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### Tomorrow is the Worst Day Since Yesterday

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TOMORROW IS THE WORST DAY SINCE YESTERDAY

by

Matthew Carlson

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Santiago Cal

Lincoln, Nebraska

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# Tomorrow is the Worst Day Since Yesterday

Matthew Carlson, MFA

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Santiago Cal

I wake up; What's that tingle in my arm? It'll probably stop soon. My right eye isn't quite opening all the way. Still heavy with sleep or is it just going to be one of those days? I get out of bed and my right leg gives out a little. Definitely going to be one of those days. I make my way to the bathroom, dragging my right leg along with me. I open the medicine cabinet and count out 8 individual pills, hopefully these help. Foot catches the top of the tub as I step in the shower, stupid ankle. Arm still tingling. Now it's twitching; Wonder if that means it's getting better. Time to get dressed. Fall down trying to put pants on without sitting. That was stupid, you know you can't do that. Tie my shoes, get a little dizzy, grab my keys and head out the front door. Just another day, I am so tired.

Susan Sontag wrote: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other space"<sup>1</sup>. This work addresses aspects of that citizenship. I used my experiences as a person living with a disability and as a parent to a son with Autism to explore the dichotomy of this dual citizenship. The contentment that comes with feeling well

contrasted with the worry of what is to come in the next minute/day/week/month/year. I aim to draw attention to the aspects of living that are not recognized as events impacting our daily lives. The elements that are unseen: the hurt, the worry, the anxiety, the ritual; The rituals that are required to find belonging in the kingdom of the well.

With *One Thousand Fourteen* I dive into a ritual that is forced upon me in an effort to maintain relatively good health. In 2014 I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, as a result, I am required to give myself bi-weekly injections<sup>2</sup>. I have a paradoxical relationship with this process and this object. This shot allows me to function and remain, more or less, at the same level of health that I have now. I am aware of this and I am thankful, I dutifully take my injection on schedule without fail but, I hate it. Truly hate it.

My life is improved and simultaneously held hostage by the injections. The injections reduce the likelihood that I will experience a major relapse by about 30%. It reduces the damage that is done during a relapse and will reduce the longevity and seriousness of the relapse. It helps control the damage that has already been done and allows me to function day-to-day. However, since I began using this medication even something as basic as the concept of time has been redefined. Instead of weeks and months I mark time in medication cycles. The day I give myself the injection is consumed with preparing to do so. The two days after my injection are spent recovering from the flu-like side effects of the injection. It hurts to give the injection. The area around my injection sites are red and sore most of the time, especially right after a dose. Every few months I need blood work to ensure that the medication isn't damaging my liver, one day I will learn that it is. The 11 days between recovery and the next injection

are filled with a building dread for the injection that is to come, until it is finished, then I can begin worrying about the next one. The good news is, I only have a lifetime of these injections left to take.

For this installation I cast a representation of that lifetimes worth of injections, 1014. That number accounts for 39 years of injections which would take me to the age of 76, the average life expectancy for somebody diagnosed with MS at the age I was<sup>3</sup>. Black representing the injections I have completed, white are the injections yet to come, and a red every 26 to mark each year that has passed and each year to come. It is overwhelming to consider the number of injections I have in front of me, so I created a visual representation of that anxiety using the object that creates it.

*Insert Title Here*<sup>4</sup> explores the systemic hostility that is experienced by people living with a disability. The hanging component is made of steel, the material that is literally the foundation of societies physical structure, as a metaphor for the manmade societal structures that can make the world difficult to navigate for marginalized communities. Because we interact with it daily the material is recognizable. Without conscious thought they understand its weight and density without the need to physically interact with it. The sculptures are consciously created with the hostility and violence of social structures and systems in mind. By using a series of layered and overlapping components in the hanging structure it has the appearance of being dangerous and intimidating. The surfaces are sharp and at a scale where the viewers space will be violated and obstacles to spatial navigation are created.

