Guts

By

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards for scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Abstract

Blurring digital and analog processes of printmaking, I create painted relief sculptures of digestive organs that are enveloped in multiplied color prints of flowering chamomile, peppermint, fennel and marshmallow. I've begun investigating the medicinal properties of these plants due to a recent diagnosis of an autoimmune disorder. The ingesting of these plants, along with the act of carving and printing has been a therapeutic process. Historically flowers have been gifted to the deceased, recently wed, and sick loved ones. This gestural form of communication extends the capacity of human language. The pairing of flowers with the winding path of the intestinal tract suggests a harmonious relationship between the inside and outside world and acts as a metaphor for life's journey.

Content

Introduction

Though I had pursued an interested in art early on, my practice didn't take off until a near death accident that left me with a three broken leg bones and a fractured pelvis. In the midst of a bedridden summer plagued by severe physical pain and medication, I felt my sanity slipping. The urge to switch up the monotonous habit of flipping through television shows eventually forced my attention to shift toward a stack of "how to draw" tutorial books that my sister had left at my bedside. I drew everyday during those months of recovery, realizing that the creative process helped with the depression and loneliness of not leaving the house. When I returned to college in the fall I had decided that I would continue to explore and pursue an education in the arts. Upon the suggestion of a professor at the time, I enrolled in my first printmaking course. The first assignment was the intaglio techniques of etching. I immediately fell in love with the process and manipulating the beautiful copper sheet. Pulling a print for the first time was like opening up a present, pure excitement and curiosity for what was underneath the paper- I knew I had found my path.

I began creating political artwork in my undergraduate career, working with transforming president portraits into satirical characters. For example, "Washingo," George Washington as a clown, was a comment on the corporate greed and corruption in the United States (Figure 1). During this same period of time I became interested in the politics of food. After developing digestion intolerances that left me physically unwell, I changed my diet to plant based vegetarianism. This coincided with my first reading of *The Jungle,* by Upton Sinclair. The book was resurrected

from a friend's grandfather's library and was- ironically- made of leather but beautifully bound with illustrations depicting the story. The story hit home with me in numerous ways. The story takes place in Chicago with Lithuanian immigrants working in dangerous conditions inside a meatpacking factory. My family immigrated to Chicago around the same time and the character's last name had the same suffix as mine. And the grotesque nature of the meat industry pulled at all of the same strings that I had been dealing with in my personal life.

Sinclair's description of meatpacking plants exposed the unsanitary conditions of this industry to the public, which at the time, eventually led to improved worker's rights and working conditions. This inspired me to start investigating the factory farming practices still taking place in the United States. I had never gone into one myself but researched undercover surveillance videos of horrifying scenes of animal abuse. This investigation directed my work into a series of block prints titled, *The Farm,* which depicted scenes of the cruelty taking place inside meatpacking plants (Figure 2).

Much of my decision to attend the MFA program at the University of Colorado was influenced by the desire to convert to a non-toxic way of printmaking. My health is very important to me and I want to spread this method of printmaking onto others. In February 2014 I gave a demonstration explaining the alternative processes of lithography at a printmaking conference in New Mexico. The audience, including other printmaking faculty, was enthusiastic to learn about this new way of lithography, and I became enthused by the idea that my practice and content could mirror each other's mission. .

In the spring semester of 2014, I challenged myself again to explore different mediums and ways of displaying work. To represent the monoculture industry of corn, I carved, printed, and cut out over forty; five color woodcuts, which stand six feet tall and two feet wide. Amongst the corn is an infestation of insects, which represents the corn rootworm. This pest causes a billion dollars worth of damage every year. There are 130 varying pests in the field that are woodcuts. It took many hours to print and cut out all of the insects and corn (Figure 3). This installation process was a successful and more impactful method of displaying work, which allowed me to invade a large wall space by utilizing repetition. During the fall of 2014, I took a film theory course that focused on the construction of memoir. This was the beginning of me focusing on a personal issue rather than a concern with society with my art. As a creative project for the class I chose to tackle an emotionally challenging issue for me that addressed my father's recent incarceration. I decided to draw the portrait of my father's mug shot, which was taken right after bar fight- an incredibly disturbing image of him.

It was an emotional experience for me. I broke down while I was alone drawing him in my studio. I don't think I quite achieved the distraught look in my drawing as the original photograph does. This may be a subconscious effect that I projected, which was the good that was still in him. I have collected now multiple letters of dialogue between my father and me since he's been in prison. I decided to incorporate the text together with the portrait drawing in an animation. I spent several hours from ten at night to almost four in the morning working on this meditative dance between the drawing and the camera. I picked important text from

the first letter I had received from him while he was in jail before his trial. It was a tranquil experience slowly writing each letter, of each word in each sentence. By gradually writing then erasing each word I was letting go.

This project was therapeutic for me. In the spring of 2015 I started having issues with my digestive system again. I went to the doctor and was referred to a gastroenterologist where a colonoscopy was performed on me. The preparation of taking laxatives and being on the toilet all day was pretty rough. The results concluded that I had chronic inflammation in my large intestine and a diagnosis of an autoimmune disorder. The disease is not quite understood but is thought to be caused by genetics, stress, and environment. I began making work about my condition, making smaller artist books that were more intimate which used photography of toilets and images from my colonoscopy.

