the rest stays poor. In order to change destiny, one when turning twenty has a chance to undergo an examination that might lead to the life of the rich. However, only three percent of the candidates will succeed while the rest will be poisoned to death.[20]

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20 The catalogue of the exhibition: *Luc Tuymans. La Pelle*, The catalogue of the exhibition: *Luc Tuymans. The Return*.

In these two paintings, a woman is portrayed as one of the losers who are soon going to face the execution. One illustrates a three quarter face and the other a profile. The images are somewhat dream like, mildly softened. Only the face of the woman illuminates in the dark. Although both speak of her state of being near death, the two paintings seem to reflect her psyche in different stages.

The first painting shows the woman's fear in a distinctive stage of shock, with her eyes tensely wide open, staring mutely into the front that to her is the unknown. Her lips are despairingly open, however, voicelessly, illustrating a heavy sense of vulnerability, which intensifies visually the inner fear of her own cease-to-be. In accordance with Heidegger, fear being a mood of attunement has certain characteristics, one being "as something threatening, what is harmful is not yet near enough to be dealt with, but it is coming near. As it approaches, harmfulness radiates and thus has the character of threatening."[21] From this perspective, the painting through its depiction shows not only the woman's outmost fear when confronted with her insuperable death, but also discloses on a more profound level her inner suffering when death inevitably approaches however not yet to be grasped. Being "thrown" towards the end, the woman in fear identifies the world as the frightening, the unsafe and the inescapable. Additionally, in a more fundamental sense, the fear could be read as the rejection to her not-being, for it is in such a mood she fails to take death as a part that constitutes the whole of Dasein and that essentially completes and affirms her being. Rejecting the possibility of being-towards-the-end as her own, she feels threatened by her expiration. Such fear on a universal scale, I believe, is radically rendered
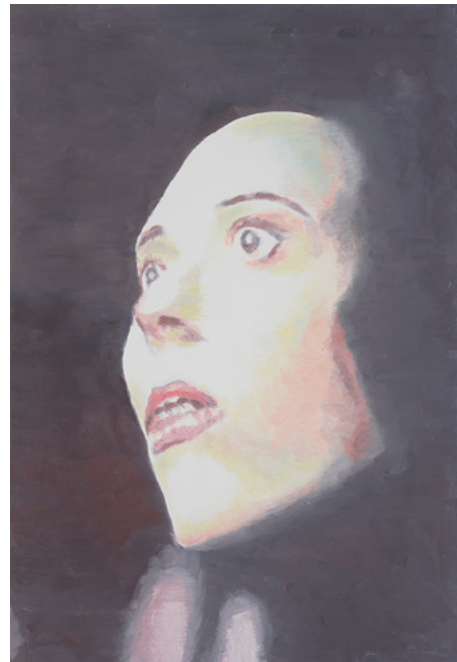
Twenty Seventeen, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2017
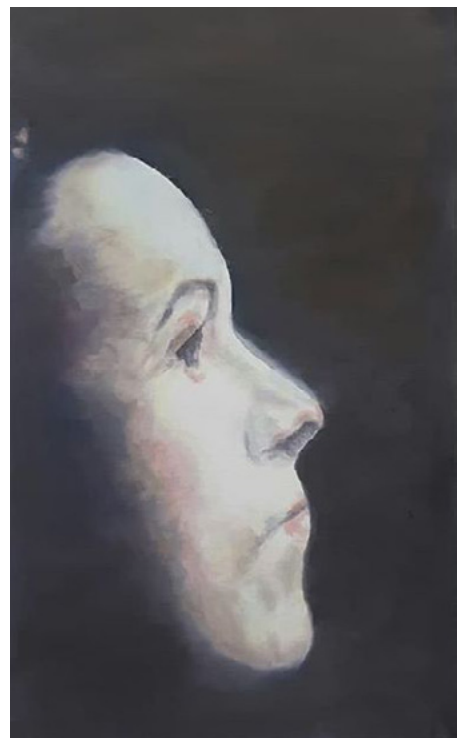
Three Percent, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2017

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21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 136.

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in the painting that reflects not only the protagonist's but also human beings' mu-tual response towards the possibility of our own demise. And fear-towards-death in this painting as an attunement in the mode of "fallenness" essentially states one's inauthentic-being towards its limitation.

If compared to the first painting, the second stage illustrated would be a rather emotionless one. The woman in the picture has become neutral. Her eyes are glazed, lips closed, and her face is composed at our eye level. The woman looks horizontally into the nothing, for in such a situation everything has become to her meaningless, which demonstrates an acknowledgement of her not-being. Realizing death is one's own most leads to the mood of anxiety in which one is concerned with his or her own being-in-the-world, for the world is then disclosed in a nihil-istic manner, as Heidegger put: "Here, with anxiety, the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself involved in anxiety initially finds expression: the nothing and nowhere."[22] In the indefiniteness, the world is no longer disclosed as the meaningful or that of importance from a mundane perspective. Being of Dasein in a place as such becomes eventually insignificant and thus detached from "falling prey" – the inauthentic mode of being. In the painting, the woman, being aware of her own temporality, enters the mood of anxiety. By painting her anxious state of being towards the end, the portrait reflects upon an intrinsic and eternal topic of Dasein. It reveals from her silent face the authentic comprehension of death as the inevitable nothingness of life, which frees Dasein ultimately from "they". And Dasein thus becomes its own self. In my opinion, although being the end of all, death depicted in this painting individuates and hence manifests the wholeness of our being.

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22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 182.

Peacock

While death remains to be a mystery to the living, Gu Changwei in his film translated the theme delicately and openly, in his own language of storytelling. In the movie "Peacock" lives a family of five. The mother among the three siblings favors the eldest son who is mildly retarded, which as a result causes frustrations and resentments for the other two. At one night, when the animosity reaches its peak, the other two siblings plan to poison their elder brother who is already asleep. The attempt is in the last minute aborted. However, when dinning together the next day, their mother unexpectedly takes out the remnant of the poison, in front of the family she callously puts a white goose to death.

The scene of the dying goose as the mother's revenge is tremendously impactful and poignant. It discloses to us the reality of the end. The goose becomes a tragic substitute of the eldest son of the family, which manifests the possible consequence of the failed attempt. From the beginning of the goose's painful struggling till the second of its neck lifelessly falling back down, death is unmasked and no longer obscure. To the audience (including the family in the film), it becomes specific when the goose ceases to be. Death then is no more an abstract and inconsequential symbol put in the final chapter of others' stories. Its weight becomes unbearable. And the silence of the scene in which no one spoke greatly intensifies the depressing moment. We thus find ourselves part of death by discreetly witnessing the goose's passing. Death therefore to us is not anymore an ambiguous notion. It perceptibly exists and thereby is undeniable as a part of our life.

Still image from film *Peacock*, Gu Changwei, 2005

Underneath the Surface of Being in Works of Art

Big Family

Although the end of being is often discussed in art, Zhang Xiaogang who was born in 1950s, China, paints the living concerning a group's state of being. Inspired by old family photos, he depicts the faces of Chinese during the period of Cultural Revolution. In his family portraits "Bloodline: Big Family" Series that records his faded memory of the past, each of the family members shares an identical look with single-fold eyelids, round however empty eyes, a slim nose, small lips and a narrow face. Their impassive facial expressions represent then the masses' nonchalant state of mind.

