

University of Alaska Fairbanks
Art Department

Wheels of Life

BFA Thesis

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May 1st, 2019

Thesis Statement

The impact of technology and transportation on the communities it connects is immense. The patterns of motion and interconnectivity driven by our technologies and ingenuity create experiences in the daily lives of humans that would never have been thought possible only a few years ago. *Wheels of Life* is a representation of the growing modernity and timeless natural beauty of the connections between us animals and the technology we have created. It draws attention to digital and technological developments and how these tools are part of the natural world we live in. It is an exploration in motion, energy, and interactivity, through color, texture, and the passage of time. *Wheels of Life* includes digital media such as photographs and animations, various printing methods such as monotypes, woodcuts, and copper plate etchings, and metal works in silver, copper, brass and steel.

Introduction

The images in *Wheels of Life* could be described as stylized and graphic, using bright colors, flat blacks and whites, and simplified shapes. I often use a color palette of Alizarin Crimson and Prussian and Phthalo blues, and the resulting purples. I also use some cadmium yellow and yellow ochre. Many of my favorite images to create are those of present and futuristic ideas and objects, but with a slightly nostalgic feeling. The work is mostly representational, so that it can be quickly understood and enjoyed by anyone. Subjects of images are often the beautiful things I see around me, like sky and clouds, roads and buildings, peoples, animals, and things. My thesis focuses on exploration; the works involve many processes and materials, combining two-dimensional and three-dimensional work while incorporating the element of time.

Digital art is fascinating because of the ever-evolving nature of computing technology. A modern digital artist has access to tools and computing power that could never have been dreamed of a century ago. This allows for digital artists to create more realistic renderings, work with more editability, create larger and better quality images, and most importantly, it has allowed for easier access to creating time-based art works. As art becomes more interactive and immersive, I am eager to become part of the workforce that generates those ideas and imagery. I feel it is important to promote digital art as an expansive and ever-evolving art form that is beautifully unique and inspiring.

When making prints, I try to accentuate qualities that cannot be achieved through digital printing, like texture and surface variation. I chose printmaking as my second area of concentration because seemed a unique challenge, as it combines aspects of drawing, painting, carving, metal work, and digital techniques all together in one studio. The embossment and impressions that can be made into the thick soaked paper are qualities I find appealing in intaglio printing with copper plate etching. Etching can create beautiful value gradients and sharp crisp lines similar to what can be achieved with pen or pencil drawing, the added element of acid allows for much finer lines than can be achieved with pen and ink. Woodcut relief printing offers unique textures and unpredictability of its own. The beautifully unique wood grain image that can be achieved with the right amount of ink and pressure is the main appeal of this print method. Relief printing also allows for the use of a split fountain, where the ink is evenly distributed across the block to form a gradient of two or more colors when printed. I particularly enjoy the atmospheric effects this technique creates and use it often in my relief prints.

Influences

I feel art that is most influential to me are the works that I can watch as they are being created. Much of my appreciation comes from knowing the effort, thought, and ingenuity of the artist, and so my fellow BFA students and recent UAF graduates have had a huge impact on my work. Not only do I want to create images I hope they will like, but I am also compelled to branch out from their work, to do something that no one else is doing. This is the upside and the downside of being the only BFA student concentrating on digital media at UAF for the several years I have been attending UAF, since it means I also have fewer in-person artists and peers to learn from.

Because the internet is a wonderful thing, I do have access to the work that thousands of other digital artists are sharing on social media platforms. Web spaces like Pinterest and Instagram are great resources for finding artists from all over the world, of all skill levels, sharing their creations. The internet is an essential tool for digital artists looking to share their work with the widest possible group of viewers. Making art that is specifically designed for viewing through the internet is something I am interested in pursuing,



Maple Trees at Mama, Tekona Shrine and Linked Bridge
Utagawa Hiroshige I,
Woodblock Print,
1857, 1st month

especially as digital technology moves further into physical space with tools like 3D printing, wearable tech, and augmented and virtual realities.

