



OVER AND OVER

ASKING, FAILING, AND ANXIETY

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Derek Witucki

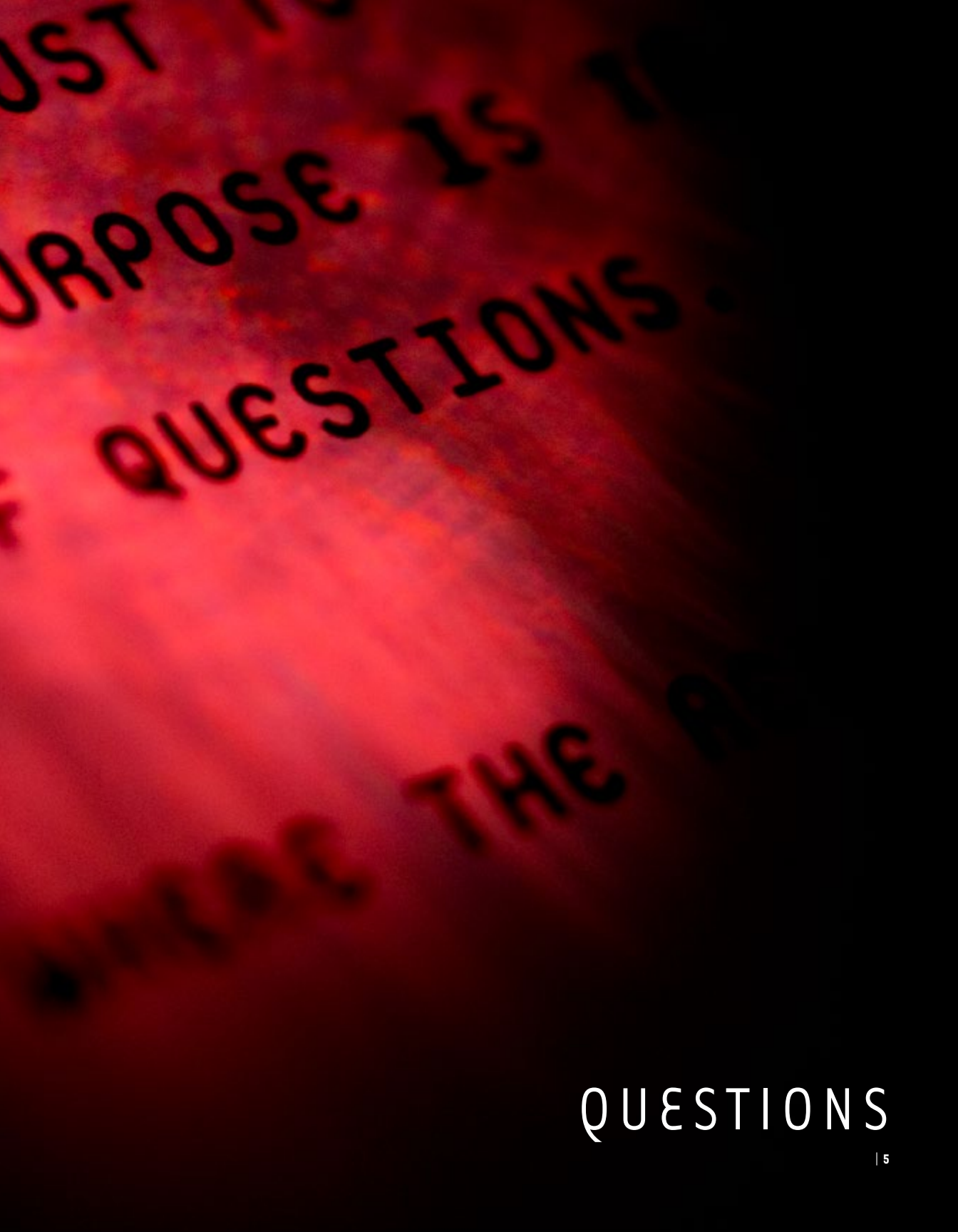
OVER AND OVER

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QUESTIONS



DEREK WITUCKI
Portrait of a Journalist, series
2016

I'm Derek, and the first thing you
need to know about me is that

I like questions.

I notice that **most people** aren't like
this; questions make them **anxious** and
in popular culture, skeptics are cast
as villains.

