

# PORTMANTEAUX

SUZIEDITTENBER

JOSHWELKER



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Photos  
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Essay  
**ERIK WENZEL**

# PORTMANTEAUX

METCALF GALLERY, TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

September 17th - October 13th, 2015

Closing Reception: October 13th, 6pm

## PORTMANTEUX

port-man-teau (pôrt-măn'tō, pôrt'măn-tō')

n. pl. port-man-teaus or port-man-teaux (-tōz, -tōz')

1. A large leather suitcase that opens into two hinged compartments.
2. a. A word formed by merging the sounds and meanings of two different words, as chortle, from chuckle and snort. Also called portmanteau word.  
b. A word or part of a word that is analyzable as consisting of more than one morpheme without a clear boundary between them, as French du “of the” from de “of” and le “the.” Also called portmanteau morph.

adj.

General or generalized: a portmanteau description; portmanteau terms.

[French portemanteau : porte-, from porter, to carry (from Old French; see port5) + manteau, cloak (from Old French mantel, from Latin mantellum). N., senses 2a and b, in reference to Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass, in which Humpty Dumpty explains slithy and other made-up words in the poem “Jabberwocky” to Alice as follows: “Slithy” means “lithe and slimy” ... You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.]

Erik Wenzel is an artist and writer based in Chicago. His work has been exhibited at the 12th Havana Biennial in Havana, Cuba, VBKÖ in Vienna, Austria, 65GRAND in Chicago and the Werkstatt Kulturverein in Berlin, Germany. His writing appears in "Akademie X" (Phaidon, 2015), "How to Write About Contemporary Art" by Gilda Williams (Thames & Hudson, 2014) and "The Lives They Lived" issue of The New York Times Magazine (12/28/14). Wenzel co-edited and contributed to "Internal Necessity: a reader tracing the inner logics of the contemporary art field" published by Sternberg Press in 2010. He teaches Art in the Department of History and Philosophy at Roosevelt University.

## VERBALIZING VISION

In teaching art, instructors are often called upon to explain the visual with words. In that rite of passage, the group critique, students are similarly expected to use verbiage to communicate what their visual art is supposed to be about. For all the importance placed on the phrase "visual language" it seems the two terms are in a constant struggle. The visual and the linguistic seem at odds, but oddly, they also fit together. Not exactly a portmanteaux, but close.

Text can defend, support, explain, justify, enhance or damn an artwork. For the artist, particularly in an academic environment, it can go hand in hand or be the bane of one's existence. Work must be done in the form of traditional research alongside the development of one's studio practice. That's why there's something deviously enjoyable about seeing Suzie Dittenber's paintings of books and magazines. Language, which usually acts on visual art is now being acted upon. These texts exist as objects in space and are subject to the same corporeal effects of light and shadow, moisture and dryness, as any other thing out there in the world. In fact no lettering appears in any of the paintings. Like Vincent van Gogh's *Still with Bible* (1885) these pages are robbed of their words. Lines of text become rectangular blocks.

These paintings are the work of someone who clearly loves books though. Each picture marks a specific experience of time well spent reading. They can be seen as visual representations of the relationship one can have with a piece of writing. Language does ultimately appear in Dittenber's work, in the titles. Rather than a poetic name assigned to the image, it is a caption telling us what is going on.

Suzie Dittenber's titles read like short stories. While didactic, they feel more like passages from a book than cold descriptions. Quickly read, "Washington Road and Ocean Boulevard, Rye, New Hampshire with Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. New York: Harper, 2013," at first sounds like a road trip to New Hampshire with a friend named Annie. And indeed it is. Here are moments in special places with friends. After all, it's common for people to think of favorite books as old friends. It feels like an enviable life, reading on the beach or soaking in the bath. But then it ends like a citation, that other thing you have to do as a scholar. How does it go? The city of publication, colon, publisher and year? What an odd syntax.



With the exception of a larger than life landscape, where we look up from a book to see a wave curl against the shore like a page turning, Dittenber's paintings in the exhibition are roughly the size of printed matter themselves. And as lovingly as one pages through a favorite publication, we can see the attention the artist has paid to each brushstroke.

