

**JAMES
HOWELL**

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**THE GREY
COUNT**

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SERIES TEN

CONTINUED

LILLY WEI

James Howell has been working on his Series Ten paintings since 1996. It is an ongoing project and at the time of this writing, consists of 428 works of varying dimensions but always square in format, always grey in color. Within the series, the works are organized in groups numbered according to the percentage of white pigment in the mix. Howell uses only three colors: titanium white, ivory black and raw umber, the latter to prevent the white and black from bluing. His format consists of narrow bands of the same width within each work arranged in graduated order, the number of bands determined by how he wants the gradation's mass to be perceived. Each work is documented by number, date and measurements. Series 10 is an investigation of the physical properties of one grey with its infinite range of color and light. His tonal scale is mapped as a parabolic curve determined by three points, the points a record of the percentages of white, black and raw umber in each band. To further explicate his thinking, Howell cites scientific observations by Neils Bohr who said, referring to the phenomenon of mass, that reality was ultimately not an edge but a range or this quote from Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis that is one of Howell's mantras: "If there occurs some change in nature, the amount of action necessary for this change must be as small as possible."

Metaphysical, metaphoric reverberations are also present, but Howell refers to them obliquely, guardedly, in dictums that he is fond of and stirs into the discussion like small, measured packets of seasoning. One such is Louis Kahn's recommendation to his students: "I would say that you present your aspiration, something in which you believe." Another is this excerpt from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke: "the landscape like a line in a psalm book, is seriousness and weight and eternity." Howell is not averse to meaning, the poetic, intimations of belief, equivalence.

Then, without missing a beat, he reverts to the pragmatic. "I want to show these darker grey paintings in a 33 per cent to 57 per cent range. I want to raise the black up and let it get dark faster but still maintain the right tonalities, to keep the surface modulated." As he explains, he smiles, slightly, and says, "it's just a form of insanity."

Howell is not necessarily a monochromatic artist, a materialist, a process painter or a theorist although he is a little of all of those. He is also an empiricist, who, however, when turned inside out, is a displaced romantic still enthralled, it would seem, by the residuum of a manifest destiny that landed him first

at one edge of America and then on another; vested in the experiential, in the factual, in the legacy of modernism and modernism's exemplary expression, the monochrome painting. He is stubbornly independent, in possession of a directness that might be considered an uncompromised form of elegance well-suited to the rich spareness of this kind of painting, whether it be called minimal, reductivist, radical, monochrome or concrete. His finely calibrated works, with their almost subliminal differences, depend upon the viewers' perceptual sensitivities and acuities and what they think of color, tone, light and movement. After the bands emerge from the surface, as they do upon careful looking, they relinquish their discreteness, reclaimed once more by the field, a repetitive cycle of whole to constituent parts to whole. The movement simulates light, a glow that vertically traverses the surfaces of his paintings in tiny increments.

Howell's paintings are challenging, resisting the quick take, resisting the instantaneity we have become so accustomed to. Vehicles for the transient and the formless, for matter and myth, they require time and concentration. The attentive viewer, however, is rewarded for his efforts and sees, as if for the first time, what constitutes a painting.

Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who writes for Art in America and is a contributing editor at ARTnews and Art Asia Pacific.

49.16 - 67.46 14 JUN 06
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
EACH 25 x 25 in 63.5 x 63.5 cm

