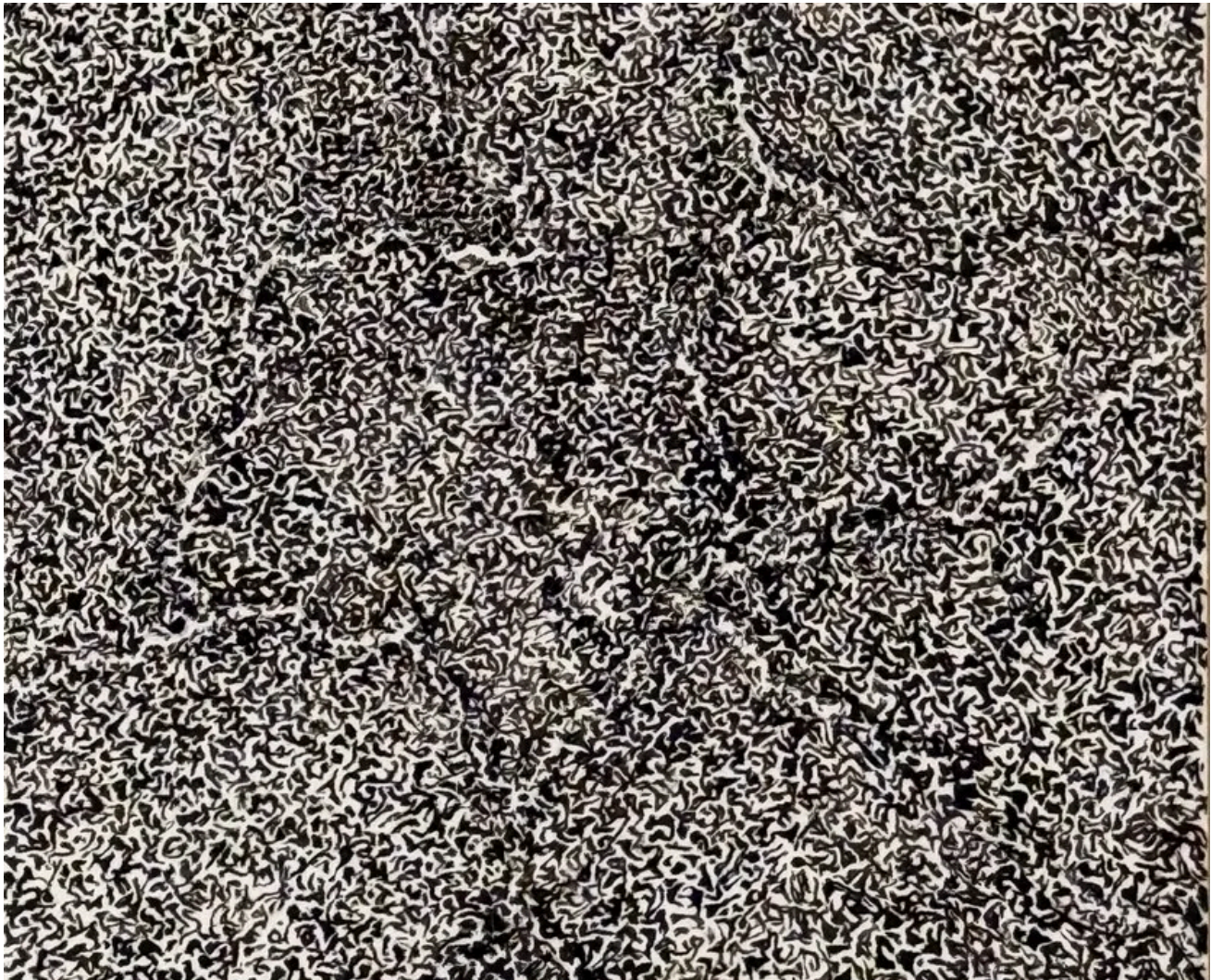


Carl Little – Spending Time with Ellen Golden

Features and Essays, Spring 2026 | 0 comments



Artist Ellen Golden is known for her intricate drawings. Working out of her studio in Fort Andross in Brunswick, Golden creates work that engages by its sheer complexity. In advance of her exhibition [Strata](#) at the Maine Jewish Museum (through 30 April), she answered a few questions about her new work, including



how a sense of time might apply to her practice. The interview has been edited for length.

