

A Thesis Presented to  
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Introspective Art as Activism: How Art Intersects with a Developing Asian-American  
Identity

By  
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I didn't know that I was Chinese until I was far too old, let alone know what being Chinese meant. I think that is a shocking concept for most people I meet, since most realize that I am Chinese-American faster than I can remember it. For this reason, and more, my final Honors Project is a combination of work from an independent show, *AnOther One*, and my senior BFA show, *For Me to Know (and You to Find out)*. Together, they become a chronicled journey of self-discovery and development through the multiple lenses of intersection that affect me the most—ethnicity, gender, class, and activism. While some images produced for this Honors Project may not be entirely legible for all spectators, the purpose of my work is to create a space for healthy and informative conversation around the intersecting demographic spheres of society. While this introductory writing does not include all of my work made for these two shows, these are the foremost examples of how the give-and-take nature of education and introspection is visualized as individual pieces.

My work on *AnOther One* was in response to the rising occurrences of blatant racism and racial microaggression on campus and nationally. Locally, there are seldom opportunities for students, particularly the extremely few art students of color, to publicize adversities that they face in a comfortable setting. I believe that is a product of our low numbers and the environments of the School of Art and Design and Alfred's campus as a whole. The academic structure for BFA-track students leaves little to no room for extracurricular involvement or non-Art classwork; this inability to invest in structured social activity shows in my and many of my fellow students' work, as artwork immediately reflects even temporary reprioritization to non-Art work. Further, the advising support is not necessarily fully equipped to encourage activist growth in students. Together with three other BFA students of color, we gathered work that was in response to these microaggressions, environments, and missed opportunities. My work in particular, as both curator and showing artist, was focused on how inadvertent action or inaction, such as microaggressions, may accumulate to a larger psychological toll on an individual, particularly us four as members of the same year and major. This culmination of behaviors and passive prohibitions, for me, is a form of inadvertent segregation, and should be called as such. *Waiting Room* (fig. 1) was created with the purpose of explicitly stating that students of color's minority status allows for institutional discrimination—or at least favoritism along Color lines—just like how legal segregation is institutionalized racism.

Over time, the accumulated occurrences of racial bias, of missed opportunities, and a general feeling of receiving lower quality feedback or benefits despite the same amount of emotional and physical input all combine to a shared reaction of depression-like symptoms for fellow students of color. To combat that, and to find a bit of community despite it all, I organized and made work for a show that could iterate these thoughts, concerns, and feelings for our audiences—the ones who “other” us, and our fellow “others.” *Colored* (fig. 2) continues to use the visual language of institutional segregation as a means of denoting the show as a form of passive segregation. No matter how White I may be, the reminder that I am still “other” denotes me as Colored. The above piece is also a reminder that, no matter how White a person may be, that person will always be Colored if they have even one drop of non-White and are recognized and treated that way. The making of this piece helped solidify myself as a member of this group, since Asian/Pacific Islander (API) and mixed-race White-API people are not always considered as being of Color despite their treatment as such.

I realized halfway through my sophomore year that Alfred University’s Institute for Cultural Unity’s only API-dedicated club had regrettably died out years before I even started attending. Further, Alfred State also lacked an API-dedicated club. I recognized my personal need for an API community to help myself recognize and analyze my general feelings of “otherness” on campus, so I conscripted a few other students to help me make Asians in America. Being the President of this club helped me realize that others were feeling similarly, and it gave me an impetus to research further. My artwork has been, from then on, a visual representation of my reactions to the academic study of inequality toward API people and other intersecting identities.

