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confluent awareness



Confluence I, China marker on paper, 96 x 107 inches, 2008

by AM DeBrincat

SARA SCHNECKLOTH'S LYRICAL AND NUANCED WORK DRAWS THE VIEWER IN AND INVITES THEM TO SEE THE WORLD SURROUNDING THEM FROM AN INTRIGUING NEW PERSPECTIVE. LIKE THE ARTIST HERSELF, HER WORK IS GENEROUS AND PROFOUND, PLAYFUL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BY TURNS. IN ANTICIPATION OF THE OPENING OF HER SOLO SHOW, *TO SCALE*, AT **FOLEY GALLERY** IN NEW YORK CITY, I WAS DELIGHTED TO SIT DOWN WITH SARA AND TALK TO HER ABOUT HER WORK.

The forms in your work are so lyrical, and for me exist in an intriguingly ambiguous space between abstraction and representation. How do you view your work in terms of these two reference points (or are these labels even relevant)?

Long live the ambiguous space – I seem to spend quite a bit of time there, figuratively and otherwise. And yes, these labels are relevant, as they each offer up a place to begin, depart

from, and re-approach. When I was in graduate school, I was making drawings that were very anatomically flavored – organs, tissue, teeth, bones– the body broken down into parts then built back together again. While I would often start by drawing from actual source material, forms would evolve on the page, influenced by factors operating on an invisible register – my own body, my internal sense of memory, desire, anxiety, pulse – as well as by the other drawings that had come before. For me, that's when I know that things are working – when there's a self-reflective quality to the drawing that seems to project it backward and forward at the same time. I get to see where and how each piece fits in the chain of influence, and have a glimpse of what may want to come next.

But those points of direct observation, the body and the landscape, I turn to again and again. They are like trigger fields – I'll start with the observed moment, and watch as it shifts to find its own language through the drawing. I've also found that bringing full attention to the behavior and characteristics of material itself - the wax, the ink, the charcoal – has opened up a different kind of productive ambiguous space, one in which the gesture of the hand conflates with the activity of the material. The *Geofact* drawings I'm doing right now are about finding the tension between the two, by letting the drawn gesture fold into the material, and back again.



From Geofact, Ink, watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 13 x 19 inches, 2015

You have evolved a highly specific and personalized set of art materials that you utilize in your work, and some of them, like the paper you use, are quite unusual. Can you talk about your relationship to materials, the way this has evolved over time, and how your materials influence the work that you create?

When I first started drawing in earnest, I was convinced I'd found the beginning and the end in charcoal. A natural material, transformed from one state to another, an incredibly sensitive extension of the body that can telegraph the physicality of the pressure, direction, and speed of my movement, one so richly expressive of emotional nuance. Why in the world would anyone

ever use anything else, when charcoal does and says so much? Well, for the same reason that we learn a broader vocabulary, or better, to speak in different tongues.

I moved from San Francisco to Cape Town in 2000, and so many of my basic art materials shifted to what was available. Suddenly, I was using a lot of tempera paint, and making my own pastels and suspensions. I was working on different grades of paper, and with materials that were less rule-bound. Things came together and fell apart in strange ways, and I loved it. In the graduate work that followed, drawing became about seeing how many different ways to mark that I could compress into one event. From that point forward, drawing became, and remains, an occasion to layer, to erase, to fuse, to complicate, to reduce, to invent. The page holds the record of the experience of those actions. There's honestly no material that I would say "no" to trying, if only to get a sense of the trace it will leave. Synthetic paper allows me to keep the material in play longer – there's very little embedded interaction with the surface, and it gives me more freedom to mount new combinations of wet and dry, gritty and smooth, sharp and soft.



Conglomerate Body I, Ink, graphite, watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 40 x 30 inches, 2014

Let's discuss color palette. For me, your color palette is an incredibly powerful aspect of your work. At times the colors feel extremely organic, and sometimes they feel synthetic, and these are really powerful reference points for me when I experience your work. Are these two associations – the organic and the synthetic – present for you when you think

about your work or color palette? How do you make decisions around color?

Given my early love of charcoal, color is something I feel like I have, until recently, kept restrained. Place gives guidance. In South Carolina, from late March through summer, the world explodes in color – the pinks, reds, purples, and greens are the flavor of the place, and they all show up in the work. When I work in Brooklyn, browns multiply. During these past few months spent in New Mexico, the desert formed the palette of the place. The synthetic colors in the most recent work that we looked at together are in many ways coming out of a sense of place, but on delay – it's New Mexico, recalled, and run through the filter of a self-imposed studio vacuum. It's that movement again between realism and abstraction – working from the observed to the imagined – the colors are learning to assume, and to create, their own sense of place.

