

Material Drawing: Exploration and Connectivity

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Minor White (photographer): “One should not only photograph things for what they are but for what else they are.”

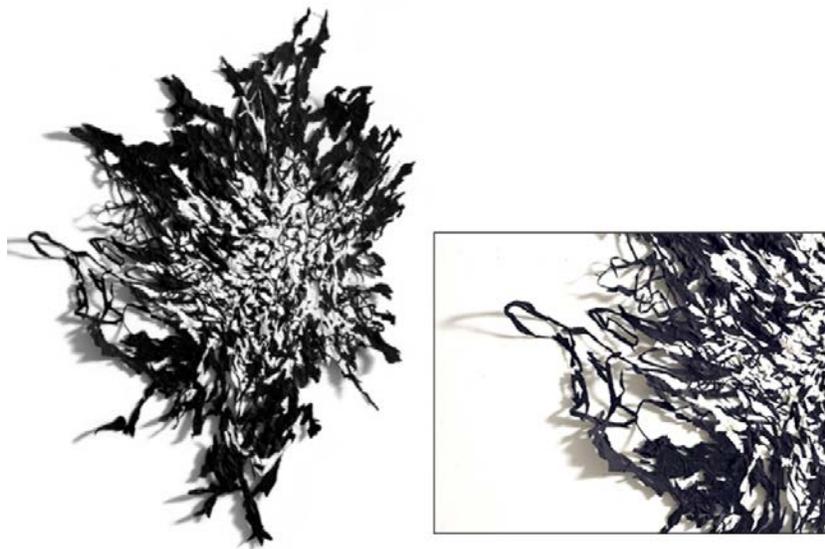
Terry Winters (painter) “Painting is a means to view places otherwise unseen.”

Van Gogh: “I believe that one would be thinking much more sanely if ideas came from direct contact with things rather than one’s looking at things with the aim of finding this or that idea.”

Sarah Sze (US artist Venice Biennial 2013): “The need to know what you are doing is overrated.”

As a visual artist and arts educator for over thirty years, I wish to share with you my studio process and insight into how essential working directly with materials is in the evolution of a work of art. I would like us to consider how the physicality of substances shaped by one’s hand or with a tool can be a complement to computational design. To see the value in how materials sometimes speak back to the maker by not always yielding to one’s hand, forcing improvisational decision-making and resolution through the making; to the benefits of slowing down the creative process which can result in moment to moment nuanced changes; and to exalt in the physicality of texture engaging the senses along with the language of emotion, all too frequently absent from the contemporary discourse. I would like us to consider that in many art practices, the physical interaction with real materials may be the central force in generating the work. Perhaps a greater emphasis on the practice of working directly with materials within the tech world during the formative design stages may provide new insights and perhaps create a generation of computational designers who are more innovative because of this.

Working intuitively and embracing the unexpected is core to my practice, while using the lowest tech materials possible, mostly torn, inked paper and tape.



The collaged paper or tape is repeatedly ripped, twisted and manipulated into a highly textured whirlpool of pulsating energy. The tape allows for a fluidity of line, a density of shape, and a material presence that emphasizes the visceral nature of the surface and its cut contour.



They result in works that contain the expanding vitality of an explosive mass of energy struggling to hold the center still when the forces of nature prove too great.



I consider most of my work drawings, even the 3 D work, because I tend to construct my drawings using a similar layering process I would a sculpture.



