

want and fear

by Emily Jane Magdalene Legleitner

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**We're all going to die, all of us, what a circus!
That alone should make us love each other but it doesn't.
We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities,
we are eaten up by nothing.**

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

What makes up the essence of a life?

Is it the things you surround yourself with? The cup that holds your coffee in the morning? Is it the work that occupies most of your day? Is it something you made with your hands? Dreams left unrealized? Is it the job you turned down to stay with your now ex-lover? Or the moment just passed, that if acted upon would change the trajectory of your future?

Is it the news articles you read when you wake up? The story of another oil spill, a species lost, a people killed, a building burned? Is it a place your father visited that no longer exists how he remembers? A place you've heard of but will never see? Is it the child you'll choose not to have? Will you feel remorse about it later?

This body of work, *want and fear*, is about all of these things. It's about the anxieties that surround everyday experiences – the over-saturation of information that hits when I open my phone, the nostalgia I feel for memories not yet made, the rapidly fleeting nature of time, and the paralyzing fear of not experiencing all of the possibilities afforded to me.

But this work is also about empathy and the human experience that binds us. A magical outcome of this body of work is how it created moments to share stories. As the work traveled for exhibitions, I witnessed it's uncanny capacity to prompt my audience to share narratives – and so it became a catalyst for human connection. These stories were often vulnerable, sometimes quaint, but always personal, authentic, and spoke with resonance to the work. This is a phenomenon of art that has the power to foster empathy between people, something so necessary as the disasters around us erodes at our confidence in being human.

In the interest of further fostering this potential to create an empathetic connection between myself, yourself, and other people who've encountered this work, I ask you to place yourself within it. Imagine you're standing in a room with your feet buried into carpet that's slowly growing up your leg, or you've wandered into a garden that's turning into a maze – *When did you last feel this way? Did you think yourself alone in your experience?*



We are eaten up by nothing.
Etching on Hahnemühle Copperplate printed with 2 colours. 24x36in (61x91cm). 2023.

The way I'm thinking about this body of work, *want and fear*, is both general and specific. Generally speaking, I am thinking about time, mortality, and longing as those constructs relate to the human experience and our contemporary age – saturated with a constant stream of information, largely devastating, highlighting our dying planet and species in conflict with each other and ourselves. Specifically, I am thinking about how these experiences manifest in my individual life – in other words, how I personally experience anxiety-provoking things. Because I am thinking about my personal experience, this work illustrates microcosmic manifestations of anxiety from an embodied feminine and queer perspective – dealing with moments of personal choice making influenced both by individual circumstances and circumstances caused by the greater world, outside of my immediate control.

I am also dealing with contradictions – as anxiety and choice are often accompanied by contradictory feelings. Home can be comforting and confining; love can be wonderfully joyous and terribly painful; labor and work can be rewarding, and at the same time feel distracting, keeping us from the things we'd rather be doing. Through printed imagery and installation I present moments when the familiar edges towards the unnerving, a sensation which has become more common for many of us as we navigate our current and complex reality. Our sense of "normalcy" has been shaken by numerous global crises in the last several decades, reinforcing our predisposition to dwell on topics such as mortality and longing. In this way the work speaks to anxiety on a macrocosmic level, as we grapple with uncertainty pertaining to our global future and the intimidating, often intangible, vastness of it all.

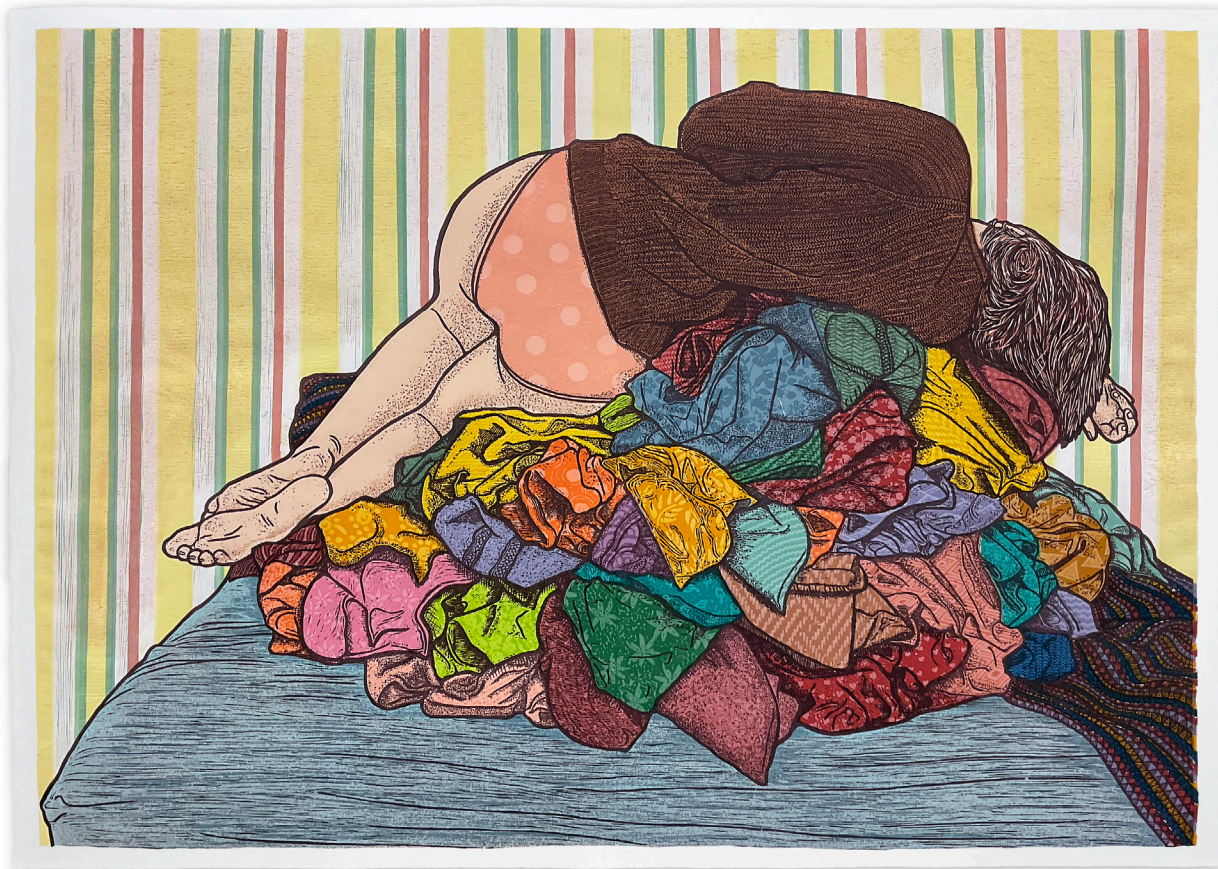
The imagery I develop through printmedia originates from spontaneous performative *play* – I ‘sketch’ in front of a camera. With a remote shutter, I capture reenactments and responses to feelings of intense emotion in combination with performative explorations using domestic objects – eggs, a garden hose, the kind of carpet found in every low-income apartment complex, pillows, nicknacks, secondhand lamps collected from family members over the years, etc. The objects are metaphorical, and open to interpretation – dependent on audience associations. Through these performative sketches I create imagery where comfort is distorted by excess and exaggeration. To enforce a sense of teetering between conflicting emotions and to evoke tension, I juxtapose opposites – towers of fluffy pillows that look as though they might topple over and smother you; or I present moments of choice – do you step down from the stool and risk crushing the field of eggs or remain stranded atop? By their distorted nature, captured in the privacy of my home and studio, the images are displays of the artist’s vulnerabilities.



Ex. The artist coordinates solo-performances with a remote shutter and DSLR camera.



Ex. Performative object explorations... **[Top left]** with 10 dozen eggs (December 31, 2021), in collaboration with the artist's mother, Lauren Tompkins; **[Top right]** with 10 dozen eggs cracked into a bath tub (December 31, 2021); **[Bottom left]** with 30 throw pillows (March 13, 2022); **[Bottom right]** making weaponry with socks and 40 pounds of garden rocks (November 28, 2021).



I know there's something I've forgotten.
Woodcut on Kozo from 6 plates & 24 colors. 36x48in (91x122cm). 2022.

Every day I want to speak with you. And every day something more important
calls for my attention—the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage

I need to buy for the trip.
Even now I can hardly sit here

among the falling piles of paper and clothing, the garbage trucks outside
already screeching and banging.