“Synthetic” operates in two ways, then – the sense of bringing together, of synthesizing, and in the movement from nature to artifice.



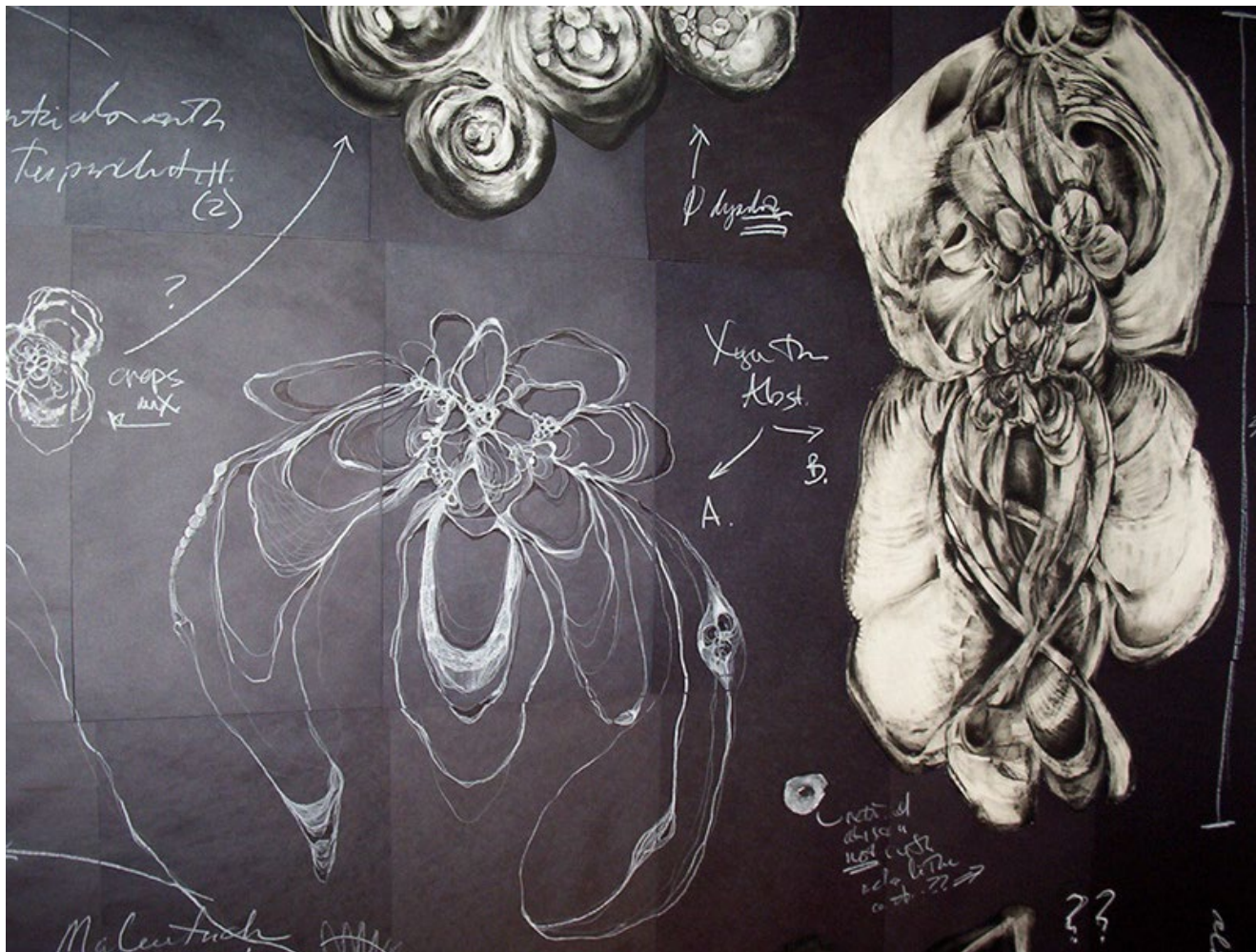
Batir – Blockade I, Graphite, wax, watercolor on paper, 50 x 50 inches, 2012

You've lived in, traveled in, and made art in so many different parts of the world. Have specific locations influenced your art in particular ways?

