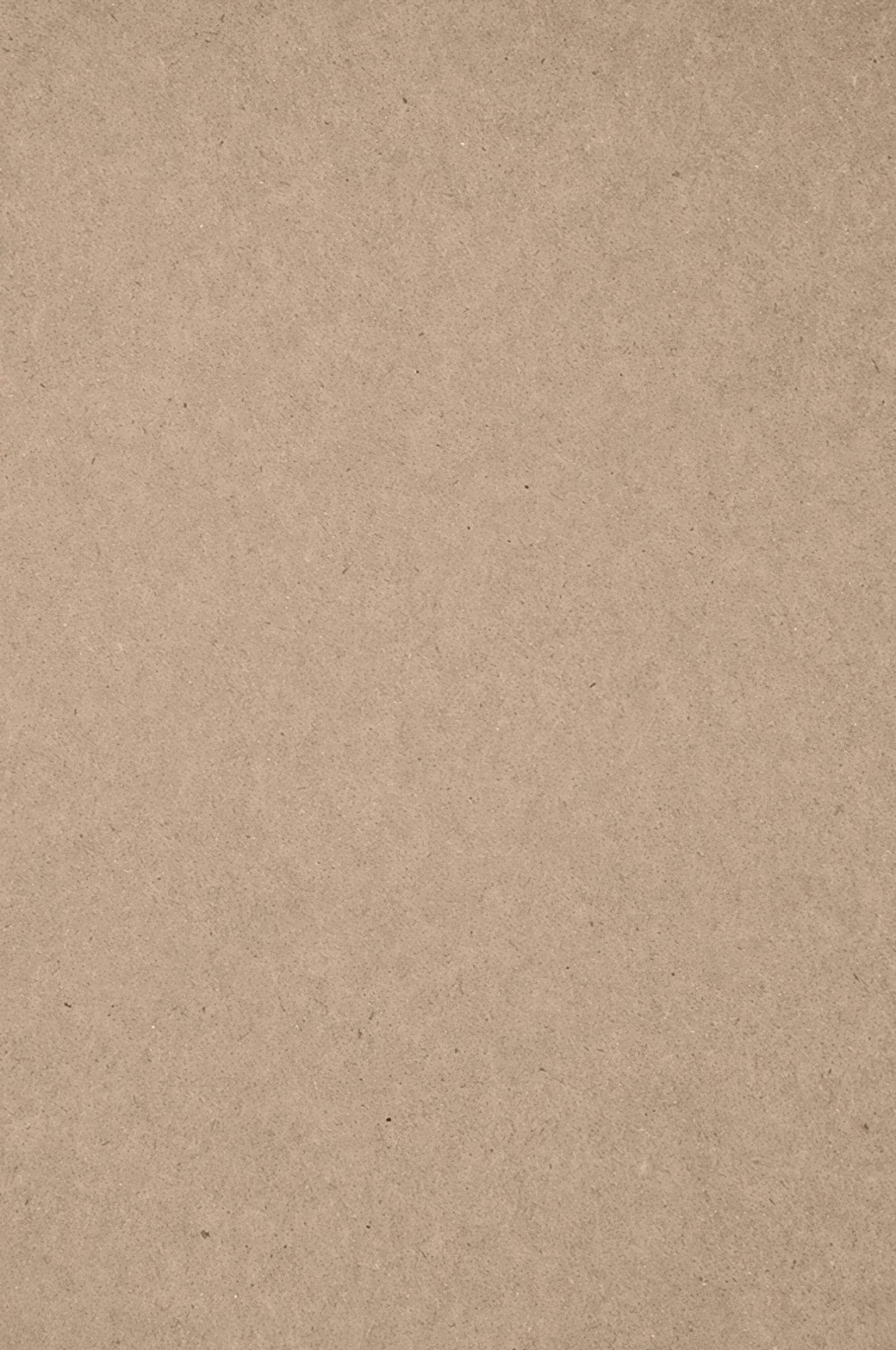


*To Move Through Stone*

Abby Flanagan





*Remote Sensing* (detail)

Abby Flanagan

**To  
Move**

***Through***

***Stone***

Curated by  
Melissa Fandos

**Visual Arts Center** University of Texas at Austin

**Abby Flanagan** is an artist and educator based in Western Massachusetts. Her practice traces interconnections between environment and self, moving across drawing, sculpture, and installation to explore subjects of materiality, presence, and precarity. Flanagan completed a BFA at Montana State University in 2015 followed by an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin in 2022. She currently teaches Drawing in the Expanded Field at Amherst College.

**Melissa Fandos** is the Assistant Curator at the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research considers how history, time, power, and people interact in the natural environment. She holds a BA in English from Grinnell College and an MA in Art History from the University of Texas at Austin. **Maggie Hansen** is an Assistant Professor in Landscape Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. Hansen's research, teaching, and creative work draw influence from theater, gardening, participatory art, and activist methods to reimagine the boundaries of design as a relational practice. She earned a BA from the University of Chicago and holds a Master of Architecture and a Master of Landscape Architecture from the University of Virginia. **María F. Rocha** is a member of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan people, a state legislature-recognized tribe of Texas. For seventeen years, Rocha served as executive director of the Indigenous Cultures Institute (ICI), the nonprofit she co-founded with Dr. Mario Garza in San Marcos, Texas. She currently sits on the ICI's Board of Elders, writes Indigenous plays for young audiences, and devotes her time to reclamation of the Coahuiltecan language. **Ann Reynolds** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History and the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. In her research and teaching, she focuses on twentieth and twenty-first century art and visual culture in the United States and Europe with a concentration on the theory and practice of archival research. Reynolds is the author of *Imagining an Altogether: Cinema, Surrealism, and New York 1940–1970* (forthcoming) and *Robert Smithson: Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere* (MIT Press, 2003).

