山水

SHANSHUI

Mountain + Water

Mary Corrigall, Pippa Skotnes

Mountain + Water

By; Mary Corrigall

Gwen Van Embden's "Mountain + Water," reflects her enduring fixation with the essence of the landscape. It is not only its art historical significance that drives this interest, but its significance in the context of South Africa's political history. Her practice, rooted in an intuitive approach and shaped by a deep engagement with the medium of black ink, drawing inspiration from Chinese *Shan Shui* painting. In her work, the landscape becomes both a space of retreat and a site of recognition—a stage on which inner turmoil and external realities are equally present.

Van Embden's chosen medium—black ink—anchors her affiliation with Asian artistic methods, particularly the ancient Chinese tradition of *shanshui* painting. The title "Mountain + Water" refers directly to *Shan Shui,* where the contrast between mountain (the immutable) and water (the fluid) serves as both a visual metaphor and philosophical inquiry. In her paintings, Van Embden invokes these dualities, echoing the centuries-old Chinese practice where each brushstroke carries the weight of history, yet is utterly rooted in the present moment of making.

These works are unified by a series of horizon paintings, works that exemplify Van Embden's pursuit of purity in both process and subject. The horizon, for her, is not an imagined fiction or idealized scene but the distilled recollection of many landscapes—an unadulterated subject. Through the horizon, Van Embden charts her fluctuating psychic, spiritual, and physical energy, allowing each work to function as a visual record of presence and the prevailing equilibrium.

There is a tension between abstraction and figuration, more marked in some works where the suggestion of form is subtle. The relationship between the natural and built environments suggested through ambiguous silhouettes adds another layer of intrigue.

Yet, ultimately, purity and distillation are central to her practice. Not only does she distill the core formal elements that delineate a landscape through a constrained though intuitive process but in so doing she remains faithful to her medium, the ink and the Belgian linen canvas. This raw unbleached canvas imparts a textural quality, which echoes the natural scenes that Van Embden evokes.

The elongated, narrow canvases limit the composition but further advance this notion of distillation and purity - drawing attention to intuitive gestural marks that express the essence of the remembered landscapes that Van Embden renders.

The monochromatic palette and sparse mark-making reinforce the conceptual and visual unity, offering a perceivable "gauge" for viewers to sense the subtle modulations of energy, mood, and memory that inform each piece.

European art traditions—such as the black of Rembrandt's mezzotints or the gold leaf reminiscent of Sienese altarpieces—subtly filter into the format and surface treatment of her works. Yet, it is through the embrace of Asian art's ethos and techniques that Van Embden finds a language capable of holding both stillness and flux, memory and presence.

Ultimately, "Mountain + Water" is not only the distillation of the two titular elements of the landscape as per Chinese tradition, but an inquiry into the act of seeing and remembering. The paintings manifest as products of different cultures and histories, offering a space where personal experience and collective tradition can meet. For Van Embden, the horizon is not merely observed, but lived—transformed through ink, intuition, and the purity of line into a record of what is both fleeting and eternal.

Mountain + Water 2

By; Pippa Skotnes

There is a politics of landscape, but that politics is at once a politics of retreat –an escape from the troubles of country and soul – and of recognition – a reflection, or externalisation of the very troubles from which it also serves as an escape. Rilke says that "the earth has made itself invisible inside you" but in painting we also make our inside visible in the land. Landscape is never one thing or another it is always both painter and the painted, the perceived and the expressed.

Landscapes have been at the heart of Chinese painting for a thousand years. The word for landscape painting *Shanshui hua*, embodies the contrasts of mountain and water, the immutable and the fluid, the enduring and the evanescent. For Chinese painters these contrasts are also expressed in masterly brushwork, each stroke carrying the weight of pigment from a hundred strands of ink-laden hair, each painting in conversation with centuries of artistic tradition.

