

# Pneumatic

Grace Johnson

May 2023

Master of Fine Arts

Book Arts/Printmaking

Thesis Committee:

Lori Spencer, Nicole Donnelly, Susan Viguers, Rebecca Gilbert

## Abstract

This paper investigates my personal practice, theories, and reality through the lens of my thesis exhibition, *Pneumatic*. I analyze my practice through the history of my process, how I use my process as a printmaker, and the relationships my process has with social topics. I connect this analysis to the concepts that my body of thesis work addresses. I suggest, in my connection of the two, that modern print history should be acknowledged in relation to traditional print practices in order for the discipline to continue to have a voice and grow creatively. The goal of this paper is to analyze my thesis work and to look at my conceptual theories through the lens of the other facets of my practice and identity as a maker.

## INTRODUCTION

My work seeks to compare the building blocks of social ideologies to intrinsic human characteristics. I focus on the aspects of the self that make a person individual and juxtapose them with the heavily structured aspects of society. This allows me to imply the mental, physical, and emotional effects these systems have on concepts of self and personal autonomy. This relationship is characterized by themes of strain, drive, repetition, reward, and co-dependence. These themes appear throughout the pieces in my thesis exhibition. I contrast the recurring imagery of the jackhammer with photography of myself to emphasize the natural and mechanical forms. This highlights relationships between soft and hard, conception and production, and form and function.

Each print is made through the process of CMYK, which is largely a commercial print technique. I connect the process to the functional structure of our society. The CMYK color model is dictated by numbers and angles, yet it keeps a mystique through its ability to create a full range of tones and hues. There is an incomprehensibility to the concept that four colors could reproduce full color photographic imagery. The separate colors are more easily identified in areas where the halftone dots are less dense. In denser areas the dots begin to blend together and transform, bringing the systematic aspects of the process to life. The concept of the color model and the physical process of printing create a third 'other,' the print itself. I relate this to the individualistic nature of humans and the complexity of the self.

I am inspired by the call and response of the internal and external, and the fight for control between them. In what ways do our external systems help, hinder, and

become us, and how do we set ourselves apart from them? My work is a reaction to the flaws of the systems our society runs on and how demanding they are of the citizens they are supposed to be providing for and supporting. These systems include the modern work week, pay, taxes, concepts of the “model citizen,” public transportation, and the numerous other institutions that people must rely on in order to live. My work allows me to inspect my quality of life more closely. It allows me to separate myself from the constant input around me and ask myself why I participate in my own life in the ways that I do, and what motivates or influences me to do that. I compare raw feelings with rationalized ones and dig deeper into my own wants and needs.

I want my work to trigger the viewer into reevaluating the roles they play in their lives and the aspects of their daily living that are dictated by societal and economic structures. I hope to point out how much time is spent trying to please the world’s definition of value and how personalities are lost through the demand to structure the self in order to maintain a functional and productive lifestyle.

## **THE PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT**

In the early stages of my practice, I was looking for a way to achieve a fuller range of colors in my screenprints that reflected the photographic qualities of the source material I was using. In order to do this without printing an exorbitant number of layers, I began learning the CMYK process. This heightened the appearance of the prints, and offered a tone and texture to the work that recalls vintage aesthetics. My work was centered around the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind a person's relationship

with consumerism. I used the home as a representation for the self and created domestic spaces that would allude to the individuals who live there through arrangements of their objects and possessions. I was exploring the different meanings of value and how they have both stayed the same and changed throughout history. This was to emphasize an aspect of human nature behind consumer culture



Grace Johnson, *A Silver Spoonful of Sugar*, CMYK Screenprint, 2019

while emphasizing the degree that advertising has infiltrated our opinion of ourselves and others. I created this series through the use of CMYK screenprinting, specifically making use of its photographic abilities, color range, and the process's connection to printed media and advertising. My current work has led me to dig deeper into the process's historical connotations, looking at how four-color processes have influenced print and society outside of just being a mode for production of commercial media.

Historically, CMYK prints do not hold value. These prints are collected, either institutionally, or through individual persons, for the documentation of everyday life and culture in relation to time and place, or for personal significance. The collected prints are ephemera, deriving their value from outlasting their temporality or fleeting popularity.

Not all of this printed ephemera would have been printed using the CMYK process, but it is an influential part of these collections, not only for utilizing advanced print technology, but also because production printing greatly increased with its use.

I associate vintage aesthetics and feelings of nostalgia with the style of early commercial process printing. The word nostalgia or sentiment are often used when speaking about ephemera and can be attributed to CMYK prints. I connect to this style of printing because I grew up surrounded by it. The majority of Western society has made these connections to printed ephemera specifically through their domestic spaces, just as I have. A widely shared experience, yet a very personal one. Printing full color CMYK in advertising didn't begin until the 1930's and became more fully developed in the 40's and 50's (Smith 2017). The 50's especially created an iconic style through color printing. The aesthetics developed in these decades continue to be influential in fashion and marketing (Clark 2023). I will refer to this value of CMYK prints as a characteristic of the process.

The history related to the actual development of the process of CMYK is important to the content of my work as well and informs where I place myself within print history and how I approach the medium. My materials necessitated by the process, and the



(Clark)

process itself, are directed by the history of print and the development of print technology, specifically in the beginning of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The history and development of CMYK, or four-color process printing is not extensively documented. Founding the color model is attributed to The Eagle Printing Company. They began their use of it in 1906, specifically for wet printing (Gamm 2020). The majority of sources on early use of CMYK refer to the colors at this time as being the cyan, yellow, magenta, and the “key” black that we know today, but those pigments weren’t actually developed until later, closer to the 1940’s and into the next decades. The colors that would have been used in 1906 and after were closer to a traditional red, green, yellow, and blue. This partially contributes to that early four-color aesthetic.