I contrasted that by building the structure on the floor with circles, allowing a softer safer feeling. This component represents the feelings of the marginalized when

faced with the system that we aren't able to be a part of. Living in the shadow, acting a mirror, overwhelmed by the structure that is nearly impossible to navigate. I left a small space between the two components to illustrate the tension that comes with these two separate systems trying to exist with one another in the same space.

The sculptures hanging alongside *Insert Title Here*, *The Leftovers* are a depiction of the systemic relationship between things. These pieces are made with remnants of the materials used for the large steel component of *Insert Title Here*. They work as reminder of possibilities, the ability for things to become more than what they are expected. They are as much a product of time as they are material. They are element of now, not an element of a planned future, but no longer what they were. The material used to create these sculptures was never meant to be anything more than leftovers, the castoffs, the parts that were integral to the creation of the structure but not a part of it.

The sculptures in this body of work retain a strong material presence. Recognizable materials and evidence of their manipulation encourage the viewer to think about the process and labor by which the work is created. The materials used have a known historical context in both societal and art terms. Whether it is metal, plastic or paper my intention is to work outside of the historical understanding and use the material in a manner that provokes thought and challenges the preconceptions of the material. By challenging the preconceptions of the material, I am metaphorically challenging societies other preconceptions.

To balance the sculptural representation of the hostility of large-scale social systems I turned my focus to a personal intimate relationship. My son Ben has Autism. Since Ben has Autism, conversations with him are not experienced in the same way as

our neurotypical peers. I have become so accustomed to the unexpected behaviors that I barely register them during our conversations. The drawings in *736 minutes of conversation: An extemporaneous collaboration* explore everyday life raising a child with a disability. Systems exist as a strategy to understand, in organizing our system of understanding we must examine where we are now. With that in mind, to create these drawings, I developed a mark making system that allowed me to translate events that occur during video conversations with Ben into drawings but forces me to relinquish control over the final outcome and look of the drawing. Since systems cannot be controlled, only planned, while I get to make decisions with these drawings, they are required to operate within the predetermined system.

Together we made a list of unexpected behaviors that occur during our conversations. Because most interactions with, and for, people fall into a predefined understanding of “normal”, these unexpected behaviors take on a negative connotation and have often made it difficult for Ben to connect with the uninitiated. We identified 26 different behaviors and each mark represents an occurrence of one of those behaviors in conversation. I used color that draws attention and energizes the viewer. Even without knowing the specific meaning of each mark the viewer can get a sense of the conversation through this visual documentation.

I made the work of *Tomorrow is the Worst Day Since Yesterday* to question structures and examine the role of systems as a method of understanding and navigation. The emphasis in the drawings is placed on the process that creates the work, rather than the final product itself. The sculptures are more than simply objects to be viewed and become something that a person experiences. The art is a result of the interaction

between me as the artist and those that interact with it. All of the parties involved bring their own physical, mental, and cultural mechanisms to the experience. The work is intended to provoke questions, empathy, curiosity and a desire to understand.

