

THE GRADUAL INSTANT

by

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in

Art

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ABSTRACT

Using visual imagery of my perceived environment allows me to map the intersection between unease with my surroundings and a deep connection to them at the same time. This work forces me to address questions of how I choose to interpret my environment. Integrating transitory clouds formations with signs of the built environment locates the work in an ephemeral and contemplative non-space.

I came to landscape from the land. The land asserts itself more than culture in Montana. It influences the culture I live in and in turn, the culture that exists here reinforces a romantic concept of the land. The Gallatin Valley is sold as Big Sky Country, a place with expensive local steaks, 10,000 square foot log homes and antler chandeliers. Rustic chic takes the aesthetic of a hardscrabble existence and converts it into the myth of opportunity by making it decorative. The winner tells the story and the version depicted in here forgets or makes light of the atrocities embedded in the history of this place. Yet it is the land that brought us here, directly or indirectly. People have come here to reinvent themselves since the 1800's, to seek wealth and fortune, to farm, to ranch, to explore and now to play. Many of us make a living contingent on the physical beauty of this place. The physical appeal of Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley fuels exponential growth while so many American towns stagnate or shrink.

Working within a tradition of contemporary realism, my large scale panoramas prior to graduate school were picturesque. My aesthetic at that time was influenced by periods of art history dominated by naturalism; the Renaissance, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism. I depicted those things that resonated emotionally with me. The landscape, as a genre in the American West, is so saturated that I turned to the sky to add conceptual depth. My paintings of dramatic storms and large scale events were attempts to move past the picturesque while still editing out anything unsightly, by which I mean the human made. The only aspects of the built environment in the work functioned as decorative. I would include the rooftops, fences and back country roads in the original photo, choosing to leave out anything industrial such as telephone poles and power lines.

The romantic illusion that I could edit out anything uncomfortable left me painting Eden.

This garden didn't have Eve. Or so I thought. I went back and forth between painting the landscape and painting the figure, with each painting posing questions that informed the next process of investigation.

I returned to the figure in painting, partly because I was hesitant to let Adam and Eve, fraught with human complications, enter my Edenic landscapes. Through my figurative work, I was trying to understand my attraction to character or types rather than the specifics of individuality or anatomy. My primary influences in this regard; Man Ray, Richard Avedon, Marilyn Minter and Marlene Dumas, all use a rich visual language of self expression to ask questions about how we perceive ourselves. Man Ray, the surrealist photographer, influenced Avedon's later more psychological content. The 1981 exhibition, *Surrealist Photographic Portraits 1920- 1980*, held at Marlborough Gallery in New York placed Surrealist photographs alongside contemporary photographers such as Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe.

*"...Dennis Longwell describes their formal portraits as displaying 'a revived and ennobling form of Surrealism' through the juxtaposition of colliding forces; Mapplethorpe's self-portrait contrasts femininity with masculinity, or Avedon's portrait of Marilyn Monroe which isolates the youth and beauty of the actress from the impending tragedy of her death."*¹

Photography's transition from documentary imagery to subjectivity is re-established through a surrealist lens, turning dream states and the subconscious into the figurative. Minter and Dumas take the subconscious dreams and desires of the surrealists

¹ Longwell, Dennis, *Surrealist Portraits 1920- 1980*, New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1981, n.p.

into literal depictions of overt decadence and social status. A violently gold tongue drips materiality in Minter's paintings while prostitutes and children stare back at the viewer from the washes of Dumas' watercolors. I lived in San Francisco for three years and the people watching was fascinating. How do we see ourselves? How do describe ourselves? Do we see ourselves through place?

