

PETER DE THOUARS

MIRROR

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Neon Gallery 2023, Budapest

Peter de Thouars

## THE EMPTY SPACES IN HIS WORK

Peter de Thouars was born the 31st of October 1952 in Jakarta and bear his mother's family name. He was, so he was told, a child of a premarital relationship of his father Dirk Simons, with whom his mother married in 1954. From that day, he was called Peter Simons. Peter's parents were both born in the Netherlands East Indies. His great-grandfather on his mother's side was a descendant of a well-to-do French family, that had settled in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. He was born on 1861 in Olst and left for the Indies at an early age. He married or lived unmarried, not uncommon at that time, with a local woman from Ciawi, a small village south of Bogor. He died in 1924 in Sukabumi. His son Alexandre, Peter's grandfather, was born in 1898 in Cimahi and had a relationship with Iti, a five-year younger Sudanese woman from the village of Sukane-gara. He worked as a clerk at the post office. Between 1926 and 1932 they got four chil-

dren, two sons and two daughters, who after the early death of their father and mother in respectively 1933 and 1934, were put in orphanages in their hometown Sukabumi. Presumably, his grandfather felt the end approaching, as he married Iti shortly before his death. The eldest son was eight years old when his mother died. Henriëtte Lilly, Peter's mother, the third child, was four years old.

Peter knows almost nothing about the time his mother and her brothers and sister lived in an orphanage. He never knew where they exactly stayed. However, he remembers that he has heard that they did not grow up in the same orphanage. The boys and girls stayed presumably in separate children's homes. He does not know either where they lived during the Japanese occupation. His mother was fifteen when the Japanese capitulated. Only after World War II, did the children find each other again, but they continued to live at different addresses. At the end of 1949, Henriëtte lived in any case with other young women in a house in Jakarta at Jalan Kudus. At that time, she worked as typist and telephonist for H.E. Oving Jr.'s IJzer en Staalhandel, where more Indo-European women were employed.

Peter's father Dirk Simons, born in 1927, is one of the four children of the Indonesian *nyai* (concubine) of Dirk's father. The family lived at the same address as the official family of Dirk's father, Jalan Madioen in the Menteng area in Jakarta, albeit in other rooms.

The children of the two families were half-brothers and half-sisters of each other. Without doubt they played with each other, although there must have been all kinds of conflicts between the families, not to mention the clear difference in social status

between them. Also, Peter and his parents settled at this address after their marriage. His first two sisters were born there. Peter's father worked in those years at the *Bat-aafsche Petroleum Maatschappij* (BPM).

Peter remembers little from what happened in those years. He still knows, however that in his early childhood more and more relatives and friends left Indonesia. They took them to the boat in Tanjung Priok, where they threw serpentines off the railing to those who stayed behind which snapped if you grabbed them as the boat went out. The house became increasingly empty, doors were locked, and he felt more and more lonely. An indelible memory is also the daily visit to the market in the *selendang* of *babu* Manni. Regularly she covered his head with a part of the sling against the burning sun, or, as he understood later, to prevent that people because of his blond hair would regard him as a real Dutchman. Not without danger in those ominous postwar years, in which anti-Dutch sentiments still resurfaced. The spread soothing light with fell through the batik, he remembers to this day. At the time of the departure of Peter and his family to the Netherlands, Manni gave the *selendang* to his mother with the words: "Then I will be with him, so that he can forget me".

The small family together with his father's mother, Sari Bin Tasirin, left with the *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt* at the end of 1957. They had tried to leave much earlier, but his father did not want to leave his mother behind, who did not have the right papers. Eventually, he succeeded in getting a letter of consent of the Queens Office. For the five-year-old Peter, the departure felt as a flight or an exile. It took him away from a familiar environment, that because of the preceding exodus of relatives was already no longer as

before. It confused him and he felt displaced, a state of mind that often returned in his further life.

The first year and a half, the family stayed in pension Walram in Valkenburg, where his grandmother died unexpectedly after about a year. After that, it settled in the village of Eys in South Limburg, where seven more children were born. Every night, Peter prayed on his knees that his uncles Otto and Henri de Thouars, the two brothers of his mother, also would come to the Netherlands and visit them. His prayer was answered. Otto, his oldest uncle, came first, together with his wife. Aunt Ans made a great impression on him. She was more Indo-European than anybody else in the family and believed strongly in ghosts and *guna-guna* (black magic). After a few years they went back to Indonesia. The youngest uncle, Henri, came a few years after uncle Otto to the Netherlands. He also did not want to stay and soon left for Australia. With the paternal relatives, the brothers and sisters of his father, as far as he knows, few contacts were maintained any more.

Peter keeps good memories of his childhood in the south of the country. Yet he felt different from his brothers and sisters. He differed from them because of his white skin, his interests, and tendency to keep himself aloof. In addition, he had a winning mentality and wanted to live up to it. He was his mother's favorite and conversely had a great affection for her. In photographs from his childhood, he always hangs on to his mother's robes. They shared experiences in Indonesia that the other children missed.

For a long time, the family was the only Indo-European family in Eys, which had a population of less than a thousand. They were not discriminated against, although they

realized that they were different and lived differently to a certain extent. The neighbourhood children loved to visit them. His parents were open and hospitable. They did not have it easy in the Netherlands, but knew there was no way back. His mother was pragmatic and tried to make the best of it.

After high school, Peter attended college to become a biochemical analyst. After completing his compulsory military service he decided to study biology in Nijmegen. However, before the start of his studies, his mother unexpectedly died in 1975 at the age of 45. His world collapsed. He was so upset that he gave up his plans to study for the time being. Instead, he went to work as a researcher on a project at the gynaecology department of the Catholic University in Nijmegen.

In the late 1970s, his sister, also born in Jakarta, married. While preparing for the wedding, Peter came across a document that showed that he was not an illegitimate child of his father Dirk Simons, but of an unknown person. It was a shocking experience that confused him again. Why had his mother never said anything about this? Why had his current father remained silent about it? A few months after his sister's wedding party, he confronted his father about it. At first, his father vehemently denied that he was not his child. When Peter, walking out of the room, said that he assumed he could take his father at his word, his father broke down and admitted it. His father did not want him to leave the family. Out of respect for his father, Peter never asked him who his biological father was. His mother had never wanted to say it. All he knew was that it was a Dutchman who had gotten a job in post-war Indonesia. The other children were puzzled by it too, but in the end were not surprised. He had always been different. Despite

the grief caused, everything fell into place for him. Feeling excluded and his urge to assert himself could be traced back to this concealed event. Later he discovered among his mother's papers a photograph of a young white man and a postcard with the greeting "much love from Wim."