I find that I am impacted most by the artists working directly around me in the studios, but there are several more well-known artists that I often think about when creating new art. Iconic French prints from artists like Toulouse-Lautrec and Alexandre Steinlen, with bold compositions, emotions, and movement. A series of ukiyo-e prints by Utagawa Hiroshige titled *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* is another inspiration of mine. All landscapes had vertical orientations rather than horizontal, and they were printed using the bokashi method of brushing ink onto wooden blocks to create color gradients with prominent wood grain texture. My *Island Getaway* print directly echos his work, where I make use of the split fountain, wood grain texture, and vertical orientation.

Ed Ruscha is an American pop artist working mainly in painting, printmaking, and photography. I particularly love his typography work, his use of bright colors, and his many versions of the same Standard Station. Ruscha was trained as a commercial illustrator who used those skills in his photography and printmaking, and was a pioneer of the use of the split fountain technique in silkscreen printing.



Standard Station,
Ed Ruscha,
Screen Print,
1966



History Kids,
Ed Ruscha,
Lithograph,
2013

Thesis Works

I feel that Ruscha's influence is noticeable in my monotype prints such as *Dreamscape No. 1* in both colors and subject matter, finished in December 2018. The incorporation of text into the image is similar, and the industrial and natural themes also echo some of his designs. I admire Ruscha's exploration in printmaking, often running strange organic materials through the press instead of ink or paint. I have yet to try printing with chocolate syrup, tomato paste, blood, grass, or gunpowder like Ruscha has, but I do like printing with recycled materials that have interesting textures like cardboard and packaging material.



Trainscape in Purple and Green, Naomi Hutchens,
Monotype Print, January 2019

Attention to movement, speed, and appreciation for things like urbanization and modernity are some influences I picked up from Italian Futurism. The ghosting effect of the collograph train car in *Dreamscape No. 1* is an example of a futurist idea of showing an object in motion. Works by Umberto Boccioni like *The City Rises* in 1910 and *Unique forms of Continuity in Space* in 1913 are excellent examples of movement, as is *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* by Giacomo Balla in 1912. The portrayal of concepts like dynamism, energy, mechanics, and electricity through the use of lighting and color is something I would like to experiment more with. The Futurists often use bicycles, motorcycles, cars and airplanes as symbols to represent power, speed, movement and energy. I form images of rockets, trains, skateboards and motorcycles for many of the same reasons.

Island Getaway is a 16" x 20" mixed process print with five layers of different printing techniques including relief, intaglio, and silkscreen. The first two layers of the image use a woodblock reduction relief print method to apply a rainbow roll or split fountain inking technique. This means that the wood block was inked with several colors at once to form a smooth gradient of colors. In this case I used blue, yellow, red, purple, blue, and yellow from top to bottom to make up the sky and sand colors in the image. Relief refers to where the ink



Island Getaway, Naomi Hutchens,
Multi-Process Print, Spring 2018

is placed on the block, and a brayer is used to apply an even layer of ink across the surface. Only the most raised parts will print, and nothing that is carved away will print. Next, the sky and sand were carved away so that they would not be printed over, and another layer of split fountain was printed. Three separate areas were inked at once and printed at the same time: the red to yellow gradient of the sun, the dark to light blue gradient of the ocean, and the brown hut in the bottom left corner. The final layer of woodblock relief printing was a separate block depicting the two central figures of people holding surfboards, standing on a gently sloping grassy hill surrounded by three palm trees. The image is printed with a subtle split fountain gradient, from a deep purple at the top of the palm trees to a graphic black at the bottom.

Three areas of the wood blocks were carved away before any printing at all was done to leave the area totally white: the white caps of the waves, the bottom letters carved into the hill spelling out “H A W A I I” and a rounded rectangle in the upper central right where the next layer would be printed. This next layer was accomplished by method of copper plate etching, where the flipped image of an emergency alert text message was etched with ferric chloride into a copper plate, ink was wiped into the fine etched lines, and then pressed under high pressure into water soaked paper.

The intaglio printing process could be considered the opposite of relief. Instead of the raised sections being the areas that are printed, intaglio only prints the lowest areas, what has been etched away. The resulting image is a tonal and detailed black text bubble proclaiming an imminent missile threat, with the addition of textural noise around the edges of the plate caused by “foul bite” i.e. tiny dots and scratches that were etched into the copper with the letters. Most printmakers take great care to avoid foul bite in their prints, but I took extra measures to ensure

that I got as much of it as possible. The copper plate etching also creates an embossment into the paper, while the rest of the print is flat. The final printed layer came out of necessity, because the white on yellow letters spelling out HAWAII in the hill became difficult to read from afar. The black outline of the letters was a silk screen layer that added tremendously to the readability of the image.