CL: I sent you the thematic focus of the spring *Maine Arts Journal* issue, which explains some of my time-oriented questions.

EG: Yes, and you know, it's so funny because I don't think I've ever asked an artist this question, although people always ask me how long it took to make a drawing. The answer is I don't know, because I don't keep track and I don't know anybody who does.

CL: The other answer you can give is that it took your whole lifetime to make a drawing, because you've been working all your life to get here.

EG: It's true. Everything you do is basically the sum of a lifetime's worth of experience, both in terms of making art and seeing and contemplating the world, and then the actual physical practice of doing whatever it is that you do.



Ellen Golden, *Welcome*, ink on paper, 6 x 4 in.



CL: What inspired your new work? While the drawings continue your focus on mark-making, they also seem to me to represent a new avenue for you.

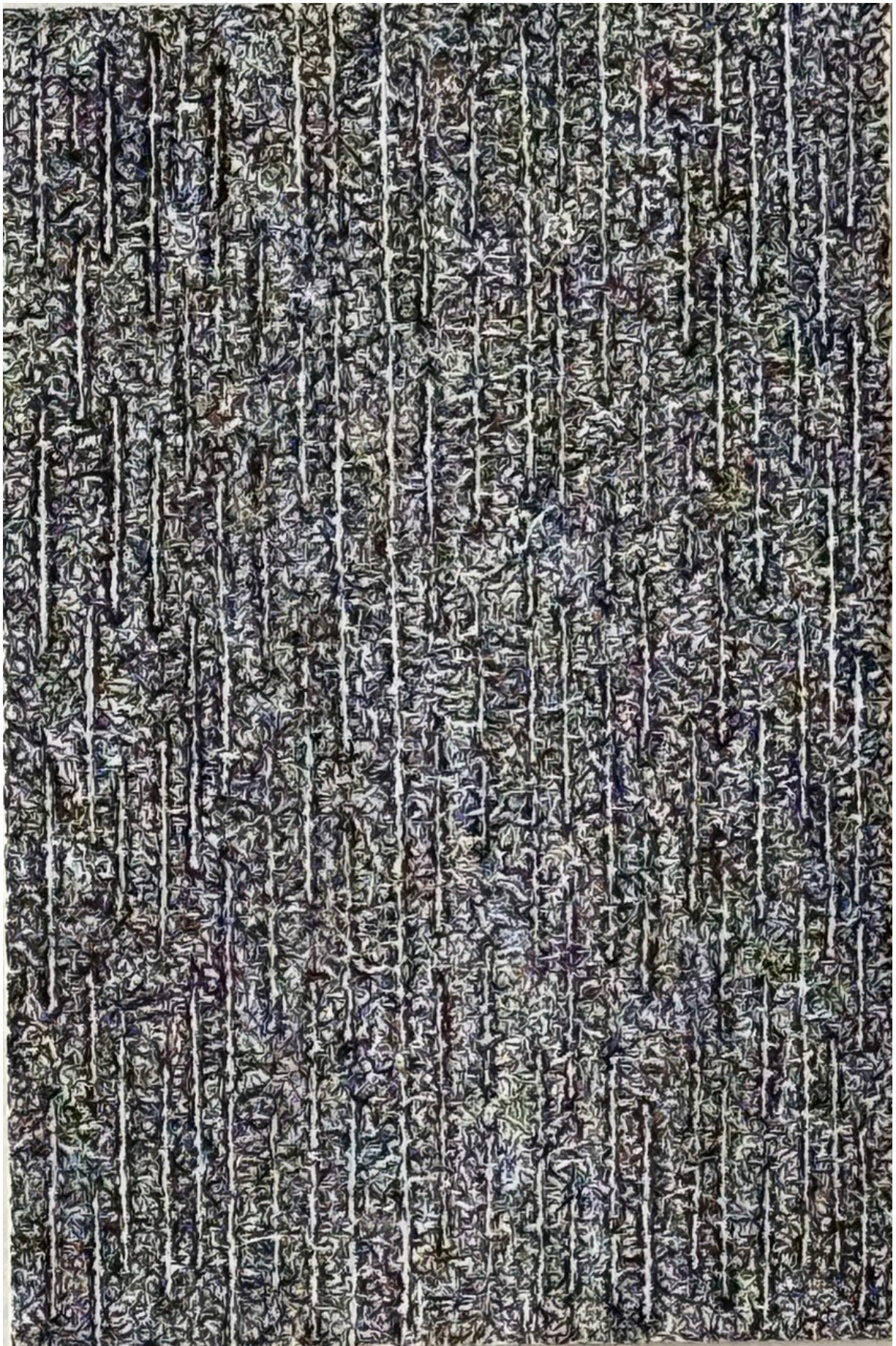
EG: The answer comes in two ways. One is that I can never fully account for why I suddenly decide to do what I do. I just get different ideas, or I'm curious. I did a lot of colored drawings for a long time, and then one day I thought, why not black and white again? I used to do black and white, and then I didn't, and then I became interested in it in a slightly different way. What I'm doing now is actually different from what I did before, although I think that was part of the impetus for it: what would working in black and white be like now, a decade later or however long it was.

