



**PHILIP SMITH**

SIGN  
LANGUAGE



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NOVEMBER 7 – DECEMBER 20, 2013

JASON MCCOY GALLERY

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**The Invention of Mapping**, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas (detail).

## ACTS OF MAGIC

Like a magic act, Philip Smith's new paintings happen right before your eyes, but you're still not quite sure what it is you've seen. The pictures themselves are straightforward enough, amalgamations of simple line drawings that have been made piece by piece and then scraped away and made again. Working on a monochrome surface that is white or gray or occasionally a single color, Smith uses images that are glyph-like and diagrammatic, and therefore freighted like portents with uncertain meaning. His paintings are pale and otherworldly, palimpsests of notations made at different times for uncertain reasons, images that seem to embody the unknown in the very traces of their erasures. They remain open in their apparent randomness, images juxtaposed by chance or perhaps by an esoteric design, giving rise to a suggestive logic that is unexpected and even revelatory.

We easily find meaning in coincidence, happily follow instructions from benevolent authority, keep an eye out for signs and prophecies, and treasure our good luck charms. Smith's pictures present everyday things that carry a psychic aura, and the images bump up against each other and overlap like a kind of magical flotsam. Enumerating the contents of any one painting is a little like tethering a bunch of balloons to the earth, an act that predicts its own undoing, the cliché of loosened spheres floating up into the sky, an emblem of freedom, loss and irretrievable possibility. One of Smith's simpler pictures, for instance, features images of a single die, a compass, a clock, a jack-in-the-box with a magician's rabbit rather than a clown's head, a schematic double helix, several hands making instructional gestures,

the number “5” and, larger than the other images, a bust of a man in profile with a five-leafed plant springing from his forehead. Like a vision or an omen, the painting carries not so much a message as a suggestion of a mood or feeling. So was it always with prophecies, which foretell the future but also bring a promise of hope.

Though they encourage thinking that feels vaguely disjointed and dreamlike and a little blurred at the edges, Smith’s paintings also have a kind of classical reserve, a muffled dignity and an equilibrium that begins with their subdued coloration. Dreams are fraught with feeling, but Smith’s painted images are reassuring. There’s no subconscious delirium here, no nightmarish loss of control. Instead we have a kind of warmth, like ashes in a campfire that has cooled overnight but still shelters hot coals within. The pictures have a casualness, even a softness, as if they were drawn in those ashes with the burnt end of a stick. We know marks like these have been made forever in dust and mud and dirt. Ancient scribes made impressions in terracotta, and artisans as well as children have inscribed lines and patterns in soft limestone, as graffiti writers before the spray-can era scraped their insignia into surfaces of wood and paint. The inscriptions of Smith’s paintings were made in such a surface, a layer of paint, and were done with an elemental stylus, a blunt screwdriver customized by long use, more elemental even than the brush. Smith’s tool is both modern and primitive, as is his medium, and as are his messages as well, both atavistic and alive.

This kind of palette, this kind of drawing, can be read as otherworldly, or at least as occupying the edges of nature’s spectrum. Their effect is one of faint echoes of chalk marks on a classroom blackboard, of the undulating surfaces of Analytic Cubist paysage, of Robert Rauschenberg’s early black-and-white pictures made by transferring images from magazines and newspapers via lighter fluid and frottage.

And gray is the color of the image output of early photocopiers, which Smith used to make his works in the 1970s. Then he would walk the streets with a cheap camera, collecting pictures of all sorts wherever he found them, logos and neons and adverts and candid and all manner of images, which he would then print out and copy and recopy until they were degraded and full of visual static. These early works, presented en masse as slideshows or installations, were key in Smith’s development as one of the original *Pictures* artists and were exact examples of what later came to be known as *Pictures Generation* pictures, the supposedly author-free artworks that were constituted by “the always already-known, already-experienced, already-given-within-a-culture,” as Rosalind Krauss so euphonically put it in *Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary* (1980). These works of Smith’s reflected the very concept of the artist as an empty vessel who has been filled with disembodied images and artificial meaning by the mass-media spectacle, a hallucinatory self with no center and no independent agency. Here gray is the color of a bliss-free dystopian system, the image-in-the-abstract unmoored from any true knowledge.

Theorists put the *Pictures Generation* at a threshold of history, the end of an old order and the beginning of a new, and however extravagant that claim turned out to be, gray is the hue suitable to that conceit. Gray is the color of an overcast sky, of a gathering storm, of twilight and dawn, all periods of passage with echoes of primal strength. Up in the country after the sun sets, the bats come out from under the weathered gray shakes on the barn and flit with haphazard speed through the darkening sky, feeding and mating and inaudibly calling. When night falls, constellations wheel across the heavens, marking the rhythms of the seasons and the circuits of the celestial clock. These natural forces still pulse through our veins and express themselves in the world we build, however mediated they might be by the mechanisms of modernity. Picasso supposedly said that he “realized what painting was all about”

after visiting the Ethnographical Museum in Paris in 1907, a remark that the late Museum of Modern Art chief curator William Rubin interpreted as defining art as a “talisman with a magic charge.” The goal was to make art with an elemental power and presence.

How amusing is it that animist notions of a world replete with invisible, living, powerful spirits can be aligned in parallel with the Postmodernist concept of a social space filled with and indeed constructed by photographic images? “We only experience reality through the pictures we make of it,” wrote the art critic Douglas Crimp in *On the Museum’s Ruins*, an essay in an early number of the journal *October*. “Our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema.” Invisible forces do surround and influence us, whether they be the electromagnetic radiation that carries the sights and sounds that preoccupied Crimp, or the supernatural beings of rather longer pedigree. Even in a scientific age, the human impulse to seek out an omniscient force apparently remains firmly rooted in the human mind, and may well be a fundamental instinct like sex or language. As modern as we think ourselves to be, we remain primitive at our core, subject to forces beyond our control.

In Smith’s current paintings, random image scavenging has been succeeded by a more meticulous order, in which each part is given a specific purpose and connection to everything else. The paintings now read a little like Wassily Kandinsky’s musical abstractions, which sought spiritual enlightenment through “the sensations of the colors of the palette.” Kandinsky railed against what he saw as the materialism of his time, which he said “turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game.” Kandinsky knew nothing of Pop Art, of course, which brought art into the material age with a vengeance. Like many of us, Smith is a child of the Pop era, and his paintings aim to find sparks of life within the circulating signs of our

contemporary culture. A key to Smith’s thinking, and the solution he has discovered, can be found in *Walking through Walls* (Simon and Schuster, 2008), his engaging and illuminating memoir of his father, the late Lew Smith, a Miami-based interior decorator turned clairvoyant and faith healer. Using techniques that his father taught him, Smith seeks to “try to implant energy, multiple meanings and codes into ordinary-looking images.”

In addition to showing something, to being a window or a mirror or just an object to look at, can an artwork actually do something as well, can it perform or function like a charm or as a kind of homeopathic remedy? We know this is true — whether it’s the miracles that make tabloid headlines with some regularity or whether it’s the magisterial succor offered by the Rothko Chapel — though it is perhaps better if it remains unspoken. It really is beyond the realm of words, and may be beyond logical thought as well. But we may try to think of it this way. The notion that artwork might be magic is but a modest echo of the classical humanist concept of art as transcendent and affirmative, and a claim that art can still be a universal sign of human individuality and creativity.