The mystics say you are as close as my own breath.
Why do I flee from you?

My days and nights pour through me like complaints
and become a story I forgot to tell.

Help me. Even as I write these words I am planning
to rise from the chair as soon as I finish this sentence.

MARIE HOWE

REFLECTIONS | *I know there's something I've forgotten.* | May 2020

I dumped several weeks worth of laundry on the bed and stared at it. The weight of a global pandemic; reading the news after George Floyd's murder by police in Minneapolis; protests forming throughout my hometown, Flint, Michigan; the urgency and fervor of the moment felt so overwhelming that even the effort to fold laundry seemed insurmountable. My body was heavy and paralyzed by the weight of it all. I felt a need to document this moment and doing so was the catalyst for my thesis, and many performance-turned-prints to follow.

I stacked more and more clothes on to an already tremendous pile of unfolded laundry and climbed on top, draping myself over the heap like a reclining Venus – all weight bearing down on the clothes, no uplifting support from my capable muscles – just surrender to the heaviness I was feeling.

The pile of clothes was a moment poignant in metaphor – a tangible representation of how the crises around us were building.

This paralyzing effect of anxiety is a common phenomena – the term “burnout” was plastered across social media well before the pandemic, while its use only increased tenfold since. *As I know there's something I've forgotten* has exhibited over the last several years, a reaction I've received often is “Oh, I've been there!” – an expression of resonance, of feeling seen in something made by another person. This brief exchange usually leads to further conversation, an opportunity to hear the sentiments of a stranger.

Artists have spoken to turbulent times throughout history. Art is a manifestation of human experience and reflects the time in which it is made. During periods of radical social change, artists have looked inward on domestic space as a reflection of and metaphor for the bigger picture. Artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro with projects like *Womanhouse* (1972)¹; Mary Cassatt and *The Bath* (1891)². We can draw direct parallels from the way our lives look domestically to how our society is fairing widely. For this reason, I am choosing not only to put domesticity on display, but to do so at a scale that can't be ignored – to make a spectacle out of depictions of vulnerability and private expressions of emotion.

Making the private public is a radical act. David Wojnarowicz, a prominent artist and AIDS activist, summed this sentiment up perfectly, saying:

“To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day-to-day illusion of the *one tribe nation*. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of one tribe nation; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the possible existence of literally *millions of tribes*.”³

want and fear is about the human condition not because the imagery is able to speak to every individual person, but because it speaks to enough people that a sense of empathy, of feeling seen, understood, and less alone in the world, is possible. This possibility is transformative, infectious, and radically powerful.

So by defacto, the intended audience of *want and fear* is anyone whose experience resonates with the work.

1 Womanhouse was an installation and performance space organized by Chicago and Schapiro from Jan. 30 to Feb. 28, 1972. The artists were co-founders of the first Feminist Art Program, a progressive collective of students and artists. Womanhouse, a public art installation visited by over ten thousand visitors, transformed an LA home into an environment, putting the conventional social roles of woman on display, exaggerating, and subverting their context to address female empowerment.

2 Mary Cassatt was an American impressionist artist known best for portraiture and figures depicting the private lives of middle-class women – drinking tea, sitting in the garden, bathing, taking care of their children, etc. Impressionists, Cassatt included, championed innovative visual language and the techniques they were developing as a parallel embrace of modern life.

3 Clamp, Brian Paul. “Making the Private Public.” Visual AIDS, <https://visualaids.org/gallery/making-the-private-public>.



I know less now than I knew then.
Woodcut on Kozo from 4 plates & 12 colors. 36x48in (91x122cm). 2021.

REFLECTIONS | *I know less now than I knew then.* | January 2020

My grandmother died in January 2020. We spent the first months of the pandemic preparing her house for sale. As the house gradually emptied, I realized the last day I'd walk through the hallway of this home was impending. I was raised amongst the fixtures, furnishings, and walls that were going bare. I fixated on capturing the house's image as it remained. The blue-striped, antique wallpaper that lined the dining room felt the appropriate backdrop to this moment in my memory.

I drew a pile of daisies to celebrate my grandmother's life. A play on the saying “pushing daisies” – the subject matter in stark contrast to such a bright, joyous, spring-time flower – a symbol for both life and death. This work is a *memento mori* image, “designed to remind the viewer of their mortality and of the shortness and fragility of human life.”⁴

4 “Memento Mori << Art Term.” Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/memento-mori>.



I know less now than I knew then.
Woodcut on Kozo from 4 plates & 12 colors. 36x48in (91x122cm). 2021.

Art has always served to reflect the human experience, and a primary pillar of that experience is inevitable death. While my work contends with issues of anxiety, much of that anxiety stems from an awareness of time's passage and the limitations that mortality places on life. The fragile boundary between life and death has been the subject of visual art since its origins – from Classical Greek and Roman depictions of epic mythological battles to the quiet demise of mortal men; heart wrenching depictions of Mother Mary mourning the death of her son have been ubiquitous since the 13th century; vanitas and memento mori paintings reflect on the transitory nature of life and earthly possessions. "Painting [shifted] from the admiring scenes of mortal struggle by Romantics to sedate scenes by Realists, such as Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*. In 20th century Western art, reflections on mortality range from scenes of brutal atrocity [like Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*] to the self-destructing machines of Jean Tinguely, to homages to the victims of AIDS by Nan Goldin and Félix González-Torres."⁵

I too am looking at ideas of mortality, focused on worries about life's potential through an autobiographical lens and, in doing so, developing an individualized language of symbolism that's informed both by widely understood metaphor and by personal associations with objects and imagery.

Frida Kahlo is well known for using extensive symbolism and deeply personal narrative in her work and, despite how complex her images may be to interpret, it is revered for its poignant intimacy and emblematic nature. Unlike Surrealists who cite dreams and the subconscious as their source for inspiration, *Magical Realists* like Kahlo depict disparate and unlike things with a naturalistic quality, incorporating elements of fantasy to evoke the mysteriousness of everyday reality. This manner of visually expressing personal narrative and autobiographical experience resonates most closely with my own approach to exploring such topics. Accurate but uncanny details, supernatural and otherworldly themes in otherwise natural settings, *Magical Realists* playfully juxtapose elements of both the physical and psychological worlds. Kahlo herself, speaking to the categorization of her work, said, "I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality."⁶

⁵ "Mortality." Artsy, www.artsy.net/gene/mortality.

⁶ "Frida Kahlo's Art Through the Lens of Magical Realism." 1000Museums, 1 June 2020, <https://www.1000museums.com/frida-kahlo-art-magical-realism/>.

“Being an artist is only about having your own experience, the work is a byproduct of the process of making. Being an artist is really located in your own pleasure of doing and your own discovery. Because the rest of what happens in the universe you have extremely little control over. To be an artist you must essentially be deeply engaged in your own experience, that’s the only thing that can hold you.”

