Blake Hurt

Lines & Faces

Contents

Introduction

This catalog documents Lines & Faces, a solo exhibition at the McGuffey Art Center in Charlottesville, Virginia in May 2012. To the 20 pieces in the show, I've added earlier works to provide further background. All works are processed digitally by a computer as a final step. Most began with a concept about how to re-imagine describing a face graphically and conclude after tracking a recurring loop of hand drawing, software design and experimentation. The process essentially follows the words of the artist, Jasper Johns, when he described art:

" Art is: you do something, do something to that and do something to that."

The imagery in this show, as with most of my digital work, concentrates on depicting faces. I am interested in faces. I do not always recognize people easily so capturing them on canvas provides an odd reassurance, as well as opportunities for interpretation. Although I stand at the end of a long line of artists who have studied, drawn and painted the human face, I have been energized by recent digital techniques that allow new perspectives in this traditional field.

The Technique of Ink Collage

Although this is mostly a digital technique, involving a family of original software programs, the concept is to use a series of drawings as metaphorical wire frames along with an underlying color picture. These dark lines of the drawing are combined, one on top of another, to form an irregular mosaic of openings. It as if you looked at a colored carpet through a tangle of wire coat hangers. Through these openings, the colors from an underlying image are digitally "squeezed" so that you get the original color image as it is pushed through the mosaic-like openings. You thus have the chance to combine a number of drawings while maintaining the image underneath.

It is an irony of the process that seeing the picture in its entirety requires that it be physically printed since computer screens are too small in their resolution to show the full image. So, like a blind optician, you can use the computer to make the image, but it cannot be used to see it.

Haunting these digital works is the role of using a computer to make art, which, until recently, has been a more hands-on process. But one way to view the history of western art techniques is to think of it as a march toward increasing the control, precision and speed of artists in realizing their vision. From finger painting, to fresco, to oil, watercolor and acrylic, artists would like to shorten the time between concept and execution. The arrival of the computer and its associated technology follows this tradition. By thinking of the computer as an agent, in keeping with the work of the conceptual artist, Sol LeWitt, whose artwork was a series of instructions for others to follow, the computer is just a tireless implementor of detail and variation specified by the artist. The results, some of which are hinted at by these pictures, are unavailable with other methods and significantly broaden the range of possible artistic expression.
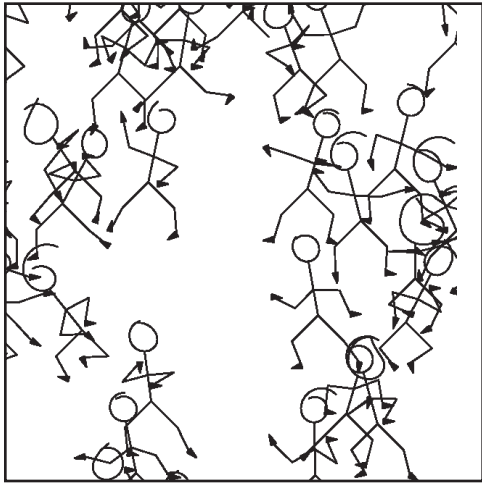
The Crowd Within

A portrait of a college student composed of dancing, almost aboriginal, stick men. Figures, assembled randomly, are located on the paper in proportion to the darkness and lightness of areas of the original photograph. Closer inspection reveals the effect of a large social gathering.

The creation and placement of thousands of unique symbols, each with a different angle to an arm or leg, or swirl for a head, illustrates how the computer can become an untiring, artistic assistant that will carefully follow instructions of the artist in making the work. Unlike a rubber stamp, where the image is identical, the machine is programmed to create a different figure at every step. Although the speed and accuracy of a computer is recent, using a surrogate to make art is not.

Sol LeWitt declared that his written instructions for making art on a wall with colored pencils was the work of art in itself. Agents assigned by LeWitt then executed his instructions. This relationship is similar to programming a computer to draw stick men on paper. In both cases, a separation is created between the artist and the work of art. It is in this gap that an instructed agent works.
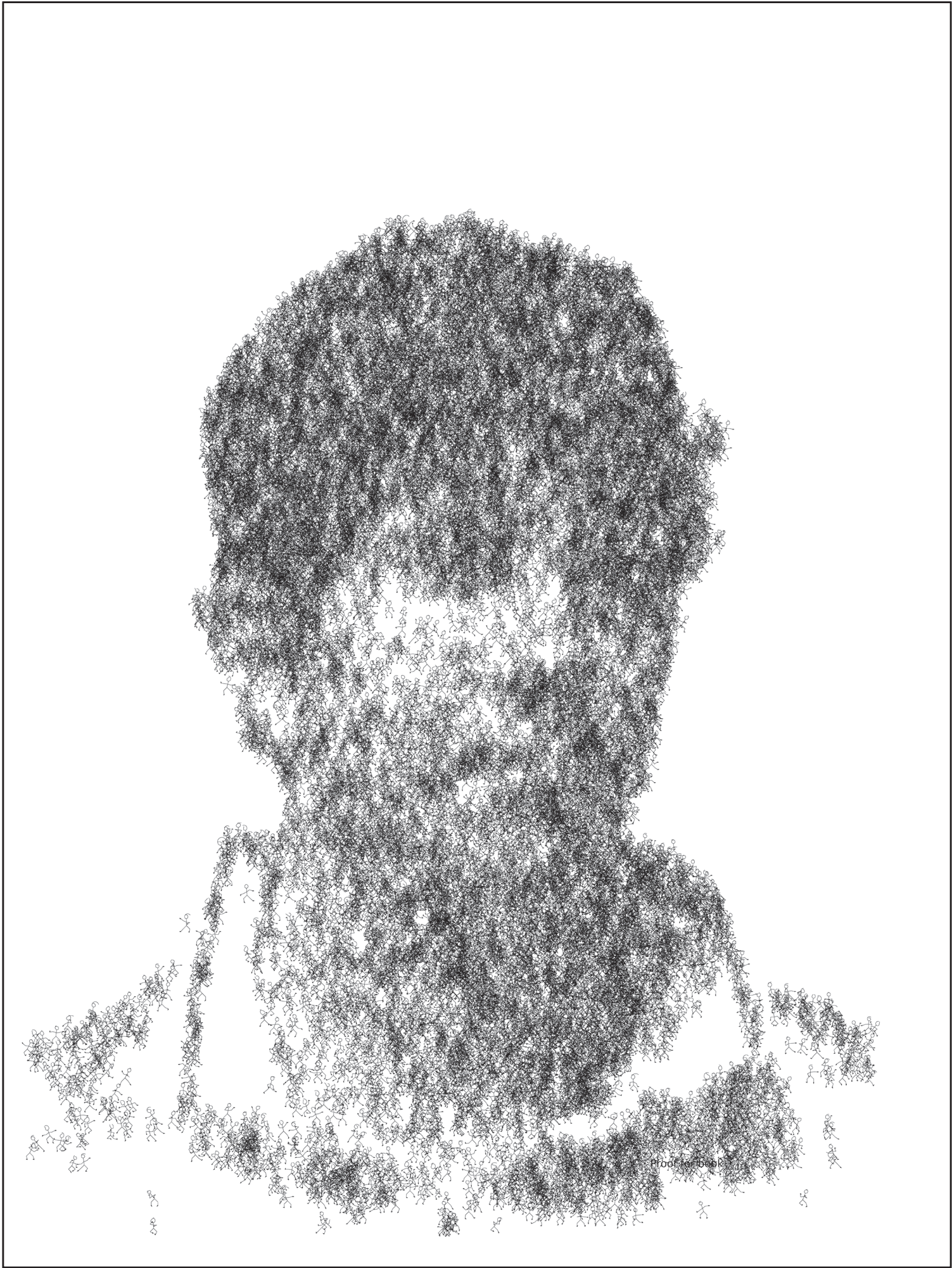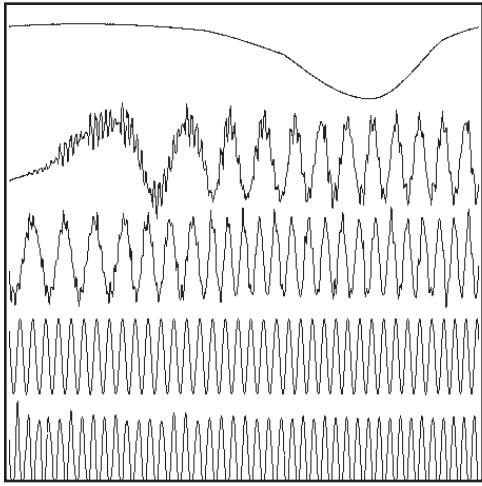
Sign of the Times

36 x 48 inches, ink on paper, 2004

Sign of the Times is a composition of squiggly lines that are the graphic rendering of a recorded voice message from a friend. By transcribing the sound waves, and using the transcription as a visual image, the image reveals the planes of physical being and identity. The aural representation of the sitter merges with his visual appearance to offer an encompassing depiction.

Traditionally, portraiture has focused on just the visual image of the sitter, often including allegorical objects to provide a context and status. The artist uses this as evidence in his portrayal. I label this method as "subjective" since it relies on the vision and response of the artist to the sitter. In Sign of the Times a scientific graph recording replaces the elaborate tapestry, neck ruff, faithful dog or memento mori fly on the rotting fruit. This elegant graphed data also describes the sitter, but from a non-visual source. It might be considered "objective" because there is no human interpretation of it.

Using independent, measured data about the person—which could be of various forms, like a heart rate, an iris scan or an MRI--offers a new range of description that previously has been difficult to include and raises the bar of how authentic a portrait can be.

In addition to these two approaches, there is at least one other approach, the "reflective" observation, which is illustrated in the work, "Dr. Deaver", described below.
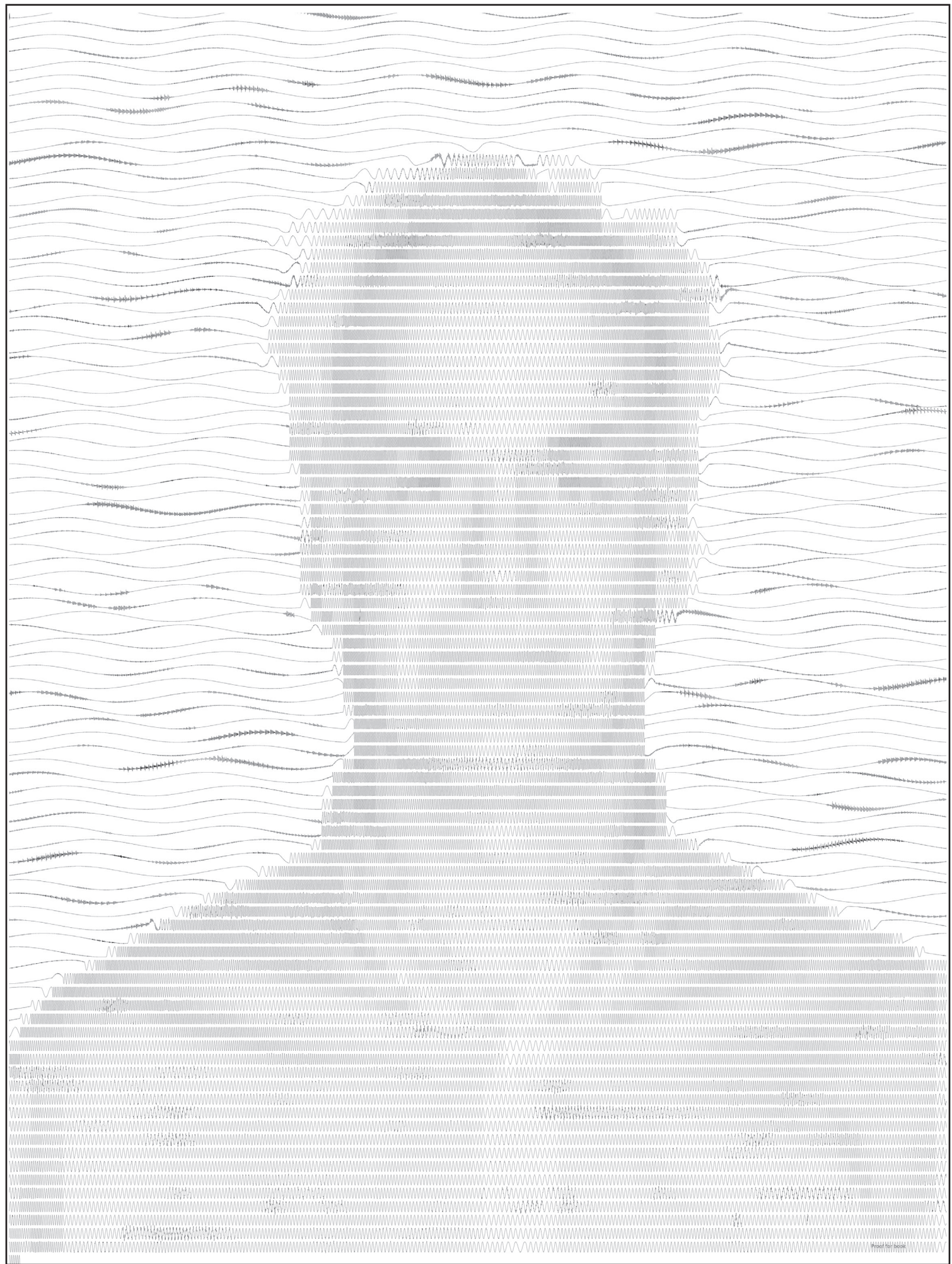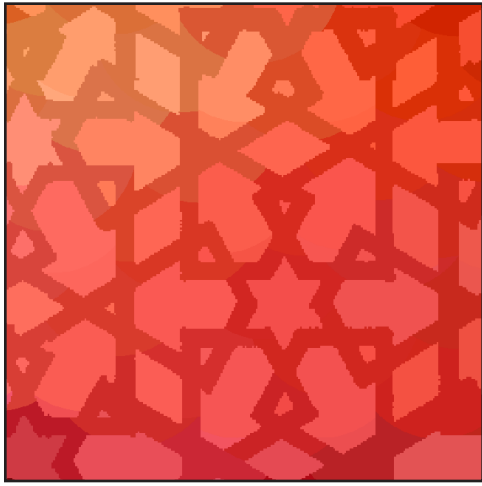
Arabesque

