

MICHELLE FORSYTH | OVER & OVER

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THE HOGAR COLLECTION

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OVER AND OVER AGAIN, THE NATURE OF MEMORY

Frances De Vuono

February 3, 2010

There is something at once both lush and sharp about what Michelle Forsyth does as an artist. In nearly everything she makes—from small works on paper to large installations—she affirms the hand-made. From a distance her works often lock into representation, a suggestion of narrative and place, but close examination reveals that the images are made of cutout pieces of fabric and paper, beads stitched to the paper or mounted on with dressmaker’s pins. Many of her most recent pieces have additional layers of prints on their surface. For this, Forsyth begins with hand drawing on film; she then exposes these drawings onto the screens and, like traditional fabric artisans across the world, she repetitively pushes the inks through the screens onto the paper over and over again. This is work that celebrates the laborious.

Forsyth is interested in history, specifically public and private memories of tragedies and traumas. To this end, she makes her images by embarking on a series of activities. For each of the pieces in both the *100 Drawings* and *Ostinatos* series here, she begins by researching an event through archived media; then she travels to the site where the incident originally took place and photographs the spot. Neither the tragedy itself, these well-sequenced steps, nor her conceptually loaded purpose stops Forsyth from additionally reveling in beauty. In all her work (excepting the *Text Works*) she manipulates our penchant for pleasure, loading her carefully crafted documentations with vibrant colors as if they were tapestries.

In his novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Columbian author Gabriel García Márquez referred to memory’s pathway towards nostalgia as a disease. Forsyth, born in Canada, at a colder, near opposite

end of the American hemisphere, must have a similar feeling about memory and its ability to course through time, mutating and changing along the way. Forsyth consciously photographs a chosen disaster such as *Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse, Tacoma, WA, November 7, 1940* years after it actually took place. The artist's deliberate acknowledgement of years passed implies that something can still be gained by remembering and seeing, as though the geography holds unseen particles of its past. In the studio, Forsyth then isolates elements from these photographic records and breaks them down further into minute units, which she finally, painstakingly reconstructs back into images again. The results are a plethora of shapes and colors with their own abstract logic that initially makes no narrative sense until we move back. Standing close to a work like *Hoboken Pier Fire, Hoboken, NJ, June 30, 1900* is akin to having used the zoom function on a digital camera or a computer. It is a pixelated image, rendered into 3-D by its compounded materials, but we only see it as a real place when we move away from it. And that, of course, is arguably the best way to make sense of our past as well. Forsyth's description of historical events fractured into tiny bits, suggests that memory could be—or should be—a kind of hologram, only truly understood within the context of its many parts.

While it is clear that Forsyth's pieces pay tribute to the handmade, it would be a disservice not to acknowledge her equally crucial engagement with technology. Describing the early stages of her process in doing research and in organizing her images, Forsyth states that she takes images “culled from television, newspapers, and the Internet...” using a grid, she translates this visual information into the vibrantly tactile work seen here, variously using cotton thread, bits of gouache painted papers, crystal and more. Conscious of the implications between her ideas and working methods, she explains, “The grid becomes a nexus between the bitmapped images [of the computer] and the hand-crafted ones.” Her very language confirms the importance contemporary technologies play in her work, affirming the observations made by artist (and now theorist) David Hockney who claimed

in his book *Secret Knowledge*, that artists have always embraced the technology of their times and that the best ones turn it to the service of their ideas. Forsyth admits that freely. But in her case, she adds “I use technology to slow my process down instead of speed it up.”

This exhibition draws from three different series done over the past four years: *100 Drawings*, *Ostinatos* and *Text Work*. While both the two former series use the processes described above and are layered with colors, forms and materials, *Text Work* does something unexpected but utterly in keeping with Forsyth's purpose. Using the same newspapers and online sources where Forsyth habitually gathers her visual imagery, for *Text Work* she eschews color and collected material. Instead she extracts the actual words that witnesses have used to describe historical events. She isolates their verbal responses the way she had formally isolated patterns from pictures, taking phrases and carefully punching them into paper. The resulting pieces are made of light and absence. The shapes that the cutout type leaves are a pentimento of text. It is a ghost of meaning and memory. Showing this simpler, quieter series in conjunction with the more layered works makes for a perfect pairing. *Edwin (eyewitness)* and *Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse, Tacoma, WA, November 7, 1940* demonstrate this explicitly because they both deal with the aftermath of the same disaster. But all three series work in a kind of rewarding synchronicity.

