

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

**The Trials and Tribulations of Being Precieved**

**Ren Dessert**

In Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
The Alfred University Honors Program

**May 3, 2021**

Under the Supervision of:

Chair: **Joseph Scheer, Distinguished Professor of Print Media**

Committee Members:

**Mary McInnes, Professor of Art History & Contemporary Art**  
**Katarina Riesing, Associate Professor of Foundations**

My thesis exhibition is about perception and the ways in which it is subjective and limited. This body of work—altered photographs and text based posters—focus on different roles of perception. It explores how outsiders perceive us, how we perceive ourselves, and the space where those viewpoints overlap. The photographs represent an outsider's point of view; the posters represent our point of view. When exhibited in concert with each other, they clash in perception. Together, my art asks this question: "How does one explain the limits of perception through art when art itself is a perceptual practice?" My written thesis below will explore this question via the work, its content, and my insights.

## I. Work

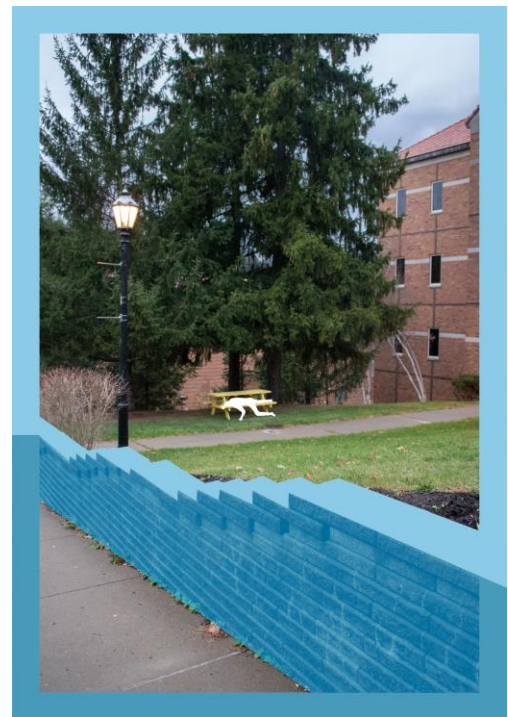
My photographs are digitally altered using graphic colors and distinct shapes. They capture images of the outside landscape of Alfred University and the outlying village. In each image, I highlight a structural element in a bold color in order to segment the photograph and draw the viewer's eye through the image. Here, in *Blue Bench* the retaining wall cuts diagonally through the composition, separating the foreground and the background. The digital manipulation begins with adding color, and continues with



*Orange Bridge*, archival print, 22 x 32 inches

overlaying the wall details. This creates a transparent layer which builds a bridge between the photographic image and the applied color. The color spreads outward to become both a border containing the narrative and a plane expanding its emotional impact.

Another constant component in these photographs is the use of a flat figure. Each figure is a different color than either the added architectural elements in the photograph or the border, in some cases standing out against the field and in other cases blending into the landscape. Often, the figures in the background are bold and contrast with the surrounding natural colors to help them stand out, while the figures in the foreground are given more neutral tones that match the surroundings and keep them



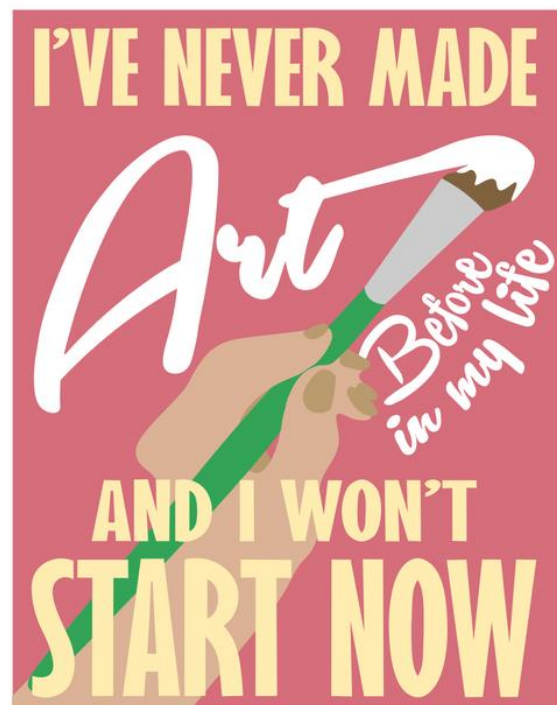
*Blue Bench*, archival print, 22 x 32 inches

from overwhelming the composition. At other times these roles are swapped; the figures in the background blend in and the figures in the foreground stand out. This palette draws the viewer's attention back-and-forth between each photograph. In *Blue Bench* a white figure is overlaid on a yellow picnic table in an otherwise unoccupied scene. The different figures are each pictured performing various tasks many of which are unexpected such as falling off a bench or dancing on a rooftop or hanging from telephone wires. Whether I draw attention to the figure by having it be in the forefront in

a bright color, or by forcing you to search for it in the background where its color blends in, the figure acts as a visual anchor to keep the viewer attentive.

The posters, like their photographic counterparts, convey narrative messages through the use of bright color and bold text. In the exhibition, I match the photographs and posters in pairs based on their similar hue and tone. These various colors and shades in each poster mimic its subject and emotion of the text.

The messages portrayed through the text encompass a multitude of topics, but each utilizes humor and parody. The variations in text font and size help create an explicit inflection in the phrasing—bold and more angular text intensifies the message while lowercase and rounded text softens it. For example, a phrase may be bracketed by the capitalized sharp-edged text and interrupted by the bending and looping middle text in the middle to mimic the cadence in which the phrase is spoken. In *Imagine Being an Artist...I Could Never*, the first and last lines of text are bold, capitalized fonts that anchor the beginning and ending of the phrase. In the same poster the middle lines are curvy, brushlike lettering that softens the tone and links the top and bottom lines of text together. These posters are printed in varying sizes which deviate from the traditional photograph ratio of four to



*Imagine Being An Artist...I Could Never*, archival print, 26 ¾ x 22 ¾ inches

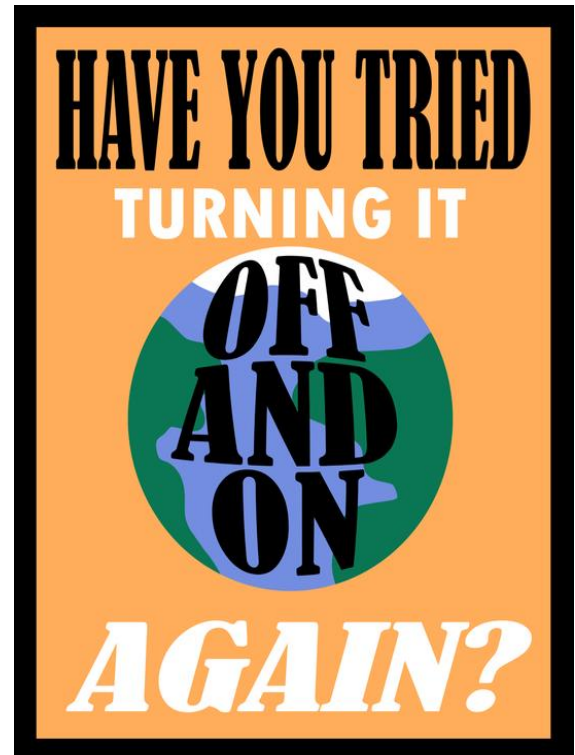


three and allows them to fit in the physical space between the photographs on the wall like puzzle pieces. The size and placement of the posters also highlight each as unexpected, independent thoughts.

