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alex ebstein

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In Conversation with Alex Ebstein

SOPHIAJACOB: An obvious starting point would be a discussion about materials, be they domestic or industrial, and their perceived gender specificity.

ALEX EBSTEIN: I use a lot of yarn and twine in my works, as a line weight and mark-making medium. It's a comment or reaction to an initial fascination I had with (and eventual repulsion to) tube-paint. That technique has this sort of aggressive, masculine, wasteful feel that can look great, but can also be a one-trick pony in painting... I like that yarn, a more gentle material, can have a similar aggression, but retains this inevitable craft and "low" art context for people. I have started to experiment with extruding paint at thinner, more manipulated widths and I want to experiment with combining these materials and blending these ideas in one piece. I love painting, but in some ways, I felt the medium wasn't really mine... I had to come at it from another angle and move toward a braver painting practice.

SJ: How does personal history recontextualize the materials?

AE: In undergrad I started as a photographer and I had a very hands-off approach to the materials. I was looking at lots of painting at my job in the school library and began to itch for other mediums and a less predictable process. I had a sudden break with photography in my junior year, and suddenly, there was no limit to the material used in my practice. Over time, erratic experimentation took a direction. I am using craft materials from childhood to create artwork. Examining modernism through media that I'm

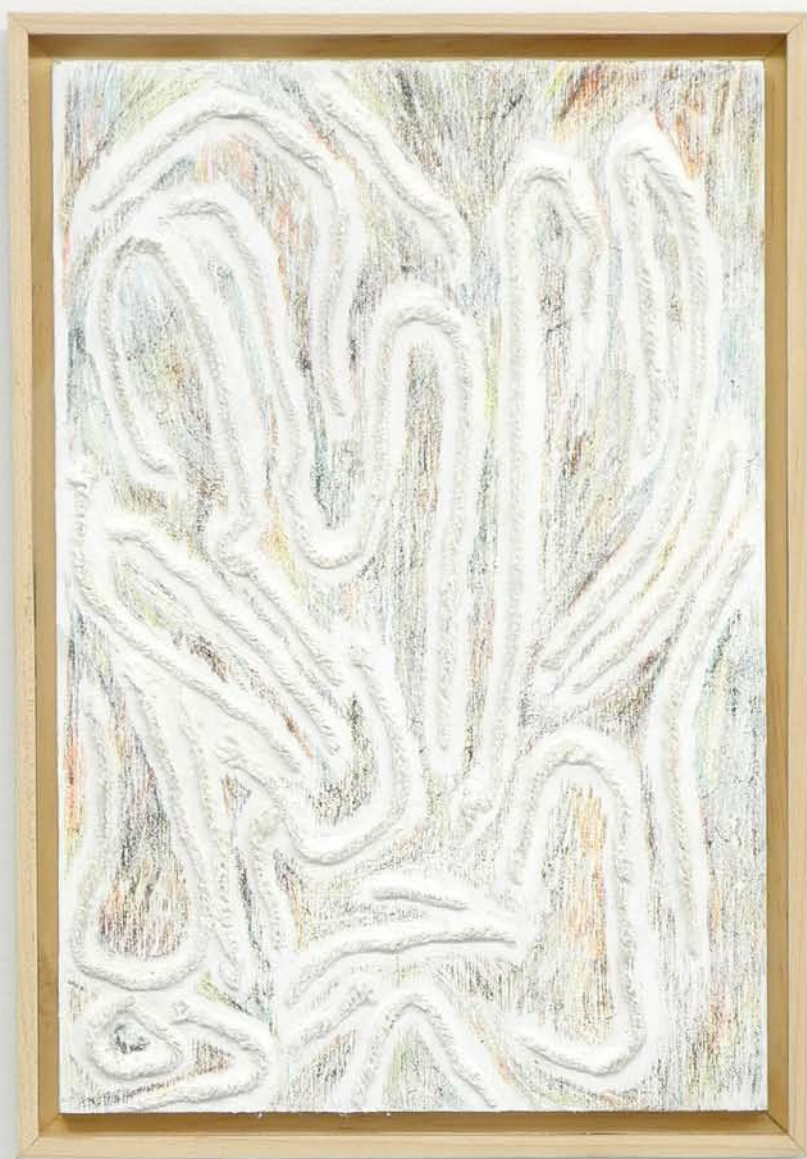
comfortable with is definitely something that I think about all the time; yarn is fun. Craft activities and materials can allow for a disconnect from the scary objective of creating art.

