

THESIS

CURRENTS

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ABSTRACT

CURRENTS

These prints represent the fusion of digital technology and an organic aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* (侘寂). Through various printmaking processes I am creating an unusual marriage between two opposite forms of mark-making and imagery. I find beauty in the acceptance of both modes of life, embracing deformities that mirror the decay of the natural world as well as the polished and mechanical realm of technology. There is a simple elegance in allowing both elements equal weight and presence in the framework of my prints. I see the work as currents, in that it is an acceptance of living in harmony with such diverse practices and values. In not fighting the current and blurring the lines between technological reproduction and the artist's touch, my work realizes its existence through a creative flow and merging of opposition. Currents also represent current technology, trends and a certain relinquishing of control to the passing of time.

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These prints represent the fusion of digital technology and an organic aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* (侘寂). Through various printmaking processes I am creating an unusual marriage between two opposite forms of mark-making and imagery. I find beauty in the acceptance of both modes of life, embracing deformities that mirror the decay of the natural world as well as the polished and mechanical realm of technology. There is a simple elegance in allowing both elements equal weight and presence in the framework of my prints. I see the work as currents, in that it is an acceptance of living in harmony with such diverse practices and values. In not fighting the current and blurring the lines between technological reproduction and the artist's touch, my work realizes its existence through a creative flow and merging of opposition. Currents also represent current technology, trends and a certain relinquishing of control to the passing of time.

Combining digital processes, such as photolithography and Photoshop, with traditional printmaking techniques, such as stone lithography and intaglio, provides me with an opportunity to incorporate the immediate action of drawing, painting, collage, digital photography and design into a sculpturally defined pictorial space created from the pressure of the press. The result accentuates both the final arrangement as well as a cohesive and intriguing style that emphasizes the whole. It is in this marriage of organic painterly qualities created on stone or zinc plates combined with digital and graphic images from a computer that challenges and captivates my imagination.

Openness, or breathing space, relates to the process and overall aesthetic embodied in my prints. By not committing to an original design, the image is free to evolve as I react to, draw on, or cut out layers. This flow permits the activity of printmaking to dictate the final result, opening

formal relationships up to experimentation and impulse without deviating too far from the conception and simplicity of the original idea. The revealing of marks and shapes that often can occur accidentally, akin to the automatic techniques practiced by the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists, is one reason why I continue to explore the possibilities of the print.

I find inspiration through certain aspects of controlled chaos in the works of John Cage. In the Enika series at Crown Point Press in 1986 (Fig. 1), he experimented with chance operations by building a fire on the press bed and placing dampened paper on the fire before rolling it through the press, relying completely on things non-intentional to reflect our world and visually represent the Zen idea of approaching the highest of truths without symbols or language in a minimum amount of steps.¹

In his process Cage removes himself further from his creation, thus blurring the lines between art and life. He states that he aspires to change his “way of seeing in our world, not necessarily seeing my work or his work.”² It is this distance from the self, however, where my work differs from his. Cage used Abstract Expressionism to learn from the surfaces alone as a way of opening his eyes and appreciating similar surfaces, like cracks in the sidewalk, with the same awe and wonder as that found in a painting. Cage equates beauty seen in a painting to the fact that it must be interesting, and if we say it is interesting then we are saying we approve, which is to say it holds our attention.³

It is rare that an artist wants to be categorized or placed in a specific genre, especially a 3rd or 4th generation of an art movement, but I must concede that my work relates more to

¹ Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing With Cage*, (New York, N.Y.: Limelight Editions, 1988), 187.

² Ibid. 181.

³ Ibid. 187.

Abstract Expressionism, in that I interject feelings and emotions into my art. It would not be enough satisfaction for me to just have approval of my formal relationships; rather, it is my hope to evoke some feeling that relates to human emotion as my art comes through me.

In my process I do allow chance compositions to occur, but I always interact with and respond to random formal relationships with an expressive mark-making activity akin to the works of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell. It seems to me a difference in the intent. In Cage's piece titled 4' 33", an entirely silent composition based on unpredictable elements of chance, he again focused on things non-intentional. Sounds of traffic or church bells fill in the void that he has created rather than any movement or action from the artist.⁴ When I make a mark on a plate, stone, photograph, or a shape or pattern that moves me, I assume that because it comes from me that I am making an intention.

Whether it is the aerial flinging of paint around a canvas (Fig. 2) or the gestural brush strokes of Motherwell (Fig. 3), I am moved by a certain hot improvisational flow that comes from human experience and life. What I do take from Cage was his ability to express the most with the least, much like the ideals of Zen and the Japanese *haiku*. A *haiku* is a restricted number of syllables attempting to get to the heart of an essence with the fewest possible strokes. The removal of excess and extraneous marks was reflected by Cage when directing the comprehension of his works when he replied, "relax, there are no symbols here to confuse you ... just enjoy." Cage's philosophy was rooted in Zen and thus connected to the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic by appreciating happenstance and removing the desire to control nature.

My appreciation and adoration for the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* comes from my experience as an exchange student in Japan my senior year of high school. I have since

⁴ Ibid. 190.

appropriated the dualities of the aesthetic, grounded and mystical, into my compositions and processes. Rather than claim that I understood the aesthetic during my exchange experience, I would propose that the feeling of *wabi-sabi* surfaced through my involvement and participation in Japanese culture. This makes sense to me in that *wabi-sabi* is related to a Zen way; by nature, the aesthetic resists exacting definitions and is more accurately transmitted through practice. Even though I have had the opportunity to absorb this feeling for the purpose of this paper, I will attempt to place the aesthetic in a more concrete context.

Extracted from the verb *wabiru* meaning to long for, the noun *wabi* can have various implications but as an aesthetic idiom it has been best illustrated in a book about tea ceremonies by Jukuan Sotaku, who wrote, “*Wabi* means lacking things, having things run entirely contrary to our desires, being frustrated in our wishes.”⁵

With this idea of *wabiru* as signifying the dissatisfaction of failing or living an impoverished life, *wabi* then becomes the modest essence of the down and out (Fig. 1). Rather than disagreeing with a poverty-stricken path in life or begrudging one’s sorrow, through *wabi* one is able to embrace material inadequacies and discover spiritual freedoms unrestrained by material objects. In a sense, finding peace apart from the world.⁶

This use and esteem for rustic, countrified and ordinary materials of a poverty-stricken, straightforward life is not all that makes up *wabi*, but often seems to be the first impression. Tea utensils such as *mizusashi* water jars or bamboo kettle hooks have a penniless sense of attractiveness that is just one of the many characteristics of the *wabi* aesthetic (Fig. 6).⁷ Due to

⁵ Nancy G. Hume, *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture* (New York, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1995), 246.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

new values and appreciation for Zen arts, “there was a gradual broadening of the aesthetic horizon so that ceramics which had never previously been considered of any merit were taken up as worthy of serious appraisal.”⁸

Whereas *wabi* has implied a disheartened sense of life, outcast from civilization, and shortcomings, *sabi* initially denoted the images of “chill, lean or withered.”⁹ In the 14th century these associations with both *wabi* and *sabi* began to take on a more favorable form as Zen monks established voluntary poverty and isolation in attempt to achieve a complete and life-affirming spiritual wealth (Figs. 9, 23). “Simplicity took on new meaning as the basis for pure beauty.”¹⁰

Oftentimes the Japanese themselves blur the connotations of *wabi sabi* in everyday language to the extent that when they say *sabi* they might have intended to mean *wabi* and vice versa. However, there are some subtle distinctions to be made between the two words.¹¹ *Wabi* is the more philosophical side of the aesthetic, concerned with the subjective inward attributes of beauty as a way of life. *Sabi* is related to the external objective side of material objects and how they are connected to the effects of time. The latter is most often conveyed in literature.¹²

In a simple phrase about one aspect of the *wabi* aesthetic Murata Shuko wrote that, “A prize horse looks best hitched to a thatched hut.”¹³ This saying embodies yet another side of the *wabi sabi* image conjured up in many of the ceramics considered to represent the *wabi sabi* aesthetic, that even though perceivably, some objects have a rugged external surface, the *wabi sabi* quality of beauty is in the ability to notice the virtuous and prosperous spirit that resides within. The

⁸ Joe Earl, *Japanese Art and Design* (Great Britain: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), 38.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Leonard Koren, *Wabi Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers* (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 1994), 21.

