

IN THE MAKE

Studio visits with West Coast artists

ABOUT

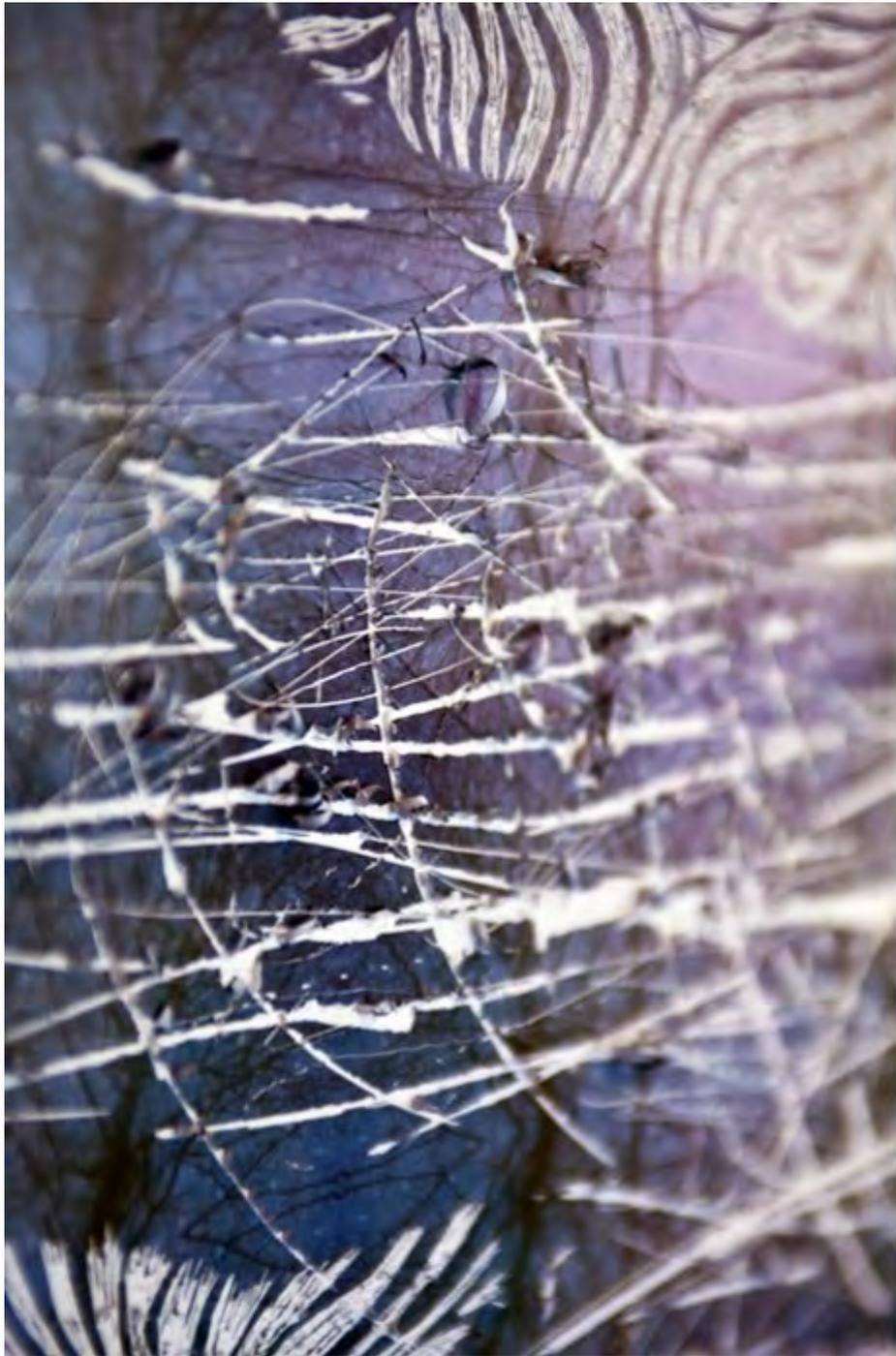
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Christopher Russell

