

BEARING OBJECTS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Emma Ulen-Klees

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ABSTRACT

Blending concrete historical anchors, fractured abstractions, and ephemeral moments of clarity, *Bearing Objects* denies itself in favor of uncomfortable disorientation. Recognizable artifacts of mapmaking are transformed, truncated, and repositioned in order to reveal the systematic flattening, emptying effects of western cartographic methods on the making and un/making of place. Challenging the isolating fragmentation of these structures, this thesis proposes instead the muddy, multiple, and intertwined, self consciously embracing the patchy, entangled, and incomplete in order to remain earnestly present.

BIO

Emma Ulen-Klees (b. 1992, Elysian, MN) is an artist and writer currently concluding an MFA at Cornell University. While earning a BFA in Printmaking and minor in Visual Studies at California College of the Arts she was awarded the Ralls Scholarship in Painting, the Yozo Hamaguchi Scholarship in Printmaking, as well as the Kala Art Institute Emerging Artist Residency upon graduating in 2014. She has exhibited at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago, Safe Gallery, Brooklyn, Anglim Gilbert Gallery in San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, CA, and Ithaca, NY. While at Cornell she curated the exhibitions *Cast Shadow*, and *SITE WORK* (with Sophia Starling). Internationally she has exhibited in Osaka, Japan and Hjalteyri, Iceland.



POINT OF BEGINNING

Washington sets his compass

Boone sets his compass

Jefferson sets his compass, looks ahead

The Geographer¹ begins his line, measures out the

ALIGNMENT, ANGLE POINT, ARROW, AZIMUTH, BASE LINE, BEARING,
BOUNDARY, CHAIN, CHORD, CONTROL, COORDINATES, CORNER, COURSE,
DECLINATION, DIRECT, DISTORTION, DOUBLE DISTANCE, FORESIGHT,
GRADIENT, GRID, LANDMARK, LATITUDE, LEVEL, LONGITUDE, MEAN,
MEANDER, MEDIAN, MERIDIAN, METER, OFFSET, OUTLINES, RANGE,
RHUMB LINE, ROD, ROOD, STICK, TANGENT, TIE POINT, VARIATION²

manifest destiny (the statesman) turns westward, unrolls the corners of his map

measures out the miles in railroad tracks

his plan gets caught up on the mountains,

becomes wrinkled and torn, keeps on/doesn't stop

Lewis and Clark take two years, go the distance

a land cut apart at right angles, the mathematicians plane (plain)

measured out, parts, pieces, shapes to be picked up

GOES BY ACRE, ALLOTMENT, ARE, BLOCK, BOUNTY, CEDE, CLAIM, DEED,
DISCOVERY, DONATION, FRACTION, FRAGMENT, GRANT, HALF, HECTARE,
HOMESTEAD, LEASE, LOT, PLAT, QUARTER, RANGE, RESERVATION,
SECTION, SITE, SUBDIVISION, SURVEY, TENEMENT, TERRITORY, TITLE,
TOWNSHIP, TRACT, TREATY ³

goes by dollar⁴

he sets his mind on a place, not here, on its own,
with nothing that's (someone's) around it
all upturned soil, soft, held together by strong shoulders (corners)
he buys an Acre for a dollar, puts it in his back pocket, and walks 1,000 miles
it looks the same, except, a little blue and more (like him)

Thoreau has second thoughts⁵

worries the edges, the sharpness, singleness, aloneness
the arbor is cut apart, the river divides

further away a dead eye pans, snaps up the light
collecting everything that is/as the same, it displaces/i am displaced
I slip between walking and falling, the land tilts away, stretches out,
is rearranged by some/one/thing else's (memories)

something is lost, doesn't make sense



6 X 6

In this case the line begins in the fall of 1785, at the feet of Thomas Hutchins, with a wooden stake pounded into the mud on the northern shore of the Ohio river just over a month earlier.⁶ Extending away from the river at a right angle, the line continues west for 42 miles, each carefully counted, marked, and witnessed.⁷ Each an anchor, a toe hold, for an idea set against the high ridges and narrow valleys of the Allegheny Plateau.⁸ From this line two sets of opposing parallels descend, crossing each other at (regular) intervals, forming a lattice(work), a grid of equal 6x6 mile squares. From here the grid shows its strength, collapsing just as easily as it expands, so that each square mile is partitioned/ marked/and numbered from 1-36. Each an even 640 acres.⁹

The pattern repeats itself, 640 is easily quartered, and quartered again,¹⁰ until 160 is 40, is 10, is 2.5.

The divisions multiply, forming a cascading set of nets, of snares that catch, tether, and tangle the multiple, the polymorphic, the unnamed and/or undescribed. Space becomes fragmentary, held together and apart by hard edges. Meaning too is forced (pulled away) from itself, its knot of interwoven senses cut, truncated, and rewritten as sterile lists of tight, bounded objects. Sets of terms which reassign value according to alien interests, terms easily measured/quantified. Separate entities robbed of their names, stories, agency. A nation/place emptied and cut apart at right angles.¹¹

The scale of the world changes, is condensed, flattened, fits nicely into the hand.

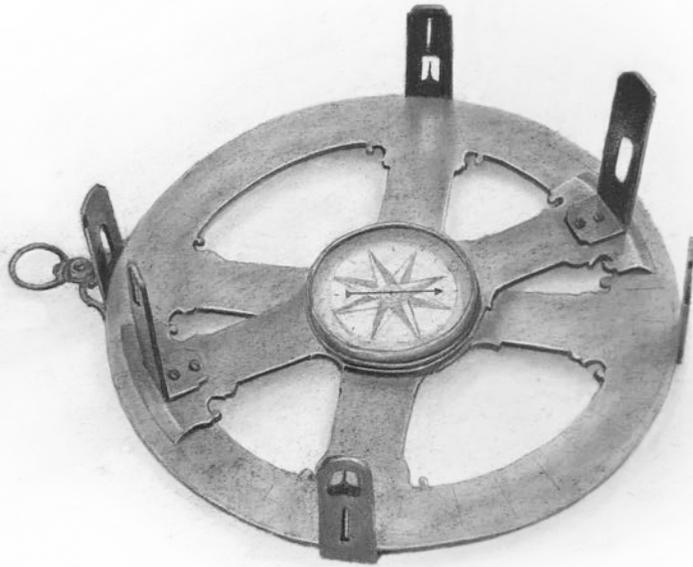
But, this abstraction has been with us a long time, it has settled, its divisions fortified. Our patterns of use so embedded that it is easy to forget the real weight of it, on history, the land, us. It is easy to lose track of something whose scale slips so easily between the local and the national, whose scope is impossible to see.

I want to be disoriented, not from place but from the pathways.