Seeing the richly layered *Ostinatos* and *100 Drawings* in conjunction with the spare, punched out ‘imagery’ of *Text Works* is a deft curatorial move. What the two different visual depictions suggest is that while we tend to understand our past by aggregate information, we also need to remember that absence of data, information and material is equally integral part of its nature. We need both.

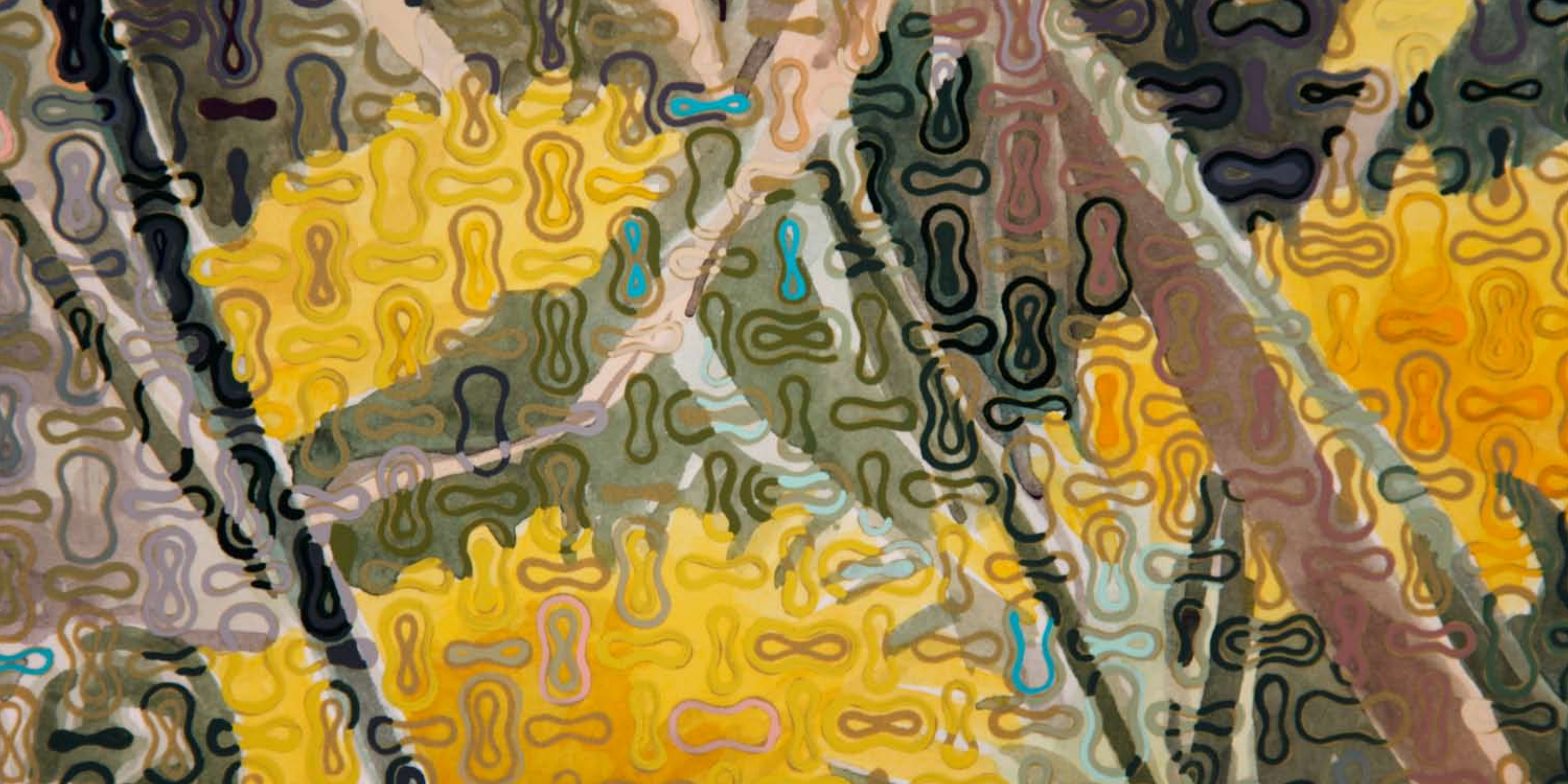
**TACOMA NARROWS BRIDGE COLLAPSE, TACOMA, WA
NOVEMBER 7, 1940**

(#22 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache and screenprint on cut watercolor paper
30 x 45 inches, 2009

On the morning of November 7, 1940, only four months after it opened to the public, the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge dramatically collapsed. Although no human lives were lost, a dog perished after it was abandoned in a car. The bridge, nicknamed “Galloping Gertie” for its wild undulating motion, attracted many visitors who would drive for miles to ride its sway-ing roadway. On windy days, cars were reported to vanish and reappear several times during a single crossing. This piece documents some dandelions growing near the site of the collapse.





