

WORKS ON PAPER
DOUG ARGUE

The Speech of Clouds

Works on Paper by Doug Argue

Essay by Charles A. Riley II

It is not speech, the sound we hear
In this conversation, but the sound
Of things and their motion...

—Wallace Stevens, "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man"

Turning to the commonplace, the master of calligraphy equalizes discrepancies.
Rain will fall, ice will melt, like a high-pitched voice, a sharp brush will move and
spread like torrential water:

—So Ching (239-303), The Force of Cursive Script (Ts'ao-shu shih)



DOUG ARGUE

WORKS ON PAPER

Leave it to Doug Argue to assay the impossible, grasping what is invisible or unknowable via the slightest of instruments. Leonardo drew the deluge. Durer carved lines so tiny into woodblocks that they would never appear in the final print. Bach wrote variations for Goldberg that even he could not play on the keyboards of his time. Keats filled the silence of the Grecian Urn with a meditation on time and "unheard melodies." Doug Argue ventures into strange seas of thought with a brush, gouache paint and black paper. Before approaching the universal premises that inform their multiple meanings, it is vitally important to begin by looking at these works as paintings. Many of the studio "secrets" (Argue, who likes to "push tools to their limits," is completely amenable to sharing backstage details on process) offer clues to sorting the gestural suggestions of the multi-level skeins. Individually designed stencils guide an array of twisted and elongated letters that are subtly immersed on the surface. Those Divisionist explosions in *What Are the Odds* and *The First Language*, with their Sam Francis-style splatter and spreading stains are blasted from a syringe at a distance of several feet, controlled maneuvers of choice with the scattershot consequences of chance. White ceramic palettes, each dedicated to a single color cut with white, isolate tonal components which blend optically in the viewer's mind rather than physically on the paper. Fine-tipped, soft brushes ensure clean edges and responsive touch in the whip-turns and fastidious parallel tracks that dance across *Marginalia* or billow over *A Common Confusion*, the support for which is a prepared black paper that the artist prizes for allowing an even more fine delineation of detail in gouache than canvas does for oil. As in the gouaches made by Sol Lewitt starting in the 1980s, the black ground is the ideal foil to the luminous effects of Argue's powdery reds, electric blues and singularly impressive whites. Like the delicate white lightning of Mark Tobey or the flashy highlights in the *Moulin Rouge* portraits of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Argue's deployment of white gouache is a source of light completely apposite to the usual method of reserving the white of the page for brightness as taught to watercolorists. The most dramatic examples of the effect include the play of jagged streaks over the darkness in *Bone Locker* or the Tobeyesque *Crazy Love*, one of a seductive group on a paler, manila ground. Unburdened by the anxiety of influence, he cites other important art historical sources on his choice of medium:

Robert Ryman taught me about light. By using white as a control he is able to make compositions in the refractive qualities of light. Shifting densities of paint reflect light differently. Areas of the ground that absorb more paint reflect light differently and different kinds of paint reflect light differently. I see many of his paintings as compositions in refracted light. If you spend hours in a Ryman show, as I did at Rob Storr's great retrospective, taking in his use of materials like wax paper, unpainted raw edges of linen and cardboard and boards, even the latex of the museum walls are all a part of the work, you understand that everything has a unique reflective fingerprint. After leaving I had a heightened awareness of how leaves have a different quality of light than the sand in the playground or the steel of a pedestrian bridge has a different kind of reflected light, even if they were all white. Brueghel invented a way of working with tempera on raw canvas or linen where the paint and the light feel like they are being absorbed into the fabric, a bit like Helen Frankenthaler, and unlike oil paint; which reflects the light back out. That is an effect that interests me in the use of the gouache. The key to gouache and its shifting transparencies is that it absorbs into the paper.

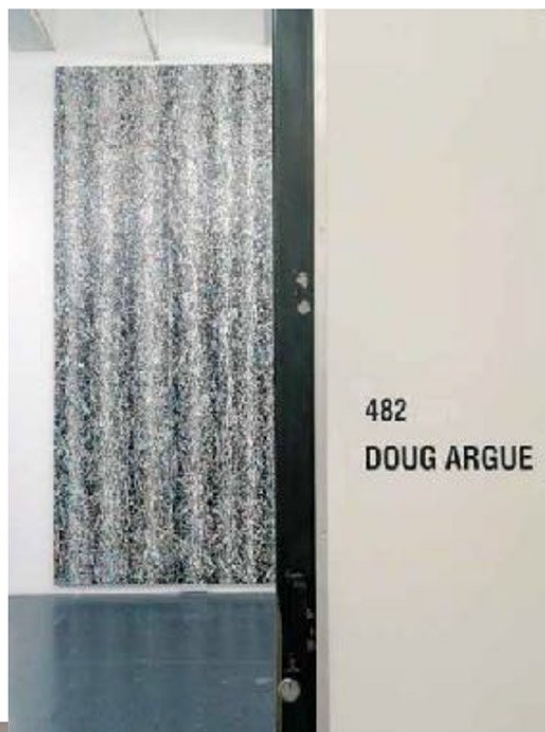
However bravura Argue's technique may be, it meets conceptual, intellectual and art historical challenges he overtly poses. An affable and supremely well-read native of St. Paul, Minnesota, Argue studied at Bemidji State University and the University of Minnesota, and quickly became a star of the Minneapolis-St. Paul art scene. Major international awards soon followed including the National Endowment for the Arts (1987), the McKnight Foundation (1992), grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1995) and the Prix de Rome (1997), as well as the London International Creative Competition first prize (2009). Prior to *The Study of Infinite Possibilities* (April 2011) and *The Art of Translation* (February 2013), both acclaimed solo exhibitions of oil on canvas works at Edelman Arts, his work has also been shown at Haunch of Venison (June 2012) and Associated American Artists in New York. His studio is a vast, sunlit loft where he works with metronomic assiduity, wearing magnifying loops for detailing, to a soundtrack that ranges from poets reciting to the complete operas of Verdi.

Argue's library is implicitly present in the studio. The linguistic subtext alone, a major element in the earlier oil paintings, including the large-scale triptych is an opportunity to deeply digress. He makes *FairyTails/Tails*, the large-scale triptych in watercolor, gouache and pastel, the centerpiece of the exhibition of works on paper. Its channeled cataracts of Gauguin orange (fading to peach at stroke's end under the addition of white), acidic yellows and range of greens course across three distinct tonal bases (blue on the left, red at center and green to the right). The third and last such triptych in response to the Heraclitus's aphorism, "You cannot step into the same river twice," its literary sources also include the works of the gnomic Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges and the brilliant psychologist and cognitive linguist Steven Pinker, whose poetic and influential treatise *The Language Instinct* offers what could be the epigraph to many of Argue's works: "Speech is a river of breath, bent into hisses and hums by the soft flesh of the mouth and throat." The Pinker connection makes great sense in that his research is so often on transformational grammar, morphology and the (graphic) mapping of cognitive response to linguistic stimuli. Argue's lined "sketchbooks" are replete with snippets of titles and aperçus straight out of Pinker on the Heraclitean flux of language:

The triptych is my river of speech, with different tones of color used for the under-painting in each of the three panels. One's mind does not make spaces between letters or words when you hear speech. Pronunciation, grammar, meaning, usage are in a constant state of flux. Imagine the magical moment when speech was first translated into text, breaking down the river of sound. In that moment one would not write down silent letters, it makes no sense. Two of my favorite examples of how the meaning of a word can change are "silly" and "man." "Silly" meant "blessed," and Old English texts refer to the "silly Virgin Mary." The word for man was "wer" (it stays in the language as werewolf) and the word man was gender neutral and meant "person." In Biblical texts you find reference to two men in the Garden of Eden, it meant two people in the garden and referred to Adam and Eve. We used to have grammatical gender like German and all of the romance languages but it was lost about the time my Viking ancestors came raping and pillaging from the north. They tried as best they could as a bunch of middle aged men to learn a new language but they couldn't get grammatical gender, so it got dumped.



Studio at MANA, 2013 Photo: Eden Cayen



Doug Argue's studio at MANA, 2013.
Photos: Eden Cayen

Argue is far from the only artist in town to trill upon the keys of language and painting. From Cy Twombly's gauche graffiti to the elegant cursive of Joan Miro's poesie peinture and the stenciled puns of Pablo Picasso and Jasper Johns or the stark black and white of Fiona Banner or Christopher Wool finds himself in verbose company. A coincidental Rene Magritte retrospective at MOMA reminds us the Surrealist poet used *Usage de Parole* as a title no less than six times in 1928 alone. One of the formidable traditions in which the same brush is used by the virtuoso to paint as to write is Chinese calligraphy, and Argue's airy drybrush flourishes in *Lost Reflections* recall the classic *Poem Written on a Boat on the Su River* by Mi Fu (1052-1107), at the center of which "Crazy" Mi expressively whipped a vastly out-of-proportion character ("chan" or "battle") in a flying white (*fei bai*) ascending gesture so named because the paper's white shines through the black ink as it stutters across the page. Certain strokes in Argue's repertoire have analogies in the seven canonic Chinese movements as catalogued in *A Diagram of the Battle Formation of the Brush* (*Pi-chen t'u*) a 7th century manual, including "A rhinoceros digging its tusk into the ground (a downward left thrust as in Argue's *Backstory*), or "shooting from a hundred pound crossbow" (the upturned hook in the Melvillean *Queequeg*) and "a withered vine a thousand years old" (a wavelike ending flourish that is the central gesture in *Hither and Thithering Waters of Night*, with its elliptical red inscription). A Chinese reader who knows the poem well enough tries to dismiss the distraction of the "disappearing" text and concentrate on the strokes. Except this is impossible, just as ignoring the letters in Argue's paintings proves impossible. Cognitive psychologists analyze the problem by means of the Stroop experiment showing the demands of literacy upon perception (a subject shown a stack of cards with the names of colors in asked to identify only the colors of ink in which the names are printed but inevitably allows their color to interfere with the answer).

When Chinese readers were submitted to the same study the meaning of the characters prevails upon the appreciation of the calligraphy as brushstroke. One of the demands made by Argue's works on paper is to realize that the letters are not discourse. Instead, consider their function as gesture, using the important idea of the literary critic and poet R.P. Blackmur, who wrote (after considering examples in art, architecture, dance, music, and religious rituals), "Gesture, in language, is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imaged meaning. It is that play of meaningfulness among words which cannot be defined in the formulas in the dictionary, but which is defined in their use together; gesture is that meaningfulness which is moving, in every sense of that word: what moves the words and what moves us." As in poetry, so in music: the stretched vowels in Argue's works are nothing less than visual embodiments of the bending of the letter into pure sound by an opera singer. Richard Wagner said of Beethoven, "Music expresses the innermost essence of gesture." Wagner was a conductor, whose baton traced in air many of the legato movements that you can follow across the kinetic Argue paintings. When Nietzsche wrote best on language the context was an essay on music and words, *Über Musik und Wort* (1871) part of which is dedicated to Beethoven's ninth symphony in which he observes, "We simply do not hear anything of Schiller's poem, the content of the words drowns unheard in the general sea of sound."

