

CATHERINE COURTENAYE

PAINTINGS



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BAM | BOISE ART MUSEUM

Published by
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in conjunction with the exhibition
CATHERINE COURTENAYE: PAINTINGS
May 14–October 16, 2011
Boise Art Museum
curated by Sandy Harthorn

essays by Michele Corriel and Sandy Harthorn

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BAM | BOISE ART MUSEUM

Boise Art Museum | 670 Julia Davis Drive | Boise, Idaho 83702 | 208-345-8330 | www.boiseartmuseum.org

front and back cover: *Cavalcade* (detail), 2008, oil on canvas, 42 x 60 inches
inside covers: *By Mail* (detail), 2006, oil on canvas, 48 x 52 inches
page 4: William Horlocher's cipher book, 1840–1842. Collection of Catherine Courtenaye.



MICHELE CORRIEL

IN THE MARGINS

CATHERINE COURTENAYE'S OIL PAINTINGS SPEAK IN A SUBCONSCIOUS NON-LINEAR LANGUAGE using layers of thinly applied color and Victorian-era penmanship details, not only as visual objects in her work but as marks, reminders of a time when conformity, above all else, dominated our culture.

But it is the deviations Courtenaye most treasures, as these are the tiny voices rebelling in the margins and endpapers. “In uncovering marginalia and doodles in workbooks of the period, I can see the human impulse to let the mind stray, with pen in hand,” she says. “Digital technology has replaced the handwritten page, but the doodle will forever remain a form of self-expression.”

Carefully opened, the pages of a brown-edged leather-bound workbook from 1840 are thick and make a small thunderous sound as Courtenaye slowly turns from one assignment to another. “He was thirteen years old when he did this,” Courtenaye says, pointing to the first page of the book where in black ink it’s written: *William Horlocher 1827–1855*. Some of the pages are faded but Courtenaye is fascinated by the beauty of the lettering and the little arrows, faces, and flourishes and not as much by the content. Because for her artist’s eye the images stand independent of the meaning: “It gets to the heart of art-making for me. How one single stroke of the pen can convey so much information about a time and a place.”

Courtenaye, the daughter of a career diplomat, grew up as a continuous foreigner in a foreign land. With a youth spent in Tangier, Morocco, the Arabesque letterforms integrated into the city’s Moorish architecture, textiles and signage were the beginning of her appreciation of letters as abstract shapes. When she went to college in Maine, Courtenaye discovered Americana and artifacts from the everyday lives of 19th-century Americans, which held her and continue to present to her a perpetual mystique. In 2010

Courtenaye relocated from San Francisco to Montana, where, a decade earlier, she had come across her first primary source for her current body of work: instances of 19th-century homesteader schoolchild notebooks, filled with elaborately penned arithmetic exercises.

The back wall of her studio is studded with twenty pieces identical in size—12-by-12-inch wood boxed panels—her current spate of inquiries into the specters of the past and the current state of contemporary abstract painting. “I think of it as my fractured alphabet,” she says, turning from the chest-high workbench where she keeps her paints to her waist-high work space, where she bends over a panel to apply a thin, thin layer with a wooden roller. “I’ve always loved color, for color’s sake; I have as a ‘grownup’ needed a rationale for making paintings. It’s just too self-indulgent and too boring to make pretty abstractions. That’s why I try to use the format of painting to express something about how important line quality is in our lives, that it communicates a great deal. And that we can learn something about our own place and time when we better understand what came before us.”

To start her process, Courtenaye takes digital images from her collected antique documents and creates a silkscreen. Using the silkscreen image, she applies it onto a panel or canvas. “From there it’s a matter of obscuring and exposing,” she says, as she chooses a two-inch flat brush and dips it in a bowl of paint thinner. Finding the overarching line of the piece, she mimics the flourish over the paint, and then using a squeegee she removes the excess. “It complicates the background and leaves bits of the underpainting peeking through.”

She places the piece on the wall to dry, standing there with her hands on her hips surveying her paintings’ progress. She grabs a red work showing a mere hint of blue underpainting below the surface. “I’m not interested in calligraphy,” she says. “I’m interested in the vernacular, the everyday writing, not the special writing. These are historical artifacts.” Putting a bit of the ruby color on her roller, she slides the paint onto the surface, quick and hard, until the piece is masked in gem-like splendor. “I want to take off a tiny bit,” she whispers to the painting, “just the tiniest bit.” As she lifts the layer off, the painting truly sings out loud.

Encaustic artist and Montana State University art professor Sara Mast admires Courtenaye’s quest for the perfect, and not-so-perfect, mark. “She’s using sources that come from a culture that disapproved of self-expression, and framing them in such a way that they become, in those moments of doodling, so very expressive,” Mast says. “Catherine’s work embodies the beautiful fallibilities of being human.” The penmanship Courtenaye uses in her work was all about regimen, a driving precision. “But she frees the Victorian soul,” Mast says. “Her work is like a page in a book where the real meaning lies between the lines and not in the perfection of the text.”

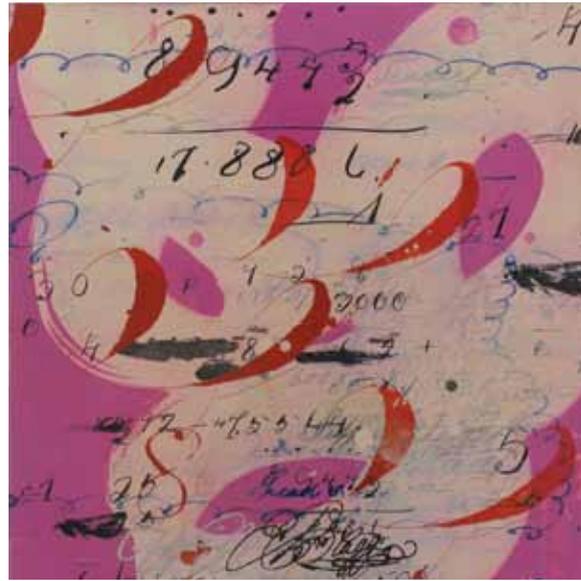
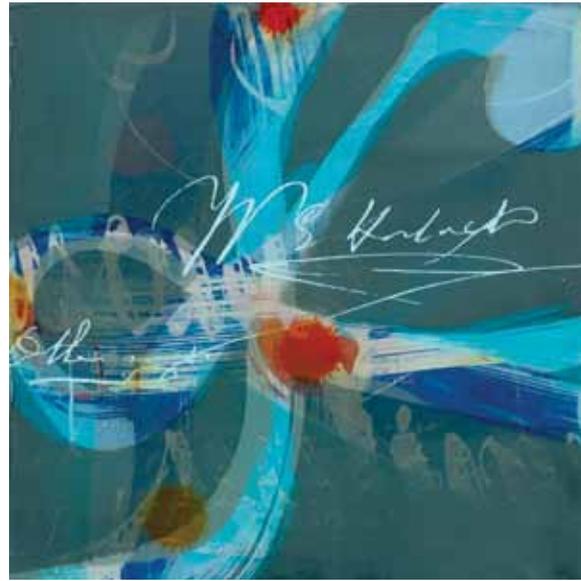
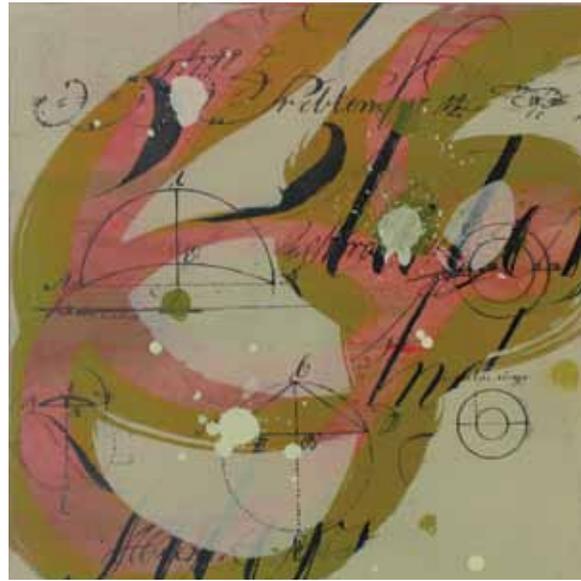
That kind of movement and intuitive freedom comes across in the finished painting. Letters, their form, shape and ornamentation, can be a wealth of personal information, indicating the era, whether the writer was a man or woman, his or her social standing, class or profession.

“Who we really are is in the margins, the humanness, the mistakes...the frailties, the forgetting, the doodling; you can’t plan that, you can only allow it, and be receptive to it once it happens,” Mast adds. That kind of play is more apparent in Courtenaye’s larger paintings, where she includes her own marks in addition to the silkscreen images she’s taken from historical documents.

“The handwriting from the workbooks is just a starting point; from there I deconstruct and destroy by blurring, smearing, and wiping what I’ve placed on the canvas,” Courtenaye says. “The dark meandering lines in the larger paintings stem from my immersion in Victorian ephemera. These tendrils play with quoted fragments within each painting. It feels to me that these lines draw themselves slowly. They lead, and I follow.”