The other thing I think that got me going was that I had been using a brush and ink for a lot of the work I've done the last few years, and I got curious again about what it would be like to work with [a dip pen and a nib](#). So it was a change of technique, I guess, a change of materials, that sent me off in that direction.

As I was making these drawings, I also got curious again about what it would be like to use a [Rapidograph pen](#). I had one many years ago, and it got lost somewhere when moving around. At some point, maybe a decade ago—I'm really bad with time, so everything is a decade—somebody gave me their rapidograph because they said they couldn't stand using it—too frustrating. So I picked up the pen and I liked it.

Some of the drawings in the show I made with a dip pen, and others with a rapidograph.



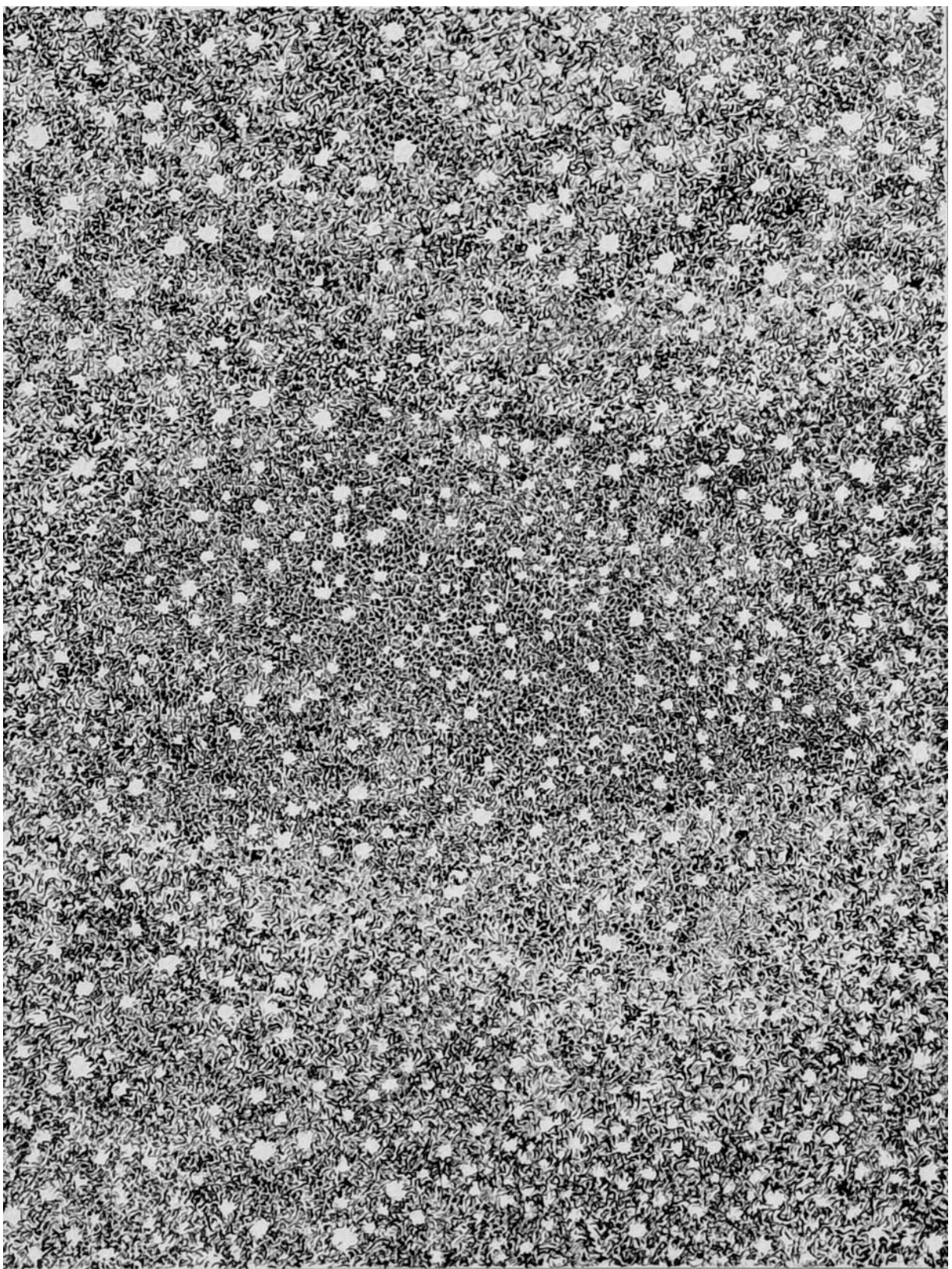


Ellen Golden, *Time Will Tell*, ink on paper, 6 x 4 in.

CL: Another thing I noticed about the new work is how you use the whole surface,

rather than having distinct patterns adrift on the paper.

EG: I've done different things in the past. I used to have images floating in space and then at some point I started going all the way to the edges, and then I stopped. And now, apparently, I'm going to the edges again. It seems to be that's where whatever I'm doing takes me. The process is really responding to what's on the paper; I'm responding to the marks that I've already made. I may have some ideas about where I think I'm headed, but that frequently changes once I get in the process of making a drawing. The initial idea, what gets me going, is not necessarily what I ultimately end up pursuing.



Ellen Golden, *Passage*, ink on paper, 12 x 9 in.

CL: What is your sense of time while making these drawings? Do you go into a zone?

EG: I do. I listen to books a lot. I also sometimes listen to music, and sometimes I just have whatever the ambient noise is, but I can really just settle in and keep



going, making those little marks.

There's a physical limit to how long I can go on any given day. I don't think I can do an eight-hour day without my wrist starting to hurt, but I can certainly do probably five or six hours at a time. I take a break for lunch and sometimes I take a walk, but I generally work on a single drawing at a time.

I know some people have multiple things going at once. I'm sort of a sequential worker. I think it's in part because I tend to sort of build off what I've previously done. I like to finish one piece and then take a look at it and think about it. Frequently that time will give me an idea for what I might do going forward.

CL: What are you listening to now, by the way?

