

THE POETICS OF PROXIMITY

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ABSTRACT

The thematic analysis of my studio work since 2020 work revealed many contradictions. The Poetics of Proximity is an investigation of these contradictions, the connective energy that holds objects, people, and ideas together. My studio work explored how forms gather, interact, and coalesce into meaning, particularly within a grid format. New energetic forms emerged where connections multiply, and where elemental units coalesce. In the mysterious gatherings and connections between individual elements I found emerging patterns, the scaffolding of meaning and belief. My thematic analysis revealed an impulse to organize, connect, construct and repair, to recognize the need for human spirituality as a condition for a better future, an attempt to compensate for my complicity in modern capitalism. My final series, *Men in Cities* represents bodies in a state of ecstatic exorcism, holding contradiction, deeply engaged in the material transition of the body and mind, energetically vibrating with faith, with new forms always taking shape.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of my work is connected to the futuristic mid-century modernism of the 1960s. My art practice is the primary focus of this support paper which is a thematic analysis of my studio work since 2020, set against the backdrop and legacy of Canadian modernism of the 1960s. The peak of mid-century modern progress in Canada was celebrated at EXPO 67, a world's fair hosted by Canada and held in Montreal in 1967 that I attended as a young child. EXPO is a rich symbol of the modern optimism that was formed in my childhood in the 1960s, and it still drives me today. EXPO was a celebration of world-wide cultural and scientific achievements, all connected by the theme of the earth as a global human community united by faith in working together toward a common goal of modern progress. In my practice I explore how the utopian themes of a united global humanity and modern progress are at odds with each other. I call the tension between them *The Poetics of Proximity*.

My medium and materials are a combination of painting, drawing, photography, and printmaking which I use to reinterpret mid-century images as an expansion of their meaning in the present. The paper is arranged into five sections each addressing the links between the ideals of modernism and my work: Distances, Progress, Possibilities, Coalescence and Faith. This paper extracts core themes from studio work since 2020 and culminates in a painted series entitled *Men in Cities*. My latest work seeks to express the necessity of constructing a future to avoid the present, the unavoidable tension of the selfish individual striving toward progress pitted against the threat of falling short of these utopian promises.

The futuristic promises of the 1960s, such as commercial flight and the 1969 moon landing, were constructive proof to me that faith in the combination of science and human power striving toward a beautiful, invented unknown was working.

“The machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them.” (Saint-Exupéry 31)

The complexity and contradictions of modern progress can be found in EXPO 67's origin story located in part in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1939 book *Terres Des Hommes*, loosely translated as “land of men”. The book was selected by Canadian writer Gabrielle Roy in 1963 during a retreat organized in Montebello Quebec for her and other thinkers to produce a theme for EXPO 67. In Roy's introduction to the EXPO 67 corporation's book, entitled *Terres des Hommes/Man and His World*, she reveals the underlying story of EXPO 67. In the book a pilot is deeply moved when, flying for the first time at night alone over Argentina, he notices a few lights scattered below him across a dark almost empty plain. In this moment he becomes profoundly aware of his own solitude, leading him to think of the solitude of others, and how solitude causes us to gravitate towards one another, a tension of proximity. The pilot's heightened awareness of solitude, enabled by modern flight, gives him insight into the necessity of human interdependence and solidarity. *Terres Des Hommes* would be the theme of EXPO 67, drawing people from around the world to the vision of human solidarity. To Roy's democratic and romantic vision, the assembled thinkers agreed to add faith in progress itself as a foundational idea. The faith in humanity envisioned by Roy was merged with the idea of faith in the machine that is modern progress, setting up a tension between them.

This project is about faith in the unity of humanity and faith in progress, both deeply human and therefore deeply imperfect and contradictory from my point of view, as one who has always believed in both. The connective tissue of unity works with and against the interests of the individual who must answer to both unpredictable human emotions and to the human and non-human community, making the promises of modernism difficult at best, inducing a progress-guilt dialectic in those like me who are part of its legacy. The thematic analysis of my studio work since 2020 maps the process of this realization in five sections. The result are visual ideas that are focused on connectivity and construction help to exorcise my progress-guilt response. The ideas are the ways for me to understand the elemental connective forces in my work using the grid as my guide; to search for the vibrations, the coalescences, new structures and finally new stories and ideas, that keep my dreams of a different kind of progress alive. In 1968 conceptual artist Sol Lewitt described artists as "...mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." (LeWitt 1). LeWitt's conceptual framework provides me the freedom to explore beyond my materials and beyond reason.

PROCESS

Much of my work since 2020 involves the mediation of mid twentieth century images drawn from photography, film, and video sources. I employed different methods in the studio to reveal the connective elements in my work. In addition to the remediation of images I used collage, assemblage, the grid, and a relational aesthetics approach to find connections, and to help identify that which recurs throughout or strengthens my work. What was true to me and what remains true? What are the molecules of my modern faith and their patterns, what connects my five sections? I pay close attention to my semiconscious states just before and after sleep where my ideas connect and can be simplified most readily. My studio work returns repeatedly to the place where rationality breaks down into awe and wonder, where human frailty and hubris is evident.

I have an expressionistic and existential need to move my body through space as an active orientation in the world, and to physically ground my mind in the visceral, to leave evidence of my physical human mark. The human body figures prominently in my studio work. The material presence of the body provides certainty, and its dematerialization provides doubt, encouraging questions of the spirit. I describe my practice as multidisciplinary, ideas-first, conceptually based and iconoclastic in the sense that I always want to make something entirely new to me, or to break, remake and connect the ideas from my existing work.

The authority of photography, film and television images helped shape my future in the 1960s. Mid-twentieth century film and photography played a crucial role in conveying a certainty, one that constructed my future then, and that contains my history now. Some of the most important events in my childhood, such as the 1969 moon landing, came to me mostly in black and white

fragments. Media authority no longer exists in the same way in the age of the internet. I want to know how the future is constructed and represented now.

Remediation

My creative strategy involves reinterpreting various images from the mid-twentieth century to connect the formation of my world view to the present. My process for this work builds distance and deterioration typically at least four steps away from the source image. First, I capture a photo of an existing image, typically at low resolution. Then, I employ digital techniques to change the photographed source image, that include aggressive cropping so that the original reference image is eliminated, as well as changes in composition, scale, saturation, and tonality. In some cases, the original subjects themselves are manipulated by selective editing of the half-tones in the painting process, making objects disappear and reappear, and emphasizing their printedness (see Figure 1).

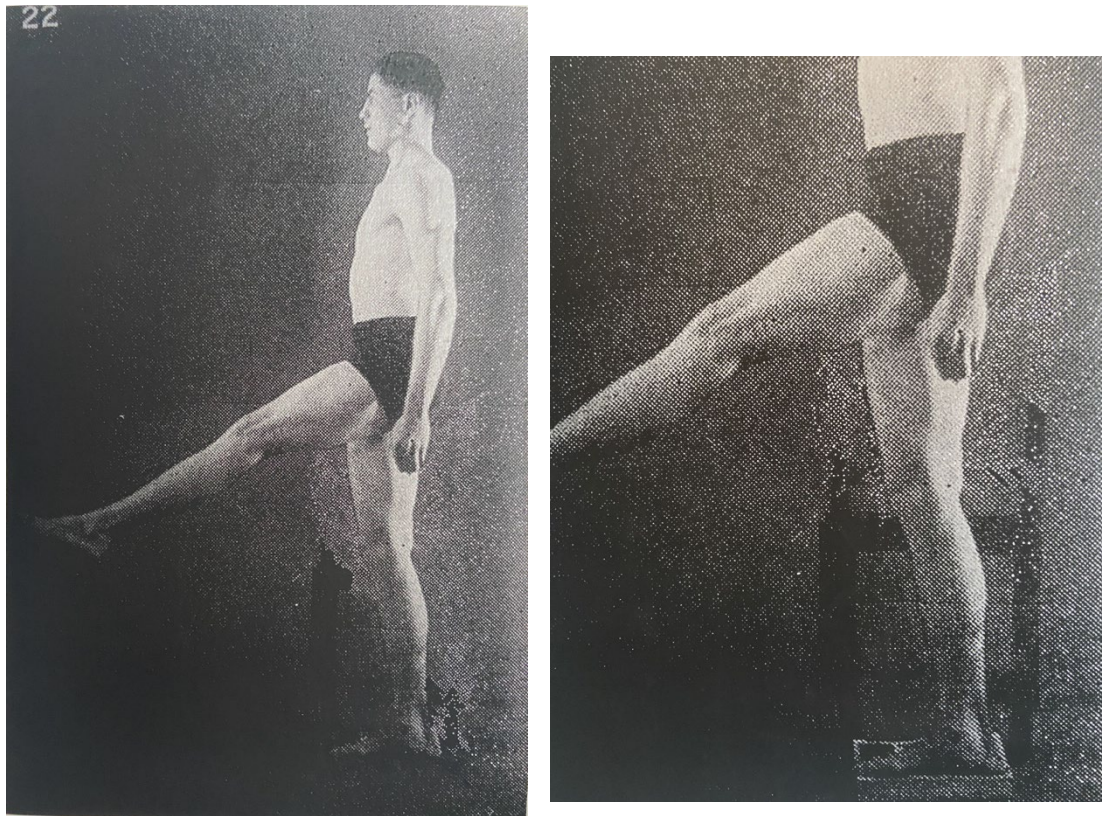


Figure 1. My manipulation of an illustration from *Physical Exercises for Men*, 1937. The supporting chair for this stretching exercise is disappearing. 44" x 68" gouache on ink jet enlarged print on paper. April 2023.

