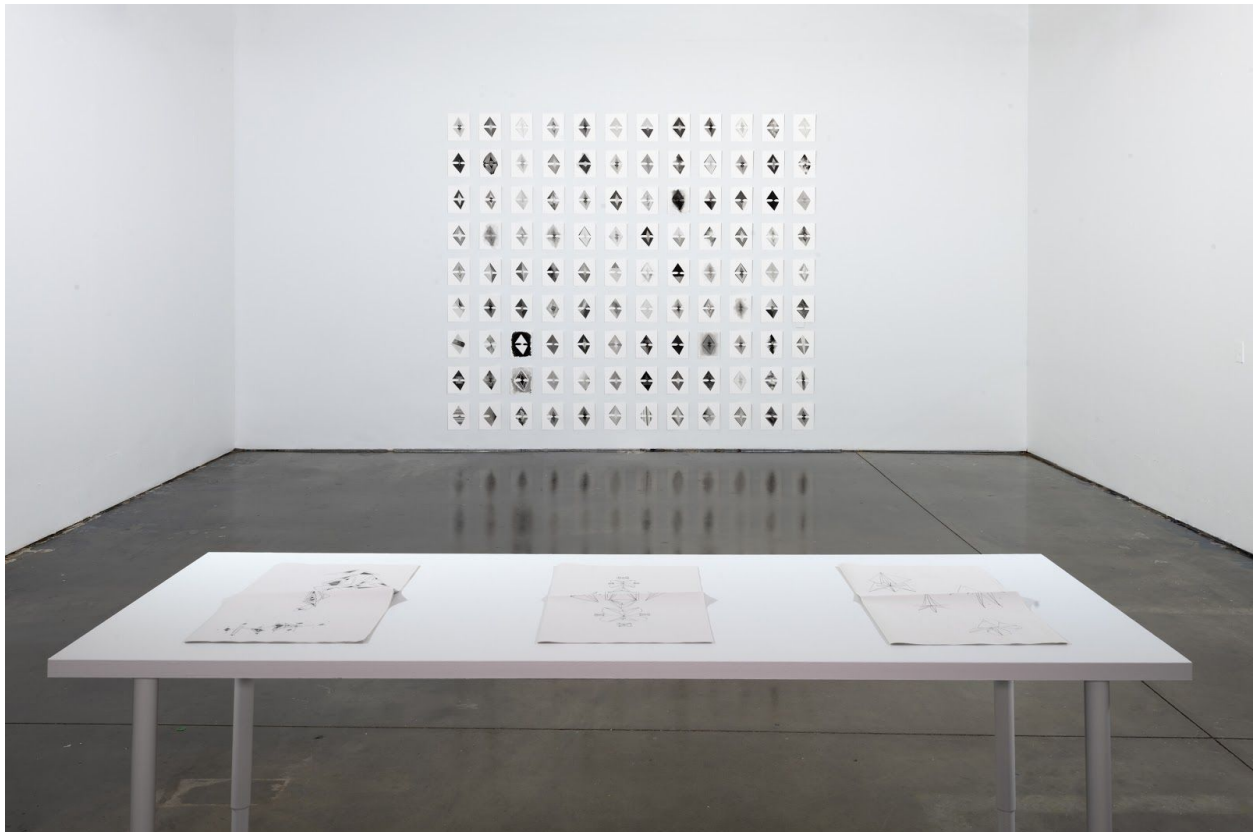


**Interview: *A Quiet Index* with artist Melanie Pankau and TuckUnder Pavilion director and artist Pete Driessen  
December 2020**

*A Quiet Index* featured an installation of 108 gouache paintings on paper and 3 volumes of an alternative newspaper filled with symbolic drawings. These two projects unfolded from Pankau's daily practice of making and meditation. The exhibition was on view in November 2020 at TuckUnder Pavilion in Minneapolis. This interview encapsulates the many conversations between Driessen and Pankau over the course of the exhibition.



*A Quiet Index* (installation view), 2020. Photo credit: Rik Sferra

**PD: You grew up in the landscape of the city of Milwaukee. What stimuli and impacts did this Midwestern influence and regional upbringing have on the development of your artistic sensibility and direction?**

MP: I think the most informative part of my background is that I spent a lot of time by myself outside in deep observation of the natural world. I believe these early experiences of curiously looking and listening set the stage for my studio practice. I feel very at home in the solitude of painting much like the many hours spent alone observing the pace and cycles of nature. Given I don't make place-based work, I can't say the city of Milwaukee itself has had a direct influence on my artistic sensibilities. However, the area has a rich history of creatives which I can only imagine being subconsciously influenced by.