From the deep grooves of movement in which I have become caught. To climb out from the eroded embankments, to slip down from the barren track into the locks of tall grass, low brush, the canopy's shade. Or maybe in among the fragrant, sharp, sage, or the busy, humid crowd of monstera leaves, or be found dwarfed by a cathedral of giants. To be caught up, engulfed, interwoven with filamental roots, leaves, trunks... (the unknowable)

I catch my sleeves on the low hanging branches of the bearing tree (that used to go by something else)

and remember



WHAT'S LEFT OUT

today I went out and looked for the corners of myself
3 were 2,000 miles away
in the honeysuckles and
ten steps past the fence-line toward willow point
in the Maples, and
the uneven, reedy angle of the lakeshore below
the big Cottonwoods, and
Somewhere along the far edge of the hay field
past the leftover Pines

What's left out are the porous edges, collaborative communities, and multi-species descendants. The indigenous, alternate, essential, histories, myths, voices, gifts. The migrations, the predators, prey, habitats without hard edges. The inherent precarity of seasonal floods and fires, of disturbance based ecologies. The wetlands, and unguided watercourses of creeks, streams, rivers. The vibrant materials, the soil, flesh, body, the decay, mold, mildew, compost, deep loam, and encouraging humus.

What's left out is compassion, nourishment, tenderness.

I am disoriented and remember/to/feel

(I am born in the spring)

the rising/running blood of the trees

(under the big bay window that looks out toward the maples)

the embrace of the apple tree as its roots grow around

(at home)

that middle body that is both my mother and I

(home)

The apple tree blooms

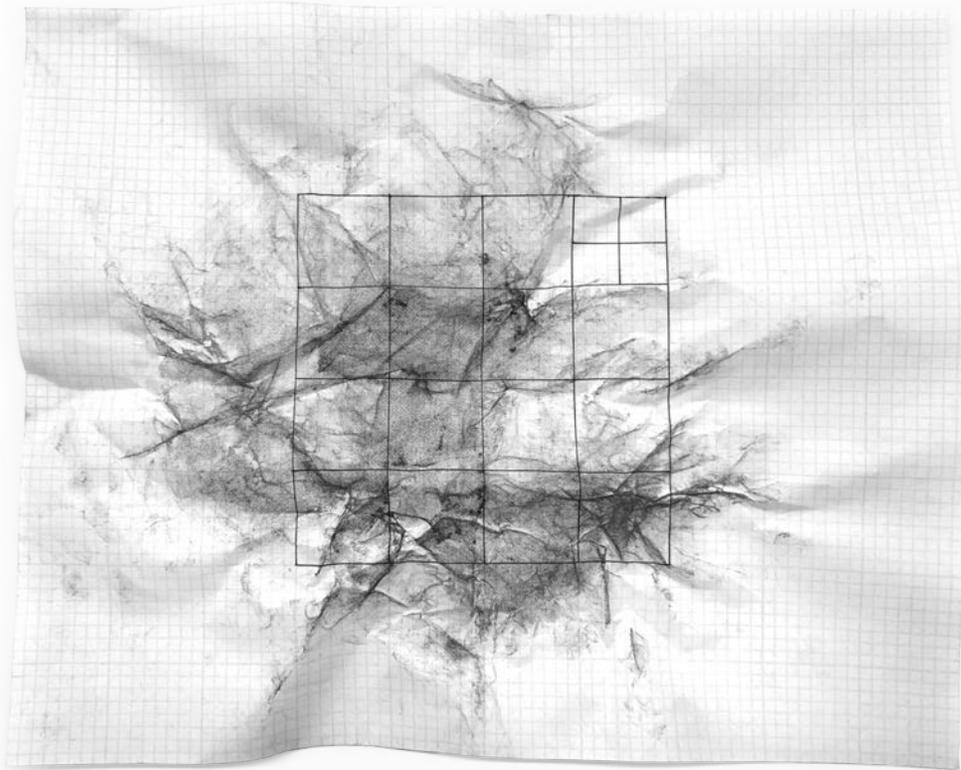
(the afterbirth)

its fruit/flesh stained pink at the heart/core

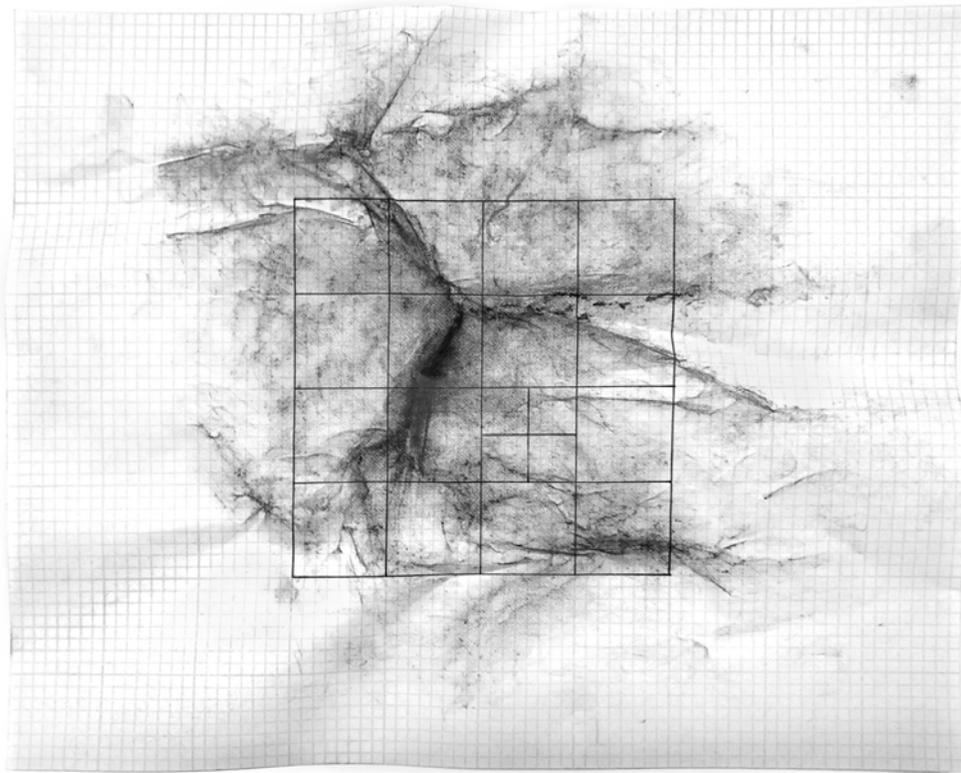
What's left out is what lingers across the shoulder blades, against the backs of the eyelids. Fading afternoon light fingering the too bright silhouettes of distant pines. The low, cold sound of stones rounding themselves out in the gravity of beating waves. The weight of a smooth stone picked up and turned over and over, warmed, in palm or pocket. The last orange blush of dusk, running itself out along the tops of the trees, an opaque mantle of milky dew softening the lush hollows of summer marshes.

