

Extravagant Currents

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, Brent Fogt explores the experiences and ideas embodied in his drawings. Fogt draws extravagant forms that, from a distance, resemble continents, animals or microscopic organisms. Within these forms are waves, explosions, paisleys and decorative patterns. Closer still, the drawings house thousands of circles of varying size and line weight. He chooses circles because they allow multiple interpretations ranging from the microscopic to the cosmic. Fogt combines story telling and analysis to create an accurate account of the thinking and experiments that led to these drawings, as well as situating his work in a broader historical and cultural context.

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Introduction

I draw extravagant forms that, from a distance, resemble continents, animals or microscopic organisms (Figure 1). Within these forms are waves, explosions, paisleys and decorative patterns. Closer still, the drawings house thousands of circles of varying size and line weight (Figure 2). I choose circles because they allow multiple interpretations ranging from the microscopic to the cosmic. They resemble cells, planets, water bubbles and pearls. Circles are basic, elemental. They are one of the first shapes you learn to draw in kindergarten.

The process of drawing is endlessly fascinating for me. Working with the most basic materials—ink and paper—I impose rules upon myself, so each drawing is like a game. Starting each drawing without a clear idea of the final result, I limit myself to one or two kinds of marks—circles, in the case of my latest drawings. Repeating the same mark over and over helps focus my mind on the myriad decisions I must make. I seek a way forward in the drawings, not knowing what they will look like, but trusting that if I just put the marks down, I will figure it out. For me, process is as important as the final product. I document my process obsessively, taking notes and photographing.

This thesis explores the experiences and ideas that my drawings embody, including:

- The handmade
- Process and uncertainty
- Exploratory lines
- Work ethic and
- Minimalism and ornamentation.

In each section I intersperse personal anecdotes with a more formal discussion of concepts. The anecdotes, though not chronological, describe experiences that influenced my artistic path and serve as the motivational source for much of my creative output. After each anecdote, I analyze the concepts these stories raise and discuss my work in relation to other artists and ideas. My hope is that this combination of story telling and analysis will create an accurate account of the thinking and experiments that led to these drawings, as well as situating my work in a broader historical and cultural context.

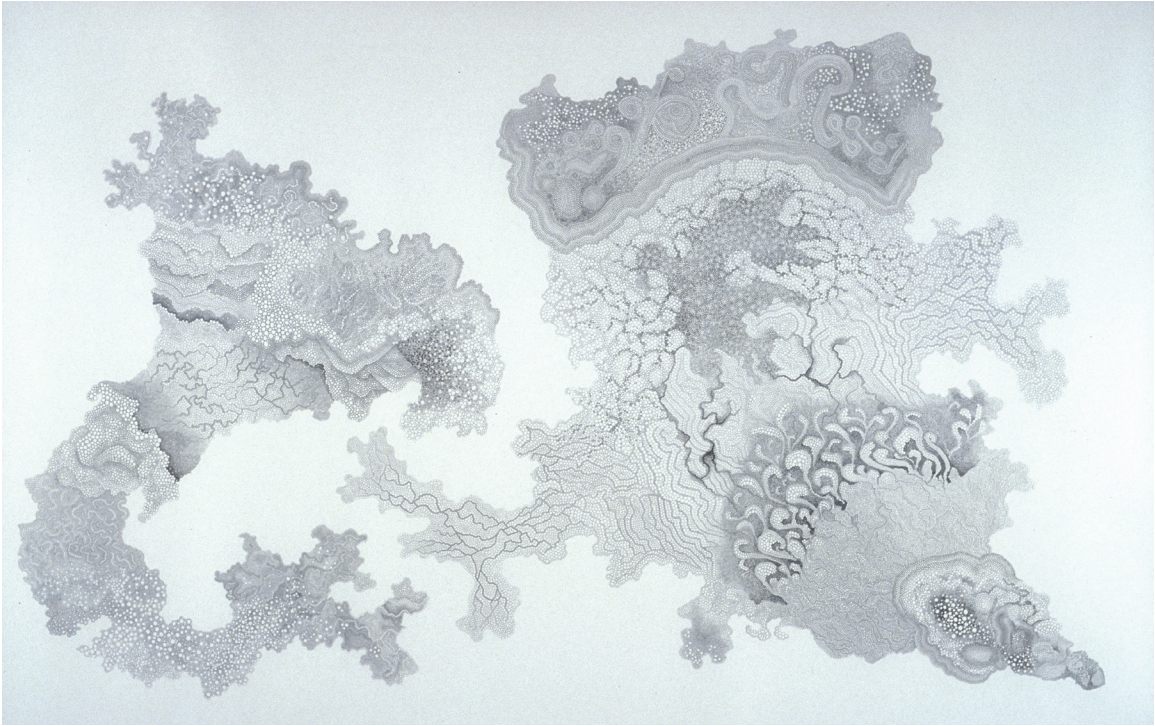


Figure 1: *Persistent Traveler*, 2006, ink on paper, 60" x 94"

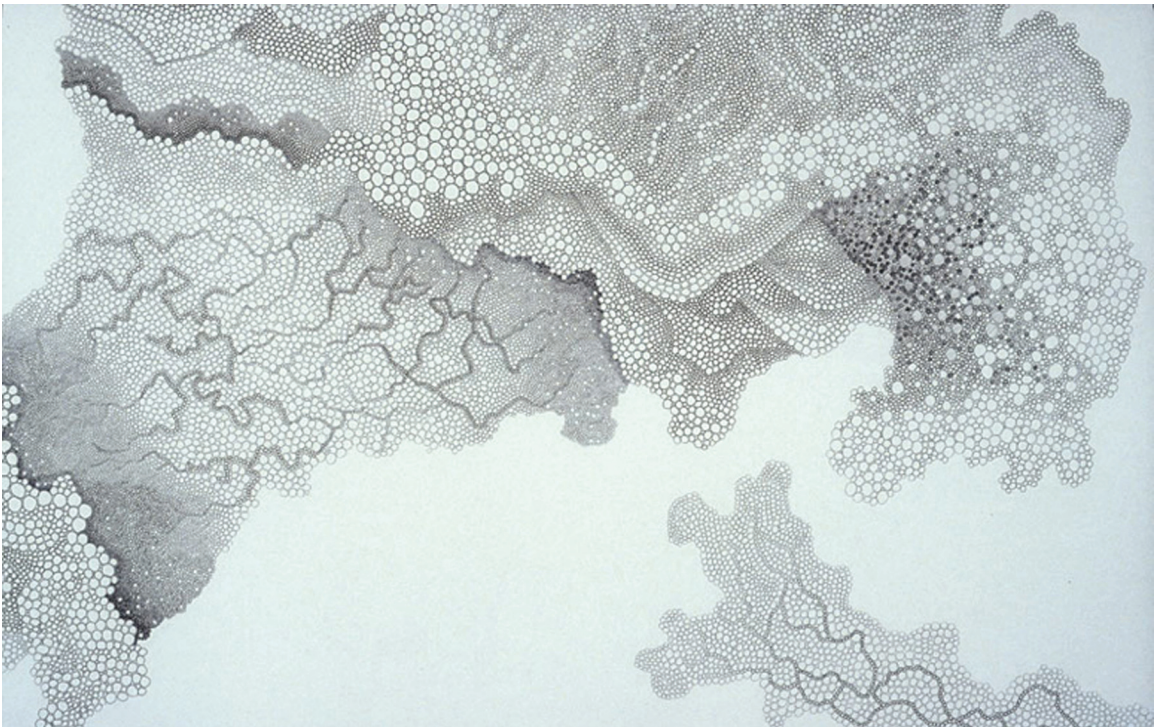


Figure 2: *Persistent Traveler* (detail)

The Handmade

My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Pierce, announced one day that she would teach knitting after school to anyone who wanted to learn. Not knowing why exactly, I raised my hand, along with a few girls. The next day, knitting needles and yarn in tow, we sat at a small table and learned the basics of knitting. I knitted almost every day for the next two months, creating lumpy looking hot pads and scarves. My technique was never very good, but I found the repetition to be oddly soothing and addictive. I am not sure why I stopped. Perhaps I started to feel self-conscious about being the only boy engaged in the activity or thought playing sports after school was more important.

Four years later, I discovered macramé. This centuries-old method of knot tying arrived in sleepy San Antonio on the tide of the hippy-driven craft renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I got a book, learned a few knots and made plant holders for our house. I enjoyed making knots, especially the twisting kinds, and liked the roughness of the twine. When I sat in my bedroom and worked, I would get really obsessed and determined to finish. Once, I was so engaged in my work that I completely ignored a friend visiting from nearby Seguin. Afterwards, I felt bad about ignoring him, but I felt an uncontrollable urge to finish.

In my twenties, long before I decided to go to art school, I found myself spending Saturday afternoons in my Washington, DC apartment making collages and tie-dying tee shirts. My friends in the policy world thought I was a little strange, but I loved it. After finally giving in to my desire to make art and getting my BFA, I spent seven years working in the corporate world. As a graphic designer in Houston, I designed web pages during the day and ran home to my apartment to make sculptures out of paper mache or wire or ties—objects I could manipulate.

