

Dwelling is Going

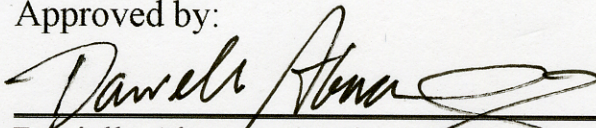
Emily Claire Orzech

Bachelor of Arts, Smith College, 2007
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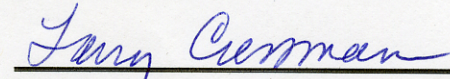
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University of Michigan
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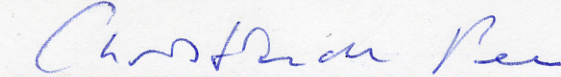
Approved by:



Danielle Abrams, Graduate Committee Chair



Larry Cressman, Graduate Committee Member



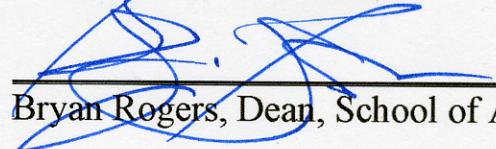
Christian de Pee, Graduate Committee Member



Larissa Larson, Graduate Committee Member



Brad Smith, Associate Dean for Graduate Education



Bryan Rogers, Dean, School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: May 1, 2010



Dwelling is Going

Emily Orzech

Thesis for the Masters of Fine Art,
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

2010

1. *Suspension*

Abstract

Dwelling is Going investigates the fragmentation of Detroit's landscape through a series of mixed-media drawings incorporating ink, screen print and graphite. The drawings respond to the processes of construction and erasure that shape the physical form of the city over time and are enacted through inhabitants' partial experiences of these spaces. In translating her spatial memories of Detroit onto a two-dimensional surface, Emily Orzech reflects on the parallels between the construction of lived space and the construction of memory.

Keywords: drawing, printmaking, painting, dwelling, urban theory, construction, erasure, memory, Detroit, Beijing

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2. *Drift*, detail

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Thanks also to my advisors and professors who have supported me throughout the three years both in formal meetings and in conversations in the halls.

Special thanks to my friends Ann Stewart and Catie Calder who encouraged me through the Michigan winter, and to my parents who taught me the love of footnotes. You are the most patient editors in the world.

Thanks to all of the strangers I have met as I travel, who offered me kindness, food and stories along my way.

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List of Poems with Drawings

Each stanza of a poem, "To Detroit," is listed by Roman numeral below the title of the drawing that accompanies it.

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3. Drift

To Detroit

I.

*We always have to drive.
A bus or train might run, I don't know,
but not often, not on time.*

*The highway opens.
Prairie grass whispers on either side
and wheels rumble down broken roads
towards where flat grey hits tarmac
in what they call a horizon.*

*The highway sinks down.
Its concrete shoulders
shrug itself into the ground
while sky blue exit ramps cross its back,
Escape ladders to a different sky.*

*On the ramp we speed to empty air
Gliding between painted lines and banking at turns,
like beads on a child's toy.*

*Then the world rights itself and we are sitting in the car,
an empty field before us and a one way sign.
Welcome to Detroit.*

Introduction to the Written Thesis

My thesis investigates processes of construction and erasure in Detroit's fragmented landscape. These processes are enacted through the material evidence of change in the city, in what I notice or overlook as I travel, and finally in my attempt to translate this time-based experience onto a two-dimensional surface using ink, screen print and graphite. The thesis is made up of the exhibition of the visual work, and two supplementary components: the written thesis and an oral presentation of my work to the faculty.

In this introduction I describe the body of visual work that I made for the thesis exhibition. I discuss the significance of the titles for individual works as well as the thesis title, *Dwelling is Going*. I then give a brief overview of the essays that make up the written thesis. Finally, I explain my rationale for the structure of the written thesis and how I see that structure as it relates to the visual work.



4. Fifteen of the finished drawings.

Description of the visual work

The visual thesis consists of sixteen 39"x50" mixed media drawings on stretched Fabriano Artistico hotpress watercolor paper (fig. 4). The drawings employ a combination of sumi ink, screen print ink, and powdered graphite to describe the sense of movement and open space that is found while driving through Detroit. All of the drawings are monochromatic, ranging from nearly white to almost black, but most of the drawings are white to light grey, as this is the range where the best modulation of tone can be achieved, and it also reflects the quality of winter light in Detroit.

A number of motifs recur throughout the series of drawings: windows of buildings, parts of cars, telephone wires and fences. These elements combine with the blank spaces representing sky and roads, and are partially obscured by drips and washes that reference the rain on windshields of cars (fig. 3). The blank spaces, and the traces of the process on the paper, are often more the subjects of the drawings than the buildings and cars that shape these spaces. By making the white of the paper as much an element of the landscape as the buildings, I deliberately double the readings within each drawing: the relation between figure and ground fluctuates. I use this fluctuation to integrate figures into the landscape so that they become almost invisible despite our natural tendency to focus primarily on figures in an image.

The instability of the double reading is explored more metaphorically through the drawings that depict reflections. In *Reflection I* and *Reflection II*, for example, there is a primary structure in the drawing, such as a building or a car, and a secondary structure reflected on its surface (fig. 35 and 40). There is also a doubling, or polysemy, set up by my treatment of the materials. I use a combination of marks that create pattern with marks that suggest atmospheric depth. By doing so I offer viewers a number of ways to look at the drawing. They can walk up close to it and examine the techniques on the surface of the drawing or back

away from it to see the ink washes resolve into cars. The drawings intentionally set up instability between possible readings in order to invite the viewer to engage with one or more of those interpretations as they approach the drawing.

Nine of these drawings were installed in a roughly box shaped configuration at Slusser Gallery this March 2010.¹ The nine works in the show, titled *Dwelling is Going*, were selected because together they create a sense of open space and suggest the sort of movement I found so fascinating when driving through Detroit.



5. Installation view of *Dwelling is Going* in Slusser Gallery.

About the choice of titles

Language is an important component of both the visual and written thesis. Each drawing is titled with a single word that appears printed in grey on a clear label beside it. The titles, such as *Transit*, *Crossing*, and *Overshadowed* were chosen because they describe an attribute of the particular place depicted in the drawing, but indicate some sort of action or process as well. *Crossing*, for

¹ 2010 MFA Thesis Exhibition: *Dwelling is Going*, was part of a group exhibition by MFA candidates. *Dwelling is Going* was installed in the Jean Paul Slusser Gallery in the Art and Architecture Building at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The exhibition ran from March 12th through April 2nd, 2010.

instance, suggests a bridge or overpass. It is also the action that both the pedestrians in the upper right corner and I, as the implied viewer driving a car across that bridge, are in the process of “crossing” the overpass.

Because each of the drawings is based on my memories of a particular stretch of road, my working titles for the drawings were initially street names. In my head I referred to the drawings as “Woodward Ave,” “Martin Luther King Jr. Drive,” “Fort Street,” “8 Mile.” These roads are loaded with connotations; the words conjure both history and prejudices that have been built up around them. “8 Mile” is probably the most immediately recognizable of these street names, famously being used as the title for a movie about the singer Eminem. It is a road that “has long served as a ...dividing line between the predominantly poor African-American city and its wealthier, predominantly white northern suburbs.”² It is the road my friend’s grandmother always used to warn her about, saying “don’t cross 8 Mile, it is dangerous over there.” The very real history of redlining in Detroit becomes reinforced by the aura built up around the street’s name.

When it came time to choose official titles for the drawings I decided to use a different system of naming. I felt that using street names immediately evoked associations popularized by the media and thereby formed a barrier of images between the viewer and the actual work, closing off alternate ways of looking at either the drawing or the location itself. I also felt that place names put the focus on location rather than on the process of movement and spatial relations that I was interested in. In order to figure out exactly what I wanted the titles to do I looked for examples of writers who use language in analogous ways to how I draw.

In the preface to her collection of essays, *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian explains how language can focus on process. She says, “the emphasis in poetry is on the moving rather than on the places— poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that

² “M-102 (Michigan Highway),” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/8_Mile_Road.

creates patterns of coherence. It is at points of linkage...that one discovers the reality of being in time, of taking one's chance, of becoming another, all with the implicit understanding that this is happening."³ When I encountered this passage in her writing, I was thrilled because this was exactly what I was trying to do with my drawings. I was not trying to paint the portrait of a place, of a single address on a street, or to collage together equally static images conjured by a street name.⁴ Rather, I was trying to link the empty lots, skyscrapers, and factories that make up the fabric of Detroit with the process of moving through and remembering those spaces. I wanted to do this both within and between drawings. When it came time to title the drawings that I had selected for the show I chose titles that collapsed position and process.

This instability between placement and process was particularly important in my selection of the show title, *Dwelling is Going*. I wanted a title that referred both to the act of being in place and the act of moving. "Dwelling" has the double meaning of inhabiting a particular location and of the process of spending time or focusing on something, as in "to dwell on a particular thought or memory." I particularly liked the word "dwelling" as opposed to other words that denote place because it indicates that to be in place is in itself a process, something that is done over time. It is a habit or preoccupation, something that comes into being through repetition. While I pass through Detroit, I "dwell on" the city through the repeated process of traveling and then revisiting those experiences as I paint.⁵

³ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ I don't view Detroit only as a social problem to be solved, as is often the case in the media. At the same time I am not creating representations of Detroit that have claims to uniqueness or complete representation. My work may evoke Detroit for some who know the city, but through a process of reflection and association *not* illustration.

⁵ I use the verb "to paint" since my entire work involves a brush and liquid media. I call the works "drawings" because that is where they fit in relation to the

When I pair the word "dwelling" with "going," using the copula "to be," I create further instability. There are several ways to read the phrase "Dwelling is Going" in the context of Detroit and my work about it. In a literal sense the practice of "dwelling" is "going" as the inhabitants leave.⁶ Many of Detroit's problems, such as the vast inequalities between the core of the city and the outlying suburbs were generated and are perpetuated by the phenomenon that the people who were "dwelling there" had the ability to "go," to move in cars around the city and bypass certain areas of the city entirely.⁷ Globalization and corporate competition has further harmed Detroit by moving manufacturing jobs to wherever happens to be the cheapest place at the moment. This in turn forces more and more people to work as migrant and temporary labor and it separates "political and economic power" from "place."⁸ The result is the "spatial and cultural separation of people from their production and from their history."⁹

Often people think of post-industrial changes like the rise of global capital as having bypassed Detroit, leaving behind a failed industrial city. It is more accurate to understand the current form of Detroit as what happens to a location when there is increasing pressure on both industries and people to move, and as a result the

Western Canon. The term 画, which is used to describe both painting and drawing with a brush is more accurate.

⁶ "dwell, v.: To remain (in a house, country, etc.) as in a permanent residence; to have one's abode; to reside." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3d ed., v."dwell."

⁷ According to the urban theorist Iris Marion Young, "the autonomous choices of suburban communities allow those communities to exploit the benefits of the city without providing anything in return." The privileged white minority in Detroit moved to the suburbs where they don't pay Detroit taxes. The separation of privileged and non-privileged into separate tax zones means that those who are not privileged have no money for their schools, roads, police or other essential services. Therefore those who are not privileged already and do not live in the suburbs never have the tools to gain privilege or even a decent quality of life. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 250.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

corporations have little or no incentive to invest in the long term future of the land and people they use to produce their capital. In this sense the practice of “dwelling” is disappearing or “going.”

Dwelling is Going can be read in an entirely different sense as well, if the verb “is” is read as “equals.” This interpretation calls attention to the fact that “dwelling” must be active. In order for the city to be inhabited people must move around it.¹⁰ Here dwelling is something that takes effort, life, time and thought.¹¹ It is something to be invested in. It shifts the notion of “dwelling” from the static noun, a concept of a city as being made up of discrete dwellings, to a sense of active urban space.

Dwelling, as a form of going, is the practice of inhabitation that Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, argues is necessary for vibrant city life. Her key principle for urban planners is that “a well-used city street is apt to be a safe street. A deserted city street is apt to be unsafe.”¹² She describes how sidewalk life generates “a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need.”¹³ Instead of individuals

¹⁰ When I was brainstorming titles for the show I came upon this quotation by Martin Heidegger: “We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal. Still, not every building is a dwelling. Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings; railway stations and highways, dams and market halls are built, but they are not dwelling places. Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling.” My work is about infrastructure rather than interiors, and my notion of dwelling, unlike Heidegger’s, puts the emphasis on habitual movement rather than territory or property. I am interested in how people dwell together in a city. While *Dwelling is Going* destabilizes the notion of dwelling, it shares with Heidegger a fascination with infrastructure (such as his long passage on bridges that follows this quotation). Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 143.

¹¹ “dwell, v.: to spend time upon or linger over (a thing) in action or thought; to remain with the attention fixed on.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3d ed., v. “dwell.”

¹² Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1961), 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

barricading themselves inside a house, gated community or segregated neighborhood she argues for the vibrant life on the sidewalk, for the mixing of uses of buildings and people of all walks of life together, which in turn creates jobs, safety and community. If dwelling can only be achieved by circulating through the city and interacting with other residents in other public spaces, then in many senses this is the hardest thing to do in Detroit, the land of cars and empty sidewalks.

In my visual and written thesis I dwell *on* the places I travel repeatedly yet I find it difficult to enter into Detroit, or dwell *in* the city. Because I have been unable to live in Detroit and I am a relative stranger to the Midwest my work is caught between dwelling and going.¹⁴ I look at the problems of a city that is rapidly losing inhabitants and at the same time I find creative potential and beauty in the process of moving through the city and thinking about it.¹⁵

Structure of the written thesis

The written thesis is structured as a parallel to the visual thesis. Just as the visual thesis is made up of a set of individual drawings that explore a particular movement in depth, the written

¹⁴ Detroit is sadly an hour away from my school, studio and work. I had originally planned to go to school in a city such as New York or Chicago, but chose the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor because of its excellent program. I will be living on the outskirts of Beijing next year, continuing my study of art and the urban environment.

¹⁵ “In 1900, Detroit had a quarter of a million people. By midcentury the population had reached nearly 2 million. In recent years, though, it has fallen below 900,000.” Rebecca Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2007, 67.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Detroit was estimated to be 871,121 in 2006, which represents an 8.4% decline since 2000. Given the current economic recession one would expect the 2010 census to show that the population of Detroit declined and the poverty level rose. U.S. Census Bureau State and County Quickfacts, “Detroit (city), Michigan,” U.S. Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html> (accessed on April 10th, 2010).

thesis is divided into eight sections: six short essays, an introduction and a conclusion. Rather than writing an exhaustive thesis on the work as a whole, each short essay focuses on a particular process associated with the work, as indicated in its title. “Routes,” for example, focuses on the process of movement used to gather visual material for the drawings and also the wider process of moving through a city.

Each essay is preceded by a stanza of a poem, “To Detroit,” which describes a single trip to and from Detroit. Photographs of the nine drawings that were part of the thesis exhibition serve as dividers between each section. Numerous smaller illustrations of the drawings, process, and my influences are embedded within the text or located in the appendix at the back of this written thesis, as indicated in the list of tables and figures.

The mix of poetry, images of my drawings and prose, like the mixture of media in the drawings, tries to find an alternate path to the linear thesis, one that opens up possibilities for thinking about Detroit. Just as the drawings do not replicate some whole “Detroit” but rather grow out of a process of looking at that city, the writing does not replicate the drawing but rather is a reflection on the visual work. One of my advisors said that describing the work was not about finding the perfect words to fit the drawing but becoming more aware of what we are trying to describe through attempts to describe it.¹⁶ The long poem “to Detroit,” represents one of my first attempts to see the city. When I first started driving to Detroit two years ago I was unsure of how to approach the city in my work. I couldn’t get past the stereotyped images of Detroit to imagine making something different. I found that writing poetry was the most effective way of sketching because I had to find metaphors to describe what I saw rather than copying down what I already expected to see. In searching for language to describe Detroit I began to notice more details of the landscape around me. The stanzas of “to Detroit” are intended to be read as a preface to

¹⁶ Jim Cogswell, Professor of Art and Design, University of Michigan Ann Arbor. Comment made during an advising meeting, winter 2009.

the drawings. They are the sketches made in preparation for the drawings just as the essays that follow are a reflection on those drawings.

Content of the written thesis

In the essay “Construction and Erasure,” I argue for the relation between changes to the city over time, the fragmentary nature of path selection and memory and the problems of representing this experience on a two-dimensional surface. The pedestrian chooses certain paths and ignores others just as both my memories and my drawings are compilations of fragments that have been joined together to form an image. These compilations depend on acts of selection, alteration and omission in order to make a seamless whole. I use the processes of construction and erasure to create the conceptual framework of the thesis, connecting three levels of understanding the city (in terms of time, in terms of personal experience, and in terms of artifacts made in response to those experiences).

Living in Beijing and Dhaka in the summer of 2008, I realized how much the culture and my position (gender, race, class, nationality, occupation) altered the ways in which I experienced very similar urban landscapes. This realization raised questions for me during subsequent visits to Detroit, which I discuss in the second essay, “Routes.” I began to ask how much the sprawling structure of the city determined the ways in which its residents lived. At the same time I asked how much of my impressions of Detroit were shaped by my subjective position as someone just passing through the city and as a white woman driving a foreign car through a predominantly black neighborhood near a Ford plant. Out of this interest in the tensions between the social and the built landscape, I began to search for ways to represent urban space that explored the impact of the city’s infrastructure and my position in a moving car on my visual experience.

The processes of moving through the city and making work are connected by the motion of my body and the choices I make

both as a pedestrian and an artist. In “Body, Motion and Memory” I argue that the physical process of making the work mimics the ways we remember the city by layering fragmented images together. These images then enable us to establish familiar paths through the city and create patterns of walking or driving. As I repeatedly travel to Detroit I collect memories to fuel my drawings. As I paint¹⁷ in the studio I become aware of the things I have forgotten which in turn sends me back to Detroit to retrace my steps. This process makes me increasingly aware of both the physical form of the city and my habits of seeing it.

