

VOLUME_04

Haunted Formalism

Nicole Phungrasamee

Fein and Dean Smith

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1526 Armacost Avenue

Apartment #202

Los Angeles, California 90025

delvazprojects.com

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Current members: Jared Baxter, Robert Crouch, Yann Novak,

Sean Nye, Jimena Sarno, and Geneva Skeen

info@volumeprojects.org

volume.la

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Haunted Formalism

**Nicole Phungrasamee
Fein and Dean Smith**

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Haunted Formalism

*Jared
Baxter*

It's summer when I write this, and the air in Los Angeles is choked with the smoke of fires. Despite the famously omnipresent smog, this is the first time I've regularly felt short of breath, and the feeling produces a lingering sense of claustrophobia, even in the face of the sweeping panoramas the city so often offers. One becomes aware of the haze not just as gatekeeper of the visible, but as the medium in which the apparition of distance collapses, permeated at every point by the burning of organic and mechanical machines.

Something of this situation is reflected, in an inverse way, in these works by Nicole Phungrasamee Fein and Dean Smith. Even in the exceptional cases where they are larger than the present page, each compels, even insists upon, a closer look, in which distinct categories emerge only to be blurred, finally refusing any necessary or essential link back to the images — if, indeed, images they are — that occasioned them.

Perhaps the most readily intuitable of these binaries is scale. Line is central to both Fein and Smith's compositions, and establishes in each a native sense of unit length, as internally regular and yet aberrant from standardized measures as the breath is from seconds. As a result, these works can seem simultaneously to refer to scales that are sub-microscopic and beyond the monumental, a vertiginous and at times abyssal indeterminacy arising from disciplined strategies of aesthetic reduction.

This, it should be noted, sets these artists' practices squarely at odds with minimalism, which seeks to achieve a stable sense of scale by explicitly setting art objects in relation to the viewer's body and the environmental context of the encounter. If anything, the tendency here is in many ways the opposite of a literalist one, to borrow Michael Fried's preferred pejorative. Thus, in spite of certain similarities, what one sees is in this case only fleetingly present in its bare facticity; a formalist approach is quickly corrupted by the imagistic metaphors one resorts to in an effort to convey the purely visual

aspects of these works. If Fein's watercolors equally resemble bacterial cultures and supernovae, Smith's drawings circuitry and labyrinths, these are both there and not there in the forms themselves. This ambivalence, in which presence and absence uneasily coexist, takes on the character of a haunting.

Just as a ghost exists between worlds, neither fully living nor fully dead, much of Fein's work here exists between media. Representing the outcome of experiments with making her own watercolor paint in collaboration with Magnolia Editions in Oakland, the meticulous, line-by-line nature of her all-black compositions pushes them towards the status of drawings. Much of the tension in these works, I think, evolves from that between the natural behavior of the pigment and the artist's gesture, producing an effect that seems less the product of an external intention than an almost occult, inner process of self-organization. This can be seen in works like *io53*, where a tan circle establishes a sense of figural coherency around a virtually uncountable series of black lines, which vary in thickness and length, oriented towards one of at least three rough centers of density within the ring. The sense of an invisible force at play, at once expansive and inward-gathering, calls to mind seashells, fingerprints, or iron filings gathering around a magnet.

This dynamic emerges in a more extreme form in the largest work in the exhibition, a grey watercolor titled *1061816*. Though the sense of a center is more definite than in *io53*, the painting lacks a border clearly delineating the outer boundaries of the figure from the surrounding ground. As a result, the question of whether we are looking at something in the process of clustering together or moving apart is made more acute, rendered undecidable by its static nature. The tension here relates directly to the deeply ambiguous nature of order itself. To the extent that we are here, experiencing consciousness, this is obviously an effect of a tremendous and improbable orderliness, on biological, chemical, and physical levels. Entropy is commonly cast as the

antagonist of this organization. Yet entropy is in fact a highly orderly force, which acts to minimize potential energy. A cold and inert universe, in which matter has been reduced to the indifferent interchangeability of the grey dots that comprise Fein's painting, represents the ultimate triumph of order, and from this perspective the vast discrepancies in temperature, density, and so forth that animate our present world are what is out of balance and chaotic.