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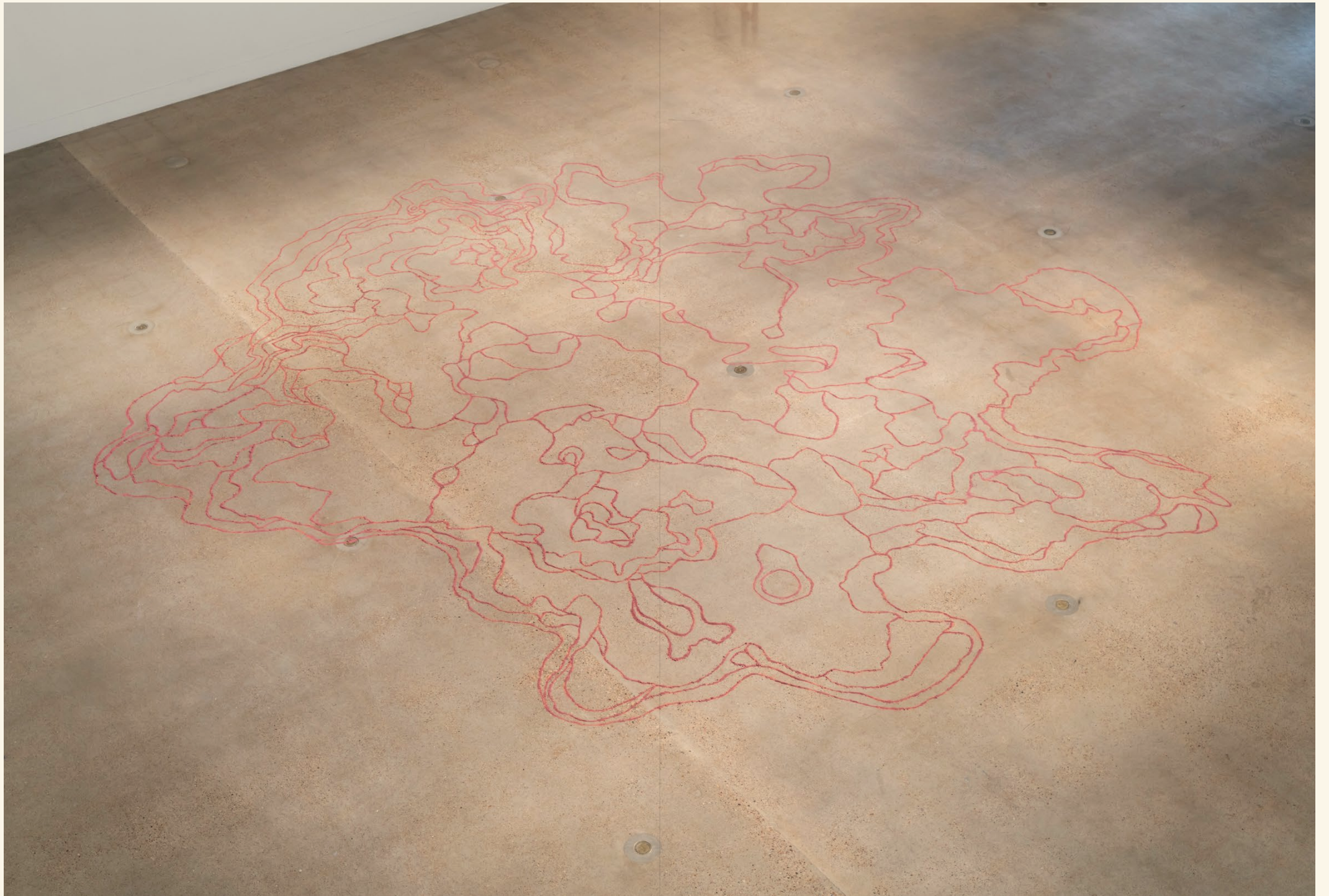
The Coahuiltecan's  
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Invisibility Into  
Absence

Ann Reynolds



# Introduction

Melissa Fandos

## ***How do you care for the places where you live and visit?***

I first connected with the artist Abby Flanagan over the specificities of a place. At the time of our meeting, Flanagan was living and teaching in St. Louis, Missouri, the city where I grew up. We discussed how the particularities of the region's geological histories shaped its human histories of land use, contamination, and conservation. How, for example, the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers provided fertile ground for a city to form, and how the extraction of underground limestone, clay, and coal enabled and eventually contaminated the once booming port city. Flanagan's art practice is informed by the places where she lives: she spends time in the landscape, looking closely at the granular organic and inorganic materials that make it up. She collects and sorts these materials and uses them to compose drawings, reconfiguring our shared landscapes so that we might see them anew.

In *To Move Through Stone*, Flanagan turns her attention to the Edwards Aquifer. The Edwards Aquifer is an underground layer of porous limestone that

stores and moves groundwater across Central and South Texas, stretching from Austin to San Antonio and west to Uvalde. Its waters support the diverse agricultural, industrial, recreational, and spiritual needs of over two million people. Yet the aquifer, its image and its critical role in sustaining life in the region, remains largely invisible to the people who depend on it. The aquifer's scale, shape, and texture remain largely underground and out of view. The delicate, complex balance of surface water and groundwater needed to sustain the aquifer is similarly obscured. Because the aquifer's groundwater emerges above ground as springs and is extracted

via wells for various human uses, it must be recharged by surface water seeping into the limestone. Intensifying storms and droughts induced by climate change, coupled with rapid development that paves over this porous landscape, greatly reduces the surface area where water can enter the aquifer and replenish its depleting water levels. Flanagan lived in Austin, Texas, for three years while attending graduate school at UT Austin. She began learning about the aquifer then, and revisits and engages this hidden system in *To Move Through Stone*.

While making new work for the exhibition, Flanagan studied the ways people gather around the Edwards Aquifer: she met with scientists who measure contributing river flow, conservationists who study drought and restrict water pumping, activists who hold Indigenous stories about the aquifer's springs, artists who use the aquifer as a subject in their work, and enthusiasts who swim at Barton Springs and explore underground caves. She asked them questions to familiarize herself with the innerworkings of the place, studied the tools they use to map and measure the aquifer, and spent time slowly walking over the aquifer's karst limestone and examining its sediment. In each work in the exhibition, Flanagan slowly builds a view of the aquifer from different angles; she tinkers with existing tools, materials, and stories, slowly implementing and translating them into her own visual forms.

Instead of mapping this invisible system, Flanagan's works embrace its uncertainty. Her drawings mirror the fluid,

ever-changing nature of the aquifer and act as sites of extended attention in both making and viewing the work. Flanagan asks viewers to look at a place not out of habit, but out of slow appreciation that will likely change over time. In the exhibition, the works reflect this state-of-change as certain materials respond to the gallery's environment and seasonal weather conditions. Inviting viewers to look closely alongside her, Flanagan proposes new ways to learn from and care for a place.

It has been an honor to work in close collaboration with Flanagan over the past year, and we are pleased to present this publication which documents and expands our thinking around *To Move Through Stone* through newly commissioned essays and interviews. Maggie Hansen, Assistant Professor in Landscape Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, talks with Flanagan about slow practices of working in, and collaborating with, landscapes. María F. Rocha, a member of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan people and co-founder of the Indigenous Cultures Institute in San Marcos, Texas, details the sacred significance of the aquifer's springs in present-day Austin, New Braunfels, San Antonio, and San Marcos, to Coahuiltecan

people over time. Rocha extends the project's timeline from a four-thousand-year-old mural located at the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers along the U.S.-Mexico border, to the proposed development of AI data centers in Central Texas today. Ann Reynolds, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, reflects on the role of everyday life when considering relationships between people and large, relatively invisible entities such as an aquifer. As my former graduate advisor, Dr. Reynolds and her Water Histories seminars have been foundational to my own thinking around the role of presence and absence when representing histories of water and land use. I am so grateful to include her writing here.





