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SHADE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Jonathan Bolton
April 2023

Accepted by:
Professor Kathleen Thum, Committee Chair
Professor Todd McDonald
Dr. Beth Lauritis

ABSTRACT

SHADE is an exhibition of graphite pencil drawings that place viewers on the precarious edge of meaning. Techniques of representational drawing such as form and perspective vaguely allude to latent, traceable narratives, then destabilize the viewer's search with confounding two-dimensional spaces, and loosely defined forms. Small, mundane scenes such as campsites, diners, and bars, are enveloped or obscured by dense, graphite expanses of skin-like surfaces. These elements destabilize viewers' convenient categorizations of darkness, fog, or space. The identifiable scenes have reduced contexts: facial expressions, interior décor, and landscape features. These are obscured or withheld to reduce visual justifications for the viewers' conferred meanings. This instability gives viewers the problem of negotiating ambiguous meanings and ultimately highlights the malleability of our perceptive experience.

The work is informed by critical analyses of my representational drawing practice and underpinned by absurdist, phenomenological, and existentialist theories regarding human quests for latent or universal meanings. Through my process, I wrestle with how traditions of representational drawing can limit the viewer's range of experiences with the work. I explore how the embodied process of mark-making with pencil and paper affects viewers' rationale of the images. I make the distinctions between perceiving visuals of an image versus judging them. I elaborate on how the space and material of the drawings evoke qualities of the sublime. Lastly, I elaborate on how ambiguity reduces the speed in which viewers can confer meaning, while still holding open a door for new associations, memory projections, and individual meanings.

DEDICATION

To Kristen for your years of commitment and support and to those future kiddos.

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To Kathleen for helping me see these foggy things clearly.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE.....	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. SHADOWS WITH SKIN.....	3
III. PLACE AND TIME	7
IV. AGAINST LIFE DRAWING.....	9
Against Interpretation.....	10
V. DRAWING AS PERCEPTION	13
Drawing Attention	14
Social Haze	16
Designation Series	18
VI. THE SUBLIME.....	20
Infinity and Vastness	23
VII. VISUAL LANGUAGE OF AMBIGUITY	25
VIII. CONCLUSION	27
FIGURES	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	46

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	<i>Resort</i>	3, 4, 5, 7, 14, 15, 16
2	Toba Khedoori, <i>Untitled (park benches)</i>	4
3	<i>Resort</i> , Installation View	5
4	<i>Conciliate</i> , detail.....	5
5	<i>Beacon 426</i>	5, 7, 14
6	Edward Hopper, <i>Nighthawks</i>	7
7	<i>Conciliate</i>	9, 11, 14, 15
8	<i>Sketch for Conciliate</i>	9
9	Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner, <i>Zöllner Illusion</i>	13
10	<i>Engager, Engaging</i>	15, 17, 24
11	Jennifer Packer, <i>Untitled</i>	17
12	<i>Sounds like you have a problem with Christmas</i>	18
13	<i>Don't know how you can be a business</i>	18
14	<i>Recess Fields</i>	14, 15, 20, 21, 23
15	J. M. W. Turner, <i>The Slave Ship</i>	21
16	Tacita Dean, <i>Chère petite soeur (Dear Little Sister)</i> , left panel.....	21
17	<i>A Little Lite Basketball</i>	24, 25
18	Olga Chernysheva, <i>Person protected by a smoke</i>	24

INTRODUCTION

In our image-saturated epoch of American culture, we are pressured to confer meaning at the speed of thumbs swiping across a screen. We have grown incredibly skilled at adding minimal phenomena together, ascribing a meaning and moving on without considering lost, nuanced contexts. We have exercised a muscle of disregard—one that makes rapid, reactionary assessments based on familiarity and convenient categorizations of context. In this exercise, we affect our abilities to uncover wells of nuanced, alternate meanings.

This has pressed me to make a body of work that relaxes this muscle of dismissal. Through line, value, and material accessibility, I interrogate the stability of our conferred meanings by withholding or making certain contexts unrecognizable. Through material, I give these unrecognizable contexts a greater presence over what little phenomena we can affirm. In this body of work, this greater presence manifests as expansive fields of graphite marks. These fields disrupt or isolate mundane scenes such as bars, diners, and social situations, acting as metaphors for actions of dismissal and the totality of what exceeds the thresholds of our curated perceptive experiences.

In this text, I will remark how my extensive use of graphite destabilizes rational interpretations of narrative and space. I will discuss how the presence of the expansive, skin-like darkness creates a tension between itself and the smaller, legible scenes it encompasses. I will discuss how the visuals of these drawings were informed by analyses of my representational drawing practice. I will also elaborate on how my work's refusal of stable meaning conjures concepts of absurdity, solipsism, and the sublime. Lastly, I

will discuss how the ambiguity of the images can create a space to confer and uncover new meanings.

CHAPTER ONE
SHADOWS WITH SKIN

To reduce the speed in which viewers can confer meaning, the graphite pencil drawings in *SHADE* exploit our pliable grasp of two-dimensional space. *Resort* (Fig. 1) depicts a small campsite located in an abundant darkness. However, the would-be absence of light has been delineated and constructed with a meticulous application of linear hatching. By constructing the darkness with graphite pencil, a skin-like quality begins to form by the interwoven layers of linework. Graphite pencil's translucency also results in frequent spots of accumulated material. With only a couple of erasure marks and a few small drops in value, these build-ups appear to the viewer as blemishes on the skin-like surface. The work also shows significant drops in value on either side of the campsite, creating an uncomfortable relief from the sink-like surface—an exaggeration of a scene that is being literally carved out of its surroundings. This versatility of graphite makes it an effective tool for disrupting our rationalization of two-dimensional space.

On closer inspection of the work, the delineated edges of the gray mass and its skin-like surface combine to transform the once comfortable scene of respite into a dramatic scene situated within an uncanny darkness. Many of the drawings in *SHADE* use this uncanny darkness to provide a substantial presence to what would otherwise be considered an absence. This creates a tension for a viewer's rapid or stable determination of darkness, forcing them to repeatedly question the darkness' role as a framing device for the scene's mood or content.

The work also subjects the viewer to considerable narrative ambiguity. *Resort* derives its imagery from a family camping trip. However, the scene is isolated with largely reduced contexts. There are no trees and only one chair to isolate the viewer with conflicting narrative implications. Are we meant to enter the site? Have we stumbled on someone else's site by accident? Was it not an accident? It's very low to the ground. Maybe it's the entrance of a bunker to survive some apocalypse. Maybe it's just some kid's fort in a backyard somewhere.

