

SIGNE STUART

F I F T E E N

Front Cover:

Construction for Line IX, 1963, acrylic on wire-sewn canvas, 48" x 48". Collection of the artist.

Title Page:

Wall (detail), 2004-2006, gesso on collaged Rives and assorted papers, ca. 8'7" x 13'10". Collection of the artist.

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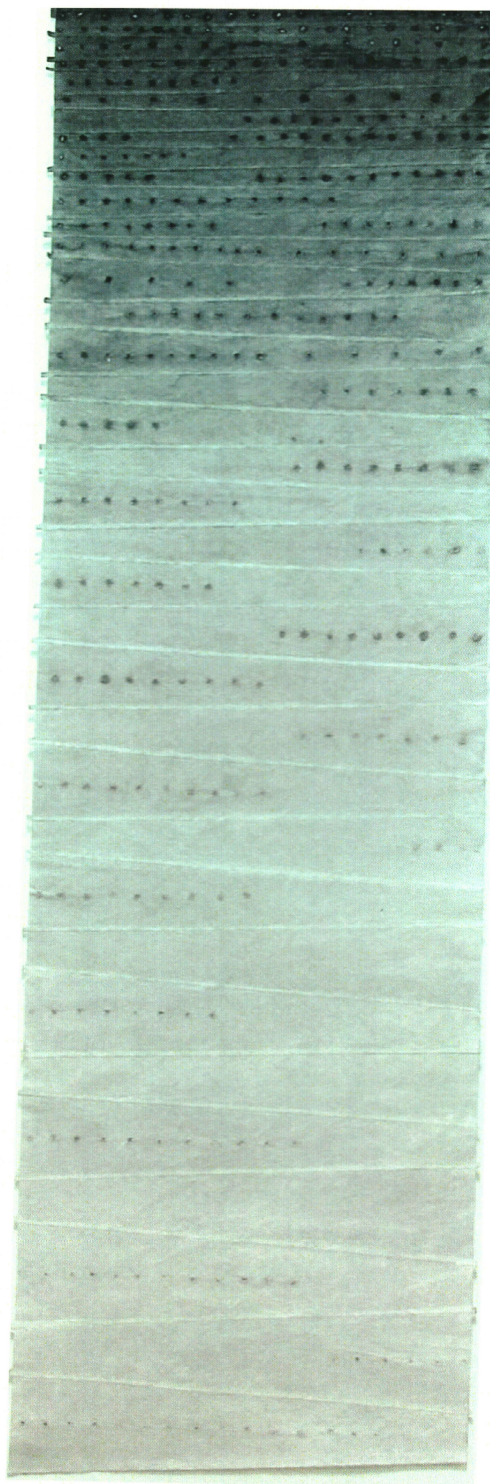
SIGNE STUART

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For more than five decades, Signe Stuart has explored the interconnectedness of materiality and immateriality through her art. Whether she is creating abstract paintings, works on paper, mixed media constructions, or installations, Stuart's work originates from the patterns and textures of this world, but her subjects are intangible in nature, dealing with essences rather than the appearance of things. Her oeuvre presents the viewer with a paradox, expressing immaterial nature through tactile materials. *Signe Stuart: Fifteen* is an exploration of this artist's ongoing creative investigations. Each of the fifteen works in this exhibition was completed in a different year, providing the viewer with a sampling of Stuart's art through time. It is not a comprehensive retrospective, but a visual meditation on the changes and continuities that have shaped her artistic inquiries.