Many of the posters have illustrations that reference those seen in political propaganda and post-war advertising campaigns. They are reductive versions of the objects they reference; they hinge more on the general shape and color than the details of what they are trying to represent. These illustrations add essential context for the message of the poster. For example, the work *Is There an IT Service for the Planet?* is understood to be about this planet because it features an illustration of the Earth, despite the word “Earth” not being mentioned

anywhere. The illustrations also interact with the text around them by either overlaying the text or integrating into the composition itself.

These visual aspects and technical manipulations are the base on which my work emerges. The formal elements of the raw photographs or initial illustrations are the foundation of a given work. The technical manipulations of added color, text, and figures are embellishments on that foundation. I introduce these elements and manipulations to help convey and promote my conceptual goals.



*Is There an IT Service for The Planet?*  
Archival print, 19 x 18 inches

## II. Content

The photographs and posters create two parallel narratives about perception. The photographs are addressing how we are perceived by the outside world; the posters are focused on how we perceive ourselves. The meeting of these two bodies of work highlights the interface between the inner persona (what we perceive ourselves to be) and the outer persona (what others perceive us to be). When the works are displayed together in my exhibition, the intersection between them reveals how perception is both subjective and partial.

The photographs act as a snapshot of how the outside world sees us. They are a single frame depicting a figure in its surroundings. This figure represents a subject as they go about their daily life; the camera is the apathetic spectator. This outsider perspective sees others in a way that they cannot see themselves. The spectator sees them from afar as they are in action. It is as though they are a model for a candid photoshoot. Since the figure cannot look at themselves directly, in the same way they cannot see the back of their head without assistance from a camera or a mirror, these photographs must be from the perspective of that spectator. The spectator represents *anyone* who may see them whether they are friend or foe, individual strangers or society as a whole. These onlookers, however, only have a limited perception of them in the same way a photograph itself can only capture a limited image.

Any photograph is a fabrication of reality with its frame, focus, and field constructed by the person operating the camera. The image both includes and excludes

a multitude of details that are consciously or unconsciously chosen. In my photographs I choose campus sites, erase their details, highlight certain architectural elements, and overlay new figures. The elements that have been colored lose distinctions in shape and texture with only minimal shadows being covered using a two-tone color palette. The image is limited to its frame; the viewer cannot see what is beyond that border or behind the camera.

My photographs present a selective view in the same manner that any spectator sees a partial view of the world. A spectator can see a physical picture of us, everything around us, and everything we are doing. This perception of us is only accessible to an external observer and not to us. Outsiders get a perception of us that we will never be able to experience. The same way that there are aspects missing or obscured in a given photograph, there will always be details missing in how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us.

My posters shift in perception and present the inner monologue of self-perception. There is a sense of humor, even absurdity, to these personal thoughts that I allow myself to express inside my mind because I know no one is watching. Even when voicing these thoughts aloud is not quite the same as how they exist in my mind, because my speech is influenced by social expectations. These thoughts are further limited by the strength of my communication skills. These posters highlight how even using every design tool I have at my disposal (color, text, illustration) there is always a perceptual difference between the finished image and my original thought. The colors can try to match my emotions and the text can try to mimic my inflections, but there is no *exact* match that would ensure a viewer has the same experience with that thought

as I do. Similar to a game of telephone where each step of the process distorts the original phrasing, each step of the art process from concept, to creation, to viewer distorts the final product. Each time I use a font that is “close enough” or a color shade that is “almost perfect,” the intent of the piece skews slightly further from my original thought.

The illustrations on the posters are examples of this distortion. They are not drawn to be photorealistic. They focus on shape and color to give the viewer a general idea of what they are supposed to be. This idea is enough for viewers to understand the intention, but it also leaves space for viewers to make their own assumptions. Is the woman in the poster young? Is she old? Is she an artist or not? This is for the viewer to decide. In the same way there are uncertainties in the perception of the illustrations, there are uncertainties in other’s perceptions of us. People make assumptions with what information they have in order to fill in those blanks. Therefore, their final idea of us is bound to be inaccurate. Ultimately, the posters cannot even capture the way I perceive myself and my own thoughts, therefore to expect an outsider to have an accurate perception of me would be absurd.

Together, the photographs and posters that form my exhibition seek to create an overlapping space where we can begin to see how perception is subjective. These two bodies of work explore the various aspects of how perception can be constructed—frame, distance, angle, color, emotion, and more. As the photographs and posters interact with each other on the wall we can see how each one is only a partial view of a full picture, an entirety that eludes us.

### III. Origin, Evolution, Insight

My thesis exhibition evolved over a year-long period initiated by my interest in marketing and consumerism. The inspiration for my senior work began with magazine advertisements from the nineteen-fifties and sixties. In particular those that came out of the madmen era of postwar consumption.



Alcoa Aluminum advertisement for  
Del Monte Ketchup (1953)

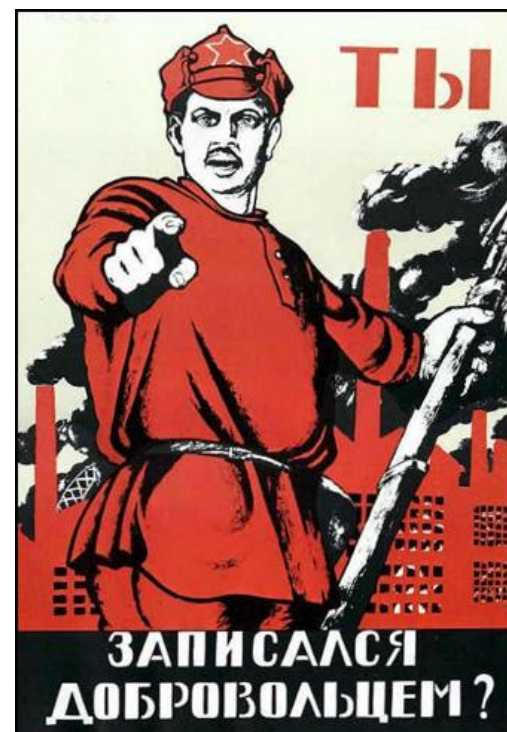
I admire advertisement's graphic style to evoke emotional responses. Bold color, strong form, and lively fonts are all enlisted. The misogyny in these images is so apparent to me now that it is both painful and makes me want to laugh. I find humor in how absurd their messages appear in comparison to the advertisements I see today. During the current pandemic, humor and joy is in high demand, and as such it holds a key role within my work. Initially, I wanted to lean into how absurd these ideas were when they were commonly accepted at the time they were produced. I then realized, however, that our present day advertising is not so different. I have just become desensitized to the misogyny of the media I currently consume. So, I spent time exploring how the advertising I was familiar with was just as filled with these absurd ideas. I explored how there is a psychological art to making even the absurd seem appealing.