At the same time of my diagnosis I began carving and painting woodblocks that explored images of vegetables from my community garden and intestines. Before I was primarily interested in the woodblock as only a matrix to transfer ink from. But now was interested in freeing the object from the rectangular shape, carving it in relief, painting the incised surfaces and finally inking the relief surface.

My work progressively started to become more positive, as did my outlook on my condition. Instead of taking steroids and immune suppressant medication I decided to take a more holistic route to treat my condition. I used meditation to deal with the stress in my life. The meditation process ranged from doing yoga, sensory deprivation tanks to outdoor activities like; hiking, rock climbing, working in the garden and making prints.

In all of the above mentioned there was a sense of being calm and centered. During my yoga practice and ninety minute long sensory deprivation sessions, I had slight visual hallucinations. I would close my eyes and see purple and green circular patterns. The internal visual manifestation began taking place in my art. I also changed my strict vegetarian diet and was more flexible with eating meat and other foods. A quote from Joe Rogan's Instagram picture of two hotdogs, "There are times when dietary disciplines must be put aside in the interest of temporary mouth pleasure. This is crucial if one intends to live a full and satisfying life."

Along with the dietary change I started researching medicinal plants that aid in digestion as an alternative to prescription pills. In my garden I grew chamomile, fennel, peppermint and marshmallow. I started ingesting these along with ginger and turmeric to bring down the inflammation in my body.

Community

Being involved in the community of Boulder has been a passion of mine while living in the area. I have a 100 square foot community garden plot, where I get my hands dirty with fellow gardeners, growing food for myself and donating a portion to *Community Food Share.* I do live printing for *Alfalfas Market* during community events that expose the public to printmaking, raise money for myself/ *Community Food Share* and promote healthy eating.

In 2014 I was selected as an artist for *BMOCA's* CSArt project, which plays on the idea of community supported agriculture programs. I created 60 handmade sketchbooks with a block printed veggie covers. Inside was handmade paper with

seed inclusions. This encouraged the participants to plant the seeds and to start drawing in their portable sketchbook.

During my thesis semester I opened a small print shop, *Flatiron Press*, in North Boulder with fellow CU graduate student Chris Blume. Our goal is to share printmaking with the community. We currently host workshops where we teach various printmaking processes. We offer our space to the public who are in need of printing equipment and who want to share ideas and techniques with each other.

My thesis exhibition is personal but also social and community based. These plants were grown in my community garden where I conversed among fellow gardeners. We shared gardening techniques, stories and food. The flowers have been healing for me and I hope it brings joy to those who view it.

Process and materials

This body of work was physically created in about a months time span. In the past I have been a traditional printmaker working in an analog, hands on method. A digital process has always felt cold and removed to me. The computer generated images I was exposed to seem to be lacking that soulful nature of the hand. This all had changed when I injured my elbow in a mountain biking accident right before the beginning of the fall 2015 semester. My right arm was swollen and in pain leaving it for the most part immobilized and unable to produce prints that I needed to make for an upcoming deadline for a premonition themed portfolio exchange.

Coincidentally, the Art Department had purchased a laser-engraving machine that had just been installed and was ready to be utilized. I had used one a few years back at Northern Illinois Univeristy to engrave some acrylic glass for a project, so I was somewhat aware of the capabilities of the machine. I came up with the idea to utilize the laser-engraver to cut a wood block for me to use as a matrix to print from. After learning how the machine operated I purchased a drawing tablet for my computer. Instead of drawing on paper, transferring it into the computer and then manipulating the format to fit with the program, I simply just drew right into the software program Adobe Photoshop.

This way of drawing was odd to me at first and took some time getting use to. The tablet had a smooth surface that led to an easy gliding sensation, which was different than the resistance of drawing on paper. I was used to looking at the surface I was drawing on but with the tablet I had to look at the screen to see what I was drawing. It was like doing a blind contour drawing- there was a degree of separation between my hand and eye. I turned the digital drawing into a silhouette, and started to reduce into the solid black shape exposing highlights- a process which was very similar to the way that I work on actual woodblocks. Instead of carving away chunks of wood I was erasing away pixels on the screen. I just pretended each stroke of the digital brush was like my wood carving gouge. The finished drawing resulted in a similar aesthetic of a woodcut.

Encouraged by the way that the prints turned out, I decided to pursue this new process in creating the body of my thesis work. I was still somewhat hesitant to this digital approach. "Is this cheating?" I wondered. My faculty members reassured

me by increasing the speed of the production process was pivotal for the amount of time I had to create this new body of work. Reading a passage in *The History of Woodcut,* I was inspired to let go of my hesitation toward the digital. This way of working is known by the term *facsimile process,* "Being so absolute a transference of the lines or tones of the draughtsman's design that the mechanical factor of cutting the wood...might be said to possess no artistic virtue." It further goes on to explain that Dürer did not cut his own blocks but only supplied a drawing for the cutter to transfer and work from. "...nevertheless his usual manner of drawing is so early allied in its linear conventions to the style of his woodcuts as to justify our speaking of them as his original woodcuts, without thought of the cutter."[1] I was like Dürer, passing my designs onto the cutter, the "Epilog Laser Engraver."

