



IN MEDIAS RES

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2014

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON DEPARTMENT OF ART MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

JONATHAN BAGBY

SAMANTHA COHEN

ALEXANDER KEYES

BRYAN PUTNAM

JOHN WHITTEN

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Latin for 'in the midst of things,' *In Medias Res* describes well this moment in the trajectory of these five artists. They are on the cusp between being graduate students and practicing artists, and the 2014 University of Oregon MFA Thesis Exhibition represents both the culmination of their three years of work and their launch into the professional realm.

In Medias Res also refers to the literary device of relating a story from the midpoint, which has a specific resonance for this year's graduating class. All are engaged in narrative tensions of one sort or another. Storytelling and voyages abound. There are stories of wilderness, of domestic unraveling, of the open ocean,

of survival; and there is the puncturing of narrative by the phenomenological or poetic moment.

Working side-by-side over the last three years, these artists have benefitted from a strong community, engaged in the hard work of the studio and the challenges of critical discourse. Pushed by their peers, faculty members, and remarkable visitors, these artists leave the program well-equipped, with promising bodies of work and the tools for ongoing inquiry.



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2013–14 VISITING ARTISTS

Benjamin Lignel and
Namita Wiggers
Sharon Harper
Melissa Levin
Andrea Polli
Josiah McElheny and
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Terry Thacker

Jordan Tate
Robert Storr
Christy Gast
Ethan Rose and Ethan Jackson
Michael Jones McKean
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The University of Oregon 2014 MFA thesis exhibition *In Medias Res* presents the innovative work of five artists—Jonathan Bagby, Samantha Cohen, Alexander Keyes, Bryan Putnam, and John Whitten. The purpose of the show is twofold: the exhibition simultaneously marks the culmination of each artist's graduate studio practice while signaling a professional embarkation.

In Medias Res—in the midst of things—is the celebrated translation of the Roman lyric poet Horace's rule addressed to the creator, the young poet or maker:

*Semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res
Non secus ac notas auditorem rapit, et quae
Desperate tractata nitescere posse relinquit*

[Even he hastens to the issue, and hurries
his hearer into the story's midst,
as if already known,
and what he fears he cannot make
attractive with his touch he abandons.]¹

Horace's words—though general—possess a

particular signification: the dictum stipulates that the artist should attempt by any means possible to *move* the listener. In his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder discusses another of Horace's passages on poetry, postulating the evolution of language from the imitation of sound and song overheard in nature to fragments of words, and eventually the invention of the verbal syntax of poetry.

Herder interprets Horace's credo to mean that contemporary expression, verbal or otherwise, is a layered language that must be understood according to its particular history in order to hold meaning. Such is also true for the plastic arts: feeling forms the basis of all senses, and language is just one tool for tracing an originary moment of expression. 'In the midst of things' in this sense is not a literal rule, but a metaphor for the nonlinear process of artistic conceptualization—a process whose intention, regardless of medium, is to shape a certain mediation of reality.

In this exhibition, five unique artistic practices



are unveiled, each of which attempt to create a particular narrative through artistic form. *In Medias Res* is a loose thematic that carries a different signification for each artist, but also conveys the broader understanding that their work unfolds along a relative continuum shaped by backdrops of contemporary landscapes, dialogue, and sensory expression.

JONATHAN BAGBY's practice is one of playful deconstruction of language and the exploration of human perception in relation to photography, exposing the indexical and illusionary potency of the medium of the photograph. For this exhibition, Bagby will exhibit new works from his series *Varying Degrees of Truth*.

Jonathan Bagby, *Untitled 38*
(from *Varying Degrees of Truth*),
2013, digital photograph,
archival pigment print,
40 x 26.5 in.

¹ Horace, *De Arte Poetica*, ll. 148–150, in *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (1926; reprint. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp 462–463.

This series exemplifies Bagby's concern with preconceived impressions that often inform ideological interpretations of formal relationships between physical objects. Each photograph carries a multiplicity of meaning within the forms central to the picture's composition, while also subtly alluding to alternative significations unveiled through the work's dialogue with another composition in the series, or a form within another photograph.

