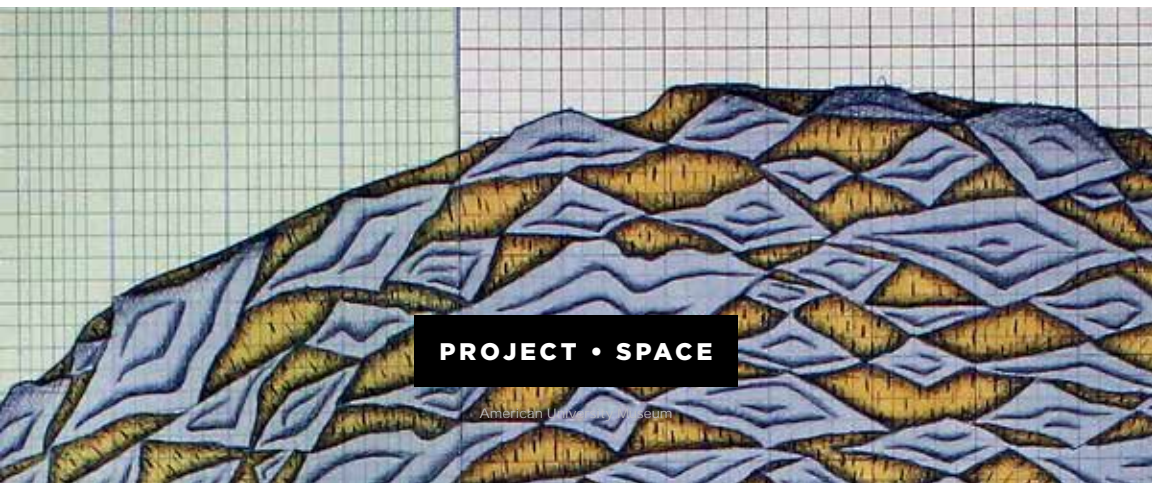




# TOPOGRAPHIES OF LIFE



PAM ROGERS, LYNN SURES, MEL WATKIN



PROJECT • SPACE

American University Museum



# Topographies of Life

Pam Rogers, Lynn Sures, Mel Watkin

Jennifer Riddell, Curator

September 3 – December 15, 2019

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE

*For each artist, the practice of drawing provides one means of forming a deep engagement with the natural world. Extended looking and examination, paired with the often time-consuming and laborious process of making, are the foundations of works that reflect upon the state in which we find and experience the natural world today.*

# Table of Contents

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Essay, Jennifer Riddell, Curator	3
Artist Statements	28
Curator Biography	34



2



Pamela Rogers, *Loose Buttons from a Hail Storm*, 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, wine pigment. 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

# Topographies of Life

PAM ROGERS, LYNN SURES, MEL WATKIN

By Jennifer Riddell, Curator

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Using the medium of drawing, Pam Rogers, Lynn Sures, and Mel Watkin trace human connections to the natural world—across time and varied landscapes. The three artists work from a consciousness of drawing's ties to illustration and evidence; and, the medium's unique ability to transmit the artist's "hand" and personal response to their subject. From the deserts of Kenya, forests of the Midwest, to the Potomac watershed, these artists are deeply attuned to the mutually affecting relationship between the anthropological and natural worlds.

The word illustration is rooted in "illumination," and takes us back to medieval times when images were introduced into spiritual books and codices to "light up" their meanings and lessons for those who saw them, many of whom were not literate. This explaining function eventually extended from narration into capturing, categorizing, and cataloguing *things*—to literally objectify. Over time, illustration's aesthetic became one of near-perfect and seamless illusion in which every leaf, stem, flower, pod, etc. of the *flora* would be rendered with the same exactitude. This progression was aided by the interest of greater naturalism in representation that developed during the Renaissance; and, by the rationalizing of nature exemplified by the taxonomies of species developed by Carl Linnaeus and other Enlightenment scientists, and scholars fascinated by the variety and diversity of species taken during colonial expeditions. Illustrations were important sources of visual evidence as records of species and the natural world (especially prior to the advent of photography in the early nineteenth century) for study and for their utility in, for example, medicine and food.



William Home Lizars (engraver), (Scottish, 1788 – 1859) after John James Audubon, (American, 1785 – 1851), *Yellow-billed Cuckoo*, 1827. Hand-colored etching on Whatman paper, *Birds of America*, no. 2. Gift of Mrs. Walter B. James, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1945.8.2.

4

Illustrations tend to subsume stylistic variety or innovation to the purpose of informing, and have sometimes been considered subsidiary to art driven by aesthetic or conceptual imperatives. Yet, the will to illustrate has produced works that are unmistakably recognized as works of art. Consider John James Audubon's (1785–1851) birds, Pierre-Joseph Redouté's (1759–1840) flowers, and Maria Sibylla Merian's (1647–1717) insect studies, all of which blend art and science to wondrous effect. In addition to the information they convey, the drawings focus the viewer's attention and provide a means of looking at specimens in a way that is unavailable in nature; for the bird flies away, the flower wilts, the insect scuttles down a hole, time passes. Specialized scientific illustrations of anthropological and cultural artifacts may be less familiar, but detailed renderings made the study of remote or singular objects available to many. They offered a tantalizing record of the *phenomena* of nature, mingled with those intangible and fleeting qualities that are evoked by its very experience or representation: beauty, pleasure, curiosity, amazement.



