

Top Flight

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Abstract:

Top Flight uses personal memoir and the ordinary experiences of everyday life as a vehicle to discuss privacy, self-awareness, learning and personal growth. The exhibit, comprised of twenty-eight large-scale drawings, took the form of an installation, encompassing one wall twenty-eight feet wide and twenty-seven feet high. These drawings, made to resemble enlarged notebook pages, featured a variety of notes, lists, and drawings. They were hung on the wall in a grid-like fashion and presented as an autobiographic account of my daily life. Viewers were encouraged to explore the records of my personal life, discover hidden narratives, and ultimately, walk away with their own understanding of what it means to document and share one's experiences.

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Last September, while driving home from a weekend vacation with my girlfriend, I had decided to make a drawing. This is not an unusual thing for me to do, as the majority of my road trips take me through the underwhelming landscape of the American Midwest. Tired of searching through a sea of static for a clear radio station, I had resorted to pulling out my small, Top Flight spiral notebook for entertainment. I began to map out what I could see from my vantage point in the passenger seat. I started drawing the rear view mirror and continued down to the dashboard, where I noticed for the first time just how many knobs and dials there are in a Honda Civic. I drew what I could see out of the windshield, which, in my drawing, translated to a horizon line and two crudely drawn trees; we were in South Dakota. The drawing was quick and I had neglected to include any tonal value, only line. As I look at this drawing now, I can remember this experience vividly. I remember why I did not include any value- because the cramped space forced me to use my knees as a table, and the discomfort encouraged me to finish quickly. As I look at the wobbly lines that make up the image I am reminded of the newly paved interstate with its incremental seams between sections of roadway. The car would move slightly every time we ran over one and my pencil picked up the vibrations like a seismograph.

Drawing and writing in a small notebook has become somewhat of a daily routine for me. I always carry a small notebook with me, and often make observational drawings between tasks or jot down thoughts before they disappear. These drawings and writings have a sense of urgency, taking form as an experience is unfolding, becoming a record of a specific event. In the same way that my discomfort and the physicality of the interstate affected the drawing described above, my emotions and surroundings influence my drawings, becoming evident in the final product. If I am impatient, my drawings might look unfinished. If I am frustrated, I might use a heavier mark. If I am focused, I will include more information, and if I am eating chicken next to my notebook, I might accidentally stain the pages. The drawings and writings that I make in my notebook *are* my experiences.

For me, these simple notebooks have become complicated objects, occurring at the intersection of personal memoir, privacy, learning, self-awareness, and the act of

drawing. Because each notebook so accurately reflects my experiences, they are incredibly personal and sometimes private. Their blank pages provide a quiet place to become introspective and self-aware, while their used pages (full of drawings and lists) provide proof of my progress and personal growth over time. My preoccupation with personal memoir, privacy, self-awareness and drawing in my prior work has led me to examine these notebooks in a more critical manner. They have become the impetus for my most recent body of work, which was recently displayed at the University of Kansas Art and Design Gallery under the exhibition title: *Top Flight*

My goal for this exhibit was to create an experience that prompted a deeper analysis of the themes mentioned above. The notebook became the lens through which the viewer and I could begin to further examine these themes.

In a series of twenty-eight drawings on paper, I recreated small notebook pages in large scale. Each drawing, sixty-eight inches tall and forty-five inches wide, was made to resemble an enlarged notebook page, torn from its spiral binding and complete with horizontal, light-blue lines and cut holes along one edge. Using acrylic paint and graphite sticks, I replicated the marks made by the permanent markers, highlighters, ballpoint pens and number two pencils that I use in my smaller notebooks. The drawings were hung unframed, and arranged in a grid-like format on the gallery wall - four drawings tall and seven drawings wide. Because of their considerable size, this grouping encompassed the entirety of one wall nearly twenty-seven feet tall and twenty-eight feet wide. The resulting installation had an impact on the viewer, leaving many feeling as though they had stumbled upon one of my notebooks, which had been left unattended and open to anyone curious enough to examine its contents.

