

March 2019

Here's What I Know

Kelsey Miller
kelsey.miller@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/mfa_sttmnts



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), and the [Printmaking Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Kelsey, "Here's What I Know" (2019). *MFA Statements*. 2.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/mfa_sttmnts/2

Here's What I Know

Kelsey Nicholson Miller

B.A. Wellesley College, 2007

A Project Statement

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

At the

University of Connecticut

2018

Copyright
Kelsey Nicholson Miller

2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had conversations with each member of the graduate faculty that has contributed to my growth as an artist; thank you all for your care and your time. Judith, thank you for your nurturing direction over these last three years, and for the countless times you swooped in to save the day, from magnets to phone calls.

My committee.

Barry, for the most efficient no-fluff studio visits, and for always asking more of me. Alexis, for the “you can do its,” and the reality checks. For asking “What’s with the boat?” and for making me say what I think, in art and writing, instead of dancing around it. Laurie, your honest support and steady challenge has helped me to know my work. In writing, you have steered me to the words I could never quite find. John, your tireless art practice will always be an inspiration. Thank you for the opportunities you have sent my way, the serious advice, the side-splitting laughs and for leaving me the snacks that got me through long days in the shop.

Ray, your drawing class and subsequent conversations over the years are what brought me to listen to myself. Deborah, in your drawing class, you pushed and pushed, and I found parts of my practice I never would have otherwise.

One benefit of this small, close-knit, interdisciplinary program, is the opportunity to work alongside peers who offer feedback from all sorts of backgrounds and viewpoints. To the MFA classes of 2019 and 2020, thank you for your questions, your passing comments and your inspiring practices.

My cohort, my spice girls. Claire, Kaleigh, Erin and Jelena, you are inimitable. I could not have dreamed up a more inspiring group of women to navigate these last three years with. I am proud and humbled to call you dear friends and colleagues.

I would like to thank my family and friends who have taken this degree as seriously as I have, and cheered me on along the way. Neil for your color, and Don for your honesty. Mum,

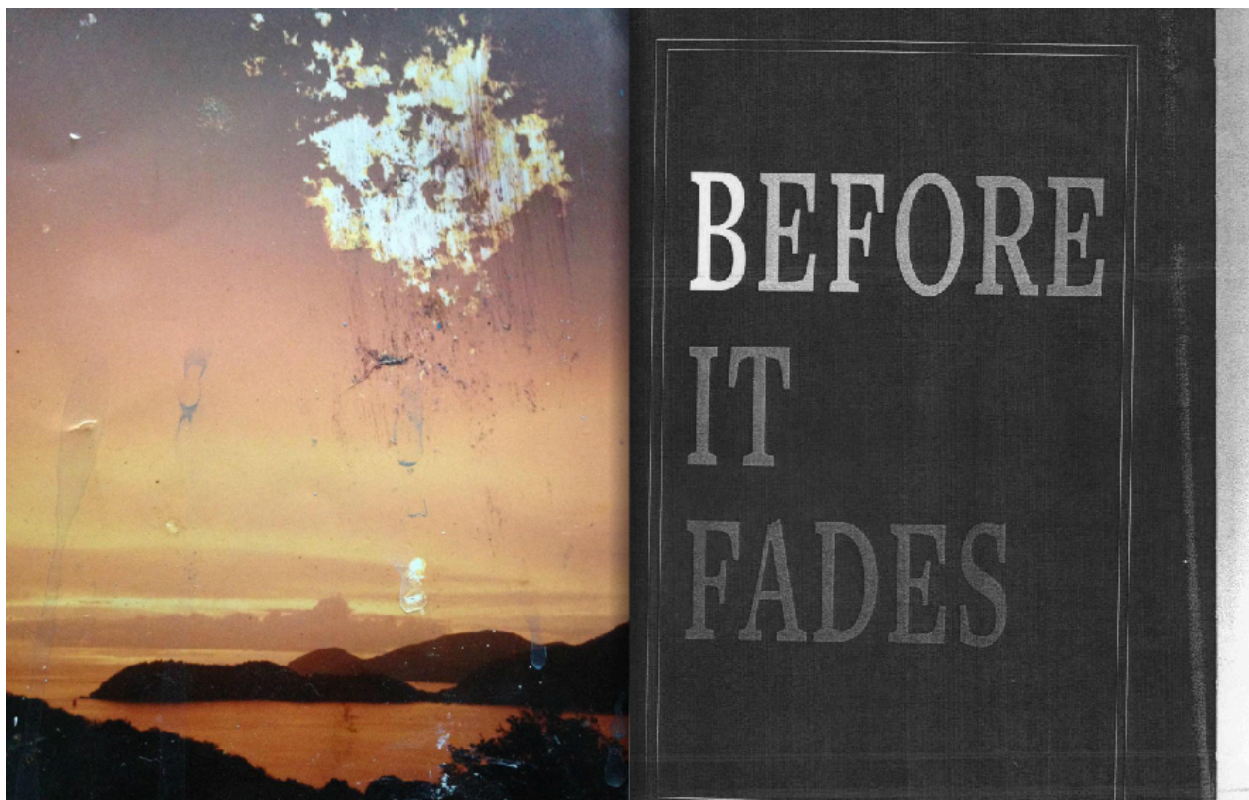
for never questioning “why art?” But rather, encouraging it, and helping me to believe that this career was as good a choice as any other. Shaun, thank you for taking care of our house, animals, and bank account so that I could pursue this longtime dream. You have surely seen the worst of me on this journey and your unwavering support is truly the reason I am where I am.

INTRODUCTION

Now, at the end of three years of graduate school, is a time for reflection—and a time to piece together a narrative of how I got to now. In our first semester here, we were given an assignment in a drawing class to gather pictures, text, and objects that informed or inspired our studio practice, a *Collectanea*. At the end of that semester, we documented and compiled our collection into a photo book—an atlas of our thoughts and observations. That book became the bones of the work I have made over these last three years. New thoughts and ideas have emerged along the way, but all are linked to that original collection of content. That *Collectanea* laid out a visual roadmap of my studio practice and my thoughts behind it; this is a written expansion of it.

When the *New York Times* pieces together information in realtime for a developing story, they do not purport to have the entire picture. Instead, they begin the article with *Here's What We Know*. The work in the exhibition *Close Third Person* and in this writing is not a summary of the last three years; it is a glimpse at one chapter of an unfolding story.

Here's What I Know.



Collectanea, 2015 (select pages)

I.

It began with loss and always circles back to it.

I drew the ocean to remember my father,

then to draw attention to climate change and sea level rise.

Death has always been in my work (family, friends, nature).