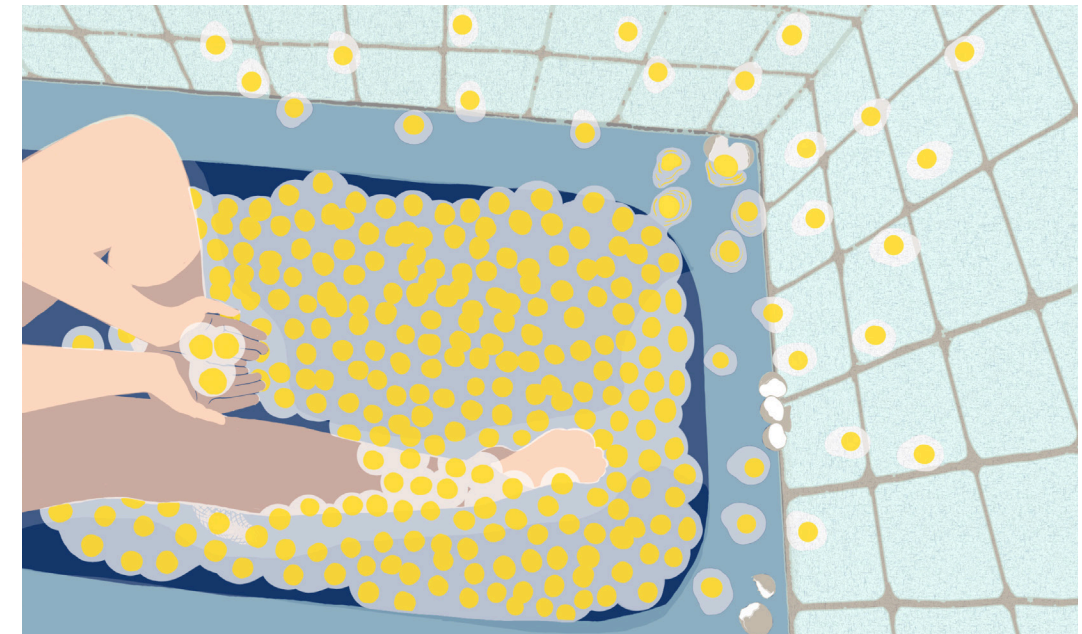
– KIKI SMITH (2017)⁷

Not only is personal experience the only thing that can hold you, as contemporary artist Kiki Smith says, but in its nature it can hold an audience too. I have found, evidenced by exhibiting autobiographical work, that its inherent authenticity captures an audience. Similarly, the content of my work, like Smith’s, features common-place and everyday objects. Smith uses images of birds, acorns, stars, branches, and the like, which at first glance is arguably unspectacular – and yet, her work is subtly jolting, effective, alluring, authentic, raw; the subject matter is easily digested, but emotionally complex.

Despite their ubiquity, common-place objects can make for effective and cathartic depictions of emotion. The immediacy of recognition and personal associations made with everyday objects facilitates an approachable and accessible quality. This, in addition to the vulnerable nature of my work, contributes to the viewer’s compulsion to place themselves within the imagery.

I play with objects that surround my daily experience – pillows I stack on my bed, socks I put on my feet, wishbones I pull from chickens before making stock. I have my own associations with these objects, which vary in degree from the associations *you* might make – the likeness is irrelevant as long as the emotional resonance is consistent. That resonance exists when someone seeks me out in a gallery space, in the studio, or online to tell me a story my work conjured up: One person’s memory of sleeping on a pile of clothes because they had no bed; of a wishbone drying on the windowsill until mom gave permission to break it and make a wish; of household remains floating on the surface of a flood after a hurricane.

“Prints mimic what we are as humans: we are all the same and yet everyone is different. There’s a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality, like saying rosaries.” – KIKI SMITH (1998)⁸



Ex. Digital illustrations, unfinished adaptations of performative object explorations.

⁷ Smith, Kiki. “Copy Cat: Meandering Prints.” Penny Stamps Speaker Series, University of Michigan. 23 Oct. 2017, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁸ “Kiki Smith Collection Premieres at MOMA.” The Daily Princetonian, 11 Dec. 2003, <https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2003/12/kiki-smith-collection-premiers-at-moma>.

I am reflecting on how my ancestor's lives laid the groundwork for my own. I am a second generation American – my paternal grandmother immigrated from Germany with her parents when she was 3. Her mother (my namesake) was a seamstress and her father a factory worker on the lines of General Motors assembly in Flint, Michigan. I am thinking about this as I move to Edmonton, Alberta – how this move could significantly change the trajectory of my life.

We make these kinds of choices every day – in marvelous acts of confidence and awareness, and in small, barely noticeable ways.

I will journey through by the strength of my father's laughter nods to this phenomena, the way in which we consciously and unconsciously shift our fates; the Butterfly Effect, the theory that small actions can have big impacts; and the quintessential “American Dream,” the pursuit of opportunity in America and the fallacious promise that your aspirations can be achieved by hard work alone, luck and privilege aside.

The lilac and rose bushes my great-grandfather grew were his pride and joy. When he wasn't working on the assembly line, he was gardening, growing food for his family and flowers for his eyes. White picket fences, a well-maintained yard, a house in the suburbs – everything my great grandparents moved to America for – is a notion now seemingly out of reach for many young Americans.

To reflect on this trend, the changing expectation of what is and isn't obtainable, I imagined white picket fences distorted by an eerie and foreboding nature. They give the illusion of a labyrinth – seemingly impossible to navigate – so that as you observe the scene a growing sense of anxiety builds. *Is there a way out of this place? How will you find it?*

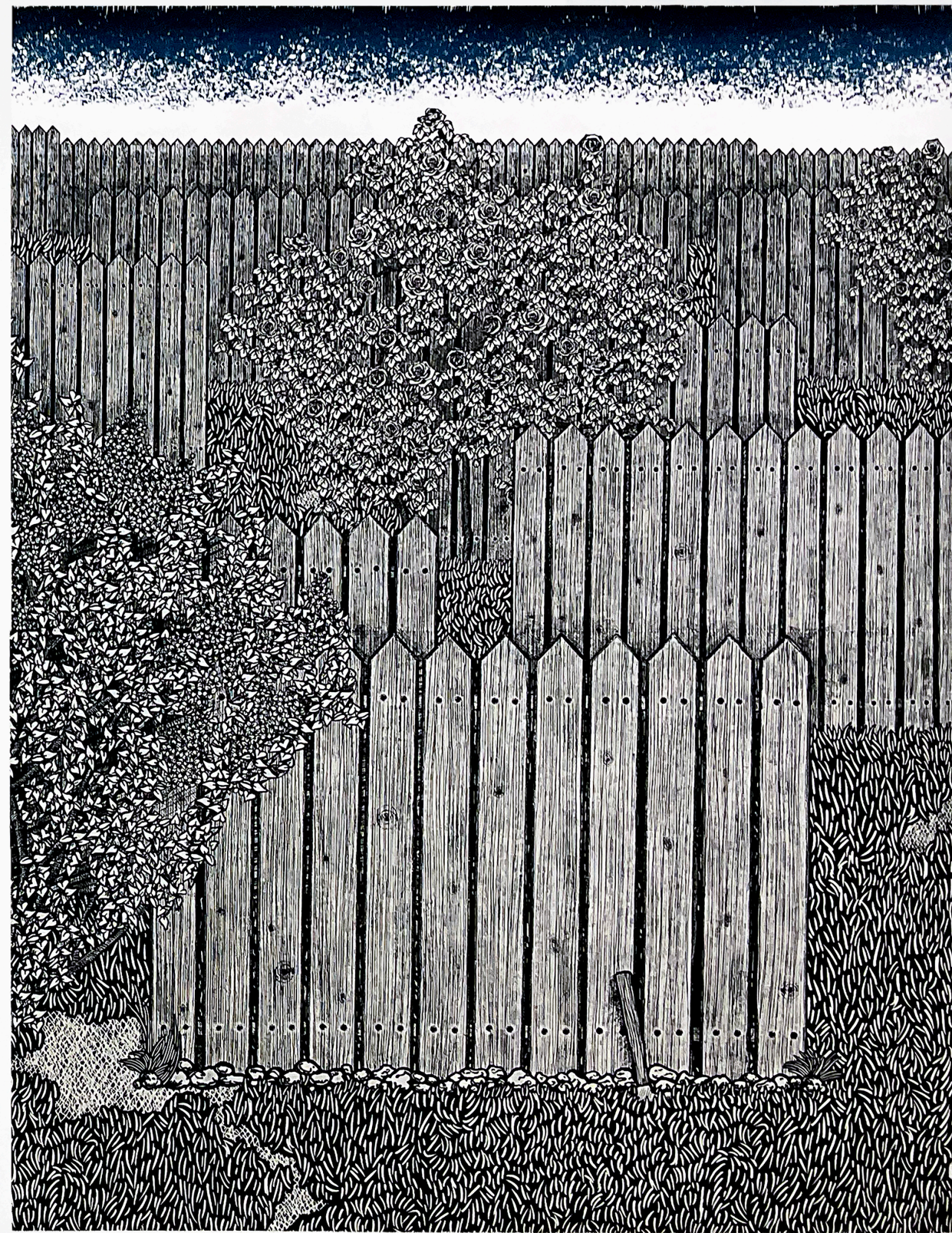
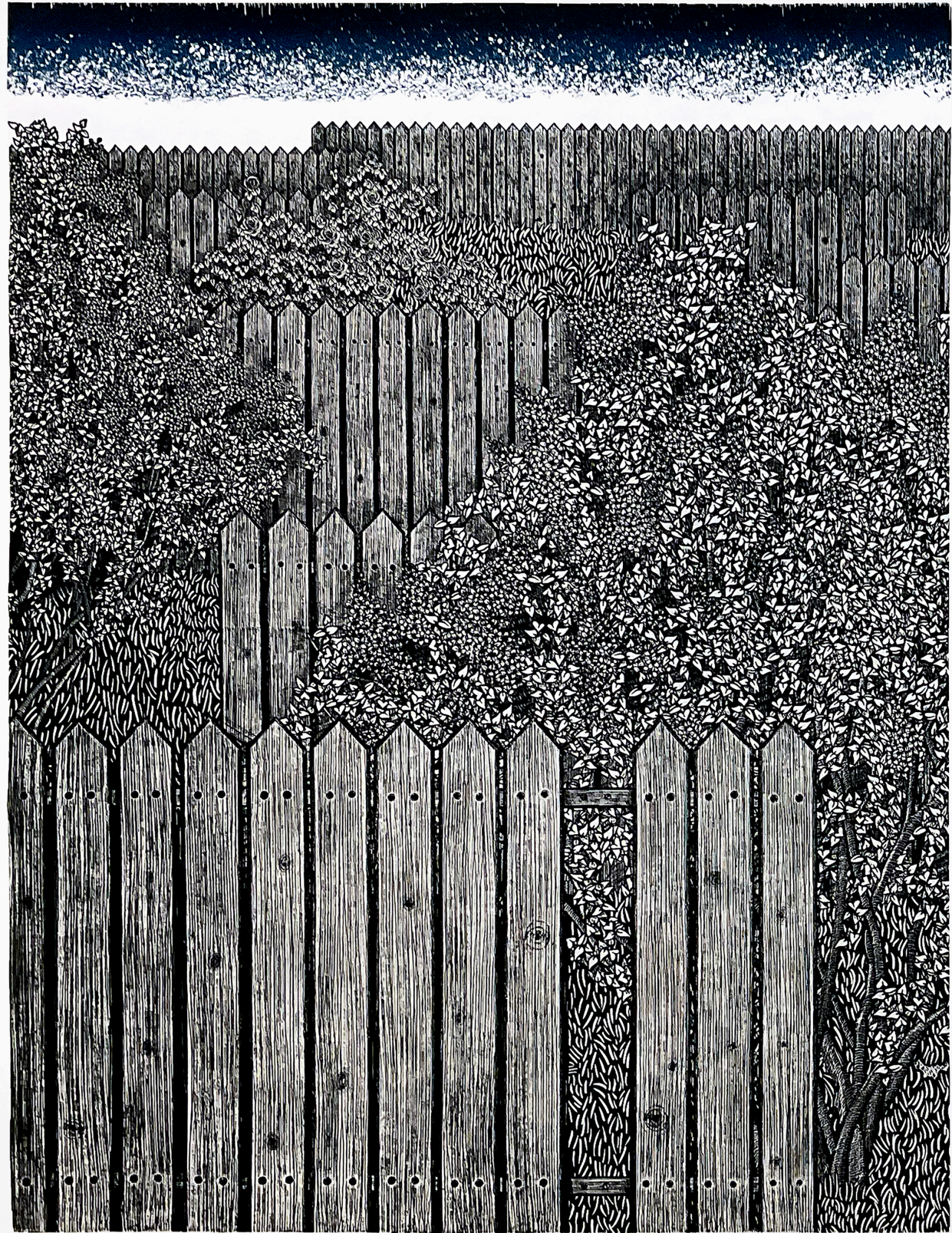
The fenced barrier in the furthest reaches of the image suggests a prison yard, emphasizing the anxiety that comes with planning for an unknown future, and the shackles of aging – an ultimately lonely experience. The only suggestion given that another human presence might exist in the labyrinth is a hammer laid next to the broken fence post, overgrown by uncut grass – offering little insight into the likelihood of rescue.

