



Ulrich Museum of Art



FALL EXHIBITIONS

7.1.20-11.30.20

Alice Aycock | *In the Studio*

Grafly Gallery (visits are by appointment)

In August 2020, the Ulrich Museum of Art will install Alice Aycock's large-scale outdoor sculpture *Twister Grande (tall)* as part of the Martin H. Bush Outdoor Sculpture Collection. A major commission, this will be the Museum's first contribution to the shaping of WSU's new Innovation Campus. The work was selected for its site because it is a significant piece of contemporary sculpture and because it captures the spirit of the dramatic changes that have taken place at the university in the last decade. It will, moreover, be a fitting and lasting tribute to the contributions of President John Bardo, who initiated and oversaw those changes prior to his passing in 2019.

Alice Aycock, the artist who created *Twister Grande (tall)*, is a force of nature in her own right who has blazed a unique path working within the art world at the intersection of sculpture, architecture, technology, and science. *Alice Aycock in the Studio* is an installation of drawings and ephemera that seeks to illuminate her creative process and contextualize *Twister Grande (tall)* as part of the larger artistic practice that has unfolded over the course of 50 years. The drawings and photographs on view here all date to the last decade, but they illuminate career-long fascinations with capturing the movements of a world in ever-changing motion, understanding the relationship between order and chaos, and identifying the forms, patterns, and metaphors that span nature and technology alike.

The Ulrich Museum is grateful to Alice Aycock for her collaboration on *Alice Aycock in the Studio* and her generosity in sharing the ideas that inform this exhibition. We would also like to thank her studio, particularly Amelia Midori Miller, for assisting with the logistics of putting together this installation.

The exhibition is generously supported by Jane McHugh.

With gratitude, we honor the donors who aided the commission of *Twister Grande (tall)*: Fidelity Bank Foundation, Lou and Terry Heldman, George and Eleanor Lucas, and Lee and Ron Starkel.



Alice Aycock, *The Mystery of the Highway in the Sky, Part 1 and Part 5*, 2017. Inkjet print, watercolor. Courtesy of the artist.



Coming Full Spiral

Twister Grande (tall) and Alice Aycock in the Studio

an essay by Ksenya Gurshtein, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Consider a short and incomplete list of visual references that Alice Aycock's *Twister Grande (tall)* might evoke in a viewer's imagination: a tornado; a dancer's pirouette; a twisting silk or paper ribbon; the path of a particle, perhaps moving in water; the spiraling strands of DNA or RNA molecules inside a cell's nucleus; the motion of a spinning top; the turbulence produced by a propeller, turbine, or blade gone awry; a thrilling and terrifying amusement park ride. We imagine you as a viewer will add more fascinating associations to this list.

The list's wide-ranging and wildly diverse points of reference are no accident. As an artist, Alice Aycock has made it her mission to draw visual connections between seemingly disparate things to challenge her own and her viewers' understanding of some of the world's messiest, most chaotic, complex, and least predictable phenomena: from the natural ones, like wind patterns and particle motion, to historical and sociological ones, like the breakneck rate of technological change that began at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

Aycock's Turbulence series, of which *Twister Grande (tall)* is a part, is a culmination and distillation of decades of thinking and experimentation in different media, often in response to a broad array of images she has discovered over the years. Following numerous peripatetic paths, Aycock has still persistently returned to certain motifs and mined personal experiences, some going all the way back to her youth. What follows is an illustrated sketch of some of the ideas that have motivated her work over the course of the last 50 years.



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These are elucidated through the works on view in *Alice Aycock in the Studio* and shed light on what led the artist to create *Twister Grande (tall)*. Wherever possible, the artist's own published words have been used.

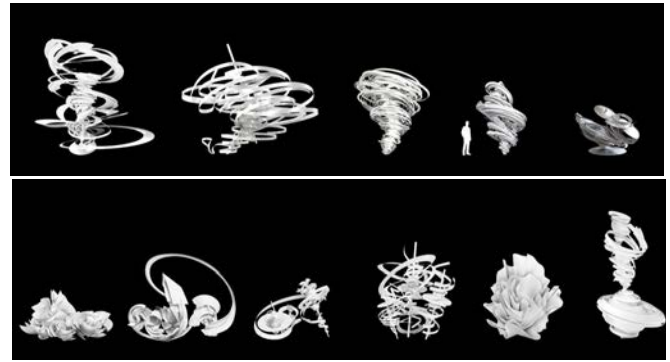
DANCE

"Many of the works of art that I am interested in have what I would call the sensation of kinesthesia. You can feel this sensation of movement in your body when you experience the work. The very beginning of my creative consciousness was the immediacy of dance. When I'm making these pieces, I feel it initially as a dance movement in my own body, and then it becomes the movement of wind, water, etc., then it gets translated into ribbons of movement. I feel all these pieces have a very strong kinesthetic sensation in them. On reflection I also think the twisters are akin to the spinning movements in ice-skating which I practiced throughout my youth."¹

