

COLLABORATIVE VISUAL SCORES: USING THE MULTIPLICITY OF PRINT TO SHARE A SERIES OF ETCHINGS (VISUAL SCORES) WITH SELECTED MUSICIANS IN EXCHANGE FOR THEIR SONIC INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to explore the process of etching as a method for investigating shared experiences and collaboration between artists from different disciplines. The aim is to focus on the overlapping language that exists between mark-making and musical composition and to investigate how one informs the other.

The research focuses on the creation of three scores, each created on a steel etching plate. Each score was sent to a musician for their sonic response. For this first series, I invited the saxophonist Patrick Shiroishi (US), the guitarist Sam Sherry (UK/NZ), and vocalist Adam Sherry (UK/NZ) to take part. My scores contain my interpretations of the environment, or journey, developed through the practice of soundwalking. The musicians enter into the project as collaborators, and the work is not complete without their sonic response. In this collaborative score project, I wanted to create a dialogue or 'relationship' between myself and other musicians by exchanging a score for a recorded response. I feel like this initial experiment was successful, and this approach has given me many ideas on how to develop this project for the future.

INTRODUCTION

As a musician and visual artist with over 14 years of experience, I have found that my methods of writing music and creating prints intertwine. The connection between musical composition, drawing, and etching seems to be instinctive, and I am intrigued by the similarities between placing a mark on a surface and making a sound in a space.

In 2020 I began to explore the American composer Pauline Oliveros' method of 'Deep Listening' to create a series of soundwalk drawings. To begin with, I walked from an estate located next to the Barbican in London (the Golden Lane Estate; built by the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon), across the Barbican high-rise walk, over the river, south through

Southwark, and down to Camberwell. I found that through walking, listening and drawing, I could transform sound to highlight particular contours and meanings that appear as marks, creating a poetical experience of a particular journey (Figure 1).

By repeating the same soundwalk, and following the same set of self-imposed rules for drawing, I began to notice that my marks started to represent the same types of sounds over and over, becoming a language that somehow described sound and landscape at the same time. By working directly onto copper and steel etching plates during these

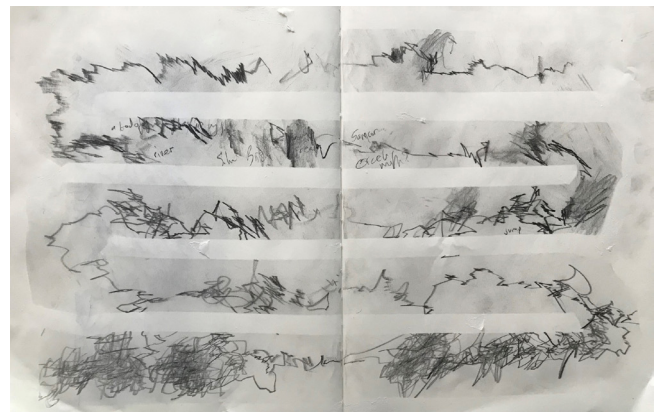


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Sketchbook drawing, soundwalk, 2021

Figure 2: Sketchbook drawing, soundwalk, 2021

soundwalks, I was able to etch marks observed from the intangible (sounds, atmospheres), onto a heavy, tangible material. This cyclic transformation of sounds into marks was then shared in the form of a visual score with a musician, to be transformed back into sound. The multiplicity of the medium of print enabled me to share the work so that the journey could be 'read' and experienced by another.

METHODOLOGY/SOUNDWALKING

I began by listening. Teaching awareness through slow movement, breath, and listening exercises that she called 'Sonic Meditations', Oliveros was seeking an "expanded consciousness" as well as a method for healing through sound (O'Brien, 2016). This idea of finding respite through sound and forming a listening practice resonated with me, and I realised the potential overlap with my observational drawing practice and how it could be developed through print.

At the same time, walking became a necessity. I was living in a brutalist estate that had been built just before the Barbican Estate, the Golden Lane Estate, originally built for social housing in the 1950s. I always found myself walking the backstreets of London to avoid most of the pollution from traffic. By listening to sounds beyond the monotonous hum of the traffic, I could hear what felt like the buildings breathing: their systems, generators, distant building work rhythms that reflected and lingered around the structures, and decorative water features that were barely noticeable, and I became interested in these sounds and how I moved 'through' them. I planned a walking route which I repeated over and over, and set about walking, listening, and drawing (Figure 2). I would initially draw repeated visual marks and patterns along with the repeated sounds that I could hear, and for each drawing, I would note specific sounds or observations. At the point when I crossed the river to reach the other side, it was as though sound dropped away and gave reverent sonic space to the force and weight of the moving water.

