

THESIS

DRAWING QUESTIONS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

DRAWING QUESTIONS

In my artwork, the questions I am interested in are those that begin with our experience of the world. Specifically, the connections between an embodied subject, the environment and the different roles the senses play on the temporality of consciousness. Other enigmas that have occupied my mind are those regarding the relationship between self and other and how to create an art that provokes a participation in the inter-subjective living moment.

To investigate these themes I create two and three-dimensional objects which provide a multi-sensory experience that is aesthetically engaging, conceptually provocative, and layered with levels of meaning. To invoke a fascination in these ideas, I have used intricate and evocative imagery, incorporation of kinetic and interactive components, and elements that change with time or different environmental conditions. Important is a necessary mobile perspective that breaks the viewer free from a static cone of vision and seduces him or her into a labyrinth of puzzles.

Formally I juxtapose various materials including silverpoint, transfers, vhs tape, polarized screens and found objects with supports ranging from folk art-style assemblages to meticulously crafted panels and glass. Subtractive processes such as carving, erasing, and veiling constitute another aspect of the layering that gives rise to the finished piece. Employing these materials and processes with subject matter that is representational as well as abstract, narrative, or illustrative of mechanical and anatomical diagrams allows me to take the viewer from a place of the known to one of not-knowing.

Every work is both a sensory and cerebral playground in which one can investigate the

curious nature of perception. It is important for this exploration to absorb the viewer in multiple epiphanies that lead to questions, self-reflection and a state of being conscious of consciousness. My art practice is inspired by the mutual arising or transactional interaction between the viewer, myself and the art experience.

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DRAWING QUESTIONS

The act of drawing is an investigation of perception that provides an opportunity to explore the surrounding environment via observation and interaction. An open definition of how I view this practice is as an organization of marks that transform a ground. This refers to the physical support of a given work as well as the experience that affects the viewer's ground of experience. This definition makes drawing interdisciplinary and allows for the possibility of multi-sensory engagement.

One of the beautiful facets of a drawing is that it can exist as a paradox, in a realm beyond the states of logical description. Before the mind has a chance to create divisions and make definitions the artwork exists as qualities in a perceptual field. It is here that certain illuminating discoveries and insights arise. This place of direct awareness is where my art making begins.

To engage a viewer the work begins as a playground for the senses. In each piece there is a variety of traditional mediums as well as metal-point, lenses, polarized screens, and organic materials such as eggshells. Many of these elements will also change through time or under differing environmental conditions. The diversity and applications of these mediums function to create surfaces that are tactile, illusionistic and intriguing.

Working and living around Appalachia has also influenced my use of materials. There is a strong folk art tradition where untrained, outsider artists use found objects and recycled items in unique and creative ways. This aesthetic can be seen in a series of work created from 2009 through 2010. In *Explorations I* and *II* (Fig. 1)(Fig. 2), for example, I have employed found objects to literally and metaphorically create a view within a view. In both works the subject

matter is a combination of objects with deconstructed cellular phone parts. *Exploration I* contains a wasp nest tucked into a three-dimensional drawing. The imagery and color palette are derived from this abandoned abode. What I find interesting is how easily a simplified and abstracted variation on this structure mimics many other forms in nature. As will become evident, self-similarity is a recurring theme in much of this body of work. In a moment of experimentation, when disassembling the cell phones, I found I could separate the polarized screens inside and use them to create holographic-like distortions and reflections.

The polarized screen in *Explorations II* is used to distort the space inside the shadow box, but one can only see this if he or she chooses to interact with the piece and disengage the magnetic switch. This illuminates the interior creating a blue glow on the right and allowing one to see through the magnifying glass on the left (Fig. 3). Behind the lens is a grasshopper but it is not clearly recognizable at first because of the change in scale created by the 5X magnification. Once this object is identified, however, it provides clues to decipher the imagery at the top.

Just as an archeologist will carefully brush away dust of the past to reveal fossils to the present, my work seeks to create a springboard for the viewer to journey from a place of the known to one of not knowing. This begins with direct perception of the formal qualities, recognition and labeling of perceived subject matter, an attempt to conceptually decipher the work, and then a return back to an immediate awareness that is now from a slightly different vantage point. Because a person will inevitably bring his or her own background to a given work, he or she can follow the thread in uniquely individual ways. These pathways burrow deeper and deeper the longer a person stays with the piece. Like good poetry, the complexity of the work gives a person the potential to come back to the same piece repeatedly revealing things that before were not noticed. Many of the works intentionally fail to give an end to the story or

interpretation so as not to limit their capabilities as dynamic contemplation pieces. Much like Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, where each story ends at the moment of suspense, I am intending for the audience to make the effort to choose their own adventure. Ultimately, I hope my art functions as a way for the curious to find multiple surprises in the primacy of perception, emotional pathos, conceptual intrigues, and transformative experiences.

To succeed in this purpose my work utilizes intricate details, surfaces that require a moving perspective, and a juxtaposition of representational elements with that of the imaginative and impossible. Non-objective areas function to relax the viewer into a state not unlike meditation. One will also find artifacts from the natural world including elements from entomology, ornithology, and earth science. Furthermore, there are kinetic and interactive components in certain works that cause a participant to concentrate on the present, living moment.

Another work to incorporate an eye loupe for magnification is *Observing Echoes from the First Sound* (Fig. 4). I have always been fascinated by attempting to figure out how things work. Tinkering, and taking things apart, has always been part of my process. While disassembling a CD player I saw a connection to something akin to a petri-dish observation platform. In an attempt to make reference to this object's former life as a mechanized music player, I chose to incorporate on each disc the progression of technological advancements in the reproduction of sound. These illustrative drawings include imagery of a phonograph, amplification circuitry, and a cochlear ear implant. These images have also been cross-dissolved with illustrations of the Koch fractal iteration. Just as most technological growth happens in an exponential fashion, so does the self-similarity of this particular fractal. The drawings on each wood disc are done using silverpoint, this is basically incised sterling silver that will tarnish and change through exposure to sunlight and the atmosphere. The graphite tone will oxidize and

become a rich sienna and then eventually a dark black.

