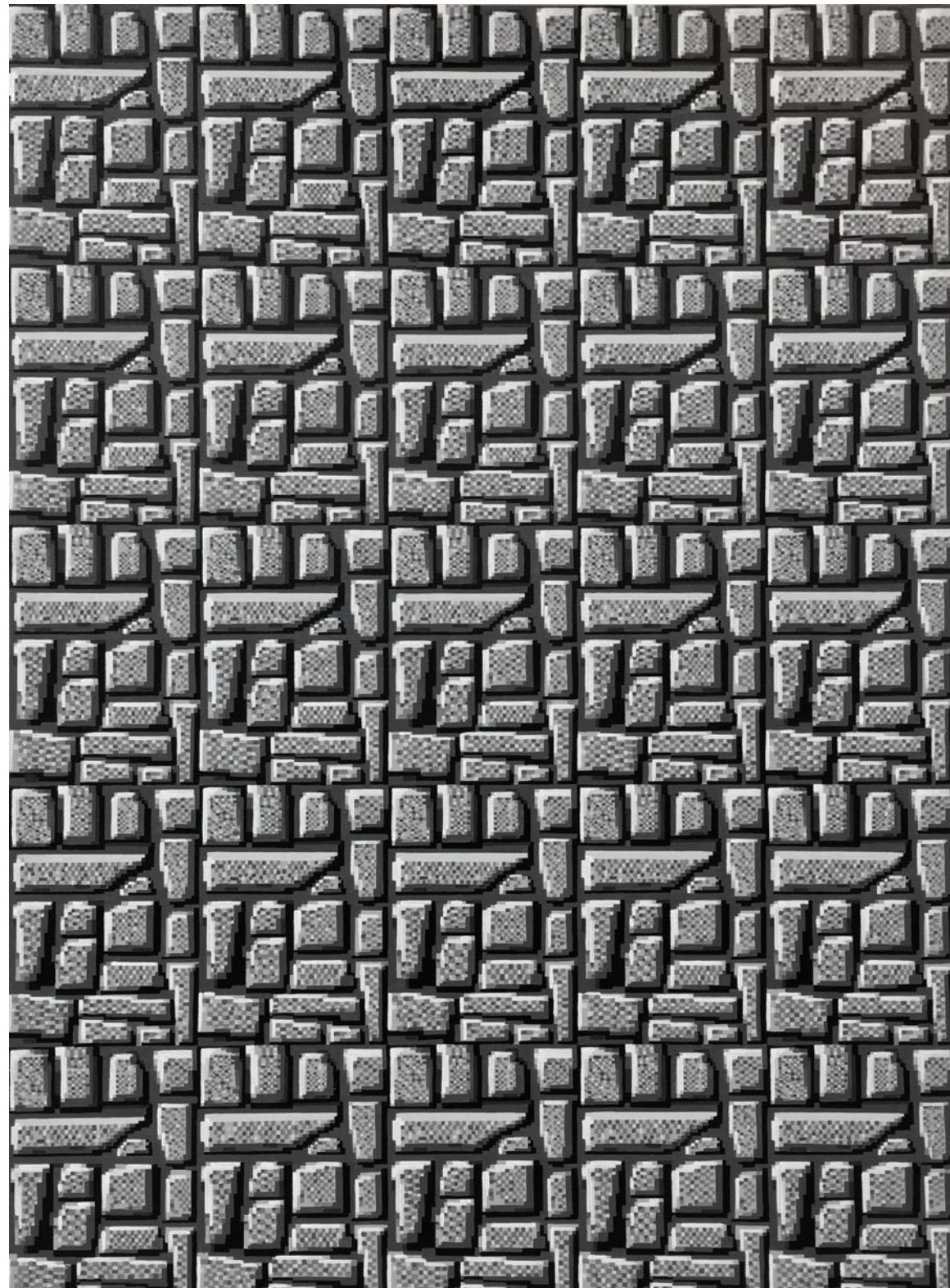


MATHEW ZEFELDT

Rocks Tiled, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

TYLER STODDARD SMITH

Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens

Sara makes a fist. She likes how the withered red skin over her knuckles becomes fierce and taut when she clenches the muscles in her hand. The simple act of fist making, the pain, reminds Sara she's done something. Her body is slim, but steady; veins in her arms and legs rise from her pale skin in blue bas-relief. She lets her fist go limp, marveling at her partially adducted thumb and the simian flatness of her callused fingers caused by years in contact with unforgiving rock faces. I've got monkey hands, she thinks—there's no getting around it.

Sara is a climber, an “alpinist,” a weekend mountaineer, really, but right now, the city of Leningrad is short on professionals. The few painters, decorators, designers, and artists left in town produce paints, tarps and netting, stage sets, and other means of camouflage for critical military and cultural targets, the same ones mined in case Germans capture the city. After the Smolny Institute is hit twice with artillery shells, Communist Party Secretary Zhdanov requests that a team of alpiners be assembled to hang the camouflage tarps, conceal military markers, and disguise the enemy's orientation points.

Sara reads about the open invitation to try out for the camouflage team on a billboard notice. The climbing “assessments” will be held in the Field of Mars. Sara is tired and hungry, overwhelmed, literally, by gravity. Who can climb when we cannot even stand?

It is early November 1941, and the Wehrmacht's Army Group North is closing in on Leningrad. Food rations are cut again, and temperatures during the month stake mercury at 0°F.

The city's food reserves, much of it held in the Badayev warehouses, are as follows:

Flour: 15 days
Cereal: 16 days
Sugar: 13 days
Fats: 12 days
Meats: 0 days

Secretary Zhdanov: . . . Comrade Stalin, General Voroshilov and I wonder if it would be more expedient to reroute the relief convoy to Smolensk. The Leningrad food stores are at full capacity; we are reinforced for the winter months,