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Thinking With Your Hands

Sylvia Katherine Towey

University of Alabama in Huntsville

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Honors College
Frank Franz Hall
+1 (256) 824-6450 (voice)
+1 (256) 824-7339 (fax)
honors@uah.edu

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Sylvia Towey

Student Name (printed)

Sylvia Towey

Student Signature

11/29/22

Date

Thinking With Your Hands

by

Sylvia Katherine Towey

**An Honors Capstone
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma
to**


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of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

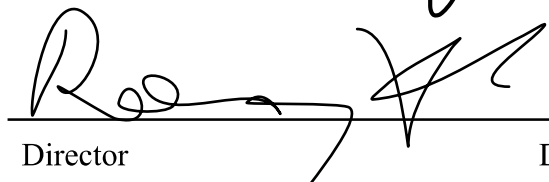
November 30th, 2022

**Honors Capstone Director: Professor Roxie Veasey
Senior Lecturer - Art, Drawing & Design**

 11/29/22

Student

Date

 11/29/22

Director

Date

 11/30/22

11/30/22

Department Chair

Date

Honors College Dean

Date

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Dedication:

This Honors Capstone Project Write-Up is dedicated to my wonderful professors who always pushed me to do more than I thought I could, and to my sibling who always believed in me.

Abstract

This Honors Project Write-Up serves to comment on what it means to think with your hands and to describe my artistic process as a whole. The series: “Thinking With Your Hands” consists of 11 pieces that approach the theme through the mediums of print, pen and ink, crochet, and mixed media created between Fall 2020 and Fall 2022. This paper is written to accompany an artistic display in the Salmon Library Gallery that was open from September 12th to October 14th. I’ve elected to discuss these pieces in the order that they appeared in the gallery to preserve the original experience.

