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PAT BOAS Record Record



PAT BOAS | Record Record

The Art Gym Marylhurst University Marylhurst, Oregon



From What Our Homes Can Tell Us, 2007-09

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Photography |

Bill Bachhuber: Alphabet (NYT 01/01/), All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times 2001, Little People

Design | Meris Brown, www.FancypantsDesign.com, Portland, Oregon

Cover |

Front: Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01) (detail), (2001–02) Back: From What Our Homes Can Tell Us, (2007–09) Front Inside: From What Our Homes Can Tell Us, (2007–09) Back Inside: From What Our Homes Can Tell Us, (2007–09)





ARTS & CULTURE COUNCIL



May 20, 2008, OBAMA EXPECTED TO HIT MILESTONE IN TODAY'S VOTES, 2008 (detail)

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5

Preface and Acknowledgements

Pat Boas is an artist who has intrigued me for a number of years. Boas makes work that explores and examines language – letter by letter, word by word, image by image. I have been drawn to the elegance of her ideas and their expression. In 2002, The Art Gym presented the first artworks Boas would make addressing *The New York Times* as source material in the exhibition **Slowness**. The Salt Lake Art Center later featured the work in its traveling exhibition **The Daily News**. Boas has gone on to create several new series of works based on the *Times*, and a selection of that work is included in **Record Record**. We are also presenting *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*. For this new body of work, Boas is assembling a photographic lexicon of words found on objects in her house and in the European hometowns of her family and ancestors. Like *The New York Times* works, these new works coax meaning from the texts and images that surround us.

The Art Gym is grateful to the Regional Arts & Culture Council for a project grant that has provided invaluable financial support for the **Pat Boas – Record Record** exhibition and publication. RACC has provided critical funding for The Art Gym's exhibitions and publications for many years.

The Art Gym also tapped its newly established Publications Fund to complete the funding for the catalogue, and we thank the Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation and Linda Hutchins for their ongoing contributions to the fund. Portland State University's Office of Research and Sponsored Projects provided Pat Boas with research and production support for *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*.

The artist and the gallery thank Stephanie Snyder for her carefully researched and beautifully written essay for this publication. Snyder's essay is the most comprehensive piece of writing to date on the work of Pat Boas and will go a long way toward deepening understanding of her ideas and their expression. Snyder is the Anne and John Hauberg Curator and Director of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College.

We also acknowledge and thank Meris Brown of Fancypants Design for her thoughtful and beautiful design of this publication. Brown has designed several of The Art Gym's recent publications, including catalogues of work by Christine Bourdette, Trude Parkinson and Dana Lynn Louis.

The Art Gym is a program of the Department of Art & Interior Design at Marylhurst University. The Oregon Arts Commission, Clackamas County Cultural Coalition, Oregon Cultural Trust, the National Endowment for the Arts, and many individuals, foundations and corporations provide support for its programming. Their combined support and encouragement make our program possible.

Finally, on behalf of Marylhurst University and the broader community, I thank Pat Boas for the time, thought and discipline that this art represents and for presenting it in The Art Gym.

Terri M. Hopkins Director and Curator The Art Gym, Marylhurst University

*		

From January 1, 2001, until the end of the year, I collected the front pages of *The New York Times* and used this archive to construct drawings that look at the newspaper as a kind of collective memory. What initially caught my attention was the binary alignment of the first day of the millennium, which *Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01)* commemorates by separating out each letter of that day's front page. Meant to be hung calendar-style, the drawings abstract the idea of information and literally frustrate our ability to comprehend what is being communicated.

– Pat Boas

Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01) 2001-02

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Detail

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All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001

2001-02

Like a Surrealist looking for the "automatic writing of the world," I traced the outlines of the heads of all the people who appeared on the front pages of *The New York Times* during 2001, month by month. I preserved the relative position on the page of each outline, creating randomly patterned calligraphic clouds, and began thinking of Freud's idea of the magic slate as a metaphor for memory. Though newspapers are thrown away and events may be forgotten, they never really vanish. The residue that collects underneath changes how we perceive the topmost layer.

