

ERIC AHO ICE CUTS

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

FOREWORD

Eric Aho first came to the attention of the Hood Museum of Art in 1994, when he was selected by then-Director Timothy Rub and then-Curator of European Art Richard Rand as one of four finalists in the museum's juried biennial exhibition *Regional Selections*. Aho was emerging as a serious and gifted painter of the New England landscape, and one of the most original as well. Recently, the museum acquired its first work by the artist, a large-scale painting from his ongoing *Ice Cuts* series, begun thirteen years after that *Regional Selections* exhibition. This acquisition inspires us, in turn, to mount

the first comprehensive museum exhibition of this body of work, which is tied to Aho's experience of the winter landscape of New England, to his Finnish-American heritage, and to the significant role the history of art plays in his painting. With this exhibition, the Hood provides visitors with an opportunity for sustained engagement with one artist's working process.

I would like to express my appreciation to the entire staff of the Hood Museum of Art, and in particular those who worked intensively on this exhibition and brochure: Patrick Dunfey for his

installation design and Sue Achenbach for framing; Nicole Williams for serving as assistant curator as well as exhibition coordinator; Nils Nadeau for overseeing, Kristin Swan for editing, and Alison Palizzolo for color-proofing the brochure; Amelia Kahl and Lesley Wellman for exhibition-related programming; and Katherine Hart for her always sensitive and thoughtful curatorial oversight. Thanks finally go to Rachel Portesi for photography of the work, to Christina Nadeau for designing the brochure, and to DC Moore Gallery in New York for facilitating the loans. Most of all, we thank the artist for wholeheartedly embracing this project during a busy time, and for his provocative work on this presentation of the *Ice Cuts* series.

With the Hood Museum of Art entering a time of renovation and expansion, it is fitting that one of our final exhibitions is devoted to winter landscapes. Exactly thirty years ago, in 1986, Dartmouth's first exhibition in its new museum building—and in these very same galleries—was titled *Winter*. It traced the tradition of depicting the season in both Eastern and Western art. Now, as winter gives way to early spring in 2016, the Hood will enter a more dormant season and reemerge with a refreshed, enlarged facility, designed by architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, featuring new galleries and an object study center that will enhance the museum's teaching mission.

Juliette Bianco
Deputy Director



The Finnish sauna Eric Aho built in southern New Hampshire, with its *avanto* in front.

INTRODUCTION

Many artists have chosen to turn their attention repeatedly to a single subject. The Impressionist Claude Monet painted about twenty-five canvases of haystacks in the fields near his home in Giverny, France, over several seasons in 1890–91. Concentrating on these conical structures, he captured the light at a specific moment in time, emphasizing its effects on texture and form. The constancy of the scene provided him with the opportunity to experiment with how color and brushstrokes can describe a subject as it transforms from one hour to the next.

Ice Cuts, an ongoing series by painter Eric Aho, fits squarely within this tradition of an artist revisiting a subject, often exploring variations on a theme, much like a repeated phrase or structure that echoes through a musical composition or work of literature. Aho's knowledge of and sensitivity to the history of art pervades his thinking about painting and his own practice. It is telling that he has chosen such a pared-down, abstract motif for this series. The rectangular swimming hole cut into the frozen surface of a pond becomes a meditation on the nuances of light and color and on the act of painting itself.

Aho has worked for over twenty-five years within the tradition of landscape painting and has cited a number of influences, such as the drawings of Rembrandt and Goya, the cloud-filled landscapes of the English artist John Constable, the luminous canvases of the American Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church, and the work of Monet. His subject, for at least twenty of those

These paintings have made me wonder how a single painted image can mediate the equivalent level of tension and sensation in our relationship to the physical world.
—Eric Aho, 2012

years, has often been the vistas of northern New England's Connecticut River Valley in all seasons and lights, but during this time he also created landscapes in other countries, including France, Russia, Finland, Canada, Ireland, and Cuba. Like Monet, who often started works outside but completed them indoors, Aho at times works in *plein air*, on site, sketching or painting smaller canvases or works on paper before making a larger painting in the studio. Significantly, as the artist explains in the interview that follows this essay, he then creates smaller additional variations that explore other aspects of the motif. In the last decade (particularly in the last six years), Aho has begun to paint more abstractly, noting that these recent works are about imagination and the materiality of the paint, as well as the landscapes that inspired them.¹

Historically, few European landscape artists made winter a major theme of their work. Northern artists inevitably depicted winter landscapes more frequently than their southern counterparts, beginning with genre scenes of everyday life such as Netherlandish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder's mid-sixteenth-century masterpiece *Hunters in the Snow*. Later, Scandinavian artists such as Johan Christian Dahl in the first half of the nineteenth century and Fritz Thaulow in the second made luminous and impressionist winter scenes, respectively, and English artist J. M.W. Turner occasionally dazzled with scenes of avalanches and dramatic winter storms. French Impressionists Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro—who were interested in the

transitory effects of light in a particular observed landscape—took advantage of the opportunity that snow afforded for coloristic effects. Monet painted winter scenes of such places as Argenteuil, Giverny (the previously noted snow-covered haystacks), Paris, Honfleur, and Norway.

Aho's engagement with the landscapes of winter seems to be a natural result of living and working in northern New England, and he has made a marked contribution to the artistic tradition of portraying the icy season. He first painted a winter scene when he moved to Vermont to teach at the Putney School in 1989–90, as he transitioned from being primarily a printmaker to focusing on painting. His interest in making cold-weather landscapes was reinforced by trips to Canada, Finland, Russia, and Norway's Arctic coast. He states that it wasn't until his Fulbright year in Finland in 1991–92 that he "devoted [his] attention to addressing the nuance and understanding [the] challenges of the winter."² Photographs show him bundled up in a parka with his easel in the unforgiving cold of Arctic Norway, and a Polaroid taken some years later by his wife, Rachel Portesi, shows him donning the same gear on blustery Cape Cod.

Since he first began to paint, he has completed at least several winter-inspired canvases every year. Some of his quieter scenes, such as *Winter Cathedral* (2006), show snow-blanketed fields overlooking the Connecticut River. Two of the most striking works are *Ice Jam* (2008) and *Ice Field* (2009), which depict the remarkable configurations of blocks of ice on the



Eric Aho, *Winter Cathedral*, 2006, oil on linen, 62 x 80 inches. Private Collection.

river as they push against each other after a partial thaw. He stated in a 2012 interview: “Winter takes me imaginatively to faraway impossible reaches. Even if it might be a view of the Rockies or of Vermont or New Hampshire, for me the winter is imaginatively about the farthest point on earth.”³

This sense of winter being another space and time is reflected in Aho’s series *Ice Cuts*, which began in 2008 and is still in progress. This body of work is tied to Aho’s decision to build a sauna beside a pond in Walpole, New Hampshire, not far from his Vermont home. A Finnish-American family tradition, which Aho’s father introduced him to as a child, the sauna (followed by a plunge into icy waters) was an experience that the artist wanted to create for his own family. In 1999–2000, with the help of a local carpenter and visiting Finnish friends, Aho built the sauna himself on a drumlin (an unusual sloping hill formed by glaciers) overlooking the Connecticut River. Since that time, it has been a site

for weekly family excursions throughout the year and where, each winter, Aho saws a rectangular hole in the frozen pond, roughly twenty feet from the sauna porch, to complete the two-part cycle of warming and cooling the body. Just as cooking traditional meals is a way of connecting to and maintaining familial roots, the sauna has been a conduit to Aho’s cultural heritage, first as a ritual and second as a subject for his art. He painted his first *Ice Cut* work, from which the series grew, nearly eight years after building the sauna.

