

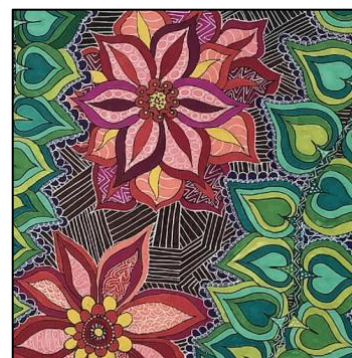
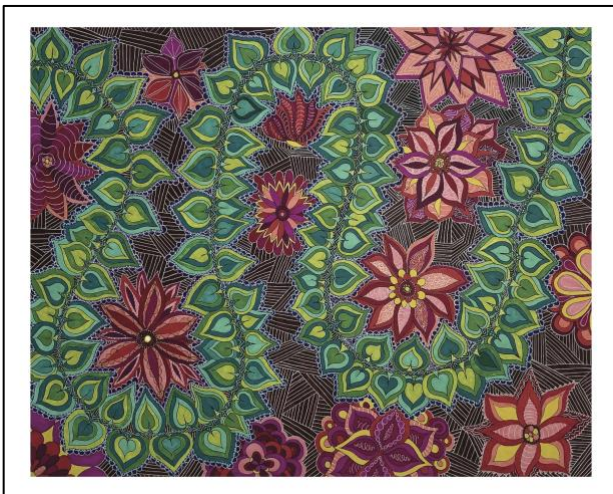
*Relax Shoulders, Loosen Grip, Exhale and Begin*

Amy Bainton

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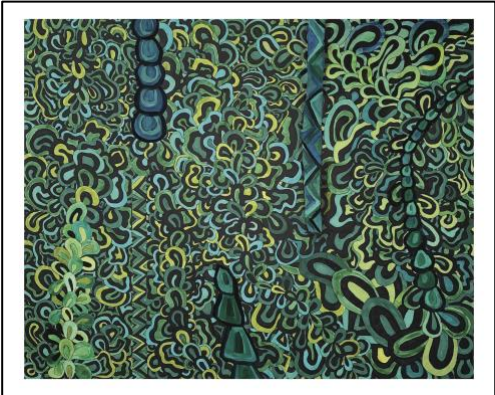
My artwork is a form of active meditation, and the drawings in my exhibit are the result of an extended process of finding joy amidst anxious moments. My drawing process creates time to pause and reflect upon the thoughts and the feelings surrounding recent events, as well as helps me to deal with anxiety about the future. Living with anxiety often means I feel panicked and vulnerable in situations where I lack control. This is the point when I pull out pens and paper, and I draw. Drawing for me is sitting in the eye of the storm, when all else swirls around. It has become the main way I deal with my anxiety. I recognize I have control over nothing in a situation except the ability to take *this* pen and cover *that* page. I have always gravitated towards quiet and solitary practices at positive and negative times in my life. I am a slower language processor and I like being thorough, so sometimes I become overwhelmed with life issues, such as taking fast-paced classes or supporting an ill family member. At these times, I draw to compensate for my nervous energy. Growing up, I was encouraged to express myself freely, so using a sort of automatic patternmaking and drawing style, with no limits or clear cut-paths as a means of expression, came naturally to me. Before I start a new drawing, I take a moment to look at my blank page full of possibilities, and I follow these steps: *Relax Shoulders, Loosen Grip, Exhale* and *Begin*. This is my reminder that the only goals are to change my disposition and to be mindful in this moment. I create many small patterns as a way to fill up my time, and doing this provides a bubble between myself and triggering events. Ironically, it is in my most anxious of states where I make my best work. I often become laser focused and continue to draw late into the night until the page is complete. I like drawing on good sized sheets of paper because I know they will take a while to cover. I start with a small circle, line, or other similar kind of mark, then slowly, over the next several hours, I fill up the page until I can't draw another line. Through this process, I can feel the tension and stress in my body release.

