

consortance

dissonance

SOLO EXHIBITION BY
ZULKIFLI LEE



13 JULY -18 AUGUST
2024

MIZUMA GALLERY



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Louis Ho

The language of abstraction retains a vibrant presence in Malaysia, even in the new millennium. An exhibition organized by the Bank Negara Museum and Art Gallery, “The Unreal Deal: Six Decades of Malaysian Abstract Art” (2017), narrated the development of the genre from the 1950s to the present moment, tracing the beginnings of the contemporary or postmodern period to seminal moments in the late 1960s and 1970s. The geometric, hard-edged vocabulary of artists such as Tang Tuck Kan and Choong Kam Kow, working in a Minimalist

lineage, were associated with the so-called New Scene that emerged in the 1970s, while the likes of Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin and Yeoh Jin Leng, who favored an expressive, intuitive approach, were referred to as the Grup artists, named for an eponymous exhibition held in 1967.¹ Their work engendered a vital tradition of art-making that spans the gamut from the gestural to the geometric; as this author has remarked elsewhere, various strategies of abstraction remain discernible today. The first is a form of soft abstraction, dominated by the quasi-figurative. Other categories include gestural mark-making, centered on the action of the artist's hand, and the geometric, including minimalism and the monochrome. Finally, materially-based abstraction is premised on an interest in materials and mediums in their own right, rather than as a means to an end.²

Zulkifli Lee's objects are poised between the geometric, the gestural and the material. The current exhibition is comprised of images and sculptures that are fabricated from natural materials such as soil, limestone and used wood. His two-dimensional works are comprised of stenciled geometric motifs, including lines, waves and other shapes, created from varieties of native soil and limestone collected from locations around Malaysia, rather than more familiar mediums such as paint. The chromatic palette of these compositions is entirely organic, derived from their constituent materials; no artificial colors or dyes were introduced in the process. The sculptural pieces are fabricated from found wood and steel, evincing the artist's familiar idiom of block- and grid-like forms. The wooden components, often bearing the visible traces of age, damage and general wear and tear, were sourced from sites such as old *kampung* or village

homes, disused train tracks and abandoned bridge structures in and around Kuala Lumpur, as well as being acquired from stores specializing in second-hand wood intended for upcycling. Carved into standardized shapes, these wooden blocks are juxtaposed with metal lattices in interlocking combinations that evoke the repetitive systems of capitalism and modern life (more on which later).

These works, as Zulkifli observes, foreground the patina of passing time and the defects inherent in nature, not unlike the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, while also suggesting the transformations in our everyday environment. The forms and materiality of his objects, however, also speak to metaphysical notions, even aesthetic precepts based on religious dictate. They represent attempts to bridge opposites and collapse dichotomies, a melding of consonance and dissonance in the

¹ As noted by Sarena Abdullah and Chung Ah Kow in "Re-examining the Objects of Mystical Reality", *JATI – Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 19 (2014). pp. 203–17.

² Louis Ho, "Foreword: Bodies of Art" in Naima Morelli, *This is How It Is* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Richard Koh Fine Art, 2021), pp. 5–8; see p. 6.

aesthetic register – a dynamic that, of course, lent the show its title. He writes at length of the exhibition's driving impulse:

Reality is a network of relationships. My sculptures works are a manifestation of the fact that we are always part of something larger than ourselves. I reconfigure familiar, interconnecting relationships. My work attempts to push the paradoxical coincidence of opposites. All paradoxes may be reconciled, and nature is built on opposites – a compromise between what is comforting and what is disturbing. Contrasts are the reality of nature, and to ignore them would be to ignore the complexities of life. Like the

*consonance and dissonance of intervals and chords in music, I want to celebrate opposites, acknowledge differences and learn to find beauty in the contrast.*³

This paradox of opposites, the contrast of contradictory phenomena that makes up the complex reality of the natural world, is embodied in the duality of forms, materials and textures in Zulkifli's works: the sculptural interlacing of wood and metal, the employment of organic substances such as soil to produce carefully delineated geometries in his so-dubbed paintings. The amalgamation of dichotomous materialities and tactilities points to the religious doctrine of oneness, with unity functioning as an allusion to the Quranic creed of *tawhid* that asserts the absolute, indivisible singularity of God –

the bedrock of Islam. Renowned Palestinian-American scholar Ismail al Faruqi describes it as belief in the “ultimate, finalistic terminus and axiological ground that He must be unique ... [a] uniqueness which the Muslim affirms in his confession of faith, “There is no God but God.”⁴ He further identifies six characteristics of Islamic aesthetics that produces the “impression of infinity and transcendence” demanded by *tawhid*: abstraction; modular structure; successive combinations; repetition; dynamism; intricacy.⁵ That Zulkifli's objects are emblematic of these attributes is immediately apparent, and al Faruqi's remarks throw the matter into relief. Repetition, for instance, serves to reinforce the language of abstraction by the “curbing of the individuation of the constituent parts”, preventing “any one module in the design from taking precedence over another”, while dynamism,

³ All direct quotations from, and speech attributed to, the artist in this essay derive from various communications with the author.

⁴ Ismail Raji al Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), p. 3.

⁵ See the relevant section of Ismail R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 165–8.

or the temporal experience inherent to the viewing of modular patterns, ensures that the “infinite pattern can never be comprehended in a single glance, in a single moment ... The totality cannot be comprehended simultaneously; instead, one only knows the whole after savoring and experiencing its many parts.”⁶

Given the context of his personal faith, the religious connotations of Zulkifli’s practice seem unsurprising. (He identifies as Malay-Muslim.) What is equally significant in the understanding of his visual vocabulary, however, is the genealogy of minimalism that his objects are heir to. Formal traits such as geometricity, seriality and repetition are aligned with the priorities of Islamic art and design, but, at the same time, recall broader references that have been read into the minimalist ethos – namely, evocations of our architectural fabric, and the abstract impulses of modernity and capitalism. The forms of his sculptures suggest urban

edifice and traditional structure alike, calling to mind the impassivity of modern architecture on the one hand, and the evolution of Malaysia’s built environment on the other. The latter, Zulkifli remarks, is attested to by the use of found wood in his work. Typically of tropical hardwood species such as chengal (genus: *Neobalanocarpus*) and balau (genus: *Shorea*) that are common to Southeast Asia, they are scavenged from the remains of abandoned houses, train tracks and even electrical poles. He points out that newly-cut wood has little character; the “patina of time”, in his words, is inimitable by human hand and stands as testimony not simply to divine action, or the work of God, but also the material culture of rural lifeworlds. Traditional wood-crafted Malay homes, from the long-roofed house (*rumah bumbung panjang*) to the pyramid-roofed version (*rumah bumbung limas*), are still in evidence in *kampungs* across the country. Postwar

development, of course, assured the displacement of wood by steel, glass and concrete, but historical materialities and the memory of vanishing ways of life are embedded in these structural fragments.

Beyond the deliberate reference to cultural shifts, however, the impression that these sculptural configurations instantly elicit is that of the rationalized abstraction of modern urban terrain. The works are redolent of the anonymity of contemporary architecture – especially the machine aesthetic of the International Style, with its modular, mass-produced formats that constitutes the mechanical uniformity of the city. *Akadraga* (2023), for instance, foregrounds the gridded pattern of its metal elements, their cubic layout protruding outward like so many windows in an office block, while *Samasama* (2023) snakes upwards in a zig-zag shape, the crenellated edges of its wooden tower hugged by steel scaffolding on one side. Zulkifli remembers

⁶ Ibid, pp. 167–8.

that, on his way to classes as a M.A. student at Universiti Teknologi MARA in Shah Alam in the 2010s, he would espy construction work underway for stations along a new MRT (mass rapid transit) line – likely the Kajang Line, which began operating in 2016. The recollection of these scaffolding-clad sites, metonyms for the constantly developing Klang Valley conurbation that surrounds Kuala Lumpur, eventually found its way into the current pieces, though it is *Julang* (2024) that perhaps invites architectural comparisons most clearly. Boasting a sleek, linear exoskeleton that wraps around a core structure of alternating wood and steel blocks, it implies both the shape of Constantin Brancusi's many variations on his *Endless Column* motif (which first appeared in 1918), as well as landmarks such as the Norman Foster-designed headquarters of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation in the former British colony, which is held up

by conspicuous external trusses on its façade that serve as supports for the entire tower.⁷ Closer to home, the architectural intimations and vertical orientation of *Julang* hint at current socio-economic contexts, with Malaysia witnessing the spectacular rise of two skyscrapers that are, as of the writing of this essay, the tallest and second tallest buildings in the country, and the tallest and third tallest in the region – respectively, Merdeka 118, which was inaugurated in January 2024, and The Exchange 106, opened in 2019.

