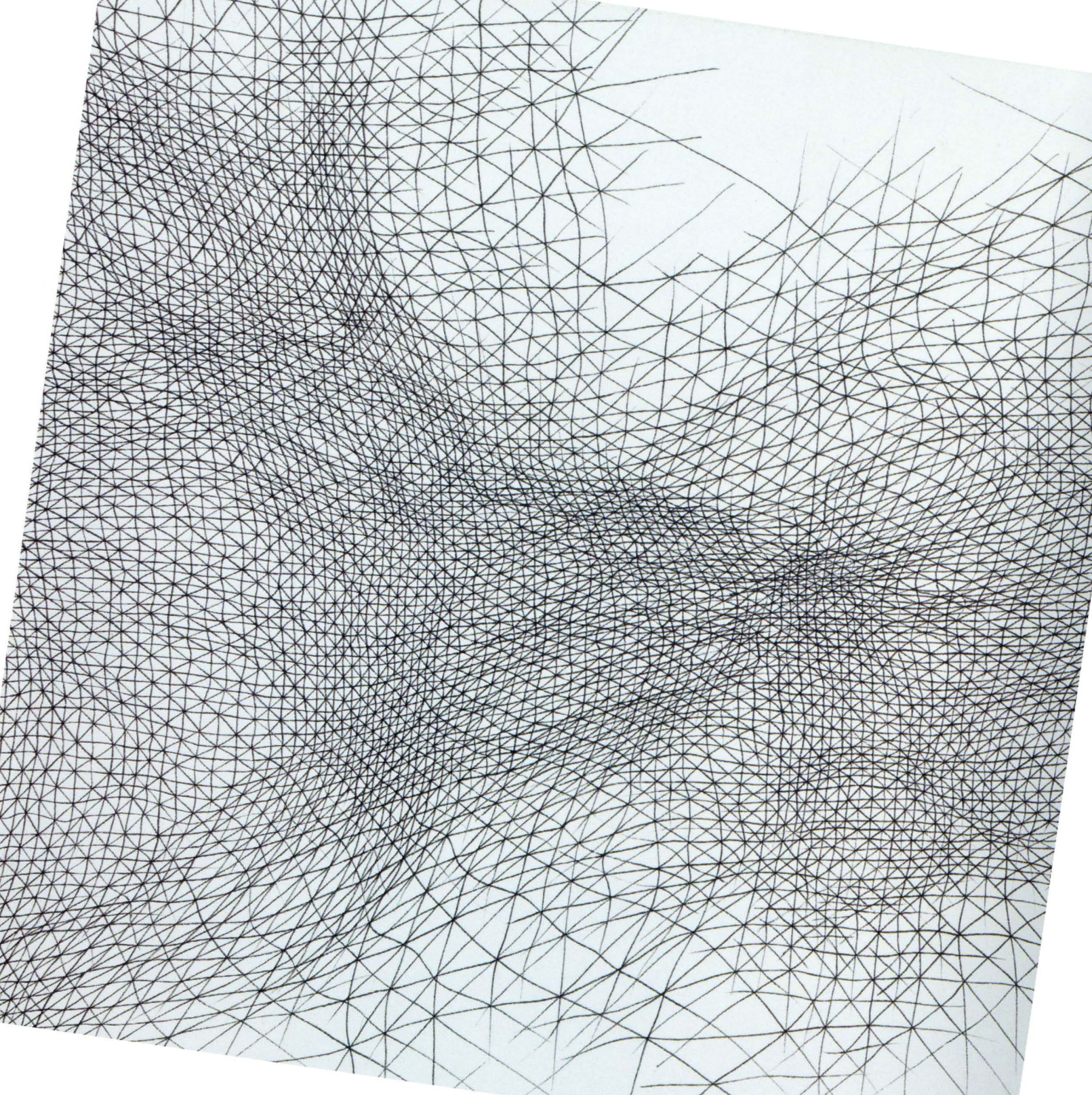
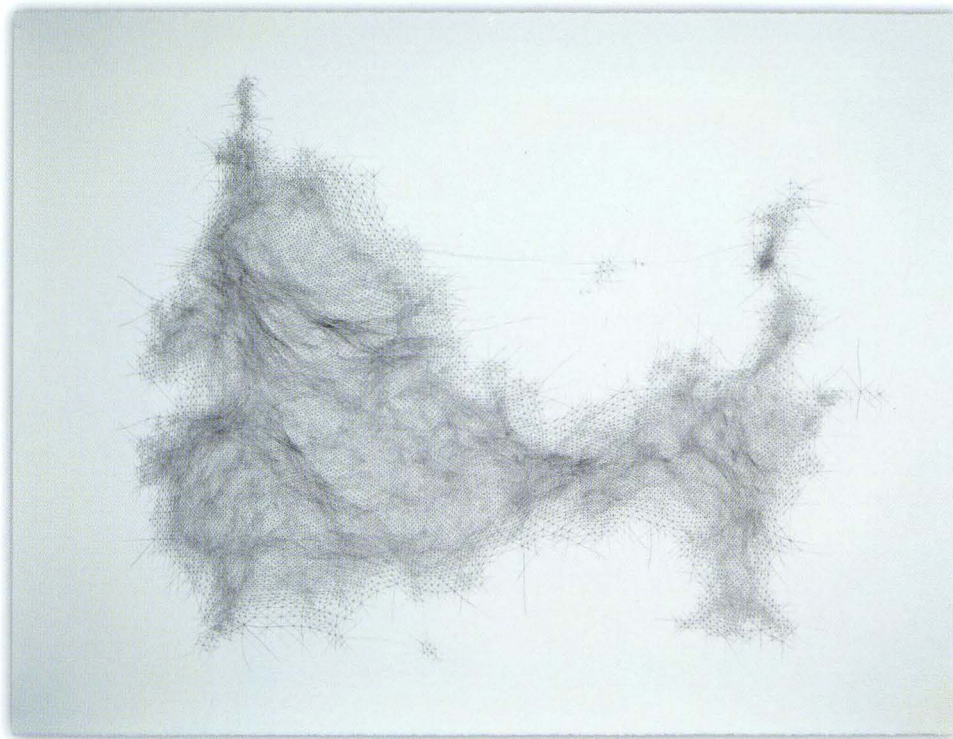




