

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a large, crumpled piece of paper. The paper is white and has various phrases printed on it in blue and orange ink. The phrases are partially obscured by the crumpling and the hand's grip. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pinkish-red color. The overall composition is centered around the text on the paper.

# ALEXI WORTH

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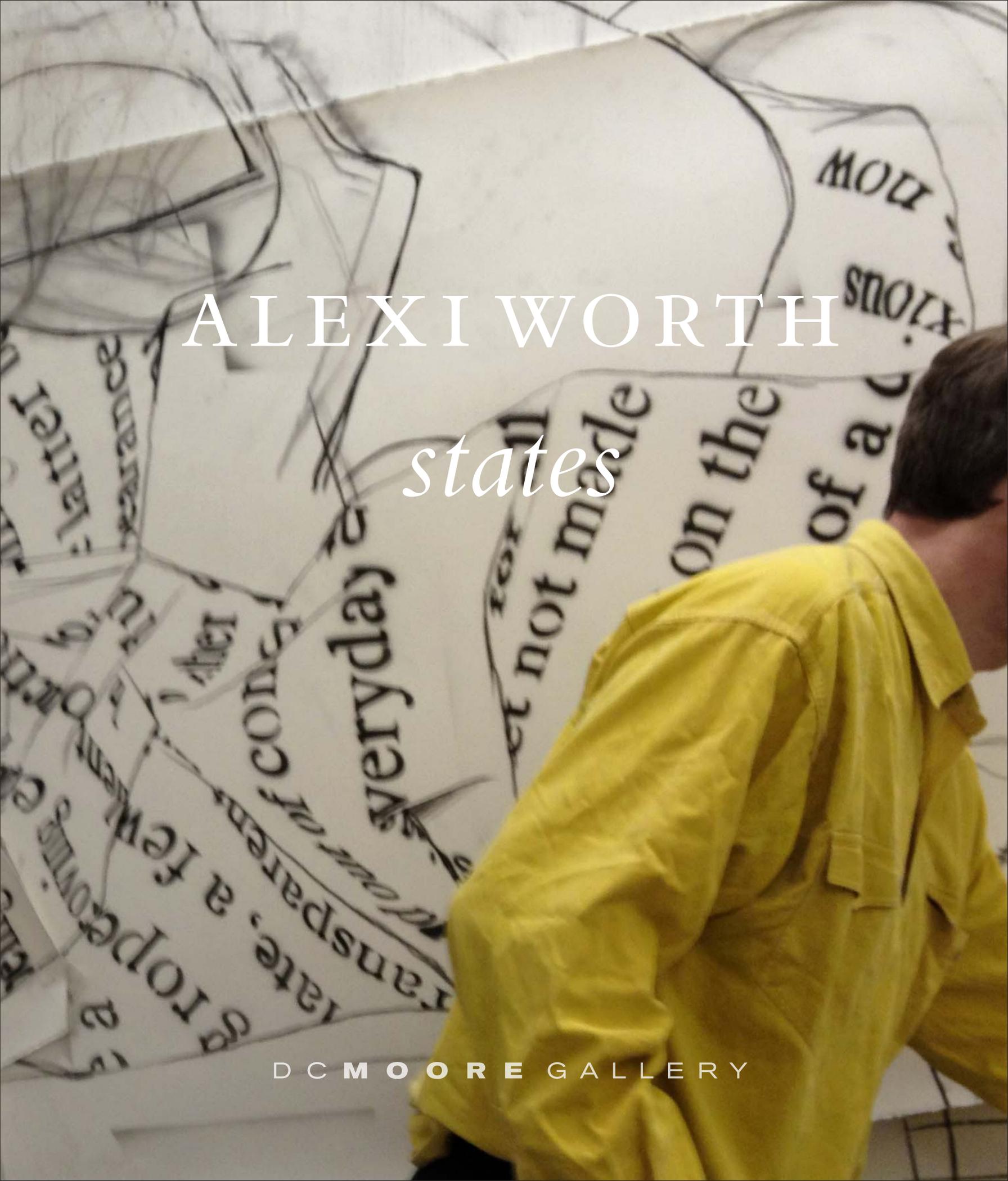
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ALEXI WORTH

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DCMOOREGALLERY

**EASEL PAINTER**  
2010  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
28 X 18 INCHES

**NOTE:**

The moiré patterns visible in several of the following images are not permanent features of the paintings themselves.  
The nature of the mesh support makes these patterns, ordinarily invisible, unavoidable when reproduced.