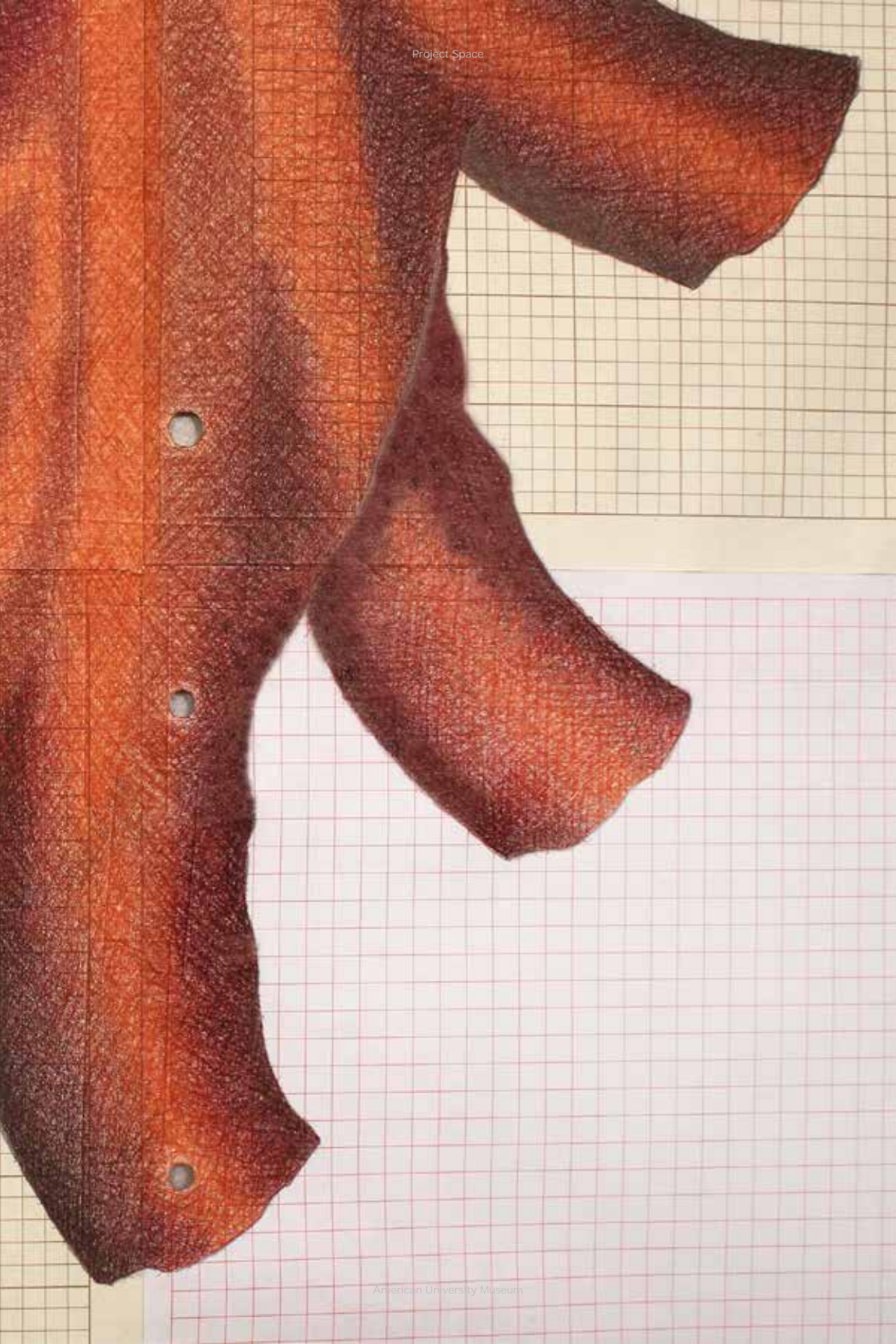


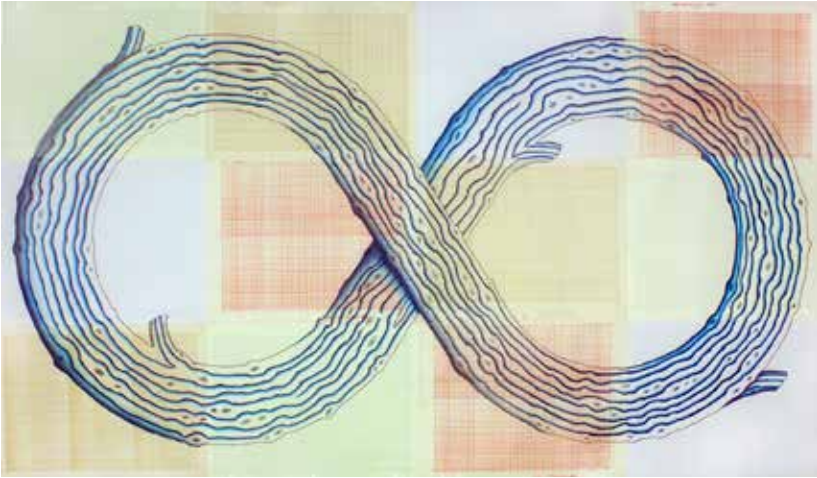
Pierre Joseph Redouté (French, 1759-1840), *A Bouquet of Flowers with Insects*, n.d. Watercolor with gold on vellum, laid down sheet: 9 15/16 x 6 3/4 in. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1988.12.1.



Thomas Martyn, *The Universal Conchologist: exhibiting the figure of every known shell, accurately drawn and painted after nature... collected in the different voyages to the South Sea since the year 1764*. (London: Thomas Martyn, 1789). Shell collecting became popular in England during the eighteenth century as a result of specimens collected during the colonial voyages of exploration by James Cook. Martyn purchased many shells from Cook's South Seas voyage. Smithsonian Libraries.

The works in this exhibition by Rogers, Sures, and Watkin make direct reference to illustration and its characteristic meticulous detail. For each artist, the practice provides one means of forming a deep engagement with the natural world. Extended looking and examination, paired with the often time-consuming and laborious process of making, are the foundations of works that reflect upon the state in which we find and experience the natural world today. The images created are not seamless or bodiless illusions; the artist's hand and human presence in the art, and by implication, within an ecosystem, is apparent. In the ecosystem, nature is not only a source or resource, but an active and adaptive entity indivisibly woven into our lives. For the artists, the relationship with nature is wholly subjective and dynamic. Implicated in their art also is the inescapable fact of our cumulative knowledge and scientific understanding about climate change, species extinction, and sustainability as well as our compulsion to continue to seek mental, physical, and spiritual sustenance and connection in the world around us.





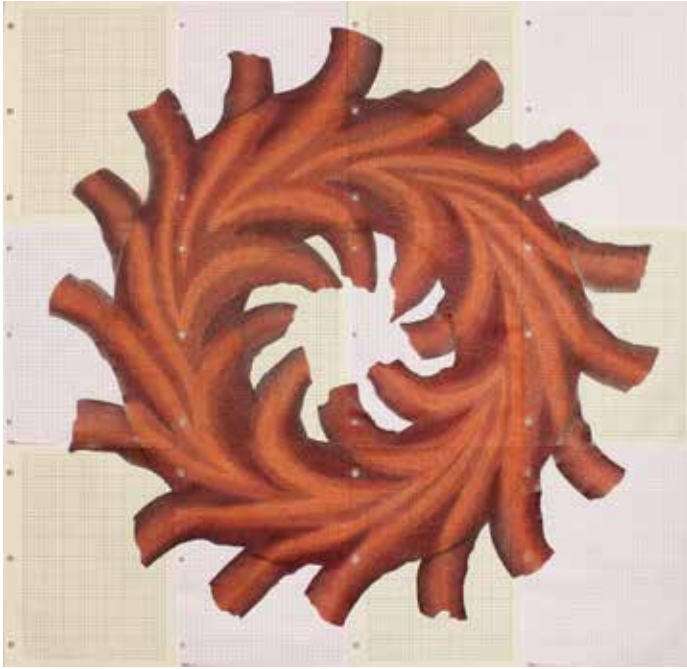
Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Fig. 8*, 2018. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 25 1/2 x 44 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Armed* (detail), 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.