Walking and driving through Detroit is part of a complex process I have set up for myself in order to slow down and extend the time that I take to try to understand the landscape surrounding me. Through this process of looking, remembering and trying to capture that memory on paper I become more aware of both the actual landscape and my habits of seeing. In the essay “Scaffolding,” I contrast my structured process with modern process-based art such as that of Sol LeWitt and to the ethos of Fordism that shaped so much of Detroit. Our structure and process have opposite intentions, and their differences illuminate the different intents behind them. There is a great difference between a structured process that is intended to maximize efficiency (Fordism), one which is a direct comment on the discrepancies between the human and mechanical in those practices (LeWitt), and a process like mine, which has been developed as a structure on which to build my creative work.

The structures of inefficiency and variation that I have set up in my walking and driving processes are mirrored by similarly inefficient and chance driven procedures of mark making. Furthermore, the marks become an index of this sort of process by combining the control of the artist’s hand with the processes of water dripping down the surface of the paper or pooling and spreading across it. The essay “Marks on the Surface” I discuss my techniques of mark making and material use. The decision to limit

my mark making, palette and format is based on my desire to create works which invite the viewer to explore the slight variations of ink and to sink into the atmosphere of the drawings.

Just as the marks of ink and graphite are used to reference process and to invite the viewer to look more closely at the surface of the paper, the installation of the work is designed to highlight these aspects and minimize possible distractions. In the essay, “Room,” I discuss the use of space both within the pieces and in the installation of the show *Dwelling is Going* in Slusser gallery.

In the organization of the show and in each the paintings within it I have tried to create an experience that is left partially open to the viewer, that exists at a point of flux between surface and depth, edge and atmosphere, tangible and intangible.

¹⁷ 画, see footnote 4.



6. Paused

II.

*The city comes in fits and starts
like a car engine turning over on a cold day.
A group of new row houses with white plastic siding
A brick home with its roof caved in,
factory building, retirement home, parking garage
an empty lot
A music store,
gas station, more abandoned buildings,
back to empty lots.*

*We are stationary,
suspended inside this shining frame of steel and glass,
wrapped in soft-seat-and-spilt-coffee-smell.
The city runs across our windshield
as if the car were at the bottom of a river.*

1. Construction and Erasure

The current form of the city is a single moment in a continually changing landscape. Buildings are built or burned down. Trees grow or are cut down and replaced by buildings. Some changes to the city obscure the ways in which it has been altered, leaving no trace of previous versions. Others join past structures as conglomerates. The space we experience is “a dynamic and continuously changing entity immersed in a dialectic relationship with its producers and inhabitants...city form can only be understood as it is produced over time.”¹⁸ The city we experience at the present moment is the accumulated result of continual construction and erasure.

Dwelling is Going takes the processes of construction and erasure as its conceptual framework. I understand construction and erasure as central forces in all three stages of my work. I see construction and erasure in the history of the city as I walk and drive through it, in terms of how I construct a memory of that city, and in terms of artifacts I make in response to that experience. I engage with the process of construction and erasure in the city through the physical construction and erasure that takes place in my drawings (fig. 2: applying ink and graphite and rubbing or washing it away again) and by the act of representation itself, which is always a distillation of the thing it represents. In this essay I argue that cities are best understood as constructive process. Sometimes the process of change obscures the reasons for that change while at other times the history is apparent in the material structures of the city. However, when we look towards the future of the city, and particularly the future of Detroit, we often imagine it existing in a utopian or dystopian state, which freezes the city at one point in time. If instead of asking what the city will look like in the future

¹⁸ Moudon, Anna Vernez. 2007. “Getting to Know Built Landscape: Typomorphology,” in *The Urban Design Reader. The Routledge Urban Reader Series*, ed. Michael Larice, Michael, and Elizabeth Macdonald (New York: Routledge, 2007), 257.

we consider what has driven changes to the form of the city, we can come to understand how these past and present currents of change might shape the future city. I explore the connections between the process of change in the city and how we view it through my drawings.

It is easy to think of Detroit as the end of a city, a conclusion to American industrialism. As the population dwindles, writers postulate a radical return to nature or the complete decay of the city. Their descriptions of Detroit lean towards wastelands or utopias. Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs describes how extreme many people’s perception of the city’s future is. She says, “Most people see only disaster and the end of the world. On the other hand, artists in particular see the potential.”¹⁹ Much of this potential is being realized in the form of small urban gardens that “dollar for dollar, is the most effective change agent you can ever have in a community.”²⁰ However, some of the discourse about the urban garden approaches the sort of utopian thinking that resulted in the development of suburbs in the first place. For instance, Rebecca Solnit imagines Detroit will be transformed into a garden where “we can reclaim what we paved over and poisoned, that nature will not punish us, that it will welcome us home.”²¹ This treatment of nature and the city is reminiscent of the Jeffersonian ideals of the city as an “unbounded checkerboard of gardens” that gave rise to Frank Lloyd Wright’s first suburb.²²

The urban designer, Jason Hackworth suggests, “a kind of uncertainty principle should affect the attitude of urban designers... to rely solely on a rational system premised on an idealized concept of man, produces results even more terrible than the circumstance that at first inspired comprehensive reform.”²³ This danger can be

¹⁹ Rebecca Solnit, quoting Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs. Solnit, 72.

²⁰ Rebecca Solnit, quoting Ashley Atkinson project manager for the Greening of Detroit. Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 73.

²² Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 32.

²³ Ibid., 43-44.

seen in how the language of Solnit’s utopian dream has been taken up by adversaries of Detroit gardeners like John Hantz who plans to buy up property around Detroit to make a for profit urban farm and drive up property prices, an investment he compares to "buying a penthouse in New York in 1940."²⁴ The farm is to be “compact, highly efficient, and tourist-friendly.”²⁵ It sounds as if Hantz vision of the garden owes much to Ford’s assembly line.



7. Plan for Hantz’s Farm

Hantz’s desire to control and commodify Detroit is a continuation of the tradition embodied by suburban utopias, which “represents a subjugation of nature to the rule of civilization”²⁶ and is “rationalized by dangerous encounters on the frontier.”²⁷ Hantz’s utopian dream claims to help the residents of the city but his rhetoric is about the conquest of nature and the use of private property to inflate prices, which bears more resemblance to ideas

²⁴ David Whitford, “Can Farming Save Detroit,” *Assignment Detroit: CNNMoney.com Special Project*, http://money.cnn.com/2009/12/29/news/economy/farming_detroit.fortune/index.htm, originally published in *Fortune Magazine*, December 29, 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hackworth, 9.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

underpinning American suburbia than left wing notions of community farms that Solnit supports.²⁸ The problem with utopias and dystopias is that they are an end product, a finished thing, and often mask prejudices through simplification. This problem is compounded because many utopic and dystopic visions have a single author, representing one voice rather than many. The city is a process that is too complex to be fixed to meet a single goal. The imagined city is like a cloud on the distant horizon, a castle in the air, which gives the actual city no place to go.

Planners and historians like Jane Jacobs and Iris Marion Young look for alternate ways of talking about the city which more closely approach the organic nature of people building and living in structures. We need a way to look at cities in terms of time, in terms of the fragmented and specific views that individuals have of that landscape and in terms of shared and often contested agency between inhabitants, planners, and government. Although I could talk about Detroit as a city, as if it were a comprehensible object, the product of a linear narrative, I find the creative potential lies in the variability and incompleteness of my experience, not the simplification and reduction of a birds eye view.

Any city’s form at any given moment can be seen as a record of construction and erasure over that city’s history, often created by political and social changes. The problematic ways in which Detroit is structured are not anomalous but indicative of behaviors and structures that we build more quietly in other cities. Even the rhythms of the landscape passing by are intertwined with a history of industrialism, race, and the current form of many American cities.²⁹ A highway is more than a highway and a suburb is more than a suburb. In *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Richard Weinstein argues that, “the city is experienced as a passage through space, with constraints

²⁸ The lawn is a middle-class embodiment of the American conflict between the value of nature as a principle and its management as a means toward material progress.” Ibid.,9.

²⁹ Ibid.

established by speed and motion, rather than the static conditions of solids, of buildings that define the pedestrian experience of traditional cities. The resulting detachment further privatizes experience, devalues the public realm, and, by force of the time spent in travel, contributes to isolation.”³⁰ The invention of the highway allowed wealthier white residents of Detroit to bypass downtown Detroit and with it both the shared public funds and shared public space where there might be dialogue on issues of class and race disparity. By understanding the history that shapes the city we can work towards altering it.

My movement through this landscape, and particularly my movement in the car, is a process of construction and erasure. From the ground I can only see fragments of the city at one moment in time and I always bring my own context to it. Kevin Lynch describes how “nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.”³¹ Whether I travel by car or on foot I see the city selectively. I cannot directly experience the city without moving through it. I choose the path I take based on the layout of streets, my destination, and what seems familiar to me based on matching the current spatial and social context with past experience. My fragmented experience is at once constructed out of the parts of the city and erased by the act of moving which only gives me time to see certain things.

The lens through which we understand the spaces we inhabit is not neutral. A pedestrian, even a driver in a car, can never be a detached observant eye that judges the places and people based on some universal standards of humanity. It may be tempting to imagine ourselves as detached observers like Benjamin’s *flaneur* “who goes in search of ‘vanished time’ ...he is in but not of the

³⁰ Richard S. Weinstein. “The First American City,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 35.

³¹ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), 1.

crowd where every face is masked in anonymity”³² However, to be present on a street is to alter that street. The illusion of detachment and the leisure to wander is itself a product of certain social circumstances. We cannot step out of space or culture to view the other passers-by with an objective eye. We are at once constrained by the physical and cultural structures we inhabit, yet by being part of those structures we have the ability to influence them. By being aware of my own choices and responses to the places I travel through I begin to have an understanding, not of Detroit as a whole, but of how I engage with the landscape.



8. (clockwise) The warehouse district in Detroit, the Renaissance Center and Centerline suburb. The warehouse district is an example of an area that is mostly abandoned. The Renaissance center was an attempt at urban renewal. The neighborhood Centerline is a working class predominantly white neighborhood near the Detroit city line.

³² Simon Parker, quoting Walter Benjamin. Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

As I drive or walk I pay attention to where I feel comfortable or uncomfortable. Is it because of the speed at which I have to drive, that I miss much of the city passing by? How do I feel in downtown Detroit (fig. 8)? How do I feel in the suburbs (fig.8)? In areas which are entirely abandoned (fig.8)? In Detroit the racial prejudices and economic inequalities that shape many American cities are on the surface. These prejudices and historical legacies are there in the radical disparities in wealth between the core of the city and the suburbs, in the lack of infrastructure, and in the current division in America between struggling industrial cities and at least temporarily better off “post-industrial” ones.

I have used the tension between the cumulative history of the city and our rapid experience of its present form to generate a series of questions that direct my observations as I walk. What does the city look like when seen from the car? What changes when I walk and what obstacles do I face in doing so? What new ways of seeing come out of changes in movement and decisions of which street to take? How can I describe the sorts of “detachment” that this motion creates and, in the process build new connections between myself and the landscape? Each road has a different rhythm depending on the built environment and how fast I am traveling. When I drive, most of the road exists as a blur, except for the view directly in front of me. Rather than repeating the trope of ruined buildings in my drawings, I point to the erasure of the built environment and the public sphere through certain modes of movement, one that renders the city a place to pass through quickly for people who are not residents while systematically disadvantaging those who are residents.³³

³³ “The separation of functions and the consequent need for transportation to get to jobs and services also contributes directly to the increased marginality of old people, poor people, disabled people, and others who because of life situation as well as limited access to resources are less able to move independently in wide areas.” Young, 246.

How I see the city, how I understand its history and how I represent the junction between the city and my current position are intertwined. For example, the construction of Detroit’s highway system and the subsequent division of neighborhoods by sunken roads in turn means that I move more quickly on those highways and therefore my memory of the city is filled with gaps where I bypassed whole neighborhoods (figure 9). What I see or don’t see when I drive is by itself insignificant, but when repeated by many people in many cars it becomes a blindness that tries to erase the city where already “some forty square miles, has evolved...into vacancy and prairie—an urban void nearly the size of San Francisco.”³⁴ My “not seeing” is tied to the construction of Detroit’s roads, the physical and mental erasure of the city, and the omissions of detail and edges in my drawing.



9. One of the highways in Detroit. At this point I am almost downtown but cannot see the city from the road.

³⁴ Solnit, 67.

My work begins with making visible my inability to see the city and the infrastructure that encourages this blindness. In the process of making this visible, however, I stop the motion of the city and engage in a process of thoughtful looking, which in turn increases what I notice in Detroit and helps me find alternate routes through neighborhoods. The process of drawing and my experience of the city is unstable or even recursive since drawing and seeing the city continually alter each other. My drawings try to engage viewers in a similarly counterintuitive process of looking at what they cannot see in order to reflect on the process of seeing itself. The works are low contrast and contain layers of ink and graphite that fluctuate being surface detail and indicating depth, never offering a complete reading or stable interpretation of the image. In *Paused*, for example the edges of the buildings almost disappear, leaving a faint pattern of square windows (fig. 6). I avoid providing a complete single reading of the drawing because I want to offer an image that the viewer can look at actively and reflectively.³⁵ The time people have spent viewing my drawings has far exceeded my expectations, with some viewers spending four or five minutes looking at each of nine drawings.³⁶ Just as creating the drawings has increased the attention I pay to the built landscape, I hope that looking at the drawings initiates a habit of similar attention for the viewer.

Whenever a three-dimensional time-based experience is translated into a two-dimensional surface, certain things are erased and certain things are reinforced. A map, for example, prioritizes street layout at the expense of form, contour and motion. Even an uncut video recording of a drive through Detroit cannot reproduce the original experience, for it both alters the memory of that

³⁵ The gallery setting together with the choice of stretching paper as canvas intentionally cues the viewer to look at the work as “art” and therefore spend time with it. The installation of the work in a square configuration encourages the viewer to approach the works from multiple angles as they walk around the gallery.

³⁶ Normal viewing time is under thirty seconds. In the essay “Rooms” I will discuss viewing at more length.

experience and influences the next experience we have in the same or similar location.



10. *Dust Hills*

The constructed nature of the drawings can be seen in *Dust Hills*, for example, where I collapse four separate trips through Dearborn's industrial area into a single image (fig. 10). Rather than represent a single view or feature I try to capture the sense of floating, the sense of a temporary landscape made up of giant hills of gravel that goes on for miles. In my memory there is almost nothing that distinguishes the land from the clouds because of the amount of dust blowing in the air. The landscape is shifted from horizontal to vertical, stretched up the picture plane to reflect that blurring of the horizon and spatial disorientation that happens while driving through that place. If I were to represent the dust hills in a conventional way, with a defined horizon line, the cumulative experience of the drive and the sense of repetition and monotony would be lost. The drawing is not a representation of that landscape but rather my process of trying to make sense of it.

In this respect the choice of drawing as opposed to time based media is more closely related to my subject matter. Professor Christian de Pee points out that "a video, moreover, eliminates the physicality of the experience, and eliminates alternatives: unlike a passenger in a car, the viewer of a video cannot turn around at will to take in a different view. The camera has made the choice—a selective view within a selective view."³⁷ Drawings are readily understood to be interpretations rather than a replica of an experience. However, a room full of drawings, like an actual city street, is often much less directive than video. The viewer may look at the drawings in any order, read the text or not, and spend how ever much or little time in front of each image as he or she pleases. On a city street and in a gallery full of drawings, it is the viewer that moves, has agency and configures a sequence of images/memories through his or her choice of where they walk and what they look at. In a video the viewer is still as the images move past.

The visual work elongates the process of construction and erasure as I experience Detroit's fragmented landscape. I travel

³⁷ Quotation from written comment by Professor Christian de Pee, April 2010.

certain routes through the city and make a series of parallel drawings in response. My memories are constructed out of a selective interaction between my body, the built spaces around me and the presence or absence of other inhabitants. I intentionally elongate this process of experience and reflection by repeatedly filtering my experience through memory rather than drawing directly from life or exclusively using photographs as reference. Drawing jogs my memory of specific sensations of location, movement and touch, but by reinforcing these it overwrites others. Working from memory allows me to make associations without the constraints of location or immediate temporality.

The erasures and omissions that occur when documenting an experience, in combination with the ways in which that documentation reinforces certain memories and associations creates tension between the materiality of the physical world and the object. This tension is generative. According to the critic Paul Naylor this sort of tension was theorized by Benjamin, whose "dialectical image represents the moment of tension between the thesis and the antithesis rather than the moment of resolution...and it is at that moment that a dialectical image serves as a tactic to investigate the holes in the seamless narrative of history."³⁸ Rather than working under the assumption that my drawings can reproduce reality as if they were windows out onto the world, I find potential in the inability to represent an experience in totality. If drawings are traditionally conceived of as a window onto the world, then my drawings are the dust that accumulates on a windshield and then is partially washed away. The images I make are not pictures of what is out there or in here, but what is left over or made out of that process of seeing and reflection.

³⁸ Paul Naylor, *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 22.



11. *Transit*

*III.
The buildings swing around us now, taller
Renaissance Tower, People Mover.
All odd shiny shapes, like dreams for a future that never came
The buildings turn slow round wide curves, faster around the tight
ones,
revolving on an axis of one-way streets.*

2. Routes

“Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by.... Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures of forgetting.” -- De Certeau³⁹

What is missed by the “survey of routes”? Is it possible to capture in two dimensions the play of shadows, the rhythm of walking and the sense of dislocation as we turn down a new path? In my current series of drawings, *Dwelling is Going*, I investigate ways to represent movement through a city from the ground rather than from an aerial “map” view. While an aerial view locates objects in a rigid grid, making them easy to find again, I want to explore my fluctuating sense of location as I move through the environment, to investigate “the act of passing by.”⁴⁰ In “Routes” I will discuss how I became interested in describing location in terms of repeated movement down a street, or the “routes” I take, rather than describing location as a line drawn on a map. I will explain how this approach was driven by a desire to better understand the complexities of my position as a foreigner in Asia and as a visitor to Detroit. In the next essay, “Body, Motion and Memory,” I will discuss the connections between navigating routes and the process of memory or forgetting that occur as I try to paint⁴¹ them.

