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## ABSTRACT

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Western Carolina University (May 2016)

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Exemplifying the symbolic relationship of materials, form, and space, the works of the exhibition reveal metaphorical signifiers of racial and gender focused binaries while utilizing combinations of traditional and contemporary practice. Understanding the connection between the psychological aspect of making and the object reflects extensive research into the history of origins of semiotics. This practice challenges the physical and poetic boundaries of medium, technique, and material by investigating the relationship of head to hand processes and how this is displayed through the objects. Combining a mixture of printmaking processes and sculptural objects, the work in the exhibition juxtaposes traditional making and contemporary thinking.

## CHAPTER ONE: CONTEMPORARY TRADITION

Photography had sparked the revelation of painting in modernist terms due to its accessible nature of capturing. Why would one paint if you could just take a picture? Why spend hours on making when you can simply use a ready-made object that can project the same idea? This moment in our history was the catalyst for post-modernism and the innate questioning of what the definition of art is. In the 1960's, the minimalist art movement solidified the artistic need for change of mode of production and inquiry into institutional critique. The expanded field of artistic inquiry has jolted us into questioning art once again. An introspective analysis of my work, in order to place it within the contemporary context, reveals an intensive study of metaphor and how medium can provoke different interpretations of meaning. The work is minimalist in regards to aesthetics and semiotic relationships of material choice and tedious labor are prominent.

In the most recent work *Ally* (fig. A1) I have placed two 4' x 8' unprinted oak woodcuts side by side, setting the cut lines opposite of one another. The title marks the importance of the piece within the everyday context. In Hal Foster's book *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, he explains how the artists' psyche instinctively relays the contemporary world. *Ally* does not hold one inherent meaning, but rather multiple meanings, dependent upon the viewers' interpretation. The beauty of the language of metaphor in art is that the viewer is allowed to become an active participant rather than a mere passive viewer. When you first walk up to *Ally*, the unprinted woodcuts could seem to be mere abstract paintings, yet placing them side by side with the right woodcut reflecting the opposite of the left, along with the title *Ally*, creates multiple signifiers tied together which reflect a metaphorical interpretation. Printing the woodcuts would allow a more accessible visual distinction between the cut lines and the veneer,

distinguishing a relationship of opposition. Instead they are left golden with the cuts symbolizing the individualistic nature of the oak wood rather than introducing a distinguished color, leaving the raw material as a signifier of amalgamation. What do you think of when you hear the word *Ally*? Traditionally, this word would be thought of in a social context, especially in regards to our current universal struggles of racial and social issues. The multiplicity of signifiers prompts the viewer to become an active participant, deciphering the signifiers in order to come up with their own connection. Not everyone is going to see the exact same metaphor, yet the work presents options available for the viewer's de-coding. Even though the frames are similar in nature, the woodcut paintings are individualistic in character, revealing a humanistic relationship between the two.

No matter how hard I tried to stay straight on this line, the wood overcame, and the process became part of the implied metaphor. I drew upon this relationship of human error and over time, the work transformed into *Ally*, as a way to include multiple lines, inherent of multiple pathways or individuals rather than just one mere line. Not existing as perfect renditions of line, yet containing inherent imperfect lines. Each line within the large block is individualistic in nature, not replicating any other. No matter how precise the cut, it still reveals individual characteristics and/or flaws. Not every line is straight, which also alludes to humanistic ideology, celebrating differences between each line.

Keeping in mind the layout of the exhibition space, *Ally* has been placed on the back wall as you walk into the gallery, highlighting the importance of the piece in relation to the space and the other works within the exhibition. While utilizing the power of metaphor, it is important to know the relationships between each piece. *Ally* relates to each piece within the exhibition, forming a sort of coded language that the viewers can decipher.

