

NICOL
ALLAN
COLLAGES

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NICOL ALLAN: FISHING WITHOUT A HOOK

RYE DAG HOLMBOE

*But are not
all Facts Dreams
as soon as
we put
them behind us —*

— Emily Dickinson, Envelope Poem A 843

In November 2019, I spent a week with Sarah Allan at her home in Hanover, New Hampshire, looking through the body of work that her husband, the artist Nicol Allan, had left behind after his death in June that year. We started with the earliest collages and over the course of the next seven days looked at almost all of the artist's work, which also includes wood reliefs, sumi, watercolours, drawings, oils and prints. What was unusual about the experience was that nearly an entire life's work was there to be seen. This was partly because Allan was a very private person, with consequences for his public exposure. His reserve was such that he never met the owners of his last gallery, Roy Davis and Cecily Langdale. Matters were only complicated by Allan's ill-health, which contributed to the fact that his collages, arguably the most important part of his work, were only produced in short periods, the artist rarely working for more than a few years at a time. There are around two hundred collages in all, which, for a career that spanned more than half a century, is not very much.

Allan made his first collages between 1965 and 1967 while he was living in Los Angeles, California. The artist rarely dated or titled his early work, so it is difficult to establish the precise dates and sequence of his two earliest series. The second series, which probably dates to 1967, includes eleven works, though some of these collages may have been earlier or later. They are composed of small pieces of coloured paper stuck at various angles and degrees of overlap onto off-white backing paper. Though Allan would sometimes use materials like wrapping paper, he would typically employ artisanal stocks that he cut or tore into smaller pieces. These were often dyed, which means that the surface of each bit of paper is slightly variegated, the colour changing with the material's texture. In some of these collages the artist used a pencil to guide himself as he worked. Traces remain of the process of making, which was one of trial and error. In other works, the position of the papers appears to have been decided by sight alone, yet here too the process was not entirely premeditated. Before any of the papers were pasted, each of the compositions was first placed under glass, allowing for adjustments to be made.

Taken as a group or series, these first collages are remarkable for the variety of their formal and material investigations—colour is paradoxically both muted and dynamic, while the empty page is often the chief protagonist—as well as for their scale—most of the collages are less than twenty centimetres high and fifteen centimetres wide. You need to get up close to see them, which makes the experience of looking much more intimate than you might at first expect from a language so scrupulously abstract.

It is difficult to find the right words to describe the experience of these collages, a difficulty that is also met when trying to think about the other works in paper Allan produced throughout his life, which changed and developed in significant ways, but are also unusually consistent. To say that the collages are small, for instance, tells only half of the story. The works only occasionally refer to the outside world, the world that both frames and contains them, and in the absence of such a referent the collages undermine the very notion of scale. Their papered surfaces may be small in relation to the human body that perceives them, small in relation to a great deal of the best-known abstract art produced in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, but it is difficult to put a measure on colour. How big is pale blue? Or ochre? Or vermillion? The answer to these questions may depend on whether colour is seen as an adjective or as a substance. Meanwhile, if the works look small when framed and hung on a wall, they feel much more expansive in the imagination. Some of the collages take on almost cosmic proportions, even as they never let you forget that they are made up of small pieces of coloured paper.

This paradoxical experience of compression and capaciousness is true of Allan's earliest collages, but it is perhaps most powerfully staged in a series of works the artist produced thirty years later, in the 1990s, which he sometimes referred to as 'waves' (Composition F18 & F2, pp. 166-7). These collages are distinctive for their uses of black. In one work, three small black circles seem to bore holes into the grey backing paper and are made to quiver by the barely perceptible white circles, rendered in chalk, which surround them. Positioned above a cone and a square, they look like neutron stars burning out in a night sky. In another work from this group, a black paper circle, slightly off-centre, exerts a gravitational pull quite out of keeping with its size. The circle also looks like an eye's pupil, dramatising the kind of vision the collage invites: intimate, expansive, absorbing.

Besides such formal problems, there is the related and equally difficult question of how to position these works in the history of art. Throughout his career, Allan held relatively few exhibitions. The most notable include three shows in the late 1950s and 1960s

at the Silvan Simone Gallery in Los Angeles, two exhibitions at Betty Parson's, who at the time was one of the most important art dealers in New York, and, later, two shows at Taranman, a small gallery on the Old Brompton Road in London run by Christopher Hewett, whose sudden and untimely death in 1983 led to a particularly difficult period in Allan's career. The artist would then find representation at Davis & Langdale in New York, where he showed his work a handful of times. There was also a series of group shows, nearly all in New York and California. Yet Allan never formed part of what tends to be called the art world; he always occupied a more marginal position.

