



NOVICE THESISDEFENSE

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Artist Statement

The proliferation of mental illness stories in today's market is vast and saturated. However, recovery narratives all end with just that: recovery. The trauma of a period of insanity upon a person's life is very rarely addressed. With a series of ten large-scale comic book pages paired with abstract drawings, Novice captures the post-mental illness narrative. Drawing from my own experience with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, I dissect my own recovery in the form of six stories, each with one or two pages. Pervasive throughout the work are themes of isolation and the malleable nature of time. Anxiety twists the hours on the clock, stretching and compressing in a sadistic nature. Comics are a natural way to depict my reflections for they have the ability to control the reader's timeline. They also have the power to define an environment which I used to mirror the lonely surreal landscape which I lived in post-insanity.

Landscape is a theme throughout the work. Growing up and recovering in the diverse biomes in New Mexico inspired the environments. They also informed how I approached the abstract elements surrounding the figurative comics. I draw a parallel between the physical landscape and the metaphorical topography of the brain. Inspired by my reading of *The Genius Within: Discovery the Intelligence of Every Living Thing* by Dr. Frank T. Vertosick Jr., I depict the mental network of a brain as a shifting terrain. As healing progresses, the network erodes and rises with new neural connections and pathways. The abstract mirrored this fluidity and became representative of the chapters in my recovery narrative.

Together, the narrative comics and abstract mark inform a dual understanding of the same concept. In the recorded conversation between an astrophysicist and a Buddhist monk *The Quantum and the Lotus: A Journey to the Frontiers Where Science and Buddhism Meet* the intricacies of the universe are discussed. Though the theories of existence are informed by very different mindsets, the intersections lead to a greater understanding than either theory by itself could provide. I drew upon this idea of intersecting perceptions to describe mental-illness trauma. The complexity of the brain is only beginning to be understood by modern psychology and the structure and processing capacities of a "normal" versus a mentally-ill brain are a nebulous concept. Neither the story-driven or the abstract representations of recovery alone can capture the fluidity. Together as equal theories they come closer.

The text of the comics served as a verbal depiction in a third perception. Structured between script and punk-song, the ten poems that accompany each drawing distill my reflections on each stage in my recovery. My experience in music and soundscape editing informed the structure of each poem as well as how I approached the writing. Compiled together in a 41-page artbook, the drawings and poems provide an intimate and personal experience. The large scale of the book provided visual impact similar to the effect each reflection had upon my life. The format encourages processing time not provided by the drawings alone. This project demands to be sat with and reread. The complexity of the subject matter and visuals is raw and unapologetic. It is my story in the multi-faceted way I understand it.

THESIS PROPOSAL

Page 1

Introduction

For the first two decades of my life, I was governed completely by anxiety. I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder at a young age and my every action was overseen by complex rituals. The repetitive actions became more and more consuming as I grew up, culminating in a three month hospitalization where I underwent intensive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT. Over the following weeks, I shattered the fun-house mirrors of anxious thought and worldview and emerged a new person.

Despite my fresh neural pathways, I still unquestionably identified with, and as, my OCD. That has changed. In his popular book *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle introduces the concept of the “pain-body” and how we cannot move forward until we move past it. We as a society and individuals draw identity from psychological and physical trauma. I myself until recent months derived my identity and outlook from behind the lense of OCD. My pain-body was everything and my work as an artist very much reflected that. Over the last few months I have abandoned that mindset. My work cannot move forward without releasing my OCD identity and striding into creation in the Now. For my thesis, I wish to explore the journey from mental illness into the ephemeral present moment. I propose to create ten large-scale mixed-media drawings combining comics with abstract diagrams to create a narrative of self-acceptance and mindful creation post-mental illness.

Context

Comics have historically been used to express much more than a gag or a super-powered battle. The unique combination of written word with drawn panel opens up new narrative and conceptual structure that thrives on accessibility. In the collection of essays *Comics as Philosophy* edited by Jeff McLaughlin, a variety of authors show that comics have been used to tackle difficult and diverse topics such as governmental strategy and ecological issues. Prepared in a straightforward manner, comics have an inherent ability to discuss arduous subjects with simplicity. It is on the strength that I pair comics with abstract explorations in my final works.

Drawing in itself is a method to be discussed. Drawing is typically the first step in any creative endeavor. Mark on paper creates a structure for the fluidity of concept. In their essay “Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art,” Cornelia H. Butler posits that drawing is an immediate media bridging the gap between thought and physical manifestation. I will draw on this history of drawing to address the concept of meditative Now. I will create diagrams of an idea, similar to the drawings of Agnes Denes of mathematical concepts and thought processes. Diagrams are instructive tools that make physical abstract processes. We cannot see the structure of an atom but we all trust what they look like because we trust the diagrams we find in physics textbook. Diagrams have also been used to embed the spiritual in two dimensions. I have been exploring the symbolic nature of figurative and abstract elements, particularly Tibetan and Hindu motifs. No mark or gesture in these images is superfluous or empty of meaning. My diagrams will be the same. Each abstract element is a relevant piece to the conceptual whole.

By using comics in combination with abstract drawings, I will create a combination of map and key to explore an esoteric concept. The drawings and the comic in each piece will function separately, but together create a context unreached by either segment. The abstract elements will be of a more liquid, ephemeral nature; they will be a representation of a concept in its entirety. The comics will be much more of an anchor, explaining the concepts in narrative. The stories in each piece will seek to portray the concepts in mundane circumstances. I draw this from my reading of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the careful transcription of Shunryu Suzuki's teachings. In the introduction of the text, Richard Baker explains how Suzuki, would use the most simple of circumstances, such as baking bread, to explain larger profound Buddhist teachings. The comic elements will mirror this, discussing the concepts in the most grounded situations.

Technical Plan

The overarching narrative for these pieces will develop in ten stages, one stage for each drawing. Unlike most mental illness narratives, stage one of mine will begin, not end, with recovery. The narrative will then flow through rejection of identity based on psychosis, burning the bridges of relationships embedded in anxiety, discovery of the Now, to fully embracing present minded creation.

My process for creating these works will be heavily research based. I will supplement my own personal journey from mental illness based identity to present-focused creation with reading on East Asian philosophy, scientific studies on the subject of meditation in relation to mental health, and prose and poetry on same topics. Over the three month of summer vacation I will fill my Thesis Journal with notes and sketching inspired by my research. The image content will be dancing on the line between figurative and abstract and will draw on my personal symbolic library as well as academically established symbols common in human consciousness, such as fire as a method for communicating destruction. I will play with a variety of media, selecting the best mark for each concept. The pieces will be unified through their mixed-media approach as well as color palette. After creating my visual language I will then create digital collages as sketches for the final pieces which will be executed traditionally and presented in a gallery context. My illustration process relies heavily on mixed media digital collages. It will be a challenge to execute the same effects traditionally but I am prepared and believe that this method will tie into my concept better than digitally executed pieces. The process of drawing is very meditative to me and the high stakes of traditional work with force me to be mindful and present for each mark. Each piece will be 22" by 30" and done on Stonehenge printmaking paper. The presentation will tie into the concept as well. Comics are not typically elevated to a gallery context but I believe that the unique combination with the abstract will create a strong enough idea to live in the white box. The works will be presented unframed to draw the viewer in, allowing for an investigation of each mark.

