



CUBA

PAULINA M JOHNSON: 2015-16 FALL RESIDENCY // VERMONT COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

PACKET NO. 5

LOOKING IN & MOVING ON

This month has packed in a few lifetimes with an awesome blow. It's been so fun, and I'm very thankful, but a little tired. Thinking back, it's really amazing that it's only been one month, so let's start from where we left off. During our last check-in meeting I was on a five day trip to Denver. Our boys had a week off from school for what they call here in Steamboat "blues break". It's such a considerate town that just in case anyone was starting to get the winter blues, they give everybody a week off to go frolic elsewhere. Which we did. Right after our Skype conversation, we took a little family trip to *The Denver Art Museum* which was unbelievable. Alex and I got to paint. Austin and I built a fort with cushioned blocks, Burt was inspired to take more photographs and we all enjoyed walking around and looking at amazing art. It was an educational experience, and a true joy for me to be able to share art with my family. Denver was an easy place to get away to and enjoy the week off.

Back in Steamboat and a week later I turned 40. It wasn't monumental at all, which is probably a good thing. My parents came out to visit, we had a nice dinner and then we called it a day. As I concluded last month, time is so relative that a socially-imposed marker such as turning "40" shouldn't take precedence over all the other, way more important, things that we should work on and consider on a daily basis. But it does feel a bit weird to say. And yeah, I do feel a bit older. My birthday resolution is to not let my 40's slip through my fingers as my 30's did. In order to be able to do that, I need to be more in the present, more in the moment, and more in a place of content; something to work on.

A few days after turning 40 we embarked on a week-long trip to Cuba. I know, crazy. My husband's boss put together an amazing trip for us and three other work couples (including himself) and contracted a touring company to immerse us in that beautiful country. I will confess that I was resistant to (and in total denial of) the trip the entire time leading up to it.

Logistics about who to leave our boys with, in addition to the fact that I don't love hanging out with some of those who went on the trip, made it very unappealing. But everything got sorted out and it was a great trip. We spent five days waking up early in the morning, going from place to place to see, hear, and do many new things, and then going to bed way past my bed time. Our adventures included going to a tobacco farm and a cigar factory, listening to a Cuban diplomat, going to hear a sudo-Buena Vista Social Club band, visiting a community art center, supporting a grassroots dance studio and drinking entirely too many mojitos. I even smoked half of a cigar which I probably don't need to do again until I turn 80. I spent much of my time in Cuba taking pictures of beautiful architecture, typography, art, and of course, mid-century old-school cars. The ingenuity with which the people of that country have survived the embargo is an inspiration. The colors that abound, even if faded by the years, a joy to be around. But of most value, the resounding reminder that the world I live in, day to day, is very privileged, abundant and incredibly different. Why is the world so disparate when we are all so similar? I am thankful for the adult field-trip it turned out to be. I am however, ready for a vacation.

The day after we returned from Cuba we noticed a major leak down into the living room from the master bathroom above, in our new home. It's quite comical because we had three major leaks as such in our old home. I posted on Instagram that "We are so sunny, we make it rain indoors. Over and over again." May as well own the experience, instead of fighting it (familiar?) Oh, and did I mention my computer died the day before we left for Cuba? Two hundred and fifty dollars later, I have a new hard drive and a working laptop again. Life stressors, I will not let you get the best of me!

Yet, despite the madness that just won't subside in our lives, this month brought about some incredible internal realizations. It's amazing how one paragraph, one sentence, or even on word, at the right time, in the right context, can rewire the way we see things, even the way we see ourselves. I can honestly say I am proud to almost be an artist. Ah, almost, almost is good for me though. I am going through a major transition, which is gaining clarity every day. I am changing the way I see and the way I do, I am also changing what I do with what I know, and because I am not finished, or at least not close to a resting point, I love acknowledging that I understand my goal and that I can embrace, wholeheartedly, the process.



03
18
16

“Making art provides uncomfortably accurate feedback about the gap that inevitably exists between what you intended to **do**, and what you did.”

Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "Fears About Yourself." *Art @ Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

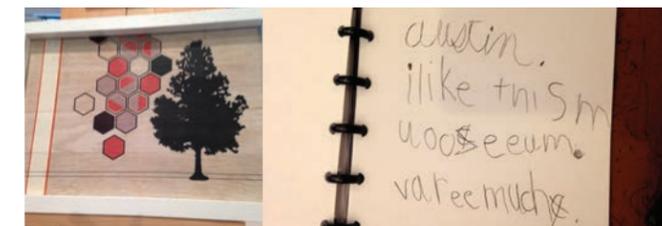
SURROUNDED BY ART

Denver Art Museum // February 16, 2016

A FAMILY TRIP TO DENVER & AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY ART TOGETHER



Our visit to the Denver Art Museum was a definite highlight of our week. We all enjoyed being surrounded by art. I tried to capture all of the pieces that moved me, in one way or another, but there were too many to count. I do feel, however, that my interests are consistent, leaning towards the abstract and symbolic, with a tone of simplicity and purpose. I noted I lean significantly towards 2-Dimensional work with a few exceptions including the incredible & immense totem pole shown below, and the intricate and endlessly beautiful Buddhist sand mandala above. When I was a kid, I used to color sugar and make landscapes in glass jars, a practice I should revisit.



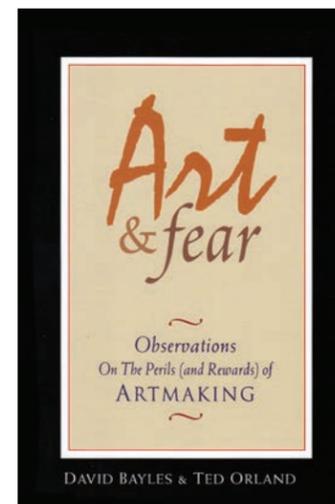
I did it! I finally caught up on my reading. It's been a long time since I was able to read a book cover to cover, in one sitting, let alone three books in one month. It feels really good, not only to have accomplished this, but to have done so with such important books. All three of these have been pivotal to my thinking and being, which for whatever reason feels really new. I'm relieved. I'm excited. And honestly, I'm really pissed.

BOOKS & PUBLICATIONS



Dear Natalia,
Your book has officially turned my world upside down. Thanks! How is it that I've been immersed (and I mean full-bodied, head first) in the world of Graphic Design for fifteen years and I never, once, questioned the origin of my practice? How is it that after many, many times of reading through my Megg's book, never did any of it come together in any form of true historical context? I know about the 'out of love and out of fear' thing, I learned it from my life coach five years ago. How is it, that after years of design school (eight to be exact) no one ever made that correlation to design clear? I am so angry. Seriously, I'm pissed. I'm angry at every single one of those design teachers who regurgitated 'best practice' design rules at me, again and again, without caring to explain that each one of those rules was created out of a reality built on fear. (Yoon Soo, you were so right about Betty Crocker) And I can't believe that every time I meticulously follow those rules, as I am on these very pages, I neglect not only my individuality, but conspire with those who created the rules in trying to hide from life and its imminent unpredictability. I don't want to swim in the fear bucket, trust me, but I do like abstract art. I also like straight lines, some times, and space that feels clean, clear and that allows room for reflection. What do I do with that now? What do I do with my tendencies toward perfection? Are you telling me I have to dig deep and scrape at the core of my being to find love for wiggly lines and in doing so come face to face with my demons? That sounds awful!!

So thank you. Thank you for painfully nudging me one step closer to becoming an artist and for putting everything into perspective. Truly, thank you!

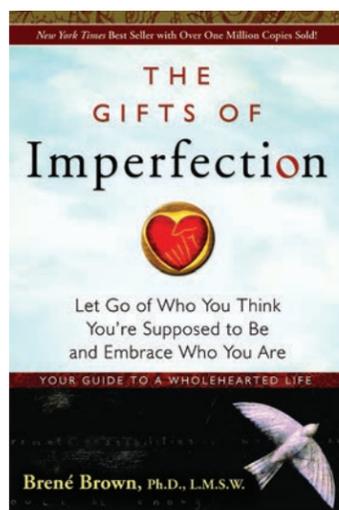


Somebody, I'm not sure who, gave me this book a really, really long time ago. At that time I read a page or two, considered it for about half a second, and then as I often do, lost interest. I was then, a designer. This month, after reading *Chasing the Perfect*, and in an effort to maximize the opportunity I had to read another book cover to cover, I decided to give it another try. I loved it!

“In large measure becoming an artist consists of learning to accept yourself, which makes your work personal, and in following your own voice, which makes your work distinctive.”

Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "The Nature of the Problem" *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

I wish I could go back to the time this book was given to me to understand my frame of mind. I'd love to know why this book didn't resonate with me then, and why it is so profound now. I don't think I had any true interest in art-making at the time. But I'm not entirely sure what my interests were. Today, this book is a guide post of reassurance and a collection of insights to turn to when the going gets tough. It's a reminder that making art can be really scary, but that it can also be incredibly rewarding. And most importantly, it is evidence that we're not alone in the fear inherent to showing the world & us, us.



During our last check-in meeting I was asked to watch Brené Brown's Ted Talk on vulnerability & trust. While I did do this, I also took the opportunity to listen to her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*. A recurring topic for me this semester and obviously something to contemplate and consider, 'perfection' sneaks itself

into so many facets of my life. But I don't really understand it. There are times I feel very confident, very worthy, very much satisfied with who I am, where I come from and what I've become. But there are also many other times when I experience shame and fear of being vulnerable, powerless and weak. How do these relate to my need for order, cleanliness and perfection? I own my story, I think. I mean, I don't like to talk about some of the most painful parts of my life, but I'm not ashamed of them either. When the time is right I'm Ok to tell those I trust that I have an older half brother and half sister who I have not seen or spoken to in years. I'm Ok to tell them that I'm pretty certain they hate me, and always have, for being born and for growing up with both a mom and a dad, in the same home. It's taken a lot of time and self-reflection to understand that non of it is, or ever was, my fault and that I'm a natural rule follower and peace-keeper because it was how I learned to navigate the often tense and painfully uncomfortable interactions of my youth. She used to call me ugly because I have brown hair and brown eyes, while giving me dirty looks and talking behind my back. He used to pretend to like playing with me while practicing his new Taekwondo moves on me with no remorse or pulling my pigtails pretending to be a motorcycle. But honestly, it wasn't their fault either. The circumstances sucked and we were all just kids. Growing up as both an only child and the youngest of three framed who I am, and I'm Ok with that. I no longer want their negativity in my life, and I'm Ok with that too. I don't know how perfection fits within all of this. Maybe I felt the need to be the one perfect kid since the other two were so far off the path. Maybe that's how I reached for acceptance. Maybe I felt it was my only option. I don't know.

I need to add here as a side note, one day later, that writing this was way more painful than I imagined. It caught me completely off guard. I do however, trust it was a healthy part of a necessary catharsis. It's never easy to acknowledge someone's utter hatred and disapproval towards us, especially from those we want to consider part of our being and our family. I also want to note that I place no blame or feel the need to point a finger. I understand circumstances were shitty for everyone involved and that life sometimes dishes out ruthlessly difficult and trying times. I am eternally thankful for both of my parents, who to this day remain some of my best friends. I am also very thankful for my husband who's support inspires courage and makes this self confrontation a little bit easier.

Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "Craft" *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

“one real difference between
art & *design* all of my career, blindly
craft: following someone else's rules,
 with craft, perfection is possible.”
 making things look pretty,
 refining the craft of choosing
 and arranging, perfecting,
 finalizing, hiding, numbing,
 and looking for acceptance.
No more.

DEFINITIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

selfish | selfISH|

ADJECTIVE

(of a person, action, or motive) lacking consideration for others; concerned chiefly with one's own personal profit or pleasure: *I joined them for selfish reasons.*

I love being a mom and completely adore my two boys, but it is exhausting and guilt-ridden, a lot of the time. Guilt comes when I know I'm not in the moment. When it's reading and snuggle time at night but my mind is somewhere else. When I'd rather be alone, doing my work. When I'd rather be harnessing my energy, rather than constantly giving it away. And this guilt feeds off a nagging chip on my shoulders that I'm so selfish for wanting to do for me, rather than for others. This month I've tried to keep a mental note of all the times I felt selfish. An overwhelming amount had something to do with my role as a mom. Not doing enough. Not doing it right. Not being able to give it all of my effort, attention and being, all of the time. And I wouldn't really want to. That's the kicker. I realize it would be utterly unhealthy all around. Regardless, the nagging 'you're being selfish' voice echoes constantly.

self-involved |self in vālvdin vōlvd|

ADJECTIVE

wrapped up in oneself or one's own thoughts.

