

Suspended Beliefs

The idea that one can suspend the trauma of their waking lives and seek refuge in their sleep does not always hold true. These works explore the landscape where the waking life interacts with the unconscious.

Highly personal, these pieces deal with the layered and idiosyncratic nature of storytelling and memory—and their roles within family relationships. Beginning from a core idea found within a memory or dream, as each is formalized, the visual narrative takes on multiple threads. Similar to how the mind works while asleep, the stories unfold in a layered and intermingled fashion—connected by images and words—rather than the traditional, linear manner through which the mind processes information while awake. Chronological storytelling is often associated with a horizontal (left to right) format, whereas the storytelling that occurs while dreaming is a more mysterious and stratified process—which is represented by the vertical, scroll-like format of the works.

This ongoing series of visual poems is created using ink, collage, and an antique manual typewriter on paper. The typewritten texts are taken from the artist's personal diaries and poems, while the collaged texts are from a variety of sources. The width of each work is determined by the typewriter's maximum paper-width, then cut vertically at varying lengths—some works are comprised of multiple panels to represent how memory often behaves as fragmented vignettes. Each piece is suspended from the ceiling with unwound tape from audio music cassettes—resembling an oversized mobile—referencing the artist's childhood reliance on listening to music in order to fall asleep.

The works hang vertically from the ceiling—purposefully set at varying lengths, and are spaced apart so that the viewer can move through the space and in between the moving sheets of paper so as to experience the work as if walking through a large-scale mobile.

While our minds work as the inner room of our being, translating words and images, these suspended pieces—set within blank walls to direct the focus around the physicality of the room itself—allow the viewer to engage with the space viscerally, as if walking through a vivid recollection of a memory or dream.

Robert Saywitz
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Suspended Beliefs



Installation
62 x 78 in. / 157.48 x 198.12 cm.

