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Tangled Hair: Uncertain Fluid Identity

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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Abstract

This dossier consists of three chapters. Chapter one is an extended artist statement within which I discuss a very particular notion of identity that acknowledges its fluidity and ever-shifting qualities. Further in this chapter, I address my studio practice processes and its overall development, as well as making a detailed comparison with Roni Horn's drawings and also Mona Hatoum's artwork. Chapter two is a documentation of selected works that I have made in the studio during my two-year candidacy at Western University. Each work is accompanied by a brief description. Chapter three is a case study on Shirin Neshat's photography project, *Women of Allah*. In this chapter I analyze why her work has been misunderstood, citing two main reasons: the title of the work and the stereotypes around the Chador. The first creates ambiguity because of the use of the word Allah, and the second is based on inaccurate assumption about Muslim women.

Keywords
Identity, Fluidity, Metastable, Uncertainty, Mona Hatoum, Roni Horn, Drawing, Cutting, Dismemberment, fragmentation, Human body, Hair, Ink, Paper, Shirin Neshat, Chador, Muslim women, Cultural identity, lineage, Iranian Revolution.

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Introduction

This Masters of Fine Arts dossier consists of three main components that support my final thesis exhibition, entitled, “I am not I, almost never. Ink Drawings”, at DNA Artspace, London, Ontario, which takes place August 25th to September 24th, 2015. These components together speculate on both the seeming uncertainty and also the sense of fluidity that engagements with issues and ideas concerning identity invoke. In my thinking, and according to the authors I cite, identity often “shapes” itself into new forms, depending on the many different variables influencing it (i.e. history, culture, time, and place).

The three elements of this dossier are: a Comprehensive Artist Statement, my Practice Documentation, and a Writing component in the form of a Case Study.

In the early stages of my research, I studied Shirin Neshat’s first photography project, *Women of Allah*, an important body of work that helped make her a prominent contemporary artist. This photography project has a particular focus on Iranian identity, before and after the Iranian revolution. In the case study, I analyze how Neshat’s artwork has been misread for two main reasons; one is the misunderstanding of the Chador, and the other is owing to the title of the project. The research involved in this study allowed me to employ a more intense focus and personal motivation in my art practice, and to situate myself regarding my own position as an artist with a somewhat similar history to Shirin Neshat: I am also an Iranian-born artist living in North America. Perhaps most importantly, this research provided me the

knowledge that identity can be complicated, both to the self, as well as to others with different histories.

My Comprehensive Artist Statement describes how I began my project, at first based on my ruminations on personal identity, and then later when I arrived at a more particular notion of identity that acknowledges its fluidity and ever-shifting qualities. In my statement, I compare my artistic process with Roni Horn's drawing and cutting processes. The American artist uses cutting and slicing procedures to make a new work of art out of multiple artworks. In doing so, she gives a new purpose to her work. Similar to that approach, I use cutting to repurpose previously drawn gestural lines to generate new artworks. Another comparison made in my artist statement involves linking the use of human hair in Mona Hatoum's work with my own work. Hatoum brings a new dimension to her artwork by using human hair as an art material – employing the human body as a source of expressive matter.

Part of my statement is dedicated to explaining how each of my decisions in making an artwork is related to the concept of fluidity regarding identity. I explain how I have used the language of drawing, with the deployment of different materials, to express my thinking processes. There are three important elements to my artwork: the drawing of line, cutting paper, and manipulating hair. Each element is discussed separately regarding its purpose in my project.

The last part of this dossier consists of my documentation of my studio-based research. The images included are documentations of my more developed works produced during my two-year candidacy. The images are chronological from the beginning of my research at Western

University to the artworks that are being shown in the final exhibition. Each image is accompanied by its title, a brief description of the work, a comment on how process decisions were made, and its date of production.

My core interest throughout the following dossier is to generate a discussion about the complexity of identity, either self-identity or identity associated with lineage and land. Both my Artist Statement and my Case Study discuss different aspects influencing identity with respect to such complexity. The images and objects that I make in my studio practice elaborate this complexity, fluidity, and uncertainty through a variety of visual forms. But ultimately, my works are made to propose this speculation about identity as something that can be felt, seen, and, importantly, talked about.

Comprehensive Artist Statement

Seeking Identity

My studio-based research has in the past several years been inspired by the idea of a *sense of uncertainty* with respect to forms of knowledge perceived and produced by human beings. The core of my art project has become focused on ideas about a particular form of uncertainty regarding identity.

Since the beginnings of modernity, perhaps most specifically in the West, it has been a significant task for individuals to ask (and then to recognize), "Who am I?" Importantly in this regard, knowledge is a set of perspectives rather than a singular view. So, it is my observation that, in light of this reality, fragmentations, discontinuities, and chaos are emphasized in the search for a sense of identity, instead of a preoccupation with order and coherence.

Walter Keuntzel suggests that gaining knowledge about the self, self-definition, is the "primary task of an individual."(87) In my own journey to understand my identity, I have experienced chaos and a plurality of views. Based on those experiences, I ultimately choose to accept that there is no "right and wrong", specifically regarding identity; the two co-exist, side-by-side.

* * * * * *

I grew up in an environment where I had to define my identity in private and public spaces differently. I did not know what identity meant, but I had a clear sense of the fact that I had to be a different person in these two spaces. It was clear to me that one context was for real and

the other one was for "pretending". To be more precise, inasmuch as I have difficulty explaining it in words even now, intuitively I was able to recognize which context enabled the "real me": the safety of my home. As difficult as it was, and as much as I hated the duality of my existence, it was my life.

> *"In the chaos of my life, the whole divided itself to two slivers of day and night. Although the Sun was there it was dark – at night one can go back home and dream about the rainbow. In the chaos of my life, if a child knew what it takes to grow up, a child would never wish to be a grown up. For a child the whole would not divide. …Whatever it had to take, I grew up in the gloom of the day and the sheen of the night."* [1]

Immigration to Canada in 2002 required me to establish a new sense of self-identity. Although I no longer needed to have "double identities", at the same time, as new circumstances emerged in my life, my social interactions changed, too. Those circumstances awakened my attention to who I was, and who I was becoming. As that was happening, I needed to know what my identity consisted of, what it was "made of." I therefore attempted to figure out how to give my identity a name: how to use language to define my self. Based on the little that I knew, I began by thinking about culture, or better said, values and beliefs associated with geographical boundaries, as a way to begin to articulate my "self." Either Iranian or Iranian-Canadian – one of those labels perhaps would be the name for my identity. Reflecting on it now: quite possibly I chose geographical boundaries because they were the most obvious variables in the project of understanding my identity.

In the period about which I am speaking, only a few years ago, I did not claim to be truly Iranian, since I had left behind my understanding of such an identity at a certain point in time and place, similar to pausing a video and not knowing what will come next, yet remembering

[1] This is part of a writing I wrote about my personal and cultural idenity as part of my undergraduate thesis in 2008.

what has passed before your eyes. As if the Iranian part of my life belonged to another time, my situation became a manifestation of the saying that "once you leave home you never can go back." Despite this, I could not, at that point, offer a coherent definition of Iranian-Canadian identity. How could I when I was not able to locate and comprehend either identity, Iranian or Canadian, fully? How could I locate something in between two indefinable poles? By necessity, though, I had decided *not* to choose "blood and land" as the sole basis of my identity. As much as I was influenced by history and politics related to blood and land, it seemed that my experience was not solely under the influence of such a lineage nor strictly related to ideas about borders. I know now that I only wished then, as I do now, that there were no borders, and for a world were people need not define their identities according to blood, land, right, wrong, or any other binary oppositions. Yet I know this world might only ever exist well beyond my time.

Ever Shifting

My attempt to define myself failed at that point because I was looking for identity as a whole, as something solid, recognizable, and coherent. Every time I attempted to imagine its form, every time I tried to hold and observe it as an entity, it wiggled and changed into a new form. I think that the struggle to locate identity is a game between "time and mind." It is constantly changing from something unknown today, in the direction of something (hopefully) known tomorrow. Gary Indiana interprets this unstable challenge in the context of the notion of a "moment." " *I* am not *I*, almost never: for this moment that is passing, already past, carries its specific weight and lightness. *I* am advancing beyond here and arriving there (but never arriving, never coming to stop, until *it* stops)."(35) We search and seek to find our identity and as soon as we find it, there is a new form on the verge of becoming another. As Jean-Luc

Nancy puts in his short article, *Identity is not a Figure*: identity is perhaps subtler and yet more evasive, in the way that it does not stabilize itself. Perhaps it is strength of identity to be "metastable." "An identity is not something one enters, nor is it something one dresses oneself in, and one cannot identify with one without at the same time modifying it, modalizing it, perhaps transforming it. Identities are never purely stable, nor simply plastic. They are always metastable." (10)

According to Nietzsche, being and becoming are not as related as we suppose. In his imperative claim, "Become what you are!" he implies that becoming does not take aim towards a final state, for: "You are not what you are; you have to become it; and nothing is given to you for this purpose since what you are is nowhere but at the end of your becoming and at that point you will not be there anymore." (19)

Given these assertions that resonate with my own thinking, I have come to think that, without insisting on an identified lineage or background, finding my identity and naming it means engaging in a process whereby identity as a concept changes into a question of how it shapes *itself*, and how it makes itself apparent. Importantly, in this regard, I no longer require the project of identity formation to be imprisoned within my own hands in order to be discovered. Indeed, I do not wish to *name* it, since the more I try to label it with words, the more readily I reduce its numerous dimensions, the more quickly I label and categorize its oppositions. By doing that, I make identity flat and tame. No longer chaotic and true, I must thus inhabit a position whereby I will simply try to observe *identity in process*, over the passing of time.