Can Bionics Bring the Hammer Down also comments upon technology, specifically how it relates to bioengineering (Fig. 5). This work is mainly silverpoint but also contains clay from Kentucky and eggshell fragments to increase the textural qualities. The imagery humorously combines a hammer atop the pedal coming system from a kick drum which then morphs into the anatomy of a human ankle and foot. Using non-traditional materials and breaking free from the constraints of the rectangle have always interested me and this piece is no exception. Given the subject matter, the shapes of each panel refer to a drum set seen from the side.

It is "A," It is Not "A," It is Both "A" and Not "A," It is Neither "A" Nor Not "A" I and II (Fig. 6)(Fig. 7) are two other examples of the intersection of art, engineering and science. These kinetic sculptures, and accompanying stop-motion videos, are based off the ancient practice of origami. I have given them a mechanical twist to create a dialogue with contemporary science and the use of origami in structural engineering. In automobile design, the folding principles of origami inform the application of crumple zones on a car for protection in an accident. In building construction, the same ideas are applied to the infrastructure of skyscrapers to counteract the destructive effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes. The applications also expand into aerospace engineering and understanding the body on a cellular level. These sculptures are meant to be played with to create an interaction between subject and object in the living moment. In this fashion they function as kaleidoscopic contemplation pieces.

Phenomenology is a useful aperture through which to look at an encounter with a work of art because it helps clarify the immediate experience of phenomena. From this point of view consciousness is seen to proceed by a filtering or bracketing of causal relationships and then a reduction of these forms into things or ideas in an intersubjective life-world. This progression is

a natural way to approach an art work and allows for multiple readings within a singular piece. Since this method is informed by philosophy, psychology and cognitive neuroscience it also provides an interdisciplinary platform to interpret the art experience. The inherent ideas in this perspective form the foundation for the questions that fueled this body of work.

In a series from 2011 to 2012, the transparency and density of both imagery and perception are explored using image transfer processes and recycled materials, specifically vhs tape from a security camera. In the installation *Smile I* (Fig.8) the tape is used directly on the wall as linear elements to create a more apparent but extremely large surveillance camera. When one would walk past the piece the reflective quality of the tape would shimmer. This material has been used in the first set of drawings, *Smile II* (Fig. 9)(Fig. 10), as a black mirrored surface that changes between being reflective and void. The ephemeral imagery of an observing security camera is derived from the content of the material and is altered by the viewer's interaction. This imagery questions how our quality of life is affected/effectuated by being constantly, mostly unknowingly, monitored. *Smile III* (Fig. 11) is a synthesis of these two works but is installed in shallow relief as a subtle, barely visible white on white.

In the second part of this series, *A Childhood Spent in Planes Without Doors I, II and III* (Fig. 12)(Fig. 13)(Fig. 14), I have used the tape in a more playful, abstract fashion. Here, I am questioning the relationship between narration and mystery. The subject is a fusion of recognizable forms and those that are more open to interpretation. Making transfers of the tape into transparent gel medium skins allowed me to layer the imagery as much as fifty times. This creates a thick surface that light can penetrate making the forms more volumetric and luminous. *A Childhood Spent in Planes without Doors III* is done by applying the transfers onto glass mounted on a mirror. Being veiled by the gel medium gives the ground of the work an iridescent

silver glow. The title and imagery hint at my earliest memories and the sense of weightlessness that accompanies them.

In the third group of this series, *Black Holes* (Fig. 15)(Fig. 16), it is the unknown I am interested in provoking the viewer to contemplate. These “black holes” represent the great enigmas of infinity and eternity. The title implies questions regarding the relationship of space/time and concepts like the “event horizon,” Einstein-Rosen bridges, plus various paradoxes and impossibilities. Furthermore, I enjoy the play on the inescapable properties of a black hole with the irretrievable information on the tape comprising these funnels.

This series is another aspect of the larger idea of the art/life experience as being a kind of phenomenological gestalt, but it goes further to ask other questions about the world around us. What is the cost of constant surveillance? What is the connection between playful curiosity, perception, and the way we create abstract fictions? Ultimately, what is the intrigue of the unknown? In pondering these inquiries, it is my intention to reveal a hidden aspect of how the viewer perceives and experiences the world around him or herself.

Another set of drawings, *Displacement I, and II* (Fig. 17)(Fig. 18), plays on the properties of light and shadow in relation to sight. In the first two works, dark ink on transfers are mounted on plexi-glass and hung several inches from the wall. The focal length determines the clarity of the projected imagery but at the optimum distance the image on the wall is more photo-realistic than the photo transfer. This hints at various ideas ranging from Plato's Cave and notions of original vs. copy, to Husserl's concept of horizontal intentionality. This latter concept is the idea that an object is never given in its entirety. This horizon of absent profiles crates an anticipatory “appresentation.” This *presentation* is the precursor to *representation* and illustrates the

difference between the indirect signitive and imaginative with the direct perceptual.¹ That the mind fills in the gaps of absent profiles illustrates an important aspect of the phenomenological claim that our perception of the world is not as complete or as accurate as one would hope and assume. Important for this thesis is the way such a navigational account of perception changes one's awareness of, and response to, the surrounding world.

Also interesting is how the experience of the three works compress four dimensions into three and then into two. In *Displacement II*, instead of ink transfers, the figures are cut out of polarized screens and layered so that they appear and disappear as one moves around the piece. However, the cast shadow remains as constant as the light source. The imagery of the figures is the continuation of my interest in certain emotive and narrative elements. To increase a sense of the visceral there are subtle, unsettling posturing and mutations.