Suspended Beliefs



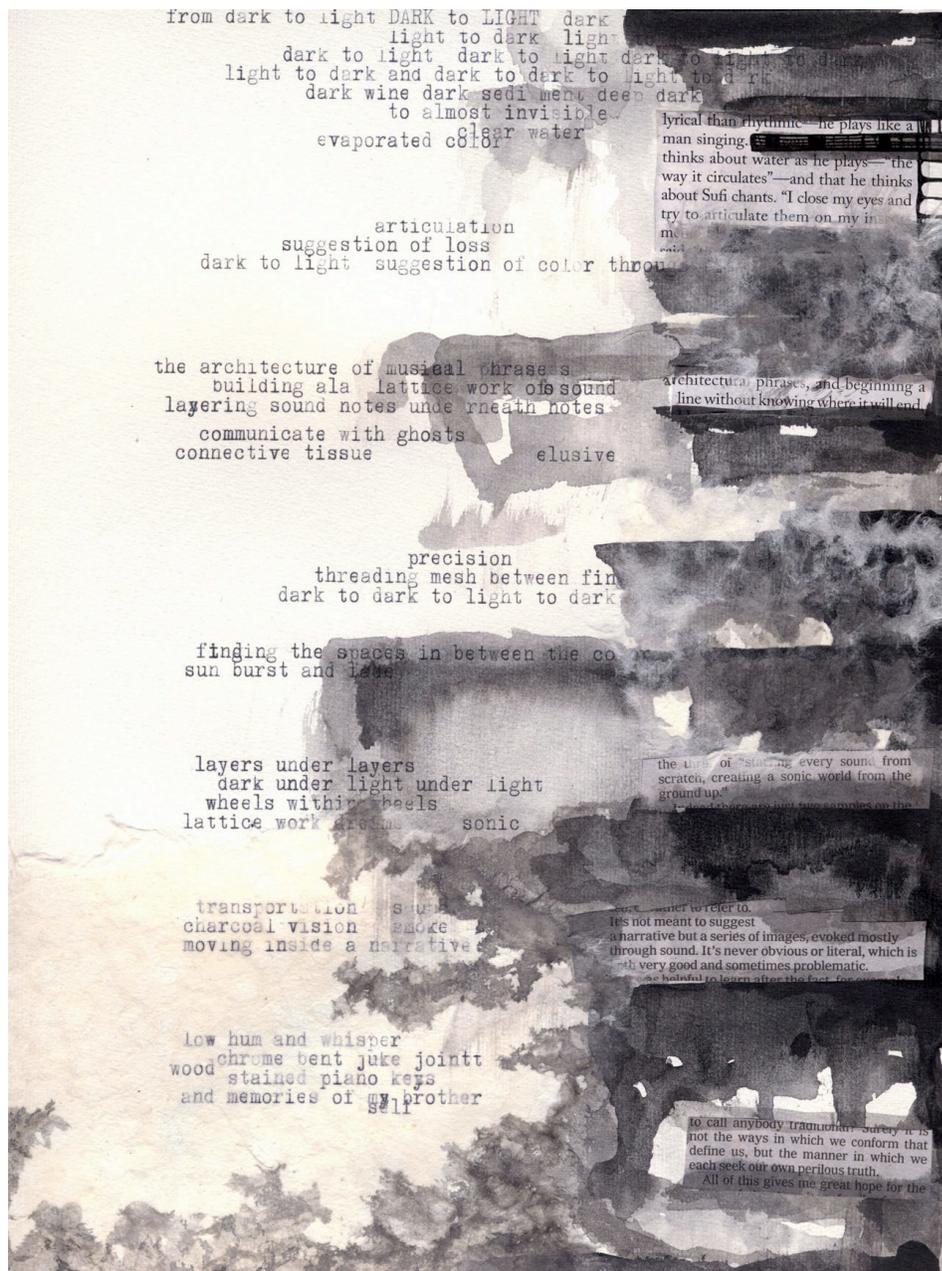
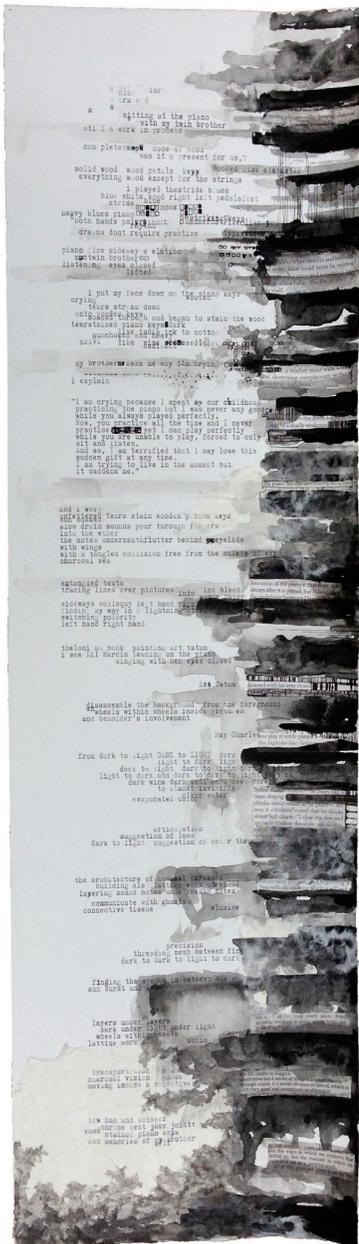
Artwork detail

Circles within Circles

2013

Ink, collage, audio cassette ribbon
and manual typewriter on paper
[three panels connected vertically]
36 x 8.5 in. / 91.44 x 21.59 cm.