## Notes

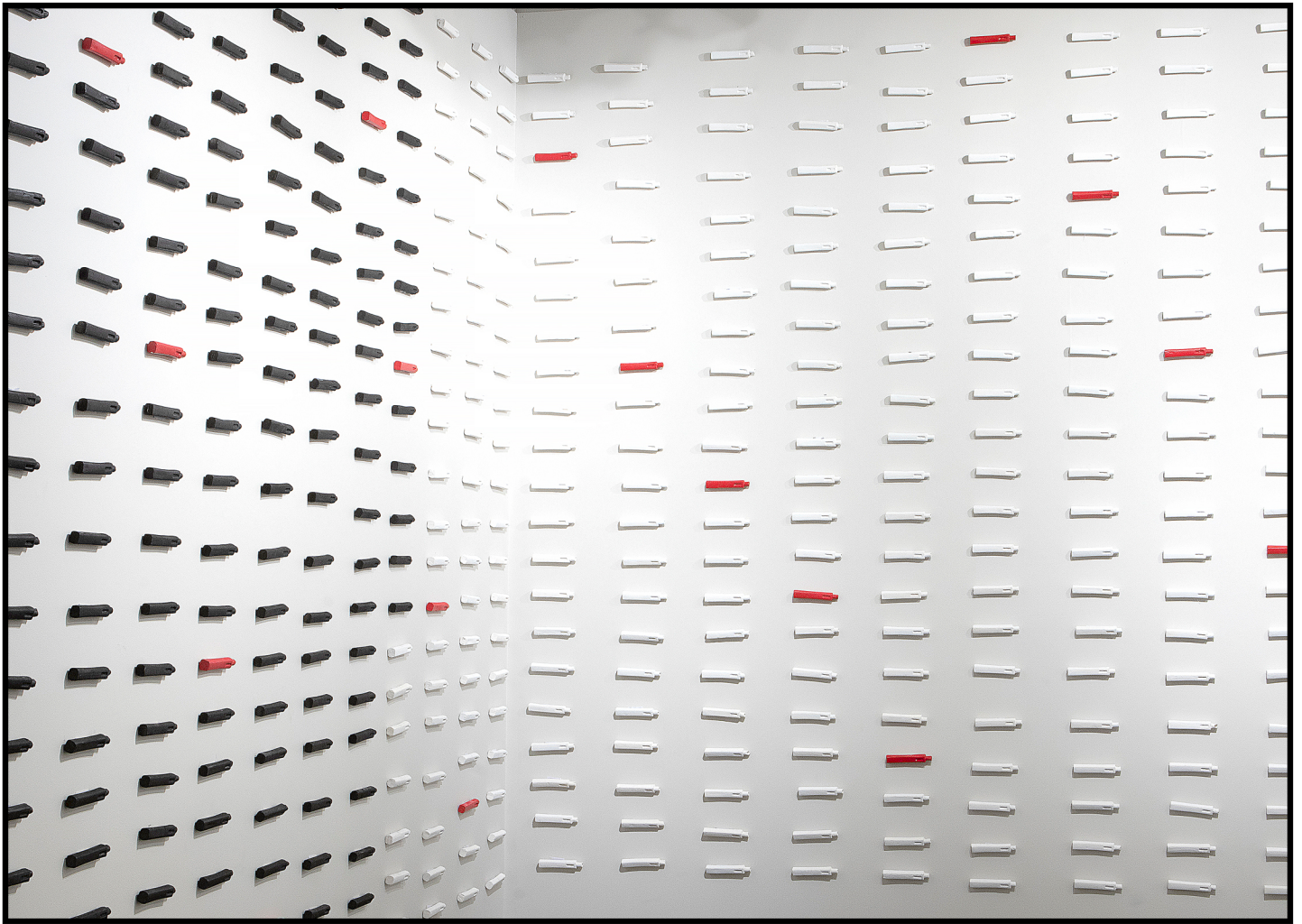
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<sup>1</sup> Sontag, Susan, "Illness as Metaphor," in *Health: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Barbara Rodriguez Munoz (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 96.

<sup>2</sup> I was diagnosed in December of 2014 after my third exacerbation that lasted approximately 3 months. After being treated with IV Steroids I began my injections of Plegridy on April 5, 2015

<sup>3</sup> The average life expectancy for somebody my age is 83. On average somebody with MS has their life expectancy shortened by 7 years which is how I arrived at 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Insert Title Here* is the title of this piece. Labels and preconceptions that come with them are a common example of the hostility I am addressing in this sculpture.



