

5-2007

Inevitable Forces: Deciphering the Environment

Jennifer Stoneking-stewart
Clemson University, jstonek@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

 Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stoneking-stewart, Jennifer, "Inevitable Forces: Deciphering the Environment" (2007). *All Theses*. 100.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/100

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

INEVITABLE FORCES: DECIPHERING THE ENVIRONMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Studies

by
Jennifer Laurel Stoneking-Stewart
May 2007

Accepted by:
Sydney A. Cross, Committee Chair
David Detrich
Heidi Jensen
Todd McDonald

ABSTRACT

My work is a response to my surroundings, the relationship between man and nature, and my perception of human impact on the environment. I compare the sprawl of cities that overtake the surrounding countryside to the spreading of microscopic bacteria and disease. My observation of the destruction of the environment and other uncontrollable events that perpetuate fear, such as passage of time, death, and growth, is visualized through the combination of two opposing forces: structure (controlled) and organic (uncontrolled). My use of printmaking processes parallels these concepts of control or lack of control. Lithography, intaglio, silkscreen and relief are closely linked to the use of hand-drawn elements and the hand of the artist. The use of the artist's hand directs the work back to my futile individual attempts to structure and control aspects of nature (both micro and macroscopic) that provoke apprehension.

DEDICATION

To my husband, my parents, my family, and all who made this possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
INVESTIGATION OF CONCEPT AND FUNCTION.....	3
INDIVIDUAL WORKS.....	7
PROCESS	19
INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS	21
CONCLUSION.....	23

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Progression of Elements	8
1.2 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction (series)	9
1.3 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #2	10
1.4 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #3	10
1.5 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #6	11
1.6 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #7	11
1.7 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #8	12
1.8 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #9	12
1.9 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #10	13
1.10 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #13	13
1.11 Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #14	14
1.12 Possibilities of Transferal: Migration	15
1.13 Contained Growth?	16

INTRODUCTION

My work in printmaking is a complex, multi-layered response to the surrounding environment. My personal methodical and obsessive traits correlate with my attraction to printmaking, and consequently with my concepts. The main concept in this body of work revolves around alteration of the environment to conform to human needs and the futile attempts to control natural and/or inevitable forces. I establish an analogy between harmful and invasive growths that exist in a biological context to what is occurring in society.

Urban sprawl is a condition that I use as a macroscopic example to describe the microscopic spreading of disease. These organic forms are harmful and invasive, meant to raise concern or be feared. I use the spread of the organic to metaphorically represent the spreading of human populations but also as forms that cannot be contained by humanity. I depict the struggle of man versus nature and structure versus organic. The work is an orchestrated snapshot of a cause and effect relationship, a scenario where two different forces are combined to insinuate a query. I try to reach a balance with my own doubts and fears, relating to growth and spreading on the micro and macroscopic level, progression of time, death, and change.

INVESTIGATION OF CONCEPT AND FUNCTION

My passion for the environment drives the concepts that relate man to nature, comparing two living organisms and forming a relationship. I observe a beauty in the environment that I want to perpetuate in my work and use as a lure for a viewer. However, a subtle tension is created between elements that exhibit a harmful pattern of growth and lack of planning and regulation in relation to expansion of cities. The exhaustion of resources and clearing of forests to make way for suburbia and the resulting excessive use of gasoline to drive cars into the city daily is not only concerning, but also angering. I have no control over the developments that are constantly expanding a city's limits; the expression of this futility is depicted in my work. I pit a human presence against natural forces to create a scenario where a cause and effect is produced, exhibiting the unfolding events.

Using the spreading of disease as a metaphor for urban sprawl began through a visual examination of cancers, pathogens, bacteria and diseases. Initially, the depiction of a disease was crucial to the function of the work, though now they have been reduced to organic elements that reference the source through colors, organization, patterns of spreading, and cellular walls. The abstraction of microscopic photographs is a device used to intrigue an audience. This leaves it more open for associations to be made based on their experiences. The use of geometric structures that reference a cityscape and grid began by looking at aerial

photography that taken over time, showed the progression of building developments and altering of the landscape.

It was clear in viewing these photographs that certain elements increased in size overtime and could be seen as aggressive, while other elements diminished and could be seen as threatened. By showing a portion of an unfolding event, I prompt the viewer to raise questions about what the final outcome will be. A progression of events unfolding in the environment, which I have no ability to control, is expressed in the work.