Suspended Beliefs



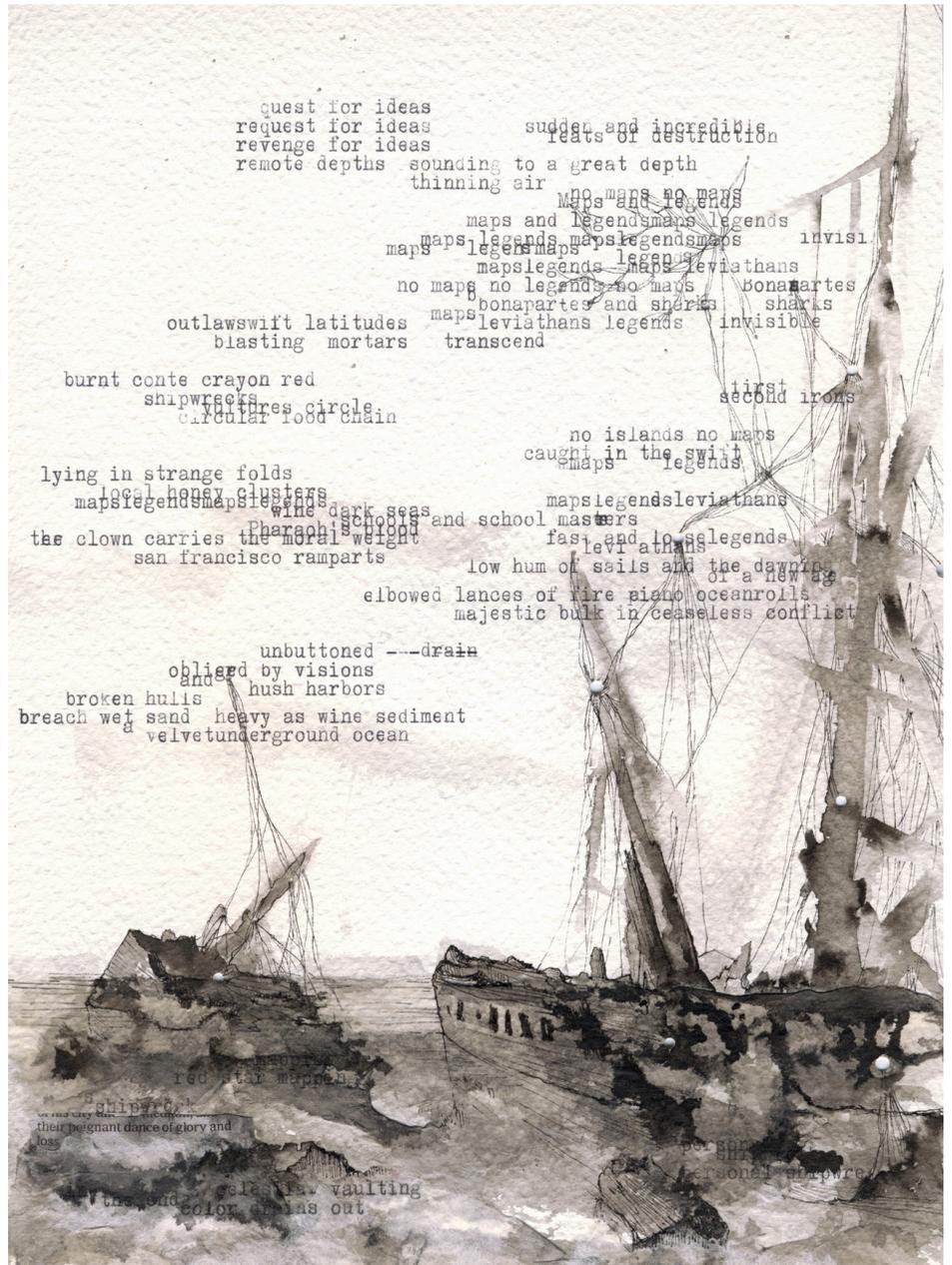
Artwork detail

Piano Roll

2013

Ink, collage, audio cassette ribbon
and manual typewriter on paper
30 x 8.5 in. / 76.2 x 21.59 cm.