In the most obvious example of academics in art, my largest piece made for *AnOther One*, similarly titled *Another One*, was an interactive exercise that helped visualize microaggressions and their psychological and emotional toll, while also providing avenues for further education in the form of a self-published zine. This zine included learnings from classes and academic articles about microaggressions, examples of those behaviors, and how to become a better ally to those not within one’s racial group. The title suggests the exhausting nature of receiving yet another reminder that one is an “other.” This piece, in particular, was inspired by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and his use of interactive takeaways to

create more meaning. People are first instructed to take a sack of pennies (fig. 3), which they must then relinquish should they read a statement that applies to them (fig. 4). The statements are on the wall and are all examples of behavioral or verbal microaggressions. Those who do not face these microaggressions can walk away with 20 pennies, whereas those who do—most likely people of color—walk away with few to none. They then come over to a table where a proctor performs a test, which is based on skin tone compared to a paint swatch (fig. 5). If a person fails the test, or is passably White, they must pay for the zine. If a person passes the test, or is of color, they may have a zine for free. The idea is to quantify and materialize privilege and racial fatigue, to provide White people the chance to experience privilege, the chance to use that privilege for positive change, and to create a time for people of color to feel recognized for their fatigue and to become educated in how to better protect themselves.

In many ways, I have felt an omnipresent and unjustified anxiety of underperforming. No matter how many languages I learn, I will never feel confident speaking; no matter how many pieces I make, my show will never be good; no matter how many credits I take, I will never be learned; no matter how high my GPA may be, I will never be smart; no matter how long my bibliography, no one will ever truly believe me. These thoughts, I have found, are not dissimilar for many other people in the minority, who feel sympathetically about the need to be exceptional to just be acceptable. Some of these anxieties are described in *Another One* and have therefore been confirmed as illogical and not applicable for many White people. For me, this need has fatigued me in every area of health, and my hope to alleviate that gathers into my introspective pieces for my show, *For Me to Know*.

Everyone always asks for explanations about culture, racial fatigue, my art, my plans, or my future. After studying how aspects of Racial Battle Fatigue work for API people, I find that these inundating and heavy demands for answers are incredibly taxing. For those asking, they have only asked me once; but for me, I may have heard that question and had to explain a hundred times already, and thoroughly because of the fear that I may accidentally underperform. This is why my show is entitled as such, as I call for people to find out as much as they can on their own, because I already know—this work is my attempt to shift some of the burden of teaching onto those who proclaim that they want to

learn. For common questions like, “what’s your senior show about?” “what are you going to do after graduation?” “what is this [generic API or Chinese tradition] about?” “why do API people do [anything remotely un-American]?” my answer, for the sake of relieving burden and fatigue, is now “that’s for me to know, and you to find out.”

This show features mostly print works; this is important to note, as material can provide meaning. Almost all of my prints on paper are reductive woodblock prints, which easily lends itself to an accessible, albeit historic and highly technical, process. For printmaking, the process of conception, analysis, dissection, and recombination easily mimic the constant forming and re-forming of identity. Throughout history, print has been a medium for narrative and news; from the 15<sup>th</sup> century etchings that would illustrate and interpret Bibles, to the propaganda posters rampant through the Cultural Revolution, to the extremely popular East Asian woodblock prints like *ukio-e*, the abilities of print are an asset to communication, dialogue, and accessible tradition and culture across space and time. Using print as my medium of choice has therefore already denoted my work as technically laborious, layered, editioned, and can also garner some East Asian art history context as a woodblock.

What differentiates one person from the “others,” I believe, are the ways they react to their environments: impressions, interpretations, things that are noteworthy to observe and remember, people and places worthy of association, behaviors and sayings worth mimicking, etc. Of all the things that leave these impressions on one’s mind, the subsequent collection of impressions is what makes the individual. While that individual and their collection may be unique, it will always be made of similar components as everyone else. Much like hair, eyes, ears, teeth, tongue prints, lip prints, or finger prints are nearly the same for all people, the collection of their minute details are uniquely identifying features of a person. Humans know this inherently, as cultures across time have imbued symbolic and almost spiritual meanings to these abstracted pieces of the self, particularly hair.

While walking through galleries in New York City one summer, my friend, brother, and I came upon a gallery with large-size graphite drawings and fiber sculptures heavily featuring hair. To me, I immediately recognized the artist as Chinese, despite a lack of signage or biography. My companions were both skeptic, as the pieces failed to include more obvious symbols of Chinese-ness. By the time we reached the back of the gallery, the

artist's biography and artist statement confirmed my assumption of her identity and overall reading of her work. Hui Chi Lee, the artist, may not use stereotypical Chinese imagery, but her innate sensibilities were legible to me as a fellow Chinese person, and radically changed my interpretation of her pieces. While her work may not be the most influential visually for me, this experience has shifted my focus on how to translate my thoughts into visual imagery. In particular, using hair may not be a Chinese symbol, but can be a symbol with strong Chinese sensibilities.