The lack of initial resolution of my black and white source images creates a field of elemental units of impressionistic or pointillistic brushstrokes, or handmade pixels, to form a complex overwhelming unity, a lack of clarity, a diffused essence, and metaphorically a complex unity. This stage in my process is followed by either an outline sketch, or a large-scale ink jet print, then a painting of the source image, or a painting on the source image. With no color hierarchy or symbolism, the graphic simplicity and the echo of black and white photography provides a scaffolding or substrate, an “all over” generative field for further mediation.

I often return to the permanency of human touch and the way that my mark making changes and reinterprets photos and paintings that I have reproduced; and vice versa, where printmaking and photography add interpretive steps to my existing mark making in what can be a multistage process of mediation. Images and ideas are refracted and recontextualized through my mark

making to expand the timeline of the selected images; one that adds my mark as evidence of my deeply imperfect human complicity. My final images seek to reinforce or verify the resonant elements of an image that remain with the passage of time. The final images are meant to include less certain and more diffuse and spiritual meanings, and tension between the painted, printed photographic object and the subject. I create questions about the subject and its material representation to encourage dreaming in the viewer, and to challenge the authority of the image, and the status quo. I want to question the truth that can be found in an image and its narrative to reveal how it can be manipulated, and where its threads of permanence are, which I think of as a structuralist ideal.

An interplay appears between the whole image and its individual units, its unity disappears up close. I imagine representing the tension between the requirement for unity amid individual striving units. For my latest work I am creating super low resolution black and white source images and then reworking the resulting half-tone pixelation in color using gouache, mimicking a pointillist technique. There is an interplay of presence and absence of underlying pattern, image and subject, a flattening and a deepening, a diffusion of the image into its pixel molecules. A floating effect is created by painting intense color pixelations on the black and white image field to evoke ideas of infinity and dematerialization of the image, its subject, and me though my transcendent mark. My manipulations, editing, reprints, and mark-making are an effort to make elusive spiritual understandings more material, my practice enacts a form of reassurance that there is some hidden scaffolding holding up the world. These reinterpretations of various media allow me to time travel, broadcasting the unique traces of my body and my thoughts through time. The collection of my handmade marks is a spiritual form, constructive evidence of my life that continues into an afterlife.

My latest work is based on iPhone photos of pages from a midcentury book entitled *Physical Exercises for Men*, first published in 1937. My final series for this project entitled *Men in Cities* includes a combination of painting, drawing, photography, and printmaking.

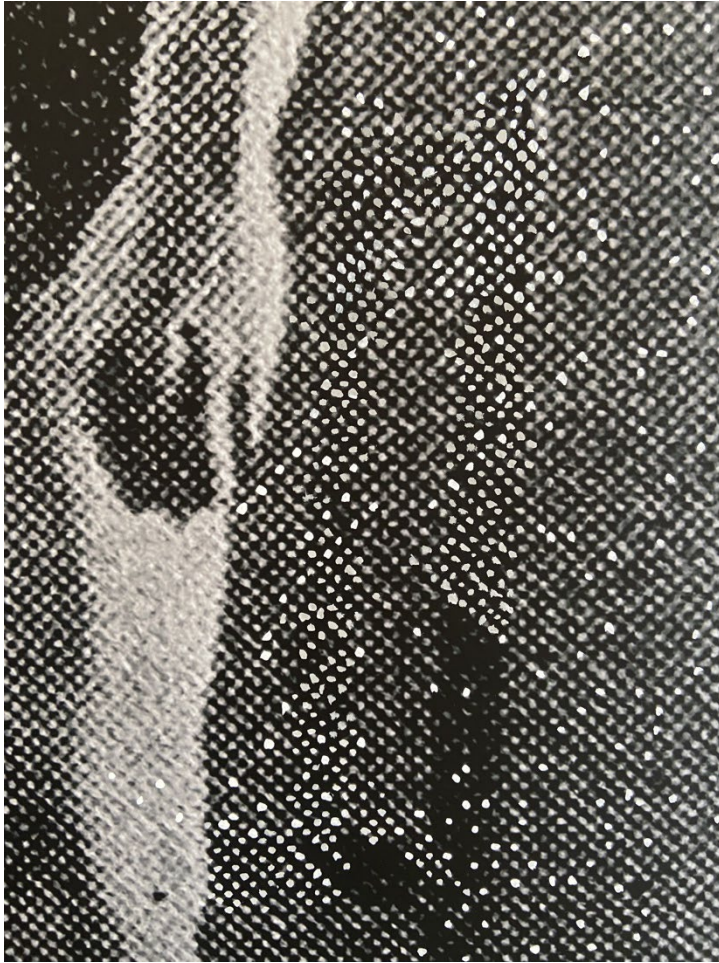


Figure 2. Manipulation of photo illustration from *Physical Exercises for Men*, 1937. Detail, work in progress, *Men in Cities*. Gouache on ink jet print. April 2023.

Assemblage and Relational Aesthetics

I rely heavily on photography to capture source images for my paintings, and in some cases, they end up being presented as photographs. Sol Lewitt, and Giorgio Morandi provide two key points of inflection for how I locate my work beyond painting. I find Lewitt's emphasis on the importance of the idea above the medium to be immensely freeing (LeWitt 1), supporting my

desire to break and remake, to find connections in the ether. I often find myself caught in the tension between the preciousness of a new idea and its next iteration. As a creative strategy, I am increasingly exploring how different media can expand upon the same idea, rather than changing the fundamental idea itself. Morandi's still-life paintings communicate a profound sense of objecthood, a grounding spiritual essence of everyday objects. I am deeply interested in how objects communicate power.

Although I concentrate on painting, drawing, photography, and printing, I have done extensive work in clay and plaster casting as well as assembling found objects. I created a relational aesthetics project entitled *Wonderstar* (2021), to establish how the same cast object given to different people creates its own community of connection. I concluded that nebulous spaces between humans are created by the objects themselves. By playing with arrangements of objects, particularly antique objects with history and patina, I created various assemblages, that are peripherally related to my studio research on connectivity and coalescence. My collection of historical objects has been infused with repeated human touch, patina. I think of patina as a human coalescence of touch in a place where faith resides by the evidence of repetition. Repetition implies meaning assuming the places that are returned to hold attention value of some kind. Arranging and rearranging objects is another process of mediation where I am searching for enduring connections.



Figure 3. My 6” Jim Russell plaster cast squash forms, 2021. Singular forms change when unified, defining themselves by the spaces of proximity, the spaces in between.

The Grid

I used grids as a method to locate sites of coalescence, places where repetition and concentrations of connectivity evidence that something important and elemental is taking place. I found that where there is a confluence of attention there can be new forms of visual meaning.

I have tended toward repetition and making series of images painted on square or rectangular paper that are displayed geometrically in a line square or rectangle. I enjoy the comforting sense of productivity from multiple images exhibited together, as well as the commercial dichotomy between craft and mass production that is evidenced through repetition and serial work.

Displaying my images in a grid creates additional narratives and expanded meaning for the viewer by creating what I call the super-image: not just a collection of smaller images into a

whole but the exponential interactive meaning that results between the images in various combinations. The super-image is like Rosalind Krauss's centripetal grid force, a concentration rather than a dispersed grid force, one that "tends not to dematerialize that surface, but to make itself the object of vision." (Krauss 12)

This super-image is demanding because it is held in tension by the viewer. The super-image is a larger visual pattern of work; it is a curatorial and thematic insistence; and an obvious concentration of effort. I see the grid form as an extension of collage, with each square holding unique potential for a regulated collision depending on how it is populated. A grid contains individual units that must navigate a strong unifying structure. A grid provides me with a measure of progress and organizational comfort, a visual accumulation of work, a reassurance of my contributed value, an accounting of sorts. A grid is infinitely complex yet constructive.

Collage

The inherent instability of collage as method appeals to me as it can be seen as either a tearing apart, or a piecing together, always producing unexpected new combinations. I used a collage of the images gathered for this project to help locate and challenge the thematic linkages in my work. The unexpected collisions support my approach of constantly breaking apart and reconnecting ideas. Collaborations with other artists operate like collages to help me to open my process and find unexpected ideas through combination. Polish Canadian Radoslaw Kudlinski from Blue Republic encouraged me to expand my creative ideas beyond painting, drawing, photography, and printmaking to include performance ideas and responses to place. As a result, I did a collaborative performance in the Gales Gallery this year (See Figure 13) which has led to

me thinking more openly about more aggressively mediating my work and inviting others into the process.

MEDIA AND MATERIALS

The focus for my graduate exhibition entitled *Men in Cities* has been painting, drawing, photography, and printmaking, with plaster cast and assemblage playing mostly peripheral roles.

The historical black and white source images I start with are typically selected from old books or gathered from internet sources that collect photos or time-based media. I find black and white simple and flexible because it is devoid of color symbolism and ornamentation, unattractive for consumption and therefore anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist, graphic, realistic, and objective.

Black and white images can be interpreted as nostalgic, they carry the pre-digital authority derived from television, newspaper, film, and analog camera references. They are a good starting point as they can appear neutral from a color standpoint but are heavily loaded through their roots in early television, photography, and print, speaking to my mid twentieth century history.

Black and white images provide critical clarity, an analog index, an essential form of visual reason, a focus on the subject stripped of distraction. My strategy is to use loose and incomplete rendering, painted in brush and ink, so that the image is left open for interpretation, collaboration, and interaction. Realism is not my goal; spiritualism is, where my presence and effort are conveyed through remediation, the field of marks made, and through the act of regenerating a historical photo. When my source photos are cropped and reprinted, my specific subjectivity intervenes on the preexisting subjectivity and indexicality, opening new interpretations for the viewer. The layers of my mediation produce a density of focus, my concentration of effort bridging time, place, and subject, a transcendent act.

