

# ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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COUNTERPUBLIC  
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FILMMAKING

SPEECH  
LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN'S  
AURAL CONTRACT







**MATT WYCOFF**  
BIRMINGHAM, AL

Our political landscape is defined by continual staking of the middle ground—*We are normal America, We are the 99%*—an essentializing of average values against the marginal, the different, and the foreign. Attempts to define the contemporary world in such chauvinist terms—there is one ideal, and it's like me—fail because they shy away from the plurality we all contain.

Matt Wycoff has pursued an open marriage with his work by highlighting his own subjectivities. His practice is compelled to philander; or perhaps it is more akin to a plural marriage—despite their differences, his factions have each other's back. This promiscuity results in an unabashed freedom of form.

Wycoff's exhibition *Variations* featured works made since 2005, presented in such a way as to provoke diptychs of seemingly disparate pairs (Beta Pictoris; January 27—March 3, 2012). In the early works, Wycoff literalized the margins of his self. The earliest piece, *Survey of disaster, war and death during the first twenty-five years of my life*, 2006, is diaristic, yet it avoids self-obsession. In hauntingly minimal form, it chronicles the official death tolls of both natural and manmade catastrophes.

Another work, *100 Poems, March 1 – April 30, 2007*, assumes similar form—drawing paper with gridded handwriting—yet it chugs through modes of language and expression that reverse the clinical aspect of the death tolls. Together they speak to the simultaneous completeness and incompleteness of an individual. In other words, they define the fiction of normalcy.

Much of Wycoff's earlier work, like these two pieces, seeks to index totalities, and that posture reveals borderlands between universal and personal structures, between fixed and elastic histories. Pulling from his experiences of language, death, and the world, the personal dimension of his work opens up a quietly welcoming platform, inviting reflection upon our own understanding of these universal spaces. However, the approach contains inherent limits: in playing off a single

kind of direct experience, it is explicitly monogamous.

Around 2007, Wycoff's practice shifted. Whereas earlier works sought to fix the self within a field of information, to literally map his place in the world, Wycoff's newest work opens a terrain of unfixed information. There is no index to this non-place, yet it is fully occupiable.

Wycoff has referred to the multidirectional nature of his work as lateral movement, one that aims to embody rather than illustrate contradictions. His shift away from language, and from the taxonomies of his own history, was a move toward what he refers to as the "incomprehensible center to which language and reason are drawn but can only orbit." The incomprehensible center was the potent core of *Variations*.

Through these shifts, Wycoff seemed to ask: Is this work doing what it's supposed to do? Do I have the right relationship with this work? What are the other relationships I could have? The binary arrangement of information in previous works—knowledge/gap, dead/living—was rigorous and contingent on an implied truth; they have since given way to inferred possibilities. Ultimately in pursuit of uncertain directions, of the incomprehensible center, Wycoff finds grounding in the process, in the doing, but also in the question "Where am I in this work?"

His newest work carves alternate ways out of the same diffuse problem, the impossibility of understanding one's place in the world. This elusiveness flows through such insouciant paintings as *Untitled (Floral)*, 2011, and *Untitled*, 2011, a large veiled canvas that airs much, yet leaves room for discovery. Critic Sharon Butler referred to this state as one of "no clear truth or falseness," a cause one might find both hopeful and ambivalent. In Wycoff's case, this place of openness and unexpected possibility is the beginning of a grander project, an abandon to the unknown. The liberty of his work is not in knowing what you want, but in knowing that you want something else.

—Hesse McGraw

**J.J. MCCRACKEN**  
BRENTWOOD, MD

Rooted in humanitarian activism, J.J. McCracken's exhibition *Thirst* featured work that relies on textures and tactility (39th Street Gallery; January 7—February 18, 2012). This is a rarity, as activism often prefers performance and conceptual traditions over craft. Clay is her primary medium: present in all of her work, it offers more than just a bridge between the realms of craft and art. It is a malleable, elemental material for mark-making, and for creating a platform to discuss such worldwide afflictions as hunger and thirst. In her previous performances and installations, clay has represented sustenance, a second skin, and, in the case of this show, thirst itself.