In this way, *I will journey through by the strength of my father's laughter* considers choice – like the many fate-altering decisions we make in a lifetime – you might ask yourself in this scenario: *Do I stay where I stand or do I move forward, following a path I can't see the end of?*



Ex. Installation of *I will journey through by the strength of my father's laughter* and *I will nestle myself within your hunger for the ground* at *Horizons*, solo exhibition at Buckham Fine Arts Gallery, Flint, Michigan, Dec 2021 - Jan 2022.

NEXT PAGE: *I will journey through by the strength of my father's laughter.*
Woodcut on Kozo. 48x72in (122x183cm). 2021.



Ocean, don't be afraid.
The end of the road is so far ahead
it is already behind us.
Don't worry. Your father is only your father
until one of you forgets. Like how the spine
won't remember its wings
no matter how many times our knees
kiss the pavement. Ocean,
are you listening? The most beautiful part
of your body is wherever
your mother's shadow falls.
Here's the house with childhood
whittled down to a single red tripwire.
Don't worry. Just call it horizon
& you'll never reach it.
Here's today. Jump. I promise it's not
a lifeboat. Here's the man
whose arms are wide enough to gather
your leaving. & here the moment,
just after the lights go out, when you can still see
the faint torch between his legs.

How you use it again & again
to find your own hands.
You asked for a second chance
& are given a mouth to empty into.
Don't be afraid, the gunfire
is only the sound of people
trying to live a little longer. Ocean. Ocean,
get up. The most beautiful part of your body
is where it's headed. & remember,
loneliness is still time spent
with the world. Here's
the room with everyone in it.
Your dead friends passing
through you like wind
through a wind chime. Here's a desk
with the gimp leg & a brick
to make it last. Yes, here's a room
so warm & blood-close,
I swear, you will wake—
& mistake these walls
for skin.

OCEAN VUONG

REFLECTIONS | *I will nestle myself within your hunger for the ground.* | October 2021

Elements of one work tend to carry over into another. I will momentarily fixate on something and print allows me to work it out repeatedly.

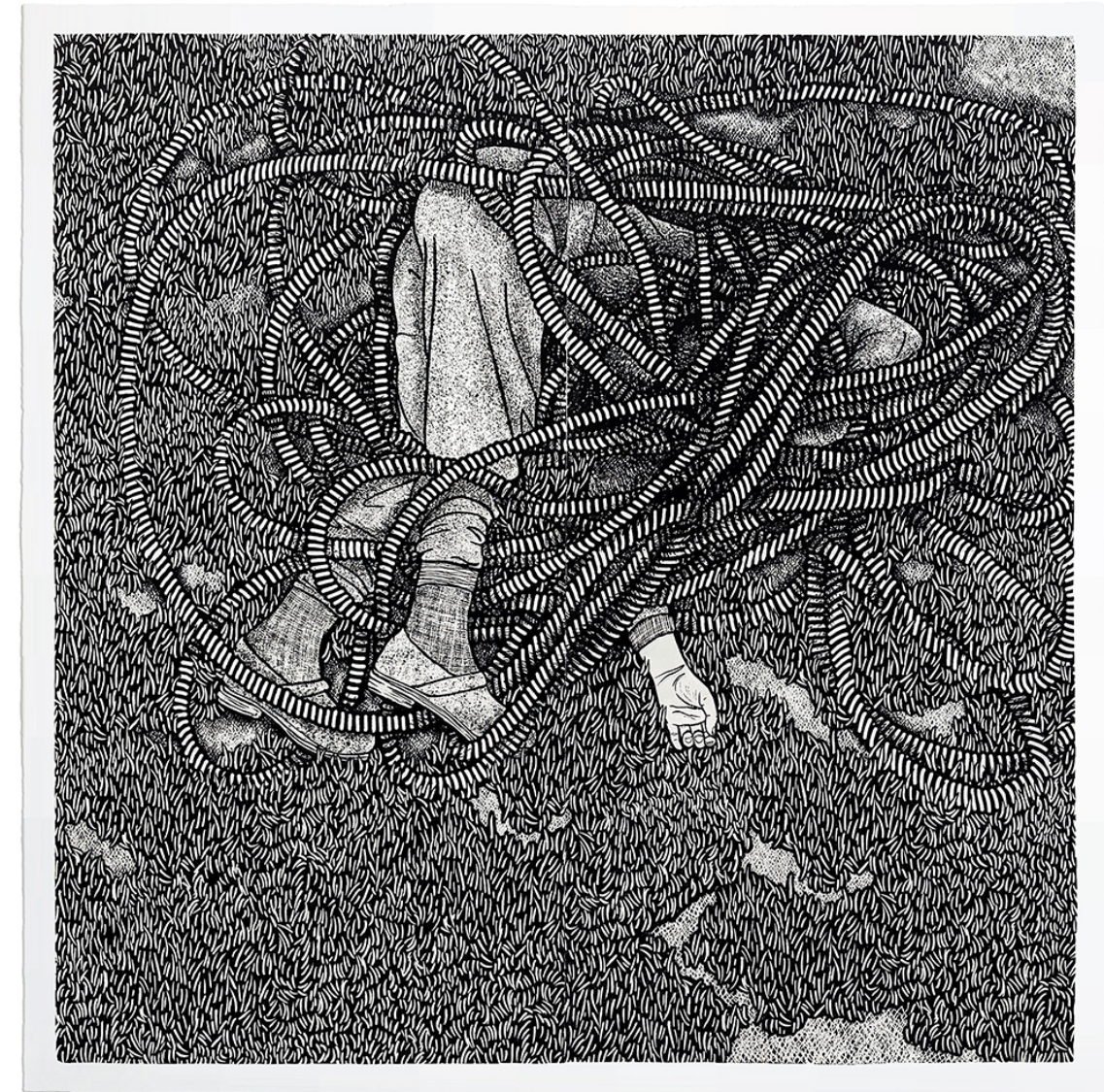
For a time, I obsessed over the grassy texture I'd drawn for *I will journey*. It made its way into another image: *I will nestle myself within your hunger for the ground*. To create this image I staged a performance with a garden hose. Rolling on the ground in my backyard within the tangles of the hose, capturing still footage of silliness, absurdity, and dissonance as the scene, upon closer inspection, was also disturbing. This inadvertently presented a juxtaposition of opposites again – playfulness, an innocent act, with the potential for violence.

