

ABYSS: DEATH & REBIRTH

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Book Arts / Printmaking

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Abstract

This paper details the decisions and process that comprise my MFA thesis project, a choose-your-path book titled *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. In my writing, I contextualize the concepts and visual design of my thesis through comparisons to my earlier work and the inspirations that have helped build my practice.

I specifically write in-depth about the importance of narrative, and how using well-known narrative beats and the visual language of comics gave *Don't Look Into The Abyss* a recognizable structure that I could then subvert. I also explore how *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is informed by my experience of queerness within rigid social structures, and how that conceptual framework aligns with the offset lithography print process and the book's choose-your-path format.

Introduction to My Practice

It's fair to say that my artistic practice has always been built from the pages of books. My grandmother, an artist who specialized in etching, began giving me sketchbooks at a very young age. She saw me drawing and decided to be my artistic mentor: I was her chance to pass on her knowledge. She gave me a copy of Nicolaide's *The Natural Way To Draw* in elementary school—I've only recently started to understand it. Still, I appreciate the effort and early belief in me and I filled endless pages with mediocre drawings of people. Maybe for that reason, I've always considered my artwork and books to be interconnected.

Specifically, small books. The book as an object has always represented a personal experience of growth and adventure. Nothing was more precious, escapist, or challenging than a book, and I carried them everywhere. There is a long history of books as companions, from palm-sized books of hours to medieval girdle books hanging from the belts of queens and travelers alike to beloved and well-worn novels. In the most romantic terms, the books we keep close are confidant and vessel. The books I read shaped my worldview, while my sketchbook was a record of my artistic growth and perspective. Now I focus on crafting intimate, narrative books in large editions with the goal of making them accessible. For instance, when I designed *Book To Tell (someone you love them)*, I intended for the book to be gifted. Each copy becomes personal for its owner, an expression of their relationship. I also chose to mix fine press and print-on-demand techniques to keep the edition affordable and ensure it would be used as intended. At the end of the day, I want my work to be carried by its readers.