Key (detail)

# Drawing the Aquifer

Abby Flanagan  
in conversation with  
Maggie Hansen

The following conversation occurred December 5, 2025, and has been edited and condensed for clarity.

**MAGGIE HANSEN** How did you find the aquifer as a focus for this body of work? Or how did the aquifer find you?

**ABBY FLANAGAN** I think it's a little bit of both in terms of me finding it and it finding me.

I lived in Texas from 2019 to 2022 while pursuing a graduate degree in studio art at UT Austin. I knew about the Edwards Aquifer from swimming in Barton Springs and learning from people who knew the region. I also noticed road signs around the city that mark the aquifer's recharge zones. I find these signs compelling because they're speaking for something that is so huge and important, yet the signs are so easily missed.

My practice deals with landscapes that are difficult to wrangle into clear images or easy contours of understanding. I think about landscapes through the materials that make them up. Over the past five years, I've been developing this process I call "tracts" where I pour granular materials into polycarbonate tubes to compose a gridded image. I've always been interested in emergent systems: images that emerge as you look, or, in the case of the *tract* (2021–ongoing) works, shift and settle into place after I make them. These processes connect me to ideas of uncertainty and doubt when trying to get to know these complicated, dynamic systems, such as the aquifer. I'm not trying to make a scientific claim of "hypothesis" and then "answer," of "method" and then "discovery." I'm interested in sitting with some unknowing and uncertainty inherent to encountering complex systems.

The scientists I met while planning for this show echoed my thoughts about the aquifer: there's this inherent gap to our systems of understanding it. When you try to understand the aquifer, you're understanding it in pieces, such as data collected through water dye tracing and aerial imagery known as remote sensing. Despite how difficult it is to assemble an image of the aquifer, collecting this data—albeit in pieces—is so important to understanding the consequences of contamination, drought, depletion, and flooding risk.

**MH** I'd love to hear your thinking behind the exhibition title *To Move Through Stone*.

**AF** As I was researching and learning about aquifer systems, I became interested in how an aquifer is not named in the way rivers, lakes, or oceans are named.

An aquifer is really the form of the earth material that makes it possible for water to move through it in usable amounts. In the case of the Edwards Aquifer, it's a porous, karst limestone landscape through which water moves. Thinking about how people understand and map aquifer systems requires an understanding of underground movement without ever being able to see it. One way people have measured aquifer systems is by timing the pace of water moving through them and tracing its patterns, by, for example, using water dye tracing, which is the method I've been looking at for this show.

I was thinking about how understanding this system is really just an understanding of the movement through the system, the timing it takes, and where an entry point will eventually meet an exit point. So, in a way, the title is just a definition of what an aquifer is—water moving through stone. I focused the title on the word “stone” rather than “water” because the geological timescale of rock formation and change felt evocative to me, in terms of the slow processes I think through in drawing and sculpture. It resonated with the slow, laborious processes I do in my studio to make the work and connected them to the much slower processes at play within hydrogeological systems.

**MH** I love this idea of finding a system in which the invisibility of the system is part of how an aquifer works: the water creates caves and fractures and fissures by eroding limestone, but the water also inhabits those spaces. Your work adapts methods people have used to attempt to understand the aquifer through artistic processes. Could you talk about the process of fieldwork and site visits that informs the work? While these sites aren't depicted as scenes, they feel present in the resulting work.

**AF** I took a trip to Texas in May 2025 before starting this body of work. Melissa Fandos, the show's curator, and I walked around the aquifer's landscape with different characters who are involved in caring for or interpreting the aquifer.

We joined a class with Marcus Gary from the School of Geosciences at UT, who was teaching students how to gauge readings of river water flow in the Blanco River. We met with Shay Hlavaty from the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District and walked around Barton Springs. She helped us look

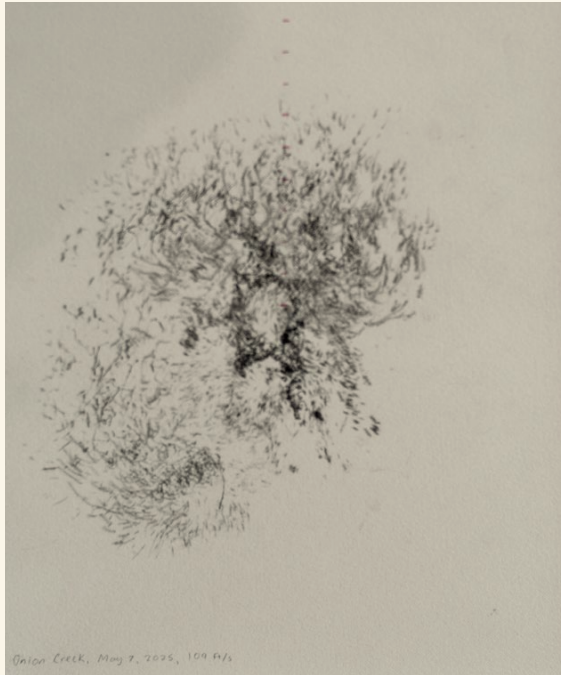


UT Austin students measuring water flow in the Blanco River near San Marcos, Texas, as part of Marcus Gary's *Field Methods in Groundwater Hydrology* course in May 2025. Photo: Melissa Fandos.



The entrance to one of the aquifer's caves in South Austin. The artist and curator joined the Texas Underground Grotto, a group of volunteer caving enthusiasts, to remove large rocks and trash from underground cave networks to improve water flow. Volunteers use a pulley system to fill buckets underground and raise them aboveground. Photo: Melissa Fandos.

Meander Drawings



at the landscape through a different lens. We swam up to where springs bubble up from underground and form the pool and she showed us the blind salamander conservation work at Eliza Spring. She showed us stuff I've walked by but never knew to look for. I met with folks at UT in the geology department, and artists in Austin who've been thinking about the aquifer. Melissa and I went caving with some volunteer caving enthusiasts!

Talking to these people, interviewing them, and doing fieldwork was eye-opening in terms of just how many stakeholders are at work above ground, maneuvering around the aquifer in various ways to protect it, monitor it, recreate around it, or care for it.

