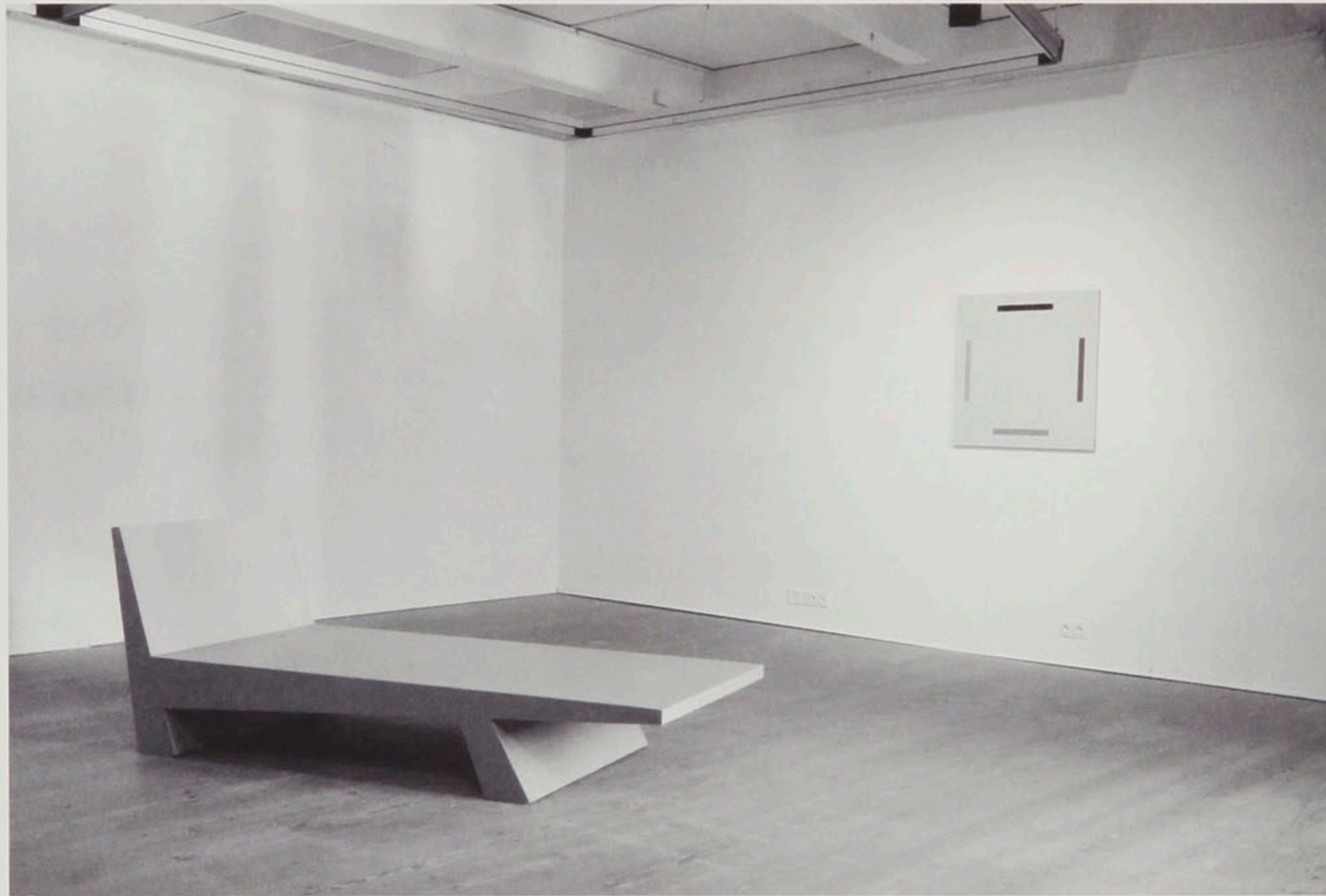
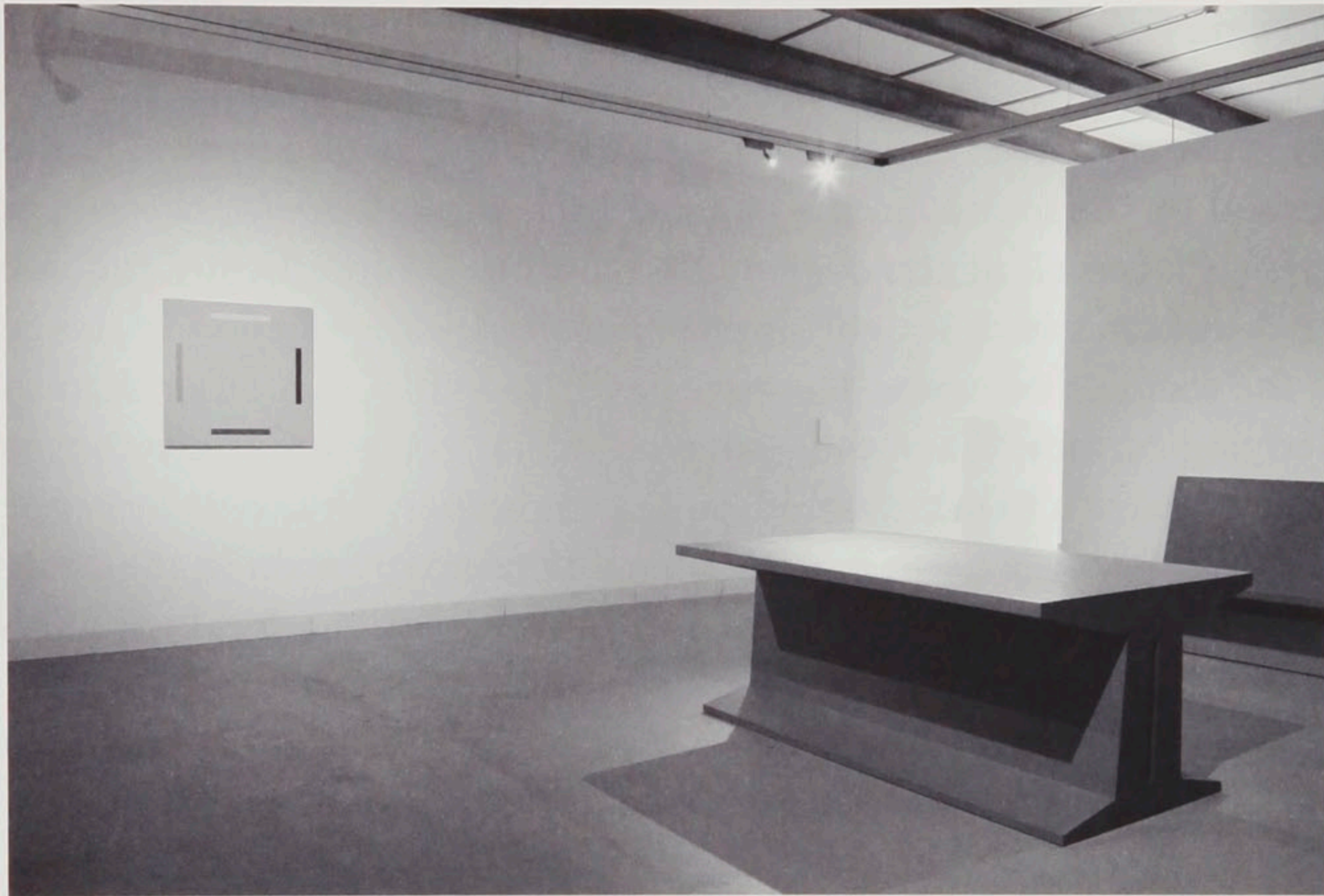


