

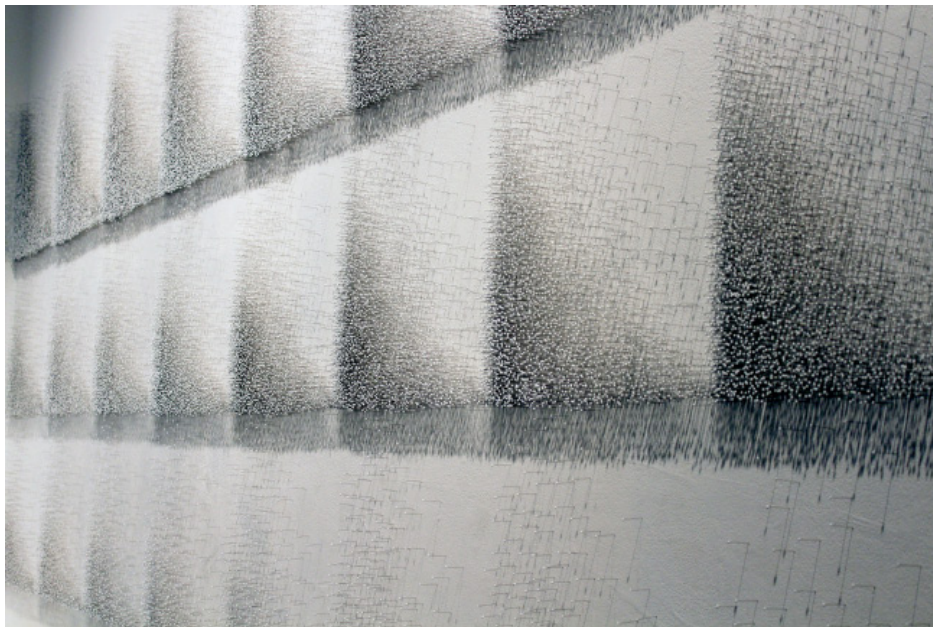


Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present Divergence, an exhibition by artist Katie Holland Lewis at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery, October 2, 2015 - January 21, 2016. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to Ms. Lewis, the Carson City Courthouse, the National Endowment for the Arts for their support and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI commissioned artist and writer Michele Carlson to write the following essay.

... It Just Might Fall Apart: The Works of Katie Holland Lewis ...

Katie Lewis' work might fall apart—or so she hopes. Her obsessive drawings and installations are made from the repetitive compulsion to pierce a surface or the meticulous placement of thousands of pins, string, knots, and small specific marks into drywall or paper. En masse, her materials teeter on the brink of collapse. This is what she refers to as a “breaking point”—pins forced together so closely they might burst from the wall, paper that has been punctured with so many holes bits hang threateningly, or thread strung so vigorously it is like an impenetrable frenetic latticework. “I make this tightly controlled thing but there is a loss of control within it. That’s the paradox.” The intricate drawings spew a tension between a desperate need to control and the willful desire to release—a moiré that accumulates in tensely specific gatherings of repeated materials and marks.



730 Days, pins, pencil, 56"x292"x 1.5", 2012

It is easy to get lost in her work, here, at the point of process. The endurance this sort of work requires seeps from the thousands of holes she makes—how much of the artist must be left in each completed piece. And yet, not only in form and process, but

also in concept and practice, Lewis' work carries with it the trace of her own state— loose indexes of her own psychic and physical terrain manifested through the sort of physicality her precariously balanced works embody. Consider this the act of mapping and the steady, habitual charting of Lewis' own topography within a landscape of her own making.

For the past decade, Lewis has explored repetitive accumulation with a handful of reoccurring materials but also through the construction of discreet sets of highly fixed systems that she uses to both collect data and direct her abstraction. Her early work around systems began with producing a methodology to analyze a reoccurrence, like sensations in the body such as numbness. Everyday, she placed sewing pins through a small piece of vellum taped to her studio wall. The pins indicated the general vicinity where she felt a certain sensation—the vellum stood in for her body. She would hang each one on her studio wall to dry and they eventually amassed into an abstract accumulation of this specific, daily recording. A collection of small red dots that seemed to be haphazardly and randomly chucked on the wall became the basis for a major shift in her practice. Lewis was developing a system of 'creative analytics' while also constructing what would be the methodology for her work that she continues to evolve today.