The physical aspect of carving into wood was therapeutic to me, but as I shifted gears was replaced by other meditative aspects of the digital process. The effortless gliding of the pen on the smooth surface of the tablet, the oscillating movement of the laser as it burns across the block, the smell of burning wood in the air, and the drowning sounds of the ventilation system all came together to form a peaceful state of mind. The next step was to create the print. I did this in the traditional western way of printing in which the block was inked with a brayer and sent through an etching press. I transferred the key block onto another piece of wood for the color printing. My arm was healed by then and I was able to cut the color shapes out by hand with a gouge. I intentionally inked the block inconsistently and sporadically to give each plant a unique look. Some of the flowers received more

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[1] Hind, Arthur, *An Introduction to the History of Woodcut,* Dover Presss, 1935. Pg. 40.

saturation in the stem and pedals than others. Even though the shape of the flower was identical to each other, the color varied and referenced the individuality of flowers in nature.

Lastly, I needed to cut the contour of the images out. I wanted them to be free and organic- not contained by the square format. I invented a registration system, similar to the one I use for printing, to cut the flower out of the paper. I experienced a fair amount of trial and error with the settings of the machine. I had to test the different power and speed levels to achieve the correct configurations so the paper was not burnt to a crisp but engraved far enough through the paper so it released.

After the flowers were printed and cut out I moved onto the intestine blocks. I had previously made smaller versions of the small and large intestines by hand. I pulled prints from those blocks, scanned them into the computer and enlarged the file size. Those were ready to be cut but I still needed to create one more for the stomach. I drew that one in Photoshop as close in style as I could to the other blocks. To me they look similar enough to where I cannot tell the difference between the hand cut and digital. The laser engraver cut the blocks in relief but did not cut the outline of the shapes out. It would have taken hours for the laser machine to cut through the one-inch thick blocks of wood so instead I used traditional woodworking saws. I found it interesting that the machine was not optimal and it was actually faster to do it by hand.

The blocks of organs were not to be used as a matrix to print from but as objects themselves, so I sanded and primed the wood for paint. Acrylic paints were used to describe the warm colors of the organs. After all the veins and highlights

were painted, I went around the perimeter edge with black paint. The last step in the painting process was to ink the relief surface of the block. The brayer hovered above the recessed painted areas and filled in the bold, black outlines of the design.

Visual Description

Upon entering the Jensdotter Gallery the viewer is confronted with three large wall installations that consist of multidimensional floral bouquets and intestinal organs. The three organs are surrounded by a repeating circular pattern of flowering plants that radiate from the central spaces that the organs occupy (Figure 4). Each piece stands at roughly four feet in diameter, and as a whole seem to slowly branch across the entirety of the wall that they occupy. From afar there is a Trompe-l'œil effect happening with the flowers, almost as if there is a real bouquet of flowers mounted to the wall. Upon closer examination one can see the flowers are in fact cut paper prints. The texture of the layered paper, paired with the weight of the central organs gives the viewer the sense that the anatomical parts are thrusting outward toward the audience- as if to suggest that the entire piece is in full bloom.

There is an overall complimentary color scheme with greens of the plants and red tints of the intestines. The left piece shows a small intestine resting upon the flowering plants of chamomile and marshmallow (Figure 5). The fennel is a dark green with vein like leaves and yellow petals; the marshmallow is a lighter green with broader leaves and petals with undertones of pink. The small intestine is a woodcut block, painted with pinks and relief rolled with rich black ink. The black lines of the woodblock create a sharp contrast from the softer colors of the organic forms that the organ rests upon. This contrast lends itself to the three-dimensionality of the work, as well as it forces the viewers eye to the center of the composition, before moving outward to the circular repetition of petals and branches.

In the central piece of the wall installation is a snakelike large intestine, which is the least massive of the three (Figure 6). The structure of the intestine winds upward from the bottom right, with a texture almost that of a piece of rope, looping around nearly meeting itself where it began. The ends of the intestine never meet, and though at first glance it appears nearly symmetrical the open space between the beginning and end creates a slight element of tension. The arrangement of this organ reveals the center of the radiating pattern of the circling peppermint and chamomile plants. This seems to be the most hypnotic of the bunch, as the viewer is thrust inward toward the central pattern and outward by the thick woodblock at the same time. The peppermints purple petals and the chamomiles white petals with a yellow center contrast the harsh bulkiness of the block. There is evidence of the laser cutting process in the burnt edges of the chamomile. The large intestine is also painted with tints of red violets and surface inked with black ink, the construction of which, like the first of the series, lends itself to the contrast between the layers of the work.

The last of the three is a woodblock stomach with a backdrop of peppermint and marshmallow (Figure 7). The combinations of flowers that appear in the third installation, which surround the stomach, come from the two previous floral arrangements. Here, the marshmallow is layered over the peppermint, entirely altering the appearance of the two plants cohesion that is seen in the first two installations. The broad marshmallow leaves cover the reticulating branches of the peppermint, giving the piece a unique, and more bold appearance than the first two. The stomach is painted with highlights of red, pink, and white placing the emphasis

of the three-dimensional quality in this work directly in the center of the piece (Figure 8).