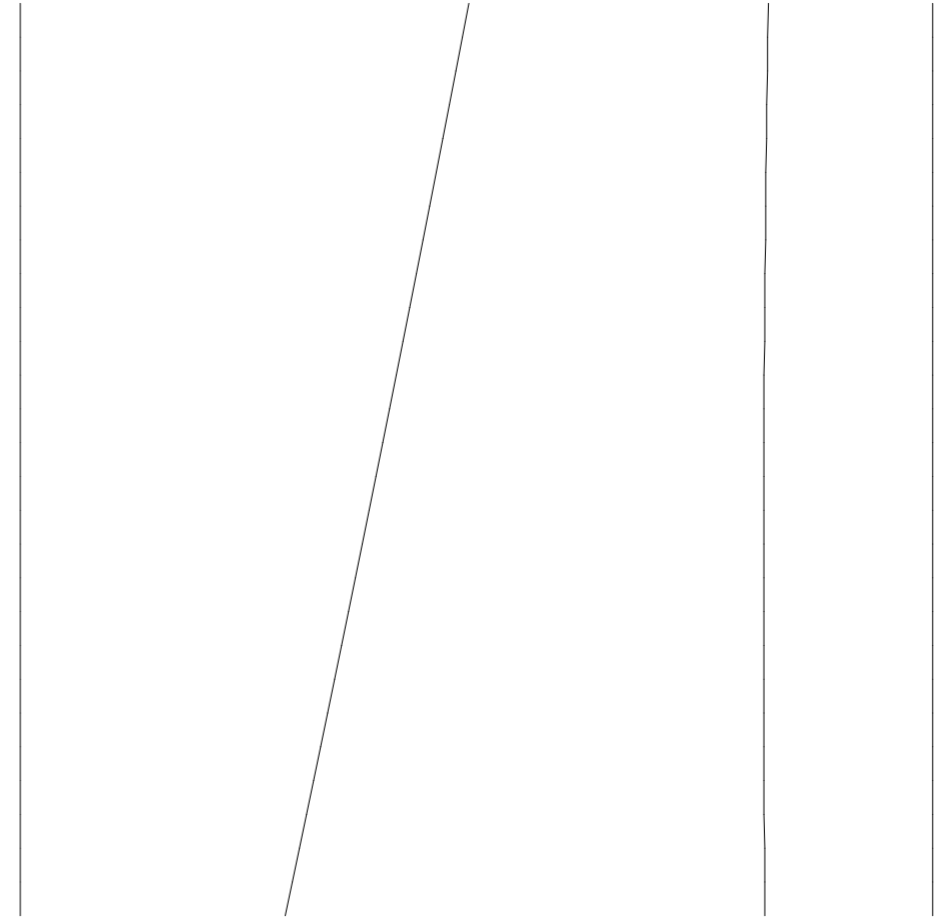




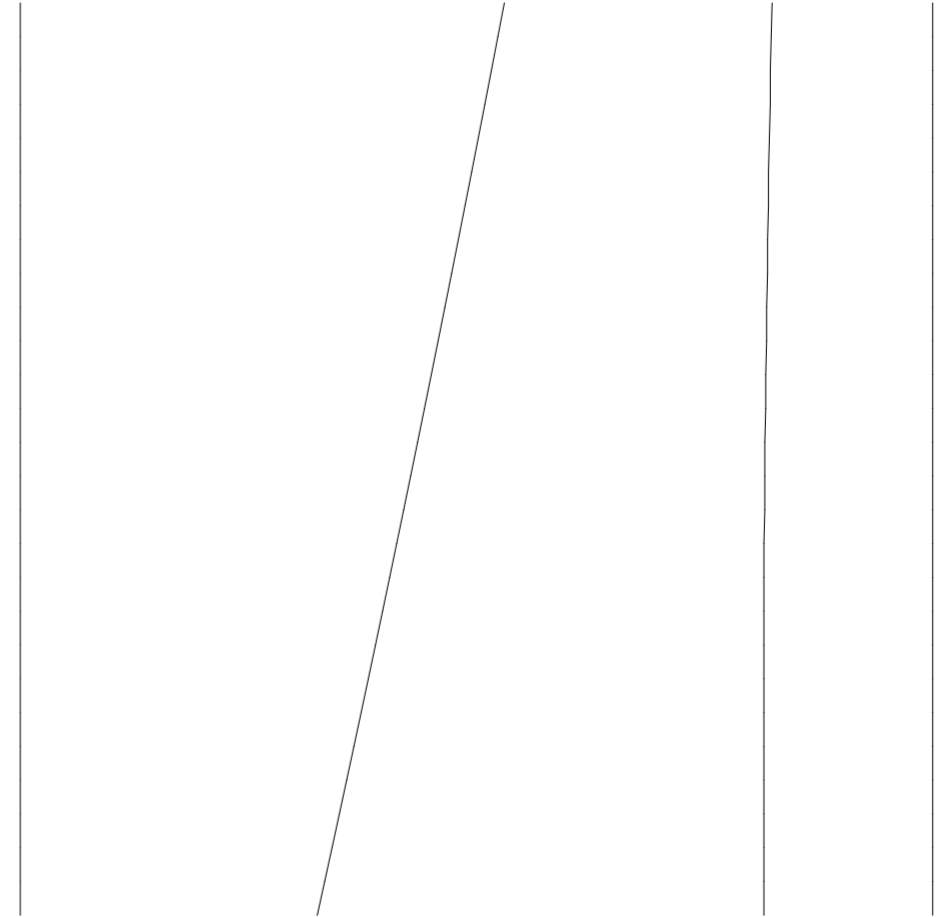
NUMBERS

**49.16-67.46
AND AREAS**