Throughout the past six months many people have asked me about school. In trying to explain what I'm doing, how it's different and why I love it so much, I find myself talking a lot about myself, which at times ends up feeling horribly self-involved. I generally don't like talking about myself that much, I'd rather listen. There are only a few people that I can enjoy talking about my experiences with, without this feeling resurfacing. I believe those are the people that ask genuinely and also have context through time; the people that really care. At that point the feeling of being self-involved is replaced by a really cool feeling of connection and reciprocity.

self-centered | self sen(t) rd|

ADJECTIVE

preoccupied with oneself and one's affairs: *he's far too self-centered to care what you do.*

I don't see much of a difference between being self-involved and being self-centered. To me, both speak to an inability to see past oneself and do for others first. After writing about *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and about my relationship with my half brother, but more specifically with my half-sister, I see how being selfish, self-centered or self-involved could have such negative connotations for me. I don't know anyone as selfish as her. Perhaps the avoidance of selfishness is closely tied to survival skills I developed in my youth and my deep rooted desire to have zero to do with her way of life.

self-reflection

NOUN

meditation or serious thought about one's character, actions, and motives.

This week I'm in an interesting situation regarding the making of this packet. Up to this point I have designed every packet the way I have many pieces in the past. I created a grid and set up a type system. I imported the content and fussed with it until it felt and looked good. For years, designing has very much been a process I do sitting at my computer for hours on end, and then come out, hopefully unscathed, just in time for the deadline. But this time I'm really annoyed to be sitting here, again, at this computer. I don't want to do the same thing anymore. I'm tired of doing production. And what's more, nothing looks as good as it did six months ago. With the making of every packet has come an incredible opportunity for self-reflection. This is because we are asked to describe our month in compartmentalized 'do', 'make' and 'think' sections. So, while this is still a great vehicle for self-reflection, I'm ready to do it differently. Self-reflection has always been important to me. I look forward to seeing what will happen when faced with the packet challenge next time.

Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "Craft" *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

“At any point along that path, your job as an artist is to push craft to its limits—without being trapped by it. The trap is perfection...”

SKILLSHARE COURSES

Recently, I discovered something called paper quilling. I had never heard of it before. I love it. I think it's so beautiful and full of possibilities. That's what I focused my courses on this month.

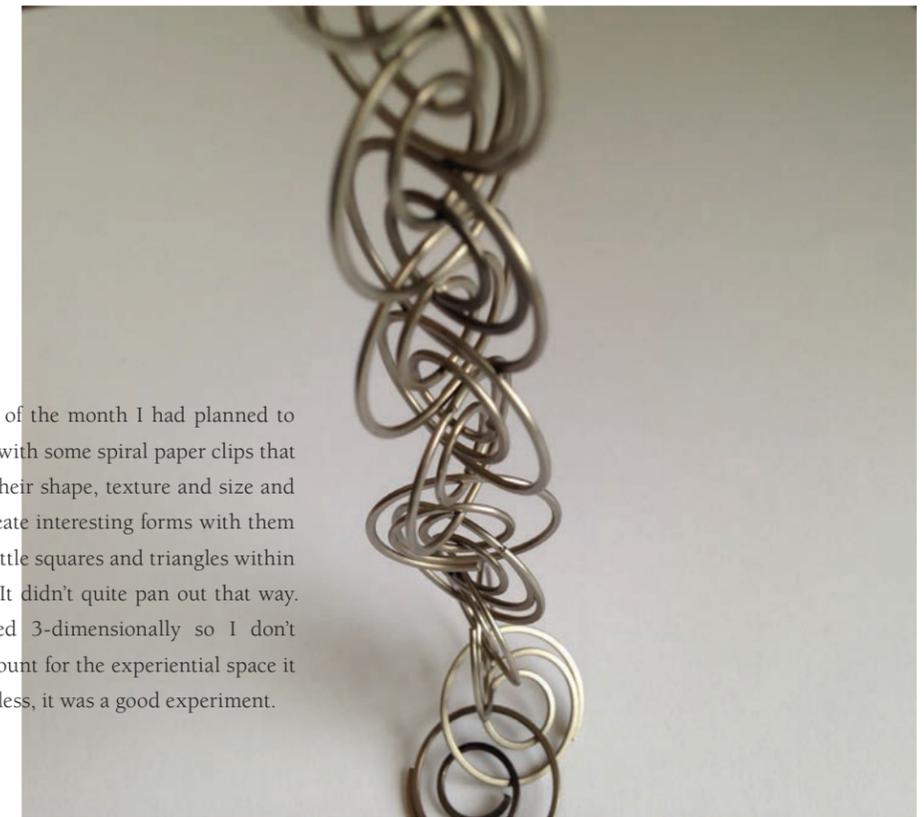
DATE COMPLETED	COURSE NAME / DESCRIPTION
02/22/16	Christmas Card: Surprise Everybody with a Hand Made Quilling Card <i>by Colo Alonso</i>
	I am not a big fan of scrapbooking or artsy, craftsy stuff like this. I don't think I would have taken an interest in this course at any other point in my life. But I'm learning I really enjoy working with paper. This specific course, although focused on making a slightly cheesy but quite beautiful Christmas card, showed some basic shapes, techniques and tools for rolling up and shaping strands of paper.
02/23/16	Introduction to Quilling: Quill Your Name from Beginning to End <i>by Colo Alonso</i>
	After learning how to make the Christmas card, I wanted to watch one more paper quilling course to gain greater understanding of her techniques. Although I resisted at first, after trying a few shapes myself with some rigged up tools, I did finally end up buying a paper shredder and a proper needle and slotted tool. I have not had time to fully immerse myself in this, but look forward to doing it these next few weeks before residency.



Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "Fears About Yourself." *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

“Fears about artmaking fall into two families; fears about yourself, & fears about your reception by others. In general ways, fears about yourself prevent you from doing your best work, while fears about your reception by others prevent you from doing (or **making**) your own work.”

“Art that falls short often does so not because the artist failed to meet the challenge, but because there was never a challenge there in the first place.”



At the beginning of the month I had planned to make something with some spiral paper clips that I found. I loved their shape, texture and size and hoped I could create interesting forms with them as I do with the little squares and triangles within my ink doodles. It didn't quite pan out that way. I've never worked 3-dimensionally so I don't know how to account for the experiential space it demands. Regardless, it was a good experiment.



After the paper clips, I moved on to my 'obstructions' challenge in which I was asked to make something out of junk mail, with my hands and sell it on Etsy. I started collecting junk mail on day one and by day three I had way more than I could handle. I decided to make origami flowers with catalog and brochure pages which soon started to look like a little paper garden.

Bayles, David, & Ted Orland. "New Work" *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

“Old work tells you what you were paying attention to then; new work comments on the old by pointing out what you were not previously paying attention to.”



I also started using those spiral paper clips as the base for the flowers which I've come to find out are magnetic. Cool!



I continued working on *Collaboration Nation* and the projects sent my way. I worked on two this month. The first, with the theme of way-finding, contains topographical representations and maps in a small bound book. I decided to contribute with some pages of my journal. The only way-finding I've done this month is within and writing has been my most powerful means to reaching important realizations. I added five pages, each corresponding to my five core personal values.



