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This paper is a reflection on my journey away from painting and my recent effort to broaden my understanding of internal and external experience by exploring language and the material world. This journey led me a few steps closer to finding my voice as an artist. It loosed the threads of thought, multiple and variable, that make up this thesis body of work.

FOR THE TIME BEING

by

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I would like to acknowledge that any successes of mine are not entirely my own. They are each and all made possible by the mentorship, love, and support of important people in my life. It is, of course, impossible for me to list everyone here. (Maybe I'll make an 'Art' out of that someday.) For now,

Thank you Bill, Linda, and John for teaching me how to see.

Thank you to the Art Faculty of UNCG, especially Mariam, Chris, Corey, John, Barbara, and Jen, for not letting me get too lost.

Thank you Grandma for your words of wisdom and generous financial support as I try to find my way.

Thank you Uncle Jim, Aunt Karen, Granddad, Sylvia, Aunt Peggy, and Aunt Ann for supporting me from afar.

Thank you Hens for loving me and inspiring me to be a fierce and powerful female force.

And thank you Momma, Daddy, and Sarah. You have never doubted me, even though I consistently choose the rocky path.

PREFACE

“June 6, 2012

I'm having a bad day today. Pippa destroyed my Tillandsia plants and one of our Rhode Island Reds is missing. (The past few mornings, I've been locking Pippa in her kennel and letting the chickens and guineas free range. I was inside doing various morning chores, and when I went out to check on them, there were 6 guineas and only 3 chickens. The 3 were going about their business like it was nothing. I did not find any feathers or blood. Either she ran off to explore on her own, or a hawk or fox or a neighbor's dog grabbed her and ran.) *Disheartening*.

Also, I found 2 Cabbage White Butterfly pupae on some lettuce I harvested in the garden. I wanted to save them and watch them hatch. Two days ago, one of them did, but it couldn't figure out how to get out of the screened-in-porch. So, I jarred it and set it free in the backyard. Pippa came bouncing around the corner and to my horror, snatched the new butterfly out of the air. I shouted profanities at her, but she just stood there looking at me and chewing. I'm determined that this next one will live longer than five minutes. But I should know better than to challenge nature. I'm not in control at all here.

That's life and death on the farm.”

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CHAPTER I

RADICAL ATTENTION

What was so wonderful about painting? There was a moment when suddenly I could “see” things, and by “see” I mean I could see the most basic shapes and color relationships that made up the forms of the visible world around me. Sometimes there were moments when those forms came together to make a harmonious composition. Sometimes an odd little visual anomaly would break up the harmony and it was as if I had stumbled upon an ephemeral gift. A present. *The present*. I was a witness.

It is dedication to perceptual experience and a kind of radical attention that I learned from painting. Radical. Forming the root. Going back to the root. Seeking out the essential.

In the fall of 2011, I was alone at my uncle’s house. I was reeling and resting after a traumatic experience in a cold place and I was trying to steady myself. It seemed logical to make a self-portrait in an attempt to find myself within my surroundings (Fig. 1). As one color was placed beside another, I began to find my form, and when it felt like enough, I stopped painting. Later, my mother asked why I hadn’t painted my eyes. It hadn’t occurred to me that a face without eyes was problematic, and now that it had been pointed out, I felt silly. I couldn’t answer her. And I felt defensive, because I didn’t want anyone to think that I’d left the eyes out because I wasn’t capable of making eyes. It was just that in the process

of painting my form, the eyes were superfluous; I was trying to eliminate superfluity.

The wondrous part of painting was the process of radically analyzing the visible, and finding a structure within the chaos of our material surroundings. Structure is reassuring. Finding structure makes me feel immersed in the world. If I can act on the world, if I can find something there, then I exist. Structure in the unstructured. Meaning in the meaningless.

It is dedication to perceptual experience and a kind of radical attention that I learned from painting. Radical. Forming the root. Going back to the root. Seeking out the essential.

