

Leah Ke Yi Zheng

I-Ching / Machine

Jan 17 – Mar 1, 2025

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Mendes Wood DM New York



Mendes Wood DM is pleased to announce Leah Ke Yi Zheng's second solo exhibition with the gallery, following our representation announcement for the Chinese-born, Chicago-based artist.

The exhibition occupies both the ground floor and lower level of our Tribeca gallery and consists of fifteen new paintings, fourteen in acrylic and one in oil, painted on silk stretched over natural wood stretchers. Each painting, to varying degrees, veers away from the orthogonal to achieve an uncanny and irregular shape. Additionally, Zheng will debut a hand-painted video work to accompany the exhibition.

The ground floor gallery is dedicated to the representation of *I-Ching* hexagrams, each painting corresponding to a different aspect of our universe, such as power, limitation, clarity, or balance. The lower-level gallery

highlights the artist's ongoing exploration of machine gears and mathematical apparatuses, reflecting a meditation on modern life and the representability of time. In a first for the artist, select pieces unite these themes, with *I-Ching* hexagrams overlaid onto images of the machines. On the lower level, an example of this new development is exhibited suspended, light passing through the translucent silk, making both recto and verso visible.

The exhibition explores an ongoing negotiation between Zheng's early upbringing and education with traditional Chinese landscape painting techniques, and the histories of the western avant-garde she studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

An essay written by A.E. Benenson accompanies the exhibition.

To arrange and organize the inchoate profusion of such times of beginning, just as one sorts out silk threads from a knotted tangle and binds them into skeins.

Wilhelm-Baynes on *I-Ching* Hexagram #3: *Difficulty at the Beginning*

The knots of Leah Ke Yi Zheng's silk paintings are the kind that get tighter the harder you pull to loosen them. When you know just a little—your mind slackened—they seem simple enough: here are some with repeating horizontal bars, like a woolly Stella or LeWitt. Line, line, line. Palermo, Kelly, Buren. When you draw nearer, pull a little harder, things become more complicated. It works a little like what they call *close-up* magic: these paintings' uncanny details multiply the closer you come. Apparently solid lines turn out to be streaked with tears of naphtha, cobalt; dissipated by a celadon marine layer or the sienna haze of evening; ochre stains bloom; a fine mist of dots here and there, as if their acrylic had been exhaled not painted. There are too many surface effects to take full stock, and then, at the edges, the outline of wooden braces appears, bones beneath taught skin. So that silk ground isn't ground really but maybe a net that catches what it can or a veil that cloaks confessions. Those surface stripes are in fact closer to transcriptions than geometry: each set is one of the 64 soothsaying texts of the *I-Ching*. A broken line stacked atop five solid ones comes from #43 (*Breakthrough*), a pictogram of a lake below a cracked sky and a spell for pushing past creative block:

One must resolutely make the matter known

At the court of the king.

It must be announced truthfully. Danger.

It is necessary to notify one's own city.

It does not further to resort to arms.

It furthers one to undertake something.

It's hard not to think of Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), a cryptogram that we still puzzle over. There, the artist at wits end is rendered as a winged maiden, chin on fist, surrounded by a heap of obscure, cast-off tools and esoteric symbols. Zheng's paintings belong to the same tradition, so-called *vexierbild*, "puzzle images" that bristle with secrets, images like flat gears asking to be turned by the crank of our mind. For five hundred years, viewers tried to work out the exact meaning of everything Dürer crammed in his print, *to get to the bottom of it*. Eventually art historian J.L. Koerner pointed out that there actually was no bottom, that Dürer had purposely overloaded the image with multiple and contradictory meanings so that subject and viewer were forever united in their vexation.

Similarly, with Zheng there isn't so much a code to crack as a switch to flip. Each *I-Ching* reading, for one, is not a conclusion but a kind of engine, a sphinx-like spring wound up tight. Their lines, which in groups of six correspond to a stanza of prophecy, are each calculated from three coin tosses whose specific combinations charge the reading with a kind of hairpin trigger that can invert its meaning. The whole stack carries not only its enigmatic message but also a precarious, tensile force: an architecture of see-sawing associations that represent the fluxing forces supposedly animating the universe.

For a number of years, Zheng has also returned to representations of the *fusée*, a specialized cog invented in the 17th century to regulate the erratic unwinding of the spring in clockworks. In this exhibition, she has superimposed them onto *I-Ching* readings, sharpening their contrasts into another koan on the artist's process: a mystic whirring regulated into an officious tik-tok. Art must come from some authentic beyond and no one can say when the muses will sing, but, you know, *time is money*. Elsewhere Zheng sketches an early mechanical computer designed by the mathematician Leibniz to speed up bookkeeping. Well, even the ancients grew tired of waiting around for

silkworms to finish spinning their downy cocoons, so artisans boiled the grubs out while they were still slumbering.

Zheng's use of the *I-Ching* is involute like this, set to puzzling its appearance in her paintings from any number of different directions. Their gossamer, silk surface betrays the fact that their wile is in this ability to keep adding on layer after layer, materially and metaphorically. Everything appears to dance on that limpid surface; take one off the wall and the canvas becomes so insubstantial that even light will pass untroubled. Yet as Koerner said of *Melencolia I*, there's no way to reach the bottom.

This is so different from the *I-Ching*'s first, faddish appearance in Western art (at the hands of mostly white, male artists). John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Philip K. Dick...they asked the book to make decisions about their work for them. But the resulting work was like a mess of empty bottles left in the wake of a self-absorbed bender. Zheng's paintings, by contrast, aren't concerned with producing decisions or outcomes. If they have a temporal aspect, it is the everlasting, shimmering *now* palpable in their many-layered flatness. Brush strokes, hues, stretchers, allusions to the canon, prophecies... each of Zheng's paintings is like the pile of esoterica heaped at the bottom of *Melencolia*. In this context, their silk ground is sublimated into a metaphysical support—the scrim of the present, that delicate moment of attention that rushes upon us intuitively and all at once.

