



Erin Washington

# I Think We're Alone Now



*tempest*, 2018, acrylic, colored pencil, graphite, high-polymer film lead on panel, 20" x 24"

In Erin Washington's painting *Anechoic Vanitas*, there are a number of the artist's signature elements on display. A beautifully built-up ground, delicate rendering in fine blue lines, fluid brush marks and drips. Some of these elements (drips, frills, greenery/foilage) are even highlighted on the painted surface with chalk arrows and text. The "Vanitas" in this painting's title refers to a genre of still life painting that many painters would use to highlight the full range of their technical skills to potential clients. Here, Washington is playing with that history by laying out her painterly tools for the viewer. While a bit tongue in cheek, this key is actually helpful when approaching the other multilayered and collaged works in the exhibition, helpful in that they remind the viewer that all the marks, edges, dots, lines and images are intentional and meant to be taken in together.

Speaking with Washington, the conversation often floats and shifts between topics and memories. Stories of personal experiences with students overlap with the histories of classical sculpture and Buckminster Fuller. All the conversation is fascinating, and in conjunction with the paintings, sculptures and drawings in *I Think We Are Alone Now* makes perfect sense. Just as Washington's technical skill is on display in diverse the marks in *Anechoic Vanitas*, her interests and experiences are displayed in all the works in the show.

The title of this exhibition refers to the period of time early in 2020 when we all were suddenly forced apart and quickly found ourselves alone. Now that we have come through that period, it is difficult to view any aspect of our lives outside of the lens of that defining experience. Here, Washington displays so much of who she is in these paintings and asks herself: How has this changed? How have these seemingly concrete images and marks shifted after so much time alone?

**Justin Witte**  
*Director and Curator*  
Cleve Carney Museum of Art

## I. To Be Someone<sup>1</sup>

Erin Washington's studio is in a former store front on Cicero Ave. It is clear and well-lighted. Gauzy, translucent curtains diffuse the sun's rays and on this partly cloudy day also provide necessary respite from the perpetual buzz of the street. Fluorescent bulbs flicker overhead. The white walls, drop ceiling, and tiled floor are part workshop, part library, part second-hand store.

Paintings and drawings hang casually here. They're half finished, barely begun and nearly resolved. Awkward and curious sculptures -sticks with teeth and crumpled nitrile gloves- lean with ease adjacent pastel pink monochrome panels. Stacks of books crowd the corners. The presence of Day-Glo color is unavoidable, but not overwhelming. Other-worldly reds, greens, and yellows flutter along the margins of plaster panels, glisten in delicate swatches of adhesive tape and flash in the litany of post-it notes that decorate the studio's periphery. They seem to gather and fade like fallen leaves.

### (Die Hand Die Verletzt<sup>2</sup>)

The presence of the hand (and by extension the body) in line and letter is the defining characteristic of Washington's creative practice. This fact is immediately apparent in the materials she selects<sup>3</sup> and the marks she makes with/on them. While painters and sculptors have celebrated their tools and techniques for centuries, few contemporary artists I know of are as aware of the power of their own hand as Washington. Many artists seek to depersonalize their work. Some cannot even be said to have touched it, let alone made it. Not Washington.

*The hand is the locus of contact, it is how we discover and makes sense of the world around us. Our lives begin with the sensation of our mother's skin and end with the touch of another upon ours. But the hands are not lungs. In the lungs we take the world into<sup>4</sup> us and are reminded that we are not separate from it. The hands represent a kind of illusion. They maintain the false dichotomy that the world is something we act upon, rather than are a part of. We cannot act upon the world; it is not separate from us.*

No thing is more precious than that which you've nearly lost. For Washington, the hand, the tool of her humanity's communication, is also the site of an attack. Celebrated, commemorated, memorialized in a series of works called "After Zeus" Washington (like the good doctor she might have become) charts the aftermath of a fateful canine attack.

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<sup>1</sup>Secular-Humanism is a vastly more profitable enterprise than sincerely held belief systems that place something other than the self at the center of the universe. Since capitalism cannot abide barriers to profit whether they be physical or psychic, it uses nihilism as a kind of social-cultural steamroller. To create is to be a producer of one's own culture, it is in effect anti-nihilist and anti-capitalist.