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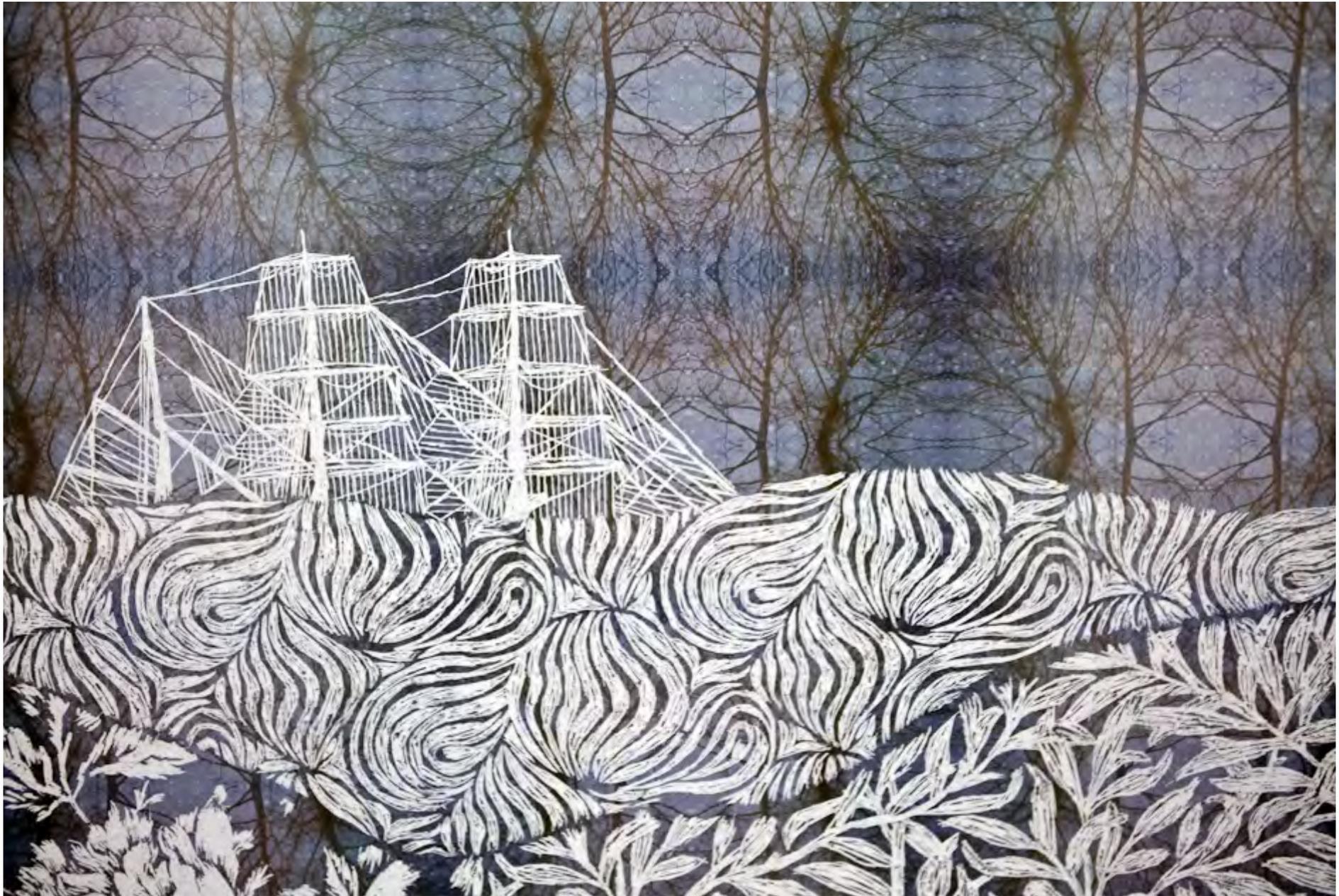


“I’m interested in beauty as a lure... into darker, contemplative places.”



Christopher lives on a quaint and quiet street in Glendale, just outside of Los Angeles. We met him at his studio, a converted freestanding garage that looks a lot like a barn that he's set up as both an office and an art making space. Christopher's work employs photography, writing, bookmaking, and digital printmaking

to create subversive, psychologically dark artwork that often explores an unsavory and unsettling side of humanity. Though I had no concrete expectations of what Christopher might be like, I was surprised by his gentle demeanor, and soft unhurried voice; there's a shy, almost childlike quality to his presence. And yet it didn't take much coaxing to get him talking. Christopher's brain is like a library catalogue, an endless inventory of ideas that cover a range of subjects far and wide— our conversations abounded with his very specific references to historical and current events, literary figures and movements, artists, political parties and landscapes, and religious texts. At times it was difficult to keep up, mostly because he jumped from idea to idea, but also because he didn't spend too much time explaining each reference. I've noticed this is a common phenomenon among artists who spend a great deal of time immersed in research— steeped in the process of inquiry and investigation, certain topics and ideas become incredibly familiar to them and as they continue to acquire information, they reach a level of intimacy with the subject matter that allows them to think of it as common knowledge. But usually it's far from common knowledge! Though sometimes conversationally challenging, encounters like these are inspiring; they're full of the opportunities to learn something new and see the world from a different vantage point. Throughout my conversation with Christopher I wildly jotted down notes so I could look stuff up when I got home. And boy, do I know a thing or two now that I hadn't before.



When people ask you what you “do”, how do you answer?
It depends on context. I tend not to admit to being an artist in circles where there isn't already a presumption about what a contemporary artist is. If I'm teaching at the time, I will say I'm an educator.

