

Watercolor Vision ~ The Power of the Middle Values

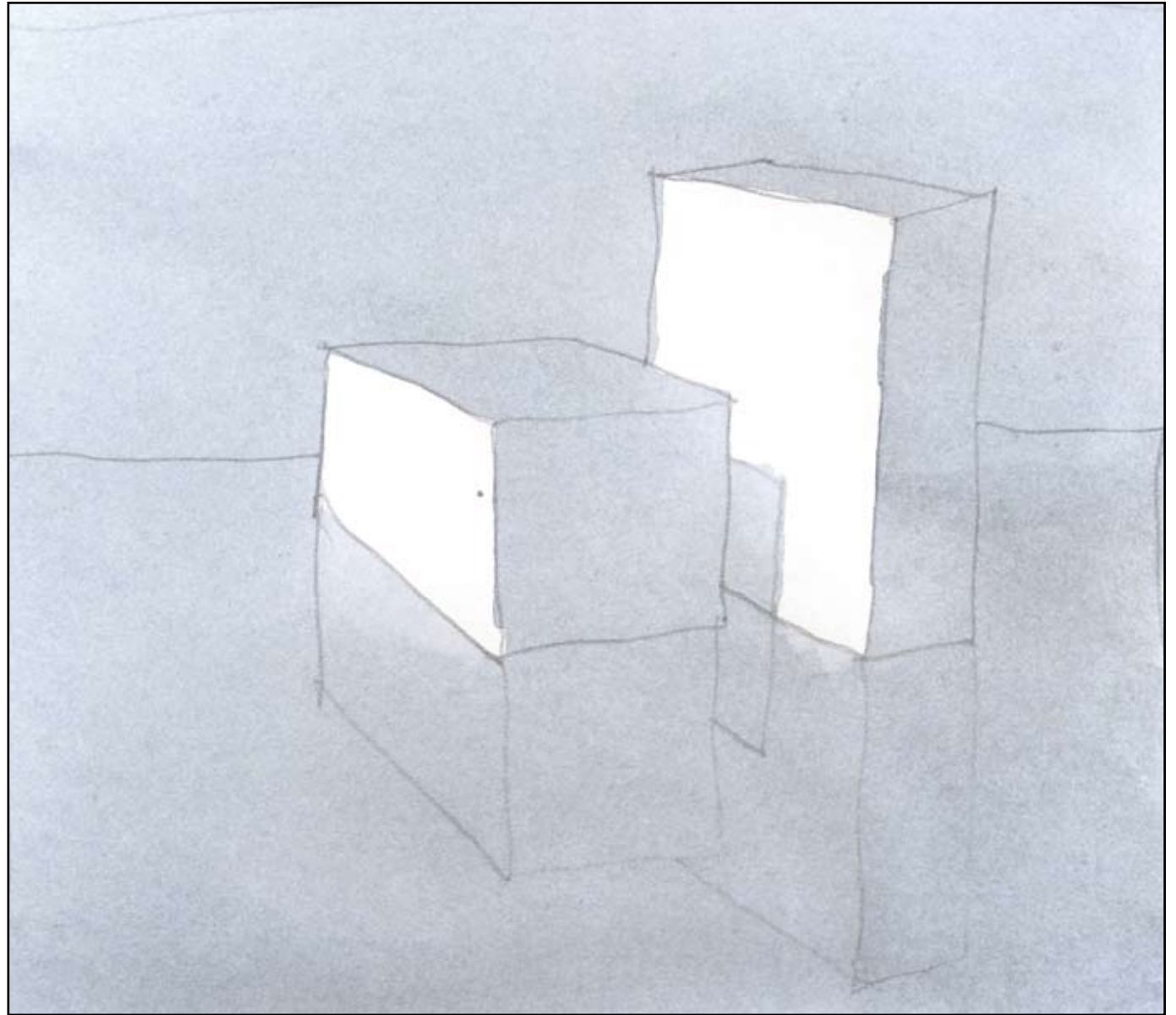
The ability to see & paint correct values is a basic skill in transparent watercolor. Many watercolor books show something like this to demonstrate the basic principles of light flows over objects. But all too often artists simply fail to grasp the importance of this effort.

So what I've done is take this same commonly used exercise and recreate it using an actual recipe rather than just showing you what this looks like.

Remember... my Recipes are meant to be practiced again & again. The result of practice is that you establish a kind of rehearsed familiarity with a particular subject or skill until at last it becomes second nature to you.

Stage One: Using only a thinned mixture of Paynes Gray... use your one-inch wash brush to quickly cover everything other than the surface that catches the most direct light.