It takes two to tango, and any paradox relies on its binary base. A hallmark of Argue's mind as well as style is the shifting dialogue between text and painting, translucency and opacity, tight and loose edgework, even science and the arts. The paradigm for this double nature is offered by *Noctis Equi*, a mesmerizing watercolor and gouache that begins with the adagio of limpid, broad brush washes of green, that Heraclitean current, over which blue and white intersecting figures flicker in columnar arpeggios. There are two dangers flanking this analytic strait by which we read as well as look. The Scylla reduces the experience of the paintings to nothing more than a distracting hunt for "Ninas" because the eye speeding across momentous passages of prismatic intricacy to spot the next letter misses too much. The Charybdis is the risk, less problematic in the case of an artist who consumes ideas and thinks this much, of over-burdening the paintings with stacks of books. Bearing that caveat in mind, another of Argue's pre-occupations is a broad interest in science and complex "blending" systems that make "infinite use of finite media" that Pinker relates logically not only to generative grammar but to genetic code, cooking, even mixing paint. Following on this track, Argue observes:

The small dots and the letter paintings have a similar genesis, to express the particulate nature of the universe. Tiny but limited characters like atoms and genes can combine and recombine in an almost infinite number of ways to constantly generate new possibilities and options out of the flux. With a dizzying beauty almost impossible to imagine the brain sifts through phonemes in the case of language and photons in the case of light to find order; pattern and meaning out of this infinite array of possibilities. So, the question of this painting is, with our incredible minds that can create language out of endless possible combinations of sounds, where does mind end and reality start. You already sensed the cosmic ambition in the percussive blasts of Argue's radiant *The First Language* or *Look Out, Red Shift*, where the visual evocation of invisible energy fields, the existence and nature of which are barely grasped by the world's most advanced scientists (these paintings come from the studio hard upon the heels of the announcement of the proof of the Higgs boson, the most momentous advance in particle physics in our time). Argue has committed his considerable technical resources and characteristic wit to a concept of breathtaking originality, nothing less than the impossible capture of dark energy, infrared and ultra violet wavelengths, microwaves, cell phone transmissions, light as particle or wave, gluons, or subatomic particles that test the boundaries of experimentation in the name of the liberating metaphor of "super" string theory. What medium could hope to convey the subtleties of a phenomenon this rarefied? Theoretical physics, thanks to Maxwell, Planck, Einstein and others, has moved from energy fields that were electromagnetic to those that are gravitational (the Yang-Mills field of gluons), nuclear ("strong and weak"), to electrons (both matter and particles) and microwaves to the grand unification of the Higgs field, posited by the Scottish physicist Peter Higgs nearly half a century ago. No less than Leonardo da Vinci mused in his notebook, "The air is full of infinite lines, straight and radiating, intercrossing and interweaving without ever coinciding one with another; and they represent for every object the true form of their reason (or their explanation)." It is hard to imagine a more provocative answer to the problem of the truth of painting, a question that has haunted



Doug Argue's studio at MANA, 2013. Photo: Eden Cayen

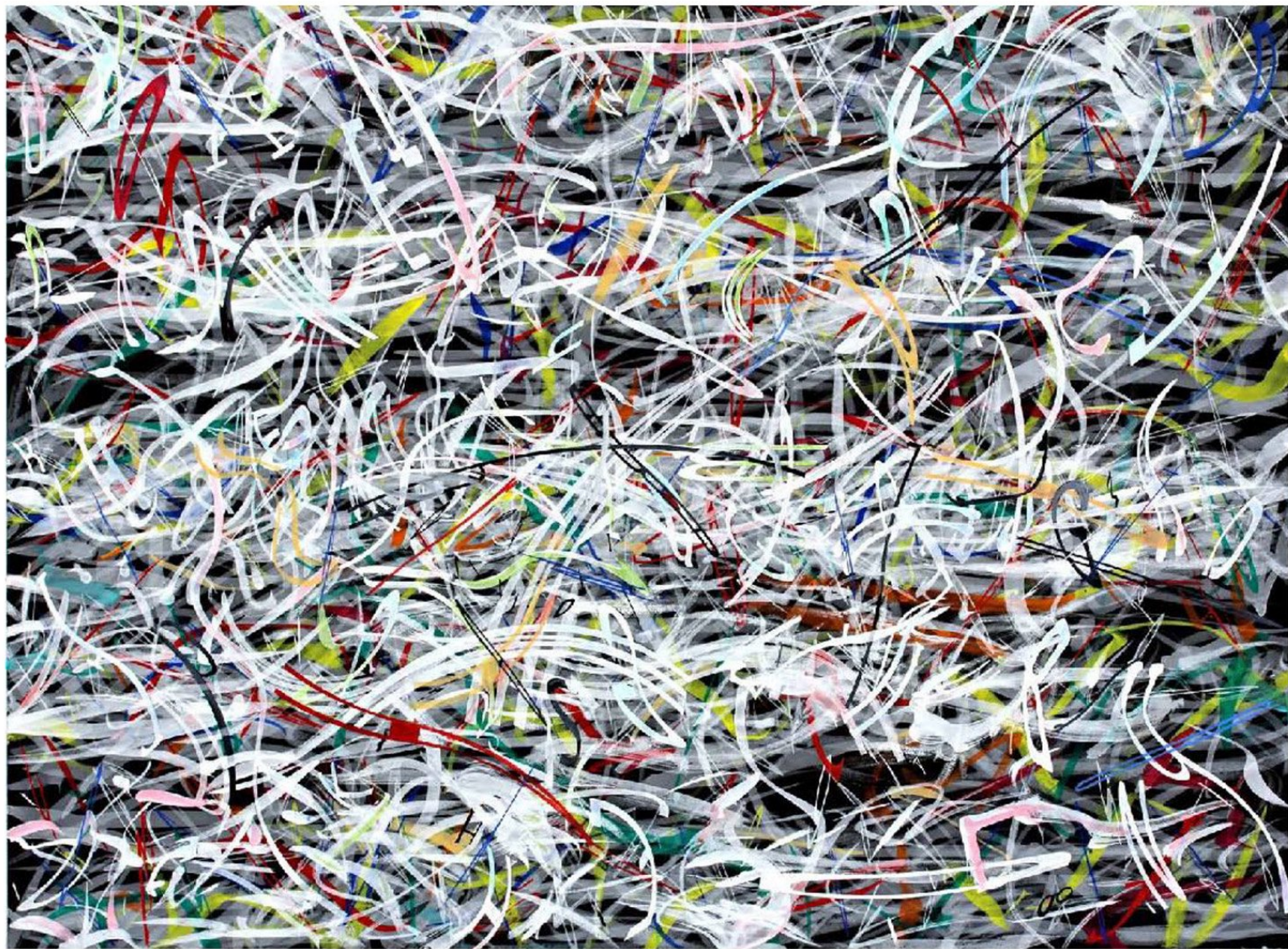
aesthetic thinkers from Martin Heidegger (in the seminal "Origin of the Work of Art" of 1950, in part about Van Gogh who attempted to paint the radiance he sensed in the night sky) through Jacques Derrida (*The Truth in Painting*, 1987) and beyond. The bond between truth and beauty only survives in art that encourages faith in the unseen and unheard, from the celestial music of the spheres to which Greek pre-Socratic thought tuned its lyres to the elegant pulse of subatomic energy posited by superstring theory. Argue manages, with mere gouache on paper, to bring us in close harmony with this unseen universe as we could never otherwise experience it.

Charles A. Riley II, PhD is an arts journalist, cultural historian and professor at the City University of New York. He is the author of thirty-one books on art, architecture, business, media and public policy, including *Color Codes* (University Press of New England), *The Jazz Age in France* (Abrams), *Art at Lincoln Center* (Wiley), *Rodin and his Circle* (Chime), and *Sacred Sister* (in collaboration with Robert Wilson). He is a guest curator at the Chimei Museum, Taiwan and curator-at-large for the Nassau County Museum of Art.

¹ All citations from the artist are based on a studio visit in October 2013 as well as correspondence with the writer, who is grateful for Mr. Argue's generosity with both his time and thought.

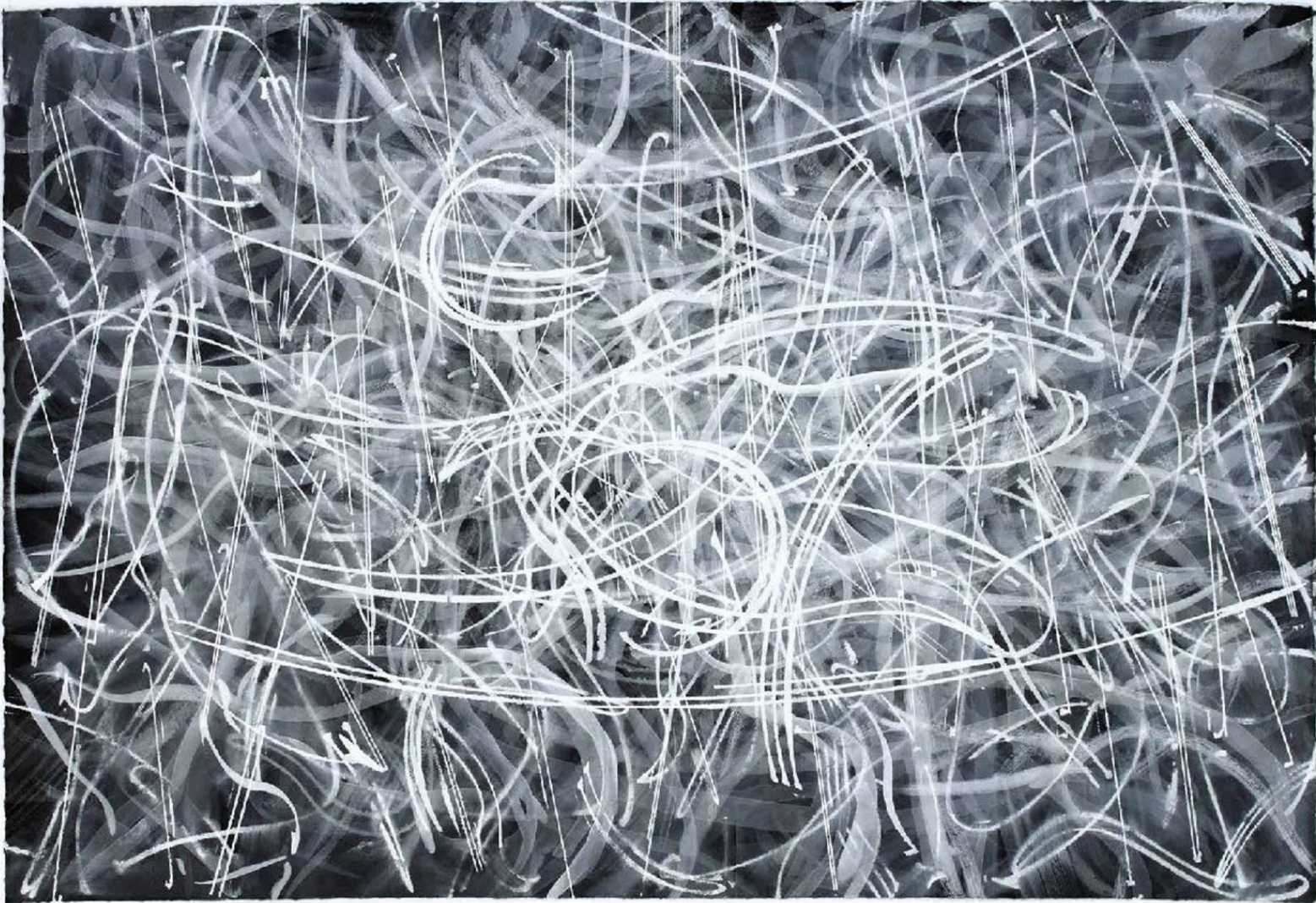
² R.P. Blackmur; *Language as Gesture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 6.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Music and Words," in Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 113-114.



