



BIO

Joel Werring is a contemporary American artist who explores complexities related to self, memory, and legacy in his paintings and works on paper. While his still lifes are made from direct observation in one sitting, his ongoing studio paintings and collages dance between abstraction and representation, pulling from film, album covers, music, and literature, and often depicting his own family. Through a process of shifting and layering disparate images, locations, and generations, Werring creates visual diaries that blend personal memory, cultural history, and collective mythology.

Joel Werring received his BA in Art Practice from the University of California at Berkeley and his MFA from the Yale School of Art. He has received numerous awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in Painting. He is currently an Associate Professor at Fashion Institute of Technology/State University of New York where he served as Chair of the Fine Arts Department from 2016 to 2019. In the spring of 2020, Werring was a visiting artist at the Lorenzo de' Medici Institute (LdM) in Florence, Italy, where he made a series of works on paper during the quarantine. He paints and lives with his family in Redding, Connecticut.

STATEMENT

I'm a painter and Fine Arts professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. I was invited by my colleagues at LdM, which is FIT's partner school in Florence, to spend my sabbatical here from January to June 2020. Although all the students and faculty from FIT returned to the U.S. in March at the onset of the pandemic, I was given an option to remain in Italy, and my wife and I made the difficult decision to stay. We felt it was in the best interests of our family—in terms of sheltering in place, our kids' education, and our work. And, fortunately, I had two months here before we were quarantined, so I had gathered enough research material to inform my art practice and carry out a good portion of my sabbatical while on lockdown.

That said, this experience has definitely been challenging, and I have been searching for any positive aspects, especially given the devastation and loss Italy has been enduring. And, like so many people across the world, I've had to make small sacrifices and restructure life. It's been difficult to feel settled, creative, and at peace when so much of the world is experiencing such intense hardship. And, of course, this is not at all how I had hoped to experience Italy or my sabbatical. Being a stubborn artist, however, I am determined to make work and meaning of this time.

I spend most of each day drawing in the apartment, with my wife and our two kids doing their work in other rooms. Fortunately, my family is incredibly patient with me. I've been able to convert the dining room in our apartment into a temporary studio. I have drawings, pencils, glue, and scraps of paper all over the table and floor. The light is beautiful in this room, and I'm thankful to have this space. I will always be grateful to LdM and Florence for their blessings of love and shelter during this time.

I usually dedicate the first part of the day to drawing simple mundane objects from direct observation—a roll of masking tape, a washcloth, a spoon, a folded map of Florence. It's a way to meditate on things we normally take for granted, a way to deepen

my understanding of the immediate, physical world. Especially in the midst of so much chaos, when so much is out of control, it has been very healing just to draw what is right on the table in front of me—to focus on light, form, space, softness and sharpness, weight, density, and mass, transparency, opacity, and the reflective nature of objects.

The physical qualities of these objects becomes more important to me than their intended function, and drawing them becomes an intimate exercise in knowing and seeing.

My afternoons are wrapped up in a series of large-scale collages. These drawings are more physical, more abstract, and the process of making them is similar to how I typically construct my paintings. It's a process of addition and subtraction—imagery appears and disappears. These new collages speak more about Florence, the art and architecture and the landscape I've encountered here—the Pontormo in Santa Felicita, Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel, the daily walk I took (before lockdown) from our apartment across the Arno and up the hill to San Miniato al Monte, the magnolia tree in the center of Piazza Beccaria. I'm trying not to be in my head too much about my work these days. Instead, I'm working more from the gut and trying to allow for a kind of freedom with imagery. I'm sure at some point I'll be more reflective, but right now it's about movement—absence and presence, cutting and pasting until something gets revealed.

As I went into my sabbatical, I knew that I was going to be spending a significant amount of time away from my painting studio in Connecticut. I've always wanted to give myself a year of just working in black and white, to really think about drawing as an investigative tool. As it turned out, the limited palette, combined with the physical restraint of lockdown, has allowed me this freedom and focus. Eliminating color has created a kind of visual arena without the emotional complexities of color dynamics. I play soccer, so the best way for me to describe this is the way soccer players wear a team uniform. The game is filled with an infinity of situations, opportunities, decisions, successes and failures, strategies and problems to solve, but the fact that everyone is wearing the same uniform (or limited palette) creates visual cohesion and somehow activates creative expression, rather than limiting it. I find that to be freeing. And drawing, like soccer, is about order and chaos, risk, and finding a resolution within a rectangle. So I think drawing with a limited palette allows for broader investigations graphically, even within a boundaried area—a soccer field, a sheet of paper, or an apartment under lockdown in Florence.

Finally, a word about the title of this series: *The Arno's Ancient Green is Holy, not Color*. This title comes from a line in a poem I wrote for my wife Eden on Mother's Day, which I have been doing for the last several years. I spent many hours observing the Arno and its mysteries on my long walks up to San Miniato. The imagery in the poem is really about enduring the lockdown—the way we are all somehow being stitched into its fabric, part of its history.

The last line of the poem is also a tribute to Eden, my wife, who has been writing about San Miniato, the "headless saint," in her own way, but for me it speaks about the unnameable power of human will and resilience.

THE ARNO'S ANCIENT GREEN IS HOLY, NOT COLOR

*In Florence you sleep
with yesterday's forgotten
Ghosts that clench your hair.*

*Tangled, they let go
when mothers of mothers soothe
Scraped ankles with clay.*

*In Florence, westward
The Arno's ancient green is
Holy, not color*

*But the stained words of
poets pulled deep beneath the
Swan's rippled S curve.*

*This Sunday I want
For you, Rosemary sprig and
the river's blessing,*

*the sacred taste of
strawberry, enduring tears
from a headless saint.*

Joel Werring

May 2020, Florence, Italy

IL VERDE ANTICO DELL'ARNO È SACRO, NON UN COLORE

Quando abbiamo incontrato Joel Werring, poche settimane dopo il suo arrivo a Firenze, era un pomeriggio di febbraio: la discussione era vivace, animata, gioiosamente rumorosa, e sul tavolo c'erano programmi, idee, progetti da realizzare per il semestre; poi Joel ci parlò delle sue lunghe passeggiate, di quanto amasse godere la bellezza di Firenze camminando sulle colline ed in riva all'Arno. Ed allora tutti noi condividemmo i nostri itinerari preferiti: la Via del Monte alle Croci fino a San Miniato, e poi su verso Pian de' Giullari, Arcetri, Bellosguardo. C'era il desiderio di condividere, la voglia di porsi nuovi obiettivi, l'entusiasmo di concretizzare nuove idee.

Finché qualcosa di improvviso ci ha travolto, ha consumato, mentre i giorni passavano, la speranza che fosse un incubo che si dissolve alla luce del mattino: i progetti, allora, hanno cambiato forma, ed una forza nuova ha condotto, giorno dopo giorno, ad affrontare questo sconosciuto accadimento della vita. Joel ha scelto di rimanere a Firenze, ha scelto di continuare qui la sua ricerca, traslando in forma la percezione di una realtà che si stentava a comprendere, tanto era sconosciuta, sconvolgente, così complicata da cogliere, nel suo incessante divenire.