For each photograph, Bagby constructs a small frame of staged objects which are found or borrowed, adding and reducing the amount until complete. More often than not, the analytic process is generative, meaning that through the random act of positioning and removing objects, Bagby organically unveils an autonomous composition constructed through varying forms—an arrangement of a plastic figurine atop a scale, a photo within a photo, a nineteenth-century French landscape painting inside a Dole banana box.

The resulting image abandons the external hierarchy of objects, and calls into question the viewer's understanding of them through their visual recategorization. Once the signification of original meaning fades, the formal relationships between the objects themselves are augmented, form to form, line to line. The process of realizing for the

viewer elucidates the documentary aspect of Bagby's process. While each photo maintains an independent significance within its own composition, the series itself unfolds as a cycle of vignettes that extract forms from previous compositions in a synthetic process, building to provide fresh insight through the staging of a new setting—much like the manipulation and compression of time and space in cinema.

The pictorial language that emerges is a riddle of pairs and metaphors that operate from within and without the photo, creating a window for interpretation that wittily ducks conventional content while strictly adhering to formal concern of the photo's aspect.

SAMANTHA COHEN's project *Wet Socks and Cheeseburgers* for *In Medias Res* is a presentation of the most recent chapter of the artist's exploration of materiality through an autobiographical lens. Her stop-motion animation installation presents a material rather than linear narrative, a visual manifestation of the artist's interest in craft, form, and the sensory experience of time.

Cohen's installations may be viewed as an intricate syntax of material form and performance, shaped in this way to compose an environment within the animation parallel to a setting for viewing from without. The



Samantha Cohen, *Wet Socks and Cheeseburgers*, 2014, installation, cardboard, marker, animation acrylic, rejected furniture, dead plant

construct of *Wet Socks and Cheeseburgers* permits the context for the animation to be viewed as a set without characters, highlighting the elements of fabrication while also allowing them to be seen autonomously.

Cohen humanizes colored, cut-out suitcases into figurines as the protagonists of the stop motion, an allusion to the artist's own experience of displacement in moving and the recent decision made by her family to relocate to sunny Florida from New York State. The lack of human form within the frames is symbolic of the loss of identity often endured by many once transposed into unfamiliar contexts or environments.

Frequently in such scenarios, personal histories are condensed, and the material manner of self-representation becomes a stand-in for characteristics intrinsic to one's personality such as humor, wit and empathy.

Vibrant, bright colors and cartoon-style forms make up the animation, humorously presenting quick, quotidian, rooted narratives and interactions of the characters. The cartoon quality activates a celebration of personal histories for the viewer, framing childhood visions of play and laughter as a fragment of the past. Cohen's fusion of stylized graphic elements with subdued sentimentality creates a static tragicomedy



Alexander Keyes, *Untitled*, 2013, mixed media, 6 x 6 x 1 ft.

for the viewer whose conclusion hovers between the narrative unfolding in the stills and its own silent audience.

ALEXANDER KEYES's recent practice is an active exploration to discover the unknown, offering a glimpse into the psyche of the maker through a vision of his unfolding aesthetic process. Keyes's current project spans media including sculpture, drawing, woodcut, and installation in order to examine a nonlinear narrative. The narrative—both in form and in content a playful one—is intended to expose a

certain naïveté at the core of human intellect, one that is often shed or abandoned in the process of becoming.

His current project, *From the Depths*, has roots in Keyes's site-specific sculptures, but the relationality is now isolated in the didactic staging of the works themselves. As a point of departure, Keyes draws from imagery of the sea as a mysterious and unknowable entity, using familiar materials to provide visible form for an otherwise ephemeral organism.

The resulting objects present a timeline of emergence that echoes the artist's process of conceptualization: a thin woodcut outline of a submarine on wood panel represents a crisp image of Keyes's three-dimensional foam sculpture of the same object. Boldly cut, alternating colored sheets of paper represent a three-dimensional form of another stark woodcut, a symbol of softly undulating waves.

