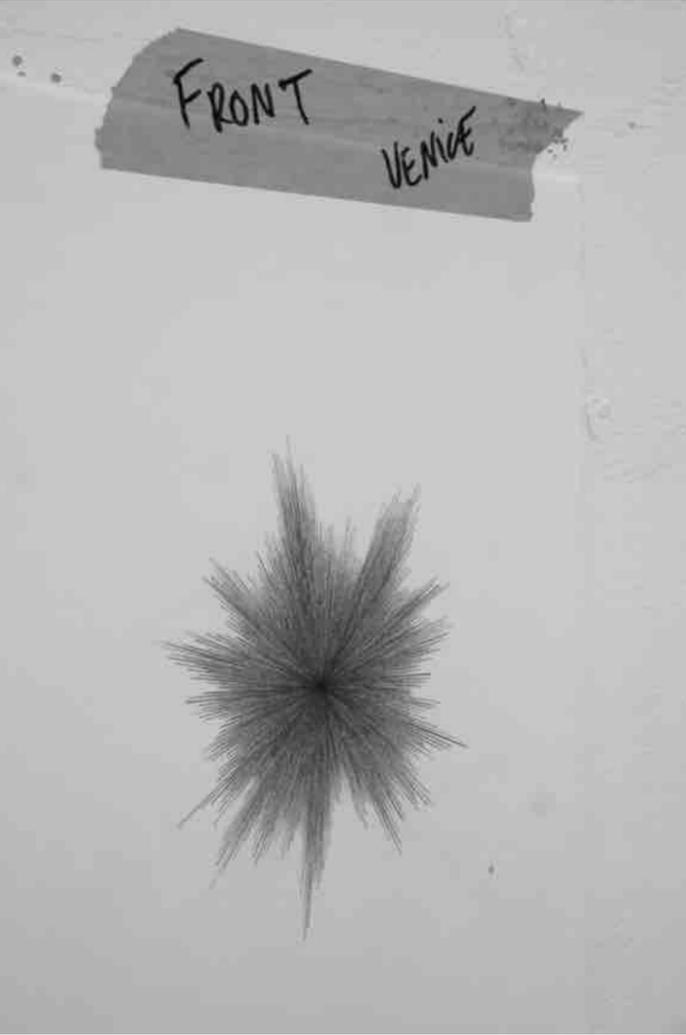


IDRIS KHAN

WORDS BENEATH WORDS



Idris Khan
Words Beneath Words

Victoria Miro





Fragments of Savagery

Nick Hackworth

There is a compelling and delicate savagery at play in the glass paintings of Idris Khan.

Like all his works these beautiful, chromatic explosions of largely illegible text are profoundly thoughtful and cultured. Though utterly contemporary they bear visually the formal influence of past masters, most closely in this case, the *Burst* paintings of Adolph Gottlieb. In other works and series, Khan both pays playful homage and adapts some of the ideas and aesthetic devices of the likes of Carl Andre, Frank Stella, Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin. The fragmentary texts themselves, stamped one over another into inky obscurity, bring, through reference, another panoply of great names into the picture, including among others Theodore Roethke, Emily Dickinson, Viktor Frankel and Idries Shah. All this is articulated with a supreme economy of expression and set within the cool, sharp edges of panes of glass.

Yet for all the sophistication of the work it seems, to me at least, to be driven at its heart by a kind of vital savageness. As Khan pointed out to me when I asked him about the texts that he stamps, he would rather I 'forget what the content is and worry about the feeling. The text ... is the starting point ... it gets stamped away. The painting is what is left.' What Khan has done in the past with multiple image worlds – such as the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher or the paintings of Caravaggio or Turner – he does here with language and the *idea* of language. The content of the appropriated subjects, however grand, is of little importance to the

final meaning of Khan's works. Rather, they are largely mined for the visual forms they contain, forms he extracts and presses into service.

Conventionally one would describe this tendency to appropriate and reconfigure as being *post-modern* but just in this moment, as a speculative thought-experiment, let us imagine the work to be *post-civilised* (a condition we may all experience somewhat sooner than anticipated). It is a thought inspired by the ideas of John Zerzan and his fellow anarchists and neo-primitivists, a group whose ideas, though decidedly fringe, are gaining increasing traction given the faltering arc of history. Having identified civilisation itself as the core problem of contemporary existence they fantasise about a world without cities, agriculture, accounting or writing.

