

THESIS

A PSYCHOSOMATIC
CONDITION PRINTS AS
SYMPTOMS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

A PHYCOSOMATIC CONDITION

PRINTS AS SYMPTOMS

To transcend my standard way of art making, I have revoked all intent or previous purpose. I work intuitively, reacting to each mark as it is placed and developing an image on the matrix rather than the mind. This mode evokes internal conflict to spill into the physical world, as they are not allowed to dawdle in the mind. The resulting images are psychosomatic: they are the physical symptoms that manifest from an underlying mental disturbance. They are not the cause of the problem, only the residue created from the mind taking form.

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY WORK

I used to think art was about being clever and explaining something to the audience, but I don't care much for that now. My interest lie in pure exploration- an investigation where answers are not the objective: I certainly have no obligations in my work to provide answers or explanations to others.

Brooding in the delusion that I enjoyed the monotony of science lectures, I enrolled in my first printmaking class six years ago as a creative outlet. I want to say my life was shaken by the encounter- that I questioned my existence and immediately denounced all things science. That story sounds wonderful and romantic, but I cannot make claim to it. In truth, my regimented and logical mind fell in love with the technical aspects of etching at its own pace. I was smitten with the crisp bite of the ferric acid and obsessed with dominating the metal. Frustrated by the regurgitory nature of my science studies, but driven with a deep need to create, I used my copper plates to showcase closely honed skills through illustrations I presumed to have a complexity beyond my chemistry textbook. The etchings were small, intricate, and fascinating. But I cannot talk about them honestly without acknowledging that they were made for others. I was prideful at the attention they drew, and composed my images in a way that would guarantee a reaction from the viewer. I wanted to anger them, insult them, make them think- wanted them to hear my story and feel that I had somehow enlightened them.

I felt a deep anxiety that my illustrations would not be original. I had great stories and opinions in my head and needed to compose the right images, lest my print be banal or evocative of a typical art school assignment. I spent so much time stressing over the image that I never

investigated printmaking as a medium of exploration- just a vehicle for my drawings. Experimenting could mean a chance at failure, and I had become too comfortable making (what I deemed) successful prints to take that chance.

I arrived at graduate school thinking I would continue my work from undergrad. I learned new techniques that forced me to consider the vastness of the medium. I was weary of the anxiety I felt when trying to compose a new illustration, but stepping away from them made me feel helpless and vulnerable. The failure I anticipated confronted me without mercy; speaking in honesty I do not think I made a single successful piece the first two years of my program. I stumbled between illustrations and forced abstraction that revealed a disparaging gap between the two I could never bridge.

Small sparks of discovery and a growing sensitivity kept me searching. I began to disregard my own abilities and intentions the summer before my last year and just began making anything. The new images were obscure and alien. I learned to gain satisfaction in the process rather than just the end product. Most of these prints were stone lithographs made from crayon dissolved in various solvents. I would add and scrape, counter etch and add, and scrape some more. The solvents would act unpredictably leaving the print very different from the image on the stone, so I stopped caring so much about the final product. I started working in a completely reactionary process, laying down lines or tones to be immediately altered as I saw fit. The image was done when my responses had led to a product that was itself of interest to me.

Looking at all my grad work as a retrospective, I can chronicle two aesthetic themes. One is a tendency towards globular, organic masses that dominate most of the picture frame. I investigated the subject of whales and icebergs repeatedly because I enjoyed the largeness and bloated appearance of their form. The second tendency is to make dropping, tangled, or static

lines. Often these two elements interact in the same image. Finally I lost all recognizable forms and worked purely with these two elements in my most recent work. The investigation of masses and layered line occupy most of the images, not as separate elements but merged as one.

The shift between my earlier and current work looks like an aesthetic change, but it was a product of evolving intentions. I bring away from this program my body of work, but also (and perhaps more importantly), I bring a deeper understanding of art making. I am comfortable experimenting without the anxiety of failure, and I have decided that any mark I deem valid will be so. I crave the collaboration with the medium and know that if I work with honesty, every endeavor (despite method or subject) will be rewarding.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

I bring with me every experience and no experience to my work. I am an inventor, builder, researcher, and insatiable inquirer. Sometimes the questions are formal: what does this line look like over another? And sometimes conceptual: how does that act of making and the final product relate to me? I have learned to be empathetic with my work. It is not cold and sterile anymore. It's a manifestation of my physical and mental state acknowledging and responding to the other through the materials and process.

