



A DARK FOREST



MIGUEL PALENCIA OLAVARRIETA





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Works by Miguel Palencia Olavarrieta
27.06.2020-19.07.2020



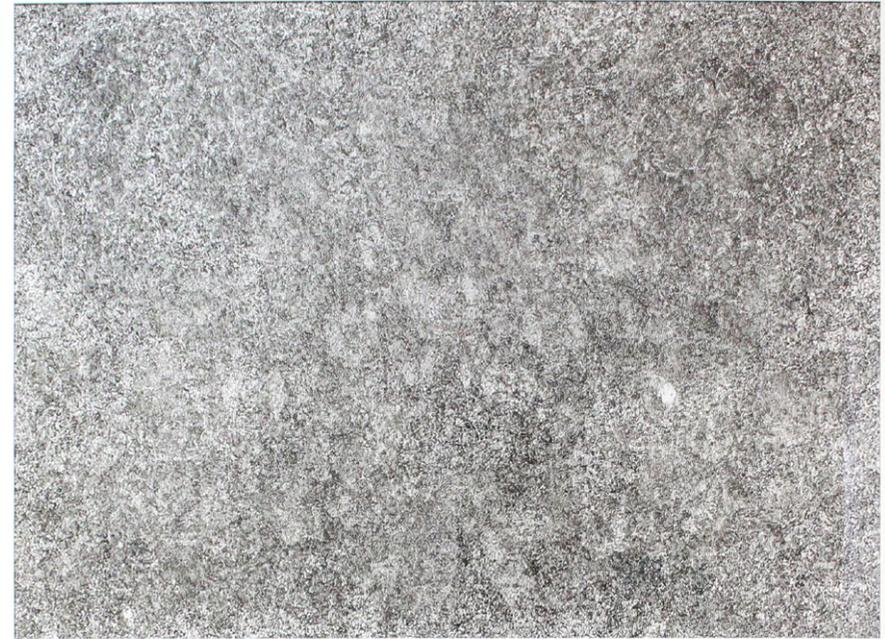
NAVEL ART
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“You don’t look at the picture so much as launch yourself into its trackless empyrean. Beyond its obvious design flair, the work looks easy because it is. Malevich is monumental not for what he put into pictorial space but for what he took out: bodily experience, the fundamental theme of Western art since the Renaissance”

Peter Schjeldahl, on Malevich’s Black Square



Field, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper - diptych (130x94.5cm)





Great Martyr I, 2019, pilot ink on tracing paper (59x43.5cm)

Great Martyr II, 2019, pilot ink on tracing paper (59x43.5cm)





Distant Star, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (67x51.5cm)