Science is alluded to specifically in the titles of *specimen1* and *specimen2*, which recall Fein's earlier work with pressed flowers. Painted in glassy acrylic on polypropylene, the lack of a compositional center and the emphasis on repetition link entropic equivalence and taxonomy, alluding to the material basis of botanical and biological knowledge in the comparison of examples in which living processes have ceased or been arrested. The metallic sheen of these works amplifies the sense of the inorganic. At the same time, however, there is a certain spontaneity to these compositions that partially accounts for the sense of these dots as pluripotent cells, which is only reinforced by the contradictory nature of the very interpretations they suggest. To the same extent that her work is capable of evoking the cosmos, then, there is an equal sense in which it invokes matter in the quantum realm, where two states can simultaneously coexist.

And yet, in the final analysis, these are merely attempts to metaphorically capture the paradoxical energies of Fein's watercolor drawings and paintings, which lack any representational content. Her figures remain, for the most part, products of the formal possibilities of her technique, which even when lines are not the basic compositional unit is essentially accumulative. A similar approach to mark-making can be found in much of Dean Smith's work, from the *circle drawings* of about 2007 - 2011 and the *spot drawings* ca. 2002 - 2008, among others. For this reason, this present series of drawings, in which the figures have been reduced almost past the

minimum required for their elaboration, represents a sharp departure.

Once again, one finds compositions that generate a rich array of descriptive possibilities while exceeding and preserving a fundamental reserve from them. The most obvious of these is the labyrinth. Though, indeed, this can be a productive register through which to approach these drawings, permitting among other things a connection to mythology and, metaphorically, urbanity, there are several key ways in which the concept of this structure as such is undermined. Firstly, the sense of a center towards which all paths lead is continually called into question. Even where such a locus is implied, it is often illusory, as in *untitled [dsl_5]*, in which the innermost square is open to both an enclosed channel and the space around it, spiraling the figure and ground into each other. The center, in other words, undoes the unicursal labyrinth, conflating the sense of interior and exterior space established in the form's margins. Crucially, an ostensible error of omission becomes the etiology through which the work's completeness can be reconstructed.

Secondly, the strong impression of interrelatedness given by this series as a whole casts doubt on the idea that the undeniably labyrinthine *untitled [dsl_13]* is different in kind from the starkly reduced compositions of *untitled [dsl_11]* or *untitled [dsl_12]*. On the contrary, each drawing performs a kind of commentary on the others to the effect that this very relationality is itself the substantial unifying principle here. In this light, the multiplicity of entrances that represent the most significant common feature among these three instances emerges as the key to the whole series. As the simplest iteration of the entire set, *untitled [dsl_11]* shows the underlying principle to subsist not in the inward, contemplative enfolding of a labyrinth, but rather the points at which boundaries of interior and exterior become both legible and in flux.

These drawings also relate in a specific way to their medium, graphite, and the concept of a labyrinth does

not capture this integral connection. As one of the most stable forms of pure carbon, and the highest grade of coal, this material encompasses one of the key conditions for planetary life as well as contemporary energy production. An electric conductor, certain of these works could literally function as circuits but for the delicacy of the lines. The tension between rectilinearity and curvature, prominent in *untitled [dsl_7]*, allegorizes the relational properties of the carbon atom, which can form both planar and cylindrical structures. Yet the most compelling link may be on the level of a pun. The etymological root of the word graphite is the Greek *graphein*, which means both to draw and to write. In trying to describe a work like *untitled [dsl_2]*, in which the labyrinthine appearance of the figure on the left is belied by the series of concentric rectangles at its center, one eventually arrives at a level of specificity tantamount to reproducing the drawing itself. Put another way, the drawings are their own self-description. This reflexivity, in spite of a detached approach to mark-making that almost entirely effaces signs of the artist's hand, produces a situation in which writing and drawing begin to merge.

Thus, it is through the linguistic compulsion to find meaning through metaphor that the uncanny nature of Smith and Fein's works comes to light. The more rigorously one seeks to formulate an equivalent in words to these works, the more they seem to be themselves their own doubles. The formal hybridity of Fein's watercolor drawings is likewise echoed in Smith's gessoed panels, in which painting is approached through a practice centered in drawing. Both artists evince a haunted formalism in which an extreme discipline and economy of gesture engenders compositions with the self-reflexivity and ambivalence of language.

