

TURN OF PHRASE DIAN- NA FRID ALLI- SON WADE

CURATED BY
JULIE RODRIGUES WIDHOLM

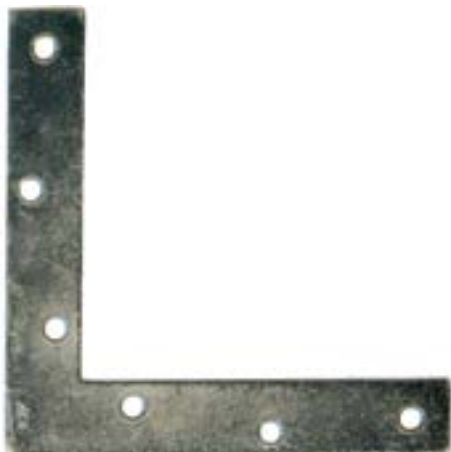


TURN OF PHRASE

DIANNA FRID
ALLISON WADE

ESSAY
JULIE RODRIGUES WIDHOLM

FREEARK ART GALLERY
RIVERSIDE ARTS CENTER



ON IMPOSSIBILITY

I try to write “automatically”
But keep stopping to look at the sky.
Words are in it
And a great blue silence
That fills the distance between.

Suzanne Buffam, from *THE IRRATIONALIST*

TURN OF PHRASE

The process of writing has always felt, to me, like sculpting. Adding, removing, carving, repeating and shaping thoughts with words. However, it wasn’t until considering the work of Chicago-based artists Allison Wade and Dianna Frid together that I truly began to explore the complex and fascinating relationship between language and sculpture—specifically, the sculpture of language (how text and language can be used as a physical material form) and the language of sculpture (not only how we attempt to use words to approach or address sculptural form but also how sculptural forms can have their own logic, systems, and meanings much like alphabets, words, and phrases—systems that comprise an artist’s unique language, their *turn of phrase*). This essay is a set of considerations and questions about visual, conceptual, semiotic, and structural resonances between language, sculpture, and artistic process. Is an allegory of viewing sculpture through the lens of language useful? For example, what is the visual equivalent of punctuation when looking at a sculpture? What does it mean when we say a work of art is poetic? Does the realm of poetry evoke notions of composition, writing, space, depth, craft, reflection, balance, texture, and quotation, all of which are equally applicable to visual arts?

Upon viewing Wade’s work for the first time at the MFA show at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in 2012, I was struck by her sparing yet elegant use of utilitarian objects. Incorporating connective tools such as s-hooks, chains, pipes, nails, and screws along with natural materials, such as wood, handcrafted ceramic objects, and handwoven fabrics, her work relied on balance and counterbalance to maintain a precarious equilibrium. The confrontation between materials and delicate points of connection, the points of mutual dependence, were exquisitely simple yet profound and beautiful. Brought together, each individual work was like a haiku that packs so much into its rigorous structure and rhythm, where rigid meets soft, organic meets geometric, heavy meets light, crafted meets

found. Her sculptures' economy of means gave each distinct material (or phrase) and transition (or punctuation) my full attention.

During a studio visit with Wade, I learned how her educational background in English informs the way she thinks about sculpture in terms of structure and syntax. Putting her work in conjunction with that of Dianna Frid, another artist who engages with language and whose use of materials is extremely sensitive and tactile, would make a brilliant conversation.¹ Both artists come out of the very strong department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Frid's work is rooted in embroidery and stitching on muslin yet incorporates a myriad of other materials including papers, gesso, paint, and graphite, among others. She culls from literature and texts, ranging from classic tomes like *The Odyssey* to obituaries from the *New York Times* to avant-garde Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky to linguistic terms such as "prosody"—the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech. In addition, and in true polymath fashion, her work's large fields of graphite create a dialogue between writing, drawing, and painting. Her exquisite hand embroidered artist books complicate and reify the persistence of the book form as a physical object, especially as it is threatened by digital technologies, by renegotiating our spatial-temporal understanding of the traditional reading of a book from left to right. Frid's seductive use of graphite, cellophane, cloth, and other materials that play with light engage with traditions of collage and assemblage, filtered through her unique approach to abstraction and traditional handiwork.

The presence of the hand is of paramount importance in the work of both Frid and Wade. There is no virtual realm, only the present, the tangible, and the physical within their work. As the Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov wrote, "There is no science without fancy and no art without fact."² The work of Frid and Wade embraces its relationship to its physical context through, for example, how light hits its surfaces, as in Frid's work, or architectural space, as in Wade's sculptures, whose careful balance could be affected by conditions in temperature, wind currents, and vibrations of people walking on the hardwood floor that supports it. The responsive nature of their work makes it in fact, quite animated, and thus human.

The hand often evokes the realm of craft, and for twenty years, Frid has merged the craft of embroidery with conceptual art practices. *Prosodies #1* is a large sculpture of conjoined circular forms comprised of embroidery hoops covered in plaster along with a floor piece of orange reflective material cut into a "shadow" of the sculpture's form. Although we cannot see the embroidery hoops, they provide the physical and conceptual foundation for the work based on craft, including the complexly gendered history of craft. The reflective orange shape on the ground redirects light and color onto the white curves of the sculpture. Orange light bounces off the material and tints the white surface. On the other side of the sculpture, powder pigments of similar hues have been subtly applied to disorient the source of this reflection. Furthermore, the position of the orange "shadow" in front of the sculpture, instead of behind, becomes incongruous with the south light shining through the Riverside Arts Center's window onto the sculpture. Through its materials, *Prosodies #1* asks us to reflect on both the physical properties of reflection and the concept of reflection: to think, ponder, meditate, and through its title to consider rhythm and intonation.

