

# 'In Praise of Shadows' by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki: A Reflection on Two Contemporary Artists, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Rebecca Salter, with Relation to Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki's Contemporary Print Practice

Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki, London

## ABSTRACT

According to the Japanese novelist Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, beauty exists in shadows because darkness inspires beholders. 'We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows' (Tanizaki, 2001, p.61). Two contemporary artists who engage in prints, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Rebecca Salter, are both influenced by Japanese culture and Western art education, and inspired by *In Praise of Shadows* (1933–34) written by Tanizaki. The works of these artists are affected by Japanese aesthetics that value shadows, which are associated with ambiguity, quietness, and nothingness. This essay reviews *In Praise of Shadows* from the premise of its aesthetics and the present perspective of its influence on other visual artists Sugimoto and Salter.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay outlines how the author, Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki, has allowed concepts from Tanizaki's essay to enter her printed works, and examines how two contemporary artists Rebecca Salter (b.1955), an abstract artist, and photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto (b.1948) also approach the expression of dim light in darkness. All have been influenced by Japanese culture and acknowledge Western art and art history at the same time. Salter and Sugimoto draw upon ideas articulated in *In Praise of Shadows* (Tanizaki, 1933–34) written by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki (1886–1965), who was one of the most prominent novelists in Japan. Tanizaki states that the Japanese sense of aesthetics plays upon the imagination, where shadows in a dark room are favoured over seeing clearly in full light.

Figure 1. is a stone lithograph: Auditorium, produced by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki, author of this essay, which was made in 2018. In this series, various seats are depicted in the dim light reflected from the stage of a dark theatre. Inspiration was drawn from her memory of the view from the stage

while playing the violin as a child, as well as from the philosophical ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: namely, the concept of to see and to be seen. The theme of the auditorium is related to themes of the 'urban landscape' as collective memory, and of absence and presence.

Ordinarily, we are more concerned with actors on the stage in the theatre, but through this series, viewers can see things the other way round, from the performers' perspective. As a metaphor for the transient nature of life, an auditorium could be



Figure 1

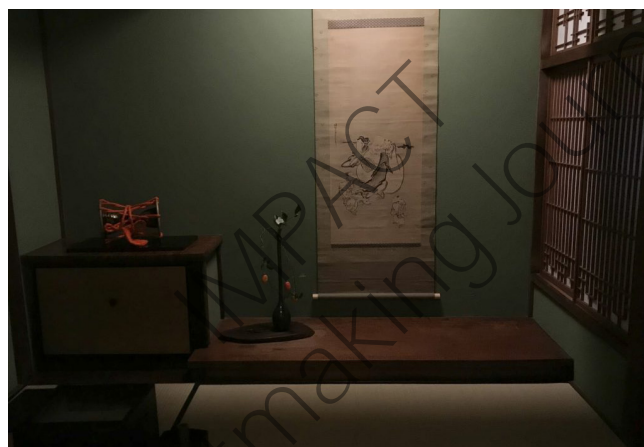


Figure 2

Figure 1: 1A10 by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2018) Stone lithography 560 x 415 mm

Figure 2: Image of an alcove called a tokonoma that functions as an exhibition place of traditional Japanese objets d'art. Photograph by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki

regarded as a place where the audience comes and goes anonymously, in the same way as unknown ancestors and individuals cross paths in the past and future. Furthermore, these ideas have been extended into exploring notions of anonymity, equivalency, and ambivalence.

The print also includes a sense of inquiry into the potentialities of the multiple and reproducible aspects of printing as a contemporary expression. The intention of this print is that it should be exhibited with large numbers of copies to create the space of a virtual theatre. At this moment in time, the empty theatre coincidentally might connote the environment of lockdown and represents an impression of this current situation. However, this series was in fact launched as an expression of the invisible human body several years ago. Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki states that her intention was to depict a glimmer of hope in the reflected light from the stage, based on traditional Japanese aesthetics that value shadows.

Dim light in the darkness is an apparent theme of the work. Hatching using serpentine lines on thin, brown Gampi paper was used in order to express subtle light in the theatre. It is possible that the author's experience such as performing the tea ceremony as a teenager and reading Tanizaki's novels might have brought out a subconscious response to the aesthetics of shadows. However, even without such previous experience, players would know that the faint light cast from the stage onto the edges of empty theatre seats is connected with silence in the dark. These might be some of the reasons why some people appreciate the beauty of shadows.

### IN PRAISE OF SHADOWS

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki was nominated for the Nobel Prize several times in the twentieth century. His essay *In Praise of Shadows* influenced various fields, such as architecture, literature, and art. He highlighted delicate aspects of Japanese traditional culture during an era of rapid change with the rise of Modernism.