The multiplicities of Keyes's approach to representing a single form in varying media—a wave, a submarine, sea motifs—present a syntheist vision which reduces each form to its most basic elements. Viewership of the forms, alternating between their three- and two-dimensional depictions, objectively reveals their most pure and nascent appearance coming into being and heightens attention lent to the materiality of each object. Such expression intimates the artist's interest in unveiling a ubiquitous, childlike vision of fantasy as reality, both in his playful, conceptual approach in his own practice and through a symbolic method of representation.

BRYAN PUTNAM's practice fuses mixed-media paintings, costume performance, archival prints, drawing on paper, performance, and installation to create a visual narrative that speaks to his concern with ecosystems, localism, and the inherent structure of surrounding environments. Influenced by his



Bryan Putnam, *Lunch Break* (performance), 2013, performance document: digital photograph

time spent in the Pacific Northwest, Putnam's current project unfolds like a fairy tale of decadent and carefully designed images intended to draw attention to the subtle—and sometimes obvious—failures resulting from inattentiveness to one's surroundings. In a series of large-scale drawings, the artist has conceptualized a habitat for a set of characters including his protagonist, Saul, and another, Hokey Bear, set against a backdrop of obfuscated landscapes.

Motivated by his study of ecopsychology and wilderness theory, Putnam's visual vernacular plays with comic grotesque renderings of an unfolding story—each presentation a window into a narrative meant to newly engage the viewer in an alternative format. Putnam's

pastiche of form adds a performative quality to the series, intended as a method to provoke a broad and real understanding of these environments as an extension of reality, not restricted to an aesthetic framework.

The playfulness and humor of some of Putnam's relational work, such as his Hokey Bear costume performances, balances the dark imagery of more provocative works such as *When Help Becomes Hell*, a bewitching ink drawing that presents a contemporary vision of natural disasters prompted by human intervention.

Putnam's most recent, large-scale mixed media drawings of Saul's environment—featured in the *In Medias Res* exhibition—embody the simultaneity of his dark and frolicsome undertones of former works in a syncopated vignette of the protagonist's adventures. The artist provides clues to deciphering the story, including the title and recognizable visual forms within the composition such as a transparent log and painted vegetal elements, but arresting, swirling forms and the collage treatment of the surface juxtapose these temporal signifiers with magnificent visions of the unknown.

The tension of Putnam's practice—intended to provide informative commentary while also allowing the viewer to understand independently—is formally unveiled in works

such as *Between the Turtle and the Log*, which stands as a metaphor for the process of understanding: the transparency of form and the crystalline lightness of the lower left quadrant of the drawing illuminate the subject, much like a car's headlamps that instantaneously illuminate one aspect of a journey only to plunge into darkness further on.

JOHN WHITTEN's current practice explores the metaphysical implications of wandering. The artist's project *A Life on the Ocean Wave* displays a series of intricately pictorial miniature drawings tandem to video installation: together, drawing and video are expressive of the artist's current study of survivalist phenomenology and the consequences of its failures.

Inspired by accounts and images found in recent adventure book and survival guide publications, Whitten's current drawings exhibited for *In Medias Res* speak to an investigation of the relationship between human rationalism and natural chaos. Each pencil drawing features natural forms—clouds, bodies of water, landscapes—paired with imagery of human attempts to navigate challenges imposed by natural disaster and the elements. Whitten's realism, while offering a beautifully intimate vision of elemental forces, delivers a subtle commentary on



John Whitten, *Untitled (Smoke)*, video still, 2013

the cognitive awareness prompted by the experience of nature, eclipsing realist form with subjective content.

Portraits of sublime elemental constructs such as Whitten's series of deep, undulating cumulus clouds, confront the viewer with a direct embodiment of the natural form. At the same time, the aspects of the clouds—extracted from context—become beasts of their own variety, evoking a primal, universal power through sharp, vibrating contrasts of dark and light particles of the landscape, beyond the frame of human reference.

