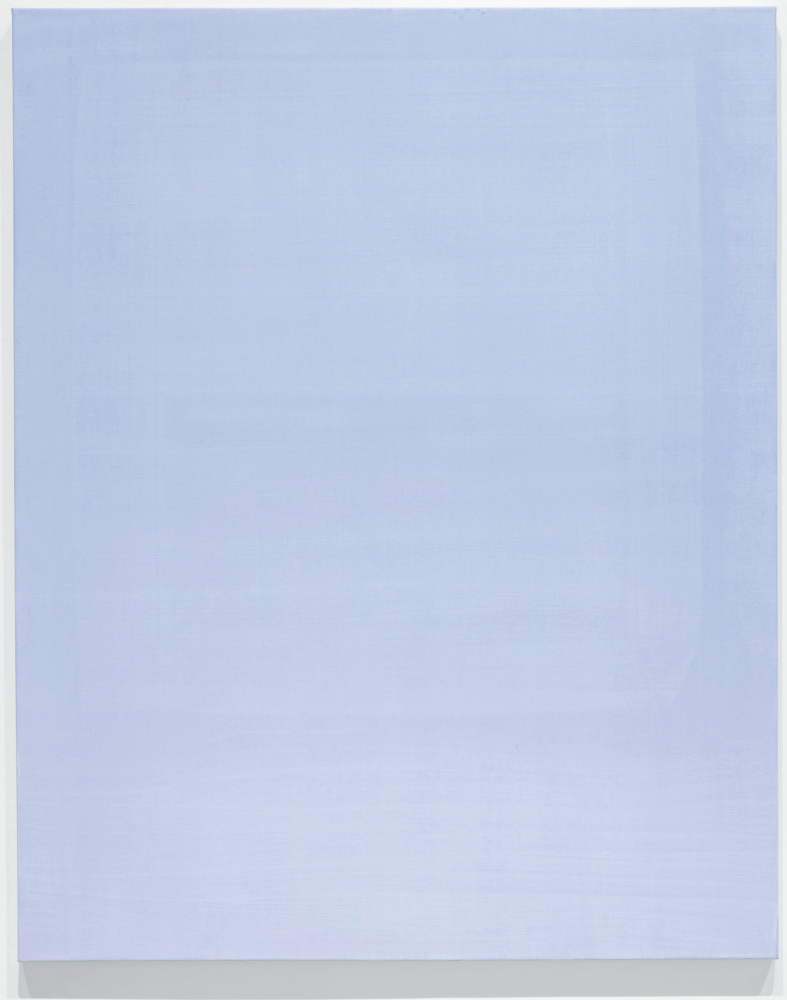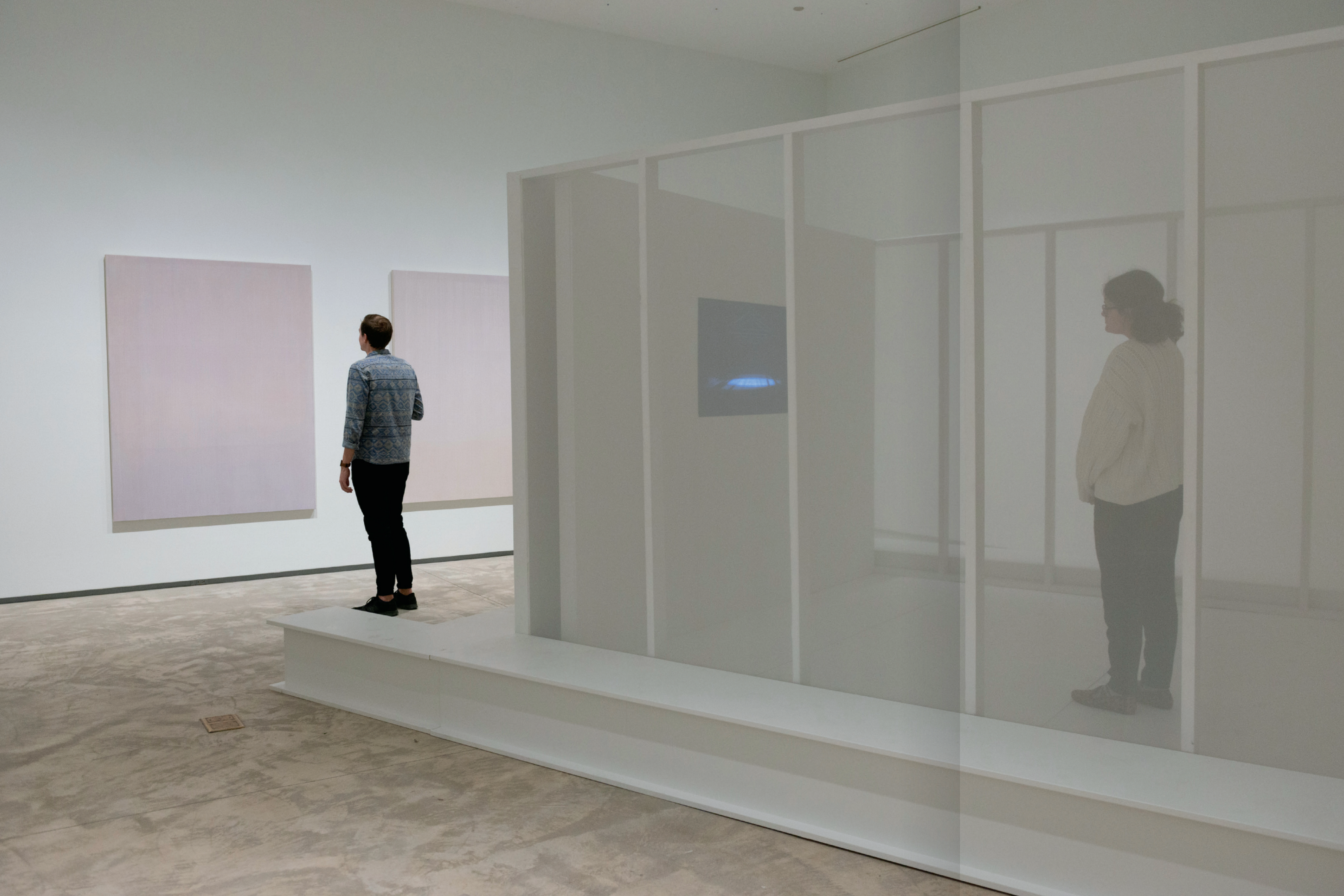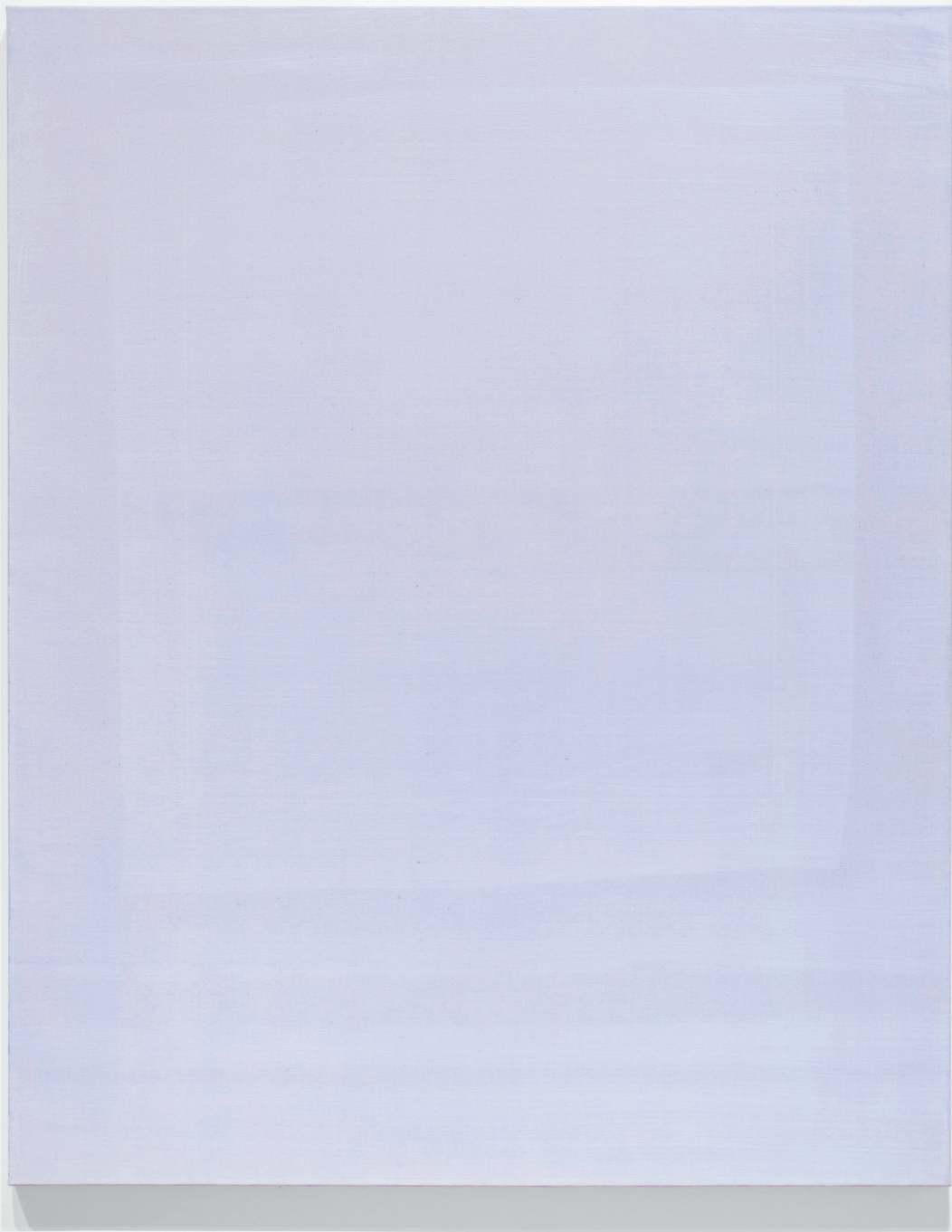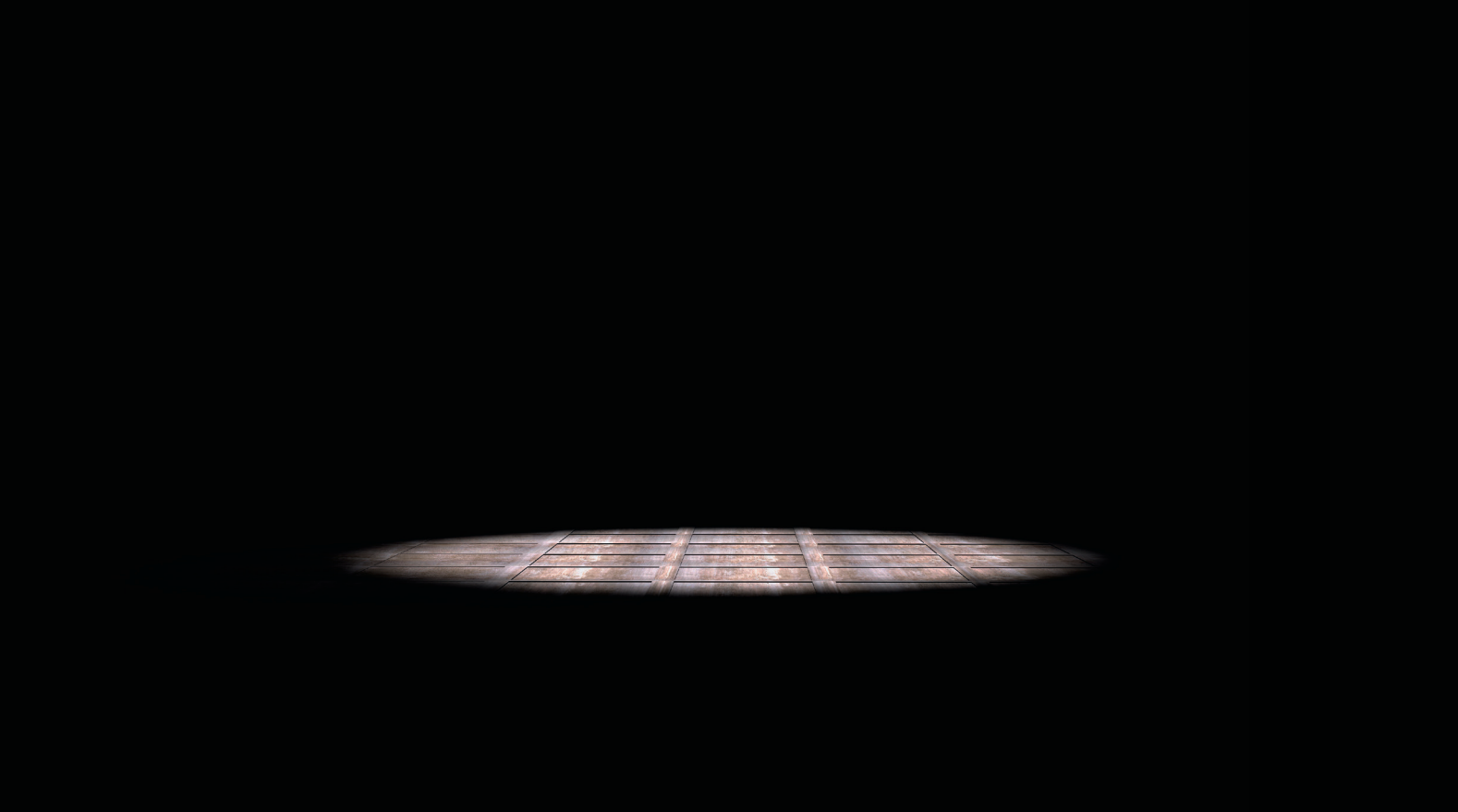Chris Kline and Yam Lau
Weave