With these thoughts in mind let us look at Khan's stamp paintings and imagine them to be the work of an anonymous artist from the neo-primitive society that would come after us. Wandering through the ruins of our culture they would pick up fragments of images and broken sentences and refashion them into something great, barbaric and vital.

Stripping words of their weight and symbolic significance and returning them to the status of marks, as Khan does in these stamp paintings, is I think an idea that would have appealed to Nietzsche, that great critic of civilisation. In his classic early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he articulated his thesis that the emergence of rationalism in fifth-century Athens was a catastrophe for Greek culture and the subsequent history of the West. He believed that the rational principle, with its totalising tendency, was corrosive to the ancient, mystical foundations of Ancient Greek culture with its acceptance and worship of the unknown and the unknowable. In an early notebook Nietzsche wrote 'Indescribable riches are lost to us', owing to the 'essential quality of Socratic aesthetics, whose most important law runs something like: "Everything must be understandable in order to be beautiful", a corollary to the Socratic saying, "Only the knowledgeable person is virtuous"'. In their dissolving of the texts' semantic meanings into these sublime, primordial, bursts of colour, Khan's stamp paintings present us with another kind of knowing: vital expositions of eternal recurrence.

It is especially pleasing to imagine these works as being neo-primitivist masterpieces while they hang in Victoria Miro Venice. There are few places on Earth that better manifest the drama that *is* the ongoing process of civilisation than Venice, this extraordinary city, built, unfeasibly in a swamp and slowly sinking back into it. The sheer collective will that created and sustained the city and its culture is visible at every turn and

has become the stuff of legend. Peter Ackroyd recounts in his biography of Venice that in the late eighteenth century the myth of 'the Venetian Secret' – the question of how successive generations of Venetian painters created the distinctively warm tones of Venetian painting – became an obsession of certain English painters, most notably Sir Joshua Reynolds. In a failed pursuit of 'the secret', Reynolds even scraped one of Titian's paintings back down to the bare canvas.

The past, both in its particulars and its fullness, is irrecoverable. Nietzsche knew this but perhaps Reynolds didn't. Whatever 'the Venetian Secret' was, he couldn't find it with a magnifying glass. Thus we might conclude that the future belongs to those who, as Khan does, with a necessary degree of savagery, take from past and present what they need and fashion from it, the new. It was indeed this impulse that animated the more violent tendencies within early Modernist thought. As the *Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto* proclaimed rather hopefully in 1919:

Tear down the churches and their allies the museums! Blast to smithereens the fragile idols of Civilisation! Hey, you decadent architects of the sarcophagi of thought [...] We have come to remove you! [...] Writing has no value! There is no market for literature! There are no prisons, no limits for subjective creativity! Everything is permitted! Everything is unrestricted!