Ask Jung instead of Greenberg about this peculiar kind of flatness: the psychologist was fascinated with the immanence proposed by the *I-Ching*, how its methods produced a richly textured snapshot of happenstance that was anything but random and reflected the “peculiar interdependence” of apparently unrelated events. Western thought (and let's add, western art), which was preoccupied with deterministic chains of cause and effect, the *I-Ching* produced “a picture of the moment that encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail.” Jung called it the book's metaphysics of

synchronicity, an insistence on the irreducible density of experience. In a word, this is the form and content of Zheng's *vexierbild*. And the result is an entirely different way to read the flatness of the painted image: as the coordinates for the ultimate compression of all our making and seeing down to a single dimensionless plane, like the unfathomable crunch at the center of a black hole. Here is modernism's material honesty without its bloodless hauteur. A vexing flatness, instead, like that cosmic version that they say is capable of holding not just this or that but absolutely everything.

– A.E. Benenson, January 2025



Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no. 4, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

41.7 x 41.9 cm

16 3/8 x 16 1/2 in

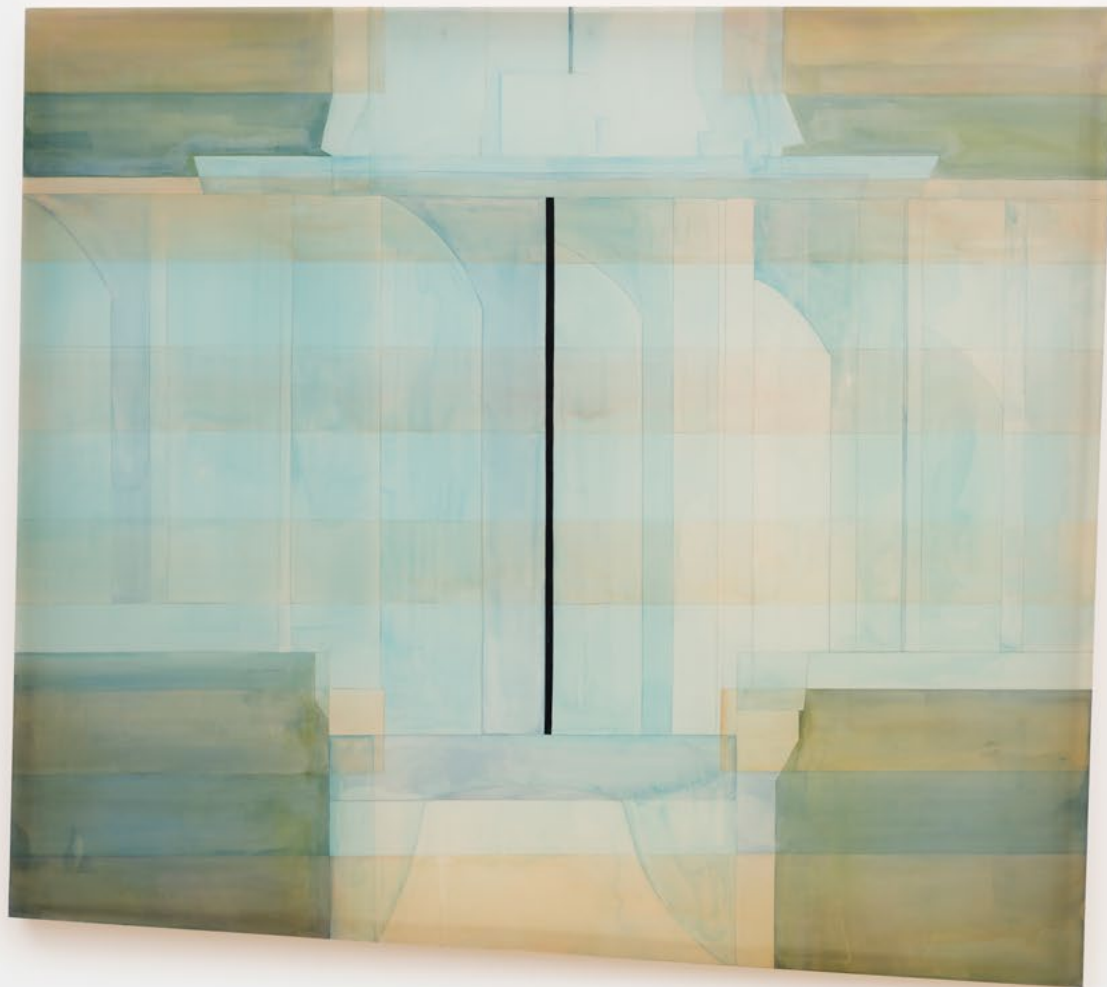
MW.LKY.033





Leah Ke Yi Zheng, *Untitled (no.49/revolution)*, 2024, acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher, 190.5 x 208.3 cm | 75 x 82 in, MW.LKY.032







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

*no.63 <.> no.37 <.> no.13 <.> no.49 <.>
no.43 <.> no.1 <.> no.9 <.> no.5 <.>
no.34, 2024*

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

94 x 94 cm

37 x 37 in

MW.LKY.023







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no.55 <-> no.49 <-> no.13 <-> no.30, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