**SMOKER AND MIRROR**

2011

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

21 X 28 INCHES

**SMOKER AND MIRROR**

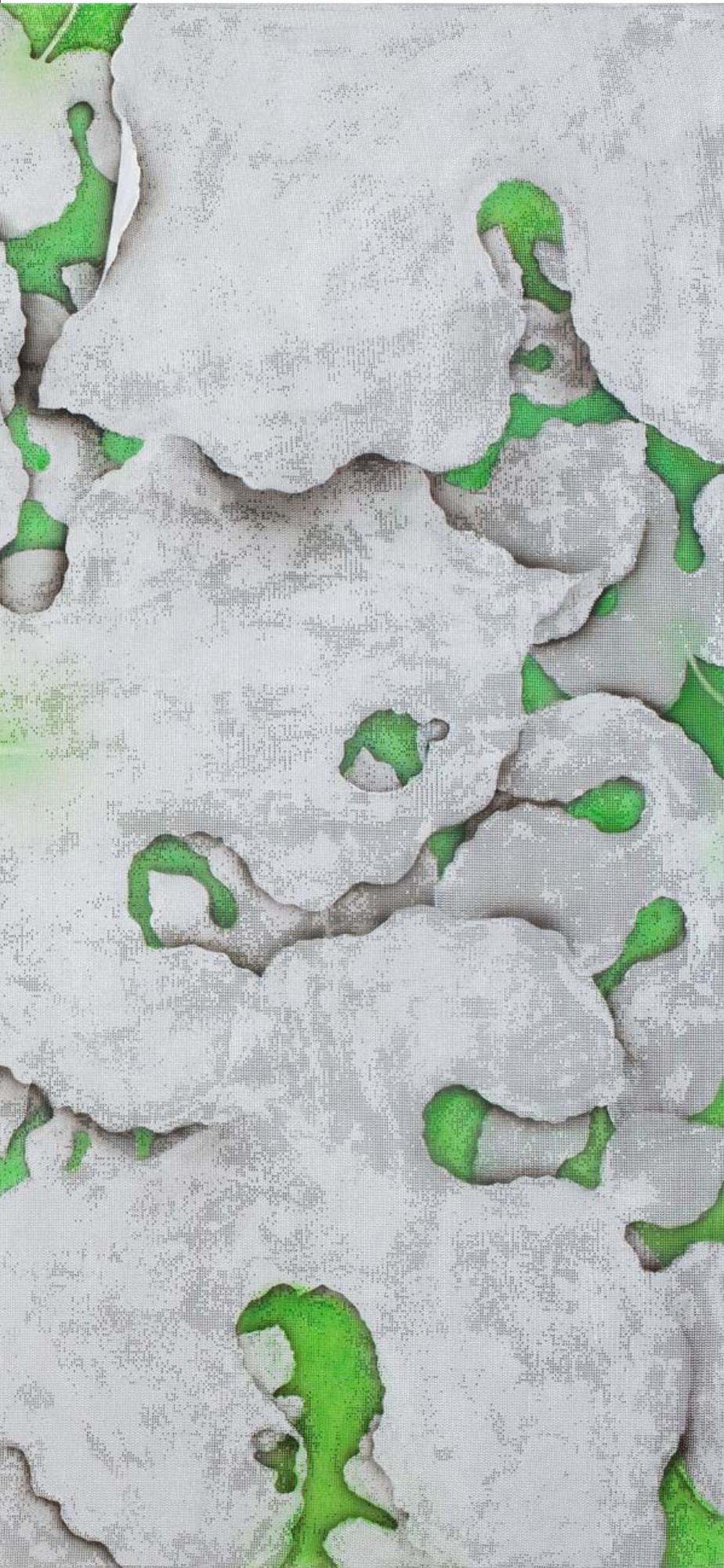
2012

ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

36 X 27 INCHES







**ARIZONA**  
2011  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
42 X 56 INCHES



**WOMAN ON TIPTOE**

2012

ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

48 X 27 INCHES

**TINK**

2011

ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

55 X 44 INCHES



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TRANSPARENT FLAME-  
COLORED INFORMATION  
2013  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
52 X 78 INCHES

COMMA  
2013  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
42 X 36 INCHES