Crucial Parts

2013, Gouache on Paper, 22 x 30 inches



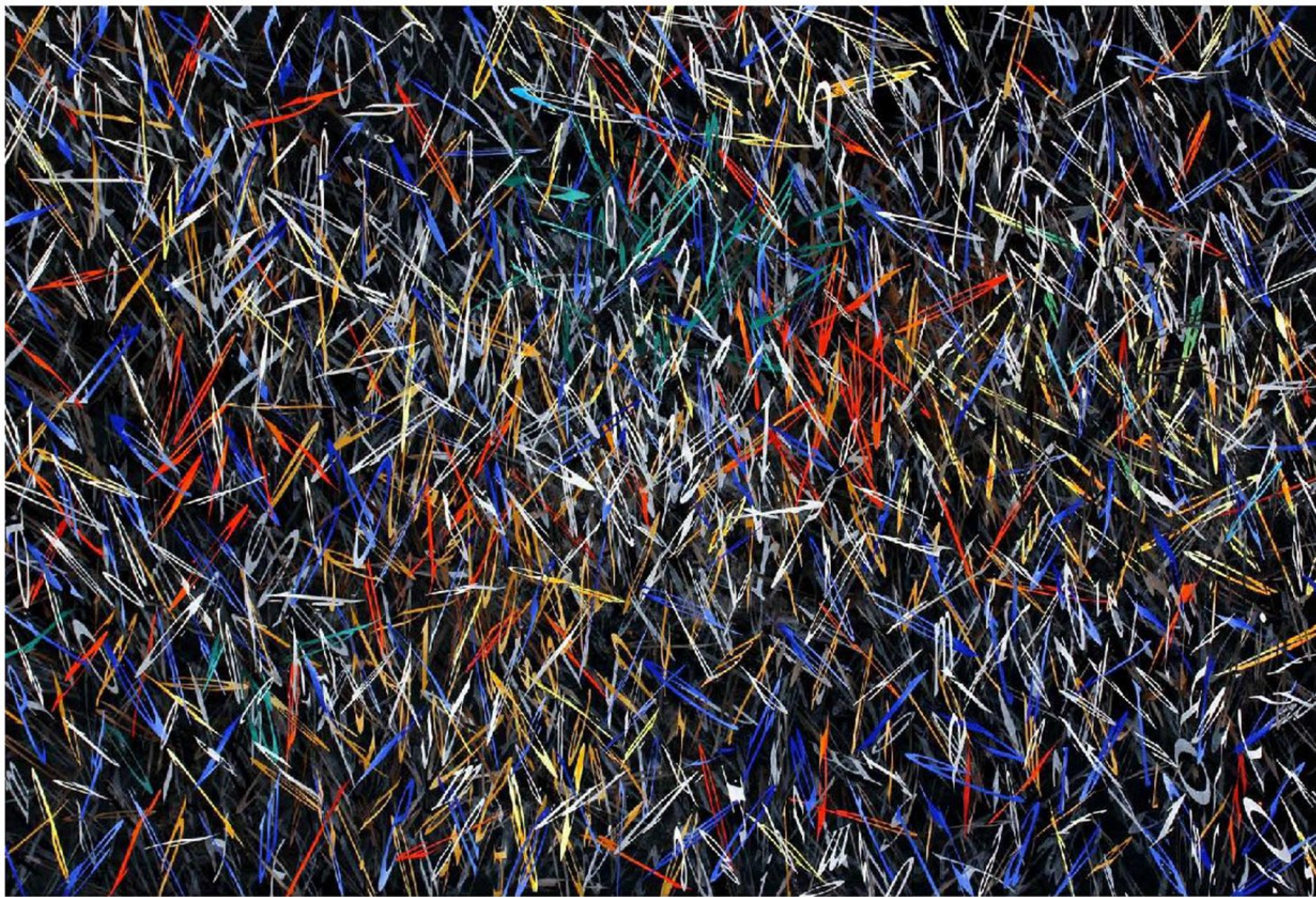
A Bit Suspicious
2013, Gouache on Paper, 30 x 40 inches



Marginalia
2013, Gouache on Paper, 32 x 50 inches



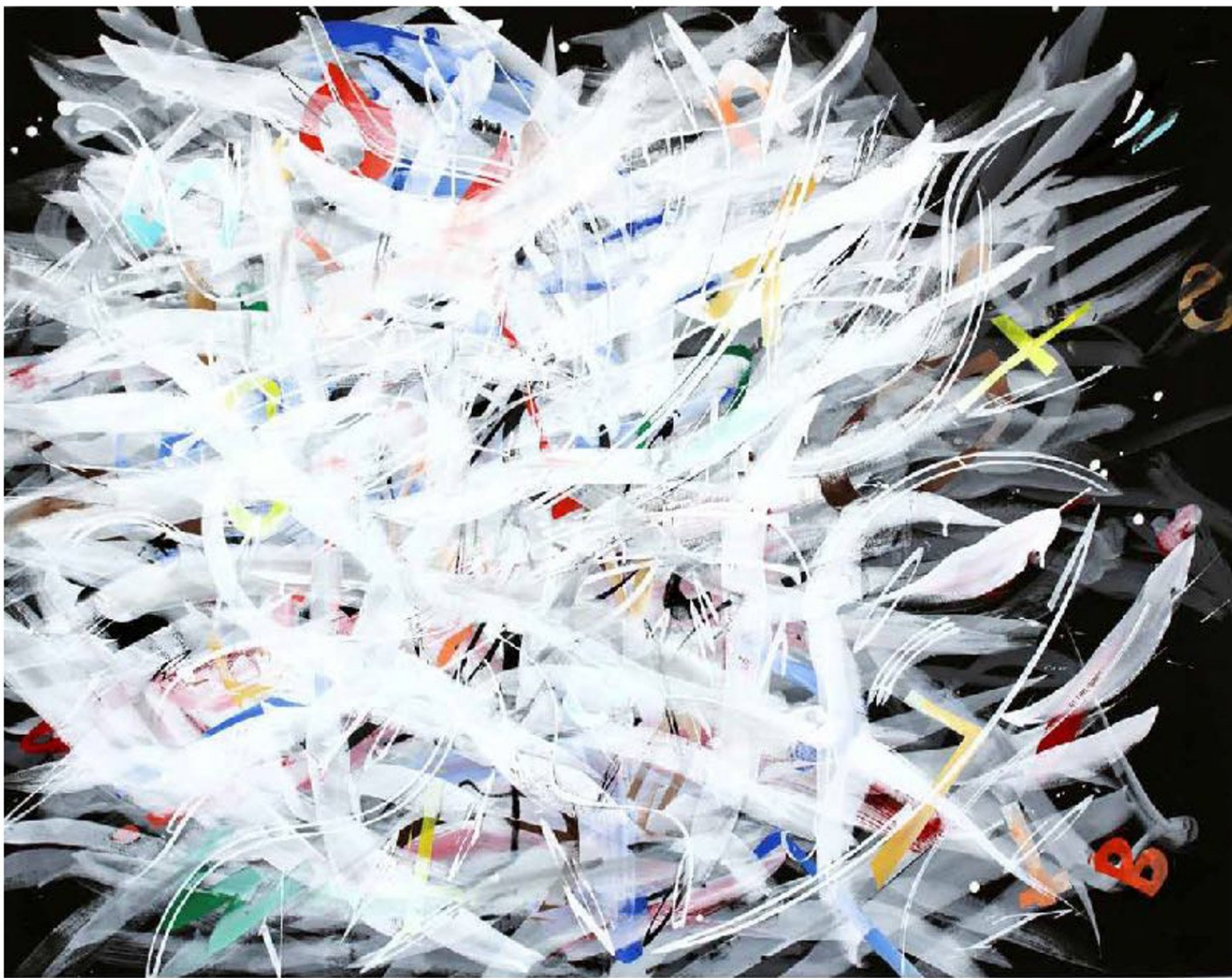
A Common Confusion
2013, Gouache on Paper; 37.75 x 50 inches