Other works in the exhibition are two-dimensional pieces that the artist refers to as 'paintings.' Despite the label, their creation involved neither paint nor pigment. The primary materials were soil and limestone of varying hues, ground into extremely fine granules and mixed with an acrylic binder, with water utilized as a solvent. The geometric motifs were produced with a stencil, and range from the dense

mesh of diagonals and horizontals in *Berkampung: Serong & Datar* (2024), to the multicolored blocks of wavy lines of *Korus Duet* (2024), to the allover squiggles seen in *Alun-alun* (2020). Zulkifli admits that his embrace of abstraction, while coinciding with Islamic precepts, is also in part a reaction to his previous career as a graphic designer and illustrator in the advertising, and animation and game industries, the output for which was very much focused on the mimetic or representational image. Here, what ultimately connects his two- and three-dimensional works is the language of abstraction, which signals – in inescapably. As painter and academic Peter Halley noted, the auspices of modernity and capitalism have, for many of us, diluted the physicality of the world into little more than ideational analogues and flows: "Each human being is no longer just a number, but is a collection of numbers ... There is the telephone number, the social security number, and

⁷ See the entry for Constantin Brancuși's *Endless Column (version I)* (1918) on the website of the Museum of Modern Art: <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81729>>.

the credit card number. The financial markets ... have completely detached themselves from any relationship with the material world. Currencies float. National boundaries crumble.”⁸ Elsewhere, he writes, social relations are governed by the abstraction of urban topographies: “People live in sealed houses or condos in highly controlled landscapes. They travel in the sealed environment of the automobile along the abstract pathway of the highway to equally artificial office parks and shopping malls. When one speaks of abstract art, it is essential to remember that it is only a reflection of a physical environment that has also become essentially abstract.”⁹

The abstraction of the economy, of cities, of industry; these are determined by the all-encompassing systems of capitalism and technocracy, which structure the tenor of life

as it is experienced in the modern era. Art historian Anna Chave hit the nail on the head when she pointedly observed that “what disturbs viewers most about Minimalist art may be what disturbs them most about their own lives and times, as the face it projects is society’s blankest, steeliest face, the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce.”¹⁰ Adherence to the doctrines of Islam represents one discursive aspect of Zulkifli’s work, but no less do the systems of capital and technology that frame so much of contemporary civilization. The assembly-line standardization that characterizes mass production – whether architectural, urban or technological – is transposed into the aesthetic register in his objects, and serve as uncanny, uneasy reminders of forces that, perhaps not unlike the will of the divine, lie outside of individual autonomy.

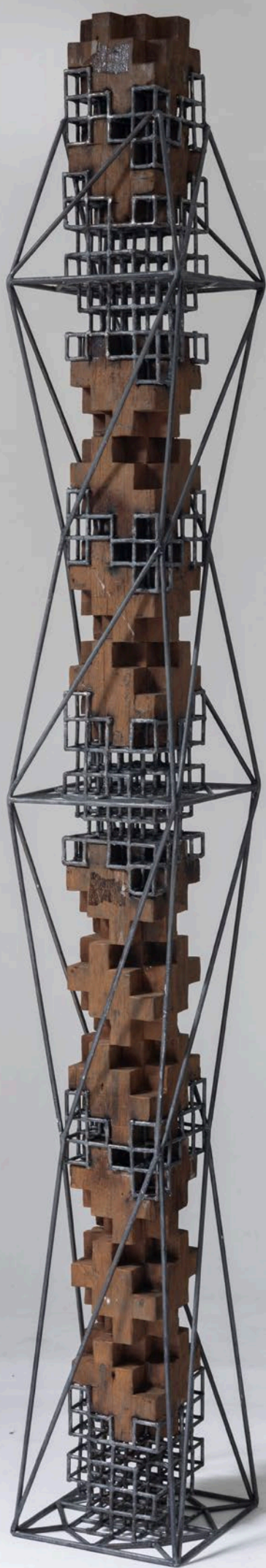


Louis Ho is a curator, critic and art historian based in Singapore. His research is concerned with the contemporary visual cultures of Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the specific socio-cultural contexts in which various visual vernaculars have emerged in this part of the world, especially the vocabularies of queerness. He is also interested in hybrid curatorial concepts. He currently lectures at the Nanyang Technological Institute (NTU) in Singapore, where he offers courses on exhibitions and postwar art. He was formerly a curator at the Singapore Art Museum, and co-curator of the Singapore Biennale in 2016. He has been published in various academic journals, and regularly contributes to platforms such as STIRworld.

⁸ Halley’s essay, “Notes on Abstraction”, was first published in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 61, in 1987. It is also archived on the artist’s personal website. See <<https://www.peterhalley.com/notes-on-abstraction>>.

⁹ Peter Halley, “Abstraction and Culture”, reprinted in Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2013), pp. 137–42. See p. 141.

¹⁰ Anna Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power”, *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 1 (1990), pp. 44–63. See p. 55.