Dance, for Aycock, is as much about cognitive leaps as it is about physical motion. In one interview, she recounted a formative dream in which she "dreamt she was dancing across history and as the music changed she moved through space in a time machine, changing centuries and world views from the Middle Ages to the 1930s of Fred Astaire. [This] became a prevailing metaphor for her life and work."²

MOVEMENT

"Movement is important to me because I view things as in a constant state of transition. Nothing stays solid as far as I am concerned. This interest in a constant state of flux began with an early work, *Sand/Fans* (1971) (four industrial fans/turbines aimed at a central pile of 4000 lbs. of sand). What I called the necessary structure and the contingent event—the arrangement of the spinning fan blades and the random movement of the sand. Initially I expected a dust devil tornado in the center to form. What ended up happening were wave/interference patterns in the sand.



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I think there is an arc from *Sand/Fans* to these new twister pieces. My fascination with wind, cloud formation, smoke, flow dynamics, wave theory, and interference patterns was there from the beginning. In various ways, I have circumnavigated around it throughout my career.”¹

DANGER

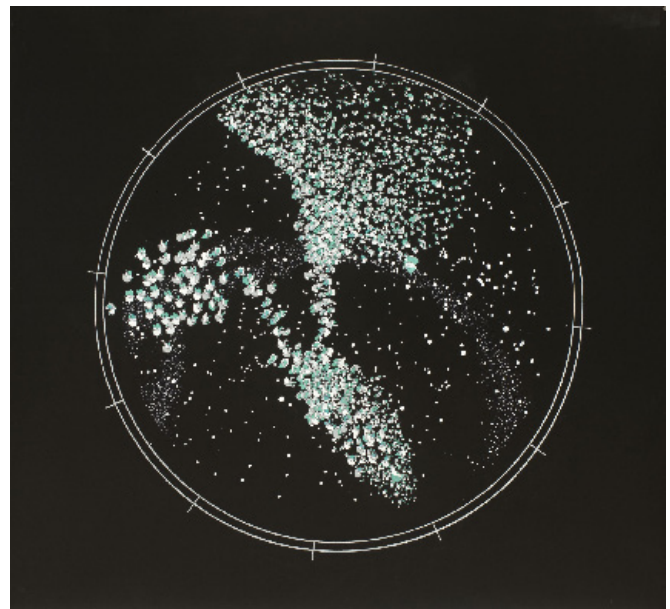
Early in her career, Aycock was part of a generation of conceptual artists influenced by systems theory and cybernetics—the science of communication, control systems, and feedback loops in both mechanical and living things.

These artists focused their work on the painstaking observation and understanding of both natural and man-made processes, akin to staging a scientific experiment and gathering data in an art gallery. “I was concerned with setting up situations in which the interaction of the things involved generated the course of events.”³ Hans Haacke’s *Blue Sail* (1964-65), for example, similarly used a fan to demonstrate patterns of wind flow. Yet Aycock’s work is notable for the degree to which she has been willing to flirt with danger and destruction. In the original 1971 presentation of *Sand/Fans*, the blades of the fans were uncovered, adding an element of visceral fear to the visitors’ experience of the work. (In the 2008 recreation of the work, pictured above, the fans were covered with guards.)

In the series of drawings titled *Things Pass By in the Night: Murmurations*, Aycock merged imagery that evokes both the starry sky, with its myriad celestial bodies, and the flocking patterns of starlings, whose mass balletic movements through the sky are called murmurations. In this drawing, the tiny bodies, though, are propeller blades rather than living things, which harkens to a career-long interest in machines that produce motion and inspire both awe and fear.



