

**Fossus**

By

Susan Stacks

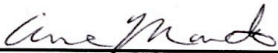
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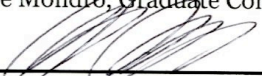
Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

School of Art and Design  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 28, 2011

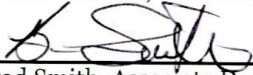
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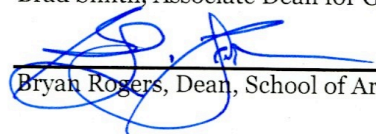
  
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### **Abstract**

In this thesis explanation, Susan Stacks describes the origin and process, and reflects on the outcome of the series of drawings composing her thesis exhibition. Stacks has made a series of mural sized drawings that incorporate repetitive marks such as stippling, hashes, and other simple gestures. The results of these actions are a series of emotional maps. The drawings are artifacts of her experience escaping loss through this meditative and transformative process.

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*Fossus* is a series of abstract drawings that record a journey towards becoming productively sad. Each serves as a charted landscape that follow the pathways of a succession of surrogate figures who are held up as models for their reaction to loss. The behaviors explored range from courses of denial and distraction to indulgence and acceptance. Emotional maps of each character are composed of labor-intensive stippling, line work, and inking. Each piece elaborates on this small visual vocabulary to articulate the mimicry of and reflection on the character's psyches. The artifact of this process documents the meditative, penance-like, and transformative qualities of the work.

This body of work came to my consciousness with its title, "Fossus". It is from the Latin verb *fodio* and as the root of fossil, it carries all the connotations of natural artifact and record, but also means dug up, pricked/pierced/wounded, and goaded/stung/disturbed.<sup>1</sup> I started this work after a year of feeling that my sense of perception and self had been damaged and was ready to excavate and understand these experiences.

My practice has always begun unconsciously with meaning and intention seeping out through deep introspection as I work. For this project I set up processes and limitations that would necessitate a greater commitment and relationship between my understanding of self and the works resulting from my ruminations.

I have been elaborating on a particular drawing process for the last three years. I make intuitive hash marks and hesitantly add steps to the pattern (filling in the space between hash lines with stippling, defining and erasing certain parts, etc.). It is a largely

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<sup>1</sup> "Fossus." *The Latin Lexicon*. 2011. The Latin Lexicon. 1 March 2011  
<<http://latinlexicon.org/definition.php?p1=1006397>>.

automatic, unconscious process. My eyes follow my hand across the page and continue making marks in relation to the one that came before. This activity provides ample time for my mind to wander. I realized I was escaping into these drawings. I felt out of control and the limitations and order I placed on their creation allowed me peace and time to locate my thoughts.



Figure 1: Stacks - *Drawing Study*, 2006.

After failing at happiness for a year I sought out ways to use these gestures to become productively sad. Depression is contagious. Standing by as a witness to loss at the hands of mental illness is, in fact, maddening. I had gone through this before with a suicidal parent and was then too helpless due to my age to even contemplate productive

action. Now I felt without recourse due to secrecy, but the consequence of both situations was an absence I felt better able to understand in a physical manner, rather than the emotional gulf set before me. I used my drawing process as tools in deciphering this new situation.

I devoted myself to work with contradictory aims, one to provide distraction and another to create a surrogate landscape and figures to work these issues through. The treatment for my pain is also a constant reminder of its existence. At about the same time I realized that I was using the drawings as a coping mechanism I started producing metaphors to guide me through the process.

Watching slides flip by in an art history course I was struck by the few examples of early American abstract expressionists we were given. They were typically huge and gestural in a bold, fast way. I copied down the lists of men dutifully but caught myself staring when a Lee Krasner painting paused for a few moments on the screen.



Figure 2: Lee Krasner *Composition*, 1949

I projected onto her immediately. I interrupted the tight, small, and multilayered gestures as strength of labor and proof that those were no less expressive than the large, bold strikes made by her male counterparts. But she was the only woman shown to me that day and I felt that the compact marks she displayed in her “Little Image” paintings

represented the extra effort she perhaps felt the need to put in as a woman artist.<sup>2</sup> In my own beginning practice I toiled over small pieces for months while others quickly produced work. I needed this first impression of Krasner to understand my own tendencies. I still value labor in this way. It is vital for me to see the effort exerted in the final image.

I believe this tendency is part nihilism and part egalitarian. I struggle to understand what value my own labor has in a world that feels purposeless. My mark making makes sense in a way I can tangibly grasp. Striving to understand myself is as ambitious as I feel I can be. I also wish for the activity to be absolutely apparent. I am wary of skill sets that mask the making process and have shied away from measures that might make the production of the image easier but indirect. Limiting myself to techniques someone else could easily take on is appealing to me. Most everyone understands dots, dashes, and lines. The obsessive repetition of these gestural elements creates a pattern with the presence of its creation and creator. (Figure 3) Art historian and curator Kirk Varnedoe described a Cy Twombly painting (*Untitled*, 1970) that uses the repetition of a gesture as “a kind of furious scribbling, a seemingly mindless repetition of the same hand-drawn gesture. But that gesture is repeated so often and on such a scale that it begins to vault into a different set of references. We lose sight of the arm or the wrist, and begin instead to be aware of the whole body.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edelman, Robert G. “Krasner’s ‘Little Image’ Paintings.” [Artnet.com](http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/edelman/edelman9-15-08.asp). 26 February 2011  
<<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/edelman/edelman9-15-08.asp>>.

