

Sam Messenger

VERSO



Sam Messenger
VERSO

7 November – 21 December 2019

DAVIDSON

521 W 26th St., New York, NY 10001
T (212) 759 7555 | F (212) 759 5824
www.davidsongallery.com
info@davidsongallery.com

A Controlled Lack of Control: Sam Messenger’s *Verso*

At those points where automation is substituted for a previous ‘all made by hand’ homologous set of steps, the artist has stepped aside for more of the world to enter into the art. This is a kind of regress into a controlled lack of control ... Automating processes of the kind described open the work and the artist’s interacting behavior to completing forces beyond his total personal control.

—Robert Morris ‘Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated’ 1970¹

The allover, kaleidoscopic abstractions on paper and canvas that make up Messenger’s *Verso* series may at first glance recall organic forms found in the world—perhaps gnarled tree bark, a reflection of sky on water, or a wound. Yet the more closely one looks, the more the issue of resemblance recedes in the face of a question that pertains only to the particular surface before one: what has happened here? The thickly encrusted paint registers a multitude of physical processes and actions—creasing, tearing, pressing, layering, buckling—each of which draws one back into the means by which these works were made.

Viewed in relation to the intricately drawn matrices and somber palettes that characterize much of Messenger’s prior work, the sumptuous colors and tactile use of paint on display here suggest a new direction. But the *Verso* series can perhaps be more accurately understood as resulting from a concern that has long defined the artist’s practice: the unpredictable alchemy between an established system and the contingency introduced by process and materials. In many of his series, the fallibility of the artist’s hand produces an element of indeterminacy in a pre-determined system of geometric marks—resulting, for example, in the irregular, undulating networks of the *Veils* from 2011. Messenger has also at times invited external forces such as the weather, gravity, and the fluid

nature of his materials to play an active role in his work—leaving paper in the snow overnight, or allowing the pattern of an ink wash to determine a drawing’s composition. For the *Verso* series, Messenger’s process places him in an entirely indirect relation to the finished form of the work. When, writing in 1970, the artist Robert Morris referred to ‘automation’ in art he meant not the use of machines but rather the incorporation into artistic process of some force, system, or other element that reduced the artist’s control over the end result (Jackson Pollock’s drip technique served as a prime example of such automation). It is in this sense that the *Verso* series courts what Morris called a ‘regress into a controlled lack of control.’²

Messenger’s automating process goes as follows: first, he lays a large sheet of polythene plastic on the floor of his studio and coats it with acrylic paint, using only one color. Next, with the paint still wet, he places a sheet of paper on top of the plastic and he waits for the paint to dry. But while the artist is waiting the paint is working; its binders, repelled by the plastic sheet, affix themselves to the porous paper instead. Once the paint is dry, Messenger carefully but quickly peels the paper from the plastic, flips it over, and lets it float to the floor. He then repeats the entire operation again, using the same sheet of paper but now a different color of paint or, at times, a layer of gesso instead. With each round, a new color is added atop the previous ones. But with each round, the paint also begins to mingle, peel, and crack. Instead of a series of monochromes, each occluding the one before, these ‘broken surfaces’ (as the artist calls them) accrete to create a kind of archaeological record of process.³

In developing this method, Messenger cites as influence two historically important techniques: that of reverse glass painting, famously employed to make Byzantine icons, and the art of paper marbling, popularized in Europe in the 19th century. But one senses that the primary force at play is the artist’s own rigorous investigation of the capacities and limits of his materials. Messenger has worked with the same 220-gram Italian Fabriano paper for over two decades, and he is intimately

attuned to its behavior (for the works on canvas, he selected an Italian modern fiber that is thin and light but immensely strong, mimicking the properties of the paper while allowing him to work at larger scale). He also experimented extensively with binders, drying time, and the consistency of his pigments to find a suitable combination. Importantly, Messenger extends this spirit of experimentation into his process, adding variables to the basic operation as he works. Sometimes he soaks the paper in water first so that it buckles more dramatically as it dries. At other times, he folds and crushes the polythene sheet before painting it, heating it slightly so that the material ‘remembers the crease marks’, as he puts it. Each change introduces another element of indeterminacy into the final result.