Stuart's formal art education, first at the University of Connecticut and then at the University of New Mexico, was steeped in Abstract Expressionism, yet she found that the action-driven, emotive emphasis of this

*Continuum, 2000,
acrylic on collaged and
perforated mulberry
paper, 75" x 24 1/2".
Collection of the artist.*



painterly approach did not especially suit her visual and intellectual interests.¹ Consequently, she chose to pursue her own artistic instincts, with the natural world becoming her greatest inspiration for both her stylistic approach and conceptual framework. For several years she lived and worked as an art professor in Brookings, South Dakota, where she was deeply influenced by the landscapes of the Badlands and other regions, especially the geological and climactic processes that created these places. After relocating to Santa Fe in the 1990s, her work began incorporating the palette and textures of her New Mexico environs.² Several pieces created throughout her career also incorporate silica to emphasize their physical nature. Commonly found in minerals such as quartz, the silica in Stuart's canvases allows her to draw new designs into her actual paintings, and gives her work a grainy, sandy appearance reminiscent of earth.

Stuart's interest in nature also extends to its most

fundamental processes. Subatomic vibrations, electromagnetic waves of light and sound, fields of energy, and other phenomena that are invisible but essential to life as we know it deeply inform her work, with the underlying structure of her pieces becoming as significant as their surface appearance.³ This is especially apparent in her canvas paintings, which Stuart paints in multiple layers of thin glazes, creating a staining effect that allows the canvas support and sewn linear patterns to remain visible.⁴ Penetrating beyond superficial appearances, Stuart's work embodies what she calls "the nature of nature," becoming visual metaphors for existence itself.⁵

In addition to the natural world, Stuart has found inspiration in other art forms, particularly in Japanese art. Many of her paper-based works use traditional Chinese and Japanese materials such as mulberry and unryu paper and sumi ink. Other works, such as *Quinacra Crossings* and *Incidents 1*, adapt forms such

¹ Interview with the artist, February 15, 2015; James Yood, "Signe Stuart: An Essay," in *Signe Stuart: Retrospective* (Brookings, South Dakota: South Dakota Art Museum, 1995), 12.

² Yood, "Signe Stuart: An Essay," 12.

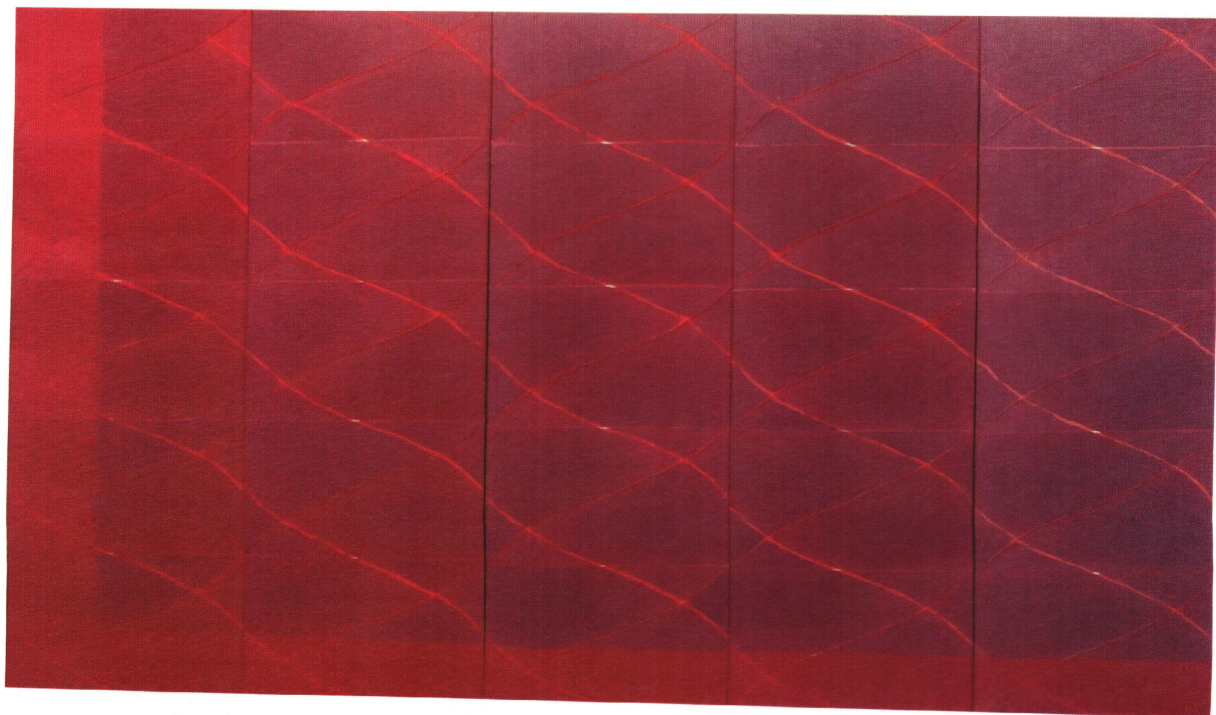
³ Signe Stuart, email message to the author, August 26, 2015.