BEN BUTLER: ON GROWTH

2011 january 21 through february 18, clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tennessee





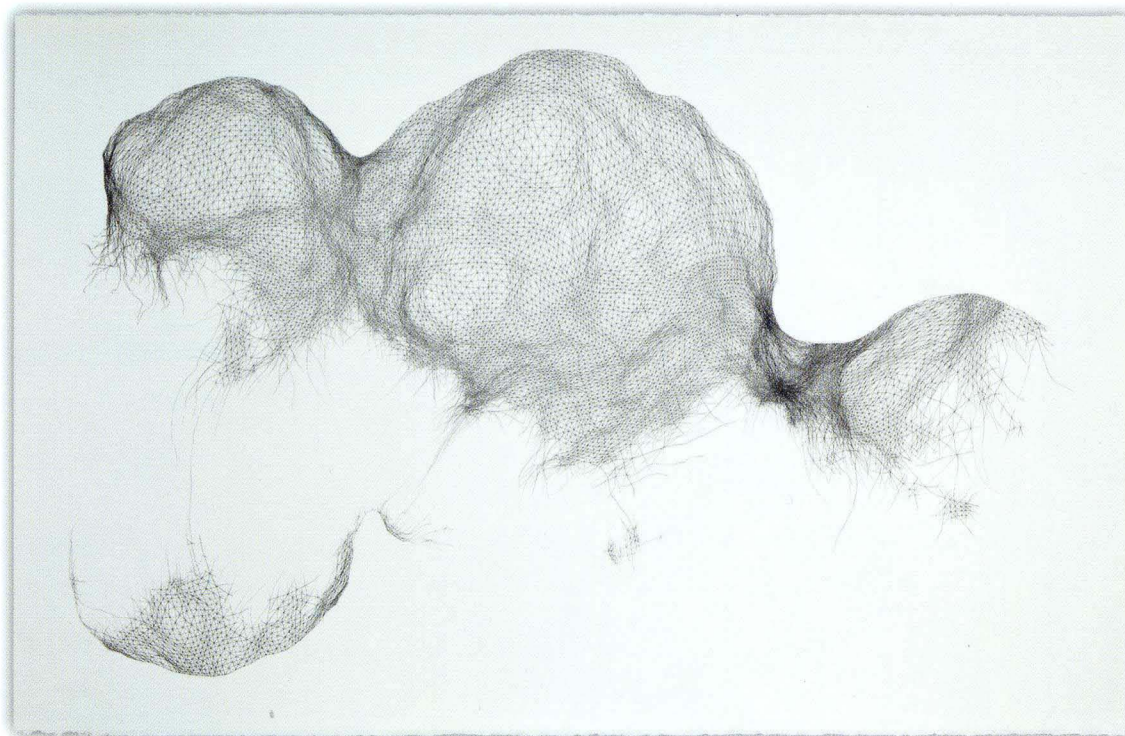
Invention #53, 2011, Ink on paper, 38" x 50"

