

the Stranger

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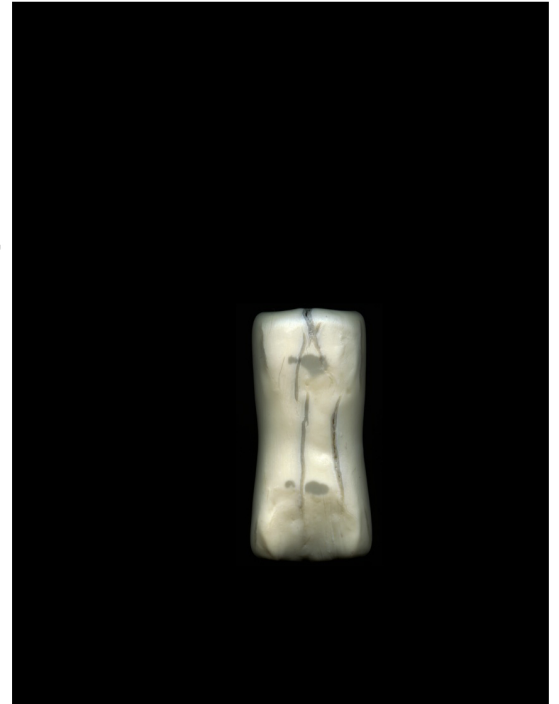
Currently Hanging: Soap, Bones, Condolence Letters (Andrew Witkin)

Jen Graves

Organization can be so comforting. Tidiness.

In Boston artist Andrew Witkin's fragmentary new installation at James Harris Gallery, I keep thinking of the placemats. The gallery is set up like a restaurant. There's a "menu" at the entrance (it contains words, just not food words), and there are tables and chairs for you to sit in. The chairs are based on these perfect little chairs Donald Judd created back in the minimalist day—but altered slightly so that they're not so perfect, they're welcoming of what happens. Rather than food on the tables, there are books and boxes you can look inside. The artist makes the books. Each page is stark white with only a phrase in the middle, the phrases printed alphabetically. The artist keeps adding to and changing this list, printing new books.

The place mats are printed with a left-aligned list of statements that Witkin received in sympathy cards after his mother died. These aren't visually striking, they're just thin black marks on white paper. But they mean so well.



Go ahead, sit down.

The rest of the installation includes small found objects—pictures of familiar places for the artist year after year, piles of stones next to similarly polished-looking hunks of laundered paper—and playing on the stereo all the time are 27 different versions of the song "My Way." Their way.

On a shelf on one wall there are three photographs: A news picture of an Arab Spring protest, a contemplative picture of a person silhouetted against an ocean horizon, and then that same Arab spring square months before, only inhabited by a little boy.

On another wall are four photographs of bars of soap. It's hard to recognize them at first. They're dirty from use, like little dirtied bodies themselves. They're pictured on absolute black backgrounds, like relics. Bones, they look like, or teeth. Things that remain.