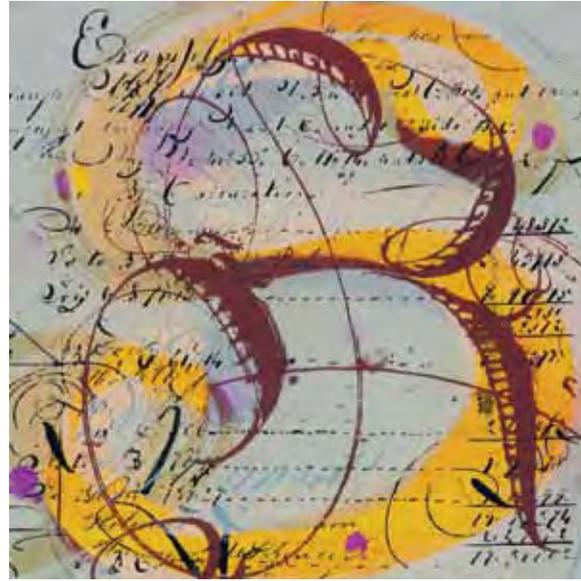
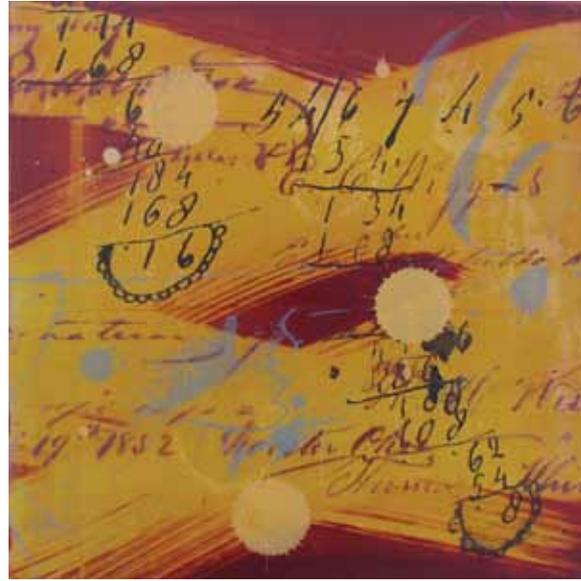
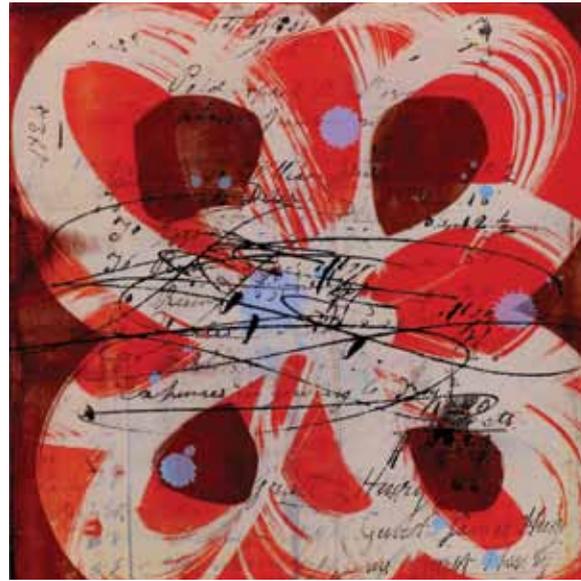
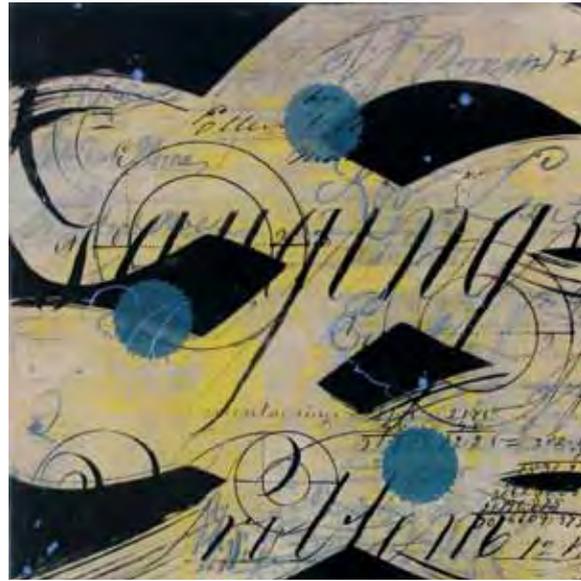
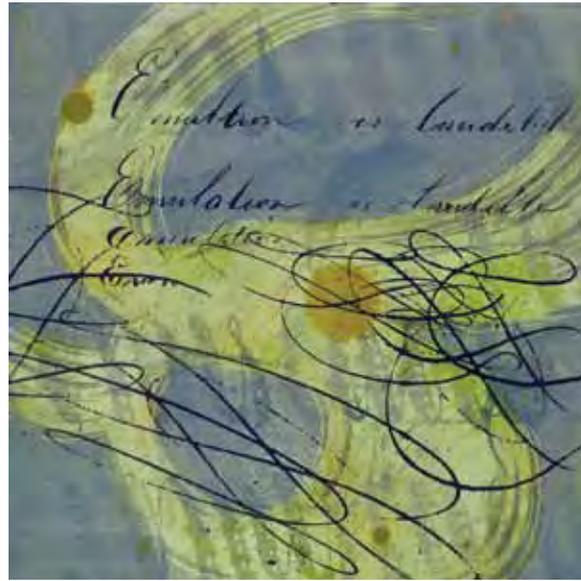
And indeed, like a trail map, a notation of where’s she’s been in the painting, where she’s wandered and where she’s stopped, somehow these veins, like filaments, seem to open up the conversation Courtenaye has with her viewer.

Michele Corriel is a freelance art writer and author living and working in Montana’s beautiful Gallatin Valley.



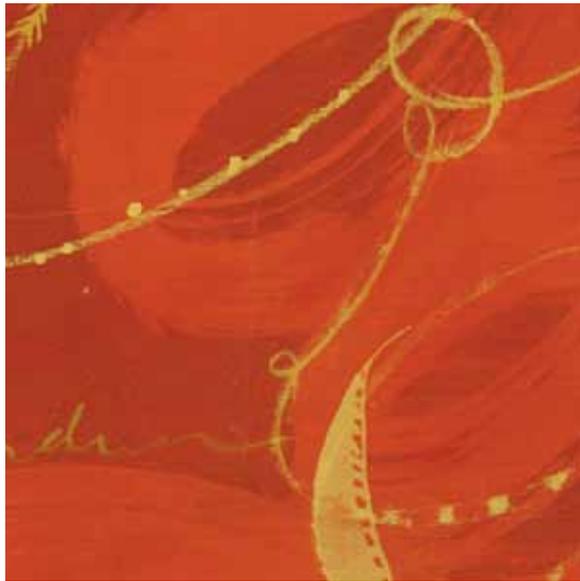
clockwise from top left:
JABBERWOCKY 18 (CRESCENT), 2009; **FRACTURED ALPHABET 10 (K)**, 2010;
JABBERWOCKY 24 (FIGURE EIGHTS), 2009; **JABBERWOCKY 18 (SERPENTINE)**, 2009; all oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

clockwise from top left:
JABBERWOCKY 6 (DRAGON'S BLOOD), 2009; **JABBERWOCKY 38 (SUNSPOTS)**, 2010;
FRACTURED ALPHABET 9 (EMULATION), 2010; **MONIKER 3 (PETRUS)**, 2008; all oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

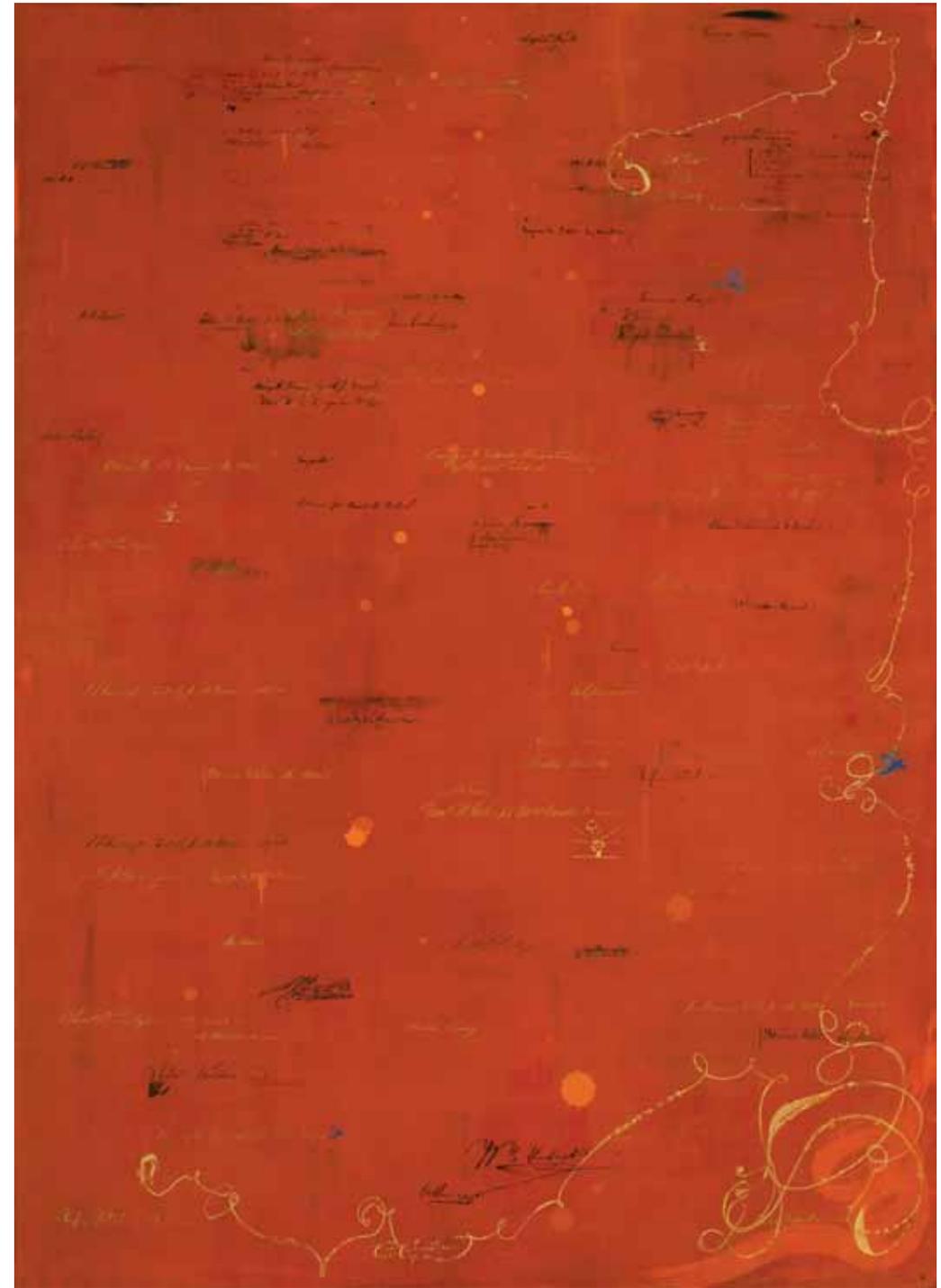


clockwise from top left:
JABBERWOCKY 39 (EMULATION), 2010; **JABBERWOCKY 25 (SWOON)**, 2009;
JABBERWOCKY 5 (JACQUARD), 2009; **JABBERWOCKY 33 (AYE BEE CEE DEE)**, 2010; all oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