30 x 40 inches, ink on paper, 2004

This picture was an early foray into the use of color and away from black and white. When I started making colored images, I was focused on interesting tilings of the picture plane. An example is this picture of a friend where I used the intricate geometric designs from the Alhambra palace in Spain.
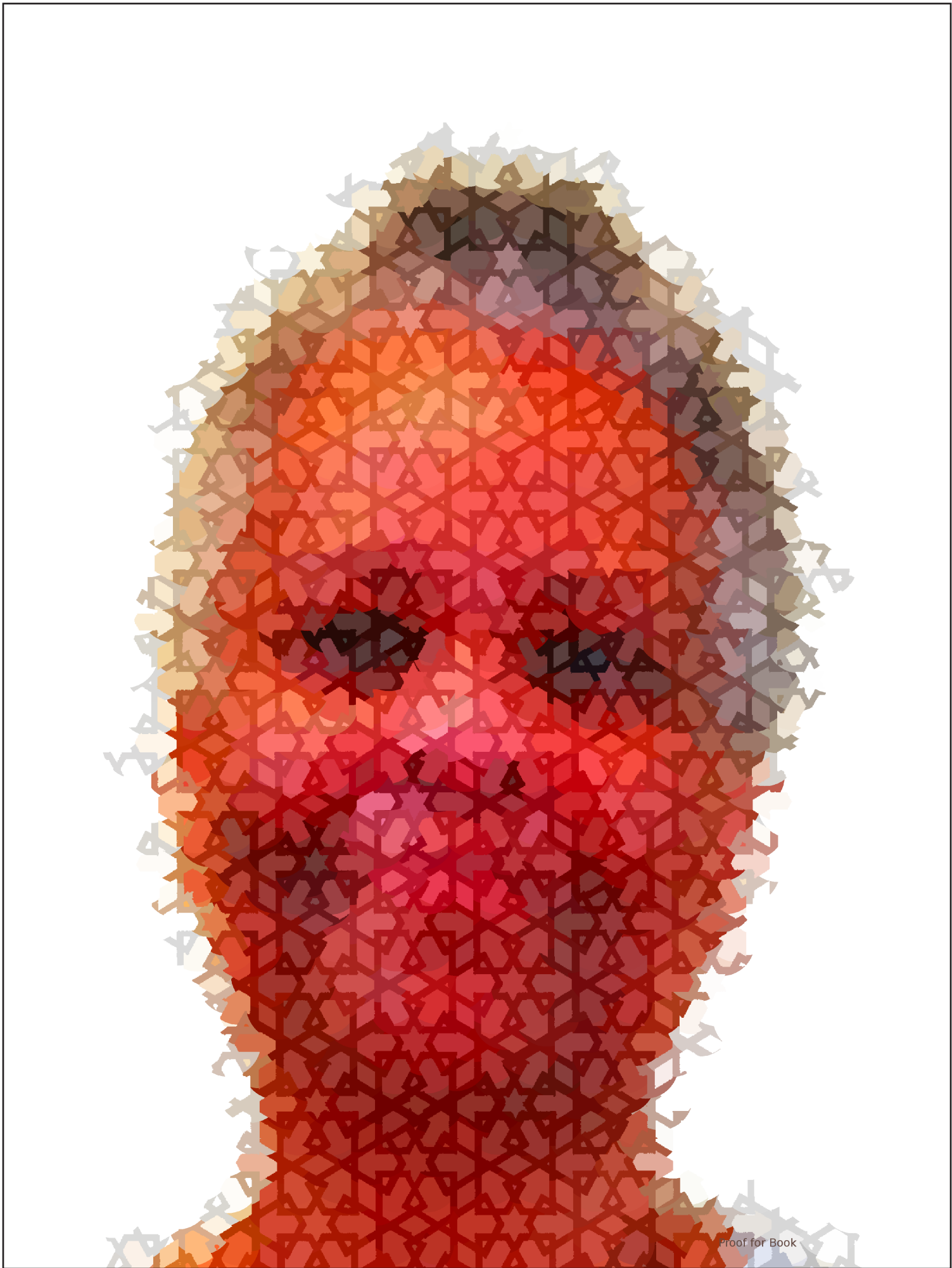
Bill, Under Construction

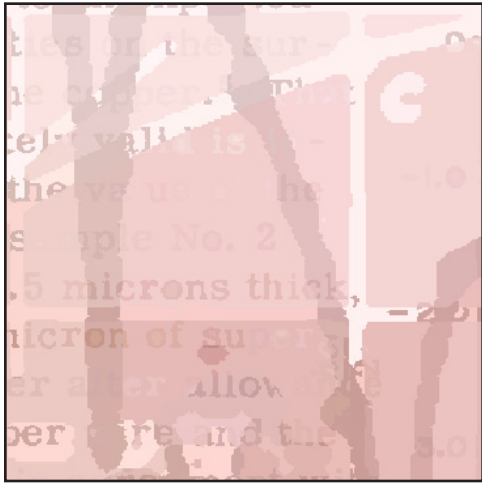30 x 40 inches, ink on paper, 2007

In addition to the drawings of three pieces of heavy construction equipment in the picture that indicated Bill's occupation, there is the drawing of downtown Charlottesville underneath. Digitally enhanced from a satellite image of the City, the arrangement emphasizes Bill's ties to the community.

An additional aspect of using a human face as a subject is the freedom to be much more abstract than is possible with a still life. This is the result of the surprisingly strong human ability to recognize faces from only a few visual cues. As an example, the simple smiley face is instantly recognized as a face and one with an expression, while other equally simple symbols carry little variable content. It is our fantastic human facility that makes it possible to recognize someone in a picture even when there are wild shapes and colors crossing back and forth in it. One can thus include all sorts of extraneous shapes and sizes that would confuse a viewer if it was about another subject like fruit on a table.   Portraiture thus provides a license for abstraction which only requires the anchoring of two eyes and a mouth to be expressive.

12
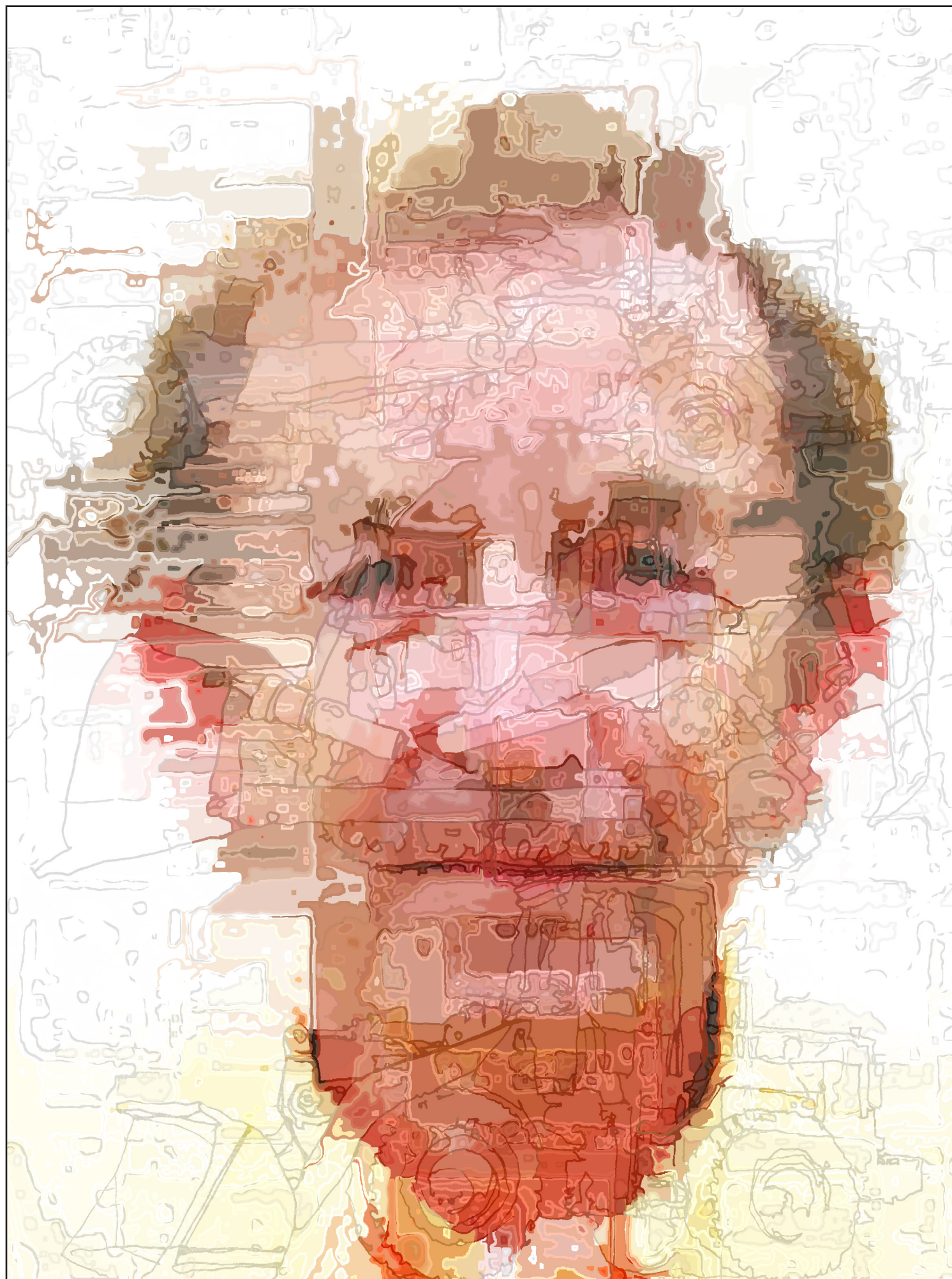
Dr. Deaver

30 x 40 inches, ink on paper, 2007

Dr. Deaver was an influential mentor of mine who is described here by drawings from equipment of his physics lab, illustrations of the principles of physics and the complete text of his most well-known paper on superconductivity.

