Chaos and Control

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By

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving wife Amber, my adoring family, and wonderful friends for always supporting my dreams, mental health, and artistic endeavors.
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Abstract

My anxiety, compulsions, and drive to control my surroundings inspires my work and at times hinders my process. I want to control every aspect of life, and the system of marks are symbolic of this. Printmaking permits me to express the area between control and lack of control, as the processes can be revised from beginning to end. My prints are composed of symbolic marks, which I create from objects that represent my compulsions and spiraling thoughts. The repetition of this indirect medium mimics my compulsive behaviors.

I convey repetitive motion, obsessive thoughts, and actions within my prints by overlapping and duplicating marks. I break down the system and reconstruct it attempting to embrace chaos and concurrently impose control. I want the viewer to appreciate my work on a formal level while offering a glimpse into my chaos, the overwhelming complexity of my obsessions, and view of contemporary culture.

Keywords: Printmaking, Screen Printing, Mark Making, Process, Repetition, Automatism, Anxiety.
Introduction

My screen-prints are composed of obsessive imagery and formal repetition that work together to form a visual language. I overlap, repeat, and rotate the marks that I print to project a sense of something happening- movement, time passing, rapid thoughts, tension, and in some cases all four at once. I also disassemble different objects that have personal symbolism, using both the whole and the parts to add to my visual language.

The works of painter Elizabeth Murray (1940-2007) are an inspiration for this formal movement. As critic Roberta Smith writes of Murray’s work, “a painting is an event, an animation of form that sets the viewers’ thoughts and feelings in motion.”¹ My prints represent an event that happens in my thoughts and through my anxious movements or behaviors.

When researching how other artists create shapes for their final forms or within their works, I discovered a similarity between how I approach shapes and how Murray formed her canvases and works on cut paper. When talking about how she begins creating a shape, Murray states, “to delve into a shape in the artist’s work means to enter in, turn it around, perhaps see it from the inside.”² That is what I am doing when I take objects apart. I try to see them from the inside out and use the inner pieces to develop my mark making system. I also do this when I cut my prints into shapes or layer them.

Murray’s work *Watch* (1991) (figure 1) is illustrated below alongside my work, *Untitled 4* (figure 2). *Untitled 4* is from the beginning of a series of experiments I was making in an attempt to map out and understand how my marks, colors, textures, and the final shape of the print all work together. This work was one of my many attempts to find out what makes the motion inside the print happen, what causes tension, and to discover personal systems.

Section 1: System of Marks

The system of marks I have created, and woven throughout my work, comes from objects that represent personal issues that cause anxiety or fixations. I make...
drips, splatters, scribbles, and marks, from traditional and non-traditional tools, with acrylic paint in an organic way. I resonate with Jackson Pollock’s (1912–1956) marks and splashes recording his movements, because my system of marks are evidence of my compulsions. In the video *Pollock 51*, the abstract expressionist says, “I like to use a dripping, fluid paint. I also use sand, broken glass, pebbles, string, nails or other foreign matter. A method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them.”³ For me, this only comes by actually dipping tools and objects into paint and then using them as paintbrushes. I directly dip an object into ink that represents one of my anxious personal issues. At times I may feel compelled to take apart that object and dip it into ink. I use it like a stamp or a brush to create multiple types of marks. In figures 3-5 below you can see some examples of the marks from various objects.

I have used the following as mark making tools: locks, makeup brushes, hand sanitizer bottles, painters tape, chapstick, pencils, my fingers, and erasers. All of these objects are inspired by the anxious thoughts that I associate with them. For example,

hand sanitizer bottles represent the constant urge to clean and wash my hands for fear of spreading germs. These marks express the feeling of being under a microscope. I often feel as though every thought I have is being over-analyzed internally, and that others around me judge my compulsions. These feelings push me almost to the brink of paranoia, while making prints has become my therapeutic outlet and mechanism.

For the piece, *I Know You Locked It* (figure 6), I screen-printed yellow-green marks from a stencil I created by taking apart an old door lock from my house and making marks with its pieces. The lock as an object symbolizes the dichotomy between the act of physically locking the door and knowing that I locked it. The back-and-forth between the reality of it being locked and my irrational thoughts that it somehow did not lock spiral out of control in my head. My thoughts go in different directions, overlap, and become blurred just as the marks from the lock do within the print.