The interpretations of *I will nestle* vary – *Is it a murder scene? A construction accident? Is the individual in distress? Are they playing? Are they trapped in the tangle of rope? Or are they huddled in a human-sized nest?* Yes, to all of the above and all other possibilities – that's the magical ambiguity of image making.

I will nestle has a curious violent quality. My interpretation is that it depicts self-inflicted struggle, which might be caused by an external stressor or by fear of the unfamiliar and uncertain. This idea of struggle is contrasted with nest-like imagery, allowing for varied associations – *fear and threat v. comfort and safety*.

The grass in both *I will journey* and *I will nestle* creates a dense visual field to get lost in, perhaps inflicting a little dizziness, acting as a visual tool to mimic feelings of anxiety.

“Printmaking] has a kind of fetishistic aspect to it because it’s fussy, it has this repetition, being able to make strokes over and over and over again as a way to be out of one’s mind, out of oneself, out of place.” – KIKI SMITH (2017)⁹



I will nestle myself within your hunger for the ground.
Woodcut on Kozo. 48x48in (122x122cm). 2021.

NEXT PAGES: *No love is ever wasted.*
Silkscreen on Kozo printed with 7 colours. 12 scrolls, each 20in x 14ft. 2023.
Installation at *want and fear* exhibition, FAB Gallery, University of Alberta, Oct 10 - Nov 3, 2023.

9 Smith, “Copy Cat: Meandering Prints.”





Using personal narrative, self-portraiture, and looking in on domestic spaces as a means of making social commentary has canonical grounds throughout art history.

Feminist artists like Cindy Sherman, Carole Schneemann, and Yoko Ono used their body in performances to speak to greater socio-political issues. Drawing attention to the individual manifestation of these issues removes it from abstract thinking and humanizes it, making the issue tangible, and open to experiences of empathy. In *Cut Piece* (1964) for example, Yoko Ono invites audience members to cut parts of her clothing from her body – in doing so she makes a spectacle out of undressing, a victim out of herself, a villain out of the participant cutting her clothes, and apathetic observers out of the audience. Using one's own body is a boundless approach to creating figurative art – particularly to depict acts of violence and vulnerability. I choose to use my own image in my artwork because I have autonomy over my body and am at liberty to share my stories. And, as stated before, I've found this kind of authenticity contributes to the empathetic lure of the work.

I not only put these personal narratives on display, but I blow them up, making images the size of billboards. I do this not to make a spectacle out of my suffering – I'm not a victim or a narcissist – but to make the work immersive and confrontational. In an age saturated by sophisticated visual imagery, presented with ease at an unprecedented rate, the attention-grabbing nature of large-scale seems necessary to encourage a viewer to take pause. Furthermore, an image that takes up the full range of your vision, pulls you in and places you within itself – the ultimate goal of the *want and fear* exhibition installation.

Artists often respond to human suffering not by depicting the horror itself, but by responding to the emotionality of the experience. Käthe Kollwitz, a pioneering artist in printmaking, did just that – by studying the human condition and mourning. Kollwitz depicted victims of war, not in conflict with each other, but contending with great emotional catastrophe within themselves – the tragedy of losing a loved one for example. Kollwitz once wrote in her diary:

“I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of men, the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain-high.” – KÄTHER KOLLWITZ¹⁰

10 “Käthe Kollwitz.” The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/3201>.

But there's no way to capture the complete and terrible magnitude of living through war – how do you convey that kind of horror in an image? If shown a photo of bloodied bodies, you may feel sympathy, perhaps fear or disgust; if told the casualty count, you may feel remorseful; but these accounts of devastation can't compel you to empathy.

Art, however, by means of abstraction and projection, may cause resonance enough to create an empathetic experience. Achievable by storytelling, visual or literary, art allows us to express the complexity of human emotion with inexplicable clarity. Because, as a viewer, you project your own experiences into the interpretation of a work of art, the emotions you feel by association are as authentically yours as they can ever be.

Ayn Rand, writer and philosopher, in her *Romantic Manifesto* proposes an explanation for why this kind of empathetic connection to a work of art happens. She states:

“It is a common experience to observe that a particular painting – for example, a still life of apples – makes its subject ‘more real than it is in reality.’ The apples seem brighter and firmer, they seem to possess an almost self-assertive character, a kind of heightened reality which neither their real-life models nor any color photograph can match. Yet if one examines them closely, one sees that no real-life apple ever looked like that. What is it, then, that the artist has done? He has created a visual abstraction.”¹¹

Further, Rand suggests that works of art reflect the ideologies of humankind – more precisely, that a work of art depicts the outlook an individual artist has on life. Meaning, if you believe humanity is inherently cruel and life inherently tragic, your art will depict man as monstrous, ugly, downtrodden. Conversely, if you see man as brave, joyous, and in charge of the world around him, you might depict man as the hero, as idealistically beautiful, strong, and confident. I am not so sure that art can be categorized in such a binary way – contemporary art, at the very least, is far too nuanced. However, I do believe that artists bring themselves into the work they make and that we view artwork through the biased lens of our personal experience. Rand unpacks this phenomenon, saying “Art is not concerned with actual occurrences or events as such, but with their metaphysical significance to man.” Given this, it might be argued that an image which is not overtly violent could be even more effective at provoking an emotional response from a viewer than an image that *is* overtly violent.

11 Rand, Ayn. “Chapter 4: Art and Cognition.” *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, NY, 1971, pp. 37–38.

Rand discusses how and why we see ourselves within artistic depictions of man (using literature as example) saying:

“An indication of the metaphysical slant of art can be seen in the popular notion that a reader of fiction ‘identifies himself with’ some character or characters of the story. ‘To identify with’ is a colloquial designation for a process of abstraction: it means to observe a common element between the character and oneself, to draw an abstraction from the character’s problems and apply it to one’s own life. Subconsciously... by virtue of the implicit nature of art, this is the way in which most people react to fiction and to all other forms of art.”¹²

This is the experience I’ve had, that my work can prompt viewers to make personal associations. While you may not have experienced the sufferings of war first hand, you likely have experienced the heavy, crushing feeling in your chest when you’ve lost someone you love. For this reason, Kollwitz’s depiction of a mother sobbing over her the body of her dead son is a much more poignant depiction of war than an illustration of fighter jets dropping bombs from the sky. Both images are provocative, but only one pulls at the heartstrings so effectively. Such a visceral response prompted by something created by another person has the potential to have significant impact on the emotional wellbeing of an individual, as Rand explains:

“Many readers of *The Fountainhead* have told me that the character Howard Roark helped them to make a decision when they faced a moral dilemma. They asked themselves: ‘What would Roark do in this situation?’ – and, faster than their mind could identify the proper application of all the complex principles involved, the image of Roark gave them the answer.”¹³

I don’t claim that art has answers to anything – really, it just asks a lot of questions. But in the kind of moment Rand describes – a moment of introspection and of choice – that person, associating themselves with the character of Roark, feels less alone in the universe and feels reassured by that not-alone-ness. This is what I mean by empathy prompted by art.