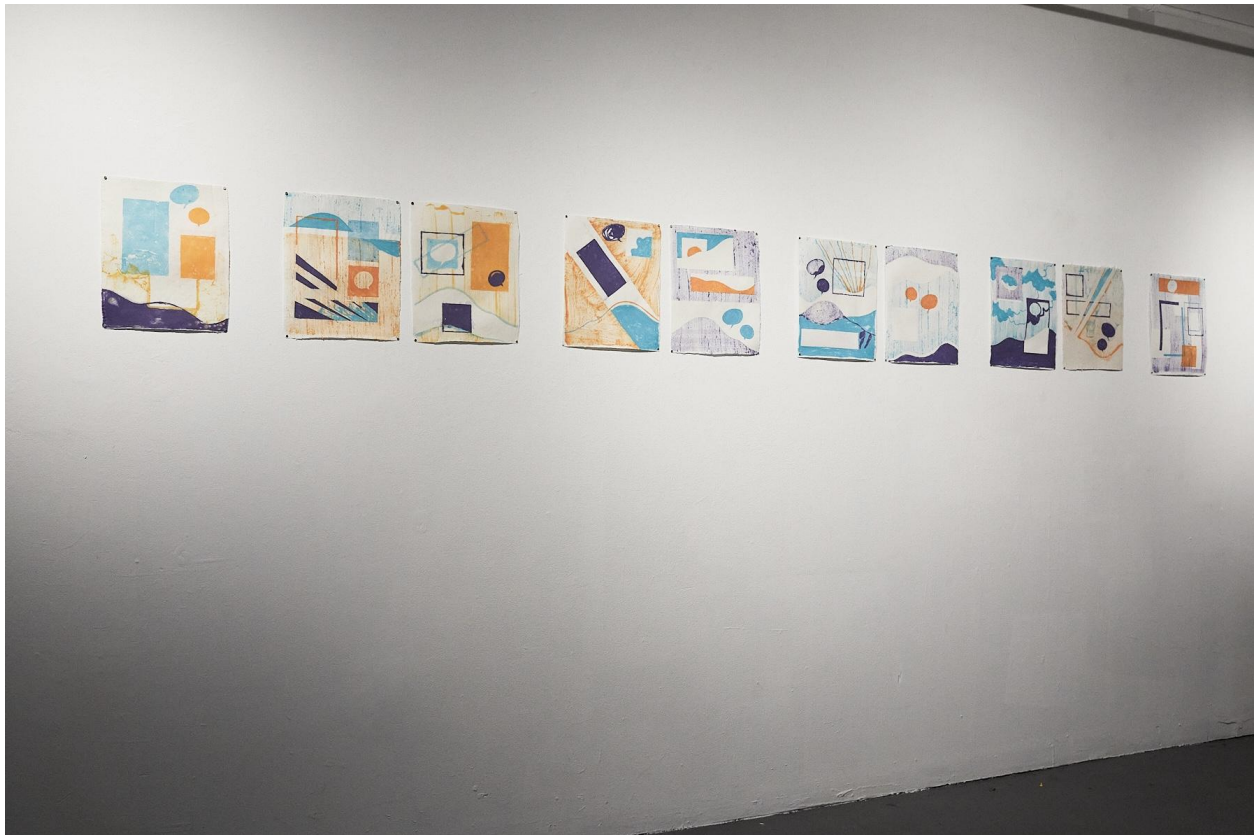


Book To Tell (someone you love them), Bryn Ziegler 2022

Comics are also central to my practice. I define a comic as a sequential, narrative work that relies on the tension between the written word and the image and utilizes closure. Closure, in the terminology of comics, is the conceptual space between illustrations where the reader internally completes the action. Artist and comic theorist Scott McCloud explains it best when he says: “I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime. Each of you was committing it in your own style” (McCloud 80). Closure is not unique to comics; it’s an unconscious action that people perform daily when we infer information from patterns. What is distinct and exciting is how comics, as a time-based medium with an established visual vocabulary of panels and narrative transitions, create a setting where closure can be manipulated. Utilizing the language of comics offers me a structure I can play within or subvert.

An example of closure from my own body of work is *Conversation*, a variable edition of pulp paintings. *Conversation* was an experiment to see how many impactful compositions I could make using only the most essential comic vocabulary. It was also an opportunity to push the expectations of what defines a comic, both for myself and my peers in the book arts field.

With five stencils of panels and speech bubbles, I built a narrative. The piece takes the viewer through a meandering dreamlike dialogue, although there are no words. The pulp paintings set the tone and pace, and the viewer supplies the specifics; each review I hear of the piece is paired with a memory. *Conversation* was also the origin of using panel overlap in my page compositions, a visual feature that is carried into my thesis work. *Conversation* is an illustration of how the language and structure of comics are foundational to my creative process.



Conversation, Bryn Ziegler 2021

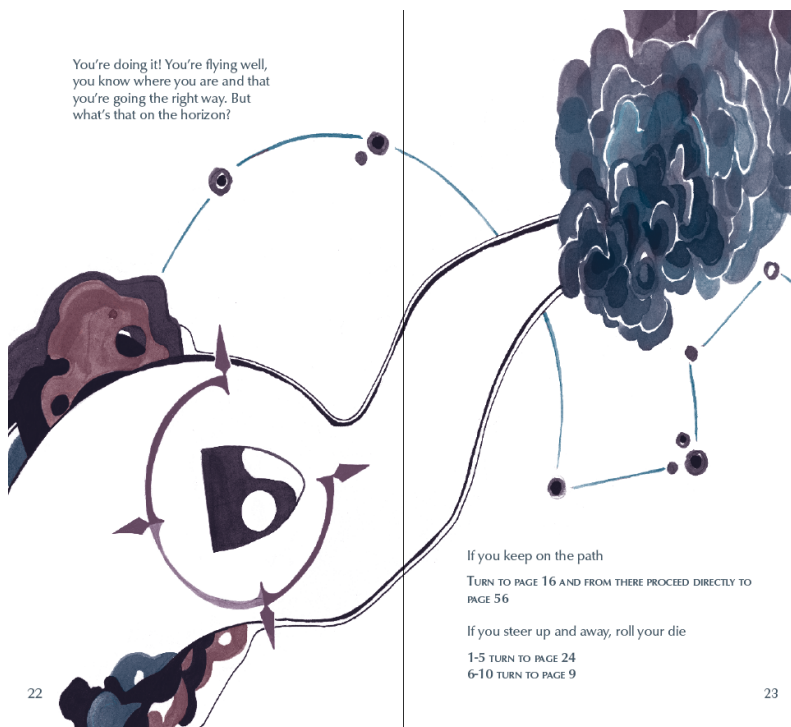
The Choose-Your-Path Format

My 2023 MFA Book and Print thesis exhibition centers around one book, and the interactive experience of reading it. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is a 72-page, single-player choose-your-path book; a gamified narrative that has different outcomes dependent on the

reader's choices. The premise is simple: you are an adventurer traveling through a vast expanse. All you have to do to arrive safely is navigate the stars and avoid the entity known as The Abyss. Every few pages, you are faced with a challenge and given two options, which lead you to two more options until you either fail your mission or successfully return home. However, while the premise is simple, the experience is not. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* also has a number of hidden passages—passages that no choices lead to—that offer a different perspective on your task. The hidden passages offer new context to the story and decisions and even an alternate ending, but the reader must deliberately disregard the rules and break away from prescribed paths to reach them.

To explain why I chose this format, I have to point to an earlier project. *Commute*, printed in the Borowsky Center in 2022, was an exercise in developing book structure and content in tandem, so one is always integral to the other. The visuals of *Commute* are based on a memory from several years ago. Although it was the same walk I took every day, this time the light from the sunset created tangible shadows that appeared solid enough to walk on. That experience highlighted the transformative potential of commonplace events and sparked the idea of growth within cycles that is so central to *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. *Commute's* single-sheet pants fold, modified to include a built-in cover, allows the book's narrative to loop. Although the narrative repeats, the experience of it can be altered by uncovering imagery hidden by folds or extending the long accordion sections. In the same way, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* offers a remarkable number of paths for the same fundamental narrative. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is designed to be experienced as something of a spiral: as the reader, you are presented with the same choices and challenges repeatedly. And then, through the hidden scenes, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* creates an opportunity for readers to disrupt that experience. To prompt change within the cycle.