There was a uniformity firmly leading in the ideology of the era when collectivism was unquestionable and individualism was repudiated. It was reflected not only in the sameness of the figures' appearances, but also in their monotonous style of dressing. In Zhang Xiaogang's paintings, we see Zhongshan suit (known also as Mao suit) and white shirt worn by men and women, adults and children. We see as well standardized hairdos appearing repeatedly. Such strict uniformity seems to reveal the majority's lack of the self during those days.

Colours are scarcely applied in his paintings, leaving the canvases mostly grey. Only birthmark-like spots are highlighted on the face of every figure, implying a few traits of individuality. The resemblance of the "birthmarks" between each member of the family embodies and emphasizes the continuing blood ties which further constitute the Chinese society where families as units of the country was heavily affected by the political atmosphere of the time. Under such a condition, an individual "I" may be assimilated and an authentic self may subside. The "Bloodline: Big Family" Series in my view portrays the inauthentic being of the Chinese majority back then.

Bloodline Big Family Series, Zhang Xiaogang, oil on Canvas, 2006

Bloodline Big Family No. 1, Zhang Xiaogang, oil on canvas, 2006

Life of Jeanne Dielman

Despite the reflections on being through the embodiment of death in films or the depiction of the living in painting, life is pictured in daily details by Chantal Akerman in her movie Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels. In a distinctive approach, the film uncovers deliberately Jeanne - the protagonist's state of being, unfolding three days of her scrupulously organized life. The picture portrays Jeanne as a widowed housewife who lives with her only son. She has sex with men at a certain hour in the afternoon so as to make a living. Routinely and meticulously Jeanne conducts her life following a rigorous timetable. We could perhaps read the rigidity of the order she establishes as the key to secure the once broken life struck by her husband's death.

Most of the time during the day, Jeanne engages attentively in daily chores, which in the "readiness to hand" mode constructs a major part of her relation with the world. And as Heidegger described, when fully involved in the task-oriented activities, the protagonist is no longer aware of her existence. Such concentration is shown in her delicate body language when interacting with the household tools, which implies a clear sense of control. The scene where Jeanne carefully dries the washed cutlery, putting them away one by one, indicates a strong compulsion registered in her preciseness. Whereas the shot in which she unconsciously and obsessively scrapes the potatoes, as her life rhythm is indirectly interrupted by the visit of her client, communicates the fragility of such meticulousness and the unstable state of her being. The strict and repeated routine she builds leads to the suppression of herself through which the world is simultaneously disclosed, as Heidegger wrote: "Mood makes manifest 'how one is and is coming along'. In this, 'how one is' being in a mood brings being to its 'there'. "[23]

Her relation with the world is ultimately disclosed in the final five-minute-long take where Jeanne sits absent-mindedly, alone in the dark. The murder she commits becomes her self-relief, and the death of her client symbolizes her realization of life nihility. The bitter and unnoticeable smile Jeanne wears at the last says to us: " yes, it is over", for her long and intensified struggle with prostitution ("being with" in the form of sexual relationships with others) and the accumulating heaviness of life have finally come to an end. By filming her "being-in-the-world" and "being-with" the others, the movie reveals to us the life of Jeanne Dileman, unveiling the inner state she dwells in. Such disclosure in a broader perspective, mirrors the vulnerability of being through the trivialness of reality in which life is fragmentized. To a certain extent, we all live according to incessant routines. And thusly, we may find a piece of us in Jeanne's life.

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23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 131.

Still image from *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels,* Chantal Akerman, film, 1975

Still image from *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels,* Chantal Akerman, film, 1975

3

Interpretation of Greyness, Photography, Randomness and Trivialness

I believe art is the mediator that brings un-concealment to light, as Heidegger wrote: "Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of being in the work."[24] A work of art, for instance a painting, by creating perceptible pictures conveys certain visual imageries that lure us into an opening-up "world" where we submerge in its illumination. This further resonates with "earth" that rests invisibly underneath as the "sheltering agent" for the "rising" – "world", for all is born out of and at long last goes back to the boundless that is hidden and abstract. "Earth", a Heidegerrian term, is the profound and the fundamental while "world" is the visible and the elucidative. The resonance in between them originates the openness that evokes and thus sheds lights on truth, which in my case is directed to the meaning of existence. Hence, concerning my focus, I would like to elaborate a little further on three elements that are embedded in my main artistic practice – painting, as they shape my "world" on the canvas while echoing "earth" that lies invisibly underneath. They are "Greyness", "Photography", "Randomness and Trivialness".

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24 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" In: *Basic Writings,* ed. by David Farrell Krell, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) p. 202.

Greyness

If nothingness has a colour, it would be grey. Being the transition between black and white, grey manifests itself in layers of shades and thus accommodates discrepancies. It is neutral and thereby open. It welcomes various hues by merging with them. A thin slice of grey is nearly indistinguishable; it hides in the shadow of our surroundings and adjust itself accordingly. Grey lands as a light coat of dust on volumes, dimming the facades. Thus we see greyish orange on the darker side of a chair or greyish white in the corner of a wall. Grey finds its place in everyday life and is therefore omnipresent. On the other hand, greyness is tolerant and liberal. It accepts and therefore creates infinite possibilities. In fact, grey is made of and thus contains the two extreme ends – black and white. It is born out of the unification of those two, hence receptive to the rest. Grey embraces an abundance of colours. It could appear on a rainy day being a little bluish or tinted with a faint hint of rose at dusk.

If grey was to be visualized, it would be a cloud, shapeless, transforming always with winds. It is not ornamental thus not outstanding. With its opacity it mystifies. Things become unfocused when washed in it, loosing their clarities. Nevertheless, grey as the obscure at the same instant reflects the ambiguity of life, for it is a blend of situations which complete the wholeness of reality. It embodies the undefined in which sharpness fades and from which abstractions are drawn. Moreover, grey is also a mood. Being the colour of nothingness, it delivers a sense of detachment. It harmonizes and thereby unifies. In greyness divergences diminish, leading to the tone of indifference.

Photography

Photography freezes. When a photo is taken, we seize a piece of reality. Time is sliced, accordingly, and space is transformed, reconstructed in two dimensions. The seemingly life-like reality of photography that we grasp thus differs intrinsically from the one that we reside in. Photography's realism, in my opinion, doesn't come to the fore in the mode of recording that mechanically frames space and time; rather, it is established upon the action of seeking.

But what is it that with photography we seek? A moment, I believe, an instant in which an intimate connection between one's existence and the world is forged. And in the moment that's sought, one finds within the connection his or her own angle from which the world clarifies, surfaces, outstanding from the concealed everydayness. The revelation of reality mirroring our being thusly unfolds, manifesting the realism of photography. Hence, when we say photography freezes, it in fact means that photography ultimately seeks from one's stand the disclosure of the world by capturing the moment.