Definitely. I can think of a number of times when I went to a location with a specific project in mind, to find that the environment calls so many of the shots and opens up new directions in the work. So much so, that I now make 'place' an explicit and active part of my process. My work is

increasingly driven by the question of how we embody the landscapes we find ourselves within, whether built or natural, and how that embodiment of place translates into the act of drawing.

I've better learned to come to a location being consciously open to what it is – not what I believe I need it to be in order for the work to be successful. South Africa, southern France, the American southwest, Brooklyn, South Carolina, each of these places I work carries a reputation, a deep and often fraught history that can shape expectation, which, in turn, can limit the sense of possibility for the present. The challenge is in adapting to what lies beyond the easy premise of place, and working in direct response to the environment, while still being aware of what has come before. It's about being attentive to how my body reacts to the web of sensory input, as well as the often less tangible forces of history and culture. I also think this is what characterizes connected drawing – the ability to simultaneously detach and absorb – to see and respond in an open state, one not driven by a predetermined end.



Studio Notations, Charcoal and pastel on paper, dimensions variable, 2006

Nature, scale, ambiguity, expansiveness, the unknown, form and formlessness. Discuss.

Last week, I gave an artist talk to a group of neuroscience students at USC interested in creativity and brain function. At the end, I introduced some of the new *Geofact* images and asked people to free associate – what did the images trigger, and in what context would people find them? To the word, each of the concepts you raise were put forward as a way to think about not just the images, but about ideas of systemic interconnection, recursive imagery, and the biomorphic impulse. In this room full of premed students, biologists, psychologists, we were

talking about art in a way that drove home the idea that there can be multiple ways to imagine how we visualize the body, the landscape, data, memory, the cosmos – all as manifest in an enhanced pour of ink. In that room, too, there was an interest in finding larger disciplinary connections, and a willingness to stand in support of ambiguity. It spoke to how we've been grappling with these fundamental questions around nature, form, and formlessness for centuries. It was funny though – a few students prefaced their remarks with some version of “this may sound touch-feely, but...” in a way that highlighted the hard divide between science and metaphysics. I think art bridges the two and doesn't require any disclaimer.

I am also going to take this as an opportunity to extol the virtues of an 18th century German philosopher, Novalis, who, for me, captures much of what it means to constellate those concepts. He has a number of writings across topics, from geology to ethics, but the first one I found is the *Novices of Sais* from 1789. I love it and want to share it. Here's the opening paragraph:

Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures which seem to belong to that great cipher which we discern written everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds and snow, in crystals and in stone formations, on ice-covered waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, of plants, beasts and men, in the lights of heaven, on scored disks of pitch or glass or in iron filings round a magnet, and in strange conjunctures of chance. In them we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar, but our surmise takes on no definite forms and seems unwilling to become a higher key. It is as though an alkahest had been poured over the senses of man. Only at moments do their desires and thoughts seem to solidify. Thus arise their presentiments, but after a short time everything swims again before their eyes.

I love that passage because it speaks to persistent unknowability – moving back and forth between what we think we understand, and a state of disintegration and blindness. There's a kind of heartbreak in that movement, between recognizing a greater pattern, and losing it again. It's a feeling that compels me to work. It highlights the ache of loss as well as the thrill of the discovery.