At the same time, his work is clearly not that of an outsider. The collages enter into dialogue with various strands of artistic modernism, from Braque and Picasso's *papier collé* to Malevich's Suprematism and Mondrian's De Stijl to American colour field painting. It is as if Allan had set himself the task of working through a number of formal problems in the history of abstraction and of making them new. His work's relationship to artistic modernism was brought to the fore in a humorous photo-collage he produced in the 1990s. Allan's head is placed on top of Henri Matisse's body, recognisable for the overalls he wore when painting and, from the 1940s onwards, making his cut-outs, a process the French artist described as 'painting with scissors'. To Allan's left is a picture of Piet Mondrian and to his right a picture of his wife, Sarah Allan, as a young girl. The artist is seen working at a table with a cut-out by Matisse laid out before him. Beneath the image, a caption exclaims: 'Of course it's art!' The portrait offers a humorous and self-conscious commentary on Allan's position in art history. Yet, more importantly, the photo-collage also insists on the continued importance of the European tradition of modernist abstraction—this, when a *tabula rasa* approach to the past remains a common way of understanding the advent of abstraction in post-war United States.

The self-portrait also calls attention to the differences between Allan's early collages and much of the abstract art that was produced in North America around that time. In 1964, an exhibition of thirty-one artists associated with colour field painting—artists including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clifford Still—was organised by Clement Greenberg, one of America's most important art critics, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Allan's collages are conversant with much of this work. But they also pose a challenge to the primacy of oil paint as a medium while resisting the idealisations and myths connected to gesture and expression. Just compare the scale and expressive surface of a painting by Rothko to one of the collages Allan made in the early 1970s, only a few years after the former's death, which are often composed of just two or three small bands of softly coloured paper. In conversation, Sarah Allan told me that, since her husband had taken to signing his work with the initials 'NA', he was pleased to discover that in Italian the letters were used as an abbreviation for the word anonymous, *anonimo*. The letters are of course in the wrong order, but the point remains that, for Allan, making art was not a matter of self-expression but of setting in motion a process more impersonal—a form of self-occlusion perhaps.



Of course it's art!

Nicol Allan, photomontage, 2010

While the collages are, I believe, the most important part of Allan's oeuvre, the artist's work in other mediums is also striking and gives a sense of how important process was to his way of making—and I suspect that there is no simple answer to the question of how and when he knew a work was finished. In the watercolours and ink drawings, you often encounter repeated motifs also met in the collages, which suggests that the artist used these mediums both in their own right and in order to work through formal problems that would later find resolution, or perhaps just further exploration, in his works in paper.

In a series of paintings produced around 1971, for example, the outlines of what vaguely look like tree branches or cliff edges are rendered in very diluted watercolour: pale blues, greens and pinks that are notable, paradoxically perhaps, for their indistinctness. The works call to mind the landscape paintings of Paul Cézanne, which they seem to place under a magnifying glass, so to speak, evoking both the so-called 'constructive stroke' of Cézanne's middle years and the floating, transparent patches of his final watercolours.

As Lawrence Gowing and others have noted, it was Cézanne's use of watercolour that led to his later experiments in oil paintings, where he floated diluted pigment over the canvas in increasingly thin layers.¹ The same might be said for Allan. When I visited his home and studio in Hanover, New Hampshire, the only three surviving oils on canvas the artist made in his lifetime were still rolled up in cardboard tubes, where they had resided since the 1960s; pulling them out after so long was a particularly memorable experience. What was unusual about these works is that they



Nicol Allan, [untitled], watercolour, 1970, 373x288mm

seemed to aspire to the condition of watercolour. The pinks, blues and greens looked like washes, the oils so diluted and thinly applied as to be almost translucent, the weave of the unprimed canvas often showing through the paint.

Similarly—and this is often true of the watercolours also—in his oils on board, where you encounter comparable motifs, Allan habitually left large areas of the support unpainted. Yet he did this in such a way that the blank spaces are not inert or passive but are instead set off and activated by the surrounding paint. What the art historian Yve-Alain Bois observes in Cézanne is also true of Allan's work: 'void spaces are as constructive as the filled-in ones.'² These various works contributed to a group or series of collages in which cliff-like shapes, almost anthropomorphic, nearly meet across the two sides of the page. There is one work that stands out for me. Made in 1972, in this collage one of the cliff faces is in fact an incision; the left-hand shape is made visible in the negative, so to speak, the cut modelling the light of the white backing paper. The shape's outline here becomes the background's inline, and vice versa (Composition C I I, p.59).

