Shaped by Play

by

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Introduction

What does play mean? According to David Arron, a designer of playgrounds and play equipment, one thing play means is inspecting, turning, holding to the light, and examining all the possibilities of something. “We speak of playing with an idea, meaning that we look at it every which way.”[1] In this sense, I play with disparate materials—ink, wood, wire, paper, clay, paint and pastel chalk—to explore place through gestures of drawing, carving, assembling and balancing. In my creative practice, play is a methodology for making, as well as a lens for observing the world.

This report will discuss the themes and questions which inform my work and their evolution throughout my time at the University of Georgia. It is not a full account of my graduate school experience, but rather a progression of my thought-process surrounding methods and materials. In each chapter, I will thread together personal anecdotes and images of work leading up to my thesis, highlighting key turning points of expansion into three-dimensional space. While my work hangs on the edge of representation and abstraction, it continues to circle around the overarching question, “Can one play with place?” Beginning with observation as the foundation of my research and moving into process, I will discuss play as a way of viewing and making.

[1] Monica Obniski and Darrin Alfred, *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 15.

Chapter 1 : Observation

In 1837, Friedrich Froebel opened his first institution for early childhood education in Blankenburg, Germany.[2] This institution came to be known as Kindergarten. The idea that educational curriculum should be geared to young children under the age of seven was a radical one at the time, but has since been widely adopted by cultures around the world. An aspect of my research has led me into a deeper study of Kindergarten and other learning systems which emphasize the construction of wooden blocks, numbers and word games, drawing, singing, dancing, and nature study. In many ways, my practice draws upon these similar foundational elements for self-expression. In 1859, Bertha von Marenholtz-Bülow, an educator known for spreading Froebel's concept of Kindergarten throughout Europe, compiled a comprehensive list of "natural needs of earliest childhood". Among them is one of the most basic actions known to humans: Observation. "A child's need to *know*, or natural curiosity, engaging in observing, examining, comparing."[3]

From a young age, we observe and categorize colors, shapes, and textures to learn and navigate the world around us. I *observe* to process information, to find stillness, and to be inspired. Observation is the foundation for my art-making practice. In this report, I would like to frame observation through the lens of wonderment; to watch the world with "glittering eyes", as Roald Dahl once said[4]. Wonder asks us to look close, to sometimes place rationality and explanations aside, to make connections, and absorb the smallest details in our surroundings. "Wonder is a natural companion of children," explains David Benner. "It gives us new eyes through which we can journey deep into the world's nature."[5] As adults, we tend to lose our sense of bewilderment, as we find everything in the world is conspiring against wonder in an attempt to crush it. How can we incite wonder, especially in a world so heavy with news of destruction and turmoil?

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[2] Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 28.
[3] Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 32.
[4] Roald Dahl, *The Minpins* (New York: Viking, 1991).
[5] David G. Benner, *Soulful Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 108.

I have come to learn that observing the world with “glittering eyes” means caring to pay attention. Smartphones are digital encyclopedias in our pockets; they literally give us information—both good and bad—at our fingertips. To *wonder* is to be humbled, forgetting the things we think we truly know. For author Anne Lammot, the wonder of life is most easily recognizable through habits and routines. Watering plants, taking a walk, sitting with a cup of coffee or tea. It can be difficult to feel bewildered, especially in turbulent times, but observation is the beginning—to notice, examine, and realize, “It is phenomenal just to be.”[6]

While I do not depict daily observations in a literal sense, my connection to landscape, interactions with people, and mundane happenings, lie on or beneath the surface of my work. In the following sections, I will zoom in and out of *place*, *color*, and *shape*. These rudimentary themes have been most prevalent in the development of my work, connecting disparate materials and narratives to create space for the viewer’s own associations.

Place

Zooming out

As my work has evolved over the past three years, the idea of environment remains a central concern. Environment as it relates to nature, plants, landscape, and also the physical spaces we build for ourselves. Since moving to Georgia from the Midwest of the U.S., I have become more aware of my body in relation to the landscape. Some people say the views of Kansas, my homeland, are made mostly of sky. In Athens, Georgia, a dense green plot of kudzu closes in around my neighborhood. I must drive or climb in search of a horizon line free from buildings and trees. There are many words to describe a place and its space within a landscape, such as, open, distant, cluttered, compact, rolling, and flat. These same adjectives can be used to construct compositions within one’s visual field or picture plane, to create tension, balance, harmony or dissonance. Other characteristics might be used to define a place, like the

[6] Anne Lammott, *Stitches* (New York: Riverhead books, 2013).

diversity of its tree population, or the color of its football team. Can one personify a place—giving it a personality from all of it's made up parts?

Purple Wave, monotype with chine collé, 16" x 15", 2020

Zooming in

The UGA Botanical Gardens have served as a place for research as well as solace and rejuvenation. Running through the forest trails behind the gardens, I feel a sense of adventure, freedom, and playfulness. When I slow down, my senses are heightened. I observe: the light shifting through the trees. There is a stark contrast of light and dark, making the leaves transparent and colors more saturated. The forest can be a place of freeness (when not in danger or trying to find my way in the dark). It is a whimsical place, with unfurling ferns and pink spheres growing up from the ground.

Early on and still today, my work grows out of a fascination for plant-life in my environment and an inherited urge to nurture plants in my home. I am drawn to them not only for their interesting shapes and patterns, but because they can enhance the mood of a space. Using color, playfulness, and narrative elements in my work, I draw attention to nature in our surrounding environments, as we depend on it for contentment and survival.

Windows is an ongoing series of prints propelled by curious relationships formed between plants and humans. The series began in my first year of grad school when I discovered I could combine the printmaking process of monotype with collage (also known as chine collé) in one seamless pass through the printing press. Houseplants often live near windows to be sustained by sunlight. Windows can also refer to a portal, a moment in time. In the case of the series *Windows*, areas are scraped away to form an aperture into a curious world.

Don't Let Them Go Dry from *Windows* Series, monotype with chine collé, 14" x 11", 2019

Through messages and pictures, plants so often close the distance between me and the people I love, near and far. Inspired by alternative book forms, plant connections, and the interaction of color & shape, I constructed *Folding Cube* (fig 1.1) with prints made using digital and traditional monotype processes. The images were pulled from correspondence with friends and family members regarding the status of our plants and the changing seasons around us. Similar to a book, the cube requires viewers to hold and turn it in their hands to experience all sides.

Fig. 1.1: *Folding Cube*, monotype, digitally printed elements adhered to wood, book cloth, 4” x 4”, 2019

Zooming in and zooming out, my surroundings have played a large role in my imagery. A continued exploration of various media throughout my time in grad school has led me away from literal representations of place and nature to more abstract reflections on spatial relations, articulated through color, shape, movement, and balance. In this next section, I will highlight certain projects that zoom in and out of colors and shapes.

Color & Shape

At an early age, we learn primaries and their compliments, warm and cool, light and dark. Shapes and colors are the building blocks of learning. According to Scholastic, when asked to sort objects, young children usually begin by using color, shape and size attributes to categorize items. “This seemingly simple process (that we use every week when we sort the laundry or find things in the grocery aisles) is the foundation for living in a mathematical world.”[7]

While my process is most often playful and reactionary, my research has also involved a more systematic approach to dissecting colors and patterns. *Unwrapped* (fig 1.2) evolved out of an affinity for saving process marks I cut out from packaging. In this handmade book, adjacent pages separate the printer's color blocks from the actual food or object being wrapped, zooming into textures and colors so distant from the manufacturer's packaging. With *Unwrapped* and other projects, I am interested in subverting ways we receive information, through hidden color and pattern, as a way to find new meaning in everyday objects.

Personal collection of process marks, 2019

[7] Ellen Booth Church, “Why Colors and Shapes Matter,” Scholastic, accessed April 12, 2020, http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3746476&emailErrors=true&username=Larrytig&recipientAddress=Yangon&senderAddress=Yangon&content=.