Commute was an initial exploration of those ideas and an example of the technical and thematic direction of my artistic practice. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is the result.



Commute Bryn Ziegler 2022, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* (excerpt) Bryn Ziegler 2023

In the campy Choose Your Own Adventure books of the 70s and 80s, readers could cavort with vampires, time travel through caves, and fight aliens. The choices these books

offered openly play on the dichotomy between restraint and freedom. In her essay “The Enduring Allure of Choose Your Own Adventure Books,” Leslie Jamison describes the opportunity to read and reread Choose books in pursuit of different outcomes as “following your intuitions” before trying “anything you wanted.” In other words, choosing your own path is about enacting secret desires. Testing scenarios as both the self you present to the world and the protagonist you imagine yourself to be. But what if your intuitions and desires are never represented in the choices placed in front of you? When no given options reflect the self you truly want? And what if I’m no longer speaking of books?

There is plenty of inherent potential for identity exploration in more traditional choice books. They can offer heartbreak, complex decisions, and even queer exploration. I remember following romantic storylines with fictional women in the choose-your-path books I read. However, I was often aware that the writing imagined the protagonist I inhabited as a man. There’s a reason this genre served as an inspiration for *Don’t Look Into The Abyss*, and it’s not because it failed. It’s because it offers an experiential narrative structure that can be utilized as a shorthand for social structures. The rules of the game are expected, welcome even. They tell us how to play: when we’ve made a wrong choice, what gambles will lead to happiness and success, and which are mistakes. In the real world, the same can appear to be true until the rules enforce a singular viewpoint.

In the case of my thesis work, the book structure itself becomes a proxy for social “norms” and restrictions. On the surface, *Don’t Look Into The Abyss* offers the reader paths of reason informed by the narration and paths of adventurous chance. However, all choices are predicated on one concept of success. The instructions enforce the notion that the reader’s

singular goal is to cross The Expanse and arrive home. While that can be achieved within the bounds of the game, the real freedom hides outside the binary choices, in the hidden passages.

Don't Look Into The Abyss has a continuous stream of narration disguised as the objective presentation of choices. The narration gives subtle judgments on the protagonist's actions, emphasizes specific options over others, and above all reminds you of the dangers of The Abyss. This may feel like an oversight, because we are used to games being objective: their goal is simply to present players with a framework. In truth, no game is unbiased because games are designed by people. Still, the majority of popular games align with belief systems so ubiquitous that their subjectivity is imperceptible. Think for a moment about Monopoly, a game about amassing as much wealth and property as possible while avoiding bad, expensive taxes. For people who, like myself, grew up with capitalism, did those rules appear subjective as children? They were cartoonish maybe, but wanting to be rich seemed like a reasonable goal. Now the rules seem like both a byproduct and a proponent of a predatory system. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, the expectation of objectivity creates dissonance when it becomes clear that the narrator has a viewpoint and at times even the presence of a character. This is intentional: just as no game is perfectly objective, no societal structure is without bias. Constructs like gender or beauty are ideas perpetuated by people: they are not immutable facets of the world, no matter how ubiquitous they feel.

The narrator is a gameplay element for the reader, but it can easily be interpreted as the protagonist's internal voice of negativity, scolding and sighing, and pointing back to the acceptable path. The hidden pages are the only ones where the narration is absent. The hidden passages also show The Abyss acting not as a monster but as a positive part of the environment. The protagonist even sees the bright colors of The Abyss in their own reflection. This parallel

narrative culminates in a hidden ending, whereby ignoring the narrator's prompting, the protagonist can pass through The Abyss and find themselves in a beautiful landscape of color.



Page with narrator's commentary and spread from hidden sequence, Bryn Ziegler 2023

Don't Look Into The Abyss is not alone in offering the reader an opportunity to transgress rules. At one point, Jamison's article mentions a Choose book with a startlingly familiar passage. The book, *UFO 54-40*, is a space adventure with a hidden ending called Ultima, where you find a utopian planet. The book's introduction explicitly states that Ultima lies outside of the rules and can only be found by flipping through the pages until you find an illustration of Ultima. As in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, finding happiness in *UFO 54-40* requires transgression, although in *UFO 54-40*, Ultima is still part of the game-play as you are instructed to find it. Of Ultima, the book's author Edward Packard says, "It's most satisfying to reach Ultima after you've been frustrated, over and over, by following the rules" (Jamison). In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I hope the hidden ending is, for those who find it, a breath of fresh air.