THESIS PROPOSAL

Page 2

Influences and My Work

My influences are varied in media. Conceptually I am drawn to East Asian Philosophy, specifically the arts of yoga and meditation. I was first introduced to the concepts through the mental health care system, but their theories have remained at the forefront of my conceptual interests. Both have had an impact on my journey out of psychosis and continue to be a practice in my daily life. When doing initial research, I found a parallel between my interests and the work of Agnes Martin. Arne Glimcher writes that Martin's work was truly an "abstract expression of positive inner states." Martin achieved a sublime beauty in her work that transcended above personal experience. Though my work is based in personal experience, I hope that my thesis will speak to concepts that encompass much more than my own headspace.

I am also very interested in the traditional visuals of these theories. Mandalas and images of the supernatural from Buddhist and Hindu spirituality have had a unquestioned influence on how I visually approach concepts and characters. I find inspiration in the abstract works of Louise Despont that also address the East Asian understandings of the cosmos. Her meticulous large scale drawings have provided a visual feast that never ceases to captivate me.

More recently I have been looking at the drawings of Julie Mehretu. Though Mehretu's work focuses on the significance of place, her process very much informs my own. Layer upon layer of architectural imagery combined with abstract mark speaks to the "margin between verbal and graphic expression to produce a sense of intense chaos." This repeated application in mark very much mirrors my process in creating both my abstract work and illustration.

For the comic's section of my work, I am very much influenced by the mixed-media comics of Dave McKean and Dominique Goblet. Both their narrative styles move beyond the panel border and blur the boundaries between abstract and figurative. In concept the work of cartoonist Kevin Hooyman with his characters undergoing existential quandaries speaks to the tone of my work. It is offbeat and esoteric though placed in a mundane setting. Similarly I am influenced by the writings of Sun Ra. The placement of intense cosmic experiences in the vernacular is of particular interest in my writing style. His poetry as well as poems in the forms of song lyrics from experimental musical artists such as Enter Shikari and Closure in Moscow are key influences in how I write the text of my comics.

My work often borders on the grotesque. Layers of mark and twisted drawings attempt to form an impactful image that bridges on the abstract. I am constantly experimenting with media and find most exciting work that merges many different mark making styles. My subject matter for both my comics and my single image illustration often deal with people learning to survive in the contemporary world.

My hopes for my thesis are to connect my work in narrative comics to a more abstract and open-ended style. I wish to develop my voice as a storyteller and move into more conceptual work than I have previously done. I also wish to merge my more intuitive abstract work with my designed illustration style.

Conclusion

Drawing has always been a way for me to process information. My art for the past few years has addressed my identity with trauma and anxiety. With my thesis, I will create a narrative more reflective of my mind-set now. I will combine the accessibility of comics with abstract drawing to create ten stages in ten drawings from identity and creation based on psychosis to present moment creation free of the burden of a diagnosis. I will create a post-mental illness narrative in my distinct drawing and writing style. I will truly embrace my new identity free from the pain-body of mental illness.

THESIS ABSTRACT

Novice is a series of ten drawings combining the narrative medium of comics with abstract landscape drawing. Six original stories draw from the artist's memories of recovery from a traumatic period of mental illness. Each story examines a stage in the post-insanity narrative in the form of a silent comic with an accompanying poem serving as the text. Themes of self-loathing, isolation, and the time-bending nature of illness are discussed leading to a fleeting moment of enlightenment. The comics are presented together on a large format page with abstract landscape elements. Recovery stages are mirrored as physical topography, treating the brain as a malleable frontier shaped by our experiences and our understanding of them. The comics, poems, and mixed-media mark exist simultaneously as different understandings of a fluid concept. All together they come closer to a representation to the nebulousness of recovery.

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 1

Introduction

Hello. My name is Zoe. Thank you so much for coming to my thesis defense. What you see before you is the culmination of a year's worth of work. This zine contains a series of 10 drawings that comprises six separate stories with text. The subject of my zine, *Novice*, requires some backstory.

The subject matter of these works is mental health, but what you see here is not a story of mental illness. That came before. Starting in my early childhood, I struggled with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and depression. Complex rules governed how I interacted with the world. As I grew up, the sadness and anxiety came and went, but each time it stepped into my life it came back stronger. When I was nineteen, it hit like an avalanche. Obsessions with protecting those around me left me non-functional. Constantly besieging me were anxieties that I had a terrible disease that I was passing to others through contaminated touch. I washed my hands for 30 minutes at a time. My skin shaved off, leaving my knuckles bloody, which only prompted more washing. I ripped my nails out, trying to eliminate the need to wash underneath them. I could not eat and did nothing but walk for miles at a time, desperately trying to forget the mental pressure and guilt of the people's lives I thought I had taken. I could not work at my job nor do my school assignments. I was in a constant state of panic where sleep was the only respite. My behavior resulted in a three month hospitalization where I underwent intensive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

Every day I would awake and repeatedly put myself in triggering situations, driving my body into panic mode. I would wait. As the panic subsided, I would record how long it took in a notebook. And then I would repeat. I was told that I could not trust myself. My agency was taken from me. I was forced to look at every fear as irrational and silly. I was viewed as sick and nothing else.

As horrifying as this therapy was for me, it worked. I recovered my sanity. But this project is not about that story. It is about what happened after, when I had to leave the hospital, and return to normal life. How was I to fit this experience into my everyday existence? I had spent the first twenty years of my life broken, in endless amounts of despair and finally I could live freely. This should have left me elated but instead I discovered that recovery did not end when you exited madness. And that's where *Novice* begins.

Project Vision

This project aims to capture my post-recovery narrative. The market is saturated with mental illness stories. However, they all seem to end with recovery. Whether the end is neat or not, the hero gets better and the book closes. The mess of after is never addressed. When you leave the hospital, your life is in fragments. The world has gone on around you while you dueled with demons of your own making. Then, everyone assumes that you've healed, that you can step back into your life unburdened. This is not the case. Trauma sticks around. I learned in inpatient that I couldn't trust my own mind. Living with the constant second-guessing of every action required healing. I found that I needed to hear the after. I desperately wanted to know that healing from mental illness is a process, not an event. When you see a hole, you must patch it. And so I did with *Novice*. I wrote my own story in hopes that honesty about my recovery would help me understand it.

I began *Novice* believing that I was healed, that I had stepped fully into the present moment. It was to be a story of enlightenment captured in drawn revelation. However, as I started the project and began to ideate, I discovered that I was just covering up the wounds. I had not allowed myself to heal. Instead, I had bull-dozed through my trauma with my work. Sometimes I touched upon mental health in said work, but never had I been completely honest about the toll my insanity had taken on my psyche. *Novice* shifted to become part of the healing. It became much more narrative with interlocking stories.