An artist that effectively wields isolation to produce narrative ambiguity is Toba Khedoori. Her large, often untitled drawings depict mundane objects in large, empty spaces. In her work, *Untitled (park benches)* (1997) (Fig. 2), viewers are given two sets of benches with only an implied horizon line to connect them. However, due to the lack of context, viewers are left wondering why these objects are separated from their environments; they are left to wonder whether "some crime or special event has occurred."¹ Like Khedoori's work, the isolated site in *Resort* permits a flux of implied narratives. However, it holds a heightened sense of drama, emphasized by its tenebrous light and proscenium shape. While my original sketch, full of additional chairs, coolers, etc., would dissolve some of its narrative ambiguity, the lack of context and dramatic isolation allows viewers to confer a range of meanings provoked by feelings of nostalgia or even a disturbing voyeurism.

Absurdity

¹ "Toba Khedoori-BIO, " Artist Bio. *The Broad*. <https://www.thebroad.org/art/toba-khedoori>.

Drawings like *Resort* and *Beacon 426 (Ch 2)* also highlight my use of material and shape to render the works absurd. As a concept defined by Albert Camus, absurdity is “born of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”² This need he refers to is the human need to uncover meaning in an indifferent universe. However, Camus remarks such *a priori* meanings are unobtainable by reason or mere sensation—or in the case of a two-dimensional drawing, by simply looking. My drawings refuse reason by denying depictions of space common to traditions of representational art.

In *Resort*, the edges of the graphite wall delineate a night sky that should reasonably, in a traditional window-esque picture plane, extend far beyond the border. Instead, I maintain the rectangle of the picture plane, only to disrupt its figure/ground relationships with curved and dissipating edges—a quality heightened by the lack of frame (Fig. 3). The moments of negative space turn the vibrating mesh of lost context into a physical mass that actively pushes against the limits of the picture plane.

As mentioned previously, the uncanny darkness is comprised of an expanse of meticulous linear hatching. The application of the material is also absurd. As viewers approach the work, the wide accessibility of pencil and paper make them highly aware of the painstaking construction of darkness. (Fig. 4) They are left to wonder why some other, more timely material was not used. Ultimately, I use this absurdity to make the drawings humorous; I instill each work with an inside joke at the viewer’s expense.

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Untitled States: Penguin Random House LLC), 1955. 28.

Even Camus jokes: “that universal reason, that determinism, those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh.”³ As viewers begin to rationalize my constructed world through hints of linear and atmospheric perspective, the fleshy and laborious mark-making becomes a prank on the viewer’s sense of two-dimensional space. While the linework certainly gives presence to the fields of lost context, I also build the surface with graphite pencil simply because it may be perceived as ridiculous to do so. This joke I play on the viewer’s rationale stems from my love of weird fiction—a genre that aims to poke fun at humanity’s limited knowledge of the workings of the universe. In these stories, humans seek out answers to the universe, only to receive absurd responses in the form of interdimensional swine-faced things and tentacle-faced horrors.

³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21.

CHAPTER TWO

PLACE AND TIME

The drawings in *SHADE* also disrupt stable interpretations of meaning through expectations of mundane places. This idea is most evident in *Beacon 436* (Fig. 5). Unlike other works in the exhibition, the subject is more identifiable. The awnings, the compact architecture, the way interior lights hang from the ceiling and shine through the fog: each of these elements denote a definitive image of a diner in the dead of night. While the campsite in *Resort* could exist in a more global context, the vernacular of the diner gives this work very American connotations.

Particularly within my region, this work could be quickly associated with the romanticized themes and visuals of Edward Hopper's famous work, *Nighthawks* (Fig. 6)—the prevalent loneliness in the late-night respite from modern-American life, and its luminous windows that carve the isolated scene from the unspecified dark exterior. However, thanks to the internet and social media, the American diner has developed a wild range of associations. At a fundamental level, it may be a place for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; but, for plenty of people it is just as commonly seen as a place to sober up. Also, thanks to globally connected apps like Tik-Tok, it's just as notable as a fight club. With the diner's ever-growing range of associations, placing the viewer at a far distance leaves them to project and anticipate whatever activities might be happening inside—an anticipation that organically changes with each new video, hashtag, or late-night escapade.

Overall, the content situates the work in practices of contemporary drawing as a way of “playing with notions of private histories and exploring overlooked or

misunderstood aspects of one's own culture or history."⁴ It exploits a mode of interpreting meaning. Our media, nostalgia, rituals, and regional histories directly influence what objects, groups, or places may signify. In each drawing in *SHADE*, I poke fun at my own nostalgia for late-night diners, or romanticized ideas of the bar as a brooding ground by disrupting their spatial contexts and stationing myself and viewers at a distance. The resulting images suggest that the meanings we give to our everyday places are just as susceptible to recontextualization as more nuanced or complex concepts. In making this work, I bring a critical eye to acts of perception and interpretation hosted by some of our everyday places.

⁴ Emma Dexter, "Introduction." *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, New York, (NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005), 9.

CHAPTER THREE

AGAINST LIFE DRAWING

Conciliate (Fig. 7), like many of the works in *SHADE* began as an on-site sketch from direct observation. As a general goal of life drawing exercises, I am challenged to describe what I see with the time I have. Every mark on the page is an answer to that challenge – this many figures, a tall someone, a shiny something: these make up some of the general phenomena I use to demarcate the scene. However, in the process of transmuting marks into a representation of an experience, I fill gaps with quickly-noted body gestures, facial expressions, or architecture—or in ironic terms, record static inferences based on rapid observations.

Because this body of work utilizes representational drawing techniques to highlight how malleable our perceptive experience can be, the act of drawing from observation poses an interesting problem. John Berger remarks that when a viewer experiences a drawing, more than a painting or sculpture, “he identifies himself with the artist, using the images to gain the conscious experience of seeing as though through the artist’s own eyes.”⁵ This is especially true when a viewer is confronted with a life drawing full of representational techniques like light logic and spatial perspective. These techniques create an expectation that viewers should be able to uncover a traceable meaning that will allow them to understand the subject as I experienced it.

⁵ John Berger, *Berger on Drawing*, (Cork, Ireland: Occasional Press, 2005). 4.

My original sketch for *Conciliate* (Fig. 8) shows a patient mother, handling four restless children in a place with typical restaurant décor. However, those observations: patient mother, restless children, typical décor—are not phenomena of an instantaneous perceived reality, but representations of an inferred reality temporally separate from my overall experience and interpretations. To make drawings that reduce the speed and stability of viewer interpretation, I turned to authors like Susan Sontag, John Berger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to criticize and understand my own.