Whitten's drawings are expressive of remote beauty through an overwhelmingly photographic facture. In a miniature frame, the

artist's highly skilled academic style conflates traditional representation of form with a romantic vision of the unknown. Whitten's draftsmanship in drawing is echoed in the ambiguous depictions of elements captured in his video works. The video segments represent the failure of rescue flares, sea dye markers, and smoke signals, showing how such mechanisms capitulate to the environment. Whitten captures this rupture in the object's utility, revealing the ambiguity of wonder and beauty in the interaction between the flare, dye, or signal, and its surroundings.

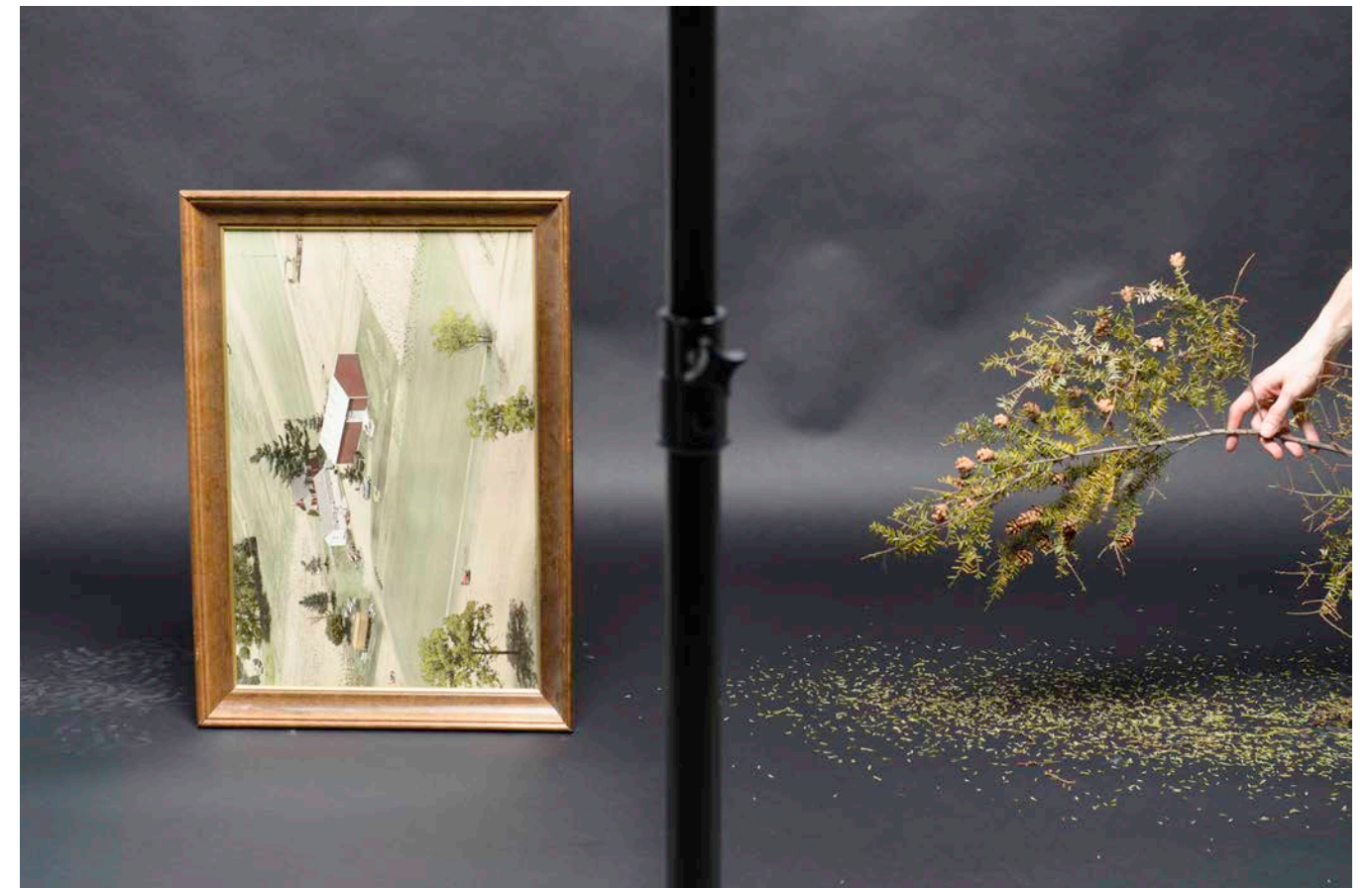
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JONATHAN BAGBY