I'm not afraid of questioning because I
was **trained as a journalist**; it's a craft
centered around asking them, and the
responsibility and **ethics** of doing so.

*There's a principle that I try to embody,
to **seek truth & report it**.*

Out of that, my designs are always
investigations and discussions. I feel it
is my duty, no matter what I am doing, to
look at the world differently and come
back able to say **one true thing**.

The second thing to know about me is that I believe the most exciting answer to a question is “I don’t know.”

Simply stated, I love to learn. I hear *I-don’t-know* as “let’s find out.”



- 1 Stuart Firestein, *The Pursuit of Ignorance* (TED, 2013), www.ted.com/talks/stuart_firestein_the_pursuit_of_ignorance.

Also see: *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (2012); and *Failure: Why Science Is So Successful* (2015).

I often look to science for inspiration, and in science the pursuit of knowledge is unending. However, that’s not what it’s about.

Stuart Firestein more aptly says, “you might have to know a lot to be a scientist. But the purpose of knowing lots is to be able to ask lots of questions, to be able to frame thoughtful, interesting questions, because that’s where the real work is.”¹

What he says also rings true in design.

As a designer, I need to be a person **accustom** to the **unfamiliar**, to **being lost**, to **fumbling around** because it is only by doing this that I can discover the most possibilities.

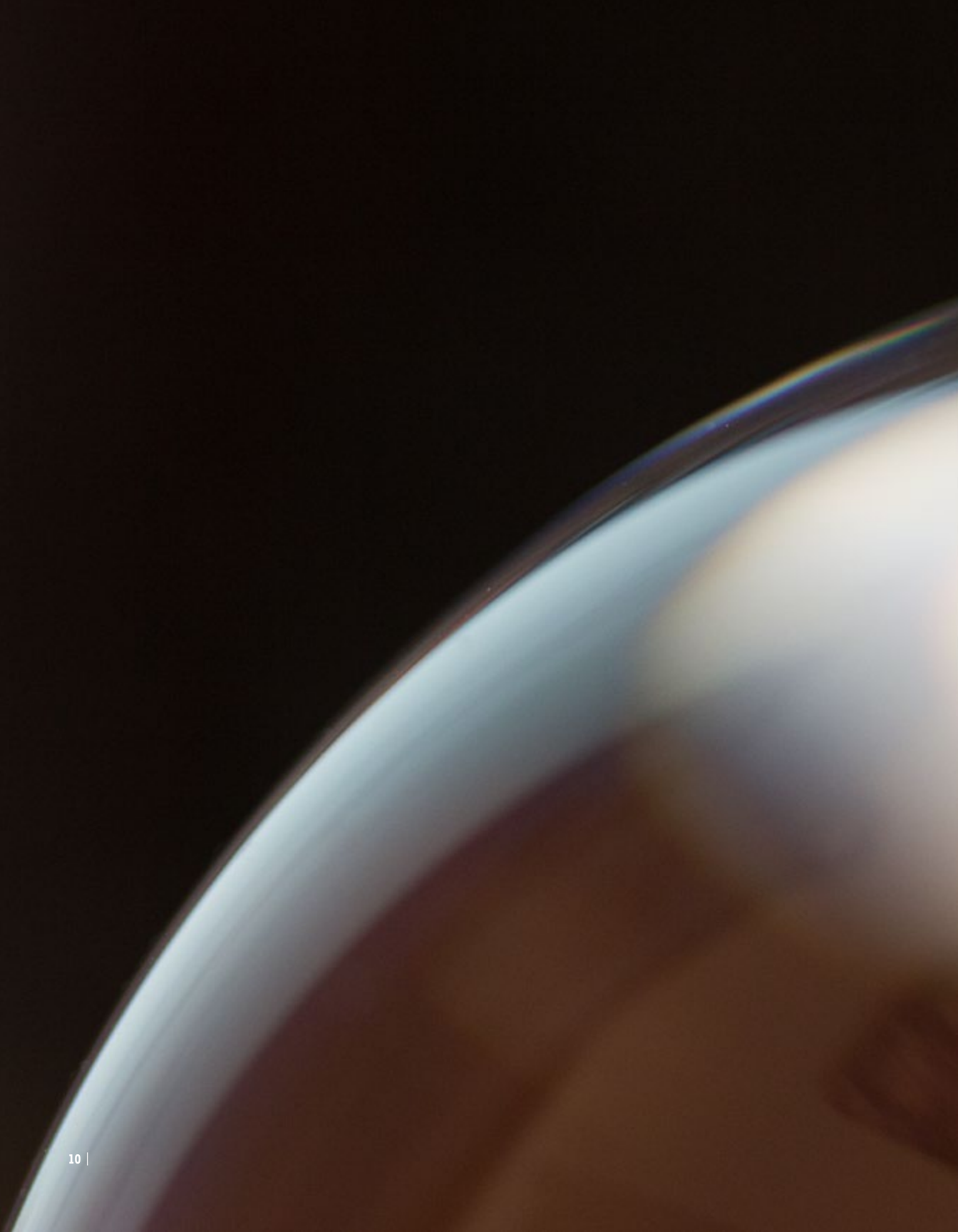
In order to embrace experimental forms, you need to open yourself to a difficult, often directionless, process. Above all, you need to be comfortable with failing.