In 1981, his father died at the age of 54. Peter became guardian of his minor siblings and his married sister became supervisory guardian. Every weekend he went home to put things in order, where necessary. Before his father's death, he had talked to him about his intention to go to art school. In 1982 he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts Arnhem, where he concentrated on free painting.

It turned out to be a good choice. He enjoyed the freedom to express himself on paper and linen. After graduation, he became active in the regional art world. He had a share in several artists' initiatives such as the Paraplufabrieken in Nijmegen and the Gelderland Biënnale, initially called Anima G. He taught in his studio and at secondary schools, and was involved in all kinds of art projects in Arnhem and Nijmegen. Before anything else, however, he was an artist. His work has been exhibited in several galleries at home and abroad over the years. After the birth of his first child Vera in 1992, he decided to use the name de Thouars again.

It soon became clear how important his artistry was in shaping his personal identity. His search for his Indo-European roots, since the death of his parents, went hand in hand with incorporating Indonesian cultural elements into his artworks. In the 1980s, the *tumpal*, the triangle common in Indonesian batik and fabrics, which has both sym-

bolic meaning and aesthetic value, appeared in his work. He brought together 365 watercolors of varying formations of *tumpal*, like medieval miniatures, in a work entitled Oracle. In a Western context, these repetitive abstract patterns evoke other associations, but for the artist himself they bridge the space between East and West. While in batik the *tumpal* are often filled in with effigies of animals or decorative motifs, he leaves them emphatically empty.

In 2015, Peter returned to Indonesia for the first time, accompanied by his wife Petra and his children Vera and Alexander. Together they visited the former parental home in Jakarta, children of his uncle Otto, and the grave of his mother's parents in Sukabumi, Grandpa Alexandre and Grandma Iti. Only recently did he discover by chance Grandma Iti's last name: Djajadinata. With a shock, he realized that she actually never had a place in his memory and that he knew nothing about her. In colonial society, local women were apparently not worthy of being remembered. They belonged to the blank spaces in family history. In 2018, he went to his country of origin again, this time mainly to immerse himself in Indonesian culture, such as the history and symbolism of batik. In doing so, he was inspired by studies by Alit Veldhuisen-Djajasoebrota on Javanese batik and by Robert Wessing on symbolism and batik patterns.

After returning from his travels, he made abstract paintings of a variety of subjects, such as the entrance to his grandparents' cemetery in Sukabumi, of the Merapi, of rice fields, and of what he calls his primeval parents. He made films titled Merapi, Brahma or Malam. He also creates a series of watercolours based on the Pancasila, the five foundations of the Indonesian state: faith in God, justice, unity, democracy, and equality.

He depicts the five (*panca*) principles (*sila*) in five coloured stripes, each of which is put down in a brushstroke. Like the *tumpal* works, they are characterized by certainty and doubt, a rigid structure within which there is room for interpretation.

In his recent works, he builds as a painter on another motif from batik, the so-called *modang* or empty, unfilled spaces. They are spaces that reflect cosmic and magical forces. They are no doubt partly based on Peter's first experiences in the *selendang*.

The philosopher Daan van Speijbroeck wrote in a catalog of Peter's work titled Tanah Airku (My Homeland), "It remains precarious to put into words what can be seen in the work of Peter de Thouars, since in its chaos and having barely taken shape, it eludes language." I can to some extent go along with this description, but the chaos, insofar as there is any, is usually restrained by geometric forms. They are the empty or strongly demarcated places in which an invisible or visible chaos still reigns, waiting to be filled in or further refined. They are typical of his entire work. At the start of a new work, he lets go of everything and the abstract works emerge that serve as models for a reality we cannot see or describe. They are a metaphor for what is unknown and unnamable.

Dr. Huub de Jonge

*former associate professor cultural anthropology*

*(On)gedeelde Ervaringen*

*Indisch cahier Nijmegen 2021*

MIRROR

KAIN KEPALA

2021, 200 x 200 cm,

oil on linen





KAIN KEPALA

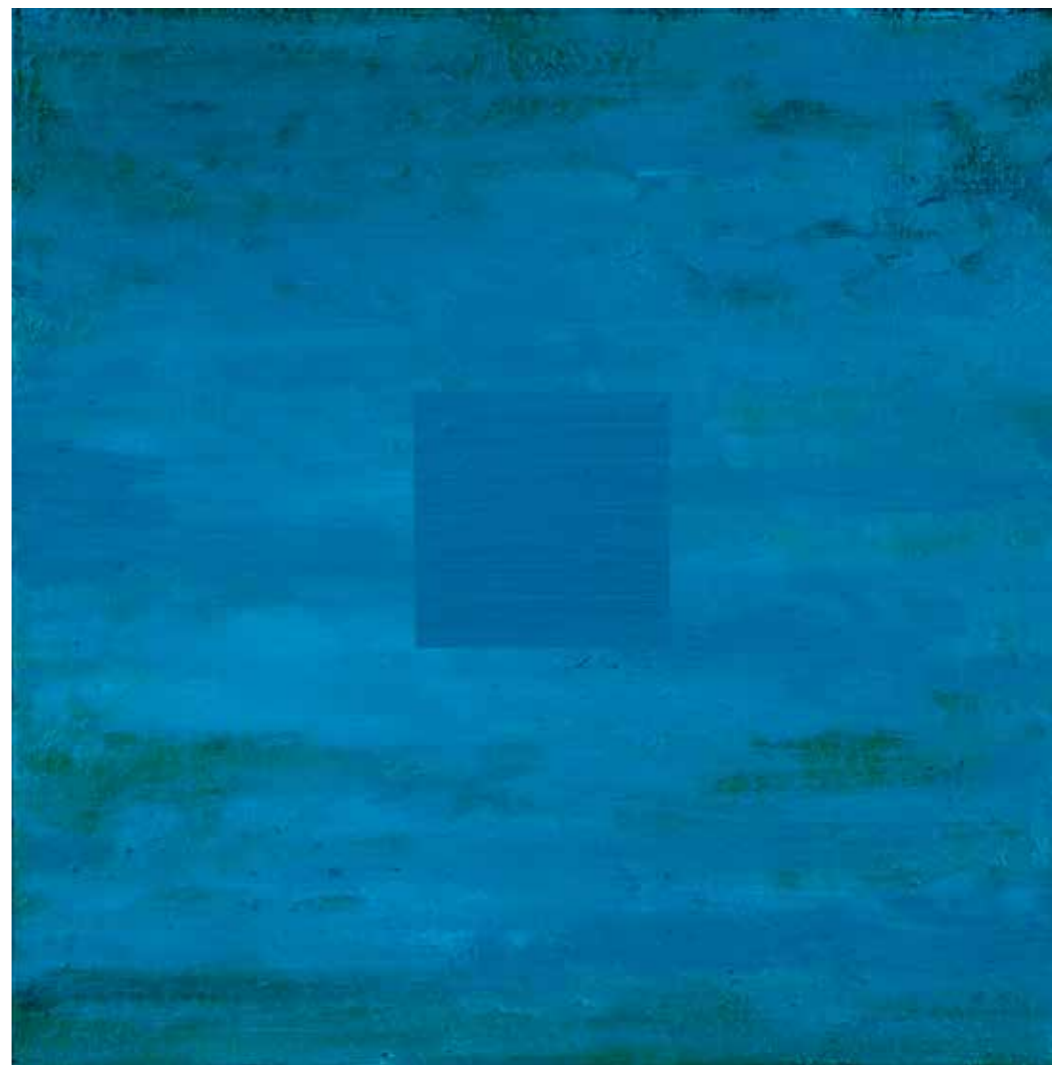
2021, 200 x 200 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON  
2023, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen

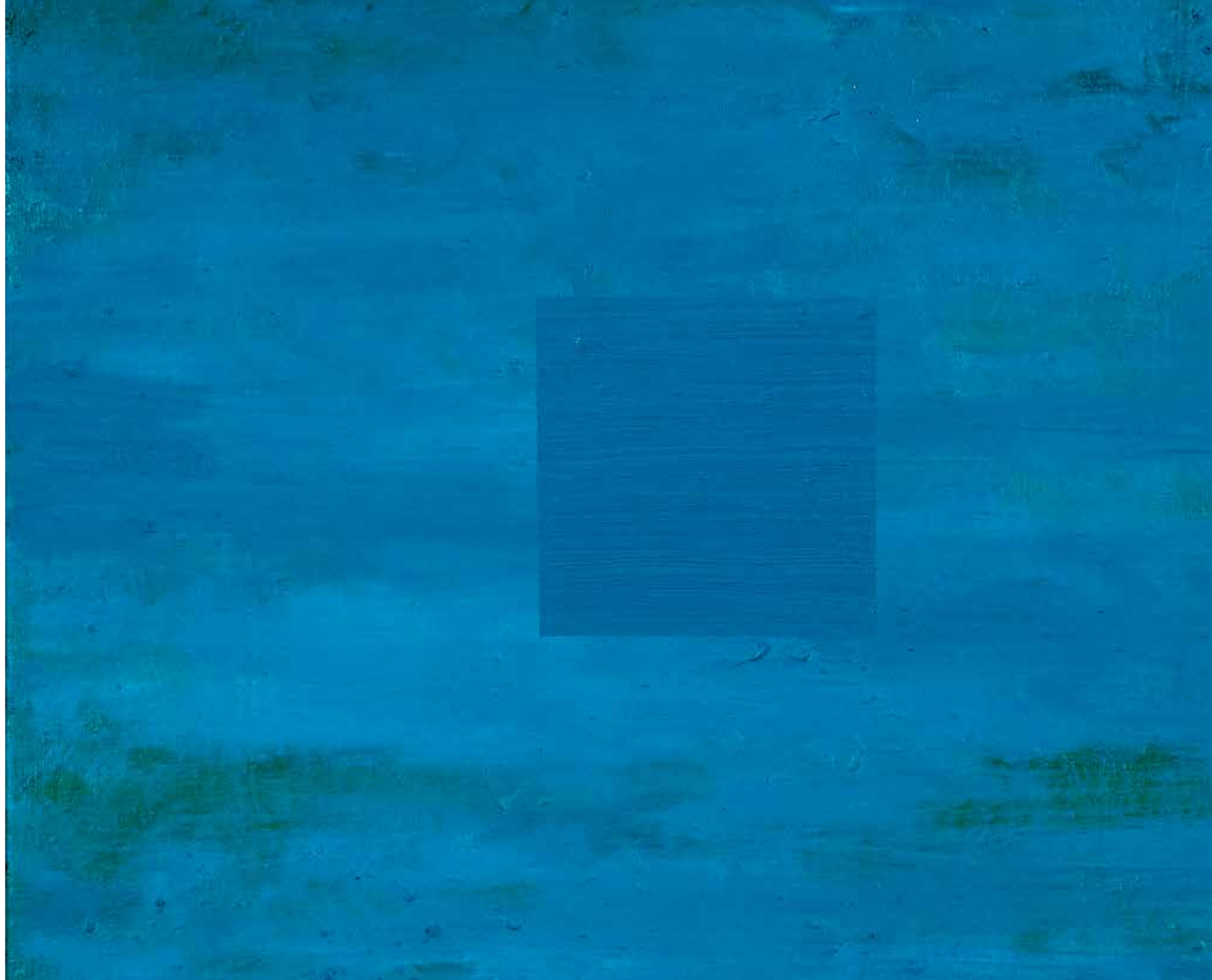


BALATON

2023, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



KAIN KEPALA

2021, 200 x 200 cm,

oil on linen



KAIN KEPALA

2021, 200 x 200 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON

2023, 100 x 100 cm,

oil on linen



BALATON

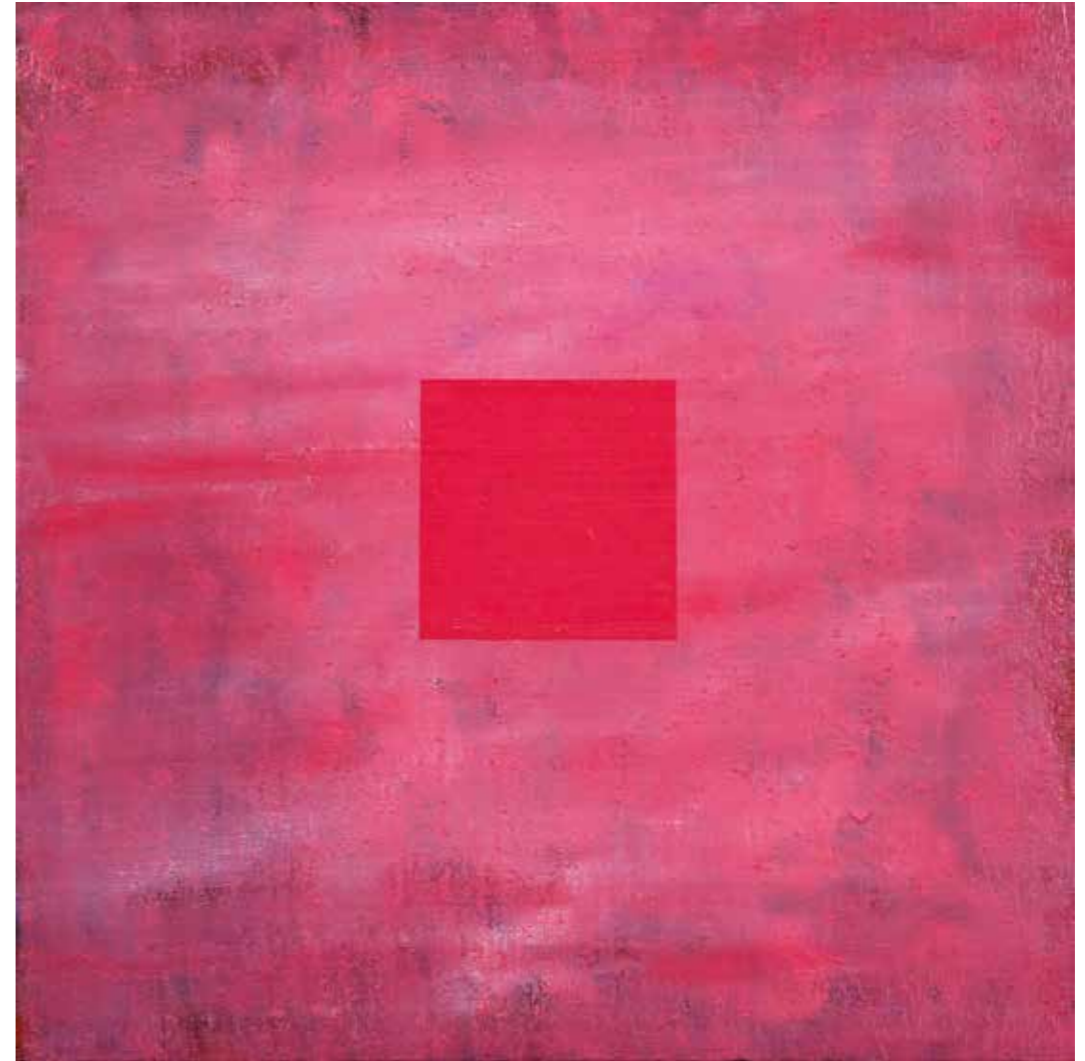
2023, 100 x 100 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON  