Otherwise, I often say I'm in between things just because I don't want to have to answer all the questions that usually ensue if I say I'm an artist.

Do you have a day job? What is it? What does it mean to you?

I do not have a day job. I fantasize about one, and currently wish to be a clerk— DMV, Air Resources Board, something governmental, but low key, low responsibility, where I am cared for, and where there is a retirement package, defined vacations, pay dates, and health insurance.

I do sometimes teach, but I don't have a permanent position at any particular school.



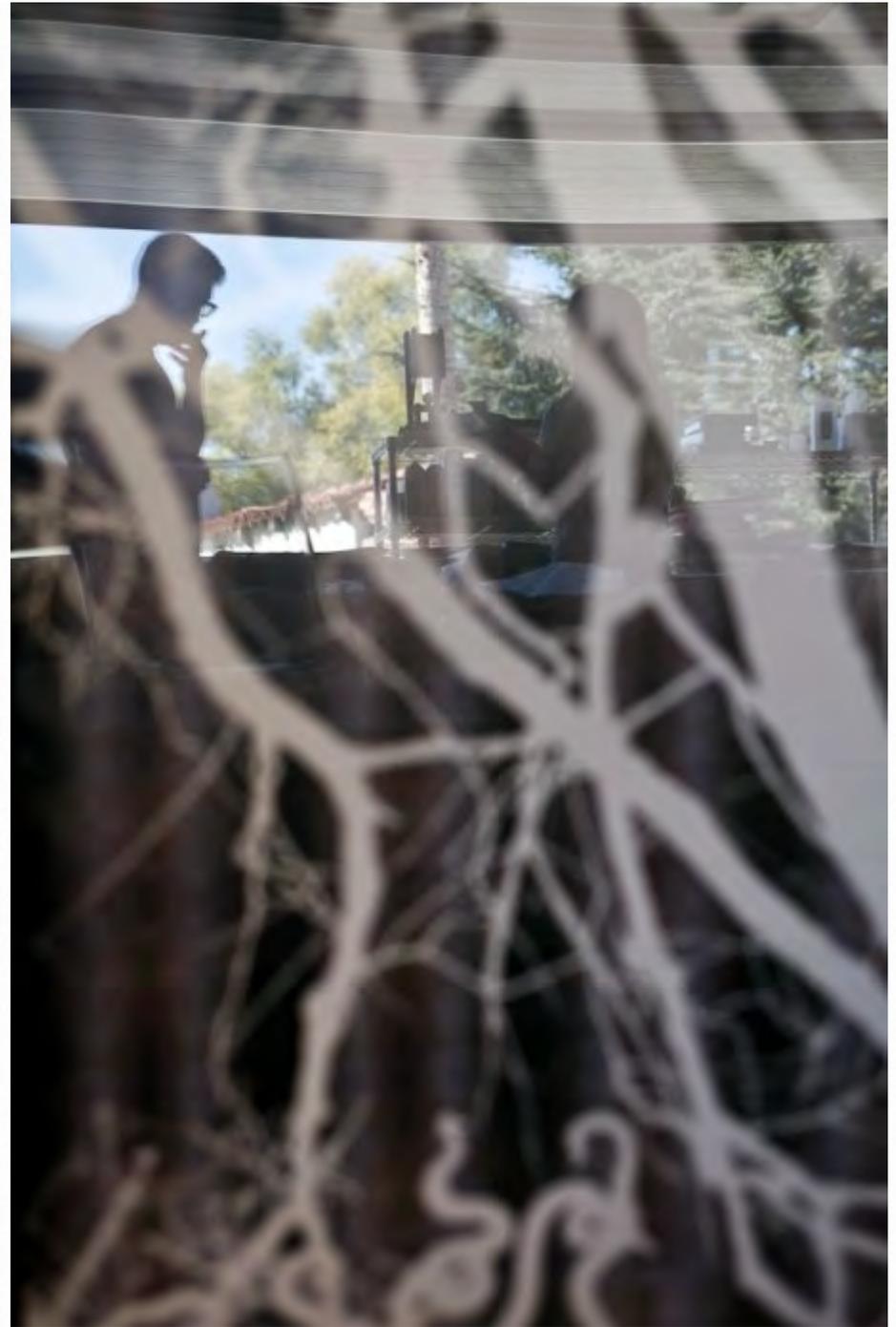
What mediums do you work with? How would you describe your subject matter? What themes seem to occur/reoccur in your work?
I am a photographer. But I do a lot of drawing, some “painting,” and sometimes I just attack the pictures or

mark them with jizz, like an animal or some such. Subject matter wise, it's psychologically dark; I gravitate towards despair.