Much of my work involves direct interaction with physical materials. Though I have access to, and expertise in, the latest digital tools, I nonetheless prefer working with my hands, employing my haptic senses as I discover the unique tactile quality of each material. One explanation for this preference is that handling materials provides information that simply viewing them cannot. By placing pressure on objects, following their contours or enclosing them in my hands, I can determine their firmness, form and volume. Research has demonstrated that “haptic explorers can be remarkably fast and accurate at recognising real objects” because the haptic senses can encode a variety of information simultaneously.¹ The combination of visual and tactile exploration gives me a more complete understanding of my materials, affecting both formal and conceptual decisions I make in the studio.

Below are some of the materials I have used in my artistic practice:

- Rubber bands
- Pillows
- Ice
- Snow (Figure 3)
- Baking soda
- Straight pins
- Candle wicking
- Water bottles
- Socks
- Shoes
- Balloons
- Bean plants
- Fishing poles
- Bottle caps (Figure 4)
- Jello
- Basketball nets

¹ David Prytherch, “So What is Haptics Anyway?” *Research Issues in Art, Design and Media*. Issue 2. Spring 2002.

Because of my connection to materials, I often feel as though I am “building” a drawing—as if, step by step, I am stacking together bricks or creating knots. I draw one circle at a time, using simple materials: ink pens and paper. I grasp the pen and lean into the paper to make marks, pressing on the page more or less depending on how dark a mark I want. Though I could probably create the drawings faster on a computer, I would lose the tactility and materiality that helps drive the work.



Figure 3: *Langaman*, 2005, bottle caps, wire, dimensions variable



Figure 4: *Dreaming of Surinam*, 2005, snow, 38” x 42” x 60”

Process and Uncertainty

Consider everything an experiment. The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something.

-John Cage²

*In January 2006, I began a site-specific work in the basement of Gallery Project in Ann Arbor. Besides the century-old brick, exposed rafters, and low ceilings, the defining characteristic of the gallery basement is its complete absence of natural light. Armed with my copy of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, a camera and little else, I spent nearly every day for one month in this sparsely illuminated space, taking pictures, experimenting with wax, ice and other materials, and reading, with the hope and expectation that this process would generate ideas for the installation. After two weeks of trial and error, I was inspired by a passage in *The Poetics of Space*:*

In our civilization, which has the same light everywhere, and puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle. But the unconscious cannot be civilized. It takes a candle when it goes to the cellar.³

I decided to create a piece consisting of a single candlestick with a three-mile-long wick. I placed the candle at one end of the basement and the remainder of the wicking at the opposite corner in a series of handmade coils that resembled nests, miniature domiciles within the cellar (Figure 5). The entire basement



Figure 5: *Cellar Dreams* (detail), 2006, candle, candle wicking, dimensions variable

was dark except for two lights: a spotlight on the coils and a dimmer light on the candle. The single candle represented my solitude in the basement, and the three miles of wicking were meant not only to be absurd but also to represent time and the basement's history.

² John Cage, "Some Rules and Hints for Students and Teachers," Hartford Art School, < <http://www.hartfordartschool.org/helpful-hints.html>>.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) p.19.

The trial and error strategy that I used in my candle installation is similar to my approach to drawing. Though I have a general sense of where a drawing is headed, I never know exactly what the drawing will look like. I discover clues as the drawing progresses. I am addicted to this feeling of suspense. Sometimes the tension is pleasurable like a mystery movie or novel; at other times, it provokes anxiety. Since I draw in ink, I cannot erase. Though I try not to dwell on this condition, it underlies every decision I make. If I try something and decide I do not like it, I have to live with it. I have to accept and integrate

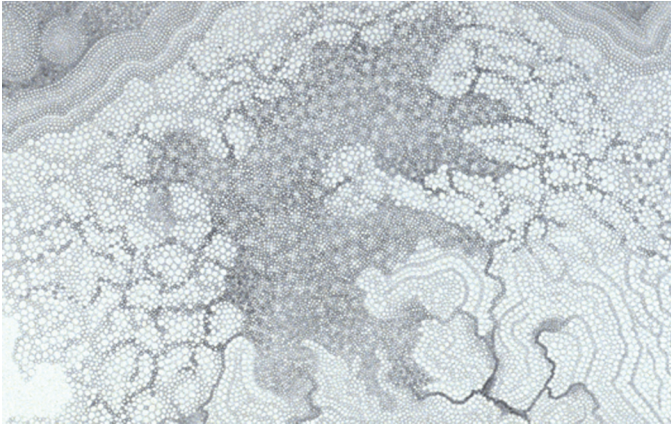


Figure 6: *Persistent Traveler* (detail), 2006

“mistakes” into my process. When I was working on my second large drawing, for example, I created a large section of dark shapes surrounded by a sea of lighter shapes. When I stepped back to look at it, my first reaction was that I had ruined the drawing. The dark shapes, instead of looking lake-like as I had intended them, combined to look like a dancing rooster or

chicken (Figure 6). If I had been working on a computer, I would have immediately hit Command Z to undo what I had done. Since this was impossible, I had to figure out a way to integrate the section into the rest of the drawing.

I follow a simple set of rules for creating my drawings. The rules are:

- Draw circles with mechanical pens on paper.
- No circle can be larger than half an inch in diameter.
- Leave minimal space in between circles.
- Strive for variety of line weight, pattern and contrast.

The most important variables in the relative value of circles are the line weight and circle diameter. I vary the thickness of lines by using a range of pen sizes from .005 mm to .8 mm. I can also vary thickness by pressure, but it is difficult to press down enough on a .005 pen, for example, to make it look like an .8. The scale of the marks is similar to that of handwriting or doodling (Figure 7).

The rules serve multiple roles. They give me a place to start. They limit the universe of possibilities and challenge me to invent new solutions to the problem I have posed. Because of the small size of the marks, the drawings evolve slowly, leaving time for making adjustments, adapting to what is already on the page. There is no rule for where I start on the page. I typically choose a random part and start drawing. Forms began to emerge after two or three days of drawing. After I have drawn the first section, I photograph the drawing and make multiple prints of it on paper. Using the prints, I make half a dozen or so sketches of possible ways to expand the drawings before deciding upon a direction (Figure 8). Once I have decided, I draw small circles in pencil to indicate boundaries. The boundaries become containers for improvisation (Figure 9).

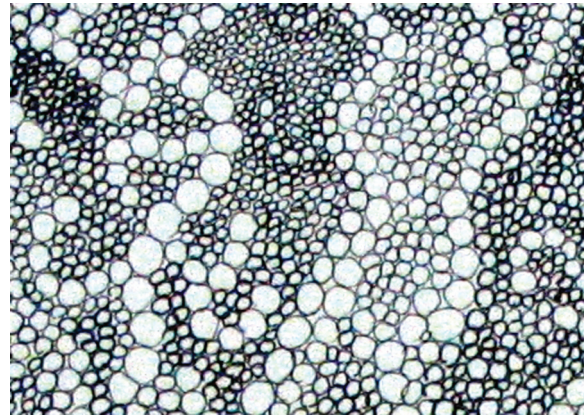


Figure 7: *Criminal Tombolo (detail)*, 2007
ink on paper, 96" x 60"

My work allows for a great deal of play, improvisation and invention. I get excited about a question as simple as “what would happen if I intersect these black circles with these light grey circles?” or “what if I create a set of ratios so that for every 10 large circles, I draw 20 medium circles and 40 small circles?” My goal is to discover new ways to create pattern and form every day I work.

My process shares some affinity with that of Sol Lewitt. For Lewitt, the concept behind a work always precedes its formal qualities. Before beginning a work, he creates a set of instructions for its completion. Lewitt, for instance, produced these instructions for Wall Drawing #340, 1980 (Figure 10):

Six-part drawing. The wall is divided horizontally and vertically into six equal parts. 1st part: On red, blue horizontal parallel lines, and in the center, a circle within which are yellow vertical parallel lines; 2nd part: On yellow, red horizontal parallel lines, and in the center, a square within which are blue vertical parallel lines; 3rd part: On blue, yellow horizontal parallel lines, and in the center, a triangle within which are red vertical parallel lines; 4th part: On red, yellow horizontal parallel lines, and in the

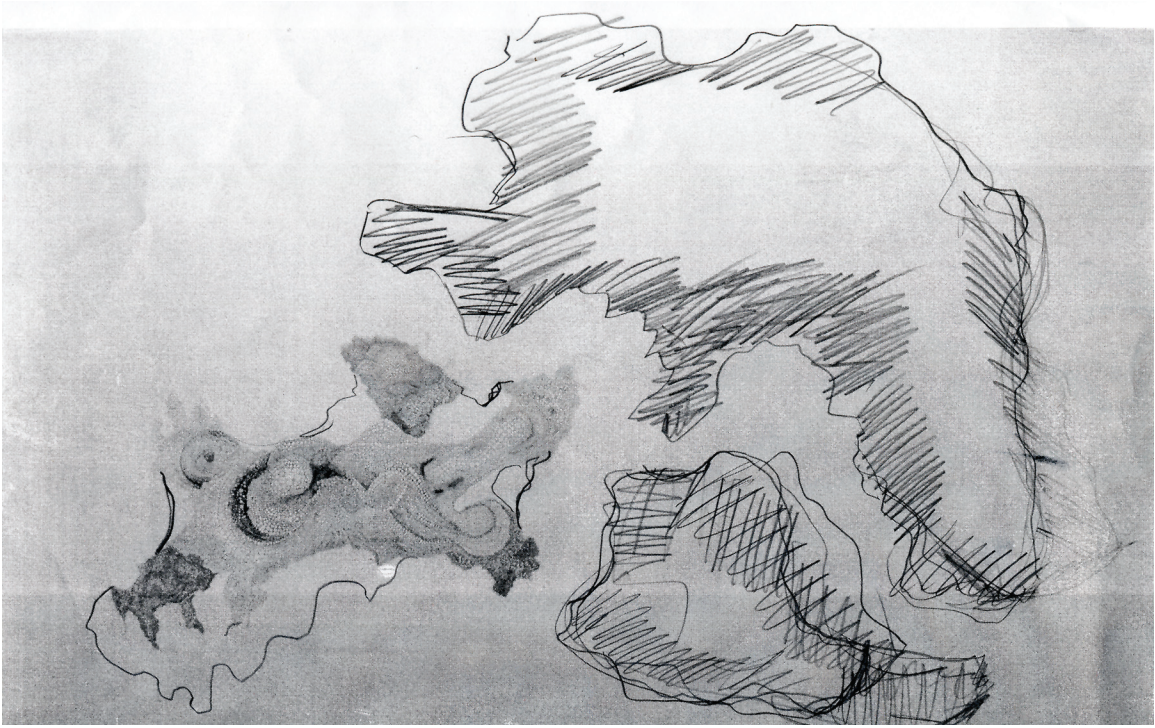


Figure 8: *Working Sketch for Havoc Action*, 2006, graphite on photocopy, 8.5" x 11"