CHAPTER II

FEELING/FILLING THE VOID

Just before I started grad school, I went to see a Mark Rothko retrospective in Portland, Oregon. I recognized the affective quality of his monumental color field paintings, but I also felt a little let down by them, perhaps because of all the hype and myth surrounding them and Rothko himself. The hype built up an expectation that left me feeling disappointing.

Rothko thought quite highly of his task as an artist. He saw it as a pursuit of some universal spiritual experience. This makes me skeptical. How pompous was he to think that he could speak some universal truth! (But don't I secretly wish to find the same thing? Don't I wish to achieve some understanding?) It was Anna Chave's interpretation of the work that made sense to me. She related his painterly gestures to an abstract language that could "speak" on a basic level.¹ The colors float in a void, barely touching (or not touching at all) and are divided by rifts of colored space, both deep and on the surface. It's the visual elements and material relationships that can embody meaning. Thus a visual tension occurs in Rothko's work; the forms oscillate between a visibly graspable space and incomprehensible void.

¹ Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

The idea of creating or using a material/visual language fascinated me. But the Promethean task of making an art object that could embody the totality of existence is frustrating. I find comfort in trying to grasp human experience, and finding connections between materials and colors and words and images; for a second, I have a sense of calm, a brief feeling of reassurance that I understand. But this is of course an illusion. I am inevitably sent back into a state of ambivalence and conflict.

A Short Poem About Ambivalence and Conflict

Must make a point to do that.
I want to buckle down and get settled.

I'm beginning to feel that excitement. I'm
I need to write down all my ideas and make a
beginning to generate ideas. I sense possibility.
schedule for myself. And on top of all this

But I haven't been able to channel
academic stuff, how am I going to exercise? I've
that into work yet. My most recent paintings and
been running a few times, but I haven't found a
drawings have felt forced. I've struggled. I need to
good route yet. Got heckled by a man on the street
prioritize my ideas and set out to do them.
yesterday.

I want to buckle down and get settled.
Must make a point to do that.

Filling the Void: Drawing, Poetry, and Experience

I didn't come to graduate school to keep hacking away at the same problems (art) with the same ax (perceptual painting). Dissatisfied with painting, I felt a void, but I didn't know how to fill it. I'm very stubborn. I could hack and hack with an ax until there is nothing left of my surroundings or me. Over the last two years, I've really struggled to fill the void. *Struggled*. But I've learned to problem solve by working around a problem and by embracing the nature of the problem. Maybe, stop hacking with an ax and start peeling back the layers with a penknife. Don't fill the void. Feel its vastness.

Looking back now, I can name three areas of interest that I have consistently and stubbornly clung to: drawing, the poetry of the everyday, and the experiential. My explorations within each of these areas has culminated in the work that I call my thesis.

An Expanded Understanding of Drawing

In 1995, Francis Alÿs walked through the city of São Paulo carrying a can of blue paint. A thin stream of paint leaked from a tiny hole in the bottom of the can. It drew a blue line on the ground as he walked, traced his path around the city. In this drawing/performance *The Leak*, Alÿs expands one of the most basic drawing components, the line, to the scale of his experience of the city. It was so simple, and it is a revelation to me.

When I entered graduate school, I was already interested in the *process* of drawing as a way to respond to the world, and I desperately wanted to find a way to eliminate unnecessary materials and gestures. It didn't occur to me until I looked at Alÿs'

work that drawing could be expanded beyond the materials. Drawing is a language and any material (physical, human, ephemeral) can be the medium for communication.

Drawing Language

1. We are each alone.
2. We each experience the world in a subjective manner.
3. We are able to achieve an illusion of intersubjectivity through language.
4. Language is verbal, visual, and physical.
5. Writing is to language as drawing is to art.
6. Therefore, drawing is a method of communication.
7. Drawing is mark-making, placing, arranging, organizing according to a system, or not.
8. Drawing is a trace of something that happened.