Several years ago, I heard a dramatic reading of Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In The Dream House*, which features a choose-your-path chapter. In that chapter, Machado sends the reader through a devastatingly average day in an abusive relationship. At the end of the chapter, the reader is sent back to the beginning, and the day repeats. Endlessly. The abuse continues. Endlessly. The only way out is to break the cycle and go to a page outside of the given options. Of the decision to use this framework, Machado says, "It's the ultimate illusion of choice, there's an illusion that you can get out of something, when in reality it's not—you're given two very narrow options that have been pre-selected for you" (Pollard). In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I designed the choices so that following the rules will create tension and frustration, and completing the given task in the prescribed way is confusingly unappealing. I want readers to feel a physical sense of being stuck, and the book's unconventional narrative structure is the perfect tool. Each scene is unmoored in time: with the exception of the introduction, they could have been placed in any order. For instance, I deliberately chose for certain story endings to occur within the first half of the book to give the impression of wasted potential. I want the very deliberate binary choices to be exciting until they begin to feel limiting. Like Machado's chapter, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is a tool to allow readers to live through a specific experience. In the case of *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, that experience is queerness.

I chose to give very little information about *The Abyss* in the gameplay instructions because I wanted to replicate the lack of information I, and many other young people, had about queerness growing up. From a young age I constantly wanted to cut my hair short. I didn't know why, but I knew it would help me recognize myself in the mirror. Well-meaning family members told me my hair was beautiful and asked the hairdresser to keep it longer than I wanted because they feared I would change my mind. Well-meaning hairdressers showed me catalogs of pixie

cuts and explained all the ways they would make my short hair look girly, because they assumed my fears were the same as my family's: that I would look in the mirror and feel unfeminine and that feeling unfeminine would make me unhappy. These people were operating on a set of social beliefs that had served them well, so they offered me the same. The idea that there was something outside of keeping my long hair or getting a pixie cut with all the girly flourishes never occurred to them, so it was not shared with me. It took years to find the words for what I wanted and finally see myself. This is only one small anecdote, but it illustrates what I worked to capture in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*.



Excerpt from *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, 2023

I make art first and foremost for my community—queer adults. The interplay between internal development of queer identity and external influences inspires me. To that end, I am interested in making work that requires engagement and exploration to be activated. When *Don't Look Into The Abyss* is widely read, I expect a reversal of connection and isolation. For those who have experienced the isolation depicted in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I hope the work will offer connection and catharsis by demonstrating that they were not alone. For any readers who may fit within societal structure well enough not to notice them, I hope *Don't Look Into The*

Abyss offers an uncomfortable foray into isolation and perhaps a greater understanding.

Queerness is an ongoing journey propelled by a cycle of reflection, a concept present in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. While designing the book, I pictured the protagonist crossing a spiderweb: following the strands will eventually get you from one side to the other, but you'll always be stuck in two dimensions unless you decide to jump into the unknown.

Narrative Choices

My practice is focused on using personal narratives as a vehicle for social and political concepts. To explain how I work with narratives, I want to start with one of my earliest inspirations for merging autobiography and social ideas, Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi. What initially drew me to Gentileschi was the same thing that brings in most of her modern fans: her paintings of Judith beheading Holofernes, featuring herself as Judith. While Gentileschi's paintings incorporate more direct physical likenesses, I consider our artwork similar because I often make pieces that reference myself. I see a connection in how I craft messages bolstered by my unique perspective, as I did in *Good Brain*, a piece speaking to the flawed prescription medication system in America. In this print I used a broadly recognizable experience—struggling to get food out of a vending machine—to express the frustration and struggle of accessing necessary healthcare when governing bodies' focus on criminalization creates persistent barriers.



Good Brain, Bryn Ziegler 2021 *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Artemisia Gentileschi 1620 *Judith With the Head of Holofernes*, Peter Paul Rubens 1616

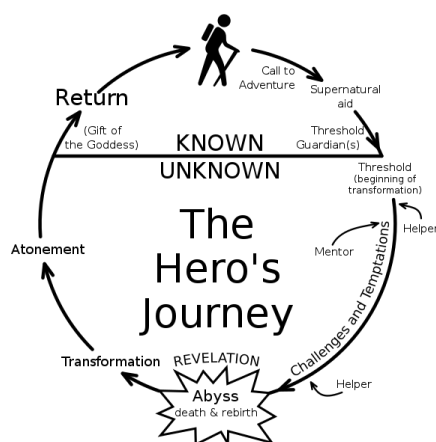
Artemisia's self-portraits function in a similar way. The apocryphal Judith was a prevalent subject during Artemisia's life, which was no surprise given Judith was both a symbol of godliness and a symbol of sex (Stocker). But while many Judith paintings are intended to be scintillating, focusing on Judith's seductive beauty, Gentileschi painted herself as a viscerally violent Judith. Her determined protagonist is straining to cut through Holofernes's neck as the blood gouts onto her dress. It's easy to draw a line between Gentileschi's Judiths, of which there are six, and the commonly held belief that these paintings were a cathartic way of taking back power after her sexual assault and subsequent poor treatment at trial. Gentileschi was forced to endure painful binding of her hands to test the authenticity of her testimony, an especially horrible ordeal for a painter (Gerrard). For Gentileschi, painting Judith was a form of catharsis.

Although I have yet to bring bloody scenes into my practice, I find inspiration for my work in two ways. First, although Gentileschi followed the artistic conventions of her era, she was not necessarily interested in what was palatable to her audience. She often conveyed pointed social messages through popular subject matter, as she demonstrated with Judith. Queerness on the public stage is often made for approval and education. I don't wish for my work to be limited

to those purposes. Nor do I wish for my work to be closed off, but I recognize that I am often speaking for and celebrating a specific audience. I am comfortable inspiring questions without offering answers.