In the early part of the twentieth century, John Dewey proposed the idea that when confronted with a true work of art, a person will have an experience that transcends the division of subject and object as well as artist and audience. A feeling of overall of connectedness is predominate; and furthermore, this experience will present itself not in the art object or the viewer, but exist in the space between. This art, as a product of experience, will cause the viewer to focus his or her conscious appreciation on the complete process of creation in the living moment.² It is my intention with this body of work to provide such an experience where one may perceive herself perceiving.

In all the works discussed therefore, the materials function on physical, illusionistic, and metaphorical levels; metaphorically, because the mediums hint at a metamorphic change and that

¹ Gallagher, Shawn and Zahvi, Dan, *The Phenomenological Mind*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008) 62-64.

² Dewey, John, *Art as Experience*, (New York, NY: Van Reese Press, 1934) 53.

which can only be experienced such as the taste of salt or the way light illuminates a surface.

The processes I use employ the standard additive and subtractive methods but also look to the resistance of non-traditional materials and how they can remain the same but become something different. This alteration can happen on a tactile level as well as how the material conceptually morphs into content. The mirrored surfaces and black holes, for instance, exemplify this use of material.

Two final works attempt to tie many of these ideas into cohesive structures. *Dynamic Systems* (Fig. 19) employs an audible catalyst that when interacted with winds a coiled spring that then releases energy spinning the iridescent discs. The discs are connected under the tension of a 5:1 hauling ratio that is physical and highly tactile.

Einstein-Rosen Bridges (Fig. 20)(Fig. 21)(Fig. 22) combines many of the processes and materials in earlier work and utilizes the black hole forms as a narrative structure. Going back to the concept of an Einstein-Rosen bridge (or wormhole), and the elusive nature of time, provided inspiration and a starting point for this piece. The two flanking panels represent the known past and uncertain future and the connecting apparatus becomes a metaphor for the ever present but fleeting now. To force the viewers' interaction, this machine is activated by a motion sensor so that when a viewer approaches the device is set in motion. This begins recording the immediate sounds, plays the recording, then erases it and continuously begins again.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty said the work of art "brings the world of perception back to life, this world hidden beneath all the sediment of knowledge and social living."³ My art practice begins with this pursuit of a subjective experience of the things themselves. How this becomes divided into objective, emotional, narrative, conceptual, and mysterious elements provides the

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The World of Perception*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008) 38.

middle of the story. The intentional openness, or non-ending of this art experience allows for a viewer to take away multiple readings. By only hinting at and not fully labeling the content the viewer can find his or her own traction and choose a possibility. This body of work leads the viewer on a multi-sensory, cerebral journey that doesn't end in a neat tidy package but opens unto the unknown.

FIGURES



Fig. 1, Nicholas Croghan, *Exploration I*, prismacolor, clay, polarized screens, wasp nest
5"x14"x2"