¹¹ Ibid. 23.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hume, 247.

Japanese “believed that the essential truth could be better caught by an artist when he pierced through, or even neglected externals.”¹⁴ Thus leading to the belief that it is “the inward aspect of *wabi* that detests excess expression and arrogance on the surface.”¹⁵

Yet another element of the *wabi sabi* aesthetic I have tried to incorporate into my prints is that of irregularity and imperfection (Figs. 40, 41). Here the *wabi sabi* aesthetic also embraces deformities that mirror the decay of the natural world, such as cracked, drooping or chipped pieces that, rather than taint the art work, these bumps and bruises accrued in life reflect on the art work and add appeal, and delight our senses as well as remind viewers and participants of the *wabi sabi* experience, of the intrigue and the mystery behind our temporal existence.¹⁶

Clinging to these ideals, I had been searching for the essential *wabi sabi* aesthetic in my prints. Yet I was always starting from a digital image or design and then destroying it to mirror the affects of time and change. In Untitled and Green Lily I took what I believed to be a perfect balance of form, in a composition made with Photoshop or from a shadow that caught my eye, and then transferred that design to an intaglio plate to give it life, warmth and the rustic irregular look I was striving for, but in many ways this failed me (Figs. 4, 6). I kept saying I was marrying the two forms of art -- photography and printmaking -- but I was repeatedly denying the digital aspect from which the origin of the idea came. As if ashamed of my own process, I was layering and covering up my inspiration and roots.

This realization led to my most recent work in which I allowed both elements to riff off of each other much in the same way that Jazz was created by combining raw, soulful blues with the

¹⁴ Langdon Warner, *The Enduring Art of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 88.

¹⁵ Hume, 251.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

highly technical and syncopated rhythms of a marching band. In Teeth and Space, I allowed the rigidity of a photograph or Photoshop design the ability to respond to the rough surface of an intaglio plate or graphite on rice paper *chine colle* and vice versa (Figs. 10, 11). These works held more integrity now that I was more honest with myself in this new process of allowing the duality of marks to shine through.

Invisible further explores the possibility of this dialogue between digital imagery and spontaneous mark-making by simply permitting each element to stand alone yet feed off of each other's strengths, thus creating a stronger union of mark (Fig. 16).

I began Invisible by creating an edition of large-scale prints from a stone lithograph. Using a large black grease stick I created an image based on the feeling of the grease sliding across the stone. Rather than depicting an object, the drawing was more of an experience of drawing itself, describing a moment in time and movement across the surface.

I then tore up the edition of ten prints into many smaller, equal size rectangles and arbitrarily arranged them on an old black chalkboard, permitting chance and accidental compositions to occur. Thinking that I would in the end make a large-scale, three-dimensional collaged print from the random layout of the torn edition, I began photographing the newly fashioned erratic arrangement with my cell phone and emailed the image to my laptop so that I could begin to alter the image in Photoshop and play with the scale, value, and spatial relationships. Relying on the complexity of the process to carry enough weight to the image, I increased the contrast, giving an even balance between positive and negative shapes in stark blacks and whites rather than augmenting one area with color or varied value and further complicating the already haphazard design. I found it interesting to be embracing irregularity and imperfection of mark-making only to flip that and create a pristine reproducible image through my inkjet printer, and then generate

a photolithographic plate bringing back human error and deformities that may be revealed during the inking process of lithography and the exposure of the plate. After exposing the transparency onto a light-sensitive plate I started the laborious process of mixing inks, rolling up the plate, wiping the plate, registering the paper, turning it through the press, and creating a new edition physically embossed by the process of printmaking. Much like photography of old, there is a certain element of surprise in the unveiling of an image off the press. From my experience of developing photographic images on paper, I discovered that even though I might “know” what the image is going to be, there is still a mystical element and surprise when the image appears. I find the same reaction when peeling the paper off a printing plate.

This response does not occur from laptop to inkjet printer or even pencil to paper; it is the result of, if only for a moment, a certain relinquishing of control and flowing with the current. When I press print on my computer, I know down to the pixel what the result will be, and there is little surprise in the translation of codes and numbers from one machine to another. The allure for me is found in the chemistry of wax and water on polymer coated plates that become soluble when exposed to light, and drawing on stone that was formed millions of years ago. My method of combining current technology with a medium reliant on chemical reactions offers a wide spectrum of aesthetic possibilities that I am just now beginning to explore. By incorporating the controlled digital qualities found in cell phone cameras, iPad drawing tools and Photoshop, there lies a fascinating cycle of creating organic marks, breaking them down only to rebuild in a reproducible, restrained digital image and breaking them down again, permitting chemistry to dictate a final result that in many ways reflects a natural process and history of our existence on earth as we struggle to balance nature and technology.

To further the cyclical relationships of marks ingrained in my applied process to develop Invisible, I left empty space below the printed image defined only by the embossment of the press, leaving room to return to my original mark-making made by the black greasy rubbing crayon that I had used on the stone from the beginning. The new horizontal stroke of ink applied directly to the paper mirrors that of the marks made earlier, but this time it is immediate and unprocessed: it just is. The thick, raw mark does not overlap the reproducible image but now stands on its own, echoing the earlier idea from *wabi sabi* of the “thatched hut next to the prized horse.”¹⁷

The new format for my works, shown in Invisible, represents the concept of the unfinished and refined existing as one whole. By enshrouding a smaller worn and textured square image inside of a pristine white square of paper I mirror the duality of mark-making, both the technical and organic, but also set up an open atmosphere for the smaller-scale images to breathe. Although the hard white square surrounds the subtleties in my images, I attempted to bring the life from the center of my print back to the outer edge of the square by displaying the deckled edge of the paper, thus repeating a visual cycle of control and happenstance.

The smaller, more intimate scale of images in my most recent series derived from technical limitations of the light table and size of the inkjet printer transparencies, as well as a personal challenge to recreate the same kind of electric current and energy of mark-making arrived at from works I had created on a much larger scale, as in Parking Lot B (Fig. 8).

What I discovered was that my initial instinct when approaching a tiny plate or drawing was to tighten up, which resulted in conservative, ridged marks creating the opposite of my

¹⁷ Hume, 247.

desired aesthetic of *wabi sabi*. Once I started to incorporate my other passion of digital photography, a completely new range of possibilities opened up for me.

In Rocket (Fig. 42), I started the process by scanning a larger print, Ice Skates (Fig. 33) and began to edit and explore smaller moments and shapes that had excited me in the initial print, which had been painted and drawn over, similar to the process used for Invisible. I was loose and unmethodically building, deconstructing, refining, and then allowing chance mark-making to echo the origin of the image.