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

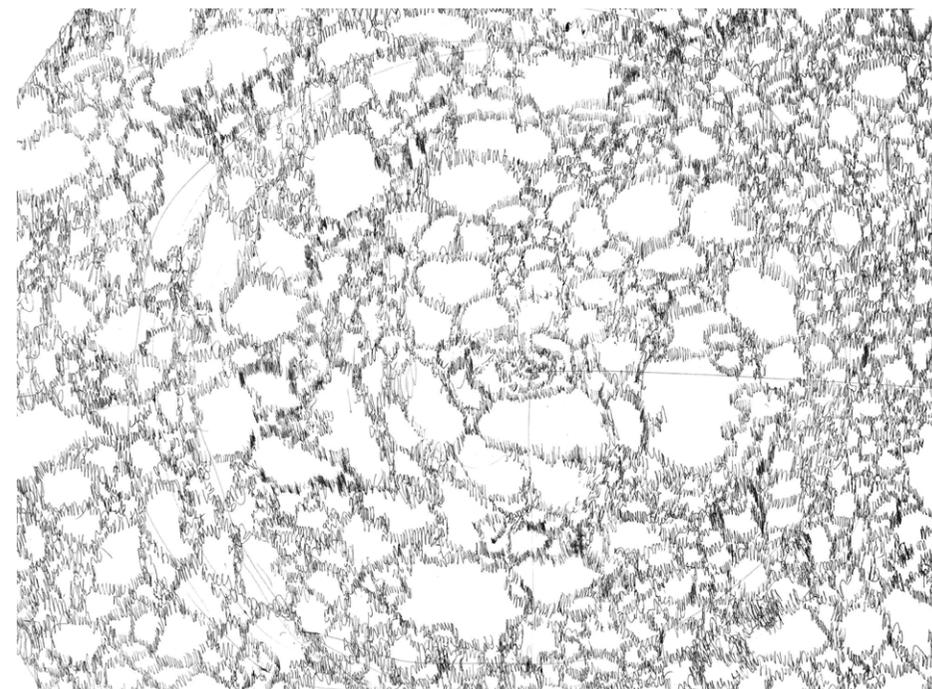
Ainhoa Ezquiaga Bravo

*"There are clear words for everything,
even for us, obscure beings"*
Carlos Montemayor

The journey allegory is possibly one of the most hackneyed in the history of literature: the hero's forge, the search for meaning, moving through stages in life, or the passage to the afterlife. Having said so, I hope I can be allowed to use it here.

It's common to refer to a transition (from figuration to abstraction) when talking about the artistic revolution of the Russian Avant-garde from the end of the 19th century. The transit that *A Dark Forest* puts forward gathers this duality (with a reference to Malevich, nearly a statement of intentions), but without the artist giving himself in completely. Simultaneous paths at different levels –the reading of the works at the exhibition, the works themselves, the composition of the images of reference and their content– lead us equally to abstraction, as to complexity, unintelligibility, darkness or destruction.

As in the *Divina Commedia*, this dark forest is a bleak place, dreadful and uncertain. We wander along a misleading path, an apparent break with the image that makes it even more visible. Miguel Palencia Olavarrieta (Madrid, 1987) takes us, through the reconstruction of visual references increasing gradually in complexity, on a walk that reflects on the role and decline of representation and iconography in art. A journey exists only in the relationship between its poles: it is the transit between states, a liminal period in which no change means no departure; the thing about this journey is that, without stopping, it takes pleasure in the tension between acceptance and rejection of the figure, a tension that is left unresolved, and which gives rise to an anxiety that increases the interest of the pieces in this series.



The Cantos, 2015-2018, ink (diverse) on tracing paper (fragment)

In his previous works, Palencia Olavarrieta also worked in series, giving shape gradually to the affinities and obsessions that would later guide his production, both thematically (relations between East and West, cultural heritage, space, mysticism) and formally (automatism, deformation of features, the reduction of the stroke, infinite repetition). He does it from a poetics that mixes travelling notes, portraits of public characters, or reconstructions from photographs and literary works. The works he presents now –up to a certain point indebted to a previous series, The Cantos, both in the narrative concept and in the first essays of the technique, developed further in two other series, Tyler and Great Martyr- is the natural follow up to those interests with a more cohesive and mature look which, leaving room for exploration, contributes clarity.

It is interesting to look at the creative process a bit more carefully. Each of the works takes a photograph as a starting point. The photograph is copied onto tracing paper with small and slightly vertical strokes in Indian ink: an automatic task, monotonous and potentially infinite, quite close to certain experiences in meditation. The process of compulsive addition that gives birth to the copy blurs, at a certain point, the referential image, which is discovered in the same act of drawing –“as I see it, I construct it and understand it”- in an unpredictable way. You could say that the copyist’s method ends up by engulfing the copy until it becomes a sort of phantasmagorical presence in which occasionally you can distinguish a wing or a skull. The works are sequenced in three groups with a classical narrative structure (introduction, climax and ending), initiating a dialogue with the drawing process until it finally gets a respite on the only stylistically discordant piece: a small portrait in fluent strokes, nearly an illustration.