Classroom Shuffle

In the Spring of 2013, the idea of expanding drawing into an experience preoccupied my thoughts. I was also feeling alone and uncomfortable in a new situation, and I missed home. Those two preoccupations, my childhood home and experiential drawing, led to the idea of *Classroom Shuffle*, drawing with anything at hand, even people (Fig. 2). I contacted my “second mom,” Gina, who helped raise me and who also

teaches sixth grade at my old middle school. She agreed to let me visit her sixth graders and make a collaborative “drawing.”

A public school classroom must be one of the most rigid and regulated environments that a child experiences. I wanted to upset that rigidity and allow for a new experience of the classroom space. I told the students that we were going to “draw” with the classroom. Any and every object was raw material, a drawing tool: furniture, backpacks, posters on the walls, and the students themselves. I told them to look around and assess what they found available to them. Then I gave them 60 seconds to “draw,” to rearrange the classroom and themselves. After 60 seconds, they had to freeze on the spot. I responded to their changes by shifting the arrangement slightly or maybe moving a student from one end of the room to another. The result was an unconventional class portrait.

The students and I discussed the activity afterwards and I asked them to respond anonymously on pieces of paper, which I read later. I had a lot of fun interacting with the space, but especially with the students. I was impressed by their energy, enthusiasm, and creativity. This “drawing” was a simple gesture, but the act itself took on a life of its own.

The Poetry of Everyday Experience

Sometimes, when I’m struggling to find the words to express some idea, I stumble upon a quote that speaks for me. The other day, on Facebook, Israel Hershberg posted an image of one of Giorgio Morandi’s bottle paintings and this quote by Wallace Stevens: “The whole world is less susceptible to metaphor than a tea cup is.” Language makes

metaphor possible. Metaphor makes language more efficient. We communicate with more understanding when we can make associations between disparate events or objects. Where literal description is inadequate, metaphor is able to speak beyond its mere parts.

Poetry is a mode of communication that makes good use of metaphor. What is a poem? A poem is a very specific arrangement of very specific words. Each sound, word, meaning, double meaning, punctuation mark and space is deliberate. It is the essential amount of information needed to communicate some *thing*. The elements themselves are basic; when formed into a poem, they become transformed. This is the model for which I strive in my own work, but instead of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, I use visual and physical materials from my immediate surroundings.

Sometimes I “find” poetry in the environment. Sometimes I create it from the raw material available to me. This relates back to my original painting revelations: “Finding a structure within the chaos of our material surroundings...Finding structure makes me feel immersed in the world. If I can act on the world, if I can find something there, then I exist. Structure in the unstructured. Meaning in the meaningless.”² Or metaphor in the material of my daily experience.

It was *structure* that attracted me to the cardboard box designs and paper goods that I used in *(un)familiar forms*, boxes from food items, India ink bottles, junk mail, and the cardstock tags from discounted clothing purchases. Each fulfills some very specific function, with just the right amount of material, folded just the right way. Efficient and intentional. I made collagraph prints from their surfaces and in some instances, I

² Page 2.

deconstructed the objects to reveal their structure (Figs. 3-5). The resulting eerie artifacts, or x-ray-like images reveal, in simple black and white, the texture, shape, and surface detail of these common, cheap objects that move “stuff” in and out of our lives, but are never really considered in themselves. In reflecting on this project, I am reminded of a quote from Stuart Shils, who says, “If the painter is open to the world, everything becomes grist for the mill, even things one doesn’t expect or even doesn’t consciously like or want.”³

³ “Interview with Stuart Shils,” *Painting Perceptions* (blog), Dec. 2, 2010, <http://paintingperceptions.com/cityscape-painting/interview-with-stuart-shils>, (March 30, 2014).

CHAPTER III

IN A MOMENT OF DESPAIR

In moments of despair, I sometimes turn to my old journals and find some writing from the previous year to get some perspective and reflect on where I've been. It was just such a moment in the Fall of 2013. I had stumbled upon a method of expanding a small piece of paper by cutting it into a zigzag, and I had been forming long paper "threads" from my infinitely growing piles of to-do lists. However, I found myself unhappy with the results. The discovery of the paper cutting method had been so exciting, but the final product felt anti-climactic.