My journey into the language of Madison Avenue resulted in me discovering that similar tactics are used in political propaganda. I was familiar with the classic “*I Want You*” poster for the U.S Military created by James Montgomery Flagg that drew the viewer in by having Uncle Sam literally pointing his finger at prospective enlistees. It utilized patriotic messaging with eye-catching graphics and colors. It had a short and easy-to-remember slogan in bold text. Every aspect of it is devoted to getting and keeping a person’s attention.



James Montgomery Flagg, *I Want You*,  
Four color print, 38 x 25 inches

The deeper I delved into political propaganda posters the more intriguing I found it. Russian designer Dmitry Moor’s communist posters, such as his *Did you apply to be a volunteer?* caught my eye with its limited color palette and dark, heavy linework. Similar to its American counterpart, this poster captures the viewer’s attention in the same way “*I Want You*” does, but it emphasizes color and graphic design elements even more. The color palette hinges on just four colors which makes each more



Dmitry Moore, *Did you apply to be a volunteer?*



prominent and significant to the meaning of the work. The line art has evolved to becoming its own shape instead just a guideline for the coloring. Dimitry Moor focused on strengthening these visual techniques and, in turn, strengthening his works' conceptual meaning. Propaganda posters like these boast the same bold colors, graphic shapes and dynamic text as the previous advertising I was looking at, but their messages were stronger, heavy-handed even. Instead of us being invited in by the advertising industry, we are conscripted into the propaganda machine.

My research on graphic language led me to begin to work on posters using the same technical qualities seen in these older advertisements and propaganda, but with my own inner thoughts. My aim is to successfully market the strange ideas that exist in my head just like companies or governments market products or programs in a way that makes them seem appealing.

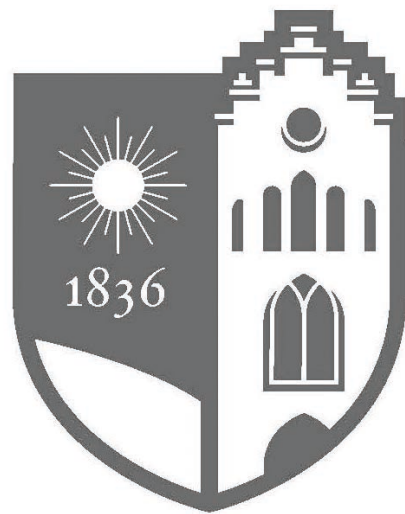
I've come to realize that both strands of my work interrogate perception. My posters are expressing how the presentation of self is an act of marketing. We are trying to get others to buy into the personality we display to the world. I played with the idea of the intersectionality between the inner self, which is typically hidden, and the outer self that we sell to others. This insight yielded a new approach in my photographic work. The brightly colored silhouettes that appear in the photographs also reflect on the presentation of self. My addition of the figure acts as a placeholder, capturing the abstract nature of self as it exists in the world. As I created more of these occupied scenes, it became clear that my entire body of work speaks to the perception of self both from the inside and the outside is subjective and does not stop at simply trying to market ourselves to others.

The final product of this process is my thesis exhibition. The photographs are intended to capture the outsider's point of view, but are limited in their ability to accurately recreate the moment they are capturing. The posters are drawn from my inner thoughts in an attempt to show my inner self that I usually keep hidden to others. As all this work is viewed side-by-side on the wall, I see it as an intertwining of the complex reality of perceiving and being perceived.

The first artist statement I wrote for this show explored only the technical and conceptual details of the work. In its simplicity, my work is about the trials and tribulations of being perceived and how that perception is influenced by both internal and external factors all of which are subjective. I was trying to express through both the written statement and my art that perception is subjective and no matter how hard we try to comprehend and control it there are too many factors that are beyond our control.

I was then struck with an epiphany the other night. It is this: my artist statement was trying to do the exact thing I was saying could *not* be done. It was three paragraphs of exposition on how my work *should* be perceived. In short, I said that my work is about how perception cannot be controlled even though by saying so I was trying to control the perception of my work. Perhaps what my work is *really* about is the futility of trying to present perception in its totality. Perception is, after all, subjective and limited by internal and external factors. Some of these factors we can't even be aware of, much less control them. Trying to exert total control over our own or someone else's perception is ultimately futile. All I can do is to continue my endeavor . . . to understand perceptions by others and to convey my own thoughts.

# “The Trials and Tribulations of Being Precieved”



Ren Dessart  
Alfred University

A thesis

Submitted for fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts with honors  
in the School of Art and Design

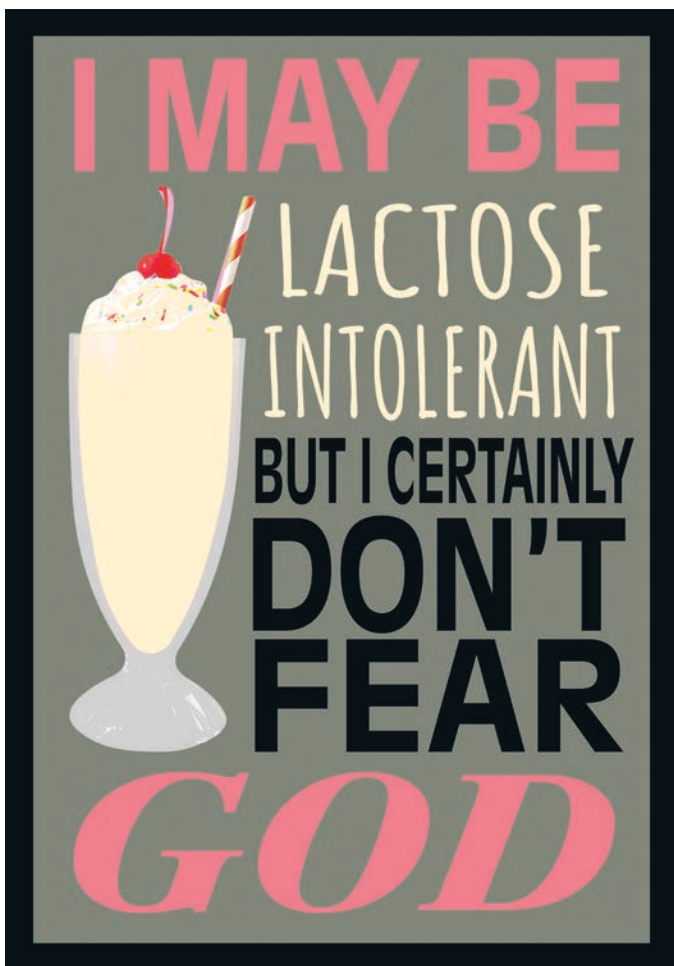
Presented to the Honors Committee of:  
Distinguished Professor of Print Media, Joseph Scheer  
Professor of Art History, Modern & Contemporary Art, Mary McInnes  
Associate Professor of Foundations Katarina Riesing



