

LEE RANALDO
Lost Highways



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Drawings

Impermanence – Roland Groenenboom

CD *Lost Highways*



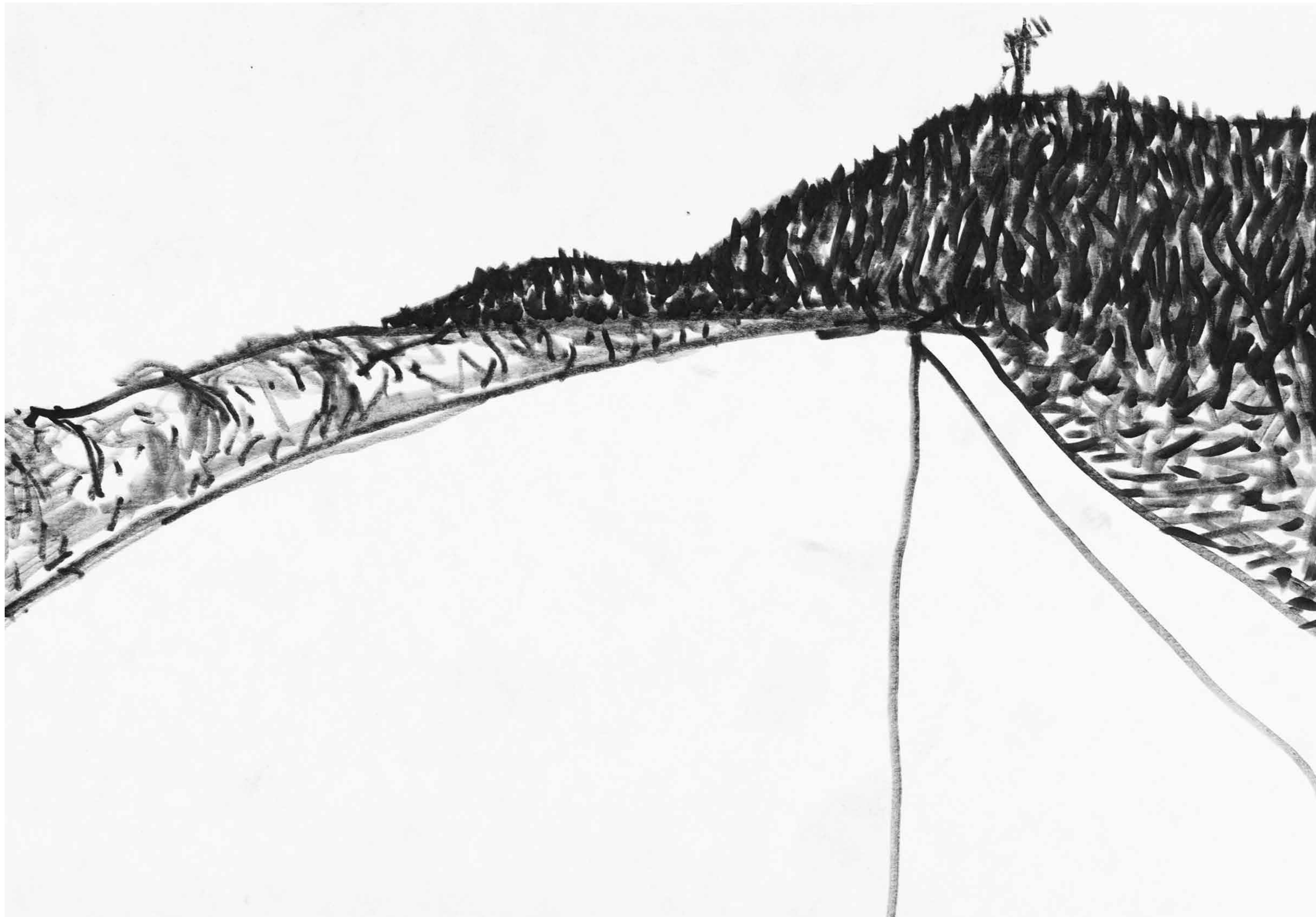










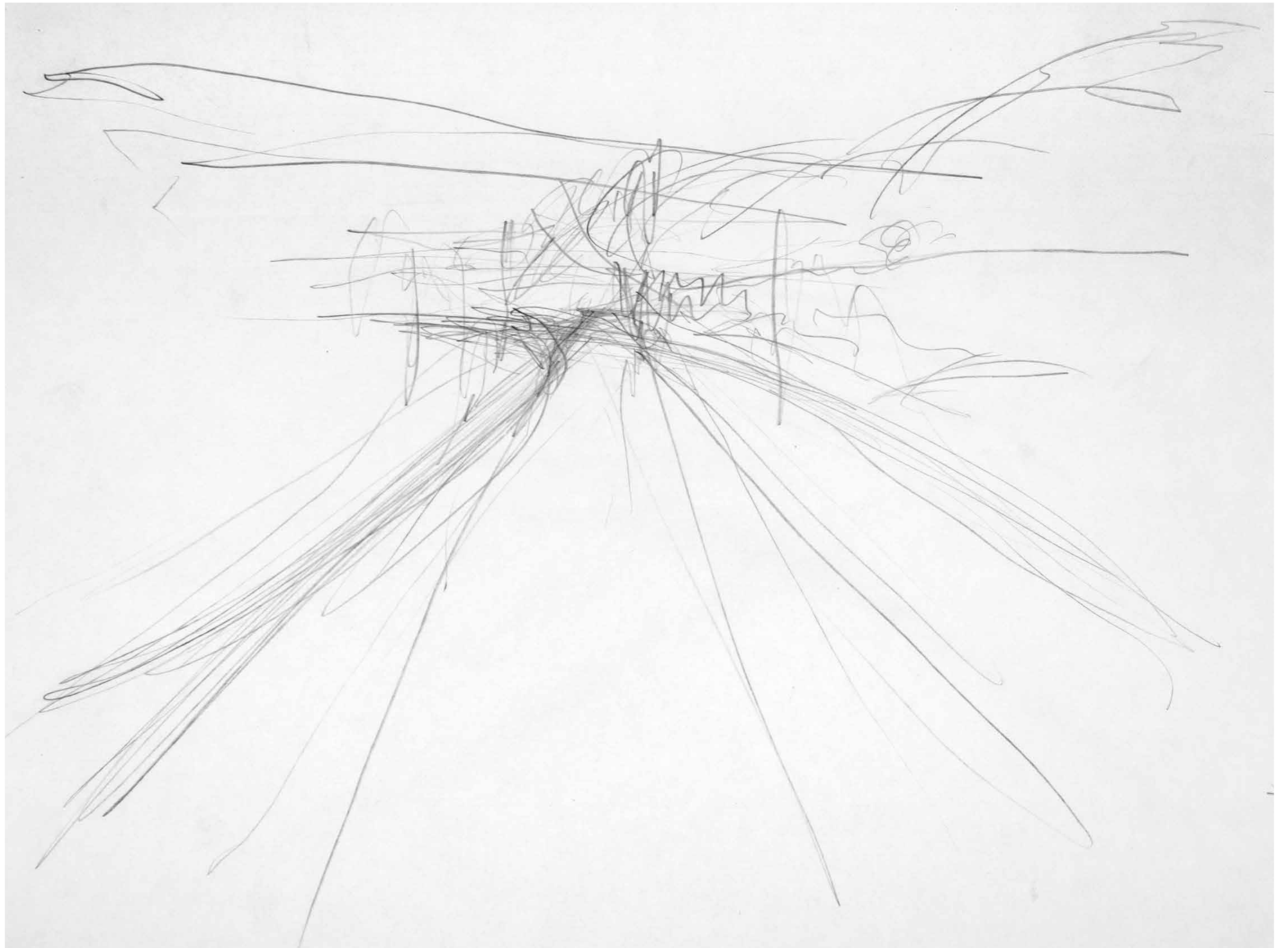


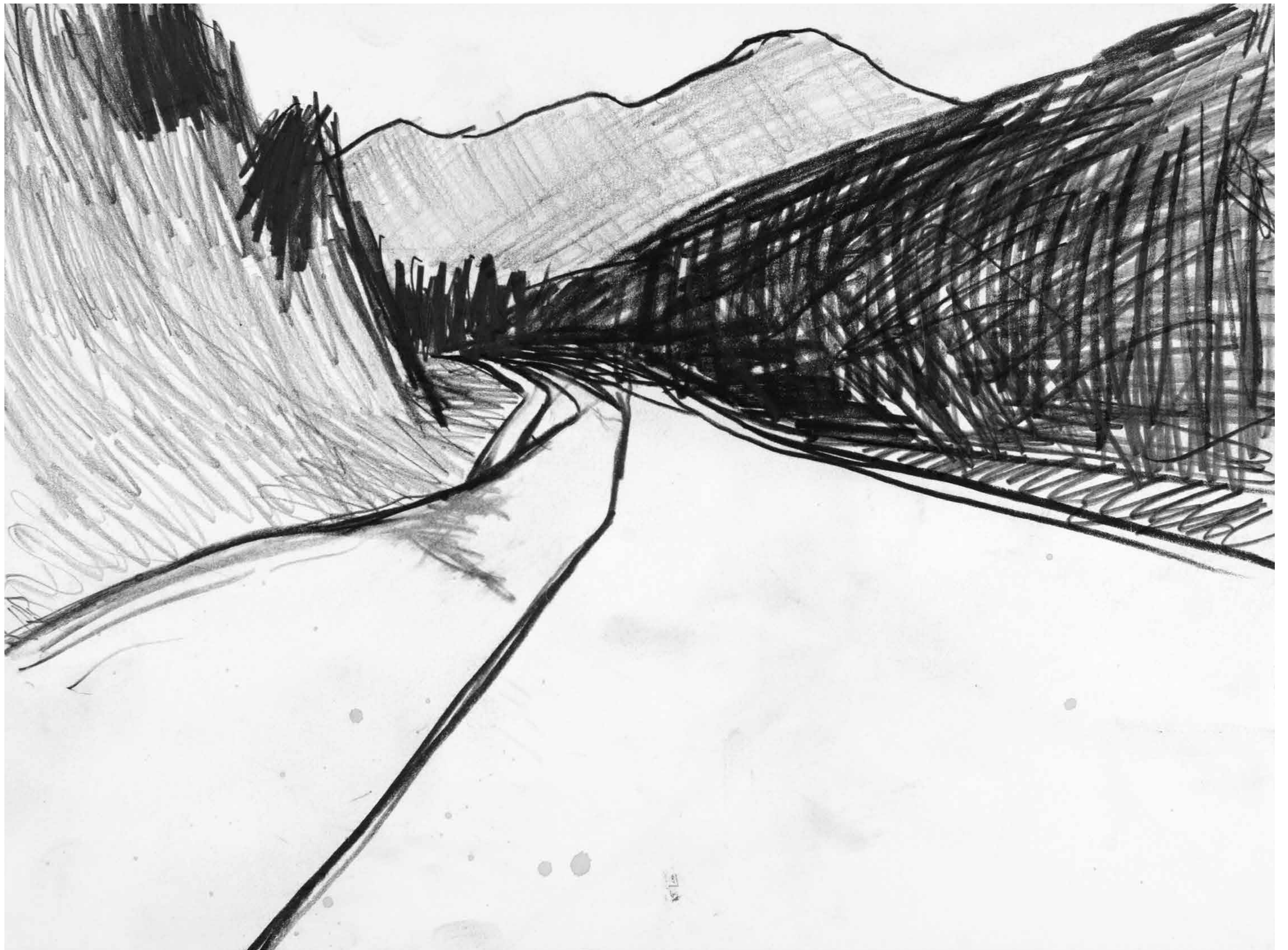


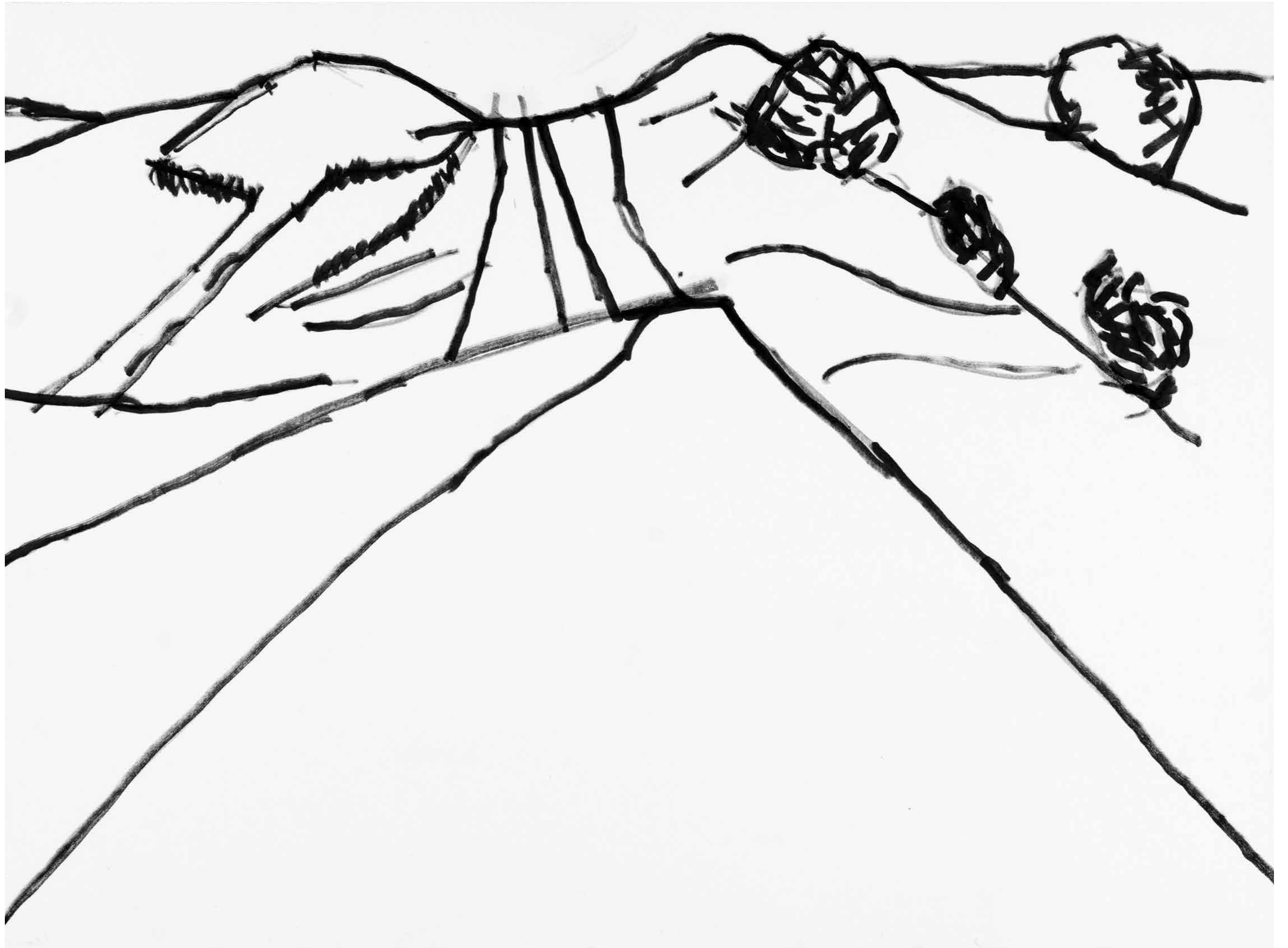


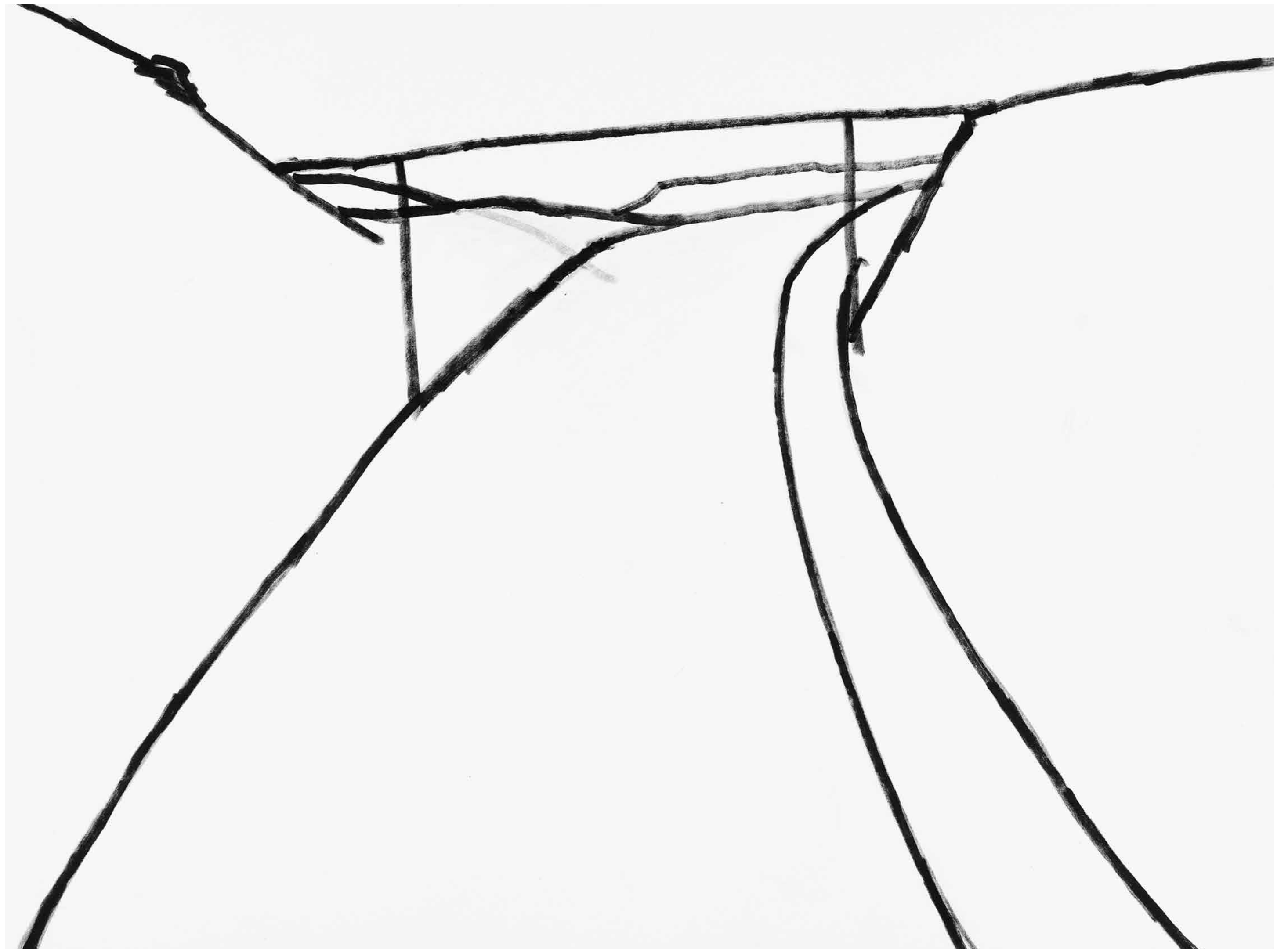






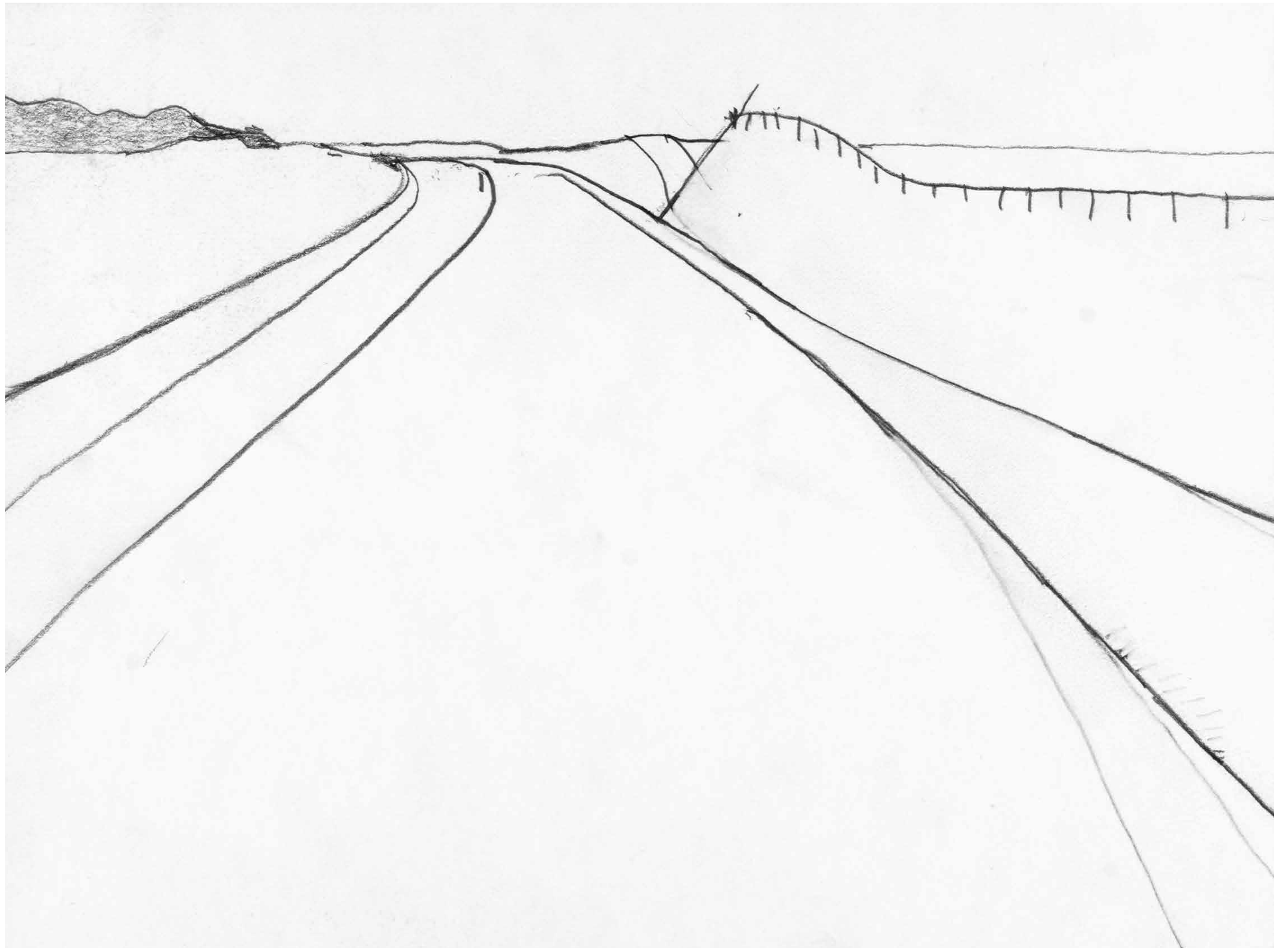












Impermanence¹

Roland Groenenboom



On 12 December 2013, in an email accompanying the conversation Lee Ranaldo and I were having on his *Lost Highways* drawings, Ranaldo wrote the following:

‘Going well if a bit much traveling – all good though – we are in California, have been up and down the west coast – wonderful shows in San Francisco area. I haven’t been getting many good drawings on this trip in spite of trying, and in some very inspiring country. It’s unpredictable when they really go well.’