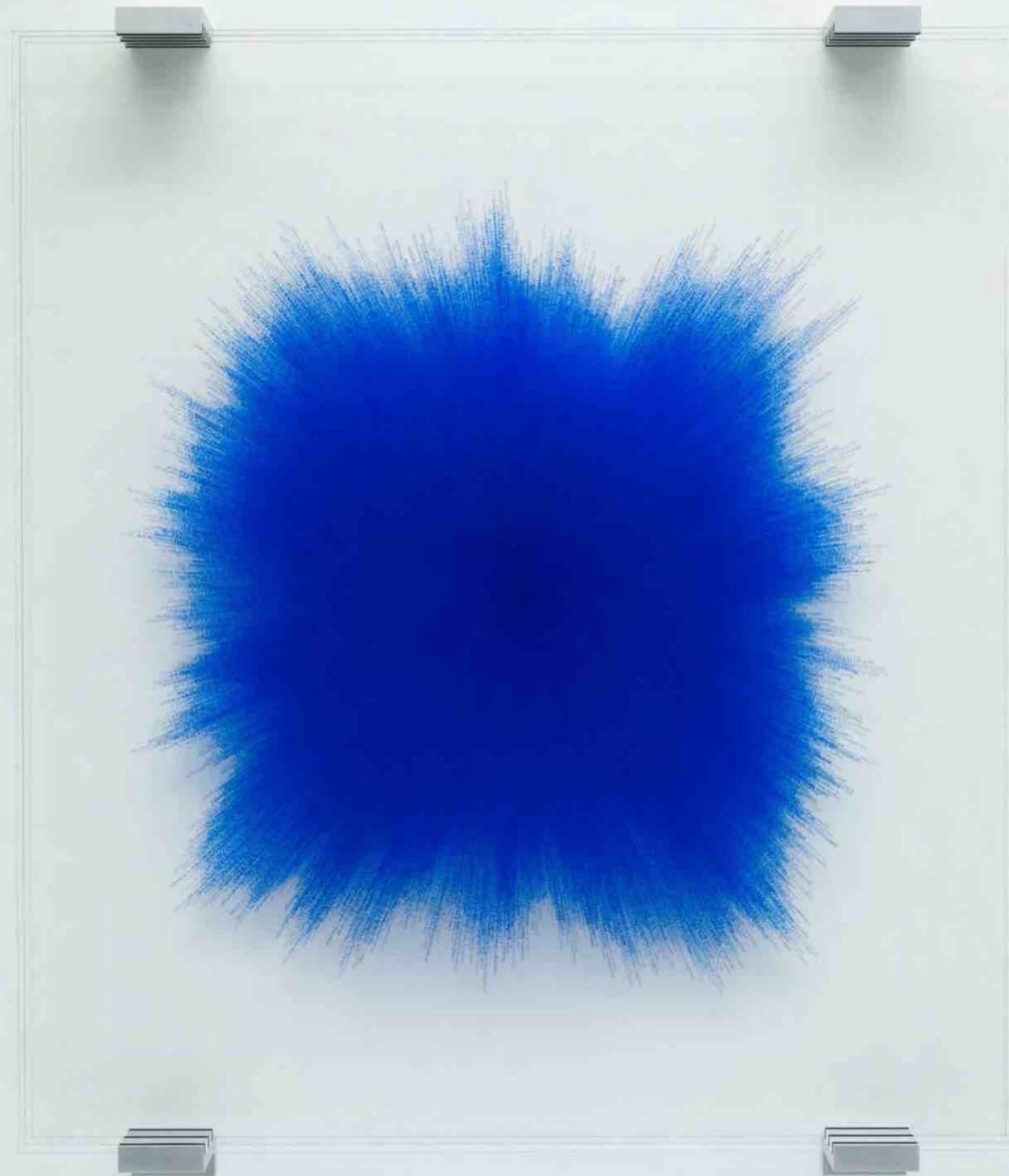
Evidently the Anarcho-Futurists were ahead of their time. It may fall to our generation, or to one that follows soon after us, to rediscover what a world without civilisation truly feels like. For the moment though, let us pretend that in these works we have been afforded a glimpse of what their great art will look like.