2023, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen



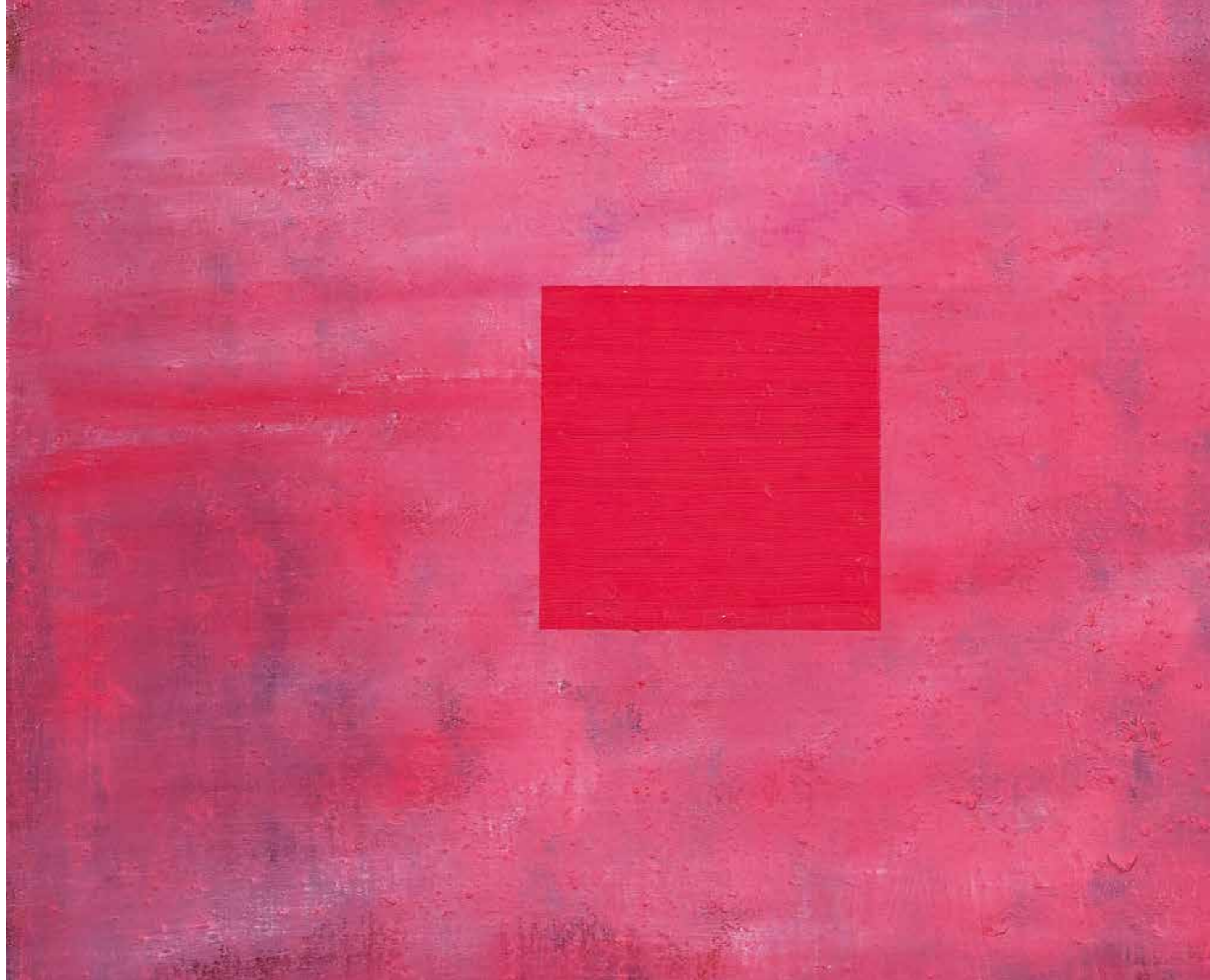


BALATON

2023, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON

2023, 100 x 100 cm,

oil on linen



BALATON

2023, 100 x 100 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON  
2023, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen



BALATON

2023, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON  
2023, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen

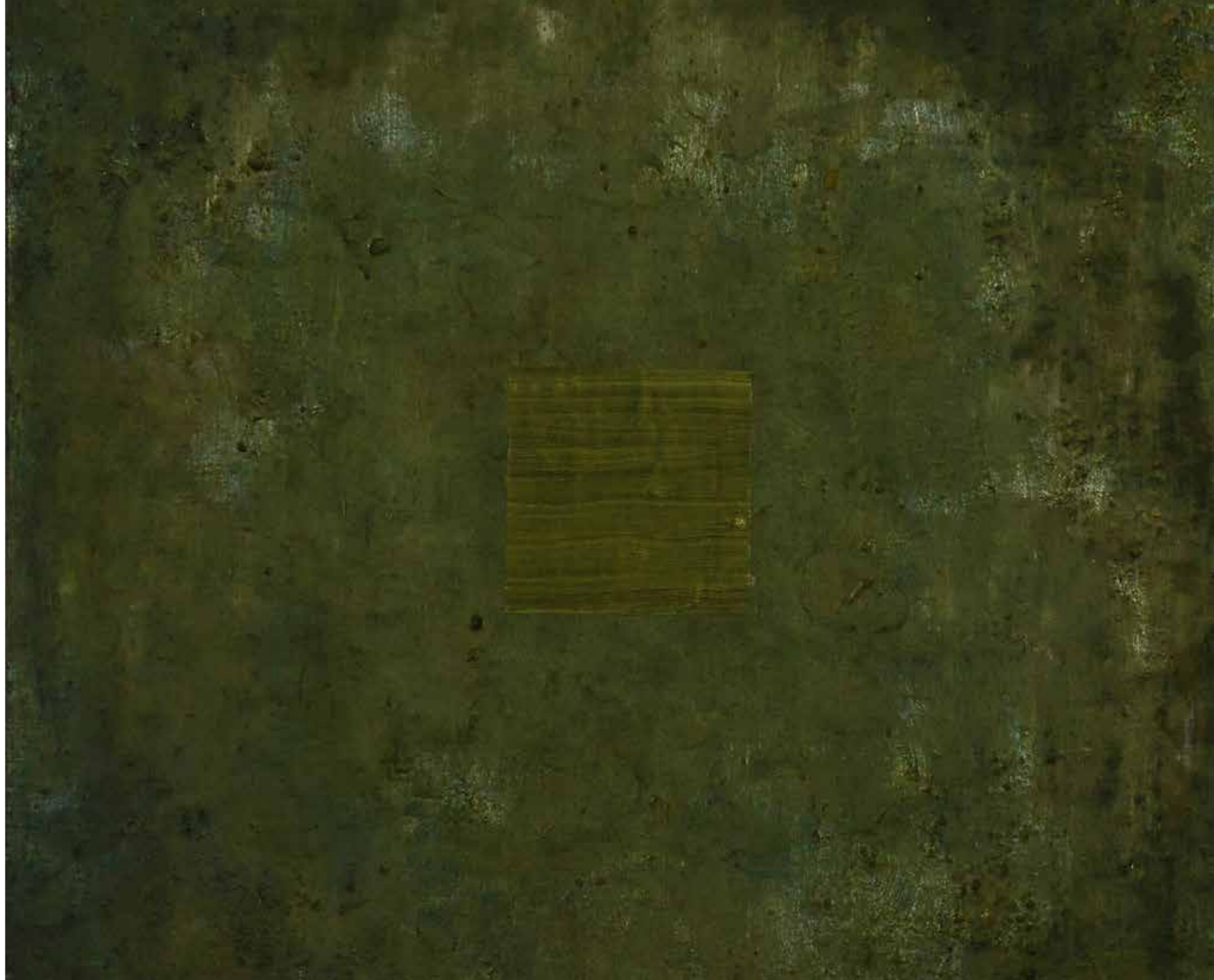


BALATON

2023, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



BALATON  
2023, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen



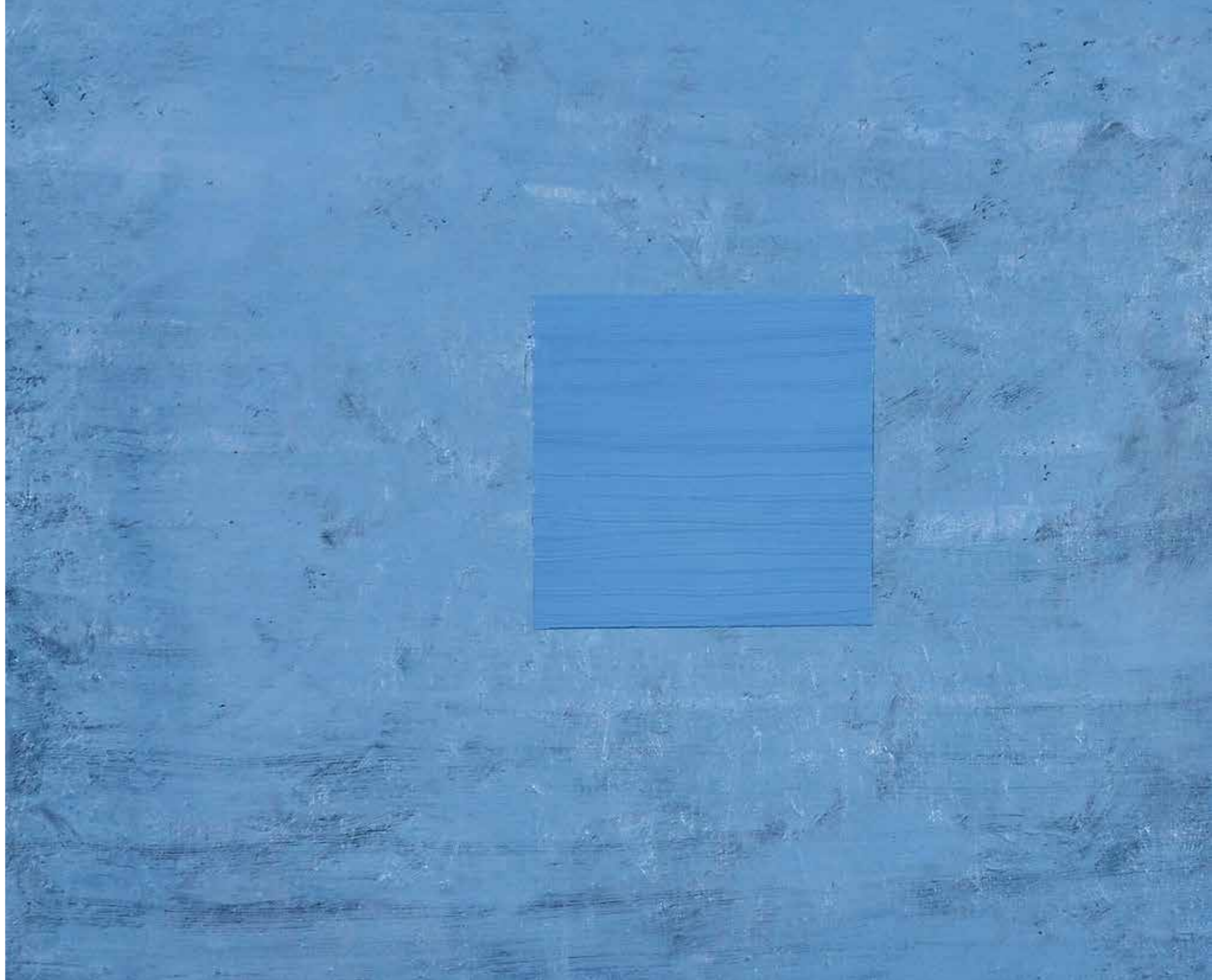


BALATON

2023, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



REFLECTION  
2020, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen

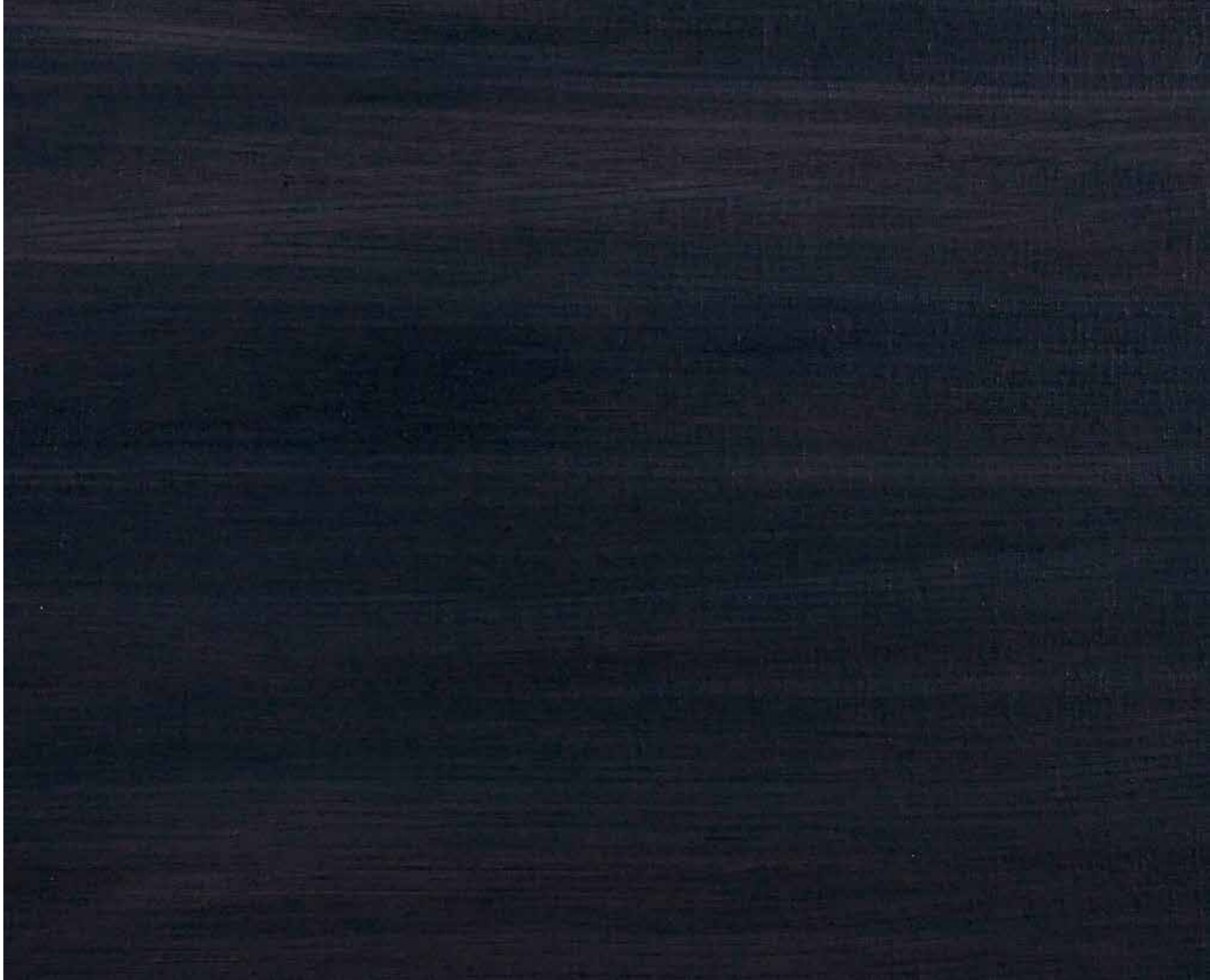


REFLECTION

2020, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail



REFLECTION  
2020, 50 x 50 cm,  
oil on linen



REFLECTION

2020, 50 x 50 cm,

oil on linen

detail

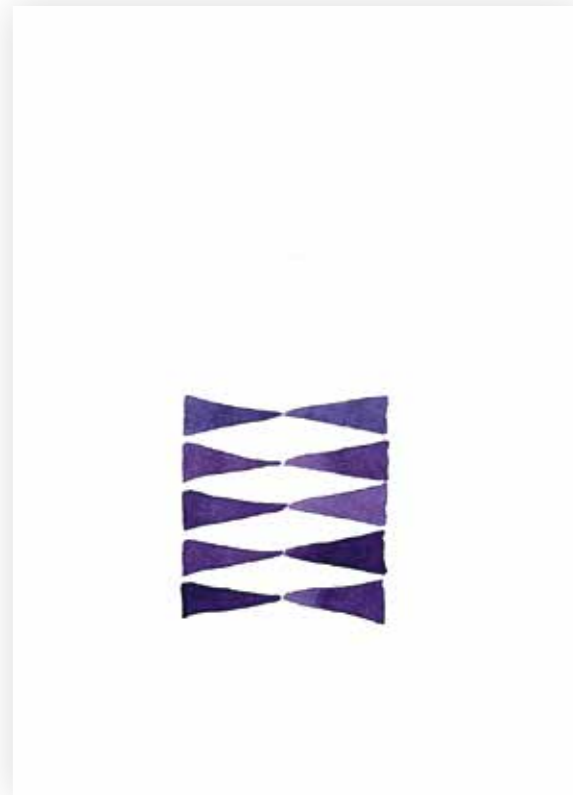
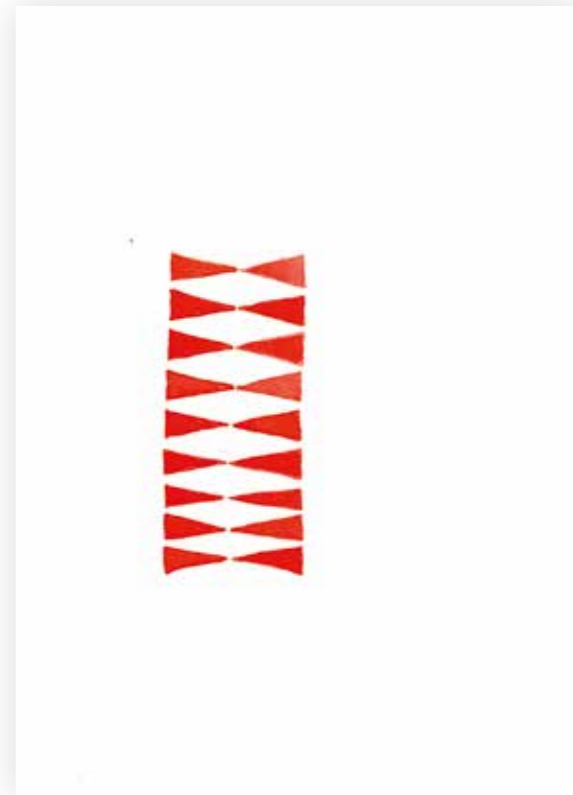
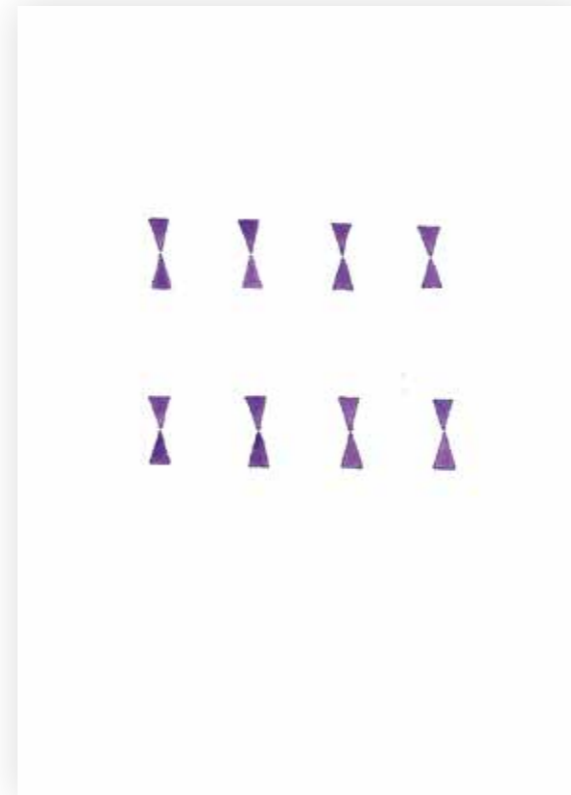


ORACLE 1985-2023