In this email, Ranaldo is referring to his *Lost Highways* drawings, an ongoing series of small format sketches that are based on roads and their surrounding landscape that Ranaldo sees from the passenger seat of the van while on the road with his band. The roads and landscapes pass very quickly, so their characteristics are mostly noted down in few lines to a sheet of paper, executed in a very short timeframe. The *Lost Highways* drawings record the roads traveled, with their curves and crests, mountains, trees, flyovers... Roads that in many cases resemble others, seen on other journeys – or even on the same trip. The drawings recognize the road as constantly changing yet constantly the same. Like life itself is constantly changing and constantly the same.

In the following conversation Lee Ranaldo elaborates on the naissance and concept of this ongoing and still evolving series of drawings, of which you’ll find a selection in this publication. The series will hopefully continue and develop in other artistic journeys. To me, it seems that for Ranaldo there are still endless journeys to embark on. The subject matter for his drawings will present itself every minute he spends traveling in a van while on tour, where the road seems to become one with life. Turn the pages of this book and embark on parts of the journeys that Ranaldo made, while he is hopefully packing his valise and gathering his pens and paper to hit the road again soon, to continue the journey. The constantly changing yet constantly the same life and work of artist-musician Lee Ranaldo seems to echo the words of *On the Road* author Jack Kerouac as he writes: ‘Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.’