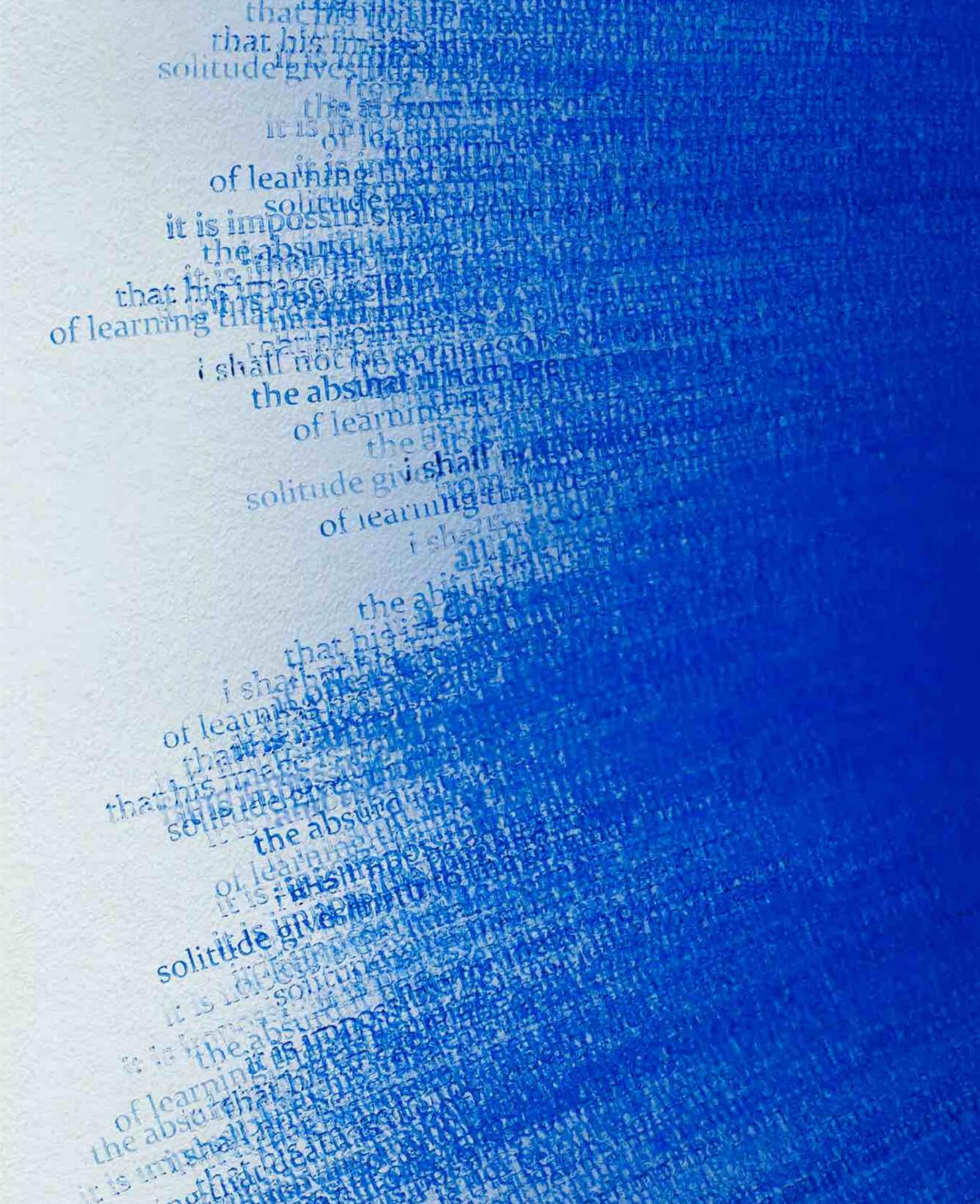
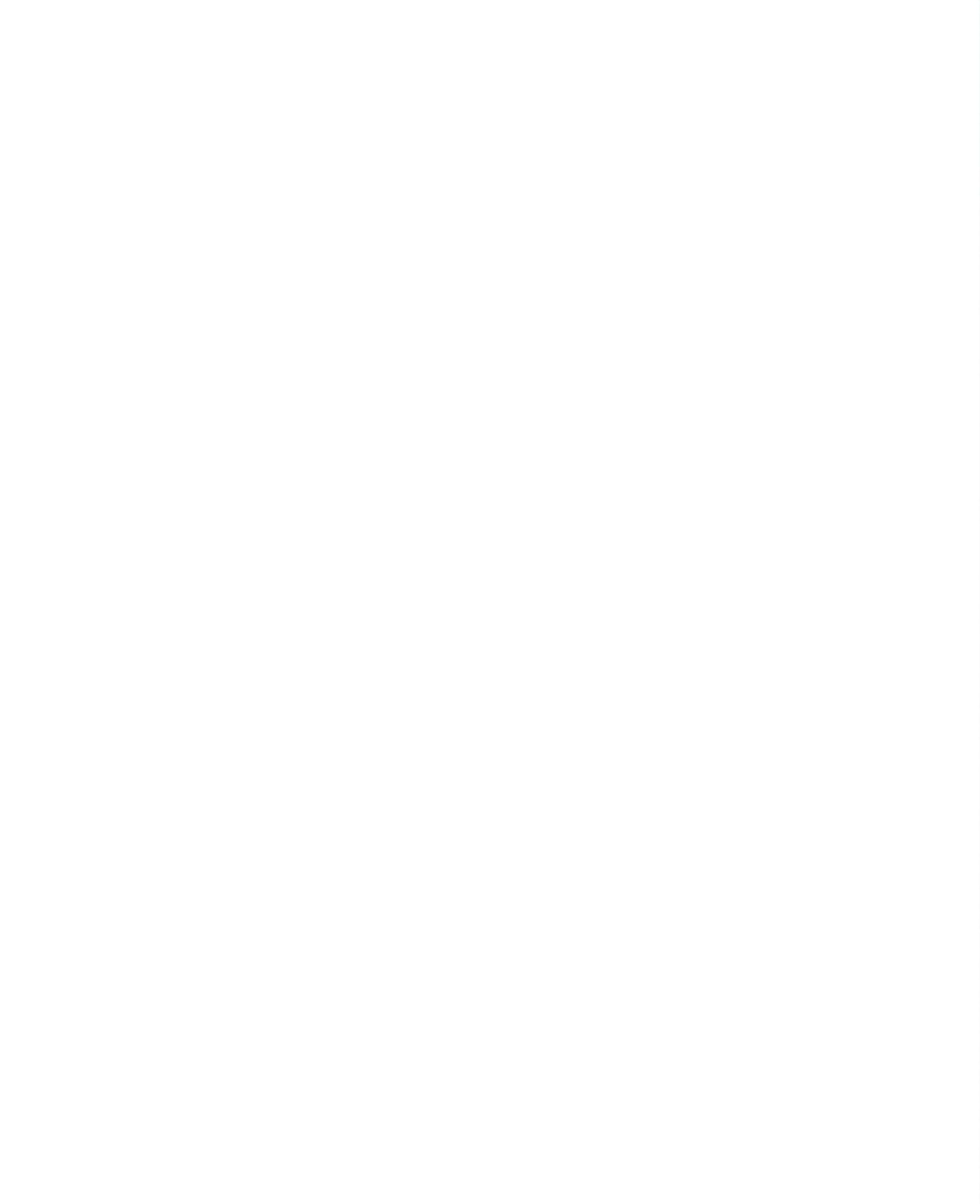