Frustrated with my original way of art making, I realized I had take an approach of pure honesty. I decided to see what would happen when I allowed for an open dialogue between my mind and the materials. I would allow my subconscious to reveal itself in printed form. In order for this to happen, my body would have to be the vehicle connecting the two. I had to be true with my physical self as well; allowing lines to tremble when my hand is tired, adjusting images when my eye does not like them, and having reactions as my only intent. What manifested were images rendered in real time, a history of decisions on the stone or plate. In this intuitive state, what would be revealed through the body of work produced? I became more genuine in my marks, using only ones I am naturally inclined to and creating images that satiate not a previously presumed image but one that reveal the subconscious through a collaboration with the materials.

CHAPTER 3

PROCEDURE AND RESEARCH

Lithographs 3.1

Wanting only spontaneous decision-making, I approach the lithography stones and clear my mind of any presumptions. The instant the first mark is made all, of the subsequent marks are a chronicle of reactions. When I feel burdened by many thoughts, I liberate my mind from the temptation to “draft” by giving myself a task- I must completely cover the stone. Now, in theory this would result in all of my work being that of black or mostly black surfaces. But this is not the case. I give myself that goal so any marks I begin to make don't matter. In theory, these marks would all be covered eventually and none would be distinguishable. However, as experiments go the result is not always the projection. As I freely make marks I become interested in a certain aspect of the image being formed. And from there I either build upon this area, remove it, or altogether alter the image. Using this exercise one would wonder if my work becomes mindless- and this too I have questioned myself- but in opposition, I believe it becomes more mindful. My body responds, my eyes, my hands. If my hand flinches the line records it. If I am indecisive, the history of subtraction and addition is visible on the stone and subsequent work. I refuse, in a medium that is so taxing on one's body, to deny my physical presence any longer in the work. In this manner, I am letting my subconscious guide my making. Such is the case of *The Underlying Issue* (fig. 1). The work began as a dark drawing, which satisfied me momentarily. Once I was through working and discovered all that I had through those marks, I began to scrape. I scraped with intensity and for hours without a single goal except to be satisfied once again with the image. Working in a non-objective manner with formal marks sometimes

compels images to appear. Whether these images are just coincidence or subconscious, I cannot say. But they do happen and for each viewer will be a difference experience. I worked on *Sad Bird* originally upside down. Nearly finished, I flipped it around and added a few quick lines (fig. 2). And upon printing, discovered that when observed upside down it partially resembles a childish rendering of a penguin. I have worked with penguin imagery before, so to say this was a shock would not be true. But how can these things manifest in my work without my permission? This event led me to believe the subconscious must be at work. That it manifests itself through my body and uses it like a tool to show its presence.

The Incident Suite 3.2

The suite of *Incident* etchings was too approached with little finality in mind (fig. 3-7). My fear of working with copper was that the material would lead me to be less spontaneous and work with more hesitation. I decided for a time to avoid copper and concentrated on stone lithographs and collographs. After consideration, I realized that it was ridiculous to be worried that the material would affect my work, as it is inevitable! Metal and stone are different and I will react to them as such.

I have a love of the sharp, clinical etched line and decided I would do a series working primarily with this. I began in the center, slowly spindling outwards. Each of the five etchings started with fragile lines making up a skeletal mesh that expanded out into a shape. *Incident 5 state proof* is a state with only one layer of etching (fig. 8). This plate shows the chatter of line work comprising the shape. I used aggressive scrawling to build the form outwards, growing from a thin frame to something with density.

The etchings are not describing something physical, rather they are themselves descriptors, or the actual physical thing that has manifested from the subconscious and is now an undeniable entity. As I work I make decisions on the shape, density, and texture of the etching. If I dislike the shape that has grown, I will scrape out areas to mold it to my interest. The shapes go through many transformations often starting as flat transparent line work that gets etched and perhaps over etched to the point of disfigurement. I scrape the etchings deeply and remove some of the density, only to be replenished with more work. This process goes on until I see fit. The ebb and flow of overworking and scraping down leave a history on the plate. I am not fully capable of removing such deeply etched work, and I allow my prints to bare witness to this physical impediment.