*'But we Orientals, as I have suggested before, create a kind of beauty of the shadows we have made in out-of-the-way places. We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, the one thing against another creates.'*

Tanizaki, 2001, p. 61

Tanizaki refers to the beauty of shadows, in particular, traditional architecture without electric lighting, and argues that dim light in darkness adds to the appreciation of art. For example, Tanizaki explains that the true beauty of lacquerware is revealed by the subdued light of candlelight: lacquerware's superb decoration with flecks of silver and gold can appear garish or otherwise vulgar with direct rays of the sun or electric light. Tanizaki argues that flashy objects turn sombre, refined, and dignified under dim light in the darkness. (Tanizaki, 2001, pp. 22-26). He indicates that the design of traditional Japanese



Figure 3

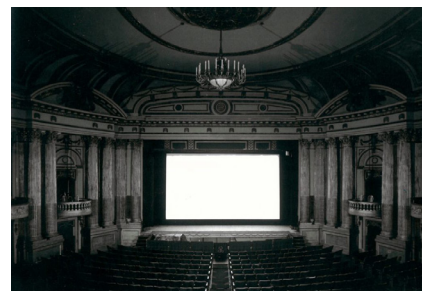


Figure 4

architecture is based on indirect, subdued light seen through thin paper screens (shoji) which form walls and cover direct views of the garden. Furthermore, he states that elements of architecture, for example, the colour of the walls, a flower in a vase, and a scroll hanging in an alcove are not simply ornaments, but specifically chosen to emphasize shadows.

For him, darkness seems to enhance the imagination, similar to a question and answer typical of Zen approaches to finding hidden truth. The lack of visibility causes the observer to become more sensitive to subtle light. In the half-light, guests at a tea ceremony would concentrate upon all five senses, for example, the tangible nature of the vessels or the temperature and taste of the tea. As Bai reports, the traditional tea ceremony is considered to have its origins in the Zen meditation practice; that is the experience of states of consciousness and unconsciousness (Bai, H. 1997; Davis, B. W. 2013). Indeed, the tea ceremony is more than a cultural custom, it is in fact, rooted in the backbone of Japanese religious beliefs.

Japanese scholar Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura (1863-1913), who contributed to the foundation of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, published *The Book of Tea* in English (1906). He regarded the tearoom as a 'sanctuary' from the vexations of the mundane world (Okakura, 1997, pp. 33-34). Usually tea houses are narrow and simple, intended to suggest refined poverty. Even in the daytime, the light in the room is subdued and everything is sober in tone. Okakura declared that the guests were also expected to select unobtrusively coloured garments, so as not to disrupt shadows (ibid, p. 25, 28).

Maria Teresa Orsi suggests that 'By highlighting volumes and contours, Tanizaki does not seek to create a chiaroscuro effect but to emphasise the affinity between light and dark' (Orsi, 1998, p. 8). In other words, Tanizaki does not suggest that the role of shadows enhances what is lit up by light but instead focuses on a fascination with the darkness itself.

## ANALYSIS OF HIROSHI SUGIMOTO'S THEATER SERIES

Hiroshi Sugimoto is a contemporary artist renowned for his photographic series of movie theatres. Sugimoto has engaged in working with fine art monochrome silver prints, as if he were an artisan of traditional crafts despite being a contemporary conceptual artist. This resonates with Tanizaki's claims that hand-made works that evoke a delicate sensation are more aesthetic than artificial technology.

In an interview in 2005, Sugimoto declares that he sees himself as a 'postmodern-experienced pre-postmodern modernist' because he is a craft-oriented person as well as a conceptual artist, although a postmodern artist is often considered to be contradictory to craftsmanship (Art21, 2005). Manual photographic methods, including developing and printing, are delicate and time-consuming techniques and practice is necessary to acquire proficiency. Sugimoto states that he has researched and developed his style of printing photography



Figure 5

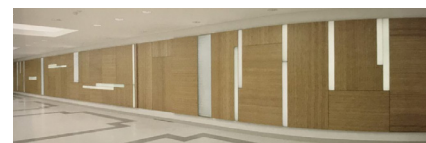


Figure 6

Figure 5. *Tabula Series 1* (2017) by Rebecca Salter

Figure 6. *Calligraphy of Light* by Rebecca Salter (2009). Installation in St George's Hospital, Tooting, London

and has tried various formulas and chemicals to obtain particular grey tones, blackness, and highlights for his work.