Against Interpretation

In Susan Sontag's essay, *Against Interpretation*, she criticizes the culturally perpetuated emphasis of finding meaning in artwork. She states “interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value... Interpretation itself must be evaluated within a historical view of consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, transvaluating, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling.”⁶ Sontag refers to a volatility of interpretation—that without critical attention, can be helpful or harmful. This volatility underpins my goal to analyze my observational drawing practice through a filter of skepticism so that viewers of the final work may endure this volatility themselves.

Raised in a region that holds skillful mimesis as the primary value of an artwork and therefore the container of its meaning, I consider how such an idea introduced a rigidity to the way I consider representational drawing. For a long time, the phenomena I recorded

⁶ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. (New York, NY: Picador), 1966. 7.

in my sketchbook (or even in long-form life drawings) – gestures, smells, sounds – were only ingredients added together to ‘capture’ a scene. For the viewer hunting for meaning, this capture shows itself as a stable, essential meaning. However, the mere act of drawing negates the possibility of ascertaining a singular, essential quality. John Berger remarks that a drawing does not mark “the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become.”⁷ This simply refers to the fact that we are beings always in flux. In the beginnings of a life sketch, my inferences on mood, tone, or temporality, even my capacity to trace them, have in some way changed by the end. When viewers infer meaning from a life drawing and assume it is a depiction of an ultimate reality, they cast me as someone capable of freezing time or tuning in to some ultimate insight on the subject. The most they have with any level of certainty is a meaning based on a subjective representation.⁸

This idea also led me to consider at what stage in the life-drawing process the scene’s meaning becomes established for myself—the stage where I move beyond the process of recording raw phenomena and begin to steer the drawing towards a particular mood, tone or narrative. To make this body of work, I paid close attention to the early stages of the demarcation process to recognize the moments when the meaning becomes known to me. In *Conciliate*, for example, I recognize the moment I draw a mother’s eyes as tired, the work inches toward being *about* that observation.

For nearly all the drawings in *SHADE*) I noted and sketched multitudes of my reactionary interpretations so that I may know which elements to reduce in the final work.

⁷ Berger, *Berger on Drawing*, 3.

⁸ Specifically refers to conducting a life sketch, not a long-form drawing from observation.

As the small, determinable scenes are reconstructed from the sketches, as I apply each layer of graphite hatching, I incrementally withhold information from the viewer. In *Conciliate* I distorted or removed visuals like *tired eyes*, *aggressive gestures*, *bored patrons*—things that would traditionally rationalize how the passing viewer should interpret the tone, narrative, or meaning of the scene. This act of withholding information from the viewer at each stage of the drawing process, allows me to critique the speed at which I confer my own meanings. Simultaneously, it gives viewers the room to discover meanings that fluctuate as their initial inferred narratives are not based on fully determinable gestures, atmospheres, or space. Sontag insists that the hunt for latent meaning is what “takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted.” She remarks that our culture of material plenitude dulls our senses, and that we must recover them by cutting back on the content so we can “see the thing at all.”⁹ Ironically, Sontag makes these observations before the invention of the internet. Our navigations of the increasingly complex, image-saturated digital landscape make it more imperative to bring a critical eye to our perceptions of images and our judgment of their meanings. In my work, the removal of easily accessible guides like ‘tired’ eyes, viewers are forced to slow down the meaning-infusion process.

⁹ Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 13-14.

CHAPTER FOUR

DRAWING AS PERCEPTION

To better understand how the works in *SHADE* use representational drawing techniques to hinder meaning, it also became necessary to analyze the relationship between observational drawing and perception through a phenomenological lens. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's book *Phenomenology of Perception*, he refers to phenomenology as a philosophy that "does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity."¹⁰ He insists that a phenomenological look at perception allows us to better understand the embodied ways we process raw, sensory information before defining the perceived world by association, memories, and judgments.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is crucial a distinction is made between genuine perception and judgement. In a simple explanation he remarks that, "Judgment, in [a] very general and quite formal sense explains perception."¹¹ He cites Zöllner's optical illusion as an example of this separation (Fig. 9). In short, we *perceive* the long, primary lines as converging. Upon reflection on the information, we *judge* that they are in fact parallel, that the diagonal lines falsified our perception of the phenomena. Whether measurably true, we perceive the primary lines as converging, that is what is perceived. Perception is separate from judgment as it includes the perceiving human in its explanation of an

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Translated by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd (New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1962), vii

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, 36.

experience. Judgment (empirically speaking) objectifies and attempts to terminate an experience.

In drawings like *Resort*, *Beacon 426*, and *Recess Fields*, I don't withhold information from the viewer with hopes it will somehow dissolve judgment. However, the lack of contexts and obscured information destabilizes viewers' judgment. For example, in *Conciliate*, without tile floors, menus on the table, figures of cooks in uniforms, etc., we cannot objectify the scene as simply being one of a distinct diner with a specific setting, time of day, or narrative. We perceive a few illuminated figures, a bit of spatial recession, lightbulbs, and a vast, indeterminable context. In *Beacon 426*, the diner is apparent, but we cannot perceive the activity inside; we only perceive what Merleau-Ponty calls a "horizon," or simply a collection of could-be meanings. In short, when I disrupt facial expressions, remove details of environments, and embed them within this field of lost context, I am engaging in an act of phenomenological reduction to give viewers an image that slowly opens the door for their initial meanings without convenient contexts to justify them.

Drawing Attention

My drawings also confront viewers with indeterminate contexts. As I mention in the introduction, our muscle of dismissal overlooks nuanced contexts by conveniently categorizing them. For any meanings of my drawings to be stabilized, certain contexts would have to be easily categorized or entirely ignorable. For example, ignoring the skin-like quality of the darkness would be the only way for viewers to define it as simply an absence of light, which would drastically limit the range of meanings the image can

produce. Merleau-Ponty proposes that a critical look at perception actualizes this lost context and shows the limits of attention. In what he calls our perceptual field, we have the information we can perceive (see, smell, hear, touch); but we also have a ‘sense’ of what lies beyond our field (or what is literally behind our back). Whether or not we give something directed attention, we can sense for example, the legs under a table even though I cannot see them or even remember what they look like. Therefore, he says, “we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon.”¹²

As a theoretical framework, this indeterminacy parallels the function of the vast expanse of graphite marks. *Resort*’s darkness conceals all other expected contexts. *Conciliate* places the small illuminated tablescape in a crater of dense skin-like texture. *Recess Fields* (Ch 5), even with its highly theatrical isolated cones of light, is situated in a massive form of hazy graphite. These drawings use this disruptive, material field of graphite to give a vastly greater presence to the lost context, ultimately disrupting the viewer’s ability to cater their viewing experience to decode the recognizable scenes. This aims to make the indeterminable a ‘positive phenomenon’ – to bring it into the viewer’s perception of the images as they proceed to interpret its meaning. This idea derives from my discomfort with the ‘muscle of dismissal.’ In an image, when we determine our meanings without considering the presence of lost, nuanced contexts, we simply lose out on potential meanings. However, the next chapter discusses drawings that explore how this dismissal of context affects bleeds into our attention at a social level.