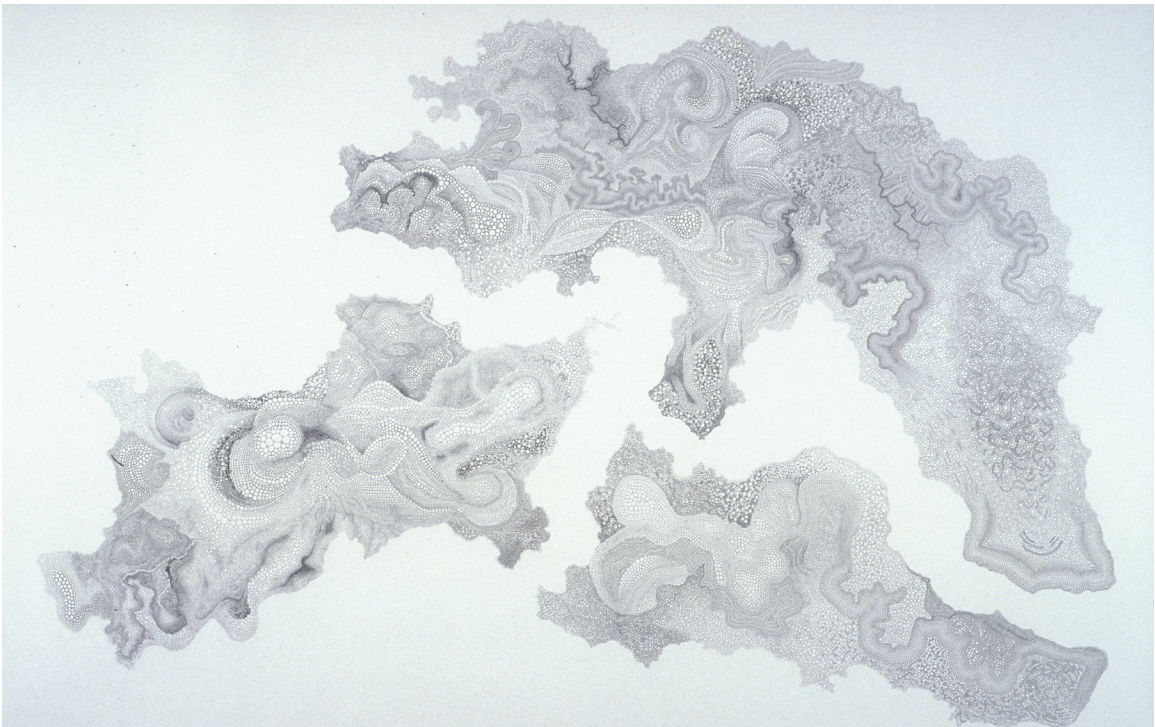


Figure 9: *Havoc Action*, 2006, ink on paper, 60" x 94"

center, a rectangle within which are blue vertical parallel lines; 5th part: On yellow, blue horizontal parallel lines, and in the center, a trapezoid within which are red vertical parallel lines; 6th part: On blue, red horizontal parallel lines, and in the center, a parallelogram within which are yellow vertical parallel lines. The horizontal lines do not enter the figures.⁴

One critical difference between my practice and Lewitt's is his emphasis on the rules as the primary content. While my drawings are rooted in following instructions with my own hands, Lewitt hires others to complete the work. Gary Garrells, curator of the 2002 Sol Lewitt retrospective at SFMOMA, compares Lewitt to a composer who "provides the notes, the meter, the design of the work, but the musician performs it, and for all the precision of the composing, there is room for variation among performances."⁵ Though my rules are less detailed than Lewitt's and focus more on mark-making than on the overall composition, I share with Lewitt an interest in establishing a structure for creative production.

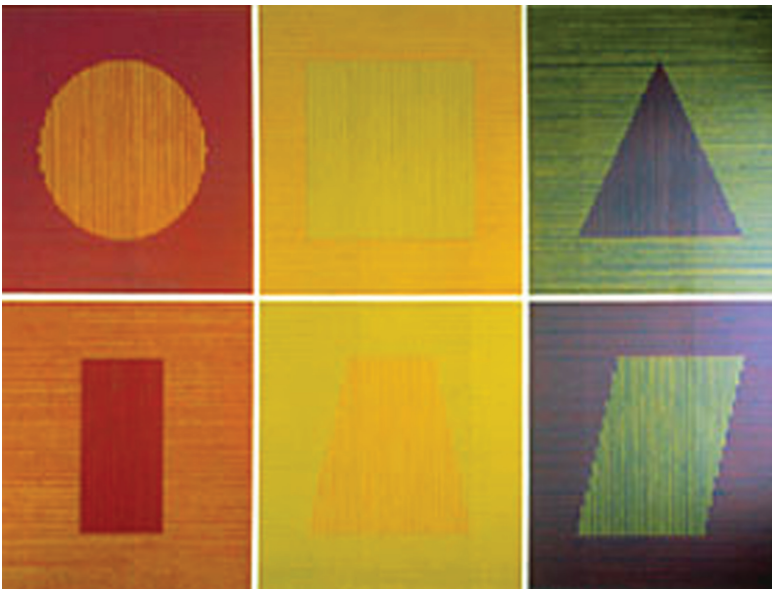


Figure 10: Sol Lewitt, *Wall Drawing #340*, 1980, oil on canvas

⁴ "SFMOMA Presents First Sol Lewitt Retrospective in 20 Years," SFMOMA Press Release, September 13, 1999.

⁵ SFMOMA press release.

Work Ethic

Last summer I set a task for myself: draw for 24 hours straight. I hypothesized that an extended drawing session would alter my mark-making and take my work in new directions. I began the drawing marathon with enthusiasm and confidence, but a strategic error prevented me from finishing. Instead of starting fresh in the morning, I made the mistake of beginning the task at 6 pm. Seventeen hours later, I felt dizzy and slightly delirious. My arm ached from drawing. Feeling guilty and a bit foolish, I stopped. The next day, when I had sufficient energy to evaluate my late-night drawing, I concluded that my work had not changed in any significant way. The exercise, however, did drive home the point that my drawings, which involve diligently repeating small marks in combinations, demand long periods of time. In 17 hours of diligent drawing, I had barely covered one-tenth of a 24 inch by 24 inch drawing (Figures 11-14). When I later finished the drawing, I had invested close to 200 hours into it (Figure 15).