<sup>3</sup> Varnedoe, Kirk. *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2006.





Figure 3: Cy Twombly *Untitled*, 1970

When I was working in smaller formats I would only focus on the wrist, but in the large scale of this current series my awareness spreads to a physicality beyond the body. Looking at a finished piece my hands are omnipresent in the texture and pattern of the dots.

I feel a deep affinity with outsider art in respect to the intuition and repetition present in many works. Laure Pigeon's drawing is repetitive, intuitive, and still graceful in its similarity to a doodle. It is welcoming while expressive. (Figure 4) I do not want to use a technique I cannot invent myself. The discomfort required to be an



Figure 4: Laure Pigeon Drawing "November 10, 1961", 1961



“insider” is something I struggle with. My respect for the intuitive and obsessive nature of my practice is something I try to protect from the self-conscious, critical, and contaminating aspects of the art world.

Though individuality the drawings are artifacts from the experience of trying on the mindset of another person, they are composed of roughly the same elements. The dashes, dots, outlines, and combinations thereof are part of an evolving visual language. At the origin of this process I used only hash marks. These were created as a method to think through the act of metastasis, the spread of disease.<sup>4</sup> The hash marks were loosely parallel to each other in succession, creating gentle arcs as they intersected and entangled themselves on the page. The lines of hash marks would grow perpendicular to the line my hand made with each mark. They felt alive, pushing further and further onto the page. (Figure 5a) As time passed I felt the need to define these drawings further. The intertwining threads create pockets of negative space. I fill in these areas with stippling. (Figure 5b) Their bodies were now full and heavy. Fearing suffocation if I continued on in this way I started removing the original hash marks from the page by erasing pencil hashes once I had dotted cells between their boundaries. This reversed the negative space from those first iterations of this process. What defined the pockets of ink dots is only assumed by its absence. (Figure 5c)

I still felt these organisms were in danger. There was no apparent reasoning to how their bodies were held together. Cells of dots on the outer reaches of the clusters would become more concentrated with stippling. They grew a protective crust. (Figure 5d) These developments came out of intuitive gestures as I worked my way across the

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<sup>4</sup> “Metastasis” [m-w.com](http://m-w.com). 2011 Merriam-Webster. 27 February 2011  
<<http://m-w.info/dictionary/metastasis>>.