Joseph Campbell describes myth as our means of understanding ourselves in our surroundings. Although not working directly with the influence of Montana and the myth of the West, I had shifted my vision over to the West as a place of reinvention and I was particularly fascinated by how figures could communicate this transformation visually. I worked on rapid figure studies of fire dancers and elaborately costumed revelers inspired by previous trips to Burning Man, busckers and music festivals in California. Questions of the gaze and consumption of the figure or portrait led me to self portraiture. Having my own face looking back out from the canvas added a depth of vulnerability. The idea of the gaze and painting images of myself raised the question of how landscapes played a role in painting's long history of affirming humankind's vision of him or herself, and helped me to address questions of how the land played a role in my personal history.

How would I convey a sense of self awareness and vulnerability in the landscape? I was learning that the way I interpret what I see and what I paint affects the content of the work. I had considered what I saw in the landscape to be my own truth without considering my impulses for how I interpret that reality. As Dr. Boehnert writes in "Ecological Perception: Seeing Systems,

“Visual intelligence involves a perpetual awareness that the visual world is an interpretation of reality, following Alfred Korzybski’s first principle of general semantics; “the map is not the territory”²

Would I reaffirm or pose questions through the work? Through the evolution in my paintings, I have followed landscape history’s broadening awareness of humankind’s connection to and consumption of the landscape.

Tapestries in Medieval times illustrated the landscape as a garden. It was necessary to depict nature as it was meant to be controlled, according to God’s will.

Within the safety of pictorial convention I altered the dimensions and segmented paintings attempting to add time and the sublime to the work. I wanted to move past the descriptive and translate some of the emotion I felt in the landscape. In Bill Beckley’s anthology Sticky Sublime Thomas McEvelley historicizes the eighteenth century sublime as,

“...associated with the grandeur of nature as evidenced in picturesque scenery, which often involved a sense of potential danger – say, walking along a cliff edge – that awakens the mind to the grandeur of the landscape with special alertness; this opening of the mind by the effect of the grandeur of the landscape is crucial, because the grandeur without is supposed to awaken the slumbering or dormant grandeur within.”³

Within this description the sublime landscape embodies nature as a place of regeneration and fear. Kant’s initial description of the sublime as fear and awe in the face of the unknowable was dark, romantic and moody in Friedrich’s paintings. Isolated

² Dr. Boehnert, Joanna, “Ecological Perception: Seeing Systems”, *The Visual Communication of Ecological Literacy: Designing, Learning and Emergent Ecological Perception*, University of Brighton, 2012, p3

³ McEvelley, Thomas, “Turned Upside down and Torn Apart”, *Sticky Sublime*, Beckley, Bill. Allworth Press, 2001. 60. Print.

and dwarfed by their surroundings, the figures face the unknowable horizon. Turner's figures, boats and buildings are engulfed in a vortex of light and energy. Living during the industrial revolution both men were imparting their reactions and emotions into the landscape. Instead of the sublime my selection of human elements remained in the picturesque. I painted every fence post but removed the telephone pole. I saw power lines, business signs, everything that jutted into the skies, as representative of what I chose to erase. Even my source materials, the sequences of photographic panoramas, were only a means to an end. At the end of my first year in the MFA program, while addressing the intrusions in the landscape and my choice of editing, I simply cut out all human made objects. I wanted the operatically grand gesture of Turner and Caspar David Freidrich's sublime, however I recognized that the environmental and scientific contexts had changed. Unlike in the 17th and 18th century, nearly every stream and mountain peak is named. Explorers have mapped and labeled the vast expanses of the land and ocean. I still feel awe in the face of nature but it is my own personal relationship rather than a cultural one. Even if the trail is named and the mountain peak I am passing has been climbed every day of summer, I find myself stunned by the scale and beauty of my surroundings. Living in a mountain town is not like standing on an incomprehensible edge looking at the vast stretch of unknown. It is a safe space on the edge of a finite source of play and livelihood. The land, until recently mined for its material resources, is now a resource for pleasure for the prosperous.