Julang, 2024

chengal wood and mild steel
219 × 28 × 28 cm

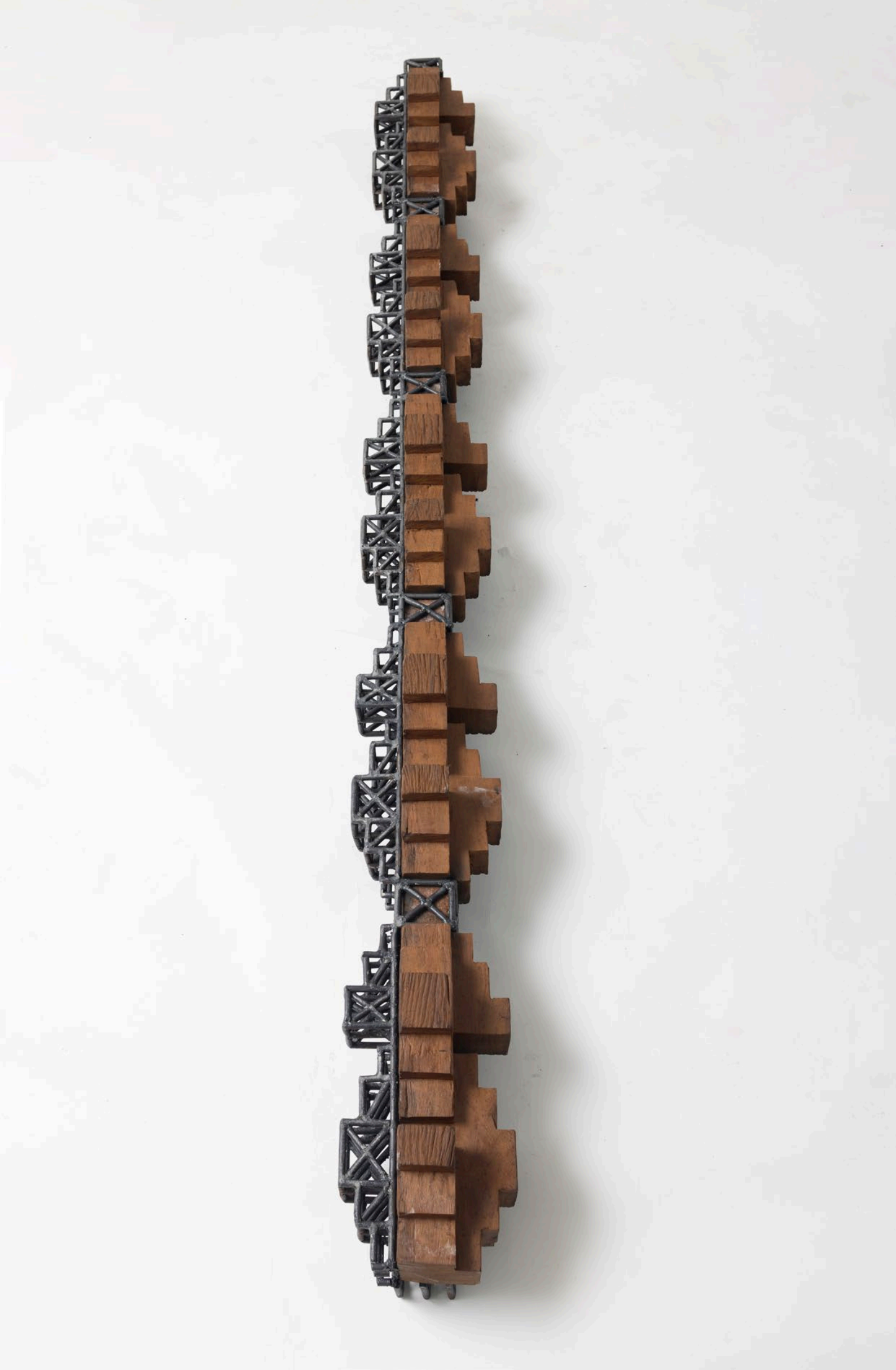




Atipringkas, 2022

soil and limestone on jute
205 x 173 x 6 cm

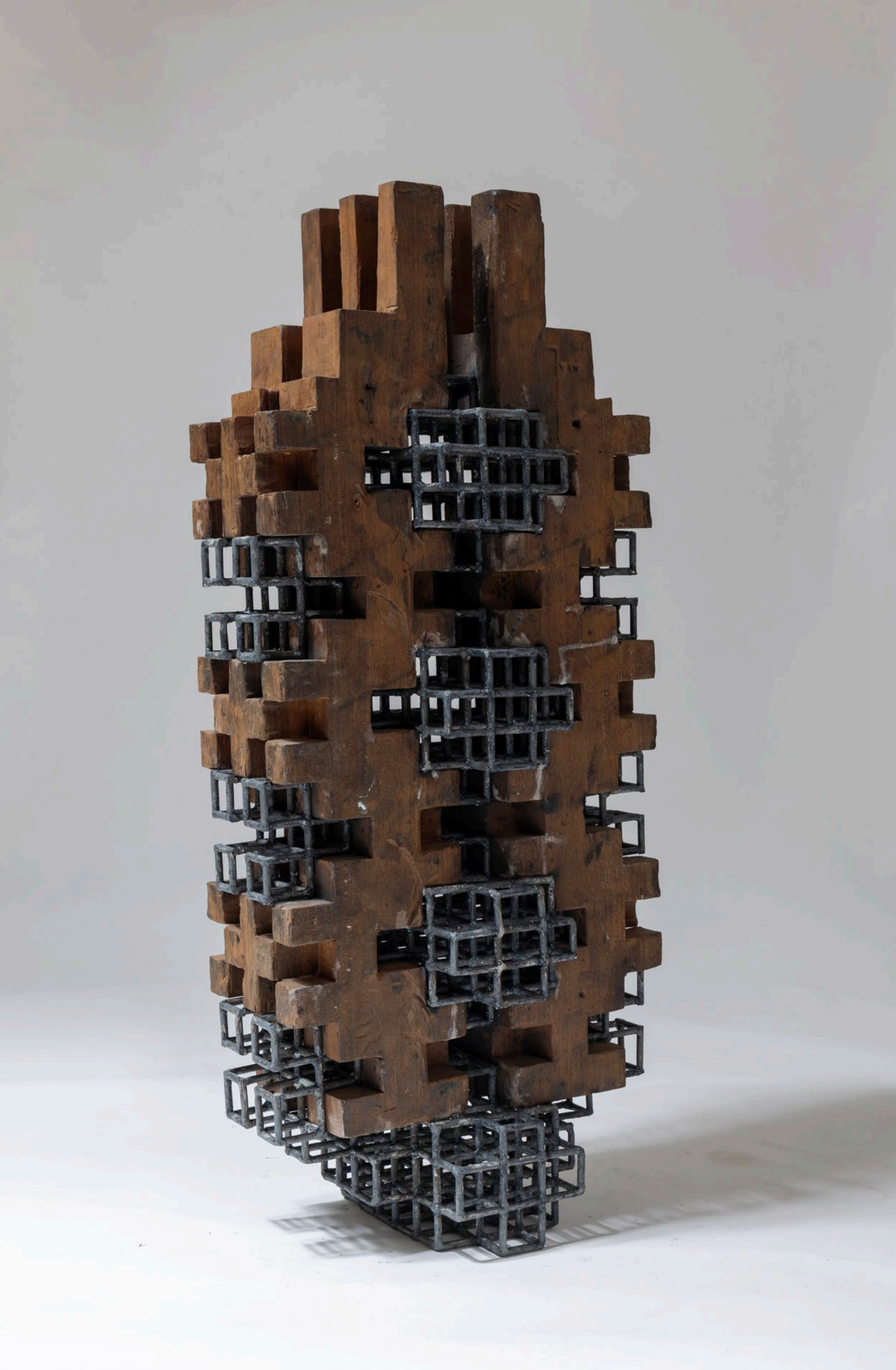




Sejoli, 2024

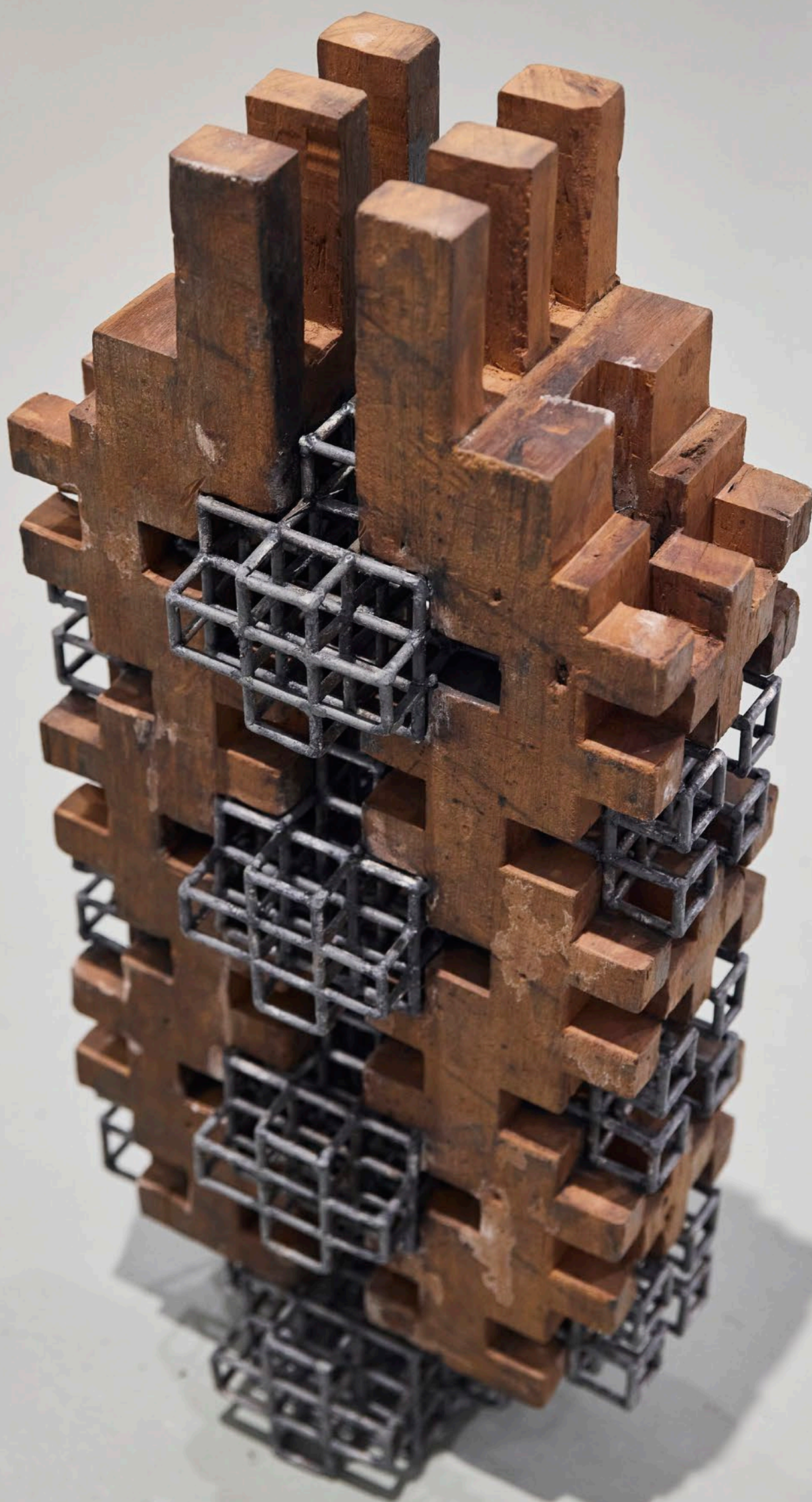
chengal wood and mild steel
211 × 18 × 18 cm