Printmaking has always been a recurrent medium within my work, due to my respect for the tradition of the medium. *Ally* stands as a diptych, yet originally, I had intended them to exist as unprinted woodcuts. Woodcut printing is one of the earliest techniques of printmaking, yet placing it within a contemporary situation emphasizes its metaphorical implications and the relationship of head to hand processes. Printmaking has been a vehicle for mass consumerism in regards to propaganda, religious doctrines, and documentation of cultural beliefs, wars, rituals, etc., since its inception. The multiplication and repetition is a way of reaching and connecting with a larger group of people, yet still honoring the head-to-hand process. By depleting the printing process from the work *Ally*, it stands alone as a block or sculptural form as metaphor. The printing process is revealed in the work *wearehuman* (fig. A2), a series of 1,200 silkscreen prints directing the relationship to the floor, which also is a grounding of sorts. The prints are divided by 400 prints in white, 400 in gold, 400 in black. Each stack of prints is displayed upon a low level wooden pedestal available for the public to take freely. *wearehuman* holds an implied connection to the civil rights poster I AM A MAN (see Fig. 1). In 1968, Memphis sanitation workers, many of them African American, held up the signs in protest of their treatment.



Fig. 1. *I am a man* broadside, ca. April 4, 1968. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

In *wearehuman*, the poem reflects past, present and future social relationships, and in being freely given out to the participating public, the work creates a metaphor for connective aesthetics. The silkscreen prints are also hand-printed, reiterating the importance of head-to-hand processes.

The work *Connect* (fig. A3) is a series of one hundred Instax photographs exhibited at the 60-inch standard hanging height for the installation of works of art. To place the photographs of the mixers on an equalizing plane alludes to a metaphor for equalization or unity. Rather than creating a composition based upon hierarchy, the photographs are installed touching sides, shoulder to shoulder. Instax photographs are a miniature Polaroid film. Polaroids are often used to instantly capture and develop portraits or groups of people. The immediacy of the Instax photographs re-inform contemporary thinking as it relates to the evolution of the photograph. I utilized a miniature size film in order to provoke an intimate investigation from the viewer, enhancing spatial relationship between viewer and artwork. The work also has a reflective quality that reflects the opposing line into itself. The reflectivity of the film includes the viewer, connecting them within the piece. In 1918, artist Man Ray created the photographic works *Man* and *Woman* where he created two photographic compositions of egg beaters and home/kitchen utensils that emulated male and female genitalia/body parts. Man Ray juxtaposed male and female dualities, subverting the opposition. *Connect* hosts similarities to the cross identification of the combination of opposites, highlighting the importance of connection of differences.

I have transformed the portrait into a series of photographs of two mixer attachments, the ones that we use every day for combining edible items within the kitchen. The combination of the spatial relationship, form, composition and medium all connect in order to represent a

metaphor for the mixing of differences and cross-pollination of the viewing population in the reflectivity which re-informs the implied connection with the other works of art in the exhibition.

## CHAPTER TWO: METAPHOR AND SEMIOTICS IN ART

The implied line is recurrent throughout my work and is even exemplified in the title of the exhibition. It is a metaphor for connection. This language is key to the work because it provokes viewers to read in between the layers and lines in order to make connections. The work contains signifiers yet does attempt to persuade the viewer in any direction. The work merely presents a situation for the viewer to decipher. I am interested in work that provokes an intellectual or emotional response. By way of explanation, I shall return to the work *Connect*. The black and white photographs of the mixer attachments are placed side by side mounted upon the wall in an equidistant measurement, each connecting to another. No hierarchy exists and a space is intentionally left in the corner. In *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Arthur C. Danto explains how metaphorical implications lead to individual interpretation:

The universality of literary reference is only that it is about each individual that reads the text at the moment that individual reads it, and it contains an implied indexical: each work is about the 'I' that reads the text, identifying himself not with the implied reader for whom the implied narrator writes, but with the actual subject of the text in such a way that each work becomes a metaphor for each reader: perhaps the same metaphor for each.

