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Contemplative Constructions

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
College of Arts and Sciences BFA Art: Painting and Drawing

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Introduction

My research into the relationship between mechanical and human reproduction revolves around the archive of maps that I have been collecting. The maps that I specifically work with and excavate signs from span from the 1970s to the late 1990s containing both marks created through mechanical printing and hand-drawn lines. As physical entities, the diagrams are made with several different formats and materials. The most basic maps are simply graphite on worn bond paper vellowed from age while the more complex maps are printed with ink and consist of large transparent sheets of vellum. The more complex drafts become so large they must be folded in their storage and this folding combined with the transparency of the paper creates new patterns of line. As I began to include the maps into my art practice, photographing them and integrating them into oil paintings, I realized that by stacking and layering these maps I was constructing a representation of a map by destroying what makes it a map: its exactitude. Symbols that seemed to lie embedded throughout these maps began to repeat themselves and I began to seek them out to re-represent them in my own work. I am less interested in mapping as places mathematically plotted to be navigated and more concerned with mapping as a process. Many of the forms I am attracted to were drawn in graphite and seemed to repeat themselves several times on each map. Architecture and mapping tools were originally sketched by hand and symbols were used as indicators of their progression. In earlier versions of maps, the indicator marks sketched in graphite by the cartographer are recurrent. I realized these marks were unintentionally a testament of authorship unique to the mapmaker who sketched them.

Maps live in a liminal space between mechanical and human reproduction because mapping as a technology requires the intervention of human touch to define its parameters. Maps and blueprints depend on design principles like legibility, accuracy, and organization which rely

on the combination of technology and human hand in their production. As soon as a human hand is involved in any kind of reproduction, however instructive that context may be, original marks will be made. For the architect, there is constructivist thinking behind cartography symbols. They have a purpose and it is not to aesthetics but to accuracy and direction. The cartographer has no interest in a mark being seen by a viewer as an artistic product, granting them a certain freedom to produce effortless forms without giving thought to the creation of an artwork. I am interested in the marks that can be defined in the category of the ordinary. There are moments when maps breach their structural state and become embedded with creative mark-making. These marks can only be made by the most nonchalant hand. A seemingly careless mark to define the outer edge of a shoreline can stand by itself on canvas as a piece of art. A hastily sketched north arrow is defined so distinctly by each mapmaker that it is close to a signature. It is this addition of the tactile that I want to lift from its context and reform into my work. I create a human mark borrowed from a human mark. If the symbol in my paintings originally represents, for example, the direction of true north, the architect has taken that idea of true north and transformed it into a sketch with human touch, graphite to paper. I then process that through layers of additional human touch, graphite to canvas. My intervention of painting the mark into a new environment is sufficient enough to disseminate these borrowings through its new setting; dispersing its use away from that of a tool.

When disassembling and borrowing marks I feel as if I am not the artist but the assembler. I take one draftsman's symbol and pluck it from its intended vista, not because of its meaning or use but because of its aesthetic qualities. I am simply attracted to the form and want to use it in a new construction. To a mapmaker, their marks are a quintessentially ordinary image, the everyday occurrence, a sleight of hand to paper. An interesting thing happens when you take

that image and place it under a new rule. If I am to combine it with a canvas its loyalty is no longer to direction but now to aestheticization.

In Defense of Reproduction

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin dissects what defines a work of art as "the original" (220). Benjamin argues that the original holds its dignity in the fact that it was created at one single point in time and space. The circumstances in which the piece was made can never be reproduced. This original has what Benjamin refers to as an aura, an atmosphere surrounding the original work of art which increases the legitimacy of its historical presence. Benjamin goes on to insist that by creating a mechanical reproduction, the original is forever affected. He says that "since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object" (221).