Niente più di un luogo amato svela la natura di una persona, ed ecco che Firenze diventa per Joel la conferma di una scelta: non sarà la città che finora ha conosciuto, ed uno sguardo nuovo inseguirà la fuga delle sue linee, la vibrazione cromatica delle sue atmosfere. Vedrà, infine, come la visione di quella sponda sulla quale trovare riparo da quel che la vita trascrive con fatalità è, sorprendentemente - e meravigliosamente - un'opportunità. Un sentimento di profonda gratitudine è quanto emerge dalle opere realizzate da Joel Werring in questi mesi: sono creazione di un pittore colto che non guarda alla cultura del passato come fonte di citazione, ma per afferrarne il senso più profondo, il germe del modo di percepire e capire il reale. Forse, proprio per arginare il dilagare del caos, Joel struttura la sua visione tra le maglie di elementi verticali ed orizzontali, facendo propria la lezione dei maestri del Rinascimento, eppure non rinuncia a far trasparire, nelle intercapedini degli spazi creati dagli intrecci, gli elementi che possiede per frequentazione quotidiana, e che ha fatto propri per una necessità interiore. È così che conchiglie, libri, mappe, forbici, si alternano a mani disincarnate colte negli affreschi del Beato Angelico a San Marco, e diventano la trama di un evento intimamente vissuto, partecipato nel profondo, restituendo una visione che troverà forse la sua piena interpretazione nei giorni futuri, quando alla tempestività emotiva si affiancherà uno sguardo più analitico, rafforzato dalla coscienza del distacco.

È il risultato di una disciplina costante, nella quale la creazione viene da questa fortemente serrata, ed è quanto tiene l'artista lontano da ogni forma di retorica, e vuota celebrazione. Un silenzio sembra pervadere le composizioni: un silenzio che splende nell'impianto strutturale delle linee, e che scivola verso gli elementi che racchiudono, svelando una trama che non spiega, ma induce lo spettatore isolare ed intuire il sentimento delle cose, dei luoghi, così fortemente evocativi e poetici per l'artista. È il silenzio che deve aver accompagnato Joel nelle sue lunghe passeggiate sulla riva dell'Arno, lo stesso silenzio che gli ha premesso di ascoltare lo scorrere, mutevole ed eterno, dell'acqua e delle infinite sfumature intonate al verde che l'artista richiama non nelle opere, condotte a grafite, ma nel titolo, evidenziandone l'elemento sacro, astratto, eterno, riflesso nelle fronde dell'albero di magnolia che ha osservato rinnovarsi ogni giorno, così come nei fondali metafisici degli affreschi dell'Angelico e nelle opere di Masaccio e Pontormo. È quel verde che l'artista sa di poter rivedere ogni volta che vorrà visitare questo suo luogo della memoria, per ritrovarsi, ancora, nella sintesi di quella luce.

Elisa Gradi (Giugno 2020)

THE ARNO'S ANCIENT GREEN IS HOLY, NOT COLOR

We met Joel Werring on a February afternoon, a few weeks after his arrival in Florence. The conversation was animated and lively, joyfully noisy; plans, ideas, and projects for the semester to come. Joel told us about his long walks, how much he enjoyed the beauty of Florence wandering in the hills, strolling along the banks of Arno. We shared our favorite routes: from Via del Monte alle Croci to San Miniato, and then up to Pian de' Giullari, Arcetri, Bellosguardo. We wanted to share, set new goals, realize new ideas.

But something suddenly overwhelmed us, and, as the days passed, we could no longer hope that it was just a nightmare destined to fade in the morning light. Plans changed; day by day, a new strength arose, which led us to face the unknown.

Joel chose to stay in Florence and to continue his research here, in this city, translating into form the perception of a reality that was hard to understand, as it was unknown, shocking, so complicated to grasp in its perpetual becoming. Nothing better than a beloved place can reveal the true nature of a person; for Joel, Florence has come to embody a choice. It is not the city he had known so far: with a new gaze, he chases its vanishing lines, the chromatic vibration of its atmospheres. Finally, he recognizes how that riverbank on which he had found shelter from what life inexorably imposes, surprisingly – and wonderfully – is an opportunity. A feeling of deep gratitude emerges in the works made by Joel Werring in these last months. They are the work of a learned painter who does not look at the past as a source of quotations but rather grasps its most profound meaning, the germ of how to perceive and understand the real.

Perhaps to prevent chaos, Joel meshes his vision through vertical and horizontal elements. He takes inspiration from the great Renaissance masters, yet does not renounce to unveil, in the gaps of an interwoven reality, objects that have become his own by daily use, that he has made his own out of an inner need. Shells, books, maps, scissors alternate with disembodied hands, once discovered in Fra Angelico's frescoes in San Marco. They have become part of something intimately and deeply felt, a vision, which might reveal its full meaning in days to come, when a more analytical look will accompany the emotional involvement, reinforced by the awareness of detachment.

It is the result of a constant discipline, which firmly leads the creative act, keeping the artist safe from any form of rhetoric or empty celebration. Silence seems to permeate the compositions: a silence that shines through the structure of traced lines, flowing within the elements that enclose it, revealing a plot that does not explain but inspires in the viewer the feeling of things and places that are so evocative and poetic for the artist. An echo of the silence that accompanied Joel in his long walks on the banks of the Arno. The same silence that allowed him to recall the metaphysical backgrounds of Angelico's frescoes and the work of Pontormo, while listening to the perpetually changing flow of water and its countless shades of green. The artist evokes this green in the title he has chosen for its corpus of work, rather than in the drawings themselves, which are created using graphite. In doing so, he expresses its sacredness, its holy abstraction – The Arno's Ancient Green is Holy, Not Color –, which he saw shining through the magnolia's flowers and leaves, as well as in the metaphysical backgrounds of Fra' Angelico's frescoes, and in Masaccio's and Pontormo's work. That green he can recall every time he wants to visit this place of his memory, and discover himself in the synthesis of that light.

Elisa Gradi (June 2020)

I met Joel for the first time when only a few days separated us from the beginning of the spring semester 2020. It is that moment of the year when it is almost natural to feel the urge of a new beginning; winter is about to end, before us only the need to come up with new and exciting projects. Furthermore, being the LdM Gallery Coordinator, the possibility of organizing the personal exhibition of an important and celebrated artist was something I was expecting with great enthusiasm.

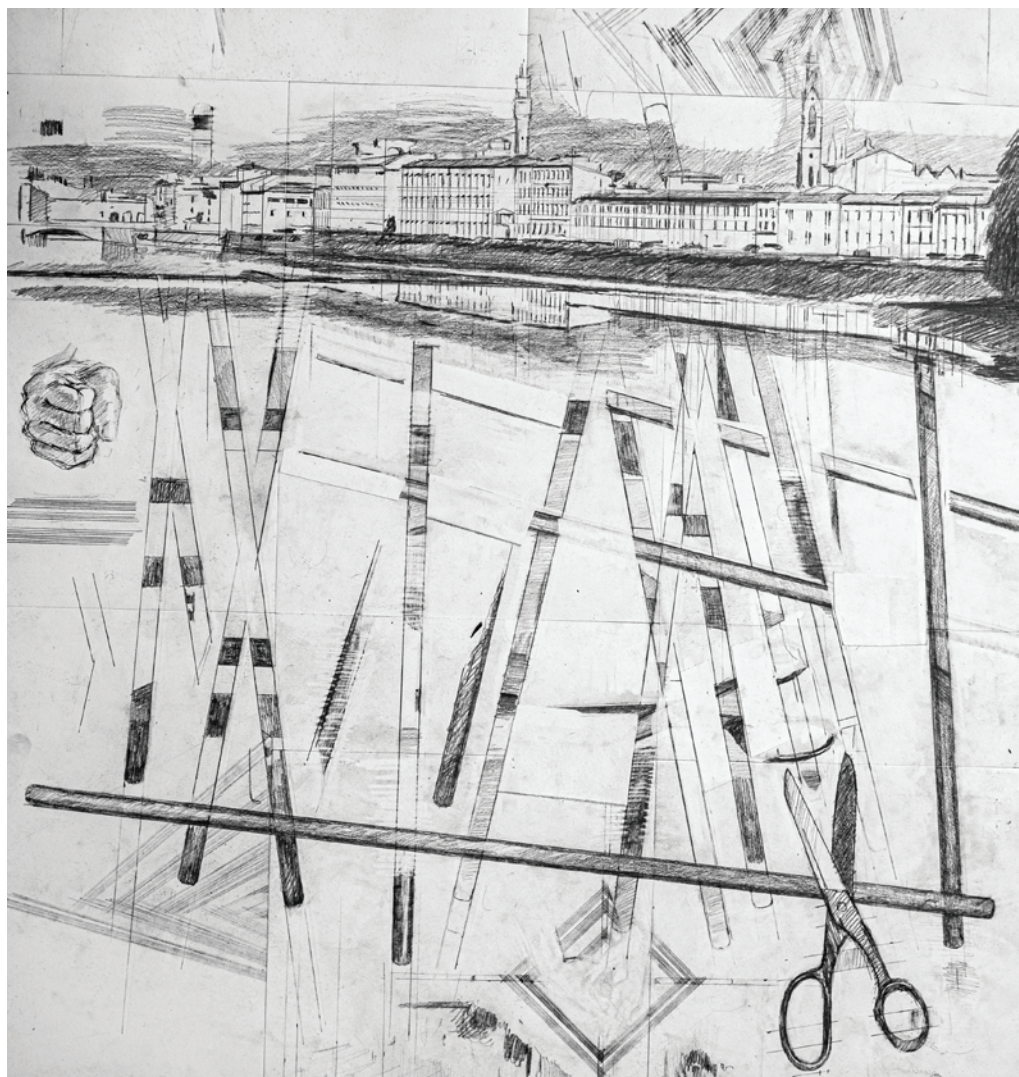
Joel turned out to be exactly what they told me about: kind, super professional and deeply in love with the experience he was having with his family in Florence. We went almost immediately to visit the gallery, and I distinctly remember his excitement and enthusiasm with which he had accepted to work in view of his exhibition. Joel literally wanted to invade the gallery space with his drawings, in what would become a large immersive installation. Unfortunately, he couldn't do this in the gallery, but the extraordinary thing is that he still managed to carry out his project inside his Florentine apartment, a large part of it transformed in his studio.