Back Story
2013, Gouache and Watercolor on Paper; 40 x 60 inches



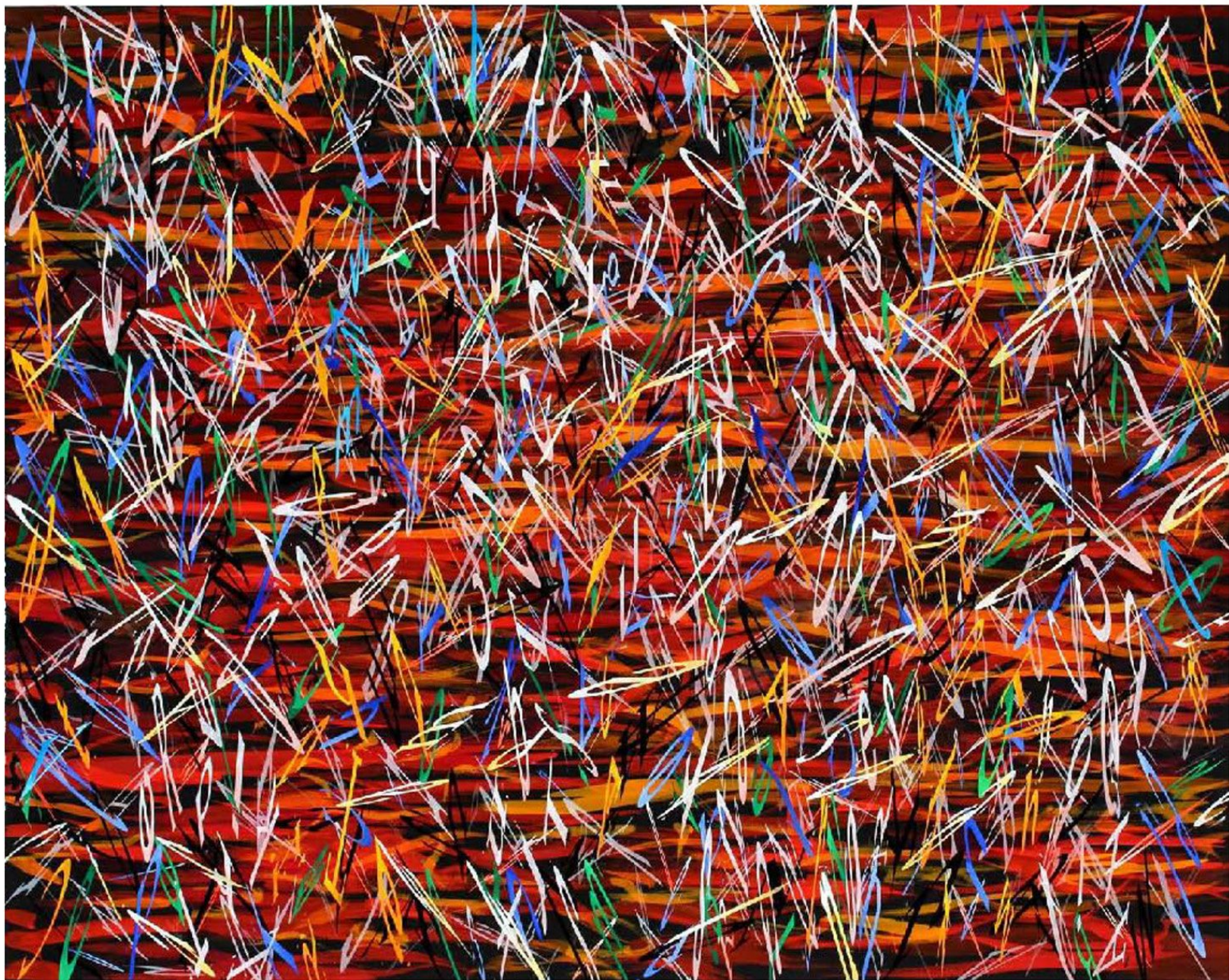
Be Grammatical
2013, Gouache on Paper; 30 x 44 inches



Bone Locker 2013, Gouache on Paper, 40 x 50 inches



Minstrel Romance
2013, Gouache on Paper, 38 x 50 inches



Chim In
2013, Gouache on Paper, 40 x 50 inches



Lost Reflections 2013, Gouache on Paper, 30 x 44 inches



Crazy Love 2013, Pastel on Paper, 30 x 22 inches



Fairy Tails 2013, Watercolor, Gouache, Pastel on Paper, 3 sheets of paper each 40 x 60 inches
Detail on next page