At the same time, *Prosodies #1* muses on the notion of an artist's language, her particular method of deploying forms and materials, and its constituent parts. An alphabet comes to mind quite literally as the circular shapes in *Prosodies* can be read as letters. Like the optical illusion of Rubin's vase, do we see the letters first or the shapes? In fact, looking closely, one will find letters—O's, U's, and L's—throughout the exhibition, as they oscillate between shape and letter. The small "L" hooks attaching Wade's *The Anecdotalist* to the wall echo the linear form (made of ceramic yet resembling wood) on the sheet of acrylic. However, the "L" hooks also echo the large steel pole with a yellow end that braces *Yes* against the floor, which then resembles the bend in a line in Wade's drawing *Floorplans for New Beginnings #3*. Visual connections abound between the two artists' works, the circular knots, "O's," filled with plaster in Wade's *Yes* complement the "O's" throughout Frid's *Prosodies #1* and also with the related collages, *Prosodic Transmissions #1-7*. The double-sided works made with photographs of *Prosodies #1* and *#2* are filled with "O's" (or circles or voids) that play with perceptions of light, shadow, space, and depth, all while hiding the opposite side of the visible embroidered

stitching. It is difficult to discern exactly how many layers there are in these works, lending the artworks both physical and conceptual depth: the distance from bottom to top; complexity and profundity of thought.

The use of quotation, often called appropriation in contemporary art or sampling in music, is one that also overlaps literary and artistic realms of making. In *Transcription for a Transcription after VM*, Frid borrows a short passage from Vladimir Mayakovsky's *How Verses Are Made* (1926): "Rhythm is the fundamental force, the fundamental energy verse" and embroiders it onto a collage of gesso, paper, and graphite on muslin. She creates her own visual rhythmic system by using red embroidery floss whenever the letters are stitched over the graphite lines, dark green when they are on paper and light green when they are on muslin. Wade's sculpture *and then nothing but a lone star remained in the sky, like an asterisk leading to an undiscoverable footnote (after Vladimir Nabokov)* employs a quote from the same famed Russian novelist to imbue imagery into her abstract sculpture, thereby underscoring how significantly titles and language inform what and how we see. Upon reading Wade's title, the hanging piece of copper in this sculpture becomes a star against a sky and/or an asterisk dangling near a letter, the weight that balances its own sculptural universe.

Does it help to think of an exhibition as an essay, and if so, would each gallery be a paragraph, the works assembled on a wall the sentences, and the works themselves the words? When installing a show, I certainly think of punctuation, rhythm, texture, and tone. So where do we find the punctuation—commas, semicolons, and exclamations—in exhibitions and artworks? Wade's delicate drawings and sculptures place great importance on joints, points of connection, and transitions that result in aesthetic, and at times, physical homeostasis. In fact, I would argue that her work's magic is found in these highly considered points of connection. For example, there is a dependence between the bent copper tube and the hand sewn fabric sand bag with a bright blue zipper that hugs the tube to weigh it down in order to hold it up. This is similar to the purple fabric seemingly tenuously holding together ceramic strips on a piece of acrylic in *The Anecdotalist*, the delineated joints between sections in her drawings, and the bottom tip of the steel pole covered in yellow Plasti Dip in *Yes*.

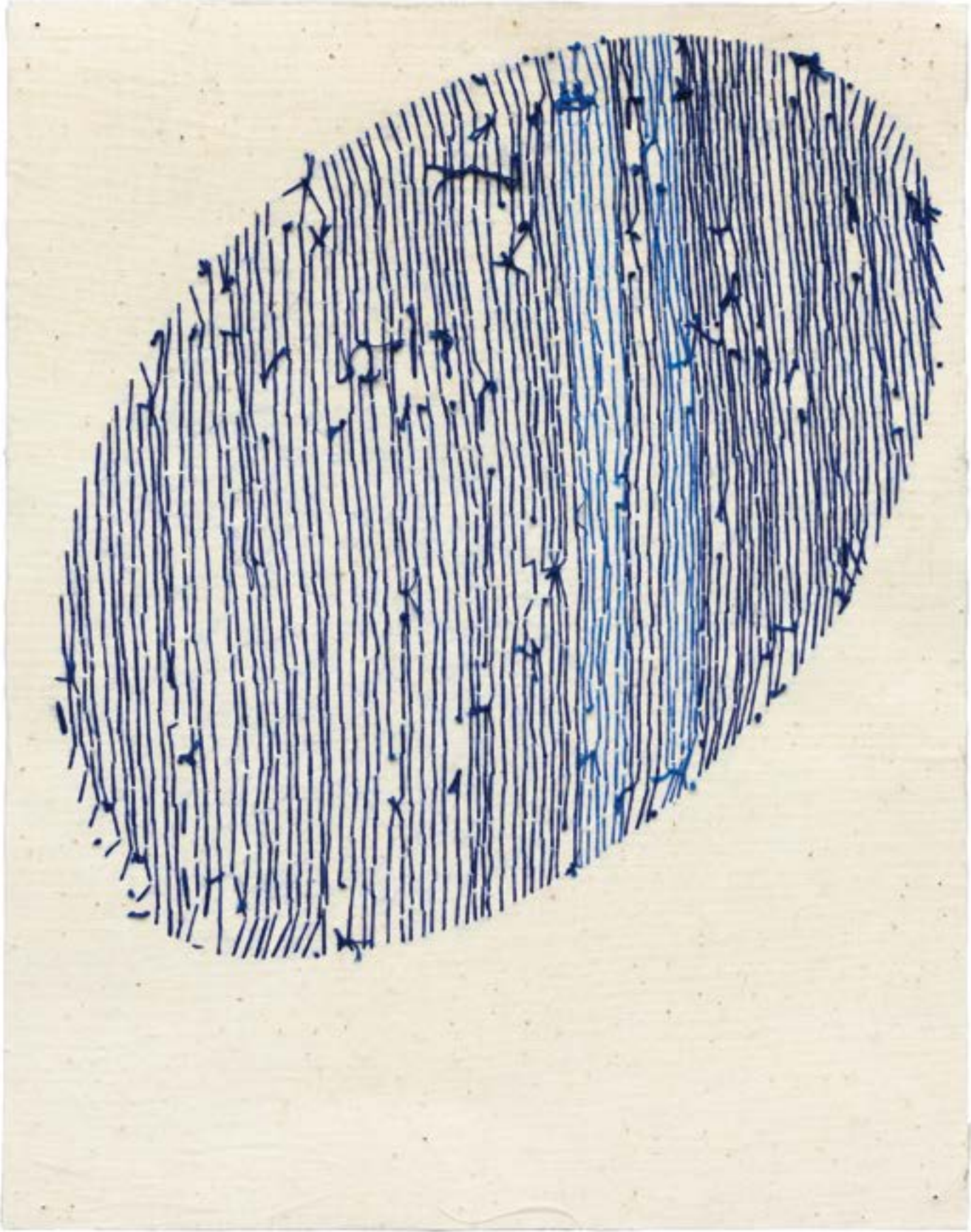
Turn of Phrase includes all new work from the last year, including forays into new directions for each artist. However, the works were not made with the other artist in mind and are meeting at the Riverside Arts Center for the first time. And like any first encounter, commonalities and differences are made apparent. Curatorial intuition led me to bring these artists together but nothing can predict how an artwork will behave, especially when placed next to another artwork and visual and conceptual elements are brought into relief. Beyond their mutual interest in language, their work explores presence and absence, where positive and negative space is given equal weight. It embodies a deep respect for the quality of line. Their work is quiet. It is contemplative. Like an introvert, it reveals itself slowly and deeply. For reasons I can't fully articulate, Frid and Wade's work points me to the realm of poetry, stemming from the minimal yet powerful use of words (or in their case materials): each so precisely considered, and employed distinctly yet cohesively. Like the best poetry, their work is elegant, evocative, and open-ended but grounded in the tangible and very real.