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“A jet engine (turbine) is both physically intimidating and also mesmerizing, eliciting an approach/ withdrawal response. I think of it as a kind of ‘catching one’s breath’ experience.”¹ Elsewhere, she’s written, “The Blade Machine is a generic image, both seductive and sinister, that implies the creative and destructive nature of technology” —certainly true in this drawing, where the superimposition of propeller blades and birds reminds us of the uneasy cohabitation of these two things.³ “You can follow this image of a blade or knife in my work as it transforms itself into a waterwheel and a windmill and a turbine and a Cuisinart and also into the crescents of the moon.”³

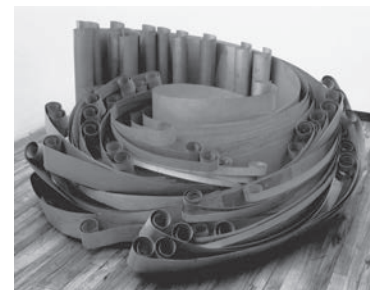
SCIENCE AND ART MEET ORDER AND CHAOS

Aycock’s 1982 sculpture *The Leonardo Swirl* was a direct response to the inspiration of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings of water in motion. “Of all the artists, Leonardo da Vinci was the most interested in exploring the dynamics of water and explosions—the composition of chaos and disorder. I came across da Vinci’s Deluge series in 1980 and have been referring to it ever since. But there is an inherent paradox in these works. In the Deluge series in which Leonardo tries to visualize turbulence and flow dynamics he has to stop the motion in order to examine it. This is not unlike the paradox in quantum mechanics and wave / particle theory.”¹

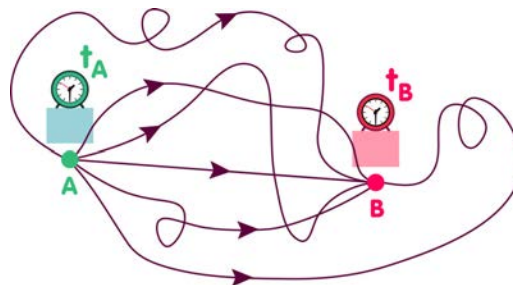
Two of the drawings in *Alice Aycock in the Studio* are from the series titled *Sum Over Histories*. This phrase was coined by physicist Richard Feynman to describe quantum theory. Aycock has cited a diagram similar to the one pictured here explaining Feynman’s idea and found in Stephen Hawking’s *The Universe in a Nutshell* as a visual inspiration. In physics, “sum over histories” is “a technique for performing calculations [for] the probability for a certain outcome (for instance, a particle reaching location A at time t)...by performing a sum over all possible ways in which this particular outcome can come about.”⁴



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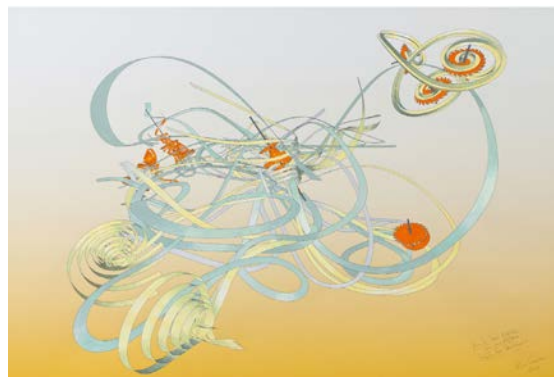
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Often inspired by science, Aycock views it as a creative endeavor similar to art in the leaps of conjecture, trial and error, and wrangling of the unknown that it requires. “These schemes are really works of the imagination.”² Aycock has also commented on the profound impact that changing scientific paradigms have on our understanding of the universe and our place as humans in it. “The stability of the Newtonian world is gone. A pity it was so hard won...”³

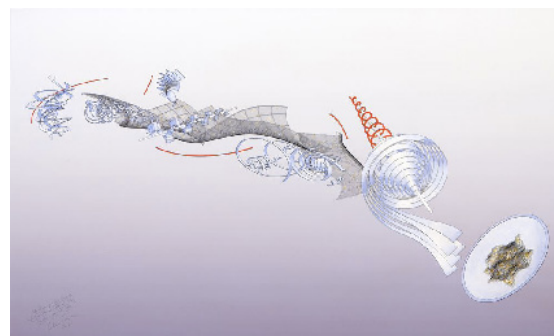
FLIGHT

“I am an unabashed lover of toys – paper airplanes, spinning tops, gyroscopes, and science toys of all kinds...”¹ Almost all the objects Aycock mentions in this list capture children’s imaginations by presenting motion as a kind of magic in the context play. Of a work from the 1980s, Aycock has said, “I saw some illustrations of tornadoes and hurricanes—things that are in constant motion and turmoil like whirling dervishes. The game I chose was the dreidel game, which resembles a game of spinning tops. In the dreidel game, if the sequences of letters line up properly, you get a miracle.”³ The magical and playful qualities of flight are also something Aycock captures in *The Game of Flyers, Part II—International Arrivals Bldg, Dulles Airport, 2012*, which depicts her major sculptural installation at Dulles International Airport.