Suspended Beliefs



Artwork detail

Shipwrecks

2013

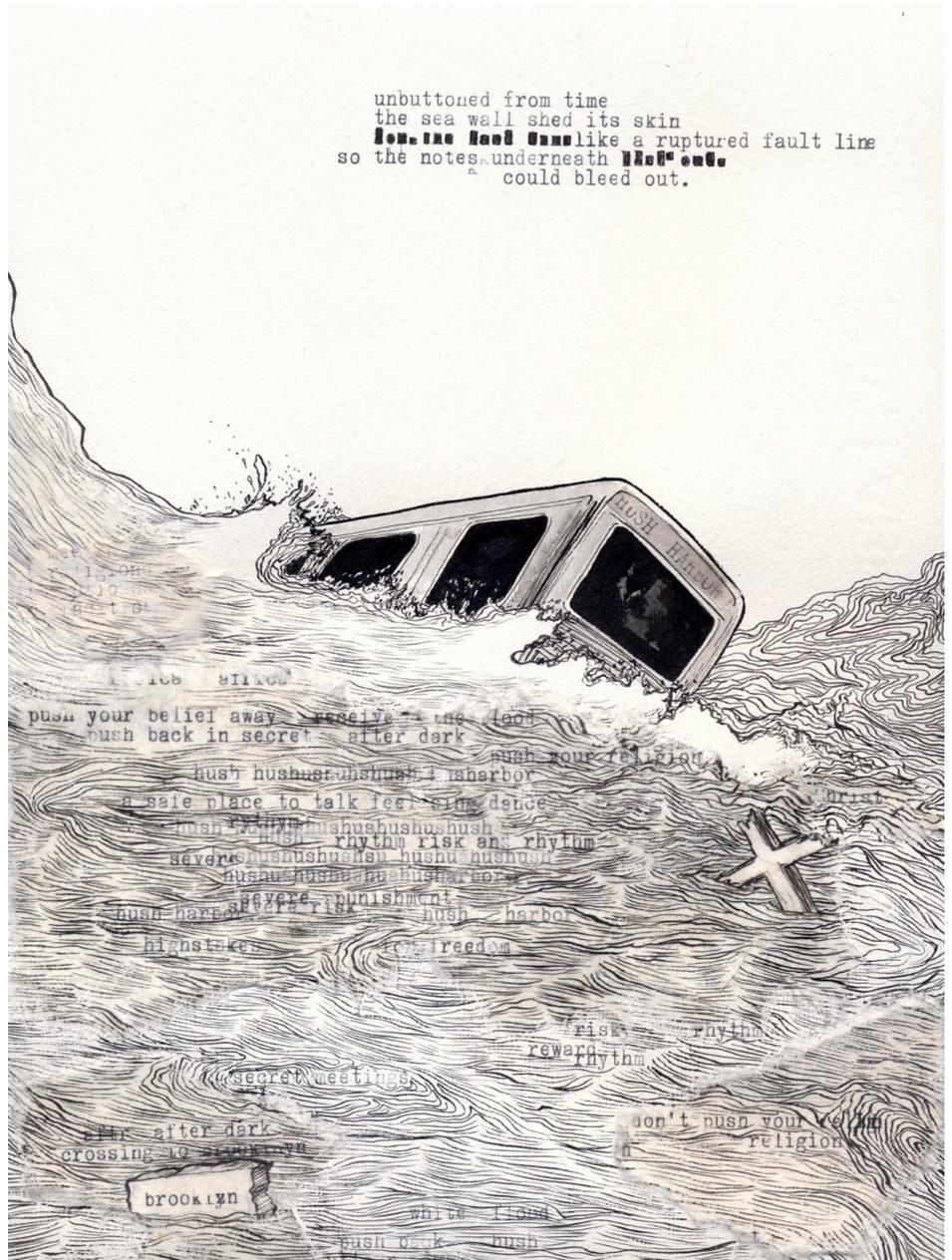
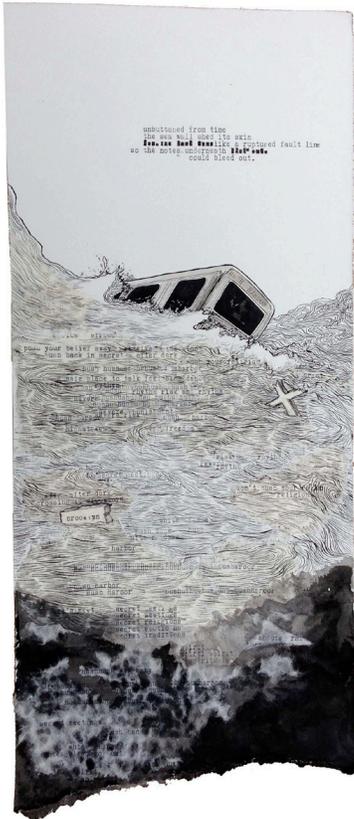
Ink, collage, audio cassette ribbon

and manual typewriter on paper

[two panels connected vertically]

24.125 x 8.5 in. / 61.278 x 21.59 cm.