Ben Butler's sense of wonder is perfectly paired with a deeply felt connection to his materials. Butler has spent years working with many types of wood, listening to it, allowing the wood to tell him what form it wants to take. The combination of the artist's faith in his intuitive process and his understanding of the material's essential characteristics is the beating heart of Butler's rich studio practice. Butler leaves his process intentionally loose, allowing his work to appear as if it was somehow born into being. He is keenly aware of how his methods mimic the way other organic objects grow from their early stages into their final forms in nature: the accumulation of cells that cause a ram's horn to spiral, the concentric growth rings in a sequoia, the gradual formation of stalactites, or the parabolic sand dunes found on a beach. The exhibition's title, *On Growth*, is taken from embryologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's 1917 book *On Growth and Form*, a book which was a landmark meditation on how certain organic shapes arrive in the physical world.

Because Butler's organic and natural way of working results in elaborate forms, the viewer is often first struck by their sheer complexities. However,

when the viewer slows down and looks closely, he/she begins to notice what Butler describes as "the story of its making."ⁱ We see that the intricate patterns and structures have many parts and layers that have been built using modest, incremental steps. The parts come together to create a visually and physically powerful sum. The intricate drawings are made up of a delicate mesh of fine lines and the large sculptures are accumulations of smaller parts, formed by a simple series of steps that lead to a logical, yet dizzyingly elaborate end.

The framework for Butler's projects usually begins with a simple idea. The idea can come from a basic shape or a found form that piques his curiosity or sparks something in his creative mind. In the piece *Drift* (2011), he set out to discover, in his words, "If I start with this small curved piece of wood and then cut another piece that is the same but just a little larger or smaller, and repeat that process, what kind of form would that generate?"ⁱⁱ For the series of *Invention* drawings, the artist wondered what would happen if he started with a large, loosely drawn rectangle, bisected that rectangle with an X, and then continued to make smaller squares within the larger initial rectangle. The



Invention #50, 2010 Ink on paper, 26" x 40"

delicately rendered lines accumulate to create a densely woven tapestry of subtle curves that rhyme visually with the gentle, rolling hills and valleys of a topographic map.

Early on in the process of developing an idea Butler imposes a set of parameters within which to build the work. Usually, the self-imposed parameters involve accepting the limitations of the kinds of materials at hand. Once these parameters are established early in the process, all the big-brain work is done and the process becomes an experiment. The artist asks the question "Given these parameters, how will I make this work?"ⁱⁱⁱ The deceptively simple task for Butler is to just let it happen. To do this, he has to follow his instincts, gently coaxing the materials through a lengthy series of quick, intuitive decisions sparked by an initial gesture.