Two languages are present in the material and depiction of the flowers and organs. There is a contrast between the lacelike paper prints of flowers with the heavy object of the woodblock organs. The delicate flower prints represent the fragility of life, a fragility that I have become more aware of throughout the course of my illness. The physical weight and scale of the wooden organs serve as a symbol for the emotional heaviness of my disease. The repetition and multiples of the flower prints mirror my daily use of ingesting the plants, whereas the woodblock organs are singular referring to the singularity of my own body parts. Also, the two contrast in style- the flowers with their scientific illustrative style and the organs with their graphic almost cartoonish style. I chose to depict the flowers in a more representational way because I saw them everyday in my garden. They look as though I had flattened and preserved the flowers in a book for identification purposes. Because I have not examined my organs the way that I have the flowers, and therefor have a different relationship to them, I chose a more humorous approach in the creation of the organs, exaggerating their forms and making light of my situation.

Together, the three installations showcase the repetition of pattern and form as a set, as well as each within themselves. As a set of three, and as objects that are almost framed or haloed by the organic paper forms surrounding them, the organs are almost elevated to icon status. They are uniform, and at the same time they are each autonomous entities- similar but individually unique. Though each work stands as its own installation, there is continuity throughout the three. The flowers shown in each work vary from one to the next, and there are slight tonality changes due to the inking process of printmaking. The prints are transformed from their traditionally flat nature. The medium has morphed from the expected, to an unexpected fusion of texture and tonality. The pealing leaves of the flowers and the intestinal blocks standing from the wall confront the viewer in a sculptural way. The overall size, color intensity, and rhythm of the installation create a collision of unanticipated arrangements in the viewing experience. The tactile nature of the works, and their subtle multidimensionality encourages the viewer to engage in an intimate experience. Proximity to the work is required for the audience to fully sense the texture and the layering of the wood and paper. This physical intimacy on the part of the audience reflects the intimate nature of the content of the work itself. The "gut" reaction to the work is, in many ways, and interplay between the outside and within.

Content and Relationship

In dealing with my medical condition, I made the choice to explore a holistic treatment path, rather than taking steroids and immune suppressant medication. I began to practice meditation as a means of coping with the stress in my life. The meditative process ranged from doing yoga, to sensory deprivation tanks, hiking, rock climbing, gardening and making prints. In all of the afore mentioned activities, I was able to accomplish a sense of calm and a feeling of being centered. During my yoga practice and ninety-minute long sensory deprivation sessions, I occasionally experienced slight visual hallucinations, in which I would close my eyes and see purple and green circular patterns. The internal visual manifestation began taking shape in my art, and can be seen in the three installation pieces through the circular organic patterns of the floral bouquets.

The imagery that I saw during meditative activity, which would eventually appear in my work, was also influenced by the traditional arrangement of the *mandala.* Mandala is a Hindu or Buddhist graphic symbol of the universe; specifically defined as a circle enclosing a square with a deity on each side that is used chiefly as an aid to meditation. The mandala-esque pattern that appears in the flowers in this project represents my meditation practice and my life. In a 1999 essay by Beverly Synder, titled "Mandalas: Art as Healer," the traditional form of the mandala is described as "an ideal tool for making the unconscious conscious, which was Jung's (1965) description of the journey toward mental health."[2] It is not the presence of the mandala, which Snyder describes as allowing for the fruitful

[2] Snyder, Beverly, "Mandalas: Art as Healer," 1999. Guidance & Counseling, Autumn 1999. Vol. 15, Issue 1. 30-35.

unveiling of a future plan, or of a resolution for an inner struggle, but the creation of the mandala itself. This process oriented activity, of creating the mandala to access an unconscious presence, in many ways lent itself to the act of healing that I embarked on in creating these works.

Beneath our skin and flesh there is a machine of organs, like a factory, that processes food and expels the waste it cannot use. After we chew our food, the rest is out of our control. The esophagus muscles constrict and contract forcing food down into the stomach where it's met with an acid bath, further breaking down the food and absorbing some nutrients. The journey continues through twenty feet of winding tunnels where the velvety tissue of the small intestine absorbs most of our nutrients. The last part of the digestion is the large intestine, which absorbs water and creates a stool.

There are other meanings synonymous with digestion besides the obvious description written above. Art is contemplative; and I want to give the audience something to chew on. The winding path of the Gastro-Intestinal tract can be a metaphor for traveling through life's journey. The title "Guts" can be defined as fortitude or symbol for strength, or having the courage to endure. It takes "guts" for me to talk about my medical issues and other vulnerabilities. In another sense I am spilling my guts, or my inner most thoughts and feelings, almost as a confessional act-showing my highly personal issues to the public. I trusted my gut or had a gut feeling when creating this project. Everything that I was interested in working with and that I was dealing with in my personal life seemed to branch outward from this interiorized space. Additionally, stress manifests in the gut. If you hear bad news

one might have a pain in the pit of their stomach. The experience of pain from this anatomical and metaphorical region manifests both medically and mentally, resulting in physical pain or emotional anxiety. With the weight of these themes considered, I wanted the viewer to have a visceral experience with the art, while not being entirely disgusted or dissuaded from viewing the work. I elected to use a graphic, or cartoon-like, style as to make the organs appear more approachable. Via a style of image that is intended for all audiences, specifically the audience of children, the sensitive material being presented to the viewer becomes more easily "digested" by all.