Through those conversations, I learned about a few specific tools. For example, scientists used to use an analog tool called the water current meter to measure river flow in cubic feet. Now they use a digital tool, but the analog water current meter became a very specific fascination of mine, and I ended up using it to make drawings for the show. So there are specific things that I can point to, but I was also grateful to just bounce ideas back and forth with people who are not artists but are involved in the aquifer. For example, rain comes up in a couple of different ways in the show. In talking with Maria F. Rocha from the Indigenous Cultures Institute, we discussed how rain connects bodies of water across vast geographies, including aquifers. Although these conversations don't necessarily show up explicitly in the work, the resonances and community building that happen along the way is very important to it.

The writing of Lucas Bessire has been incredibly influential to the way I've been engaging with field work.<sup>1</sup> His article "Aquifer Aporias" in particular has shaped and reflected my approach to this project. In it, he argues that ethnography is a helpful tool to focus on and connect the diverse lived experiences of people who rely on aquifers as a resource and feel the effects of their depletion. Focusing on intimate moments of uncertainty and incoherence, he argues, creates a more intimate scale for people to care for our

<sup>1</sup> Bessire, Lucas. "Aquifer Aporias: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Groundwater Depletion." *Current Anthropology* 63, no. 3 (June 2022): 350–359. The artist and curator first learned about this essay through Emily Lee, Sydney Nichols, and Chrys Zhao, students who selected it as a reading for Dr. Ann Reynolds and Dr. Julia Guernsey's Water Histories art history graduate seminar in spring 2025.

at-risk aquifers. I'm very grateful for his ongoing engagement with this topic, and have returned to this article several times while making work for the exhibition.

**MH** The poetry of interconnection across water manifests in different ways throughout the show. *It's raining, rain is* (2025), the large curtain rubbing, brings rainwater from your location in Massachusetts into dialogue with the work you're developing here in Texas. Can you describe what a trackway is?

**AF** A trackway is a slab of rock that shows fossilized footprints. The area where I live in Western Massachusetts, in the Holyoke Range, is known for the discovery of trackways that show dinosaur footprints. The way I understand it, during the Jurassic period, the region had tropical and volatile weather. There would be heavy, heavy rains followed by sunny, hot weather in quick succession, leaving the imprint of individual raindrops in the mud. A critter would run across the mud and also leave an imprint. Then bacteria would grow over the surface of the mud, and if the conditions were such that a mudslide came in, it would seal the imprints and capture an image of whatever was printed in the mud at that moment—rain, footprints, etc.

When geologists dig for these things, they find slabs of rock that show the convex prints of dinosaur footprints, and they've also found other kinds of prints: impressions of water movement, ripples, shorelines, and rain. There's an extensive collection at the Beneski Museum of Natural History at Amherst College where I work, and I just love them.

Bringing rain into an exhibition as a material is an interesting problem in my mind, whether that's rendering it, representing it, or collecting it. I made the rubbing by patchworking fabric over a single trackway with rain imprints. It's large, about 30 feet long and 11 feet tall, because I was thinking of it as a wall to give it the scale of weather, like a sheet of rain.

**MH** At 30 feet, I'm sure that took a significant amount of time to develop! There are multiple places where duration, slowness, and a meditative quality come into your work, and I think that shows up with these tracings. But there's also the time spent on site gathering materials for the *tract* works. Both actions gather information from a surface or landscape. How do you think about making the large rubbing *It's raining, rain is* (2025) in relation to gathering material for the *tract* works?



Trackway ACM ICH 51/10 was collected from Smith's Ferry in Holyoke, Massachusetts around 1863. Photo courtesy of the Beneski Museum of Natural History, Amherst College.