Note: If at this initial stage... you cannot begin to see the light source... you've done something wrong. Stop, analyze, and start over.

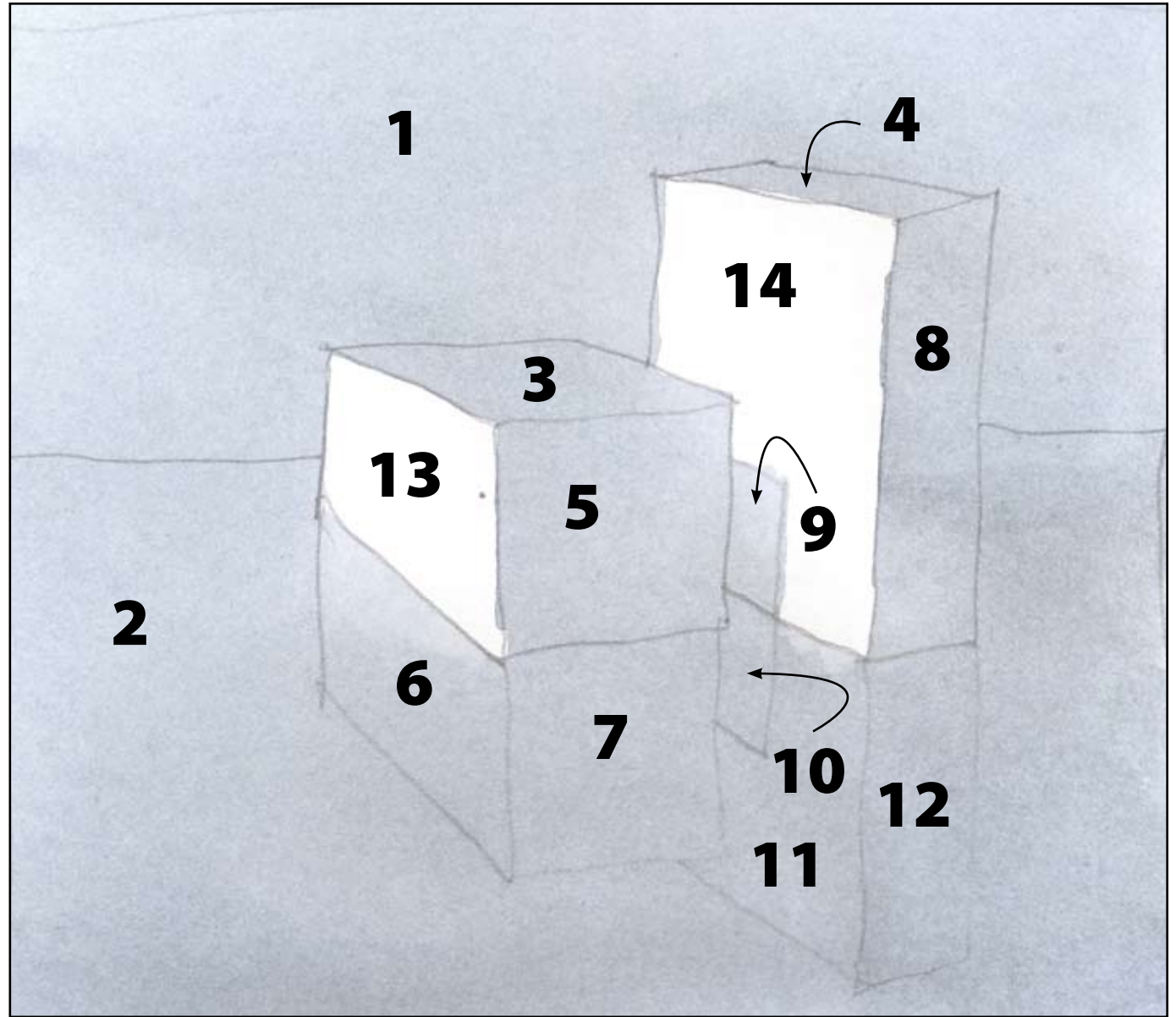


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Darker / Lighter In all paintings... an artist makes 1,000 subtle value adjustments in order to create the subject. And in most cases this process goes unnoticed, undefined, and rather unconscious. But in all instances, no matter what medium an artist chooses to use, this ability to see, recognize, and paint differences in values will actually be the single most important factor in a painting's success full conclusion. But this is a skill that can be refined & upgraded. But rather than it being a rather unconscious skill... I want it to become a conscious skill that you control and use effectively.

All subjects are illuminated by some kind of light. And in all circumstances... you recreate a particular subject by making subtle adjustments in the *value* of the light flowing over or bouncing off the objects.