Selecting the works for this online exhibition was the easiest thing I was asked to do. In his Florentine months, Joel has, in fact, worked a lot and well, and when you have so much quality in front of your eyes, you just have to be careful to find the right balance.

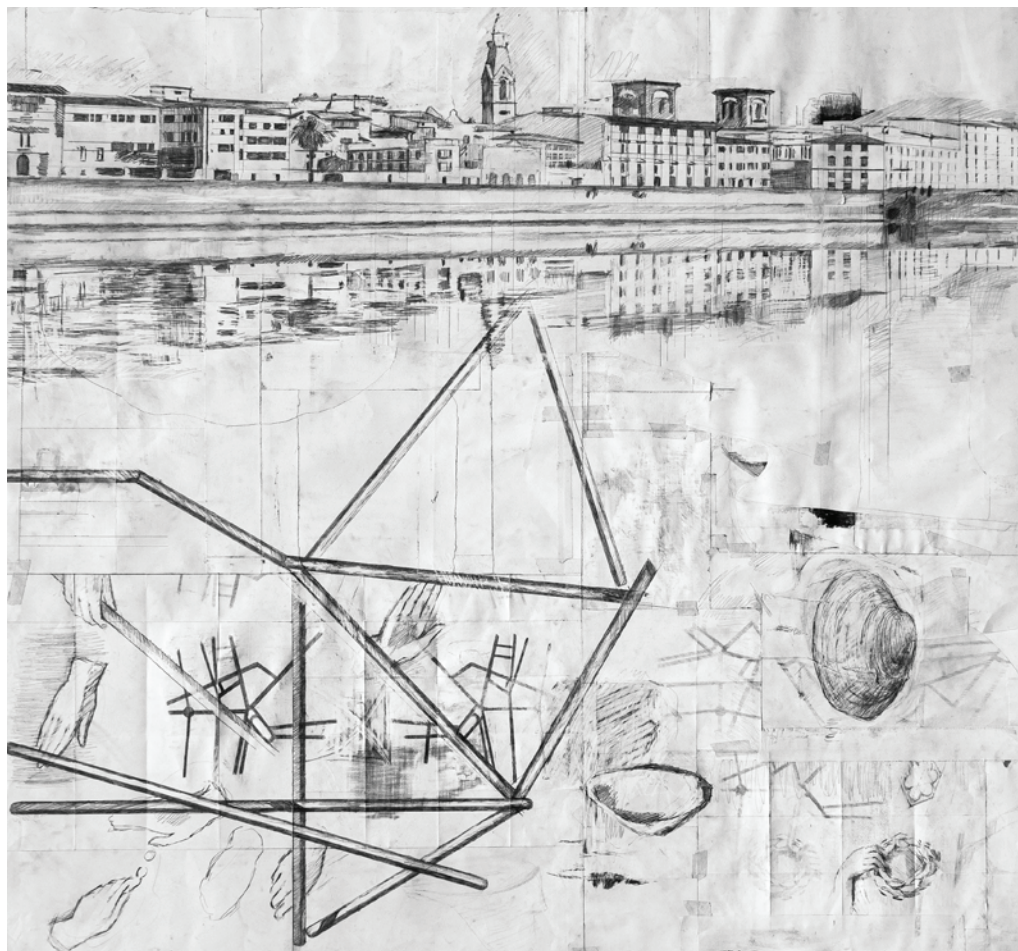
To complete the exhibition, a video in which the artist tells us about his experience in Florence and how all this has profoundly influenced his way of working. All of us are left with the pleasure of enjoying his works, grateful to Joel for his passion and infinite humanity.

