

A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.

Joan Didion

Debra Scacco in conversation with Deb Klowden Mann in the context of The Letting Go — December 10, 2015

Deb Klowden Mann: One of the things I love about this show is that it is a very diverse body of work, but each element speaks to the overall context of the exhibition in such a wonderful way. And while each work has a chance to resonate individually, there is an obvious connection between the pieces. It's something you can feel without reading or hearing Debra speak about it, but it is so wonderfully enhanced by hearing where she's coming from. So to start with, I'm going to ask you to tell us about the conceptual grounding of the show, which I know very much connects to the foundations of your overall practice.

Debra Scacco: My work centers around the fiction of memory and its relationship to place. I'm interested in where we come from and how we remember where we come from; and how, over time, the compression of memory and place shapes the person we want to be. I work with many different expressions of this idea, often times in an effort to compile time, memory and place into a sort of utopian vision. I'm also very interested in interpretations and intentions of cartography: how we look at maps and the role they play in our lives. It all relates to the larger issue of how we, as individuals, consider place and distance, and how this affects our identity over time.

DKM: Could you take us through the specific points you use when you're looking at place, and how that translates into the bodies of work?

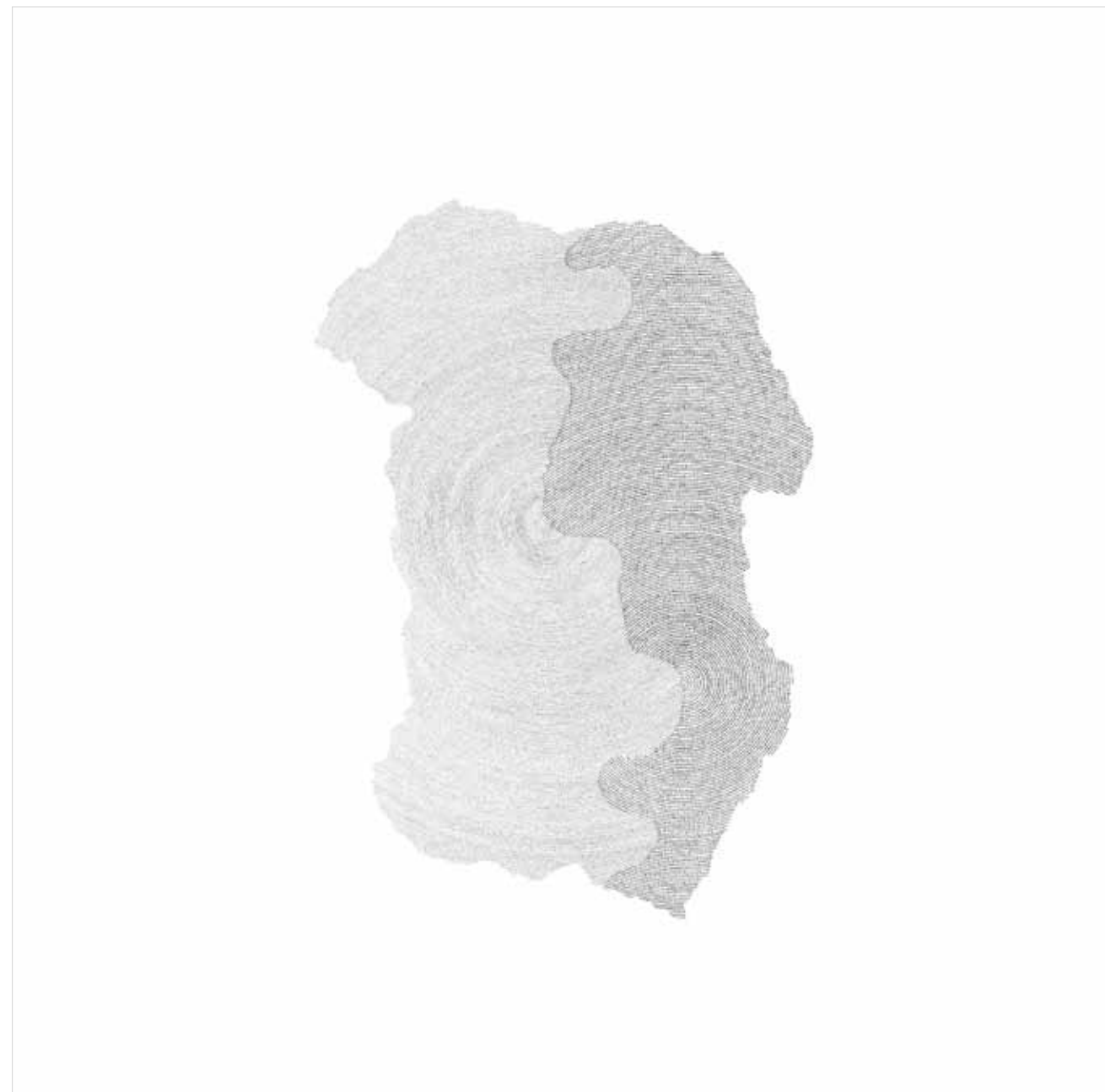
DS: I instinctively make work about what I know best, which is my own history. So I use my personal experience as a catalyst to make work about what I believe is a general state of placelessness for a lot of people in contemporary society. My initial examinations of this idea looked at the physical spaces I grew up in: patterns on furniture, the structure of our family home, (REF: *I dream of coming back...*) all things very specific to my family and my culture.