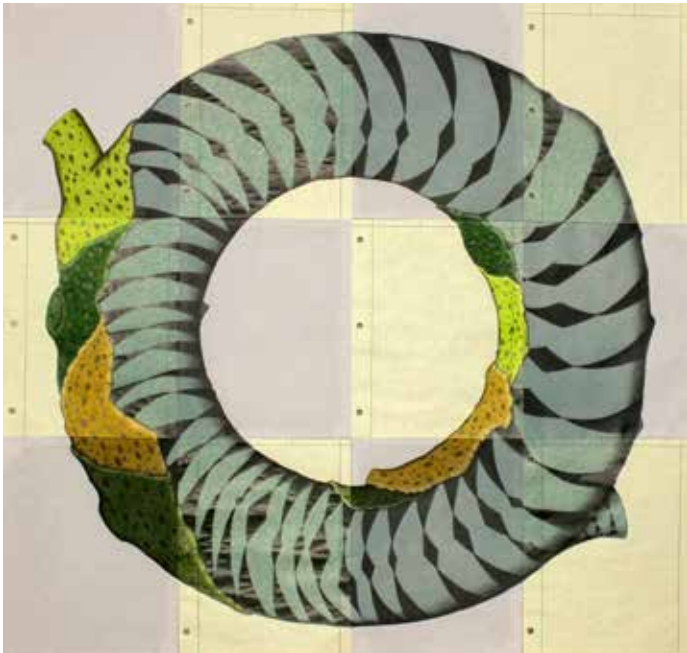
At first glance, **Mel Watkin's** drawings may look like purely abstract geometric forms. Closer looking reveals the small, almost compulsive marks of the pencil that create a convincing realism that seems familiar, yet is just out of reach. The source for the drawings turns out to be trees—specifically species local to her rural Illinois home—Hophornbeam, Black Cherry, Sycamore. The artist became better acquainted with them following a derecho, or intense wind-driven storm, that tore across the Midwest and downed many thousands of trees in its path. Watkin approached and began studying the felled ones—considering their new state and in what ways they might be incorporated into the cycle of life, whether spawning other growth, or returning to the earth. The artist noticed the particular patterns, colors, and forms of the trees' bark, which are detailed in her drawings, and also discovered anecdotal information such as that Sycamores are sometimes called “ghost trees” for their striking white bark, which can stand out starkly against the sky or during the winter when leaves are dropped.

The circular samples of various tree types are entitled *Cross-Section*, connoting the presentation a deconstructed object—a specimen—taken for study, or to diagnose a condition. They do not resemble what might be a