<sup>2</sup>The hand that wounds. Season two, episode fourteen of The X-Files. Mulder and Scully investigate the mysterious death of a New Hampshire teen that is ultimately tied to the ritualistic Satanic practice of the local high school's faculty. The devil herself intercedes and a man is swallowed whole by a snake. Washington's eternal return (2015) depicts the figure of the Ouroboros, a serpent consuming its own tail.

<sup>3</sup>Wood, plaster, pigment, cotton, graphite, polymer, lead. These are builder's materials and notably, impermanent. Her studio is both human and humane in scale, and so too are the various pens, pencils, scissors and erasers that stand at the ready.

<sup>4</sup>spectrum/polarization (2020) a 9"X12" work on paper features a collaged image of a box and trophy, a semi-anatomical drawing, and the phrase "Bring the light inside the body". The phrase is likely a tongue-in-cheek reference to one of former President Donald Trump's many extemporaneous and irresponsibly suggested "cures" for COVID-19.

In these humble endeavors, none larger than 5" X 7", we see her right hand over the course of nearly a decade, rendered meticulously in white chalk on black ground, or non-photo blue on absorbent gray. The scar's sinister smile becoming less visible as the days pass into months, the months into years. This hand is always active, aware of itself and its fragility. The drawing is a searching, a verb as opposed to a noun.

## II. Automatic for the people.

Colors fade and wounds heal. The impossibility of a fixed, permanent state of affairs, the transient decay of random chance occurrences informs and foregrounds the evidence of change and ambiguity<sup>5</sup> in Washington's work. Nowhere is this process more obvious than in her automatic drawing.

A method of short-circuiting the analytic centers of the brain, yielding direct access to the subconscious mind, automatic drawing is inextricably linked to surrealist practice. It is perhaps the movement's chief contribution to the development of twentieth century art. The creative breakthroughs of artists such as Hilma af Klint, Joan Miró, or Jackson Pollock would be unimaginable without it.

For Washington, though, these drawings are part of an active response to an experienced situation, a way of thinking and interpreting through making.<sup>6</sup> They record space, movement, and duration, and occur in both public and private places. Visually, the tangled web of marks that characterize these drawings are heir to a series of 24"blind" charcoal on paper works executed by painter Willem de Kooning in the mid-1960s. They are not the ecstatic soliloquies of surrealist automatism.

While de Kooning's drawings were made horizontally and sightlessly, Washington's process involves occasional glances at the work in progress. These "reorientations" involve the eye<sup>7</sup>, but are not beholden to it, analysis and interpretation are subdued. Under the studio's artificial sun, these dense, fibrous creations find new life as the architecture of more elaborate compositions. Additions of paint and collage suggest, reveal, and abstain. The blue lines are traces becoming form and then sinking back into indeterminate viscera.

WORD/IMAGE/WORD I want to believe (the letter A is the image of a bull's head turned on its side)

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<sup>5</sup>A classic example of the way in which visual ambiguity is decoded and deciphered is the rabbit-duck illusion. Made famous by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is a cryptic image of an animal's head and depending on one's perspective, it can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck. In Gestalt Psychology a similar phenomenon is sometimes referred to as a "counterchange," an obscure image that can only be profitably interpreted by bisecting the picture into an either/or relationship. Either it is a duck, or it is a rabbit. Either it is figure, or it is ground.

According to Anton Ehrenzweig in his 1967 text *The Hidden Order of Art*, this gestalt-based process of reasoning is a superficial product of the active conscious. For Ehrenzweig, it is precisely the artist's ability to hold and sustain the ambiguity of both the image of the duck and the rabbit in mind's eye simultaneously that connects to the primary process of the unconscious and allows for fruitful creativity to emerge.

<sup>6</sup>In *The Mind in Motion* author Barbara Tversky suggests that thought is intimately connected to the movement of the body in as much as it is a process that occurs chemically in the brain. For example, when blind people speak, they gesticulate, though visible gesture should be meaningless and pointless for them. When we offer directions to a stranger, we move our bodies toward the locations we are discussing. Muscles do indeed have a memory.

<sup>7</sup>In Washington's *An Eucleation* (2020) a pair of disembodied eyes are presented to the viewer, literally on a platter. The selectivity and subjectivity of our vision is a recurrent theme in the artist's oeuvre (see footnote 5) and our "lying eyes" are inherently implicated by automatic drawing. Milton Resnick recounts an exchange in the late 1940s between painters Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning in which Gorky attributes the success of his recent work to the fact that he used "no eyes". Resnick indicates that this was meant as an insult to de Kooning, whose eye, Gorky believed, was too studied and academic.