SJ: You've talked about the planning that goes into each piece and how there is an idea about what it's going to look like. How do you know when something is done? Are there unexpected decisions being made along the way?

AE: I tend to have ballpoint pen sketches, but those always change and evolve based on how the material is responding. Lately, especially in the past eight months or so when I start a piece that I've sketched ahead of time, I also start a work that is unplanned, and I've almost had more success that way. Working with both methods at the same time encourages me to be freer with the works I haven't planned. Some of the new works are side notes to larger works, which were themselves based on thumbnail sketches. To make a line drawing into something with dimension changes it. *Tasthaare* came from a drawing I changed after realizing the limitations of the materials; such as how the faux leather was going to adhere to the burlap and the way the burlap was going to wrap around the panel. Everything is a few degrees shift...

SJ: You were talking about the yarn's line weight and how it is something you really can't change. What about the shift in scale of your work?

AE: A lot of my work has remained small, 18 x 24 or smaller. All of the work has a similar line weight and though I may be comfortable with that, it also encouraged me to keep collecting different materials. I've gone more in the direction



of industrial-type materials since there are limitations with craft materials. For instance, acrylic kids yarn from the 90's has its limitations; it dries out or gets ratty or the cat finds it. I can keep industrial materials more orderly because they are made as tools. Twine comes on a really nice spool as opposed to a ball of yarn, that's part of it. Yarn sits in a bag on the floor and the spools sit on a shelf. Studio time is so precious that I don't want to think about having to get organized before starting.

SJ: What about the tension between 2-d and 3-d and your process? I see the pieces as sculpture that hangs on the wall. I'm sure there are some interesting things on the back.

AE: There's some problem solving back there, but I like the idea of that space being unknown.

SJ: There's something withheld there...

AE: It isn't the same treatment that I give to the materials on the front of the panel. In some ways I'm getting a little messier with stuff on the front. Feeling a little floppy-footed on the back definitely made me feel more comfortable making decisions on the front.

SJ: Your previous work, the eye charts or vision tests, all utilized text until now. You were dealing with glaucoma or pre-glaucoma?

AE: It was glaucoma, but now it's controlled, stabilized glaucoma. The first time I realized I had something wrong with my eyes was fifth grade.