⁴ Interview with the artist, February 15, 2015.

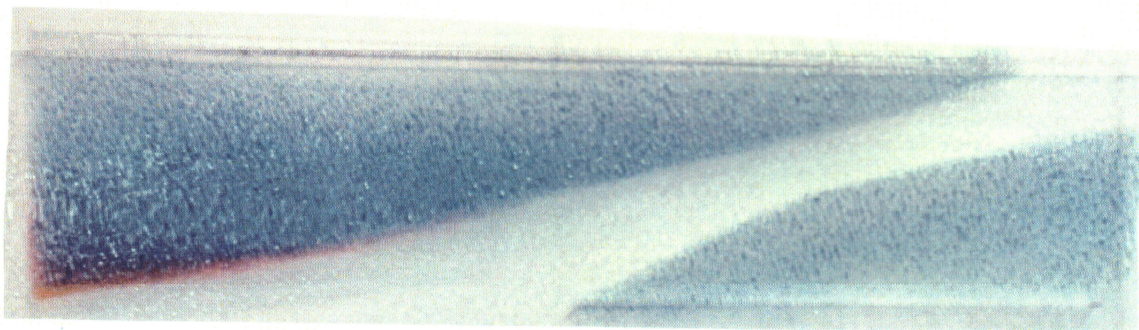
⁵ Stuart, email message to the author, August 26, 2015.

Incidents 1 (detail 1), 2002, acrylic and sumi ink on unryu paper, 11" x 60". Collection of the artist.





*Quinacra Crossings, 1982, acrylic on
sewn canvas (five panels), 54" x 90".
Collection of the artist.*



*Watershed 2, 2011, acrylic on
acrylic (Plexiglas), 12" x 48".
Collection of the artist.*

as folding screens and hand scrolls in order to explore the passage of real and imagined time. The prominence of negative space in Stuart's art, especially in her paper works, also echoes Asian aesthetics' allusions to the void, the emptiness which contains all and carries as much meaning as painted or constructed surfaces.⁶ Synthesizing these influences with her aesthetic sensibilities, Stuart has created her own formal vocabulary, resulting in a body of work that is highly varied in its use of forms and materials yet harmonizes with itself. Like a musical suite, viewers can appreciate each of her pieces independently while recognizing the visual melodies that connect them to one another.

One of these connections is the process of artistic creation. Sewing in particular has been an important working method for Stuart, especially in her paintings. Punctuating her canvases with contours ranging from straight lines to curving arcs, these stitched interventions highlight the distinctive texture of the canvas, emphasizing the fact that Stuart's paintings are material objects capturing light and creating shadows. Stitching underscores the handmade quality of these pieces, becoming a record of both the subtle transference of touch between the artist and her work, and the idea of imperfection, which for Stuart endows her art with a greater beauty than perfection itself.⁷ The act of stitching also becomes a metaphor for creation, with the needle and thread pulling ideas together into palpable forms.⁸ Many pieces, such as *Construction for*

Line IX, incorporate the actual production process into their titles, reminding viewers that these works have been physically built out of such materials as paper or canvas. Several larger works, including *Quinacra Crossings*, consist of multiple, smaller panels instead of a single one, a practice that developed out of pragmatic needs for space and shipping. To see these works in their intended form, assembly is required, a kind of reconstruction mimicking the artist's own process.⁹ Stuart's works are as much a visual record of their own genesis as they are explorations of materiality, narrating the story of their creation.