And then, over the years, that has evolved into looking at physical place (REF: *I cannot reach you*) and how that affects our perceptions of ourselves, how we present and edit ourselves as adults both internally and externally. When I started to really consider this, I became almost obsessed



I dream of coming back to you
(I dream you will come back to me)

—
Ink on tracing paper
15" x 35" / 2011



I cannot reach you

—
Ink on paper
58" x 58" / 2012

with the geography of where I had been, to try and understand this relationship between instinctual movement and passive movement. Why are we at times so confident about certain decisions, when at others we are paralyzed by the seemingly simple decision to stay or leave?

These decisions that on paper can seem just a part of the natural movement of contemporary life have huge effects on the path our lives take. In many ways my work seeks to understand these movements on a micro-level. How and why have these decisions been made? Looking at this in a physical way lead to this obsession with space and geography and boundaries and distance.

DKM: One of the things I love when I watch people come into the show is the immediate recognition of mapping and place. As they look at your work, they attempt to fit it into something they might know, as if they're sort of *supposed* to know. They feel that they are supposed to know this place, supposed to know what this is, but they don't. And yet, at the same time, they seem to have a real emotional connection and reaction to whatever it is they *don't* know about it, but are somehow connecting it to. Is that desire to identify place something you were conscious in trying to effect?

DS: It wasn't intentional, but presented itself naturally. I had begun this very regimented investigation of where I had been, and was exploring various articulations and interpretations of this. One of the first maps that I made (REF: *Where do we go from here*) is a map of London, using the central border of the city but cutting off on the north side of the Thames — both because that was my version of the city, and also because I didn't want it to be immediately identifiable. The territory was articulated through language, drawn in a pattern derived from the furniture in my childhood home. This representation of geography was both specific and abstracted; yet I watched people continually try to identify this place in the world.

The natural instinct, *need* almost, is to immediately try to root place in reality. I hadn't anticipated this, but I found it totally fascinating. I also immediately recognized the same instinct in myself. When we see something that we believe to represent a specific place, we feel the need to locate ourselves within that. We constantly seek this familiarity of place, and that



is what my work talks about. It is a desire and need to find a familiarity and comfort in the place that you are in, while also searching for a place that in some way makes you feel a sense of belonging.

Audience member: Do you enjoy playing with the tension between belonging and not belonging? There's an internal desire for one or the other, and also a freedom in possessing both at the same time. Does your work play between those two mindsets?