¹² Rand, Ayn. “Chapter 3: Art and Sense of Life.” *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, NY, 1971, pp. 27–28.

¹³ Rand, Ayn. “Chapter 1: The Psycho-Epistemology of Art.” *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, NY, 1971, pp. 10.



Ex. Installation of *We are eaten up by nothing* and *I know less now than I knew then* at the 32nd South Bend Museum of Art Biennial, South Bend, Indiana, Oct 2023 - Dec 2023.

As for Rand’s notion that the work of an artist reflects their idealized sense of man – my work is much too pacifistic for this. I situate my work within the neutrality that contradictions offer. Every image teeters between despair and joy, as life does. There is a stillness to my work, like capturing a moment just before or after something more dramatic happens – Humpty Dumpty sitting atop the wall the before the fatal fall. The work has an underlying sense of anticipation and subtle dread. This captures the genuine experience of anxiety – the expectancy of something to come, always thinking about the future, dwelling on the possibilities and, often, preparing for the worst. Most things you’re anxious about cannot be addressed in the moment – it’s either something out of your control or something that will take time and several steps to resolve – so it forces you to sit with your emotions and with your fear. This experience, as discussed before, can be paralyzing, therefore the images I make suggest stillness.

NEXT PAGE: *Terrified again of being loved and not by you*.
Silkscreen on Somerset printed with 20 colours. 58x117in (147x297cm). 2022.



REFLECTIONS | *You are full of want and fear.* | January 2022

The 'title track' of my thesis, so to speak. *You are full of want and fear* started as an experiment in my parent's kitchen with several dozen eggs, rolling them around on the tile floor, listening to them rattle, whirl, and clink together, naturally forming groupings, leaving pockets of floor exposed here and there. Looking at the results, I wondered *how can I navigate this space without crushing the fragile shells?*

Standing with a stool in the center of these eggs, I staged a moment of entrapment. To step down from the stool would risk breaking the eggs, letting yolk ooze onto the floor – but to stay on the stool would mean to be stuck, stationary, nowhere to go. Reflecting a moment of choice – one with no ideal resolution – like being “between a rock and a hard place” as the saying goes.

There is a cost and benefit to nearly every choice we make in life. Only sometimes do we stop to analyze it; and sometimes the consequences of our decisions don't become clear until we're so far down the road that there's no turning back – like crushing the shell of an egg, unable to be repaired

The image of the egg is ripe with metaphor. It conjures up ideas of the *cosmic egg* or the *world egg* – the origins of life, the beginnings of the universe, or the “hatching” of some primordial being coming into existence. The egg is a symbol for new life, birth, fertility, nutrition, purity. It suggests protection, tenderness enclosed within a strong shell, hidden and “unhatched” potential; etc. As an auto-biographical image, *You are full of want and fear* represents the potentiality of motherhood, at the age I am now, making choices that affect the likelihood of parenting.

To conclude the performance, I had to step down from the stool – crushing the delicate eggs under my feet. *There's no way to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.*



You are full of want and fear.
Etching on Hahnemühle Copperplate printed with 4 colours. 36x60in (91x152cm). 2022.

NEXT PAGES: *You are full of want and fear.*
1000 slipcast earthenware eggs with 4 colours of underglaze. Approximately 12x12 sq ft. 2023.
Installation at *want and fear* exhibition, FAB Gallery, University of Alberta, Oct 10 - Nov 3, 2023.







I encourage my audience to experience stillness not only by mimicking the act of stillness in the imagery itself but also by presenting an abundance of visual information and detail. Density of detail makes a viewer take the image in slowly. This, coupled with lengthy and vague poetic titles, asks my audience to pause and contemplate. The titles I pair with my work aren't prescriptive – you read them, then look back at the work, and wonder why I've named them such. This back-and-forth moment contributes to the work's potential to create personal associations by audience members.

As evidenced by the titles I pair with my work, poetry influences my practice significantly. My first boyfriend was a poet and the resonance I've felt to written word has since stuck. I play songs on repeat when I work in the studio, clinging to certain lyrics. Passages of poetry I've encountered find avenues to my titles. No differently than the way Rand's readers relate to her Howard Roark, I associate moments of my life with the words of a poem or the lyrics of a song. I feel a sense of awe, of delight and relief, when I read something that beautifully describes my emotions. I want the images I make to reach into someone's soul in the same way a writer's words have reached into mine.



You saw yourself, then you saw yourself in shadows.
Woodcut on Kozo from 3 plates & 10 colors. 48x72in (122x183cm). 2022.

I want to write something
so simply
about love
or about pain
that even
as you are reading
you feel it
and as you read
you keep feeling it
and though it be my story
it will be common,
though it be singular
it will be known to you
so that by the end
you will think-
no, you will realize-
that it was all the while
yourself arranging the words,
that it was all the time
words that you yourself,
out of your own heart
had been saying.

MARY OLIVER



REFLECTIONS | *Shower Flood* | April 2019 and October 2022

In the spring of 2019 I drove to my hometown to meet with the poet, my first boyfriend and ex that hadn't been in my life in almost 10 years. Yet, there was a time when I couldn't imagine life without him. The relationship was intense and guilt ridden. The nature of the circumstances that brought me to this meeting overwhelmed me – years of repressed emotions bubbled to the surface – and after seeing him, I spent hours showering with my clothes on trying to rinse away the guilt and racing thoughts. Like the piled laundry and fraying wallpaper, I felt urgency to document the moment. I took photos of myself stripping away the soaked clothes as I turned off the shower.

Years later I dug the photos out of the archive, after another break up, fresh but just as painful as the first. Again it conjured up a mental image of washing away undesired feelings, soaking in the shower. After years of sitting on this image, it took age and time to know what to do with it.



Much of my work comes about this way, from years of dwelling on the suggestion of a visual or a feeling until the right mixture of inspiration, maturity, and clarity, presents itself. Literature and music can sometimes prompt these moments of inspiration. I trust in my intuition and the passage of time.

What changed with time in this instance is that I now I knew what tweak, what oddity, was needed for this image to get my emotional intentions across – a flood of water, like the rush of worry and crushing pressure of heartbreak, consuming half of the composition.

Allowing for passage of time is critical to the development of my work – as is labor. The process of woodcut, etching, and analogue printmaking forces me to slow down and sit with an image for many months. Sometimes this leads to misguided investment and abrupt abandonment when time has revealed that an image isn't doing what I want. But more often, it's why my practice is influenced by such a wide-reaching array of things – why I have to point to so many disparate parts as sources of inspiration.

