

## APPROACHING BLACK AND WHITE

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In 1962, the young painter Sanford Wurmfeld visited the Washington Gallery of Modern Art to see the Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition. Inspired by the structure of Kline's work, and the restriction of his palette to its barest components, Wurmfeld began making abstract paintings in black and white as well. These early paintings certainly had the look of Kline's—bold, irregular forms in solid swaths of black and white, the contrasting values competing for visual primacy on a single picture plane. The simplified parameters enabled Wurmfeld to explore two-dimensional spatial relationships in what would become a lifelong interest in figure-ground interchange. Wurmfeld remarks that there was an imperative at that time to make every part of the painting count, to distribute compositional tension throughout the surface. He was striving toward a framework that would achieve this overall spatial dynamism. With black and white as givens, the emphasis of Wurmfeld's early work was in a formalist vein, and made during the period when he was still finding his way to the various grids that would characterize his mature work.

In 1966, after meeting Ad Reinhardt at Hunter College, Wurmfeld saw Reinhardt's black monochrome paintings in a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Jewish Museum in New York. Wurmfeld cites his exposure to these paintings as an impactful introduction to compositions comprised of close value ranges, an approach Wurmfeld has revisited again and again in his own work over the years.

As his paintings progressed toward an increasingly refined geometry and a more complex system of organization, Wurmfeld began to reintroduce color. Visiting Wurmfeld's studio in Rome in the mid-1960s, the artists Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason pointed out to him that the subject of his work was unquestionably color itself. Having achieved some mastery of the ideas of figure-ground interchange and having honed his relationship to form, Kahn

and Mason's critique was well timed. By 1966, Wurmfeld was utilizing a full spectrum of colors, and beginning to analyze their relationships to one another. For over four decades since, he has investigated these relationships along the three primary axes of color manipulation: hue, saturation, and value. Wurmfeld has explored both hue and saturation to the extreme limits of their potential, including the full range of visible hues—from full saturation to apparent desaturation.

Periodically, Wurmfeld has sought to work at the limits of the third axis, value, exploring relationships of colors in dark and light ranges. In 2011, the artist circled back to his interest in black and white to begin a series of paintings that seeks to push the limits of value to the ultimate perceptual extremes: the darkest darks, approaching black, and the lightest lights, approaching white. Decades of experience in color painting have changed the game dramatically for Wurmfeld. Today his interest in value extremes is no longer intended to foreground formal components, but rather to investigate the perception of color in paintings that appear to be black and white. While the dark and light paintings do approach an overall effect of monochromatic black or white, they are in fact altogether chromatic works whose subtle hues are organized in various distributions across the picture plane. Wurmfeld's objective is to create a spectrum of colors so close to either black or white that only through active viewing do they reveal their various chroma.

The task of mixing such a palette is a highly technical endeavor. It would be easy to presume that this level of precision would require some mathematical system of increments for its development, but Wurmfeld insists that the apprehension of color is always subjective, its nuances often unpredictable. Color may only achieve meaningful organization through sustained attention of individual human perception. Therefore, in order to achieve the subtleties required of the work, the