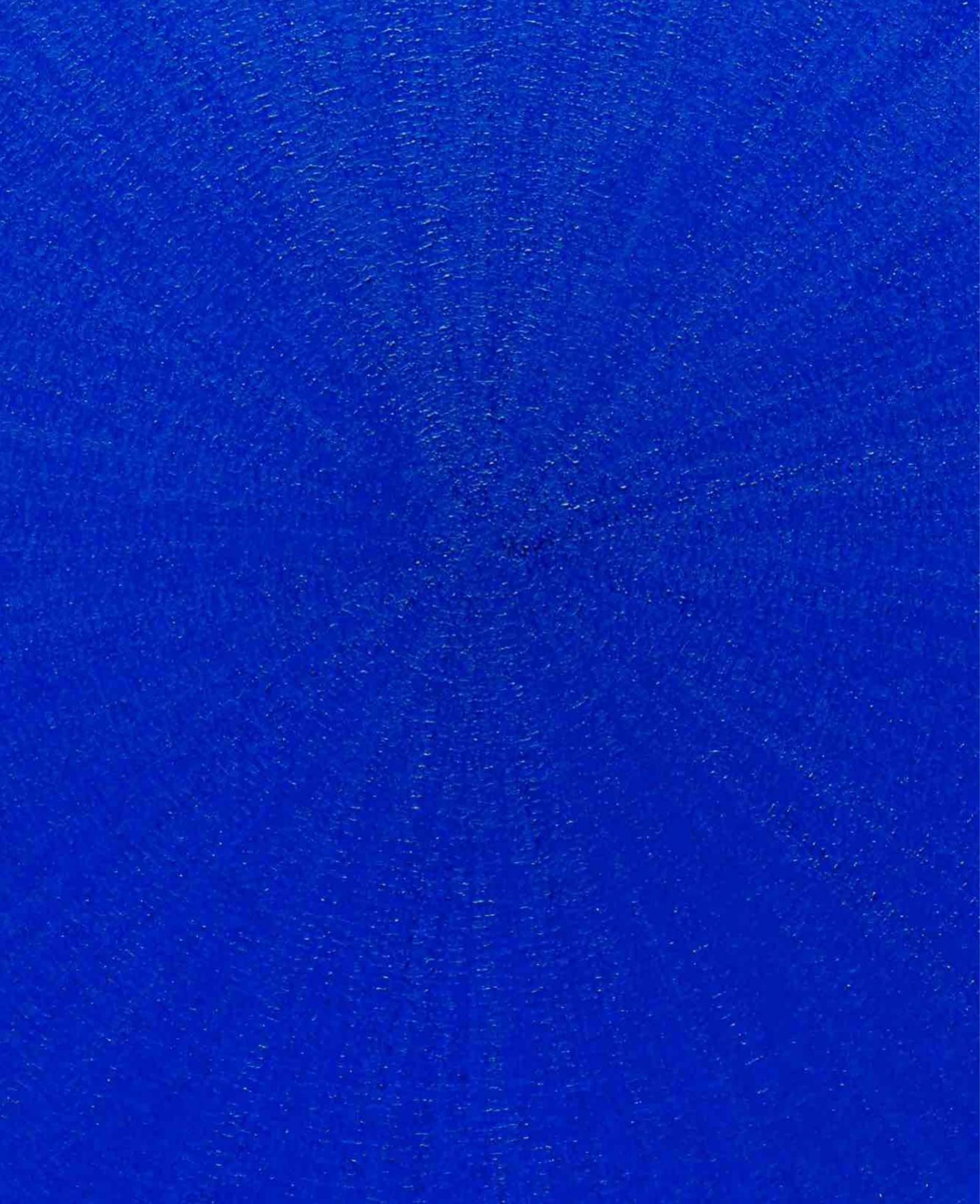
Idris Khan

Words Beneath Words

A Fundamental Pause, 2019
Oil based ink, glass and aluminium
165 × 140 × 18 cm
