

Gabriel Sosa:  
No Vehicles  
in the Park



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No Vehicles in the Park

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October 1, 2022 - January 8, 2023

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The fun of being a curator of contemporary art is the ability to work closely with artists to share their creative talent with the public. I have wholly enjoyed the process of putting together *No Vehicles in the Park* and first, I would like to acknowledge and thank Gabriel Sosa for being an ideal project partner. His absolute and equal consideration of this exhibition's conceptual vision and logistical needs is a curator's dream. His multifaceted skill is reflected in his ability to seamlessly juggle the demands of teaching at the university level, his own curatorial practice (as Deputy Director of Essex Art Center in Lawrence, MA), and his studio practice. In addition, he is a fabulous conversationalist (I especially enjoyed our "commute calls") with big ideas and a drive that translates into results. I, and the team at FAM, appreciate Gabriel's patience and continued work on the project amidst a tumultuous year that included family bereavement and the birth of his adorable daughter. And, I am grateful that we will continue to work together.

Gabriel's work was initially endorsed by the discerning eye of former Terrana Assistant Curator, Marjorie Rawle, who helped kick off this project in its earliest stages. Her mantle was picked up by our current Assistant Curator, Brooke "Eli" Yung, whose calm demeanor and ready assistance I am deeply grateful for.

Many thanks to the preparatory and installation team: Jesse Kenas-Collins, Aminadab "Charlie" Cruz Jr., Dylan Safford, Steve Backholm, and Mel Bailey. And finally, thanks to all of the staff members at the Fitchburg Art Museum who directly or indirectly contributed to the success of this exhibition, including Director of Education, Susan Diachisin, for a fun and engaging Learning Lounge installation, Marketing Manager, Christian Lopez, for the marketing and promotion of the exhibition and related events, and Deputy Director of Advancement and Administration, Rebecca Wright, for a lovely opening reception.

This catalogue has been made possible by FAM's ongoing collaboration with Professor Robert Carr and his driven students at Fitchburg State University. This catalogue represents 9 ½ years of this partnership. Thank you to the students of the Fall 2022 Client Project Management catalogue team: Ariana Lyons, Helen McGonigle, and Deanna Tarantino.

**Lauren Szumita**  
**Curator, Fitchburg Art Museum**

# DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

The Fitchburg Art Museum is proud to present the first museum solo exhibition of the work of Salem, MA artist Gabriel Sosa.

I was first made aware of Gabriel and his work through the Accelerator Program at Now + There, a non-profit dedicated to fostering temporary contemporary public art at sites throughout the City of Boston. In 2014, I helped found this organization along with Kate Gilbert, who is Now + There's Executive Director. Kate is also a member of FAM's Board of Community Advisors and serves on our Collection Committee.

Now + There's Accelerator Program annually provides funding, training, and logistical support for cohorts of emerging and mid-career artists who realize ambitious works of public art. In 2020 and 2021, Gabriel Sosa created English and Spanish text-based artworks on billboards in multiple neighborhoods in Boston, through his project *No es fácil/It ain't easy*. These billboards featured giant block letters and bright colors that delivered brief messages of hope to communities deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here at FAM, Gabriel is showing an entirely different body of text-based work—drawings deeply informed by his twelve years of experience as a Spanish language in courtrooms. And here the style of the letters is not drawn from the world of advertising, but proceeds from the emotively shaped, re-arranged, and pictorial traditions of concrete poetry and Lettrism, twentieth-century avant-garde movements that radically distorted typography in the service of image-making. With these techniques, Sosa explores the power, subtlety, ambiguity, and malleability of legal words and language. His installation in FAM's George R. Wallace III gallery is both beautiful and eloquent.

I would like to thank Gabriel Sosa for the privilege of presenting his work. I would also like to thank FAM Curator, Lauren Szumita, and Assistant Curator, Brooke "Eli" Yung, for organizing the exhibition. Thanks also to former FAM Terrana Assistant Curator, Marjorie Rawle, who participated in the early planning for the show and introduced Gabriel Sosa to FAM. Lauren and Eli worked closely with our exhibition installation team, Collection Manager, Aminadab "Charlie" Cruz, Jr., Facilities Manager, Steve Backholm, Facilities Assistant, Mel Bailey, and Preparator, Dylan Safford, to bring the show to a beautiful fruition. Thanks also to FAM's new Director of Education, Susan Diachisin, who hit the ground running and designed a compelling Learning Lounge to accompany *No Vehicles in the Park*.

This catalogue is the product of an ongoing partnership with Fitchburg State University. Every semester since the spring of 2014, students in the Communications/Media program under the direction of Professor Rob Carr have designed catalogues for FAM exhibitions. This catalogue for *Gabriel Sosa: No Vehicles in the Park* was designed by Helen McGonigle, Deanna Tarantino, and Ari Lyons. The Fitchburg Art Museum and Fitchburg State University are proud of this collaboration, the student designers, and this wonderful catalogue.

**Nick Capasso**  
Director



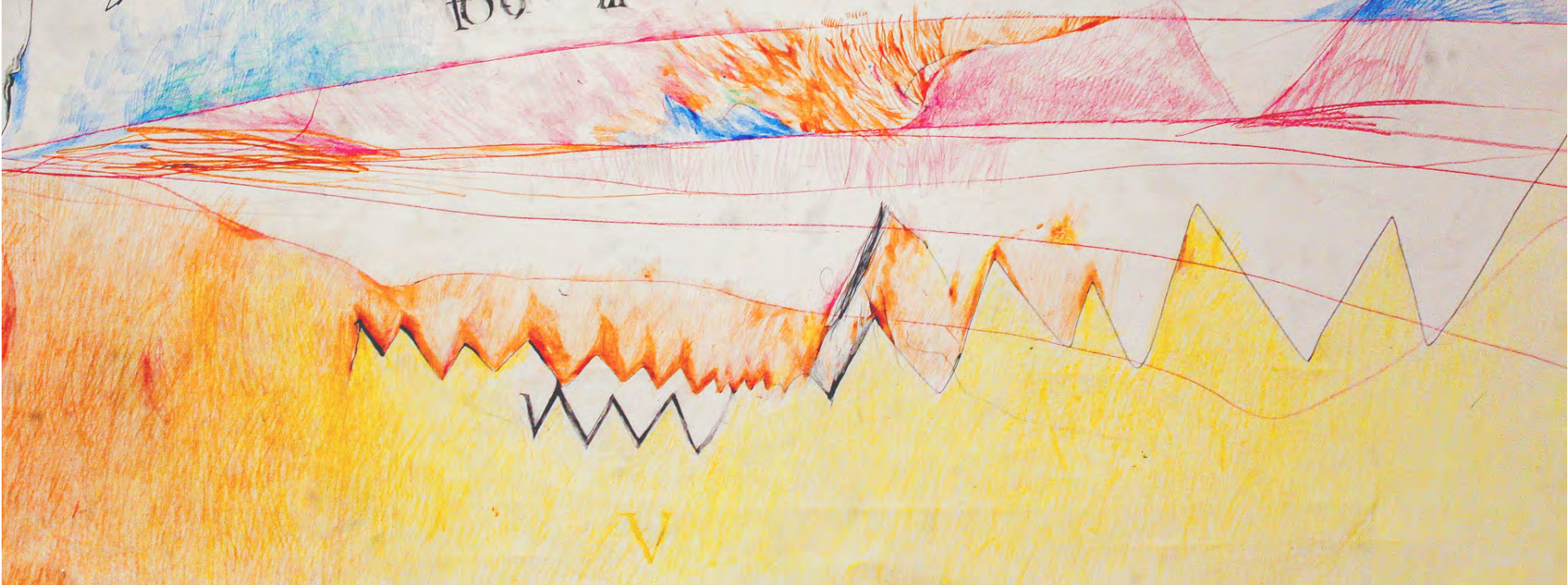
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law limitations impaired the  
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# INTRODUCTION TO *NO VEHICLES IN THE PARK*