To maintain the technical element of the image I came up with a system of cutting windows in Mylar that not only aided in the registration of the photo plates on the press bed but also preserved the unmarred white surface of the paper surrounding the image. Most important to me, however, was that the Mylar window also created a slight embossment and subtle sculptural detail that could not be mimicked digitally and was just enough of a visual element to balance a 5" x 5" image on a 22" x 22" square piece of paper.

My newfound interest in combining the *wabi sabi* aesthetic with digital technology is exciting and is the beginning of a process that I intend to push further. Perhaps enlarging the pixilation of an inkjet-printed image before the drawing activity engages it, or printing collagraph plates like Untitled (Fig. 21) onto actual digitally printed images are both steps toward my goal of showcasing the marriage of the two elements in one image and increasing the velocity of the current flow.



Fig. 1, John Cage, Eninka #28, #28 from a series of smoked paper monotypes with branding on gampi paper chine colle, 1986, 18.5" x 24.5".



Fig. 2, Jackson Pollock, Cathedral, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas, 1947, 35" x 71.5".

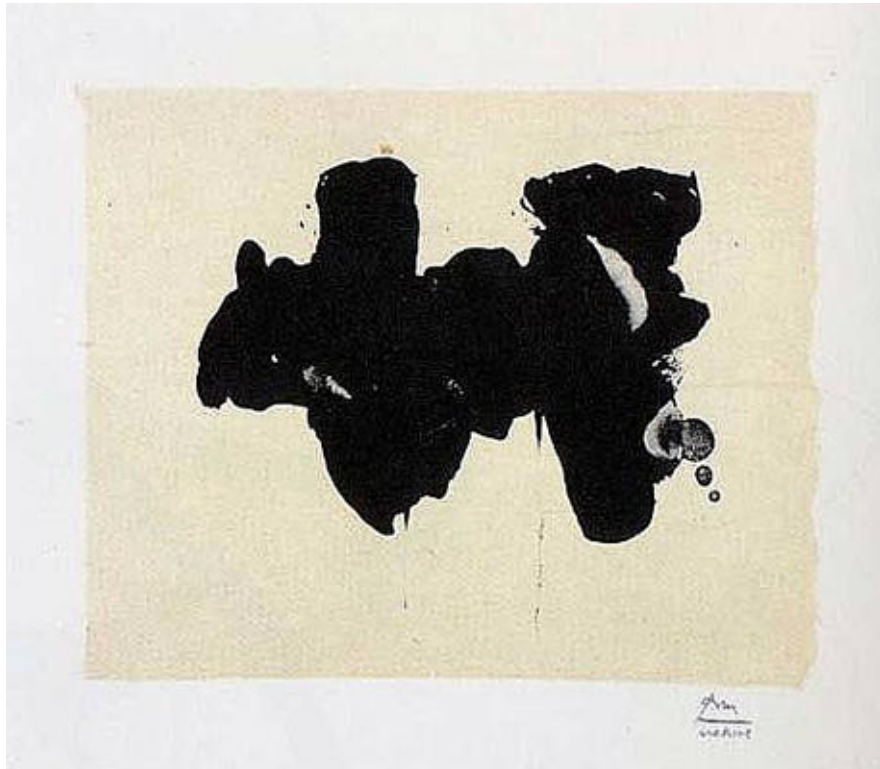


Fig. 3, Robert Motherwell, Alberti Elogy, lithograph, chine colle, 1981-1982, 15" x 14".



Fig. 4, *Chojiro*, 16th century, black roku tea bowl, earthenware.



Fig. 5, *Mizusashi* water jar, 16th to early 17th century, stoneware with natural ash glaze over incised and impressed decoration, 8”.

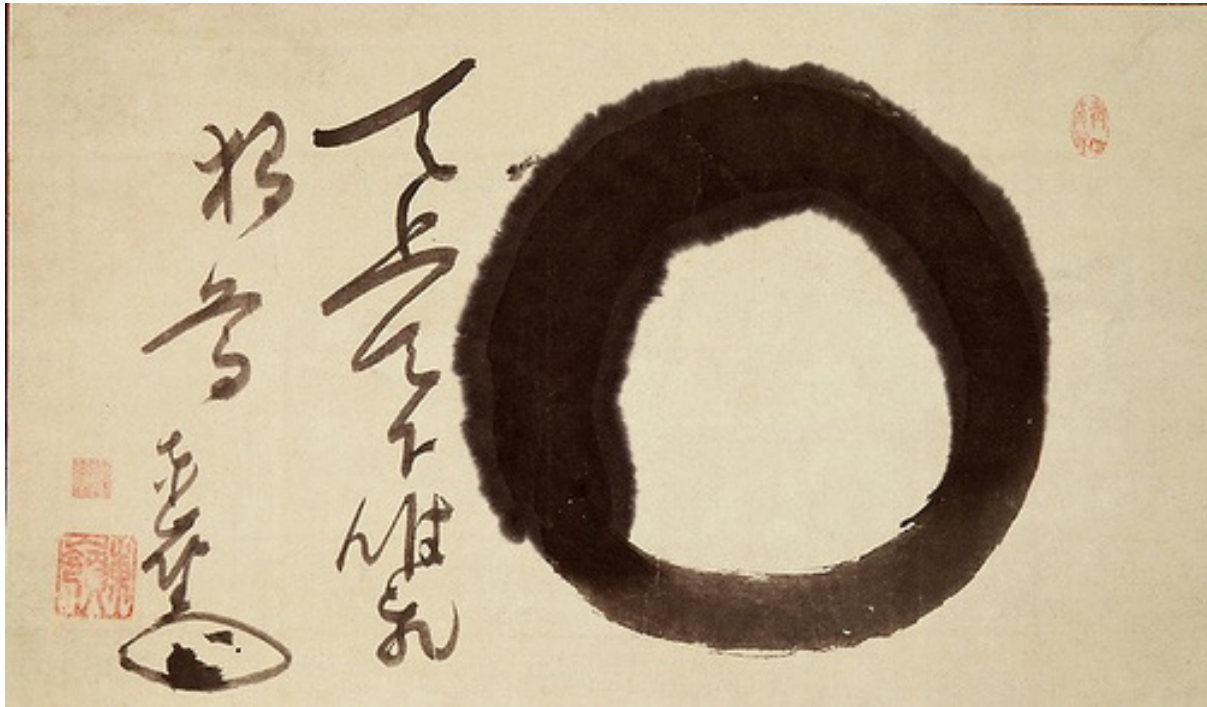


Fig. 6, Torei Enji, *Enso*, 18th century, ink on paper.