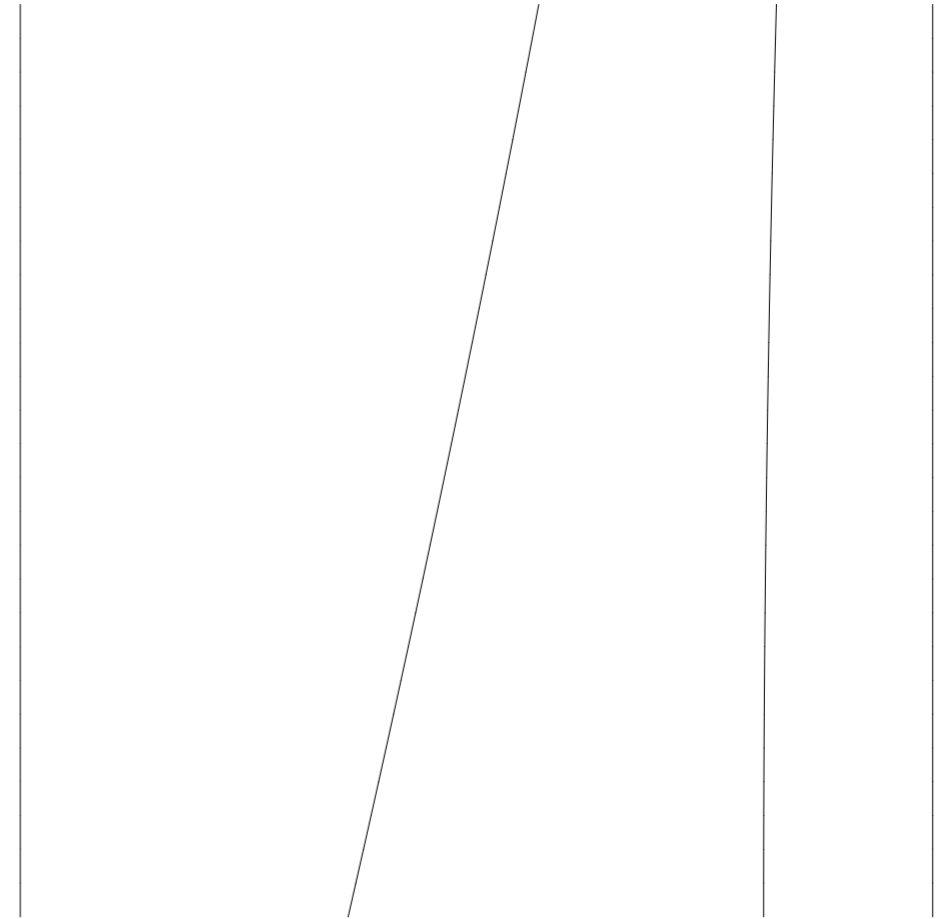
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