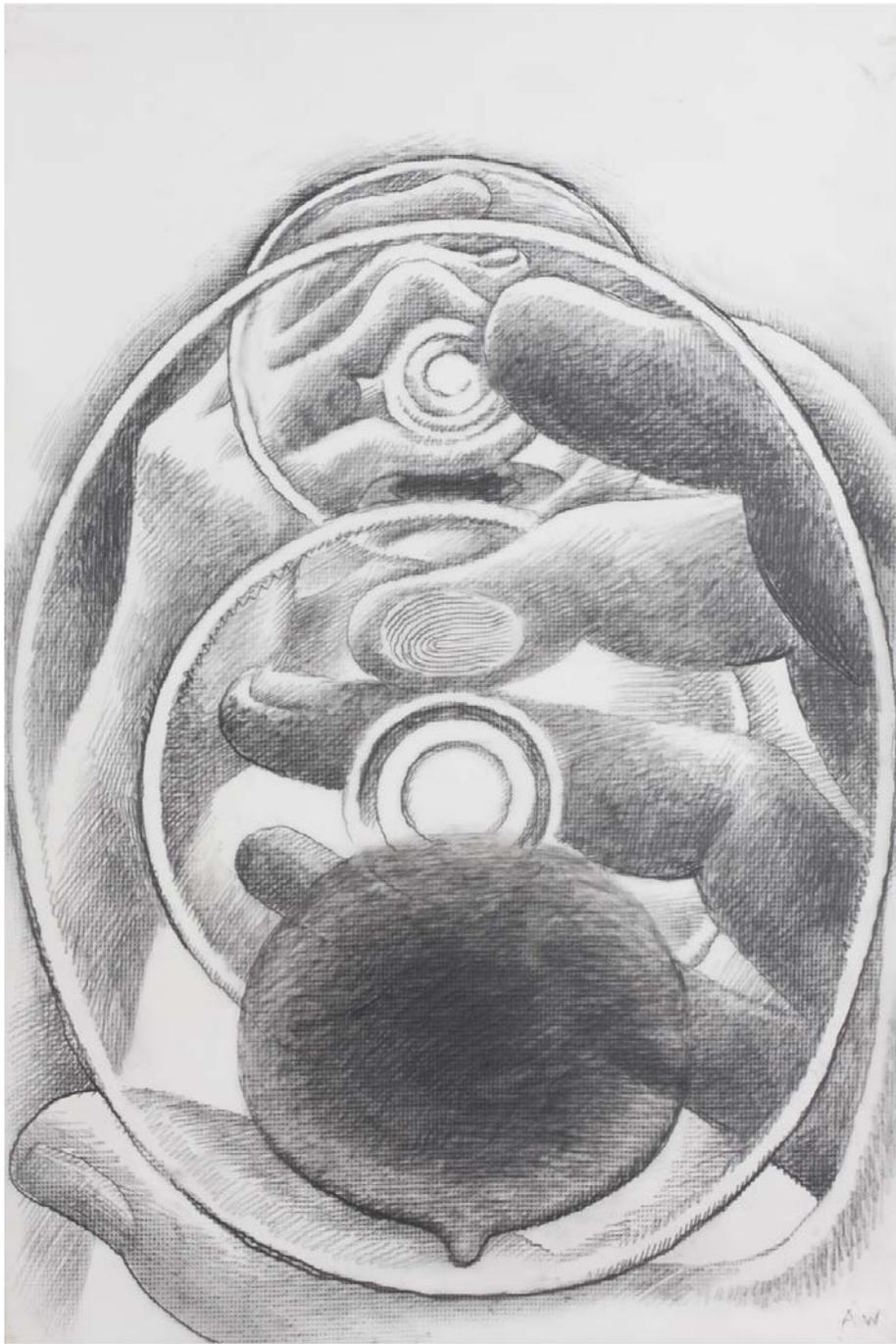




**DOUBLE SIP**  
2010  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
28 X 21 INCHES

**DOUBLE SIP**  
2011  
ACRYLIC ON PANEL  
24 X 18 INCHES





**DOUBLE SIP**

2013

GRAPHITE ON ON MYLAR

18 X 12 INCHES

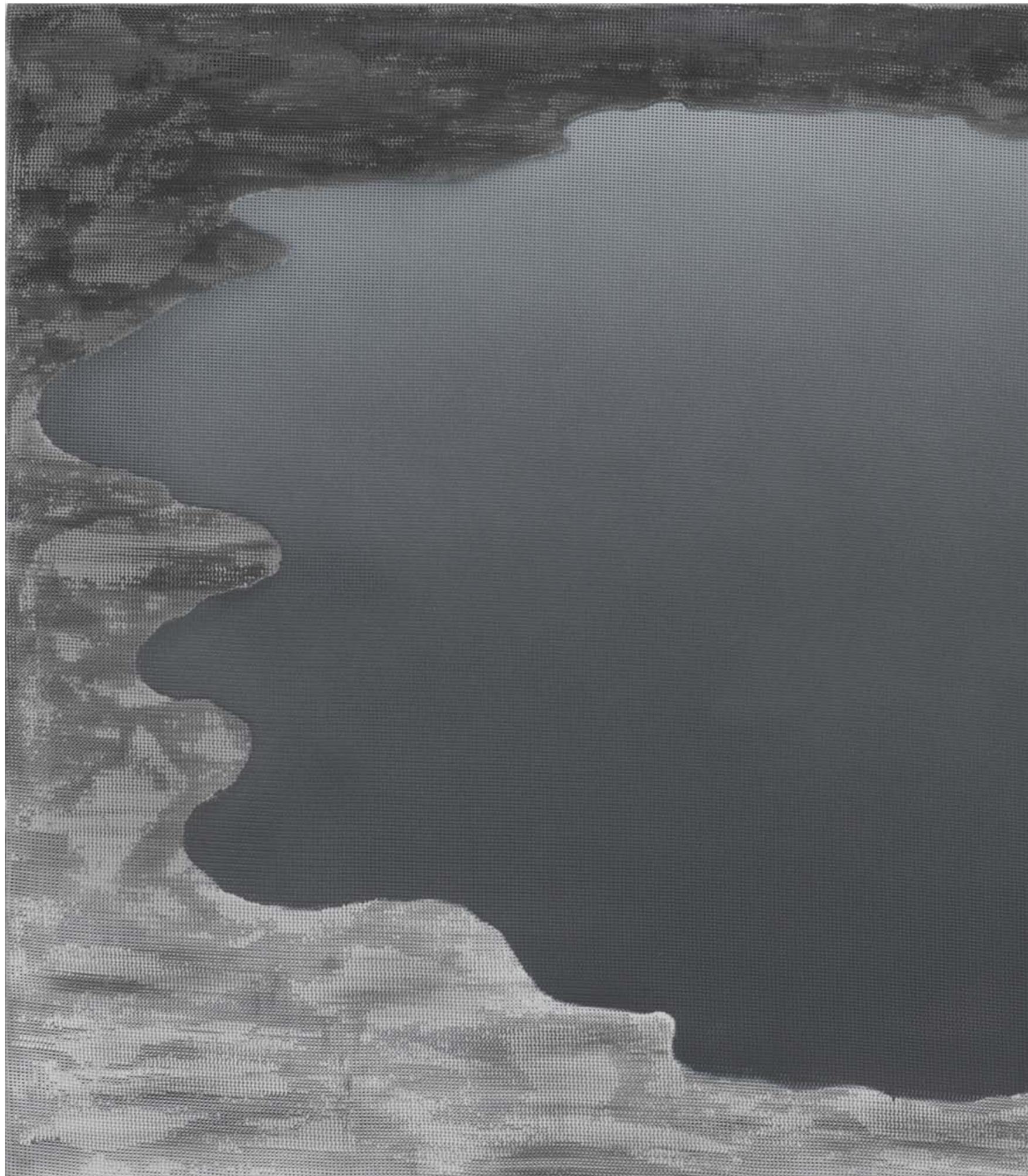
**FINGERPRINT**

2013

ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

64 X 44 INCHES







**WATER STREET**  
2013  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
22 X 30 INCHES

SQUARE I  
2013  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
48 X 64 INCHES