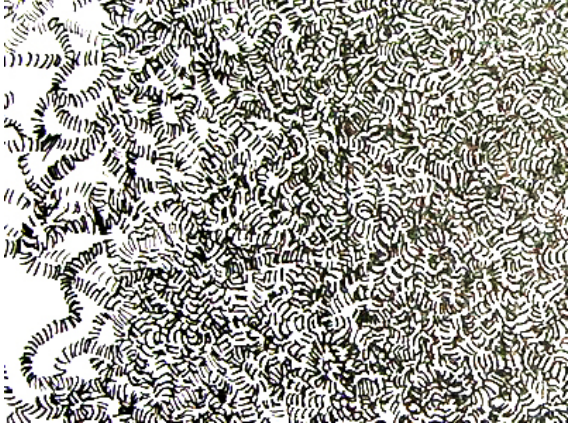


Figure 5a

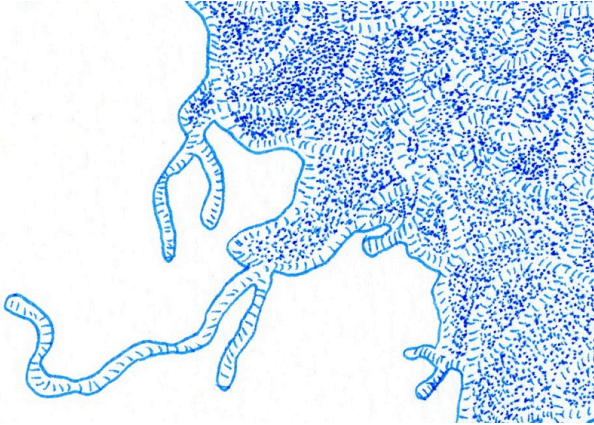


Figure 5b

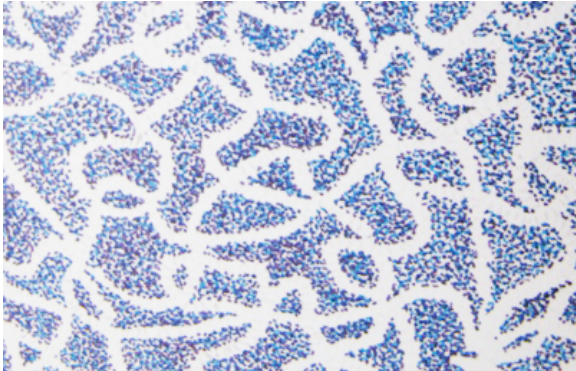


Figure 5c

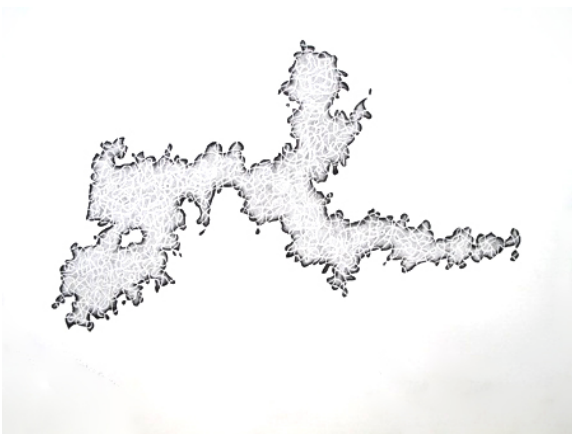


Figure 5d



Figure 5e

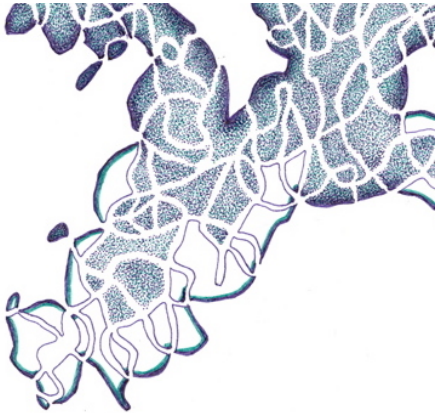


Figure 5f

page. Each successive drawing developed a new rapport with me, seeking stimulation, balance, and sustainability.

The scale of these works remained small. They would live on planes from about 2" x 3" to 22" x 30". They were specimens to me, they required no significant commitment and felt both entrusted to my care and vulnerable to my whims. I started rupturing the clusters of cells through increased negative space and internal borders. (Figure 5e) Some patches of cells were outlined (Figure 5f) and prohibited from filling with dots. I imagined the dots as a life source for these bodies as well as the gesture sustaining my peace of mind. I kept tight control over their concentrations and placement.

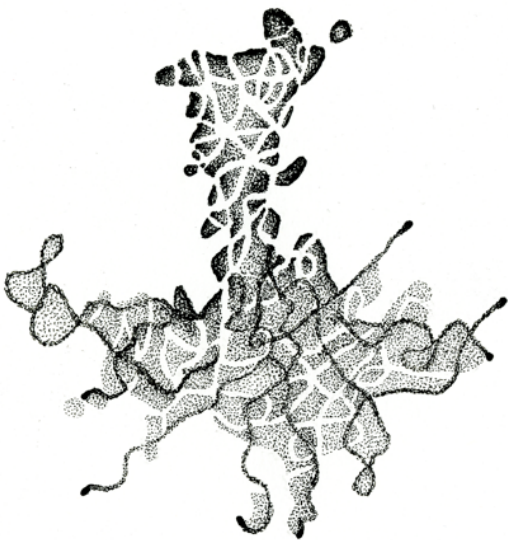


Figure 6

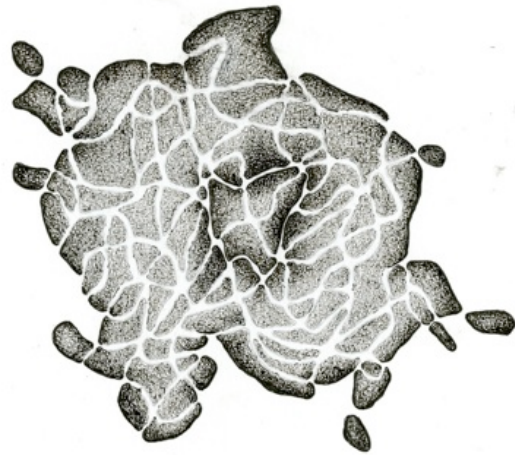


Figure 7

Each time I impulsively added a new element it was as if there had been a mutation in the DNA of the drawings. New characteristics were now possible and

inevitable. Ruptures, outlines, bold lines made out of stippling, and metallic accents were all possibilities and elements I could not move forward without.

When my motivations for producing these drawings became apparent I altered the manner in which I personified each. I was already in the habit of anthropomorphizing the drawings but I began to couple them to characters prominent in my thoughts. The scale of the work also increased greatly. I started working on 6' x 8' planes. At this scale I could have a reciprocal relationship with the work. Its presence would engage and overwhelm me and a deep intimacy was built. My reasons for choosing this scale echo Mark Rothko's: "I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however—I think it applies to other painters I know—is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger pictures, you are in it. It isn't something you command."<sup>5</sup> There were many times I would work, face inches from the page, and a draft would billow the paper forwards, caressing a cheek or occasionally expelling a pin and striking down a corner over my head. In response to each I found myself feeling affirmed, angry, lonely, ignored, and joyous.