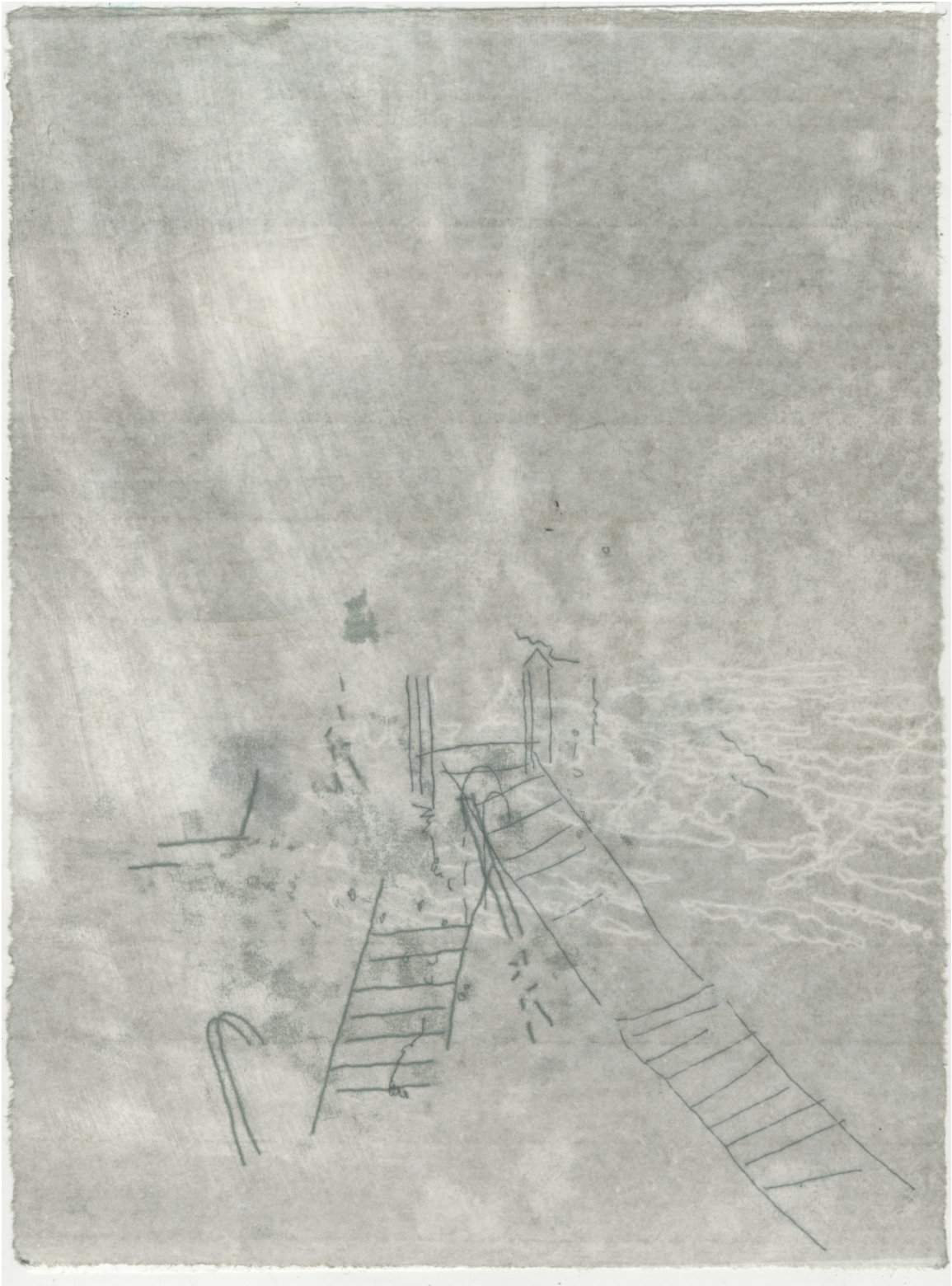
The political has always been in my work.

Neither subject fixed solely in anger or sadness.

They encompass hope for the future and memory of the past.

They are a reminder to look forward, and to think of what we will leave behind.

The week I moved into my studio at VARC, I did not know how to start working. I felt that being in graduate school meant everything I made had to be great, and I found that expectation I put on myself to be paralyzing. I tacked up postcards and pamphlets I had collected of artists that inspire (Alyson Shotz, Jason Middlebrook, Paul Gauguin) and phrases that motivate (*Less whining, more printing!*) to interrupt the overwhelming emptiness of the white walls. It was just for show. The only piece of paper that really needed to be there was the photocopy of my father's obituary that I had folded in quarters, text side in, so all that was visible was the white of the page. I did not want to reveal that as a driving force of my work because I did not want it to be *only* about that.



Place V
Monotype, 11x14," 2015

II.

My landscape prints—sea, fog, broken logs and drifting hulls, were a search to translate the sublime, to be elegant and ominous. They are the memory of a time I felt most connected to nature, a seventeen-day trip across the Atlantic Ocean on an 82-foot sailboat. During that passage, I started a routine of daily drawings that became a meditation on the sea and its endless expanse. Facing such vastness, I felt life and death simultaneously. I felt my father's presence in the dolphins that surfed our bow waves, and in the density of the ocean's depth—so blue it looked black—when we jumped in at the halfway point of our crossing. I felt his loss in the the boundless emptiness around me, and yet, that vastness at sea was also a clean slate, our human imprint on the environment momentarily forgotten, like wounds washed over and healed. Then I would remember—and mourn—for my seeming inability to change the effects of pollution and the rising level of the sea. I wondered how I could leave my own mark on the future of our planet, and on the lives of others.

III.

After leaving the transient life at sea and returning to the rhythms of life on land, the notes and sketches from that time became the foundation of my work. The obituary hidden on my studio wall was a porthole to the vastness I wished to capture in my prints. I wanted to carry viewers out to sea, to capture the beauty, fear, and awe that is captured in that word—sublime—but I felt it would be presumptuous to admit that, so I did not. Instead, I danced around ideas of “memory” and “space,” my imagery eventually transforming from direct observation of place into a record of memories that became altered, obscured, and fragmented—the real and the imagined often indistinguishable from one another.



It is Not Down on Any Map (After Melville)
Monotype, 70x75," 2016



Level
 Monotype Installation
 Each panel approx. 25 x 35," 2016-2017



Lights I & III
Monotype, 25x35," 2016

IV.

The political in my work began as an undertone. I made installations like *Level* with the intention of prompting viewers to reflect on the human impact on the history and the future of the climate. At the same time, I aimed for subtlety and ambiguity in the work that allowed for myriad meanings, shifting with each viewer as their own histories became part of the interpretation. While I continued to be influenced by my own memories of the sea, the air around me became increasingly clouded, fervent with political opinion fueled by the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Misinformation, denial, complacency, and fear became a part of everyday discourse—and often lead to emotionally derived beliefs that are at odds with scientific data. Like many, I found it virtually impossible to separate politics from my everyday life. Quietly, I began to consider more intently the polarization of opinion and fact, and began making work informed by current events, historical documents, national identity, and weather—both a symbol of change and its real harbinger.

When I brought letterpress *EMPATHY* signs to the Women's March in 2017, I wanted a message for dissenters that would be difficult to argue with, and one of encouragement for those standing with me. I did not think of it as a project linked to the obscurity I sought in my studio practice, like that found in the mysterious glow of my most recent *Light* prints. Instead, it was a side project, like the patriotic *I VOTED* cards I had made in November 2016 to hand out in celebration of voting; a reward, like the stickers given out at polls. Months later, as the climate in Washington festered and waves of hate spread outwards, that celebratory action felt futile and the cards took on a new meaning—a reminder to stay active and involved in our democracy, especially when it challenges our views.

I printed a new edition of the cards in gray.



Wednesday, November 9, 2016
Letterpress Installation, 20x25," 2016

Around the same time, we were given an assignment in a second drawing class to address entropy as a process, with the option to use text. The protest signs were still fresh in my mind, and I became fascinated by the phonetic and defined relationship between the words *empathy* and *entropy* as they tangled together in my thoughts. Empathy, a trait that if more people practiced, could solve so many of the problems that feed the divisiveness of this political moment. To me, *entropy* represented the unraveling of values (equality, progress, innovation) that had at one time made me proud to be a US Citizen. The *Entropy* assignment, and others that followed, opened the door for experimentation that at first ran parallel to my work in print, and eventually merged with it. It was the first time I had used text in my imagery.