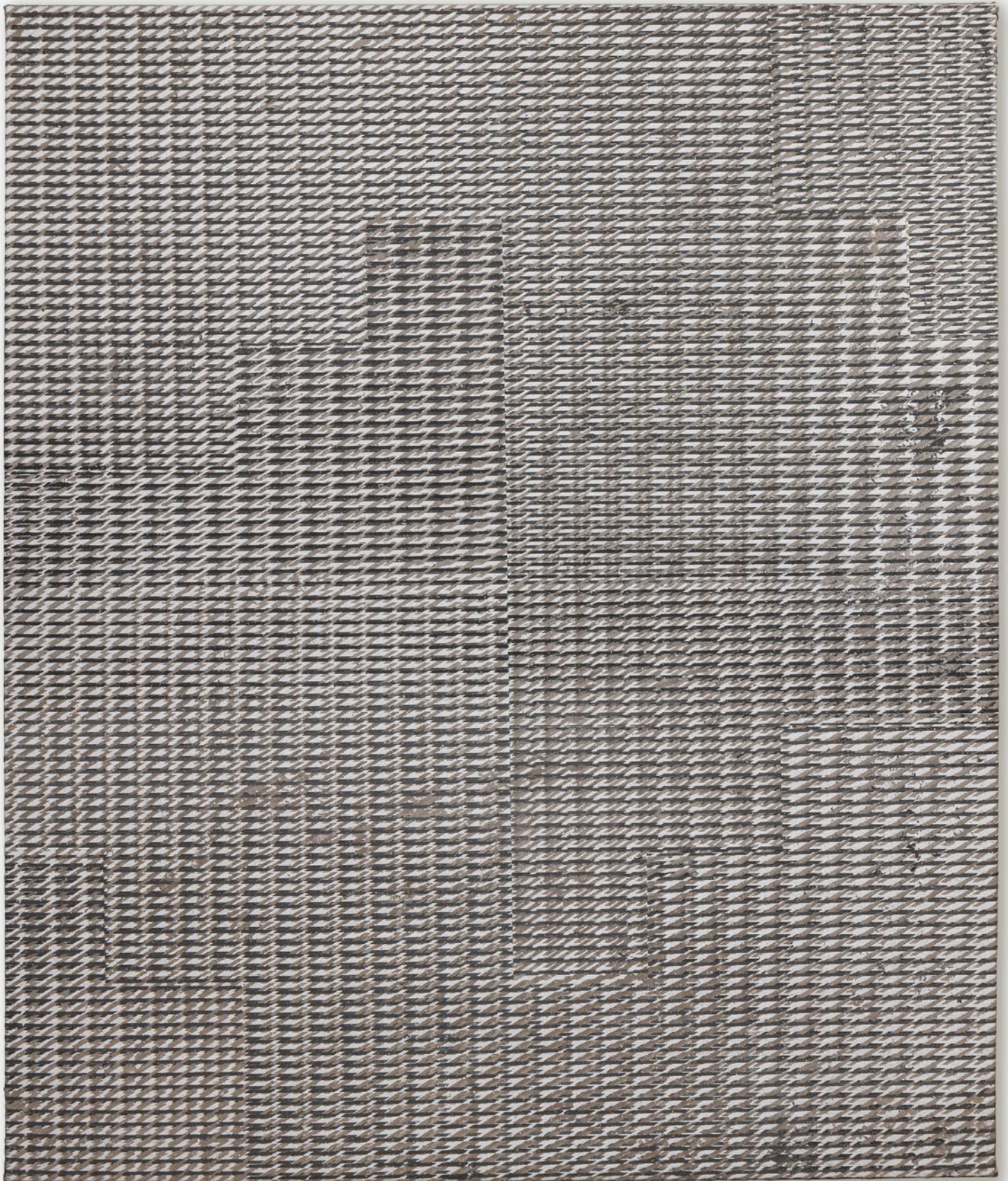




Regu, 2024

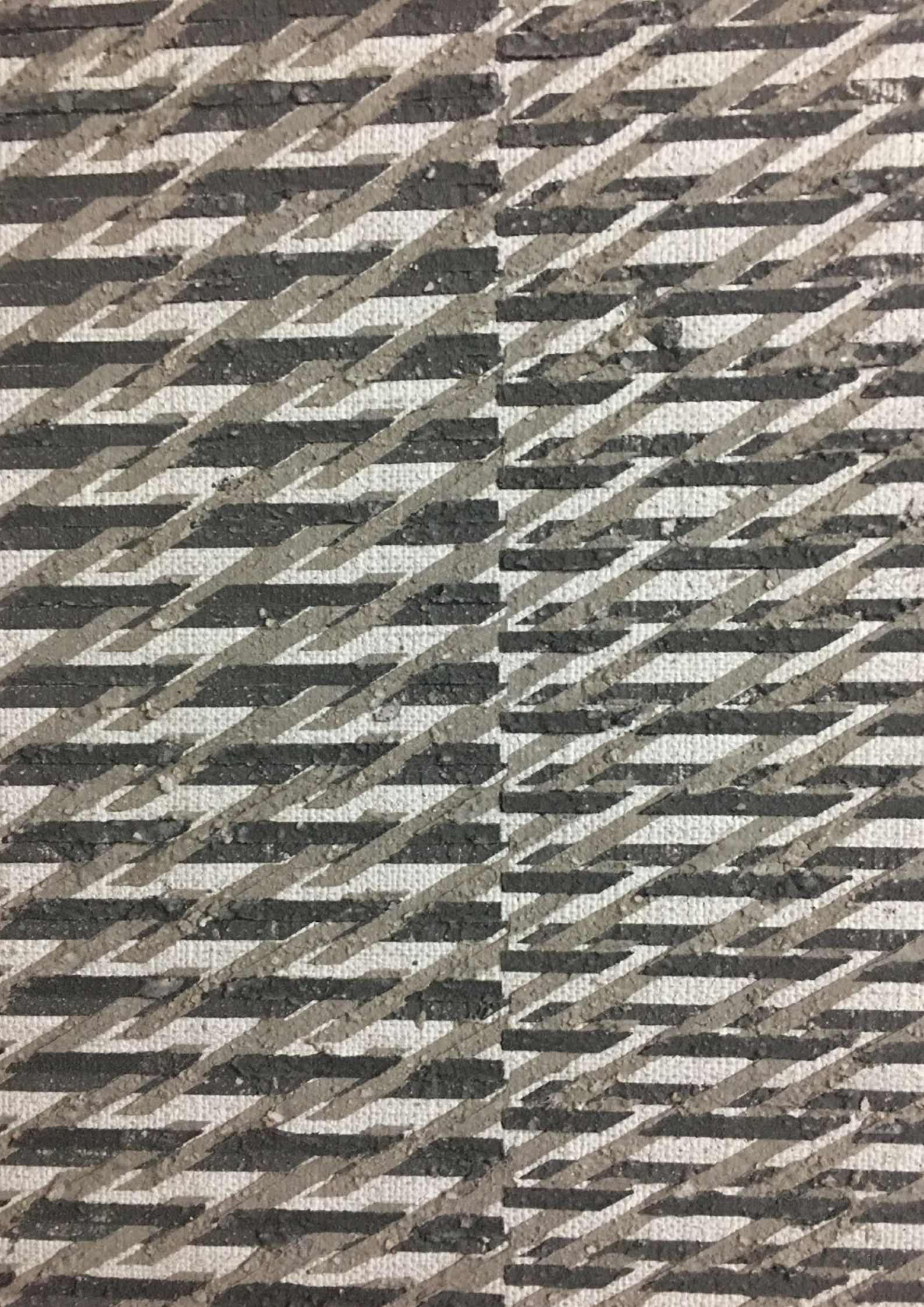
chengal wood and mild steel
82 x 34 x 22 cm





Berkampung: Serong & Datar, 2024

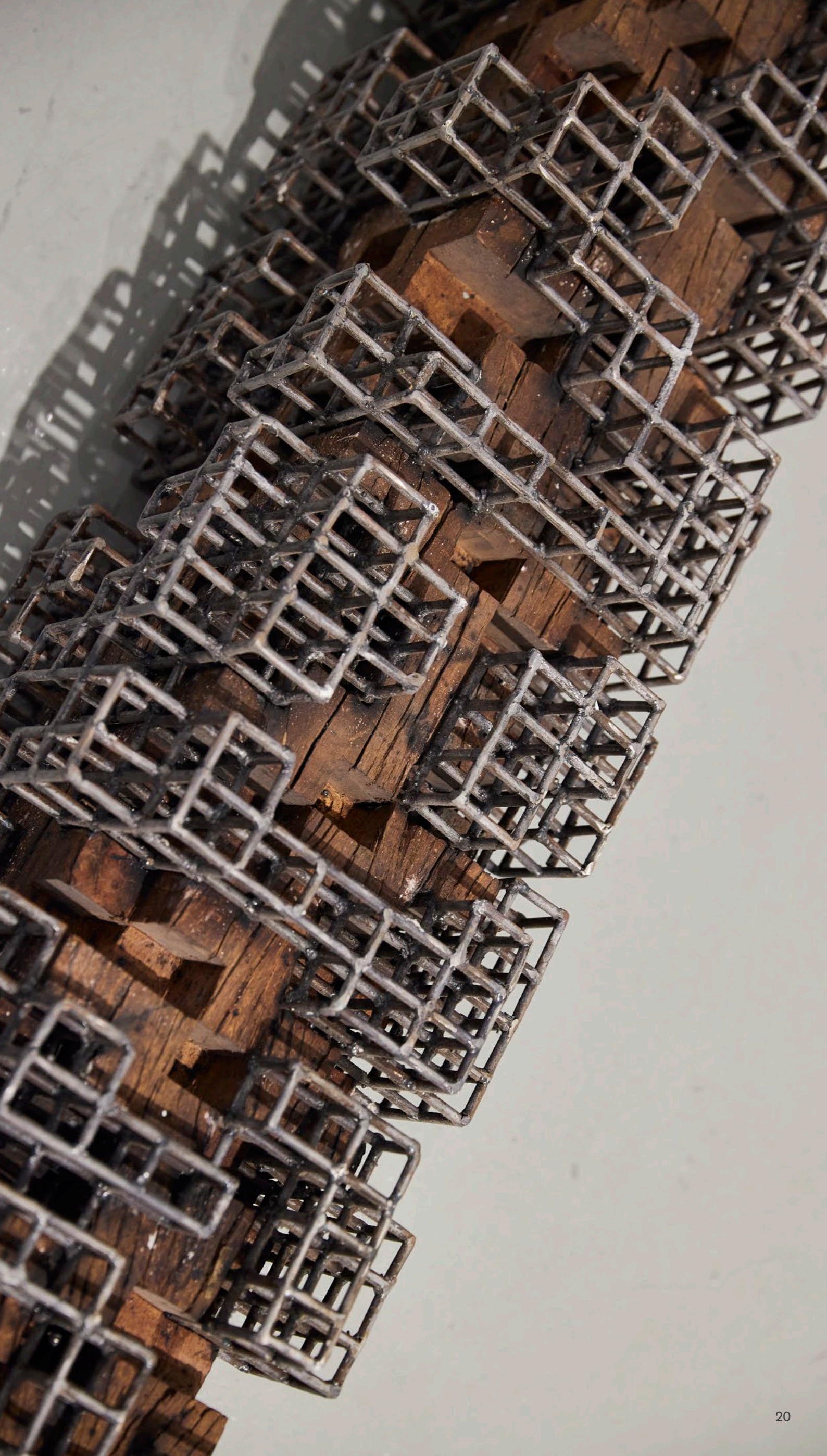
soil and limestone on jute
205 × 173 × 6 cm