ROLAND GROENENBOOM As for the inspiration of the series’ title, *Lost Highways* drawings: David Lynch or Hank Williams?
LEE RANALDO Hank Williams for sure! It’s all playing off the ‘Lost Highway’ of his song title, and using it as a representative for all of the many road songs, songs born of the road, of wanderlust, or wandering. I wanted the drawings to represent the constantly changing, constantly-the-same quality of the highway. Zen masters of the past have used the metaphor of the river – it’s always the same and always different – to illustrate a basic koan, and I’m also trying to evoke that teaching as well.

RG Could you elaborate a bit more on the relation, for you personally, between a koan and your *Lost Highways* drawings?
LR A koan is sometimes described as a means by which a Zen master would disrupt or combat the general analytical nature of the mind, a ‘puzzle’ that would cause logic to fail. In my drawings, I refer to the nature of the endless ribbon of road as ever changing, yet ever constant. To try and draw a moving target on the one hand and at the same time something that, for all it’s variety, is always in some way the same: the endless vanishing point of the perspective on views out a car window.

The trick for me is to find a way into the image, to try and capture something that has changed from the first mark I make on the paper – that is never the same when I finish as it was when I began. I’m not working from photographs, which would be another project completely, nor am I spending endless amounts of time on any one drawing. The object is, firstly, to try and harness some of the energy of the landscape in a graphic way, and then, from there, to see where

¹ The term expresses the Buddhist notion that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is in a constant state of flux – panta rhei, meaning ‘everything flows, everything is in motion’.

it might lead. Some of the images are done in a matter of moments, just grabbling general shapes and trying to jot them down. In other cases the image formulating on the page takes precedence and I start concentrating more on it than on the actual landscape rushing by. Another aspect that to me informs the drawings is that each one is dated on the back with the place of execution (‘To Barcelona 101213’, ‘To Seattle 121213’ etc). Each ride in the van can be seen as a particular series. Usually during a ride I find one medium is working well and sometimes try and execute a rapid series of related pieces, as though the line had come alive or the eye especially insightful.

RG Would you relate your drawings, made with few, expressive lines, to Zen ink drawing and calligraphy?