Martin Puryear's work creates allegorical forms that exceed the frame of reference of formalism. In *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996, Puryear encapsulates Washington's philosophy of racial progress in the simplest possible form, a curving surrealistic ladder that gets narrower as it extends to the ceiling, which is a clear and precise rendering of the struggle of African-Americans for equality in a society that denies them the means for self-advancement (see Fig. 2). Puryear's work provokes a conversation about identity through abstracted or elevated perspectives, in which the viewer comes to their own interpretation of the work.



Fig. 2. Martin Puryear. *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. 1996. 432 x 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  (narrowing to 1  $\frac{1}{4}$  at top) x 3 inches. Wood (ash and maple). (Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by Exchange)

Materiality re-informs the metaphorical implications of each work. Material itself contains an underlying message. For instance, in *Untitled* (fig. A4), I have juxtaposed a large cotton form with a mesh screen covered form in tar. The colors alone allude to social concerns dealing with identity and the historical implications of the colors of black and white, yet the material choice is a key to its symbolic reference. The form of the cotton piece is convex, protruding like a belly, while the tar mesh hangs convex. The form of the piece supports the binary relationship of gender that is also repeated throughout the exhibition. Unlike *Ally* and *Connect*, I left the work *Untitled* in order to respect the strength of the material and form as metaphor. *Ally* is made up of oak plywood, one that is available for purchase at your everyday hardware store. In many cultures, oak is a symbol of strength, and drawing upon this association with strength, *Ally* stands. Material choice is another layer of metaphor that is highlighted throughout the exhibition.

*Walking Sticks* (fig. A5) is another work of art in ‘-----’ which metaphorical significance is drawn from the choice of materials. The walking sticks were collected during three different journeys, dipped in three different mediums and displayed upon fragile glass panes. One stick is dipped in white gesso, the middle stick is dipped in golden glaze, and the right in roofing tar. One interpretation of metaphor may result in another social conversation, the journey of the white, the journey of the gold, and the journey of the black. We could also pull different interpretations of metaphor from the crutch-like nature of the walking stick and the fragility of the glass. Into the context of the exhibition, a social connection is made by relaying the recurrent social theme that is presented throughout many of the works.

There is also an underlying metaphor of racial differences that is juxtaposed with the exhibition that is presented in the Permanent Gallery of the Fine Art Museum of Western

Carolina University: *Color + Theory: Past + Present*. Works from artists Josef Albers and Kenneth Noland are displayed where they play upon formal relationships of color theory. The works of '-----' were chosen specifically in order to draw upon the relationship of social color theory, rather than formal. Not all of my work concerns itself with social issues, yet as stated earlier, my work reflects the environment in which we live.

### CHAPTER THREE: PROCESS AND EXECUTION

Specifically for the work *Ally*, I placed all of the materials on the floor. I started by using a handsaw and miter box to cut my 45-degree angles, building with hand tools, rather than machines. I adhered the frame to the oak panel, using wood adhesive, a hammer and nails. Some people asked why I did not just use a power-saw or a nail gun. For me, the process is a way of exemplifying metaphor as well, highlighting the head-to-hand relationship. “Thoreau said that we reason from our hands to our heads. We know and understand things as we apprehend them through the labor and pleasure of our hands, so we tend to proceed from the perceptual to the conceptual and back again.” (Strauss, 4). There is a dichotomy represented that is inherent to life, good and bad, easy and hard, etc. The exasperation and hard work that I put into my work exemplifies this natural relationship.

After building the frame and hand-sanding the block, I drew multiple lines onto a block, revealing individualistic characteristics due to its hand-drawn nature. After I marked the lines with pencil, I then sealed the blocks with semi-gloss polyurethane. I repeated the hand-sanding and sealing process several times, in order to completely seal the block. I then used an incision hand tool to cut along the lines, completely engrossed as I sat on the floor, so close to the block that I became one with the work. After making the incisions, I used the v-gouge in order to cut along the edges of the incisions in order to frame the lines. I then used the u-gouge to scoop out the meat of the line, revealing the wood underneath. This head-to-hand process alludes to the metaphor of labor: labor of struggle with one of the hardest and most resistant wood surfaces to cut: oak. The decision of the oak surface is specific to the struggle of social relationships between individuals. The labor of becoming an *Ally* is highlighted through the laborious process of cutting with a small tool.