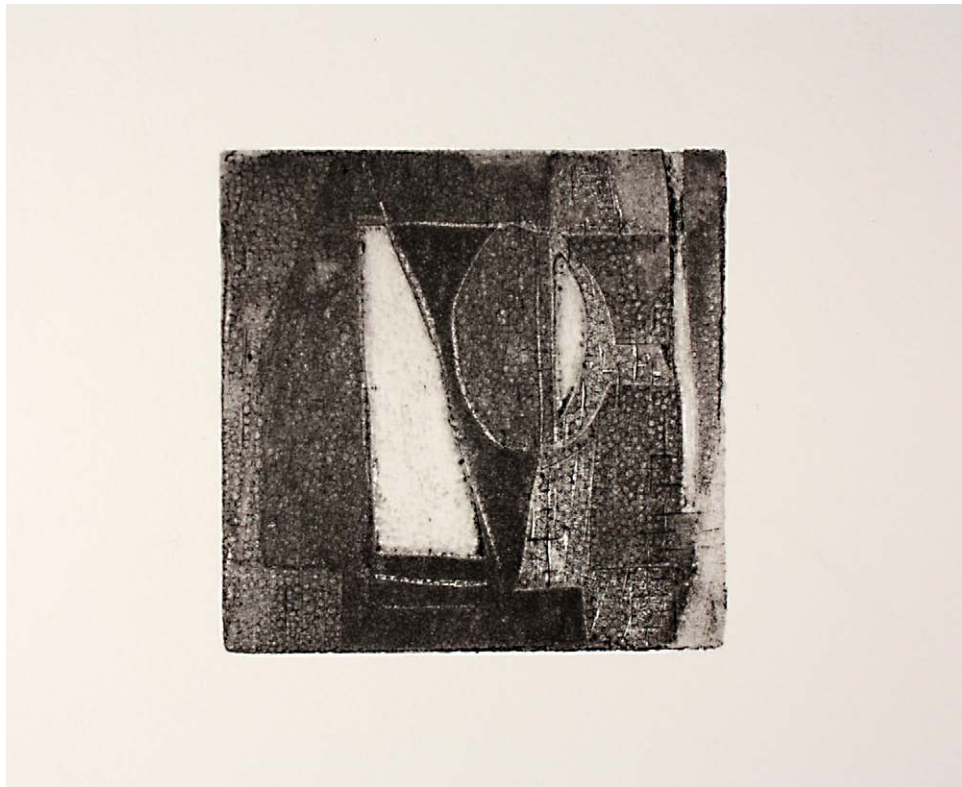


Fig. 7, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, intaglio, 2010, 10" x 10".



Fig. 8, Maxwell Ayars, Submarine, lithograph, graphite, water color, 2011, 18" x 14".

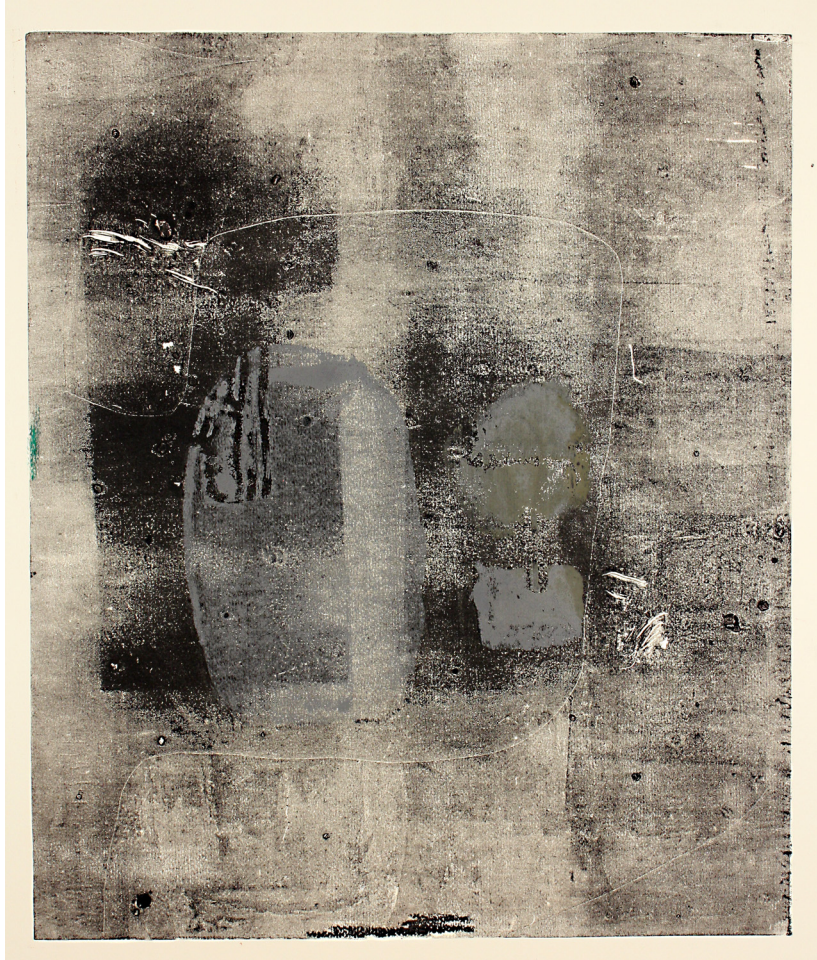


Fig. 9, Maxwell Ayars, Green Lily, intaglio, monoprint, 2011, 27.5" x 39".

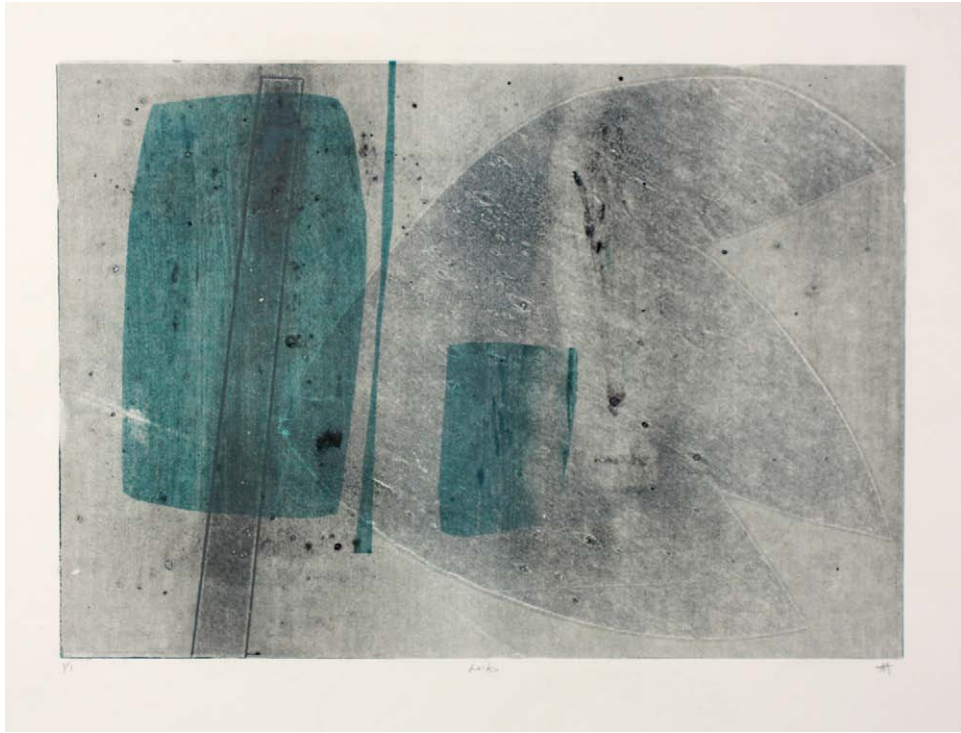


Fig. 10, Maxwell Ayars, monoprint, 2010, 28" x 23".



Fig. 11, Maxwell Ayars, Parking Lot B, intaglio, rubbing ink, chalk, 2010, 35.5" x 23.75".



Fig. 12, Maxwell Ayars, Collapse, intaglio, monoprint, 2011, 40" x 27".



Fig. 13, Maxwell Ayars, Teeth, photolithograph, intaglio, chine-collé, pastel, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".