DS: My work exists exactly between those two mindsets. It is about trying to maintain a loyalty to your history while also having the freedom to seek what you desire for the person you are now. And I believe that those two things are often at odds. Because while you want to honor and stay loyal and live up to what you believe are cultural expectations or obligations, you also

Where do we
go from here

—
Ink on tracing paper
25" x 35" / 2010

have your own desires, your own instincts and ways of wanting to be which may not necessarily parallel your history.

In the work, this physically translates into a constant battle between controlled and organic. Many of the materials and processes I work with are very organic, yet are all completely led by sets of rules. I formulate systems based on my conceptual foundations for that particular body of work, so that when I actually start to make the physical pieces, I'm just articulating the system. With much of my work, it may not be immediately obvious that it is created through a rule-based system; but it absolutely is. The ideas make the rules. And when I'm making the work, I basically just follow the rules.

Audience member: So what are the rules?

DS: The rules are a tiered reflection of the idea in some way, so they will vary from body of work to body of work. For example, *This is our past* and *This is our future* are based on the flight paths between New York and London, and Atlanta and London: my two very distinct points of history and the point where I spent the bulk of my adult life until very recently.



This is our past /
This is our future

—
Ink and acrylic on paper
39" x 79" each / 2015

Audience member: So you use those flight paths as a structure? And then you expand on the personal?

DS: Exactly.

DKM: If anyone hasn't been up close enough to see these pieces, they actually contain a phrase in Debra's hand that is written repeatedly within the bounds of the structure of the painted shape underneath.

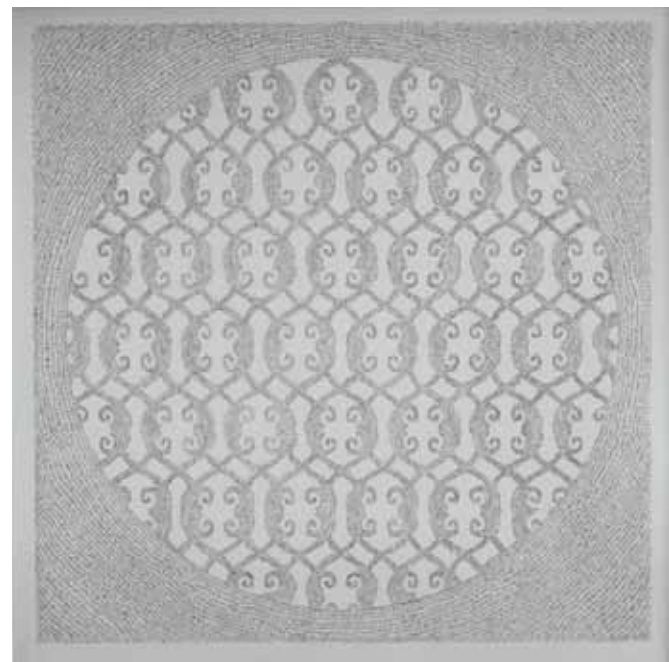
Watching people discover this aspect of your work reminds me of my first introduction to your work. I knew of your work through Claessinka Anderson's gallery (Marine Contemporary), but I think the very first time I encountered your work in person was at a fair that Claessinka and I both did in LA. And for any of you that have had the dubious pleasure of art fairs, you know that if something stops you in that context, in a way where everything else disappears and you can actually fully engage with it, it's something to really take note of. I remember standing in front of your work and feeling that there were these layers that I was allowing myself to respond to, both because of the extremely organic nature of the work and because there was a system. I believe that part of me might have resisted my initial emotional response if there hadn't also been this layered system within the work, to contain it. And so I think even when people don't notice immediately what the work might be or the way it functions, I think they still get that feeling.

All of this prompts me to ask — when did you begin to use the personal writing?

DS: I began to use language in an almost accidental way. When I first started making work, I was a lens-based artist. I was making photographs and video, and was working within a medium I always felt very frustrated by. I felt disconnected from the process. Eventually I started to experiment with installation and sculpture, allowing myself to play, and just to really let the idea dictate the medium and let that be okay. But I arrived at a point where I felt like my ideas were on one side and my work was on the other, and they weren't communicating. So I had to stop until I could figure out what was missing, until I could figure out how to make my work honest again.