Federico Gori

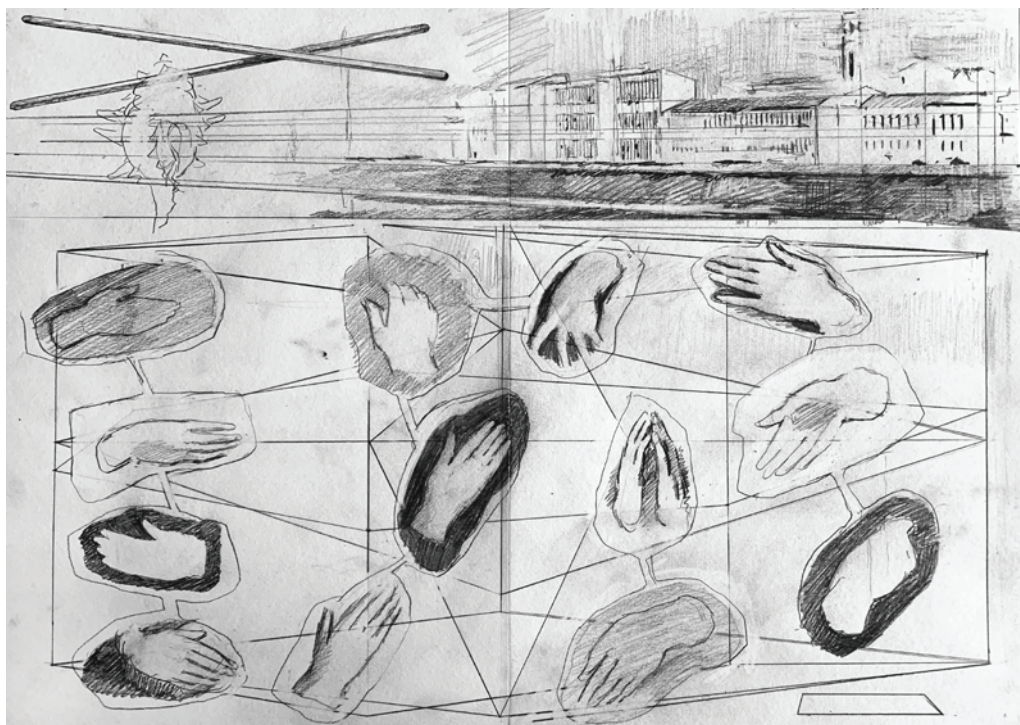
LdM Gallery Coordinator



Rock, Paper, Scissors, graphite and collage, 70 x 66, 2020



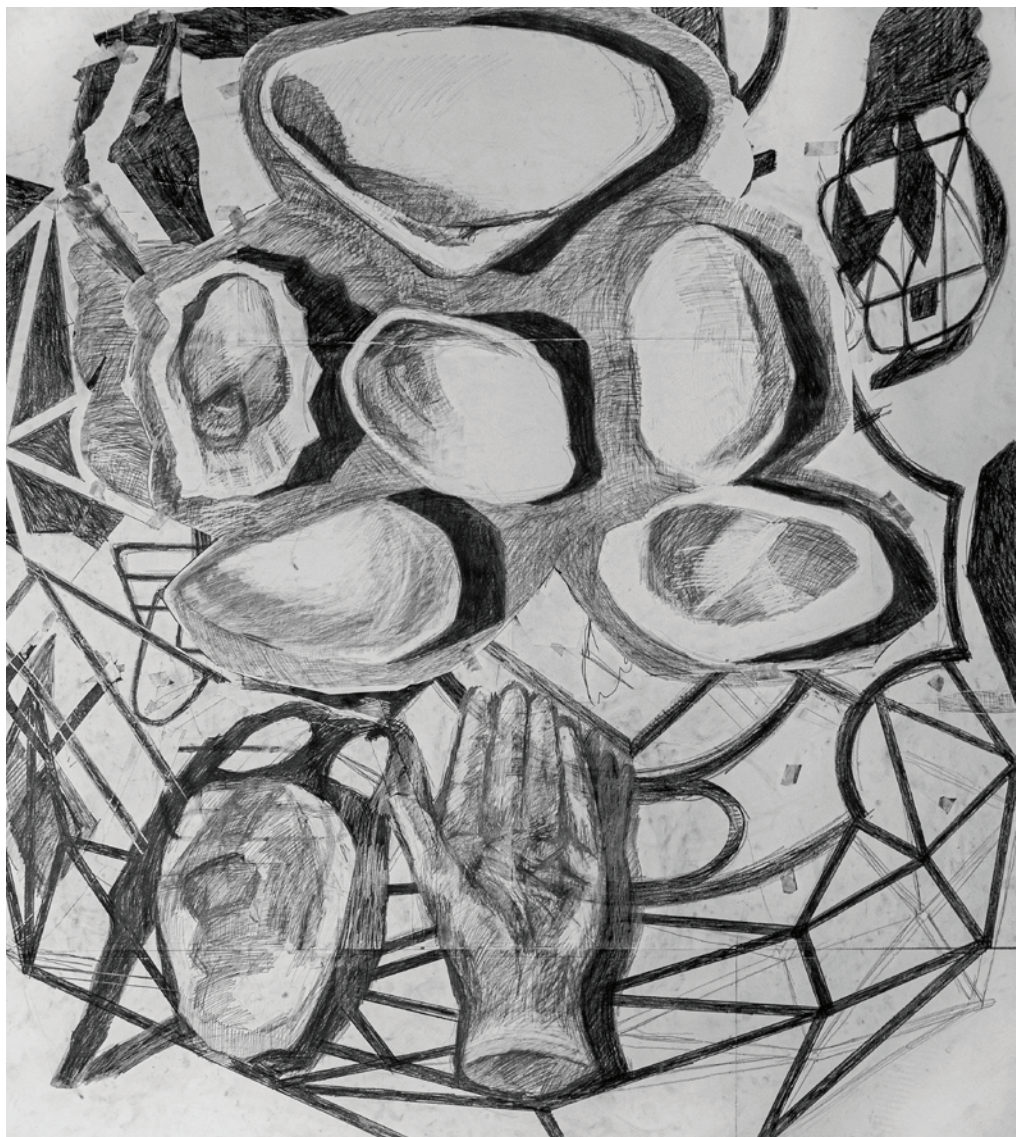
Arno, graphite and collage, 120 x 125, 2020