What I've learned in my process is that there is a unique possibility that I can separate a form from its original meaning completely. The chosen form can then exist in its original form independent from my process and simultaneously can be used in my own work as a new phenomenon. When I take a mark from a blueprint, map, or sketch and transpose it onto a new surface, the goal is not to ruin the original meaning but to displace the form and allow it to be seen as an aesthetic mark in a new context. I feel as if using the original object in a new form increases the authority of the original by producing a new aura. If the authority of the form is tied only to its past existence, by reusing it I am extending its existence. The maps I pull from are physical and tangible. I can hold them in my hand, trace and copy them. I can see the pencil marks pushed into the paper and erasure marks from corrections. If I were to respect it as

Benjamin wishes, avoiding all reproduction, its notes of sincerity would be lost to the contemporary world. Sometimes respectful reproductions are necessary to rescue marks that would otherwise be lost to technological advances and the digitizing of the new age. Benjamin's reaction to reproduction implies he would be happier in the destruction of an aura through forgetting whereas I choose to adopt marks into a new poetic composition in respectful preservation, creating a new aura.

If the circumstances in which we view art must always relate to the original piece's aura, we lose the ability to reframe art in a contemporary discernment. In *Creation and Discovery:*Essays in Criticism and Aesthetics, theorist Eliseo Vivas argues that art must continue to reproduce itself outside of the circumstances it was made because "the vocabulary in which this discussion is cast is apt to make it miscarry" (Jenkins, 623). Iredell Jenkins expands on Vivas' argument in Art and Ontology, relaying that art must reference beyond itself in order to be understood. This is because our current understanding of the world is ever-fleeting and needs constant restructuring.

Our ordinary and usual experience is only rough and vague, inchoate and unstructured, tentative, and fleeting; we miss, through inertia or indifference or distraction, much of what is there to be apprehended (Jenkins, 630).

If the artist employs art as a tool to express the truth of conditions, it would be an act of isolation to limit a work of art to one original production point. The reshaping of objects and ideas into a new composition explores the past to structure a new argument and unisolate the original artwork by continuing to view its elements in a modern perception.

The problem with Benjamin's argument is that he frames art as existent only in the past and thinks that as we advance into fields of the contemporary we move further away from the

classic or authentic. Benjamin believes that technology philosophically deconstructs art because it erases the aura. In his essay, there is a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of reproduction. What Benjamin cites as acceptable is tactile reproduction, students using their master's work as practice for sketching, replicas of statues crafted by hands to imitate the original. Benjamin takes his real case up with mechanical reproduction. Mechanics of reproduction began with engravings and lithographs and as technology advanced led to photography and film production. Benjamin's case draws a distinct line between handmade reproduction and machine reproduction. He states reproduction could always be achieved but the uniformity of technology is too thorough in its replication. The problem with this argument is that all forms of reproduction at one time include human interference that sets them apart from the original, if not visually, then in process. Reproductions can also exist as a new statement in conversation with its surroundings. If the aura of the original is created through the distinct space that it exists in then the aura of the reproduction is also unique to its surroundings. While Benjamin is correct to fear specific forms of reproduction that discount the physical, like digitized reproduction, he missteps by assuming that new technologies cannot also bring the form into a new light. It is the context in which the artwork is reproduced that determines whether the aura of the original is affected.

The Selection Axis and The Combination Axis

In semiotic theory, a syntagmatic relationship is any ordering of a combination of signifiers, a sequential chain of signs that forms an idea through their structural ordering. In the case of prose vs. poetry, poetry is the aesthetic language of the two. In literary semiotics specifically related to poetry, signs are arranged to achieve a structural symmetry or a purposeful

asymmetry. While prose refers outwards to present logical expressions, poetic language refers to itself to create aesthetic expressions. In Roman Jakobson's account of poetic language, there are two steps in creating poetic arrangements:

Firstly there is the axis of selection which refers to the choices we make in language when selecting particular words or elements to convey meaning. The axis of combination refers to the way these words or elements are combined to create larger units of meaning, such as phrases, sentences, and texts (1960: 358).