Study this Test Recipe and note that your simple objective is to carefully cover each part of the subject with the proper value of gray. So I've numbered each section in order to clarify how this works. And you can see that in fact, there are 14 distinct shapes that will need to be accessed & painted.



Each of these 14 sections presents a slightly different value of light. And in order to create an effective illusion, you must somehow paint each section correctly or the illusion won't work right.

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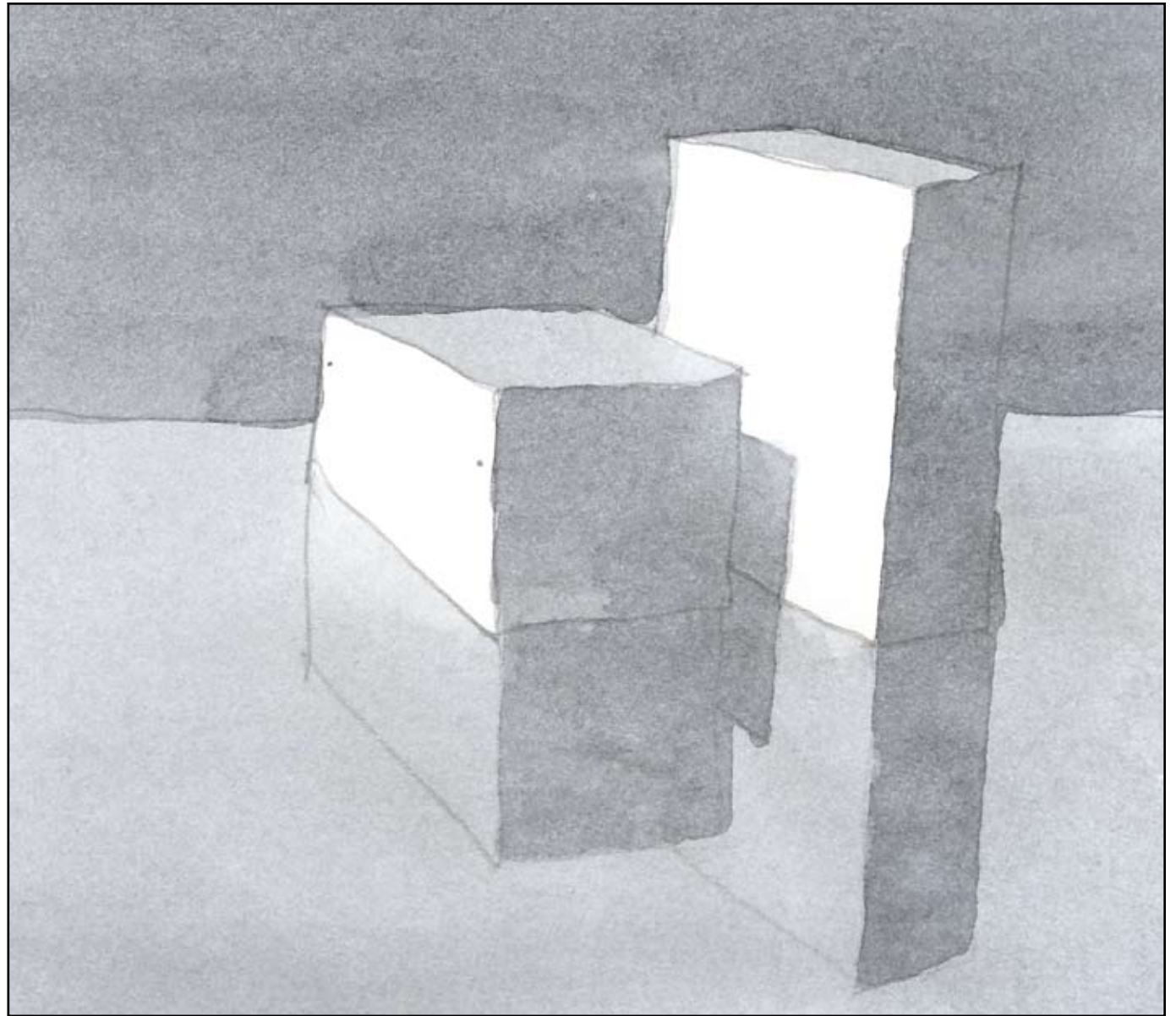
Second Stage Once you've dried the first stage... mix a slightly darker mix of Paynes gray. And then paint that one value over the entire upper background section... Number 1.

As you work your brushwork around the shapes... continue brushing this same value into the side of the tall vertical shape... Surfaces #8 and the Reflected Shape #12.

Also paint this same value into Shapes... 5... 7... 9... & 10.