Fig. 6. Hilary Dugas, *I Know You Locked It*, 2019, cut screen-print on paper, 8” x 10”

Fig. 7. Hilary Dugas, *Untitled Experiment 5*, 2019, screen-print, 18” x 22”
Section 2: Compulsive and Spiraling Thoughts

Compulsive and spiraling thoughts have always been present in my mind, and have always informed my creative process. My screen-printing experiments began with mark making and color choices working against one another and spiraling out of control into a mess; just as my anxious thoughts and compulsions often do to me. There is an example of my marks and colors spiraling out of control, becoming muddy, and hard to decipher, in *Untitled Experiment 5*, pictured above (figure 7).

Experimenting with different marks and organization methods, I discovered how to make the colors and negative space work in harmony within each composition. To accomplish this I organize the marks, scramble them up, and reorganize them. I do the same with my layering process by reordering the sequence in which each stencil is printed as well as swapping ink colors around until the combination is just right. The final product is considered finished or right when the composition is balanced.

I then transitioned to focusing on the negative space, inspired by moments of clarity and stillness between the anxiety and compulsions. The negative space represents a pause, a sigh of relief, a fleeting moment before the chaos begins again. This happens in *Blue 1* (figure 8) and continues to be a part of my ongoing work. My marks still remain compulsive by repeating the same mark over and over again within a field of negative space. This is evident in *Pink 1* (figure 9) and is reminiscent of the dots in Yayoi Kusama’s (B. 1929) piece *Accumulation* (1952) (figure 10). According to the entry on MoMA’s website about Kusama’s work, “though the scale of these compositions is intimate, for the artist they evoke a sense of vastness. She once described them as reflecting “the great depth of my inner heart.” Like much of her work to come, *Accumulation*...
tion is based on repetition—or as its title suggests, on the accumulation of her repeating marks.”

Fig. 8. Hilary Dugas, Blue 1, 2020, screen-print, 28” x 18”

Fig. 9. Hilary Dugas, Pink 1, 2020, screen-print, 18” x 21”

Fig. 10. Yayoi Kusama, Accumulation, 1952, ink on cardboard, 16.61” x 11.88”

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Section 3: Process and Links to Surrealism

When I first began experimenting with cut and torn shapes in my screen-prints, my work *Untitled 2* (figure 11) was seemingly the most successful, with it’s windows into the chaos between the turquoise layer of ink and texture in the background. Some of the shapes I cut out to form my stencils, and the end shape of the work, were formed partially by automatism, in my case what felt right when cutting the shapes. Which lead me to researching more about Surrealism and Jean Arp’s (1886–1966) *papiers déchirés*, that were all formed by automatism when he dropped torn pieces of paper onto a tacky board. In a statement about these works he said, “The ‘thirties, during which I created the *papiers déchirés* represented experiences most important for my work. They clarified within me the boundaries between certainty and uncertainty, day and night, between the absolute and the relative, between calligraphy and nature.” For me, cutting and creating shapes sparked a whole new chapter in my art process and ultimately propelled me toward creating relief prints and wood cut outs.

Throughout my ever-evolving process of creating art I have been drawn to Arp’s biomorphic shapes that he created within his collages, prints, and wood reliefs. Two of his wood reliefs that particularly interested me, and influenced my work, are *Constellation with Five White Forms and Two Black, Variation III* (1953) (figure 12) and *Yellow Constellation* (1932) (figure 13). I began to draw, carve, and cut my own style of

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shapes, while also being influenced by other contemporary artists including Allan McCollum (B. 1944) and his body of work *The Shapes Project: Collection of One Hundred and Eight Perfect Pairs* (2005-12) (figure 14).

Fig. 11. Hilary Dugas, *Untitled 2*, 2019, screen-print, 12’ x 12’

Fig. 12. Jean Arp, *Constellation with Five White Forms and Two Black, Variation III*, 1932, oil on wood relief, 23 5/8” x 29 5/8”

Fig. 13. Jean Arp, *Yellow Constellation*, 1953, oil on wood relief, 29 1/2” x 23 5/8”

Fig. 14. Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Collection of One Hundred and Eight Perfect Pairs*, 2005-12, acrylic on wood relief, 128” x 96”
I began to draw fairly small, approximately 6-inch, drawings of my newfound shape style in different configurations. First, I started with shapes that formed into a circle when arranged a particular way like a puzzle (figure 15). I then had the wood shapes, that are approximately 10 times the scale of the drawing, cut and hand painted red. As I have been doing from the start, I arranged and rearranged the wood pieces on the wall into a composition I was satisfied with (figure 16).