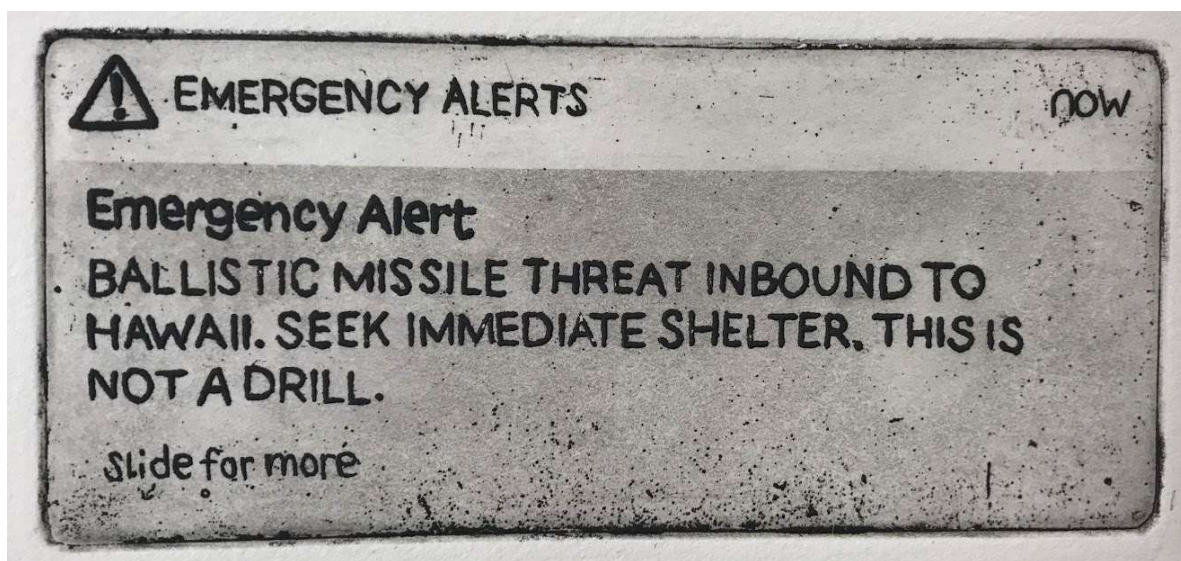
This print was inspired by what Wikipedia calls the 2018 Hawaii False Missile Alert, an event that occurred on January 13th, 2018. The missile alert was sent out to all cell phones, televisions and some radio broadcasts throughout the state of Hawaii by an employee of the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency who mistook a drill for an actual emergency. The alert caused widespread chaos and confusion throughout the state for a brief period before a correction alert was sent out 38 minutes later. During that time, state officials used social media like Twitter and Facebook to communicate to the public that the alert was a mistake.

I heard about this event from my partner later that day as he was reading the news. We were on our way home from our own winter vacation, having very nearly chosen Hawaii for our destination. My first reaction at the colossal mistake was to laugh at how unbelievable it seemed. Then I thought about my friends who lived there, what their reaction would have been when they received that text message. The alert was written in all capitals letters:

**BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER.
THIS IS NOT A DRILL.**

What would have gone through my mind seeing those words appear on a screen as personal as my cell phone? Hawaii is a popular vacation destination for Alaskans due to its proximity and the beautiful winter weather. I felt compelled to make a memory out of the event

by carving a print that would capture the peace and natural beauty of Hawaii being disrupted by this slightly comical, slightly terrifying event. During the process of creating the print, I spoke with several people about their experiences and memories of the event. Many Alaskans were in Hawaii during the winter holiday break, and the personal stories shared with me only further affirmed my reasoning for creating the piece. The print was awarded Viewer's Choice during the Spring 2018 Juried Student Art Show.