If you've done this correctly you will already be able to see the light on your objects... and they are now reflected in this base surface that they are sitting on. And your illusion has been achieved with only 2 values.

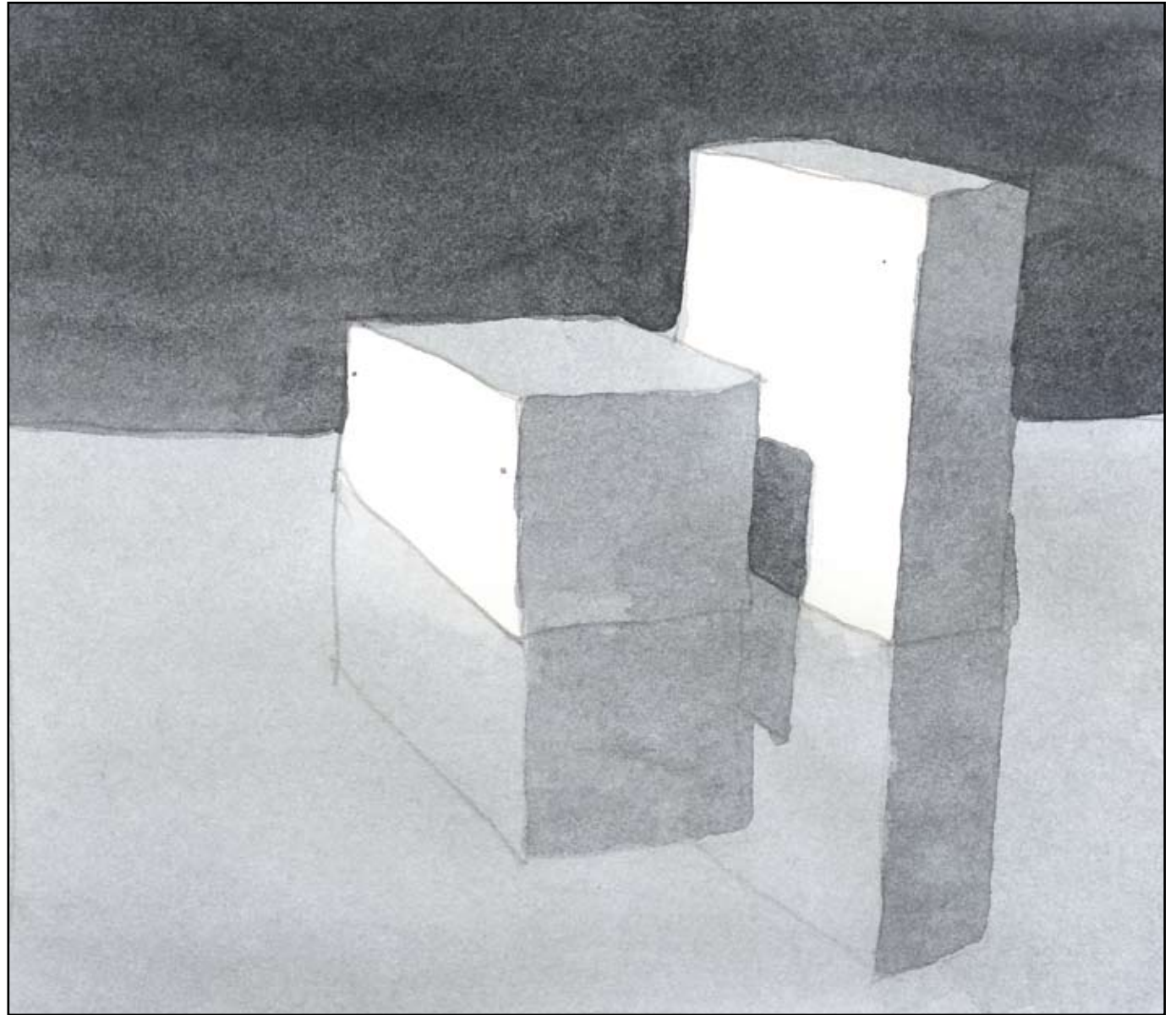
Page back & forth to see just how powerful and amazing it is that you've created an illusion of objects sitting on a reflective surface... using only 2 values of gray!



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Stage 3 Use a still darker dark and paint it in over the background... and into this tiny area on the face of the larger block. That is in fact... a Cast Shadow... falling onto the surface of the larger block.

Once again... pause to study what you've done. Page back & forth to see the effect happen.