And I therefore seek as well with photography being one of my sources for painting, or rather as a method with which I look for my connection to the outside world. From a distant observation, I search for the moment where reality discloses itself in the randomness and the trivialness of life. By capturing the unnoticeable and the unappealing, life is revealed to me in a language that interprets reality as the undistinguished, the basic and the ordinary. This suggests in an illuminative way both the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of being that constitutes the idea of nothingness. And the discovery of the moment with photography is brought into being through the visualization of my perspective, transferred onto a canvas where my interpretation of reality is finally translated.

Randomness and Trivialness

In "The Question Concerning Technology" Heidegger wrote: "But that which frees – the mystery – is concealed and always concealing itself… Freedom is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing shimmers the veil that hides the essential occurrence of all truth and lets the veil appear as what veils."[25] In my opinion, there is double-layered thinking in Heidegger's words. Truth according to him is not simply the unconcealed; instead, it appears in "the clearing" that manifests, in the state of being veiled while letting its veil come into sight. Therefore, in un-concealment circulates the reality as the concealed.

And I also believe the concealed hides in the mundane that are exemplified by the randomness and trivialness of life, disclosed as such, for the everyday reality is essentially consisted of the uncontrived fragments of our being. Hence, be it a casual moment of a person getting off his seat or a piece of torn paper lying on the floor, both stand for the imagery of being as the unremarkable however also the truthful. Randomness being the spontaneous and trivialness being the insignificant constitute a fundamental layer of the meaning of life, disclosing the world in its most basic and natural way. On one hand, they veil due to their commonness and frivolousness, but on the other hand unveil, uncovering themselves as the veil, appearing as what they are. Correspondingly, my practice of painting deals with such a view on life by depicting the random and the trivial, which, with the choice of content that captures the insignificancy of life and the preference of composition that frames the imperfection of reality, reveals being at its most genuine, as the unembellished and un-staged.

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25 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" In: *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) p. 330.

Conclusion

Although Taoism and Heidegger's philosophy perceive being from different angles, it is interesting to find that in both theories lies the alteration between "the existing" and "the non-existing", for the nothingness is recognized as a primary part that constitutes our life and that opens itself to all. Thus, "the non-existing" could bring about full possibilities of being whereas in "the existing" the traces of nothingness could flow. With such a relation in between, the two philosophies manifest the truth of being by unveiling the world as how it is, un-concealing our daily reality in the state of being concealed. And simultaneously, the alteration exemplifies the flux in which resides the oneness that sits behind everything.

The topic of being is accordingly discussed in artworks as well with different approaches. On one hand, some talk of "the existing" with specific illustrations of the tangible which being the multiplicity of the world includes spaces, objects, scenes, people and so on. On the other hand, some speak of "the non-existing" in the form of abstraction that is extracted from the flux of life to deliver the idea of nihilism. And some may engage both, having two elements complementing, balancing each other. Nonetheless, in spite of the approaches in which the topic is directed, there is always an underlying layer that suggests the potential opposite in a larger scale. The illustrative as "the existing" may seek behind its surface the nothingness of life, while the obscurity of "non-existing" could possibly point to the realistic side of being. At last, they flow towards each other, into the same river.

Therefore, art itself hovers between "the existing" and "the non-existing", for it doesn't state the "truth" of only "the black" or "the white". As far as I'm concerned, there is no fixed formulation of art to place things in order for an absolute answer, since art does not make manifest sheer correctness. In fact, formulas put art in production, which defeats its initial purpose that is to seek in between the layers of the true and the false, for life can never be simplified or reduced.

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Tasman Sea, Table Cape, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 2016
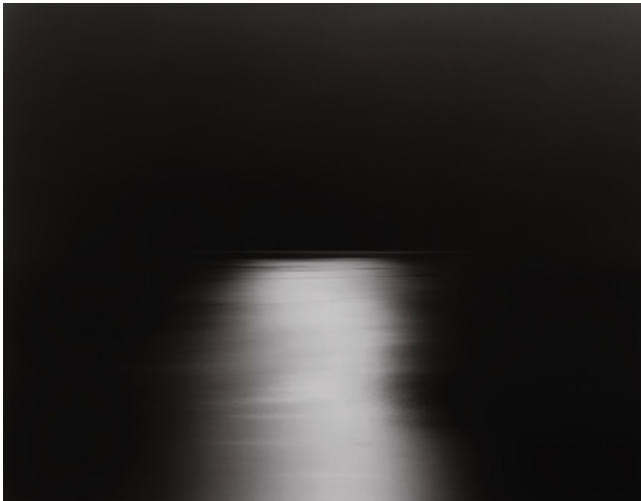
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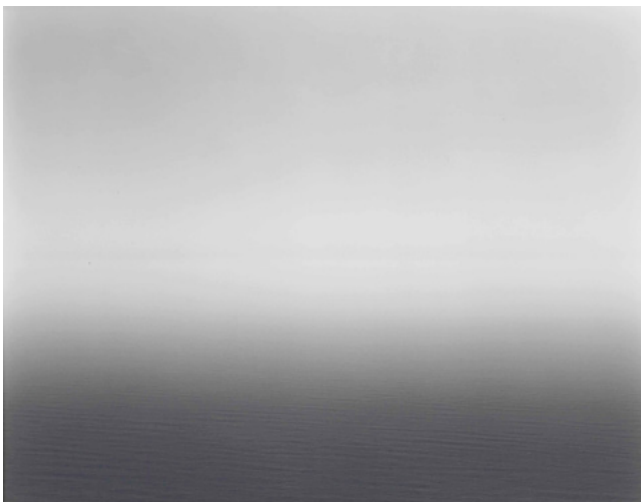
Ligurian Sea, Saviore, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1982

Ionian Sea, Santa Cesarea, Hirohi Sugimoto, 1993

Al Ringling Theatre, Baraboo, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1995

Goshen, Indiana, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1980

Orinda Theater, Orinda, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1992

U.A. Rivoli, New York, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1977

U. A. Play House, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1978
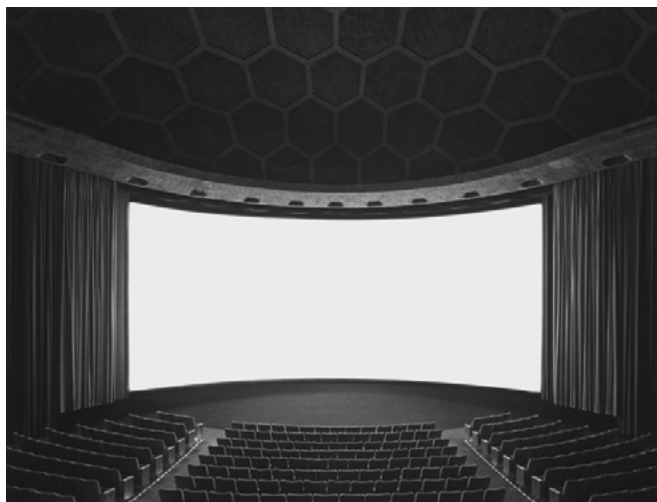
Cinerama Dome, Hollywood, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1993

Dark Brown Grey Orange, Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 1963

