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Jaco van Schalkwyk

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**Bait al-Hikma**

( House of Wisdom )  
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**GALLERY AOP**

**2 - 30 April 2011**

*The Bait al-Hikma was a library and translation institute in Abassid-era Baghdad founded in the 9th century. It is considered to be the intellectual center of the Islamic Golden Age. Having obtained the secret of papermaking from Chinese prisoners taken at the Battle of Talas (751 AD), the library flourished, supported by stationery shops selling thousands of books per day.*

*Renowned as a great center of learning, scholars from around the world were brought to the library, preserving and translating Greek, Indian and Persian texts including the work of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Euclid, Galen, Arybhata and Brahmagupta.*

*Perhaps its greatest resident scholar was Al-Khwarizmi, the father of algebra.*

*It is said that when the library was ransacked during the Mongol invasion of 1258, the river Tigris ran black with ink for six months from the large numbers of books flung into the river. The library was again ransacked during the American invasion of 2003, and remains partly destroyed.*



## INTRODUCTION

Wilhelm van Rensburg

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*Jaco van Schalkwyk's black ink drawings involuntarily invoke two types of enterprise: explaining the meaning of the abstract works, or discovering their meaning by examining the formal elements. The former approach references, in literary theory, poetics, and the latter, hermeneutics. Van Schalkwyk's drawings are undoubtedly lyrical and poetical in their aesthetic sensibility, but considering the cumulative, compounding meaning that emanates from the forms created in black printer's ink, the latter seems to be the more satisfactory option in dealing with the compelling enquiry that his work invites.*

The materiality of the ink inadvertently draws attention to itself. Its viscous nature determines the abstract forms: it seems to flow and congeal according to its own liquidity. The heavy black ink in Van Schalkwyk's drawings does not necessarily anchor the picture plane, and even sometimes prefers to defy gravity when it drips and flows freely from left to right over the paper. Eva Hesse said:

*"If a material is liquid ...I can control it but I don't really want to change it. I don't want to add color or make it thicker or thinner...I don't want to keep any rules; I want to sometimes change the rules. But in that sense, process, the materials, become important and I do so little with them, which is, I guess, the absurdity. Sometimes the materials look like they are so important to the process because I do so little else with the form. I keep it very simple."*

In exploring the uncontrollable nature of his medium and process, Van Schalkwyk deliberately lures the ink into 'battle' by blasting it from an industrial spray gun, forcing him to attempt to 'contain' the ink to prevent it from covering up the delicate marks already laid down.

Van Schalkwyk's chosen material – ink – transgresses into a surprising solidity when applied liberally. In this sense his drawings are reminiscent of those of Richard Serra. The themes in Serra's black, melted paintstick drawings are mass, density, volume. The melted paintsticks are spread over a large area, over which a window screen mesh is laid. On top of this is put down a large sheet of paper, which absorbs the black paint, attracting it like a magnet, to settle *en masse* on the surface.

*“Black is a property, not a quality. In terms of weight, black is heavier, creates a larger volume, holds itself in a more compressed field. It is comparable to forging. To use black is the clearest way of marking against a white field,”* according to Serra.

Whether fluid or solid, Van Schalkwyk's heavy use of industrial printing ink seems to cover up, and by the same process reveal that which is hidden. The seemingly random ink marks and surfaces are like words on a page. They need to be read.

*“Material is Metaphor”, says Anni Albers: “How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication? ‘Accidentally’, something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness or softness, it catches us and asks us to be formed. We are finding our language. Ideas flow from it to us and though we feel to be the creator we are in a dialogue with our medium. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become. What I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it, makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive. The finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art.”*

The meaning of Van Schalkwyk's abstract drawings resides in a comparison with Kazimir Malevich's *Black Suprematist Square* of 1914: simply a medium on a surface. Malevich's black square was painted on canvas, not quite regular, slightly tilted, pitch black, its bituminous surface badly cracked: the most famous black in the history of modern art. Contesting the concept of the image in abstract art denies many of the possibilities of interpretation offered by figurative images. Instead it demands an effort of the imagination, a creative response. We need to respond directly to the dynamic relation between its visible elements of colour, texture and form. In an astonishing moment of intuition Malevich had seen in that image the energetic origin for a wholly new way of painting. He had realized its mythic potential as a painted sign for a new beginning, the signifying progenitor of any number of created forms whose dynamic relations would take place in the imaged space of the painting rather than the imaginary space of a picture.