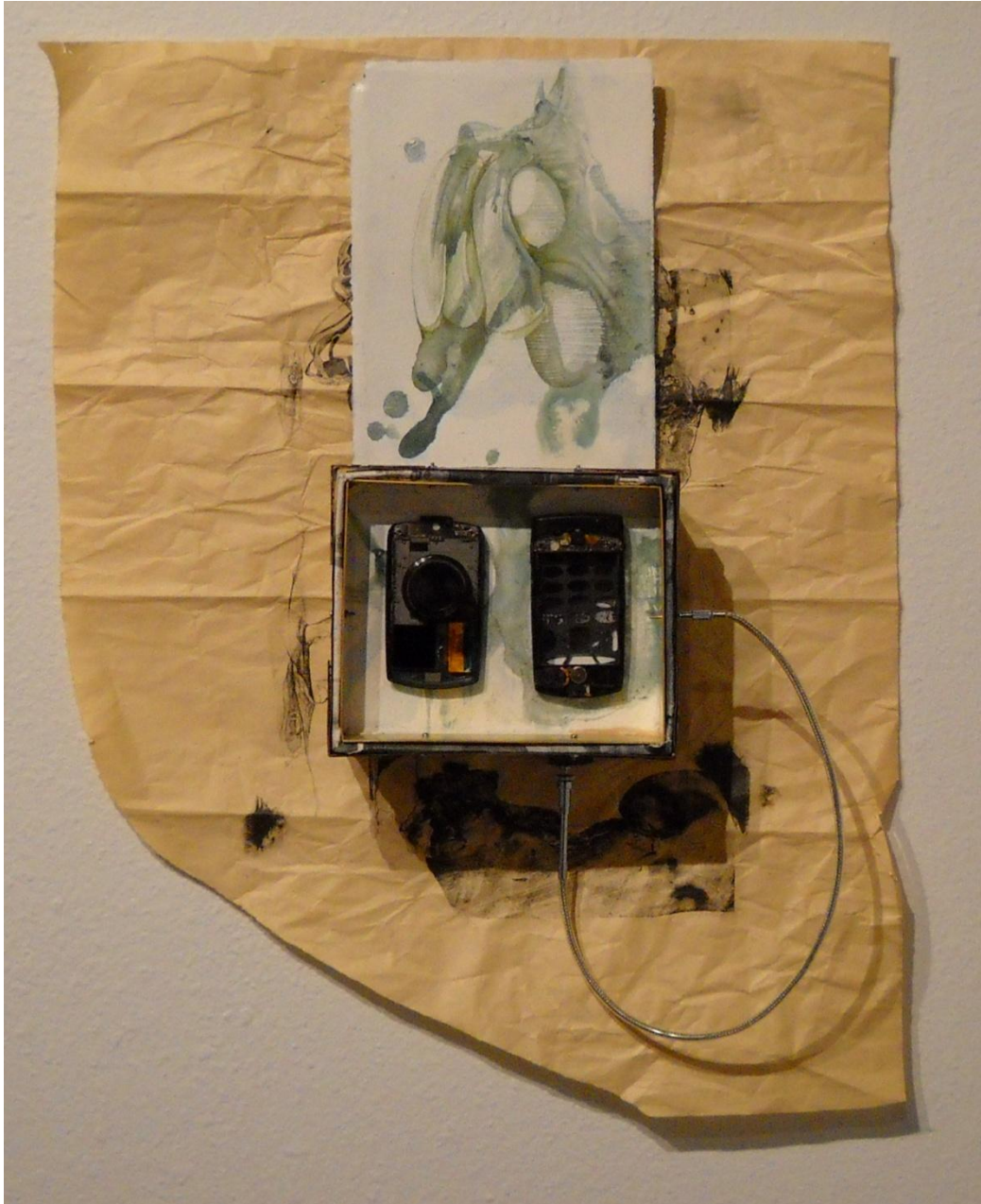


Fig. 2, Nicholas Croghan, *Exploration II*, prismacolor, polarized screens, grasshopper, magnifier, brass, copper, light, 30"x22"x5"



Fig. 3, Nicholas Croghan, *Exploration II*, detail



Fig. 4, Nicholas Croghan, *Echoes from the First Sound*, silverpoint, acrylic, brass, lens
12"x11"x5"



Fig. 5, Nicholas Croghan, *Can Bionics Bring the Hammer Down* , silverpoint, acrylic, prismacolor, clay, 36"x20"x4"

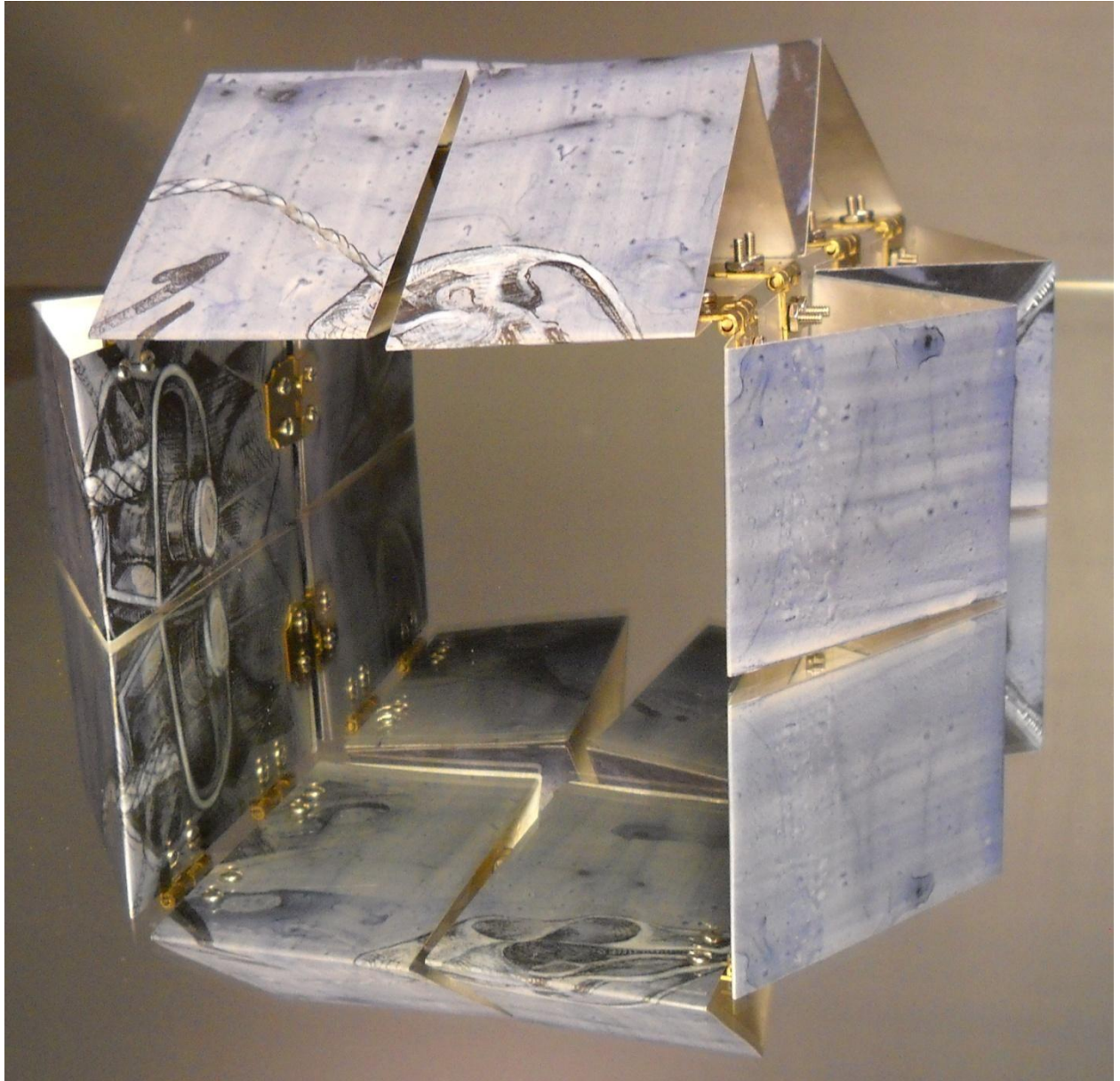


Fig. 6, Nicholas Croghan, *It is A, It is not A, It is both A and not A, It is Neither A nor not A I*
ink, acrylic, brass, 9"x9"x2"