Viewing my practice through the lens of a Jakobsonian function of language, the maps I draw from represent the function of prose, and the compositions I create in my artwork represent the function of the poetic realm.

If the purpose of an image or form relies on its primary function, I transform that function from its original placement and disrupt the rhetoric around it that allows it to be used as a linguistic tool. In this instance, the symbols within maps connect to prose because the forms exist only to express an outward concept such as direction. It is the functionality of a map that determines how people view its form. The image is defined by its placement and surroundings. It works as a tool only in combination with the forms around it. After removing a form from its original placement the form lacks the plane of content that gave it a specific purpose. By montaging the selected forms into a new context I can make new relationships between the forms. I gain a sense of control over the construction of the images and combine them until I have created a new set of signs. These signs exist within the language of poetry as they rely on each other to create inward meaning. Prose and maps are expected to present facts and therefore do not need symmetrical or aesthetic relationships between signs. Poetry and painting are not tied to fact but to formal qualities. They can create aesthetic representations through their syntax.

If Benjamin believes that the aura of a work of art exists in its unique place and time of creation, the benefit of dismantling his termed art into multiple signifying images is that signs can be viewed in a plurality of contexts. Relating to language, a sign, similarly to a word, can be placed in numerous contexts and the purveyor of the word has control over its spoken or written meaning.

In Charles Peirce's categorization of signs, there exists the icon, the index, and the symbol (Peirce). An icon exists to represent the object- an icon of a tree looks like a tree. The index shows something referential to the object- the index of a tree is a leaf, for example. The symbol, however, is untied to visual representation and therefore has the power to be displaced into a new environment. Some symbols have been so exhausted by the written language that there is an immediate connection created by the viewer through human experience. The symbol "x" for example represents a letter in the Latin script alphabet and also represents a factor to be solved for or proven in a mathematical alphabet. Tradition and convention have taught us these things so thoroughly that "x" will always be relative to them. Symbols must be learned to connect signifier to signified. Without the preconceptions of "x" and considering it as it has never been seen before, "x" as an aesthetic object is the conjoining of two straight lines of the same length. It is simple, alluring, straightforward, ordered, and attractive. If my work is simply about the forms I am attracted to and the new relations I can make through combining them, the predecessor to creating the work must be to unlearn the symbol. In choosing a subject so arbitrary to the modern technologies of mapping, the analog map, I have placed myself in a generous position. Most of my audience has not learned the meaning of hand-drawn directional signs. This means I have the ability to generate a symbol for the viewer that is independent from previous teachings. Through my research, It has been difficult to forget the meanings that I have

learned. Being the processor of the research I have forever intertwined the language of mapping with my art. However, in the case of the common viewer, I can keep the discipline of cartography unrelated and showcase the value of the symbols as I originally recognized them. In a way, I am jealous of the unaware, and as I paint these symbols into their new landscapes I try to reach an unlearning of my own.

To be open to accepting new arrangements of the poetic all past tense versions of the used language must be muted. In his introduction to *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard relays that poetic imagination is unavailable to those who have ordered the imagining of signs into an organized section of prose.

A philosopher who has evolved his entire thinking from the fundamental themes of the philosophy of science, and followed the main line of the active, growing rationalism of contemporary science as closely as he could, must forget his learning and break with all his habits of philosophical research, if he wants to study the problems posed by the poetic imagination (I).

As a mode of representation painting is a language with many broad generalizations. One generalization, the one most broadly used, is that painting is a language of representation. Painting should accurately represent an object, an icon, a scene, or a person. This diminishes painting by assuming that it must properly and structurally represent a thing. If in the most basic assumptions, painting is said to create truthful visual icons of the object then it is within the viewer's interests to find truth in reimagined icons. If mimetic painting lives within Bachelard's description of the "growing rationalism of contemporary science," the advantage of abstraction in painting is that it relays to the "poetic imagination." The benefit of a loss of representation is that all remaining painted surfaces must be accepted as present, not only in the sense of its

physical existence, but as evoking a presence.