# *One Thousand Fourteen*

Ceramics, Spray Paint, Multiple Sclerosis,  
Plegridy Injection Pen

600'' x 144'' x 1''

2021





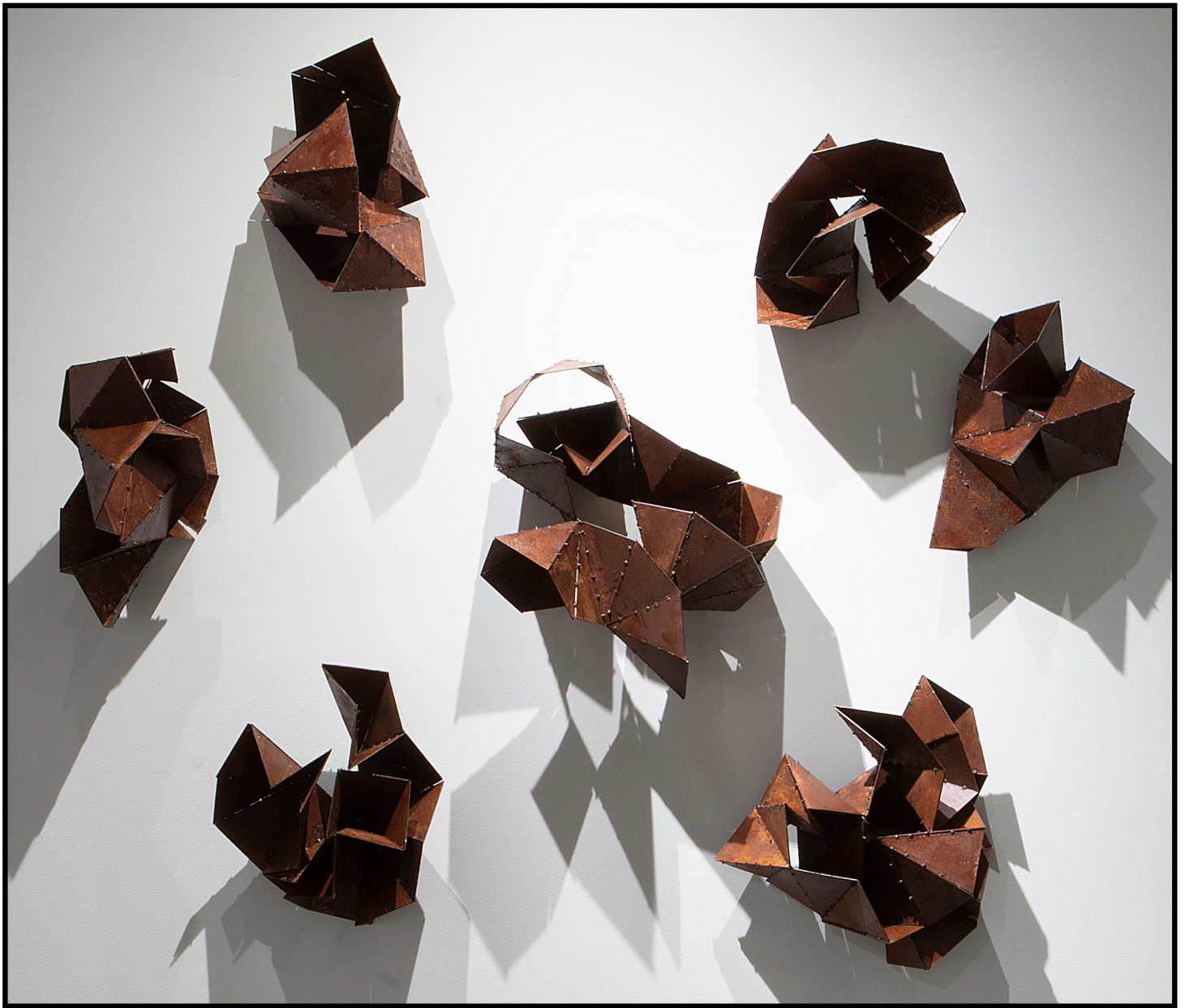
# *Insert Title Here*

Steel, Paint, and Cable

132" x 54" x 59"