There are multiple layers of healing that can be identified within the plants that I have created in this project. All of the plants, aside from the marshmallow, were grown in my garden. My garden is part of a community organization on top of hill looking out onto the plains. It is a place for me to get exercise, and to spend meditative time alone, while also occasionally conversing with other gardeners. There was a therapeutic aspect to the digging, planting, and watering of the plants- almost as a ritualistic practice. These herbal plants that I had grown were used practically in my daily life, harvested and utilized in culinary applications- making teas and seasoning dishes. All of the plants that I have mentioned here aid in the process of healthy digestion. The physical creation of the prints and the methodic process within the drawing, carving and printing was likewise therapeutic.

There is a physical mirroring of the plants and the human body. The reticulation of the plant's veins, roots and branches, reflects that of the veins and neurons within the human body- suggesting that we are all part of the same

universal system. The plants and the organs, though they are abstracted parts of a whole, symbolize the root of life, growth, and progression. Each element of the series represents a natural and animate organism, requiring the aid of positive and nurturing elements to survive. Separately, flowers are often considered to be something that put people in a good mood. In the Victorian era flowers were placed upon body parts that were injured or troubled in some way, thought to possess the power to applicably heal.[3] Historically flowers have been gifted to the deceased, recently wed, and sick loved ones. This gestural form of communication extends the capacity of human language.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a Victorian writer accredited with the late nineteenth century text, *The Language of Flowers,* says about the symbolic nature of flowers, "The most superficial observer cannot fail to perceive that plants present faithful emblems of the various stages of human life, and the most remarkable peculiarities in our physical formation, and in our moral relations to each other."[4] In this description, the plant and the human form become intertwined and symbols of one another. This concept manifests physically and visually in this project, as the internal organs and blossoming plant life form a solid and united entity of lively matter.

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[3] Black, Carolyn. "The Joy of Giving Flowers," 2012. PennState Extension, July 2012.
[4] Beverly, Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History,* 2015. University of Virginia Press. 27-28.

Conclusion

This project was pivotal in healing my mind, body, and spirit. Though there is no cure for the disease that I have, however, I am happy to say that I have been in remission for the last several months while working on this project. I hope to keep the positive state of mind that this project has allowed me to obtain, and would like to continue working with themes that deal with elements of nature and concepts of my internalized being. Mixed media artist Annette Massager has said about her work, "being an artist means forever healing your own wounds and at the same time endlessly exposing them."[5] In life, one is faced with a smattering of inevitable obstacles. Instead of keeping them concealed, I hope to continue addressing these difficulties in my own artistic practice.

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[5] Annette Massager, "Discover Annette Massager," 2014. http://www.mca.com.au/discoverannette/