In the 1980s, the *tumpal*, the triangle common in Indonesian batik and fabrics, which has both symbolic meaning and aesthetic value, appeared in his work. He brought together 365 watercolors of varying formations of *tumpal*, like medieval miniatures, in a work entitled Oracle. In a Western context, these repetitive abstract patterns evoke other associations, but for the artist himself they bridge the space between East and West. While in batik the *tumpal* are often filled in with effigies of animals or decorative motifs, he leaves them emphatically empty.



ORACLE  
1985-2023, 33 x 35 cm each  
watercolor on paper  
detail



## CV

### Peter de Thouars

Born 1952 Djakarta Indonesie  
Lives and works in Nijmegen (NL)  
www.dethouars.com  
peterdethouars@hotmail.com

1981-1986 University of Fine Arts: Academie voor Beeldende Kunsten Arnhem (NL)

## EXHIBITION

- 2023 Mirrors of Space, Abbey of Tihany  
Veszprem-Balaton, European Capital of Culture 2023, exhibition and artist talks
- 2022 Lege Velden, toespraak op de Indië Herdenking 15 augustus Nijmegen, speaker
- 2022 Mirrors of Space Preview , Museum Muveszetek Haza Veszprem HU
- 2020 INDIGO Galerie De Nartis, Nijmegen [Solo]
- 2019 Modang, Romer Floris museum, Gyor Hongarije [G]
- 2019 What about us, Persingen [G]
- 2018 Blue, Rozet Arnhem [S]
- 2017 White Suit projects, de Garage, Nijmegen [S]
- 2017 VM 23 Arnhem [G]
- 2015 Feszek Gallery Budapest [G]
- 2015 Neon Gallery Budapest [G]
- 2014 Trans Arnhem GBK [G]
- 2006 Vergeten Ijzer, Katharinahof Kleve [G]
- 2003 Inner Asia, Gallery Academia, Moscow
- 2002 Moerser Kunstpreis finalisten schouw, Städtische Galerie Peschkenhaus Moers [G]
- 2002 Inner Asia, Uzbekistan Academy of Arts, Usbekistan, Tashkent
- 2001 Inner Asia, The Aitiyev National Kirghiz Museum of Fine Arts Kirghizia, Bishkek Gallery Tribune, Kazakhstan, Almaty, Gallery Valensia, Saint-Petersburgh, The Novosibirsk Art Gallery, Novosibirsk
- 2000 Centrum Beeldende Kunsten Nijmegen, lounch video "Hotel" [G]
- 1999 de Loods, Nijmegen [G]