The human desire to produce flight in settings ranging from war to amusement parks and going as far back in time as the Early Modern period has been a long-time source of fascination for Aycock, as in the two works pictured here. Aycock’s remarkable 1980 architectural sculpture *The Game of Flyers* was “a large wooden construction...composed of wheels, ladders, platforms, trenches, a tower, a column, and a carousel, reminiscent of a fantasy medieval carnival crossed with a battleground. [Its] fanciful...devices [were] intended to be instruments of flight that would propel one upward into the sky.”²



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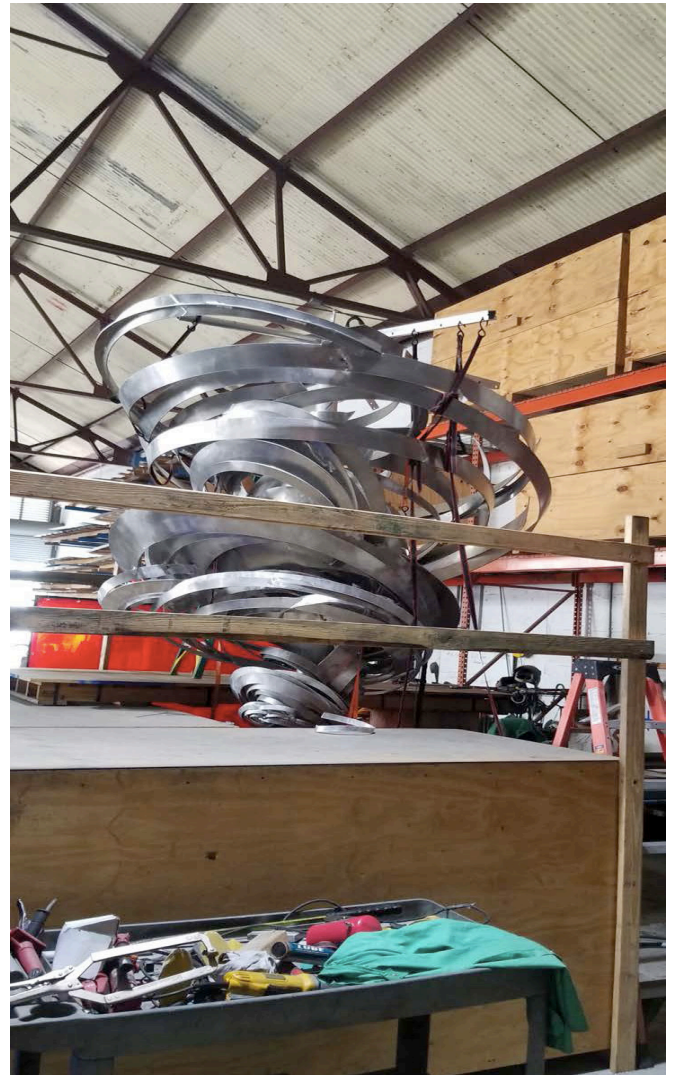
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The Game of Flyers Part Two, sited inside Dulles International Airport, reinvigorates the awe-inspiring wonder of flight in a context where it might otherwise get lost amid the routines of contemporary air travel.

ENGAGING TECHNOLOGY

The striking changes in appearance and materials of Aycock's work that one can see between the two similarly named large-scale public art pieces above were precipitated by the technological changes that Aycock embraced mid-career. Since the early 1990s, permanent public art commissions requiring increasingly advanced engineering expertise have been the artist's focus. She has also been using computer-assisted design software for both her drawings and sculptures since 1992, the time when such software first became available for use by contemporary architects, whose practice it has radically transformed. "From the outset my drawings were never intuitive sketches—I always used the graphic standards of architecture—plan, elevation, isometric renderings scaled so that the works could be built. Therefore when computer applications such as FormZ, 3D Max, Rhino were developed, it was a natural segue for me."¹ At the same time, Aycock has said of her work in relationship to architecture, "What I'm trying to do is to take normal architectural language and make it disjunctive."³

One of the central paradoxes of Aycock's work is that she harnesses all the complexity of contemporary manufacturing processes to produce meticulously structured pieces—thousands of pounds of carefully arranged metal—in service of creating visual representations of chance and chaos.