The inclusion of his scholarly article in the portrait provides an illustration of another little used possibility in portraiture, in addition to the subjective and objective points of view describe previously. This would be a "reflective" point of view which incorporates the sitter's own self-description in the picture. By including elements that were created directly by the sitter, like his writings, the viewer has an opportunity to see another facet of the personality, which is the work the sitter himself has produced, without the intermediation of the artist.

EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FOR QUANTIZED FLUX IN SUPERCONDUCTING CYLINDERS

Bascom S. Deaver, Jr., and William M. Fairbank
Department of Physics, Stanford University, Stanford, California
(Received June 16, 1961)

East Meets West

30x40 inches, ink on paper, 2007

This is a picture of a friend who was the chief city planner of Charlottesville. Born and raised in India, he has lived most of his adult life in Charlottesville and through his work has been instrumental in the design and shape of the area. In this picture the eastern side of the city is superimposed on the western part, serving as a reminder of the intersection of his Eastern outlook on this American town.

This also highlights one irony of digital portraits—their paradox of scale. The computer is necessary for creating them but it is inadequate for viewing them. The small format of the computer screen contrasts dramatically with the machine's ability to produce large, detailed printed images. In contrast to many painted pictures that can be easily seen on the screen (although the technique and brush strokes often cannot), the computer can generate work and pictures that carry different meanings when seen from different distances from the picture. The result is that digital works like this one include many fine details, like the names of parks and streets, but these can't be appreciated without having a large, physical printout. Similarly, the text in Dr. Deaver's picture print also cannot be read on the screen, but requires a 24x32 inch print.

Because there is an interplay of fine detail which coalesces into an overall impression, viewers often walk to and fro when inspecting the picture. Unlike the static nature of the single point of view, many of these works require a more active participation when looked at.

Mahmut

18 x 24 inches, ink on paper, 2007

Mahmut was our guide on a trip to Turkey, and his head was filled with facts and information about the ancient Greek sites in Turkey. This is a description of him and our journey through ancient Lycia. The lower half of his face is the map of the southern Turkish coast and his chin is a detail of the area.

The picture underscores the difference in the working sequence of this technique from that of painting. In painting, the subject is blocked in with broad areas of color which are then refined with smaller details. With this technique, there is no blocking in; the final images are produced digitally with the details specified at the start, along with the aggregate final impression. There is no adjustment, and the processed image is accepted or rejected as a whole. Furthermore, small changes in the ink collage drawings or a rearrangement of them can result in areas being flooded with entirely different colors, making large changes in the appearance. Getting a satisfactory image is thus like picking apples from a tree with a shotgun: you get a result, but it is often not the one for which you were aiming.

A. Acropolis Hill Xanthus
B. Ilik Belen
C. Kocali Belen
D. Theatre
E. Stadium
F. Late Gate
G. Early Gate
H. Agora
J. Palaestra
K. Cistern
L. Baths?
M. Baths?
N. Churches
P. Tomb of Plancia Magna
Q. Street of Tombs

A. North Harbour
General Harbour
South Harbour
Main Avenue
Gate of Hadrian
F. Theatre
Rectangular Agora
Agora of Domitian
Baths?
Aqueduct
City Wall
N. Outer...
P. Gate
Q. Temple
R. Cistern

General Map
of
LYCIA
500m

200m

Gymn...
Theat...
Odeur...
Temp...
Temple
Found...

River

Tonch

18 x 24 inches, ink on paper, 2007

In "Tonch", I found myself not in direct contact with the subject but discussing the content with his wife. The motifs included are therefore not necessarily part of the story that the sitter would tell about his interests and outlook as much as it is the narrative as told by his wife. In listening to her I came to realize that how we describe ourselves often springs from the collection of stories that others tell about us.

Mary in Spirals

18 x 24 inches, ink on Mylar, 2011

A long distance runner is described by using spirals of varying width and distance.

I was interested in exploring portraits of similar, repeating emblems, and in this work I used a small spiral as the defining mark. Like any faithful, responsive agent, the computer will execute the program commands repeatedly without variation. In using an identical emblem this can lead to an uninteresting pattern that lacks the visual excitement which might be found if the emblem were drawn by hand and thus had minor variations.

Seeking such variety, after many failed attempts to make the resulting drawing expressive, I wrote software that modified the spirals so that the degree to which they were wound, the thickness of the line in which they were drawn and the exact location were all subject to variations of the probabilities of a bell shaped curve. These small modifications helped to lessen the sense of mechanical reproduction.
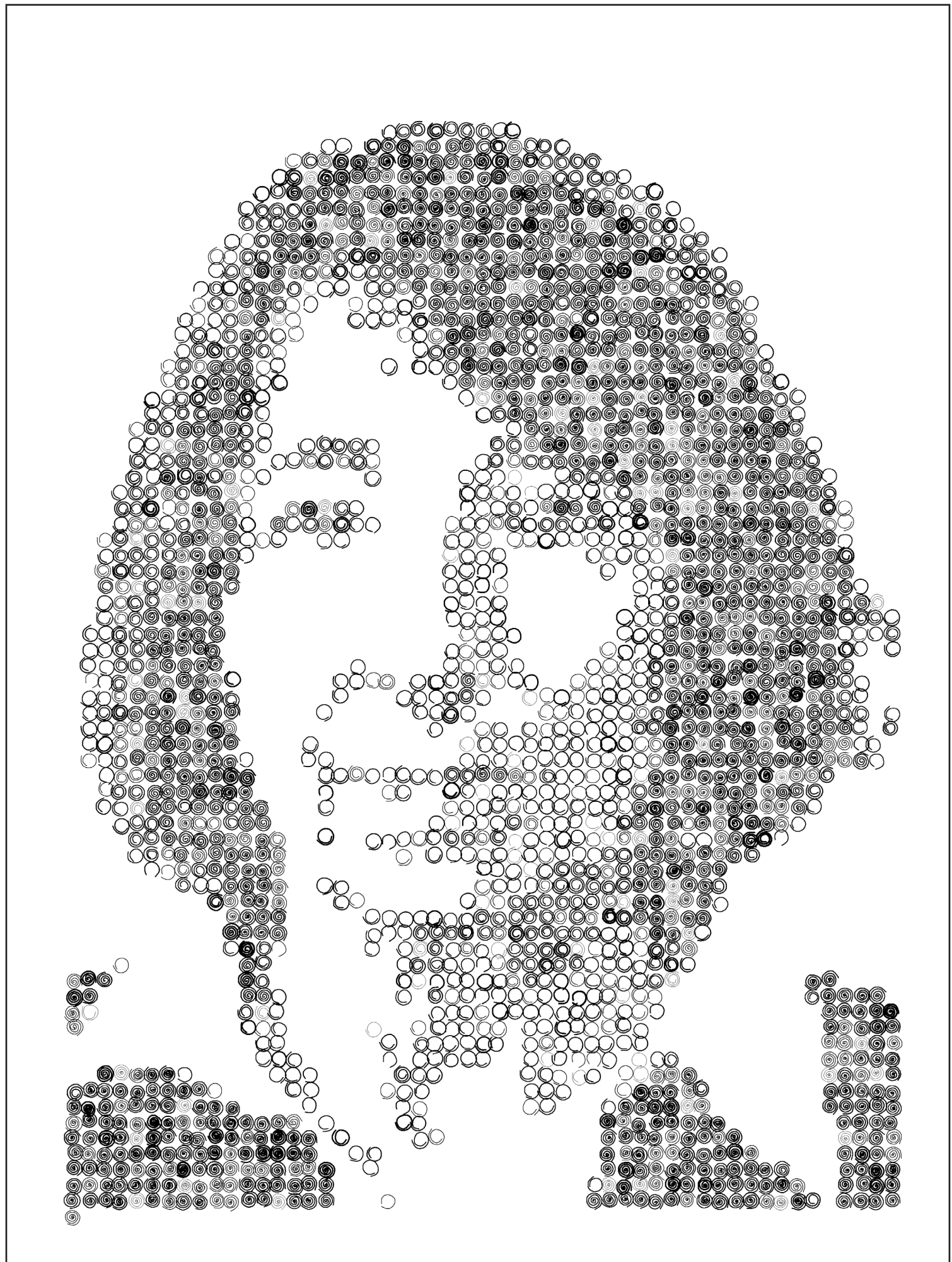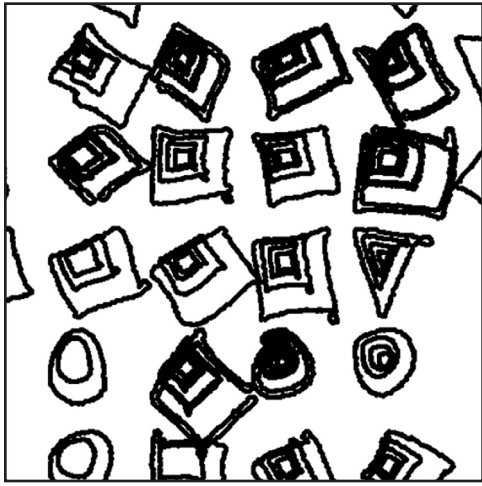
Sue in Squares

18 x 24 inches, ink on Mylar, 2011

 A lawyer is described in small hand-formed squares and triangles.

In this work, I experimented with hand drawn templates for the small shapes. These emblems then became the patterns for further, slight variations in drawing the picture.

This idea of using actual hand drawn symbols rather than the programmatic symbols used in the earlier Mary in Spirals is a continuation of the theme of using similar emblems. I find that as an idea develops from the general to the specific, it also branches with suggestive alternatives. These then often become the kernels of a new avenue of interpretive approach.
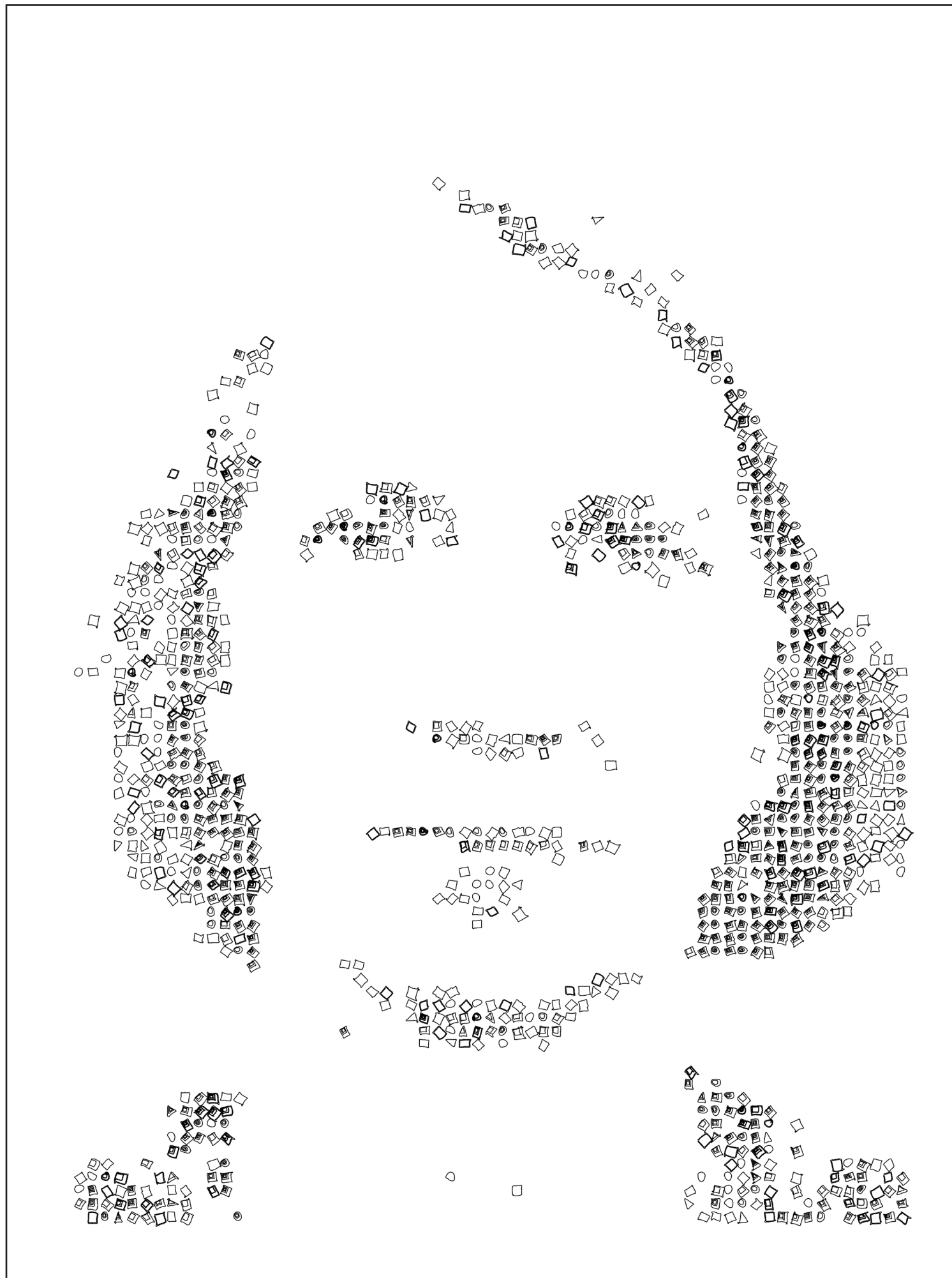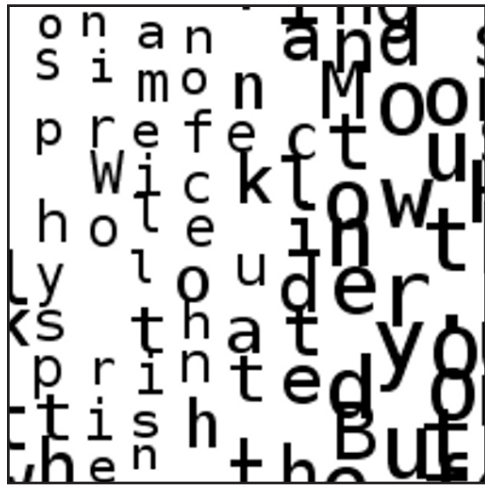
Portrait of An Artist

