

SELF AND DRAWING

By

Benjamin Joel Sandness

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of BENJAMIN JOEL SANDNESS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Kevin J. Haas, M.F.A., Chair

Chris J. Watts, M.F.A.

Nickolus L. Meisel, M.F.A.

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Abstract

by Benjamin Joel Sandness, MFA
Washington State University
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Chair: Kevin J. Haas

In this thesis work, I strive to create an experience of self-awareness by means of worry. I use drawn and printed marks to communicate the intangible qualities that come from my experience of worry. Images often include every-day objects as metaphors for the opposing forces within these internal conflicts. I focus on an emotive use of line, color, and texture as I develop images. The subject matter and mark making work together to communicate a sense of tension. As a result, the viewer is left with a similar uneasiness to what I experience in my worrying.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Nichole, who continues to provide me with unconditional, unrelenting motivation and support through all stages of our life together.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I am interested in self-awareness, that is, the ability to observe one's self as a thinking entity. As a thinking entity, it is possible to objectively identify thoughts and emotions as they occur. Physical surroundings do not cause these internal experiences, but they undoubtedly influence them. It is not possible to completely isolate an experience of self from the interactions one has with their own surroundings. The artwork that I make is documentation of my internal experience in response to the environment in which it's made.

CHAPTER TWO

A WALL OF GLASS

For a year I worked in a room with three white walls and one made of glass. The room was narrow. The two long walls were white and uninterrupted. One of the short walls was mostly glass, looking out into the world. The other short wall had a door that lead into a hallway. My room was in the center of this hall and rooms just like it continued in either direction. In this narrow room at the center of a hallway, I spent a great deal of time thinking, watching, drawing, and building. My wall of glass acted as an ever-changing variable in the equation of my artistic practice. Sometimes light shined into the room, other times light from the room spilled out through the window. Some moments the outside world was empty and still, other times I witnessed waves of people moving across my view.

While in this space, I focused my artwork on visualizing conscious thought. My process for this began with a writing method called “stream of consciousness writing”, where an individual indiscriminately writes thoughts as they come into their mind. The continuous transcription of thoughts may not yield coherent sentences, but it encourages an even attention to all passing thoughts. The writing became a routine part of my studio practice. I began my days with ballpoint pen in hand, writing for 15 to 30 minute at a time on sheets of soft cotton paper. Through this process, I became progressively more aware of my thoughts and self.

Once I became comfortable with stream of consciousness writing, I began to alter the process. Instead of writing the internal dialogue that passed through my mind, I began to draw it. Using the same black ballpoint pens and soft cotton paper, I began to draw the stream of my

consciousness. I would create rough drawings of tangible things as they crossed my mind, but only adding detail as my thoughts dwelled on them. The marks that I made did not stand in for words in sentences, but instead, they worked together with adjacent marks to visualize the stream of thoughts. Lines would vary, being heavy, light, sweeping, jagged, repeating, straying, connecting, and isolating. The resulting image would be a reflection of thoughts as a space, instead of the linear translation that comes with writing.

Alone in my room, I would write, draw, and reflect. Anyone in the outside world could easily look in at me, but I felt certain that I was the one observing. More often than not, I was a passive observer. I did not stare out the window, but the changes and happenings outside affected my environment. I became aware of these outside influences as I continued this process. It was clear that sounds, smells, lightness, and other factors subliminally affected my conscious stream. I wanted purity. I covered my windowed wall with opaque white paper. I kept lighting constant. I used fans to create white noise and drown out the world around me.

Now with four white walls, my space was unpolluted. I was certain that I would find some greater level of self awareness in the stream of consciousness drawings that I would make. Instead, I just kept identifying more “distractions”. White noise is still noise; white walls are still walls. I realized that I could never remove all of the outside influences. Not only would it be impossible, but it would be against the spirit of my research. My conscious thoughts take place in my mind; my mind is in my body; and my body is always someplace. It is the nature of conscious thought to be affected by sensory information as it enters the mind. In hindsight, I

liken the narrow white room to my mental space. Just as the outside world affects the inside of my room, the world outside of my mind affects my conscious thoughts.

I began to experiment with the variables that I had been working so hard to eliminate. I made stream of consciousness drawings with music and audio books in the background, with silence, daylight, darkness, movies playing, in different seating positions, while hungry, and while eating. I varied size and time constraints. To my surprise, the drawings only subtly reflected the variables that I was attempting to control. The events leading up to the drawing seemed to have a greater impact on the finished image.