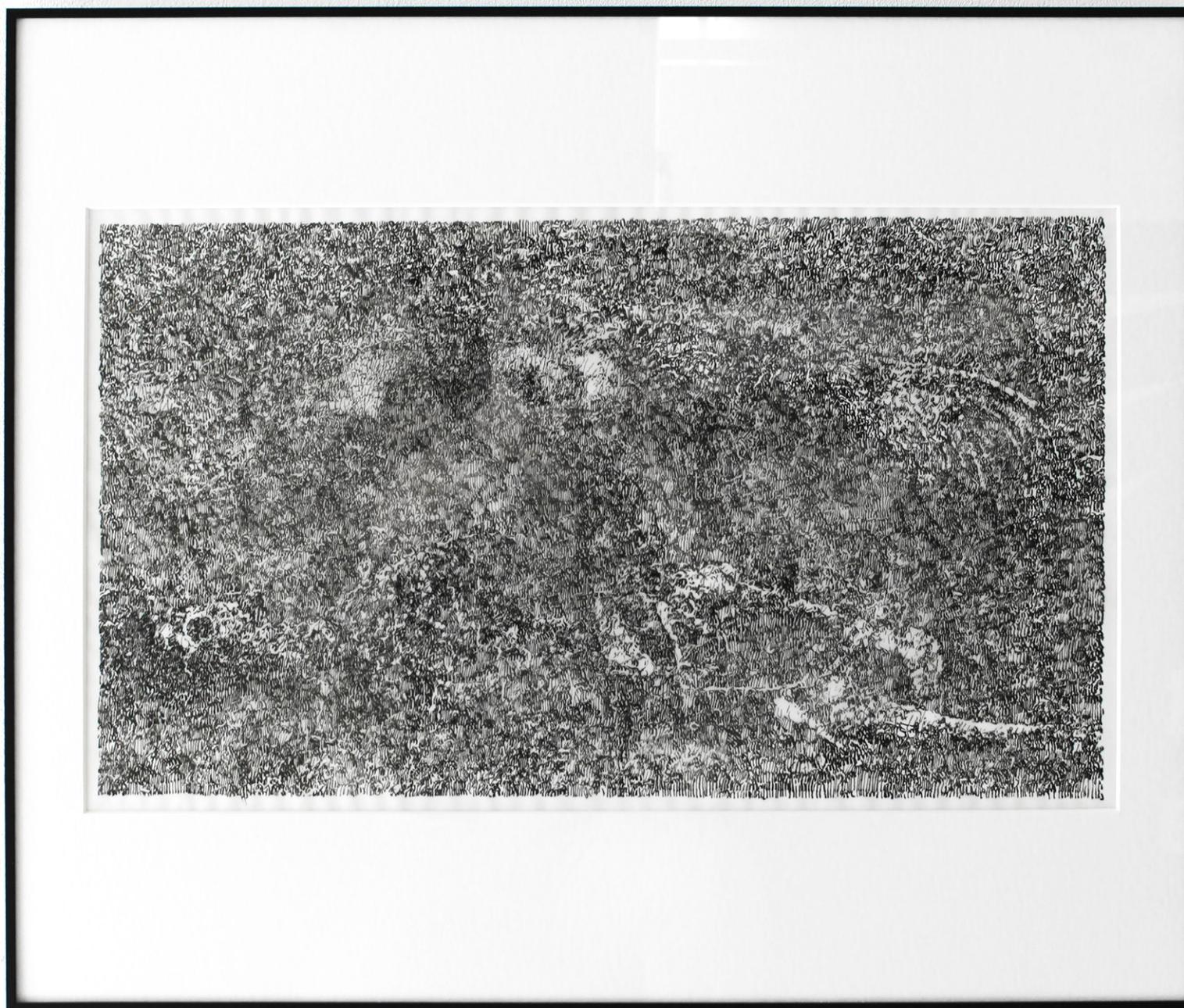


Distant Star, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (detail)