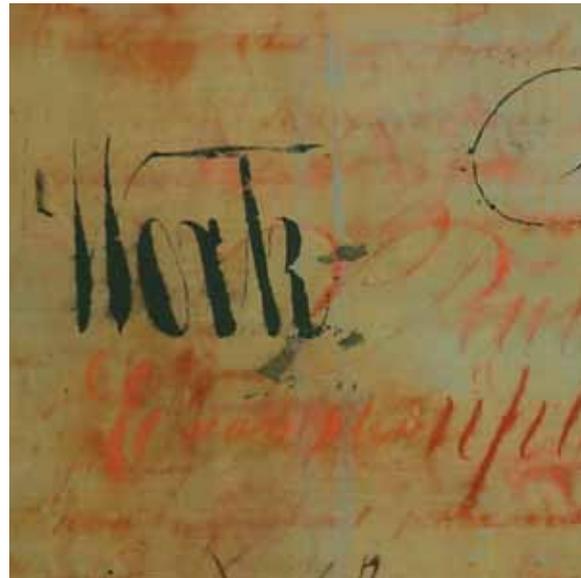
clockwise from top left:
JABBERWOCKY 23 (HAIRPIN TURNS), 2009; **FRACTURED ALPHABET 7 (QUATREFOIL)**, 2010;
FRACTURED ALPHABET 1 (INITIATION), 2010; **JABBERWOCKY 31 (STRUT)**, 2010; all oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches



detail



BY MAIL
2010, oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches



detail



BRICKLAYERS' WORK
2006, oil on canvas, 48 x 52 inches



detail



SMOKE SIGNALS
2008, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 inches
collection of Talila Baron and Greg Rosenberg

SANDY HARTHORN

A LANGUAGE OF PAINTING

CATHERINE COURTENAYE'S ABSTRACT PAINTINGS ARE GROUNDED IN THE VERNACULAR PENMANSHIP of 19th-century America and are the outcome of her interest in handwriting manuals, ledgers and documents. Using a variety of printmaking techniques, Courtenaye transfers phrases, signatures, alphabets and numbers from original manuscript sources onto painted surfaces, layering her compositions to create a metaphor for the passage of time. Her graphic quotations reference the Victorian era, when proper penmanship was a requisite skill and the mastery of cursive writing was considered a path to self-improvement. In Courtenaye's luminous paintings, letterform flourishes and elegantly crafted phrases allude to these social conventions. By addressing the past in the context of the present, Courtenaye's art becomes particularly relevant at a time when social media are the latest trend, and typing and texting have replaced the written word.

As an artist, Catherine Courtenaye is well aware of the rich history of handwriting and equally familiar with the integration of language and textual mark-making in modern and contemporary art. She draws upon this history as a resource and starting point for her paintings, in which she navigates between the rigors of lettering perfection and the exuberance of gestural brush-strokes. While she uses printmaking technology as a method of precisely incorporating her source materials into her paintings, she consciously deconstructs the images through a process of blending, blotting and dissolving, thus relinquishing the ideals of graphic perfection.



Endeavour to Improve, 1998, oil on canvas, 22 x 24 inches.

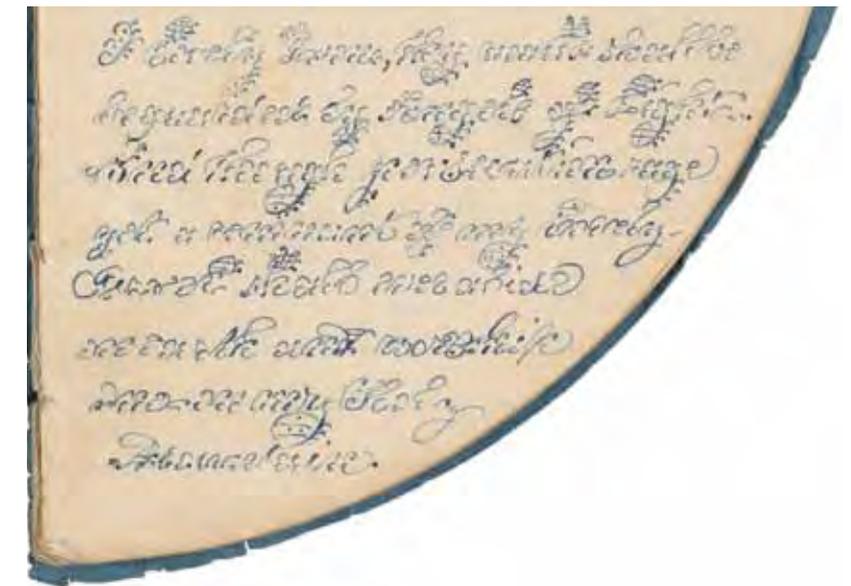
Over many years, Courtenaye has collected manuscripts, drawings and penmanship examples from the 1800s, scouring libraries and regional historical centers to examine firsthand a variety of period instruction books and original handwritten texts. Among notable publications in the field are *Spencerian Key to Practical Penmanship* (1866), developed in the 1840s by innovative writing stylist Platt Rogers Spencer, and Thomas E. Hill's *Manual of Social and Business Forms: A Guide to Correct Writing*, circa 1865, both established teaching aids in widespread use. By the mid-19th century their published copybooks formalized and popularized the fundamentals of proper penmanship. A practiced control of showy longhand embellishments characterizes this style. By the late 1800s Austin N. Palmer, a traveling teacher from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, developed a method of writing quickly and legibly. Palmer's system, which stressed control and rhythm, facilitated the need of business to standardize letters and essential records in a uniform hand. Immersing herself in the study of these publications and their precise practices, Courtenaye discovered how restrictive the road to cursive perfection can be.



William Horlocher's cipher book, 1840–1842. Collection of Catherine Courtenaye.

In what she calls a “channeling of imagery,” Courtenaye has come to value not only formalized penmanship, but personal expressions found in the papers of ordinary people, such as cipher books commonly used by grade-school children and signatures found in documents associated with various trades. In her painting *Bricklayers' Work*, 2006, the surface is layered with a graceful calligraphic script, material derived from the 1840 workbook of a thirteen-year-old student, William Horlocher.

In *Smoke Signals*, 2008, Courtenaye records fanciful drawings of frontier life with which the young Horlocher embellished his arithmetic exercises. Original documents such as the Horlocher workbook, often replete with incidental doodles, suggest a longing for freedom from prescribed writing styles and, as the artist says, a “tendency to daydream, like every school child, no matter how rigidly trained.” While self-expression was generally frowned upon in 19th-century practice books, it is the enigmatic strokes and quirky sketches that ignite Courtenaye's imagination.



Detail of *A Booklet of communications from Prophetess Anna and a native spirit named Carifick P.*, 1843. Emily Babcock. Circular volume written on paper cut into concentric circles of varying sizes. Shaker Manuscript collection. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

In recent large-scale compositions, Courtenaye has become increasingly focused on the more abstract variations of 19th-century writing samples, not only marginalia and endpaper scribbles, but markings such as those found in “spirit drawings” of the Shakers, comprised of mystically inspired characters that resemble alphabet letters. She is fascinated by them because their scripts are indecipherable, requiring an interpretation different from “reading.”

A student of art history and frequenter of museums, Courtenaye travels widely to view the masterworks of artists with whom she feels an affinity. Captivated by the art of Cy Twombly, Courtenaye has made pilgrimages to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, to experience in person his powerful “blackboard drawings,” distinguished by circular lines that stream across the picture plane—motions of handwriting with

no actual words. In Courtenaye’s own works, she permits her strokes to flow, move and transform the image in an intuitive course. While she is intrigued that a single pen stroke made in the 19th century can evoke the personality of an era, she recognizes how individuality can similarly be achieved in modern art with idiosyncratic lines and scrawls.

Kurt Schwitters, the 20th-century master who selected and arranged found objects with a “painter’s eye,” is another influence on Courtenaye’s compositional strategies—what she calls a “collage mentality.” She, like Schwitters, melds the processes of painting with the layering methods of collage—yet the act of painting always remains central to the core of her efforts. On occasion, Courtenaye’s applications resemble graffiti-like marks that bring to mind the art of Antoni Tàpies, whose work she cites as persuasive in its powerful incorporation of alphabet letters and regional vernacular roots.

Overall, Courtenaye’s larger-scale works appear abstract from a distance. The artist conceives color-field space as an atmospheric field in which transferred inscriptions and text fragments play multiple roles: hinting at language, creating shapes and textures, and serving to convey spatial depth. In *Cavalcade*, 2010, Courtenaye juxtaposes soft and crisp black linear marks as elements to establish dichotomies between order and chaos, line and movement, control and freedom. In *By Mail*, 2010, various embedded 19th-century signatures have an understated presence. They are subtly alluded to by a ribbon-like swirl of yellow line that meanders along the canvas edge and echoes flourishes seen in the lettering. Ghostlike, the signatures represent long-lost individuals, their names faded into a sea of burnt orange pigment.

In works such as *Frontier*, 2007, Courtenaye employs a jagged line that moves in starts and stops, cutting back on itself in unexpected turns. This wandering line creates a deliberate anti-formality that is countered by wispy scrolling letters punctuating the image. In *Skirting the Rules*, 2009, Courtenaye creates a more open picture plane with a free flow of notations, scripts, knotted lines, and splatters of paint, a more minimal and gestural approach.