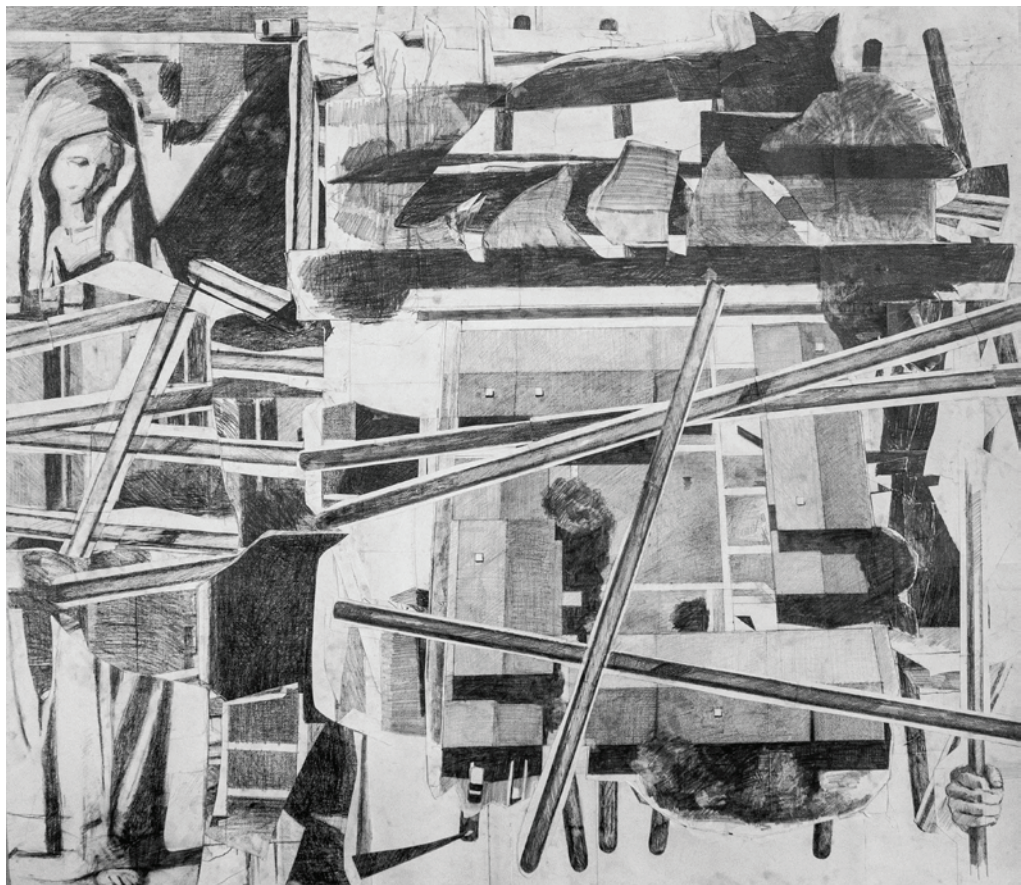
Lungarno, graphite, 34 x 48, 2020



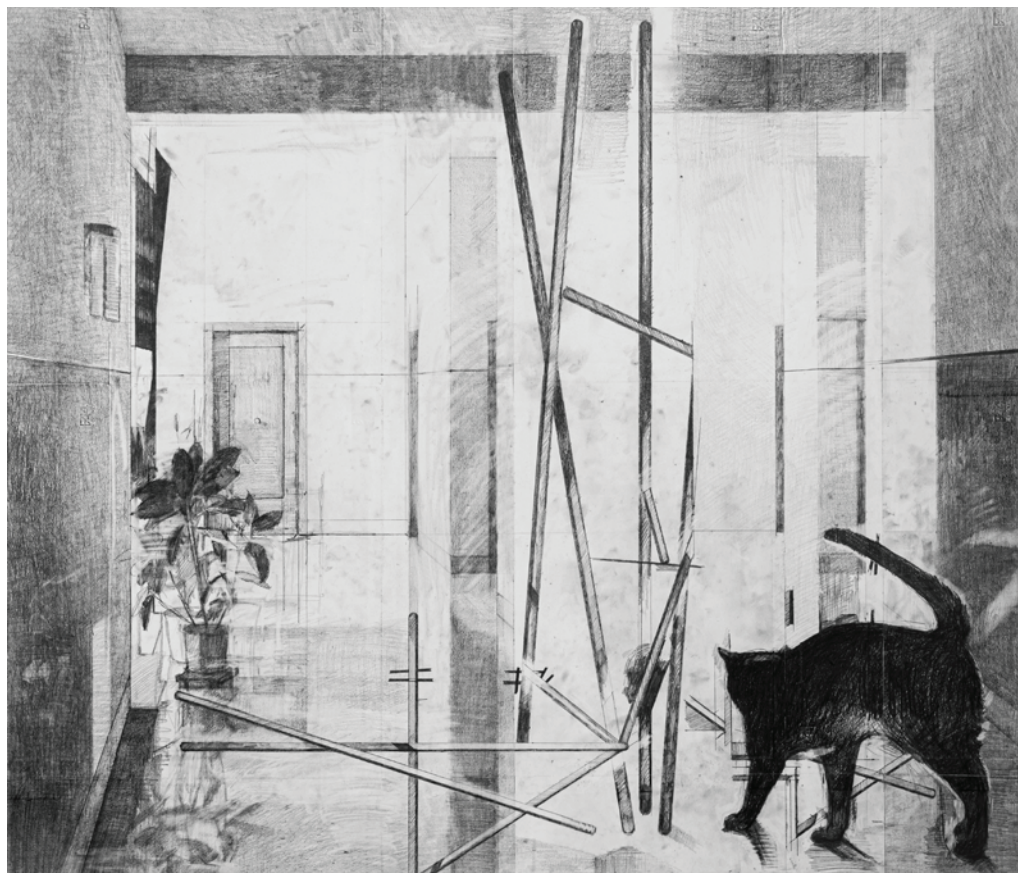
Grazie (work in progress), graphite and collage, 160 x 192, 2020



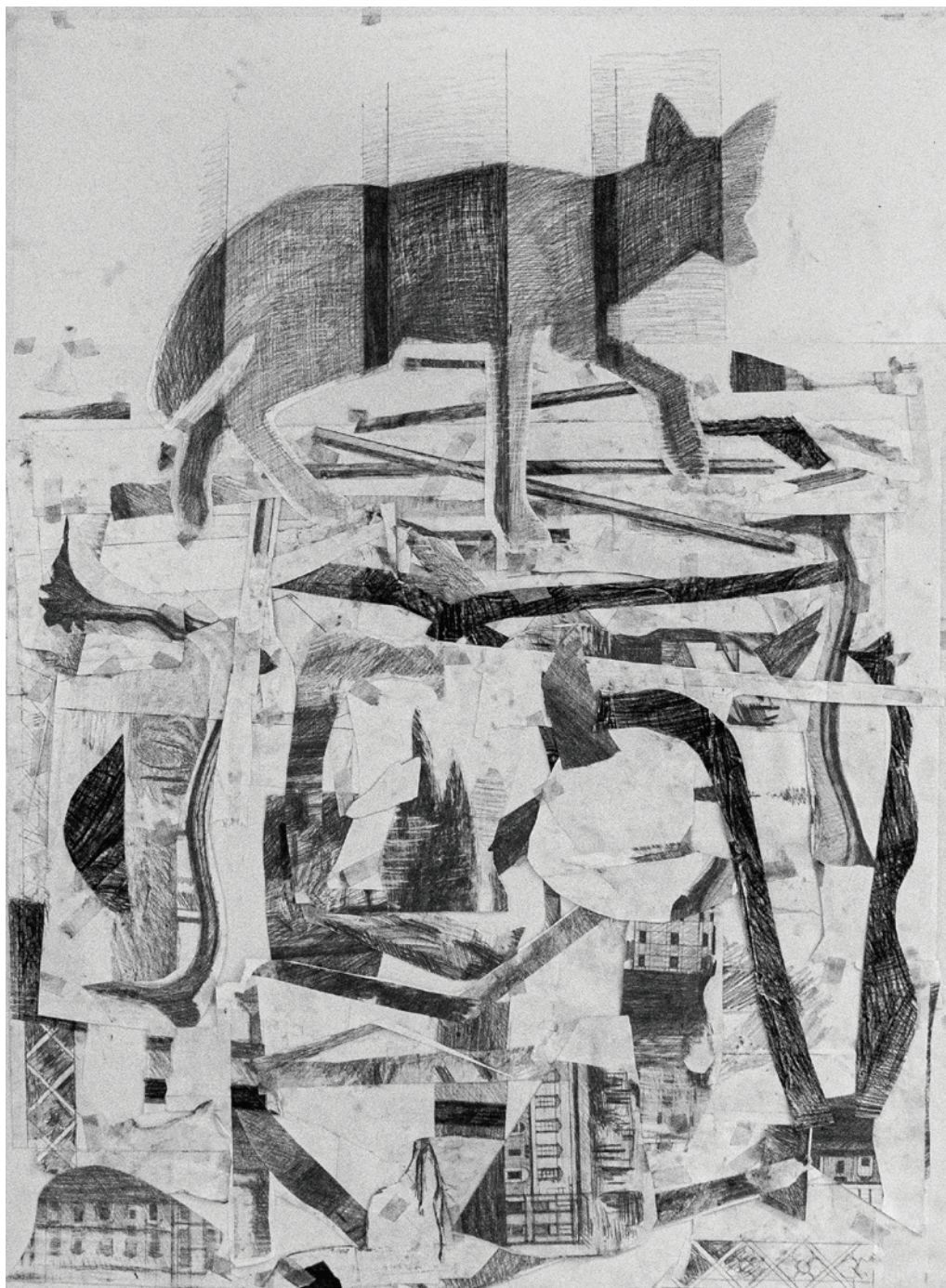
Big Shells, graphite and collage, 152 x 137, 2020