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CUT PAPER

One of the marvels of Aycock's work is that it manages to make metal look like so many other things. Her first powder-coated aluminum outdoor sculpture piece that foreshadowed her current work was the 1987 *Three-Fold Manifestation II*, inspired by the appearance of DNA strands. But it was not until 2014 that the same visual ideas were realized to their fullest with the installation of pieces from the Turbulence series titled *Park Avenue Paper Chase*, a massive feat of both creativity and engineering whose title playfully suggested gigantic crumpled and twisted wads of cut paper blowing down New York's Park Avenue, often associated with the paper-pushing of the banking and insurance industries. Aycock has also said of her recent work, "The pieces also have a reference to the practice of making cutout paper models of visual ideas in architecture and sculpture dating back to Russian Constructivism."¹ The photograph shown here is a digital collage of some of the paper and cardboard 3D paper models and maquettes found in Aycock's studio.

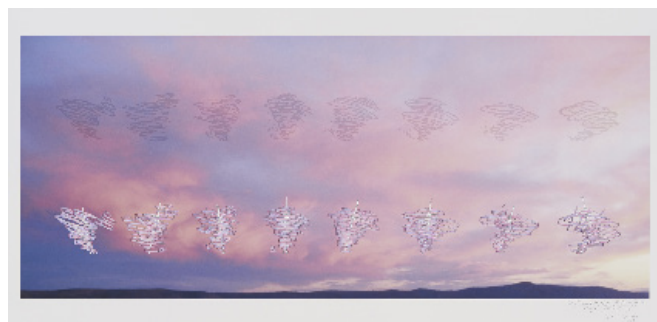


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COMING FULL SPIRAL

"[T]he compositional system of a spiral or whirlpool is the underlying structure/design for many phenomena both natural and manmade."¹

The title of one of Aycock's most recent series of drawings, *The Mystery of the Highway in the Sky*, makes a connection to one of her earliest interests—the interstate highway system, which was begun in the 1950s when Aycock was growing up as the daughter of Jesse Aycock. Her father had worked as an engineer on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and later ran a construction company that specialized in large-scale industrial projects, especially erecting power-plant turbine generators.² In 1971, Aycock wrote her Masters thesis on the phenomenology of the core American experience of driving on highways.



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She wrote of driving as “the experience of continual transition or passage from position to position. The experience is such that the whole of the articulated form of the road can never be seen at any one time. The portion traveled can only be remembered.... Instant by instant one is leaving a position in space... entering into immediately ahead, and anticipating or misjudging what can be seen in the distance.”²

As you walk around *Twister Grande (tall)*, you might find that, like driving on the highway, Aycock’s sculptures demand to be seen over and over in the round. They actively defy being seen and remembered as a whole, asking to be returned to again and again.

Later in the 1970s, she further reflected, “The highway is a path on which one moves through the heterogeneity of the world. When one drives along the highway the world goes by in all of its relatedness and unrelatedness like a movie. The highway is a theatre from which the spectators watch the world, a world which is itself a kind of stage set. Conversely, the highway is a set on which the actors/drivers move. No other experience I can think of, except for art, allows us to consider the world in all of its richness and contingency simply for its own sake.”³

The Ulrich Museum is very grateful to Alice Aycock for her collaboration on Alice Aycock in the Studio and her generosity in sharing the ideas that inform the exhibition and this text. We would also like to thank Amelia Midori Miller for her help on every aspect of the Ulrich’s collaboration with the Aycock Studio.