If the thought of failing makes you anxious, then you are not alone.

We tell ourselves to never fail, that failing is wasteful and abhorrent. We label the stigmatized as “failures,” be they things, ideas, or people.

Yet, failing teaches you to be both humble and successful. The experience reveals the bounds of your current knowledge and skills, and it shows you how to grow.

If you’re not failing a lot, you’re not making enough.

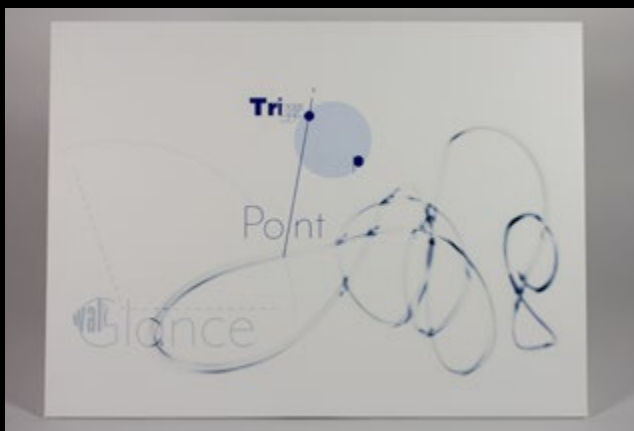




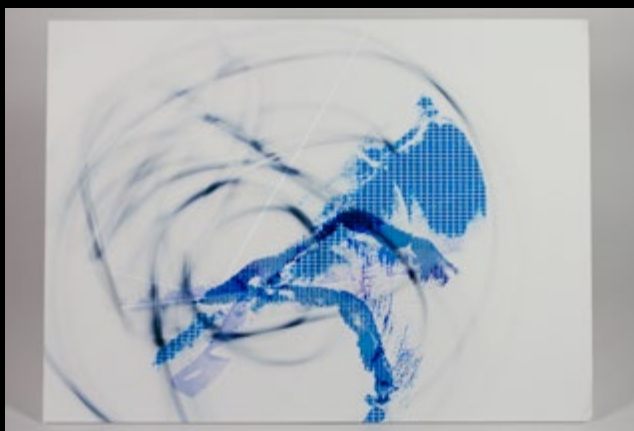
FAILURE



VR: Conceptual Expression



VR: Typographic Expression



VR: Visual Expression

IN MY DESIGN PRACTICE, FAILURE IS AN ALLY.

2 Experimental design in the sense used by Armin Lindauer in *Experimental Design: Visual Methods and Systematic Play* (2015).

3 See also *House Industries: The Process Is the Inspiration* (2017).

My VR series exemplifies this notion.

It translates the spatial, full-body gestures used by virtual reality devices into visual forms. I was using the series to question virtual reality interfaces and to speculate on the form that computer metaphors could take as technology matures.

Behind the pieces are a staggering body of work and studies. Distinct from linear iterations, my experimental² design process explored many, many branching ideas while developing the visual translations.

But, most crucially, the series could have never come together without every step along the way going wrong.

For weeks-on-weeks, I struggled with form and technique. I played with drawing, photography, and sculpture; turning out 10, then 15, then 35 pieces exploring different ideas. I experimented with embossing, spot varnishes, and vinyl overlays—each ruining multiple prints in their own ways. On more than a few nights, I questioned what I was doing—sometimes who I even was.