I began this series of drawings by creating the large “sheets” of notebook paper. Starting from a ten-yard roll of paper, I measured and cut pieces to the desired size— the height of my body. I then painted thin blue horizontal lines on the front and reverse sides before hand-cutting holes along one edge. I developed certain techniques to accurately replicate the look of the marks made by pencils, pens, and markers in my small notebooks; I used large graphite sticks in place of pencils and a round brush with fluid acrylic paint to recreate the mark made by a ballpoint pen. I sprayed fluorescent acrylic paint out of an airbrush and used stencils to reproduce the flat, semi-transparent mark of a

highlighter. It became important to me to accurately represent these small notebook pages in large scale; I believe that creating a convincing illusion would allow viewers to comprehend these drawings in the same way as their smaller copies, as honest and autobiographic records. These techniques were largely successful; I created nearly perfect scale models of these notebook pages. Some gallery visitors believed that they were looking at large digital prints of scanned notebook pages. This convincing illusion imbued the work with a sense of sincerity and encouraged viewers to believe that the content on each page was genuine.

I treated these large pieces of paper in much the same way as the small notebook pages; the daily tasks and experiences on any given day would dictate the imagery on each page. An afternoon spent in a doctor's waiting room might yield a drawing of a patient's fidgety feet, and a weekend spent catching up on household chores could produce a list of "things to do." Working in this spontaneous style seemed random; but the chaotic, stream-of-consciousness arrangement of these large drawings was actually chronological. The grid-like display of these drawings in the gallery referenced a calendar and suggested that each drawing was arranged in the order of which it was made. This chronological organization allowed narratives to develop. Over the course of several pages, certain motifs repeated themselves, ideas evolved, and lists of "things to do" slowly became crossed off. During the several months that I had been making work for the exhibit, I had witnessed the diagnosis, decline, and death of my Grandmother. The experiences associated with this loss can be seen in select drawings from the exhibit, such as the repeated reminders to "Call Grandma" and the references to traveling home. However, the documentation of this somber incident was not the only narrative represented. A variety of day-to-day occurrences and depictions of domestic life found their way onto the large pages. Grocery lists and childish doodles provided a sense of humor to the otherwise deeply personal subject matter. The result was a diverse body of drawings with a range of emotive qualities that gave the work an intimate and sincere sensibility.

When I look through my small notebooks, I can feel a sense of honesty embedded in their pages. This is, in part, due to the variety of content within the notebooks; it seems to accurately represent life's tendency to juxtapose two unrelated things together. The

honesty of these small notebooks can also be seen in drawing quality. The drawings are often awkward and anatomically incorrect, yet unapologetic. They are idiosyncratic and show evidence of my temperament. As I made these observations about my small notebooks, I realized that this honest quality made it possible for the notebooks to also contain private information. It became important for me to replicate this sense of sincerity in the large drawings order to allow the viewer to consider the idea of privacy.

As gallery visitors examined the large notebook drawings they assumed a role somewhere between a passive observer and voyeur. The drawings appeared to be torn out of a giant notebook and put on display for the public; but they also seemed very personal. Some information appeared to be scratched out or hidden. These pictorial strategies were designed to guide the viewer towards contemplating this public/private dichotomy by both encouraging and discouraging them to gain access into my personal life. Some of these pictorial strategies can be seen in drawings such as *No Good*, (Figure 1) where a light “pencil” drawing of a figure’s face has been obscured and almost covered up by a “accidental shoe print.” The bottom third of the same page has been completely torn off, leaving only a suggestion of something once there. By partially covering up information, I am suggesting that the viewer is seeing something not meant to be seen. These visual techniques are intended to frustrate the viewer, forcing them to probe deeper into my world and actively question how privacy functions within the work. But not every drawing meets the viewer with resistance. Several drawings from the series have a more intimate presence, inviting the viewer to share my experiences with me. *December*, (Figures 2 and 3) a drawing that spreads across the implied spiral partition, becoming a diptych, is a delicate illustration of a domestic space. The image depicts a view out of my large, living-room window, with trees and vegetation visible in the distance. The drawing is pleasant and welcomes the viewer into the comfort of my home. Together, drawings like *No Good* and *December* seem to contradict each other. This contradiction is meant to challenge the viewer by creating an interplay between revealing and concealing information, encouraging them to ask questions about the diverse role that privacy plays in our lives.

The enlarged scale of these drawings could certainly be seen as one of the pictorial strategies that encourage viewers to examine its contents. At nearly four feet by

six feet, these drawings are reminiscent of historical painting, public signage and other visual information in the public sphere. However, the size of these drawings plays a more complicated role. The scale shift (from a small notebook page to an oversized page) dramatically changes the experience of looking at a notebook page. What was once an intimately sized ordinary object has now become overwhelmingly large and grand. This transformation from a common object to the subject of a labored work of art can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which I have elevated an everyday moment, immortalizing it into my large notebook. *Top Flight* highlights the importance of being present in each moment and encourages viewers to appreciate the ordinary.

