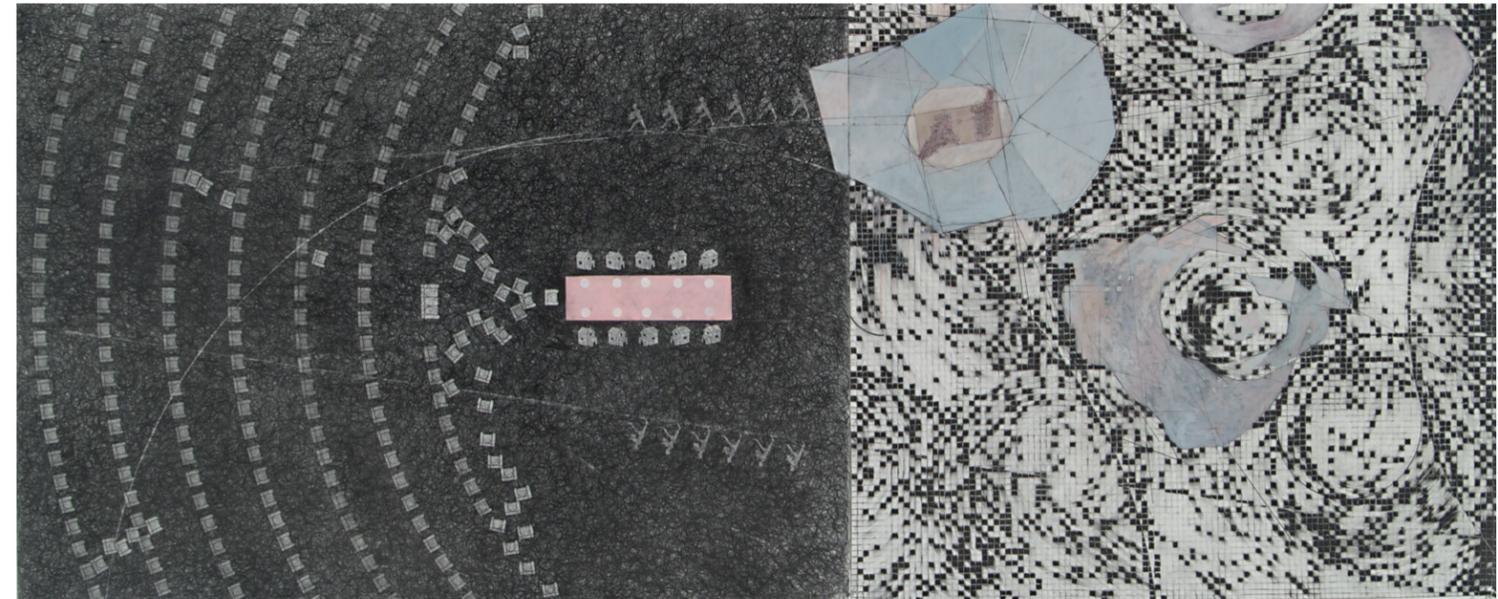
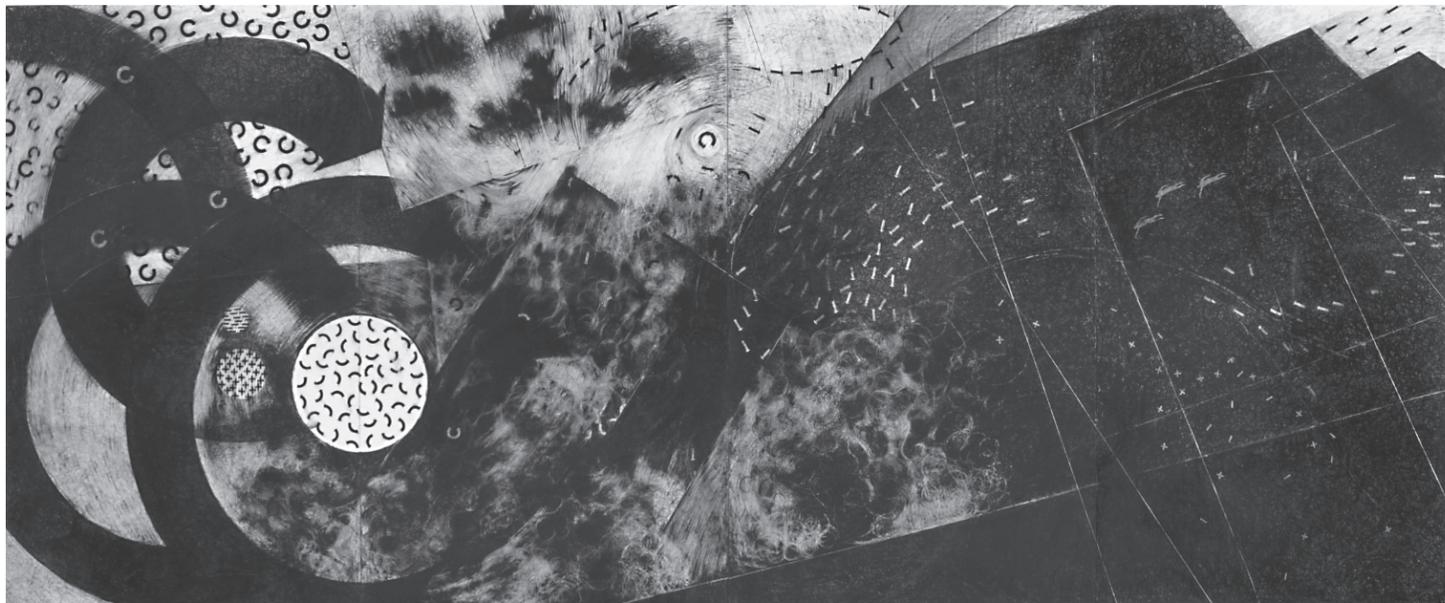