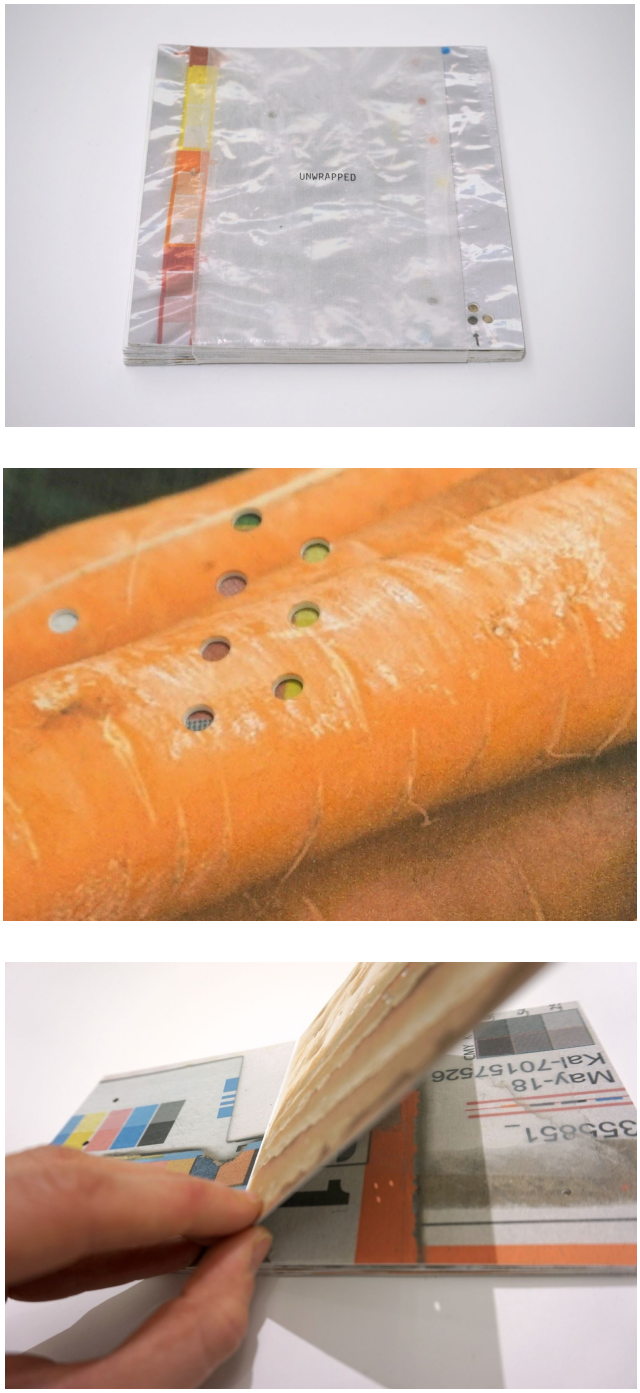


Fig. 1.2, *Unwrapped*, digitally printed pages, circle cutouts, drum leaf binding, 5” x 5”, 2019

Beautyberry

Observation of plants and colors in my immediate surroundings led me to a specific color study of the American Beautyberry, which, in certain seasons, grows around the Lamar Dodd School of Art (fig 1.3, left). In 2018, the Beautyberry was designated by the Georgia Native Plant Society as “Plant of the Year”. One qualification for this title is that a species be underutilized in landscapes and gardens. Around the same time each year, while walking around the school, I would see the clusters of berries change from green to purple; a sign fall was on its way. This gradual, yet poignant, color-shift impacted my senses, subconsciously infiltrating my palette.

Fig 1.3: Left: American Beautyberry plant, Right: Studio View

My interest in this plant began with a color study. Using the printing press and hand-mixing purple and green shades specific to the Beautyberry, I overlaid the transparent hues from light to dark. The wall installation of paper ellipses was a byproduct of the studies (fig 1.4). Looking back, this arrangement during my second year of grad school, marked a significant shift in the dimensionality of my work and introduced shadow as another medium for playing with color and shape. *Beautyberry*, while an abstraction of the physical plant itself, also became a visual representation of color observation; separating and exploring color interactions, like specimen.

As seen throughout the history of marketing, color has a peculiar and powerful effect on mood and how products are advertised. I am equally fascinated and confused by companies, like Pantone, which uses color to designate a period of time. This, in turn, affects the way products are designed and marketed. Maybe only PBS knows why Barney was a purple and green dinosaur, but could it have been to enhance kids' imagination and make them feel more calm?

Fig. 1.4: *Beautyberry* (detail), ink on newsprint, steel pins, 2018

Shapes

Shapes safely guide our steps across cement streets. They tell us when to “stop” and “go”. “Everything is made up of shapes” is something I would often tell my students who were first learning how to draw. The still life of familiar objects and their cast shadows is really a conglomeration of squares, circles, triangles, and cylinders. To draw the hand, we must forget the idea of the hand, and instead look at the positive and negative shapes that make a hand, a hand. This point is outlined well in Ed Emberly’s children’s book, *The Wing On A Flea*.

“A triangle is the wing on a flea, and the beak on a bird, if you’ll just look and see.” [8]

I am inspired by the children's books of Eric Carle, Ed Emberly, and others who break down important themes into basic elements, as children (and adults) are encountering ideas for the first time. Large flats of color and isolated areas create a space where imagination can chime in. I often gravitate toward using saturated, primary colors to evoke a sense of play and whimsy. Through the use of color and shape, childrens’ books often imbue an imperfect depiction of reality, which can help people see the world in a different light. While I don’t necessarily intend for my work to illustrate narratives, I do think of it in conversation with children’s story-telling books; intended for young and old viewers alike.

In the book *Picture This*: *How Pictures Work*, author and illustrator Molly Bang describes how shapes communicate narrative and emotion. For instance, principle one says: smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm. “We humans are most stable when we are horizontal because we can’t fall down.”[9] Principle seven: curved shapes are more comforting than pointed shapes.

[8] Ed Emberly, *The Wing on a Flea* (Pasadena, CA: AMMO Books, LLC,1962).
[9] Molly Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000).

With Bang's principles in mind, how does the interaction of color and shape influence our perception of our physical environment? Can color, shape, and line foster wonderment, or closer looking?

Paying closer attention to shapes in my daily observations, specific shapes have had certain prevalence at different times. The ellipse has been a recurring motif in my work; I can trace its beginnings to before grad school, when the gesture of an oval repeatedly found its way into my prints and paintings. Around that time, my family was living in Kansas and we decided to raise chickens in the backyard. Finding an assortment of chicken eggs atop a soft pile of hay was a daily gift; but it also felt strange, knowing thousands of eggs lined grocery store shelves every day. The egg, a common food item for many people, became more spectacular to me because of my new connection to our chickens; thus, the egg-shape, whether subconsciously or deliberately, became an important theme in my work.

Froebel's Gifts

The ellipse is perhaps the most familiar shape to humans. Consider the earth, moon, and all of the planets in our solar system moving along elliptical orbits around the sun. Traffic lights, seed pods, camera apertures, punctuation marks; the list of notable ellipses could go on. But I would like to mention the first in a series of about twenty *Fröbelgaben*, or *gifts*, which, alongside *occupations*, were play materials Friedrich Froebel introduced to his early kindergarten. The first of Froebel's gifts is a squashable, wool ball hanging on a string. Gift one was meant to be utilized when an infant first took notice of its surroundings—about six to eight weeks after birth.[10] "Perfect in form, the ball, or sphere was the practical expression of stability and the material expression of motion. By grasping, rolling, dropping, hiding, and swinging the ball, the child gained intuitive and experiential knowledge of objects, space, time, color, movement, attraction, union, independence, and gravity."[11] In play, the ball can become anything a child wants it to be; a person, a mouse, a bird.