Multiple ways of understanding recovery are necessary. Mental-health is a very nebulous subject matter. Trying to conceptualize the intricacies of the brain in one way is futile. The human brain is the most complex structure that we know of. Endless neural pathways flooded with barely identified fluids and pulses construct the organ. Though modern psychology has made great leaps in the mapping of the structure of the brain, we have yet to fully understand the way in which information is processed. This problem is intensified even further with the concept of individuality. A perfect model of a brain functions in one way but each person's experience and lifestyle confuse a static comprehension. This is further conflated with mental illness. If we can't even conceptualize how a healthy brain functions, how are we to denote how a sick brain rationalizes? Most people are so stuck in their own worldview that shifting their perspective to inhabit another's is nigh impossible unless they gain a concrete insight. It is with this insight that I was drawn to describe my illness in comic form.

Comics have historically played an important role in my life. I have always been an avid reader. Most of my work experience has been in libraries. I devoured fiction and non-fiction alike. Unfortunately, somewhere in my teens, OCD struck. Consumed with mental rituals, I found I was incapable of reading. I would get stuck on words and be unable to move past them for fear of destruction. When I was unable to read novels, I turned to comics. In some strange twisting of reality, the problems I faced with books didn't apply to comics. I found comfort in them. Soon I wanted to create them. I have always enjoyed writing, but my stories were always burdened with visual details. With comics I was able

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 2

to create whole worlds without the risk of becoming too wordy. When I chose to convey my story in comic form, I did so because of the ability to control space and time. Mental illness stretches and compresses time on an individual scale. It controls how you see space and how you interact with the world. By choosing comics, I can illustrate a space and timeline that fit with my mindset.

The process of making this world began intuitively. At the beginning of the year, I started a thesis journal filled with mind maps and free-form sketching. I feel most at home when I'm in a sketchbook. There is nothing precious or confining about a sketchbook. You can react without a plan to each new mark. Total spontaneity is key. It is a place for studies, for exploration, and for unconscious solutions to appear. I start every new project in the sketchbook. I've never been able to jump straight to thumbnails. Good ideas and innovative visuals never seemed to come from there. My comics find this first step equally as important as whole singular images do. If I'm going to have them function as a world, I first need to build up the pool of marks and ideas before I even start putting them in a framework.

I spent the summer in this phase. Every day I would spend time in my sketchbook, drawing from my visual and written research and personal experience. I fed a reservoir of images and written material into my brain and reacted to it. Everything from Balinese temples to deep sea vents made their appearance. I made abstract marks, icons, and patterning with as many different media as I could get my hands on. Each successful drawing was mentally cataloged for future use. It got complex very quickly. When I found my sketchbook became stagnant, I began to do large drawings on 18" x 24" newsprint. These were even less precious than a bound book. I worked with big brushes and gestural drawing, using my whole body as a tool. I inhabited my kitchen floor in a mess of media. Eventually, I narrowed down the media to include ink washes, chalk pastel, and colored pencil. I liked the ability of ink to be gestural and liquid. The pastels balanced the fluid with a dry, gritty texture. They also gave me the ability to block out the ink with opaque fields of color. Colored pencil allowed for bright, precise detail and translucency. I also made the decision in this phase to work on toned paper, because I liked how the newsprint could be brought back to white for emphasis. I created a visual language that could describe my subject matter. It was here that the surreal and isolated world both inside and outside the panels began to coalesce.

Each aspect of a panel or mark is curated to inform a certain understanding of a scene. In comics, there is no room for unnecessary mark. If a prop is included in a scene, it is because it will become important. Anything that is not in service of the progression of the story falls away. I designed the settings of my comics in the same way I used to design sets for theatre. Drawing from significant locations in my past and present, I created the atmosphere. Windows became very important. I often feel as though I am another person when I look back on my illness. I view myself from outside a house, as though I am floating in the atmosphere. Windows were also the sources of light. Magic light plays an integral part of my inner tranquility, and the extraordinary sunlight must be preserved in these scenes.

The combination of word and visual image allows for multifaceted subjects to be discussed. Comics are inherently unassuming. They are very well suited for jokes and one-liners but can become very elaborate. Since their humble beginnings in newspapers, graphic novels have been used to explore everything from personal experience to the effects of war and how a government should function. I drew on this in my own project. Simple narratives can provide a doorway into labyrinthine ideas like mental health recovery.

The interplay of text and visual can be very powerful. It can be literal, or it can be theatrical. What is happening in a panel visually may not always match up with the text. In the case of this project, it doesn't. I draw on my previous experience in postdramatic theatre. In the one act play *Krapp's Last Tape* by Samuel Beckett, an old man sits listening to a recording he has made at various stages in his life. Throughout the whole play, very little happens except the man sitting and listening. There is no action. There is no dramatic structure, though we learn a great deal and form opinions on the man. An extreme economy of movement is in play here. No unnecessary action distracts from the point of the play. We leave the theatre with an overwhelming sense of lonely existentialism despite little actually happening. My stories function in much the same way, though the end is not a sonnet of nihilism. There are very few actions in the stories, yet in combination with the words I attempted to describe a moment. I attempted to write a story without climax, for the climax has already happened.

When I began this project, I looked to describe a journey to present mindedness. In a way I stuck with that concept if only in the simplification of the recovery narrative. Of all the moments in our lives, we will remember very few except for the seconds we did something differently. The memory of rising and falling of mental clarity is lost. We do not remember every peak and valley. We only remember those moments when we were at our lowest or conversely, our moments of clarity. I distilled these moments down to six. I begin with arriving home, make my way through triggering situations and end at a moment of enlightenment. In each moment, time slows down. They exist in a space where our epiphanies stream faster than seconds. I drew upon my reading of Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*. In a conversation of teacher and student, Tolle insists upon the idea that all we have is the Now. Past and future exist only as concepts because we don't inhabit them. We are here, in this moment. These moments I have captured were Nows, even if they're viewed as a sequence of events. In a way nothing actually happens, they just are, each panel its own Now.

Each story was carefully chosen to fulfill this purpose. They are contemplative and quiet. Writing them was like a meditation. I chose a stage in recovery and dissected it. I pulled out the thoughts and examined them. The same scrutiny I had used to pin down destructive obsessions applied to the imagery in the text. Each line influenced how the next was perceived. There is no dialogue in this work. It was important that a sense of isolation was preserved. I had many people supporting me through my illness and I'm eternally grateful to them. But, in the end, I had to face my mind alone.

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 3

The imagery in the panels is at times very simple. They are easily comprehended. So why accompany them with abstract elements? There is no clean storyline in life. A smooth story arc is an element of fiction. Noise and distortion push a recovery story back and forward. I found in my experience that I would progress in one area while falling back in another. I needed to confuse the clean lines of my panels. Having just a comic would obscure the rawness of the experience. Feral marks and materiality break the logical understanding of the narrative. The mess of healing is fully visible, rising and swelling with key moments.