Language is inherently imperfect. This notion forms the basis of Salem-based artist Gabriel Sosa's work, which is largely influenced by his twelve years of experience as a Spanish-language interpreter in the courtroom. His work explores the ambiguity of language, the power dynamics embedded in legal jargon, and the consequences of phrasing. *No Vehicles in the Park* features a new body of work by Sosa that urges us to consider the contradictions in the American legal system, the impact of past tradition on the present, and the openness of interpretation.

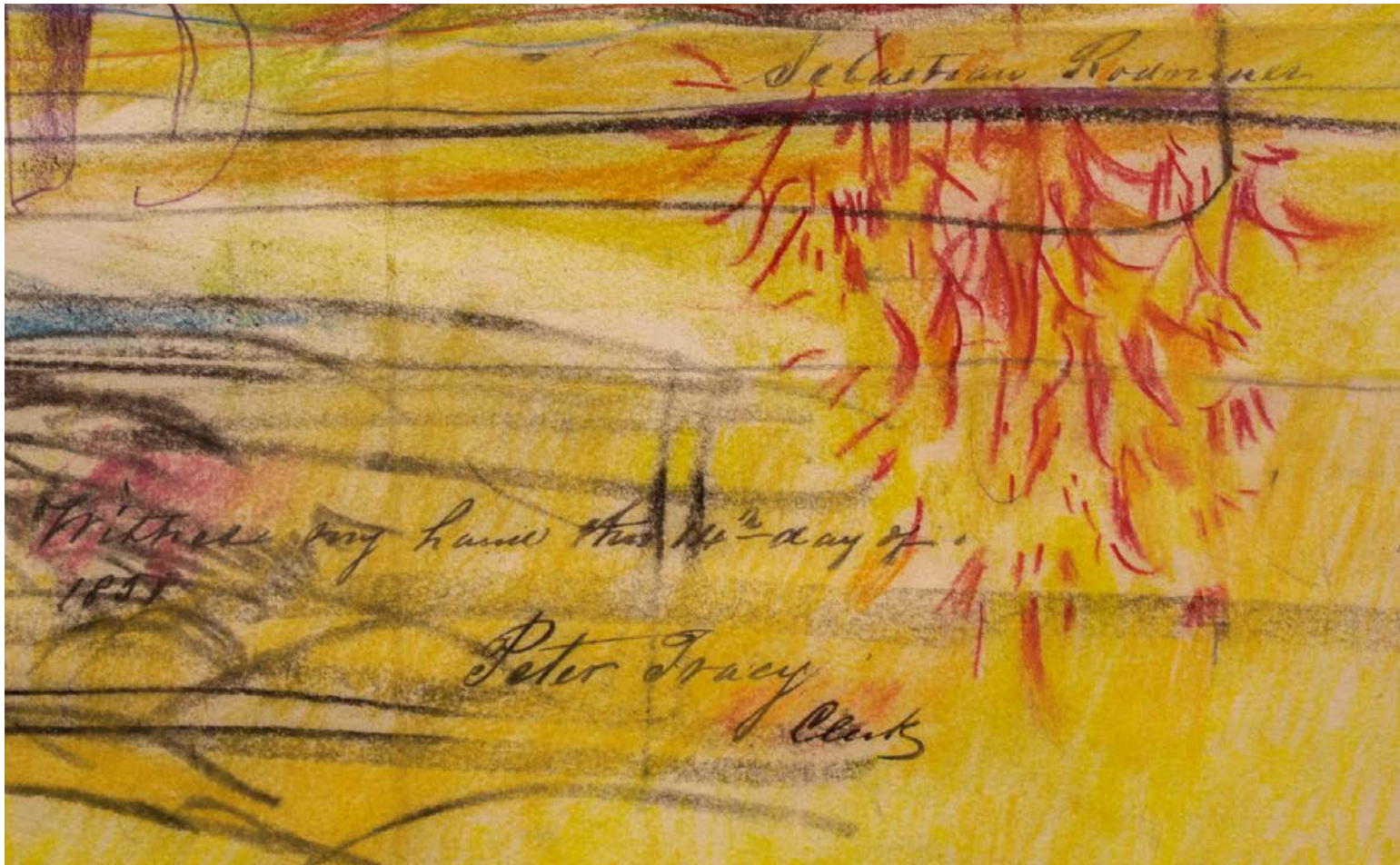
The title of this exhibition comes from a legal exercise in which participants argue the definition of a "vehicle" as prohibited in a public space. Would a skateboard, stroller, or wheelchair be considered a vehicle? Are there ever exceptions to the rule, such as an ambulance that needs to transport an injured patient? Legal language is meant to express with efficiency and clarity, but ambiguity is frequently present—and sometimes welcomed. In the legal system, words wield power. They direct case outcomes and expose skewed power dynamics between prosecution and defense.

Sosa uses drawing to examine how meaning is derived from—and can be manipulated in—an array of legal documents, such as recent Supreme Court decisions, inmate phone call transcriptions, and the Boston Police Department Rules and Procedures. He extracts and repeats phrases to examine the text and its meaning, questioning the confidence that we ascribe to language. Sosa's drawings present a layered exploration of how we understand and interpret language in political and judicial contexts, and asks us how we seek comfort and reflection in difficult times.

# INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

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On November 1, 2022, the Catalogue Production team from Fitchburg State University—Helen McGonigle, Deanna Tarantino, and Ari Lyons—sat down with Gabriel Sosa to learn more about his creative spirit and vision.



*Untitled* (detail), 2022

**Fitchburg State University:** Gabriel, thank you so much for talking with us. This is a really thought-provoking and timely exhibition. How long have you been making art?

**Gabriel Sosa:** Always, I guess. I think nearly every kid makes some kind of art, right? Mark-making, in whatever form, is such an innate human experience. I was born and raised in Miami, and I always took art seriously. I graduated from New World School of the Arts, an arts high school in Miami, but during college and for quite some time after, I was more drawn to reading, writing, and learning languages than making, per se. Years later, that changed. I felt that it was the most effective way to engage with what I was interested in, and I enrolled in the MFA program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts. I graduated in 2016, and you could say that since then, I've really dived into artmaking in a professional sense.



*To be clear, even if a modern day regulation is not a dead ringer for a historical precursor, 2022*

**FSU:** What made you gravitate towards text-based art?

**GS:** I used to be really hesitant to create text-based art, and was even turned off by the idea of it for a long time. I always thought of writing and image making as distinct things. But my shift in approach came from my work as a court interpreter. I spent close to 12 years working in the court system in the Boston area, orally translating court proceedings into Spanish. This work was accompanied by a lot of interpreting at attorney-client meetings, and translating written documents as well. When I was in graduate school, I had been working as an interpreter for about four years and continued working full-time. And so there was a lot from my job that was starting to percolate. Incorporating text into my artwork seemed like a natural response to what I was seeing and participating in on a daily basis.

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Once it's in the frame, that's it, I can't touch it. It's just too much of a production to remove work from a frame and I've made my peace with it at that point. But if that's not the case, the work remains subject to change. One of the pieces in the show (*Do you understand the consequences of pleading guilty?*) was originally a drawing that I created during a figure drawing class in my senior year of high school. Over the years, I've made and erased one work after another on the same sheet, so there are dozens of layers underneath the final drawing. ”

Gabriel Sosa



**FSU:** How did you choose the specific texts that you have for this body of work?

**GS:** Rarely do I write the texts that I use in my work, but rather recontextualize them from other sources, in this case, legal documents. I choose what strikes me as salient or memorable in some way, depending on the project. The typeface I've used here is predominantly Century Schoolbook, in which the US Supreme Court issues its opinions. Most of the text in this exhibition isn't easy to read. It's either plainly illegible or requires some time to discern or disentangle, if at all. A lot of that comes from my own experience working in the court system and how intimidating that language can be, as well as my readings of these opinions. The Supreme Court cases that I address in the exhibition are *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*; *New York State Rifle and Pistol Assn., Inc. v. Bruen*; *Vega v. Tekoh*; and *Ramos v. Louisiana*. All of these are recent cases that I feel are bubbling at the surface of American society. Most folks may not be as familiar with *Ramos* or *Vega* as much as they are with *Dobbs* or *Bruen*. But I think all of them have some kind of really impactful relevance on our lives and the country we live in. I wanted to respond to all of that, specifically the way language can manipulate or obfuscate certain issues.

And then the other thing is the steadfast reliance on the past in all of these cases. Citing judicial precedent is an integral part of the common law system, but I mean, we're talking about stuff from the colonial era or even the medieval era in England at the birth of the common law system. So where do we as a society draw the lines in terms of what history is going to mean to us? What's the threshold? What I wanted to get at with this show is how right now in the United States, we have such a lack of capacity for nuance, particularly judicial nuance.

**FSU:** So it sounds like you spend a lot of time with Supreme Court documents. Can you tell us a bit more?

**GS:** Yes! Most people don't read the opinions. We all read the headlines, and we tend to inform ourselves through third-party summaries. I suspect that those individuals who actually read the entire decisions, some of which exceed a hundred pages, are relatively few. In theory, Supreme Court opinions are supposed to be written in a way that's accessible for everyone, but they're really not. And it takes patience, but also a certain familiarity with vocabulary and a lot of contextual historical knowledge, in order to make sense of them. And not everybody has that. So, in reality, they're not that comprehensible. And the other thing is, in some discussions I've had about this show, it's surprising how many folks don't realize that all Supreme Court opinions are public information. You just Google them and download the PDFs. I'm amazed at the number of people that have said to me, "Oh, where do you get these?"





*Neglect of Duty* (detail), 2022

**FSU:** Can you talk about why you choose to revisit old work?

**GS:** Once it's in the frame, that's it, I can't touch it. It's just too much of a production to remove work from a frame and I've made my peace with it at that point. But if that's not the case, the work remains subject to change. One of the pieces in the show (*Do you understand the consequences of pleading guilty?*) was originally a drawing that I created during a figure drawing class in my senior year of high school. Over the years, I've made and erased one work after another on the same sheet, so there are dozens of layers underneath the final drawing. When something is unframed, as are many pieces in this show, it remains vulnerable and subject to change, just like language and the law.

*Le queda un minuto*, the installation made of crumpled drawings tacked to the wall, also continues to morph, but in a different way. I've added more sheets to it since I first began the piece in 2017. I like how in its nature, it will never be the same anytime it's installed. There's this compulsion I have to kind of reach back into what's old and reshape it into something new. I find that I do that a lot, and it's one of the defining elements of this exhibition.

**FSU:** Okay, so we would like to shift the conversation a little bit and ask about some of your stylistic choices. Your drawings have a very tactile and immediate feeling to them. Why do you choose to emphasize this sense of tactility in your art?

**GS:** Even though I work in different media, like video and public art, I really wanted to focus this exhibition on drawing. I am enamored of mark making and erasure, and drawing is so direct and adaptable that it seemed fitting for this body of work. When I revisit older pieces and I enter this continuous process of layering and erasing, that paper inevitably becomes a palimpsest. You can see my fingerprints and smudges and trace the history of my decisions in a drawing. And I believe that that's the tactility that you're referring to. It's an aesthetic that naturally emerges from the way I work.





“ This brings us back to the impermanence of the law. It’s like drawing. No matter what change is made, the residue of the past is still there; there’s a stickiness to the legal past, whether it’s something that we’re yearning for, or something that we have triumphed over. It’s changeable and it’s erasable. And whatever comes next is built on top of whatever came before. In some way, the past remains perceptible. ”

Gabriel Sosa

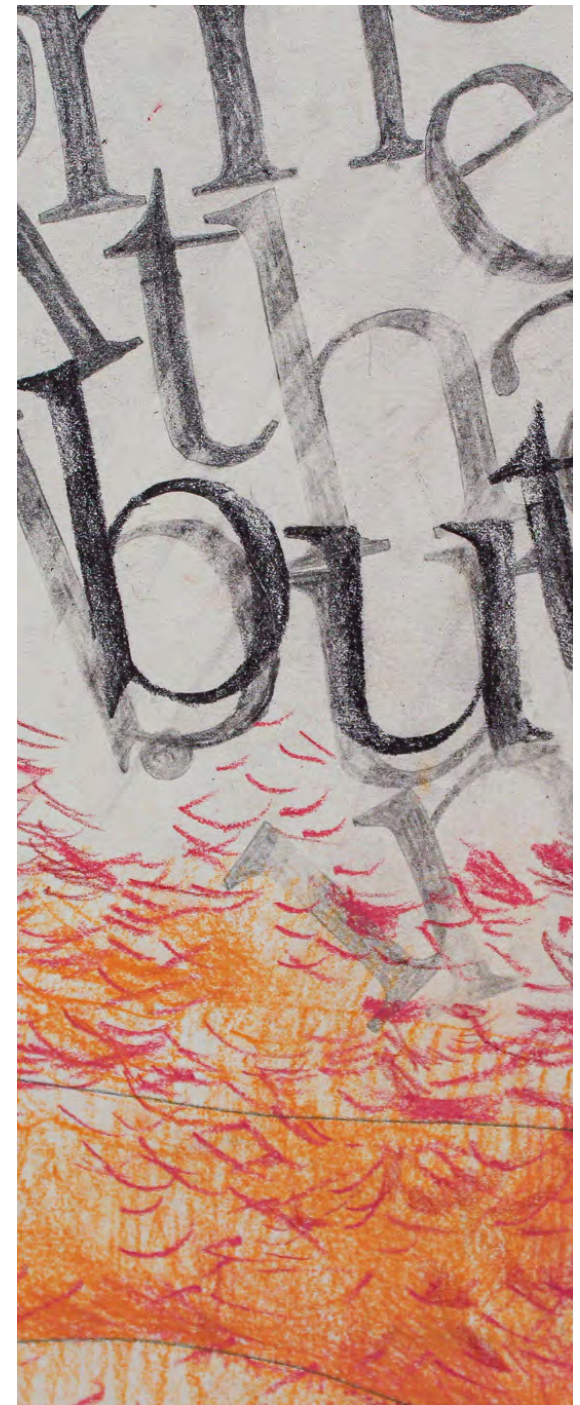
**FSU:** So how does the aesthetic of your work relate to your thinking about legal problems, conundrums, and paradoxes?

**GS:** This brings us back to the impermanence of the law. It's like drawing. No matter what change is made, the residue of the past is still there; there's a stickiness to the legal past, whether it's something that we're yearning for, or something that we have triumphed over. It's changeable and it's erasable. And whatever comes next is built on top of whatever came before. In some way, the past remains perceptible.

**FSU:** What made you choose to contrast bright colors in your work against a black text and white paper?

**GS:** I was very interested in this contrast between expectation and reality. I hope that when you encounter that soft pink and yellow, both on the walls and in the work, there's something very soothing about it. But once you become aware of the subject matter, there's a disconnect there that can be jarring or even disconcerting. And that's something that I wanted to tap into, because I'm really interested in this notion of judicial awareness. There is such an abstract, removed understanding around the law and how it works. I think that once you learn how courts operate, it can be both enlightening and disconcerting. So that choice of color palette throughout the exhibition very much reflects that.

And then there's also the sheer power of color. There's the story of Baker-Miller pink. It's a particular shade of pink that was thought to be very calming, and in the 1970s and '80s, it was used for a brief period in jails and prisons in the United States as a way to reduce the number of violent incidents in these facilities. However, it was based on only one study. Once actual holding cells were painted this color, the hypothesis that pink would reduce violence was proven to be untrue, and in at least one instance, the opposite occurred and violence actually increased. I think there is also something in that, too. And no, the pink I used is not Baker-Miller pink. But there have been other color experiments in correctional facilities since that time, and I feel like it's hard to connect the color pink with the US legal system without thinking of Baker-Miller pink, and how it speaks to the disconnect and dysfunction in that system.

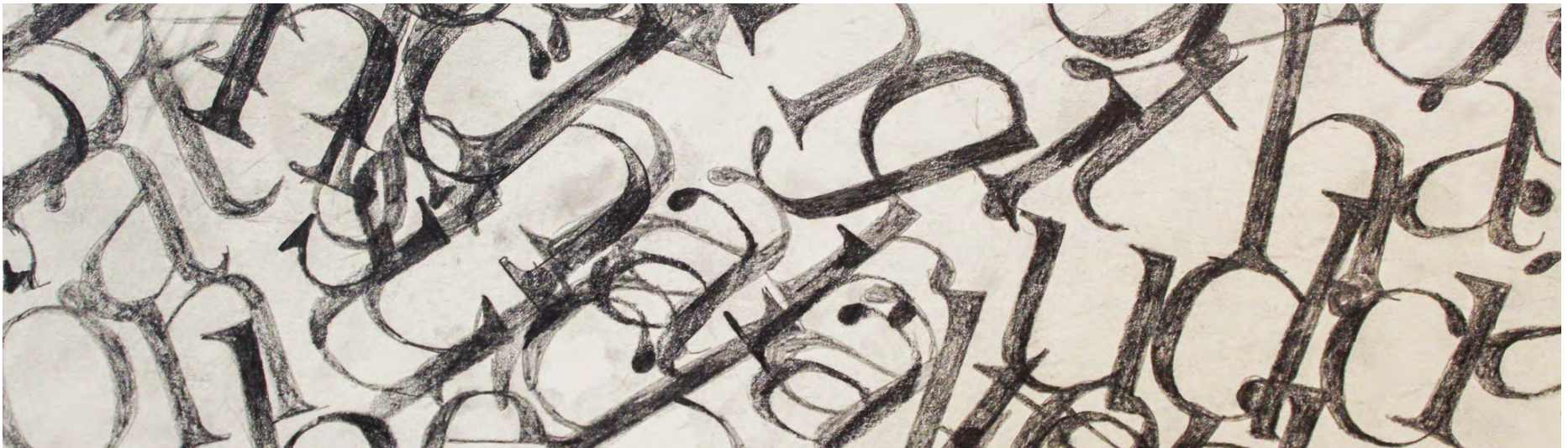


*A substantial reliance on English history* (detail), 2022

**FSU:** One final question. What do you think is the biggest problem with the US legal system?

**GS:** Oh, wow. We could spend a lot of time on that. The (in)justice system is rife with racism, ignorance, and disregard for the wellbeing of others. In working across the multitude of courthouses in the Boston area, I saw how the entire machinery of the judicial system disproportionately negatively affects communities of color. Instead of justice, there were hopes dashed, lives ruined, and families torn asunder. I not only saw the fractures and fissures of our courts, but worked within them. As an interpreter, in line with the best practices of the profession, I would always interpret in the first person, i.e. “I arrived that morning,” rather than “the witness said that they arrived that morning.” As a mouthpiece, quite literally, my voice became that of victims, judges, defendants, witnesses, prosecutors, and defense attorneys. So much of what I would interpret would hinge on subtlety, context, and nuance. This show stems largely from those experiences. I want the audience to consider the power of interpretation, not only from one language to another, but across a variety of legal contexts. How can language be manipulated? And, what impact can it have on us?

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



*On occasion, when the court ignores* (detail), 2022



# ARTWORKS

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In these large drawings, Sosa incorporates portions of recent decisions by the US Supreme Court to question the influence of historical precedent on modern-day decision making. Judges in the US are required to follow previous decisions made by higher-level courts within the same jurisdiction, a principle known as *stare decisis*, which provides legal consistency and predictability. Here, Sosa erases, disassembles, and rearranges the text into abstract forms that invite us to meditate on how we decide when to reject—or affirm—the past.

The soothing color palette found throughout the drawings—like the colors on the walls in this gallery—contrasts with the unclear and often harmful consequences of legal decisions, pushing us to further probe the words before us. These works contend with 2022 decisions including *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and the constitutional right to abortion; *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, which overturned a New York gun safety law that required a license to carry concealed weapons in public places; and *Vega v. Tekoh*, which prohibits civil lawsuits against police officers for not reading Miranda rights to suspects. These decisions cite centuries-old legal history to justify their reasoning, including 17th- and 18th-century English legal scholars Sir William Blackstone and Sir Edward Coke.

(Exhibition Checklist #1-8)















“As during the colonial and founding periods, the common-law offenses of ‘affray’ or going armed ‘to the terror of the people’ continued to impose some limits on firearm carry in the antebellum period. But there is no evidence indicating that these common-law limitations impaired the right of the general population to peaceable public carry.”

New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen, 597 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2022), Syllabus page 5.



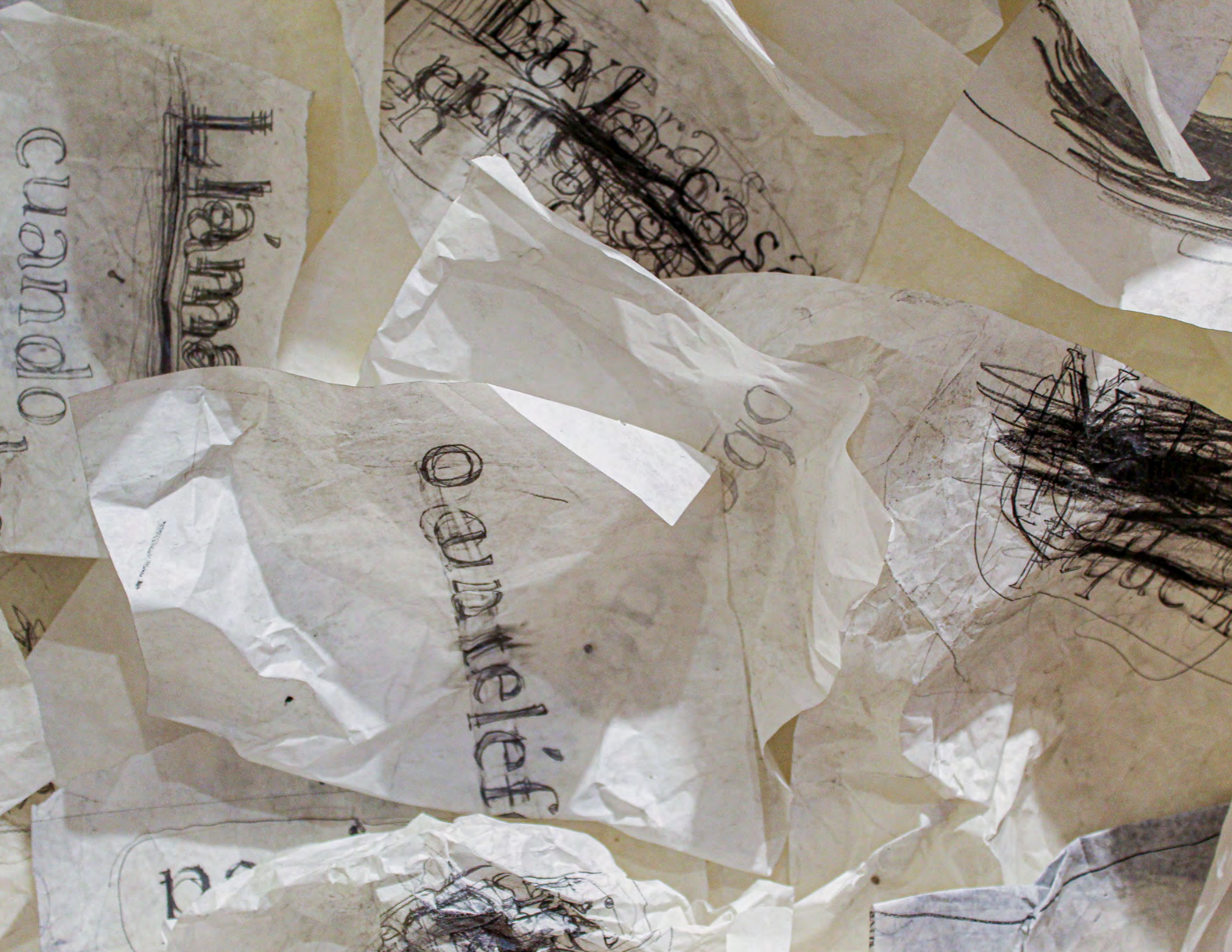
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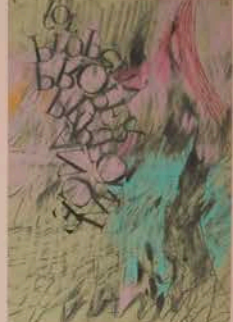
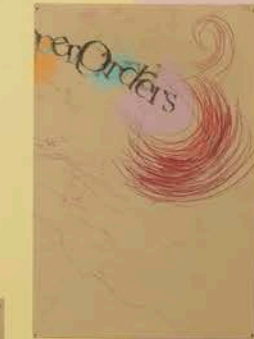
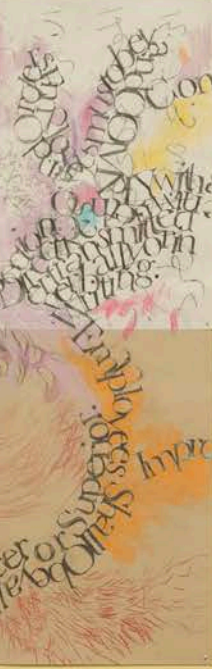
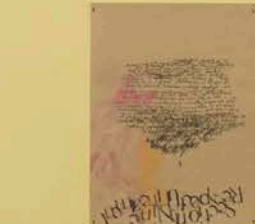
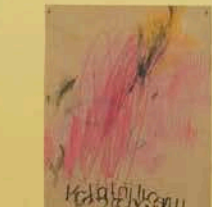
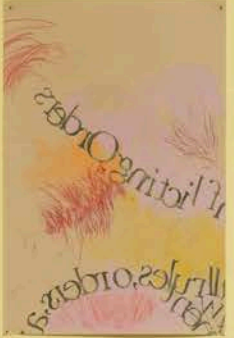
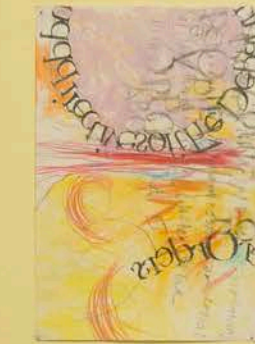
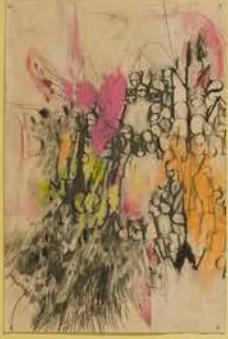
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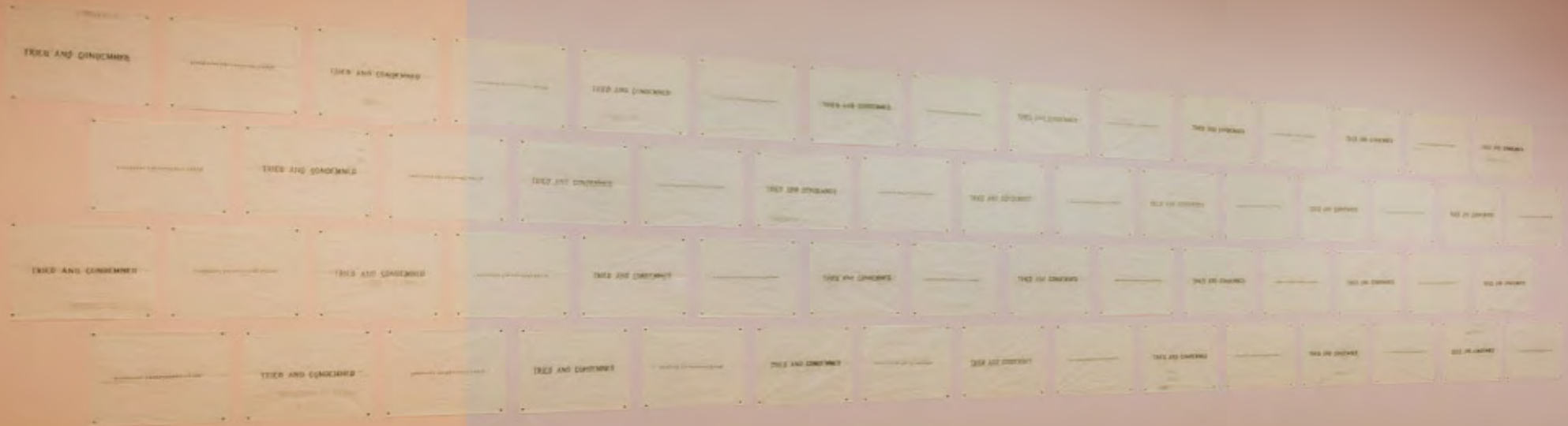
Inspired by Sosa's notes as a court interpreter, *Le queda un minuto* offers an intimate look into the personal lives of incarcerated people. All outgoing phone calls from imprisoned people are recorded, excluding conversations between attorney and client. As an interpreter, Sosa was often hired to transcribe and translate such recordings for the prosecutor's office to scour for incriminating evidence. Yet, most of the calls contained distinctly human messages of love, frustration, and nostalgia for the comforts of home. Once the translations are analyzed and determined to be irrelevant, they are discarded by the courts, while defendants linger in jail.

(Exhibition Checklist #10)

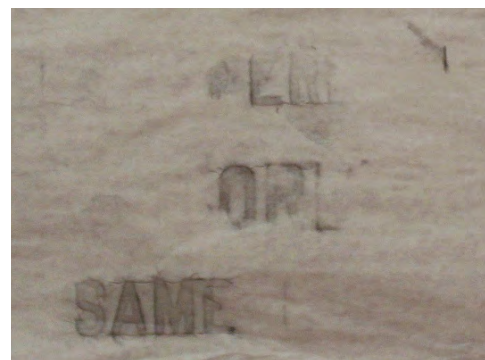
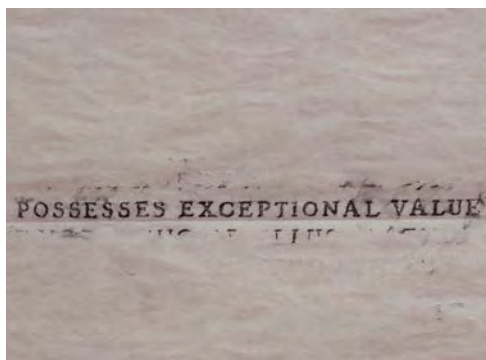
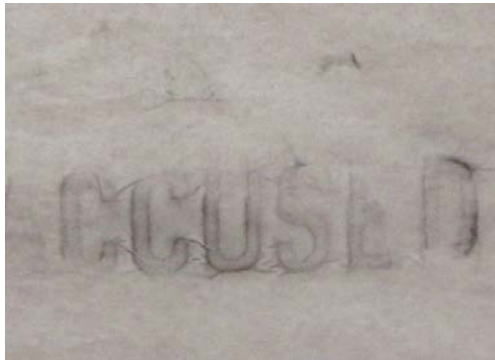
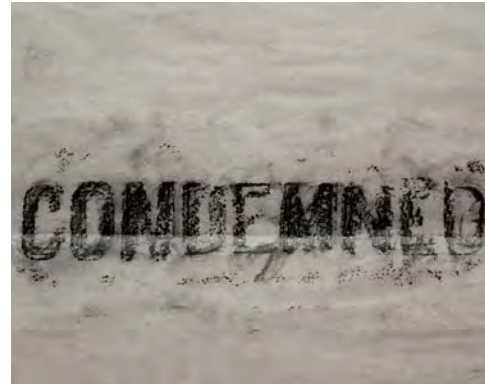
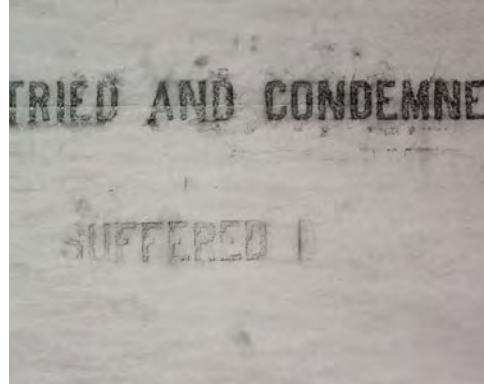


In this work, Sosa invokes the famous (and controversial) Rorschach inkblot test to question legal texts' ability to resist interpretation. Drawing from Rule 102 in the Boston Police Department's Rules and Procedures, Sosa scrutinizes officers' responsibility to obey their superiors' directives without hesitation. Commands such as "employees shall obey all orders of a superior officer" repeat throughout the installation, interspersed with the broken phrases "improper orders" and "conflicting orders." Extracted from Section 8 of the rule, these phrases refer to the provision that officers must follow direction, even if doing so violates personal ethics or official procedure. Regulatory texts like police manuals attempt to eliminate any room for interpretation, but grant authority figures interpretive privilege. Like Rorschach inkblots, which were created to provide a definitive ruling on a person's psychological state but delivered ambiguous and unreliable findings, legal regulations are sometimes "open to interpretation."

(Exhibition Checklist #11)



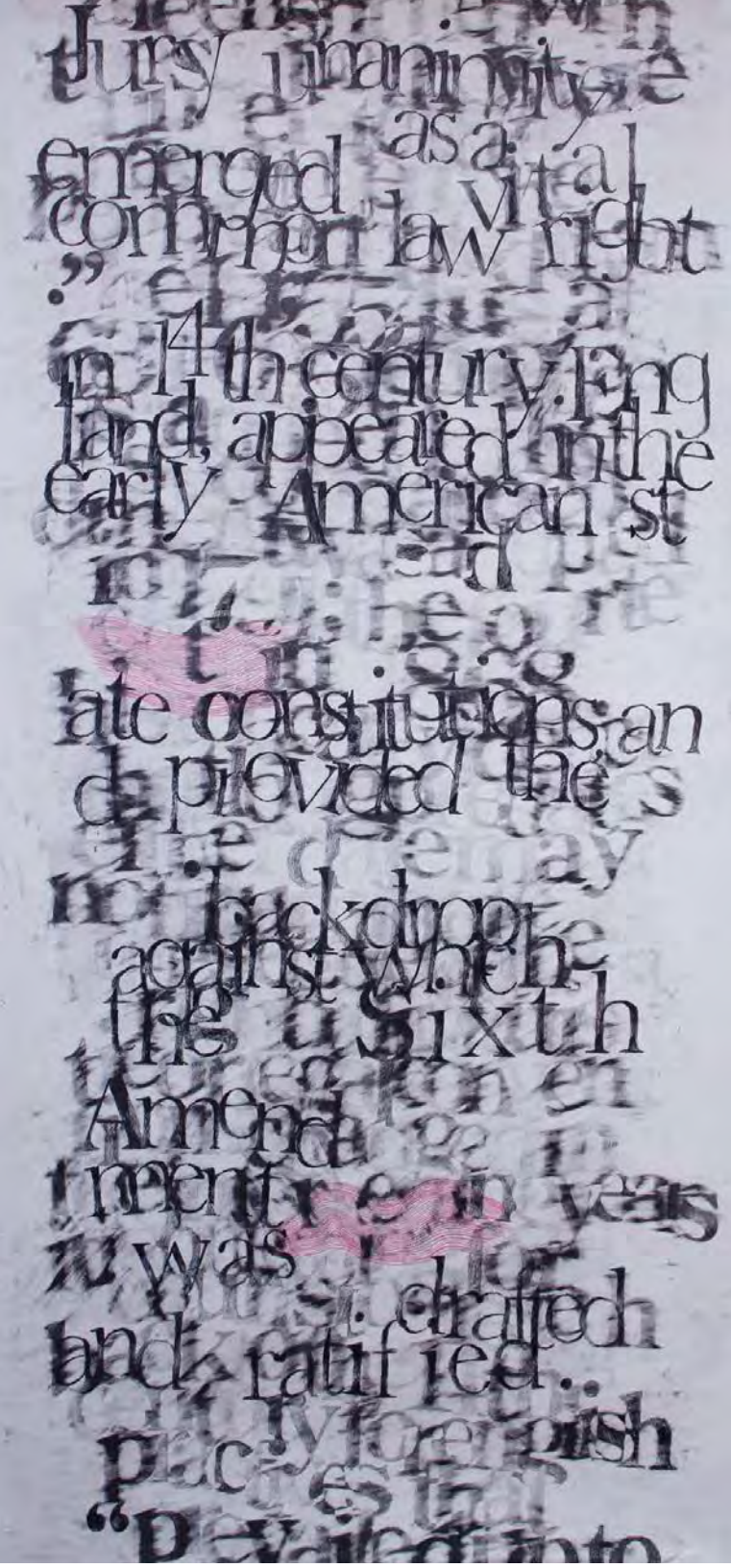




Much of Sosa’s practice engages with text in the public sphere, and he frequently creates rubbings of words or phrases he finds in communal spaces. These rubbings rely on the immediacy of drawing. While the original form of the text was chiseled in stone or casted in metal, Sosa transforms it by engaging with the natural impulse to draw, creating handmade marks over a mechanical process.

Two such phrases, “tried and condemned” and “possesses exceptional value,” complete the grid on this wall. They speak to both the authority of legal decisions and the vagueness of language, asking: How do we define value? And, can we try and condemn something—or someone—that has it? By repeating and juxtaposing these phrases, Sosa heightens the ambiguity of what are otherwise meant to be definitive statements.

(Exhibition Checklist #13)



*Twelve out of twelve* is part of a series of new works by Sosa related to jury trials. It refers to *Ramos v. Louisiana*, a recent case in which the US Supreme Court considered a state law in Louisiana that permitted a guilty verdict to stand if 10 out of 12 jurors in a criminal trial voted to find a defendant guilty. Citing the Sixth Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the right to a unanimous jury verdict, and the history of jury trials in English common law, the Louisiana law was deemed to be unconstitutional.

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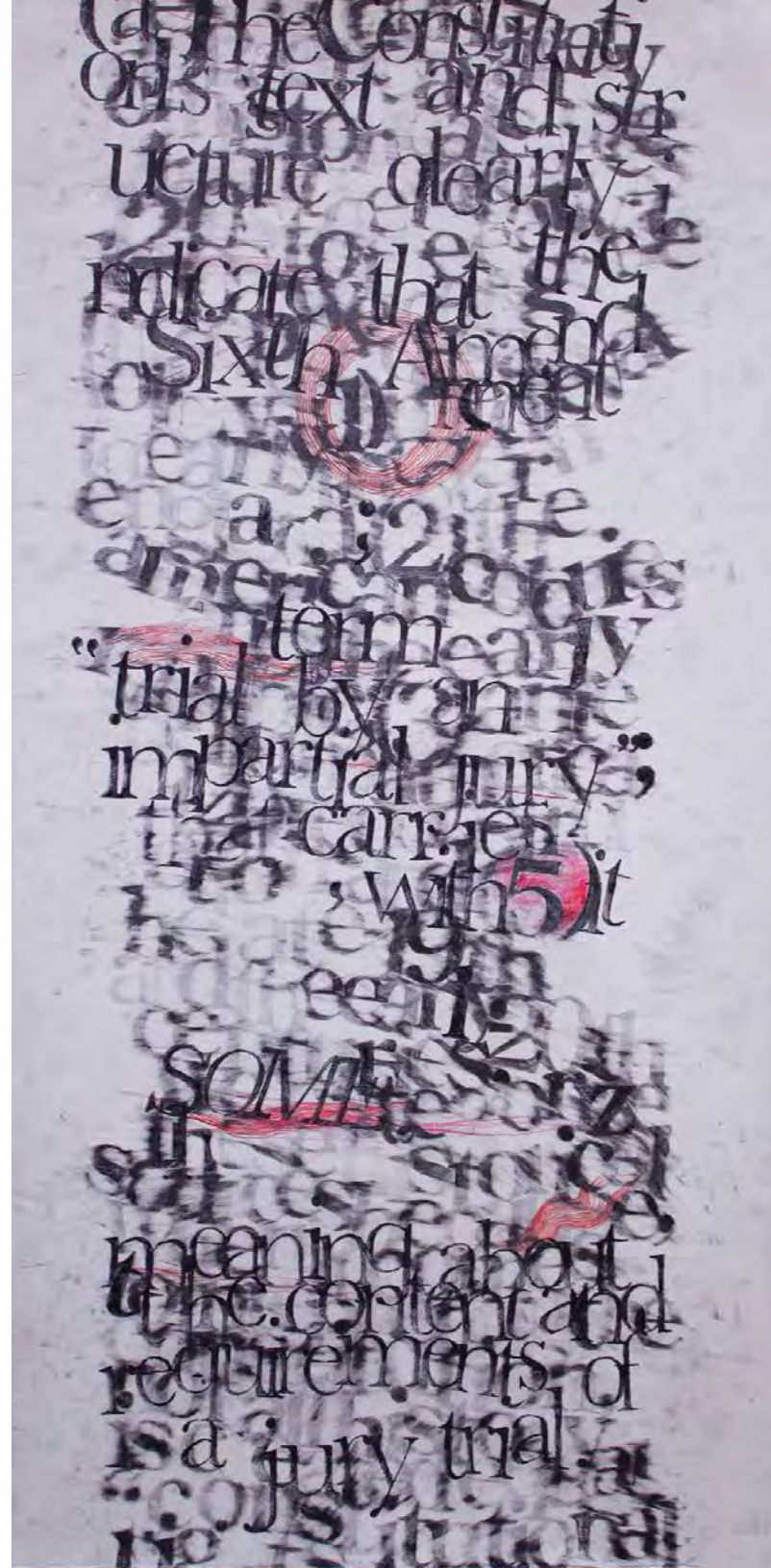
(Exhibition Checklist #14-15)



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The bold letters of Ramos distinguish themselves from the background, and indicate a distinct separation between past and present that stands in contrast to the series of large drawings nearby.

The timeless capacity that drawing has for immediacy and layering makes it an ideal method for Sosa to address issues of law and language. Marks, lines, and shapes can be created and radically altered quickly. But no matter how many marks are erased, the residue of the layers underneath persists in peeking through.



## ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Art is nothing if not a collective act. This exhibition was made possible through the assistance and support of Caroline Bradley, Sam Kim, Verónica Pedrosa, Irene Roytenberg, Sally Dion, Laura Sosa, Luciana Sosa, and Victoria Roytenberg. *No Vehicles in the Park* is dedicated to the memory of Danielle Abrams and Boris Roytenberg.



Enation's  
fourteenth



## ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Miami, Gabriel Sosa is an artist, linguist, professor, and curator. His work has been presented in the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; Fábrica de Arte Cubano, La Habana, Cuba; Tufts University Art Galleries, Medford; A R E A, Boston; and Museo La Tertulia, Cali, Colombia. He has completed projects in the public space in collaboration with Now + There; Montserrat College of Art; O, Miami Poetry Festival; and Sommerville Arts Council. He's participated in residencies at Lugar a dudas, The Art & Law Program, Urbano Project, Materia Abierta, and the Santa Fe Art Institute. Sosa is a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston and Deputy Director of Essex Art Center in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

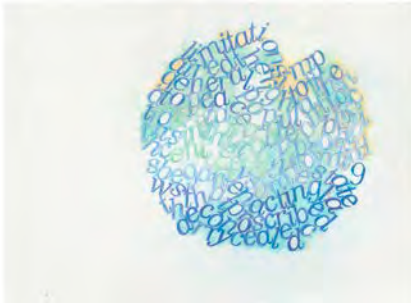
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# EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

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1



*Some limitations, 2022*

Colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

4



*Quickening, 2022*

Colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

2



*For the First 185 Years, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

5



*A substantial reliance on English history, 2022*

Colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

3



*After surveying English history, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

6



*On occasion, when the court ignores, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

7



*To be clear, even if a modern day regulation is not a dead ringer for a historical precursor, 2022*

Colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

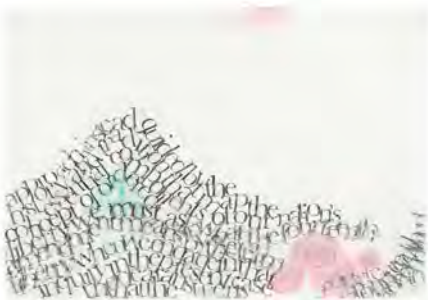
IO



*Le queda un minuto, 2017*

Graphite on paper  
Dimensions variable

8



*We must ask, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
38" x 50"

II



*Open to interpretation, 2022*

Graphite, colored pencil, and oil pastel  
on paper  
Dimensions variable

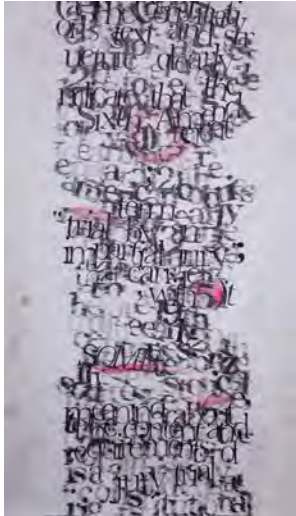
9



*Hung Jury, 2022*

Graphite on 60 sheets of  
paper  
Each sheet 15" x 16"

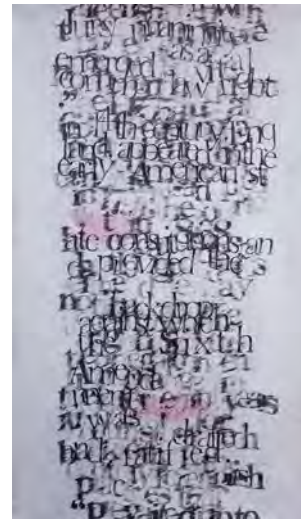
12



*Twelve out of twelve (left), 2022*

Graphite, charcoal, and colored pencil on paper  
53" x 31"

13



*Twelve out of twelve (right), 2022*

Graphite, charcoal, and colored pencil on paper  
53" x 31"

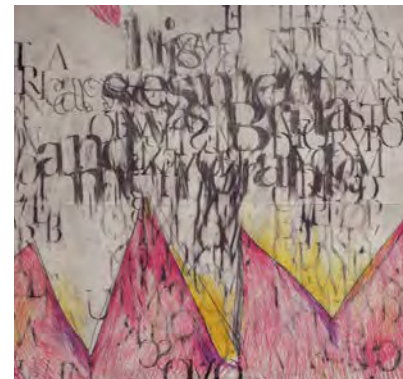
14



*A public official, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
15" x 21"

15



*His assessment was brutal, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
18.75" x 20.5"



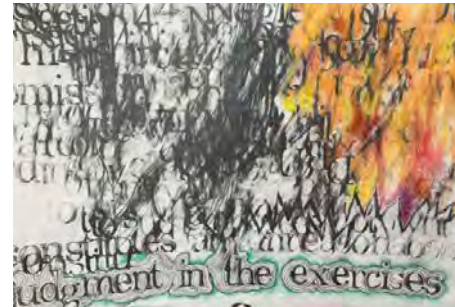
16



*Untitled, 2022*

Graphite, charcoal, acetone transfer, and chalk pencil on paper  
15" x 11.5"

19



*Section 4: Neglect of Duty, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
13.25" x 19.75"

17



*Untitled, 2022*

Graphite, charcoal, acetone transfer, and chalk pencil on paper  
11.5" x 15"

20



*Sharply conflicting views, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
18.5" x 20.75"

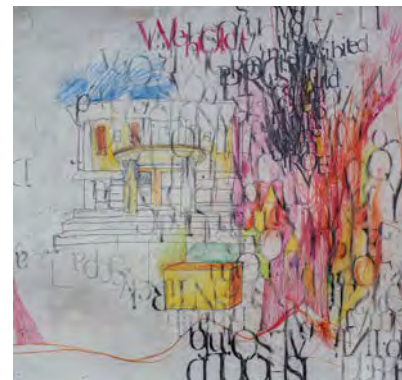
18



*Do you understand the consequences of pleading guilty?, 2022*

Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper  
36" x 24"

21



*We hold, 2022*

Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
18.5" x 20"

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This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Gabriel Sosa: No Vehicles in the Park*, presented at the Fitchburg Art Museum, October 1, 2022–January 8, 2023. This exhibition was organized by Curator Lauren Szumita and Assistant Curator Brooke “Eli” Yung.

Catalogue edited by Lauren Szumita and Brooke “Eli” Yung.

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*Open to Interpretation* (detail), 2022 on next page.





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