In contrast to Dittenber's titling convention, Josh Welker gives us very little. His titles consist only of the works' dimensions. Similar to Dittenber's titles naming location and reading, Welker provides something concrete and knowable. In establishing the dimensions of the painting's surface he is literally outlining the boundaries of what we are to consider. When a title is given, it reflects right back to us. "Call it Dark Matter, Call it Anything," it says almost in exasperation. The intricate patterns and colors, and the movements and rhythms of these works invite imaginative interpretation. Like psychedelic Rorschachs, any number of readings could be projected onto them. So in this context, of distinct entities coming together and the overarching theme of language and reading, the fact they are loose leaf sheets seems important.

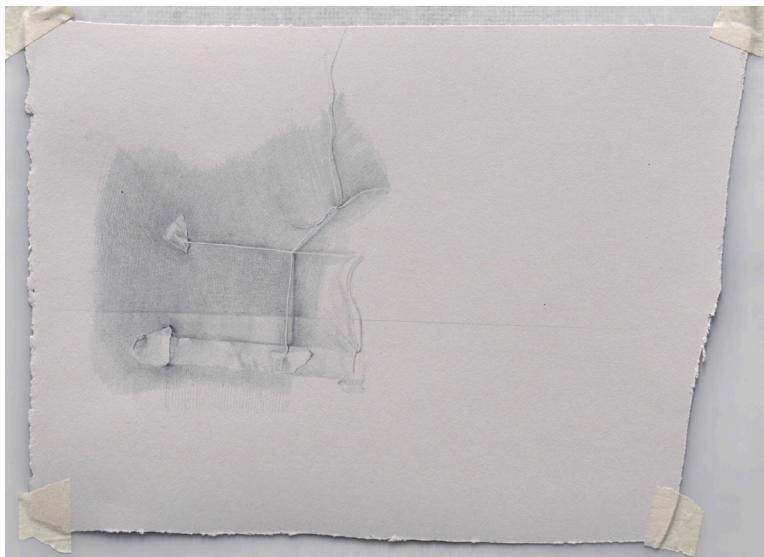
Dittenber is painting pages while Welker's pieces are pages. They form a nice counterpoint. Dittenber's paintings are firmly contained in regular rectangles. Painted on board and standing out from the walls on wooden cradles, they are discrete objects. Welker's sheets buckle and writhe against the walls they are directly attached to. This idea of paper is embedded in the images themselves. The undulating patterns in Welker's pieces look like the growth rings of trees and wood grain. Other works look like the patterning seen in birch bark.

Whorls of fingerprints, wrinkles of brain tissue and firing neurons can be seen. Colors move around like a computer model illustrating the flow of energy that can't be seen by the naked eye. This is all description though. These are things the artist's work is *like*. They resist interpretation or explanation. If we're looking for a historical referent, the graphic work of Henri Michaux is a good one. The notes he produced while taking mescaline took the form of ink drawings that appeared to be written language but were not. This isn't to say Welker's work is drug-induced, rather that it bears a similarity to Michaux's project. Michaux sought to combine language and image, writing and drawing, as a way to describe an experience that neither could adequately depict alone.

And that's perhaps where we are left with Portmanteaux. It's not bringing together two distinct bodies of work as much as it is two distinct bodies of work that are attempting to bring together the spoken and the seen, the verbal and the visual.

**- Eric Wenzel**





**Button Factory, 855 Islington Street, Portsmouth, New Hampshire with  
Carney, Sean Joseph Patrick, "The Precession of Simulacra" by Jean Baudrillard, Translated from  
English into American" Continent Issue 2.2, 2012.**

Suzie Dittenber

11 x 14 inches, graphite on paper on frosted mylar with masking tape, 2015



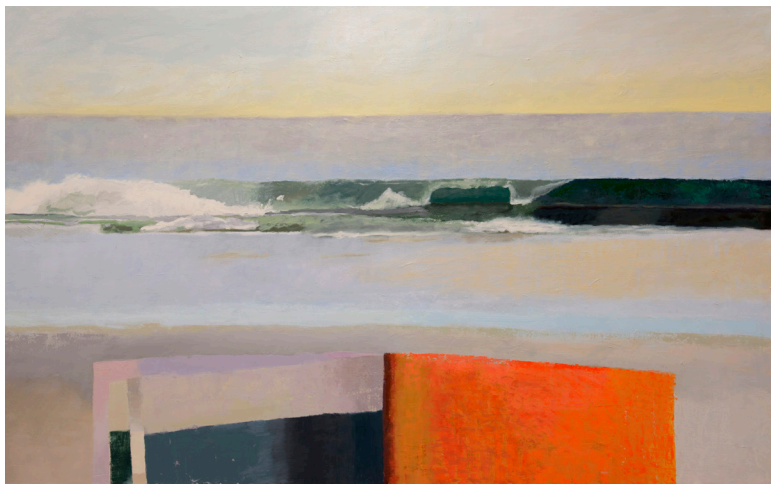
Warehouse, 803 S. Washington Street, Marion, Indiana with  
Princenthal, Nancy. *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015.  
Suzie Dittenber  
11 x 14 inches, oil on board, 2015