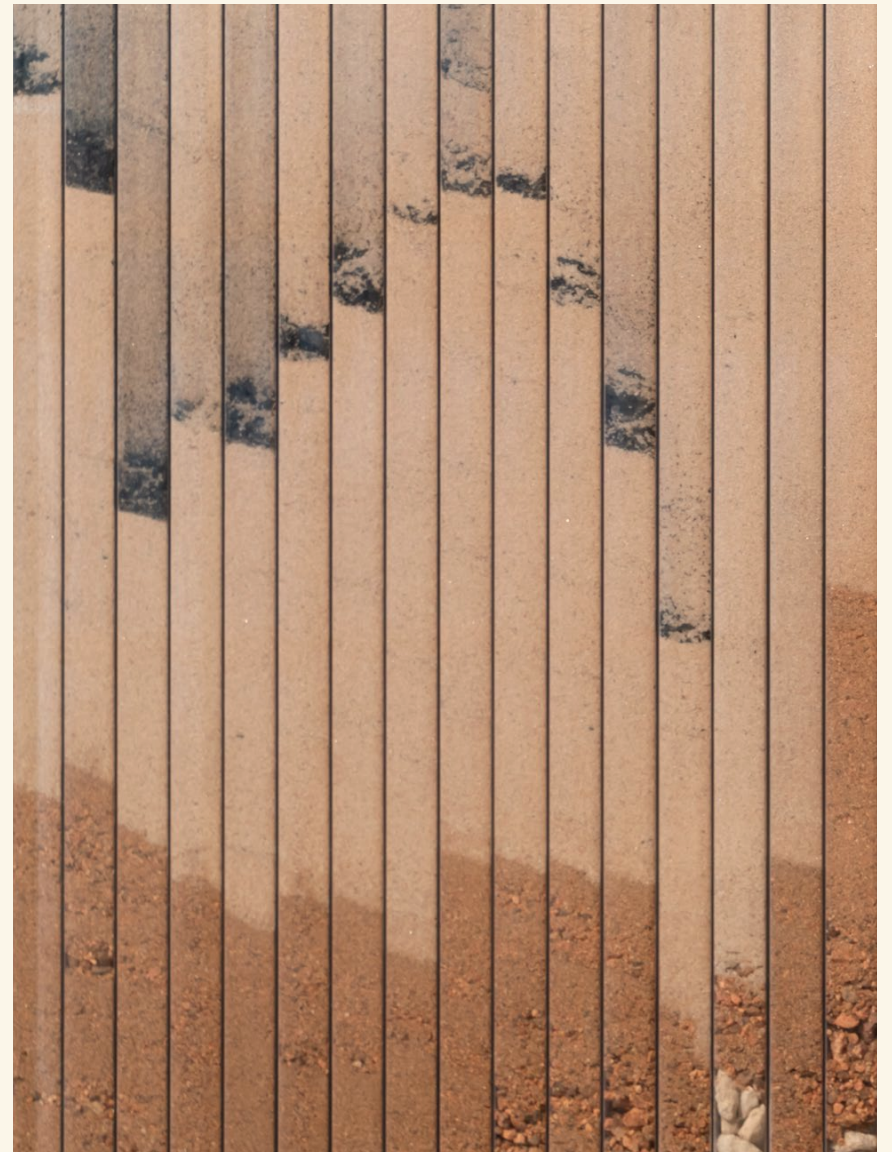


*It's raining, rain is (detail)*



*tract (aquifer) (detail)*

*Map (detail)*



**AF** I haven't thought about those works in conversation in that way, but I like thinking about that overlap. I got to know the trackway pretty well over about seven weeks of making the rubbing. The materials I collect for the *tract* works are often overlooked; it's the granular stuff that makes up the texture of your environment, but it's not necessarily the parts that are featured. I think the relationship between these two methods is that they both emphasize the minor materials that make up the textural or ambient aspects of one's surroundings, which are not prominent in the visual hierarchy of looking. Through collecting materials for the *tracts*, amassing piles, and then translating them into compositions, I think it shifts how those materials are perceived or how one encounters them. When I first started making the *tract* works, I remember people thought that the rhythm of the work felt very much like rain. That visual association has stayed with this work for a while, so I enjoy thinking about these two processes in conversation.

**MH** The *tract* works are always pulling me in and out of scale, much like the aquifer. How are you thinking about scalar dynamics when making installation choices?

**AF** For the five years I've been developing the *tract* process, I've explored shifting between a close-up, microscopic view of something and a view pulled back to the scale of the weather or atmosphere. I'm interested in making work that moves between scales within a single encounter.

The aquifer is a good subject to take that up with. On a human level, we see the aquifer in moments, such as when it emerges as a spring. There's no way of seeing it as a whole in the same way you can encounter other landforms in the round. For the most part, the works in this show had a very clear connection to aspects of the VAC's architecture. I wanted the rain rubbing to be a wall rather than displayed against the wall or on the floor, and I'm making single-channel *tract* works that will be woven into the windows between the courtyard and the gallery space. I embedded some of the work at the VAC, so it almost feels like it's in the periphery of the space. That peripheral view connects to how one encounters the aquifer while moving around Austin.

**MH** The smaller *tract* works—such as the *Key* pieces in *Map & Key* (2026)—offer a whole other approach to understanding the system. At first, I thought they were studies or tests, but then they started to read almost like mosaics or tablets. But they also seem to work in relation to each other as a mapping tool.

**AF** The small *tract* works are playful to make because I don't know what they will look like when I set out to make them. The *tract* works in *Map & Key* reference symbols from maps found in the Walter Geology Library at UT. I start with a sketch and outline of where the shape begins and ends, and how each channel might connect to the next. When I pour the different materials into the polycarbonate, they change a lot as they settle. I try to respond to them and draw with them. To me, looking at the work becomes about reading marks slowly. There are two layers to reading them: first, you see shape and color, and second, you notice the textures of materials, such as spongy or sandy, or fluffy.

**MH** In landscape architecture, I work with natural phenomena. I think of it as trying to invite collaborations, but part of it is out of my control. There are microclimates and soil conditions that you can't fully account for. I see that as a thread weaving through all



Abby Flanagan and Diar Enayatpour look at maps of the Edwards Aquifer with librarian Janelle Headstrom at the University of Texas Libraries in May 2025. Photo: Melissa Fandos.

of this work. You described the fossilized trackways as a moment in time when the climate and the materials were at just the right set of conditions, and then they were captured. I feel like the *tract* works are your own invitation to natural phenomena to collaborate with you. They're unstable but also interdependent. How do you think about that? Is it a collaboration or an investigation? How do you think about that relationship to uncertainty within the work?

**AF** To me, there is a distinct difference between noticing and investigating, and I'm more interested in the former. I find and develop processes over time that sit with uncertainty or let uncertainty take a role in the artwork. I invite moments for the material to do its thing without knowing what that is. For example, I often use a kitchen sponge in the *tract* works, and when I crumple it up and put it in the channel, I leave space, knowing it might absorb and expand. I'm leaving physical space inside the polycarbonate to invite the material to play out, so, in that way, it does feel collaborative. After making this work for five years, I'm still learning. Certain materials surprise me or make me excited about another way I can combine sand and wool, for example.

**MH** Your relationship to manipulating materials is so tactile, and there's an intimacy in that. I wonder about the role of emotion in the way that you're working. Is there an intuition, affinity, or affection developed around things that are overlooked? How do you channel that in your work?

**AF** I think the textural experience of making the work is where I have an emotional relationship to it, such as seeing the color of the soil up close.

There is a closeness to the material itself that extends to the experience of being in—and really caring for—a place where I live. And for a long time, that place was Austin. I don't live there anymore, but I really care about that place and that community, and the subtleties of Central Texas. Spending time with the materials of the Texas landscape and becoming familiar with their idiosyncrasies helps me get into a landscape and read it down to the granular details.

**MH** You describe each of these works as a drawing: *rain score* (2026) is a drawing that hovers horizontally through space, and the tracts form thick sedimentary lines. Others might describe this work as sculpture or installation. What does presenting the work as a drawing mean to you?

**AF** I think of drawing as a gravitational core to my practice. This body of work is about the activity of drawing rather than the object at the end, whether it's pouring sand, making a rubbing, or using the water current meter. I think of them as sculptures, installations, and architectural interventions, too, but I appreciate the way the work is maybe a little bit slippery in terms of what to call it. That slipperiness reflects the sense of dislocation I experience amidst the climate crisis and late capitalism. The slipperiness is related to hybridity. For example, when sculpture and drawing blend into something that's neither, yet both. This way of thinking frees me up quite a bit in making work. Rather than discipline-specificity, I look for spaces of traversal. It's a conceptual choice, too; making work that doesn't just sit comfortably in one category creates momentum for generating something new.



BACK *tract (Map & Key)*

FRONT *rain score (detail)*





# The Coahuiltecan's Sacred Springs of Texas

María F. Rocha

The name “Coahuiltecan” began as a label given to the ancestors of my people, the inhabitants of the lands stretching from what is now central-south Texas into northern Mexico. It was a catchall term initially used by the Spanish colonizers and later coined by archeologists and linguists to describe the Indigenous people of that area. But for our people, it is a word that calls upon a deeper knowing through time. It gives voice to the various peoples of this sacred homeland, including the guardians of the Coahuiltecan creation site and the keepers of what we call the “gardens,” the only region in the world where the Peyote Medicine grows naturally.

In this land, we honor the four sacred springs—Barton in Austin, Comal in New Braunfels, San Pedro in San Antonio, and our central heart, the Sacred Springs at Spring Lake in San Marcos. These springs, once soaring fountains of water shooting fifteen to twenty feet into the air, were not merely rest stops; they were holy witnesses along the traditional pathway for Indigenous travelers in the region.