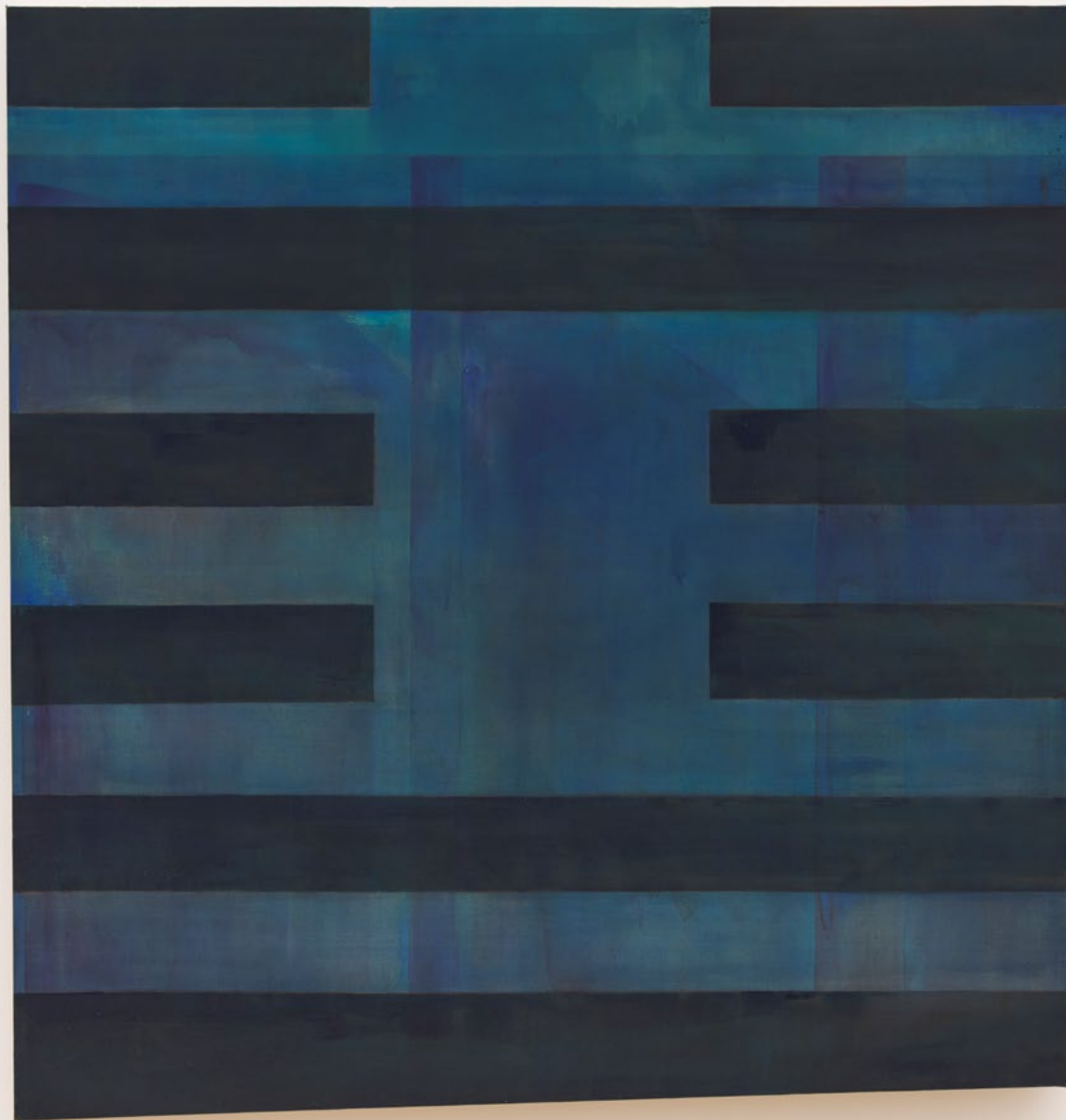
72.4 x 72.4 cm

28 1/2 x 28 1/2 in

MW.LKY.025







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no.60, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

94 x 94 cm

37 x 37 in

MW.LKY.024





Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no.64 <-> no.6 <-> no.50 <->