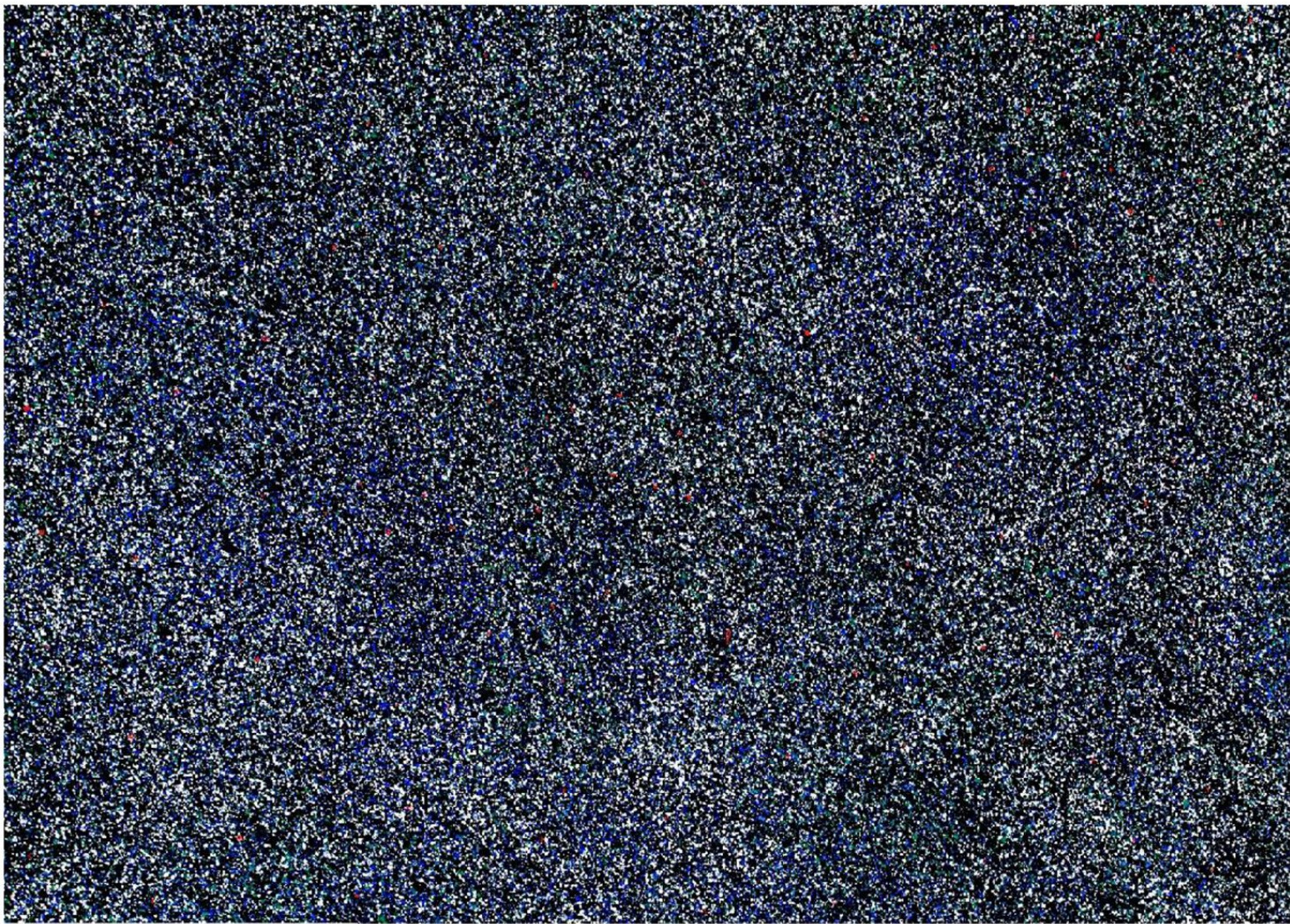


Happily Ever After
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches

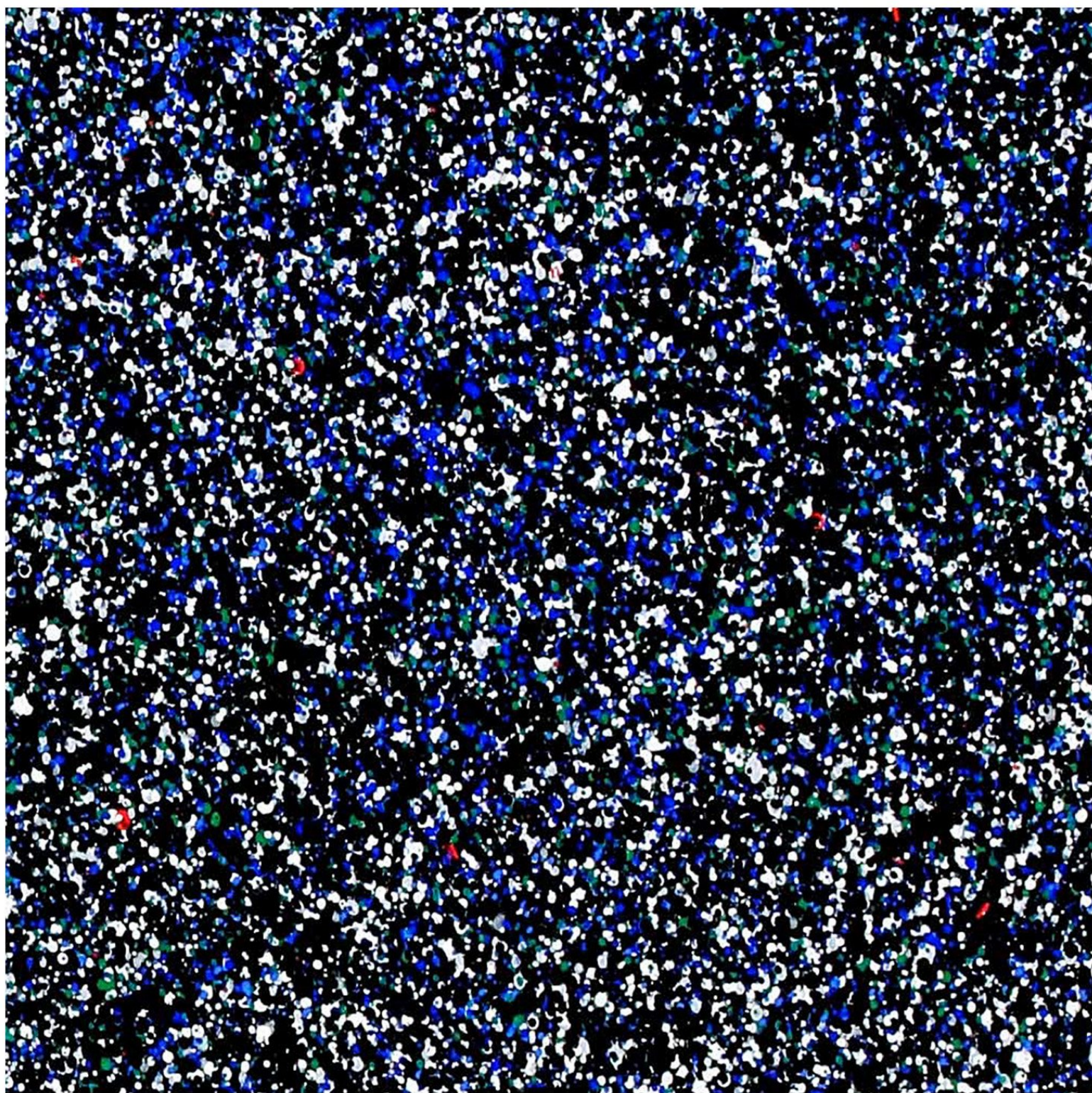


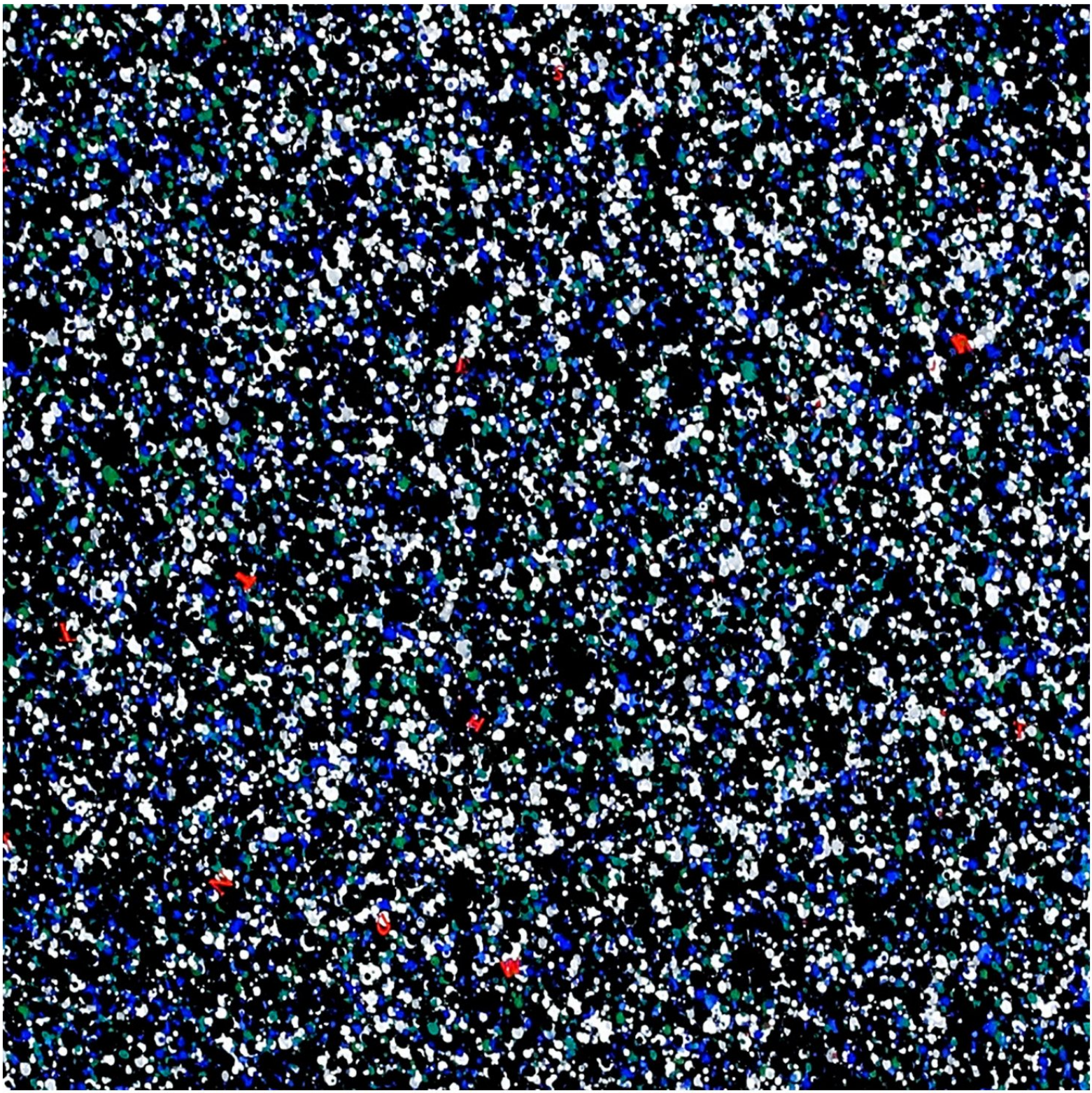
Introduction
2013, Gouache on Paper, 50 x 40 inches
Detail- Right Page

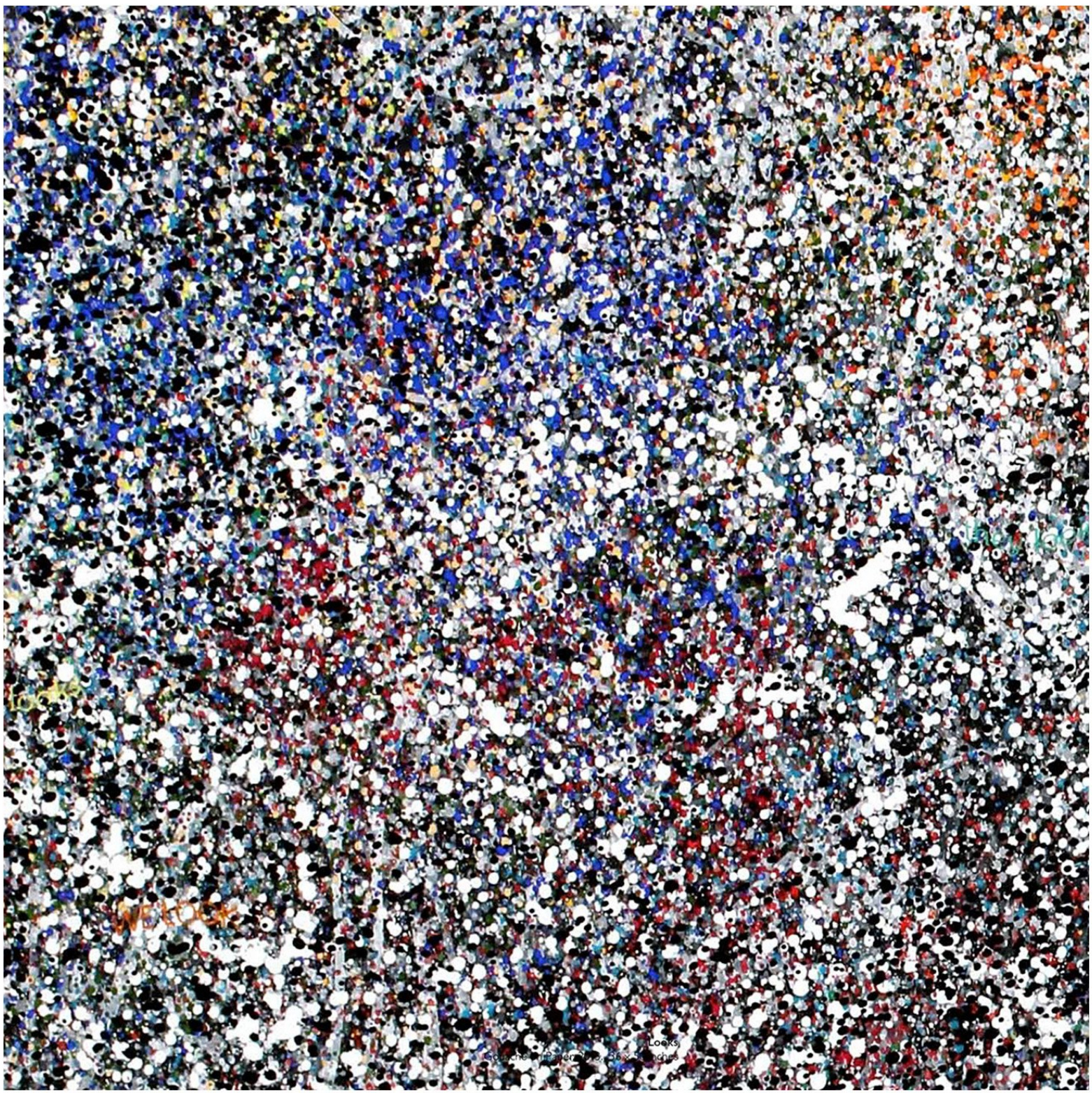




Look Out, Red Shift!
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches
Detail on next page









Looks
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches
Detail on left page



More Little Sorrows
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches



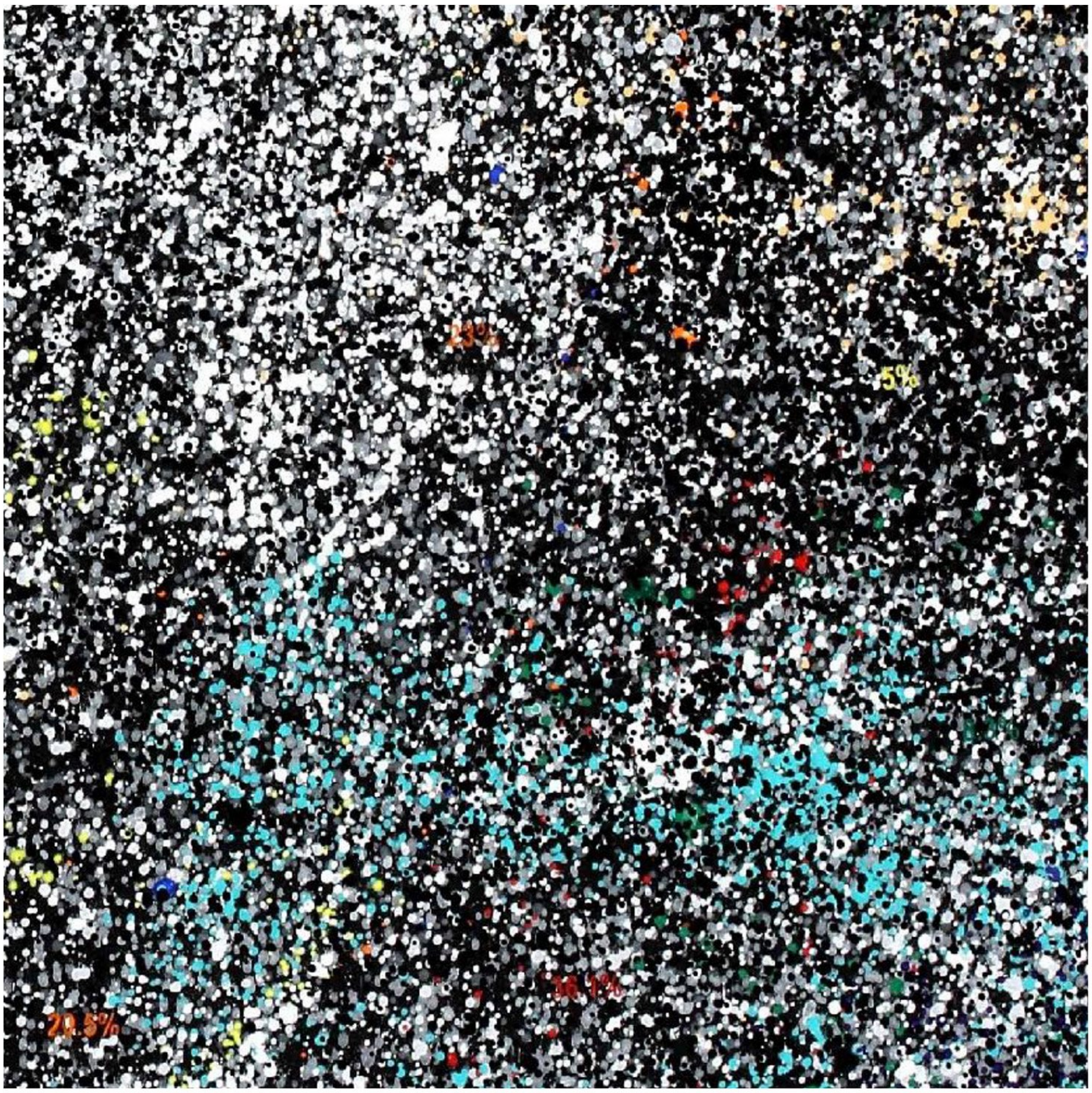
Morphology
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches
Detail on next page