The two series that led to my current thesis work, *Bikes/Birds* and *Tunnels*, developed out of my desire to find a new way to describe position. I began the series *Bikes/Birds* because I

³⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

⁴⁰ Kostof argues that often designers investigate forms like the grid layout of many cities as if it were linked with a universal meaning. He says, “to the form-seeker, for example, a grid is a grid is a grid. ... To us here, on the other hand... we will have to come to grips with the fact that the grid has accommodated a striking variety of social structures.” Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1991), 10-11.

⁴¹ 画, see footnote 4.

was searching for a way simultaneously to conceptualize my relation to Chinese language and culture and my shifting position as I commuted by bike every morning from an artists’ complex on the outskirts of Beijing to the 798 galleries (fig 12).⁴²



12. Bikes and pedestrians on a road in the 798 complex (left) and one of my first ink paintings I made while in Beijing (right).

As I joined the flock of bicycles heading towards the city every morning, I had the sense of being at once foreign and in the middle, at home in a place where the ways I had been taught to understand the world were in sync with those around me. The way academic discourse often splits identity into categories of the self and other, made only a narrow sort of sense in this context. All the labels of “foreigner” and all the issues about Westerners coming to

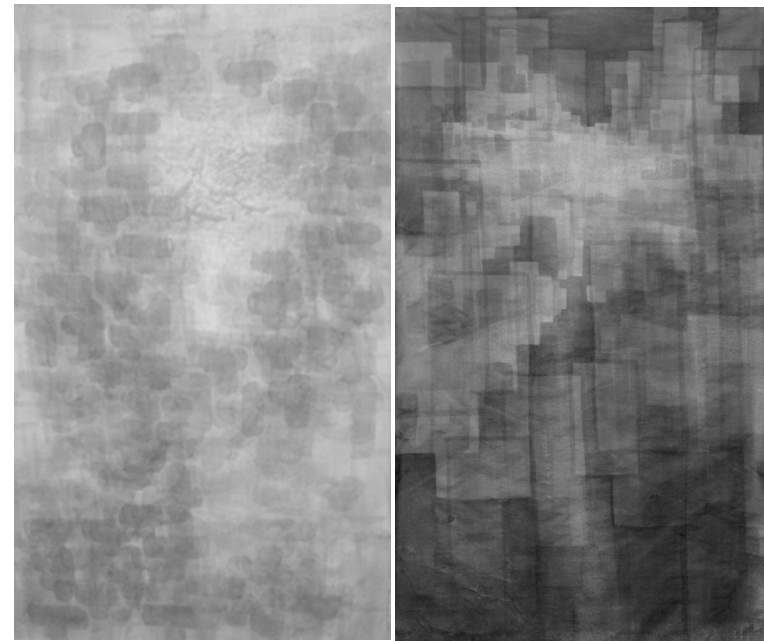
⁴² 798 is an old German Bauhaus style arms factory located on the northern edge of Beijing. In recent years it has been used for gallery spaces and artists lofts. Although it is continually facing pressure to commercialize, it has been the center of the emerging contemporary Chinese art scene for the last decade. I worked in Red Gate Gallery’s 798 branch, which was eliminated because of the recession. Red Gate Gallery’s main location is in the Watchtower and it was the first contemporary art gallery established in China.

the East and then returning with stories about the so called “exotic,” were part of my experience and can be drawn out on a map. But maps I learned as a child in my Taiwanese Kindergarten class make this neat division between inside and out more complicated. I grew up knowing a map of the world that put China at the center, as in its name- Zhong Guo 中国- Central Kingdom. When I was in Taiwan in 1991 this map was contested. The Mainland Chinese government and the old exiled government in Taiwan both claimed to be the legitimate rulers of China, while a new Taiwanese party advocated for independence from China instead. At school we sang anthems and raised a flag with a great sense of national pride and no idea of how the land we stood on related to the maps and politics, except that it had something to do with the reason the old government had never bothered to build infrastructure so the city flooded every time it rained. My categories of self/other were developed out of this moment: on the one hand I recognized the complexities of identity and distrusted reductionist labels, on the other hand the nationalism of my Kindergarten education and my parents’ interest in Chinese Buddhism lead me to automatically think of Chinese (Taiwanese) culture as the center (中)/ norm/ inside and myself as the outsider in relation to it. This is a different assumption from one made by most Americans: that being foreign means the place one came from is the center, and the place one is foreign to is the periphery. It all depends on how you draw the map.

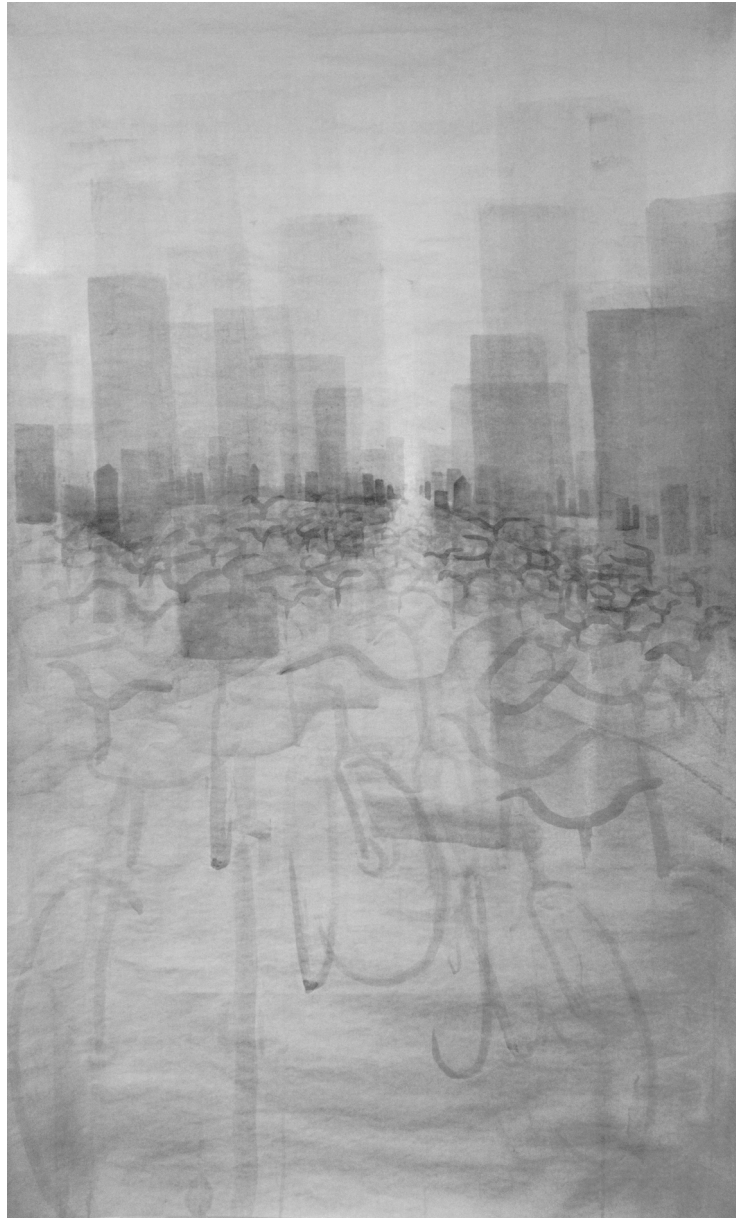
I realized that maps omit these complexities of position, whether it is a child’s confusion over Taiwanese sovereignty or the sensation of commuting to work in Beijing. These omissions represent the process of “making invisible the operation that made [the map] possible.”⁴³ The map of Beijing says nothing about my knowledge of the bicyclists on either side of me or our sense of each others’ physical presence that helps us move together as a flock and avoid collisions. The map erases both the body and the sense of temporality from the image.

⁴³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

When I returned to Ann Arbor I continued my exploration of crowds and bikes in my series *Bikes/Birds*. I became interested in how the spaces between the labels on the map expand and collapse as a way to write myself back into the equation. I wanted to be able not simply to think about people as fixed in a position and an identity: foreign/native, self/other viewer/viewed. It seemed to me it was not the labels that were interesting but the pull between them, which like a flock of birds or bicycles was constantly in flux yet always aware of the shifting spaces between. The flocks of birds and bicycles were metaphors I could use to think about these issues of distance and relation. I thought of the marks that represented the birds, bikes and buildings as a sort of writing that stood in for the presence of those forms (fig.13).



13. *Bikes/Birds: Accumulation II (right) and III (left)*



14. *Bikes/Birds: Commute*

Instead of using a traditional receding perspective with a dark foreground and a light background, I based my distribution of light and dark forms on the viewer's cumulative experience of traveling through a particular distance (fig. 14). I thought of the picture plane as a slice of air through which the crowds of bicycles moved at different times. The darkest bicycles were moving through the plane of air at the present moment while the lightest had been present some time ago (fig. 14). Unlike the bicycles, the buildings don't move except under the influence of gravity. Here the system of darker and lighter buildings is based upon the idea of the accumulated experience of traveling through the city on the bicycle (fig. 13). The picture plane represents the entire memory of the ride, and the darker buildings are those that are seen more clearly and experienced closer in time to the present moment while the fainter layers underneath were experienced towards the beginning of the journey.

In *Bikes/Birds* I was still very close to the map because I was extracting information about a particular street and representing it as a set of symbols. What had shifted from the aerial map was what information I was prioritizing as the content of my map and the angle and direction from which the map was drawn. Instead of the plane of the map being parallel to the ground it was perpendicular, in the same orientation as our bodies or a picture plane. However, unlike the picture plane used in point perspective, I imagined that this picture plane was moving through space or time with me. If I stood still, it gathered all of the motion that took place in that spot over a period of time. If I was moving, I imagined the picture plane as attached to the front of my bicycle, gathering all of the dust on my way down the road. Rather than mapping the direction of the street and then marking my position on it, as on a traditional street map, I mapped all the activity of the road in relationship to my shifting position. This shift in mapping prioritized the information that was relational rather than absolute. It gave me the tools to begin to think at once about how I looked at

the place I was moving through and also how my movement altered that space.

As my time in Beijing receded further in the past, I found myself facing a challenge. I was interested in spatial relations between people in crowds as a way of thinking about distance and belonging, but I was much more isolated when I lived in Michigan than I was in Beijing. There were no crowds for me to be a part of. I also found that I was less interested in the symbols and the brushstrokes that they were made up of than in the somatic experience of walking through a space and the traces of the brush and water left on the paper in the process of drawing. The birds and bikes were not derived from visual artifacts of motion but abstracted from outlines of static objects, in many ways they were no more than an “x” on a map, marking position. I needed to find an urban form that was easy to visualize and in some way made me aware of my movement and shifting location in a similar way that walking in a crowd does.

In my Ann Arbor studio I began by doing a series of exercises where I visualized myself walking through tiled tunnels, which I chose because they reflect my shadow and echoed my footsteps back to me. I spent nearly a month on the first drawing (fig. 16). I started by visualizing myself walking into one of the tiled tunnels that pass under a huge department store in Beijing’s Wangfujing commercial district (fig. 15).



15. Tunnel in Wangfujing Commercial District, Beijing



16. *Tunnel Series: Pale Tunnel*

I walked towards the paper on my studio wall, visualizing the shadows and light reflections I saw. I painted them on the paper in light ink. Each time I walked I visualized the shifts in the patterns of light on the tunnel walls, trying to reference the way the light shadows undulate down the tunnel with the rhythm of my walk. Eventually I visualized myself walking back out of the tunnel, through the picture plane of the paper, so that as the painter I positioned myself facing out of the picture plane rather than into it. I limited myself to little squares in very light ink.

Gradually the walls of the tunnel built up, becoming darker in the areas that I thought about most frequently (fig. 16). The tunnel began to have walls, and a sense of space, but the lines of perspective shifted with my vision, having a similar sense of vibration as the accumulated lines of Giacometti's drawings (fig 17).

Yet imagining the tunnel offered me only a single path of movement and was a category that hid much of the social and cultural context that informs the ways in which we traverse those spaces. In response to the tunnel series I began searching for shadows and reflections that connected the tunnels to the wider landscape around. In the graphite drawing *Monsoon*, for example, I recall my experiences as a child wading through Taipei's flooded streets (fig. 18). The water transformed the city, submerging the usual paths. Streets became rivers of stranded cars, underpasses turned into waterfalls and the whole city was scattered in reflections across the water's surface.



17. Alberto Giacometti, *Annette with Chariot*



18. *Monsoon*

I also made work based on the reflections on windows in London and the canals of Venice, where I spent part of the summer of 2009 (fig. 19). Because reflections break apart and distort the familiar architectural forms, they can shift the way we see an urban space from being primarily about static solids in space (buildings, sidewalks etc...) to being about patterns and rhythms that allow multiple simultaneous readings of depth and movement.



19. *Sinking Cities: Venice/ Dhaka*

As I finished the *Tunnel* series, which used generalized architectural forms from a number of locations, I began to explore how Detroit might influence my next series of work. I wanted to take what I had learned about movement and space from the work on tunnels and apply it to more complex forms. Unlike Venice, London or Taipei, Detroit was somewhere I could visit repeatedly while I lived in nearby Ann Arbor for graduate school. I initially tried to find places in Detroit that had the same spatial qualities as those in my previous work. It is easy to describe the volume of a public space when it is filled with people, like the protest crowds in Joy Gerard's large drawings or my series of bicycle drawings (fig. 20).⁴⁴ The sense of people in crowds can be hinted at with very

⁴⁴ Joy Gerrard, "Protest Crowd, San Francisco," <http://www.joygerrard.net/index.html> (accessed December 4, 2009).

simple marks. I soon realized that my understanding of urban spaces as defined by crowds could not be extended to Detroit. I had to find another way to talk about the physical experience of space, one that focused not on the volume of people in a given space, but on the movement of a single person along a route or path.



20. Joy Gerard, *Protest Crowd, San Francisco 2003*.

I also had to change the ways I gathered visual material. As I will discuss at length in the next essay, I normally began gathering material for my drawings by walking an area of a city repeatedly, letting myself get lost and then finding my way again, establishing routes. I also spent time sketching outdoors, both as a way of seeing the environment around me and as a way to start up conversations with people around me. In Detroit this mode of walking and drawing was a challenge for a number of reasons. I had to drive to the city in order to visit it, and then I found that many places were so spread out that I felt as if I were walking in place. There were

few other pedestrians to create the sense of crowds that I had been interested in and few constricted spaces like the tunnels I had been working on to reflect my changing position. During the winter it is too cold to draw outside and there are even fewer pedestrians, all of them hurrying indoors. While my sketching did catch the attention of a number of pedestrians, even these interactions were superficial because I don't know people living in Detroit neighborhoods and don't have a particular destination to visit.

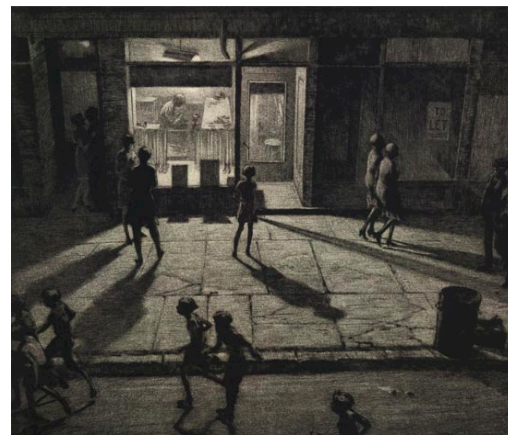
Rather than finding the lack of crowds and the difficulty walking a hindrance to my work, I looked at these issues as highlighting key features of life in Detroit and a potential subject for my drawing. Detroit was designed as the first quintessential car city and is now further spread out by urban decay. The urban theorist Richard Weinstein describes the difficulties I experienced in moving through Detroit as typical of modern American cities. He says, "the city is experienced as a passage through space, with constraints established by speed and motion, rather than the static conditions of solids, of buildings that define the pedestrian experience of traditional cities. The resulting detachment further privatizes experience, devalues the public realm, and, by force of the time spent in travel, contributes to isolation."⁴⁵ The car is not only at the core of Detroit's industry and former prosperity but is the continued cause of its unraveling. It does this through the particular type of visual experience it creates. An experience, he argues, that encourages people to isolate themselves rather than interacting as they would if they were pedestrians.

I was intrigued by Detroit because it disrupted my usual patterns of interacting with and making art about cities, which was based on walking and crowds. I approached this difference by looking for situations that were analogous to issues I had explored in my previous work. Besides crowds, I had been interested in cast shadows and reflections as indicators of my own position. My tunnel series, for instance had been influenced by the elements of abstraction in Martin Lewis's prints (fig. 21, 22).

⁴⁵ Weinstein, 35.



21. Martin Lewis, *Little Penthouse*



22. Martin Lewis, *Spring Night, Greenwich Village*

I first became aware of Lewis's work in the context of the 1930's printmaking movement, in conjunction with the younger generation of WPA artists like Gerardo Belfiore, who creates a sense of atmosphere and shifting figures in his print *Mid-city* by making it difficult to separate out figures from ground.⁴⁶ As I studied Martin Lewis's prints in the British Museum Print Room last summer I became particularly interested in Lewis's use of shadows and reflections in the urban landscape to create abstractions and ambiguities.⁴⁷

Lewis renders everything, from the figures' faces to the windows of the buildings, with precision and clarity, and yet the shadows and textures are often as much the subjects of his prints as the figures. The shadows make the mundane subjects of the city unfamiliar, causing the viewer to look again (fig. 22). Though we know little about Lewis, this fascination with abstraction was certainly intentional as he wrote a line of poetry about Euclid's geometry below one of his sketches for the print "Shadow Magic."⁴⁸ In a sense the shadows un-name the objects, drawing our attention to the air and light rather than to the forms.

