

University of the Arts
MFA Book Arts & Printmaking
2023 Thesis Exhibition

Warm gratitude to...

- » Gretchen Schermerhorn for the catalog essay
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and a heartfelt congratulations to Xue'er Gao, Jingnan Cheng, Grace Johnson, and Bryn Ziegler for the successful creation of thesis work that is true to who they are as individuals and a reflection on the culture they are part of.

Lori Spencer, Director, Book Arts & Printmaking

As a longtime admirer of the Book Arts and Printmaking MFA program at the University of the Arts, I was honored to be invited to be the Guest Critic and Essayist for this year's MFA cohort. My sincere congratulations to Jingnan Cheng, Xue'er Gao, Grace Johnson, and Bryn Ziegler, on the completion of their thesis work. The high caliber of the work produced by these four graduates, who entered the MFA program right after the lockdown was lifted, is a testament to their perseverance, ingenuity, and dedication to their practice.

After viewing the artists' work in the Hamilton Foyer and Arronson Gallery and afterward hearing their presentations, I began to recognize some relationships and characteristics in the work/concepts of these four artists. For the purposes of this essay, I'll call them: instinctive curiosity, the materiality of the piece, and immersive experiences.

Curiosity is a consistent attribute for most artists; and from years of observation and personal experience, I can testify that creatives tend to be the most inquisitive and ardent researchers. It's common to see them working until three in the morning in the paper studio, just because they have to figure out the right combination of retention aid and formation that will aid will creating pulp paint with the right consistency to produce the

color and mark that they envision. It's typical for artists to spend almost as much time researching and developing a concept, as the amount of time they spend in the studio carrying it out. Tenacity and curiosity are traits that are sometimes confused, although I would argue after gaining an understanding of these artists' ambitious work, it's safe to assume that they are also a tenacious bunch. However, these artists did more than persist in their respective bodies of work, they continually asked 'what if' and 'why.' One can see how curiosity played an important role in all of these artists' cumulative work, but it's especially evident in the work of Grace Johnson, whose work is an exploration of the relationship between the self and societal systems. After spending only a few minutes with her work, viewers easily perceive how her work questions the ways our external systems help, hinder and become us and, furthermore, how we set ourselves apart from these systems. It offers not only an immersive experience but allows both viewers and the artist an opportunity to evaluate and reevaluate the roles they play that are dictated by societal and economic structures. This body of work also invites viewers to be curious participants. As I studied her miniature eye-level shallow moss-filled crystal vessel pieces, which were skewered in various depths by cocktail martini swords, I couldn't help but question my own relationship with the natural world and the heavily structured or built-up aspects of society. In an age where we can design, print, and wear a piece

of jewelry in a few minutes or press the undo button with ease when we make a mistake in Photoshop, it was refreshing to see so much evidence of the human hand in these four artists' works. The materiality of the piece recognizes that works of art extend beyond the fact of physical matter to encompass all relevant

information related to the work's physical existence. The artwork's physicality, those aspects that can be sensed and verified by viewers, is a priority, and its physicality impacts content and, subsequently, its meaning. As artists who use their hands to pull sheets, push squeegees, and bind books, it's evident that all four of these artists intentionally choose to create work that places importance on how the entities involved in the creation or formation of artwork are integral to its meaning. Two artists in this cohort, Jingnan Cheng and Xue'er Gao, take material exploration to another level. Cheng's work is an investigation of material and includes examples of stitching, color mixing, and symbology, and dyeing it to express her inner thoughts, from pain to anxiety and from joy to elation. *The Footprint Journal*, made from various types of hand-dyed organza and muslin fabric, is sewn together in a loop-like fashion, which for the artist, represents the cyclical nature of living with anxiety. The piece is mounted on the gallery wall and viewers are encouraged to touch and pull on the Mobius strip-like fabric, thereby having a greater understanding of Cheng's

perspective. Especially powerful are Cheng's Diary pieces, which consist of machine-sewn black text onto light silk organza. The pieces are mounted 4"-5" inches away from the wall, and because of this, they cast haunting and mythical shadows upon the wall. With the artist's sensitivity to materials, including the fabric choice, and in understanding the thread's intention to tangle, bunch, and stretch, viewers feel pulled into the artist's inner thoughts.