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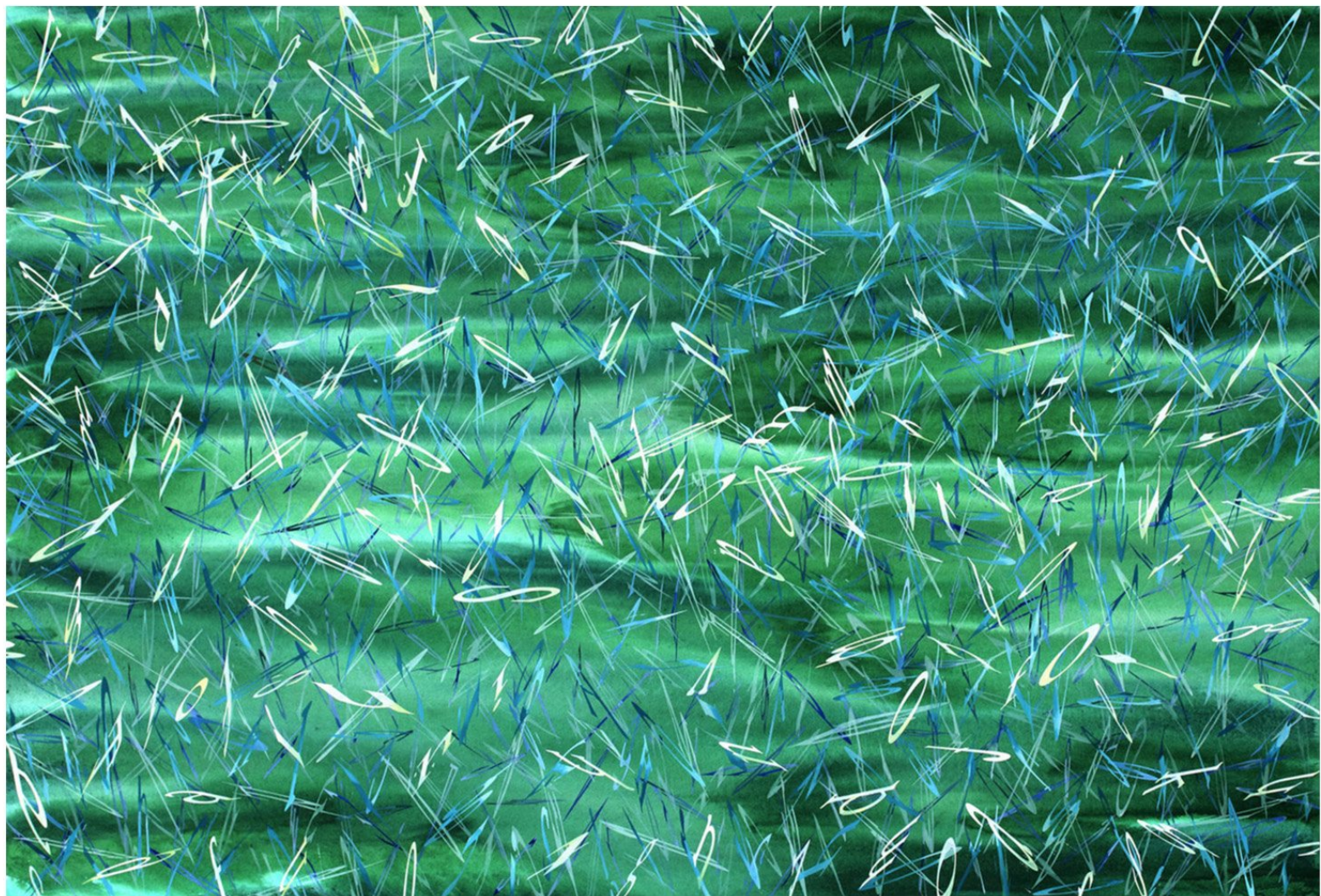
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Murmurings
2013, Gouache and Watercolor on Paper, 30 x 44 inches