Essays by
Stephen Horne and Sunny Kerr

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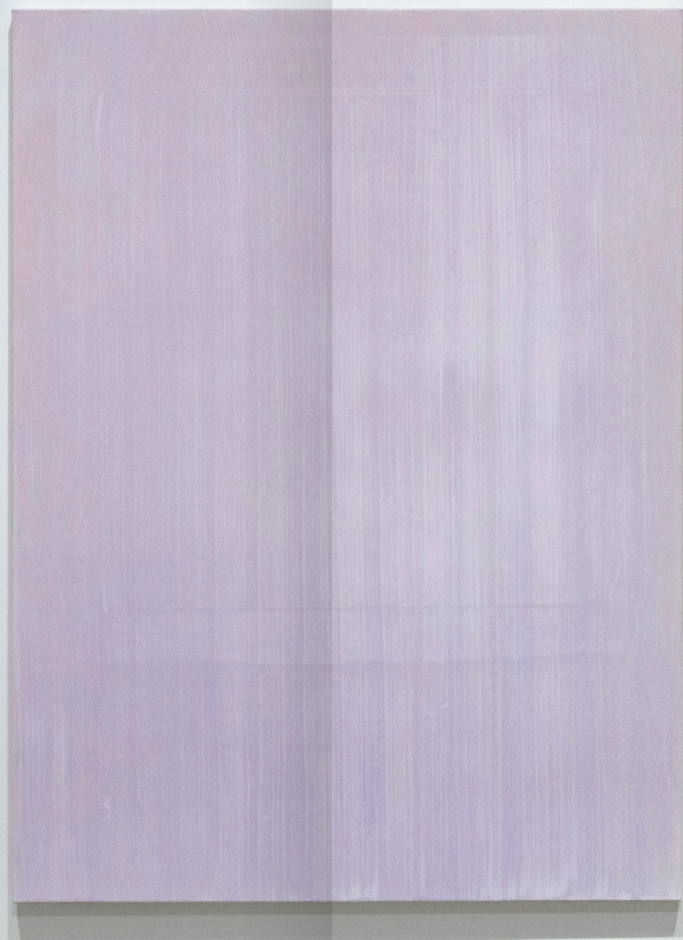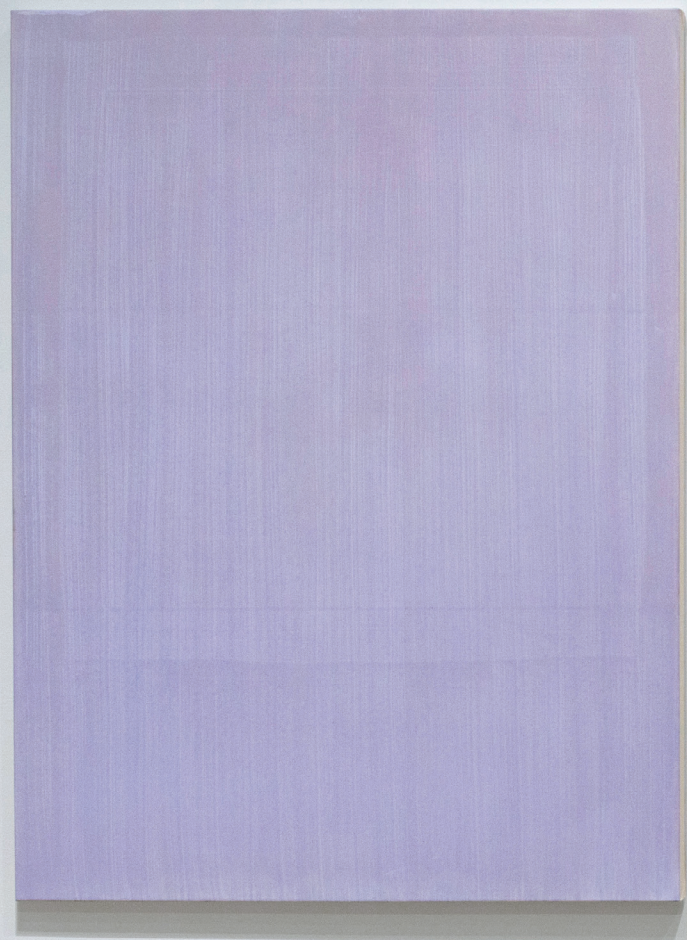
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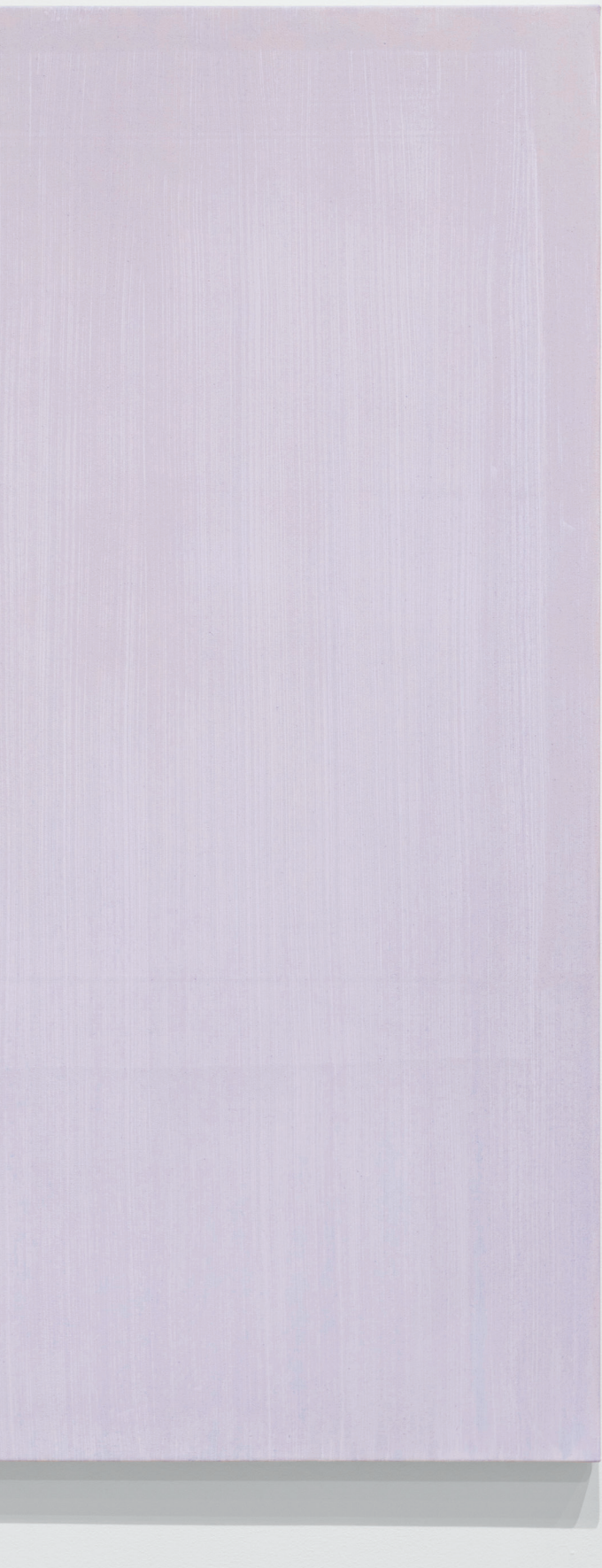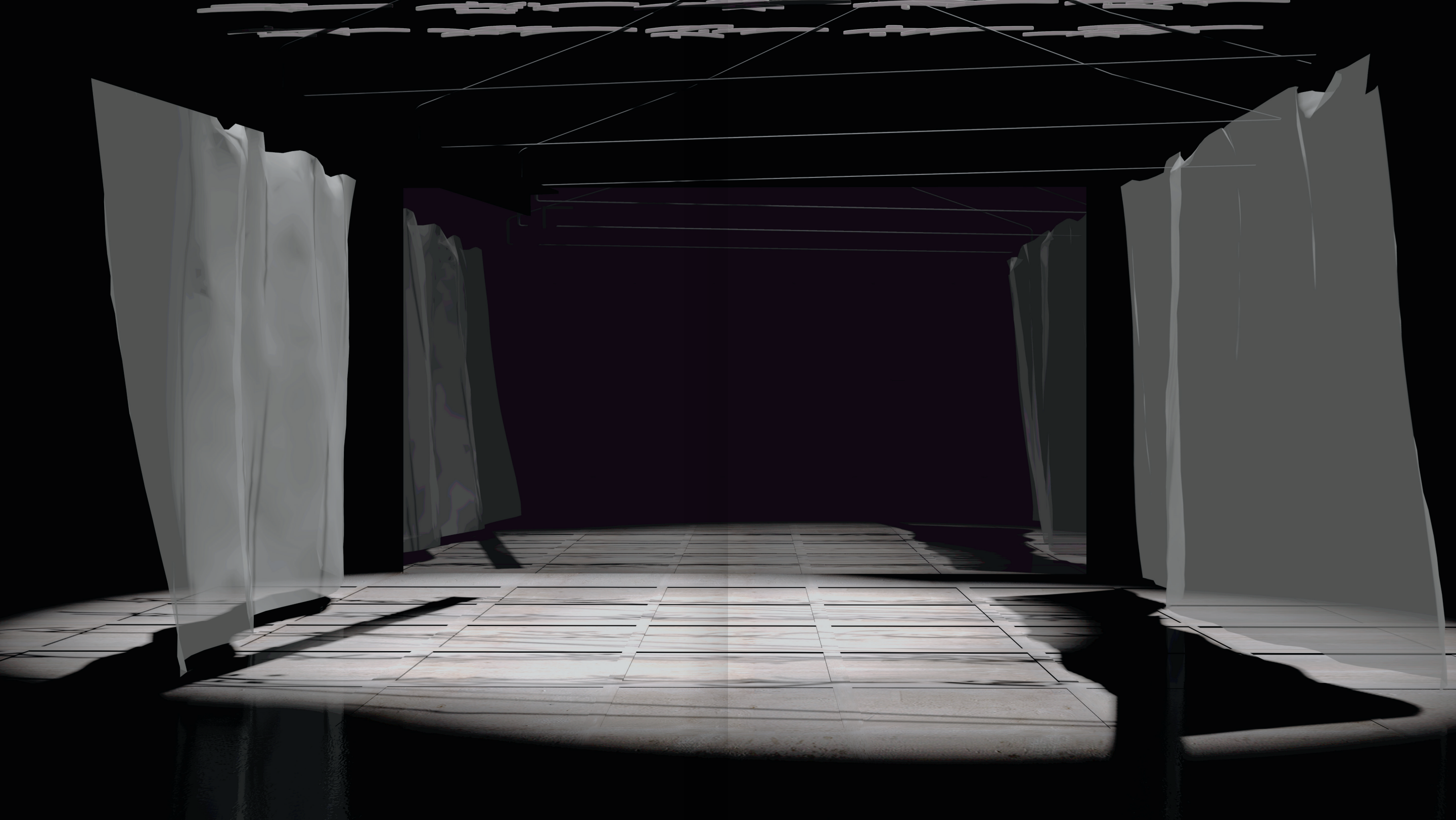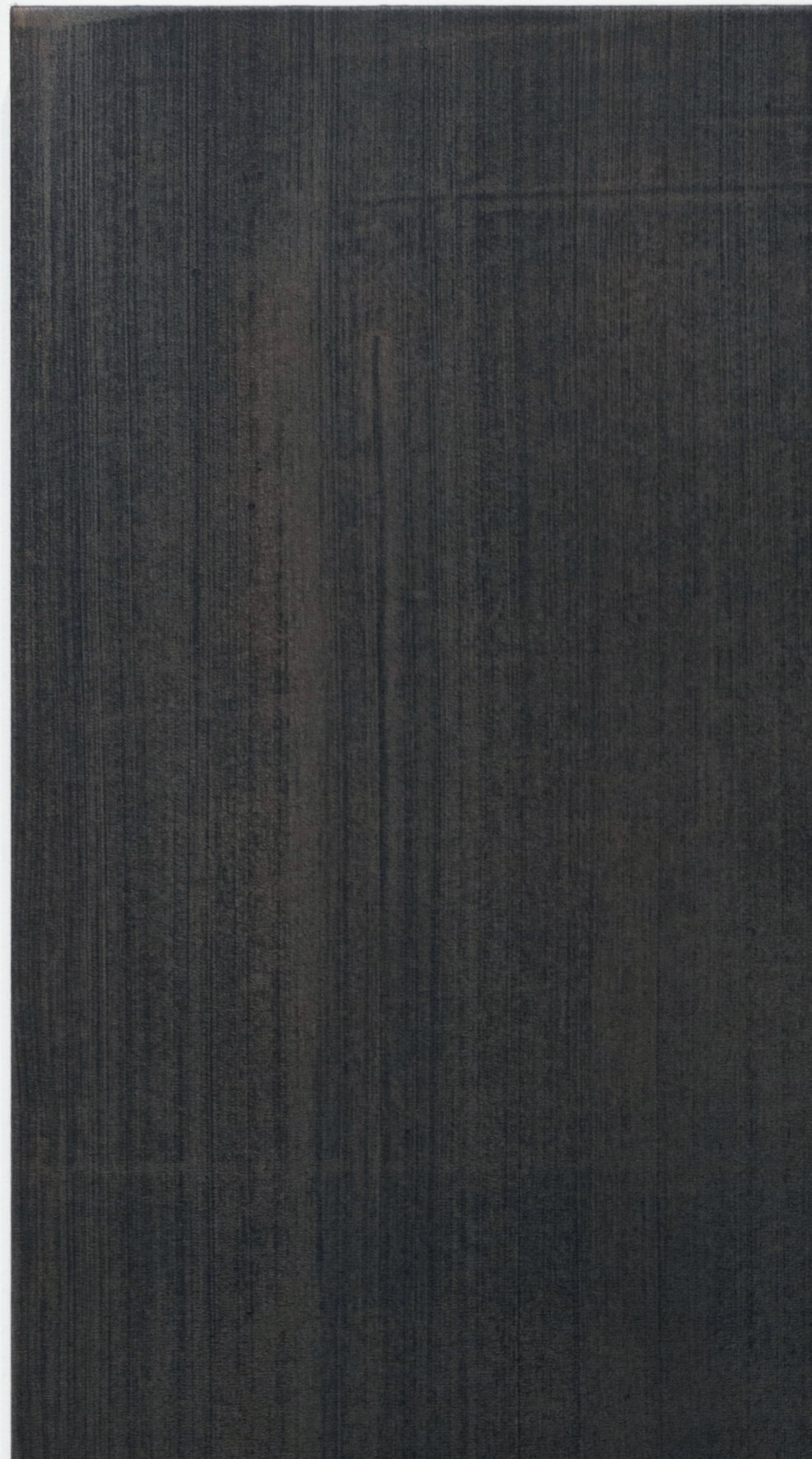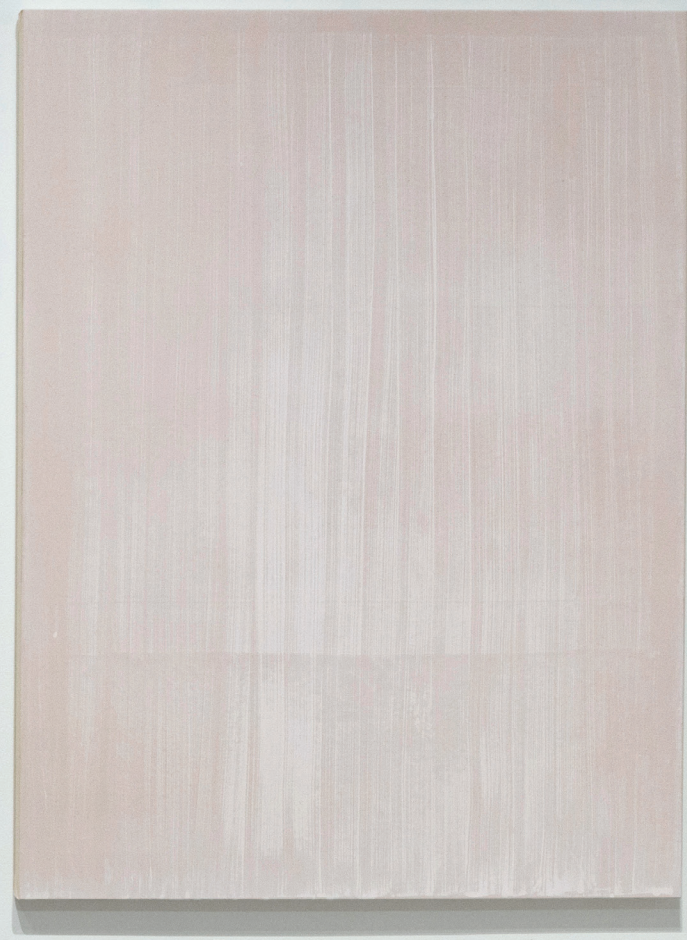## Chris Kline and Yam Lau