Ren Dessat  
*Red Roof*  
 Archival print  
 32 x 22 inches



Ren Dessart  
*Do the Rich Even Taste Good?*  
 Archival print  
 18 ½ x 29 inches



Ren Dessart  
*No Milkshake Shall Defeat Me*  
 Archival Print  
 15 ½ x 29 ½ inches

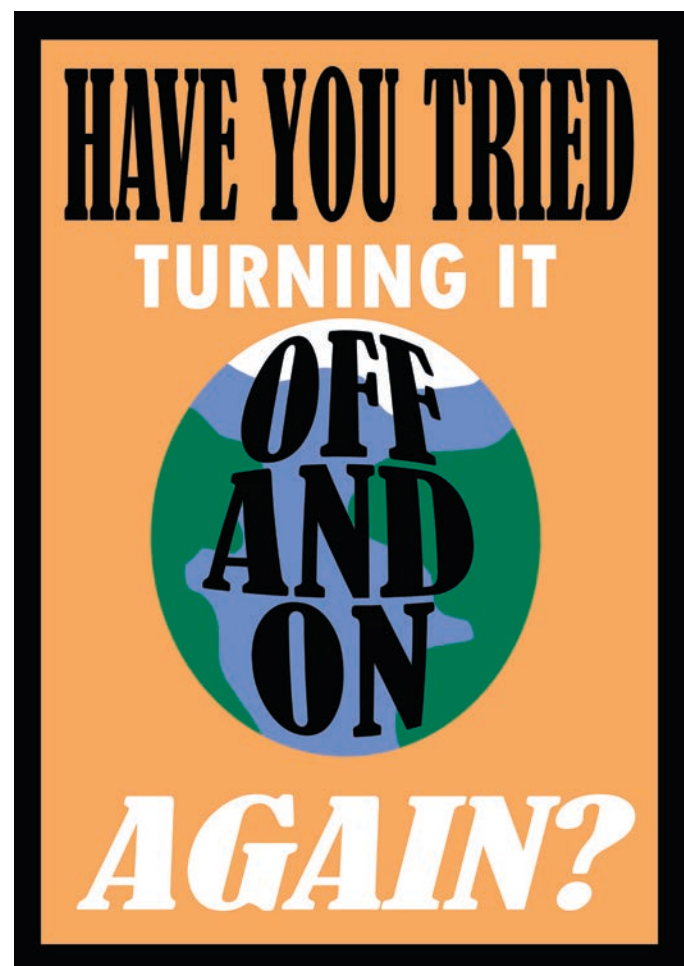


Ren Dessart  
*Pink Shoe Line*  
 Archival print  
 22 x 32 inches

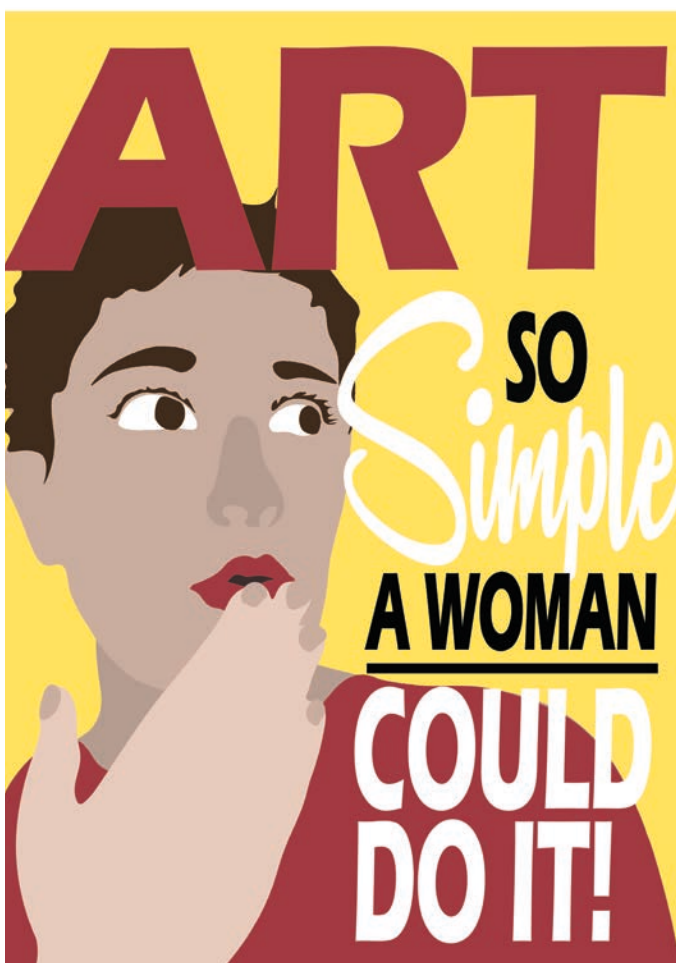




Ren Dessart  
Orange Bridge  
Archival Print  
22 x 32 inches



Ren Dessart  
*Is There an IT Service for the Planet?*  
Archival Print  
19 x 18 inches



Ren Dessart  
*If I Was a Woman, I'd be An Artist*  
Archival print  
20 x 23 ½ inches