Aho paints not the sauna itself, but the hole cut into the adjacent icy surface. Creating and depicting the plunge pool each year echoes his father’s own ice-cutting experience, as told to the artist repeatedly during his childhood and again with final urgency on his father’s deathbed in 1996. Aho reinforces this connection by titling some of the works for the early Depression years of his father’s childhood, when the elder Aho first joined in the formative cultural experience of cutting and harvesting the ice. The artist uses an antique saw to cut the ice (see page 6); each week throughout the winter the hole he makes is approximately the same size, about 3 x 4 feet. It is made in nearly the same location, and traces of the previous week’s hole can be seen, much like a painting’s pentimenti. Aho intuitively understood the hole as an abstract motif, with a mutability caused in part by environmental factors and by his physical position in relation to the cut when he was sketching or painting. The depth of the ice, the light of the day, the reflectivity or opacity of the water, the snow accumulating around the opening, and the angle of the view on the ice cut—all of these elements differentiate the paintings in terms of subject. They are also distinguished by

material and facture—the scale of the work, the artist’s brushwork, the palette and the medium and support, whether watercolor, oil, or monotype. Aho’s steady work on this series for the last nine years allows for a meditative contemplation of the subject. He has observed that for some viewers the ice cut is something that attracts; for others it can be frightening in its empty darkness. It can either evoke the void of the grave (as in Gustave Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*) or reflect the infinity of the yellow arctic sky.

The artist himself has not had the opportunity to view these works together—in various media and scales, from the simple sketches to the large canvases—before this exhibition. As the *Ice Cuts* series was initially conceived as a ten-year project, Aho plans to continue work on it for at least another year. Still, this partial retrospective reveals gradual, meaningful changes in the series to date. While the first large canvases emphasized the stark darkness of the rectangular hole in the ice, Aho recently has introduced brighter colors such as yellow and blue. One might be tempted to read in this shift a personal narrative, prompted by the work’s potent imagery. Yet the lightening of Aho’s palette in the series can also be seen as an evolution that has more to do with explorations of the central theme, coupled with a growing sense of artistic freedom. As an exercise in sustained imagery, the *Ice Cut* series stands alone in his oeuvre—a disciplined exercise in memory and the language of abstraction.

Katherine Hart
Senior Curator of Collections
and Barbara C. and Harvey P. Hood 1918
Curator of Academic Programming

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Katherine Hart: We are here to talk about your almost decade-long *Ice Cuts* project in relationship to an exhibition of this work at the Hood Museum of Art. Can you describe how this series came about?

Eric Aho: It came out of something that I was already deeply familiar with, but I had never paid close attention to before. The hole in the ice, the *ice cut*, is many things to me: it is the swimming hole (the *avanto*, in Finnish), a plunge pool in front of the Finnish sauna; it is about the cultural legacy of harvesting ice in New England; and it is also about the act of painting. Following the heat of the sauna *inside* the building, you emerge *outside* and jump quickly into this hole. It is a year-round activity: in the spring or fall you swim in cool water, and in the winter this icy water. I think it emphasizes a contrast of nature and of the elements, and reminds you of what your body can tolerate. Following the plunge, you sit on the porch. At my sauna, there's a porch where you look out at the Connecticut River Valley, but then when you look down, back at the ice cut, there it is, this sort of edited object. It's a piece taken out of nature. The ice has been cut through; it is like a veneer—a fragile covering.

KH: It's like a skin.

EA: It's a skin. Sometimes six inches, sometimes fourteen inches, sometimes two feet thick, as it was last winter. For fifteen years or so I've sat—or rather, *before* I started this project I sat—on that

porch and I looked out at it. Then it occurred to me one day that this dark opening might be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I mean, I'm often asking myself that question. Today, driving north, I saw remarkable skies and clouds. We all wonder these things. But in my particular life and among all the things that I scrutinize, here's something that's sitting right before me, and I hadn't given it that kind

of attention before. It had been a utilitarian object, this hole in the ice. I love cutting it, I love the feel of cutting it, I love that exercise in the winter.

KH: Do you use a traditional ice-cutting tool, or do you use something more modern?

EA: No, no. It's all “old school.” It's a nineteenth-



The *avanto* (Finnish for hole in the ice or plunge pool) reflecting the artist and his sauna.

century ice saw—in fact, it came from a barn in New Hampshire, unused, sitting there all this time. I acquired it from a fellow who had just cleared out the ancient barn. There it was, along with other ice-cutting tools, the tools of the trade that I wish I had also acquired at the time. The saw was still in its original wooden sheath with leather straps, and it dates from sometime just before 1900, when ice harvesting by hand was at its peak, really. It went on through just after World War II when in-home

refrigeration became more widely available. I now have the chisels, the tongs, the cleats and the weights, and most of the things one would require to form an ice-harvesting operation, if that were ever my intention. But mostly I have those things for anecdotal interest. But the saw is a tool I use every week, in the winter, and it's a remarkable thing in and of itself. Sharp as the day it was forged, and has never been sharpened since. So when it occurred to me—that aha moment—I just, I couldn't believe it.

For the first time, I saw this familiar object as something completely other, as something I could manage in painting. I conceptualized it there and then, really, though it wasn't until I started painting the first of the *Ice Cuts* that I began to understand the formal, cultural, and art-historical implications this form would present over, now, almost ten years.

KH: I'm aware that you are deeply involved in your Finnish heritage. Can you talk a little bit about that—about your father, and also about your own engagement, how that happened over time?

EA: Well, the home in southern New Hampshire I was brought up in was very different from my father's Depression-era upbringing—which he often called “growing up *in Finland, in America*”—in Townsend, Massachusetts, one of the Finnish communities just outside of Fitchburg. His family settled there in 1920, and he was raised on a small self-sustaining farm. I often heard from my father—in fact, on his deathbed in 1996, he once again told the “story”—of cutting and harvesting the ice on Lake Potanipo in Brookline, New Hampshire. He had told it to us (my brothers and me) innumerable times throughout childhood, to the point of, “Oh, Dad, not again—we don't need to hear that story again.” But it shocked me that nearly the last words that passed his lips were again about this event. He was, as I imagine it now, reliving it, and he had been trying to share it, impart it, this formative experience, through his recounting it. Of course, we can never go back to 1932, with the old Finns and the smell of wool and the horses—

KH: Wet wool.



Eric Aho cuts into the ice to create his *avanto*, while his daughter plays by the Finnish sauna.

EA: Wet wool, and the sounds so vivid. Eventually, diesel equipment came in. When you talk about transition periods, even from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century—in a way, that was my father. He was that hinge. And it is still, for me, a touchstone to the nineteenth century, to the old world. When I first cut through the ice with my saw, I was aware that this bore some resemblance to my father's activity. Then, as I began to paint it, and I would notice the scoring of the ice I would have to do in order to mark out the spot, I grew more interested. I went and researched a little bit about ice harvesting, and I familiarized myself with a lot of those techniques. An element of the so-called "research" into this painting was actually research into cultural history, local history, and certainly the history of the Finnish community. They were farmers in the summertime, and otherwise, in the winter (farmers typically don't have much to do in the winter), ice harvesting became another chore and source of income.

KH: That's what my grandfather did—farmer during the year, and he ice-cut during the winter.

EA: Right. And it was social too. You fill up your own icebox and that of your friends, and what's left you pack in sawdust or hay and put in the boxcars of the train headed to Boston for ports unknown. It's a multilayered, multifaceted project, which I wasn't aware of initially. All the many layers revealed themselves slowly, and have kept my engagement all this time.

KH: So, when you were growing up with your father, did you do the sauna and he cut the ice, or did you participate in this process when you were a kid?

EA: The sauna, yes, but in the winter, no. This is something that I reclaimed. We didn't have a sauna at home where we could do it ourselves. We had to travel back to the Finnish community in Fitchburg for that. So, in a way, it's reclaiming this birthright, and making that available for my family.