Much of my painting since 2020 is black ink on seventy-four-pound polypropylene paper that accommodates many kinds of mark-making along with interesting watercolor effects, especially pooling. This pooling technique builds in looseness, chance, and time, and eliminates the expressionist brushstroke, creating questions about the agency of the painter. I often achieve playful and unexpected effects with ink which can change dramatically as it dries. Polypropylene paper does not absorb ink, providing adhesion of paint only to its surface. Interesting figurative or topographical effects of the ink's evaporation can be seen as receding little shorelines in each dried pool. It is extremely strong and allows for aggressive additive and subtractive material explorations and techniques, although the slightest touch of its surface can damage or erase a carefully made mark. The paper can be punctured, sewn, and even bolted together. Dilution, reduction, time, and the unexpected overlapping effects create anthropomorphic forms that connect to my interest in the digitally dematerialized figure. Although grounded in the figure, my work oscillates between abstraction and representation. This oscillation holds clues to the destabilized yet connective energy that I am looking for. I am interested in "opening up the photo" as Michel Foucault suggested in his ideas about Gerhard Richter's photogenic painting.

[The works] do not however incorporate images through their painting technique but extend technique itself into the great sea of images, where their painting acts as a relay in endless circulation. (Deleuze and Foucault 91)

By opening the photo, I mean expanding the medium with successive manipulations, from different directions and points of view, trying to get to the core of its meaning, as originally intended and through my view of the world and those of contemporary viewers. Opening the photo extends and expands its meaning in new directions, the most fundamental of which is the act of mediation itself, a resetting of its original aura, challenging the disciplinary borders

between painting, photography, and printmaking, which all work to uncover the scaffolding of the image.

My work is typically completed on a flat surface, with the drying of ink pools in some cases taking many hours, which leads to interesting questions of easel versus floor painting history, especially when they are then hung vertically. Accidental patterns emerge when I can move completely around the image while painting, generating multi-dimensional energy. Spiritual forms emerge visually and materially in my work when I work on many individual units at close range and then pull away from the individual pixel to reveal another kind of super-image. An image that was not conceived in the whole but ended up as one. Important meaning forms where there is coalescence.

My latest paintings use heavy forty-four-inch-wide enhanced matte paper roll to print out large scale black and white ink jet prints of historical images that I paint on directly using gouache and acrylic paint.

History, Context and Artistic Influences

As both a businessperson and an artist, I believe in the science-based certainty and the progress-oriented optimism of modernism, yet I also agree that its promise has fallen short for many. The ideals of modernism are closely aligned with capitalism which I believe accurately reflects much of human nature, so perhaps it might be reformed but not abolished. The popular Canadian mid-century modernist promises of the future exhibited at EXPO 67 were based on the earth as a limitless resource to be exploited. The mid-century futurist ideals buried important truths on many fronts in the name of progress. and did not consider sustainability, the Achilles heel of

progress, as part of the vision. As a result, my era of progress has produced much guilt and a negative orientation toward the idea of progress. My work recognizes progress-guilt, and the need to update the ideas of the future imagined by modernism, and to include the important dissatisfactions of postmodernism, in a way that moves forward and upward, rather than in useless polarization. Postmodern thinking did help to produce the resistance necessary to broaden the ideas of progress to make them more inclusive, but I find at times it devolves into a nihilism and relativism that frustrates my constructive and connective instincts.

Billy Childish and Charles Thomson, founders of the Stuckist art movement initiated remodernism in 2000, their proposed updated version of modernism, with a manifesto. Remodernism proposed an updated version of Modernism, to bring a new spirituality into art, culture, and society to replace the ennui of postmodernism (Childish and Thomson). Like me, its founders were disillusioned with the modernism that had emerged and did not find postmodernism a constructive approach. The Stuckists proposed a return to more spiritual, less conceptual art, updated in part with figurative painting, a return to the importance of the anchor of the body as ground zero for exploration of the human spirit. Remodernism would be a more spiritual modernism, one that is more broadly distributed and more easily accessed. I imagine remodernism as a move in the right direction, away from the mid-century modernism that had proven selfish and destructive on so many fronts, thanks in part to appropriation by intense capitalist interests.

How to reconcile the individual drives that make up modern progress, against the human need for unity, our need to look to the future, all while acknowledging human frailty, lack of reason and the need for faith in something?

The most recent update to modernism, metamodernism takes remodernism one step further, proposing to always integrate rather than refute opposing thematic stances, generously combining modernism and postmodernism, echoing a measure of Remodernism's transcendent spirituality,

a better model that rejects both modernist essentialism and postmodernist skepticism; a way that is beyond both hyperspecialization and obscurantism; a way that is neither purely inward-gazing nor outward-assimilating, that can sustain the necessary tension in which self and other function in interdependent relationships. (Storm 2)

The constructive upward spiral of metamodernism identified by Richard Storm holds the tension of the parts, changes the center, and moves holistically toward a more spiritual vision,

This is not a turn in the fixed plane of disciplinary horizons (as so many other turns have been) but rather a three-dimensional reorientation. Rather than running in circles, we need to spiral upward. The center must move if we are not going to fall into further fragmentation. (Storm 6)

Modernism reflected the interests of the self-improving individual driving toward progress under the cover of unity for all, followed by remodernism's more democratic resetting to recover a sense of unity and spiritual meaning, intended to do away with the negative and destructive dissatisfaction of postmodernism, followed by metamodernism's inclusive and constructive generosity. The three movements wrestle with the thematic contradictions initiated at EXPO 67: the collision of individual interests in the name of progress against the ideal of a united global community. My studio work seeks to express this struggle in a positive way.

I locate my artwork within modern painting practices, beginning with Edouard Manet's social criticisms, followed by other socially critical contemporary artists such as Gerhard Richter. Like

me, both launched their social criticism from inside positions of the privileged white, male, economic class. Many of my influences worked with ideas of sensations and diffusion, such as Georges Seurat and Yayoi Kusama. The pure modern unfettered spirituality of Kazimir Malevich's reductive Suprematism provides the foundation for my latest work with grids and pixelation. Malevich's black square is the visual ground zero for the painted elemental unit just as the pixel is the elemental unit of the digital. The American Abstract Expressionists connect me to the all-over ground of pixelation that I use as a generative start for my latest images. I return repeatedly to Agnes Martin's meditative, spiritual, and imperfect fields of marks, which are a contemplative gateway to the divine. Robert Longo's series, *Men in Cities*, provided the direct inspiration for my work with grids and for my current studio work, *Men in Cities*, whose subjects are in the throes of exorcising their progress-guilt, instead of expressing jubilant and dramatic life in the city.

PORTFOLIO OF SELECTED STUDIO WORK

The visual documentation of my studio work commenced around the pandemic's start in March 2020 and does not yet include the final work underway for my exhibit at the Gales Gallery in April 2023. The following is a detailed description of my portfolio of selected studio work so far, organized into five sections. I completed this arrangement retrospectively by grouping my images thematically according to certain recurring ideas that form a broad narrative entitled *The Poetics of Proximity*, an investigation into the energetic spaces and connections between things.

SECTION 1 – DISTANCES

My work from this section went back to my fascination with the 1960s future, the beginning of my progress-oriented worldview. I believed in the shiny promises of the future based on my contact with the airplanes at Dorval through my father's lifetime devotion to Air Canada and its extended community. The Air Canada jets flying over my small suburban Montreal world promised exciting destinations and were a beacon of possibility and optimism to me. There was a mysterious distance between the prescriptive world of my suburban family life and the open world of what was then called the Dorval Airport, known as "the base." My father taught me how to identify different jets by their sounds and engine configurations.

At EXPO 67 I saw a future. My images in this section are rooted in the early 1960s based on my recollections of suburban life in Montreal and the impact EXPO made on me. Upward mobility was available for my high school educated parents. The space race was on with modern technologies promising infinite possibilities. I included images of measurement tools, 1960s science, jets, the clearly defined roles of domestic suburban life in our traditional family, the popular striving for improvement and fitness, and gender roles. Flight implies distance and represents infinite possibilities to me, a symbol for the mysterious connections between people, unknown places, and things. I could barely stay awake for the televised 1969 moon landing brought to me on a small black and white television. The future was happening, it was exciting, and I had faith that it would continue its incredible trajectory.

When Neil Armstrong set foot on the Moon, it was evident that the facts of science had the old fantasies of the space adventure story. (Clarke 12)



Figure 4. 1960's inspired images. Jim Russell 11"x14" black ink paintings on polypropylene paper 2020, 2021, 2022



Figure 5. 1960's inspired images painted in black ink on 11"x14" polypropylene paper conveys a tension underneath the apparent certainty of the 1960's. Jim Russell 2020

SECTION 2 – PROGRESS

The images in the Progress section represent the exciting and contradictory ideas of the future to me, both the confidence striding toward the unknown, and the limitations of the futuristic imagination, seen in hindsight, otherwise known as retrofuturism. I painted images based on some of my memories from the 1960s, especially EXPO 67. The images provide a layer of criticism and even humour with the passage of time. I find past ideas of progress and the future fascinating because they are often so far off the mark. “The prophecies and predictions of the last 200 years show that the future is not accurately predictable on any scale nor in any detail.” (Clarke 316).

My images of robot toys, EXPO 67’s representation of technology, and 1960s open sexuality were sources of the promises making up my ideas of progress and the future. The popular future is a device of imaginative projection.

My latest images are from a mid-century fitness book “Physical Exercises for Men” (citation pending). They attempt to capture a tenuous human faith in the future, the motivation to move through difficult activities, striving for individual perfection in the present to get ready to participate in the promises of the future.

What if the faith in global unity had not been combined with the idea of progress for EXPO 67, but instead of progress a kind of transcendence, something with a different connective tissue, to a less material future? What are the possibilities now?