Figure 11: 24-hour drawing, 6 pm

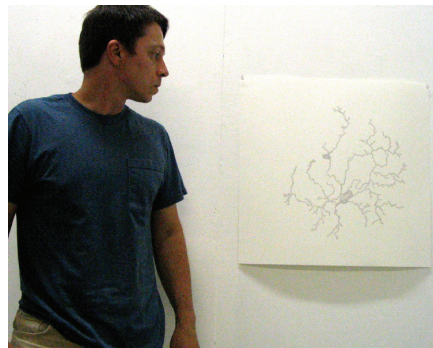


Figure 12: 24-hour drawing, 9 pm



Figure 13: 24-hour drawing, 1 am



Figure 14: 24-hour drawing, 11 am

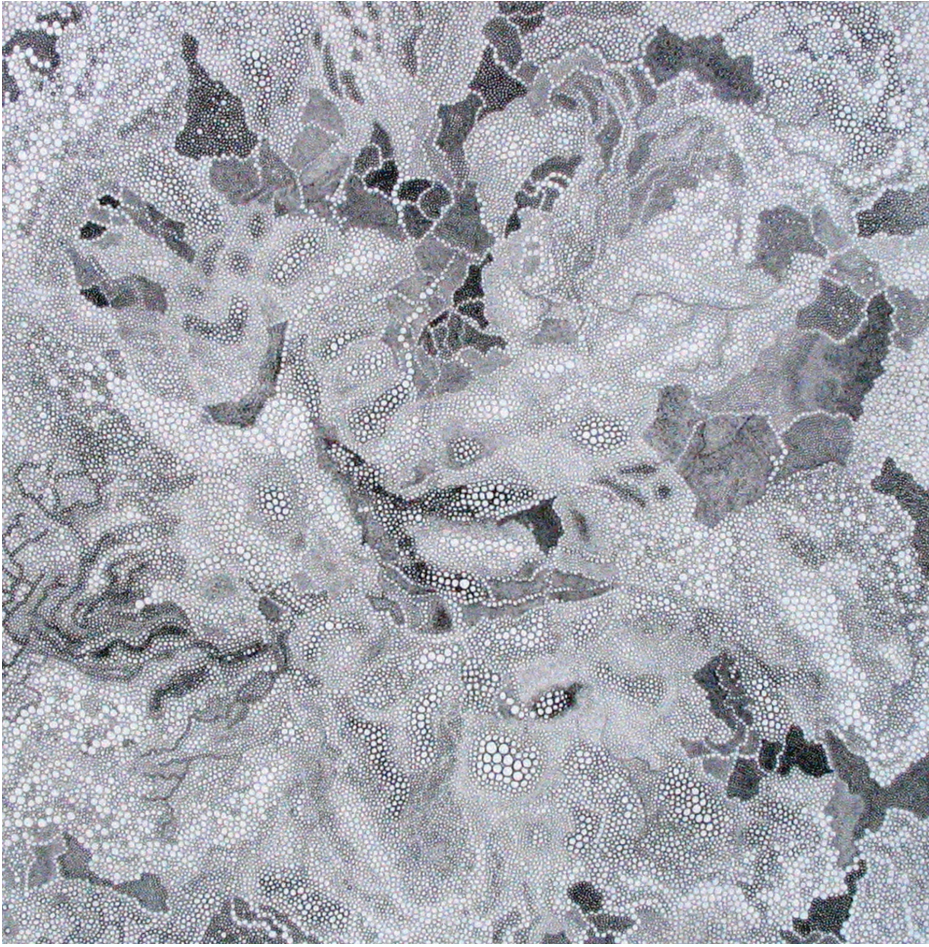


Figure 15: *Edification*, 2006, ink on paper, 24" x 24"

The first thing people usually ask me about my drawings is “how long did that take?” Though, for variety’s sake, I would like to be asked something else on occasion, I am not disappointed by this question, because it directly addresses the element of time as central to my process. In response, I usually say “somewhere between 200 and 300 hours,” depending on the drawing. Perhaps I should anticipate the question that is bound to come at some point: “how many circles are in that drawing?” Calculating this would not be too difficult. I draw at a rate of one circle per second. If I take into account that perhaps 50 percent of the time I spend drawing is devoted to looking, a 200-hour drawing might contain 360,000 circles. There is very little “hidden” labor in these drawings: no underpainting and little editing. Everything is there for the viewer to see. The marks of the pen serve as evidence of time and labor.

A golf pro-turned-salesman in Depression era America, my grandfather covered thousands of miles in his succession of beige sedans, visiting customers in San Antonio, Corpus Christi and the border towns of Laredo and Brownsville with a wide selection of office products, including typewriter ribbons. He was proud of the relationship he had with his customers, who trusted him to decide exactly what products they needed and bill them accordingly. He often told me "If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing right." Even in retirement, my grandfather gardened an acre of land every day, working from sun up to sun down in the hot Texas sun. The sweet potatoes he grew were simultaneously monstrous and delicious.

I completely internalized these lessons. As a varsity tennis player in high school, I never missed a day of practice out of fear that I would lose my edge. Even on the day of the school blood drive, I practiced almost immediately after donating blood in spite of how dizzy I felt. If it rained and official practice was cancelled, I would still go to the park and hit balls against the backboard.



Figure 16: tennis match, circa 1977

In the catalogue to *Work Ethic*, an exhibition held at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003, curator Helen Molesworth claims that “artistic labor” is “one unifying principle of the extraordinarily heterogeneous field of post-World War II avant-garde art.”⁶ One artistic strategy that addresses the changing role of labor in the postindustrial economy, she claims, is “The Artist as Manager and Worker: The Artist Creates and Completes a Task.” William Anastasi’s drawings belong in this category. In one drawing, Anastasi made as many marks as he could in 60 minutes, and then stopped (Figure 17). In others, entitled the *Subway Drawings*, he sat, eyes closed, with paper and pencil on a subway car and allowed the swaying and jolting of the subway car to determine how his hand moved across the page.⁷

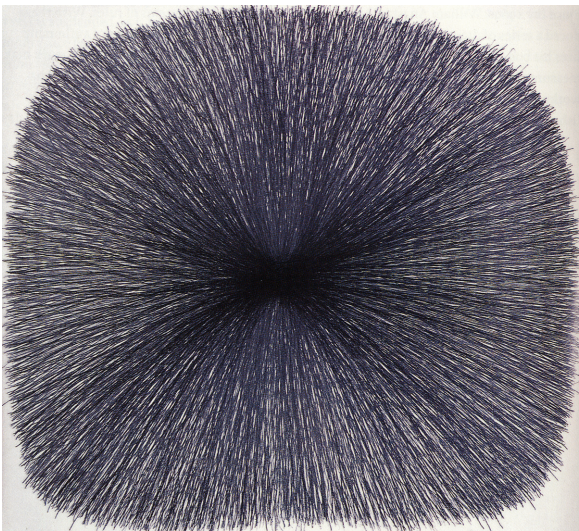


Figure 17: William Anastasi, *Without Title (60 Minute Drawing)*, 1999

Given my experience with task-oriented projects such as *24-Hour Drawing*, I feel an affinity with Anastasi and other artists in the exhibit, including Tom Friedman. Though Friedman is best known for his quirky sculptures made of everyday materials such as pencils and aspirin, his contribution to *Work Ethic* included *1000 Hours of Staring*, which consisted of a blank sheet of paper that he had stared at over a five-year period. Though I respect their attention to process, where I might differ with these artistic experiments (and I suspect someone like Friedman might

differ as well) is what Molesworth calls their “almost total lack of interest in the final product.”⁸ By nature, I am as results-oriented as I am process-oriented. I want my work to be as interesting to see as it was to make.

⁶ Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 25.

⁷ Molesworth, pp.109-111.

⁸ Molesworth, p. 101.

During the summer between my junior and senior years of college, I had the best job of my life: mowing grass. The pay was fair, less than I had made the past two summers waiting tables on the San Antonio Riverwalk, but I found the job far more satisfying. My boss, a landscaper named A.J., taught me that mowing grass was an art form, and that lawns, though typically rectangular, were most efficiently cut by pushing the mower in circles. The secret was to mow the lawns' corners first.

Learning these and other tricks of the trade was fun, but the best part of the job was getting to see the fruits of my labor eight to ten times per day. Driving a pickup truck attached to a rusty trailer full of equipment, my high school buddy Mario and I would arrive at a typical home and, especially after a solid rain, be greeted with wild, tall grass whose runners crept over the curb and into the street. With the help of A.J.'s turbo-charged Briggs and Stratton lawnmowers, we could mow, edge and sweep a large yard in less than an hour, completely transforming its appearance and delighting its owners.

In 2006 I created an installation in the University of Michigan's Robbins Gallery in which daily labor was critical to the conceptual and physical success of the piece. This piece, entitled *Oculus*, combined melting ice, vinyl tubing and dry concrete to produce solid blocks of concrete of the exact dimensions as the original block of ice (Figures 18-19). Each day, I drove down to Washtenaw Dairy, an Ann Arbor hangout, bought a fresh block of ice (and a doughnut as a reward), drove up to Robbins Gallery, lowered a pulley from the ceiling, placed a block of ice in a net and raised the same pulley. At the other end of the gallery, I removed an almost-dry block of concrete from a mold and refilled the mold with dry concrete. My daily ritual recalls Tehching Hsieh's *Time Piece* (Figure 20), but on a much, much smaller scale. While Hsieh punched a time clock in his studio every hour for an entire year, my labor lasted only one hour per day for a six week period. What the pieces share in common is an interest in labor and time.



Figure 18: *Oculus*, 2005, ice, basketball net, vinyl tubing, monofilament, concrete, dimensions variable



Figure 19: *Oculus*, (detail)



Figure 20: Tehching Hsieh, *Time Piece*, 1980-81

Exploratory Lines

During a month-long residency in Surinam, I maintained a daily practice of walking along the streets of Paramaribo, the capital city, collecting small round objects. I arrived in the country without knowing precisely how I would spend my four weeks. I did know, however, that I would explore the streets of the city by foot, the way I have explored many cities. After a few days of walking, I noticed a number of round holes cut out of buildings and park benches around the city and decided to mine this formal recurrence by collecting circular objects. I walked with plastic bags, picking up objects from the streets and bringing them to our studios, an abandoned monastery. I washed my findings and over a period of three weeks integrated the objects with the building's architectural features. As part of an exhibit held at the end of the residency, I created an installation of hundreds of these objects and brought the objects back to Ann Arbor for future installations.