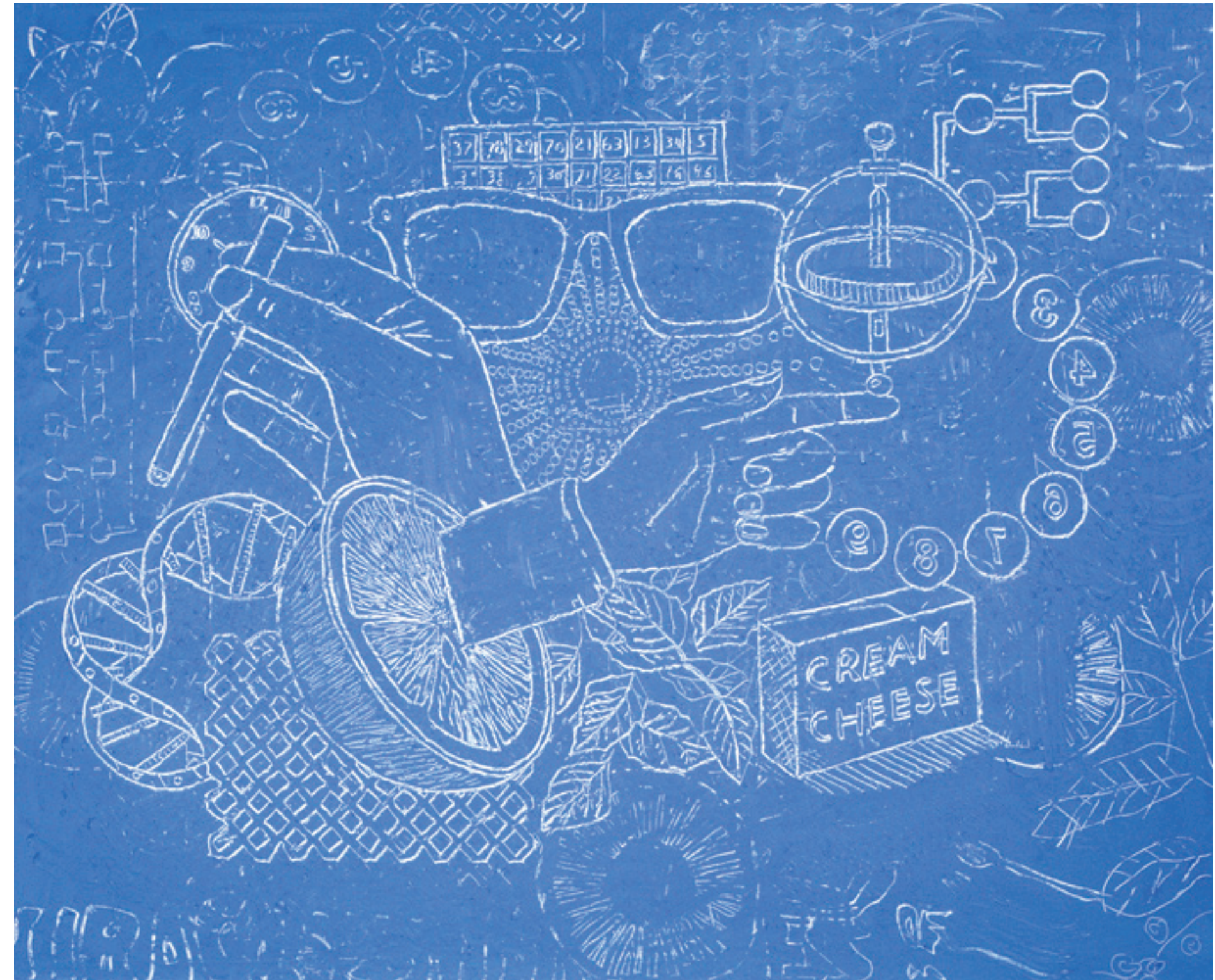
— Walter Robinson, August 2013

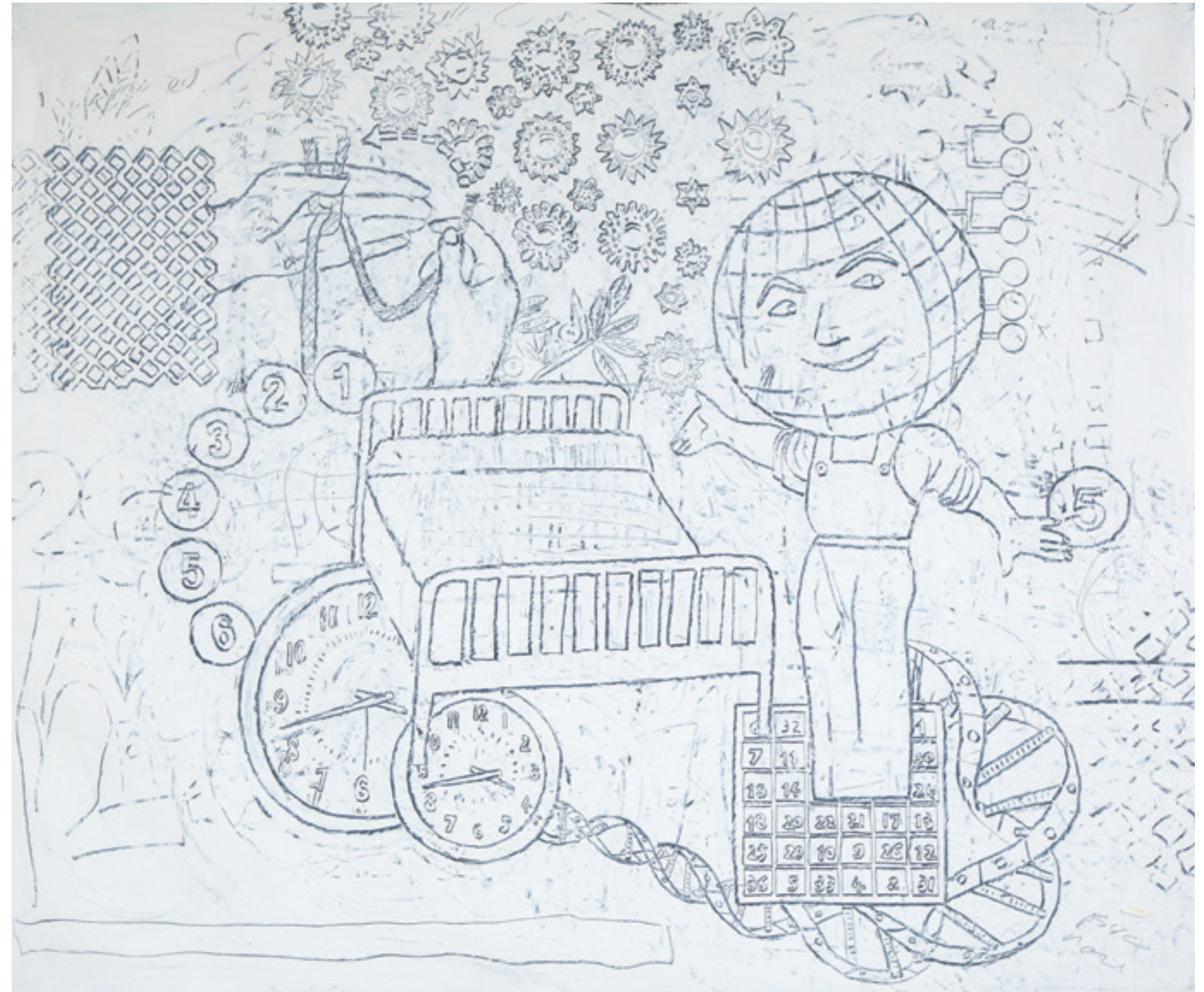
*Walter Robinson is a painter who has exhibited his work at Metro Pictures, Tibor de Nagy and Dorian Grey Gallery. He is an art critic who was founding editor of Artnet Magazine (1996-2012) and currently writes a twice-monthly column for Artspace.com.*

Origin of Species, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.



Models of Jupiter, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 43 x 53 inches.





Let's Move to Mars, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.

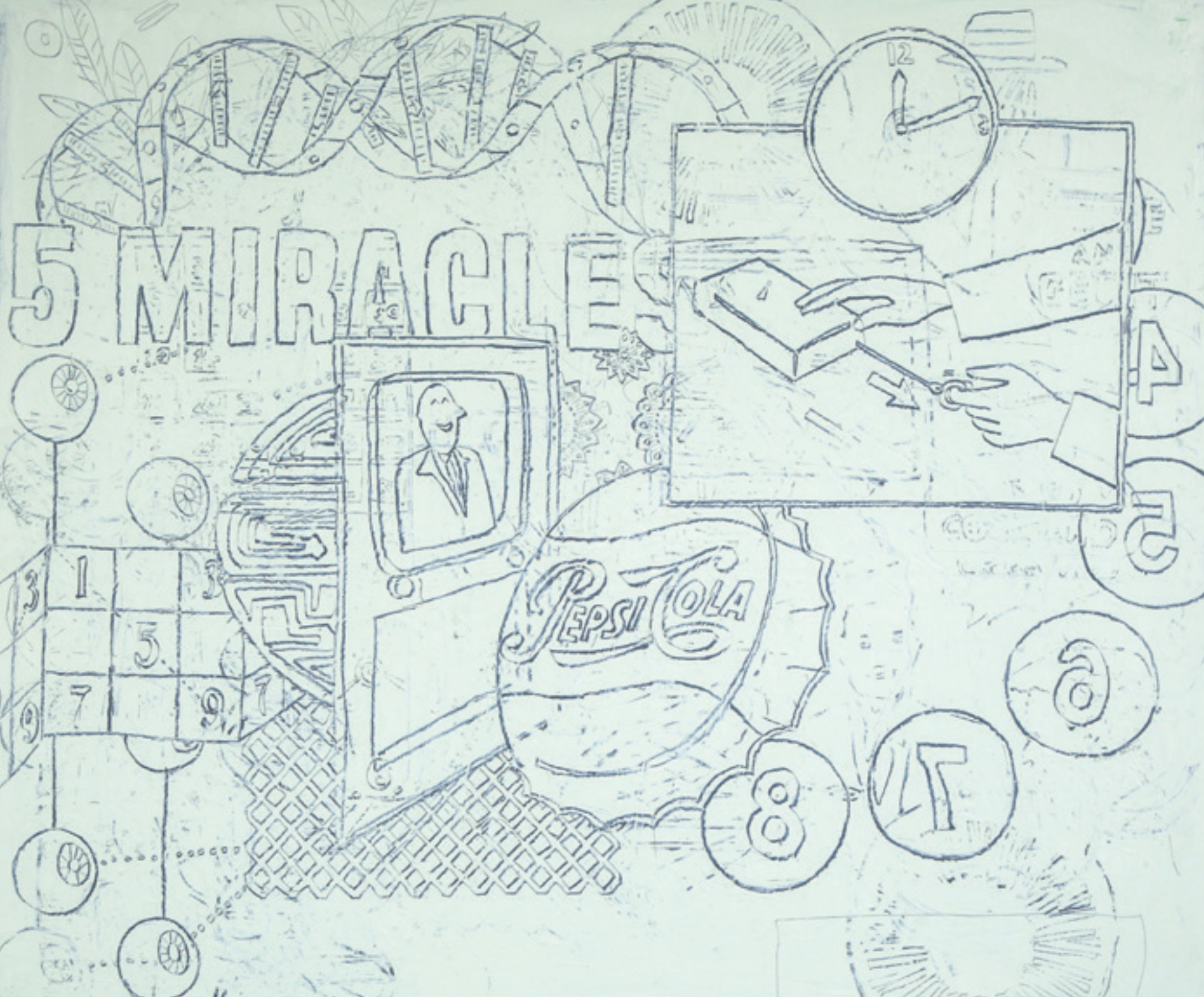
The Invention of Mapping, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.





Orange Bowl, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.