While color is paramount in all of Courtenaye’s paintings, a brighter palette prevails in *Foragers*, *Voyageurs*, *Jotters*, *Flat Earthers* and other works of 2010. Multiple coatings of paint mask messages, letters and lines, yet the surfaces remain luminous if somewhat veiled in their transparency. Viewers, attempting to decipher obscure meaning, become immersed in the paintings’ visual appeal, with their strata of color and detail. Courtenaye reveals that for her, the richly tinted layers represent periods of time, and looking through the variable density and translucency of surface is analogous to peering back into the 19th century—a metaphor for the untouchable yet ever present past.

Courtenaye views shifting perceptions of written expression as a reflection of the historic and ongoing change in our social mores, lifestyles, technology and values. The question for now is how discourse has changed with the advent of digital media, which reduce writing to an impersonal fragmentation of data and language; and importantly, how society is altered when the practice of penmanship is usurped and replaced by the abbreviated language of texting and email. From Courtenaye’s artistic process emerges an affirmation of the value of the aesthetic qualities of handwriting and mark-making. By utilizing digitally appropriated texts, printmaking techniques and her own gestural method of painting, she composes images with a modern temperament, wholly new.

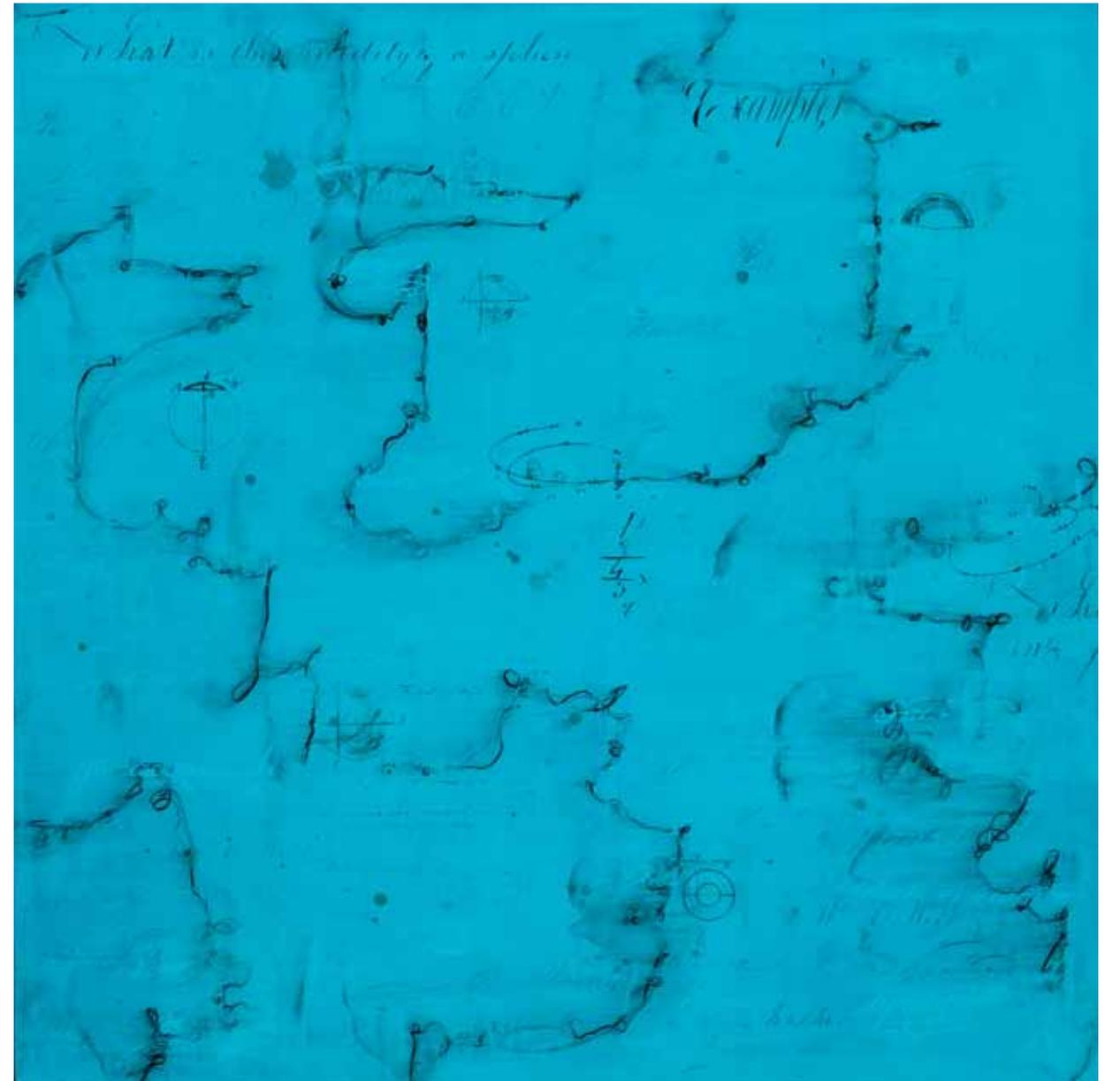


Installation, Modernism, San Francisco, 2009.

Sandy Harthorn is Curator of Art at the Boise Art Museum.



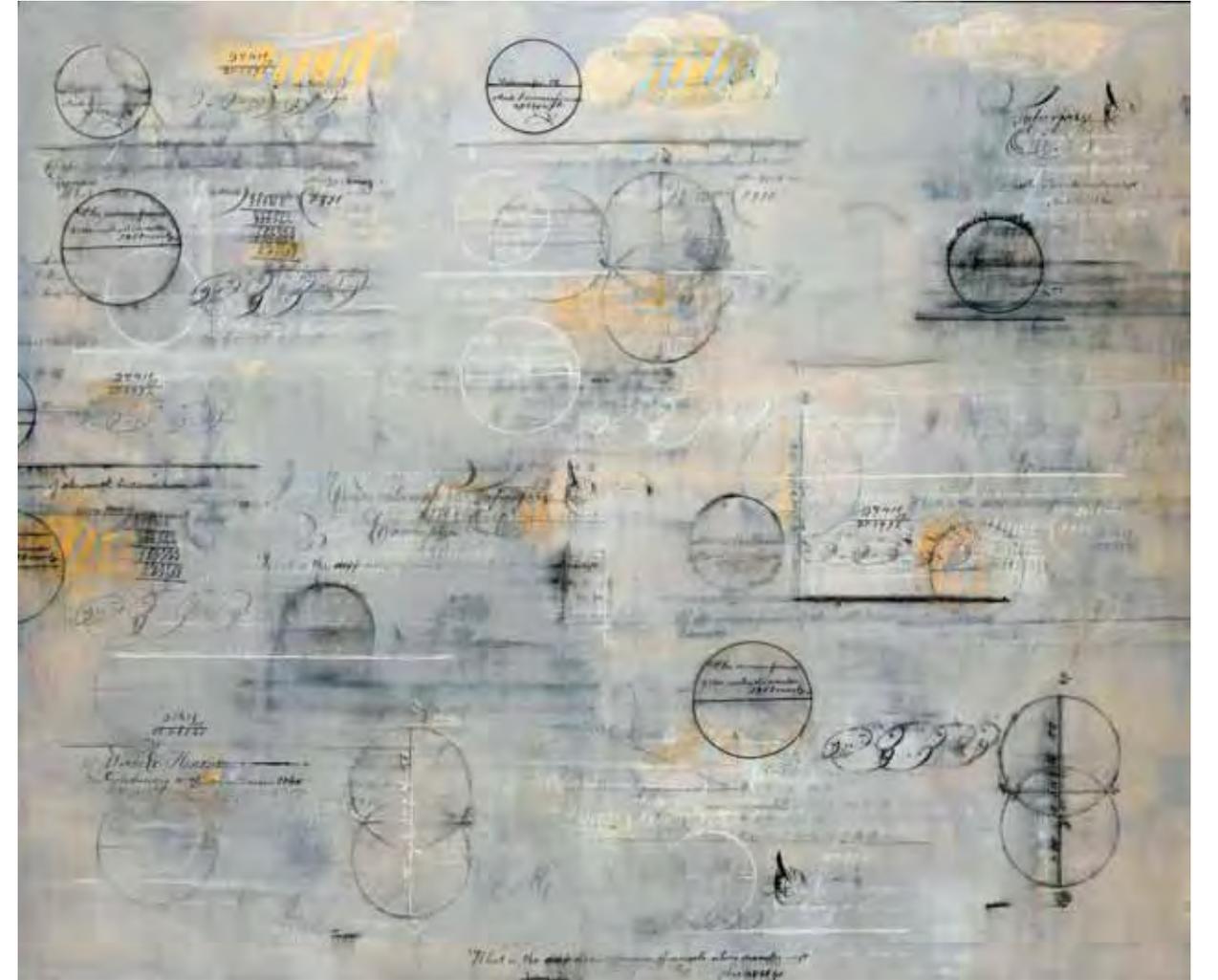
FORAGERS
2010, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches
private collection



VOYAGEURS
2010, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches
private collection



detail



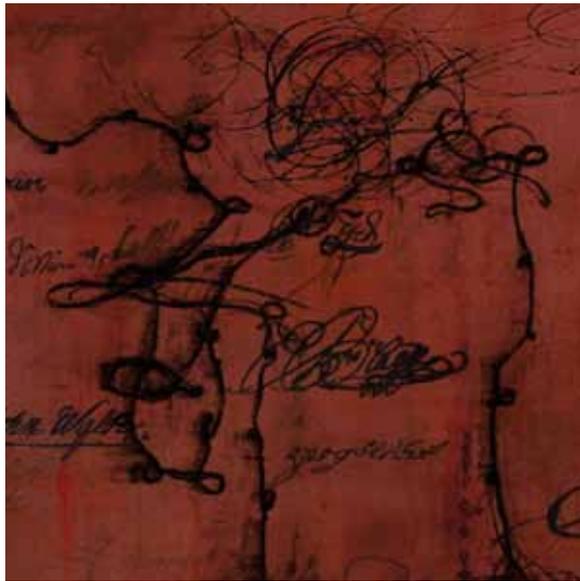
CIRCUMFERENCE
2007, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches



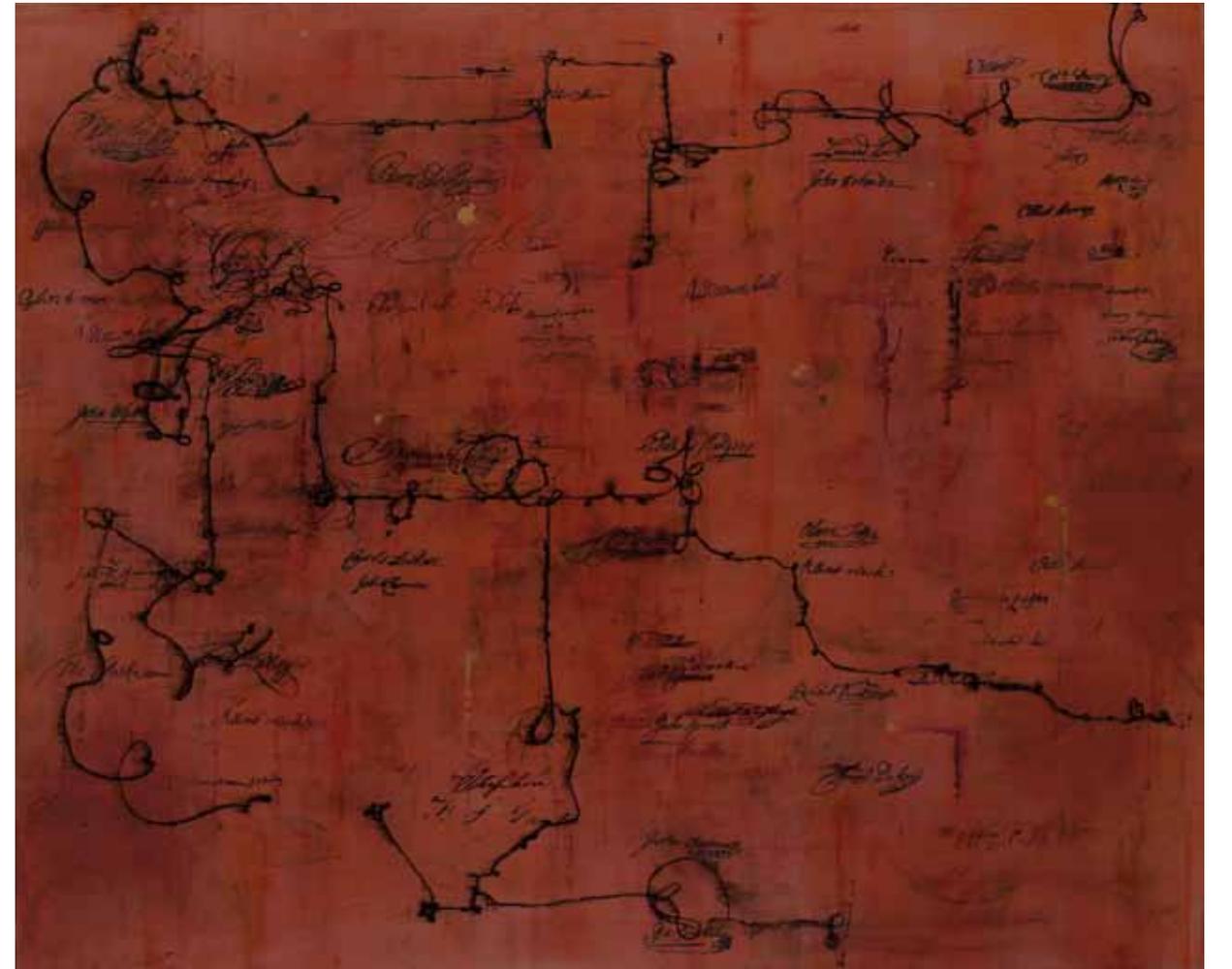
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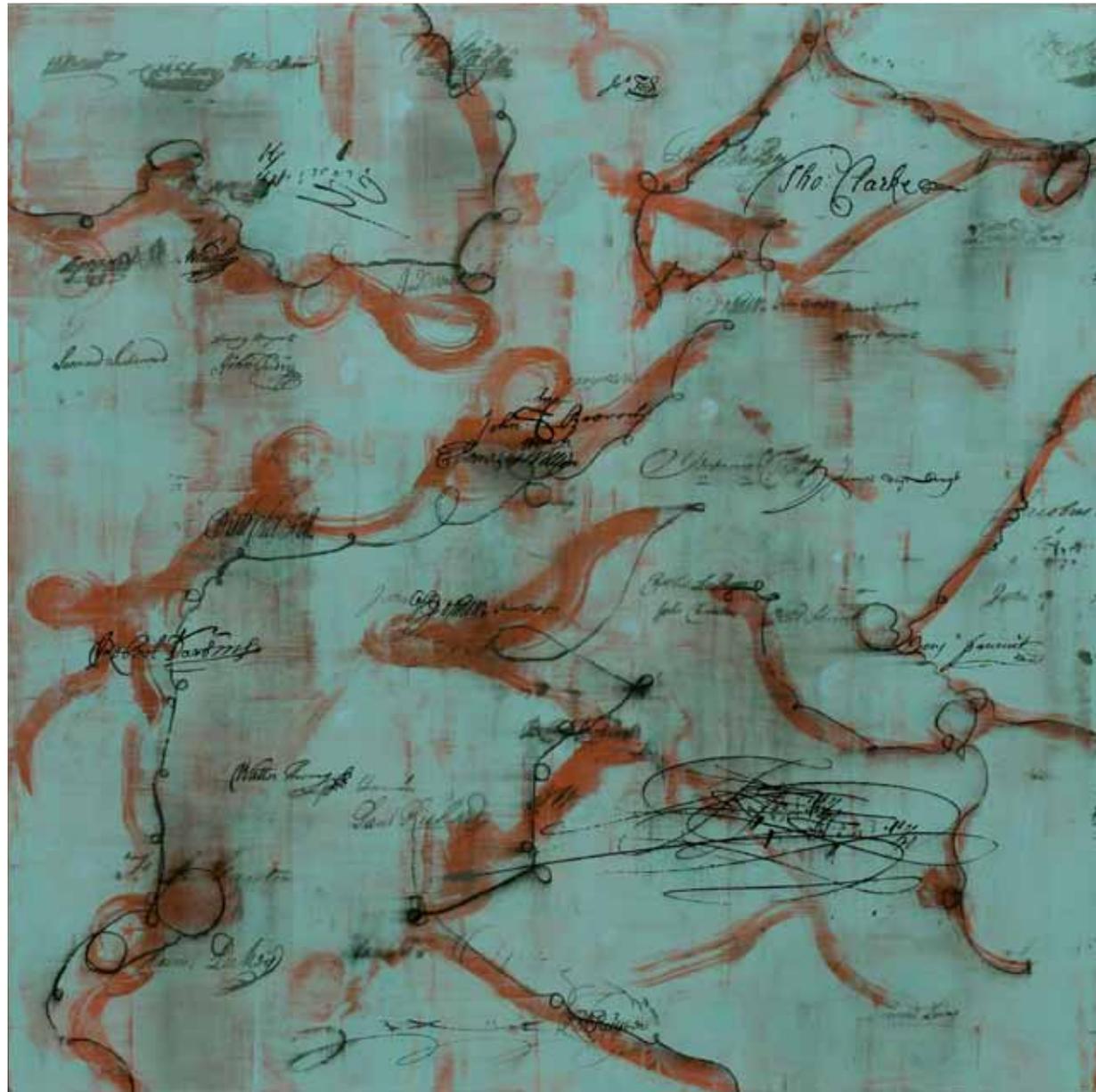
ZIG ZAG
2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 44 inches