Fig. 14, Maxwell Ayars, Space, graphite, chine-collé, photo lithograph, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

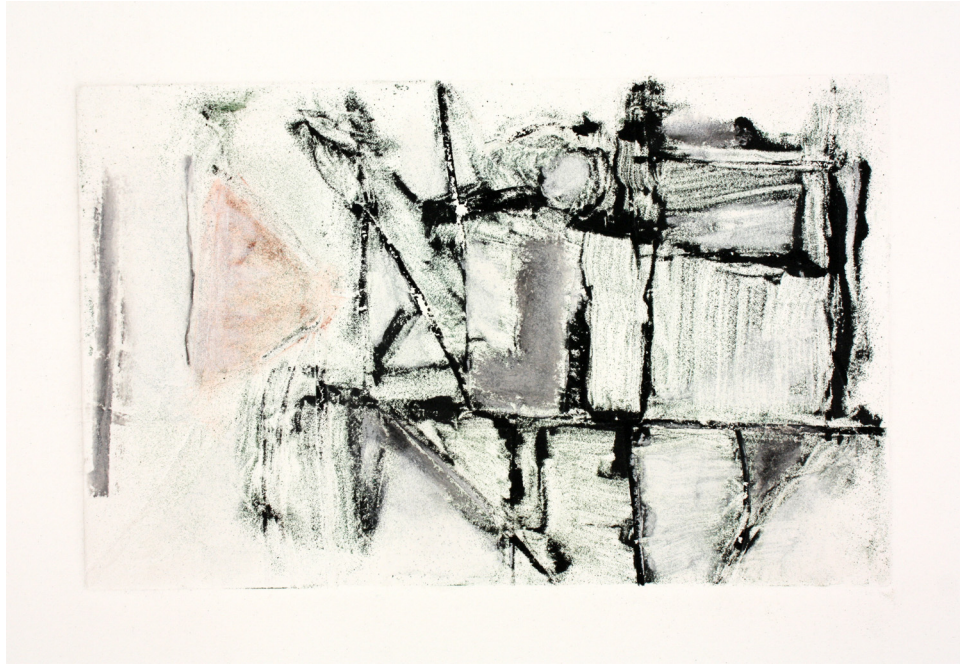


Fig. 15, Maxwell Ayars, Algae, spirulina monoprint, 2011, 15" x 22"

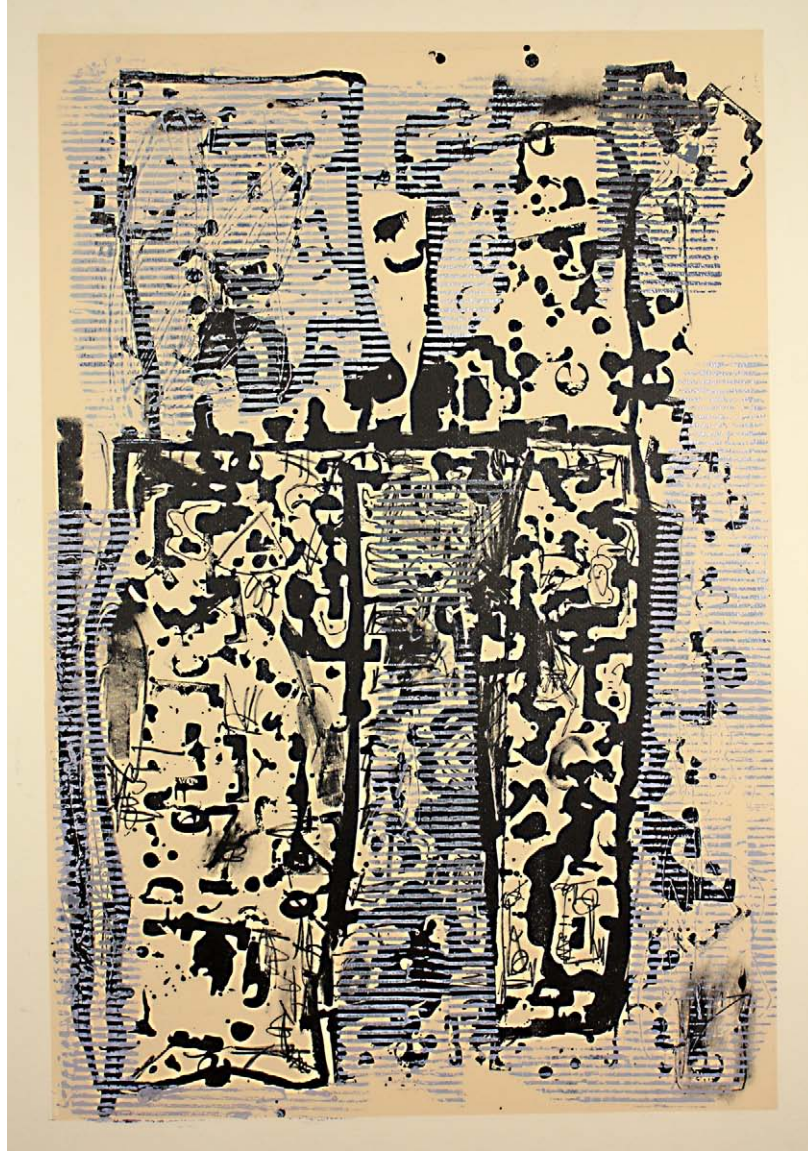


Fig. 16, Maxwell Ayars, Vases, relief, lithograph, collagraph, 2011, 27.5" x 35.5".



Fig. 17, Maxwell Ayars, Drums, intaglio, chine-collé, photolithograph, chalk, rubbing ink, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

