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Complex Conversations: A Creative Exploration into Language Used  
Over Direct Messages on Social Media Platforms

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
College of Arts and Sciences: BA Studio Art

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## Abstract

This paper details a series of paintings that explore how the language used virtually over direct messages (DMs) on social media platforms can allude to how complex notions of gender, violence, and behavior function in reality.<sup>1</sup> This research questions how forms of communication or interaction exist within different spaces and contexts, as well as how the recontextualization of language can disrupt power and produce new forms of interpretation. This paper acts as a secondary source of knowledge in relation to the paintings under review and provides further explanation of their conceptual motivations. In particular, the paintings engage with Sara Ahmed's theory of "sweaty concepts" through the process of laying handwriting in paint because both entities leave an irreversible mark behind, one that can be painted over but never fully erased.

*Keywords:* Direct Messages, Social Media, Painting

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, direct messages can be understood as "a private message sent on a social media website, that only the person it is sent to can see." "DIRECT MESSAGE: Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary," DIRECT MESSAGE | definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/direct-message>). Social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content." Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010): pp. 59-68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>

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## **Introduction**

The conceptual art project detailed in this paper is the amalgamation of scholarly research and creative experiments completed in pursuance of a departmental honors thesis at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. The paper begins with a review of the empirical and theoretical literature that informs the project, followed by a discussion of artists in consideration and of the creation of final artworks. The paper will then review the outcomes of the project through a more detailed description of the paintings produced and will conclude with lessons learned from the exercise of working through this creative thesis.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

At its core, social media is a tool that combines technology and culture to capitalize on an inherent human desire to interact with one another. Its impact on society as a form of communication cannot be underestimated, as social media today plays a crucial role in how individuals are able to interact, through features like direct messaging. The first social media platform to develop a communication system similar to DMs was the website SixDegrees in 1997, which operated almost exactly like Facebook does currently. While the popularity of SixDegrees only lasted into the early 2000s, the overall structure of its online platform became standard. The result of this overarching design trend combined with the continual interest of individuals to communicate privately over these spaces is that almost all online platforms existing currently, including Facebook and Instagram, provide an interface for communication or interaction through direct messaging.<sup>2</sup> Despite the decades-long presence of direct messaging as a form of popular communication in culture, few empirical studies research the specific language

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<sup>2</sup> Irfan Ahmad, "The History of Social Media [Infographic]," Social Media Today, April 27, 2018, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/the-history-of-social-media-infographic-1/522285/>

used on social media platforms. There has been, however, an abundance of studies by media theorists, sociologists, and business researchers that, to varying degrees, note how social media is used by individuals to construct a personal and professional identity, and how this lends itself to be easily manipulated as an advertising and marketing tool.<sup>3</sup> The ability to manipulate one's identity through these online platforms facilitates interactions based on how they perceive or have established their online persona. Thus, when an online persona is constructed as one that is aggressive, it facilitates digital communication that is violent and intrusive.

The 2013 study *Personality, Gender, and Age in the Language of Social Media: The Open-Vocabulary Approach* is the largest research project quantifying language used over social media messages to date.<sup>4</sup> This research analyzed 700 million words, phrases, and topics gathered from messages sent on Facebook combined with a predesigned personality test to establish deviations in the language being used based on personality, gender, and age. The study displayed the results visually through three succinct language cloud clusters that provided an in-depth, exhaustive model that successfully informs my own work, because it demonstrates how language is used virtually over social media messages can allude to how individuals think, interact and communicate in reality.<sup>5</sup>

Pairing with the insights of *Personality, Gender, and the Age in the Language of Social Media*, I turn to British-Australian scholar, Sara Ahmed, whose book *Living a Feminist Life* informs my research. Reflecting on the often-aggressive overtones of direct messages, Ahmed's

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<sup>3</sup>Antonio García-Gómez, "Sexting and Hegemonic Masculinity: Interrogating Male Sexual Agency, Empowerment and Dominant Gendered Norms," in *Analyzing Digital Discourse: New Insights and Future Directions* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 257)