So, in despair, I picked up some old journals and began reading my entries written during an artist residency in Oregon in 2012. Because of the temporal distance from that time, I could read them somewhat dispassionately. I remembered the crippling fear I had felt, but it was long past. The writings reflect a mixture of verbal anxiety and reflections on day-to-day experience, and even though they were far removed from my current experience, they felt relevant. The writings are specific, but when taken out of context, they are more general, almost neutral. These excerpts became *lo(o)se the thread*, a series of loose, lost thoughts and reflections.

I abandoned the to-do lists and used a typewriter to record excerpts from my journals on a piece of 8.5" x 11" handmade paper. I typed double-spaced in black ink

and when I reached the end of the page, I flipped it upside down and typed with red ink in the open spaces. The black writing was right side up. The red was upside down. When cut into a zigzag, the black and red sentences were all upright, only now, the sentences formed a single line, with black and red sentences alternating and interrupting each other. Each 8.5" x 11" paper formed (roughly) a 43' long thread, which I wound around a walnut spool (Fig. 6). I recorded a "reading" of each spool in video. As I slowly unwound the spool, the text moved across the screen like a ticker tape. But instead of "the news," it announced just one person's news. The mundane information— sometimes garbled, sometimes coherent— moves across the screen, falls to the floor, and forms a pile of paper thread at my feet (Fig. 7). Both the information and the presentation are neutral. The viewer may or may not find meaning. But I believe *this* is the risk of all experience.

For the first time, I really felt like the work was *whole*. It presented moments of serendipity and clarity, where the alternating lines of text just happened to line up, and then moments when the thread of thought falls apart and gets lost. Incoherence and lucidity. An oscillation not unlike the tension in Rothko's paintings, but one that I had discovered on my own.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLOWERS

When I was a child, I used to stay with my Great Aunt Harriet while my parents worked. She was a genteel Southern Lady, but not pretentious. She smoked cigarettes like a cool Hollywood star and when she saw you, she'd say, "HEY Dahlin'!" She also had a green thumb. Exotic houseplants and cuttings filled her back porch, and her yard was carefully landscaped with ornamental trees, grasses, and annuals. Though small, her yard felt like an enclosed world to my tiny child self, like a sheltering flower forest with nooks and crannies to explore. While I wandered and played, she would walk along the perimeter to check the hedge and pluck dead blooms from her bushes.

I have always felt a little sentimental about growing things and when I moved to Greensboro, I resolved to fill my tiny apartment with houseplants (even though I live on the shady side of the house.) I found the farmer's market the first week I moved and that soon became a source of potted plants and flower bouquets. At some point, I began a weekly ritual of buying small \$5 bouquets from one particular stand staffed by Shirley and her mother, whom everyone calls "Mom," and who looks uncannily like my late Aunt Harriet. They sell bouquets year-round, using herbs and greens in addition to flowers from their farm, and it's a good thing. I *need* those flowers every week. It isn't a luxury, but a necessity. After an exhausting week at school, those flowers are a small gift to myself and a reminder that all things are subject to time, which makes it even more

important to witness the present. The flowers meant so much to me. I felt compelled to represent that somehow, but how do you illustrate the present? Something that is so elusive and subjective?

As If The Force Could Extract Something Special

The first attempt was a printmaking solution. I had made collagraph prints for the *(un)familiar forms* series. Maybe the force of the press could reveal the power of the flowers the way it revealed the structure of the boxes. As soon as I noticed that a bouquet showed signs of waning and wilting, I took it to the studio. I laid each flower, and sometimes a group of flowers, on the press with a heavy piece of cotton rag paper. The press forced the two materials into each other and left an embossing of the flowers along with any colored liquid and organic residue. The simple prints are a bit vulgar, without the sweetness and charm of “pressed flowers.”

I started this new weekly ritual, desperately (and forcefully) trying to coax something profound from those damn flowers. After pressing over 60 individual prints, I stuck them all over my studio walls. Maybe their sheer number would overwhelm me with their presence? But they could not do that. Yes, they were beautiful, but like Rothko’s paintings, I couldn’t expect them to embody a power beyond their physicality.