For me, the method of soundwalking has always been a very personal, almost meditative act, and one that I could not imagine sharing with others. The Canadian composer and sound ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp describes a soundwalk as 'any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment' (Westerkamp, 2007, p. 49). In her essay 'Soundwalking', Westerkamp sets out an invitation and instructions for the reader to go on their own soundwalk to experience 'uncompromised listening' (Westerkamp, 2007, p. 49):

Start by listening to the sounds of your body while moving. They are closest to you and establish the first dialogue between you and the environment. If you can hear even the quietest of these sounds, you are moving through an environment that is scaled on human proportions. In other words, with your voice or your footsteps, for instance, you are 'talking' to your environment, which then in turn responds by giving your sounds a specific acoustic quality. (Westerkamp, 2007, p. 50)

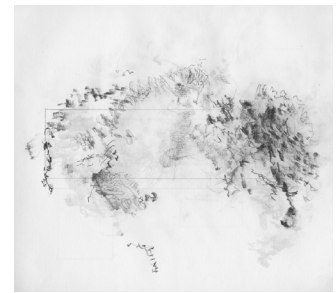


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 3: Sketchbook drawing, soundwalk, 2021

Figure 4: Untitled (Soundwalk, March 2021), etching, 42 x 23cm, 2021

Figure 5: Over the river, etching, 40 x 30cm, 2021

I find it interesting how Westerkamp suggests that the sounds of the body can initiate a conversation with the environment. The motion of walking, and the focus on the rhythm of my breath, allow me to listen intently to the layers and overlapping sounds that transform as I move through them. Since I began the walking drawings, I have become more aware and more attuned to the sounds around me and how they change, as well as the direction they are moving and my understanding of what they are. I am also more aware of where my body is placed in relation to the sounds and how everything is moving fluidly. It is as though, alongside listening, the act of walking has the potential to bind time and place through experience. I had originally taken this fluidity and movement for granted as I moved through the city. This thought also makes me realise my partial attraction to the fluidity of the river, as though in an attempt to understand (through drawing) the shifting forces underneath the surface of the water, I could somehow relate to my body moving through the landscape (Figure 3).

THE TRACE/DRAWING

Throughout my research runs the thread of a few of the theories of the British social anthropologist Tim Ingold. Ingold writes within the realm of phenomenology and human perception and seeks to integrate the practices of art, design, and architecture within anthropology. In his book, *Lines* (2016), he explores a discipline that he calls the 'anthropological archaeology of the line' and imagines a world in which interwoven and connected lines weave through everything and everyone. Having read the chapter on 'Traces, Threads and Surfaces', I found it helpful to consider Ingold's definition of the trace in relation to my drawing:

In our terms, the trace is any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement. Most traces are of one or other of two kinds: additive and reductive. A line drawn with charcoal on paper, or with chalk on a blackboard, is additive since the material of the charcoal or chalk forms an extra layer that is superimposed upon the substrate. Lines that are scratched, scored, or etched into a surface are reductive since in this case they are formed by the removal of material from the surface itself. (Ingold, 2016, p. 44)

This is relevant to my thoughts about presence and absence while undertaking the soundwalks. On these walks, I trace a path with the movement of my body to leave imperceptible, reductive traces, and I leave the trace of the mark of my pencil or etching tool upon a surface and therefore the trace of the sound that has transformed into a mark.