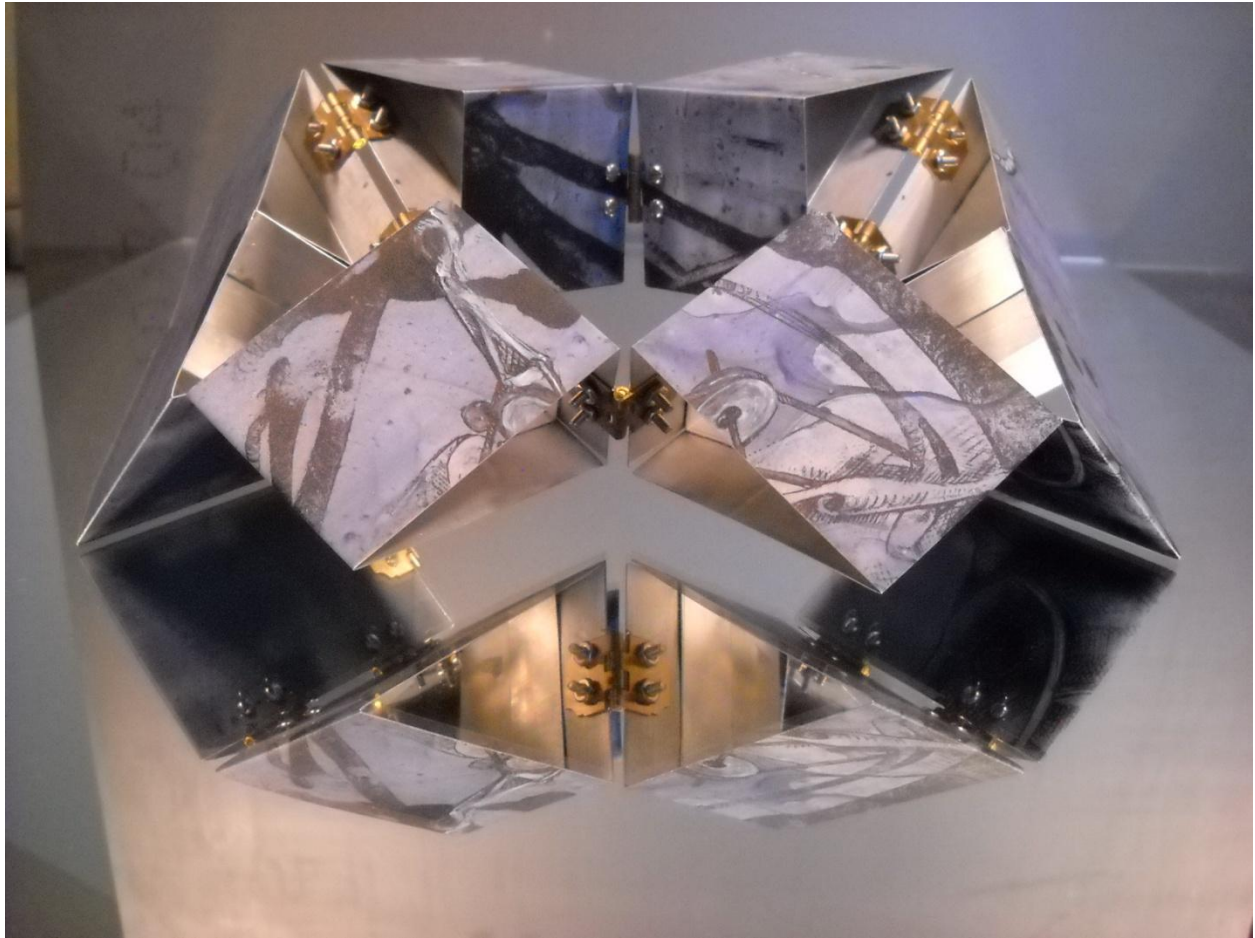


Fig. 7, Nicholas Croghan, *It is A, It is not A, It is both A and not A, It is Neither A nor not A II*
ink, acrylic, brass, 12"x12"x4"