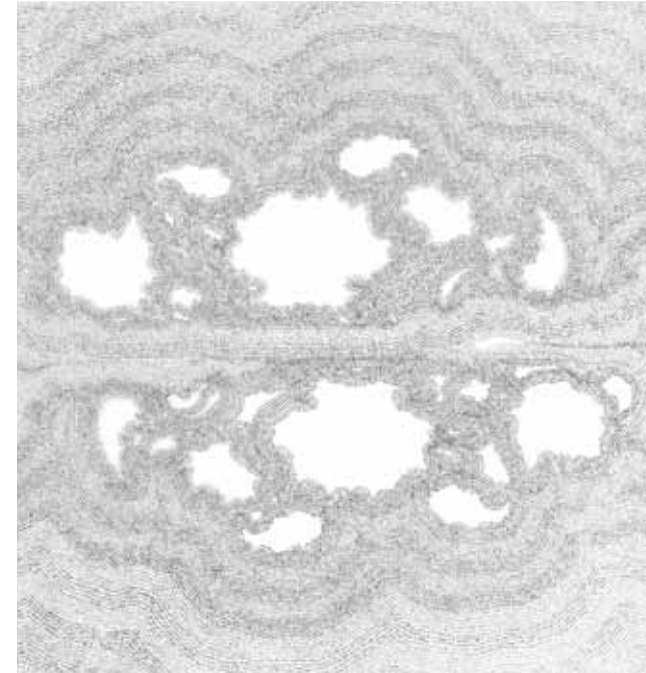
I let go of a lot of the external concerns and insecurities that come with defining yourself as an artist – the concerns over showing enough, the concerns over funding the next show, the constant struggle for time when you're balancing going to work and going to your studio... I let go of showing altogether, and focused strictly on making. I spent my studio time writing, taking Polaroids, and sketching with no particular goal aside from enjoying what I was making at that moment. I went through all the work I had made to that point, to try to identify the common thread that I had been trying to communicate. And when I looked back through my sketchbooks, it was all writing. So I started playing with it and playing with it, many times unsuccessfully, until I finally landed on drawing.

The language itself evolved organically, through looking at my writing over the course of many years and identifying words and phrases that kept returning. So I thought, if the reason I stopped doing this is because I was hiding from something, then the way back in is to release it. Be honest. Let it be what it is.