As I draw while I listen and walk, I continue to explore the idea of moving through or 'in' sounds. I mark the sounds by touch as the sound moves or as I move, and I mark the sound down where it is in relation to my body. I mark pulses, hums, gentle, singular sounds, construction sounds that bury the ambience of a place, birds, and the droning generators of each building. I try to listen 'through' the constant sounds of the traffic, although sometimes I am open to using the rhythm intuitively. I attempt to memorise marks so that I can recreate a sonic environment in the

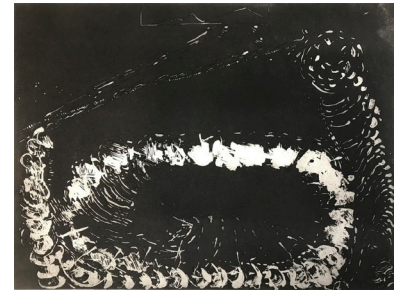


Figure 6

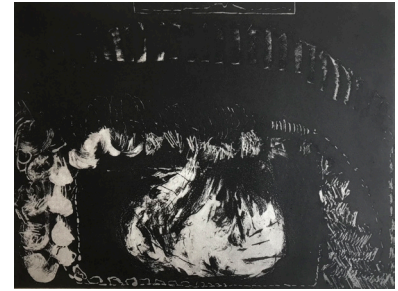


Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 6: Two Voices (score for Patrick Shiroishi), etching, 40 x 30cm, 2021

Figure 7: Two Voices (score for Adam Sherry), etching, 40 x 30cm, 2021

Figure 8: Two Voices (score for Sam Sherry), etching, 40 x 30cm, 2021

studio or in the print room, which invites the question of how others can 'read' the marks, and at what point they could be considered language.

ETCHING PROCESS

The etching *Untitled (Soundwalk, March 2021)* was the first prepared plate that I took out with me on a soundwalk (Figure 4). The zinc plate was prepared with a hard ground and taken on the route that began at the Golden Lane Estate, crossed the river, and followed backstreets south to Camberwell. I used a heavy fine scribe to notate sounds as marks and record the rhythm of my walking and breathing. Once etched, the plate was coated with another ground and taken back out on the same route; the previous marks were almost completely hidden by the ground. Having worked on the plate while walking the same route each time, I was interested to see if I had recorded the same marks on the same area of the plate. Part of my route included a 'high-rise' pavement with traffic flowing and curving underneath.

The etching titled *Over the river* was created by taking a prepared copper plate on a soundwalk on a set circular route with the Thames at the centre (Figure 5). I prepared the copper plate with hard ground and worked on the plate with the vast space of the river always on my left (which involved crossing the river multiple times). I focused on encircling this one point of the river and once the plate began to accumulate enough marks, I sat down on a bench to write down my observations. The finished print is formed of many repeated marks and shapes that signify the sounds that were around me. While the drawing was started and initially developed at the location, I continued it at the studio. By using repetition and my memory of the marks, I followed the journey of each mark as a sound moving through the location, with the small build-up of marks in the centre of the plate forming a map of the hum or drone of the river.

It made sense for me to record these soundwalks onto metal plates. These marks, forms designating certain sounds, would be 'held' within these weighty materials and had the potential to be captured through the 'reductive' and transformative process of etching. As the plate is being etched, it undergoes a transformation; the drawn, 'reductive' marks mirror my reductive presence through the city. By passing the print to a musician, this process of transformation continues, always evolving the sound into marks, into a trace, into sound.

By preparing plates to take outside of the print studio, I was able to embrace the 'dynamism' of marks directly onto the plate surface. I experimented with transporting plates prepared with a soft ground (housed in a protective box), which allowed me to use more subtle movements to transpose the sounds around me into marks. In my ongoing search for an intuitive way to draw directly onto the plate, I tested various materials that I thought would work as an interesting stop-out directly onto steel. These included tools and materials such as a reed pen to paint on liquid hard ground, drawing with a black oil bar, vaseline, lithograph crayons, and Chinagraph pencils. The lithograph



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 9: Patrick Shiroishi
 Figure 10: *Two Rains* (score for two guitars), woodcut, 65 x 62cm, 2022

crayons proved to be the most practical way to work directly onto a plate while soundwalking.

While working in the negative on steel (and by using its capabilities to create dark tones through open-bite) I discovered a freedom in my mark-making, and it was at this point that I decided to develop the work in the form of a visual score.

VISUAL SCORES

In June 2014, I was invited to perform a piece of music called 41 Strings at the Southbank Centre in London. Written and conducted by the musician Nick Zinner, the classical piece was intended to be performed by 45 musicians. The musicians included an orchestra of young players from Southbank Sinfonia, Goldsmiths and the University of London, as well as electric guitarists, bass players, and drummers, many of whom were not classically trained. I found it interesting how Zinner had devised his own graphic notation for the project. Every musician, whether they could read traditional musical notation or not, was able to understand Zinner's graphic notation and could perform the piece successfully.