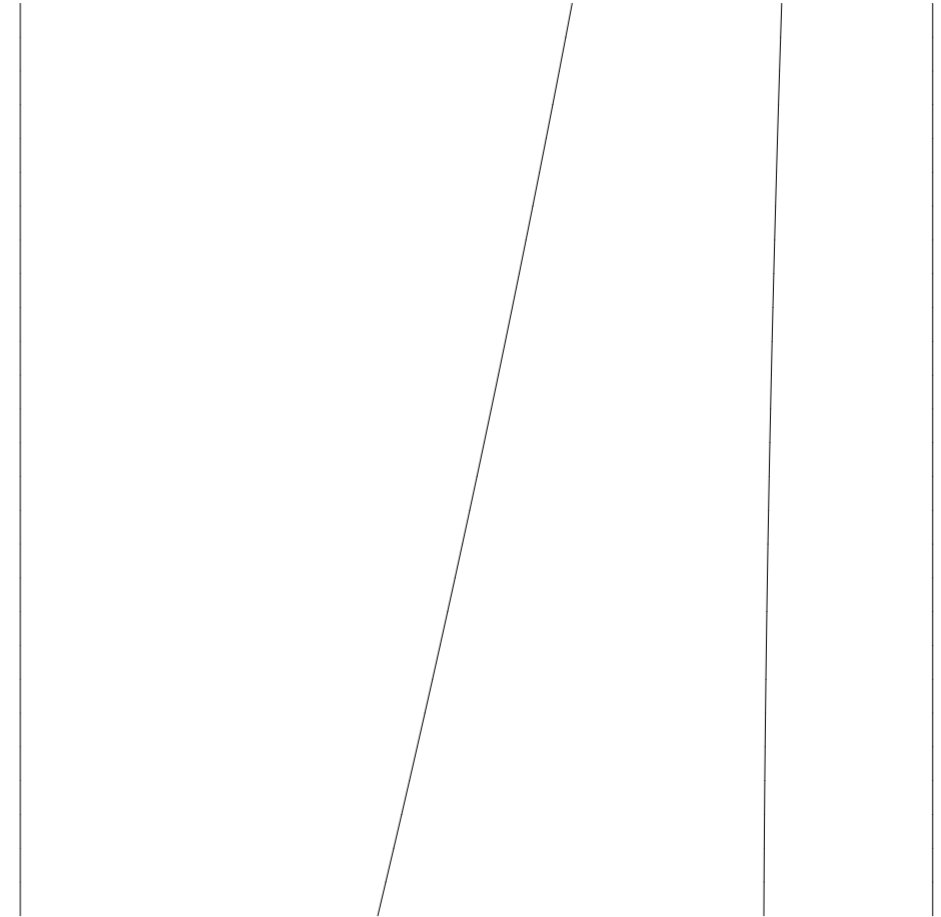
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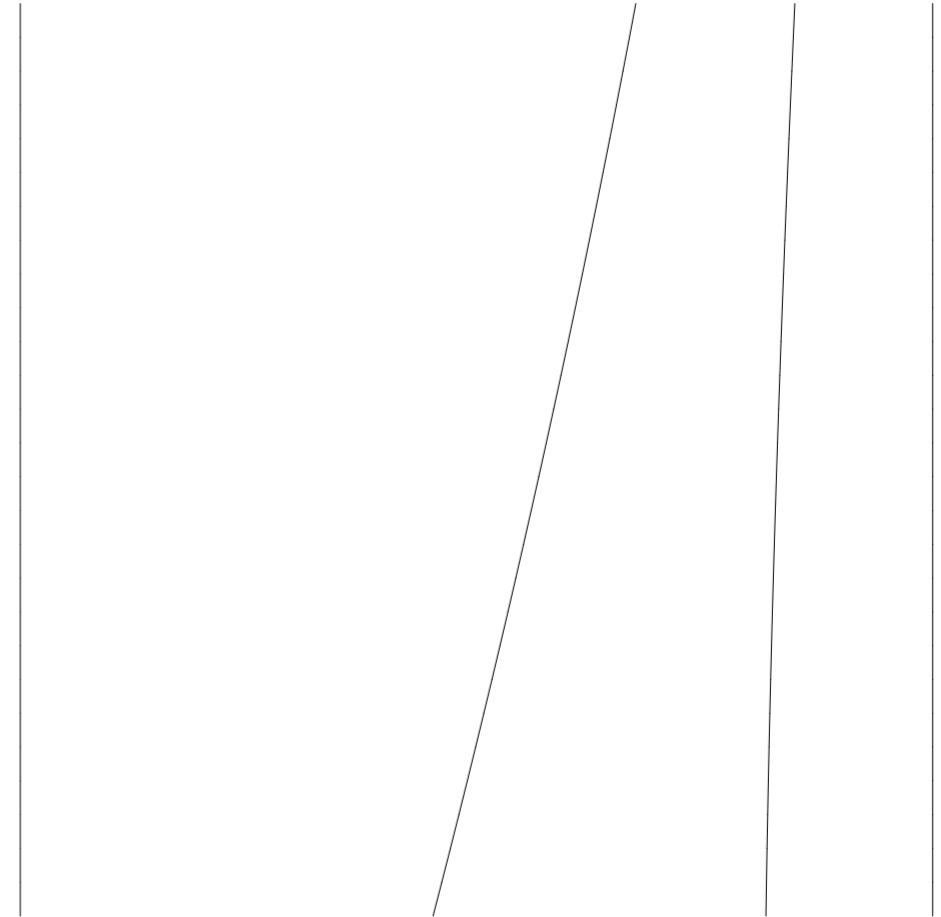