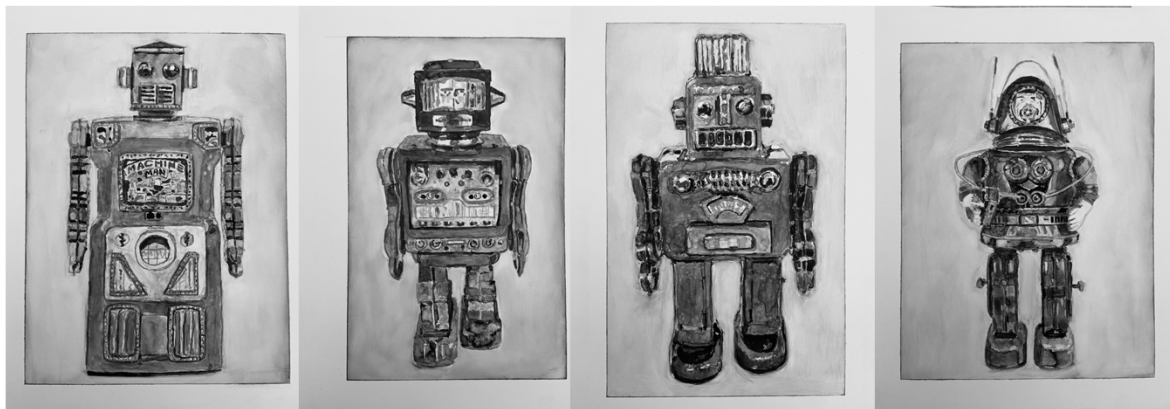


Figure 6. These ideas of the future seem funny now. 11"x14" black ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

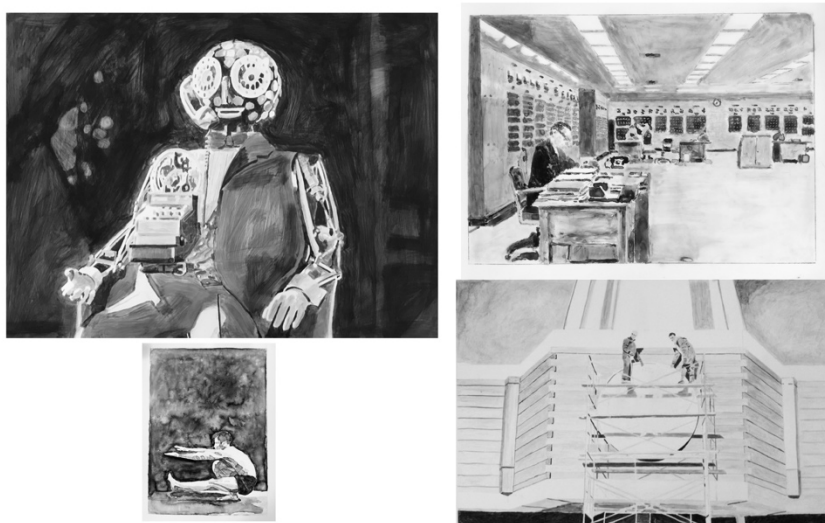


Figure 7. Images of the future. Black Ink on paper 36"x48" Jim Russell 2020.



Figure 8. Inspired by EXPO 67, the images of the 1960's are endlessly fascinating to me, constructive and forward looking. They are vaguely ominous in hindsight, conveying that we had no idea what was really to come. Ink on paper, assorted sizes up to 40". Jim Russell 2020.

SECTION 3 – POSSIBILITIES

In this section I attempt to create a clear starting place from which to build new stories of the future, a tabula rasa, inspired in part by the natural sublime. I think of the natural sublime as ground zero, a clear conceptual space, a place of energetic patterns, a solitary place like St. Exupéry's pilot found on the vast dark plain, from which all measurements, stories and ideas take shape. This section expresses my interest in the boundaries of thinking, reasoning and being, how all human stories might start with the longing for connection inside a vastness, a spiritual longing for connection. These images reflect the sublime expanse, a space not yet filled by the material designs of progress, a place of limitless creative potential. Starting from ground zero, where does representation begin?

My desire for a sense of organization began to creep into this work, looking for connections, the starting point for individual connection. In this section I recognize, translate, and interpret natural patterns. I am looking for some other thing to connect to in the blackness. It is important that I

keep trying, that I keep faith in my creative process. I find that where calculations fail, infinite potential begins.



Kazimir Malevich's Black Square(cite)



Black ink field

Figure 9. My 11"x14" ink on paper starting point and Kazimir Malevich's famous oil on linen painting, 79.5cm x 79.5 cm Black Square (1915), are similar.

Ground zero



Figure 10. 11"x14" Black ink field drying prior to applying sgraffito techniques. Jim Russell 2022.

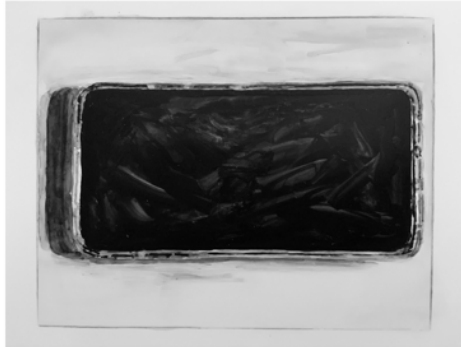


Figure 11. Cell phone black mirror as elemental and infinite access point. 11"x14" black ink on paper. Jim Russell 2020.

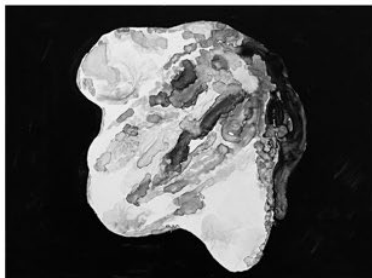


Figure 12. This energetic gesture of seeking connection occurs when my reason and a rational method break down to reveal more spiritual forms. 11"x14" black ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.



Figure 13. The sublime is difficult to describe, so geometry and calculus creep in. Math calculations for a formula representing randomness were added by a York University math student who came to see the Wave Theory piece (left) at Gales Gallery. Ink and pencil on paper 44"x54" Jim Russell 2022.

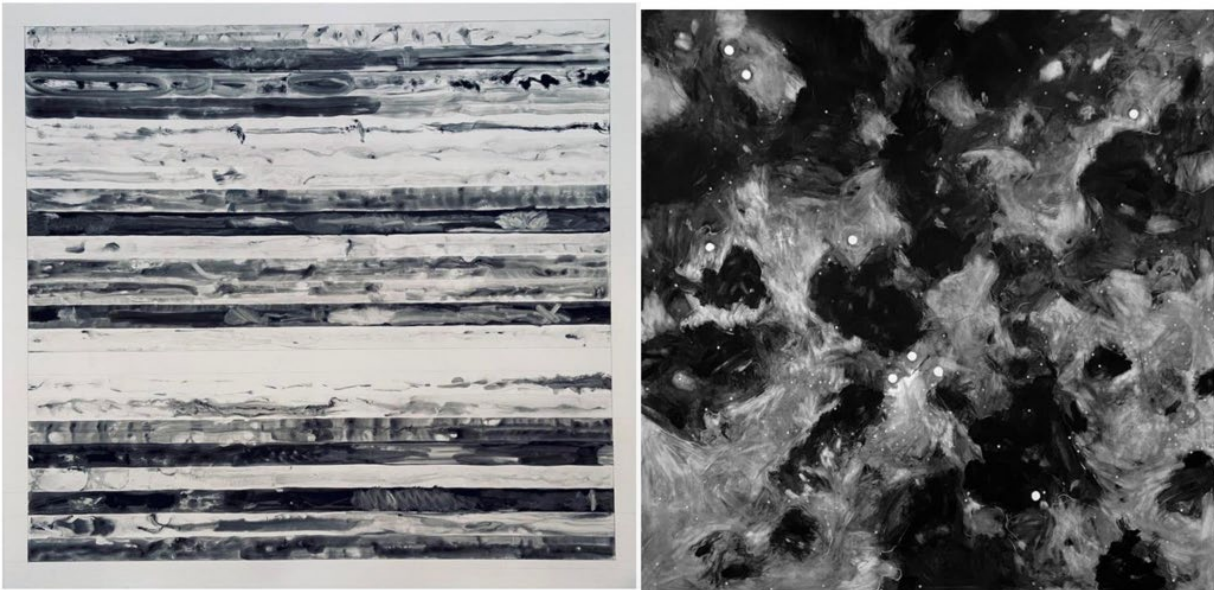


Figure 14. Order creeping into the sublime. 60"x60" black ink on paper. Jim Russell 2021.

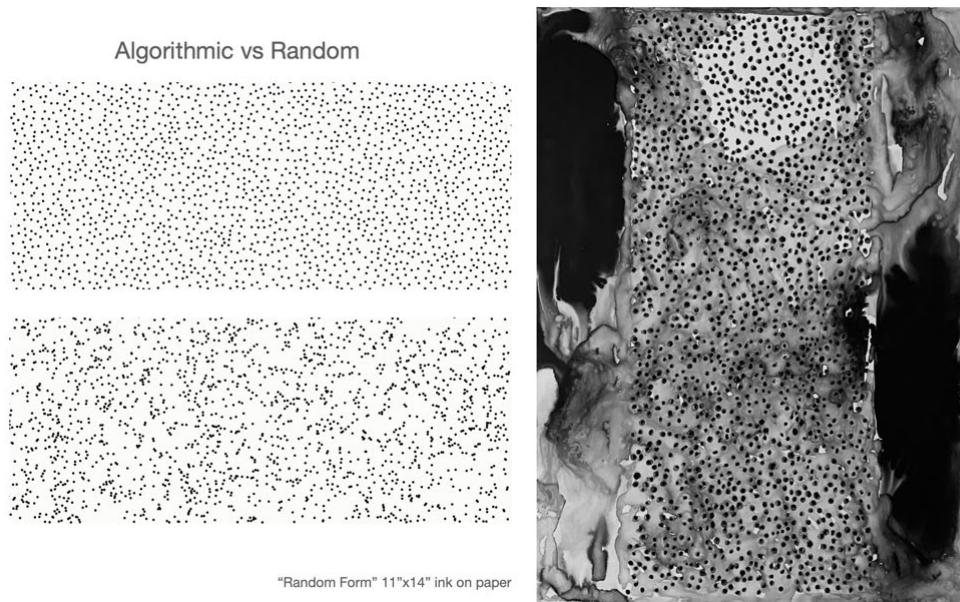


Figure 15. I explored basic algorithms and found the patterns in the natural sublime can be mimicked by algorithms. Mitchell's best-candidate algorithms (left) appear random and are therefore very deceptive. What does constructed order look like and what does it mean? 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