I first encountered Lewis' work in 2004 while we were both graduate students at the California College of the Arts completing our MFAs in Printmaking. We arrived at this tiny, private art school in the San Francisco Bay Area—slightly over 200 miles from Reno, Nevada, where Lewis was born and raised—that unbeknownst to us was serving as an institutional battleground for a multitude of categorical tug-o-wars. When we arrived at CCA, the college had just ceremoniously and symbolically dropped the word 'crafts' from its name—it had been called California College of the Arts and Crafts for 97 years prior. The art world was in such a canonical frenzy that even the word 'craft' had become completely polarizing. Over the course of the two years, we found ourselves in the center of many other ideological struggles: the Oakland campus versus the newer more industrial-chic San Francisco campus. The Social Practice graduate program was launched—we were amidst the avant-garde and what would become commonly known as a post-studio art world.

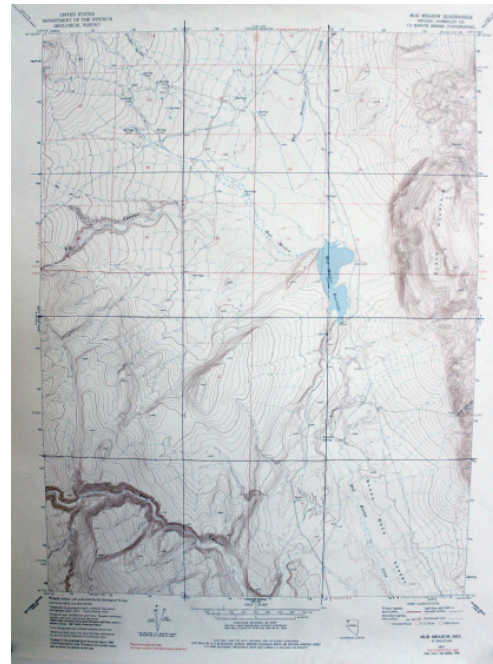
But of course, then, we didn't totally understand any of this or that as students entering in as Printmaking MFAs we were, by default, designated as part of the 'old guard.' We spent many hours fervently debating the efficacy of certain mediums and processes over others and while many of us railed against, or buttressed up, categorical desires—trying to find a place for our work to belong—Lewis was methodically working and creating systems amongst our chaos. I bring this socio-educational landscape up because it is here that Lewis' works shifted from legible printmaking where she set out to make an image, to works that privileged the procedure that led to the final composition. She no longer referenced the body but created a practice that developed systems of the body. Her search for order amongst the disorder began, in small part, as a methodical and systematic approach to making work in the face of the frenetic nature of graduate school, ideological tumult, and art school shenanigans.

While printmaking for printmaking's sake was a discursive topic in school, it is necessary to mention how immediately her work can be read as an extension of

contemporary printmaking. Printmakers often build composition and visualize space or form in layers. If you are formally trained, as a printmaker, you are taught to pull a cohesive image apart down to its most segregated elements—color, value, and texture—and rebuild it, systematically. One step at a time, repeating the same actions over and over: Carve. Ink. Press. Carve. Ink. Press. Repeat: until the original image is recreated anew. Prints are indexes of their original matrix but not beholden to mimic, or even represent, it exactly. Much of Lewis' work embodies this desire to repeatedly recreate a mark or action in an attempt to both redefine and reference its origins.

Her current project, *2067 II SE—2167 II NE #2* (2015) begins with hundreds of topographic maps of northern Nevada that belonged to her grandfather—the title reflects the names of the specific maps she has used. After he passed away, Lewis felt drawn to work with something of his and while many of the maps held no personal connections, a lot were of places in the Nevada deserts where they had gone together over the years.

The systems of Lewis' work are vital and their strictness is not to be taken for granted. For *2067*, she starts with one topographic map that she first divides into twelve equal quadrants. She traces the lines on each quadrant onto its own sheet of Mylar then projects them from an old school overhead projector onto the back of a thick piece of 30" x 30" paper. She repeats this process for every twelve quadrants of one topographic map—tracing the lines on top of the previous.



