Lilah Fowler:
The Shape of Things

IN THE FAR WESTERN DESERT, in a place only a couple of hours from the ocean but nevertheless unaccustomed to water, there live some of the oldest living things on earth. The creosote bush, scratchy and brown, grows low to the ground in wide circles. As the plant ages, the ring expands and its centre dies away. The largest of these rings is 70 feet across, its roots still connected deep underground. It is estimated that this plant is 11,000 years old.

Even before the King Creosote plant took seed, there were people living in the desert. The land was harsh and unforgiving. Raw edged and barbarous. Invisible creatures waited to attack, and most plants were either poisonous or lethally sharp. It was blisteringly hot in the day and cold at night.

Those who remained in caves amongst the canyons and rock piles chose this region not because of its abundance or fertility, but because of its untrammelled emptiness. They recognized the advantages of space. **1.**

For these people, the world was vast and open. They did not try to contain it, but it contained them. Space was circular, the earth was flat and the horizon equidistant in all directions, unless mountains cut it short. Their homes were round and so were their pictures. Wherever they were (and they moved around a lot) they understood that they were at the centre of the universe.

Things remained like this for thousands of years.

Then came new people with horses and mules and all their possessions packed into wagons and carts. Strange to think: these wagons were probably the first rectangles that the desert had ever seen. Nobody could have imagined that this was the way it would be from now on, that this new form was the land's destiny.

Once the rectangle entered the landscape it spread like a virus, unstoppable. **2.** The settlers arranged their homes and settlements the same way they designed their wagons: first along straight roads, and then around squares and rectangles. The exteriors of these buildings, which

Untitled 2013 (inkjet on cotton rag paper)

When faced with something as utterly incommensurable, as defiantly singular as a rock, our instinct is to classify it amongst others of its own kind. Its resistance to such simplification is what makes it endlessly maddening and mysterious. Even frightening. Societies, throughout history, have responded in extreme ways to such provocations.

Blocks, plots, plains 2013 (fabric, neoprene, resin, polyurethane)

Neoprene rectangles laid on the floor follow their own orientation, irrespective of the space they are in. Four panels, arranged within a contiguous grid, absorb everything around them into their rational worldview. Including the raw and chaotic form of a sharp rock, which is displaced here by its cast resin ghost.

were generally situated parallel to the rectangular edges of the subdivided plots on which they stood, naturally informed the interiors. Furniture was rectilinear in order to fit neatly against the walls of the house; the objects that were kept inside it were made to stack in the most economical way, to take up the least space. Goods were designed in modular formats, fitting as much as possible into the most tightly compressed area.

The people who had lived in the desert before the settlers drifted away. Some, in fact, were chased or killed; others soon understood that it was safer to hide with the coyotes and jackrabbits in deep canyons or to retreat to higher, rougher and more inaccessible territories. The settlers forgot about them, and began to believe that there had never been anyone before, that theirs was the only way of inhabiting the land.

The desert got smaller. The new people were not so foolish to think they were at the centre of anything. They were merely on the road to somewhere else. Until they arrived there, they believed they were at the very edge.

No matter how hard life was, it seemed important for them to make pictures of where they were. They would send the pictures back to their relatives, people who were so accustomed to living at the centre of things that it amazed them to see such emptiness. The pictures that they made were all rectangular, of course, and over time people found ever more ingenious ways of condensing the enormous and unfathomable space around them into straight-edged frames. **3.**

Maps were made that showed places that still did not exist. There were paintings of the world as people wished it could be, and then there were photographs that did the same thing. Later, there were pictures made by satellites many hundreds of miles above the earth. Some didn't look like pictures at all, but like graphs of data that had to be unscrambled into three-dimensional topographies. **4.**

There were moving pictures too. On film, space was not so easily organized or regulated; it pulsed and throbbed with a desire to break out of its frame. When movie cameras themselves started moving when they

Periphery 2013 (paper, steel)

A billposter – a picture as big as a house – is cut down into subdivisions. Glimpses of wild landscape are visible through the visual noise of the CMYK raster pattern, a mathematical system for printing any image through overlaid grids of coloured dots. The powder-coated steel ellipse that cuts across it is akin to a vector, or a human body: a singular shape that is irreducible into modular components.

Aerial Composition:
Vessels: Cactus, Tressel, Yucca 2014 (self adhesive vinyl, aluminium, rubber)

Metal tubing is bent into shapes that resemble nothing so much as arms or legs, detached from bodies and removed from any previous function. They sit, abandoned, on vinyl mats printed with a pattern as beautiful and as intricate as a crystal. In fact, the design is taken from the surfaces of rocks modelled by programmers in 3D digital software, and distributed online for architects and planners making virtual mock-ups of places that are yet to be built. Extrapolated and flattened onto the smooth adhesive vinyl, they are permanently fixed in scale and location.

could effectively function as extensions of the human body the fabric of the world that they perceived began to fold and warp. The smaller the camera became, the more elastic was the space it described.

Around the same time, people began to design buildings that did not align with longitude and latitude, and which resisted the tyranny of the right-angle and the truly horizontal. They made structures that were as unpredictable and contrary as the bodies that they were built to contain. Since the grid has no use for ornament or desire or mystery, they broke it into pieces and discarded it. **5.**

Even though people knew that they were on the edge of things, it began to concern them less and less. They became better connected to people who lived on the other side of the country, and on the other side of the world. At first they used wires that they slung between tall posts beside long straight roads. They laid thick cables under the ocean. Then they used metal aerials to capture sound and image signals from the air. When they had inhabited the space above the earth's atmosphere as well as the land beneath, they drew down transmissions from hundreds of miles in the sky via large dishes fixed to the sides of their homes. Then the aerials became so tiny that they disappeared altogether, and people forgot they even existed.

Information could no longer be organized in the way it once had been, in lines and columns on rectangular pages inside stacks of books in regular rows in the library. Through the proliferation of infinitesimally tiny networks, it began to take the shape of a human body, its arteries, veins and nerves subdividing into every available cavity. Then the body began to mutate and its heart collapsed, and was replaced instead by hundreds of smaller hearts. The space where information existed looked like a plant with no centre, only nodes and branches and roots that buried deep, invisibly, into the arid earth. **6.**

Site specific installed wall 2013 (plaster render)

What is the meaning of a column that does not bear weight? What sense is there in a form that is supported only by the structure that it is meant to support? Why do we continue to build even once we have made our dwellings warm and dry?

Of all the objects in the universe nothing is smaller than the earth
2014 (Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag paper, website, digital download file)

A printed text, on one side of a sheet of paper, records the address of a website. On the back of the paper is printed a password. The website displays a single, glowing colour image of a brown rock throwing a sharp shadow across flat grey concrete. A button says 'enter here', so you click it. A box appears asking you to enter the password, and the website reveals a download link to a black and white JPEG of the image, and instructions for printing. You have reached the end.