



D O U G  
A R G U E



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Photo by Jose Maris

Cover image (detail): *Pantheon*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 70 x 94 in / 178 x 239 cm

# DOUG ARGUE

## Palimpsests

October 9 – November 7, 2015  
at 960 Madison Avenue

Monday – Friday 9:30 am – 6 pm  
Saturday 11 am – 5 pm

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## Foreword

We are delighted to present the first solo show of paintings by Doug Argue at Waterhouse & Dodd. Doug has already developed a devoted following from many distinguished collectors which his beautiful, lyrical paintings - multi-layered in both conception and execution - certainly deserve. His two large paintings recently commissioned for the One World Trade Center lobby have brought him much acclaim, and have enabled his work to be discovered and appreciated by thousands in their daily routines.

We believe Palimpsests, the first exhibition by an American artist in our new gallery on Madison Avenue, will further his reputation substantially. Doug's exhibition during the 2015 Venice Biennale received rave reviews, and at the time of writing has been seen by 2,000 art enthusiastic viewers. Waterhouse & Dodd will be developing his international exposure over the coming years, organizing solo and group shows for him in Europe. We will also be exhibiting his work ourselves at major art fairs in the United States and Europe.

We are very grateful to our client and friend Patrick Coakley for introducing Doug to us, and to Mary Frank for her lucid and perceptive introduction.

We hope you will be able to view the exhibition in person.

Ray Waterhouse  
September 2015

Right: *Counterpoint*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 72 x 93 in / 183 x 236 cm





# Palimpsests

The title of the exhibit captures the spirit of Doug Argue's work in a single word. Palimpsest (pronounced PAL-imp-sest) is not a word that most of us use everyday, but its manifold meanings accurately describe the paintings in this exhibition. In its broadest sense, a palimpsest is something that is reused or altered but still hints of its original identity. Argue's works are varied in appearance but consistent in theory. There are recurring recognizable subjects, including books, bricks, and the universe. The works look different but they all express the same intent. Looking carefully at Argue's paintings and learning about his working method reveals that creating palimpsests is second nature to him; his paintings demand that you read between the lines.

The word palimpsest has Greek roots and literally means "scraped again." It refers to the medieval method of recycling ancient parchment manuscripts. As Stephen Greenblatt so eloquently explains in his book *The Swerve*, making parchment was a labor intensive and costly process. When the monks who worked as scribes in medieval scriptoria needed a new supply of parchment they would find a manuscript that was no longer deemed important and laboriously scrape away the old words. Then they would reuse the parchment. Seminal works by the Greek mathematician Archimedes, the Greco-Roman physician Galen, along with writings by Cicero, Ovid and Lucretius were erased to make copies of other documents, much less valuable to us today.

Fortunately, eradicating the old ink was a tedious process and the scribes did not always do a very thorough job, leaving behind traces of the original works. These layers of meaning on the parchment constitute a palimpsest, the old layer of meaning obscured but partially detectable beneath the new. With careful work, it is sometimes possible to decipher and reconstruct the original writings, making palimpsests' hidden treasure visible after centuries. Galen's treatise on medicine and the Archimedes Palimpsest (which sold at auction for \$2 million) have both been painstakingly reconstituted by teams of scientists and scholars who have successfully deciphered significant portions of the so-called undertext.

With the advent of the printing press in the late fifteenth century, recycling parchment and creating palimpsests became a thing of the past. Paper replaced parchment and the age of mechanical reproduction began. However, the idea of the palimpsest endured, taking on additional layers of meaning, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of its etymological destiny.

The word came to be applied to anything with a practical purpose that is reused but still retains traces of its original form. Old buildings are often palimpsests, maintaining their foundations but showing the world a façade that is an accretion of elements added over time. Indeed, the passage of time is implied in the existence of any palimpsest, giving it historical resonance.

The Basilica of San Marco in Venice, originally built in the tenth century, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. After Venice's decisive victory over the Turks in the Fourth Crusade in 1204, much of the façade was sheathed with marble and adorned with columns from buildings in Constantinople, serving as an eternal reminder of Venice's power. The building that we see today is truly an architectural palimpsest, documenting Venice's history and making visible the passage of time.