Drawing oneself

My fascination with our human ability to image the invisible motivates me to make images and objects, which I conceive of as existing in a destabilized realm; a space of speculation. I begin this creative work by observing and probing identity through gesture and behavior, and also by pondering memory. This is not for the sake of defining or naming identity according to specifics, but to question it and possibly to move closer to understanding it.

The process of making art in the studio acts as a metaphor for becoming. The moment "arises," and the art as an object is born, created, it happens. In doing so, it appears to implicitly demand an identity; it behaves and communicates in its own way, with its own gestures, yet is related to the maker and the environment in which it is produced. Once the moment arises, the "not being able to go back" is established. There is then only one way to go: forward. Once one is born, one cannot help but exist.

"To exist is to sketch onself [*s'esquisser*]. One would like to write *s'esquisser* __to open oneself to a form which shows itself in the movement of its uprising. No one would consent to live if they did not experience this desire __ to open oneself to the desire of (letting oneself be) drawn to the outside."[2] To draw is a choice to outline and therefore recognize the self it admits into existence, both the existence of the body and the fact of art as metaphor. In the studio, drawing is a clarification of thought. It is a way to research. Or, as Paulo Herkenhoff says, "Drawing is an act of dismemberment." (27) Importantly, this does not mean drawing dismembers in order to treat each constituent part in exclusion of every other part. Rather, drawing is a practice that allows the artist to perceive and produce (or vice versa) each part,

[2] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2013), xiii.

as it belongs to the greater whole. It involves searching for fragments, order, chance, and discontinuities, then juxtaposing them to compound the meaning, in the interest of the whole.

Dismemberment

One of the ways one attempts to recognize the value of the fragment is through reduction, cropping, or dismemberment. For example, in Figure 6, *Inked #4*, in order to produce information, I used a masking out technique to reduce information from the background. The masking tape appears in the pattern of the grid that emphasizes order and coherence, yet later is disturbed by chaotic lines of different thicknesses. And in Figure 8, *Soaked #2,* the metaphorical suggestion of order is more disturbed. This example is not as simple as Figure 6. This time I soaked the gauze in masking fluid to create a new masking material. Here the marks and traces are very delicate, inviting the viewer closer to the surface for a more intimate investigation. These metaphors concerning order and involving the grids, keep the other elements of the drawing, such as lines, shapes, and the addition of strands of hair, together. They manage to keep the identity of the whole together while looking like everything is on the verge of dispersing. There seems to be a very similar attempt in Roni Horn's drawings; Herkenhoff talks about the economy of Horn's composition: "A drawing organizes a whole in tense confrontation with atomistic perception. By resisting pulverization, a Horn drawing is an effort against entropy." (31) If we imagine the whole as a physical object, those grids then need to change and move alongside the rest of the elements in order to keep the whole together. The whole, here, is a metaphor for identity and its quality of metastability.

As an artist I recognize that another way to reduce the whole is to crop and cut. Roni Horn's drawings have inspired me to think about cropping as drawing. Cutting creates a line at the same time that it divides the plane into multiples. In Horn's drawings, edges of the planes become part of the whole while they are aligned with other edges. The whole is held together by "different stages of nearness. One or two drawing(s) is reduced to geometric pieces and reembodied in a compound drawing" (29). The way I use cropping is different, but for a similar purpose. Cutting is an act of creating fragments of the whole. One drawing becomes multiples pieces. It enables the idea of uncertainty and possibilities of plural perspectives rather than one complete whole. Unlike Horn, I follow the gestures of the lines rather than cutting geometric shapes. By doing that, I hope to retain a sense of the "ground" on which my work is based to better see the patterns and matrices of order in the body's muscle memory of certain gesture and marks. [3] Like Horn, I juxtapose those pieces to create a new being. This action is a metaphor for my attempt to respond to the assertion, "you have to become what you are," and is arguably a practice of "becoming" in the studio. In Figure 14, *Tangled #1*, it is clear that I emphasize the cut by neighboring cut gestural lines with immediate and direct lines on the main ground of the drawing. I emphasize discontinuity vs. coherence while reorganizing the gestural lines. The gestures here become irregular, moving to appear as continuous movements in the actual drawings.

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[3] An example of muscle memory would be how we retain our personal way to write and how our personal experiences differentiate our writing from that of others, except when we purposely control it. Calligraphy and text is an important part of education in most Iranian upbringings, as in few other cultures. It is very apparent that many of gestural lines in my drawings resemble Farsi calligraphy. I agree with Pruesse on how language informs our sense of who we are: "Language, words, speech become objects jettisoned out of the body and entering into the body through the senses. The internal and external world meet; become entangled via the transitional zones of our body – its passageways and senses. These zones and the things that pass through them are charged with significance and become important elements in how we conceptualize the self." (7) Calligraphy is perhaps informed by external world and also fueled by internal inducements, a product of body and language.

Body (hair), gesture, memory

Hair is a protein filament that grows from skin. People often employ specific approaches towards hair, such as the wearing of certain hairstyles and the covering of hair, to indicate personal attitudes and beliefs or social positions related to, for example, gender, religion, and age. In so doing, they actively use this part of the body to identify themselves, and to define their social position. But, when this part of the body detaches from the body, it becomes an object. So, an object that is no longer attached to the human body can become an abject thing and serve a drawing: to act in the form of a line. Filled with personal and social information, a strand of hair in my drawings is a tool: an art medium.

Kym Pruesse expands on the idea of something becoming abject, and our attitude to body parts attached to or detached from our bodies: "… these abject things are not to be consumed … of course it is this expulsion, this abjection that causes our distress. These abject things were once us, part of who we are, but once they cross the threshold of the body, they are "other", they become objects, abject". (7)

Although I think hair can become an art medium to produce a drawing, and when this occurs it is no longer alive and attached to the human body, I understand that it is still *from* a human body and therefore has an extra dimension beyond the fact that it "becomes" a line, like one drawn with ink or graphite. Hair helps me to challenge the viewer by removing two-dimensional drawings from the world of simulated images and displacing them into the realm of objects and tactility. Hair may function as line, but everyone is aware that it is either pulled out/cut or falls and is then collected from a body. Prior to functioning as part of a drawing vocabulary (line), it had a purpose in identifying and defining a person. Regardless

of its functionality before or after the fact of "attachment", hair contains the DNA and thus holds all our information and biological memories, even long after the other parts of the body return back to earth.

Among many artists who used hair as art medium, Mona Hatoum's works influenced my work more than others. The most important and perhaps most relevant artwork by Hatoum in which she used hair as an art medium is her drawing *Untitled (hair grid with knots 3)*. It is a small relatively ordered grid. I am interested in this work for two reasons: surgical dexterity is required to knot strands of human hair and then weave them into a grid; secondly, this piece might seem small and quiet compared to other artworks in a museum, but it is obvious that it took an extremely long time to accomplish such a task. Hatoum's process is very slow and requires precision. This is very similar to my own process in drawing, as I use a very sharp and thin knife to make small cuts into paper, when I am working with hair as line. To remove any trace of evidence that the paper has been manipulated, such as by cutting it with a knife, I use a sharp pin to push back the cut pulp of the paper, to mend the cut after I insert the hair. I want it to look like the hair grows from the paper, as if it originates from the paper and it is still attached to "its body".

Another reason I am interested in Hatoum's *Untitled* is its use of a delicate grid. Recognizing the forty-year gap between Hatoum's work and Agnes Martin's calm grid drawings, I find Hatoum's *Untitled* equally compelling in relation to such earlier work. As in Martin's grid drawings, there is no immediate figure appearing in Hatoum's work. There is a grid that suggests an empty space and no figure. Not only does this locate the pictorial surface, but its being made of "human body parts" gives it added gravitas, for me. As discussed before, there

are many associations surrounding hair: gender, memory, and psychosocial position, among others.

Since I have considered identity as something fluid and metastable, I have reached the conclusion that I can never truly know who I am in the present moment. It is this same uncertainty and fluidity that keeps me motivated and engaged in the studio. It allows me to embrace unpredictable possibilities when I create a work. With this in mind, I can assert the analogy that this knowledge as a whole is so large that no matter where I stand I would never be able to see it thoroughly. What is possible for me is to stand close and observe the details. My attempt in the studio is to deepen my observations and challenge my thoughts. Practicing in the studio allows me to express my thoughts and intuitions, and more importantly, to turn back and learn from the work.

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Practice Documentation

Fig. 1, Remembered #2, 2013, Ink on paper, wood and metal structure, 4’ x 7’

This installation is from a series of figurative drawings on paper that were drawn loosely, often wet on wet, and then cut and installed in different distance from the wall. They are attempts to create broken and uncertain information related to memory and remembering.