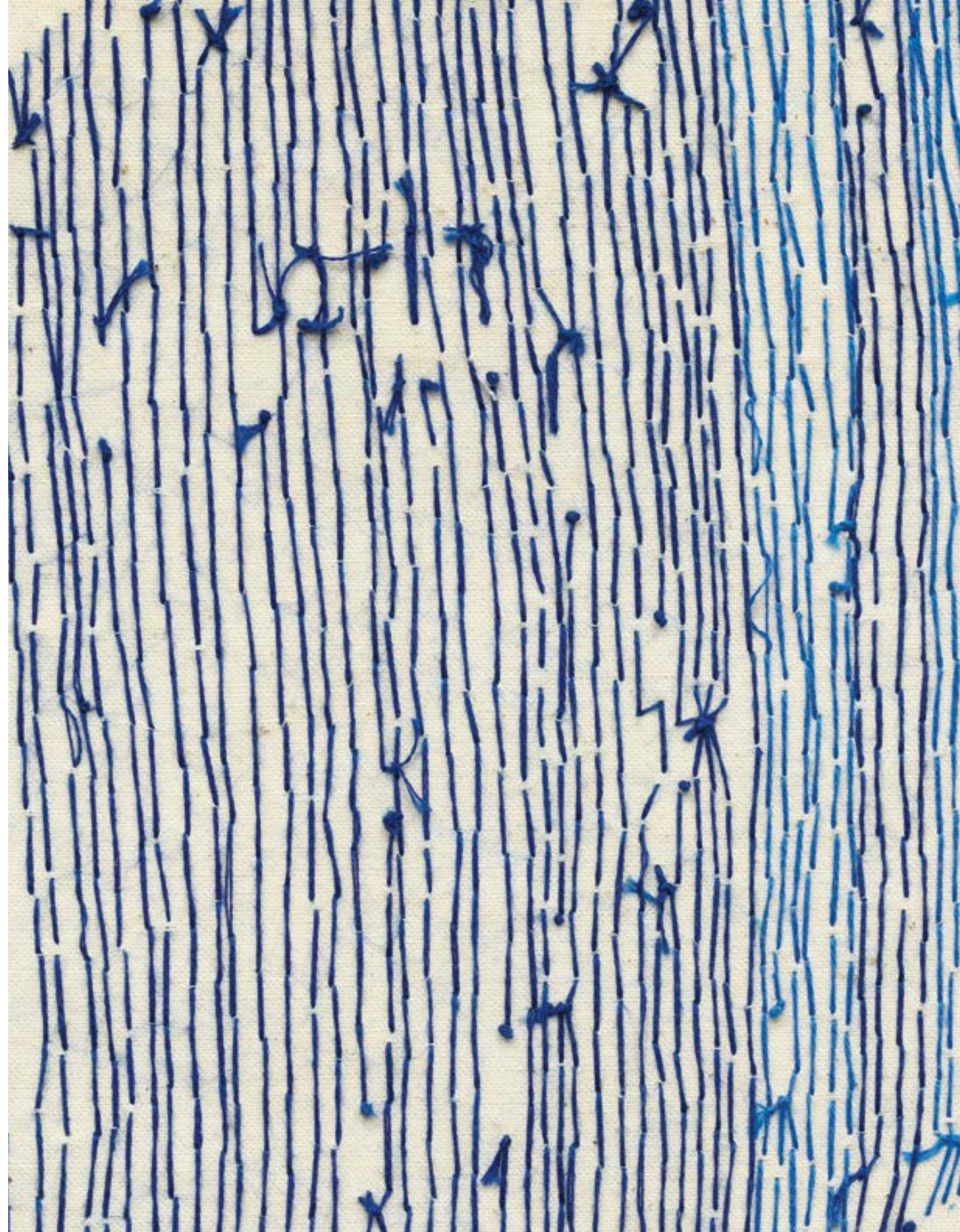
This brings to me a point in which I feel that writing circumnavigates but never gets close enough to the experience of being in front of the work itself, and this is especially true with the work of Frid and Wade. A Chicago-based poet whose work has been a part of our dialogue around this exhibition, Suzanne Buffam wrote in an unpublished manuscript about "things that are distant but near" and "things that are near but distant." This perfectly illustrates the relationship between language and art. As useful and necessary as it is, language is simply a tool (structural or conceptual) for the making of art and can only be an allegory or metaphor to the experience of visual art, which demands our physical presence. To employ an overused but apt colloquialism, *it is what it is*. Frid and Wade's work has its own conversation beyond language. And standing in the gallery viewing both artists' works is the best place to eavesdrop.