Yet for all its physicality, Stuart's art also exudes a decidedly immaterial quality, with actual openings and other negative spaces frequently appearing in her work. For her, "openings allude to real and imagined dimensions, playing with traditional ideas of painting as two-dimensional objects staying within the confines of the rectangle. My compositions are open: patterns, sequences, and rhythms seem to move beyond the physical to suggest the metaphysical."¹⁰ The openness of Stuart's compositions also alludes to their simultaneous sense of continuity and evolution, with her visual and intellectual investigations unfolding and developing over time.¹¹ As early as 1963, Stuart began incorporating openings into paintings such as *Construction for Line IX*, which features five slits loosely sewn back together with metal wire. More recently, *Nexus 3*, a paper-based construction created in 2012, resembles a net coalescing

⁶ Ibid; Yood, "Signe Stuart: An Essay," 18.

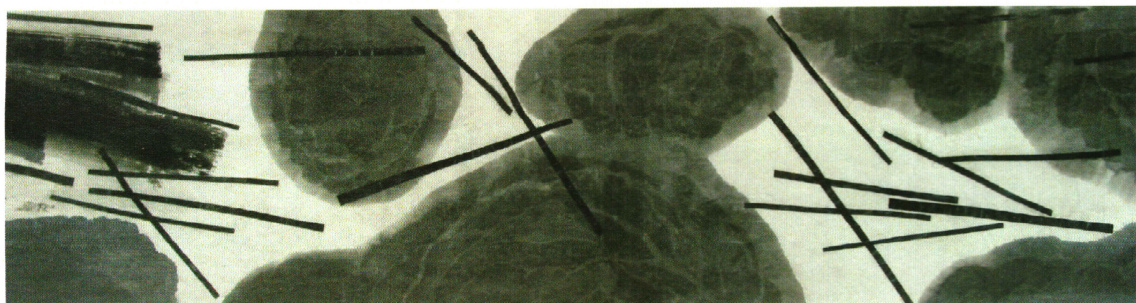
⁷ Stuart, email message to the author, August 26, 2015.

⁸ Interview with the artist, February 15, 2015; Yood, "Signe Stuart: An Essay," 14-16.

⁹ Interview with the artist, April 25, 2015.

¹⁰ Stuart, email message to the author, August 26, 2015.

¹¹ Ibid.



Incidents 1 (detail 2), 2002, acrylic and sumi ink on unryu paper, 11" x 60'. Collection of the artist.

into a large golden hemisphere, or synapses transferring energy and mapping spaces, with the openings at the edges of the work gradually filling in with gold-painted paper.¹²

Shadows are equally important in Stuart's work, often becoming one of the most critical parts of the composition. One particularly subtle example is *Watershed 2*, which is an acrylic painting on Plexiglas. The blue and red paint of *Watershed 2* appears to float on its transparent support, but the paint itself also casts a shadow underneath the plastic surface, reminding viewers of the work's tactile nature. Another piece, *Wall*, considers shadow on a bigger scale. While its title may imply a solid object or barrier, this work is a net-like construction of gessoed paper designed to be hung several inches in front of any actual wall, forming another, incorporeal wall through its own shadow play. Shadows are the immaterial counterpart to Stuart's art objects, simultaneously reminding viewers of the former's physicality while adding an ethereal dimension.

Within Stuart's oeuvre, *Wall* is also significant as a

precursor to her installation work of the last decade. Constructed out of lightweight Tyvek, these works represent not only her most ambitious use of shadow play and negative space, but also her ongoing commitment to artistic experimentation and the investigation of the dialogues that can occur between different materials, visual conversations that generate new directions for expressing her ideas.¹³ Typically occupying an entire gallery, these installations transport the viewer to a space defined by openings and shadows. As viewers engage these delicate spaces, their presence gradually affects the installation itself, with human movement alone eventually severing many of the fragile connections comprising the work's Tyvek walls. Such transformations are intentional in Stuart's conceptual framework, however, underscoring her ongoing interest in the passage of time and its impact on a work of art as a physical object.¹⁴

The necessity of a human presence in the unfolding of these installations emphasizes the significance of the interaction between the viewer and Stuart's work, for as she explains, "viewers complete the intent of an artwork

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with the artist, July 30, 2013.