18 x 24 inches, ink on Mylar, 2011

A playwright is sketched out in the opening lines of James Joyce's "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man".

In this work, lines of text move across the page and are given more of a presence by varying both their font size and orientation. The letters' angles and location jog up and down as the sentence runs across the page.
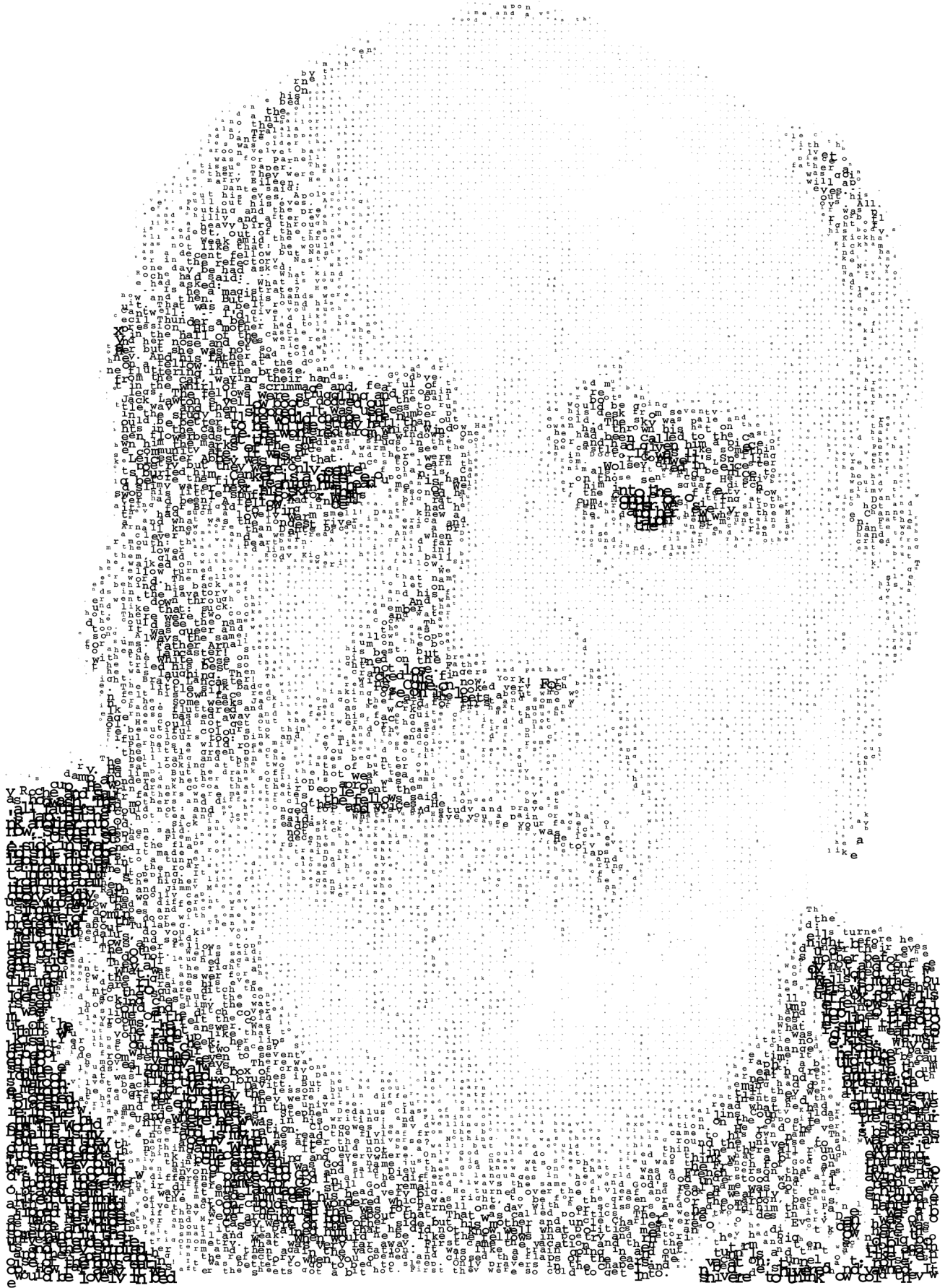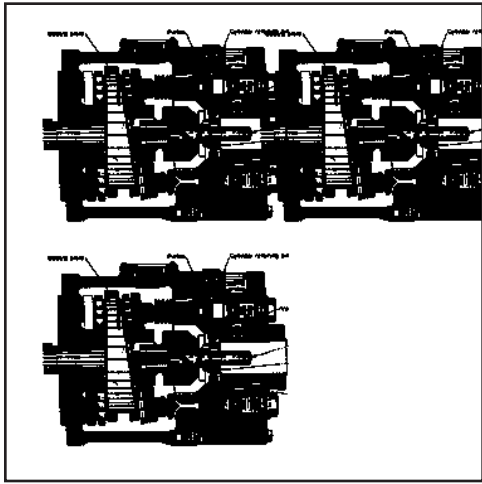
Bill in Pumps

18 x 24 inches, six sheets of ink on Mylar, 2012

Printed on six sheets of Mylar using a repeating image of a wobble pump, this combination of images conveys a layering of icons to portray a lawyer from the town in Wisconsin which is home to the world's largest musical fountain. Other associations included the idea that a "wobbly" was an old term for a socialist, which was a widespread labor movement in the Midwest.

In Bill in Pumps, the wobble pump emblem is introduced. In the image shown here where it is printed on a single page, the emblem is repeated in different shades and matrices of gray, not unlike a pixel image. The straightforward representation is more mechanical than if the emblems' reproduction had been varied. However, in the actual work, the repeating emblems are printed in jet black on six separate sheets of Mylar. Stacking the translucent sheets obscures the black ink sequentially reducing its intensity. An uneven arrangement of a sheet alignment thus creates anomalies that make it more compelling than on a single printed sheet.
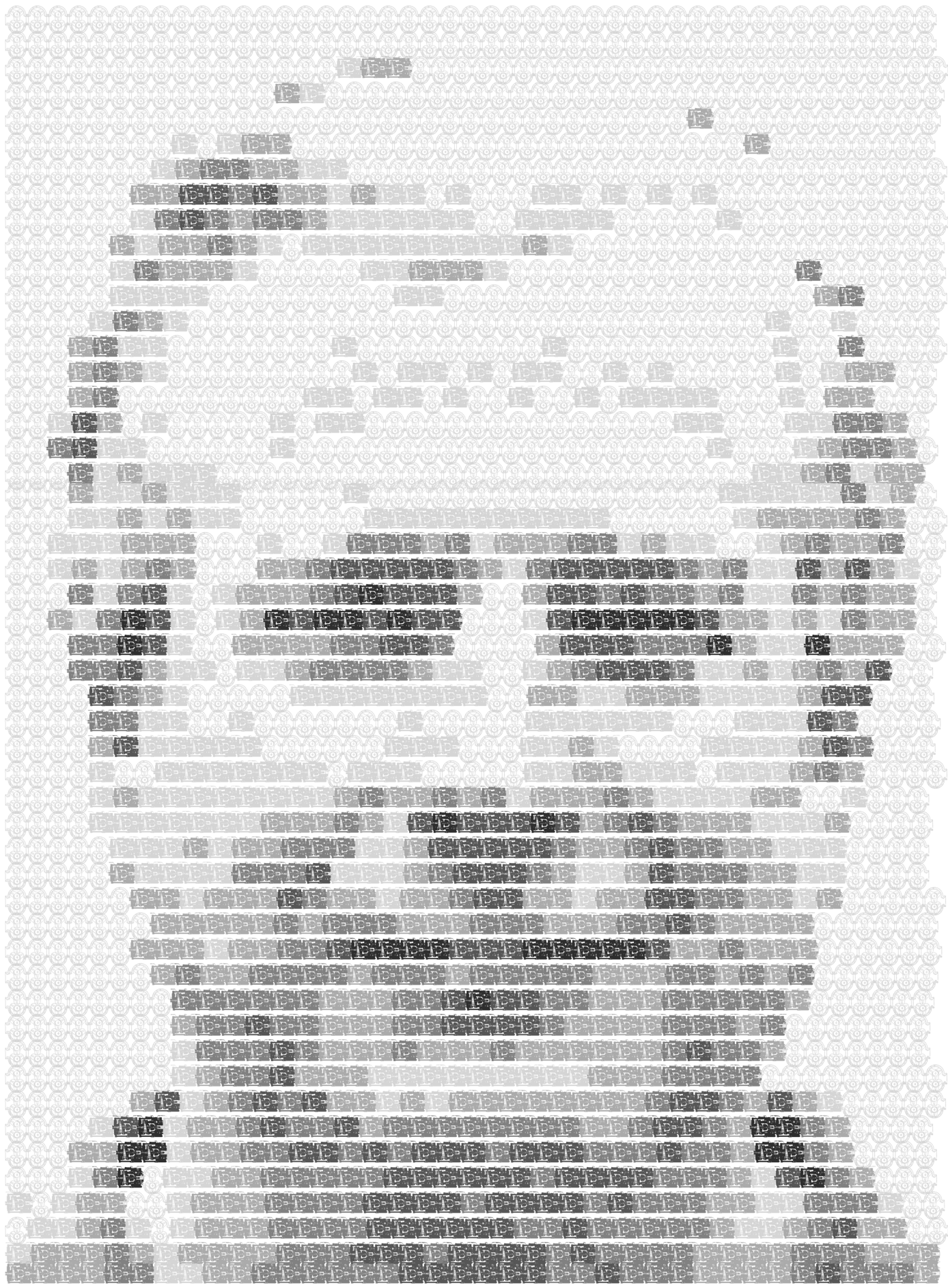
Ella

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2011

This is a commission of a little girl that was composed of the elements that her father had documented as most representative of her interests: a doll, crayons, a favorite fork, and words that filled her vocabulary.

I began this work with several photographs of this beautiful child. I naturally picked the most attractive, which was from an angle high above. I found, however, that the abstracting process of rendering the colors and shapes into simpler mosaics made the initial results alarming—an eerie, disembodied face, a twisted body. I concluded that in the same way that the human mind leaps to complete an image of a face, the mind's eye will also jump to an unsettling explanation where there is an absence of symmetry. We are programmed to associate symmetry with normality and certain kinds of asymmetry with abnormality.

I chose a different picture.