The fine-art monochrome silver print, which employs chemical reactions instead of pigment, can be recognized as a type of printmaking – albeit using light. Sugimoto’s photographic artwork series *Theaters*, taken with a long exposure time during the length of an entire movie, is an outstanding example of the expression of light in contemporary art. He has continued to produce photographs of the same frontal composition of completely white screens in theatres, on which the actual movie has vanished. According to him, this invisible image which cannot be seen is what the camera saw in the past (McGrath, 2015). On this point, Mary Doane points out that through the ellipsis of the cinema image into light as a material component of photography, Sugimoto transforms time into space in the Theater prints (Doane, 2013, p. 92,97).

Lin suggests that Sugimoto’s artwork contains contradictions akin to the Zen metaphor ‘a void is a consequence of fullness’ (Lin, 2017). In fact, contradictions of thoughts are compatible in Zen philosophy. Furthermore, Okakura argues that beauty can be discovered only through completing the incomplete in the mind, because the Zen conception of perfection is in the very process of seeking for perfection, rather than in finding perfection itself (Okakura, 1997, p. 31, 32). Thus, the description of an interior hidden by shadows is perhaps more impressive than the unintelligible vision of a movie which has faded to light in Sugimoto’s work. Sitting with the dim light somewhere between perfect white and perfect black, beholders are given time to reflect on where beauty lies. In addition, the idea of the void does not necessarily denote a negative meaning. That is to say, a vanished film on a completely white screen, could have been replaced with darkness in terms of invisibility. On the other hand, the darkness in the theatre which Sugimoto photographs does not seem to represent death, despair, or another kind of nihilism in the sense of classical interpretation of Christian painting, for example. He states that the darkness of the night in candlelight has a poetic quality and was intimately known by humanity before the advent of artificial light (Cué, 2016). In brief, it seems that Sugimoto shares values in common with Tanizaki not only for his approach to shadows but also for his desire to create works made by hand.

## REBECCA SALTER’S LIGHT

Rebecca Salter is a British artist who studied traditional Japanese culture in Kyoto for six years. She researched and practiced traditional techniques of ceramics, calligraphy, and woodcut printmaking. She spoke to Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki about the relationship between her methods and her intentions, in a personal interview. ‘Fundamentally I am interested in the mark made by the hand of the artist and also the meditative quality of repeated marks. The interest lies in the infinitesimal differences between all the small marks’ (Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki, Interview with Salter, 2020). Salter’s theories and practice,



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 7. Bethany Squares by Rebecca Salter (2003). Mixed media, each square 230 x 230 mm, Yale Center for British Art

Figure 8. Tantu by Rebecca Salter (2020). Japanese woodblock print, 350 x 260 mm

grounded on the experience of handling physical material and objects, appear to concentrate on the exploration of delicate gradations and muted tones. Salter declares that she is also influenced by *In Praise of Shadows* (Ohki, 2011, p. 56). She comprehends the aesthetics and creates her works using traditional Japanese methods and materials.

Sadako Ohki indicates that Salter's works are affected by the significance of the void, which is one of the traits of Japanese art, related to the nothingness of Zen philosophy (Ohki, 2011, p. 55, 56). For example, in 2009, Salter designed an installation called *Calligraphy of Light*, which was made of recycled glass and bamboo panels for St. George's Hospital. Inspired by calligraphy, Salter's installation consists of a few simple lines of LED lights on the wide walls, highlighting the presence of the void. The hospital selected her works to make the space calm and restful, and she achieves a meditative expression (Cork, 2011, p. 74, 79). It demonstrates that she has a profound understanding of the essence of traditional Japanese culture.

At the same time, Salter is influenced by a Western art tradition which values theory and experiment. As Achim Borchardt-Hume writes, Salter describes herself as a border walker of cultures, genres, and modes of engagement. According to Gillian Forrester, Salter regards as her artwork as 'places to be' even if it is a singular place just for herself. Her work reminds viewers of a contemporary abstract painter influenced by Eastern philosophy which chimes with Agnes Martin's remark, that she is possibly 'looking for a perfect space' (Forrester, 2011, p. 5, 18).

Even when Salter does not use actual illumination, her work creates the illusion of light to beholders. *Bethany Squares* (2003) is a suite of grey tones drawn as an homage to Josef Albers's practice and intended to be variations of musical analogies, which were inspired by a stay at Bethany (Forrester, 2011, p. 23, 24). This work consists of 18 square panels in three rows with equal spaces between them. Different values of mark making from ivory to dark grey seem to render an optical illusion to viewers: the lighter panels appear to be shimmering slightly.