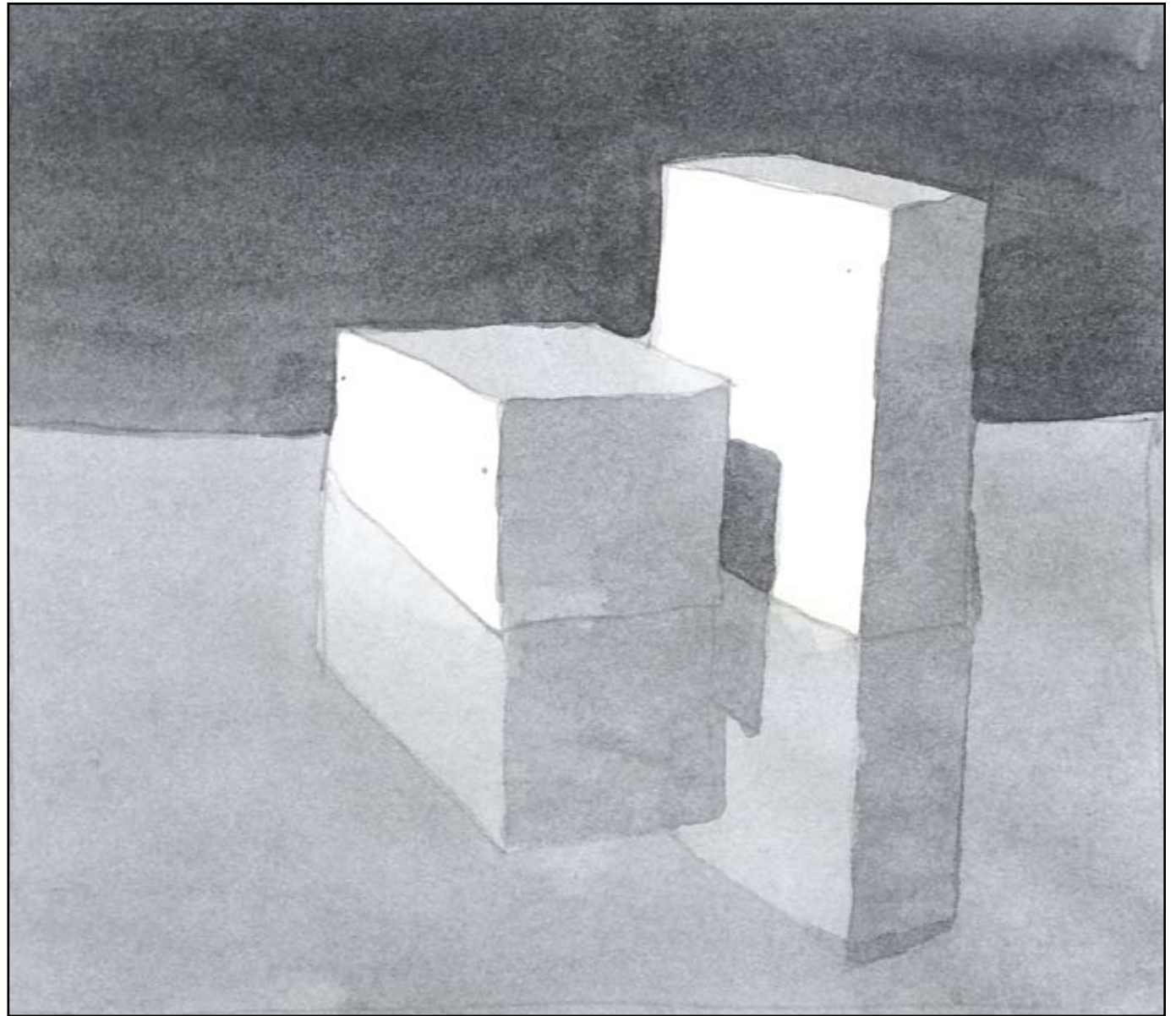
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Subtle Adjustment Page back & forth with this page and the previous one in order to see what I've done.

In the previous stage... the bright white reflective surface on the blocks was drawn into the reflective base... but these surfaces were as yet... not defined. So I mixed a gray value that was just a bit darker than the very first wash I used. And I brushed it into this base and around these shapes. And by doing so... the reflected surfaces become more defined... and the whole painting begins to take on a more finished look.

Can you see how darkening Section 2 just a bit... makes sections 6 & 11... appear to be a bit brighter?

However... although we've added a second layer of gray over Section 2... we have not done anything more to sections 5... 7 ... 9... 10... or 8... 12. But even so... our illusion of bright light already works.