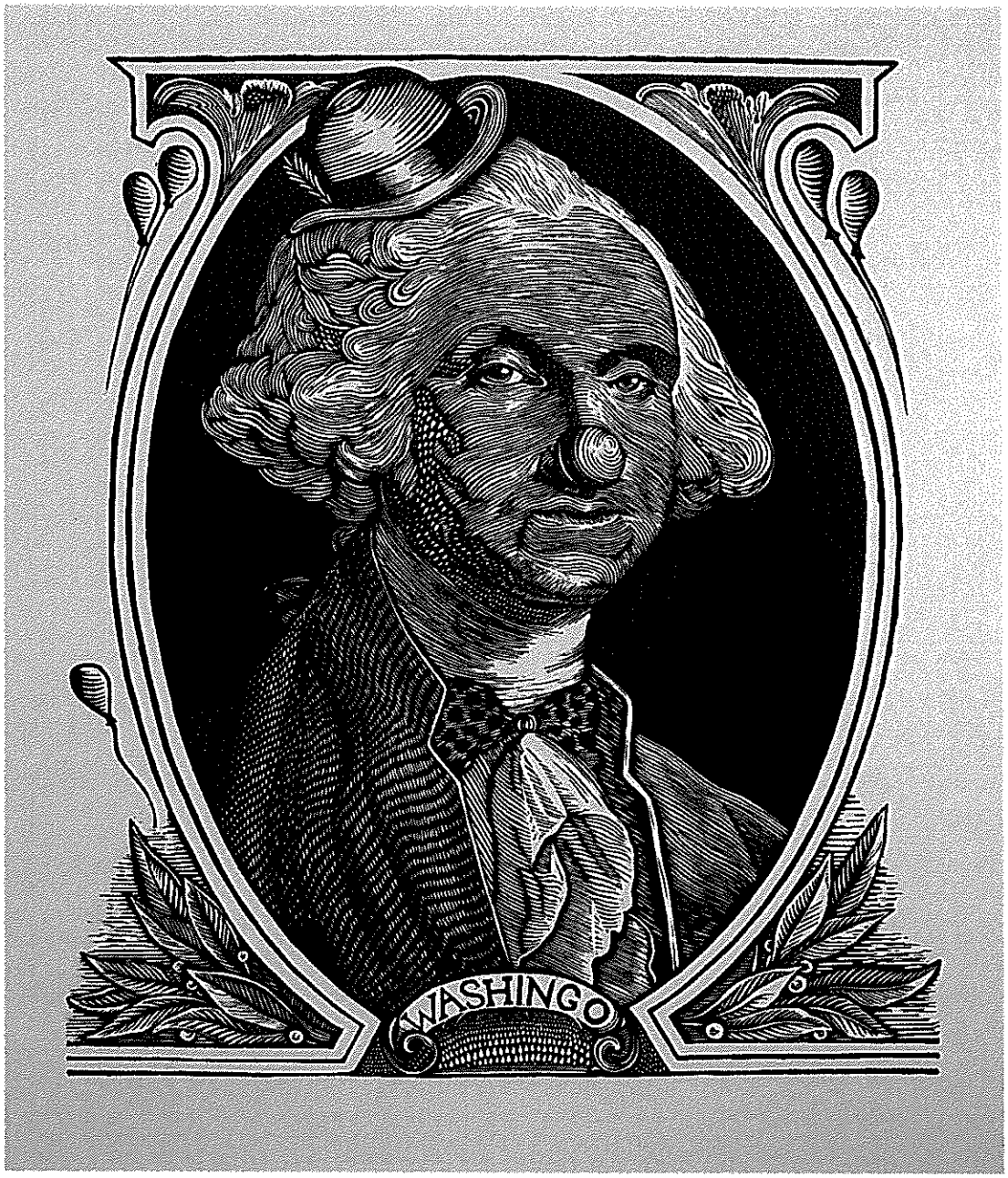

Figure 1. Sam Cikauskas, Washingo, 2011.

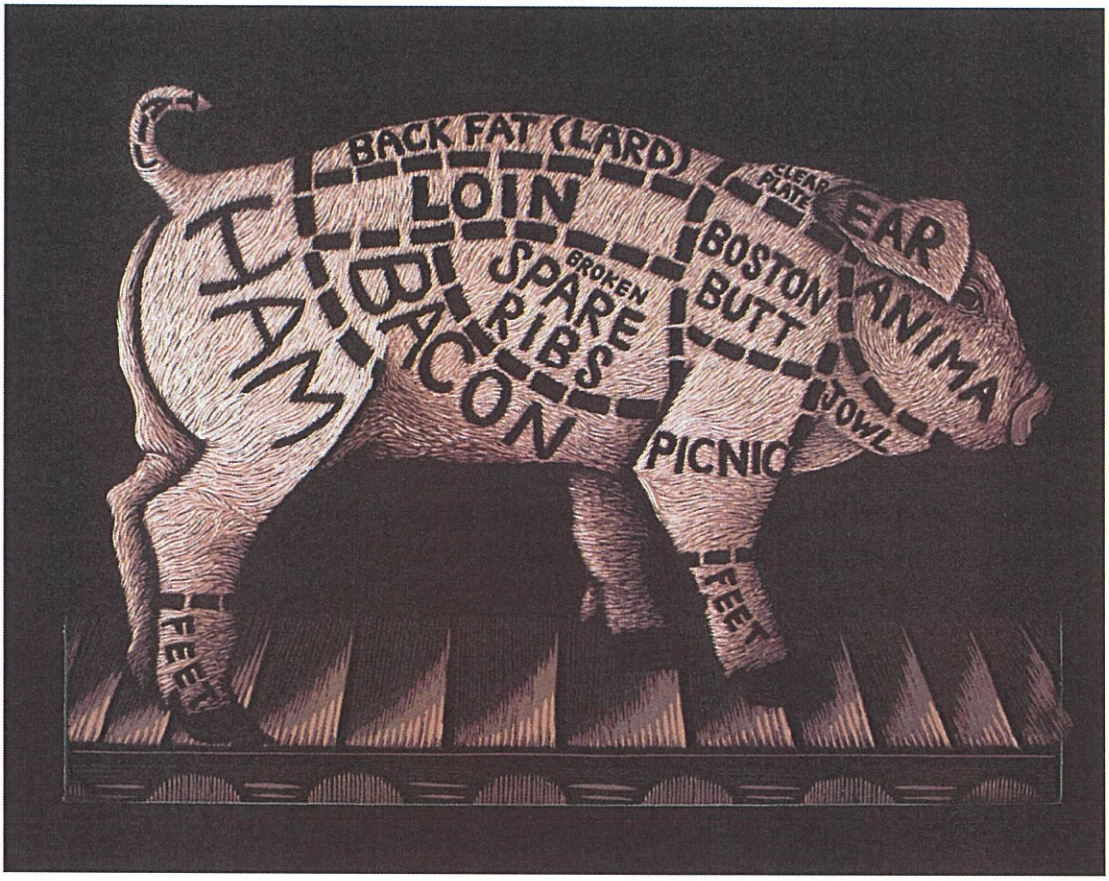

Figure 2. Sam Cikauskas, The Farm, 2011.