Other Prints and the Allowance of Play 3.3

Layering, and the investigation of materials have granted an area of play in my work. The *Incident* suite gave me much room to explore the etched line, but I felt it could give me more. I wanted to negate the dense, reserved look of the etchings and decided color would accomplish this nicely. The etchings were layered with one another and other dry points in *Endoscopy* 1-3 (fig. 9-11). The density of the plates made them obscure the previous print, creating semi opaque fields that would withhold information.

Other techniques such as collograph or monoprints gave a great freedom and directness other methods lacked. Both allowed layering in unique ways that spoke true to the materials. *Untitled* collograph was physically sculpted with gesso and carborundum (fig. 12). I used a pallet knife and sandpaper to add or subtract the relief I was building. The layering in this case was building upwards onto the matrix. In contrast, *Distention* was layers built onto the stones,

plexiglass, and surface of the print (fig. 13). The monoprint layer allowed me to bypass the complexities of process and paint freely, obscuring the litho below. A graphite pencil was the most direct layer, augmenting the appearance of the two previous prints.

CHAPTER 4

INFLUENCES

I am more attracted to artwork that is unsettled, that has a very apparent struggle or a jarring sense of the deranged. My instinctive affinity towards dense masses and drooping lines pull me to artists with similar aesthetics. Perhaps because of my physical response to artmaking, I find myself attracted to many sculptors or 3D works. Judith Scott obsessively wraps objects in soft threads until the particular object is no longer apparent. What is left of her binding are new objects that have swallowed up others and are both beautiful and threatening. I appreciate them more upon finding photos of her embracing the works (fig. 17). Their size indicates that Scott had to be very physical with her pieces and yet she is still compelled to embrace them upon completion. They are an intimate and physical part of her that she has a bond with.

Eva Hesse, with her experimental latex ropes (fig. 18) and dangling bulges (fig. 19), gives the sensations of the internal body spilled outwards. Her sculptures are surreal but reminiscent of organs so they stay within our realm and not an imaginary one. Her engagement with the materials she was using went beyond the act of manipulation or collaboration; it ultimately was the likely source of a brain tumor that ended her life.

Scott and Hesse represent to me artists who broke the sterile boundary between art and maker. They were one in the same- their work being extensions of themselves left like a residue of their plight. But formally, I connect more with both painters and printmakers. There is no pen, pencil, or metal wire that can compare with the etched line. It is both a recess- being bitten into the plate- and a deposit, when filled with ink and accepted onto the paper's surface. Martin Puryear's printed forms are built by layers of lines, like rebar supports. The density can only be

attributed to the deposit of ink being forced into the paper. I am stricken by the presence of his forms. Their density and architecture suggest something more prominence than its size reveals on the paper. These forms stand alone and confidently inhabit their own world. His print, *Three Holes*, captures your gaze and sends it searching from one white dot to another, never able to leave the vortex of lines but content with that fate (fig. 20). I am most interested in all of the intersections of the lines, how they overlap but stay regimented without tangling. His prints are similar to those of Terry Winters whose lines are more interested in encompassing the space than building up believable structures. I enjoy the white spaces that shine through the netted marks on *Grid* and the curious bold squares in the upper left corner (fig. 21).

CHAPTER 5
REALIZATIONS

Creator and Viewer, How I Interpret the Work 5.1

I find a disjunction between my experience making my work, and my thoughts viewing the finished product. While working I try to keep my focus in a vacuum of the image; watching it grow and change without a specific endpoint in mind. I work in layers of application and removal, acid biting and scraping. The physical process of making is so consuming that viewing the finished product seems less important. The image is evidence of my physical motions and nothing more. As my body of work began to build (particularly the *Incident* suite), I have been forced to acknowledge there is more at work than just physical motion.

My hand is the mode to which the subconscious is released. The images are manifestations of a mental state brought physical- the symptom of something greater, something unspoken showing itself in a way that is undeniable yet not completely tangible, like the overpowering stench of a whale rotting miles away offshore that cannot be seen but is true and all encompassing. The prints are a result of a compulsion of mental factors taking physical form. In our society we refer to this condition as many things: stress, delusions, poltergeist, tumors. All connote something physical but may be more proper in relation to the psychological. This is the realm I find belonging to my work. The prints are the manifestation of a psychosomatic condition. They are drawn from the subconscious and allowed to spill into the physical world through the printmaking process. These entities are not the *cause* of the mental condition but the bastard child generated from the affair of mental taking somatic form.