Access to the Realm of the Ordinary

To remove an object's ties to its former circumstance it must transcend planes from object to thing. The thing, unlike the object, has no purpose. The thing lives within the realm of the ordinary and can be repurposed into any field. If the object is tied to the structure it exists within it is only through disassembling that structure that we can discover an ordinary thing. Thingness can be found anywhere, if a hammer is a tool and a hammer and a nail create a unit then a nail without a hammer in existence is a thing, and a hammer without the purpose of hammering is a thing. Without the existence of the map, directional symbols become meaningless and become thing-like. It is Heidegger who says "The first step towards such vigilance is to step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls" (181). The obstacle that prevents us from seeing a thing for its thingness is preconceived notions of general justifications. The categories that we have allowed ourselves to be taught encapture us and limit the possibilities we have to undefine a form.

In his autobiographical novel *My Struggle vol. 1*, Karl Ove Knausgaard notes the mundane as an aesthetic experience, he expresses his attraction to the banal in prose:

There were few things I found more beautiful than cranes, the skeletal nature of their construction, the steel wires running along the top and bottom...the way heavy objects dangled when being slowly transported through the air, the sky that formed a backdrop to this mechanical provisorium (provisional arrangement) (363).

The crane, as a thing, contains several notions that interact with classical aesthetic compositions.

As Knausgaard notes it has the presence of line, intersection, weight, foreground, and

background. It is first the recognition of the crane as a thing, and then the associations of its qualities with the aesthetic that makes it available to poach and use in a new translation.

Knausgaard translates the crane from object to thing by reimagining it as a non-use object. He describes the crane as both a sculptural object by noting the nature of its construction simply to achieve a construction and not to aid in any other purpose. He also associates the crane as a painterly device when mentioning its relationship with the background, immediately putting it in conversation with the language of landscape and still-life painting by accentuating the push and pull between subject and backdrop.

The question now posed is how Knausgaard's ideas can exist as an artwork in a new totality. Is it simply enough to displace the crane from its environment where it lives as a structural technology? The structural integrity of the crane is made invisible by its learned purpose as a tool. The tool is only a tool when it is functioning within a set. When the tool is individual it is no longer a tool but an image. If Knausgaard's crane were set in a gallery as a readymade artwork would the act of separating the crane from its function as a tool be enough to allow a viewer to see the crane as a poetic object as Knausgaard can? In Akiko Busch's *Notes on Invisibility*, she speaks on expression gaining power through extinguishing references. "The elimination of words and images serves as an antidote to the blizzard of those surrounding us" (100). I seek to enroll myself in the gaze of a newcomer to the explored world and to liberate myself from the obligations of the discovered. Setting Knausgaard's crane into a gallery is similar to setting the map's symbol into an envelope of painted surface. By displacing the "blizzard" of surrounding references. I am forcing the focus of the viewer's eyes by removing all surrounding pieces of information that skew the symbol's artistic integrities.

One basis of thing theory is its focus on relation to the external world. There is a desire

behind collecting things to reintegrate us with the external world. Things are admired, to hold, desire, touch, and take them apart. The emergence of material studies in artworks is based on the attraction to spaces that can be uncovered through explorations of a new enclosure. Listening closer to the voice of things opens an existent void equally as large as the imaginings of the undiscovered. In Bachelard's study of the botanist's language, he uncovered an imagined world upon entering into the already existing temple of the flower.

[The narrator] entered into a miniature world and right away images began to abound, then grow, then escape. Large issues from small, not through the logical law of a dialects of contraries, but thanks to liberation from all obligations of dimensions (154).

Entering into the world of the map, similarly to Bachelard's flower, begins with the unfolding both literally and conceptually. As I breach the map's mechanical state, I discover new

both literally and conceptually. As I breach the map's mechanical state, I discover new dimensions. What was microscopic now becomes an insurmountable problem of recapturing a symbol that must be tackled through graphite and oil paints. I want to create a discussion about the tensions that reside in each piece - about the nuances of a tense line careening through an open field; a lack of satisfaction but a desire to see more connects to that contrast. I want viewers to consider a rejection of the map and apply that rejection while still noting the existence of the original map. The work can hold both the spaces of muse and product simultaneously.