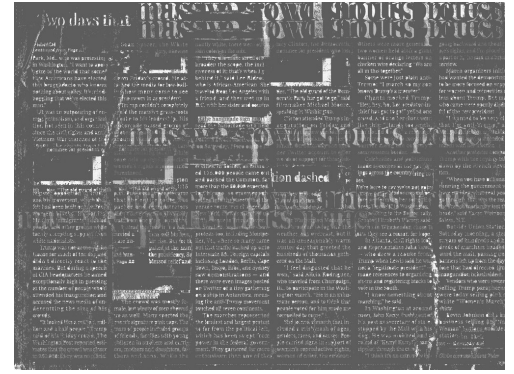
In the piece *Massive Crowd Shouts Protest*, I made physical collages out of newspapers from the weekend of the Women's March and inauguration. I scanned and further manipulated the collages digitally, then printed them out and assembled them to make a large paper flag. That multistep process ensured that I fully absorbed that weekend's news. I felt an urgency to continue to address the political with my art, both as a way to try and understand what was happening, and as a way to participate in the growing movement of resistance to our new government. I found a call to action in the writing of activist and Professor of Media and Culture at NYU, Stephen Duncombe, and continued to make work with this challenge in mind.

Activist art that doesn't move us leaves us standing still. (Duncombe, 2016)

I realized quickly there was a surge of artists who, like myself, were making work in direct response to the election and the number of issues it brought to light. This was apparent in the posts I saw from the network of artists in my Instagram feed and in the themed calls for entries in my inbox (*Gray Area, Re: Acclimating, Political Impressions*). Renowned artists and institutions embraced this outpouring of the political in contemporary art, as seen in



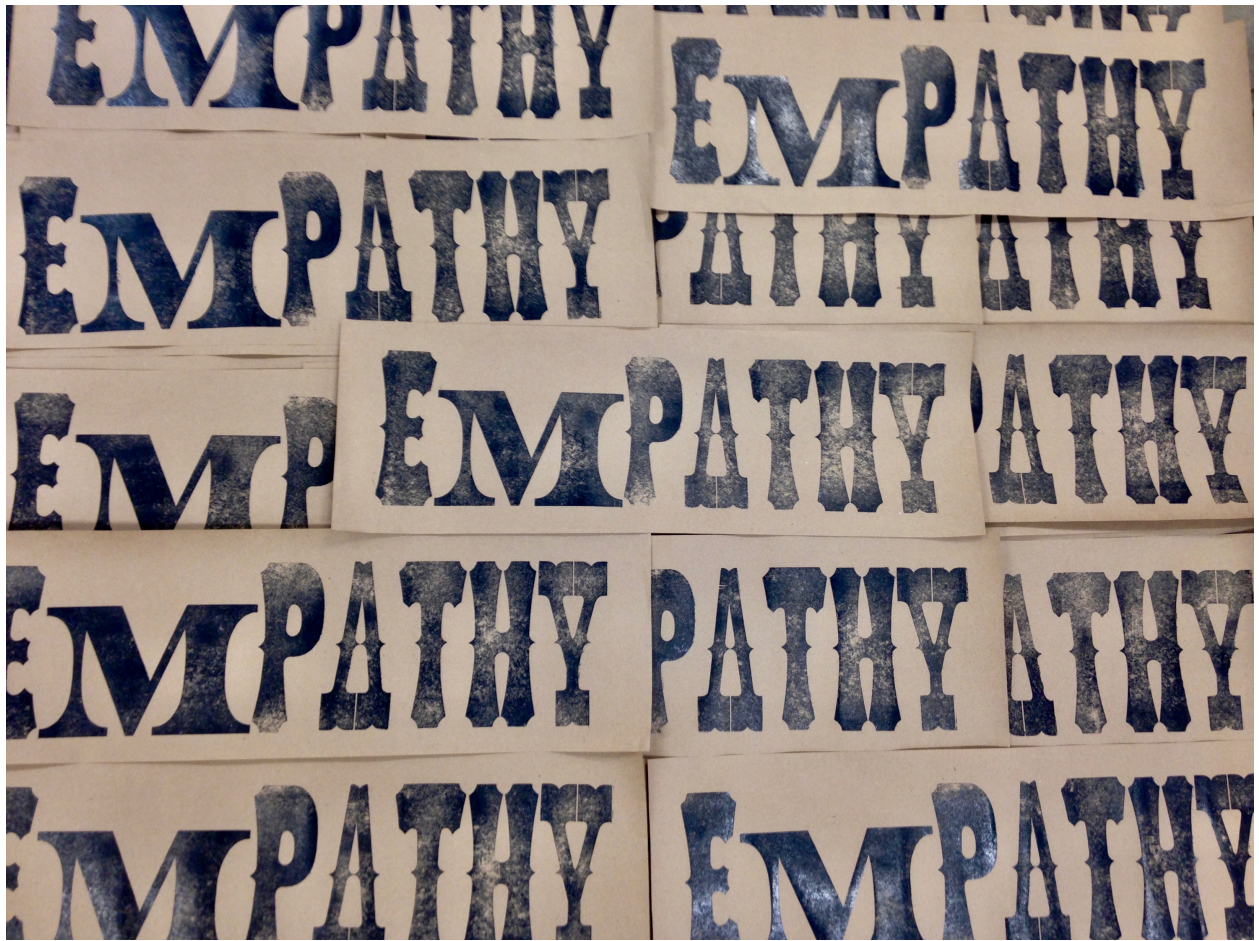
Massive Crowd Shouts Protest
Inkjet prints of digital collages, 48x84," 2017