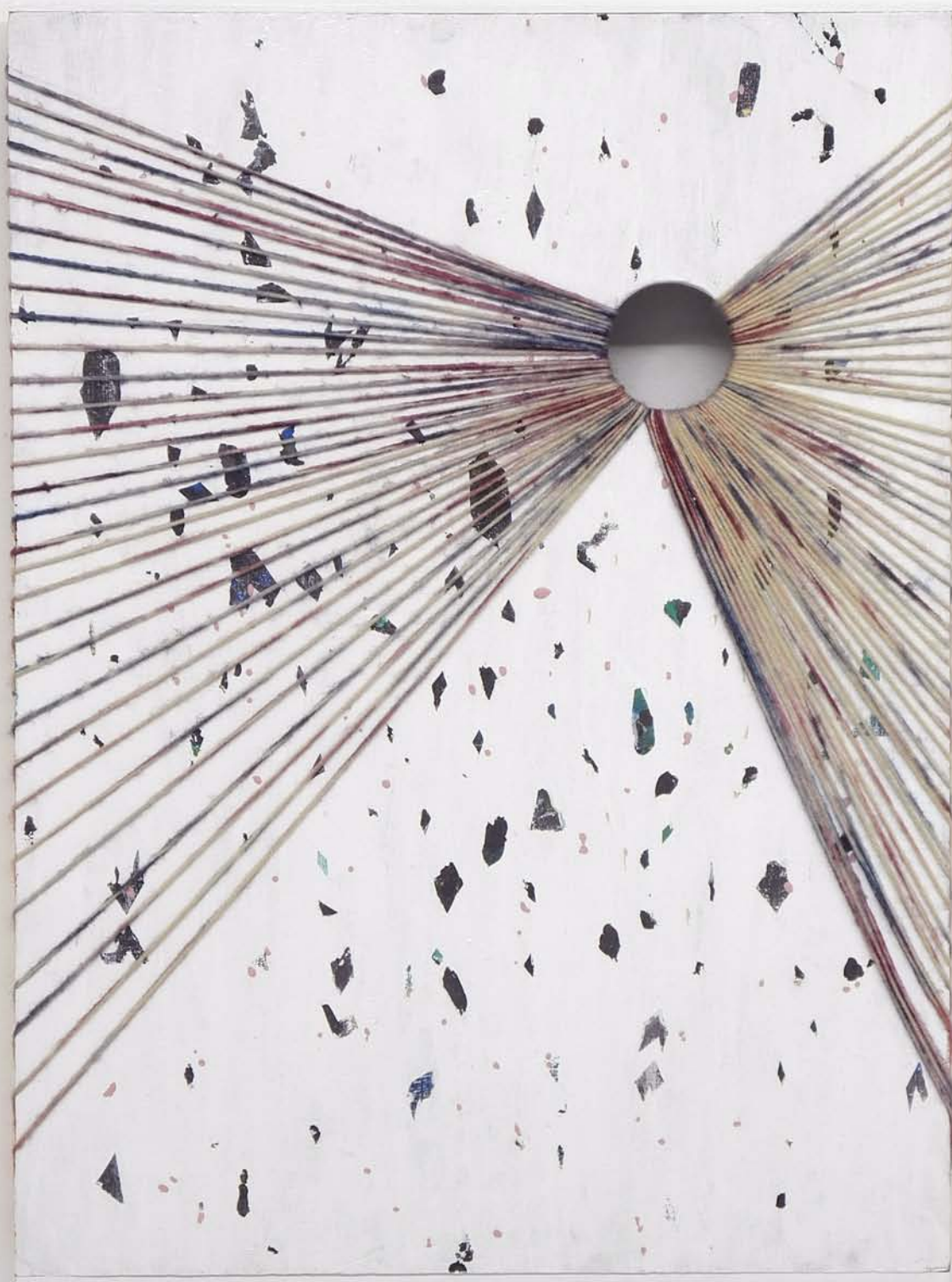
SJ: Fifteen years ago?

AE: Yes. It built slowly, but eventually I was getting really stressed out when I was driving in unpredictable lighting situations, like the rain. I didn't have enough contrast in my sight and that was really scary. When I was younger, especially in high school and college, stress would cause a flare-up no matter what I did or how much medicine I took. I couldn't control the milky vision from returning; it was automatic. I had no control over it. I was stressed that I would get stressed and not be able to see. I thought that I would go blind and wouldn't be able to read.

SJ: Yet you were making work about it.

AE: Definitely, all those eye charts were about a buildup of anxiety. I had four surgeries in three years. They removed my cataracts and lenses and replaced them with artificial lenses. I knew what I was going to experience over the next couple of years and I was thinking about it all the time. The eye charts were just a way to move through it or think about it nicely for myself. I drew letters and symmetrical structures with letters; I was looking at them all the time in medical eye charts, and having to consider their shape without any other language context. They were symbols that stood for some measure of my deterioration. I was really nearsighted before my surgery, now my vision range is about 18 inches to 20 feet, which is great because I can walk around the world very comfortably. In the studio, I set my work at arms length whereas before the surgery I would work much closer. Driving at night I still get a little nervous, but I have glasses for that, and the same goes for movies and dark situations.

SJ: Do vision problems affect other aspects of the work, like color?



