



Akron Art Mail Vol. 1

Akron Art Museum and Akron-Summit County Public Library

AKRON ART MUSEUM, AKRON, OHIO

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Introduction from Akron Art Museum

The word museum brings to mind quiet galleries and esoteric artworks. While galleries are important, the Akron Art Museum understands that museums are also about our patrons.

In 2020, when the Museum closed to the public, our team stepped back to consider how the galleries meet the needs of our community. COVID-19 challenged many aspects of everyday life, making uncertainty the only constant. The need to limit in-person interactions impacted the Museum's main ways of sharing art with our community. Works from the Akron Art Library could not be checked out. Visits to the Museum's galleries could not happen.

The gift of art seemed the ideal antidote to the challenges facing our community. The team commissioned dozens of local artists and writers to produce small, postcard-sized artworks. These works added thought-provoking beauty to people's lives. They could be mailed, so patrons could pass these gifts on to others. Community members were encouraged to create their own mail art to share with our on-site visitors once the Museum reopened.

Akron Art Mail exemplified the role of museums in our society. Museums are organizations that foster creativity, thought, beauty, and innovation. They are places that continue to engage, even when society transforms completely. Because, in the end, museums are about the people we serve.

Seema Rao

Deputy Director & Chief Experience Officer
Akron Art Museum

Introduction from Akron-Summit County Public Library

Knowledge sets us free, art sets us free.

—Ursula K. Le Guin—

It was a time of both isolation and exposure. It was a time of restrained freedom—freedom of movement, of connection. And it is likely that only from such a time could the Akron Art Mail project, providing a key to shared reflection and expression, have taken its unique shape.

Harnessing the energy and passion of two organizations that take their missions and values from the communities they serve, Akron Art Mail touched the lives of participants with the vision and words of artists considering this particular time and, in response, became an opportunity for all community members to share their own, very individual truths. Words and images bring with them a certain freedom, a certain release, even when created in the most difficult of circumstances.

The Akron-Summit County Public Library and the Akron Art Museum celebrate this daily inside our buildings and beyond our walls. Our collaborative relationship, so powerfully expressed through the Akron Art Mail project, continues to grow as art is made, ideas are celebrated, and knowledge is gathered, and all are shared as far as we can reach, with as many as we can reach—together.

Barb White

Deputy Director

Akron-Summit County Public Library

Mailing the Moment

When digital means of personal communication became standard in 2020, the world lost its sense of touch. Virtual happy hours replaced the familiar clink of celebratory pints. Kisses blown into a camera occupied the space that could no longer be filled with embraces. But one daily, tactile act remained: receiving mail. And thus, Akron Art Mail was born and the challenge to artists and authors was set: capture your experience of 2020 and condense it into a 4 x 6 postcard. The responses display a breadth of experiences as complex as the epoch that birthed them.

Hope is an overriding theme in this collection. Author Hanif Abdurraqib spoke about his faith in a brighter future and a hope that the reader can join him there. A similar sentiment runs through Philip Metres's poem, which describes a perilous escape to freedom where the narrators "can rise / meet the shore." Likewise, artist Justin Michael Will printed the phrase "Today is going to be" on his postcards, followed by handwritten words like "tomorrow" and "great," embodying the hopeful potential contained in a single day.

Many of these works celebrate the slower pace and solitude this era allowed them. In her work, Maria Alejandra Zanetta depicted a table set for one, complete with a lone croissant. Author Brad Warner wrote of the strange quietude of the COVID-19 era, "a wonderful time to settle into silence." A celebration of silence also ripples through Sequoia Bostick's set of postcards. A solitary figure peeks inquisitively through sunflowers in one image; in another, a woman stretches tall, enjoying the cool embrace of moonlight while she tends to her plants.

This connection to the natural world is another common thread, with author Joanna Wilson rejoicing in the respite of hiking mask-less on a trail, breathing "as freely and as deeply as we

want without fear of contagion from others.” Several works spotlight more whimsical images of nature, like Dinara Mirtalipova’s dancing goats, Dave Szalay’s stag with curling horns, and Joan Colbert’s kingly crow.