As Timothy Morton has argued, during the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic age the concept of "nature" was conceptualized as other. As an "other" nature

was easier to consume and possess. As with the feminine other, nature once objectified also became subject to violence. Despite the construction of fences and railroads that would both connect and carve up the North American continent, the American West nevertheless became the new frontier of man's vision of self during the 19th century. With Europe devastated by two world wars, artists like Moran, Church and Bierstadt became visionaries of the new continent. Would we preserve nature or use it to further the technological progress and interests of the dominant powers in our society, namely corporations? Creating composite images called cosmic landscapes, Church and other painters of the Hudson River School, created an Eden they saw in peril of being lost before it could be preserved. In Cole's series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*, the land is transformed from an idyllic state, through the rise of civilization to its demise. At the same time Moran and Bierstadt were on the payroll of the Northern Pacific and Union Pacific railroad companies respectively, to envision a West rich with opportunity. The exquisite beauty of their paintings perpetuated the myth of the Old West. Their work still appeals to latter day equivalents of the 19th century rail baron like Ted Turner, who owns a collection of paintings by Moran and Bierstadt. For the media mogul bent on preserving large tracks of land in Gallatin County, these paintings were powerfully persuasive. The power dynamics of nature were often embedded in landscape by these artists even when the built environment was not.

Would I subvert or re-affirm this consumption of the landscape with my work? I cropped the horizon line and added power lines. This led me to a dislocation in space which I began investigating by collaging and layering perspectival view points, to create

a less narrative space of illusion. Embedding the power lines into atmospheric formations, with the paint and the clouds absorbing the human made element, later informed my thesis paintings. The human made could be a sign rather than the thing itself. In the 1975 New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape exhibition, a group of photographers decided to re-investigate ideals of the landscape. Turning away from a romantic vision of the land they looked at the banal and built environment. Adding buildings and power lines to my paintings felt derivative of their photographs. Collaging and layering built elements in paint started to feel surrealist. Historically surrealist work focuses on the unconscious and I was instead trying to understand and find a visual language for the things I was especially conscious of. I turned to the medium of paint to uncover the landscape through the process of painting.

Using squeegees, my hands and house paint I found the landscape in the painting rather than painting the landscape. Cecily Brown flays her subjects into parts and reattaches them in a way that is both serious as well as playful. Although I enjoyed letting go of my precious process, I couldn't continue with gestural abstraction. The delicate whimsy and magic of Rodin's watercolors and Alexis Rockman's landscapes became clumsy in my attempts to replace description with the experiential. Rather than describing what I saw I wanted to convey what I felt. How could I convey the paradox of the unknowable with the controlled use of paint? On our graduate student trip to Las Vegas we went to see Turrell's installation Akhob. He uses architecture and light to create a place where gravity seems to have lost its strength. The installation was beautiful and disturbing. The dislocation made me slightly nauseous. Turrell's

contemplative spaces are meditative and precise in their design. I could use a similar play of architecture and light to envision a place of contemplation rather than indexical marks on canvas.

With a grant from the Dean's office, I went to New York City to see three works of art that worked with scale and the installation space in interesting ways. Newman, Rothko and Pollock used scale as a major force in their work, but what happens when the content is in some way representational? Does it emulate the architectural space or compete with nature? *The Heart of the Andes*, by Frederic Church, is massive, though it feels like a miniature diorama. The details take over the scale of the work. Seen from afar it is a window, up close it is as luscious as satin. In contrast, Thomas Hart Benton's mural *America Today* envelops and transports the viewer to a place of intention. He believed technology would be the making of America, although he was deeply concerned for the role of the laborer left destitute by the Great Depression. A paradox of trust and fear had entered the landscape. Feeling engulfed by his painting resonated deeply with me. I felt that I was a part of the narrative. The scale created a sense of physical connection that is one of respect rather than desire for the small work that could more easily be possessed. I feel small in the face of nature and technology, and the scale of art can create a similar physical response. I wanted my own work to encompass the vastness of unknowing. The pace and complexity of nature and technology exceed my vision and comprehension. Using large scale canvases is one way I can address with the expanse within the parameters of my physical environment.

