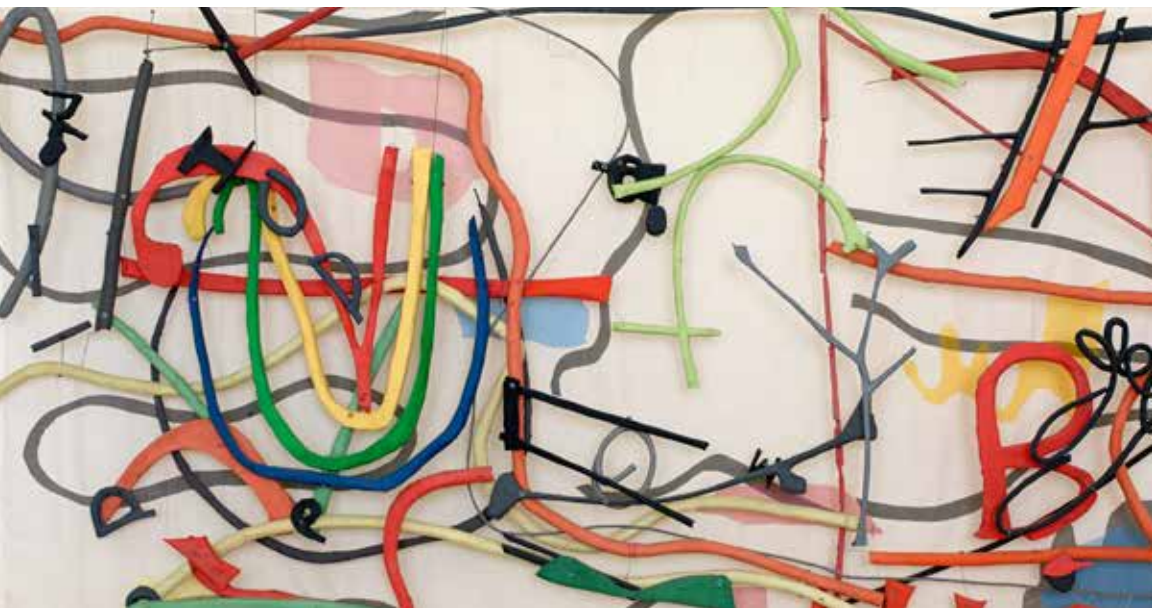


Alexis Petroff *Floating Drawings*



List Gallery, Swarthmore College

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Front cover: *Floating Drawing no. 4*, 2009, detail
cotton paper, molded and painted with gouache on wire armature,
muslin and appliqued painted silk grounds, 96 x 48 x 12 inches

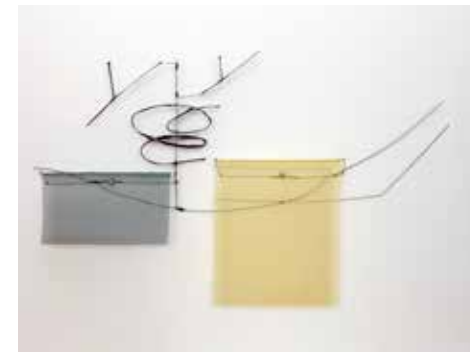
Alexis Petroff's *Floating Drawings*: Expanding Our Notion of Landscape

—Blake Oetting '18, List Gallery Intern

The representation of landscapes has been a recurring preoccupation throughout the history of art. During the past century, the genre has evolved as artists address the varied effects of industrial development and globalization. Rapidly changing technologies, particularly digital media and satellite imagery, provide artists with new ways to explore and illuminate our changing place in the world. Alexis Petroff's art builds on traditional craft and formal concerns while also incorporating technological advances and digital modeling, resulting in a hybrid approach that appears fresh and contemporary. Taking inspiration from a variety of cultural sources ranging from Japanese scrolls to Google Maps, Petroff expands our definition of how and where a landscape can exist.

Walking into *Floating Drawings*, Petroff's List Gallery exhibition, one will not necessarily think of his artworks as landscapes. Instead, one notices three distinct but interrelated art forms: First, we admire his

colorful and luminous *Floating Drawings*, which combine suspended pieces of cloth, sculptural forms, and wire armatures into whimsical, dynamic compositions. Second, one notices a display of four of the artist's accordion-style books, three of which represent urban imagery. Third, one notices an installation of the artist's collages made from one-inch-wide Scotch tape he has unrolled and covered with varied imagery gathered by pressing the tape successively onto drawings, advertisements, maps, and ink-jet prints of imagery gleaned from the Internet. All three of Petroff's art forms encourage us to move beyond conventional perspectives and consider alternate ways of seeing the spaces we inhabit.