Gentileschi's use of common symbols and stories as frameworks also relates to my methods of working within a structure: establishing a limited color palette or creating a complex narrative within the walls of a simple game. Artemisia Gentileschi communicated by placing herself in recognizable, existing narratives. I'm doing the reverse: crafting a narrative for my reader to place themselves within. For both of us, a symbolic story is a vehicle for larger ideas.

So what is the symbolic story of *Don't Look Into The Abyss*? It's a story of failing expectations. It's a foundational hero's journey that doesn't close the loop. If you return home, you return by accident or because you cheated, completely bypassing the idea of revelation. If you find the revelation, it's because you turned down a different path. I find it highly appropriate that many of the hero's journey diagrams I referenced over the course of charting this book refer to the revelation as "Abyss: death & rebirth."



Public Domain Image of the Hero's Journey

I used to believe composing narratives meant determining all of the details. Now, especially as I push further into interactive work, I am convinced the key to engagement is leaving negative space for the reader to bring their own experiences. That may sound simple, but I don't mean finding the correct place to stop filling in details. I'm talking about quitting even one step beforehand—leaving some ideas off the page entirely and allowing allegorical elements not to match precisely. A one-to-one allegory often lacks weight. It states its message and exits the room. My favorite pieces of art are the ones where I am aware that if I were making them, I would have done something differently... And that if I had, it might ultimately be a less thought-provoking experience. That doesn't mean the piece is careless; instead, it's deliberately inviting questions and leaving room for multiple perspectives to bleed through.

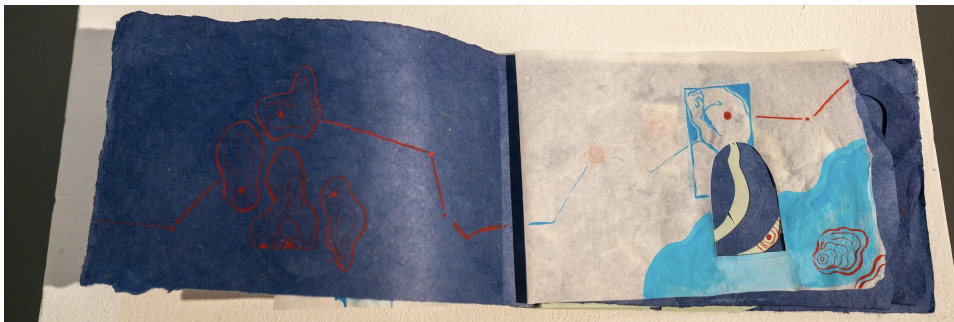
One of my earliest inspirations for *Don't Look Into The Abyss* was Tim Hutchings's book *1000 Year Old Vampire*. It is a memory game; once you create a character, a series of prompts forces you to choose who and what to forget over the course of a long vampiric life. And while you have choices, there is no un-flawed or successful outcome; you will inevitably kill someone you used to love or forget your parents' names. You cannot win. And that's what makes *1000 Year Old Vampire* such an engaging work of art. It allows the audience to safely play out mistakes and heartbreak. In my opinion, it's impossible to walk away from the game without learning something about yourself. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I hope to push the 'incompleteness' of the narrative to achieve a similar degree of personal exploration.

Don't Look Into The Abyss was initially developed as an allegory for the inner journey of queerness, specifically gender nonconformity, based on my personal experience. The book's rigid structure of binary choices, the flawed concept that not acknowledging your adversary will limit its hold on you, and the consistent building pressure are all inspired by and in service of this

metaphor. However, nowhere in the story is this metaphor made explicit, and the longer I spend with this project, the more I see that, while I am depicting a specific experience and I hope my audience feels that connection, there is an opportunity for more. I want to leave just enough room for readers to insert themselves into the narrative and use it as a fresh lens to examine their history. I believe that duality—crafting a particular analogy while allowing for additional interpretations—will strengthen readers’ connection to the work and cause it to stay with them past the initial reading.

Visual Roadmap

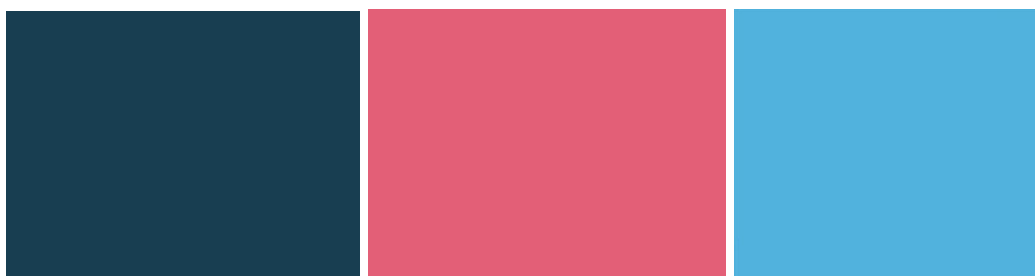
Don't Look Into The Abyss started as a bookbinding exercise. I was learning Hedi Kyle's spider book, and I decided to paint inside the model. At the time, I was thinking about the connection between the body and topography—I can't remember why, but the mountainous nature of the spider book may have had something to do with it. As I painted a figure in a hidden flap of the book and drew little islands of concentric circles, I found the narrative that would become *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. The connection between understanding and legitimizing something by recording it, including depicting the physical aspects of a landscape, and reckoning with the queer body became the visual foundation for this book. The map is the known world: The Abyss is what disrupts it.