Suspended Beliefs



Artwork detail

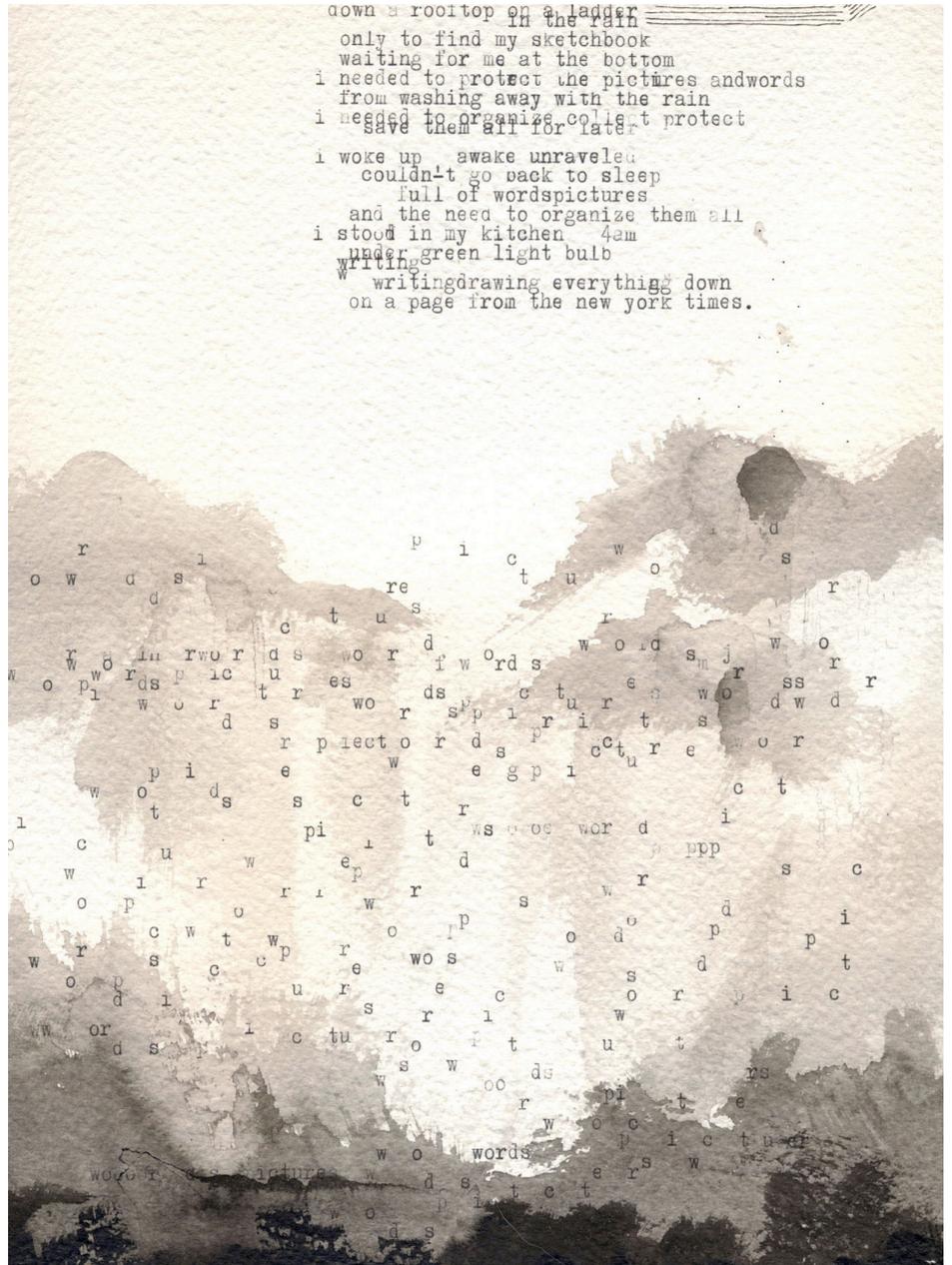
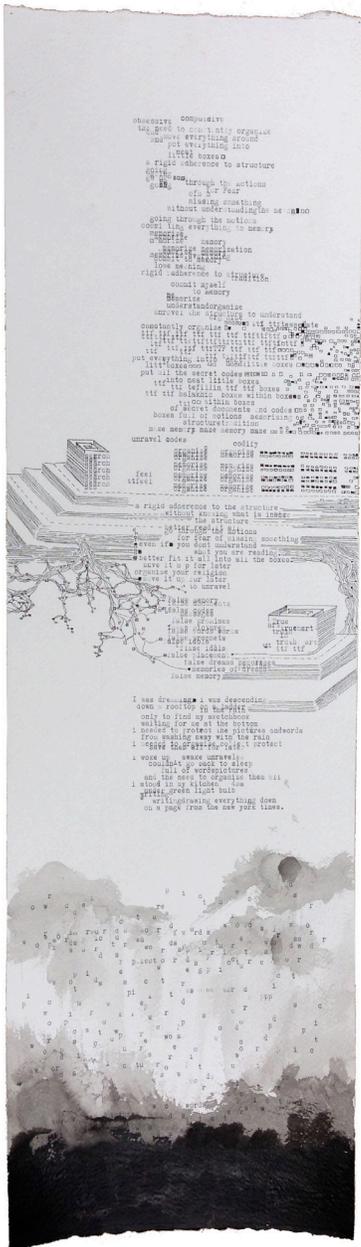
Hush Harbor