For centuries, people from the north followed the ancient river systems, traveling great distances southward to renew their relationships with the Peyote Medicine in our Coahuiltecan sacred

gardens. The stops at the four springs along the way were necessary spiritual preparations before reaching the gardens where the Peyote Medicine grew. As far back as our people can remember, the springs were places to rest during the arduous journey and fill water containers. But most importantly, the springs were sites of prayer to ensure the Medicine's blessings for the pilgrimage.

Our prayers, spoken in songs around the fire during all-night ceremonies, are not mere ritual; they are a direct reenactment of *Napakō*, Our Journey, our creation story documented on a cliff-sheltered rock wall painting referred to by archeologists as the White Shaman mural (see Figure 1). This carbon-dated, four-thousand-year-old mural is located at the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers along the U.S.-Mexico border near Comstock, Texas. It contains all the instructions for our Medicine ceremony.

FIG 1

The four-thousand-year-old White Shaman mural located at the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers along the U.S.-Mexico border near Comstock, Texas. Photo: Dr. Ruben Arellano. Courtesy of the Indigenous Cultures Institute.





It also contains a map of the four fountain springs that designates the Sacred Springs in San Marcos as our creation site, the place where the People emerged onto Mother Earth (see Figure 2).

Many Indigenous communities around the world have creation stories. My community, the people who practice the Coahuiltecan Medicine Ceremony, have a long and complex creation story that has been passed down from elders to our children for thousands of years. This is a sacred story that tells where our ancestors came from and how to live in the natural way. We do not share this story with people outside of our community. The elders of our community gave me permission to create a simple version of this story to pass down to all children so that we may value each other's cultures and know the importance of living in balance with Mother Earth. This is the story of Napakō:

FIG 2

A digitally enhanced detail of the White Shaman mural. The semicircle to the lower right of the white shaman figure depicts the four fountain springs: the Sacred Springs at Spring Lake in San Marcos, San Pedro in San Antonio, Comal in New Braunfels, and Barton in Austin. A white line crosses over the Sacred Springs at Spring Lake, designating it as the Coahuiltecan creation site. Image courtesy of the Indigenous Cultures Institute.

**A long time ago, there was an upper world and a lower world. And in the upper world were all the things of Mother Earth, Tāp Tāi. There were hills and valleys, mountains and streams, animals and birds, everything except the People, the Pīlam. The Pīlam were in the lower world, but in the lower world, they were spirits, Tamōx. So, the Tamōx wandered the lower world until a cataclysmic event took place, and they turned into Pīlam. But they were still in the lower world and needed to be in the upper world on Tāp Tāi. Suddenly a Panama, sacred deer, appeared to them and told the Pīlam to follow him. After a journey fraught with obstacles, they arrived at a portal up above filled with water, Wana, and through the opening they could see Tāp Tāi. So, the Panama grabbed the Pīlam and the Pīlam held onto Panama, and they started swimming up through the portal. Just at that moment a huge Miakan, waterbird, was flying over the Sacred Springs and dove into the Wana, grabbed the Panama and the Pīlam and hauled them up onto Tāp Tāi. And that's how the Pīlam came to be on Tāp Tāi.**

This beautiful story points to the time when humans began their journey with “all their relations”—a phrase describing all that is on this earth—and is the reason the Indigenous Cultures Institute (ICI) centers its work around water. The past does not stay in the past; it breathes life into the present, and we must ensure the fire passes on.

Our youth, the next keepers of the fire, are brought to the headwaters of the San Marcos River during the Indigenous Arts Summer Encounter. We guide them in ceremony, teaching them to connect physically and spiritually with the Sacred Springs. When they gather in prayer and feel the spring water poured into their hands, they establish a profound, physical connection with the source. Through this ritual of reciprocity, the water offers the young people its strength and support as they navigate the trials of life. In return, the youth make a commitment to the Natural Way that our ancestors practiced and passed down to us, living in balance with Mother Earth. This deep knowing is the antidote to the modern ways marked by separation and individualism, and this is where ancient storytelling turns into modern action.

When our young people understand their relationship with the land and the water, they embrace the meaning of responsibility. We teach them to sense the connected nature of water, a reality that defies all fences and political borders. We explain that Spring Lake is the headwaters of the San Marcos River, which meets other rivers and flows into the ocean and across to the other side of the world. If something poisons these headwaters, it poisons the other side of the world. This simple, profound truth empowers them to stand up for the water, knowing they stand up for everyone on Tāp Tāi. Our children understand that this responsibility is not a burden, but a precious gift handed

down from generation to generation and literally set in stone in the mural depicting our creation story.

The Sacred Springs have never run dry, but sadly, Edward Burleson dammed the San Marcos River in 1849 to create Spring Lake and power his grist mill and sawmills, which destroyed the magnificent site of the soaring fountains. While the entity continues to provide us with water from its mother aquifer—the Edwards Aquifer—below, more frequent droughts and increased groundwater pumping have become a threat to the everlasting legacy of the Sacred Springs. Almost two hundred years after the river was first dammed, new threats to the aquifer appear on the horizon.

The proposed development of AI data centers in this sensitive region poses a risk of profound violence. These facilities require vast, unsustainable volumes of water for cooling and operation—enough to deplete whole aquifers, especially when those aquifers are already on the verge of being overdrawn. Such unsustainable water consumption would spell the death of this sacred portal that for millennia has sustained life and kept its covenant with humanity. The damage is not only ecological; to allow this level of consumption is to risk the spiritual and physical death of our most sacred site.

Our efforts to protect the springs are not solely environmental advocacy. They are a spiritual defense of our Coahuiltecan creation story and our very identity as the People. The water that flows from the Sacred Springs is the Wana that brought us into this world, and to protect it is to protect ourselves, our children, and all the relations of the world. We must ensure that relentless consumption and the pursuit of technological progress do not extinguish the eternal flow of the lifeblood of our people. As I think about the enormous challenges and the work that lies ahead, I am reminded of the wisdom of our ancestors embodied in the saying, “We are not just guardians of Mother Earth; we *are* Mother Earth.”

Dye tracing using rhodamine.  
Courtesy of Geary Schindel,  
President of Karst Works.