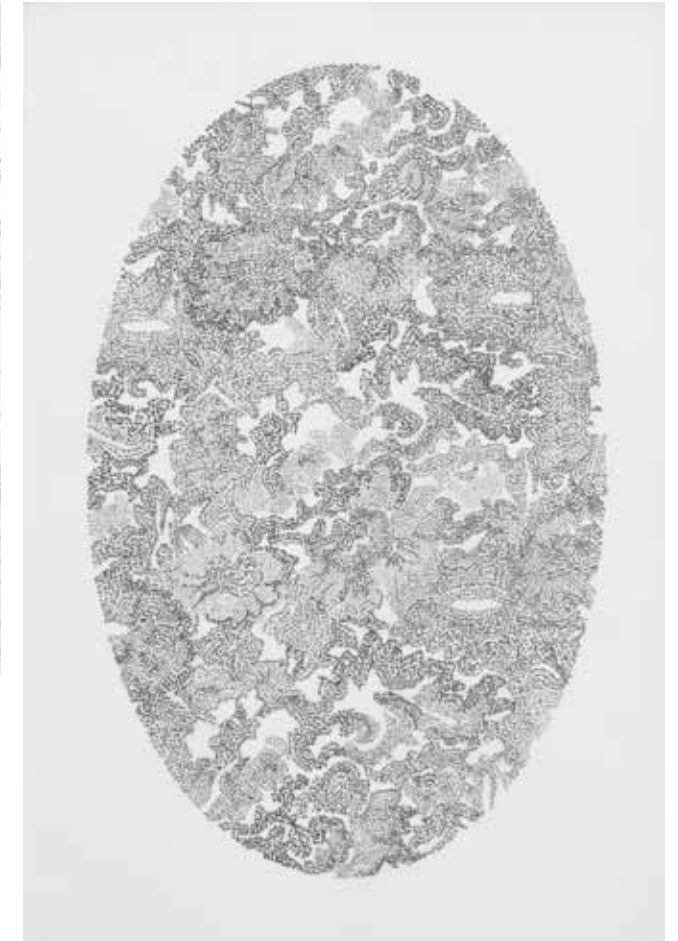
I keep you close to me

—
Ink on tracing paper
13" x 13" / 2010



A part of me belongs to you

—
Ink on tracing paper
22" x 22" / 2010



Stay with me forever

—
Ink on tracing paper
14" x 11" / 2010

Audience member: I was thinking of how you use systems and thinking of somebody like Charles Gaines, where the systems are right in front of you. There are grids and you can kind of figure it out. The Flight Path pieces are more like that, but the *Sedimentary* works are process painting, and *The Letting Go* is about line, and mass and space. Do you care if people look at that out of context and see process as opposed to idea? I know with the way you work, you have very specific ideas. Does it matter to you whether it's translated in an obvious way?



Sedimentary I: 10306/11219
Mixed media on cutaway board
55" x 55" / 2015



The Letting Go
Hand dyed nautical rope, wood
21' x 11' x 8' / 2015

DS: I think as visual artists, we actively choose to work in a visual media. So for anyone to engage with the ideas, they have to be drawn in to the aesthetic in some way. So if a resemblance to process painting or any other formal concern is a gateway into the ideas, then I'm okay with that.

Audience member: It's like seduction.

DS: I suppose it is. Also the point from which I work is just so personal. I don't know if I want you to know absolutely everything. The very specific way I work is in some ways a release of responsibility as well; because once I have the system, the work is going to be what it is. I don't allow myself the ability to make certain decisions — because the system has already told me how it's made.

I sometimes fear that the complexity of it may get lost, but also don't want people to look at my work and feel what I feel in my head. It gets very complicated — you would just want to run out of the room. [laughs] So it's probably best that you don't know all the rules.

Audience member: So the systems contain and structure the way you work. I'm wondering how that helps you explore the emotional content and concept of the work. Are those systems also a way of mapping your experience?

DS: Yes, I think that's a great way to put it. A lot of what I do is about the desire to obtain the unobtainable. In the last few years, the linguistic base has shifted to a simultaneous request and demand. Or about owning time, owning things that, as people, we cannot own. I think this very structured way of working somehow gives me permission to explore emotional and intangible territories. If I didn't have that structure, I wouldn't know where to begin.

DKM: It makes sense to me that you came to your work in this way - this honest, releasing out into the world, but doing it within the framing of your systems. Just as I mentioned earlier with your language pieces, which I see as offering both release and containment at the same time, I believe your work overall offers a wonderful contradiction. On the one hand you're saying it's

impossible to fix and hold on to all these things that we feel from our past and our present, all that we remember, and the places that are important to us; but yet at the same time you are offering us the fantasy of being able to do just that — to fix all of those things here, in time, in a way that we can in fact hold on to. Can you speak about this idea in relation to *The Letting Go*, and where it came from?

DS: The Letting Go came from a quote I discovered while doing a residency at Ellis Island Museum in 2012. I'll just read the quote as it is really poetic, and I certainly can't improve upon it. It's from *La Merica*, a book by Michael LaSorte about pre-WWI Italian immigration. The quote, cited to Luciano DeCrescenzo, is:

Many immigrants had brought on board balls of yarn, leaving one end of the line with someone on land. As the ship slowly cleared the dock, the balls unwound amid the farewell shouts of women, the fluttering of handkerchiefs, and the infants held high. After the yarn ran out, the long strips remained airborne, sustained by the wind, long after those on land and those at sea had lost sight of each other.