I find my bearing(s), let them go

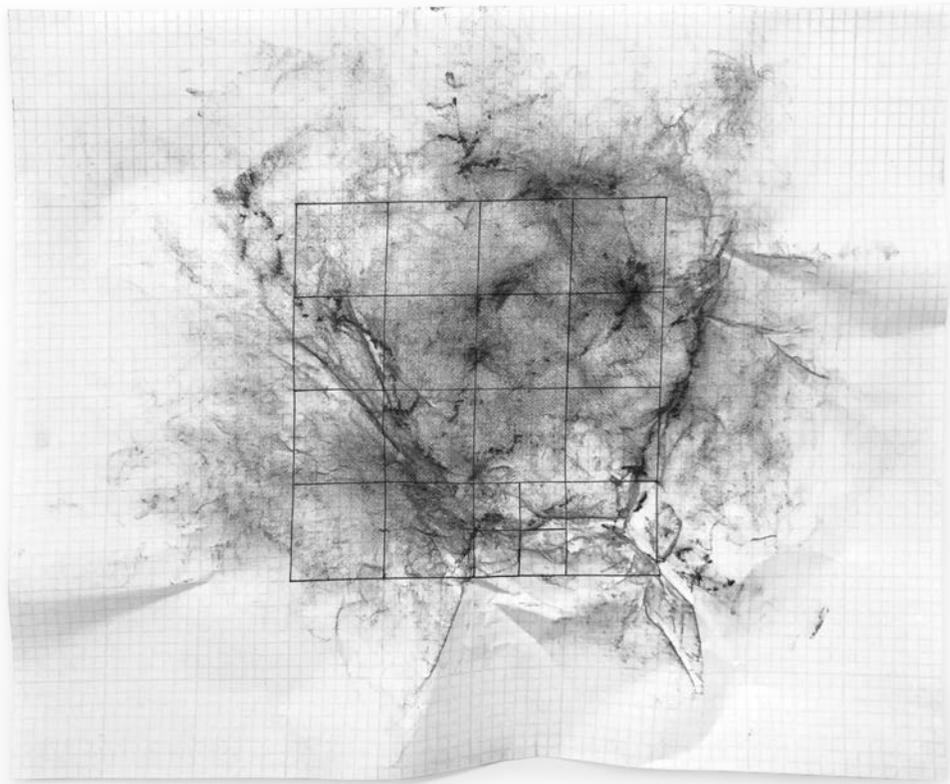
The center is underneath where the apple tree used to be.



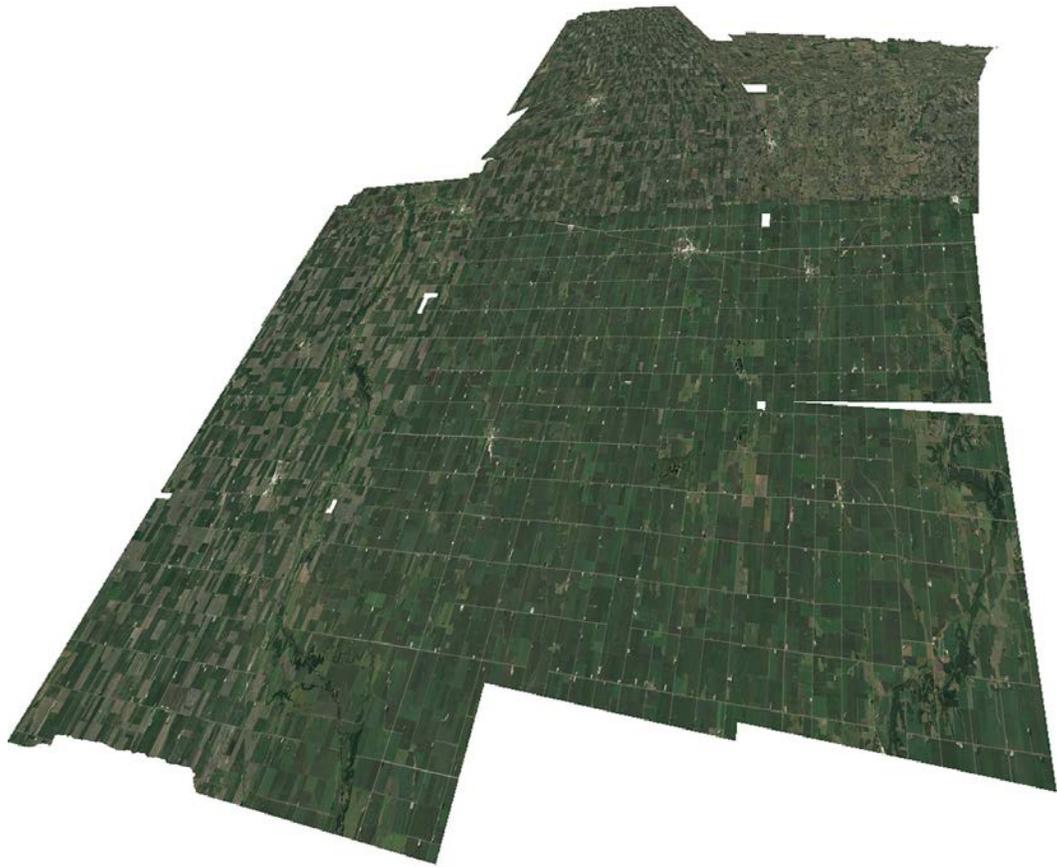
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Land Ordinance Studies #6, 2019, graphite on grid paper, 10 x10 "



