

The Intimate Humanness of Rocks and Walls: Q and A with Emily Gherard

BY ERIN LANGER

I never expected to fall for a painting hung inside an alt-weekly newspaper box. Not even terribly visible through the residual scratches that coated the aging plastic, [Emily Gherard's](#) painting of a stout, yellow mass caught my eye like the passing visage of someone I used to know. Printed on the cover of Seattle's newspaper, *The Stranger*, on the occasion of [her nomination](#) for the publication's annual Genius Awards, I had seen the artist's work before, in galleries, where all of their subtleties of texture and layering could be rightfully appreciated. However, the unlikely humanness the artist imbues into her distinctly non-human subjects of walls and rocks played particularly well with this banged-up, human-sized metal box, living out in the world. Enshrouding Gherard's jagged, gentle jewel, the box's own human qualities became similarly more pronounced—its stalwart, weatherproof air of permanence that stands against its quiet shame of rusting irrelevance. Not surprisingly, transforming banal entities into breathing beings is an intricate, intuitive process, as I found out when I recently caught up with the artist to talk about her current and upcoming projects.



Emily Gherard | *Untitled*, 2011, Oil on canvas on panel, 12" x 9"

Erin Langner: *It is interesting that you find so much inspiration from walls and rocks, which seem like fairly innocuous objects. How did your work with these subjects come about?*

Emily Gherard: The walls and rocks started as substitutes for figures and piles of paint. When I started thinking about them, I was still doing mostly figurative work, making piles of homogenous figure blocks. Those blocks slowly started becoming more solid and concrete, kind of as a way to mark out space. I was also hiking and drawing things from the environment, at the time. I was fascinated by the experience of finding a rock and just looking at it, thinking about the way it can be both everything and nothing.

I find myself more and more drawn to these subjects, again and again, and there doesn't seem to be a point at which when I lose interest in them. I make them more abstract or less abstract, more figurative or less figurative; they hold a lot for me. They are both a landscape and a figure. I particularly like the way that they don't directly represent a person, unlike a shoe, or a nameable building, or something that made by a human. They are more masses and forms that can be humans while being completely non-human.

EL: *Your palette is also fairly monochromatic. You work mostly with whites, blacks and grays—colors often associated with the Northwest. Do you ever find that limiting?*

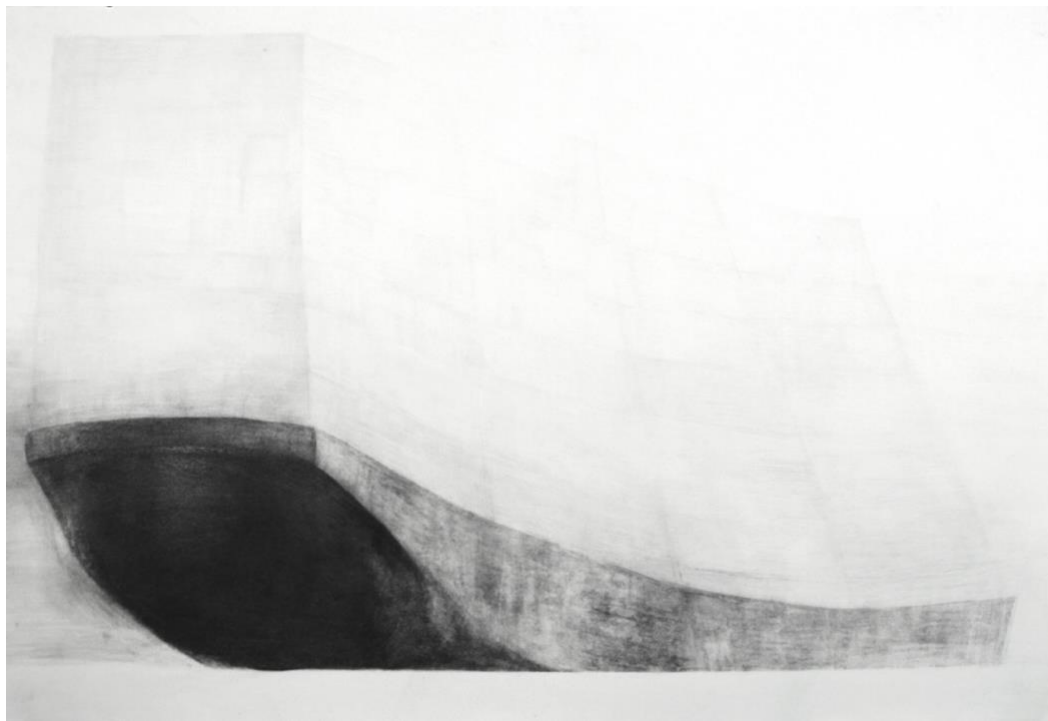
EG: [Laughs] I'm definitely inspired by the Northwest. I love the rain. It's perfect. I think the fall here is the most visually stimulating season. I have a job now that requires commuting to Bellingham, Washington twice a week, which is a gorgeous drive that has been inspiring millions and millions of ideas.