Black Blue Painting, Mark Rothko, oil on paper, laid on linen, executed in 1968

Untitled, Mark Rothko, acrylic on canvas, 1969

White Band no.27, Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 1954
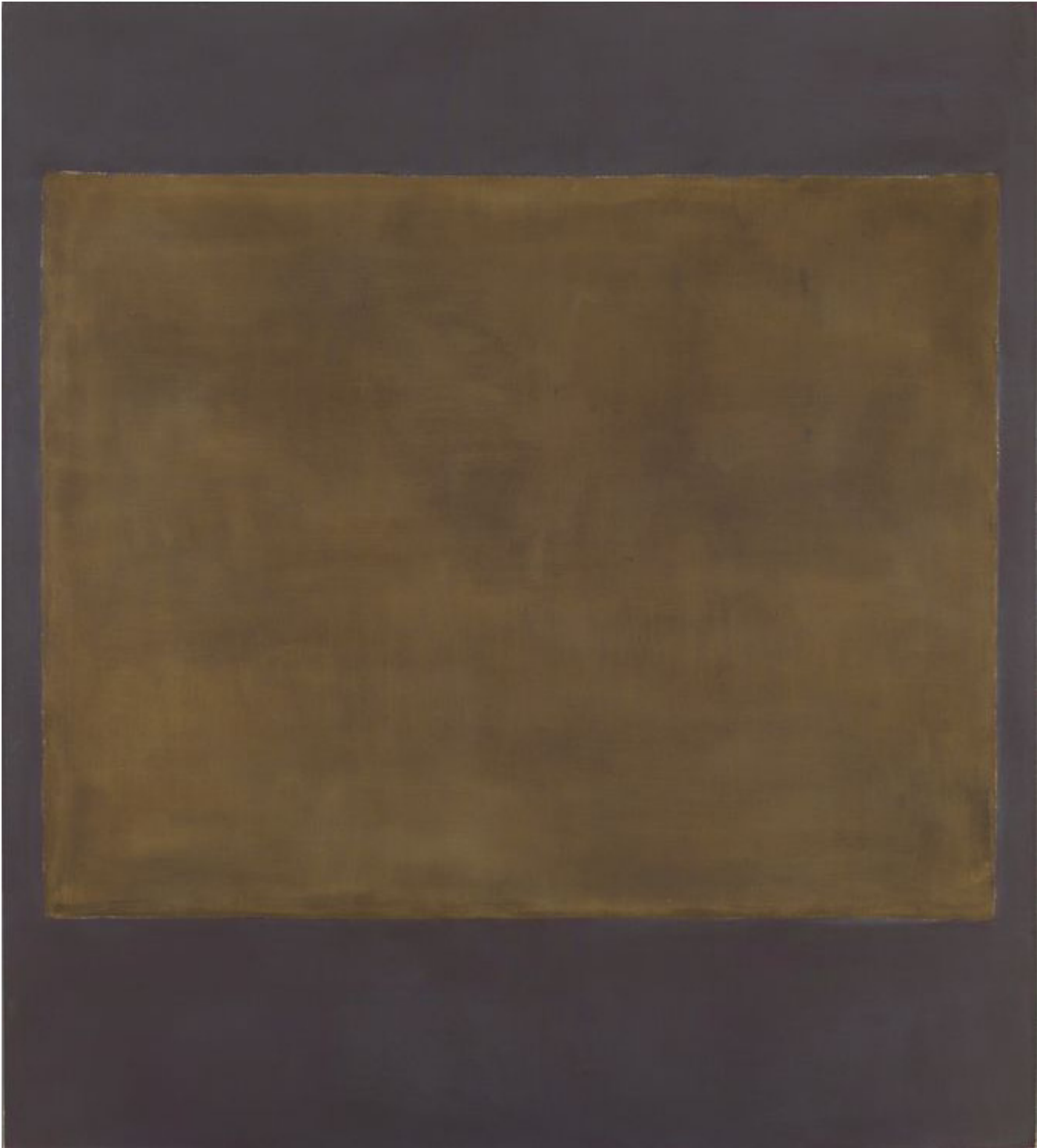
Untitled (Plum and Dark Brown), Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 1964

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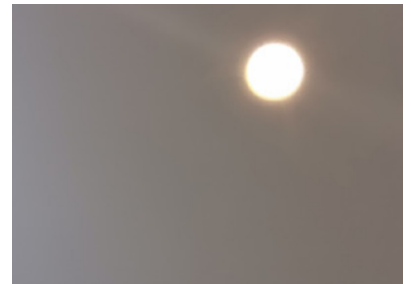
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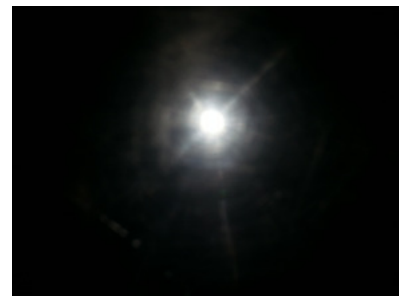
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A Bigger Splash, David Hockney, acrylic on canvas, 1967

The Yellow River No. 08 - Fire Burning In A Wetland, Shanxi, Zhang Kechun, photography, 2011
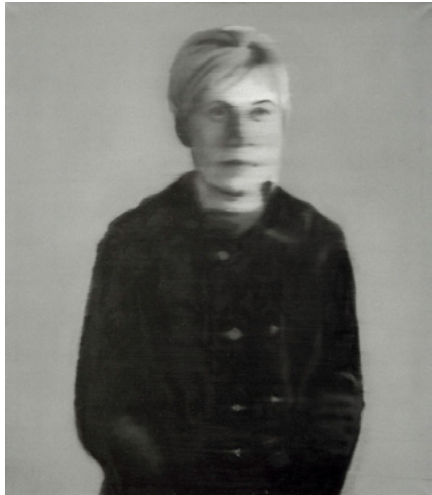
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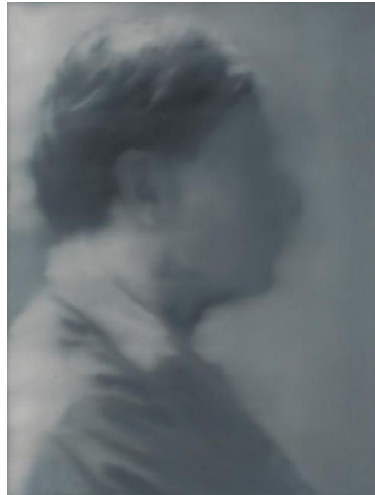
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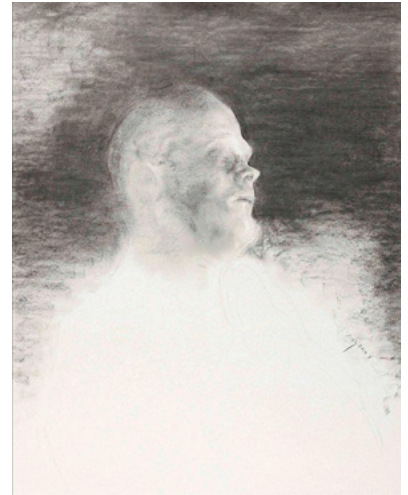
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Daido Moriyama

The Company They Keep - Panel, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2010