While engaging with the paper I was also creating a landscape. This area was used as a surrogate arena in which I dissected and acted out my own behavior, but also those of another identity. In this space I could dress up in the attitude of my sadness role models and force my perception of their strategies to align with my own. In distress

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<sup>5</sup> Rothko, Mark. "I Paint Very Large Pictures." Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings. Eds. Kristine Stiles, Peter Selz. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996. 158.

I believe we look to find some sense of our misfortune, that there are entities that have if not previously resolved their burdens, at least exist as figures for commiseration. I followed this tendency to pull explanation and guidance from ancient archetypes to modern figures whose elocution of struggle strikes our own experience. I chose each figure because of a sensed affinity towards sorrow and loss, but the inconsistencies I uncovered in this ground pushed me forward to the next and slowly back to an understanding of self.

The first figure I felt possessed by was Penelope, faithful wife of Odysseus from Homer's *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, who wove a single shroud until his return.<sup>6</sup> As I continued to draw and move forward in my sadness I transferred my attentions to others and the perceived steps they took to overcome being at a loss. With each figure I sought to embody I found myself at a greater understanding of my real nature.

**“Severely Chaste Penelope remains;  
But, lost to every joy, she wastes the day  
In tedious cares, and weeps the night away.”<sup>7</sup>**

In Penelope I found a figure who was miserable, who refused to move on and whose stubbornness was eventually rewarded. I wanted that. I was miserable, and refused to imagine an outcome beyond the reason for my sorrow suddenly becoming obsolete. In order to save myself from thinking further I dove into drawing and imagined working until my situation resolved itself. I was biding time and trying to distract myself, but would instead bring myself to tears in each session of work. I became disillusioned with

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<sup>6</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Alexander Pope. [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org/). <<http://www.gutenberg.org/>> 9 August 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. “Book XVI”



this tactic when I recognized I would finish the piece without attaining resolution or comfort. Figure 8, an in-progress image of *Renovations to Keep the Ghosts at Bay*, shows the unfinished state of this moment.

