

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Kit Warren – Moments of Recognition



*Altered States (untitled), 2019, Acrylic, flashe on birch panel, 36 x 36 inches,
photo courtesy the artist*

Kit Warren's works on paper present complex and elaborate visual cryptography – patterns of lines, dots, and bold colorful shapes. They evoke layered associations ranging from microcosmic to cosmic. Kit Warren shares with Art Spiel some of her ideas and work process.

AS: Tell me a bit about your background and what brought you to art.

Kit Warren: My path was circuitous. I grew up in a science family. We lived in many places, and looking at art, cathedrals, and arboretums were our main family extracurricular activities. I was not an art maker until college; before that my main focus was centered around playing the viola. I was lucky enough to grow up within a public-school system that had a strong extended music program. At University of Pennsylvania, I took my first drawing class with Frank Kawasaki in Design of the Environment and learned calligraphy in the intensive Chinese program. This is where I discovered the pleasure of mark making. I switched from my Chinese language major into the BFA program. It was very traditional; I learned my ABCs, painted landscapes, figures and still life subjects. The process ran parallel to a type of learning I was used to from my music training: repetition, and hours of labor. For instance, in color theory I worked for semesters making cards with minute color shifts on them. It was both absorbing and satisfying.

Towards the end of the program a show of paintings by Robert Zakanitch at the Institute of Contemporary Art at U Penn blew my mind. Enormous non-figurative, gorgeous abstracted paintings. It made me think of other possibilities of expression. I was struggling (and have been until quite recently), with the idea that there should be a “subject” to my paintings. And here was my first glimpse of work without an overt representational narrative, yet deeply satisfying and intelligent. I loved the sheer size; they were big, but not “monumental” as most of the oversized work I’d looked at. I have to say here that although I had spent so much time looking at art, I’d seen very little contemporary and abstract work.

For graduate school I chose the School of Visual Arts partially because the faculty was so different from that at Penn. No landscapes, not many figures either. It was challenging and exciting and required a type of verbal rigor I hadn’t encountered before. My advisor, Will Insley, had a highly intellectual approach to his own work, and introduced me to the idea that you could be a drawer and a painter and a builder, and switch between mediums to work out different parts of larger thoughts.

AS: In your text *Thoughts*, you indicate that your paintings have shifted from earlier “microcosms-worlds” to more recent macro views from above and you add that what unifies these two perceptions is repetition and pattern. Can you refer to two paintings of your choice in that context?

Kit Warren: The shift was multi-faceted and reflected a general dissatisfaction with process and uncertainty about what I wanted to “say”. I stopped building and painting on wood, and began working on paper, focusing on what had before been only peripheral: the mass of marks that formed patterns.

The first, *Beautiful Virus*, reflects a micro-view. It is a painting on cut wood, based on microscopy images of ten viruses seen with a scanning electron microscope. I think of this body of work as looking down through a lens. As a child I was exposed to both electron and light microscopy, and early on I was aware that beneath every surface is a remarkable secret world.