I take photos, digitally convert them to patterns, and then print them out on photo paper. I then scratch and etch into the surface, sometime delicate drawings with an X-Acto knife, sometimes violently with a meat cleaver.

What are you currently reading, listening to or looking at to fuel your work?

I am in a huge production mode, working 12-14 hours a day in the studio, so I'm not actively reading at the moment. I don't think I could really take additional input at this stage of my production. For my current project, my curiosity is provoked by current events, by the train wreck of politics and what passes for journalism. It creates a sense of defeat unlike any in literature.





What are your biggest challenges to creating art and how do you deal with them? How do you navigate the art world?

My biggest challenge is networking, putting on the public face and selling myself. I abhor that sort of

business mentality, yet it seems to be necessary to get to the next step. It's so much a part of the larger culture it's become an assumption of activities that have been traditionally considered counterculture. A large part of modern art was an assertion of independence, freedom, a drive to see a world without the rigidity of the academy, or the kitsch of consumerism. But now so much contemporary art seeks academic validation purely as a means of ensuring marketability.

What does having a physical space to make art in mean for your process, and how do you make your space work for you?

I have a studio. I converted the detached garage at my place. 400 square feet, no extra rent, no having to travel and give up time to make art. But at the same time, there's no break. If I feel overwrought needing to tinker at 2 am, it's there when it probably shouldn't be.



Has there been a shift or change in your life or work that has led to what you're making now?
No. I don't want my work to be personal in that way. I imagine there are things that are deep that will come out later, sort of like: you made X when Y happened. But it comes back to a key difference between

influence and reference, influence being deeply held within yourself, so that the artist is surprised to discover connections, while reference is a boring academic trope that puts an artificial limitation on the artist, that kind of art making comes from art history. Historians should be running to keep up with artists, not vice versa.

Do you see your work as autobiographical at all?

In ways it has to be, but it's never a primary read. I began making art in the midst of Identity Politics, and I understand the political implications of first person artwork, and I recognize that some people do that extraordinarily well, such as [Zackary Drucker](#).

But I prefer the malleable identity of third person— I like to see myself more as a narrator telling a story or asking questions. I don't want to get stuck; I need to constantly be thinking about the future of my practice, and staying open and curious and not align myself with just one political stance. For example, I'm totally resistant to making work that is about being gay— I just don't want to fall into a place where I'm grappling with the same questions over and over, and producing work that continuously deals with the same subject matter, confusing repetition with depth.





Is there something you are currently working on, or are excited about starting that you can tell us about? I'm finishing one project and moving to another. I'm maybe making my last ships, which I love, and I'm sad to see them go, but it might be time. They deal with patterns as an inscription of personal values, formatted so that they can, theoretically, expand forever. In the ship pieces, one is literally looking into a reflection in a puddle where some sort of Romantic world emerges, though the text that inspires the images is a maze of monsters, introversion and a necro-utopia.

I'm thinking a lot about politics right now, and how insane our political landscape has become—the news system that reports lies without checking or reporting them as such. I wrote a fictional text, which is where my work tends to start. It's work that I started before Occupy, but which comes from a similar place. The text begins with the invention of photography as a haunted medium, cursed from the start, a system rigged to collapse, an allegory for the U.S. as an ailing superpower. It works through a number of political ideas, such as the interplay of public perception, free will and opportunity. I come at these topics in circuitous ways, using the 19th century mystic, H.P. Blavatsky while thinking about Allan Sekula's photo theory, end-of-an-era-paranoia courtesy of the false allegations of ritual abuse surrounding the McMartin Preschool as a symbol of paranoia stemming from America's insecurity with both holding and losing their position as a superpower. The book ends with a satanic prayer to ward off the Tea Party. At the same time, I'm drawing, by scratching into photos, pictures of the Brooklyn Bridge in varying degrees of ruin. The excess of the Brooklyn Bridge has made its way into the vernacular as a synonym for fraud: "If you believe that, I'll sell you the Brooklyn Bridge." Its image is coupled with crumbling bits of deco architectural design; I just want to see the exuberant promise of industry, the role of the corporation in the promise of America, reduced to rubble, overcome by forces outside its control. It's less politics and more like revenge.



What are you most proud of?

Points of pride become a stopping point; something from which all other things are compared. The high school jock in his 40s reveling in the big win. No. I push myself to change my aesthetic, to really push how

far I can take my work. I don't think my practice allows that line of thought.

What do you want your work to do?

I'm interested in beauty as a lure, things that maybe have a more modernist association with beauty, but lure people into these darker, contemplative places.

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How will you know when you have arrived?

I'm not interested in goal driven production. Arrival seems to be about money, the conscious creation of commodities, career trajectory. I often make things knowing that they will never be sold. When I make

money from my work, it allows me to put more money into the work, more time to make it, but I don't think there's a piece or a show or a collection that is defining.





0 Comments