

Mazey Hoffman

Thesis Defense :)

Good morning everyone! Thank you for coming to my Thesis Defense today, I appreciate all of you for being here! My name is Mazey Hoffman and today I will be presenting *WALKING THE DISSOLVING LINE*, a body of work that I have developed over the past few months to complete my studies in the area of Printmaking at PNCA. Using the skills I have developed in the print studio, I have been making fabricated relics of becoming; each littered with evidence of my experiences with transness, religion, and self-preservation.

In the studio, I have been exploring traditional and nontraditional print applications, focusing on intaglio. Intaglio is a planographic print process using a plate made of metal, usually copper or zinc, relying on varying textures and incisions made into the metal using chemical and mechanical means. The textures and lines made into the plate pick up ink in varying concentrations to produce a print with a variety of marks, tones, and lines.

I have been using copper plates to produce printed works that were made by a combination of, digitally produced and manipulated images screen printed onto the plate, and images hand burnished and etched into the copper. With these digital and analog processes, I combined references to tradition and antiquity with my own contemporary experience in a visual manner that appears to dissolve, decay, and compress traditions, signs, objects, gestures, and images.

With this project, I hope to not only challenge conventional notions of binary gender—but also binary ways of thinking about artwork and images, spirituality, materials, and our place in the world. Our bodies, identities, and artworks are subject to similar limiting logics of categorization, and by abstracting, transforming, and leaning into nuance, we can work to free ourselves from repressive ideologies.

RUBBERY BITS IN MY ESTRADIOL, one of two 8"x8" works, is the work that most explicitly facilitates a discussion about the trans experience. A pixelated printed image of a bottle of estradiol is framed with actual estradiol bottles, consumed by black textured acrylic medium to varying degrees, and a small sculpted image of a christian cross. The printed imagery was pulled from a generic stock photo of a bottle of Delestrogen on a healthcare website, manipulated and bitmapped in photoshop in order to render the image viable for screen printing. Using a sugar-based ink solution and a silkscreen, the image is transferred to a copper plate in a process known as sugar lift or lift-ground etching.

What is finally printed on the press is not perfect, crisp, pixelated imagery, but instead a record of the varying embodiments this image has assumed. This process combines hand, chemical, and pixel in a collaboration that produces a result that could not exist without the pushing and pulling of each element. While starting with a medical image of a liquid hormone—in some ways a cold and clinical symbol of the trans experience—the process the image goes through to get to final print obscures the immediate legibility of the image, simultaneously mechanizing and humanizing the qualities of the image. There is a sort of cognitive dissonance happening between the religious and transmedical imagery, which is pushed even further by the obscuring use of materials.

Growing up I attended an evangelical christian church, where I was taught a view of the world that heavily reinforced a binary approach to understanding, ******leveraging shame and fear to prevent questioning. This negative personal experience I had with religion is a source of a lot of the ideologies that I have had to unlearn in order to fully become who I am meant to be. When doing the self work that is required throughout the process of becoming, the shame that is taught in many circles of organized religion lingers, and sometimes I still feel like that impressionable child at sunday service, at the will of whatever god has planned for me.

*SUNDAY SCHOOL, an 8"x109"***** features an aquatinted line etching of a gothic cathedral from antiquity, not quite what you would expect from the title, but kitschy holographic bible themed stickers bring the piece into the realm of a contemporary evangelical christian child. One of the stickers, once a sparkly purple and blue cross, has been torn off, ripping the paper, leaving behind a ghost of the sticker's shape. This act of removal is like a naive and childlike form of iconoclasm, however an unsuccessful attempt as the impression of what was once there is left behind, perhaps more hauntingly so.

In her manifesto *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell argues, "The construct of gender binary is, and has always been, precarious. Aggressively contingent, it is an immaterial invention that in its toxic virality has infected our social and cultural narratives. To exist within a binary system one must assume that our selves are unchangeable, that how we are read in the world must be chosen for us, rather than for us to define—and choose—for ourselves."

All bodies are subject to aggressive interpretation and immediately placed into a category when in public spaces. Visual markers of identity are quickly computed in one's subconscious to place an individual into a preconceived and expected classification. For trans people, this is experienced as being forced into a binary of legibility when in non-queer spaces. Russell's positioning of binaries as viral pathologizes logics of legibility rather than trans and genderqueer identities, which have been the target of pathologization through medical, religious, scientific, and cultural means throughout history.