1 I also curated a solo show of Frid's work at MCA Chicago in 2006.

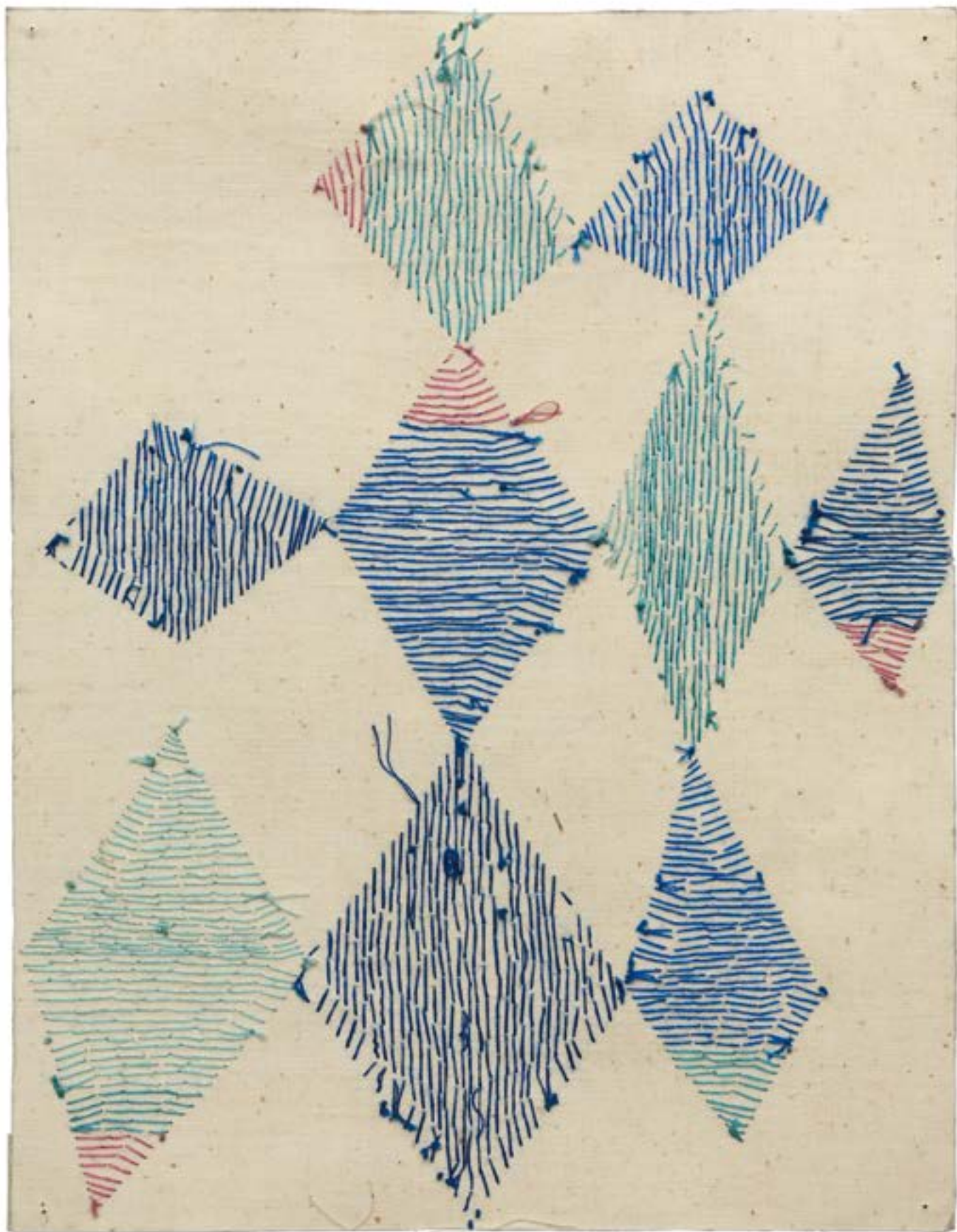
2 Originally published in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. VIII, no. 2, spring 1967. Accessed via http://lib.ru/NABOKOW/Inter06.txt_with-big-pictures.html. Nabokov was also a lepidopterist which greatly informed his work. Others have addressed this duality here: <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/01/the-advantage-of-dual-identities-a-case-study-of-nabokov/>