January (opposite)



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April













November December (opposite) Previous Pages: September (left), October (right)







2008-09





Since the 1920s, Tiffany & Company jewelry ads have occupied the upper-right corner of the third page of *The New York Times*. Until the layout changed in spring 2008, the space next to the ad was filled with an international news photo. This daily juxtaposition (which has not gone unnoticed) resulted in a collection of often horrifying image pairings in what seem like deliberate examples of First World excess mocking Third World suffering. Having tried several ways of responding, I finally decided simply to isolate the two images, preserving the spatial relationship between them and letting the silence of white space comment on the obvious. The titles are the actual captions of the jewelry ads.





















After completing the 2001 *New York Times* drawings, I kept watch on the sociology of the front page and began to see a change in those featured "above the fold." By 2008, the trend had shifted away from the rich and powerful toward ordinary people doing ordinary things. I thought of the Egyptian Faiyum commemorative portraits and Persian miniatures, and again began to collect the front pages of the *Times* for a series of gouache drawings. Each isolates only the "unfamous," brought together by the somewhat arbitrary nature of what is considered newsworthy on a given day. The titles of the drawings pair the major headlines with the people I am choosing to commemorate.

NYT Little People

2008-09



March 25, 2008, Bush Given Iraq War Plan With a Steady Troop Level, 2008 (detail)














April, 11, 2008, Downturn Reviving Rift Over '96 Welfare Change, 2008 (detail, opposite)







April, 11, 2008, Downturn Reviving Rift Over '96 Welfare Change, 2008 (detail)



June 17, 2008, BOOMING, CHINA FAULTS U.S. POLICY ON THE ECONOMY, 2008 (detail)





June 22, 2008, Inside the Interrogation Of a 9/11 Mastermind, 2009 (opposite) (detail, above)









WHATOUR



HOMESCANTELLUS

2007-09

Two influences lie behind the videos and prints of this series. One is the theory held by some linguists that our experience of language is determined as much by random associations, arbitrary contexts and stray memories as by the meanings of the words we use. The other is those beautiful Shaker "spirit drawings" of messages received by a medium/artist thought to be under divine influence. Putting these together, I wondered what might lurk in the spaces we inhabit and decided to try my hand at becoming the medium. I began photographing as many words as I could in my house, looking for what sense could be squeezed and scraped off the sides of everyday objects. I continued collecting as I traveled to cities I had particular connections with and composed the resulting texts by sifting through the captured vocabularies until messages emerged.



























51





Record Record

Stephanie Snyder

"Words die as they bring forth thought." -Lev Vygotsky



Pat Boas investigates official and unofficial sites of record and forms of information, expanding and contracting the legibility, velocity, and shape of images and texts. At times, Boas transforms pre-existing information systems – newspapers, for instance – into enigmatic serial works. Boas also creates original texts through the careful documentation of her surroundings, utilizing whatever materials seem most suited to the task (graphite, paint, and, more recently, digital technology) to carefully observe, interpret, and construct a poetics of everyday, though tightly edited, language and linguistic forms. Boas' exploration of language, whether conducted alongside images or in a more purely typographical fashion, captures and extends the viewer's mental image and memory of reading and writing (and printing) as an expanded time space – a space requiring considerable attention to absorb, a place of stories grand and mundane, simultaneously forgotten but potentially rediscovered in the act of rereading and remaking – language spaces so common that they disappear in plain sight and become newly *un*familiar in Boas' expansive installations. When the artist meticulously dismembers and expands the front page of one issue of *The New York Times* into twenty-six individual drawings, that same newspaper, its coherence dispersed, becomes titrated and distilled like a rare intoxicant or an ancient manuscript.