With *Connect*, I chose Polaroids specifically due to the innate and casual portrait connotation of the film. I took one hundred portraits of the mixers with colored film, and placed them in a setting that made the film seem like black and white photography. An implied connection is made with the empty corner, suggesting a break within the connection. The Polaroids are vertical in nature, yet are placed on a horizontal axis, drawing a relationship between the grounding of a vertical plane. The two lines pointing directly into the void represent an implied connection reiterating the importance of spatial metaphors within the piece. Would the piece reveal the same metaphor of spatial relation if the Polaroids were physically connected, rather than implied? The implied connection is presented between the two lines. Our eyes see an implied connection. The immediacy of the film, intimacy of the size, and composition emphasizes the head to hand relationship. Form and process coalesce to reveal a semiotic relationship.

I treat every work as if they are snippets of a much larger story. The viewer is presented with jumbled lyrics to a longer song. Whether the work has to do with social issues going on in the current world, or everyday life as a blue-collar worker, the process and execution reaffirms the important connection of material, form, and space. Sometimes the work is immediate, and sometimes an entire year can be invested on one project. The persistence of repetitious activity strengthens the importance of connection with the viewer as diligence is also generally related to socio-political activity.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONNECTION

The work in this exhibition relates to the engagement of social issues and utilizes metaphorical implications of material, space, and form in order to create a larger understanding of the importance of implied connections.

Whether connecting with others by giving them free prints, or connecting with the viewer in an intellectual conversation presented by material choice, form or space, connection with others is still reaffirmed by semiotic relationships as it pertains to social situations.

Suzi Gablik talks about Connective Aesthetics and the way artists are adapting to this larger idea of social connection through art. The work in my exhibition not only reaffirms this contemporary thinking but also respects the tradition of making with head-to-hand processes. *Ally, Untitled, Walking Sticks, eyeamahuman, and Connect* all utilize the physical and poetic attributes of metaphor, as well as the importance of medium, form and space in relation to each other and in a much larger context within the exhibition. In order to establish a connected relationship with other works of art, respect for tradition and contemporary ideology come into fruition.

An implied line utilizes multiple lines in order to create an implied connection. ‘-----’ consists of works of art that not only have inherent implied connections, yet create a series of connections with the entire group of works in the exhibition.

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Gablik, Suzi. "Connective Aesthetics." *American Art* 6.2 (1992): 49. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 12 Sept. 2015.

APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION

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Tonya D. Anderson, MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Fine Art Museum of Western Carolina University, 199 Centennial Drive, Cullowhee, NC 28723, March 31<sup>st</sup> - April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016



Fig. A1. *Ally*. Courtesy of artist Emily Rose.



Fig. A1.2. *Ally* detail in exhibition space. Courtesy of artist Emily Rose.