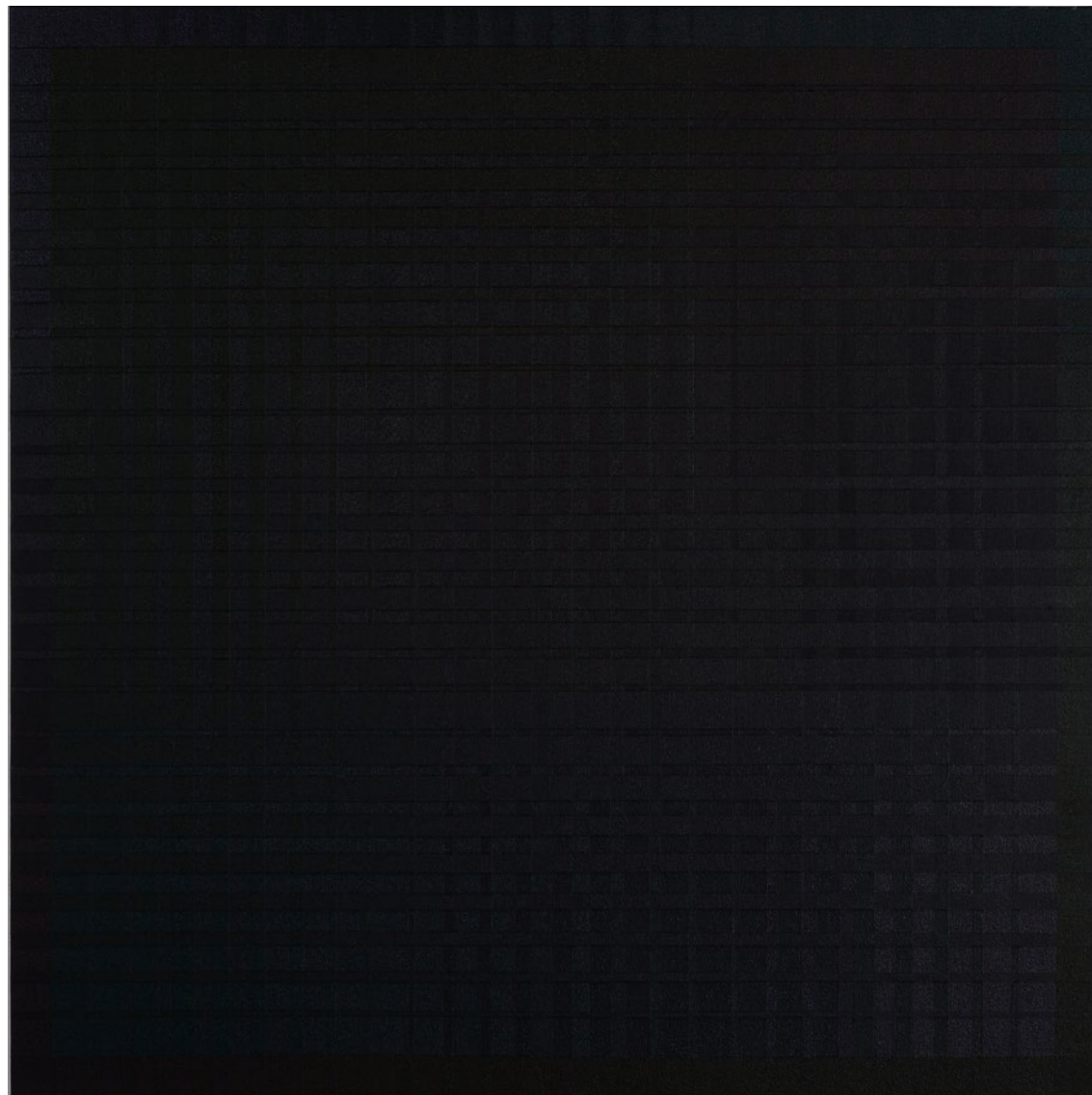


PLATE 63 II-16 #1+B (Dk), 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 42 in. (106.7 x 106.7 cm)

artist mixes each color through a painstaking process of trial and error. He applies these colors side by side onto small canvas palette boards, which help him assess the relationships of each color to the others. Once he begins the model-sized works, and later the full-scale paintings, the more complex relationships of the grid help further reveal particular qualities of hue and value. As he works up to the larger works, he continues to make adjustments to individual colors. This rigor is essential, for if the value or hue of a single color is amiss, that color might dominate the painting and undermine the careful equilibrium of overall equivalency.

At the outset, Wurmfeld was particularly intrigued by the challenge of this work: “There’s something about the idea of pushing to do a painting that I wasn’t sure I could actually accomplish.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, soon after he began the series, he started to find the initial paintings too apparently colorful, “almost like primaries.” He set about making comprehensive alterations to the palette, pushing even further toward black, on the one hand, and toward white, on the other. His second round of chromatic dark and light paintings came much closer to delivering the slow read he aspires to. “I really want you to walk in the room and see these and think, ‘it’s just a white canvas,’ and then slowly get to it.”<sup>2</sup> The paintings now comprise a growing series that showcase Wurmfeld as an artist at the peak of his abilities. As his eye hones to these greater degrees of subtlety, his ambition toward the extremes only increases. Pointing to a recent work, he says, “I’m tempted, even with this one, to add more white to it and try another one even whiter ... I mean, that’s the temptation: to see how far I can go that way.”<sup>3</sup>