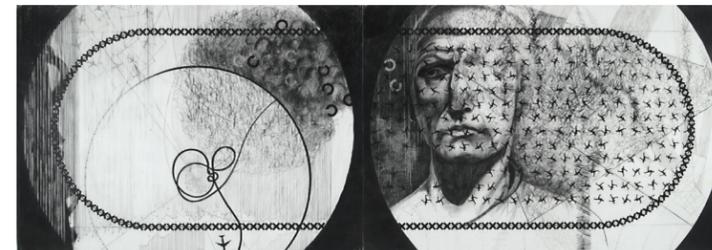
Installation view, *Catharsis*, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2013, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the AGSM



*Arena III*, acrylic, graphite, pencil on paper, 2011, image courtesy of the artist



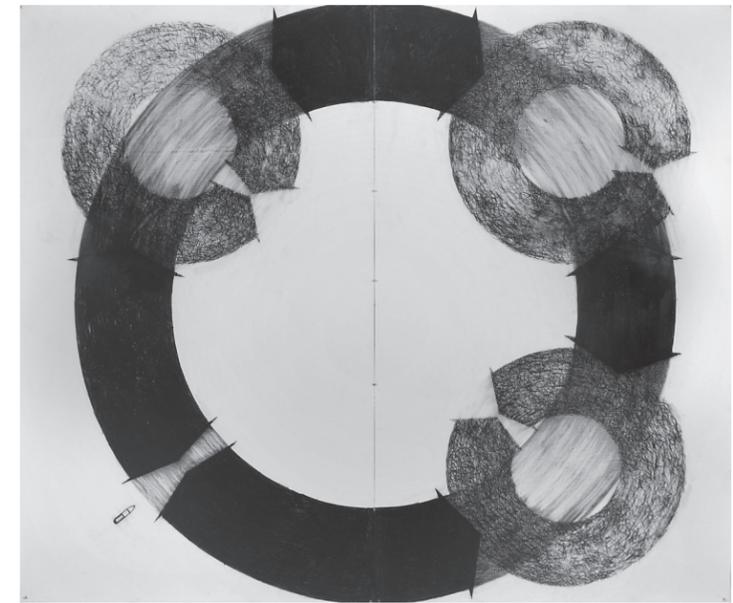
*Catharsis II*, graphite, pencil on paper, 2010, 84" x 200", image courtesy of the artist



*Arena II*, graphite, pencil on paper, 2010, 50" x 145", image courtesy of the artist