This experience of rehearsing and performing 41 Strings using Zinner's form of notation stayed with me, opening up possibilities that I did not think were possible for a self-taught musician. I realised that this form of graphic notation or visual score had the potential to offer a sense of freedom to musicians; firstly, by enabling players to transpose the same system or language in the form of visual symbols outside the realm of traditional musical notation, they were able to communicate with each other no matter their training; and secondly, it opened up the possibility for players to approach the score in their own way.

I began to think about how the visual score could become a useful tool for musicians through its potential to offer a sense of freedom to transpose visual symbols or marks that correlated with their personal sonic vocabulary or language. I was interested in how another musician would approach my mark-making and transform it into sound, and how my own listening and drawing practice could be 'read' or transformed through another's practice.

The series of visual scores titled Two Voices are etchings on steel plates developed from sketches created on three different soundwalks. Each score was given to a musician with a simple set of instructions and 'exchanged' for the recorded response. The instructions included a brief description of how the score was created through a soundwalk/listening practice; how the prints were created (the etching process); a suggestion to keep the composition within 4 minutes; a request for their first, instinctive impression of the score; how to choose the key of their choice; and that the recording could be made from a simple recording device/zoom/single microphone and local background noise would be embraced.

The steel etching plates, each measuring 40 x 30cm (the size chosen for ease of walking and sketching on the plate as well as posting the final print to each musician) were drawn on with various resists, backed, and then etched in nitric acid. The steel areas that were not covered with resist were etched to a dark tone using open-bite (Figure 6, 7, 8).

I chose three musicians with whom to share the scores: American saxophonist Patrick Shiroishi (Figure 9), New Zealand musician Sam Sherry, and New Zealand vocalist Adam Sherry. As this was the first time I had collaborated with musicians on such a project, I decided that keeping the instructions simple was the best approach. Shiroishi responded to the visual score with a beautiful saxophone composition that began with a delicate breath passing through the instrument, building up into a memorable melodic motif. Sam Sherry transformed the marks into a stunning composition on classical acoustic guitar, and Adam Sherry encircled a drone note created on a flute with vocal lines. As I received each musician's sonic interpretations, I was incredibly excited about how to proceed with the project. I began to ask myself questions about how to present the work so that the sonic and visual elements of each piece could be communicated to an audience. To start with, I set up a Soundcloud page called 'The Visual Score Project'¹ as a record of each sonic composition alongside an image of the print. In the future, I would like to work towards inviting the musicians to perform in the space in which the score is exhibited.

CONCLUSION

This early research was successful and this initial approach has given me many ideas on how to develop the project for the future. The multiplicity of print works very well within the project because the print becomes a tool or a notational device that can be transformed or transposed by multiple musicians. I am currently in the process of developing these ideas further by creating a woodcut score for two guitarists, a score for percussion and guitar (etching), and a larger-scale graphite drawing for a quartet (Figure 10).

My visual scores contain my own interpretations of the environment, or journey, developed through experience, imagination, and memory. The work could also be described as a form of landscape and is maybe comparable to the traditional Chinese form of landscape painting called Shanshui painting – the purpose of which was not to reproduce the grandeur of the mountain scenery but rather to grasp 'an emotion or atmosphere so as to capture a sense of the numinous' (Yoon, 2010, p. 58). And perhaps, the score, transformed into sonic form and part of the sensory world of sound, can be considered a trace because it attempts to reveal something transient and ungraspable in a visual form.

REFERENCES

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Footnotes

1. <https://soundcloud.com/thevisualscoreproject>

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Gemma Thompson is a multidisciplinary artist who works through drawing, print and sound to record sonic experience of place. She uses drawing to intuitively transcribe a sense or (intangible) feeling of place and to reimagine sound as physical presence. Recording sensory experience through drawing, soundwalking and listening, the movement of her hands attempts to mirror sound and rhythm, as a force or pressure. Through the process of printmaking, she explores the potential of multiplicity and the opportunity to enlarge drawn marks. The weight or indentation of the surface upon which she works is important to her - as an anchor or embrace of the intangible sounds observed.