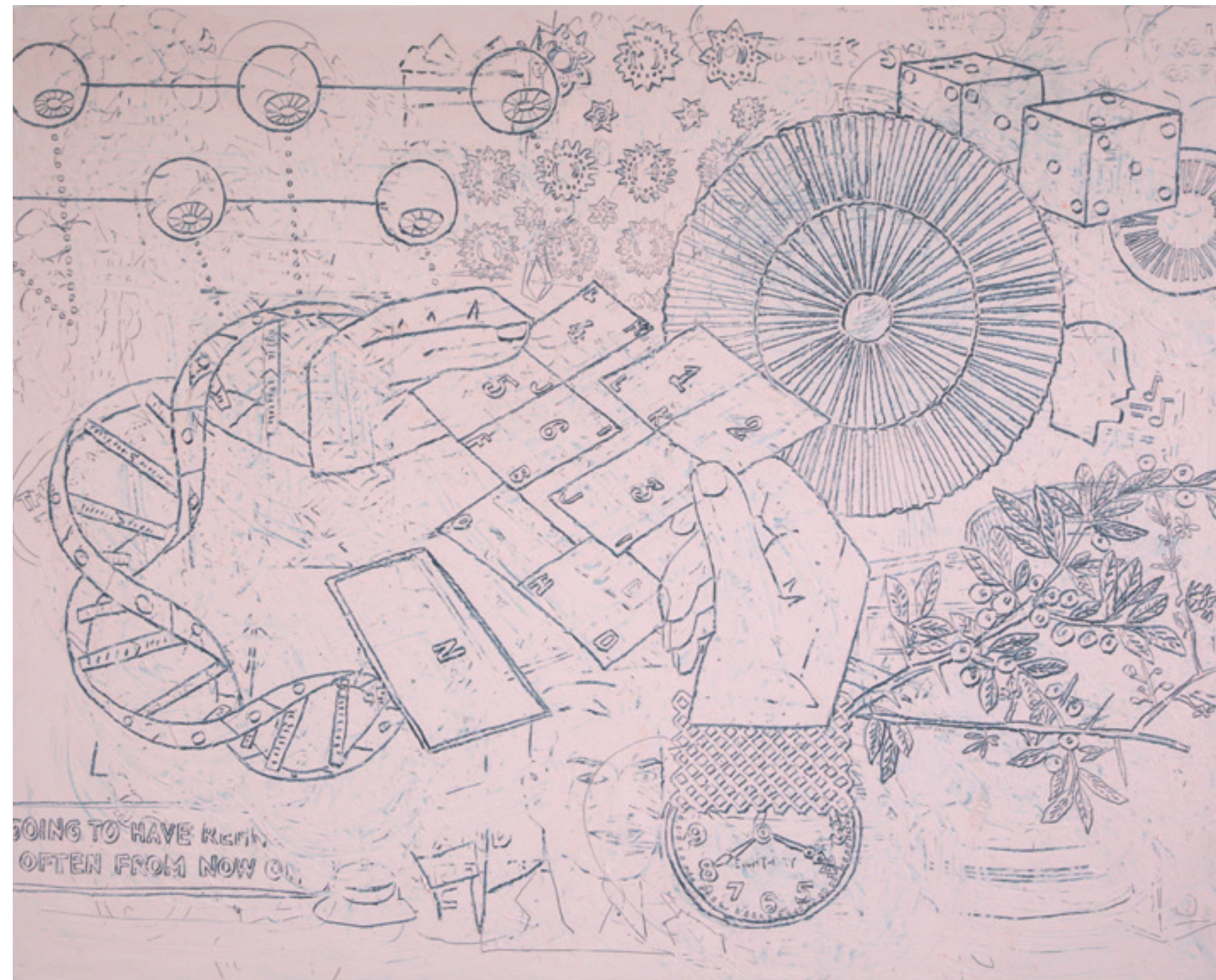
In the Planning Stages, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.

Conventional Weapons, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 43 x 53 inches.





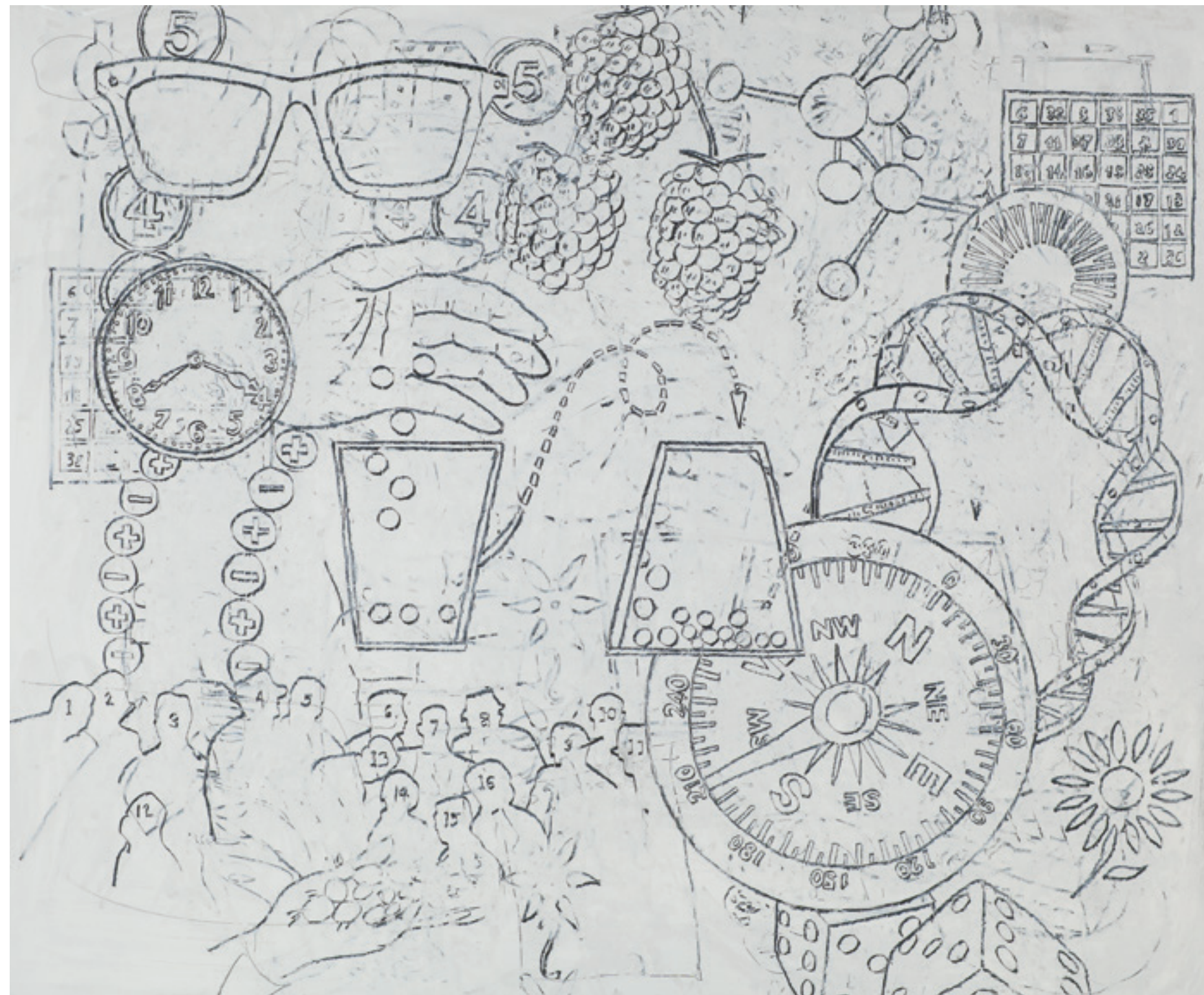
Preparing for Sleep, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 43 x 53 inches.



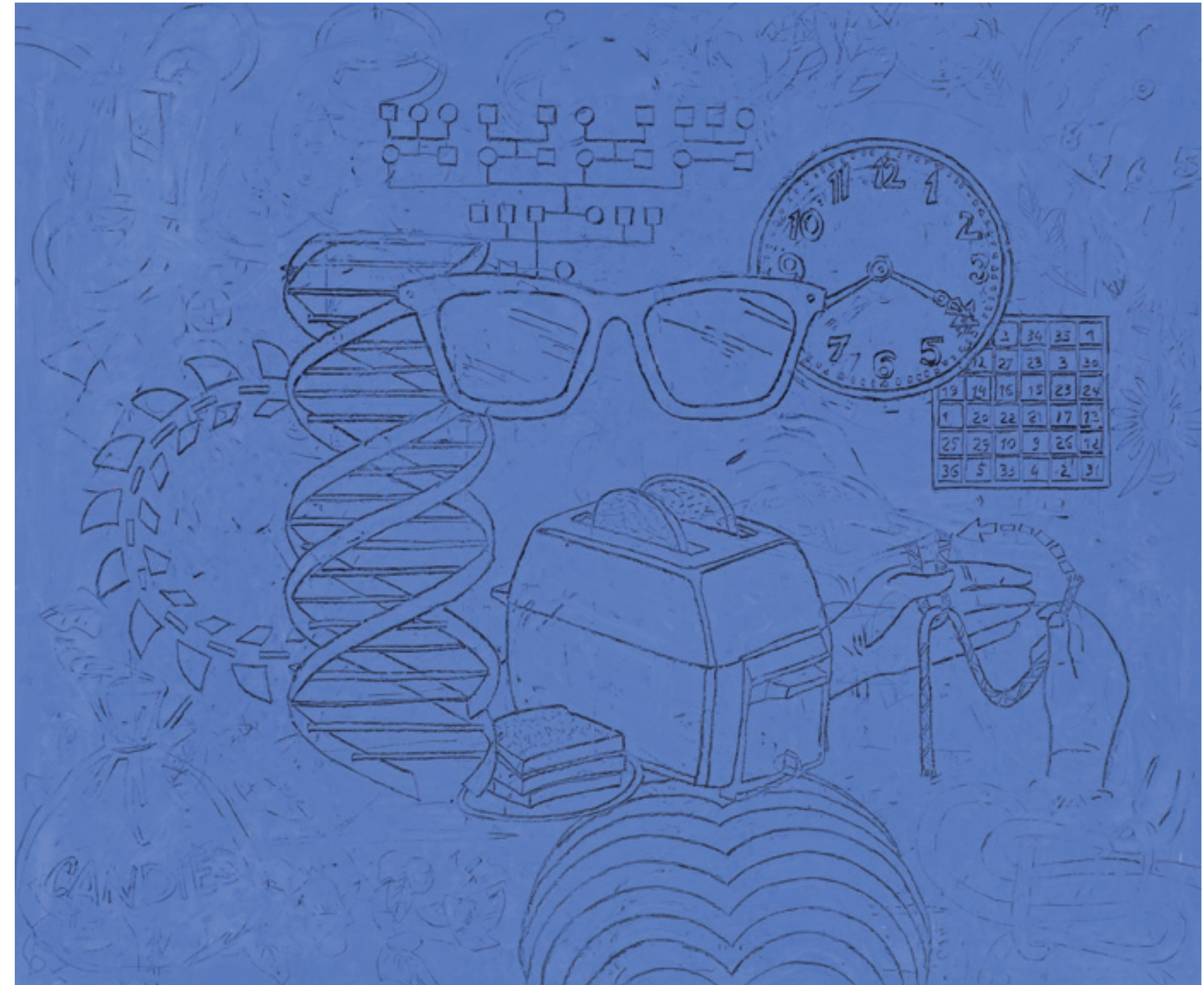
Can of Peas, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.