Original book inspiration, Bryn Ziegler 2022

Printing and Format

Don't Look Into The Abyss is bound as a long-stitch with five signatures. There will be several fold-outs to emphasize narrative moments and one circular die-cut in the hidden ending, where the protagonist literally passes through the illustration of The Abyss on the page. The book will be printed on the Heidelberg Kors offset lithography press using three spot colors: Pantone 3035 U, Pantone 184 U, and Pantone 306 U.



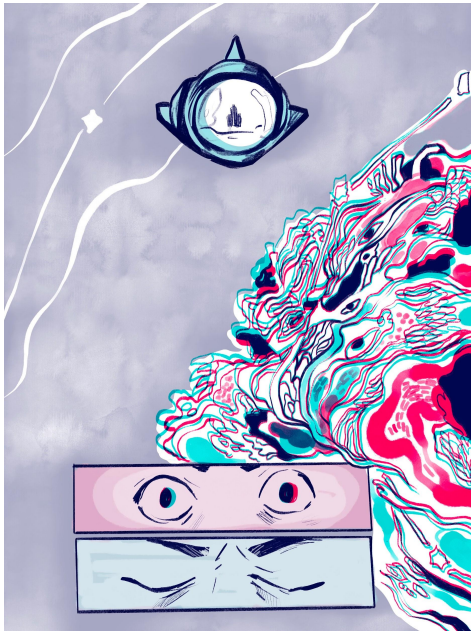
Swatches of Pantone 3035 U, Pantone 184 U, and Pantone 306 U

In *Commute*, I used the offset lithography process to play with transparent layering, seeing how much range I could extract from a two-color palette. I contrasted delicate textures with bold flats, emphasizing the solidity of the light against the more ephemeral landscape. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss* I used the colors in a more deliberate way. Pantone 306 U and Pantone 184 U are two pieces of a split complementary color scheme, meaning they pop next to each other and mute one another when overlaid. Pantone 3035 U adds much-needed depth. While the potential for bright colors is present throughout, they are tamped down by the heavy layering, with all three layers combining at full saturation to create the linework and large areas of black. The unfiltered colors are only seen when The Abyss is present, adding allure and dissonance to its existence.

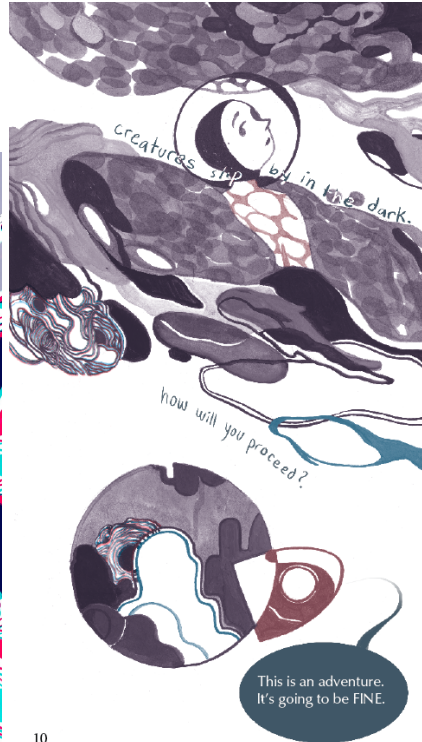
Visual Representation of The Abyss

I made several test page iterations and even a twelve-page zine while developing the visual language for *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. The biggest challenge was how to represent The Abyss. The Abyss in the context of the narrative walks the line between an entity and a sort of environmental hazard, like a black hole. It's unpredictable and unnerving. But conceptually it's a representation of something internal: an unacknowledged personal truth. It's an idea that seems to take on life the longer you try to ignore it and makes itself known in unexpected situations. I find that to be a somewhat universal experience—a little lie that becomes larger, or the crush that you pretend you don't have. To me The Abyss is that feeling taken to the extreme; it's an identity. It represents a parallel version of yourself that may feel more truthful than your outward-facing presentation. Recognizing it runs the risk of changing the reliable and comfortable components in your life. And you may hate that version of yourself, maybe because you've been told to or maybe for making *you* feel false.

That's a lot of messy emotion to distill into a visual shorthand. My primary concerns in early drafts were that The Abyss might feel too much like a distinct character or that its design could not walk the line between beautiful and frightening. Partway through this process, I smacked face-first into Jennifer Roberts's Mellon lecture on the history of interference in printmaking, and her fascination with the moiré shifted my entire approach.