2021





# *Leftovers*

Steel and Rust  
Various Sizes  
2020





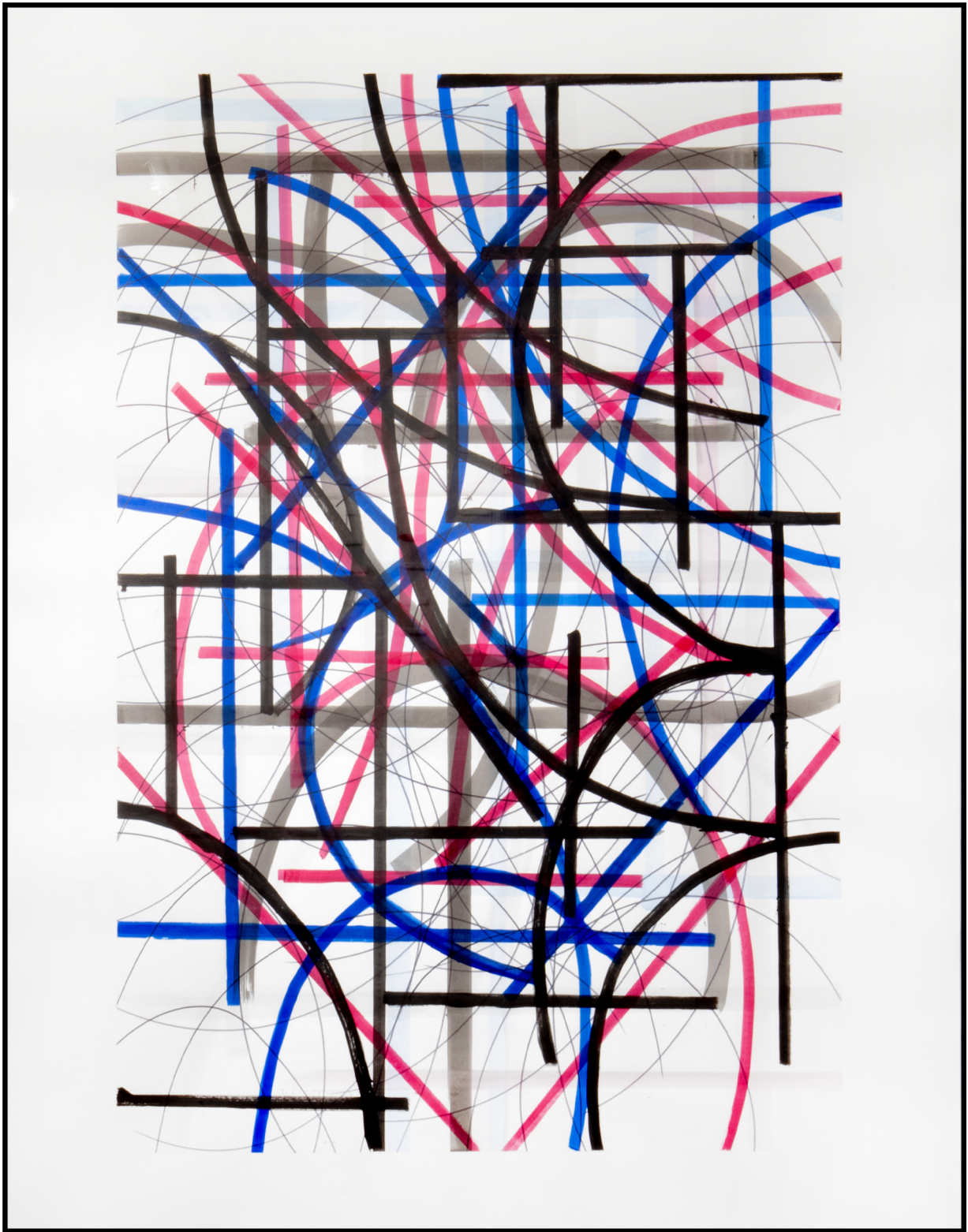
# *Untitled #37*

Steel and Paper

42" x 38" x 32"