# Invisibility Into Absence

Ann Reynolds

**It was me who made things disappear.  
That must be it. I am living in a time that  
eats up the world.**

Solvej Balle  
*On the Calculation of Volume*

Solvej Balle's heroine, Tara Selter, is caught in a day that endlessly repeats, although this does not seem to be apparent to anyone else, at least initially. This situation alters her relationship with her possessions; their presence becomes unstable and unpredictable. Once out of her sight, especially when she is sleeping, objects randomly disappear while others remain. Tara also notices how her routine, relatively circumscribed consumption steadily empties out the world. She participates in a system which itself has been arrested so that her own role in depleting it through her everyday actions becomes unavoidably visible and consequential. A reminder that in the process of using, things will eventually get used up. Because of this, Tara calls herself a monster, whereas those who repeat the day without awareness she identifies as ghosts. "Ghosts haunt. They return,

again and again... [to live] in a world that restores itself."<sup>1</sup> Time may be suspended for both monsters and ghosts, but with incommensurate consequences.

What might these characterizations have to do with the invisibility of bodies and systems of water, such as aquifers? Does their relative invisibility enhance their potential to disappear? Alternatively, do efforts to render them readily visible stand in the way of perceiving the inherent fragility and finitude of such environments in relation to our seemingly small everyday actions? An aquifer is not an object, at least in the traditional sense, yet in an effort

to understand it, we might feel the need to transform it into one. Such an impulse is not inherently wrong-headed, but it requires a sense of one's motivation and complicity. One needs to embrace the monster, as ghosts can have a difficult time perceiving and intervening with the physical world.

Questions of invisibility and absence resonate with me as a historian because they are predicated on imagining relationships between small, sometimes imperceptible, and often inconsequential local details or archival fragments and much larger circumstances or events operating on several different physical and temporal scales. The historian Carlo Ginzburg suggests that such imaginings, which are routine for novelists—"Tolstoy leaps over the inevitable gap between the fragmentary and distorted traces of an event (a battle, for instance) and the event itself."—but considered off-limits to the historian, can remediate the limitations of archives by "exploring their gnoseological implications and transforming them into a narrative element."<sup>2</sup> This requires patience and a willingness to speculate about the discontinuities between objects, both seen and unseen.

According to the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, objects "serve the instinctual need for representation and provide the subject with the pleasures of the object's actuality."<sup>3</sup> These objects arrive by choice or by chance—they "process us in different ways," depending on their singular material character, and each one represents "an important

unconscious decision about the structuring of lived experience, and is part of the differential erotics of everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> They are in time and timeless, used and using, significant and inconsequential, and often function as the sites of screen memories of a subject’s past. Because of these qualities and functions, objects can also operate as evidence of what Bollas calls “character.” To be a character in one’s own life is “to gain a history of internal objects,” which are the psychic traces of encounters with the object world. In turn, these encountered objects come to life, are animated or reanimated, by the subjects who engage with them. And because they are not exclusively either “hallucinations” or “real” in a Lacanian sense, they exist in a materially intermediary space “between the subject’s state of mind and the thing’s character,” as forms of representation *and* as actualities.<sup>5</sup>

So how to access these objects, both internalized and material, as evidence of individual subjects’ character? A simple inventory of what subjects have made or chosen, what they live with in their apartments, homes, or studios—or what remains in their archives or in the possession of other individuals or institutions when they are gone—even if taken within their personal spaces during their lifetime, tells us very little without their owner interacting with them. Bollas offers a more imaginative solution, one that inadvertently points to another way in which objects possess and shape individuals and their sense of their location in space and time:

What if we could watch this person move about his room, picking up objects, moving them about, giving form, as it were, to his person? To make this imagining sharper, throwing into relief the point I wish to make, let us think

of this person’s idiom by conceiving him to be a ghost. We are in the room, then, with a ghost, whom we can see only as objects are stirred or moved around the room. By seeing the objects move, rather like observing the wind by watching the moving trees, we would, in effect, be watching his personal effect as he passed through his life, and theoretically, we could film subjectivities’ enacted dissemination by catching the movement of objects over time.<sup>6</sup>

Bollas’s scenario effectively eliminates the individual physical subject, which, like the objects this subject owns and handles, is all too often assumed to be self-contained and self-defining. Its physical absence enables one to more easily witness the subject’s presence in a more capacious form through what Bollas calls “the forms of existence selected by any human life, sculpted through the choice and use of objects.”<sup>7</sup> These moving forms still cannot specify their internalized counterparts, conjured by the mind of the subject. But Bollas claims, “we do know something of this movement when our internal world is characterized by the other’s effect upon us, something that the theory of projective identification and other theories of unconscious communication now address. In other words, we are internally shaped by the presence and actions of the invisible other. Although it is difficult to witness how one person ‘moves through’ the other, like a ghost moving through the internal objects in the room of the other’s mind, we know it is of profound significance, even though exceptionally difficult to describe.”<sup>8</sup>

Although aquifers are not people, just as they are not objects, by fostering similarly slow and oblique scenarios for imagining our relationships to such relatively invisible entities, we can begin to tell stories about complex environments while acknowledging our motivations and complicity while doing so. In this way, a potential absence is not predicated on invisibility, but on our awareness of the ways in which we use things.

1 Solvej Balle, *On the Calculation of Volume I*. Translated by Barbara Haveland. New York: New Directions, 2024, 103-4.

2 Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It,” *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*. Translated by Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012, 209.

3 Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience*. Hove and New York: Routledge, 1992/1993, 17.

4 Bollas, *Being a Character*, 41.

5 Bollas, *Being a Character*, 18.

6 Bollas, *Being a Character*, 55.

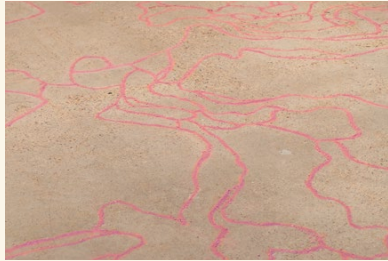
7 Bollas, *Being a Character*, 55.

8 Bollas, *Being a Character*, 56.



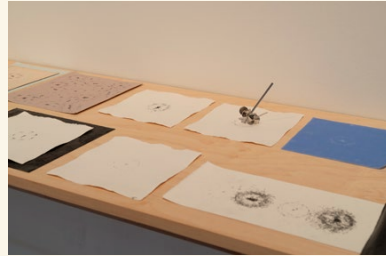
Dye tracing using fluorescein at South Onion Creek in Austin, Texas, in 2017. Courtesy of Brian Smith, Principal Hydrogeologist at Caves and Karst, LLC.