Contemporary artists like Ross Bleckner and Hang Qing work in a much more abstract manner than Lewis, yet they share his fascination with pattern and light.

⁴⁶ Gerardo Belfiore (1914-2002) developed the carborundum print through experimentation at the Fine Print Workshop of Philadelphia, which was funded by the WPA. The carborundum technique mimics the atmospheric effects of the mezzotint. I am particularly drawn to the prints made under the WPA because the relevance of their themes of industrialism and race to my current work. The WPA's sponsorship of printmaking provided a living wage for artists from all walks of life. Furthermore, many of the technical and artistic innovations funded by the WPA were pioneered by women and minorities who today are still marginalized in art. Stephen Coppel, *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock* (London, UK: The British Museum Press, 2008), 153.

⁴⁷ The British Museum, "Highlights: Martin Lewis, Little Penthouse, a drypoint," http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/m/martin_lewis_little_penthouse.aspx. (accessed September 9, 2009).

⁴⁸ Coppel, 101.



23. Ross Bleckner, *In Sickness and in Health*

Ross Bleckner describes his work as "about building up and taking apart...how the shapes form and unform, how they dissolve and reassemble."⁴⁹ Bleckner, like Lewis, is fascinated with the process of seeing and what happens when we upend the habitual hierarchy of figure, shadow and space (fig. 23).

⁴⁹ Helen A. Harrison quoting Ross Bleckner. Helen A. Harrison. "An Artist's Investigation of Loss and Memory," on *Ross Bleckner*, <http://www.rbleckner.com/press28.html>. First published in *The New York Times*, January 2, 2005.

The artist Hang Qing paints images of cars and headlights (fig. 24).⁵⁰ Even though these paintings consist of only a few bright spots in a fog of purple-grey paint, they are positioned in exactly the right way to be read as headlights, which in turn transforms the purplish canvas into a road, even though there are no lines drawn. In these paintings there is so little delineated that I simultaneously read the images as headlights and as just paint on canvas. Despite the vast differences in both background and approach, Hang Qing, Bleckner and Lewis all disrupted my familiar habits of seeing by reprioritizing what I focus on as the primary subject of the landscape, whether that new focus be an expanse of road, shimmering patterns of light that might be flowers or dividing cells, or patterns of light and shadow cast across a sidewalk.



24. Hang Qing, *Night Trip No. 6*

I wanted my drawings about Detroit similarly to disrupt habits of seeing, yet I couldn't find the sorts of shadows in Detroit that Lewis's Chicago is so full of. Except for in the heart of Downtown Detroit, the buildings were so far apart that they did not cast shadows onto one another. The glass in the windows reflected back the flat grey sky. It was only when I began to look at how my sense of space changed from walking to riding in a car that I realized that Detroit was full of reflections I had not noticed as a pedestrian. The city transformed into ribbons of light on car windows and dissolved into the flickering patterns of high tension wires in the dusty air behind the steel mills.

As I drove through Detroit I became interested in how much variation there was between different sections of the city and in the dramatic shifts of speed and direction I had to make in order to navigate its one-way system. One moment I would be driving slowly down a canyon of skyscrapers, the next I would find myself on a highway or on an entirely empty road in the middle of abandoned warehouses or in a maze of small streets filled with houses. I began to develop this language of routes as I started to pay attention to the way I navigated the city in response to my position as a visitor in the city (as opposed to an inhabitant) and my particular goal of gathering images for drawings. In order to direct the subject of my drawings I asked how then were the routes I took in Detroit different from those I would take in a smaller city or even a sprawling city like Beijing, which was crowded and filled with pedestrians. I realized that in Detroit I was distanced from the city by my position as a stranger to it, by the speed of the car and by the barrier of the windshield. Viewing Detroit from a car generates its own visual language, just as much as commuting with flocks of bicycles in Beijing did. And because driving generates an emptiness, or a skipping over it is often overlooked as subject matter.

⁵⁰ Red Gate Gallery, "Hang Qing: Essay," <http://www.redgategallery.com/artists/han-qing-gallery/han-qing-essay>.

This question led to specific shifts in the way I depicted the city. For the first part of the year I worked primarily in graphite on large paper. Through these drawings I asked myself where the paths were in the landscape and how the visual paths sometimes differed or were separated from the paths that could be walked. In a drawing of the factories in Dearborn for example, the path is the steam and smoke that winds up the paper (fig. 25). It is not a path that can be walked and I intentionally close myself out of the drawing with the flat faces of the buildings. In another drawing, *Dust Hills*, it is the piles of gravel behind fences that are the paths, something that can only be climbed over in the imagination (fig. 10). In other drawings the paths were the roads, street corners and sky (fig. 26 and 27).



25. Graphite sketch of Dearborn factories (two states of the same drawing).



26. Graphite sketch of Dearborn factories



27. Graphite sketch of sky and telephone poles

However, something was missing. A fellow student asked me where all the people were and why everything in my drawings was empty or open. I realized it was hard to experience openness if everything was open. There needed to be variation between contraction and expansion of the space, just as an architect uses a narrow entrance to give the visitors a sense of expansive space when they walk through that entrance into the atrium or main hall.

This pointed to the second issue with the work: my city seemed entirely uninhabited and the drawings always seemed to depict something seen at a distance, rather than something that was directly in front or even surrounding the artist/viewer. The variation of space was one way in which I could become more aware of my own position within the drawing, stepping back into it as I had done in the tunnel drawings.



28. Detail from graphite sketch (left) and detail from *Dust Hills*, the first mixed media drawing I made (right)

As I started to make the mixed media drawings that form the thesis, I returned my focus to motion (fig. 28). As I did so I realized that the city was not empty but full of cars. Perhaps it was not crowded, but that was the predominant way in which people were present on the street. I began by looking at the distances between cars, which like pedestrians tend to travel in clusters. In *Drift* (fig. 3) I position groups of cars floating up the white paper. The paper could be a road, but the plane that the cars inhabit shifts and wobbles as the eye moves up the paper, rather than being drawn in stable point perspective. Streams of ink run down the paper like water on a windshield, partially washing away the painted cars. The space within the drawing, which is only hinted at by the relative position of the cars, is unstable as if the viewer is in a car driving over uneven pavement on a rainy day.

In *Reflection II* (fig. 40) the viewer is positioned somewhere in between two cars, as if he or she were squeezing between them, though it is unclear if the cars are in motion or parked. The space between the cars is the least focused and the bodies of the cars are slightly distorted so that it is hard to determine exactly how close they are together. In a critique one graduate student said she felt as if she were squeezed between the two cars and a bit lost or dislocated because of the soft focus, as if she had forgotten where she had parked her car in the lot and was now looking for it. As I alternate between driving and walking in Detroit I choose my routes because they either gave me a very strong feeling of my location, as in *Reflection II* where I am squeezed between two cars, or create a strong sense of displacement, as in *Drift*, where the wide avenues in the rain made me lose all sense of the constructed city.



29. Overshadowed

IV.

*Paused for a moment at a light, people shuffle forward,
edging as close to the next car's bumper as they can,
eyes fixed for the signal to go,
to be the first cast adrift on the roads again.*

*Here and there someone crosses the street
jacket pulled up to ears against the cold.
The few pedestrians look odd against the looming buildings
A mistake, too few to make a crowd, like a pigeon without its flock.*

3. Body, Motion and Memory

“Body memory...connects into places because the shared experience of dwellings, public spaces, and workplaces, and the paths traveled between home and work, give body memory its social component, modified by the postures of gender, race, and class” — Dolores Hayden⁵¹

In the essay “Routes” I talk about how depicting the city in terms of paths of repeated or habitual movement has shaped my work and has challenged me to focus on elements of the city, like patterns of wires or the spaces between buildings, rather than on static forms. In this essay I discuss how we construct a partial narrative memory of our experience as we walk or drive, which in turn enables us to navigate that route again, a process I also use when drawing. I am particularly interested in how the body is able to “read” the city by stringing together disconnected places to form a mental map and how these memories are re-embodied through the process of drawing and viewing the work.

In his essay, “On Walking” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the French historian Michel de Certeau argues for the agency and creative potential of an individual moving through the city as one that both undermines and transforms structures intended for other uses. He says, “If it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move)...then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities...he also moves them about and he invents others...thus Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane.”⁵² Walking generates endless possibilities for improvisation, as the walker chooses particular paths and reacts to the structures in the landscape. My drawings extend this improvisation from the choices

⁵¹ Dolores Hayden, “Place Memory and Urban Preservation,” *The Urban Design Reader, The Routeledge Urban Reader Series*, ed Michael Larice, Michael, and Elizabeth Macdonald (New York: Routeledge, 2007), 196.

⁵² de Certeau, 98.

I make as I walk or drive through Detroit to the decisions I make as I paint or draw in the studio.

I first read this chapter of de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* in college for a course on art theory. The chapter on walking offered an alternative route through Foucault’s world of surveillance and Benjamin’s world of reproduction. It did not offer a way to undo or counter the speed up and regimentation of modern life, but rather opened a door within those structures that initially seemed inescapable. It transformed the panopticon into a giant jungle gym.

De Certeau suggests that the idea of the city seen and organized from above by some planners and politicians misses the complexity. He says, “the ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins...they are walkers, wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’.”⁵³ In other words, the experience of the city does not often occur from the bird’s eye view at the top of a sky scraper. It is no longer watched by an eye or composed by a planner. Rather, “the networks of these moving intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments and trajectories and alterations of spaces.”⁵⁴ Each pedestrian becomes like a jazz musician, improvising off of fellow pedestrians and the structures around him or her.

For me as an artist, this view of walking through the city was particularly appealing since the issue of the spectator and the power of the gaze often set up seemingly inescapable binaries of power. De Certeau provides a theoretical tool to analyze the dynamics of power from a position within the system. This is particularly useful for artists because we simultaneously create and critique culture. We are always altering our subject matter as we speak about it so we need theoretical tools that allow us to find our bodies and voices somewhere between the traditional art-historical

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

dichotomy of viewer and viewed. De Certeau's walkers are embodied inhabitants of the city.

At the time of reading the chapter of de Certeau's book, in 2007, I was completing an undergraduate thesis in etching (fig. 30). During this time I became frustrated with my lack of position within my prints. The work I was making dealt with issues of space and identity on the border between Chinese majority and Tibetan majority counties in Yunnan Province, where I had been apprenticing with Buddhist mural painters. Even though the impetus for the work was the complexity of position, when I tried to make prints that were about my experience working in that area, I seemed removed from the equation in the actual work. Thinking about my physical location in relation to other people, gave me a different angle from which to approach my work.



30. *Building on Borders*, prints from my undergraduate thesis.

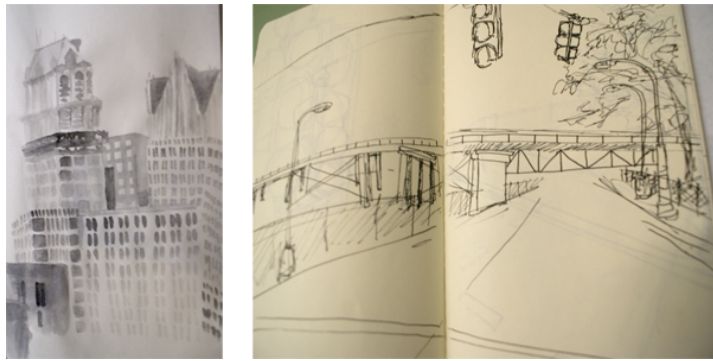
In graduate school I therefore decided to start from my own body and my immediate location and see where I wound up. Over my first year of living in Ann Arbor and the subsequent summer spent in Beijing, I decided to start walking as a basis for making work about inhabiting a particular place. I developed a system of walking that I used to gather images and generate my work.

When I walk I choose a point of departure and select a path according to where I find the densest set of visual patterns or rhythms. I walk an area repeatedly (at least four times). The distance of my walk is determined by the area that I can walk repeatedly, seeing every street within that area. Therefore the area that I walk is dependent on the density of development in the city and the nature of the streets, something termed "urban fabric." During the first walk I simply observe, looking for patterns of pedestrian movement, architecture, and my own rhythm of movement. During the second walk I document the route by taking snapshots every few feet, in order to produce a visual reference that I can check later against my remembered impressions (fig. 31). During the third walk I will stop periodically and sketch, paying attention not to outlines of forms but to patterns of movement (fig. 32).



31. Photographs taken during my trips to Detroit. The mode of the photographs has been changed to gray-scale and the white balance has been changed in Photoshop in order to highlight patterns.

By walking an area repeatedly I build up a set of images in my head. I can then mentally walk the route as I paint⁵⁵ in the studio. I occasionally check the sketches and photographs I took while walking to provide a sort of resistance to my often inaccurate memories (fig. 31, 32). These discrepancies and the challenge of re-walking a route in my head as I paint⁵⁶ make me aware of how I remember space differently as I walked and then as I try to visualize and paint⁵⁷ that experience.



32. Sketches made in Detroit

It is because of this process that I became drawn to Detroit. Walking in Ann Arbor I quickly exhausted the paths. Kevin Lynch is one of the first theorists to study the cognitive processes by which people navigate the city. He says, “the paths, the network of habitual or potential lines of movement through the urban complex, are the most potent means by which the whole can be ordered. The key lines should have some singular quality which marks them off from the surrounding channels... This leads to what might be called a visual hierarchy of the streets and ways... a sensuous singling out

⁵⁵ 画, see footnote 4.

⁵⁶ 画, see footnote 4.

⁵⁷ 画, see footnote 4.

of the key channels and their unification as continuous perceptual elements.”⁵⁸ I realized that I was interested in the process of becoming familiar with paths, but by my third year of graduate study I was so familiar with the area I walked in Ann Arbor that I no longer saw it. I was much more aware of my position and the subjectivity of my memory of a place when I was somewhere that was initially unfamiliar and had to develop a new mental map or get lost. I decided to start taking regular trips to Detroit, where the city goes on for miles and I am constantly getting lost.

Ironically, when I temporarily set aside the thorny issues of being a foreigner in Asia in order to focus on where I was at the present moment, I ended up doing work about traveling between Ann Arbor and Detroit. I found in Detroit that I had circled back to the issues of identity and displacement that so interested me in the work I did in Yunnan, but from an angle where my position in that location *and* in the process of making the work were intertwined. In the quotation at the beginning of this essay, the urban planner Dolores Hayden describes body memory as always modified by “postures of gender, race and class.”⁵⁹ The more I pay attention to my physical interaction with a space and the ways in which I remember and navigate it, the more I become aware of how the simple act of navigating a street is inflected by cultural codes.

Walking in Detroit, for example, is completely distinct from walking in New York or Hong Kong where stores and cafés overflow onto the sidewalks and there are so many pedestrians that it can be hard to find a path through the crowd of people. De Certeau’s theories about walking take on a different set of associations and meanings when read in light of Detroit instead of New York, the subject of his essay. In Detroit, thinking about walking is measured against the car—either by people in vehicles looking at the long Detroit blocks and deciding that they can’t walk

⁵⁸ Lynch, 96.

⁵⁹ Dolores Hayden, “Place Memory and Urban Preservation,” *The Urban Design Reader, The Routledge Urban Reader Series*, ed Michael Larice, Michael, and Elizabeth Macdonald (New York: Routledge, 2007), 196.

easily or as the many inhabitants of Detroit who don't own a car find their daily activities continually hampered by the structure of the city. If you want to shop at a supermarket you have to own a car to get there; if you don't own a car and have to walk, your only choice is a convenience store. For many in Detroit it is difficult or impossible to get basic things like fresh fruits and vegetables, which is one of the things urban gardens are trying to counteract. Public transportation is hardly an option since the buses are sporadic and the people mover is confined to a three mile loop in the heart of downtown, an area that can be easily walked anyway. The "Motor City" represents in many ways the end of cities designed for the pedestrian—the injustice of it is that more than a fifth of the inhabitants can't afford a car.⁶⁰ The pedestrian on a Detroit road is like Chaplin on the escalator in *Modern Times*, intentionally "misusing" something designed to move people quickly from point A to B in order to create alternate possibilities and social interactions. However, like walking the wrong way up an escalator, it is potentially hazardous and frustrating—especially if you have no other choice.

As the auto industry moves from Detroit it leaves old structures in its wake: the Ford plant, warehouses, schools, neighborhoods divided by race and class and passed over by the highway system for the suburbs. The holes in the fabric of Detroit seem an opportunity, a place of possibility and yet trap the inhabitants in a world where there is nowhere to go. The creative possibilities of walking, and by extension inhabiting an urban environment exist in constant tension with the anxiety of getting lost, a sense of urgency to get somewhere and to make ends meet. De Certeau describes this combination of potential and anxiety in the context of walking. He says, "to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of the proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking place ... there is

⁶⁰ Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2007, 68.

only a pullulation of passer-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretenses of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places."⁶¹ Walking generates possibility and potential for creativity and yet it also inherently unstable. In a crowded city full of pedestrians this instability creates energy, generates commerce, and a safety in numbers and life. According to Jane Jacobs it is the accumulated sum of many public encounters that creates a vital city where "casual public contact" generates "a web of public respect and trust" that "cannot be institutionalized."⁶² In a city where pedestrians are few and walking is difficult, as in Detroit, the sense of instability often overshadows creative potential.