Figure 21: Walking in Surinam, 2005



Figure 22: *Magdalenastraat*, 2005, round objects collected in Surinam

My walks have purpose. I rarely walk aimlessly or for fun. Rather, I walk to get somewhere or find something. Rebecca Solnit likens urban walking to “primordial hunting and gathering.”⁹ In Surinam, I was literally a hunter/gatherer, combing through street debris for round objects the way I used to search for shells on the beach. Another form of walking, the pilgrimage, is directly related to my drawings. Solnit defines a pilgrimage as “walking in search of something intangible.”¹⁰ She elaborates:

Pilgrimage is one of the fundamental structures a journey can take—the quest in search of something, if only one’s own transformation, the journey toward a goal—and for pilgrims, walking is work. Secular walking is often imagined as play, however competitive and rigorous that play, and uses gear and techniques to make the body more comfortable and more efficient. Pilgrims, on the other hand, often try to make their journey harder, recalling the origin of the word travel in *travail*, which also means work, suffering and the pangs of childbirth.¹¹

When I begin my large drawings, I often feel as though I am beginning a pilgrimage. I have a destination—a finished drawing—but I have no idea what will happen along the way or what I will learn. I impose constraints upon myself in the form of rules. I am not suffering when I draw, but it is hard work and requires persistence and discipline.

Paul Klee called drawing “a line on a walk.”¹² The kind of walk I imagine when I think about Klee’s work is a meandering, playful walk. By contrast, the walks I take in my drawings are those of an explorer. For me, drawing is exploring a space while simultaneously creating it. I view the page as unsettled territory. When I draw, I send out tentative lines—trails of circles—to test the waters and set a direction for potential development (Figure 23). Marks collect around exploratory lines, forming communities of activity, colonies or settlements.

⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 174.

¹⁰ Solnit, p. 45.

¹¹ Solnit, pp. 45-46.

¹² Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), chapter 1.

The drawings continue a long-held fascination with maps that began on long car trips with my family. I would sit in the back seat poring over the road atlas to determine where I had been and where I wanted to go. I was also intrigued with where places and cities are in relation to each other. When I arrived in Ann Arbor, I thought a lot about my new home and studied maps of it as a way to start “claiming” it. Comparing Ann Arbor’s roads and rivers to other cities where I had lived, including Austin and Houston, I based a series of drawings on these maps, creating hybrid places that integrated salient features of each city (Figure 24). Prior to beginning my thesis drawings, I studied a number of 19th century engraved maps in the Graduate Map Library, paying close attention to how the artists created convincing topographic detail by varying the density of lines.

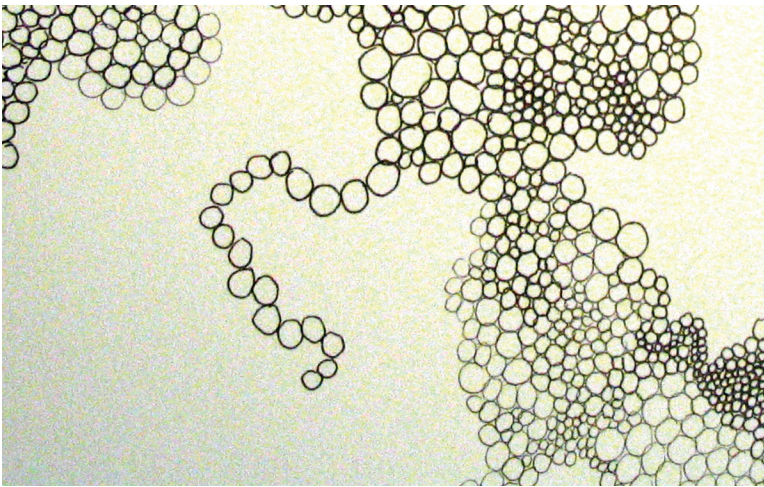


Figure 23: work in progress (detail), 2007

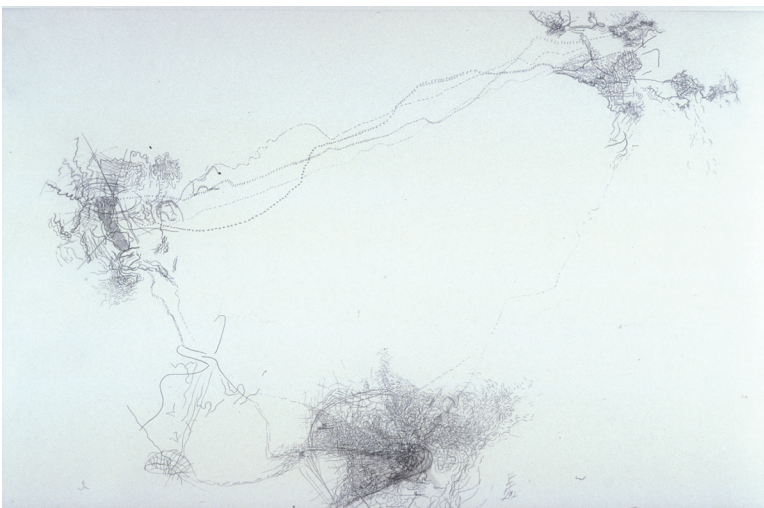


Figure 24: *Citified*, 2005, ink on Mylar, 30" x 38"

Minimalism and Ornamentation

In 2001 I visited Chinati, Donald Judd's monument to Minimalism in the West Texas desert town of Marfa. I was staying nearby in Alpine, Texas, where I had a show of paintings. Driving those 12 miles to Marfa on my two visits, I thought about the Judd boxes I had seen in photographs and in museums. They were two or three feet wide and about eight inches tall, made of wood or metal, and mounted in a vertical series on the wall. I had never cared much for them, so I had low expectations about Chinati. I just knew that artists from all over the world made pilgrimages to Marfa, so I needed to see the place for myself. What I saw was magnificent: a sea of stainless steel boxes bathed in southern light, resting in the spacious interiors of abandoned Army barracks. The boxes interacted with the architecture of the space and the surrounding landscape in a magical way. The place seemed more like a cathedral, a sacred shrine, than an art installation.



Figure 25: Donald Judd, *100 Untitled works in mill aluminum*, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

After my trip to Marfa, I started experimenting with Minimalist motifs: grids, seriality and monochrome color schemes. This investigation resulted in a series of sculpture that blended the Postminimalist, organic forms of Eva Hesse and the found-object installations of artists such as Tara Donovan. I applied to graduate school with a portfolio of these pieces, including *Tin Cans and String*, a piece which referenced toy phones, umbilical cords and Carl Andre's floor sculptures (Figure 26). I continued to make this Postminimalist sculpture during my first two years of graduate school, cobbling together found objects to make archways, fountains and vines (Figure 27).



Figure 26: *Tin Cans and String*, 2003, cans, string, ink, 42" x 40" x 4"



Figure 27: *Aqueduct*, 2005, plastic bottles, plywood, 48" x 10" x 54"

My father owned a bookstore on Commerce Street in downtown San Antonio during the 1970s. When we were in junior high and high school, my younger brother and I worked at the bookstore on Saturday mornings, and while we were downtown, watched kung fu and horror movies in the afternoon at the nearby Aztec Theatre (Figures 28–29). The Aztec was a run-down yet ornate cinema decorated with faded Mesoamerican relief and a three-ton, two-story chandelier. I only remember two of the movies we saw—Bruce Lee’s Enter the Dragon and one of Vincent Price’s Doctor Phibes movies—but the experience of spending Saturday afternoons with my brother in this majestic space was one of the highlights of growing up in San Antonio.

Living in Ann Arbor, close to two equally ornate movie theatres, the Michigan Theatre and the Fox Theatre, reminded me of my affection for the Aztec. During my first month in Ann Arbor, I attended a political fundraiser at Detroit’s Fox Theatre featuring the Dixie Chicks and James Taylor. The musicians performed admirably, but for me, the palatial space was the star of the evening, and I could not help but gaze at the impossibly ornate ceiling, globe-shaped chandelier and gold-lined columns. In 2006, in the stately, equally golden Michigan Theatre in Ann Arbor—where I have spent nearly every Thursday afternoon for the past three academic years listening to lectures sponsored by the School of Art & Design’s Penny Stamps Distinguished Visitors Series—I created a site-specific installation with a colleague, Alison Byrnes. Since the structure is already a gem, Alison and I decided to intervene in the space subtly, placing gold cupcakes along the major paths of circulation within the lobby and up the stairs (Figure 30). Intended to serve as small visual treats for the opening night of the Ann Arbor Film Festival, the cupcakes were a popular item with moviegoers, who pocketed nearly a third of them.



Figure 28: *Lobby of Aztec Theatre, San Antonio, Texas, 2006*



Figure 29: *Chandelier, Aztec Theatre, San Antonio, Texas, 2006*

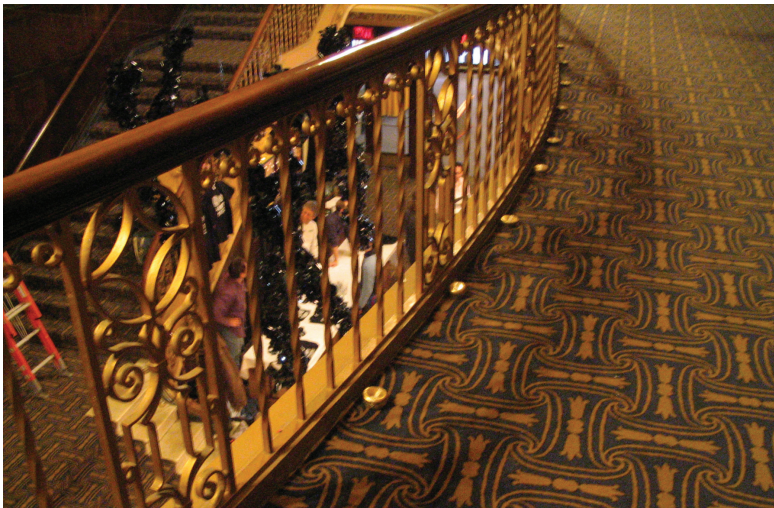


Figure 30: *Cupcake Installation at Michigan Theatre, (with Alison Byrnes), 2006*
wax, gold paint, dimensions variable