Floating Drawing no. 36, 2015
wire, paper, silk, gouache, 31 x 17 x 3 inches

Tape Collages



Petroff's *Tape Collages*, a series he began in 1997, reflects his training as a printmaker and interest in capturing imagery through pressing one surface against another, causing pigment to transfer. Like an artist's sketchbook, they provide a portable way of collecting inspirations that are grounded in observation. Easy to take on a train or other forms of transport, his tape collages express his love of mobility, economy and openness to different visual inspirations, from maps to manga. Using rolls of tape, Petroff peeled off corporate advertisements found in local yellow pages, graphic imagery from transportation maps, and visual material from other publications in an effort to build a visual vocabulary.

Petroff's *Tape Collages* reorient us to what constitutes a landscape by scavenging fragments of the sociocultural landscape of Chicago, New York City, Paris, Madrid, and other urban centers. By documenting the corporate brands and mass produced images ubiquitous in metropolitan areas and collecting them into a linear format that can also extend horizontally like a landscape, Petroff reminds us of the capitalist environment that dominates our lives, whether we live in a major city or not.

Inspired by Japanese scrolls, Petroff displays a small fraction of each tape roll, giving us a sense that the collage will continue if we were to unroll each piece further. The tape collages are arranged next to each other on the floor of the List Gallery with some reaching higher up on the wall than others. Therefore, Petroff not only produces a sense of the sociocultural landscape, but also suggests a skyline, further reflecting his urban sensibility. By installing his collages next to a display of artist books featuring urban photography, Petroff suggests how the forces of corporatism constantly shape our environment. As he collects and archives the graphic residue of our contemporary economy, Petroff causes us to consider how technology and commerce shape and mediate our environment. In counterpoint to the imagery he collects from material culture, Petroff's handmade marks and gestures challenge us to reflect upon issues such as gentrification, urbanity, and income inequality.

Opposite: *Tape Collages*, 1997–present, detail
part of an ongoing series using 1-inch Scotch Magic Tape,
variable lengths

Accordion Books

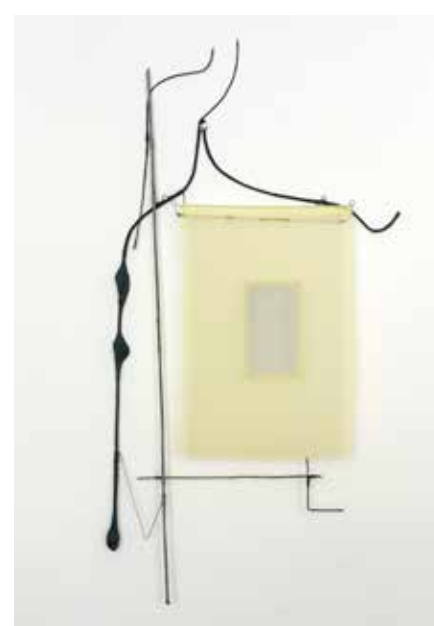


Petroff's interest in a visual language that reflects social marginalization, displacement, and the inequities of urban life is even more apparent in his accordion books, particularly *Carts*. Each page of this booklet presents a photograph of a shopping cart he encountered during his daily commute in Chicago. Assembled by different homeless individuals who scavenge detritus for resale, some of the carts hold wooden palettes, some hold blankets and scrap metal. In each case, the material dramatically towers above the sides of each cart. Although the cart owners and collectors are not visible in the pictures, they are portrayed through their acts of collecting.

Carts and similar booklets record Petroff's journeys along Chicago streets over time. His books broaden our notion of landscape photography. Instead of a journey across fields, mountains, and bodies of water, Petroff traverses a terrain of buildings, concrete, and carts full of scrap metal.

Beginning in the 1960s, artists such as Charles LaBelle, Hi Red Center, Edward Ruscha, and Nari Ward began to turn attention to and validate the street as a legitimate landscape, one occupied by individu-

als largely left out of the Western canon. Like such artists, Petroff helps redefine our notion of the landscape. In doing so, he explores varied methods of documentation, most often turning to collage work, found marks and objects, and street photography as authentic ways of representing his environment and community.



Above: *Floating Drawing no. 38, 2016*
wire paper, silk, gouache, 17 x 30 x 3 inches

Opposite: Accordion book display, List Gallery

Floating Drawings



Petroff's *Floating Drawings* take up a majority of the wall space in his List Gallery exhibition. He creates them with wire armatures and volumetric forms painted with gouache that hang in front of or behind sheets of silk and muslin. In compositions such as *Floating Drawing no. 2* (2007), a complicated array of colored shapes hangs in front of the outermost layer of muslin and suggests the forms of trees, bushes, and blossoming flowers. Other works in the series, such as *Floating Drawing no. 6*, are simply composed of rectangles of fabric suspended from wire. Such compositions encourage us to focus more on geometric relationships, the transparency of the fabric, and the space between fabric layers and the wall.