False Alert, Naomi Hutchens,
Copper Plate Etching, 2018

When creating any new work, motion is crucial in many ways. A sense of movement throughout the piece is important to me, as well as consideration of how the viewer will interact with it. Incorporating motion into printed work is tough to do, and interactivity even more so. *Flip Me* is one solution to both of these problems; it is an artist book comprised of 44 pages of copper plate etchings on paper designed to be view in rapid succession, as the viewer applies pressure to the left side of the pages. It was intentionally made as a left-handed book, bound on the right side and opening from the left. The book is bound with copper plates and rivets, each 2”

x 3” image hand colored after printing. The images combine into a tiny “video” inspired by the many hills surrounding Fairbanks. The images show a Black-Capped Chickadee flitting in and out of the frame before mysteriously turning into an airplane and flying away.

Flip Me makes use of motion by repeatedly drawing the same background images, in this case the hills and the birch tree trunk, with the main action of the bird changing slightly with each image. The hills in the background hint at the radio towers, telephone poles, and other technology that can be seen crowning Birch Hill, Ester Dome, and others. The Chickadee is another popular Alaskan character, present year round in Fairbanks and oh-so adorable.



Flip Me, Naomi Hutchens,
Artist Book, April 2019

The animation makes use of surprise in a couple ways, most notably when the viewer first picks it up. The reversed orientation of the book often causes some slight confusion, since most people are accustomed to western books that conventionally are bound on the left and open from the right. Growing up in a Jewish household with many hebrew books written and bound from left to right, this orientation

does not feel out of place to me, and in fact makes the animation as it is composed more visible and understandable. The second surprise comes in when the bird changes into a small airplane, something only possible in an animated image. This surprise should cause viewers to think, “Wait a minute, where did that plane come from?” and make them want to flip through the book again to figure it out. The third and final surprise from this little book was an experimentation with printing small, irregularly shaped copper plates, as opposed to the conventionally square plates that the rest of the images are comprised of. When the plane is nearing the left edge of the frame towards the end of the animation, small copper airplane shapes were printed to give the illusion that the plane is breaking through the frame and looping around before reentering the main image. This is a small detail that results in varying success, since the small copper plates proved to be much harder to work with when etching and printing, but do add a fun and exciting twist to the end of the short animated image.



Left: Silver Gray Jay Right: Silver Chickadee, Sterling Silver, Naomi Hutchens, March 2019

The imagery of *Flip Me* is very similar to other works in the show. The books were displayed near the screen playing digital animations that include wireframe animal structures, as well as physical wireframe jewelry. Two silver rings, *Silver Chickadee* and *Silver Gray Jay* were also displayed near the flip books. The interactivity of the wearable sculptural rings is one of their strongest characteristics, the ability to hold a small silver bird perched on the finger. The wireframe nature is very transparent, especially with polished silver, so the rings need an intimate viewing where they can be rotated and examined closely to be fully appreciated.

Who Are You? Who Am I? is an interactive mixed-media sculpture that incorporates visuals, audio, and textural components. The piece is a wearable mask suspended by a pulley system meant to be experienced from the outside as the audience, and from the inside as the wearer. The mask prompts the viewer to become a contributor to the evolution of the sculpture. The wearer of the mask is encouraged to animate the sculpture, while the audience is welcomed to create photos and videos of the installation and share them on social media, adding their own memories to the ever-changing performance.

A viewer's experience begins by examining the exterior of the mask head. It is decorated with faux fur, lit with LED lights, suspended by tethers from support columns and lowered onto the shoulders of the wearer. The mask is quite large, taking the shape of a fuzzy white animal head, something between a bunny, a bear, and a mouse. The sculpture combines textures for tactile people, incorporating fur, sequins, mesh, ribbons, and wire. There is a single board computer inset into the mask that powers video and audio feeds for the wearer of the head.

The mask is meant to be worn for about a minute, with audio and visuals playing inside for the wearer. A central goal of the installation is to make the experience as inclusive as possible for all who would like to participate. The mask incorporates sights, sounds, and textures to create



Who Are You? Who Am I?, Soft Sculpture,
Naomi Hutchens, April 2019

a full experience for the wearer, despite any sensory impairment. The pulley system raises and lowers the mask so that there are no steps or height requirements to try it on. Even for those who would prefer not to put the mask on themselves, the interactive exterior can still be appreciated from the outside.