A comparable economy of means is encountered in Allan's sumi or ink drawings, the first of which date back to his earliest collages. These are composed of just a few, deliberate strokes of ink. The resulting works are elegant and often quite humorous. To my eyes, the three most successful sumi are of a bird, a bicycle and a cat. There are also, among others, sumi of skulls and mountains, as well as three small portraits of Cézanne and one of the eleventh century BCE



Paul Cézanne, *Route en sous-bois*, 1890, watercolour and pencil on paper, 484x317mm

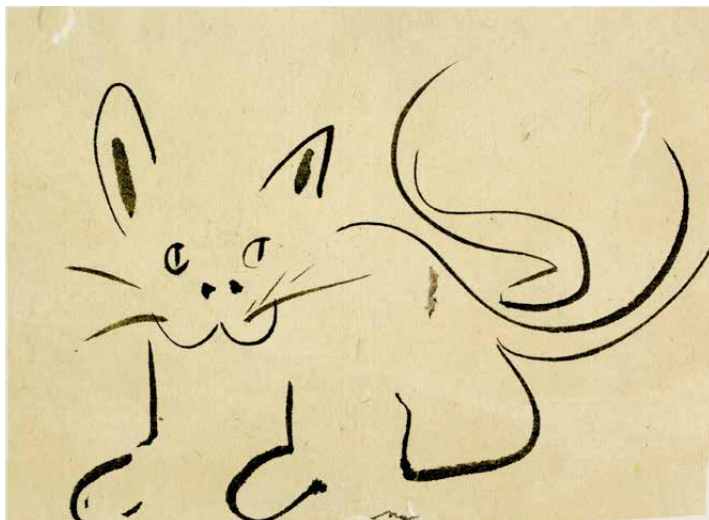
Chinese sage Taigong Wang, a figure who, depending on the version of the story told, would go fishing without a hook, believing that the fish would come to him when they were ready—the story might well describe Allan's attitude towards the public exposure of his own work. The artist's attraction to sumi or ink drawings formed part of a wider interest in Zen Buddhism in 1960s Los Angeles, first in the Beat Generation, where the philosophy played an important role in the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg, for example, and later in the work of artists such as John Cage, for whom emptiness was not a vacuum but a plenum.

Important exhibitions of sumi or ink drawings at the time include a show by Chiura Obata, the well-known Japanese-American artist and art teacher, at the Berkeley Art Centre in 1966, as well as a major retrospective of Matisse's work at UCLA's newly opened Dickson Art Centre, also in 1966, which included some of the artist's inks on paper, drawings such as *The Burning Bush* (1951), *Acrobat* (1952) or *Large Face (Mask)* (1952). As with the works of both of these figures, Allan's sumi use the fewest possible lines and tones necessary. Each image is filtered to its essentials. No detail is superfluous, and every line is drawn with a single movement of the brush. The sumi combine deliberation with spontaneity, so that the result, though methodical, is also both provisional and open to chance. This is also true of Allan's collages, some of which contain small ink notations. The works appear at once controlled and improvised, as if the paper compositions had come into being on their own accord. Matisse used the expression 'instinctive

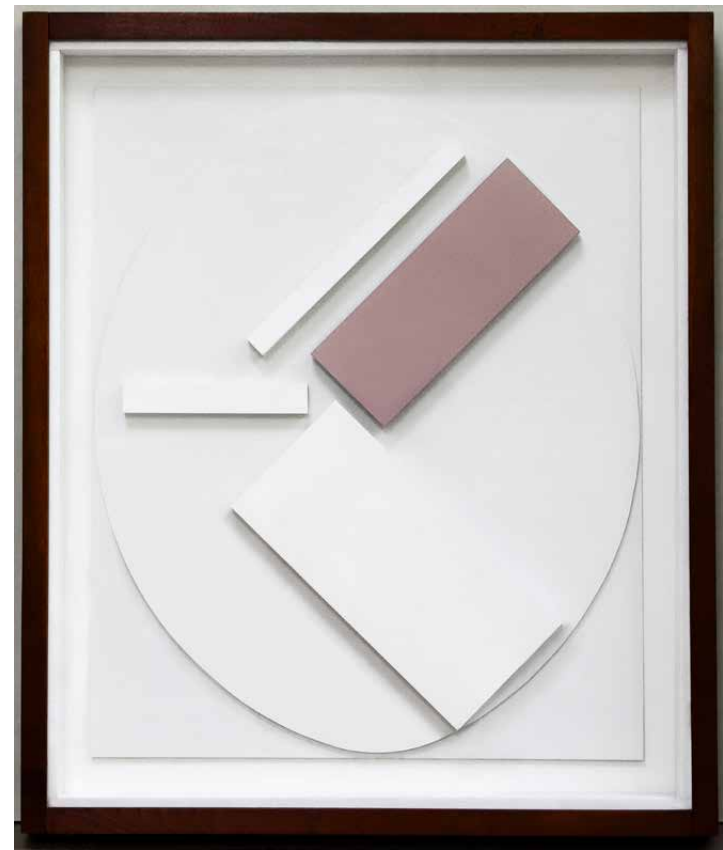
geometry'³ to describe the patterns on the Kuban textiles he collected; shorn of its primitivistic connotations, the expression may also provide an adequate way of describing Allan's collages.