**PD: You have worked in various capacities as art administrator and curatorial assistant in many galleries and institutions. Does this managerial and administrative role influence your creative work habits in developing your work and practice?**

MP: Definitely! I'm a planner at heart. Over the years, all of my positions have allowed me access to the inner workings of exhibitions and avenues into the art world. From the conceptual beginnings of exhibitions, publications, art handling, installations, archiving, collection management, art fairs to working with artists from emerging to established, I've learned so much from these experiences that I have incorporated into my own practice.

On a practical level, I map out deadlines, requirements, and allow plenty of time for writing/reflecting, problem solving, and for any last minute issues that pop up. Oftentimes, I build models of the exhibition space or sketch out the gallery on paper to figure out the flow and placement of the work as I am creating it. I think composing a space is crucial to the reading and experience of my work.

Working with other artists has been influential as each artist's path is so different. I love hearing other artists' stories of career milestones, inspirations, how they balance work, studio, and life, and how their failures and successes play out in their work. They have taught me to treat my practice as a professional career, to be organized, and that kindness, gratitude, and a simple thank you card can go a long way. Sometimes you just have to be at the right place at the right time and if you receive a rejection or a no, it doesn't mean they won't say yes later, so it's important to keep showing up for the work every day no matter what.

**PD: In the TuckUnder Pavilion *A Quiet Index* exhibition, you have two bodies of aligned artwork that directly and indirectly reflect on your daily meditation process. Can you enlighten us to your daily meditation process and its parallel practice with your drawing and painting?**

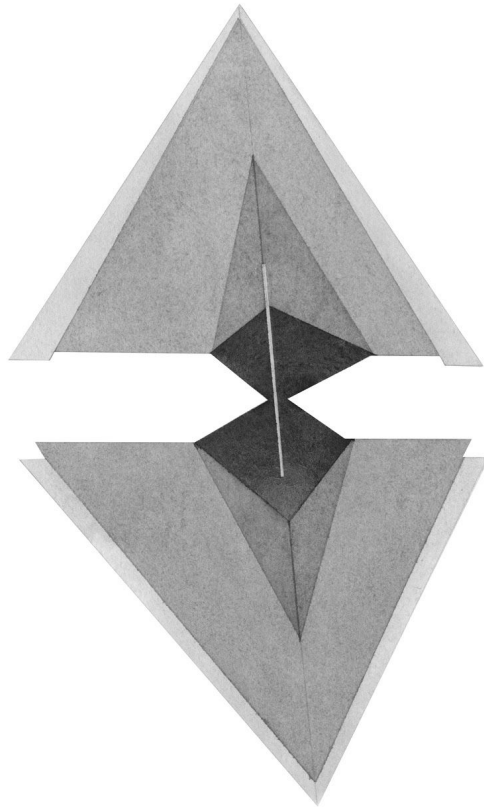
MP: Every morning I meditate for about 20-30 minutes. For the past year, I have been mainly working with two different meditation techniques: mantras and kriyas. Mantras are a Sanskrit sound or phrase that is silently repeated, and kriyas actively move energy and awareness to specific points in the body. Both meditations allow the mind to enter a deep state of concentration, are calming, centering, and healing, and open up a field or space for the images to emerge.

Directly after meditation, I draw in my sketchbook. I like to think of it as a visual reflection or a type of automatic writing but in a visual form. Oftentimes these sketches are the foundational compositions for paintings and mirror a contemplative state of being. All the drawings in a *daily message* vol 1–3 and the main form used in the installation emerged from this process of meditating then drawing.

**PD: The prominent ‘diamond-like’ shape that you present for your *A Quiet Index* exhibit references a personal daily yantra image. Can you expand on the yantra form that you are illustrating? Do you have or work with other yantras?**

MP: Over a year ago, this form appeared to me after a meditation. After I recorded it, I wrote down a “calm and peaceful force.” My intention is that the shape embodies this presence or meaning. I would describe a yantra to be a geometric form or pattern that holds a symbolic meaning to help focus the mind and aid in a meditative state. I like to think this form conveys several different energetic movements: the upward triangle as ascending, the downward triangle as descending, and the double diamond where they meet as an assimilation of those two forces. In the very center is a thin vertical line that holds everything together.

Also, the overall shape explores two pervading energetic systems—the steady, constant, and unchanging and the dynamic, fluid, and impermanent. The outer form/outline remains still while the interior markings fluctuate. I think all of my work in one way or another is a type of yantra. My intention is to create images that are quiet, centering, and contemplative for myself and the viewers.



