

ZAHOOR UL AKHLAQ (1941-1999)

“Art in Pakistan”

BFA-IV (Visual Arts)

Class Incharge: Ms. Farah Khan

Institute of Design & Visual Arts, LCWU



Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999)



Artist Profile:

➤ Education:

- i) 1958-1962: National Diploma in Fine Art; National College of Arts – Lahore, Pakistan
- ii) 1966–67, Post graduate studies: Hornsey College of Art, London
- iii) 1968–69, post graduate studies: Royal College of Arts, London
- iv) 1987 -89, Post doctoral studies: Fullbright Research Fellowship at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music; Religion and the Arts, Yale University, USA and at Yale School of Art and Architecture, Yale University.

➤ Awards: Sitara-i-Imtiaz (2005)

Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999)

- Zahoor ul Akhlaq was one of the few Pakistani painters who have continuously played and experimented with their art; coming up with a diverse and dynamic repertoire. His art defies explanation though and moves gracefully over boundaries created by terms such as postmodernism and deconstructionists.
- He was born on February 4, 1941 in Delhi, India. His family moved to Lahore in 1947 during the partition, eventually settling in Karachi. He was a groundbreaking artist from Pakistan working primarily in painting, sculpture and graphic design. He is widely renowned for his innovative artistic practice as well as his influence on contemporary Pakistani artists. He has been called “the father of contemporary Pakistani Art” by curator, historian and critic Salima Hashmi.
- Zahoor ul Akhlaq broke away from the strict modernist education that he was well versed in and began to re work Islamic influences such as calligraphy, miniature painting, and geometrical abstraction in his work. Beyond the formalism that he is generally known for he embraced the folk, vernacular of his time.
- Zahoor ul Akhlaq lived and worked in an almost indefinable space between modernism and post-modernism and grappled with concepts that traversed tradition and modernism. His was a time when notions of hybridity and pluralism were entering the lexicon of art and new trajectories were being discovered and explored, and influences, stimuli and effects were difficult to pinpoint with absolute precision. He worked in the near absence of written or verbal ideologies perhaps because he was himself sorting out conceptual subjectivities and the internal rather than the theoretical was his pivotal concern.

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- Zahoor ul Akhlaq's early art education in Karachi was very basic. It was like going to study at the level of primary school. But there were things on and around the school that fascinated him and he used to take interest in them. He thought, art education cannot be achieved only within the school boundary. He used to observe life while going to and returning from the school. He was fond of new ways and new streets. He observed jugglers, peddlers, and people selling medicines. He saw so much on those streets: people working till late hours, busy in welding, doing carpentry jobs and so on. It was in a way very fascinating. And this observation became part of his expression. Then there were people making commercials like Mustafa Muhammad. Their ads and posters attracted him. He met them and tried to study the techniques they used. Then, there came a time when he decided to come to Mayo School of Arts. But when he came to Lahore this School was devoted and renamed as National College of Arts (NCA). He was lucky to get admission into the first batch of NCA.
- In those days, Sponenburg was the Principal of NCA, Zahoor completed his first three years of study under his principalship. He taught him History of Art and Architecture. Shakir Ali was his first tutor of drawing and painting. Shakir Ali made them understand the basic skill of drawing and stressed his students to concentrate on drawing before going on to do paintings. Zahoor always gave credit to Shakir Ali for letting him understand the basics of drawing. Because of the constant practice, Zahoor became able to capture whatever was needed on the surface of his canvas. He always went back to the basics and set out on a new journey.