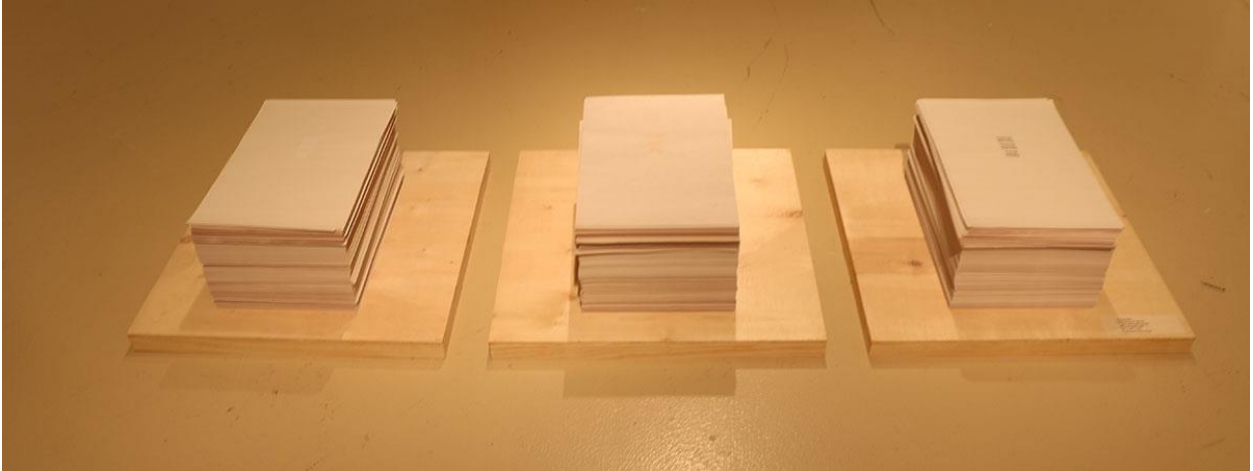


Fig. A2.1. *wearehuman*. Courtesy of the artist.