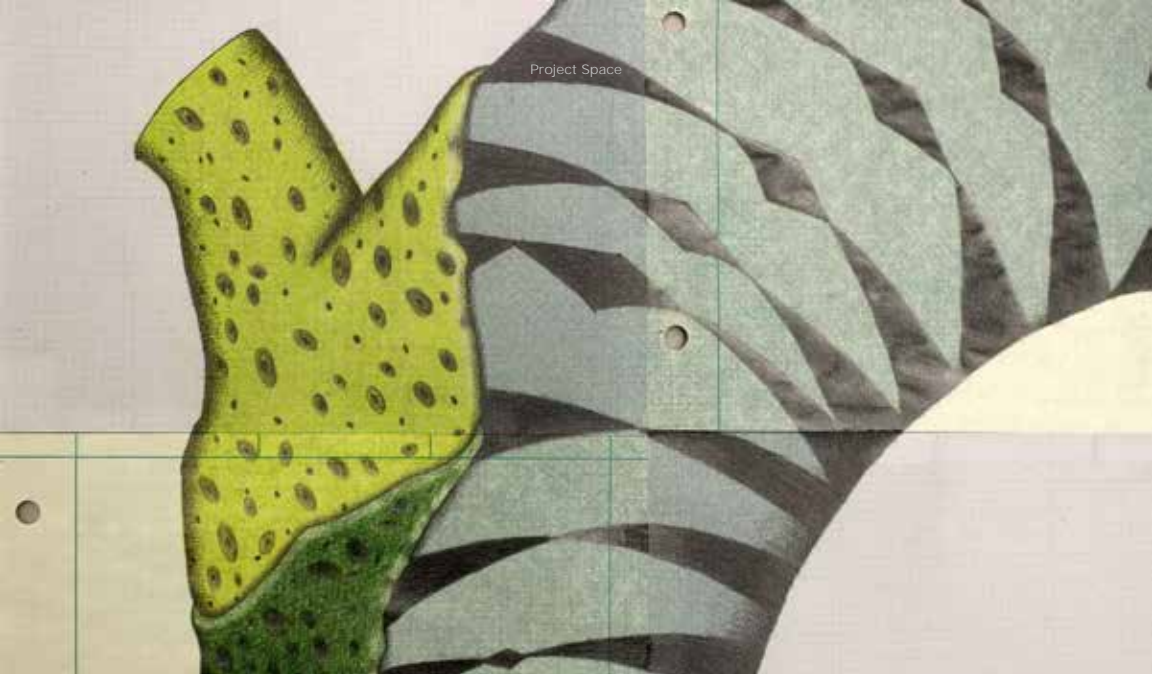




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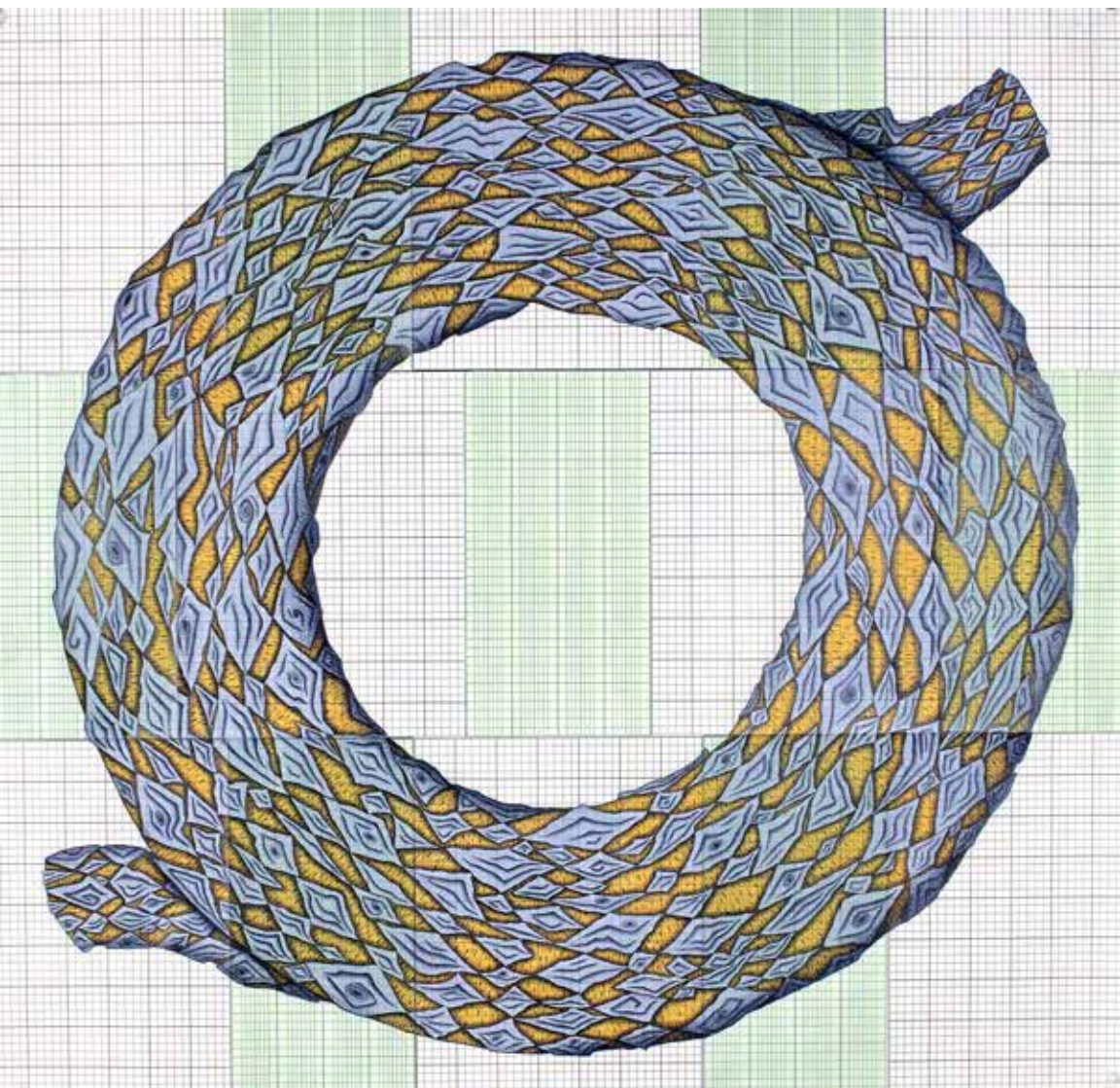


From top: Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Armed*, 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.; Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Nautilus*, 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Nautilus* (detail), 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.

typical lateral cross-section of a tree trunk with growth rings that reveal the tree's *interior*, what is hidden from us. Watkin's drawings suggest *exteriors*, with scaly surfaces, strange growths, and multiplying branches. The centers, instead of revealing the unseen, are empty, enigmatic. With works such as *Cross-Section: Armed* and *Cross-Section: Nautilus*, the species name in the title has been supplanted by references to the mutant and somewhat threatening characteristics each tree segment has taken on. One appears almost like the blade of a circular saw with spiky red arms; the other a hybrid creature of the sea, named after the mollusk with a distinctive spiral shell, that seems to telescope out of itself. Each drawing appears to float atop sheets of graph paper tiled together. The sheets are meant for diagrams, technical drawings, and charting scientific and mathematical data. They suggest the application (or attempts to apply) different modes of interpretation and understanding. Watkin's fantastical images are like found evidence of a hidden and self-perpetuating world, as trees take new interspecies forms, circling and twisting back upon themselves. They connote a secret agency or inner spirit and at the same time, recall histories of art: from the vivid grotesqueries of early Netherlandish engravings, as well as the beauty and wonder of classical botanical illustration.



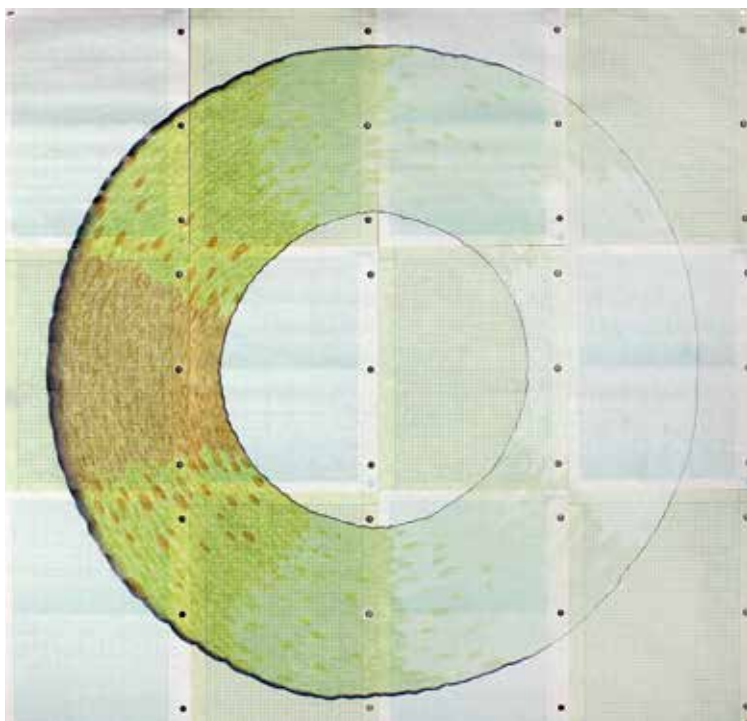
Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Hophornbeam*, 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 26 x 27.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite, from top: Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Black Cherry*, 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.; Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Sycamore (Ghost Tree)*, 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.





11





Pamela Rogers, *A Summer Vignette*, 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Pamela Rogers, *The Children's Hour*, 2019. Plant and soil pigments, ink, wine pigment, turmeric, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to her studies in art history and studio art, **Pam Rogers** holds a certificate in botanical illustration from the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens, just outside of London. It was established in the eighteenth century to collect and study plants to unlock their healing and other properties. Using and subverting her training in the close observation of nature, she renders unruly botanica set free from the constraints of illustration's purpose to explain or exemplify. Into her art come pigments and stains derived from the earth, plants, and products both cultivated and wild—soil and ground minerals from specific localities, wine, berries, mushrooms, spices like turmeric, and sometimes elements of the plant itself.

Rogers's "Flora Marchita" (which means withered or drooping flowers, using Latinate naming) offers a series of drawings that are a hybrid of the still life and landscape genres, drawing on the histories and meanings bound up with each. Still lifes are highly realistic paintings of inanimate objects—such





Pamela Rogers, *Time Passing*, 2019. Plant, soil pigments, graphite, ink, tea and coffee, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Pamela Rogers, *Meritage*, 2019. Plant and soil pigments, graphite, ink, wine pigment, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Pamela Rogers, *Indigofera*, 2019. Indigo, soil pigments, plant pigment, ink, graphite, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

as flower arrangements, food, and other household items. The spent bloom, extinguished candle, or empty wine glass in traditional still life painting were symbols of the transience of life's pleasures and of mortality. Rogers creates swirling and elegiac compositions in which vestiges of wilted leaves, petals, branches, intimations of water, and imprints emerge and recede. The watercolor medium produces fine edges, cloud-like volumes and gradations of color that offer both specificity and expressivity. Landscapes present a visual record of a place. The artist's handmade pigments, accompanied by ink and graphite drawing, come from places of personal significance to her and becomes a multisensory—visual, haptic, cognitive—picture of that place.