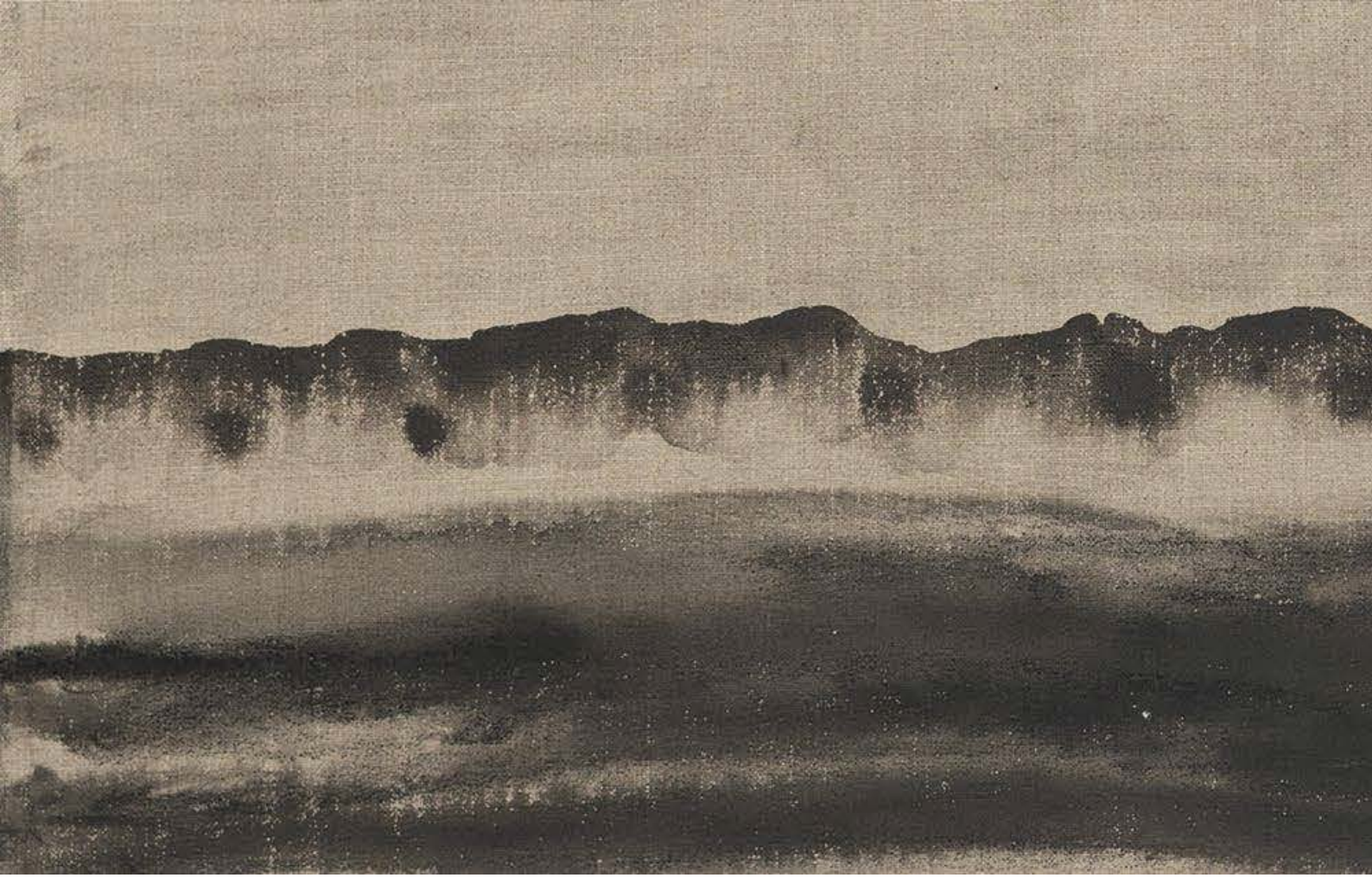
These works represent an exploration of the power of painted traditions of landscape art and the rich expressive tonalities of Chinese ink wash paintings, the lamp black burr of Rembrandt's mezzotint or the dark night of Goya's Disasters of War. They are also a turning out of the inside – grim, deeply felt anxieties in endless dialogue with the beauty of a painted mark.

The body of work speaks to Chinese, European and African forms of landscape making, to the importance of representation (and painting traditions) and it tries to offer a way to make sense of contemporary issues on the stage of the land that will survive them.