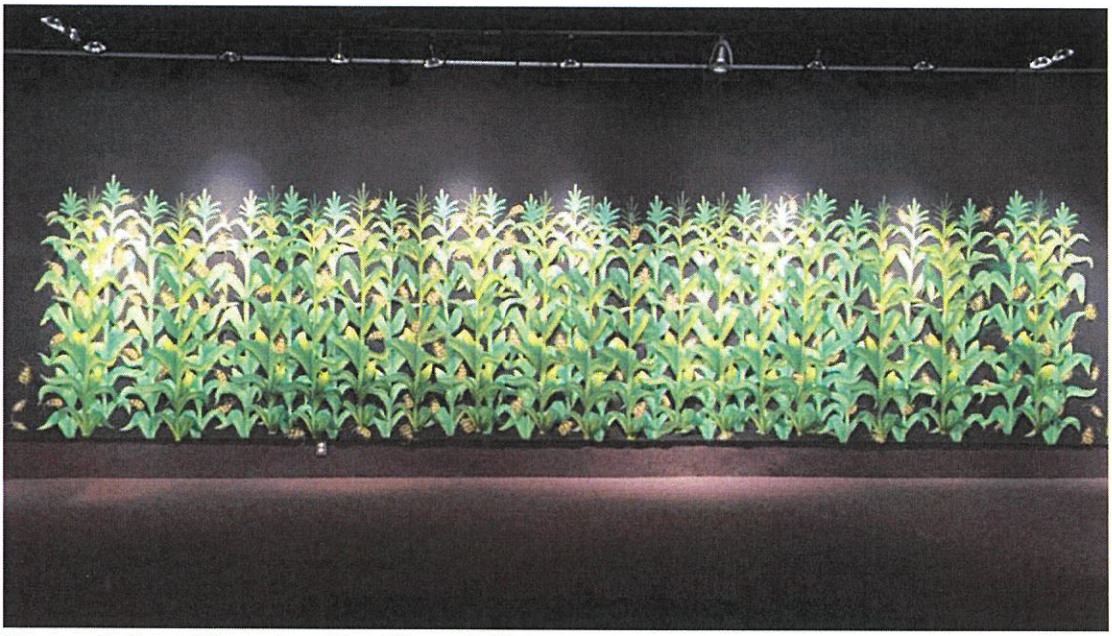

Figure 3. Sam Cikauskas, Zea Mayz, 2014

Figure 4. Sam Cikauskas, Guts Installation, 2015.

Figure 5. Sam Cikauskas, Small Intestine, 2015.