SQUARE II  
2013  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
48 X 68 INCHES

# IS THIS HAND MINE?

## Alexi Worth in Conversation with Alexander Nagel

**THE TEXT THAT FOLLOWS** is drawn from two recorded conversations between Alexi Worth and me, held at his Brooklyn studio in March 2013. We talked surrounded by works of art in various states of completion, by stacks of drawings and tracings, by intricate quilts of stencil shapes, their edges brightened or blackened by use. Some of what we said never got recorded, some was left untranscribed or edited out. The discarded themes are like fragments of ideas, left on the studio floor and walls. I feel tempted to offer a partial list of them, as if in a studio snapshot: the value of “dumbness” in art; Elizabeth Murray’s generosity; immigration politics and the Garden of Eden; what it means to work in the space between comics and photography; “Chateau Mangold” and narrativized Minimalism; the way Venetian limbs move and don’t move; puddles; the etymology of the word “complicated.” Because Worth’s work has changed in substantial ways over the last four years, we focused on essentials of subject and technique, and the process of change itself. I hope what follows will help to elucidate these playful, somber, and perplexing images.

### CRUMPLED DRAWING

2011

ACRYLIC ON PAPER

22¼ X 24 INCHES

**ALEXANDER NAGEL:** Usually when we crumple a piece of paper it’s a moment of frustration and disgust, not a moment of making something visible. You want the piece of paper to disappear; you want to forget all about it. But in your new paintings, this piece of paper is being held up, like a placard—except that it’s a crumpled placard.

**ALEXI WORTH:** I don’t think of them as placards, exactly. But I like that blunt, centered quality, as if to say, “Here, look at *this*.” When MoMA had a big still life show, back in the 90s, I was very struck by the difference between the European still lifes, which were like little cities, and the American ones, which were mostly “one big thing” paintings. I keep coming back to that format. My “lenscap” images, the wine glasses, the reaching Eves: they are all built around hands holding single objects. But you’re right that the crumpling gesture feels a little different. Svetlana Alpers calls these “fist” pictures.

**NAGEL:** The fist of protest and the placard are there to make a public statement about large issues. And here we have a moment of private frustration being treated in that way.

**WORTH:** It’s an affirmation of that private frustration. Or at least, that’s how these paintings began. Three years ago, rethinking the way I paint, I was feeling pretty anxious. I needed to remind myself that frustration wasn’t necessarily permanent.





DESKTOP  
2011  
ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH  
27 X 36 INCHES

**NAGEL:** We're not actually to think that in crumpling a piece of paper you arrived at this motif?

**WORTH:** No, but I was sitting in a room full of crumpled paper. I always do a lot of revising and redrawing, but during that period I edited many paintings down to zero. The trash was full but the walls were empty. I felt like I was becoming a painter's version of Jack Nicholson's typing scene in *The Shining*.

**NAGEL:** Speaking of typing, I'm curious about the text that appears in these newest crumpling paintings, like *Comma*. It's pretty jumbled, not exactly easy reading, but quite a bit of it is legible. Where do those texts come from?

**WORTH:** I'd rather not spell it out. I began by choosing writing that made me a little crazy, that I could quarrel with. More important, I wanted texts that viewers wouldn't identify. I know: any phrase can be Googled. But I preferred that viewers parse the phrases for themselves, without a lot of prior associations.

**NAGEL:** But you do want the phrases to resonate. You *are* doing a kind of concrete poetry.

**WORTH:** I didn't want to be writing a poem; I wanted to avoid narrowing the painting. I tried an Updike text, but right away you could tell it was Updike. I wanted the words to feel like intersecting thoughts in your mind. Not just "stream of consciousness" which always sounds so placid.

**NAGEL:** The text is legible in another sense: even if we don't see that final "s" of the word "blackness," we still know what that contour is. The deformations of the letters become a kind of spatial drawing. But this depends on the way you are using stencils, which brings us back to the question of technique. Why did you give up using more traditional materials?

**WORTH:** I didn't set out to change. I began experimenting, dabbling really, with airbrushes and sprayed acrylic. Almost right away, there was a lift—a sense of unclaimed possibilities. I felt like a musician changing instruments. There were things I couldn't do. That was exciting: new challenges, new constraints.

**NAGEL:** What *couldn't* you do?

**WORTH:** With the airbrush, interior modeling felt clumsy. It nudged me in a flatter, more shape-based direction. The other challenge was density, that feeling of optical weight. Until I began painting on nylon mesh, I couldn't see how acrylics could convey that.

**NAGEL:** I would have thought a porous material would be *worse* at conveying solidity. How does that work? And where did the mesh come from anyway?