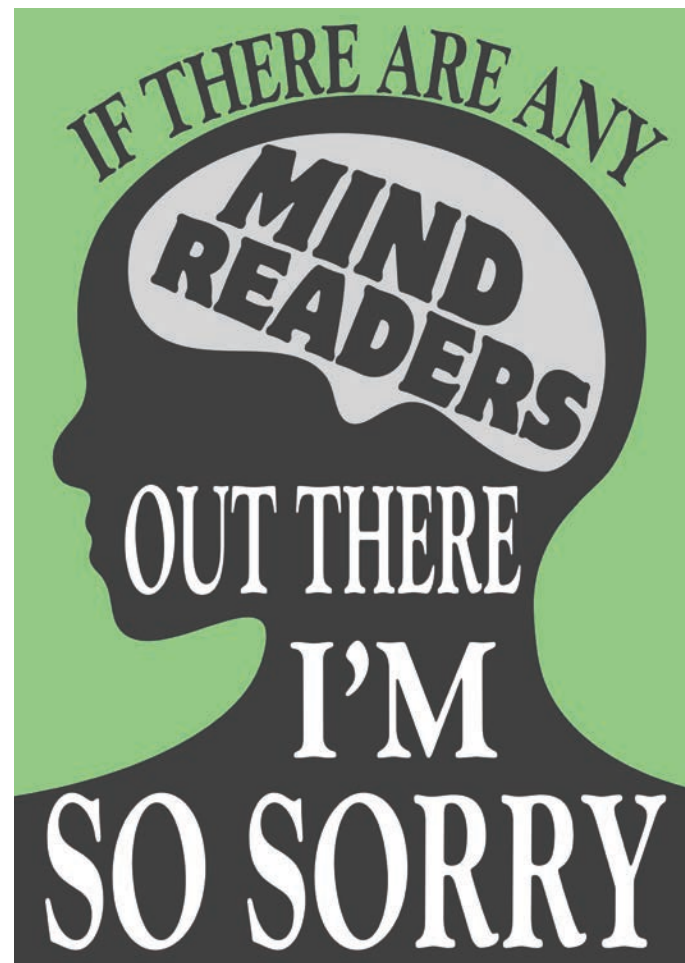


Ren Dessart  
*Yellow Creek*  
Archival Print  
32 x 22 inches





Ren Dessart  
*Green Fence*  
 Archival Print  
 32 x 22 inches



Ren Dessart  
*Read My Mind at Your Own Risk*  
 Archival Print  
 21 x 20 ½ inches



Ren Dessart  
*Imagine Being An Artist...I Could Never*  
 Archival Print  
 27 x 23 inches

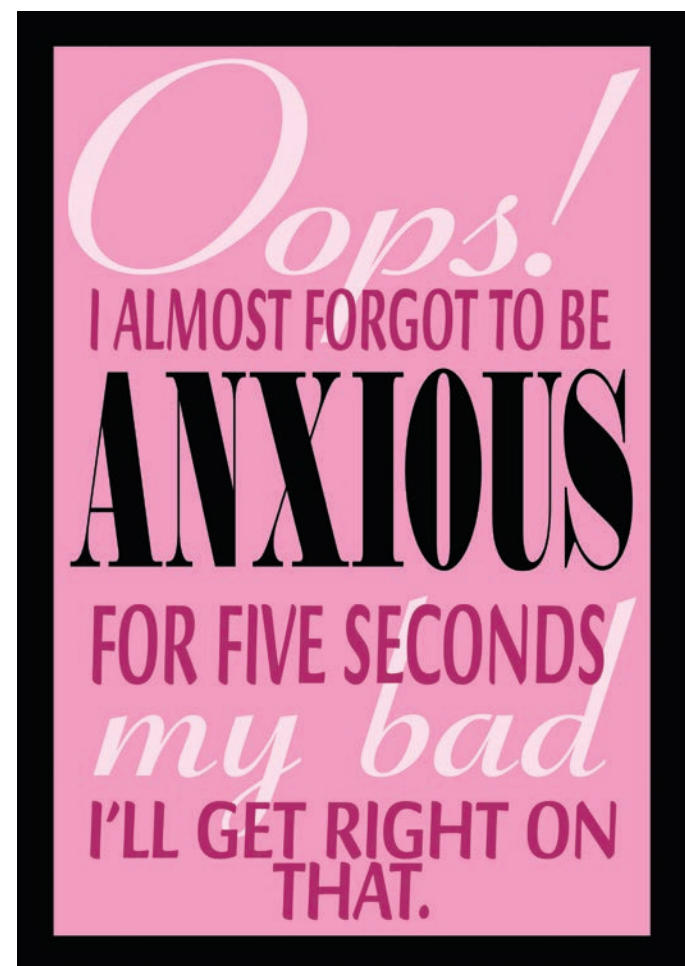


Ren Dessart  
*Dark Green Dance*  
 Archival Print  
 32 x 22 inches





Ren Dessart  
*Pink Hair*  
 Archival Print  
 32 x 22 inches



Ren Dessart  
*My Service Cat Has Anxiety Too*  
 Archival Print  
 21 ½ x 25 inches