When I take the role of a viewer, what I find are visceral forms or environments that are in distress but content to remain in the picture plane. The prints are not imposing or aggressive, rather quite self contained and dwelling within their own ecosystem. They do not extend their reach but are undeniably there and present. This is particularly true for the suite of large etchings. The dense forms spindle inwards with small fibers attaching them to the picture plane. They do not have movement nor do they beckon or repel. They are content, like contemplative monks, to dwell in their own space.

True too is this for my smaller lithographs. The imagery is unmapped and intuitive, and yet somehow does not threaten to approach our own fleshly world. *Static in my Belly* is an investigation of line work lying atop one another (fig. 14). The lines keep my eyes scraping from one area to another and the contrast and open space is quite jarring. But because it is so small, and the lines are frantic yet feeble, it somehow exists in its own frame and universe.

This visual interpretation solidifies my urge to relate the work to the psychosomatic. That they are self contained entities is like a medical condition- ulcers perhaps- that are content to exist by means of their host, and inevitably show their presence. They suggest something biological in their form but exist on a two dimensional plain that frustrates the notion that their size or structure somehow relates to the severity of the mental issue. Such as *Distention's* quiet and calm demeanor, it slowly droops and bulges downward (fig. 9). Eventually something will happen, the form will grow or escape, but it does so quietly and without revealing what troubles this will cause.

Medium Enforcing Concept 5.2

As I step back to realize the greater dialogue in my work, I find the medium of printmaking has a direct impact on the work and how I relate to it. This recent body of work has pushed me beyond my attraction to the etched line. I no longer sit in admiration of the nature of prints- I collaborate with them. The indirectness of printmaking alludes to my investigation of the psychosomatic in that mental factors do not always have an apparent or direct effect; they lie in frozen animation, building slowly and quietly until they must be forced into the tangible world.

My physical process of printmaking can be meditative or obsessive, it borders on both madness and contentment. The large etching series takes form from hours of repetitive scribbling and scraping. Each form is created by countless tiny lines layering entangled- such as small occurrences layered together to create a psychosomatic symptom. It is never just one event, it is many small happenings that knit together and form their own creature. The largeness of the copper plates and weight of the stones are a constant reminder of the physical issues I am addressing. When I scrape the stone's surface, or scribble line work over previous etches, the sounds created are overbearing at times. I have to stop or find ear coverings just to deal with this harsh sound. I realized by doing that I am trying to deny the presence of the artwork. These pieces are not created quietly. Their entrance into the physical world is clumsy and jarring, like a tumor whose size has finally began to restrict the function of other organs.

The issue of a "frame" or confined image making space is an element that has intrigued me through the whole process. There is something uneasy and thrilling about the embossment revealing where the metal has been. The way a print sinks into a paper, versus pushing out into the space (like a painting) is an element I like to play with. The large etchings have a very defined space of "print" and "no print". The embossment keeps them existing in a realm between

physical and theoretical. They recede in as if to step back from our world, and yet the presence of dense black ink pushes back outwards. They are the physical embodiment of minuscule layers and marks I have compiled. One might call them a chronicle of actions- but this would be definitive of all artwork. I have come to realize them as a chronicle of flattened emotions. Emotions that were once fresh that have been processed and are now dry and used as building material.

Due to the nature of a litho or bleed print, some of the works are devoid of an embossment completely. The *Endoscopy* series is cropped elements of my large etchings that do not have the embossment- their aperture border contains them without the need for a physical boundary. I like that I can reveal or hide parts of the plates by cropping them. I found the circle to be the most intriguing border because it is continuous and pulls the image back into itself. It speaks to a physical or medical issue, where only small parts can be observed if at all. The lack of embossments hides one of the most common indicators that the work is indeed an etching. Such an obscure element is a nod to the ways a psychosomatic condition appears as a physical ailment, but is something else entirely.

Conclusion 5.3

To conclude, I am no longer an artist after a clever trick. My hands only create what brings me pleasure, and I allow my journey to show in the work. I crave the frustration, unanswered questions, and awkward situations I have to deal with during my art making. I hope to never be fully satisfied with any of my work.