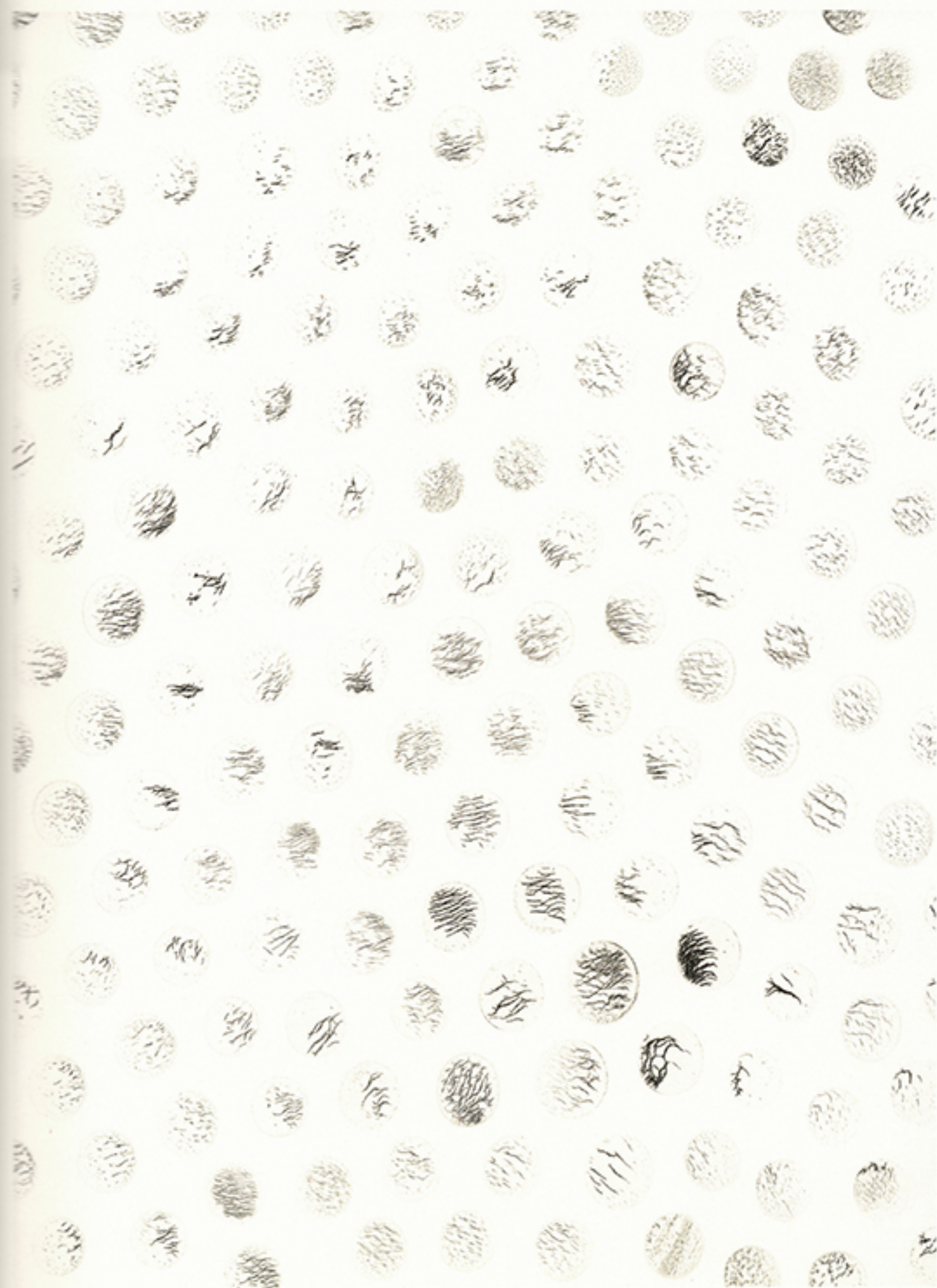


io4, 2015, handmade watercolor on paper, 5.875 x 6 inches

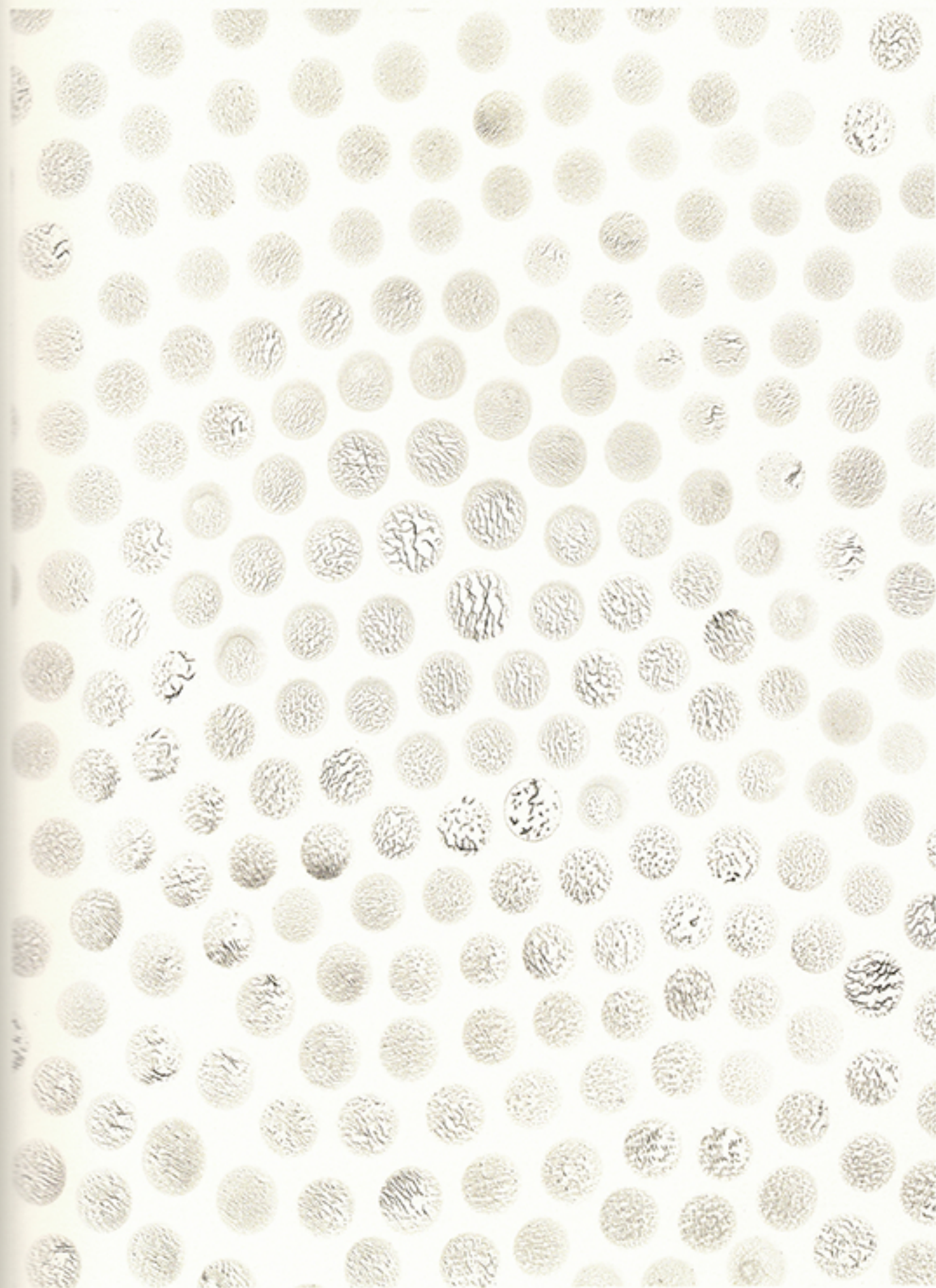


io53, 2016, handmade watercolor on heavyweight paper, 8 x 8 inches

specimen1, 2016, acrylic on polypropylene, 12 x 8.875 inches



specimen2, 2016, acrylic on polypropylene, 12 x 8.875 inches



The Painter's Measure

*Norma
Cole*

For Nicole Phungrasamee Fein

Hope is encountered, variously
remembered, granted the patterns
of heaven— countless tiny
stars, oxalis hearts,
forget-me-nots, test sheets

Distant mountain ridgelines
flatten to paper in daylight
with every purposeful motion
night vision of timeless time
approaching the pulse of suspension

Metabolic edge of experiment,
the radiant points, scales and
variations of beads and dots
breathe benevolent notes, their
particular legibility of trackless

Resistance, deep-rooted, time
becomes sight incarnate, embodied
control framing chaos, space beyond
clarity, branches of lavender, thistle
grinding binding wetting the colors

A meteor shower—constellation
as memory of perfection