One of the (perhaps many) unfortunate consequences of the modernist project has been the segregation of senses intertwined. Nothing is purely optical, aural, or narrative.<sup>8</sup> Sounds, words, and images are the sisters of thought; they are representation and embodiment.<sup>9</sup> This ongoing dialog between image and word is fundamental to the experience of Washington's art. Many, if not most, of the objects that adorn the artist's studio -and indeed most of her work- teem with phrases, fragments of text, or her self-consciously uncluttered and impersonal handwriting\*.

\*(a stylistic choice Washington tells me, an act of resistance<sup>10</sup> set in opposition to the overly gestural "artistic" scrawl that one finds in so many acts of expressive art.)

Sometimes the words are the pictures.

In 2017's *White Out*, a centrally placed note from the artist's mother is conspicuously redacted so that only the enigmatic phrase "And I do suppose that winter may come again..." remains.

Stripped of its context, the fragment becomes another automatic line, riding currents and eddies of multiple and often contradictory meanings. The mixed word/image may be interpreted as threatening or mournful (see footnote 5) and the work's content invoked almost entirely by one's disposition. Coupled with Washington's repeated application of a "chalkboard" ground in so many of her works, we are presented with a structure that emphasizes provisionality, analysis, and revision. Words written are meant to be erased, the residue of 1000 different options of which only their pentimenti remain. Fluorescent colors fade quickly.

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<sup>8</sup>See Caroline A. Jones' "Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses".

<sup>9</sup>In the Orthodox eikon tradition, the distinction between sign and signified is collapsed since for the Orthodox believer, the image of Christ or a saint is viewed not as a depiction, but rather as embodiment, a revelation of the prototype in heaven. Unlike the inaccessible two-way mirror of painting in the Western tradition, this is a portal that engages the lived space of the faithful.

After the second wave of Byzantine iconoclasm in the ninth century, icons, which up until that point were often uninscribed images of holy individuals, more frequently appear accompanied by nomina sacra. Byzantine scholar Karen Boston directly correlates the rapid expansion of these inscriptions to the ninth century writings of Theodore the Studite and their role in the triumph of Orthodoxy. In his *On the Holy Icons* Theodore lays out a precise rationale for the devotional use of icons by emphasizing the likeness of the icon to the prototype in heaven and its connection with name.

The linking of name and likeness is critical, as Theodore himself states: "a name is a sort of natural image" a word-picture that is related to, and an embodiment of, the prototype in the same metaphysical manner as its likeness on the surface of the icon. Boston furthers Theodore's argument by noting that the recorded Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council identify name as "a means of establishing contact with the prototype and transferring honor" to it. According to Robert Nelson, for the believer, to utter a name or word is performative and to invoke it has real world consequences. To speak a name is not to signify, but to call upon and act.

<sup>10</sup>Creative endeavors thrive in an environment of pressures and resistances. In the Western tradition, these pressures take on different forms, but can be characterized by a combination of material, formal and cultural resistances. For centuries, the primary creative pressures painters responded to were formal and material, balancing the limitations of then-current technology with the formal problems of creating enhanced fidelity to life. These pressures gave rise to the development and widespread preference for oil paint over tempera and canvas over panel, as well as the development of techniques such as linear perspective, chiaroscuro, grisaille painting, glazing, etc.

The Beauty of Everyday Things<sup>11</sup>

Two precious cigarettes, a pair of pliers, the keyboard from your MacBook. There is a tradition in art that elevates the everyday, the mundane, and the prosaic, enabling us to see things with new eyes. This didn't begin with the myth of Duchamp's *Fountain* (*nobody ever saw that thing. It was photographed then thrown away*) but with whomever decided that a simple arrangement of flowers and fruit was a subject as worthy as any mythological story or biblical narrative. Washington's facsimiles share this genealogy.

Unlike the carefully choreographed marks that make Jasper Johns' bronze Ballantine Beers so indistinguishable from the "real thing"<sup>12</sup>, Washington's cheap, ham-fisted plaster creations are decidedly not. Even as the blue letters and pitch perfect yellow of a vaguely cylindrical form scream "CAFÉ BUSTED," we know *ceci n'est pas une canette de café*.<sup>13</sup> And we are immediately let in on the joke.