Organic forms represent harmful and invasive diseases indicative of death, uncontrollable events in the natural world, and unconstrained spreading or sprawl. The organic shapes do not conform to the grids and structures imposed by humans in an attempt to regulate. Geometric forms represent the contained element of human presence and systems of organization. Grids and structures directly relate to the use of architecture and mapping, especially topographic maps. Maps and building plans are easily understood by most people and the same information, the description of a space, is conveyed to most all. Both describe a large place in small scale, while also showing features such as rivers or a stairwell, that aid a person in navigation through an environment. Organic forms in the work reference topographic maps with lines that show an elevation increase or decrease describing depth or three-dimensional form. This allows it to function as both microscopic and macroscopic, while using a vernacular visual language.

In the work, architecture is used predominately to represent cities and buildings that could contain a large population. Cities, with their high population density, contain a higher concentration of diseases and bacteria in a confined area,

therefore increasing a risk of infection and death. By presenting a piece that shows the unseen yet present through the use of microscopic organisms that surround us constantly, an audience becomes aware of unknown and inherent dangers. The unknown is a powerful motivator; it raises questions about mortality and loss. By having an audience question events and their surroundings, an awareness of a cause and effect relationship is formed.

Through the formal elements of color, composition, and balance, I want to attract the viewer and make them aware of an unfolding event. By conveying a tension between the organic and structured elements, an ominous presence or foreboding is depicted through a sense of chaos and expansion, or confinement and claustrophobia. I prompt anxiety through colors and forms in depicting uncontrollable sprawl and growth. The attention in the media to outbreaks of disease and how it spreads from a point of origin influences particular compositions. The influence of the media can be seen in how I construct compositions. By presenting images in a format that is based on the media and/or a diagrammatic construction, a believable image is created. Manipulated source material such as photographic images, imply in an authoritative voice spreading and mayhem. This parallels the way the media manipulates images to create fear within an audience. Scientific and mediated images are presented as cold and detached, lacking of emotion or personal ties. I create images that are also detached and void of a strong personal emotion, producing a cold, clinical portrayal.

INDIVIDUAL WORKS

Progression of Elements (Fig 1.1)

The piece *Progression of Elements* is an exploration of development and growth over a period of time and the study or monitoring of it. I approached the process as a reductive silkscreen, starting with the most information and then reducing it. By reducing forms, I exert control over two elements that are expanding in the environment which in reality I do not have the ability to contain. This is a clear depiction of organic versus structure. They act as opposing forces that are in the process of coming together and overtaking each other, yet the prevailing force is not evident. The final outcome between them is left open for the viewer to hypothesize. This was a time-based project where, over a four-day period of time, two runs were printed daily. This systematic execution references census documentation and studies of population growths, as well as scientific experiments where the growth of an organism (both microscopic and macroscopic) is monitored and documented on a set schedule. This piece also compares the hand-made¹ to the machine-made². The build-up of layers relates to the build-up and growth of cities, organic organisms, and the passage of time.

The chaotic appearance of this piece was determined by the lack of precise registration, therefore creating a movement of the elements, forming a visual tension and optical shift. The colors are based on those used in heat sensing and

¹ Organic mass made by applying tusche wash to frosted mylar.

² Geometric grid created in Adobe Photoshop™ and then printed onto inkjet transparencies.

meteorology. White functions as an extreme of both hot and cold, and the progression of warmth in the colors from purple to red shows an increase in temperature, but also an increase in density. The sense of chaos and disorder is clearly conveyed, functioning as an environment that is out of alignment. The visual tension between the colors, layers, and opposing elements create an ill-ease or ominous presence that raises questions. In this piece, I am controlling growth, time, and the progression of elements through my approach to the process.