<sup>4</sup>H. Andrew Schwartz et al., "Personality, Gender, and Age in the Language of Social Media: The Open-Vocabulary Approach," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 9 (September 25, 2013): pp. 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0073791>)

<sup>5</sup>H. Andrew Schwartz et al., 13

theory of “sweaty concepts,” feels significant. She characterizes sweaty concepts as “trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present,” and “a way of being pulled out from a shattering experience.” Ahmed states further that, “a sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying,” the challenging part “is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing the difficulty. Sweaty concepts are generated by the experience of coming up against the world...”<sup>6</sup> Through an exercise of writing down my own “sweaty” experiences, I became interested in doing a detailed study of the language used over DMs. Rewriting misogynist DMs I received such as, *Are your hands boobs? Because I want to hold them* or *Paint is for painting, glue is for sticking, would you like to come over to receive a good fucking?* became a form of embodied research, of contextualizing the assault of aggressive words in a new form. I catalogued receiving unprovoked DMs that aggressively commented on various parts of my body and aspects of my overall appearance. After the moment of encountering the DMs had passed, I could still feel their uncomfortable, sticky presence on my skin and thoughts, calling attention to the space held by DMs as a *sweaty* one. The heavy and intrusive nature of this language is something that could be quickly wiped away, like sweat, but the residue of those words would remain attached to my body until I scrubbed them away or covered them up with another experience. Even then, you are not rid of the sweatiness, as the process of cleansing yourself of sweaty memories is an arduous task, one that makes you feel complicit and burdened in an uncomfortable way. This experience of verbal assault is one that unprovoked and as such leaves the victim no path to retribution, making you feel powerless. These interactions led me to identify words or phrases commonly used over DMs that felt significant to the receiver, because a focused study of this language could elucidate trends in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, 12-15

vernacular used in these spaces, which is often aggressive and obsessive. I began by gathering DMs from my own experience as well as from persons in my community in an effort to distinguish a common vocabulary that would inform the language and methodology used to create the final artworks.

Considering Ahmed's theory of "sweaty concepts," I turned to the practice of handwriting. In his writing on the visual work of artist Patti Smith, David Greenberg notes how Smith experimented with the potential "physicality" of language to express herself, oftentimes stopping in the middle of a drawing to scribble words or poems all over the page.<sup>7</sup> Using Smith's method as a catalyst to explore the physicality of the vocabulary generated from DMs, I began repetitively writing and layering words appropriated from DMs. I made a practice of writing the language in various ways, whether that be in the order it appeared in the DM, randomly, or in a specific self-created structure. In rearranging and layering the words in an attempt to disrupt their original meaning, the studies began to gain a sense of urgency, irritation, and obsession that is reflective of the sexualized, hostile language used over DMs. The process of layering text allows for the words to be reorganized, suggesting different contexts and confusing authorship, displacing the language and revoking it of the power it holds within the framework of DMs. In the same way a sweaty interaction leaves an imprint on one's body or mind that cannot be fully erased but only built on top of, the layering of the written word works to facilitate a similar type of multifaceted structure. Sweaty experiences and the layering of handwriting through paint are both processes that leave a residue that will later be covered up, restructured or added onto,

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<sup>7</sup> Greenberg's writings on the visual work of artist Patti Smith were sourced from an exhibition catalogue titled, *Strange Messenger*. Greenberg's short essay included in the catalogue's preface was reprinted from an article he wrote, titled *Illuminations: The Drawings of Patti Smith* which was originally published in *Parkett* magazine in 2001. *Strange Messenger* was produced by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburg to accompany the largest exhibit of Smith's visual work to date, which was on display from September of 2002 to January of 2003.



slowly becoming heavier, more convoluted, and increasingly difficult to contextualize. The process of obsessively layering paint creates a surface where aspects of other layers continue to be visible, often regardless of how much they are painted over. The presence of these residual marks further connects sweaty experiences to practice of handwriting in paint, because both concepts leave an impression behind that one can try to conceal or paint over, but ultimately it is always sitting on the canvas, visible or not.