There are instances of four-color printing before 1906, closer to the 1890’s with Frederick Ives using it in the States as Dr. E Vogel was developing the process in Germany (Gamm 2020). Many methods were being explored to achieve full color photographic quality prints like additive color processes, three color processes, hexachrome, photochromoscope and more (Welling 2007). It took time and trial and error to perfect color systems that could accurately depict color as we see it. Many of these processes became discontinued or were re-invented under another name. In the early 1900’s another aspect of the CMYK process was being developed by Dr. E. Albert. He created a system for angling halftone screens for specific colors relating to three and four-color processes (Gamm 2020). The halftone screen had been around for a while at this point, patented in America in 1881 by Ives (Stulik and Kaplan 2013). The angles for the halftone were vital to the development and success of CMYK (Gamm 2020). The half tone screen is what creates the illusion of a continuous tone image, allowing print

matrices to translate photographic imagery, effectively. The angle of the halftone places the dots in the correct configuration to blend properly in order to reproduce the original image (Stulik and Kaplan 2013).

The start of the 1900's marked the beginning of the "technical image." With the introduction of photography around the 1900's coinciding with developments in CMYK technology, the two transmedialized into somewhat of a codependent relationship (Pelzer-Montada 2018). Jennifer L. Roberts does an excellent job illuminating this relationship in her Mellon Lecture series on Printmaking. In the fifth part of the series titled *Interference*, she focuses specifically on the Pop Art Movement's use of photographic print technology. This lecture focuses specifically on the halftone dot in relation to moiré patterns, but more broadly discusses how Pop Art played with and expanded on the creative possibilities of new color and photo technology, utilizing the technology outside of its commercial contexts (National Gallery of Art Talks 2021).

Roberts explains how developments in printmaking were reliant on the development of photography in order to expand the possibilities of how images could be represented through print techniques. That said, photography was also reliant on print's ability to then be able to recreate those photographic images. This is the co-dependence of the 'technical image' Pelzer-Montada speaks about. Roberts points out how the majority of photography we consume is actually through the print medium, unless it is produced through dark room techniques (National Gallery of Art Talks 2021). Up to this point I have been referring to hand and press printed four-color and full color processes as in photoengraving, lithography processes, screenprinting, and so forth. In present day, photography shows up frequently in printmaking in the form of inkjet prints.



Inkjet printing is a digital process that uses the CMYK color model. The development of inkjet printing began in 1950's, and by the 1970's inkjet printers could reproduce images sent by a computer (Elward 2019). These prints are able to have a higher resolution and a continuous tone that does not require a halftone dot and produce a more photorealistic print than that of a traditional CMYK print. Gravure and offset lithography have been able to mimic this sleekness in their processes, yet I still want to distinguish the difference between the technology that has been discussed up to this point and digital print technology.

When people think of CMYK printing today in or out of the print community, they often think of inkjet printing. From a fine art perspective inkjet printing blurs the line between photo and print to the extent that they become each other. Digital printing is a new medium, one that should be considered separate from traditional CMYK printing. Despite the digital technology only relatively recently becoming a part of print history, it is the extent of most people's knowledge of print. Printmakers themselves seem to have dismissed a past in relation to the CMYK process, rendering it completely separate from traditional printmaking as a whole. By choosing to create my work through CMYK screenprinting I am able to exploit the characteristics of earlier process printing while utilizing a very vital part of print's history and development. The prints from the 30's-50's and into the 60's and 70's created eras of visual language that was in conversation with society and culture, defining it and responding to it. The development of this visual language was utilized by, most known, the Pop Movement, one of the first movements to combine high and low aesthetics and make bold cultural and societal statements through the modes in which what was being critiqued had been created. Messages

targeting anti-capitalism, anti-industrialism, anti-sensationalism and more were being printed in the same ways nationalism propaganda was. This further created a tone of irony and humor to the work being made in response to the boom of commercial media. By taking this approach, The Pop Movement was able to open up conversation about art outside of exclusive circles, making art about and for everyone, and emphasizing the similarities in high-art hierarchies to that which their art critiques. This relationship established print as a socially conscious medium.

In *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking*, Pelzer-Montada addresses the lack of a clear anthology of print. In her book, she decides not to focus on specific techniques, which much of the literature on printmaking consists of, but rather on writing that addresses theoretical aspects of the medium. Pelzer-Montada includes an essay written by Katherine Reeves, titled “The Re-Vision of Printmaking.” Reeves points out how often Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is referenced to the point that it has become one of the only shared writings on theory in print. This observation combines with the popular topic of technological development threatening slow print processes. Reeves makes note of the stigmatization and misconception that digital processes are inherently a ‘fast’ process, referencing how time consuming many practices are such as 3D animation. In this essay, she points out that, in actuality, print and book artists are predominantly the ones pushing this narrative, further limiting the discourse around printmaking (Reeves 1999). In *Freud and beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*, a book which Reeves references in her essay, Margret Black and Stephen Mitchell are quoted as saying, “History is now understood by many as not a simple uncovering and assembling of facts, but as an

active process between past and present, involving a selection and arrangement of some facts, from an infinite set of possibilities to produce one among many possible understandings” (Mitchell and Black 2006, p.226). She then goes on to reference two more passages which I believe communicate the greater ‘why’ behind my use of CMYK and my interest in the processes past and present associations. First, Ruth Weisberg is quoted as saying not to be unwilling to “construct a framework of ideas and concepts that would locate our practice in relation to the larger intellectual paradigms of our time” followed directly by part of a quote from Linda Hutcheon saying we must engage in “a more general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system...from the decentered perspective the ‘marginal’ takes on a new significance” (Reeves 1999, p.79).