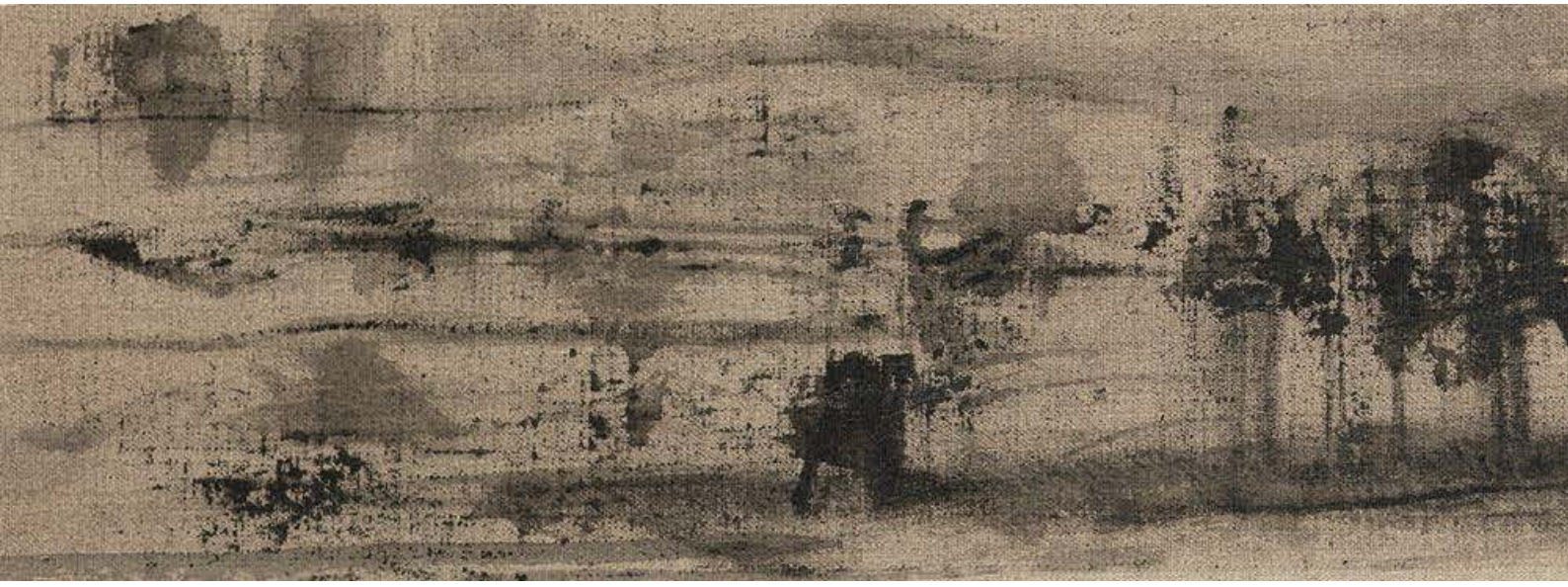
These paintings are made using black ink on canvas and silk; the format refers to the (rotated) screens of Chinese ink wash paintings. They include references to Goya and Turner et al while the gold leafed backgrounds to Sienese altarpieces. The contrasts of invoking at once deep space and time of distant mountains and the foregrounded spaceless presence of gold surface.