A Poetic Solution

Disappointed and unsure what to do next, I turned to some artistic mentors, artists I’ve never met in person, but whose work provides examples of dealing with weighty content in delicate ways.

One artist such artist is Janine Antoni. In her video *Touch* (2002), you see a beach and a horizontal black line, a tightrope, stretched across our screen view, just above the ocean horizon. Slowly, Antoni begins walking across the tightrope as her weight brings the taut line closer and closer to the horizon. She reaches the middle of the screen, and for a moment, her foot touches the horizon and appears to rest there. That is what art can do! Allow you to defy your human limitations and step out onto the horizon. But she doesn't linger; she continues walking across the screen. And that is the crux of the work. It is a poetic effort to achieve an incredible feat that also acknowledges the illusory nature of representation.

Continuing to pursue art's impossible feats while recognizing its limitations is real idealism. It is admitting the limitations of your humanity, but continuing to strive for transcendence. That is, to me, the ultimate poetry.

For The Time Being

All I wanted to do with the flowers was condense their being into some little graspable nugget of time, to preserve them so that I could turn to them for comfort or pass them on to someone else like a talisman. What if I mashed and molded them into bricks? I don't know how to make bricks. But I do have a bread pan, running water, and a freezer. I began encasing my weekly flowers in loaf-sized blocks of ice. The result was a pleasant surprise. The ice preserved the forms and colors of the flowers and greens. But the block had to remain in the freezer in order to stay that way. Once again, an obstacle. I cannot compete with time and physics. But I can embrace them.

My freezer started getting quite crowded at around 17 bricks, so I decided it was time to share them. I set up a plain white shelf in the lobby of the Gatewood Studio Arts Building and displayed each of my bricks for an entire day. As they began to melt, the ice became crystal clear and revealed the bright colors of the flowers within. The day wore on and the melting accelerated. I couldn't let my bricks slip away so easily, so I started capturing the water in jars and cups. By the end of the day, the ice was gone and a sad, soggy mass remained. And a video.

For The Time Being is not merely documentary, but a reflection of what I couldn't achieve with the project in the first place. The video begins with me placing bricks one by one on the shelf and moves forward through time to the melting process. Then it jumps back to the shelf and the fully formed bricks. Fades into melting. Then jumps back to the beginning. Video is able to move back and forth in time, but it is still just representation, an illusion. And the video will continue to loop and loop and loop, achieving what I can't. A defiance of time and change.

The Resolution of Indecision

At the end of the day, I had cups and cups of pale green, gold, and ruby colored water. What to do with them? I didn't have the heart to throw them out; they contained the essence of the bricks. I considered using the colored water to dye wool or fabric or paper, but I hesitated. I hesitated (well frankly, just avoided making a decision) for two months. March rolled around and it was time for Open Studios with the MFA students. The night before the event, I started cleaning out my studio. "Now I will be forced to deal

with that water,” I thought. I cleared a path through my studio junk to the windowsill, where the cups awaited my judgment. I reached for one. It was empty! For two months the water had been evaporating slowly, leaving delicate rings and residue on the walls of the cups. I sliced one open so I could see the residue more clearly. Inside each cup, the residue formed a mysterious image. A sepia-toned landscape, a seascape, or a desert. A world contained within a plain ole paper cup. All that time I spent trying to force meaning from paper boxes and envelopes, and here it happened by accident! It was a poetic *Resolution of My Indecision* (Fig. 10). It is also an opportunity for a new beginning, an opportunity to further explore time and poetic failure. This is not the end.