- 1998 Artol, Bedburg – Hau, Germany [G]
- 1998 Stedelijk Museum Het Kasteel, Wijchen [S]
- 1997 St. Stevenskerk, Nijmegen [G]
- 1997 Liber Americum, Centrum Beeldende Kunsten Nijmegen [G]
- 1996 Galerie De Plak, Bemmel [S]
- 1995 Brand New, Kunstcentrum Hollandsche Spoorweg, Nijmegen [G]
- 1995 Galerie Schuwirth en Van Noorden, Maastricht [S]
- 1994 Villa Sonsbeek, Arnhem [G]
- 1994 Galerie de Plak, Bemmel [S]
- 1992 Imaginaire reizen, De Verschijning, Tilburg [S]
- 1992 De Gele Rijder, Arnhem [S]
- 1993 Galerie Ellen Hansen, Wamel [S]
- 1992 Museum Commanderie van st. Jan, Nijmegen [G]
- 1991 Schouwburggalerie Rotterdam [S]
- 1991 Imaginaire reizen, de Verschijning, Tilburg [S]
- 1990 Museum Commanderie van st. Jan, Nijmegen [G]
- 1990 Galerie Schuwirth en Van Noorden, Maastricht [S ]
- 1990 Kunstcentrum Hollandsche Spoorweg, Nijmegen [S]
- 1989 Nogradi Sandor Museum, Salgotarjan, Hungary [G]
- 1989 Anima G, Nijmegen [G]
- 1988 Galerie de Boog, IJsselstijn [S]
- 1988 8 Installaties, Parapliefabriek Nijmegen [G]
- 1986 Magyar Kepzomuveszeti Foiskola, Budapest, Hungary [G]
- 1986 Fészek Galeria, Budapest, Hungary [G]

## PROJECTS AND ARTIST TALKS

- 2019 Spiritual fields in batik, Galerie Smend Keulen
- 2019 Empty spaces, Romer Floris museum, Gyor Hongarije
- 2019 The Tumpal as an cosmic gate, Persingen Nijmegen
- 2018 Natural dye, Museum Tekstil Jakarta
- 2017 het hazenkampThuis ouderinitiatief veilig wonen voor jong volwassenen
- 2018 Magic Mix ontwikkelproject Belastingkantoor Nijmegen wonen en identiteit
- 2015 Pancasila politiek en samenleving, Rozet Arnhem
- 2014 deThouarsArtProductions
- 2010 toART|Arnhem
- 2001 'Landschatten', Nijmegen, met Willem den Ouden, Hans van Haalen, Rene Brouns, Theo Elfrink
- 1995-1996 Brandnew I, II, III artist talk Hollandsche Spoorweg Nijmegen



- 1991 “N”, floor installation, schouwburg Rotterdam
- 1990 “DrieAeenOO II” wall installation, Arnhem
- 1990 Reis door midden Siberië, van Tomsk naar Oest Hanzas
- 1989 “K-T-N-8-9”, installation de Uitleg, Nijmegen
- 1989 “Een Volumen II”, installation AVE festival, Arnhem
- 1989 “Intersymposium”, Matra Almas, Hungary
- 1988 “DrieAeenOO”. light – soundinstallation, Parapluie fabriek Nijmegen
- 1988 “One or two days”, installation, Nijmegen
- 1988 Start foundation E102, Nijmegen

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## PUBLICATIONS

- 2021 (ON)GEDEELDE ERVARINGEN, Indisch Cahier Nijmegen, ISBN 978 90 9034874 2
- 2019 Tanah Airku, uitgave in eigen beheer
- 2015 Európai 2.0 – European 2.0, catalogus met inleidingen van Daan van Speybroeck en Viola Farkas
- 2002 Moerser Kunstpreis, catalogus
- 2001 Inner Asia, catalogus
- 2000 “hotel”, catalogus, uitgave Centrum Beeldende Kunst Nijmegen
- 1998 “Zoektocht naar de imaginaire grenzen...”, drs. Chris Tielemans, filosoof
- 1996 “Te Bommel alwaar de zon ‘s ochtends vanzelf opkomt”, Koos Tuijtjer, De Gelderlander
- 1996 “Ikonen van abstracte verstillig”, drs. Jan Bartholomé
- 1994 “Onderweg naar absolute stilte”, Koos Tuijtjer, De Gelderlander
- 1993 “Een aquarel voor elke dag in mei”, Koos Tuijtjer, De Gelderlander
- 1992 “Vragen zonder antwoorden”, Désirée Meulenbroek, Het Nieuwsblad
- 1992 “De samenhang der dingen, drs. Daan van Speybroek, openingswoord De Gele Rijder
- 1991 “Imaginaire Reizen, Geestelijk Elders”, Nell Westerlaken, De Volkskrant
- 1991 Kunstaankopen Gemeente Nijmegen 1990, catalogus
- 1991 “Imaginaire reizen”, catalogus, uitgave De Verschijning Tilburg
- 1990 Beeldende Kunst Gelderland 1988-1990, catalogus, uitgave De Provincie Gelderland
- 1990 “Op het Oog”, Jan van Krieken, Arnhemse Courant
- 1990 “Uitdaging”, Koos Tuijtjer, De Gelderlander
- 1989 Intersymposion, catalogus
- 1989 “K-T-N-8-9”, installation de Uitleg, Nijmegen catalogus
- 1988 “Hemels Voedsel”, drs. Daan van Speybroek, openingswoord
- 1988 8 Instalalaties, catalogus, voorwoord Paul Panhuysen
- 1985 De Europeesche, catalogus met voorwoord van Henk Peeters en Hegi Lorand
- 1980-1985 Armoedzaaiers & Huursoldaten, i.s.m. Walter van der Cruijsen, Tom van der Noordt, Ad van Hoof en Jan Bartholomé.  
Tijdschriften, Hoorspelen, muziek en performances

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