For the work to be experienced as anything more than a plain black or white canvas requires time and attention. As with many of his paintings, Wurmfeld shows us that the experience of color is changeable, contingent upon the duration of viewing. To activate this engagement with the canvas, the artist provides the viewer essential points of entry through discrete areas of contrast. These serve as the most readily visible locations of color on the picture plane. In a dark painting from 2012 titled *II-15 (Dk/Y-V)*, narrow contrasting borders frame the vertical edges of the canvas with shifting complementary colors. The site where sections of distinct colors intersect—dark yellow-orange on

the border next to a larger section of dark yellow-green, for example—is one where these nearly imperceptible hues become slightly more apparent. This color clue opens the door to a perceptual experience of the entirety of the chromatic plane. Wurmfeld’s campaign toward the absolute edge of color, where the individual is just barely afforded the capacity to perceive it, pays its reward in the very achievement of that discovery.

Offering the viewer an opportunity to expand the limits of perception, the dark and light paintings are immersive environments that seem to transcend their physical parameters. In addition to a slowly unfolding recognition of hues, with sustained attention the paintings, generate an unusual effect of luminosity. Color, deeply embedded in apparent black or white, over time appears illuminated. Wurmfeld describes, “I really want you to sense a kind of apparent black light here. That’s what happens as the hue comes on. As it gets stronger and stronger, you get this feeling of a very dark luminosity.”<sup>4</sup> Because the hues in these paintings are so elusive, and so closely aligned with the conceptual absolutes of black or white, the brain seems to oscillate between two perceptual possibilities: black or color; white or color. It is within the space of that perceptual dilemma that the sense of illumination arises, as it seems impossible for pure black or pure white to appear colorful without light. The brain seems to require an experience of luminosity in order to justify the possibility of hue. Therefore, as the color appears, so does the sense of light. The experience of effulgence is akin to the experience of what psychologist David Katz terms film color, or color detached from any object, surface, or source of illumination.<sup>5</sup> Examples of film color are hallucinations, dreams, and the spectral patterns that appear when one’s eyes are closed (“subjective gray”). In the case of the dark and light paintings, the optical effect is not simply disembodied color, but the apparent emission of light itself, independent of any source.

The precision and control Wurmfeld employs through the color organization of the dark and light paintings accounts for the aesthetic information available to the viewer. Given time and attention, the same optical effects are available to anyone who has the capacity to perceive color. This includes the perception of a full spectrum of dark or light colors, afterimages, and the effect of illu-

mination. What Wurmfeld does not, and perhaps cannot control, is the semantic information the work may convey. The experience of aesthetic information may inspire individuals to make connections between these works and ideas unrelated to the paintings themselves or the medium in which they are made. For instance, the subject matter of dark and light, or black and white, may itself carry diverse strains of semantic association. For a painter so rigorous in his dedication to order, it might be surprising to know how openly Wurmfeld allows for the significance of the subjective response:

I think the semantic connotation of the viewer is uncontrollable by the artist. We each bring to [the paintings] some kind of baggage that is far from universal, and so each of these paintings have a different emotional [content]. I mean emotional as an almost visceral response, rather than a feeling that you would name with words. I recognize that’s it’s there, but I don’t think it’s something that I’m particularly controlling for the viewer. I’m just creating something that creates a kind of visceral response in me. And then it may or may not have that kind of response in other people.<sup>6</sup>

The visceral response Wurmfeld describes here is a transcendent one, moving the viewer beyond the pedagogical experience of sensory information toward a personal relationship with the art object. The experience of color in Wurmfeld’s art is perhaps best realized in works that enable the viewer to enter them as immersive environments, thereby providing the greatest level of access to both aesthetic and semantic experiences. The artist’s largest existing dark and light paintings are 90 by 50 ½ inches, a scale that relates to the human body, fills the visual field, and enables something near to uninterrupted engagement. Yet, these larger works only foreshadow the potential for their ultimate successor. For Wurmfeld, an artist who is constantly pushing the limits of experience, this series serves in part as a set of studies for their inevitable incarnation. Always painting in scale models, a skill adapted from his early interest in architecture, for Wurmfeld these large-scale paintings are the penultimate iteration before moving on to the final form, a Cyclorama, in either dark or

light. The Cyclorama will elaborate the perceptual themes of the dark and light paintings, resolving them onto a continuous 360-degree canvas. In the meantime, the existing works offer the observer ample opportunity for an expansive personal encounter—the essences of color and light reveal themselves in the eye and brain of the viewer in an experience at once visual, visceral, and unique.