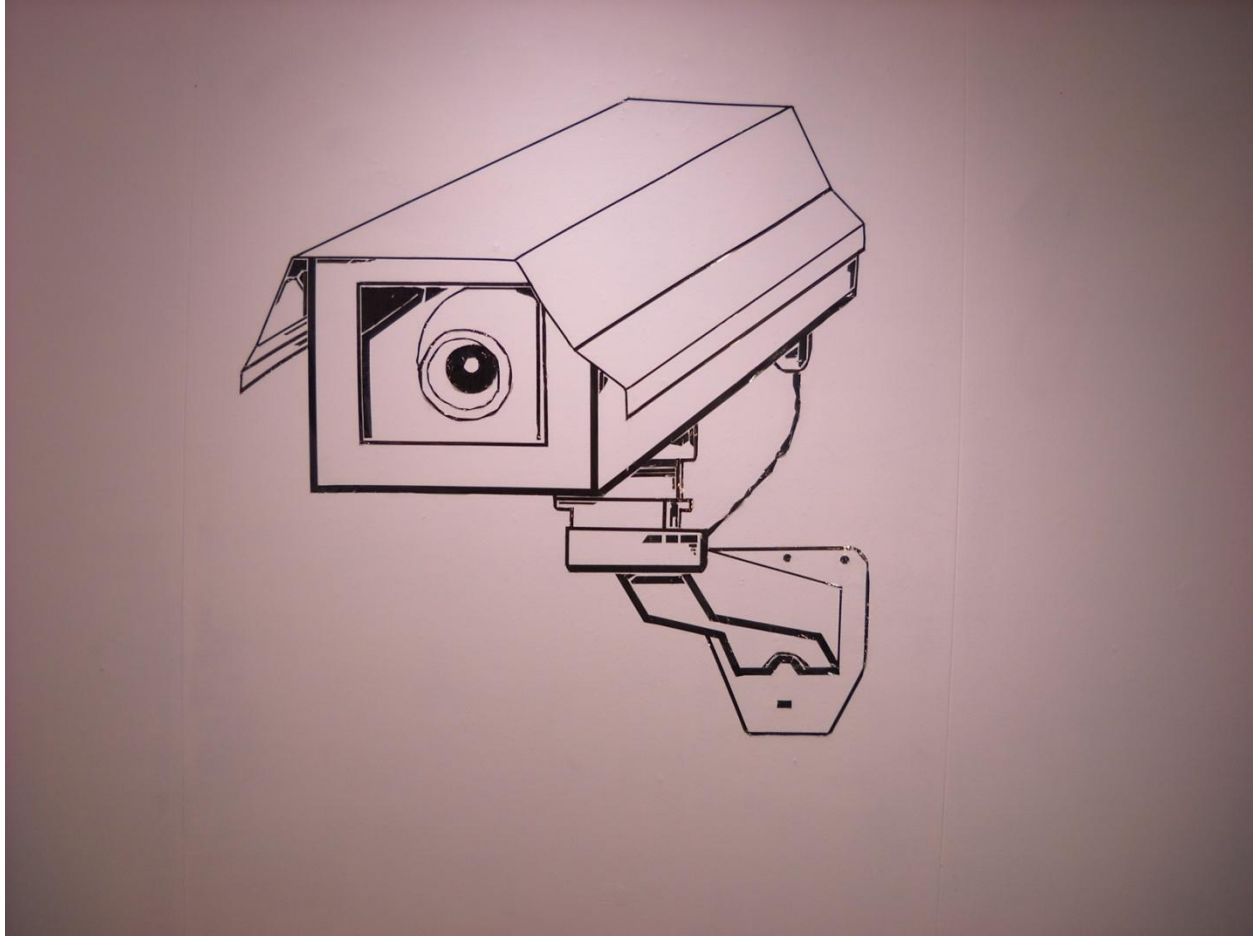


Fig. 8, Nicholas Croghan, *Smile I*, vhs magnetic tape from security camera, approximately 48"x48"

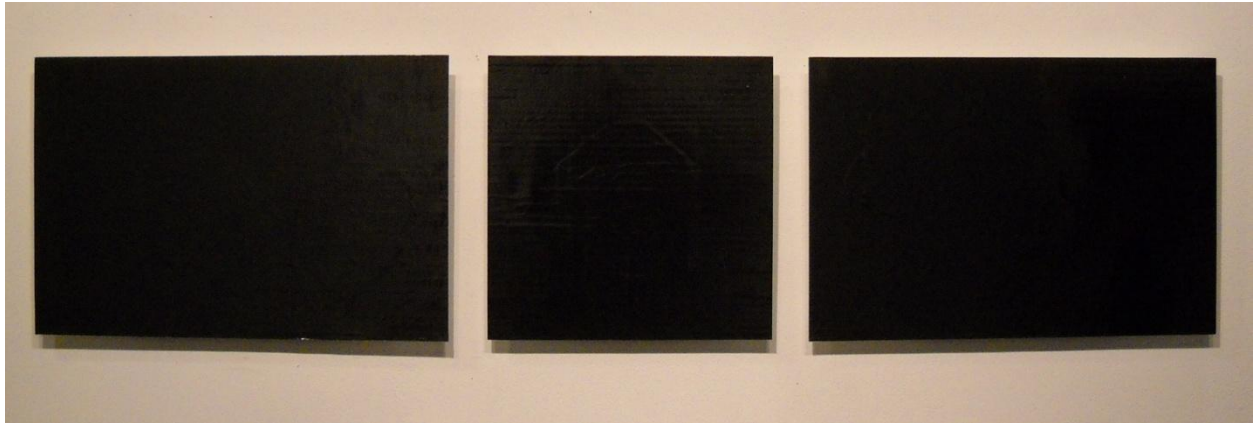


Fig. 9, Nicholas Croghan, *Smile II*, vhs magnetic tape from security camera, approximately 12"x56"