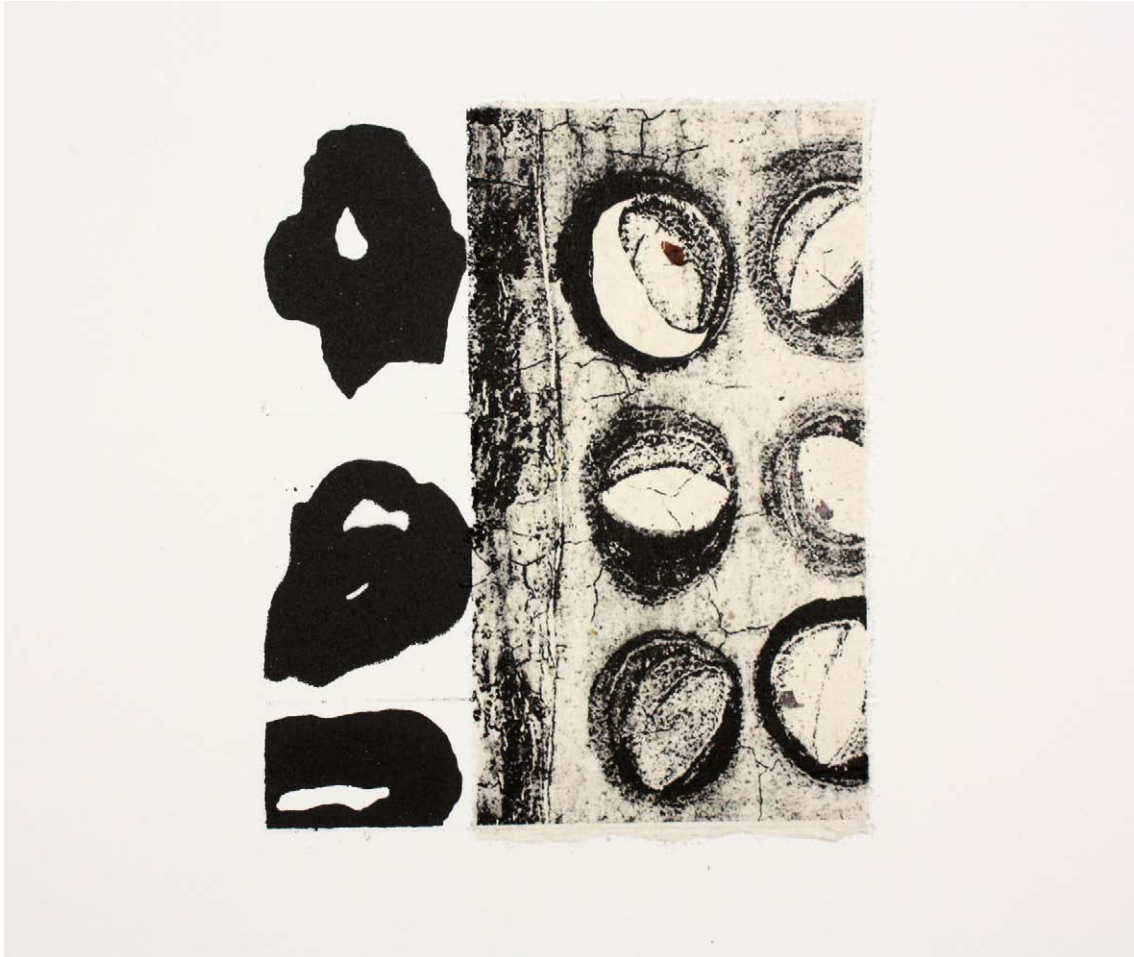


Fig. 18, Maxwell Ayars, Morning, photo lithograph, chine-collé, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

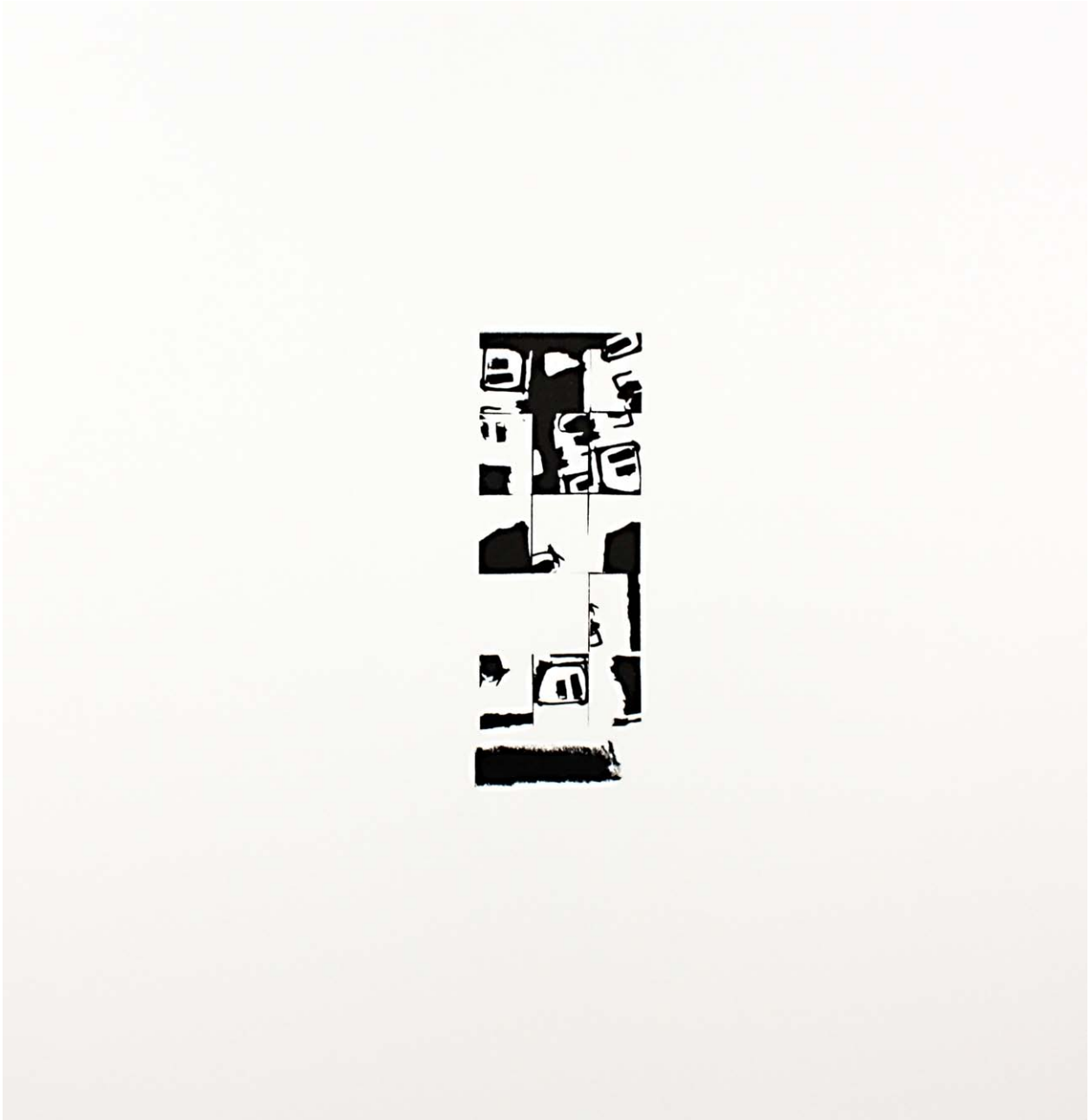


Fig. 19, Maxwell Ayars, Invisible, photo lithograph, rubbing ink crayon, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

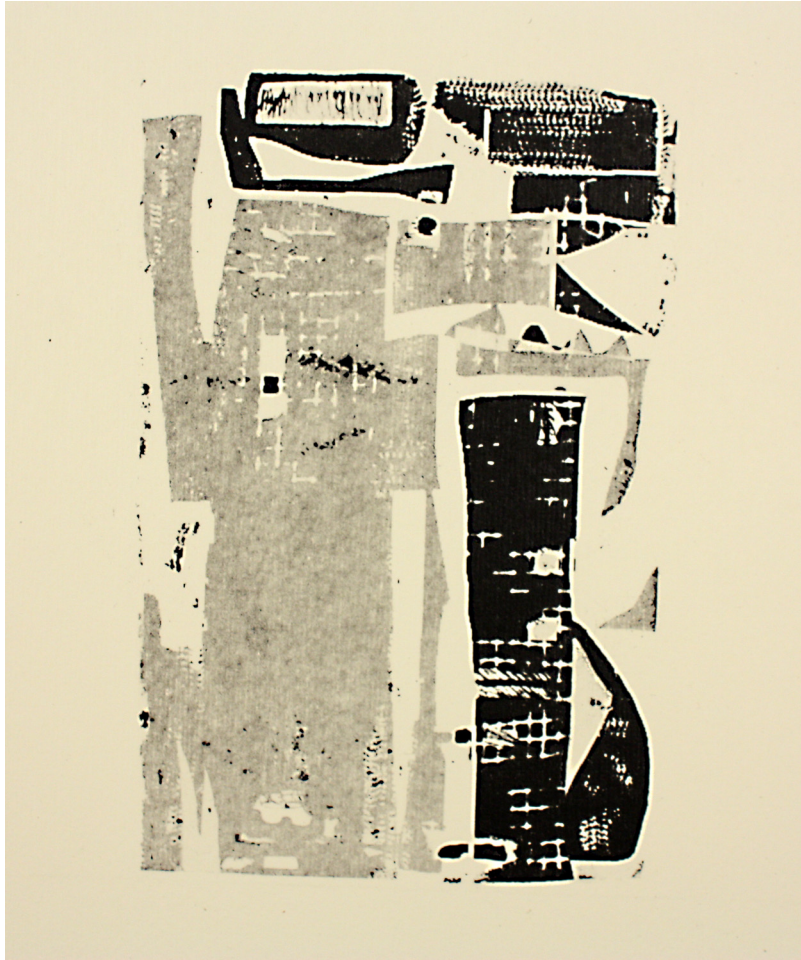


Fig. 20, Maxwell Ayars, Jungle, photo lithograph, 2011, 14" x 20".