*A Quiet Index #82, 2020, gouache and graphite on paper, 9 x 7 inches*

**PD: This is your first time seeing *A Quiet index* in an upright format, presented in a 9 x 12 foot grid on the wall. How has your viewing of the individual drawings/paintings on your art studio floor transferred to the larger overall grid changed in the singular white cube wall of TuckUnder Pavilion? Does the element of lighting enhance the meditative capacity of the works?**

MP: I was excited to see all 108 paintings up on the wall! I began the series of paintings on the first day of quarantine where I created a painting a day from March 15–June 30, 2020. Periodically, I would lay them out in chronological order on my studio floor to see how the project was developing. The reading of the work definitely changed as I was able to view them vertically. They filled my vision and expanded beyond the space of my body. The overall grid felt more monumental which is in contrast to my other acrylic

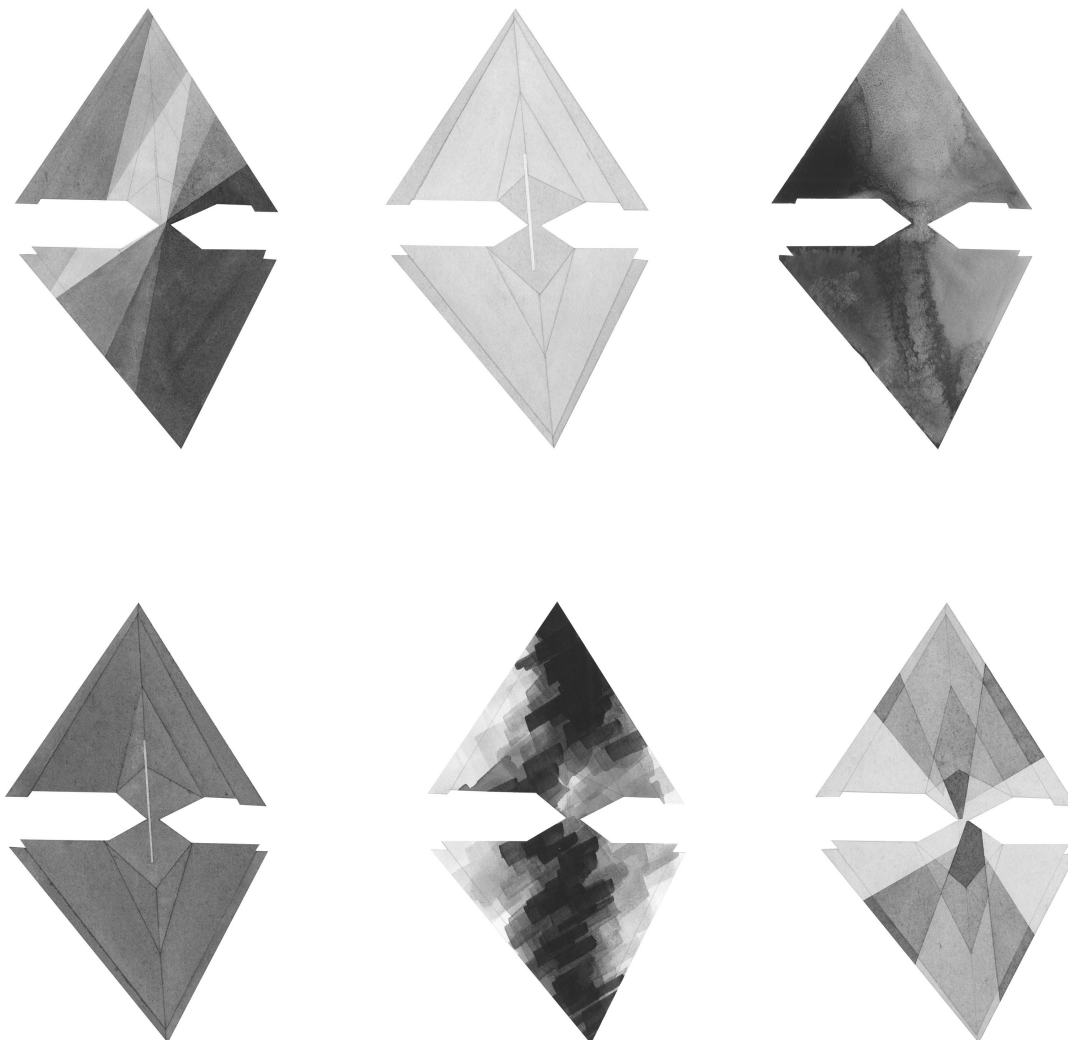
paintings that are intimate in scale. I think the lighting added another layer of interpretation giving the space a more altar-like and meditative presence.



