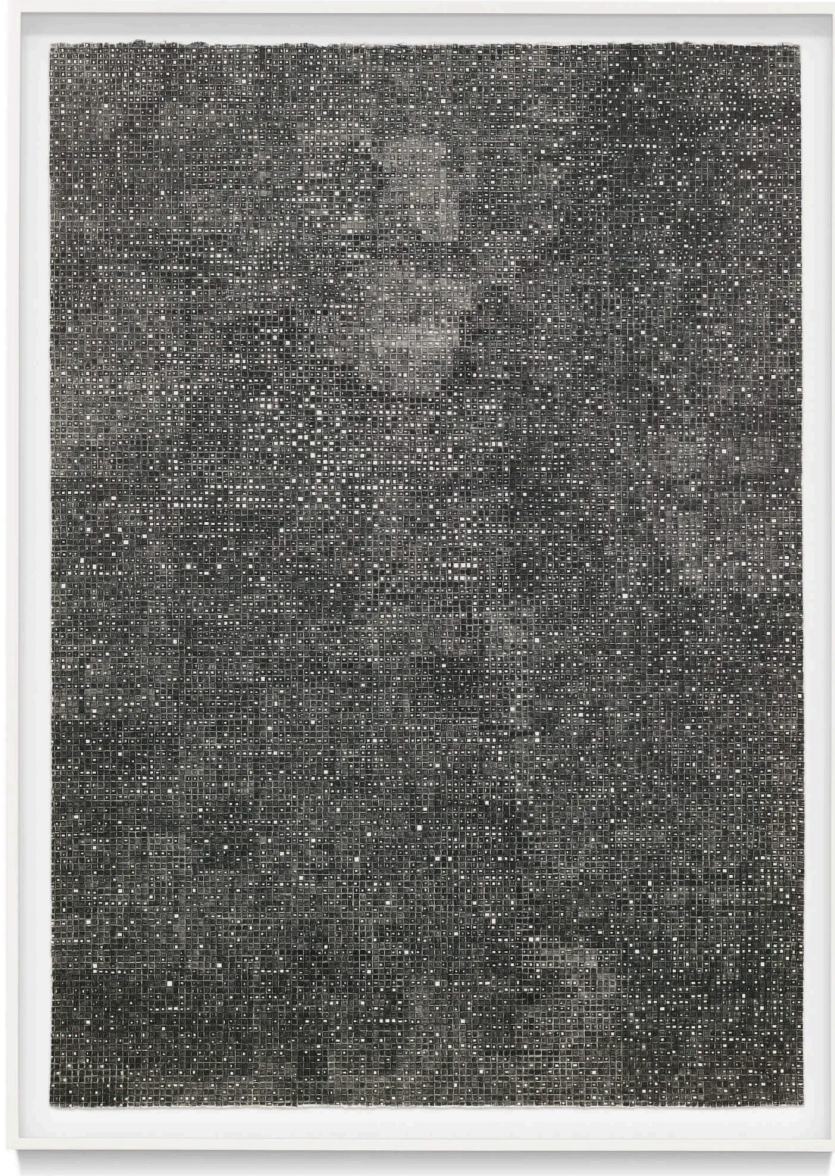


Victoria Burge | Artseen | The Brooklyn Rail

By Christopher Alessandrini 2/5/2025



Victoria Burge

Krakow Witkin Gallery
January 11–February 15, 2025
Boston

In Victoria Burge's first solo show at Krakow Witkin Gallery in Boston, the artist's obsession with the grid is evident across a succinct yet eloquent selection of recent works. From delicately rendered chalk drawings to sculptural folded paper, the exhibition tracks a finely tuned, constellatory intelligence as it navigates multiple archives. Burge's investigations range from women's underacknowledged contributions to textile manufacturing to their involvement in the early days of computing and scientific observation. The result is a highly cerebral and elegant body of work that poses urgent questions about labor, visibility, and the social assignment of value.