The anxiety of getting lost, the frustration of not being able to get anywhere in a timely way on foot, and the sense of being nearly alone on the street magnifies other anxieties about race and class and feeds into the impulse to create what Jacobs calls "turf."⁶³ She describes how "the middle- and upper- income housing occupying many areas of the city, many former blocks, with their own grounds and their own streets to serve these 'islands within the city.'"⁶⁴ Her argument is that "turf" is an attempt to compensate for the sense of safety that would normally be provided by a vibrant sidewalk life with many pedestrians. However, she points out that the more fences you build, the more you wall yourself off from your neighbors. The less you go out onto the street to interact with those neighbors, the fewer people feel safe walking on the street and the more fences you need to build to maintain an illusion of safety. Fear of other people is magnified by fences while it is greatly diminished by continual contact with strangers on the street. The examples Jane Jacobs gives of "turf" are in New York and

⁶¹ de Certeau, 103

⁶² Jacobs, 73.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁶⁴ James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 272.

L.A., and yet this process applies equally to present day Detroit where there are few pedestrians, many fences and a media that reinforces the notion that it is not safe to walk.

I realized that I was much more aware of my location and motion in relation to both the landscape and the few other pedestrians because I was frustrated by this cycle but also caught within it. It began with the desire to walk and the sense of isolation both while in the car and while walking on the street. When I walked I was highly aware of my position, both in terms of the physical exertion it took to get from one destination to another across the long blocks often in a cold rain or snow. I was constantly uneasy about the lack of pedestrians on the street and the huge gaps between buildings, many of them uninhabited. I was aware of my desire to get out of the weather and into a faster mode of transportation. I also noticed I was the only white person on the street and in many neighborhoods the only woman not with a group of friends. I knew I stuck out and worried what the few other people walking down the street might think of me, if I was intruding or if they thought I was crazy because I was wandering around with no clear destination. When I stood in a doorway and sketched I generated a fair amount of friendly amusement. I don't mind people thinking I'm crazy if I make them smile in the process- this seemed like the best way of doing my work, but unfortunately it was winter time and I could only draw for a few minutes before my hands got too cold to hold the pencil or paints (fig. 32).

In the car, on the other hand I constantly saw places where I wanted to get out and walk, but often there was absolutely no one around. I also often saw or remembered a place where I wanted to walk but then couldn't find it again. At the same time I became much more attuned to how fast the landscape of Detroit changed from one street to the next or even within a single block. This was not something I could get a sense of when I walked.

I used the conflicting desires to see more of the city in the car or to walk short distances and experience it more directly to shape the subject matter of my work. *Suspension*, for example, tries to capture the sensation of glancing out the window of a car and

seeing an empty lot pass by, but not being able to slow down enough to understand the context of the landscape (fig. 1 and 34). The empty lots are open places that could be changed and yet they are seen so fleetingly out of the window that it is as if they were not really there. Because of the movement of the car they are unanchored from any concrete sense of land. They seem suspended, unreachable, like a cloud floating in the sky. In *Suspension* I paint a lot with a cloudlike form and place it in the middle of the paper (fig. 1 and 34). It is intentionally unfinished because the details of those lots are never quite seen or accessible.

Paused shows a similar dissociation between parked cars in the foreground and the faint group of buildings in the background (fig. 6 and 33). The cars and buildings are divided from each other by a band running horizontally across the middle of the paper.



33. *Paused*, detail

The drawing is based on the view of buildings across a sunken highway from the Eastern Market parking lot. Even though a pedestrian bridge joins the two sides, there is always a sense that the two places could not be physically bridged—I have a sense of not being able to get there from here, coupled with a desire and curiosity to do just that.

I am interested in the moments when I become aware of the infrastructure of the city—the roads, bridges, sunken highways, guardrails and fences—and the ways in which the inaccessibility of places draws my attention to them. This process of looking as I move through the city is mirrored in the process of visualizing routes that I take when I am in the studio. There is always a discrepancy between the paths I imagine taking, through the empty lot or over the divided highway, and my actual ability to do so in real life. The repeated visualization of these paths and the drawing of them becomes like the desire lines, paths worn across open stretches of grass where people veer of the sidewalk and take a shortcut. However, they are not traced onto the actual landscape, but are like the path I used to trace with my finger on a reproduction of a hand scroll. Just as I can wander through mountains and clouds I have never seen, my drawings allow me to linger on the moment between lot and cloud, and its ambiguities of space. If I stopped the car and walked over to the empty lot I would experience it as a defined place with grass and the smell of dirt and maybe some construction debris. It would no longer have the same sense of intangibility as it did when I only saw it passing through my peripheral vision as I drove quickly by. There is no way to stop and look at the lot without losing the motion that made it interesting in the first place. But in the drawing, the lot is suspended forever in a state somewhere between the solidity of the ground and the transience of a cloud (fig. 34).



34. *Suspension*, detail

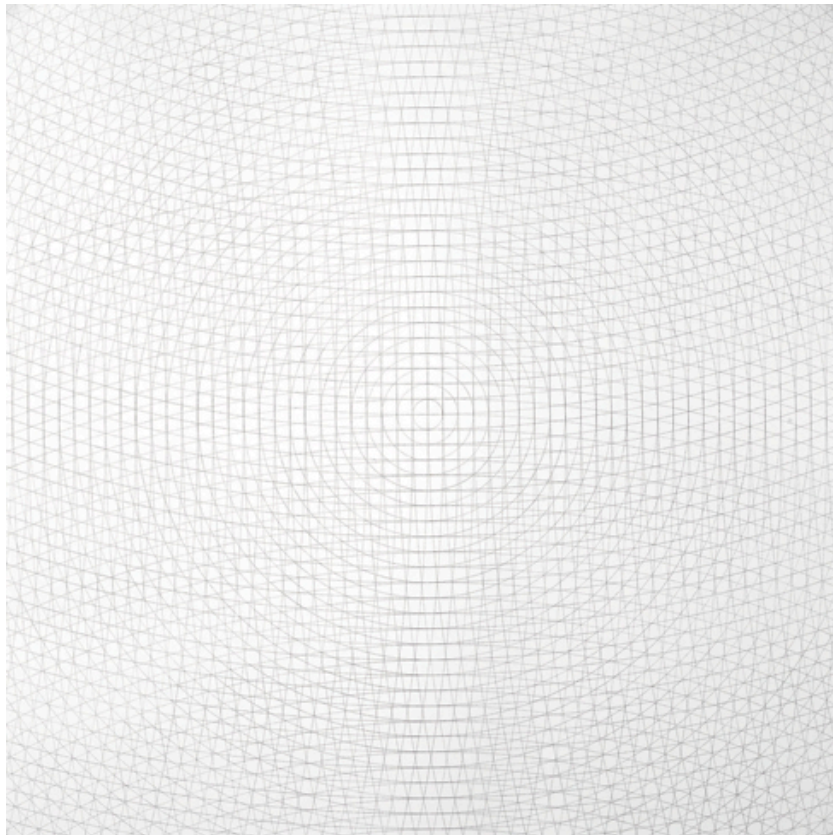


35. Reflection I

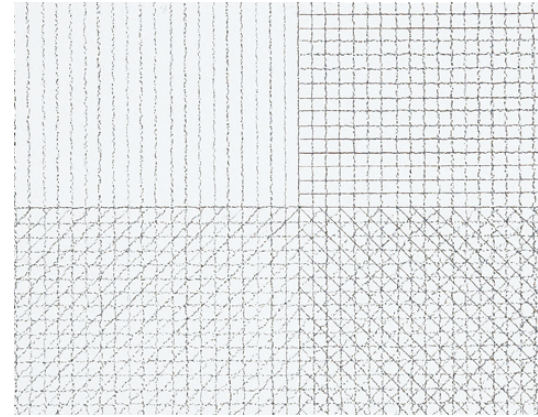
*V.
Somehow the skyscrapers spin themselves out into broken factories.
Roads fill with rubble.
slowly erased, people erased.*

4. Scaffolding

Sol LeWitt's wall drawings are based on a set of instructions intended for other people to carry out. "Circles and arcs from the midpoints of four sides" results in Wall Drawing 138 (fig. 36) and "a square is divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with lines in four directions superimposed progressively" results in Wall Drawing 56 (fig 37). I also have a set of procedures for my work.



36. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing 138*: circles and arcs from the midpoints of four sides



37. Sol Le Witt, *Wall Drawing 56*: a square is divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with lines in four directions superimposed progressively

My drawing instructions to myself are as follows:

1. Walk or drive starting from a familiar point. Turn on an interesting street until you are entirely unfamiliar with the area. Try to eventually find a way back to a main road or landmark that you are familiar with. Repeat the route throughout the year, continuing to get yourself "lost" but always coming back to a familiar spot at least every other week.
2. For half of the walks/drives you should just be present. Be as aware as possible of your location in space, your decision making process for where you walk or drive, the ways in which you do or don't interact with other people, if you might alter others' experiences of the landscape through your presence. For the other half of the walks/drives you should continue to pay attention to your surroundings but document the route by making quick sketches or taking snapshots. When sketching or taking photographs look for patterns in the landscape made visible by movement. Photographs are better if taken without even looking

through the lens, providing a second “set of eyes” which may confirm or undermine what you remember.

3. In the studio cut paper to a standard vertical size with a width that is about the same as the reach of your arms. The choice of paper that is comfortable in proportion to your body is analogous to the space you take up while walking.
4. Walk in circles in the studio while thinking about the previous walks/drives until you find a space you can remember clearly enough to visualize. Mentally walk that route until you find yourself noticing some predominant feature (eg. movement of wind, a pattern of telephone poles, a sense of crowding).
5. Begin to make marks with ink on the paper (fig. 38). The first set of marks should establish the overall atmosphere and some areas of light and dark in the drawing. Subsequent marks should describe variation and pattern. Use only compound marks: marks that rely on both the initial brushstroke made by the artist and the properties of the ink and paper to make a complete mark. For example, you might paint an area with dark ink and then remove areas of ink with a wet brush. As the lighter areas dry into the darker ink they spread outwards. There is always a conversation between the action of the artist and the action of the ink as it dries on the paper. Use different strengths of black ink (grey scale) so that the final product is low contrast. When any further mark blends into the other ink and becomes muddy (usually when the paper is completely wet) stop and let it dry until it is no longer cool to the touch. During this time do not look at the drawing.
6. Come back to the paper and look at it. Now imagine walking around in the inked space. Try to do this at the same time as imagining walking around in the physical space that was the original subject of the drawing. If you feel that the marks are becoming too generic, refer to photographs or return to the same or similar place as reference, but do not directly draw from the photographs or

sketches. Repeat steps of visualization, mark making, and drying.

7. Each time you paint⁶⁵ ask a question specific to the physical or painted⁶⁶ space. Was I comfortable or uncomfortable moving through that location? Why? How did I physically interact with that space? How does that sense of interaction change as I paint?⁶⁷ What are the visual paths through the drawing and do they reflect the sense of access to the place I was traveling or lack there of? Where is my body positioned and how am I relating to people around me or aware of an area that is abandoned? When you begin to feel that the drawing and the memory are drifting apart and that it is harder to make sense of either the memory of the place or the spatial organization of the drawing repeat the process at least two more times. Examine the discrepancies between the original experience and the image, but don't correct them.
8. Stretch the paper by wetting it completely and then stapling it tight over a wooden canvas stretcher. Allow it to dry flat to prevent warping and wrinkling.
9. Paint a stencil onto a silk screen based on a predominant feature or pattern in the image, using photographs or sketches directly for reference (fig. 39).⁶⁸ Print the screen stencil on top of the ink drawing. Repeat if necessary. Use

⁶⁵ 画, see footnote 4.

⁶⁶ 画, see footnote 4.

⁶⁷ 画, see footnote 4.

⁶⁸ Here I am painting the stencil using the red speedball stencil fluid. The stencil stops out the negative areas of the image by preventing ink from passing through the screen wherever the stencil fluid is applied. Stencils can also be made using drawing fluid, which allows the artist to paint the positive instead of the negative areas, and emulsion, which allows the artist to burn a photographic image into the screen. In this series of drawings I am only using the stencil fluid because the process requires me to think about the negative areas in the picture rather than the forms and therefore helps me be freer with my use of the image than if I were painting the positive form or using photographic material as the stencil.

water and a stiff bristle brush to erase out and incorporate the screen print into the ink drawing, adding ink details if needed.

10. Resolve the image. Add powdered graphite selectively to bring up the contrast of certain areas, reinforce the composition or add areas of fine detail by erasing out of an area of tone (fig. 39). Add and erase graphite until the space in the drawing can be reentered, so that you can visualize walking inside the graphite and ink drawing, and so that the drawing has a presence as an object/ tactile surface. The space should be resonant enough of the original space to evoke memory but have enough presence as an object and as a flat surface that even that memory takes on the aspects of the media.



38. Detail from *Tunnel Series: Underpass*. Example of ink on paper (the first media applied in the mixed-media drawings)



39. Detail from *Reflection II* (left) and *Drift* (right). Screen print defines the tire on the left while graphite defines the car on the right.

The complex steps involved in my drawing process do not look much like LeWitt's few lines of text. I discuss Sol LeWitt in contrast to my work rather than as a direct influence. His wall drawings provide me with an example of an alternate way to think about structure. We both set up a structured set of procedures to create a work of art and we are both interested in the deviation between the different states of this process. However, Sol LeWitt's steps spell out the artist's actions as strictly as Ford specified the motions of his workers on the assembly line. Like Ford's instructions, these instructions are meant to be carried out by another person. Each of his directions dictates a simple and reproducible action such as "draw a line," yet instead of gaining efficiency, LeWitt's instructions highlight the slight deviations in

the artist's hand and variations of interpreting those instructions. April Gallant, the curator of prints, drawings and photographs at the Smith College Museum of Art, says LeWitt's "simple systems create interesting anomalies as their instructions are interpreted by the people who follow them. These intersections between the rational and spontaneous are an essential component of the work."⁶⁹ It is the simplicity of LeWitt's instructions that simultaneously seem absolutely mathematical and yet often highlight the slight human error of the person who is carrying them out.

My work uses low contrast to highlight variation between brushstrokes, but the unpredictability of the hand and of the ink itself does not foreground error. Rather it intentionally uses the inexactness to produce variation that in turn produces a creative tension between the represented and the representation. Sol LeWitt's instructions for the drawer are written with a precision intended to eliminate error. My procedures set up a structure for myself that is intended to generate chance and variation. My process is designed to create inefficiency in the intentional use of "getting lost" as I drive through Detroit, in the unpredictability of drying ink during the drawing process, and in failures of memory to reproduce the experience of driving through Detroit as I work in the studio.

Sol LeWitt's instructions can be visualized in terms of the way architects design structures. LeWitt draws a blueprint of a house with his list of instructions and is interested in the discrepancy between the blueprint and the house that gets built. He also described these drawings as "musical scores" that another artist would then perform.⁷⁰ The metaphor of music and structure is

⁶⁹ April Gallant, "Sol LeWitt: Wall Drawing #139 (grid and arcs from midpoints on four sides)," Smith College Museum of Art, <http://www.smith.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/LeWitt/>, (accessed April 10th, 2010).

⁷⁰ Roberta Smith, "Parting Thoughts for a Master of the Ephemeral," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/21/arts/design/21lew.html>, (accessed April 10th, 2010).

actually quite specific. In his earlier work like *Series 1-2-3* "permutational sequences grew in part out of his deep interest in music—Bach's Goldberg Variations were a favorite—in which groups of notes were combined, inverted, and recombined."⁷¹

It was listening to and practicing the Goldberg Variations, along with working on a sound piece about structure and transformation in Baroque keyboard music, I began to think about structure in a slightly different way. The first and last of the Goldberg Variations is the exact same aria and yet through the process of listening to all 36 variations, the experience of hearing the final aria is entirely different from hearing the first. What fascinated me was not the progression of intervals as much as how the accumulated experience of those intervals across the set of variations transformed the way I heard the same set of notes played with the same inflection. I have built into the process of walking, visualizing and drawing multiple points at which I return to the same place and travel the same route so that I become more aware of how my visual memory, just as my auditory memory is dependent on context. I think relationally. The process of my drawings is driven by an interest in all the spaces between the structures rather than the structures themselves.

If LeWitt is interested in the shift between the blueprint and the built structure, I am interested in all of the activity in and around that structure and the memories of a time when there was no structure there. When I look at scaffolding going up, my mind begins to wander away from the purpose at hand. I am not interested in how reproducible the house is from the instructions on the blueprint. Instead I am interested in how the people building the house interact with the scaffolding and then how the inhabitants live and move through the space of the house. From the scaffolds being erected, I am interested in the contradiction between the ghost of the building which allows workers to scale a yet un-built structure and the weight of the poured concrete or brick or packed

⁷¹ The National Gallery of Art, "Sol LeWitt", Exhibitions of the National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/LeWitt.shtm>, (accessed April 10th, 2010).

earth which gradually fills it, becoming the floors and walls. I think of how the new rebar skeleton will eventually form a foothold for trees to take root like they do in abandoned parking decks in Detroit. And I wonder what it feels like to climb up those poles and feel the different surfaces of metal or wood as you work on building the structure, and how they give differently beneath your feet/ have different spring depending on what the scaffold is made out of if I were to climb them.

Both our structures for working can be seen as critiques of modern notions of “progress” and efficiency. LeWitt takes the idea of reproducibility and the economy of motion developed on Ford’s assembly line and reduces his instructions to such an extreme (a few written lines directing another person to draw a few geometric forms in a certain configuration), that “their execution is often irrational, so that any beauty or aesthetic value that comes out of it is incidental.”⁷² My work does the converse, creating a complex and specific set of instructions that rely on error and inefficiency to engage in dialectic between my experience of the city and the process of drawing.

⁷² April Gallant, “Sol LeWitt: Wall Drawing #139 (grid and arcs from midpoints on four sides),” Smith College Museum of Art, <http://www.smith.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/LeWitt/>, (accessed April 10th, 2010).