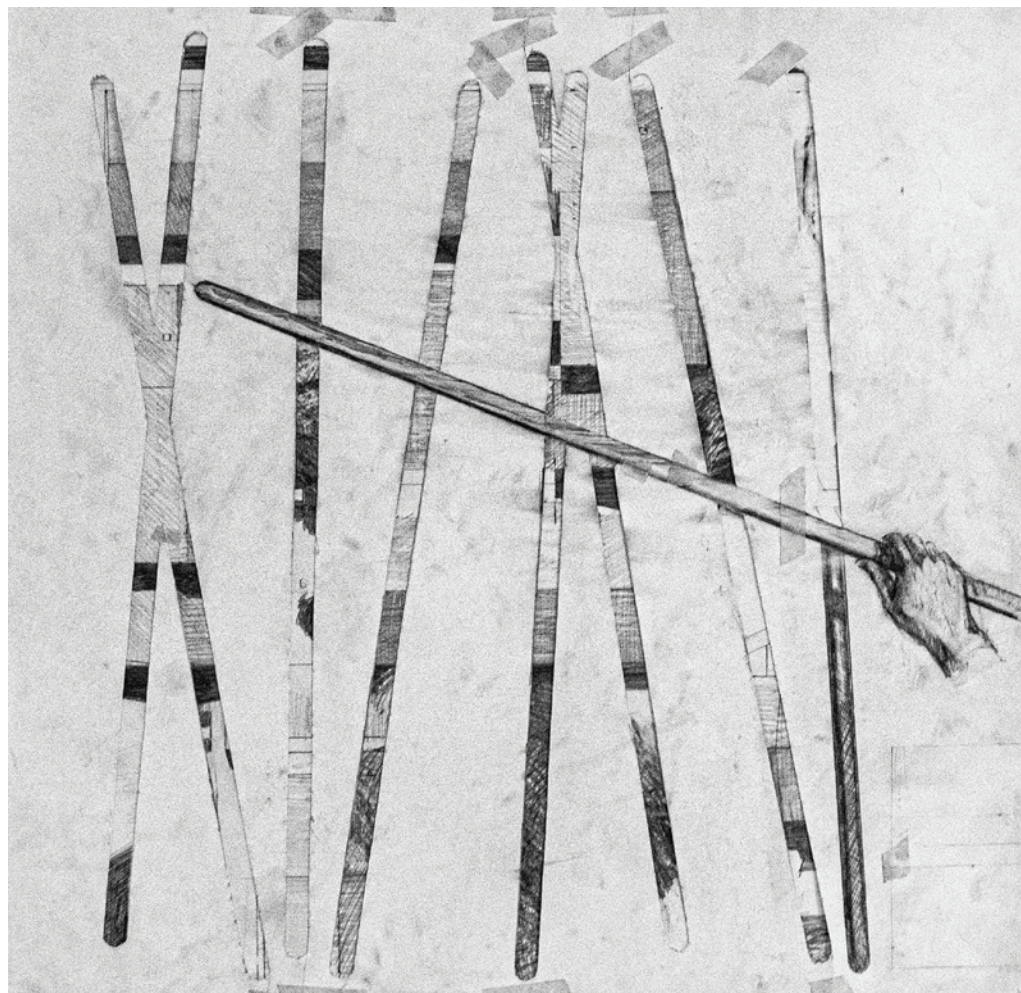
Den, graphite and collage, 145 x 128, 2020



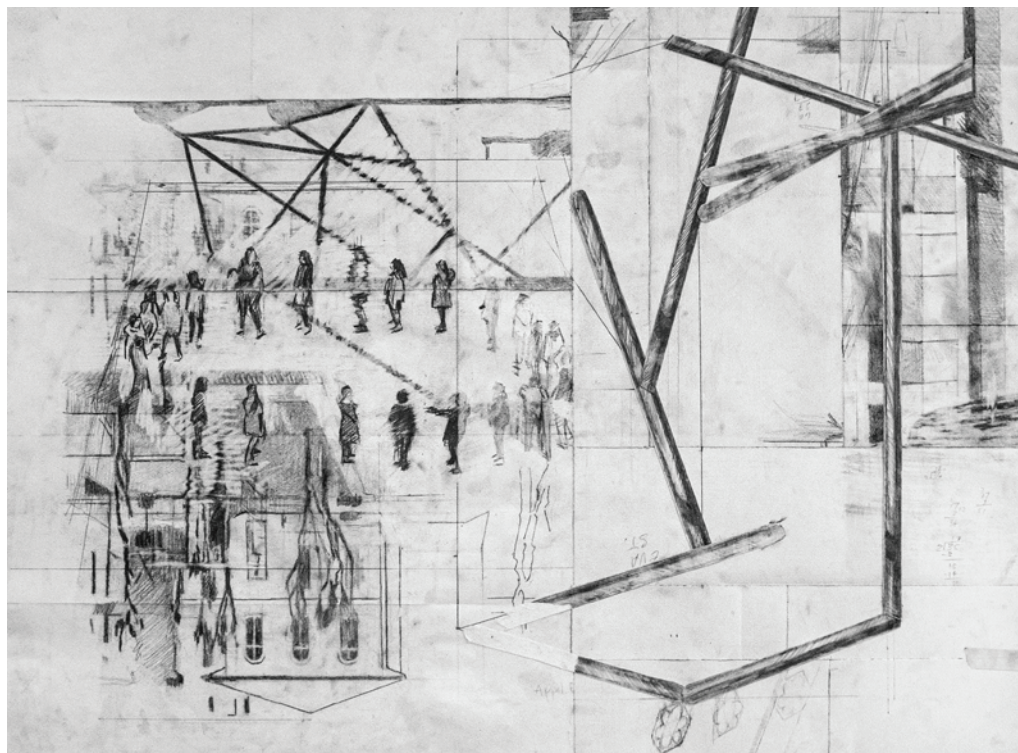
Third Floor, graphite, 95 x 105, 2020



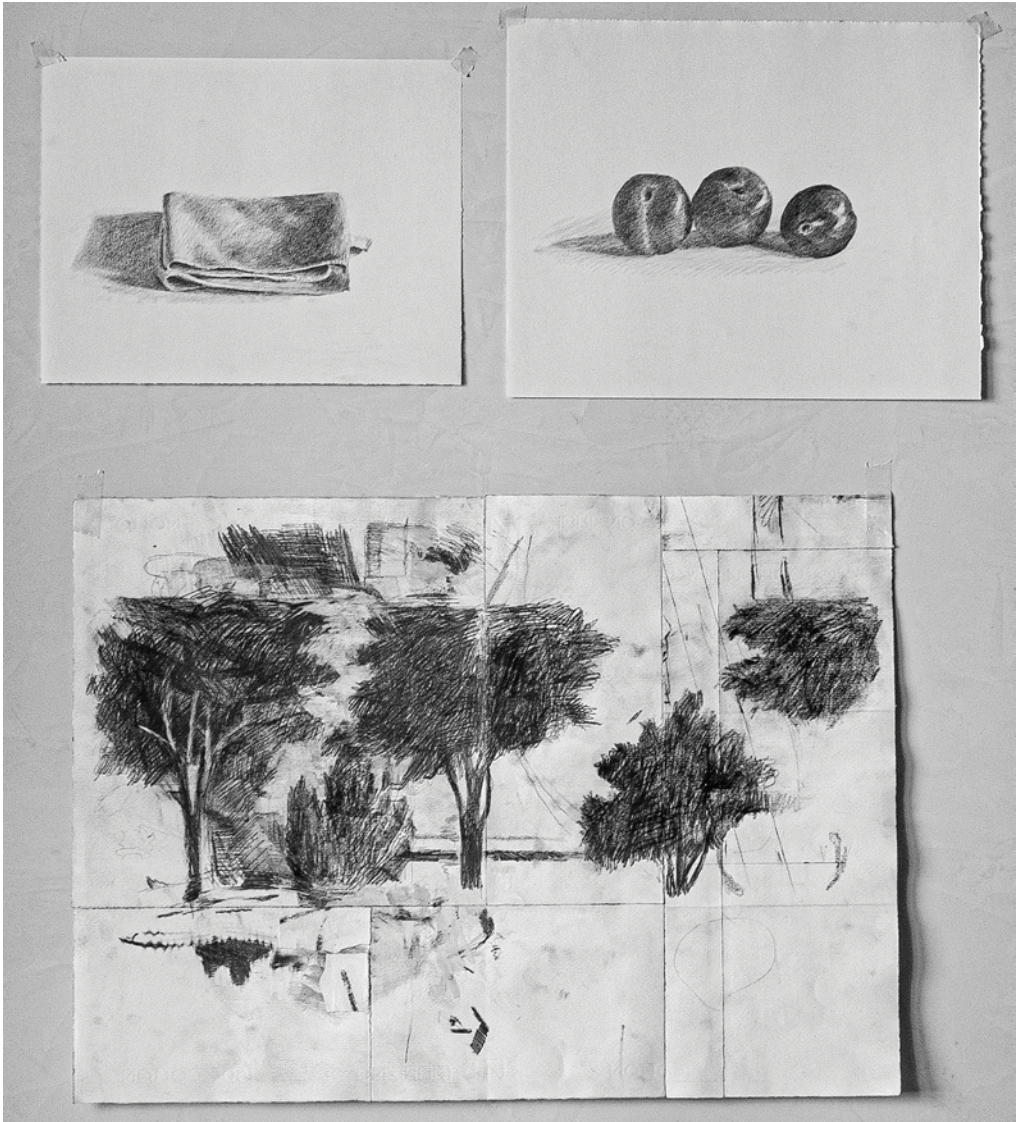
Coyote, graphite and collage 152 x 100, 2020