The desire to explore language through different materials and forms is a practice that has been investigated by many artists of different backgrounds. Of particular relevance to this study is the artwork of Jenny Holzer and Glen Ligon, whose select pieces help to situate my own paintings within the visual discourse of artworks using text as image, drawing attention to and disrupting language from its original context.<sup>8</sup> Holzer's investigations into how language, through varying degrees of redaction and legibility, can stimulate discussions about how gender, violence, and power function in society informed what language was used in the paintings and the process of concealing or covering up text to produce alternative forms. Ligon's oil stick prints, coupled with Smith's use of handwriting, illuminated how the accumulation of specific words or phrases creates a surface texture that relays a sense of aggression and desperation. Ligon's ability to displace context to suggest new forms of interruption by abstracting language through the layering of text influenced how the paintings were arranged and rotated to deconstruct the language. Significant to my thought process, both Holzer and Ligon are invested in how art can dissect or rearrange language to relay a lasting sense of heaviness or violation, reminiscent of a sweaty experience.

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<sup>8</sup> See Jenny Holzer's, *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise* (1981), *Top Secret 23* (2012), and Glen Ligon's, *Study for Passing* (1991), *Untitled (I am Somebody I)*, 2014.

## Creative Process

I began research by collecting DMs from my own experience, my acquaintances, and from public online forums on social media sites dedicated to sharing and discussing experiences with DMs, specifically from Reddit, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.<sup>9</sup> DMs were not collected or solicited with any specificity except that they felt significant enough to the receiver to share with me personally or on a public platform. Unsurprisingly, not all, but many of the responses that informed the 50 most used were from women who had received DMs from men. The majority of people who volunteered to share their experiences with me or publicly online identified as female, indicating that women specifically are more likely to be addressed in an aggressive or sexualized way through DMs, and because of this, women often take note of hostile online interactions after the fact. The 50 most frequently used words generated from this process indicated that memorable language used in these online spaces is often sexualized, aggressive, and obsessive. By drawing attention to the words that were used the most regularly, such as *answer*, *nudes*, and *boobs*, this vocabulary generated from DMs informed which language was experimented with in the paintings and how it was arranged on the canvas.

I completed this series of paintings through a repetition of handwriting and the layering of paint. Paint's ability to be covered up, scraped away or diluted, fosters a process that allows for deconstruction and recontextualization of the language being painted. The excessive layering of language using paint produces a harsh surface texture that reflects the antagonistic nature of the language used to communicate over DMs within and outside their online context. The repetition of language through paint further reinforces the complex ways sweaty experiences

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<sup>9</sup> To study and quantify this vernacular, over 200 examples of DMs were gathered and entered into an online software that generated the 50 most used words and how many times each word was used out of 50.

build on top of one another, becoming denser and more confusing as the text is continuously layered on top of itself. The process of returning to the work and covering or recovering up certain aspects of the piece alludes to the process of being forced to reconcile with sweaty moments, which often means hiding the language or interaction away behind other layers of experiences. Using paint to imitate DMs as a form of interaction, the pieces are in conversation through the repetition of a similar color palette, ranging from light grey to black.

The works were produced through a practice of rotating the pieces and layering text in paint to build up a rough, bulky surface and allow the language to take on its own meaning. Many words generated from the DMs that I had not previously paid particular attention to, such as “answer” or “hello,” suddenly felt distinctly aggressive to me: “*answer, answer, answer me, answer, answer please, hello, answer me, answer, hello?, answer, are you there, answer me.*” In those cases, experiments were done using colors I associate with aggression or desperation. After finishing one layer of writing, I returned and coarsely covered up words or letters, rearranging and censoring the language to reimagine meaning. The completed paintings required between 75 to 150 layers to establish a sense of discomfort and frustration that is experienced in a sweaty moment. Through this process of rotating, layering, and repeating the language, the text gradually became increasingly abstracted, obstructing the legibility of the words and suggesting new connotations.