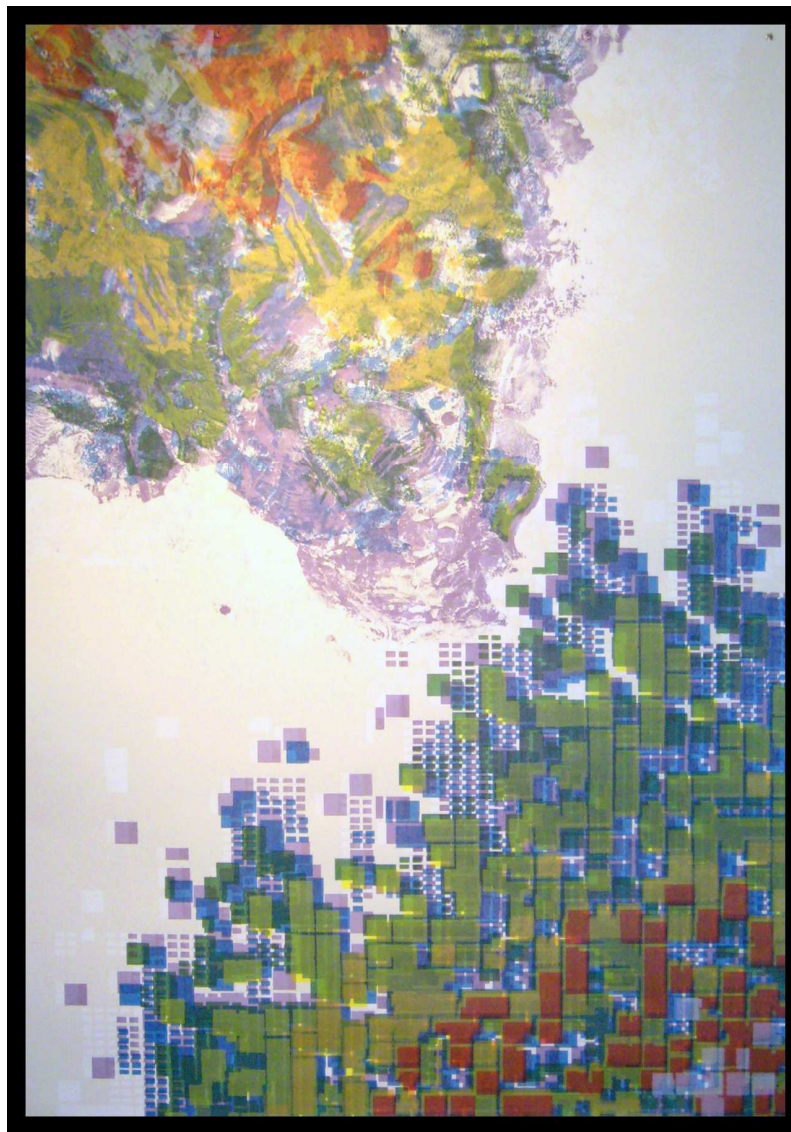


Fig. 1.1 *Progression of Elements* (2007)
Silkscreen, 44 1/2" x 30 1/4"

Spreading: Construction and Destruction (Fig. 1.2 -- 1.11)

The series entitled *Spreading: Construction and Destruction* consists of fourteen progressive stages of an etching, nine of which are exhibited. I am responding to a pure element, the zinc plate, which functions as a metaphor for the environment. The combination of organic with structure in this series makes a relationship in which two opposites wrestle with each other at each stage of the plate development. By using the etching process and the materials³ to dictate the image, the series unfolds to show the struggle between the organic and structure, nature and man, as it plays out. The progression of images exhibit the disintegration of the physical plate while representing the destruction of our environment as it becomes subject to this struggle.



Fig. 1.2 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction* (2007)
Series installed in Lee Gallery for Thesis Exhibition

³ Use combination of hard ground, soft ground, and solvents that dissolve them to create the organic masses. Asphaltum is printed on the plate by the process of silkscreen to create the structured grids. Both stages (organic and structured) are etched in a bath of nitric acid.



Fig. 1.3 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #2* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

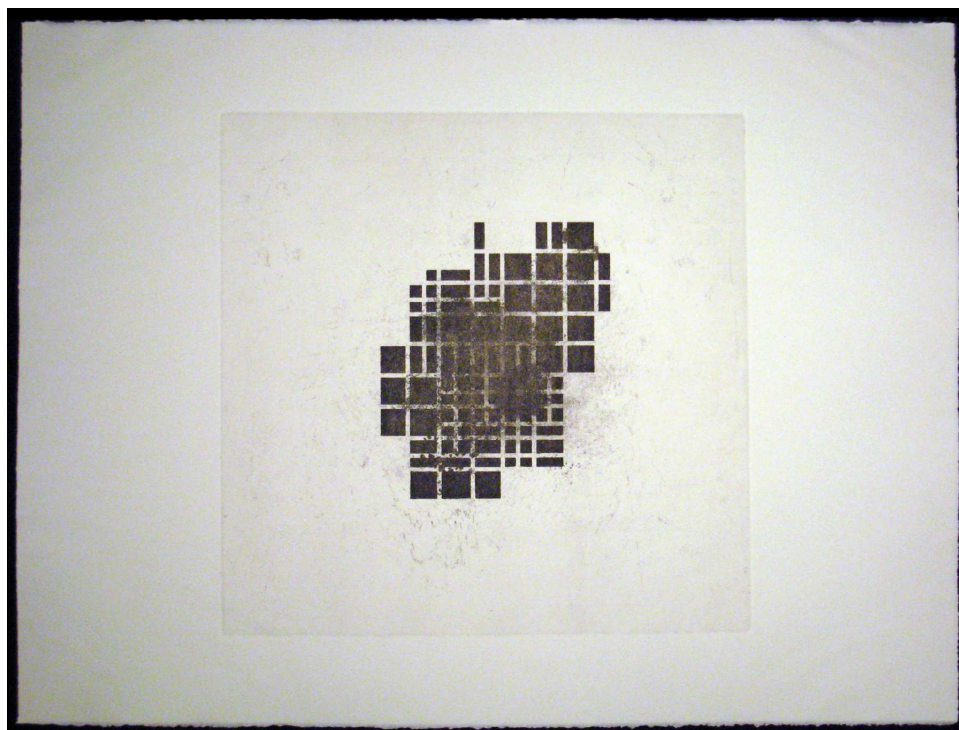


Fig. 1.4 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #3* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