Innocent Bystanders, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.



I See You, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.







Observing Security Violations, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 47 inches.

Turkish Delight, 2013. Oil and wax on canvas, 43 x 53 inches.



## AN AFTERNOON CONVERSATION

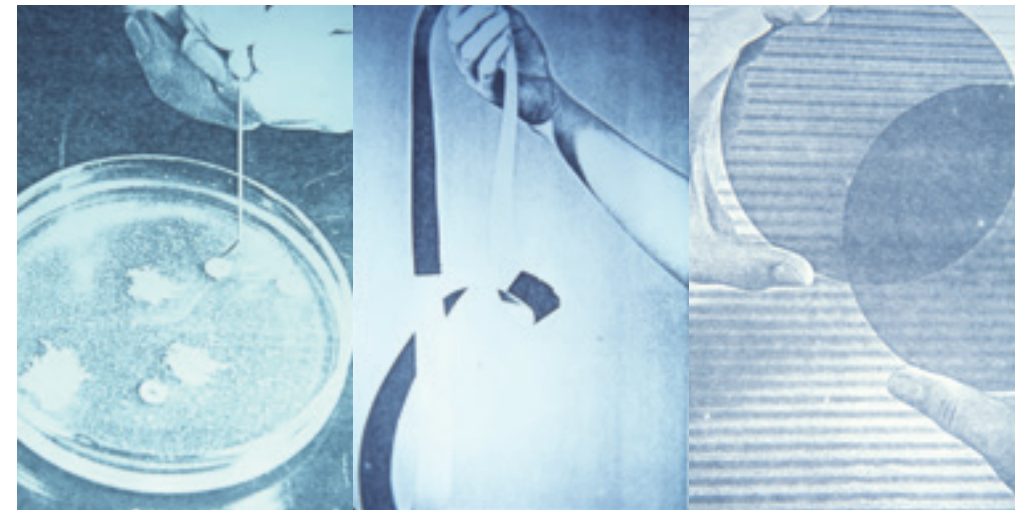
**Doug McClemont:** Before we talk about the new paintings, let's go back a bit...along with Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch and Jack Goldstein you are one of five artists whose work was included in the *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space, in 1977 curated by Douglas Crimp. This was the seminal exhibition that launched a generation of new artists and new thinking that continues today.

**Philip Smith:** While the *Pictures* exhibition was my major exhibition debut, my initial, unofficial introduction to the New York art world was with and through Ray Johnson in the early 70s. I became a part of his New York Correspondence School. On no particular schedule, his breathlessly typed letters with ink drawings of art world characters and figureheads would arrive in the mail. His letters were like communiqués from a lost space colony on Jupiter. Ray was creating this pantheon and network of New York artists that all fed into his own collage work. Through the mail he would introduce me to various people as “a good new young person.” As a result of Ray being my “godfather,” this correspondence network grew. Among many of the people Ray introduced me to A.M. Fine (if that was even his real name), would send me index cards on which he would place objects and spray paint over them, creating a kind of stenciled image that had the appearance of a Tony Smith and photogram combined. Then A.M. introduced me to a dwarf who was always dressed up in S & M leather and chains. When I visited his apartment, I would lift him onto the table so that he could talk to me eye to eye. And the network broadened as one person introduced me to the next. This was all like a very twisted and demented “Alice Through the Looking Glass.” I was only a kid at the time and boy, did it open my eyes. Ray and I would meet in the City and he would take me to openings, cocktail parties and a lot of strange apartments on the Lower East Side. I was extremely fortunate as spending time with Ray was like going to a very exclusive private prep school for the New York art world. This was before everyone had a lot of money to buy and sell art. The art world was like a private club. The admission requirements were never

clear; you either got in or you didn't. And everyone was very proud of his or her outsider status. Through Ray, I began to taste the exotic nectar of the New York art world, some of it highly forbidden at the time. Years later I was sharing a studio with Peter Schuyff, who at the time was communicating with Ray. Based on this reminder, I contacted Ray and our correspondence began all over again until one day he decided to swim to his death as his final art performance. That was the official end of the New York Correspondence School.

**DM:** That's quite an introduction to the New York art world, so how were you chosen for the *Pictures* exhibition?

**PS:** Somehow I knew Helene Winer, who was the director of Artists Space. In 1975 I did a one night slide performance, called *Still Stories*, which consisted of found images and a



*Relinquish Control*, 1976. Slide performance, Julian Pretto Gallery.

collaged sound track of found audio that combined Gertrude Stein and Tennessee Williams reading from their work along with Persian and Chinese language instruction. Maybe twenty people showed up and they all sat on black cushions on the floor. For some reason, I remember Keith Sonnier being there. Keith was always very supportive of young artists. I had photographed the images and then ran them through a copier countless times until they began to degrade, then reshot them through a colored filtered lens so that they appeared even more distorted. It was both intentionally primitive and anticipatory of future video work that would happen decades later. This body of work was called *Extruded Cinema* — it was as if I was pulling, squeezing every drop of juice and energy from these found images to create new meaning. The result was somewhat haunting. For a while, I continued to do these slide performances in small galleries around Tribeca like Julian Pretto and Hal Bromm.

I spent a lot of time in and around Artists Space. It was as if this old office space in Tribeca (which was a bit of a ghost town at the time) was sending out this homing signal, “calling all artists.” Magically, Helene created this clubhouse where young artists who had nowhere else to go could find an audience and shared experience. Helene had a very specific vision that was prescient of the art to come and she had great instincts on how to find artists who were inventing and supporting this vision. I don't think anyone who was there at the time was uninteresting. It was a very special scout troop and Helene was the den mother. This list of people I remember who circled around Artists Space included Jeffrey Deitch before he went off to business school, Diego Cortez, John Goode, the *Pictures* people, Matt Mullican, Cindy Sherman. This list goes on and on. Don't forget, this was time when the galleries were almost uniformly addicted to minimalism, so anyone working with images just didn't fit into the existing paradigm.

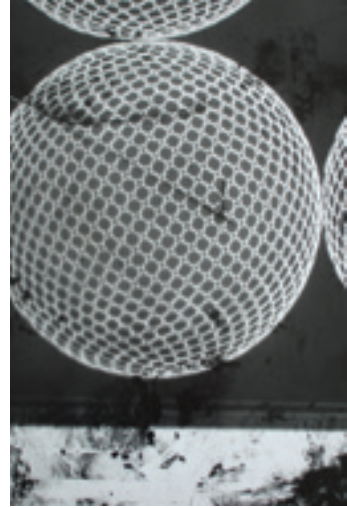
One day Douglas Crimp appears with an interesting idea of what the next wave in art was going to look like. Helene opened her Rolodex and started directing him to various studios that she thought would arouse his curiosity. Fortunately, my name was on the list. At the time, Douglas and I spent a fair amount of time looking at art, hanging out. We both spoke this new language that was not the native language we had grown up with. History has finally handed Douglas an Academy Award for best director, thirty-five years after the fact.

**DM:** What was your work like at the time?

**PS:** Different and the same as it is now. A lot of the qualities I started to explore during the *Pictures* period are still part of my working method today and hopefully have matured. These include discovering found images that could be reinvented to have new meaning, my interest in line, schematics, erasure, a cinematic yet abstract narrative in black and white with some color. During the day, I would scout the City with a beat-up camera looking for images that I could capture and reinvent in the studio. It's as if I were on a shoot but there were no models involved, just images. Anything and everything was interesting; everything was material. I'd pop into bookstores, libraries, bars, grocery stores and photograph anything of interest on



*Pictures*, 1977. Opening and installation.