Ren Dessart  
*Y'all Are Nasty*  
 Archival Print  
 18 x 29 inches

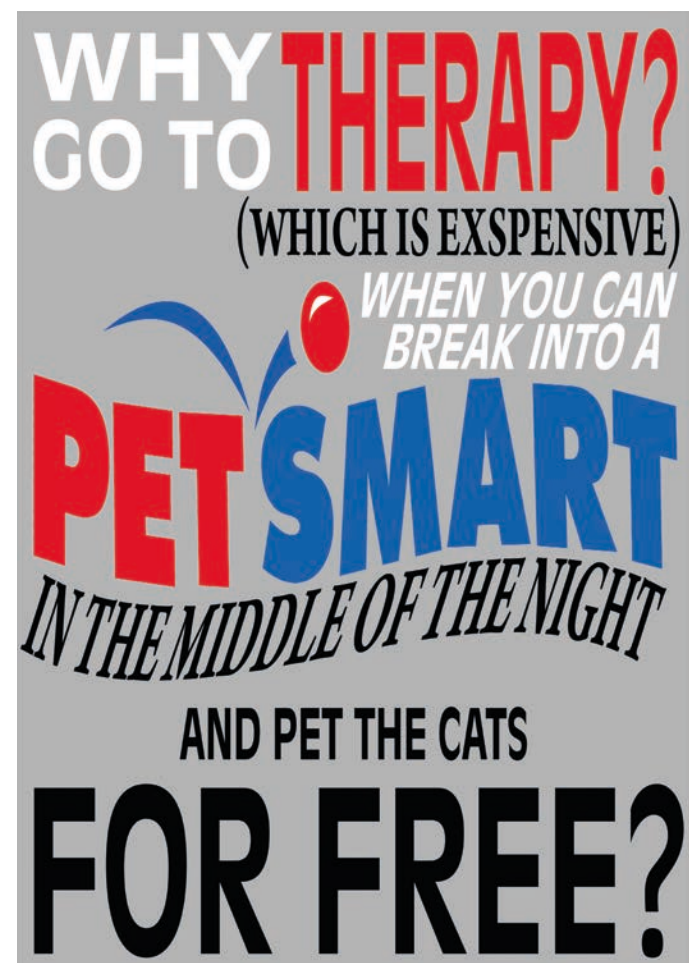


Ren Dessart  
*Purple Guard Rail*  
 Archival Print  
 32 x 22 inches

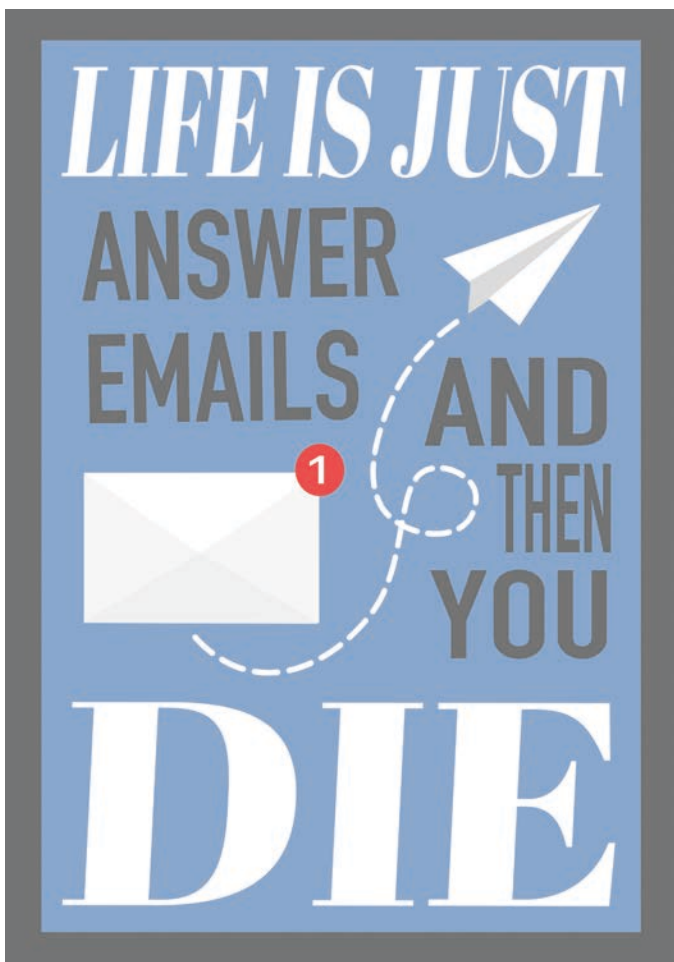




Ren Dessart  
*Dark Blue Road*  
 Archival Print  
 32 x 22 inches



Ren Dessart  
*I Got Arrested in a Petsmart  
 Parking Lot*  
 Archival Print  
 29 x 22 ½ inches



Ren Dessart  
*Life, But Everytime You Answer  
 An Email it Gets Faster*  
 Archival Print  
 27 ½ x 20 inches