Crested Myna Standing on a Branch,
Bada Shanren, hanging scroll ink on
paper

Shi Tao, ink on paper
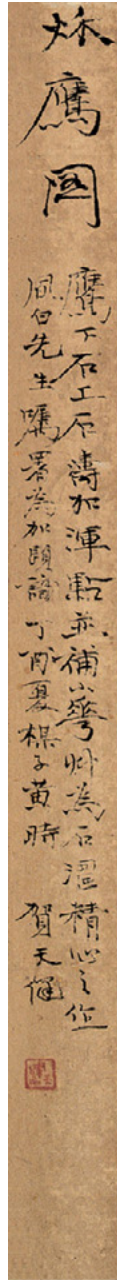
Flower-and-Bird, Shi Tao

Landscape Painting, Shi Tao
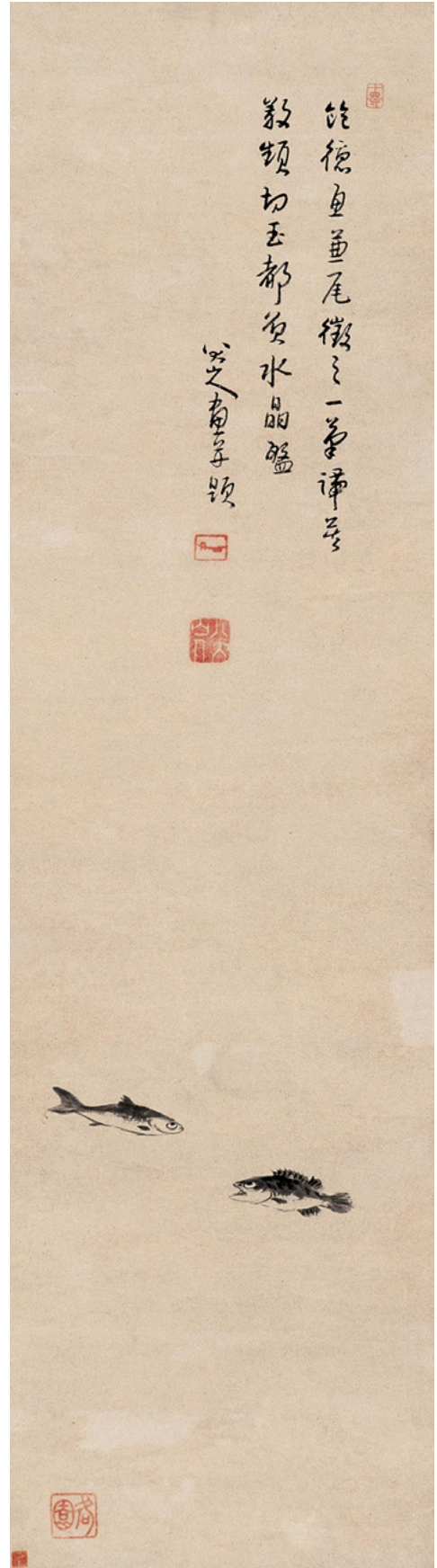
Double Fish, Bada Shanren, ink on paper

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Memory of Dog 2, Daido Moriyama, 1982

Tsugaru, Daido Moriyama

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Hokkaido, Japan, Daido Moriyama, 1978

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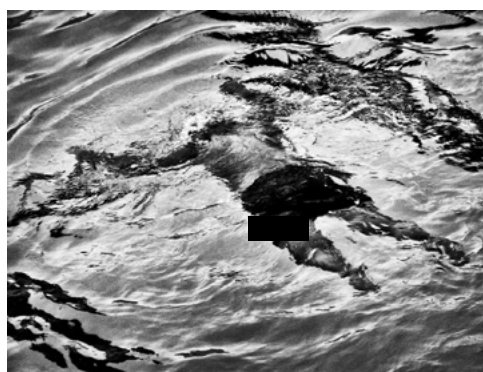
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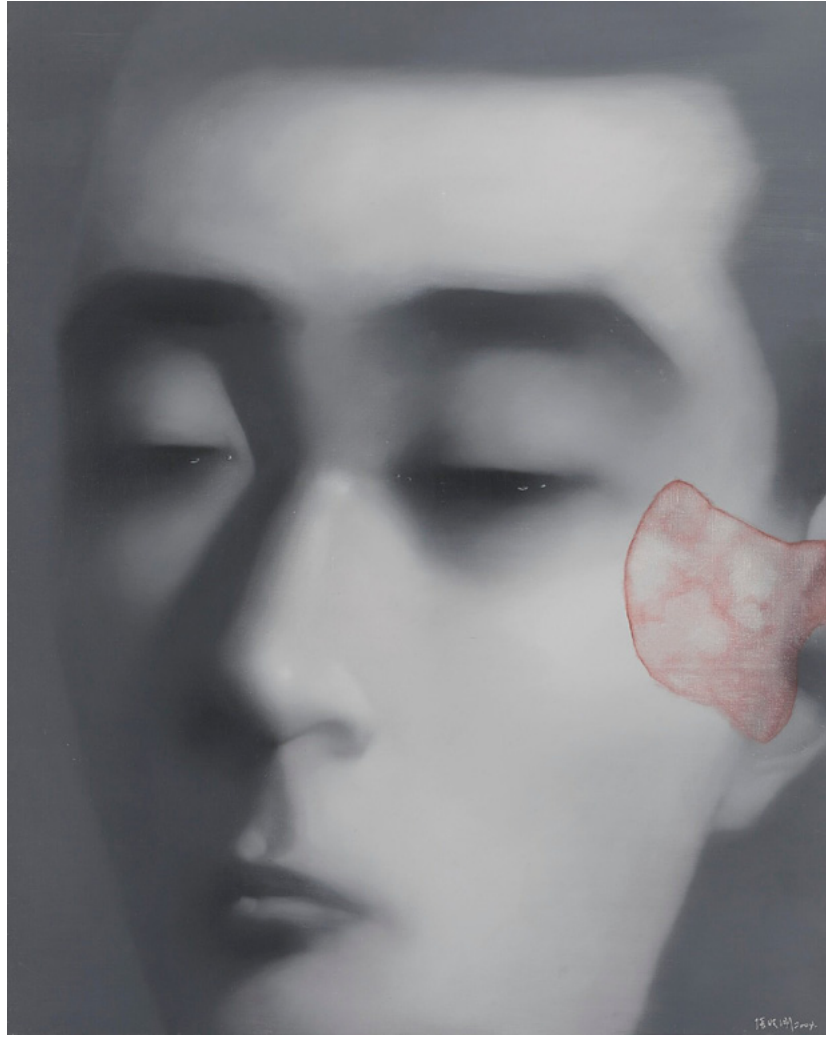
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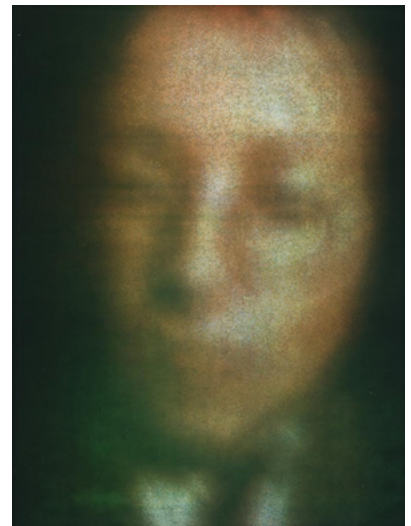
Heiner Friedrich, Gerhard Richter, offset print on lightweight chromo card,1970