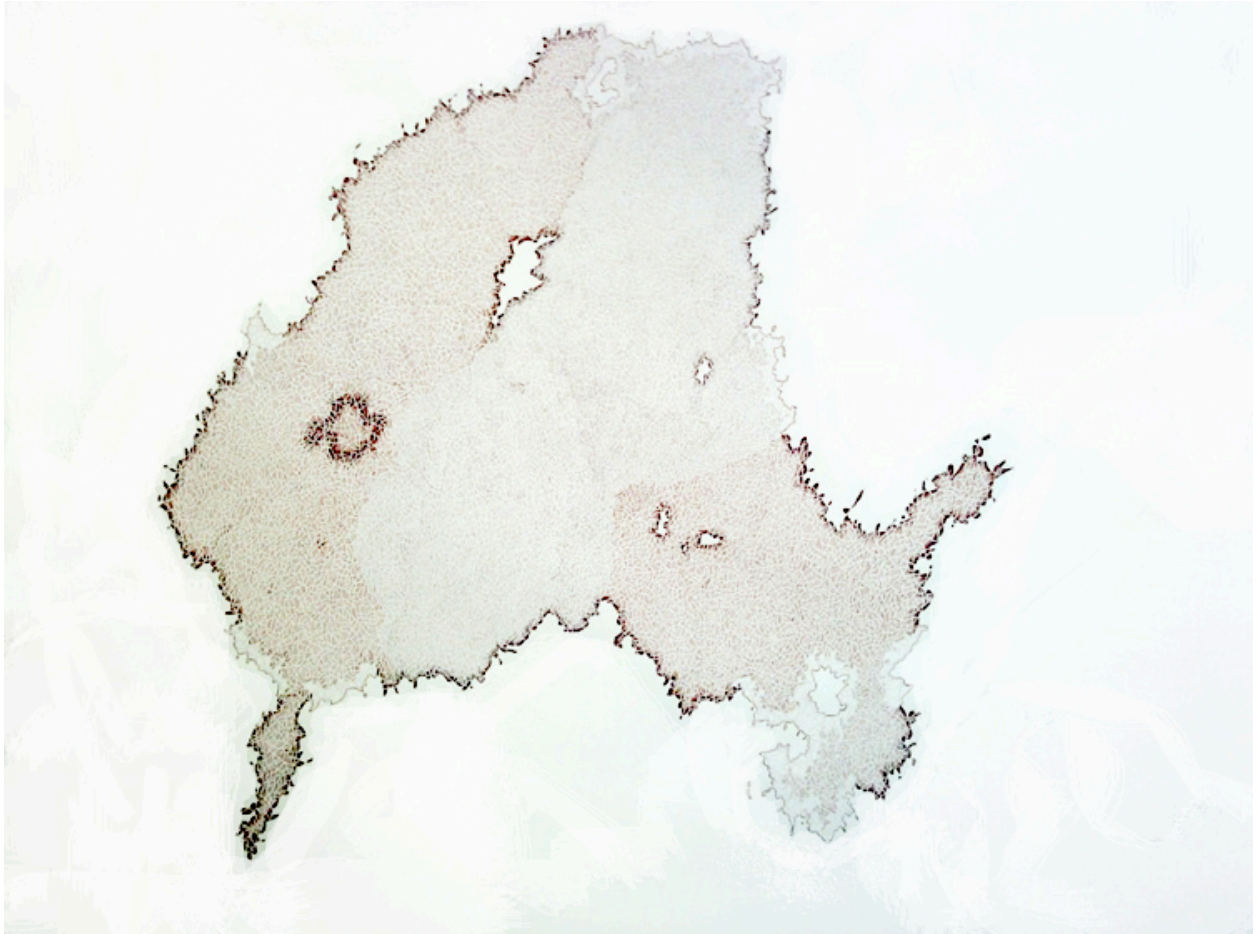


Figure 8: Stacks – In Progress *Renovations to Keep the Ghosts at Bay*

I resolved to finish this piece under the example of my next role model in misery, Sarah Winchester, but chose to reenact the process in *Lost to Every Joy, She Wastes the Day*, (Figure 9) a perpetually unfinished drawing in honor of my Penelopian efforts to reestablish calm.

Penelope is only an admirable figure because Odysseus makes it home from this twenty-year absence before any mandatory direct action on her part. He defeats her suitors and takes back his kingdom. Would her standard epithet, (a descriptive often



Figure 9a Stacks- *Lost to Every Joy, She Wastes the Day* 2011

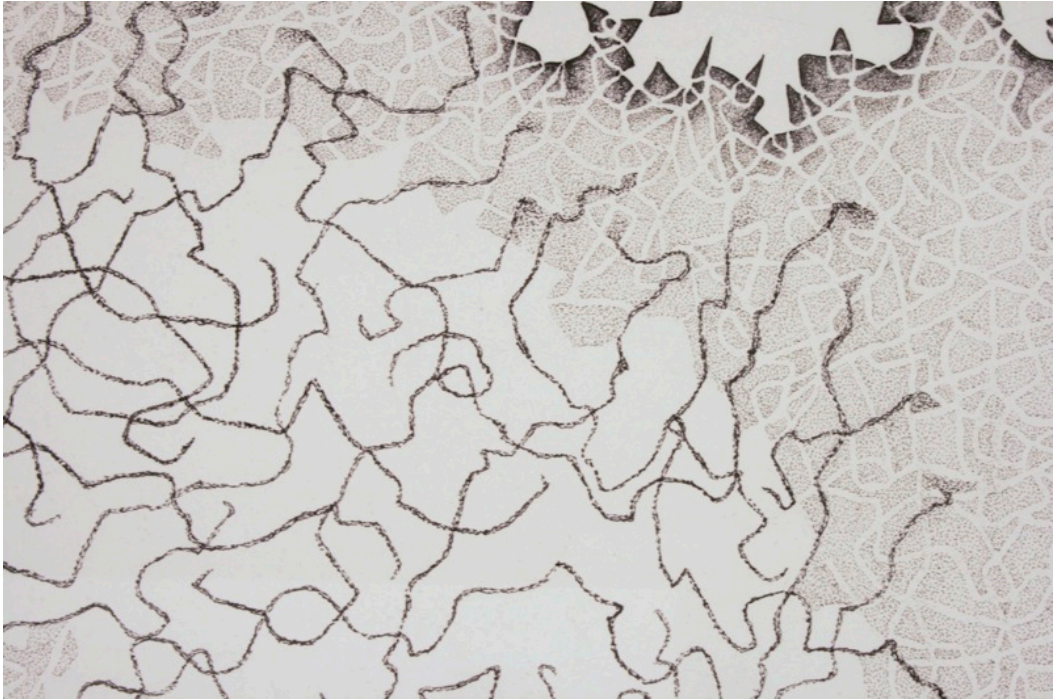


Figure 9b Stacks- *Lost to Every Joy, She Wastes the Day* detail

attached to or replacing the name of figures in epic poetry<sup>8</sup>) be “Faithful” if she had been forced to remarry or if Odysseus had permanently been seduced by “Subtle” Ceres or any of the other mythological characters delaying his journey? I felt like a deranged Penelope, mad, desperate, systematically unraveling my mind in response to her physical deconstruction of work. I had ceased to reenact her resolution, and sought out another figure, one who, though “Wretched”, created something from her grief.

Sarah Winchester had the finances to transform her madness into eccentricity. The widow of William Winchester, heir to the Winchester rifle fortune, Sarah had an almost unfathomable amount of money to spend at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> Seeking to ameliorate her grief over losing a child and husband, she visited a medium who told her “all would be well so long as the sound of hammers did not cease in the house or on the grounds” of her estate.<sup>10</sup> From the purchase of a farmhouse in 1884 until her death in 1922, Sarah funded non-stop construction of a nonsensical mansion built to appease and confuse the wayward spirits of all those killed by Winchester firearms.<sup>11</sup> She was dedicated to a Sisyphean struggle. There would never be a point at which her pain would be ameliorated, but accepted her situation and took the actions necessarily to not be debilitated. I found this type of inefficient labor admirable, as if it was honorable to accept sadness and give it a home, rather than flail to smother the feeling. I set to work like Winchester, continually moving on, focusing on the work rather than any end result.