## CHECKLIST



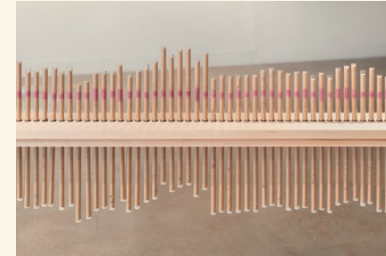
*Remote Sensing*, 2026

Chalk, limestone sediment,  
rhodamine dye



*Meander Drawings*, 2026

Transfer pigment on paper  
Made with water current meter



*rain score*, 2025

Glass, limestone sediment,  
rhodamine dye, rubber bands,  
maple table



*Well*, 2025

*Rock*, 2025

Transfer pigment on Arches paper



*tract (Map & Key)*, 2025

Sand, plaster, soil, rhodamine dye,  
wool, sponge, saw dust, thread,  
newspaper, linoleum, sunflower  
seeds, rust, pappus, bark,  
*Chasmanthium latifolium*  
(northern sea oats), *Ambrosia*  
*trifida* (giant ragweed), and  
calcium carbonate in  
polycarbonate panel



*tract (aquifer)*, 2026

Limestone sediment,  
granular material, water,  
and rhodamine dye in  
polycarbonate tube



*It's raining, rain is*, 2025

Graphite on voile



*something, everything*, 2026

Limestone rock on loan, wood  
stands, *Meander Drawing* (transfer  
pigment on paper, made with  
water current meter)

All works courtesy of the artist.

Installation photos: Alex Boeschstein.

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**Francesca Lally**  
**Julio Martinez**  
**Maysa McAtee**  
**Megan McAtee**  
**Marc Silva**  
**Mary Alice Smith**  
**Kaya Halil Sümer**  
**Hunter Thomas**

COVER IMAGE

Abby Flanagan, *Rock* (detail), 2025.  
Transfer pigment on Arches paper.

OPENING / CLOSING IMAGE

UT Austin students in the Barton Creek Greenbelt in Austin, Texas, as part of Maggie Hansen's *Slow Landscape Practices* course in May 2025. Photo: Jennifer Irving.

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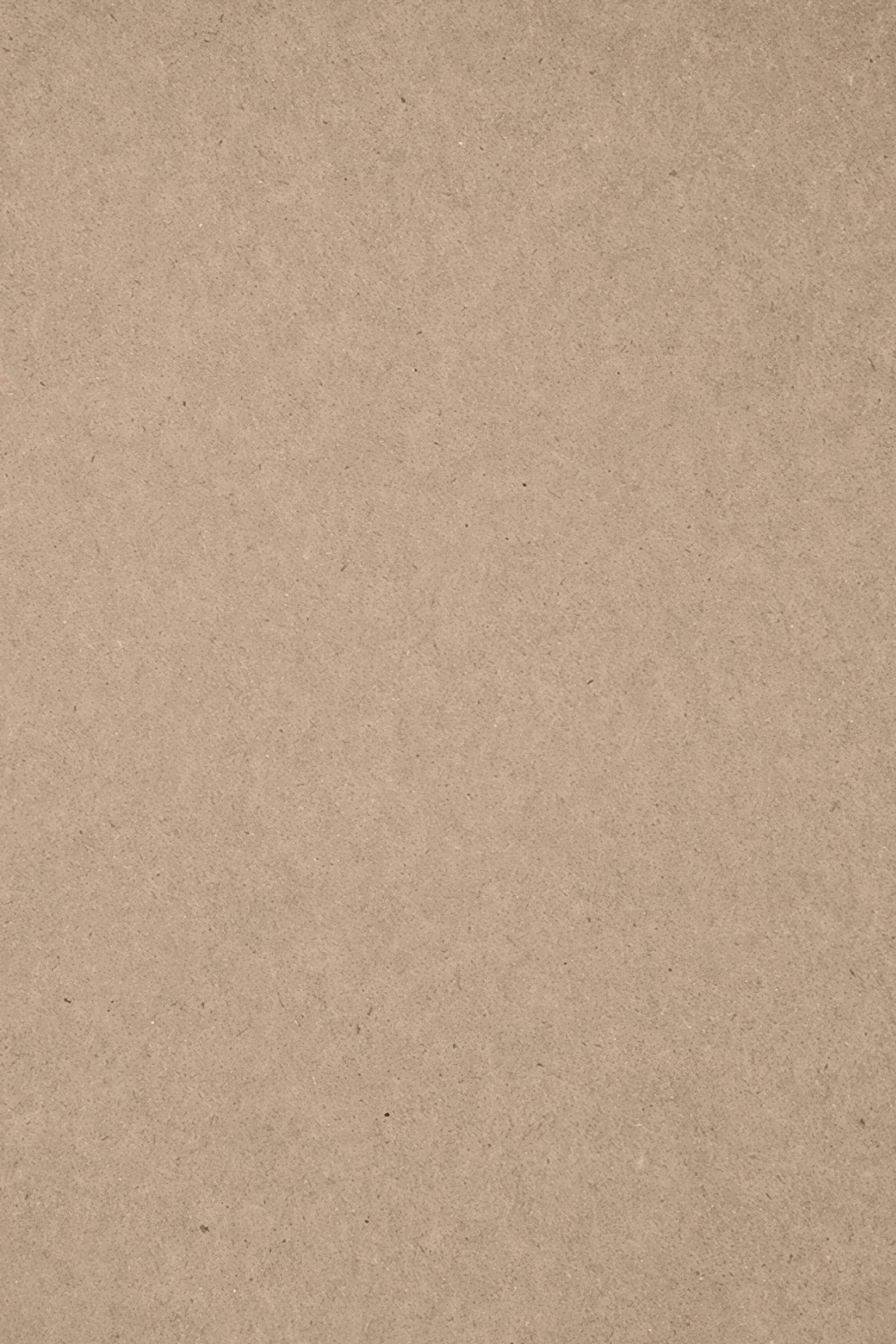
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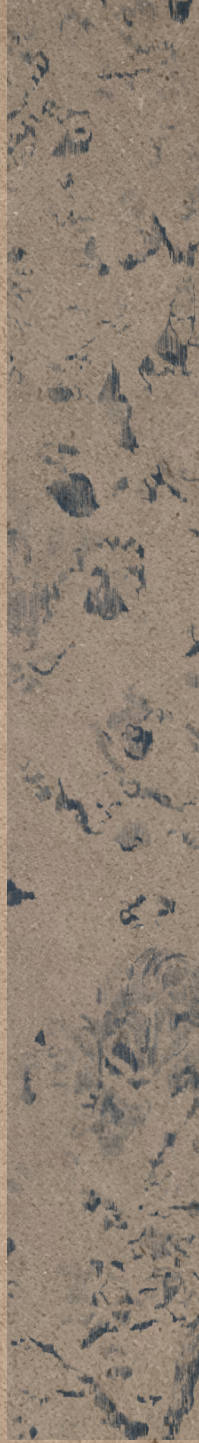
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