[10] Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 42.
[11] Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten, 42.*

The second gift in Froebel's series, developed in concept by 1836, consists of a sphere, cylinder, and cube. Froebel considered this set most profound of all, claiming that to understand the second gift was to understand kindergarten.[12] With gift two, spinning the cylinder on its side makes the appearance of a sphere; spinning the cube around an axis makes the appearance of a cylinder. In a simple gesture, one shape transforms into another. *To play is to look at something multiple ways.*

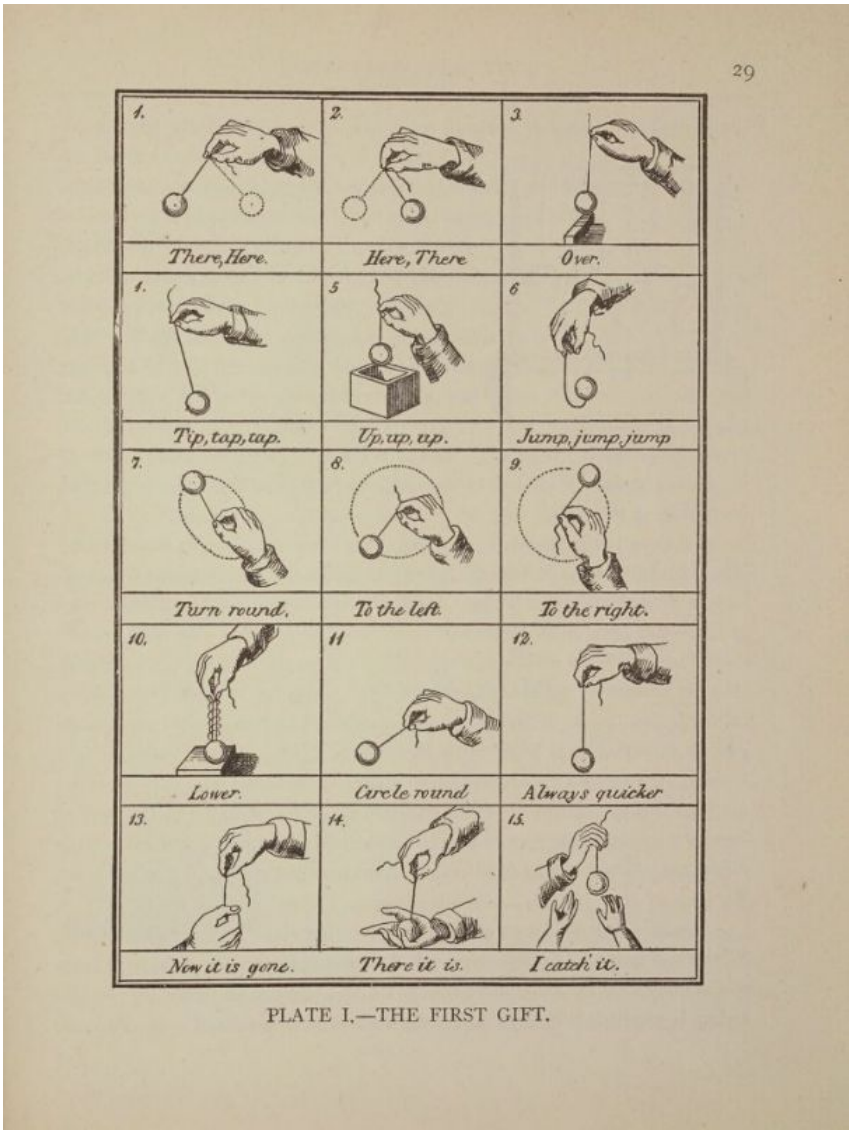


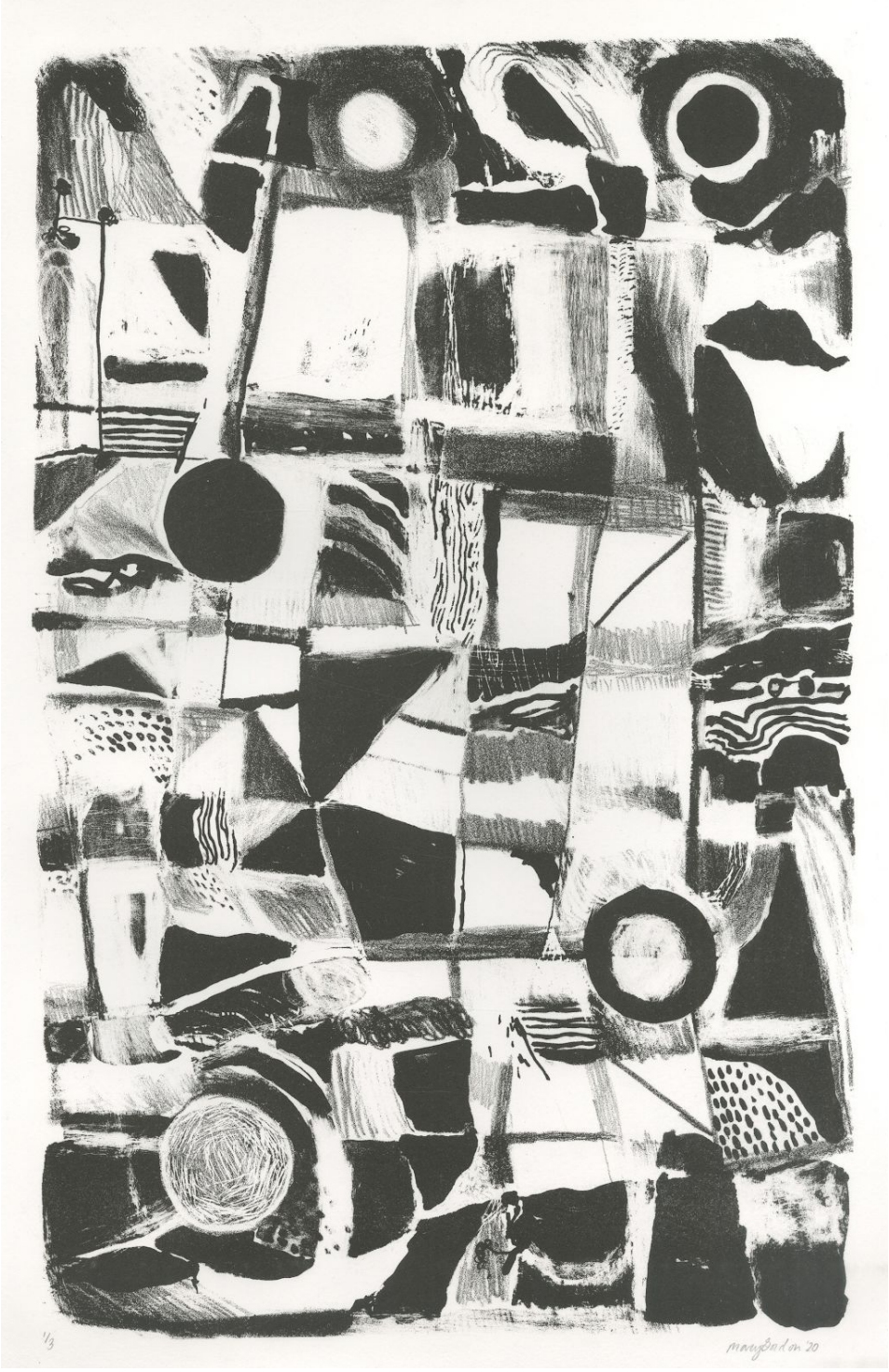
Plate I, The First Gift. Source: Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/dcmsiabooks.royalgiftsforkin00vann_0/?sp=31

[12] Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten,* 46.