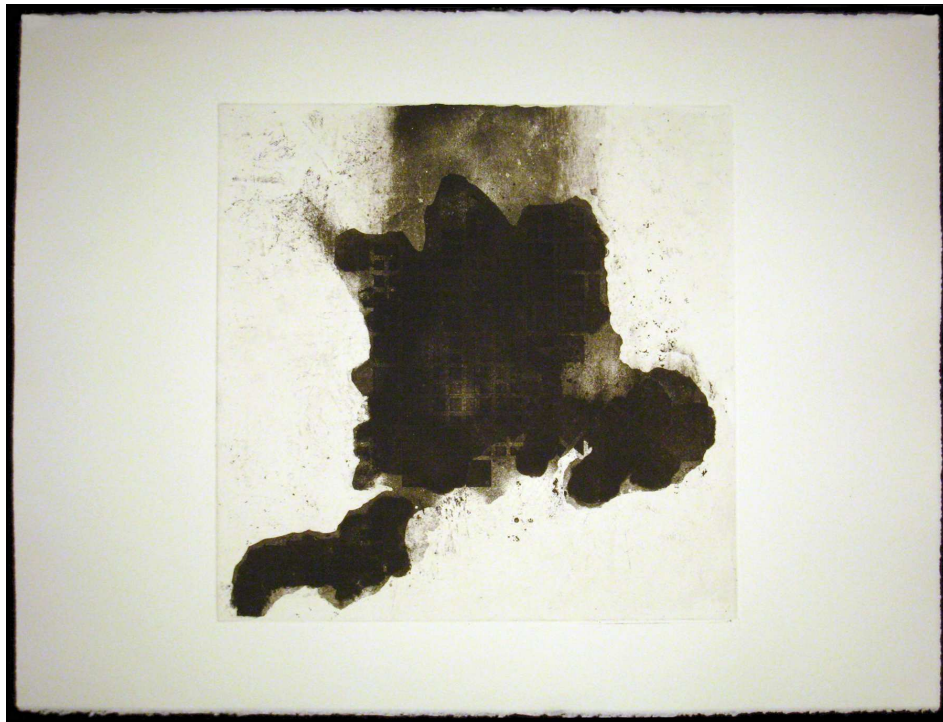


Fig. 1.5 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #6* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