Inhabitants of Superimposed Boxes

The most effective method of successfully reimagining an icon is dependent on placing it in its newly created environment. In painting, the environment is contained through the edge; the framing device or edge of the canvas are horizons that define where forms are allowed to live.

The artist must be aware of these boundaries and learn to work with or against them. The edge

can be a tool to breach purposefully but that entails a message, the message that a boundary exists and must be broken by the more important piece, the symbol. In his volume of essays *The Truth in Painting* Jacque Derrida's theories on deconstruction concern the space that painting inhabits,

Between the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified, and so on for any two-faced opposition (410).

Any move that is directed against the hierarchies of the canvas is a noticeable act that opens discussion into the why. Whether I choose to respect the boundaries of the edge or breach them are not decisions taken lightly. Line can create dimensions undiscovered and that opportunity is given, handed with open arms to those willing to reject the ingrained teachings of an object. Rejection of the space or extreme respect of its borders each relay a take on the histories of the institution of art. As Derrida implies in his discussions on the draftsman's art of drawing in Thinking Out of Sight: Writings on the Arts of the Visible, "No drawing is without the adventure of this unique experience. Experience means crossing, transmission, trajectory, translation" (143). In the maps I draw from, all mechanically produced lines are contained, sometimes even doubly contained, by the edges of the physical map and an additional ink border. I have respected this in some of my work as I want to showcase the mechanical aspect of mapping along with the tactile. It is always the human-drafted marks I come across in these maps that disrupt borders. They carelessly impose themselves on aesthetic law and so I have transposed that into some of my pieces, forcefully reprogramming my hand to reimagine the hierarchy of the frame in painting.

In Bachelard's structural exploration of the house, objects, and rooms do not exist as a

seen image but as "the concentration of intimacy... in its most simplified form" (37). Art, painting, does not imitate; it discovers, and that discovery is the process the artist takes to employ new meaning onto a form or series of forms. The arenas in which my paintings play out each have a set dimension. The canvases are self-inhabiting inside their four walls. In Bachelard's look into intimate spaces, one aspect of homes that remains steady is that they contain themselves. Homes are individual units; like paintings, they have unwavering dimensions that contain all of their elements. The relationship between architectural landscape to painting is that each landscape is rooted deeply in how we arrange a space and provide aesthetic attention to structuring intimate environments.

When seeking out the structuring of the banal in mapping I look to Paul Claudel's structuring of the city of Paris. The apartment block is looked at by Paul Claudel as a removal from the earlier use of the house as a living structure. The apartment is the rearrangement of the house to a vertical, more mechanical, and structured way of making "a sort of geometrical site, a conventional hole which we furnish with pictures, objects, and wardrobes within a wardrobe" (144). Bachelard refers to Claudel's apartments as "superimposed boxes" unrestrained and elevated groupings that contain draftsman's hands in their creation. Now it is the job of the artist to reinvent the draftsman's line into aesthete creations just as I employ the markings of the cartographer in my work. As some artists find allegiance to chance, my allegiance lies with allowing the marks made before me to define the geometric borders of my work. The maps contain a doubling of the border; the actual physical edge of the map and its use of an extra printed line to encapsulate the inner workings of the map. I've used this doubling of the border in my own work, letting the canvas exist as an edge, and within it, "superimposed boxes" create more edges that try to resist the imposition of stray markmaking.