EG: I'm listening to a mystery, but I tend to vary it. I do listen to nonfiction and then I listen to so-called literary fiction. Sometimes I just need something that doesn't require much effort and I'll listen to a mystery.

CL: I'm totally the same way. I just started listening to a Walter Mosley crime novel. Do you know him?

EG: God, I just listened to one of his books recently. Easy Rawlins is a great character.

A few years ago, I read a three-volume biography of Winston Churchill, written by William Manchester. It took me the better part of the summer. I can take on something that requires paying some attention, but occasionally, when I am really wrestling with some decision about what I'm doing, I have to stop listening to focus on what I'm doing. I also listen to podcasts sometimes, just to break it up a little bit. Generally speaking, I'm listening to something when I'm working.



Ellen Golden, *Nocturne*, ink on paper, 16 x 12 in.

CL: The title of your show at the Maine Jewish Museum is *Strata*. What were you thinking of when you came up with that title?

EG: Some of the drawings are made in layers. The basic marks are made, and then I go back and manipulate them in a variety of ways. It's unlike a lot of the work that I made in the past, which really was a single layer, although, and this is true of some of this new work as well, I like the fact that it creates the illusion of depth. A number of the drawings in the show do that. The white in all of those drawings is the paper showing through.

CL: [You have written](#), "I am interested in the unexpected that results from the cumulative impact of small repetitive marks and the illusion of depth and contrast that may emerge even within the constraints of a limited palette." What draws you to that unexpected nature of drawing?

EG: Well, the work is not interesting to me if I know exactly how things are going to turn out. I mean, that's just who I am.

I travel a lot these days, and part of what attracts me to travel is going to places that have cultures with which I am unfamiliar. I like discovering new things. I like a little bit of unpredictability. I personally like to be surprised by what I do.

I think that's one of the reasons why I got interested in going back to black and white, because I felt like I knew what the outcomes were going to be of continuing to do that red and orange and white work that I was doing for quite a long time. I think it makes the work more interesting to other people. I think it enlivens it, because some sort of anticipation and unexpectedness is felt in the work, even if, you know, it's not sort of spelled out. I think that people are able to feel it and respond to it.

CL: Responding to the fact that you left art making for many years, [you once said](#), "[I feel that I have to make up for lost time, so being in the studio is my priority.](#)" Do you still feel this urgency?

EG: Yeah, I would say so. People often ask, how much time do you spend in your studio? And I was like, well, it's my job. I'm actually still at home this morning because I had a board meeting for Surf Point Foundation, but when we finish this call, I'm going to Brunswick. I'm there pretty much every day unless I'm traveling. Obviously, there are things that interfere, but I'm a pretty regular worker, I have to



say. Traveling is obviously a priority for me too at this age, but when I come back, I'm eager to return to my studio.

In the course of the day, we all have things that we have to do, like a doctor's appointment or phone calls that you're supposed to make. I frequently find it difficult to interrupt my workday, if you will, to do those things. I'll sometimes go to the studio with a list of phone calls that I have to make, and I'll go home with that list totally intact.





Ellen Golden, *Here, There, and Yonder*, ink on paper, 6 x 4 in.