The frightening roar of the collapse
sounded like a continuous peal of
thunder lasting about fifteen seconds.

EDWIN (EYEWITNESS)

(#8 from Text Work)

hand-punched watercolor paper

28 x 42 inches, 2009



**GREAT FIRES, GOOSE ROCKS BEACH, KENNEBUNKPORT, ME
OCTOBER 21, 1947**

(#27 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache and screenprint on watercolor paper

18 x 27 inches, 2010

Late in October 1947, southern Maine suffered tremendous losses due to forest fires. Goose Rocks Beach in Kennebunkport was hit particularly hard. Nearly one hundred early nineteenth century beachside cottages burned. To escape the flames, terrified residents and woodland animals ran onto the beach and hid under dampened blankets. This piece documents some trees located near the edge of the beach.

HOBOKEN PIER FIRE, HOBOKEN, NJ, JUNE 30, 1900

(#24 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache, acrylic and screenprint on watercolor paper

30 x 45 inches, 2009

On June 30, 1900, a fire broke out on Pier 3 in Hoboken, NJ. Within fifteen minutes of the ignition, the blaze raced a quarter mile along the piers and continued to burn until several passenger liners and multiple small boats were on fire. Of the hundreds who died that day, many were trapped in ships whose portholes were too small to pass through. This piece documents the surface of the Hudson River where the event took place.



FEBRUARY 4, 1999**DETAIL**

(#9 from *Ostinatos*)

Paper, watercolor, gouache, screenprint, felt, beads, sequins and pins
36 x 54 x 6 inches, 2010

On the evening of February 3, 1999, a large freighter was caught in a severe squall near Coos Bay. Unable to enter, the ship was forced to anchor for the night. Early the next morning, the anchor began to drag, and the ship broke apart on a remote sandy beach three miles north of port. Although the ship was empty of cargo, it was seeping oil from the roughly 400,000 gallons left in its fuel tanks. To avoid a larger spill, the remaining oil in the ship was intentionally burned off. Clouds of sticky black smoke rose from the hull of the ship. More than 3,000 shorebirds were killed. This piece documents some broom growing near the beach where the stern of the ship remains.



APRIL 5, 1958

(#5 from Ostinatos)

Paper, watercolor, gouache, screenprint, felt, sequins, beads and pins mounted on archival panel, 28 x 42 x 2 inches, 2010

Ripple Rock was a twin peaked underwater mountain located near the town of Campbell River, BC. Nearly twenty large vessels and about one hundred smaller ones fell victim to this treacherous rock before it was destroyed in 1958 by a planned explosion. The explosion created a column of debris that rose nearly 300 meters in height. It was considered a national historic event and was broadcast live on CBC Television. This piece documents some thistles growing on the side of the highway near the plaque that commemorates the event.





ADDY AND AUKE (EYEWITNESSES)

(#10 from Text Work)

hand-punched watercolor paper

18 x 27 inches, 2010

We watched at the windows and soon saw
a strange sight. There came, as if it
were a ghost ship, a house approaching,
riding the waves.



**HURRICANE HAZEL, RAYMORE DRIVE, TORONTO, ON
OCTOBER 15, 1954**

(#26 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache and screenprint on watercolor paper

28 x 42 inches, 2010

On the morning of Thursday, October 14, 1954, Hurricane Hazel reached southern Ontario. By midnight of the following day, more than eight inches of rain had fallen and much of the metro area of Toronto was flooded. The Humber River rose twenty feet. Fourteen houses were swept into the river and thirty-two residents were killed. This piece documents some foliage on the side of the river in Raymore Park, which is dedicated to the memory of the disaster.