Curated by Stephen Horne and Sunny Kerr
Agnes Etherington Art Centre

Foreword

In their potent pairing of works by Canadian artists Chris Kline and Yam Lau, the curatorial team of Stephen Horne and Sunny Kerr has conjured a striking aesthetic resonance that probes—elegantly and without pretension—the deepest impulses of artmaking and reckoning with the nature of being. Kline's *La Manche* series of paintings and the twin pavilions of Lau's *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* installation seem to draw breath together to invoke these questions. And, amid its pleasures, the exhibition *Chris Kline and Yam Lau: Weave* recalls and speaks to a world transfixed by the endless mutability of electronic screens.

     I thank the artists for their gorgeous, subtle work, and for their willingness to accept the invitation to participate in the *Weave* project. I am grateful to the curators for their thoughtful investigations in developing the exhibition and the beautifully wrought essays herein. I thank the Agnes Etherington Art Centre staff members for the care and creative integrity they bring to each project, and here extend that gratitude to Principal Studio, designer of this publication.

     The development and presentation of *Chris Kline and Yam Lau: Weave* have been made possible through the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, the City of Kingston and Kingston Arts Council through the City of Kingston Arts Fund, and our members and donors. We acknowledge these crucial resources with gratitude.

Jan Allen, Director

Something Happens
When Nothing Does
Stephen Horne

… there is a plural return among leading Western artists to the light of ancient Asian wisdom.
— Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Digital Film Event* [1]

Analogy runs through everything-that-is like a shuttle through a loom, weaving its threads into the All, or what I call the 'world.'
— Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy* [2]

This exhibition, titled *Weave*, presents recent work by Chris Kline and Yam Lau. Kline is presenting abstract painting and Lau "cinematic" installations composed with digital video and computer-generated video animation. Where these artists overlap is in their concern with the screen as a hybrid form. The exhibition proposes that we consider the sensuous world as a weave of visual and tactile experience, where digital media and traditional artistic practice are brought together, drawing attention to the hybridity of the modern and tradition that is globalized culture.

One of the outcomes of the attention given to hybridity in recent years is that the materiality of the artwork has become a much discussed topic. This, while a profound "dematerialization" of the artwork is underway, a process also identified within the broader discourse of globalization. An immense shift in perspective is taking place: a shift in what is space and what is time, and for whom or what; effectively, the conception of materiality as a substrate of reality is being displaced in favour of process. Artists often take process in the direction of the production of knowledge or the development of networks. However, a second and more interesting path is one reaching back to artists of early Modernism, in particular Kazimir Malevich. There is also a longer view that would incorporate a couple of thousand years of Asian tradition. For example, key points that connect Malevich to the traditions of the Tao and the Buddha would be the non-opposition of the active and the passive in favour of their co-emergence or their reciprocal engendering. As art critic Boris Groys writes, "Malevich proposed that the artist relax, that the artist give up the ambition of shaping the permanent flow of the material world. Instead, Malevich preached laziness and inaction, which were supposed to release entropic forces that had true revolutionary power." [3]

In response to an installation by Yam Lau, art historian Alice Ming Wai Jim states that, "Throughout China's long seventeenth century, the notion of reclusion, of self-imposed withdrawal and extreme seclusion from the world in order to provide models for others, was idealized and imagined more than achieved in actual practice… It was accordingly the ineffable dimension of the studio as a world or realm that afforded the ideal place precisely to engage in a dialogue of disengagement as a means to re-engage (fig. 1)." [4] Groys sharpens this evaluation of passivity by

drawing attention to the critical force of "blank nothingness," and how nothingness can be experienced as "a space of ideological freedom." He suggests that "the experience of radical spiritual freedom… dissolves not only ideology, but also any familiar social space—allowing nothingness to permeate our everyday world."[5] This last phrase provides an important way of accessing the practices of both Kline and Lau, each working from an empty centre, a condition of non-attachment, which, as philosopher François Jullien proposes, allows "everything to exist only in process, passing from one state to another."[6]

Alongside the salutary theme of "blankness" is that of "the tangible," a notion taking us in the direction of haptic perception and the experience of "tactile trace" which is the residue of touch, handling and holding. The theme of "tactile trace" is important in this context as it introduces the issue of "contact," which is complex and open-ended. In his texts of the late-40s Barnett Newman explored notions of the "here and now," and in *Prologue for a New Aesthetics* (1949) he hinted at a conception of place as time, suggesting that place be understood as process rather than a fixed point with hard boundaries.[7] According to filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, the time/place of electronic media is that of impermanence and non-linearity. She suggests that we shouldn't "think in terms of linear progress, but rather in terms of a spiralling, multi-dimensional here and now—where anything in the present carries with it its past and its future."[8] Her statement, "What characterizes the digital image is its inherent mutability—the constant movement of appearing and vanishing that underlies its formation,"[9] is most helpful with regard to Lau's computer-generated video animation.

The practices of Kline and Lau—one hand-worked/abstract and one electronic/abstract—are equally concerned with the humanistic themes of touch, memory, self and intimacy, as well as the conventional opposition of the natural to the artificial. Their works show great restraint, often relying on "withdrawing" and "withholding"—gestures that move toward intimacy and inhabitation rather than spectacle. This seems to reflect an attitude that favours "allowing" space—the space of the other—rather than the more common ambition to occupy and dominate a space. In their studios, Kline and Lau share the same commitment to art as a practice of emptying out rather than the more aggressive and instrumental practice of "producing" some thing. Their particular sensitivities allow them to wait and listen where other artists often simply want to build, push on ahead or fill in. There is something of the seventeenth-century Chinese practice of "retreat" in this.

Chris Kline grew up in the 70s and 80s in rural eastern Ontario. He recently described this place and time as a "country of quiescence and still distance" in the words of Al Purdy, and this seems like an appropriate introduction to the atmosphere found within Kline's paintings. In the artist's notes regarding this environment there are some key terms, such as "ghostly" and "ruins." Kline also mentions having grown up in a house in the style of our time, in the mode of reproducibility.[10]

Kline often refers to his attachment to textiles and fabric. He points to the etymological proximity between "map" and "cloth" (from the Latin *mappa*, referring to material upon which maps were drawn), which of course leads to "fabricate" as in building and making in general. Kline connects this to memories of accompanying his father at work while he surveyed various "properties" or pieces of land to be sold. It is not surprising that themes of "geo" and "earth" recur on a regular basis within the artist's work.

There is more to these memories than nostalgia. Reflecting on his work, Kline cites *The Disintegration Loops* (2002–2003), a minimalist music composition by William Basinski, as an inspiration, and it's easy to connect a sense of suburban futility with Basinski's adoption of the loop as a compositional practice. Even more pertinent would be Kline's interest in the musical assemblages of composer Éliane Radigue, whose work resembles a tectonic plate of sound evolving so slowly it seems to move and stay still at the same time.

Kline's momentum is one of a compression toward a zero degree that constitutes one particular maximization of painting. His paintings are a matter of touch—touching the frame, fabric and surface. They are a sort of landscape where the canvas is an analogy for the earth's surface, skin, veil or screen. Works of art that present a rich sense of tactile space are those most likely to touch us deeply. The grain of canvas, the shimmer of paint, and in the case of the recent paintings, the ghostliness of their doubled but empty framing brings us back to the veils we see in Lau's *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* animations. This veil is an analogy for the screen, a motif that informs both artists' works. Here I am thinking along the lines of the "tarpaulin" works by the late Betty Goodwin (another Montreal artist). Aside from the tarpaulins, which were found objects, she also worked with found fabric—vests, shirts and other pieces of clothing—to create drawings and prints. In their appearance some of these pieces play on the theme of ghostly absence, something explored at great length by Susan Hiller with her series of compressed cube paintings made with the remnants of past work.

Of course it is possible to situate Kline's paintings in the familiar lineage of "reductive" painting. The quality of abstraction, the sort of emptiness we find in Kline's work, is often affiliated with an "Asian" or "Eastern" aesthetic. This is to walk a knife-edge where on one side of the chasm there is cliché, and on the other, an exhilarating adventure of keeping everything up in the air. We know air in the first instance as breath and breathing. One way of keeping things up in the air is the practice of repetition, doing "the same" over and over again, or following a convention as was done in traditional Chinese landscape painting. Perhaps enough time has passed since Abstract Expressionism's heroic assertion of "the void" or "nothingness," that we can now appreciate the broader implications of these practices as they unfold. When discussing the relationship between Eastern and Western aesthetics it is important to remember that each is always already a hybrid rather than any sort of pure identity.

Kline's formal concerns—with measure, configuration, the rectangle, the painting's fabric and support, the particularities of brushwork—suggest a parallel between these aspects of his art practice and the world of everyday life, where ethics and the issue of artistic form typically appear in all their thickness. There is a possible parallel to be drawn out, manifested through his concern with measure, in the sense of weighing something up. This may well connect with the tension that Kline establishes between methodical, meticulous and pre-planned execution, and the sense of a poised indifference. This latter is another connection to the Asian tradition of non-attachment informing the trajectory of John Cage and the artists in his wide sphere of influence, a tradition that is very instructive for those of us in the West.

Looking at some paintings relevant to Kline's, for example those of California painter John Zurier or James Bishop (an American in Paris), we can see how difficult the challenge of painting is. It is difficult in the sense of finding a place in our times, but more simply, what we might call finding one's way to a unique *seeing-touch*: the actual doing of the work, including the sensitivity to the materials, as well as the insight and the touch that comes with a certain distance. In many cases, for example that of Richard Tuttle, we could describe this as a "light touch," meaning both in the sense of its restraint, but also it's ability to touch with a certain light. With Tuttle's early work there is also his use of "matter-of-factness,"

a form of restraint echoed in Kline's work. These are qualities that bring us back to the "here and now" of what we are looking at, and this works best when there is an underlying sense of distance as well.