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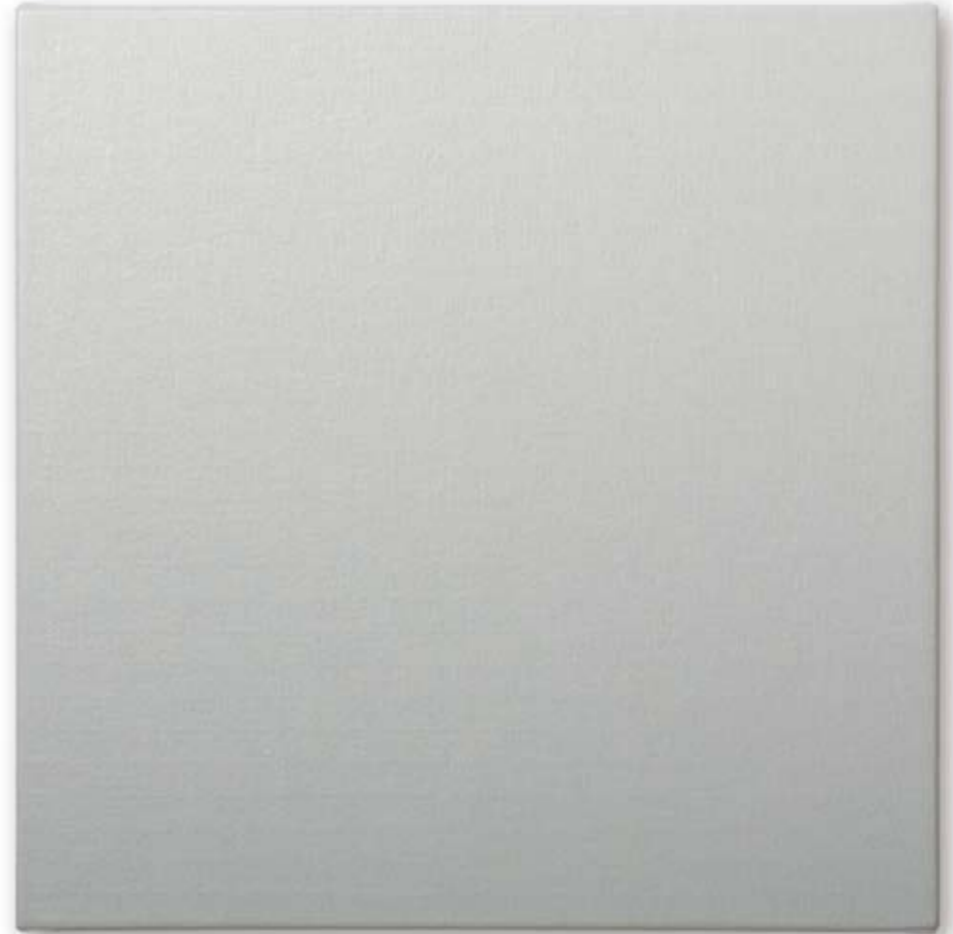