Then I went onto more drawings (figure 17) and multiple sets of the wood pieces to arrange. I started with some shapes that I painted black, and raw wood shapes, to begin the composition (figure 18). Then I painted the raw wood set white and another set of the same shapes blue. I incorporated all three sets of the same shapes from the original drawing: black, blue, and white, into the final composition that grows across the wall and playfully begins to flutter around the doorway (figures 19-20).
I went on to carving the same style of shapes from linoleum blocks to create relief prints (figure 21). Then printing them on different types of paper including translucent paper and layering them to form the final composition (figures 22-23). From these prints came more cut and painted wood pieces that grew into installations that are 10 times larger than the 5x7 inch relief prints from where their shapes came.
Section 4: Printmaking and Repetition

Printmaking is inherently about repetition and control. So are my compulsive thoughts and behaviors. But, if I can line them up just right, in both cases something wonderful appears; something bright, authentic, vibrant, and moving.

I started making the same marks over and over again in either the same direction, sections, or lines. Some of the marks in my systems have begun to take on the movements and shapes of other objects rather than their own object. For instance, in *Yellow, Pink and Blue 1* (figure 24), the abstract shape of, or reference to some kind of citrus fruit, emerges from the marks of the fan paint brush I used to make the original mark. Calligraphic marks appear from loops and can represent never-ending thoughts. In *Red 2* (figure 25), scribbles begin to imitate handwriting when they are layered and repeated much like the drawings by post abstract expressionist, Cy Twombly (1928–2011) (figure 26).  

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I then decided to create much larger works that I had up until this point. The first large work I made is 15-foot long by 30-inch tall work *I Know I Locked It* (figure 27). It is made up of entirely marks from different pieces of our door lock and its inner workings. This was made as my response to trying to work through my compulsions about checking to see if the door is locked, even after I have locked it. At first it seemed like an insignificant action, but when I do that same ritual over and over again every time I...
leave the house it is overwhelming. Just as the marks are small, but when they are repeated hundreds of times over the length of the paper they become an overwhelming and enormous image. In the drawing *April 15, 1989, 32 Minutes, 4B*, (1989) (figure 28) William Anastasi (B. 1933) “with his eyes covered, [he] moved from one end of the room to the other for exactly 32 minutes, marking the wall in big sweeping movements as far as his arms could reach.” His work is literally blindly repeating an action for a period of time to create a mark which makes up his composition. In contrast with my work, which is a representation of repeated actions that I subconsciously perform every day and lose time doing.

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Conclusion: Controlling Chaos

To summarize, I have explored obsession and anxiety as well as the behaviors and thoughts they provoke and how to express them within my work. I have created a system of symbolic marks. I break down that system, and then reassemble that system within my work. I explored various palettes and personal symbols throughout my work. I also brought my work from a small scale to large scale. In the future, I anticipate the work will become even larger and the mark making system will become more expansive to include more objects and explore other behavioral/mental health themes. I am interested in continuing the practice of using objects, that are associated with my obsessions and spiraling thoughts, within my future work. It is cathartic for me to explore these objects their physical marks and symbolic role in my work.
Bibliography


Hilary Dugas is an avid printmaker and graphic designer who specializes in screen-printing. She is the recipient of the 2021 Homer L. Hitt Society Art Award, which recognizes the artistic achievements of students at UNO and the high quality of work they produce. Her work has been exhibited in The UNO Lakeshore Gallery, UNO St. Claude Gallery, Where Y’art Gallery, The Old 77 Hotel and Chandlery, and The Ameen Art Gallery. Over the last decade she has worked for large- and small-scale print shops and taught printmaking and design classes to children and adults. She worked as a design and marketing intern for The National WWII Museum and as an administrative intern for Prospect.5, Prospect New Orleans, a citywide contemporary triennial. She was born, raised, and currently lives in New Orleans where she works as a freelance artist, graphic designer, and teacher.