no.44 <-> no.14 <-> no.1, 2024

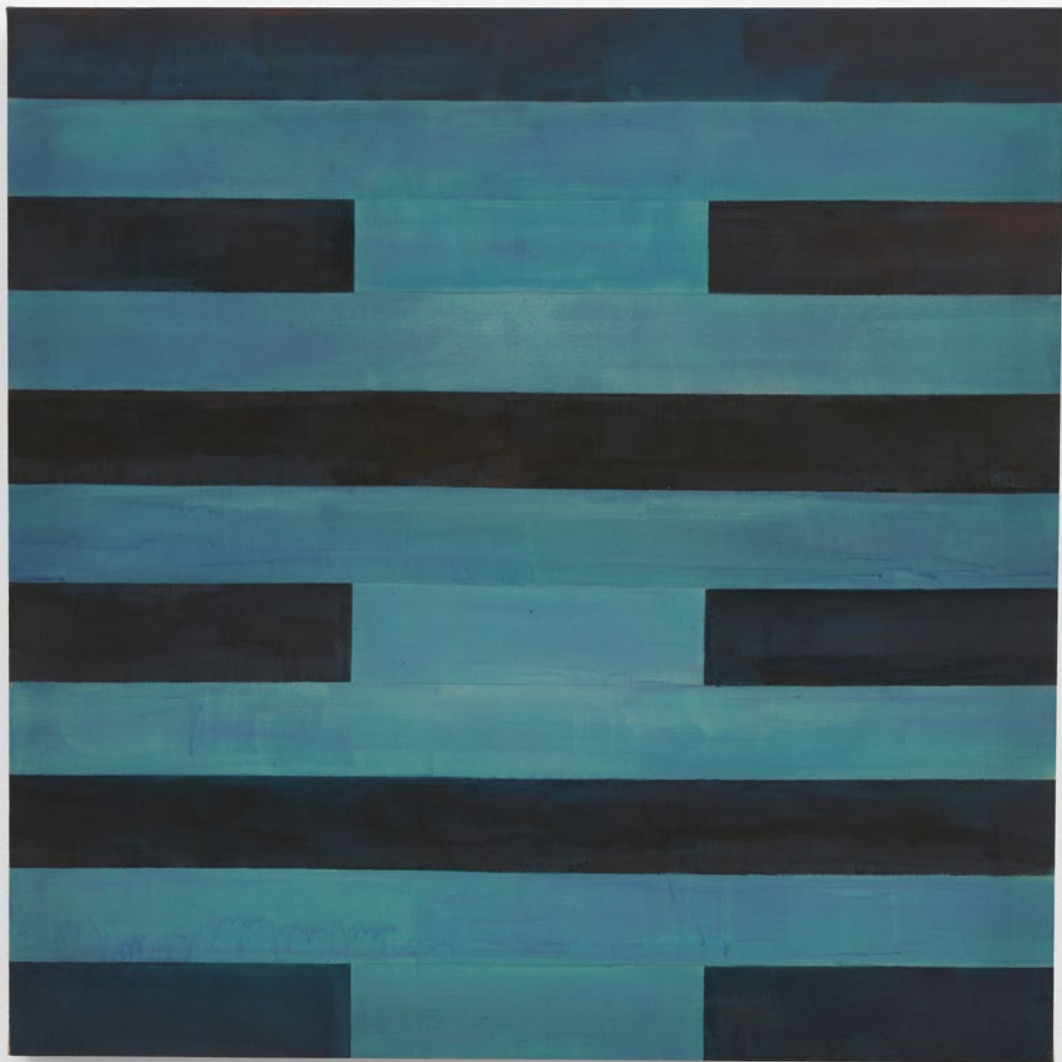
acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

84.5 x 84.5 cm

33 1/4 x 33 1/4 in

MW.LKY.036





Leah Ke Yi Zheng

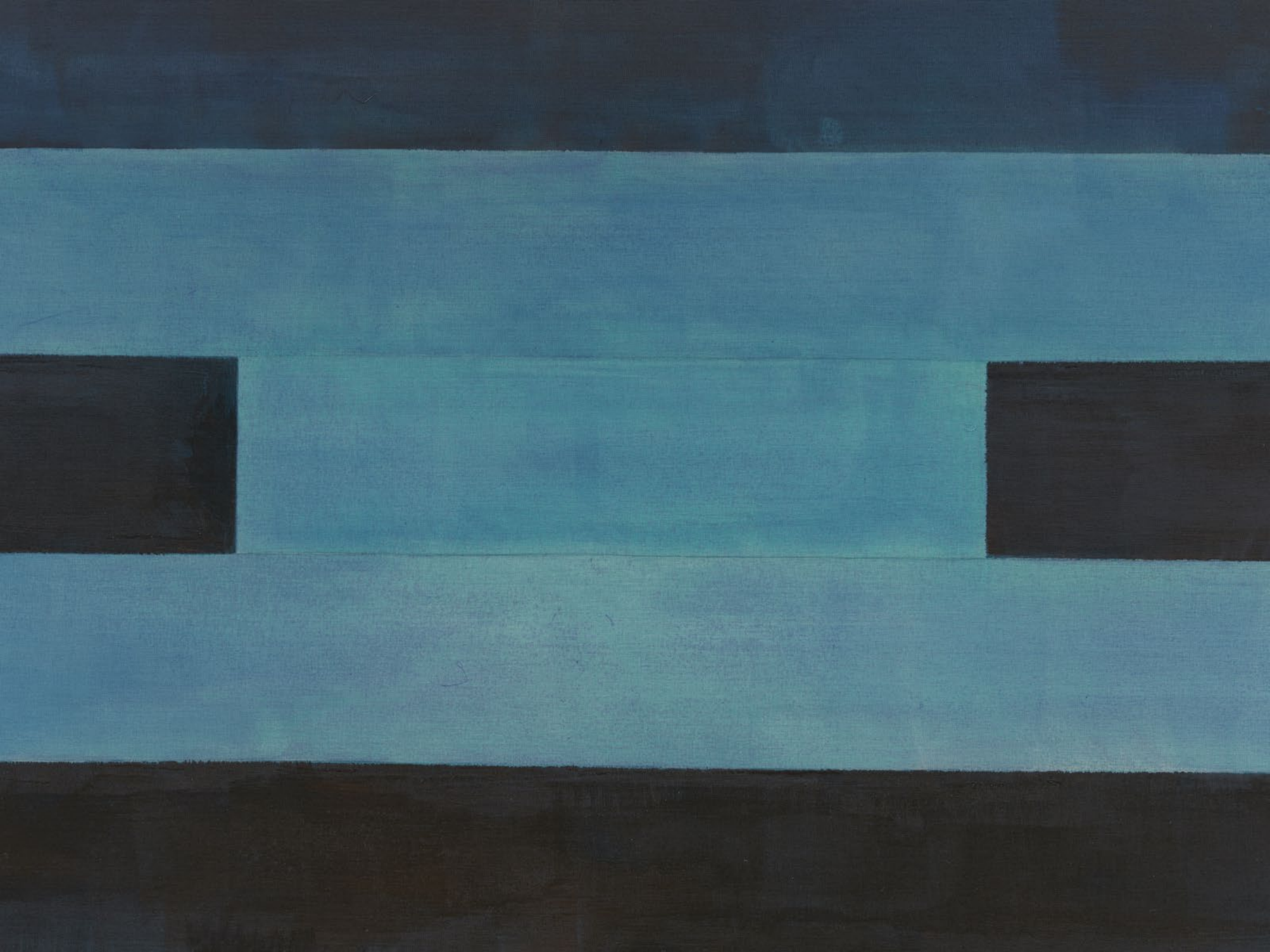
no. 64, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