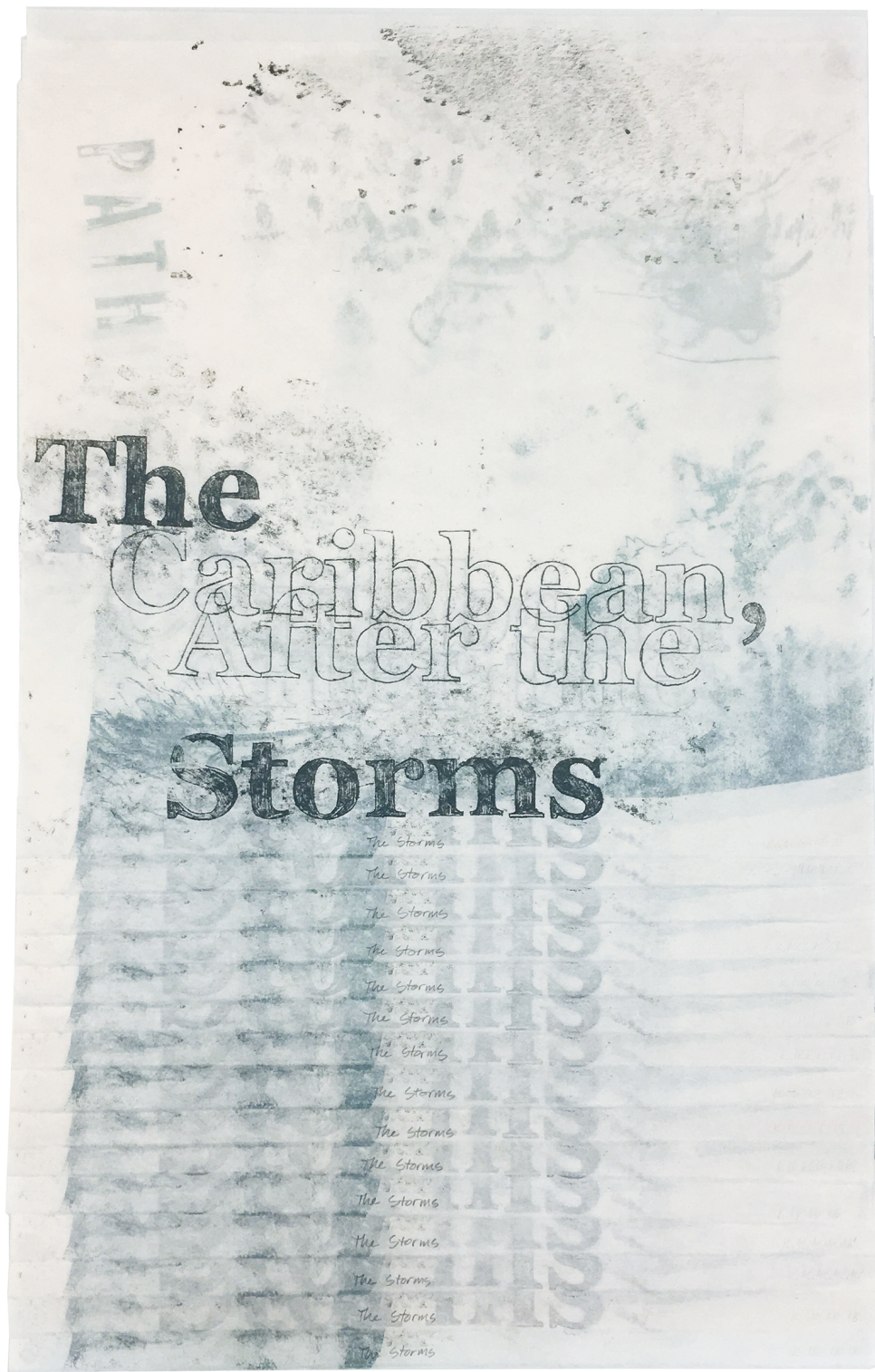
exhibitions like the Whitney's *An Incomplete History of Protest* and Mass MoCA's *Thumbs Up for the Mothership* as well as MoMA's installation of works by artists from banned Muslim countries. On November 9, 2016, Rikrit Tiravanija used that day's *New York Times* to make the piece *Untitled (The Tyranny of Common Sense Has Reached its Final Stage)*. Alfredo Jaar's *A Logo for America*, first displayed in New York's Times Square in 1984, became newly relevant when it was shown again in Times Square in 2014, then in Mexico and London in 2016. Jaar made the piece to correct the idea that the term "America" only refers to the United States, rather than the entirety of the continents of North and South America. This statement is even more jarring when juxtaposed with the Trump administration's cries for a border wall and the rise of overt xenophobia within his support base.

I was at once overwhelmed by the prospect of how my own actions could be an agent for change, and inspired that my voice could join so many others as a participant in both this current movement of resistance, and those that have come before. Feeling the need to carry out a concrete action, I printed a second edition of 50 *EMPATHY* signs and sold them to raise funds for the American Civil Liberties Union, a group able to resist in ways I cannot.

I want to make a difference.



Empathy Signs
Letterpress, 10x30," 2017



The Storms
Lithograph, 20x20," 2018

V.

My practice is rooted in printmaking and expands on its inherent qualities of repetition and layering. In my work, these qualities occur in the accumulation of panels for large-scale installations, iterative mark making, and in the layers of ink that evidence numerous passes through a press. I am drawn to how repetition can be employed as an element to both state and disseminate a message—it can be used as a tactic to convey a singular emphatic pronouncement—or an echo that lingers. Alternatively, it can instill a condition of numbness, like that which results from the barrage of information we face in the daily news cycles. And it is that complacency I wish to resist, by asking viewers to slow down and consider their actions in the world. Now more than two years after those *EMPATHY* signs, political opinion continues to simmer below the surface of everyday conversations. We receive news and information at a rate faster than we are able to process. The act of making resists the act of skimming, insisting that I too continue to absorb and respond to what is before me. That I be informed and stay informed.

In many ways, my work is about pause. It is a record of how I process my surroundings. It is how I see and make sense of the world, sometimes clear and declarative, other times clouded and confused, like a dream that appears and disappears without beginning or end.

The painting never resolves itself until the artist understands that it must be left as such, a rough sketch of a rough situation. (Mira Schor, 2014)

I want the work to reveal itself over time. Through the process of layering, I bury and expose information, denying the viewer a singular interpretation. Fragments of text and imagery emerge from dense areas of ink, or become partially concealed by folds in the page. As I print, I often fold the paper the way we fold newspapers to read, consolidating full-page spreads into manageable rectangles of information. Sometimes, I fold to protect imagery from being covered over with a new layer of ink, or else to preserve emptiness on the page.



In Assessing Damage, Plenty of Questions
Lithograph and Monotype, 35x75," 2018

My mother left me her journals, and all her journals were blank.

My Mother's Journals are clouds.

My Mother's Journals are bones.

My Mother's Journals are a white tablecloth not yet set.

My Mother's Journals are a white blouse not yet worn.

My Mother's Journals are the letters never written.

My Mother's Journals tell me everything.

My Mother's Journals tell me nothing.