Fig. 21, Maxwell Ayars, Cup, intaglio, photo lithograph, pastel, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

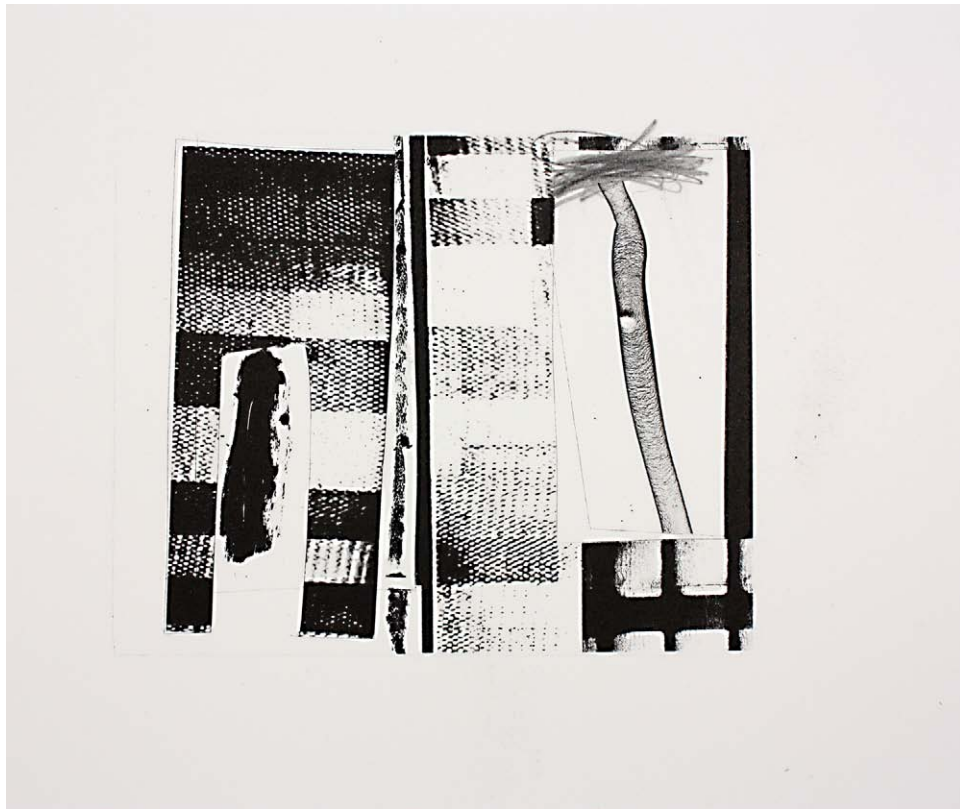


Fig. 22, Maxwell Ayars, Lean, photo lithograph, graphite, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".



Fig. 23, Maxwell Ayars, Ash, monprint, water color, 2010, 27.5" x 27.5".

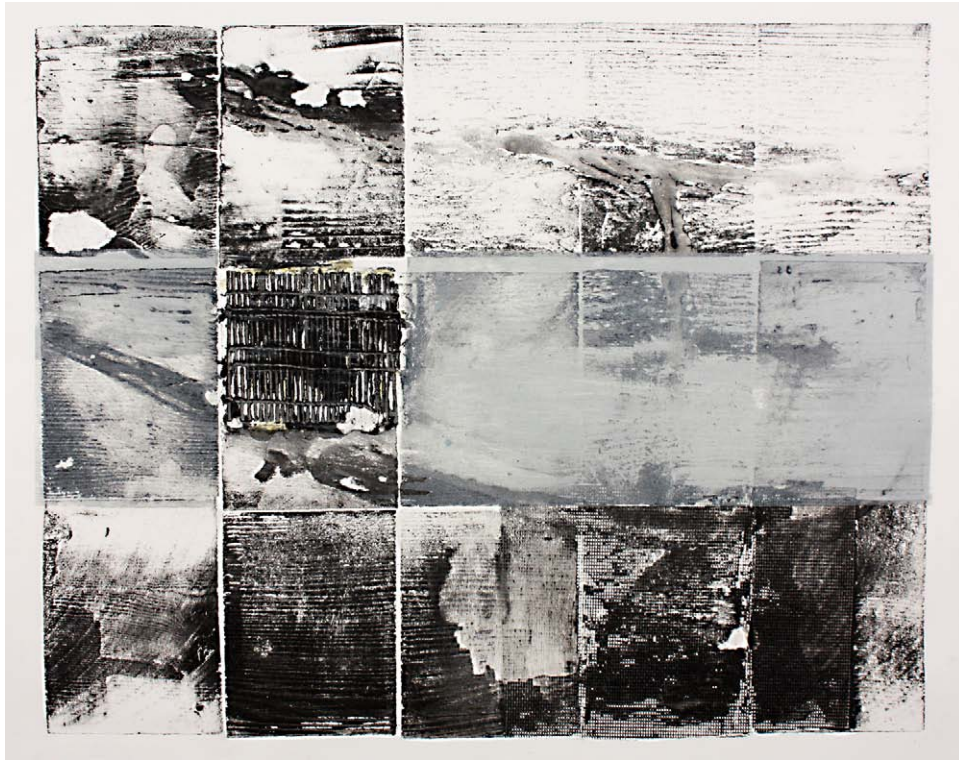


Fig. 24, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, collagraph, 2011, 22" x 30".



Fig. 25, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, photolithograph, 2011, 20" x 13".



Fig. 26, Maxwell Ayars, Playset, intaglio, 2011, 16" x 16".

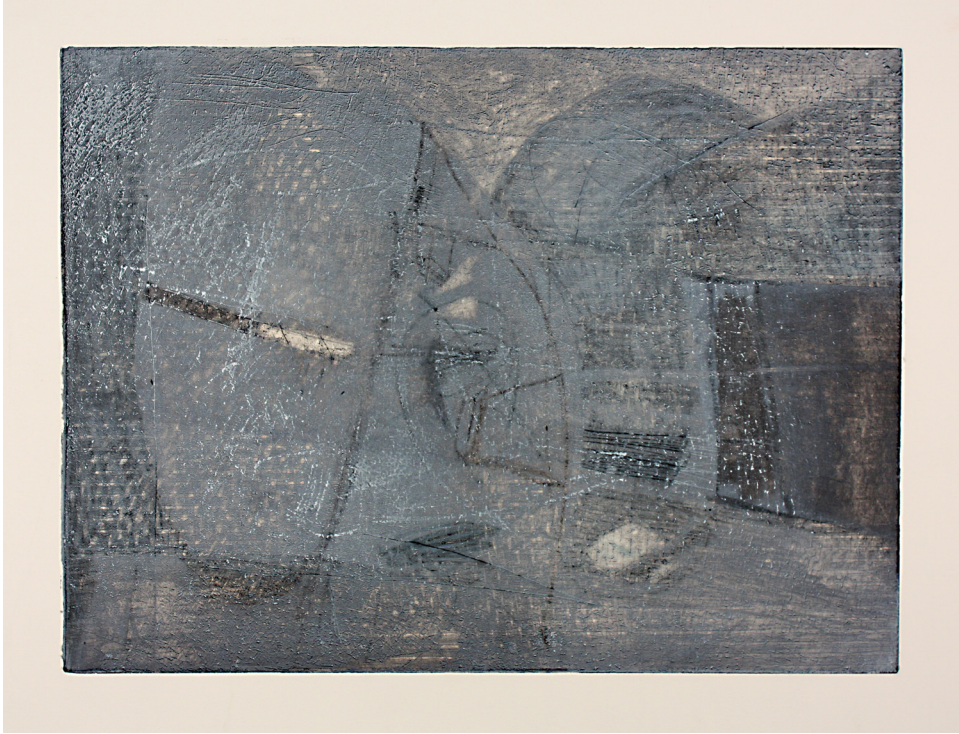


Fig. 27, Maxwell Ayars, Landscape, intaglio, 2011, 24" x 17.5".