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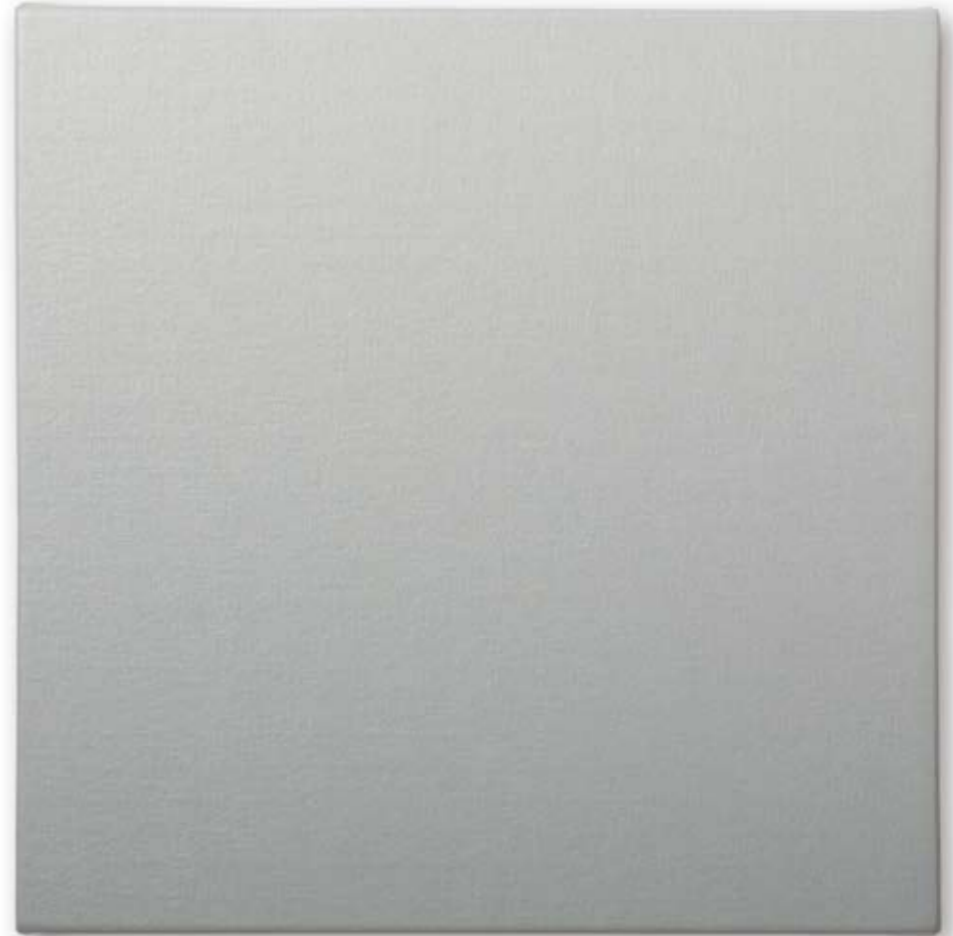
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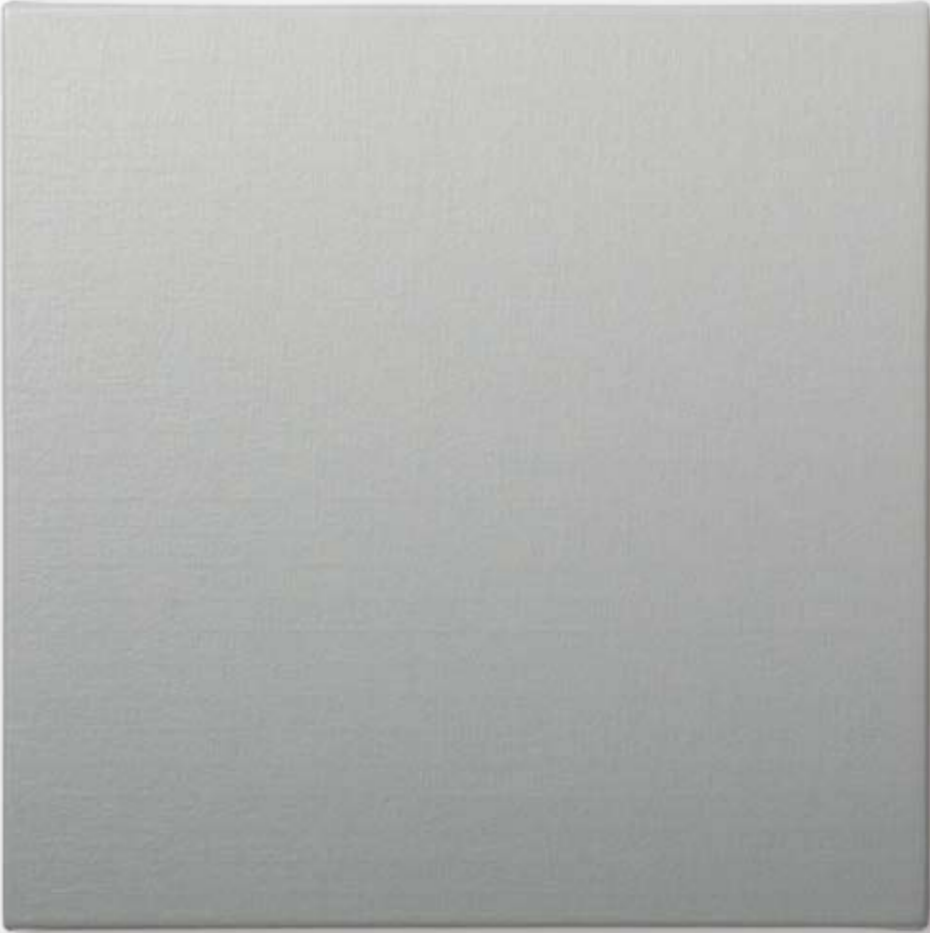