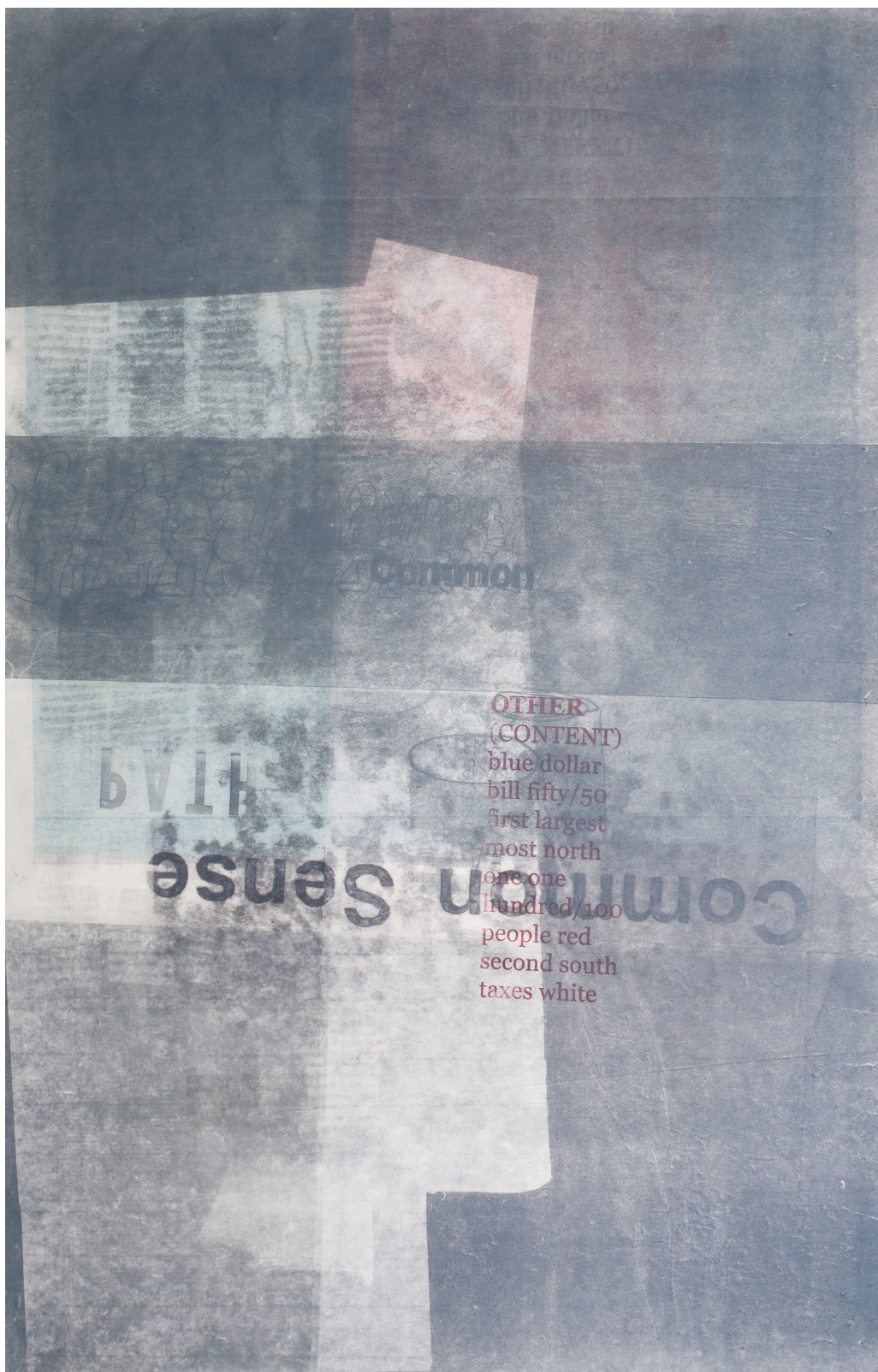
My Mother's Journals ask me to turn the page.

(Excerpts, Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 2013)

Like these blank journals, my work has a purpose, but often refuses to communicate explicitly, prompting viewers to engage through the details they may decode. It is sometimes ephemeral and atmospheric, and other times as concrete as a headline.

I want to leave viewers in thought.

I want to make a mark on this time.



Trivia
Monoprint, 25x39," 2017

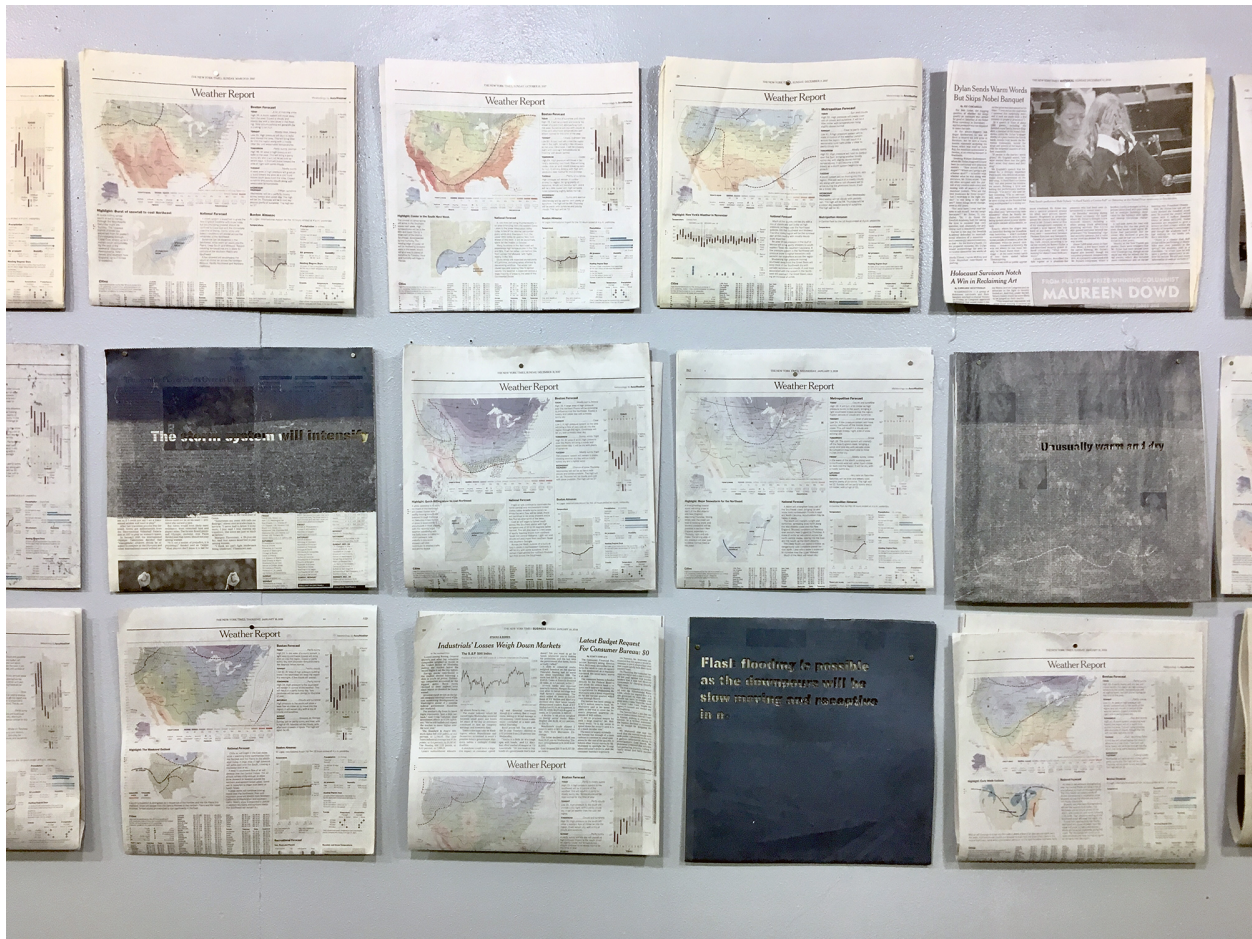
VI.

Text is present in everything I have made since the *Empathy/Entropy* drawings. I scroll news feeds, peruse weather reports, and frequently revisit the study guide my husband consulted during his recent process of becoming a Naturalized US Citizen. From all of these sources, I take note of words and phrases that confuse or clarify, that anger or placate. I keep an inventory of text that documents my navigation of this world. I look for words that can assume multiple meanings when removed from their original contexts. How do we read and evaluate, for example, a weather forecast that casually predicts *Unusually warm and dry*? To me, it is a problem worthy of front-page news. Or, what dictates and who decides the list of vocabulary words and facts that future U.S. Citizens need to know? (*Trivia*) The ordinarily vapid language of weather forecasting, with its uncertainty and foreboding began to seem to me like transforms into uncanny metaphors for roiling environment of politics and protest.

The storm system will intensify.

Flash flooding is possible as the downpours will be slow moving and receptive in nature.

At times I step back and see a weather map as just that. In those moments, the repetitive banality of that daily report becomes the only news I can digest. The forecasts become a break from the resentment of ending one day with *Trump Stuns Lawmakers with Seeming Embrace of Comprehensive Gun Control*, and waking up to *The N.R.A. Quickly Regains a Friend*, two days later.