The *craquelure* of Malevich's *Black Suprematist Square* is indicative of the fact that the surface is not solid or static, but fluid, alive. It is almost as if the material engages with itself. Malevich had to restore the work soon after it was completed, and he often had to apply fresh coats of black paint. The work thus became a repeated gesture, signaling gestural art and becoming an artistic act, or a performance.

The *act* in Van Schalkwyk's drawings is paramount. The ink, intended for printing newspapers or books, is applied by painterly and by sculptural means in order to »

» make the marks and surfaces of his drawings: he uses chefs' knives to apply the ink thickly on the paper; he drips the ink on the paper like a Jackson Pollack would drip oil paint onto a canvas; he sprays the ink off the surface of the paper with a power tool and leaves it to run down the paper and congeal in its own time. Layering the ink in this way not only gives his drawings a painterly quality; the surface also becomes sculptural. The paper becomes an arena in which to act. What is to go on it is not a picture but an event unfolding in time.

The tension between surface and depth is what gives Van Schalkwyk's drawings their edge. Like an archaeologist, the viewer has to peel off one layer of material after another, uncovering ever more evidence in an attempt to see what lies underneath. Conversely, coming up 'for air' to the surface of the drawing, one is confronted with its compression, torsion and surface tension, giving it a 'vulcanized' appearance. At times the surface is pebbled with soft glossy peaks, and occasionally, with flat puckered patches. Underneath all this and partly covered or even obliterated, lies delicate drawings in graphite and pen and ink. Almost decorative in their simplicity, they invoke a different sensibility, a different culture. Emblematic of Arabic interlace, they connote an intricate mathematical construct or geometric pattern.

These drawings seem to hold as much information as the narrative of a story. At the same time they could well hide the chaos behind or beyond the picture plane:  
a memory of an event not captured on the paper itself.

Van Schalkwyk's drawings are informed by the illustrious legacy of abstract expressionism, *tachisme*, *Art Informel*, *Art Autre* (strands of gestural painting embodied in the work of Michel Tapié), and the work of the Gutai-group in Japan. The latter straddles the divide between abstract gestural painting and performance and is essentially a dialectic between material and spirit. Jiro Yoshihara, its leader said:

*"In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission. If one leaves the material, then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice. Keeping the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit."*

Van Schalkwyk's drawings connect the gestural with the material and integrate both visual and tactile perception, allowing the viewer to experience a dense intensified space in relation to materialized time.

†

*“All these neat, little houses and all these nice, little streets... It's hard to believe that something's wrong with some of those little houses.”*

*-Dustin Hoffman as Carl Bernstein in All the President's Men (1976)*

## HOUSES OF KNOWLEDGE

Jaco van Schalkwyk

...

I used synthetic printing ink, which I can obtain in large quantities. It is the same petrochemical ink used to print newspapers. The ink allows me to create expanses that spread independently of my will. To apply the ink I used a spray gun power tool. It is averse to detail and variation. With pen, I drew individual lines and collective patterns. They don't stand a chance, but some prevail. While drawing, I think of the social contract. Initially, I imagined the social contract as a series of extinct narratives. I imagined dismay at the immeasurable loss of knowledge that surely must coincide with those points of extinction- when great rivers run black for months on end.

*Is there any government today that may claim to represent its people? Is it not our task as citizens to arbitrarily ransack that which we were born into? To rescind the collections which have been amassed for our classification? Should we not, as a matter of conscience, discard into the river these innate filaments, these neat little houses on these neat little streets, in which we find ourselves arranged?*