Though 2020 offered several of these silver linings, this collection would not be a true encapsulation of the year without acknowledgment of its difficulties. In her poem, Mary E. Weems described the terror felt when the narrator interacts with the police: “I freeze when I see them on the streets, / I say silent prayers / I try not to stare / or be seen.” Similarly, David Hassler wrote of the need to “honor the breath of George Floyd,” while Thrity Umrigar issued a call to break out of our boxes and “take the first, tentative steps toward a freshly imagined world.”

Now, over a year later, we are beginning to take those tentative steps, with these postcards standing as a record of our transition into this era. With this shift in mind, the question posed by April Bleakney in her postcard feels like a guidepost for our moves in this new world:

“How to grow from this moment?”

Reggie Lynch

Curator of Community Engagement
Akron Art Museum

Commissioned Postcards

Fourteen artists and authors from the region created postcard-sized visual art and writing to inspire and foster togetherness amid isolation. These cards featured thoughtful language and imagery that made a lasting impact and provided meaningful connections to art and writing when the community needed it most. While physically distant from the Museum and Library, the commissioned postcards brought art and writing close to home, making it accessible to a larger audience. The postcards were distributed through local businesses and organizations and put into the hands of schoolchildren, community groups, and individuals throughout Akron and beyond.

April Bleakney




Sequoia Bostick



Claire Bowman



clairebowmanstudio.com

 [@clairebowmanstudio](https://www.instagram.com/clairebowmanstudio)

Joan Colbert



Joan Colbert

April Couch



Gary and Laura Dumm



Erin Guido

I LOVE YOU I LOVE
YOU I LOVE YOU
AHHH I JUST LOVE
YOU SO SO VERY
VERY MUCH !!!!!

Horrible Adorables



Dinara Mirtalipova



Arabella Proffer



Nicole Schneider



David Szalay



Dave Szalay
daveszalay.com

PUSH

Justin Michael Will



Maria Alejandra Zanetta



Hanif Abdurraqib

I hope that, wherever you
are, you can join me.

My mother would tell me that even the worst loneliness still felt like good luck. A chance for the self to determine its own destiny. Even though that feels like a myth now, with the wind and rain beating against the humidity beating against the doorstep for what feels

like the hundredth Ohio day in a row. Still, I convince myself that I am happy to be here, crawling towards a future that I cannot see but feel certain is better than the present that I am immersed in now. I hope that, wherever you are, you can join me.

Mary Biddinger

Every reed aspires to
harden like a fence.



We're not sure what it's asking, but
electricity travels every plane connected
to another plane. Trees are just math
until we need them as cover. Sky a cone
tinted gold then spun. The landscape drops
like a carnival ride, rain in our mouths
something taught then forgotten. These

daffodils beg as shorebirds seeking bread.
Every reed aspires to harden like a fence.
Air so angry it sings itself into shut rooms.
Can we trust the pond that displays us
in haunted reverse? We were built as trees
then settled under eaves, hands over ears.

Theron Brown



You're either an
entertainer, or a
consumer of
entertainment,
yet we all need an
entertainment
district.

You don't know how much you miss it until it's gone. This is a place where you spend time with family and friends, take your emotions and imagination on a roller coaster ride, and also how some make a LIVING. You don't know how much you miss it until it's gone. We

all yearn for "normality". When we are blessed to have a glimpse of "normality", one should promise to properly embrace every part of it. You're either an entertainer, or a consumer of entertainment, yet we all need an entertainment district.