Gao's thesis work strongly focused on experimentation and exploration, where paper has the leading role in conveying her concepts. Her exhibition is a feast of handmade paper whereupon it is woven, cut, stretched, and pierced; it truly pushes the boundaries of what paper can do and be. Included in the exhibition are paper sculptures, rugs, flowers, and a window installation, which she conceptualizes as a metaphor for returning to the beginning while simultaneously offering an opportunity for reexamining. Whether there are stanchions in place, expensive ticket prices, or lofty ideas that alienate viewers, we are familiar with barriers that come with viewing art. Gao's work flips the script on this notion, not only encouraging viewers to peer closely through open areas of her work but taking it a step further by encouraging viewers to touch and acquire (handmade paper flowers) a part of her exhibition.

Most importantly to this notion of the materiality of the piece, both artists encourage viewers to touch, handle and engage with the works, which inevitably creates a

connection between the viewer and the work of art.

The last concept that is a throughline in all of these exhibitions is the importance of immersive experiences. This terminology should not be confused with the commercial technology-driven, mixed reality playgrounds and secret passageways that the Van Gogh Experience and Meow Wolf offer, and to be clear, I'm not belittling that expression. However, the type of immersive experiences these artists created in their exhibitions are intimate, coupled with a strong point of view. More specifically, Bryn Ziegler views books as an opportunity for a collaborative experience. She maintains that when strangers read the same book, they carry a shared story. In this instance, the artist is creating books that require engagement and exploration to be activated, not sedentary, although viewers are encouraged to settle into the cozy chair atop the paper rug, which is also an important part of the exhibition. *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, the artist's thesis exhibition, is a display of several single-player choose-your-own-path books, which are designed around self-discovery within restrictive structures. She has consistently incorporated interactive elements in her work, but this book goes a step further by utilizing the game format, which requires readers to actively engage throughout the experience to create their own paths. When viewing her thesis work, I was struck by the details the artist considered in creating this work, such as the way she created different play station

heights and the way she offered both a micro (holding and engaging with the trade-sized book in the palm of your hands) and a macro (observing the cartographic mural on the wall) experiences for viewers/participants. These considerations not only draw the viewers in, but encourage them to play, settle in, and share their experiences.

Many thanks to Lori Spencer for inviting me to be this year's Guest Critic and Essayist. Viewing Jingnan Cheng, Xue'er Gao, Grace Johnson, and Bryn Ziegler's work and hearing their presentations not only provided an opportunity to refresh my vision and sharpen my critical opinions, but excited me about the future in the fields of Printmaking, Paper, and Book Arts, which will surely be positively shaped by these talented artists.

MFA Book Arts & Printmaking, Class of 2023

Xue'er Gao

Jingnan Cheng

Grace Johnson

Bryn Ziegler



Wu Li Kan Hua (flower in the fog)
 paper weaving, handmade paper
 2023

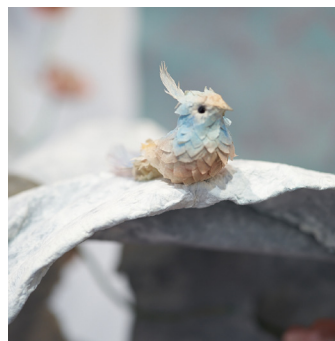
My studio practice is all about exploration and experimentation. I create stunning artist books, prints, installations, and 3-dimensional forms using papermaking techniques that transform the patterns of Chinese culture into vibrant, colorful visual poetry. Drawing inspiration from the magical world around me, my art is infused with a sense of wonder and whimsy that captures the essence of artistic vision. And in my artistic creation and learning, I am curious about different materials. Each material has its own characteristics, and I hope I can understand them fundamentally and communicate with them.

In the thesis exhibition in the spring of 2023, I designed a visual feast where paper is the main character, along with the theme of spring. Paper sculptures and paper rugs made of pure paper pulp, with Kozo paper flowers suggest spring bloom memories. Pulp paintings combining modernity and tradition are created with Yongchun paper weaving technology; this is a Chinese traditional skill that begins with a traditional Chinese painting which is cut into 2-3 mm and then cross-woven with 2-3 mm rice paper. *Hazy view, Lake vapor*, the Eastern Papermaking installation shows the characteristic of Kozo paper with natural light behind it. Finally, page through the book of all the paper samples of the exhibit bound by Chinese style thread binding, touch each piece with your hands; feel the texture of paper.

The works in the exhibit are named after Chinese idioms. From my perspective, I show the colors of spring in different seasons (in the Chinese culture this has 24 solar terms). I use paper as the medium and spring as the jumping off point. This is a journey of returning to the beginning and re-examining at the same time. Artistic creation is the communication between me and the material. When the works are exhibited, I hope that the audience can return to the simplest feeling in these spaces.