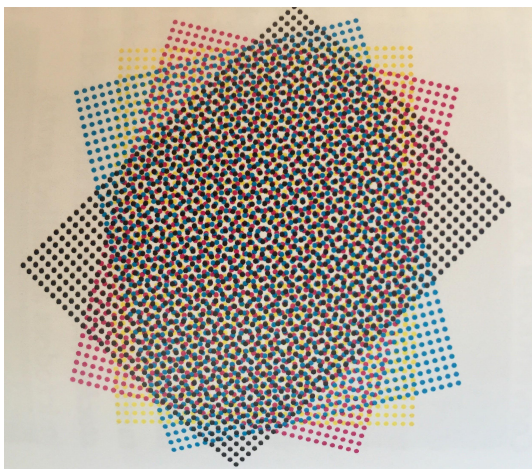


Left: Early draft page from *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, 2022



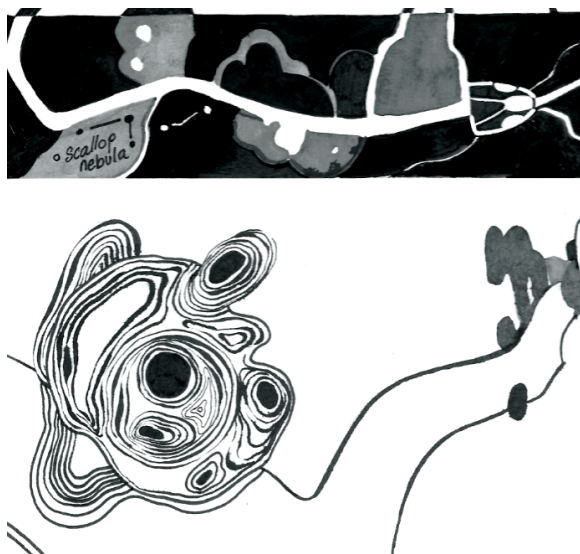
Right: Final draft page from *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, 2023

Moiré imagery is similar to an optical illusion, the result of halftone dots or layered lines creating patterns where they interact. The design is typically accidental and considered a mistake in printmaking (Roberts).

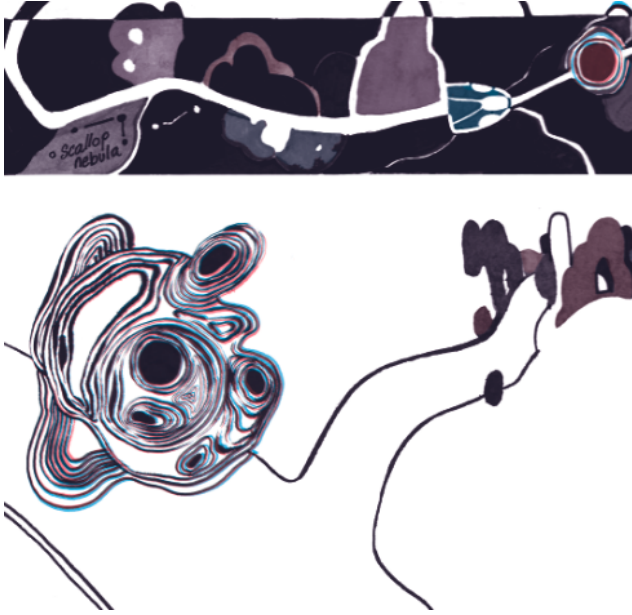


Example of a moiré image, Marina, 2017

For commercial CMYK printing, which is a means to reproduce text and image with precision, moiré effects are a disruptive wildcard, avoided through meticulously choosing dot angles for halftone screens. Deliberately utilizing moirés appealed to me because I drew a direct connection to my experience of queerness: it is a naturally occurring pattern, considered undesirable in many contexts, and difficult to look at while at the same time visually exciting. But the final selling point is that moiré effects are created by internal conflict between versions of the same image. In CMYK and spot color printing, each film represents one understanding of the picture. Registering these color layers on top of each other is the act of creating something whole. Three or four colors interact and become ten colors or twelve, so closely woven that it's hard to believe they started out apart. A moiré pattern breaks this illusion. It shows some of the messy work that goes into building something whole. In the context of developing *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, it became a perfect representation of dissonance between interpretations of self. Each illustration of The Abyss started out as one black-and-white illustration, which I split into three color layers and manipulated digitally until I achieved a moiré pattern.



Original depiction of The Abyss in ink and gouache, Bryn Ziegler 2023



Digitally edited depiction of *The Abyss*, Bryn Ziegler 2023

A secondary symbol within *The Abyss* is the concentric circle. In part, the concentric circle is a practical element of the moiré patterns. However, it was also inspired by the connection between topographic maps and the body, which has been present throughout the project. In addition, it is not accidental that this symbol within *The Abyss* looks like an eye. This is more of an instinctive visual decision than a researched one, but I chose to include the eye reference for two reasons. First, *The Abyss* is more interesting as a narrative foil if it has agency—if it is watching you. Second, I am the disgruntled owner of two astigmatisms, and they physically affect how I visualize the world. Specifically, in low light or when looking at bright light, I see halos that mirror the moiré patterns crafted for this book. How I see and understand the world is the most impactful contributing factor to how I make artwork. Paying homage to the ways my eyes informed the development of my personal visual language seems only fair.