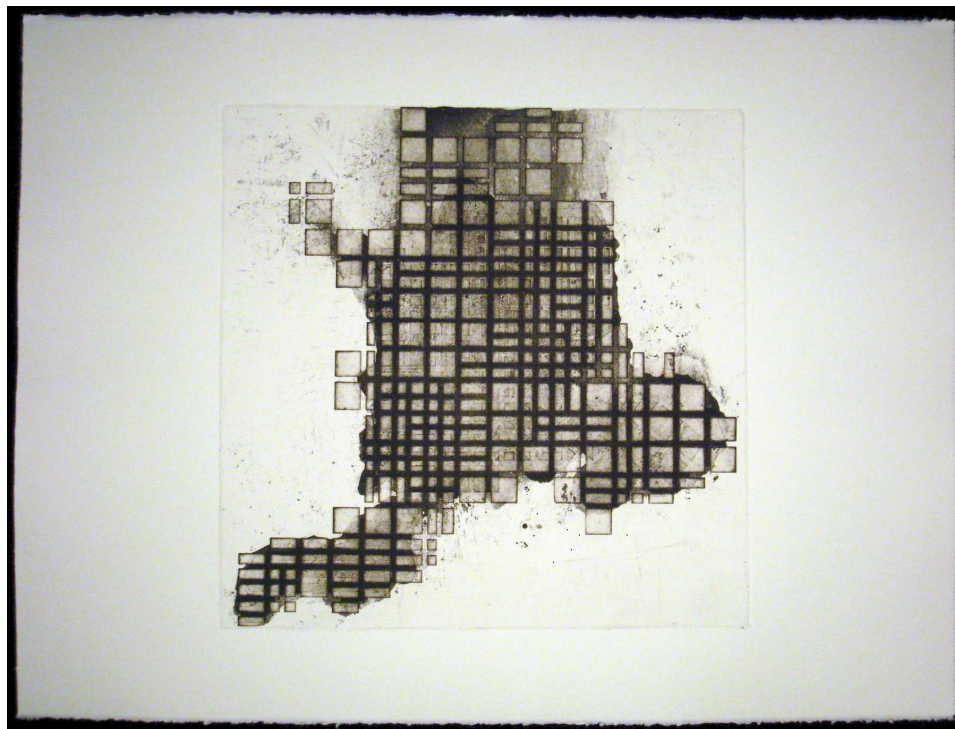


Fig. 1.6 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #7* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

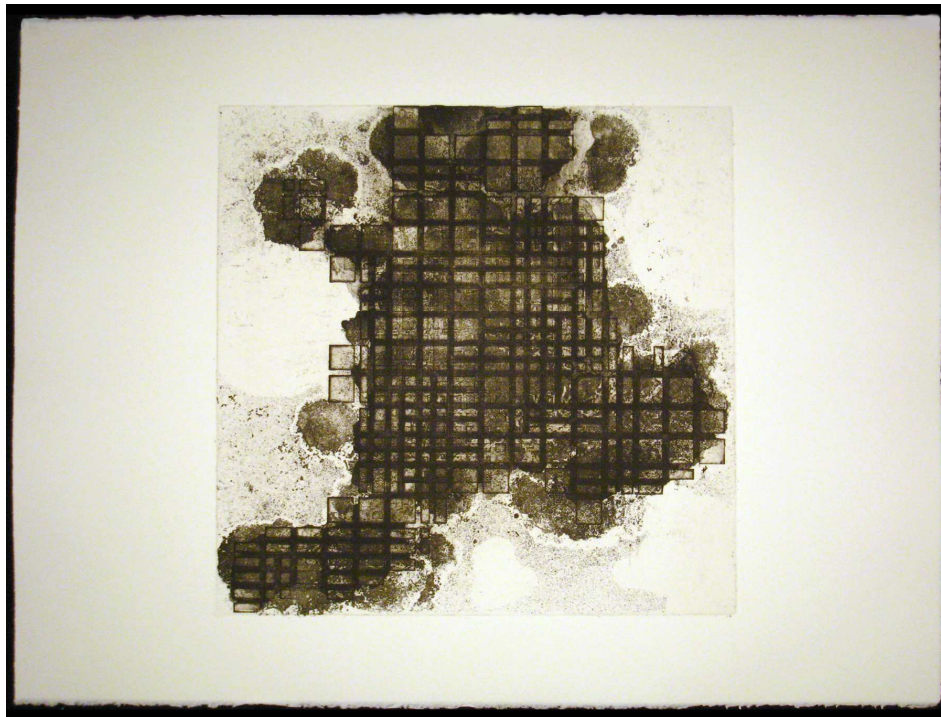


Fig. 1.7 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #8* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

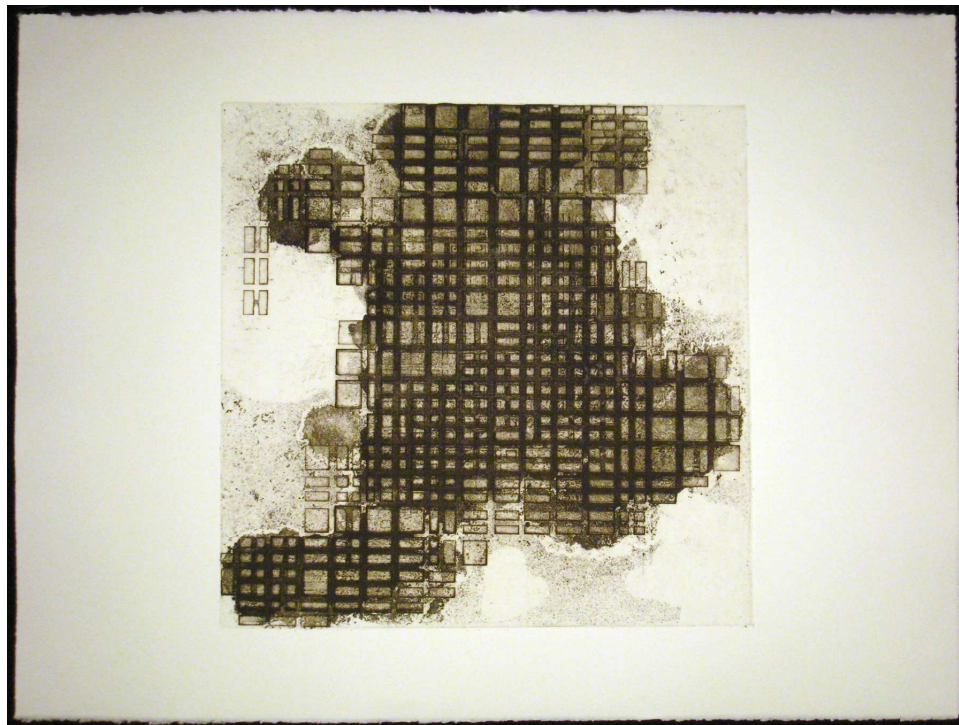


Fig. 1.8 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #9* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