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- He received the British Council Scholarship which was a thrilling turn in his career. He studied at Hornsey College of Art and Royal College of Art, London for four years from 1966 to 1969 and also did work there, picked up some techniques. In addition, he had access to great art which he had previously seen in books or slides. In his words: *“It was really a different experience. I went there to see my favorite paintings, because, every time you look at a painting, you do so from a different view and perspective! I did a lot of work there, which was accepted and appreciated. This way my scholarship continued. My tutors were satisfied with my work. It was a very positive experience. I spent large part of my time looking at miniatures in British Museum in the special area, which you can have an access to only through an assurance that you are a student of art and you are doing research on the subject. I also went to USA on Fulbright Scholarship where I worked at the Institute of Sacred Music, Religion and Art, Yale University.”*
- Zahoor ul Akhlaq was never pinned down to one medium. He brought his work to the cusp of the contemporary for mainstream art historians - yet his experimental style renders his work difficult to categorize. Trained first in Lahore and then in London, he worked in a postcolonial moment of political and social upheaval. As such, he was always interested in his own cultural background, integrating traditional regional techniques into his own contemporary style, in order to bring them into the present.

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- His interest in eastern vocabulary remained very strong, though he had all the necessary skills to use and execute things in a western manner. His interest was not in the surface of the visual pattern; their technique, execution or creations never attracted him. For instance, in Mughal art, he was not into seeing only the kings, the princes and the princesses or their luxurious lives. What he was interested in, is how painters created space for a certain scene, and related and narrated things. Its space structure attracted him.
- Whereas on the other hand, he experimented with calligraphic elements taken from the eastern tradition. He learned the rigors of calligraphy at the hands of master calligrapher, Yousuf Dehlavi. In the words of Zahoor ul Akhlaq: *“I have seen and studied the art of calligraphy very closely. It attracts me aesthetically, but the kind of calligraphy, which everyone seems keen to put into his or her paintings here, makes me doubtful about its future. Spreading of colors on some surface does not make a piece of calligraphy. It’s a serious art and you cannot do justice to it without knowing its principles. You should not deform a powerful tradition so carelessly. Only after understanding this art would you be able to use it properly according to its set traditional concepts and techniques. So far as I am concerned, I have used calligraphy in a different manner. My interest in calligraphy is not that I make a kataba. I use it because it’s part of me. I can’t deny it. I own it. You can’t borrow it. I have great regard for calligraphy. In my paintings I have just used the space division of the calligraphy. I love its linear rhythm. Its aesthetic structure is most important for me. Then its manifestation, its fineness and its complex resolutions of space attract me. I am just fascinated with the space and rhythm and its linear movement”*.

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- Akhlaq's use of the grid, calligraphic elements and tropes from the miniature tradition were mined from Islamic and local cultural sources but he took ownership of them and incorporated them into his stylistic, but more importantly, intellectual framework. In England, he immersed himself in the study of miniatures through the vast collection at Victoria and Albert Museum. And he was well-informed in his investigation of geometric iterative pattering in Islamic art.
- Thus all the signifiers of his art that may be considered appropriations of Western modernism were in reality derived from a national heritage and collective histories — the planar color fields or windows in the semblance of Reinhardt and Newman was a variation of the *hashia*, perceptibly broken to offer a path into the painting. The text-like forms are semiotic renderings of formal calligraphic alphabets, not Klee's markings simulating children's doodles. The artist re-examined the genre of miniature that had become archaic and irrelevant and encouraged students to revisit the tradition with fresh eyes.
- Akhlaq's cerebral approach to his own practice remains primarily undocumented and unexplored because visual experimentation was his focus and theoretical musings not his forte. Yet, he remains one of those artists for whom Western convention was only background study and his search for the authentic practice lay in the paradigms of his own culture.

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- Zahoor ul Akhlaq used colors in minimalistic manner. Cool colors and warm colors was an outdated theory for him. In his perception, there could be many interpretations of color. Zahoor's work was mostly executed with the rendering of black color. He said: *“With colors I don't have any problem. Black often has the connotation of mourning. I think color is a matter of your association. Along with socio-cultural environment, one's personal priorities are also involved in developing an association with color. The beauty of black attracts me, I can see things in it. I love it; therefore I use it in my paintings. I am not afraid of colors. However, I use only those colors, which can express what I want to paint. I want to see how color, surface and space coordinated with one another”*.
- Akhlaq's painting invoked a dialogue between modernist abstraction and many traditional forms and practices found within South Asia (including Mughal Miniature painting, calligraphy and vernacular architecture). At a time when his contemporaries in South Asia were developing their work within a modernist tradition, or had primitivist leanings, he eschewed both schools by merging his interest in abstractions with traditional and vernacular practices. Although he evaded the label of an abstract artist, his work mostly fits this definition.
- Akhlaq's influences are from a vast range of sources, which include painting, literature, philosophy, Sufism, dance, and music. His teaching and practice is considered to have had a significant impact on a generation of Contemporary Pakistani art and artists.