Like a letter from mom shorn of its context or a face of its eyes, these forms are an invitation to perceive and then question, and perhaps suggest that we not take the whole thing too seriously. It is OK to laugh with art.

In these facsimiles, objects that are personal and useful to Washington inexplicably take on lives of their own, assume new forms, and reach out with their own hands. We cannot turn the pages of Erin Washington's Amy Sillman's *Faus Pas*, or drink from the slouching spout of a recreated kettle broken on repeat. They are not actual nor artificial, like the rabbit-duck they are both simultaneously. These works and this exhibition chart the strange, silly, and astoundingly omnivorous terrain of things unknown and arrive as solutions to questions yet unposed.

Erin Washington's studio is in a former store front on Cicero Ave. It is clear and well-lit. Gauzy, translucent curtains diffuse the sun's rays and on this partly cloudy day also provide necessary respite from the perpetual buzz of the street. Fluorescent bulbs flicker overhead. The white walls, drop ceiling, and tiled floor are part workshop, part library, part second-hand store.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>According to the 20th century Japanese writer Soetsu Yanagi, things are beautiful in part because they are useful and become more so as they are used. The essential "rightness" of an object is discovered in its repeated application to the task for which it is suited. Art is a conundrum, for it is both beautiful and useless.

<sup>12</sup>For French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad from good, pleasure from displeasure, the real from the unreal, is the site of the uncanny.

<sup>13</sup>This is not a can of coffee

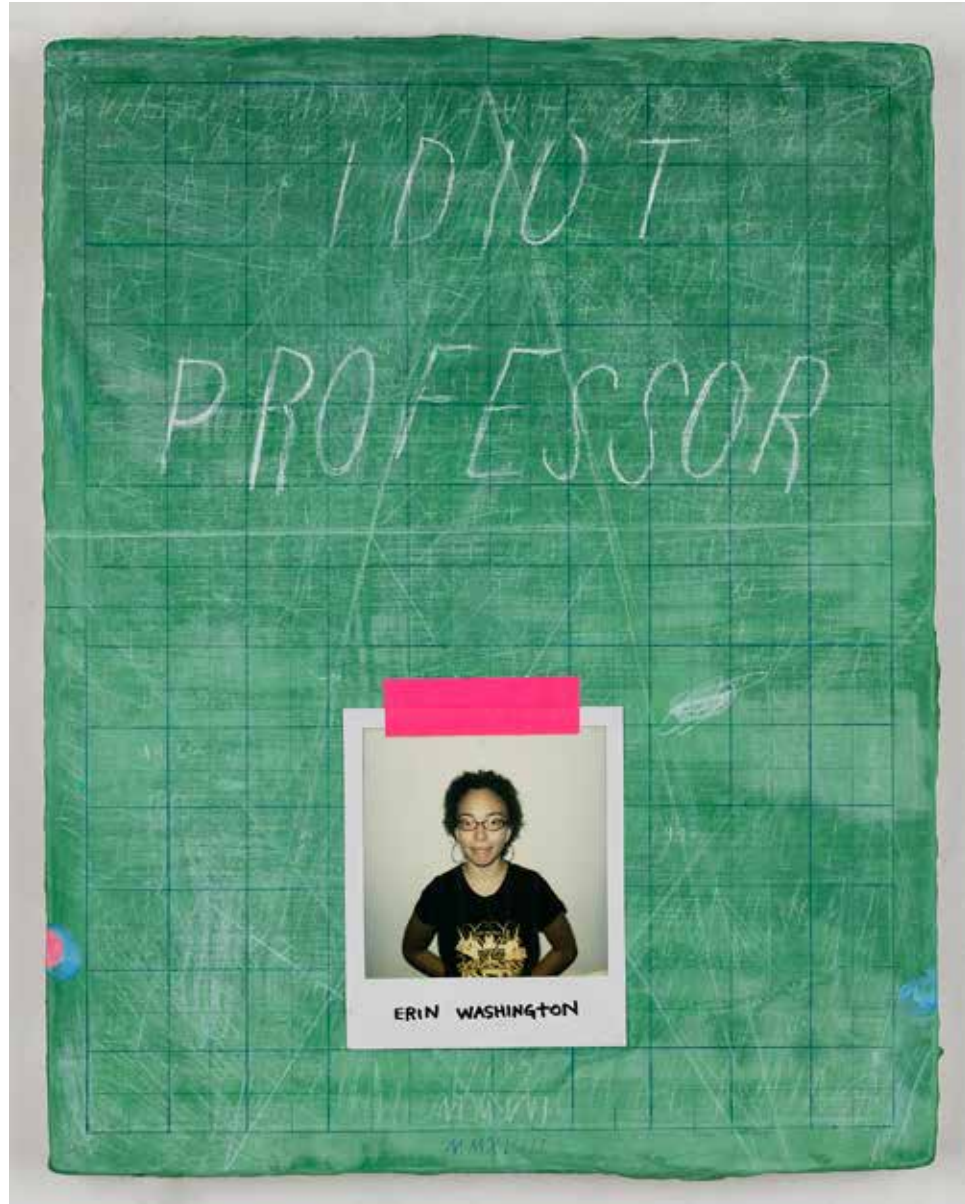
<sup>14</sup>"Through faulty tape splicing, a portion of the music event gets inadvertently repeated at one point." New York Times music critic Martin Williams in his 1970 review of Miles Davis' groundbreaking creation "In A Silent Way". Williams fundamentally misunderstood the revolutionary intent behind what he was experiencing and attributed the musical sample that bookends side B to an editing error.