Fig. 2, Remembered #2, 2013, Ink and silk thread on paper, wood, metal, and string structure, 4’ x 8’

This piece was drawn less loosely, more true to imagined visual memory. It was drawn on four separate papers then each paper was installed at a different depth. The second paper was removed from the piece and replaced by two inked papers. The paper created a new texture and curl after ink application. The flowers were hand sewn with white silk threads. The role of hair in relation to identity, human body, and memory first appeared in this work.

Fig. 3, Scattered #2, 2014, Ink and glue on paper, 2’ x 5’

This work is part of the series where the element of hair became more abstracted. The drawing began with a wet on wet process on rice paper. The figures were drawn on a piece of thin paper with a brush to mimic hair and then cut into their specific shapes. Afterwards they were pasted to the rice paper on the front and the back.

Fig. 4, Clogged #2, 2014, Inked paper and human hair, 4”x 5”

This was an attempt to use human hair as an art material and make a “drawing” that does not rely on the flat surface of the paper. The ink was applied to the paper and created a texture. The paper was cut into strips and then woven together. Afterwards, hair strands were added to the work. This piece was used as a model for later drawings.

Fig. 5, Drawn #5, 2014, Woven inked paper, 12” x 15”

For this piece, the paper was cut into long strips and then ink was applied. The long strips made it possible to weave the paper, to create a three dimensional form. Afterwards, the form was pressed to become as flat as possible. Making (weaving) these forms brought the concept of grid to the work.

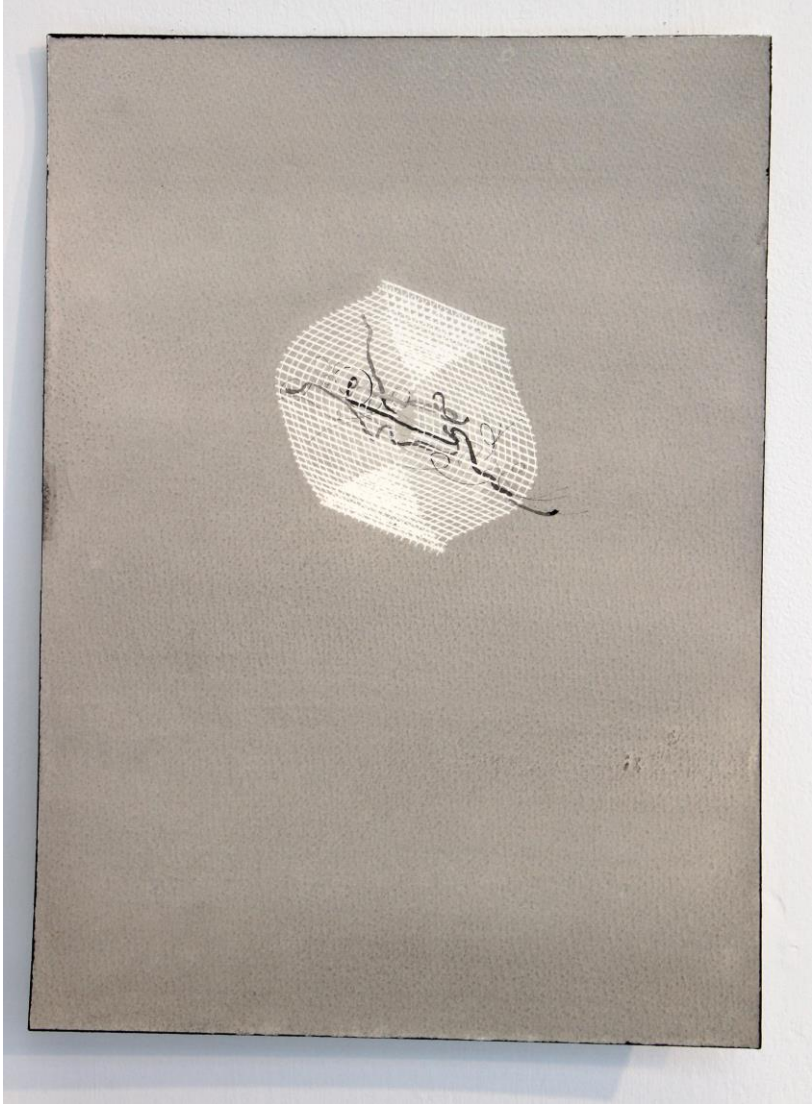

Fig. 6, Inked #4, 2015, Ink and graphite on paper, 10” x 14”

To create this piece, a grid-patterned tape was used to mask out the floating figure in the middle of the frame. To create a desired shape, the tape was reformed before attaching it to the paper. Then the lines and other shapes were added. To install this piece, the bottom corners are not secure to the wall. This is an effort to emphasize the floating quality and the lightness in the figure.

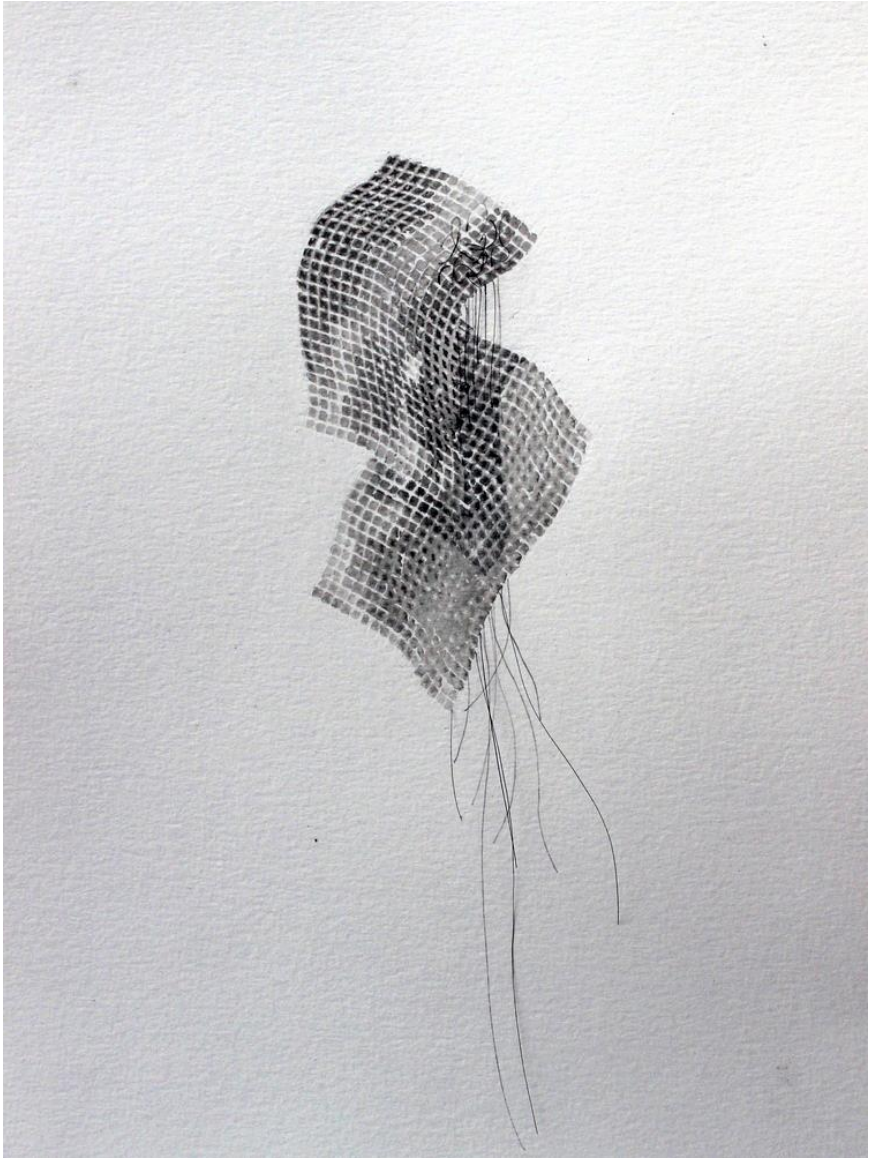

Fig. 7, Drawn #5, 2014, Ink and human hair on paper, 12” x 15”

After making the gridded shapes, human hair was inserted into the paper. The paper was carefully cut and the hair was secured at the back. In addition to human hair, similar lines with similar gesture were added to the work. The suggested gesture of hair and the gridded shapes are meant to give this piece a sense of movement and floating.

Fig. 8, Soaked #2, 2015, Ink on paper, 10” x 14”

Instead of using the gridded tape, a small piece of gauze was soaked in masking fluid and then applied to the paper before the ink wash. The gauze absorbed the surrounding ink while the ink was drying and created a halo around the figure. Afterwards, different lines were drawn to create a tangled complicated shape.