National Forecast

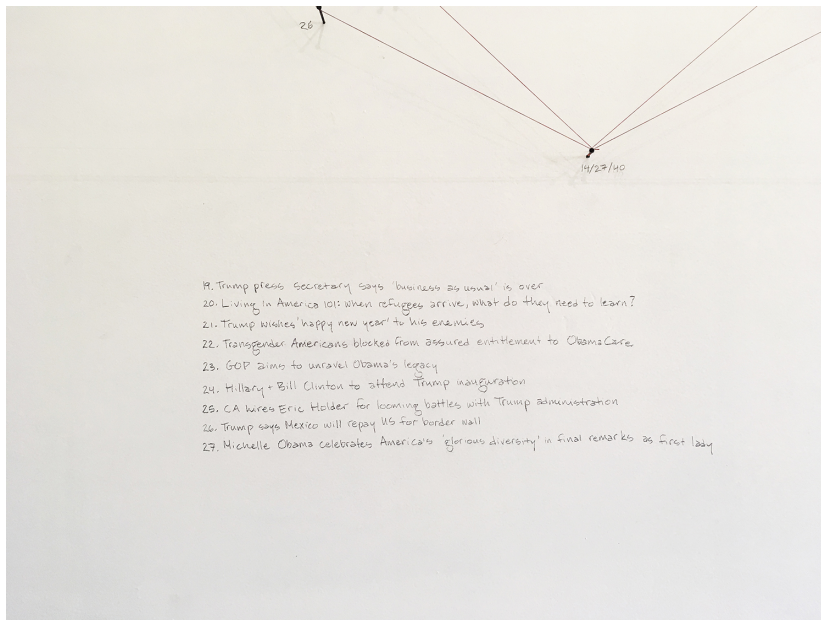
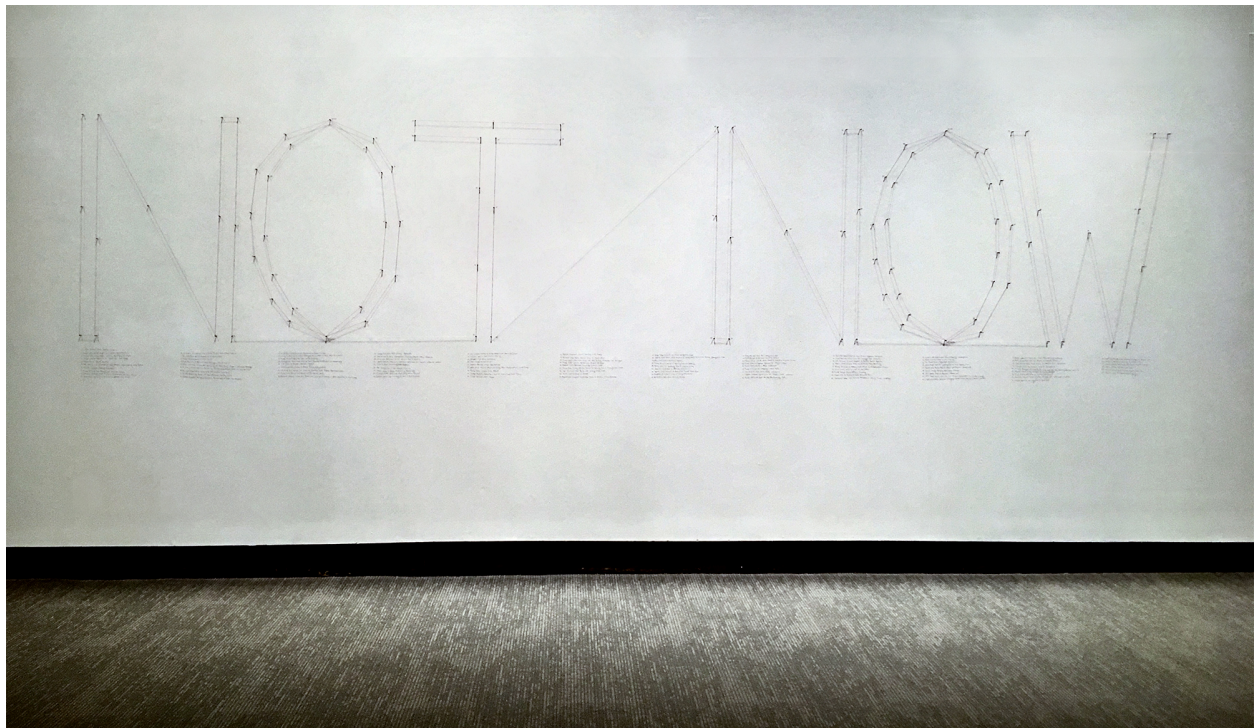
Monoprint on newspapers with laser-cut text
Each panel 11x11," 2018



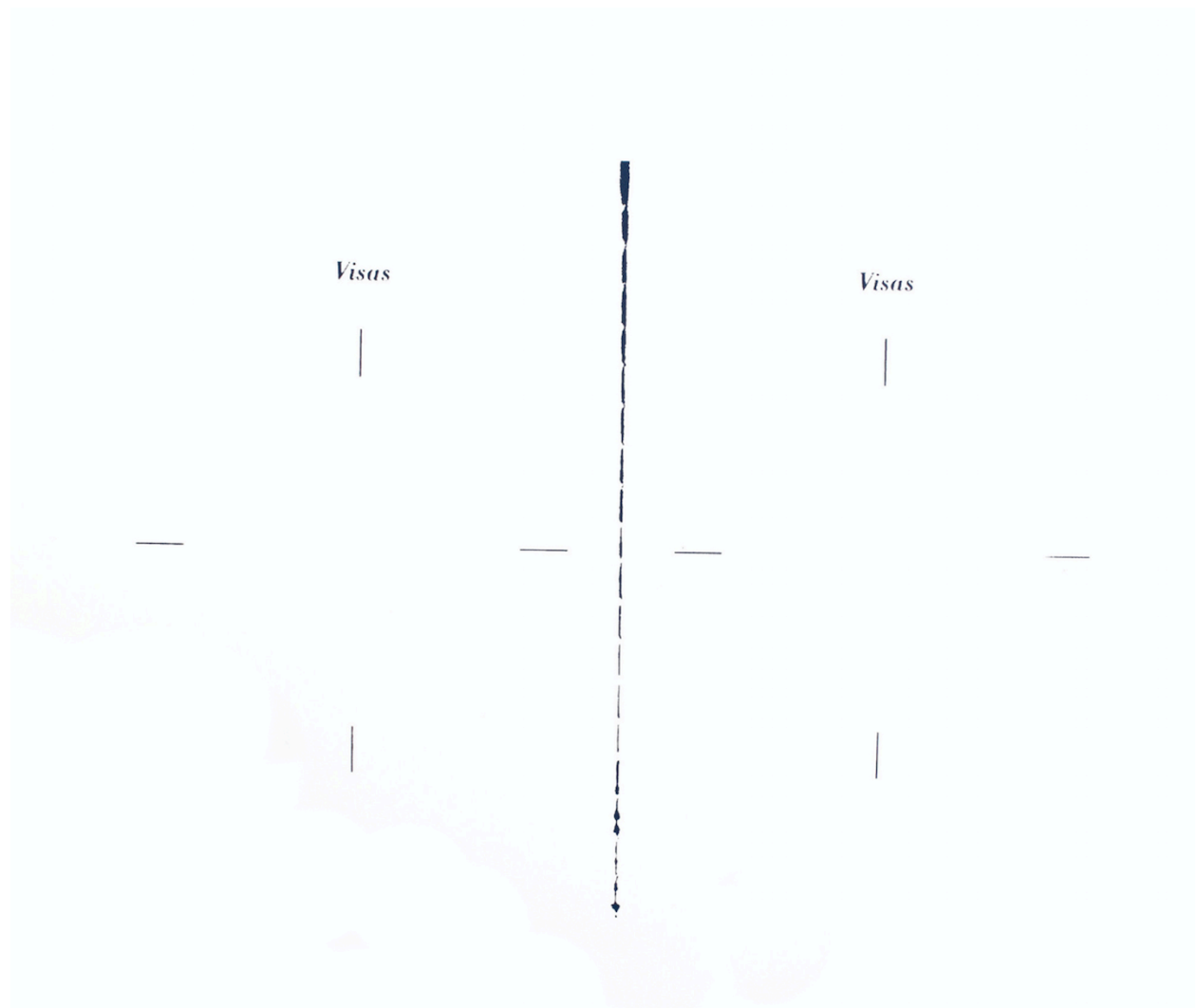
When I use text, the legibility varies in form and meaning. Words manifest as wall-sized proclamations (*NOT NOW*), short phrases that float within an image (*The Ashes in Napa*), or are isolated on a stark page (*Visas*). I employ titles to add clarity to my work. If a piece is specific in its intended meaning, like the inaccessible newspaper stacks in *Media Outlets Blocked From White House Press Briefing*, or the wordless columns in *Sue Watson, 90, Tireless Advocate for Liberal Causes*, a title can help complete the puzzle. In work that is more open-ended and ambiguous, titles offer clues for interpretation.