Orlando, Florida

www.jonathanbagby.com

Above: *Untitled 47* (from *Varying Degrees of Truth*), 2013, digital photograph, archival pigment print, 40 x 26.5 in.

Left: *Creased Sky with Torn Horizon*, 2012, selenium-toned silver gelatin print, 16 x 16 in.

My explorations of the photograph are grounded in photography's varying capacity for representation in relation to perception and memory. I am drawn to the tension created by the photograph's ability to be poetic or indexical and its possibility for both flatness and illusory space. I construct new physical relationships between phenomena and collapse them into photographic space to exploit the slippage of meaning between objects, perceived space, and a viewer.



SAMANTHA COHEN

Ridge, New York

Above: *Wet Socks and Cheeseburgers*, 2014, installation, cardboard, marker, animation, acrylic, rejected furniture, dead plant
Left: *Wet Socks and Cheeseburgers*, 2013–14, animation still, paper, marker, sand

Through autobiographical narrative I explore the complex realm of cartoons, creating tragicomic, stop-motion animations that rest on themes of displacement, heartbreak, and catharsis. Using the language of cartoons and comics, I build domestic installations with rejected furniture using painted bold outlines in order to fictionalize objects. By blurring the line between artifice and reality, I attempt to make sense of the boundaries within our imagination.