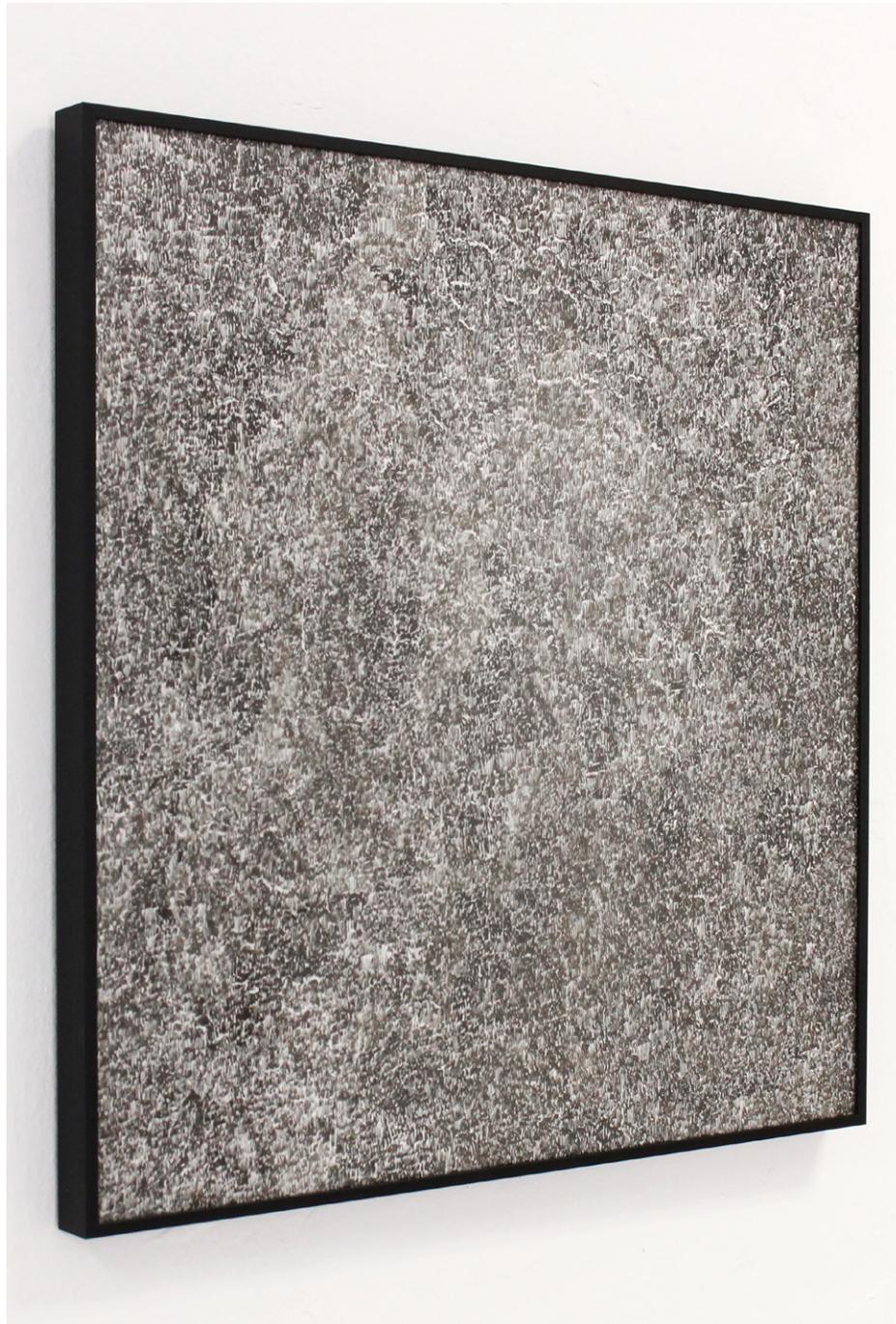
The series anchor is in the introductory quartet: Zero Degree of Painting, Interior and Great Martyr I and II (these two the only works in which Indian ink is replaced by Pilot ink). Taking some icons from various origins (Malevich's Black Square, two Orthodox martyrs, or the view of the interior of a church in Mount Athos' Great Lavra monastery) as a starting point, the artist does a new reading of the works, focusing on the grain and the composition of the photographs; the path runs on in parallel lines towards referents increasingly richer in motifs and less figurative pieces. The second and third groups (the climax and the ending) abound in references to the East, moving on to the Buddhist tradition, although not (or not only) to its mystical aspects: they are records of the history of Tibet and its fall into the hands of the Chinese regime. The corpse of an old emperor victim of retaliation by the Cultural Revolution, a "rainbow body" (the manifestation of an incorporated existence between life and death), some human remains being devoured by vultures in which is known as a "sky burial", two "Refuge fields" (mental visualizations of all Buddhist gurus evoked in meditation), and the eleventh Panchen Lama, abducted by the Chinese Government. These images tell the story of a political and cultural defeat, accompanied by a growing disfiguration and an increase of the scale that prevents us from taking in the totality of what we are looking at. As in the cave of Refuge, the images embrace us until demanding total surrender.