16

Pamela Rogers, *Between the Earth and Sky*, 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Pamela Rogers, *New Growth*, 2019. Plant and soil pigments, graphite, ink, carbon, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

The poetical titles of individual works—*A Summer Vignette*, *Sleepless Nights*, *Along Overgrown River Banks*—reinforce the idea that the glimpses, forms, light, atmosphere, and reflections of nature are as important as their material and concrete form in our memories.

Another series, “Flora Totems,” demonstrates a range of organic effects that come from plants, wine, earth, spices, and other organic materials, with the occasional emergence of something recognizable—a decorative frame, a feather, button. The “Totems” seem like a distillation of an experience into a very concise, surrealistic form, like a personal map. Rogers likens the work to the distinctive somatic experiences of people, places, and scents.







Project Space



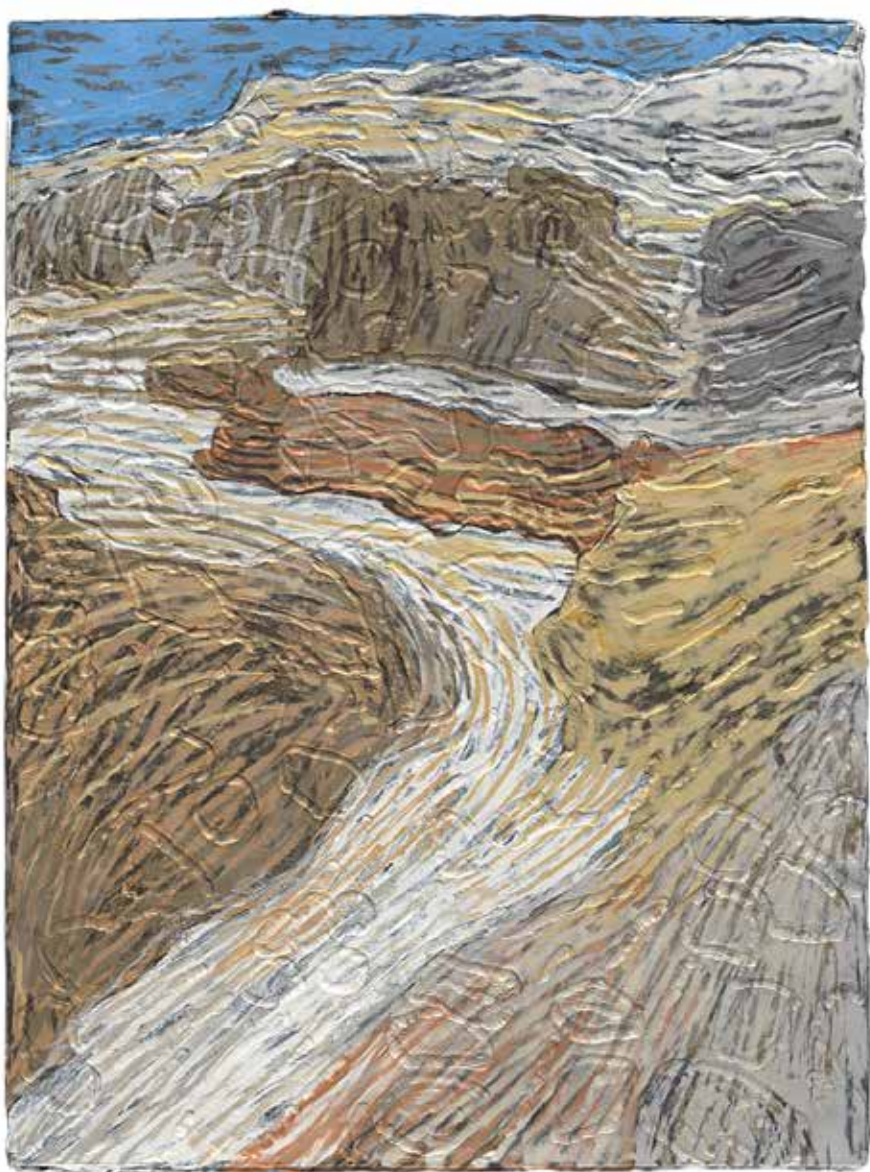


Pamela Rogers, *Along Overgrown River Banks*, 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, 24 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Pamela Rogers, *Sleepless Nights*, 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Pamela Rogers, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, 2018. Plant, soil and mineral pigments including soils from the Potomac Basin, ink, graphite, carbon, 76 1/2 x 44 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Sures, *Excavation*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Lynn Sures, *Windy Night, Olorgesailie*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

21

**Lynn Sures's** body of work, "Portraits of the Anthropocene," is the result of a Smithsonian (SI) Artist Research Fellowship, which supports interdisciplinary work between artists and scientists. Sures chose the SI National Museum of Natural History as her research site where she found an affinity with artifacts related to the origins of early human life on the African continent. To this interest, she brought her expertise in mediums of drawing, painting, and paper-making. Her drawings are on her own handmade paper, and she works in a unique medium, "pulp painting," in which the painting's coloration and support are integrated. An additional step of embossing the work with a collagraph plate adds a linear, relief-like pattern to the surface. The handmade paper's richness and saturation create a dense, tactile effect.



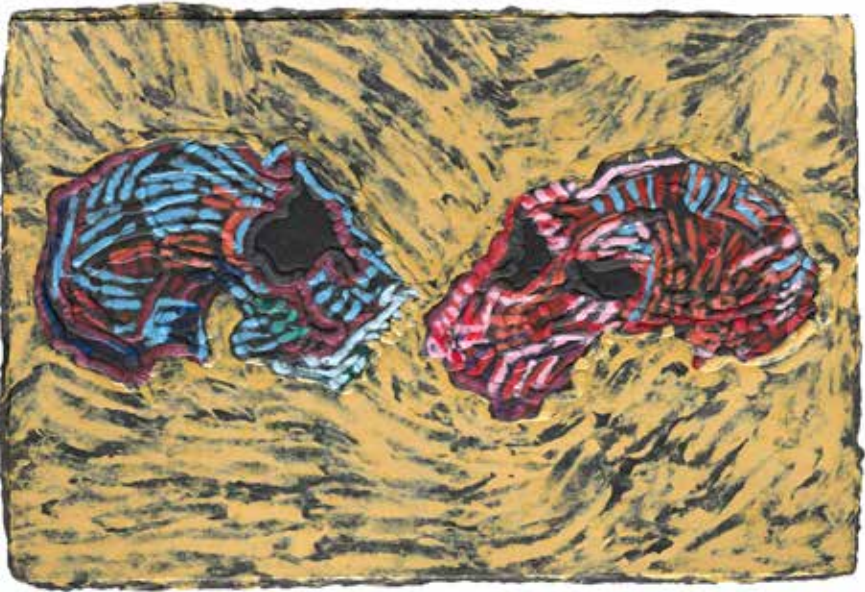


Lynn Sures, *The Handaxe Quarry*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

The fellowship enabled her to travel with a team of paleoanthropologists (who study the evolution of human life) and a geologist to the site of an ongoing archaeological dig in Olorgesailie, Kenya, in the southern part of the country. There, discoveries of ancient human fossils and artifacts mark a pivotal period 1.9 million to 200,000 years ago during which early humans, *hominini* of the species *Homo erectus*, began actively adapting their surrounding environment to their needs, as they experienced ecological change. That transformation, over millennia, has culminated in the Anthropocene, our current epoch, which is characterized by the nearly complete transformation of the earth to meet human needs.