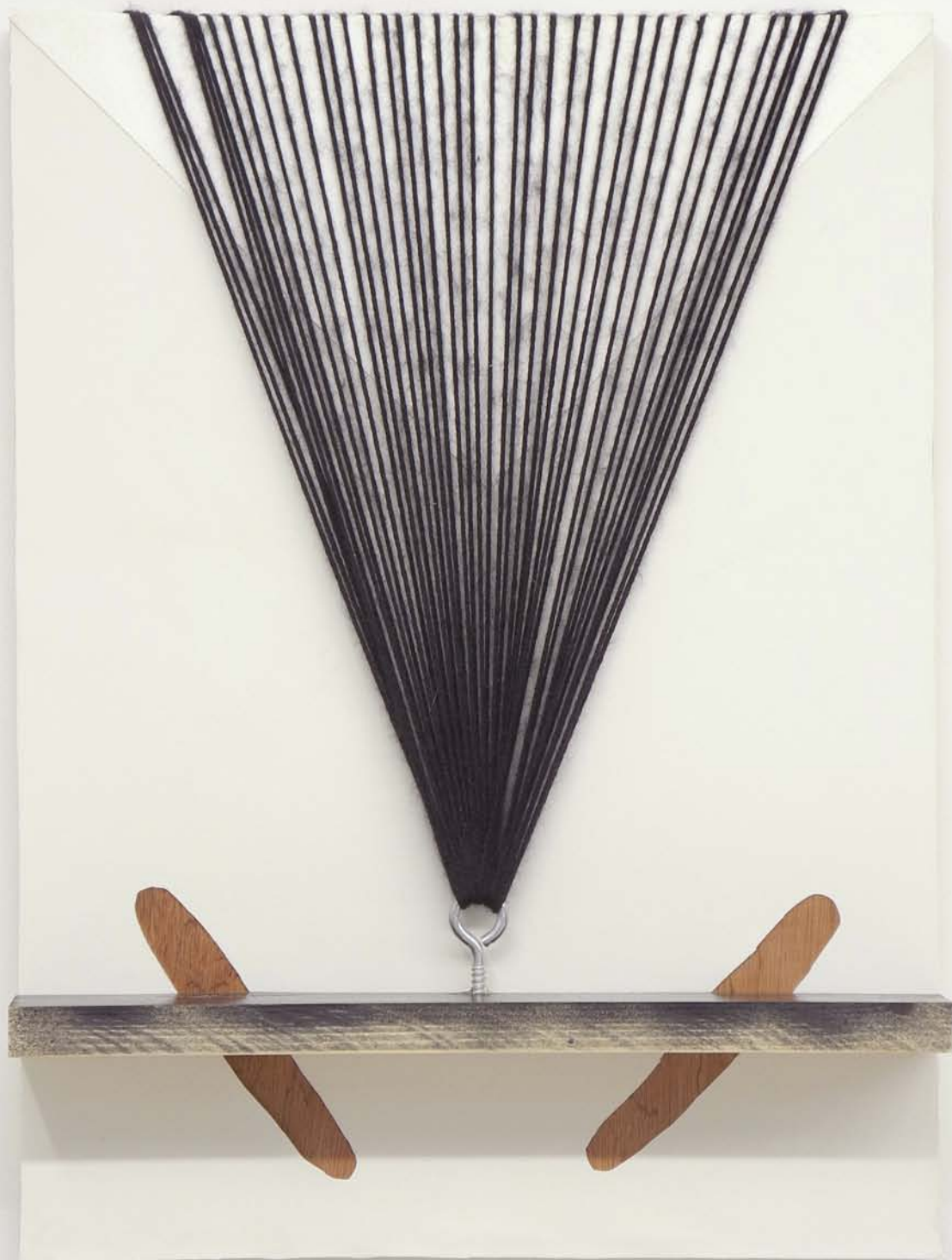
AE: I was not always sure how the colors looked in my own work. I was keeping the work small and I was using neon washes or really quiet washes. I was comfortable for a while, though I was unsure of the contrast level. Now everything is really clear and bright all the time. I have a greater appreciation for the colors of the paper, cotton, and raw material that appeared so similar in color before the surgeries.

SJ: So even though the vision problems have stabilized, your experience with anxiety and uncertainty continues to be influential?

AE: I would say so. I still use letters to construct my compositions, instead of drawing lots of small letters, I look at individual structures of these de-contextualized symbols to break-up space. I still think about vision, and the slight differences in the symmetry in my own vision a lot, but without the same worries. Making art is definitely a freer process.