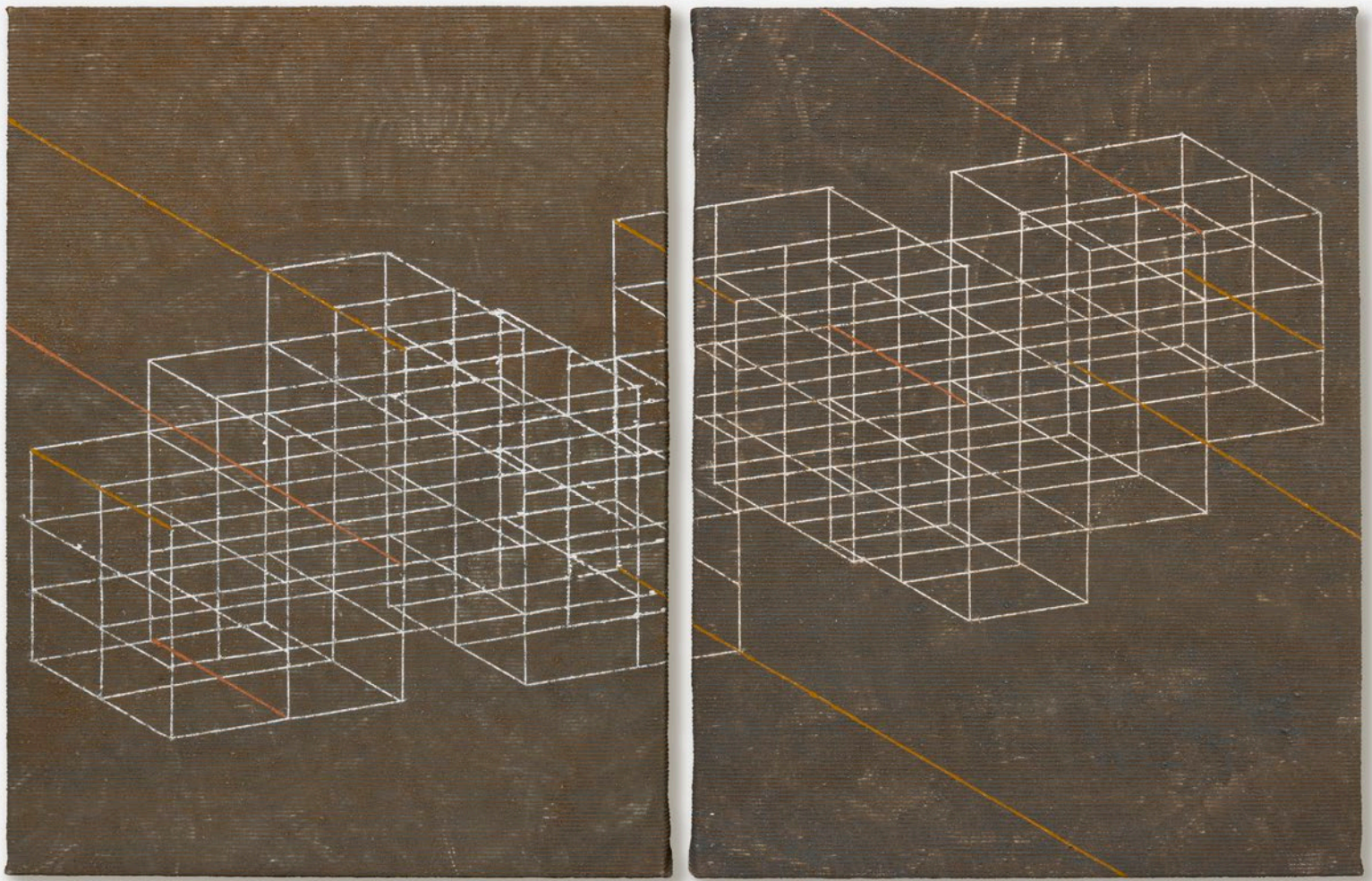




Akadraga, 2023

balau wood and mild steel
135 x 29 x 29 cm





Hubungan Dalam Ruang : Antara, 2024

soil and limestone on canvas
140 × 220 × 6 cm
(diptych, 140 × 110 × 6 cm each)





Kesatuan, 2022

meranti wood, chengal wood, and mild steel
84 x 24 x 20 cm





Padupadan, 2023

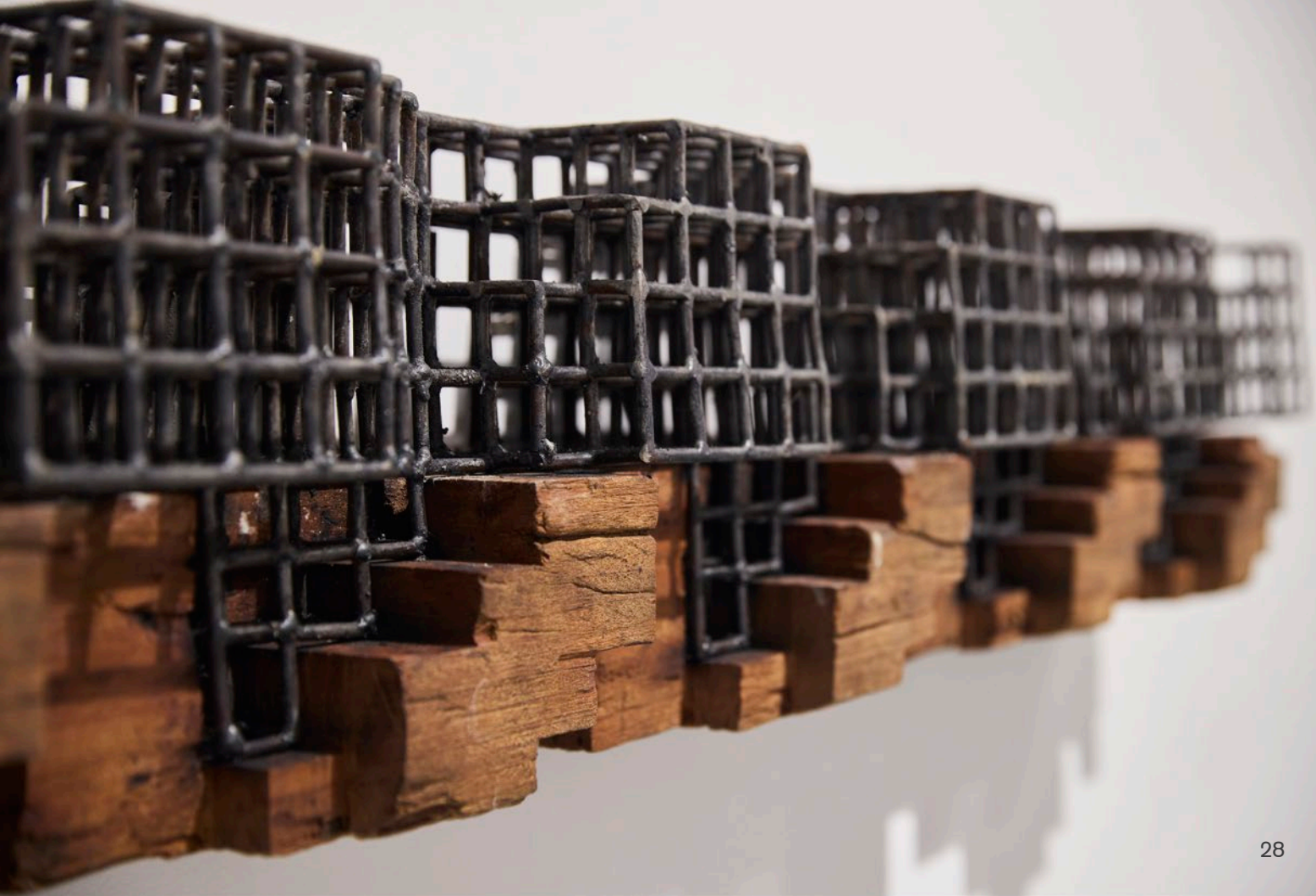
meranti wood and mild steel
100 × 27 × 30 cm