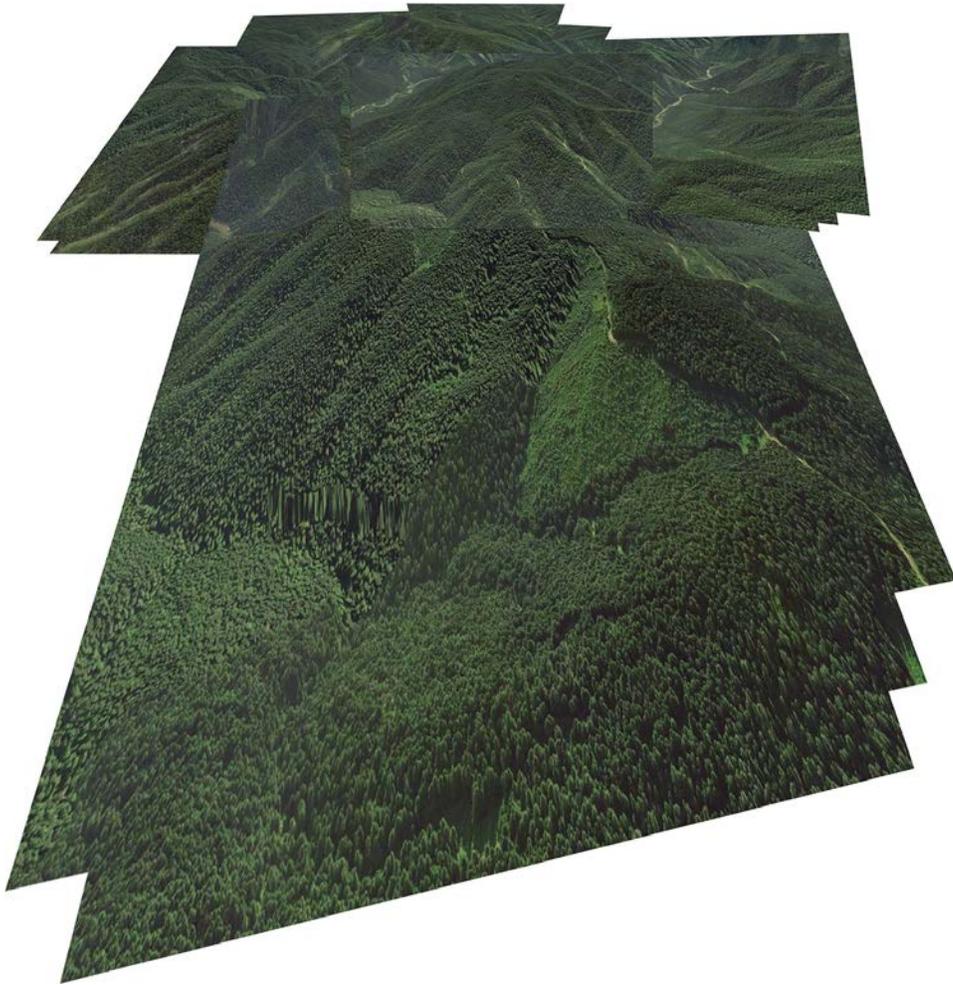
Land Ordinance Studies #7, 2019, graphite on grid paper, 10 x10 "



Anti-Map, 2020, Inkjet Print, 30x40"



Anti-Map, 2020, Inkjet Print, 30x40"



Anti-Map, 2020, Inkjet Print, 30x40"



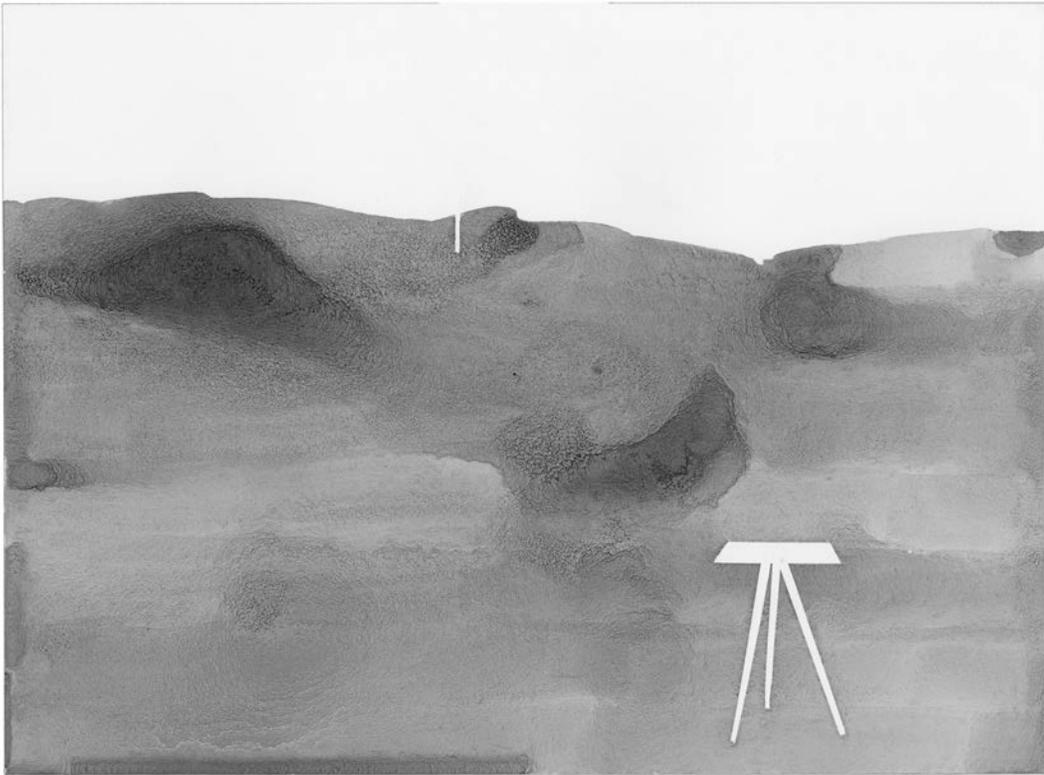
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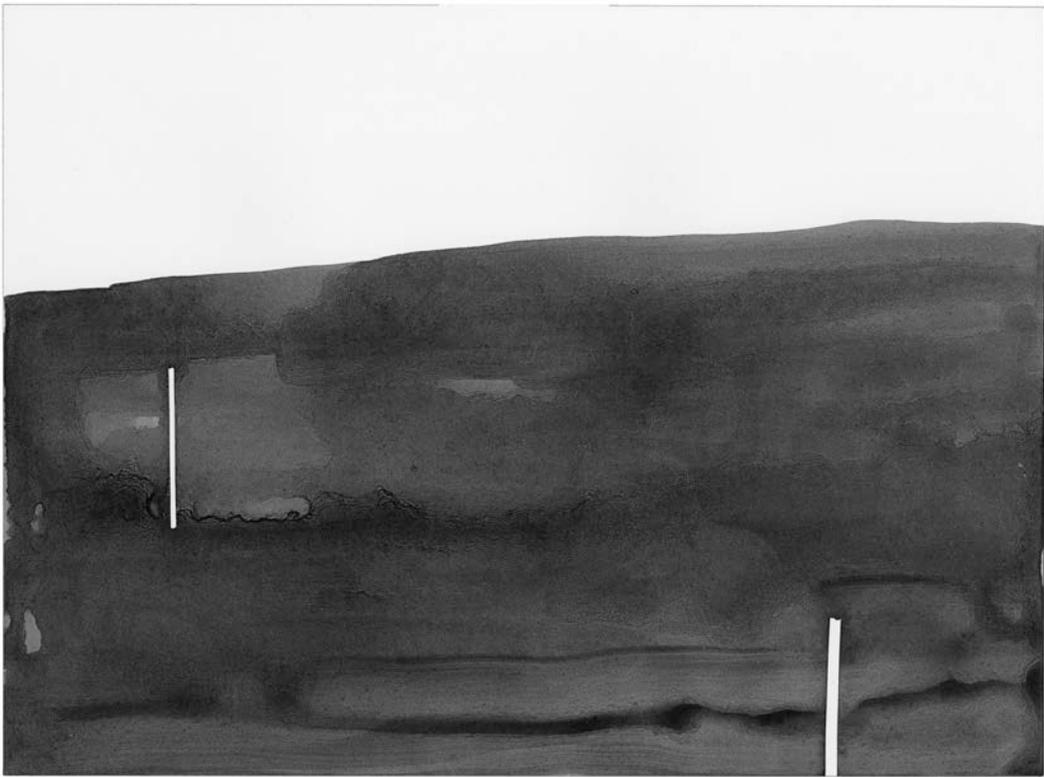
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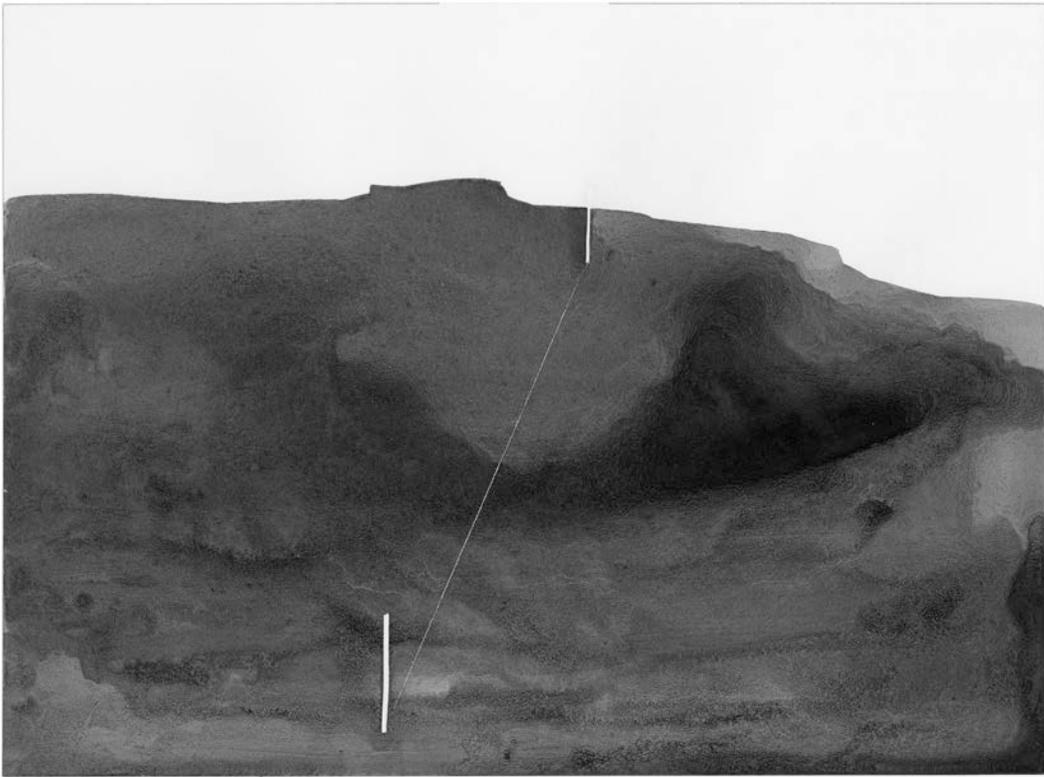
Survey Studies #12, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