Figure 31: *Hiroyuki Doi, Untitled #303, 2003, ink on rice paper, 55" x 27"*

In the summer of 2006, I returned to the map-like drawings I had made upon first arriving in Michigan, but I abandoned my “less is more” strategy and infused the drawings with pattern and ornamentation. Part of this shift was the result of seeing images from the *Obsessive Drawing* show held in 2006 at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. The show highlighted the work of artists, many of whom are self-taught, who draw in intricate detail. Excess is the norm with this work, including the gorgeous, cloud-filled drawings of Hiroyuki Doi, a Japanese artist who began making drawings filled with tiny circles after the death of his brother in the 1980s (Figure 31). By drawing circles, Doi feels he is “alive and existing in the cosmos.” He asserts: “Suppose every creature is a circle, which exists in this world, how many of them can I draw? That is my life work and my challenge.”¹³ Also included in the show was the work of New Zealand’s Martin

Thompson (Figure 32). Though less organic than Doi’s, Thompson’s drawings are similarly meticulous. He transposes mathematical equations onto graph paper with felt-tip pens, creating designs that resemble fractals.¹⁴ What impresses me most about the work of artists in *Obsessive Drawing* is their unwavering commitment to processes that are often highly idiosyncratic. I also appreciate how the work, built in small units, invites visual exploration at both micro and macro levels. Seeing this work encouraged me to continue my rules-based approach to drawing while significantly increasing my work’s density and complexity (Figures 33-35).



Figure 32: *Martin Thompson, Untitled # 1 (detail), circa 2002–2005, pen on graph paper, 15 3/4 x 22" diptych*

¹³ “Previous Exhibitions,” Phyllis Kind Galler <http://www.phylliskindgallery.com/exhibits/2002/index_121402.html>.

¹⁴ Mark Amery, “Martin Thompson, Master of the Universe,” *The Lumiere Reader*, April 11, 2006 <<http://www.lumiere.net.nz/reader/item/721>>.

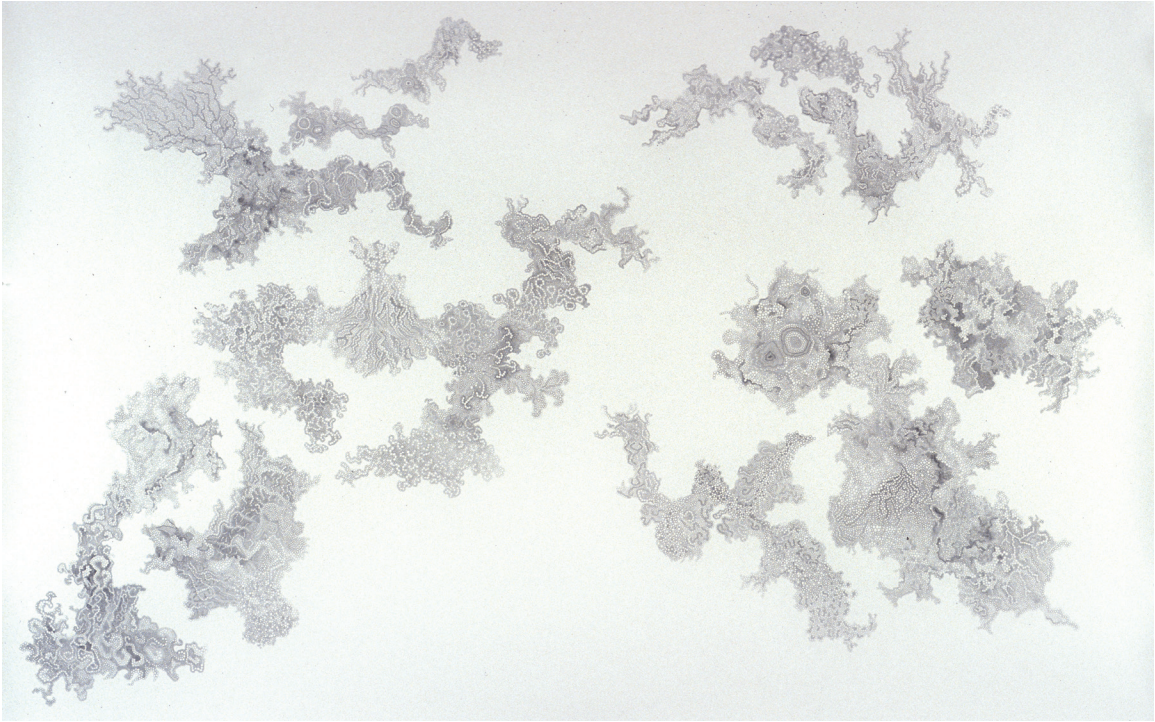


Figure 33: *Criminal Tombolo*, 2007, ink on paper, 60" x 96"

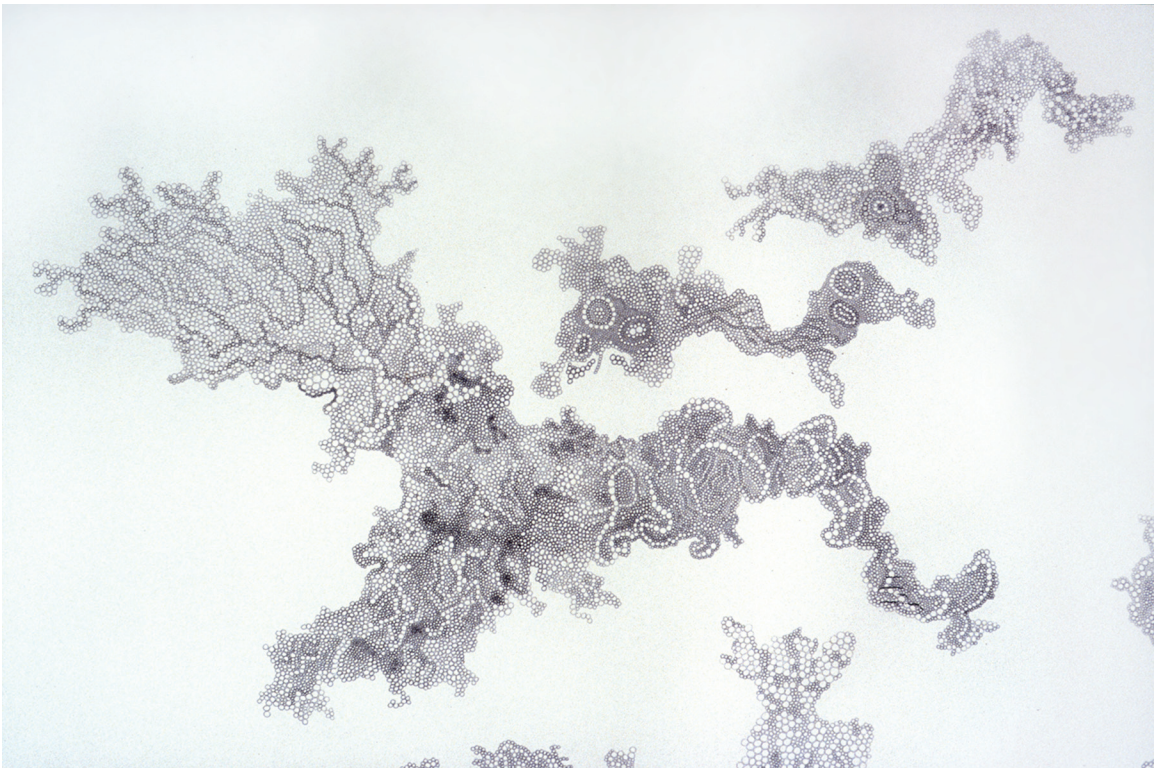


Figure 34: *Criminal Tombolo* (detail)