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE BOWELS

I reached a point where I was satisfied with my stream of consciousness work. As my interests shifted, so too did my environment. I no longer have three white walls and one made of glass; now I transitioned into the bowels of the same building. My new space to reflect and make is larger and colder. The walls are nearly “three of me” high. I am surrounded by grey, unpainted cinder blocks and a tan section of poured concrete. There is a 4 foot stripe of white pin boards at eye level most of the way around the room. My ceiling is crawling with galvanized steel ducts and white insulated pipes. Five banks of fluorescent lights hang at staggered heights perpendicular to the plumbing.

I am a worrier. By this, I mean that I experience various degrees of worry constantly, from mild stress and concerns to anxiety, panic, and terror. As far back as I can remember, my internal dialogue has been a perpetual brew of plausible happenings and irrational what-if's. I have a subconscious magnetism to sensations of dread, doom, terror, and panic. I have always been this way; I have always been a worrier. This chaotic state is something that I have taken for granted.

This new working space is stark and honest. The bricks, pipes, and ducts exist on their own, independent of my presence. They occupy the space with me, but they are neither the space nor are they me. In much the same way, my thoughts and self cohabit my mental space. Here, I spend time with my emotional crises, trauma, grief, frustration, anger, fear, and loss. I focus on the emotions that stem from my personal and family situations. I retreat to my

worries. These automatic thoughts that cannot be forced from my mind are now my conduit to self discovery. By dwelling on the experiential, emotional qualities of my worries individually, I create drawings and prints that reflect the actual experience. How does this worry feel? How can I visualize the emotional experience? Will the viewer recognize the emotional state shown?

There is give and take as I develop images in my drawings. I work additively with ink, graphite, charcoal, pastel, and marker. I work reductively with gesso, sanding, erasers, solvents, and scrubbing. As I bring areas of the drawing forward and back in space and clarity, I make decisions responsively and intuitively in an effort to bring out the desired emotional experience. As a result of this process, I often have open spaces in the drawings that are residue of earlier marks. These areas are active spaces, with the history of the drawing present. This making and removing of marks is like worry chasing its tail in my mind, with its memory recorded in the residue. There is a struggle and there is a record of it.

Surface is an important component of these drawings. I work on paper because it is simultaneously flexible and vulnerable. It can become wrinkled, curled, torn, and repaired. All the while, the paper remains relatively light and transient. As you walk past a drawing that is hung from the top, it will pull away from the wall. These qualities are important for representing a mental space. Gesso acts as both a drawing material on the surface and reinforces the paper to handle the rigors of my drawing process.

Tension is a quality of my process and a visual device that commands many of my drawings. I work with a mix of abstract marks and suggestions at recognizable objects. These

objects function as symbols within the composition. The inherent qualities of the objects and the way in which they are represented work together with the abstract marks to create an emotional experience. I tend to draw objects of utility—such as rope or tools—that imply directional forces at play. These objects interact with themselves, other objects, abstract marks, and the drawn space in which they exist to create an environment of angst. In a metaphorical sense, objects are often placeholders for me or acting on me.

I begin developing images in response to a specific concern or anxiety. The subject that I select will be something that I will have been sorting in my mind at that time. As time passes, my point of view tends to shift, causing the image to transform with it. Most of these images start as a frenzy of fight or flight instinct on paper as waves of emotion spill over the beginnings of an image. Marks begin coarse and aggressive. The preliminary marks are often gesso on paper. If pigmented marks are used initially, such as graphite, charcoal, ink, or a marker, the marks tend to be minimal. This is the construction of a space for my worry to live in.

By visualizing my experience of worry, I am using a relative constant from my thoughts as a means to become more self aware. I focus on taking in the emotional experience of my worry. As I decode my experience and translate it into visual imagery, I begin to look at my process and experience of worry more objectively. My *self* experiences the thoughts and emotional responses, then chooses to create drawings from them. I become increasingly aware of my self as an entity that is independent from my thoughts.

This process of becoming more self aware is cathartic for me, as it reinforces the segregation of my self from my thoughts—in particular, my worry. As I study my worries and create these drawings, I am able to externalize the worries themselves. Likewise, the drawings that I make are a physical product of this process. Though all of this can be mentally taxing and stressful, some of the burden passes to the drawing. For me, the drawing *becomes* the worry.