For such a long time I have worked with this idea of distance, and this was the first instance I had found that articulates distance in a physical way. I think a lot about the physicality of distance, I think because my father emigrated from Sicily in 1949. I often think of his initial journey versus the way we travel as a modern society... He measured distance. He was on a boat for eighteen days, and he felt every single mile that he crossed. And so, how privileged am I to travel between New York and London and LA, and to never feel that kind of distance. I think that lack of understanding, that lack of measuring, is a huge influence on my work, and is really key to this piece. There's also the contradiction of holding on and letting go, knowing the journey cannot complete until that tie is broken. But the idea that really resonates is that truly letting go is impossible. We always carry with us memory and place. So I began with these beautiful airborne colored strands; and I anchored them.

This piece [laughs] is like the shining glory of the rules. The seven large points are based on seven boundaries that I've been working with

for the last several years. They are boundaries that are significant to my personal history – divides in places that I and my parents have lived, and that my family emigrated from in Italy and Sicily. So, if you consider me as a geographic being, I am the sum of these seven parts. I've worked with these boundaries in many ways, for many many years. And then each of the nineteen small points corresponds to a place I've lived, plotted on the walls in three sections: West Coast, East Coast and London.

Once I realized that it was about anchoring these lines, I established systematic connections between every point of origin and every destination. And so it took a little bit of engineering...

DKM: A little bit? [laughs]

DS: [Laughs] Yes, just a little bit. Each origin also has its own color, which in turn becomes a way of tracing the destination back to the origin. Which of course is virtually impossible within this kind of mass.

Audience member: Since you brought up color, I'd love to ask what your relationship to color is, and how that fits into your system and the way that you think? Because your earlier work, especially your very early work, had no color at all, it was just black and white. This show, more than any of your other shows, seems to have a very deep relationship to color. So I would really love to have you talk a little bit more about that evolution for you.

DS: Any change in my work is a very pained decision that usually goes all the way around the houses and back to where it started. When I first returned to making work, I wanted to start from the most basic materials possible. I started working with language, with these very emotional phrases, working with patterns, shapes and references from my childhood. I felt incredibly strongly that, under no circumstances, should any decision be arbitrary. So I didn't use color because there was no specific reason for it. And then, when I started working with paint, the palette was always very restrained because it was about distance, which for me is about the ocean. So I worked only with blues, in particular grey blue, as something that is very organic, oceanic and very representative of a particular kind of

distance or space. *The Letting Go*, more than any other piece, is about marine voyage and measuring physical distance. And so it felt right that each origin adopts a color of the ocean. So it became seven blues.

In the *Sedimentary* works, I played around with them being fluorescent, as it's something I would love to do just because I think it looks great. But there was no logic for the palette. I then realized these pieces are still based on the seven boundaries from my history, so they remain blue. But they are a compression of time and memory in a way that can only be a fantasy, so they become electric blue. When I started this body of work, I assigned each boundary a single color. Each piece is made with two of the seven boundaries. So when I start, I know exactly what two colors will be used.



Sedimentary II: 10306/11219
—
Mixed media on cutaway board
55" x 55" / 2015

There's another body of work I made using fluorescent reds, and those were an acceptance of utopia as fantasy. They were purely made by paint and were purely fantastical. And again I went through a whole cycle of what the color should be. Red is a color of duality. It's the color of passion, rage, hatred, love. It is basically a color of contradiction, so became the color of my unattainable utopias.

So even with palettes, they're still tied into systems. With everything that I do, with every action that I make, with every body of work that is conceived, everything relates back to something.



With you I will remain
—
Ink, watercolor and
gouache on paper
36" x 36" / 2013

DKM: And how do your rules regarding color relate to the two reflective pieces? Can you tell us more about what they're based on, and how they relate to the other bodies of work?