Poppies 25, ink on silk mulberry paper, 100 x 220 cm, 2025

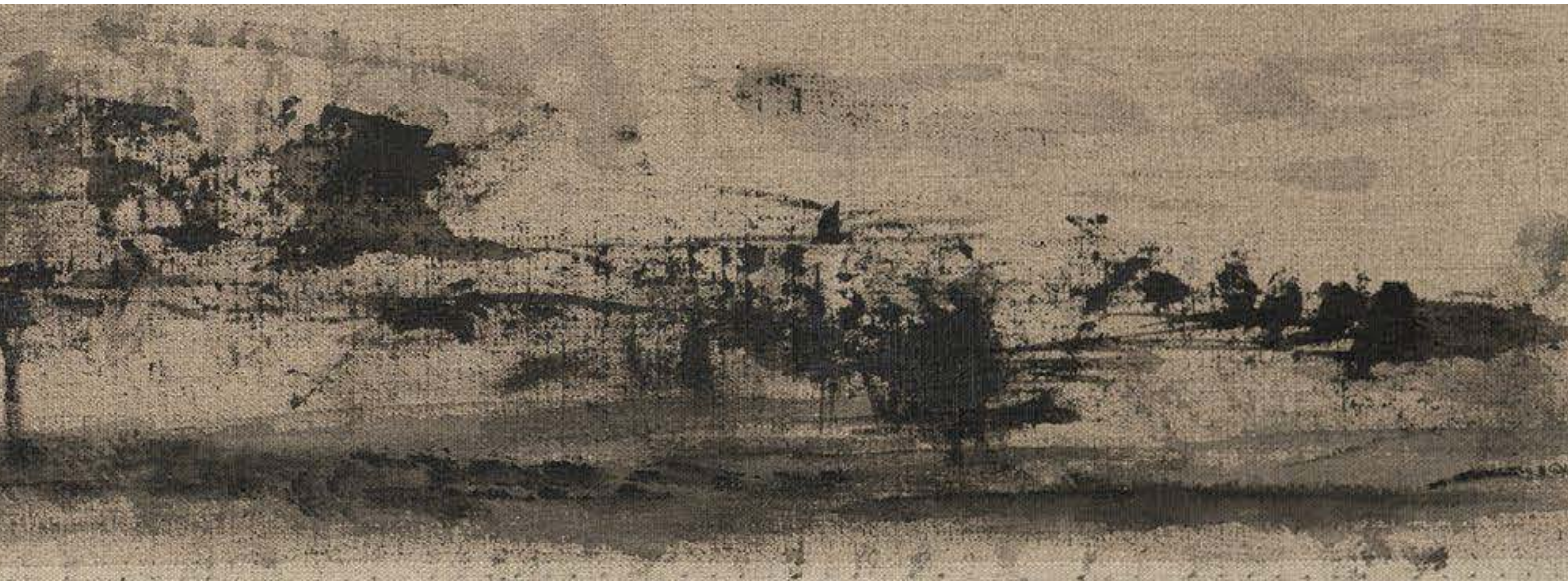


MOUNTAIN + WATER series 24, ink on linen, 23 x 72 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 25, ink on linen, 19 x 101 cm, 2025