An example of my work that has helped to bring me calmness is a floral and organically-shaped piece drawn early on in this project (Drawing 2). Every part of the white 24-inch by 19-inch Bristol vellum surface paper is covered by the drawing. The pens I used were micro-drawing pens, colorful Sharpies, and a white ink pen. I drew for about three hours a day, over a week, to complete this work. Whenever I would feel stressed in my summer class and I couldn't take studying anymore, I would pull out this work and continue to build up the shapes and colors. After I finished the black outlines of the piece, I went back in with color, then re-outlined each shape with the white pen. It is covered in a multi-layered green vine with heart-shaped leaves that switch-back across the center of the piece. It has five similar shades of green. The vines are decorated with small blue and purple circles along the perimeter of the leaves. In addition, there are several uniquely stylized flowers that all fit around the vine. The flowers include patterns and designs on the petals made of white pen, and are a mixture of reds, purples, and yellows. They are evenly spaced around the piece and are mostly similar in shape and size. The background of the piece is a solid layer of brown with white diagonal lines drawn throughout. The lines are divided into small parallel sections at different angles across the page, creating triangles in the negative space. The colors of the piece are bold and saturated, and the vine in the foreground takes up most of the visual field.



(Drawing 2, *full and detail*)

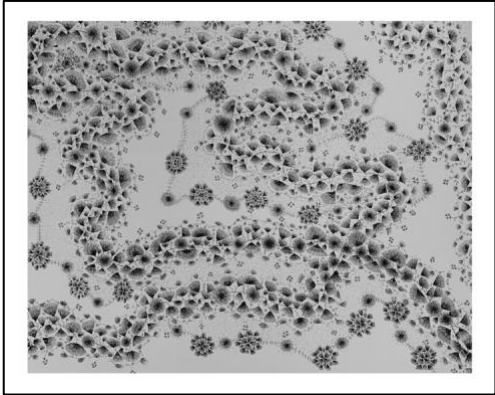
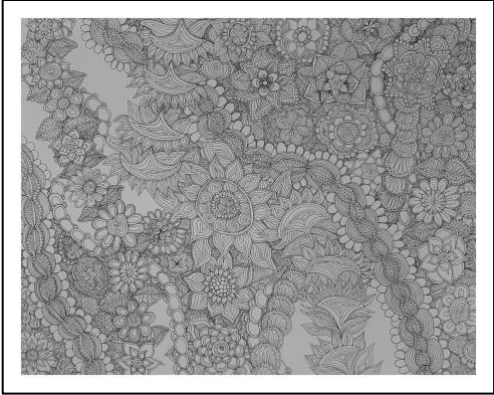
The organic shapes that define my drawings are inspired by patterns, rhythms and beauty found in nature, and focusing on these natural elements as I draw creates a calming pause in my day. Drawing these pieces helped me to regulate my mood, and I believe my work can also give other people a visually pleasing image to look at that can potentially brighten their moods as well. For myself and others, having a visually elegant work of art to look at during times of stress may bring a moment of joy and calmness. Compositionally, I often fill the entire paper with bold and rich colors, leaving no space uncovered, such as in Drawings 3 and 5, and at other times I choose to leave white space to give the eye somewhere to rest, as in Drawings 15 and 20. Incorporating many details provides a pause for the viewer as they notice every part of the composition. I work with permanent pens and usually don't plan out exactly how the end result will look. I don't usually work with paint or other materials that are challenging to achieve clean lines with or that take more time to dry, thus undermining the improvisational quality of producing the images. Also, working with permanent pens in this way means I don't have an option to erase or to perfect the lines that I draw, forcing me to accept what "mistakes" I make and to continue working while creatively incorporating them into the image. When decisions are not working and a piece feels like it is failing, I remind myself that the goal of this work is to remain in the moment and to accept imperfection as merely part of the process. It is therapeutic to have less control over the outcome, and it makes me more mindful and present in the moment of creating the piece. This practice provides a sanctuary away from life's stressors and helps me to accept my lack of control in these situations.



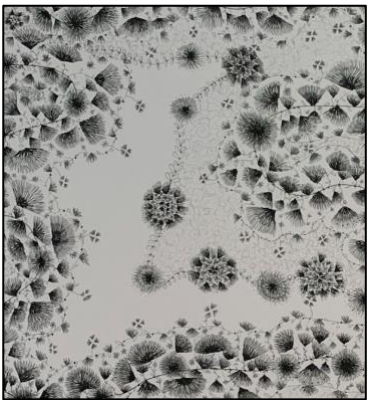
(Drawing 3, full and detail)



(Drawing 5, full and detail)



(Drawing 15, full and detail)



(Drawing 20, full and detail)