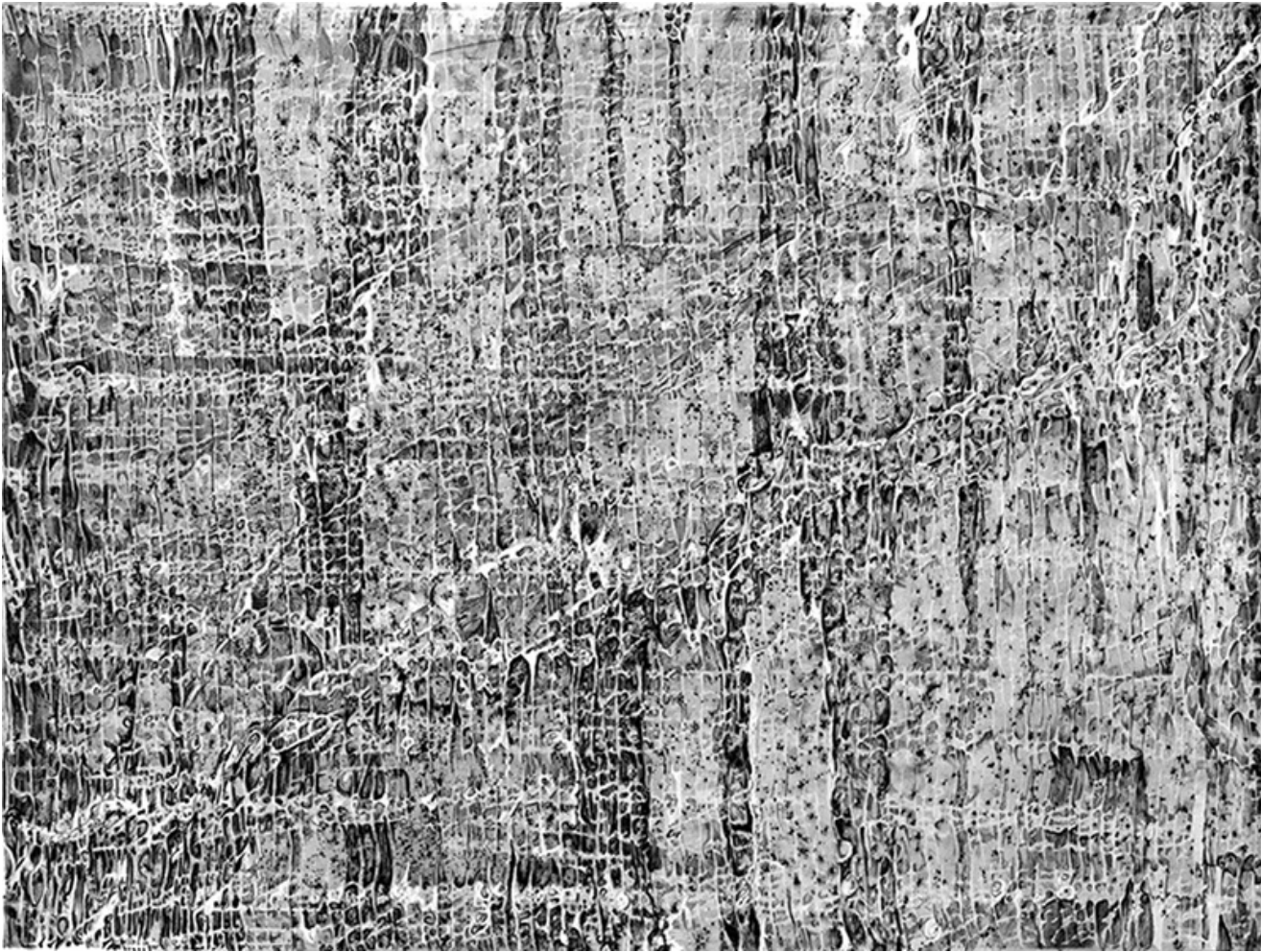


Batir – Wall VIII, Ink, graphite, watercolor on paper, 12 x 24 inches, 2011

Let's talk about your series *Geology into Architecture*.

I've been immersed lately, well for four years now, in seeing and reacting to moments in which geology, biology, and architecture fold into and inform one another. It started during an artist residency in France, where I worked with a crew to rebuild a length of dry stone wall. This is a perfect example of environment setting the direction – it was impossible not to react to the abundance of stone in the village I was staying in, and the surrounding countryside, and the ways in which stone constitutes the substance and the structure of the place, and has for thousands of years, through war, plague, and famine. Working with stone in this traditional method to build the wall was a personal revelation – it was as though all the drawing concerns of gesture and the body, mark, and organic/structural fit came into very sharp relief in one activity. I took it back into the studio, and the drawings became driven by the material, the physicality of the layer, the cultural labor of assembly, the memory of practice.

From there, it was a short visual leap to thinking about the integrity of cells, of interlocking forms that create strong barriers as well as structures that are porous and solid at the same time – skins and membranes. I now look to draw in locations where people have woven natural materials and the built environment together in such a way that the body and history are both present. The past several months working in the southwest was incredible for finding these living architectures and material fusions, and I'm going back this summer to continue, focusing on fences. The timeless politics of boundary structures - the wall, the fence, the skin – the barricades that surround us, that we build or inherit - they continually shape our relationships, movements, and sense of self and other.



Deep Sequence I, Graphite on paper, 30 x 40 inches, 2012

Tell us about your series *Deep Sequencing*.