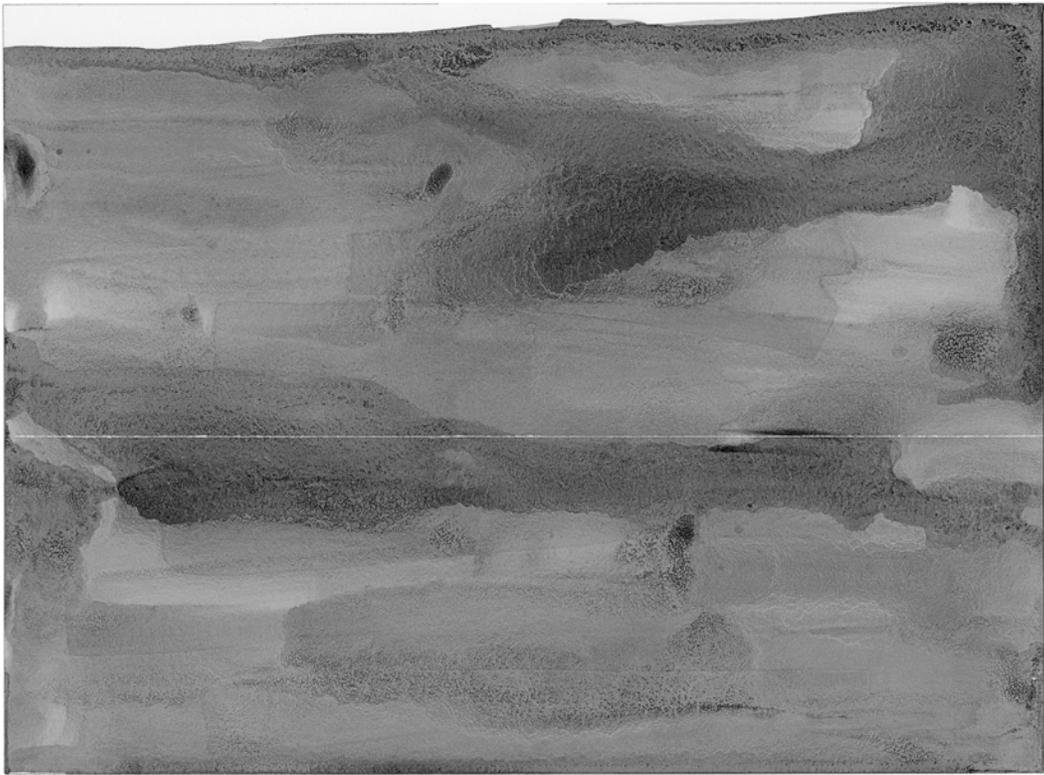
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Survey Studies #5, 2019, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