Waylan

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2011

Like the proceeding portrait of his younger sister, Ella, this is a commission of a child seen through the eyes of his father. The portraits are a memorial of their father's perspective. I am struck when I hear parents and their adult children talk about the past, and how remarkably different their memories are of everyday life. The record here of Waylon's tastes are as accurate as his father can make them; whether these items carry any emotional freight as he gets older is uncertain.
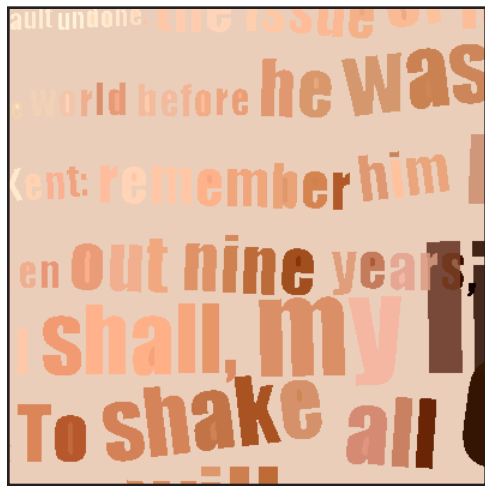
The Mistress of King Lear

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

This work describes an exceptional teacher of English through the opening lines of Shakespeare's play.

The use of vertical lines of varying text was one of the threads of ideas generated from making A Portrait of An Artist. Working with a variety of fonts and orientations as well as ranges of uncertainty in the location and spacing of the words, I was attracted to the effect of a cascade of falling letters.

Since the spaced letters do not fully specify the features of the face, it is often the case that the expression of the sitter is different from the photograph that serves as a starting point. In this work, the sitter appears to be looking to her lower left, as if in reflection. These changes which are frequently noticed in the eyes and mouth lend a note of introspection to the sitter.
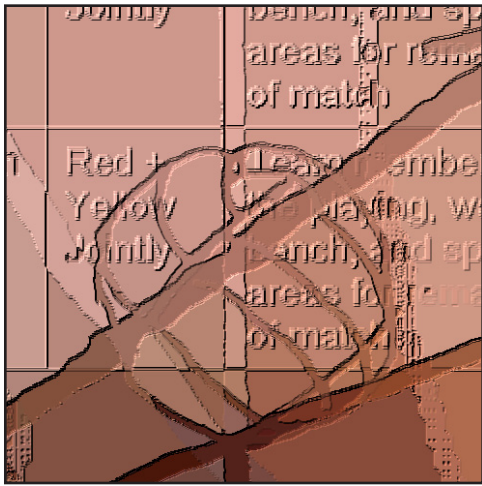
Volleyball

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

This is a picture of a game, its rules, and a Player.

One defining element of this work was the use of a visual illusion of embossed lines, as if the lines had some depth and cast a shadow on the area below it, lending additional texture to the canvas.

Determination of the positions between players of the same team.

center   right   center   right

correct   fault

right   center

fault   correct

right

left   center   left

29'6"
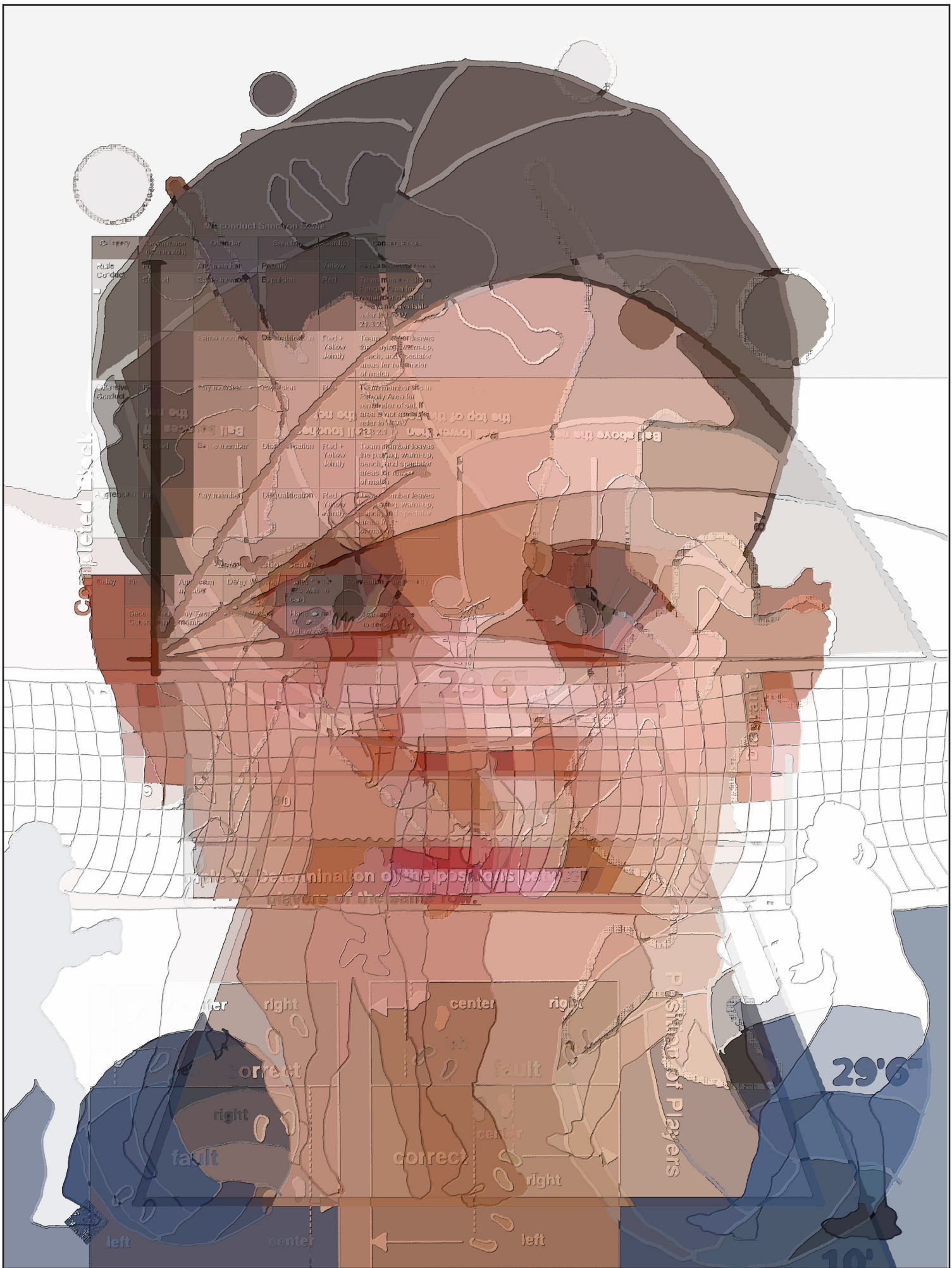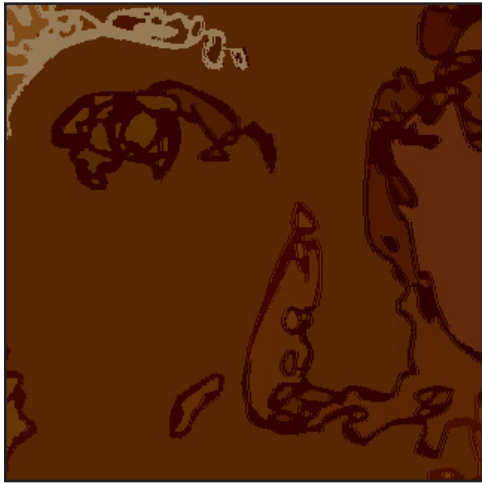
Photoshoot

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18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

In the vein of Andy Warhol, a repeating image of this actress moves across the background, evolving from the specific to a more generic drawing at the bottom right of the page.

Like a repeated xerox, one cost of becoming a celebrity is the gradual wearing away of the finer, unique features of the person. As roughly illustrated by this portrait, what starts as specific and detailed becomes looser, and less refined, until it becomes almost a logo.
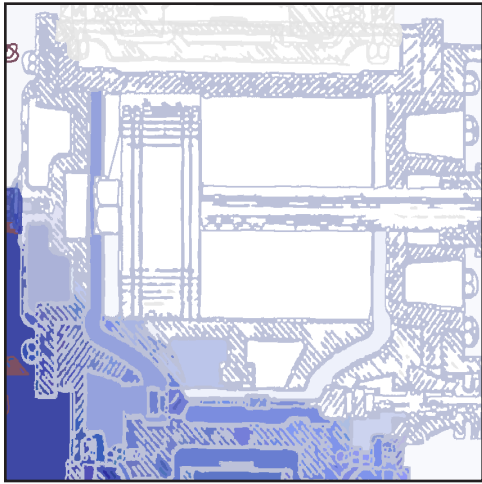
The Evolution of Steam

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

This is a picture of a patent lawyer. The underlying graphic is the slow evolution of a steam engine from a simple swirling of lines in the upper left to an increasingly detailed engineering description of it in the lower right.

The small line drawings that progress across the page in this picture start as simple swirls and become increasingly detailed. This development, from simple to more complicated, is similar, but in the opposite direction, to the picture, Photoshoot. In Photoshoot, I used a method to simplify a complex drawing, arranging the series of small drawings so they start with a detailed drawing of the model and end with a simplified version. In this work, it starts simply and ends with the full drawing. The two are linked by the technique but document two different ideas. In Photoshoot, a complex subject is worn smooth to a symbol which reflects the over exposure of an idea and people's tendency to create simple handles for reference. In this picture, there is the illustration of a kernel of an idea that requires further elaboration before it can be fully realized. One removes detail for the sake of brevity; the other creates details for the sake of clarity.
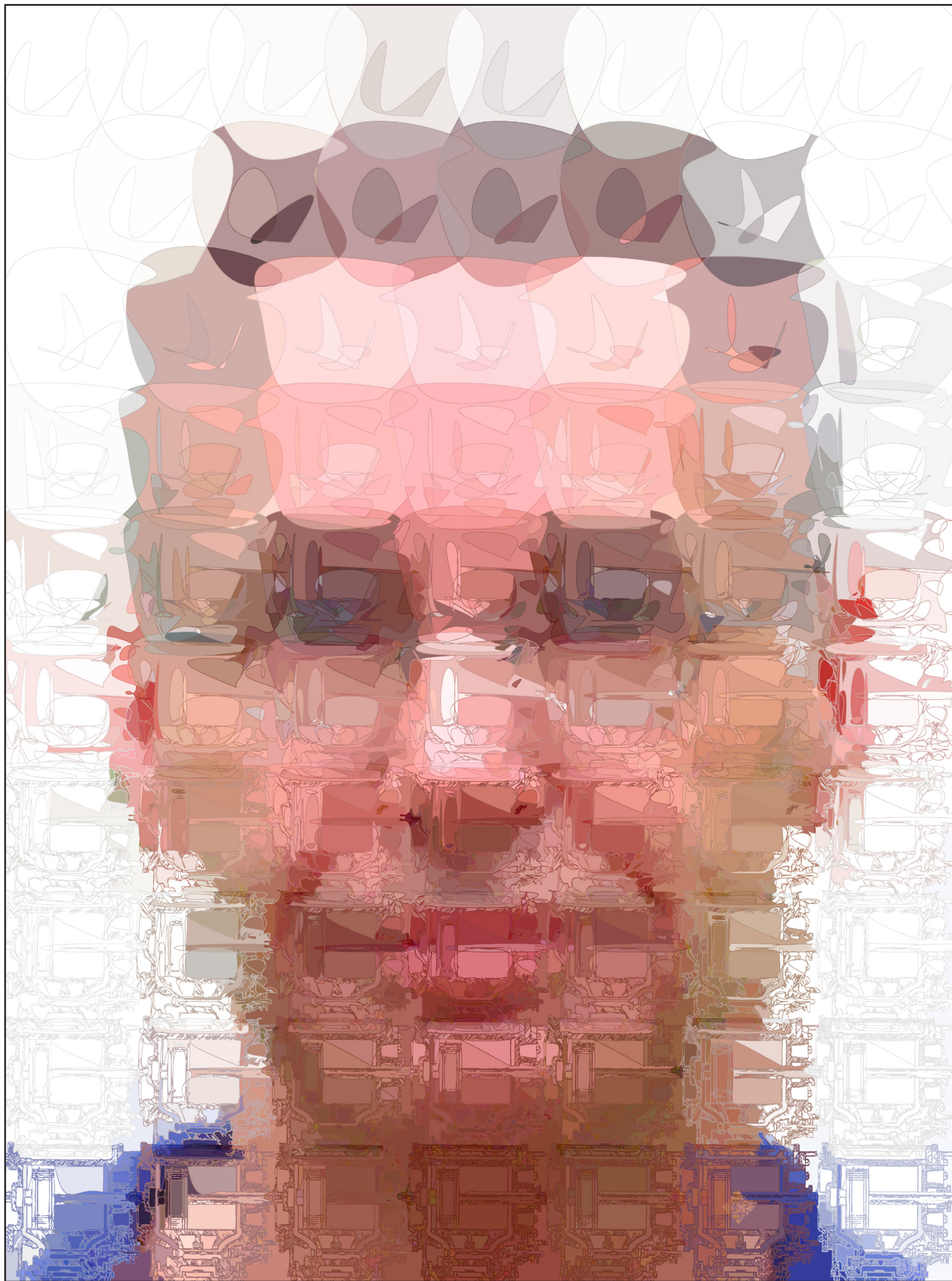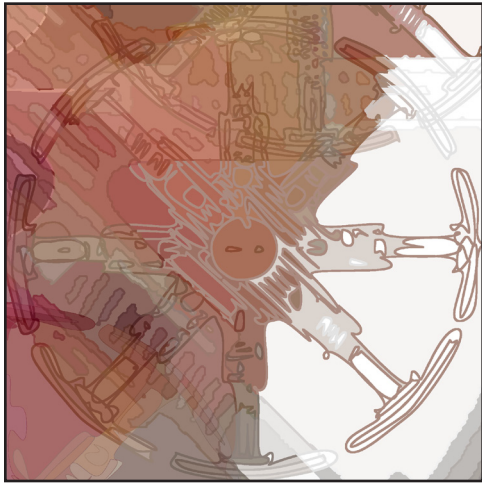
Brake Explosion