2012 was a summer of TED-talk bingeing while working in the studio, for better or for worse, and I kept coming back to talks that related to genomics. I felt like “sequencing the genome” had become part of our normal vocabulary, but I really didn’t have an understanding of what was involved, and I was tired of the shorthand (and granted, a twelve-minute talk is still a kind of enhanced shorthand). What struck me as interesting is that as geneticists are able to sequence the human genome to a greater level of specificity, they are uncovering more and more junk DNA, or “biological dark matter,” all of which is a part of us. What gives us historical substance? What have we inherited over generations that constitutes our present state of being? These questions have been driving my larger practice for almost twenty years – whether drawing from the idea of the ancestors as experienced in South Africa, or relics and remembrances of lost family, or the primitive architectural impulses to create shelters and boundaries – how does this one body, this one life, act as a vessel for all that has come before, while still creating its present and future?

These drawings begin with a visual cue from electrophoresis panels, which already are ghostly and strange. As I worked on the drawings, entirely in graphite, I thought/felt/marked through sensations of immediate time, of bodies in states of change, and of a deeper geological time I crave a glimpse of, and find in caves and canyons. The drawings are a record of that state, and fold back into the idea of visualizing the matter that is within us, the notion of inheritance, and

how we both know and don't, or can't, know the extent of our own substance.



Open Gestures, 2008, Installation view. [View a video of Open Gestures table here.](#)

Let's discuss *Open Gestures*.

Open Gestures is an interactive drawing series from 2008 - 2009 that revolves around the idea of viewers' bodies activating images through physical touch. They work as 'disclosure machines', encounters in which one needs to use an active, bodily, gesture in order to uncover the image and to put it into a state of visual flux. The drawings are modeled on the experience of coming to a coastal tide pool – compact and complex ecosystems that invite a kind of intimate study and reward curiosity. Each of the drawings consists of a field of gesture-driven forms, inspired by fossil beds, coral reefs, dissection tables, asteroid fields, and are shown in a way that requires a viewer to use her own gesture to activate the drawing. One drawing's surface is hidden under a blanket of 40,000 plastic BBs, to be pushed aside and put in motion. Suspended above another drawn surface is a hand-stitched quilt of Fresnel lenses embedded with small handles. Manipulating the quilt of magnifying lenses brings parts of the drawing into different levels of focus and shifts the scale from viewer to viewer. Another drawing consists of thirty small drawings that float on a bed of air – a repurposed air-hockey table – and can be put into motion with touch or breath. The hope for each of these is that gesture and vision work together to bring both the imagery and the experience of drawing, the hand-driven and hand-felt experience, into relationship. I think all of my work is based around that hope, really, to bring bodily and visual experience together, even if that relies on a telegraphed sense of the body and its actions.

In addition to being an artist, you are an Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina. How do these two aspects of your life – creating art and teaching art – cross-

pollinate?

I get to answer this from the grateful space found at the end of a full-year sabbatical. I am in awe of what can happen with students in a day, in a semester, in a year. Like the studio, I regard the classroom as a laboratory – there's a very high priority placed on curiosity and invention, on being able to experiment, fail, succeed, adapt, and discover. Drawing as a discipline affords a remarkable range of ways in which to work with materials, ideas, the body, and space, and to take risks that can have immense and unexpected payoffs. South Carolina is a place to work deeply on projects I care about – it's a place that holds a complex history, where we deal daily with collisions of past, present, and future. My teaching doesn't trade off with studio work, it enhances it, challenges it, and connects what I do in my studio to a greater network of ideas and practices.



Coyote Fence III, Ink, colored pencil on paper, 22 x 30 inches, 2014

Ask yourself a question that feels intensely relevant to your art practice right now, and answer it.

The question that is foremost in my mind right now around practice is one of mechanics – specifically, how do we become immersed in doing our best work? For the past few months, I've been shuttling between South Carolina, New Mexico, and New York – and finding that both ends of the spectrum, the isolation of the desert and the densely populated flow of the city, feed me in essential and somewhat contradictory ways. Both offer a kind of productive isolation, and both are spaces of seemingly endless nuance, detail, and stimulus. All are a site of complex histories and landscape, each with a particular impact on the body and its movement. Can we make work anywhere? Sure, but the question I'm wrestling with relates to how one strikes a productive balance among elements of inspiration, sociality, isolation, and stability. It's a great problem to have, and it's a function of seeing how many different ways there are to live, to make work, to be

inspired – for me it’s a question of memory retention – recognizing the qualities of each place that trigger the most connected drawing, and finding the patterns that link the places I want to be.