Argue's paintings satisfy the definition of palimpsest in every sense of the word. As he makes his works he builds up layers of paint, scraping parts away and adding more. Sometimes he paints over existing paintings, allowing just a glow of their first form to radiate through the top layer of work. Finally, he adds a scrim of letters over the surface of the painting. Each letter is painstakingly painted using a stencil, with layers of paint in multiple colors built up over time. The letters are upper case and lower case; some are immediately legible, others are distorted. Like snowflakes, no two letters are alike.

It is important to understand that the artist does not intend the letters to form words. They are representations of phonetic sounds, more akin to notes of music than to words. They fall, float, or hang, magically suspended above the foreground of all of Argue's works, out of space and time. They are what Argue calls "particulate matter" that creates the possibility for infinite patterns and infinite meaning. In works like *Night Poems*, the letters are sharply angled in space to create a highly animated effect, while in others they are large and elongated, creating rays of energy that emanate from the work, as in *Counterpoint*. Although they are deliberately placed, they appear random.

This randomness reinforces the sense of a world of infinite possibilities. Returning to the medieval scribes hunched over their desks hundreds of years ago, we must realize that when they recycled the sheets of parchment they paid no attention to the order of the pages in the original manuscript. This makes deciphering the original texts an even greater challenge. Argue brings the undertext to the top, making it the fourth dimension of his work and allowing us to see in it what we wish.

*Nature or Nurture* pulls together all of the qualities of a palimpsest in Argue's method. The painting began life in 2006 as an untitled figurative work of a monster-like head, with the words "Nature of Nurture?" inscribed at the top (fig. 1). Today the canvas is an abstraction in the same hues but with no recognizable words or figures. A glowing swath runs diagonally down the center of the canvas, a palimpsest of the figure that once was.



(Fig. 1) *Nature or Nurture*, 2006 (above);  
*Nature or Nurture*, 2015 (reworked, below), see p. 7



*Ramesses* epitomizes Argue's fascination with the universal aspects of language, how we use it and how it constantly changes. Originally, Argue chose the hieroglyph of the Egyptian King Ramesses as the centerpiece for a painting (fig. 2). As you look at *Ramesses* as it appears in the show, the artist will explain that Egyptian hieroglyphs, like most writing systems, start out as pictures of things that gradually evolve from pictograms into strictly phonetic representations. When eighteenth-century scholars were trying to crack the code of hieroglyphics, Ramesses was the name that held the key to their success. They realized that each symbol that constituted the word was a phonetic component, that is a sound, not a pictorial element. The first symbol, the circle with the dot in the middle, is Ra, the sun god. The last two symbols are the "S" sound. Knowing that the oval cartouche around the "word" meant that it was the name of a king supplied the final clue: the hieroglyph spells Ramesses. Argue is fascinated by this phenomenon and how language has the potential to constantly change.

If you step away from the work called Ramses that is exhibited here, you can still see the all-important cartouche hovering under the layers of impressionistic brushstrokes that have floated in to cover the first version of the work. Finally, there is the dusting of letters, falling gently over the surface, animating it and reinforcing the message that letters, our own Roman ones or Egyptian hieroglyphs, are the building blocks, the DNA of language.

What clouds bring forth the letters that are the constant element in these paintings? Argue observes that books have traditionally been the building blocks of our culture and they have been a favorite subject in his work for years. In 1997 he made a monumental painting of haphazard stacks of books, entitled *Library of Babel*. His most recent book paintings are smaller, more manageable, and domestic in scale.



(Fig. 2) Left: *Ramesses*, 2014; right: *Ramesses*, 2015, see p. 14

There is a lovely synchronicity to the fact that this year is the 500th anniversary of the death of Aldus Manutius, the great Venetian printer who helped save parchments from turning in palimpsests. He also invented the first printed "pocket book" volume small enough to carry with you.

Renaissance Venetian painting is a touchstone for Argue, who first visited Venice when he was a young man. Tintoretto's monumental canvases inspired him to paint on a grand scale. Titian's method of painting directly on the canvas, without preparatory drawing, laid the foundation for Argue's method.

Argue's paintings of bricks also have Venetian origins, for bricks were the preferred building material of the Renaissance city. These bricks were held together with relatively soft lime mortar, which allow buildings to move gently in a city that shifts with the changing tides. Porous by nature, bricks absorb the salt air and often develop complex surface patterns.