Following the theories of Leonardo da Vinci and Goethe, Albers made experimental studies on perception and started to produce his signature series *The Homage to the Square in Yale* from 1950 (Tate, 2012; Lauf, 2018). In the *Interaction of Color*, Albers explains that the brightness of colours is affected by the visual sensation of the juxtaposed area (Albers, 2013). Salter may have considered Albers' theory because she visited New Haven, spending time Yale University where Josef Albers had taught (Forrester, 2011, p. 23). Therefore, it could be said that Salter is reflecting part of a long history of Western art which includes the theory and practice of light and colour.

Meanwhile, Salter's method in this work seems to be inspired by a feature of Japanese art, which she explains as follows, 'What is most interesting for me in Japanese art is the flat use of space (without shadows of course). So, space is delineated by marks/soft tones rather than delineated by directional light' (Yamazaki, Interview with Salter,

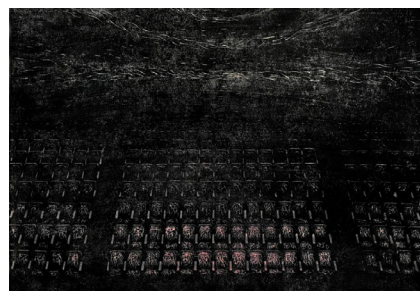


Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 9. *Dim Light in Darkness* by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2020). Japanese woodblock print, 45.5 x 60.5 cm

Figure 10. *4T28* by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2019). stone lithography 34 x 25 cm

2020). In this statement, she appears to use the word 'shadows' in the sense of Western art, an object casting a shadow in the light. In Bethany Squares, Salter renders the fluctuation of light to viewers as she applies Albers' theory. Simultaneously, the flat expression of space and shadows seems to be associated with Japanese art. It can be argued that she connects both cultures in this work.

When it comes to Salter's works, the influence of Japanese culture has been frequently pointed out. However, it may not be a sufficiently rigorous analysis. Muted grey is recognized as her trademark colour and she uses various shades of grey, probably influenced by the traditional Japanese preference for regarding subdued colours (shibui colours) not as shabby, but as graceful and delicate (Ohki, 2011, p. 59). As Okakura argues that shibui colour is appropriate to the tea ceremony, it might be conceived that shibui tones accord subtle gradation of shadows. She explains her taste for shibui colours in the interview

*I think there are similarities in the use of materials and there is a shibui quality to several British artists e.g. Ben Nicholson. So, I think I have a natural understanding for that common aesthetic. In many ways Japan felt very familiar to me when I arrived.*

Yamazaki, Interview with Salter, 2020

Ben Nicholson, whom Salter identifies as an artist who also uses subdued colours, states his view. He mentions that it should be impossible to separate form from colour or colour from form in a painting because colour exists not as applied paint but as the inner core of an idea that cannot be touched physically (Beard, 2019, p. 38). Nicholson has produced paintings, relief, and prints investigating elements of the art, for example, tone and colour as well as material, texture, space, and lines. According to Peter Khoroché, he is pre-eminently a tonal painter, and his style of using a limited range of colours is effective in lending depth to linear and spatial expression (Khoroché, 2008, p. 96).

Nevertheless, the reason why Nicholson restrains colours might be the requirement of an abstract artist; this idea and In Praise of Shadows have a common point: restriction of visual information facilitates the concentration of viewers on subtle cues. When Zen monks meditate, it is reported that they sit in an empty room and half close their eyes to immerse themselves in the void. Salter refers to meditation as an approach that she takes when making her work, 'The meditative quality to the way of working has a direct relationship with the time it takes for the viewer to really 'see' the work. There is a basic time-based element to the work both in the way it is made and the way it is viewed' (Yamazaki, Interview with Salter, 2020).

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## CONCLUSION

There are some common points between Sugimoto and Salter related to concepts outlined in *In Praise of Shadows*. These themes are associated with approaches to depicting time and space along with Japanese aesthetics. Doane indicates that in Sugimoto's Theater series, light which is converted into time is saturated on the screen by long exposure photography (Doane, 2013, p. 92, 97). According to Arata Isozaki, in Japanese, time and space can be translated into a single word 'ma'. This word also means a pause, relation, or distance and Salter mentions that 'moment' is an essential concept of Japanese culture (Ohki, 2011, pp. 53-54), noting that she is conscious of the time associated with making and seeing her marks (Yamazaki, Interview with Salter, 2020). In addition, Salter's artworks usually seem to be subdued and modest as if they were stable shadows themselves. Therefore, her works might be frequently considered as evoking a feeling of time or eternity in viewers. It can be theorized that her marks and use of restrained shibui colours ask beholders take their time to see her works fully. Yamazaki's series Auditorium, depicted by the reflected light which fades with distance from the stage indicates metaphorically at the continuity of time as the audience passes by past, present, and future. As Tanizaki recollected the past thorough shadows, the moment of the dim light in darkness on the empty seats is linked to the origin of Yamazaki's aesthetics.