In Haptic Recall, 2007, Installation view

Of all the things that each of us can do in our lives, we both have chosen art. Why do you do this - why are you an artist?

For me, becoming an artist was a very conscious choice triggered by unexpected loss, and fueled ever since by a sense of possibility. As an undergraduate at Northwestern, I was a political science major. I took one drawing class at the very end of my senior year, and for the first time in four years, felt like I was truly in the right room, doing the existentially right thing. But by that point, and being a dogmatic twenty-two, there was no sense in starting over, it was time to graduate and move forward on the chosen path in the non-profit sector.

When I was twenty-four and living in San Francisco, my mother developed cancer and was given three months to live. She was fifty. I went home to Iowa, and took care of her in the final months of her life. We had long, amazing, painful, important talks about choice, regret, and what it means to be looking at the end of life so much earlier than imagined. We talked about goals accomplished, dreams ignored, and we talked, often, about how much I loved to make art. I went back to SF and, after a few months, quit my poli-sci major’s job and began temping. I got a studio in the Mission and started taking art classes (thank you, Michael Markowitz, the best figure drawing teacher out there). What drove that choice, and has driven its expansion ever since, was the full on confrontation with what it means to be aware of why we do what we do, and to not default into habit or a sense of predetermined expectation. My mother recognized how much I loved drawing, and that it was something that I’d talked myself into putting in the margins

in the name of fulfilling what I thought were the expectations of others. Ever since those three months in 1994, I have tried to make all of my choices with that awareness in play.

You have a lot of exciting shows and projects happening now. Can you tell us about them?

My first solo show in NYC just opened at [Foley Gallery](#) on Orchard Street in the LES, and it runs through May 31. There will be a site-specific dance performance happening in the space on May 6. Dancer [Bryn Cohn](#) is choreographing new work in response to my drawings and the work of Gelah Penn, who is also showing at Foley, and I think it should be an amazing night. On May 15 in Charleston, SC, I have a show opening with printmaker Mary Robinson at the [Meeting Street Gallery](#), that will run with the Spoleto Festival and through the end of June. Then this summer I'm headed back to New Mexico, this time to Taos, as the Visiting Artist at the [Doel Reed Arts Center](#) - I'll give a talk at the Taos Art Museum on July 16. I'm thrilled for all ahead.

SARA SCHNECKLOTH IS MOTIVATED BY THE QUESTION OF HOW SCIENCE, IMAGINATION, AND THE BODY INFORM ONE ANOTHER THROUGH THE ACTIVITY OF DRAWING. BY COMBINING THE VISUAL LANGUAGES OF BIOLOGY, GEOLOGY, AND PHYSICS INTO LARGE-SCALE, MIXED-MEDIA, AND INTERACTIVE DRAWINGS, SHE CREATES IMAGES THAT SPEAK TO THE PHYSICALITY OF MARKMAKING, THE EMBODIMENT OF MEMORY, AND OUR INTERPRETATION OF NATURAL SYSTEMS AND PHENOMENA. AS IT BRIDGES THE CONCERNS OF TRADITIONAL ILLUSTRATION, SCULPTURE, AND NEW MEDIA, HER APPROACH SEEKS TO DISCOVER WAYS IN WHICH DRAWING OPERATES AS A SITE OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY INQUIRY.

SCHNECKLOTH HAS SHOWN IN OVER SIXTY EXHIBITIONS THROUGHOUT THE US, SOUTH AFRICA, AND FRANCE, HELD NUMEROUS ARTIST RESIDENCIES, AND ORGANIZED COLLABORATIVE DRAWING EVENTS AT SEVERAL UNIVERSITIES AND THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. HER ESSAYS ON DRAWING AND EMBODIMENT HAVE APPEARED IN THE JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE, VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS QUARTERLY, AND THE MANIFEST INTERNATIONAL DRAWING ANNUAL.

SCHNECKLOTH HOLDS AN MFA FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON, A BA FROM NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, AND HAS LIVED AND WORKED IN IOWA, CHICAGO, SEATTLE, SAN FRANCISCO, AND CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA. SHE IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE SCHOOL OF VISUAL ART AND DESIGN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA IN COLUMBIA, SC, WHERE SHE HEADS THE DRAWING PROGRAM. IMAGES OF HER WORK CAN BE FOUND AT [SARASCHNECKLOTH.COM](#) AND [INSTAGRAM.COM/SARASCHNECKLOTH](#).