2021



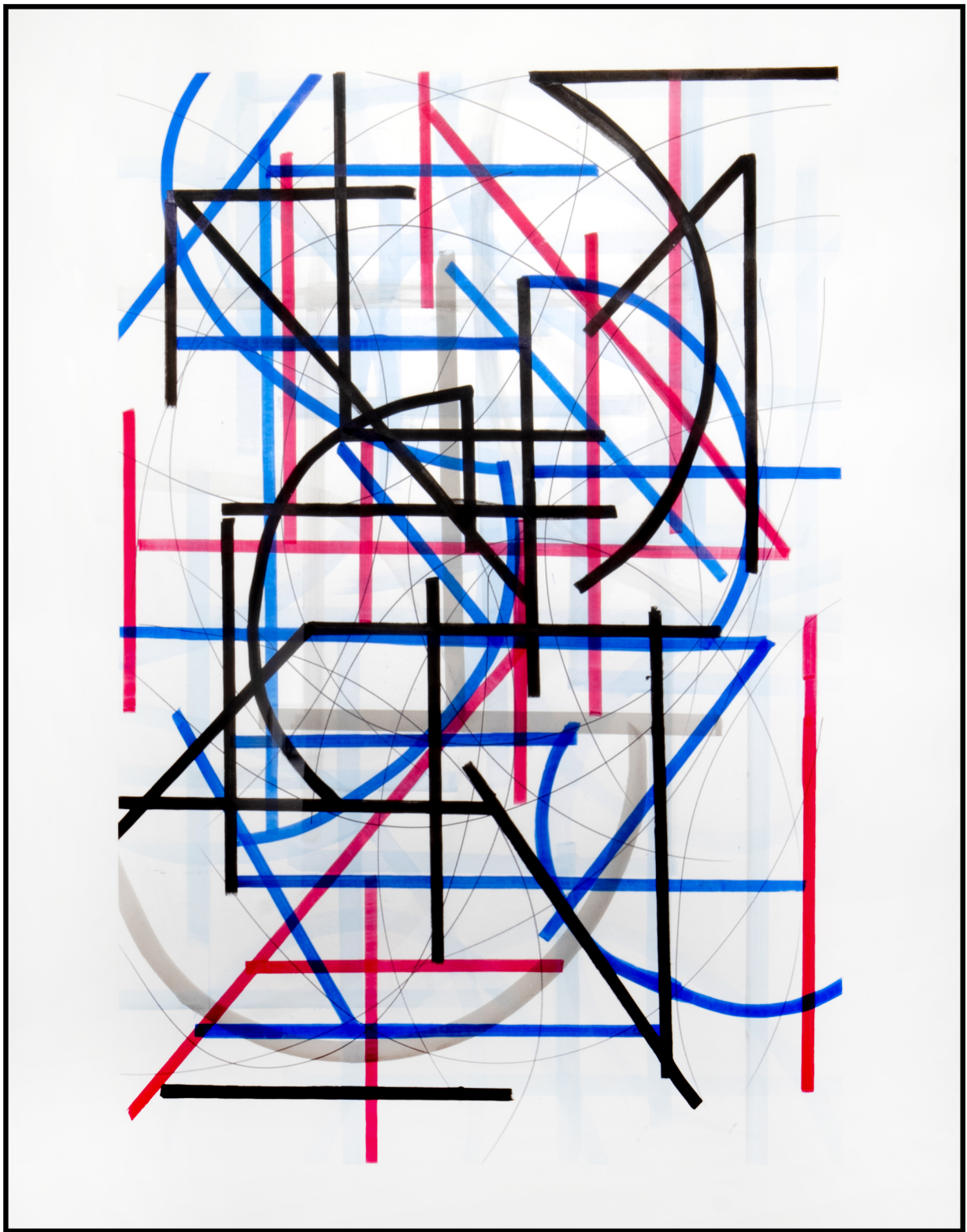


*April 22nd-May 6th*

Ink, Paper, Video Chat

44" x 60"