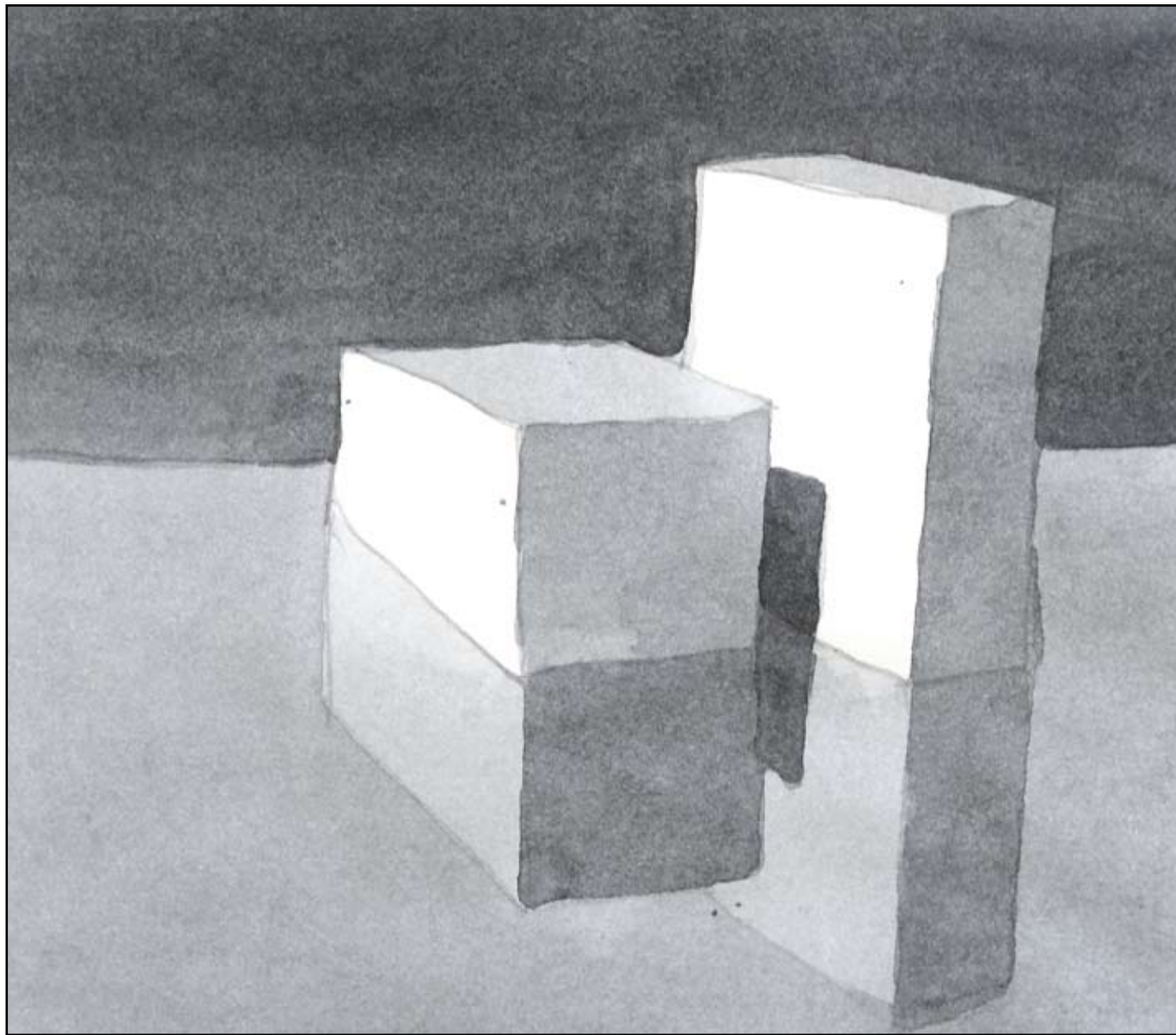
Watercolor Vision ~ The Power of the Middle Values

Stage 4 The general rule of thumb in observed Nature... is that the **reflections of objects, in either water, wet surfaces, or shiny smooth surfaces... is usually darker than the objects themselves!**

This is a commonly quoted phrase by many artists. However... it is well worth mentioning that... in point-of-fact... the reflections of objects is usually darker than the objects... only 60-70% of the time. And the other 30-40% of the time... they can be lighter!

So here... I've darkened shapes 7 & 12. However... I darkened shape 9 & 10... but section 9 is actually "darker" than 10. I did this on purpose to show you how the eye will make a subject look correct... if the overall value structure works.

And for all practical purposes... this illusion is complete and could be left at this stage.



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Subtle Adjustments But now look at what I've done... I worked into 5... 7... 8... and 12 to make each one darker.