In a short press release written on occasion of an exhibition of collage and sumi at the Parsons-Dreyfus Gallery in 1980, Allan described the works displayed as 'masks', 'heads', 'rain', 'waves', 'sea', 'mountains' and 'dancers'. These nouns are not quite titles, but they do suggest that there was a connection for the artist between the structure of his work and that of nature, a view that finds an echo in Cézanne's understanding of painting as the rendering of the material world 'in terms of the cylinder, the sphere [and] the cone.'⁴ The ways in which the collages sometimes shift between different visual registers is one of their most striking qualities. In one work, for example, a small piece of blue paper with a hole punched through it resembles a fish swimming above a wave, floating playfully between reference and abstraction (Composition F4, p. 149). In another collage, a white, translucent paper triangle hovers above a black rectangle, like a sail silhouetted against the night sky (Composition G16, p. 198).

In another group of collages, vertical strips of paper resemble portals or archways, alluding to three dimensions and evoking the kinds of theatrical spaces you might expect to find in paintings by de Chirico. In relation to these last works, which share the subtitle *Hölderlin Zimmer*, it is worth observing that in the mid-1960s Allan produced a small group of abstract wood reliefs, works that might be described as constructivist in that they were made by assembling components in a collage-like manner, rather than through sculpting or carving a material. These works, white and mostly monochromatic, also invite us to see the collages under the sign of sculpture and architecture. This is especially true of the aforementioned group of collages. In each of these compositions the paper is lent a surprising degree of solidity; the works give an impression of mass and size that contrasts with the fragility of the materials used and contrive to present us with various possibilities of distance, of nearness and of farness.



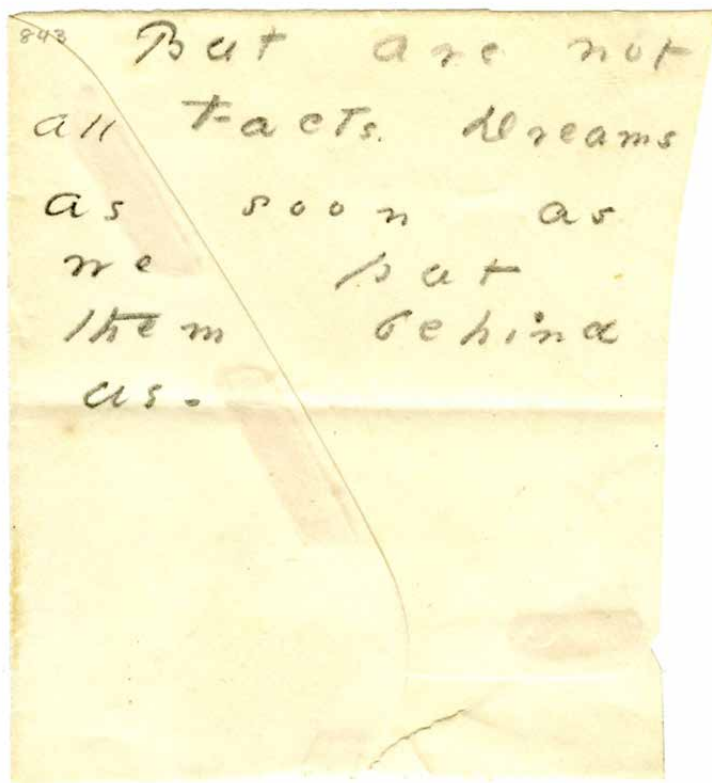
Nicol Allan, [untitled], sumi, dimensions unknown



Nicol Allan, [untitled], wood relief, 1965, 673x567mm

Illustration, metaphor and theatricality were and continue to be perennial antagonists to a particular vision of artistic modernism that makes a virtue of experiencing things 'as such' and of reaching a 'pure' state of abstraction. Allan's work is more generous than that. The occasional introduction of referents, however vestigial, forms part of the pleasure of looking at the work, even as these referents are also contingent, resisting your urge to recognise and so to pre-empt what is going to be seen.