In *105 Days Before Today* (March 27, 2017), I used the game of *Connect-the-Dots* as a metaphor for the need to be engaged in our surroundings and piece together the information before us. Once connected, the dots spell out *NOT NOW* in billboard-sized letters across the wall, a phrase that can be read as both an ambivalent dismissal and a call to action. The numbered dots correspond to a prevalent news headline, from the day I completed the piece, to 105 days prior. When read in succession, the headlines themselves create a narrative of events, from mid-December 2016, through late March 2017. For the second installation of *105 Days*, a year to the day after the first installation, I chose to rewrite the original 2017 headlines—a reminder of those “old” news stories. Many seemed outlandish when they were first broken, but were then quickly forgotten, and have since been replaced with similar ones or worse. Writing these headlines for the second time was more jarring than the first, as I relived the transition from the 44th president to the 45th, from the eloquent to the abhorrent.

For *Negotiations*, I pulled information from media coverage of various recent protest marches. It is part of a series I made using a red, white, and blue palette as a nod to the American flag. This group of “flags” combines fragments of information that represents the growing number of issues I find myself grappling with, from sexism and racism, to global warming, immigration, and national identity.



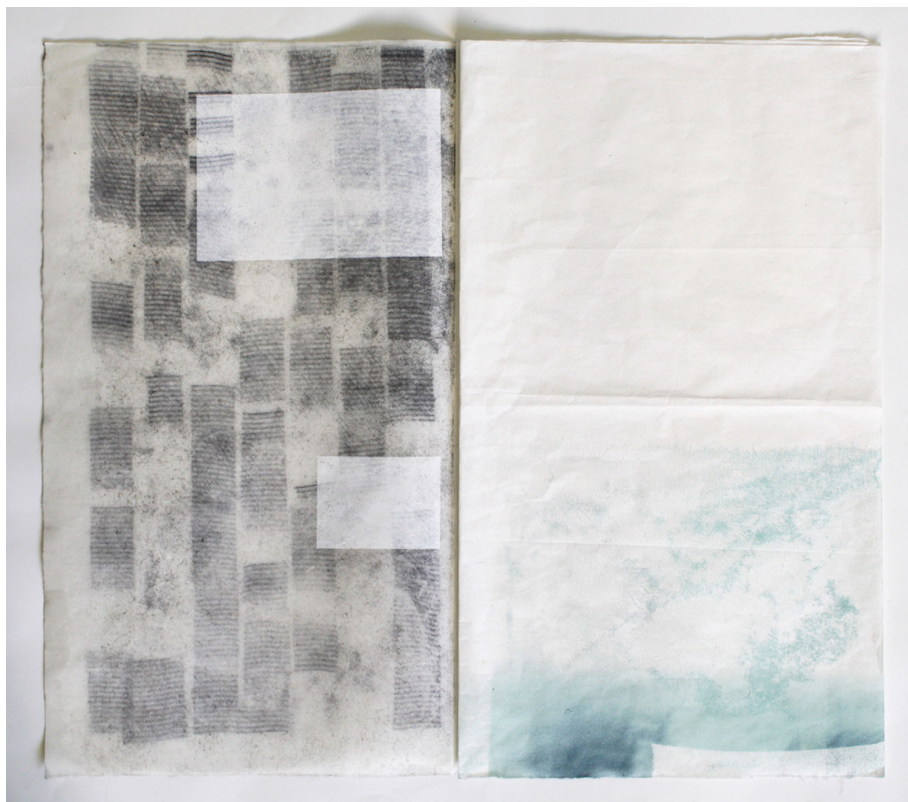
105 Days Before Today (March 27, 2017)
 Installation, 2017 & 2018



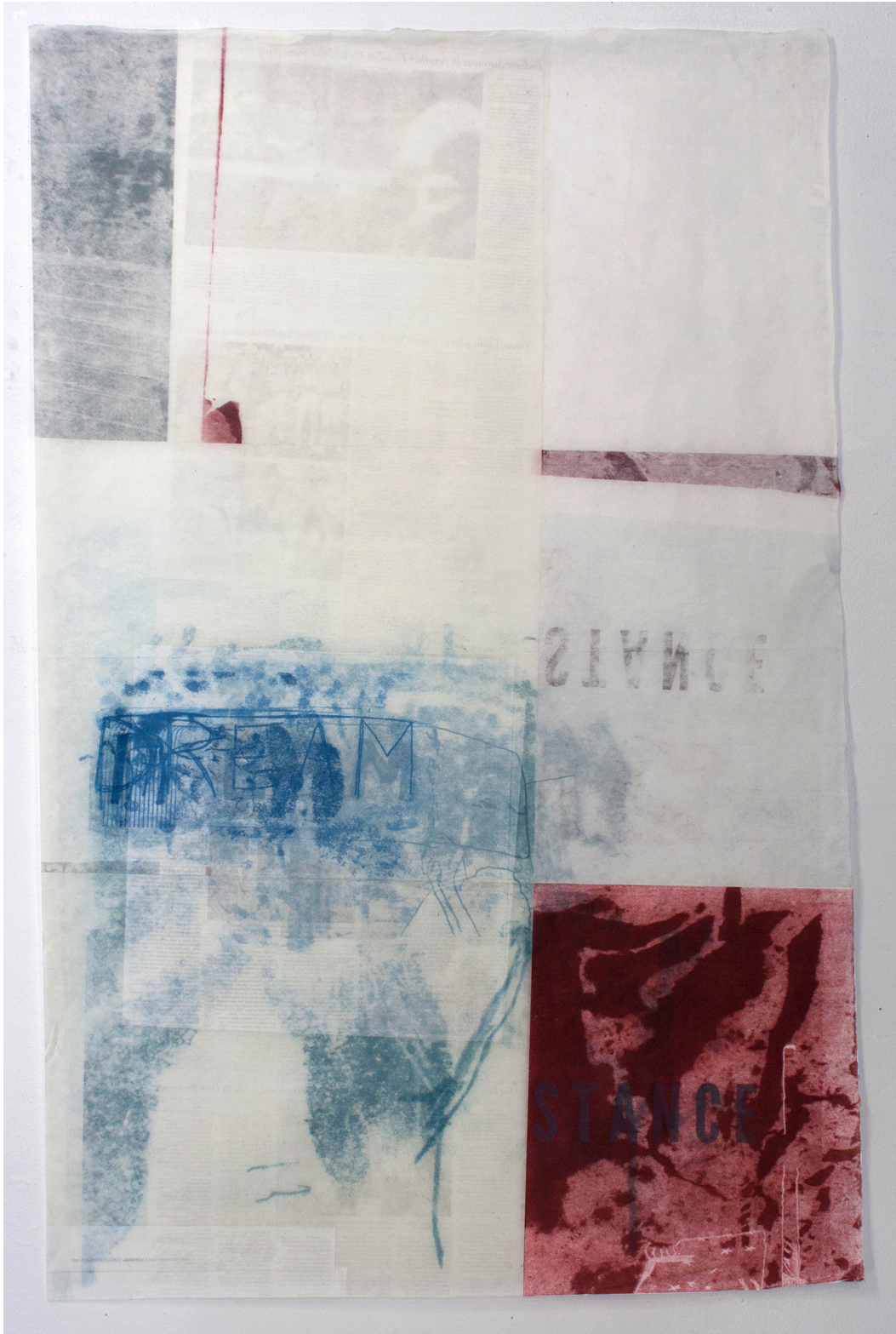
Naturalization
Screenprint, 20x22," 2017