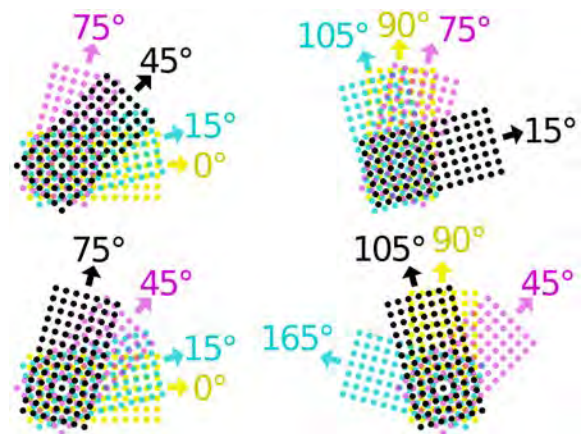
Using CMYK in combination with screenprinting, I hope to challenge the argument that the progression of technology threatens print, pointing to the larger implications within the debate that are potentially more interesting. I also hope that my work is able to bring an appreciation back to the process, working to remove the stigmatization that the process is marginal in its importance and creative abilities. Print and book artists cannot control change that comes with new technology. To continue the conversation only asserts our own demise. It is the antithesis of a solution and does not attempt to re-evaluate the recent history, but ignore it, as if print’s history stopped at the beginning of the 1900’s. I am attempting to build my own theories around my printing process and practice by investigating the intersections of CMYK’s identities as a viable process outside of digital printing, its character and value as it relates to visual aesthetics and fine art, its historical narratives, and the transmedialization of print and

photography. Printmaking is intrinsically linked to technology. Print has always responded to the world around it, in form and content. Many print processes work off of a set of operations. These can then be experimented with and expanded on. The same can be true for digital or photographic print technology. Much of the equipment and supplies used by printers are produced for commercial means. Printer's oriented towards slow processes often want to distance themselves from commercial contexts, but both take from each other's worlds.

## **THE DUALITY OF CMYK**

I want to explain the steps of my process in order to further break down my comparison of the system of CMYK to societal systems and the practice of the process itself to individualistic qualities of the self. I use a combination of digital and traditional print technology. In the pre-press stage my work is composed in Photoshop and then printed on pictorico film after being split into CMYK channels and bitmapped with a halftone screen. Creating the images themselves is taxing and time consuming, but the process of converting those images into the appropriate format to be printed in CMYK is largely automatic. This would not have been the case pre-digital technology, but is in my practice. The formatting is based on a set of numbers and angles that relate to the resolution of the image, the mesh on the screen, and the frequency of the halftone dot. This limits how fine the halftone dot can be, which subsequently makes them more visible in the screen print medium in comparison to the resolution and dot frequency a photolithography plate can hold. The plate technology allows photolithography to have

high resolution images and without the limitations of the mesh in screenprinting. Photo plates can hold a higher frequency of dot, which means the halftone dot can be smaller and less visible. In my screenprints these dots can be seen as their own entities that interact with each other. The interactions of the layered dots take place in the form of rosettes. Rosettes are a limitation of the process that is related to the angling of the dots. A more visible dot will produce a more visible rosette. This is important in order to understand how the choice of screenprinting in CMYK emphasizes the limitations rather than hiding them.



Ex. of rosettes and their relationship to screen angles

Screenprinting is a manual medium. Printing these images by hand introduces another variable. CMYK is fickle process that operates like an equation. Any deviation from the equation will expose the process, which is meant to be hidden. In the case of hand printing, constancy in the amount of ink and the pressure of the hand are necessary in order to have consistency and accuracy in color in each print individually, as well as throughout an edition.

There are limitations in the function of the color model itself. CMYK, in theory, can produce a full color range, but in practice the pigments have their limitations. Certain colors can be difficult to produce in CMYK. These colors include orange and green, also blues, and bright reds. In general, it is difficult to achieve a high level of vibrancy, especially neon tones when using CMYK. Because of this, printmakers tend to use Pantone's spot colors to apply to areas of CMYK prints to compensate for what the

processes cannot do on its own. There are also six-color, eight-color, and twelve-color printing models that have been created that utilize the model but add additional layers of color.

I use CMYK not only for the abilities of the process and its context within print history, but also as a conceptual tool. The structured parts of the process parallel the structures that uphold our society. Reduced, they are both guided by a set of units and rules (Nasrullah Mambrol 2019). These units and rules, in CMYK's case, are communicated to the color information and the dot pattern, splitting and angling them properly, telling them where to go and how to interact. These are also the elements that are easily skewed if not printed precisely, deviating from the system. In societal terms I see this as structural functionalism, or "a school of thought in which each of the institutions, relationships, roles, and norms that together constitute a society serves a purpose and each is indispensable for the continued existence of the others and of society as a whole" (Britannica n.d.). These are the units and rules that guide individuals. Through every step of life we are guided through these systems. From birth we are marked by stages in age which correspond to calendar cycles, which multiply the roles that we move into as we grow. With age we are given more ties to these systems, voting, taxes, health insurance, these ties require more societal responsibility on an individual's part. Becoming an 'adult' assumes an individual is supposedly given more free agency in their life, but they are inversely being regulated throughout these systems more which subsequently limits that agency. In this comparison the individual is to societal structures what the halftone dot and the color information is to CMYK. The internal and the external, or the individual and its environment are inherently linked to

each other. The systematic nature of Western society is not one that is inherent to an individual. The individual does not work off that same system, they learn it, and can only be guided by it. The color information and the halftone dot are inherent to the system of CMYK printing, much like the individual and their environment, but the two, as much as developments in technology have attempted to, cannot be completely controlled by the units and rules of the process. They have an individual nature that exists outside of CMYK, and in that case can only be guided, just as its human parallel is. I use the systematic nature of four-color process printing in combination with its limitations and its limitations through screenprinting to parallel the systems in our society, their limitations, and their limitations on individual expression.