Campaign(glasses), Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2007
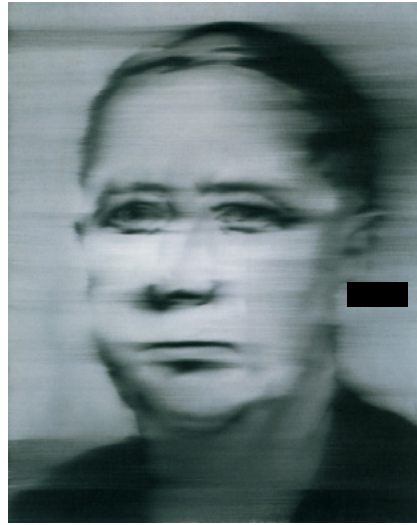
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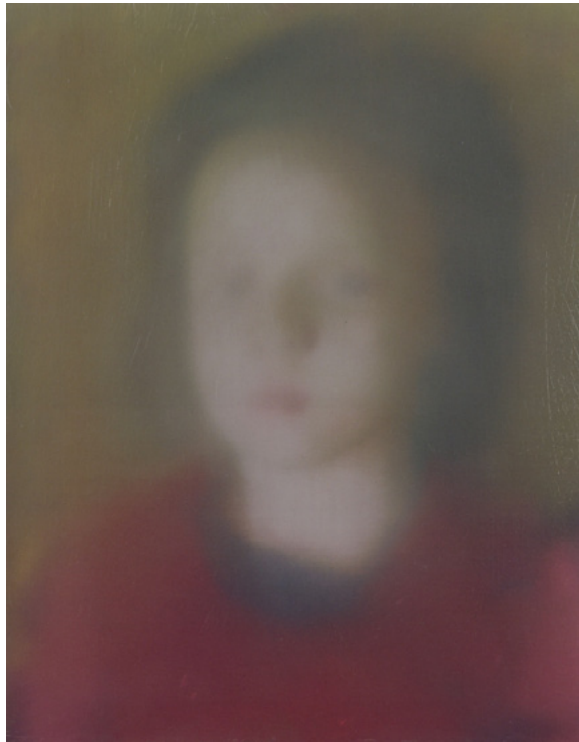
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Head- sketch, Gerhard Richter, oil on aluminium, 1997
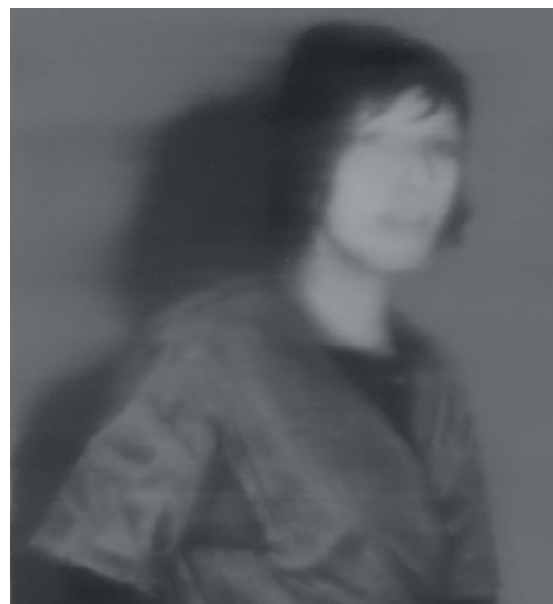
Confrontation-1, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1988

6.2013 Spring Summer, Fang Lijun, oil on canvas, 2013

Coastline-No.1, Zhangxiao, Giclée, 2009

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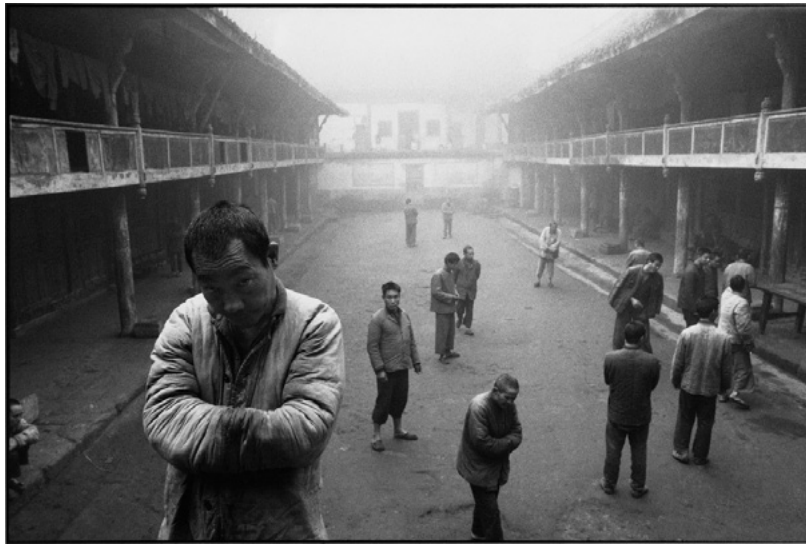
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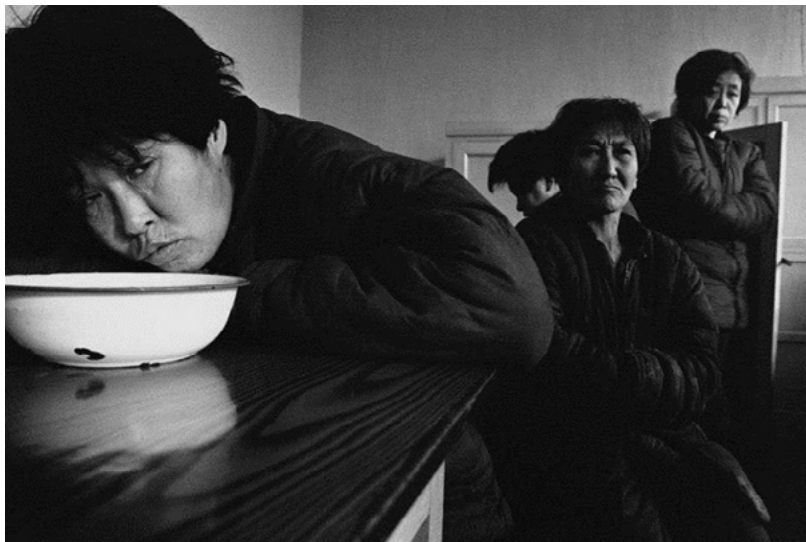
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Coast Line Series, Zhang Xiao

Coast Line Series, Zhang Xiao

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Mayday, Moscow, William Klein, photography, 1959

11 November (Armistice Day), Paris, William Klein, photography, 1968

Western Union, New York, William Klein, photography, 1955

Elsa Maxwell's Tory ball, Waldorf Hotel, William Klein, photography, New York, 1955