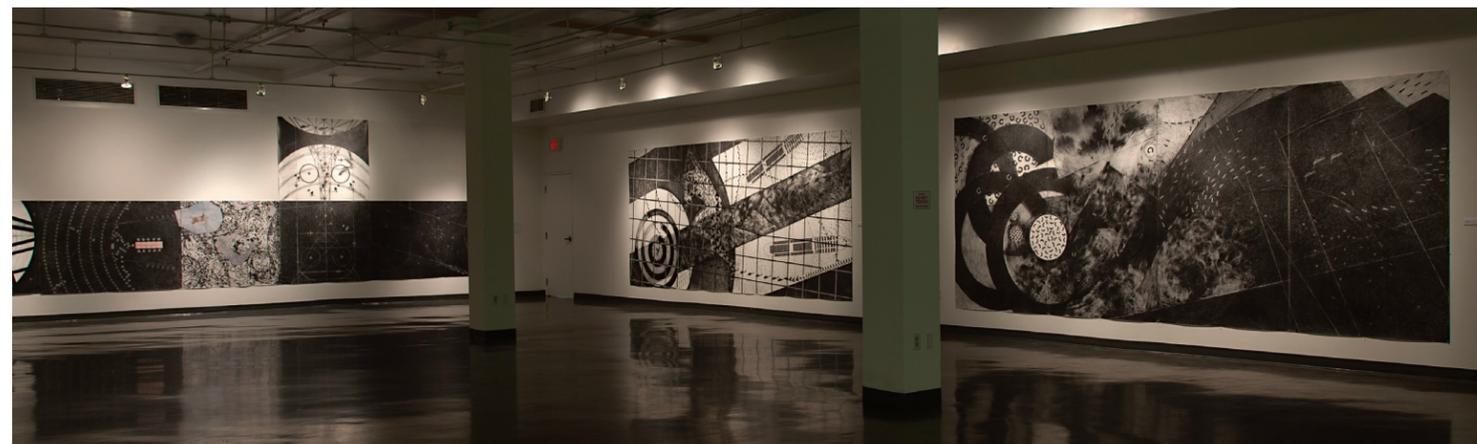
*Catharsis I*, graphite, pencil on paper, 2010, 84" x 200", image courtesy of the artist.



*Portal*, graphite, pencil on paper, 2007, 84" x 100", image courtesy of the artist

## DOUG SMITH

Doug Smith was educated at the University of Manitoba in the Fine Arts Diploma Program. He majored in ceramics and continued as a sculptor in clay for several years, eventually making a shift towards drawing and painting. His work has been exhibited in several group and solo exhibitions throughout Manitoba, the United States and Europe. Some exhibition venues include The Sculpture Center in Cleveland, Burke University in Ohio, the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, and Plug In ICA in Winnipeg. His work also resides in many corporate and private collections, including Manitoba Hydro, Great West Life, Manitoba legislature, Blue Cross Canada, as well as the Manitoba and Canada Art Banks. Since 2001, Smith has been working primarily on a large-scale ongoing drawing project.



Installation view, *Catharsis*, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2013, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the AGSM

## CATHARSIS DOUG SMITH

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA  
AUGUST 8 – SEPTEMBER 14, 2013

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA  
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2  
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

[www.agsm.ca](http://www.agsm.ca)

## SCHEMATIC FOR A UTOPIAN EVENT

The term *catharsis* has been used by Aristotle to describe the effect of purging societal angst through evocation of pity and fear in tragic drama. Outside the realm of theatre, the term’s meaning has been extended to signify personal experiences of release, such as in revealing repressed emotions and memories. Doug Smith’s series of monumental drawings build on ideas of spectacle and transmigration, suggesting the possibility of staging cathartic moments for the viewers in which their personal and collective memories and emotions become unhinged. The drawings tower over the spectators, enveloping and sweeping up the viewers into the uncanny logic of meticulously repeated stencilled images. By carefully orchestrating moments of recognition and chaos, Smith brings into question how meaning is projected onto the drawings’ surface. Commercial aircraft, military helicopters, marching soldiers, human and bird figures, references to architectural draftsmanship and interior design, and familiar landmarks weave through the exhibition as a cast of easily recognizable characters. Our surroundings are already filled with these images that permeate the news, Internet, magazines, videogames and billboards. References to popular culture and comics contained within the narrative of the drawings also suggest easy readability and access, while the monumental format builds a space of spectacle and awe. However, unlike the easily consumed and predetermined contents of the media that Smith references, there is no easy reading of the narrative within his works. As a result, Smith creates a simultaneous push and pull between accessibility and a mutable meaning. This sense of opaque familiarity that steers clear of a specific reading brings into focus the space just below the surface of both personal and the collective consciousness.

The inner discomfort brought forth by seeing figures lined up in formation - their individual identity reduced to meticulously repeated stencils - resonates with the fear of totalitarianism and the anxiety of slipping into a collective consciousness led astray. By building on patterns and habits of power, and their representation through diagrams and schematics, Smith mirrors and subverts an easy linear reading. Immersion into the complex whirlpools, twists, and arrows within Smith’s work creates a different way of looking at images that constitute our own environment, leading one to reflect not only on what is represented in the drawings but also far beyond them. The flow within the exhibition also suggests that the scenes depicted are not final, but continue to move outside the frame and the gallery walls.