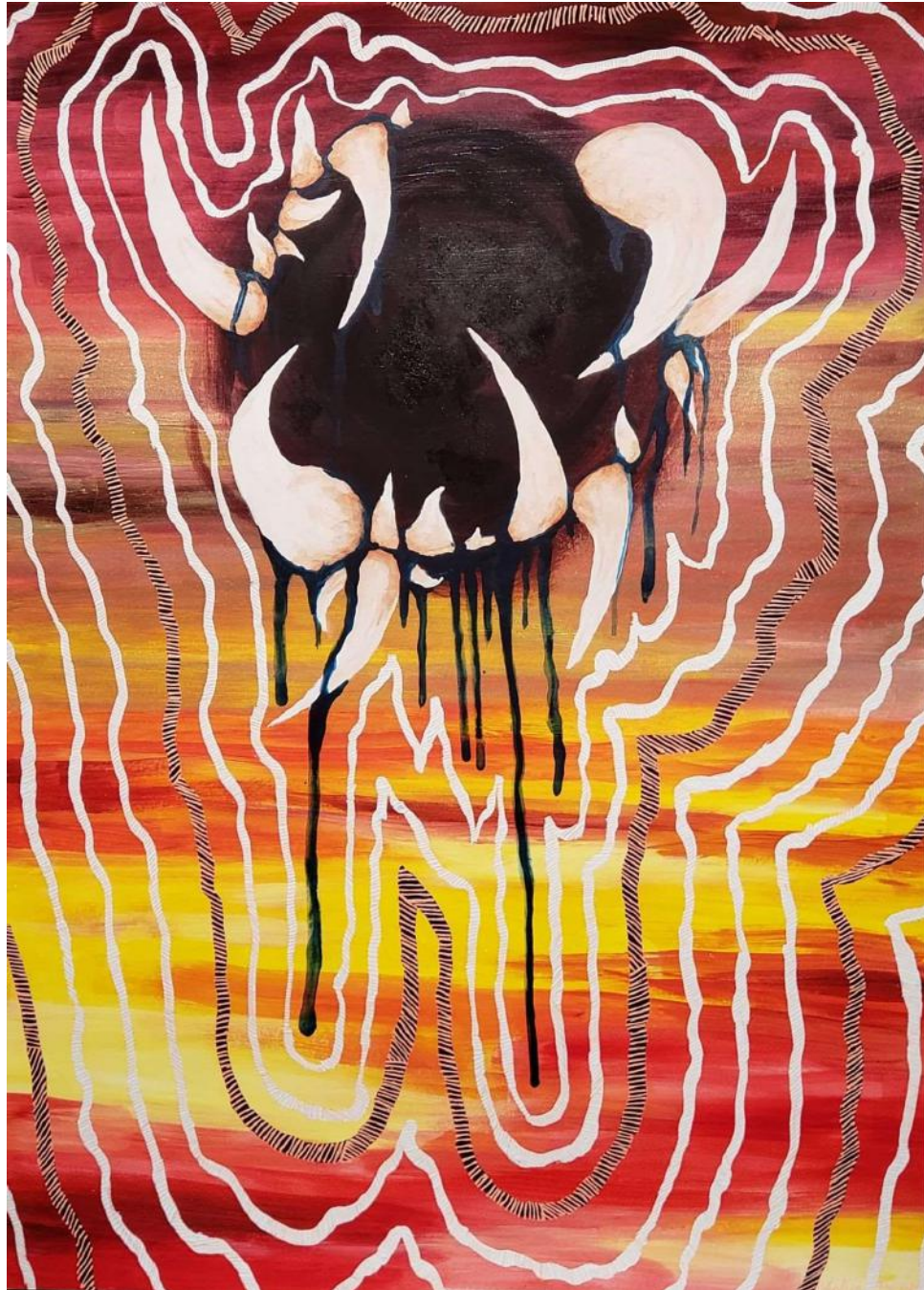
Introduction

One of the first art pieces I remember seeing was Raqqa II by Frank Stella. I was drawn to the bold colors and shapes and I couldn't look away. I love patternmaking. It's magical the way that a pattern fills any space you give it. The edges aren't always defined, and you decide when it's finished by when you're ready to let it go. The emotions an abstract piece captures are especially beautiful. There isn't just one way to look at an abstract piece. Every viewer sees it differently and notices different patterns and different moments. Often, if I'm feeling overwhelmed, I take a step back from the issue and draw, or do other art, to focus my mind. Lately, because of the art of Hiroyuki Doi, I've been in love with circles, but anything you love works.

When I was speaking to a friend she said: "I love it when the process of making art can kinda be a way to think with your hands." This quote has stuck with me and now I see it everywhere. To me, thinking with your hands can mean a few different things. It can be as simple as turning your mind off, and letting your hands do the artwork on their own. It can be letting the strengths and limitations of your medium influence the work you choose to create. Or it can be letting the piece you've made change your vision for the final product when you're already part way through.

Piece 1: Void

My goal for this piece was to work in layers to create a result that I wouldn't otherwise be able to achieve. I started with a gradient using acrylic paint and metallic ink. Over top, I added the simple form of the void circle. Next, I added the teeth. Then dark blue drips of paint and then lines around the void in white-out and Dioxazine purple. The purple looks black in the piece but it has more depth than actual black paint. I really liked the piece but I felt like it was hard to look at it because the contrast of the lines was stark and pulled the focal point downward. So I added a pattern of orange pen lines over the white and purple lines which made the piece more detailed and interesting to look at, but also lowered the contrast between the lines and the background so that you could look at the piece more easily.



Void
2022
Mixed Media
Sylvia Towey

Piece 2: Jack-O-Lantern Mushrooms

This piece was an edition of reduction woodblock bleed prints. I started by carving Kento registration marks which allow you to line your paper up in the same spot for each layer that is printed. I carved down all of my white space and printed a pastel yellow layer. I carved off everything I wanted to remain yellow and printed a pastel orange layer. Then I carved away everything I wanted to remain orange and printed a final layer of black ink.

I find mushrooms to be a very charming subject in part because they are so diverse. This is a reduction print so each layer of ink is printed on top of the previous layer so I wanted to pick colors that would complement each other and layer well. Jack-O-Lantern mushrooms are really only one color, so they lend themselves to a limited palette. I chose to use just a base color, a highlight, and a shadow. When you see a photo of Jack-O-Lantern mushrooms, they don't look real because of how vibrant the colors are. This made me really excited to work with them. And to try and create a piece that feels otherworldly. I was also inspired by illustrations of fairies, and how often they include these small floating lights. This was why I leaned towards pastel colors and included a background of fairy lights.



Jack-O-Lantern Mushrooms

2022

Woodblock

Sylvia Towey

Piece 3: Naps across the known universe

This piece is a six-piece series made using pochoir. I was inspired by the artwork of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. When I started this piece, my goal was to play with stylized shapes and solid graphic colors because they complement each other well. I laid out my pieces to tell a simple story about a cat going to space and realizing that it's not so different from home. I have these grouped together in sets of two by their location, and by their colors. And when spaced like this it reads almost like a comic book. I used almost exclusively matt finish paint for this piece, but I chose to use a satin finish for the cat itself to subtly bring it forward and off of the background.

The medium of pochoir influenced the story I chose to tell. Pochoir used paint pressed through a stencil to create layers and shapes. I used sheets of acetate and carved shapes out with an Exacto knife and used a sponge to press acrylic paint through. Because of this, I was able to use some of the stencils multiple times so that certain panels mirrored each other. In particular, I wanted earth and the alien planet to be more similar than one would expect, and by using the same cat stencils for the cat on earth, and that cat on another planet they feel closer together.