Social Haze

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 6.

Engager, Engaging (Fig. 10) has a cheeky title denoting the bare-bones phenomena of the primary figure. In the drawing we see faceless figures, delineated by multitudes of arms and echoes of obscured elements. Unlike the darkness or fog in works like *Resort*, the fog does not only envelop the scene, but plays an active role in distorting it. Only a few objects manage to break through the distortion field—two prominent chairs that separate the viewer from any vicarious participation in the scene’s activity. Like the other works in *SHADE*, we only have enough information to begin unpacking its mystery: arms, chairs, a table, but we cannot fully understand what is happening. Are the figures arguing, telling stories, or engaging in some Jim-Carrey-level excitement? There’s only enough information to insist on some sort of discussion or activity. However, keeping with our discussion about judgment and attention, the viewer sees the back of the figures, separated by chairs, and looks through the haze of graphite. These levels of separation place the viewer on the precipice of the scene as a participant in a back-and-forth role as the dismiss-er and the dismissed.

The bouquet of flailing arms is a close reference to a scene in Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel, *Nausea*. The narrator, intensely preoccupied by a surging existential crisis, fails to calibrate his ontological lens. This causes him to experience surreal manifestations as the lines between subjects and objects are blurred. In one scene he remarks, “On the right, they are playing cards...I did not see them when I came in; I simply sensed there was a warm packet...with some pairs of arms waving about.”¹³ Overly distracted by his existential tension, he loses his ability to see people as anything more than objects to

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (UK: Penguin Books), 1963. 23.

avoid while navigating a space. This could be seen as an example of the narrator's perceptual solipsism.

In Sartre's seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre warns that the solipsist holds an unjustified affirmation of ontological solitude, which only means to say, "outside myself, nothing exists." In this passage, Sartre remarks that the solipsist embodies a person who refuses to sufficiently consider the existence of the Other; and that in their dismissive blur, the solipsist designates even other people as indeterminate "mental entities" to avoid while navigating a space (as one would with objects like chairs or tables).¹⁴ My work, *Engager, Engaging*, uses the fog and overlapping forms to create one of these uncanny 'mental entities.' The fog then becomes a metaphor for the solipsists disregard for people's individuality, or all other context beyond their demarcated field of experience.

New York artist Jennifer Packer also makes use of dissolving images and figures. While she is best known for her large-scale paintings depicting figures at rest in harsh monochrome environments, her drawings portray figures in transient states. One of the works in the Whitney Museum's 2022 Exhibition, *The Eye Is Not Satisfied with Seeing*, an untitled drawing from 2014 (Fig. 11), shows two figures dissolving in some areas and destabilizing in others. Packer's practice takes part in drawing's unmatched ability to make ontological statements about humans that deserve to be seen. Her transient figures tackle the uncomfortable shift of visibility and invisibility given to African Americans in

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond. Originally published 1943. Republished (Great Britain: Routledge UK), 2018. 317.

the history of portraiture. In the exhibition statement for *The Eye Is Not Satisfied with Seeing*, Packer remarks that her desire to work from life is entirely political, saying “We belong here. We deserve to be seen and acknowledged in real time. We deserve to be heard and to be imaged with shameless generosity and accuracy.”¹⁵ Unlike the figures in Packer’s drawing, the figures in *Engager, Engaging* are non-confrontational and engaged in their everyday activities. They do not demand to be seen by the viewer; nor do they show any indication of returning the viewer’s gaze. The fog obscures the figures from the viewer, insisting that this solipsist field of dismissal not only casts a problematic veil over the perception of others, but blatantly limits any nuanced information that could be gained. This drawing places the viewer on the uncomfortable, precarious edge of this event.

Designation Series

This exhibition also contains two diptychs from an ongoing body of work. Each is titled with a sentence spoken by one of the figures in the image. One is titled *Sounds like you have a problem with Christmas* (Fig. 12) and the other, *Don’t know how you can be a business* (Fig. 13). For simplicity, I will only refer the latter in this text and only as *Business*.

Viewers will first note the scale and that the works are framed. Unlike the other works in the show that use vast spaces to complicate small mundane scenes, the works in this series are constructed from memory, each from an interaction I directly observed.

¹⁵ Jennifer Packer, “The Eye Is Not Satisfied with Seeing” Exhibition Statement. <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/jennifer-packer>.

The drastically reduced scale gives me relative real estate to reconstruct these snapshots of my experience. Meanwhile the frame merely reduces the importance of confounding the viewer's sense of two-dimensional space. Each work in the series uses the gray fog to visualize a mutual dismissal in a social exchange.

Spanning from a 15-year career in food service, I have an enduring frustration with dogmatic assessments in customer-employee interactions; which were only intensified by the work-force strain prompted by Covid 19. For example, *Business* is informed by a customer attempting to use a hundred-dollar bill, an employee correctly explaining they could not take it, and the frustrated customer scolding the employee with a raised voice exclaiming he did not know “how they can be a business and not take cash.”

The use of the diptych visualizes how both the employee and the customer's dismissal shrouds the other. The right square shows illuminated eyebrows, referring to the customer's dramatic emphasis on communicating their anger. We also see the employee heavily embedded in darkness, obscured by the customer's refusal to note that they are yelling at a kid with no say-so in the protocols they follow. In the left square, the aggravated customer is completely shrouded in darkness; denoting that this is an exchange of dismissal. While some might say it's the only way to stay sane in a service job, it could be said that it conversely overlooks the speed in which we're willing to cast judgement despite having so little information. The drawings reduce this brief little moment into a dramatic visualization of how we allocate our attention.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUBLIME

Recess Fields (Fig. 14) could be seen as a conglomerate of all of the exhibition's strategies for destabilizing interpretation: the reduction in context, ambiguous identities of familiar places, material plentitude of the darkness, and disrupted forms. However, I am going to use this work to discuss how my drawings conjure aspects of the sublime.

In an introduction on the contemporary sublime, artist and author Simon Morley remarks that artists of the sublime have continued to expand beyond the traditional emphasis on the awe of nature or chasing religious experiences. Morley remarks that various thinkers and artists uncover sublime themes of incalculable excessiveness, destabilization through modern life, technology, and other manmade forces. However, he notes that all explorations into the sublime are still traceable to early concepts outlined by early authors like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, namely their concepts of human inadequacy, and terror. Morley attempts to ground the sublime as an “encounter with all that exceeds our comprehension...[and that it is what] takes hold of us when reason falters and certainties begin to crumble.”¹⁶ This includes encounters with obscurity, vastness, and infinity.