If the abyss exists in my work it is a technological sublime. I cannot place myself or the work solely in the land even as it reflects human perspectives without addressing our constructed environment. I am afraid of nature in its raw form. I am powerless against its multitudes of dangers. At the same time I feel deeply connected to nature as my source of life. This paradox is reiterated with technology. The pace, the complexity and the power of technology to alter the future is vast and sublime. Yet it is embedded in my life. I live in a network of technological advances that both limit and protect me from natural dangers, while creating and mitigating their own.

“The sublime depends on what it means to be human, because it is the response of a human – physically, emotionally, and intellectually – to the expansiveness of literature, art, or nature, that makes possible the “hypsous,” or “state of transport,” that is the spark of sublimity.”⁴

My encultured space creates a feeling of vulnerability. I feel deeply uneasy about the current pace of cultural change, the dislocation from earth, from the language of the land. I am dependent on a fragile, unsustainable market economy rather than on my immediate surroundings. We have made a religion of progress and technology. Progress is the forward motion of cultural constructs toward a more complex system. Technology, for the purpose of this paper, is all the human made tools created and employed to assist humans in our needs, wants and whims. In the distant past humans built their homes. They collected, grew or hunted their own food. Those things out of the range of their control, sickness, natural disaster, attack from other species or their own, were explained through myth and religion. Now we are dangling so far along the chain of commerce that

⁴ Beckley, Bill, *Sticky Sublime*, Allworth Press, 2001, p4

an act of faith or distraction is necessary in order to believe or forget that so many links beyond our own control will hold. My paintings touch on a vast expanse of information as symbolic of my dislocation. The way that I deploy the technological sublime in my paintings is intentionally more minimalist and anticlimactic than the operatic works I previously emulated. Instead, I crop operatic nature just as human investigation compartmentalizes nature in a series of systems.

The current work reflects my intuitive and visceral reaction to investigating the duality of connection and disconnection I feel with my surroundings. The land though mapped, labeled and dissected makes me feel mortal in a way that technology does not. I touch on the larger implications of the built environment as a massive system of which I only know pieces and parts. I work with fragments of the whole not unlike the fragmentation of experience that Rosalind Krauss argued was signified by modernist painting's use of the grid:

*"... our intellectual tradition supports objectification or the separation between 'in-here' and 'out-there'.... The reduction of wholes and systems into component parts lies at the heart of many of our intellectual traditions. As a consequence we readily perceive things and are relatively insensitive to the relationships between them."*⁵

Krauss argued here that within modernism there is a paradox in isolating and abstracting parts to understand them. We value parts to the exclusion of the whole.

Contemporary artists have devised their own version of the grid's estrangement of nature.

Three artists that have influenced my aesthetic choices are Julie Mehretu, Sarah Sze and

⁵ Sewell, Laura, "The Skill of Ecological Perception", *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, Roszak, Theodore, Counterpoint, 1995, p208.

Teresita Fernandez. They explore the fragmentary nature of dislocation within time and space. On a white void, Mehretu combines her own personal narrative with transferred lines derived from socially charged public spaces. Architectural elements are reduced and abstracted into a vortex of “multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity.”⁶ Sze works in a similar aesthetic through sculpture, but her installations are more whimsical. Using everyday objects she creates impermanent and delicate structures. Random baubles, junk and strings swirl up from the floor and the walls into space, as she plays with our perception of value through orientation and disorientation. Fernandez creates sculptural installations influenced by natural phenomena as well as historical and cultural references.