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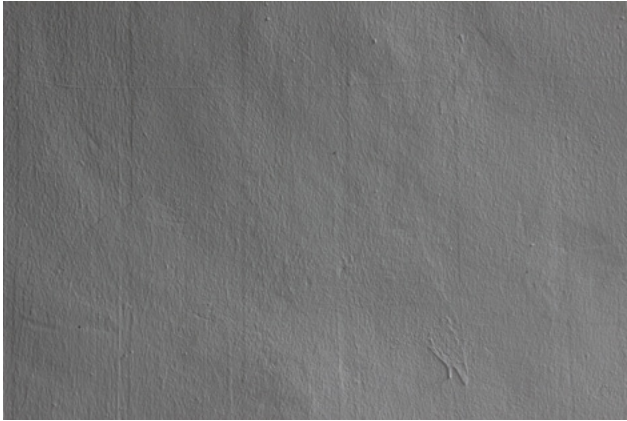
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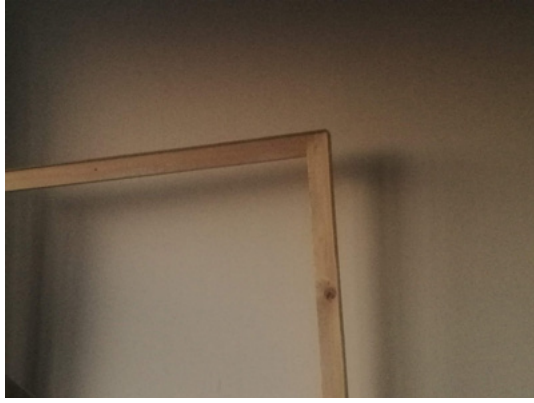
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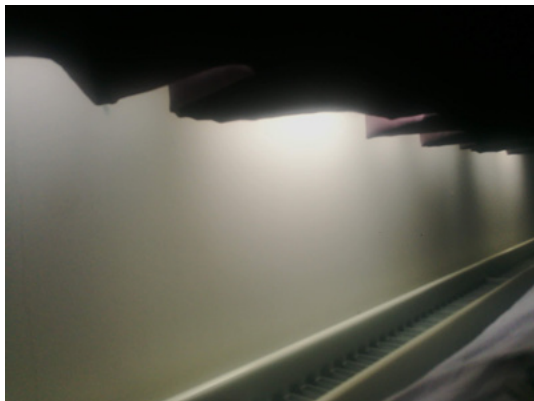
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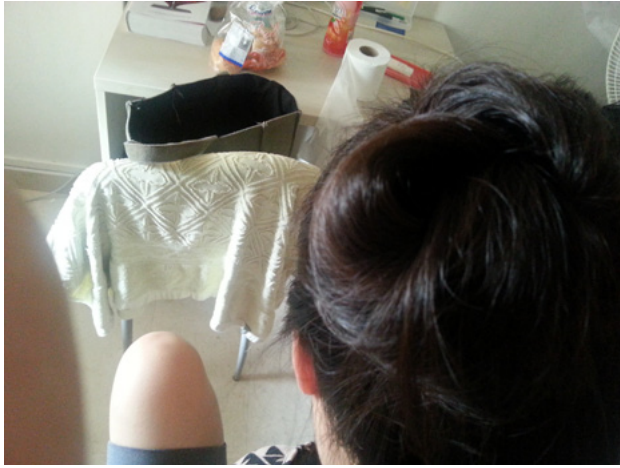
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Photo by me, 2014-04-17 16.08.20
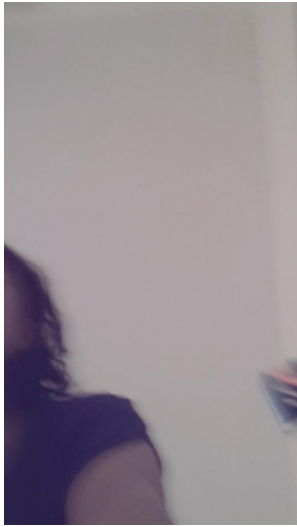
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14.10.56

Photo by me, 2012-11-26
01.22.01

Photo by me, 2013-10-31
18.33.33
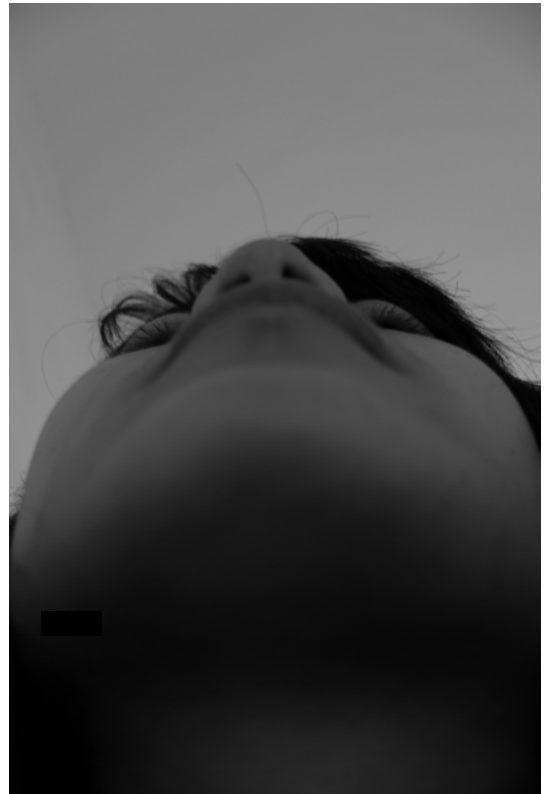
Photo by me, 2014-01-26 16.40.59

Photo by me, 2014-02-26 20.16.58

Body, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 1990

Artificial Underwater Flower, Daido Moriyama, photography,1990

Shinjuku, Tokyo, Daido Moriyama, photography , 1995/98

Dough, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2005

The Priest, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2016
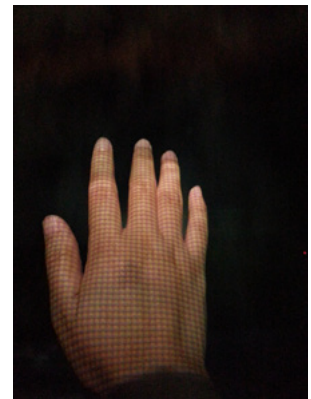
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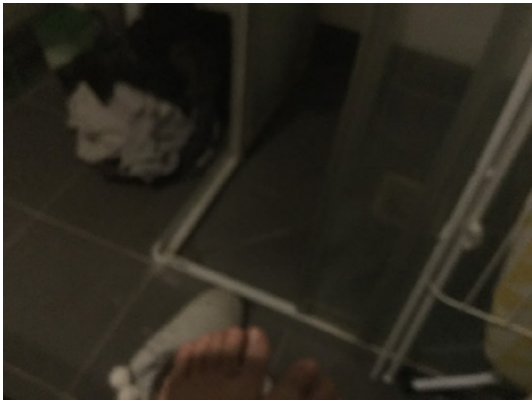
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Photo by me, 2019-08-28 15.33.06