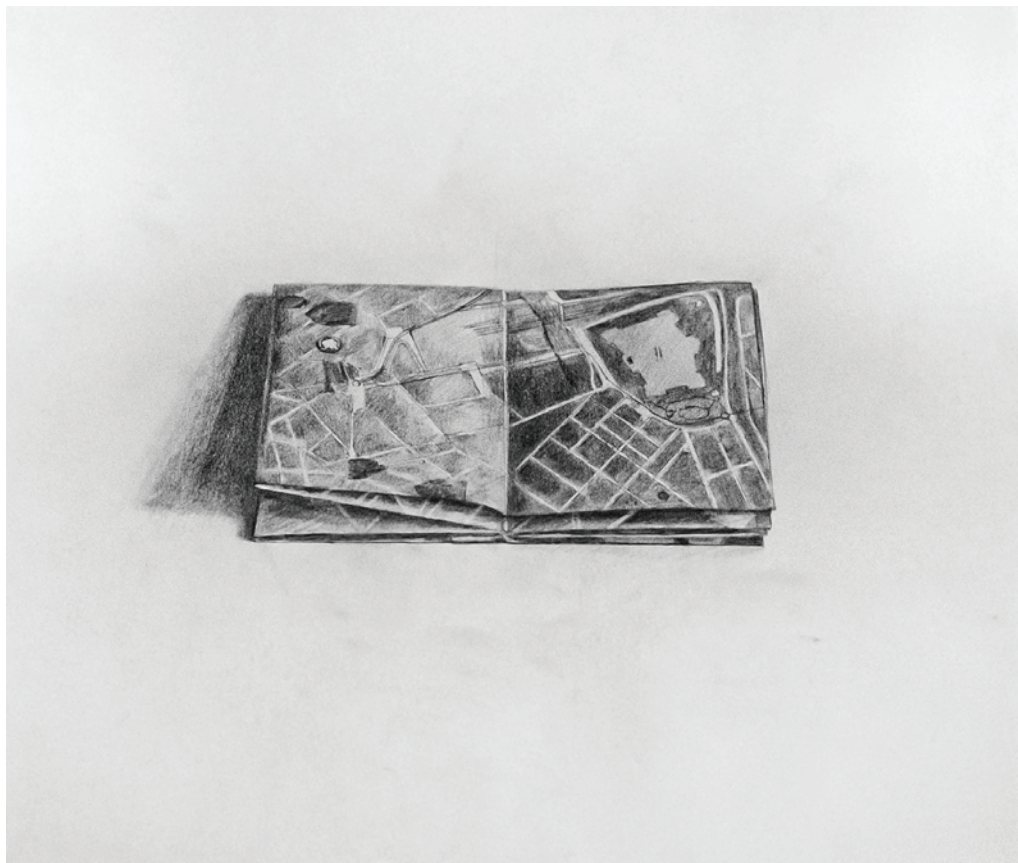
Wands, graphite and collage, 71 x 71, 2020



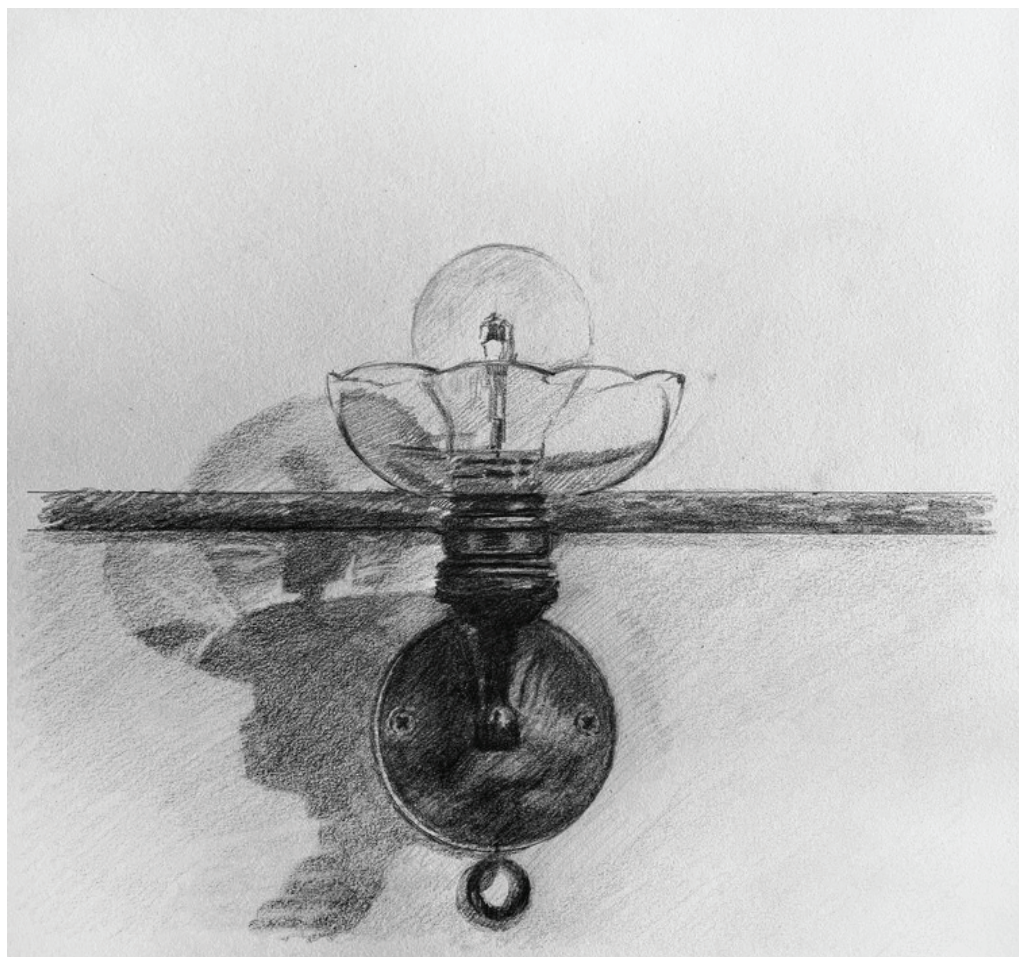
Schoolyard, graphite and collage, 65 x 85, 2020