In a similar manner, I am dislocating fragmentary architectural elements, thereby removing the work from the narrative illusion of time by locating the viewer in an abstracted non-space of meditation and contemplation. I have similarly attempted to layer and embed disparate elements and intuitively placed windows and floor plans into clouds, and used negative space as a metaphor for time and dislocation. The location of these elements within a void or a moment is cropped by the canvas. The work is placed in the void of the white walled gallery space isolated and cropped from the context of the sky and embedded in the built environment. The interpretation of a non-space expands as far as we choose to perceive the cycle of dislocation and location expanding outwards.

⁶ “Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting”, Walker Art Center, n.p., 2003, <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/2/AF7361E991C363206165.htm>

Perception is the awareness of connections between ourselves and our surroundings, engaging all of the senses to experience the many dimensions of a moment in time. I was so focused on an answer for “Why clouds?” that it took two years before I realized that watching a particular cloud formation, or a dramatic storm move across the valley, I am fully present in the moment. I gain perspective in the abstraction of light and color. The lists, the obligations, the needs and wants fade as the sensory takes over. However, a state of constant awareness of connections is untenable. I must return to my petty concerns and pleasures in order to function in society. Locating the work in an abstracted moment in time can create a non-space of orientation and disorientation.

I am also using time to understand place. Perception requires time just as it requires our senses. My initial attraction to the storms was due to the way they enter into my life. Gusts of wind, lighting and changing weather insist on a certain degree of attention that blue skies do not. Most cloud formations last for less than an hour before dispersing or merging with others to create storm systems. In the paintings the specificity of aspects of cloud formations is evidence of their transience. I had to expand my senses to include the connection of the clouds and the landscape to the intrusions into the sky, the built environment. The power lines that cut across the clouds became floor plans.

Architectural floor plans represent an interior space, a safe space, a constructed space. The optimism of human fallibility is presented in a clean sequence of sections.

We push forward with technology and culture in an unsustainable free fall toward the destruction of everything we have developed. Drawings become solid structures. These

in turn are abstracted and layered as a grid system. In modern art the form that I liked the least was the grid. I saw it as a lack of imagination.

*“In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is the antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.”*⁷

Krauss’s words resonated with my intuitive feeling that the grid is symbolic of the technological sublime. It goes on and on and on. It is pervasive. I live within the grid.