2021



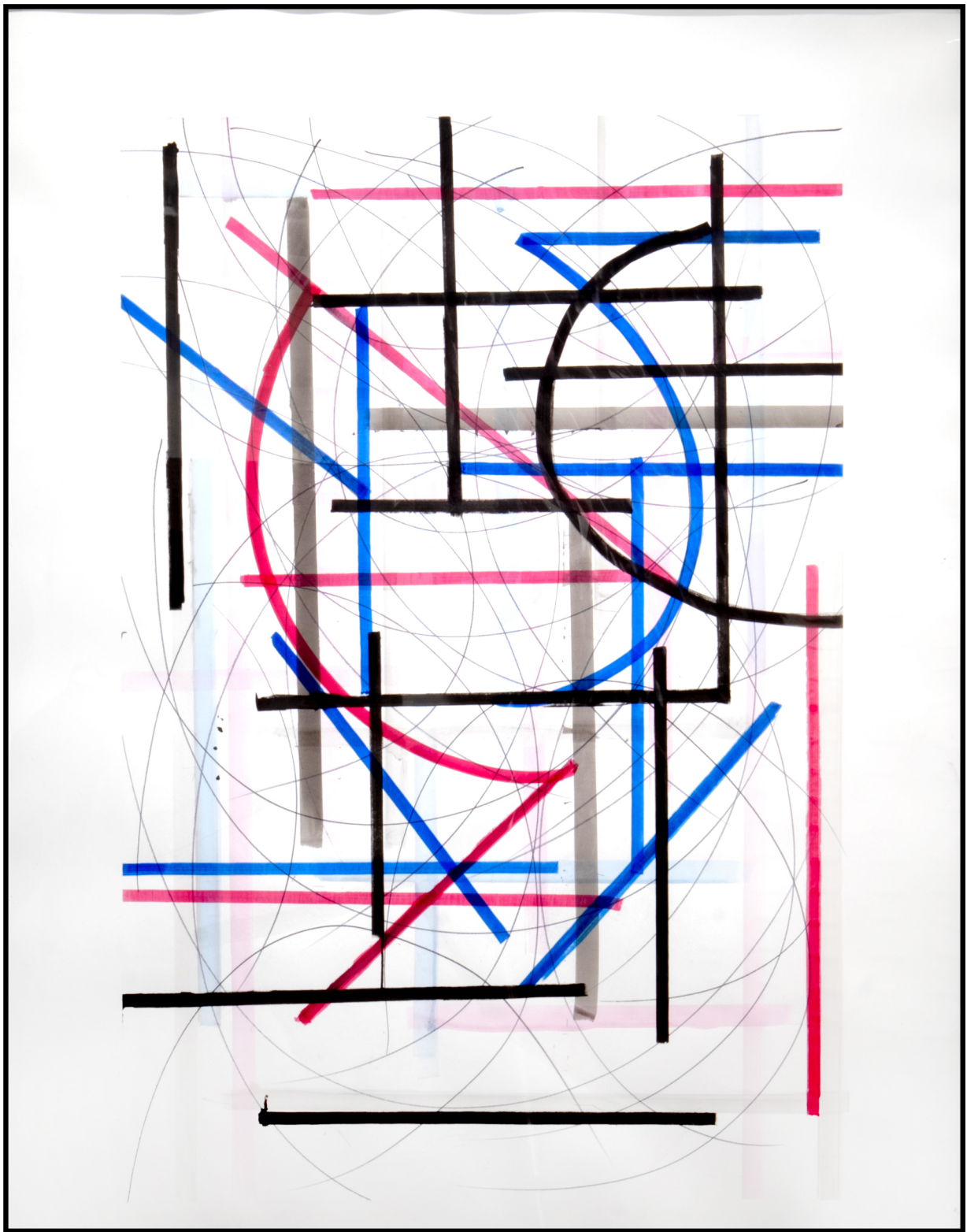
*August 12th–August 26th*

Ink, Paper, Video Chat

44" x 60"