SECTION 4 – COALESCENCE

Inspired by Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist painting *Black Square* (Malevich) in the last section, that he intended in part as a perfect reduction of all visual forms, I used a black ink field as a starting point for my grid investigations. By multiplying Malevich's singular square into a grid, I assumed it must produce a pure collective visual form, a place where singular loneliness and infinite connection exist simultaneously. The grid's coalescent power works through its capacity for both infinite expansion and complete containment, a perfect structure for the containment of contradictions. "Because of its bivalent structure (and history), the grid is fully, and even cheerfully schizophrenic" (Krauss 60)

I explored sameness and difference within the grid structure, and thought about relationships in a structured space, the infinite variation, and the potential of relationships all held in tension. As it is populated, the grid's organizing structure multiplies complexity which in turn requires an

increasing amount of diplomatic energy, yet it maintains an objective indifference to the messy problem of the reconciliation of its parts. Metaphorically the grid has lots of potential.

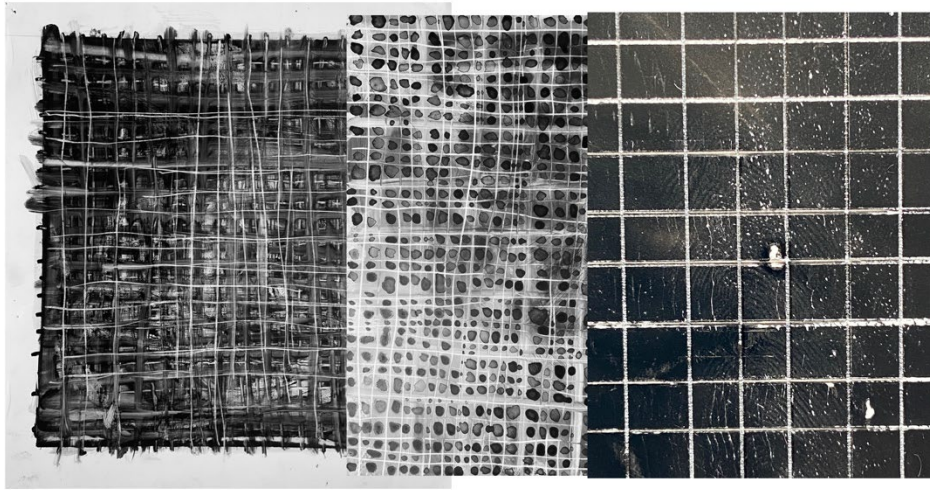


Figure 16. Grids contain infinite expansion and unique single elements. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

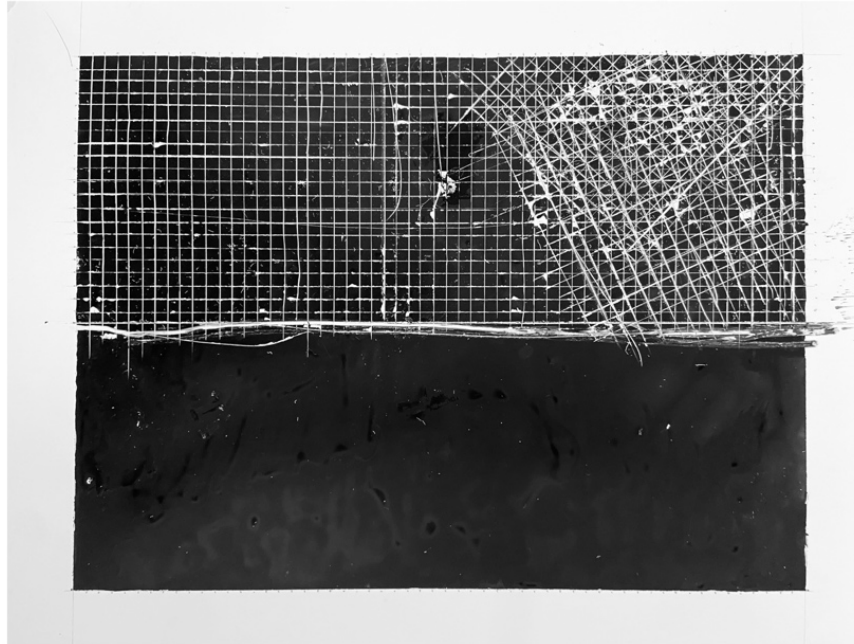


Figure 17. Grids as metaphors for the application of reason, or the collision of ideologies, modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

I imagined the grid as a metaphor as a digital algorithm. I represented my contemporary identity as an algorithmic portrait, the sum of my technological interactions, the future imposing itself on me in real time. I used the grid to help visually reveal these often-invisible algorithmic forces. I found that where coalescence occurs energies multiply and create new emergent forms.

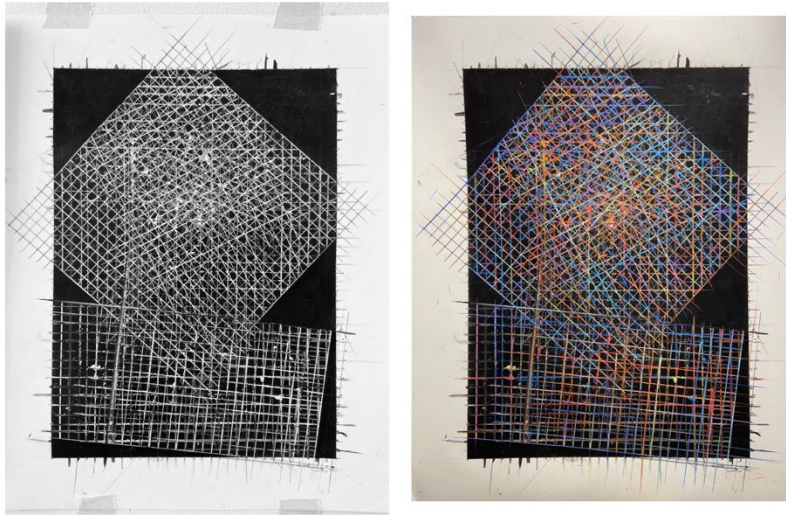


Figure 18. Algorithmic portraits create new forms out of points confluence. 11"x14" ink on paper (left), 44"x54" colored pencil on ink jet print (right). Jim Russell 2022.

My work in this section represents a confluence or density of interest as a form of truth. What are these energetic connections?

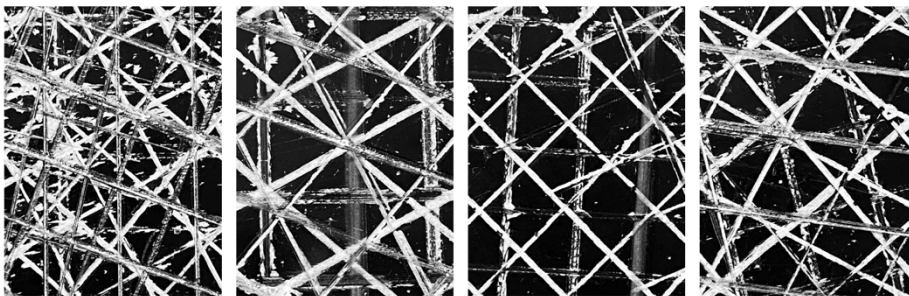


Figure 19. Close-up photos of areas on confluence in algorithmic portraits. New energetic and spiritual forms emerge where connections multiply. 8.5" x 11" copier prints of close-up photos of Algorithmic Portraits. Jim Russell 2022.

There is tension in a grid between the individual and the whole, between infinity and control. Pixels operate similarly by dematerializing and materializing depending on the distance from which they are viewed, abstract and grid-like up close, and representational of a whole unit from further away. I use this transitional vibration as a creative strategy to create an energetic vibration, a kind of material transition, a spirit. Where things are undone and redone, made and remade repeatedly, faith forms in the suspension, not in one state or the other but in their material and conceptual transition. Believable stories can form where there is coalescence between states.

Geometric fields invite a process of contemplation and comparison, possessing both mediative and meditative qualities. Transcendence may be represented in their infinite combinations. Is it in the number of connections that an analytical mind finds the divine, truth and certainty? Does confluence create truth?

A subject thus acquires knowledge not through analysis, concentration, or theorization, but through distraction and soaking in the 'ocean of matter,' articulated through the experience of geometric surfaces, which informs a habitus of recognition of the similitudes between geometric order and the order of divine creation. (Shaw 44)

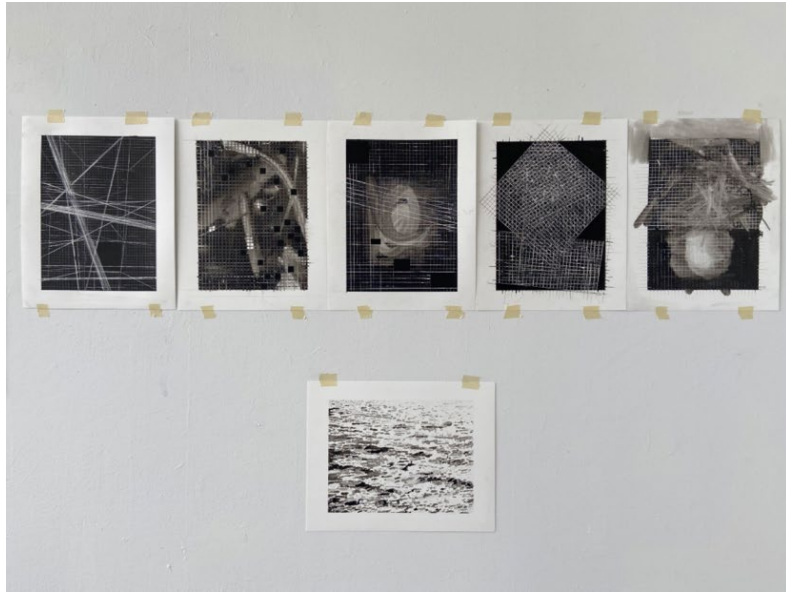


Figure 20. Collection of 11"x14" ink on paper grid research where blind spots are blacked out sections of a dimensional grid indicating the failure of logic or narrative (top row). Wave patterns provide sublime inspiration (lower). Jim Russell 2022.