Image Credits

1. Alice Aycock in her studio, 2013. Photo: Kristine Larsen.
2. Alice Aycock, from left to right: The Turbulence Series: *Smoke Twister*; *Devil Whirls*; *Twister Again*; *Twister Grande (tall)*; *Untitled Cyclone*; and *Park Avenue Paper Chase* (part of The Turbulence Series): *Maelstrom*; *Hoop-La*; *Twin Vortexes*; *Spin-the-Spin*; *Waltzing Matilda*; *Cyclone Twist*. Digital collage. Courtesy of the artist.
3. Alice Aycock, *Sand/Fans*, 1971/2008. Sand, fans. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tim Lee.
4. Hans Haacke, *Blue Sail*, 1964-1965. Chiffon, oscillating fan, fishing weights, and thread. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein, Mimi and Peter Haas, Patricia and Raoul Kennedy, Elaine McKeon, and Robin Wright. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
5. Alice Aycock, *Things Pass By in the Night: Murmuration 2 (from the continuing series entitled “On the Starry Night”)*, 2009. Ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper. Collection of Hugh Freund.
6. Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of Water*, c. 1510-12. Ink and black chalk on paper. The Royal Collection. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
7. Alice Aycock, *The Leonardo Swirl*, 1982. Galvanized sheet metal. Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Fred Scruton.
8. Daniela Leitner and Markus Pössel, Illustration of the path integral formulation of quantum theory, 2006. Einstein Online, https://www.einstein-online.info/en/spotlight/path_integrals/
9. Alice Aycock, *From the Series Entitled “Sum Over Histories”: Study for a Timescape V*, 2013. Inkjet print, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery.
10. Alice Aycock, *The Game of Flyers, Part II—International Arrivals Bldg, Dulles Airport*, 2012, 2012. Inkjet print, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery.
11. Alice Aycock, *The Game of Flyers*, 1980. Wood, steel, fire, water, birds, buckets, carousel, column, ladders, platform, pulleys, tower, trenches, wheels. Temporary installation sited for Washington Public Arts, Washington D.C. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Alice Aycock.
12. Alice Aycock, *The Game of Flyers Part Two*, 2012. Aluminum, fiber optics, LED lights, neon. International Arrivals Building at Washington Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Dave Rittinger.
13. Production process of Alice Aycock’s *Twister Grande (tall)*, 2020. Photo: Eric Small.
14. Alice Aycock, Paper maquettes from the artist’s studio, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.
15. Alice Aycock, *The Mystery of the Highway in the Sky, Part 3*, 2017. Inkjet print, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist.
16. Alice Aycock, *The Mystery of the Highway in the Sky, Part 15*, 2017. Inkjet print, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Citations

- ¹ Alice Aycock: *The Turbulence Series*, New York: Marlborough Gallery, 2017. Pages 6, 4, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 4.
- ² Robert Hobbs, *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2005. Pages 346, 297, 222, 27, 62, 59.
- ³ Jonathan Fineberg, *Alice Aycock Drawings: Some Stories Are Worth Repeating*, Water Mill, N.Y.: Parrish Art Museum, 2013. Pages 22, 61, 94, 13, 96, 52.
- ⁴ Markus Pössel, “The sum over all possibilities: The path integral formulation of quantum theory” in: *Einstein Online*, 2006, found online at https://www.einstein-online.info/en/spotlight/path_integrals/, accessed June 19, 2020.

**WHAT'S
NEW**

Acquisitions

Alice Aycock, *Twister Grande (tall)*, 2020. Powder coated aluminum. Museum Purchase with additional funds provided by Fidelity Bank Foundation, Lou and Terry Heldman, George and Eleanor Lucas, and Lee and Ron Starkel.

Alice Aycock was the 2018 recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award in Contemporary Sculpture from the International Sculpture Center—a testament to her significance in the field of contemporary sculpture. Since the 1970s, her art has been looking to scientific ideas and engineering practices to shape an influential body of sculptural work, much of it installed in highly-visible public spaces around the world. The Turbulence series, of which the Ulrich's new commission *Twister Grande (tall)* is a part, is the culmination of Aycock's practice. It gives solid form to the ever-moving natural force of wind, which impacts Kansas more than most places, made possible by advances in contemporary computer-assisted design and production. *Twister Grande (tall)* will be a significant addition to the Ulrich's Martin H. Bush Outdoor Sculpture Collection, which includes work by some of the most prominent 20th and 21st century artists working in the field of public sculpture. Among its 80 pieces, the OSC currently contains a handful of key works by major women sculptors, but women are still underrepresented in it. Adding this work by Aycock will celebrate the best art can offer in a public space while also celebrating an artist who herself is a force of nature.





Ulrich Museum of Art

**Galleries remain closed through January
20 Staff can be reached at 316-978-3664**

Museum Hours

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Closed Sundays/University & Major Holidays

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Fall Update 2020

Visioning Possible Futures