In 1999 Kline created a breakthrough group of small and modest but very fine paintings, remarkable for their emphatic use of bland colour and recycled near-transparent support material. These found bits of cotton poplin were already imprinted with a pattern to which he added discreet modifications. Kline has adopted such procedures as a way of incorporating the everyday into what is otherwise a rather ascetic activity and they have remained important throughout his career. This is particularly relevant for the recent series exhibited here, *La Manche* (2016–present), which involve a sort of "printing" on fabric, albeit the printing of a blank surface on a blank surface— a double void.

Mostly medium-sized at around four by five feet, meticulously made, simple and elegant, "physical" in appearance, each painting in the *La Manche* series presents the frame as subject. Positioned symmetrically on the surface of each painting, we find the faint outline of a frame that is slightly smaller than the stretched canvas. This drawing of a frame consists of a slight ridge on the surface of the canvas and is a clue to the use of printmaking techniques in the construction of the paintings. Kline's frames recall several pencil and watercolour drawings of Eva Hesse, including *Untitled* (1969) and *Right After* (1969), commented on by Briony Fer in an essay (pertinently for us) titled *Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism* (1994).[11] With a fragile/raw tension, meticulous and slow in the sense of literally being difficult to see adequately (as per Rothko), Kline's paintings bring to mind the process-oriented work of John Zurier, though where Zurier's emphasis is on the weight of historical technique, Kline's suggest an affinity for the machine-made look of Wade Guyton's digitally produced "paintings."

There is a degree of rapprochement here, as both Kline and Guyton associate their paintings with the labour and material of textiles. In spite of this reference to Guyton, my sense is that Kline's work is more linked to the ambiguity that is textile, its relationship with both the tradition of domestic handwork and the melancholy that is industrialization. We can see a similar affection for the weave as image, procedure and concept in the works of other painters, particularly Dagmar Dahle's *Van Gogh Drip Paintings* (2004–2008), and Andy Patton's series of photography-oriented close-ups of a textile weave produced between 1990–2006. Both bodies of work address the theme of pattern/surface and both present an intense look at a textile weave, Dahle's being more tactile and process-oriented while Patton's emphasizes the photographic image.

In the process of creating this open-ended series of works, a sense of "contact" is made literal. Kline's use of a formal method that involves printing reflects an interest in the effects of compression and layering found in rock formations and geologic strata. While his method is technically simple, the initial stage being something like a monoprint that then becomes a surface to be painted, the process is actually a matter of creating a trace, one that simultaneously harks back to his early interest in the ghost and the ruin. Here, layering is used to arrive at the point where "the real work" begins. Suffice it to say that with the *La Manche* series "ghost" and "ruin" are to be taken literally, each painting bearing as an imprint the material residue of his own previously cast-aside works. From a physical point of view, these remnants are invisible in the new work, however in the weave that Kline performs with the visible and invisible, the past as ghost and ruin becomes phenomenal body in each new painting. This is the source of the vibrant resonance to be encountered with the *La Manche* paintings.

Chris Kline is a maker of paintings and Yam Lau works with video and computer-generated

video animation. Given their different métiers, what could be the single opening to understanding the privileging of sensuous perception in both artists' work? Sensuous perception has to do with time as motion, disappearance, the fading at work inside any here and now. Such evanescence rests on the paradoxes of appearance or how every appearing is already entropic. Perhaps this is revealed in digital media's intertwining of absence and presence, a "there is" but one that's never fully present nor fully absent. A parallel to this exists in the Asian tradition of the empty/full relation where each is "co-emergent."

Yam Lau was born and grew up in Hong Kong, completing his undergraduate studies there before immigrating to Canada and pursuing graduate studies in Edmonton. He eventually moved to Toronto where he teaches painting at York University. Hong Kong provides a suggestive reference due to its brief history as a British colonial centre in Asia and much longer history of more than two thousand years within the "Chinese Empire." Lau lived in Hong Kong during the period of British presence, though the culture would have been diversely Chinese due to the rapid changes that followed the end of British rule in 1997. Of note is the fact that leading up to and including Lau's years in Hong Kong, textiles played a major role in Hong Kong's modernization. This has perhaps endured in Lau's memory and his art practice, in which the principle of weaving prevails. If the traditional context of weaving is textiles, its contemporary context is that of digital electronic media. Weaving is a provocative and flexible rhetorical device that functions as an analogy for irregularity: to weave is the antithesis of walking in a straight line. "Weave" initially refers to a principle of fabric-ation in which elements are intertwined.

Some of Lau's previous pieces include *Scapeland II* (2007), *Room: An Extension* (2008), *Hutong House* (2009), and the more recent works to be discussed here: *Rehearsal* (2010) and the

wonderfully resonant *Nüshū I: Echo Chambers* (2014) and *Nüshū II: Echo Chambers* (2018) videos installed in the pavilions that Lau has constructed for this exhibition. Lau works with recording technology and computer-generated video animation to create layers of constantly shifting images within his screens. The imagery is often of street life in Beijing—"an elsewhere." The use of video editing and animation software is kept to a basic level rather than attempting to be an impressive display of technical virtuosity. The notion of "being-time" is key to appreciating Lau's engagement with video and computer-generated animation. His video installations explore subtle relationships between transparency and reflection, and between space and place. They make themselves within our perception of them as we move together in-time, intimately.

In an earlier example of Lau's videos, *Rehearsal* (2010), the scene opens into a room of drawn models floating in layers of varying opacity (fig. 2). The point of view or camera position is itself a creation of the digital imaging software that Lau has adopted. In this case "the camera" tours through layers of variable density while projected drawings dissolve and rotate. If there are images, they are schematic depictions of rooms in the style of architectural renderings (fig. 3). The audio element—the sound of heavy rainfall— is equally prominent. The camera glides through the unfolding spaces, spaces that fold while the camera turns around multiple and changing pivot points. If this is a room, an interior we are in, there are shadows cast on its walls by the schematic framings of the other rooms wheeling around in "the space." Perhaps at this point what has become most obvious is the consistency of the speed, which feels invariable, without beginning or end. The audio on the other hand, gestures toward something natural or episodic, a storm with rain, thunder and lightning. Meanwhile, imagery shot with a video camera slips into the frame: we are looking through a window into

a room where a woman sits quietly smoking, absorbed in a private moment while the rain falls in the surrounding space. Her image is reflected to us in a mirror on the wall opposite the window. The camera withdraws back out through the layers, leaving her in this introspective moment, possibly wiping tears from her eyes—an interior echo of the rain falling "outside." These elements all take place as screens, veils, mirrors, walls and windows, and as such participate in a climate of uncertainty or even anxiety. There is a sense of one's subjectivity being dispersed throughout space, a space that paradoxically feels freed from the constraints of "place." Some questions arise. Where is "place," or "when" does place arrive? Is place, like home, perpetually arriving and departing? In this case "place" and "home," like this electronic image, are constantly being made, unmade and remade.

With Lau's work the screen as a motif works as an analogy for the skin, fabric and veil. According to art historian Wu Hung, within the history of Chinese painting, the screen is the single most important item.[12] Lau's ways of presenting the screen are multiple: a screen can be an object in a room, or nearly transparent itself; it can also operate as a veil or a window, or even as a mirror. In this sense, alongside Hung's observations on the role of screens in art, there are interesting Western examples of transparency and reflection in architecture, such as the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe or the Fondation Cartier in Paris by Jean Nouvel.

A helpful example of a paralleling of worlds and cultures is suggested by positioning Alice Ming Wai Jim's description of the Buddhist metaphor known as Indra's Web alongside Giorgio Vattimo's description of our current technological media culture. In Jim's analysis of Indra's Web, the universe is conceived as "an enormous grid or net" that is continuously unfolding, in which all phenomena emerges "simultaneously in an interdependent, relational mesh or web of cause and effect, conjuring a vision of boundless totality and

concatenation." Indra's Web is also referred to as a metaphor for the "networked multiplicity of phenomenal reality."[13] And from a contemporary Western perspective Vattimo suggests, "There is no single history, only images of the past projected from different points of view," with no single point of view being able to encompass all the others. An apparently inevitable pluralisation, "chaos," a weave instead of linearity.[14]

There are moments, especially in our urban architectural environments, when we by chance perceive a series of transparent reflections, or reflections of partial opacity. That is, we may see a reflected image weaving through another reflected image, or a series of such reflections making up a multi-layered translucence. Some of these images may be moving, which makes for a wonderfully compelling vision, an experience we sometimes call "cinematic" because of its interlacing of movement and stasis forming a web of webs. There is also an analogy to memory in this "web of webs" where we touch the touching that memory and imagination can perform.

For this exhibition, Lau presents two versions of *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* (2014, 2018)*, with each video presented in its own pavilion. Together, the pavilions form one piece. The single-channel videos are projected at different times; as one ends the other begins, forming a continuous loop. *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* opens in darkness until an ellipse of lighting falls on an invisible floor—an unfolding that is theatricality itself. Through a gradual expansion of lighting, a space emerges, paradoxically closed, as if made from veils of tissue and stone, without openings, and yet appearing simply by way of light, and lighting. As the room slowly fills with light it is simultaneously permeated with the voice of a woman chanting a song. In this "echo chamber" the song resonates with a return of the past: this voice is as if from a ghost.[15] This is a weave in which sound and sight pass through each other reversibly, moving in and out like the breath from which the Nüshū

songs are made, or like the wind that moves the filmic veils we see giving shape to a room. This aspect of the work functions as an analogy but also a chiasmus—the screen is a veil as the veil is a screen, each ambiguously on the side of the real/virtual. Veils may be analogous to bodily membranes, residue of the first dwellings.[16] The feeling of this film installation created with computer-generated video animation is one of serenity but also one of a "near-distance" which is the feeling of intimacy and longing. As the room is slowly being constructed with light it is also being shaped by shadows of calligraphic script that float across the floor and walls. This script, if we pursue its story, is a syllabic script, a lost language, created and used exclusively by women in Jiangyong County of Hunan Province. Calligraphy, a literal trace of the hand gesturing, in this case become virtual, is like the aura in a relationship of contact, a tactile relationship by way of light touching us. Sung in Nüshū, the song Lau has recorded represents his concern for the loss of local histories and experiences of displacement within globalization.

Lau is one of the few artists to actually examine and confront the question of what it means to live by our involvements in digital space and time. Lau's video animations present a consistent meditation on experience itself and how it is altered by our digital environment. What we see is the actuality of artifice playing out in digital media. In Lau's video animations we experience the video as a process that makes and unmakes itself. The images projected on the screen are always "in the making," appearing and disappearing, concretizing while dissolving or fragmenting. Disappearance is part of what appears, as contrasted with analogue film that proceeds in the form of an accumulation. In this digital work, erasure is as important as inscription. This is one of the sources of the pleasure found in watching Lau's video animations, a pleasure that arises thanks to the displacement of the bounded and

centred subject, a "letting-go." The installational aspect of Lau's work extends the screen as object and our own bodily movement into the architectural ensemble.

With the weaving that exists between the tangible and the ephemeral in their work, Chris Kline and Yam Lau are dedicated to hybridity, an "in-between" space in which experience breathes intimacy, slowness, plurality and touch. In this process without centre, the "technological" and the "traditional" shift and trade places, a perpetual to-ing and fro-ing. Working with intuitions both traditional and modern, the works of art and the exhibition itself present procedures such as the layering of the seen and the unseen, and the foldings of transparency, translucence and reflection. Tactile spatial experience is here interwoven with electronic abstraction, along with an overcoming of the virtual/actual opposition. In their respective practices, Kline and Lau rigorously address contemporary issues such as the relationship between art and aesthetic experience, and how artistic experience relates to the everyday.

It has of course been pointed out that some of the terms that come to mind when thinking of Asian traditions, such as "impermanence" and "emptiness," can also describe aspects of "the new technology." Speed of information processing and circulation is the objective of compression. Viewed in this context, speed has a significant impact on how we inhabit space. In recent decades modernist practices of gathering, centering and presence have been displaced by ways of living space, time and things in modes that prioritize impermanence, dispersal, multiplicity and absence. These concerns are played out existentially in our experiences of home and belonging. In the contemporary world, within the context of globalization, placelessness, non-belonging and nomadism have become increasingly the norm. What we thought was static physicality we can now relate to as something that has always been in motion, transitional and evanescent.

These characteristics allow non-oppositional relationships, slowing us into a meditation. This is an offer to make contact, to "be in touch." Or should I say, "to be, in touch." Like this, it becomes a statement of dwelling or inhabitation, being in touch, touched by being. This atmosphere is the "strange weave of space and time" that Theodor Adorno called "artistic experience." [17] Perhaps we could propose that this thing called "artistic experience" is what the artist works to install. And yet, we refuse to breathe this atmosphere, we choke on it and wish to be returned to solid ground.