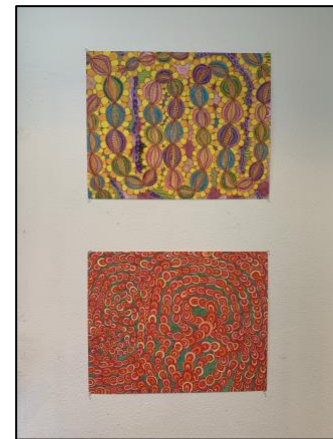
I have been making these patterns of layered half circles and floral designs for years, taking many hours of practice for the designs to become second nature and automatic. But when I think back to how I discovered my love of drawing in this way, I am sure that watching my grandmother create quilts one shape, stitch or fabric square at a time influenced my love for making patterns and repetitive shapes. I enjoyed seeing her slow, methodical and hand-made approach to art making, and how she created works that would soon become gifts for others. My grandmother made a quilt for every person in the family, and she would take us to a quilting store and let us pick out the fabrics we wanted her to use. I remember spending a long time looking at variations of patterns, gliding my hand along fabrics, feeling for soft textures, and eventually choosing the materials based on playful color combinations. Spending time watching my grandmother work in her quilting room and looking at all of her collected fabrics with bold graphic designs heightened my interest in making patterned art.

Due to COVID-19, my thesis exhibition has been installed on three walls of my room, creating a “U” shape where both the middle wall and a sidewall have windows on them. This creates a natural separation of two wider spaces and two shorter spaces to display my work (see below). On the largest wall space is my colorful group of drawings, Drawings 1-8, next to a smaller wall with Drawings 9 and 10. On the other side of the window are Drawings 11-13, the three more representational and less fully color-saturated pieces; the only pieces that are smaller than 24-inch by 19-inch. Next to this wall is the second largest wall space, holding my black and white/grey-scale drawings, Drawings 14-21. This configuration creates a transition of vibrancy of color from fully saturated, with no white space, over to the muted line drawings. When looking at the transition of color from piece to piece in this layout, the viewer can see a range of tones I chose when creating the works. I wanted to provide a space where the viewer looks at so much detail that it gives them a chance to pause and to process what they see, in a similar way to

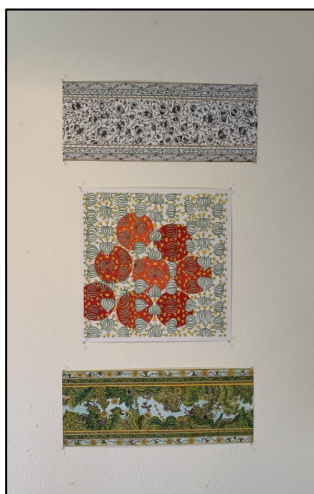
how I feel when drawing. I chose to display these drawings in this orientation so that as the viewer scans the room, they can settle their eyes on the designs that best fulfill their viewing needs. They may feel more uplifted and visually stimulated in one area, or calmer in another, depending on where they choose to look. Hypothetically, the viewer can stand in the middle of the room, taking in the quilt-like grids all at once, or they can walk around and have smaller moments with the individual pieces. Despite the difference in color hues, the styles of the drawings are related to each other because they represent the organic, floral, and geometric motif-like way in which I draw, while remaining compositionally unique.



Wall 1 (*Drawings 1-8*)



Wall 2 (*Drawings 9 and 10*)



Wall 3 (*Drawings 11-13*)



Wall 4 (*Drawings 14-21*)

When creating a new piece, my process usually starts with me holding a black pen, saying my calming mantra to myself, looking at the blank space, then creating a small circle or line in a corner of the page. I will then trace a line around the shape, add more circles on its perimeter, and continue to add on shapes, creating radial symmetry for about four or five layers. Then I will start this process again in the other blank areas of the page. After I have several clusters drawn, I think about how I will connect them to fill the page. This is usually where I decide whether or not to add lots of color to the page, because the level of density I continue with depends on this decision. If I decide to add colorful marks, I will leave more open spaces or create negative spaces that will allow for larger patches of color. The color choice depends on how I want to spend my time, and what is going on in my life. At times of high stress, where I become anxious about the future, I don't want to spend my time thinking heavily about the design elements of a drawing. I would rather just have a page to fill, so I will create less dense designs that can be easily colored in. This is essentially like creating a large coloring book page for myself, allowing me to simply pick the color range I want to work with, and filling in the design in an intuitive and improvisational way that frees my mental space for processing life. In contrast, if I'm feeling calmer, I will draw more dense and muted works that require more deliberate and fine pens strokes than simply filling in large sections with thick colorful pens. Working only in grey-scale uses more of my mental capacity, so I choose to create these sorts of works when I have the emotional bandwidth for these tedious design elements. My anxiety comes in waves and is typically situational, so it makes sense to me as I look at this gallery that there is a mostly even divide of colorful and muted tones of drawings on the walls. I grouped these drawings together as "colorful" and "grey-scale" walls because the pieces in the two groups relate much better to each other in terms of the looks, qualities, and emotions they portray.