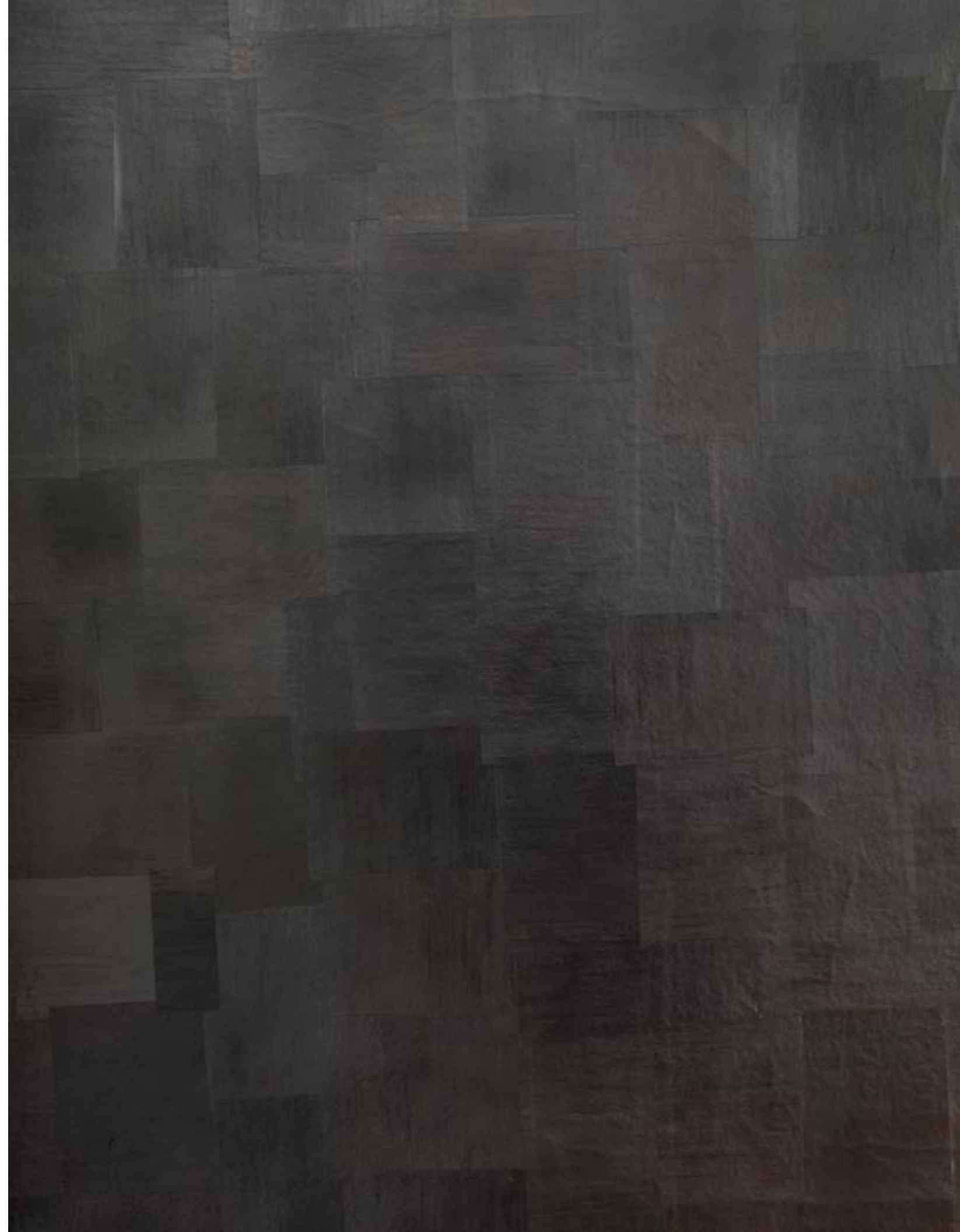
DIANNA FRID