PARADOX OF THE EGO is the largest of the five works, and it serves as a centerpiece and entry point to these works. *EGO* consists of two separate copper plates. The larger plate features a depiction of my own head between two crossed antique swords with floral designs on the handles. Obscured partially in shadows, it is not quite clear whether I have just been beheaded or am blending into the background of the print,

and gestural marks surrounding my head can be read as drippy, gory entrails or unruly vines of decaying and growing plant matter. The smaller of the two plates depicts a cramped frame of skeletal-headed creatures. This plate was made by burnishing an aqua-tinted plate in a sort of faux-mezzotint process, working from dark to light. The skully creatures peek through a thick layer of black chunky pumice, appearing to be a window into an underground catacomb.

During this process, I employed a lot more drawn imagery than expected, I found drawing to be non-restrictive, well suited for fantasy and the imagination as well as organic shapes, textures, and lines. I utilized multiple different approaches to drawing, some more representational and methodical, and some more spontaneous and intuitive. For example, on the plates for *PARADOX OF THE EGO*, I planned out the drawings ahead of time, worked in representing my own likeness, and kept the lines, especially of the swords more strict and methodical, while still maintaining evidence of the hand and allowing the marks to be loose and intuitive. This style of drawing produces an image more grounded in descriptive information and clear narrative, but may be less organic or dynamic than a more spontaneous approach to drawing.

On the plate *BROKEN STRAIGHT SWORD* I began by hand drawing an image of a bent, broken, decaying sword. This drawing was then scanned, dithered, and transferred to copper with the same sugar lift process as the Estradiol plate. After applying the decaying pixelated sword imagery, I applied a soft ground to the plate which allows for a line quality similar to a graphite pencil and a drawing process that is very immediate and spontaneous. My approach to the drawing on the softground layer of the plate was more intuitive and spontaneous, adding gestural lines, spiky stars and sparkles, misshapen swords, vines, and foliage.

This mode of drawing and etching felt to me much like a transformation. Gestures are transformed to marks that transform the copper plate, which are transformed to symbols that phase in and out of representation and action. The sense

that this work is in a state of change and transformation is pushed further by sculpting the air dry clay frame to have protruding spikes, breaking free from plain rectangular framing and igniting an outward motion of expansion.

The spikes on the frame of this piece also signal a sense of protection; the piece has a built in defense system, functioning the same as thorns on a vine or stem. This idea of self-defense is woven throughout the work, manifesting as imagery of swords, shields, and thorns, but the estradiol bottles and cross can become protective objects, whether protecting the physical body, the emotional ecosystem, or the ego. As I progress through the evolving process of medically transitioning, the way my body is perceived, how I present my identity externally, and the space that I am in changes the degree of safety which I experience. Paradoxically, the ways in which I protect myself emotionally and spiritually, such as expressing myself truthfully, subject me to more potential for violence from transphobia. This has changed my understanding of self-defense, safety, protection, and violence; not only for myself, as my embodiment still grants me privileges and safeties that trans women of color do not receive. Protection and defense is a community concern; there is no hope in relying on militarized police or state systems to protect communities, and the symbol of a sword is a romantic symbol of this idea of individual, independent, and mutual protection.

Going back to the idea of transformation, the processes of printmaking feel appropriate, as much of the practice relies on discoveries of material interactions that produce many transformations.

TRANSFORMATION FLOWERS is another plate on which I used screen printed sugar lift as well as quick and intuitive softground drawings. Swirling and naive drawings of a candelabra, a shield, flowers, foliage and a sword surround a central image of a pixelated decaying flower. The original image of the flower was an appropriated image of a flower cast in metal, and by transforming it through print processes, it becomes abstracted and dissolved, almost illegible behind the marks left by the softground

etching. This print possesses the most plate tone of the five works, as well as uneven inking and scratches. I intentionally used especially thin grounds and allowed the plate to soak in ferric acid for long amounts of time, and because of this the surface of the plate carries a record of the acid eating away at the plate, adding aesthetic qualities of a relic, but also embracing the visual qualities of etched copper and imperfection. All of the imperfections and disparate elements of this print come together to make something that feels whole and united.

A very important aspect of printmaking is collaborative skill sharing; without letting our peers know our discoveries in the studio, the traditions of discovery cannot be passed down to the next generation of printmakers.

This is apparent in the case of Hercules Segers, who lived from 1589-1638 and was a Dutch painter who somewhat lived in obscurity until his work's importance was considered posthumously. Segers developed sugar lift etching in the 1600s in order to make his "printed paintings", mainly focusing on landscapes, architecture, and the natural world. His prints were extremely painterly, sometimes even approaching abstraction, and they definitely are an important visual inspiration for me as an artist. However, Segers is also interesting to me for another reason. Contemporarily, Segers is attributed as being the first to work with sugar lift etching in the 17th century, however, because he did not have peers in printmaking with which he passed down his discoveries to, sugarlift did not make its way widely into the hands of artists until the 18th century. This exemplifies the importance of collaboration and community in printmaking, but it also emphasizes a deeper truth about the nature of life and history; the actions, beliefs, and histories that come before us echo through time to the present, and future generations build upon knowledge of the past, remixing and rethinking ways of being.