At a certain point in the beginning stages of this series, somebody asked me, “Why do the pages have to be big? Why can’t you just display your actual notebook?” After thinking about this, it became clear to me that these drawings also needed to differentiate themselves from their smaller sources. This communicated to the viewer that each mark was deliberate. I wanted to use the visual characteristics of notebook pages (smudges, stains, erasures, tears etc.) as tools to address my conceptual ideas, but these visual characteristics are usually accidental. The large scale made it possible for viewers to be aware of the fact that these nuances were a part of the content. This idea can be seen in *Chicken Stain* (Figure 4). The oil stain on this piece acts as one of the “pictorial strategies” used to conceal information. Had this drawing been on a smaller scale, the oil stain on this drawing might be read as only a consequence of clumsiness. Because this drawing is much larger, the stain is interpreted as an intentional mark, leading viewers to question its purpose.

These “accidental” marks and the awkwardness of many of the drawings, give the work an unrefined and unfinished appearance. In this way, I can relate these drawings to the contemporary painting movements associated with “provisional aesthetics.” In Raphael Rubenstein’s article, *Provisional Painting*, published by Art In America in 2009, he describes provisional painting as a movement of contemporary painters who are united in a sort of nonchalant attitude towards painting. Artists associated with provisional painting are preoccupied with process of painting rather than the medium’s ability to create a masterpiece, confidently acknowledging that there is no such thing as a painting free of mistakes and failures. They paint quickly, tentatively, and with little regard for

traditional standards of beauty. Because these artists make work that is heavily informed from its own process, they are essentially making paintings that are self-aware – paintings about painting. These ideas resonated with me as I began to make work about my own life, a notebook about notebooks, and drawings about drawings. I started to think of these drawings as self-aware entities. I found a strong connection between this work, which seemed to look inside of itself, and the introspective act of making a record of my own existence.

Like any introspective activity, I believe that self-examination stems from a desire to learn from oneself. Similarly, I believe that the practice of documenting our experiences is closely tied to the pursuit of growing and developing. As I look at my small notebooks, it is clear to me that it is a place for genuine expression, but it is also a place to experiment and work out ideas. Throughout the time that it takes to fill a notebook from cover to cover, an immense amount of knowledge is gained, and this is easy to observe - ideas mature and new skills are acquired. I wanted viewers to be aware of the relationship that these notebooks have to the learning process.

In order to communicate this relationship to the viewer, I used particular visual cues to show the passage of time and imply the progress made. In one particular drawing (Figure 5), I carefully traced my own handwriting with red ink, mimicking the look of a ballpoint pen. The text, a snippet from the first draft of an artist statement, was then scribbled out with what looked like a large permanent marker. The drawing was intended to describe the difficult procedure of articulating oneself, showing evidence of ideas that were conceived only to be abandoned, leading me one step closer to the final outcome and implying progress. Other evidence of learning can be observed in more subtle ways, such as the use of color. In the earliest drawings, marks that represented fluorescent highlighters were only used to bring attention to certain words; as time progressed, these “highlighters” were used to augment graphite drawings, eventually becoming the primary drawing tool in the last few pieces (Figure 6). As an additional reference to the connection between documenting and learning, I chose to replicate a notebook with lined pages. I felt that its academic connotations would subconsciously inform the viewer about this relationship.

As I reflect on what these notebooks mean to me, I think about how they are containers of my personal experiences, records of my progress, and evidence of my growth over time. Within

these themes, I can relate the process of keeping a journal to the act of drawing. In an essay titled *Lobster and Three Fishes*, published by Art on Paper Magazine in 2006, John Berger eloquently describes the relationship between drawing and time: “Isn’t the act of drawing, as well as the drawing itself, about becoming rather than being? Isn’t a drawing the polar opposite of a photo? The latter stops time, arrests it; whereas a drawing flows with it.” I believe that drawing is a direct representation of the passage of time and our experiences along the way. It teaches us to look closely and react to our marks in the same way that our daily lives invite introspection, and inform our future decisions. With this understanding, I have found the medium of drawing to be highly effective in the pursuit of documenting my day-to-day life.