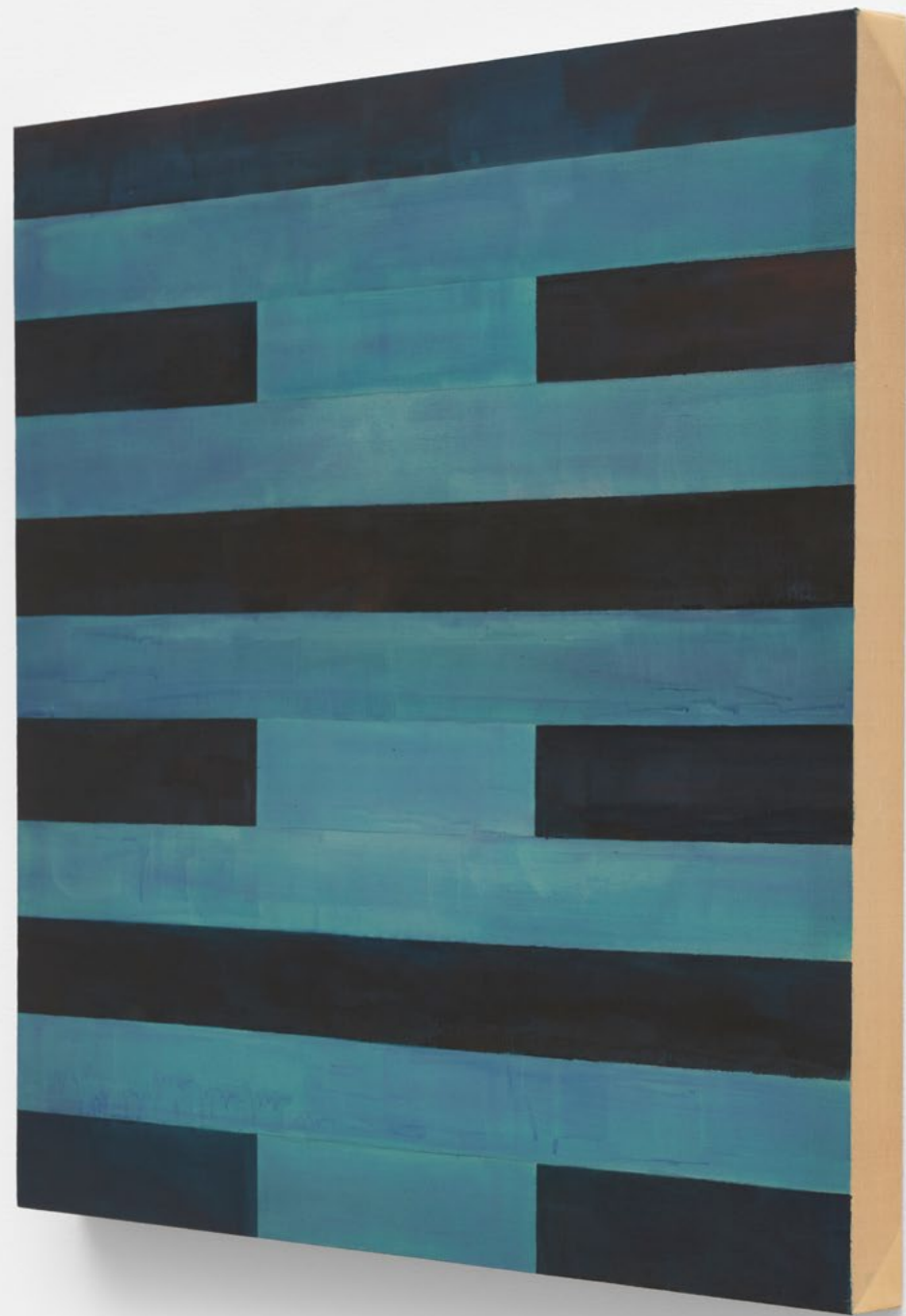
81.3 x 81.3 cm

32 x 32 in

MW.LKY.028









Leah Ke Yi Zheng

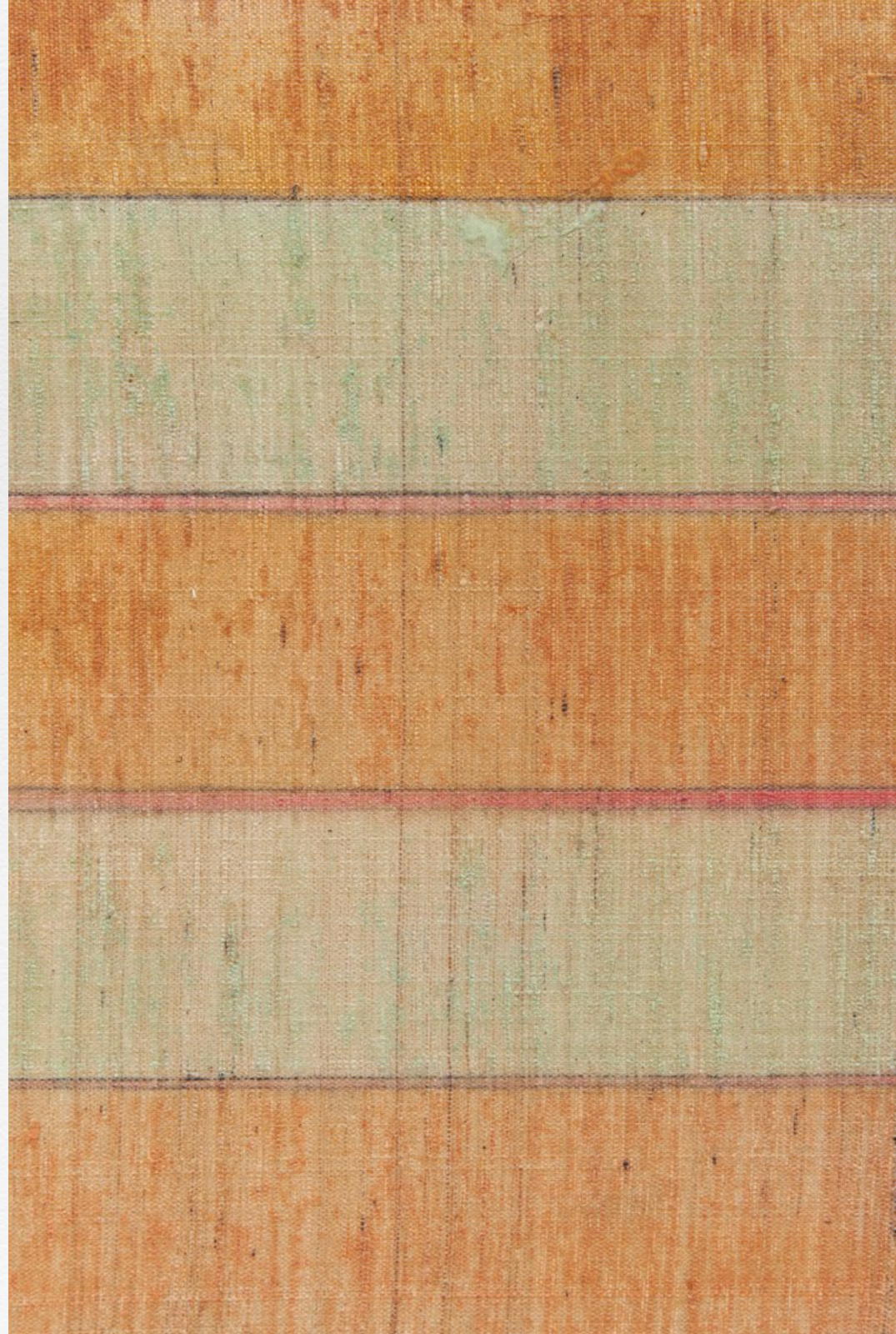
no. 34, 2024

oil on silk over mahogany stretcher

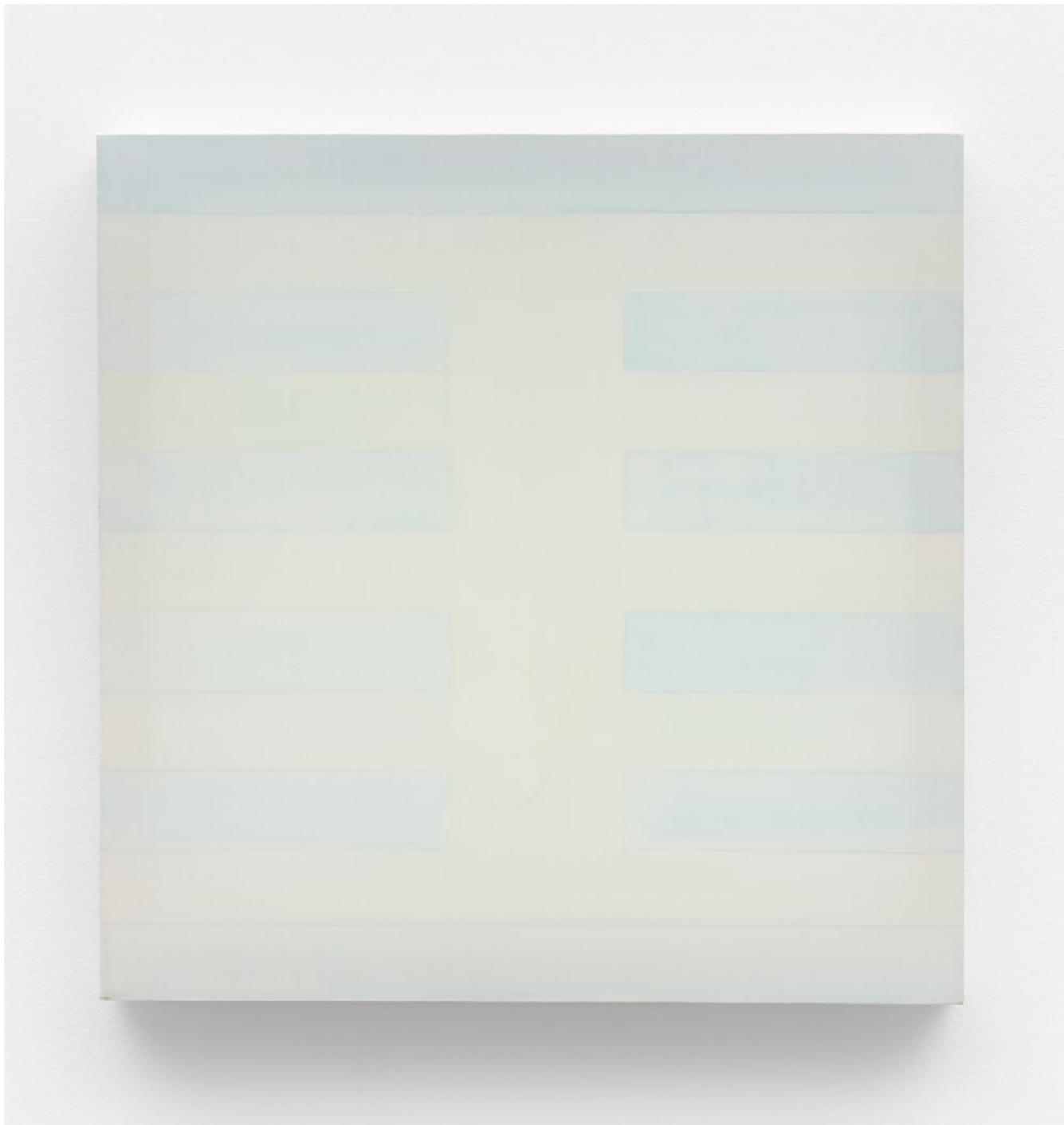
38.6 x 52.1 cm