Holly Christensen

DEAR ONES-

WE ONCE WORE BUSY LIKE A BADGE
CLAIMING WE WANTED QUIETER TIMES

A FALSE REQUEST GRANTED
IN A MOMENT

THE OLD WAYS BECAME

UNTENABLE

THE FUTURE

UNCERTAIN

GARDENS CULTIVATED WITH CARE

IGNORE OUR CRISES

WILD FLOWERS RIOTOUS WITH COLOR AND ODOR

IGNORE OUR CRISES

IT IS NOT LIKE THEM TO BORROW TROUBLE

SEE OUR BEAUTY SEE

YOUR BEAUTY WE ARE

ALIVE WE ARE

ALIVE YOU ARE

ALIVE

dear ones-

we once wore busy like a badge
claiming we wanted quieter times
a false request granted
in a moment
the old ways became
untenable
the future
uncertain

gardens cultivated with care

ignore our crises

wild flowers riotous with color and odor
ignore our crises

it is not like them to borrow trouble

see our beauty see
your beauty we are
alive we are
alive you are
alive

David Hassler

The earth is
a vast lung
of which we
are a part.

Beneath a thin layer of soil, along vast fungal networks, trees talk to one another, warning of insect attacks. They have evolved as allies. We, too, are relational beings, what trees breathe out, we breathe in. The earth is a vast lung of which we are a part.

When George Floyd gasped, "I can't breathe," his dying words became a rallying cry, another distress signal to wake up and activate a seedbed in our bodies to dismantle systemic racism and white supremacy. Can white America learn from the trees to work as allies and honor the breath of George Floyd?

Philip Metres

**so we can rise,
reach the shore,**

night, come tenderly.

Night, Come Tenderly, Hold Us

soft in your jaws, across
your bed of wide molars.

keep your canines
at bay. night, come

tenderly, as we prepare
in pale evening, unable

to stay. restive fugitives
of day, we shelter

in swelter, in shade. trees
don't lie. inked in, we—

lashed by sudden
branches scribbling blank

on our cheeks—cross creeks
under the cold cover

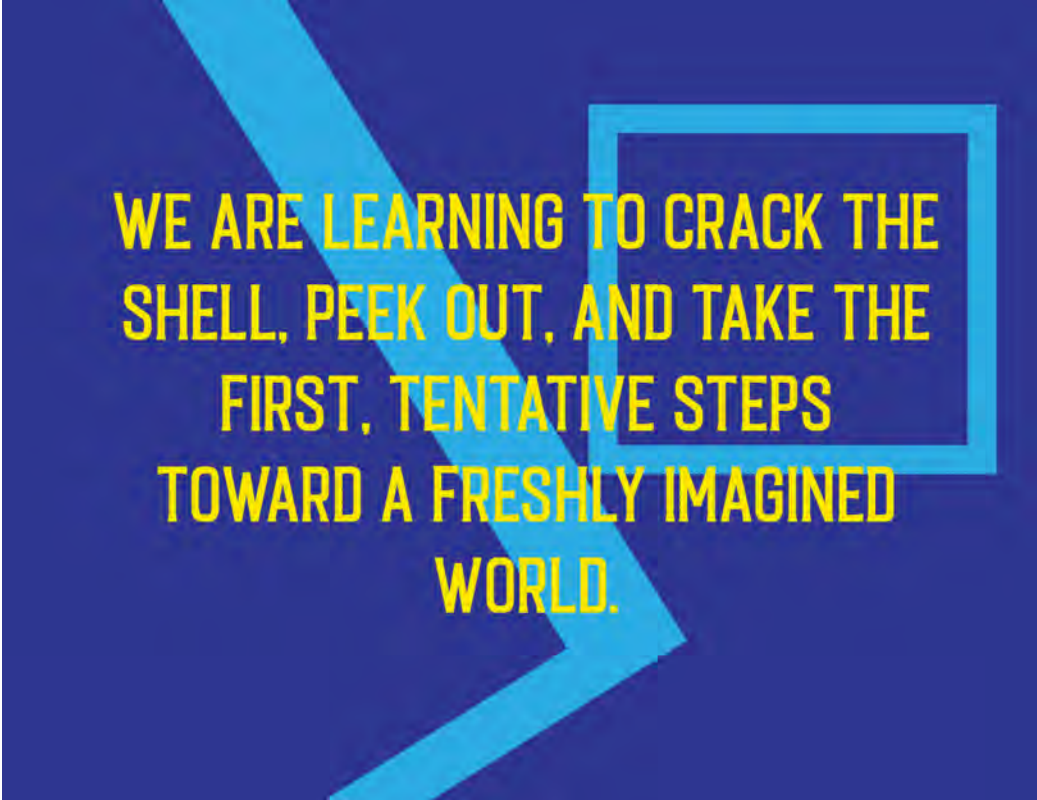
toward our arcing star north.
night, we're nowhere