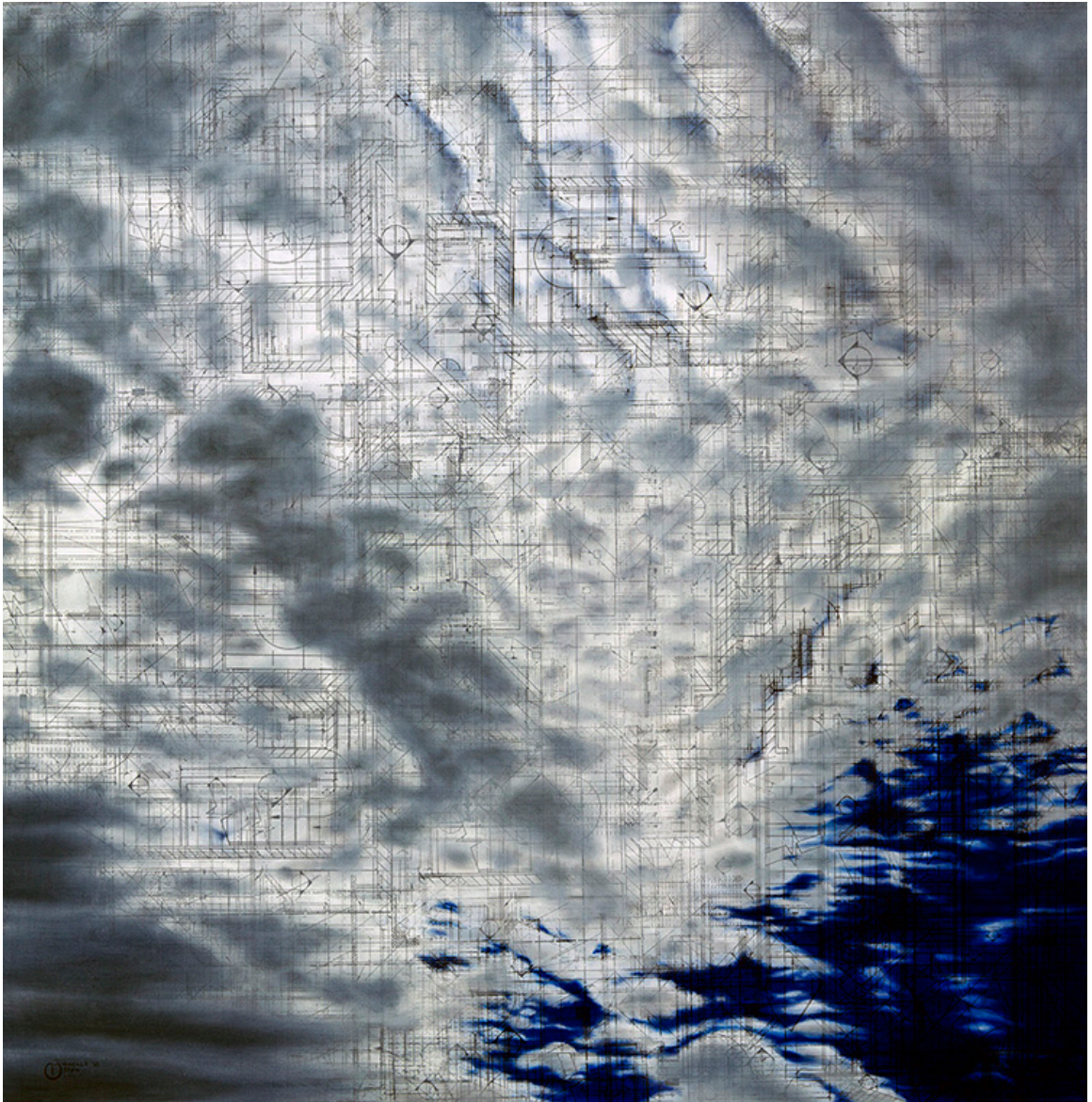
The reduced, layered, erased and suspended sign of the built environment in which I live is unsustainable in its current trajectory called progress. I moved from work where the cloud was the dominant feature, with light erasing the floor plans, to my last painting where the floor plan forms the main structure of the composition and the sky/cloud element is flattened into the backdrop. Light became negative space. The lines formed boxes, opaque windows suspended across the canvas. I started abstracting the cloud/sky relationship filling the contours with solid shades of blue that almost becomes a map. The push and pull of dominant elements in the work reflects my relationship to place. The land continues to be dominant in Montana but the built environment is expanding into the land and the work.

My work has evolved out of a westernized history of landscape painting and a broadening awareness of my connections within my surroundings. These paintings sit at the intersection between my unease with my surroundings and my nevertheless intense connection to them. They are a map of opposing and interlocking elements that are both at odds and inherently connected. They are integrated within my own myth.