I must collaborate with the systems and limitations of the process in order to manipulate them and create the intended experience for my viewer. This is a fundamental role of a printmaker. The printer speaks through the process which speaks through the matrix. For me, this is a balance between hiding the process and exposing it. This involves how I photograph images to include in prints, how I choose source imagery, how I choose to edit the images at their digital stage, changing opacities of the separate ink colors when printing, pulling more or less ink through the screen for certain layers or using more or less pressure with my hand. More ink or less pressure causes colors to overprint and dots in the same color to blend together, less ink and more pressure causes colors to be weaker and dots to lose information. These factors effect areas of the prints causing them to look tighter or looser in registration and color accuracy. These choices effect how rosettes are seen in the prints, can create moiré

patterns, and overall change the printed image's appearance compared to its digital reference.

In the detail image on the left in this detail from the image, *Provoked, Prerogative, Provocative*, can be compared to its CMYK counterpart on the right. The texture in the first image, the digital version, is increased when the halftone screen is applied, which can be seen in the image on the right, or the CMYK screenprint. The screenprint is overly yellow, which produces a green color in combination with the cyan layer. The screenprint is overexposed in its highlights and the shadows appear more dramatic, and in comparison to the digital photograph, looks vintage, a characteristic I associate with CMYK. There is also a physicality to the screenprint. This becomes even more apparent in person. The layers of color and halftone screens create a vibrational movement. Areas in the print read more multi-colored than any one solid color or tone. The image on the left could be edited to mimic the screenprint and could then be inkjet printed, but why? "Technology and technique are never purely 'technical', or mere 'tools', and that they are always mediated by multiple factors...no matter how 'immediate' or pragmatically motivated they appear to an individual practitioner or indeed, an institution" (Pelzer-Montada 2018, p.4). The point of CMYK having a dual nature is suggested through this quote. It's a system that presents itself as purely technical and is seen as a tool in printmaking rather



Grace Johnson, *Provoked, Prerogative, Provocative*, CMYK Screenprint, 2022



than a creative process. In its application, CMYK promises a technical finesse that the process alone cannot actually deliver, calling for the aid of the printer or additional techniques, and its characterization as a tool rather than a creative medium is dueled by the intersectionality of its characteristics, being the quality and value of the prints, the developing narratives and historical contexts around the process, and the printmakers that continue to use traditional modes of printing in combination with CMYK.

## **THE SELF**

The self is simultaneously a very simple yet complex concept. The physicality of our bodies makes the self seem obvious. The fact that we are made up of matter asserts the self as undeniable through physical means or tangible proof rather than through conceptual or theoretical means. I describe the halftone dot and color information as it relates to the CMYK printing process to be unpredictable, limited, and somewhat incomprehensible. I use the word mystique to describe the concept of the color model. I use these descriptors as a parallel to the way I think about the self. I chose the word mystique because of its associations with human understanding, specifically things beyond our perceptible abilities. The word has a spiritual denotation, which does lead into religious and spiritual beliefs as practices, but more simply refers to something not of the physical or material realm. These words help to explain my fascination with the CMYK process, but they are also words that often arise when talking about the self in a theoretical way. A common way a person's essence is described is through the phrase 'mind, body, and soul.' I have acknowledged that our

body is physical and self-asserting in its actuality. The mind and soul are arguably much harder to define. The word soul has loaded associations, specifically within spirituality, which is why I made the distinction in the interpretations of the word spiritual. I will use the words tangible and intangible to refer to physical and non-material elements of the self, respectively. Rather than distinguishing what a soul is in relation to the mind and what the mind is in relation to the brain, I prefer to use the word 'self' to refer to the essence of an individual. The self or selfhood implies introspection and uniqueness or individuality and acknowledges the tangible and intangible parts of being. I do, however, feel that the uniqueness and individual parts of the self, the essence of who someone is, has an otherworldly nature, a spark that doesn't actually exist tangibly or intangibly, yet is a part of us. There is something mystical that necessitates the inclusion of the word here, in spite of its better known interpretations.

As I have established, my work has always focused on the self in some way or another. Previously, I was more focused on how individuals used tangible or material things as a way to describe themselves. Perhaps now I am looking at that same idea from the other side. How can we describe ourselves through ourselves?...and how do we do that in a web of societal systems and standards? I discussed the relationship between gaining more agency as one grows older being inversely related to societal control, or as someone's agency increases in the sense of personhood, their agency as a citizen diminishes. In going through this process I became aware of myself in a new way. I felt as though I needed to always be prepared, that I needed to hone skills that I was good at, that I needed to be able to list my assets, and consistently look highly presentable. This went beyond looking at how we define ourselves materialistically to

how we define ourselves physically, our capabilities and physical beings, and how we can function in our capabilities while meeting other standards like the aforementioned presentation of self in relation to appearance and attractiveness. I began to get very lost while cultivating this new kind of value for myself. These became my identity signifiers, which in turn created a loss in my sense of self.

My work has always been a tool for me to work through these topics, but I felt a roadblock in returning to my practice. I felt as if I had lost my uniqueness, my spark, my mystical force that confirmed life beyond just a pulse. I began to make work about the hyper-awareness I was experiencing mentally, physically, and spatially and how I felt I had become disassociated from myself and the roles I was playing in my life. My day to day became more about preparation, presentation, and meeting a mark than actually experiencing a moment. I was simultaneously experiencing an inner and outer identity crisis. I was asking myself: who was I to the world around me, who was I to myself, and where those identities were intersecting or not intersecting.

My piece *Reaching* attempts to capture that feeling of disassociation of the self while also creating a hyper-awareness of space and body. This emphasizes my inner



Grace Johnson, *Reaching*, handmade double couched abaca paper, handmade pulp painted cotton paper blow-out inclusion, CMYK Screenprint inclusion, 2022

and outer experiences. Negative space became very important in expressing this feeling. It also made space for the forms to be read in a tangible and intangible ways. The emphasis on the physical forms and limiting, in the case of *Reaching*, what is shown in the space making the conceptual implications more obvious and encouraging the viewer to look at the piece beyond the tangible representations.