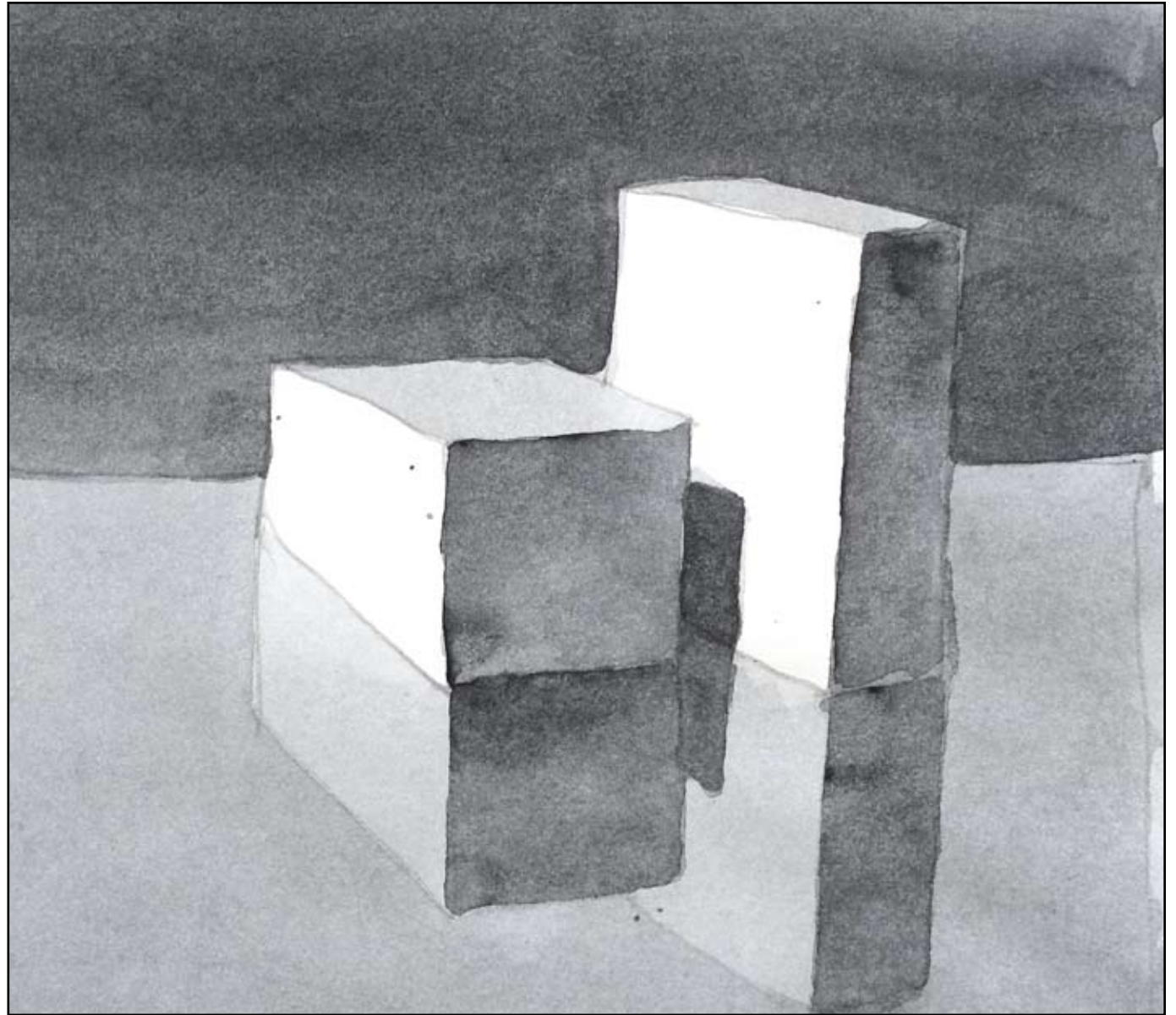
Notice that I purposefully work darker mixtures into the surfaces at the edges.

But I've done nothing more to 9 & 10.

Also... look carefully... can you see how although subtle... I maintained the Basic Reflection Rule in shapes 7 & 12... they are still a bit darker than the surface 5 & 8.

But now that I've darkened these surfaces that are in Shade... the brighter surfaces in the reflected plane... shapes 6... and 11... seem to have lost some of their punch. They don't seem to be defined as well as the previous page?

We haven't done anything to those surface shapes... yet they've lost some definition when we darkened these shaded sides of the blocks.