Chun Man Ren Jian
(spring reigns everywhere)
kozo paper
2023

Resting Stop Installation
handmade paper
2023





Resting Stop Installation
handmade paper
2023

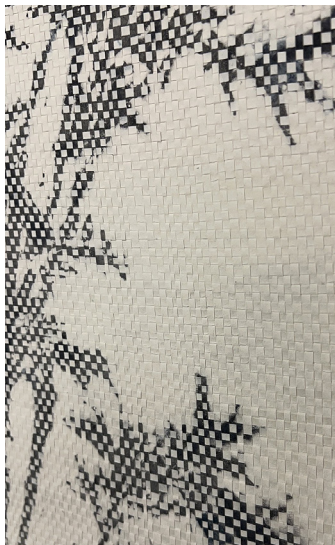


Paper-Rug Collection – Bloom
handmade paper
2023



Hazy View, Lake Vapor
paper installation
2023





You Zhu Yan Yu
(misty rain, deep in the bamboo forest)
 paper weaving, handmade paper
 2023





Wu Li Kan Hua (flower in the fog)
paper weaving, handmade paper
2023

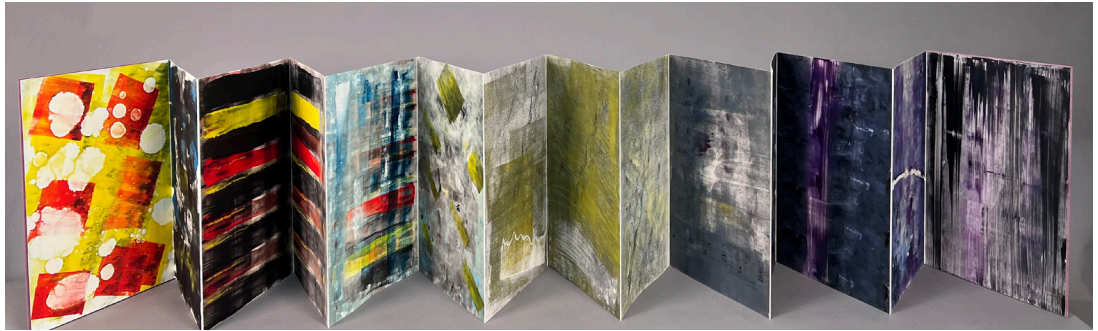
My art is presented through different mediums and methods, including pulp sculpture, screen prints, monoprints, tie-dyeing, installation art, and more. The mediums and methods I choose are all used to express my inner thoughts, from pain and anxiety to lighter, happier feelings, like inspiration and joy. My art doesn't have a pre-made form. It is subconsciously inspired by what I experience. It is abstract, not illustrative, and time is thematically important. I place great value on interactive pieces because I feel that is the most powerful way to experience art.

In my Thesis Exhibition, I used monotypes in my accordion books to express emotions, finding solace in the daily process. I focused on abstract patterns and colors, inspired by my inner thoughts and influenced by my experiences.

My Self-Portrait II: "Death" screen print shows struggle/ depression and hopelessness. Yellow symbolizes masked pain, red represents internal pain, and yarn represents the passage of time. Blue dots over the face reflect a reluctance to confront emotions.

The Footprint Journal piece uses different types of cloth, including organza and muslin, sewn together in a loop to represent the cyclical nature of anxiety and living. Screenprinted and embroidered footprints on

tie-dyeing background represent the chaotic nature of anxiety and the use of bold colors expressing emotions that are difficult to articulate in words. The looped cloth is mounted on a gallery wall, allowing the audience to engage with it by pulling it down like a never-ending roll of fabric, contributing to its continuous motion.