1   Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Digital Film Event* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.
2   Kaja Silverman, "The Miracle of Analogy," *NONSITE.ORG*, no. 11 (2014): 4, accessed 26 March 2018, http://nonsite.org/feature/the-miracle-of-analogy.
3   Boris Groys, *Particular Cases* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 235.
4   Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Afterword," *Public* 25, no. 50 (2014): 6.
5   Groys, *Particular Cases*, 241.
6   François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 52.
7   Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 174–175.
8   Minh-ha, *The Digital Film Event*, 21.
9   Ibid., 3.
10   Chris Kline, letter to the author, June 24, 2014.
11   Briony Fer, "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism," *Art History* 17, no. 3 (1994): 424–448.
12   Wu Hung, "The Painted Screen," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 23 (1996): 37–38.
13   Jim, "Afterword," 7.
14   Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 3.
15   The last person proficient in this writing system, Yang Huanyi, an inhabitant of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, died on September 20, 2004, at age ninety-eight. Also of interest is the symphony composed by Tan Dun titled *Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women* (2013).
16   Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 163.
17   Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 274.
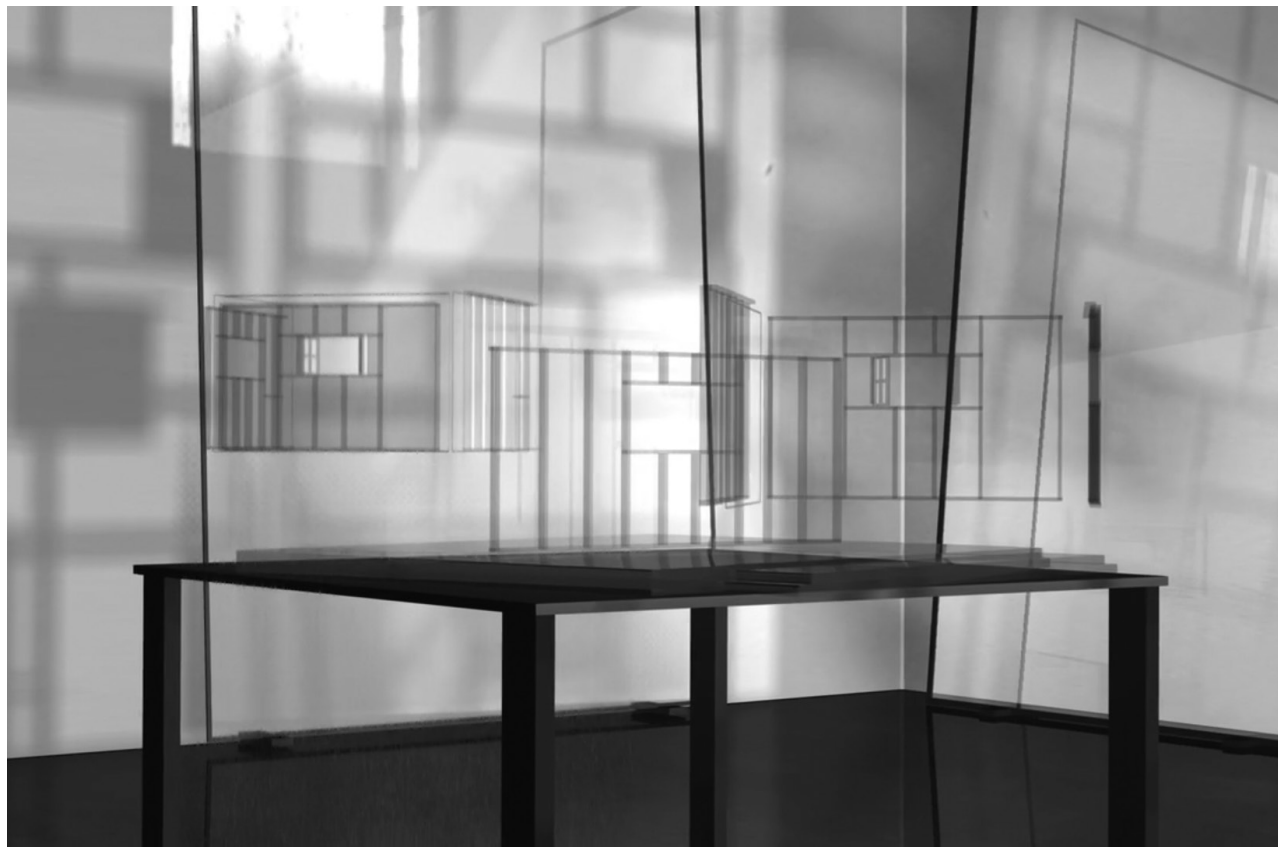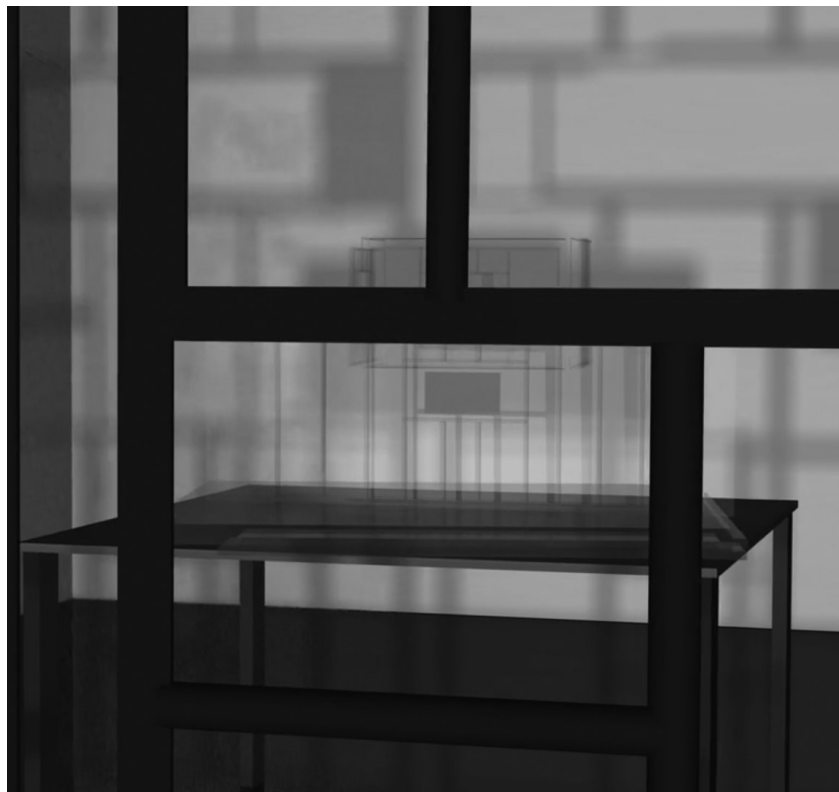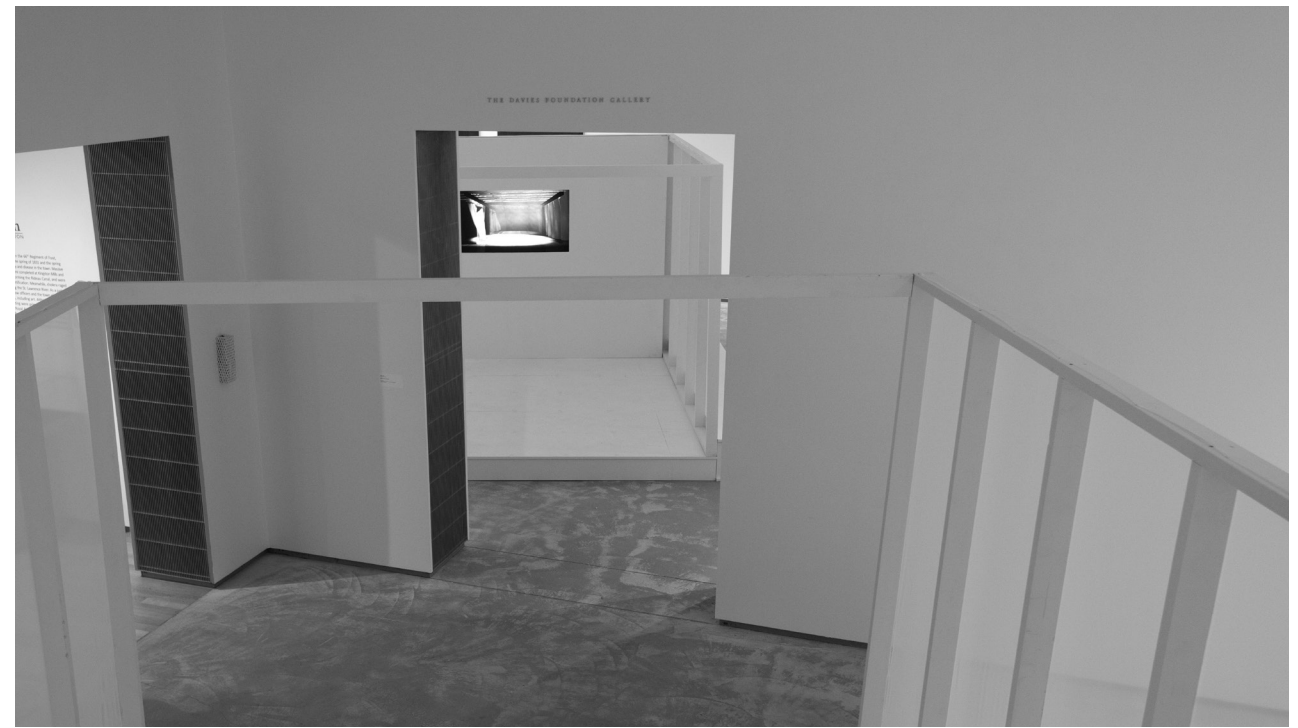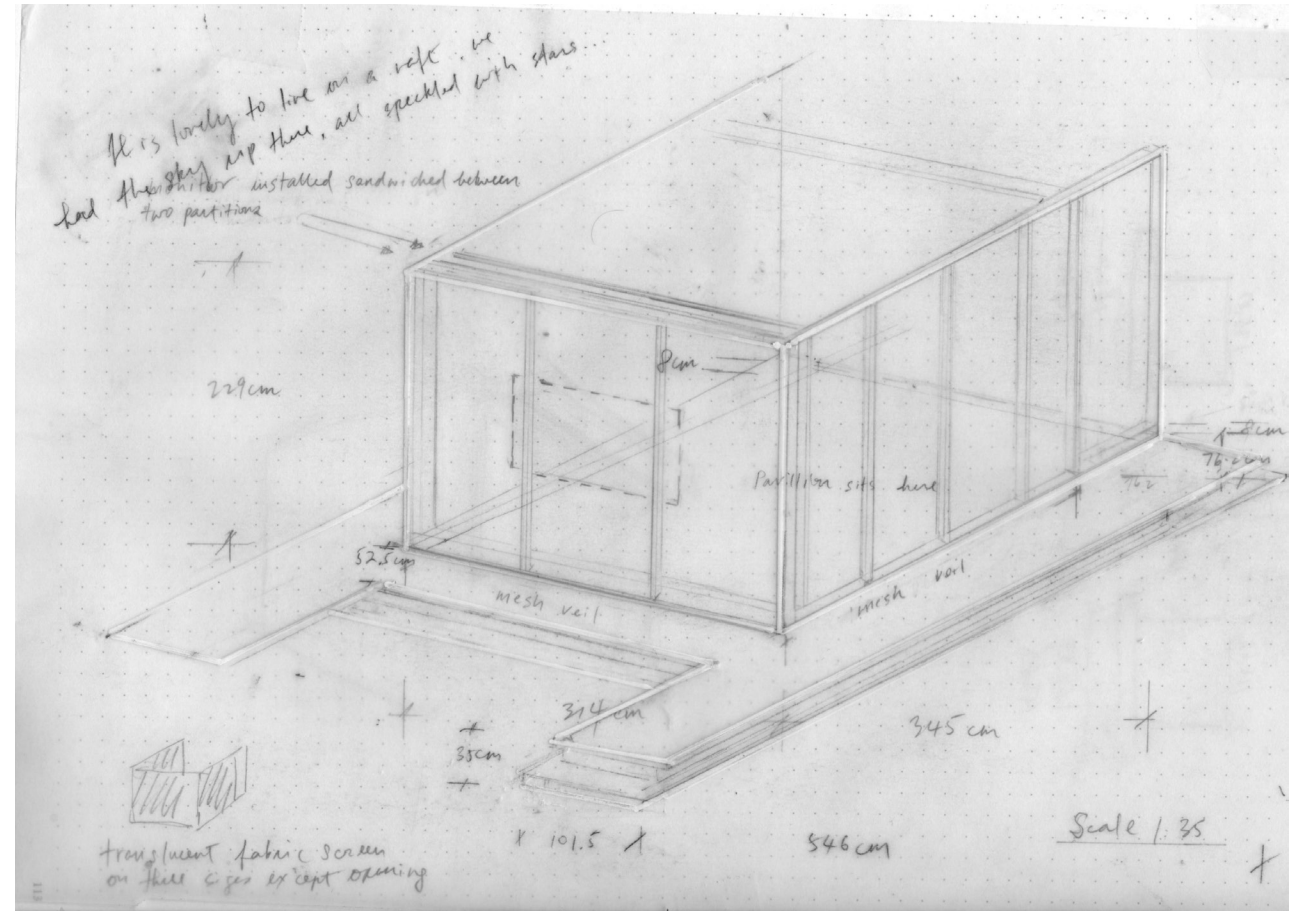
fig. 1

fig. 2

fig. 3

fig. 4

fig. 5

fig. 6

fig. 7

fig. 8

fig. 9

Crossing Thresholds
Sunny Kerr

Passing through a door can feel like a moment of stillness within movement even though it is an experience informed by different instances of sensory input. Likewise, the act of crossing a threshold simultaneously connects and separates; it joins and divides inside and outside, private and public, self and other. German media theorist Bernhard Siegert suggests that doors are "cultural techniques" used to invent inside and outside—concepts we retroactively attribute to experience.[1] Opening a door and crossing a threshold also connects and separates inner power and the law. Thresholds are sites of resistance and continuity for unauthorized, repressed or othered bodies. They mark sites of "passing." To cross a border without fear or anxiety is an experience of social privilege, whether or not one is aware of it at the time.