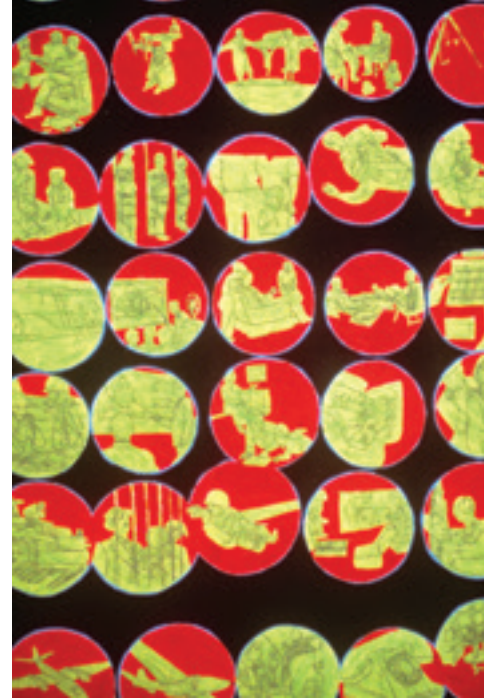


black and white film. This practice was an economic necessity, as I didn't have money to buy books. Taking my own photographs on cheap, expired black and white film and "stealing" the images was all I could afford. In fact, I didn't have any money at all. I was living in a condemned

loft with no heat and broken windows on the Bowery. I would cook on a hot plate and eat dinner under an electric blanket to stay warm. At night I would develop the film myself and use these pictures as an image library for creating large drawings and the slide shows.

**DM:** Is this the sort of work that Crimp saw in your studio?

**PS:** Yes. By the time that Douglas was visiting the studio, the drawings evolved from single images into these large vertical drawings composed of a constellation of disparate images. They were more like storyboards for some sort of abstract cinema. For example, a picture of a soldier was next to a monk was next to a ballroom dancer was next to a funeral was next to a television set was next to someone drinking cocktails, next to medical devices, next to monkeys, next to Indonesian dancers and on and on. They were all separate, distinct images but collectively they created a kind of image friction that was forming many new narratives



**Watch, Bring.** 1977. Oil stick, oil pastel, pencil on paper.

depending on where and when you entered the drawing. Eventually, the images began to talk to one another and interact. They became intertwined in this constellation of images that enveloped you.

**PS:** Were you selling work? What did you do for money?

**DM:** No one was selling work back then. This was 1976, ancient history. The art world was very small and the group of collectors was even smaller. The few people who bought art were not interested in what we were doing at the time. I made a little bit of money writing. Warhol would pay me \$25 when I interviewed someone like Jasper Johns for his *Interview* magazine, and I would do articles for *Arts* magazine and that paid \$100, which seemed to last me forever.

**DM:** You were a part of Andy Warhol's circle as well, right?

**PS:** Yes, knowing him was an amazing experience. Everyone seemed to have very different experiences with Andy. In my case, Andy always presented himself as having a profoundly well-honed Zen approach to the world. He was an extremely smart, perceptive, frighteningly sensitive and brilliant man. Just brilliant. I would stop by the Factory every once in a while (both the one on Union Square and, later, the one on Broadway) just to say hello and see what he was doing. I always got through the gauntlet of assistants and Andy would take a break and talk to me or include me in whatever circus was happening around him at that moment. Sometimes I joined in the lunches that were brought in from Brownies while he tape-recorded the conversation. I loved watching him take a bucket and mop to apply background colors to a piece of canvas on the floor for his next painting. It's amazing how he could work so publicly. I need immense privacy when I work. Later on when he was doing the collaborative work with Basquiat, I would stop by and look at them in progress. Andy would kid with me that he would sell me one for \$100. That was a lot of money at the time for me and I chose to buy food rather than take him seriously. There was a dynamic energy with these paintings that was not so present in his other work at the time. They were oddball paintings. Sometimes before I went up to the Factory, I'd stop by Antonio Lopez's loft and visit with him and Juan Ramos and Paul Caranicas. We would always look out the window and see what Andy was working on like the dollar sign paintings.

One day, I was at the Factory photographing Andy for a story and he started sneezing. I lowered my camera and waited for him to stop, thinking I was being courteous. He said while he was sneezing, "don't stop, keep shooting, these are the best pictures." This was one of the most profound lessons in art I ever had. A lot of good art comes from those fleeting and almost invisible moments between moments. Sometimes Andy would call me up on a

Saturday just to chat. When Robert Hayes died, Andy wanted me to become the editor of *Interview* but I declined because I thought that no one would take me seriously as an artist if I was running *Interview*. After I said no, Andy pushed a couple times on this issue and sent requests through several mutual friends asking me to change my mind. This was probably one of the few decisions in my life that I do regret. I can't imagine a more interesting job.

Despite turning down the job of a lifetime, I was very fortunate. I got to meet and spend time with all my heroes from Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to Roy Lichtenstein. *Arts* magazine asked me to do an article about Bob who lived around the corner from my Bowery loft. I usually worked until dawn as did he, so once in a while, I would stop by at Lafayette Street around 3 AM. If I went earlier, I might run into Antonio and Ileana, and we'd all sit at the kitchen table and just talk while Bob drank Jack Daniels and smoked. It was another universe. Bob had a very unique and profound aura about him. Also, a one of a kind, brilliant, brilliant man. One night we were sitting at the kitchen table and Bob took out a match to light a cigarette. He held the match in his hand for several minutes while we were discussing how many different words there are in Japanese for the kind of special light in the sky between night and dawn. At some point Bob changed his mind and decided not to have a smoke. Rather than throw the match away, which most people would do, he respectfully tucked it into the back of the match book to save it. For me, the respect he showed that simple cardboard match summed up everything about Bob and his work. It was a very telling gesture.

**DM:** What sorts of ideas were influencing you at the time?

**PS:** A couple of key ideas remain constant to how I make work today. Because of the way I grew up, I was always attuned to metaphysical imagery and the idea of information

coming from an ethereal, intangible source. I was always fascinated by Jain paintings and drawings from the early 1900s that purported to chart other dimensions or human energy fields. So, in my mind I was working toward connecting with the type of information that comes from trance or hypnosis. I wanted to make large images that induced a state of awe. Yes, I know, that is a tall order for a young man but I truly believe that this is the purpose of art, to open that door to another dimension or realm of perception. In pre-literate cultures, the religious leaders would instruct and educate the population with narrative images. Whether it was the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Mayans, Chinese or Indians, they all imparted wisdom and social ideas through pictographs that were permanently memorialized into stone. This interest in early cultures that communicated concepts about God, right living and the afterlife through pictures or pictographs was certainly a big starting point for me. As a kid, I wanted to be an archaeologist and devoured books on hieroglyphs and Egyptian art. By the age of five, I was making my own primitive hieroglyphs.



Carving, Stone, 1957.

On the other side of the spectrum was Nicholas Roeg's 1976 film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* in which David Bowie plays a space alien who visits earth to find water for his planet. While he is here, he gathers information about earth by turning on twenty or thirty television sets at once and watches and absorbs all the content of these images in a nonlinear fashion. Whether he is watching a football game, a soap opera or a cereal commercial, he is absorbing the essence of the information and creating meaning about our planet from these different

images. The movie made a point that we were surrounded by an atmosphere of intangible images that impinged on our brain and affected how we thought, how we made decisions and how we felt. I wanted to take that idea and create a new sea of images where you would feel you were almost drowning in imagery to the point of hallucinogenic unconsciousness. Those are basically the two areas I was interested in, the ethereal and the everyday. It's my version of high/low. Come to think of it, in many ways, my work along with the work of the other Pictures artists presaged the current digital age.

**DM:** In what ways?

**PS:** We were all working with found, commercial images as if they were a fluid medium that could be bent, twisted, cut up and changed. We considered images to be a malleable medium just as one would use clay or paint. Just to give you an idea of how radical this point of view was, you have to remember that back then, images were fixed. By that I mean that all of us were passive consumers of images. Images were fed to us and we digested them in exactly the form and context in which they were presented. Images were found in print or in the movies or on television and that was that. People could not grab an image and make it their own the way a kid today can grab an image off the internet change it, distort it and create a T-shirt or mouse pad or whatever else with an image pulled from the internet ether. As I said, images were fixed, they belonged to someone else and needed to be observed and consumed in the way someone else determined.

I think all of us at Pictures were anticipating and working along these lines to yank images from their defined and frozen context and reanimate them to mean something else. We were performing alchemy with the images that we were inhaling.

This idea of transformation or transmutation of images has always provided powerful mythology for religion and alchemy and is now accessible to everyone in the digital age. In many ways, as images and their medium become more and more intangible (books printed on paper give way to digital books), we move closer to a change in consciousness, but that's a very different and complicated discussion. Basically, as things like books, images and movies move from physical objects to ethereal collections of numbers that you cannot touch or feel, we will begin to experience more ethereal realms of consciousness as well. The *Pictures* exhibition also anticipated that images would re-emerge as primary modes of communication beyond the written word. Related artists such as Sarah Charlesworth's newspaper piece in which she eliminates all the text and just the images remain is in part about this idea. And, we wanted to point out that images could mean many things, not just one meaning determined by someone else.

So the Pictures artists said, "let's rip this image from its known and expected context and put it somewhere else in some other way and create our own meaning or, even more importantly, let the viewer create their own meaning." For example, Sherrie Levine pulled Lincoln's silhouette off the penny and reconfigured it on graph paper in day glow colors. You could almost say that her images were the precursor of digitized images. In her own way she was creating pixilated images. Each one of the Pictures artists was in effect saying, "yes, you the image makers have fed me this image but I'm going to reinvent it and its meaning." Even though this image was created by someone else to mean something very specific, I am freeing this image to mean anything. It was a very subtle but highly subversive act. This might sound like no big deal today but in the pre-digital society of 1977 this was extremely radical and revolutionary. We anticipated the power of cultural imagery at a time when the art world was trying to erase all meaning and imagery through minimalism and conceptual art. The Pictures group was looking in a totally different direction and working on a much more visionary level.