Between the fully colorful and grey-scale walls is a wall that has differently sized paper and partially colored in pieces, including a square drawing and two longer panels. These are the three pieces (Drawings 11-13) where I had created strict parameters for myself, and I actually used pencil to trace out a draft of where the lines and designs would go. These drawings were the most tedious for me to create, and they incorporated more thoughtful design elements. Each was done in much less stressful times, but still gave me the calming benefits I needed. I'm glad to have been advised by Professor John Halaka to explore new approaches to my process. He encouraged me to see what I could create and learn if I altered the size of the paper, and potentially gave myself limitations, such as with color. From there, I had in mind the idea of drawing crown molding or decorated base-board designs in the longer panels for Drawings 11 and 13. Living at home reminded me of the patterns I grew up seeing around the house of hand-painted Italian plates my mom collects and displays in the kitchen. I mimicked these geometric and partially realistic painted designs in Drawing 11, where I carefully created floral designs and used all of my mental energy for drawing evenly spaced and consistent lines throughout the piece. In contrast, Drawing 13 was done in a more fluid and free-flowing way, creating a more organic and rustic feeling within the same spacing parameters. In both of these drawings, I was influenced by my research on Eugène Grasset, a designer who also tightropes between a realistic and a geometric drawing style, which I will discuss below. For Drawing 12, I sketched an even grid of flat green seed pods, then layered large reddish-orange circles underneath. I had originally planned to fill the entire background with these circles, but I was encouraged by Professor Halaka to leave the drawing in its current state, helping me to realize that this gives the piece a more dynamic relationship of foreground and background as well as creates movement and spatial dimension that was different from my other drawings. These drawing exercises helped me to realize that I can still use my busy pattern making style when drawing, but I am

able to create work with a better thought out and elevated visual aesthetic, while still achieving the mindful and calming benefits of my original process. I have learned I can draw in my “cover the page” sort of way and not lose the free-flowing style of that work, but I can also be more deliberate in my choices of arrangement on the page to breathe more life into the work. For example, when comparing the first and second-to-last drawings I created for this exhibition, Drawing 1 and Drawing 20 respectively, one may see the growth in consideration of foreground and background, negative space, color arrangement, dimensionality, composition, etc. versus a more flat and two-dimensional drawing.

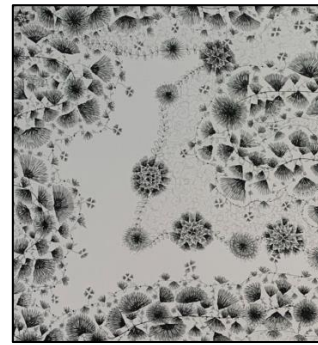
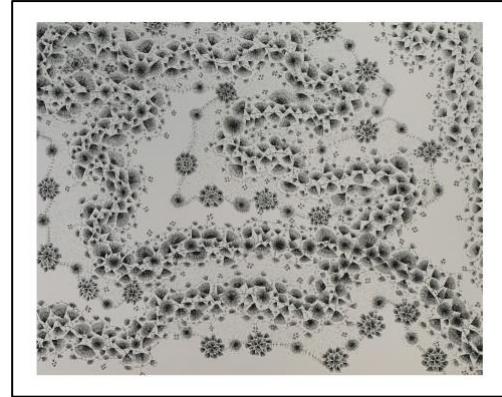


(Wall 3, Drawing 11-13, *full and details*)





(Drawing 1, *full and detail*)



(Drawing 20, *full and detail*)

A work of art's meaning depends upon a person's relationship to it and their experience with that art. If we consider the viewer, the meaning comes from the viewer's perception of content, as well as how they feel in the viewing space. The presentation of a piece can influence its perception, and ultimately its meaning. Originally I planned to exhibit my work in the May Gallery at USD, with more space in-between the pieces, in a single line around the room. Instead, given the circumstances, I have decided to fill the white walls of my bedroom in San Francisco with my edited group of drawings. Interestingly, having my pieces shown over Zoom at my house attaches a more personal quality to the work, giving a different context than if shown at USD. While seeing the pieces displayed tightly together could allow the viewer to better recognize my repetitive tendency and my compulsion for details, I do not think this is a critical realization in order for them to feel joy and calmness from the gallery.