Book Arts & Printmaking
MFA THESIS EXHIBITION



Footprint Journal

muslin, organza, screenprint, tie-dying, sewing

2023



Footprint Journal
additional detail
2023

Footprint Journal sewing detail
2023



Jingnan Cheng's Installation
2023



Self-Portrait Series II 'Death'
screenprint, fabric, yarn
2023



Belaying
screenprint
2023

My work seeks to compare the building blocks of social ideologies to intrinsic human characteristics. I focus on the aspects of the self that make a person individual and juxtapose them with the heavily structured aspects of society. This allows me to imply the mental, physical, and emotional effects these systems have on concepts of self and personal autonomy. This relationship is characterized by themes of strain, drive, repetition, reward, and co-dependence. These themes appear throughout the pieces in my thesis exhibition. I contrast the recurring imagery of the jackhammer with photography of myself to emphasize their natural and mechanical forms. This highlights relationships between soft and hard, conception and production, and form and function. I am inspired by the call and response of the internal and external, and the fight for control between them. In what ways do our external systems help, hinder, and become us, and how do we set ourselves apart from them? My work allows me to inspect my quality of life more closely. It allows me to separate myself from the constant input around me and ask myself why I participate in my own life in the ways that I do, and what motivates or influences me to do that. I compare raw feelings with rationalized ones and dig deeper into my own wants and needs. I want my work to trigger the viewer into reevaluating the roles they play in their lives and the aspects of their daily living that

are dictated by societal and economic structures. I hope to point out how much time is spent trying to please the worlds definition of value and how personalities are lost through the demand to structure the self in order to maintain functional and productive lifestyles.



Rota
screenprint
2023

Everlasting
screenprint
2023

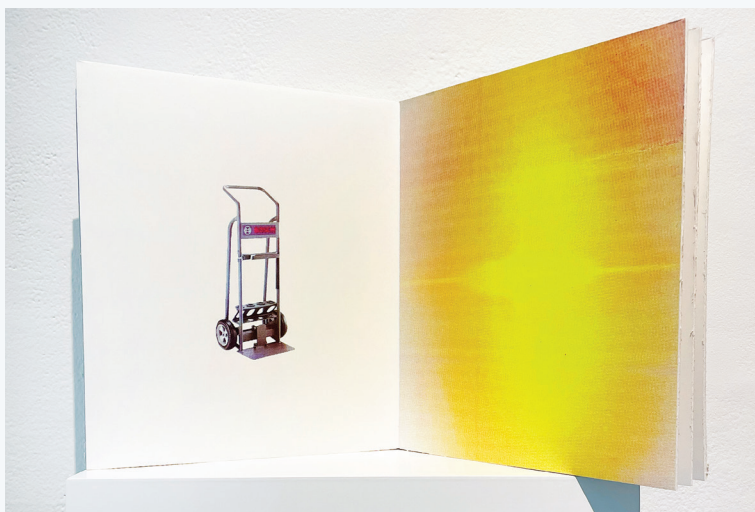




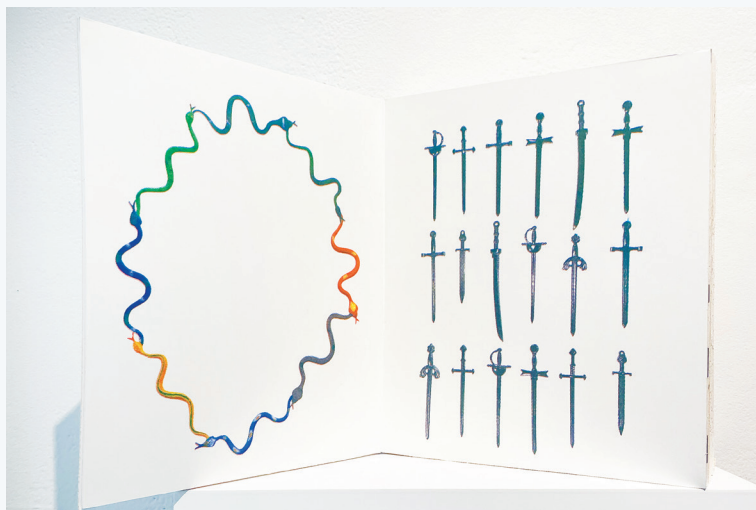
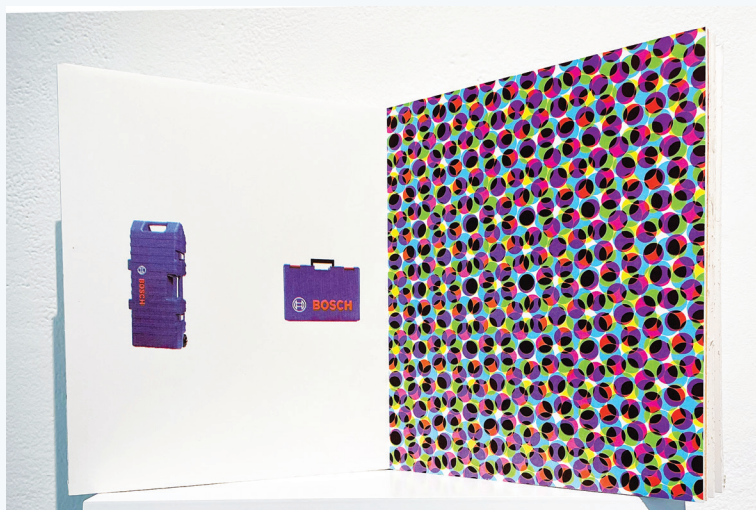
Cleaning Crew
screenprint
2023