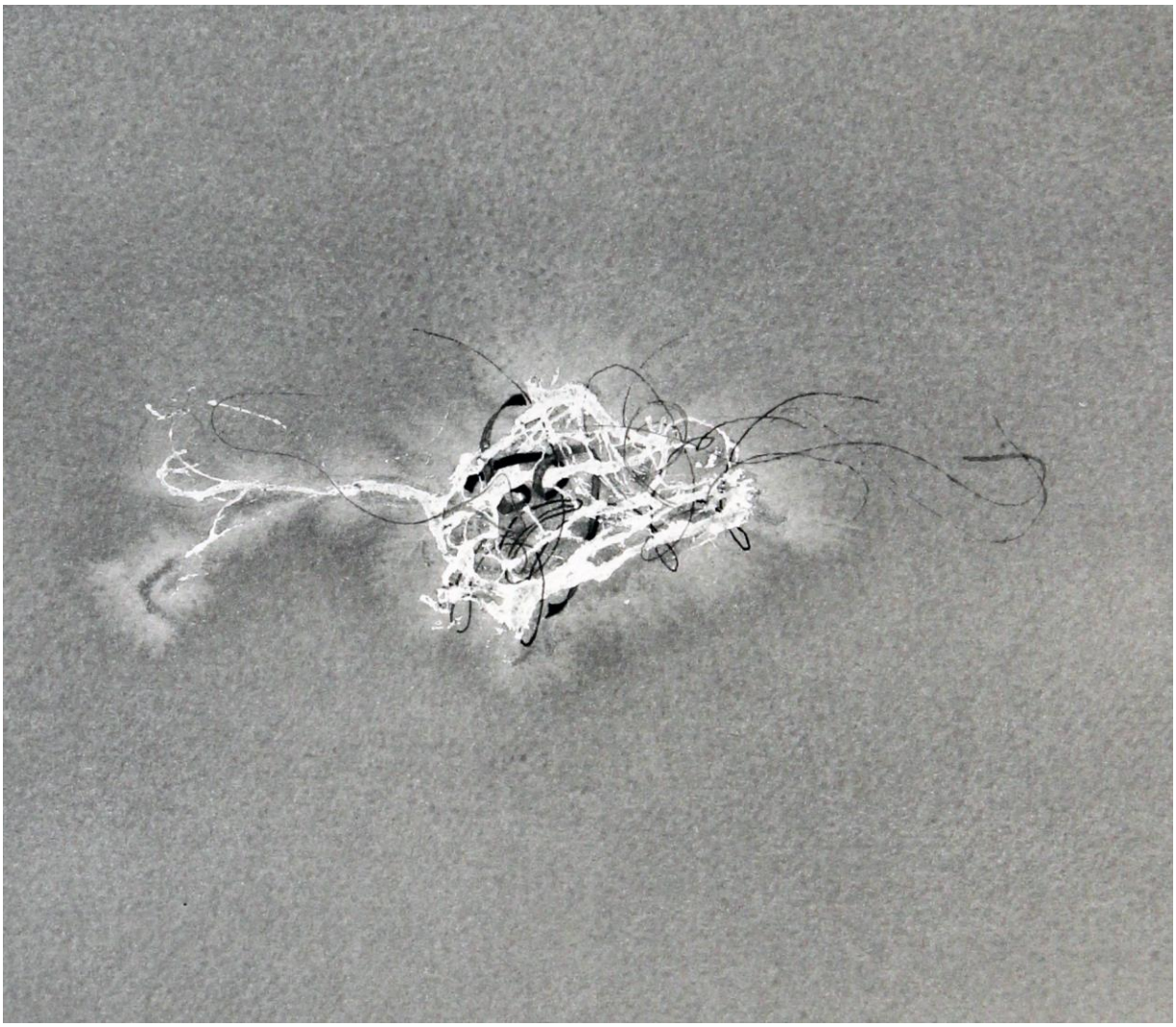

Fig. 9, Soaked #2, 2015, Ink on paper, (detail)

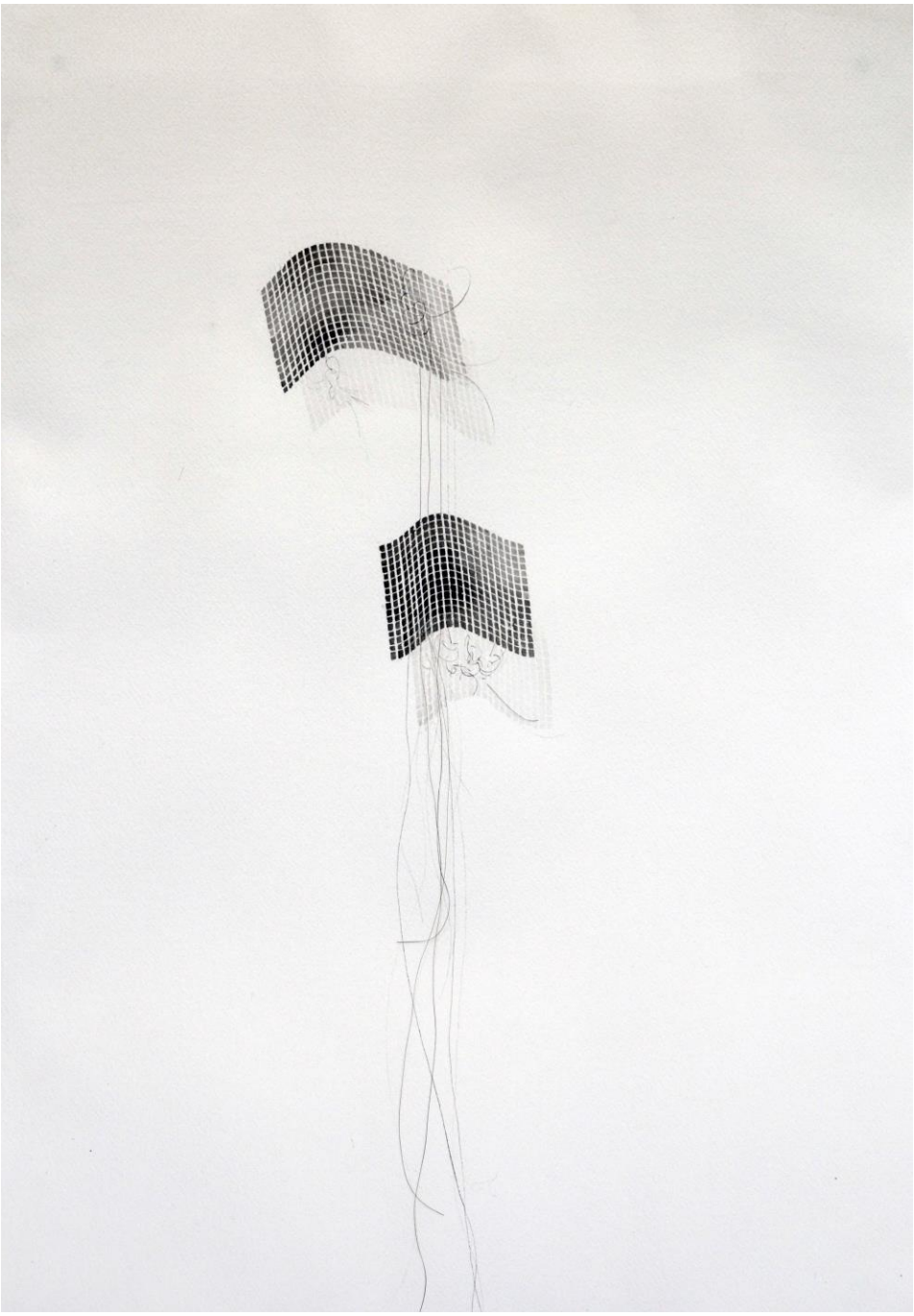

Fig. 10, Drawn #7, 2015, Ink and human hair on paper, 12” x 16”

Fig. 11, Drawn #7, 2015, Ink and human hair on paper, (detail)