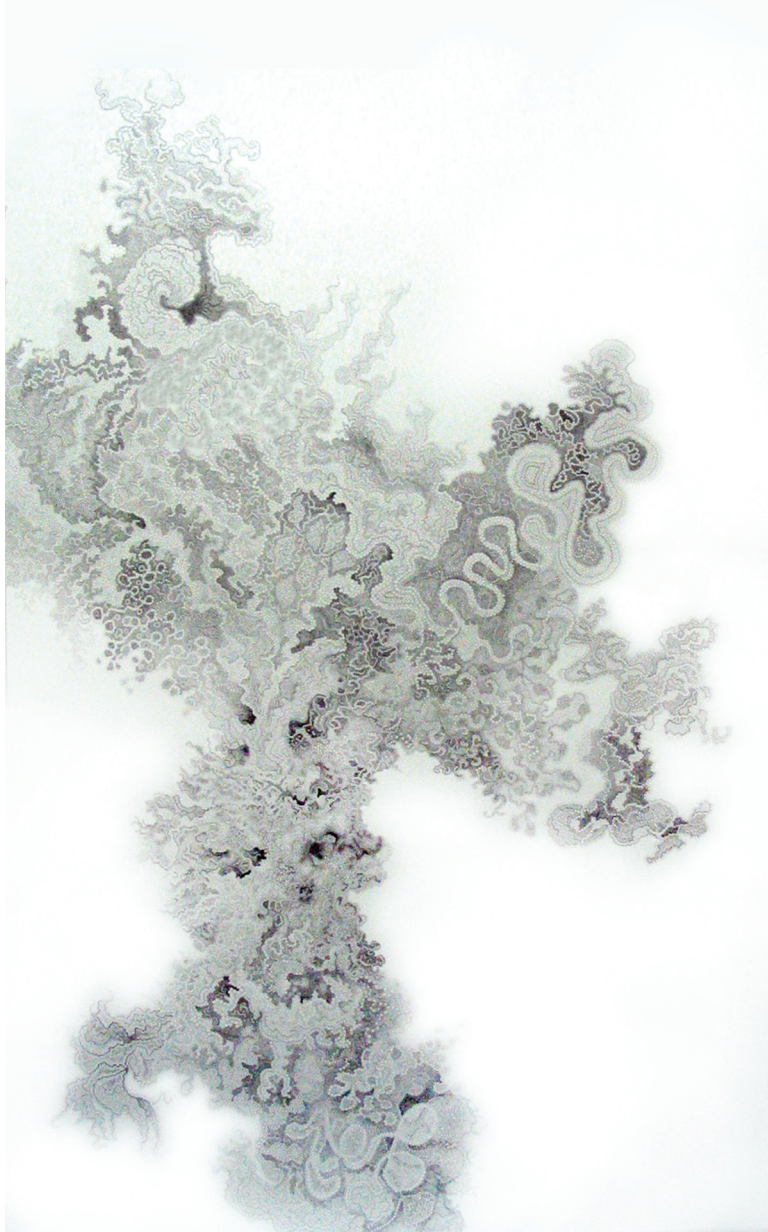


Figure 35: *Longshore Drift*, 2007, ink on paper, 96" x 60"

The senior class at Holmes High School in San Antonio voted me “Best Dressed Male” in 1978. I earned this honor by wearing a florid assortment of shiny silk suits, platform shoes and leisure suits. My shirts featured paisleys, stripes and even landscapes. Matching these shirts with pants was always tricky, because I inherited some of my grandfather’s red-green color blindness. Before leaving for school, I usually asked my mother or sisters if my clothes “went together.” Since graduating from high school, my taste in clothes has evolved towards khakis or blue jeans and solid shirts, many of which are black or grey. My mother, however, must still picture me as a feathered-haired adolescent, because she gives me brightly colored, patterned shirts for my birthday every year.

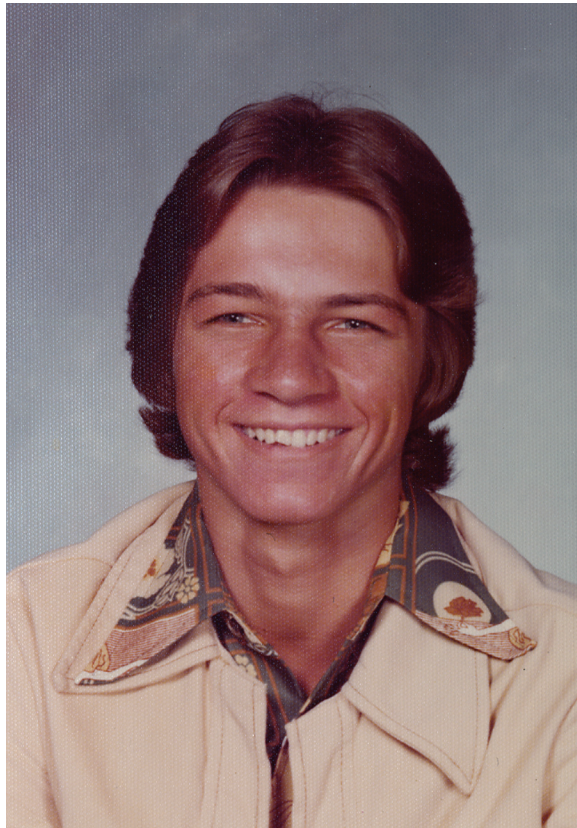


Figure 36: high school photo with feathered hair.

Mies van der Rohe said, “The least is the most.” I agree with him completely. At the same time, what concerns me now is quantity.
-John Cage¹⁵

As my reverence for classic movie theatres and florid shirts indicates, I am attracted to the exuberance, complexity and visual abundance of ornamentation. Though it seems contradictory, I am also drawn to the austerity of Minimalism, which is reflected in the sparseness of my sculpture. The tension between my attractions to both Minimalism and ornamentation reflects a century-long debate over the role of decorated objects in the art and design worlds. Ornamentation was an integral part of life, a given, until the early 20th century. Art Nouveau, with its whiplash lines derived from natural forms, was the style of choice from the late 1890s until the First World War. In 1908, however, Adolf Loos questioned the very existence of Art Nouveau in *Ornament and Crime*. For Loos, ornamentation was vulgar and wasteful, representing “backwardness or even a degenerative tendency.” He argued that the eradication of decorated objects would help ensure society’s upward progress.¹⁶ Once fellow-architect Le Corbusier began to promote Loos’ ideas a decade later, the schism between Modernism and ornamentation was permanent.

Minimalists such as Donald Judd shared Loos’ disdain for decoration, favoring geometric sculpture made of monochromatic industrial materials. At its best—at Chinati, for example—Minimalist sculpture is elegant in its simplicity. One of the reasons Judd’s barrack installations work so well, however, is that the steel boxes reflect light from outside, calling attention to the scrubby Texas landscape, whose scraggly trees, incidentally, share much in common with the lines of Art Nouveau. In the Judd installations, the natural and manmade are in harmony. If the same boxes were placed inside a white-walled gallery, for example, they would not function as effectively. This was an important realization: Minimalist sculpture needs a strong context for me to find it compelling.

¹⁵ Eddie Kohler, “John Cage: Indeterminacy, New Aspects of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music.” <<http://www.lcdf.org/indeterminacy/s.cgi?105>>.

¹⁶ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” trans. Wilfried Wang, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985) pp. 100-103.

In the late 1970s, I went through a progressive or “Prog” rock stage. I collected and obsessively listened to groups such as Yes, The Moody Blues, Genesis, ELO, Kansas and Starcastle, who featured classically trained musicians such as Richard Wakeman, keyboardist for Yes, and incorporated long instrumental breaks into their epic-length songs. Best listened to on headphones, this music sparked my intellect and imagination at an age when I was making the transition from high school to college. Compared to Disco, the most popular music at the time, Prog was edgy. Only later did I discover that I had missed the far edgier Sex Pistols concert in 1977 at Randy’s Rodeo, which was less than a mile from my house, but that is another story. Besides the thrilling experience of listening, say, to a Wakeman solo on headphones or to the lush harmonies of the Moody Blues, or even hearing Yes lead-singer John Anderson belt out indecipherable lyrics such as “Mountains come out of the sky and you stand there,” I thought the album covers were fantastic, reflecting the bands’ interest in English fables, rocket ships and outer space.

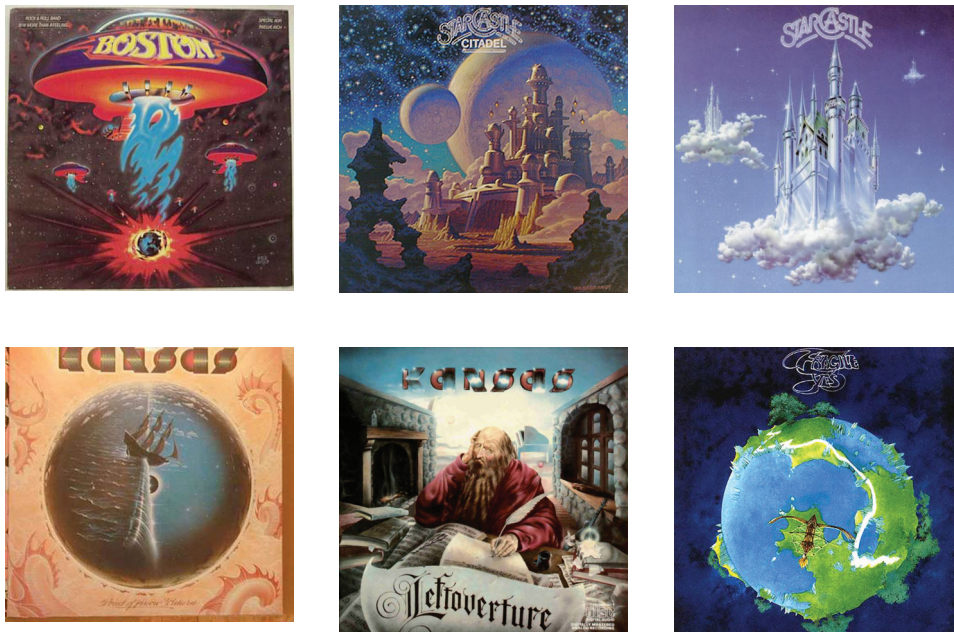


Figure 37: (top row, left to right) Boston–*Boston*, Starcastle–*Citadel*, Starcastle–*Starcastle* (bottom row, left to right) Kansas–*Point of No Return*, Kansas–*Leftoverture*, Yes–*Fragile*

As Modernism waned in the second half of the 20th century, the whiplash lines of Art Nouveau reappeared. In music, a group of artists living in and around San Francisco in the 1960s explicitly referenced Art Nouveau’s curvilinear, natural forms in posters and album covers for bands like the Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead.¹⁷ In the art world, ornamentation made an energetic return through “Pattern and Decoration” (P&D) in the 1970s. P&D painters such as Robert Kushner and Valerie Jaudon covered canvases with flowers, vines and interlacing (Figure 38). Today, Daniel Zeller and other drawing-based artists diligently fill every inch of the page with intricate topographic and microscopic patterns (Figure 39). In architecture, Frank Gehry’s explosive stainless steel structures, such as the Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago (Figure 40), exhibit every bit of the raw energy of Art Nouveau.