KH: Can you talk about when you decided to do this? Because obviously you acquired a place where you could start this tradition with your own family. When did you do that?

EA: It was around 1998–99. I became friendly with the owners of an orchard, in southern New Hampshire, just a short drive over the river from my home. The orchard is a very unusual and beautiful apple orchard on a drumlin overlooking the Connecticut River—very rare, geologically speaking, to have a pond, and then an orchard on a drumlin. It offers a spectacular view. The owner was a businessman from Boston, and he managed this orchard until he passed away a few years ago. Now his wife runs it. One day I said to the husband, "I have a building I'd like to build, and I need a pond, and you have a pond in need of a beautiful building." We had a conversation, and he was open to the idea. Then we sited it, built it, and there it stands today. We use it every week.

KH: That's a very Vermont story, I think.

EA: It is. It's a cross-the-river story. Curiously, I grew up in New Hampshire, so each week I'm sitting in New Hampshire looking from my childhood home over the river to my adult home. Didn't Maxfield Parrish say he lived in New Hampshire to have a

better view of Vermont? There's a level of autobiography there. But to expand on the question you asked about family, when I first traveled to Finland in 1991, I discovered my cousins—my father's cousins, and now my second cousins. Well, of course they're Finns, so they're happily continuing this culture, which had been interrupted with my grandparents' arrival to the States. Meeting them really put the spark into me to reclaim that tradition for myself Stateside.

KH: And what brought you to Finland?

EA: I took a Fulbright Fellowship in 1991–92, and an American-Scandinavian Foundation grant in '93. With the help of those organizations, I finished my graduate work.

KH: What did your dad think about this, you spending so much time in Finland?

EA: Oh, he was thrilled. He expressed no active interest in going back. I think, given all the time he spent in Europe during the war—he did say, a number of times, that that was enough travel for a lifetime. I think he was happy to be at home. But, he was thrilled that I could travel back, that it was important to me. He was astounded that I found a whole thread of family that was almost forgotten.

KH: You've been talking about reconnecting, and it's maybe not a coincidence that you built this place for yourself a few years after your dad died. What he was speaking about on his deathbed—you were saying it had a very strong resonance for you then.

EA: It did. I listened as he labored to share the details so strongly etched in his mind. Some weeks after his death, going over the scene again in my own mind, I realized this was the very last thing he said to me, the last thing he would give me. All I could think about was why that? And when I first cut the hole in the ice (though for a very different purpose), I realized I was reconnecting without really intending to. And Dad was also a builder of saunas, though he never built one for himself. He and his best friend, Eino Hill, built “any number of saunas”—that’s how he put it—I take that to mean anywhere from two to six. This was one of their summer jobs, for the Finns in Townsend.

KH: So it’s a natural thing for you to have done.

EA: It was. I regret he wasn’t there to help with the logs, and fit them together.

KH: And be there for the sauna itself.

EA: And that of course! I did have friends come from Finland—Tommi Koivisto, a close friend and talented carpenter; his father-in-law, Yrjö Kautto; and Yrjö’s grandson, my godson, Jaakko. I also worked with Ken Christie, a great local carpenter and a great guy from Alstead, New Hampshire. Ken knew how to make the building, just didn’t know quite what it was going to be used for, didn’t understand its function. But it was gradually explained by the others—with lots of laughs!

KH: Let’s move on to the series itself. Did you realize it was going to be a series when you actually started painting it?

EA: No, I didn’t. The first painting, if I recall correctly, happened in 2007 during the time I had been working on a series of views overlooking the Connecticut, from several vantage points where the river can be seen and the valley really opens up, and where the cloudscape is remarkable. For ten or more years, I constructed these paintings of the Connecticut River Valley, making them at all times of the year. At the moment when it first occurred to me to paint this hole in the ice (I hadn’t even thought of calling it an “ice cut,” which eventually became the name for the series), I thought of Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*—without the figures—that there would be this chasm, essentially, in the foreground of the painting. And in the first painting it took up very little space at the bottom of the canvas—like Courbet’s painting, where very little of the painting is given over to the hole. I was struck by how the snow I had to clear away in order to access the ice became a kind of mountain-scape or topography in relation to the distant hills, the actual topography of the landscape. Then the clouds set up yet another one. So there were interesting relationships happening. I became mesmerized by the prismatic effects of the ice—the blues, greens, turquoises—and then the big question of how was I going to paint that darkness, that black. Well, black is just an easy word to throw out there. The hole is hardly black at all. In fact, there isn’t black in any of these paintings. It’s a chromatic “black,” if anything, a mixing of many different dark colors, some heading towards warmer temperatures, some heading towards cooler: violet and green or umber and crimson.

KH: As a painter who had been doing landscapes for a while, with this idea of seasons and times of day,

you’re now working with just one season with the *Ice Cuts* series. So the time of day becomes more of the issue? I know you’re very interested in the effects of a particular feeling and the effects of a particular moment. Can you talk about how you started painting more than one of these works?

EA: Well, after that first painting, the winter ended. I was shocked the painting had worked, but I packed it away without further thought and moved on to the next, unrelated group of paintings. When winter came around again, I thought, well, what am I going to do next? I was eager to get back to it and took a cue from the fire paintings I had been working on, and I pushed the landscape away. I was becoming increasingly aware of how I was dealing with the fundamentals of painting. I often talk about this in teaching—that painting is a particularly fundamental thing, for as complex as it is, it’s also very basic. We have a few colors, and a support, and we have to work within these limitations, putting them together somehow. Dealing with the elements (ice and fire) was part of this process. In the fire paintings, as in the ice paintings, I pushed the landscape motif away, so it was no longer a ridge or a horizon, or a sky. No longer a specific place. I tipped the space up to focus on the hole—the subject—to give it all its due. I completed one painting, and that must have been in December or January (both are dated 2008). I thought, maybe I’ll do one a year. And of course, now I was thinking more closely about my father’s story of cutting the ice and how I wished he were still telling me those stories. And I felt embarrassed too, as maybe we all do, when a family member, anyone close, is telling us yet another of their stories, embarrassed at my irritation and

impatience. I realized they need to—it's crucial for them to impart something, to make it indelible, as they're about to leave. It's the most formative thing, often, if we look back. Painting these was a way to access those stories again and again and again. Then, as these paintings began to accumulate, I began to see the shape of the ice as this object formed from the collision of realism and abstraction, something I have always pursued in my painting, but here it is emphasized differently because, by nature of the subject, it is minimal. And that sent me looking at Ellsworth Kelly in a new way. And of course, other minimalist painters and artists—especially James Turrell. Kelly is an artist I first discovered in art school. My drawing—my line drawing—still has a relationship to Kelly, but my painting evolved in a different way. And this outgrowth of the ice cut project was so exciting, because I had conceptualized the painting in a way I hadn't really done before—I started to see the project in relationship to minimalism, in spite of the obvious realism, even more strongly. After the first painting I thought, I'll do one a year. One a year for ten years, just to see what happens. The format of the hole in the ice would remain the same, a touchstone for me, but time would intervene. So, I wouldn't be changing the painting necessarily from one week to the next over the series evolving. Change would occur gradually, one year to the next.

KH: And also as you change as a painter, that affects what you do, right?

EA: Right. It was a project I couldn't possibly have conceived of in my twenties. One has to have a little bit of distance and personal perspective in order



Ice Cut II, 2009, gouache and watercolor on gessoed paper. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2015.24.3.

to understand that time is an important element in this—or in anything that we do.

KH: It strikes me as a wonderful thing that maybe artists have that other people do not have—the ability to have a sustained engagement in such a way where one can reflect or make choices, where one can decide to reflect in a particular way. There’s a ritual to it.