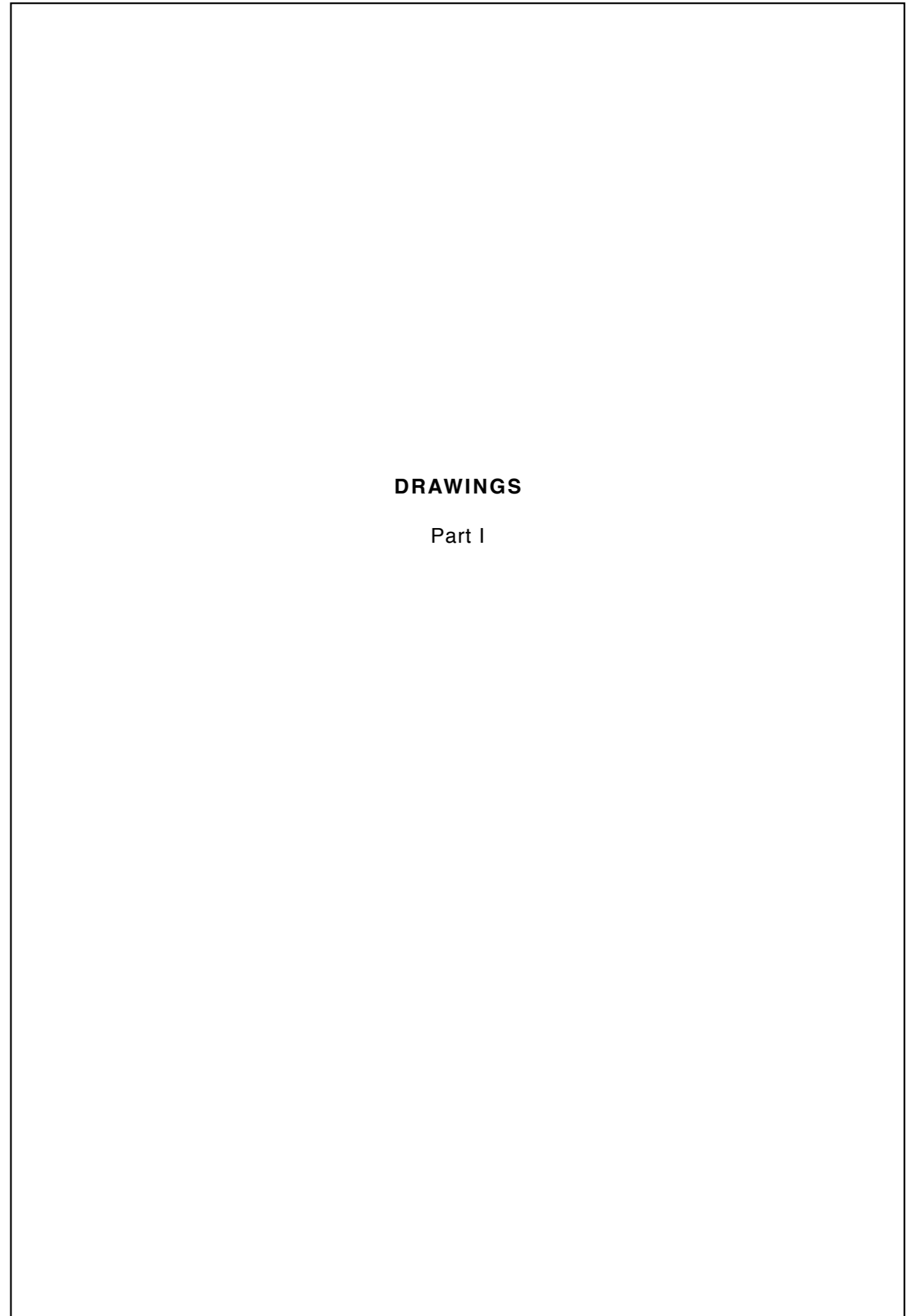
*What purpose do they serve but to stand as the ruins of an already extinct agreement?*

Gradually, as I learnt to control the spray gun, I began to find pertinence and sense in the extinctions: the social contract cannot return as a relevant narrative, without having first ceded priority to an indiscriminate loss of knowledge. After the point of extinction- when only the ramifications of the event are allowed to drip down the page- it becomes clear that our suffrage was not secured in 50 or 400 years. The flow of our liberty encompasses thousands and thousands of years.

And yet, we are by no means free of the tyranny of men.

Finally, colour returns: there is so much joy in the world, so much stuff we may employ to stymie disillusionment.