40. Reflection II

VI.

*There are stories somewhere out here,
of unions, of retirement checks that arrive at someone's door
from a long gone company. Of hope for their children,
nieces, grand nephews...*

*Maybe where the road swings out by the river,
past barbed wire, brown fields...
People fish sometimes down there. Weeds grow.
Clean now but for the smell of water and grass and once in a while
of ash
from another house gone.
There are even a few gardens,
and the monks at the soup kitchen keep bees.*

5. Marks on the Surface

“Whistler insisted that the subject ‘should really, and in truth absolutely does, stand within the frame— and at a depth behind it equal to the distance at which the painter sees his model’ ...the viewer must step forward— into the picture if you will— and immerse himself in its atmosphere.”—Holden⁷³

“Smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces and sonorous and tactile qualities...the sea is a smooth space par excellence, and yet we the first to encounter the demands of increasingly strict striation...the striation of the sea was a result of navigation on the open water.”—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari⁷⁴

In the previous essay, *Scaffolding*, I described the involved process I go through to make the drawings in terms of ideas of structure and how it relates to movements of modernism and industrial processes. In this essay I will focus on the structure of the drawings themselves, the type of marks made, the artists who have influenced me, and the choices of medium and technique. How do I conceive of the relation between surface and depth in my drawings and how does the choice of mark making support a particular reading of the surface?

Whistler’s notion that the depth within the painting and the distance the viewer or painter stands from the canvas are in fact equal call to mind simpler metaphors of the canvas as a window, a surface that is seen through and contains depth. Yet it also goes beyond this metaphor by collapsing the distinctions between painter and viewer and the viewer and the subject. This is particularly true of his nocturnes and late seascapes where the subject is “the great, haunting spaces” not “the blurred ships or the faint shoreline” which were “merely the artists means of organizing space”⁷⁵.

⁷³ Donald Holden, *Whistler Landscapes and Seascapes*. (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1969), 16.

⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 1987) 479.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, plate 7.

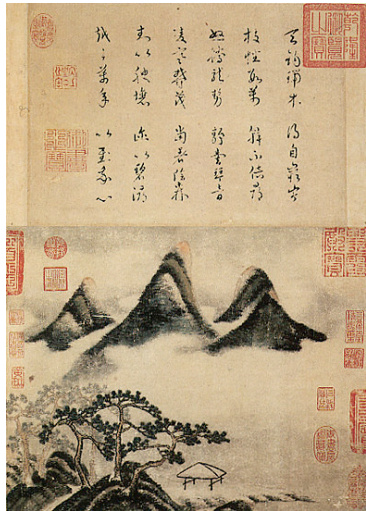


41. James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne*



42. James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Palaces*

If the subject is not a person but rather space, and the distance the viewer stands from the canvas is equal to the distance painted by the artist within the canvas, then the viewer in a sense “walks” that distance as they move towards the canvas. The tropes of Chinese painting take this metaphor a step further, saying that the “reader” of the painting ought to imagine him or herself as walking along the winding mountain paths and over bridges depicted in the painting (fig. 42 and 43).⁷⁶



43. Mi Fei (1051-1107), *Mountains and Pines in Spring*. I grew up looking at the reproduction of this painting that hangs in our hall at home. I was fascinated by the way the mountains, clouds and land all defined each other through the choice of composition.

⁷⁶ The composition of Northern Sung painting such as those by Fan K’uan (fig. 44) is described as consisting of “‘high distance’, ‘deep distance’, and ‘level distance’ to construct a full-scene ‘true landscape’. Appearing in the painting are mountains and streams, woods, and buildings that appear to be of solid substance as well as elements of less concrete forms, such as clouds and mists, haze, and atmosphere.” The National Palace Museum, “Grand View: Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung,” http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh95/grandview/painting/account_1_en.html.



44. Fan K’uan, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*.

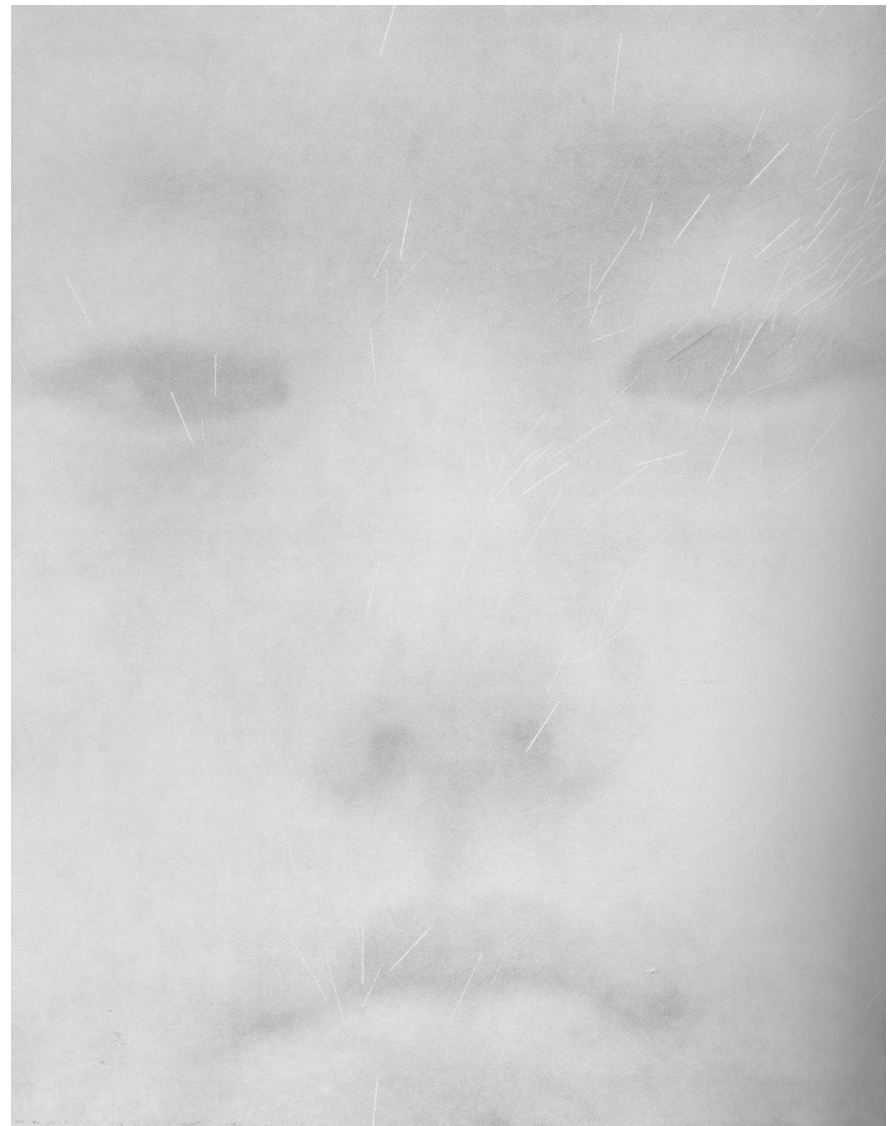
The experience of following these paths is much more active than looking at a canvas as if it is a window onto a still scene, a surface we cannot break through. In modern art, the surface itself is sometimes the subject, and the depth is that only of the literal paint.

Thinking about surface was the starting point for my thesis. My current method of drawing began when I walked into Long March Space and saw Lin Tianmiao's two series of low contrast monochromatic prints that use a combination of lithography, screen print, embossing and sewing on handmade paper.⁷⁷ The two bodies of work, entitled *Focus* and *Seeing Shadows*, both play with the relation between surface and depth in the prints (fig. 45 and 47). The lithographs of blurred faces or dilapidated houses only come into focus at a distance while the embossing and inclusions in the paper can only be seen when the viewer stands an inch or two away from the paper (fig. 46).⁷⁸ The low contrast monochromatic palette, combined with the haziness and scale of the prints puts the images just on the edge of visibility.⁷⁹ I found myself repeatedly backing away from the prints and then walking up close to them again. The low contrast invited me to notice much smaller variations in tonality and further highlighted the details of the paper itself, which had needle shaped forms, threads and spheres embedded in the paper. The lack of contrast, coupled with the diffused nature of the image and the need to see the detail up close meant that there was no position in the room at which the entire drawing clicked into focus.

⁷⁷ Long March Space is a gallery in the 798 Art District in Beijing, China.

⁷⁸ Singapore Tyler Print Institute, "Introduction," *Lin Tianmiao: Focus on Paper* (Singapore: Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2007). "collaboration between Lin Tianmiao and the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STP) from her four week residency as a Visiting Artist, which culminated in the *Focus* and *Seeing Shadows* series."

⁷⁹ Victoria Lu, "Reflection of a Goddess: Looking at Lin Tianmiao's Print Series," *Lin Tianmiao: Focus on Paper* (Singapore: Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2007).



45. Lin Tianmiao, *Focus*, Lithograph on handmade paper with flocking, 2007.

The only way to experience the drawing was by moving in front of it, by walking a distance on the floor in a way that resulted in the visual reading of the image fluctuating between atmospheric depth and surface detail.



46. Lin Tianmiao, *Focus*, detail

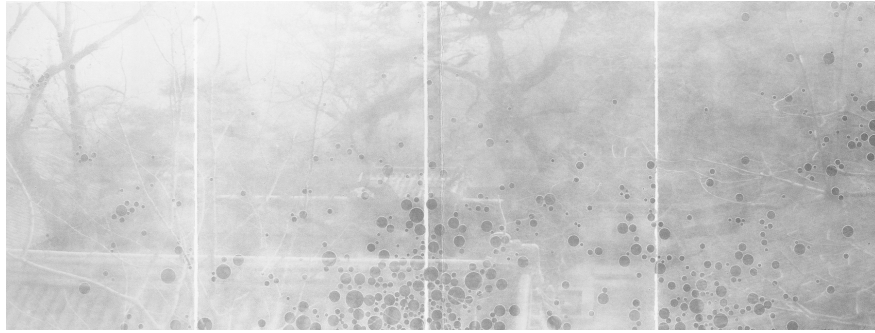
For me this was a pivotal moment in the development of my work. I had been asking myself where am I and where is the body in the work I am producing. Outside the studio I was fascinated by groups of people moving and by the ways people inhabited urban spaces. I was searching for a way to make two-dimensional images that were at once aware of the depth of the subject (crowds, bicycles, roads) and the physical experience of the artist and then the viewer. During my first year of graduate school I felt pressure to use video or installation to create an interactive experience for my viewer. Much of this stemmed from an institutional categorization of video art and installation as contemporary and conceptual and two-dimensional work as traditional and by extension unable to

engage the viewer in active ways. Working in the Chinese contemporary art scene for a summer, where most work is two dimensional, I realized how erroneous this categorization was. However, it was not until I saw Tianmiao's prints that I realized that her prints were not only equally capable of being contemporary but could actively engage with the viewers in ways that were distinct from but no less important than those used by time based media. Lin Tianmiao's prints could not be taken in from a single vantage point. To appreciate the fine detail on the surface of the paper and also see the large blurred image printed on the paper the viewer had to walk up close to the painting and back away from it. For the viewer to have this experience the work had to be two dimensional and static. It was the stillness of the image that allowed this fluctuation between surface and depth to occur and demanded a certain level of contemplation and engagement from the viewer.

The difference between Lin Tianmiao's two series, *Focus* and *Seeing Shadows* pointed me towards subjects I could develop in my own way. In *Focus*, Tianmiao blurs the faces of her friends and enlarges them to the size of the paper (fig. 45 and 46). The paper and its textures, inclusions and holes also can be read as the skin of the person in the print. The paper and the blurred faces work together to speak about the body and identity.

Seeing Shadows depicts a series of interiors and courtyards of run down old houses in Beijing (fig. 47).⁸⁰ For me, however, the inclusions and threads lose some of the resonance they had when they were the surface that the faces were printed on. However, *Seeing Shadows* was surprisingly similar to the work I had been doing with interiors, doorways and other urban environments. Although the subject matter didn't seem as integrated with the material, I could see how my work on urban spaces related to this series. I wondered if I could find a way to describe the urban spaces in a way that was as somatic as the faces in Tianmiao's *Focus*.

⁸⁰ Singapore Tyler Print Institute, "Introduction," *Lin Tianmiao: Focus on Paper* (Singapore: Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2007).

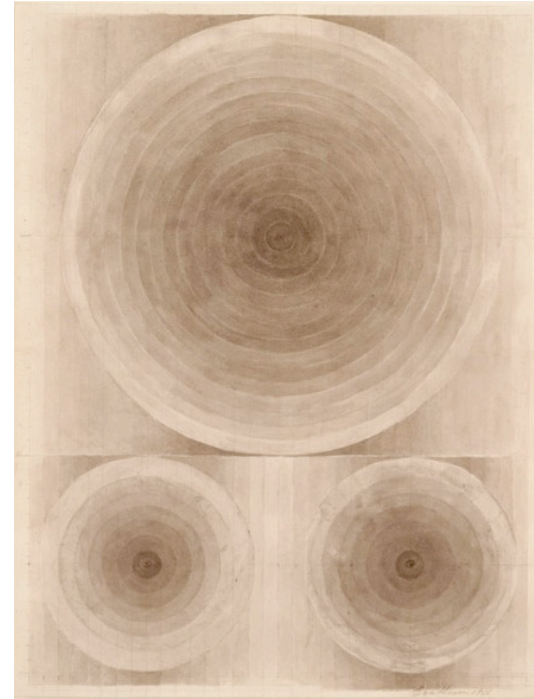


47. Lin Tianmiao, *Seeing Shadows*, lithograph on hand made paper, 2007

To better understand what I found in Tianmiao's work that made it so effective, I looked at a range of work by contemporary and historical artists. I was particularly drawn to Eva Hesse's ink and graphite drawings of concentric circles (fig. 48) which "adopt some of the forms of Minimalism, such as series of circles or grid patterns, but then subvert them with accidental marks and idiosyncrasies. As a result, the precision of Minimalist geometry takes on a hand-made, personal quality, the antithesis of the movement's style."⁸¹ Like Tianmiao's handmade paper, the surface of Hesse's drawings read as if it were the surface of the body. The material itself was a portrait. Hesse's drawings also do something different from Tianmiao's prints. Tianmiao's prints show a record of labor and process in the carefully sewn threads and embossed needles in the hand made paper (fig. 46).

Hesse's drawings seem even more directly about the time of drawing, with each circle being made up of an accumulation of marks, an index of her hand moving over and over again (fig. 48). The accumulation of mark making that builds up until it becomes a blur or a markless atmosphere is an important element in my work, from the accumulation drawings in the *Birds/Bikes* series (fig. 13 and 14) to the build up of tiles in *Pale Tunnel* (fig. 16).

⁸¹ The Tate, "Eva Hesse," The Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/hesse/room7.htm>, 2002, (Accessed February 24th, 2010).



48. Eva Hesse, *no title*, 1966

I have come up with a number of ways of thinking about the surface of my drawings and the sorts of marks I make on that surface. What I found most striking about Tianmiao's prints was the fluctuation between surface and depth. Like Tianmiao and Whistler's atmospheres, I wanted viewers to be able to wander around inside the drawing.⁸² At the same time I wanted viewers to

⁸² The concept of the viewer "wandering through" a two dimensional representation of a landscape has its conceptual roots in the tradition of Chinese landscape painting where the viewer was said to imagine him or herself following in the footsteps of the tiny sketches of travelers in the paintings. The viewer "journeys" along the paths, crosses streams and climbs mountains depicted in the painting. I have much more modest expectations of my viewers, in that I merely try to create an open landscape that invites the viewer to wander about rather than to follow a complex path or to envision shrinking to the size of the ant-like figures of Chinese landscape painting.

be aware of their own position and the materiality of the surface they were looking at. As I make my work I think of the three spaces of a drawing, not one or two. There is the interior of the drawing, the exterior (the room), and the surface of the drawing. This dual interior/ exterior of the drawings creates a tension that is located within the materiality of the ink and paper. In this way surface is the point of fluctuation. A material “gap” or hyphen between the reading of the drawing as depth and the reading of the drawing as an object that affects the room (fig. 49).



49. Installation view of *Dwelling is Going*

All of the drawings in the *Dwelling is Going* series are fairly large (39”x50”) and in a vertical format. The drawings are not only about stepping inside, but also about their presence in the room and in relation to people walking through the gallery (fig. 49). I wanted the surface to roughly correlate with both my own body and that of

the viewer’s. It had the added benefit of working against the traditional horizontal composition of western landscapes and cityscapes, which prevented me from defaulting back on perspectival habits learned in drawing classes.⁸³ Because I could not default on the wide horizon line as a way to describe expansive space I became more aware of my compositional choices and the process that had to occur in order to translate my experiences of that landscape onto a vertical surface of the paper.

After a number of attempts to flatten the paper by pinning it to the wall or floating it on a backing I decided to stretch the paper (fig. 50).



50. *Tunnels: Chicago L* (left) is an example of an unstretched ink painting. *Dwelling is Going: Transit* (right) is an example of a stretched ink painting.