Although my process of drawing is geared towards providing a stress-reducing activity for myself as the artist, I am aware that the sorts of drawings I make do not tend to project my sense of urgency or anxiety that creating these pieces helps me to cope with. It's not necessary for the viewer to know my background reasons for drawing these pieces in order to have the kind of relationship with them that I am hoping for. If a viewer were to enter a gallery of my work without any prior knowledge of my purpose, they could see it as a busy group of patterned drawings, or perhaps a series of drawings done for the sake of ornate doodling. I recognize that "doodling" can be taken by some as pejorative, but I actually would agree with this assessment of my work to an extent. It is done as a way of mindfully inhabiting time, and not with the intention of stating a direct message or changing people's opinions about a world issue, for instance. It is simple in the way "doodling" suggests, and I am comfortable with this interpretation. If the viewer is able to slow down and experience joy or calmness by noticing the group of small details or bright patterns in my work, then I feel the pieces are successful. I have even been told that this series could be used as designs for greeting cards, shower curtains, journal covers, coffee mugs, scarves, etc., which informs me that my work is ornamental in nature, and would be usable in practical design contexts. I am encouraged that people have been interested in my work, though I have no immediate intention of commercializing it. I do see these reactions as positive, because they inform me I have created designs that uplift people, and my goal of this project has been met: I have provided time for myself to pause and feel joy while creating the works, and I have done the same for others as they view the gallery. Nonetheless, if I were to consider such in the future, my process would not change. I would create for my personal needs, drawing with my usual meditative approach.

USD classes that greatly inspired me to think critically, ultimately preparing me for my senior year and for working on this exhibition are "Design Foundations 101" and "Advanced

Visual Communications 401” with Professor Saba Oskoui, and “Advanced Drawing (London) 403” with Professor Halaka. Professor Oskoui pushed me far out of my comfort zone by having the class create multiple projects based on design problems we needed to solve. She encouraged me to focus on the most effective way to compose a piece, teaching me how to preserve the integrity of the message while editing out unnecessary visual information. This disciplined practice allowed me to create stronger and clearer pieces. One project that stands out in particular was when we were given the limitation of only using three colors and three geometric shapes to create a dynamic scene for a simulated client. This challenged me to realize that negative space is just as interesting and important as positive space in a meaningful composition. Professor Oskoui influenced my thinking on what is important and necessary to include in the work I make moving forward. In addition, Professor Halaka’s class has not only helped me to improve the quality of my drawing and painting skills, but also has changed how I view art as a window into cultures, perspectives, and experiences very different from my own. He taught me to think critically and to engage in an active relationship with artwork. I spent three weeks in his London class looking at sculptures and paintings, then redrawing and recreating them in my sketchbook. This gave me a great background on how to pay attention to the details of something in front of me, making me a more critical thinker by better reflecting on the relationships between forms, content and cultural functions. I remember drawing a floral crown molding carving I spotted on the ceiling of a museum to practice how to illuminate volume using shadows, and with my new learned techniques, drawing realistic objects made better sense. It took many sketches for me to understand drawing the illusion of space. His class also taught me how colors, marks, weight of lines, compositions, foregrounds and backgrounds, etc. make a significant difference in the way a piece is perceived by the viewer. This inspired me to have visually dynamic areas all

throughout the compositions. I have carried into my current work Professor Halaka's lesson on engaging the space around a drawn object so that the full page looks intentional and active.

I have developed a list of questions from creating my project, which led me to research the work of artists Eugène Grasset, Yayoi Kusama, and Cas Holman. First, when wondering, *Why do I feel the need to create geometric patterns instead of life-like drawings, as I was trained to do in classes?*, and *Why do I include organic shapes, roundness, balance, beauty, etc. in my work?*, I looked to the work of art nouveau artist Eugène Grasset. Grasset's *Plants and Their Application to Ornament (1896)* is a series of naturalistic lithography studies of twenty-four flowers used as references for floral fabric designs, stain glass, vases, and lace patterns. He once stated, "The art of drawing is not the art of observing forms and objects alone, it is not mere mimicry of these objects; it is the art of knowing how far and wherein, and with what just limitations, those forms and objects can be reproduced in a picture, or in a decorative work" (3). My approach references the way he walks the line between creating naturalistic and abstract patterns for the purpose of ornamentation in a space or to inspire enjoyment. I strive to create a similarly balanced aesthetic in my own work. I also create abstract geometric patterns with floral shapes in a similar ornate and busy way. I outline my shapes and create decorative floral patterns that activate the whole space. There is movement and the suggestion of an organic and natural growth in my work, similar to Grasset. His work is inspired by actual flowers in nature, where mine are usually just floral patterns I make up to fill in the spaces. I create drawings for the sake of meditative work, whereas Grasset created patterns for clients, but I feel we have a similar approach to density of composition and overall mood given by the designs.