Gemma is based in London. She completed her MFA in Printmaking at Camberwell College of Art in 2021 and exhibited as part of London Grads Now 2021 at Saatchi Gallery. She has been a musician for over 10 years, performing around the world, and has received two Mercury Award nominations while writing and performing in the band Savages.

IMAGE GALLERY

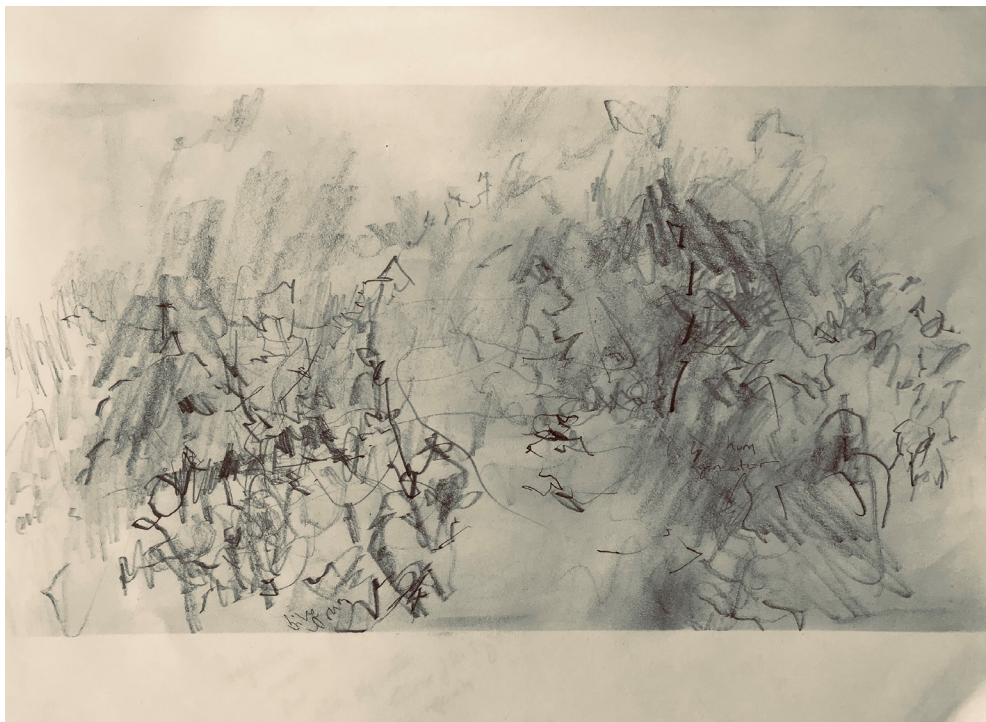
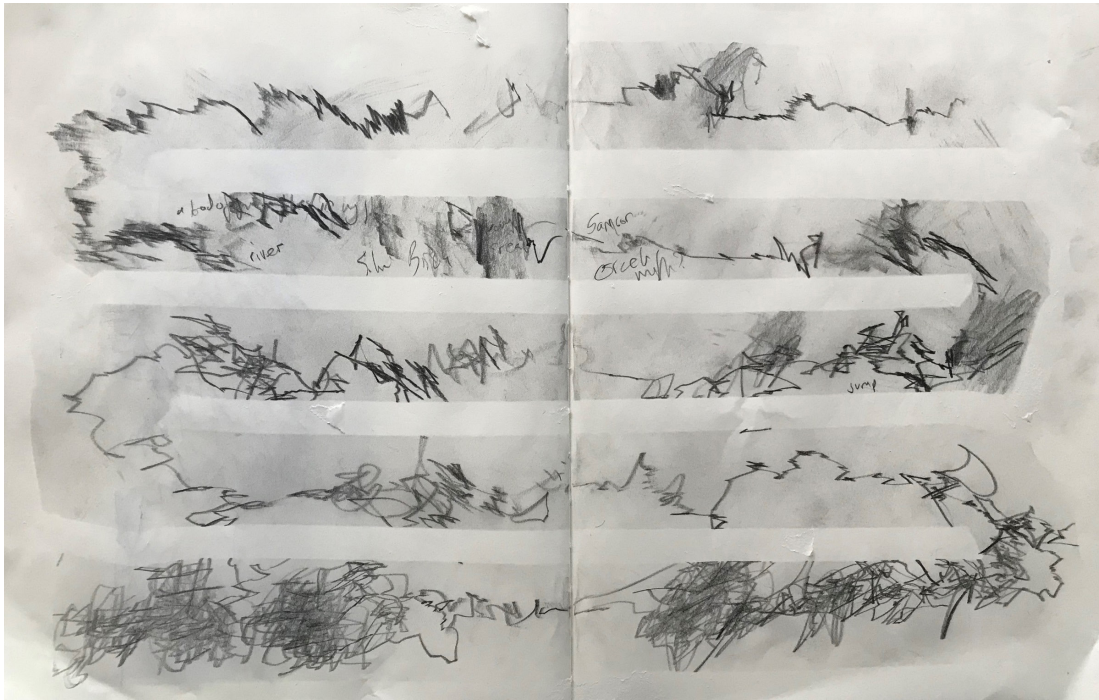