What is perhaps more important than this referential pull, however, is that, much like Cézanne's reduced geometry, the establishment of a relationship between art and nature in Allan's collages implies the existence of a kind of primary structure or holding pattern that persists—or insists—in the provisional arrangements of paper. This helps to make sense of why the collages are so satisfying to look at and why a single means of making work could be so productive, providing Allan with a visual grammar that opened onto more and more combinations, transpositions and intensifications. Abstract art is often held to be a repository for everything that is immutable and transcendent, and the intimation of an underlying structure or pattern may lend the collages a metaphysical dimension. Indeed, in the very few texts he wrote, Allan himself was prone to a certain romanticism—hence the references to the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin and to Albert Pinkham Ryder, a painter associated with the American Sublime. In this respect, Allan also connects across history to other artists such as Mondrian and Malevich, who saw their own paintings as expressions of the absolute or the universal.



Emily Dickinson, Amherst Manuscript # 843, [date unknown], envelope fragment

Yet such claims feel overstated and in danger of overlooking the materiality of the works themselves. Allan's collages—and this may be true of both Mondrian and Malevich's work also—are insistently physical but also delicate and improvised, more exploratory than definitive, even as some achieve a kind of aesthetic unity, a synthesis of form and content; you sometimes cannot tell the dancer from the dance, so to speak. The collages express a desire to simplify or distil the natural world and to turn it into a fragile balance of forces, to find a sense of equilibrium among different parts. Yet it is also the case that the integrity of their papered surfaces is often disrupted by an accent on process and by the works' deliberately unfinished character.

There is one collage that is particularly striking in this regard. Made in 1992, it is composed of three wave-like shapes each in a different state of coherence. Looked at from left to right, the waves gradually break, both metaphorically and compositionally; the collage reduced to a tangle of drawn lines. The work can be seen as an attempt to capture the movements of nature and to render them schematic. But the collage is also about the process of its own making—or unmaking (Composition F8, pp.170-71).

When seen from this perspective, there seems to be less place for the valuations of an absolute or for the promise and consolation of an ultimate coherence. Perhaps the point is not to try to resolve this problem, however; or to fall on one side or the other of the spiritual-material divide; positioned on the threshold of the physical and the metaphysical, the collages convey both dimensions while denying neither.

During my visit to Hanover, New Hampshire, I spent some time looking through Allan's extensive collection of books. Of particular interest was a volume of Emily Dickinson's so-called envelope poems, one of which provides this essay with its epigraph. The poet, who

published very little work in her lifetime, wrote these short poems partly because envelopes were close to hand, and partly, I imagine, because the shape of the envelope provided her with a kind of constraint: an edge, crease or fold might help form the poem's content.

As I turned the pages of the book, trying to make sense of Dickinson's handwriting, which was thankfully transcribed, though quite different in feeling when typed—one of her correspondents compared her script to the fossil tracks of birds—I was struck by the elliptical and highly suggestive character of the poems.⁵ 'One note from / One Bird / Is better than / a million words', starts one of these paper fragments. 'A not admitting of the wound / Until it grew so wide / That all my Life had entered it', begins another. The fragments are all the more ambiguous because it is unclear for whom they were written. 'Intensely alive', writes the volume's editor; 'these envelope poems are charged with a special poignancy, addressed to no one and everyone at once.'⁶ The idea of a letter without an addressee, like a fishing line without a hook, resonated with Allan's work, as did the idea that the meaning of a poem might be on the outside, on the surface of an envelope, rather than in what it conceals. This may help to explain Allan's interest in masks, which make ambiguous the relationship between inner vision and external motif.

Inside the book were a series of reviews of an exhibition of the envelope poems that Allan had cut out and saved. There was also a single pressed, dried leaf, which the artist had placed inside the volume, as a small tribute perhaps. Dickinson was equally interested in botany, arranging some four hundred flowers and plants from the Amherst region where she lived across the pages of a large leather-bound herbarium. She described them as the 'beautiful children of spring.'⁷ Allan would also sometimes make these kinds of things, collecting dried flowers and leaves and pressing them inside books. These are not artworks in the same way that the collages are, but they do share their fragility, their sense of scale—inclining towards the small—and their visual cadence. They also participate in the passage of time.