(Eugène Grasset, *Plants and Their Application to Ornament*, 1896)

Second, I wondered, *Why do I feel the need to cover the pages completely?*, and *Is it valid to create spontaneous work that focuses on making one line at a time?* To help answer these questions, I turned to Yayoi Kusama's *Obliteration Room* (2012), a project where the audience is invited to cover all surfaces of a blank room set in colorful dots, one sticker at a time. Her process of starting with the parameter of having viewers fill in the white room with stickers, piece by piece, is similar to my way of creating. Like Kusama, I have no exact end result in mind, and my process functions in a fluid and non-constricting way. Her work makes me feel that my way of representing moments in my life through drawing abstracted lines and circles that fill up a blank page is a valid process of creating and can make for meaningful artwork. As mentioned, I have been concerned with my need to create geometric patterns as an alternative to the life-like drawings I was trained to do in classes. Kusama uses her artwork to manage her stress by overwhelming the spaces she works in with many patterns of shapes, seemingly leaving one world to create another, which is similar to how I feel when I create my drawings. In addition, Kusama has created work that, despite her own personal struggles, brings a fun and uplifting energy to herself and to the viewer. Her artistic choices have validated my creative

decisions and the process in which I work. Although I do not share Kusama's struggle with severe mental health issues, I relate to how she uses her art as a technique for processing life, and I do see a connection to myself in her creative process when she says, "I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art. I followed the thread of art and somehow discovered a path that would allow me to live" (4). Kusama has used her art as a means to keep going, a purpose, a motivator, and an expression of her internal processing. Similarly to my exhibition, the viewer may not understand immediately the inspiration behind Kusama's work or how creating it is therapeutic to her, but this may not be a necessary understanding for the viewer to get out of the work what Kusama intended.



(Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2012)

Third, I asked myself, *Would others feel uplifted by looking at my work in the same way I feel by making it?*, and *How much do I need to reveal about myself in the actual artwork to achieve my goal?* With these questions, I turned to Cas Holman, an artist who works on creating spaces "designed for play" (2). She wants her clients, especially children, to use her abstract pieces to create new and innovative ideas as they play with her works. Her design process starts by first thinking of the desired experience she wants others to have, then about how to make the necessary items for this play. Holman greatly emphasizes in her work the value and importance of allowing others the space for free expression and innovation by not giving elaborate

instructions. For example, instead of saying, “Use these items to build a car,” she will tell her clients, “Use these items to create a way to get to school” (2). This places greater value on the unstructured process of letting people think for themselves through their play. She sees unstructured time as how creativity and innovation are truly born. Holman’s work gives me the creative license to make my drawings for the sake of what the experience brings to me, rather than planning for a specific result. She has also helped me to understand that the viewer owns their response to my artwork, despite my purpose for making it, and that they will have their own interpretations and experiences with it. I realized I don’t need my work to explicitly depict my issues with anxiety, or even that these issues need to be understood by the viewer. My art can simply stand alone and be pleasurable to look at on the viewer’s terms.



(Cas Holman, *Rigamajigs* and *Imagination Playground Blocks*, 2017)

I like working as an artist because it makes me pause and reflect on my experiences and on life. In today’s world, daily activities often feel less personal and fast-paced, but my art is very slow and methodical. It gives me a long period of time to really stop and be observant of what is going on inside my head, and to think and feel through the issues while creating. I can respond to a thought or an emotion in any way I see fit using my pens and paper. There is no direct outline or clear path I need to take, and I have the ability to set my own parameters and to challenge myself. I get to feel like the possibilities are endless, and I let myself be more

vulnerable in this creative process than in most activities. Drawing has become a part of my everyday existence, and it brings me comfort and allows me to be a better version of myself in other aspects of life. I am particularly interested in how making art can affect one's mood and allow for better processing, communication and self-expression. My approach to drawing has helped lead me to be interested in pursuing a career in art therapy, and I will continue to develop my practice as well as to learn from others' research about the benefits of using meditative art making in my future studies. Maybe my work can inspire others to find their own version of a mindful practice, but at the very least, they will have looked at a vibrant wall of patterns and will hopefully have been given a mental break from their own stressors. I identify with what Henri Matisse once wrote about his approach to art making, "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter; a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue" (5).

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