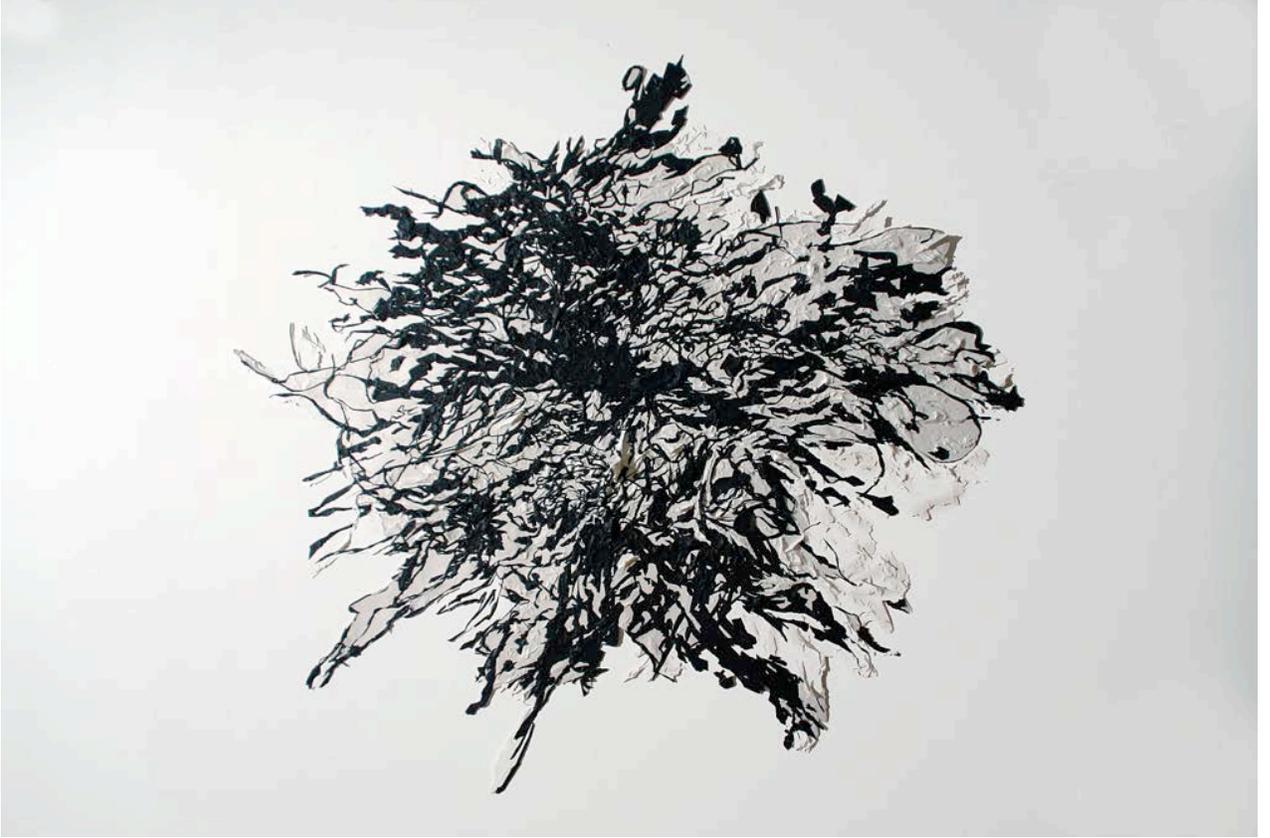
I have rarely placed a mark with a traditional drawing tool directly on a surface. I prefer an indirect approach with the material mediating my gesture, my line, my glyph, and imposing its will and imprint on my decisions.



While my work is resolutely grounded in abstractionism, it always has “one foot in nature”, as the artist Bryce Marden once said about his own abstract calligraphic drawings. The iconography in my work alludes to a multitude of phenomena in nature: tidal pools of water, tornados twisting in space, land formations moving and shifting. To bring to reality these “unseen scapes” sometimes means hours of meandering, a willingness to recreate work in the moment, and a collaborative approach with the materials I use, the tape and paper, which sometimes in their stubborn resistance to my hand surpasses my intentionality and even my imagination.

It is the surprises that occur in the making, the materials that I can't quite control despite my years of experience that interest me the most. It is about being prepared to take advantage of those studio surprises and even the failures to push an idea forward. The traces of prior decisions, the sedimentary layers of tape or paper that bear the history of my process including my missteps create the final image.

I refer to Tim Ingold's writings on drawing vs. painting as an indelible record, or drawing as “an archive of its maker's muscle”. I believe this process gives the artwork its authenticity and spark and most parallels nature's phenomena where the unpredictability of weather, air masses and the water reshapes over time the contours of our landscape.



I must admit it is not really an efficient way to make sculpture where gravity and engineering comes into play but as I have gotten older, I have come to accept that this is my process, that mark by mark I construct my work.