2021



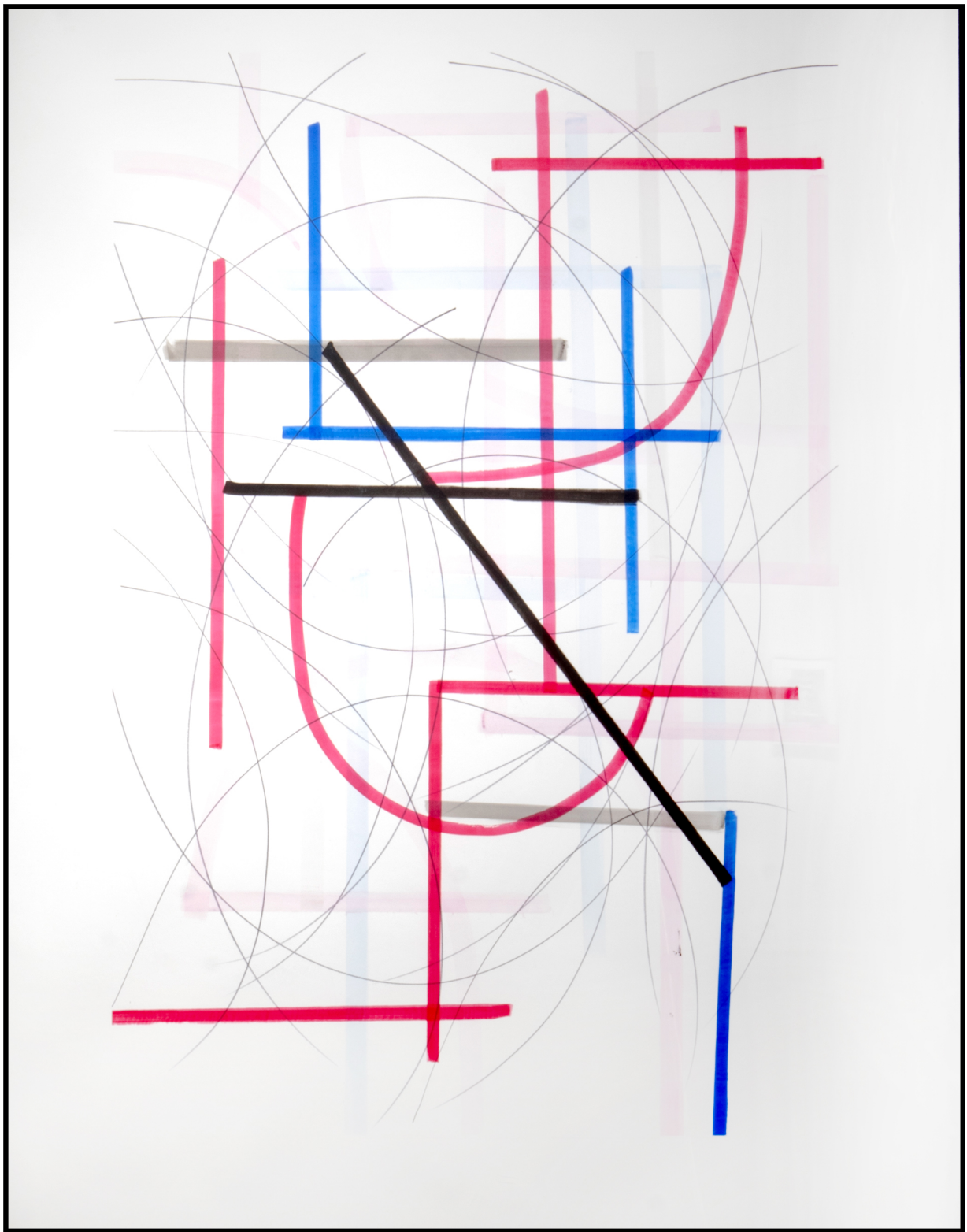


*January 15th–January 27th*

Ink, Paper, Video Chat

44" x 60"

2021



*October 7th–October 20th*

Ink, Paper, Video Chat

44" x 60"

2021

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Matt Carlson

