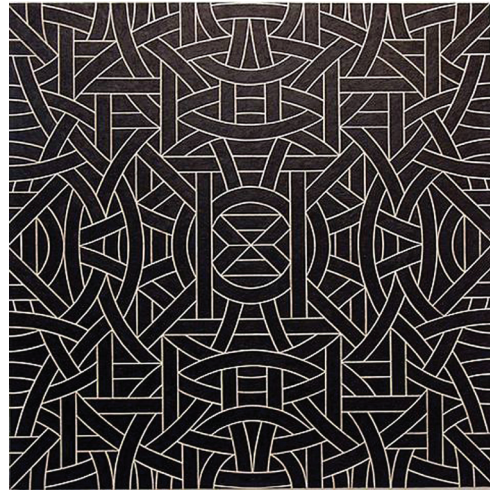


Figure 38: Valerie Jaudon, *Homewood*, 1976, oil on canvas, 48” x 48”

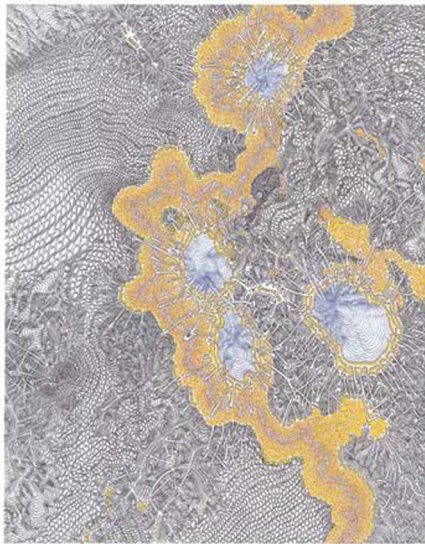


Figure 39: Daniel Zeller, *squamotemporal relinquishment*, 2003, ink on paper, 13.5” x 11”

Not everyone has cheered this return to ornamentation. In his 2002 book *Design and Crime*, Hal Foster, likening the current obsession with design to that of Art Nouveau, rekindles the debate over ornamentation that Loos launched. Citing examples as diverse as Martha Stewart and Microsoft, Foster argues that today’s design is “inflated” to the point where “the package all but replaces the product” and where branding is “a way to prop up stock value apart from the realities of productivity and profitability.”¹⁸ He states:

¹⁷ Sally Tomlison, Walter Patrick Medeiros, and D. Scott Atkinson. *High Societies: Psychedelic Rock Posters from Haight-Ashbury*. (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2001), p 12.

¹⁸ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 20.-21

This old debate takes on a new resonance today when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything—not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes—seems to be regarded as so much *design*....Yet the new designer is very different from the old: the Art Nouveau designer resisted the effects of industry, even as he also sought in the words of Walter Benjamin, “to win back (its) forms” – modern concrete, cast iron, and the like—for architecture and art. There is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in postindustrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of architecture and art to the manipulation of design.¹⁹

Foster longs for an art and architecture based on principles more noble than those of the global market, claiming that today’s design “seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority.”²⁰

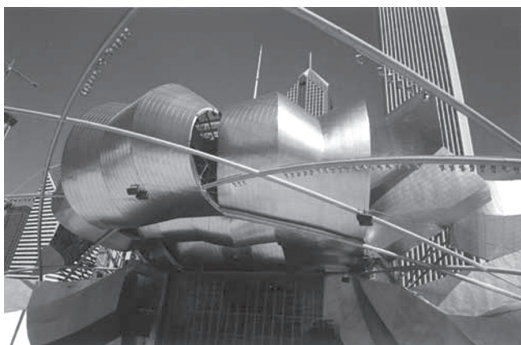


Figure 40: Frank Gehry, *Priztker Pavilion*
Millenium Park, Chicago

In the 1980s, Suzi Gablik expressed a similar concern in light of the explosion in the art market and the pluralism in artistic practices, arguing that Postmodernism is spiritually empty, with no coherent set of principles. She claims that the “real crisis of modernism...is the absence of a system of beliefs that justifies allegiance to any entity beyond the self”²¹ and calls the capitalist system “hostile to the

spiritual production of art.”²² Though neither Foster nor Gablik is arguing for a return to Modernism, they are nonetheless asking artists to hold themselves to a standard higher than that of the international marketplace. Foster resurrects Loos’ old argument about ornament because he believes the “slick” quality of contemporary art and design is symptomatic of broader social and economic problems.

¹⁹ Foster, p. 17.

²⁰ Foster, p. 25.

²¹ Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 42.

²² Gablik, p. 39

To make work today that embraces ornament is perhaps not as “criminal” as it was in Loos’ day, but doing so still leaves the artist vulnerable to charges of superficiality. Perhaps this is the reason I am so attached to artistic process. My rules, though flexible, ground my work in something concrete. By limiting my choices, I impose a certain rigor into my process that is not unlike the self-imposed rules of the Minimalists regarding seriality and monochromacy. While my rules link me to both Sol Lewitt and to Donald Judd, the lively forms I create with these rules tie me to Art Nouveau, album art, P&D and Obsessive Drawing.

Visitors to my studio have interpreted the drawings in varied and surprising ways. Some see fractals and histology slides, while others see mosaics, illuminated manuscripts and Chinese landscape paintings. I follow up on these references and if sufficiently intrigued, incorporate what I learn into future drawings. For instance, after seeing images from the exquisitely illustrated *Book of Kells*, I began experimenting with a form of interlacing in which lines of circles cross over and under each other (Figure 34). Perhaps as a result of this research, my latest drawings are beginning to look less like maps and continents, and more like hybrid forms (Figure 35).

Conclusion

On the occasion of the 2002 exhibition of Venezuelan artist Gego at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Iris Peruga wrote about Gego's creative process:

She was particularly intrigued by the simple act of “doing” and the possibility of surprising herself, or experiencing wonder, and, above all, of having fun with whatever her hands might create.²³

“The simple act of doing” motivates much of my work. I value hard work and the creative process. Jasper Johns' dictum—“Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.”²⁴—has always resonated with me. Notice that Johns does not specify the kind of object or the specific action to take with it. What is important is that *some* kind of exploration take place with *some* kind of materials.

For me, spending time in the studio and working are paramount. I choose my materials and establish my creative methods with care, but the working process itself is what matters. I have been fortunate to find a way of working that appeals both to my desire for rules and my desires to explore and invent. It is a process that is simultaneously simple yet complex, clear yet mysterious.

Since beginning this project in 2006, I have begun to use my drawings as a springboard for installations. Using paper or vellum, I create digital prints of sections of the drawings and attach them to walls (Figures 41-42). Breaking up the drawings into modular parts permits multiple configurations, and the malleability of the paper or vellum allows for bending and layering, so the forms go beyond pictorial space into sculptural or architectural space. In contrast to drawing, in which I react to what is already on the page, with installation, I react not only to the pieces I have already placed on the wall but also to the idiosyncracies of the wall or building.

I have also returned to my knitting roots, but I have replaced my knitting needles with a set of crochet hooks. The rules of crochet are similar to those of my drawings. Each crochet stitch creates a small circular unit. I create line and pattern by varying the tight-

²³ Iris Peruga, “From Matter to Space,” in Mari Carmen Ramirez and Theresa Papanikolas, eds. *Questioning the Line: Gego in Context*. (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2003) p. 67.

²⁴ Jasper Johns, “Sketchbook Notes,” in Peter Selz and Kristine Stiles, eds. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p. 326.



Figure 41: *untitled installation*, 2007
digital prints, dimensions variable



Figure 42: *untitled installation* (detail)

ness of each stitch. Though I am far from exploiting the full potential of this medium, I am already pleased with the areas of density I have achieved (Figure 43). The crocheted pieces have a textural, tactile quality that I cannot attain in my drawings, and I can use the pieces in installations.

Besides my commitment to “the simple act of doing,” I strive to stay open to new methods and materials for creating art. I never want to feel so comfortable with a particular way of working that staleness creeps in. The working methods I have established for my drawings and installation should serve me well in the near future, but I will reevaluate them continually and revise them when necessary, so that my rules allow plenty of space for investigation, improvisation and extravagance.

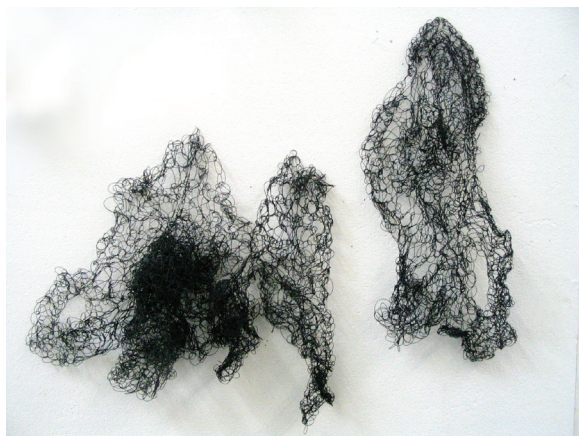


Figure 43: *Crochet Pieces*, 2007

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