Missing Child, 2019, Indian ink on tracing paper (30x21.5cm)



Sky burial, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (60x51.5cm)



Zero Degree of Painting, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (40x38.5cm)



Refuge, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (82.5x67cm)



Dead Emperor, 2020, Indian ink on tracing paper (95x67.5cm)



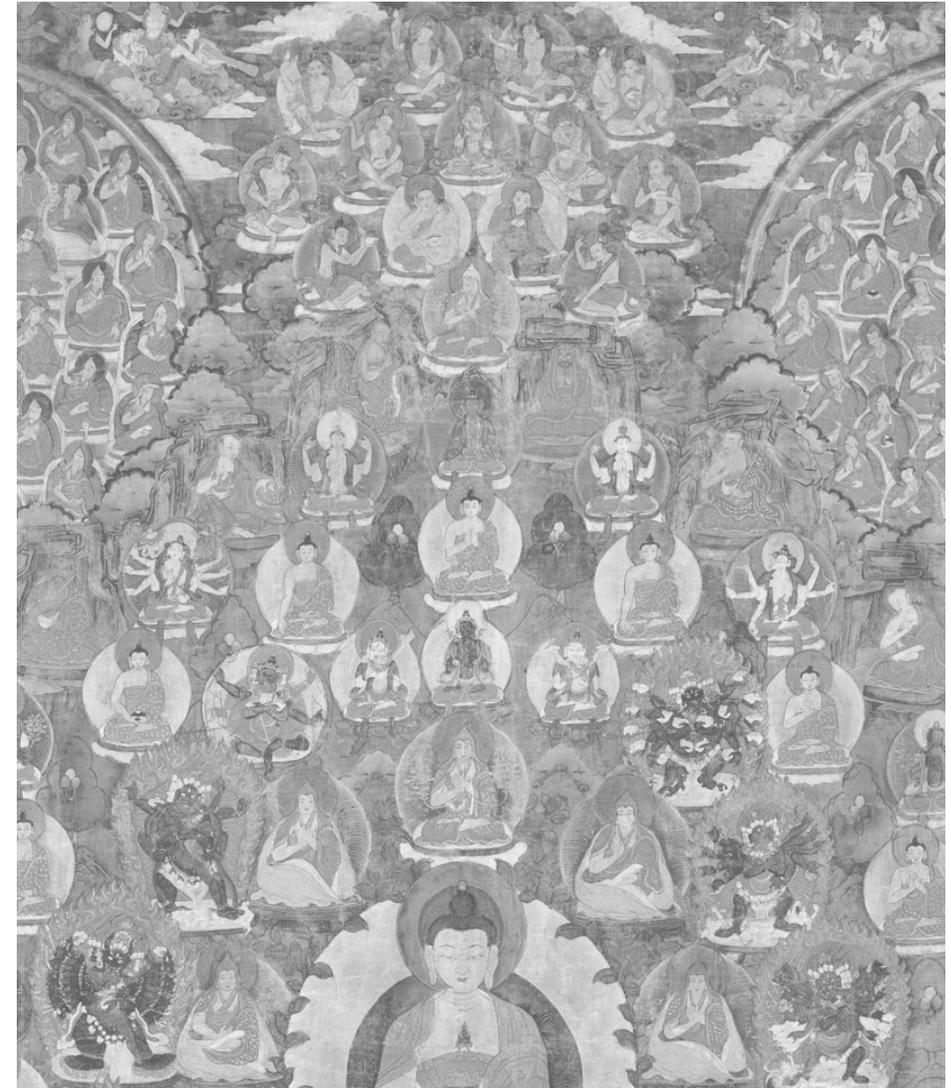
Interior, 2019, Indian ink on tracing paper (42.5x30cm)