*Pretoria, March 24th, 2011*



**DRAWINGS**

Part I



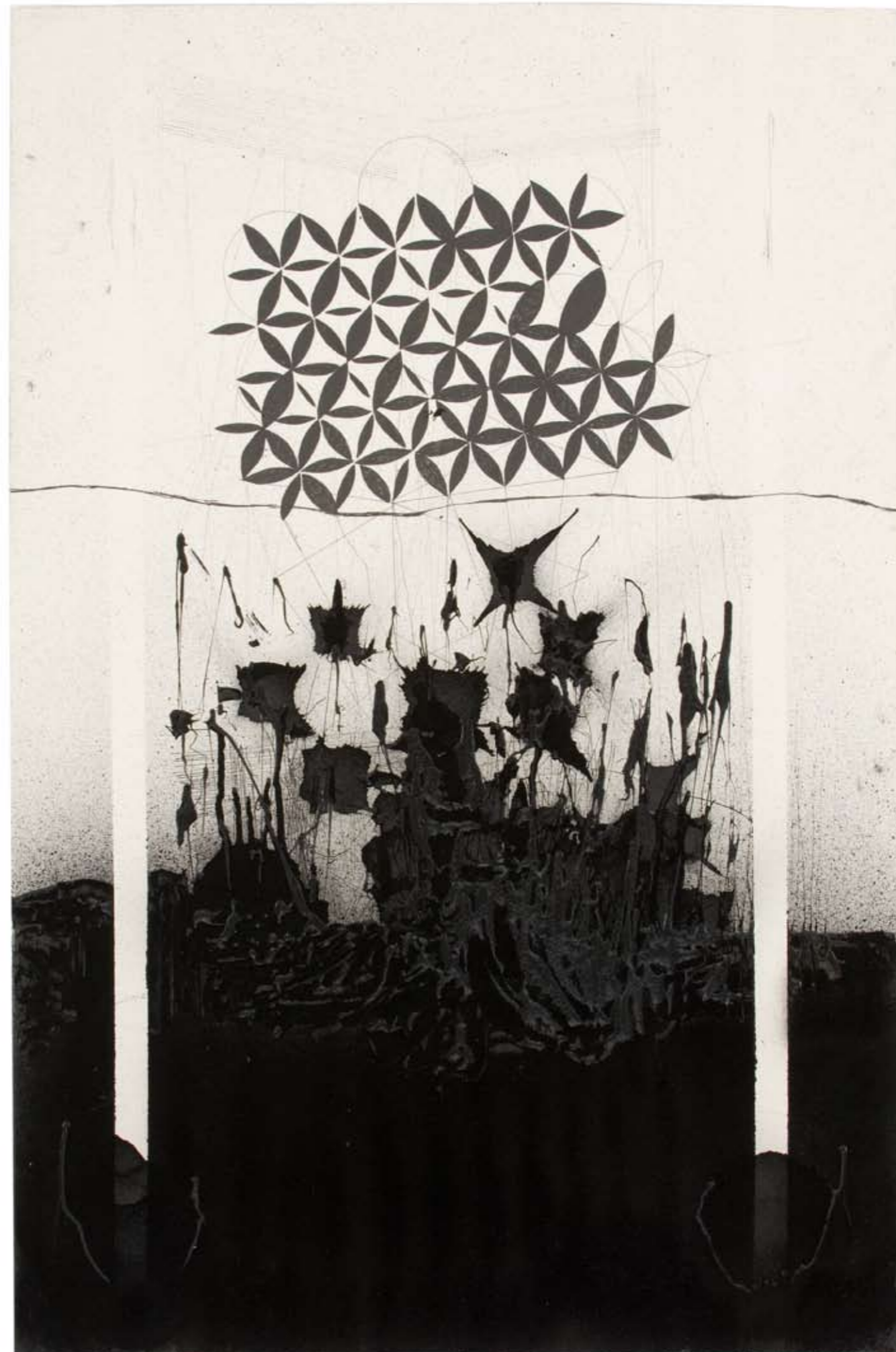
*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_01.* Etching ink, acrylic, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_02.* Etching ink, pen and ink, graphite lead on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_03.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_04.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.