*A Quiet Index* (installation view), 2020. Photo credit: Rik Sferra

**PD: You mention in your artist statement that your “*compositions convey the energetic fields of the body, subtle layers of consciousness, and non-linear knowledge.*” Yet one often visualizes the aura, chakras, and animistic capacities as formed and materialized with color. Why portray the form solely in monotone values of black, white, and grey?**

MP: I wanted the focus to be on the form itself. Color would ultimately affect the reading of the work. For me color adds a whole other layer of decision making, because I was creating a painting a day I needed to simplify my process. By pairing the materials down to thinned layers of black gouache and graphite, I wanted to illuminate the graphic quality and overall rhythmic pattern of the form/installation.



*A Quiet Index #65, #67, #52, #76, #83, #74, 2020, gouache and graphite on paper, 9 x 7 in. (each)*

**PD: Overall, your rectilinear yantra image grid numbers 108 paintings. Why stop at the number 108? Is there a mystical or mathematical significance to this number to the final work or presentation?**

MP: When I first was conceptualizing this project, I knew I wanted to create at least 100. As I mentioned earlier, I often layout the space as I am producing the work. I was trying to figure out how many rows and columns I needed to create an immersive experience or that would fill the frame of the viewer's vision. The number 108 has come

up at various times in my studies, is considered a sacred number, and has significant meaning across many fields. A few examples are:

In mathematics, the diameter of the Sun is 108 times the diameter of the Earth and the average distance of the Sun and the Moon to Earth is 108 times their diameters.

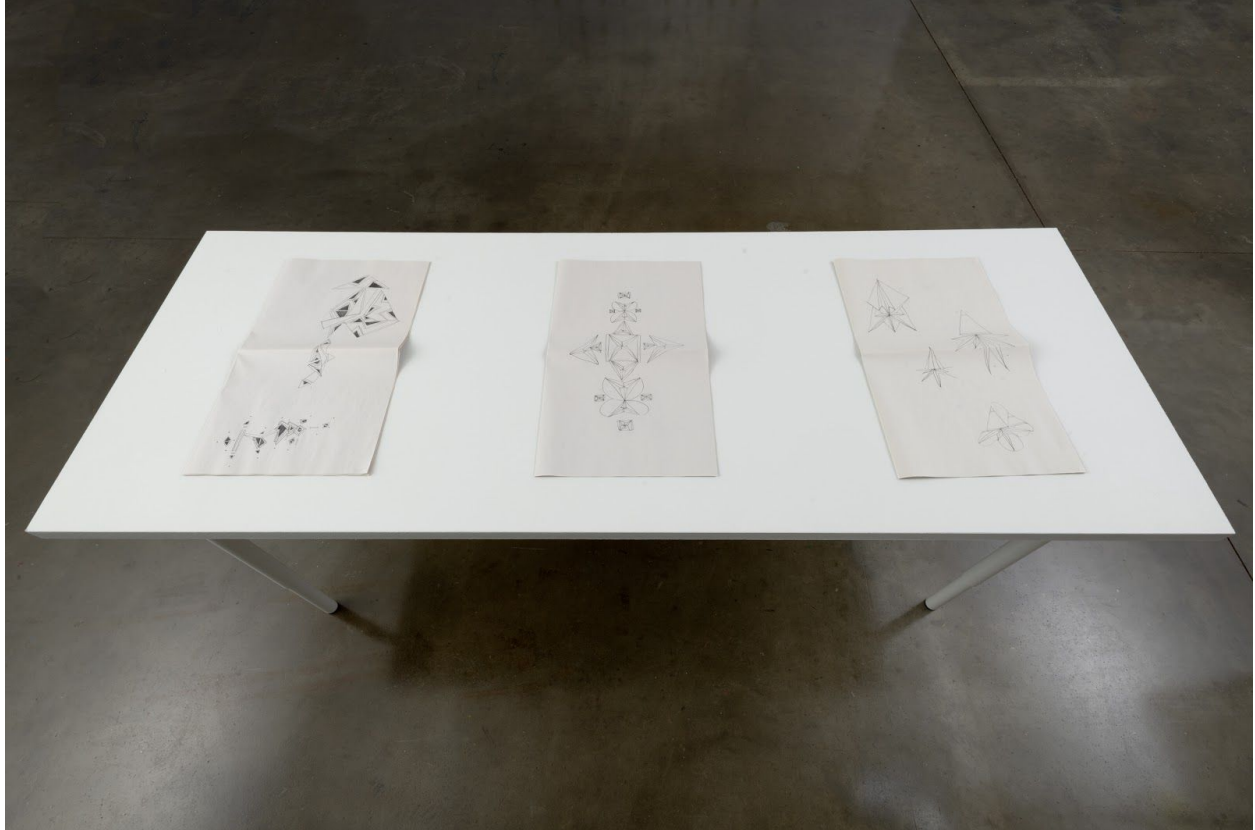
In the human body, there are 108 marma points that are considered to be sacred energetic places in the body and 108 nadis (energy channels) which converge in the center of the chest.

There are 54 letters in Sanskrit, where each can be seen as either masculine or feminine totaling 108.

The installation of 108 works equaled out to be 9 rows and 12 columns and for me represents wholeness, connection, and completion.

**PD: The three volumes of the *daily message* drawings printed on creamy newsprint reflect the *NYTimes* newspaper format. With the minor exception of a singular minimal title credit on the last page, there are no headlines, no body copy, no type...only the rough daily graphite sketches presented in a wide range of different compositions. I also appreciate that our global ecosystem and sustainability become subtle largess ideals: they are not mass produced, with a very small run, in a limited edition of three each. What is your strategy in the development, production, and distribution of these volumes?**

MP: I was exhausted from reading the daily news! This project unfolded from my longing for an alternative and a desire to read something positive. I took matters into my own hands by creating a newspaper based off the daily drawings I was creating after my meditation practice. My original idea was a kind of intervention. I had plans to mass produce the newspapers and slip them inside newspaper boxes, libraries, grocery store aisles, coffee shops, etc. Then Covid hit and I began to rethink these strategies. I decided to keep it simple at three copies each, but I am not opposed to creating a large run at some point.



*daily message*, vol 1–3, 2020, OCE prints on newsprint. Photo credit: Rik Sferra

**PD: As evidenced on your website, your past paintings on panel, along with this new body of work are visually aligned to Geometric Abstraction and Minimalism. Female artists that come to mind when viewing your works are Agnes Martin, Agnes Pelton, and Hilma Af Klint. Are there certain artists, art movements, visual cultural, or historical precedents that move, inspire, and/or influence your current body of artwork?**

MP: All three artists that you mentioned have been influential. I think traces of their work have inspired this current body of work and over the years have been an affirmation to my practice. They have connected me to a lineage of other female artists that created work from an interior space and used meditation or trance-like states to access the forms expressed in their paintings. They drew from the vast well of knowledge that lies outside our physical reality and offer an alternative way of seeing and experiencing our world that is more connected, affirming, quiet, and positive. My intention with *A Quiet Index* was to provide a space that is calm and contemplative to counter the noise, negativity, and combativeness of our current cultural experience.



**PD: Your minimal *A Quiet Index* exhibition at TuckUnder Pavilion gently asks the viewer to be at peace with and to become aware of what is hidden or minimally in front of them. This staying power that is required in your work is often difficult for many audiences as they are continuously conditioned to be visually bombarded with theatrical elements. Your effective presentation seems to be at odds with so many over-hyped Pop Culture scenes: there is nothing over-the-top, no computer-based technology, no flashing lights, no fast cut videos, no hype. Have you considered future interdisciplinary activity that connects the simplicity of your two-dimensional works with audio, video, or the performative entering into the final work? Or will you remain true to the visually quiet space in parallel with your meditative practice?**

MP: I am most interested in work that tells a story about the intelligence of the hand where the artist's labor and presence are felt in the materials. I strive to make work in this vein. So much of our daily experiences are mediated through technology, I am interested in direct experiences and the knowledge and understanding that comes from this space. I don't have the desire to incorporate interdisciplinary elements, screens, or technology into my practice. I would rather challenge my hands to create images that require one to slow down—painting necessitates a slower pace of viewing. I want to elicit the viewer to become present by deeply looking, sensing, and reflecting upon the tactile image directly in their view. I am curious about what shifts within them, whether it is said or unsaid, conscious or unconscious, what is immediately understood and how the image can linger in the mind of the viewer.

Pete Driessen

[www.tuckunder.org](http://www.tuckunder.org)

Instagram: @petedriessen

pete@petedriessen.com

Melanie Pankau

[www.melaniepankau.com](http://www.melaniepankau.com)

Instagram: @melaniepankau

mel@melaniepankau.com