A DARK FOREST

Miguel Palencia Olavarrieta

The drawings of A Dark Forest put forward a route through a series of images which are worked on by a process which reconstructs them as they are disintegrated, diffusing them into gloomy vibrant areas formed by an infinite number of strokes. They are the result of a working method half way between close attention to each image and a sort of automatism.

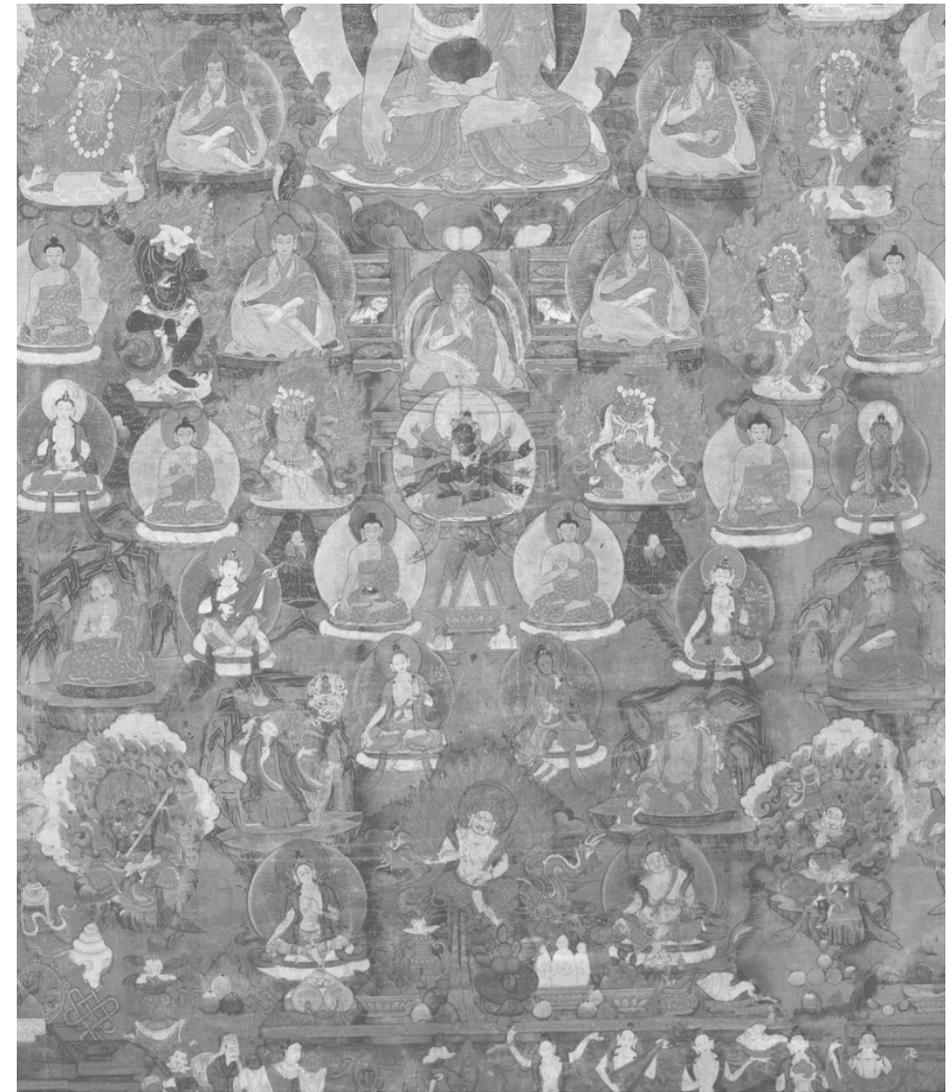
This twilight route is explained in three stages, linking symbols and references to the history of art and other fields, fixing them as meditation objects and directing them eventually in the same direction, that of dissolution. The first stage -Great Martyr I and II, Zero Degree of Painting, Interior- introduces several fundamental aspects of the whole, like the tension between abstraction and figuration. Two images inspire how the work proceeds: the Byzantine model disfigured by the passage of time and Malevich's Black Square. It is their status as icons but, above all, the relationship between their role as repeatable models and the individuality of their material grain. Interior introduces a certain spaciality, which is further developed in Field and Refuge, and which links the spacial exploration of the whole set of works with an experience: the contemplation of an elaborate system of representation in a space in total darkness, with which it fuses. These first drawings introduce themes of the history of art, of mural painting of spiritual traditions such as the Byzantine or the Tibetan; painting as a representation of a mental construct, and a fragile type of painting related both to the ideas and visions to which it offers support and to their physical reality and the passage of time. Painting understood in this way is what lies behind the works of A Dark Forest.