EA: Of course.

KH: So maybe it’s similar to ritual behavior. But it’s this wonderful coming back to something—whether you’re a writer or a painter—coming back to a theme or coming back to a subject. My question is: is it new for you every time, or does it really feel like you’re building on something that you did before? Both, maybe?

EA: They’re new each time. But I had to learn how to evolve. Once I formulated the project, I knew that it was going to evolve over a ten-year period.



Reflection of clouds in the *avanto* cut by the artist.

But the paintings also needed to be similar in some way, so I wasn’t exploring wildly different aspects, but I was going back to scrutinize similar things, and those things would change very slightly—the position of the hole in the ice,—

KH: Perspective.

EA: Perspective. Although the fundamental viewpoint is the same. And it wasn’t until very recently, after having six or seven years of this behind me, that I could finally relax a little bit and say to myself, “Why does it have to be so dark all the time?” Because it isn’t. It’s only dark—the hole in the ice—it’s only dark at certain times. At other times it’s reflecting the sky; at other times it appears to advance, and give off, rather than recede and sink. And I think that coincides with being more relaxed with my own work, and understanding it. Not understanding it finally, but understanding it better, and accepting that I work in a certain way. I think the *Ice Cuts* paintings of the last two years are less rigid. They’re looser, somehow. They’re a little bit more . . . they’re even airier, to a certain extent. Certainly the one that’s full of the yellow of the arctic sky, which is a memory, imposed upon yet another memory, imposed upon this action.

KH: Color seems to be what this painting is about. When you have something that’s simple, compositionally, where the subject *becomes* paint, the subject is color, the subject is gesture.

EA: In a way, this is the simplest painting, the simplest *subject*, I’ve ever approached. Yet it’s the most complex in terms of what it can represent. But,

fundamentally, it's a painting: it's color, it's paint—all of these things that I love and I'm engaged with every day—but I handle differently. This, for me, is also a retreat. Like winter is a retreat from the exuberance of summer, this is a retreat from the exuberance of painting the summer. For me, it's a way to focus differently. It's a different sort of puzzle. And it has . . . while some of the parameters have already been defined, it's still remarkably full of mystery. And there's room for accident and room for change, and discovery, still. And one of the things that I've been thinking about lately is how the act of painting is really the desire to possess something that's impossible to possess.

KH: Or fix it.

EA: Or fix it, yes. So this structure you were talking about is really a structure of absence. It's the well-known line from Wallace Stevens: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." That is very true in this case.

KH: You seem to have been growing more into working on thematic things that involve memory. Can you talk about your *Ice Cuts* series in terms of this idea of things that you see and experience, but also how memory becomes infused in it? I'm speaking here also about your series of landscapes of World War II battle sites. Can you speak a little bit about this idea of both memory and the experience of the physical, natural world as conveyed in your painting?

EA: As we spoke about just earlier, the desire to regain something that's lost—that conversation with

my father—or some connection to a past event or past time, in a way that's not cloying, or sentimental, or over-imposing . . . Painting is really the only tool I have at my disposal to do that. And painting has *always* managed to get me imaginatively to some other place. If I'm sitting on a hillside looking at the view, it's not just the day that I'm painting; I'm also responding to the events that preceded it. In the Connecticut River Valley, the French and Indian Wars aren't particularly interesting to me, I don't have any personal relationship to them. Eventually I looked elsewhere, and as I dug deeper, I found that I could *invent* places. And I found, curiously, the paintings had to be liberated from the structure of the observed. For me, anyways, observation in and of itself wasn't going to do that. The translation of the place to canvas or paper wasn't going to do that. It had to break apart, so it became . . . abstraction isn't the right word. I don't have a word for it, really. But it became about the *removing* of what I'm observing. A redaction of sorts. It's a disintegrating, it's a deconstructing . . . those are some ways to think about it. The other project I'm working on currently—a series of paintings reconstructing my father's World War II battalion itinerary across Europe—is about engaging with the landscape through painting, but also about withdrawing, and reclaiming another space in my mind occupying past, present, and future. And painting, I think, paint as a material is the *only* thing that can do that, as far as I can tell. Photography doesn't have the physicality that paint has; it's about light and shadows, things that are intangible. Paint remains physical, the physicality of human presence—even in the black hole there's a skin. That's an idea Rubens was aware of, it's a term that de Kooning was aware of. De Kooning remind-

ed us of Rubens's interest in the paint as flesh. But when you're painting something that has nothing to do with human flesh—but does it? Like the ice. The ice is a veneer. It's fragile, like human skin.

KH: It's transitory.

EA: It's transitory, yes. It's a protective layer, a scrim, something that we all employ to get ourselves through the day, through our lives. And then at some point you have to address it. So the ice cut—it is a window into some aspect of digging deeper into what painting's about, but also . . . here I am, making these, so it has to be personal.

KH: You have been engaging more and more, it seems to me, with landscape as metaphor. Particularly I was thinking about the battlefield series and the fire series.

EA: I'm increasingly interested in painting's symbolic potential. I'm looking for something iconic rather than narrative or purely pictorial. The war paintings like the fire paintings are about layers of experience: violence behind the beauty.

KH: In the *Ice Cuts* there's a certain tension between abstraction and figuration . . . a tension between paint as something that describes something and paint that exists in and of itself as something to look at. Where do you see all this going?

EA: When I came up through art school, and maybe it was wrongly understood by me in my late teens and early twenties, there had to be one way of working. Either you were a representational

painter, which is my inclination, to show things—I like to tell stories—or you were an abstract painter. I recall being told, later, once I was out of art school and began to paint in earnest, that I couldn't survive for long on a "seesaw." That is, the back-and-forth between abstraction and figuration. I had to make a decision. But this didn't make any sense to me, it didn't correspond to the way I saw things out there. Somehow, from the beginning, I've managed to maintain an exchange between the two ways of approaching essentially the same thing. As luck would have it, there is much more room now within the language of painting. I've been working at fusing the two, getting closer to how I see and remember events, encounters, and places.

KH: I thought I would go back to process. When you walk into the studio, what is usually on your mind as you approach the work you do that day?

EA: When the *Ice Cuts* project is set up in the studio I'm thinking first and foremost about contrast. I think that's fundamental to all of the paintings I'm doing, but clearly the ice cut emphasizes—it's dark and light, it's hard and soft, it's warm and cool, every aspect of it, inside, outside. I usually have an image in my mind, an image relating to one of my father's accounts. Dates corresponding to the Great Depression are enclosed parenthetically in the titles—you'll see it says *Ice Cut (1932)*. My dad was twelve years old at that time. So I also go back to myself at twelve, and I overlay that, imaginatively at least, with his experience at age twelve or so. There's nothing definite there. In part, it's fiction. It's how memory, it's how imagination, it's how constructing a story works. But it's more about getting

at a feeling. It might be something sensory, like the smell of wet wool, or of coffee in a thermos. Or the sounds, of the ice, the cracking of the ice, or of the saws. These things that he told me in such detail—I don't have that first-hand experience. It becomes an intersubjective experience, the overlay of one person's account onto another's, creating some sort of universal experience. All of that happens in a split second, really—it's a feeling. And again, I'm not painting a narrative, but it's what is going on in my head that allows me to open up and inhabit the painting.

KH: Can you talk about your watercolor sketches and the place of scale in your work also? You've spoken previously about the formative aspect of these sketches and smaller works and the larger works—what the scale of that work does.