DE PEUTER (EYEWITNESSES)

(#11 from Text Work)

hand-punched watercolor paper

18 x 27 inches, 2010





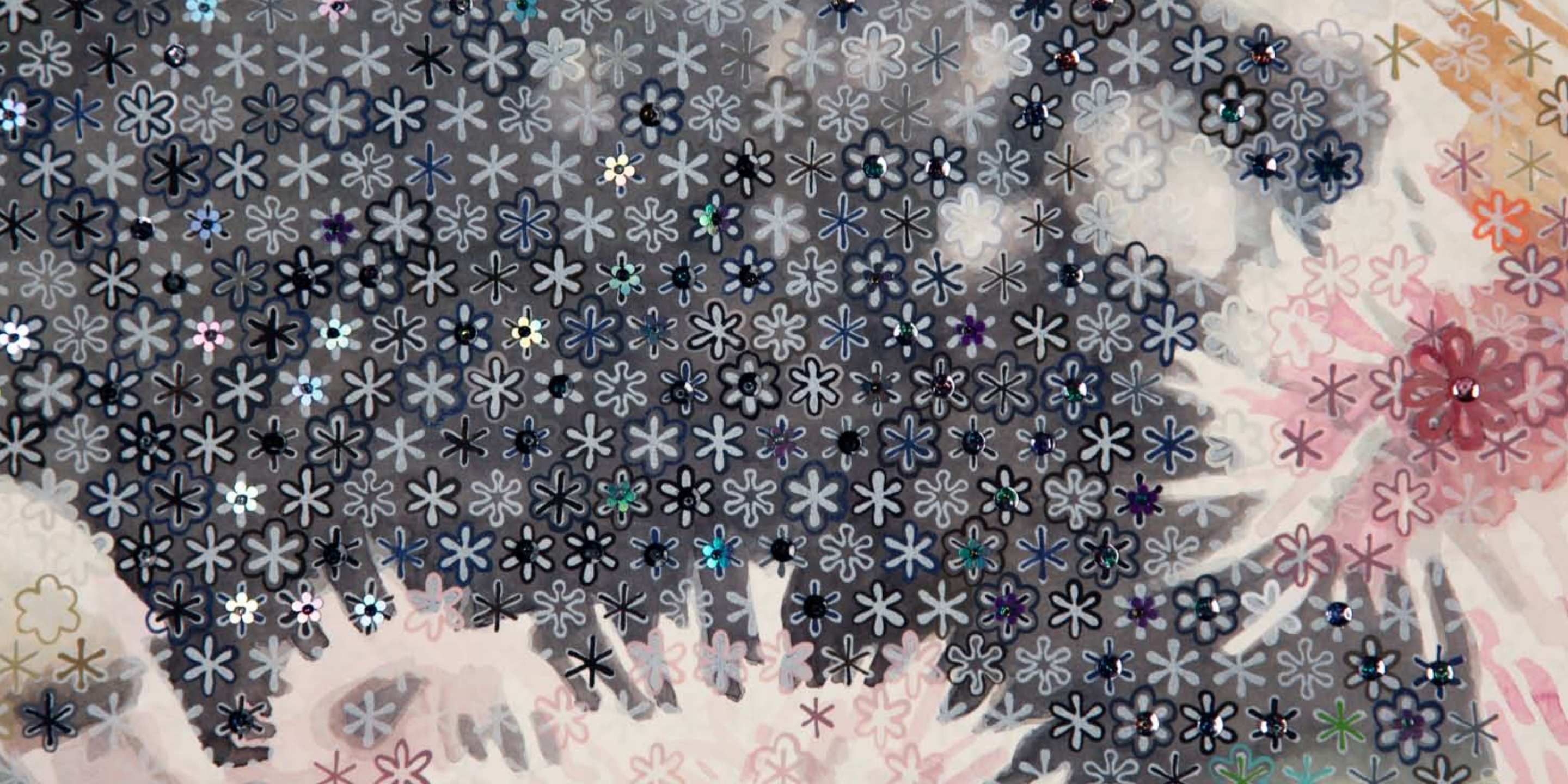
**RIPPLE ROCK EXPLOSION, DISCOVERY PASSAGE, BC
APRIL 5, 1958**

(#25 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache, screenprint, beads and sequins on cut watercolor paper

28 x 42 inches, 2010

Ripple Rock was a twin peaked underwater mountain located near the town of Campbell River, BC. Nearly twenty large vessels and about one hundred smaller ones fell victim to this treacherous rock before it was destroyed in 1958 by a planned explosion. The explosion created a column of debris that rose nearly 300 meters in height. It was considered a national historic event and was broadcast live on CBC Television. This piece documents some thistles growing on the side of the highway near the plaque that commemorates the event.