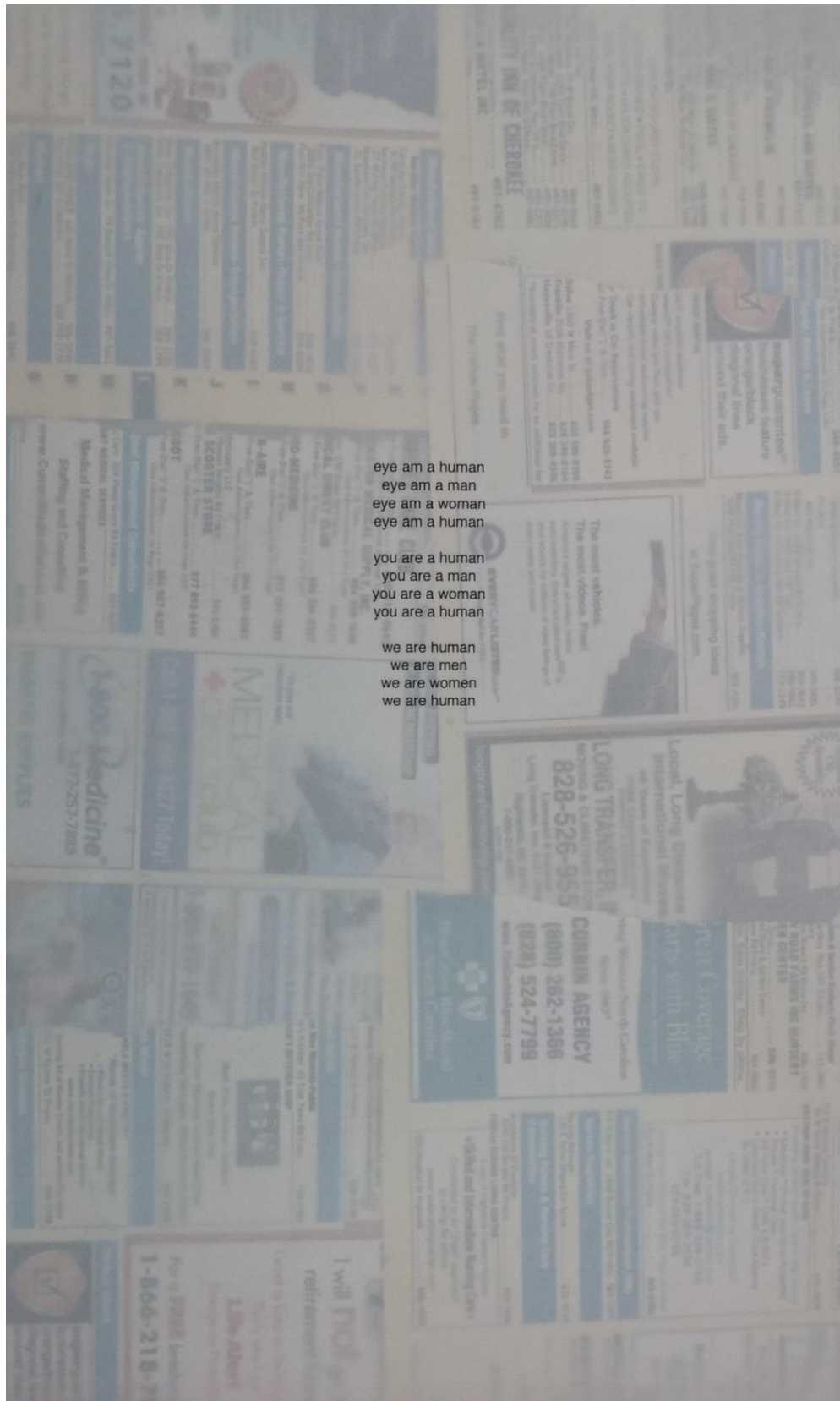


Fig. A2.2 *wearehuman* detail. Courtesy of the artist.

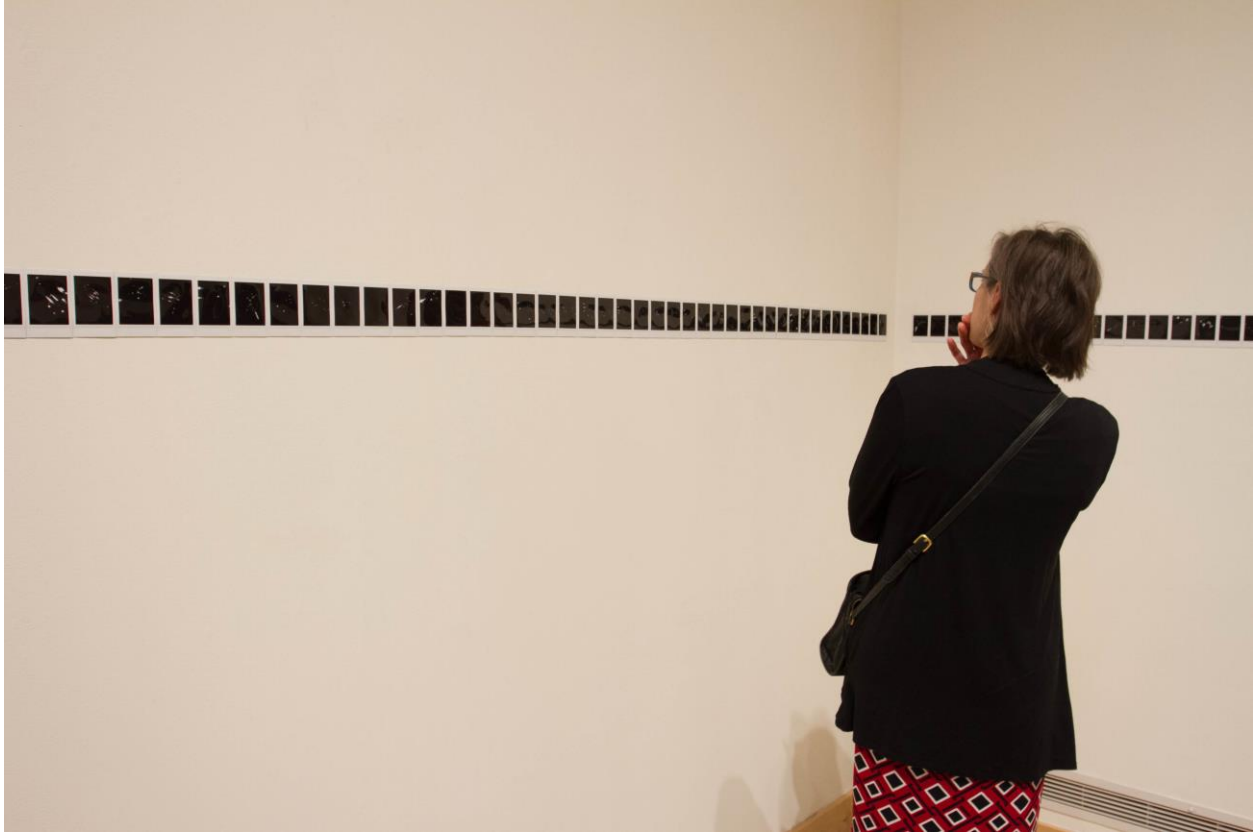


Fig. A3.1. *Connect*. Courtesy of artist Emily Rose.