The origin of the word "record" lies in the concept of remembrance. Boas raises the question of whether one must rerecord experience in order to grasp and retain its meaning and symbolic potency. Within Boas' work the relationship between public and private experience (and space) looms large. How does one understand and mine the potential of the record to re-establish the boundary – the symbolic edge-space – of subjectivity, where poetry resists instrumentality? Space becomes place when it is constrained and organized. Space expands, place collapses. Boas is obsessed with studying both the orderly and indescribable spaces that emerge through the organization of cultural information. In Boas' hands, remembrance becomes an obscuring but universalizing transformative force. Whether penetrating *The New York Times* or exploring the language patterns of domestic and civic spaces, Boas channels place like a medium, filtering and synthesizing signals akin to a Shaker artist receiving and transcribing the wisdom of the divine spirit.

In the drawing series, *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001*, Boas traced the outline of every human head appearing on the front page of *The New York Times* from January through December. Boas completed this exercise using brush and ink each day in one-month increments: one delicate silken page, returned to daily for one month, one page per month, collecting the outlines of the living and the dead, the powerful and the impotent. Each month Boas began a new drawing and conducted the project, serially, for one year, completing twelve drawings. As viewers, we cannot easily place or contextualize the empty-faced bodies whose subtle contours and idiosyncratic layering suggest the unfolding of organic, abstracted human forms – like a field of poppies sprouting in an ephemeral eternity of whiteness, or a populous collective drifting within a reassuring yet tenuous emptiness of anonymity. Suddenly, reading *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times*, we realize that we are certainly studying the bodies of the dead. Boas reminds the viewer that the record of death is an assembly of outlines and letterforms – of ghosts.

The tracings of photographs that comprise *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times* recalls Roland Barthes' elucidation of meaning in his 1980 book *Camera Lucida*.¹ In this seminal work Barthes describes two primary, contrasting, and productively antagonistic types of significance within the photographic image: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* denotes the cultural, linguistic, and political agency of the photograph; in contrast the *punctum* denotes the wounding, personally touching detail with which the photograph establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it. Boas' examination of the text/image field of *The New York Times* shapes and shifts the *studium* toward the material and emotional realm of the *punctum*. Boas abstracts the "objective" information on the front of the *Times*, revealing the shape of desire and transcribing an animistic consciousness that embraces the salience of each life, each story, and each set of circumstances while suspending life in the viewer's field of vision.

Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01), created from 2001 through 2002, began innocently enough at a breakfast table bathed in morning light. Boas was inspired to investigate the front page of the *Times* on January 1, 2001, the inception of the millennial year, and a seductively binary date - 010101 - time-encoded and time-enclosed in a perfect numerical sequence, an ideal conceptual framework for dismembering the space of the front page according to its own internal logic, while embracing it in the realm of the punctum. In Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01) Boas set about systematically creating twenty-six separate silk tissue "drawings" recording each letter of the English alphabet in situ. Boas created Alphabet by photocopying the Times' front page, and then, using solvents, transferring the powdery black printing toner onto silk tissue, separating and rubbing each letter onto the soft receptive silk. The twenty-six resultant drawings are installed unframed and hung in the configuration of a calendar, suggesting the slow reassembly of content through the act of reading. The work suggests an expanded palimpsest that has been laboriously deconstructed according to its unique, internal logic. Typographic hierarchies, from masthead to caption, rise and fall as we scan the sometimes fuzzy and pocked edges and contours of the letterforms. Time appears slowed and somewhat distended through Boas' extension of one day's news through months and months of labor and consideration. This is a work of poetic, phenomenological resonance. The viewer feels Boas' hand and body coursing through the work like

an electrical current. *Alphabet* hums with a psychological intensity resulting from the letterforms' repetitive and somewhat eccentric patterning. The idiosyncratic gestures and incidental marks that surround each hand-transferred letter solicit private, poetic reverie. The viewer is encouraged to read afresh, to become a decoder, a rereader, and a reconstructive poet seduced by the work's careful order.