Samasama, 2023

balau wood and mild steel
160 × 21 × 27 cm





Korus Duet, 2024

soil and limestone on canvas
150 × 225 × 6 cm





Silang Berteguh, 2024

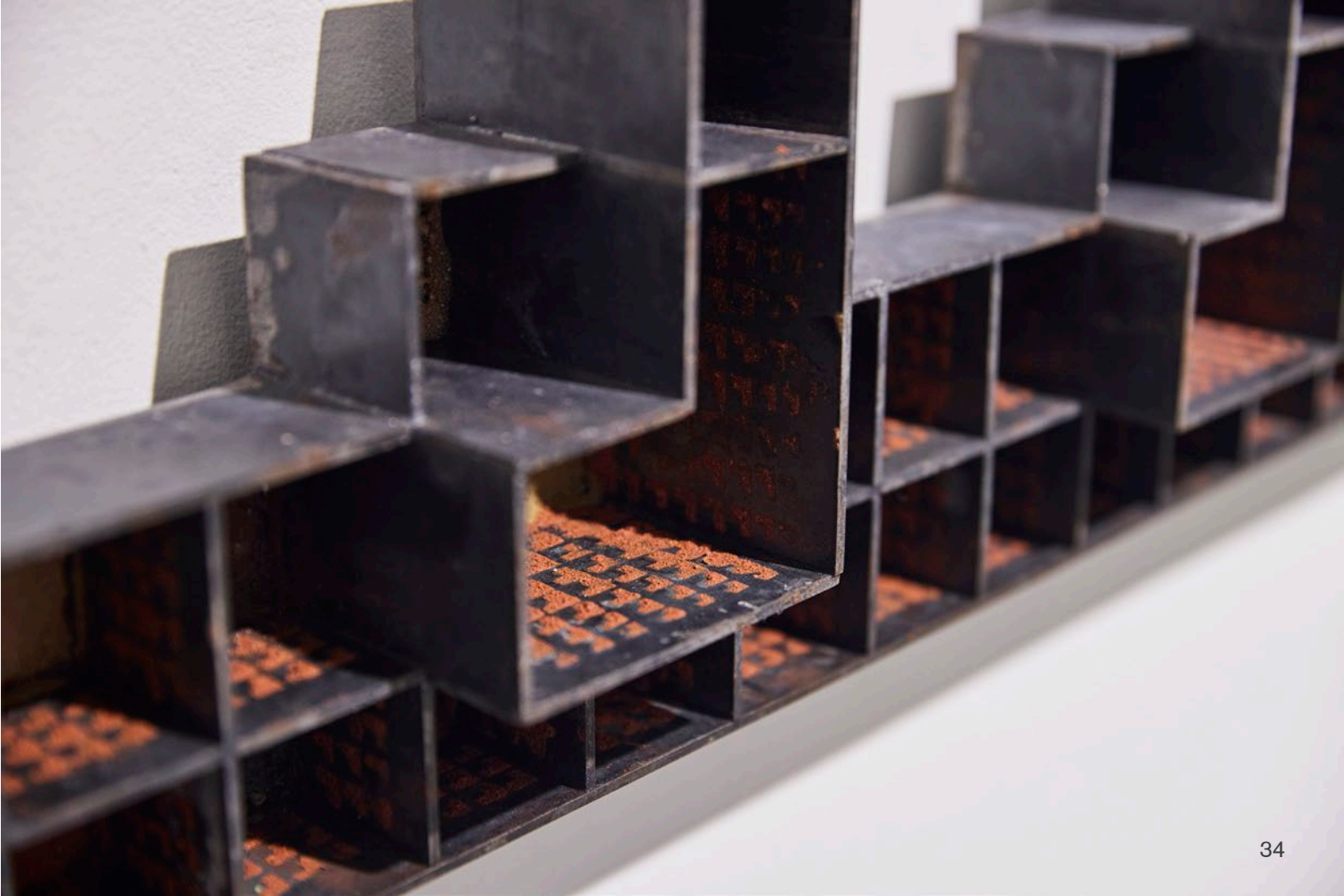
chengal wood and mild steel
144 x 12 x 30 cm

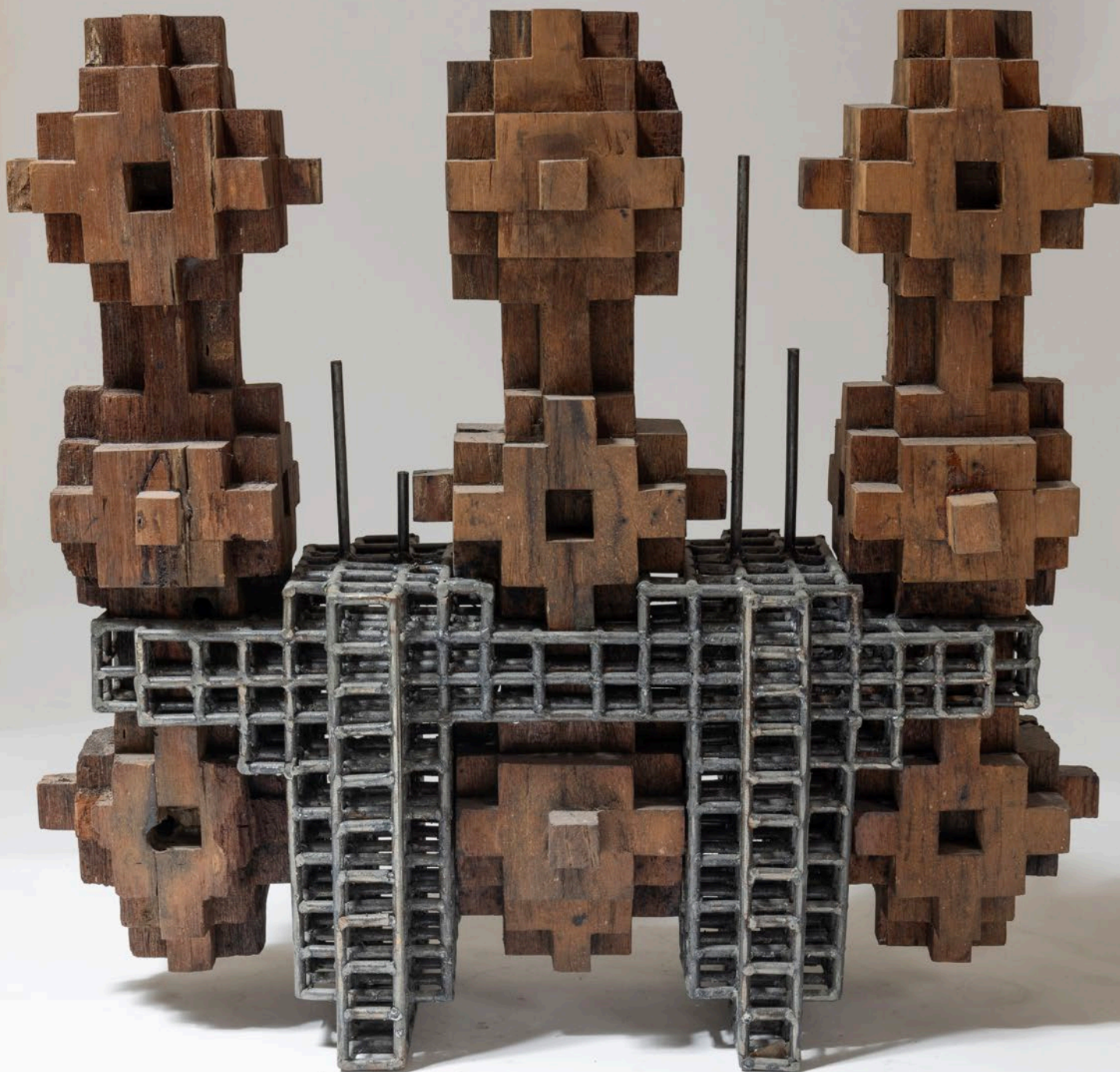




Isi dan Kulit: Inti, 2022

mild steel, soil, and limestone
200 × 20 × 10 cm





Tautruas, 2022

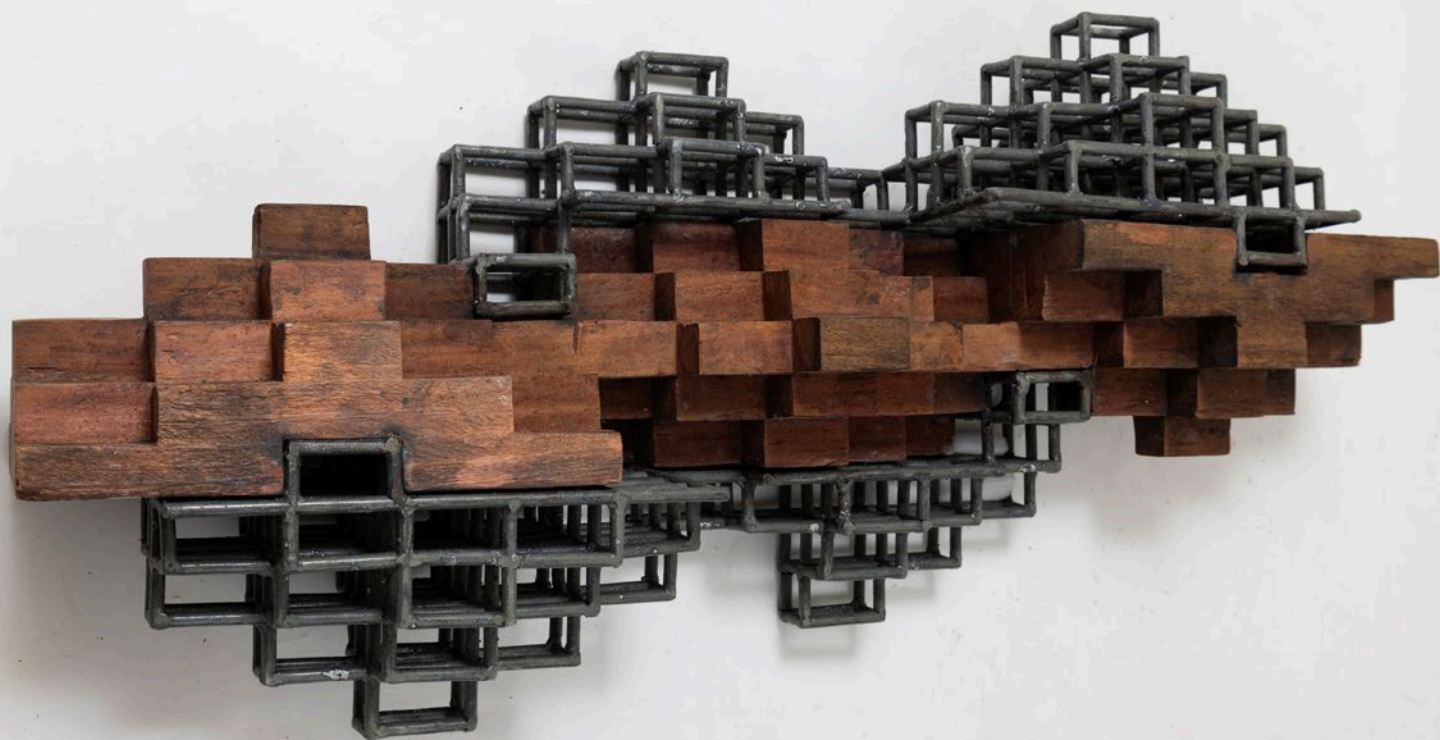
balau wood and mild steel
67 x 75 x 23 cm