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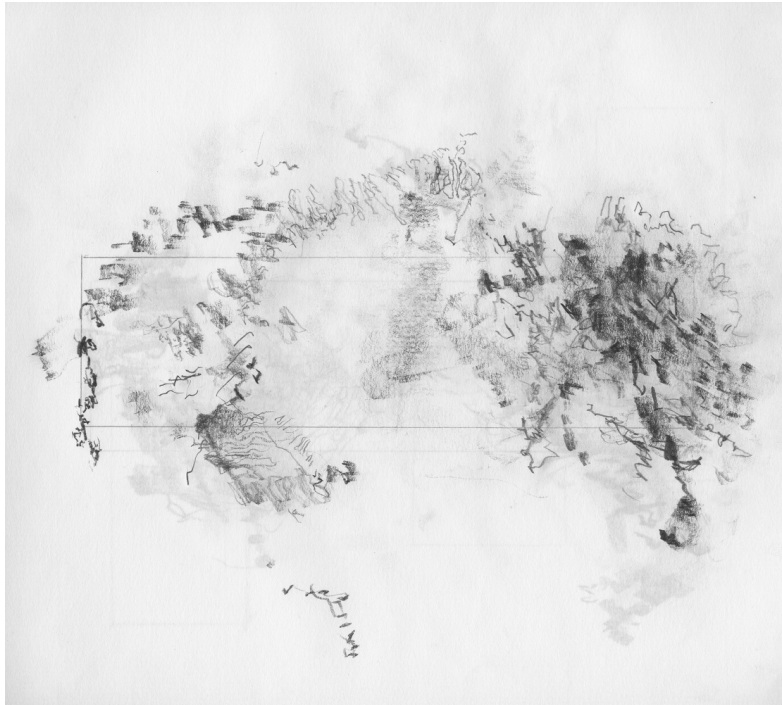


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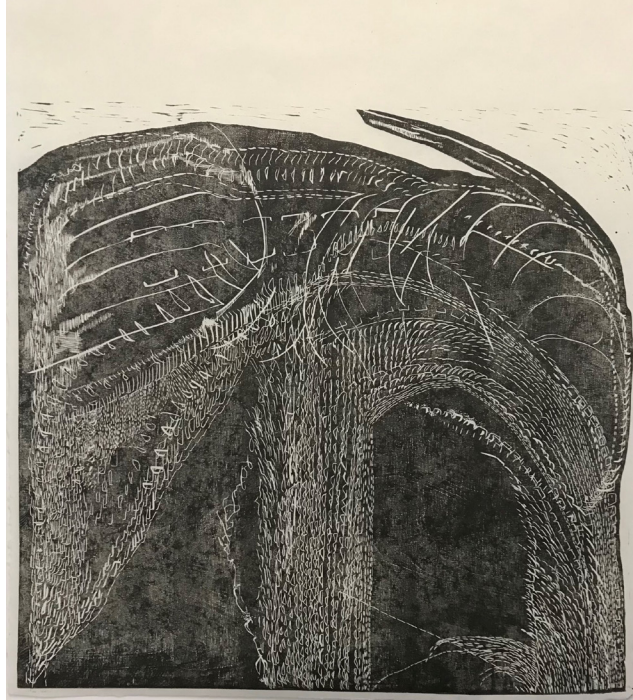


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