MOUNTAIN + WATER series 21, ink on linen, 20 x 101 cm, 2025

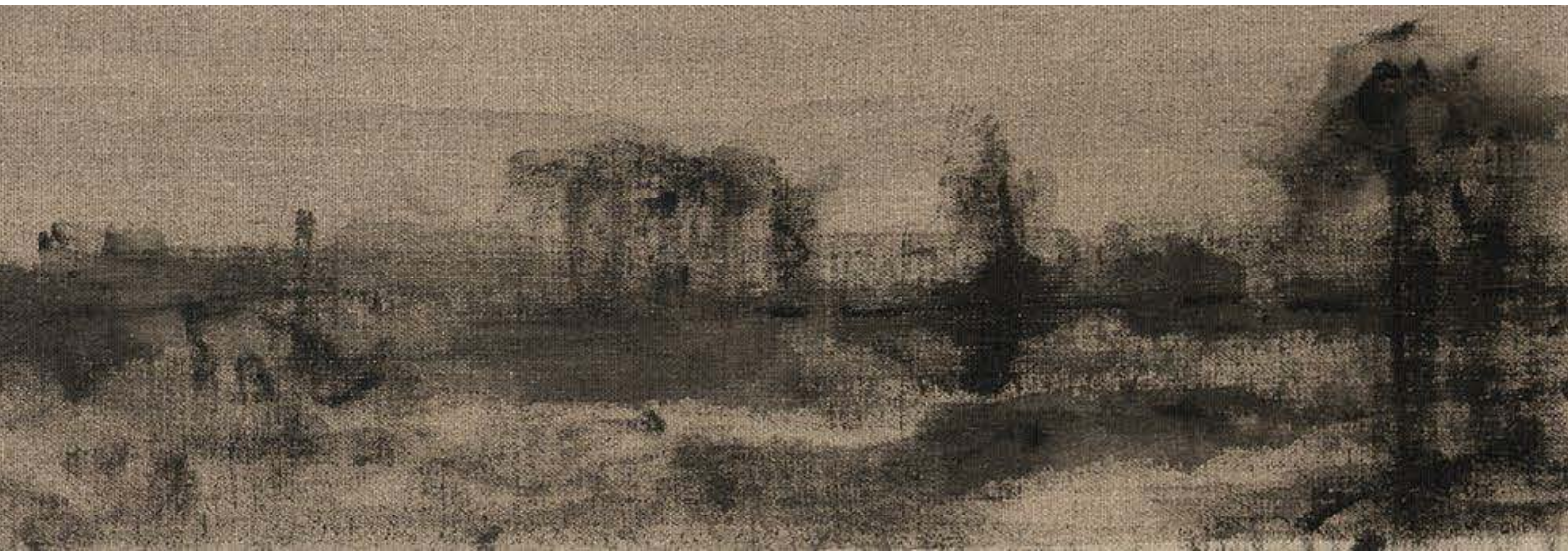


MOUNTAIN + WATER series 18, ink on linen, 26 x 99 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 13, ink on linen, 19 x 100 cm, 2025

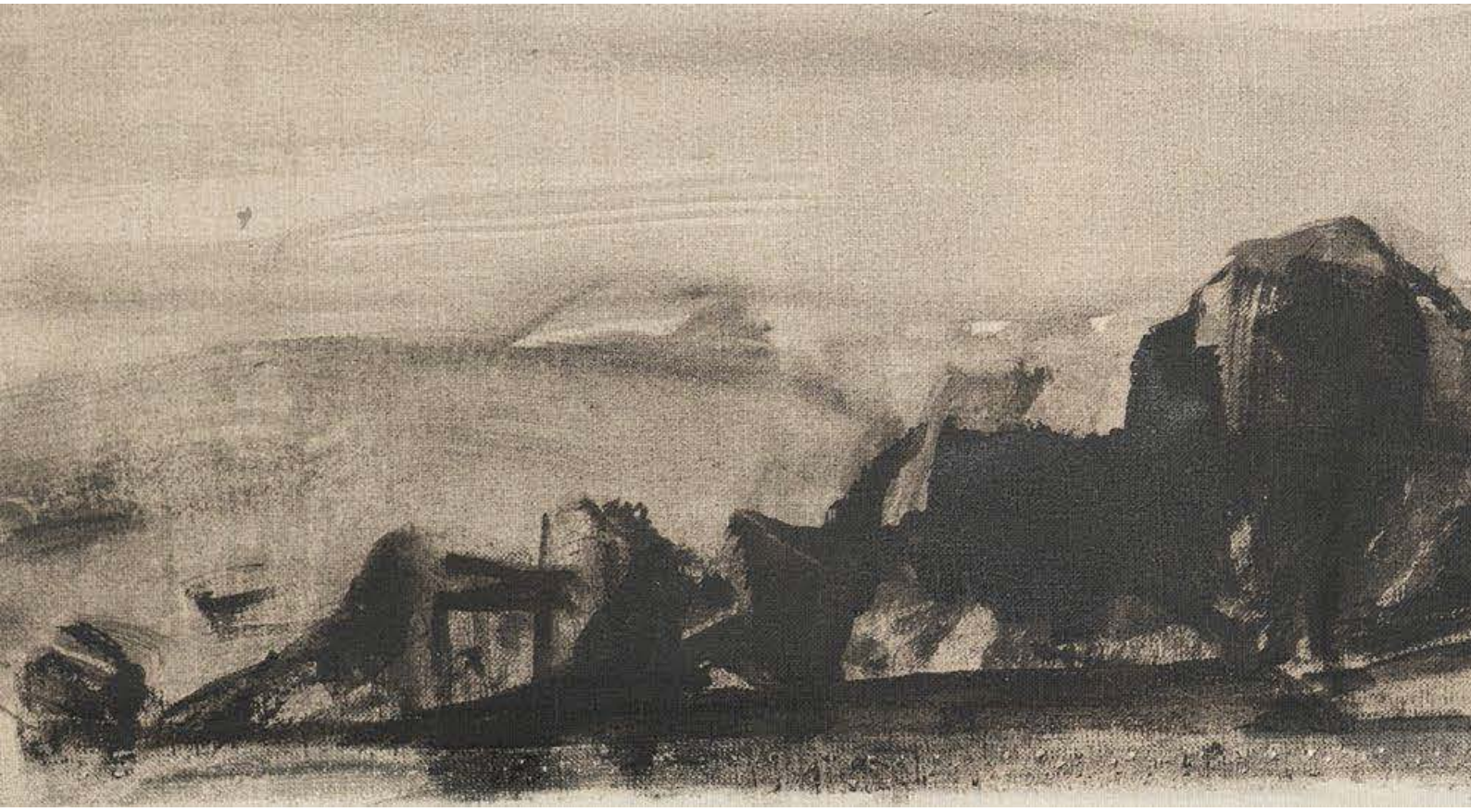








MOUNTAIN + WATER series 8, ink on linen, 27 x 150 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 3, ink on linen, 22 x 77 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 9, ink on linen, 26 x 154 cm, 2025