But, I kept throwing myself at it, and I found a true thing! That I could build off disastrous mistakes to uncover better ideas. That failure and dumb-luck can be inspiring, integral parts of the process.³



JUAN FRANCISCO CASAS

Photo by David Osuna

Artist with *Sofi* #2 (2014)

Yas #3 (2014)

Andrea #4 (2014)

Yas #4 (2014)

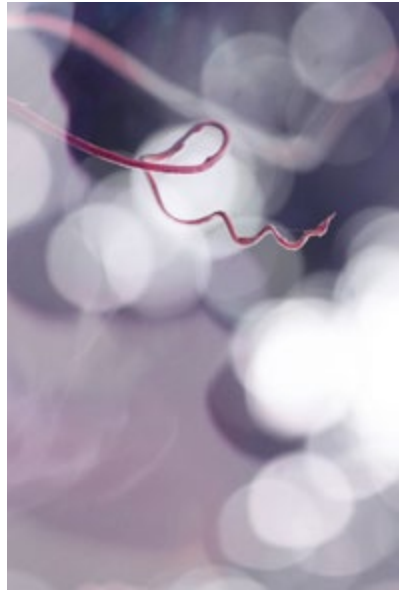
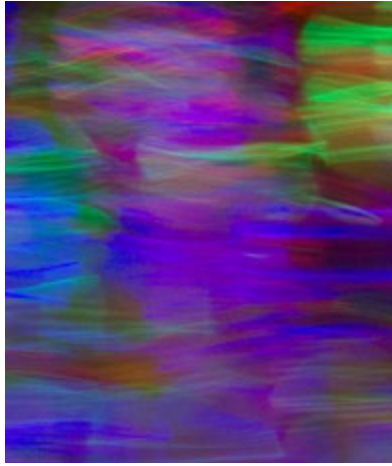
Sara Jevo Surprise Attack #3 (2008)



Several years ago, I researched Spanish artist, Juan Francisco Casas. He's a hyperrealist ballpoint pen artist whose drawings reproduce the harsh effects of amateur photography. While his drawings deal with promiscuity and sexuality, I read into his body of work a commentary on the lens. On how it sees and distorts us.

And, in turn, how lenses distort our self image.

When selfies became a dominate form of self-expression, increasing numbers of people started getting nose jobs due to these images. But, because the camera is closer to your face, your nose looks 20 to 30 percent larger in a selfie than in a traditional portrait.