The idea of surrounding the spectators with images, especially repeated patterns that signify and simplify the logic of exterior life, can be argued to date back to earliest types of representation. Integral to forms of ritual, they have always maintained a strong tie to power. Enormous panoramas were patented by Robert Baker in 1787 in England, striving to present encompassing views of European cities, British conquests, and Imperial wealth. It is rumoured that when the first panoramas opened to the public, spectators felt nauseated and fainted as they were not used to the intensity and scale of the images. Contemporary experiments with 3D cinema, immersive

virtual reality, and enormous IMAX screens, belong to the same lineage. Smith’s drawings, however, while they reference the relationship between representation and power inherent in these traditions, stay clear of transparent representation. As they always slip into abstraction, the uneasy immersion invites anxious attempts to decode and contemplate meaning, replacing acts of passive consumption.

The tiny human figures fill a space that rests beyond comprehension in the realm of the subconscious alongside dreams and visions. Smith’s repetition of the stencilled figures is a strategy to make the series accessible as a whole, to pull the viewer through them in search of answers and resolutions. The flow begins to mean utterly different things if the military figures are benevolent, or if they represent histories and fears of repression. Leaving these decisions to the viewer and offering only oblique clues to their resolution creates a visual engagement that renders the spectator ethically responsible for the construction of meaning.

Smith is extremely interested in the notion of the primordial flow and pre-visual and pre-conscious states, represented in the series by bursts of vivid colour and gradual flow out of abstraction. The primordial leads to the formation of patterns and representations that inevitably carry through the rest of the images. The movements of humans, birds, and machines from one place to the next is guided through an understanding of systems that predate them: dominant winds, currents, collective memories, and preconscious decisions. How people move and flow from one environment to the next, and how society is built, structured, and constantly in flux in relation to these forces brings Smith’s drawings into the contexts that span much wider concerns than a critique on contemporary society.

Encoding is a necessary reduction, and humans must all become flat silhouettes in order for patterns to come through. Without reduction, it becomes monumentally impossible to classify or grasp memories and experience. Jose Luis Borges, in a short story titled “Funes the Memorious” tells of a man who decides to escape this, creating a system in which every instance of every object, every individual memory, is preserved without generalization. He realizes that it would take him years to even begin to unlock the memories of his childhood, must less the world around him. A blueprint or a diagram - as a code - is characterized by repeated elements that depend on the viewer’s belief in their consistent meaning. Smith relies on this assumption; that the same glyph will continue to mean the same thing throughout the drawings, thus a narrative could be constructed by simply decoding the glyphs, just as translating the Rosetta Stone unlocks ancient languages.

The relationship pattern creates between representation and abstraction carries strong ties to history of ornamentation and architecture. As enormous blueprints, Smith’s drawings suggest that they have been created by larger forces, stronger in both numbers and power. Who else would need such large surfaces to lay out human actions? The architecture within the drawings, as well as the space they create within the gallery, suggest a means of controlling human movement to hold it

back from the forces of primordial abstraction. The plans mirror actions of the implied viewers as they assemble around them, following arrows that twist and turn from one work to the next. The silhouettes march as they have marched for centuries around facades and interiors of temples and monuments, leaving archaeologists to guess their meaning. The significance of such ornament always seems familiar but slightly outside our reach, inspiring theories about aliens building the Mayan temples or giants constructing Egyptian tombs. Looking at these monumental structures, the question always remains about what our civilization will leave behind, how it will be decoded or understood.

The repeated elements in Smith’s drawings present a strangely familiar view: a world that is clearly ours, but whose logic still belongs to forces beyond our control. The primordial flux of colour and abstraction develops into structures of power, as the tiny humans attempt to navigate through it. The relationship between order and chaos plays out in the scale of the drawings, as figures are swept up, released, and sent to assemble in formations. The main question that remains as we make our way around them is whether, as viewers, we are asked to follow, reflect, or resist these movements.

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Natalia Lebedinskaia

Curator of Contemporary Art

Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

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## LIST OF WORKS

### *Schematic for a Utopian Event*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2008, 84” x 100”.

### *In the Nocturne*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2008, 84” x 100”.

### *Portal*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2007, 84” x 100”.

### *Pangaea*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2007, 84” x 100”.

### *Catharsis I*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2009, 84” x 200”.

### *Catharsis II*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2010, 84” x 200”.

### *Arena I*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2011, 120” x 50”.

### *Arena II*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2011, 50” x 140”.

### *Arena III*

graphite, pencil, acrylic on paper, 2011, 50” x 125”.

### *Arena IV*

graphite, acrylic, pencil on paper, 2012, 100” x 130”.

### *Arena V*

graphite, coloured pencil on paper, 2013, 50” x 350”.

### *Treaty of Westphalia*

graphite, pencil on paper, 2006, 50” x 95”.