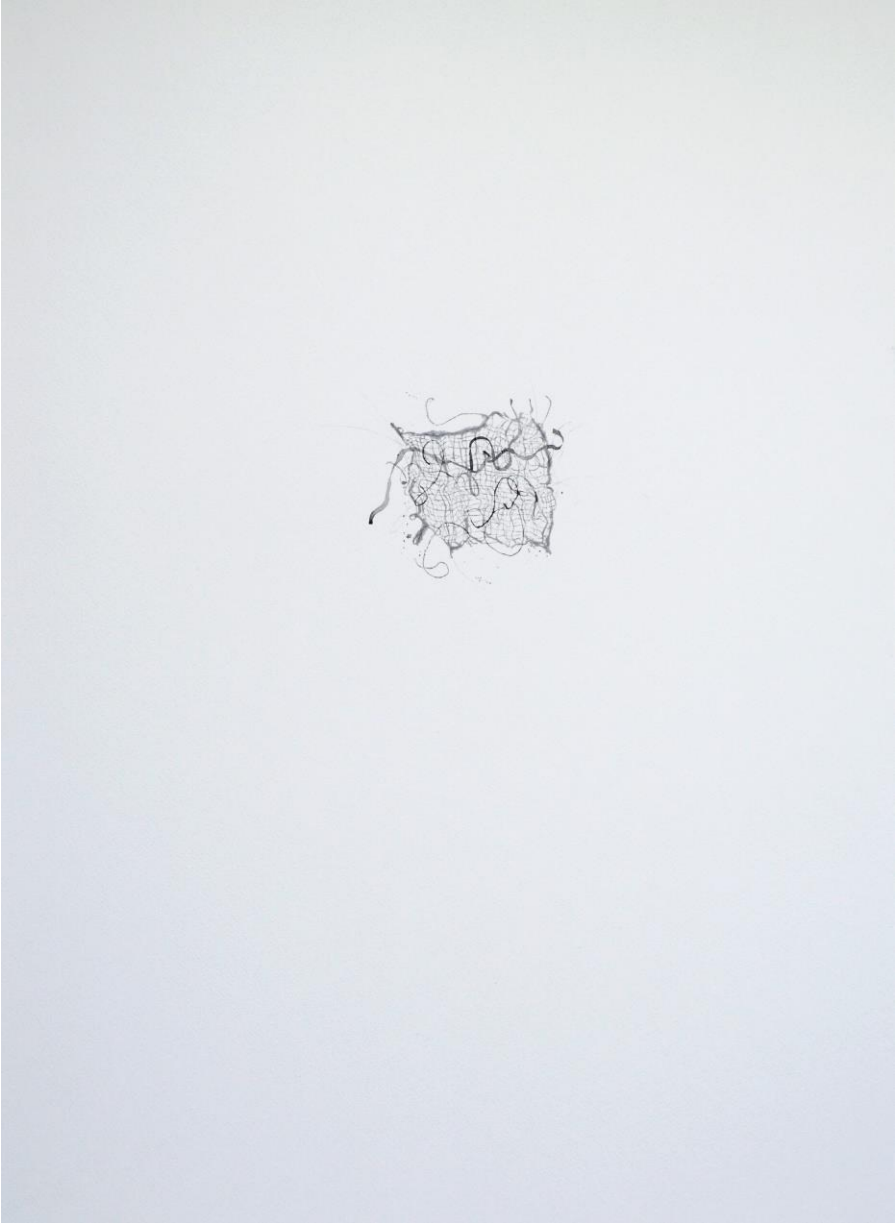

Fig. 12, Drawn #10, 2015, Ink on paper, 22” x 30”

A small piece of gauze was soaked in diluted ink and then a mono-print was made on paper. Then lines and shapes were gently drawn.

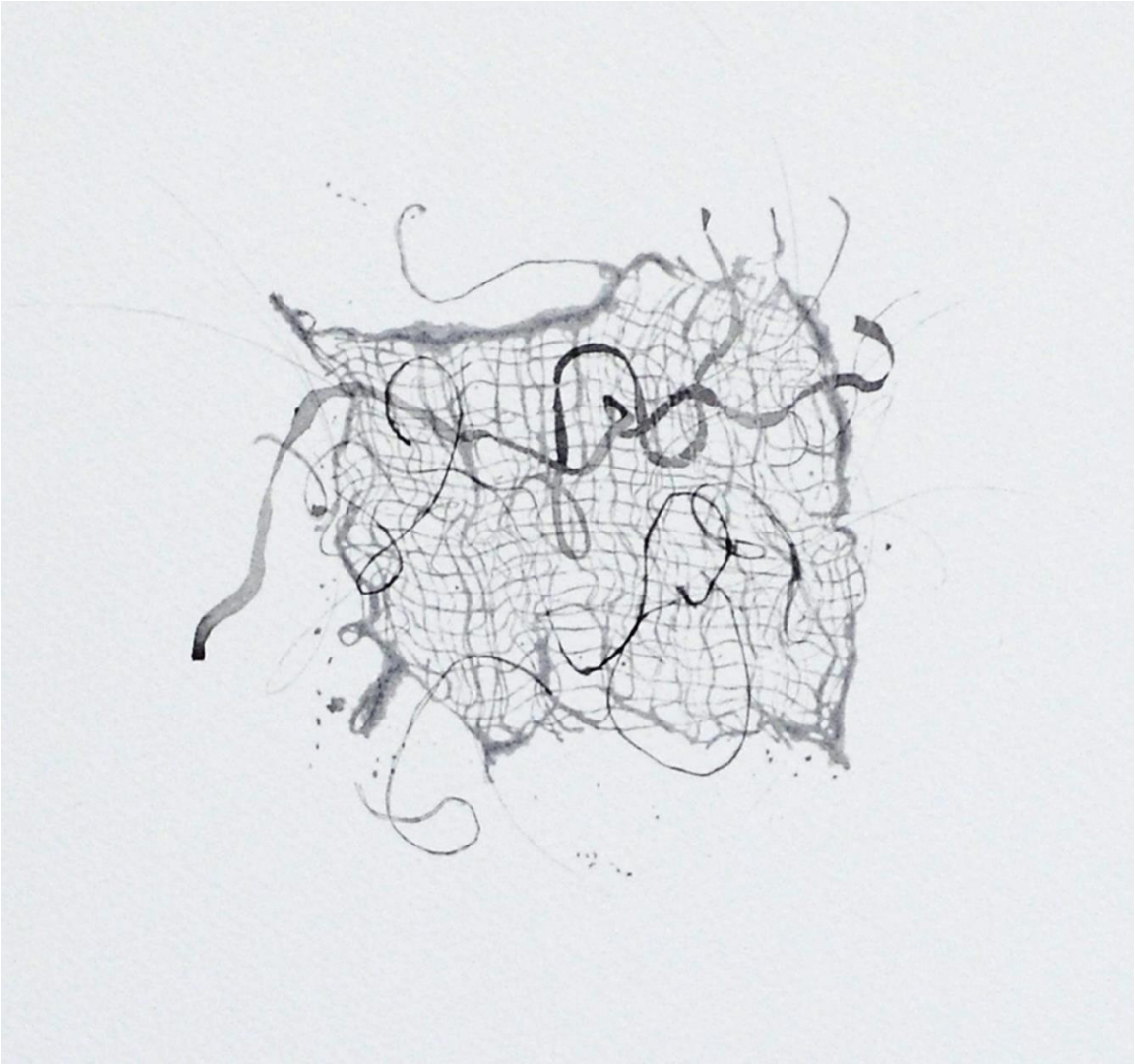

Fig. 13, Drawn #10, 2015, Ink on paper, (detail)

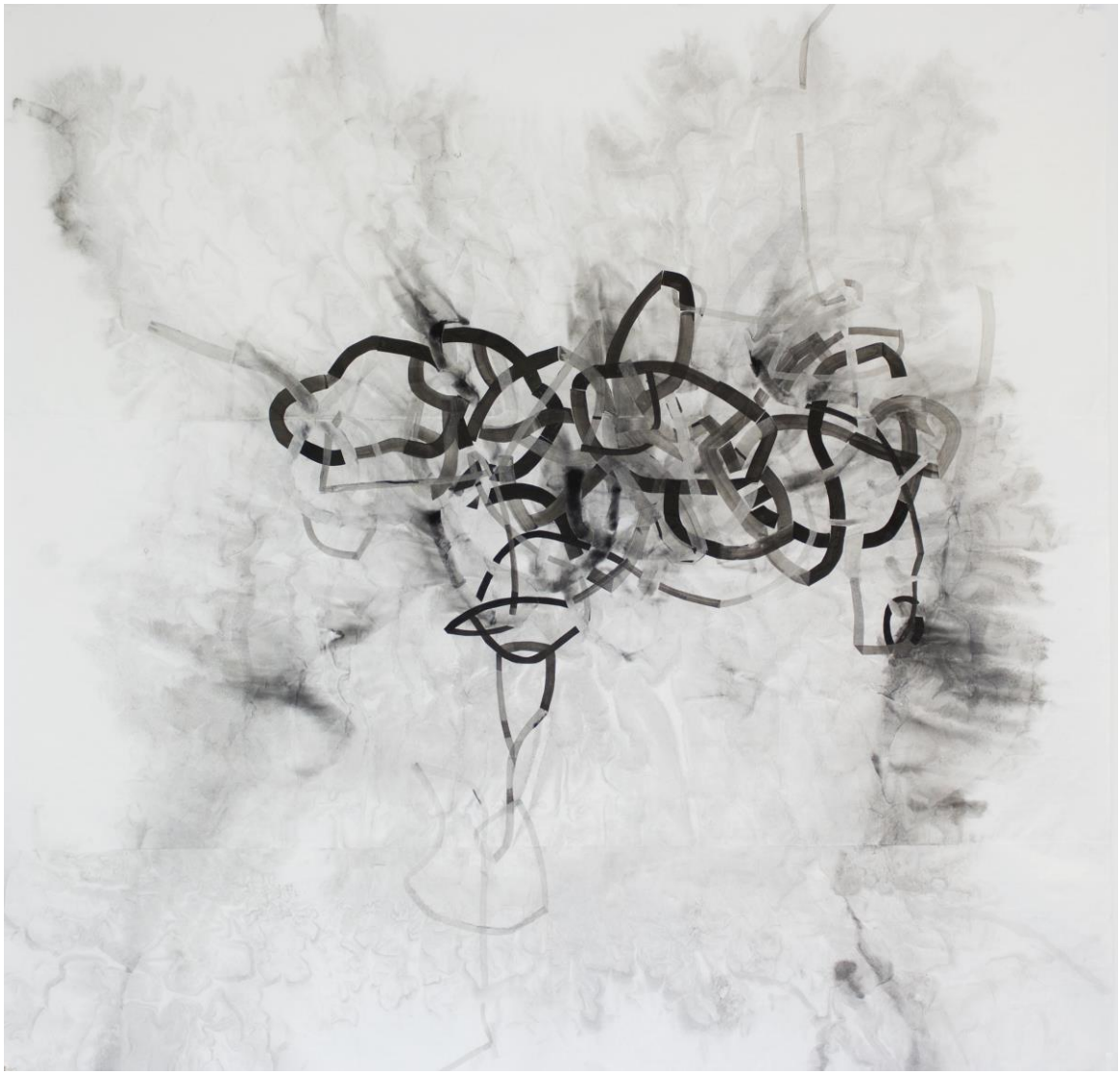

Fig. 14, Tangled #1, 2015, Ink on paper, 6’ x 5’

This work began with working wet on wet: drawing tangled lines. After the paper was dried, some lines faded away while bleeding onto the wet fiber of the paper, and some stayed more visible. The stronger lines were drawn on a different paper then cut into pieces. The cut lines were rearranged and then pasted to the paper.