When focusing on the abstract in my intuitive sketching phase I found that I was more likely than not to produce forms that resembled landscape. Though the marks are gestural, they resonate with particular manifestations. The more I meditated on these forms, the more I got intentional with where they were placed. The titles of each piece became the elements as I understood them to appear in recovery. I believe that the narrative comics and the gestural landscapes are two ways of viewing the same concept.

In his book *The Genius Within: Discovering the Intelligence of Every Living Thing*, Dr. Frank T. Vertosick Jr. contemplates the intelligence of living networks. He describes it as a collection of different cells or simple organisms that learn to better perform a function by collaboration and stored information. We typically think of the brain as the center of intelligence. Yet, we as humans can observe the intelligence of organisms with very simple or complete lack of brains. Vertosick introduces the concept of an E-surface, or an ever-shifting diagram of information stored within a network. A network of interconnected cells such as an immune system is constantly taking in and responding to different stimuli. Each stimulus flips a switch, if you will, modifying the topography of the E-surface to suit each problem. Eventually the network acquires a sort of conditioning. As more and more information is digested, some areas of the E-surface become peak-like while other areas are like valleys. When an unencountered problem is presented, a metaphorical ball is dropped and rolls into a valley most suited to be the solution. The brain itself is network and comes with its own metaphorical landscape. What I am interested in is how the topographical features change at different points of recovery. More, how do you represent them on the page. The landscape comprising a freshly recovered brain versus a transcended brain would be very different. The conditioning and problems the brain has faced determine its landscape. So, as a person heals, the landscape shifts to solve problems in different ways. To make physical and organize the marks of the various recovery topographies I decided to pair them with literal external landscape elements.

I grew up in the high desert of New Mexico. The geography there is uniquely beautiful with everything ranging from sand dunes to high altitude forests. This variety mirrored the complex and disparate thought my brain produced post-recovery. I associate certain flora with specific points in my mental health. The dust and cacti around my apartment in Albuquerque held very different connotations than the aspen forests of my childhood haunts in the Jemez Mountains.

As I progressed in my healing, the pull towards mountains grew stronger and stronger. My first experience of total peace took place at the top of a mountain in Colorado. I began to scramble up it with many of my peers. Most fell away as we got closer to the peak. I was one of the small group that made it to the top. As I looked upon the landscape below, I realized my own insignificance and the dual truth of my own importance. As the narrative progresses in *Novice*, mountains replace forests and tranquility overtakes turbulent thoughts.

Even with solid reasoning behind both the narrative and abstract elements, it is yet to be fully explained why they exist together on the page. We return here to the concept of nebulousity. Can one was of understanding of an abstract concept be enough to accurately capture it? In a conversation between Buddhist monk and astro-physicist recorded in the book *The Quantum and the Lotus*, the nature of the universe and time is questioned. What seem like highly divergent theories intersect in a number of ways. Though the specifics of their conversation are highly stimulating, what is important here is that neither the spiritual nor the scientific can alone comprehend the vastness and complexity of the known and unknown universe. But when viewed together as equal understandings, far more of the beautiful strangeness of existence can be comprehended. Similarly, neither the abstract nor the narrative can separately describe something as complex as mental trauma and healing. Together though, I believe we can come closer. What the narrative fails to explain, the intuition of the abstract takes over. For example, in *Nopal*, the metaphor of a cactus explains the sensation of being stuck in time. Cactus spines hold you in place, unable to move forward without ripping your flesh.

The final drawings were an exercise in returning to this intuition. If left to me, I would stay forever in a sketchbook, processing, but I needed to move on. I began with sheets of 20" x 28" sheets of pearl grey stonehenge. I would carefully layout the borders of the comics, and then I would begin. Drawing on my catalogue of marks I had made, I selected landscapes most suited to the subject of the drawing. Color was chosen in relation to a core color palette of the primary triad. I find this color palette in Tibetan mandalas which inspired the creation of this project. Using the triad as my base, I would select colors according to the atmosphere I wanted to create. For example, the cold fall weather of *Aspen I* and *II* was primarily blue and autumn colors, while *Fera Flores* was paler and pink to match the flowers of its namesake.

Every chapter was intentionally chosen. We begin with *Piñon*, a tree outside my childhood bedroom that I returned to after the hospital. The dry prickling on the back of your neck that characterizes being watched makes up *Yucca/Nopal*. Something is not right about the situation of opening no longer relevant mail. You've been gone and the world has progressed around you. You are stagnant and observed as such. *Aspen* was chosen for the translation of my hometown, *Los Alamos*. The aspen forests held scars of generations past, similar to the physical and emotional scars I now had. *Juniper* was tricky. I'm allergic to juniper pollen, yet it was all around me growing up. The insignificance of my one person to the natural world I found blissful. The beautiful smudge of my trauma was nothing compared to the rotation of the earth. *Fera Flores* means wildflowers. I spoke earlier about the mountain in Colorado. The clean domestication of flowers is beautiful and designed, but the thistles above the treeline were a far better mirror of the knots I had to accept

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 4

within my psyche. I end the series with Meru. Mt. Meru is the home of the gods in Hindu and Buddhist culture and speaks of enlightenment. It is also a physical peak in the Himalayas. There have been countless attempts to summit the 21,850 ft peak. It was only recently that it was successfully climbed by a small group of three climbers. What is significant is that it was the second attempt these particular climbers had made. I found this story of continuing after you fail and equal parallel to my recovery.

Using the features of landscape I had chosen, I began the drawings with big marks with ink washes. I thought about it in the similar way as Cubism's all perspectives. How could I portray a single plant in as many different abstract ways as possible? I then went in with pastel, pulling things forward with large chunks of color. Finer detail came next where I created space and selectively flattened it with bars of color. The abstract elements were always done in one long sitting. I could not interrupt the flow and expect to get the same piece. Each mark would inform the next moving with more and more detail and color into the energetic center. I hoped that they would glow with authenticity in that nucleus.

I progressed to the panels last. Part of the reasoning for the toned paper was so I could lift the panels forward with a white background. I did this in white gouache. I then went in with another layer of gouache in a solid tone. I found that using a single tone allowed me to create greater atmosphere and complexity of light. The gouache also allowed me to use my strong mark design and achieve opacity. I then "inked" the panels with graphite. I have previously done highly detailed graphite drawings portraying light. Though my panels were more simplistic, the range of value achievable by graphite allows for more depth of field.

Frenetic mark and figurative panels all combined felt a truer portrayal of my experience than my previous understanding. However, comics imply text. Even if a comic is silent it has some form of script. Originally I intended to run the text on the drawings, in traditional format. As the drawings progressed they became increasingly layered. I felt that to place text on these drawings could become confusing. The comics would also lose some of their sense of contemplation. I spent so much of my life in silence, unable to articulate my headspace. I'm only beginning to peel back the layers of isolation. The comics needed that silence and loneliness to be an accurate representation of my own understanding of my illness. I decided to run the text opposite to the drawings, separate but equally as important. They were created in tandem and to cut the text entirely would cause the comics to become too silent. When not matched up with panels, they needed to stand on their own. I revised them until they became poems instead of a script.