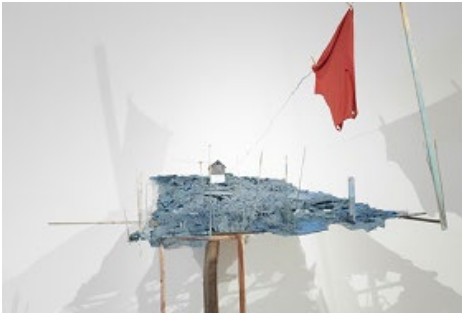
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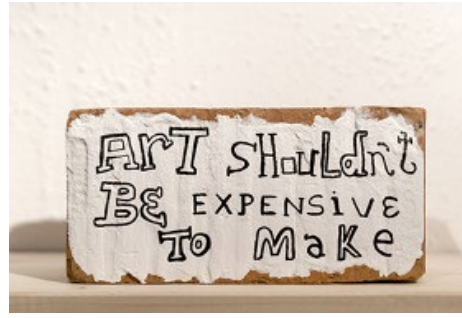
Emmy Mikelson



Mary DeVincentis



Juan C. Escobedo



Tonel



Alejandro Yoshii



Al Diaz



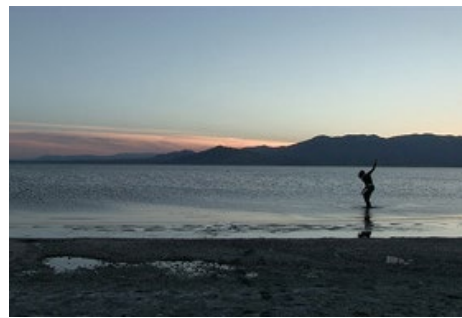
Aaron Johnson



Lisa Zukowski



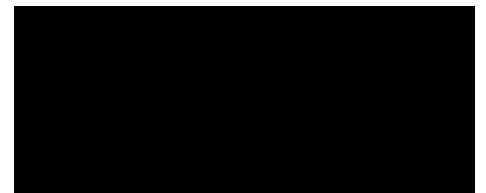
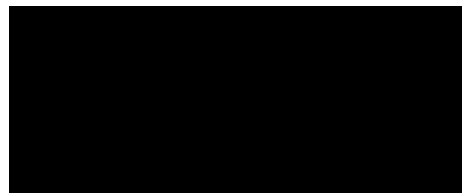
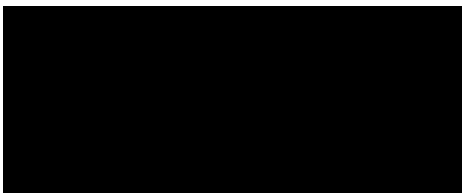
Sara Schneckloth



Kate Harding



Gavin Sewell





Kasumi



Will Ellis + ABANDONED NYC



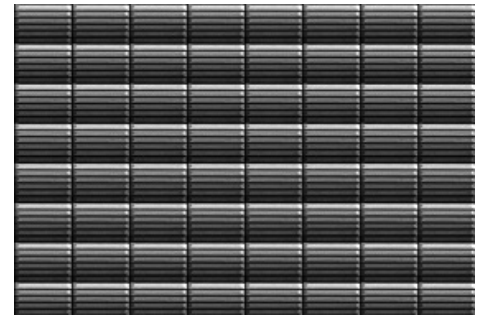
Ian MacDonald



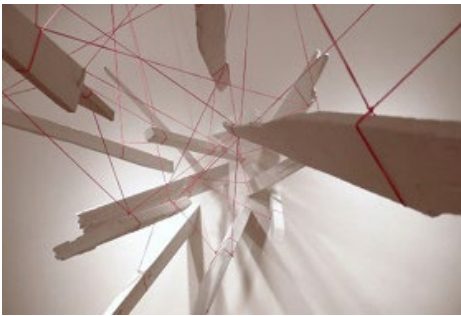
Ghost of a Dream



Elisabeth Condon



Michelle Murphy



Sarah Hardesty



Camilo Leyva



PULSE Art Fair 2015



Drew Conrad



Andrea Wolf + REVERSE



Dana Lynn Harper