CHAPTER V

NOT THE END

In her essay titled “The Grasp of Totalizing Systems,” artist Camille Henrot states, “Totality makes sense only if it can be brought to human proportions, which is to say, held at hand.”⁴ That is the task that I have set out to do, to try to reach an understanding of experience in such a way that I can translate it into a material language. But Henrot also warns against the perils of this type of translation when she says, “We should understand the violence inherent in defining reality by trying to grasp it, by manipulating things with our own hands and concepts. Grasping, as in comprehending or holding, is both sensual and violent.”⁵ I wish to pursue art as a catalyst for contemplation— a means of achieving understanding and transcendence, but also as a way to celebrate my human limits. I am empowered, but also limited, by language. Language is incomplete, and, because of this, I must always strive to get one step closer to perfection. Mark Rothko wasn’t a fool. And neither is Francis Alÿs, even though he spent several hours pushing a block of ice around Mexico City in *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997). I am happy to join the ranks of these “not fools” in creating and finding some semblance of poetry in this mess of existence.

⁴ Camille Henrot, “The Grasp of Totalizing Systems,” *Art in America*, (June/July 2013): 44.

⁵ Ibid: 45.

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CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *Self Portrait*, oil on board, 12"x 12", 2011.

Figure 2. *Classroom Shuffle (Group 2)*, video still, dimensions variable, 2013.

Figure 3. *(un)familiar forms: India ink*, collagraph print, 6"x 8", 2013.

Figure 4. *(un)familiar forms: six pack*, collagraph print, 22"x 20", 2013.

Figure 5. *(un)familiar forms: clearance sale tag*, collagraph print, 3.5"x 2.5", 2013

Figure 6. *lo(o)se the thread*, paper wound around walnut spools, dimensions vary:
6"x 2"x 2"- 4"x 2"x 2", 2013.

Figure 7. *lo(o)se the thread*, video still, dimensions variable, 2013.

Figure 8. *For The Time Being*, flowers in ice, dimensions vary: 8"x 4"x 3"- 11"x 4.5"x3",
2014.

Figure 9. *For The Time Being*, video still, dimensions variable, 2014.

Figure 10. *The Resolution of Indecision I*. water lines on paper cup. 9"x 1"x 8", 2014.



Figure 1. *Self Portrait*, oil on board, 12''x 12'', 2011.



Figure 2. *Classroom Shuffle (Group 2)*, video still, dimensions variable, 2013.