In the print, *Inheritance* (fig. 6), I discuss how these pieces of the physical identity represent one's psychological identity. Since different cultures imbue different meanings to each piece, the overall meaning may change. For me, hair represents a traditional Chinese girl and the connotations that come with that identity. For example, with each alteration to my hair, according to Chinese tradition and people, I move even further from being an acceptable Chinese person, despite my American label never changing. In all the ways that Chinese tradition can support or suffocate me, the uncertain and anxiety-ridden balance is imbued into this image: without the hair, would some of these other features, like the eye or the lips, even exist? How could the hair be beneficial if it also suffocates the open mouth and ears? Can the hands control the hair, or is it yet another object meant only to sustain it?

Similarly, I use hair in *Mixed* (fig. 7) to help denote the two individuals as White or Asian. In homage to Adrian Piper's self-portrait drawings, "Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features," and "Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady," I was struck by her mission to use her mixed-race status to "destabilize the very concept of [race]" (Cotter). As a child, I never noticed that the two halves of my race were supposed to be separate "sides," the White side and the Asian side, and that they were supposed to react differently to the same stimulus. Lately, I have begun to understand their separateness, so I created this woodblock to visualize the times that I identify more with one side than the other despite never actually physically changing. This disassociation is shown in Piper's work, but I felt that the lack of their connection despite their forced division should be shown as well. The act of silencing the Asian call for equity and social justice, and the act of forcing the White ally to open her eyes and use her voice and privilege for them both are purposeful representations of how my mixed-race status both enables and disables me, and how their strained relationship can still be somewhat functional.

As with all things, I worry about my performance as a Chinese person, especially since I am only an American. My worries about my ability to claim an ethnicity are reflected in the personalities of my family members, and so I objectively use their likeness as symbols for these intangible but ever-present concepts. For this series of work, called the *Window Series*, I begin with old family photos and digitally abstract them as part of a ritual of filial piety, particularly to immortalize the essences of them as symbols and reflective aspects of me as a psychological entity. I then separate the colors of that digital image into layers. Then, I screenprint those layers onto plexiglass, which are specifically mounted to allow for a lenticular-like view of the overall image. This long and almost reverent process reflects much about identity, its multiple layers, and how it creates countless images depending on perception. No two people will see the exact same image, just as no one will see these images the way I do—as a process and not a product.

For my brother (fig. 8), his aloofness to his ethnic identity protect him from the anxieties and worries that plague me daily. His tendency to think logically as opposed to my propensity to feel intuitively allows him to focus entirely on one thing and therefore become highly skilled in specific areas. My wont for being involved in many areas despite my inability to sustain that involvement makes me appreciate his ability to do what I cannot. For many reasons, I see my brother as my character foil; because of that, he has become integral to my description of myself, as what I am and what I am not. Not just in his general personality, but his approach to identity is also almost the exact opposite of mine. In this way, I feel that he and I may be two halves of a greater whole that broadly covers all skills, opinions, feelings, and personality traits. Ironically enough, he does not share this opinion, and his disinterest in art, ethnic studies, and API activism is one of the major contributing factors for my dedication to those areas of interest.

Similarly, my father's cousin, Melinda (fig. 9), is another foil of mine. Her greater ability to perform being Chinese, such as speaking the language, knowing the customs, and being ethnically full, show that my abilities, like my ability to pass as a full Chinese person, are lacking. For as long as I can remember, I have looked up to her and her capabilities for fitting in while around my Chinese family since even before I realized why I was unable to do so, too. Because of this, her image is looking down at the viewer, and the overall piece must be viewed from below to line up the plates as one picture (fig. 10). This also shows

how position can change the image on the plexiglass. Now, as an adult, through self-imposed investigations on Colorism and through ongoing conversations within my club—Asians in America—I have found an ongoing problematic trend of Colorism, passibility, and a hierarchy of authority on the API experience within the API community. These trends threaten solidarity and dialogue within the API community at large as well as with my cousin.