**WORTH:** It's a pretty standard material, widely used for blinds and displays. And actually I had already used it for a few years. I was coating it with gesso to make a normal sealed surface. Then I had one of those, "Why not?" moments. Why not let the surface remain open—or partly open? Suddenly, instead of one surface, I had something variable. The unsealed areas function like a physical halftone. You see through them, to the shadowed wall behind, and even the stretcher bars. By contrast, the sealed areas feel more solid. And in fact they are; more light is bouncing back at your eyes. So the surface collaborates with the illusionism.

**NAGEL:** Maybe we should back up and just have you explain how you make the paintings—how do you begin?

**WORTH:** Everything begins with drawing. I do cartoonish line drawings, redraw, redraw, and finally cut the drawings into stencils. Then I use an airbrush to spray over the edges of each stencil. The spray shoots forward and disperses, like a flashlight-beam of pigment. Where the stencil shape was, you get a reverse silhouette, a bright, unpainted area outlined by a dark peripheral mist.

**NAGEL:** Like David Smith's spray drawings?

**WORTH:** Exactly. Or like a photogram. At the contours, the spray leaves a crisp edge, a perfect record of the stencil. Moving away from the edge, there's this beautiful soft tonal diminution. Depending on how I spray, it can be a quick fade, like a digital drop shadow, or a slow atmospheric dimming.

**NAGEL:** I imagine Leonardo would have done quite a bit of dabbling in spray paint if he had been able.

**WORTH:** One of the blacks I use is marketed as "Smoke," so it's almost literally "*sfumato*." And of course, this is all a shortcut way of doing what oil paint was invented for—making invisible transitions, mimicking light. Actually working with a kind of mist, you're closer to the phenomenon.

**NAGEL:** Impersonal processes take over some of the work. And that's liberating for you.

**WORTH:** There's less rendering, less of a feeling of laboriousness. I don't have to duplicate things point-by-point. It's a kind of abbreviated naturalism. And at the same time, it has created new options, like misregistrations.

**NAGEL:** You're talking about what happens along the edges in paintings like *Desktop*, that doubling or stuttering effect?

**WORTH:** Yes, it was accidental, initially. It's not always easy to get the stencils to match up. But I realized that a double edge was such a natural way of suggesting a little motion, a little extra depth. It's been around since Cézanne, that tradition of uncertainty—you know, Giacometti is the

**BEAUTIFUL  
UNFINISHABLE MAGAZINE  
2006  
OIL ON CANVAS  
40 X 32 INCHES**



caricature. For a long time I resisted it. I preferred a clear, overemphatic contour. But the truth is, uncertainty is part of the beauty of things. It's more like ordinary vision, which is so much less straightforward than it seems. And you can suggest that just by shifting the stencil over. It's a natural outgrowth of this way of working. Why resist it?

**NAGEL:** When I saw your 2011 show, I remember thinking what you had created was, among other things, a fresh and comic and viable take on Cubism.

**WORTH:** I love Cubism but it's an historical style. What was more helpful to me was thinking about 3-D effects, printing errors, and especially Alva Noë's writing on perception. Together, they helped give me a palette of options to complicate flat images, to give them more perceptual chewiness.

**NAGEL:** Should we mention here that Noë used one of your hand paintings on the cover of his most recent book, *Varieties of Presence*?

**WORTH:** I was delighted about that, of course. Noë writes so vividly about the embodiedness of vision, and about hands in particular. As infants, being able to reach out and hold things is how we learn to "see" them. The hand is part of the eye. Those ideas certainly helped fuel my preoccupation with "grasping" images.

**NAGEL:** Let's get back to technique, and its connotations. Your hand images are not "handmade" in the conventional sense. Not painted with a brush, for the most part. One has the feeling that these images come not only from you, but from elsewhere as well. Authorship has been opened and distributed. There's a feeling of assembly.

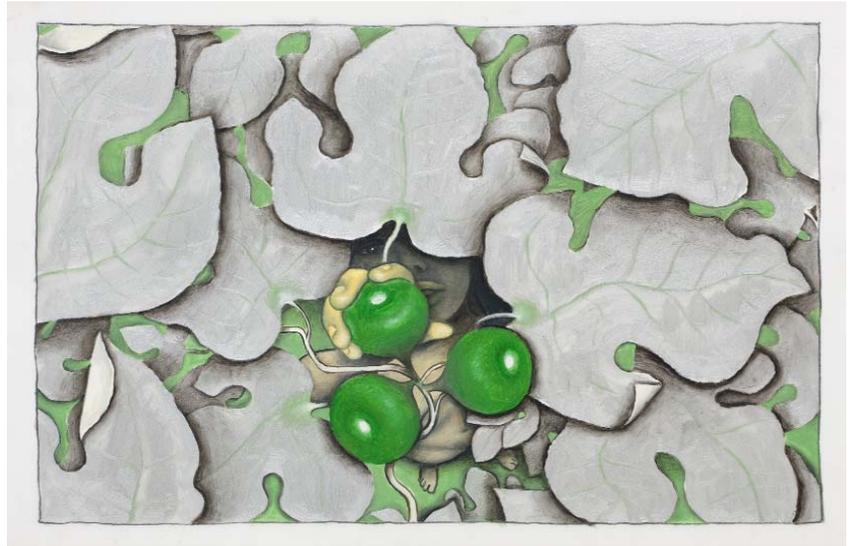
**WORTH:** "Assembly." You can see from the walls in my studio that that's true—they're littered with all these stencil shapes, taped and push-pinned everywhere. But overall the process is simpler. Getting rid of modeling and interior shading allowed me to strip down to essentials. The earlier paintings required more research, more figuring out how things might actually look. Now, I know how they look already: as if a flat, bright light shone hard on them.