close and almost there.
nearing & centuries.

so we can rise,
reach the shore,

night, come tenderly.

Thrity Umrigar



**WE ARE LEARNING TO CRACK THE
SHELL, PEEK OUT, AND TAKE THE
FIRST, TENTATIVE STEPS
TOWARD A FRESHLY IMAGINED
WORLD.**

Boxes.

That's the theme of 2020.

We are boxed in by a virus—countries locked inside borders; old people trapped in nursing homes; the rest of us isolated in the boxes of our homes. We live behind masks, without touch, without embrace, all the things that make us human.

But with the multiracial Black Lives Matter protests, we are also stepping out of the boxes that have long imprisoned us—boxes of racism and fear and prejudice. We are learning to crack the shell, peek out, and take the first, tentative steps toward a freshly imagined world. Toward the sky.

Brad Warner

YET IT'S ALSO
BEEN A WONDERFUL
TIME TO
SETTLE
INTO SILENCE

Zen values silence. Silent spaces. Silent meditation. A silent mind. But perfect silence is nowhere to be found. There's the sound of the wind, of insects buzzing and chirping, distant sounds of human activity. Still, beneath even the loudest sounds, silence is always there. It's the bedrock of every sound. When

the noise of traffic, or people, or the chattering of my own mind become too much, I remember that silence is always there. These days even brief human contact is precious and I sometimes long to hear voices. Yet it's also been a wonderful time to settle into silence.

Mary E. Weems, Ph.D.

I say silent prayers,
I try not to stare
or be seen.

Help! I'm afraid of po-lice.
I freeze when I see them on streets,
I say silent prayers,
I try not to stare
or be seen.
Last week my friend Jay
got stopped with her mama and sister,
cops walked up with guns
said car was not hers
then made them face down

in the dirt.
Her auntie said "Check my ID,"
but cops still handcuffed her and Jay,
while his little sister cried,
she thought they might die.
They never asked for car's registration.
They never said "Sorry, mistake,"
now when Jay sees police,
her body right away
starts to quake.

Joanna Wilson

**We can
breathe as
freely as
deeply as we
want without
fear of
contagion
from others.**

Each morning I get up just before dawn. At the trailhead, the beams of the summer sun reveal a morning mist that hangs in the cool air just above the adjacent ball fields. We like to be alone on the hiking trail in the morning; it means we won't have to wear the masks we

carry with us. We can breathe as freely and deeply as we want without fear of contagion from others. The footprints in the clay reveal crowds have passed in the time between our daily hikes. My acts of rebellion used to look much different.

A Network of Connections

Mail is a potent source of potential. A single stamp can take a letter to any one of an uncountable number of destinations, at fantastic speed, for just a tiny price. A postal worker's bag might contain almost anything, from anywhere. The very concept of mail suggests a worldwide network of connections, invisible paths just waiting to guide parcels and messages.

But let's not be swept away by the grandeur of it all—mail is also grounded in everyday life and all of the messy unpredictability that comes with it. Mail gets lost, delayed, creased, crumpled, jostled, smudged, and rained on. A misspelling or a bit of sloppy handwriting can lead an envelope far from its intended destination. Thanks to marketers and billing departments, one of the words most frequently associated with mail is “junk.”