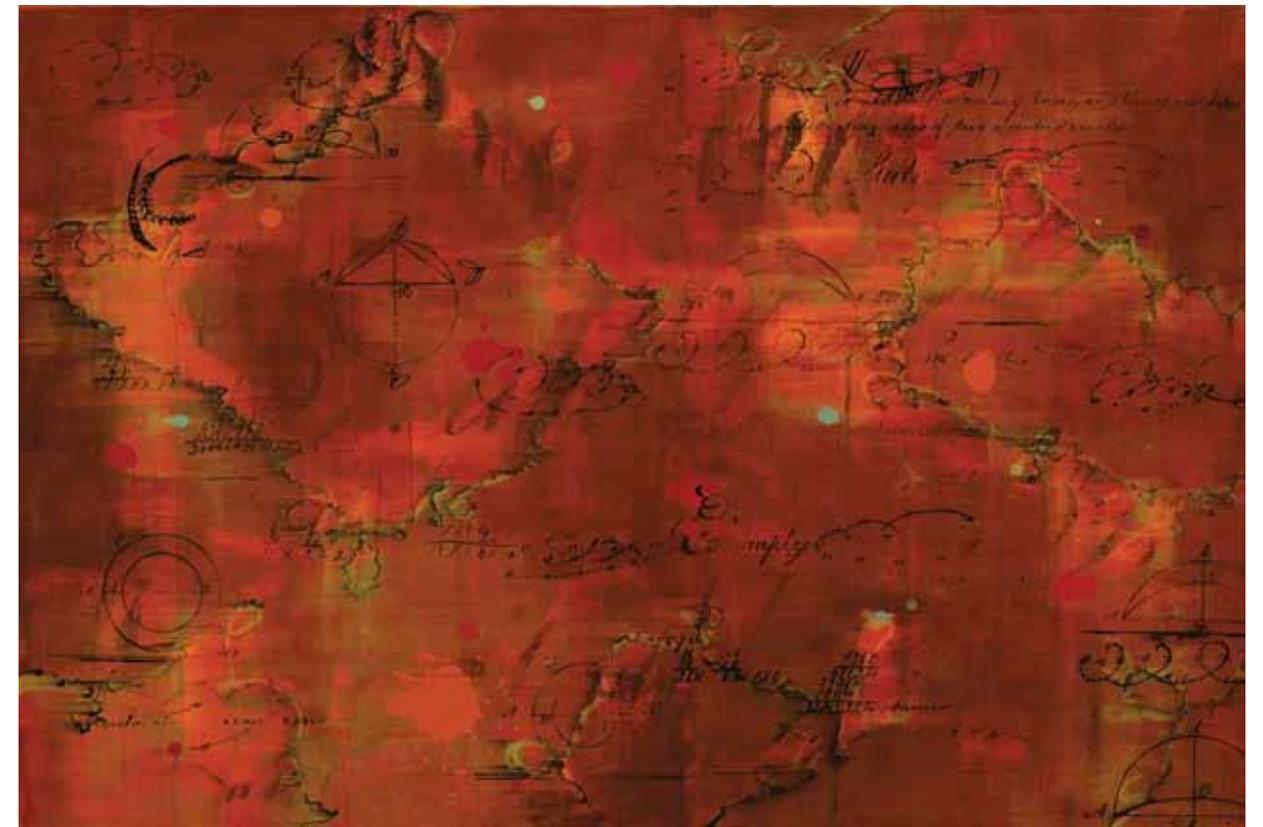
detail



BEDROCK
2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 44 inches



LINEAGE
2008, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches



LINER NOTES (MARS)
2009, oil on canvas, 20 x 30 inches

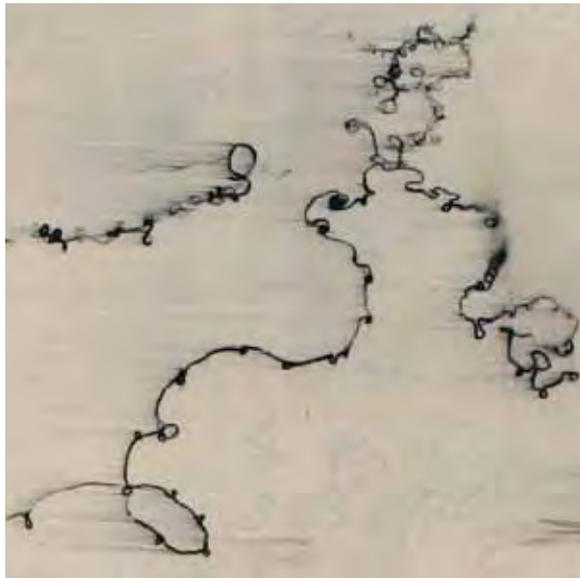


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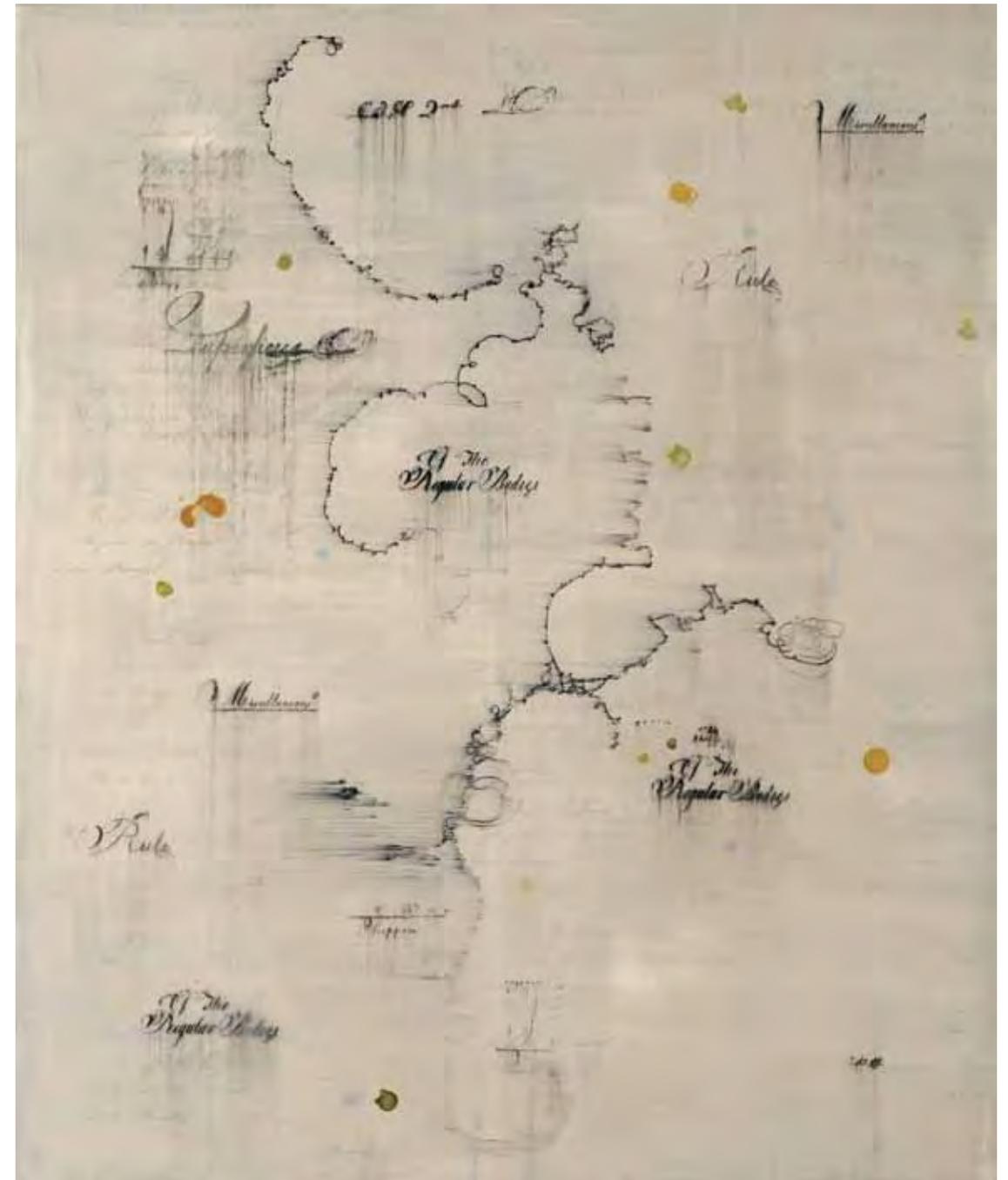


FRONTIER

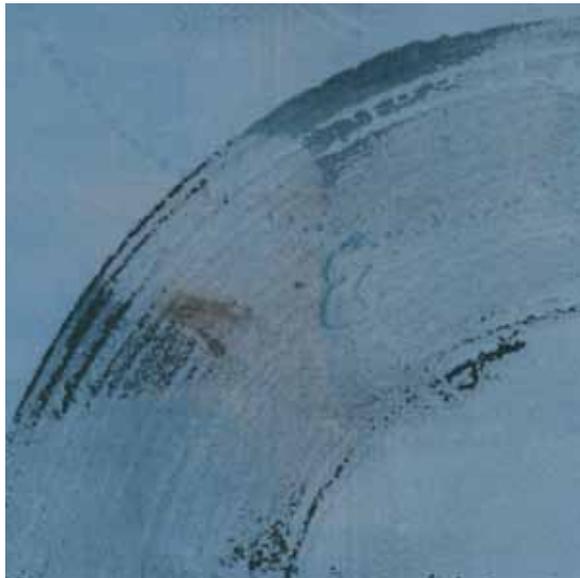
2007, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
collection of Carie DeRuiter and Charles West



detail



SKIRTING THE RULES
2009, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches



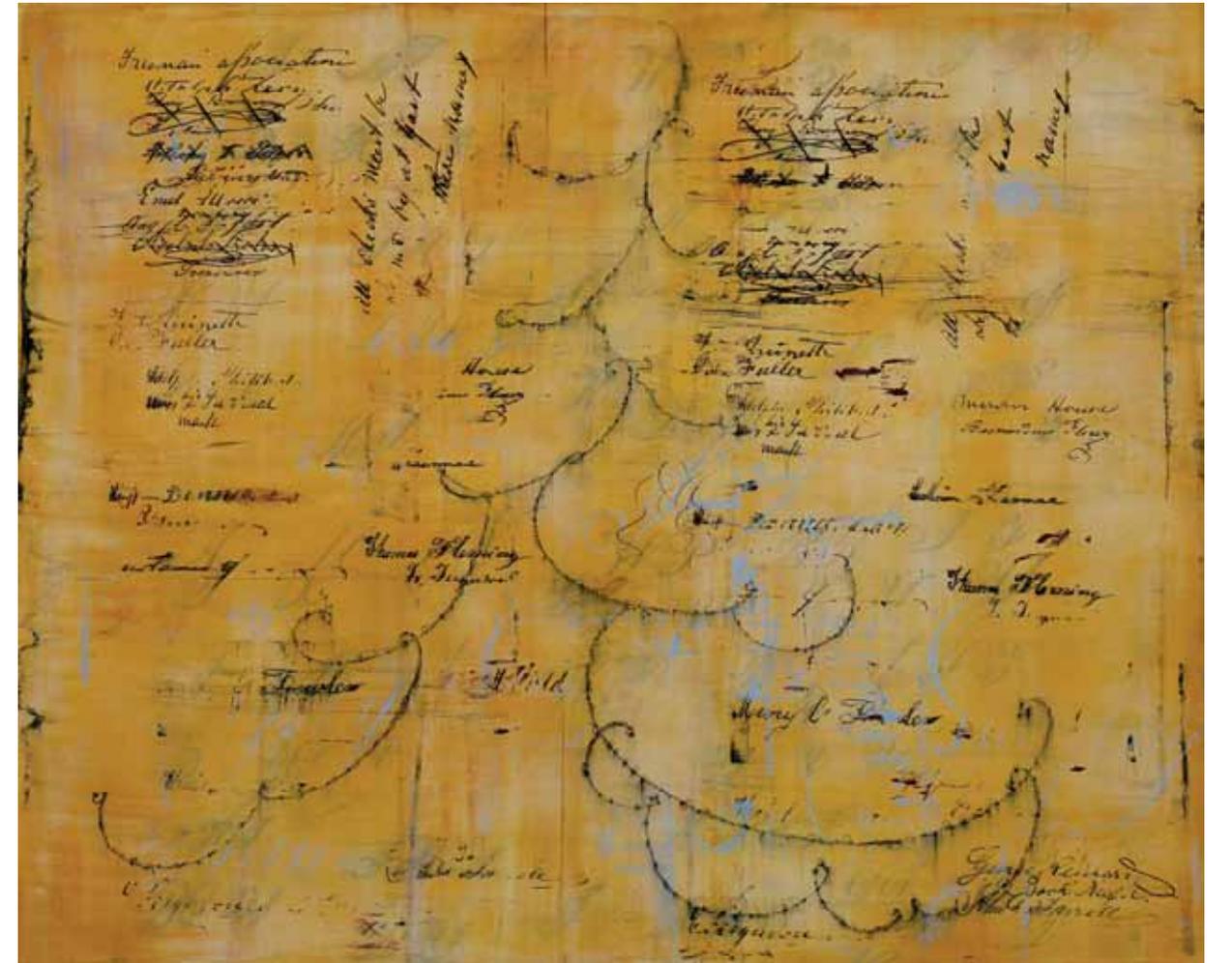
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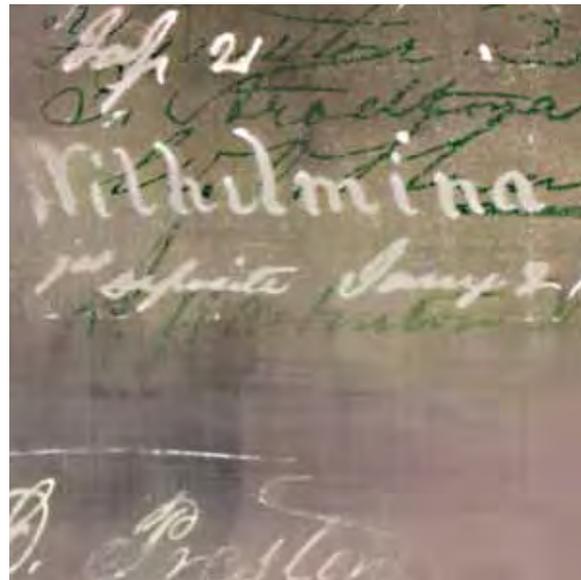
SHENANDOAH
2008, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 inches



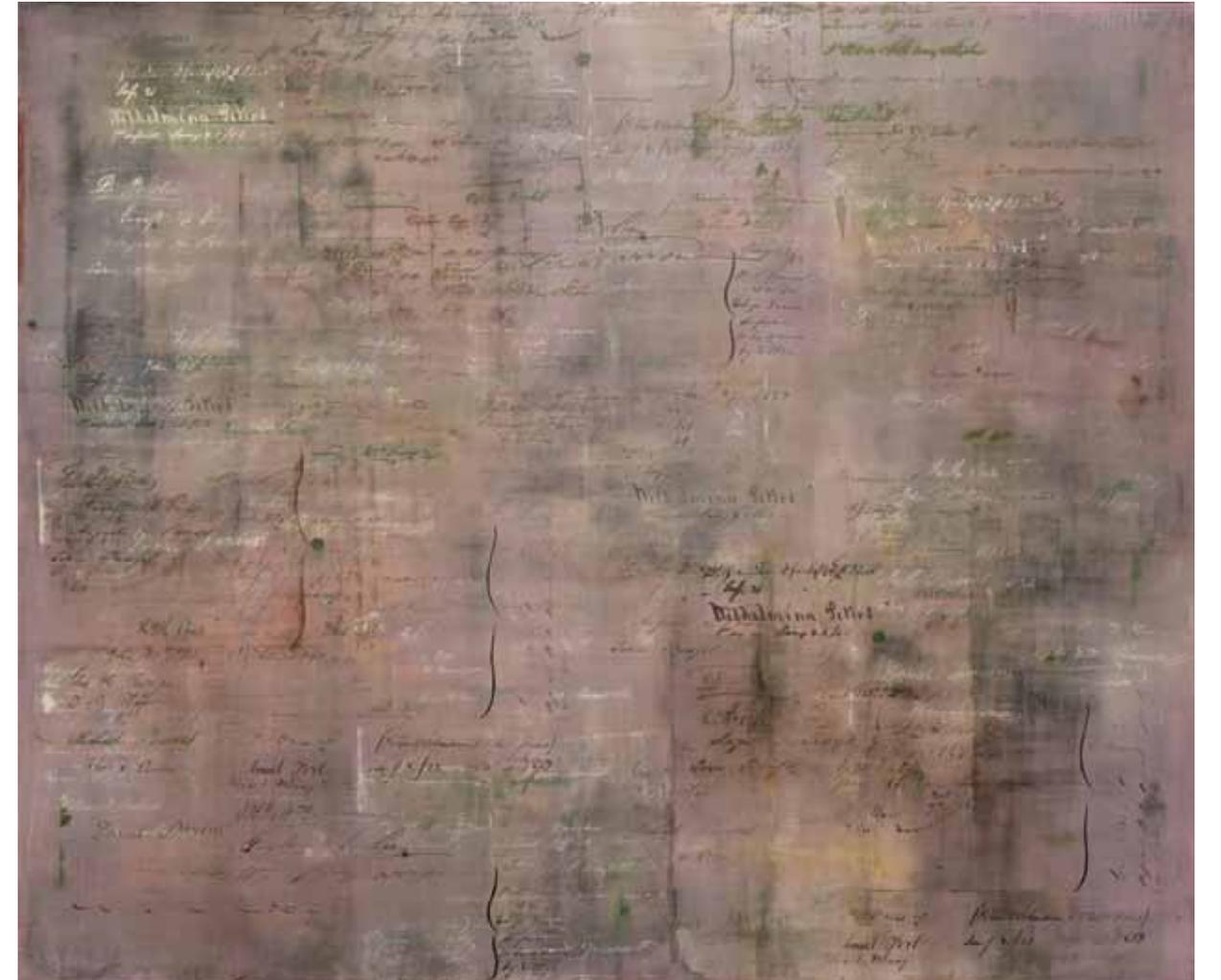
detail



GOLD DIGGER
2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 44 inches



detail



WILHILMINA
2006, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches
collection of the Oakland Museum of California, gift of G. B. Carson, Berkeley

BIOGRAPHY

Born Madrid, Spain

EDUCATION

University of Iowa, Iowa City, M.F.A. in painting and drawing, 1984

University of Iowa, Iowa City, M.A. in painting and drawing, 1983

Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 1980

Colby College, Waterville, Maine, B.A. magna cum laude in English, 1979

University of Bath, England, 1977

American School of Tangier, Morocco, 1973–1975

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho, 2011

Modernism West, San Francisco, 2011

Modernism, San Francisco, 2009

Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, New York, 2009 (two-person)

Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, 2008

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2007

Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, “Ghostwriters,” New York, 2007

Bentley Projects, Phoenix, 2005

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2004

Lobby Gallery at 455 Market, San Francisco, 2003

Latham Square Building, “Sampler,” organized by Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, 2002

Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Santa Monica, 2000

Shaker Museum, South Union, Kentucky, 2000

LIMN, “Paintings of Shaker Objects,” San Francisco, 1999

Grover/Thurston Gallery, “The Colors of the Soul: Paintings of Shaker Objects,” Seattle, 1997

Andrew Shire Gallery, Los Angeles, 1994

Hartnell College, Salinas, California, 1994

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, 1992

Bank of America World Headquarters, San Francisco, 1990

Kouros Gallery, New York, 1989

Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery, San Francisco, 1988

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

The Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture, “Bozeman Printmaking,” Bozeman, Montana, 2011

Bentley Gallery, “Small Works,” Scottsdale, 2010

Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, “Inscribere,” Oakland, 2007

Gensler, “Chroma,” curated by Chandra Cerrito, San Francisco, 2007

San Francisco State University Fine Arts Gallery, “Cali/Graffi,” A California Calligraphy Summit, San Francisco, 2006

Anne Reed Gallery, Sun Valley, Idaho, 2006

Roshambo Gallery, “Firecrackers: Artists to Watch,” Healdsburg, California, 2006

LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, 2006

“Freefall: Contemporary Painting in the ‘00s,” online exhibition curated by Chandra Cerrito, 2005

The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, “Contemporarities,” 2006

Michelle Bello Fine Art, “Handpicked,” San Francisco, 2003

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Artists Gallery, 25th Anniversary Exhibition, San Francisco, 2003

Stremmel Gallery, “30 Years/30 Artists,” Reno, 2003

Kala Art Institute, “Solos: The Contemporary Monoprint,” Berkeley, 2002

LIMN Gallery, “Wrap Up,” San Francisco, 2001

Sloan Miyasato, “Black and White and Read All Over,” San Francisco, 2001

Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, “Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined,” Walnut Creek, California, 2000

Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Gallery Artists Summer Show, Santa Monica, 2000

Missoula Art Museum, Regional Drawing Exhibition, Missoula, Montana, 2000

Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York, 1999

Jan Baum Gallery, “Precious,” Los Angeles, 1998

Patricia Sweetow Gallery, “Pharmacopoeia,” San Francisco, 1998

The Jewish Museum, “L’Chaim: A Kiddush Cup Invitational,” San Francisco, 1997

Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1996

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, “Refound,” San Francisco, California, 1996

Richmond Art Center, “Anonymous Arrangement,” Richmond, California, 1995

Gallery Concord, “What’s in a Word?” Concord, California, 1995

Schneider Museum of Art, “Art Faculty Exhibition,” Southern Oregon State University, Ashland, 1993