The gifts also include wooden blocks, parquetry, sticks, rings, interlacing slats, and modeling clay. Combined with drawing, pricking, sewing, cutting, weaving, and folding, these components and actions build on each other; progressing from solid, to plane, to line, to point, and then reversed to arrive back in three dimensions. Froebel's play materials were not necessarily new or profound, but the methodology and educational component behind their use was radical for Froebel's time.

There are plenty of theories to describe the deep significance shapes and colors hold, and what they might communicate to a viewer. In my work, shapes become personified characters, an aerial view of a landscape, the close-up of a pebble, the top of a mound; they are elements to form a pattern, and symbols to sketch deeper meaning. A venn diagram, for example, depicts an intersection of shapes to highlight a common ground. While I can attribute my own narratives to the shapes in my work, I'm also interested in each viewer's links and attributions. Humans have the inclination to see analogies and draw conclusions by comparison. Like children, we also anthropomorphize inanimate objects—giving them life and personalities.

Little Dance, monotype with chine collé, 22" x 30", 2019



Somewhere Up There, lithograph, 12” x 9”, 2020

Chapter 2: Play

Not too long ago I was sitting with my three-year old nephew on the living room floor surrounded by wooden blocks, train tracks, puzzle pieces, and toy cars. At one point, my nephew gathered all of the blocks he could find to stack them as high as he could. Eventually, they tumbled, and we arranged them in a straight line on the floor to measure his height. Entire educational philosophies were built upon the block and continue to be used today as a way to develop spatial relations, imagination, fine motor skills, and problem solving.

I've watched my nephews learn colors and shapes, gravity's effect on objects, and how to move their bodies in space. Looking back, perhaps being an aunt to two little boys during grad school influenced my time in the studio; specifically, a return to simple elements of design and materials made from wood. When my nephews are playing, a stack of blocks can go on forever in their imagination. There is an aura surrounding play which makes room for wonder. David Brenner explains this way of seeing as a transformation of perception.[13] In this space, and in the context of a gallery, how can different configurations of colored shapes of wood and mixed media create moments of familiarity, moments of tension, moments of discovery?

[13] Brenner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 114.

Materials

I've saved remnants for as long as I can remember; pieces of paper and scraps that are often overlooked or discarded—the process mark tabs on packaging are one example. An accumulating bin of leftover monotypes sits in my studio, ready to be used for collage. During my second year of grad school, I began scavenging for and collecting discarded wood scraps from around the school's woodshops. Initially, I was drawn to these leftovers for their peculiar shapes and visible layers of composite. Some of the end pieces revealed a manufacturer's stamp, which reminded me of humans' sometimes strange connection with, and attempted dominion, over nature.

The palm-sized wood pieces, reminiscent of children's building blocks, were comforting to hold. I began treating the pieces as collage elements—carving into them, or adding color and texture to the surfaces by adhering monotypes, digital photographs, and acrylic paint. Somewhere along my material journey, a friend dropped off a box of old wooden children's building blocks outside my studio door. I began working these manufactured blocks into the mix of salvaged wood pieces. All of them contain an embedded history, as well as a reference to humanity's impulse to play and build.

Aside from paper and wood, other materials in my studio practice have included polymer clay in the shape of beads, powder-coated wire, pastel chalk, and organic matter. I think of these materials as drawing tools, not literally to draw with, but to construct a picture plane within two and three-dimensional space.

Certain artists have influenced my work for their use of materials inspired by play. Art educator and toy designer, Karen Hewitt, is a proponent of open-ended toys, such as wooden blocks that come without directives. Hewitt's objects of play double as art. Bruno Munari, twentieth century Italian artist and designer, merged worlds of modern art and design with play and learning in his children's books. "Munari did not just work on books; he was interested in and tried out the full range of artistic possibilities (painting, sculpture, design, graphics, teaching, poetry, writing photography, film, entertainment)," writes Giorgio Maffei in the introduction to *Munari's Books: The Definitive Collection of Book Designs by Bruno Munari*. "But throughout his career books were his personal diary in which he noted down his experiences, an authentic register of events."[14] Munari's use of typography, color, and design is timeless. Many of his books, like *Abecedario Di Munari*, an alphabet book published in 1942, contain subdued colors and harmonic forms, enjoyable for design-enthusiasts, just as much as children. Munari was interested in moving beyond genres and aesthetic typologies.[15] Similarly to Hewitt, Munari's work joyfully blurs the line of *art* and *toy*.

Some classic children's games have left a strong impression in my memory and continue to resurface, like the classic wire bead maze found in waiting rooms. While I am inspired by the aesthetic look and feel of playthings, the objects I create are not made to the exact configurations of learning tools, and are not always intended for viewer interaction through touch. Rather, the gallery is used as a space for imagination; inviting viewers to reconnect with notions of play—inside the tension contained in a stack of objects ready to fall, a game of shadows, or a winding rollercoaster of wires and beads. In the adult world, and in my world, I'm constantly arranging, building, and stacking, in a literal sense in my spaces at home or in my studio, but also very much in a metaphorical sense, as I try to balance all the parts of life. I don't quite know if these metaphorical or physical stacks are being built up, or crumbling down—but I think they can be either, depending on how you look at them.

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[14] Giorgio Maffei, *Munari's Books: The Definitive Collection of Book Designs by Bruno Munari* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 12.
[15] Maffei, *Munari's Books*, 13.

Process

Collage

Improvising - exploring ideas, objects, and materials without considering sense, purpose or function - is one of the key features of play.[16] My studio process operates in this context; a space of not always knowing, but always exploring. Making usually comes best when I can turn off the analytical side of my brain and improvise, responding to the marks, shapes and colors on a surface. I'm drawn to collage as a process because it allows for control, while also maintaining a sense of spontaneity throughout assembly.

The expressive nature of collage, as it emerged as an official fine art medium in the 19th century, gave way to a sense of improvisation as it challenged traditional materials and perspectives. Artists turned toward collage in every medium because the technique provided a necessary form; a way of working through problems posed by new modes of production and consumption.[17] With the rise of technology, more physical material infiltrated society and was made available to the masses at a faster rate, ready to be consumed, cut-up, manipulated, and placed in a new context. This is even more true today, as we have more material possibilities, as well as more detritus.

In the work of some contemporary artists—whether it be a digital format, traditional paint, sculpture or installation—the technique of cutting and assembling materials has played a major role in the formal resolution of the work. American Contemporary artist, Squeak Carnwath, makes paintings, constructions, prints, and works on paper using a collage aesthetic. In a 2014 Hyperallergic interview with Carnwath, Jon Yau was attentive to her process and studio space. Annotations, painting notes and prose hang next to her paintings in progress[18]. Ideas, words, lists, and color swatches live together on the surface. Though not incorporated directly into the final work, the papers are a visual montage of thoughts excavated from her everyday life.

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[16] Phillip Prager, "Play and the Avant-Garde: Aren't We All a Little Dada?", *American Journal of Play 5* (2013): 241.
[17] David Banash, *Collage Culture : Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2013), 18.
[18] John Yau, "Weekend Studio Visit: Squeak Carnwath in Oakland, California," Hyperallergic, accessed April 12, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/103607/weekend-studio-visit-squeak-carnwath-in-oakland-california/.

Assemblage

I use the terms *assemblage* and *collage* somewhat interchangeably; both involve piecing remnants together to form a new whole. Whether flat or object-like, I think of my work from a collage perspective. The inspiration behind my shift toward assemblage came about in part by an innate desire to arrange personal space and orchestrate commonplace objects; the still life on my kitchen table, refrigerator magnets, mementos on shelves, laundry piled high. Coupled with play, arranging and building with objects begins at a young age as a way of learning and navigating the world in which we live.