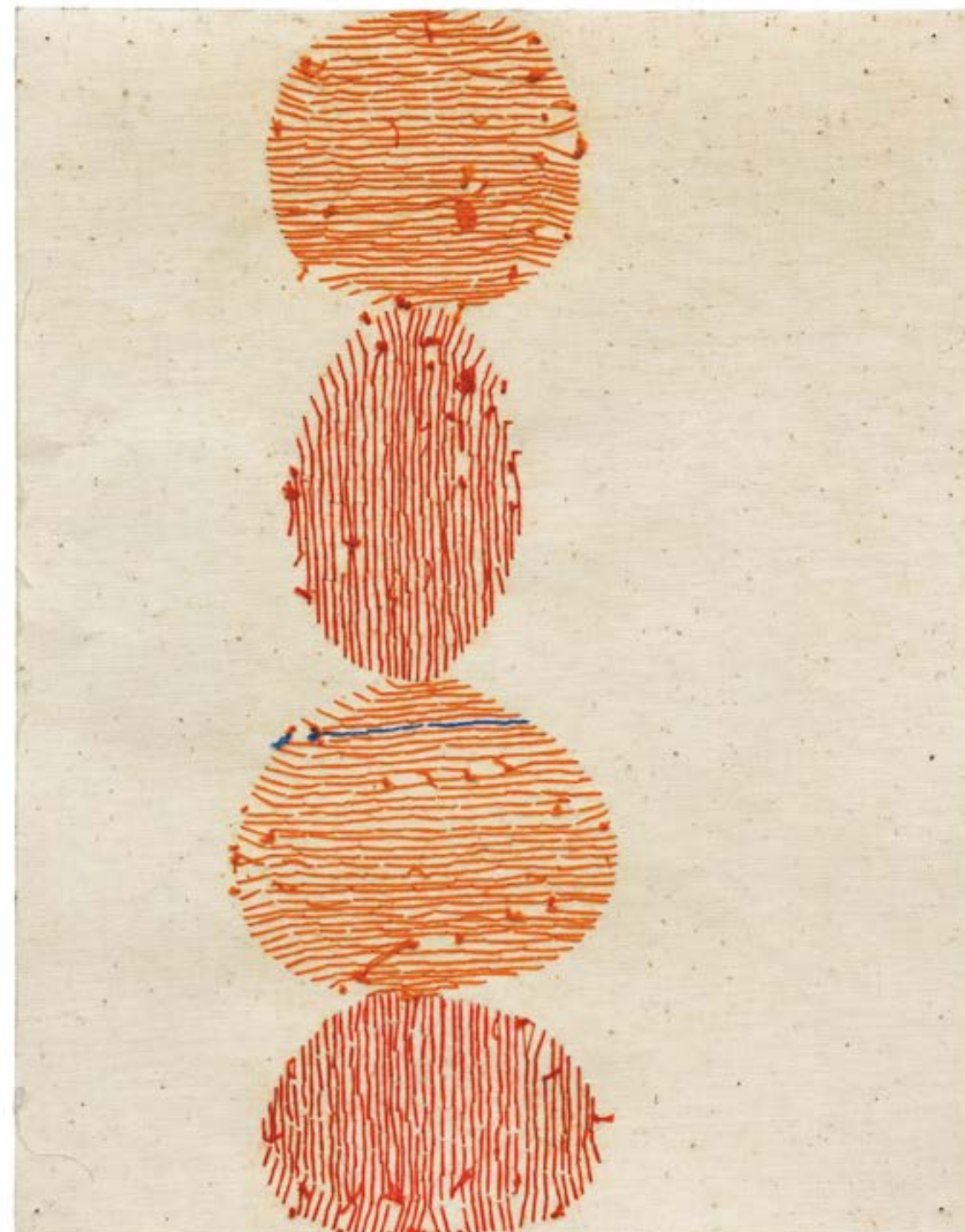
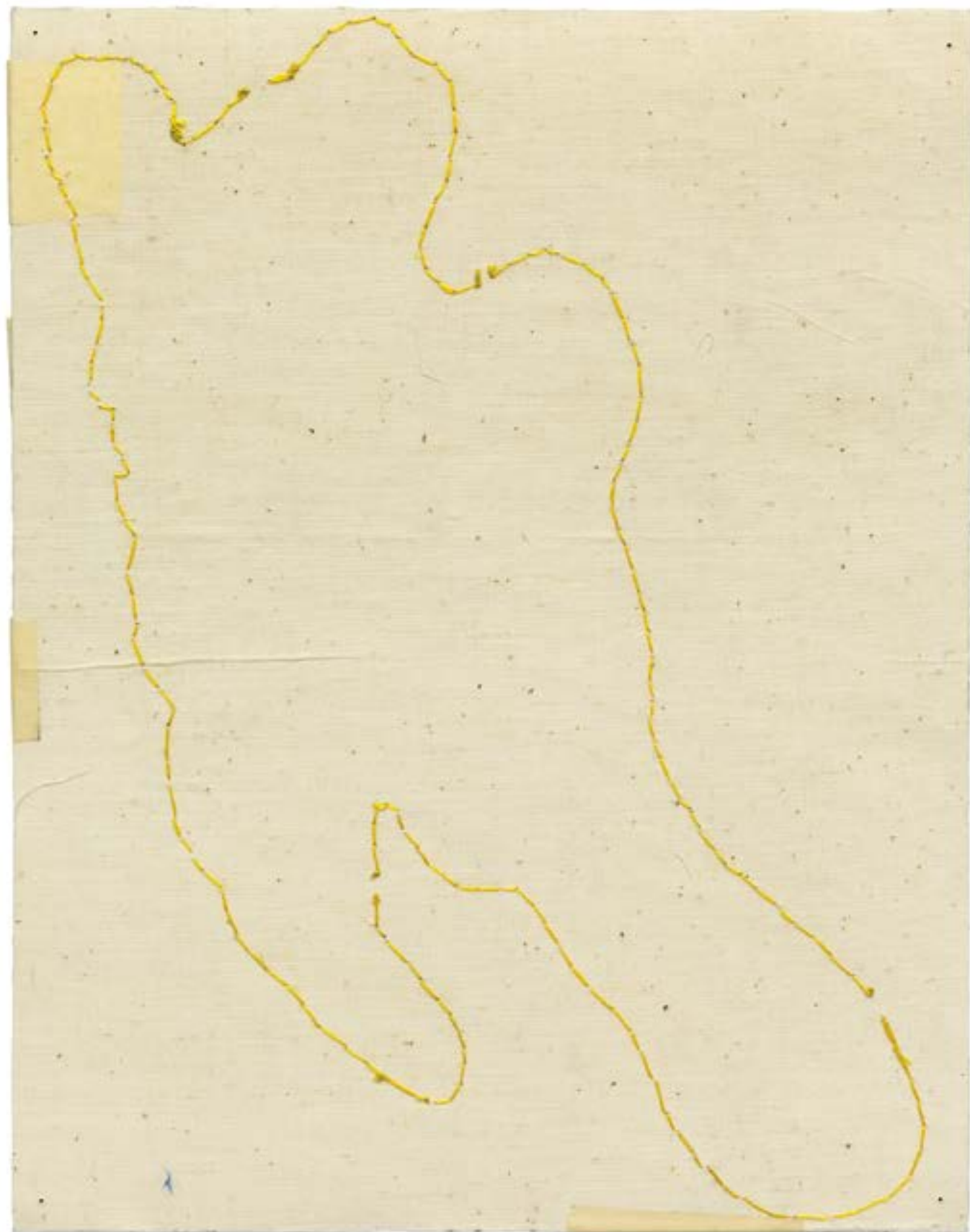