### **Final Artworks**

The results of this project culminated in three series of paintings and one large painting, for a total of seventeen individual paintings. The first series, which includes two paintings, is entitled, *please\_answer//send\_nudes* the second series, which is made up of three paintings, is entitled: *looking\_going\_ignoring*; and the third series, which includes eleven paintings, is

entitled: *answer//hello*, *Untitled (roses are red)* is the final painting in this body of work.<sup>10</sup> The respective works range in size, content, and levels of abstraction. Each set of paintings can be rearranged or repositioned when displayed to allow the language to be viewed in various combinations, always suggesting new translations. Through this fluidity, the paintings allude to the experience of receiving a DM as a subjective one that is interpreted and contextualized by individuals differently. An important defining aspect of each work is the relationship between legibility and abstraction. Each painting leaves portions of legible text, drawing the viewer closer in an attempt to discern meaning. Several of the pieces' titles elude the language used over direct messages on social media, while others remain ambiguous. This mixture of legibility and abstraction further facilitates a space to disrupt the language, allowing the paintings to take on multiple meanings.

*Please\_answer//send\_nudes* consist of two 22"x30" paintings, each composed of red, black and tan paint. Both paintings were created through the layering of the phrase "please answer" and "send nudes," respectively. The words used in *please\_answer//send\_nudes* embody, through strong use of the color red, the desperate and sexualized DMs messages I noted in my journaling. *Looking\_going\_ignoring* is made up of three 11"x14" paintings that all use black, grey, and nude paint. All three artworks were created through the layering of a single word—"looking," "going," "ignoring," individually. The series uses writing in a variety of sizes and a manipulation of the paint to allow different degrees of translucency and legibility. The words used in *looking\_going\_ignoring* all suggest action or decision making, prompting one to consider the space and language that surround DMs in relation to a distinct type of action or choice. The *looking\_going\_ignoring* paintings informed the creation *answer//hello*, which uses the same

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<sup>10</sup> See Figures 1, 2, 3, 4

color palette but is made up of eleven 18"x14" works with each painting only focusing on the repetition and layering of one letter. *answer//hello*, explores what happens visually if you break words to their very foundation—the letters they are composed of. From there, the piece continues using the same method of writing and layering text to create an image. *answer//hello*, unlike the first two paintings, does not cover or remove the language because the words are already deconstructed into their most basic form. The paintings feel as though they are interacting internally, or in dialogue with each other, as “answer” and “hello” are intended to serve as a response to one another. The last and largest painting created, *Untitled (roses are red)* 42"x30" is composed of a white, grey, black, red, and tan color palette. Whereas the other pieces are made up of words, phrases, or letters distinctly, *Untitled (roses are red)* combines the repetition of all these aspects of language, relaying the feeling of being overwhelmed by an excess of vocabulary. The piece is interrupted by bold tan lines to further disrupt and confuse the observing experience to suggest new contexts.

## **Reflection**

When reflecting on the lasting results of this research process from a personal standpoint, I am struck most by how different aspects of the project, particularly the vocabulary generated from DMs and the practice of repetitive handwriting increasingly challenged my own relationship with or understanding of language and the spaces it occupies with such confidence. The highly monotonous, repetitive nature of writing the text in paint led to a disassociation from the language that was being written. This process of dissociating from language was an experience that continuously prompted questions surrounding the power that language holds in constructing how individuals see themselves and the world around them. Words are ultimately a set of concepts composed and organized in a certain order, created by humans for human

exchange, and as such are always subjectively changing. Despite this, they are often treated and referenced as absolute. If through a simple practice of repetition, a person can begin to separate themselves from language that defines their entire existence, how can someone begin to conceptualize their own identity as unique? When speaking of things in the world—buildings, roads, colors, people—it is often assumed that there is something known about them, when in actuality these concepts are understood as metaphors of things. These metaphors are socially and historically constructed, and ultimately hold little value in relation to reality. Language often builds barriers that seem impassable, but that does not mean that it should not be questioned, and that one should not actively work to deconstruct or reinvent language to critique and push back against the restraints it holds in place. Approaching the conclusion of this year-long project, it is not the DMs collected or the paintings created that continue to occupy my mind, but these questions and ideas still lingering from explorations into methodology and language.