Overall, I hope for the viewer to share in my emotional experience. This is not to say that I want to burden them with my baggage, rather, I want the viewer to recognize the emotional qualities that I am working to depict. Perhaps they will be reminded of a time when they've experienced something similar. This association to memory makes the experience both personal and universal.



Gallery view of drawings and prints as hung for thesis. (*2010 Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, Museum of Art / WSU, Pullman, Washington*)



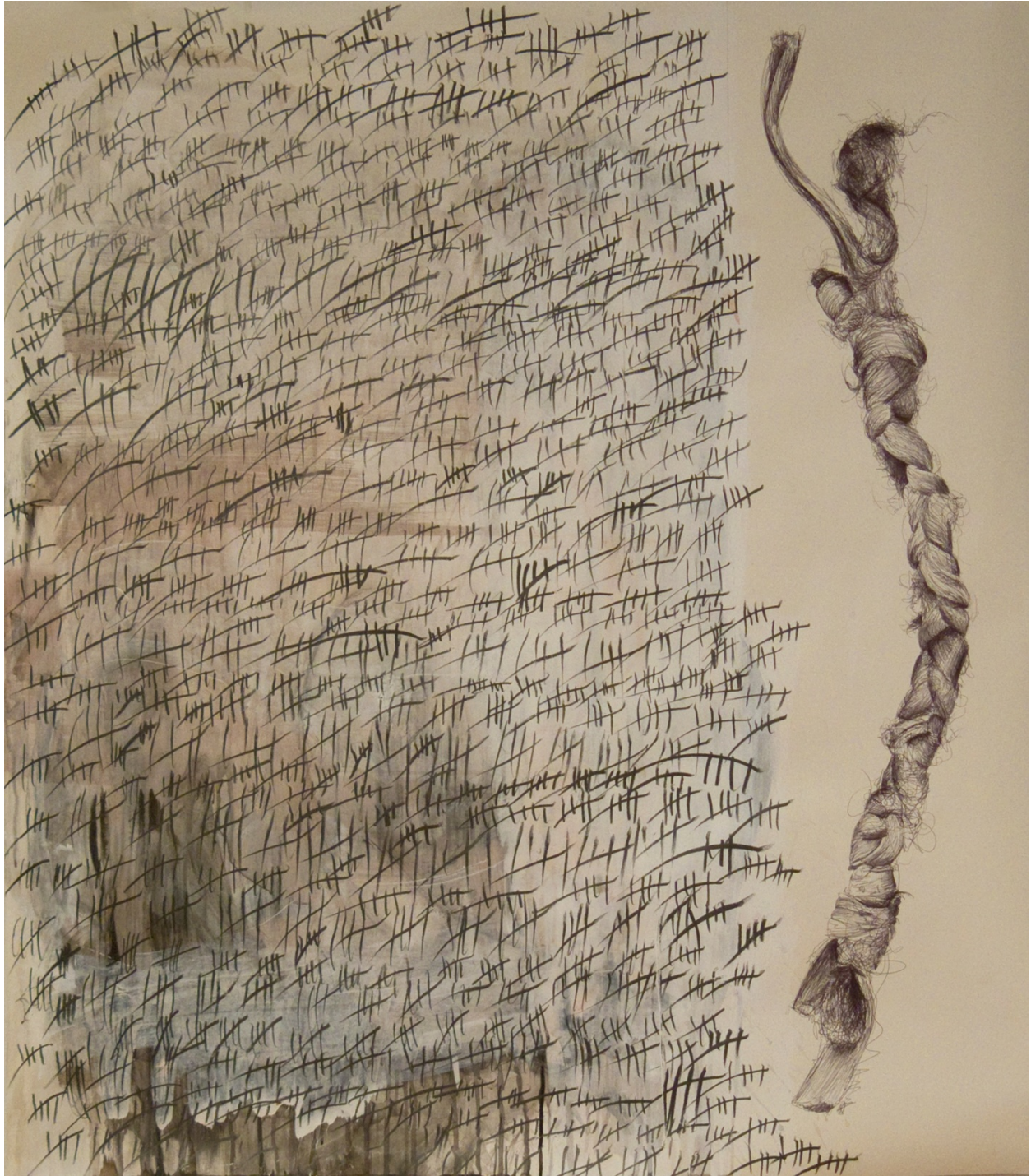
Part, ink, gesso, 43"x48", 2010



Seven and Three Quarters, graphite, coffee, ink, gesso, 48"x60", 2010



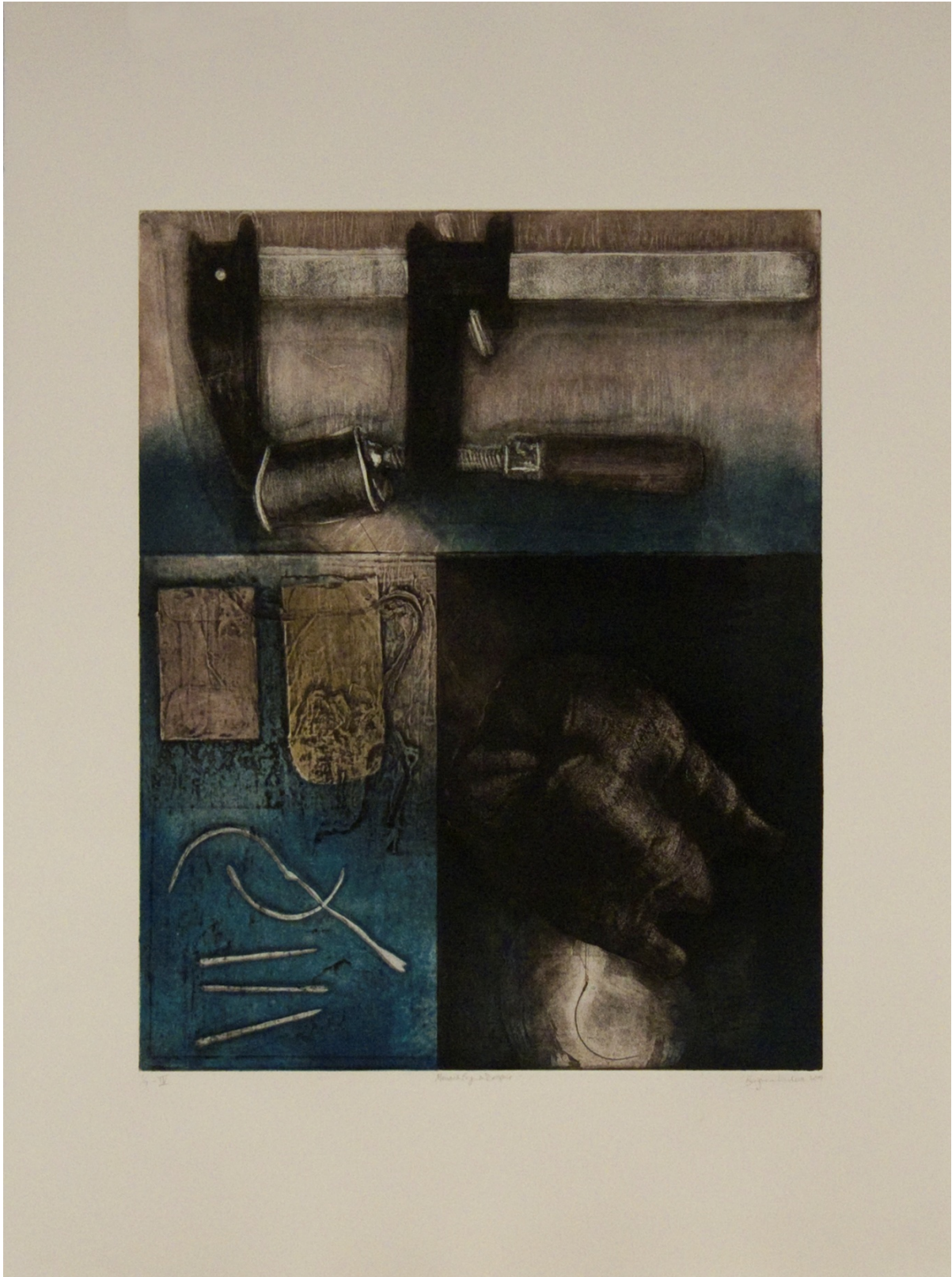
Path, ink, graphite, intaglio, collage, gesso, 43"x48", 2010



Reminder, ballpoint, ink, graphite, gesso, 42"x48", 2010



Step 1, relief, graphite, 15"x22", 2010



Mended Beyond Despair IV, intaglio, 16"x20", 2009



25, graphite, ballpoint, charcoal, oil pastel, coffee, gesso, 48"x60", 2010