Pupuk, 2024

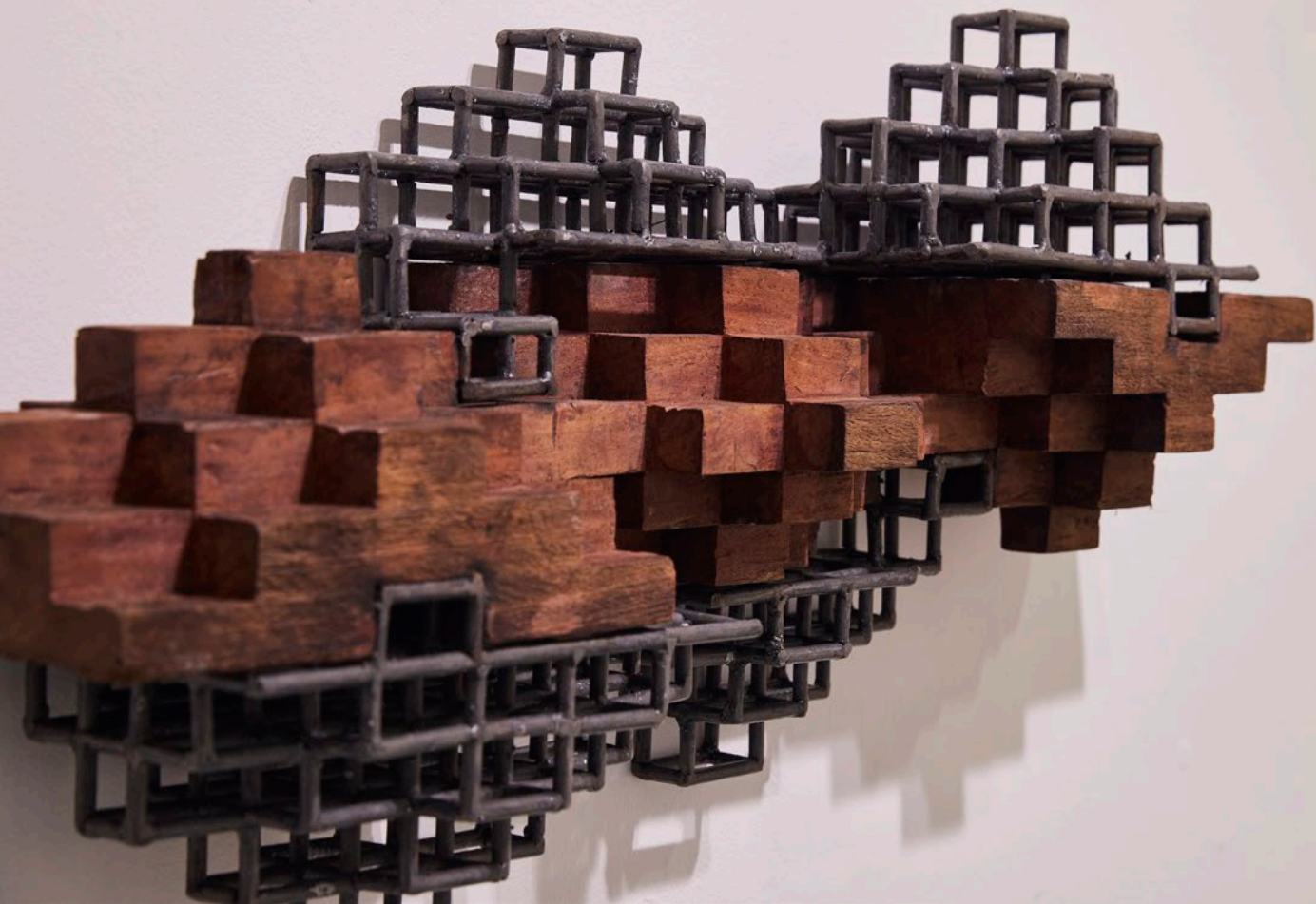
soil and limestone on jute
205 × 173 × 6 cm





Sekufu, 2021

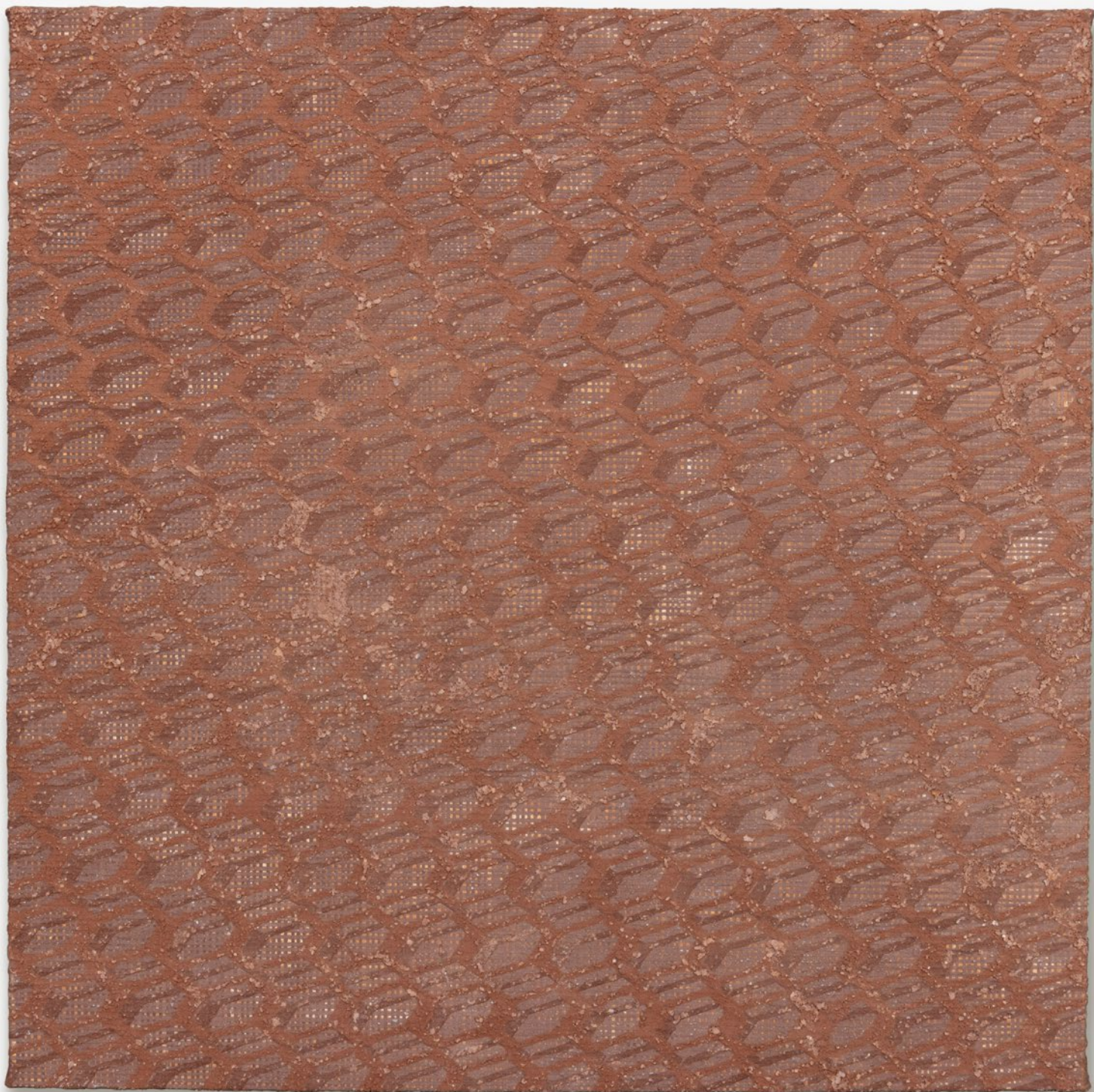
meranti wood and mild steel
41.6 × 90 × 18 cm