15 1/4 x 20 1/2 in

MW.LKY.030







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no.27, 2024

silk over acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

64.5 x 64.5 cm

25 3/8 x 25 3/8 in

MW.LKY.035







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no. 42, 2024

acrylic on silk over cherry stretcher

152.4 x 147.3 cm

60 x 58 in

MW.LKY.031









Leah Ke Yi Zheng

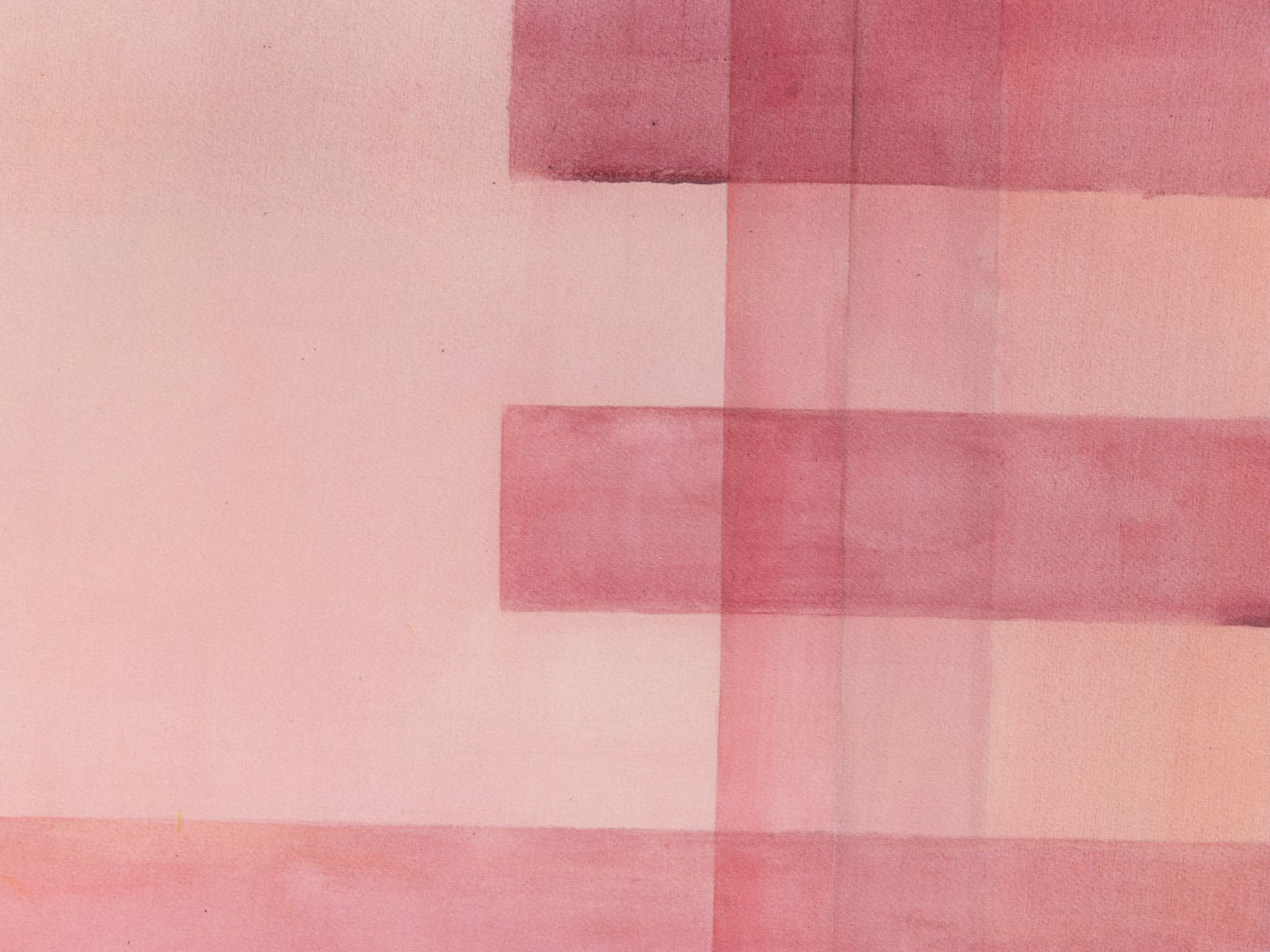
no.34, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