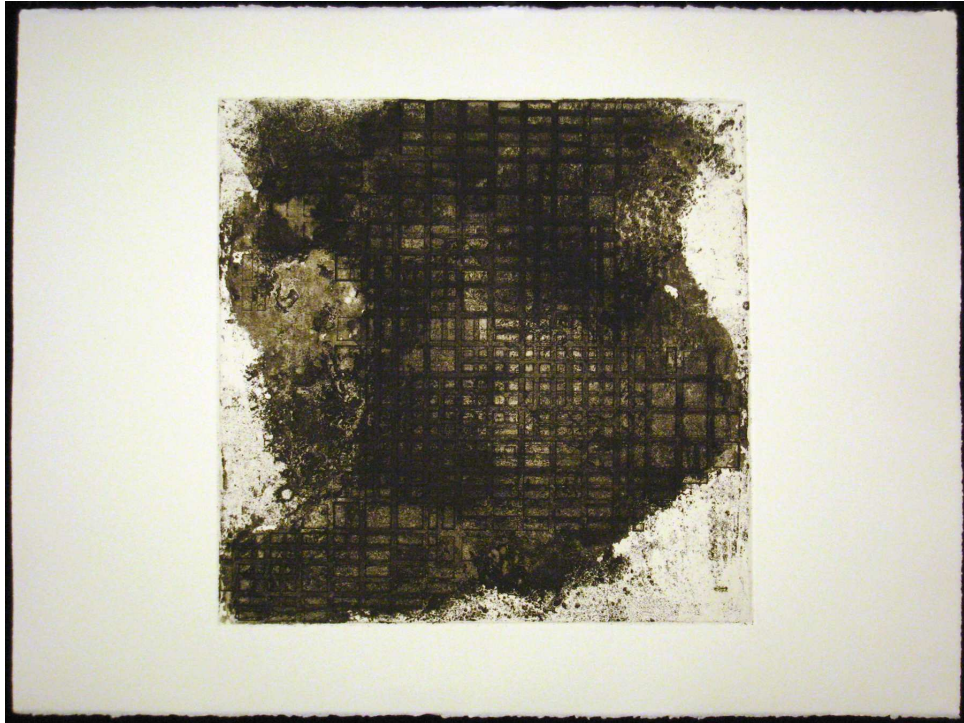


Fig. 1.9 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #10* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