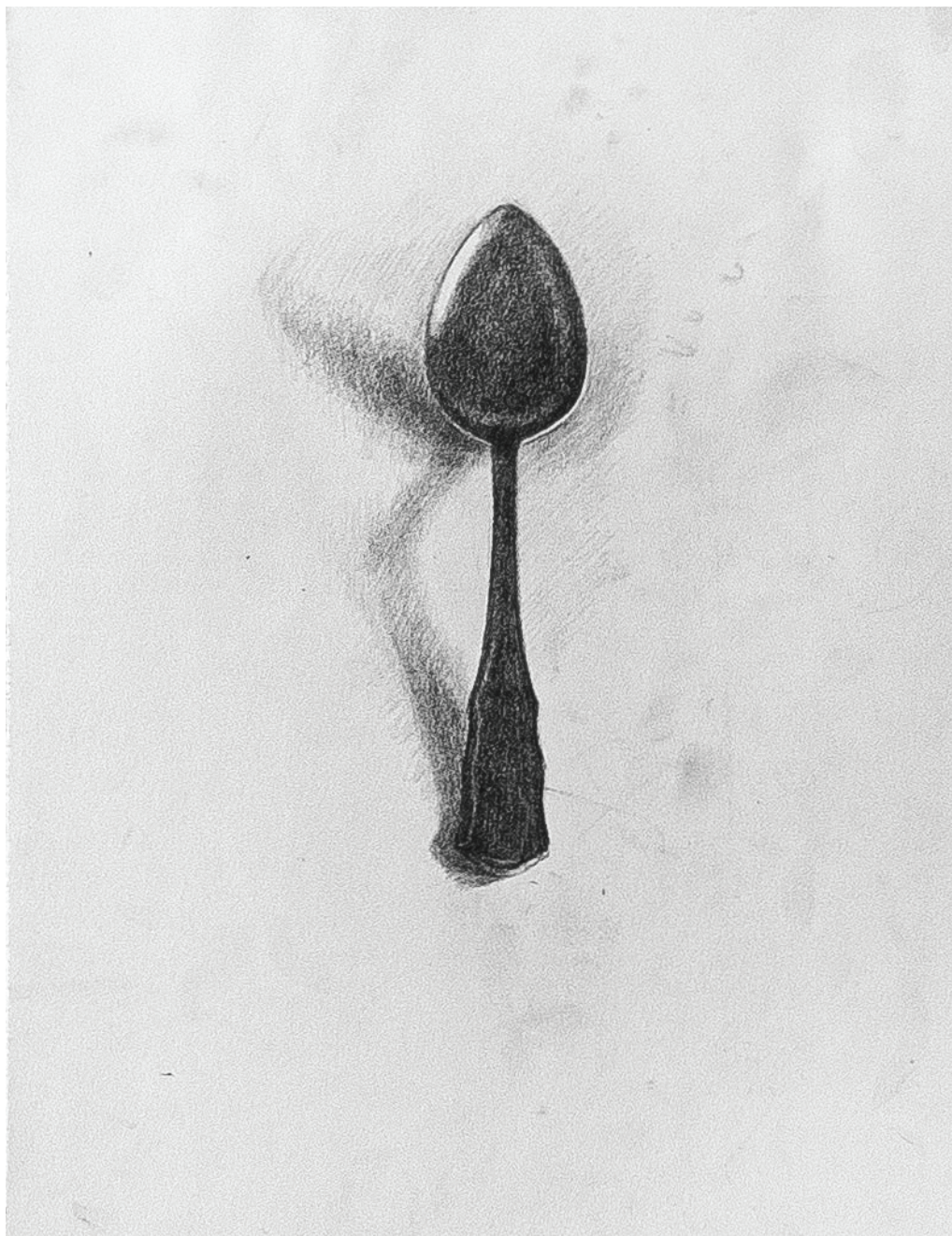
Washcloth, Plums and Masaccio's Trees



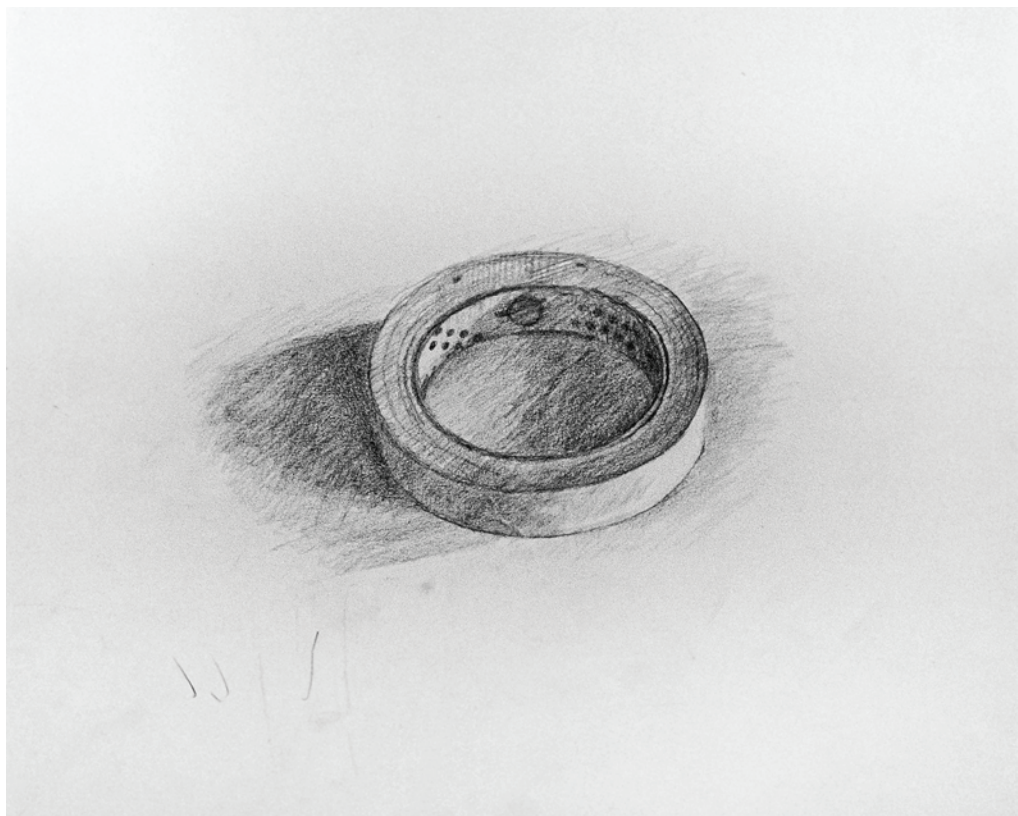
Map, graphite, 34 x 40, 2020



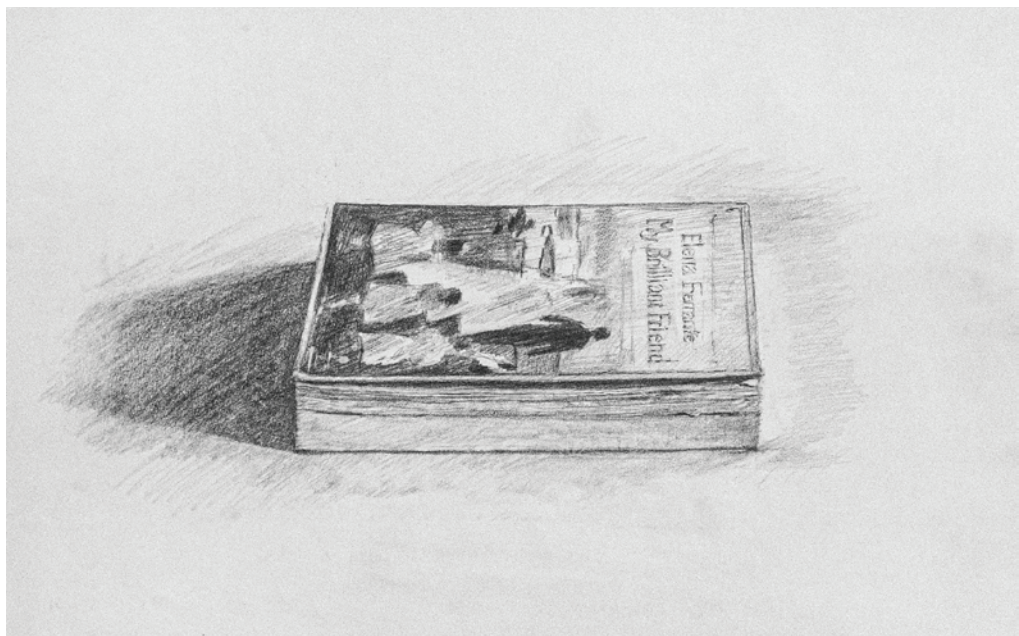
Light, graphite, 28 x 28, 2020



Spoon, graphite, 30 x 23, 2020



Tape, graphite, 27 x 33, 2020



Italian Story, graphite, 30 x 47, 2020