I explored this same notion in my book *Constructure*. This book helped me to develop a new visual language that I had been trying to cultivate. The juxtaposition of hard and soft, metal and flesh spoke to the societal pressures and value standards I had been building my identity around. I was re-humanizing myself in a way while creating a distinction

between the two forms themselves, their functions, and the implications that arise from those elements.



Grace Johnson, *Constructure*, Offset Lithography, 2022

Those implications are

focused on the awareness or consciousness of the individual that is interacting with the objects, and the nature or identity of the objects themselves. This brought me to explore how to explain and discern the nature of things. Specifically, the nature of myself as an individual in relation to this external stimuli that was continuously confusing the line between a cohesive identity across the internal and external. This brings back the question of how we explain ourselves from ourselves, or put another way, how to

explain intangibility through intangible notions. This is the simple complexity of trying to explain the self.

I want to go through some of the theories, terms, and discussions that have helped me explore these questions. I want to establish that my discussions on the topic of the self is largely from my own cognitive reasoning. The term ‘folk psychology’ explains this as an everyday, commonsense way of “understanding, or rationalizing, intentional actions in mentalistic terms” (Ravenscroft 2016). Folk psychology is related to ‘theory-theory’ which explains a cognitive ability innate to humans to understanding theories and concepts. Theory of the mind points out conceptual systems that underlie our ability to “understand, predict, and interpret the thoughts, feelings and behavior of self and others by reference to specific mental states” (Binder, Nobutaka Hirokawa, and Uwe Windhorst 2009, 4064). In the description of theory-theory I use the word innate. The discussions around innate versus acquired or learned aspects of the self is one that doesn’t have a clear definition or majority consensus. The nature versus nurture debate is a part of this larger discussion. The studies behind innate and acquired parts of the self, in my interpretation of them, only enlighten and highlight my association of mysticism in relation to the self. Essentially, the ‘answer’ to the debate is beyond what we are able to perceive and digest.

I have always been inspired by Rene Magritte and how he approaches these theories. Magritte is known as being a part of the Surrealist Movement. He has also been associated with the DaDa Movement and the conceptual art genre. Arguably, Magritte is best known for his piece *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)* (LACMA n.d.). In relation to my own work, I see Magritte exploring the nature of things,

the building blocks of perception and cognition with the addition of external influences and stimuli.

There is a quote from Magritte that referenced the first time he “saw thought,” after seeing a Giorgio de Chirico painting (Marler 2018). This idea of seeing thought gets at the point of the intangible explained through the intangible. This highlights



Rene Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, Oil on Canvas, 1929

the barrier between the internal and the external and the difficulty in the translation of one to another. This is in part the difficulty to identify one's own self as well as the difficulty to simulate intangible concepts and information in a tangible, or in terms of visual language, in a representational way.

John Berger, in his *Magritte and the Impossible*, quotes Magritte saying, “Life, the universe, the void have no value for thought when it is truly free. The only thing that has value for it is Meaning, that is the moral concept of the Impossible” (Berger 2009). I see this in my own work as the obligation of applied thought in society to increase one's value, that to hold meaning is a societal obligation, or that to justify your existence you must provide a value or service to the world. I see this in relation to the 'Impossible' as being the fundamental separation of the internal and the external. As I have established previously there is an unknowing nature to what is innate to the internal self, as well as there being a desire to express oneself outside of physical or external contexts. The

'Impossible' is the inability to perceive or externalize the self through purely internal means. There is no true agency of self just as there is no true application of self. The quote Magritte, "the Impossible has been grasped, measured, and inserted as an absence in a statement made in a language originally and specifically developed for depicting particular events in particular settings" (Berger 2009). In my own work I explore this absence through the negative space and limiting representational imagery and additional context clues. This also helps to build a surreal feeling, a feeling of the uncanny. Magritte wanted to challenge perceptions of reality, creating visual puzzles in unordinary contexts with an emphasis on unsolvable mysteries of being and perception ("Personal Values, 1952 by Rene Magritte").

The piece that gave Magritte an artistic breakthrough was created by Giorgio de Chirico (The Art Story Contributors 2011). Chirico founded the metaphysical art genre, specifically within the painting medium. My exploration into the ways that Magritte approached his art connected two previously unconnected influences. This expanded my understanding of both artists and the development of visual languages to describe internal and external experiences in different fine art movements. Metaphysics refers to study of the "first principals of things, including abstract subjects like, being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space" (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Chirico was interested in the enigma. He wanted to create work that was not easily understood (Dupêcher 2017). Chirico's painting style approaches space in a very interesting and uncanny way, playing with time, light, and perspective. Action is implied in his work, but not explicitly shown, only suggested.

I am inspired by the ways that both Chirico and Magritte explored theory in their work. They, in my opinion, were not only innovative in their visual languages, but also in the ways they verbally spoke and wrote about their work. I see them not as artists exclusively, but individuals who have used the art medium to



Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*, Oil on Canvas, 1914

explore existentialism, self-actualization, and reality's relationship to the internal and external experience.