Being a product of multiple cultures is not unlike having bifocal contacts—I perceive and receive impressions from more and different lenses than any members from either side of my family. Things I was taught to know since birth are otherworldly to some, and ideas that plague my mind are not even considered by many; this was confirmed by the reactions of a largely White audience to the pieces in *AnOther One*. The people who inspire me, movies that engage me, stories that move me, jokes that offend me, questions that fatigue me, and causes I fight for are all -subconscious by-products of how I was raised as mixed-race in a society of single-race people. My perseverance on them has brought these concerns and impressions to the fore and have become the basis for each individual piece as I analyze how these lenses change who I am in each environment I move through. Hair returns as a force of change for a pair of double-iris eyes. The variant print collection, *Metaphase* (fig. 11), is in reference to a stage of DNA replication in cellular reproduction. At this frozen point of time, the cell is in two, yet still in one cellular body. The tendrils of centriole microtubules—the filaments that pull the already-replicated sister chromatids apart—are either pushing the chromatids/eye away or together/closed or open, as the frozen image cannot denote its action to us as the viewer. This tension of being watched, watching, being forced to open or to close are all reflective of similar tension as seen in *Mixed*.

As I travel into and throughout spaces, I have also observed how others perceive me. After all these years, I am still figuring how what it really means to be mixed-race White-Chinese American. One major aspect that I have realized is that my collection of labels, or varying identities, is typically more numerous than my companions'. These labels not only allow me to almost fit into many more places with my long, hyphenated identity, but they also hinder and exclude me from so many more communities, cultures, and experiences. In an attempt to define themselves, the labels society and individuals use to define themselves

have been used to define me as “other,” and it seems that “other” is perhaps the only place I can belong.

What you see in my work are all my thoughts and feelings about the above: a critical analysis of the intersections of identity, race, gender, privilege, colorism, xenophobia, ethnic performance, language, passibility, memory, perception. From the color to the subjects, size, and medium, these works and their elements are all tools in creating a narrative. These stories should be fought for, as they may not reveal themselves easily—they were not easy things to live through and analyze.

The shows, *AnOther One* and *For Me to Know (and You to Find out)*, inform people that I can only do so much to incite a dialogue. I benefit from some White privileges—such as my privilege to go to college, and my privilege of affluence so I may spend more time on extracurriculars and not on becoming employed—and I try to use them to educate myself and create times and spaces for dialogue and education. These shows are also a way to validate myself as someone who, after studying University-level classes for four years, is knowledgeable and can be a reliable resource for specific topics. In this way, the show and their titles simultaneously claim my racial reality and combat the microaggressions typically aimed at people my gender, age, and ethnicity.

In all the history, sociology, cultural studies, and psychology classes and articles that I have read about race relations in America, almost all are either about Black and White tensions or the difficulties faced by Jewish people. After reading studies by Derald Sue, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, my worry that the lack of similar studies for the API community were confirmed. The African American and Jewish dominance of the fields of race and ethnic studies is completely understandable, considering the extensive history and gravity with these two minority groups. However, the lack of documented and peer-reviewed precedence leaves me in a strange place as an Asian-American going through the requisite identity or existential crises typical of a young adult. Engaging with this controlled crisis is the main motivation for most of the work I do: from creating and running Alfred University’s only API club, to taking sociology and culture studies classes here and abroad, to almost all of my artwork for the past three and a half years. The context for my art is the research and validation for Asian-American social diversity, inclusivity, equity, and justice, as it so often is absent from the conversation on

Color. Learning from the histories of other minorities, I have accrued a vocabulary and general knowledge that helps me to analyze, recognize, and describe trends of racism and racial microaggressions toward Asian-Americans and API people.