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<sup>8</sup> “Epithet” Wikipedia.org. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epithet>>. 10 July, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> “Sarah Winchester” Winchester Mystery House. <<http://www.winchestermysteryhouse.com/>> 12 June 2010.

<sup>10</sup> “Winchester’s Widow Dying”. New York Times. 11 June, 1922.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* Winchester Mystery House.



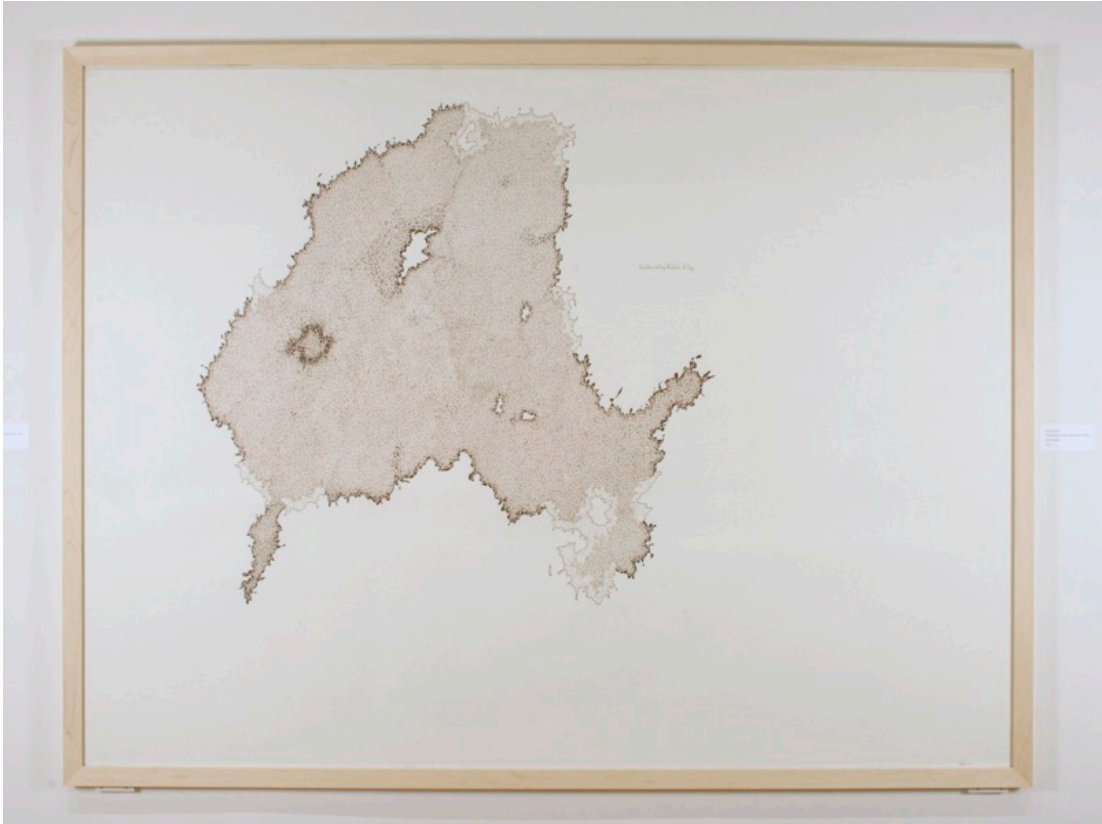


Figure 10a Stacks- *Renovations to Keep the Ghosts at Bay* 2010

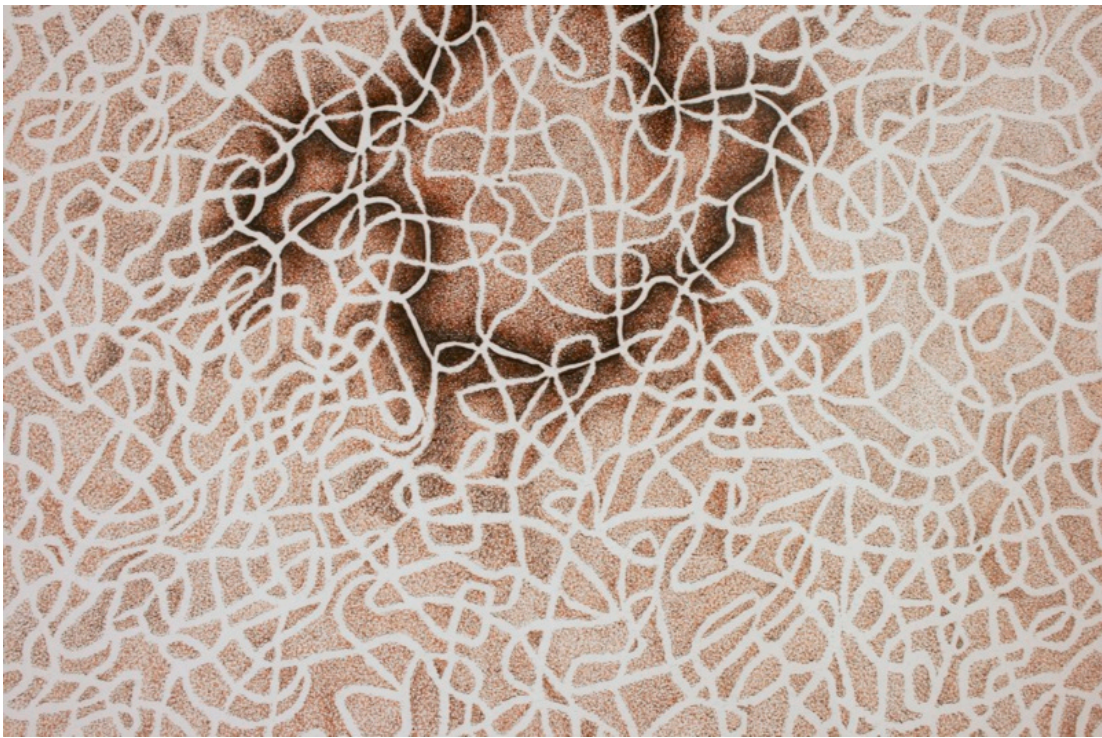


Figure 10b Stacks- *Renovations to Keep the Ghosts at Bay* detail

*Renovations to Keep the Ghosts at Bay* (Figure 10) is my response to Sarah Winchester. It is a tedious, heavy, single object in the composition, with only some diversity in texture. More than any other drawing in the series, it served as a vessel in which to pour every negative thought I could muster. But these would always leak into the next and need another room to increase capacity. Unlike Sarah Winchester I lacked the resources to continually increase the capacity of my heavy thoughts. I felt headed for a crash and needed something new.

*Low* has always been my favorite David Bowie album. As an adolescent I passed over the flash of Ziggy Stardust and literally painted my room electric blue after Bowie's in "Sound and Vision". With the wisdom of the past decade of so under by belt I've since scaled back to a dresser of that hue, but my affections remain the same. I initially turned to Bowie at this point in my life because I wanted a façade to armor myself against the world, but again found myself comforted by his identity at its barest.

Brian Eno, who was then beginning his collaborations with Bowie, said of his state at this time, "He was pretty much living at the edge of his nervous system, very tense. But as often happens, that translated into a sense of complete abandon in the work. One of the things that happens when you're going through traumatic life situations is your work becomes one of the only places where you can escape and take control."<sup>12</sup> This was the impetus towards labor I recognized in myself and was a path away from the diversions of Penelope and the unceasing obsession of Sarah Winchester. Bowie's nihilism was that of a state before rebuilding, rather than endgame. He was also utilizing many of the same tools, isolation and meditation to get to a different