FIGURES



Fig. 1, The Underlying Issue, stone lithograph



Fig. 2, Sad Bird, stone lithograph



Fig. 3, Incident 1, copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 4, Incident 2, copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 5, Incident 3, copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 6, Incident 4, copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 7, Incident 5, copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 8, Incident 5 state proof, copper etching



Fig. 9, Endoscopy 1, 3 plate copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 10, Endoscopy 2, 2 plate copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 11, Endoscopy 3, 3 plate copper etching with drypoint



Fig. 12, Untitled, collagraph

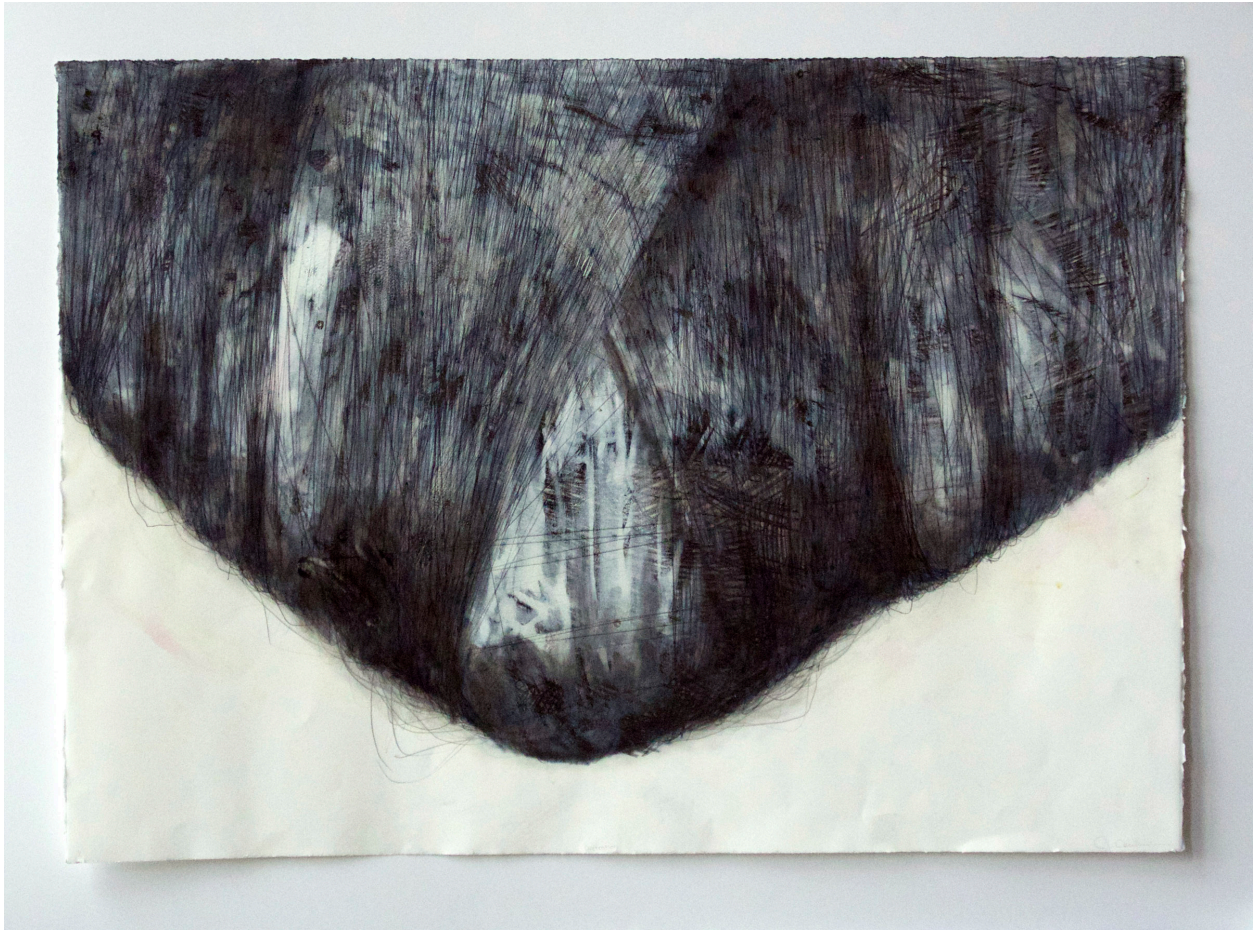


Fig. 13, Distention, 6 stone lithograph with monotype and graphite



Fig. 14, Static in my Belly, 2 stone lithograph



Fig. 15, Realizing there's a Problem, stone lithograph



Fig. 16, Trapeze, 2 color lithograph



Fig. 17, Photo of Judith Scott with sculpture, 2002



Fig. 18, Eva Hesse, *No title*, latex, rope, string, 1970

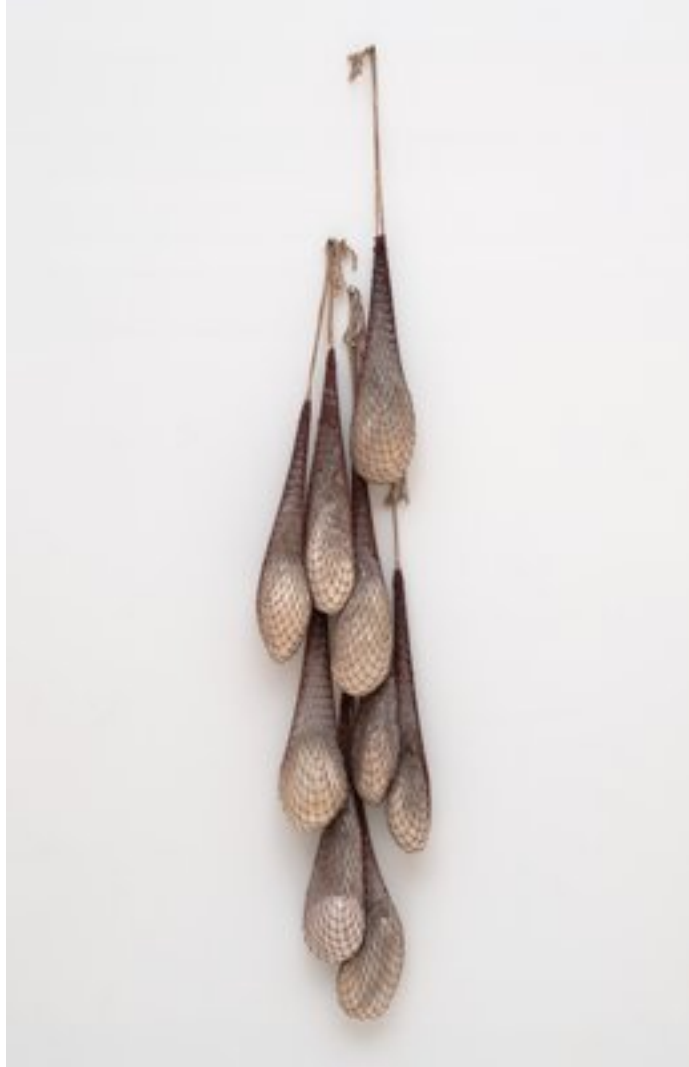


Fig. 19, Eva Hesse, *Untitled or Not Yet*, net bags, clear polyethylene sheeting, metal weights and string, 1966