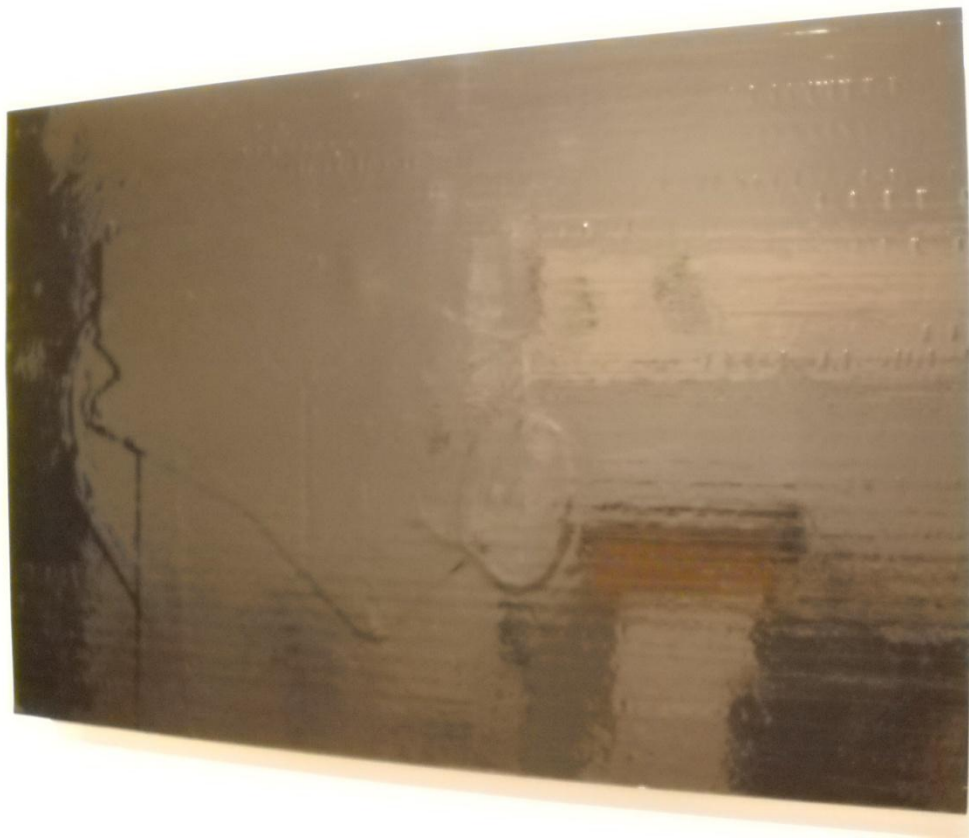


Fig.10, Nicholas Croghan, *Smile II*, detail



Fig. 11, Nicholas Croghan, *Smile III*, paper, acrylic, approximately 18"x24"

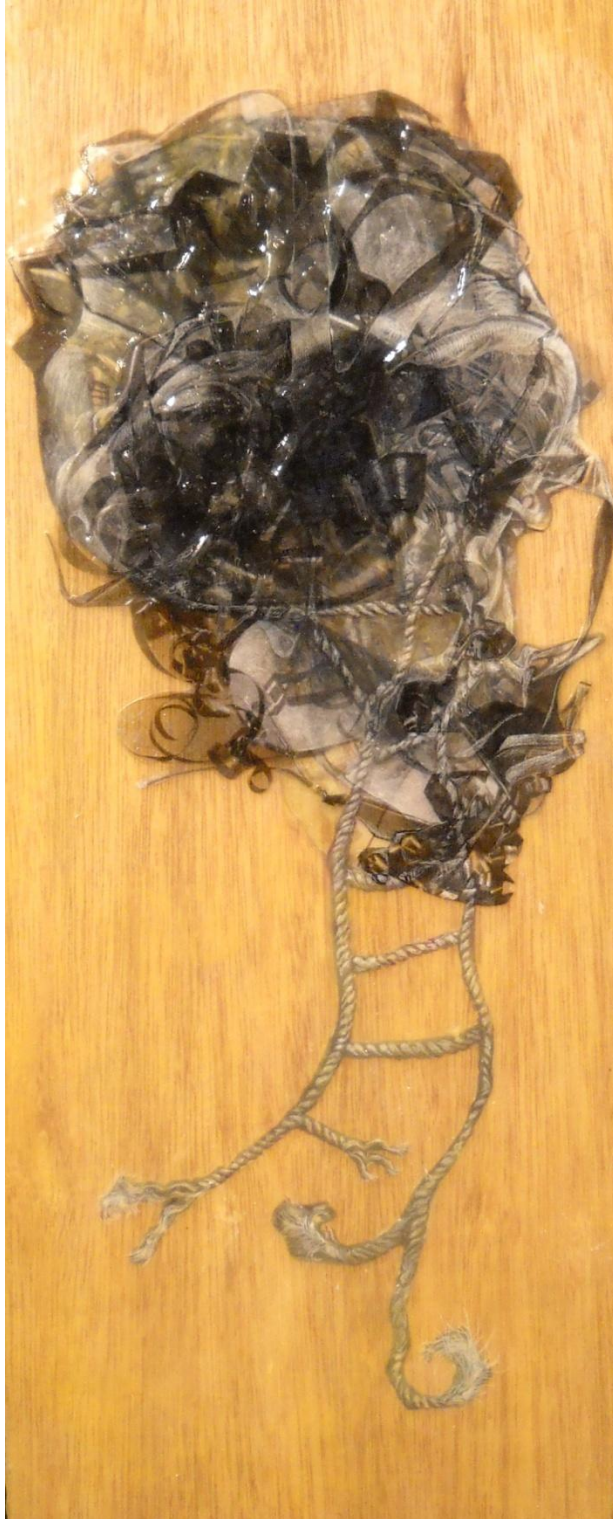


Fig. 12, Nicholas Croghan, *A Childhood Spent in Planes without Doors I*, ink, prismacolor, gel medium, 20"x8"



Fig. 13, Nicholas Croghan, *A Childhood Spent in Planes without Doors II*, prismacolor, acrylic, gel medium on clay, 26"x16"



Fig. 14, Nicholas Croghan, *A Childhood Spent in Planes without Doors II*, ink, prismacolor, gel medium on veiled mirror, 19"x14"



Fig. 15, Nicholas Croghan, *Black Holes I*, vhs magnetic tape, gel medium, 4"x4"



Fig. 16, Nicholas Croghan, *Black Holes II*, vhs magnetic tape, gel medium, polarized screen, 12"x5"



Fig. 17, Nicholas Croghan, *Displacement I*, transfers on plexiglass, 27"x16"