The walls of the exhibition space where Argue exhibited during the 2015 Venice Biennale are raw brick and were the inspiration for a large scale painting similar to *For All I Know*. Measuring about 9 by 13 feet, *Cosa Mentale* functions as a palimpsest on several levels, for covering the bricks are countless white letters, like a layer of salt, obscuring what lies beneath and at the same time animating the surface, revivifying the crumbling old wall. Installed on a fifteenth-century Venetian brick wall, the juxtaposition of old and new, painted and real, permanent and temporary, creates a series of echoing palimpsests that are a monument to the inspiration of the past on the present (fig. 3). The brick paintings in the current exhibition are representative samples of this monumental work.



(Fig. 3) *Cosa Mentale* (detail), 2015

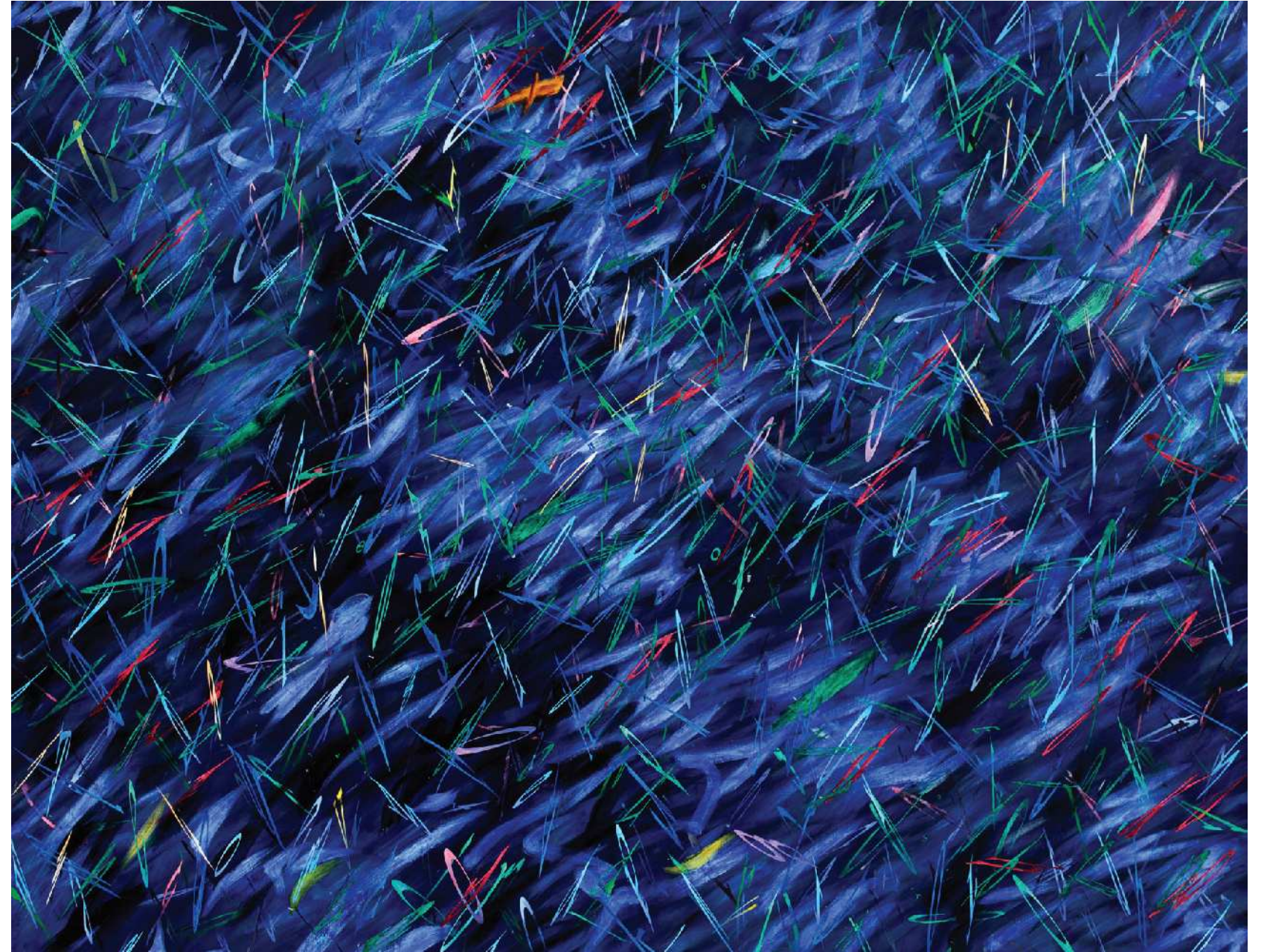
*China Spice*, the last work that Argue made for this exhibition takes the contrast of old and new to a different level, mixing the rough texture of handmade Venetian bricks with slick flat, brightly colored enamel bricks that could be subway tile. Indeed, Argue is perhaps seeing through the walls of the train he takes to his studio everyday to the past that lies beneath. Two worlds come together here, beneath a shower of random letters reminding us of the infinite possibilities and combinations that the universe offers if we are willing to read between the lines.