In a series of highly detailed, nearly photo-realistic gouache paintings entitled NYT Little People (2008–09), Boas continues to explore hierarchies of information and meaning directly related to the representation of the human figure in the context of the newspaper. In Little People, Boas focused on images of ordinary individuals that she noticed appearing with greater regularity on the front page of the Times. Boas reproduced images of people in their original size and location, removing everything else on the page. Isolating these lush yet ordinary narrative moments within a stark white space, Boas raises questions about what is and isn't present on the original page, drawing our attention to the importance of the absence of language as a contextualizing force and a marker of time. In NYT Little People, dates and headlines have been shifted to the space of the exhibition label, clearing the artwork itself from the burden of textual description. For instance, one title reads: "June 17, 2008, BOOMING, CHINA FAULTS U.S. POLICY ON THE ECONOMY." Boas' titles (copied exactly from the newspaper) locate us in a time and place that is constantly shifting in relevance and familiarity. Little People focuses the viewer's attention on aesthetic information in the form of imagery, as opposed to the textual captions and stories that the reader usually relies upon for knowledge and contextualization. Here the viewer must study the painted human form as a primary source of identification.

Other artists who have used media publications, and specifically newspapers, to memorialize and critique culture, such as Andy Warhol and Nancy Spero, have also selectively reproduced and deconstructed its visual "voice." Warhol, for instance, created diverse photographic silk-screen prints based on advertising imagery, exploring the ephemera of spectacular events and people. Robert Rauschenberg also incorporated newspaper clippings in his combines and prints to ground them in the world of significant current events, where they act as distilled cultural chronicles. Typically, artists exploring such media retain and manipulate the image-text relationship in collage-based forms. Boas, in contrast, consistently separates image and text in her media-related work, prying apart the graphic terms of its construction to poetic ends, working serially over long periods of time, stretching the temporal and physical dimensions of the word-image relationship, and pushing the limits of formal legibility and meaning. Boas' approach differs radically from that of most modern and contemporary artists, who rip, tear, cut, glue, and cast newspapers in innumerable forms of bricolage.

In contrast to work that incorporates popular media as a form of abject materiality, it is much more relevant and satisfying to consider Boas' careful formal explorations in relationship to artists such as Agnes Martin and Howardena Pindell (specifically Pindell's meditative geometric work from the 1970s). Both artists methodically explored the formal properties of the artwork as an abstract linguistic space to be distilled for the purposes of observation and revelation. Like Martin and Pindell,

Boas investigates the properties of geometric abstraction as a collection of related parts that elicit striking self-contained systems of representation, systems that catalyze awareness through rigorous and handmade order. Although they are not constructed using text-based forms, the shimmering geometry of Agnes Martin's paintings reminds the viewer of the orderly yet quivering letters in *Alphabet* or the carefully traced heads in *All the Heads on the Front Pages of The New York Times*. In Boas' work, newspapers and other ubiquitous language forms become the properties of a poetic code. Encountering and reading Boas' reconfigured images or texts, the viewer is seized by the impression that they are transmitting esoteric information from a place that is both within the world of the page and far away from the page itself. Hence, sometimes the world-space in Boas' work feels highly cryptic, recalling Martin's work in particular, or a work of poetry, such as that of the Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, who coded poetic language within a synaesthetic universe, as in his poem *Voyelles (Vowels)*, bringing forms of sensual perception into the space of the page and literally describing the letters of the alphabet according to color systems.

Canadian poet Lisa Robertson writes that poetry is experienced most acutely through resistance and dispersal. She writes, "I hold that for me at least poetry is an *unquantifiable* practice. Its topos, its place of agency, is invisible, and necessarily so."² Robertson goes on to posit that the closest correlative to this unguantifiable space is the space of friendship, a space inhabited by communal pain, pleasure, and misunderstanding, a space that records but evaporates under the pressure of overdefinition. Boas also addresses language as topos, as a place of meeting that hovers somewhere between the page and the reader. Robertson's reference to "friendship" may be interpreted as a space of trust and kinship. By embracing current events within her highly poetic and formal aesthetics, Boas turns our attention to the notion of community and social awareness. Boas asks the viewer to consider whether poetry and art have the capacity to create a symbolic topos where forms of communal and unguantifiable companionship and understanding are possible. Alphabet and All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001, reauthor places of public record toward the qualities of space that Robertson describes as "unquantifiable." We see in Boas' work a circumscription of mental activity, but what we see is an edge-space of understanding, a diary of aesthetic priorities, a chronicle of a resistance to the velocity of place, and a critique of the relationship between human experience and different forms of economy.