**NAGEL:** That kind of flat light goes back to Manet, doesn't it? You've written about just that quality in Manet's lighting—you've been preoccupied with it for a long time.

**WORTH:** Well, as you know, Manet introduced that kind of photographic light into painting. Until Beatrice Farwell, art historians didn't understand—many still don't understand—how particular Manet's lighting is. And how much the lighting angle sharpens the feeling of confrontation and complicity.

**NAGEL:** Just to be clear here, we're talking about paintings like *The Dead Christ* in the Met—where we're standing in front of Christ's body, and the whole image feels as though it is there for us. And *Olympia* too.

CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT  
STUDY FOR ARIZONA, 2  
STUDY FOR ARIZONA, 3  
STUDY FOR ARIZONA, 4  
STUDY FOR ARIZONA, 5  
2010  
OIL ON MYLAR  
14 X 20 INCHES





LEANING WOMAN  
2011  
ACRYLIC ON PANEL  
27 X 36 INCHES

**WORTH:** People talk about the famous directness of Olympia's gaze. But there are a lot of direct stares in earlier painting. What's different is that the light is shining straight at her from where we are standing—from the viewer's position. The light's alignment with your axis of vision: it sounds abstract, but the effect is so visceral. You said it exactly right: she's there *for us*.

**NAGEL:** When did you begin using frontal light yourself?

**WORTH:** Around 2006. When I was still working with models, sometimes I would pose with a halogen aimed right behind my head, so that my cast shadow made my own presence explicit. In paintings like *Beautiful Magazine*, that was a way to tweak the portrait format. My hair actually began to singe, the light was so close to the back of my head.

**NAGEL:** Your shadow is obvious there, and it's present in most of the current paintings. When we walk up close to them, our own shadows appear too. They merge, almost. I can't imagine that wasn't part of the idea.

**WORTH:** Frontal lighting is also gallery lighting. Pictures are lit that way. So what I'm doing is creating a continuity, an optical link, between the real lighting condition and the depicted one. I like to think that has a subliminal effect. When you approach the picture, your own shadow falls forward onto the picture surface—onto a version of itself. Shadow-on-shadow. In reproduction, that is lost, along with the lighting continuity as a whole. But in person, it has an odd resonance. You are present, or invited to be.

**NAGEL:** So many of your paintings are close-ups, situations where we are very near. The two "square" paintings are a different kind of situation. I know that on your daily walk to the studio, you go through Cadman Plaza Park, which is a launching ground for protesters on their way across the Brooklyn Bridge. Does that have something to do with the genesis of these new images?

**WORTH:** It always feels odd to walk through those keyed-up, placard-carrying crowds—as if I were joining up, and then defecting. It makes the solitude of the studio feel more extreme. But these pictures really grew from thinking about protesters further away, in Tahrir Square in Cairo. When Mubarak's goons showed up, the protesters protected themselves with shields made of plywood and furniture. They were strange, beaten-up shapes, with gerrymandered contours: a Kentucky-shaped shield, an Oklahoma-shaped shield. Seeing those shapes got me started.

**NAGEL:** In your paintings, the shields are like screens, bearing projections—that's where we see the spectators' shadows most clearly. When you and I were standing next to the first of these "square" paintings just now, I was gauging the size of our actual shadows in relation

to the ones you painted; it was really quite close. Do you really do that? Do you pull people into the studio and trace their shadows?

**WORTH:** Yes. I wanted that sense of literal scale. And I like the idea that fictional scenes can have empirical elements. In the painting called *Arizona*, I used a few actual fig leaves as stencils. If you look carefully you can find them. Likewise, in the *Squares*, the women in the foreground are real studio visitors.

**NAGEL:** I see the *Squares* as related to the *Crumplings* in that a moment of urgency—in one case a very private moment, in another a very public moment—gets processed and complicated. Both are “fist” paintings, reflective images about anger and impatience.

**WORTH:** That impatience, that hunger to tear down a glaring injustice: I wanted to make a painting about that. But how to do it? Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* seems in the end just a stirring poster saying, “Go for it!” The threads that connect me to Tahrir seem more complicated. In this POV world, we feel present, right there with the protesters. In the end I tried to make a painting of my simultaneous nearness and distance.

**NAGEL:** Why not just *one* spectator, *one* head casting a shadow—why the confrontation between group and group?

**WORTH:** Imagine you are watching a video in a dark gallery. You walk in, and after a few minutes, maybe when the screen goes blank for a moment, suddenly you notice your own silhouette. Then your neighbor’s. Then another neighbor. There’s this belated awareness: “Oh, we’re here together.” That idea of an unexpected community was in my mind for a long time. And really the subject of these “square” paintings is not the shield-bearers but the evaluators, the gallery goers. I wanted to do a painting where we would belatedly recognize ourselves.

**NAGEL:** It seems like a very big leap from these paintings to the wine glass paintings, but they are right beside each other here in your studio. And they share the somber, black-dominated palette of much of your new work.