September, 2012

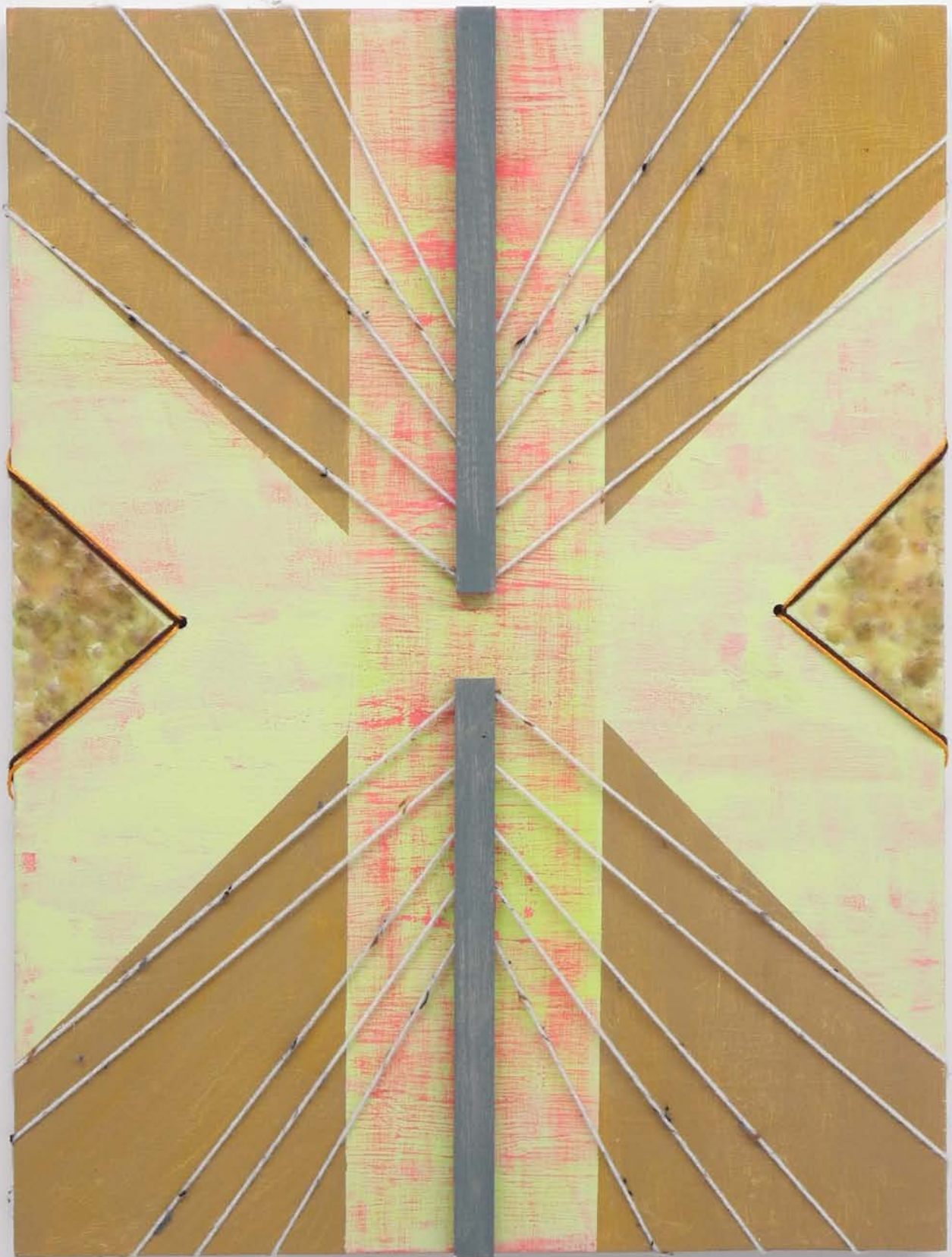












Index of Works

5.

White Lines

Yarn, Acrylic, Colored Pencil on Wood Panel

12" x 8"

2011

7.

Yarn Rays

Yarn, Acrylic, Enamel, Wax, Gouache

24" x 18"

2011

9.

Untitled

Yarn, Acrylic, Enamel on Panel

20" x 16"

2012

11.

Untitled (Fancy)

Faux Leather, Yarn, Wood, Enamel Hardware

18" x 14"

2011

13.

Cosmic Tumblr

Twine, Acrylic, and Enamel on Panel

11" x 10"

2012

15.

Wax Stone

Wood, Pillowcase, Acrylic, Yarn, Wax

14" x 11"

2011

17.

Untitled (Tasthaare)

Burlap, Faux Leather, Twine, Cotton and Acrylic on Panel

40" x 30"

2012

19.

Untitled (Webelo)

Acrylic, Yarn, String, Wood and Wax on Panel

24" x 18"

2012