Arkab, 2024

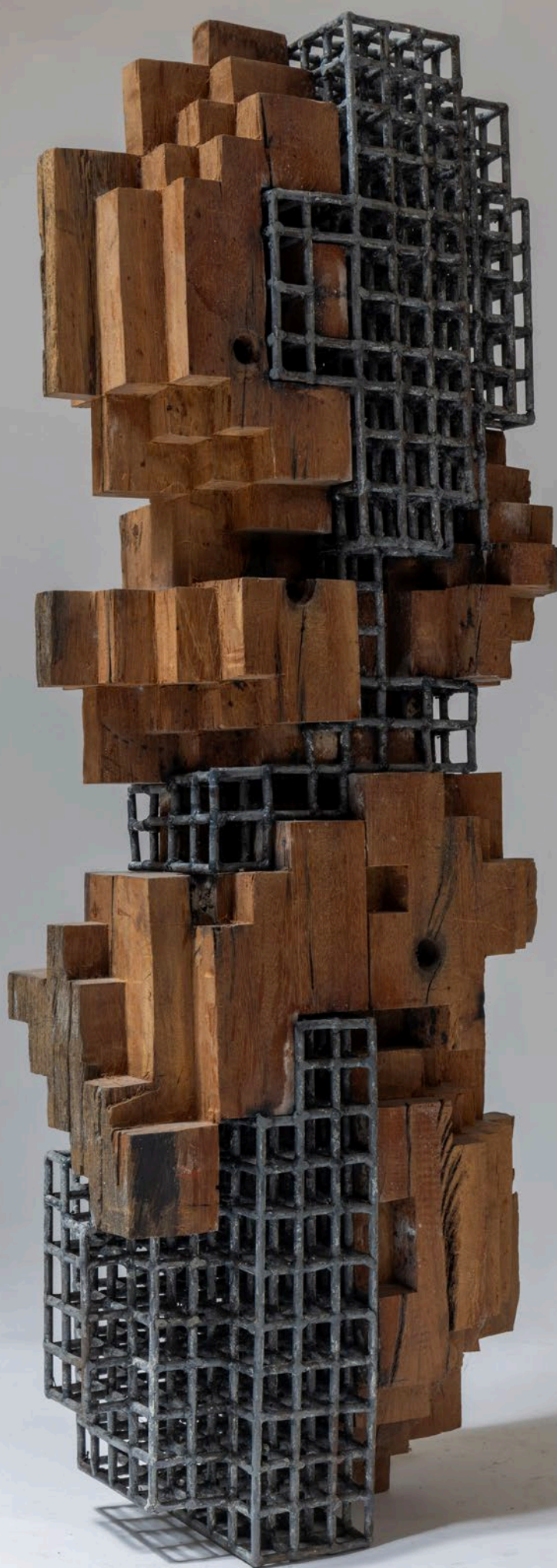
chengal wood and mild steel
163 × 19 × 19 cm



Setara, 2019

limestone on canvas
100 × 100 × 5 cm





Rampung, 2023

balau wood and mild steel
36 x 95 x 19 cm



Alun-alun, 2020

soil and limestone on canvas
150 × 224 × 5 cm





Teman, 2020

meranti wood and mild steel
30 x 75 x 30 cm



About the Artist

Zulkifli Lee (b. 1978, Pahang, Malaysia) holds a MA in Fine Art and Technology (2013) and a BA in Art and Design (2000) from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. His practice explores the dynamic between personalised and impersonalised forms, using the language of materials. His work juxtaposes the beauty and paradoxes of the relationship between humans and nature. Bridging Islamic aesthetic philosophies with contemporary principles, Lee references traditional Islamic and Malay folk art to create minimal yet intricate compositions, often involving systematic and rhythmic geometric patterns. Rather than striving for total control, he embraces the element of chance and submits to the materials' naturally occurring properties, sharing the creation process with nature itself. Since 1999, Lee has exhibited extensively in galleries and institutions in Malaysia and abroad. As Rimbun Dahan's year-long resident artist for 2017, he presented his first solo exhibition *Material, Order & Chance* (2017). He also finished ACME Studio Associate Artist Residency in London, UK in 2019. In early 2021 he presented a solo sculpture exhibition titled *Interdependence* at TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur. He has exhibited in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom. Zulkifli Lee lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Education

- 2013 M.A of Fine Arts & Technology, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
- 2000 Bachelor Degree of Art and Design (Major in Fine Art), Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 *Consonance & Dissonance*, Mizuma Gallery, Singapore
- 2021 *Interdependence*, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2020 *Trace*, SantySaptari Art Consulting, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2017 *Material, Order & Chance*, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2024 *Journeying through Malaysian Art, Imagination and Legacy*, Think City, Bangunan UAB, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
- Sesat Di Kuala Lumpur*, Puteh Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Abstraction*, Galeri Z, Taman Melawati, Selangor, Malaysia
- Alchemy*, Sareng Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

- 2023 *Realpolitic*, Cult Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Embracing the Beauty Within: An Ode to Life*, Galeri Khazanah, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2022 *Imposing Dimensions*, China House, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
- Alchemy*, Sareng Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Turun Tanah*, Puteh Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Local Only 2022*, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Rhymes With Orange*, FOLD Gallery, London, UK
- The Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2022*, Art Central, Hong Kong
- Abstract NOW*, Wei Ling Gallery Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2021 *Alam & Manusia*, Galeri Z, Taman Melawati, Selangor, Malaysia
- Open Show*, Cult Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 10 Tahun*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Syurga & Neraka*, Cult Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- ASYAAF 2021*, Hongik Museum of Art Seoul, South Korea
- Niskala*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2020 *Bebas*, Cult Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

- Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Warnanegara*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Emboiment*, TAKSU, Singapore
- Gen Set*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
- 2019 *ArtAids'19*, WhiteBox Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Reintepreating Minimalism*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- New Generation*, Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand
- What You See Is What You See*, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
- 2018 *Frictional*, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
- Lingering Manifestation*, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
- Bintang 5*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Local Only 2018*, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Abstract Show*, TAKSU, Singapore
- 2017 *Hell, Heaven*, Cult Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- ArtAids17 (Bebas)*, WhiteBox Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- The Unreal Deal*, Bank Negara Malaysia Museum & Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Sensation*, Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

	Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>Bilateral Bond</i> , TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>Young Contemporary' 16</i> , National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Malaysia <i>Pahang Young Contemporary Arts</i> , SENIKA Gallery, Kuantan, Malaysia <i>Pahang's Open Exhibition</i> , SENIKA Gallery, Kuantan, Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2016	<i>Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur</i> , TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>The Practitioners</i> , Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	<i>Pameran Ekspresi Selangor Indah</i> , Shah Alam Gallery, Shah Alam, Malaysia <i>Gema Jiwa Bicara Seni</i> , FSSR Gallery, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia	Residencies
2015	<i>Shift</i> , TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>Art4Manekurai</i> , Galeri Chandan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>Local Only</i> , TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	1999 <i>Gema jiwa Observation & Perception</i> , FSSR Gallery, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia	2023 CULT x Borneo Laboratory Art Residency, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia 2019 ACME Studio Associate Artist Residency Warton House, Stratford, London, UK 2017 Year Long Art Residency, Rimibun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia
2014	<i>Open Show Malaysia</i> , National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia		
2013	<i>Young Master</i> , Segaris Art Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia		
2012	<i>Urban Art</i> , Pelita Hati Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia		
2011	<i>Obsessive Art Disorder</i> , Core Design Gallery, Subang Jaya, Malaysia		
2008	<i>Malaysian Illustrator Exhibition</i> , Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia		
2005	<i>Gema Jiwa Art Exhibition</i> , Galeri Seni Johor, Johor Bahru, Malaysia		
2002	<i>Orchid In Art</i> , 17th World Orchid Conference MIECC, The Mines, Sri Kembangan, Malaysia		
2000	<i>Degree Show</i> , Galeri Shah Alam, Shah Alam, Malaysia		
		Awards <i>Finalist, The Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2022</i> , The Sovereign Art Foundation, Hong Kong <i>Finalist Young Contemporary' 16</i> , National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia <i>Excellent Masters Award</i> , Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia	
		Collections Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Muzium Seni Pahang, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia Khazanah Nasional,	

About Mizuma Gallery

Executive Director Sueo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists in the region as well as the introduction of Southeast Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space “Rumah Kijang Mizuma” opened in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to create a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia. From 2018 to 2023, “Mizuma & Kips” opened in New York, USA, as a shared collaboration between Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Singapore and Kips Gallery from New York.

About Gillman Barracks

Set in a former military barracks dating back to 1936 and surrounded by lush tropical greenery, the Gillman Barracks visual arts cluster was launched in September 2012. Gillman Barracks’ vision is to be Asia’s destination for the presentation and discussion of international and Southeast Asian art. Today, Gillman Barracks is a place for art lovers, art collectors, and those curious about art. The cluster is a focal point of Singapore’s arts landscape, and anchors the development of visual art in the region and beyond.

Executive Director
Mizuma Sueo

Director
Fredy Chandra

General Manager
Theresia Irma

Project Manager
Marsha Tan

Designer
Yusuf Aji

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Photography by Wong Jing Wei

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