Los Angeles River (Artery)

Ink on Duralar
31" x 19" x 5.5" / 2015

Rio de Porciúncula (1769 - present)

Ink on Duralar
168" x 54" x 41.5" / 2015

DS: When things changed in my life and I had this new environment to explore, I thought about what it means to be in a place and to feel that level of familiarity and comfort that we were talking about earlier. In LA we have this crazy concrete structure of a river, which is a fascinating boundary for so many reasons. If you want to talk about contradictions, look at the LA River — it is one giant 51-mile contradiction. There had to be some exploration of the LA River as the boundary of my present, as a symbol of contradiction, and as a catalyst for getting to know this new environment. I wanted to create a topography from my present that I felt I could own and understand. So that for me starts with *Los Angeles River (Artery)*.

The core shape of the piece is a line drawing of the main artery of the LA River. Each line then expands outward from the last; with the idea that although technically I'm working from the origin, the farther I move outward, the more I'm working from my own edited memory of that source. So it's creating my own fiction from the present. And because it is the present, I wanted there to be a direct reflection of the environment, and also a sense of interference in this new fictional landscape. When you look at it, you become the interference in this topography.

I'm interested in the idea of placing people in their environment immediately, and making them conscious of their environment immediately. I think that's where the work is heading, especially with these larger spatial pieces. It's about becoming more aware of our physicality and where we are at the moment, the environment that we're surrounded by and the environment that we move through continually.

DKM: I'd also like to ask about the research you did for this piece. Can you talk a little about the time you spent working with a historian at the Central Library Downtown?

DS: When I first relocated to Los Angeles, I was trying to figure it out, both logistically and conceptually. I was just looking at maps constantly. I come from cities where we don't need to drive; LA is a whole other structure of navigating urban life and assessing where you are. I haven't really driven... ever. [laughs] So driving and highways and this new way of navigating

– it all had to be figured out. And it felt like the place to start was with a dissection of highways.

I did a lot of research on my own into highway evolution and structures in LA, and later learned about the fantastic map collection at the Downtown LA library. There's a map historian there who, if you're really interested, will just gift you map after map after map. So I made an appointment to go. I went in saying, I don't really know what I'm looking for, but I'm really interested in the way we move through Los Angeles as a place, and I'm interested in systems that were never realized, and I'm interested in the LA River. On my first visit I was totally overwhelmed, so kept going back and going back. He wasn't just showing me books – he showed me historic maps that tell incredible stories about our city and how it evolved. And eventually he brought out the map that was the real inspiration for the LA River work. It was long and narrow, hand-drawn on oil skin, from the late 1870s I believe. It was stunning. The whole map is essentially three lines.

When I looked at that, it reinforced the fact that boundaries are only lines. That was the moment I knew exactly what I needed to make. I've now made several line works, and several pieces based specifically on the LA River. While *Los Angeles River (Artery)* is based on the current path, *El Río Porciúncula (1769-present)* is based on the shifting course of the river; so the latter actually represents a compression of time.

Audience member: Were the reflections intentional?

DS: Yes, and the reflection is a fundamental part of the piece. It presents the organic outside of what I'm able to make, and also ties the two spaces together in a non-tangible way. The visible reflection as you enter the gallery is also important, as it allows the present (in the front and back of the gallery) to punctuate the past (in the main gallery).

I had been working with the material for a while in my studio, watching light move off of it, watching it reflect. I hoped it would happen in the space on that scale, but didn't want to get my hopes up too high. Needless to say I was very happy when we switched the lights on.

DKM: How did you get to the point where you moved from working with language to working with line?

DS: That happened in the context of thinking about place and cartography. I had worked with the idea of maps on paper and with the idea of aerial views. What I hadn't worked with is a topographic space that instigates physical exploration. So the real point between the language and line works is a series of gold topographic drawings.

Again they are based on the same seven boundaries from my past. These works look at these boundaries both for what they are factually and the fiction that I have created through my memory. There are seven sets of drawings in pairs, so 14 total works in the series. Each piece is a language piece, but using only one single line of language. Each pair consists of a gold on black drawing and a gold on white drawing. The black is a direct transposition of that boundary, so the line as you see it on a map. And the white is a mirror reflection of that. From each single, very precise boundary made through language, lines emanate outwards, each one based solely on the last. So again, you're always working from the origin, yet the farther you move from it, the more you are in your own distorted memory.