45.7 x 43.8 cm

18 x 17 1/4 in

MW.LKY.026







Leah Ke Yi Zheng

no. 43, 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

43.2 x 43.4 cm

17 x 17 1/8 in

MW.LKY.027





Leah Ke Yi Zheng

Machines, 2024

acrylic on silk over pinewood stretcher

210.8 x 162.6 cm

83 x 64 in

MW.LKY.029









Leah Ke Yi Zheng

Untitled (spinning machine), 2024

acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher

213.4 x 150.5 cm

84 x 59 1/4 in

MW.LKY.034



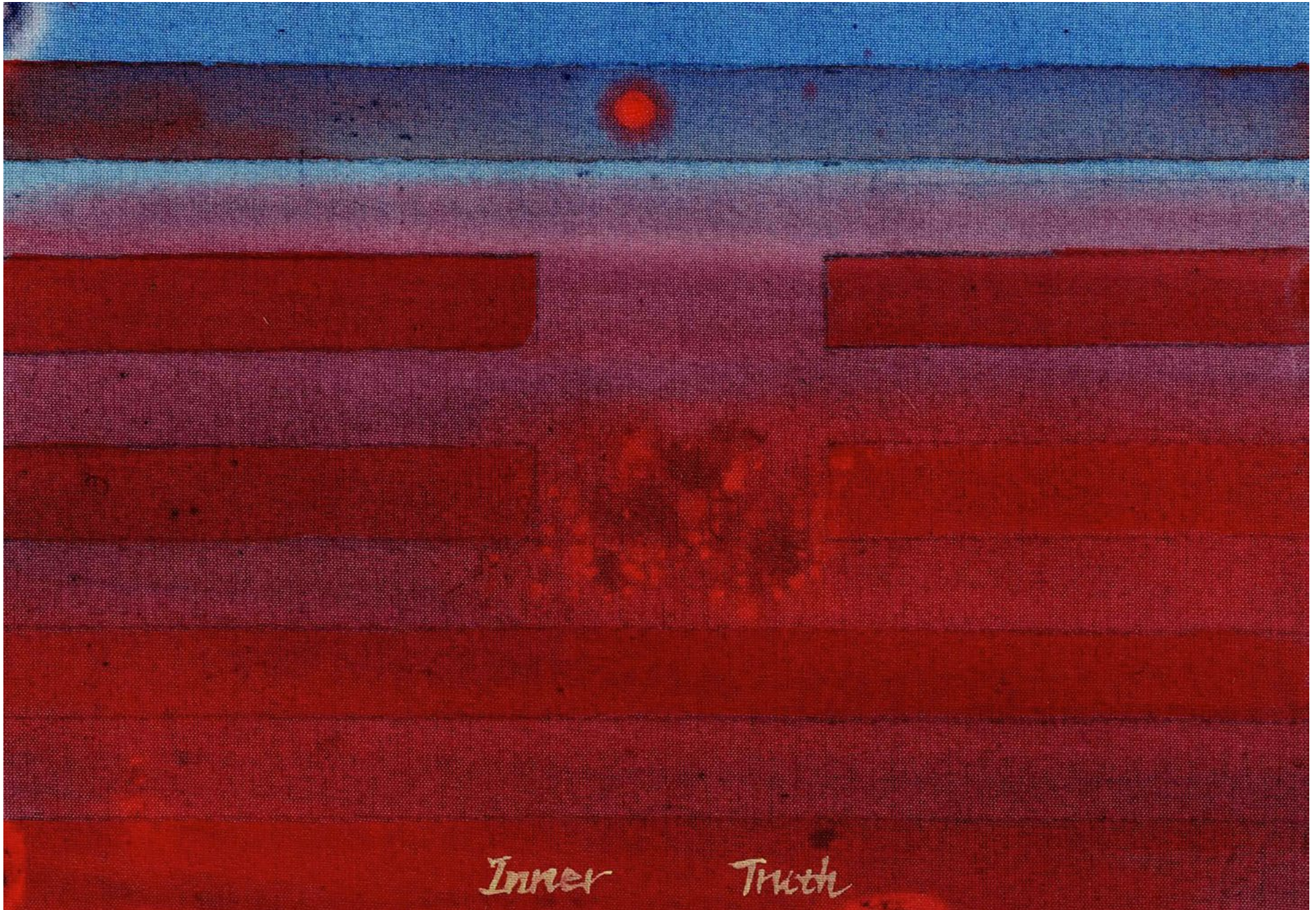




Leah Ke Yi Zheng, *Untitled (no. 27 / Leibniz's machine)*, 2024, Acrylic on silk over mahogany stretcher. 45.7 x 35.6 cm | 18 x 14 in, MW.LKY.041







Break-through (

Resolution)

Revolution
(Molting)

Duration

Leah Ke Yi Zheng (b. 1988, Wuyishan, China) lives and works in Chicago.

Leah Ke Yi Zheng's art marries the techniques of Chinese painting with histories of the Western avant-garde, revised and updated into both a personal and poetic vision. Her paintings follow two key physical characteristics: each utilize silk fabric stretched over hand-crafted hardwood stretchers, each has a unique contour, striking an eccentric and fluid conversation between rigidity and suppleness. Zheng apprenticed in traditional Chinese painting techniques from an early age, and continued her art studies in the United States, synthesizing divergent cultural practices which now determine a singular temporality that harness the forces and consequences of globalization.


Her practice exists within the critical space between one's mind and a surface of perception. Machine gears, *I-Ching* hexagrams, fictional portraits, and phantasmagoria develop within a delicate but firm compositional structure of lines both fixed and open-ended. The silk medium offers a gossamered effect, and this translucence is flooded by an emotion of color as light changes effortlessly in a transcendental elucidation of her own artistic decisions. Her works revise the deliberate framework of painting, attending to the very nature of painting itself, its histories, and its capacity for spirit; they call forward the abstract field of a viewer's individual perception and innermost subjective experiences.

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I make irregularly shaped paintings because I want them to point to, and make notice of, all the other irregularities in the world... that's how I want to think of the paintings' presence—a totality of the painting object. The decision of destabilizing the painting's infrastructure comes not from starting with the 0, but with the -1; it begins even before a thought of a painting could take place.

– Leah Ke Yi Zheng

The background is an abstract composition of various shades of blue and teal, with several large, solid black rectangular blocks placed horizontally and vertically. The text is centered in the middle of the composition.

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