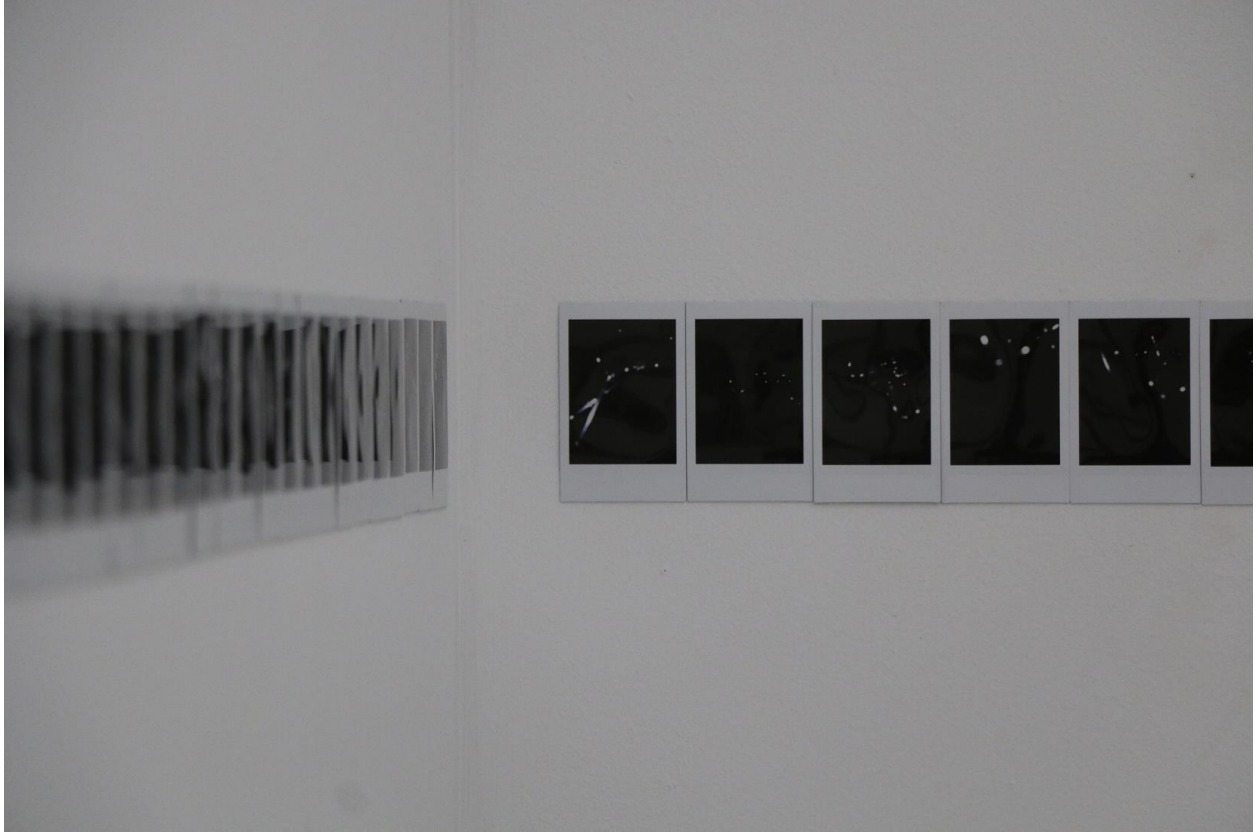


Fig. A3.2. *Connect* detail. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. A4. *Untitled*. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. A5. *Walking Sticks*. Courtesy of the artist.