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Visual References

Figure 1:



*please\_answer//send\_nudes*

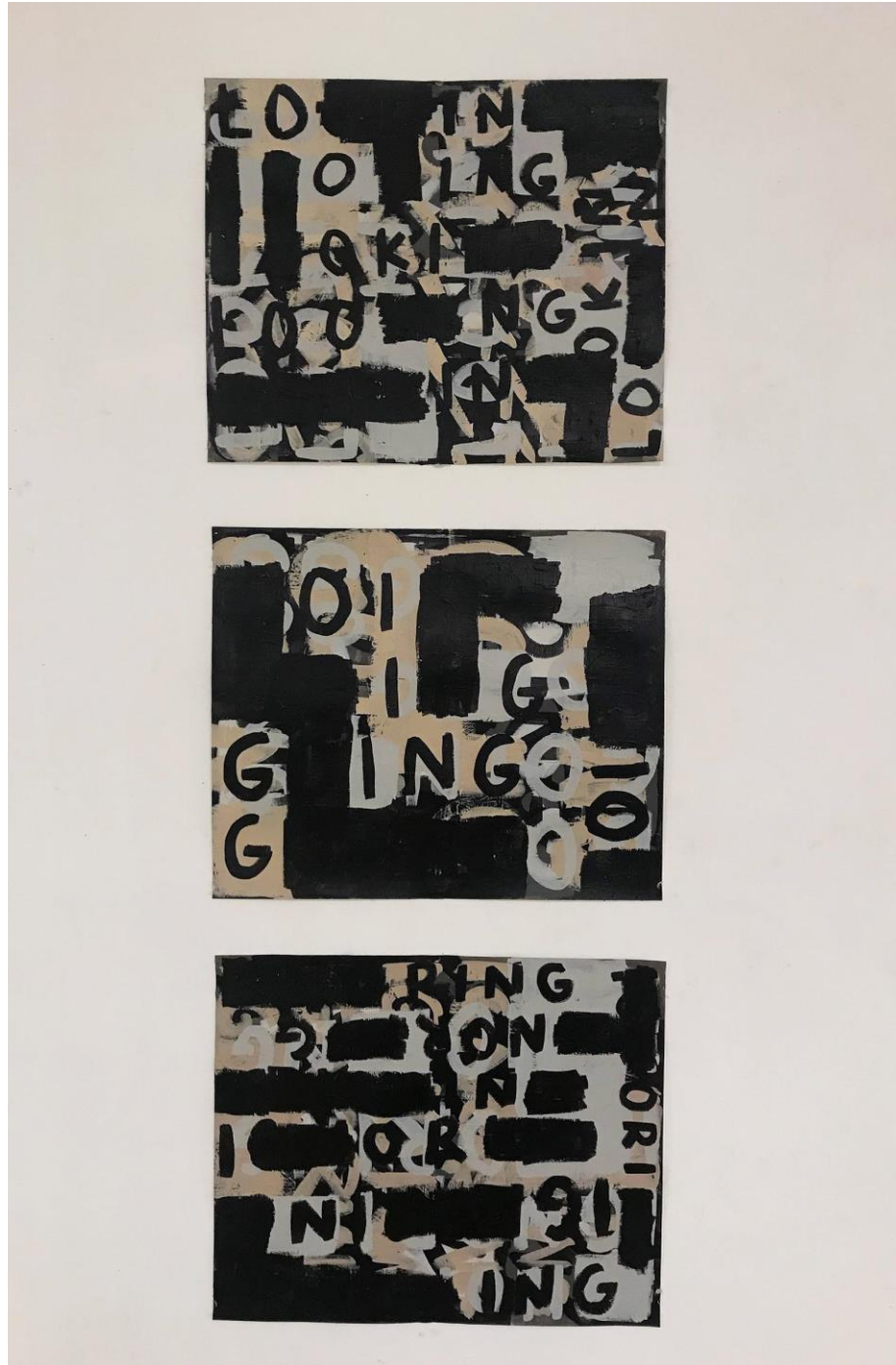
2020

Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

22"x30"



Figure 2:



*looking\_going\_ignoring*  
2020  
Acrylic on Watercolor Paper  
11"x14"

Figure 3:



*answer//hello*

2020

Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

18"x14"