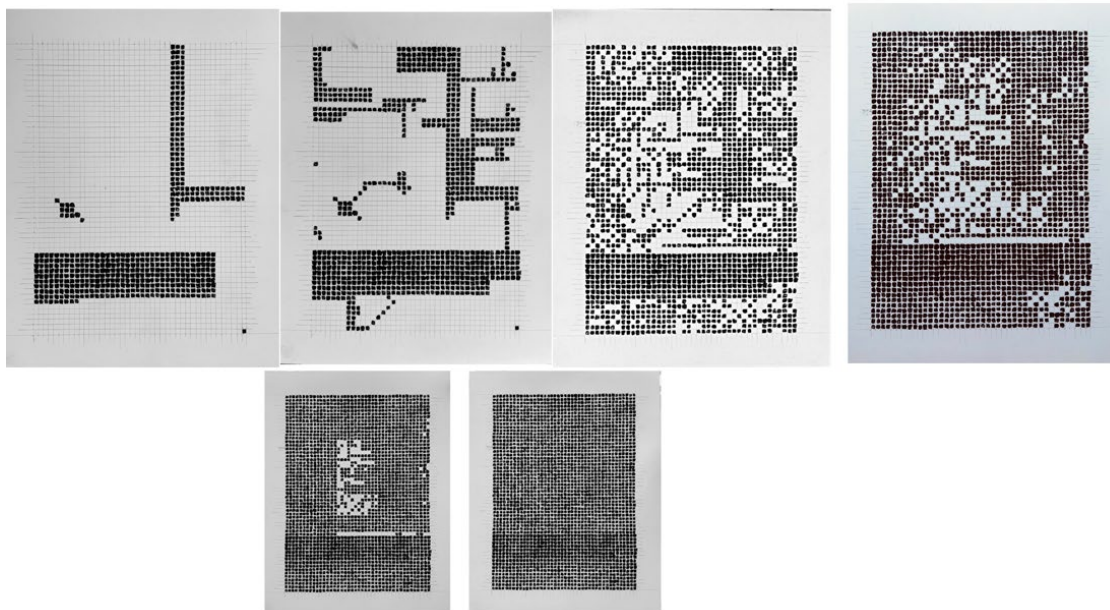


Figure 21. My investigation into coalescent forms is created by the presence and absence of singular forms. There is comfort in fixed absolute abstract forms, definition in a technologically diffuse social context, a chance to reassert my place in the world. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

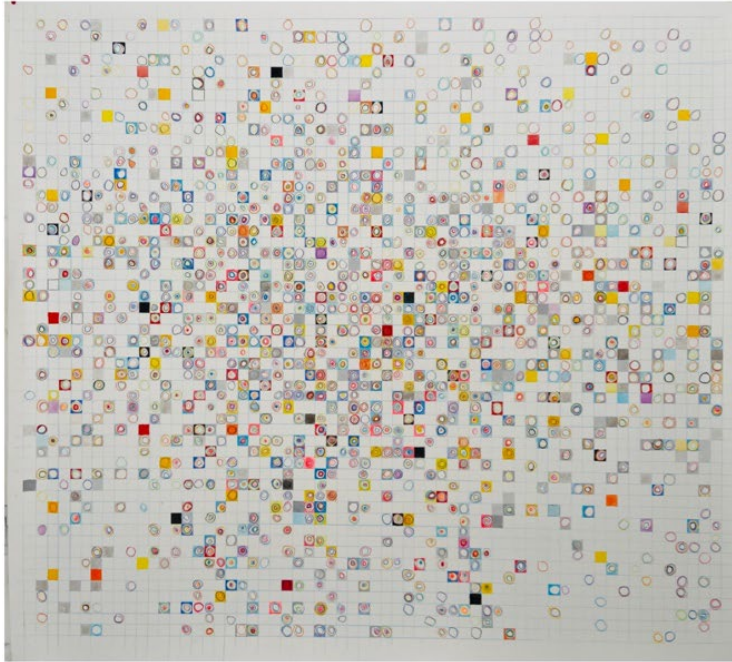


Figure 22. These studies explore the complex navigation of proximity where new forms are created by the spaces in between, and in the places they are not. Gouache, ink, and pencil on paper. 60"x60" (left) and 12"x12" (right) gouache and colored pencil on paper.

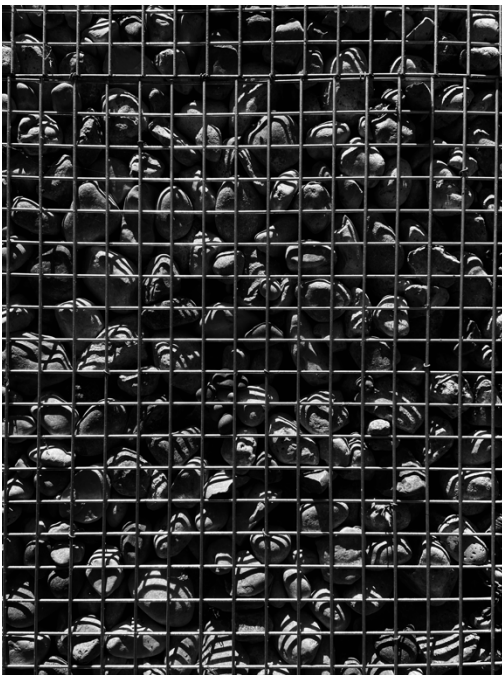


Figure 23. This found grid contains forms like prisoners. iPhone photo. Jim Russell 2022

Object based organization

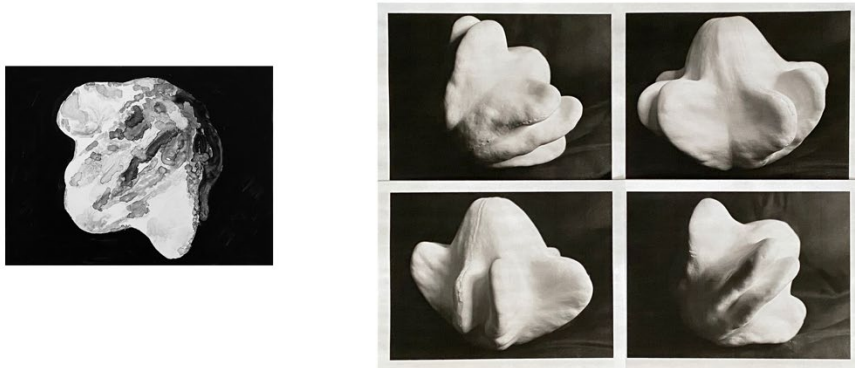


Figure 24. Semi-abstract forms encourage different points of view. 11"x14" ink on paper(left), 8.5" x 11" digital photograph(right). Jim Russell 2022.



Figure 25. The requirement for diplomatic navigation of the singular form among many other forms in proximity. The abstract energetic shape, the pixelated fuzz of energy, the new emerging density, the suggestion of points of light like a city, the population, is the inspiration for my version of *Men in Cities*. Untitled, From Robert Longo's *Men in Cities* (1980). Charcoal and graphite on paper 96"x60" (left), Jim Russell 40" x 40" gouache and pencil on paper, *Men in Cities* 2022.

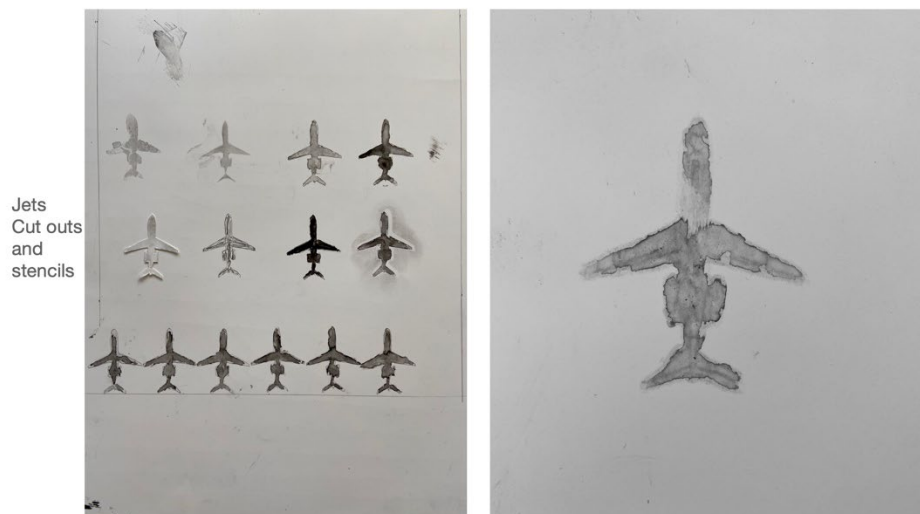


Figure 26. Jets coalescing, spiritual jet representing distance. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2022.