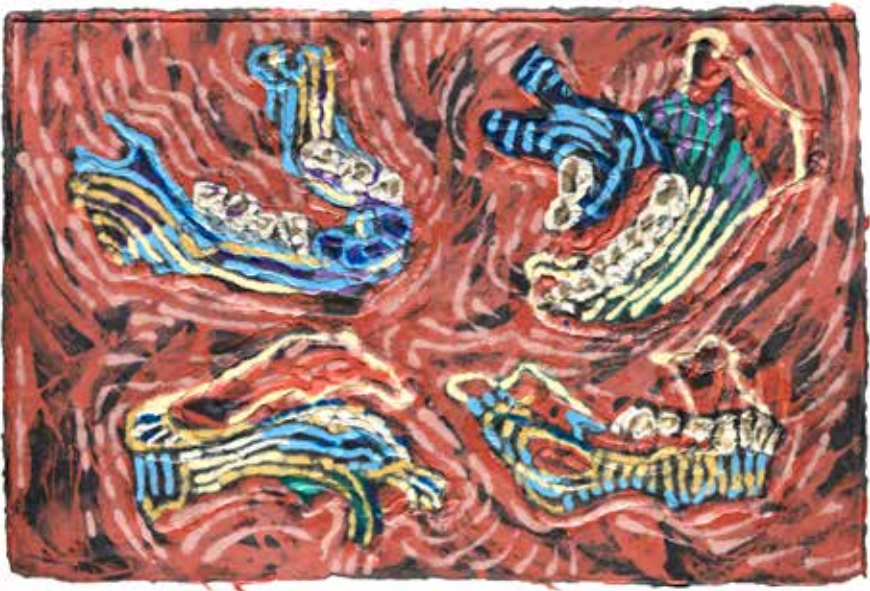
Onsite in Kenya, and in the SI National Museum of Natural History collections in the US, Sures did not so much document as ingest and experience the rare fossil artifacts (housed permanently in the Nairobi National Museum, and in cast form at SI) and landscapes. Her careful and time-consuming study and rendering of objects such as *2017.3 Spine and Handaxe*





Lynn Sures, *A Conversation 2*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

23



Lynn Sures, *Communication 2*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.







Lynn Sures, *2019.4 The Hell Hole*, 2019. Colored pencil drawing on artist-made kenaf paper, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

and landscapes such as *2019.4. The Hell Hole*, informed more expressive and immediate “versions” of similar subjects, including *Communication 2* and *The Handaxe Quarry*, made in the pulp painting medium. The lines and deep colors of the work transmit a nervous energy and vibrant sense of life.

The display of the SI National Museum of Natural History’s treasures is informed by rigorous classification systems that locate that object in time and place. We, as viewers, tend to regard these artifacts as sealed evidence in a way; from a time and place so distant that it is no longer reminiscent of us. Sures, through her personal interaction with these evidentiary artifacts, offers an invitation to reconsider our relationship to our early forebears and how we have arrived at our own place in time.



Lynn Sures, *Seek 2*, 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

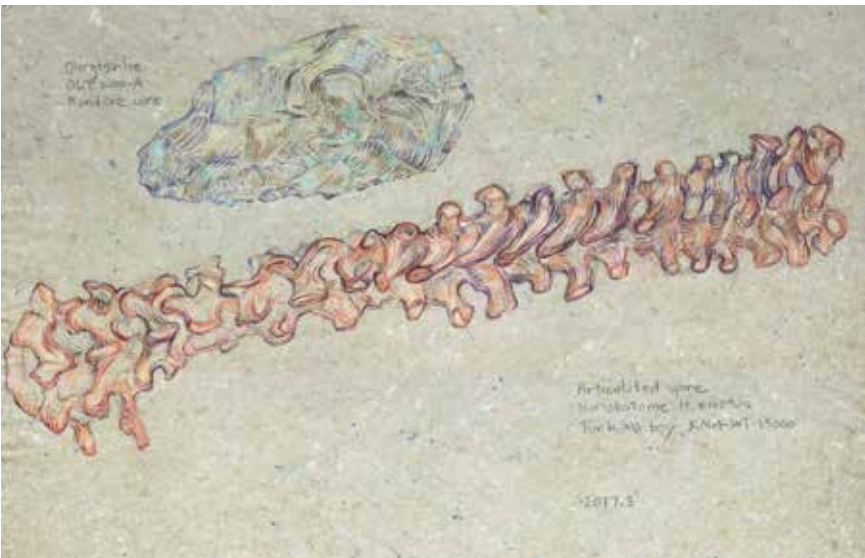
Opposite: Lynn Sures, *2017.25 The Hominin Site: Habitat*, 2017. Colored pencil drawing on artist-made kenaf paper, 24 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist.