Symbols within my work infringe on the rules of the geometric, breaking line or living distinctly off kilter to the boxes that compose the larger configuration. If poetry is the reconfiguration of fragmented language then the physical montage of elements into a new surface creates a poetic and tactile space. I refer to painting as a form of montage. While collage employs a stacking method, montage allows the enmeshment of signs. Collage is built upon itself, there is additive and covering up, montage embodies a removal as well as an addition. By viewing Gregory Ulmer's The Object of Post-Criticism in the context of Jakobson's section of semiotic theory, collage exists within the realm of the selection axis and montage of the combination. If "collage is the transfer of materials from one context to another and montage is the dissemination of these borrowings through the new setting," then all montage begins from collage as all combination begins from selection (95). Selection without combination is simply taking the original image and transferring it like a decal. It is mechanical reproduction; directly forming an image without the addition of human touch. Montage seeks to guide the viewer into the envelope of space created by the combination of canvas and graphite, directly addressing the inside of the geometric structure alongside the outside until those distinct bounds become unwound. Every position imagined by a viewer is within a space created by human expression.

Aesthetic attention does not only relate to how we structure an environment but the elements chosen to exist within a new totality. The selection of signs as proclaimed in Jakobson's work is the predecessor to the combination. The attraction to banal marks of the everyday comes from their quiet existence. If the artist's goal is to create an expression there will always be an entrapment to signify brilliant invention. In Vivas' *Creation and Discovery*, he notes that the relationship between art and the everyday world is that art must first reference the everyday world in order to understand it. By appreciating the structuring of the everyday world and the

way that spaces are converted by human existence, the artist can employ modesty and the assemblage of truthful forms will inertly create an honest artwork.

A self-consistent structure, involving an ordered complex of values of a sensuous, formal, and of an immanently meaningful nature, which satisfy the alert mind turned towards them for two reasons. First, because they are, in the isolation of the aesthetic experience, final values, inherently interesting for their own sake and not as means. And second, because beyond them we perceive an authentic vision of the structure of reality (Vivas, 187).

Paul Claudel's apartments speak to Vivas' "authentic vision" because they isolate themselves from an aesthetic vision, creating lines and geometry that were not first proposed to please the eye. The casual power of the of the cartographer's mark lies in the fact that it was made outside of the aesthetic sphere and in doing that they have created the most honest mark because they didn't mean to make it to be viewed as an oeuvre. It is authentic in a way that the artist's hand can only mimic because we are structured to create poetry and by that structuring, we lose the ability. My excitement upon viewing a plain-spoken poetic image physically manifests in my reproduction. In the words of Bachelard on translating from the poetic logos, "When I receive a new poetic image, I experience its quality of inter-subjectivity. I know that I am going to repeat it in order to communicate my enthusiasm" (xxiv). Repetition has the ability to drain something of symbolic value. It gives me the opportunity to feel sated by the symbol and begin to explore the independent variables in the painting. The reproduction of the symbol is a shrine to the original object, a successive version of its aura limited to no signified language, and within the new aura I, as the artist, can continually develop creative decisions.

Referencing the Map

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty displays the connection between the viewer and the work by amending that every work was created by borrowing a section of reality through touch, and reversedly every reality now contains the created aura of the newly assembled artwork.

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes- even more, every displacement of my body- has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space (134).

Maps live in the intersection of the tangible and the visible; they are the perfect vessels for designing with invisibility. They are the mathematical planes that describe with precision the world in which we reside yet they are empty of any human experience. Maps are the impression of the places we physically exist within onto a visible plane with a matte mid-grey. The benefit of the marksman's drafting is their allegiance to already discovered dimensions. Their techniques relate to organized truths and their methods are simply to line things up factually with drafting. It is within the human's scope to designate real dimensions into digestible arenas such as a scaled map but it is also the name of the discipline to employ transitional lines with creative notion. In Derrida's words, painting has a "mimetic essence," the ability to create a reflection or representation of something in existence (131). Painting is the desire to fill in the traces of

illustration and to expand upon the "partition between the visible and the readable" so as to not be confined to fixed contours (92).

The body of work that I have created contains structural integrity built upon imagined dimensions. Nothing engrained in each canvas is apart from human touch. It was the imagination of objects structured in prose that brought cartographers to embody their objects into written form and it is the imagination of new structural poetic creations that brings me to arrange new constructive contemplations of past thoughts through painting.