LR In some sense I would, yes, or anyway I’ve looked at a lot of calligraphic writing/drawing over the years. These drawings start out with a few gestural strokes, inspired by what I see in front of me, and put down as quickly as possible.

The other reference I sometimes have in mind (although I have not gone back and looked at this work since starting on this series) is the heroic, graphic paintings of Franz Kline – similarly also mostly in black and white, and also with many lines running right to the edge of the picture plane, as though uncontainable. In Kline’s paintings the lines never stop midway across the canvas but rather always travel all the way to the edge. My roadway lines are doing the same thing in most cases – they are cutting the picture plane into shapes.

RG Which other artists come to mind as inspirations for this series?

LR Another one would be Richard Diebenkorn, both the late *Ocean Park* series (which is so much about the line) and also his earlier abstractions that seem to picture landscapes seen from above, like topography maps. These early abstractions, and his early figurative drawings, which had such a bold, graphic style, have been a very big deal to me. And speaking of Diebenkorn, there is ALWAYS Matisse (from whom Diebenkorn took SO MUCH). Among my most favorite paintings ever would be *View of Notre-Dame* (1914) by Henri Matisse, that skein of black lines on a blue field, so abstract and yet it’s all there, the cathedral, the quay, the Seine.

RG In 1977, you were an art student and you made an etching based on sketches of landscapes seen from a car window. How did you get from the 1976 sketches to the 3-plate etching of 1977? Did you base it on a specific drawing or was the image more freely approached and put together from different sketches, for instance? And why did you decide to transform a quick sketch into a laborious work such as a 3-plate etching?

LR I had a few drawings done during that 1976 road trip – all variations on the same theme – that became the basis for a 3-plate, 3-color etching. This was a student assignment, part of the process of learning the technique of creating a multi-plate etching. I was (and remain) very committed to the etching process. I chose a couple of those sketchbook road drawings, which had watercolor on as well, as being suitable for use on this assignment. They were created with a limited palette of colors and it seemed I could easily derive plates of red, blue and green from the sketches.

RG In the etching all elements, such as the clouds and the trees, are stylized – almost Hockney-like, and also reminiscent of the paintings of Munch – while the recent sketches are very free, loose, but strong in line and composition. As with the process from sketch to etching, would you think of ‘translating’ these recent drawings to paintings, or do you accept and cherish them as they are, as sketches, drawings?

LR I’ve wanted for some time now to attempt some larger scale versions of some of these pieces (with my memory of Franz Kline’s works in mind – big and gestural on a large scale), but thus far have not done so – I’m possibly hesitant about the process of trying to recreate in a studio environment the natural energy that is flowing when the car is actually moving through a landscape. I know I have to attempt larger scale versions of this idea at some point, but thus far have not figured out a way in to doing so that I think would be legitimate. Also, at the moment

I’m reveling in the sheer number of them, their ease and freedom of execution. I have dozens and dozens of them now, can do 5 or 10 or 12 on an afternoon’s drive if things are going well. Somehow the cumulative aspect is also important, pixelated visions of the road rushing by.

RG When did you start the series? I saw drawings from 2011, but you seem to have intensified your production of them when on tour for your album *Between the Times and the Tides*, in 2012?

LR The series took off in earnest in the early summer of 2012. I decided sort of spontaneously to bring along some paper and drawing materials that summer as my band was traveling around the USA and Europe. I’m not sure what I had specifically in mind. In part the idea was simply to keep my hand in with some graphic energy while on the road – just making marks on paper without worrying too much about the outcome. A quick notational jotting that might be a visual equivalent to the sort of ‘highway journals’ I kept more fastidiously in the 1980s and 1990s – sort of staring out the windows of moving vehicles and noting down thoughts inspired by the traveling.

Alongside these drawings are a large number of even smaller sketchpad drawings – many done on nighttime drives in total darkness that are even more gestural in their nature, following what lines are visible out the window without having any reference to the paper at all. ‘Blind drawing’, I suppose. Sometimes these smaller ones have an even stronger energy than the daylight ones.

RG Do you select drawings and discard others after they’re done or are they all accepted the way they are?

LR Rarely are drawings torn up and discarded, but there are certainly ones that I find ‘better’ than others. There is really no telling when an especially good one will come along. Sometimes I get a bunch of nice ones in a row, sort of ‘on a roll’ (no pun intended!) and other times I’ll make many that I feel are second-rate. The simple logic is to keep at them, keep doing them, and sort out the value of individual drawings later. Indeed, sometimes my favorites a month later were the ones I might have destroyed at the time I completed them.

RG What do you find striking in roads/landscapes as seen from the car window that you started drawing them at this frequency since the summer of 2012?