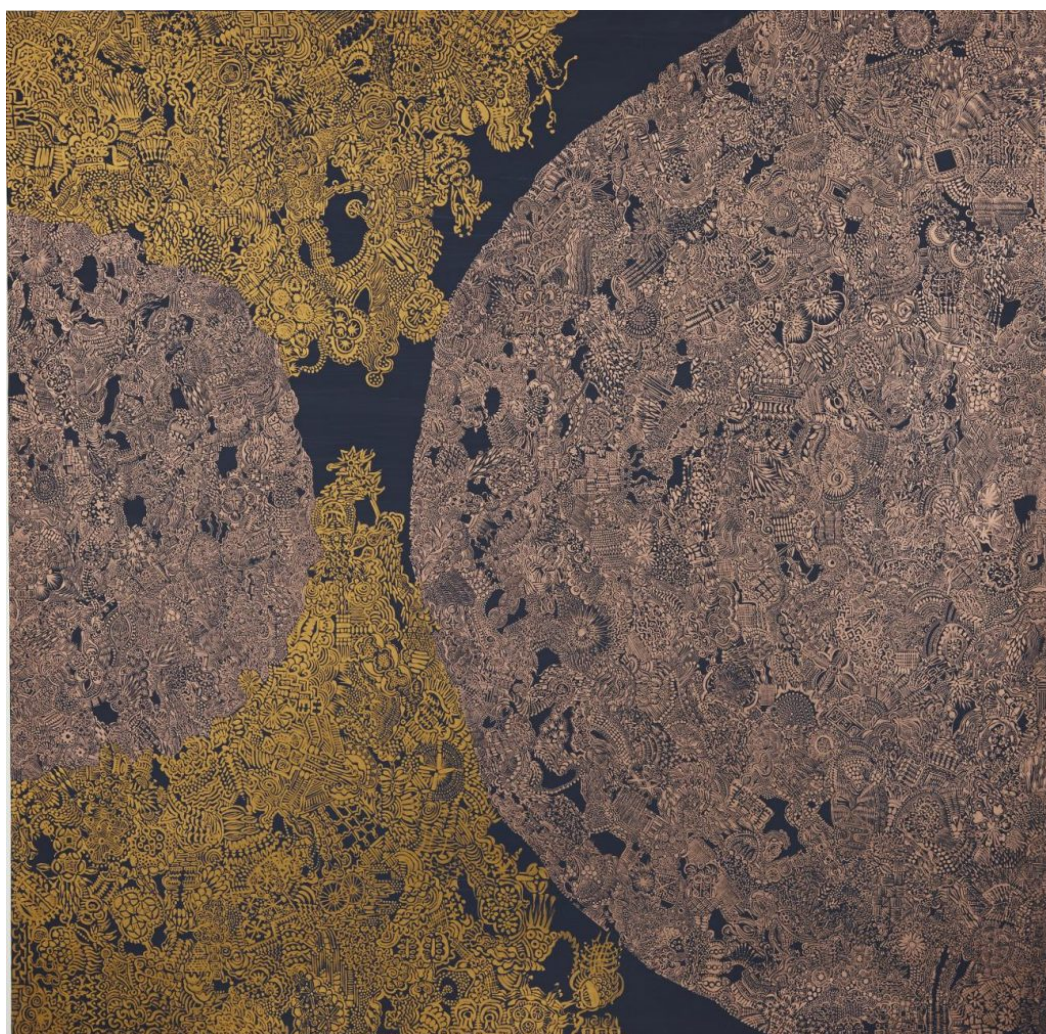
At this point I still proceeded from the viewpoint of a figurative painter, embellishing observation of an exterior biological phenomenon. This approach felt more and more like a limitation while the peripheral patterning around the central figure became oddly more engaging.



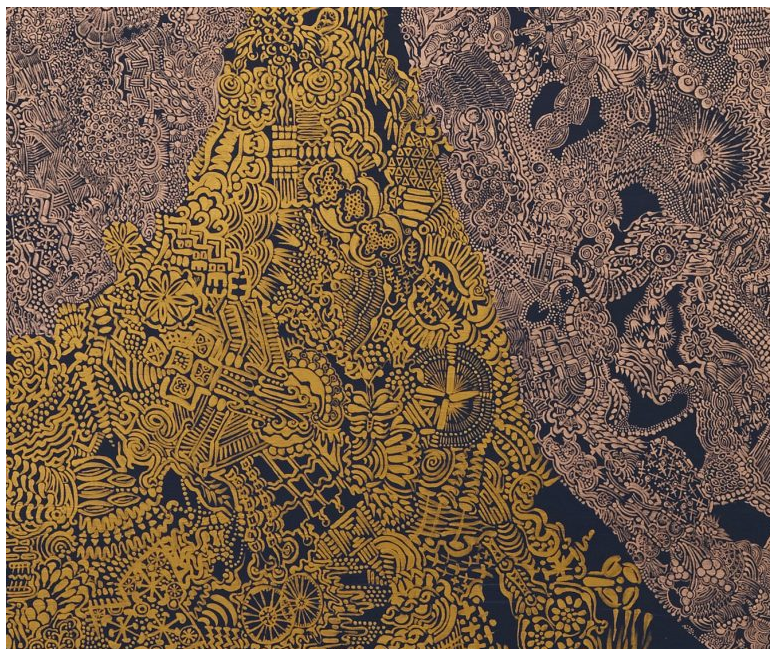
Beautiful Virus, 2009, Acrylic on cut wood, 29” diameter x 1” depth,

photo courtesy Zachary Sterz

The second piece, *Worlds Apart*, was painted a year or so later. The point of view moved out from behind the microscope and hovered far above the world, an aerial view of sorts. Other than the circular forms that suggest a land mass, it broke with the literal. Repeating marks created patterns that drew from a personal, abstract visual library. Landscapes, wrought iron fences, biological illustration, signage, architectural detail, Chinese characters, electron microscopy, the New York Times: all these and more found their way into the cryptography of the work. It was very personal, and exciting. As I made more and more repeated marks, autonomous patterns formed, to which I could then respond. The smaller patterns were absorbed, and at times disappeared into the greater matrix. I liked the process of revealing, and especially of the obscuring.