FRANK SLIDE, CROWSNEST PASS, FRANK, AB, APRIL 29, 1903

(#23 from One Hundred Drawings)

Watercolor, gouache, screenprint, sequins and beads on watercolor paper
30 x 45 inches, 2009

During the early morning of April 29, 1903, a massive landslide dislodged the eastern limestone face of Turtle Mountain. The resulting rock pile spread over the valley floor, covering more than a mile of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a portion of the town of Frank, and most of the coal mine below. Nearly seventy people died in the event. This piece documents the eastern face of the mountain as it looks today.



MICHELLE FORSYTH

Born in Vancouver BC, CAN, 1972

Lives in Pullman, WA, USA

EDUCATION

2001 M.F.A., Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

1996 B.F.A., University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, CAN

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010 *Over & Over*, The Hogar Collection, Brooklyn, NY, USA

2009 *Canopy*, University of Southern Maine, Gorham, ME, USA

2008 *Field Work*, Zaum Projects, Lisbon, PRT

2008 *Then & There*, Deluge Contemporary Art, Victoria, BC, CAN

2007 *Paperwork*, The Hogar Collection, Brooklyn, NY, USA

34 | 2007 *Marking Time*, Lorinda Knight Gallery, Spokane, WA, USA

2006 *Routine Incidents*, Charleston Heights Art Center, Las Vegas, NV, USA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010 *Old Media/Old News*, The Luminary Center for the Arts, St. Louis, MO, USA

2009 *Scarlet Fever*, The Hogar Collection, Brooklyn, NY, USA

2009 *Show Off Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain*, Stand B10, Port des Champs Elysées, Grand Palais, Paris, FRA

2009 *Art Sydney*, Royal Hall of Industries, Moore Park, Sydney, AUS

2009 *Across the Divide: Contemporary Art from the Scablands and Beyond*, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA, USA

2009 *Cutters*, The Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, NJ, USA (catalogue)

2008 *Aqua Art Fair*, Aqua Hotel in South Beach, Miami, FL, USA

2008 *November 7, 1940 (for Tubby)*, Woolworth Windows, Tacoma Contemporary, Tacoma, WA, USA

2008 *Start*, Zaum Projects Contemporary Art, Lisbon, PRT

2008 *Cutting Fine, Cutting Deep* (traveling) curated by Julie Püttgen
University Art Gallery, Sawanee: The University of the South, Sewanee, TN, USA
Robert C. Williams Paper Museum, Georgia Tech, Atlanta, GA, USA
Art Gallery at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX, USA

2007 *Drawn to the Wall III*, Jundt Art Museum, Gonzaga University, Spokane WA, USA

2007 *Sundays*, Kirkland Arts Center, Seattle, WA, USA

2007 *The War on Terror; Abstract Painting in Today's World*, Miami University Young Painters,
Hiestand Galleries, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

2006 *The Whole is the Sum of its Parts*, The Hogar Collection, Brooklyn, NY, USA

2006 *Spitting Images*, Truck Contemporary Art, Calgary, Alberta, CAN

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2008 Clint Roenisch. *Carte Blanche Vol. 2: Painting*, (Toronto: Magenta Publishing for the Arts)

2008 Wendy Welch. "History Repeating" *Monday Magazine*, February 6

2007 Carrie Scozarro. "Palimpsestic" *The Pacific Northwest Inlander*, September 6, 2007

2007 Brian Sherwin, "Art Space Talk: Michelle Forsyth," *myartspace.com*, posted May 23, 2007

2006 Katie Anania. "Death and Praxis: Michelle Forsyth's Presentation of Incidents is Hardly Routine," *City Life*, Las Vegas, NV. April 27, 2006

2006 Kristin Peterson. "Mad, Mad Media," *Las Vegas Sun*, Las Vegas, NV. April 7, 2006

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2008 Canadian Studies Program Enhancement Grant, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

2007 GAP Grant, Artist Trust, Seattle, WA, USA

2007 Project Grant, Canada Council for the Arts, CAN

2007 Second Prize, Young Painters Competition for the William and Dorothy Yeck Award, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

2005 Professional Artist Grant, Canada Council for the Arts, CAN