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- An example of Zahoor ul Akhlaq rendering traditional processes contemporary is his inclusion of the grid technique, which was traditionally used for proportion in Mughal miniature paintings. The artists's exposure to the extensive Persian and Mughal miniature collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London is said to have nurtured his interest in this technique. In turn, his miniature paintings came to influence the contemporary generation of so-called "neominiature" artists such as Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Shahzia Sikander, and Saira Wasim. "Zahoor ul Akhlaq never taught miniature painting, but he was an advocate of students using traditional arts as an inspiration to create contemporary art. So miniatures would only have been one of those traditional arts."
- In the words of his daughter Nurjahan Alkhlaq at the retrospective show of Zahoor ul Akhlaq at NCA: "*His work (whether finished or unfinished), gives some insight into his mind and his process. He strove to be true to himself and his cultural background - but at the same time he was very fond of reading, travelling and staying informed on the art trends of the time globally. So his works are a reflection of who he was as a person, his ideas, beliefs and interests*"

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- A number of contemporary artists acknowledge Zahoor ul Akhlaq as the principal influence on their work. He was the fountainhead from which all relevant postmodernist art and contemporaneity springs today. Perhaps no other artist has wielded this scope of influence on young practitioners in Pakistan. Zahoor ul Akhlaq transcends movements, eras and conventions to stand singularly tall. Zahoor ul Akhlaq continues to produce art, in the form of his students and followers who are extending his ideas, pictorial concerns and aesthetic vocabulary. Rashid Rana is the most illustrious example.

- In the words of Quddus Mirza (a renowned critic, artist and art educationist):

“The art of Zahoor ul Akhlaq contributes to developing a better understanding of his predecessors such as A.R. Chughtai, Shakir Ali and Mughal miniature painters. Likewise, it offers clues for comprehending the revival of modern miniature painting in Pakistan. Today, one can fully grasp the genius of Zahoor ul Akhlaq, glimpsed in his works and those of his former students and followers. They keep informing us that an artist is not caged within a body, not confined to a family, nor contained within a school.”