Intimate (fig 2.1) contains salvaged wood pieces stacked in an open frame. On some of the blocks' surfaces, I adhered thin paper monotypes, acrylic paint, and photographic imagery from a deconstructed magnolia seed pod; a tree well-known and dear to people living in Georgia. The color palette within the frame is interspersed with the color scheme Pantone titled "Intimate" with characteristics of "soft, nurturing, leaning decidedly to the warm side of the spectrum."[19] Here, I am using the blocks for viewers to connect to nature through color and shape, while also calling attention to subjective naming systems and marketing campaigns which lay claim to the symbolism and meaning of color and nature.

Fig. 2.1: *Intimate*, wood, monotype, acrylic paint, photographic imagery, 2019

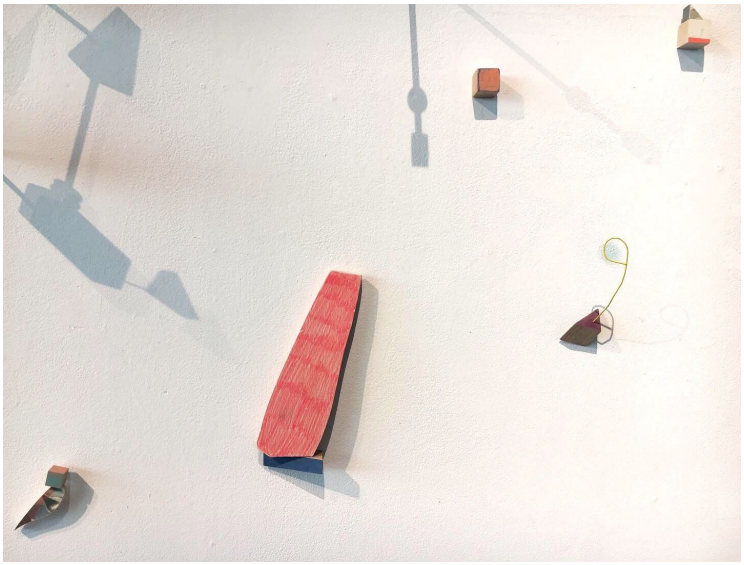
[19] Leatrice Eiseman, *Color - Messages & Meanings: A PANTONE Color Resource* (Gloucester, MA: Hand Books Press, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, *Beautyberry* marked a shift in the dimensionality of my work. Paper elements began to come off the wall, and shadow was introduced as another medium for playing with color and shape. The wall became my drawing plane, no longer confined to rectangular borders. *Wonderwall* (fig 2.2) and *Stack with Acorn* (fig 2.3) are site-specific installations using various materials and the wall as an open "page". I have been referring to these works as collages in 2 ½-dimensions; not quite flat, not quite viewable in-the-round. These assemblages—while similar in materiality—became different approaches to how color and shape are perceived in space, both in construction and viewing. One wall collage asked for a viewer's slow meander, while the other a stationary glance upward.

As the maker, actively curating, stacking, and assembling shapes of wood and mixed media on the wall, my body is placed inside the physical space of collage. Working with and against gravity, I shift shapes, color and line; physically trying to balance them, as a child might when playing with blocks. With these configurations, I am interested in the space between reality and perception; the moments shadow, light, and gravity come into question. As a viewer, bright and playful shapes may begin to take on the aura of something looming or dangerous. Looking at a shape one way, it might appear comfortable and flat, but with a slight turn of the head, the shape projects out of the wall, almost weapon-like.

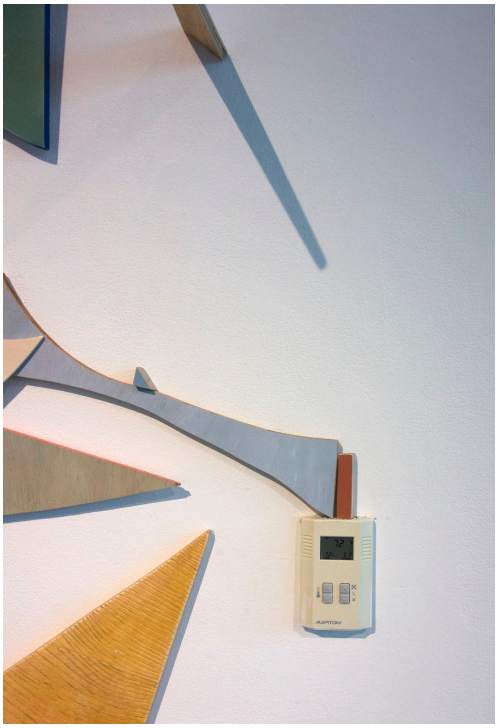
My assemblages are often provisional, arranged in response to the space they occupy. One of the challenges, but also exciting things about having a site-specific piece, is that there are real parts of the wall to work around. For instance, a thermostat, outlet, exit sign, and fire extinguisher are typically seen as obstacles for an artist looking to display work on a blank wall. In *Stack with Acorn*, an existing thermostat on the wall is made into a shape with necessity, as it bears the weight of other blocks.

Fig. 2.2 *Wonderwall*, mixed media, 2019



Wonderwall (detail)

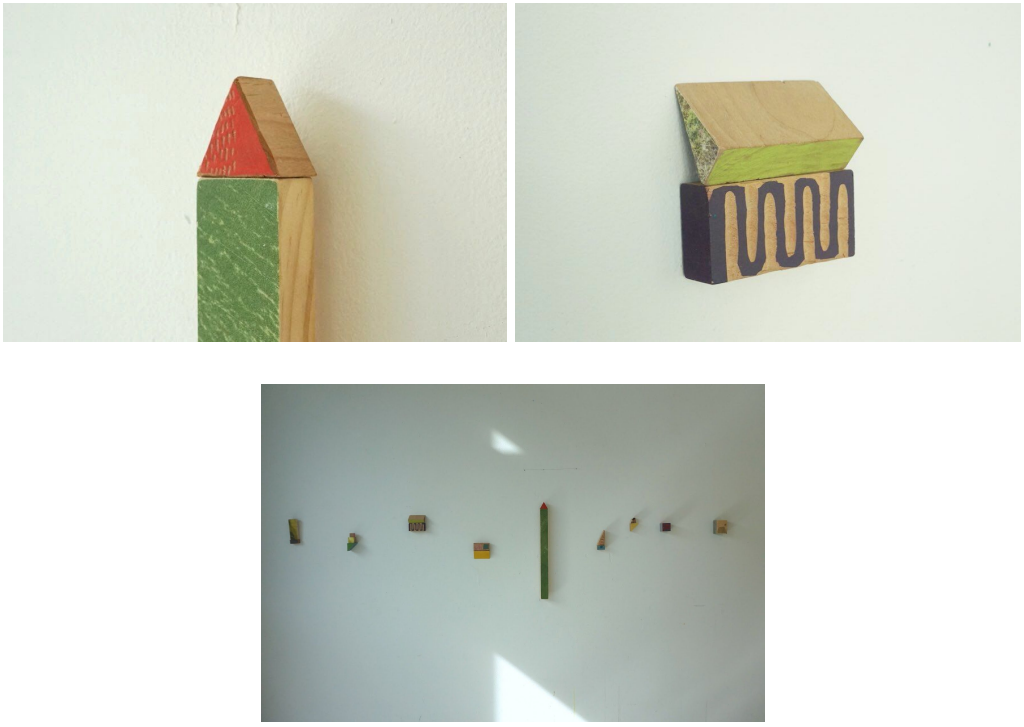
Fig. 2.3 *Stack with Acorn*, monotypes and acrylic paint adhered to wood, acorn, 2019



Stack with Acorn (detail)

Printmaking

I think of my two- and three-dimensional work from a collage perspective, but my process often begins with printmaking. Printmaking and sculpture in tandem allow for layering, a sense of uncertainty and surprise, as well as the joy of tacility. With print, material is removed or added to transfer information from one surface to the next. The etching press allows for simultaneous layering and flattening on paper. Multiple passes of ink creates a physical accumulation of material; the history of a gesture through textures and marks left on the surface of a plate. Monotype is generally considered the most painterly printmaking process. It allows for quick, sweeping marks and a combination of layering with other media. I sand my plexiglass before rolling out ink to be scraped away, to bring forth the texture of a worn surface and chatter of mark-making. The technique of relief-carving creates physical hills and valleys in the wood to reveal pattern and texture. I often use these blocks as sculptural elements, rather than print matrices.