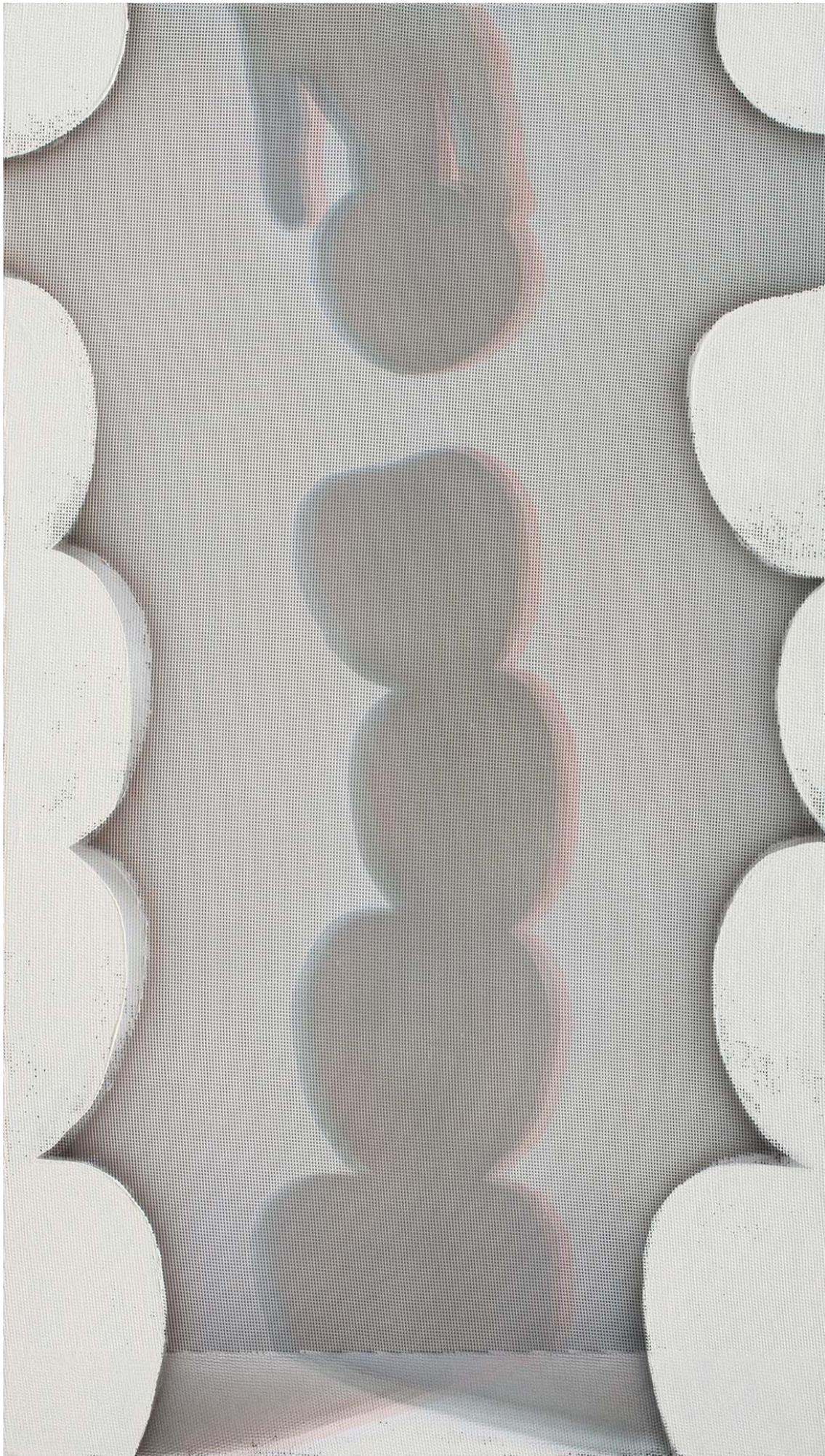
**WORTH:** The earlier wine glass paintings were images of reciprocity. You’re drinking, she’s drinking. Through the glass, male and female hands almost touch. The idea is that pictures are courtship. If the painting is good enough, we are drinking the same Kool-Aid, so to speak. The new solitary drinker is a less rational, less explicable image. There’s something about pouring this dark, nearly black liquid into ourselves that fascinates me. As a painting, it seems much cruder and flatter than the earlier ones, but the presence of the wine, the way it is tipping forward, is stronger than ever before. Of course as we’re talking, I’m recognizing that it’s another “one big shape” painting.