Butler's working process is evident in the accumulated layers, the gradually shifting forms, the universal shapes, all which make his work feel as if we are seeing a fresh, new version of something that is ancient and familiar. We are somehow surprised to see something that looks as if it had always been there. The innate *rightness* of Butler's art taps into the reptile-

brain of the artist and the viewer, allowing us to feel a kinship towards the pieces by understanding how they came into being. By nurturing his intuitive connection to the natural order of things, he is able to gently nudge the work towards completion. The work is shaped by the artist's faith in his process and in his understanding that if his approach remains honest to the project's parameters and the essence of the materials, the work will eventually end up where it is supposed to, with delightfully surprising outcomes.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

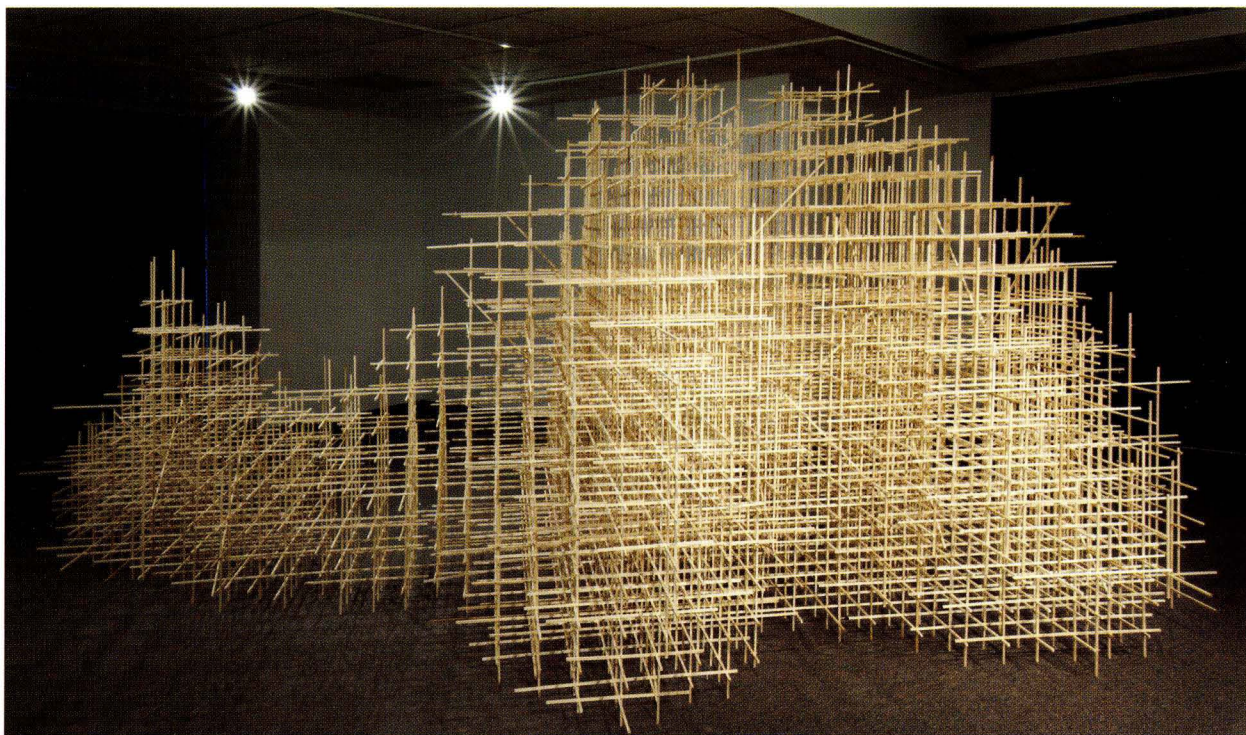
ⁱIn his artist's statement Butler writes: "All things, under close enough observation, will reveal the complete stories of their making. My objects simply reveal themselves much more readily than most, and therefore hope to teach us something about looking."

ⁱⁱConversation with the artist, January, 10, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱArtist's statement.



Inside flap: Installation view of *Drift*, 2011, Poplar, 14' x 125" x 316" (foreground) and *Cloud*, 2010, Poplar, 90' x 124" x 229" (background)



Cloud, 2010, Poplar, 90" x 124" x 229"



Rhodes College
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Images courtesy the artist, John Davis Gallery (Hudson, New York), and Zg Gallery (Chicago, Illinois). Photos by Chip Pankey.