Little Scapes, wood, monotype, ink, acrylic paint, 2020

Afternoon Dune, monotype, 14” x 11”, 2020

Sun Trails, monotype with chine collé, 13” x 12.5”, 2019

Chapter 3: Space

Playscapes

Playgrounds act as containers for children to explore space through play. By the 1930s and 1940s, new discussions on the design and function of playgrounds were taking place.[20] Postwar designers and architects created play spaces and play sculptures that were less prescriptive and more open, playful, and imaginative.[21] Isamu Noguchi, one of the twentieth century's most critically acclaimed sculptors,[22] used the idea of the playground as sculpture, and in his designs tried to teach people to be more mindful of space; how we occupy it and how it works. Many of Noguchi's playground designs were not realized, due to park safety standards and regulations, but they are celebrated just the same. In 1952, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited a plaster model of a playground made by Noguchi and Julian Whittlesey, designed for a site near the United Nations Headquarters.[23] The site was never built, but the model was widely seen. Susan G. Solomon writes in her book *American Playgrounds,* "It planted the seed of the idea that abstraction provided a more stimulating play environment than traditional equipment, and that children could learn about space and form through such a place."[24]

In 1976, Noguchi saw the first completed playground of his design built in the United States. I took a trip to see the playscape in Piedmont Park in Atlanta, GA. It is a simple park on a hill with oversized, brightly colored shapes. "These were conceived as sculptures,"[25] writes Ana Maria Torres in *Isamu Noguchi: A Study of Space*. The structures and their stark, cast shadows were brought to life in the sunlight. Standing at the top of one of the cylindrical slides, I looked up through an opening to see blue sky and clouds. For a moment, I was taken out of my daily adult-routine to climb, slide, jump, and play.

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[20] Obniski and Alfred, *Serious Play, 13.*
[21] Obniski and Alfred, *Serious Play, 13.*
[22] Biography, The Noguchi Museum, accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/biography/biography/.
[23] Alexandra Lange, *Design of Childhood* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 245.
[24] Susan Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (Lebanon, NH: UPNE, 2005), 25.
[25] Ana Maria Torres, *Isamu Noguchi: A Study of Space* (New York: Monacelli Press, Inc., 2000), 30.

Photographs from *Playscapes*, designed by Isamu Noguchi in 1976, Atlanta, GA

Thesis Work

What does it look like to play with a place? Places that are most familiar to us—natural and built landscapes in our surroundings—can we take aspects of them and zoom in and out, stretch them, turn them, and hold them to light? My thesis body of work comprises monotype prints and wooden block pieces dispersed and assembled along a white gallery wall. Familiar shapes repeat, magnify, stack, fall, and climb; oscillating between solid forms and flat prints. The prints and assemblages are not exact depictions of one another, rather, imagined narratives coalesce into similar conversations of play and place. The work threads together elements discussed in previous chapters while circling around David Arron's definition of play, "To look at something every which way." The work is shaped by my experiences with play; in my observations of place and nature, my studio practice, and material-use.

Specific pieces in my thesis body of work reference locations which have anchored me to feelings of home and well-being. Many of these locations trace back to Kansas, where I have lived for most of my life. My parents' house lies on the outskirts of town in a small valley surrounded by rolling grass. There is so much space here. When driving away from their house, I usually pause for a moment at the end of the gravel lane which intersects with a larger road. From this vantage point, a gentle hill meets an open sky. It is a grounding view ingrained in my memory. The print, *Deep Creek* (fig 3.1), named after the street my parents live on, recalls this familiar bent horizon line.

In my work, I do not attempt to depict specific locations, rather, certain aspects live in my subconscious and come through my hand in sweeping gestures of scraped away ink. The color of a place also has this impact on my subsconscious, like I mentioned in the Beautyberry example. In Georgia, invasive Kudzu attaches itself to houses and trees for much of the year, covering everything in green. It is a spectacular, yet unwelcome site, since too much Kudzu can disrupt the health of an ecosystem. According to Molly Bang's seventh principle for how shapes communicate, a depiction of Kudzu might contain pointed shapes to show its dangerous attributes. *Green Squeeze* (fig 3.2) plays with this principle, as it zooms into curved, globular forms, about to touch, or perhaps recently divided. These forms are not literal depictions of Kudzu, but carry similar characteristics of the plant's tendency to enclose a space.

The prints and assembled blocks in my thesis are snapshots of moments frozen in time. *Big Red* (fig 3.3) could be perceived as the top of a mound seen from a distance, or an up-close view of the small red pebble in the print, *Ascend* (fig 3.4). Around the gallery, shapes bounce, fall, and dance within constrained wooden frames and out onto the wall. Small clusters act as building blocks, highlighting the space around forms as much as the forms themselves. The room is an additional frame for the viewer to enter and explore connections with color and shape through observation, like a visual playscape.

Fig. 3.1: *Deep Creek*, monotype mounted in wood frame, 23.5” x 18”, 2020

Fig. 3.2: *Green Squeeze*, monotype mounted in wood frame, 26” x 38”, 2019

Green Squeeze (detail)