Refuge Field, 1700-1799, mineral pigment on cotton, Mongolia, (fragment of upper half) Rubin Museum of Art, New York

The middle stage consists of three memento mori. The source of the references and the stories they tell is in China-Tibet. The method of extremely careful work with free strokes emanating from the grain of the photographs that inspire these images achieves results which seem to exhibit a conflict in which light wins the day –for a brief period- over darkness. Distant Star is based on a 2011 photograph of the Lama Achuk Rinpoche which revealed his “rainbow body” –a subtle representation of a physical presence in an intermediate state between life and death. Dead Emperor builds on a 1966 photograph of the remains of emperor Wanli, subject to a revolutionary trial by the Red Guards. Sky Burial is based on a contemporary image of this traditional Tibetan burial ritual in which corpses are dismembered and fed to vultures.

The route ends with Refuge and Field, the largest works. These two drawings show symbolical constructions typical of Tibetan Buddhism, and known as “Refuge fields”. In Refuge the images are displayed on the inner walls of a cave, whereas in Field they are painted directly on a tapestry. In both cases the spatiality of the visual concept is clear. The working method changes somehow when working on these multidimensional models, and resembles and is inspired by advanced tantric exercises of visualization in which the mind works on these constructions with the aim of transcending the duality “nature of the mind/perception of the object” –an aim also pursued by automatism. Here the images end up by dissolving into darkness as a return to the zero point of painting – gradually filling in the void the images generate- as if from the beginning the subtle difference between a square and a figurative model represented another duality, interior/exterior, which eventually merge, as in both cases it is night.



Refuge Field, 1700-1799, mineral pigment on cotton, Mongolia, (fragment of lower half) Rubin Museum of Art, New York



As a contrast and respite, and connecting it to the obsession with the destruction of Tibet, Missing Boy attempts to symbolize once more this tragic fate with the only photograph taken in life of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the eleventh Panchen Lama, abducted by the Chinese Government in 1995 and missing since then.



Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, XI Panchen Lama, 1995





Miguel Palencia Olavarrieta (1987, Madrid) has lived and worked in Spain, United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, Cambodia and Germany. As an architect he has worked for experimental studios like SANAA in Tokyo and H&dM in Basel. As an artist his work feeds on and synthesizes the whole of his experiences, journeys, influences and readings.

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Ainhoa Ezquiaga (1986, Madrid) is an architect and an anthropologist. Her professional interests have to do with social analysis, urban planning, communication and cultural management.

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