65 × 55⁷/₈ × 7¹/₈ in





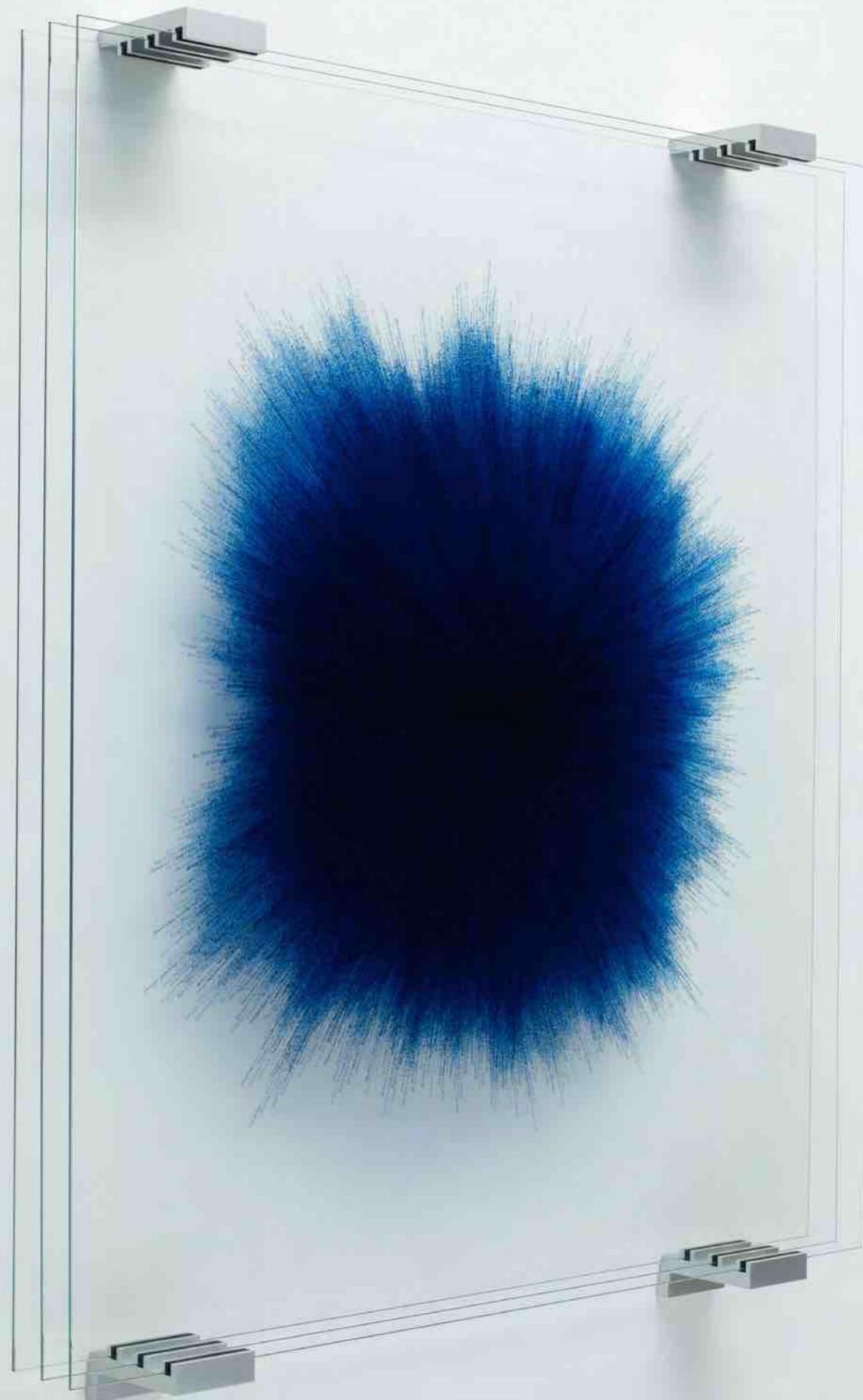


The Mind Enters Itself, 2019
Oil based ink, glass and aluminium
165 × 140 × 18 cm
65 × 55⁷/₈ × 7¹/₈ in