– Mary E. Frank, art historian and collector





*Nature or Nurture*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 88 x 77 in / 223.5 x 195.5 cm



*Night Poems*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 72 x 93 in / 178 x 185 cm





*Chorus*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 12 x 14 in / 30.5 x 35.5 cm



*For All I Know*, 2015. Oil on panel. 24 x 30 in / 61 x 76 cm

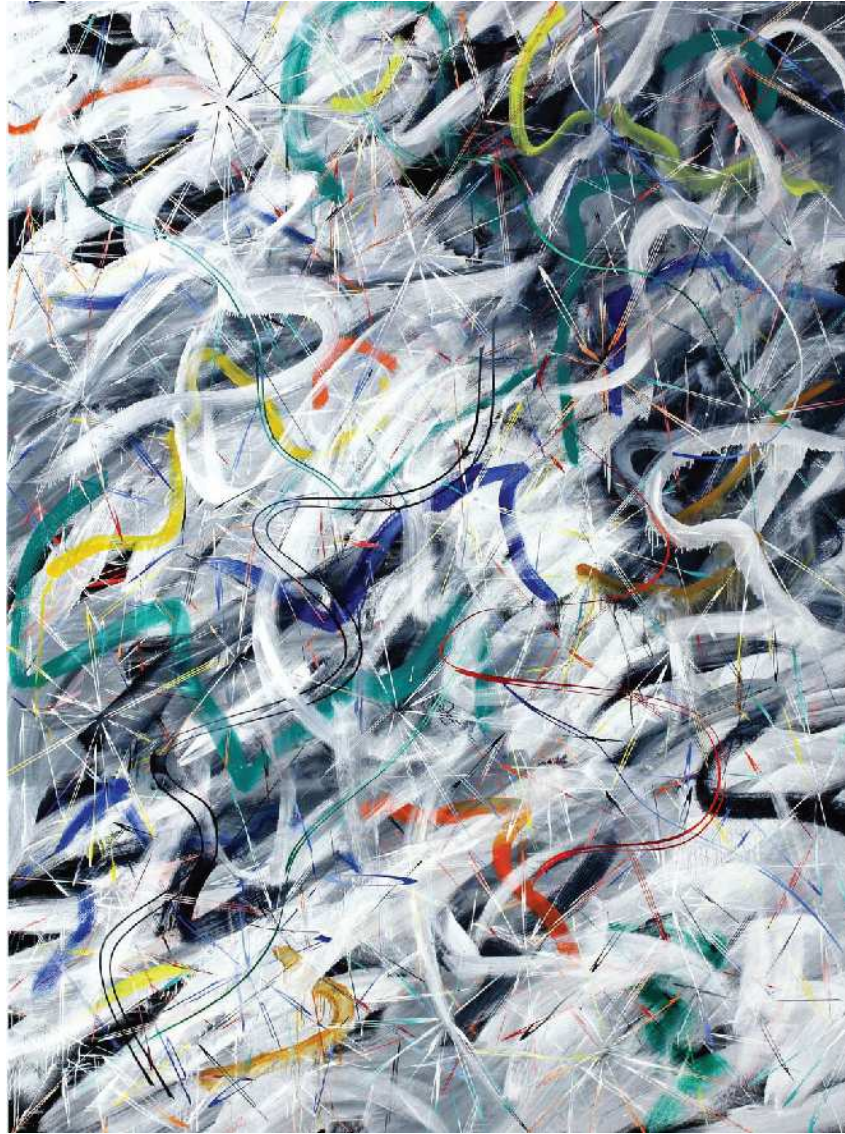


*Fleetful*, 2015. Gouache on panel. 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm



*Flutterby*, 2015. Oil on lithograph.  
39 x 28 in / 99 x 71 cm





*Pipers Song*, 2014. Oil on canvas. 93 x 69 in / 236 x 175 cm



*Little Lamb*, 2014. Oil on canvas. 93 x 69 in / 236 x 175 cm



*Down Pour*, 2015. Watercolor, gouache, and pastel on paper. 60 x 40 in / 152 x 102 cm

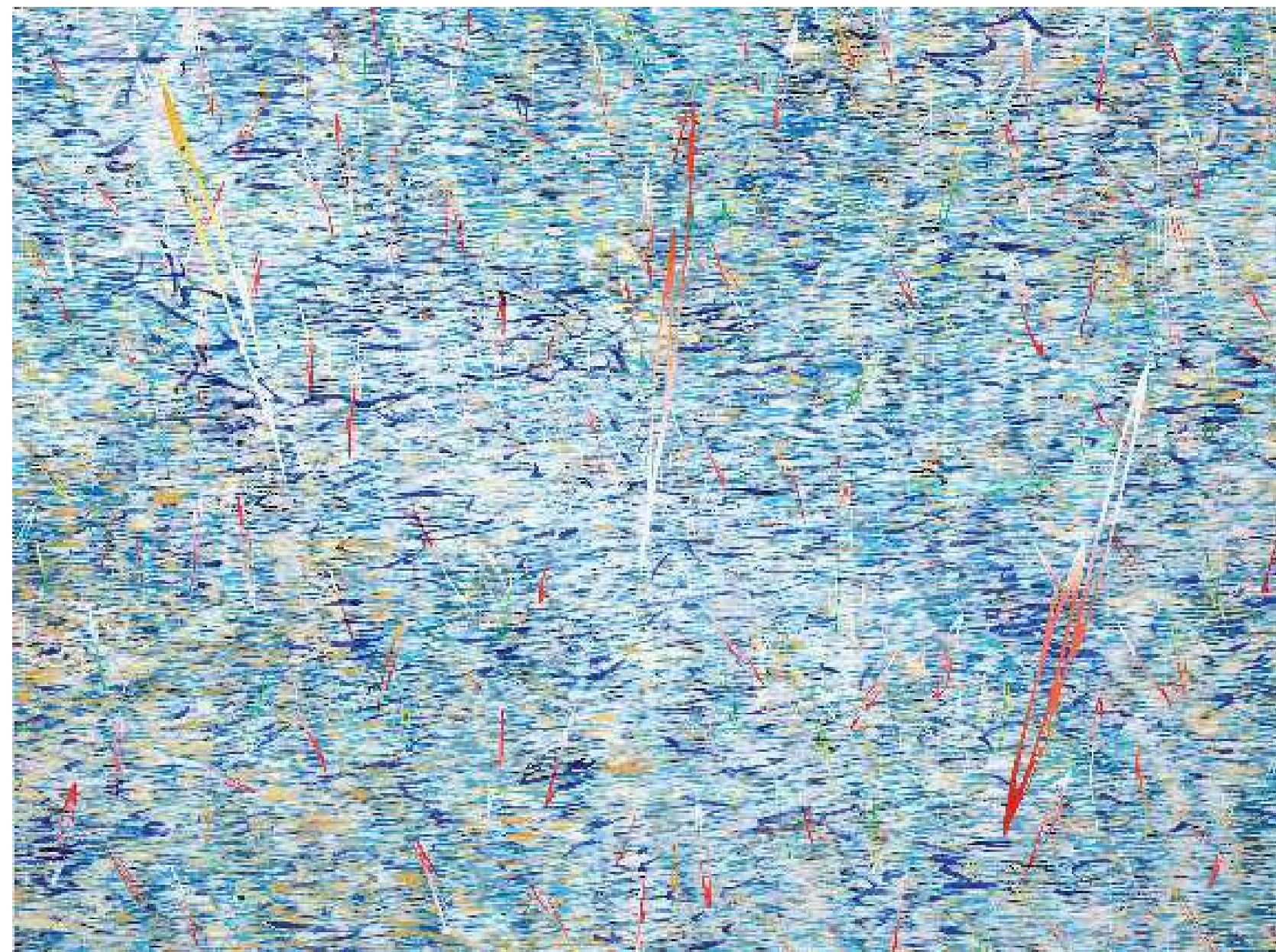


*Strata*, 2011. Oil on canvas. 78 x 54 in / 198 x 137 cm





*Free Verse*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 78 x 90 in / 198 x 227 cm