At first I was, and to some degree still am, reluctant to refer to them as poems. The text is poetic, sure, and great care was taken on each word, but I never thought "poet" would apply to me. I have always loved beautiful words and was a strong writer from early youth but I thought that talent was reserved for school papers. The literature world seemed so out of reach. In primary school we are introduced to the classics. Shakespeare was the God of Poetry. It seemed like such a lofty goal. I didn't think of words like that. I received confirmation from my teachers that I was not a poet with bad marks on any poetry assignment. Silently, I stuck to my essays. Then poetry came back in the most unassuming of places, punk rock.

I grew up going to punk and metal shows. I felt more at home in the sweaty mosh pit than I did in my bedroom. Here were people that took pride in screaming and standing out. I didn't feel as isolated there. When at metal shows I accessed a part of me that was normally kept quiet in the back of my closet. I could be loud. I could be dissentful. I found the courage in the lyrics inspiring. I learned that lofty and buttoned up words didn't equate poetry. These slam poet anarchists were questioning everything I believed about what art was.

I wrote the text of Novice as a punk song. I drew inspiration from artists like Refused, Enter Shikari, and Against Me!, who were all twisting words into their own canon of poetic. I found that no words were beautiful or ugly. All words were part of the possible. The text at times became very image based, at other times simple statements. Any pretense of what poetry should be was forgotten.

Punk music also played a key role in how laid out the poems as well as the panels. Meter and rhythm became very important. I reluctantly played piano when I was a child, but I found true joy in playing bass guitar. As I left high school and went to my first college, I joined a metal band. We were terrible, but I learned a lot about how to craft a song. How audio was mixed and the interplay between various instruments was extraordinarily stimulating. I organized my poems how I wanted to hear them in a room. Various levels of indentation and listing corresponding to the mental map I had of the sound. I also used this method to lay out the comic panels on the page. Panel size and orientation corresponded with tone, rhythm, and repetition. For example, three panels of the same size would match a staccato beat where a long landscape panel would be a sustained note. I used the layout to mirror the sound mapping of the poems.

This layout design was key in how I designed my final zine. Originally I had planned to scan my drawings and present the comics without the abstract in a new layout. However, as I progressed in this project I discovered how conceptually integral the abstract was. I decided to print the final drawings in their entirety on 12" x 18" pages opposite their text. I also inserted a title page, table of contents, and chapter title pages to space out the visual complexity. The book went through several design iterations. I had never designed a book before and found it to be quite challenging. In the end, I went with a clean, book-like font for the text and allowed ample breathing room to balance the images. Binding the book was difficult because of the large scale of the prints, but I knew it had to be hand-done. There is a meditative aspect to this project and the act of hand binding a book requires precise presence. I bound in two sections to allow the zine to fold and be packaged with a translucent band as a finishing touch.

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 5

Audience

I was unaware at first just how much the unassuming atmosphere and diy ethos of a punk show had affected the work. Audience has always been a difficult question in regards to this project. I was making it for me. Making it to be honest with myself about what had happened and to not hide behind barely functioning coping mechanisms. Yet I wanted this work to be viewed. I began wanting it to exist on a wall at a gallery. I quickly found that this was not its place. It felt too quiet and personal to exist in a showroom. But it is also not traditional illustration. Over my years at PNCA I've tried very hard to fit into the illustration box. I've failed considerably, making a whole host of unsatisfying work in the process. It was only when I left the bounds of traditional illustration and into my own visual language that I began to make work that hit.

It is not illustration and it is not gallery work. It exists in its own space for its own audience. Did I want the viewer to understand, or stand in solidarity? It was with this question that I decided to produce the works as an art book as well, a format more suited to individual contemplation. This format would allow for the moments to have time to digest. Leafing through a book is a thinking act. Your brain is primed, ready for new information. I've hidden a great deal of symbols within this work. Holding a book in your own home encourages re-reading and an i-spy treasure hunt. I don't expect everybody to find them. In this it turned out that my audience was my own demographic. I'm 26. I'm just beginning to figure out the world and I find comfort with the young others that are navigating the existentialist nightmare of the 21st century. I don't expect anybody who has not danced with nihilism to understand this story.

In that it gets even more specific by diving into the indie comics community. At times the project has unexpected visuals, even grotesque images. Grotesque is defined by Merriam-Webster as departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical. Mental illness is not pretty, nor is recovery. There is a lot of looking at yourself and deciding to accept everything that doesn't conform to the normal or expected. Grotesquery seemed the only way to display this. This can only be appreciated by those within a community that pushes the boundaries of what comics can be. The audience is those interested in experimental stories. I believe that it is a small but mature community. I write for people like me: young, creative, with a tendency to push boundaries of understanding. An atmosphere of a campfire is much more suitable than that of a lighthouse. I can't tell you where this project sits firmly, for it expands past the boundaries of both the comics world and the gallery world. I would just hope it finds those who need it.

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 6

Comparative Media

When creating this work, I looked at a wide range of art and design. Everything from cave paintings to heavy metal album art was considered. However, it was imperative that I consume similar media. First I turned to Kevin Hooyman and his ongoing comic series *Conditions on the Ground*. Big questions are contemplated in the most mundane of circumstances. With little to no character development, Hooyman places figures in the midst of existential quandaries. Stylistically, the comics are much cleaner and line based rather than my emphasis on mark making. Still the subject matter intersects. Hooyman also plays with the surreality of space. Imagined landscapes give the characters a sense of isolation which has carried into *Novice*.

Visually the work of Dominique Goblet provided ample inspiration. Layers of paint and graphite create their comic *Pretending is Lying*. There is also a strong use of grotesque gesture in heightened emotions. I'm fascinated with the grotesque as a design tool. Every time you disrupt what the viewer expects to see you force contemplation. *Novice* demands to be thought about. Each moment in the sequence provides a window into a journey that is not spoken about and aims to change that. In this regard I am drawn to the work of Julie Doucet and Aiden Koch. Though they work with very different visuals, they both communicate with raw experience. My goal was to have this work be as open as possible. Hiding the ugly parts of a process is not authentic. Twisting the truth has never served me, it has only compounded how broken I felt.

When gathering images for this project I often turned to contemporary abstract drawing. I fell in love with the works of Louise Despont many years ago but their influence has carried into this project. Their meticulous drawings are created with the use of a myriad of architectural stencils. Large-scale images emphasize the use of pattern and symmetry to understand abstract concepts such as the birth of the universe. I studied their simplification of form to express my own landscape elements.