A feature of the expression of Sugimoto, Salter and Yamazaki is to allow beholders to focus on invisible or indiscernible subjects. As for Sugimoto's Theater, he does not provide a particular story on the screen. The inside of the building is visualized as if the interior of the theatre were a delicate lacquer craft box in a dark room, the type of dark room that Tanizaki illustrates. However, what Sugimoto intends to show might not be the decoration of the building but time, aesthetics, and his philosophical ideas. Similarly, the abstract works of Salter do not render concrete images and bright colours but only impressions of faint light, like shadows. They do not hide everything completely in the dark, but at the same time they do not reveal their intention explicitly. The undepicted audience in the works of Yamazaki evokes viewers' imagination of absence and presence. The shadowy relationship between an actor and the audience, related with Merleau-Ponty's thought, adds to the ambiguity of the shadows which Tanizaki describes.

Influenced by the aesthetics which Tanizaki represents, the above artists express their own thought and experiences alongside their themes. Tanizaki's writing is rooted in Japanese culture, but seems to be permeated by universal and abstract concepts that are relevant to all. In particular, Salter's works show how elements of Japanese art are linked to abstract painting, as a 'border walker'. The concepts discussed in this paper propose that the essence of a culture might be more deeply understood when it is born anew in creative art forms.

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## AUTHOR

Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki is an individual artist and researcher. She expresses reflected light from the stage associated with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in her current series Auditorium based on the traditional Japanese aesthetics which value dim light in darkness. Aiu researches the aesthetics between the West and Japan since the 19th century such as Bauhaus, artists in St. Ives, associated with Modernism. Her work has been exhibited in the UK and Japan such as The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, The Royal Scottish Academy Annual Exhibition, Woolwich Contemporary Print Show. She was awarded the State of the Art prize by Printmaking Today

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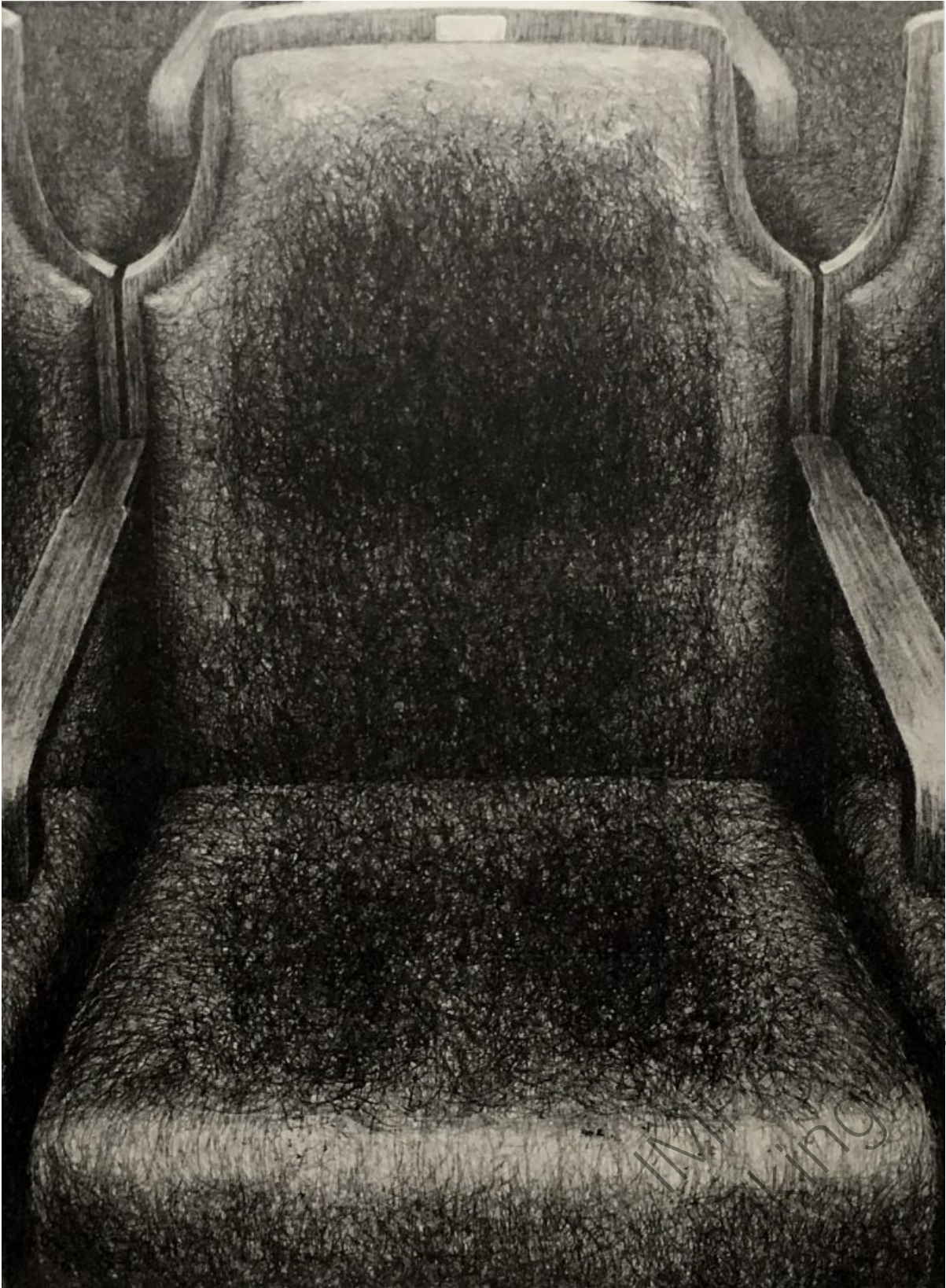
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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: 1A10 by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2018) Stone lithography 560 x 415 mm