In relying on an indirect treatment of medium, Messenger’s series extends the legacy of the Process art of the late 1960s and 1970s. As with the art Morris characterized as ‘anti form’, the traditional logic of the rigid, vertical, and stretched canvas is replaced by a horizontal field in which the means of making—the artist’s actions, materials, and tools—register in the final work.⁴ In Messenger’s series, formal and conceptual elements central to the development of postwar art re-appear, but now as byproducts of process. The grid visible in certain works is not a matrix drawn by the artist but the pattern created by the indexical trace of a set of actions—the folding of plastic and the imprint in paint of the resulting crease marks. So, too, the ‘serial attitude’ that informed much Minimalist work is tracked here by the ways in which certain colors migrate across the series as paint left behind by one sheet is picked up by the next.⁵

Like many artists of his generation, Messenger is unconcerned with traditional divisions between media; his work mingles materials and techniques from painting, drawing, and even printmaking. But what is most remarkable about the *Verso* series is the way in which its process renders the distinction between medium and support also irrelevant. Here, paper and canvas act as medium alongside acrylic and ink. The paper in essence paints itself, soaking up the pigment and recording the texture of the polythene sheet. Traditional divisions between medium and support, and even

between support and tool, no longer apply. This unconventional treatment of the artistic support both as an active, plastic medium and as tool recalls Simon Hantai’s groundbreaking *pliage* technique and the ‘drape paintings’ of Sam Gilliam. Messenger’s title perhaps signals the importance of this approach to material. While the term ‘verso’ commonly refers to the back side of a work of art, its original usage in relation to manuscripts and books has a slightly different connotation. Short for the Latin phrase *versō foliō*, it refers to the leaf or page that has been turned over, indicating a material constituted by its relation to action.

Frances Jacobus-Parker, October 2019

¹Robert Morris ‘Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated’ (1970), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 87.

²I borrow the terms ‘contingency’ and ‘indeterminacy’ from the composer John Cage, whose exploration of the interplay between chance and control was influential to many artists of the 1950s and ‘60s, Morris included.

³Sam Messenger, conversation with the author via Skype, October 4, 2019. I am grateful to the artist for his generosity in sharing the details of his process with me.

⁴Works from the late 1960s by Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra are emblematic of what became known as Process art. Morris’s writings from the period, including ‘Anti Form’ (1968) and ‘Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated’ (1970), articulate the concerns that informed Process art and Postminimalism more broadly. See Morris, *Continuous Project*.

⁵Mel Bochner used the phrase to denote a method of working governed by a numerical or otherwise predetermined system. Mel Bochner, ‘The Serial Attitude’, *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 28–33.

Couru 2017
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Quatre 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Dial 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Interlock 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Anna 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Around 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Sickle 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
165 x 152cm (65 x 60")



Interval 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
152 x 76cm (60 x 30")



Open 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
152 x 109cm (60 x 43")