*Bait al-Hikma, Part L\_05.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



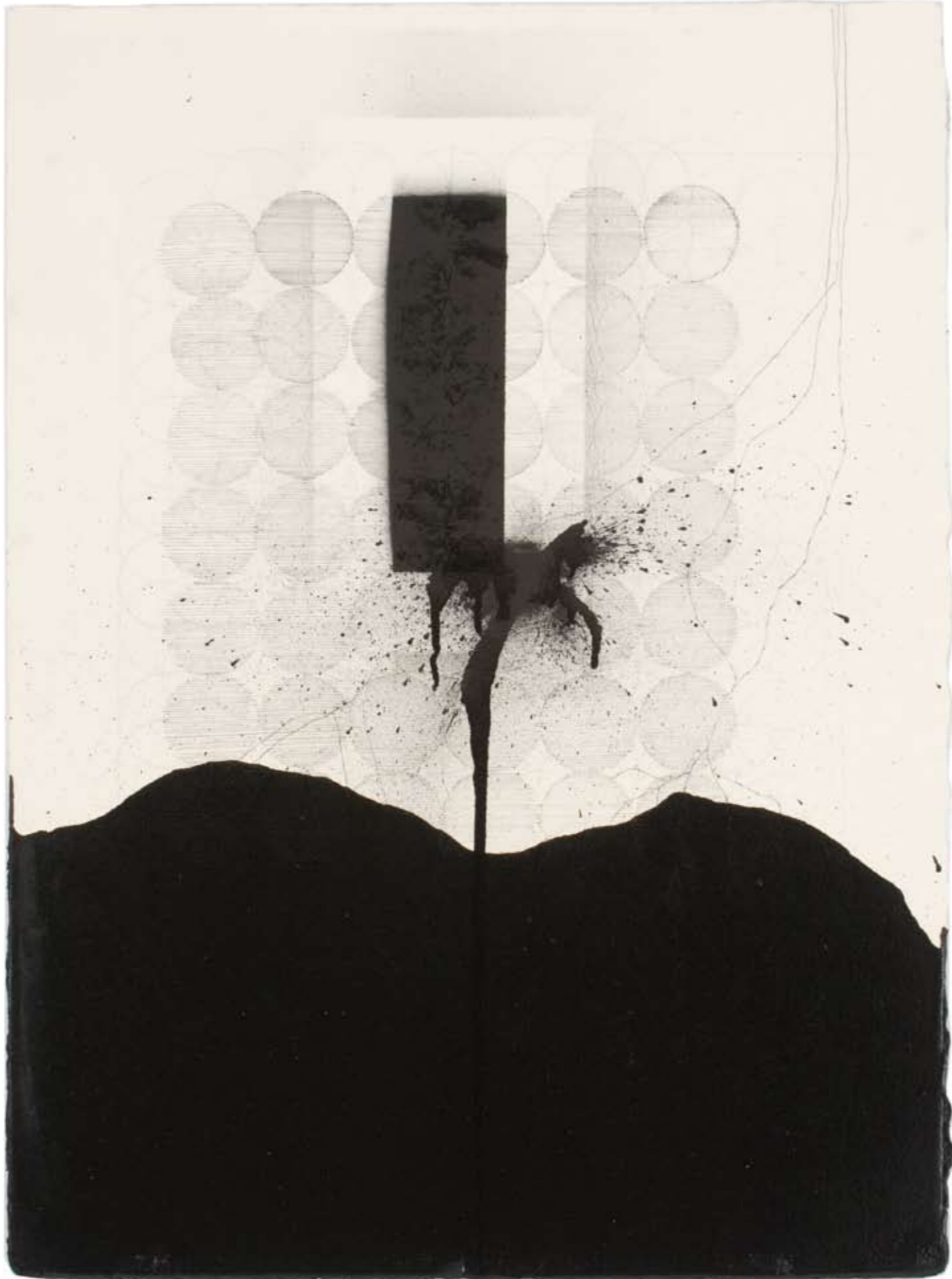
*Bait al-Hikma, Part L\_06.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