**DM:** Can you elaborate on the process of how these large drawings were created?

**PS:** They were all sourced from the thousands and thousands of black and white negatives that I had taken and were lying around the studio floor. I would work at night, when it was dark. I seemed to concentrate better at night. They were drawn in pencil and looked like a storyboard for some abstract movie. Then the line drawings were covered in oil stick or pastel, which I subsequently scraped off with a razor blade. Removing the oil stick or oil pastel in this way would blur the pencil line so that the image became less distinct and more like a memory or apparition. Erasure and blurring continues to be a significant aspect of my working process even today. By erasing or blurring the image, it gently unhinges the image from its original context, opening the door for the viewer to read it in a new way.

If I think about it, perhaps the erasure owes a partial debt to Bob Rauschenberg and the beautiful, evocative images that exist in his *Dante's Inferno* drawings that look like they have been erased. Also, erasing creates ghost-like images that linger as being there and not there. When I was growing up, my father, who was a psychic healer, was always talking to dead people whom I couldn't see, and this might have something to do with these slightly erased images that appear as apparitions and spectral memories of what was previously there.

**DM:** The act of drawing continues to play a major role in your work.

**PS:** To me, it's "mark making," which has been a fundamental human need forever. Since who knows when, humans have made a mark and told stories using an incised line. With a line that conveyed information, it was the first time that humans could relay information that continued to be communicated even though the originator was no longer present. There's something very human about a line. It's incredibly simple, economical, elegant and richly communicative. Lines help us create maps, record information, create schematics and on and on.

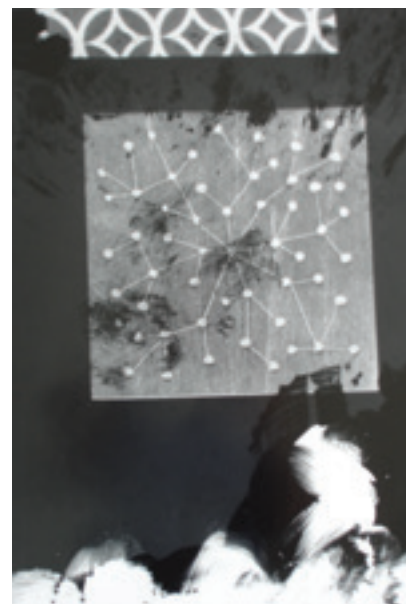
Of course, now that we are in the digital era, line making is fading quickly as that's not how we convey information. So I am working with a disappearing technique. Line and drawing will soon go the way of Morse code.

**DM:** So how is your work different today?

**PS:** As I said earlier, it is and it isn't. I still use found images, only now I draw directly into paint rather than onto paper. Even though I'm working with paint, I still consider the final piece as a drawing rather than a painting. I actually spent years researching and developing these canvases and paints so that they could function like drawings. It sounds simple but it isn't. In the studio, I spend weeks preparing the canvas so that it is ultra smooth and absorbent and functions like a piece of paper. Next, I prepare the paint using cold waxes and a variety of exotic plant oils to control the paint density and drying time so that I can work and erase for up to several weeks. The result is that the canvas becomes a kind of blackboard where I can draw and erase in a very automatic way. When I first stand in front of a canvas, I feel like I'm one of those physics professors in a movie who is looking to explain the red shift and the existence of space beyond the known solar system. I just start "writing" with images until a "formula" comes into view. Once that formula or story line is established, then the painting starts to dictate what it needs from me in order to be complete. I can honestly say, I don't make these paintings alone, if in fact, I really make them at all. There is a kind of trance communication going on that I can never explain and have never been able to control or summon on demand, no matter how hard I try.

**DM:** And then you draw into this mixture of oil and wax?

**PS:** Yes.



35 mm film negative, 1983.

he suggested that I should print them just as they were with all the paint and scratches. He saw them as works in their own right. There's a real patina to them as well as a record of the studio activity with my fingerprints and the coagulation of paint.

I liked James's idea but didn't act on it until several years later. Eventually, I found a really talented darkroom printer and we began to work on the photographs, but it was enormously time consuming and the print process was so complicated that I put that project aside. Recently, I realized that my negatives could simply be scanned just as they are and then printed, which would save all the darkroom work. I usually take the hard way out and avoid using technological shortcuts. But in this case, technology provided a real solution. I liked that the

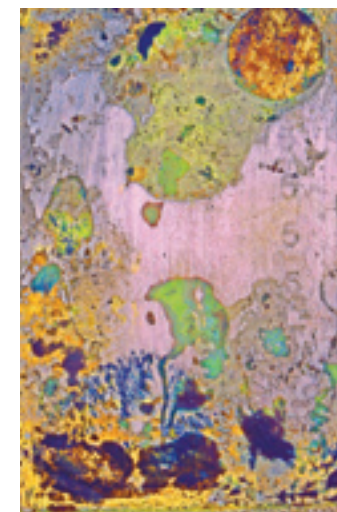
**DM:** You also make photographs.

**PS:** Most of the photography, the act of taking pictures and developing film has to do with creating image sources for the painting. These negatives continue to be the sketchbook for my paintings. But that has changed thanks to James Nares. One day, James came by the studio. I had been buying some of his very early paintings on paper that are still so beautiful and authentic, and I'm so fortunate to have them. James saw the mounds of negatives on the light box, they were covered in paint, torn, scratched and beat up in a way that would horrify any serious photographer. He leaned over the light table and started picking up the slides one by one. Once I explained what they were and how they were used,

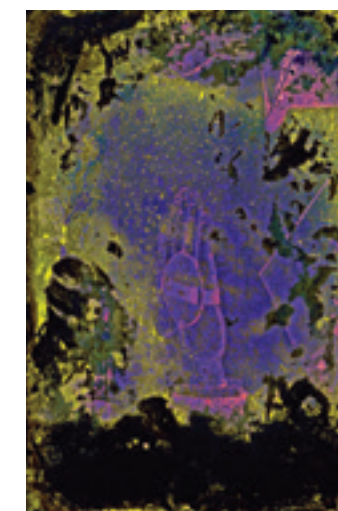
printed photographs originate from 35mm Tri-X negatives. But because of all the encrusted paint and crinkled surfaces, the computer has a nervous breakdown when it scans the negatives and starts throwing random colors at the screen. The psychedelic coloration is beyond my control. We just print it as is. Basically, slipping these crusty negatives into the computer sends it on an acid trip. All the computer's neurons go on hyper-drive and its beautiful logic is completely suspended. The results are randomly colored photographs that look like someone spent weeks doing advanced Photoshop work, but that's not the case.

**DM:** What is the inspiration for your work? While a lot of the images obviously come from pop culture, there's also something haunting and other worldly about the work. They seem to work on many different levels.

**PS:** I had interesting parents, both of whom revered artists. My mother loved to go to exhibitions, she had portraits done and busts created of the family by various artists. All her jewelry was handmade by various artisans. My parents supported artists in whatever way they could. She was always curious about what artists were doing, thinking, making and followed them quite seriously at a time when being interested in art was seen as something almost Unamerican. I can't even imagine what museum attendance was back then. She loved



Number 5, Hypnotized, DNA, Hand, 2012.  
Digitally scanned black and white negative film.



to be wowed by art. For my father, who was an interior decorator before he became a psychic healer, artists were like priests of the most sacred religion. In his eyes, artists were able to take unseen knowledge and make it visible. They made things that no other class of humans could do. For him, making art was the equivalent of making magic, it was conjuring. He himself was a remarkable painter, sculptor and photographer. The idea that art was a career was ridiculous and offensive. For him, art was a calling, very few were chosen and if you were, you had a special responsibility to ignore the hardships of life and carry on with your work.

Whenever he had a little extra money, he would buy work from local and truly starving artists. Now, this is back in the 50s and very few Americans thought about art, much less bought it and supported it. Even though we lived in Miami, which at the time was a segregated Southern town, my parents were members of the Museum of Modern Art, and when the latest exhibition catalog arrived, usually months after the exhibition had closed, we would all sit down and look at it as if it was an illuminated manuscript. Think about how astonishingly radical it was in the fifties for a five-year-old to look at a black and white image of a Giacometti or a Pollock. There were no references in the world that surrounded me to explain these strange things. Yet they were compelling

beyond anything I had ever seen in my short life. These images were a secret language and I wanted in on that. I wanted to speak it and live it. My parents provided me with a very important art education that has guided me my entire life.

**DM:** You took some time off from exhibiting to write a memoir about your family called *Walking Through Walls*. What motivated you to take on this project?

**PS:** My parents were highly unusual people and I felt it was extremely important for people to know about their lives and especially my father's work. They were very rare creatures. Free, joyous, creative spirits with a vision. I felt a tremendous responsibility to my parents to tell their story. After all, they gave me my life, it was the least I could do. The book was an adventure that I never anticipated. I gave myself a year to write the book but it took significantly longer than I ever anticipated. My father left behind an enormous archive of tape recordings, photographs and writings that all needed to be reviewed and processed. Once I started and opened that door, there was no turning back. I had to see it to its conclusion. I continued to paint but did not exhibit because for years after the book was published, I was busy giving lectures and interviews about my father's work.