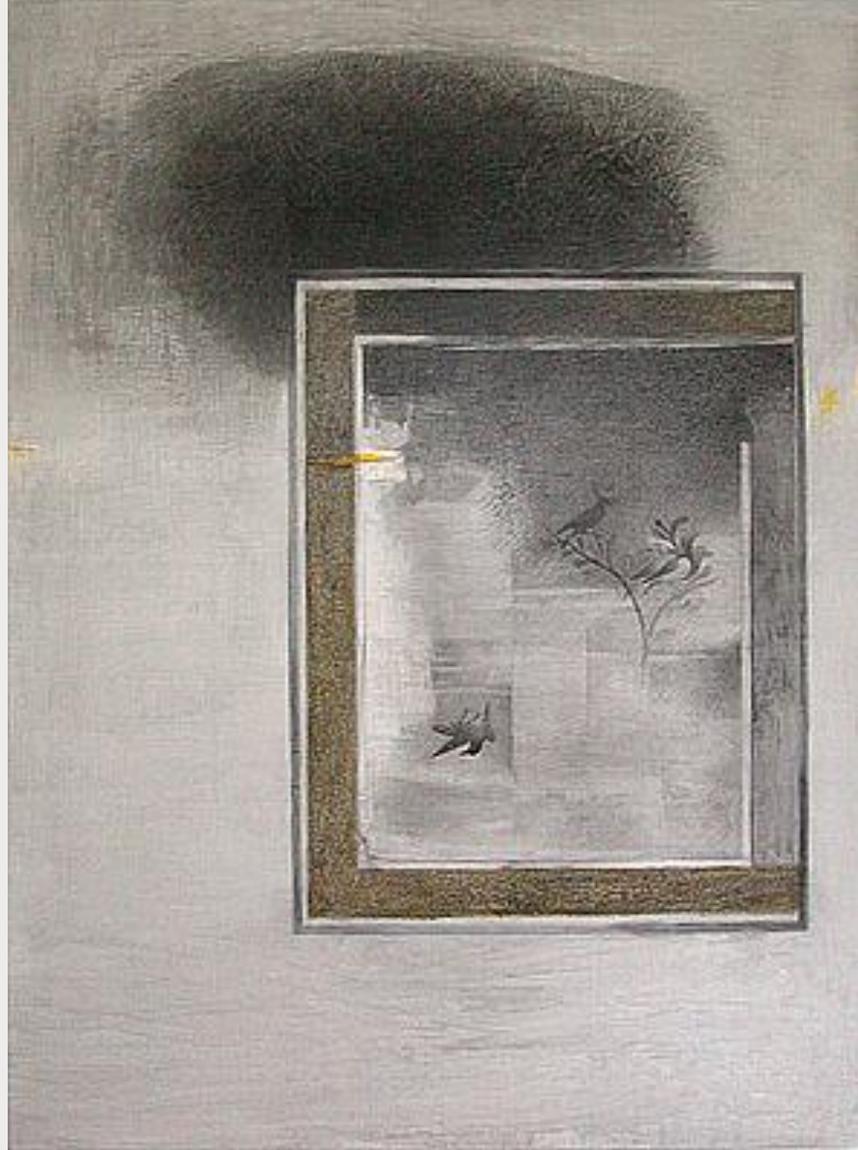
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Composition 166