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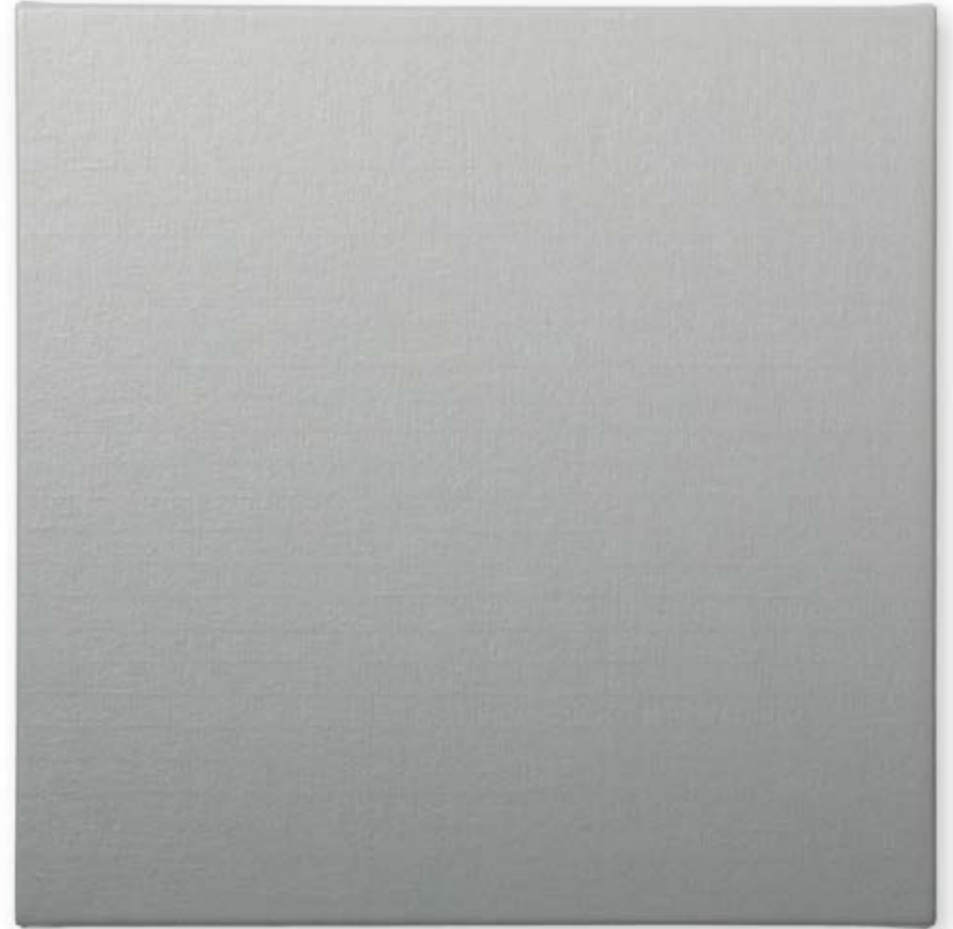
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STUDIO