But what are these assemblages representing and how can we be sure they constitute landscapes? Although his style recalls the disconnected linear and geometric elements of abstract paintings by Joan Miró and Wassily Kandinsky, his relief-like spaces and recurring circular patterns are not inspired by Modernist abstraction so much as by observed natural and urban landscapes and digital representations of specific landmarks.

For example, in *Floating Drawing no. 2*, the large amorphous blue shapes were inspired by Russian lakes Petroff found on Google Maps. Both behind these transparent layers of silk and in the "foreground" of the assemblage, gouache-painted sculptural forms help articulate the landscape, creating a sense of "near" and "far."

Also using Google Earth, Petroff found a bird's-eye view of docks and lake houses located on the James River near Jacksonville, Florida. Admiring the way the satellite image shows the parallel lines of docks penetrating the oval lake, he translated that aerial perspective into *Floating Drawing no. 6*. Petroff's use of such specific sources may seem surprising given the abstract appearance of the resulting works. Such tension between specificity and abstraction brings to mind the cognitive dissonance always present in our interactions with the world—the difference between knowing and unknowing.

Opposite: *Floating Drawing no. 2*, 2007
cotton paper, gouache, wire armature, muslin and silk,
96 x 65 x 15 inches

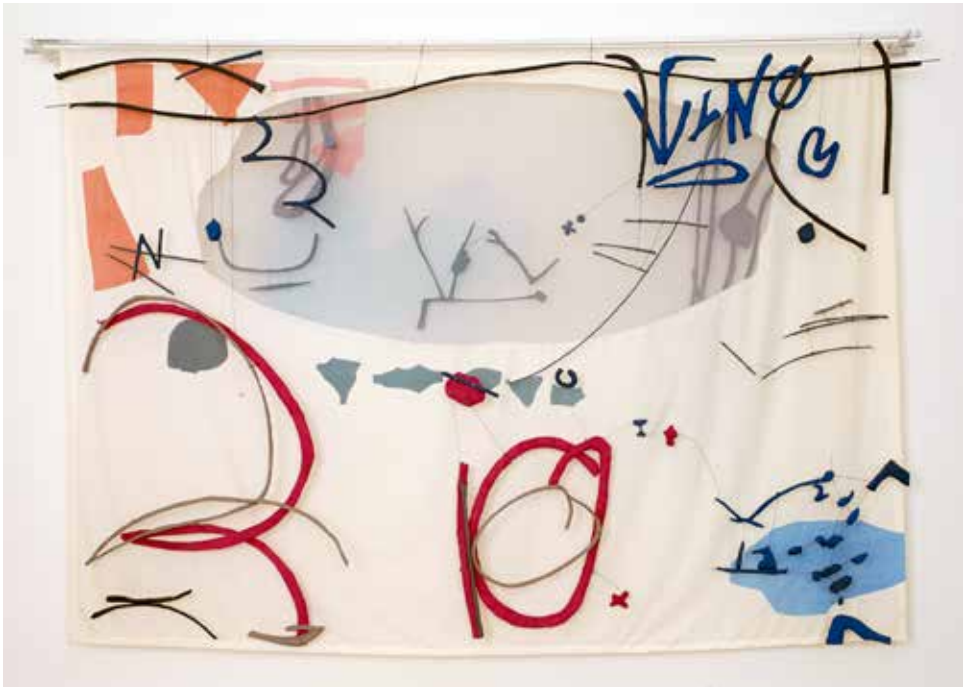
Petroff also emphasizes duality through his careful layering. The forms on the front side of each drawing are accessible, whereas those lying just behind the sheets of fabric are visible, yet beyond our grasp. The image of a figure standing in front of an expansive landscape is what we usually expect from traditional landscape scenes such as photographs by Carleton Watkins or Ansel Adams. However, in Petroff's *Floating Drawings*,

we contemplate a new, less accessible reality—a reality that combines conventional, digital, aerial, and internalized concepts of space. By abstracting forms in his *Floating Drawings* and reorienting the ways we think about social culture and the street, Petroff calls into question the ways in which we see, feel, and move through the world. Ultimately, his work alters the very concept of the landscape that we have been conditioned to understand.



Opposite: *Floating Drawing no. 3*, 2008, detail
cotton paper, gouache, wire armature, muslin and silk,
65 x 48 x 12 inches





Floating Drawing no. 5, 2010
cotton paper, molded and painted with gouache on wire armature,
muslin and silk grounds, 96 x 72 x 14 inches