Throughout the several months that I spent making work for the exhibit, I contemplated privacy, self-awareness, learning, drawing, personal memoir, and their associations with one another. Like the small notebooks that I keep in my pocket, *Top Flight* came with its own lessons.

As I considered self-awareness specifically, I got into the habit of questioning my every move and analyzing my decisions. In the early stages of *Top Flight*, this exercise was directed towards my daily experiences outside of my studio, but before long, I began to question my most basic assumptions about my own artistic practice. I needed to know what initially attracted me to the medium of drawing. As I researched the medium, I was reminded of its ability to most directly transfer an idea onto a surface and its historical purpose of providing an in-progress diagram for a painting or sculpture. Learning about the history of drawing helped me to justify the use of the medium (I wanted my work to be direct and about my life in-progress) but it also taught me the importance of being aware of the medium, its processes, and its historical implications.

As I observed people at the exhibition, I realized that *Top Flight* had become the conduit for a personal connection between myself and the viewer. Those who spent time with the work and proceeded past the obstacles that I put in their way generally felt rewarded by this relationship. Many gallery visitors in attendance at the opening of the exhibit commented on this personal connection. In some cases, the work superseded the need for an introduction; “I feel like I know you,” one smiling visitor told me. For the viewers who knew me personally, *Top Flight* felt satisfying – an accurate representation of my personality. Seeing the uplifting reactions in the viewers taught me the importance of sharing in the human experience. Privacy can protect us,

but sharing allows us to bond with each other, paving the way for new relationships and helping us in our quest to grow and develop as human beings.

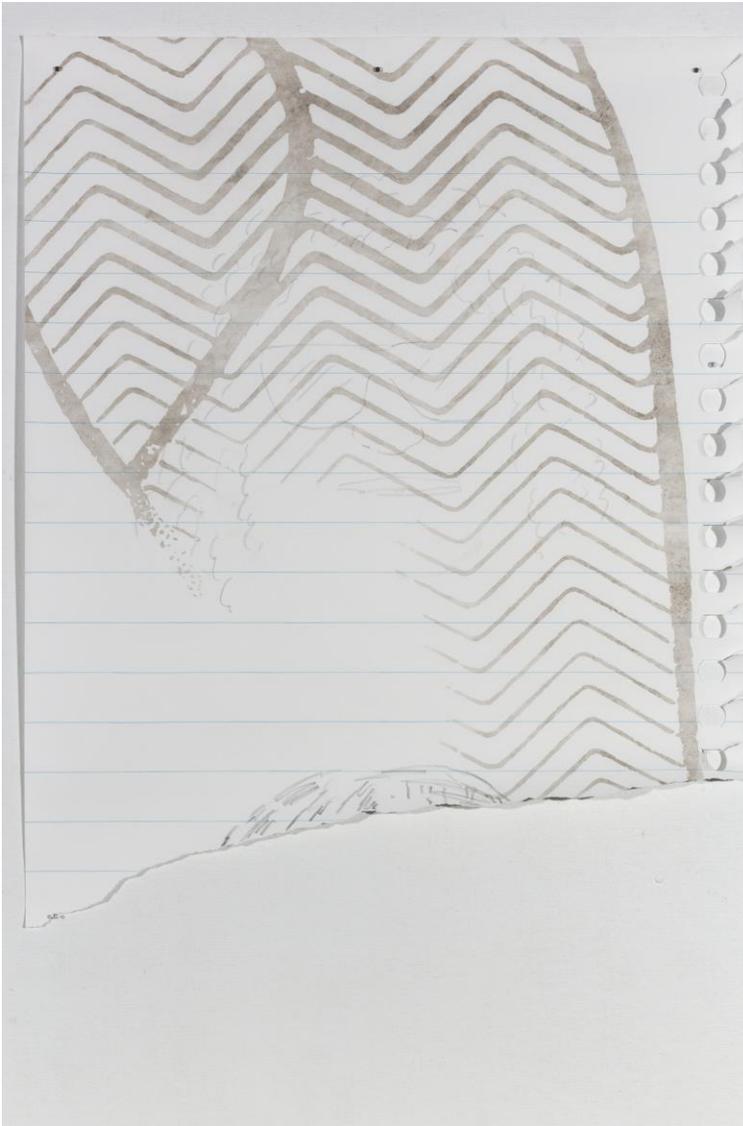


Figure 1.
No Good
Acrylic, Graphite, and Vacuum Dust on Paper
68" x 45"