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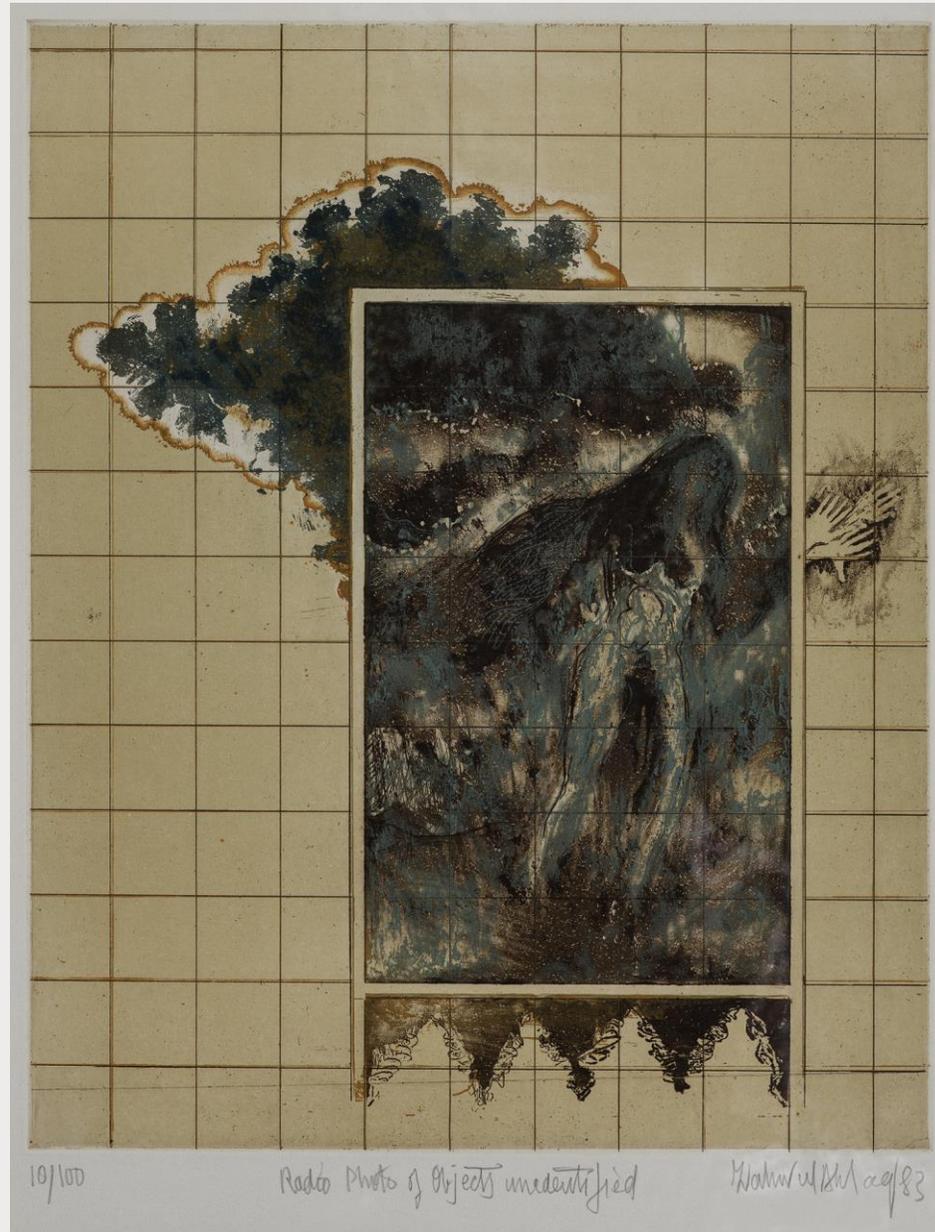
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