Boas' acts of cultural subterfuge have occurred in other forms of visual exploration. In the series *A3*, Boas worked specifically with page A3 of the *Times*. Before the paper was reorganized, the international news brief was placed on page A3, and Boas noticed that it was consistently sited in close proximity to Tiffany jewelry advertisements bearing a striking formal relationship with characteristics of the international news images. A survey of Boas' *A3* pages is completely arresting and disturbing in its illustration of First World excess and complacency. In each of Boas' *A3* pairings, we are confronted with the uneasy marriage of radically different agendas, cultures, and capital: A poor boy in a derelict dwelling is set next to an advertisement for extravagant diamonds; another young boy lays his head in grief on the wall of a building adjacent to an advertisement for necklaces that mimic the boy's angular gestures. The image pairings are virtually impossible to rationalize or

describe. How was this visual critique created? From the collective consciousness of our shared trauma? Or by a subversive art director or designer at the *Times*?

In *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*, the most recent body of work in the exhibition, Boas turns her attention to the abundance of words and hidden messages lurking in the artist's domestic space and in other locations Boas considers "homelands" for a variety of personal reasons, places such as Krakow, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Photographing and cataloguing over a thousand images of such found words, Boas has begun using them as the raw material for both photographic prints and digital videos. The videos are synchronized to assemble and shift; phrases cohere and evaporate with a rhythm akin to the fluctuations of the mind and body while reading. Boas' visual language constructions feel strangely familiar, like notes on a refrigerator; but they remind us of the far more formal (and unconscious) ways that we are constantly reading the linguistic terrain of our homes, our cities, and the products we buy. The title of the work, *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*, implies that it is through repetition and re-encounter that we begin to notice and incorporate the language that surrounds us.

Regardless of their origins, Boas' words seep out of the world, evidencing the humor and substance of everyday life. A small sample of phrases from the artist's home reads as follows: "Time Pricks Us"; "Chance Watches Over You Safe Until Tomorrow's Past"; and "A Sense Of History And An Unconscious Longing For Beauty Reconfigured Discontent With The Present Making An Ordinary World New."

What *topos* is Boas describing? The artist lists a variety of her sources: "Junk mail, labels on food packages, products and medicines in my kitchen and bathroom, book titles and other printed matter, grocery lists and scribbled notes, the news crawler on the TV screen, labels on clothing, etc. The word-images retain a sense of the original location and context. For example, the word 'power' comes from the control panel of my microwave, the word 'deep' from the label on a bottle of Thai marinade in my refrigerator, the word 'forever' from the cover of a book of postage stamps on my desk." In one sense, *What Our Homes Can Tell Us* transforms the viewer into a voyeur. We witness, and are implicated in, mysterious acts of surveillance along with the artist as Boas tracks her ability to articulate the world.

Poetry is not public. Boas explores poetry as the ultimate space of empty return and of the whole world: of the caesura and the ellipse, of the eclipse. One can never truly remember, never truly record the poetic and the space of the page, as the recordable is a set of decisions established in the service of discourse. Is poetry a record? Poetry is not itself remembrance. Poetry is the space of the indistinguishable, the space of thought, of what is missing, of what dies to return. As Lisa Robertson argues, it is unquantifiable resistance that poetry affords the thinking mind, and Boas has chosen to antagonize both the public space of public opinion and the private space of the domestic in the remaking and removal of language toward the space of poetry, a poetry that flows through the body of the artist. Poetry, language, absence — information recorded becomes record, and the agency of record becomes power. In the age of reproduction, the age of the simulacrum, the recorded is

appropriated toward subversive goals: The already recorded, the mixed tape, the cover, the already re-recorded, and the barely understandable but locatable too become records of implication and hybridization. Considering the relationship between space and language, the French philosopher and novelist George Perec writes in "Species of Spaces":

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbors, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?³

The paintings, drawings and prints that Boas has created by interpreting and remaking authoritative sites where image and text converge to define the cultural and emotional landscape (like Perec's ribbon of text defining the coastline) reimagine information and the experience of reading.