EA: The first watercolors I made right on the sauna porch, in the sun. It's wintertime, but it's fifty degrees on the porch on a bright day, so the watercolors work just fine. I played around with the orientation of the hole, and noted—made notations of some of the colors, just as an aid to my memory. But I didn't use them so much as studies—I think some of them are titled studies, but—I've never really liked to be held accountable, or held to the decisions made previously. I like the work to happen all at once, as if it's not been . . . where all the problems haven't been worked through. To address the idea of scale, the cut in the ice is painted almost to scale—it's almost a one-to-one relationship. I wanted that feeling, like the canvas is a plug taken from reality. I did eventually increase the size of the canvas. The hole in the ice remained much the same, but I want the sense that it is human-sized.

It's about, oh, I don't know, it varies, three feet by four feet, or four feet by five feet, depending on how arduous a task it is to cut through it. The idea that I as the painter, and you as the viewer, can fit through the hole is crucial. It has to be this size. Of course, the little paintings don't do that, so they exist, then, in a different way, formally. I often get the painting underway, and I then use it as the "source," making a watercolor or a small painting from the big painting. The big painting becomes the natural object, and I'm making a little, as it were, *plein air* painting from that, in the confines of my studio, so it becomes another generation removed. You see that pretty clearly in the multiple groups of those colored fields, the colored pools of water, and the white of the page, the white of the paper becomes the light of the snow. So I get to play out very quickly many different orientations of that shape. Of course in the big canvas you have to choose just one. But with dozens of pages of paper over the course of days or weeks, you can play out countless variations. And in the last group, I mixed a very particular greenish ink, which resembled the water as closely as I could. I let the ink be the water. It's not a very complicated idea, and it's certainly executed in a way I never—I rarely do—but I had the license to do that, I suppose. One of my first responses was these look quite like video screens. Which made me think again of James Turrell and Dan Flavin, and the relationships to ways of working that I'm not involved with. So the ice cut then took on a further dimension I had never anticipated, and it is something to see those displayed in a grid. They were painted and then pinned on my wall much that way. Now they're displayed rather formally there, in the gallery.

KH: The idea of variation in sequence, which the subject allows you to do.

EA: Right. As I was saying, I make those quickly over a period of days and weeks, whereas otherwise, I'm waiting years to see this project unfold.

KH: There's a satisfaction to that.

EA: This conversation has certainly given me some new things to think about. It's just occurring to me to add—it's challenging for me to think of the *Ice Cuts* as removed from the larger body of work, the larger activity that I'm involved in. I think, on one hand, they would *appear* to be. They don't have many of the same concerns. They are an escape—a step back into something else, a pause. I may have addressed that in terms of how the project relates to the seasons, but the interesting thing to me about *this* exhibit is that it is removing this body of work to focus on it. It is a new experience for me to take something away and to examine it—recognizing the give-and-take between it all. I can begin to identify elements that are related to other paintings. And then, when I can come back to the landscape again, these more “maximalist” paintings, I can see how my sojourn in the minimalism of the ice has affected me.

KH: We've cut away this work from your—

EA: [Laughter] Well, it's a paring back. It's redactive, there's something about taking away . . . A writer friend tells me and I guess this is said among writers, “the thing that is edited remains.” So it is with the *Ice Cuts*.



Ice Cut (Arctic Sky) Study no. 2, 2015, watercolor and gouache on paper.



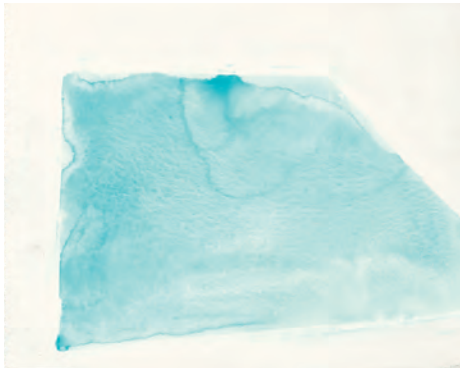
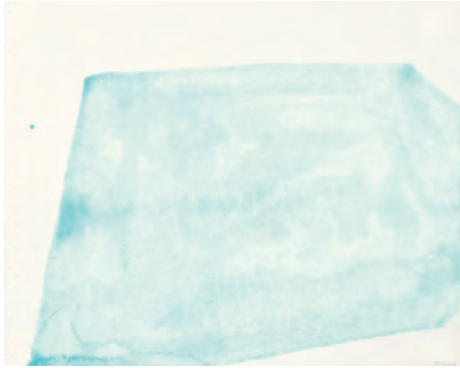
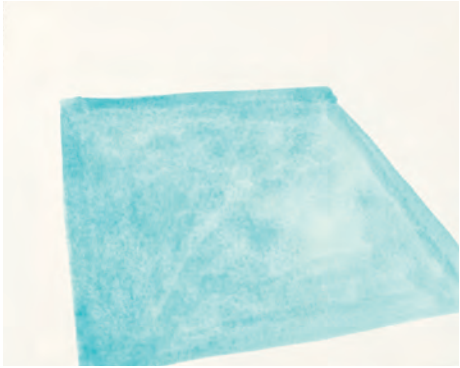
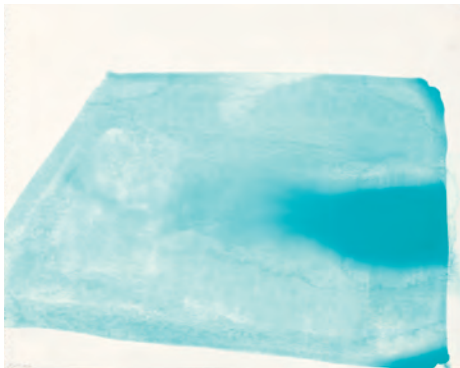
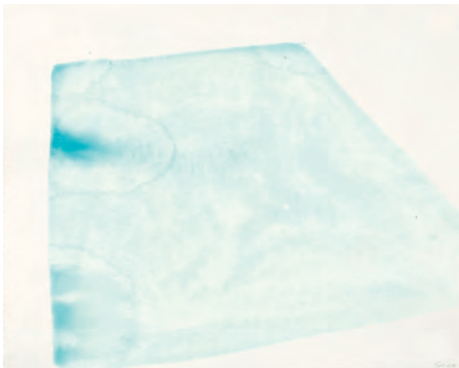
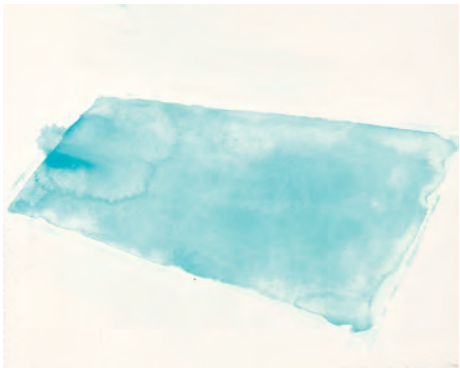
Ice Cut Study (Green), 2014, oil on panel.

KH: As you evolve as an artist and you've been working for a longer period of time, these moments happen where you do reflect on a particular thematic aspect of your work, a particular body of your work.