This contradictory combination of smooth and dreamy possibilities with irregular and haphazard realities has long animated an area of creativity called “mail art.” Its early roots extend back into the European modern art movements of Surrealism and Dada in the 1920s, but its full blossoming is usually traced to the 1960s with Ray Johnson and his New York Correspondence School. From Johnson's example, mail art became adventurously inventive, openly shared, and international in scope. The objects involved are often humorous and humble, and a commonly observed rule declares that they are works of art only after they have actually been sent through the mail.

I was aware of this history before the Akron Art Museum started its own mail art project, but I suppose the knowledge hadn't really taken hold. Somehow I failed to anticipate just how much variety there would be in the submissions that we received from our community—drawings and written messages, of course, but also collages, photographs, pastels, stickers, inky prints, and

tiny paintings, each bearing scuffs and scratches as evidence of its particular journey. These marks made the potential and the liveliness of mail art unmistakably apparent.

The collages that arrived clarify this approach, with their exuberant energy and wide range of source material. Norman Mallard’s repurposing of a vintage photograph playfully turns its portrait subject into a photographer, while in Beth Prindle’s 1950s-inspired image the last collage layer is actually the unexpected postal barcode, which creates an amusingly ambiguous phrase: “I Wish I Led A... Life!” Other submissions are meticulously composed, showing that postcards need not always be casual. Maria Uhase’s chipmunk bristles with fine detail, and an abstraction by Robert and Marilyn Merchant features delicately balanced shapes, edges, and textures. We even received cards from an artist represented in the Museum’s collection, photographer Daniel Mainzer. Eager young artists also sent many pictures—one named Finn was especially prolific and enthusiastic.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was that, amid all of 2020’s bad news and heated debates, the mood of the submitted postcards was almost entirely upbeat. Politics were represented only in subtle ways, like one photo’s tiny marquee spelling out “Defund the Police.” Evidence of COVID cropped up here and there, but mostly in positive messages regarding masks, social distancing, and mutual respect. If this is any indication, I hope that Akron Art Mail provided a happy opportunity to be connected and creative during an undeniably difficult time.