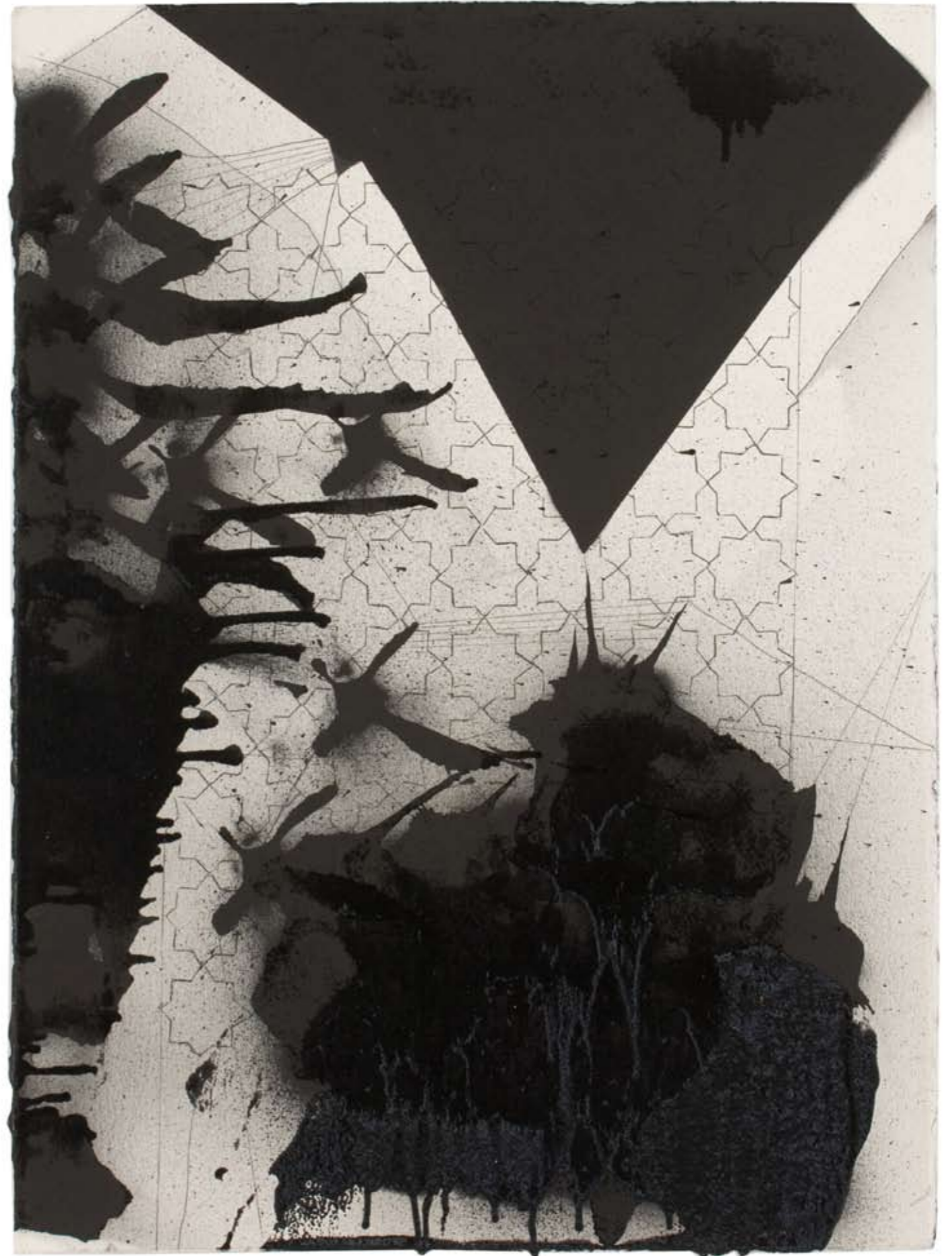
*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_07.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 770 x 566. 2011.