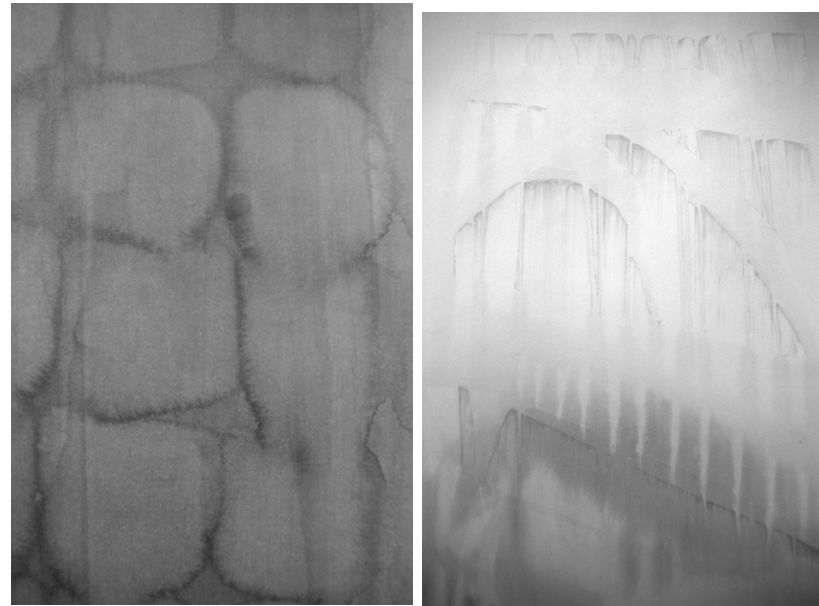
⁸³ James Elkins says that, “In twentieth-century post cubist art, perspective is a simple matter. One signifies ‘perspective space’ with a square, and lines radiating from its corners, or else with a sunburst of orthogonals... No further conventions, rules or details are expected.” The use of perspective as a default as opposed to a tool has been ingrained in me through my high school art classes. It was only when I took a course on figure and perspective at Hampshire college that I realized it was something that could be played with. Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 256.

This created a smooth working surface that was taut, like the head of a drum, which was particularly helpful where I used screen print and needed the paper to be utterly flat to get a clean print. The choice of stretching paper was not just a technical consideration but also an aesthetic and conceptual one. I wanted a format for my drawings that helped the drawing be viewed as fluctuating between surface and depth. The unstretched paper undermined a reading of illusionistic depth because when it curled and buckled it cast shadows that were darker than the ink on the paper, making the low contrast areas difficult to see. This interaction of the ink and shadows always brought attention back to the physical form of the paper. While I love the natural bend and curl of paper, and find that it can be effective when the paper itself becomes a medium as in Tianmiao's use of handmade paper. However, it becomes distracting if there are no other reasons to draw attention to curling edges except an accident of presentation.

The physicality of the paper was important to me, especially in its reaction with the ink. I wanted it to seem touchable or intriguing, but not to the extent that viewers first impulse on seeing the piece was to pull back the curling edge to look behind the paper, as I saw people do with a previous set of work. I wanted them to look at the place where I had invested the most work, the surface itself. By stretching the paper I eliminated the shadows that were obscuring the drawing and used a format that was familiar enough to audiences that they were not initially distracted by the shape or presentation of the paper. The interaction between the material and the viewer was still important. Many people assumed that I was using a traditional medium (ink on canvas or oil on canvas) at first glance, but when they walked up to the drawing they realized that it was paper with mixed media. I hoped to invite viewers to pay this sort of attention to the media, where the media does not obstruct the viewer from looking at the piece more carefully but rather invites in depth viewing.

Just as the format of the drawings is essential to the overall reading of the drawings so is the choice of marks. Drawing

attention to the surface means drawing attention to the ways in which the ink pools on the paper, disperses, runs off and is absorbed. Normally the brushstroke is a clear index of the action; it points to the movement of the artist's hand. Many of the marks I make, however, are made through a compound process. For example, I make a lattice-like grid by first washing the paper with dark ink and then removing patches of it, creating holes (fig. 51). The surface therefore does not point to the artist's hand, to a single expressive motion. It points to an action, but the action that it points to is obscured by other actions. The act of drawing is always altered by the changes of the medium itself as it dries. I look at the drawings that result from this process as a conversation with the materials, just as my process of walking or driving is an interaction between the built environment and my body.



51. Two examples of compound marks using sumi ink.

I look at a number of artists whose work balances on the edge between delineation and imagination and between the process of drawing and the memory of the thing being painted. Zhou Jirong is one such artist. He “is clearly not offering realistic depictions of urban forms shrouded in darkness or bathed in fog. Rather, they hint at those beautiful forms in which truth and fiction become difficult to distinguish.”⁸⁴ The abraded surfaces of the drawings and the crumbling industrial structures in them are at once tactile and elude grasp (fig. 52 and 53).



52. Zhou Jirong, *Quodis Arcana of the Dong Jing Region No. 1*, screen print, 2008



53. Zhou Jirong, *Landscape No. 2*, mixed media on canvas, 2005

⁸⁴ Zou Yuejin, “The Illusory Nature of Existence: On the Meaning of Zhou Jirong’s Fantastic City Series,” Red Gate Gallery, <http://www.redgategallery.com/artists/zhou-jirong-gallery/zhou-jirong-essay>, (accessed December 10th, 2009.)

The marks I use are not only an index of process but create a viewing experience that relates to specific readings of depth within the drawings. By using compound marks rather than a single brush stroke I depart from the preoccupation with outlines so common in depictions of urban landscapes. The static architectural line drawings set in perspectival space lock the viewer and the painter into a single position in front of the image. Converging perspectival lines map the place the viewer stands to look at the drawing onto the position that the painter stood to look at the landscape, always with the imaginary window between the painter/viewer and the scene depicted. In *Figure and Perspective*, Elkins says, “perspective freezes and excludes the viewer, and it breathes a ‘strange’ and ‘absent’ atmosphere. It is difficult to think about; most any subject can be, but perspective is also difficult to think through or around: that is, it is not easy to begin to move in ways that perspective does not prescribe...this confinement is the real interest of the subject.”⁸⁵ The painter/viewer can never step up to, much less through that imaginary glass or shift from side to side or look around corners. Artists like Whistler (fig. 41 and 42) and Turner (fig. 54) escaped this problem by using atmosphere rather than architecture as the predominant feature in the painting.



54. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Ehrenbreitstein 1841*, Watercolor and pen on paper

⁸⁵ Elkins, 271.

Giacometti, in his drawings, documented the shifts of his subject's position as he moved his eyes (fig. 17). Even locking in the viewer/painter's position at certain points can be effective when used selectively. In his conclusion to *Figure and Perspective* Elkins says, "the best way to end may be to acknowledge the persistent pull of perspective. Perspective directs our eyes and orders our thoughts: when I stare at the strange scene of Schwabian churches and 'broken buildings' I can feel myself being pulled into its illogical vistas, trapped in the comparison of its hallucinatory churches and uneasily floating pillars and stacked horizons... Perspective seems to control not only what I see—it sets the conditions of visibility—but how I see and how I describe the way I see."⁸⁶ The perspective Elkins is referring to here is much more inventive and even disquieting than the simple one point perspective students are first taught to use. Many of these drawings and paintings that Elkins mentions "play with the fabric of perspective itself, rather than to crowd the pictures with demonstrations of technical prowess."⁸⁷ It is the playfulness of space that engage artists and viewers that I admire in both the multiple receding buildings of early perspective drawings and in the swirling atmospheres of Turner and Whistler.

As I freed myself from depicting Detroit through the lines and edges of buildings, I was able to ask different questions about the landscape I was traveling through. Depicting Detroit through any single vantage point is highly problematic. The city is too spread out and has too much variation to capture from a single position. The book, *Detroit, Then and Now* for example, shows images of the buildings that occupied certain lots at the turn of the last century and compares them with what is there now.⁸⁸ This view entirely misses the greatest changes to Detroit, which are not the presence or absence of certain old buildings but rather changes in

the relation between buildings, roads and an increasing number of empty lots. When I shift my drawing from single point perspective to multiple and atmospheric perspective I start to see what is out of sight in the book (fig. 55).

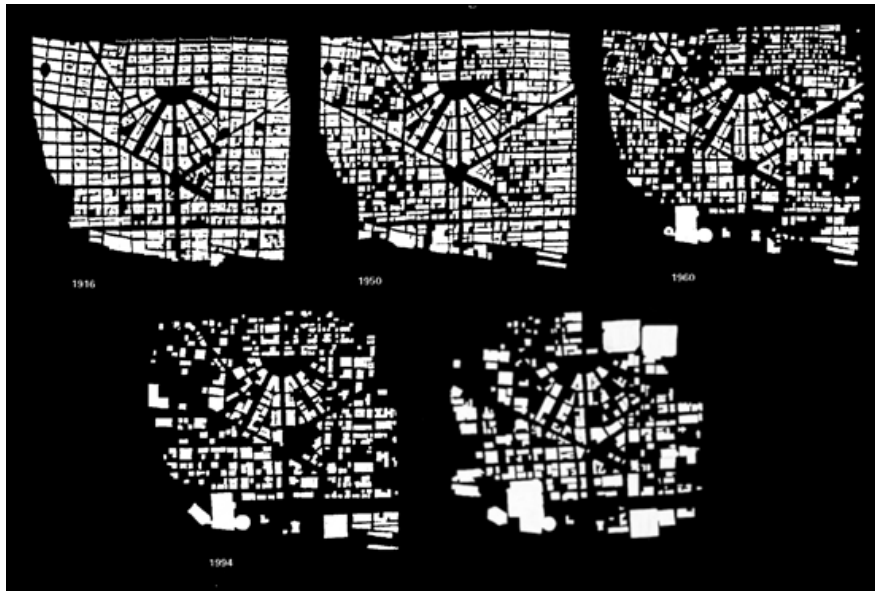


55. *Margins*, detail. The stencil I painted on the screen to create these buildings used one point perspective, but this perspective was dissolved as I printed the screen multiple times in the same area to create this cluster of buildings.

⁸⁶ Elkins, 272.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁸⁸ Cheri Y. Gay, *Detroit Then and Now*, (San Diego, CA:Thunder Bay Press, 2001), 28.



56. Urban fabric maps of Detroit beginning in 1916 (top left) and ending in the late 1990's (bottom right).

What has changed is not the view of any single lot, but the view as you drive down the street. I ask what is next to that building? Is there still a building there? Who is living in that building? Is someone growing a garden in that empty lot? A comparison of the city layout of roads open spaces and buildings, what in architecture is called the urban “fabric,” shows radical change over time (fig. 56). A tight network of roads arranged in a fan shape, with many small buildings packed closely together gives way to a more chaotic arrangement of buildings and eventually the complete erasure of large sections of the city.⁸⁹ But this view can't give a sense of what the city feels like on the ground. By opening up the drawings' compositions and allowing myself to “walk around,” I begin to see the huge spaces in between the buildings,

⁸⁹ Image from a power point in Professor Larissa Larson's Urban Design Theory Course, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, fall 2008.

the predominance of pavement and sky over the built environment, and how the buildings sit in space rather than creating space.⁹⁰ My subject became the moment between the namable landscape and abstraction as the car speeds up, the atmosphere created by pavement and sky, the occasional points of connection within the fragmented landscape.

The marks I use similarly generate a flickering back and forth between the ink defining the atmosphere and defining the edge of a form. The three different media used in the drawings help articulate these sensations. I use the sumi ink to lay in the bones of the drawing, the overall areas of light and dark (fig. 38). The ink also forms some of the atmosphere and gives shape to major elements. It indicates directionality and flow. The ink forms the bulk of the drawing and it is here that I use compound marks (fig. 51).⁹¹

The screen print stencil is placed on top of the ink and usually serves to create flat areas of even value with sharp edges (fig. 59 and 60). Because I work into and erase some of the screen print with a wet brush into the drying ink, some of these areas are more like ghost images (fig. 58 and 59). They are still defined by sharp edges but they are barely visible. Others are points of focus for the piece, acting as anchors in the drawings where the viewer might pause for a second (fig. 39). Most of the areas I screen print in this manner form the edges of buildings, windowsills, and the bodies of cars.⁹² Some areas of screen print have similar qualities to

⁹⁰ Often in art mixed media is used to make distinct layers, to separate out or collage together disparate elements. In my work however, I use the media to create effects that are immersed in the same atmosphere. In etching I use aquatint to create hard-edged solids, spitbite to create atmospheres, dry point to create fuzzy lines, and hard ground to create sharp ones, all in a single coherent print. My paintings are based on my background in etching, so I use the sumi ink, graphite, and screen print together as tools to create a final “plate.”

⁹¹ I think of this technique as analogous to spitbite process of etching, which is one of the most painterly and least controllable of the etching techniques.

⁹² I think of this process like I would when if I were making an aquatint by stopping out areas I did not want etched.

the sumi ink. Here I lay down a large flat area of screen print as an atmosphere and then allow drips of water to wash away the screen print. This again indicates directionality or the wash of water across a windshield (fig. 57).⁹³

Finally I dust powdered graphite over the composition (fig 39 and 60). The powdered graphite is used very minimally to bring up contrast in areas with screen print (it sticks to the screen print more than the paper) and to make the atmosphere in a certain area hazier or darker. I occasionally use it to add details that can't be achieved as well in ink or screen print such as the definition of the contours of the car in *Drift*. I use the media to balance between definition and atmosphere and to create a shifting focus.



57. *Drift*, detail. Example of drips created by ink, water and screen print.

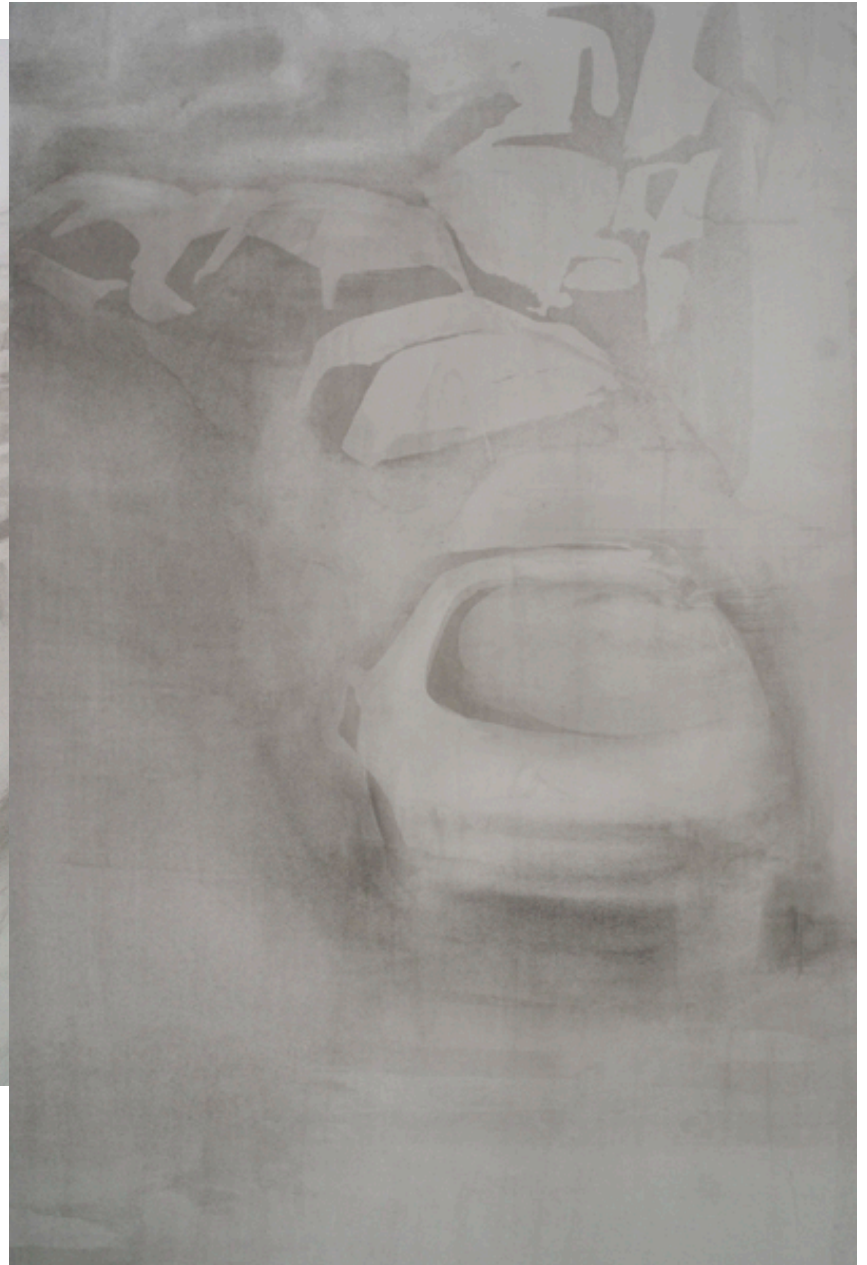


58. *Transit*, detail. Example of area of screen print “erased” with stiff brush.

⁹³ I relate these techniques to spitbite, whiteground, and sugar lift.



59. *Crossing*, detail. Example of screen print over ink.



60. *Transit*, detail. Example of graphite over screen print and ink.

The type of marks I use works together with the choice of a low contrast monochromatic palette. The reason to use a narrow value range and only paint⁹⁴ in shades of gray is to draw people into the image, to ask the viewers to continue looking and to draw attention to the small nuances and shifts in gradation of the ink. The narrower the overall range of contrast the more nuances the eye can distinguish. Looking at a low contrast drawing is like stepping out of a brightly lit room to look at the night sky. At first you only see a few bright stars, in the drawing the most distinct points of contrast, but gradually your eyes adjust and you can discern faint stars that initially blended in with the empty sky.

Deleuze and Guattari describe this phenomenon of observing what appears to be emptiness in their essay *A Thousand Plateaus*. They say, “Smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces and sonorous and tactile qualities...the sea is a smooth space par excellence, and yet we the first to encounter the demands of increasingly strict striation...the striation of the sea was a result of navigation on the open water.”⁹⁵ This quotation could describe the open spaces of Whistler’s nocturnes (fig. 41 and 42), or even more the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose photographs of the ocean are empty and yet seem suspended between stillness and continual motion (fig. 61).