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Appendix

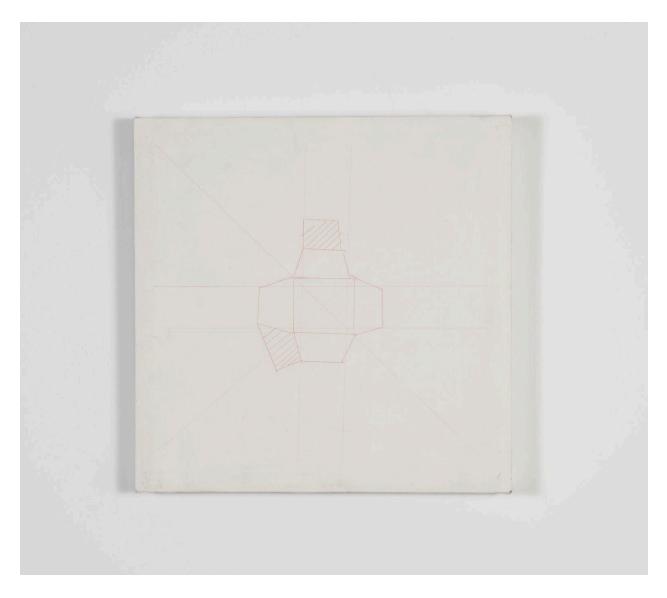
This is a digital iteration of the body of paintings that accompany this text. The following pages show the entirety of the body of work titled *Contemplative Constructions*.