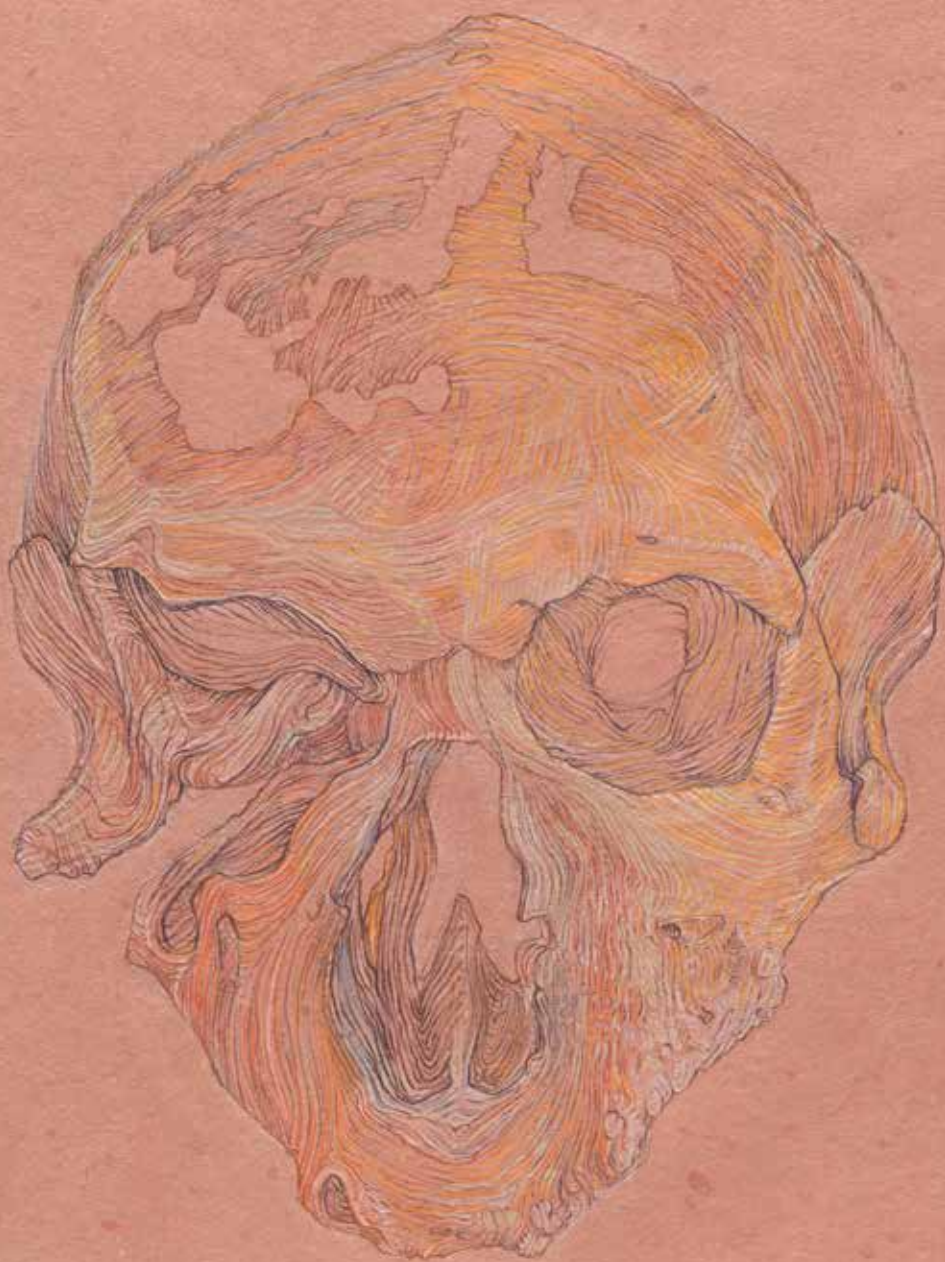
Lynn Sures, 2017.22 *Turkana Boy*, 2017. Colored pencil drawing on artist-made kenaf paper, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

26



Lynn Sures, 2017.3 *Spine and Handaxe*, 2017. Colored pencil drawing on artist-made paper, mixed fibers, 12 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Lynn Sures, 2019.3 *Circeo*, 2019. Colored pencil drawing on artist-made sisal paper, 24 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Giuliano Davé  
Circolo L

2019

## ARTIST STATEMENT: **PAM ROGERS**

Throughout my life, I have found myself drawn to the natural world. I grew up in the West, so I am inclined towards large and mighty spaces; I gravitate to nature and the power it generates, but also the intimacy it can provide. I loved being in the garden with my Grandfather, planting and harvesting. I would create cities from pinecones and bark and fill them with citizens carefully crafted from Hollyhock plants. I kept plants in my room growing up—watering, trimming, and watching for new growth. I learned lessons from plants: patience, empathy, and survival of the strong. This fascination with nature is the basis for my work and manifests itself in paintings, drawings, sculpture, and installation work. I visually explore how individuals nurture and develop relationships, societies and ideas and then create carefully crafted identities based in these themes, all in the context of botanic imagery.

In my two-dimensional works, I use handmade plant and soil pigments as well as more traditional inks and water-based media. The organic materials have been collected from various locations throughout the US, thus creating a direct connection between my materials, the events and relationships in my life. The ephemeral sculptures made from plant material are never the subject of the drawings and paintings, but instead a tangible context for the environments I create. They allow me to explore the imagery through process and materials. I enjoy presenting beautiful imagery measured against presumed sinister and threatening elements that challenge the viewer to question what lurks beneath. It is at this point that the work begins to take on a persona of botanical magic realism, forcing the exploration of personal relationships and events in an alternative context. In examining the relationship between people, plants and place, I continually try to weave the strings of art and agriculture, myth and magic, and healing and hurting into an ongoing inquisitive whole.





## ARTIST STATEMENT: LYNN SURES

Looking at human fossils, maybe I can thereby get to know them, and while studying them have some wordless insights about who we humans are in the present day.

I started out wanting to know the early *Homo erectus*; the first “makers” as I learned in my reading and discussions with paleoanthropologists. I spent almost two years drawing and painting and reading about these ancestors who made and slowly improved upon handaxes and other stone tools. Because they made things with their hands, I identified with them. After the years of studying *H. erectus* I realized I was ready to investigate the archaic *Homo sapiens* and the Neanderthals. These ancestors of ours were the first artists, I had learned from researchers, who were reporting on their findings to the scientific community. I was electrified to know that ochre was used as a decorative or artistic pigment; that Neanderthals had done cave paintings. I began to draw these more recent species, looking for the light that might connect them to me and my fellow artists. This is still very much where I am in my artistic research.

Drawing allows me focused study, analysis, and connection with an object, individual, or site. In Kenya, I looked for points of convergence between our early ancestors’ traits, capacities, and habitat. I made drawings of human and animal fossils at the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi. I camped with scientists at the Smithsonian Institution’s field research site at Olorgesailie, drawing the excavation sites and coming to know the vivid, harsh, physical site itself, infused with evidence of early human presence. Pulp painting, later in my own studio, releases the emotionally driven responses to the subjects I’ve studied in drawings. In Washington, at the National Museum of Natural History, I continue to draw fossils as I did during my Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, now as a Human Origins Program researcher. The potent bond of ecology—landscapes, habitats, and living creatures—permeates my practice at this point.

Lynn Sures, *Seek 2* (detail), 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.