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Figure 2: Image of an alcove called a tokonoma that functions as an exhibition place of traditional Japanese objets d'art. Photograph by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki



Figure 3. Traditional lacquerware (vessels for sake; rice wine). Photograph by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki



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Figure 4. AL. Ringling Baraboo by Hiroshi Sugimoto (1995). Gelatin silver print. (c) Hiroshi Sugimoto / Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi

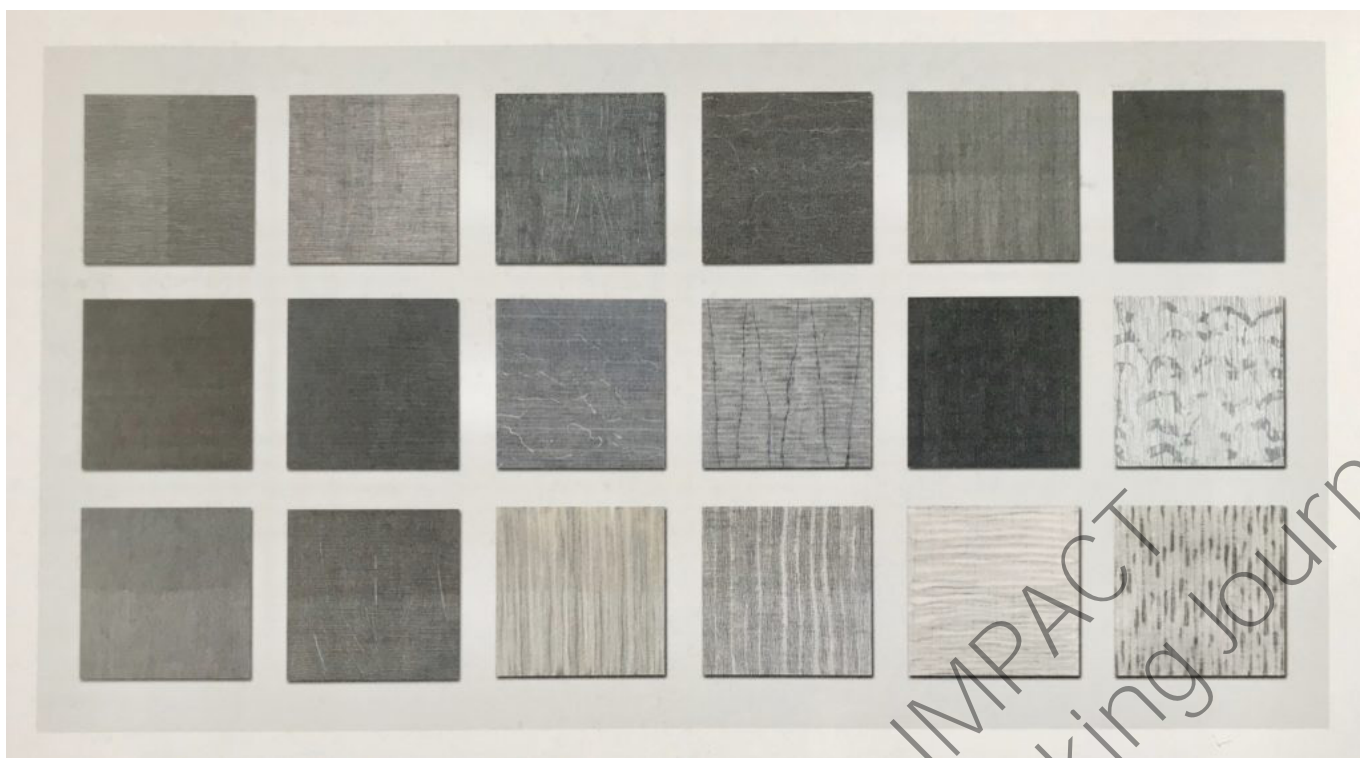


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Figure 5. Tabula Series 1 (2017) by Rebecca Salter