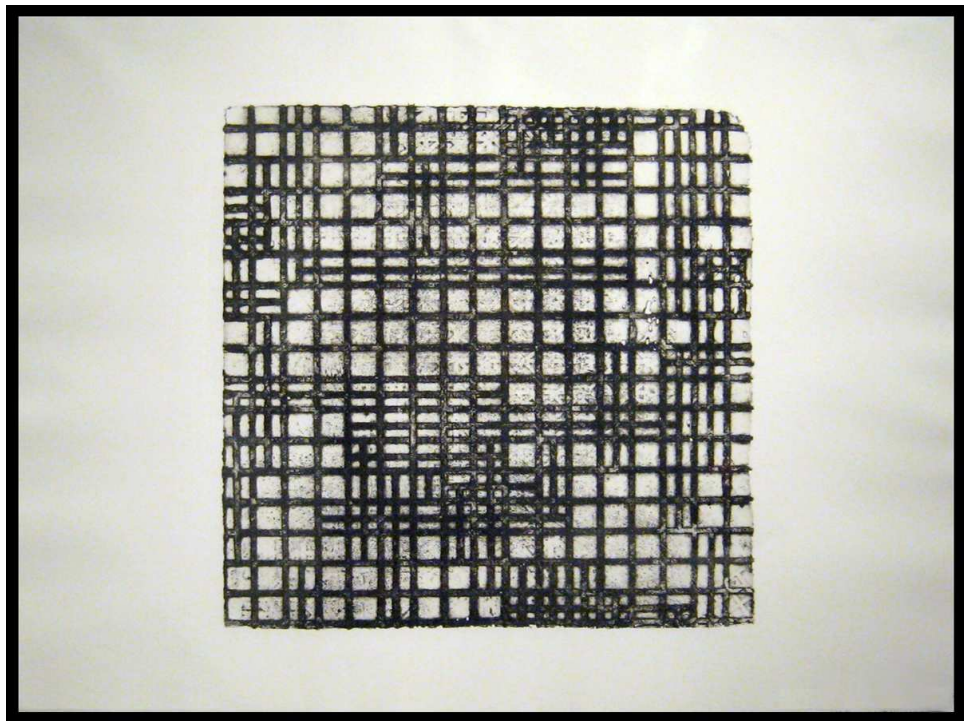


Fig. 1.10 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #13* (2007)
Etching, 22 1/4" x 30"

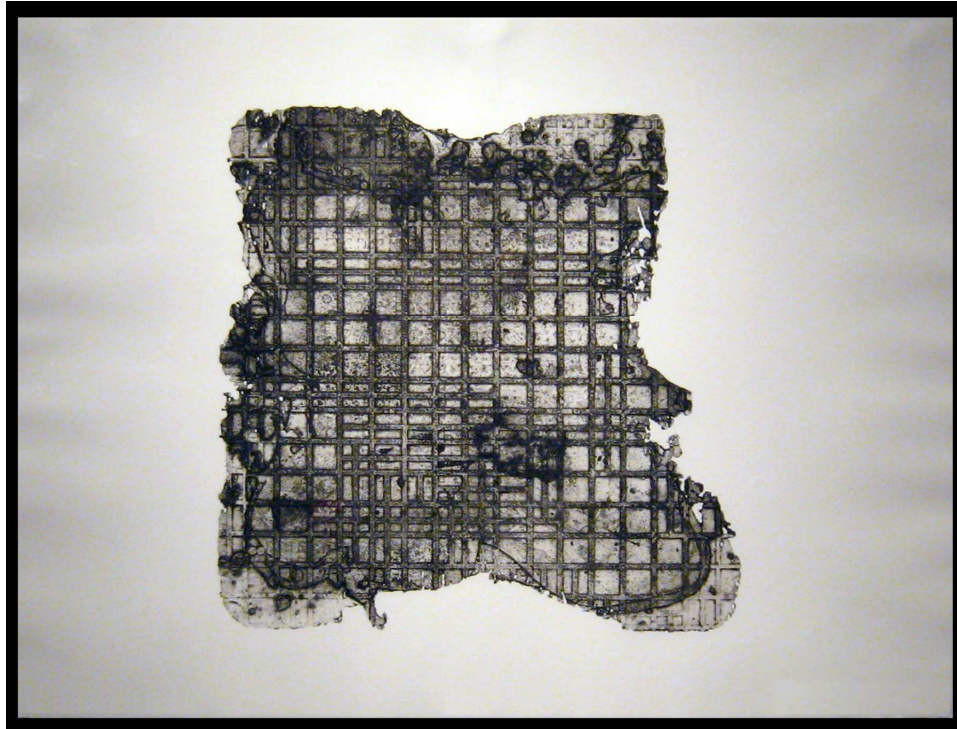


Fig. 1.11 *Spreading: Construction and Deconstruction, #14* (2007)
Etching, 22 ¼" x 30"

Possibilities of Transferal: Migration (Fig. 1.12)

The simultaneous operation of the piece, *Possibilities of Transferal: Migration*, as both microscopic and macroscopic is clearly seen in the recognizable depiction of a map that describes a landscape filled with bacteria. The red masses function as an anomaly in the cellular photograph, but also as a density of human population, showing a direct relationship between the sprawl of a city and the spread of a disease, both harmful. The concept driving this piece specifically addresses how spreading can occur in multiple ways.

The association given to a specific color is critical in this work. Red is a strong emotive color relating to anger, passion, and it references the body. By using red for the flock of birds and the concentrated areas of population, a connection is

made between the two. Multiple interpretations are extracted, one being that the lower area with the flock is a blown-up view of the red above, possibly a rash because of the flesh tone, or conveys a movement or migration, as in the migration of a disease.



Fig. 1.12 *Possibilities of Transferal: Migration* (2006)
Lithography and Silkscreen, 22 1/2" x 30 1/4"

The map of roads, both main arteries and small veins, suggest how to travel through the landscape, spread information, and operate as a carrier. The idea of a carrier relates to the spread of disease and the origination of a strain. The attention of the media to diseases carried by birds, such as the Avian Bird Flu and the West Nile Virus, their spread and threat to human populations, influences this piece. It functions as a depiction of spreading on microscopic and macroscopic levels,

through carriers such as humans, birds, and the landscape. All serve as the possible source of infection and infestation, and all are present in our everyday lives.