SECTION 5 – FAITH

Modern ideas of the future were often commercially inspired and were infused by powerful social and political agendas leading to a reticence to believe anything in contemporary society. There is a tragic element to my work in this section, the recognition that past futures were not realized as intended, they did not unify global humanity, but the necessity of faith in humanity prevails.

The images in this section convey ideas of a solitary form inspired in part by a bright star reflecting off Lake Huron, of a struggling mysterious human form, and lack of image at all, when there is nothing to hang on to but the aura itself. My work in this Section begins with thinly veiled criticisms of the church and capitalism, two social constructs requiring faith. When stripped of images of the interior and its three dimensions, the Sistine chapel reveals a complex collision of competing orders. *Get Ready for Disco* conceptually appropriates faith in a vaguely

defined future event. I examine the solitary individuality of faith against the requirement for unity.

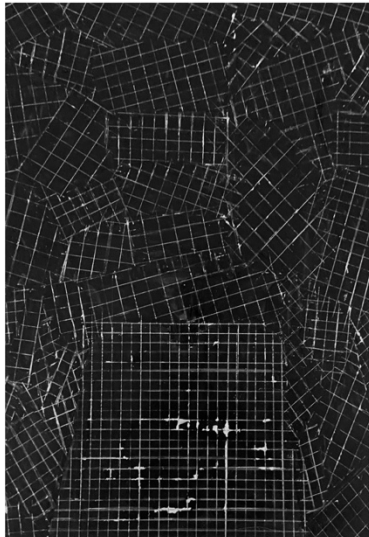
My own faith in the creative process is part of the subject. Connections form when I make a leap of faith, as I have done when I created the work in each of these sections, each a thread in the fabric of a new story, connecting to the unknown and back again. I imagine that my repeated trips out and back strengthen this creative fabric made of faith.

Like faith itself, this section is a work in progress. It contains my final series *Men in Cities*, fragmented figures caught in dream states where their pixelated spirits coalesce into new forms. This series is literally and conceptually an exercise in faith expressed as vibrating states of pixelated transition, the interplay of a disintegrating subject and new emerging forms. My work for *Men in Cities* has a disorienting point of view and a disoriented subject. I am injecting Modern abstraction and Pop art color palette as a challenge to reason and the material, a pixelated vibrating power meant to express the difficulty of contemporary faith, yet the relentless hope of reconstruction, in newly forming colorful coalescences of order. The bodies are fragmented, the subject is uncertain, and the surface is oscillating between two and three dimensions.

Ideas of the modern future required a type of faith that is deeply flawed, just like past futures thinking things will be different this time, ignoring the various competing agendas, willfully suspending reason, chasing shiny objects, and being deeply and at times selfishly human. The persistent insufficiency of science and the magic of human thinking are united in my latest work.



Figure 27. Get Ready for Disco. Mockup for neon sign. Capitalistic appropriation of anticipation. Anticipation as a form of faith. Digital screenshot. Jim Russell 2022.



Construction of Faith
Sistine Chapel-Structure of Belief
11"x14" ink on paper

Figure 28. The Sistine Chapel was reduced to two dimensions, and no story, a collision of ideologies. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2023.



Figure 29. The isolation of the solitary form creates connective tension. 11"x14" ink on paper(left and centre), photo(right). Jim Russell 2020.

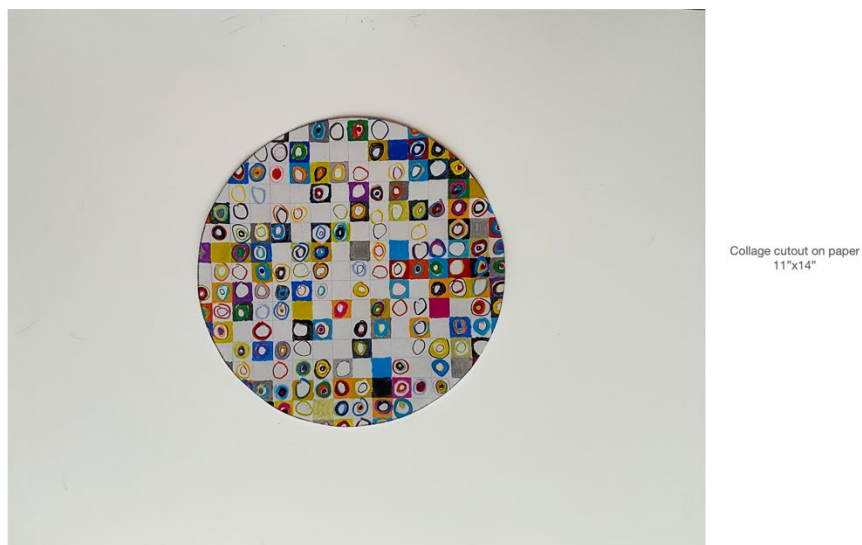


Figure 30. Tension between the solitary and unified. 11"x14" collage. Jim Russell 2023.

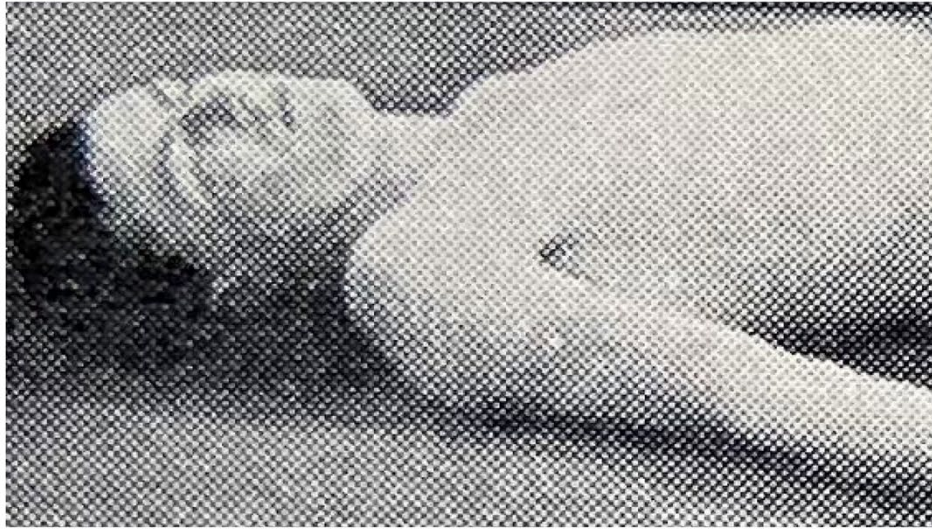


Figure 31. Solitary struggle. 11"x14" ink on paper. Jim Russell 2020.



Figure 32. Photo of family photo album. No images, the intended subject is not present, leaving the idea of the subject. 8.5" x 11" digital photograph. Jim Russell 2022.

Men in Cities – Work in Progress

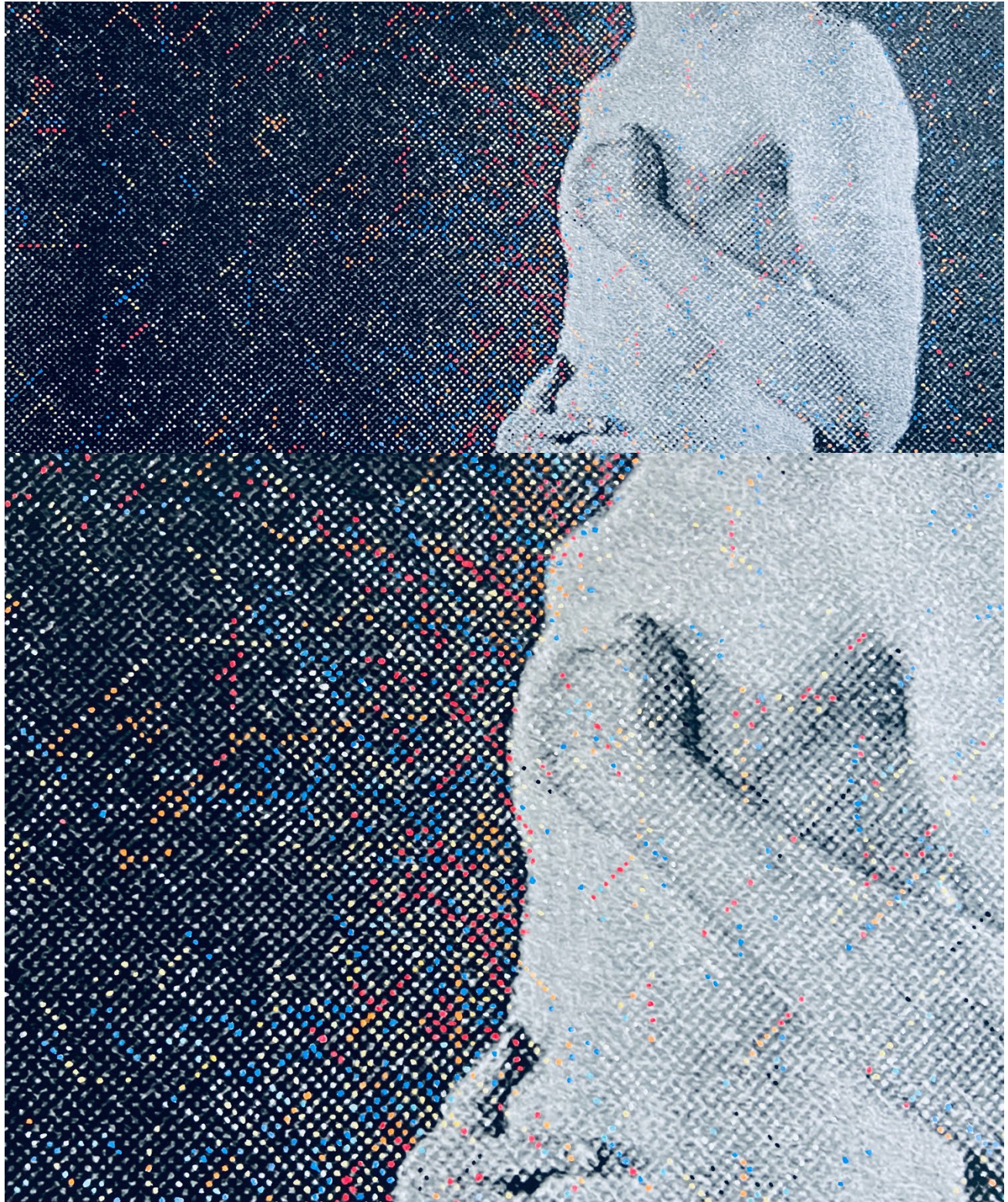


Physical exercises for men

Figure 33. Cropped image from illustration found in *Physical Exercises for Men*, 1937. These images are the starting point *Men in Cities* initially inspired by Robert Longo. 24"x42" laser jet print on paper.