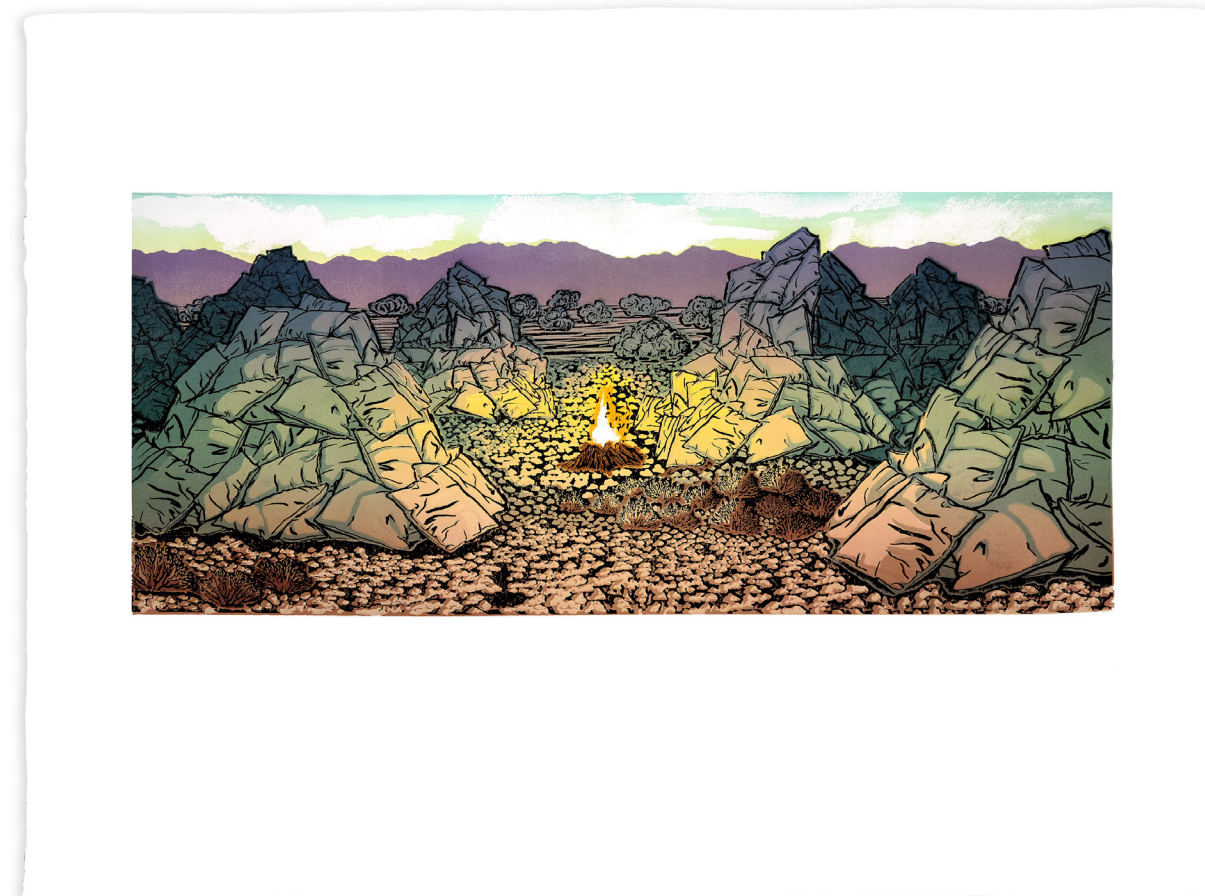
Ex. [Top left] digital illustration, 2022. [Bottom] digital photographs, 2019.

I am drawing, carving, and printing while receiving news updates, while reading science-fiction novels on speculative futures, while experiencing heartthrobs and heartaches, etc. In this process, working on these images becomes a response to the circumstances of life passing by. Similarly, printmaking, in its nature, is a process that asks you to contend with the unavoidable – natural faults in the wood being carved, unexpected results from the acid etching the copper plate – as a printmaker you learn to adapt to these encounters and find opportunities to elevate the outcome. This is analogous to navigating the inevitable unexpectancies of life.

“Printmaking is a great way to generate things. We think of printmaking and photography as being very influential in painting and sculpture and the way we think. It taught people to think in layers, it taught people to think in a kind of deconstructed manner so they understood that each level of something was complete abstract nothingness – it’s just ink and paper – there’s nothing inherent in it, just an oily substance on a piece of paper. But one can create the illusion of reality out of that. That’s a good model, to step back from one’s immediate circumstance and realize that there’s no substance to it really, so therefore it can change and move.” – KIKI SMITH¹⁴

I began to generate piles. Piling is the most common visual thread of the works in *want and fear* – overtly and covertly. The water, flooding the entryway of the bathroom, is a kind of pile; the laundry, the daisies, the wishbones – literal piles; stacked fences, tangled rope, towering pillows; a living, consuming carpet. Piling is a metaphor for anxiety, for being overwhelmed; it’s a symptom of consumerism, the neverending collecting of things and thoughts, of worries, opinions, advice, news articles, tragic stories, losses, choices, and so on.

There is precedence for artists using piles as a visual motif, for a multitude of reasons: The imagery of overflowing waste in landfills is a ubiquitous visual today, directly exposing the faults of consumerism, excess, and poor waste management, all affecting climate change; heaps of fresh and exotic fruits rimming the baskets of still-life and vanitas paintings, commenting on the futility of pursuing earthly delights and pleasures. One of the most famous examples of the pile as motif was presented by artist Félix González-Torres, in *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, created at the height of the AIDS crisis. The work invited gallery participants to take a piece of candy from a massive pile of the delicacies, colorfully wrapped – causing its mass to diminish overtime, reflecting countless lives lost to the epidemic or the rapid weight loss of a person dying of AIDS related illness. In these examples, the emotional vigor of piles as metaphor can’t be denied.



I am your guide here.
2 plate reduction linocut from 6 layers + key and 13 colors on Coventry Rag, 18x24in (46x61cm), 2022.

The structure of the piles in my images can rarely exist in reality, often they defy physics – water can’t flood a room with an open door. This is where my work tips from realism into surreality, or Magical Realism, offering just enough can’t-be-real to leave audience members with a disquieting feeling.

Artists have always challenged our perception of reality. Like the science-fiction literature I read, I employ world-building to escape from reality or to speculate on alternatives to reality. I present worlds where the apartment carpet might grow over you like grass, where disembodied hands hold trinkets from your childhood, or cast shadow puppets on walls.

¹⁴ Smith, “Copy Cat: Meandering Prints.”



My room was the size of my life.
Linocut on Hahnemühle Copperplate, 22×28in (56×71cm), 2022.

My life was the size of my life.
Its rooms were room-sized,
its soul was the size of a soul.
In its background, mitochondria hummed,
above it sun, clouds, snow,
the transit of stars and planets.
It rode elevators, bullet trains,
various airplanes, a donkey.
It wore socks, shirts, its own ears and nose.
It ate, it slept, it opened
and closed its hands, its windows.
Others, I know, had lives larger.
Others, I know, had lives shorter.
The depth of lives, too, is different.
There were times my life and I made jokes together.
There were times we made bread.
Once, I grew moody and distant.
I told my life I would like some time,
I would like to try seeing others.
In a week, my empty suitcase and I returned.
I was hungry, then, and my life,
my life, too, was hungry, we could not keep
our hands off our clothes on
our tongues from

JANE HIRSHFIELD

Within creative fields, alternative realities and speculative futures presented in literature, film, visual art, etc., are most often constructed when society is in a state of upheaval. Given that marginalized communities (members of the LGBTQA+, BIPOC, and feminine-identifying communities) are the first to feel the effects of sociopolitical disparities and social tension, it is no surprise that these communities have produced some of the most poignant examples of such artistic output. Appropriately stated by author and scholar Alexis Lothian, “The suggestive descriptions of possible queer worlds demonstrate that prospects of alternative futures have a powerful hold on queer imaginations. When things fail to get better is when the most interesting things might happen: transformations could occur, the world could be made to deviate because of deviant desires.”¹⁵ Referencing Ernst Bloch, a German Marxist philosopher, Lothian continues, stating:

“Bloch defines hope as the critically utopian impulse that motivates critique, separating longing from the violence its actualization may produce. That longing is the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’: an impulse of possibility that ‘wells up utopianly’ from even the most untenable of positions and is both a psychic fundamental and the heart of revolutionary struggle... Bloch argues that ‘everybody lives in the future,’ theorizing that hope for better possibilities to come is a central part of human consciousness and that such hopes manifest in utopian impulses through which people speculate futures in everything from daydreams to architecture to artistic production... Minoritarian and queer subjects have the greatest need to engage the Not-Yet-Conscious in order to enable survival, and indeed that queerness itself – the transformative ideal of a queer world – is located on a horizon we access through illuminatory glimpses that transcend the everyday.”¹⁶

Transcending the everyday is precisely the work I am doing through surrealistic visual production presented in *want and fear* – critically analyzing ideas of hope and longing and when those feelings waver. While I’ve given an extensive overview of the ways in which artists have spoken to these topics already, I am readdressing these fundamental human experiences through a contemporary lens, as the circumstances from which we navigate today’s world has changed drastically, and will continue to rapidly.

15 Lothian, Alexis. “Chapter 4: Science Fiction Worlding and Speculative Sex.” *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York University Press, New York, NY, 2018, pp. 172.

16 Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*, pp. 174–175.

In tandem with the burgeoning advancement of technology today, the frequency and severity at which we receive distressing information is unprecedented, while as a species we are undergoing an epidemic of loneliness and our need for connection has heightened. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Census Bureau reported that Americans are spending less time with friends and more time alone, and that a trend of feeling serious loneliness has steadily increased since the 1970s. An alarming percentage of Americans report feeling lonely on a regular basis, while this epidemic of loneliness is understood as a significant threat to public health. The health effects of loneliness include higher risk of developing anxiety, depression, dementia, stroke, and heart disease, just to name a few, all of which results in earlier mortality rates. Certainly the rapid evolution of technology is a contributing factor, but experts also point to higher demands on our free time and wider accessibility to activities that can be done in solitude. So while we live with technology that makes it possible to be more connected than ever before, we find it has contributed conversely.