**Across from Ray's Seafood, Rye, New Hampshire with  
Robert Motherwell: Opens, Andrea Rosen Gallery, May 1 – June 20, 2015.**  
Suzie Dittenber  
8 x 12 inches, oil on board, 2015



Washington Road and Ocean Boulevard, Rye, New Hampshire with  
Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. New York: Harper, 2013.  
Suzie Dittenber  
24 x 30 inches, oil on board, 2015



Wallis Sands, Rye, New Hampshire with  
Als, Hilton et al. *Peter Doig: No Foreign Lands*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013.  
Suzie Dittenber  
60 x 96 inches, oil on canvas, 2015



**Incandescent Light and Bathtub, Upland, Indiana with  
Lynne Cook, ed. Agnes Martin (*Dia Foundation*). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.**  
Suzie Dittenber  
11 x 14 inches, oil on board, 2015

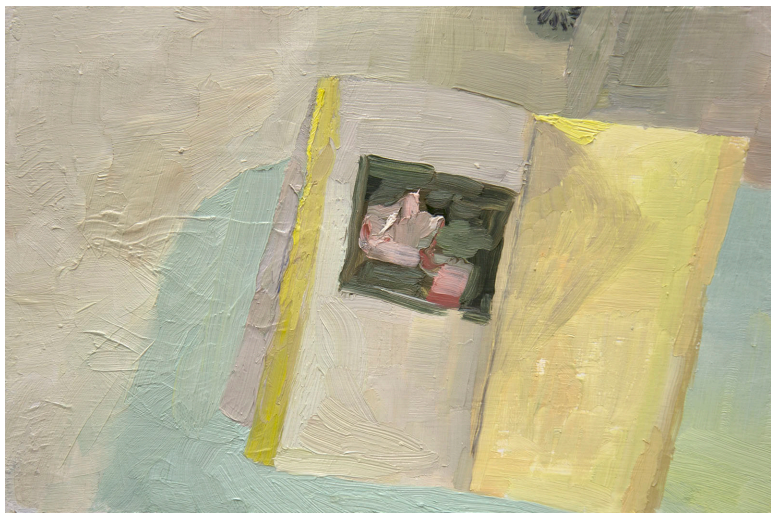




**Window Light and Bathtub, Upland, Indiana with  
Duvall, Ben. *New Modernism(s)*.**  
Suzie Dittenber  
18 x 24 inches, oil on board, 2015



**Bathtub, Upland, Indiana with  
Art in America, May, 2015.**  
Suzie Dittenber  
24 x 18 inches, oil on board, 2015



**Bathtub, Upland, Indiana with Kaufmann, David.** *Telling Stories: Philip Guston's Later Works.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2010.  
Suzie Dittenber  
8 x 12 inches, oil on board, 2015



Warehouse, 803 S. Washington Street, Marion, Indiana with  
Kaneda, Shirley. "Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine." *Painting (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2011.  
Suzie Dittenber  
11 x 14 inches, oil on board, 2015