Contained Growth? (Fig. 1.13)

This piece, *Contained Growth?*, is a clear reference to sources of architecture by simultaneously depicting a large and small environment. By combining multiple city skylines into a square, an enclosure is formed that also serves as an architectural



Fig. 1.13 *Contained Growth?* (2007)
Lithography and Silkscreen, 20" x 20"

layout. The interior space shows organic forms that are smooth and conforming to spatial regulations. However, movement and life is seen in the color draining from the top and the escape of a small cellular form. Once outside of the confinement of the city or the architectural enclosure, it breaks out of its smooth exterior shell and forms a new shape. The shape of the escapee references cancer cells and underwater contact mines from World War II. This piece shows that an attempt to contain or control can only last so long before something slips through or happens that is unexpected, something that cannot be controlled.

PROCESS

The process of printmaking and creating an image forms a direct correlation to my concept of creating a structure or planned system. The processes either require structure through technical steps or less structure by using low-tech procedures. Lithography requires a formulaic process to be followed if success of an editionable print is desired. The layers of a print are executed and planned out in advance. Through the use of a key matrix, each run is registered to the previous layer. The printing of one on top of the other shows a progression and development of the image over time. I connect this progression to the passage of time and the desire to control development and growth as a concept in the imagery.

The specific processes of lithography, intaglio, silkscreen and relief are closely linked to the use of hand-drawn elements and the hand of the artist. The presence of the artist's hand allows the work to be about my individual attempt to structure and control aspects of the landscape, both micro and macroscopic. The processes of printmaking can easily be used in combination with one another. Hand drawn elements can be juxtaposed on photographic elements, creating a formal tension, and referencing graphic media sources. When combining lithography and silkscreen, the two processes give a surface texture to the paper, providing contrast. Transparent inks can be used to create more colors through layering, and also places one image on top of the other. This facilitates how I reference the passage of time through evolution or progression and how cities build on top of themselves. The use of the printmaking process is parallel to my concepts of control or lack there of.

INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

Terry Winters, known for his paintings, drawings, and prints, influences my ideas relating to structure, nature, and forms operating as both micro and macroscopic. He references both organic sources and geometric forms. His work from the late eighties and into the early nineties is the most influential to my body of work and concepts. One series, *Set Diagrams* (2000-02), Winters approached as a “‘hysterical investigation’ of nature, believing that natural biological processes are unpredictable.” Through his process that was also unpredictable, he investigated very controlled elements, such as plotted spheres, charts, and graphs, which “dissolve underneath chaotic lines and pointing arrows . . . *Set Diagrams* uses the abstraction of painting to explore the chaotic patterns within nature, abstractly mapping complex, fundamental systems of human life.”⁴

The work of Kiki Smith influences my work through her ideas revolving around mortality and death, the frailty of a human life, yet enduring spirit of the human race. Death (of close family and friends) is a driving force in her work. Her work creates a tense relationship between forms and uncertainty in the viewer. She exhibits the vulnerability and fragility in a person, as in the uncontrollable release of bodily fluids. The constant reminder of our own mortality is a fear or unknown that we have no control over, and her use of this concept is influential to my ideas and work.

⁴ Broad Art Foundation,
<http://www.boadartfoundation.org/collection/winters.html>

Julia Mehretu and Nicola Lopez influence my work and concepts through the use of similar visual elements and concepts. Both use formal elements relating to urban life and structure that are compared to the depiction of chaos and uncontrollable events. Mehretu's work is influenced by the perceived acceptance of chaotic and catastrophic events that have become a predictable occurrence in the urban landscape. Her depiction of the urban landscape is chaotic, cramped, geometric, scary, and thrilling. She references architecture and maps, giving a sense of order to the disorder. Lopez is also influenced by the urban landscape and an attempt to create a system of order out of an overload of information and commotion. Her work displays the tension between order and disorder by creating installed landscapes that struggle against themselves, which speaks directly to the concepts that influence my work.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this body of work is the expression of how I am affected by my surroundings and offers an examination of the relationship between man and nature. My perception of human impact on the environment creates an uncertainty and anxiousness about the uncontrollable. By communicating a tension between the organic and structured elements, an ominous presence or foreboding is conveyed to an audience through a sense of chaos and expansion, or confinement and claustrophobia. I use uncontrollable microscopic and macroscopic organic elements as a metaphor for the uncontrollable changes in life, the passage of time, and death. Geometric grids and architectural structures are representative of man's methods to control nature. The printmaking process itself becomes a representation of control or lack of control. I show the unending struggle of organic versus structure and the desire to control the uncontrollable.