Jeff Katzin

Assistant Curator
Akron Art Museum

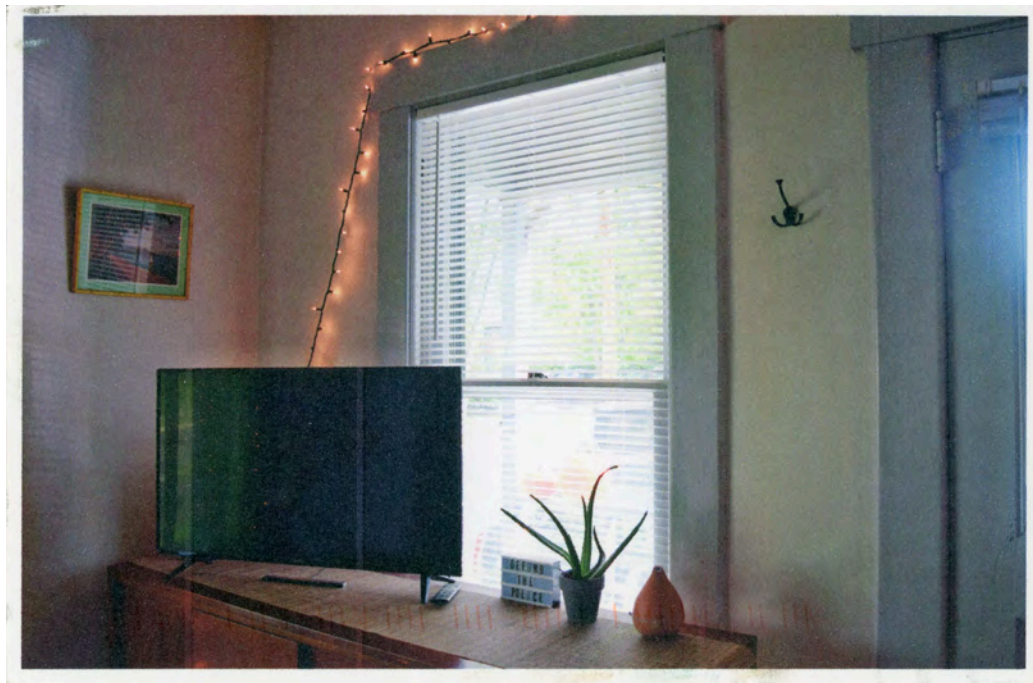
Community Submitted Postcards

With hopes to spark imagination and creativity within the heart of our community, the postcards created by local individuals prove that this project accomplished that goal and more. The community-submitted postcards are the embodiment of the present, full of life's disruptions, frustrations, possibilities, and promise, containing an array of ideas and images. All of them, both the simple and the complex, tell a unique story of personal perseverance and are united by the common theme of joy even in the midst of uncertainty.



Maria Uhase







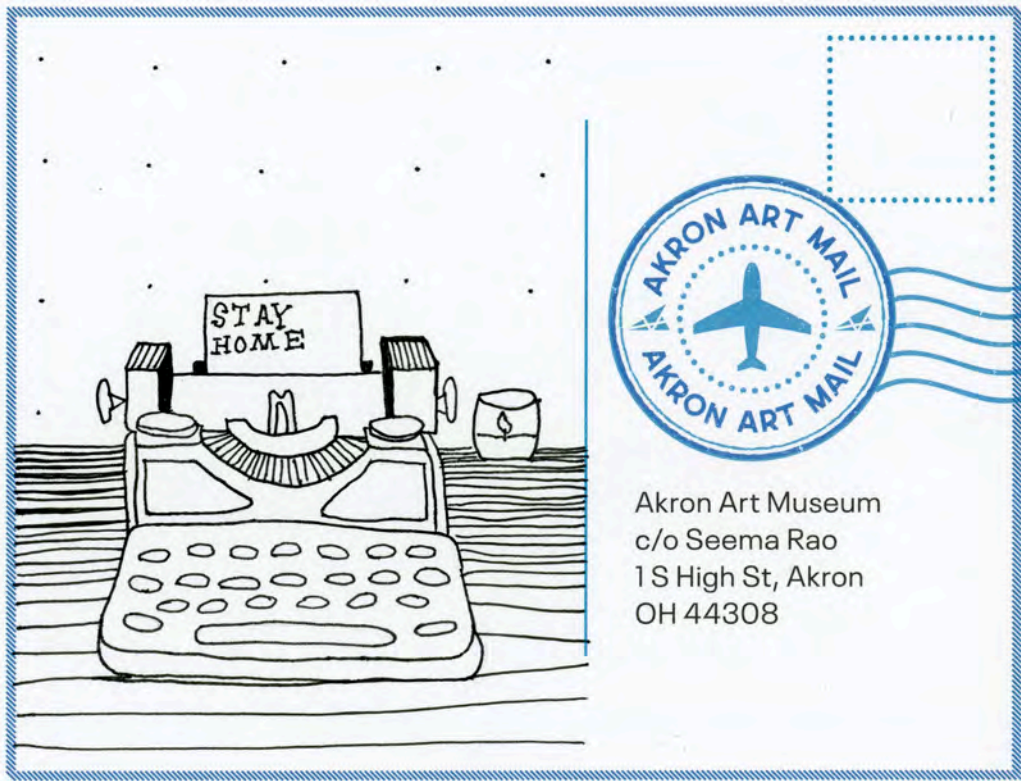
of each other



CARE



Let's TAKE GOO







RESPECT.

PEACE.

RESPECT EVERYONE.

PEACE BE WITH YOU.