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

In Brake Explosion, a safety brake forms the clocklike face of the sitter and a smaller duplicate of it at one o'clock is repeated around its face becoming simpler and simpler as it moves toward midnight.
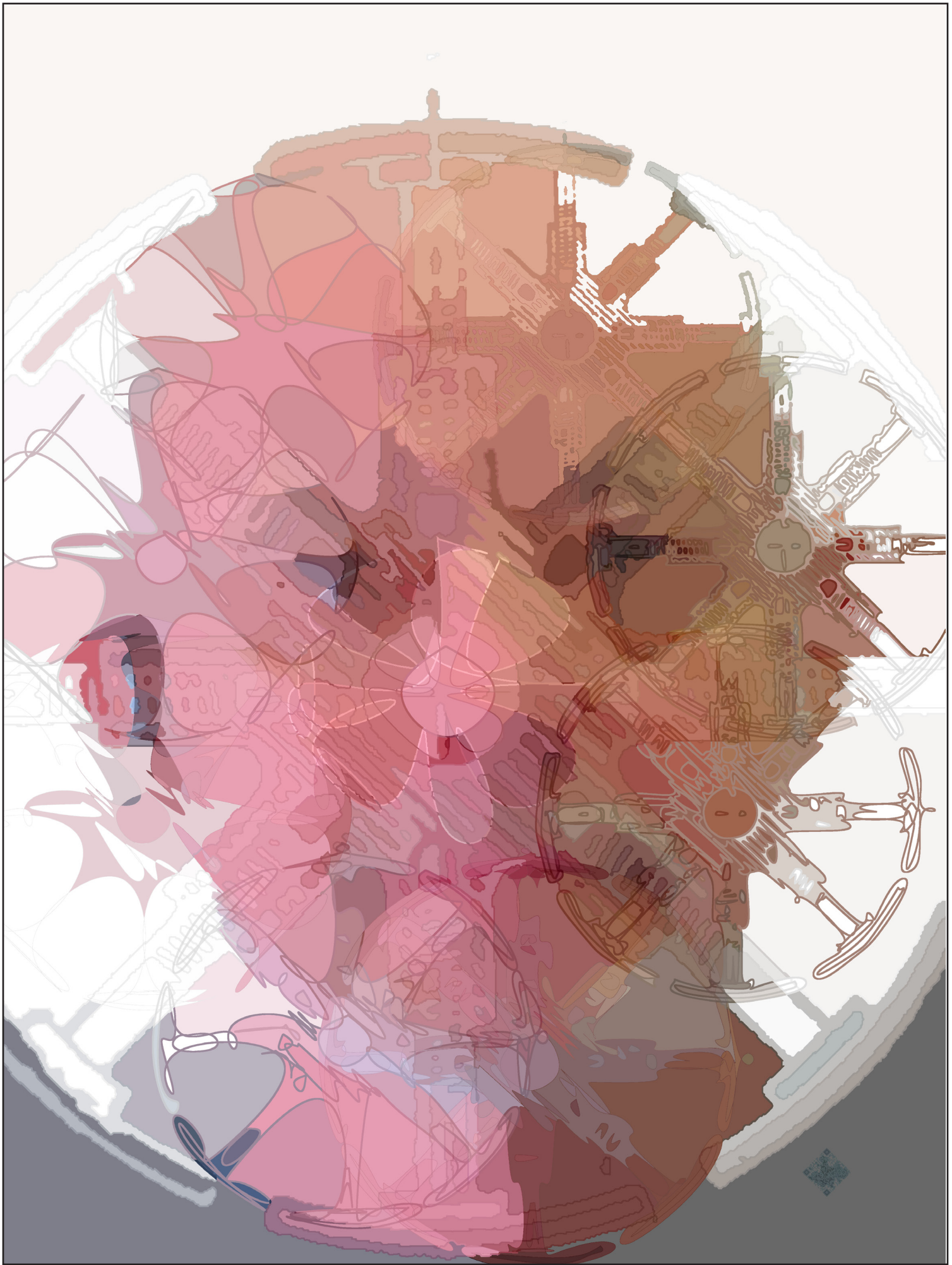
Chernoff/Susan

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

Hermann Chernoff invented a statistical technique for presenting complex data based on the insight that people are sensitive to slight changes in facial expressions. By associating each dimension of the data with an aspect of a face, like the brightness of a star to the length of the mouth, or the speed of the star to the roundness of the head, Chernoff was able to create simple faces that represented each data sample which, in turn, could be compared rapidly with another sample face. Although such comparisons can be quickly made, the statistical significance of a happy face versus a sad one is not always clear. Nevertheless, using information on galactic clusters from astronomy's Sloan Digital Sky Survey, this bright friend from Chicago has been composed through hundreds of such faces representing the individual characteristics of single galactic clusters providing an interpretation of herself and the universe as we know it.
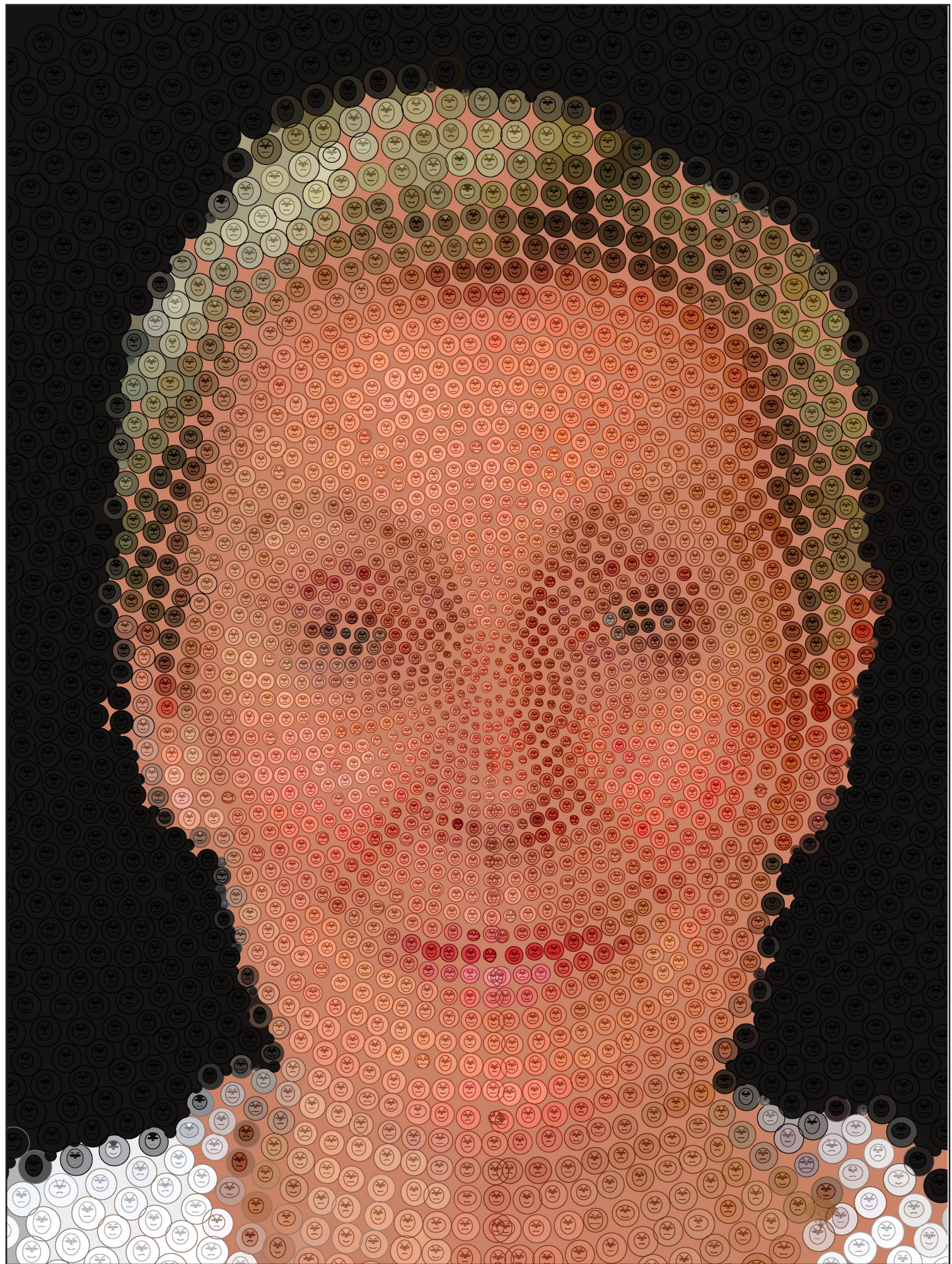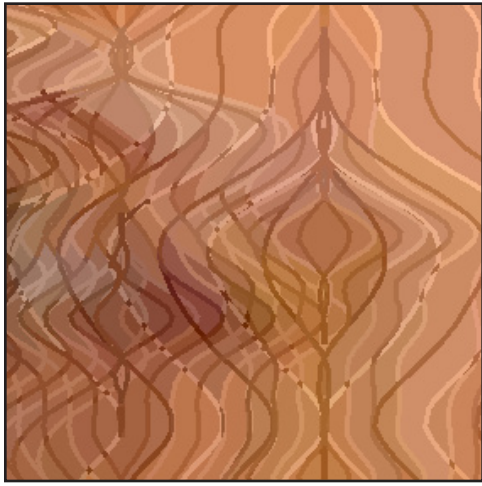
Airstream