Vladimir/Emeryville Cultural Exchange, Vladimir, Russia, 1992

Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, 1991

Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon, 1991

“Art: the Other Industry,” Emeryville, California; John Caldwell, juror, 1990

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, 1990

Galleria San Benigno, “America, Italia, Spagna,” Genoa, Italy, 1989

The Fourth International LA Art Fair, Los Angeles, 1989

ProArts Annual, Oakland; Graham Beale, juror, 1988

San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, “Chain Reaction,” San Francisco, 1988

Los Medanos College, “Ten Women Artists of the Bay Area,” Pittsburg, California, 1987

Richmond Art Center, “Bay Area Drawing,” Richmond, California, 1987

Oakland Museum Collectors’ Gallery, “Small Treasures,” Oakland, 1987

ProArts Annual, Oakland; David Ireland, juror, 1987

“Art: The Other Industry,” Emeryville, California; Sidra Stich, curator, 1987

University of Iowa Museum of Art, M.F.A. exhibition, Iowa City, 1984

AWARDS

National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Grant, 1989

Ford Foundation Grants, 1982, 1983, 1984

Phi Beta Kappa, 1979

RESIDENCIES

Experimental Workshop, monotypes, Emeryville, California, 2001

Ucross Foundation, Clearmont, Wyoming, 1991

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, Virginia, 1985

REVIEWS

- “Flexibility brings pressure for Courtenaye,” Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle, November 14, 2009
“Ghostly Cursive on Jay,” Arts Advocate, Battery Park City Broadsheet, March 2007
“Catherine Courtenaye at Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art,” Charlene Roth, Artweek, January 2001
“Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined at the Bedford Gallery,” Juan Rodriguez, Artweek, October 2000
“Driven to Abstraction,” Sarah Lavender Smith, Diablo Magazine, August 2000
“Nostalgic,” Rick Deragon, Monterey County Herald, November 1994
“Art as a Civic Virtue,” Jennifer Crohn, The East Bay Guardian, November 1991
“A Promising Quartet,” Kenneth Baker, The San Francisco Chronicle, May 10, 1990
“Drawn to Richmond,” Jim Jordan, East Bay Express, July 10, 1987
“Richmond’s B.A.D. Show is g-o-o-d,” Charles Shere, Oakland Tribune, July 7, 1987
“Drawing Conclusions,” Phyllis Bragdon, Marin Independent Journal, July 6, 1987
“Direct Marks and Layers of Mystery,” Dan Nadaner, Artweek, May 30, 1987

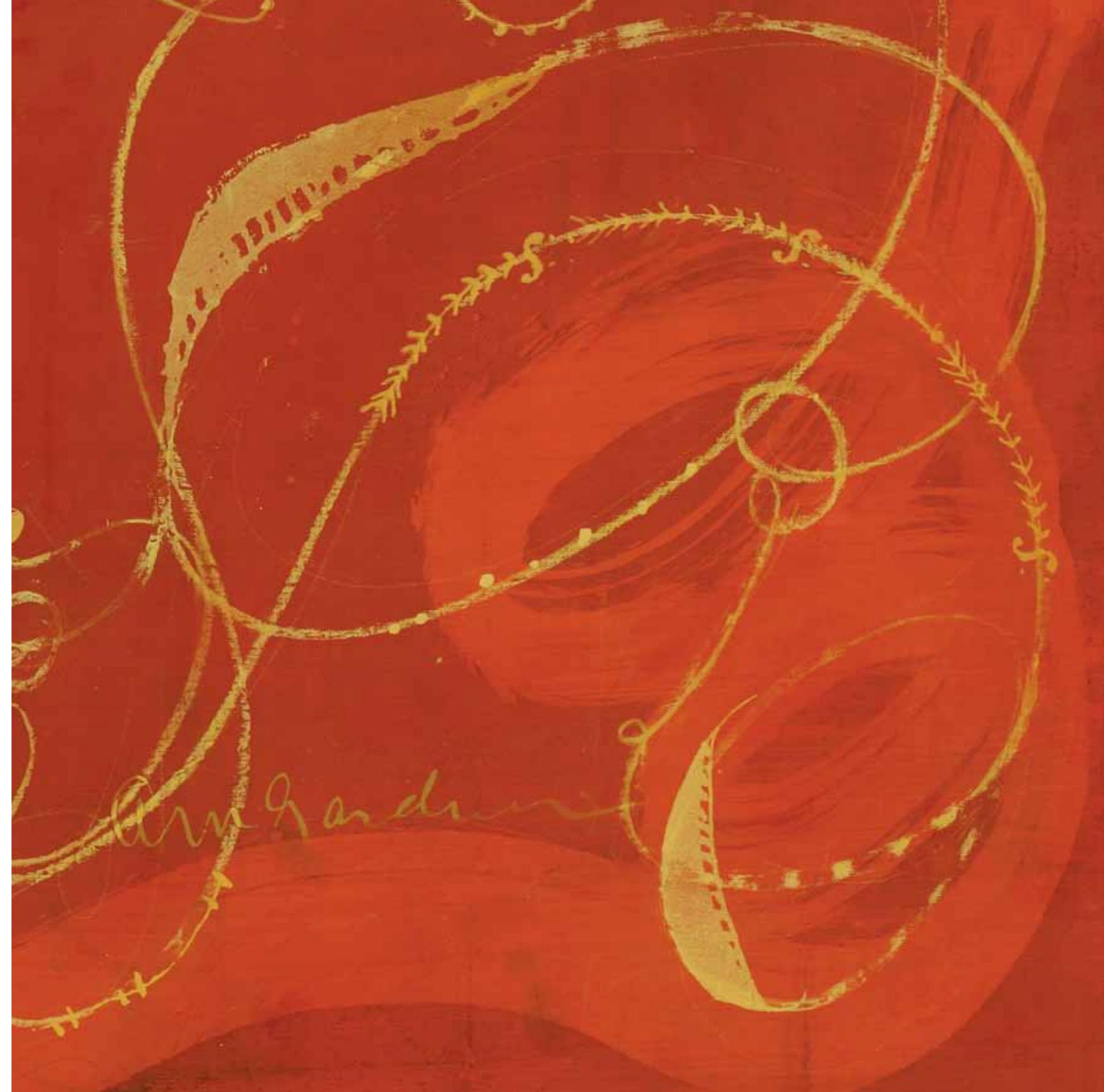
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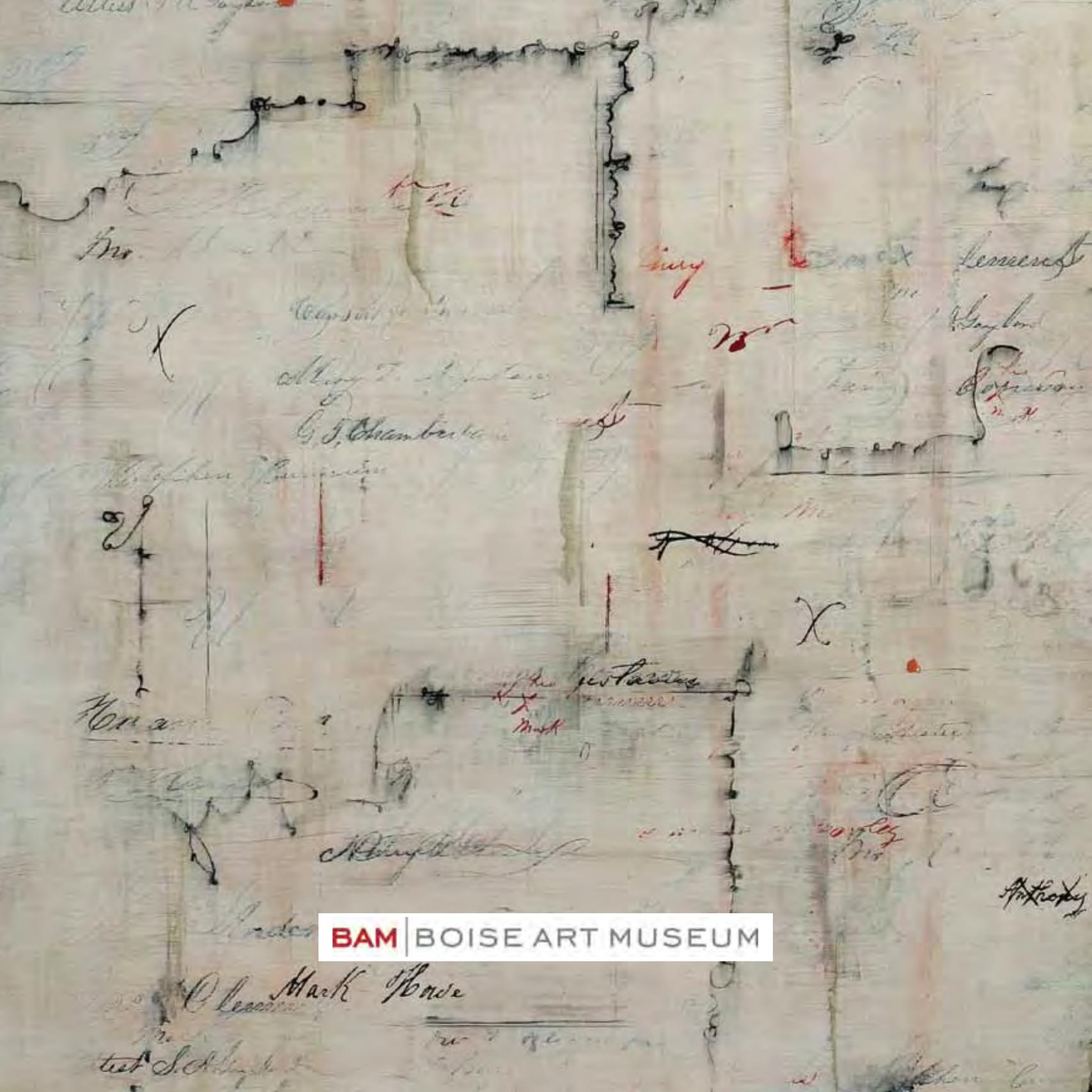
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