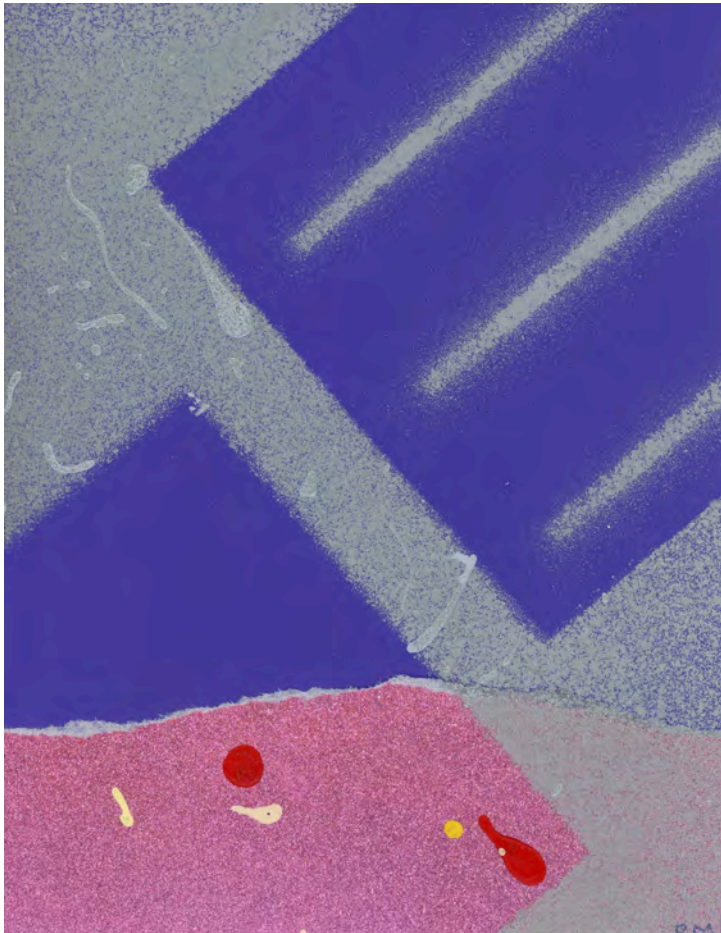
THINK.

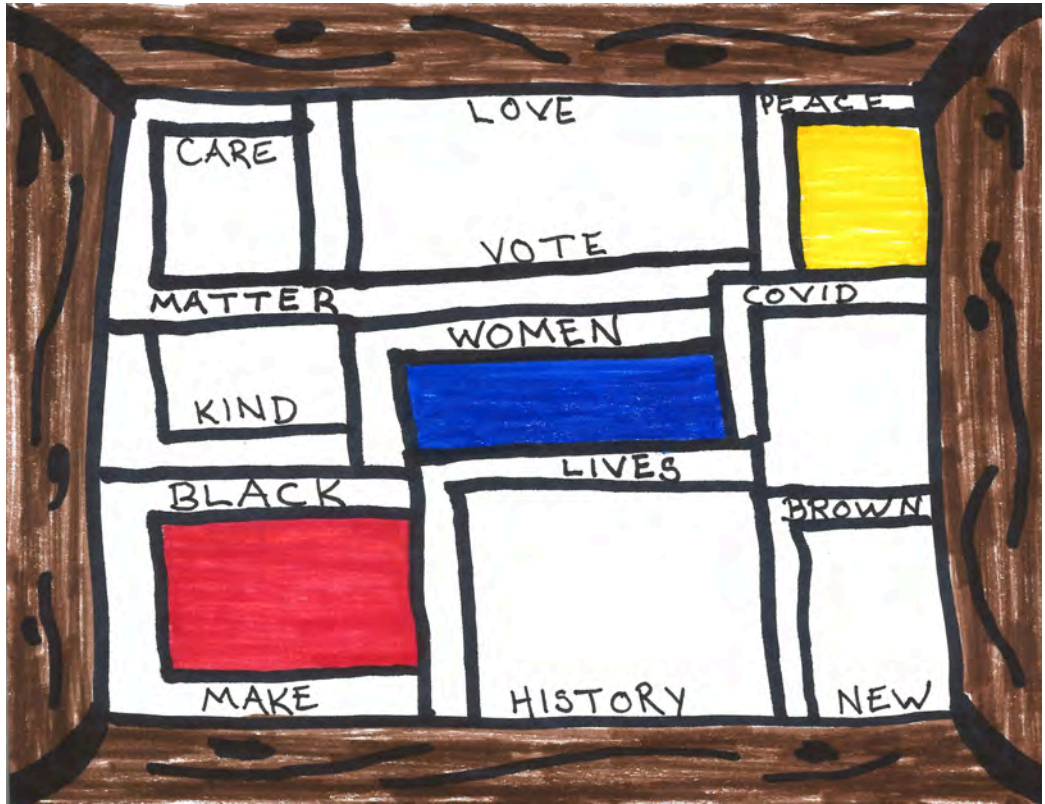
THINK AGAIN.