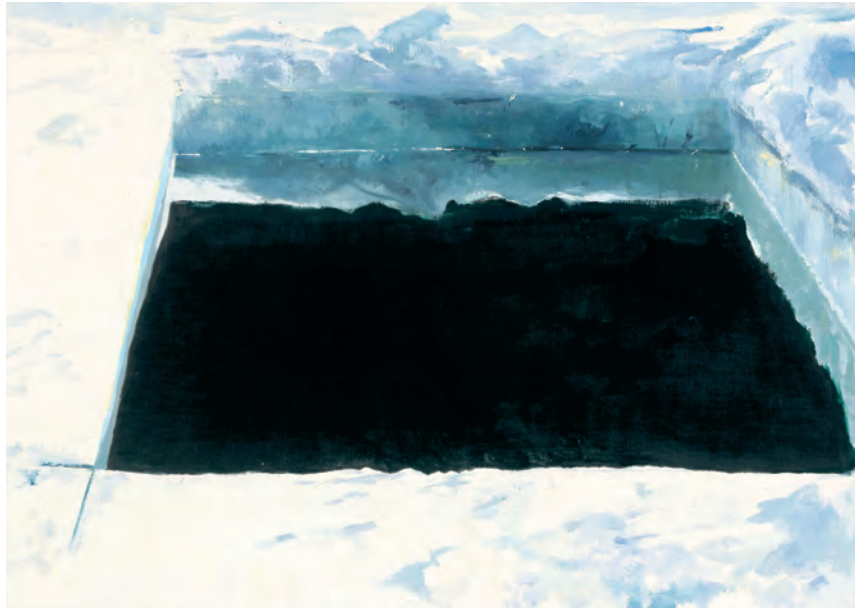
EA: It also occurred to me because I've only exhibited a couple of the *Ice Cuts* individually, on just a few occasions. I've never shown the entire group. In fact, I've not yet had the opportunity to see the whole group myself. I work on them one at a time, generally. But when people have seen them—I'm thinking now about responses from the viewers, the audience, that I've heard—there are the people who say, "Oh, I want to dive into that!" And then there are people who stand as far back as possible and say, "I'm not going anywhere near it," as if it would swallow them up. And I think, that's exactly how I feel. That's the give-and-take that I feel in making the painting. And there it's being experienced by the viewer, which underscores a notion that I've carried around about painting, that if a painting is made with conviction, the honesty *and* the conviction that's necessary to its realization, the viewer will have the very same experience the painter has had. In fact, one could even say you are constructing it anew each time you stand in front of it. I think that could be true about Velázquez, that could be true about Ellsworth Kelly. I hope it's true about these.

*This interview was conducted on August 20, 2015,
at the Hood Museum of Art.*

PLATES



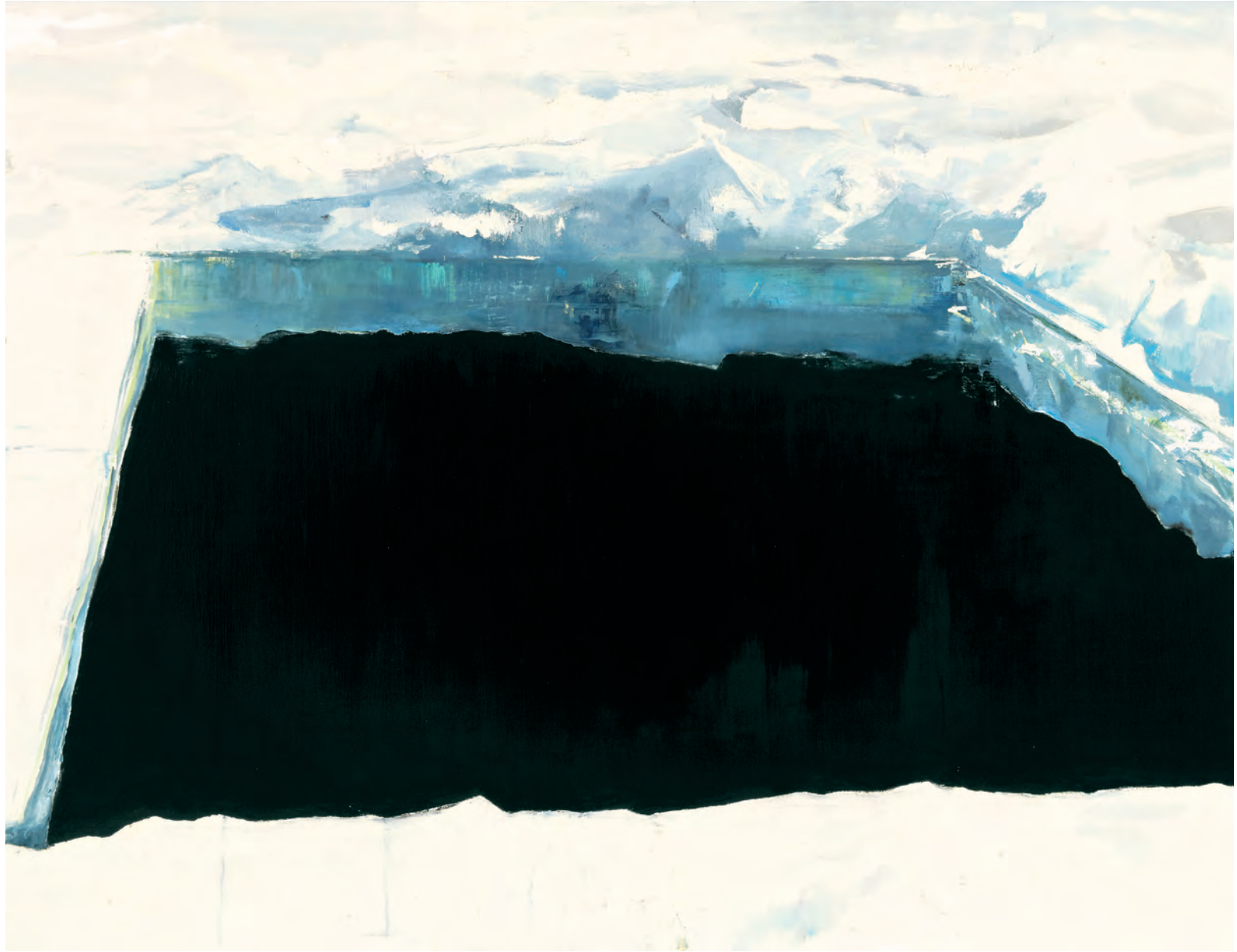
Turquoise Pools, 2009, watercolor and gouache on paper.