Boas' diverse bodies of work do not always resemble one another in conventional ways; they live unbounded by the pressures of coherence. One becomes witness to Boas' preoccupation with certain practices: formality, precision, separation, and isolation. If, as Borges posits, the aleph (alphabet) is a world, one locating us in an infinite present, then Boas has surely created a world with history hovering at the periphery. Pat Boas has spent the last twenty years immersed in comprehension and meaning: exploring, and recording, the fragile skin of subjectivity through the fleeting and ephemeral nature of language.

Stephanie Snyder is the Anne and John Hauberg Curator and Director of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College.

 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Richard Howard, translator (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).

2 These quotations were taken from a now deleted blog entry by Lisa Robertson, provided to the author by Matthew Stadler in 2009.

3 Georges Perec, Species of Spaces and Other Pieces, John Sturrock, translator (New York: Penguin, 1997).

Biography

Pat Boas is an artist and writer based in Portland, Oregon. Her drawings and projects have been shown at the Portland Art Museum, the Boise Art Museum, the Salt Lake Art Center, the Nicolaysen Art Museum in Casper, Wyoming, and Seattle's Consolidated Works. The recipient of several grants and awards for her studio work, she has written articles and exhibition reviews for such publications as *Art Papers, Artweek* and *artUS*. Boas is an assistant professor of Art Practice and chair of the Master of Fine Arts Program at Portland State University.

The artist would like to thank Stephanie Snyder, Meris Brown, Anna Gray and Christopher Huizar for their assistance with the exhibition and catalogue, and her husband, Jacob Boas, and son, Simon Boas, for their support.

Exhibition Checklist

Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01), 2001-02

26 drawings, solvent transfer on silk tissue, 24 x 18 in. each

All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001, 2001–02

12 drawings, ink on silk tissue, 24 x 18 in. each

A3, 2008-09 Pigment prints, 24 x 18 in. each

A3 True Love, 2008	A3 Sweetheart, 2008
A3 Altas, 2008	A3 A Brilliant Proposal, 2009
A3 Aria, 2008	A3 A Fine Mesh We're In, 2008
A3 A Perfect One Liner, 2009	A3 Alphabet, 2009
A3 Gentlemen Beware, 2009	A3 Charm Your Heart, 2009
A3 Irish Eyes Are Smiling, 2009	A3 Extreme Lengths, 2008
A3 1 Million Times, 2009	A3 The Brightest and the Best, 2008
A3 Your One and Only, 2008	A3 One For Each of Life's Celebrations, 2009
A3 Legends, 2009	A3 Theater In The Round, 2008
A3 Open Heart #2, 2009	A3 XOXO, 2008

NYT Little People, 2008-09

Gouache on paper, 22 x 18 in. each

January 6, 2008, U.S. CONSIDERING NEW COVERT PUSH WITHIN PAKISTAN, 2008 March 4, 2008, Democratic Rivals Clash Before Two Pivotal Votes, 2009 March 25, 2008, *Bush Given Iraq War Plan With a Steady Troop Level*, 2008 March 29, 2008, *TREASURY'S PLAN WOULD GIVE FED WIDE NEW POWER*, 2008 April, 11, 2008, Downturn Reviving Rift Over '96 Welfare Change, 2008 May 20, 2008, OBAMA EXPECTED TO HIT MILESTONE IN TODAY'S VOTES, 2008 June 17, 2008, BOOMING, CHINA FAULTS U.S. POLICY ON THE ECONOMY, 2008 June 22, 2008, *Inside the Interrogation Of a 9/11 Mastermind*, 2009

What Our Homes Can Tell Us, 2007-09

Digital ink jet prints, single and multiple-channel videos





The Art Gym, Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, Oregon