*Ramesses*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 72 x 93 in / 178 x 185 cm





*Short Epic*, 2015. Oil on panel. 30 x 24 in / 76 x 61 cm



*Notorious Fictions*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 45 x 57 in / cm



*China Spice*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 45 x 57 in / 114 x 145 cm



# Doug Argue

American (b. 1962) in St. Paul, Minnesota

## Solo Exhibitions

- 2015 *Palimpsests*, Waterhouse & Dodd, New York, NY  
*Scattered Rhymes*, Venice Biennale, Collateral Exhibition, Venice, Italy
- 2014 *Page Turner*, Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 2013 *The Speech of Clouds*, Edelman Arts, New York, NY  
*Doug Argue*, Cafesjian Center for the Arts, Yerevan, Armenia  
*The Art of Translation*, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
- 2012 *Catch My Drift*, Haunch of Venison Gallery New York, NY
- 2011 *The Study of Infinite Possibilities*, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
- 2005 Sherry Leedy Gallery, Kansas City, MO
- 2004 Gallery Co., Minneapolis, MN
- 1998 *Library of Babel*, Associated American Artists, NY
- 1997 Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 1996 *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY
- 1994 *What is the Grass*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
- 1990 Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 1987 Bockley Gallery, New York, NY
- 1986 MC Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 1985 Tally Gallery, Bemidji, MN
- 1984 B square One Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 1983 Bemidji State University Gallery, Bemidji, MN

## Select Group Exhibitions

- 2015 *20 | 20 Nature Nurture*, Bangkok, Thailand
- 2014 *Monumental*, MANA Miami, Miami, FL  
*All The Best Artists are My Friends*, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ
- 2013 *Pop Culture: Selections from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation*, MANA Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ  
*Contained Conflict*, Driscoll Babcock Galleries, NY, NY
- 2012 *Pop Culture: Selections from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation*, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu, CA  
*Abstraction :What is Real*, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
- 2010 *Tuffatore*, GRAM, Grand Rapids, MI  
Haunch of Venison Gallery, New York City, NY
- 2007 *Made in California*, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA  
Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA
- 2006 *12 x 12*, Todd Gallery, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

- 2005 *National juried exhibition*, Mills Pond House, St. James, NY, Juror: Claudia Altman-Siegel, Director of the Luhring Augustine Gallery.  
*Word Art*, University Galleries, Cincinnati, Ohio.  
Millard Sheets Gallery Foundation, In association with the Smithsonian Institution, Pomona, CA.  
*Eclectic Eye*, Frederick R. Weisman Museum, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA.  
*Inertia 2005*, Gallery 500, Portland, Oregon  
*Will Creek Survey*, The Allegany Arts Council/ Saville gallery, Juror: Kristen Hileman, assistant curator; Hirshorn Museum, Cumberland, Maryland.  
*2nd Biennial International Juried Exhibition* at Herbst International Exhibition Hall in San Francisco, juried by Marian Parmenter Director SFMOMA Artists Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
The Fran Hill Gallery, Toronto, ON, Canada.  
*National Juried Exhibition*, Phoenix Gallery, Juror: Trevor Smith, curator New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, New York.  
*Alpan International 2005*, Alpan Gallery, Juror: Phyllis Braff, President Emerita, International Association of Art Critics, Long Island, New York.  
*2005 Annual Juried Art Competition*, South Arkansas Arts Center, Juror: Suzanne Weaver, Dallas Museum of Art Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, El Dorado, AR.
- 2004 Scope Los Angeles, Refusalon, Los Angeles, CA.  
*Two Portraits*, Frederic R. Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.  
*Minimalism and More*, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA.  
Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.  
*California Artists from the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation*, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, traveled to CSU Bakersfield, CA.  
Post Gallery, LA, CA.  
Culture Club, Oakland, CA.  
Refusalon, San Francisco, CA.
- 2001 *Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte*, Florence, Italy.  
*Introductions*, Refusalon gallery, San Francisco, CA.  
*Twin Cities Collects*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN  
Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul, MN.  
American Academy in Rome, Italy.  
Associated American Artists, New York City, NY Threadwaxing Space, New York City.  
Composing A Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.  
Weisman Art Museum, Saint Paul, MN.  
Drawings Midwest, Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul, MN.  
Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.  
McKnight Foundation Exhibition, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.  
Katherine Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