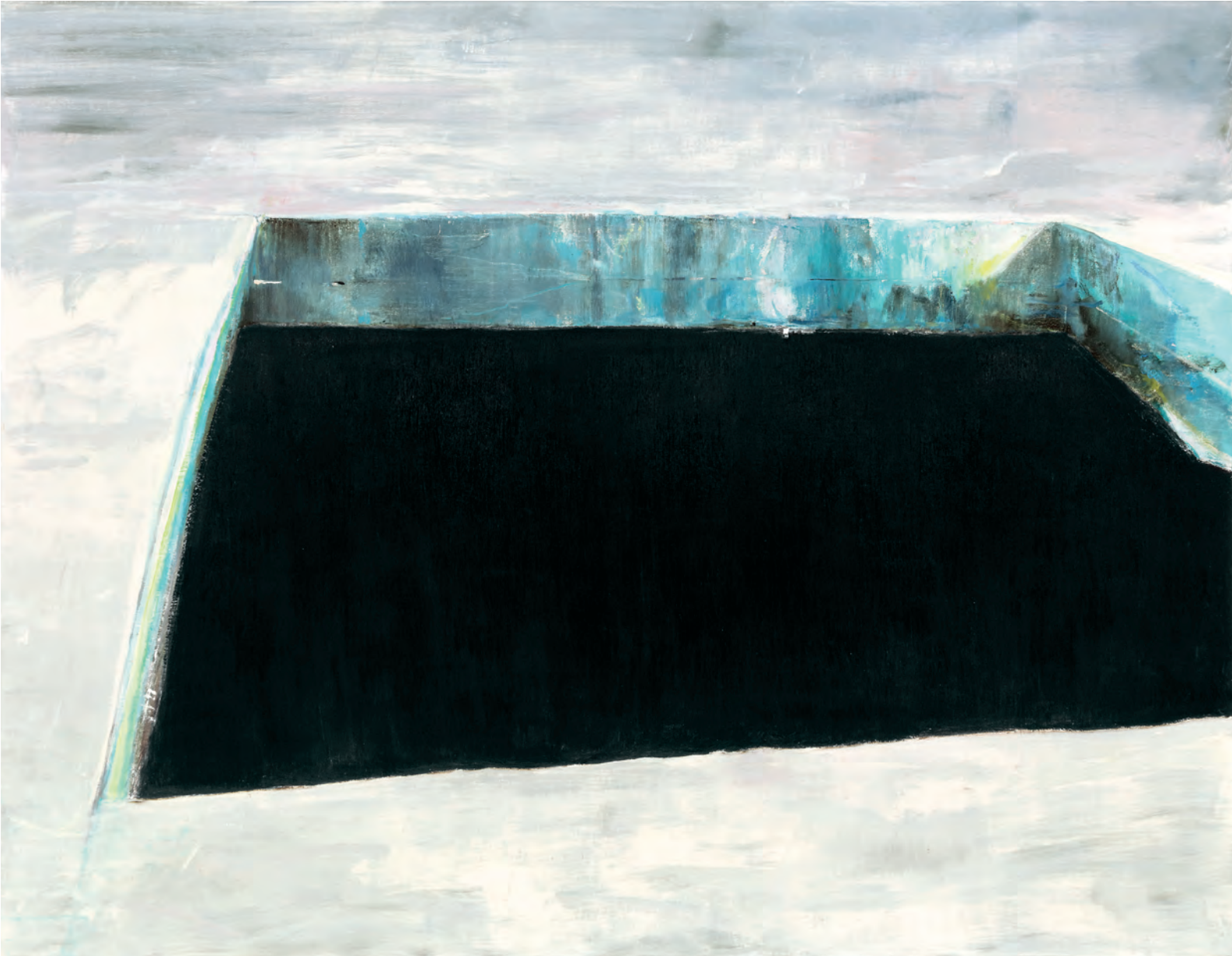
Ice Cut (1930), 2008, oil on linen



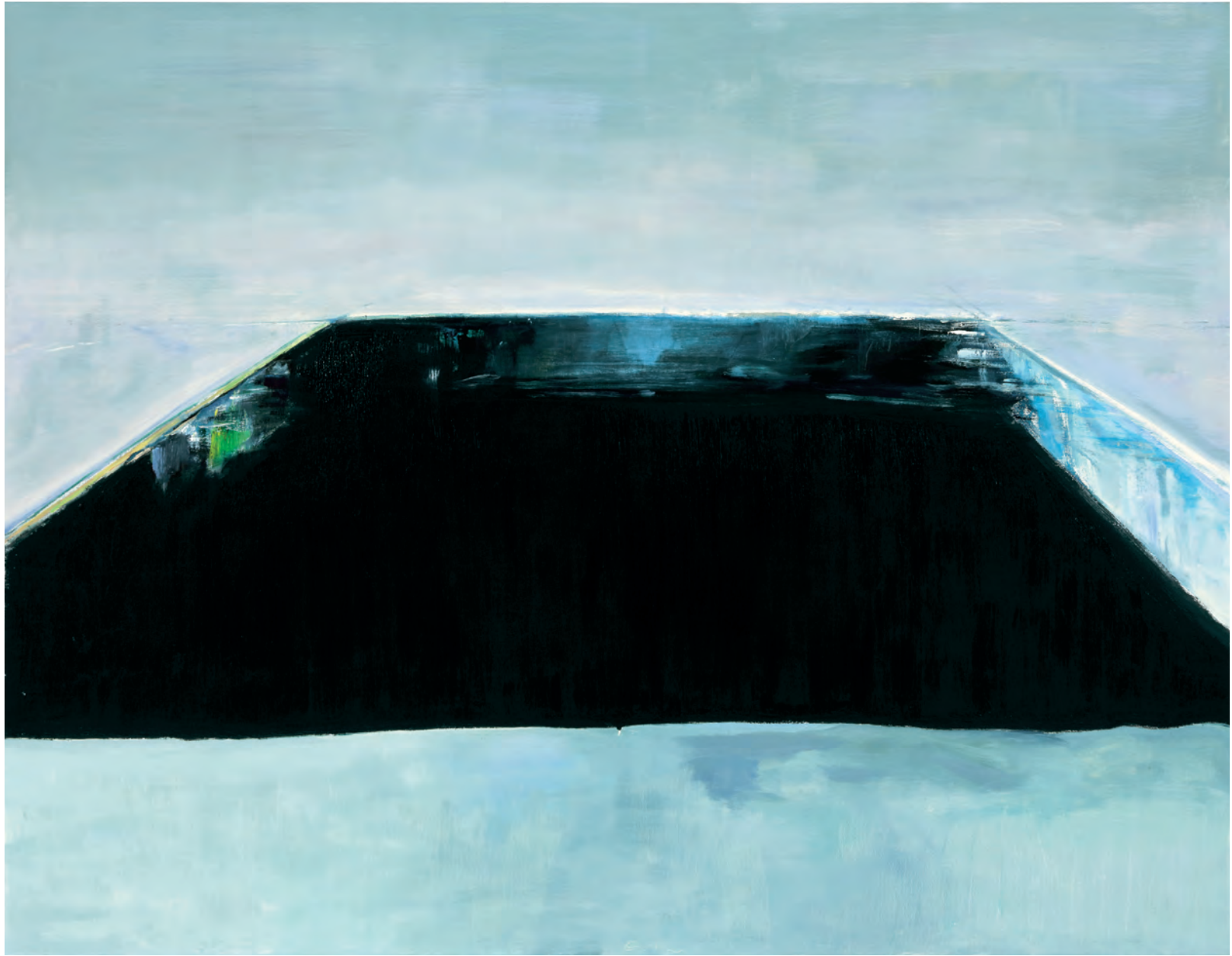
Ice Cut (1931), 2008, oil on linen



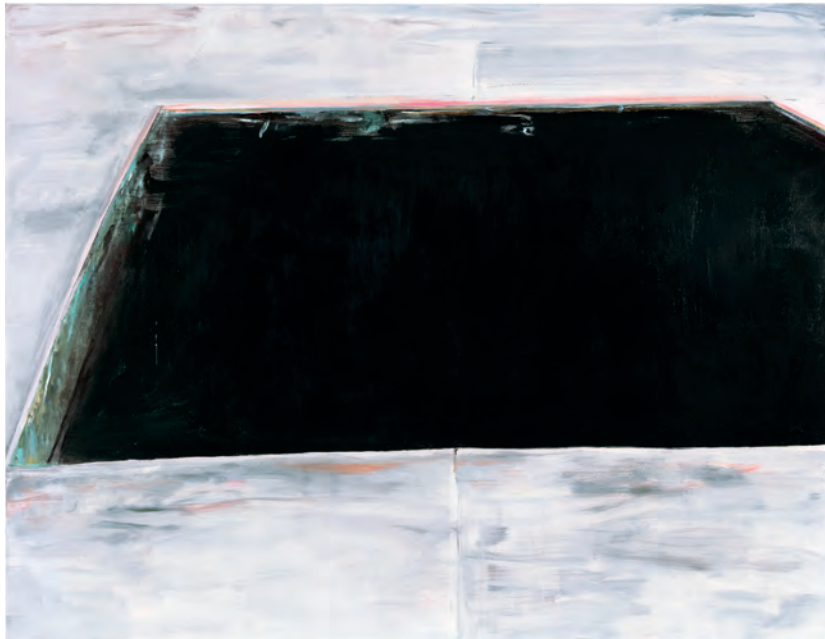
Ice Cut (1929), 2010, oil on linen



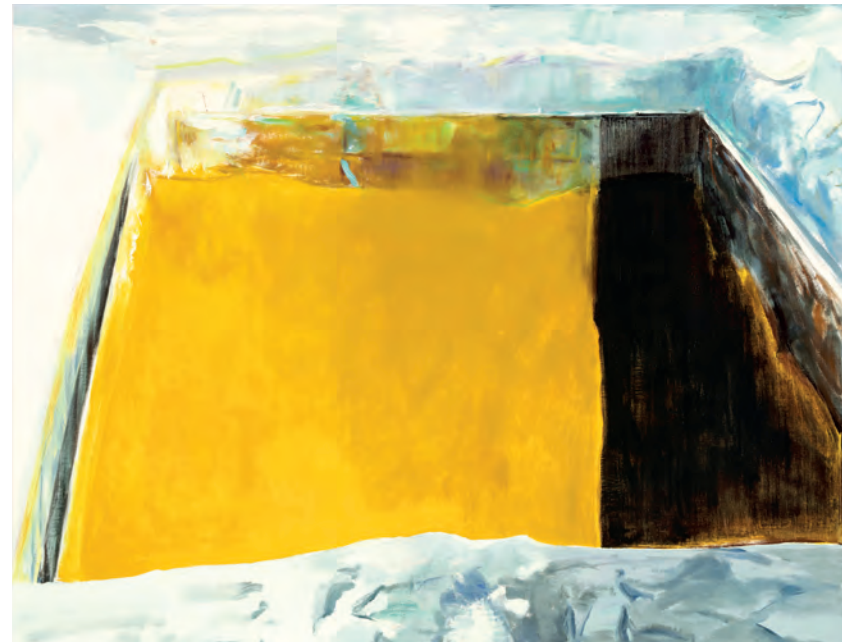
Ice Cut (1933), 2012, oil on linen



Ice Cut (1934), 2011–13, oil on linen



Ice Cut (1935), 2014, oil on linen



Ice Cut (Amber Sky and Shadow), 2015, oil on linen



Ice Cut (Arctic Sky), 2015, oil on linen

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Unless otherwise noted, all works in the exhibition are courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

PAINTINGS

Ice Cut (1930)
2008
Oil on linen
50 x 70 inches

Ice Cut (1931)
2008
Oil on linen
50 x 70 inches
Private Collection

Ice Cut (1936)
2009
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut (1929)
2010
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut (1932)
2010
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College:
Purchased through the Virginia and
Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2015.24.1

Ice Cut (1933)
2012
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut (1934)
2011–13
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut (1935)
2014
Oil on linen
74 x 95 1/2 inches

Ice Cut (Reflecting Blue Sky)
2014
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut Study (Green)
2014
Oil on panel
16 x 20 inches

Ice Cut (Amber Sky and Shadow)
2015
Oil on linen
62 x 80 inches

Ice Cut (Arctic Sky)
2015
Oil on linen
74 x 95 1/2 inches

Small Ice Cut (Arctic Sky)
2015
Oil on linen
16 x 20 inches

WORKS ON PAPER

Ice Cut 6
2008
Monotype
29 5/8 x 41 7/8 inches
Private Collection

Turquoise Pool no. 2
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 3
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 4
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 5
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 7
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 8
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 9
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 10
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Turquoise Pool no. 11
2009
Watercolor and gouache on paper
11 x 14 inches

Ice Cut I
2009
Gouache and watercolor on gessoed paper
11 1/8 x 15 inches