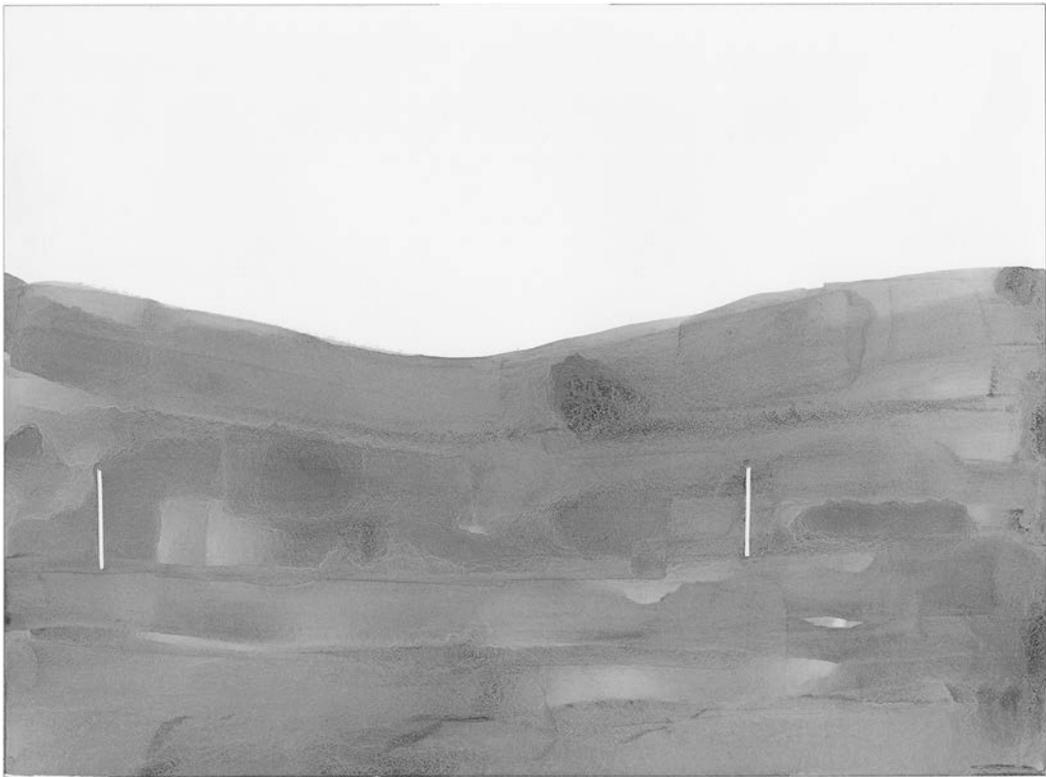
Survey Studies #7, 2019, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



Survey Studies #10, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



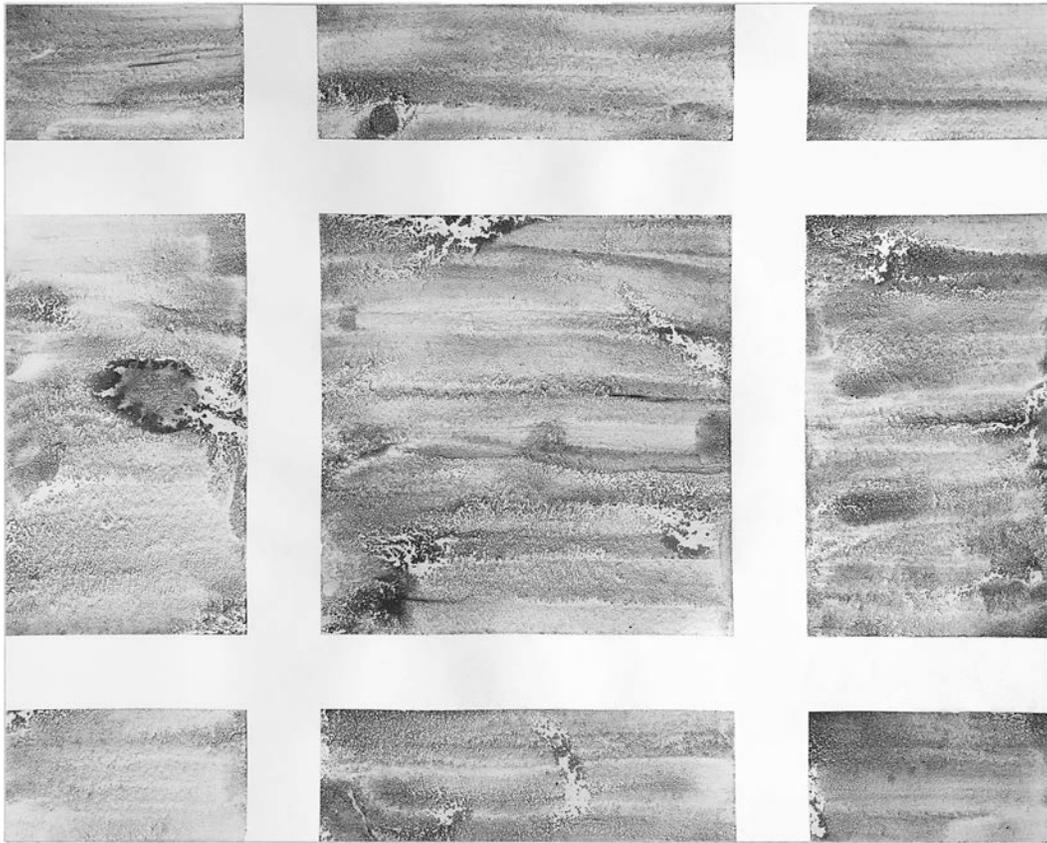
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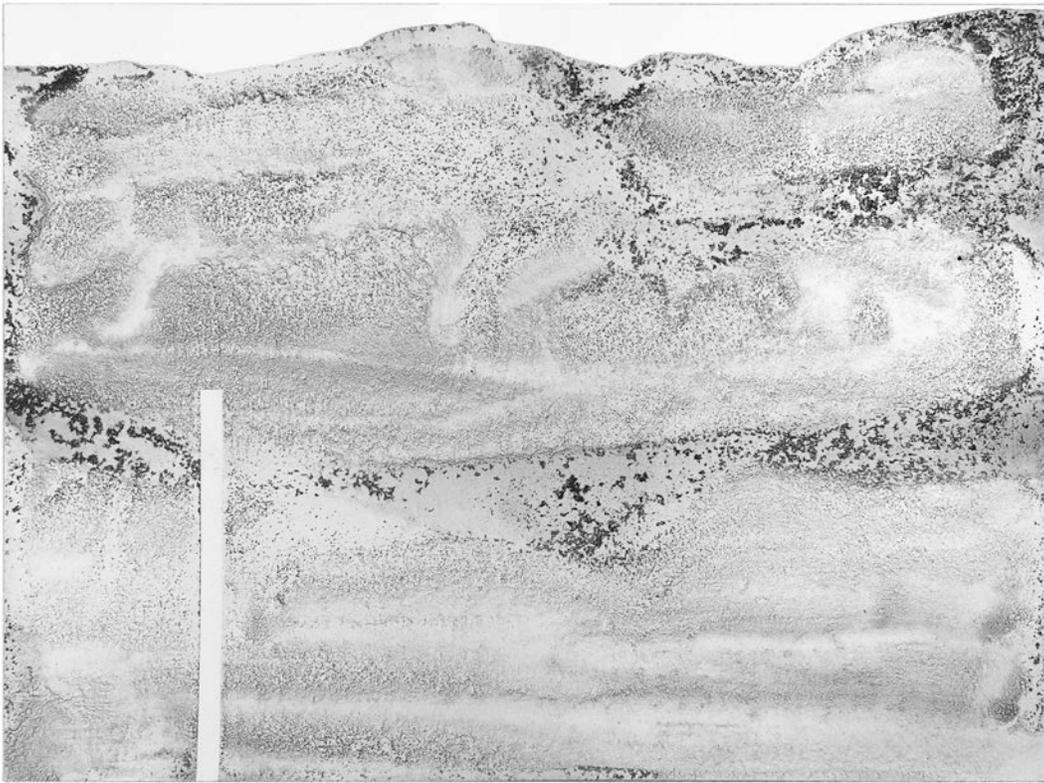
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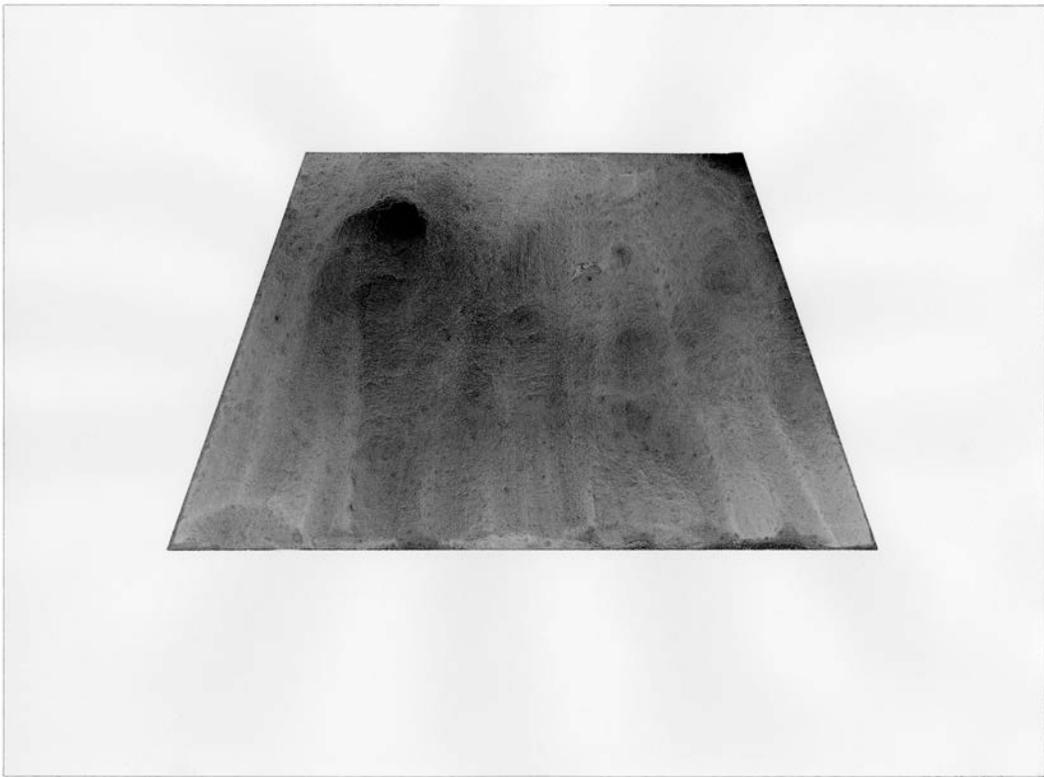
Survey Studies #4, 2019, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