Media Outlets Blocked From White House Press Briefing
 Installation, 24x48," 2017



Sue Watson, 90, Tireless Advocate for Liberal Causes
 Monotype, 22x24," 2017



Negotiations
Monoprint, 25x39," 2017

In the monochrome prints that began with *The Storm System Will Intensify*, text is less prominent in the image and less declarative in meaning. Ink is pressed through paper, at times becoming so dense it shimmers. The ghost image of words float on the page detached from their original existence, a jumbled conversation taking place across multiple panels, and between audience and artwork. In many ways, it is a return to my more ephemeral and atmospheric work that began with prints of the sea and ended with prints of light, but with the additional weight of three years of research, life, and art-making. I now know more about what each piece is for me. I know when I want to give answers and when I do not. I am deliberate with the ambiguity, and use it as a tool more than a crutch. I want to engage but not pontificate; to leave viewers in thought.



The Storm System Will Intensify
Monotype, 24x28," 2018

AFTER, AFTER, AFTER

THAT

AFTER THAT

The Ashes in Napa

AFTER WHAT

AFTER THAT

I see loss as a marker of time and often the harshest reminder to use it wisely. I read
obituaries, tear up for strangers, and savor their accomplishments.

A tribute and a record of a life.

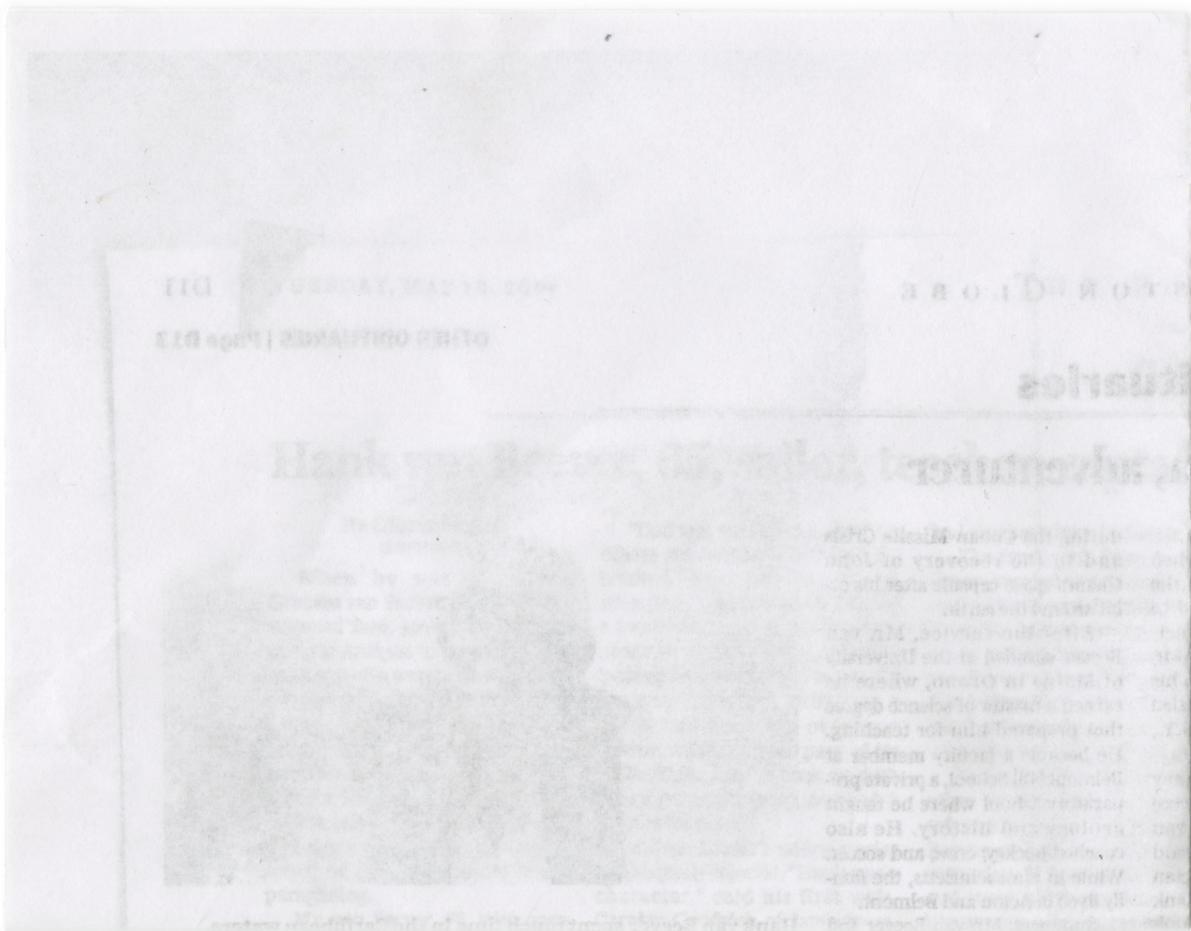
The work I make is a record of my time.

It is a call to action, but also a pause,

with the intention of offering a moment of reflection and sanctuary.

I use the language of words to offer meaning and to ask questions.

Like grieving, the answers are not always clear.



REFERENCES

Duncombe, Stephen. "Does it Work?: The Effect of Activist Art." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Volume 83, Number 1, Spring 2016, pp. 115-134 (Article)

The New York Times, 2016-2018

Schor, Mira. "The Ground." *Cultural Politics* 1 November 2014; 10 (3): 320–332.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-2795705>

Williams, Terry Tempest. 2012. *When Women Were Birds*. Reprint Edition.
New York, NY: Picador