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

Airstream evolved from the concept of a visible stream of flowing air over a face. As the stream flowed over a smooth surface, like the cheek, the lines would be calm and unwavering. As it encounters the darker eyes, nose and lips, the flow becomes disrupted, becoming active and agitated, moving back and forth more vigorously.
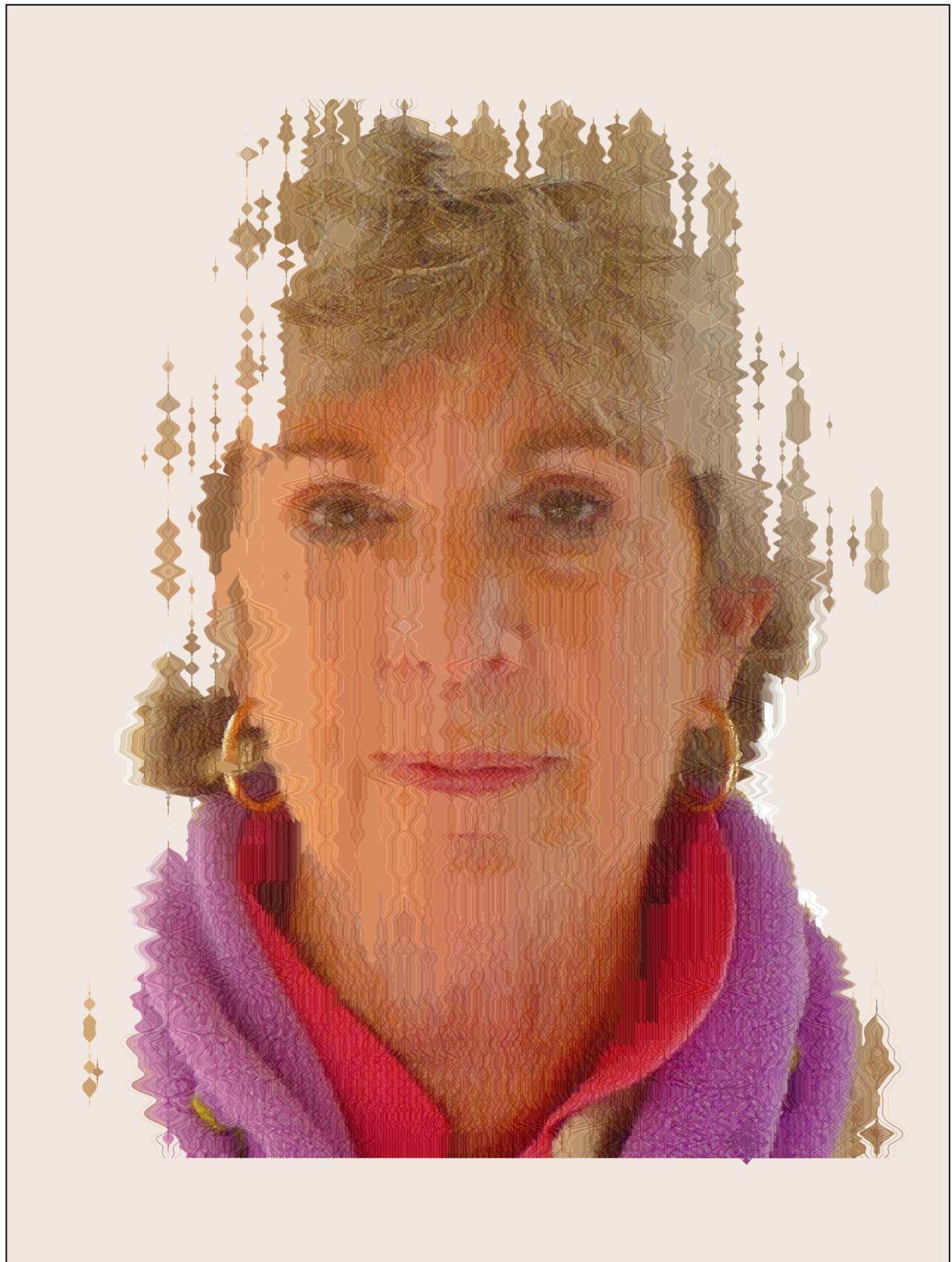
Diamond Girl

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

Using a technique similar to Airstream, in this work there are two stream flows –one from the upper left and one from the upper right—which move down across the face, intersecting as they go. The unexpected result was a diamond pattern that gives the portrait a pulsing rhythm.
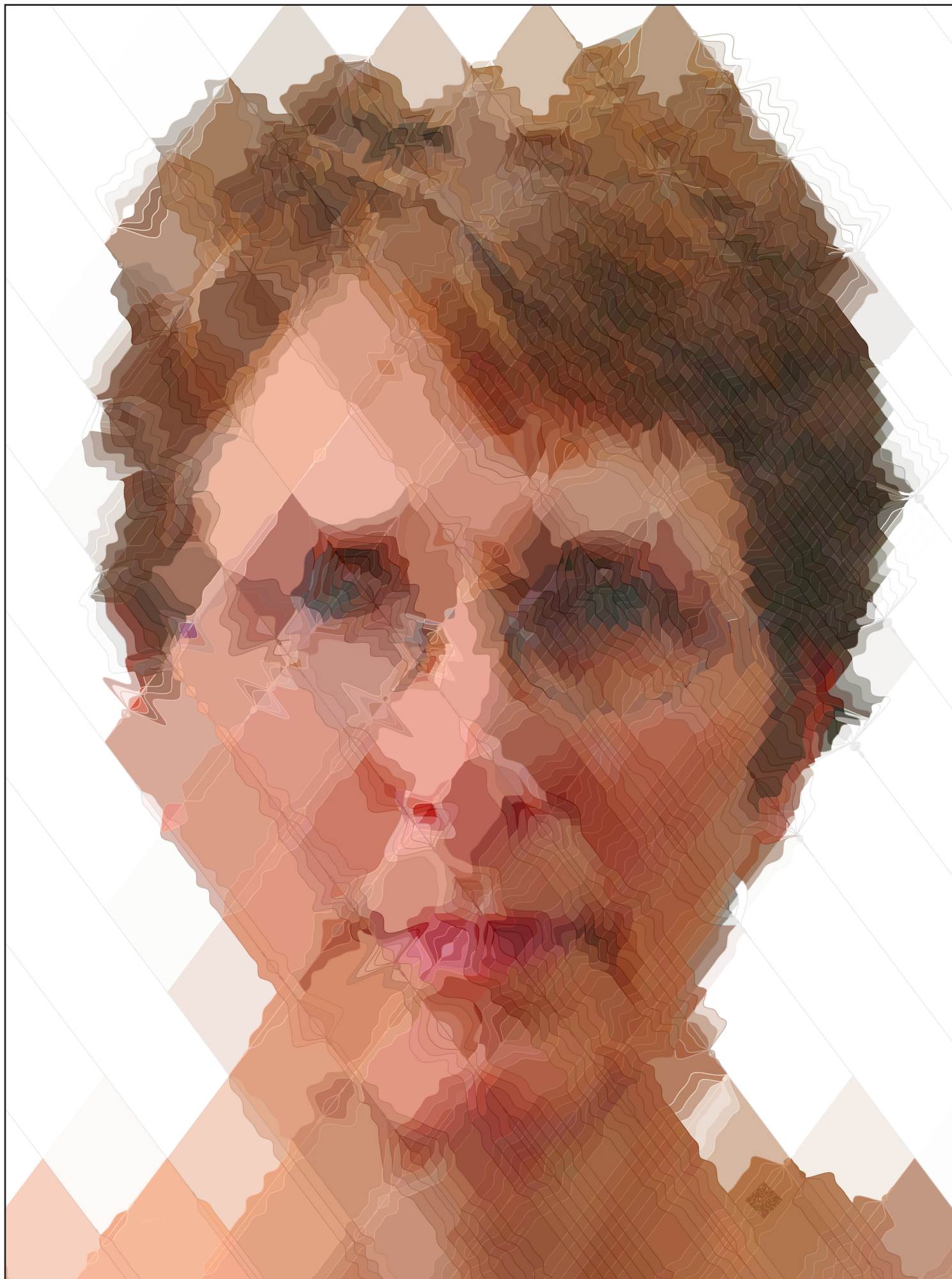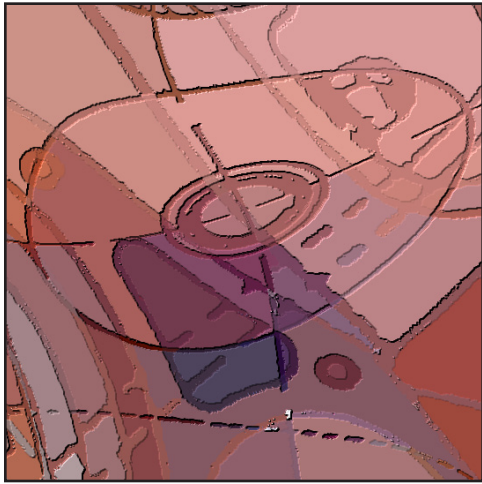
Engine Melt

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

I was toying around with the idea of ice cream and its melting, and combined the idea with the nature of elaborate engineering drawings. In this case, the sculptor, Robert Bricker, with his combination of art and engineering skills, came to be a fitting embodiment of the rigid and the flexible. The upper part is a melting high-speed combustion engine, sitting on an unmodified technical drawing.
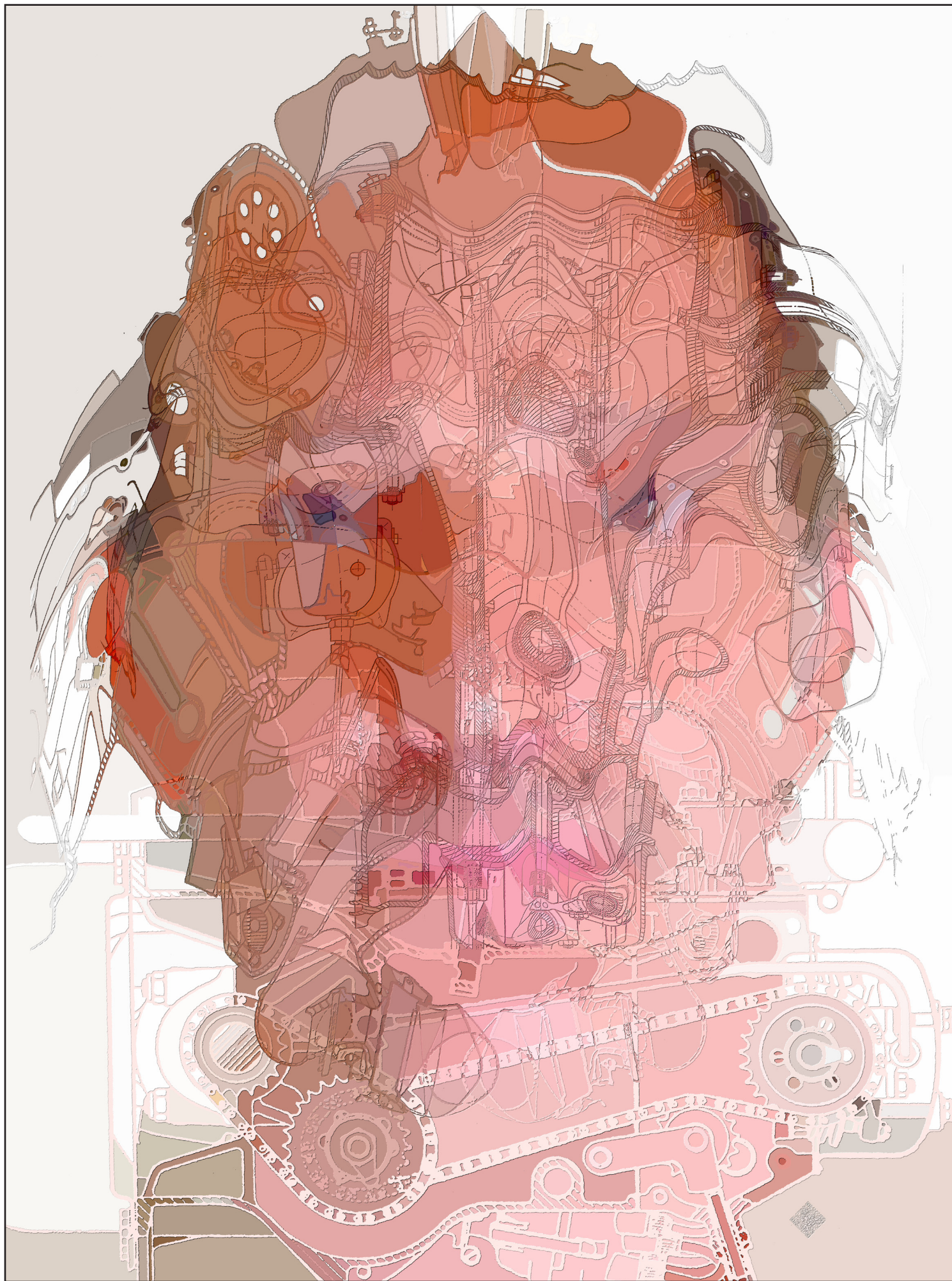
The New Yorker

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

Letters and fragments of lines from a recently published story of Amelia Earhart become a filter of this Park Avenue sophisticate.