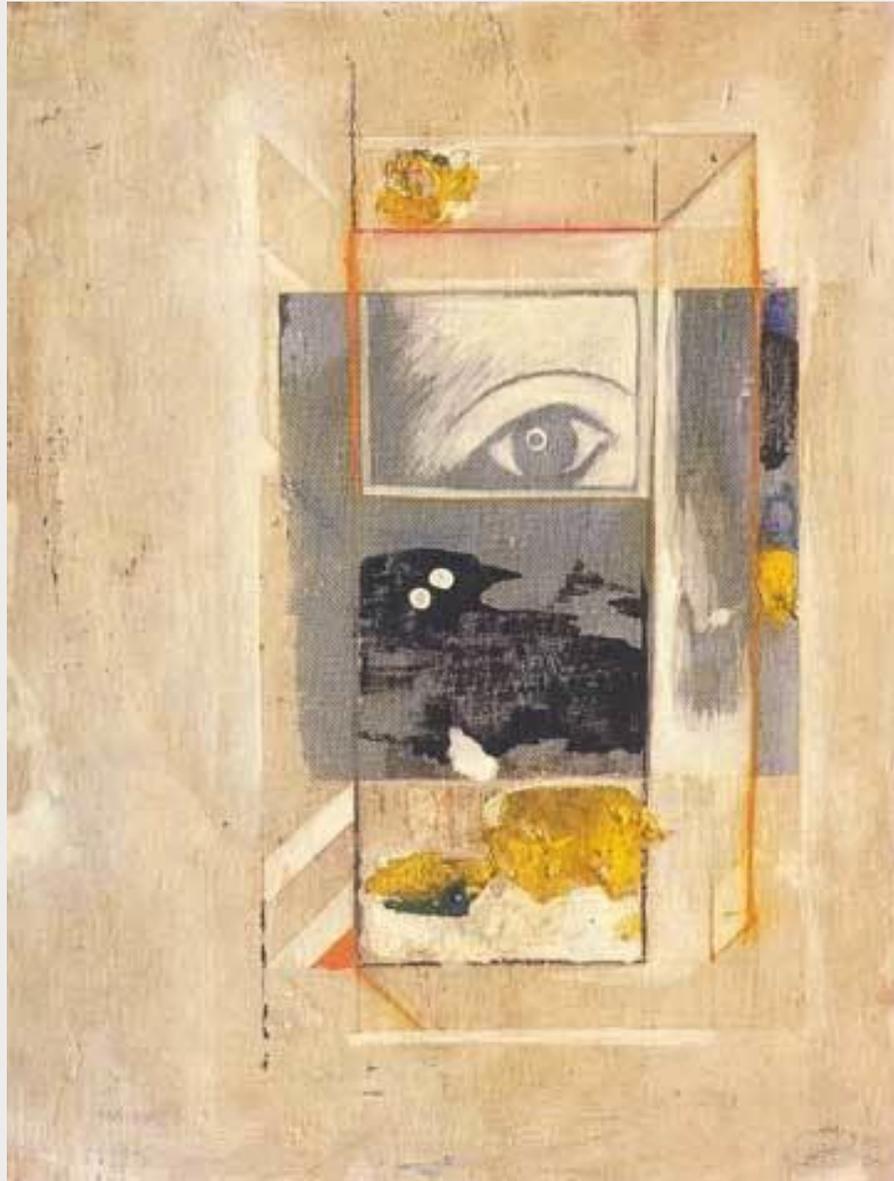
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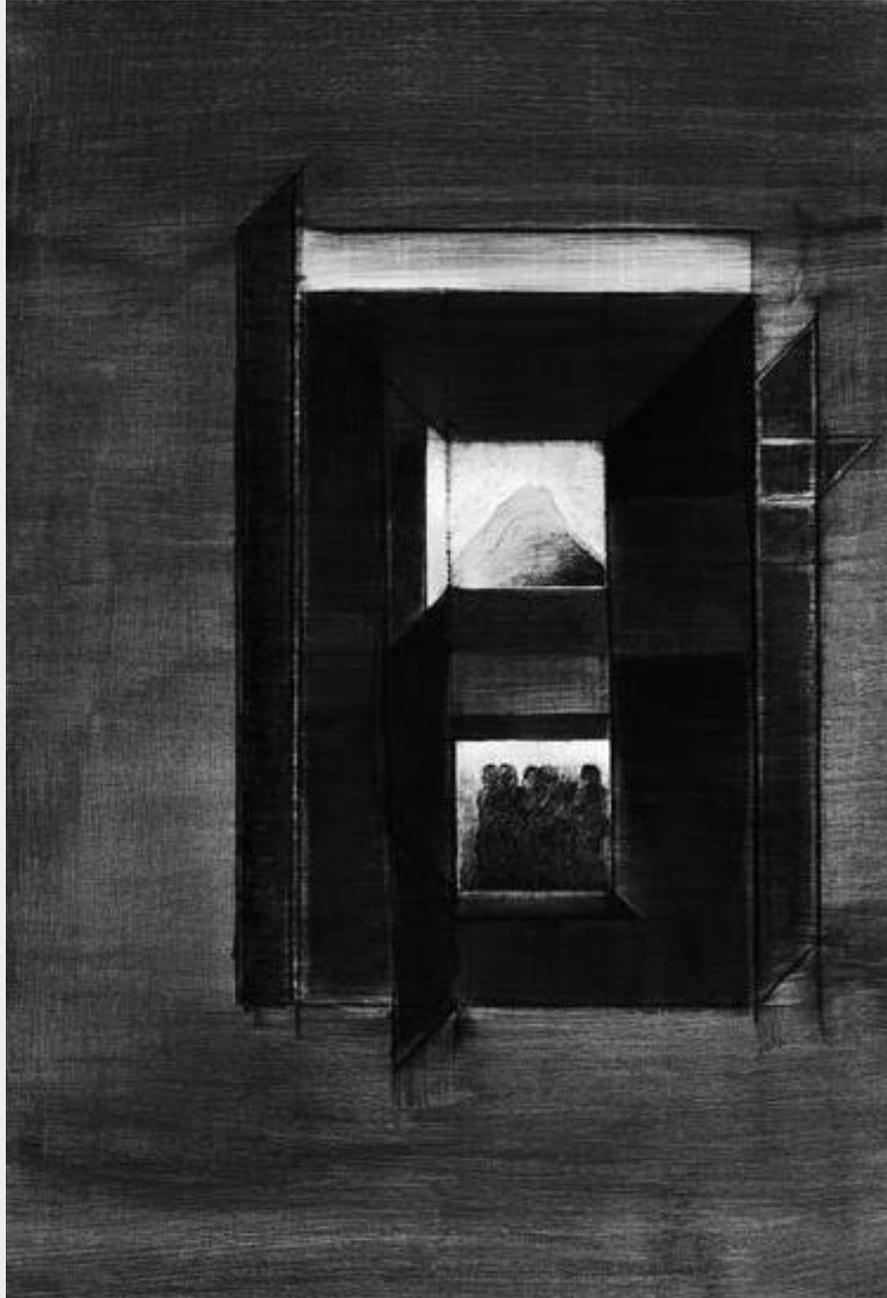