I want to bring one more discussion into dialogue with my other investigations into the self. Plato's *Phaedo* explores a wide range of theories, concepts, and ideas. I specifically want to talk about the topic of dualism in relation to the mind which essentially speaks to mental and physical realities. Plato states that the mind investigates through the body, which makes investigation into "the highest, eternal, unchanging, and non-preceptable objects of knowledge" essentially impossible. He refers to these as "The Forms" and describes them as, "universals that represent the



essences of sensible particulars” (Calef, n.d.). Part of Plato’s philosophy was focused on the nature of the human soul among other abstract concepts. Plato was interested in the nature of being, “To understand which things are good and why they are good (and if we are not interested in such questions, how can we become good?), we must investigate the form of good.” (Kraut 2017). This illuminates how I have come to my position. In order to understand myself in the most authentic way possible and to understand why I am that way, I have to evaluate my own ability to do that, and to accept that in its external practice. The scientific theories such as theory of mind validate, to an extent, a human ability to understand themselves. Chirico and Magritte put theory into practice in their investigations of visual thought through the enigmatic nature of being. Plato’s theories, to me, speak more on the mystical aspects of being within the tangible and intangible. Kraut says, “Many people associate Plato with a few central doctrines that are advocated in his writings: The world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities (called “forms” or “ideas”) that are eternal, changeless, and in some sense paradigmatic for the structure and character of the world presented to our senses” (Kraut 2017).

Speaking about the self continues to be complicated in defining what it is, how it functions and what form it takes. I have attempted to explain the ways that I approach talking about the self and how I think of the individual. I think it is important to acknowledge that the conversations surrounding this topic will continue to be explored, and that there is a fundamental block that perpetuates the conversations because the answers, solutions, and illuminations are, to a degree, outside of our perception. This is

not a conversation about creationism, but one about the limits of self-actualization, expression, and introspection.

## **THE SYSTEM AND THE SELF**

The more I investigated my own perceptions of myself in comparison to others' findings and research the more I questioned why and how Western society has been built and developed in the way it has. If it has been essentially impossible to define an individual's internal world, how or why is it that our external world is so dependent on structures and definition? The dynamic between the two feels polarizing rather than symbiotic. I want to return to the description of structural functionalism: "a school of thought in which each of the institutions, relationships, roles, and norms that together constitute a society serves a purpose and each is indispensable for the continued existence of the others and of society as a whole." (Britannica n.d.). The last part of the definition states that these elements are indispensable to the continued existence of society as a whole. Inversely, I argue the point that the indispensable systems are, in practice, so encompassing that they themselves have become the focus in our reality rather than it being on the individuals that they were presumably created for.

The amount of products that are designed to increase organization, scheduling, and efficiency demonstrates the irony of the situation. When invention becomes centered on how to mediate the human condition, I believe there is a need to step back and re-evaluate what we are pushing for. Often products are marketed in a way to convince the individual that they will have more time for self-enjoyment and will become

a more capable person. In reality, when everything is increasing at the same rate, these products are not creating time, they are aiding us in keeping up, past a natural level of expectation.

I created a series of work for my thesis exhibition titled *Pneumatic*. The series focuses on the aspects of the self that make a person individual, with an emphasis on humanizing the body form. I juxtapose the self to the heavily structured nature of society with an emphasis on capability and production standards. This allows me to imply the mental, physical, and emotional effects these systems and the standards they create have on concepts of self and personal autonomy. I point out the fundamental differences in the natures of internal and external being. I characterize this relationship through themes of strain, drive, repetition, reward, and co-dependence. Co-dependence is an important defining factor because of the inability to separate the internal from the external, as well as the reflexive relationship between the form of societal functioning as a service to humanity, and, humanity being the element that continues the



Grace Johnson, *Rota Fortunae*, four-color process Screenprint, 2023

function, blurring the lines between cause, effect, and the separation of the two.

The exhibition includes four CMYK screenprints as well as a dos-à-dos book that explores inkjet and screenprinting comparisons and functions as a companion narrative to the four wall prints. To break down the visual elements, I chose to use the reoccurring imagery of the jackhammer throughout the exhibition because of its association with both destruction and production. The form of the tool is visually overbearing, intimidating, and confrontational. It evokes audible associations of its unrelenting sound. The jackhammer is a pneumatic tool, meaning it is operated by compressed air or gas. In New Testament theology pneumatic means relating to the spirit. I chose this as the title of the exhibition because of the coincidental parallel. In my work, the jackhammer functions as a symbol that represents the effects of the societal systems I am critiquing. It implies labor required by the individual interacting with the tool. I present the jackhammer as having its own individual context that is interacting with the themes and dynamics, such as co-dependence, that the prints focus on.

The brand Bosch can be read on the jackhammer, which appears in three of the four pieces. I chose to include the branding as a recognition of the extent our society relies on defining, branding, and labeling anything tangible, including the individual. To create my own brand or to remove the branding all together would not be representative of the reality that I experience. This is related to the discussion about Pop art using the form of something to critique that thing, or choosing to include branded objects or objects associated with the everyday in order to emphasize how much they are a part of our existence.

The prints in the exhibition are without a figure-ground, existing in a void of white negative space. This takes out the possibility for a location or interior to influence the dynamic of the forms or create unnecessary contexts. It presents the pieces as a thought, as Magritte might say, and pushes the viewer to look past surface level associations to the deeper implications in the work. The negative space also allows for the feeling of the uncanny. It creates a discomfort in the viewer that recalls the feelings of hyper-awareness and moments of disassociation that my earlier pieces, *Reaching* and *Constructure*, communicated. I chose to keep the figure in neutral clothes, barefoot, with little to no cultural signifiers in order to avoid extraneous associations. This is a way to humanize the form, keeping the body unadorned and in a basic state. I attempted to present the figure as being of itself and not of the tangible things around or applied to it.



Grace Johnson, *Everlasting Gobstopper Attempts to Last the Lasting Evers*, four-color process Screenprint, 2023

Each of the four wall pieces includes a bar of color that runs along the bottom edge. These colors are printed in the pure forms of the cyan, magenta, yellow, and black process inks. “Pure” meaning there are no additional modifiers and were printed

straight from the ink can. In the exhibition the color bars dictate the order the pieces are hung. I hung them in the order I print the CMYK layers: magenta, yellow, cyan, and lastly the key, black. The color bars reference the color bars used in production printing to track the densities of the inks being printed. This is an homage to that tradition as well as a way to communicate aspects of the process to the viewer that they might not be aware of. The pieces do not form a narrative explicitly within themselves or across the pieces, but rather communicate a moment in a scenario or a presentation of dynamics. In *Everlasting Gobstopper Attempts to Last the Lasting Evers*, the figure is seen reaching into a light that is partially hidden behind the color bar. This piece implies the jackhammer uncovered something that is wanted, referencing treasure or gold.