Untitled, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 2023



Untitled, Oil and Colored Graphite on Canvas, 2023



Untitled, Oil and Colored Graphite on Canvas, 2023



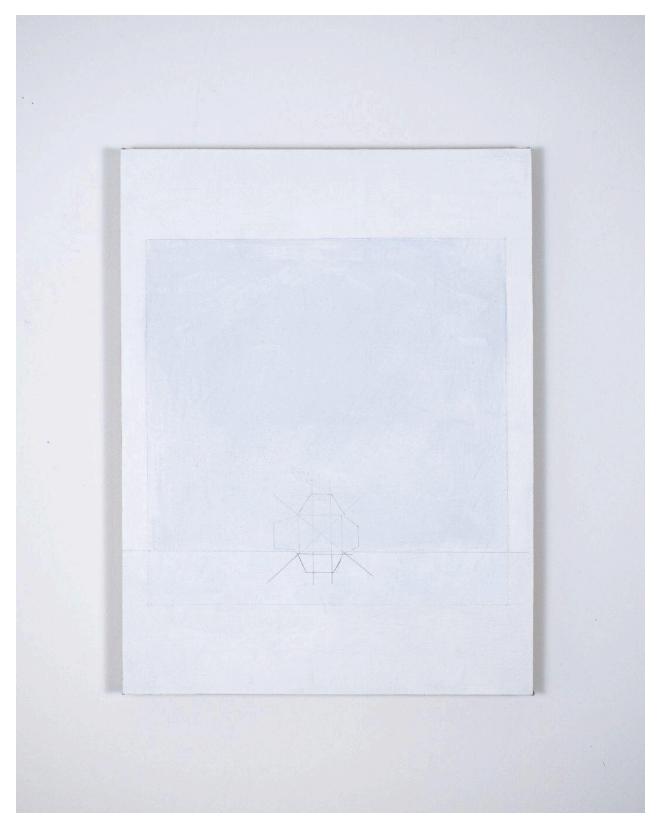
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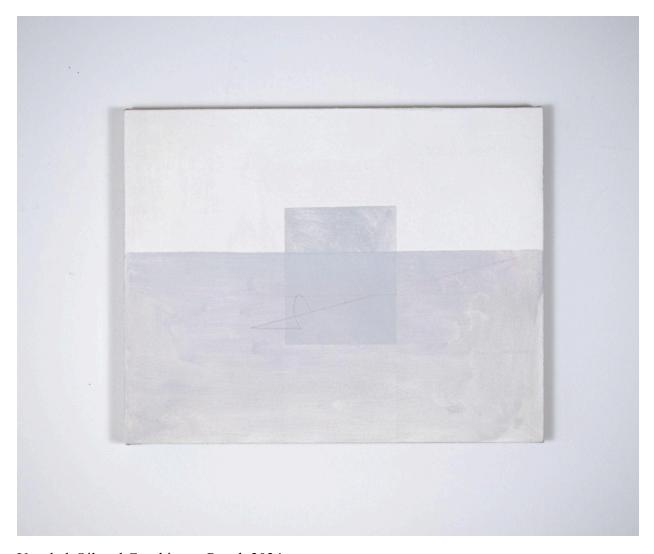
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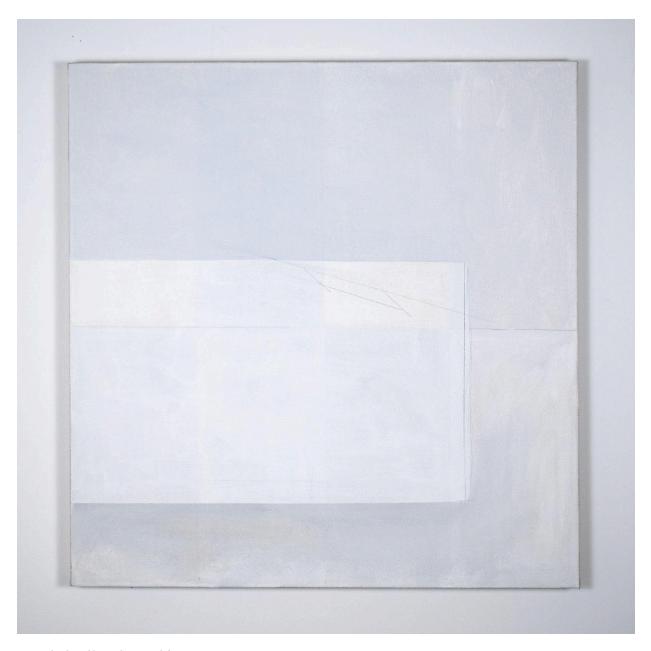
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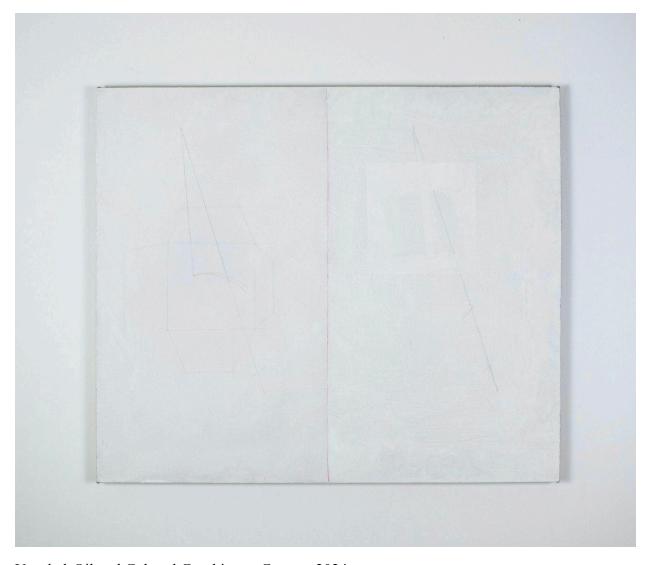
Untitled, Oil and Graphite on Panel, 2024



Untitled, Oil and Graphite on Panel, 2024



Untitled, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 2024



Untitled, Oil and Colored Graphite on Canvas, 2024



Untitled, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 2024



Installation view of Contemplative Constructions at the ICA gallery in Chattanooga, TN.