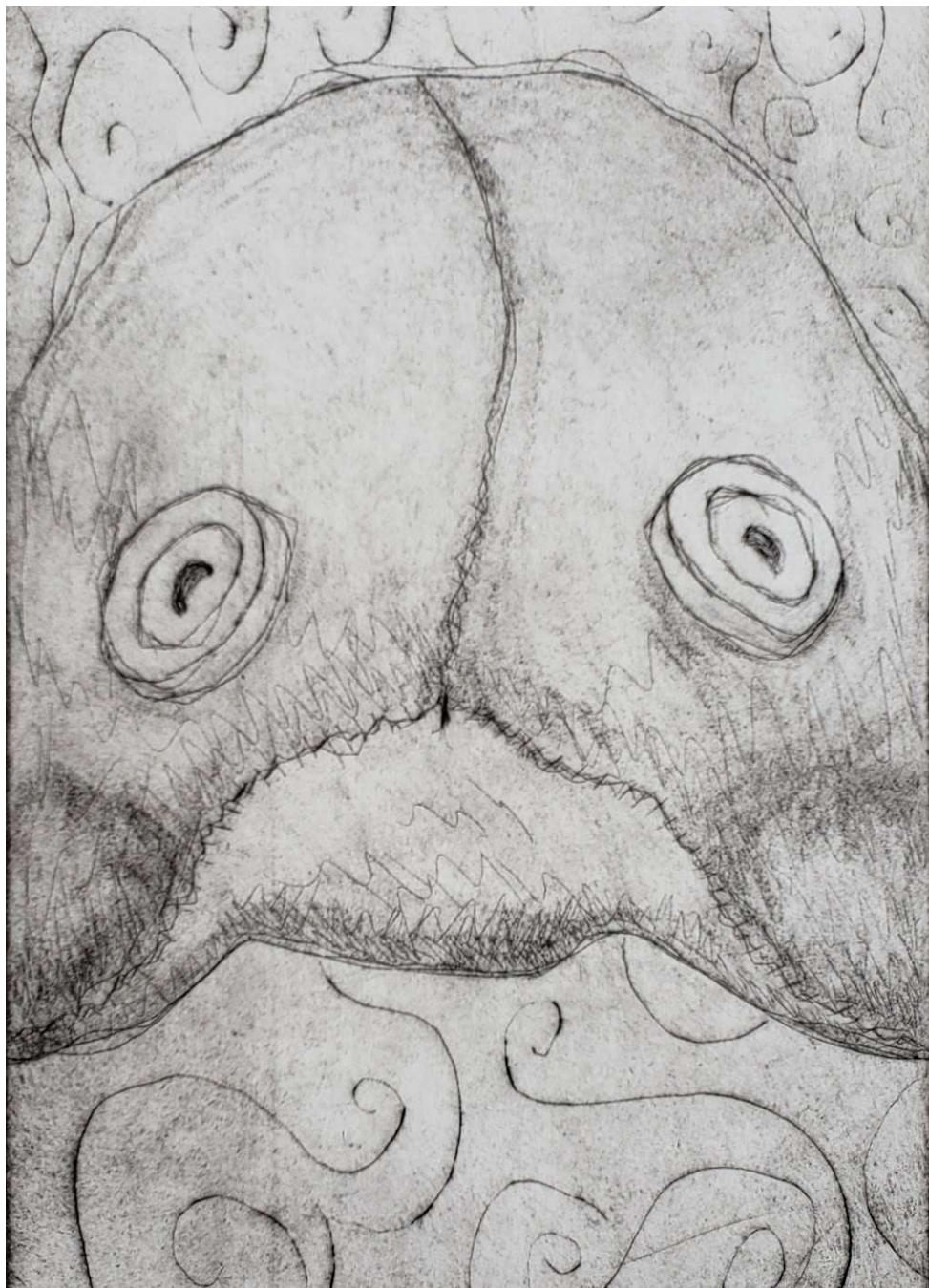


Naps Across the Known Universe
 2020
 Pochoir
 Sylvia Towey

Piece 4: Froggie

This piece is an edition of copper etching prints. To etch the plate I first covered the back of the plate with plastic and then covered the front of the plate with hard ground. Then I used a tool to draw lines in the ground and then soaked the plate in acid for a few seconds to a few minutes. To print the plate I first covered the plate with ink and then rubbed away the excess ink from the smooth surface of the copper plate so that the ink only remained in the grooves. Then I printed it using a press.

This is a print of a small plush frog. I'm particularly proud of the illustrative lines and the button eyes. I wanted to play into the strengths of etching, which are delicate lines similar to a pencil sketch, so I tried my prints to look like a sketch. I made my lines feel fluid by drawing them loosely and going back over them to make the shape softer. I also used a roulette to add a fuzzy shading texture to the plush frog because I wanted it to look as soft as it feels.



Froggie
2022
Etching
Sylvia Towey

Piece 5: Self Portrait

My goal here was to create an image using many different materials and to experiment with different media. For one quadrant I used colored pencils, for another I used acrylic paint, for another I used small colorful circles in pen, and for the last quadrant, I used a collage of painted paper and air dry clay and then stitched it together with golden thread. For the background, I evoked rain with small splatters of gold ink.

I wanted to use this photo because it felt like me in important ways. I loved the bright colors and how happy my eyes looked and that was what I really wanted to capture.