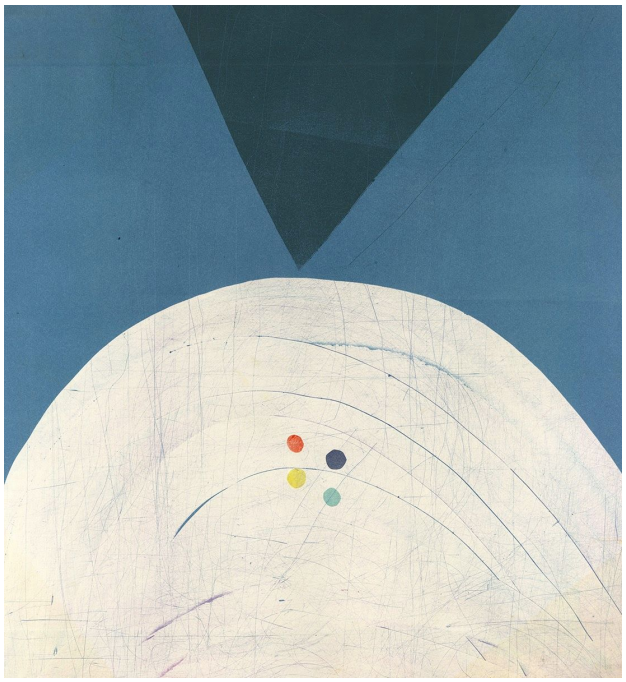
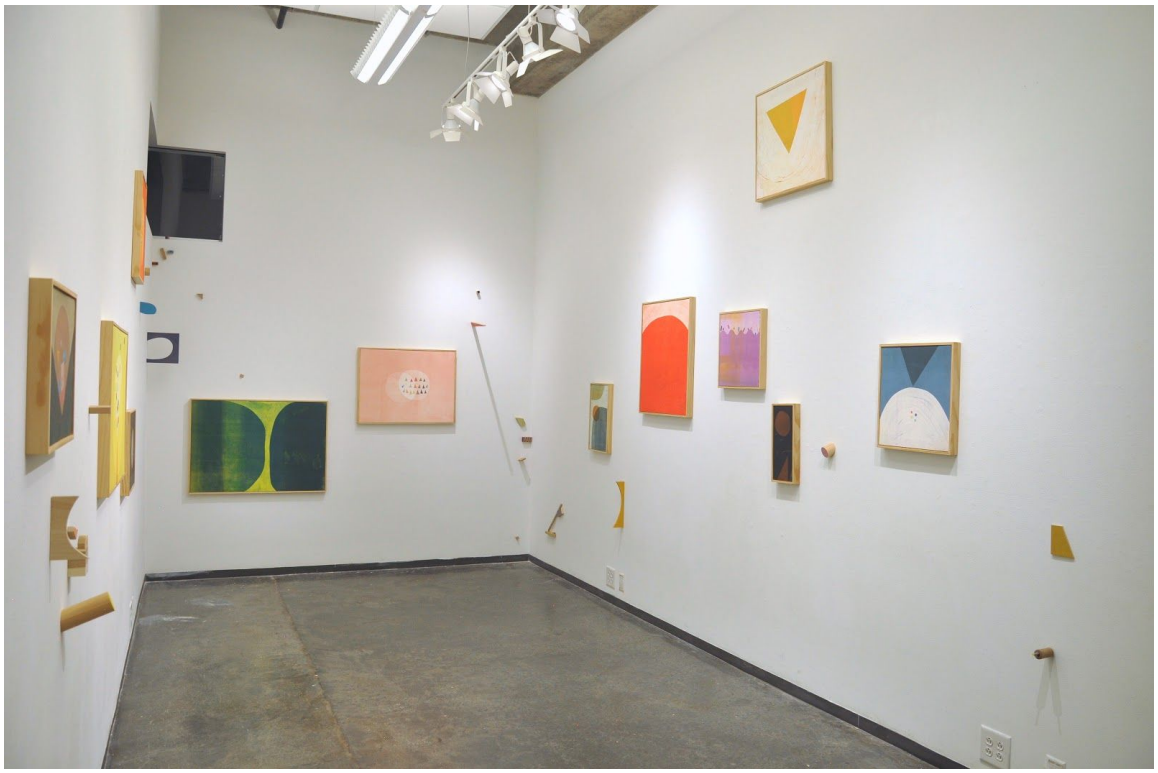
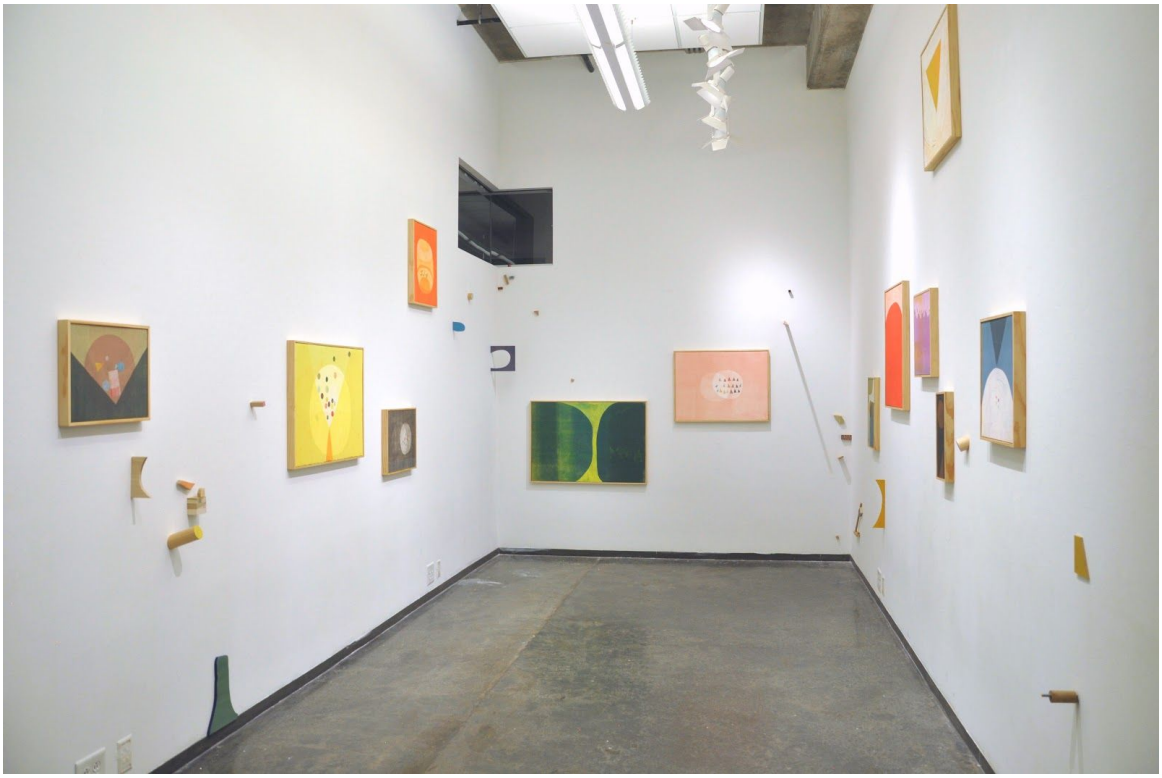


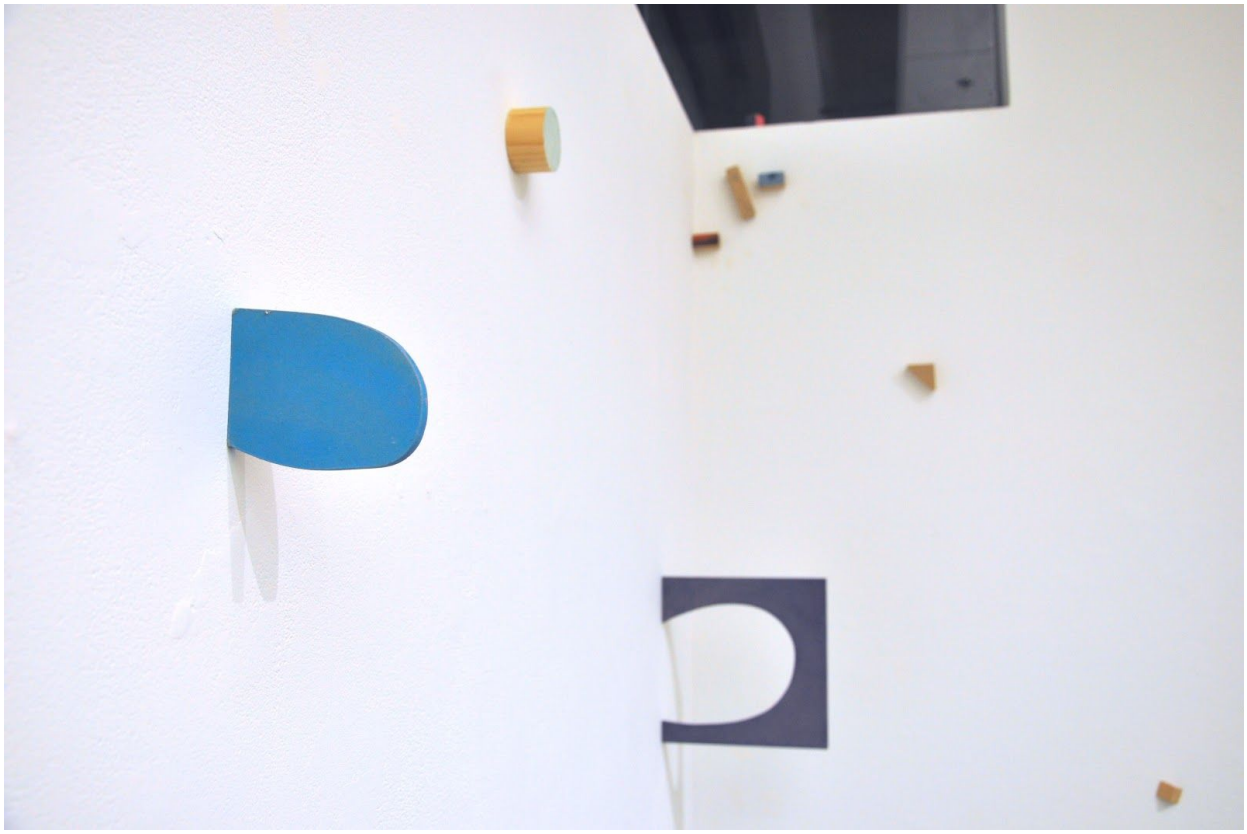
Fig. 3.3: *Ascend*, monotype with chine collé, 16” x 15”, 2020