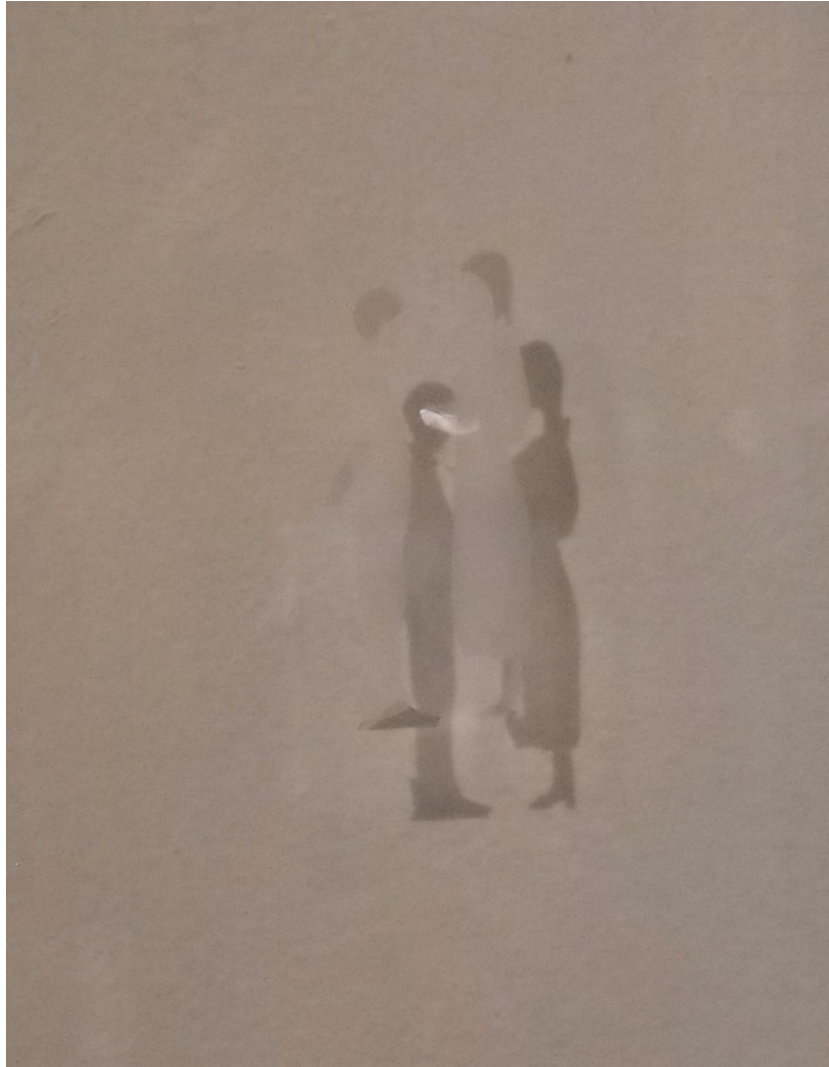


Fig. 18, Nicholas Croghan, *Displacement II*, polarized screens on plexiglass, 6"x3"



Fig. 19, Nicholas Croghan, *Dynamic Systems*, cd's, prismacolor, brass, steel, music box, wax, acrylic, oil, 18"x60"



Fig. 20, Nicholas Croghan, *Einstein-Rosen Bridges*, vhs magnetic tape, prismacolor, acrylic, copperpoint, tape deck, mirror, gel medium, wax, plaster, 48"x114"x4"



Fig. 21, Nicholas Croghan, *Einstein-Rosen Bridges*, detail

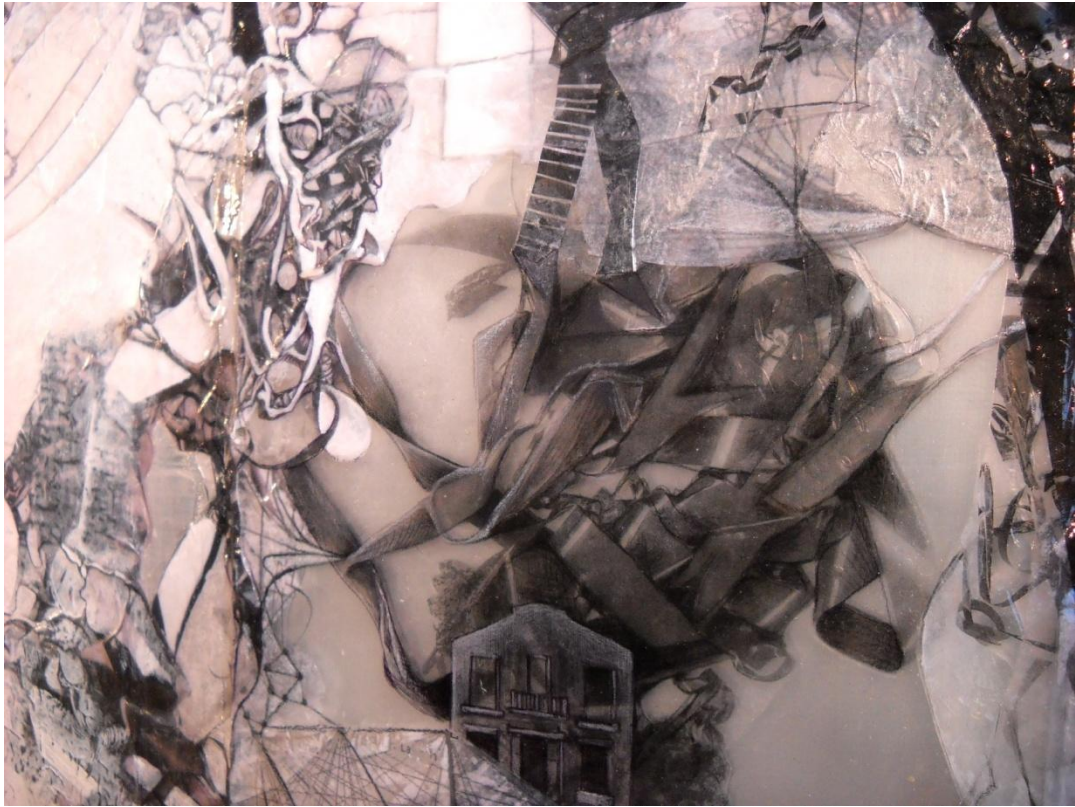


Fig. 22, Nicholas Croghan, *Einstein-Rosen Bridges*, detail

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