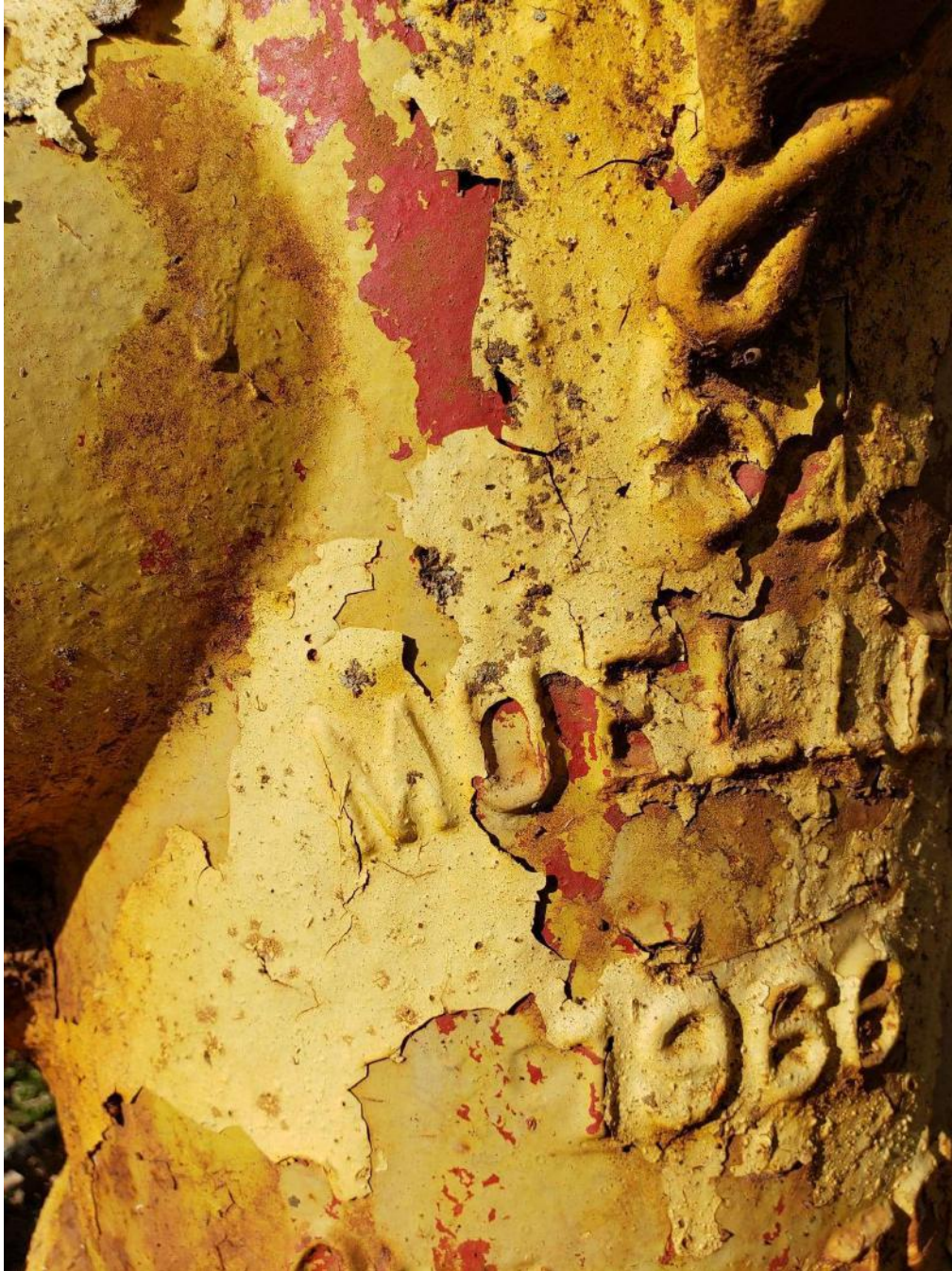


Self Portrait
2021
Mixed Media
Sylvia Towey

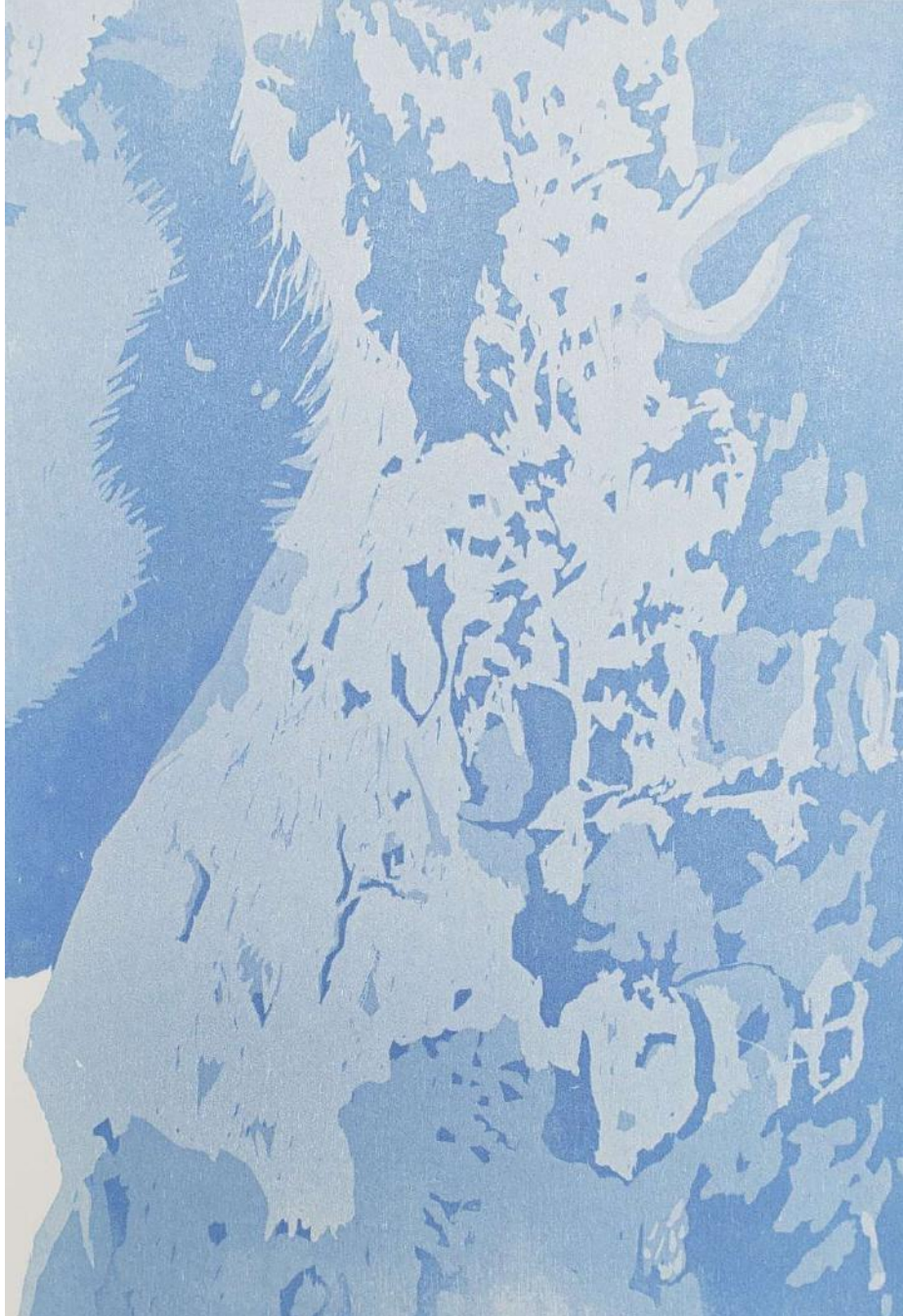
Piece 6: Fire Hydrant

Similar to the previous piece this is an edition of reduction woodblock bleed prints. However, these are done in the chiaroscuro style. In that style instead of using opaque ink, the same transparent ink is layered over itself to create a range of values. In this piece, I used one transparent blue ink for the first three layers and used unaltered blue ink for my final layer. I kept one print without the last layer because it was more true to the chiaroscuro style.

I took a photo of a fire hydrant to use as my reference for the print. I was intrigued by the layers of paint and the unusual shapes formed by the chipping paint. The photo itself is an abstract photo, and in this print I focused on the different values in the photo over the form of the fire hydrant. This caused the image to become even more abstracted. I created my sketch by tracing over a black and white print of the photo and labeling each section created by the paint chips with a number 1-4 which would correspond with how many layers of ink would be printed on that section. The fire hydrant in my photo is mostly yellow and red. However, I chose to print using a color of ink not in the photo because I wanted to separate the print from the photo and emphasize the abstract element. I chose this particular ink color because I went on a walk and imagined my piece printed using each color of ink available in the printmaking studio. I felt that this shade of blue would create the most interesting final image because I could create a wide range of values with it, and because the ink in its unaltered state reflects a reddish color which I thought would add visual interest to my final layer.



Fire Hydrant
2022
Photograph
Sylvia Towey



Fire Hydrant
2022
Woodblock
Sylvia Towey



Fire Hydrant
2022
Woodblock
Sylvia Towey

Piece 7: Circle Daze