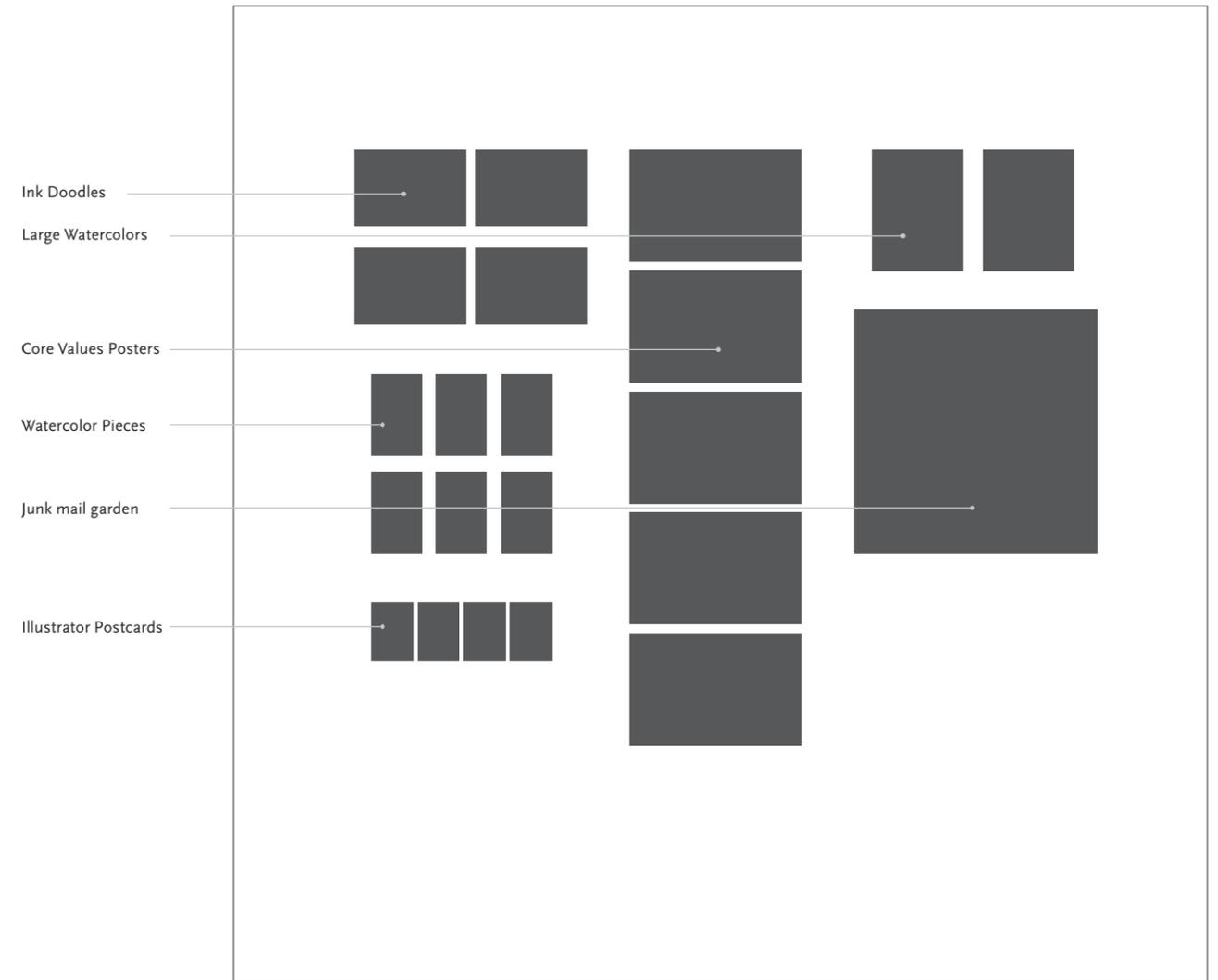
The second project was divided into simple but beautiful outlined compositions originally created as collages. I decided to add in that spirit with ink textures and pieces of watercolor paintings I'd done throughout last month.