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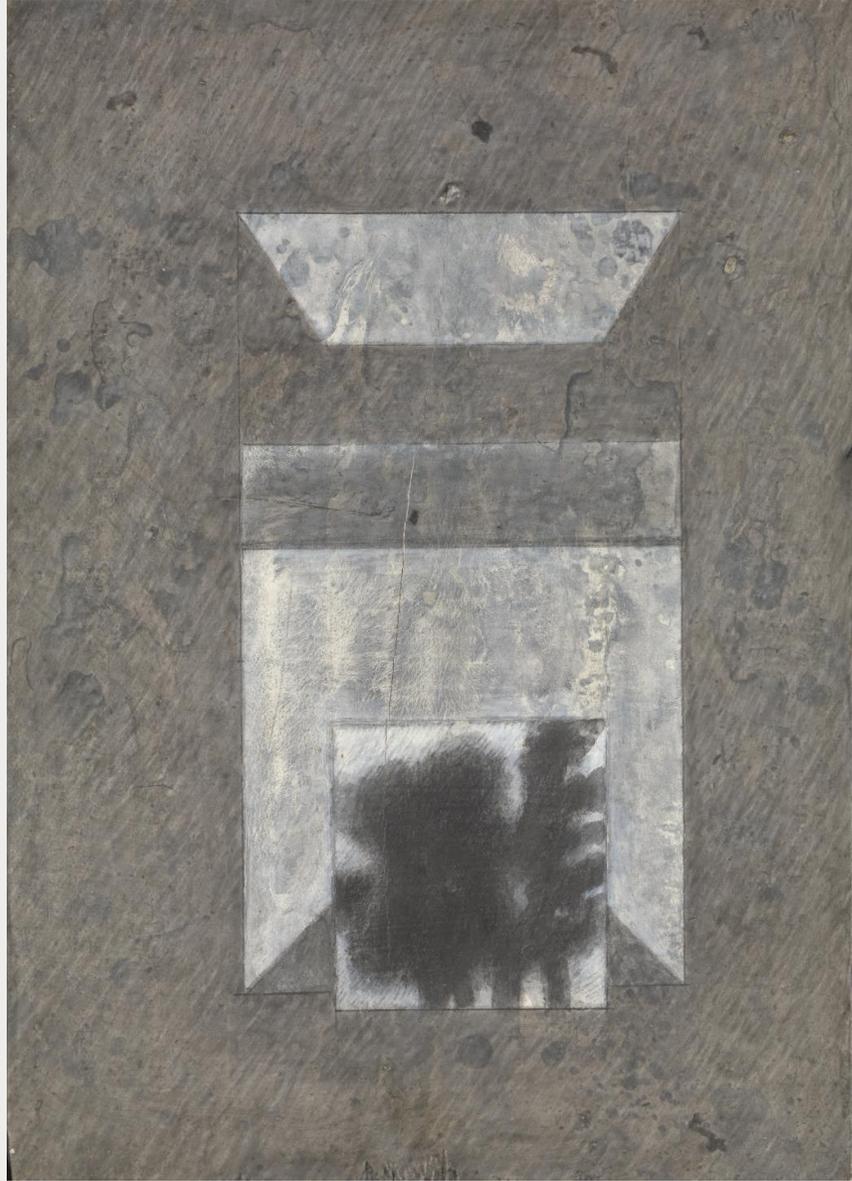
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