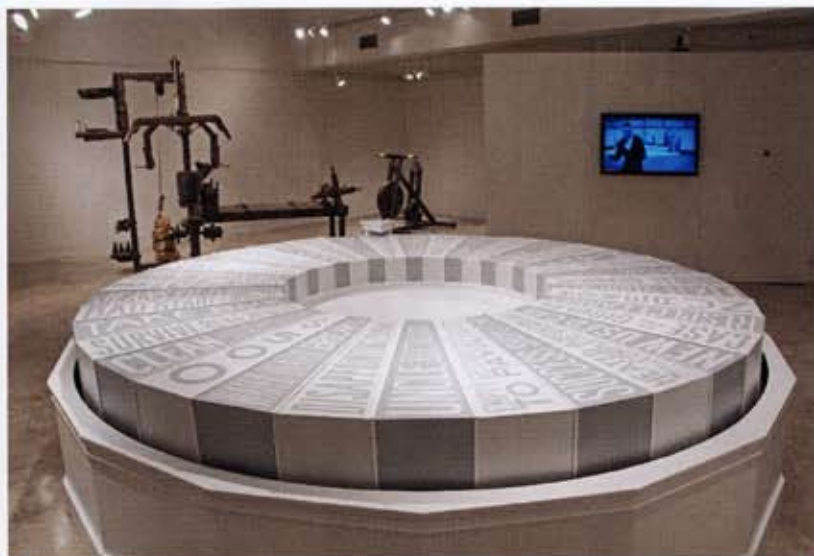
McCracken began her investigation of thirst—both as a social issue and a bodily sensation—in 2011, with the seven-hour performance *Thirst, and the Martyr* at the (e)merge art fair in Washington, DC. Photographs documenting this work were displayed at the front of the exhibition. They show McCracken tethered back-to-back with another performer—her sister, Synda McCracken. Covered with clay silt, blindfolded, and laden with suits of hanging clay pots, the women strain and pull against each other in an effort to reach the water sources in front of them. With two ladles strapped to their hands and the clay drying out their skin, they continually fail to quench their thirst, translating scarcity through corporeal turmoil. The exhibition activated the visitor's body to raise similar concerns.

Drawing the viewer into a sensory tableau recalling Ann Hamilton's encompassing installations, McCracken's exhibition combined experiential elements to conjure the sensation of thirst. Six buckets were arranged at the entrance to the first room—a dark, empty space echoing with the sound of running water. The soundtrack, in fact, is a recording of the artist showering, and the five-gallon buckets contain the 24.67 gallons of water she collected in the process, daily life's unwitting discards.

Light filled the second room, which was completely overrun by parched and heavy grass on the floor and thick, viscous clay along the walls, leaving behind finger-

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Matt Wycoff, *Untitled (Double)*, 2011, oil on canvas, 58 x 58 inches. Matt Wycoff, exhibition view of *Variations*, 2012, at Beta Pictoris, Birmingham, AL. (courtesy of the artist and Beta Pictoris, Birmingham, AL)





### OKAY MOUNTAIN CHATTANOOGA, TN

prints and hand-shaped mounds that curled, shrank, peeled, and flaked as they dried. A single opening in the far wall drew the viewer into the space, encouraging one to move forward along an inclined grassy floor, raised to provide just enough resistance to evoke struggle, to a slit window with a limited vista into another, otherwise inaccessible room. Like looking through the eyeholes of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, 1946–1966, the viewer could gaze into McCracken's hidden landscape of empty clay pots and a small television, which ran a series of commercials on a loop. The commercials featured people swimming in pools, pouring water glasses, washing their faces—consuming and wasting water in a variety of ways, but in distant places. In McCracken's space, the monitor was out of reach, the water nowhere to be found, the grass neglected, and the walls covered with clay, which leached moisture from the air, leaving a dry sensation in the back of one's throat.

Every element of the monochromatic installation triggered a desire for hydration. McCracken conveyed her humanitarian message through an exploitation of the lushness of clay, offering a rather elegant reminder that water is both the most basic human need and the most overlooked luxury.