In balance of line and shape I looked to the drawings of Julie Mehretu. The use of architectural diagrams in her works as well as expressive mark creates swirling nebulas loaded with meaning. I am also fascinated with the significance of place as I hope is clear by now. For me it is the desert mountains of my childhood. Running through the trees in the canyon behind my house is so far away but my work has retained that feral quality. In that final quality I found, in plain sight, the work of Agnes Martin. I first encountered her work at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, New Mexico where she holds a permanent gallery. Typical thought pictures Martin's grids as restrained and precise. They are, yet there is an uncontrolled wildfire there. Influenced by East Asian philosophy and the New Mexican landscape so suited to meditation, Martin's work seems to understand perfect peace and interconnection. I see no similarity in our styles, but I connect with the subject matter. Existing in a material world is filled with distractions. In Martin's clean grids there is a discipline and distillation of all experience to only what is needed. The grids also speak of the web of connections between every experience. Buddhist thought argues that nothing exists inherently. Meaning that nothing

exists without any links to other phenomena. My recovery from insanity hinged on my web of connections that brought me tranquility.

I argue that peace is not as simple as one believes. I find it in the sunlight which has traveled millions of miles to land perfectly through my bedroom window. It is the chaos of a trillion trillion chemical reactions that has led us to arrive here. It is the unrestrained movement of a girl who nearly broke my hand at a DIY venue on Gold street. It is this feeling I had as I set mark on my page. And it is everything I have not yet attained.

ORAL DEFENSE

Page 7

Conclusion

As I completed these drawings and compiled them into their zine format, I found that they were very different than I intended. I began with a concrete end: enlightenment. But I found that I was not there yet, nor was I as recovered as I let on to be. I had never fully allowed myself to admit what had happened. I shoved it down in a pit of shame. It became my dark secret. I could never speak of it leading to a lack of recovery. With these works I opened my ribcage and screamed it. I drew from my gut. I made marks with the purest of intentions. Still, none of the drawings ended in the calm I claimed I had. I wrote a story, but it was not a story of victory. It was more a portrait of headspace. I question the traditional understanding of recovery by admitting that it does not end cleanly. It cannot be described without a combination of abstract and narrative logic. The complexity of the topic requires ample exploration in many different modes of creation. Novice was created to invoke a sense of solidarity for those searching for a new type of story.

It is not an account of beautiful transcendence. In the last two drawings, Meru I and II, a ball of light comes from the universe. It travels through the cosmos with a purpose. It finds me on a mountain, sitting waiting for it. I know what to do. Without hesitation I swallow it. It radiates from within me. Light flows around my bones. Sunlight shines through my skin and I speak truth. But it doesn't last. Despite being willing, my body rejects it. I expel enlightenment and it travels back into the beyond. But it is not failure. I have tasted bliss and the purity of this Now.

I know this feeling in my life. The ball of light is my sense of peace with myself and my place in the world. I would like very much to pretend that my mental illness will never come back. I so dearly wish that. But that is not the case. It has come back before and it will again. All I can do is choose to keep getting out of bed and love despite being utterly insignificant to the cosmos. Maybe some people are meant for true enlightenment, but for me I think it is tell the stories of those trying to make this mangled world a better place. I leave PNCA now to go out into the world and travel. I've never been good at staying in one place. I have to see what's out there and this project cannot come with me. However, I will continue with comics. I hope this life takes me to many different places and I'm sure I will find stories there. I'd like to do more interview-based and non-fiction work. The world is as tangled as my own headspace. I'm interested in so many ways of telling its story. I'd like to continue to play around with different mediums. Sculpture and video work have always held interest for me and in today's internet connected world any form of creativity can create an income.

This work is complete. I have conceived, planned, and created it only with the most genuine of intentions. It is the largest body of work I have ever created. It is also the most honest. I let my psyche out and ran with my intuition. I learned a great deal about how to create a body of work. I also learned how to forget barriers and just make, something I had lost since I did my portfolio on my bedroom floor. But I still have so much to learn and see. I'm at the start of my career and stronger work is yet to come. I have tasted enlightenment and now I must let it come to me. At the end of this and the beginning of the next, I am just a novice. Thank you.

CREATIVE BRIEF

Creative Brief

Project Vision

I aim to create a series of 13 large-scale mixed-media drawings that merges abstract landscape drawing with short comics as well as a printed collection of the final drawings. The project is a post-mental illness narrative exploring the trek from recovery to transcendence.

Audience

YA to 30 women
Individuals overcoming mental illness and/or trauma
Indie comics community

Methods and Materials

Mixed media intuitive sketching based on memories of landscape elements.
Scripting and thumbnailing of comic elements
Comic pencils and layout design
Rough sketches of final drawings
Return to refined intuitive abstract drawing.
Final comic panels in gouache and graphite.
Scanning and compiling in photoshop with comic text added.
Final comic layout in InDesign with cover, title page, table of contents, story title pages, acknowledgements, and contact info.
Print reproductions in 24" x 18" newsprint spreads and packaged in custom envelope.

IV. Comparative Media

Contemplative indie comics
Kevin Hooyman
Dominique Goblet
Aiden Koch
Julie Doucet
Abstract Drawings
Agnes Martin

Louise Despont
Julie Mehretu

V. Marketplace Application

Comic and zine markets
Gallery shows

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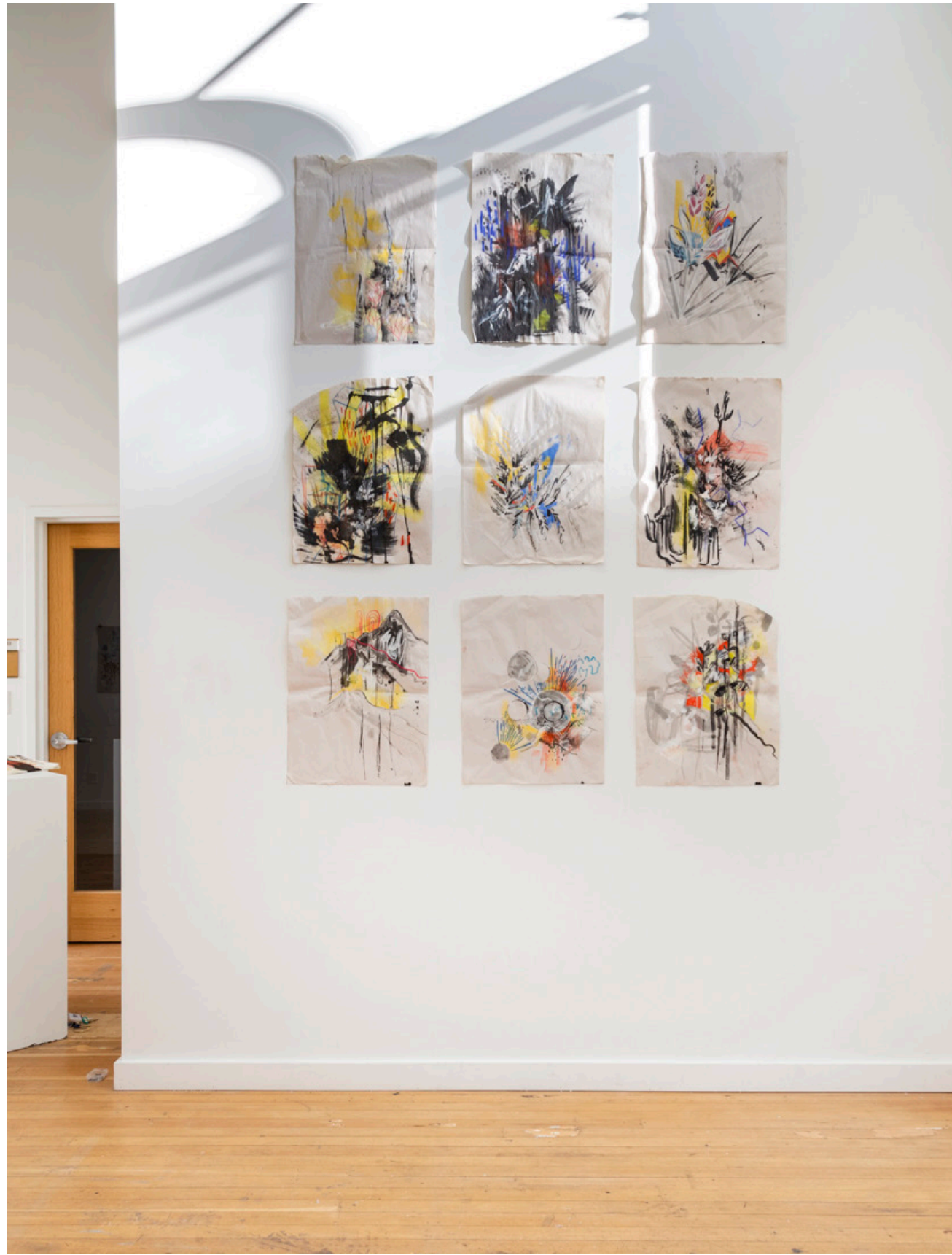
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THESIS INSTALLATION