\*Sizes listed is for original prints



Ren Dessart  
*Light Blue Bench*  
 Archival Print  
 22 x 23 inches





MAYBE

*The French*

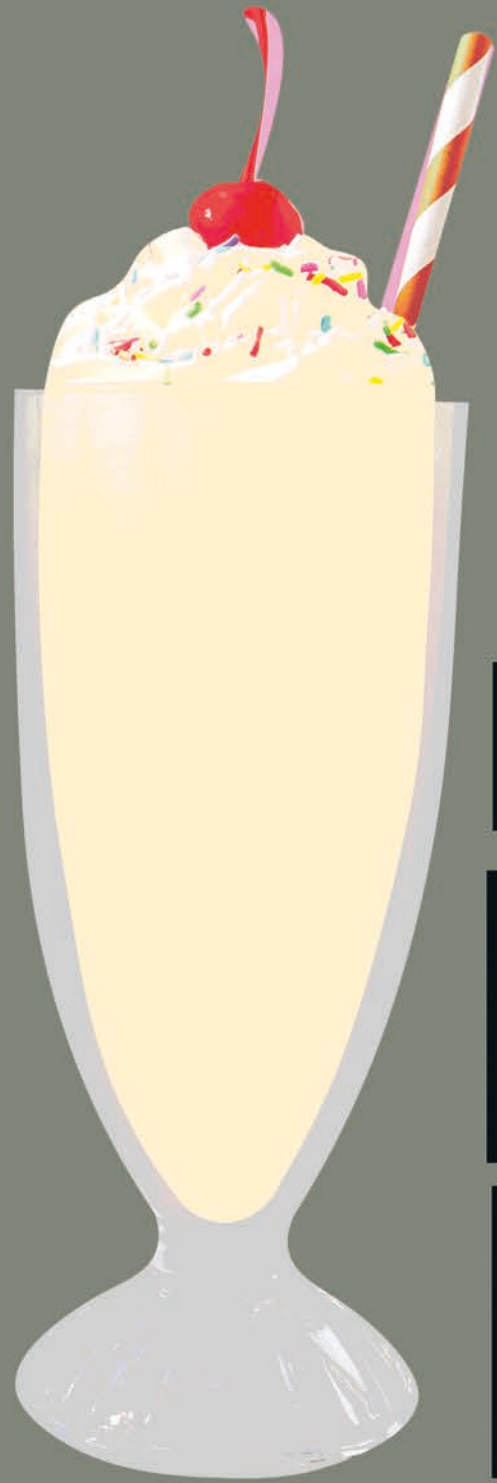
HAD  
THE  
RIGHT  
IDEA







I MAY BE



LACTOSE  
INTOLERANT

BUT I CERTAINLY  
DON'T  
FEAR

*GOD*







**HAVE YOU TRIED**

**TURNING IT**



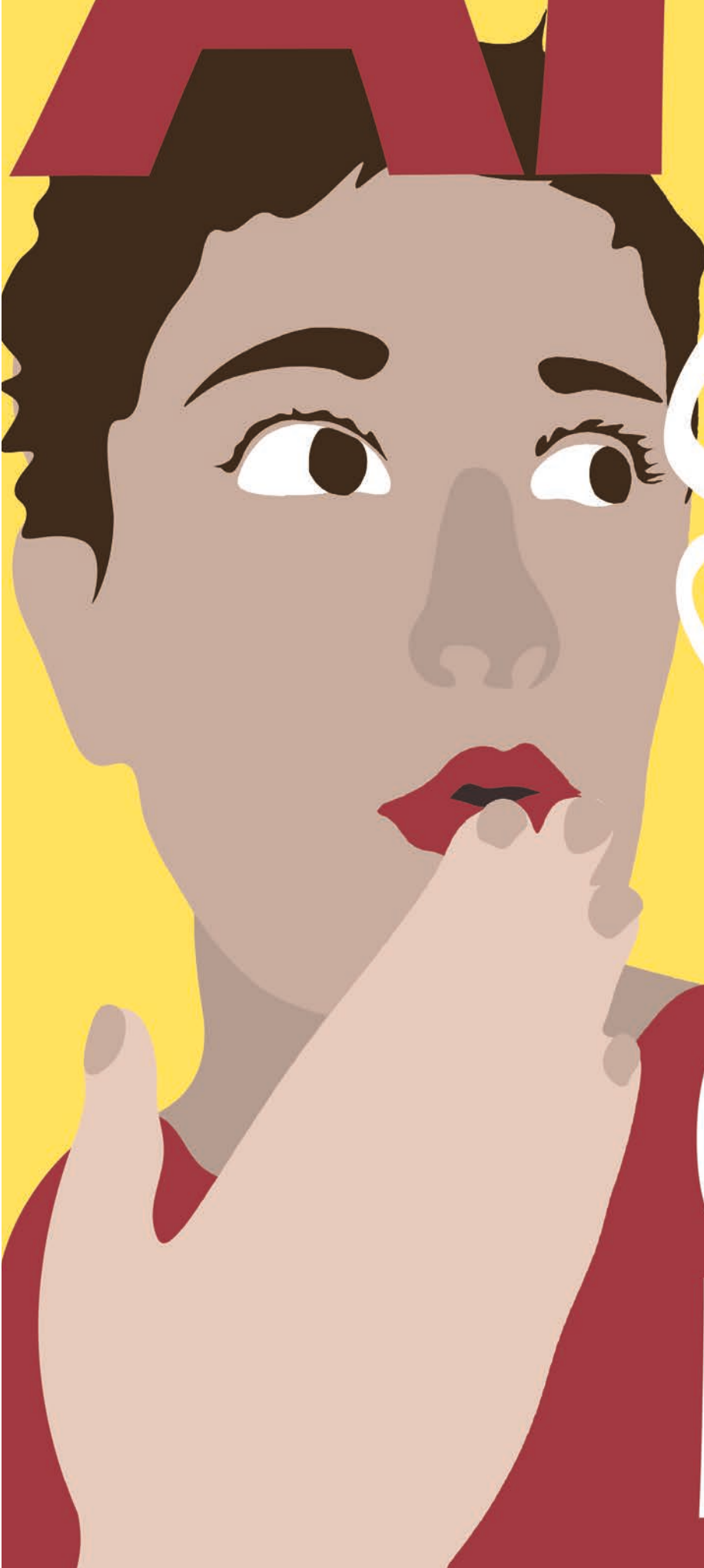
***AGAIN?***







# ART

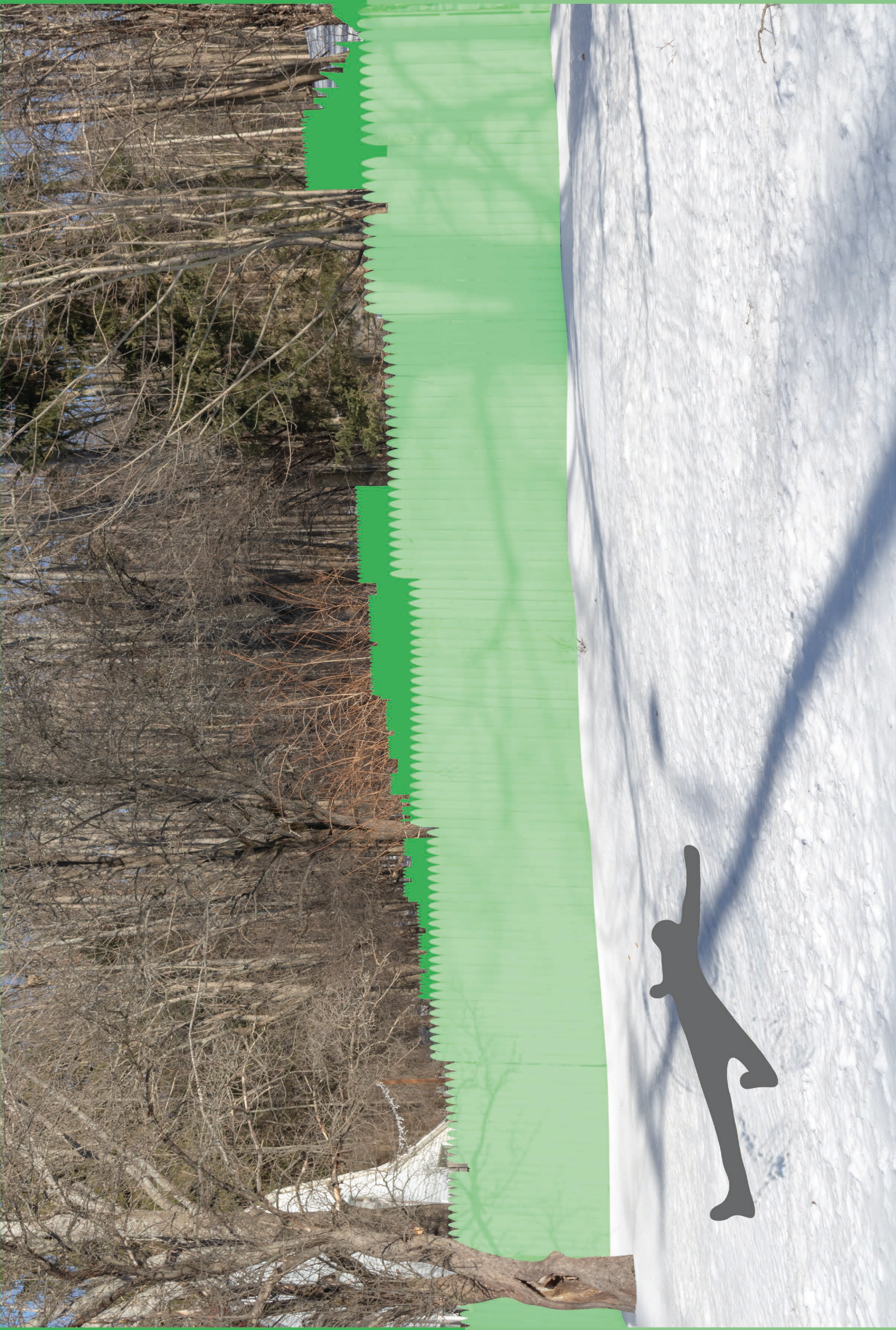


so  
*Simple*

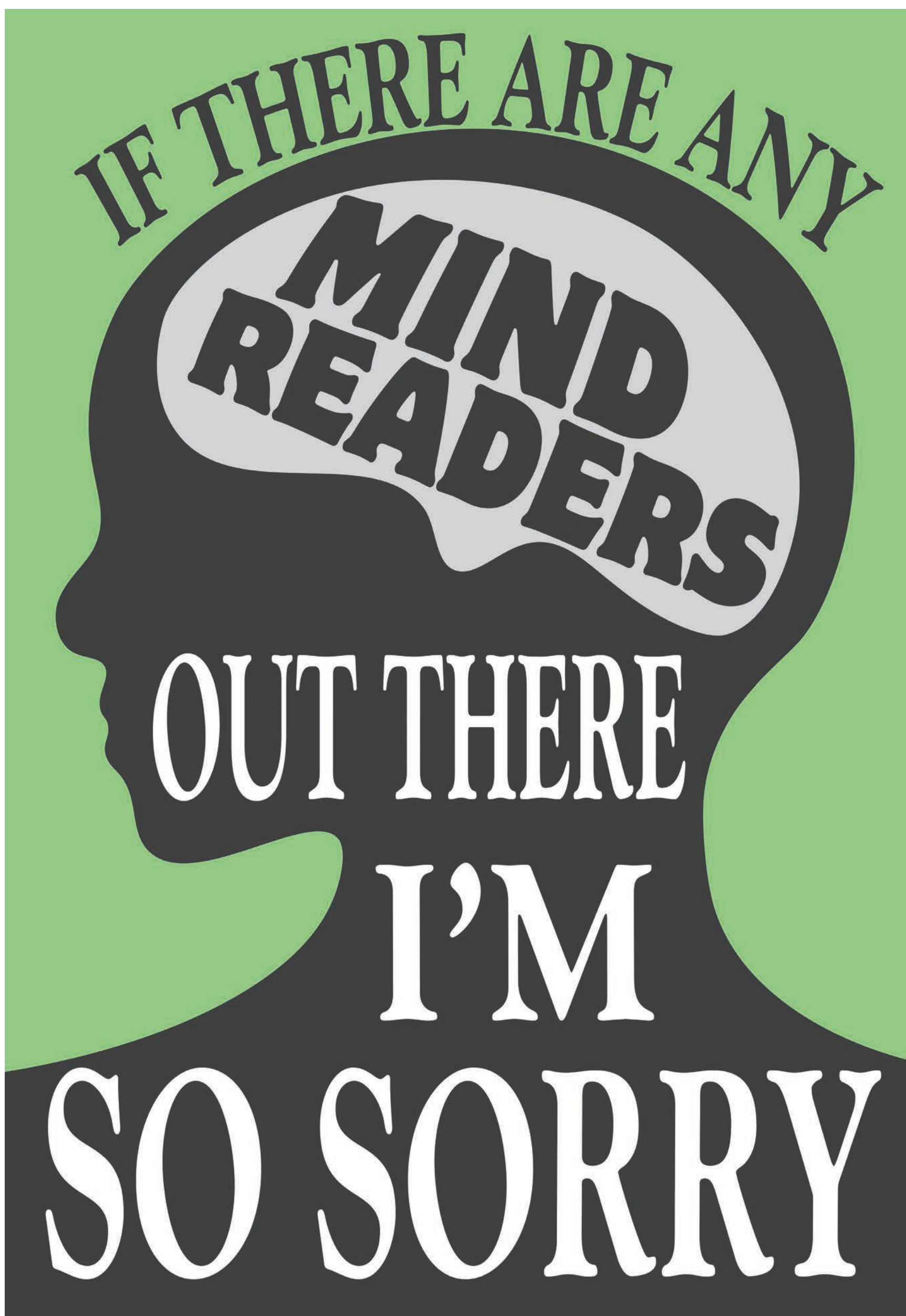
**A WOMAN**

**COULD  
DO IT!**













I'VE NEVER MADE

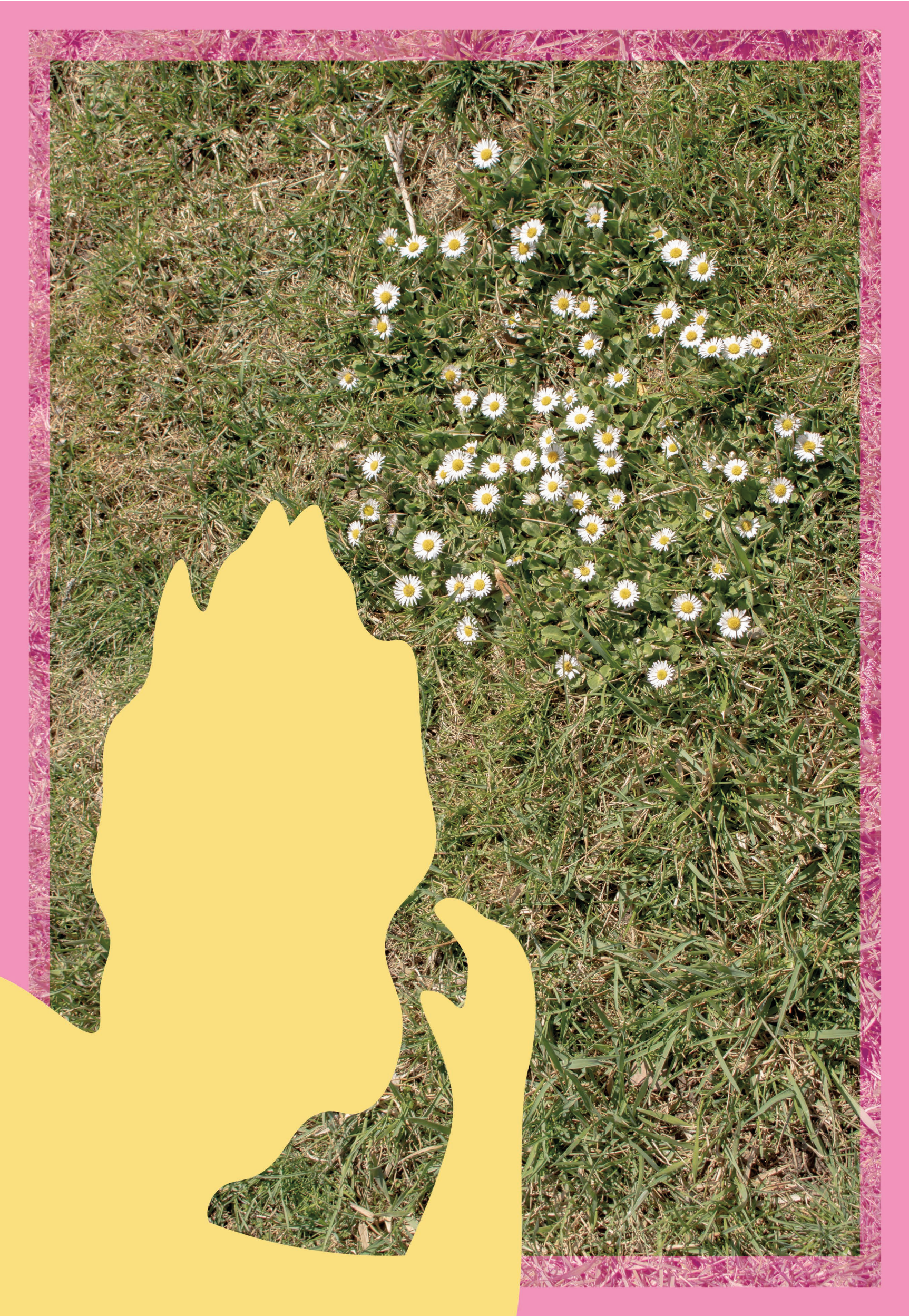
Art

An illustration of a hand holding a paintbrush. The hand is rendered in a simple, flat style with a light skin tone and brown spots on the fingers. The paintbrush has a green handle and a grey ferrule. The brush head is white with a brown tip, and it is positioned as if it has just finished painting the word 'Art'.

*Before  
in my life*

AND I WON'T  
START NOW







*Oops!*

I ALMOST FORGOT TO BE

**ANXIOUS**

FOR FIVE SECONDS

*my bad*

I'LL GET RIGHT ON  
THAT.







FOR THE  
YOU  
SHOULD

RECORD

*Wash Your  
Hands*



WHEN  
THERE ISN'T A

PANDEMIC *TOO*







**WHY  
GO TO THERAPY?**

**(WHICH IS EXSPENSIVE)**

*WHEN YOU CAN  
BREAK INTO A*



**PET SMART**

*IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT*

**AND PET THE CATS**

**FOR FREE?**







*LIFE IS JUST*

ANSWER  
EMAILS



AND  
THEN  
YOU

*DIE*