This may be what makes Allan's collages so resonant with an experience of life as having no assurance of transcendent meaning. There is comfort to be found in an implied structure, to be sure, as well as in the continuity between art and nature, but the collages are also intimate a more groundless and vertiginous dimension of experience. It is this ambiguity, more than any thematic content, that both motivates and lies at the heart of Allan's paper poetics.

¹ See Lawrence Gowing, *Cézanne: The Early Years 1859-1872* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1988).

² Yve-Alain Bois, 'Cézanne: Words and Deeds', *October*, 84 (Spring, 1998), 41.

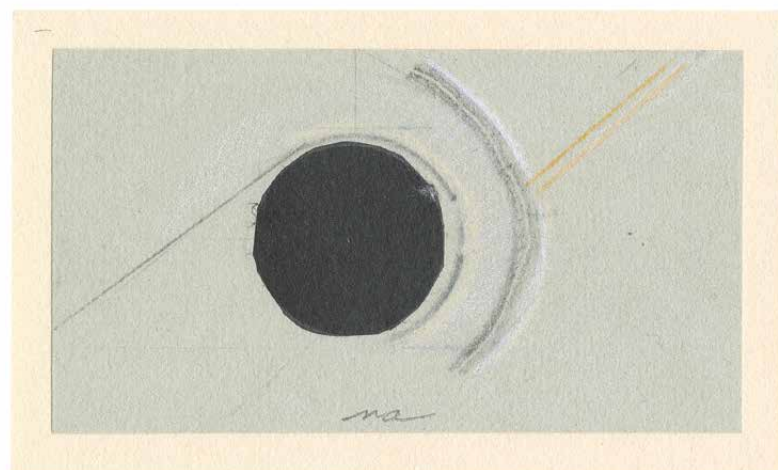
³ Henri Matisse, cited in John Klein, *Matisse and Decoration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, New Haven, 2018), 62.

⁴ Paul Cézanne, cited in Carol Armstrong, *Cézanne in the Studio: Still Life in Watercolours* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 55.

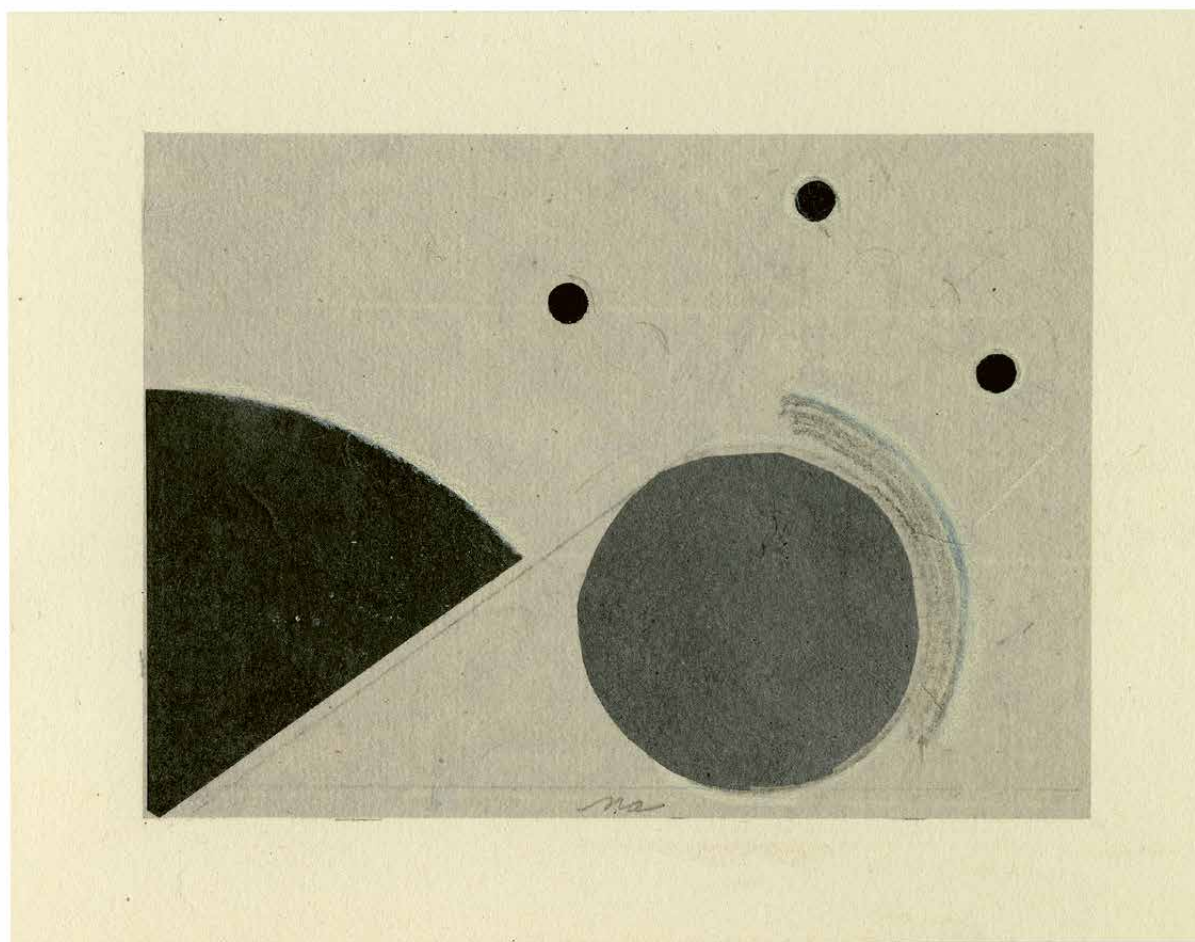
⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, cited in Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16.