Worlds Apart, 2012, Acrylic, pigment on paper, 55 x 55 inches, photo courtesy Zachary Sterz



Worlds Apart, detail

AS: You also use reflective paint on paper. What would you like to share about the idea and process behind that?

Kit Warren: I often use deep matte backgrounds with markings of metallic acrylic and powdered metal pigments. Because the reflective marks sit on top of the matte surface they're very sensitive to both ambient and direct light. As the viewer walks around the painting, the changing angle of light on the painting activates the inert surfaces, creating a dynamic of time, movement and light. Forms are obscured and revealed. The metallic paint sits securely between the paper or panel and the outside world. It's inert, but becomes active in reflecting light. The light acts as a bridge that connects the painting, its environment, and the movement of bodies through space.

Recently, I've been using other materials to explore the tension between matte and reflective, such as a background of micaceous iron oxide with its mica like aspect, and a super matte black paint on top. These are very dark paintings and the markings behave more like shadows than glowing scrims of reflection. Similarly, graphite on a black flashe background becomes a remarkable variably reflective material.

Besides the physical qualities, art- historically speaking, its use crosses time, culture, geography and religion. I have always been deeply drawn to objects and paintings that included gold: Islamic art, pre-renaissance painting, illustrated manuscripts to name a few. Plus it's so beautiful.

AS: Tell me about your Words project.

Kit Warren: I was going through a period of minimalizing what had been a colorful palette with exuberant marks. I painted mainly lines and circles on a dark blue-black ground, often with a central vague shape like a ghostly sound wave.

During this time I began working with words; a group of text paintings. This ongoing series uses visual and written language to explore the weight and significance of intention in a mark, whether it be the deliberate information contained in lines that make up a word, or the figurative suggestions contained within the horizontal, and vertical lines, and the circle. What are the boundaries of a written sign system? What happens /what does it mean when marks dissolve into meaninglessness or conversely leap/cohere into significance?

The text comes from many sources. Often it's stream of consciousness; occasionally emerging haltingly, but more often pouring out like a faucet turned on full. I've spent so much time in my life reading and sometimes I imagine that all the words have remained packed from toe to head in my body, just waiting for a way to get out. Since many of the paintings are 50" x 50", it might require 18-20,000 words to complete a piece.

I've done commissions where I'll be given a text to paint. One was for an investment banker who wrote weekly letters to his investors during the financial crisis in 2008. I wondered whether the intensity of that time, and the anxiety of his writing would somehow be transmitted in the finished piece; can these painted words hold and transmit emotion and meaning.