- 1997 (cont.) *Composing A Collection*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.  
Weisman Art Museum, Saint Paul, MN.  
*Drawings Midwest*, Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul, MN.  
Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.  
*McKnight Foundation Exhibition*, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.  
Katherine Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.  
*The Persistent Figure*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.  
*Art and the Law, presented by West Publishing Co.*, St. Paul, MN, traveled to Plaza Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Albrecht Art Museum, St. Joseph, MO, Landmark Center, St. Paul, MN, traveling exhibition.  
*Eight McKnight Artists*, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.  
Rochester Art Center, Rochester, MN.  
*Doug Argue and Jim Lutes*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.  
*Five From Minnesota*, MCAD Gallery, MPLS, MN, Traveled to the New-Museum, New York City.  
Daedalus Fine Art, Minneapolis, MN.  
Saint Paul Art Collective, Wall Street Gallery, St. Paul, MN.  
Bemidji, Art Center, Bemidji, MN.

## Awards

- 2009 London International Creative Competition, Artist of the Year
- 2001 Golden Family Foundation
- 1997 Rome Prize Fellow
- 1995 Pollock- Krasner Foundation  
Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship  
Minnesota Arts Board Career Opportunities Grant
- 1994 Minnesota Arts Board Career Opportunities Grant
- 1992 McKnight Foundation Fellowship
- 1991 Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship
- 1990 Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant
- 1988 Bush Foundation Fellowship
- 1987 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
- 1986 McKnight Foundation Fellowship
- 1984 Jerome Foundation Fellowship

## Collections

- Cafesjian Museum of Art, Yerevan, Armenia  
Port Authority, One World Trade Center, New York, NY; two paintings  
American Academy in Rome, New York, NY  
Random House Books, New York, NY  
General Mills, Minneapolis, MN  
Target Corporation, Minneapolis, MN; Commissioned in 2001  
Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis, MN; Commissioned in 2001  
Minnesota History Center Museum, St. Paul, MN

- Minnesota Museum of American Art  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; six paintings  
University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Business, Minneapolis, MN  
University of Minnesota, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN  
Frederic R. Weisman Foundation, Los Angeles, CA; three paintings

## Select Bibliography

- Nardin, Marie Ohanesian, *Venice Biennale Arte 2015: Doug Argue's Scattered Rhymes, a Satellite Exhibit You'll Want to See*, HUFFINGTONPOST.COM, May 8, 2015.  
Doug Argue. *Rime Sparse*. ARTE.IT, 2015.  
*Four monumental paintings by Doug Argue on view at palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo* ARTDAILY.ORG, May 2015.  
*A Venezia, le "Rime sparse" di Doug Argue*. ARTEMAGAZINE.IT, April 30, 2015.  
Frank, Mary E. *Doug Argue in Venice: Scattered Rhymes* Lukić, Dejan. Of the Letters, Nebular; Venice Biennale Satellite Exhibition Catalogue, 2015.  
Illytzyk, Ula. *One World Trade Center Artworks*. AP.ORG, December 2014.  
*Expansive abstractions of the universe on view at newly opened One World Trade Center*. ARTDAILY.ORG, November 2014.  
*Art at One World Trade Center fills the void*. EXAMINER.COM, November 2014.  
Mitsios, Apostolos. *The Isotropic Nature of Matter* HG, Online Magazine, Issue III, Vol. 2, May 2014.



*Archaeologia*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 15.5 x 24 in / 39 x 61 cm





*Alliteration*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 72 x 93 in / 183 x 236 cm  
Back cover: *Fundamentals*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 70 x 73 in / 178 x 185 cm



Photo by Jose Maris

Supplementary reading to the Introduction by Mary E. Frank:

C.W. Ceram, *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of Archaeology*. Knopf, Doubleday Publishing Group, 1967; Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. W.W. Norton, 2011; Deborah Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*. Yale University Press, 2002; Felicia R. Lee, "A Layered Look Reveals Ancient Greek Texts." *New York Times*, November 27, 2006; Mark Schorpe, "Medicine's Hidden Roots in an Ancient Manuscript." *New York Times*, June 1, 2015.





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