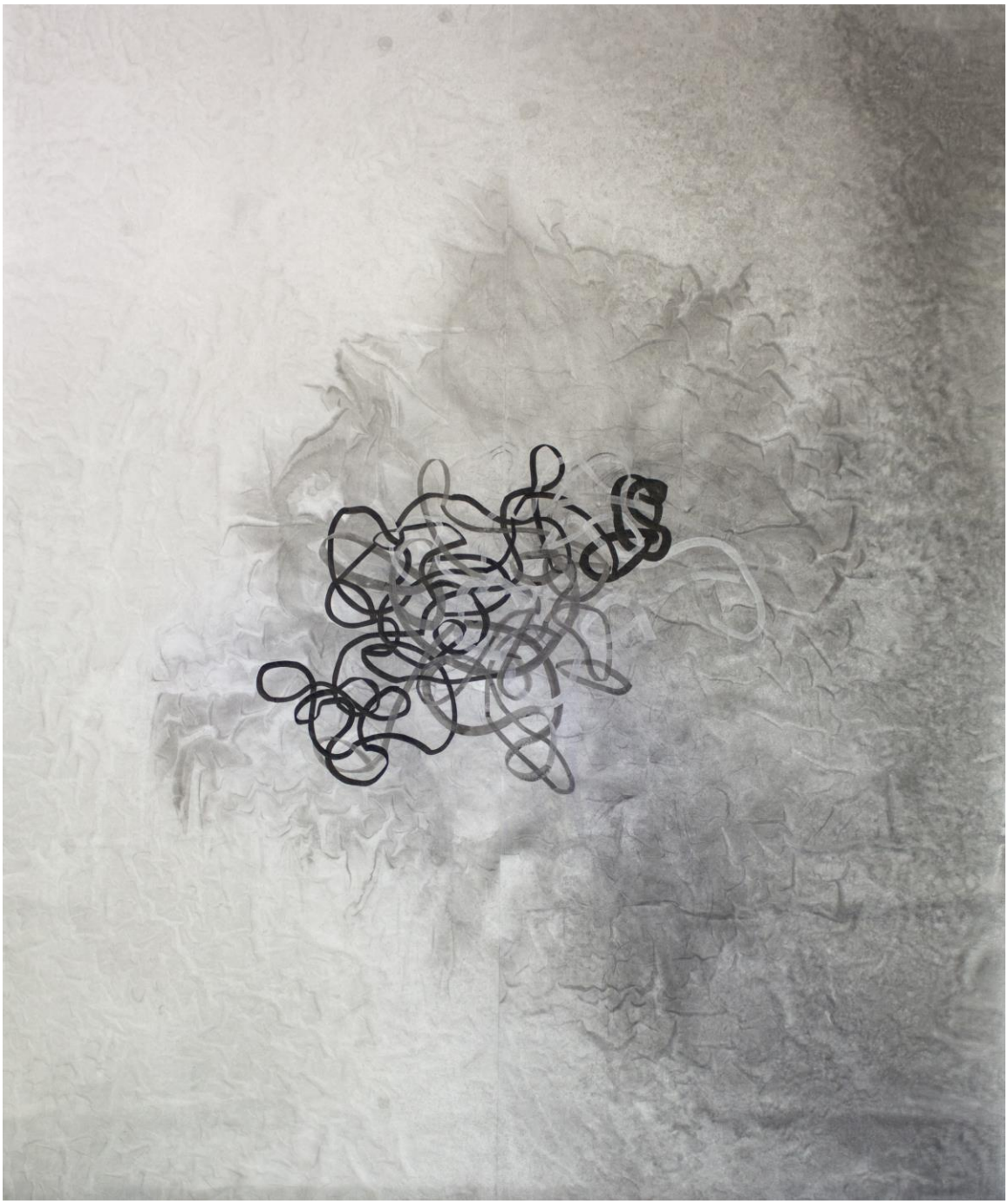

Fig. 15, Tangled #2, 2015, Ink on paper, 6’ x 8’

In this work, different gestures were used to draw the lines. This is meant to give the piece a sense of fluidity.

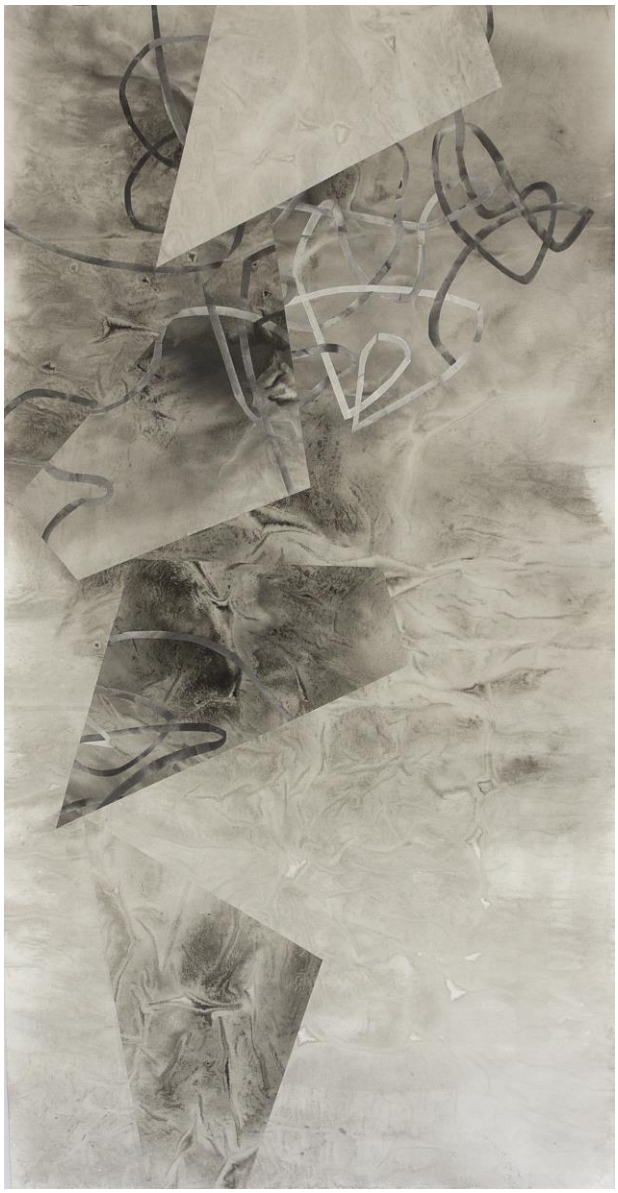

Fig. 16, Muddled #1, 2015, Ink on paper, 3’ x 6’

After pasting the lines from a different drawing, the four trapezium shapes were cut from the paper. Then the four planes where moved around and filled the holes.

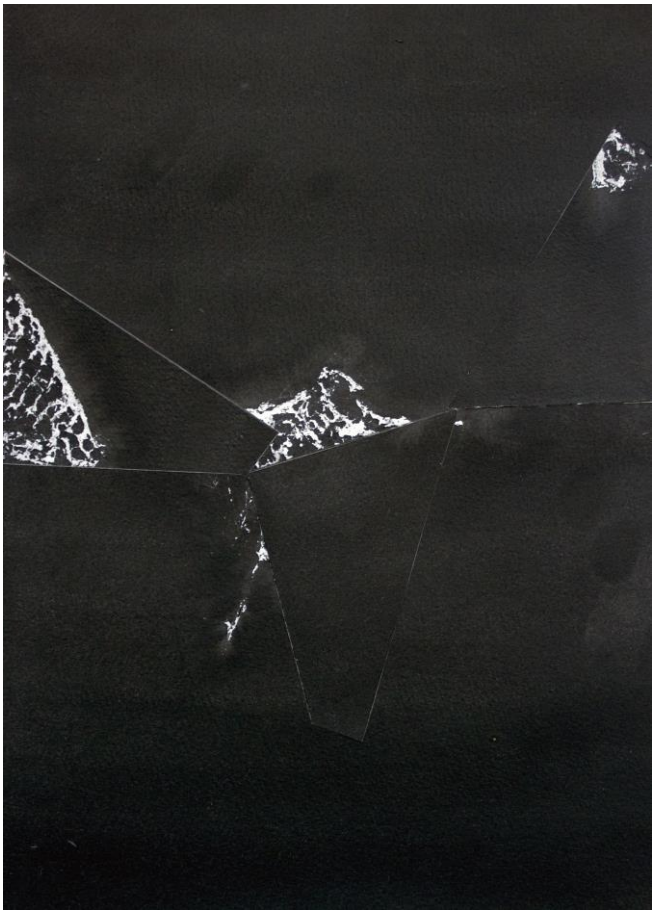

Fig. 17, Drawn #5, 2014, Ink on paper, 12” x 15”

Similar to Fig. 16, three trapeziums were cut and moved around and filled the holes. This method was chosen as an alternative for pasting elements from a different drawing.