This is the largest art piece I have ever made. It's 4'x4'. I loved the idea of contrasting these small circles with the grand scale of the artwork. I wanted a way to show the process of art making in my final piece so I decided to choose a different pen color every day that I worked on the piece so the viewer can experience that timescale when they look at it. Some days I might only draw 10 circles, other days I might cover a square foot. I didn't give myself requirements, but let the shape flow and reflect my mood. My only restraints were that I couldn't change my pen color until the next day, I couldn't pick the same color twice, and I could only draw small circles. I approached the drawing as though it was one line that coiled back and forth over itself to fill the piece. This line wasn't solid but made of dots. This led to a lot of lovely organic shapes and curves that appeared from wrapping this line back and forth.

I enjoyed having a really large art piece to work on over time. Whenever I had a free 30 minutes I knew what to do with it. I liked the way that interacting with the piece changed over time.

Sometimes I chose to start drawing at a certain spot by what color I had picked and where I thought it would look good, and sometimes I chose it by where I wanted the next piece of movement to go. But sometimes my motivations would stem more from myself and less from the piece. Sometimes I would pick what section I wanted to add to by choosing whether I wanted to sit or stand to draw. I brought out a step stool for the upper regions and for the middle section I would sit on my desk chair. For the bottom, I would move between the floor and my bean bag depending on the height where my wrist needed to be.

The piece remained approachable no matter my artistic mood. I had control over color, the amount I wanted to draw, and even where I wanted to draw.

The way that I approached the piece changed over time. At first, I picked colors really randomly based on my feelings that day, or based on balancing the piece, but I later added gradients where I would pick out a series of colors days in advance. Although this process was less intuitive, it was extremely satisfying each day to add to the gradient.

The final piece is surprisingly striking. Despite it not being planned, the colors swirl around each other in satisfying patterns. The color surprised me too. Although many of the pens I used were dark, the final piece reads as all pastel colors because of how the dots interact with the whitespace around them. It makes the piece feel soft and comforting. I feel like this conveys the meditative feeling of working on the piece.