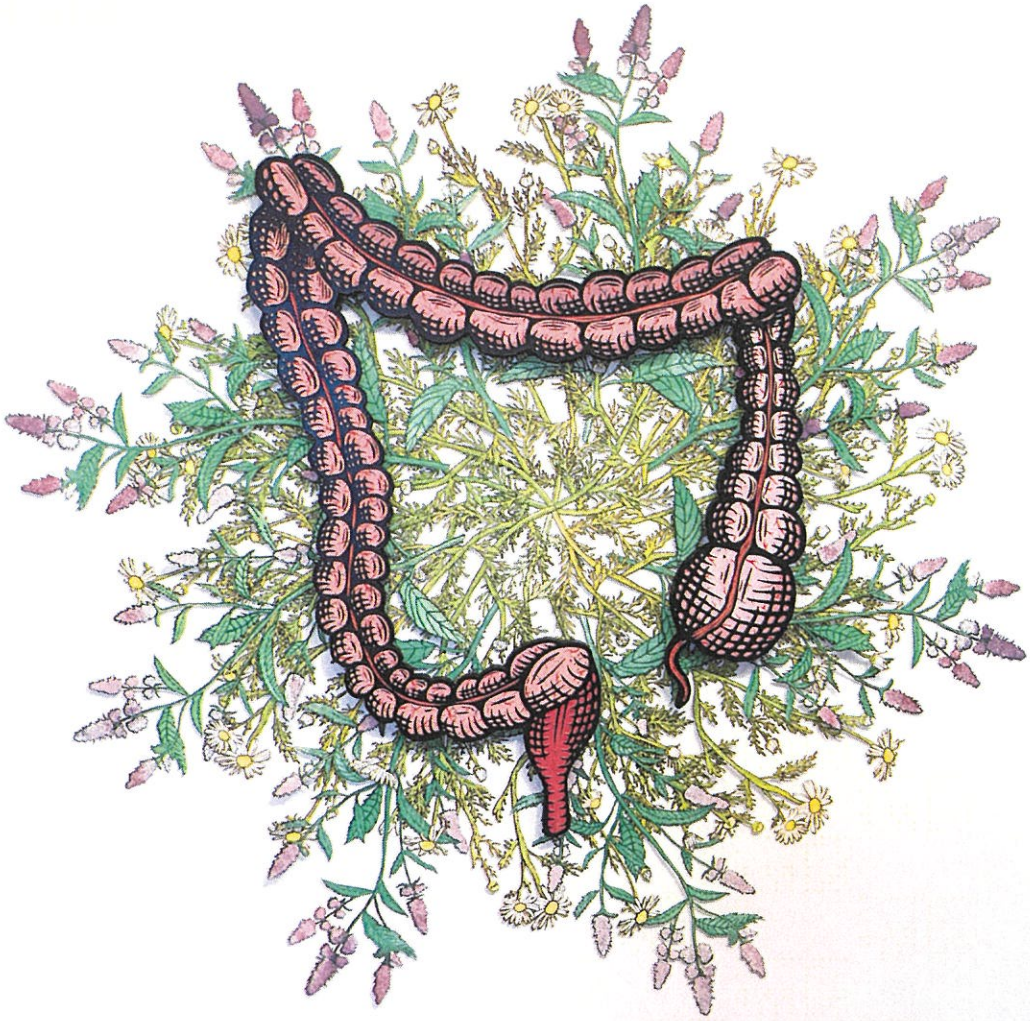

Figure 6. Sam Cikauskas, Large Intestine, 2015,

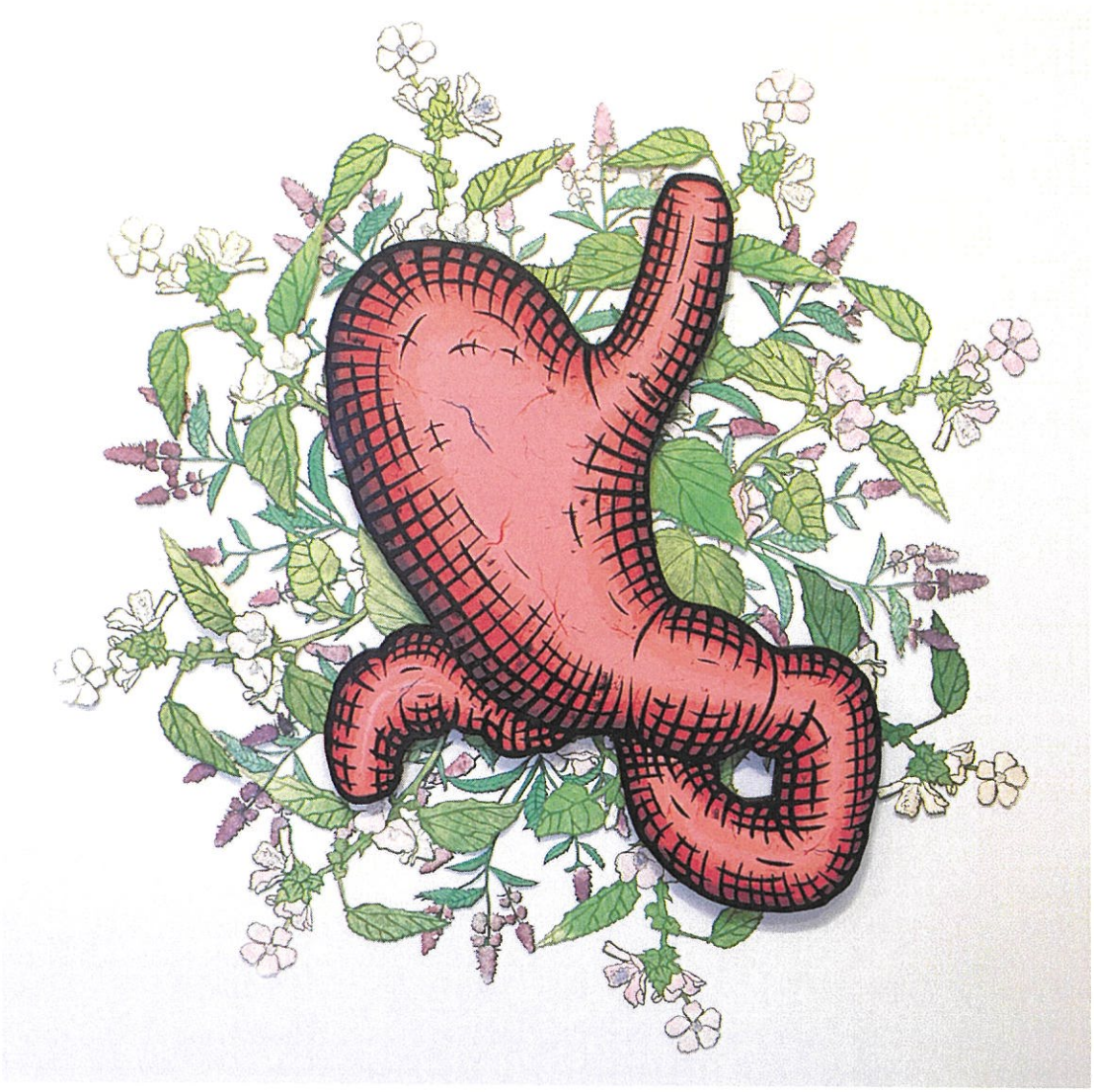

Figure 7. Sam Cikauskas, Stomach, 2015.

Figure 8. Sam Cikauskas, Stomach Detail, 2015.
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