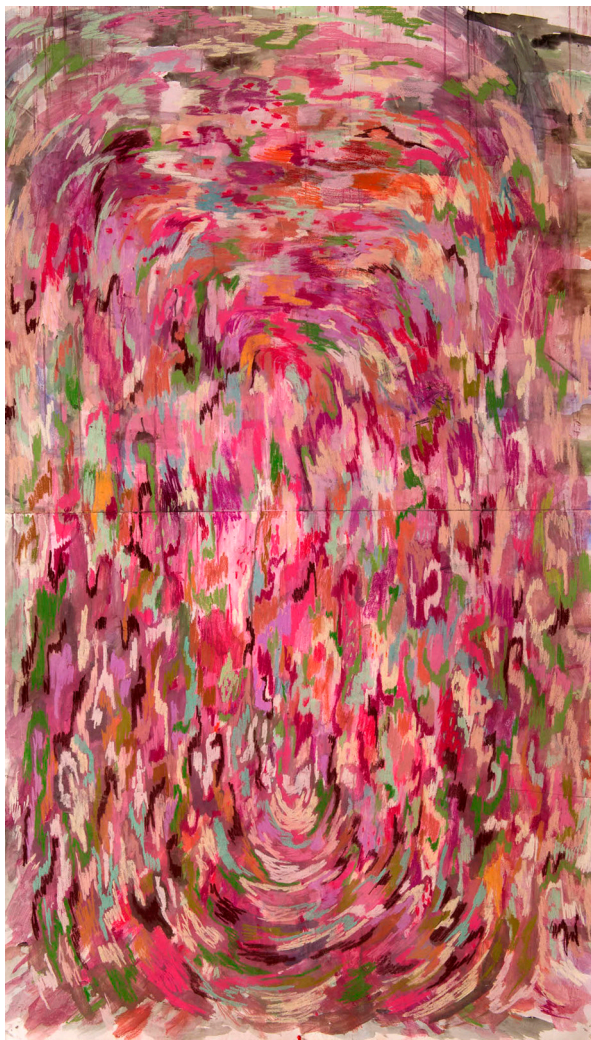


55 S State Avenue, Indianapolis, Indiana with  
O'Neill, Desmond. "Agnes Martin: The Fragility of Innocence." *The Lancet* 386 29 August 2015.  
Suzie Dittenber  
8 x 12 inches, oil on board, 2015





**Rectory, 111 E 9th St, Marion, Indiana with  
"Mostly everyone loves someone's repeating." Gertrude Stein.**  
Suzie Dittenber  
10 x 8 inches, oil on board, 2015