⁷ Krauss, Rosalind, “Grids”, *October*, Vol. 9, 1979, p 51

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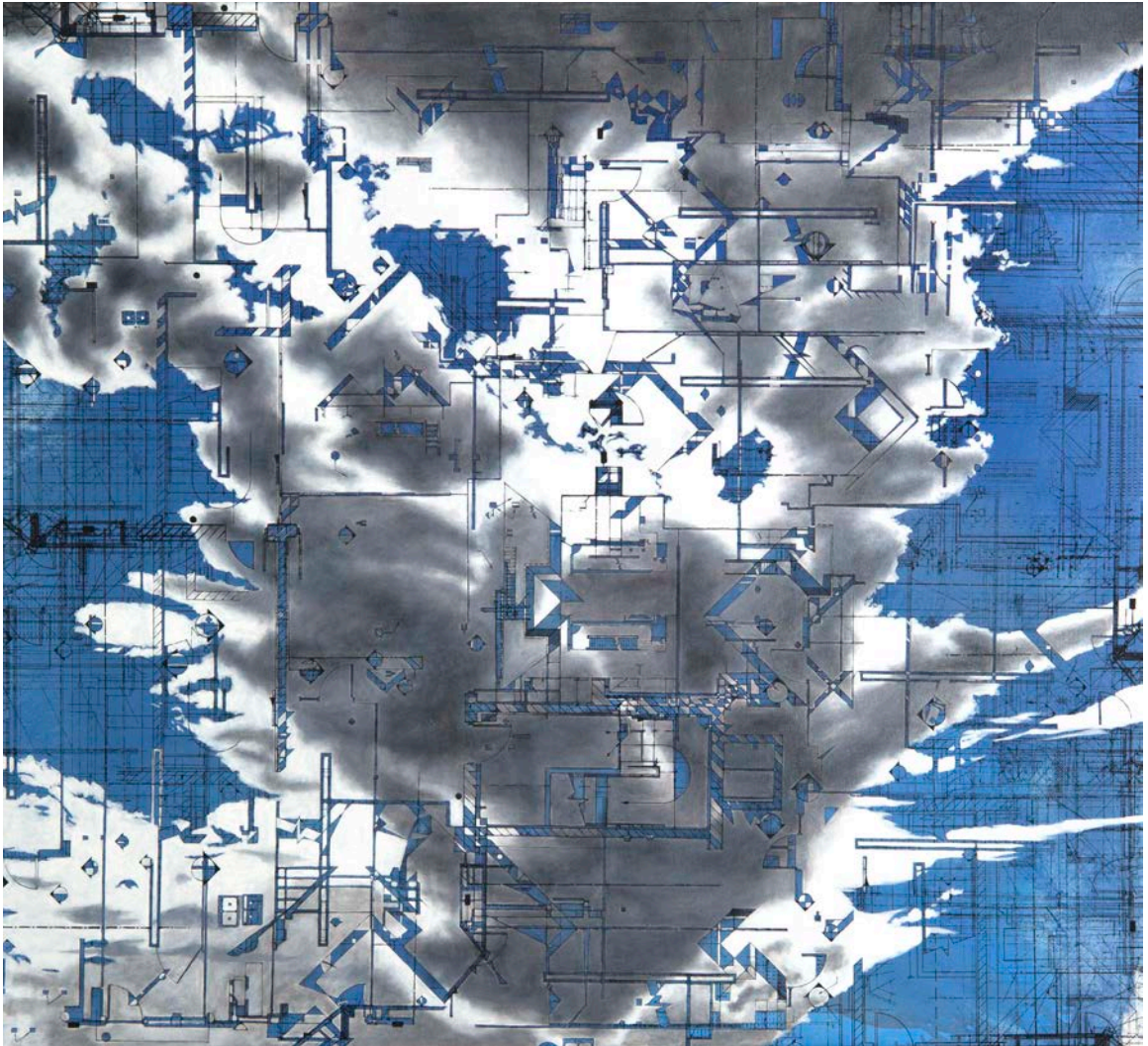
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Stratus Cloud I, Oil and Silk Screen on Canvas, 2015