Neshat's *Women of Allah* – Case Study

Shirin Neshat's work is strongly influenced by her situation as an Iranian artist in the diaspora. In her journey to find her identity between two realities, Iran and the West, her constant questioning and her sense of the *unresolvable contrasts* between those worlds became the groundwork upon which she builds her artwork. Hers are among some of the most important works of contemporary art. In this paper, I outline two important aspects of a specific artwork in an analytical reading of Neshat's first prominent work, *Women of Allah*. One aspect is the title and the other is the black Chador. I aim to investigate why there have been misunderstandings in how these elements in her works can be read.

Shirin Neshat was sent to the United States to pursue higher education a year before the Iranian revolution. Then, upon returning to Iran for the first time in twelve years, she was confronted by a new social structure, a foreign-like society. During those twelve years many significant things had occurred: the leader of the revolution was dead and the Iran-Iraq War had ended. As a result of those historic events, "all secular oppositions to the Islamic Republic had been systematically repressed, and *bona fide* militant theocracy was in operation." (Dabashi, 39)

In an interview with Scott McDonald, Neshat expressed her willingness to know and digest this change about a place once called home: "I was both fascinated and terrified by the impact of the revolution. There was so much that I didn't understand that I desperately wanted to understand." (629)

Her frequent visits to Iran after her first trip motivated her to work on her first eminent project about Women and revolution. She told MacDonald that the trips, “brought me an artistic focus: the revolution and women in relation to the revolution. Finally I had found a subject that I felt passionate about; but more important, making art about this subject became an excuse to reconnect myself with long-lost culture.” (628)

Being an expatriate of Iran gave Shirin Neshat a new perspective with regard to her homeland, which had changed drastically after the Iranian revolution. However, being away from Iran’s rapidly changing environment also took away the opportunity for firsthand observations of the circumstances in her home country. In regard to this, it is interesting to note that her artworks have been criticized for being subjects that are intended largely for the postcolonial Western eye. However, Neshat insists that her artworks were made through her personal experiences, to construct a relationship to her own country of birth rather than as a social critique of Iran. (626)

In an interview with Octavio Zaya, she expands this assertion: “I found them, women, to be the most potent subjects, in terms of how the social and political changes caused by revolution affected their lives, how they embodied this new ideology, and how they were managing to survive the changes.” (165)

In my own investigations of Neshat’s practice I try to find what is missed and abandoned through reading her artwork. In light of this, I think it is important that we take a closer look at Neshat’s response to her culture and experience, in order to avoid misunderstanding such prominent works, especially given their importance and strong relationship to global politics.

One of the common aspects that make many of the texts about Shirin Neshat so interesting is how the geopolitics of the writers addressing her work influence their readings of Neshat's work, and how meaning and intention often becomes lost or changed through this cultural exchange. Hamid Dabashi, an Iranian-American scholar, states in his article:

> It is impossible to read anything on Shirin Neshat these days written by someone having already imagined himself or herself inside a hermetically sealed sort of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can code-named "the West" without reaching for a red pen and marking the number of times that phrases such as "repressed Iranian/Muslim women" appear and mar any serious conversation with her work. (59)

One example of Dabashi's point is in Scott McDonald's interview where the writer mentions that Shirin Neshat's photographs provide "a sustained rumination on the status and psyche of women in *traditional* Islamic cultures, using three primary elements: the black veil, modern weapon, and the written text." (34)

I think we need to consider why words like "repressed", or "traditional Islamic culture," would be used repeatedly. What are the assumptions made by most Western writers and critics that lead them to use words like this? Yet we also need to ask where Shirin Neshat leaves room for interpretation and influences these commentaries. And most importantly, it must be acknowledged that the very first collection of photographs by Shirin Neshat, *Women of Allah*, set a very strong foundation for her later artworks. It created a specific language and a prominent image of the artist and her artwork.

The *Women of Allah* series of photographs, from 1993 to 1997, are the artworks that made Shirin Neshat well known throughout the world. She displayed her own body wearing a black Chador, holding a weapon, and had overlaid written ornamental calligraphic Farsi text on exposed skin or other parts of the photograph.

To think through the impact and meaning of the work, let's start from the beginning. The series is titled *Women of Allah*. In fact, the title itself may mislead the spectator and cause unwanted assumptions about the work.

In order to interpret these works, it is necessary to be reminded that most of the reception of her art occurred in the West. As mentioned before, she repeatedly stated that the *Women of Allah* photographs are reflections of personal experiences during her first visit to Iran after the revolution. However, many from the West read into her artworks more than she intends. Living, as we viewers do, in the era of accessible information, many of us assume and judge works of art based on what we know. But many of us don't know how much of that information is censored, manipulated, or curated for political and even economic reasons. Simply put, what we know is not accurate or adequate. So, reading the title *Women of Allah*, literally 'women of God', can cause us to read the images to portray the female devotees of God. However, it is important to acknowledge that when Allah is used instead of God in an English phrase, one automatically assumes that the photos make reference to women who practice Islam.

If we step back and look at more accurate information about the language of the title, and the imaginative[4] or assumed geography of Islam, we realize that there are non-Muslim people with different cultural values who still speak Arabic and call their god Allah. Walking into the gallery and seeing the iconic orientalists' symbol of Muslim women, the black Chador,

[4] Dabashi often uses *imaginative geography*. In this context he refers to how inaccurate information is known about the Middle East, specifically about MacDonald's commentaries: " the Middle East is not just colonial designation referring to what is also known as the Levant, namely the western edges of Asia, from what used to be called Asia Minor in current Turkey down to Egypt, but far more compelling it is the imaginative (quintessentially erotogenic) location of the Orient."

readily contributes to the assumption that the photographs are about women who practice Islam. Another piece of information that we need to consider is that Shirin Neshat specifically refers to Iranian women and how their lives changed in the decade following the revolution because of social and political changes. Indeed, Iranians speak in Farsi and Iranian Muslims practice most of their religious sayings in Arabic. Alongside this information, and according to Shirin Neshat's interviews, *Women of Allah* are Iranian religious women, not all women – they are not *all* women in Iran, who cover their bodies with black Chador in public spaces in post revolution era. While we might expect a clearer title from the artist in order for her intentions to be better understood, it is also expected that a critic must inquire more deeply into the entire information surrounding the work.

The next element in the photographs that has created an imprecise idea about the artwork is the black Chador. What Shirin Neshat encountered after her first visit to Iran was the use of the black Chador among middle class women in urban environments, specifically in Tehran. Women who had become very modern and westernized between Reza Shah's modernization in 1930s and Neshat's exit from the country in 1975 were now seen wearing the Chador. Shirin Neshat often generalizes in her representation of the new 'image' of the population such that it could appear to be about all Iranian women. Although the Hijab[5] was mandatory, not all Iranian women started to wear the black Chador. Dabashi explained that the practice of veiling happened in relation to the process of urbanization: "… women who worked in the rice paddies of the north, engage in seasonal migration in the east and western parts of the country, or wear traditional tribal costumes in the south, never veil the way women in

[5] Hijab in Iran could be covering hair and wearing a long and loose mantou. It doesn't have to be the black Chador. But Chador is always recommended by the Army of the Guardians of the revolution who were responsible to mandate, and control peoples' behavior and Hijab throughout the entire country.

Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, or other major urban centres do." (45) Thus, knowing the history of the black Chador is important in reading the work.

A variety of types of clothing like the Chador have been in the history of Persian culture. Veiling for women and men goes back to 400 BC. At that time, the veil marked class status and showed respect. Throughout history, the purpose and meaning of this dress code has changed. Around the 1930s, in order to make the country appear modern and Western, Reza Shah banned the wearing Chador, veil. The ban was compulsory until 1941. Only elderly and religious women would be seen wearing a Chador in public. Before the revolution in 1979, the theocratic revolutionary enthusiasts and devotees started to wear the Black Chador to protest against the Shah and his Western politics and plans. So the re-adoption of it was a dramatic change.