Circle Daze
2022
Pen and Ink
Sylvia Towey

Piece 8: Pattern sampler

With this piece, I wanted to tell a story through abstract patterns. I've been drawing patterns for many years. Over that time I've come across many patterns and imitated them and altered them. And I associate certain patterns with certain times in my life when I drew them. Each pattern holds memories of all the places I've drawn it, the places I lived, the books I've read and doodled in the margins, the sketchbooks I carried to class, on walks, in museums, other states, and countries. Each of the patterns in this piece carries significant memories.



Pattern Sampler

2022

Pen and ink

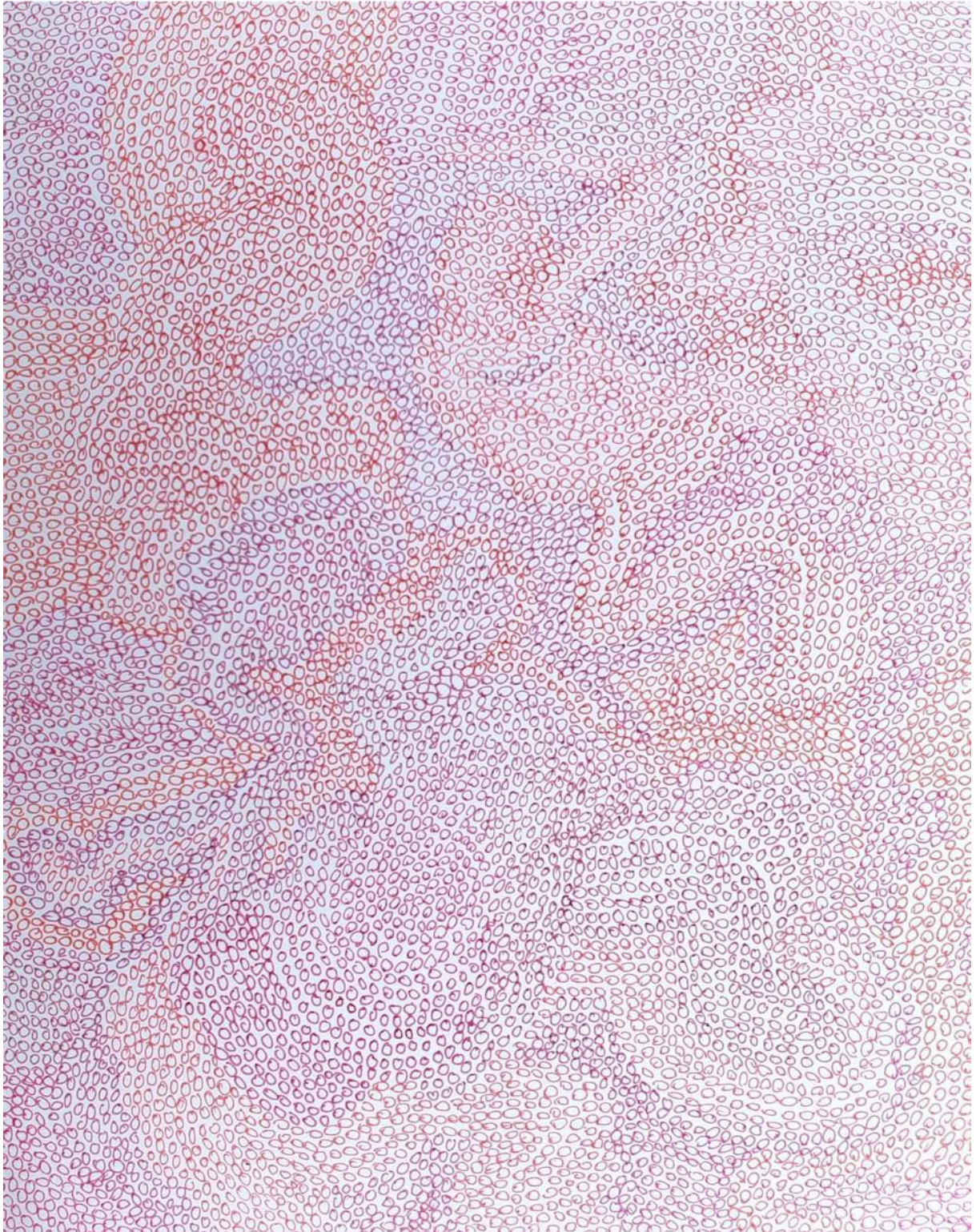
Sylvia Towey

Piece 9: Circles in 13 parts

This series has 13 pieces in pen and ink that utilize the same circle pattern as *Circle Daze*. I wanted to play with color palettes and specifically low contrast palettes so for each piece in this series I selected different pens that were the same or similar colors and were also very close in value. The movement in these is more subtle because of the low contrast and I love that. Each piece has different shapes in it because I let my hand make the decisions about where each circle would go, and these novel organic shapes were what came out, along with one more angular piece.