Cumulus Cloud I, Oil and Silk Screen on Canvas, 2015



Stratus Cloud II, Oil and Silk Screen on Canvas, 2016



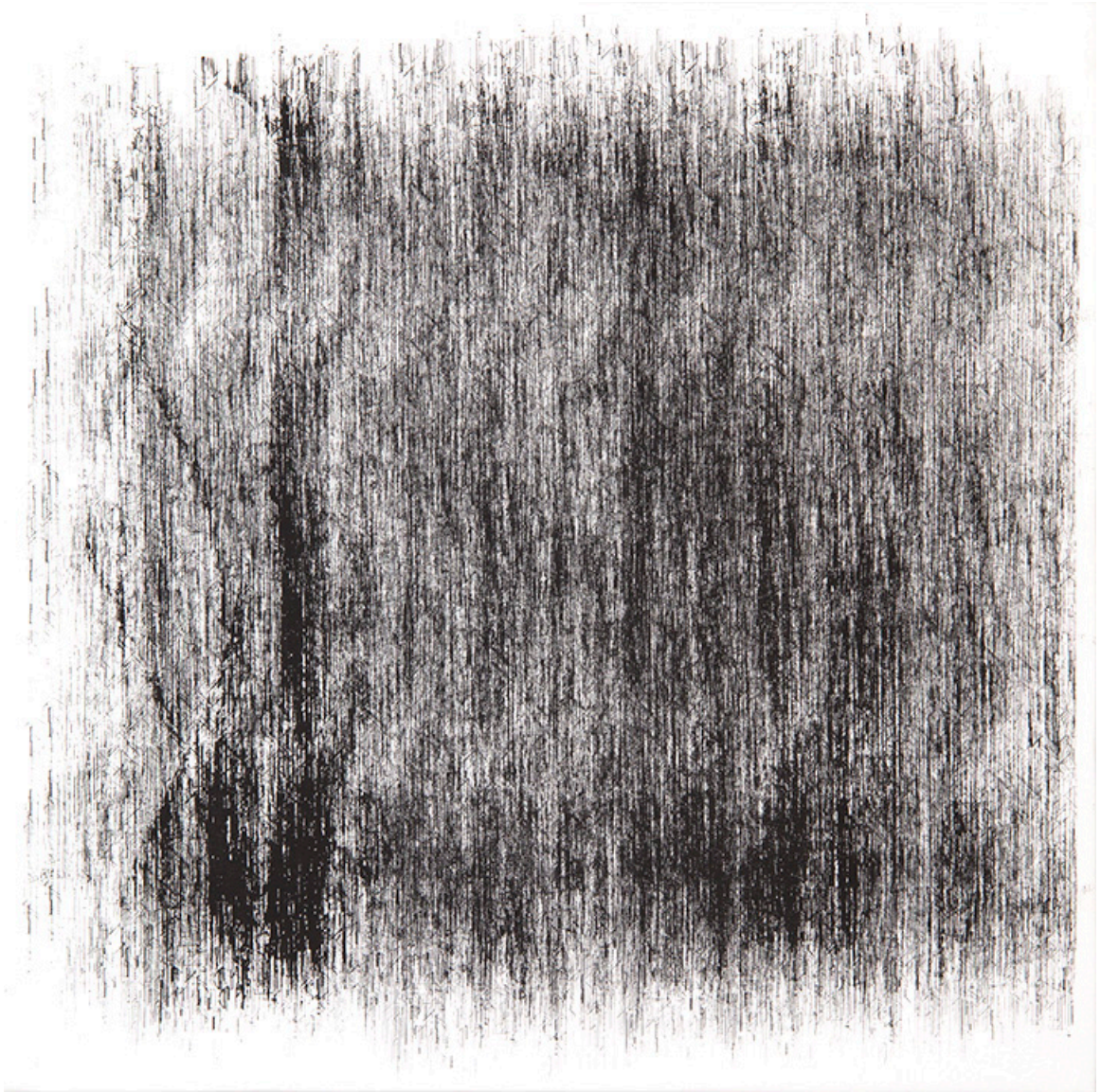
Windows I, Oil and Silk Screen on Canvas, 2016



Windows II, Oil and Silkscreen on Canvas, 2016



Floor plan, Oil and Silkscreen on Canvas, 2016



Lines, Silkscreen on Canvas, 2015



Untitled, Oil and Chalk lines on Canvas, 2016



Untitled (close up), Oil and Chalk lines on Canvas, 2016



Gallery View I



Gallery View II



Gallery View III