The helmet of yellow hair, like a cosmonaut, was a serendipitous result which became another thread of continuity between the sitter's journey and the Earhart's path towards female independence.

For my tenth birthday, I got
the present of my dreams: a
piece of Amelia Earhart
luggage. It was a small overnight
case, carefully stamped with
brass corners, and covered in
blue. Between the flat... her
was a... plaque with an... said
to help guide her...

THE... YOU... KER

...looking out...
...and filled it...
VOGNAN COULD
suspected of Amelia Earhart would have
...presumed... had the domestic
...spectacled grey... If... as...
THEY SEE THE SNOW OF BLACK
cases... THAT... breakfast carefully in av...
THE CUTTER WAS DUMPING OUT.
EARHART'S
...focus... have... dominated by men
8:43 A.M.   MESSAGE WAS LOGGE...
...thinking had her
wedding day in 1931, the thirty-th

Good Medicine

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2012

The man responsible for the new Martha Jefferson Hospital design is seen through a whirl-wind of its construction plans. I manipulated the plans that are in the upper half of the picture to give a sense of flames in his hair, reflecting the urgency of his tasks.

Kindness

Humility

Planning Preparation Investigation

Thankfulness

INTERIOR DETAILS

Listening

Team Work

Consideration
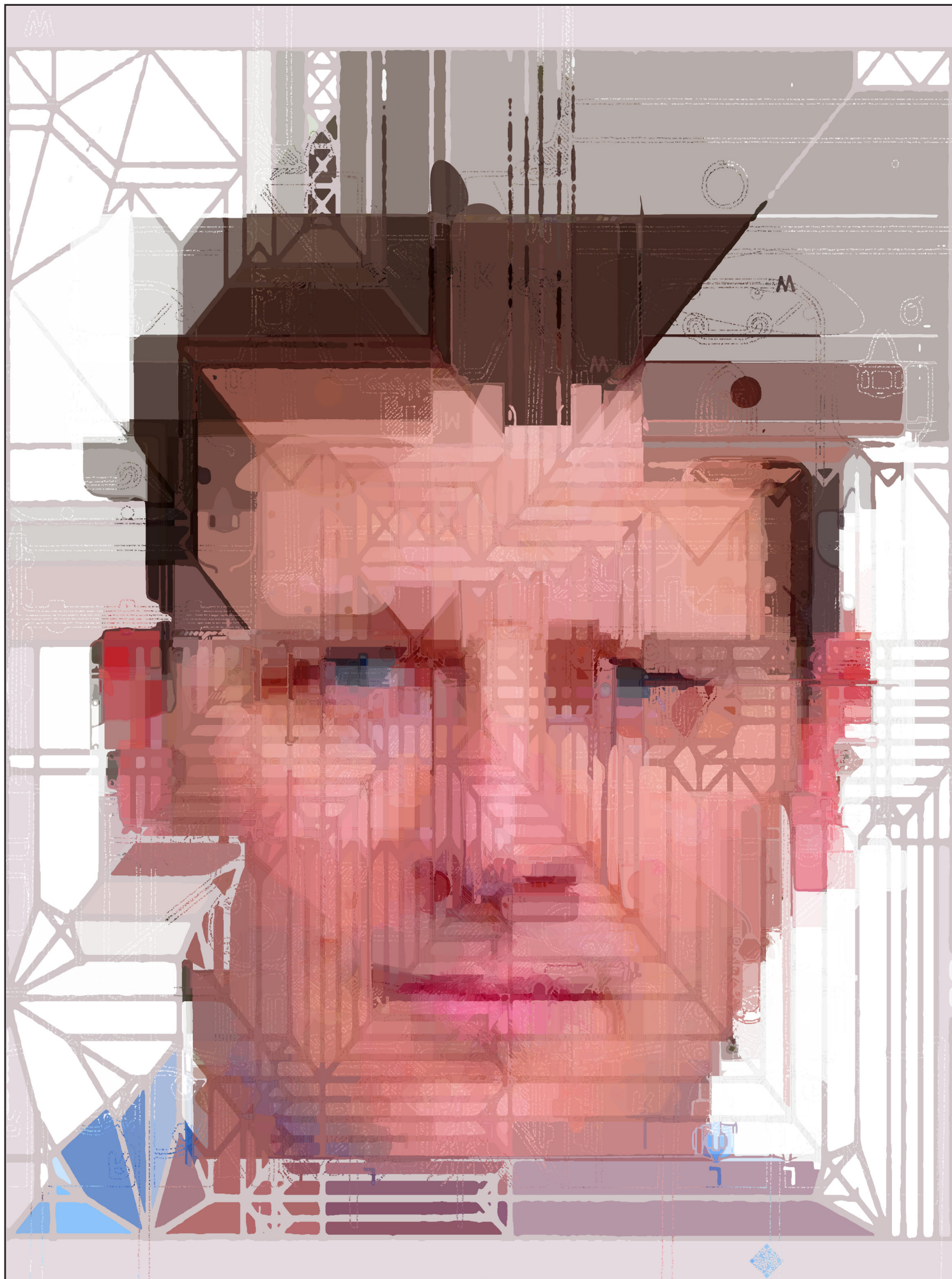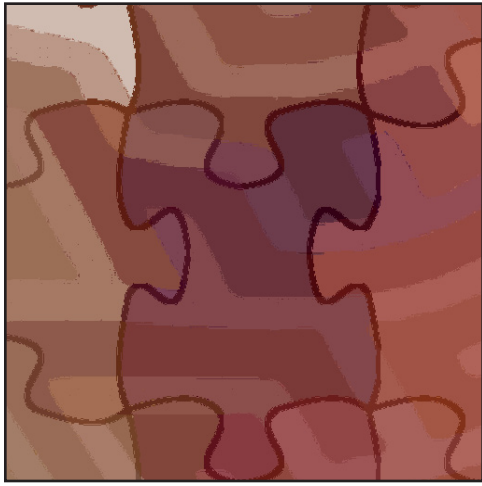
Origami: Adam Smith

18 x 24 inches, ink on canvas, 2011

An investment manager moving between the secular and the divine is shown in an unfold-ed origami design and in drawings whose lines are rendered in looping text which has been taken from Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations".

Puzzle

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18 x 24 inches, on three separate layers of Plexiglas, 2012

A picture of a psychiatrist is composed from a three dimensional maze and a jigsaw puzzle.

Here is another aspect of how the physical representation of the work is fundamentally different from a computer screen projection. As you approach the piece, the gaps between the layers of the maze become evident as being printed on different physical layers. The viewer is thus encouraged to look at the work from the side and beneath.

This multi-layering is a recurring interest. In most cases, the additional meaning can be written with small marks and incorporated unobtrusively into a larger picture, or it can be created in shades of color that only reveals its references with attentive inspection. In this case, the meaning is separated by a quarter inch air gap between the Plexiglas layers.
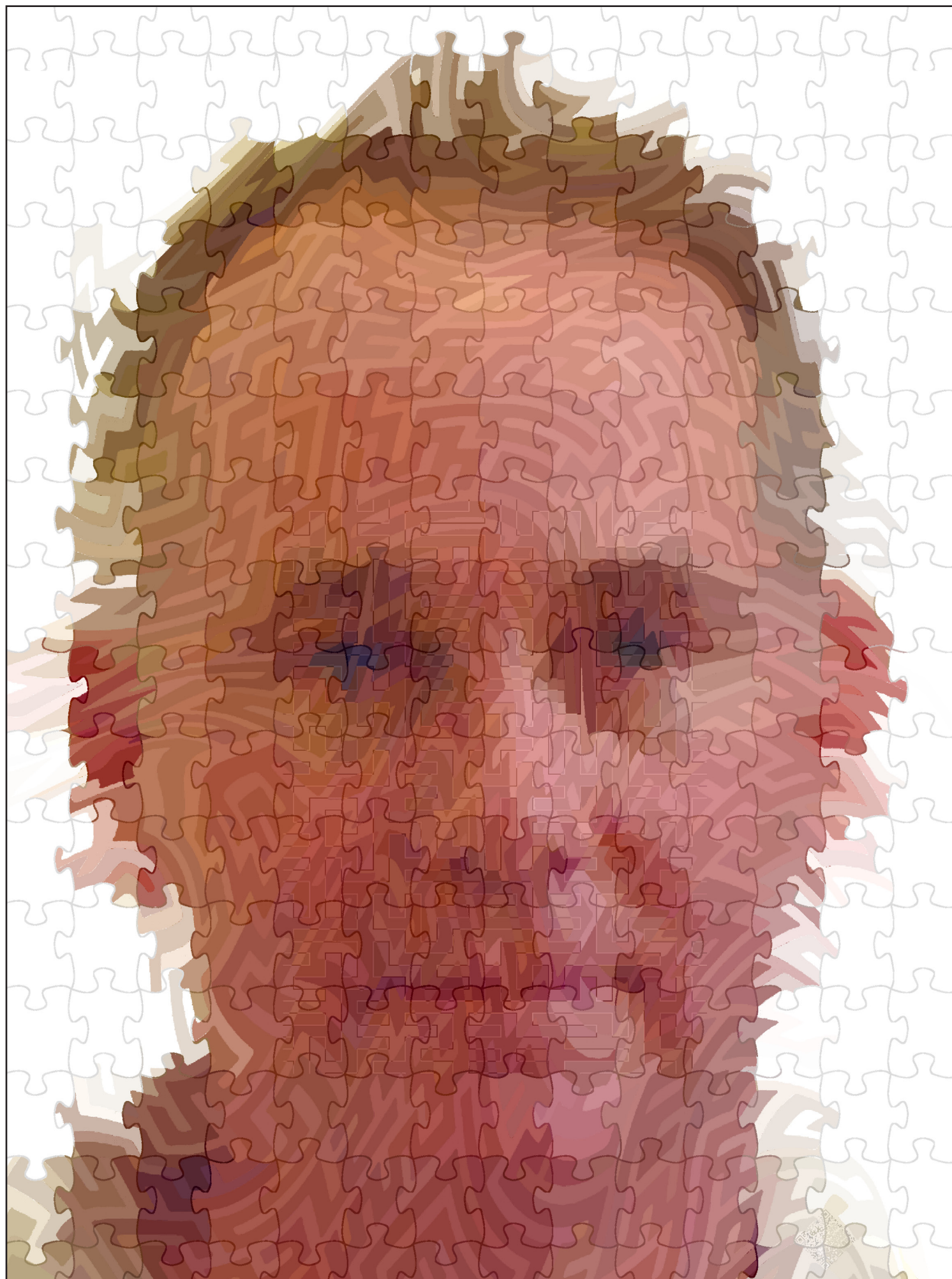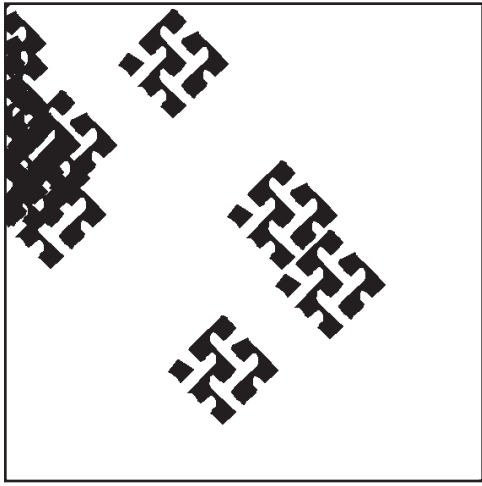
T.J. Frosted

10 x 14 inches, etched on two sides on each of four sheets of glass, 2012

This was an experiment in the use of glass sanding where four panes of glass are sanded on both sides according to the darkness and lightness of the underlying image. The icon used is that of Gropen's Sign, and the image is the owner of Gropen's Sign, T.J. Ronayne, whose establishment carved my eight images into the glass.

Like Puzzle, this piece demonstrates the possibilities of new technologies for creating images in the visual arts.