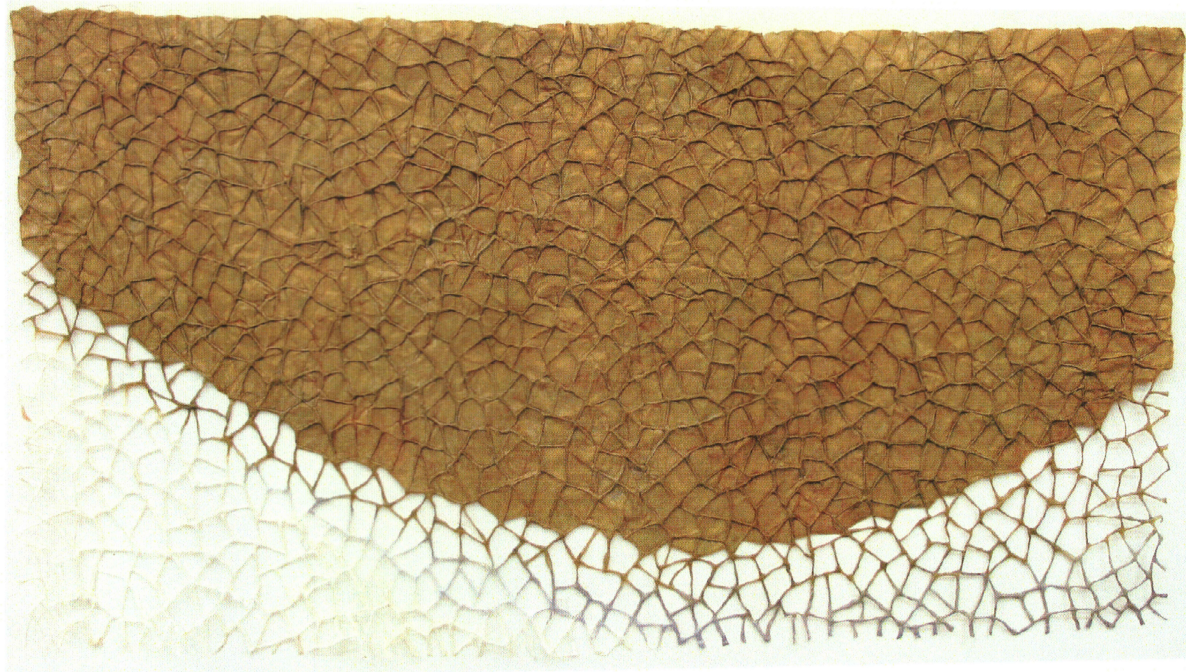
by recreating it through their own filters of thought and emotion, enabling a single work to assume multiple interpretations."¹⁵ Often designed to hang at eye level, her art projects a human quality. Pieces that incorporate Plexiglas into their compositions even reflect our own faces back to us, offering us our own representations through the lens of the painted image.¹⁶ Stuart's abstractions may not appear overtly anthropomorphic, but they nonetheless exude a decidedly human character by recreating the circumstances of face-to-face interaction. Such communication requires physical elements such as the body, gesture, and eye contact, but it is the incorporeal qualities of personality that

infuse such exchanges with humanity. Similarly, Stuart's art comes into existence through canvas, paper, and polymer, but it is the shadows, openings, and empty spaces that both enhance the work's physicality and pull us in as viewers. When we engage her art, we participate in a visual conversation that uses textures, colors, and other formal qualities rather than words. This engagement represents a final opening, for it is within this silence, the space between ourselves and the work, that Stuart's artistic voice is clearly heard.