Photo by me, 2019-06-10 16.03.39

Photo by me, 2020-01-12 20.30.48

Photo by me, 2020-01-31 00.47.02

Photo by me, 2020-1-20, 12.53

Photo by me, 2013-05-11 17.13.34

Photo by me, 2014-01-13 21.03.33

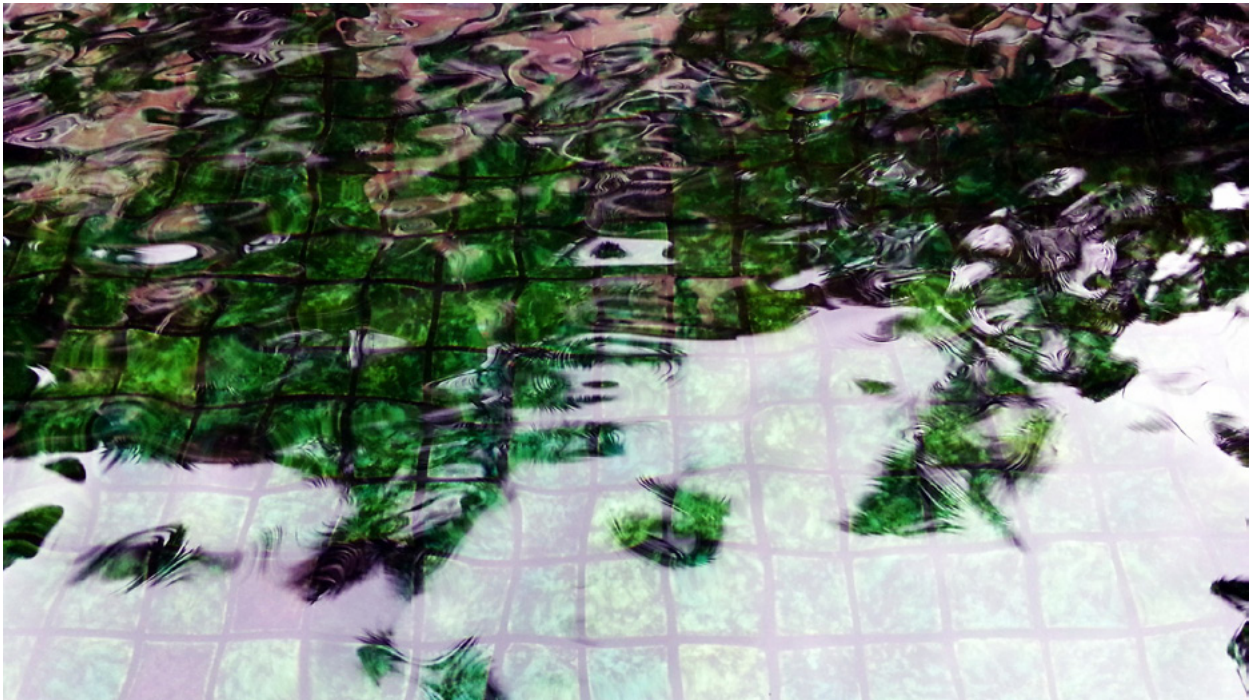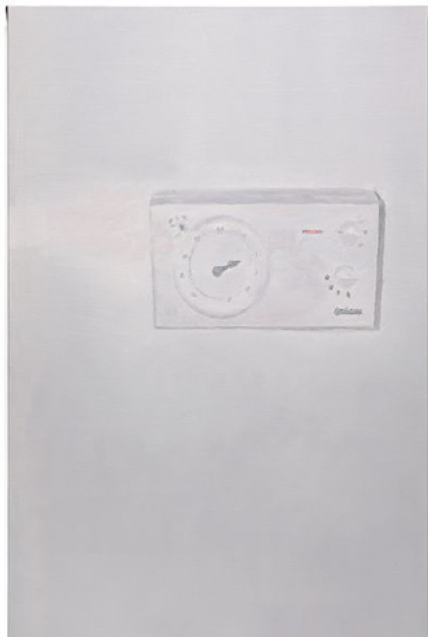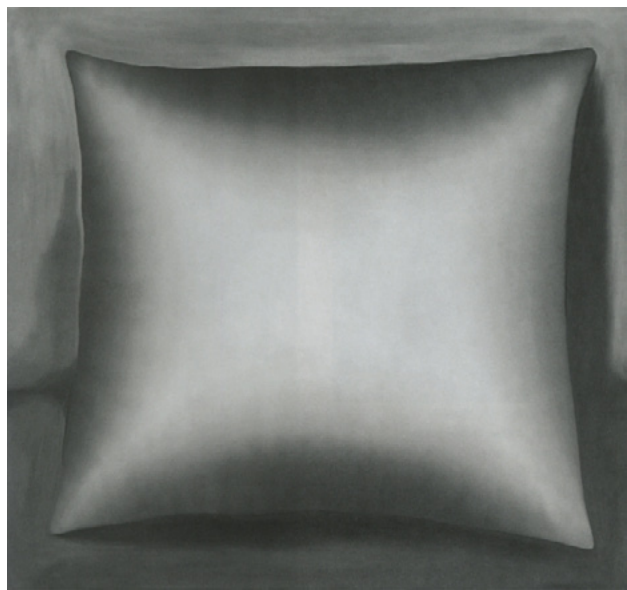*Photo by me,* 2012-12-15 13.05.38

Photo by me, 2013-09-30 00.32.51

Photo by me, 2014-04-10 11.30.14

Timer, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2005

Pillow, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Roses, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas,1994

Lamp, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 1992

Toilet Paper, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Toilet Paper, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Toilet Paper, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Toilet paper, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Kitchen Chair, Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 1965

Photo by me, 2020-02-24 14.21.00

Window, Luc Tuymans, oil on canvas, 2004

Photo by me, 2020-04-05 1.29.25

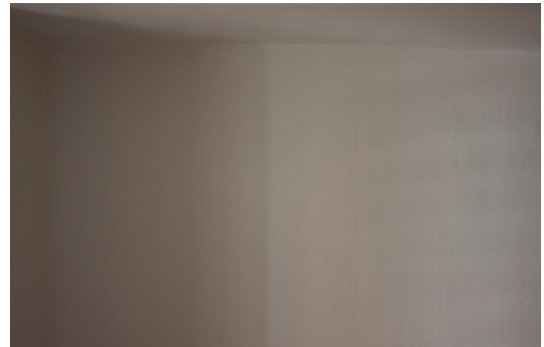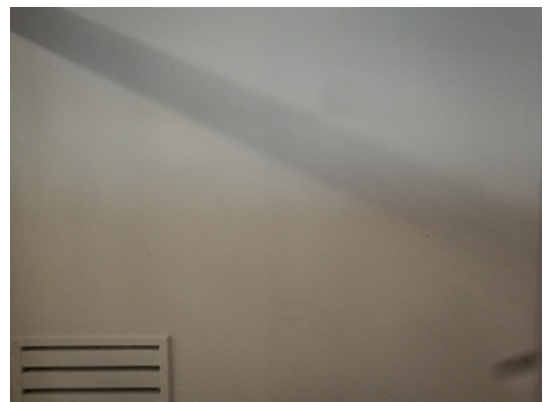*Photo by me,* 2020-04-05 11.42.13

Photo by me, 2019-11-20 15.53.09