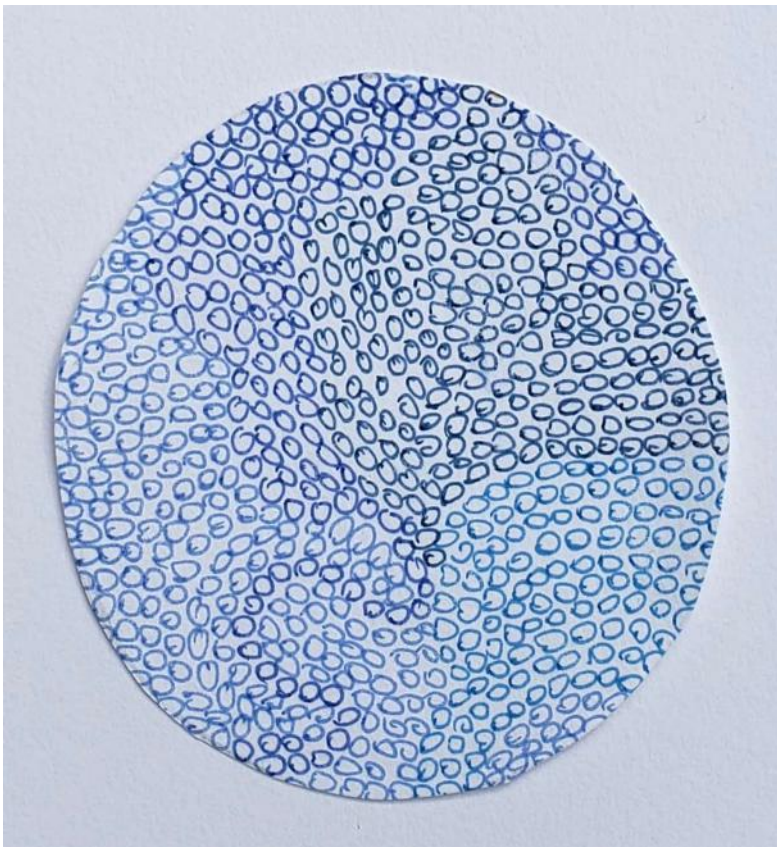




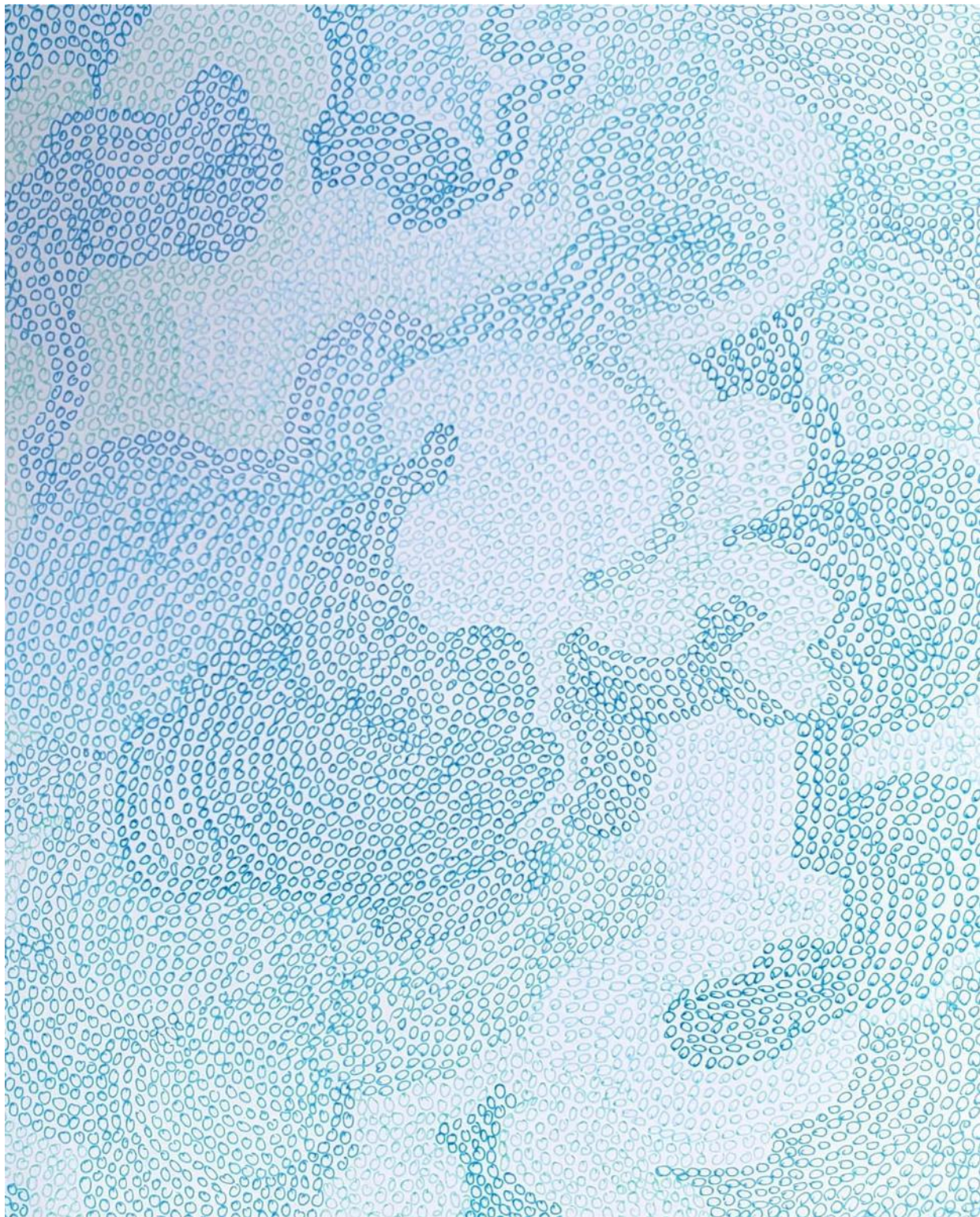


















Circles in 13 Parts

2022

Pen and Ink

Sylvia Towey

Piece 10: Genderfluid Blanket

To me gender is very much like art, everyone has a unique experience with it. My experience is fluid and will change from hour to hour and day to day. I wanted to find a way to share that experience with other people.