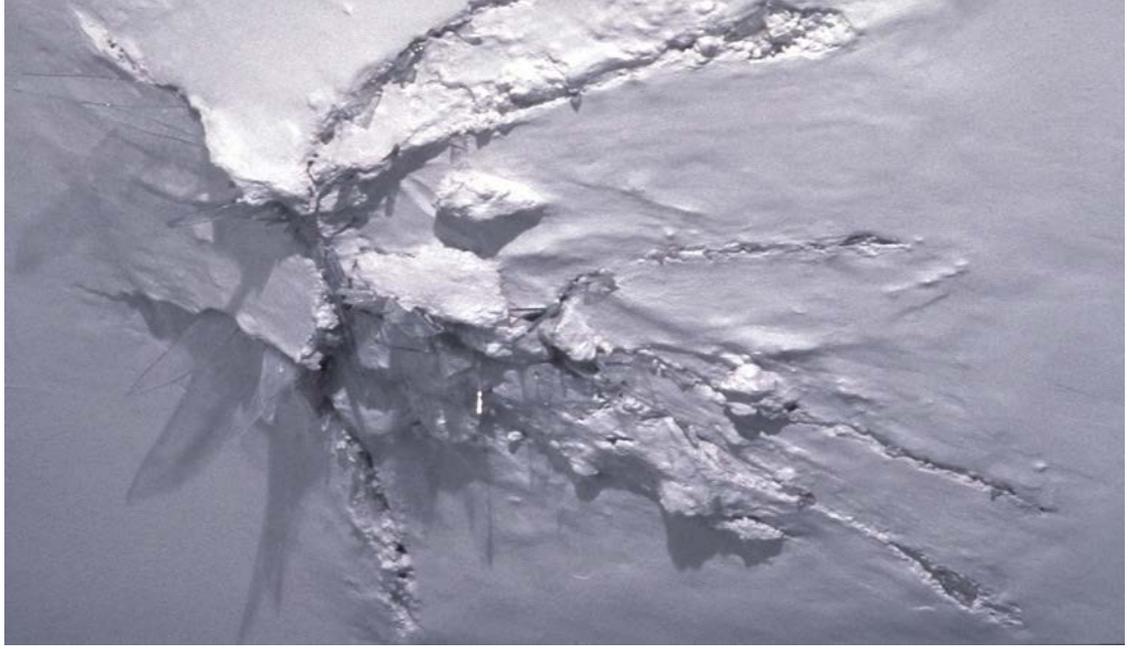
And when I am in right frame of mind, I can even sometimes take pleasure in this very slow rhythm of building up and breaking down. The physical process of making my work echoes a major theme in it as well, which is entropy.

The process of not knowing is an essential and integral aspect of my work and of many artists, with the materials animating the work and providing an expressive framework to it. For me, the materials I have worked with over the years and the manner in which I use them, which is usually non-traditional, are largely driven by meaning, in the poetic sense, and the way I wish my audience to encounter my work. Whether I want the work to exude a feeling of ephemerality, such as in the pieces I made using a translucent fiber, gut:



Or with a sense of impending pressure that can barely be contained, like the forty foot high installation entitled (Sub)Surface in which prefabricated, fictitious fractures with glass shards were embedded into the museum wall:





Or allude to the entropy in nature as echoed in the more recent sculpture:



This approach, the idea of not knowing exactly where I am going, differs dramatically from how many US students are presently educated. Students live in fear that the consequences of not knowing will have a damaging effect in their future college choices, their employment options and ultimately their financial success. We have created a system of high stakes testing starting at a young age which sometimes determines who goes in what track, with a growing emphasis and value placed on the pursuit of science and technology. School districts frequently pit the funding of technology against the arts, with the arts generally losing out or at best relegated to an auxiliary holiday or seasonal activity for younger children. In my creativity classes at Boston College students frequently express a strong discomfort with not knowing the exact direction before they begin a project. They like to map out the solution before they begin. Even with firm instructions that there is no one right answer and that working in this manner will not yield them the results they so anxiously desire. It is my goal by the semester's end to have my students “deal with the unknown with a level of comfort”. And almost all do within the 14 weeks. To quote Thomas Payzant, past superintendent of Boston public schools, "Education is knowing what to do when you don't know". But it appears that in today's educational climate we have done the exact opposite, which leaves our students ill prepared to create the solutions for the challenges we will be facing in the 21st century. As Ken Robinson said in his Ted Talk on “How Schools Kill Creativity”, “if you are not prepared to be wrong you will never come up with anything original”.

Even in the primary grades, those childhood experiences and endeavors that traditionally were underscored as part of a one's emotional, social and intellectual development have been excised to emphasize linguistic and numerical proficiency. Parents and educators alike are replacing the sandbox, play dough or finger painting with an increase of screen time (or as a second grade teacher once told me when I asked her if she would like me to bring in some clay and lead a workshop: "too messy and too much prep and clean up time needed"). There is a decrease in engaging the brain and eye in active seeing of the natural world, a decrease in physically moving our body through space as more and more kids sit inactively in front of the screen in their free time. What does it mean that many children's sense of materiality is moving a cursor along a planar surface and viewing most visual imagery on a rectangular flat screen? How does the omission of working and making directly with materials and separating designing from the physicality and messiness of making impact a person's creativity and in particular, impact flexibility in decision making and working in a more open ended manner without a preconceived solution? While technology has allowed us to find solutions in record time, to create and design images that are beyond the ability of the hand to draw and for the mind to conceive, and with a speed beyond human capability to match within a short span of time, has it also removed the richness of the meandering process which frequently results in *Aha!* moments and the making of new connections that we hadn't anticipated?

So as an artist and educator I will continue to advocate for a reshaping of 21st century education that includes material making, with the abundant and new perspectives it can provide, as being a vital complement to technology and design. The unique richness' each discipline offers the other may result in a hybrid approach between art and technological practices.

References

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