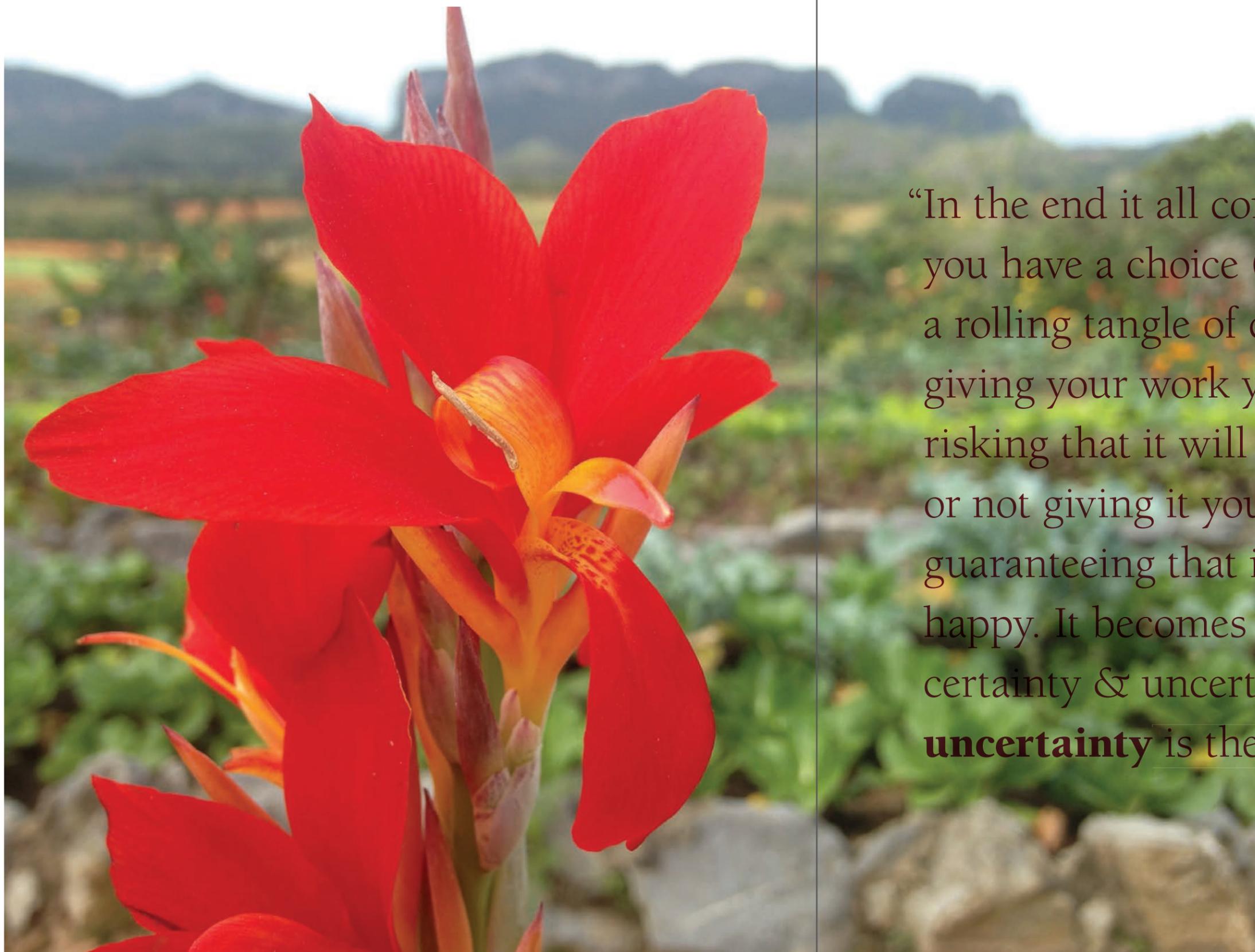


I got my first 2 packets printed through blurb.com in hopes of being able to bring them to residency next month. The quality of the pieces was horrible though. I have contacted them and will get them reprinted. I plan on including all five packets in my pin up presentation.

PIN UP LAYOUT

We were asked to submit an exhibition form last week, including a tentative pin up layout. To do this, I pulled out everything I've tinkered with this semester and decided to include a lot of the work I've done. I think this will showcase my trials and tribulations and paint a clearer picture of my journey. I have also requested a pedestal on which I will display all of my packets.





“In the end it all comes down to this: you have a choice (or more accurately a rolling tangle of choices) between giving your work your best shot and risking that it will not make you happy, or not giving it your best shot—thereby guaranteeing that it will not make you happy. It becomes a choice between certainty & uncertainty. And curiously, **uncertainty** is the comforting choice.”

In every other packet this is where I compile all the little insights that came about through my writing that month. But here, it seems a moot point. I have more questions than answers and a resounding sense of utter confusion.

But if I had to sum things up, I'd say it's a relief to understand where the rigid rules of design that I've been diligently following for years came from. It is also great to feel I no longer have to follow them. I don't know what to do instead though. I don't know how to proceed without.

As painful as it was, it was also good to revisit my childhood roles and dissect them in search of the why's that make me who I am today. This is especially the case when it comes to my search for perfection and subsequent need for acceptance, by others and myself.

Both rule-making & -following, and the search for perfection & acceptance are apparently directly correlated to fear. So I guess I've been living in fear. A much deeper and more powerful type of fear than I ever imagined or cared to admit. An inherited fear. A subconscious fear. A constraining fear. An elusive fear. But again, I don't know what to do with that now. While changed, I'm not a fundamentally different person today than I was a month ago. I still want my kitchen to be clean and my desk to be in order. I've messed with the H&J's on this page and cleaned up the rags. I almost can't help it. But I guess what's important at this point in time is that I remain committed and trust both the journey and the process. Yoon Soo, thank you so much for your insight and guidance. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor this, my first semester.