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<sup>12</sup> Wilcken, Hugo. *Low*. New York, London: Continuum. 2005. 104.



Figure 11a-b Stacks- *Emotional Alchemy* 2010 detail



Figure 11a-b Stacks- *Emotional Alchemy* 2010 detail

place. Bowie has said, “I get a sense of real optimism through the veils of despair from *Low*. I can hear myself really struggling to get well.”<sup>13</sup>

As I worked I threw myself into indulging in the Bowie of this era, listening obsessively, distancing myself from others, and constructing a bedroom sanctuary for reflection. I saw his path from the excesses of his previous work to *Low* and the rest of his Berlin Trilogy (“*Heroes*” and *Lodger*) as having a metallic life. The emphasis on surface, transitioning from polish to corrosion, isn’t a degradation, but restorative, and eventually additive. The breakdown of Bowie’s façade also led to the buildup of one more in tune with his core chemistry. From space polish to earth-compatible patina. A way to sustainably exist in the world. *Emotional Alchemy* (Figure 11) is my attempt to dissect the layers of surface I saw peeled away and built up on the concept of David Bowie. It is the only drawing where the dots do not ever rest directly on the surface of the paper. The gold underlay, exposed, covered with ink, with varying thickness and shine, is an intermediary in my relationship with the work.

After absorbing the codifying tarnish of Bowie’s *Low* his influence began to fade. I work slowly, and while the *Low* period was a useful roadmap to a better place, it didn’t satisfy my need for a long-term plan to be productive in my sadness.

I feel like there has always been a copy of *Swann’s Way* (the first volume of Marcel Proust’s multi-volume *In Search of Lost Time*) waiting for me. I’ve peeked through the pages when scanning bookshelves, brought copies on trips, but did not crease the spine until, like Marcel Proust, I started spending the bulk of my time in bed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wilcken. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Shattuck, Roger. *Proust’s Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time*. New York: W.W. Norton. 2000. 15.