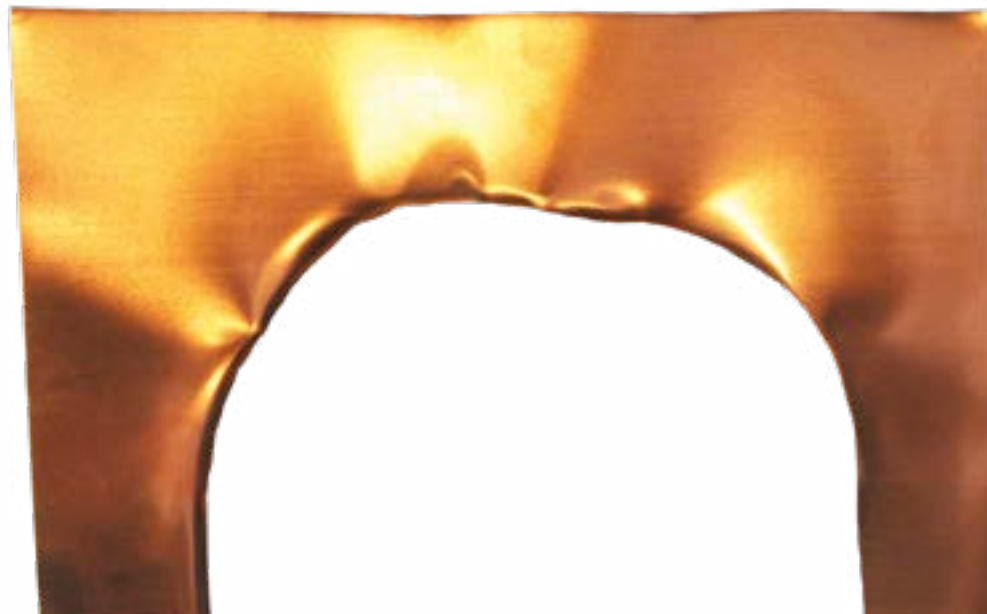




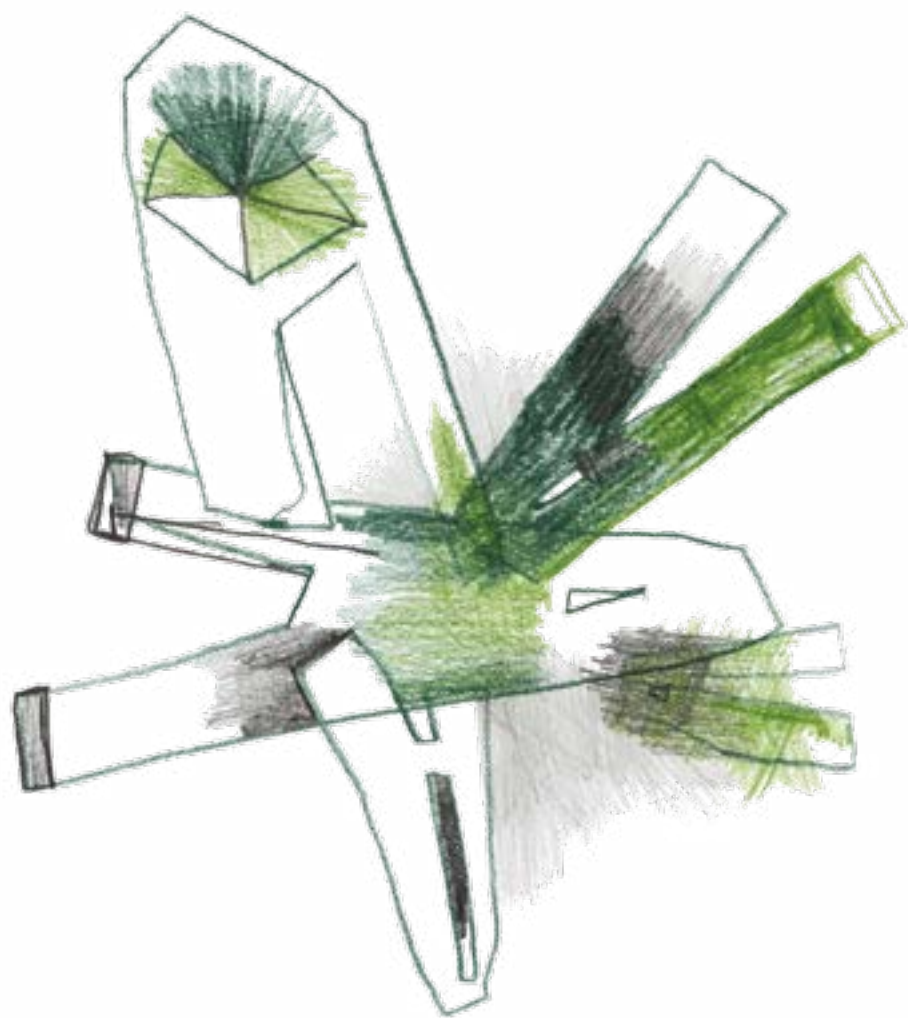


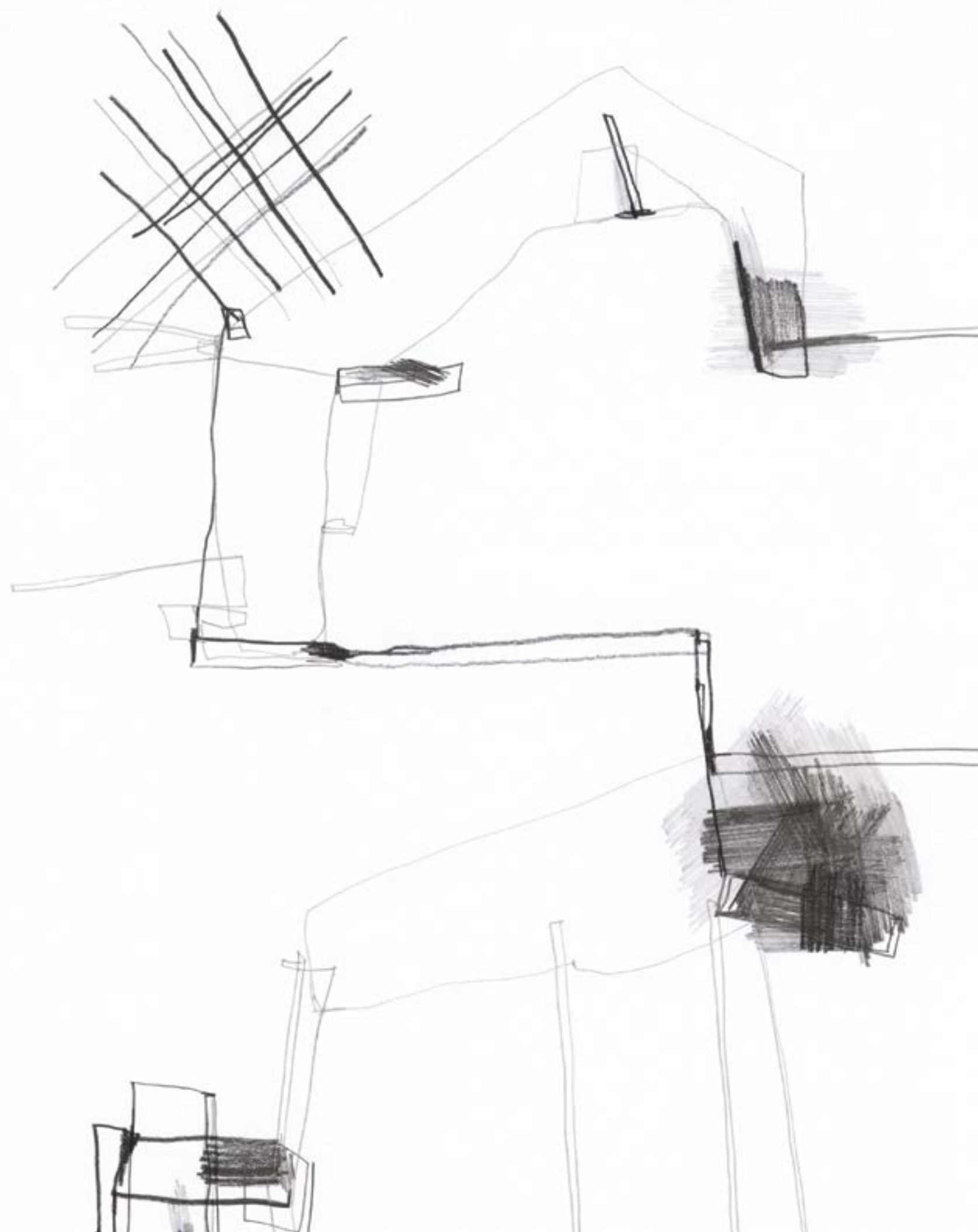
ALLISON WADE

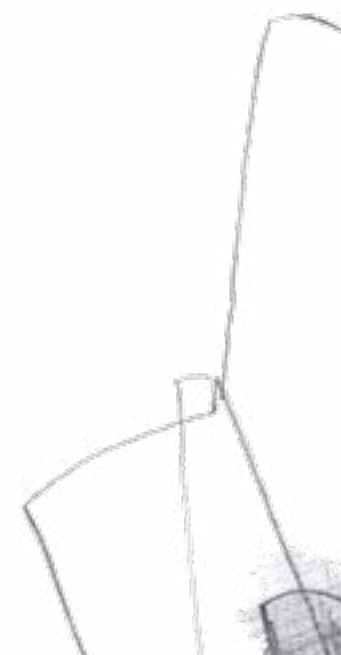




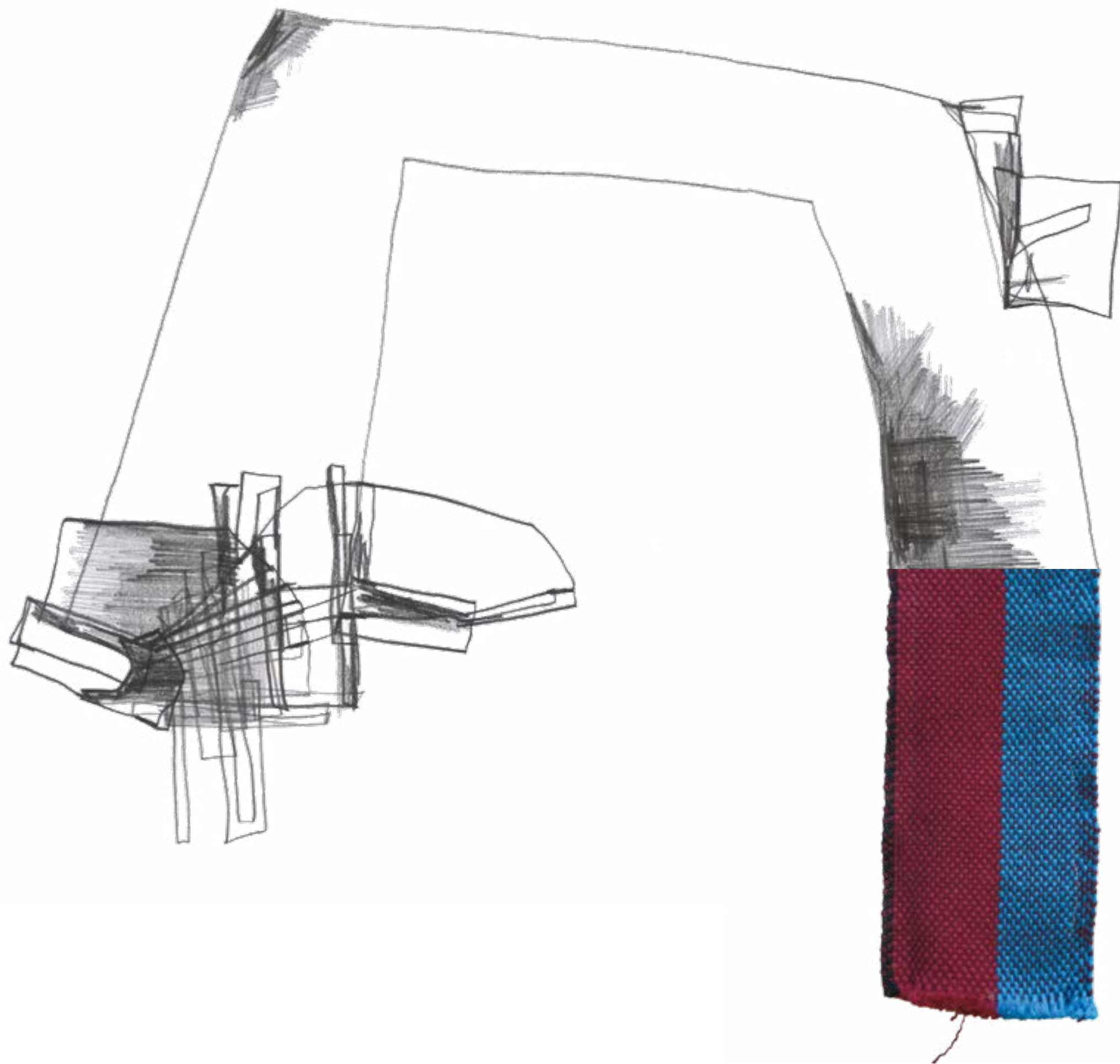












CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

DIANNA FRID

1
Transcription for a Transcription after VM, 2013
Embroidery, graphite and paint on paper
21.5 x 14 inches unframed 25.25 x 17.25 inches framed

2
Evidence of the Material World #4, 2013
Graphite membrane on wall and wood shelf
83 x 86 inches
(see pages 17, 18 and 24)

3
Prosodies #1, 2013
Embroidery loops, plaster, paint, cloth, paper, powder pigments, metal and cellophane
64 x 62 x 72 inches
(see pages 44 and 45)

4 – 10
Prosodic Transmissions #1 – #7, 2013
Each pieces consists of most of the following:
Digital photograph mounted on fabric, embroidery thread, graphite, paper and collage elements
11 x 8.5 inches
(see pages 9, 10, 13 – 16, 19 – 22)

ALLISON WADE

1 – 2
Little likelihoods, 2013
Ceramics on wood shelf
11 x 9.5 x 1.25 inches and 11.5 x 10.5 x 1 inches
(see pages 24 and 25)

3
Conduit/Offering #2, 2013