Fig. 3.4: *Big Red*, monotype, 26” x 22”, 2020

Installation Views







Conclusion:

Isamu Noguchi envisioned the earth as sculpture, an ultimate frontier. Referring to this vision, Noguchi said, “I always kept at it...And other people have done it. When you consider that the Mexicans were at it, actually doing it. So were the Egyptians. So were the Cambodians. They were making things like this [pointing at a model for *Play Mountain*]. Everybody's been after the imaginary landscape from the beginning of time.”[26] We are born observers, seeking deeper connections with the world around us. This can happen through play, but it is not always easy. When children play, it can mean serious business; ironically, it takes work and energy.

I acknowledge that the thoughts and topics within my thesis paper meander and drift, as one might when going for a walk without a clear destination, but this has not made my grad school journey any less serious. If anything, the serious play that is my studio practice, has allowed me to absorb and reflect content in different ways, from multiple angles, hopefully allowing viewers to do the same. As I come to the end of writing this report, it is March 2020 and humanity is facing a world-wide pandemic. It is surreal, alarming, and fearful; a strange limbo of panic and calm. But it is also the beginning of Spring; a new season to observe life’s growth. We may not always be able to incite the wonder that comes from watching the world with “glittering eyes”, especially in turbulent times, but can we make space for that kind of vision? Can we climb into it, and climb back out—even just for a moment?

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[26] Charlotte Zwerin, *Isamu Noguchi: The Sculpture of Spaces*, directed by Kenji Hayashi and Charlotte Zwerin (1995; New York: Films Media Group, 2006), Films on Demand - GALILEO.

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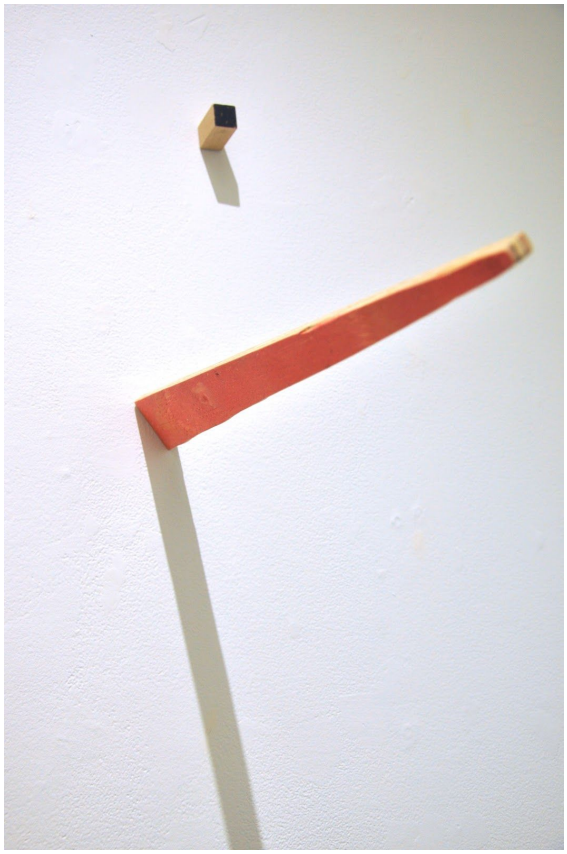
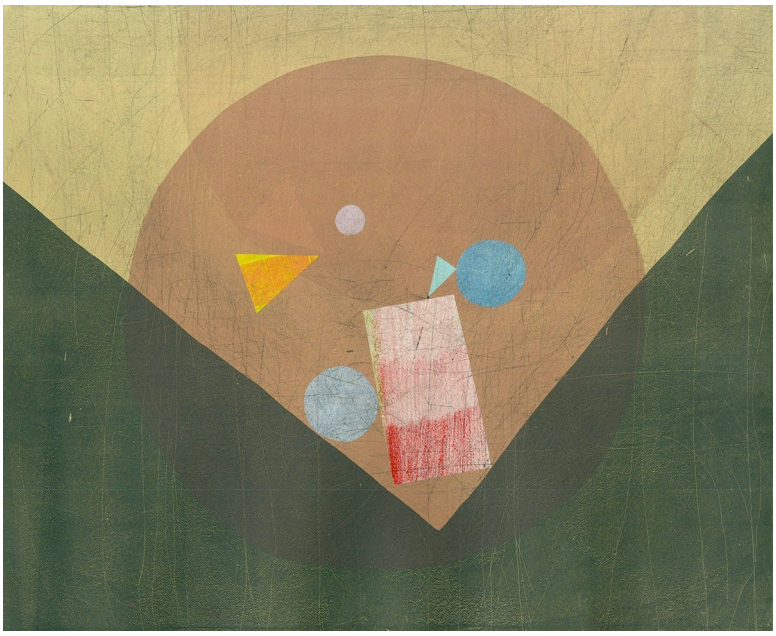
Supplemental Images





Corner Round, monotype with chine collé, 11” x 14”, 2020

Bounce, monotype with chine collé, 20.5” x 17”, 2020

See-Through, monotype, 17.5” x 11”, 2020

Yellow Dive, monotype, 22.5” x 22.5”

Outcrop, monotype with chine collé, 14.5” x 18”, 2020

Collect, monotype with chine collé, 22” x 30”, 2020

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May 1, 2020

To the Graduate Office at the Lamar Dodd School of Art:

As Major Professor to Master of Fine Arts graduate Mary Gordon, I am pleased to report that after the conclusion of Mary's final review of her thesis work, the committee unanimously agreed that she should graduate with the honor of Distinction.

The committee came to this conclusion due to the diligent manner in which Mary approached all of her responsibilities as a graduate student at the Lamar Dodd School of Art. Mary came to the program with an open mind, eager to challenge herself to find her voice and establish her practice. She worked with monotypes and collage to work through a variety of compositions and color palettes, mostly dealing with abstract imagery as well as images of foliage. As she progressed in her work, she began to explore the notion of "play" in her work, researching different theorists in educational pedagogy. Her work adapted to reflect this new line of inquiry. Mary's final thesis work continued this exploration through the use of monotypes as well as printed and painted wooden shapes that worked together to create a larger tableau on the gallery wall. Her work was nuanced and sophisticated, evoking subtle metaphors and references to memories and experiences Mary had has throughout her life.

Mary's thesis was well-written reflecting the serious deliberation she gives to her work. All of the committee members commented on the excellence of the thesis and appreciated the thoughtful layout and commentary.

Mary was also a responsible and dedicated member of the graduate community and the Printmaking and Book Arts Department. She contributed many hours to the Printmaking Student Association helping with print sales, open houses, and upkeep in the studio. She taught several courses during her graduate studies and the excellent student work from her classes is a testament to her skills and dedication as an instructor.

Mary exemplifies our ideal graduate student; she is a studious, dedicated artist, open to constructive criticism, motivated in her personal practice and research agenda, active in the Lamar Dodd School of Art, and an overall generous and kind person. It was an honor to work with her and witness the evolution of her work. She is deserving of this honor and I am proud we are able to recognize her with distinction.

Sincerely,

Melissa Harshman
Professor, Area Chair- Printmaking and Book Arts