Sara Woodbury
Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

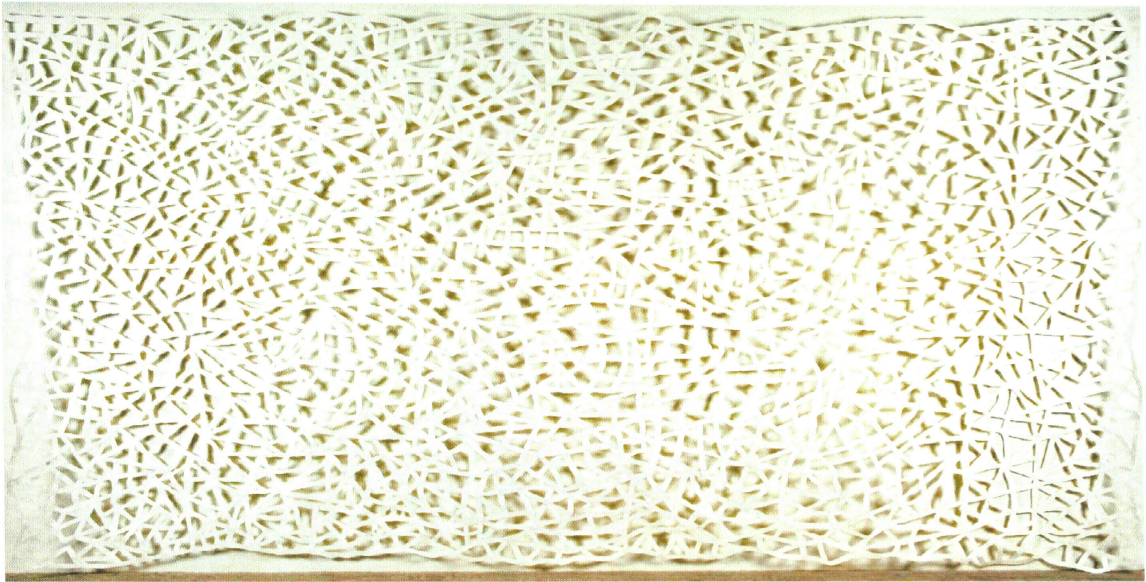
¹⁵ Stuart, email message to the author, August 26, 2015.

¹⁶ Interview with the artist, February 15, 2015.

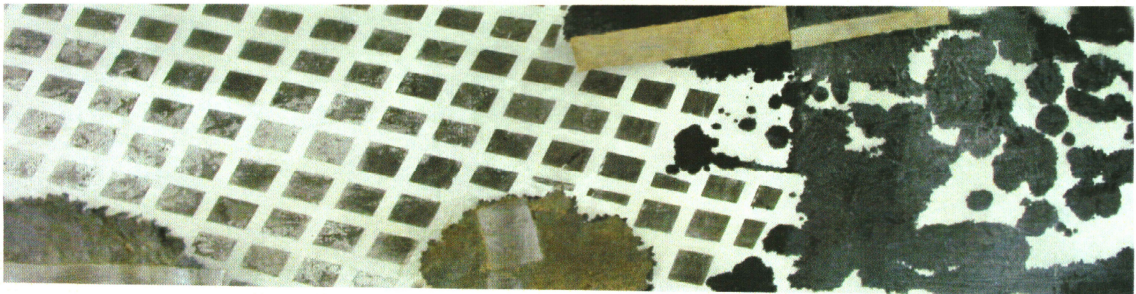


*Nexus 3, 2012, acrylic on reconstructed
Chinese unryu paper, 34 3/4" x 63 1/2".
Collection of the artist.*

*Wall, 2004-2006, gesso on collaged Rives
and assorted papers, ca. 8'7" x 13'10".
Collection of the artist.*



*Incidents 1 (detail 3), 2002, acrylic and
sumi ink on unryu paper, 11" x 60".
Collection of the artist.*



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