For example, in “Performing the Hyphen, Engaging German-Jewishness at the Jewish Museum Berlin” the idea that people may feel obligated to perform their ethnic identity struck me. It was a subconscious behavior of mine and many others that covertly plagued our every thought and action. The indescribable need to be “more Chinese,” or a “better Chinese person,” became describable. After this reading, referenced in a class titled “Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Germany,” I realized that the larger significance of identity being a lifelong performance and not only a list of hyphenated labels. This radically changed my approach to art. Whereas before, I sought to learn as much as possible about Chinese art history to then reference and make my art look more Chinese, I now know that my art is Chinese-American art regardless of aesthetic, and that to continue a pointless quest to become more Chinese than I am was not only tiring but also a lie. While I still reference imagery from Chinese art and craft, such as work from contemporary Taiwanese artist Hui Chi Lee or prints and masks from Beijing opera and its marketing, I find that it is liberating to know that my identity as a Chinese-American person will not change with my inability to perform at all times. I hope to bring these ideas of performance, identity, and acceptance to more Asian-Americans; as I have learned while working with Asians in America, many Asian-Americans—especially mixed-race or adopted people—have an extremely difficult time attempting to perform according to the invisible expectations of society.

Similarly, while being in a leadership position for this club, I have had to expand my academic knowledge of Asian-American history and the obstacles that the community has faced as a minority. While again, most trustworthy academic sources focus more on the Black and White tensions, essays, like Derald Sue’s “Racial Microaggressions and the Asian-American Experience,” have been extremely elucidating and validating. In my most recent work, finding methods to engage the audience to think about ways that they may be passively helping to perpetuate the cycle of institutionalized or socialized racism is a major goal. When regarding other social justice artist activists, like Ai Wei Wei and Adrian Piper, the use of art as a vehicle to incite constructive dialogue and introspective thinking is

inspiring. In this context, my art practice in these two shows depict my evolution from art for art's sake and introspection as self-care, to introspective art as a form of activism.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