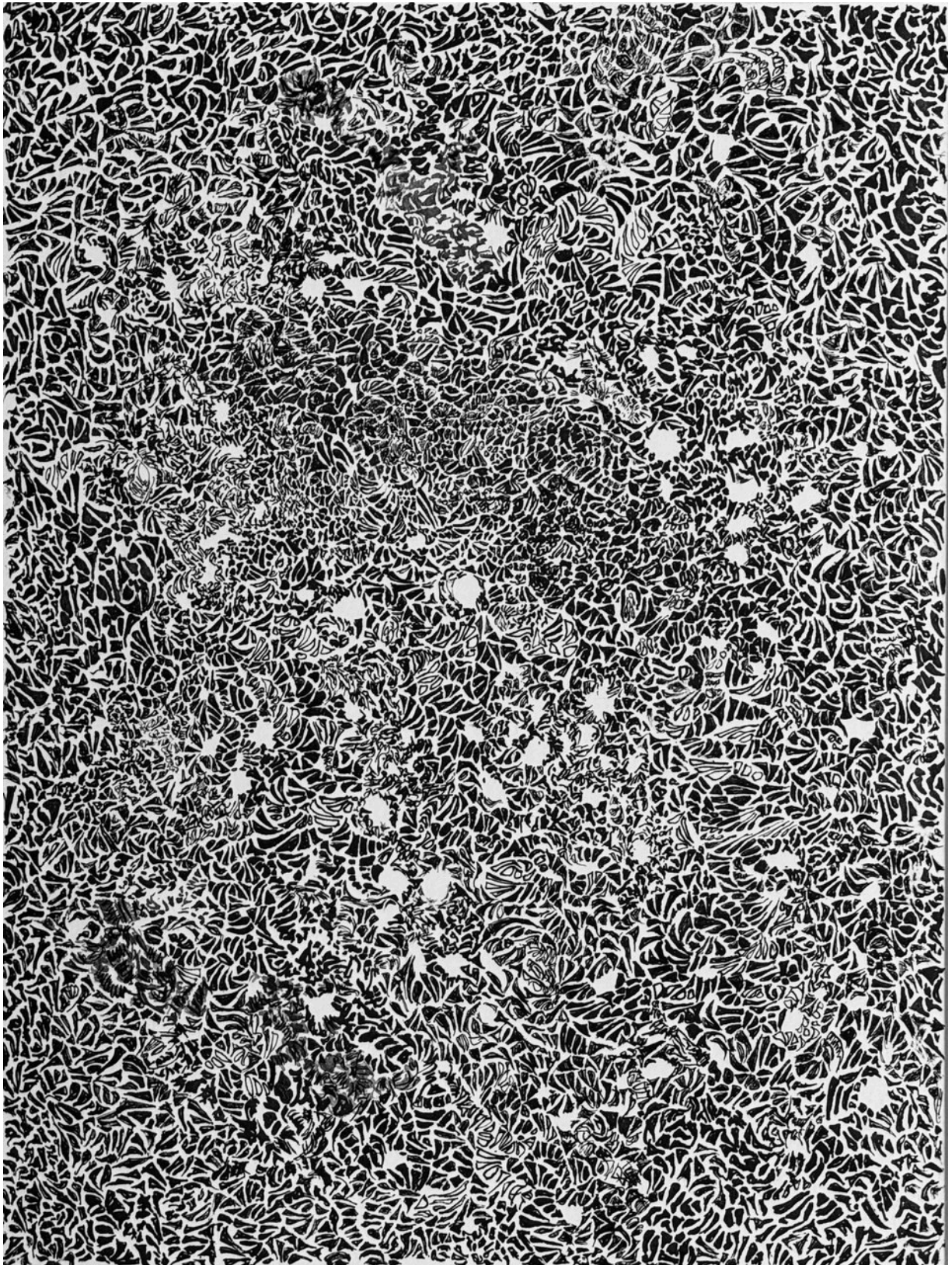
CL: Is your art a way to escape the world?

EG: It's a way of being in the world actually. God knows, this is certainly a really challenging time. Making art is a way of getting grounded, which is something I



think we all need to do when we're being assaulted on a daily basis by these events that we hope to be able to influence, but that we obviously can't control.

I guess that there's probably, on some level, something going on inside me that sort of surfaces through the work, but I find drawing really helpful as a way of ultimately remaining engaged in the world and not just digging a hole and burying myself, which is what most of us would like to do.



CL: Anything further about the time element in your work?

EG: I think this has to be true for everybody who's making work: it's actually a process. As a rule, I'm not thinking about how I operate. We have lives to live, and we are spending time every single day. What matters to me is how I feel about what I'm doing.



Full view of the image at top:

Ellen Golden, *Wonder*, ink on
paper, 6 x 4 in.

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