⁶ Emily Dickinson, *Envelope Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

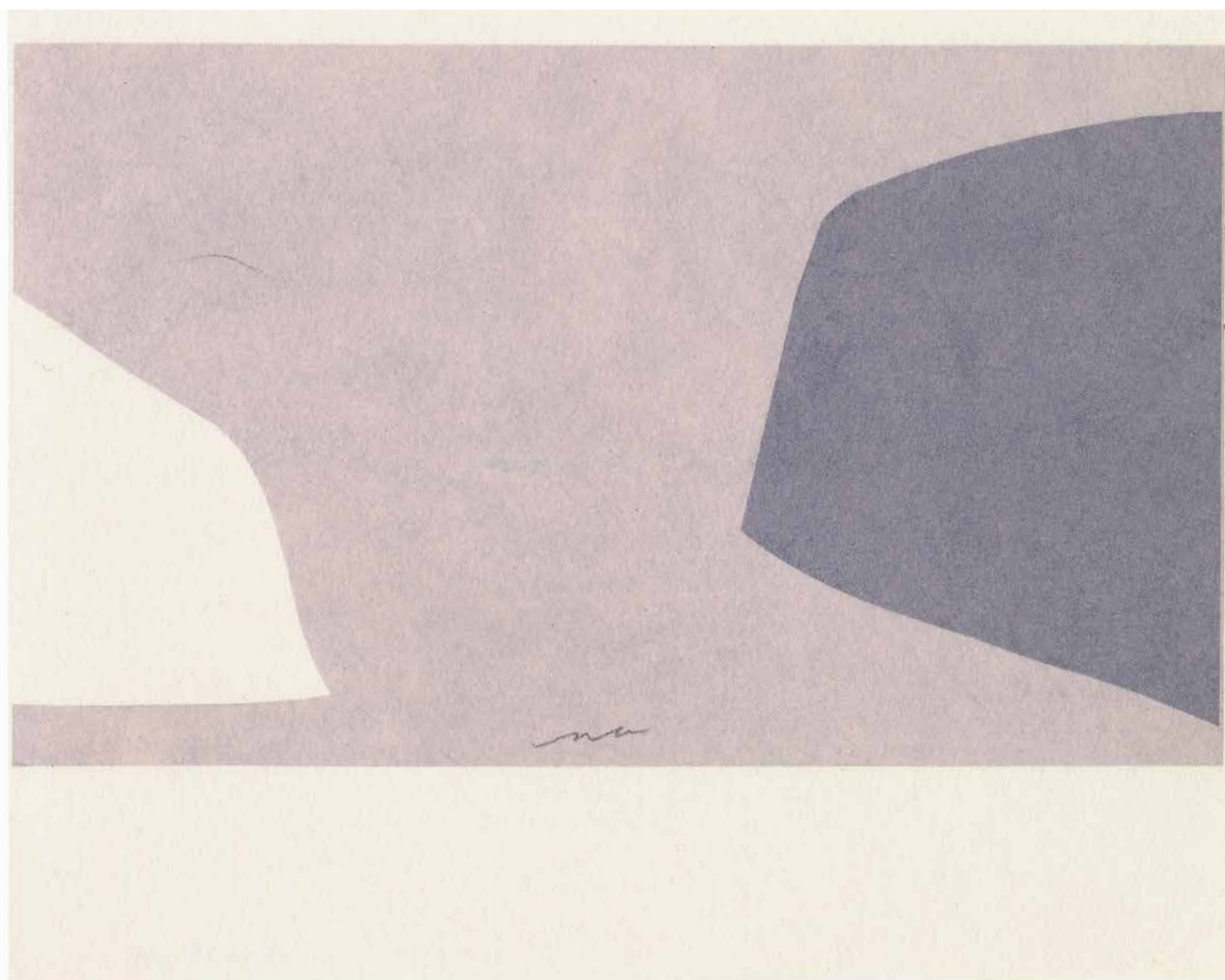
⁷ Emily Dickinson, *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1924), 135.