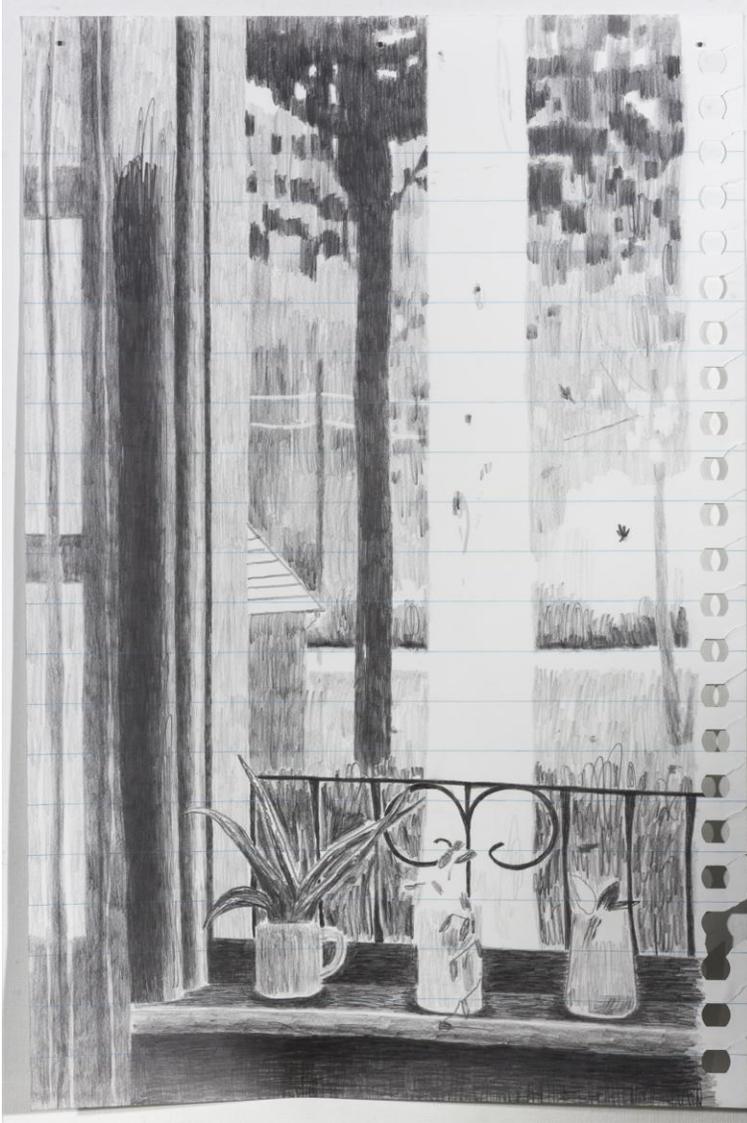


Figure 2.
December
Acrylic and Graphite on Paper
68" x 45"



Figure 3.
December
Acrylic and Graphite on Paper
68" x 45"