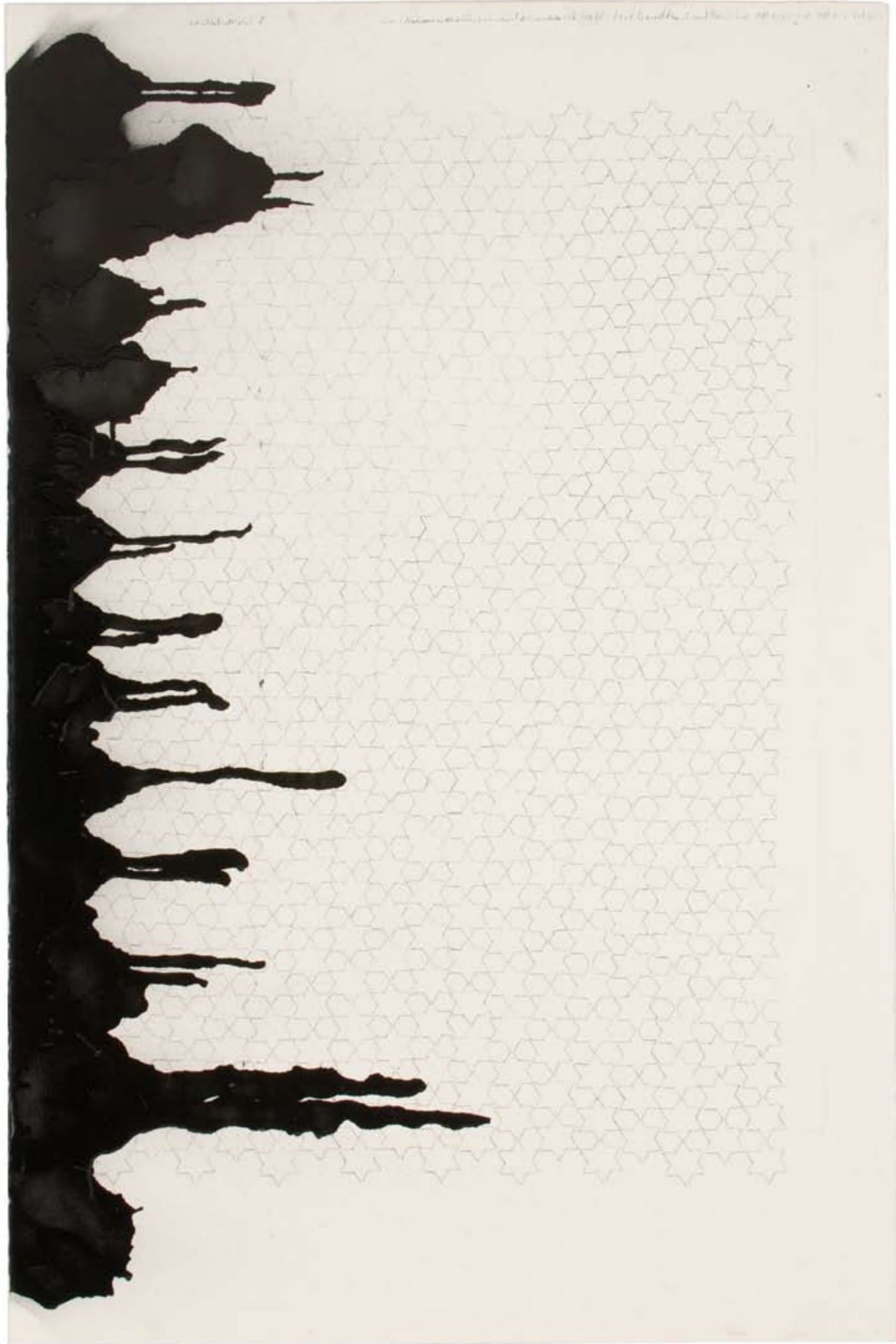
*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_08.* Etching ink, pen and ink, graphite lead on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