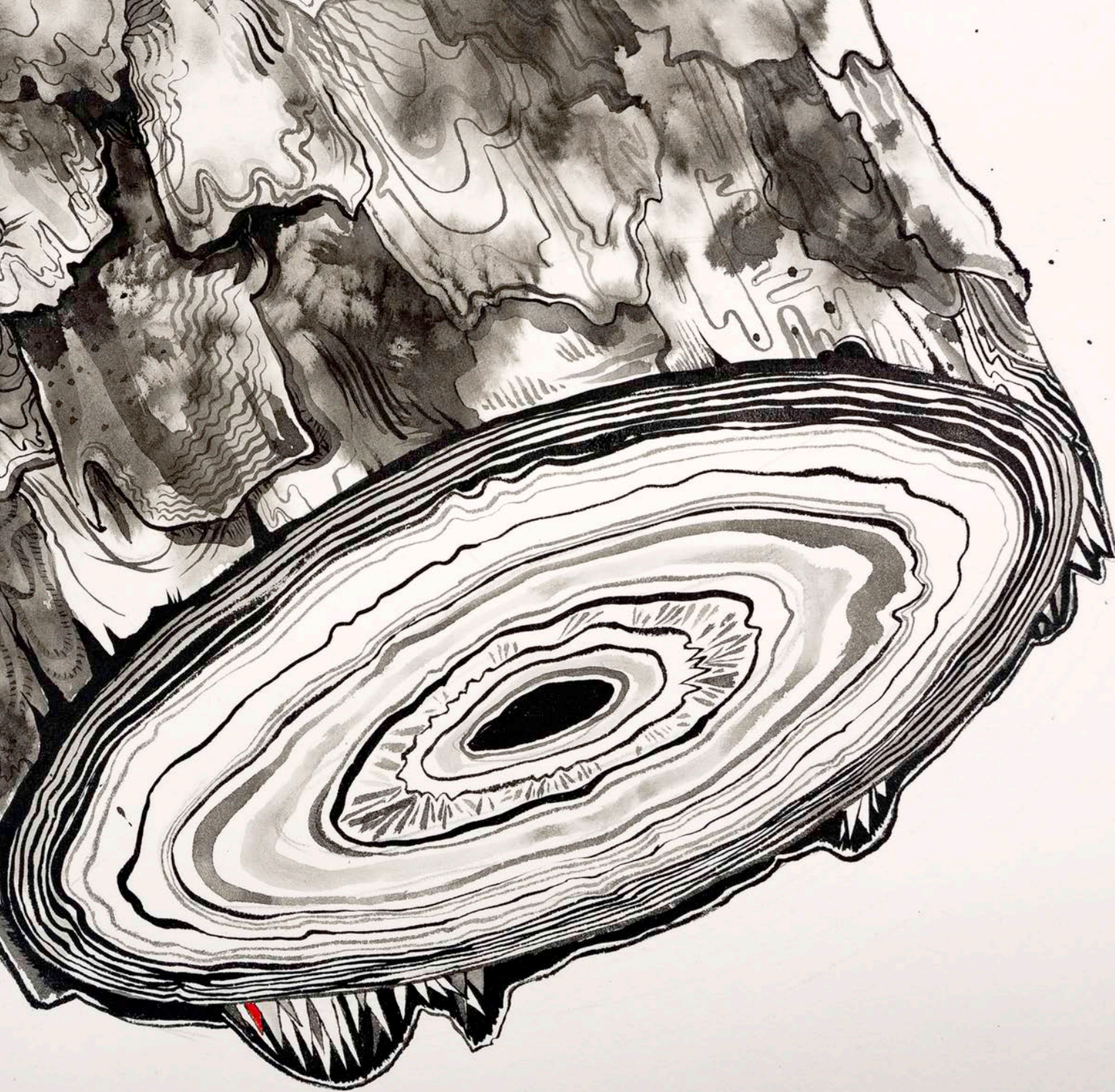


ALEXANDER KEYES

Bellingham, Washington

Above: *Untitled*, 2014, plywood, medium-density fiberboard, two-by-fours, 10 x 3 x 6 ft.
Left: *Untitled*, 2014, plywood, found book, 12 x 12 x 12 in.

From the Depths is an accumulation of the memories and imagery from a space of fantastical speculation. In imagining an expedition out to sea, I am attracted to the romantic longing of the quest as well as the futile nature of such an endeavor. By looking to the sea as a representational and symbolic unknown, my work is a confrontation with the anxiety of transitions and rites of passage we face from birth through death.

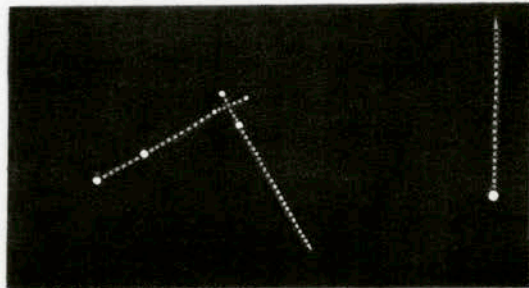


BRYAN PUTNAM

Methow Valley, Washington
www.iamrainier.com

Above: *Log Mama* (detail), 2014, sumi ink and gouache on paper, 30 x 20 in.
Left: *Drift*, 2014, sumi ink, etching, cut paper collage, gouache, and pastel on paper, 70 x 48 in.

Relishing in the narrative tendencies of drawing, I craft an idiosyncratic tale of wilderness and man. As a primal 'site of imagination,' drawing allows me to materialize visions of my folk-myth as feverishly as they appear in my mind. The works themselves trace this process—as mark and line act as cairns in a round trip voyage between imagination and image. My hope is to catalyze a nuanced process of speculation, to wander and to wonder.



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JOHN WHITTEN

Princeton, Indiana

Above: *Signal*, 2013, video still
Left: *133*, 2014, graphite on paper, 11 x 14 in.

A Life on the Ocean Wave mines survival manuals, distress signals, and stories of misadventure to explore both the psychological allure of being lost at sea and its philosophical implications. Through drawing and video, I mediate and objectify safety instructions and signs of duress (e.g., flares, smoke signals, rescue dye), dislodging the hope placed in them to embrace what is revealed when faced with failure.

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