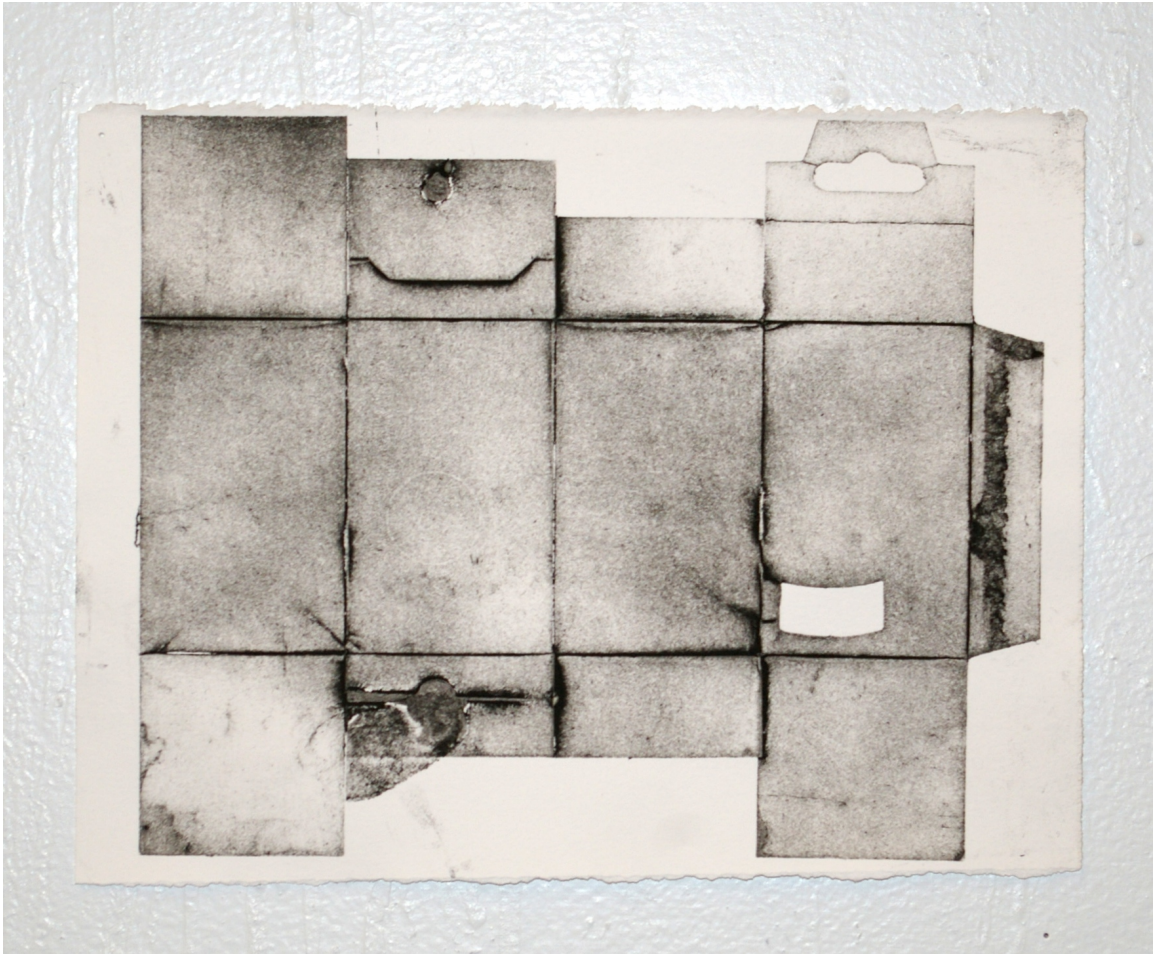


Figure 3. *(un)familiar forms*: India ink, collagraph print, 6"x 8", 2013.