From my encounters with traditional believers, when I lived in Iran, I understand that the Chador can simply be a dress code for public appearances: a way to be covered, and/or a symbol of innocence and purity. Interestingly, according to Muslim Scholar, Shabbir Akhtar, the aim of the veil is "to create a truly erotic culture in which one dispenses with the need for the artificial excitement that pornography provides." (24) This suggests opposing understandings of the function of Chador: one says the Chador represses the male sex drive by covering and promoting innocence, and the other, that it stimulates sexual desire. No matter the understanding, women sacrifice their freedom of choice by taking on the Chador. Certainly, in the 1970s, the Chador came back to Iran with a different mission, a revolutionary mission.

A further note on this: Dr. Ali Shariati, one of the intellectual and key influential figures before the Revolution, considered Western dress a form of imperialism, thus urging Muslim women to adopt Islamic dress. Ultimately, this would involve the black Chador. (25) Here, it could be argued that there is some small bit of agency in choosing Islamic dress code – that is, if one agrees with Dr. Shariati. However, to *actually dress more freely*, one should perhaps abandon the familiar dress code, either Westernized or Iranian, and adopt a new form of clothing. I would also argue that one is naïve to assume that the Chador could ever free women from the beauty industry,[6] or think that this objective was the true reason for mandating the wearing of the Hijab and Chador for women in Iran. These forms of clothing have been used to repress and control the general public in fundamentalist theocratic societies, such as today's Iran. Importantly, though, the Chador and Hijab have not, however, served to control the population as fully as was intended.

Neshat's work perhaps helps to further this understanding. Nonetheless, the creation of images of women covered tip to toe by the black Chador in public spaces could, "if evaluated uncritically, feed into and proliferate stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern cultures not unlike earlier traditions of orientalist art". (184)

Iftikhar Dadi, who is a researcher with a specialization in the Middle East, believes that using such symbolic element in photographs creates an inaccurate assumption about what all Muslim women wear: "because (Neshat's) work directly references the visual representation

[6] In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Brooks tells several stories about Muslim women she had encountered. One example is: "It took a few minutes to recognize the bleached blonde as the same woman who had wailed the emotional eulogy at the Khomeini house. When I mentioned my surprise at the way she looked, she laughed. 'This is the way we are at home', she said, striking a seductive pose. 'Islam encourages us to be beautiful for our husbands.' I suddenly understood why Khadija, Khomeini 's widow, had hennaed her hair to carrot –orange, and why an inch of gray had grown in since she stopped doing it on her husband's death."

of Muslim women [the black Chador], and ends up bearing an inordinately heavy critical burden and is frequently taken to index the status of all women in Islam". (128) It is impossible to represent Muslim women using one uniform image or symbol since the category of Muslim women are vastly diverse in the world, even in post revolutionary Iran as one single country. I would agree that the woman wearing the Chador is the stock media image of Muslim women.

Neshat's work is caught between being understood as engaging with orientalist veiled women and documentary portrayals of actual conditions of Iranian or Muslim women – because the photographs are allegorical. "The allegorical mode is more profoundly ambivalent and complex, and it mediates meaning between realism and fiction in a manner analogous to the effect that the calligraphic screen in Neshat's photographs creates between the work and the observer." (128) Neshat denies revealing an immediate and simplistic reading by unveiling the body. The individual women appearing in the photographs completely fulfill Iranian legal strictures of public dress code, but this doesn't simply mean that the work supports the law or the situation of women in Iran. At the same time, Neshat also questions the Western portrayal of Iranian women in the media, which is often as a mass of black silhouettes holding weapons ready to fight against the West. In response to these complexities, Neshat tries to give them [the women] autonomy. She subtly alters and reorients them allegorically. She refuses to use any props, temporal elements, and narrative link in the photographs. Everything stays minimal in the frame allowing ambiguity in interpreting her work.

As Dadi mentions in his article, *Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories*, there are two other aspects that create distance between the viewer and the artwork to avoid any immediate simplistic reading. One is the calligraphic and ornamental screen overlaid on the skin. The other is the removal of the woman figure from being an anonymous element in a mass public to its individualized placement in a new frame. This gives the individual appearing in the photograph a sense of agency and identity unlike the mass media representation of veiled Muslim women. The allegorical mode emphasizes that there is more in the image that may be considered than orientalist depictions of 'the Harem'.

Shirin Neshat, Seeking Martyrdom, variation #2. 1995, B&W RC print and ink[7]

[7] (Photo taken by Cynthia Preston). All images are copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York. Source: Staci G. Scheiwiller, Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity, Anthem Press, 2014, 245. Reprinted in accordance with the fair dealing exception.

As a specific example of seeing how details in photographs can foreground allegorical referents, I wish to focus on *Seeking Martyrdom, variation #2*. In this image, Neshat's body bearing the black Chador is centred in the picture. Her right hand is seen holding a rifle by its barrel while a red and yellow tulip is exposed at her wrist. Her left arm is entirely exposed. The red tulip is a symbol of martyrdom in Iran. It is reproduced many times everywhere from walls, to stamps, and in revolutionary institutions' logos. She appropriates this motif here but importantly, it is not red, and it is a different tulip. Also, unlike other images of red tulips accompanying the weapon, it is not inserted into its muzzle. She is wearing the Chador but her arm is exposed, so is her neck. The calligraphy creates a very flat screen behind her, emphasizing the unreality of the space. With these allegorical details, Neshat offers "a critique of the mass Iranian-Muslim female subject but also points to her nonarrival as a properly individualized Western subject." (146)

Despite the matter of misunderstandings regarding Neshat's work, or the reading of her artworks uncritically, what is evident now is that Neshat has become more confident, aware, and more engaged with the subject of women in the world, and not necessarily only Iranian or Muslim women. She looks at the subject of the work differently and does not limit it to the geography, culture, and the politics of Iran, Middle East, and concerning Muslim identity. In light of this, Dadi further declares that her artwork was able to accomplish becoming an *un-locatable* artwork, which does not belong to Iran or any other locatable site: "her art is no longer Iranian, Islamic, Western, Eastern, or indeed divided along any such national, regional, or bipolar dichotomies or set of sensibilities". (145)

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

2015 - Master of Fine Arts, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON

2008 - Bachelor of Fine Art – Drawing and Painting, OCAD U, Toronto, ON

EXHIBITIONS

2015 - I am not I, Almost never, DNA Artspace, London, ON

2015 - Uncooperative, Forest City Gallery, London, ON

2015 - Satellite, Satellite Project Space, London, ON

2014 - The fire doesn't burn itself, After Hours Projects, Toronto, ON

sum of two and three, one more than four, Artlab Gallery, London, ON

Carte Blanche, DNA Artspace, London, ON

2013 - Studio Works, CB Gallery, Toronto, ON

Desmond Juried Art Exhibition, Chatham, ON

2012 - GAS, Gerrard Art Gallery, Toronto, ON

2011 - Experiencing Perspectives, Mercedes-Benz Gallery, Oakville, ON

2010 - Catalyst for Change, Daimler Services, Mississauga, ON

2008 - Last night I dreamt, Walnut Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

Make Believe, OCAD U Student Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

Memory, Graduate Exhibition, OCAD U, Toronto, Ontario

49 Parallel, Steam Whistle Brewery Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

2006 - Second Vision, Ryerson University, ISARU, Toronto, Ontario

2004 - Children of heaven, Richmond Hill Academy of Art, Ontario

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2015 - Teaching assistantship, Advanced Painting, Professor Glabush, Department of Visual Arts, Western University

2014 - Teaching Assistantship, Advanced Drawing, Professor Merritt, Department of Visual Arts, Western University

2013-14 - Teaching Assistantship, Foundation Art, Professor Johnson, Department of Visual Arts, Western University

2006-08 - Archive and Slide Library Assistant, OCAD U

VOLUNTEER/ORGANIZATION/COMMITTEE

2015 - Juror, Drawing Show, Paper Jam, Satellite Project Space, London, Ontario

2013-15 - Organizer, Western Open Studios, University of Western Ontario

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OTHER TEACHING EXPERIENCES

2013 - Drawing and Painting Instructor, Text in Paint, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, ON

2013 - Drawing and Painting Instructor, Creative BluePrints, Toronto, ON

2009-12 - Visual Art Instructor, Little Prints, Toronto, ON

2008 - Drawing Instructor, ArtBarn School. Toronto, ON

AWARDS

2013-14 - University of Western Ontario Dean's Entrance Scholarship

2008 - Mrs.W.O. Forsyth Award, OCADU, Toronto, ON

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2015 - sum of two and three, one more than four, Curatorial catalogue, London, ON

2011 - Mercedes Benz Financial, Annual Group Show catalogue, Oakville, ON

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2009 - Colour and two-dimensional design text book, Glenn McArthur, Toronto, ON

2008 - Drawing and Painting Department Catalogue, Toronto, ON

WEB BIBLIOGRAPHY

2006 - Taking a Second Look Magazine, Ryerson University, Artist Interview, Toronto, ON

AUCTIONS

2015 - Big Draw, OCAD U, Toronto, ON

2012 - I heart Art Auction, CB Gallery, Toronto, ON

2011 - Whodunit Auction, OCAD U, Toronto, ON

2011 - Paint Rocks, OCAD U, Toronto, ON

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