Fig. 28, Maxwell Ayars, Plains, lithograph, chine-collé, relief, 2011, 20" x 15".

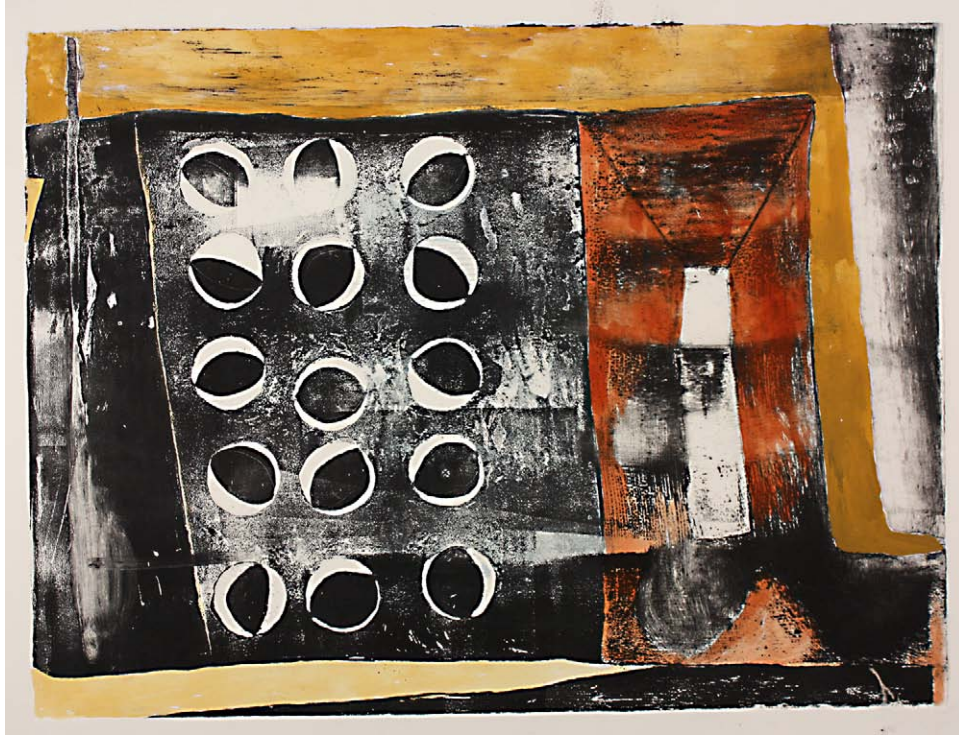


Fig. 29, Maxwell Ayars, Variation of Stone 3, intaglio, water color, 2009, 30" x 22.5".



Fig. 30, Maxwell Ayars, House, relief, chine-collé, rubbing ink, 2011, 14" x 16".



Fig. 31, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, monprint, 2010, 27.5" x 39".



Fig. 32, Maxwell Ayars, Nudes 2, relief intaglio, pastel, 2011, 11" x 6.5".

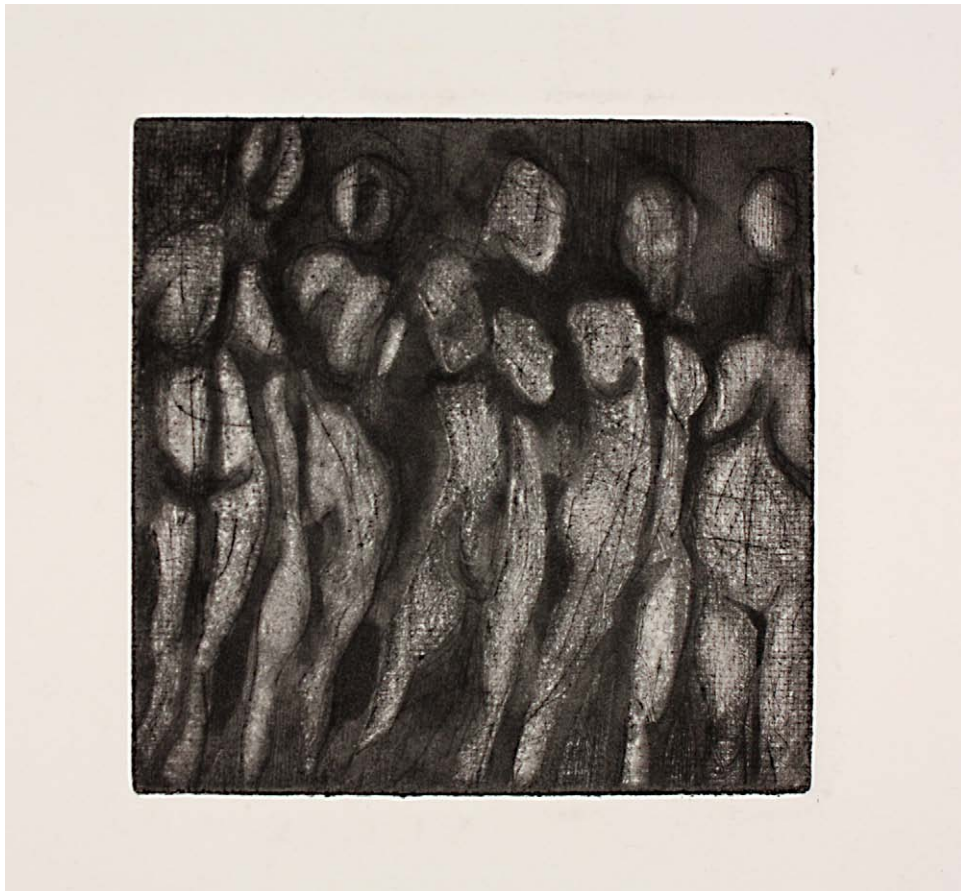


Fig. 33, Maxwell Ayars, Nudes 3, intaglio, 2011, 8.5" x 8".



Fig. 34, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, monoprint, acrylic paint, charcoal, pastel, cante, 2011, 27.5" x 39".



Fig. 35, Maxwell Ayars, Sink, intaglio, charcoal, 2010, 40" x 26".



Fig. 36, Maxwell Ayars, Hallway, relief intaglio, photo lithograph, 2012, 22.25'' x 22.25''.



Fig. 37, Maxwell Ayars, Ice Skates, lithograph, water color, 2010, 15" x 18".



Fig. 38, Maxwell Ayars, Notes, intaglio, relief, 2010, 12" x 18".



Fig. 39, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, intaglio, relief, 2011, 20" x 15".



Fig. 40, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, intaglio, monoprint, cante, 2010, 14" x 9".



Fig. 41, Maxwell Ayars, Untitled, monoprint, chine-collé, 2010, 28" x 23".



Fig. 42, Maxwell Ayars, Rocket, photo lithograph, graphite, 2012, 22.25" x 22.25".

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