**58 x 98.5 inches**

Josh Welker

watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015

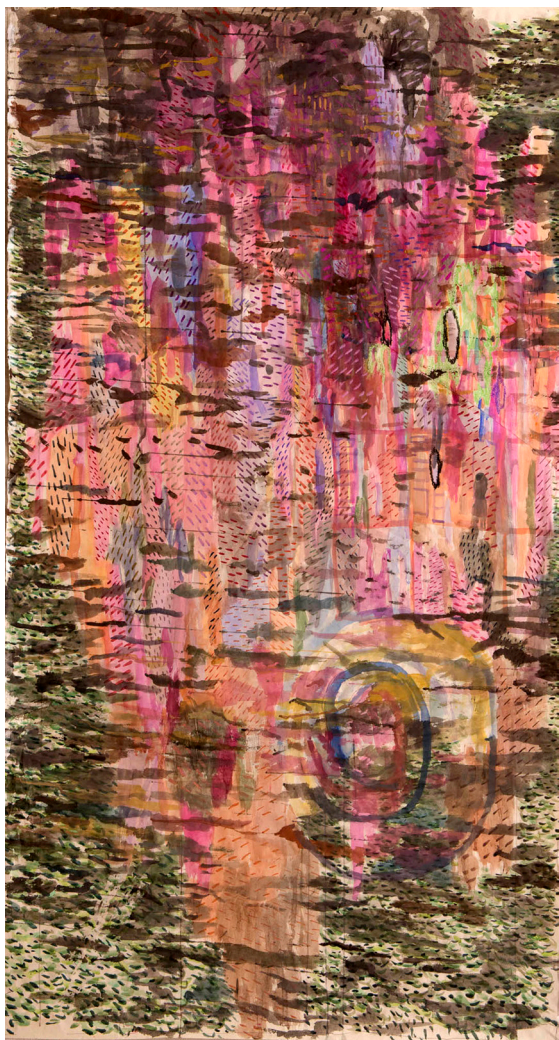


**68.5 x 70.5 inches**

Josh Welker

watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015

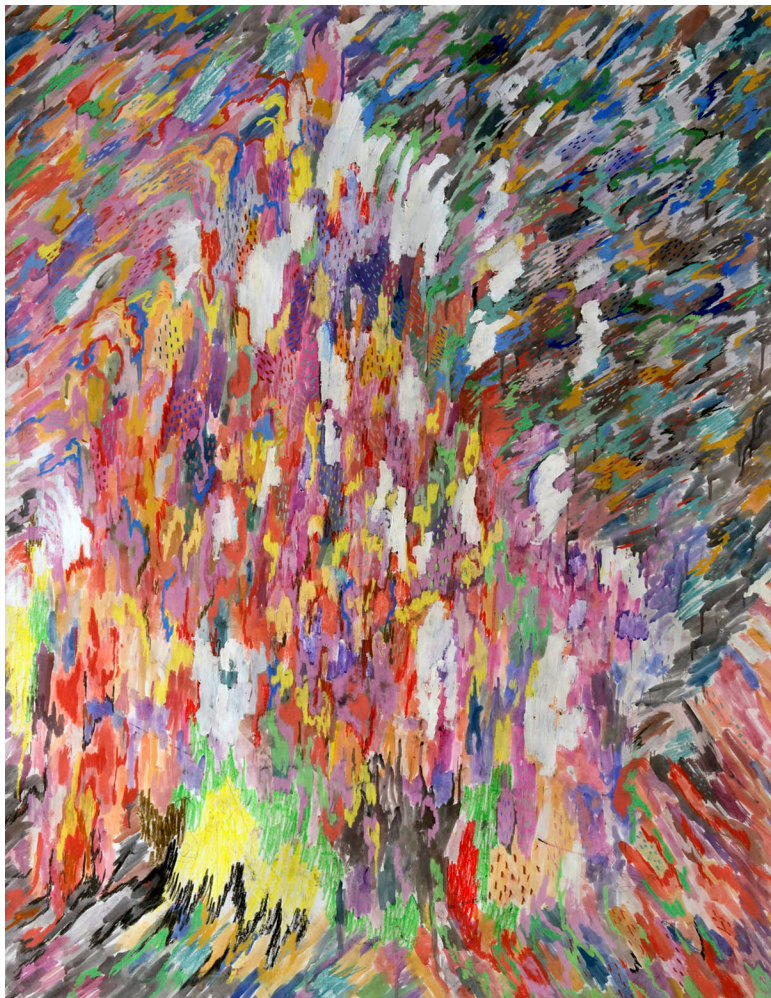




**70 x 40 inches**

Josh Welker

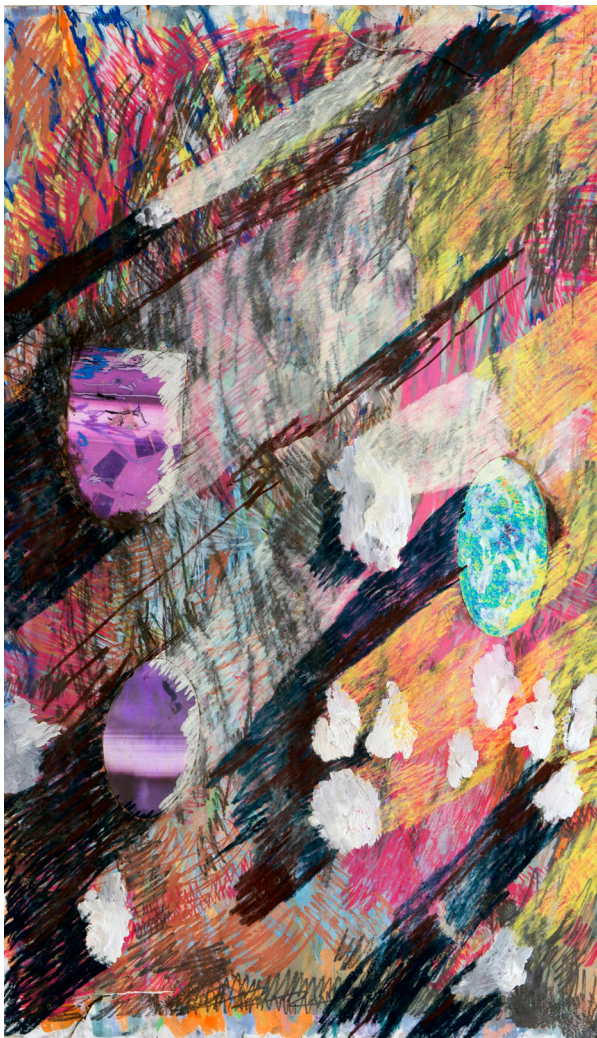
watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015



**78 x 60 inches**

Josh Welker

watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015



**Call it Dark Matter, Call it Anything**

Josh Welker

38.5 x 59.5 inches, watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015





**67 x 48 inches**

Josh Welker

watercolor and compressed pigment on paper, 2015

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