—Danielle O'Steen

Okay Mountain, a ten-person artist collective based in Austin, Texas, recently took over the Cress Gallery of Art at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga with a four-piece mini-retrospective [February 8—March 20, 2012]. Okay Mountain began as a gallery space in Austin in 2006, seeking to expand the contemporary art offerings of the Texan capital. In 2009, the installation *Corner Store*, a faux all-purpose store commissioned for the PULSE Art Fair in Miami, raised their international profile. Since then, Okay Mountain has continued making intricate and carefully crafted multimedia installations focusing on absurd and grotesque aspects of American culture. Their key strategy is to denaturalize the overly familiar and kitschy. As a result, they don't accuse as much as shock us with the bizarreness of consumer culture.

Like a Welcome Center lobby, *Road Side Attractions*, 2012, greeted visitors with a fake plant, two chairs, and glossy tourist brochures advertising invented tourist attractions. The brochure for *Nihilism Gardens* has an image of a lunar eclipse and a lifeless tree. The text on the back asserts that "Solar Death is inevitable." The fonts are garish and tawdry, the images gaudy and vacuous. Okay Mountain has a cheeky, satirical, and at times scathing sense of humor. But the male-dominated collective's jokes may occasionally border all-too-close to the phallogentrism of advertising and consumer culture. The brochure "Dolls and Miniatures, A fantasyland of beautiful dolls" has a photo of two life-sized blond, bosomy plastic dolls in skin-tight black and see-through S&M lingerie. *Road Side Attractions* heightened the absurdity of a consumer culture that holds few things sacred, certainly neither female bodies nor political revolution. The advertisement for the Tuxedo Tent Company has the tagline, "Occupy Wall Street In Style" and the goofy image of a black-and-white tent with a huge bow tie on the zipper door.

The sculptures that comprise *Multi-Station Machine/Torture Gym*, 2011, are a hybrid of contemporary exer-

cise equipment and antiquated torture devices. Made out of roughly hewn wood and stained a dark mahogany, they look like they come from the Inquisition's ingenious devices to pull, gnash, and rip apart the bodies of heretics and unbelievers. A bench press has a rope and crank to tie the feet and pull the legs. Instead of weights there are buckets of rocks. A pyramidal spike replaces the seat on an exercise bike. Leg lift handles are traded in for wooden shackles. The cushioned area used as a head rest in standing stomach crunches, or as a seat for pull-downs, is now made of wooden and lead spikes. One can imagine the moans of a fifteenth-century dungeon overlaid with the grunts and sweat that fill our gyms. Rich associations bounce off this strange object, like the dark masochism hidden in our contemporary obsession for the perfect body.

A neighboring piece, *Water, Water Everywhere So Let's All Have a Drink*, 2010, is Okay Mountain's celebration of late-night channel surfing. The group's members appear in various roles and disguises, acting out *Saturday Night Live*-styled infomercials, ridiculous exercise routines, a caricature of a weather report, and even simple animations. Each "channel" parodies the flashy, glitzy style of cheap television shows, giving the group a chance to show off an enormous amount of half-finished ideas, talents, and visual devices. Peppered with inside jokes and self-mockery, it also offers a glimpse into the playful collaborative relationship between the members. One scene finds us in the middle of an interview with one of their former interns, a young woman. For a moment, before another jarring juxtaposition, we hear her describe working for Okay Mountain: "A total boys' club," she says, "Every time I came in it was like I had barged in on some disgusting male ritual."

For *Wheel*, 2011, Okay Mountain highjacked another famous apparatus of contemporary pop culture—the casino wheel from the television show *Wheel of Fortune*—and gave it a new meaning, which lends Pat Sajak's wheel—full of glitter, vibrant colors, and bright

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: J.J. McCracken, view of *Thirst*, 2012, three-room installation with sound, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist); Okay Mountain, view of exhibition *Okay Mountain* at Cress Gallery of Art, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2012, background, left to right: *Multi-Station Machine/Torture Gym*, 2011; *Water, Water Everywhere, So Let's All Have a Drink*, 2010; foreground: *Wheel*, 2011 (courtesy of the artists and Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles)