



S I D E

eleanor

A N G L E

conover

T I D E

SIDE
ANGLE
TIDE

RECENT WORKS BY ELEANOR CONOVER



NOVEMBER 17 – DECEMBER 15, 2022
LIST GALLERY, SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

Eleanor Conover — What the Mind Sees
by Eleanor Heartney



“Take an object. Do something to it.
Do something else to it.”

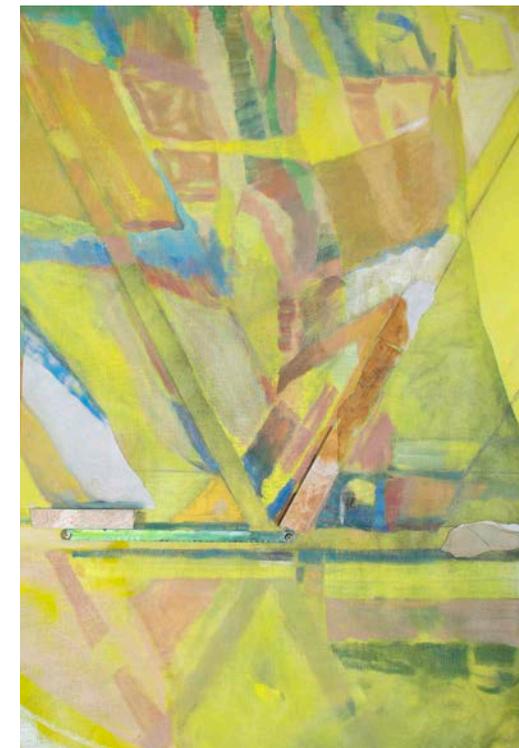
—Jasper Johns

From one perspective, nothing could seem simpler than Jasper Johns' account of his working method. But from another, this description opens a door into the complex relationship between objective reality and imagination, form and process, visual and conceptual meaning. This is also the territory that Eleanor Conover explores in her lyrical, layered paintings. Approached in a purely visual way, these works seduce us with the sheer beauty of translucent blocks of color that play off each other while butting up against a subtle underlying geometry. But these paintings can also take the attentive viewer into a realm of philosophical speculation about how art is made, where in the mind it originates, and how it is understood in the world.

As Conover points out, there are two ways of thinking about abstraction. One is art historical. During the Modernist Art Movement in the early 20th century, many artists in the West thought of abstraction as a process through which they could free themselves from the burdens of representation and explore a wide range of subjective, metaphysical, and purely formal concerns. But in common parlance, abstraction has a more general meaning. To abstract is to reduce, simplify, or distill the essence of a thing or idea, while leaving its relationship to the world intact.



Conover toggles between these meanings. For example, her use of unifying color fields and structural forms may remind viewers of modernist artists like Helen Frankenthaler, Anne Truitt, Dorothea Rockburne, and Elizabeth Murray. But her paintings are also tied to the world of concrete experience. Sometimes the tie is literal, as when she affixes bits of marble, paints over graph paper, or leaves the bleached imprint of a rock on the canvas. At other times her mode of representation is more metaphorical, such as when she evokes waterscapes, landscapes, and cloudscaapes, or suggests the outlines of a boat, a torso, a window, or objects lined up on a shelf. Yet these suggestions are only that—suggestions, inviting viewers to bring their own associations to bear on the work.



Conover's creative process stresses the primacy of her materials, a principle she learned from the textile artist Anni Albers, whose work blurred the lines between art and craft. In her famous essay titled "Work with Material," Albers remarked, "We must come down to earth from the clouds, where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material." For Conover, this means engaging with the multiple ways that marks and objects can be impressed on canvas. Conover began the paintings featured in *Side Angle Tide* with thin layers of paint or dye soaked into the canvas. At times, Conover subsequently removed some of this dye through using bleach. In addition, she also incorporated graphite rubbings or the ghostly shapes of stones whose imprints appeared when she brushed them with bleach and pressed them against the dyed canvas.



Untitled (when and if), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches

Conover acknowledges the objectness of her paintings in a variety of ways. Instead of using rectangular canvases and stretcher bars that suggest a flat, illusionistic picture plane, Conover bevels the edges of her stretchers and joins them using varied angles. As a result, her polygonal forms appear more sculptural and, at times, like functional objects, such as shields. She also reinscribes the stretcher bars as lines on the front of her shaped canvases and, at times, she affixes real objects, like marble chips, shells, or plumb lines. Some paintings flirt with the representation of an illusionistic space, while others are more atmospheric, with luminous saturated colors that evoke the dematerialized reality of light, air, or water. Viewers may feel they want to escape the bounds of the physical canvas and celebrate a joyous freedom beyond the constraints of time and space.

Side Angle Tide also contains a number of smaller works on paper that exhibit a similar aesthetic. Conover paints over plotting paper with loose sweeping strokes of paint that play off against the underlying grid. Here, the "real" world intrudes in the form of collaged photographs of isolated landscapes—images that have been cropped so that they almost become abstract.

While Conover's process is complex, it results in a satisfying completeness. Her works are designed to slow viewers down and take them to a place far removed from the noise of contemporary digital media. She invites us to explore her paintings and drawings over time—to consider the interplay between the compositions in their entirety and their complex details, processes, materials, and forms. Fragmented objects and abstracted images collaged onto the works serve a dual function: They simultaneously evoke a world we can recognize, while also making that world appear strange and new. Conover's works are the outcome of multiple experiences. She was born in Hartford, Con-

necticut, and received a BA from Harvard College and an MFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia. In graduate school, she made large paintings inspired by rock formations and quarries. A turning point came in 2018, when she moved to Tennessee for a teaching fellowship at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. After having spent her life in the Northeast, she found herself deeply influenced by the Tennessee landscape. This became the basis for works in which she radically rethought what it means to make a painting. She explored new approaches to materials, mark making, and structure. She began to dye her canvases, sew pieces together, leave canvases outside, mark them with mud, and apply marble chips from a local quarry. She was especially drawn to pieces of marble that made her feel connected to history. She also began to collect and incorporate marble that had been marked, polished, or otherwise manipulated in the service of a building façade, serving as a bridge between the natural and built environments.

Another important experience for Conover was a trip to the Bering Sea in 2014. She filmed documentary footage for a team of ecologists studying the potential effects of climate change in the Aleutian Islands, an archipelago extending from the Alaska Peninsula to the Kamchatka Peninsula. The islands were battlefields in World War II, but are now mostly uninhabited and barren, but for the presence of the aging infrastructure set up by the U.S. military. At once haunted by their history and reminded of her own childhood trips to the rugged coastline of Maine, Conover incorporated fragmented photographs of denuded Aleutian landscapes into some of her collages. Meanwhile, several paintings included in *Side Angle Tide* contain abstracted representations of military structures—forms that loom eerily in the canvas like the alien monolith in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

As an undergraduate, Conover majored in literature and history and minored in art, and these interests continue to inform her work. She often uses literary analogies to explain her work and she is particularly interested in the way words can simultaneously denote abstract thoughts and represent concrete objects. She is also fascinated by the aural relationships among words and the way poetic rhythm and meter can create a musical effect. This offers another way to read Conover's paintings. Her works heighten viewers' awareness of visual metonymy, celebrating slippages, traces, fragments and spaces in-between. The open forms of her compositions celebrate heterogeneity, and even at times a deliberate incoherence. In this respect, they approximate our own efforts to build meaning in a world that often seems frighteningly devoid of order. Rather than force a false unity on reality, Conover invites us to embrace complexity and make it our own.



Eleanor Heartney is a New York-based art critic and writer. She is a contributing editor for Art in America and Artpress and is author of numerous articles and books about contemporary art.

Works on Paper



Untitled (rise and fall), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (teaching painting teaching), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (living), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (edge), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 ½ inches



Untitled (cut), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 ½ inches



Untitled (mineralogy), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (millet), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (model), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches



Untitled (cyan), 2022, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plotting paper, 11 x 16 1/2 inches

Paintings



Early Warning, 2022, oil, acrylic, bleach, dye, and graphite on linen with beveled pine, 76 x 50 inches



Hurricane, 2022, oil, acrylic, graphite, bleach, and dye on linen with beveled pine, 50 x 33 inches



Time Keeper (July), 2022, oil, graphite, dye, and bleach on linen with beveled pine, 46 x 28 inches



Ledge, 2022, oil, acrylic, dye, and graphite on linen with beveled pine, 35 x 45 inches



As\all\we\them\us, 2021, oil, dye, bleach, and graphite on linen with beveled pine, 58 x 40 inches



Nocturne (you can see it from here), 2022, oil, acrylic, graphite, bleach, dye, and marble on linen with beveled pine, 55 x 38 inches



Quarry, 2022, oil, acrylic, graphite, dye, saw blade, wooden blocks, and marble on sewn linen with beveled pine, 56 x 41 inches



Range of Motion, 2022, acrylic, oil, and graphite on canvas with beveled pine, 60 x 40 inches



The Day the Tide, 2022, oil, acrylic, dye, and graphite on linen with beveled pine, 60 x 45 inches



Although the Sun, 2021, oil, bleach, dye, and graphite on sewn linen with beveled pine, 45 x 35 inches



Airborne, 2022, acrylic, oil, and marble on linen with beveled pine, 45 x 35 inches

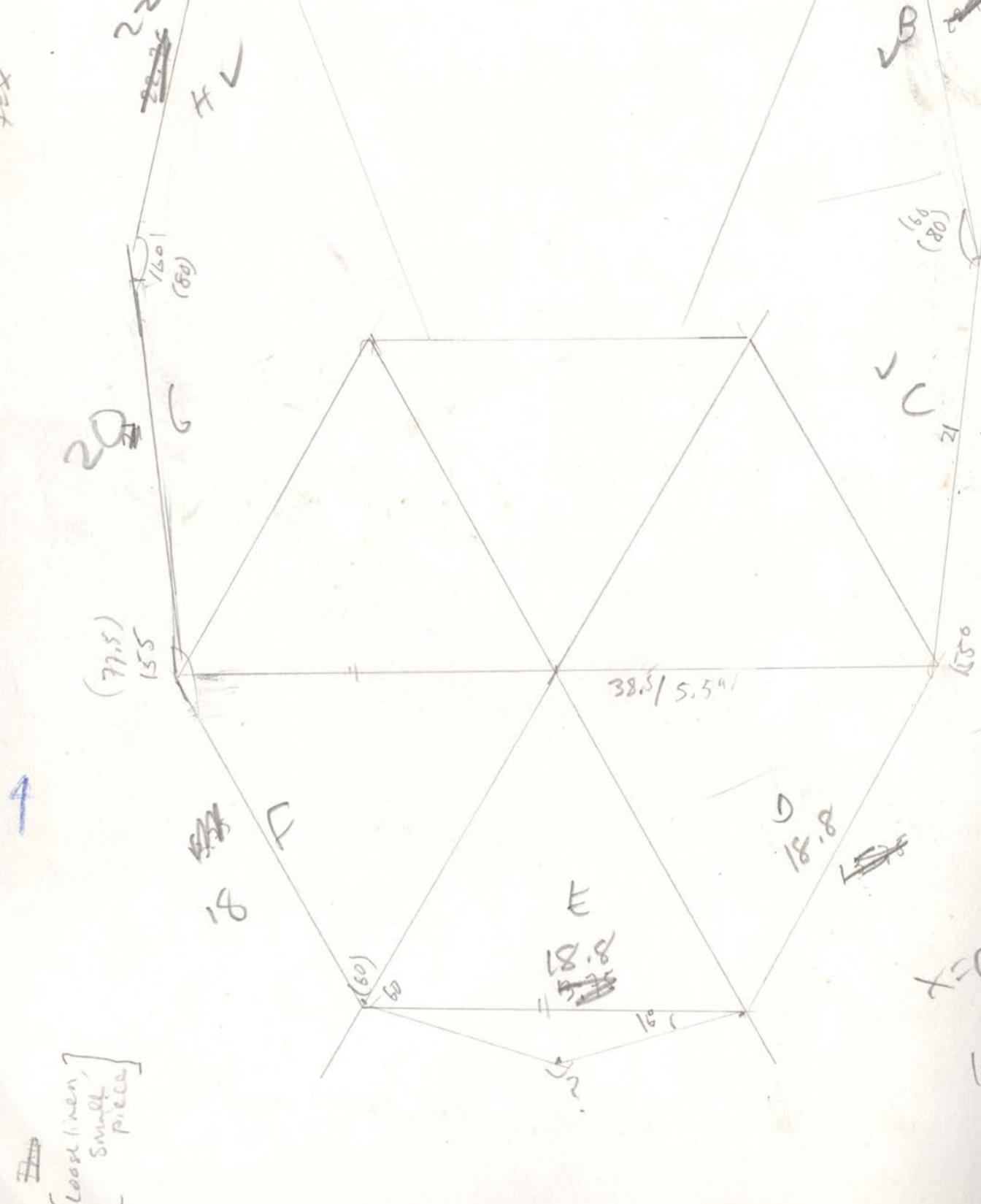




Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1988, Eleanor Conover earned a BA from Harvard College in 2010, and an MFA at Tyler School of Art, Temple University in 2018. She taught as a Visiting Lecturer in Painting and Drawing at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, before relocating to Carlisle, PA, where she is currently an Assistant Professor of Art at Dickinson College. Conover's recent exhibitions include *Right to Repair*, Hudson House, Hudson, NY; *Weather Reader*, at The Trout Gallery at Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; *Glass Half Moon*, at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA; and *Parts of an Immense Whole*, at Able Baker Contemporary, Portland, ME. Her work has been supported by numerous residencies, including at the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation, New Berlin, NY; Eastern Frontier Educational Foundation, Norton Island, ME, the Joseph A. Fiore Art Center, Jefferson, ME; the Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT; and Cow House Studios, Co. Wexford, Ireland. Conover's other awards include the Alice C. Cole '42 Fellowship, Wellesley College (2020-2021); a Presidential Fellowship from Temple University (2016-2018), and a Dickinson College Faculty Spring Research Grant (2021).

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Eleanor Conover would like to thank the List Gallery at Swarthmore College, the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation, and the Eastern Frontier Educational Association.



[Loose linen, small piece]

VIOLIA OR OBLIVION, Hidden fig., Soft binding, Stone

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We thank Eleanor Conover for allowing us to curate *Side Angle Tide* and for sharing her diverse inspirations and processes. In addition, we are grateful to Eleanor Heartney for her insightful catalog essay. As we organized the exhibition and catalog, we relied on the support of our esteemed Swarthmore College colleagues, Stacy Bomento and Caren Brenman. We were also assisted by List Gallery interns, Amal Haddad '23, Lauren Maguire '23, and Amanda Roessler '24.

—List Gallery Director Andrea Packard and Exhibitions Manager & Assistant Curator Tess Wei

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Opposite: Excerpt from the artist's sketchbook