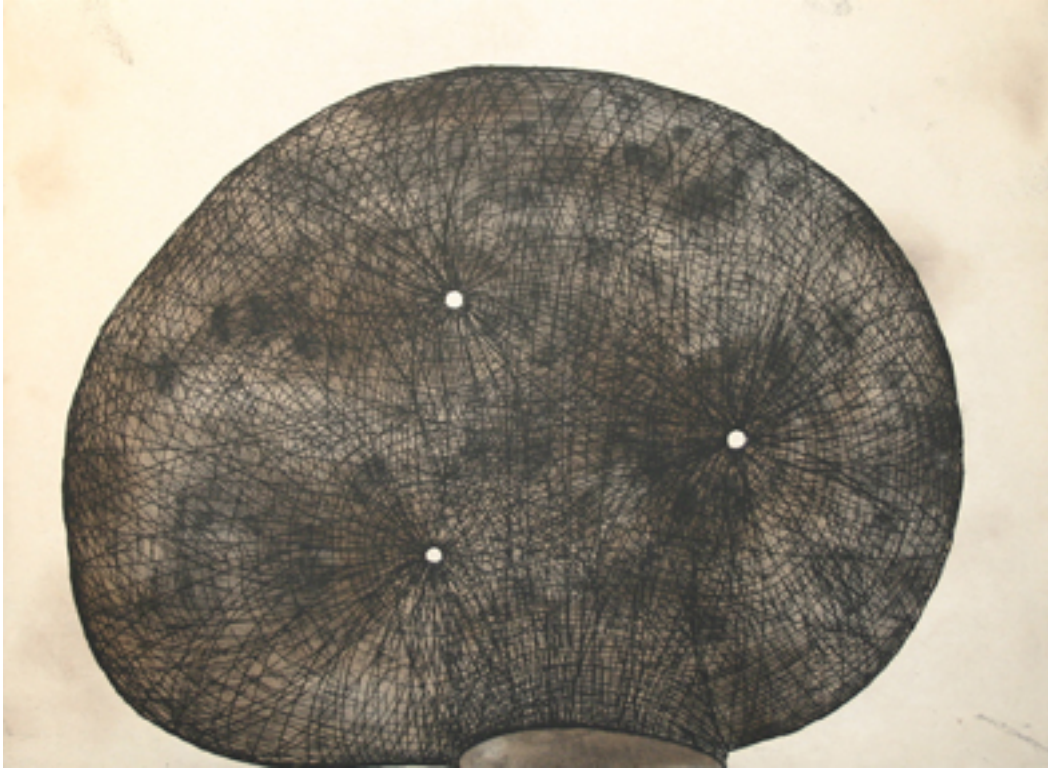


Fig. 20, Martin Puryear, *Three Holes*, intaglio, 2002

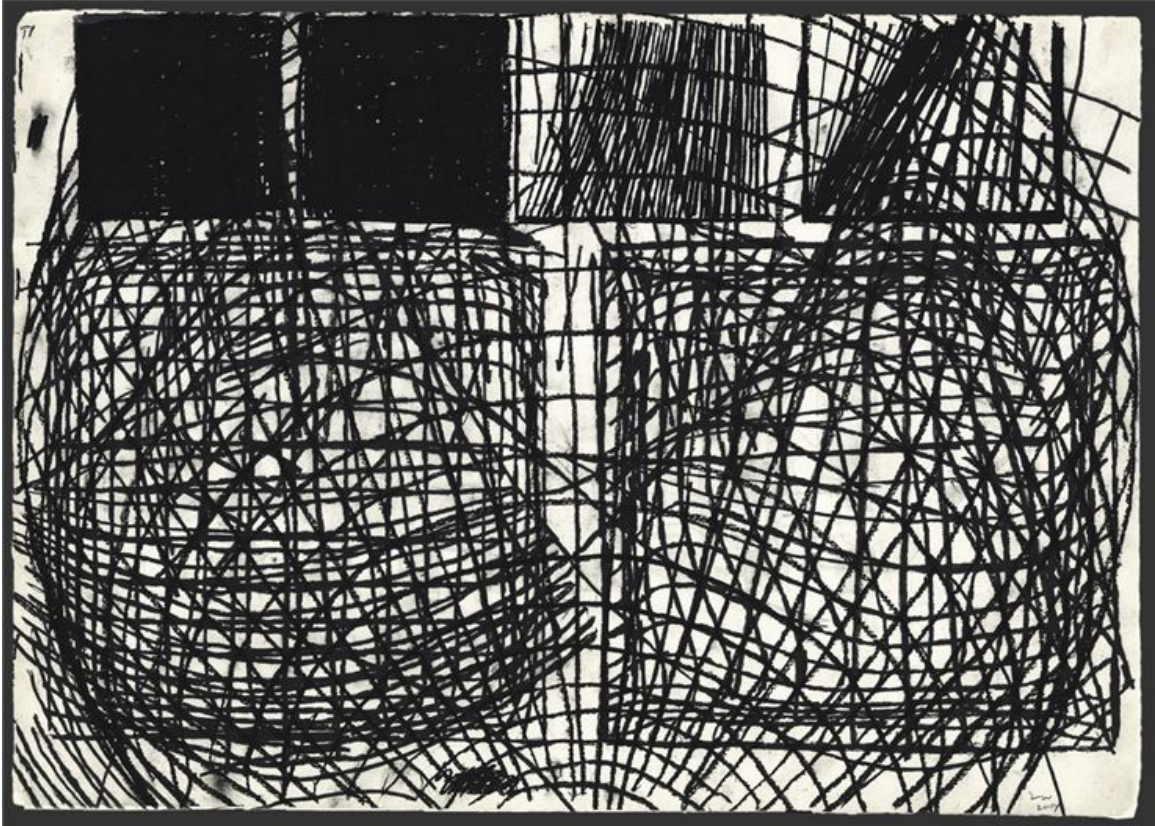


Fig. 21, Terry Winters, *Grid*, lithograph, 2004