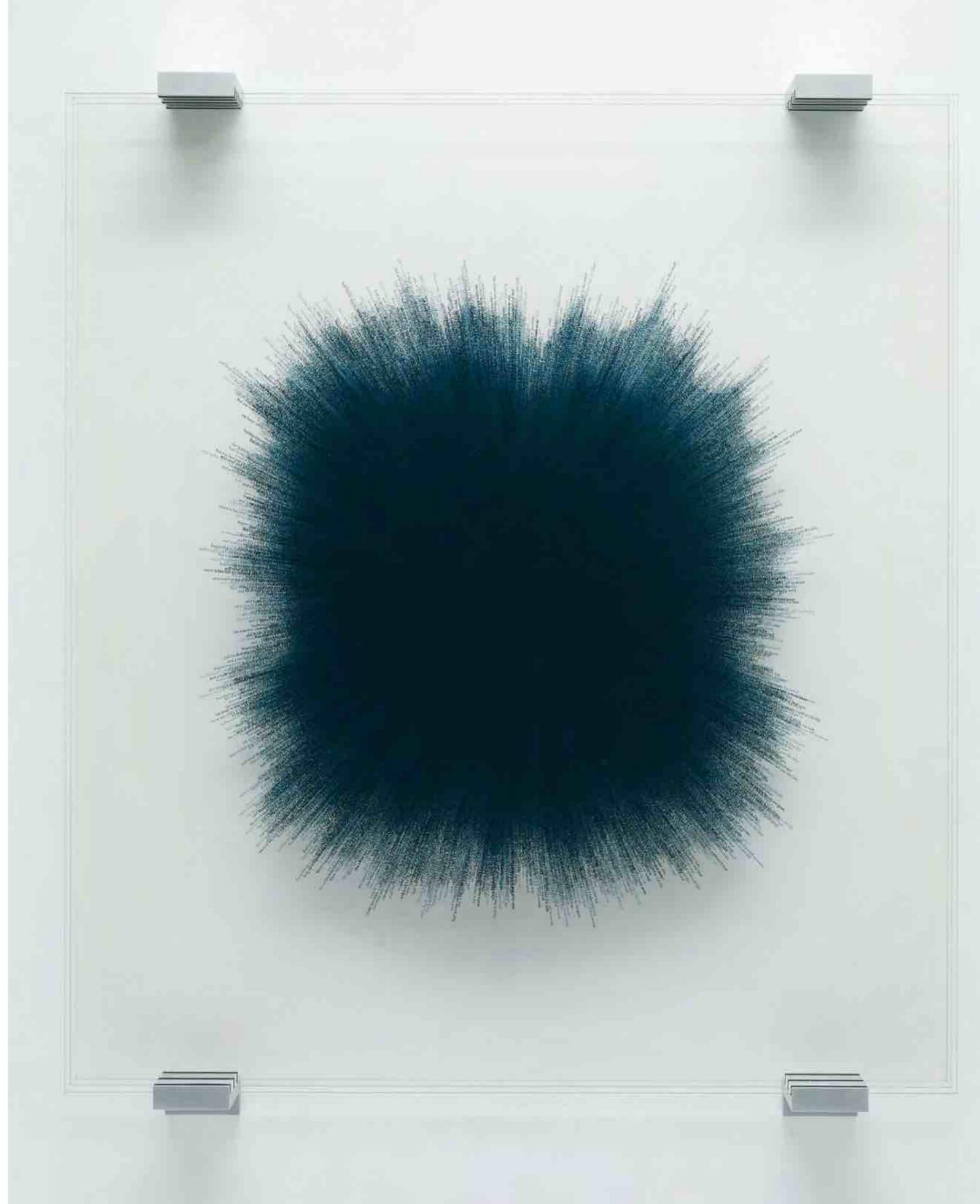




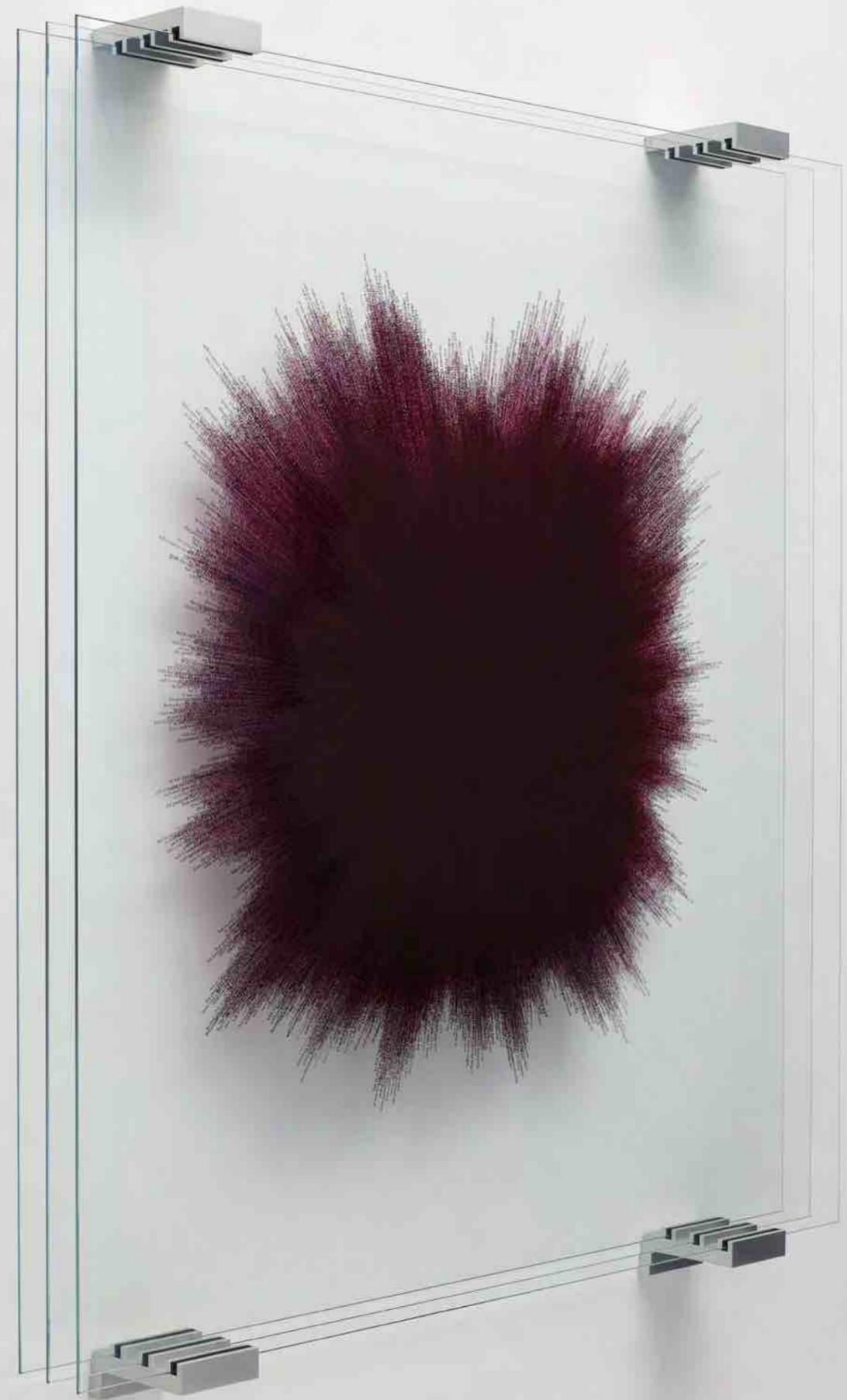
Steady Storm of Thoughts, 2019
Oil based ink, glass and aluminium
165 × 140 × 18 cm
65 × 55⁷/₈ × 7¹/₈ in



The Edge Is All It Has, 2019
Oil based ink, glass and aluminium
165 × 140 × 18 cm
65 × 55½ × 7⅛ in



The Words Beneath Words, 2019
Oil based ink, glass and aluminium
165 × 140 × 18 cm
65 × 55 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ in



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to find the right
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