*Belaying Benevolence* shows a journey to connect the jackhammer with its spike. The figure is shown in a moment of reaching down while looking up, implying past and future action while actively showing a moment of being. This allows the viewer to access an emotional and physical space with the figure, while seeing the jackhammer as the driving force that is



Grace Johnson, *Belaying Benevolence*, four-color process Screenprint, 2023

seemingly becoming a force of exhaustion. The print titled *Rota Fortunae* states the figure and the jackhammer purely, comparing the form of the tool to that of the body. The tool fits to the body's shape but is very different in material and being. This comparison gets at the purpose of the tool, and the applied purpose onto individuals to utilize themselves as tools to society. This is the first piece in the show and presents itself as a definition of the theory I've developed in the work as a whole.

*Intermission (Cleaning Crew)*, the piece representing the key color bar, and the last piece in the show, does not include a jackhammer. It shows a Bosch hand vacuum with the same color profile as the jackhammer. Similarly, a tool case is included in *Belaying Benevolence* that matches the profile as well. The tools are a part of the Bosch Professional collection. I chose to use this collection to establish uniformity, regimentation, and a diversity of sameness that parallels the nature of the external systems the prints discuss. The hand vacuum is being held, but only the hand and arm are seen, maintaining an anonymity to the figure. The vacuum is pointed towards a pile of gravel, referencing how the jackhammer is typically seen breaking up

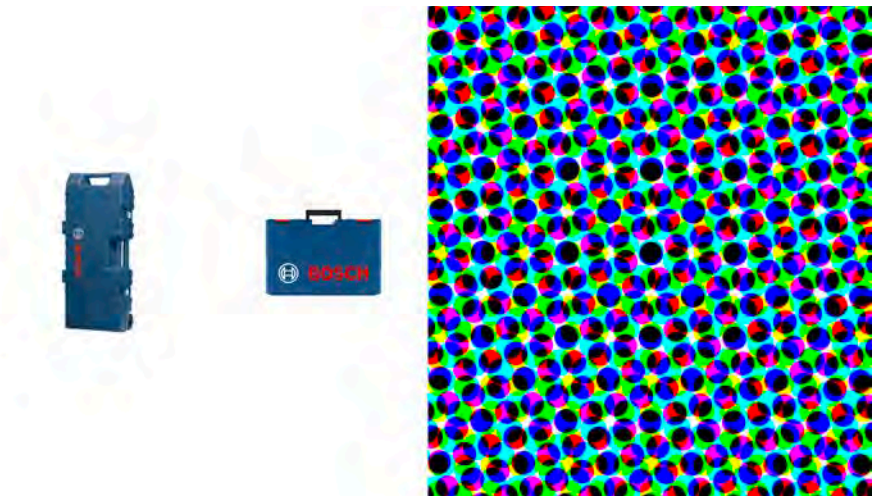


---

Grace Johnson, *Intermission (Cleaning Crew)*, four-color process Screenprint, 2023

concrete. On the pile of gravel a foot is placed in a way to show all of the weight of the figure pressing into the rocks. This piece assumes more action than the other three prints, showing two figures interacting actively with the objects in the piece. *Intermission (Cleaning Crew)* implies the individual is the one that broke the concrete, rather than a jackhammer. I did this to emphasize the idea that societal systems rely on the individual's participation in order to continue, forcing the individual to perpetuate their own lack of agency, as well as to highlight the harm that relationship causes. The physical pain assumed by the foot putting its weight on the rocks shows this harm. The hand reaching with the vacuum attempts to clean up the gravel, showing how the negative effects of our systems are not handled by the systems themselves, but must be navigated and cleaned up by whomever they are affecting. The individual must change and adapt in order to keep going.

The dos-à-dos book included in the exhibition, also titled *Pneumatic*, functions as a partner piece to the wall pieces. The book approaches the same topics the prints do, while providing additional imagery through a different format. The spreads in the book depict two separate ideas, which, in context of the wall prints, form associations with each other. The book



Grace Johnson, *Pneumatic* (pp.3-4), CMYK Screenprint, 2023



also provides information extraneous to the wall pieces. The third spread recalls the same case used in *Belaying Benevolence* along with a tool case that is a part of the collection of tools by Bosch. The second page of the spread depicts a magnified version of the interactions that take place when layering colored halftones on top of each other. This provides information about the process that the viewer might not be privy to. This is an homage to the system of the CMYK process and a clue to the conceptual theories I have created around the process. My book *Pneumatic* relinquishes the control I have as the printer. I allow ink layers to overprint, obscuring the definition of the halftone and effecting the accuracy of the color in the final image. Layers are printed slightly off register, giving a bright highlight to the edges of the objects depicted in the book. In comparison to the more accurately printed wall pieces, my book directly brings my discussions on CMYK as a process into discussion with the concepts my thesis explores.

The pairings created in the spreads of the book communicate with each other to build a loose narrative. One spread is then paired with the next one, prompting the viewer to compare the pairing on the previous spread to the newly turned one. This builds a line of associations that adds context as the viewer moves through the book.