30 MAR 08

LILLY WEI

In a conversation between James Howell (JH) & Niklas von Bartha (NvB) in New York on March 30, 2008 at the artist's loft in Greenwich Village, they discussed his paintings with Lilly Wei, who edited the exchange.

JH: I'm not in the club of monochrome painters. I use chiaroscuro, gradations; my work is not flat. In fact, my work verges on figuration. However, because I'm in the [Natalie and Irving] Formans' collection, I've been given a pass. Others in the club are also not pure monochrome painters. Joseph Marioni, for instance, uses modulations and gradations in his work.

NvB: Phil Sims is also becoming a figurative painter. He's been looking at seascapes recently. Abstraction has been subject to a very long inquiry and to be successful now, an abstract artist must push hard against its edges, he must work at its extreme edge, as Jim does, otherwise it would be banal. It's easy to get an effect, hard to get at something authentic.

JH: What interests me is light. The premise of light includes movement, a little movement, change, a

subtle change. I like movement; I like change. In Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce talks about rhythm and movement within the work—part to part and to the whole.

NvB: I'm often asked how far this kind of painting can be taken. Can one work encapsulate all the work? It's a thought that arises when viewers see Jim's paintings. But to regard them as simply a modulation, a gradation misses the point. They are also a logical, even an inevitable evolution in the history of art and can only occur and be understood within the given framework of abstraction. Actually, so many people don't see the gradations. They see the work but not the divisions. It is work, however, that invites you to make associations. It always goes back to the natural world even as it makes connections to the mathematical with its charts, graphs, percentages and calculations.

JH: There is also the romantic notion of time, weathering, falling apart. I think my paintings depict light falling at twilight in a cave. It is the light that you see as you enter the cave, sometime around 7:15 or so on a day that didn't have much blue sky. It might also be a light that never happened. I think my work is like a Hiroshi Sugimoto without a horizon line on a cloudy day.

NvB: Sugimoto is sometimes too soft; Jim isn't.

JH: If you make a large body of work using a simple idea, the differences in the paintings have to be charted so the work is specific within the infinity of a series. I like scientists—they can change reality. They can look at infinity in the palm of their hand — and it's not metaphoric, it's specific. I don't want to mystify anyone.

NvB: Why do you use a square?

JH: Because my work is not about form. It's about mass and gradation. There is change in that so it doesn't need change in construction and composition. A viewer told me that she didn't see the movement in the dark paintings as much as in the light paintings so now I'm working on the dark paintings. A lot of viewers prefer seeing the lines.

NvB: I can corroborate that. But unlike other abstractionists, for Jim, the composition is not important.

JH: I started focusing on mass rather than line in my work in 1975. I had been working on San Juan

Island, in my house there, my hermitage, and I had decided that I didn't want to deal with shape anymore. I had been working with points and fields - Einstein said there were only points and fields - and then, I dropped the points and kept only the fields. That's when I started working solely with gradations of the field. I sold my house on San Juan Island (1992) and if you do that, if you leave paradise, you have no choice but to come to New York. Before that, I was spending some time here, some time in LA but after that, I relocated completely and came to the East Coast.

NvB: It's important to understand that Jim is a New York artist, surrounded by other New York artists and part of what is designated as a 90s monochromatic art movement.

JH: Monochrome is a movement that never leaves. It keeps reappearing. It's one of the longest art movements in recent history.

NvB: Yes, it's all happening again. Young artists in Europe are looking at the 1920s and 1930s but it's only a question of time until they revisit the 60s and 70s and monochrome paintings.

JH: On and off, they say that it's all dead, the novel, painting - but how can they be dead if the forms they assume are infinite? Basically, I'm not concerned with what the subject really is or whether it is successful or not. What keeps me going is the work itself.

JAMES HOWELL

Born 1935 in Kansas City, MO

Lives and works in New York City, NY

For further information please visit

www.barthacontemporary.com/jhowell/



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