A few centuries later in mid 20th century New York City, Atelier 17 was an Avante Garde print studio with many talented printmakers pushing the boundaries of the

medium and making new discoveries with the processes and materials of printmaking. Sue Fuller innovated softground etching by building textured patchworks of fabrics, strings, and knots, and pressing the fabrics into the softground on a plate to leave an impression of the texture to be etched into the plate. Of course, Fuller's discoveries and innovations were not always attributed to her throughout history, and instead much of the credit often went to her male peers at Atelier 17. Louise Bourgeois, a peer of Fuller also worked with soft ground etching, as well as engraving, producing over 400 prints, drawing in a sparse architectural style, relying on line and gesture. Bourgeois' experimental and spontaneous style of drawing on plates had a lasting impact on printed artwork, and has influenced my thinking around the aesthetic possibilities of the medium.

Claire Gunville is a Portland-based printmaker who graduated from PNCA in 2019 whose work is very influential to me, and she has been very open to sharing her skills and knowledge of intaglio! Claire often works with screenprint sugar lift to transfer digitally scanned imagery of cables and wires to copper, creating fossils of "dead" electronic items. Gunville's work uses printed matter to make artworks that question the ways humans impact global ecology in the name of technology. I would not have been able to incorporate digital imagery into my copper plates if it weren't for Claire's helpful tips for doing screenprint sugarlift around the studio, and I really appreciate how good of a teacher she is, but also the ways in which she is thinking about the tension between obsolete and innovative technology through the lens of print technology.

The general concept of etching a line into metal using acid originated in early 15th century Europe out of a necessity to ornament armor without the skill required by hand-engraving. The tension between romanticism and industry is interesting; how idyllic that etching was originally developed to transfer images of flowers onto breastplates and sword hilts, but this was also an early development in the industrial replication of images—and for tools of war.

The initial driving force for the print market, which led to the development of etching in Europe was for playing cards and small devotional images that could be mass produced and could reach the hands of many; a very personal and intimate beginning for prints as objects. Printed matter was one of the initial major elements necessary for a nation or state to construct a standardized sense of cultural, religious, or moral identity.

References to the origins of metal printing have made their way into my imagery, floral adornment on metal weaponry, a line etched image of a gothic cathedral, and ornamental foliage. However, I have made these objects one of a kind; possible to be made into a small edition in the future if I ever so pleased, but at the moment they exist as contemporary art objects that are not meant to be disseminated on a large scale, but instead the viewer can be invited in to have an intimate and personal experiences with the images I have made. Eventually expanding beyond the realm of metallurgy, intaglio printing made its way into the hands of artists, allowing for drawings to be relatively easily drawn onto the plate by an artist, and printed for mass dissemination by a skilled printer. As artists experimented with the materials in order to achieve a wider variety of marks and tonal ranges, new processes such as mezzotint, aquatint, sugar lift, spitbite, and more were being discovered and used in print studios through the 16th to 18th century. In contemporary image culture, there are many tools and innovations provided by digital technologies to speed up the production of images. Industry standards constantly change and update, and many of these technological innovations give us new tools and forms of creating with new aesthetic and technical capabilities. Working with a combination of analog and digital processes slows down the working process of image making, but it also connects the art to a tradition of discovery and experimentation with material and craft, while remixing and experimenting with new elements and tools.

Printmaking exists within a tension between history and experimentation. While referencing and working in many traditions of printed matter, my application of materials subverts traditions by not working within expected modes of editioning and presentation.

In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag states, "Ours is a culture based on excess, on

overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life- its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness-conjoin to dull our sensory faculties... What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.”

I do not have an interest in making perfect plates that faithfully copy a painting or drawing, but instead I work with the copper as a three dimensional object, in some ways working sculpturally with the copper, getting to know the plate and forming somewhat of a relationship with the material that influences my working process. If I am stuck at the start of making a plate, there is a standard set of steps and processes I need to complete in order to prepare the plate, and often once I start getting the plate ready, a plan for the imagery or technique comes to mind. Furthermore, copper is well suited for reworking and layering, so often I can start with one image on a plate and then push or pull the plate further based on what I feel the imagery need.

My project has shifted courses tremendously since I initially proposed last semester and throughout the process of actually creating and assembling the finished work. When I first proposed my project, I planned to work with both etching and CMYK Screen Printing, as well as assembling a small zine or pamphlet. This was a very ambitious proposal for the timeline of the thesis, and I found myself not being able to spend as much time learning and experimenting with my etchings.

The realities of life are factors that played a big part in the shifts I took from proposal to now. Stress of life and family illness affected the pace at which I was able to produce, but I also was experiencing a lot of dysphoria and imposter syndrome, I didn't feel equipped to speak on behalf of the trans community, and I felt fear of being vulnerable in my work. I think what the pieces became is much more about healing, self-discovery, and sitting with abstraction and fuzziness than when I originally proposed. Although I would like to revisit some of these concrete ideas such as

publishing, book and zine making, and text, for right now, I am happy with how the work is existing as more quiet and ambiguous pieces. And that is not to say that publishing, text, and books cannot also be quiet and ambiguous!

I made the decision to scale back and focus more on each piece as a precious object. This narrowing of focus allowed me to slow down my process and take more care with each image. Furthermore, I realized that I had every right to allow the work to be quiet, ambiguous, and coded.

In line with treating each piece as a precious object, I moved away from presenting the prints as two-dimensional works on paper in traditional frames, as I originally proposed. I printed the plates on Japanese Washi paper for the rich color of the paper and the soft, textural qualities, and mounted the prints onto a wood panel to serve as a substrate for me to build my own kind of frames around the pieces. Starting with a base layer of air dry clay around the prints and moving onto a layer of black-tinted acrylic pumice gel, I was able to give the prints dynamic shapes and textural qualities that extended beyond the border of the print. I was inspired to use this material after I saw a piece by Portland-based artist Momo Gordon titled *Gate*, in which a small graphite drawing on canvas of a tiny section of filigree ornamentation is exposed through a thick border of textured acrylic medium. Gordon's work is a large influence on my own; I am very inspired by their precious use of materials such as found and handmade paper and a reserved, quiet mode of drawing that effectively embodies the idea of cutting back so that we can truly see the thing at all, in the words of Sontag.

Printmaking is a lifelong practice of discovery, there is always more to learn, and this project represents just the very beginning of my journey with printmaking. This is one of the first times I've made finished work that I am excited to keep making more of, I feel that this project has given me confidence as an artist both with the materials and processes and with making work that is true to myself. I am looking forward to getting

back into the studio this summer to continue many of the ideas and techniques that I have just begun to explore during my time working through the thesis process.

While the images are somewhat encoded, I want the work to be an invitation into a sensory experience, perhaps one that the viewer can relate to. Visual art can function just as music can to provide a peaceful moment that can heal and make the innate suffering of the human experience more bearable. All beings are interconnected, we are all enmeshed within the same systems, but often affected differently by them; and art can be a tool to remind us of these truths, and I hope that my art can function that way for the viewer.

My role as an artist is to weave together and rework the influences that I have been exposed to while working and thinking in my own unique way with my own aesthetic sensibilities. At this moment, content has been produced in such overwhelming volumes that it can feel challenging as an artist to want to add your voice to this ever flowing information stream, so I hope that I can somehow freeze this streaming information and provide a slower and quieter experience for the viewer that might raise more questions than they answer.

At the moment, this work is intended to exist in a gallery, I want the pieces to be involved in contemporary artistic practice. The pieces function to “dirty” the walls of the gallery with traces of history, experience, and identity. The viewer may be drawn in by the symbol of the cross, the sparkle of the stickers, or the estradiol bottles attached to one frame, but I hope once they are pulled into the work up close, they have a more nuanced and personal experience with the work.

I’m not sure exactly who my audience is, but I do think that people with different lived experiences will access the work in very different ways. People who are unfamiliar with the processes or materials of printmaking may respond differently without knowing how these images came to be. Cis people who may not know what estradiol is may not connect the works to trans experience, or may be confused or unsettled by the pairing

of religious and transmedical symbols. I am excited for my experience with the pieces shift and change as others are exposed to the work and discuss it.

In the future, I want to expand the audience for this work by adapting the prints into a form that could be published. I want to try reproducing the etchings with digital printing and assemble them into booklet form, potentially paired with text and screen printed images. While the works would lose some of the objectness that they currently have being mounted on wood and with hand built frames, the format of a book makes the work more accessible and portable, people can experience the work in their own home, at their own pace, and in their own hands.

In the future, I also want to dive deeper into experimentation with screen printing on copper and the complexity and layers to the digital designs that I decide to work with on metal. I have a lot to learn and figure out both with pencil on paper and with digital image manipulation, and it is exciting to have found a process where I can simultaneously practice drawing skills, digital image processing skills, and print studio skills.

After having completed this work, I truly see that a theme that has run throughout the work is protection, whether this protection is working for the better or worse. Moving forward, I want to push even further the power of drawing as a tool of radical fantasy and imagination. I could make a whole long term project just surrounding the aesthetics and history of swords and weaponry. I have a unique personal connection to each piece, and I am glad they exist. They might not help me reach any sort of answers or conclusions, but they definitely feel like extensions of myself, and I can't help but feel they are objects that provide me very real comfort, protection, and safety.