Page 1



THESIS INSTALLATION

Page 2

THESIS INSTALLATION

Page 3



THESIS INSTALLATION

Page 4



THESIS INSTALLATION

Page 5



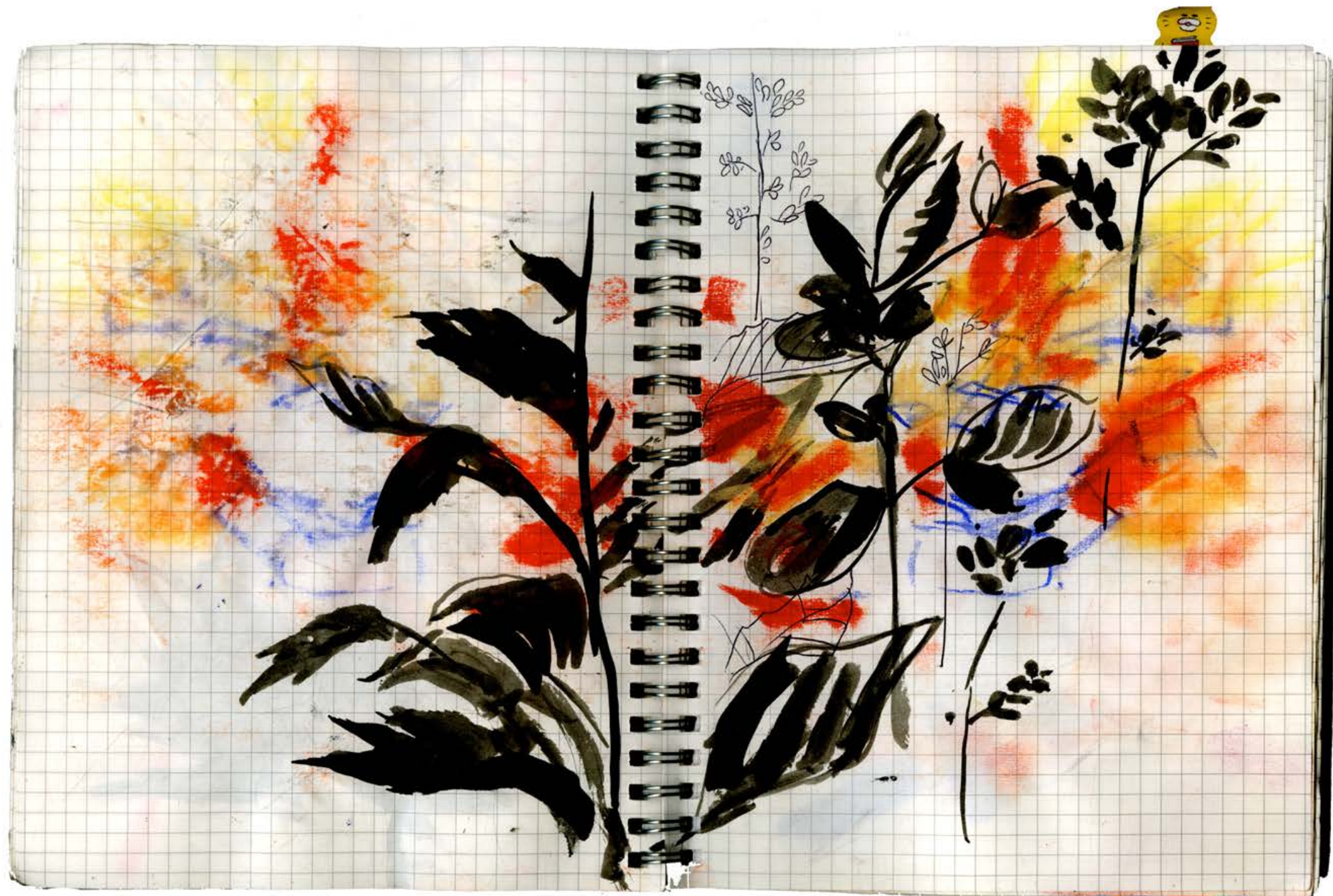
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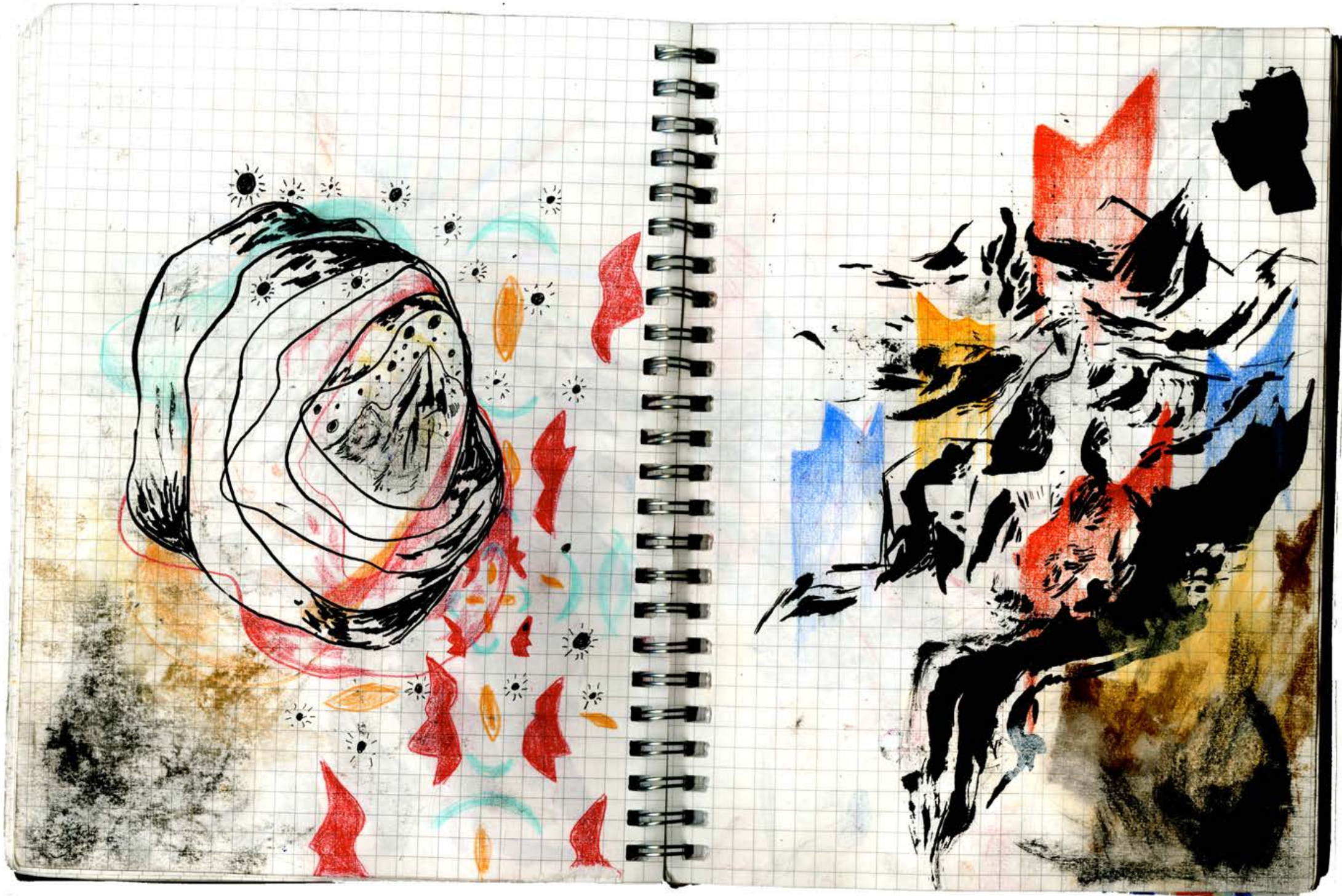
Page 1