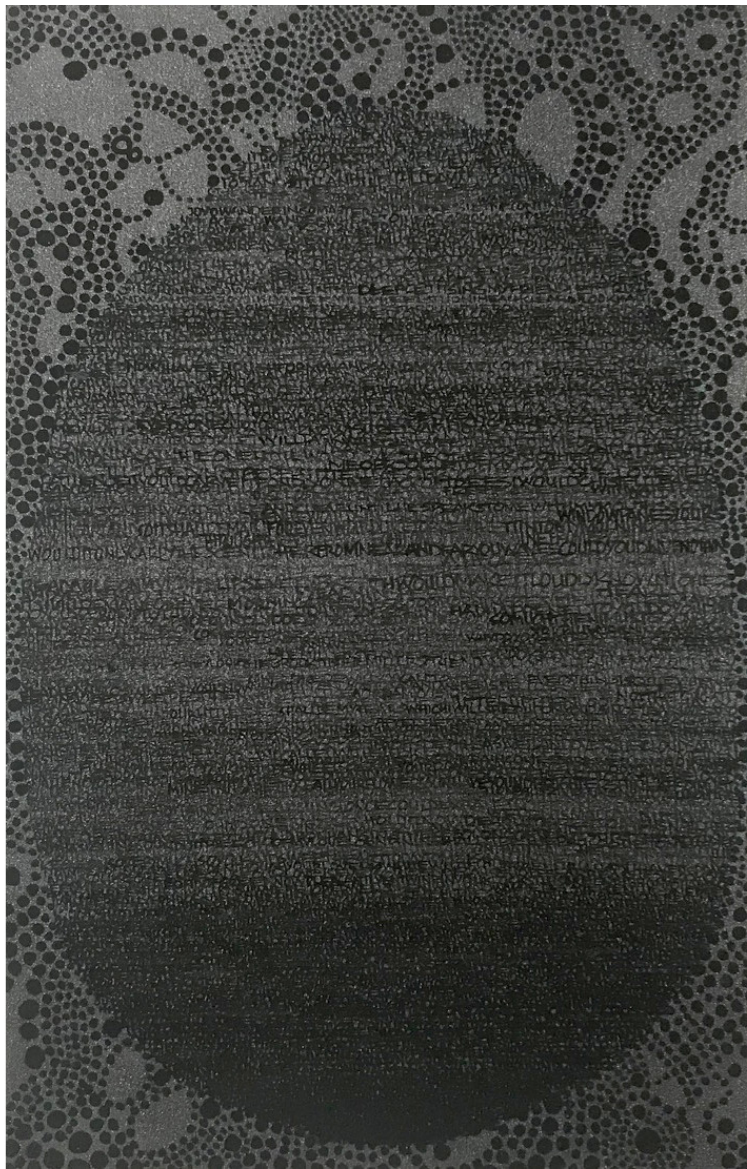
In the past couple of years, I've been painting my facebook feed—cutting and pasting all the posts of my Facebook friends, beginning after the inauguration of DT. It's been surprisingly intense and fascinating. These posts are in a sense throw-away writing, meant to pass quickly out of the world, often filled with emotion: anger, outrage, frustration, pride, joy, information. I take all these words, read them aloud and paint them, densely, to form a kind of micrography. As I paint a single word and then the next, the text becomes indecipherable, absorbed into the veil of language. Many times the text interests me, but unsure of who authored it, I type it back into Facebook to discover the source. I realized that what we view as careless, temporary writing will exist forever online, whereas my painting, meant to examine the text and take the words seriously, will exist only as long as the physical paper and paint.

The philosopher Hannah Ginsborg (my sister in law), wrote this of my words pieces in the blog [Aesthetics](#) for Birds and I think describes it well:

“Each sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life?” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 432). The shimmering, undulating surface of this painting (Words I) is made up of words – 18,000 of them – collected from friends, relatives and studio visitors and painted without spaces between them so that their meanings disappear in a mass of letters. From a distance, even the letters disappear, leaving only subtle rhythms of color and the glint of light reflecting from the complex pattern of gold brushstrokes. These signs have lost one kind of life and taken on another.”



Words (FB), 2019, Acrylic, pigment on paper, 55 x 55 inches, photo courtesy Paul Takeuchi



Words (mourning), 2019, Micaceous iron oxide, flashe on paper, 17 x 9 inches. Text is Die Schone Mullerin, poem by Wilhelm Muller, song cycle by Franz Schubert, photo courtesy of artist

AS: And Altered States?

Kit Warren: *Altered States* is a newer series of acrylic, casein, and flashe paintings on paper. They began simply as unabashed expression of qualities that I responded to emotionally and viscerally: the clarity of line, richness of color, beauty that I saw in Indian miniatures, Italian medieval art, and accumulated collections of natural objects.

The central form suggests landmass, a non-specific geographic shape with the ground being multiple layers of deep velvety color. Contained within this larger form are thousands of small dots, each painted with two semi-circular strokes in gold acrylic and

powdered pigment. In the process of painting these dots over time, shapes form, figures emerge. As I add more marks, these figures disappear into their neighbors, and a larger shape appears. Eventually some remain visible, but more are absorbed into the shimmering scrim of gold; hidden. I've done a series of diptychs that are larger than I am. As I paint, I feel that I'm travelling through a series of events, moving back and forth, up and down. The smaller pieces, painted at my table, can be seen in their entirety as I work, and are more intimate. These paintings are both more intuitively and more directly executed than other work; they have less "concept" to hang their hat on, less of a conceptual middle ground between impulse and object.

As in aerial photographs, the larger forms, in closer proximity, reveal themselves to be composed of smaller shapes. In some of the work I've clustered the dots more densely around the edges of the landform, like a map describing the population of a country. The repetitive and the additive nature of the marks suggest the barrage of information we pass through each day. The accumulation of visual information serves as noise and stimuli but it also allows patterns to form as the mind tries to understand what it sees. It creates order from randomness.