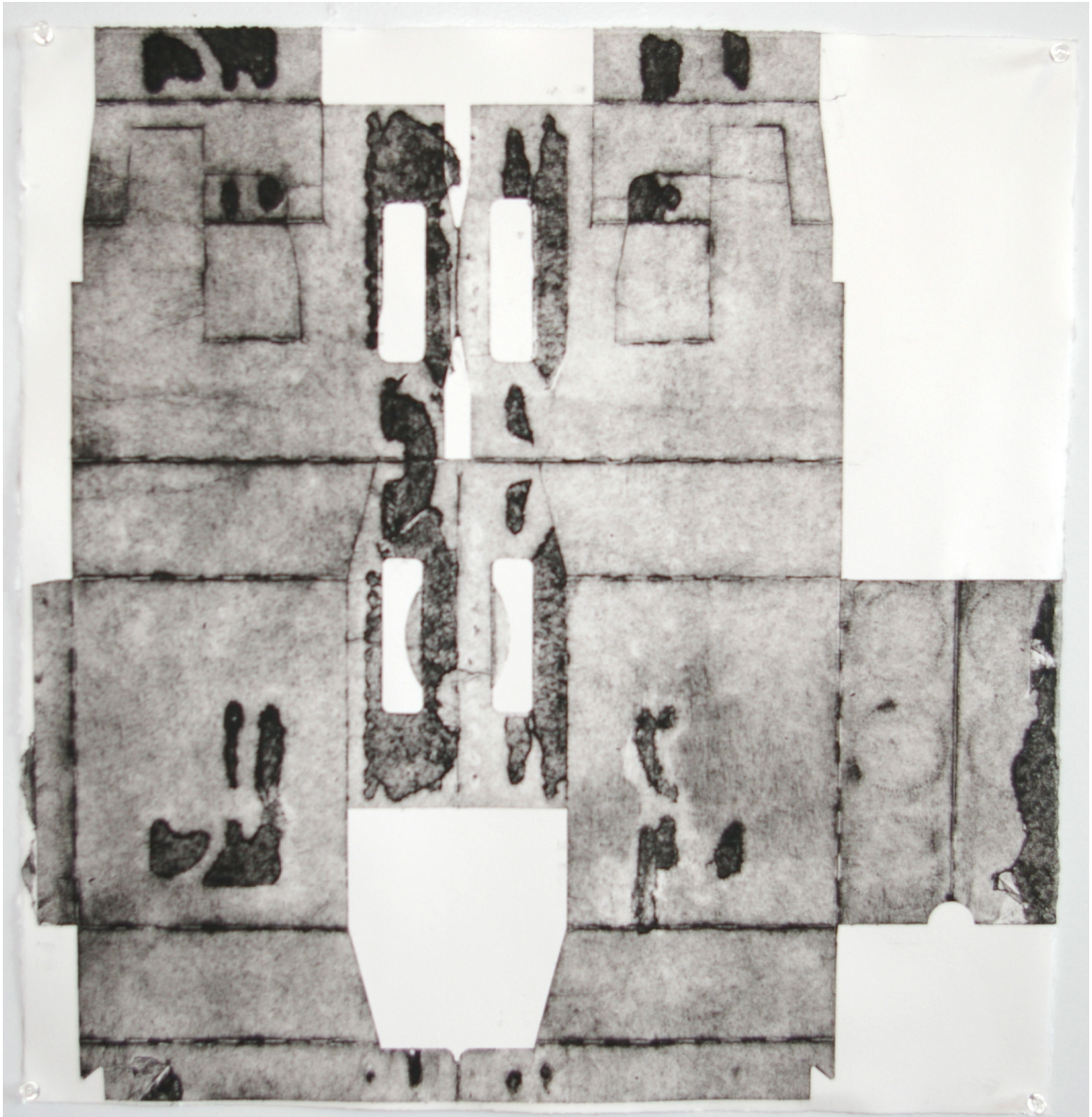


Figure 4. *(un)familiar forms: six pack*, collagraph print, 22"x 20", 2013.

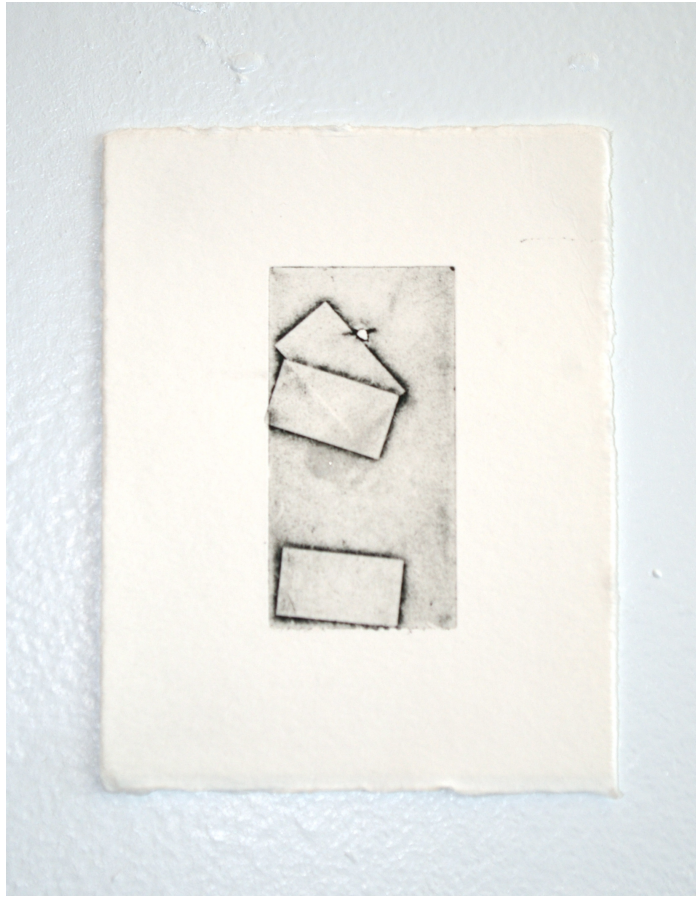


Figure 5. *(un)familiar forms: clearance sale tag*, collagraph print, 3.5"x 2.5", 2013



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