**DM:** What were these tape recordings?

**PS:** As I alluded to earlier, for much of his life, my father was a high society interior decorator who worked for the presidents of Cuba and Haiti, Jack Dempsey the boxer, Walt Disney, Dean Martin and much of Palm Beach. We had a sort of jet set life. Then, one day in the

sixties, he discovered that he could heal people of any disease. He was truly a miracle worker. This was at a time when there was no Lipitor, no CAT scans, no MRIs, no gene therapy. Basically, if you were terminally ill, you went home to die because the doctors could not help you. But these are the people who came to my father to be cured. And he did cure them. The crippled could walk and the blind could see, for real. But the medical authorities didn't like what he was doing, taking away business from the doctors even though he never charged a penny for his work, so he would frequently be arrested for practicing medicine without a license. He knew what he did was strange and not accepted so he started tape recording his healings, his lectures and his phone conversations as a document of his activities. Even though everyone thought he was crazy, he knew that something had happened to him that didn't happen to most people and he wanted to make sure there was a record. It was from these tape recordings that I wrote a great deal of the book.

**DM:** Sounds like a movie.

**PS:** Showtime acquired the rights for a series and they just finished the pilot script. It could be an interesting project that will help open people's minds about the reality of other realities. Interesting how my family might be reincarnated on the small screen. In a funny way, my life becoming a television series is a reversal of the Pictures paradigm.

**DM:** How so?

**PS:** Pictures artist becomes TV instead of TV becoming Pictures art.

**DM:** So growing up in this supernatural household explains the mysterious metaphysical feeling that emanates from the work.

**PS:** My father taught me a lot of what he did and wanted me to carry on his healing and spiritual practice. But I wanted to be an artist. His being and his teachings are definitely in everything I do creatively. When Andy said something to the effect of, "if you want to know anything about me, just look at the paintings, it's all there," he wasn't wrong. I don't think people can make work that is not connected to and reflective of who they are. In Tibet and Nepal the monks create thangkas, which are paintings that depict the life and teachings of the Buddha. But they also function as devotional images and can impart a blessing or some enlightenment onto the viewer. I hope in some way that my paintings are able to convey more than a visual stimulus to the viewer, that there is an energy exchange. I do think that there is a palpable presence in my paintings. In many ways, I feel connected to everyone who has my paintings in their home. We are in some ethereal way, living together. I just don't make product for sale. Something else is at work.

**DM:** Has writing the book had any impact on the paintings?

**PS:** I think so. For many years the paintings were dense skeins of disparate images woven together in a somewhat hallucinogenic web. There was no center or anchor, it was everywhere and nowhere. It was as if you were surrounded by and drowning in these images, almost as if your life were passing before your eyes. With the book, I had to learn to be highly specific in what I was trying to say. In painting you can be very obtuse and open ended, but not so with the written word. The book helped my thinking to become more organized much in the same way my karate training has done. In the martial arts, you don't have a second chance to hit the target because if you miss the first time, you most likely will end up

dead from your attacker. So, when you are in a situation, you aim to resolve it immediately and not waver in your intent or become distracted. When I was still a white belt, I was thrashing all over the place and the teacher told me, "there are no extraneous moves in karate, you must always hit the target, your life depends upon it." I immediately started thinking, "what is extraneous in my work?" It took me years to process this idea and finally get the paintings to talk without extraneous images. As a result, the newer paintings are much more succinct. They seem a bit more pop in their imagery and structured in a way like poems or haiku. They are much tighter.

**DM:** Are they in any way autobiographical?

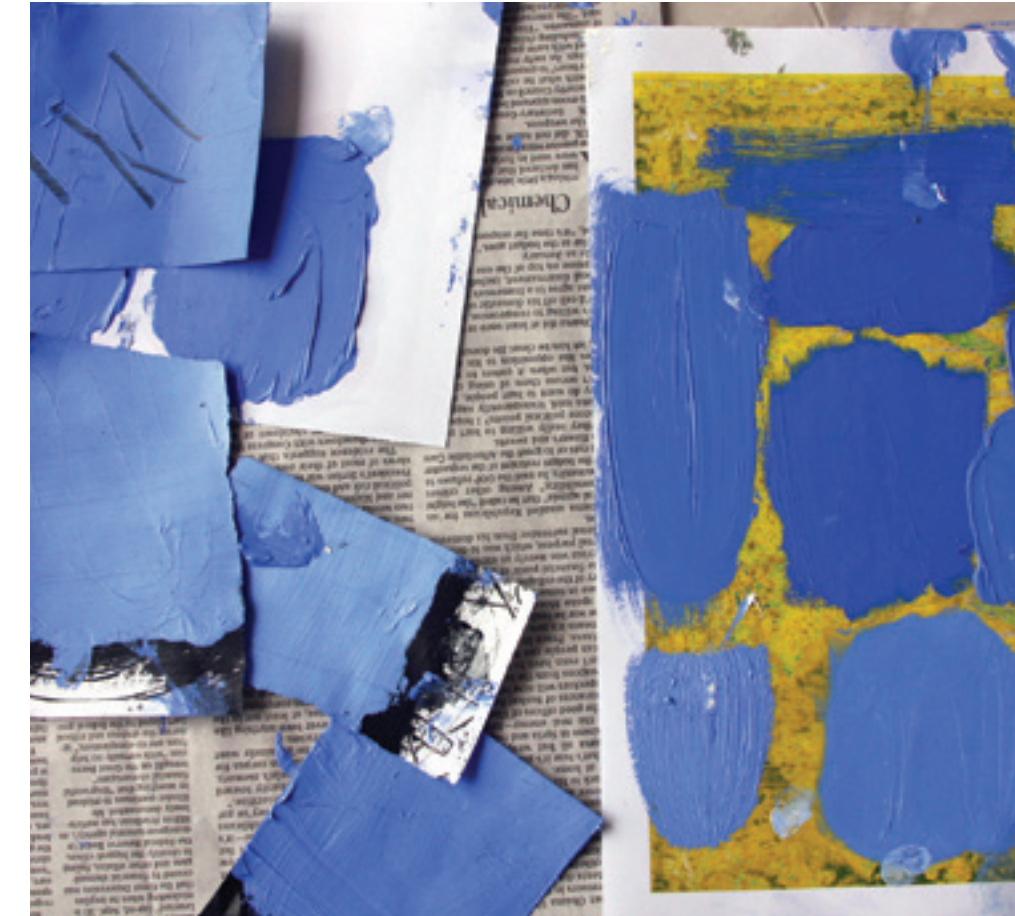
**PS:** In many ways they are. On one level, they function like tarot card readings. The cards are dealt and they can mean anything to anyone but they also mean something very specific only to you and your life or to me and my life. So, for example, even though three people may each get the seven of wands card in a reading, the card does have its fixed meaning but it also means something very specific to that person at that time. The images in the painting function in a similar way. There are times that I'm trying to figure something out in my life and when I finish the painting the answer is clearly laid out for me by the images. It's always astonishing. The paintings talk to me, they are living things. I sense that those who live with the paintings have similar feelings.

If you think about it, all the materials, the wood in the stretcher, the cotton in the canvas, the minerals and the oil in the paint all came from living sources that once required air, water, sunshine or magnetic energy from the earth to be created. And now, these materials are orchestrated by me with my energy, so, of course, the paintings are living things.

**DM:** Do you still consider yourself a Pictures artist?

**PS:** I'm sure that my work can have a range of labels affixed to it and Pictures artist is certainly one of them. People forget that there were only five of us in the *Pictures* exhibition yet that exhibition and the ideas that we put forth have had a profound impact on how art is thought about, made and viewed. My methodology of using found images and reinventing or isolating their meaning is an important part of what that exhibition was about. So, yes, I'm a Pictures artist based on being in that particular exhibition and the way I work. But I'm also all kinds of other types of artist as well. However, while the Pictures philosophy still informs the core of my work, hopefully my work has evolved beyond just commenting on the sea of manufactured images that surrounds us and has become something richer and more meaningful. I would hope that both myself as an artist and my work have evolved far beyond a single exhibition that occurred in 1977. Don't tell anyone but sometimes I dream of being a big, messy abstract painter but that just never seems to happen. It looks like so much fun.

*Doug McClellmont is a New York based curator and contributing editor for ART + AUCTION His writing appears frequently in art publications and websites from Huffington Post to ARTnews.*



Studio, 2013.



## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Whitney Museum of American Art  
Boston Museum of Fine Arts  
Dallas Museum of Art  
Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute  
Detroit Institute of Art  
Houston Museum of Fine Art  
Miami Art Museum  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Milwaukee  
Harn Museum of Art  
Bass Art Museum  
Addison Gallery  
Bard College Center  
Norton Gallery of Art  
Siemens Kultur Stiftung  
Chase Manhattan Bank  
New York Public Library

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Philip Smith: Sign Language*, New York, NY

2008  
Rosenbaum Contemporary, *Philip Smith, Boca Raton, FL*

2002  
Museum of Modern Art, *Philip Smith*, Passau, Germany

2001  
Baldwin Gallery, *The White Paintings*, Aspen, CO  
Kevin Bruk Gallery, *Philip Smith*, Miami, FL  
American Contemporary Art, *Young Art From New York*, Munich, Germany

2000  
American Contemporary Art, *Philip Smith*, Munich, Germany

1999  
David Klein Gallery, *Philip Smith*, Detroit, Michigan

1998  
Baldwin Gallery, *Philip Smith*, Aspen, CO  
Danese Gallery, *Philip Smith Paintings*, New York, NY  
ACA Munich, *New Paintings*, Munich, Germany

1995  
ACA Munich, *Recent Paintings*, Munich, Germany  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Recent Paintings*, New York, NY

1994  
Beth Urdang, *Recent Paintings*, Boston, Massachusetts

1993  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Recent Paintings*, New York, NY

1992  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Philip Smith: Recent Paintings*, New York, NY  
Center For the Fine Arts, *Philip Smith*, Miami FL