1. Sanford Wurmfeld, interview by the author, October 11, 2012, New York.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. David Katz, *The World of Colour* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner Co. Ltd., 1935).

6. Wurmfeld, interview.

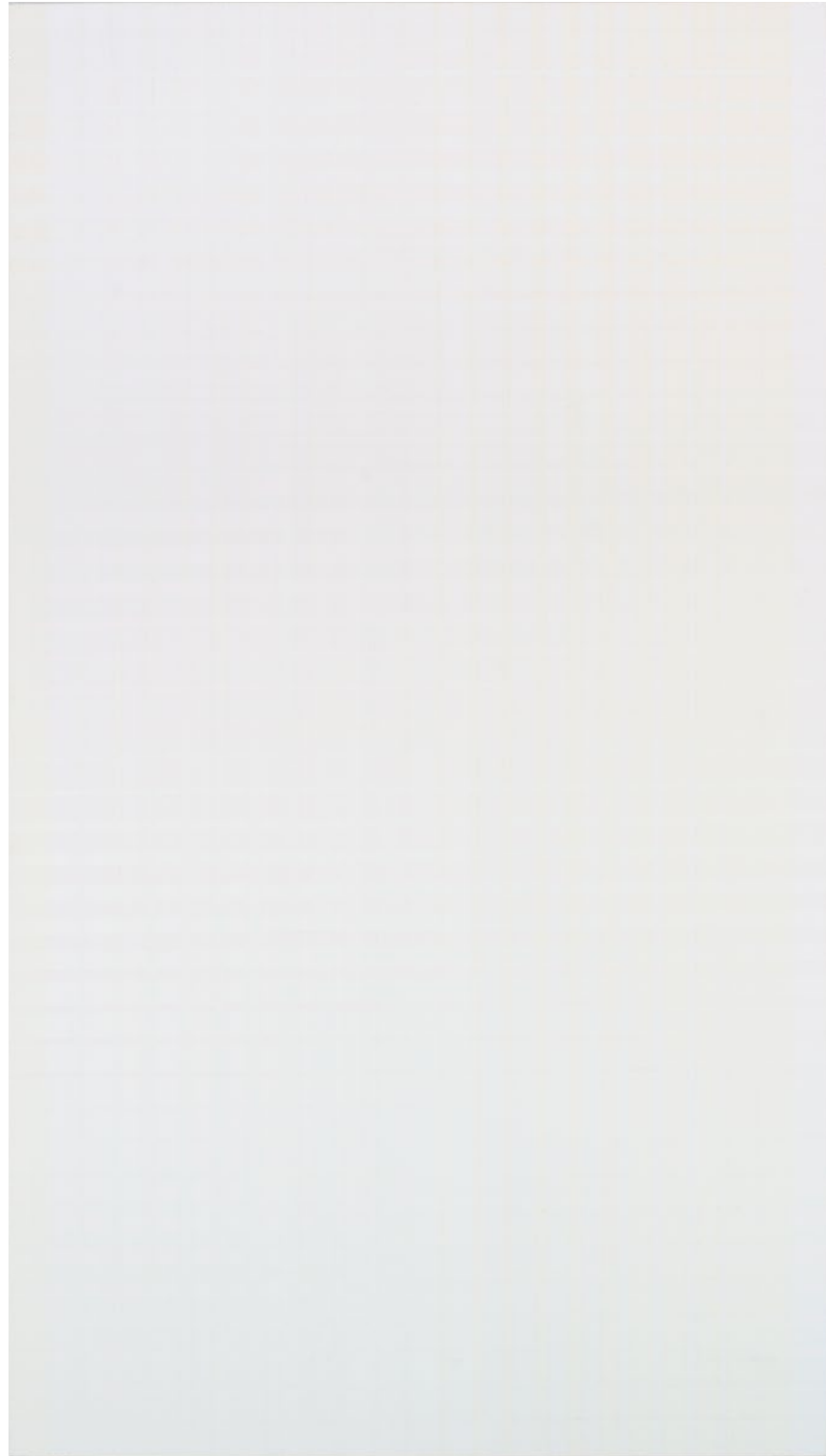


PLATE 64 II-15 (Lt/Y-V), 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 50 1/2 in. (228.6 x 128.3 cm)