Figure 34. *Men in Cities*. 24"x42" gouache on laser jet print on paper. Jim Russell 2023.



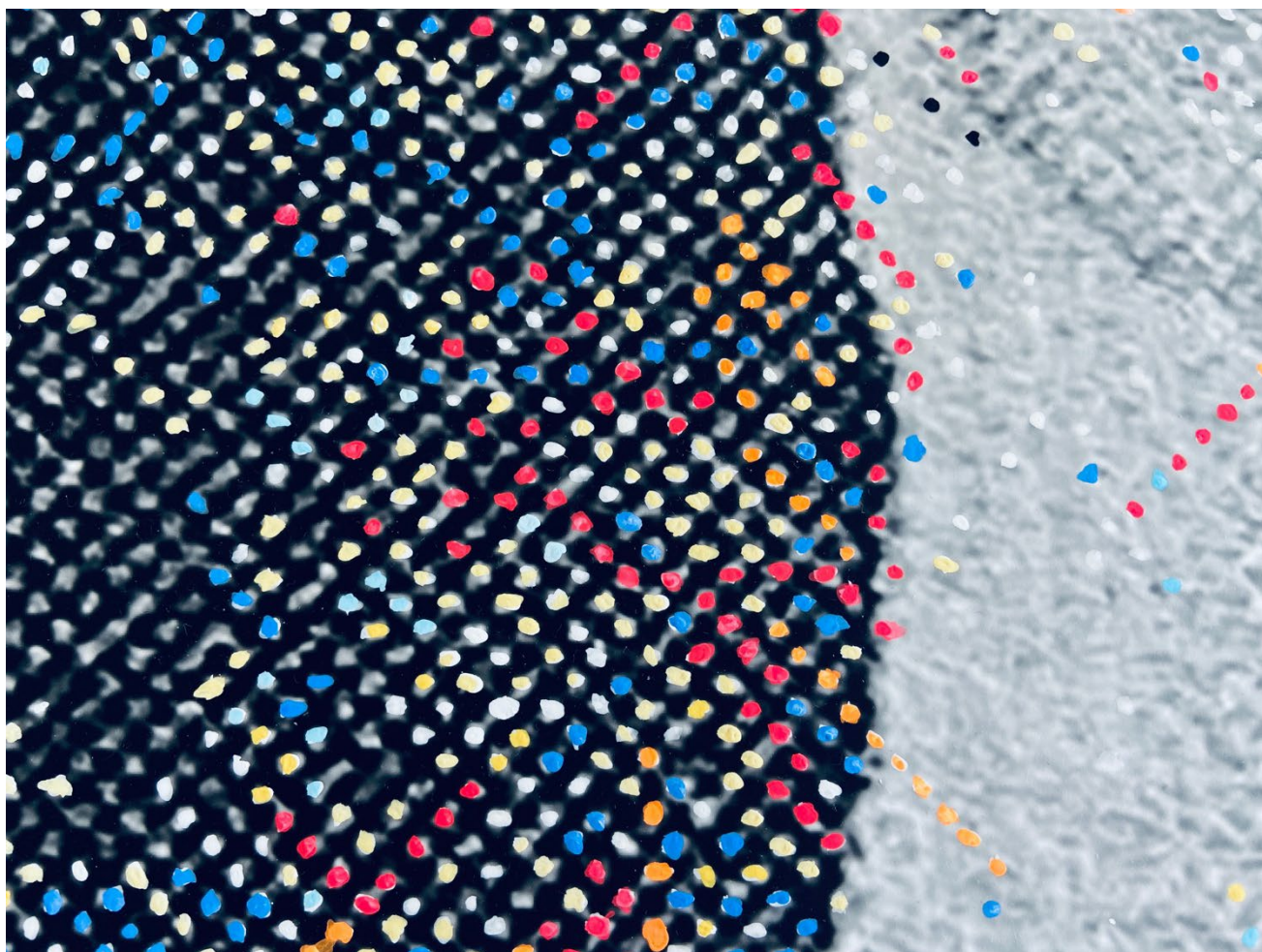


Figure 35. Work in progress for Men in Cities, 24"x42" gouache on black and white ink jet print. Dematerializing the body and the formation of new constellations of meaning. Jim Russell 2023.

CONCLUSION

The thematic analysis of my studio work since 2020 revealed many contradictions: local and distant places, past futures, certainty and uncertainty, abstraction and representation, the containment of the grid and its infinite expansion, my points of view as a capitalistic product of modernism and as an artist, coalescence and diffusion, totality and fragmentation, reason and the sublime, hope and melancholy, color and black and white, photography, printmaking, and painting.

By holding on to rather than resolving its contradictions, my work seeks to express this struggle in a constructive way. My hybrid position contains two points of view, one intensely structured and individualistic, and one less structured and more community oriented. I seek to challenge and celebrate the assumptions made in both positions to connect communications between them, a constructive effort made to avoid hypocrisy, isolation, and division.

The highest ideals of modernism expressed in EXPO 67's origin story contain a contradiction between the individual striving for progress and a more unified progress to benefit everyone that cannot be easily reconciled. Ideas of the modern future require a type of faith that is deeply flawed, thinking it will be different this time despite the proof of past futures, ignoring the various competing agendas, willfully suspending reason, chasing shiny objects. The Poetics of Proximity is a collection of these contradictions, the tension created by objects, people or ideas that are near each other, connected invisibly and held together by a connective energy.

My studio work explored how forms gather, interact, and coalesce into meaning, particularly in a grid format. New energetic forms emerged where connections multiply, and where elemental units gather. In the mysterious gathering connection between individual elements I found emerging patterns, the scaffolding of meaning and belief. Where there is repetition there is meaning, where connections coalesce faith is evidenced by a repeated return to the same location. That which refuses definition must be energetically sustained by multiple connections and coalescent faith, or it ceases to exist.

I searched for the connective tissue between contradictions by looking at how metamodernism might hold the ideas of both modernism and postmodernism together. Modernism reflected the interests of the self-improving individual driving toward progress under the cover of unity for everyone. This was followed by remodernism's more democratic attempt to recover a sense of spiritual meaning that was intended to do away with the negative and destructive dissatisfactions of postmodernism, followed by metamodernism's proposed synthesis of both modernism and postmodernism into an inclusive and constructive upward spiral.

This thematic analysis revealed a move from my critique of broader universal themes to a more personal point of view, to exorcise my progress-guilt. How to reconcile my individual drive toward modern progress, against the human need for fairness and unity? The gesture of holding contradictions is a form of energy that continues even when my reason and a rational method break down into awe and wonder. It is an energetic spiritual channel, existing despite a persistent doubt caused by contradictions, always seeking without completely finding. Notwithstanding this lack of certainty, meaningful patterns and connections can always be made. My thematic analysis revealed an impulse to organize, connect, construct and repair, to recognize the need for

human spirituality as a condition for a better future, an attempt to compensate for my complicity in modern capitalism, the engine room of modernism.

My creative strategy seeks to revise, critique, update and acknowledge the power of Canadian mid-century modernism by mediating photographic images from that period in a way that proposes an acknowledgement of its failings and a way forward through a constructive, dematerialized human spirit. My latest response to all this contradiction is my painted series on large scale mid-century photographic prints entitled *Men in Cities*, inspired by American artist Robert Longo's work by the same name. It is a work in progress that reflects my own wrestling with the contradictions of the modernist thinking that defined me, specifically based on my business career brokering city skyscrapers. By mediating large scale mid-century black and white photos of a striving male subject, I combine painting and photography using colored pixelation to both challenge and manipulate existing forms, ideas, and images, creating and holding tension materially and conceptually. *Men in Cities* are modern bodies in a state of ecstatic exorcism, resigned to human struggle, deeply engaged in the material transition of the body and mind, energetically vibrating with faith, with new forms always taking shape.

THESIS EXHIBITION - THE POETICS OF PROXIMITY

My thesis exhibition, *The Poetics of Proximity* (Gales Gallery, York University April 24-28th, 2023), investigates the mysterious and unstable connections that are formed between humans, ideas and objects across distance and time.

The Poetics of Proximity looks at how coalescent forms and ideas emerge when subjects are placed close to each other. How our thinking and our bodies are dematerialized and rematerialized into new forms.

My thesis exhibition includes a combination of images, objects, and ephemera, selected much closer to the exhibition date depending on my studio production. I communicate core ideas of isolation, tension, coalescence, distance, and faith. I imagine my gallery exhibition using the cavernous scale of the Gales gallery to reinforce my exploration of distances and connections, the feelings of proximity, accumulation, suspension, and the solitary. There will be a play of proximity between the works and the viewer.

If successful, my audience will question the mysterious connections between us and the world and join my own journey by forming part of a coalescent energetic suspension, in seen and unseen dimensions.

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APPENDIX A: Documentation of Thesis Exhibition, *Men in Cities*, Gales Gallery at York University Campus, April 24-27, 2023.