I think the work is actually getting less colorful lately. I just started getting into making egg tempera, which doesn't deepen the colors as much as oil. The tempera takes all of these familiar pigments that I'm used to working with and gives them this completely new experience. It's a whole new palette with the same palette. It's kind of exciting.

I don't ever find my palette limiting. It's like having a conversation with only a few close friends. You wonder, *am I going to get sick of these people?* But, you don't.



Emily Gherard | Untitled, 2012, oil on canvas, 32" x 30



Emily Gherard | Untitled, 2013, Graphite on Paper, 40" x 30".

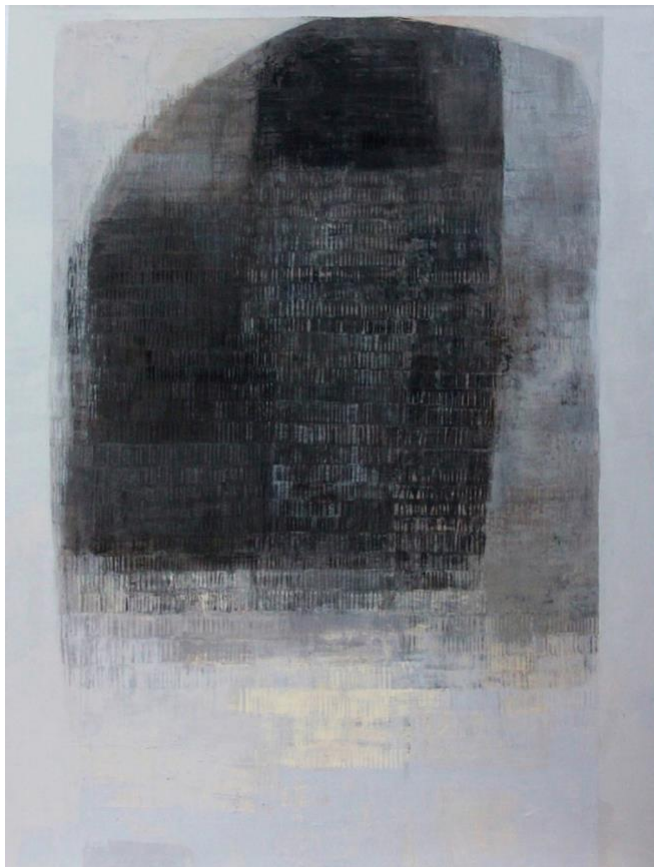
EL: *Are there other new processes you have been exploring lately?*

EG: My work has been making a shift over the last couple of years, becoming a little more linear in the way it's made. I start with a proposition and work my way through, as opposed to working exclusively intuitively. I am now looking more for the structure that drives the work.

When I was recently invited by the Museum of Northwest Art to create a piece in response to a lithograph by Mark Tobey, I felt like it was a big test in whether I could radically change the way I make something and tie that process to a specific idea. I focused on trying to figure out what the lithograph was about and what I wanted to pull from it. The piece had this weight, this sorrow and this grief that resonated. I realized I could create a process that was not something I was doing normally in my studio that connected those ideas. I developed a system of using an eyedropper with solvents to alter the layers. It was like trying to start from a place and develop the process and was a very different way of working from what I had done in the past.

The lithograph was also a beautiful little figure. Throughout the time I was working on my response, I kept being reminded that the drawing had probably taken Tobey something like five minutes to make, and then it had become this labor-intensive lithography that someone else had probably done for him. And, yet, I was making this huge piece that was very, very labor intensive, in order to get to the same place. My piece was so large, his piece was so small, and I kept looking at it; his would feel large, my piece would feel small, and that ended up being a nice kind of frustration.

Right now, I also have some ideas of about using and bending the canvas a little bit more. I'm working on these thin, suspended panels with nothing on them; I'm trying to build these pieces in a way that manipulates the space. They are a starting point. I don't know where they will go. I feel like I'm in that studio moment at the beginning of experimentation. I still have a lot of questions.



Emily Gherard | Until the well runs dry, 2014, oil on Linen, 96" x 60".