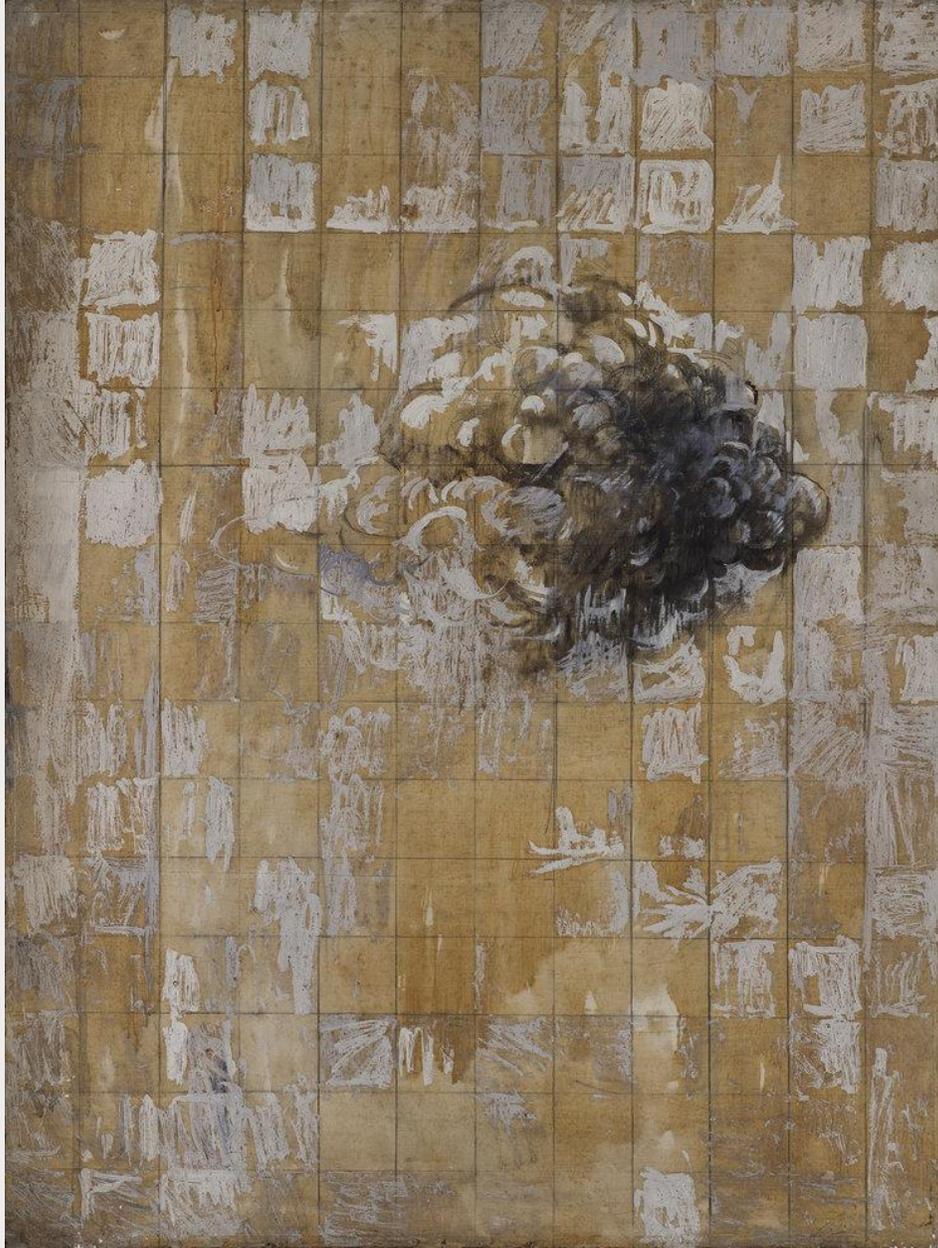
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Sunless Days II



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