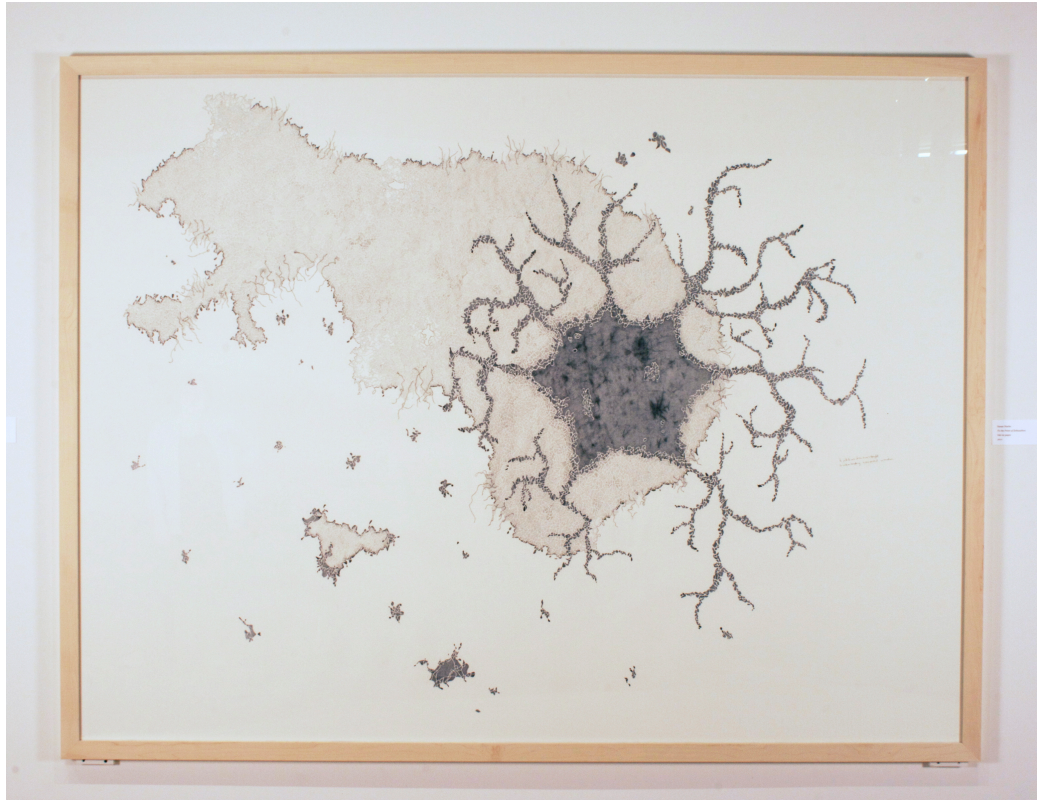


Figure 12a Stacks- *To the Point of Exhaustion*, 2011



Figure 12b Stacks- *To the Point of Exhaustion*, detail

Through the experience drawing *To the Point of Exhaustion* (Figure 12) my internal monologue started mimicking the languid meandering of Proust's works. Memories would drift past, snag and have to be untangled. I'd unexpectedly find myself dissecting a past event I had no consciousness of a moment before. As I drew I would race through sections only to be stalled on a tricky square foot, in reading I would pick up the next volume immediately after completing the previous, and then take weeks to get through five pages. I gave myself to indulgent reflections without hierarchy. I breathed in not only cataclysmic and climactic memories but also those between, the unconscious sensations and gestures that give shape to my life as a whole. Considering all memories in this way dulled the few that I thought were piercing. I embraced reflection and followed each thought down to its most subtle detail. At the end of these paths were clearings, areas of myself untouched by painful memories yet heavy with import that had been previously obscured. Proust told a friend that his one rule was "to yield to one's demon, to one's thought, to write on everything to the point of exhaustion".<sup>15</sup> I had committed myself to drawing to the point of exhaustion, but Proust's example of indulging in all components of life showed me how to live through and manipulate my own, turning painful elements into tools and finding calm in the landscapes between dramatic events.

After reaching this point I decided I needed to complete this series with a drawing I could inhabit alone. Though not to the scale of other figures, whose cultural presence is greater than themselves, *Molting Core* (figure 13) looks forward to redefining my own sense of self. Through picking up and casting aside the guises of the

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<sup>15</sup> Shattuck. 15-16.





Figure 13a Stacks - *Molting Core* 2011



Figure 13a Stacks - *Molting Core* 2011

other characters I retained some traits from each. The need for obsession, distraction, acceptance, and reflection are vital to my sense of self. I came to value the space between troubling events and that indulging and reflecting can be turned into a tangible presence.

Over the course of the last year I have engaged in drawings to confront my feelings of loss. These drawings have cleaned my wounds, reconnected my tissue, and shielded me from further harm. As caretakers, the drawings developed a reciprocal relationship with me. The artifacts from this relationship are maps of these living beings dominating my thoughts. Maps of my emotional journey away from loss, maps of the imagined ideology of larger than life individuals, and maps of the time and labor necessary to move from one feeling to another.



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Figure 2: Lee Krasner *Composition, 1949*

Figure 3: *Untitled, 1970*

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Figure 12a-b Stacks- *To the Point of Exhaustion* 2011, detail

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