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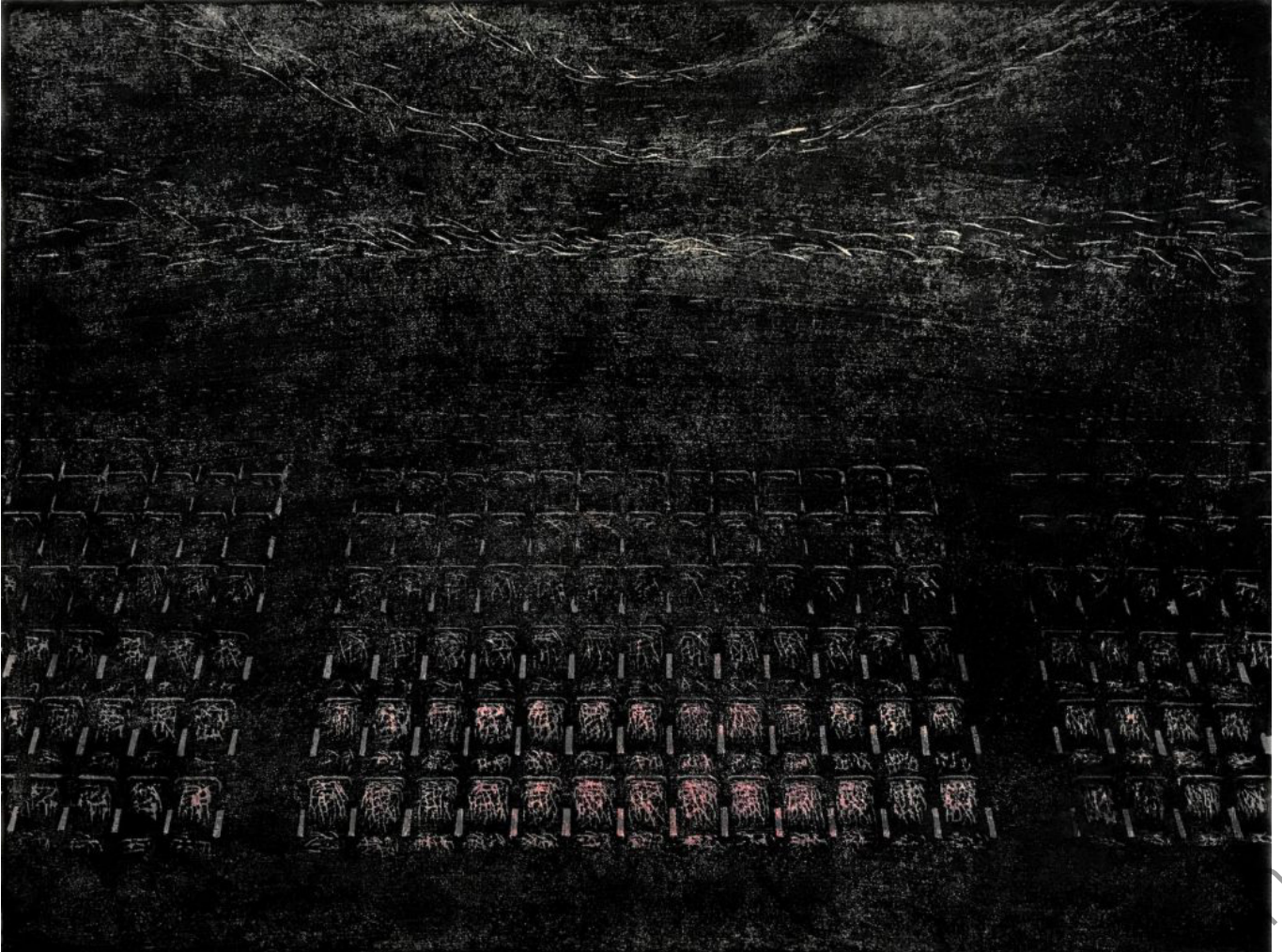
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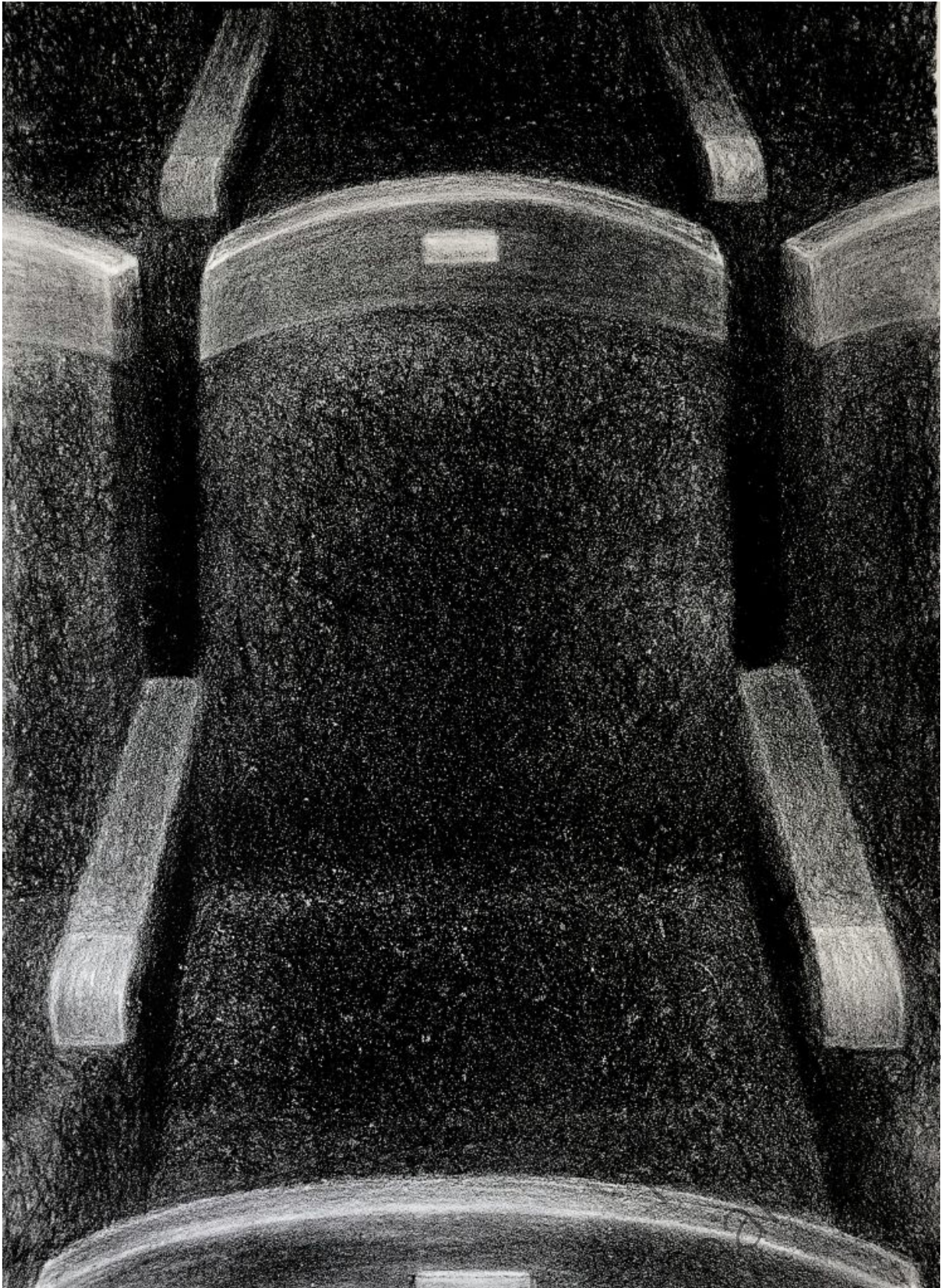
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Figure 8. Tantu by Rebecca Salter (2020). Japanese woodblock print, 350 x 260 mm



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Figure 9. Dim Light in Darkness by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2020). Japanese woodblock print, 45.5 x 60.5 cm



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Figure 10. 4T28 by Aiu Kitayama Yamazaki (2019). stone lithography 34 x 25 cm