LR The road is serving as a metaphor for a particular psychological state of mind, one that includes the idea of escape and also the freedom of the open road, as representative of endless possibilities – around every bend a new adventure, a new life perhaps. Moving requires traveling light, leaving behind the dead weight of old ideas, and advancing towards certain unknowns. There’s also a certain lack of stability that comes with continual travel, which has both positive and negative aspects.

RG While on the road and drawing, do you experience differences between countries or even provinces of countries or does the landscape become more generic as you try to catch it in a few lines?

LR It differs not by country but by character – deserts to flatlands to mountains, etc. I tend to recognize now the types of landscapes that most inspire – ones with a lot of architecture to them – lots of planes, masses and lines. I guess it could be said of the roads that I’m sketching – with their yellow and white lines painted across the land – that I’m simply re-drawing those lines, and the way they cut a swath through the natural world.

RG The other day, I talked about the *Lost Highways* drawings with an artist who mentioned that the drawings to him do not just represent roads and landscapes, but that they evoke many other images, such as female nudes. How important – if at all – is it for you that these drawings are open to interpretation and that the viewer could see different things in them apart from roads and landscapes?

LR In my mind my activity is strictly focused on trying to capture the landscape and the road, with its various twists and turns as it winds in and out of view ahead. Certain landscapes are more inspiring than others, landscapes with lots of curves and depth and shape. So the travel element

has been important in terms of discovering various different types of landscapes. It seems as though the more rugged the landscape, the more elements there are to grab on to with the pencil or marker or whatever – the more graphic possibilities.

That said, as someone with a lot of figure drawing in my background (the nude was a particular focus in my college days) I have also noted the similarity of the landscape to the female form in creating these works. I’m constantly trying to note down the various curves in front of me in a way very similar to life drawing, the expanse of fields or valleys being very similar to the skin of the human form. Often evocative of the female form. There’s a reason, I suppose, why we refer to ‘Mother Earth’ – it’s in part to do with the verdant, fertile nature of the land, but also to the rolling curves as well.

At certain points in my work drawing the nude I became stuck by the graphic nature of simply noting the outline of the body, realizing that I needed to draw *within* the lines of the body as well, over the surface of the skin in all it’s dimensionality. I think I’m at a point now where I’m facing this same dilemma with the landscapes. I need to now take them to a next level, but I’m not sure yet what it is. It might be simply setting up in the landscape now, *without* moving, and trying to capture a more detailed image. Maybe. Certainly there are many landscapes I’ve driven through during the course of this project where I’ve wished I could have stopped and studied the architecture of the scene in front of me more completely.

IMAGES & DRAWINGS ON PAPER, IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

p. 1: From Guwahati, India 091913
To San Diego 121413/2 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To San Diego 121413/3 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To Seattle 120713/6 – pencil and wash, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
Virginia 102413/1 – pencil, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
Zaragoza-Barca 041813/5 – pencil, 29.7 × 21 cm / 11.7 × 8.3”
Zaragoza-Barca 041813/9 – marker, 29.7 × 21 cm / 11.7 × 8.3”
Nova Scotia Hwy Drawings August 2012/4 – ink, 20.8 × 14.8 cm / 8 ¼ × 6”
Iowa 101813/1 – pen and ink, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To San Jose 121013/2 – pencil, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To Bilbao 042513 XI – marker, 29.7 × 21 cm / 11.7 × 8.3”
Autobahn Drawings July 2012/i – pencil, 35.4 × 28.4 cm / 14 × 11”
To Vancouver 120713/1 – pencil, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
Iowa 101813/3 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To Valencia 112913/5 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
To San Francisco 121113/6 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
East Coast Road Drawings August 2012 XVI – pencil, 27 × 20.8 cm / 10 ⅝ × 8”
To Valencia 112913/10 – pencil, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
p. 38: From Ziro Valley, India 092313
CD print: To Sao Paulo 071913/2 – marker, 30.4 × 22.8 cm / 9 × 12”
front cover: From Farm and Wilderness 062613
back cover: Lee Ranaldo’s pedalboard 2009 – photo: Chris Lawrence

TRACKS

1. To Jajouka, December 2012	8'42
2. Countless Centuries Fled Into The Distance Like So Many Storms – part 1, April 2008	3'52
3. From Raleigh, December 2005	7'36
4. The Ride Home, April 2012	3'08
5. Hurricane Transcriptions demo – part 3 (excerpt), May 2013	3'20
6. Lecce, Italy, August 2011	5'02
7. To Jajouka (reprise), February 2014	7'16

This CD was composed for the edition ‘Lost Highways’
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