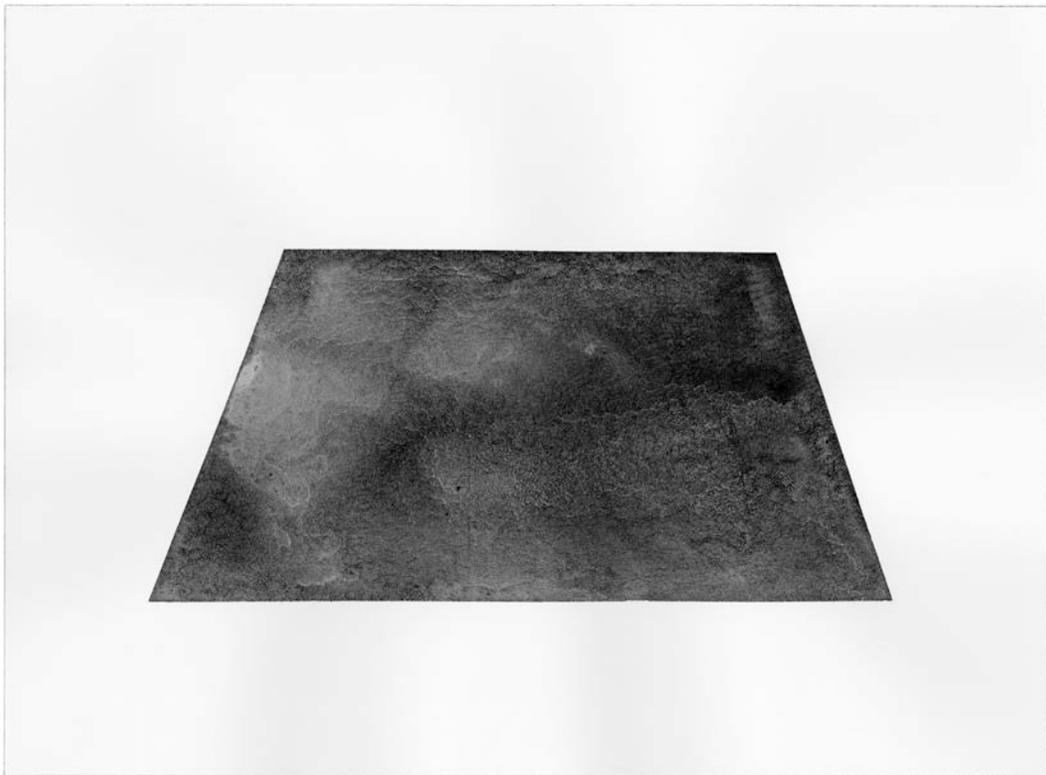
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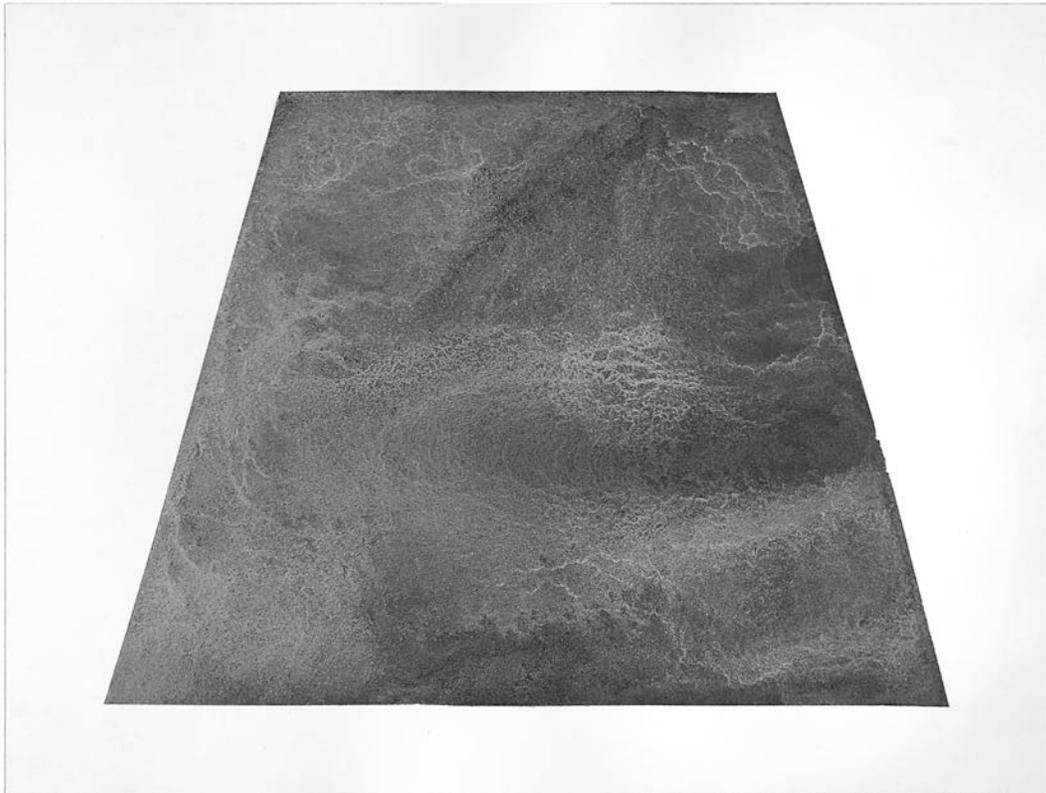
Survey Studies #11, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