Anchoring the gallery is *Landscapes & Atmospheres* (2024), a taxonomic grid of fifteen collaged paper panels, each a study in texture and contrast, void and form. They share a unified visual language, rendered in varying shades of black or furiously embellished with keystrokes from vintage typewriters, including one for mathematical notations and another for the Cyrillic alphabet. Some designs recall the geometric precision and granularity of Frank Stella's "Black Paintings" or Lygia Pape's woodcuts; others are exercises in negative space. One seemingly blank panel is embossed with Braille-like dots punched onto the surface with percussive strokes. The typewriter, freed to test its sensual properties, yields to the tactile pleasures of mark-making, a record of passion diligently tempered into pattern. The arrangement achieves a remarkable equilibrium between the frenzy of creation and the power of restraint.

Drawn from heterogeneous sources, Burge's vocabulary rigorously reanimates older forms: weaving codes and punch cards, maps, graphs, scientific diagrams. Many are inscribed on found materials, such as nineteenth-century schoolhouse slates and sheets of yellowed antique paper. She finds inspiration in typewriters and looms because both insist on rigidly prescribed movements to create intricate patterns of thought or design—restrictions that, in the right circumstances, can deliver expressive freedom. In the realm of contemporary art, the grid is often unfairly associated with a specific strain of Minimalist machismo, though the radical compositions of Anni Albers, Beryl Korot, Agnes Martin, and Vera Molnár attest to its malleability and emotional range. Burge, in her own effort to humanize the grid, stages moments of strategic breakdown, puncturing the illusion or expectation of perfection. These blips are transcriptions of a body in time and space: a tremor, a hiccup, a knee knocks the table and the pen slips. Error is the mother of beauty, and these imperfections serve as a reminder that art is never in competition with life's unruly elements but instead its miraculous reward.

Burge's largest work in this exhibition is the marvelous *Star Data II* (2024), a painstakingly detailed black-pencil drawing based on a photographic print from the notebook of Annie Jump Cannon, the astronomer who devised the Harvard spectral classification scheme. Up close, the image reads like a scramble of glyphs or keyboard tiles—ornate, repetitive, indecipherable. Its surface seems to undulate like a pool of quicksilver, with lighter swaths of milky graphite (where the artist's hand tired) offset by darker passages, evidence of sustained pressure and physical endurance. Distance allows the image to cohere. From afar, the image's underlying logic sharpens into sublime focus—a city skyline looming through fog, an aerial view of a densely populated metropolis. Data accumulates and thickens like water condensed from air, its essence distilled to liquid, made visible.

The artist's first-ever exhibited painting on canvas, *Upsilon* (2024), is on display—a sly *trompe l'oeil* that quietly asserts its presence. Its premise is simple enough: a painting of fabric on unprimed canvas, a playful commentary on its own materiality. Half of the composition is heavily worked, an earnest attempt at mimesis; the other half is a basic grid, an homage to the elementary principles of warp and weft. After the artist stretched her canvas, however, the neat lines webbed and frayed, achieving a pleasing and subtly disorienting *moiré*. Order never prevails too long in Burge's universe, although it often provides moments of exquisite serenity.

Burge also presents a series based on the Pleiades, the seven sisters of Greek myth transformed by Zeus into stars. Electra and Sterope appear alongside their parents Atlas and Pleione (all 2024), a partial family tree sketched in three-dimensional space. Vija Celmins, another great chronicler of the night sky, feels kindred not only in her meticulous, labor-intensive approach but also in the depth and potency of her fixations. Both artists share a particular brilliance for attention: their works are ledgers of time spent in the concentrated act of looking, layering and subtracting until an image is pared, and sometimes rebuilt, to its essential qualities.

Burge's love for human knowledge—how it's discovered, organized, disseminated, preserved—is discernible everywhere in these works. Gathered like fragments of a longer text, they hover on the cusp of legibility, amassed with the urgency of someone conjuring an alphabet from years of private gleaning. A certain degree of opacity is necessary. She has taken up the challenge of updating these forms for the twenty-first century without sacrificing the integrity of their original designs. Wisely, graciously, she refuses to disclose their central mystery.