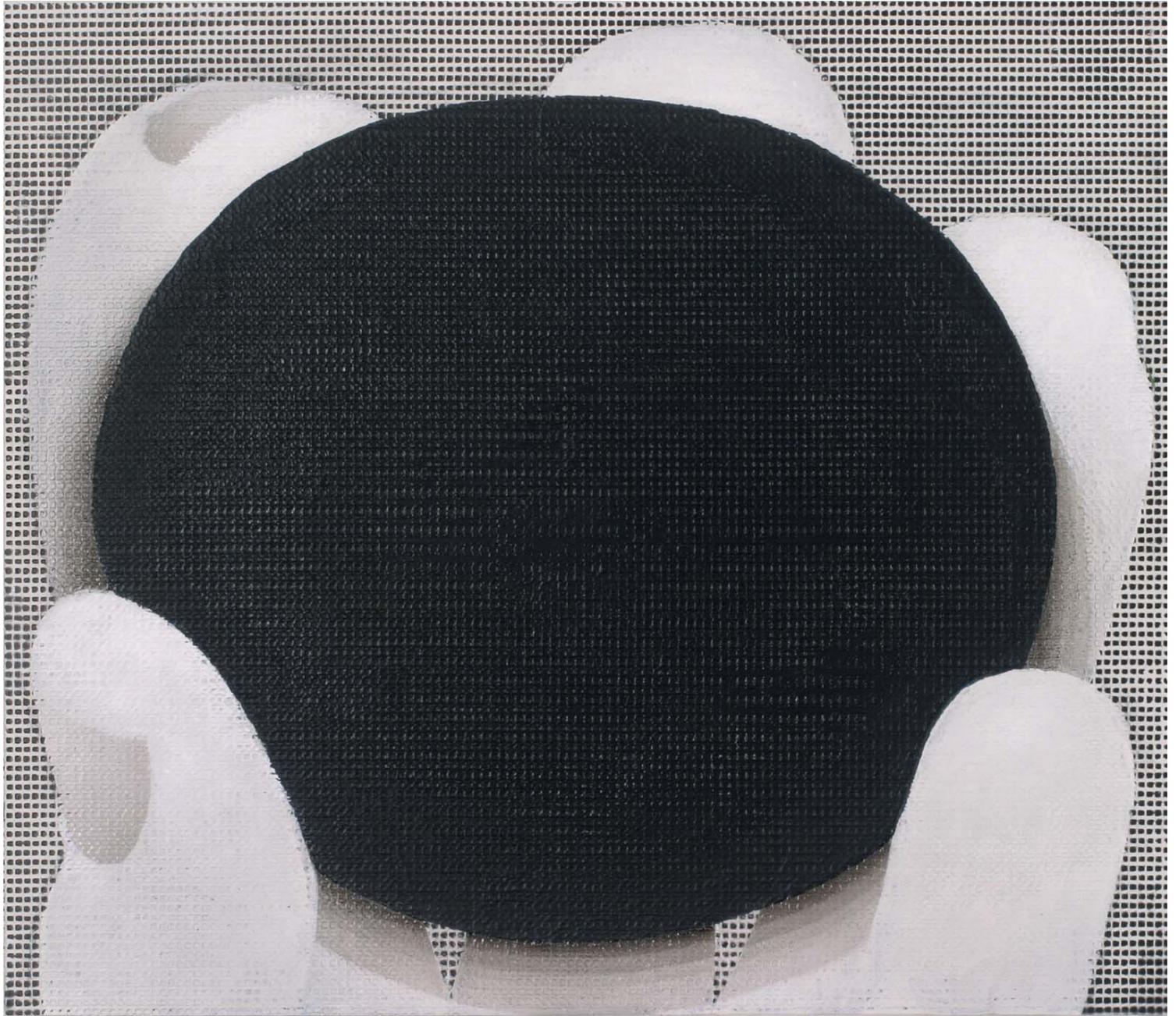
#### ADDITION

2011

ACRYLIC ON NYLON MESH

32 X 18 INCHES





LENSCAP  
2011  
ACRYLIC ON PANEL  
13 X 15 INCHES

**NAGEL:** So is the new *Smoker and Mirror*. The whole center is a big blank rectangle. It seems at first glance like a picture of nothing.

**WORTH:** That painting began as a tribute to Richard Artschwager. He did these beautiful paintings of monochromatic mirrors. He got the pale green just right, so that when you first see one, there's a moment of mistaking it for an actual mirror. They are the most economical trompe l'oeil paintings ever made. I'm fond of that kind of semi-literalism. In my own mind, all the smoker paintings are portraits of Artschwager. But was he really a smoker? I have no idea.

**NAGEL:** As I look at this newest smoker painting with you, my eye wanders to the various formal subtleties, the way the light is reflected on the floor, the way the edges of the mirror meet the outside corners, almost as if it's a painting on a hinge. But also continually on my mind is the social dimension. The question becomes, "Is this one of those parties where I'm happily talking to someone in the corner, or am I looking down that hallway wondering when I can get out of there?" An English exit is feeling almost inevitable here.

**WORTH:** I was thinking more about the existential English exit. To me, it's always been a solitary painting.

**NAGEL:** Oh. Is this hand mine?

**WORTH:** It could be. The hand is life size. If you were to grasp the painting, your own right thumb would fit into that thumb shape on the right edge. I like to think of it as an invitation to step into a place where you would see yourself: a potential portrait.

**NAGEL:** In fact though, the mirror is blank, the corridor is black. There is something a little macabre going on.

**WORTH:** In the back of my mind, many of these paintings are *memento mori*. The cigarettes are a sidelong way to touch that theme, to give it a little tap.

**NAGEL:** Yes, the cigarette is like a piece of drawing charcoal, pointing toward the darkness. I love the way this painting refuses and gamely invites allegory. It does both, so simply.

**WORTH:** I hope that's true. That double quality is a tricky thing. You want that feeling of intuitions just past your fingertips. You want something definite in your hands, and at the same time, out of reach.

**ALEXANDER NAGEL** is the author of *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (2000), *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (2011), and most recently, *Medieval Modern* (2012). He is a professor at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts.

# DC MOORE GALLERY

535 West 22nd Street New York New York 10011  
212.247.2111 www.dcmooregallery.com

This catalogue was published  
on the occasion of the exhibition

## ALEXI WORTH

STATES

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May 2 – June 15, 2013

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IS THIS HAND MINE?

Interview Copyright © Alexander Nagel, 2013

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pages 2–3: Artist in studio with study for  
*Transparent Flame-Colored Information*

opposite: Artist's studio wall

back cover: *Smoker and Mirror*, 2011 (detail).

Oil and acrylic on nylon mesh, 21 x 28 inches



center

#3  
left  
side

left