Noctis Equi
2013, Watercolor, Gouache on Paper, 40 x 60 inches



Songspell
2013, Gouache on Paper, 22.5 x 30 inches



Spolia
2013, Gouache on Paper, 30 x 44 inches



Pensées
2013, Watercolor, Gouache, Pastel on Paper, 40 x 60 inches

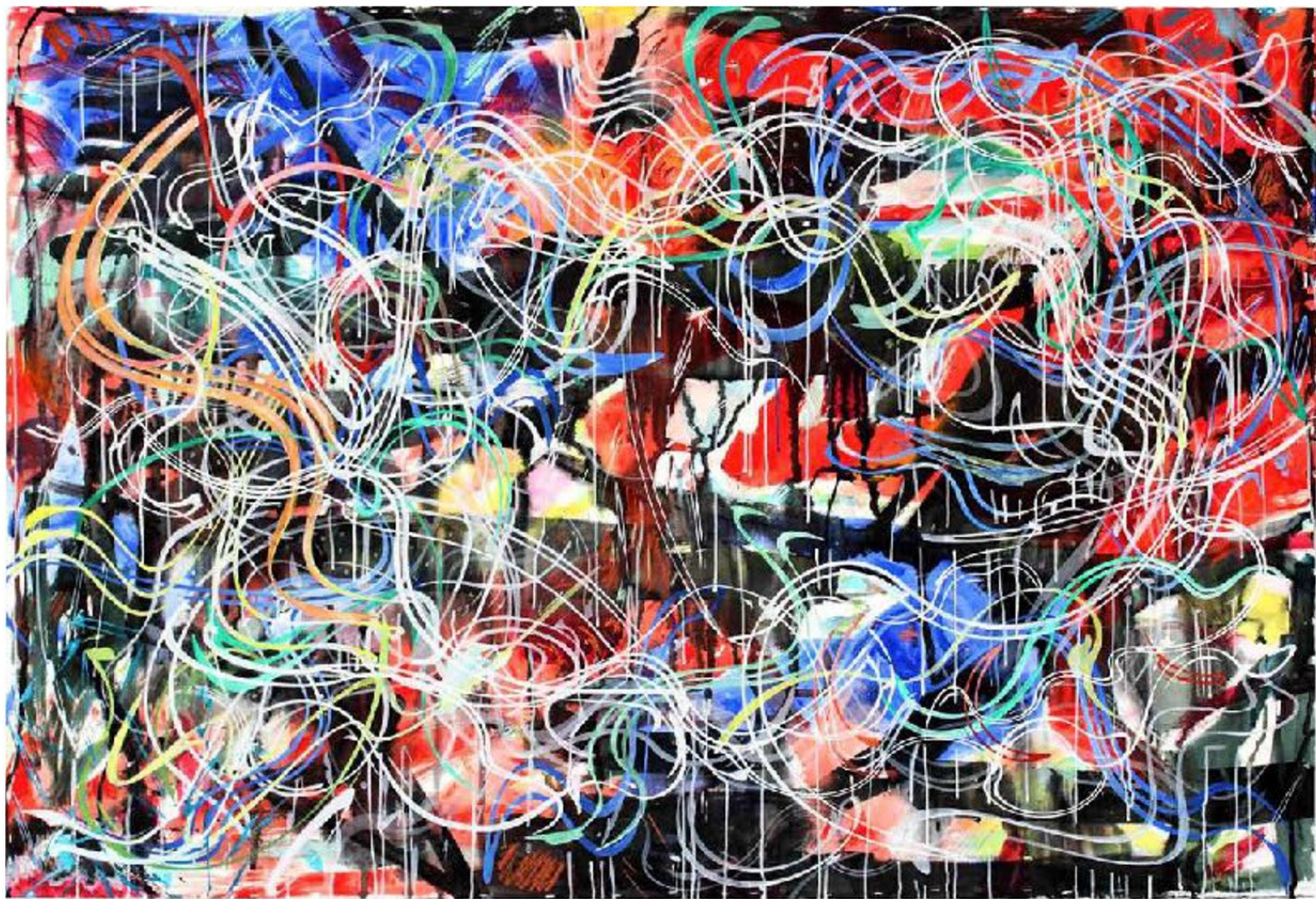


Straight A's
2013, Gouache on Paper; 38 x 50 inches



Wellspring

2013, Watercolor and Gouache on Paper, 42 x 28 inches



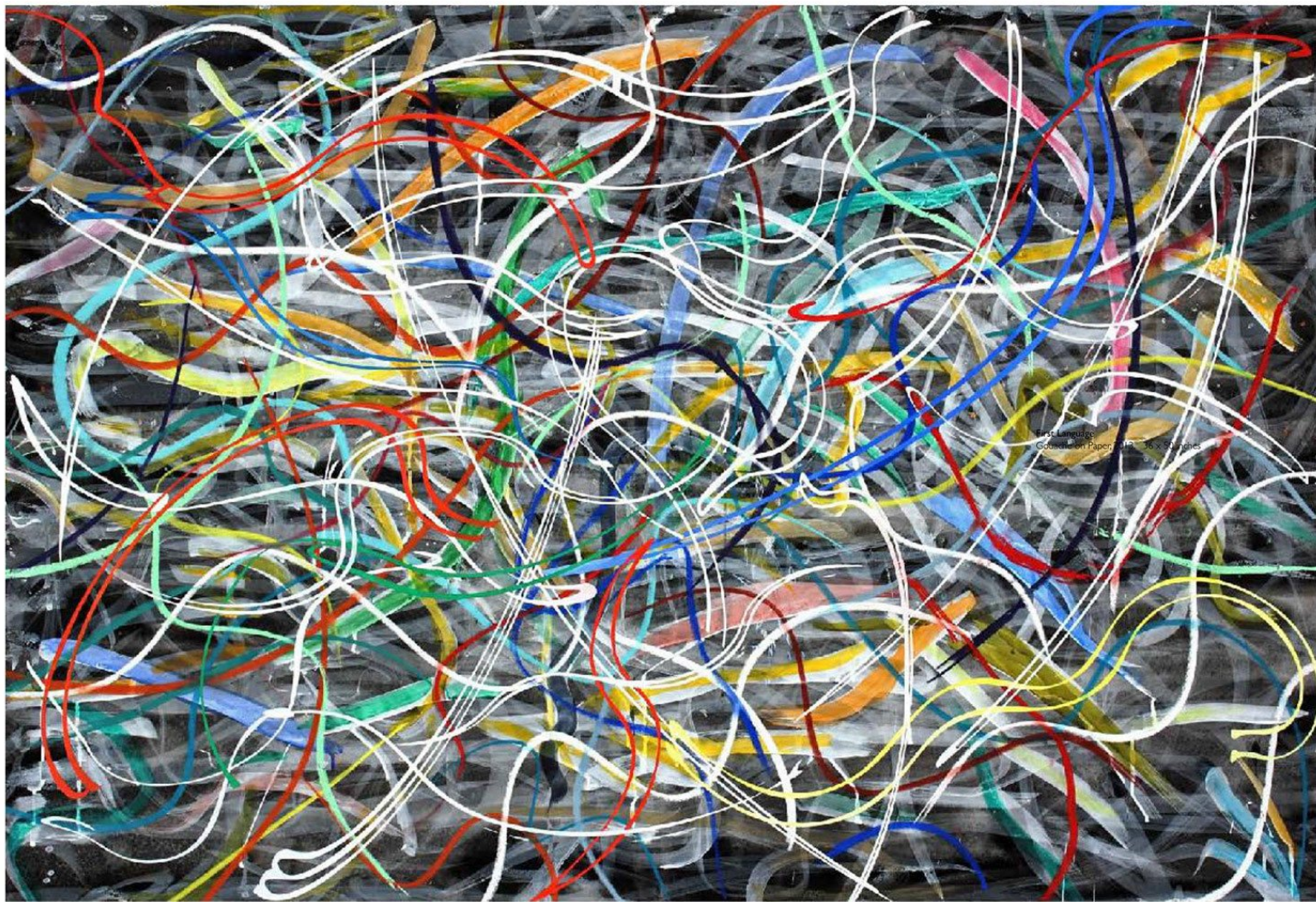
Wild West
2013, Watercolor, Gouache, Pastel on Paper, 40 x 60 inches



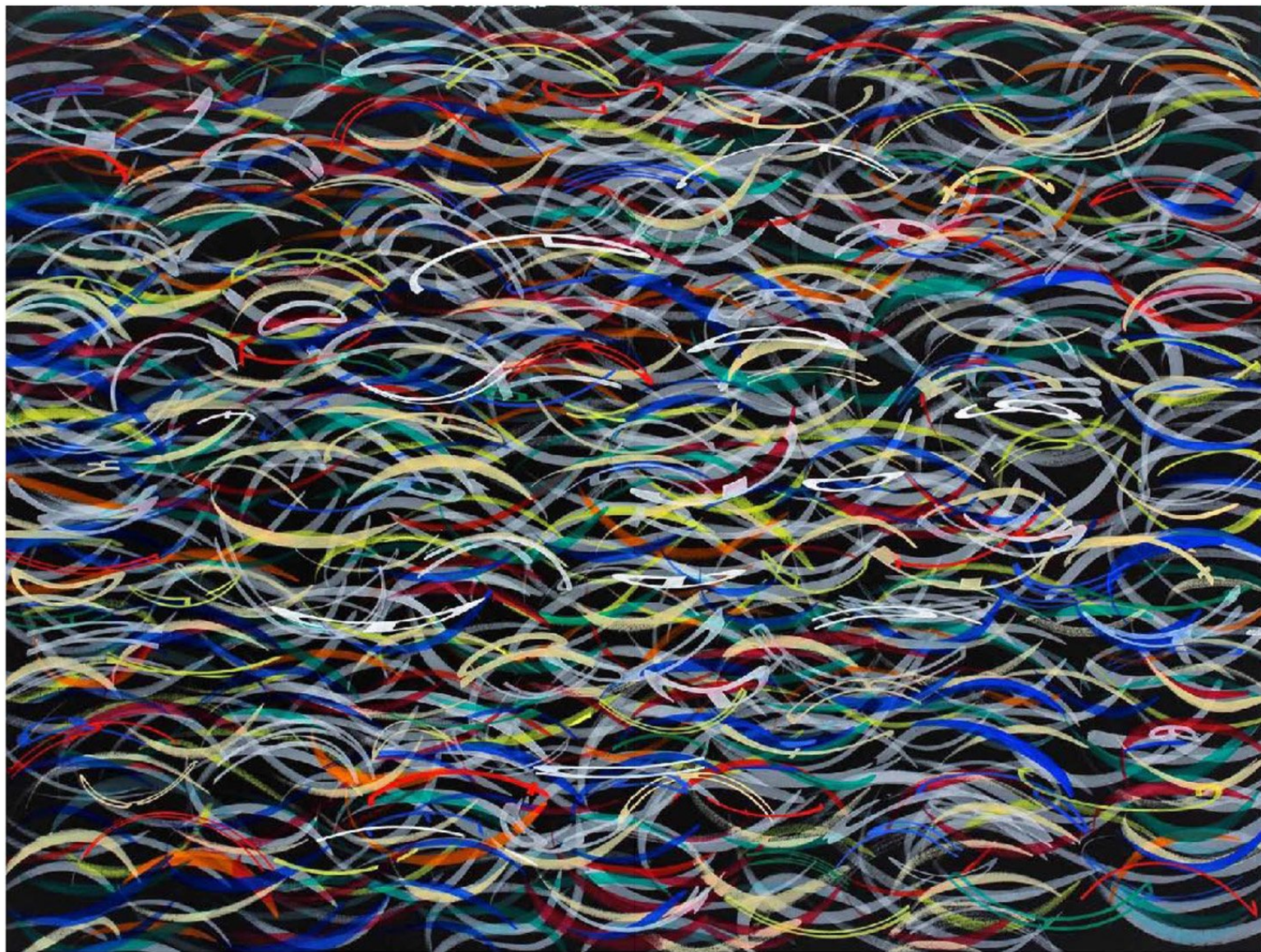
Strapless Black Dresses
2013, Gouache on Paper, 30 x 44 inches



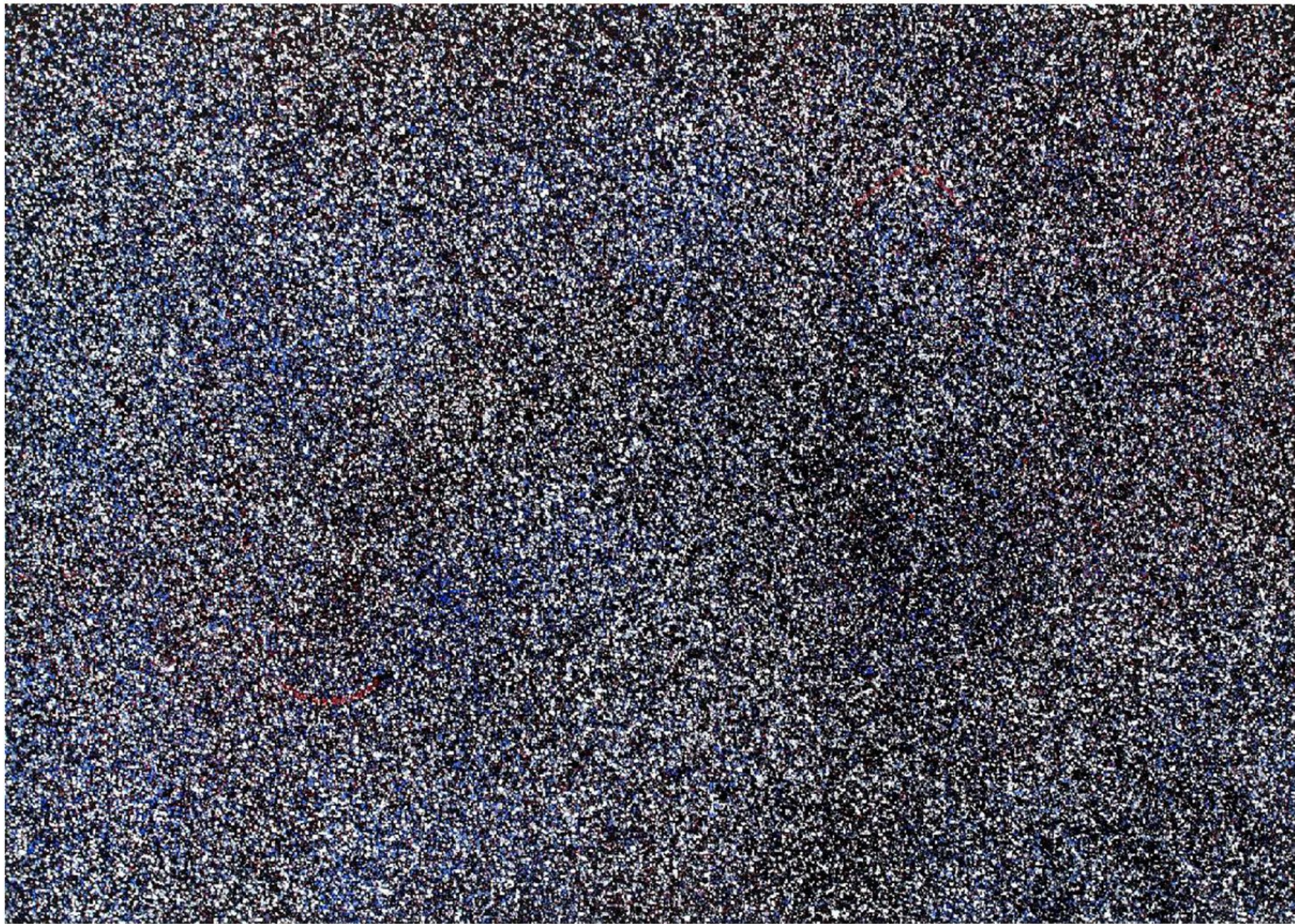
The First Language
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches