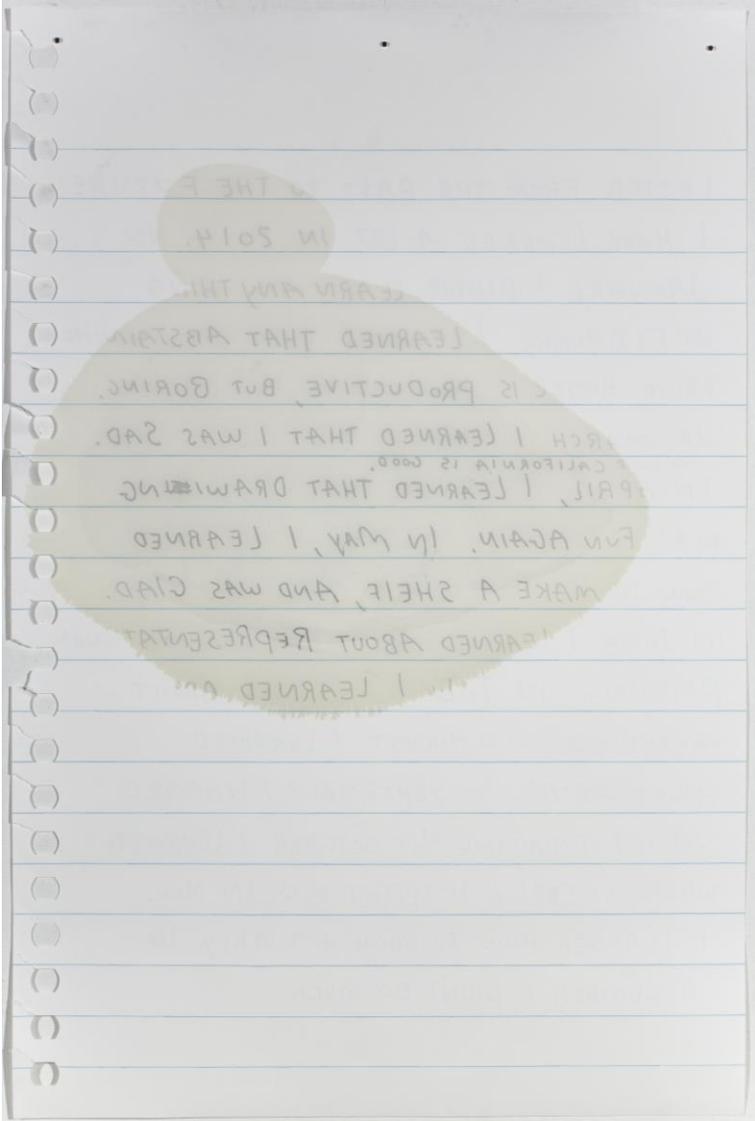


Figure 4.
Chicken Stain
Acrylic on Vegetable Oil on Paper
68" x 45"

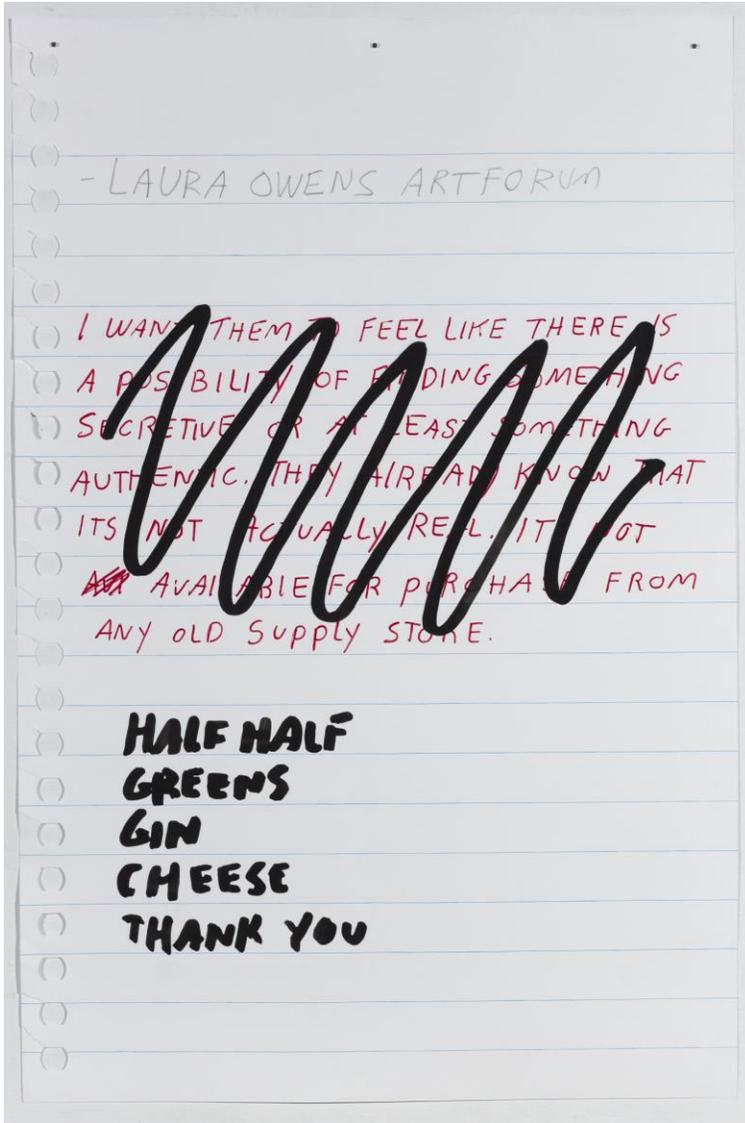


Figure 5.
Learning
Acrylic and Graphite on Paper
68" x 45"



Figure 6.
Fluorescent Still Life
Acrylic and Graphite on Paper
68" x 45"