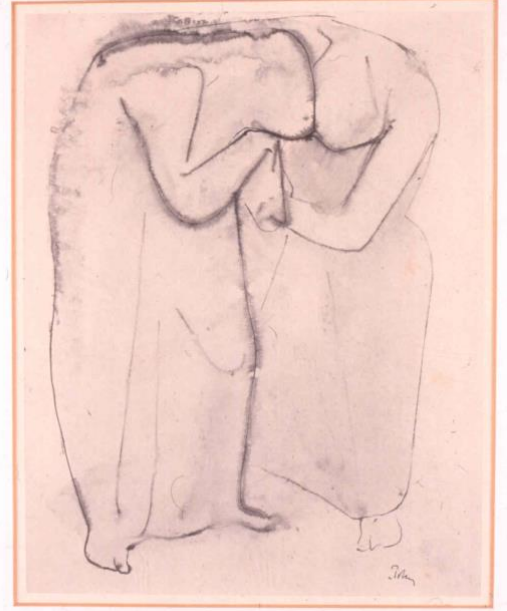
EL: *Bending your canvases, as well as scraping and some of your other techniques, are very physical processes. Do you feel that having a highly physical experience with the work is important part of your practice, or is it more about achieving an end result?*

EG: I am realizing more and more how important that physicality is to my actual practices. I think it is really fundamentally crucial.

My techniques started off as ways to create a particular kind of layer, and they often had connections to the content; the forms that I was painting were creating these physical spaces for themselves. It was something that would visually accumulate on the canvas and then be scraped back. I realized I'm kind of addicted to that process, that I actually enjoy physically pushing the materials around.

I also love the exhilaration of a process that completely disintegrates the image and then enables it to re-emerge. When I sand a painting, it becomes this muddy mess, because the sand degrades the surface. But then, when I polish the painting afterwards, the image emerges in a way that is kind of like pulling a print off of a press. Sometimes, you pull the print and just think, "Huh." And then, sometimes, you pull the print, and you think,

"Wow. I didn't know that was going to happen."

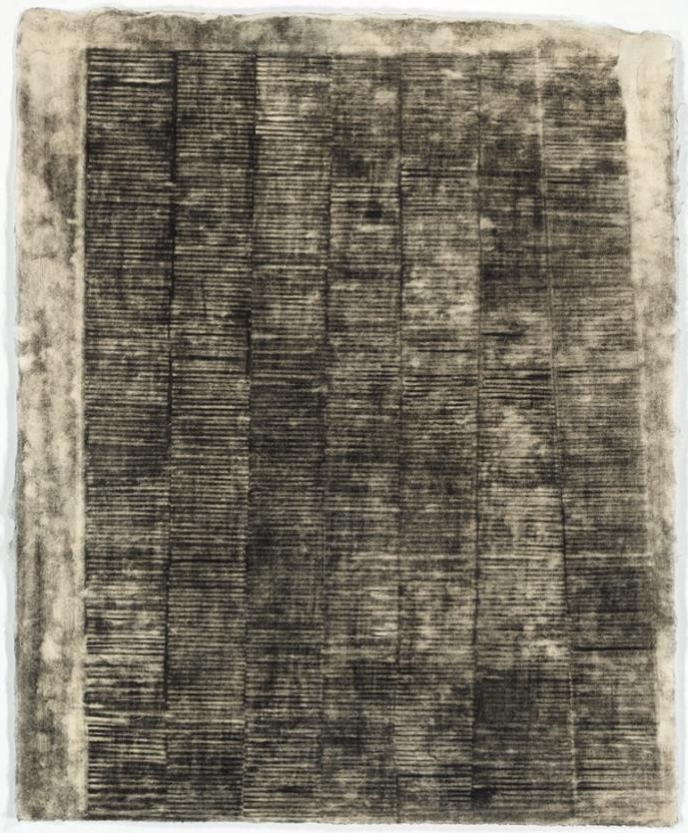


Mark Tobey | *Etudes d'Après Nature, 1932-33, 4 of 7* reproduced lithographs. Image courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art

Emily Gherard lives and works in Seattle, WA. Her work is on view at the [Museum of Northwest Art](#), in La Conner, WA through January 4, as part of the group show, *To Be Alone Together*. Her work has also recently been shown at *Blindfold Gallery* (Seattle, WA) and *Francine Seders Gallery* (Seattle, WA). Gherard received her MFA from the University of Washington and her BA from the Rhode Island School of Design.

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Emily Gherard | *Untitled, 2014, 20" x 16" pencil on paper.*