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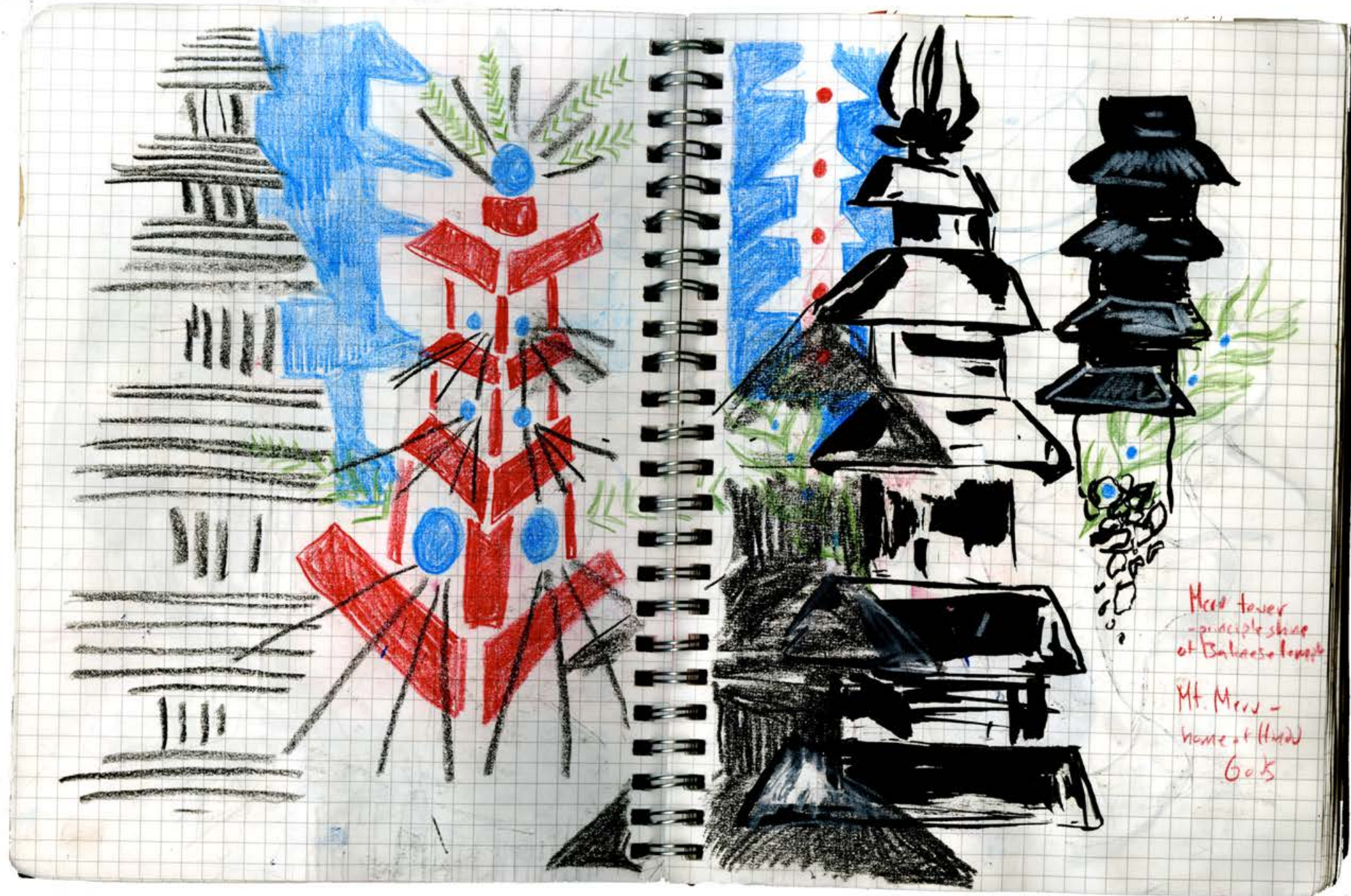
Page 2





THESIS JOURNAL

Page 3



THESIS JOURNAL

Page 4

Head tower
- principle shape
of Balinese temple

Mt. Meru -
home of Hindu
Gods



How ABSURD JUST TO LIVE IN THIS WORLD

"YOU'RE PRETTY TOUGH FOR A GIRL"

lmao - frozen moment

THESIS JOURNAL

Page 5