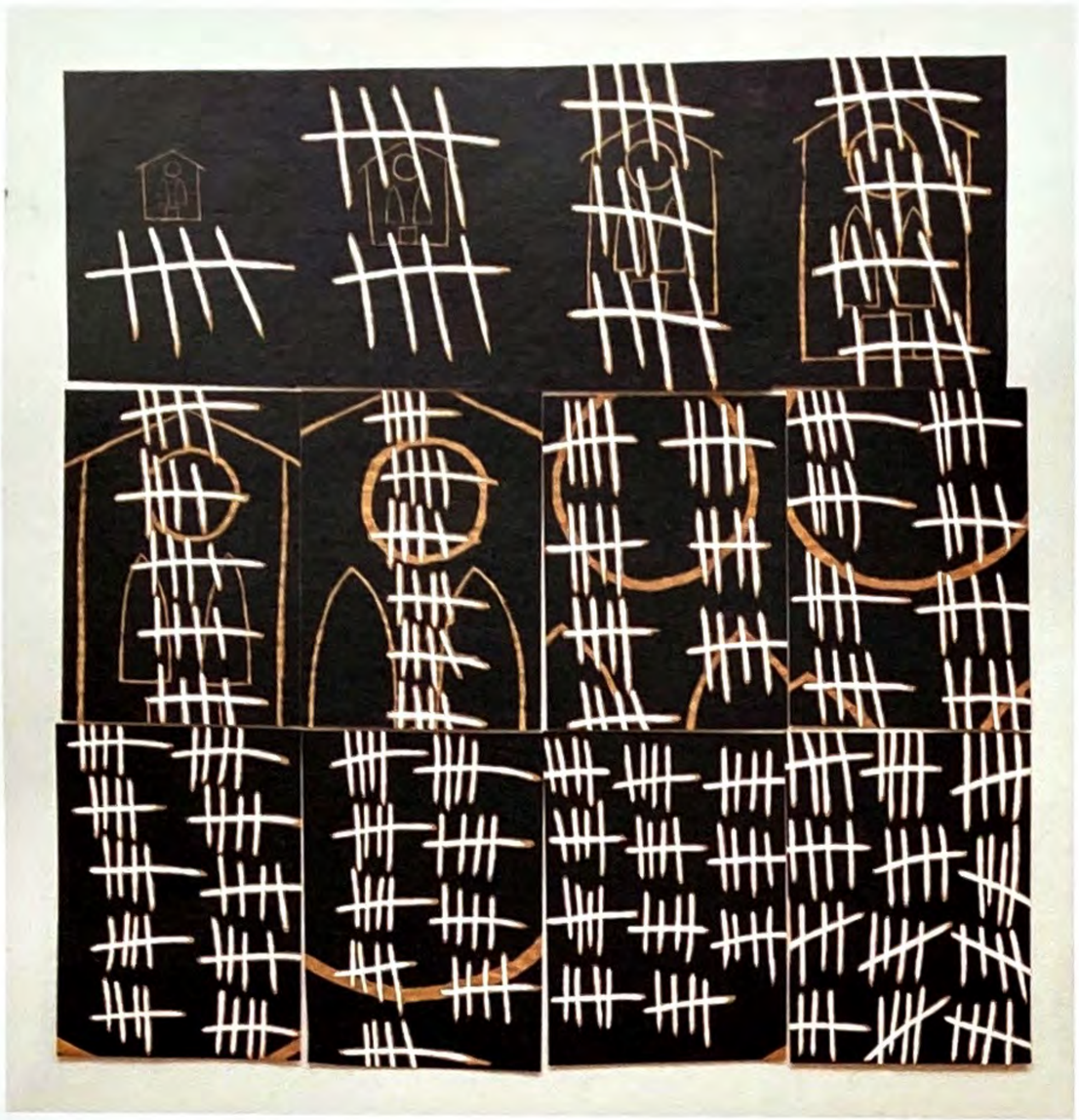
CONVERSATION
PIECE

Conduit's Annette Lawrence survey traces her ever-evolving artistic fascinations, a journey that's far from over.

BY STEVE CARTER

Annette Lawrence. Photograph by Megan DeSoto.



A career survey mandates an artist to revisit, reassess, and process their history. It's a family reunion, time travel, chapters on parade, a greatest hits collection. In the case of Conduit Gallery's upcoming Annette Lawrence survey, *Indeterminate Conversations*, featuring works from 1990 to 2006, it's all of the above, a celebration of Lawrence's restless explorations; the exhibit runs from October 9 through November 13.

"Each of the pieces has been shown before, but never together, so I'm wanting to see what that looks like, when they're in conversation with each other," Lawrence says. And the intriguing title? "I really like the word 'indeterminate'—it means that something has value that can't exactly be named, and it leaves things open. I think that's how conversations ought to be," she says with a laugh.

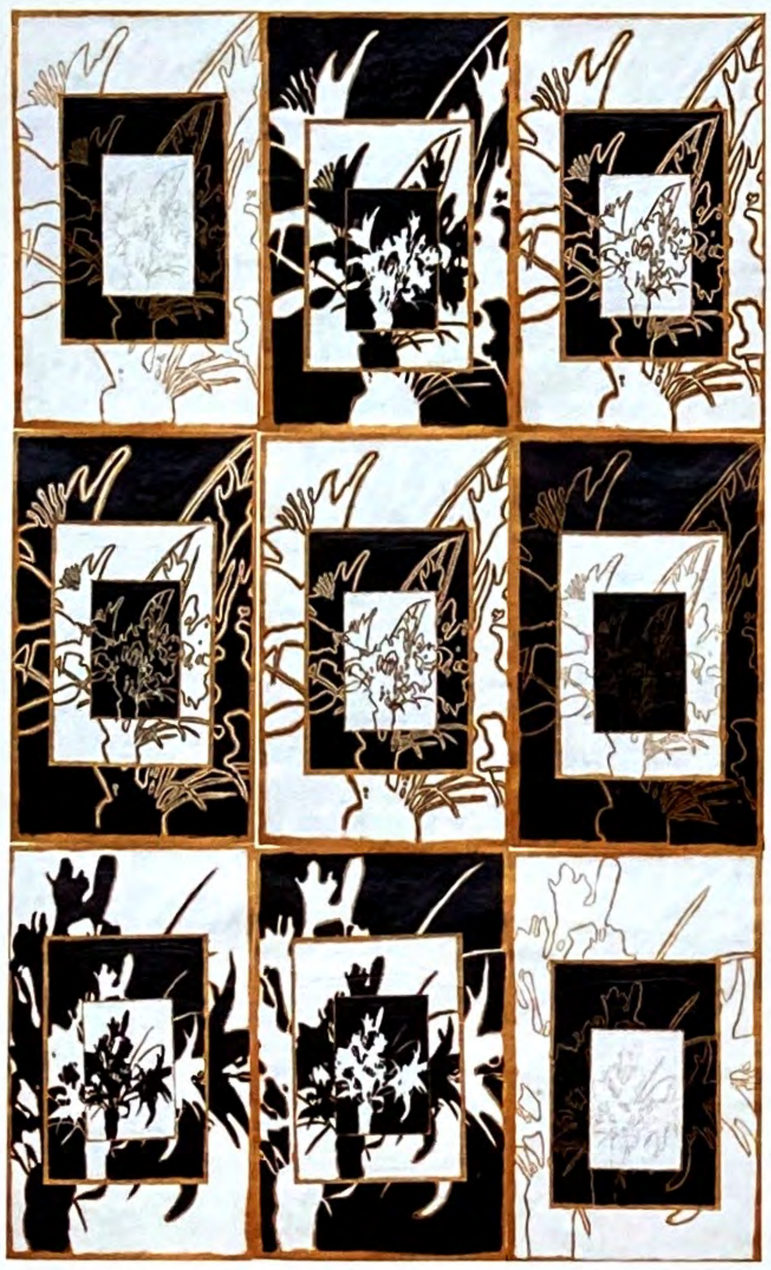
Indeterminate Conversations marks the artist's third solo show at Conduit; she's been with them since 2016. A New York native, Lawrence has lived in Denton since 1996 and is a faculty member at the University of North Texas' College of Visual Arts and Design. When she recently accepted a visiting faculty position at Vermont's Bennington College, she invited Conduit owner/director Nancy Whitenack to her studio to review her earlier work, sowing the seed for this survey. In her two visits, "We just went through everything," Whitenack says. "It was clear to me after the first visit that we had to do something with this—it merited doing something serious. So I suggested to Annette that we do a survey show, and she was all for that." Surprises in reviewing the 16 years of output? "The early work was really quite bold," Whitenack observes. "She used a lot of black and white, and images were drawn at a larger scale and then outlined, most always done on brown paper. There was an intensity to the images."

The earliest work in the show dates to 1990, an epic piece that was Lawrence's MFA thesis at the Maryland Institute College of Art. *Wallpaper* originally comprised 18 panels, but in this iteration, it's limited to nine. Even in its edited form it's stunning; Lawrence

Above, left to right: Annette Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 1996, acrylic and graphite on paper, 78 x 74 in. Photograph Tesa Morin; Annette Lawrence, *Indigo Ellipse*, 2004, acrylic and graphite on paper, 88.5 x 93 in. Photograph by Kevin Todora. Below: Annette Lawrence, *Free Paper 6 / 06*, 2006, paper, glue, and wood, 27 x 25 x 2 in.

Annette Lawrence, *The Ancestors and the Womb I*, 1995, paper, acrylic, and pencil on wood, 48 x 36 in.; Annette Lawrence, *The Ancestors and the Womb III*, 1995, paper, acrylic, and pencil on wood, 48 x 36 in.; Annette Lawrence, *The Ancestors and the Womb V*, 1995, paper, acrylic, and pencil on wood, 48 x 36 in. All exhibited in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. Courtesy of the artist and Conduit Gallery.

manipulating an image of a flower's shadow through theme and variations. Looking back, she acknowledges *Wallpaper* as a seminal turning point in her practice. "I think of it as the origins of my using systems as a way of generating work," she assesses. "At the time it was just an idea—one thing led to the next led to the next. Now I see that that's really how I work…I'm always turning this thing I'm looking at—looking at it *this* way, turning it a little more, looking at it *that* way."



Annette Lawrence, *Wallpaper*, 1990, acrylic and graphite on paper, as shown 150 x 114 in. Courtesy of the artist and Conduit Gallery.

Phoenix, (1996), is a starkly somber commemoration of the epidemic of Black church burnings that plagued America in 1995 and 1996. The piece's black fields are populated with symbols—simplistic icons of churches and people—and strewn with cross-like tally mark counts in fives. Lawrence was outraged by the lack of outcry the arsons garnered, and *Phoenix* was her response. "Why wasn't this being treated like an act of terror?" she recalls thinking. "What number of burnings would make it a crisis—100? 200? But with each one of these instances, the communities rallied together and supported each other and proved that the church is not the building—the church is the people."

A representative trio of Lawrence's 10-piece *The Ancestors and the Womb* (1996) is on view as well; the work was included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. The three portraits aren't traditional, but rather silhouettes of the artist's grandmother on brown paper. A circular grid of dates chronicling Lawrence's menstrual cycle shares the page. It's transgenerational portraiture—part ancestry, part selfie. "It's the relationship between the unborn and those who have passed away, in the tradition of Yoruba," she explains. "You come from and go to the same place." The patterned background reflects her grandmother's quilts, and it's also a coded nod to the quilt communicating of the Underground Railroad.

Although her undergrad degree is in sculpture, Lawrence has worked nearly exclusively in two dimensions. In fact, the Texas Commission on the Arts named her 2021 State Artist of the year, Visual Artist, 2-D. But 3-D has stayed with her, and *Free Paper 11-05*, (2005) and *Free Paper 6-06*, (2006) are playful reminders. The wall sculptures are curiosities composed of precisely stacked strips of unsolicited mail and glue, each representing one month's accumulation. They're wonders of evanescence, monuments to insignificance, their profiles suggesting pre-Columbian pyramids. Lawrence has a long-established practice of repurposing materials into art—junk mail, brown paper bags, stacks of lists, childhood notebooks, journals, and more, the quotidian detritus of existence, the passage of time sacramentally memorialized. "I'm trying to elevate the thing that we take for granted, and also to see what *is*," she admits. "'Value' is a very subjective word, but it's assigned, and maybe too quickly, without enough consideration." Slow down and consider *Indeterminate Conversations*. **P**