I'm genderfluid, and I was interested in trying to convey that feeling of change and uncertainty in gender to my viewer. I started a spreadsheet on June 22nd, 2021 to track my gender identity over the course of a year. I created a total of 8 categories, but two of them didn't appear that year. I had two neutral identities: feeling no gender, and feeling multiple genders. I then had three variations for identifying the strength of my masculine or feminine feelings. I could categorize my masculine feelings as somewhat masculine, very masculine, or only masculine. I had similar categories for feminine feelings. I grouped them into somewhat feminine, very feminine, or only feminine. The two categories that my gender never fell into were very feminine and only feminine.

Each line in the blanket represents a day, and each color corresponds to a gender identity. I wanted to play with the idea of gendered products and colors, so the soft pink corresponds to somewhat feminine feelings, periwinkle to somewhat masculine, light blue to very masculine, and dark blue to strong masculinity. These play directly with ideas of the gender binary, but I wanted to represent feelings beyond this binary. So I included purple to correspond to feeling multiple genders and yellow to feeling no gender at all.

I chose crochet instead of knitting for this project for two reasons. The first is that I wanted a thick warm blanket as my final product and crochet tends to produce a thicker product because each crochet stitch has more layers of yarn in it than each knit stitch. The second reason was that I knew this would be a long project that I would have to move around a lot and travel

with, and it is much harder to transport and store an in-progress knitted project than a crochet project because of how easy it is to drop a stitch and have it run through your whole project. So crochet was more practical.

For gender identities that only appeared one to two days in a row I used a single crochet stitch, but for identities that appeared multiple days in a row, I would integrate rows of half double crochet. This served a double purpose of making the crochet fabric more flexible, and of emphasizing streaks of certain identities by slightly thickening the sections of that color.

I love the final piece. It really helps to visualize the way I experience gender. I also love the way that the medium of a blanket plays with ideas of gender. The classic baby blanket is child-sized and colored pink for girls or blue for boys. This blanket takes that idea and changes it to convey a much more complex concept of gender.

Date:	Identity:
6/22/2021	Genderless
6/23/2021	Multiple Genders
6/24/2021	Genderless
6/25/2021	Very Masculine
6/26/2021	Man
6/27/2021	Somewhat Masculine
6/28/2021	Somewhat Masculine
6/29/2021	Somewhat Masculine
6/30/2021	Very Masculine
7/1/2021	Null
7/2/2021	Multiple Genders
7/3/2021	Somewhat Masculine
7/4/2021	Genderless
7/5/2021	Null
7/6/2021	Null
7/7/2021	Genderless
7/8/2021	Somewhat Feminine
7/9/2021	Multiple Genders
7/10/2021	Genderless
7/11/2021	Genderless

Sample of Gender Identity Spreadsheet

2021

Spreadsheet

Sylvia Towey



Genderfluid Blanket

2022

Crochet

Sylvia Towey

Piece 11: Genderfluid Print

This piece was my first attempt at translating my experience with gender into art. At the time this piece was created I had only completed about three months of tracking my gender identity, so it has many fewer rows than the blanket that I made later. I corresponded each identity to a color, and each row to a day, and then I printed each row with its corresponding color. This was a monoprint that I made by painting one line at a time onto a piece of acetate and then pressing my paper over top to print that line. I liked the result, but I felt that the medium of print didn't add as much to the concept as crochet did.



Genderfluid Print

2021

Monoprint

Sylvia Towey

Challenges and Performance

To me, *Genderfluid Blanket* is my strongest piece. It's very important to me to create art about my experience as a transgender person and to speak openly about being transgender. There is a distinct lack of representation of transgender voices at UAH. So I hope that by discussing transness in my art I can educate people on what it means to be trans, and I can make people feel more comfortable talking about their own experiences. I got to see so many people interact with that piece and think about transness in a way that they hadn't encountered before, so I'm so glad that I made those pieces. The blanket was also the piece that took the longest to create. The spreadsheet that I used as my guide tracked my gender identity for slightly over a year, and the blanket itself took 9 months to make.

I am pleased with the different pieces that I was able to create. It was important to me to address my theme of thinking with your hands through more than one medium. Pen and ink and mixed media are more fluid so the pieces I was able to create with those were more responsive to my mood and emotions. Printmaking tends to be a more rigid process, so those pieces were changed by the strengths and limitations of that medium. My pieces are cohesive because my love of pattern making appears in every one of them.

Overall, I'm proud of the work that I created for this show. It gave me the opportunity to produce works at a scale I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. And I learned a great deal about the mediums I worked with in the process.