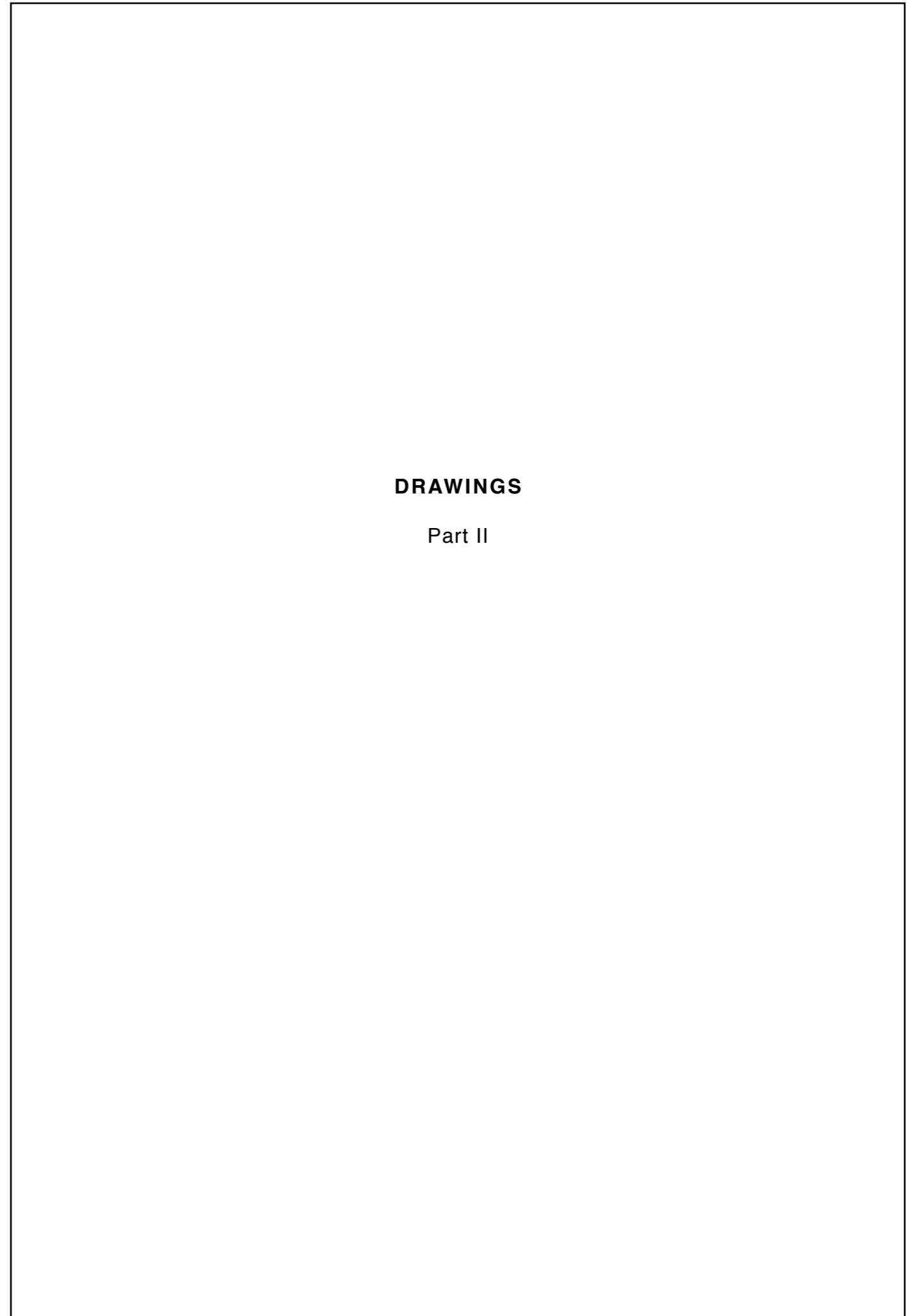
*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_09.* Etching ink, pen and ink, graphite lead on paper. 770 x 566, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_10.* Etching ink, pen and ink, graphite lead on paper. 770 x 566mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part I\_11.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm. 2011.



**DRAWINGS**

Part II



*Bait al-Hikma, Part II\_01.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 1000 x 660mm. 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part II\_02.* Etching ink, pen and ink, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part II\_03.* Etching ink, pen and ink, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Part II\_04.* Etching ink, pen and ink, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



*Beit al-Hikma, Part II\_05.* Etching ink, pen and ink, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



*Beit al-Hikma, Part II\_06.* Etching ink, pen and ink, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 1000 x 660mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Proof\_01.* Etching ink, pen and ink, graphite, dry pastel in Paraloid B72 solution on paper. 770 x 566mm, 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Proof\_02.* Etching ink, graphite on paper. 770 x 566mm, 2011.





*Bait al-Hikma, Proof\_03.* Etching ink, pen and ink on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



*Bait al-Hikma, Proof\_04.* Etching ink, graphite on paper. 770 x 566mm. 2011.



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