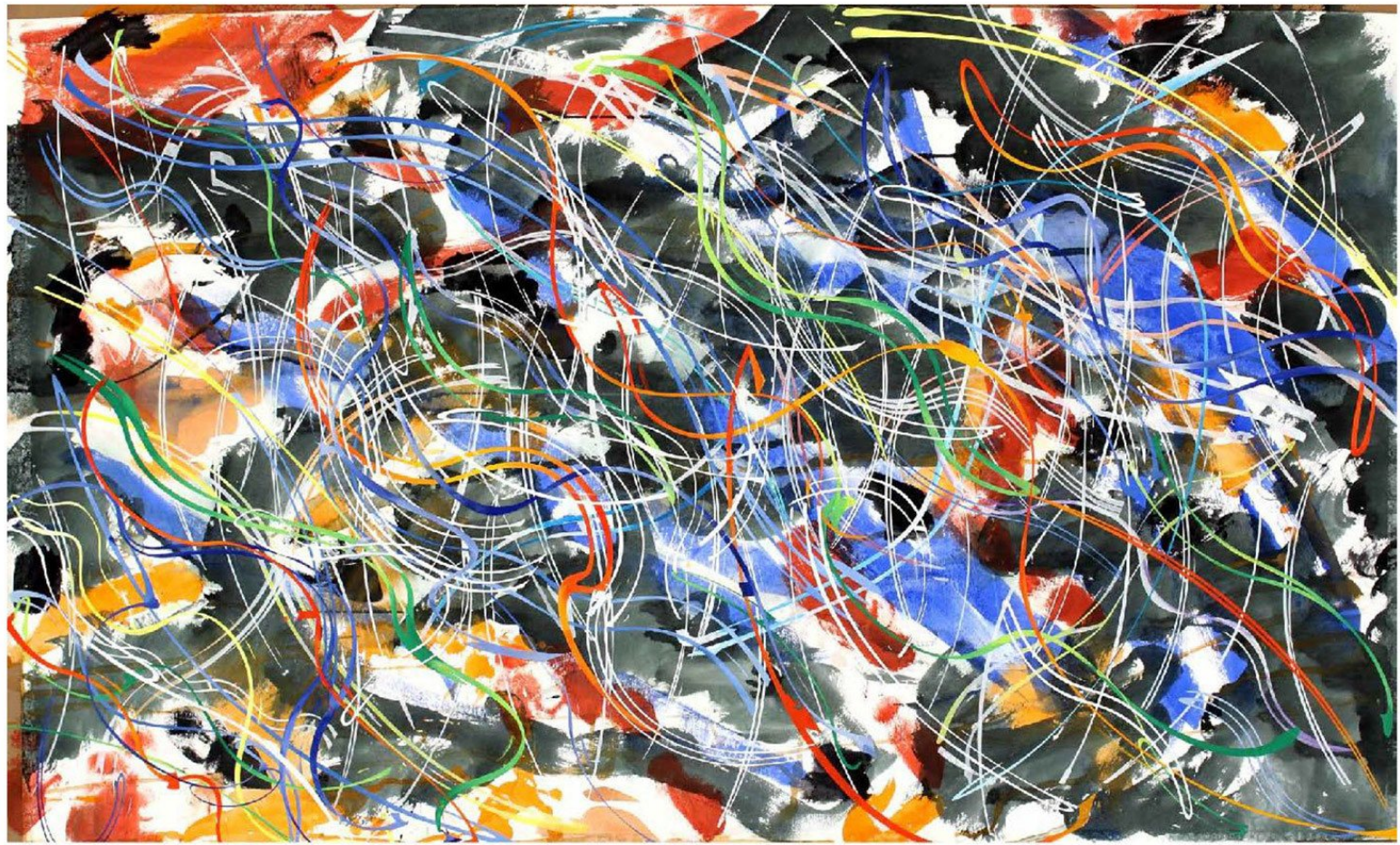
Upon Waking
2013, Gouache, Watercolor, Pastel on Paper, 40 x 60 inches



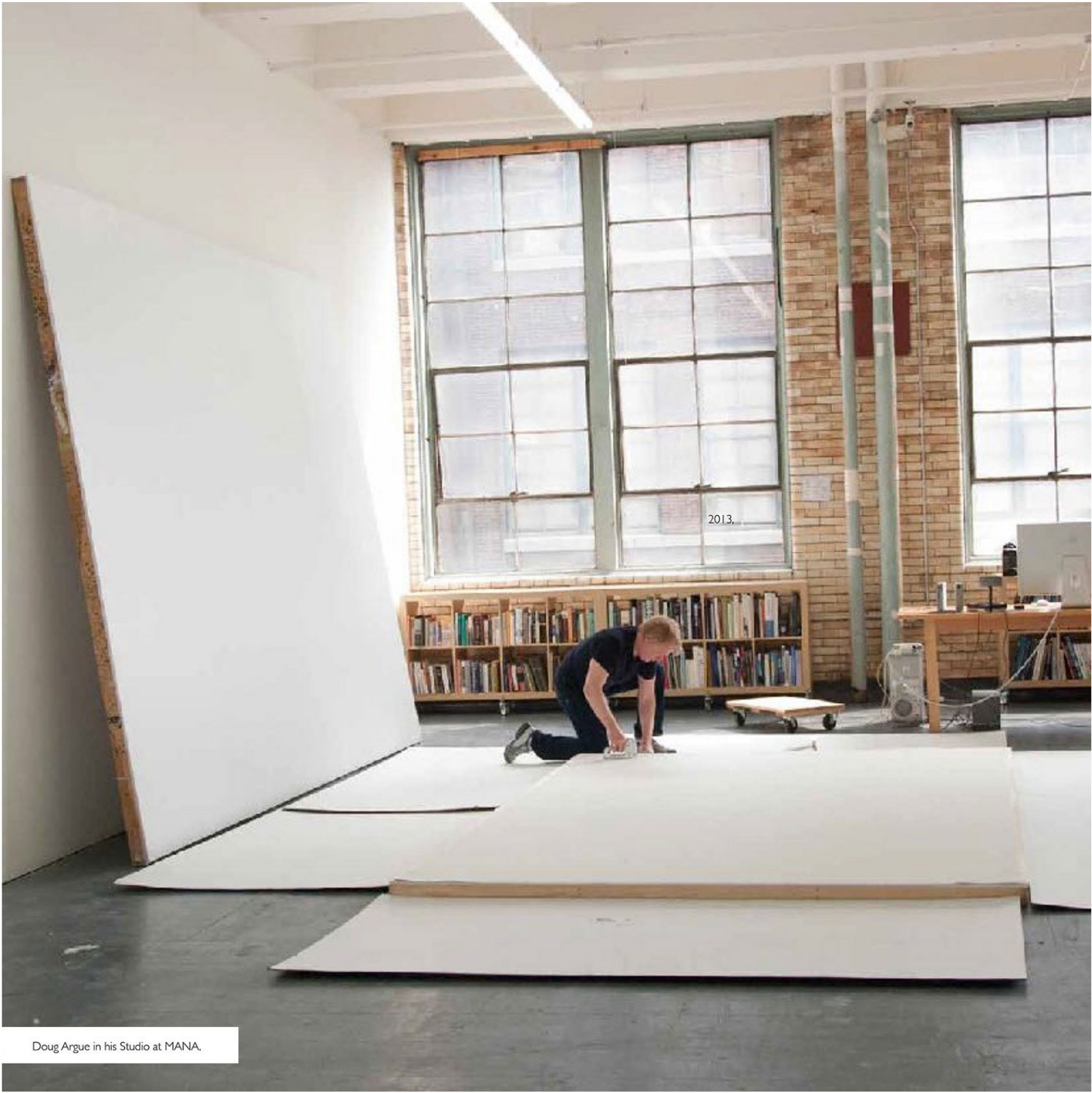
We Discovered
2013, Gouache on Paper, 22 x 30 inches



What Are the Odds
2013, Gouache on Paper, 36 x 50 inches



Wily Odysseus
2013, Watercolor, Gouache on Paper, 31 x 50 inches



Doug Argue in his Studio at MANA.

Doug Argue

b. 1962, St. Paul MN

Education

1983 University of Minnesota
1980-82 Bemidji State University

Awards

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

Solo Exhibitions

2013 Works on Paper; Edelman Arts, New York, NY
2013 Doug Argue, Cafesjian Center for the Arts, Yerevan, Armenia
2013 The Art of Translation, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
2012 Catch My Drift, Haunch of Venison, New York, NY
2011 Studies for Infinite Possibilities, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
2005 Sherry Leedy Gallery, Kansas, MO
2004 Gallery Co., Minneapolis, MN
1998 Associated American Artists, New York, NY
1997 Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1996 Associated American Artist, New York, NY
1994 Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
1989-1990 Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1986 MC Gallery, Minneapolis, MN

Group Exhibitions

2013 Pop Culture: Selections from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, MANA Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ
2013 September Selections, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
2013 Contained Conflict, Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, NY
2012 Pop Culture: Selections from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu, CA
2012 Abstraction: What is Real, Edelman Arts, New York, NY
2010 Tuffatore, Grand Rapids art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI
2010 Four Projects, Haunch of Venison Gallery, New York, NY
2007 Made in California, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, traveled to Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA
2006 12 x 12, Todd Gallery, Murfreesboro, TN
2005 National Juried Exhibition, Mills Pond House, St. James, NY; Juror: Claudia Altman-Siegel Director of the Luhring Augustine Gallery.
2005 Word Art, University Galleries, Cincinnati, OH

2005 Eclectic Eye, Frederick R. Weisman Museum, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA
2005 Inertia, Gallery 500, Portland, OR
2005 Will Creek Survey, The Allegany Arts Council/ Saville Gallery, Juror: Kristen Hileman, Curator; Hirshorn Museum, Cumberland, MD
2005 2nd Biennial International Juried Exhibition, Herbst International Exhibition Hall in San Francisco, Juried by Marian Parmenter Director SFMOMA Artists Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2005 Alpan International, Alpan Gallery, Juror: Phyllis Braff, President Emerita, International Association of Art Critics, Long Island, NY
2004 Scope LA, Refusalon, Los Angeles, CA
2003 Minimalism and More, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA
2002 California Artists from the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, traveled to CSU Bakersfield, CA
2001 Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte, Florence, Italy
2001 Introductions, Refusalon Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2000 Twin Cities Collects, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
1999 Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul, MN
1998 American Academy, Rome, Italy
1996 Thread Waxing Space, New York City, NY
1996 Composing A Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
1996 Drawings Midwest, Minnesota Museum of American Art, Saint Paul, MN
1994 Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN
1993 McKnight Foundation Exhibition, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1990 The Persistent Figure, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
1987 Art and the Law, Presented by West Publishing Co., Saint Paul, MN, traveled to Plaza Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Albrecht Art Museum, St. Joseph, MO, Landmark Center, Saint Paul, MN, Traveling Exhibition
1986 Eight McKnight Artists, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
1985 Doug Argue and Jim Lutes, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
1984 Five From Minnesota, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN, traveled to New Museum, New York City

Collections

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
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN, four paintings
Minnesota History Center Museum, Saint Paul, MN
Minnesota Museum of American Art, Minneapolis, MN
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, (26 paintings)
Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, three paintings

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Essay by Charles A. Riley II, PhD.

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