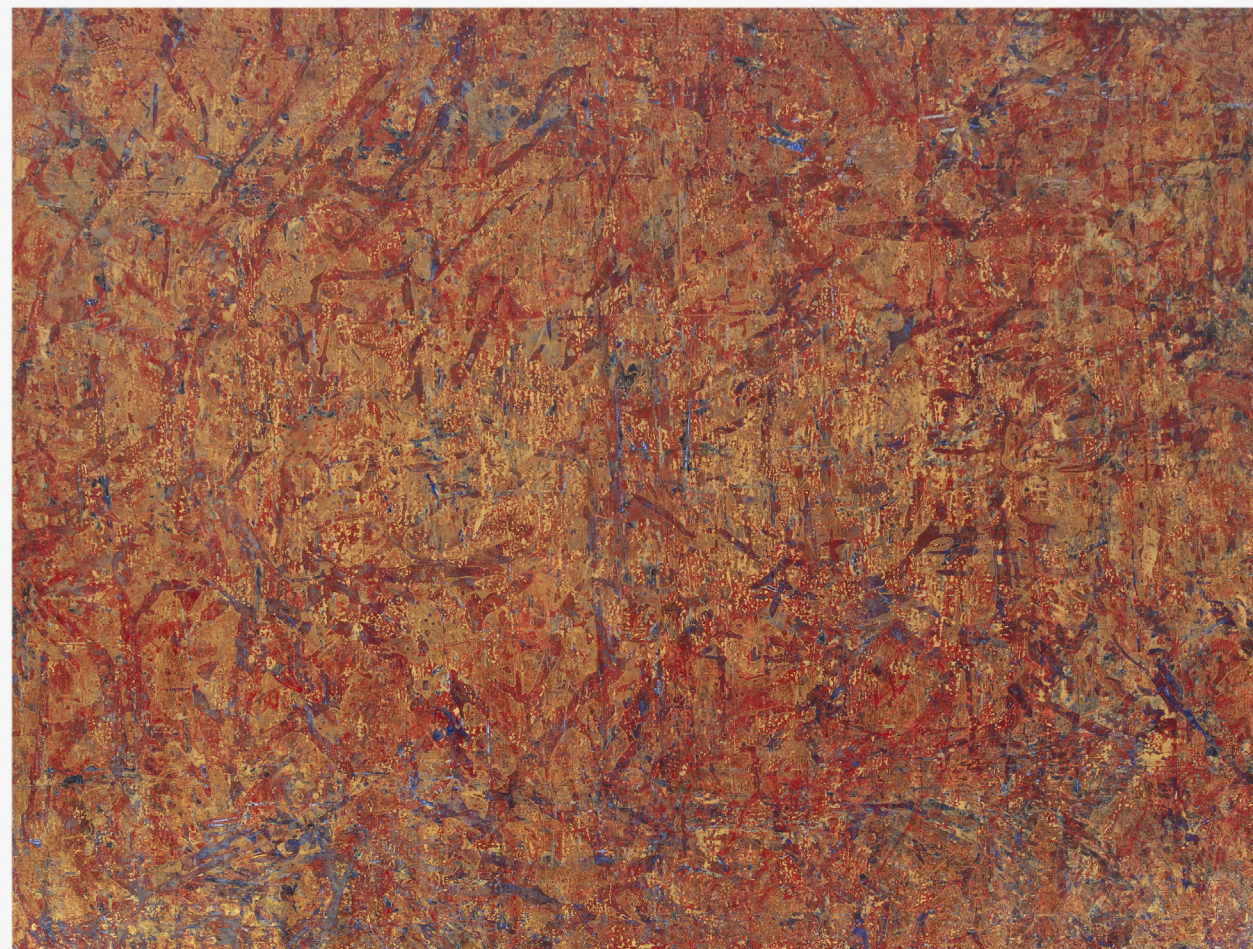
Cue 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
152 x 109cm (60 x 43")



Front 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on paper
152 x 109cm (60 x 43")



Garden 2019
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on canvas
191 x 254cm (75 x 100")



Biography

Born 1980 London, England

Art Education

M.A. Royal College of Art, London (2003-05)

B.A. Camberwell College of Arts, London (2000-03)

Messenger's work has been shown in various exhibitions internationally, including:

Contemporary Works on Paper Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco 2018

Tactile Line Bartha Contemporary, London

Sam Messenger Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco (solo) 2017

Horizon ADAA The Art Show, Park Avenue Armory, New York (solo)

Dot, Dash, Dissolve Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia 2016

13 Cycles Davidson Contemporary, New York 2016 (solo)

Fracture Davidson Contemporary, New York 2014 (solo)

Line: Making the Mark Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas 2014

Paper Jam Neuberger Museum of Art, New York 2014

Early Drawings Davidson Contemporary, New York 2014 (solo)

Abstract Drawing Drawing Room, London 2014

Textility Visual Arts Center of New Jersey 2012

The Art of Collecting Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan 2011–12

Six Veils Davidson Contemporary, New York 2011 (solo)

40 Artists–80 Drawings Burton Art Gallery & Museum, Devon UK 2011

Now WHAT? Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach 2010

Straightedge Davidson Contemporary, New York 2008 (solo)

You Silently (Two): Image-Object-Text Courtauld Institute of Art, London 2008

His work is held in both private and public collections, including Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, and Williams College Museum of Art.

Messenger currently lives and works in London.

This catalogue was produced in conjunction with the exhibition **Verso**
at Davidson Gallery, New York City, 7 November – 21 December 2019

All works © Sam Messenger 2017–2019

Artwork photography by Adam Reich
Catalogue design by Thomas Messenger
Printed by LOG-ON, Inc. New York NY