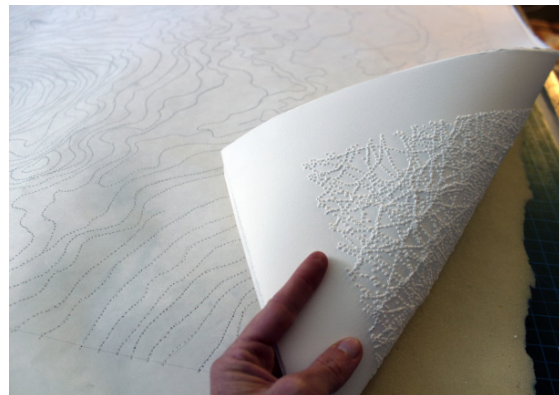
USGS topographical map of Mud Meadow Quadrangle



Topo map projection - in her studio

projector onto the back of a thick piece of 30" x 30" paper. She repeats this process for every twelve quadrants of one topographic map—tracing the lines on top of the previous.

This is when the real work begins. Lewis then meticulously punches through the back of the paper with a tiny pin both breaking through and





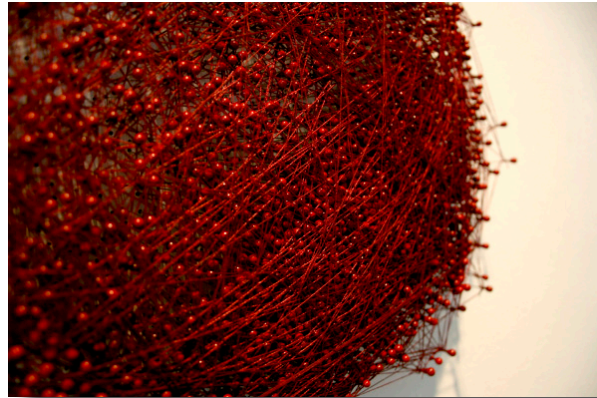
2067 II SE—2167 II NE #2 (detail) 30"x30", 2015

creating a mark at the same time. She continues this process until she has pricked over every traced line on the back of the sheet, even if parts of the paper have begun to break apart, tear, fall off, and disintegrate from her own perforating actions. It is the surprise and unexpected possibilities in the paper's deterioration that makes the oppressiveness of her specific systems and rules seem comprehensible. "Just by the perforations they start to make these compositions based on how they fall apart." Lewis does not attempt to control how her actions break down the paper—it is in this failure for the paper, or surface to 'hold it together' that is transforming.

Akin to Yayoi Kusama's, *Infinity Nets* painting series and like-installations, Lewis shares the urge to use the repetition of minimal materials and marks that accumulate into an intensely, alluring visual experience. The polka dot for Kusama is both form and content. It is a simple abstract mark while also a complicated symbol for the self. Kusama creates vast spans of polka dots both by creating obsessive patterns on canvases and walls or by producing large mirrored rooms—both go on forever and are meant to get lost in—endings and beginnings or edges and borders are only delineated by default of the fact that a canvas and room end.



Tangled Pathways, pins, enamel, thread,
49" x 106" x 1.5", 2006



Tangled Pathways (detail)
49" x 106" x 1.5", 2006

But Lewis' works are not endless and she does not ask us to transcend, for even a second. They are immediate and tightly controlled moments—breaks and cracks that burst through the veneer of a pristine wall or the practice of 'doing just fine.'

Her works are a way of accessing deeply private experiences and like Kusama, who has always acknowledged that her work engages with her own mental illness, sexual anxieties, and hallucinations, Lewis controls the chaos. The charting of personal and psychic trauma is no easy task. *2067* demonstrates a melancholic act—an obsessive torment with making sense of what you cannot. Lewis embraces this pathologic cycle as she is constantly pushing the systems she so strictly enforces to the edge. Even for her, order has its limits.

Her grandfather's topographic maps are an apt source material for what has become the compulsively systematic charting of her own psychic and physical topography—a private landscape she puts forth to the public on her own terms. While her work is not about specific pain, trauma, or loss, per se, it is about how action can make change. The act of enduring may allow for something as banal as a stack of topographical maps, or as traumatic as the loss of loved one, to become fodder for transformation.

Michele Carlson
Oakland, California
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Capital City Arts Initiative
www.arts-initiative.org

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