Copper, fabric, zipper, sand
17 x 12 x 4.5 inches

4
Leave it at that, 2013
Graphite and colored pencil on paper
8.27 × 11.69 inches

5
Floorplans for New Beginnings #3, 2013
Graphite and colored pencil on paper
8.27 × 11.69 inches

6
Beyond the knowing, 2013
Graphite and colored pencil on paper
8.27 × 11.69 inches

7
The Anecdotalist, 2013
Ceramic, fabric, acrylic
23 x 12 inches
(see pages 46 and 47)

8
Yes, 2013
Wood, plaster, fabric, steel, Plasti Dip
52 x 23 x 9.5 inches

9
and then nothing but a lone star remained in the sky, like an asterisk leading to an undiscoverable footnote (after Vladimir Nabokov), 2013
Aluminum, copper, wood, fabric, zipper, sand
59.5 x 31 x 13 inches



DF chk. 1



DF chk. 2



AW chk. 1 – 2



AW chk. 3



DF chk. 3



DF chk. 4



AW chk. 4



AW chk. 5



DF chk. 5



DF chk. 6



AW chk. 6



AW chk. 7



DF chk. 7



DF chk. 8



AW chk. 8



AW chk. 9



DF chk. 9



DF chk. 10

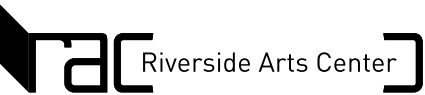




CREDITS

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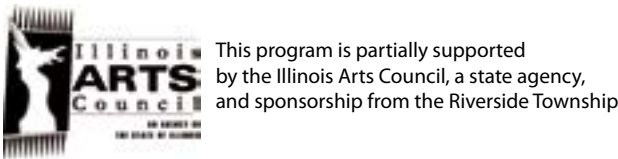
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