After passing through the gallery door and entering the spaces of *Chris Kline and Yam Lau: Weave*, I experience a clear and elegant unity of harmonious parts in which the pressures of the socio-economic seem temporarily suspended, while still present. As a whole, the exhibition feels light. Its character is restrained but not opaque nor aloof. The combination of sound, colour and architectural framing immediately reminds me, "Slow down. There's more here." The song-filled gallery space embodies a sense of intimacy and introspection. I am in the midst of the formation of experience, immersed and active, gathering impressions of colour and shape, coherence and dissolution, of virtual architectures. To "weave" is to take an indirect route, liberated from instrumental routine. It is to move at one's own pace, on one's own authority. If you can successfully negotiate the pressures of the socio-economic order, you might accept the invitation to move between Kline's and Lau's works, let your gaze drift across their surfaces. The itinerant assemblage of mind, body, image and object reflects and re-enacts the movement that interlaces material qualities to aesthetic experience.

Together, Chris Kline's and Yam Lau's works guide me into experiencing the substance that joins creative and material forces. Yet, this is only one of the exhibition's subtle social acts. The artists' works suggest introspective turns, and at the same time the exhibition's pairing of different disciplines encourages reflection on what is shared beyond form. Tensions emerge through the dialectic between insight and communication that inflects experiences of the work.

At first glance Chris Kline's *La Manche* (2017–present) paintings seem like a series of differently coloured flat monochromes. They are arranged in tight groups based on size, colour and subject matter. The "colour-space" of each group—uniquely rendered with subtle textures and tones, compositional forms and enigmatic traces of the painter's hand—conveys a specific emotional tone. By slowing down and giving

time to individual paintings I discover surprising traces of an unstretched canvas ingrained into the surface. This almost imperceptible image comes into view faintly sometimes, and other times more sharply. Kline made the figurative element of each painting by using an old canvas—a canvas that has been stretched, painted and then removed from the stretcher frame—as a pattern that was stamped onto the surface of the new work. This use of a printmaking technique for creating the diagram leaves an implicit imprint on our perceptions. I apprehend a moment of contact/force that is repeated across the surface of each painting, an impression that seems to be held at a distance as it becomes, ambivalently, content.

In this body of work, each painting's material/structural support—a wooden frame—is represented through its nonappearance. Kline's reference to the genre of abstract painting as "content" reminds me of the utilitarian objects I am with in the space, the wooden painting stretchers and cloth canvases. Sometimes a picture plane appears to give a visual counterpoint; this pictorial illusion is created through the painting's "framing" of an indistinct interior space around the printed image's rectangle, which I can't help but see as a lit window, or at other times a dark doorway. There is a quality of matter-of-factness to Kline's work. It oscillates between "painting as painting," "painting before painting" and "painting after painting." You can interpret these pieces as the work of a conceptual artist who uses not just the mechanics but also the genre of painting as a motif. Like the best of Minimalism, Kline's paintings refuse to be anything other than their own form, and despite the reflective mirror being held up to the discipline of painting and its history, they seem to be only fleetingly about themselves. Indeed, as I will discuss, they apply the virtual to the material in a way that is felt in the immediacy of its occurrence.

Kline's gradual revelation of an unstretched canvas traced on the surface of a stretched canvas beautifully aligns with Yam Lau's play of constructed and computer-generated architectural space in *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* (2014, 2018). The interior volumes of Lau's carefully crafted pavilions designed specifically for this exhibition "echo" the spaces depicted in the animations that unfold on the flat screen monitors embedded in the far wall of each architectural form. These "stages" resemble white shrines or elegant roofless gazebos. With translucent fabric skin stretched over three walls and long built-in benches that look like pontoons, Lau's twin pavilions are placed across from one another and set on an oblique angle in the passageway between the galleries housing both artists' work. When standing in this threshold between the galleries, the pavilions feel like reflections of one another (fig. 4). The tain of a mirror describes a zone of contact between the real and its reflection. What is uncanny about mirrors is the irrational notion that they might reflect contemporaneous and/or latent versions of reality. Lau's installation suggests the presence of the virtual through its construction of real space—"rooms" that viewers can enter. As in Kline's works, which are marked by the moment/image of contact between stretched and unstretched canvas, the pavilions seem to play off of their own construction as a way to draw attention to the chiasmatic relationship between interior and exterior. This reading of the architecture's open form is reinforced by the "reflective" relationship between the physical and computer-generated buildings in Lau's piece.

Lau's work often suggests an openness to myriad possible forms, but there is a recurring theme addressed within *Nüshū: Echo Chambers*. The whole gallery is filled with the sound of tender melodies sung in the "women's" language of Nüshū that accompany the animations presented in each pavilion.[2] Each animation introduces a temporary monument (memory-space), a shelter for a disappearing linguistic form. The animations foreground the interplay of interior and exterior, mass and void, and the layered interpenetration of all possible contours and forms, as the women's voices call a secret language in and out of being. The structural elements of the walls, crosspieces, curtains and Nüshū calligraphic letterforms rotate in and out of place, and their shadows have the effect of unsettling the sense of foreground and background, positive and negative space. The slow moving shadows introduce oblique planes and counter-movements that sometimes disturb the implied solidity of architectonic elements, revealing cycles of formation and formlessness. Lau lends a feeling of exquisite discipline, eternal equilibrium and repose to his subject.

To "weave" is also to thread from front to back, like the relationship between warp and weft in the creation of cloth. The exhibition highlights the way in which a viewer becomes entangled in artistic experience through material encounters and sensory impressions that foreground embodiment. In this, a dialogue takes place between form and idea that Tim Ingold calls "textility."[3] This textility of viewing is analogous to the textility of making. Ingold's work in anthropology provides the useful notion of "undergoing" that adds a further ethical inflection to this aesthetic relationship. When you split wood, you are surrendering to the wood; you are both passive and active as the wood grain's field of force guides the axe and shapes the desired object's final form. Rather than being violently slashed with a knife as in the work of Lucio Fontana, in Kline's and Lau's work images are formed through the act of perception, as surfaces lean toward contact, are implied, held in tension and made abstract. Undergoing is akin to opening oneself up to the other, putting oneself in the other's shoes.

It was Stephen Horne's idea to bring these artists together. He conceived of this exhibition based on an intuition that the artists' complementary preoccupations with the screen and the textile would inspire a productive leap of faith into the possibility of materializing a complex harmony. The similarities and differences in the artists' approaches draw attention to dialectical processes that fabricate self and other. This in-and-out movement best characterizes the experience of the exhibition as a whole, as it "diagrams" the continuities of inside and outside, form and content, virtual and actual. In Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's metaphysics of substance, "inside" and "outside" are simply folds of the same. The works in *Weave* show thresholds to be overlapping areas where these plications fold into one another.[4]

As I pass through the threshold leading to the second gallery, I reflect on how the privileges afforded by ability, gender and institutional context allow the artists and curators to operate "freely," without having to justify the pleasurable use of colour or the allusion to graceful creation in the void. The milieu we are working in doesn't mark our very presence as political, or interpret our work through a biographical lens. Global capitalism's demand for productivity and speed would mark the works' "retreat" as an act of resistance, however. The work's subtle challenge to the intimate aesthetic domain of learning and being in the world depends on this inward turn. Motivated by a resistance to contemporary culture, the artists have produced "models of retreat as protest." See for example, the model of the monk's cell and the Chinese scholar's studio that inspired Lau' pavilions, or the Japanese teahouse that was a direct inspiration for a later ceremony/performance (fig. 5).

The exhibition's theme suggests the "free" movement of bodies as an essential element. In the individual works and their intertwining with one another we are drawn into the making of space for the body, including the other's work (and possibly the "other" in broad terms). Essentially, the artists have bent their distinct and multivalent practices toward each other, making the play of differences into new material folds. In *Weave*,

Kline's and Lau's different formal and conceptual engagement with retreat, singularity and otherness come into contact and suggest a real and symbolic meeting of minds. Bringing together painting and video installation folds visual responsiveness into zones of introspection and respect: thresholds, doubled and inverted volumes, the play of nearness and distance, repetitive framing and reframing, different forms of textile enmeshment and self-reflexive processes of making and unmaking. All of the pieces in the show gently compel viewers to slow down and give time. Through their sensitively conceived spatial and visual compositions the artists make space for self-reflection and deference to the other. Their individual pieces also embody such entwining.

Kline's *La Manche* paintings are highly distilled and meticulously crafted. His paintings draw the viewer into a heightened experience of looking. Although smooth and well defined, their monochromatic surfaces contain irregular passages marked by creases and wrinkles. What at first seem like easily reproducible monochromes reveal themselves to contain traces of the hand, striations created by concentrations of pigment as a brush pulled acrylic medium across a surface. The associations with printmaking techniques and mechanical reproduction make me doubt these perceptions, however (fig. 6). Have these brushstrokes really been made by hand, or have they somehow been transferred onto the canvas in a manner that can be infinitely reproduced? (fig. 7) Since the presence of the hand remains elusive, the paintings suggest a troubled relation to the re-presentation of previously stretched canvases. The slow disclosure of the "content" in these paintings reflects ambivalence toward revealing how they were made and places emphasis on a relational and embodied response to painting as a form of thought. Through the textility of looking, structural and material aspects of the work are abstracted as a kind of afterimage of process. They become images

of what is discarded or is left undone. The gesture of showing an imprint of the material used for a previous or future work alludes to a kind of emptying out of expectation. Significantly, in *La Manche*, imprinted canvases were clearly folded over a stretcher and then taken off to introduce a kind of wrinkle, a fold that marks a brief reversal of process. I see this as a folding of the present into past and future moments of touch. There are deconstructive and performative dimensions to Kline's work; by tracing stages done and undone in the process of making, we reconstruct a prior act.

Lau's *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* animations also display their own process by exploring the outer edges of painting. They don't make claims to any seamless simulation of reality. Instead, they embrace computer-generated imaging, characterized by smooth mechanics and digital artefacts, to reveal its medium and artifice. In the videos that pay tribute to a disappearing language and culture, I see energetic voids in which brief passages of time are given to the assembling and disassembling of architectural forms in a never-ending cycle. Lau's making and unmaking of animated domestic spaces connects obliquely to the making and unmaking of the painting's structural support in Kline's work. Both artists allude to times before and after the moment of encounter, figuring the process of creation in the finished piece. Kline embraces the traditions of painting and foregrounds the work's material support—the stretched canvas. As a result, the paintings in the *La Manche* series simultaneously draw the viewer into an enfolding of a past moment and a space of potentiality.

This enfolding of the historical moment is also embodied in Lau's tribute to an outmoded language and cultural form: Nüshū. Citing Lau's training in modernist painting and his work's continued dialogue with the discipline, Kim Neudorf describes the artist's work as an "interval between painting that is and painting that has yet to be."[5] With Lau's work we encounter a space that seems outside of present time, a space that

holds a sense of infinity and suggests a "groundless ground" of investigation. Michel Foucault wrote that the goal of scholarship is "to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."[6] It isn't a stretch to apply Foucault's idea to the work of Kline and Lau by substituting "painting" for "scholarship," with the goal of learning to what extent the effort to paint one's own history can free painting from what it silently paints and thus enable the artist to paint differently. In this context, an auto-critical approach to process foregrounds the materialities that are medium and vestige of a historically situated self-investigation. With these works, are we witnessing a struggle to free the mind (and painting) from the limitations of material and tradition, while simultaneously showing how the struggle is carried out?

Following on the work of Susanne Langer, Brian Massumi suggests the concept of "semblance" best describes artistic events that incorporate the recent past and near future as much as the present. He refers to semblance as "the manner in which the virtual actually appears" and "the being of the virtual as a lived abstraction."[7] Here, the "virtual" signifies moments in time before, after and during the event's appearance. Kline's *La Manche* series provides a material articulation of the play of the virtual and the actual. The role of semblance is of equal concern to Lau, and is clearly present in the *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* installation.

Upon viewing Kline's work, an afterimage appears that is like the shapes that seem emblazoned on the retina under the eyelid. It is like a secret code given to those who take the time to approach things with an open mind (here, the mind is a blank surface made available for my own marks). Lau is also concerned with the past-ness and futurity of painting. The emphasis on painting's infrastructural support doesn't negate or outlaw content. Indeed, it radically opens to it. Think of Lau's use of the car as a kind of

support for other artists in a work like *Vehicle* (2007), done with the WayUpWayDown Collective (Yam Lau, Sunny Kerr, Tania Ursomarzo). Also think of his Donkey Institute of Contemporary Art (2008–present) in Beijing.[8] Lau often works across disciplines, inside and outside of institutional contexts, questioning art's conventional spatial and temporal framing. And he often makes the exhibition platform a work in and of itself, where "content" plays a minor role.

As I touched on earlier, Horne's curatorial gesture made it possible for both artists to make works that anticipated the other's, and to be involved in how the exhibition as a whole was installed. In *Weave* each artist's skilful approach to framing is allowed to open onto and inform the other's work. Kline is best known for his translucent poplin works that are graced with a single mark and show the wooden painting stretchers "hidden" behind the surface. Lau is known for delicate 3D-rendered architectural spaces that constantly move. For Lau, the new pavilions act like large-scale translucent paintings in architectural form (fig. 8). For Kline, as in Lau's *Nüshū: Echo Chambers*, there is an engagement with the void, a spatial/temporal event that precedes form. Each experiential echo/resonance within the space stems from this layering of sensibilities. Lau's pavilions reframe Kline's work, Kline's paintings reiterate the evanescent interior volumes presented in Lau's installation. We could say that each artist gives the other space through a renegotiation of the exhibition's curatorial and architectural frame. For example, as I walk through the gallery, Lau's translucent fabric walls distort my vision, creating an atmospheric "unframing" of all that surrounds, including Kline's work (fig. 9).