Beyond Description

Rudi Fuchs



Steven Aalders, *Place*, Mondrian House, Amersfoort, 2009 (with furniture by architect Dom H. van der Laan)



The calm simplicity displayed, at least outwardly, in the five paintings by Steven Aalders that I recently observed could, in fact, be deceptive. That occurred to me. They make up a coherent series titled *Place*. The square works are then distinguished by the monochrome color of each surface: *Black, Brown, Beige, Grey & Ash*. Placed along the edge of the painting, symmetrically and consistently, are four bars which roughly indicate or mark off a location in the center, which is the focus of our gaze. The bars have the four colors other than that of the underlying surface. When the underlying color is grey, they are consequently black, brown, beige and ash-colored, so that ultimately all five colors appear in every painting. Because there is a clear but subtle progression in the weight of each color – from black to the lightest color, silvery white ash – I tried to see whether a rhythmic kind of succession might be discernible in the placement of the bars. Nearly every painting which is developed on the basis of a geometric order invites the eye to see whether all sorts of clever formal principles or patterns are hidden in the design. The same thing happens, actually, when we look at the visual stunts in a surrealist painting. Once that has been discovered, the painting has been *solved*, as though it were a problem. Such works have been produced of course: by artists such as Peter Struycken or Richard Paul Lohse, who aimed to have the process of design follow a strictly logical course and thereby avoid the uncertainties of intuition. But the longer I looked at these five paintings by Steven Aalders, the more I began to notice the discretion and the lightness with which those bars were manifest. Their presence is, in fact, as understated as possible. Because they are not connected, I don't regard them as a *definition* of the uncanny middle area where my eye keeps on lingering. The minimal contrasts of color among the bars are moreover so gentle and balanced that they cause no real interruption of the velvety surface. They could sooner be called conductive. Perhaps they could also be compared to melodic chords that set a *tone*.

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On looking at these motionless paintings that allow us to know so little about what we actually see or should see in them, I had to think of the first lines of a short poem by William Wordsworth – in which he is moved by the sight of a butterfly:

*I've watched you now a full half hour,
Self-poised upon that yellow flower;
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep, or feed.*

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What I see in the paintings of Steven Aalders, I do indeed see; yet I cannot express or describe what that is, any more than the poet was able to say whether the butterfly was sleeping or feeding, even after having spent time observing the fragile thing so silently and patiently. Because I want *to know* what I see (it's in our nature to be curious) I continue to look. That's why my eye keeps on resting in the middle area of the painting, which becomes a place of intimate serenity, surrounded by those quiet bars, like the silence that can be heard during an interval in a melody. No story is being told: the paintings are made in such a way, with those forms and those colors, that nothing other than a muted balance remains while minimal fluctuations nevertheless occur at the same time, mainly in the relationships among the colors or, as I've said, among their weights. We know those colors, yet their appearance continually changes on each underlying color – in a way that I cannot describe but can indeed see. The paintings therefore literally show the indescribable: that's what makes them so special. This capacity to transform that which cannot be named into something which can be seen and experienced is, of course, the unique quality of all good visual art. Usually that seems to be a mere side effect: Vermeer's *View of Delft* could conceivably, mostly in terms of what it says, be considered simply an image of that city – but the painting becomes fascinating solely as a result of all those refined gradations of color and effects of light that are visible even between the houses. Perhaps more than we realize, it is that chromatic liveliness – to a much greater extent than any skyline or contour – that allows us to experience the city as radiant whole. The unparalleled way in which something is painted: that's what intrigues us. The subject is just a point of departure.