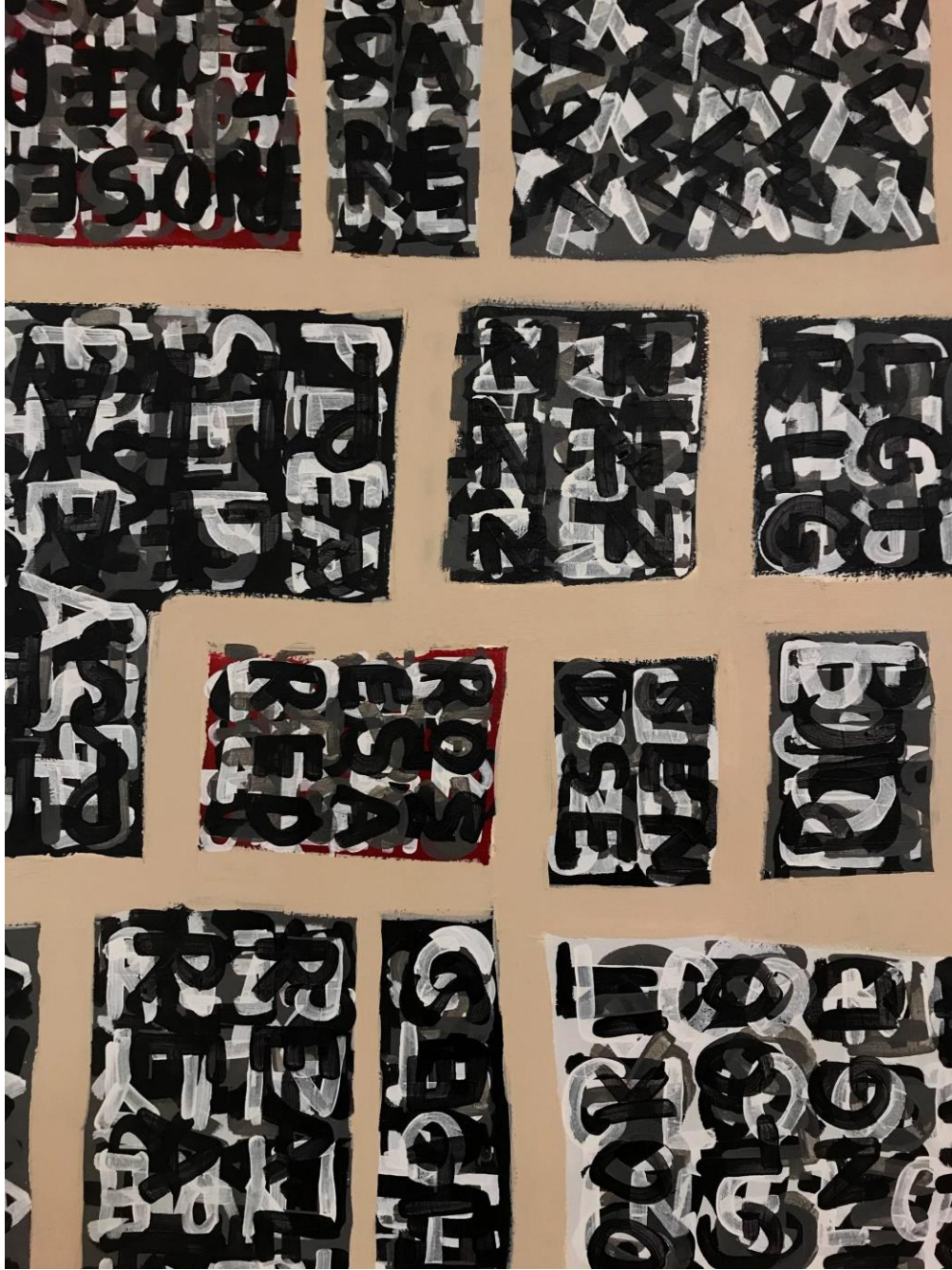
*answer/hello* (Answer Detail)  
2020  
Acrylic on Watercolor Paper  
18"x14"



Figure 4:



*Untitled (roses are red)*  
2020  
Acrylic on Watercolor Paper  
42"x30"



*Untitled (roses are red) (Detail)*

2020

Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

42"x30"