Kline sidesteps painting's grand expectations, and nimbly considers the relationship between art and everyday life. The paintings gently force us to consider the simple reality of the frame and the fabric. In this exhibition he has arrayed his paintings in tight groups that evoke a sense of

"any possible colour." On first blush the paintings feel like colour fabric swatches; colour is itself a diagram of potentiality, since any hue includes all colours in the spectrum. Embodied and convivial, colour doesn't surface without the gaze and depends on "the background" for its mercurial qualities. On a formal level, the relationships between figure/ground and nearness/distance create a productive tension between autonomy and contiguity. The singular emotional appeal of each painting is tempered by its placement within a series; the singularity of each piece is elevated and problematized by its inter-reliance on the others. I read this as a formal appeal to an aesthetics of mutual support. Beyond form, Kline's approach to displaying the works intentionally eschews a market paradigm dependent upon the autonomous life of a singular painting, usually shown in a "neutral" white space.

The pairing of these artists is also complex because both employ "withdrawal" and "retreat" as formal strategies, strategies that place value on slowness, self-reference, mirroring and denial of authority. Their investment in "retreat," as a tradition and space of inward turn is itself communicated in the moment of retreat. A kind of dance takes place in the sustained movement between withdrawing and making space. Lau's animations present a "non-place," a dynamic void that precedes form. They position the women's songs as non-diegetic sound that nevertheless belongs to architectonic forms that seem to build and unbuild themselves. The architectural "models" or "diagrams" in Lau's animations seem to develop outside of time, as if they inhabit a parallel world in which things come together and then disintegrate for the pleasures of enactment alone. In Lau's work, there isn't a willful imposition of form; instead, it seems like the void or perhaps the singing voices themselves, engender the architecture. What I'm seeing as a contact point of introspection and relationality may be even more basic. In *Semblance and Event*, Brian Massumi

articulates an ontology that depends on a "constitutive doubling of the event into co-occurrent relational and qualitative dimensions."[9] This implies that subject and object are not divided, but part of a continuous process of becoming, and that experience is "aesthetico-political" at its core (in both actual and latent magnitudes).

It is through this latency that I read in Lau's work a resistance to re-inscribing patriarchal traditions at the same moment that it memorializes Nüshū. Lau does not seek to revive this disappearing language in the way that an activist might do. Instead, he pays tribute to its voicing of overlooked solidarities. *Nüshū: Echo Chambers* seems to respect and appeal to a transindividual voice expressed by the songs of "missing home" and "friendship" that were shared as unnoticed communications between members of a sisterhood.

The sound of the songs has an important physical effect in the exhibition, evoking the inner voice as interlaced with but independent of the body. Both artists directly address the body of the viewer. Kline's paintings have an immersive size and temporal dimension. His title, *La Manche*, is itself a bodily metaphor, referring to the "sleeve," a textile stretched around the wrist, or other part of the body. It suggests a textile, receptive and cylindrical space, that figures the body through its absence. It also folds a counterintuitive depth into the supposed flatness of painting. Correspondingly, Kline has said that these paintings "play in the envelope between medium and genre, touch and distance, material and light."[10] The idea of "the envelope" might be easier to understand if we note how Massumi describes a line on a chalk board as being not a line, but in fact an oval that crosses the limit between chalk and board.[11] A mark on a painting is at once *on* the surface and *of* the surface. Likewise, a sleeve describes Kline's suggestion of the continuity between surface and support. Lau's work literally frames the body in its pavilions. Like the unstretched canvases and painting stretchers in Kline's work,

the bodies of the Nüshū singers are present through their absence. Their voices drift beyond the architectural frame, while their absent bodies are enclosed by the animated structures. Lau's pavilions are places where viewers can enter to focus on the video animations, or rest on the exterior benches and observe Kline's work. Like subverted Minimalism or Post-Minimalism and like architecture, all the work in *Weave* needs the body.[12]

In "Percept, Affect, and Concept," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the creation of affects as a job of the artist who "invents unknown or unrecognized affects and brings them to light as the becoming of his characters."[13] The interplay of works in *Weave* and their folding together of private process and public encounter make a critical nexus for retreat and openness. They retreat from certain masculine traits associated with power: aggression, stoicism and physical strength. Even the stereotypically masculine actions within space—building structures, cold minimal abstraction, computer animation—are subtly subverted, and the work comes to reveal a far more profound change within the subject. Key instead, is a letting go of servility to material and a release of infinite variety. Kline's and Lau's works accept a groundless ground, figure pastness and futurity, remain open to vulnerabilities and becomings, and spatialize fugitive forms of expression.

I leave the exhibition's subtle and dynamic interplay of refined gestures. The artists' folding of perception into material, and material into perception, has carried me across aesthetico-political thresholds that prepare a renewed, gracious readiness for collective life.

1   Bernhard Siegert, "Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic," trans. John Durham Peters. *Grey Room*, no. 47 (Spring 2012): 6–23, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/GREY_a_00067.

2   Nüshū is a syllabic script derived from Chinese characters, some say to better-fit embroidery patterns. Literally "women's script," Nüshū was used exclusively among women in Jiangyong County in Hunan Province of southern China. Yam Lau, "Nüshū: Echo Chambers," *The Site Magazine,* (October 2018), http://www.thesitemagazine.com/read/nushu.

3   Tim Ingold introduces Gilbert Simondon's critique of Aristotle's hylomorphism and the implications of Deleuzian ontology. Tim Ingold, "The textility of making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, no. 34 (2010): 92–102, https://academic.oup.com/cje/article/34/1/91/1696932.

4   Simon O'Sullivan, "Definition: 'fold'" https://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/deleuze-dictionary.pdf.

5   Kim Neudorf, "Two sightings: On the work of Yam Lau," *Syphon* 3.1, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre (Spring 2015): 6.

6   Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

7   Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2011), 16.

8   David Court, "Yam Lau: A Life of Re-creation," *Yishu*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2011): 82, http://yishu-online.com/wp-content/uploads/mm-products/uploads/2011_v10_05_court_d_p079.pdf.

9   Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 4.

10 Email from Chris Kline, April 24, 2018.

11 Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 89.

12 In an influential interview about renewed approaches to formalism and how they can be understood as reclaiming Michael Fried's critique of Minimalism, David Getsy said, "In order to critique a […] coyness of Minimalism, Fried drew out its solicitation of the viewer—its "need" for the viewer […] and […] the affective intensities possible when a viewer engages with even the most reductive geometric form." Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal Open* (March 31, 2014), http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468.

13 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 174.

Chris Kline

was born in Ontario and attended Queen's University (B.A. Honours) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Kline has been a semi-finalist in the RBC Painting Prize, and long-listed for the Sobey Art Award. His work has also been featured in the 2011 Quebec Triennial. The artist currently lives and works in Montreal, Quebec and his works can be found in the collections of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Halifax), the Musée d'art contemporain (Montreal), the Musée d'art de Joliette (Quebec), as well as private and corporate collections in Canada, Europe, and the United States.

Yam Lau

was born in British Hong Kong and is an artist and writer based in Toronto. He received his MFA from the University of Alberta and is currently based in Toronto where he is an Associate Professor of Painting at York University. Lau's creative work and research explore new expressions and qualities of space, time and image. His most recent works combine video and computer-generated animation to recreate familiar spaces in varied dimensionalities and perspectives. In addition to his new media work, he is actively involved in the local art community. Certain aspects of his practice, such as using a donkey as an ongoing mobile project space in Beijing, China, are designed to solicit community participation. The recipient of numerous awards from the Canada Council and Ontario and Toronto arts councils, Lau has exhibited widely across Canada, mainland China and Europe.

Stephen Horne

is primarily an art critic, writing on contemporary issues in European, Canadian and Asian art. He has organized exhibitions in Canada, Germany and France, and publishes in numerous periodicals in Canada, the USA, Europe and Asia. His articles and essays are included in catalogues and anthologies published by JRP Ringier, Dumont, YYZ, Plug In Institute and various art museums for catalogues of artists such as Jana Sterbak, Mowry Baden, Lani Maestro and Pierre Dorion. With France Chouinard, Horne co-edited the anthology *Fiction, or Other Accounts of Photography* (Dazibao, Montreal, 2000). A book of his essays, *Abandon Building: Selected Writings on Art, 1992–2006*, was published in 2007 (Press Eleven, Montreal). He was a professor at NSCAD University from 1979–2005, and at Concordia University, Montreal from 1992–2000. He sees his work in criticism and curating as a "collaborative" practice. Horne currently lives in France.