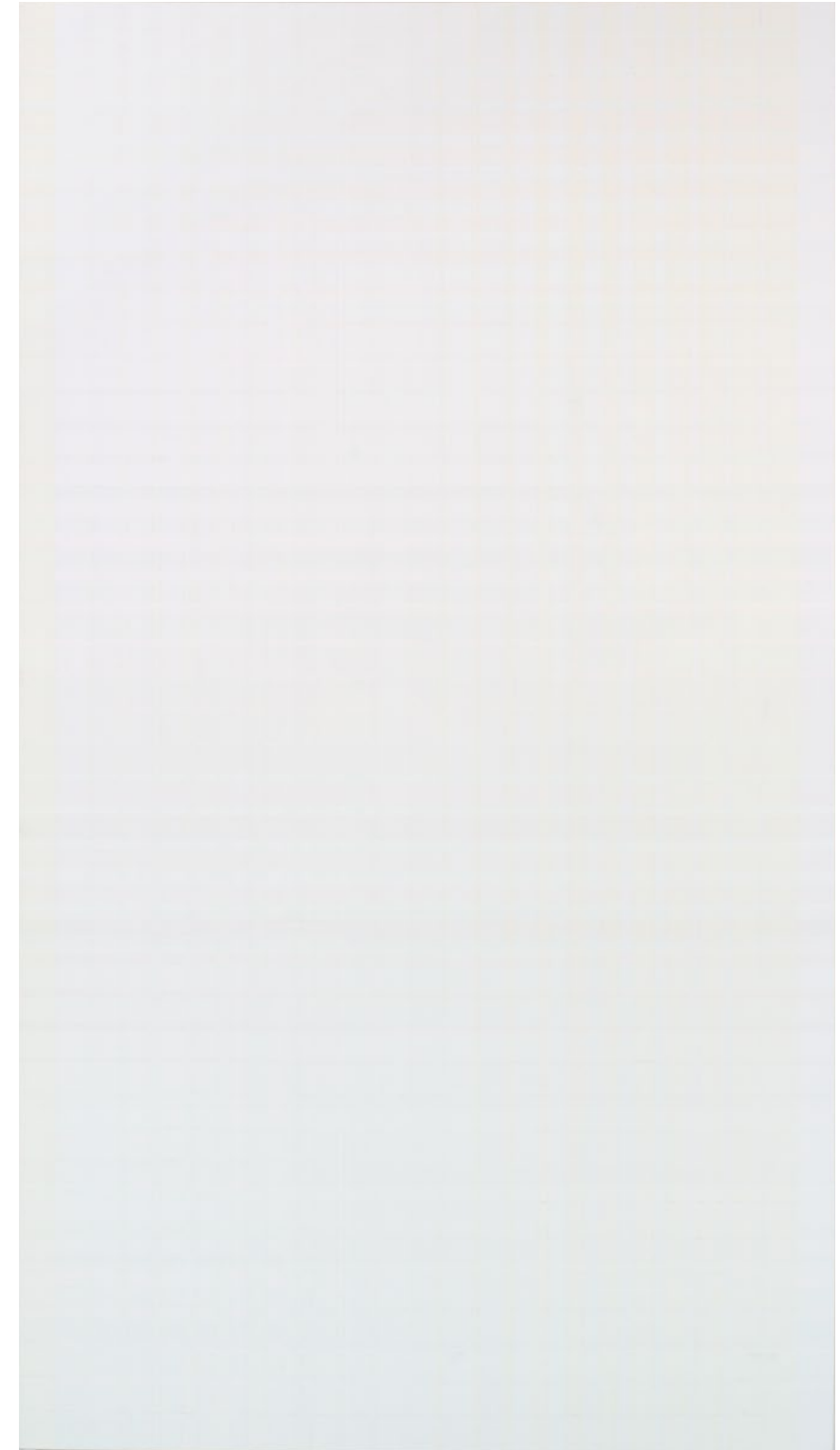


PLATE 65 II-15 (Lt/RO-BG), 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 50 1/2 in. (228.6 x 128.3 cm)