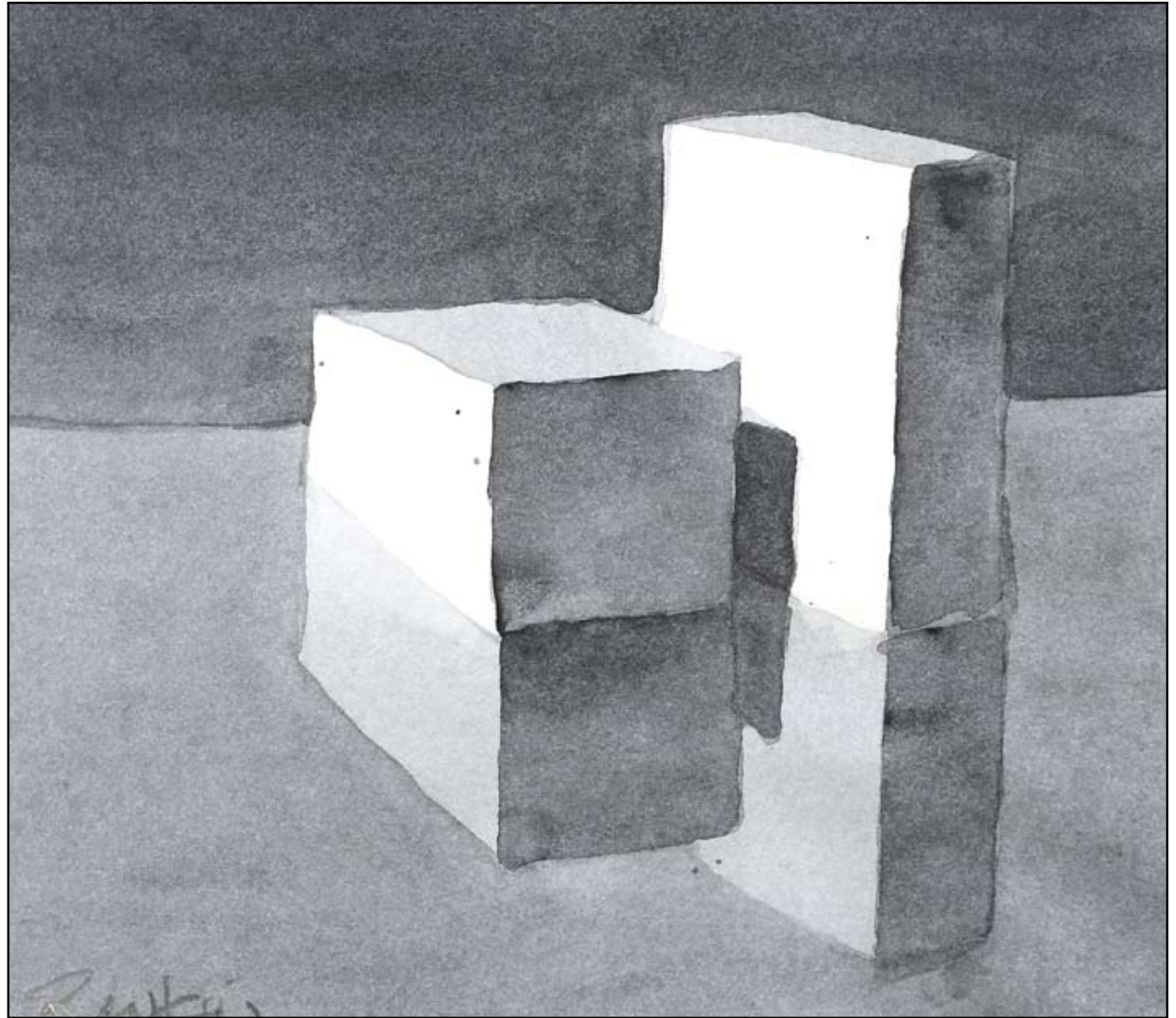
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Last Stage In this Recipe... you can make final adjustments to values even after to reach Stage 4.

Stage 4 can stand on its own... and in many paintings you as the artist can determine when a painting is finished. But I wanted you to see... and practice taking a simple subject just a bit further in order to strengthen the illusion.

I also then erase the pencil lines at this stage... because I do not want the objects defined by pencil lines... but rather by the painted brushwork.

And again... remember... this is now a Recipe. It will work every time you do it. However... once you've done this a couple times this way... try changing the values placed into these various surface shapes to create a different illusion simply by changing the values you place in these 14 different surface sections.



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Using this Approach Here are several of my own Gray Studies for various paintings I am developing. Can you see how this skill comes in handy when trying out ideas. Although these are studies... I take care in creating them. They are done carefully and thoughtfully because this is where I want to make mistakes... not in my final watercolors. And in most cases... these small quick Gray Studies help me see, plan, and execute my final watercolors... faster... with fewer mistakes... and much better overall impact in the finished watercolors. And each of these followed this very same approach beginning with Stage 1 to define the White Design.