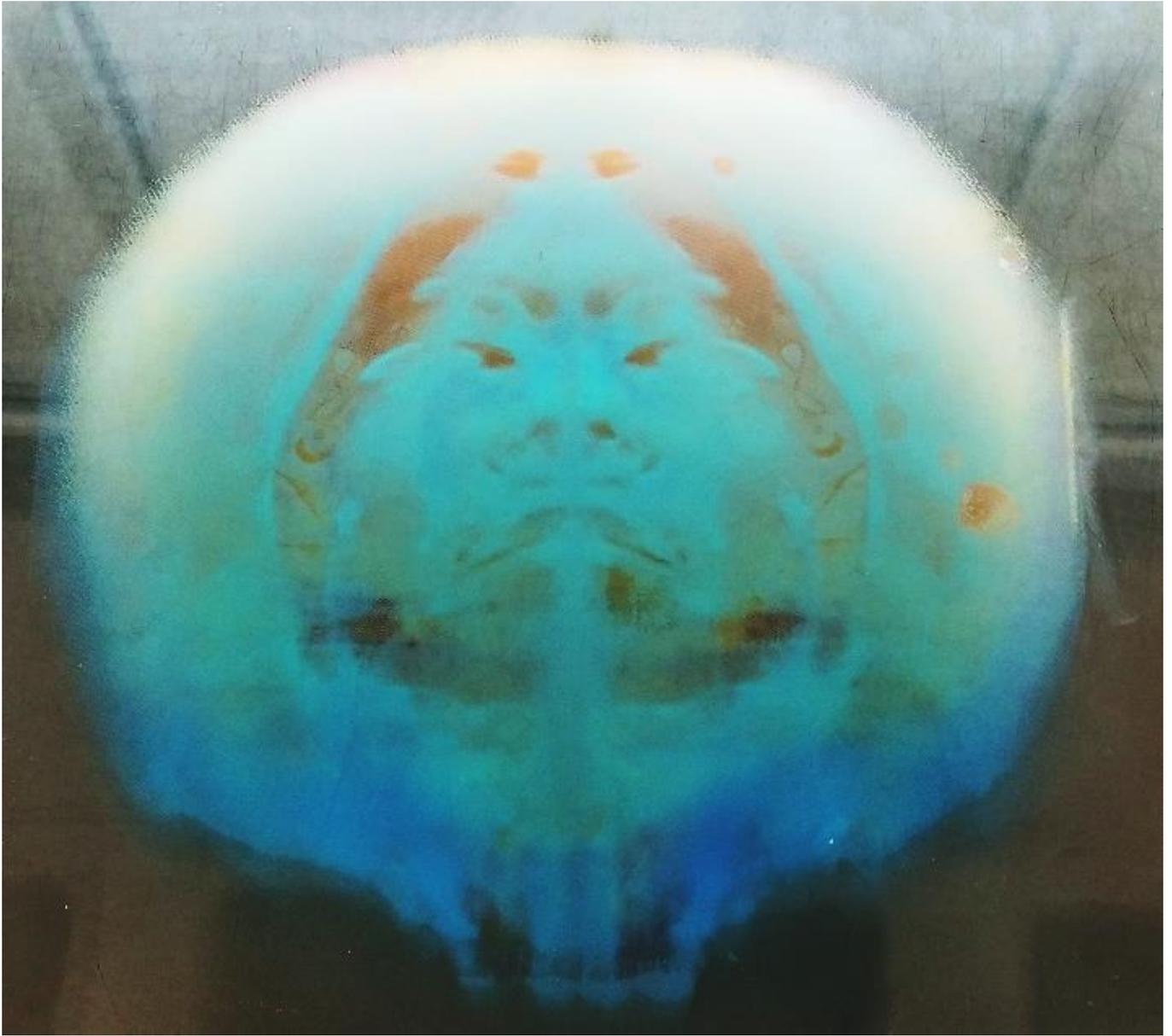
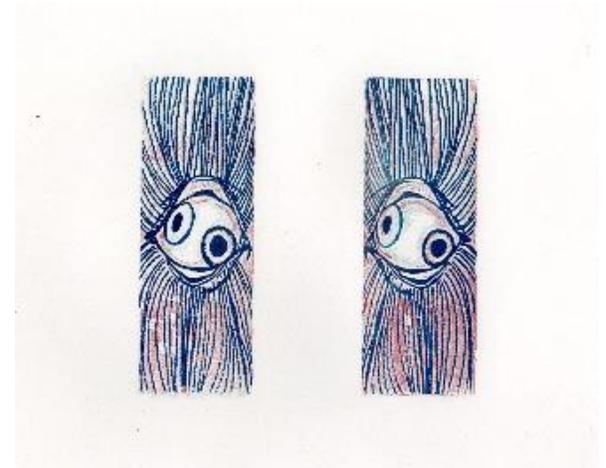
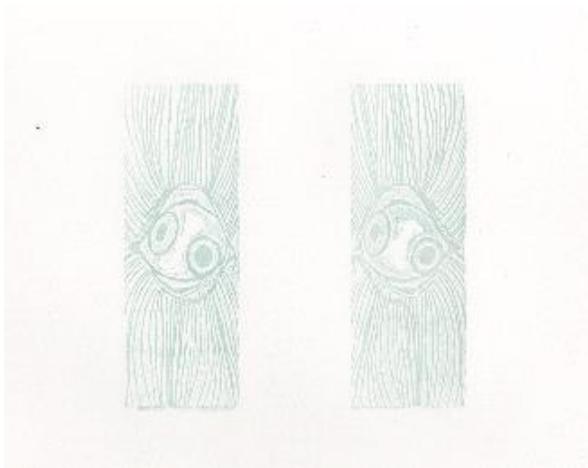
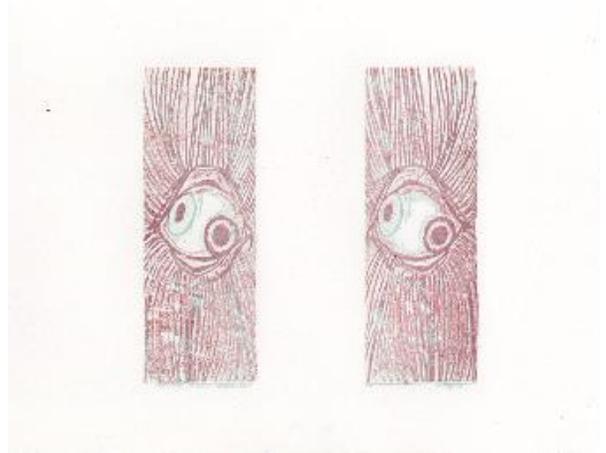


Figure 11



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