Broken Sword (top)
resin, plastic sword
2023



Pneumatic book spreads
screenprint, inkjet
2023





Don't Look Into The Abyss
installation
2023

My thesis centers on one book edition which represents the technical and thematic direction of my artistic practice. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is a single-player choose-your-path book printed on a Heidelberg KORS using offset lithography. The game is designed around navigating self-discovery within restrictive structures. The premise is simple: you are an adventurer traveling through a vast expanse. Every few pages, you are faced with a challenge and given two options, which leads you to two more options, until you either fail your mission or successfully return home. However, there are also a number of concealed passages offering a different perspective. Through those scenes, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* creates an opportunity for readers to disrupt their experience. This book and its format explores three central tenets of my work: growth within cycles, interactivity, and the comic format.

I make art first and foremost for my community—queer adults. I am inspired by the interplay between internal development of queer identity and external influences. I understand queerness as an ongoing journey propelled by a cycle of reflection, a concept built into the variable narrative of *Don't Look Into The Abyss*.

The interactivity of my work comes from my fascination with the collective intimacy of book editions. When

strangers read the same book, they carry a shared experience. When I plan pieces, I imagine the people who view it are connected by a thread, and challenge myself to take that community on an adventure. With that in mind, I am interested in making books that require engagement and exploration to be activated. I've incorporated interactive elements in my previous work through printed bookplates or imagery hidden within a fold. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I take the interaction a step further, utilizing the game format to prompt readers to form their own path.

Finally, I want to address the format and the use of comics as a pillar of my practice and a core element of *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. I continue to find new reasons to love working with comics; the highly recognizable language offers me a structure that I can then play within or subvert. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, the framework of comics, present in the panels, style, and page transitions, helps craft—and distort—a sense of time and place. I was also able to make use of the offset press's transparent inks and a split complementary color scheme to heighten the conceptual impact of the book. By deliberately mis-registering sections of the films, I crafted a reserved color palette that gives way to eye-popping tones at specific moments.



Don't Look Into The Abyss installation
mural, chair, shelves, hand-bound books, paper rug
2023



Don't Look Into The Abyss
deluxe edition enclosure (top)
pochoir, acrylic gouache
2023



Collaborative Paper Rug With
Xue'er Gao (left)
handmade paper
2023

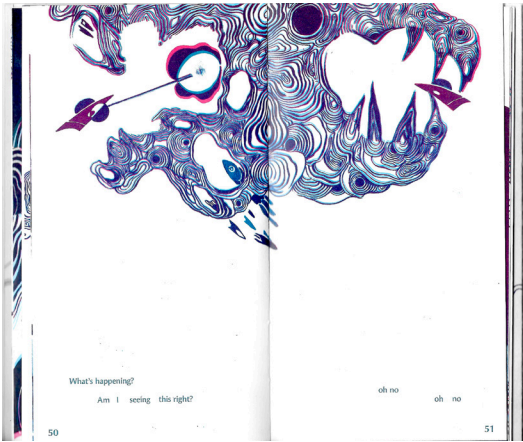
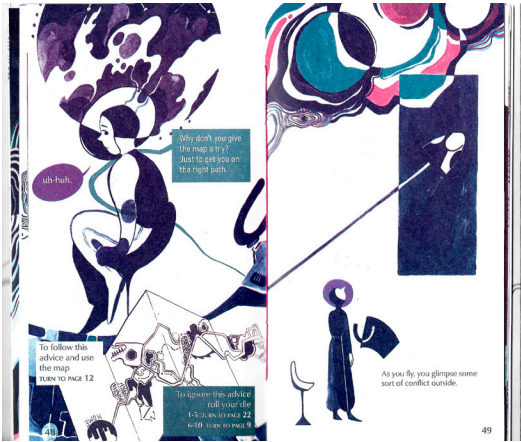
Don't Look Into The Abyss
original pages
gouache, ink
2023





Don't Look Into The Abyss
 offset lithography, long-stitch binding
 2023

Don't Look Into The Abyss
shelf installation
hand-bound book, shelf, die
2023



Don't Look Into The Abyss Page details
2023



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