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College:
Purchased through the Virginia and
Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2015.24.2

Ice Cut II
2009
Gouache and watercolor on gessoed paper
11 1/8 x 15 inches
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College:
Purchased through the Virginia and
Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2015.24.3

Ice Cut IV
2009
Gouache and watercolor on gessoed paper
11 1/8 x 15 inches
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College:
Gift of the artist; 2015.39.2

Ice Cut III
2010
Gouache, ink, and watercolor on gessoed
paper
11 1/8 x 15 inches
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College:
Gift of the artist; 2015.39.1

Ice Cut
2010
Ink, watercolor, and gouache on joined
paper
13 3/4 x 15 inches
Collection of the artist

Ice Pool no. 1
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 3
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 4
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 5
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 6
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 7
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 8
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 12
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Pool no. 13
2015
Ink and watercolor on paper
9 x 12 inches

Ice Cut (Arctic Sky) Study no. 1
2015
Watercolor and gouache on gessoed paper
11 x 15 inches

Ice Cut (Arctic Sky) Study no. 2
2015
Watercolor and gouache on paper
12 x 16 inches

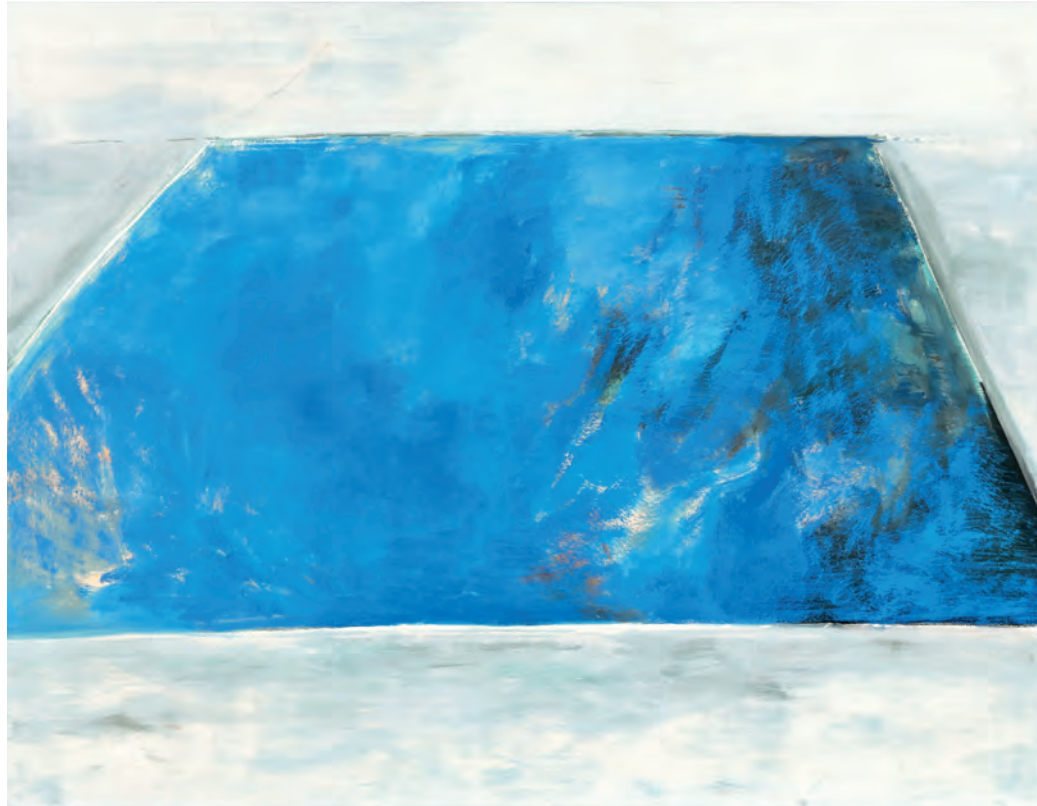
NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

Epigraph: Eric Aho, from an interview with Chard deNiord, in *Transcending Nature: Paintings by Eric Aho* (Manchester, N.H.: Currier Museum of Art, 2012), 80.

1. Eric Aho, in *Transcending Nature*, 87.
2. Artist's email communication with the author, September 24, 2015.
3. Eric Aho, in *Transcending Nature*, 93.



The artist in his studio with *Ice Cut (Arctic Sky)* and other works, winter 2015.



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Cover: Eric Aho, *Ice Cut (1932)*, 2010, oil on linen. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey '58 Fund; 2015.24.1. Back cover: Eric Aho, *Ice Cut (Reflecting Blue Sky)*, 2014, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.