*Anocheic Vanitas*, 2021, acrylic, caesein, chalk, colored pencil, non-photo blue lead, graphite and gouache on panel, 20" x 24"



*alleyway vanitas*, 2022, acrylic, graphite, gouache and non-photo blue lead on panel, 24" x 31"



*Untitled (idiot professor)*, 2018, graphite, chalk, tape and photograph on board, 11" x 14"



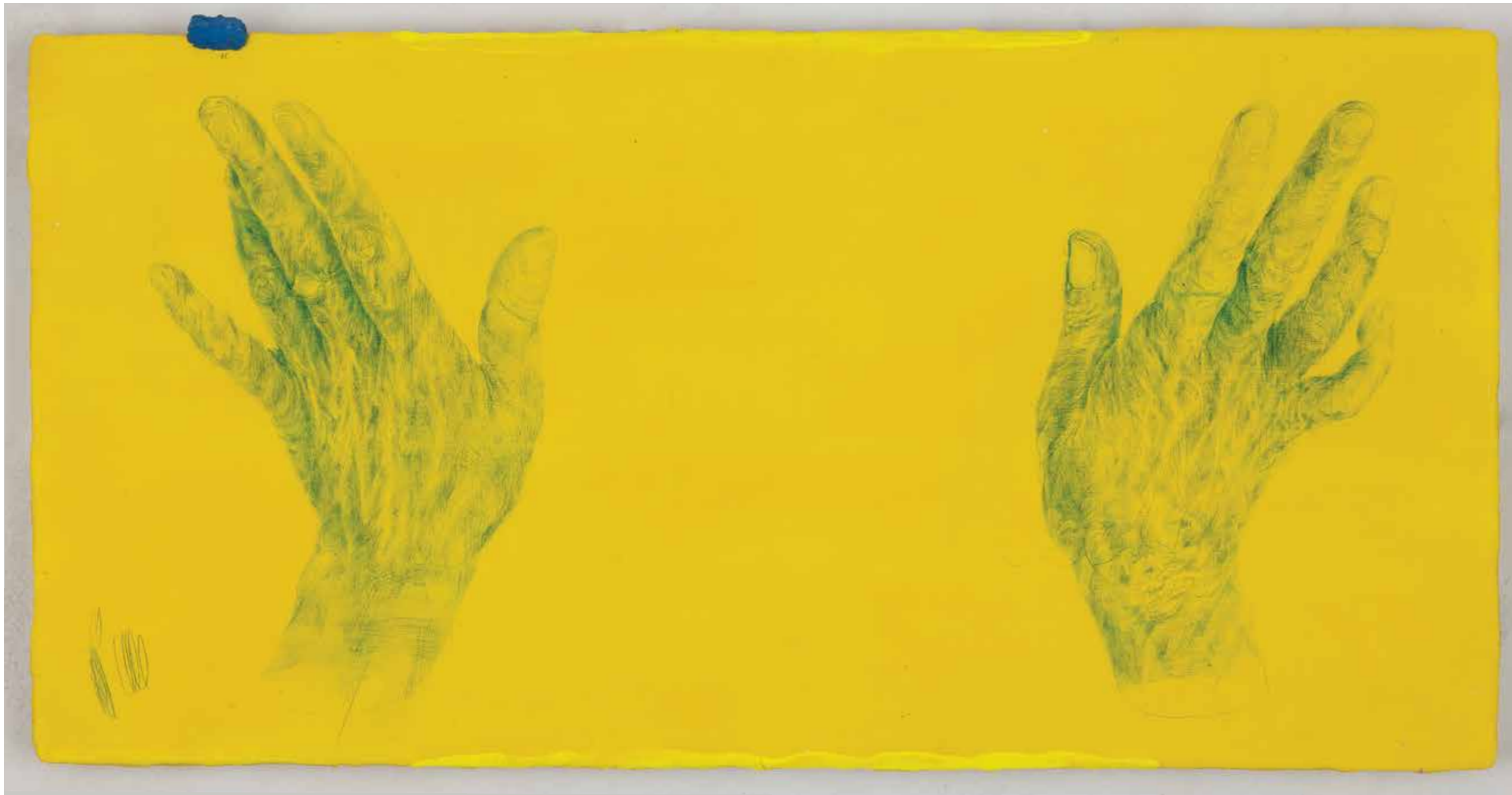
*white out*, 2018, acrylic, chalk, collage, note from the Artist's Mother, and oil on panel, 14.5" x 18.5"



