Since the late 1990s, Joan Linder has employed mark making to scribe a visual commentary on the power structures that surround us. As a nonnative Buffalonian, Linder came to the topic of her current project—toxic waste and environmental disaster sites in Western New York—through her own reconnaissance and pursuit of knowledge. In 2010, she visited part of the now-uninhabited Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, and was poised to draw the landscape she encountered there. Yet, with each stroke, Linder came to realize the potency of her subject. She therefore endeavored to develop a larger, more consequential body of work and delved deep into research: a massive undertaking that forms the heart of this exhibition.

Joan Linder: Operation Sunshine presents meticulously hand-drawn replicas of archival documents and large-scale renderings of pervasive weeds, grass, dirt, and gravel. These are joined by a sequence of drawings in small, accordion-style notebooks that portray the current vestiges of cleanup sites and their surroundings: chain-link fences, power lines, row houses, and city streets. Taken together, these deftly rendered images faithfully record the passing of time, subtly calling into question the authenticity of information. With each incidental mark and imperfection, Linder’s hand is evident. Her ardent observations create a poignant, collective memory that bears witness to the improbability and travesty of historical events.

Holly E. Hughes
Godin-Spaulding Curator & Curator for the Collection

Joan Linder: Operation Sunshine
July 9–October 30, 2016

This exhibition is organized by Godin-Spaulding Curator & Curator for the Collection Holly E. Hughes. This project has been supported by Faculty Fellowships at the University at Buffalo’s Humanities Institute and Techne Institute for Arts and Emerging Technologies and residencies at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, and the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California. The artist would also like to acknowledge Mixed Greens for their support of this project.

About the Artist
Joan Linder is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art at the University at Buffalo. She has shown her work throughout the United States and in Brazil, Denmark, Germany, India, Japan, and South Korea. This is her first solo museum exhibition.

Related Events
Live Drawing by Artist Joan Linder
Friday, August 5, 2016, 6–8 pm
Part of M&T FIRST FRIDAYS @ THE GALLERY

Live Drawing by Artist Joan Linder
Friday, September 2, 2016, 6–8 pm
Part of M&T FIRST FRIDAYS @ THE GALLERY

Artist Talk: Joan Linder
Friday, October 7, 2016, 6 pm
Part of M&T FIRST FRIDAYS @ THE GALLERY

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Museum Hours
Tuesday–Sunday, 10 am–5 pm
M&T FIRST FRIDAYS, 10 am–10 pm
Closed Mondays and Independence, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Days.

Cover: Salt, Water, Power, People I Have the Mantra, "Energy/Decay," 2015. Ink on paper, 54 x 36 inches (137.2 x 91.4 cm).
Holly E. Hughes: You never wanted to settle for painting and sculpting. How did you arrive at this point of drawing?

Joan: Drawing was fundamental in art school; it was painting. At different points, drawing pushed to painting and sculpture. How did you end up at this point?

Holly: Not really. I had an intense understanding of the words “Love Canal.” I knew it was an environmental disaster. When I first came to Buffalo, I started to work with imagery that was iconic, that represented disaster. When I first came to Buffalo, I wanted to make very large pencil drawings of Turkish rugs as I looked out my window and a fifteen-foot-tall drawing of the Fernsehturm. They looked much like the drawings I had done two years before but on a larger scale. I was thinking about gender and power all the time. I wanted to create a life-size drawing of a toxic site; I wanted to convey the sense of scale. I sit and I look, and I draw. It’s really simple in the beginning. Then it involves a compressed element of time. I like that in the finished drawings. I try to convey the sense of scale, the enormity of these projects, to make the viewer to walk to see it all. The drawing begins to feel like a scale model, yet it is so big that it requires the viewer to walk to see it all. The drawing begins to convey the sense of scale, the enormity of these projects. I was overwhelmed at the quantity of government reports. I started to become interested in the design of report covers, how much information just for a housewife. It’s about power—literally. Love Canal is the place where they injected people with hexavalent uranium. Those drawings were experiments at Strong Memorial Hospital, Rochester’s experiments at Strong Memorial Hospital, CECOS, and Hooker (Hyde Park), to name a few. Suddenly, there were terrifying parallels. With Love Canal and the other toxic sites here, the subject is easier for me to deal with. Even though I live here, I have a level of detachment because I’m not from here. To me, these projects participate in larger questions about the inability of our modern institutions. They investigate the idea that we somehow remain buried in land that people generally live on or near. The drawings are not about geological time, but they are about the political power of the press, and the ability of government to deal with. Even though I live here, I have a level of detachment because I’m not from here. To me, both Love Canal and the other toxic sites here, the subject is easier for me to deal with. Even though I live here, I have a level of detachment because I’m not from here. To me, these projects participate in larger questions about the inability of our modern institutions.

Holly: Off of the archival material you have encountered throughout this project, which of those haven’t you had to make you think twice?

Joan: I don’t remember making any of those decisions. I just remember making very large pencil drawings on paper. I was thinking about the feminist implications around mark making and scale. It was really during my residency in Berlin, and there was a woman there who told me that she had done two years before but on a larger scale. I was thinking about gender and power all the time. I wanted to create a life-size drawing of a toxic site; I wanted to convey the sense of scale. I sit and I look, and I draw.