Other Visual Elements

The concentric circle also pops up in the character design of the protagonist. The character is bundled into a spaceship with large circular portholes, and wears a circular space helmet. These objects are tools of home that protect the protagonist from the presumably inhospitable outside environment. When the helmet is cracked, the narration indicates that the protagonist dies. These circles are also windows to the outside, and reflective surfaces in which the protagonist sees both themselves and *The Abyss*. The protagonist's head within the helmet or the helmet within the circular window are subtle allusions to the concentric circles of *The Abyss*. The *Abyss* and the protagonist cannot be disconnected.

The protagonist's appearance offered unique challenges. Because the book is based on my own experiences, it was important that I felt a connection to the character while drawing. In some way the protagonist needed to look like me. At the same time, the design needed to work as a mask: another term coined by Scott McCloud referring to how simplicity in cartooning creates space for the reader to project into a character. In a choose-your-path book like *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, the audience's ability to mask is particularly vital: the book addresses the reader as though they *are* the character on the page. To participate, they must be able to lean into that conceit.

In my initial sketches I attempted to build in additional storytelling. I based the visuals of the ship and clothing on 1960s space age fashion, which I find fascinating in its contradictions. Space age fashion was attempting to depict the extravagant technological future from a

perspective that is now seventy years in the past.



Pierre Cardin's Two-Tone Jersey Dresses with Vinyl Waders, 1969. Photo by Yoshi Takata, copyright Pierre Pelegry

Space age fashion was groundbreaking, but it was also easily caught in the belief that women of the future would still require femininity. Here, I am broadly defining feminine as an aesthetic presentation that has, in western cultures, historically been required of people assigned female at birth. Femininity is a deeply complex subject. Its history of enforcement paired with lingering negative connotations can make it a tool of oppression, but choosing femininity can also be deeply empowering, especially for gender non-conforming individuals. I will never believe femininity makes a person unserious. But in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, I wanted to explore the shortsightedness I saw in Cardin's designs, and the belief that concepts like gender are static facts, when the opposite is true.

Just as language grows and changes, so too do definitions of gender. Judith Butler cuts to the core of the issue, writing: "That gender reality is created through sustained social

performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character..." (Butler). Gender is a learned performance which is both reinforced and challenged across generations. We are told that gender is a known truth, handed down along with a list of rules about aesthetic presentation and acceptable life goals. That's just the way it is. But slowly, through the bravery of people who wanted more and different, who refused to make themselves small to fit into those molds, our concept of gender evolves. Another example of change within a cycle.

To return to *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, because the theme of breaking away from binary choices is central to the book, and the decisive inspiration for that theme is gender, my first character sketches featured a space age look with visual cues alluding to restrictive gendered expectations: the character's space suit included an impractical mini-skirt and a tightly cinched belt.



Early character design for *Don't Look Into The Abyss*

But I found that this design, regardless of any cultural critique worked into the details, made it difficult for me to identify with the character. So as I progressed I prioritized the goals of autobiography and masking. I kept the geometric space age inspiration by working that aesthetic into other aspects of worldbuilding, but for the character I focused on creating a stronger connection to myself and my audience. The result is a simpler design. It still features a tight belt, but it also includes a coif or hood that hides the character's hair and puts emphasis on the sharp, emotive face. The key design element that has remained throughout development is the helmet.

The helmet can be interpreted as a representation of restriction. It keeps the protagonist physically separated from everything and is a constant reminder of the expectations and beliefs of their home. When the protagonist encounters aliens who live alongside The Abyss, they do not wear helmets, and yet if the protagonist's helmet breaks it is equal to failure. In the hidden ending, the protagonist achieves happiness and transformation only when they choose to remove the helmet. Which prompts the question: What happens after the ending where the helmet breaks?



The helmet being used as a narrative device in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, Bryn Ziegler 2023

Closing with Closure

This is a perfect moment to revisit the idea of closure. Most often, closure happens in the space between panels, commonly known as the gutter. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, the concept of the gutter is amplified by the space between detached scenes. How much time has passed? What happened during that time? If you go from scene A to scene B and then later from scene A to scene D to scene B, how does that change the interpretation of scene B? In addition, there are entire scenes hiding in those gutters. How might the hidden scenes alter the reader's understanding of scene A and the choice they make?

The message of *Don't Look Into The Abyss* lives in those liminal spaces, and relies on how the reader completes the story. The decisions they make, how they fill in the time between scenes: does a cracked helmet mean your death, as the narrator would have you believe? Or, if you see the hidden ending, could that failure become a spectacular crash into a new beginning? Neither of those options are scenes in the book. They can only exist in the mind of the reader. At the same time, they are an essential part of the narrative.

My goal for my thesis work is the same as my overarching goal for my artistic practice. I want to create compelling, interactive narratives that each reader can have a personal experience with. On that note, let me tell you two stories.

1. You set out on a path through the woods. It's a path many have taken before you. They have prepared you for this journey, you are excited to see the sights, and you know what is waiting on the other side. You follow the path. You don't stray. The sights aren't as beautiful as you thought they would be, but you stop for them anyway. You are careful not to look out into the trees for too long, for fear that

you will lose track of your goal. You place your feet one in front of the other, and you reach the other side.

2. You make your own path through the woods.

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