The last page on the last spread depicts a hand and its shadow reaching out. I chose this in part to recall the hand reaching into a promising light



Grace Johnson, *Pneumatic* (p.12), CMYK  
Screenprint, 2023

in *Everlasting Gobstopper Attempts to Last the Lasting Evers*. The hands are represented through a magnified colored halftone, similar to the one shown on the fourth page of the book. The direct application of halftone to an image of an individual's hand recalls my discussion of the parallel nature of the color information and halftone dot to the self. It also brings light to the shadowy image, the energy of the mystique and spark of the individual, the creative possibilities the process provides, and speaks to the uncontrolled nature that they both possess. The addition of the book allows for accessibility and provides a more intimate look into the process of CMYK. It communicates the concepts in my art without the necessity of a gallery.

## **CONCLUSION**

I want my work to trigger the viewer into reevaluating the roles they play in their lives and the aspects of their daily living that are dictated by societal structures and the expectations and pressure that is created through those structures. I hope to point out how much time is spent trying to please the world's definition of value and how personalities are lost through the demand to structure the self in order to maintain a functional and productive lifestyle. We, internally, are constantly growing, changing, and discovering things about ourselves, while having aspects of ourselves that we will never be able to define, predict, or control. It is task enough to decipher ourselves much less to practice that externally in a world that does not stop for us to catch up. I want to remind myself and those who are receptive to it that we are not tools, we are not a mode or means of production, and we do have an agency in ourselves that must be

protected. In an external world that is becoming less and less inhabitable to the individual I believe this sentiment will continue to increase in importance. There is no real conclusion, and the search for any real answer becomes cyclical, the ouroboros, or just a dog chasing its own tail.

## Bibliography

- The Art Story Contributors. 2011. "Giorgio de Chirico Artist Overview and Analysis." The Art Story. The Art Story Contributors. June 1, 2011. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/de-chirico-giorgio/#>.
- Berger, John. 2009. *About Looking*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Binder, Marc D, Nobutaka Hirokawa, and Uwe Windhorst. 2009. *Encyclopedia of Neuroscience*. Berlin: Springer.
- Britannica. n.d. "Structural Functionalism." In Britannica. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/structural-functionalism>.
- Cabinetmagazine.org. 2007. <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/27/cmyk.php>.
- Calef, Scott. n.d. "Dualism and Mind." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/dualism-and-mind/>.
- Clark, Carlie. n.d. "Design through the Decades | the 1950'S." Brisbane Digital Agency | Hello Creative Agency. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://www.hellocreativeagency.com/blog/design-through-the-decades-the-1950s>.
- Dupêcher, Natalie. 2017. "Giorgio de Chirico." The Museum of Modern Art. MoMA. 2017. <https://www.moma.org/artists/1106>.
- Elward, William. 2019. "Inkjet Printer History." Castle Ink. October 30, 2019. <https://castleink.com/blogs/printer-help/inkjet-printer-history>.
- Gamm, Brian. 2020. "Thomas A. Lenci and the Eagle Printing Ink Company." CMYK History. July 4, 2020. <https://cmykhistory.com/thomas-a-lenci-and-the-eagle-printing-ink-company/>.
- Kraut, Richard. 2017. "Plato." Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/#PluCenDoc>.

- LACMA. n.d. "The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe) (La Trahison Des Images [Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe]) | LACMA Collections." Collections.lacma.org. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://collections.lacma.org/node/239578>.
- Marler, Regina. 2018. "'Every Time I Look at It I Feel Ill' | Regina Marler." Www.nybooks.com. an Francisco Museum of Modern Art/DAP/Distributed Art Publishers. October 25, 2018. [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/25/rene-magritte-every-time-i-look-at-it-i-feel-ill/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1395914](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/25/rene-magritte-every-time-i-look-at-it-i-feel-ill/?lp_txn_id=1395914).
- Mitchell, Stephen A, and Margaret J Black. 2006. Freud and beyond : A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought. New York: Basic Books, [Post ], Cop.
- MOMA. n.d. "Giorgio de Chirico. The Enigma of a Day. Paris, Early 1914 | MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80587>.
- National Gallery of Art Talks. 2021. "Jennifer L. Roberts on Printmaking, Part 5." Www.youtube.com. July 12, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObQildKUSgw&list=PLErBGbWC2wSNiNIgU3WRB3JEnKI5z2SFX&index=5>.
- Nasrullah Mambrol. 2019. "Structuralism." Literary Theory and Criticism. March 25, 2019. <https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>.
- Oxford Languages. n.d. "Metaphysics." In Oxford English Dictionary.
- Pelzer-Montada, Ruth. 2018. *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking : Critical Writing since 1986*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- "Personal Values, 1952 by Rene Magritte." n.d. *Rene Magritte: Biography, Paintings, and Quotes* (blog). Accessed November 12, 2022. <https://www.renemagritte.org/personal-values.jsp>.
- Ravenscroft, Ian. 2016. "Folk Psychology as a Theory (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." Stanford.edu. 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/folkpsych-theory/>.
- Reeves, Katherine. 1999. "The Re-Vision of Printmaking." In *IMPACT*, 69–75. University of the West of England: IMPACT Press. <https://cfpr.uwe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IMPACT-PROCEEDINGS-copy.pdf> University-of-the-West-of-England.pdf.

- Smith, Ernie. 2017. "Color Printing History: Lithographs, Offset Printing, CMYK." Tedium: The Dull Side of the Internet. April 18, 2017. <https://tedium.co/2017/04/18/color-printing-lithography-history/>.
- Stulik, Dusan, and Art Kaplan. 2013. "The Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes HALFTONE." [https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/pdf/atlas\\_half-tone.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/atlas_half-tone.pdf).
- Welling, Mathew Brannon, Morgan Fisher, Liam Gillick, Amy Granat, Elin Hansdottir & Darri Lorenzen, Leslie Hewitt, Corey McCorkle, and James. 2007. "Artist Projects / CMYK | Mathew Brannon, Morgan Fisher, Liam Gillick, Amy Granat, Elin Hansdottir & Darri Lorenzen, Leslie Hewitt, Corey McCorkle, and James Welling."