When the mask is being worn by others, viewers awaiting their turn are encouraged to take photos and videos of the decorative exterior of the sculpture, including the wearer, to contribute to the digital life of the installation. While worn, any photo or video taken of the “performance” as the mask-wearer will be a unique interpretation of the work. This means the work is constantly evolving as more people wear the mask and share digital documentation of it. The mask can be worn by nearly anyone, and is still interesting and fun to watch even if one doesn’t want to wear it themselves. This project highlights the desire of modern art viewers to take part in the art they are experiencing, and to share that experience with friends through social media.

The mask also represents the outer self compared to the inner self, what others see versus what the individual experiences. Mirrored surfaces are incorporated inside and outside the mask, so that wearers can see parts of their own face up close as well as their whole body wearing the huge head. An animated video is looping on a small screen inside, accompanied by soft music. There are large transparent mesh areas where the viewer can still see their surroundings, while appreciating the copper wireframe and painted elements on the interior. The audio and visuals encourage movement and performance, bringing the viewers' attention to their own body and the self inside of it. The mask head is characterized by dualities of the inner self and the outer self, outward appearances and introspective thoughts. The mask prompts the viewer to consider the self that includes the mask, the person behind that mask, as well as the self inside one's own head. This concept may also be applied to the portrayal of the digital self through what we choose to include in online profiles, and what we choose to confine to the physical realm. The installation is also about fun: fun to look at, fun to touch, and fun to try on.

Reflections

On the evening of the opening reception, the sculpture was, in fact, quite fun. I was very pleased to see the reactions of viewers as they entered the gallery and saw the head. I set up colorful "distraction curtains" between the door and the head, creating a visual break so that the head was not immediately seen from the entrance. For some, the first response to seeing it was "That's scary!" and it made at least one baby immediately start crying. Others were amazed by the floating head suspended in air, and many children had to be pulled away from the sculpture by their parents, they were so enthralled. In true spirit of *Wheels of Life*, I am pleased with the full spectrum of reactions to the works in the show. The flip books, wood carvings, and digital

animations were also well reviewed. I organized the silver wireframe bird rings, next to the animations of the wireframe chickadee and the flipbooks, also featuring the chickadee.

Displaying the framed works in the gallery for the first time was a learning experience for me in many ways. I now appreciate the painstaking effort that goes into framing a piece of two-dimensional art: the matting, glass-cutting, frame assembly, wire hanging, and wall measurements. I also learned that the bright light cast by the television screens create unwanted reflections in the glass of the other works hanging in the gallery. I learned that the space the work will be displayed in makes a huge difference in how it is interpreted, things like power outlets, electrical wires, and exposed plumbing is not ideal for displaying installation pieces. Lastly, I learned the overwhelming satisfaction that comes from other people enjoying the work that I have made, and witnessing all they ways they interact with it.

Conclusion

Technology and transportation are essential components of modern life and shape the way we are able to view the world. The technologies of transportation have made it possible for me to experience a much broader area of the world than I would be able to see just on my own two feet, and I hope that exploration is present in *Wheels of Life*. My thesis work highlights the beauty of human technology as part of the natural world, the ways we interact with it and how it shapes our lives. *Wheels of Life* began as an investigation of motion over time, of energy, tranquility, and progress. It will remain a stepping stone on my journey through the world and represents my first explorations into the mediums and techniques I will use to document that journey.

I would like to thank my family, friends, professors, and peers for their help and immense support throughout my journey. Huge thanks to Professor Miho Aoki, who provided essential knowledge of computer programs, storytelling techniques, and the encouragement to pursue the creation of digital works in the field of Fine Art. To Dr. Zoë Jones, thank you for providing historical context to the ideas and concepts I was beginning to develop, and the environment to improve those concepts into statements that could be understood by others. Professor David Mollett provided essential contemporary art conventions and practices, as well as ample space for experimentation and feedback to aid in furthering my artistic development. Thank you David for putting up with all our studio antics. Professor Patricia Carlson, thank you for laying the groundwork for creating three-dimensional physical objects, and for pushing me to create wearable art and sculpture that invites interactivity and kinetic movement. Lastly, thank you to my fellow BFA and BA students that helped me learn, grow, and procrastinate.