*an enucleation*, 2020, acrylic, collage, colored pencil, gouache, graphite and high-polymer film lead on pink panel with grey square and graphite eyes, approximately 20.25" x 30.5"



*Untitled*, 2021, China marker, colored pencil, collage and ink, 11" x 14"



*Seven Years After Zeus*, 2020, acrylic and non-photo blue lead on panel, 11" x 20"





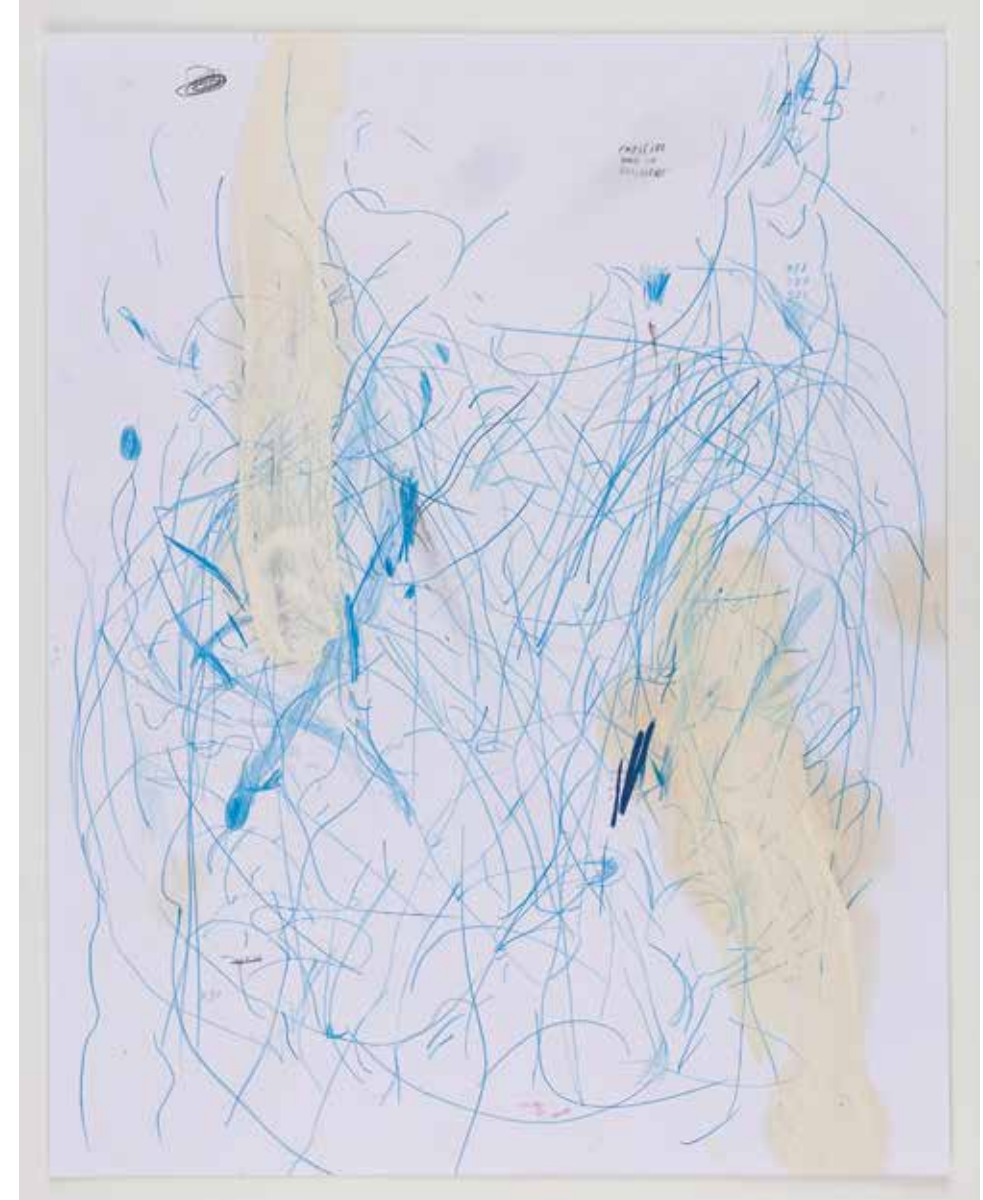
*ruin and cosmic dust*, 2015, chalk, acrylic and gouache on panel, 34.5" x 30"