1991  
Barbara Gillman Gallery, *Philip Smith: New Paintings*, Miami FL

1990  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Philip Smith*, New York, NY

1988  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Philip Smith*, New York, NY

1985  
Art Palace, *Philip Smith: New Paintings*, New York, NY

1983  
Gabriele Bryers Gallery, *Philip Smith*, New York, NY

1982  
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, *Philip Smith*, New York, NY

1979  
Miami Dade Community College, South Campus Gallery, *Philip Smith*, Miami FL

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013  
The Carlton, *Drawing on Habit: An Ambition*, curated by Saul Ostrow, Miami Beach, FL

2012  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Paper Band*, curated by Stephanie Buhmann, New York, NY  
Leila Heller Gallery, *Young Collectors*, New York, NY

2005  
*Beijing International Arts Biennale*, Beijing, China

2004  
J Johnson Gallery, *Contemporary New York*, curated by Nabil Nahas, Jacksonville Beach, FL

2003  
Feigen Contemporary, *OnLine*, New York, NY

2002  
The Drawing Center, *25th Anniversary Benefit Selections Exhibition*, New York, NY  
*Art Downtown: New York Painting and Sculpture*, curated by Richard Marshall, New York, NY

2001  
Artists Space, *Pictures*, New York, NY

2000  
Danese Gallery, *Reconfiguration*, New York, NY

1998  
Danese Gallery, *Drawings*, New York, NY

1996  
Harn Museum, *From the Permanent Collection*, Gainesville, FL  
ACA Munch, *Group Show*, Munich, Germany  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Works on Paper*, New York, NY

1994  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Summer Group Show*, New York, NY  
Barney's, *Red Windows*, New York, NY  
Pediatric AIDS Foundation's *Kids for Kids*, curated by Jennifer Bartlett  
*Art Against Aids Japan*, curated by Richard Marshall, Tokyo, Japan  
Yokohama, Japan; Sogetsu Art Gallery, Tokyo Japan; Thread Waxing Space, New York, NY  
Edobori Gallery, *Contemporary Artists in New York*, Osaka, Japan

1993  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *New Works*, New York, NY  
The Drawing Center, *The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*, New York, NY.  
Traveled to Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Fundacion para el Arte  
Conteporaneo, Mexico City, Mexico; Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA; Forum for  
Contemporary Art, St. Louis MO  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Summer Group Show*, New York, NY  
Jaffe Baker Gallery, *Three from New York*, Boca Raton, FL

1991  
Jason McCoy Gallery *Faces*, New York, NY  
Whitney Museum of American Art, *Biennial*, New York, NY  
Nina Freudenheim Gallery, *Black & White*, Buffalo, NY  
Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, *Figuring Abstraction*, New York, NY  
Hill Gallery, *Painting, Sculpture, Drawing*, Birmingham, MI  
Albright-Knox, *Members Gallery, New York Collection 1991-92*, Buffalo, NY  
Janice Charach Epstein Musuem Gallery, *The Art of Collecting*, West Bloomfield, MI  
Pace Gallery, *BAM Art Sale*, New York, NY

1990  
The Artists Museum, *Construction in Progress, Back in Lodz*, 1990, organized by Ryszard Wasko, Lodz, Poland

1989  
Jason McCoy Gallery, *Group Exhibition*, New York, NY  
Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, *Whatever It Is: Beckman, DiPalma, Mosset, Rios, Schuyff, Smith*, New York, NY

1988  
Schreiber Cutler Gallery, *Painterly Paintings*, New York, NY  
Florida State University Gallery & Museum,  
*National Endowment for the Arts 1987-1988 Awards*, Tallahassee, FL.  
Traveled to: Pensacola Museum of Art  
*GMHC Contemporary Art Auction*, Sotheby's, New York

1987  
Gabrielle Bryers Gallery, *From Private Collections*, New York, NY  
Holly Solomon Gallery, *Art Against AIDS*, New York, NY  
1986  
Brooklyn Museum, *Public & Private, Print Biannual*, Brooklyn, NY. Traveled to:  
Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

1985  
La Foret Museum, *Correspondences*, curate by Nicholas Moufarrege, Tokyo  
Art Palace, *Group Exhibition*, New York, NY  
*GMHC Art Auction*, Sotheby's New York, NY

1984  
Charles Cowles Gallery, *Totem*, New York, NY  
Artists Space, *A Decade of Art*, curated by Linda Cathcart, New York, NY  
Monique Knowlton, *Ecstasy*, curated by Nicholas Moufarrege, New York, NY

1983  
Monique Knowlton *Intoxication*, curated by Nicholas Moufarrege, New York, NY  
Artists Space, *Hundreds of Drawings*, New York, NY

1982  
The Drawing Center, *New Drawing in America*, New York, NY  
Larry Gagosian Gallery, *Group Show*, Los Angeles, CA  
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, *Young Americans*, New York, NY  
Contemporary Arts Museum, *The Americans: The Collage*, Houston, TX

1980  
The Drawing Center, *Group Show*, New York, NY  
Brooke Alexander Gallery, *Illustration & Allegory*, curated by Carter Ratcliff, New York, NY

1978  
*William Wegman, Jon Borofsky, Lois Lane, Susan Rothenberg, Jennifer Bartlett, Philip Smith* curated by Douglas  
Baxter, Philadelphia YMCA, Philadelphia, PA

1977/8  
Artists Space, *Pictures*, New York, NY. Traveled to Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, OH; Los Angeles  
Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; University of Colorado, Boulder, CO

1976  
Julian Pretto Gallery, *Concert*, with Lucio Pozzi, New York, NY

1975  
Artists Space, *Still Stories*, New York, NY

## PUBLICATIONS

*Walking Through Walls; A Memoir*, by Philip Smith, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008

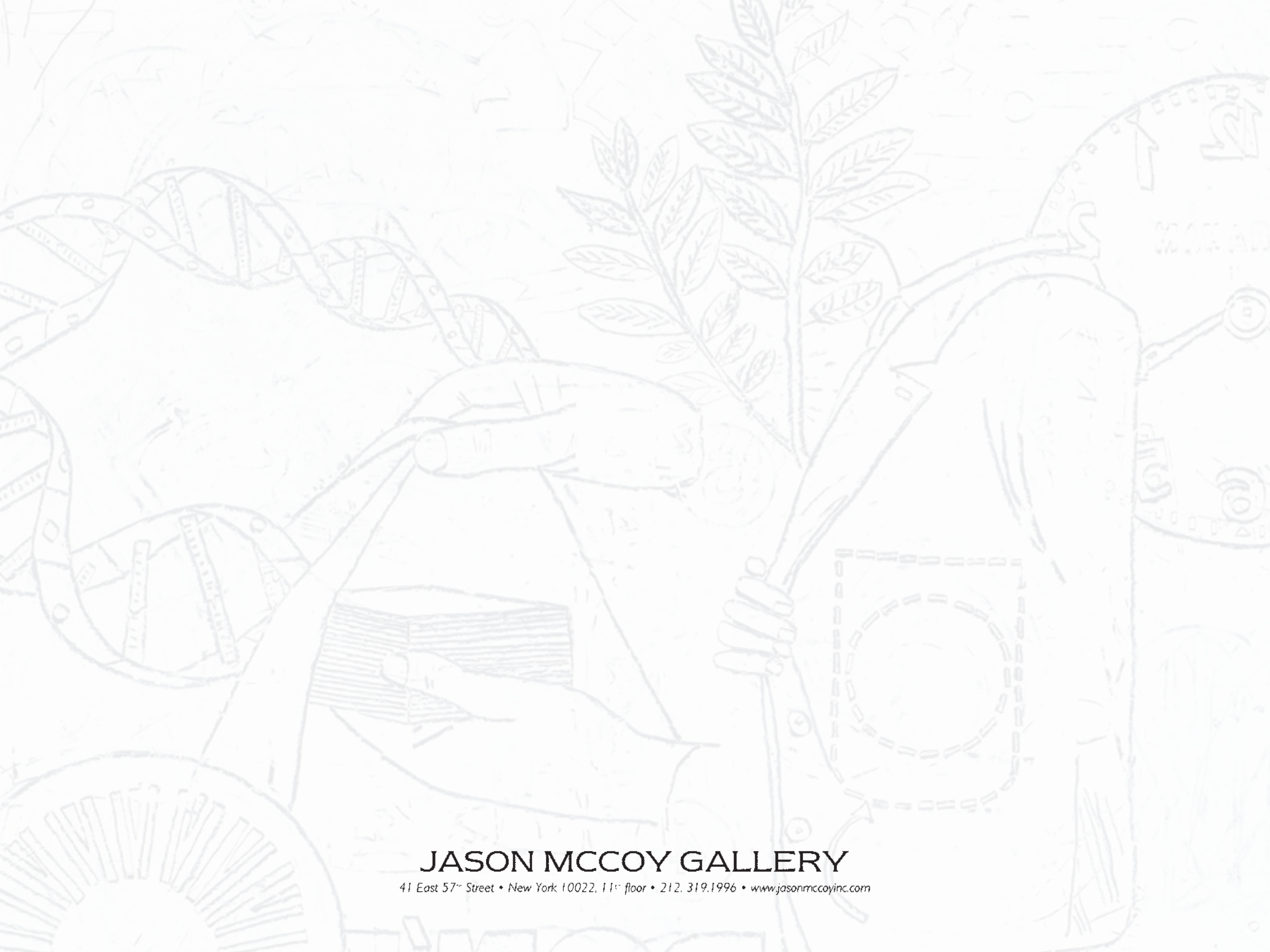
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*Art in America*  
*Art News*  
*Bomb Magazine*  
*The Paris Review*

## AWARDS

1987  
National Endowment for the Arts





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