Topographic works:
Boundaries

—
Installation view / 2015

The other bridge between language and line is a sculpture based on the Arroyo Seco (REF: *The space between*). It is a steel construction based on the path of the river, which is also the path of the first highway in LA. The



Let me want I

—
Metallic ink on paper
25" x 32" / 2014



Let me want II

—
Metallic ink on paper
25" x 32" / 2014



and hangs in space on thin steel wire. The steel base supports 8,500 ball bearings held in place only with very tiny magnets. This was my first real exploration of a physical boundary in the present tense, and also perhaps my first real exploration with line.

The LA River works are certainly an extension of both this piece and the topographic drawings, but raise a wider discussion. They highlight our relationship with boundaries, and the physical movement of navigating cities. It happens everywhere, but I think LA in particular is a city where

The space between
—
Steel, ball bearings,
neodymium magnets
8" x 3/4" x 10' / 2013

we can easily forget the direct result of urban infrastructure on our daily movements. For me the LA River is the axis of these discussions on many levels. I want to talk about place not just on a micro-level, but also in the context of the larger landscape.

DKM: I think more and more we use GPS and are constantly focused on where we are; that dot of 'you are here', and only just the very surrounding area. We stop looking at the larger landscape that we're moving through. We navigate through places without really knowing them. And your work captures the way in which we get lost.

DS: I think my work very much speaks to this idea. Just from the generation between my parents and me — I have never had the same understanding of mileage that they have. Because we, as a culture, have lost that necessity to have an understanding of where we are on a larger scale; and that's contradicted by the fact that we know so much about what's happening in other places globally. I really believe we've lost the intimacy of place. And I think that loss is both cultural and physical. And it's also both long-term and immediate.

Audience member: You make these maps or physical representations of emotional spaces of memories. How does that change the way that you interact with the original phenomenon in your head?

DS: Wow. That's a really good question. One thing that can be difficult about working from your own history is that you can no longer perceive it in the same way. So, on one hand, the personal side of memory becomes obstructed by its potential as creative information. But on the other hand, making this work gives me a reason to work with my family and ask questions about their history.

It's interesting — many first-generation children have said their parents don't often talk about their immigrant experience, I think to a large extent because our parents are rightfully proud of and grateful for establishing lives in the country they emigrated to. So as a first-generation child, you are wonderfully immersed in their culture of origin. Yet this

culture is not wholly yours, and you have very little actual information about the source of your own familial environment and traditions. So, to return to the question, while the intertwining of memory and work certainly have an impact on how I remember, it has also created the opportunity to learn so much about my family's past that I wouldn't otherwise know. For example, I was speaking to my parents about a piece I was working on, and I asked them to take me to every home they ever lived in. And although they are so close so frequently, my mom hadn't been to her childhood home in Brooklyn for decades. Watching her react to seeing that house again was incredibly special, and would not have happened if not for the instigation brought on through my work. So while of course my work affects my perception of memory, the more unanticipated effect is that it impacts my family's ways and experiences of remembering as well.

DKM: I'm sure that's something that every generation feels with their children to some extent. I think that there is lack of a shared language to communicate experiences between generations — there's a missing link that we're always trying to overcome. And in the way that you work, it feels like you're creating a language that doesn't exist — for communicating the space between those two experiences.

DS: That makes sense. I think that we get so wrapped up in our lives and the present tense and wishes we may have for the future, that the value of the past can fall by the wayside.

Of course a lot of what I discuss is not actual memory: it is a consciously fabricated version of the past. And even still, in making this work, I get to ask my family very specific questions about their lives, and see them open up about memories that may not otherwise be triggered. So while my relationship with memory has certainly changed, I think this process of working and questioning may also be a vehicle for others to reinterpret and remember in their own way. That's something I hadn't considered, but I'm very happy that it's happening.

DKM: I know it's a late, rainy Thursday. Thank you everyone so much for coming. Debra, thank you so much.