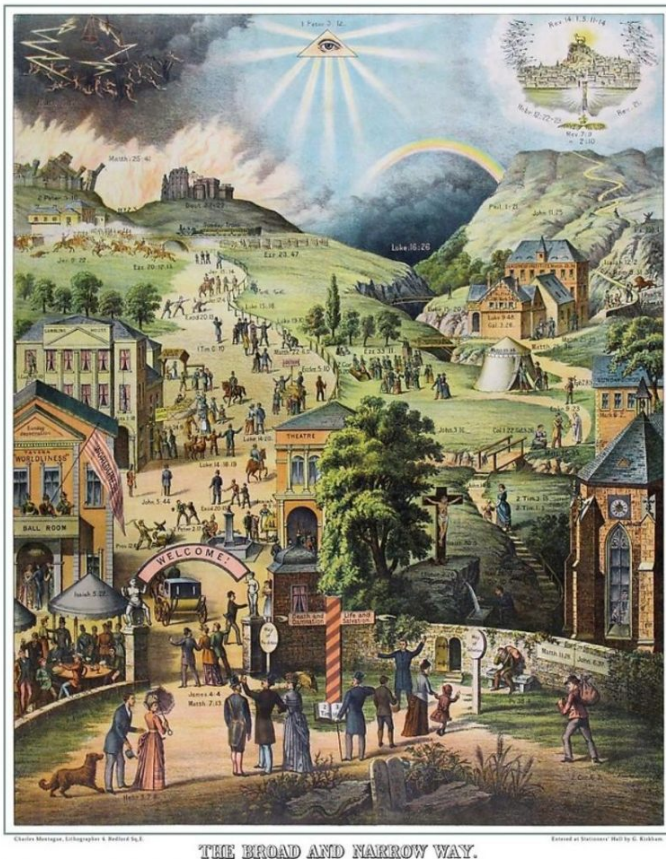
Recently, I've been interested in the *Altered States* series as a sort of narrative that allows the many little figures, relationships and events that come into being to remain visible. Like in my words paintings, there are moments of recognition, "oh, that's a word", or "oh, that's an amoeba". My impulse had been to camouflage them through the addition of surrounding dots, forming a dense impenetrable surface. Right now, as a source, I've been drawing from three prints that I've had since I was a child: *The Broad and Narrow Way*, *The Land of Make Believe*, and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. All three have a strong moralistic viewpoint, and present choices through a journey comprised of a collection of events. Over the years I've tried to address them in some way, always too literally. *Altered States* is an asemic visual version that is much closer to my intention.



The Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymus Bosch, 1503-15



Altered States (earthly delights), 2019, Acrylic/ flashe/ pigment on paper, 88 x 84 inches, photo courtesy of artist



The Broad and Narrow Way, anonymous, early 1900s



Altered States (journey), 2019, Acrylic and flashe on birch panel, 36 x 36 inches , photo courtesy Kenise Barnes



The Land of Make Believe, 1930, Jaro Hess

AS: What body of work are you working on these days and how do you think your work is developing?

Kit Warren: A few years ago, after an injury, I began making small white organic shapes out of clay, massing thousands and thousands of them in various configurations in my studio; occupying the corners of the wall, flowing from ceiling to floor, in piles like bleached detritus, they are gathered, assembled and dispersed.

I've spent most of my summers in Woods Hole, a small scientific community in Cape Cod where I worked in labs and attended science school. I've spent an inordinate amount of time collecting, sorting, identifying, labeling, and continue this process with these shapes. I've come to think of the clay pieces as collections of matter like concretions or teratoma. These both exist outside of the body as mineral matter sometimes found on beaches, or as inorganic masses found within cavities of the body. Initially the randomness of my organizational systems were connected to found natural forms—in the woods, on the beach. By hanging them, they've become more like body parts, abnormal growths like teratoma, tumors that might contain bone, teeth and other tissue.

This sculptural body of work both connects to and contrasts with the large brilliantly colored paintings on paper lining my studio walls. It shifts the sense of place and additive process that exist in my painting into a 3D model, creating a varied micro/macro environment. In both assemblages and paintings, the viewer is invited to see first the larger massed areas of shapes that are a simultaneously elegant and awkward tangle of unidentifiable forms, primarily divided into bone white and color. Moving closer, specificity of color, texture, pattern and grouping reveal themselves, an order emerges from the randomness and chaos. All of this work reflects my thinking about beauty, accretion (natural growth), and accumulation (the act of gathering).



Untitled, 2019, clay, rope, paint, paper, variable size, photo courtesy Paul Takeuchi



Words, studio, 2015, 110 x 198 inches, photo

courtesy Zachary Sterz



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