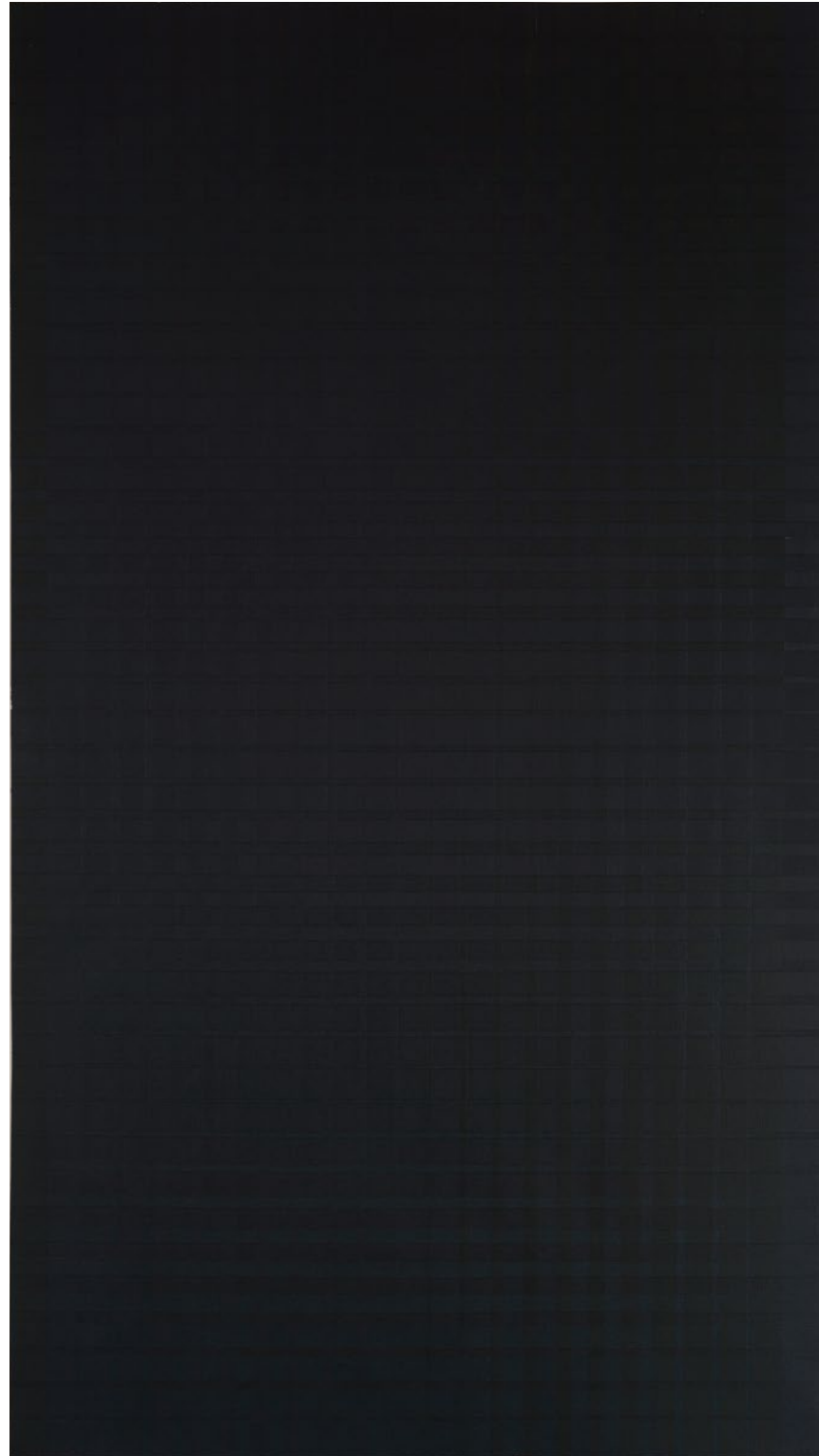


PLATE 66 II-15 (Dk/RO-BG), 2012-13. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 50 1/2 in. (228.6 x 128.3 cm)