## ARTIST STATEMENT: MEL WATKIN

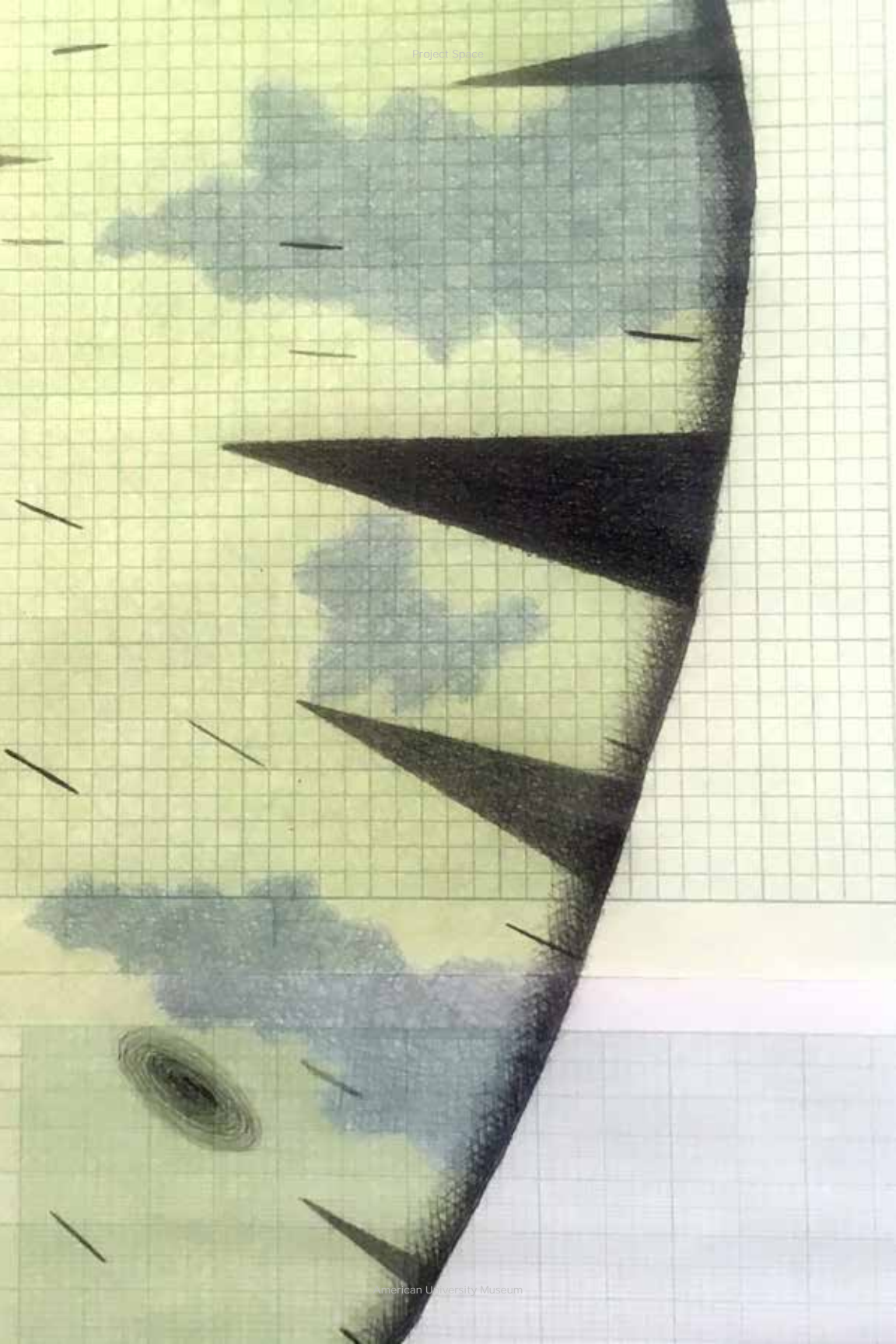
In essence, my work is about the process of drawing—making marks layer upon layer to build an image. I have been drawing on surfaces other than plain paper for over 20 years. I like surfaces that come with embedded history and automatic associations such as graph paper, old road maps, pillowcases, lace, and tea towels. My work is influenced by history and uses traditional methods of drawing to deal with present-day issues.

Since 2010, I have explored the dichotomous forces of nature by drawing the trees surrounding my old farmhouse in rural Southern Illinois. While the drawings are realistically rendered, they are actually altered compilations of different species. Using traditional drawing methods I pay homage to scientific history, as well as recurrent art historic themes such as the “four seasons.”

My drawings are intentionally beautiful, but also slightly menacing because, as recent events show, nature is enticing, but it can also be deadly. Life in the Midwest now includes regular hurricanes, tornados, flooding, snow and ice storms: trees to fall on homes and cars, block roads and snap power lines. Not long ago, in my rural area, we lost over 3,000 trees in a major storm with winds up to 106 mph. One of these trees, weighing approximately 1,000 pounds, crushed my car. Watching this happen significantly changed my relationship to trees. While trees are essential to our lives and beautiful, I now am much more aware of their height and weight. For several years, replicating their huge scale was a major factor of my work. Revolving, a 46-foot long drawing, is a life-size falling tree held together with bandages. It comes back to life as it cycles through the seasons of the year and then begins to decompose before returning to the earth.

After spending years working in great detail on three large-scale works on paper, my focus turned to a series of “Cross-Section” drawings on various kinds of graph paper. Based on the idea of architectural cross-sections, these works concentrate on the pattern, flow, and movement of tree bark. After 26 years of living in Southern Illinois, the history, steep hills and strange rock formation surrounding our property have seeped into my work—including my husband’s indigenous tree collection—now like old friends. I have learned their habits, preferences, and identifying qualities by heart.

Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Black Cherry* (detail), 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 33 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist.



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**JENNIFER RIDDELL** works at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, as Interpretive Projects Manager and Writer. In that role, she strives to connect diverse visitors with the collection by providing print, digital and in-gallery experiences about art, its histories, contexts, and meanings to enhance their enjoyment of art and the museum experience. Her previous work as a curator and affinity for modern and contemporary art lead her to seek projects and involvement in the DC regional community that keep her connected with regional artists and artmaking. Previously, Jennifer was Public Art Curator for Arlington, Virginia Cultural Affairs, and worked with artists including Mary Miss, Vicki Scuri, Erwin Redl and Martha Jackson-Jarvis on commissioned art projects. Before that, she served as assistant curator at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which supported innovative and experimental modern and contemporary art exhibitions. There, she worked with artists including Olafur Eliasson, Kay Rosen, Joseph Kosuth, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Lewis de Soto.

Her professional and community service includes leadership roles with ArtTable DC, an organization for women in the visual arts and producer of the annual public program *State of Art/DC*. For ArtTable DC she has served as chapter co-chair and is currently as a member of the Executive Committee. Jennifer also served for eight years on the Board of the Arlington Arts Center in Virginia. She received a BA in Art History and English from Michigan State University, and an MA in Modern Art History, Theory and Criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Front cover, from top:

Pamela Rogers, *Sleepless Nights* (detail), 2019. Plant, soil and mineral pigments, graphite, ink, 24 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Lynn Sures, *The Handaxe Quarry* (detail), 2018. Pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Mel Watkin, *Cross-Section: Hophornbeam* (detail), 2019. Pencil on multiple sheets of graph paper, 26 x 27.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



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The AU Museum Project Space, launched in Summer 2019, is dedicated to working with academics and non-traditional curators to create exhibitions addressing special topics of interest across the university and the greater Washington community.

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