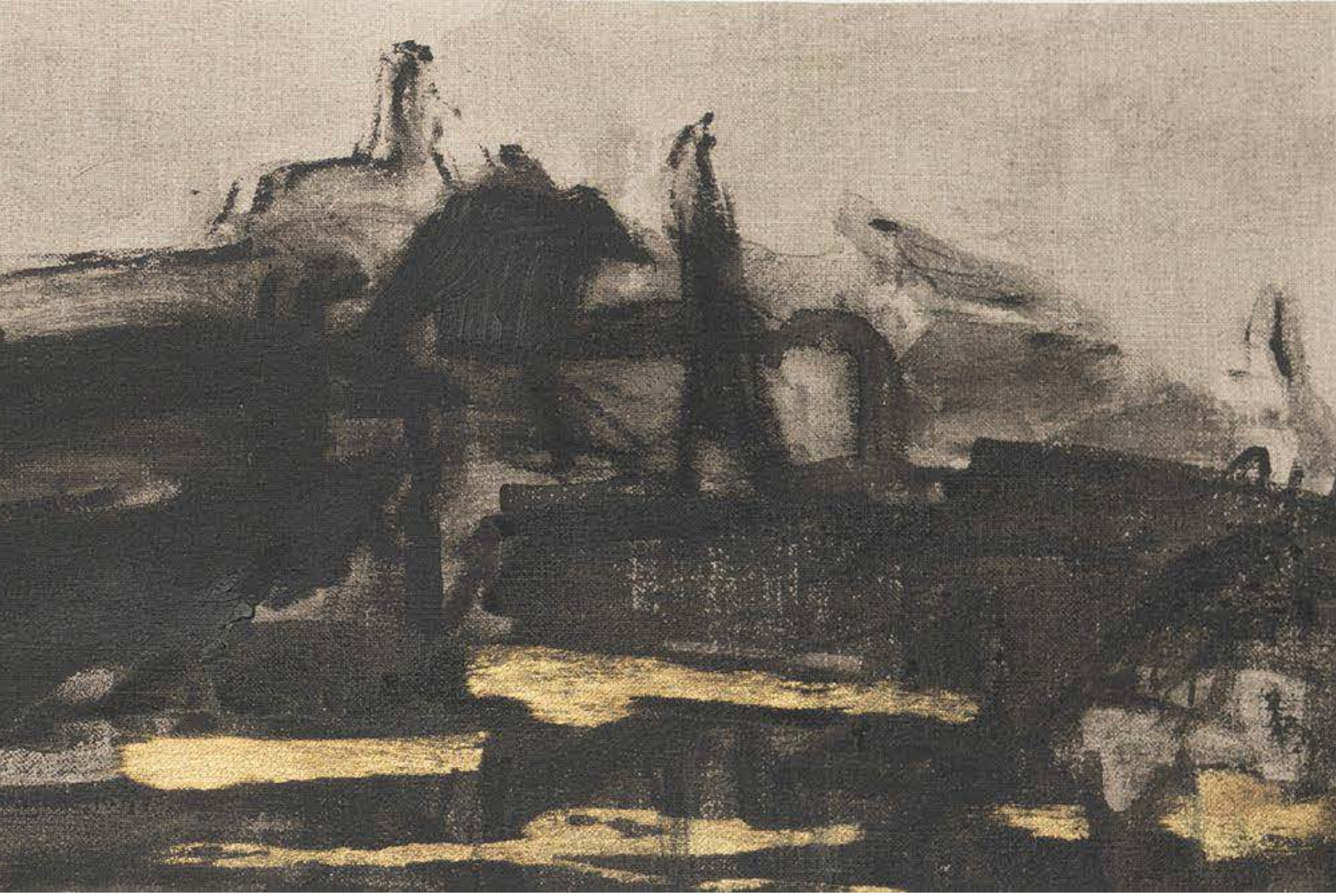


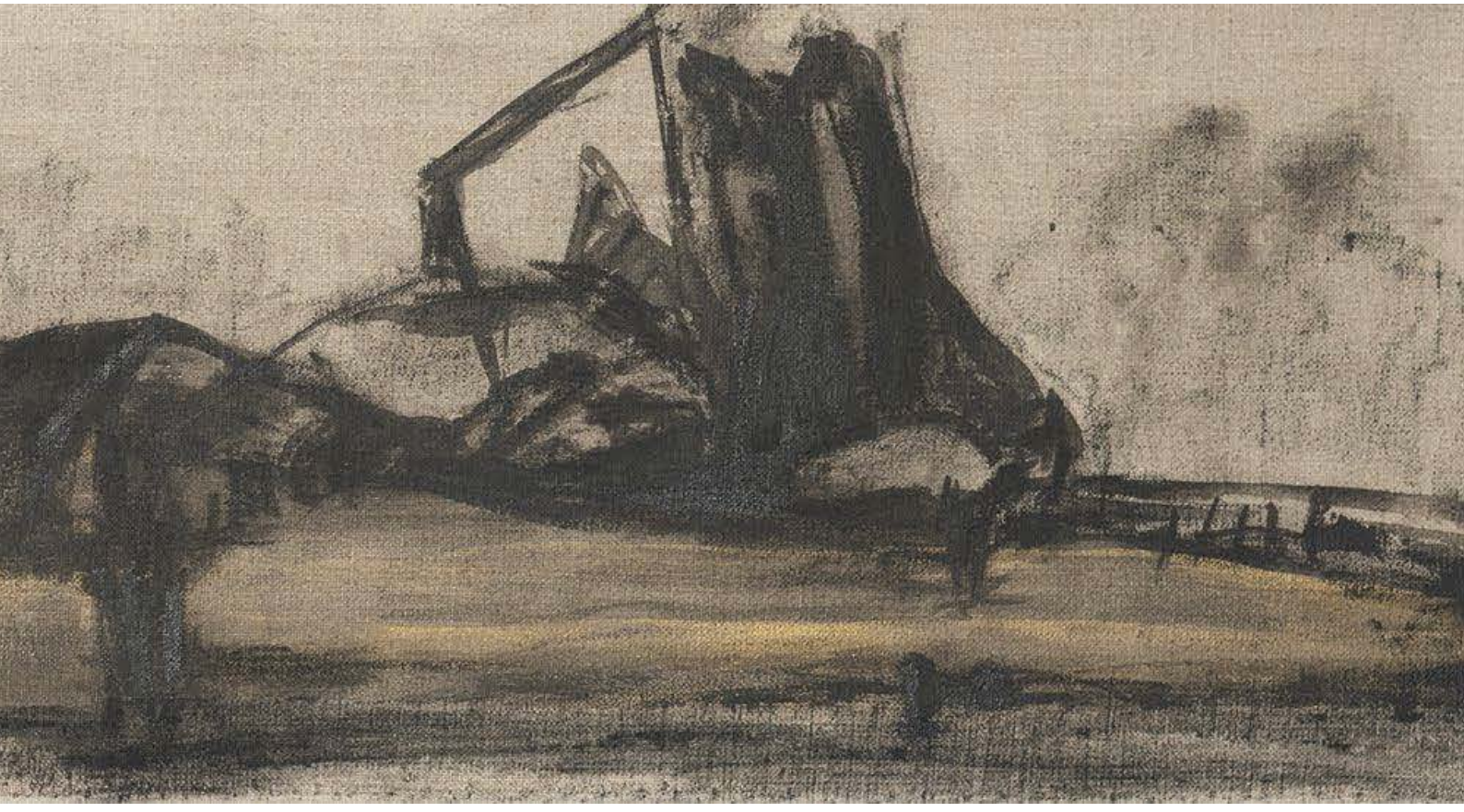


MOUNTAIN + WATER series 4, ink on linen, 23 x 69 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 6, ink on linen, 20 x 72 cm, 2025







MOUNTAIN + WATER series 7, ink on linen, 20 x 75 cm, 2025



MOUNTAIN + WATER series 20, ink on linen, 20 x 74 cm, 2025