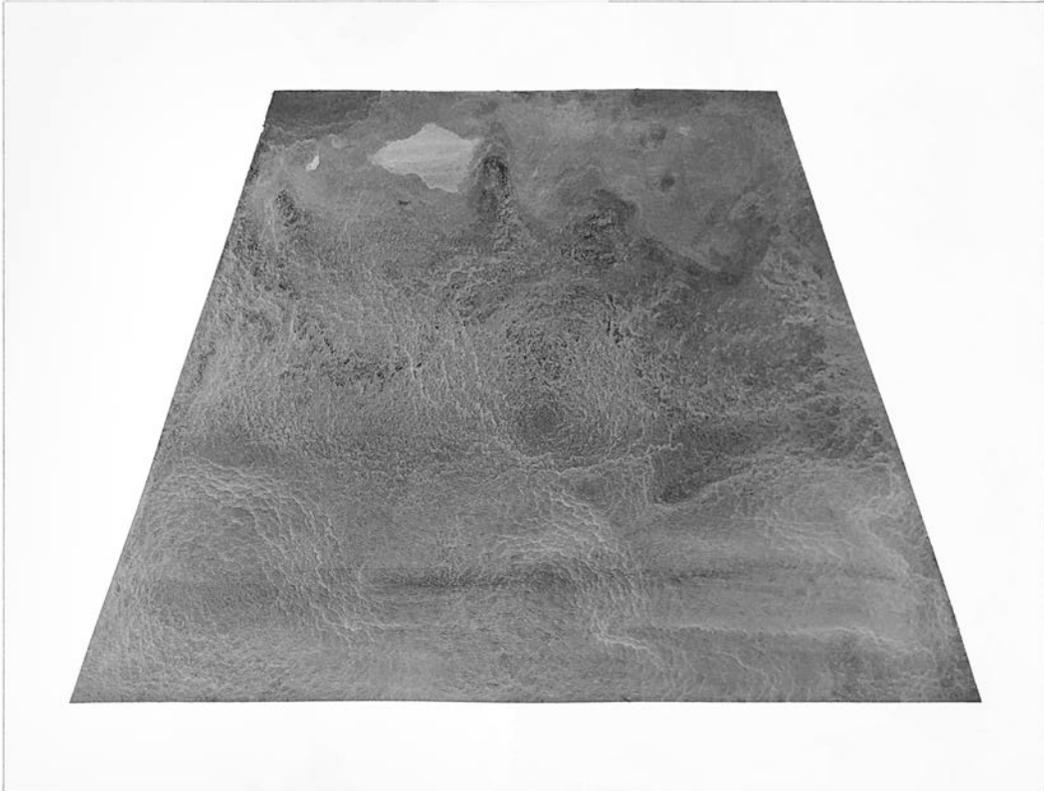
Survey Studies #17, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



Survey Studies #18, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 9.5x12"



Survey Studies #19, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 12x16"



Survey Studies #20, 2020, Tusche on Watercolor paper, 12x16"



Center (Ithaca), 2020

Series of 12 Photographs























NOTES

¹ Following passage of The Land Ordinance of 1785 Thomas Hutchins is appointed as Geographer of the United States and tasked with surveying the Seven Ranges, often seen as the blueprint for the Rectangular Land Survey System. Witcher, *Setting the Boundaries: The Point of Beginning Survey*, 2.

² Terms used in cartographic measurement, see pages 4-9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17-19, 24, 26, 27, 34, 35, 37-40, 45, 46, 53, 54, 57, 64, 67, 69, 128 of *Glossary of BLM Surveying and Mapping Terms*.

³ Terms used in cartographic measurement, see pages 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 60, 17-19, 24-26, 28, 29, 35, 37, 49, 52, 53, 56, 59, 61, 65, 67, 69, 70 of *Glossary of BLM Surveying and Mapping Terms*.

⁴ According to the Land Ordinance of 1785 no Acre of the 7 Ranges would be sold for less than one dollar. *A History of the Rectangular Survey System*, 12.

⁵ For an incredibly rich description of Thoreau as land surveyor and his internal conflicts about how to measure and describe landscape see Miller, *This Radical Land*, 27.

⁶ Pattison, *Beginnings of the American Rectangular Land Survey System 1784-1800*, 128.

⁷ “The first line surveyed under the rectangular system. This line, which extends the width of the Seven Ranges (42 miles), is named for Thomas Hutchins, the Geographer of the United States. Under the Ordinance of May 20, 1785, the geographer was to “personally attend to the running of” a line westward from the “Point of Beginning.” *Glossaries of BLM Surveying and Mapping Terms*, 26.

⁸ Pattison, 128.

⁹ White, 12.

¹⁰ The simplicity of equal subdivision was appealing not only for its easy application with minimal tools/skills, but it also represented Jefferson’s belief that mathematic division could provide a certain kind of democracy. Pattison, 50, 57.

¹¹ About 3/4 of the continental U.S (some 3 million square miles) is divided according to the Rectangular Land Survey System. Mein, *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation*, 191-192.

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