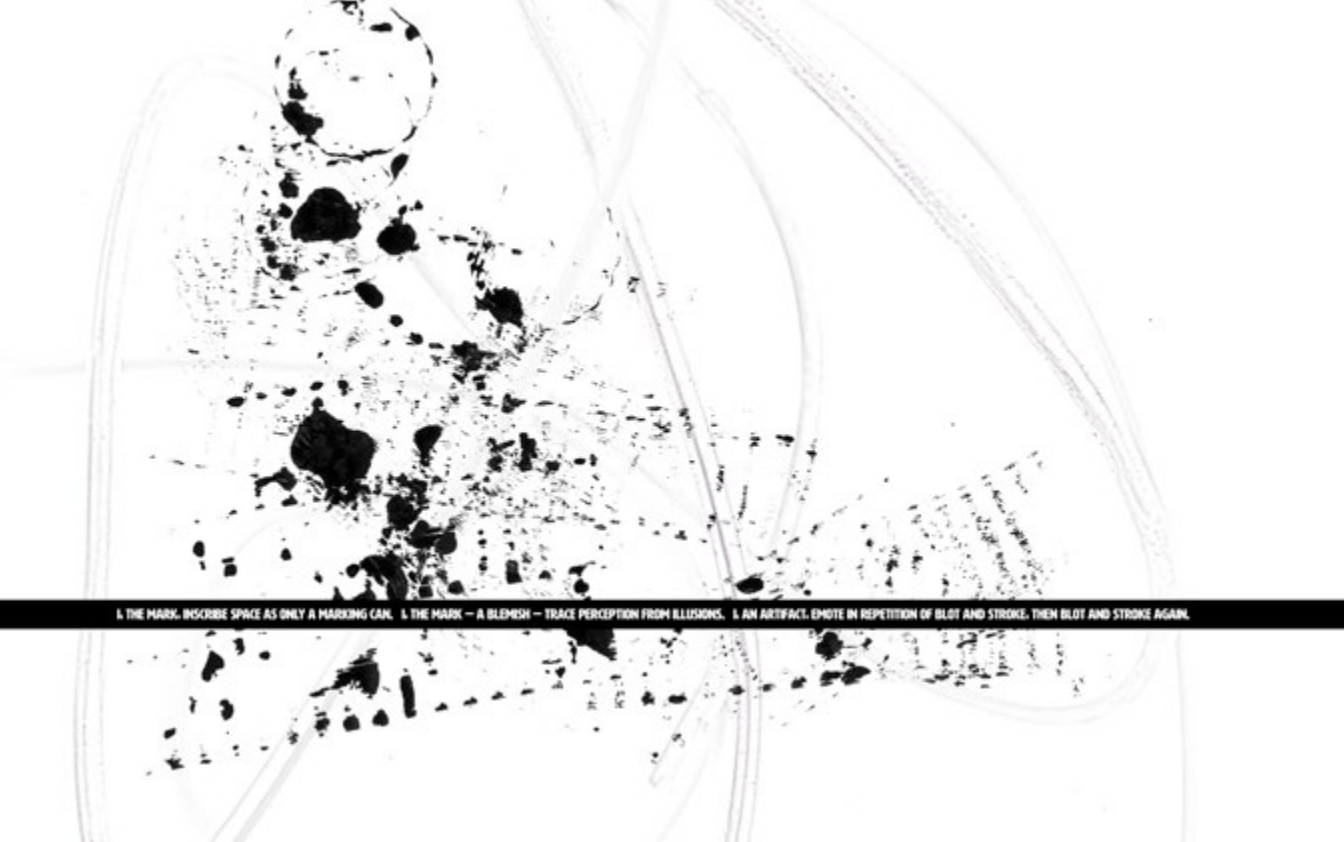


DEREK WITUCKI
 Selected works and studies
 (2016–2018)



After making these observations, I kept finding myself playing with optics and light. I'd perk up when I saw it other work, I became obsessed with macro-photography, then I started accumulating different sorts of magnifying glasses, and then other optical instruments—toys, really.

I had various reasons... that never really went anywhere. But I kept them around, and I kept photographing with them.



DEREK WITUCKI

Mixed Dimension

2018

A bit more recently, I had a chance to read *Jens F.*, a rare artbook by photographer Collier Schorr. I poured over the book, studying the photographs and my reaction to them. In them, Schorr makes apparent the effect of male gaze on portraiture.

At the same time, I had Dziga Vertov's manifesto on the camera looping in my head. "*I am an eye. A mechanical eye...*"

I tried again, but I still wasn't able to do anything with this.

"I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, maneuvering in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations.

Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I coordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you."



ROBIN BROADBENT

*The Photographic Works of
Robin Broadbent (2017)*

These ideas resurfaced a while later at a photography exhibit. Where, at first, I found the photos kind of, well, pedestrian: Why would you shoot straight on? Etc, etc.

But as I saw more of the work, it hit me—**she's an architect**. And she sees the world as only an architect can.

It had left an imprint on her photography, and I began to wonder what the imprint was on mine? So I tried to do something with that notion, but it wasn't all there and I wasn't very successful.

In discovering **Robin Broadbent**, I found an answer—no, I found better questions. His minimalist photography uses stark contrasts of light to bring forward graphic lines and forms.

Not only does he photograph like a graphic designer, but I will argue his photographs are graphic design.

It showed me that I could bring photography—and perhaps journalism—**more completely** into my design work.