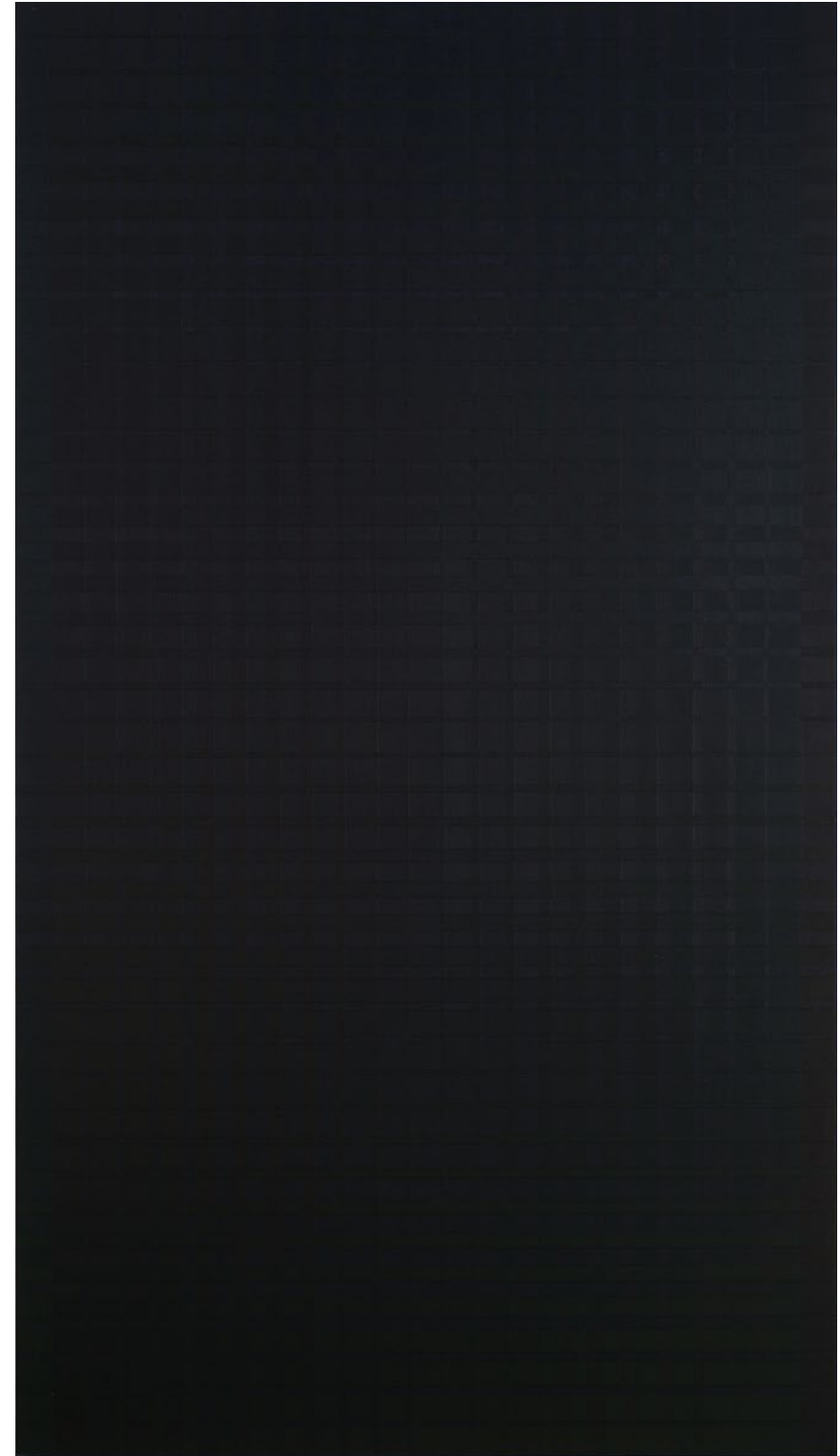


PLATE 67 II-15 (Dk/Y-V), 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 50 1/2 in. (228.6 x 128.3 cm)