*untitled (pieta)*, 2022, China marker, colored pencil, graphite, non-photo blue film lead, 8" x 10"



*untitled (BOWERY)*, 2022, colored pencil, non-photo blue film lead and oil paint, 9" x 12"



*untitled (chernobyl series)*, 2020, colored pencil, graphite, non-photo blue film lead and oil paint, 11" x 14"



*Artifact and index*, 2017, acrylic, casein, collage, high polymer film lead, graphite, metalpoint and phototransfer on panel, 24" x 30"



*laocoon too*, 2021, Litho print



*laocoon winter*, acrylic, chalk, collage, note from artist's mother and oil on board, 17" x 22"



*light handed*, 2020, acrylic, chalk, collage, high-polymer film lead, book titled "how to know people by their hands" and nitrile gloves on panel, approx 24.25" x 30.25" x 7"



*light touch*, 2017, acrylic, casein, collage, colored pencil, graphite, gouache, high polymer film lead, oil and yarn from artist's blanket on panel, 23" x 31"



*on black square*, 2020, acrylic, casein, metalpoint, high polymer film lead and the artist's shoes on panel to be displayed horizontally on a pedestal of similar dimensions, dimensions variable (approximately 18" x 18" x 10")

**Image on top:** *idiot professor*, 2017, chalk and collage on found object with artist's shoes, dimensions variable



*Facsimiles in Isolation*, 2021-present, acrylic, cardboard, charcoal, concrete, non-photo blue lead, plaster bandages, graphite and found objects, dimensions variable



Cleve Carney Museum of Art  
**Erin Washington: *I Think We're Alone Now***  
 Saturday, Sept. 10, to Sunday, Nov. 20, 2022

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Erin Washington for exhibiting her work in the Cleve Carney Museum of Art and for working so closely with our staff on this exhibition. I also want to acknowledge Maria Li and Julia Walker for their help in preparing this exhibition. Finally, I would like to thank the College of DuPage engineering, marketing and copy services departments as well as the staff at the McAninch Arts Center.

**Justin Witte**

*Director and Curator*  
 Cleve Carney Museum of Art

Image above: *mothership earth (solution without a problem)*, 2017-present, geodesic dome, spaceblankets and artist's tape, dimensions variable

Cover image: *Six Years After Zeus*, 2019, acrylic, graphite and high polymer film lead on panel, drawing of artist's hand six years after suture removal on panel, 5" x 7"

Back cover image: *Five Years After Zeus*, 2018, acrylic, graphite and high polymer film lead on panel, 5" x 7"



This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by The National Endowment for the Arts.

For ADA accommodations, please email [access@cod.edu](mailto:access@cod.edu) with the event title in the subject line and your accommodation request. Please email two weeks in advance.

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