Edmund Burke describes obscurity as a necessity for terror, as it removes our ability to know where we fully stand in relation to danger.¹⁷ Immanuel Kant later

¹⁶ Simon Morley, “Introduction/The Contemporary Sublime,” *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Edited by Simon Morley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 2010. 12.

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry...*, Originally published 1757. Republished by (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform), 2018. 74.

elaborates that obscurity makes the sublime indiscernible, indeterminate, and unnamable.¹⁸

In line with traditional investigations of the sublime, J.M.W. Turner's paintings like *The Slave Ship* (Fig. 15), pits the insignificance of human existence against the incalculable power of nature. The painting depicts a vast ocean seascape with enchanting warm colors. However, upon longer inspection, it reveals a highly obscured ship and numerous bodies being swallowed by the violent waves and abundant atmosphere.

In *Recess Fields*, obscurity is embodied by its encompassing and unknowable space. The expanse of graphite holds a conflicting role as both an absence of light that reveals the isolated moments, and as a corporeal force, affected by light, and embodied by surface blemishes and delineated edges. In this fluctuating state, viewers perceive that the fog and darkness, the age-old concealers of danger, have been made physically capable of swallowing the mundane scene and its inhabitants. It is then perceived as both a physical and ethereal force—one that threatens to absorb the subjects or break down their forms if they are separated from the light.

The monumental blackboard drawings by Tacita Dean also produce an obscuring atmosphere to evoke the sublime. In her 2002 diptych, *Chère Petite Soeur* (Dear Little Sister)(Fig. 16), she loosely renders ships on a vast ocean in white chalk on a blackboard. Her use of the blackboard evokes both the traditions of using chalkboards as film production storyboards and as a dark, menacing seascapes that reinforce the ships' danger of erasure.

¹⁸ Morley, "Introduction/The Contemporary Sublime," 16.

Infinity and Vastness

Additionally, Morley notes that concepts of infinity and vastness are traceable through nearly all inquiries into the sublime. Also, that in the art-viewer's safe position, they are still able to acknowledge these concepts as "a resigned sense of inadequacy (that) addresses our failure when faced with all that so blatantly exceeds us."¹⁹ In all of the drawings in *SCAPE*, the use of shape and material creates a sense of infinity. Despite the delineated curves and dissipating edges, some areas of the gray mass expand beyond the picture plane like an endless night sky in a landscape. Additionally, the sfumato used to create the work's foggy atmosphere recedes beneath the mesh of graphite crosshatching. This provokes viewers to get close to investigate the meticulous marks. When viewers experience a graphite mark on paper, it is fully affirmative, and without a material mystery. Simply put, the viewer can conceive of the mark's beginning and end. In my works, this observable trace is repeated to an absurd extent, one that appears endless. Viewers can get close and trace a succession of lines with their eyes; however, they are incapable of determining or even having a sense of its beginning or end.

Edmund Burke remarks that succession and uniformity evoke the infinity. Succession because it "impresses the imagination with an idea of progress beyond their actual limits" and uniformity because the consistency does not present "the termination of one idea and the beginning of another."²⁰ Simply, if the work were to have a single

¹⁹ Morley, "Introduction/The Contemporary Sublime," 19.

²⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry...*, 94-95.

brushstroke of paint or gesso on the surface, the graphite marks suddenly end where the new material begins.

Lastly, the isolated scene in *Recess Fields* positions the human element in confrontation with a perceivable vastness. The strange theatrical lights mark an irony that even in social settings like the bar, the capacity for social withdrawal or conversely, dismissal, is maintained despite the site's vast range of social possibilities. Additionally, this ironic isolation is dramatically amplified, as the illuminated figures are juxtaposed against the all-enveloping gray mass. The foggy atmosphere obscures the presence of the human element, but also totalizes all that exceeds the perceptive fields. As a passive third-party, the viewer can acknowledge the vast totality that overshadows the small, catered experiences. However, the patrons are completely immersed in the scene and remain unable to tune in to this fact of their situation.

These qualities of the sublime tie to the exhibition's theme of relaxing our muscle for visual dismissal and highlighting the malleability of our perception. Obscurity, infinity, and vastness, in Morley's account of Kant, are aspects of the sublime that give us "a recognition of our limitations, and so transform a sense of negative insufficiency into a positive gain: such experiences serve to establish our reasoning powers more firmly within their rightful, although diminished domain."²¹ *Recess Fields* (as do many others in *SHADE*) allows viewers to recognize these limitations as they view a familiar scene, engulfed by a totalization of all contexts that exists outside of it.

²¹ Morley, "Introduction/The Contemporary Sublime," 16.

CHAPTER SIX

VISUAL LANGUAGE OF AMBIGUITY

The title of the final work in the exhibition *A Little Lite Basketball* (Fig. 17), subverts the ambiguity of the rest of the drawings, and simultaneously points to the potentiality of engaging with an ambiguous image—its capacity to shift with minute, nuanced contexts. While the drawing shares visual similarities to *Engager*, *Engaging*, the challenge of navigating ambiguous meanings is disrupted by the lighthearted title. The strange forms, the unknowable space, and the sensibly dreary tone is disrupted by the title’s tongue-in-cheek contextualization. The title’s misspelling of “lite” as a reference to a specific beer, and even the word basketball itself, suddenly transforms the range of meanings we can infer about the work. Luminous rectangles are more readily recognized as screens. Consecutively, figurative gestures become more readily recognized as someone excited while watching a basketball game.

A similar strategy is used by Russian artist Olga Chernysheva. In her 2012 ‘*Person Protected By*’ series informed by 19th Century Russian Social Realism, loosely rendered figures are in danger of being dissipated by the instability of their cultural climate. Her loose sfumato and sketch-like rendering makes her figures elusive, without disclosing specific identities, professions, or social statuses. To keep her unstable figures from being completely absorbed by the ambiguity of their circumstance, she pastes a title directly into the image, suddenly anchoring them to an alternate reality. In her work, *Protected by a smoke* (Fig. 18), a darkly rendered figure merges with the foreground and surrounding atmosphere as a small cloud emanates from their face. The title then

combines with the cloud to transform the cold, oppressive atmosphere into one of relative stability and momentary respite.

A Little Lite Basketball shows an uncanny sense of temporality and shadows that threaten to envelop the work's protagonist. However, while I don't superimpose the title into the image, it nonetheless provides the work with a pseudo safety net that keeps it from slipping into an overtly dark or moody tone. This, again, is why the works are made ambiguous. With only the slightest recontextualization, and without altering a single visual, the mood, and therefore its meaning is completely changed. This pliability of our perceptive experience insists there are always unconsidered, alternative meanings—not to be determined and stabilized through rationalization, but to be constantly anticipated and allowed to change resulting from new sensations and new experiences.

This idea can be traced to Simone De Beauvoir's book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While she formalizes an ethical way to live in a universe without meaning, her concept of existential ambiguity parallels the pressured, reactionary ways we decipher the unknowable or withdraw from it. She says, "to declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won."²² While my process jokingly makes my drawings absurd, the isolated moments of discernible scenes, shapes, and figures provide viewers the room to ascertain their meanings, even if unstable.

²² Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman. Originally published 1946. Republished (New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc, 2018), 139.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, my drawings resist stable and rational interpretations of meaning. The dark bodily expanses disrupt expectations of two-dimensional space while representational elements imbue viewers with hints of meaning. However, these meanings are destabilized by the drawings' ambiguity. The images are embedded in unknowable expanses and haze-covered spaces, and stunt convenient categorizations of determinable narratives. However, the shapes of screens, specific gestures of bodies, dramatic theatrical or tenebrous lighting remain perceivable and therefore open to spatial associations, projections of memories, and individual meanings. Whether the images are experienced as dark or daemonic (to quote my aunt), or as nostalgic isolations from everyday life, or whether the viewer refuses to engage with the image at all, rendering it meaningless; they do so against the fact that there are meanings to be conferred, but only if they are willing to slow down and hunt through nuanced phenomena.

FIGURES

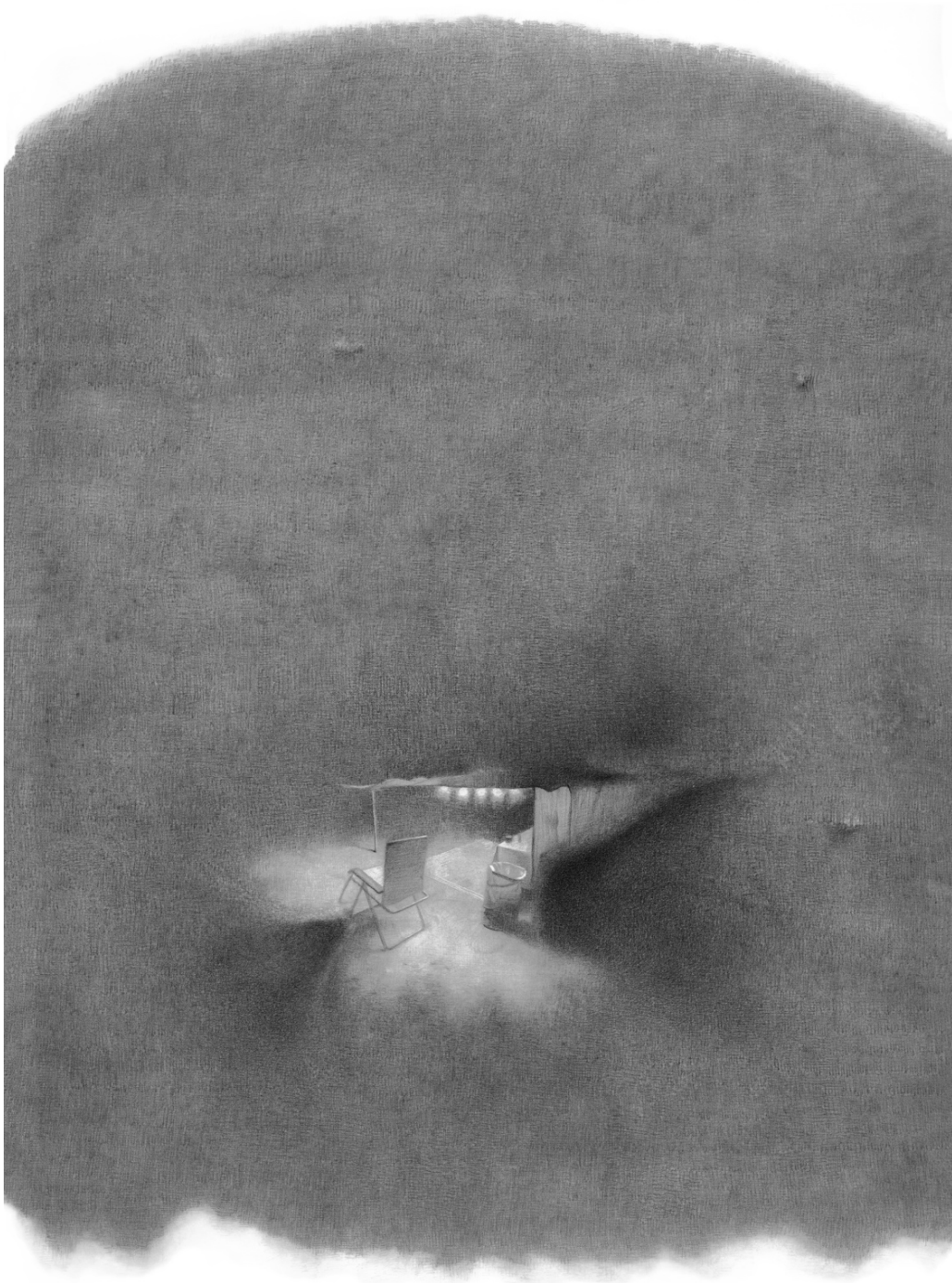


Figure 1: *Resort*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Graphite pencil on paper,
50" x 36" x .75"

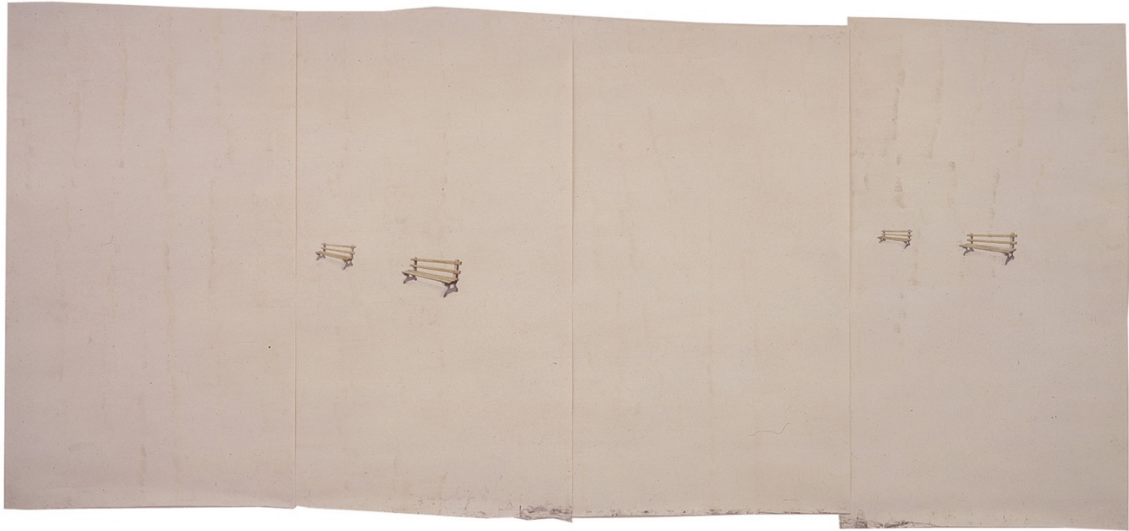


Figure 2: *Untitled (park benches)*, Toba Khedoori, 1997,
Oil and wax on paper,
138" x 300"



Figure 3: *Resort* (installation view), Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Graphite pencil on paper, mounted to aluminum panel
50" x 36" x .75"

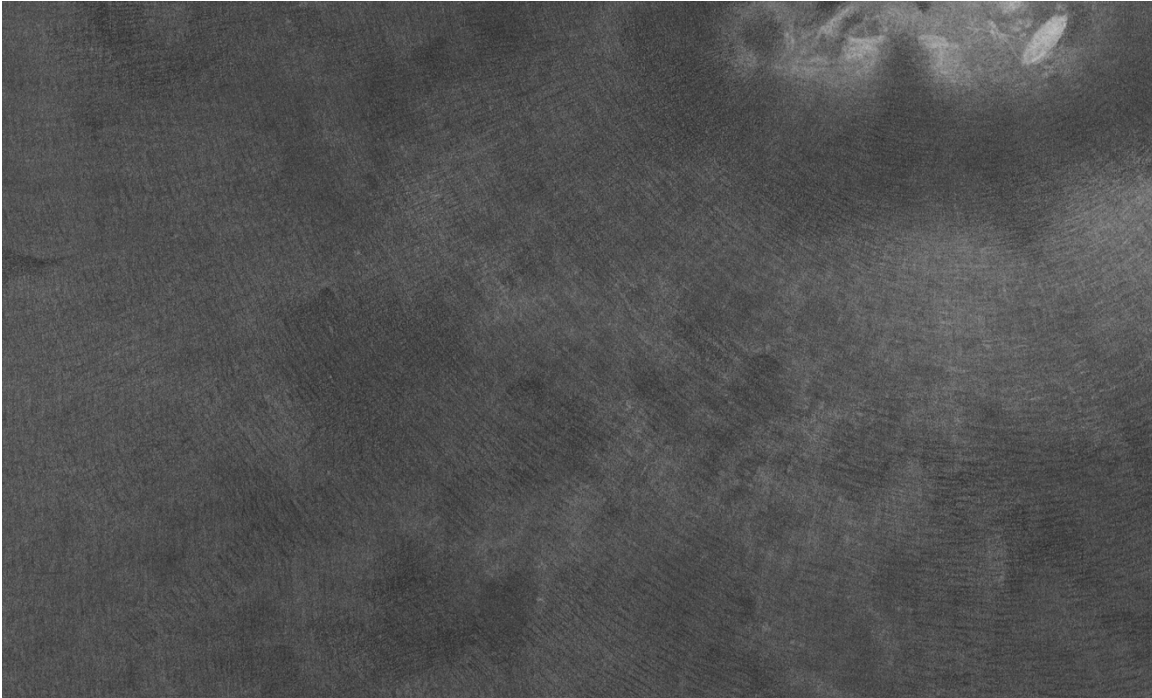


Figure 4: Detail of *Conciliate*, Jonathan Bolton, 2023,
Graphite pencil on paper
36" x 50"



Figure 5: *Beacon 426*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Graphite pencil on paper
36" x 50"



Figure 6: *Nighthawks*, Edward Hopper, 1942,
Oil on canvas
33" x 60"

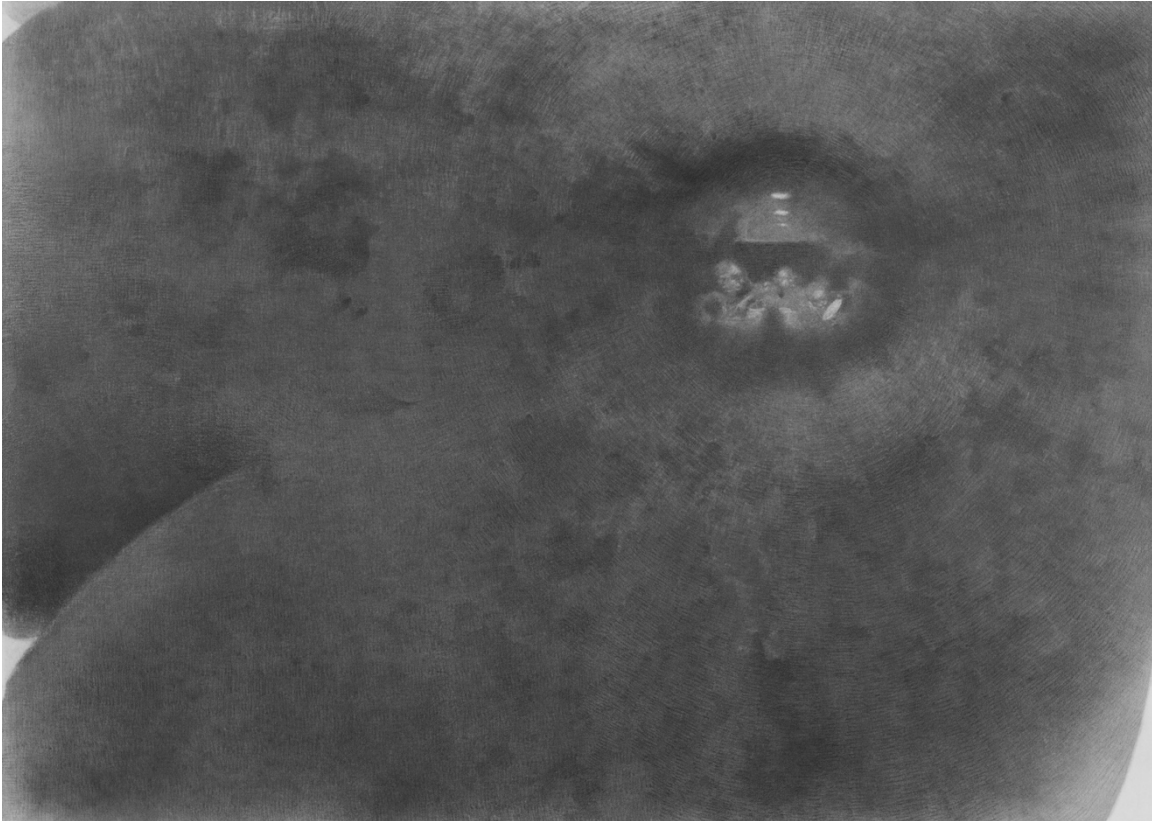


Figure 7: *Conciliate*, Jonathan Bolton, 2023,
Graphite pencil on paper
36" x 50"



Figure 8: *Sketch for Conciliate*, Jonathan Bolton, 2023,
Ink on paper
Full page 12" x 9"

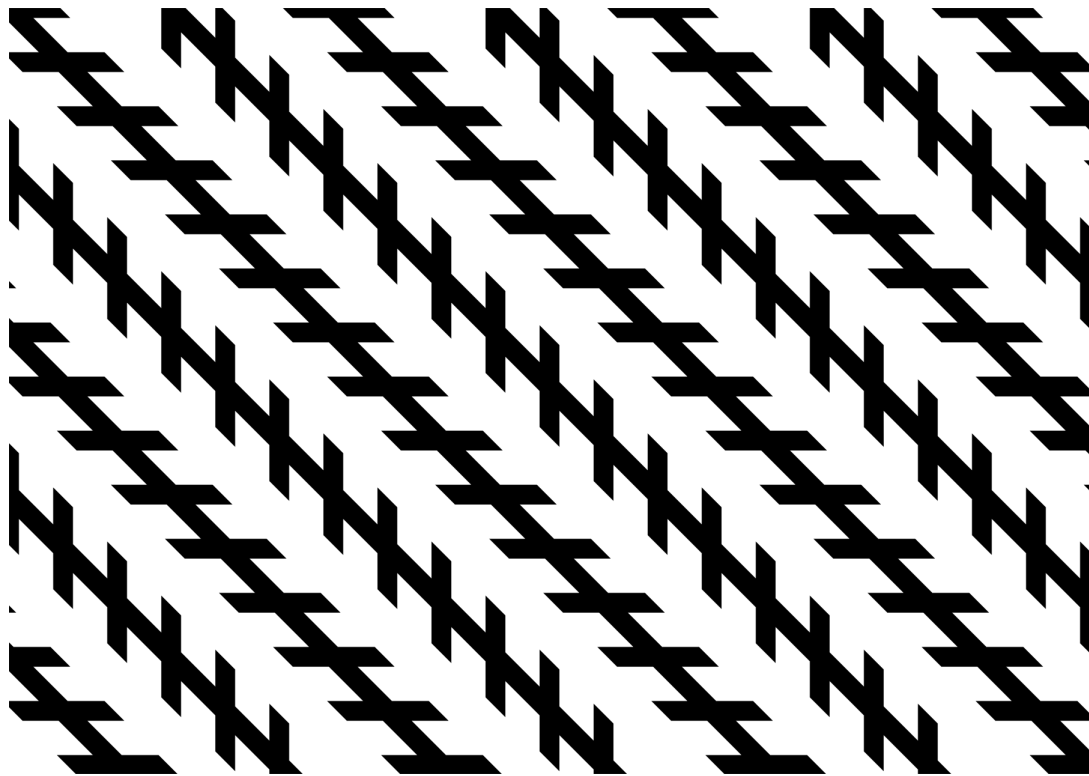


Figure 9: *Zöllner Illusion*, Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner, 1860,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zöllner_illusion#/media/File:Zollner_illusion.svg



Figure 10: *Engager, Engaging*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Graphite pencil on paper,
50" x 36" x .75"



Figure 11: *Untitled*, Jennifer Packer, 2014,
Charcoal on paper
98" x 48"



Figure 12: *Sounds like you have a problem with Christmas*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Diptych, graphite pencil on paper
14" x 21" framed



Figure 13: *Don't know how you can be a business*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Diptych, graphite pencil on paper
14" x 21" framed



Figure 14: *Recess Fields*, Jonathan Bolton, 2022,
Graphite pencil on paper
36" x 50"



Figure 15: *The Slave Ship*, J.M.W. Turner, 1840,
Oil on canvas
36" x 48"

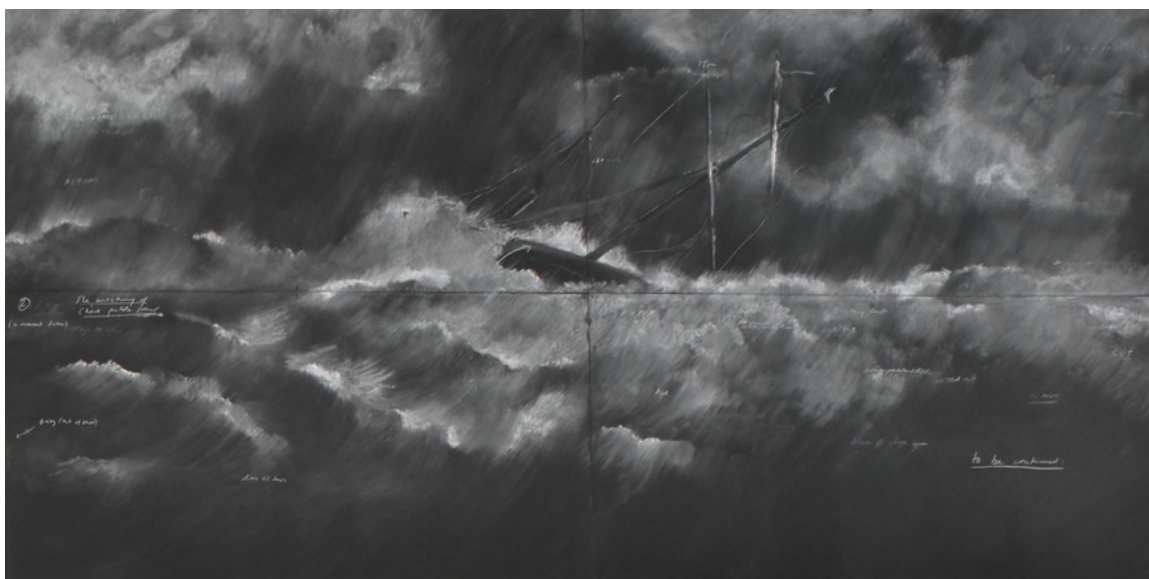


Figure 16: *Chère petite soeur (Dear Little Sister)*, left panel of diptych, Tacita Dean, 2002,
Chalk on two blackboards
Full version 96" x 192"



Figure 17: *A Little Lite Basketball*, Jonathan Bolton, 2023,
Graphite pencil on paper,
12" x 12"



Figure 18: *Person protected by a smoke*, Olga Chernysheva, 2012,
Charcoal on paper,
14" x 11"

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