2013

Ink, collage, audio cassette ribbon
and manual typewriter on paper

19.75 x 8.5 in. / 50.165 x 21.59 cm.

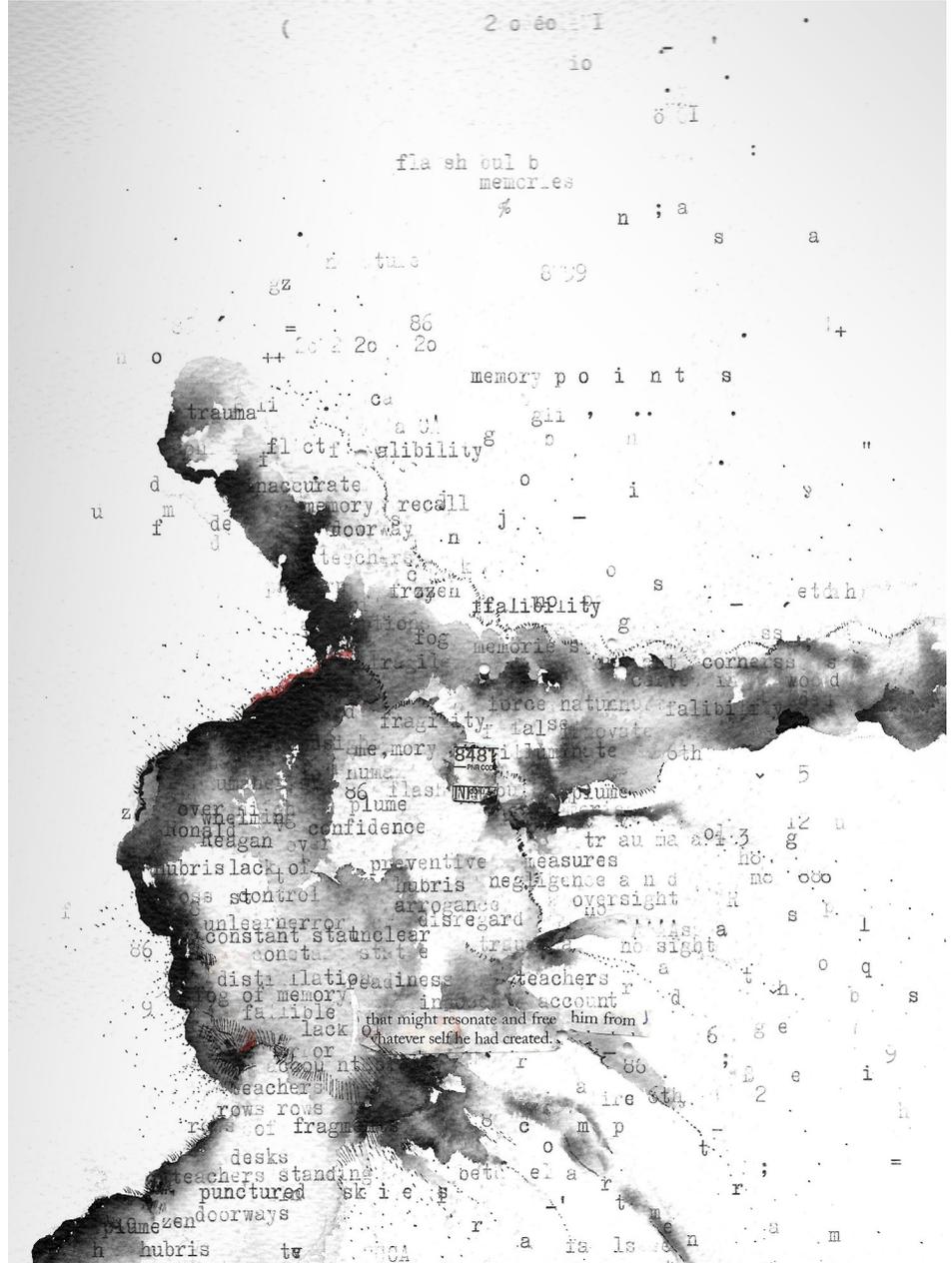
Suspended Beliefs



Artwork detail

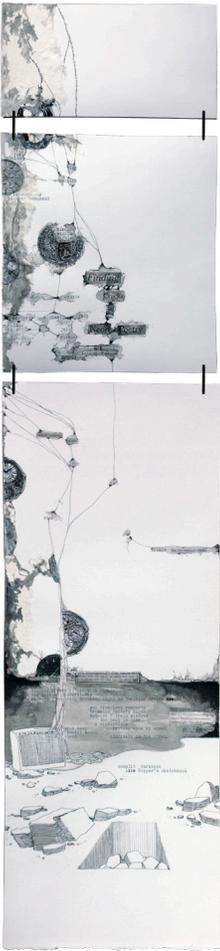
Compulsion
2013
Ink, audio cassette ribbon
and manual typewriter on paper
29.5 x 8.5 in. / 74.93 x 21.59 cm.

Suspended Beliefs



Artwork detail

Unusual Plume
2020
Ink, collage, audio cassette ribbon
and manual typewriter on paper
30 x 8.5 in. / 76.2 x 21.59 cm.



Circles within Circles

36 x 8.5 in. / 91.44 x 21.59 cm.

This piece deals with the complexity of the immigrant experience, family relationships, and more specifically, my relationship to my paternal grandparents—after whom I’m named, but who died a year before I was born. One of the ideas this piece starts to unravel is the power of myth and why the relationships we have with family members that we’ve never met, are sometimes more powerful than the contemporary ones with whom we interact daily. A recurring icon throughout this piece is the pocket watch, a powerful symbol that gets handed down from generation to generation. The inner workings of the watch also hold great significance for me in the context of complex relationships and the passing of time. Some of the watches are broken, some are whole, and some reveal the inner workings—the circles within circles—that enrich our lives.



Piano Roll

30 x 8.5 in. / 76.2 x 21.59 cm.

A dream I had about my relationship with my brother—and the powerful connection of music that has always bound us closely together—inspired personal narratives about identity, desire, regret, and loss. In the dream, I am eight years old—sitting at a piano with a twin brother, though in reality, my brother is four years older than I. I begin to play the piano beautifully, then put my face down on the keys and begin to cry—my tears soaking through the wooden keys. My brother asks me why I am crying. I look at him and say, “I’m crying because I spent my childhood practicing the piano, but was never any good at it, while you played perfectly. Now, you practice constantly and cannot play well, while I never practice and suddenly, I’m able to play perfectly. I’m terrified that I may lose this gift at any time, so am trying to live in the moment.”



Shipwrecks

24.125 x 8.5 in. / 61.278 x 21.59 cm.