“Humans as a species evolved to be social. We have an innate, biologically-driven ability to develop and form interpersonal connections. These social bonds, formed early in life, also create the foundation for human beings to coexist in and across groups, and are a vital and essential part of the human experience.”¹⁷

Indeed, we do have an innate need to feel connected to other people. So while the works that make up *want and fear* forfeit explicit imagery depicting engagement between people, the act of exhibiting such works is a plea to make interpersonal connection possible, beyond the limitations of corporeal existence. That is the intention of *want and fear* – to consider that *what makes up the essence of a life* is the connections you leave your spirit open to.

17 Trach, Jessica, et al. “Humans Are Social and Emotional Beings.” UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, <https://mgiep.unesco.org/article/humans-are-social-and-emotional-beings>.



What a gently welcoming darkness.
Linocut on Somerset, 11×15in (28x38cm), 2023.

All the parties you spent
watching the room
from a balcony
where someone joined you
to smoke then returned.
And how it turns out no one
had the childhood they wanted,
and how they'd tell you this
a little drunk, a little slant
in less time than it took
to finish a cigarette
because sad things
can't be explained.
Behind the glass and inside,
all your friends buzzed.
You could feel the shape
of their voices. You could
tell from their eyes they were
in some other place. 1999
or 2008 or last June.
Of course, it's important
to go to parties. To make
life a dress or a drink
or suede shoes someone wears
in the rain. On the way home,
in the car back, the night sky
played its old tricks. The stars
arranged themselves quietly.
The person you thought of drove
under them. Away from the party,
(just like you) into the years.

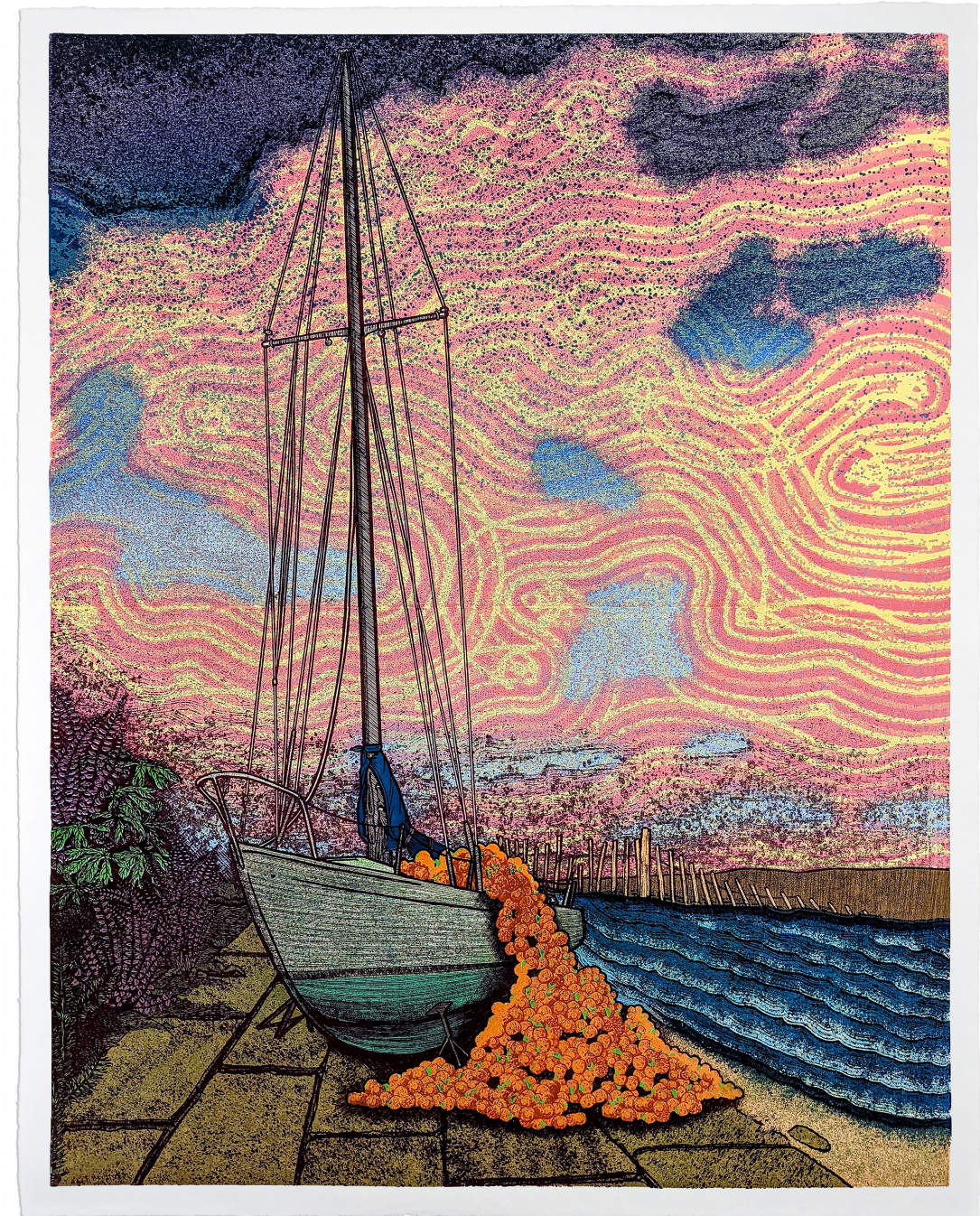
ALEX DIMITROV

REFLECTIONS | *A promise made to Reason.* | September 2023

I feel that I struggle to communicate – in words, anyway. I admit, I can't confidently say that I express myself much better with visual language either – it's not made to be explicit, to tell you something in specific detail, like words might. I've always been concerned with getting my emotional intentions across, to make sure that someone knows how I *feel* about them or something they've shared with me – how I cherish every memory I'm invited to make with them. Words I've written seem to fall short trying to express this. Art falls short in exactitude, but sometimes its done well enough to express the desired emotionality.

When I started this series I made an homage to my dad's sailboat, *Viva*. *Viva* is an unrealized dream – a ship whose sails have been furled longer than I've lived. I chose not to include this work in the final presentation of *want and fear* only because its specificity made it less accessible to a broader audience, which became the intention of my thesis. But in the daily practice of making my work I realized that the essence of the thematic concerns I had in 2021 remained the same through 2023, and traces back to 2018, when I started to develop a serious studio practice. In the promise of sailing *Viva* one day, my dad's dreams became my own. *A promise made to Reason* is an image about longing.

My portfolio chronicles the evolution of my metaphysical awareness, documenting how I've processed big feelings as I'm aging, as my priorities are changing, as I worry over things and aspire for others – my *want and fears* as they collide with the forces of the world.



A promise made to Reason.
Woodcut on Thai Kozo from 5 plates & 17 colors. 36x48in (91x122cm). 2021.

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BIOGRAPHY

Emily Legleitner is an interdisciplinary artist with a studio practice based in printmedia and the expanded fields of fiber arts, ceramics, and metals. Her research examines auto-biographical experiences and emotions associated with anxiety, mortality, longing, and the human condition. Born in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania in 1996, Legleitner was raised in Flint, Michigan where she maintains a studio and residence. Legleitner works as the Curatorial Assistant at the Flint Institute of Arts, the second largest museum in Michigan. Legleitner received an MFA in printmaking from the University of Alberta in 2023 and a BFA in Studio Art from Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan in 2019. Her imagery is informed by lens-based inquiry, performance, and the body – using self-portraiture to share auto-biographical narratives and self-reflections. Legleitner's work has garnered critical acclaim throughout North America, winning notable awards including the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant, Best in Show at Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition (BWAC) *2021 Prints* exhibition, and Best in Show at the *58th Annual Greater Michigan Art Exhibition* (2019), among others. Her work can be found in the permanent collection of the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (2022) and has been published in the London-based print journal *Printmaking Today* (2018). Recent solo exhibitions have included BWAC, Brooklyn, New York; Crooked Tree, Traverse City, Michigan; and Buckham Fine Arts Gallery, Flint, Michigan. Legleitner was an artist in residence at the Icelandic Textile Center (Blönduós, Iceland) in 2019.

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