Deleuze and Guattari contrast this smooth space of the ocean to the striated, or highly organized space of a city. They argue, however, that it is in the smoothest spaces of sea and sky that people spend the most effort trying to chart, while the striated structure of the city provides for openings, possibilities and contradictions.⁹⁶ Perhaps what is most unsettling about Detroit is that it is a city dominated not by crowded structures but rather by “intensities” of movement on the long stretches of highway, with buildings interspaced irregularly like the crests of waves. The

atmospheres in my drawings represents the blur of accumulated motion punctuated by patterns of telephone wires and fences just as Sugimoto’s photographs are hazy from the accumulation of waves over long exposures.

The atmosphere invites the viewer to sink into the drawing and occasionally grab onto an anchor- a car tire, a reflection in a window- that is in sharper focus. At the same time all the drips, washes and tendrils left by the spreading ink draw attention to the physical interactions of ink and paper. Like Tianmiao’s *Focus* prints, surface and depth exists together to create a double reading. I think of the drawings like clouds, sometimes seeming solid yet always shifting and just out of grasp, the blur of empty lots passed by in a car.



61. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Ligurian Sea, Savioire*, 1982.

⁹⁴ 画, see footnote 4.

⁹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 1987) 479.



62. Margins

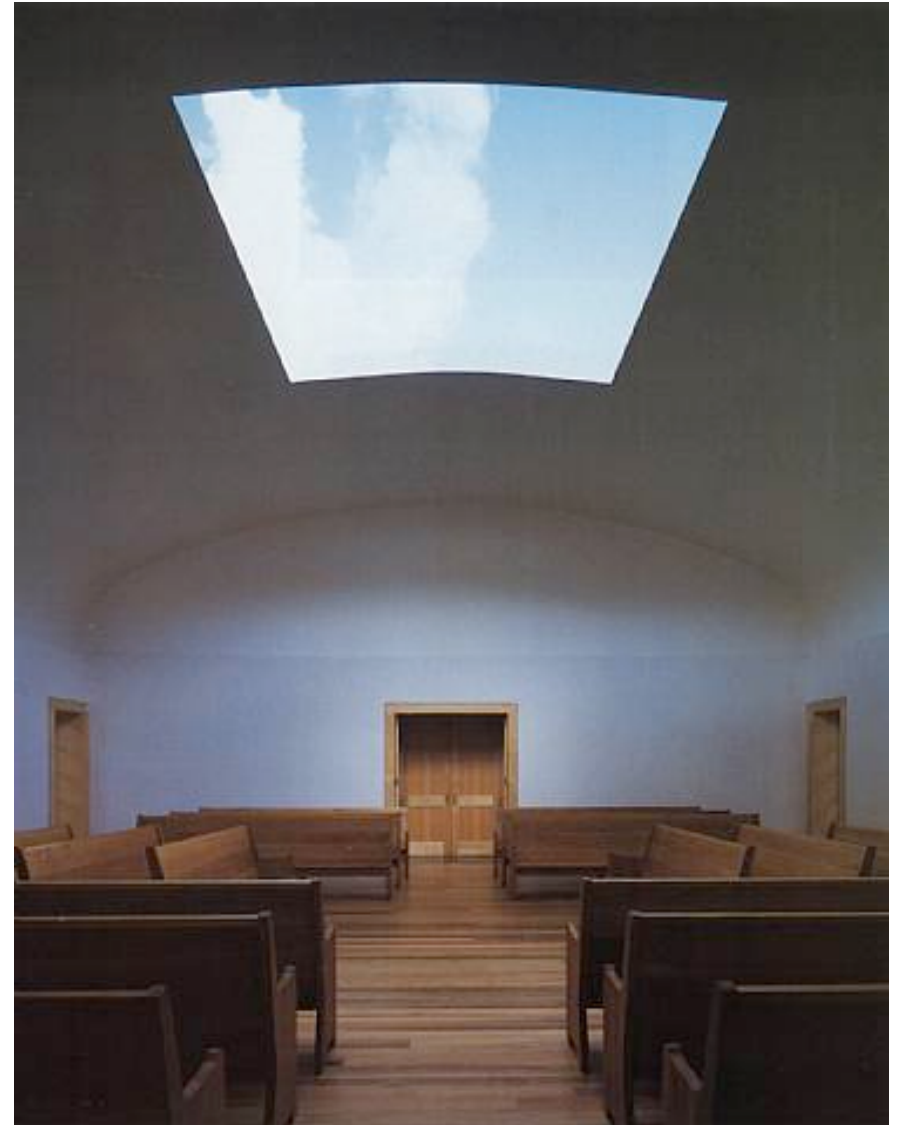
VII.

*Once a young man was walking down a road
Every morning he passed an old woman grinding a large piece of
metal on a stone
One day he finally asked her what she was doing
“Making a needle,” she said.*

6. Room

From the outset of the thesis I conceived of the drawings as forming a room that viewers walk into and inhabit for a short time. The “going,” the continual movement through the streets of Detroit, is transformed into a moment of contemplation, where viewers “dwell on” the images of the city. But the dwelling is not in Detroit itself, nor do I try to recreate the experience of being in Detroit. Rather I hope to provide a space for reflection on both the city and the ways in which we look at and represent it. It is the practice of looking that is central to both my process of making the work and, I hope, to the viewer’s experience of seeing it.

In “Marks on the Surface” I discussed the three spaces I considered in each drawing: the surface, illusionistic depth, and the space between the work and viewer. In conceiving of *Dwelling is Going* I considered the effect of installation of drawings on the space in which the viewer stands a very important part of the drawing. I was influenced by James Turrell’s light installations and certain of Rothko’s large drawings that when installed together created a quality of light within the room as compelling as the drawings themselves (fig. 63). After seeing these large Rothko paintings I realized that the overall luminosity and hue of a painting could actually alter the quality of light in a room. Turrell’s installations are dependent on creating an environment that is minimal enough for viewers to notice the gradual changes of light over time. While the primary subject of my drawings was not the atmosphere created in the gallery, I realized that with such low contrast drawings, the installation of the work could easily augment or entirely overwhelm the drawings.



63. James Turrell, *Sky Space*, 2001

The formal elements of the installation, from the gallery walls to the choice of typography for the labels are intentionally minimal. While the works are united in size, medium and recurrent motifs (cars, windows, telephone poles), each drawing is self-contained (fig. 65). There are no lines that carry over from one drawing to another, nor do the arrangement of drawings form a narrative arc. Each drawing is meant to be read “in” rather than “across.” In other words, the drawings are not like stills from a film, each representing a discreet moment in time, but instead are like a Kentridge drawing that contains all of the traces and erasure marks left by his animation (fig. 64).⁹⁷ Many of the drawings come out of repeated trips down one particular road or through one particular neighborhood. I therefore wanted the viewer to spend time with each drawing and to sense a pause between each piece rather than read time and space across a sequence of drawings.



64. William Kentridge, drawing from *Automatic Writing*

Because I wanted viewers to be attuned to the surface and depth of each piece I wanted to limit the other sorts of variation that could take place in an installation. Varying the size of the drawings or height at which it is hung, creating ways of hanging that drew attention to themselves, or labels that immediately caught the eye

⁹⁷ Museum of Modern Art, “William Kentridge: Five Themes,” MoMA, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/964>, 2010, (accessed April 6, 2010).

creates distraction. Just as it was important for me to stretch the paper so the curling edges did not overshadow the brushwork, I needed to design an installation that had even less contrast than the work. For this reason I installed the work on movable walls in an open square configuration at the front of Slusser Gallery. I wanted viewers to have room to step away from the drawings and the walk back up to them. I also wanted to create an environment in which people could circulate and approach the work from many different angles. I needed my work to be separate enough from other work in the gallery, large doors, exit signs and tables so that the work wasn't drowned out by either other pieces or the visual “noise” of the gallery. I was particularly fortunate to be able to install in the Slusser Gallery since the high ceiling keep all of the wires and lighting from being distracting (fig. 65). It also enabled me to use soft lighting rather than spots. This created light in the gallery space of analogous softness to the atmosphere in the works themselves.

The design of the labels was also important. As I mentioned in the introduction, language is an important, if minimal part of my visual work. The titles of the show and the titles of the individual works provide a point of orientation for the viewer to fix upon while indicating an action or motion taking place within the piece. However, I wanted the viewers to spend the majority of the time looking at the drawings not the labels. In many shows I find myself spending more time reading the labels than looking at the work, out of some guilty feeling that if the artist put that much text on the labels I would become more educated if I read them. Often I spend thirty seconds reading the label and then about ten seconds glancing from the label to the work and back again. This is wonderful if most of the meaning is in the label and the work is supplementary. I decided, however, to go in the opposite direction and put as little information on the labels as possible. Each drawing was titled with only one word, printed in grey san-serif on a clear label. I did not list medium, dimensions, my name or any other information that often appears on labels. I intended that the viewer spend the bulk of their time looking at the drawing and could glance at the label if they were feeling lost.



65. Four views of the installation in Slusser Gallery

Using such minimal labeling, however, meant that I had to have an artist statement of some sort, at least to list my name and the media used (fig. 65 top left). I also wanted to let viewers know that the drawings were based on trips I took through Detroit. I felt it was important to mention the place since the drawings are specific to that city. While the drawings could describe certain other decaying Midwestern industrial towns they were made not only about my experience in a specific city, but specific streets at a specific time of year. My interactions with another time and place would result in entirely different art, as I know from the small scale and highly saturated colors in my work from Venice and Dhaka. I felt it was not only important to mention the place but also to give credit to Detroit, as a partner in generating this work and to ask my viewers to perhaps take a second look at the city for themselves.

I wound up printing the artist's statement in grey ink on a large clear sheet that I applied to the wall below my name and title. The title and statement together took up about the same room as a drawing. I wanted the text to be easily readable and to blend into the wall rather than standing away from it as it would if I printed it on paper or mounted it on foam. The labels were located on the wall next to the main entrance of the gallery, along with two drawings. Because of the orientation of the gallery, people walking into the gallery have their back to the statement and face into the square made by the three movable partitions and a permanent gallery wall. Once they walk into the center of that square and turn around they see the statement. In a solo show I would have located the title and artist statement on an unused wall to further de-emphasize the text.

The curation of the drawings was perhaps the most important step in creating the thesis show, as the particular group of drawings I chose said something very different than other possible combinations. At the time of the show I had sixteen drawings, fifteen of which were stretched and could be selected for the show (fig. 10). The rest ranged from a drawing of an overpass that was almost invisible against the white of the paper to an entirely dark tunnel with cars painted in a slightly lighter grey (fig 4).

I initially arranged the medium grey works of cars and skyscrapers on the three main walls to form a *U*, and the lighter drawings on the free standing movable wall and the title wall by the gallery entrance. I had initially thought that the more solid drawings should go on the more enclosed walls of the *U* and the more ephemeral drawings should go on the free standing wall and the title wall. As I curated the work, I realized that I had this completely backwards. Although I liked the pieces individually I felt like I was about to be run over when I walked into the center of the show. The darker drawings in the *U* felt too close together and made the viewer feel like they were in a cramped space. As I shuffled the drawings into different positions with the help of my advisors, I realized that the *U* shaped walls created a very particular sort of space, and that I needed drawings that complemented that space rather than fighting against it. The problem with the *U* configuration was that there were two corners, which meant four out of the five drawings had one edge close to that corner and as a result, close to another piece. The dark drawings formed heavy solids on the white walls and when put at a right angle to another drawing created a sense of a very small space (fig 65).

I realized that the show was about whatever was on the three walls that formed the *U*. If the gallery was a sentence, the three walls were the main clause and the two other walls were subordinate clauses and prepositions. They modified the meaning of the main walls. In my initial layout the majority of the images on those three walls had cars in them. The images of buildings and empty spaces ended up on the other walls. The show as a whole then read as being about the car. Much of the work I made though was not about cars, even if some of the pieces happened to have cars in them. I wanted the show to be about the spaces of Detroit, many of them created by cars or in relation to cars, but not as exclusively about cars. It was not that the work was not about cars, but that in the sentence I wanted the main clause to be about space and movement and for the cars to merely be in a preposition: through cars or in cars. I began to organize the works in terms of these two requirements; works on the *U* shaped walls needed to be

predominantly light and needed to emphasize space over cars. Works on the other two walls could be darker and foreground cars more heavily.

I was both surprised and gratified with the final selection of work. The two walls of the *U* that the viewer first sees contain the most minimal of my work, putting it at the center of my show. I say that I was surprised and gratified because while these were some of my favorite pieces they were much riskier. The fewer marks there are in the drawing, the more each mark counts. The beauty of using ink with compound marks and with drawing into screen print is that it does the unexpected. However, when this is coupled with such minimalism, making the drawings means that I am always on the edge of disaster. When I made the works there were many times when I held my breath as I let a drip run down the page or applied a section of screen print to an entirely white area and hoped I placed it in just the right spot. I have learned how to work in this way, but can always see the imperfections in these works since there is so much less room for error.

When I put the works together I was startled because the works and the space actually strengthened each other. I had been afraid that it would seem like too much white space or that there was too little there, even though that was where my heart was. Instead the positions of the drawings are at right angles to each other actually created a tension between extension and enclosure. The edges of the walls were also echoed in the primarily architectural subject matter of the drawings. The drawings of cars on the other walls then complemented these expansive spaces, hinting to the mode of movement that was being used throughout the show (fig. 65 and 66).



66. Viewers looking at the work from close up (top) and from a distance (bottom)



67. *Crossing*

VIII.

We have circled back to the highway now.

The prairie grass turns to streamers in the corners of our eyes

We watch others dream.

*On the news the announcer says that more people are leaving
Michigan,*

but we know better.

*Some part of us is stranded here,
lying still at the bottom of this river,
a hunk of iron worn by the current
until we become light enough
to float away.*

Conclusion

The drawings in *Dwelling is Going* ask that the viewer spend some time looking. They do not demand, or immerse the viewer in an experience as so many contemporary installations do. Rather the drawings together form a room that the viewer can choose to inhabit. The openness in composition, the use of atmosphere, and the shifting focus mean that viewers are invited to immerse themselves in the landscapes and atmospheres of the drawings, and by the same token, that unless viewers engage with this process of looking, the experience is lost. There is nothing there without the imagination and engagement of the viewer.

An etching professor once told me that a completed circle is dead, because it leaves nothing for the viewer's mind to do. An incomplete circle, or a hint of a circle asks the viewer to mentally fill in the blank, involving them in an active process of looking. For me all of Detroit is an open circle, yet one which so many people avoid looking at. And at the heart of this hesitation is the fear that it would take too much to fill in that gap, require too much emotional investment, or that somehow the people of Detroit are at fault for the gap, like a pothole in the road. The highway system that bypasses downtown Detroit and the American economy as a whole, artificially circumvents the gap. It lets people avoid spending time looking, transporting them instantly from isolated rooms of home and cubicles of work.⁹⁸

My work is not about patching the circle, about moving on quickly on the perfect mathematical curves of the highways, or finding a fix for Detroit. I believe that there is much that needs to be done, and wonderful community action, architectural planning etc... that many wonderful and dedicated people are involved in doing. What I have been doing in my aimless drives around Detroit

⁹⁸ While many departments at Michigan, as well as the public radio station, are making an effort to engage with Detroit this is certainly not representative of the attitude of the country as a whole, as I have learned from discussions with friends and strangers.

and the hours spent drawing in the studio is something much more intuitive and much less prescriptive or efficient. Instead it is a practice of seeing openness in Detroit as an opportunity to take time to dwell on that motion, that gap, rather than trying to cover it up or ignore it. Out of this process I make art that is partially open, that tries to challenge viewers to dwell on the erasures in the paintings and in the gaps in the city. I ask them to not to dismiss these spaces as absences, to mourn a vanished past or an unrealized future, but rather find in these openings a potential for thoughtful looking and improvisation in the present moment.



68. *Transit*, detail

Glossary of Images

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20. Joy Gerard, *Protest Crowd, San Francisco 2003*, ink on paper, (p. 26). Originally found on Joy Gerrard (artist's website), <http://www.joygerrard.net/>, (accessed February 5th, 2010).
21. Martin Lewis, *Little Penthouse*, 1931. drypoint (p. 27). from the British Museum Collection © The estate of Martin Lewis, Courtesy Robert K. Newman, The Old Print Shop, Inc., New York. <http://www.britishmuseum.org>, (accessed September 9, 2009).
22. Martin Lewis, *Spring Night, Greenwich Village*, etching, 1930, (p. 27). From the British Museum Print Room, © The estate of Martin Lewis, Courtesy Robert K. Newman, The Old Print Shop, Inc., New York. <http://www.britishmuseum.org>, (accessed September 9, 2009).
23. Ross Bleckner, *In Sickness and in Health* (p. 28). Originally found on Ross Bleckner (artist's website), <http://www.rbleckner.com/press28.html>, (accessed April 19th, 2010).
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42. James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Palaces*, etching, 1878 (p. 46). From the Collection of the British Museum, © The Trustees of the British Museum, <http://www.britishmuseum.org>, (accessed September 9, 2009).

43. Mi Fei (1051-1107), *Mountains and Pines in Spring*, Sung hanging scroll/ink and color on paper, 62.5 x 44.0cm, (p. 47), Originally found on <http://www.nigensha.co.jp/kokyu/en/p06.html>, accessed on (April 21, 2010).

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Originally found on The National Palace Museum, "Grand View: Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung,"

http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh95/grandview/painting/account_1_en.html (accessed April 19, 2010).

45. Lin Tianmiao, *Focus*, Lithograph on handmade paper with flocking, 2007, (p. 48).
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From the collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles. © The Estate of Eva Hesse, Hauser & Wirth Zürich London. Originally found on the Jewish Press, http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/18790/Jewish_Arts.html, (accessed December 12, 2009).

49. Installation view of *Dwelling is Going*, in Slusser Gallery, March 2010, (p. 51).

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Originally found on Portland Art and News,
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68. *Transit*, detail, from *Dwelling is Going* series, ink, screen print and graphite on stretched Fabriano Artistico paper, 39"x50," (p. 66).

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