The singular, arresting vision of a shipwreck is the focus of this work, which addresses themes of searching for one’s path, chasing dreams to the detriment of yourself and those around you, zealotry, hubris, and unreasonable quests. It also explores a lost sense of identity and trying to reclaim one’s values. When viewed against incoming light, one can see multiple patterns of punched holes in the paper, varying in size, reflecting the idea of constellation mapping and navigation when lost at sea. The holes shine through the bottom panel, to symbolize the pervasive nature of light—even under the most oppressive and dark circumstances.



Compulsion

29.5 x 8.5 inches / 74.93 x 21.59 cm.

The work confronts the idea that each generation adheres to certain religious ideals, and passes them down to each successive generation—and questions why certain philosophies and rituals continue to remain ingrained in our culture, while others slip away. Visual cues within the work reference phylactery—Jewish Tefilin prayer boxes—as an iconic symbol of mystery and ritual. The work also investigates how important religious rites play out as a rote process bereft of the true meaning behind them—performed as perfunctory and compulsive versions due to fear, cultural pressure, or other myriad reasons.



Hush Harbor

19.75 x 8.5 inches / 50.165 x 21.59 cm.

This piece delves into the nature of history and memory—and what happens when their connecting wall is breached. It explores the secret and perilous journey of the immigrant odyssey and the reliance on religion as a support structure during difficult times. The title refers specifically to African American slaves who were forced to gather and conduct their religious meetings in secret, because their 'owners' were fearful about them assembling without supervision. The meetings were held after dark, in secluded areas—Hush Harbors—where they could combine their African religious traditions with Christianity. Clandestine ritual is embedded in my own ancestry, as Jewish history is rich with secret meetings which were held to practice religion and song, free from the tyranny of oppressing regimes.



Unusual Plume

30 x 8.5 inches / 76.2 x 21.59 cm.

Memories born of an emotionally impactful moment—flashbulb memories—create a highly detailed imprint or 'snapshot' of circumstance. This piece examines my own flashbulb memory of the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy in 1986—a sudden, first exposure to death by witnessing a live catastrophe, experienced on a personal and collective level, as we watched it unfold on television, alongside our teachers and classmates. Only later was the Challenger explosion revealed not to be an accident, but an easily avoidable tragedy resulting from human error, lack of accountability, hubris, and prioritizing schedules over scientific evidence. The title of the piece refers to the beginning of the cover-up which shifted the blame away from NASA, and the innocuous language in the official NASA report—which described video evidence of flames leaking out of the rocket booster o-ring as an "unusual plume." The artwork invokes other significant events that share the tragic thread of human behavior as the root cause—from 9/11 to the recent wildfires throughout California, and the disastrous oil spills of the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon.

Robert Saywitz is a Bay Area-based multi-disciplinary artist, designer, illustrator, and visual storyteller. He creates graphic narratives in his original works on canvas, paper, found objects, and artist books with the intention of building images infused with emotion as a magnification and intensification of our daily life experiences. These images represent glimpses of how he perceives the places, people, and sounds within himself and the world around him.

Finding inspiration from collective and personal histories—and often the world of music—Saywitz approaches each project as an investigative journalist might begin to research, analyze, and unpack certain stories or moments in time that were either overlooked, misunderstood, or simply forgotten. He seeks out ideas from the world of history, books, and news stories, but his personal studio—full of seemingly random artifacts including old instruction manuals, maps, magazine clippings, keys, matchbooks, old typewriters, and ticket stubs—functions as an essential library of inspiration and tools for each project. The artist seeks out materials that will work as a blank canvas for a drawing or painting, but also those which relate to the subject matter. Many of these non-traditional and found materials—including antique books, wooden crates, or music-related items like vinyl and cassettes—are part of Saywitz's process to breathe new life into discarded or antiquated objects that often find themselves on the street or in second-hand shops. Often the deterioration of the materials will add to his storytelling. The manual typewriter also plays a large role in his recent works—a nod to his skillset as a graphic designer, and his passion for typography and the physical book.

Saywitz believes that the creative process of the visual artist closely mirrors that of the musician. Both adhere to laws of rhythm, harmony, tone and composition—while utilizing elements within a specific medium to create original and evocative stories. Just as the musician forms a composition through the arrangement of notes, melodies, and silence, the visual artist composes a story using form, color, and negative space. His work has been exhibited at various art spaces and galleries in New York and California.