AN UNUSUAL DATE
THE ANSWER IS UP

I DON'T KNOW

AND

CHES

AND **I GASP**

FOR THAT ONE SECOND

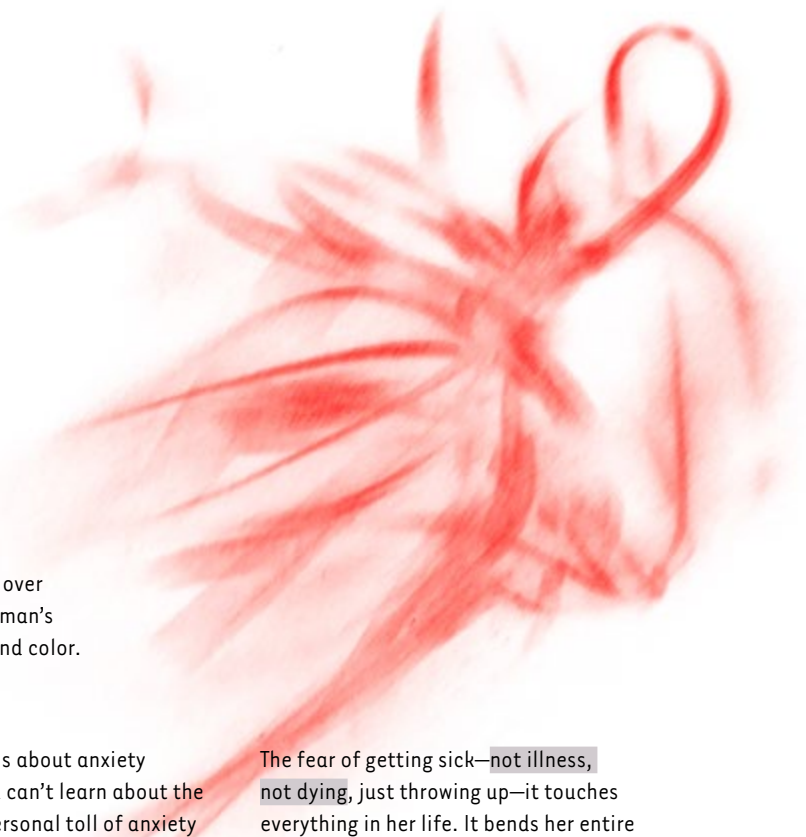
WHAT IS GOING ON

I PANIC

ANXIETY

It was those over and over again tries this.

It's the combination of all these influences in photography and optics; it's the result of honest observation, questions, and a long succession of failure.



Using camera obscura projection over typography, it carries a young woman's experience through word, form, and color.

The project itself is about anxiety disorders. But you can't learn about the experience and personal toll of anxiety from just reading the medical literature. That's not to say you shouldn't, it helps you ask compassionate and informed questions. But to really learn about anxiety, you have to talk to someone with anxiety.

As a form of **visual journalism**, my piece shares a personal moment from the life of a woman suffering with an anxiety disorder. Her's is both trivial and debilitating. It is fixed on a single and **crippling phobia**.

The fear of getting sick—**not illness, not dying**, just throwing up—it touches everything in her life. It bends her entire experience until even the feeling of hunger itself blurs into a threat.

This project is about looking at anxiety differently. At these little moments that cascade into something bigger. If I can say **one true thing**, it's that when she talks about anxiety, she does not mean the types you or I have.

15 MINI AM
AT

ALL N
I KEEP D
WHERE T
AND SO I THINK I

ANXIETY TACKS

RIGHT, I COULDN'T SLEEP
REAMING ABOUT A BOOK
HE CHARACTER IS SICK
MUST BE SICK

DO YOU KNOW HOW
IN THE MIDDLE OF THE
I WAKE AND GRAB YOUR
AND THEN IT'S OVER IN
IT WAS THOSE **OVER** AND

E NIGHT

ARM

TWO SECONDS?

OVER AGAIN



MY BREATH CATCHES
IT WAKES ME UP AND
I DON'T KNOW HOW
AND I

S
D
I
FOR THAT ONE SECOND
WHAT IS GOING ON
GASP
PANIC

מאמץ
הממשלה
לשקט
המדינה



My work is a synthesis of design and journalism, and I use both in my creative process to pose questions and share perspectives.

Derek is a Houston-based graphic designer studying to complete his MFA at the University of Houston.

He was a speaker at the 2017 College Media Convention in Dallas, TX where he presented interdisciplinary strategies for the creative, expressive use of typography in the editorial process. He currently holds a teaching fellowship at the University of Houston, is a design consultant for the literary journal *Gulf Coast*, and holds honors in media design from the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association.

Principally, I am a media designer with photography and journalism as cornerstones in my design practice.

DEREK WITUCKI

www.witdesign.me

Alongside these sustaining interests is a far-reaching and process-driven approach where I seek to incorporate disparate ideas and novel techniques. This comes from a vision to use graphic design as a vehicle for dialogue and education, and out of that, my designs are always investigations and discussions.

I started working for news publications because I am driven to learn and share information; it is now the passion behind my visual work. I use design to engage social issues and provoke discussion by presenting my questions and critical ideas to an observer without the entanglement of their learned responses or my own.