Sunny Kerr

has developed numerous exhibitions, acquisitions, programs and publications in his role as Curator of Contemporary Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. His approach to curating focuses on emergent issues and practices in contemporary art and experimental formats of presentation and participation. His recent exhibitions include projects by artists such as Judy Radul, Ciara Phillips, Brendan Fernandes, Ibghy & Lemmens and Tau Lewis. Kerr completed his BFA at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University and earned his MFA at York University in 2006.
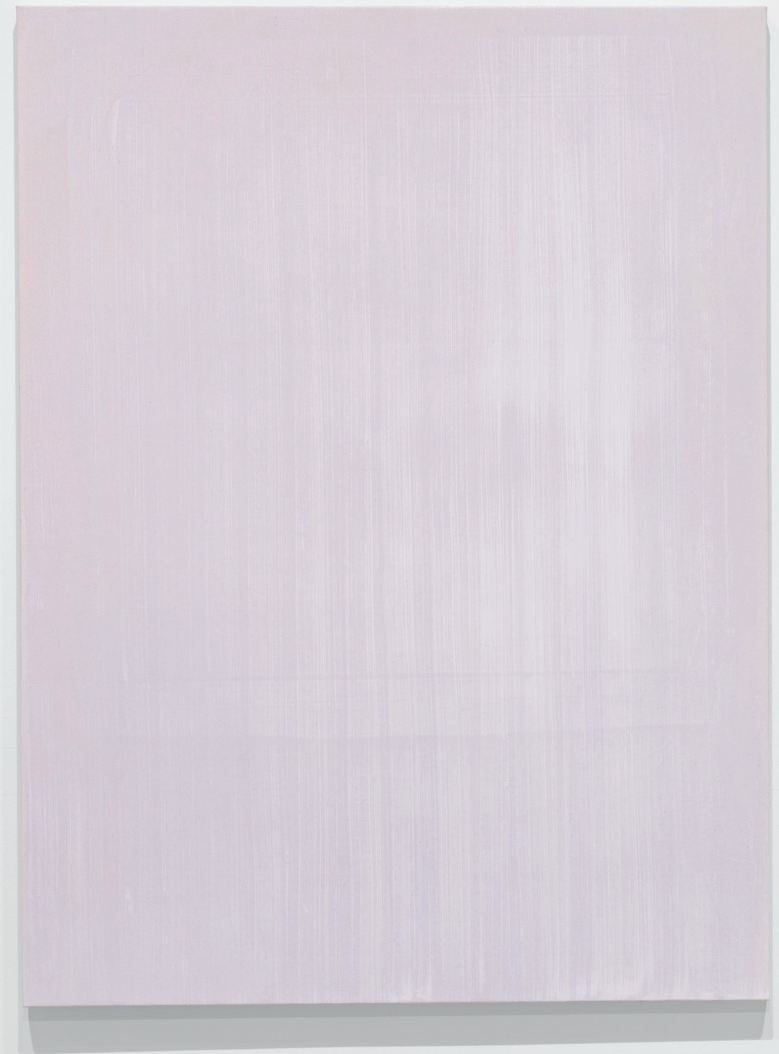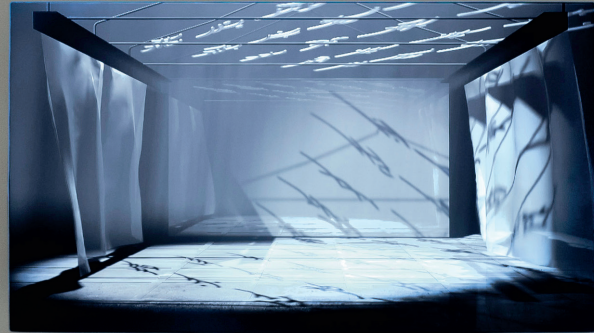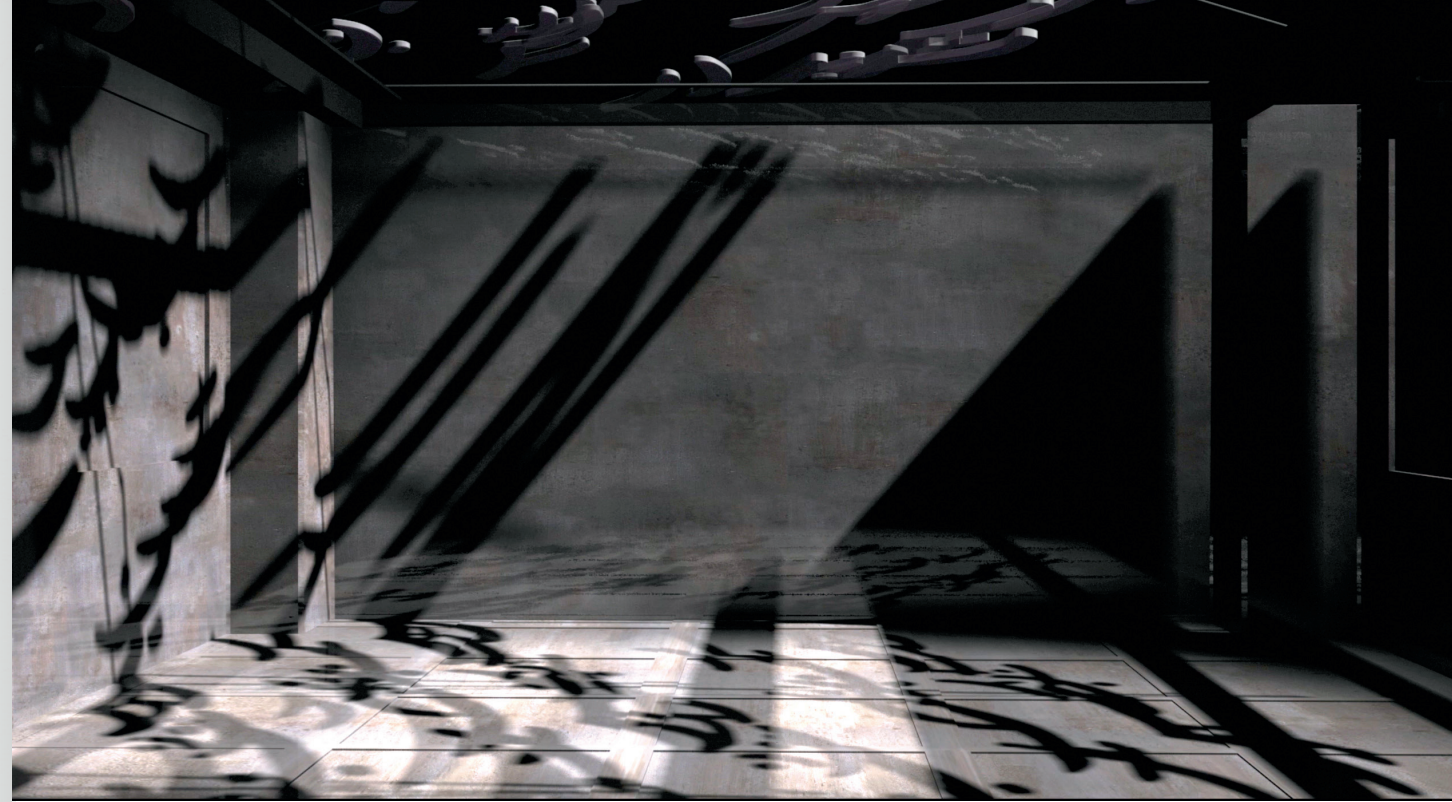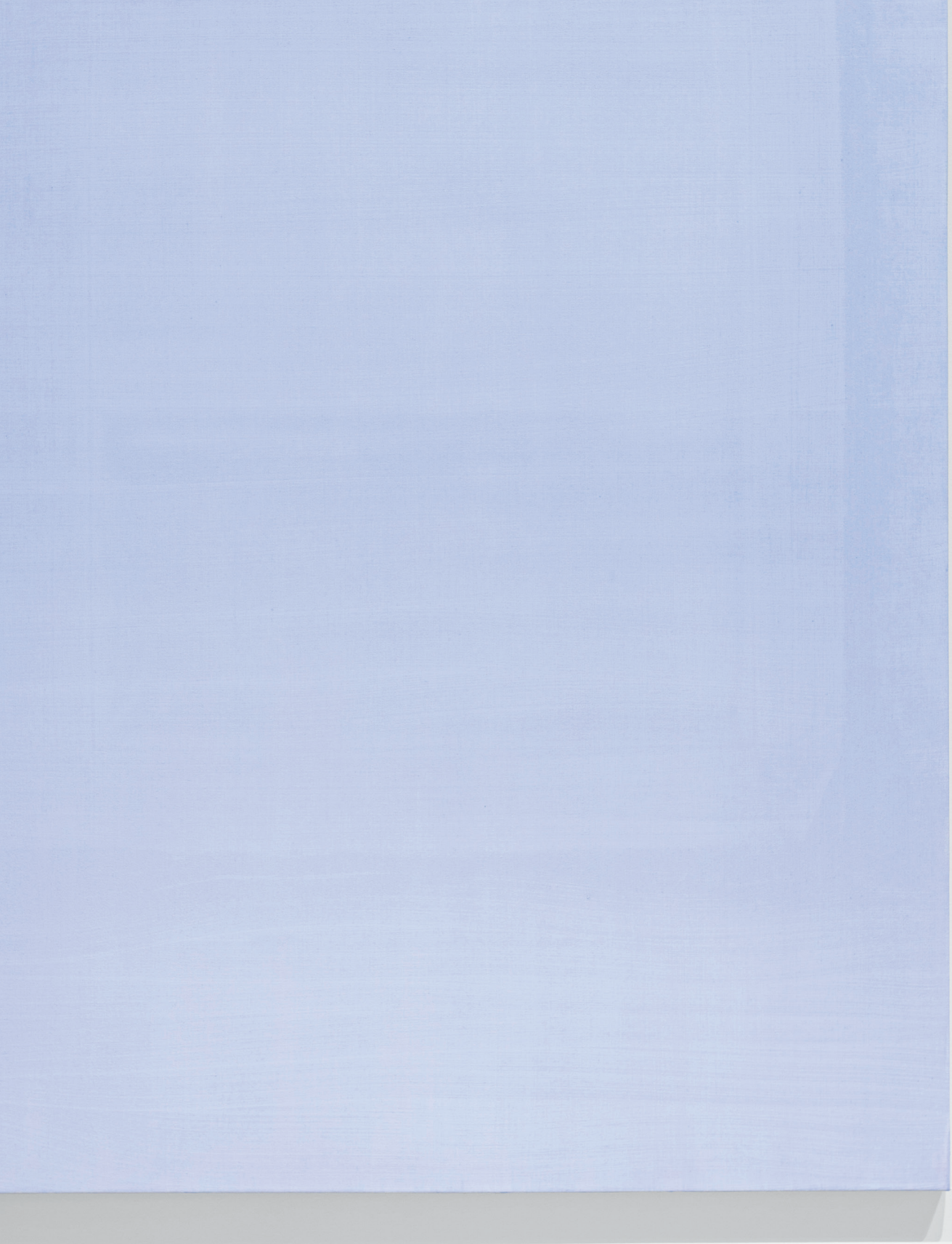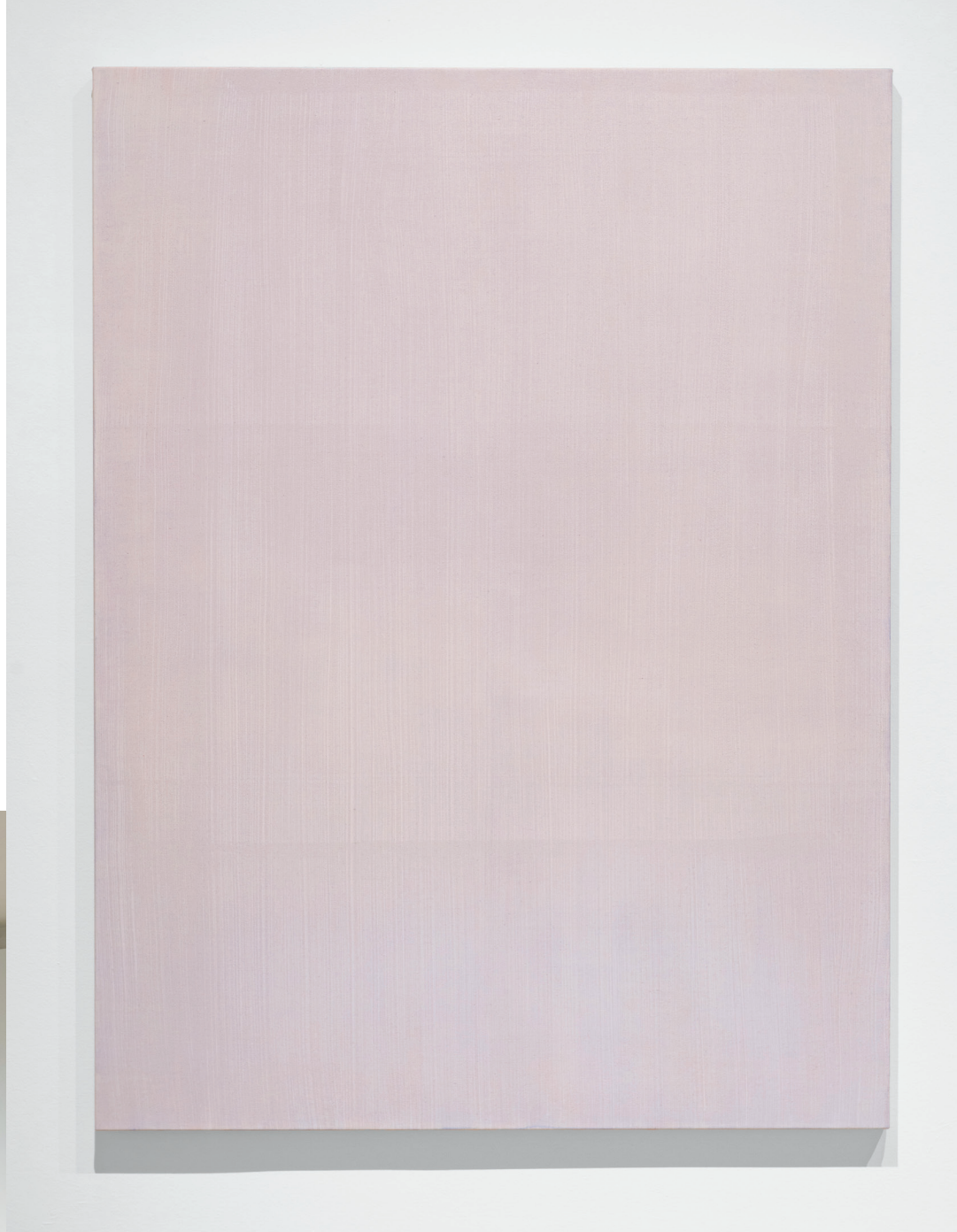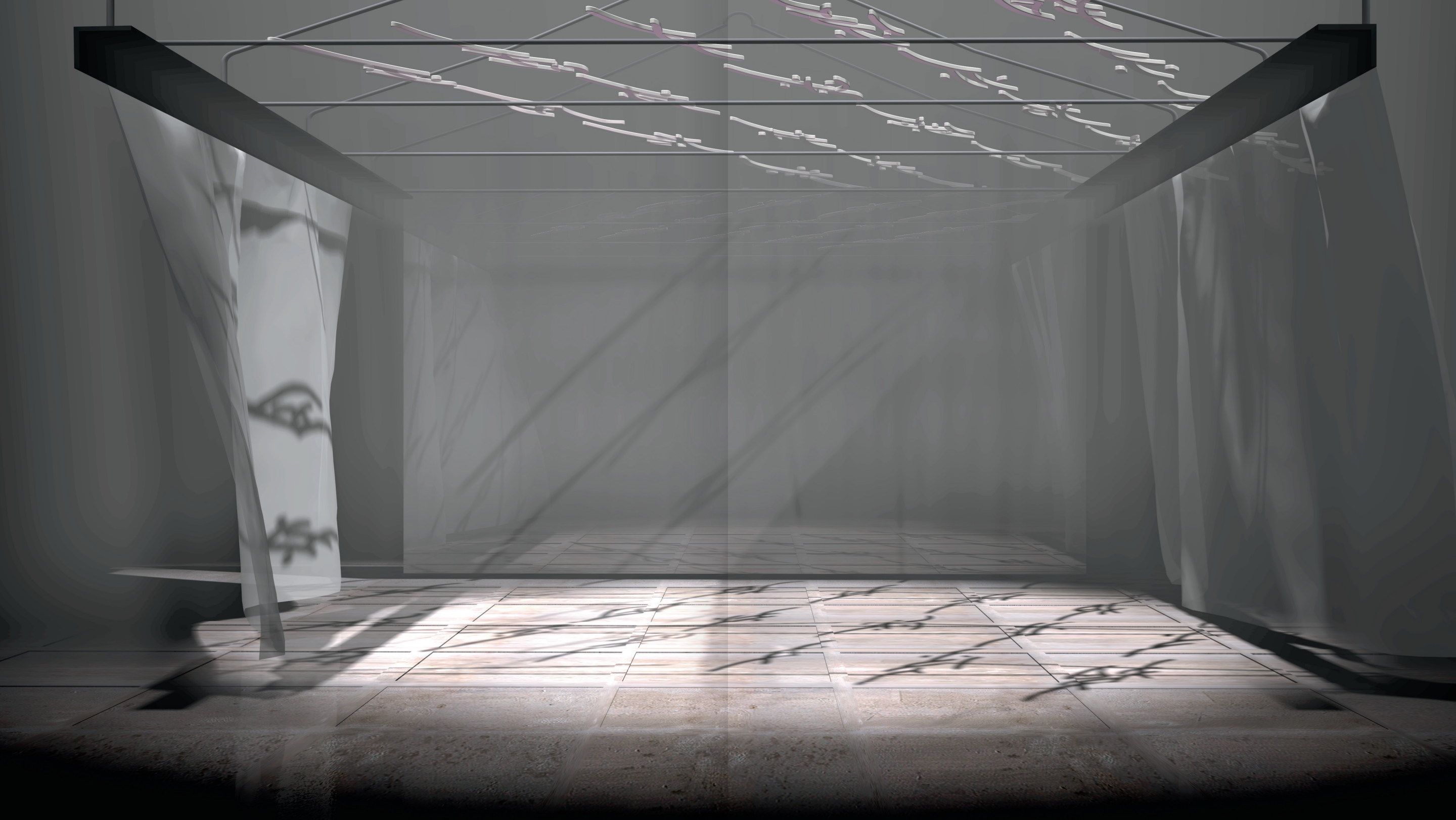
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