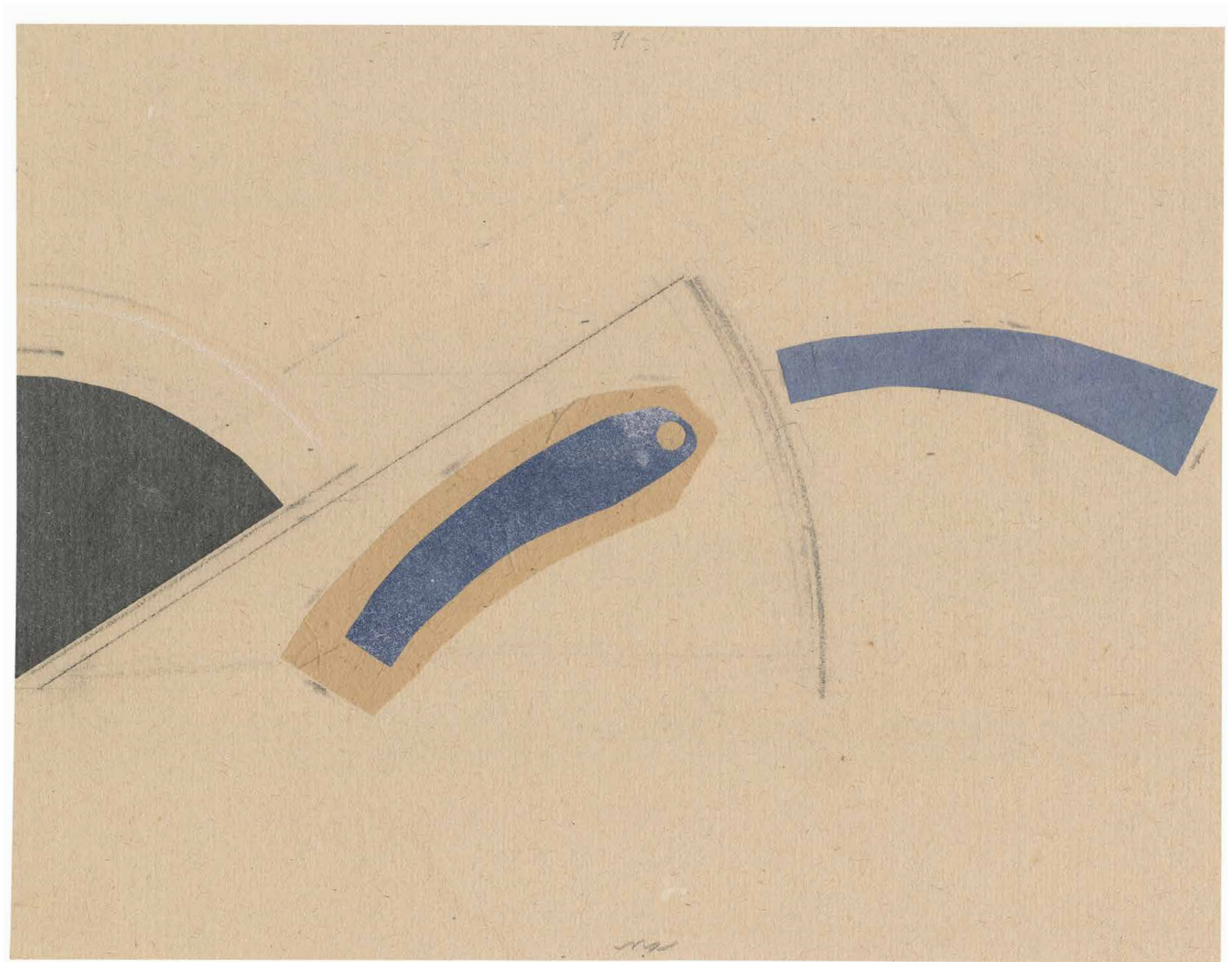
COMPOSITION F18



COMPOSITION F2



COMPOSITION C I I



COMPOSITION F4



COMPOSITION G16