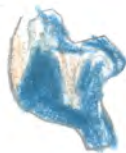
ACTION BEFORE THE WORD.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.

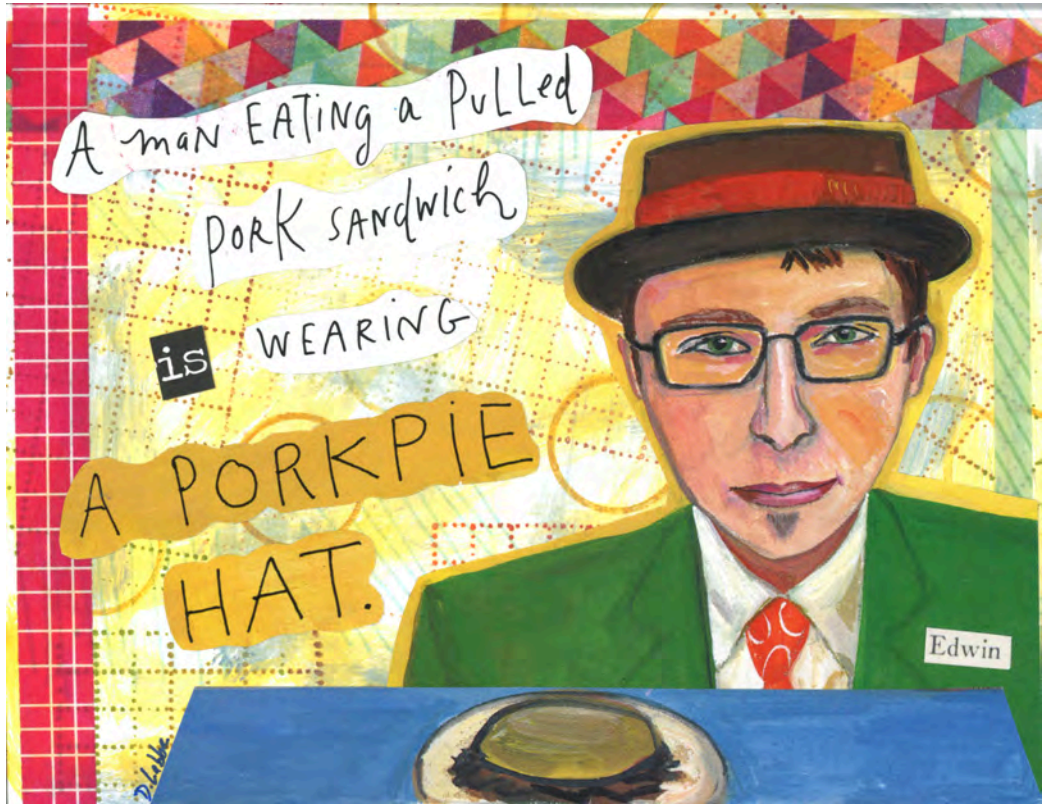
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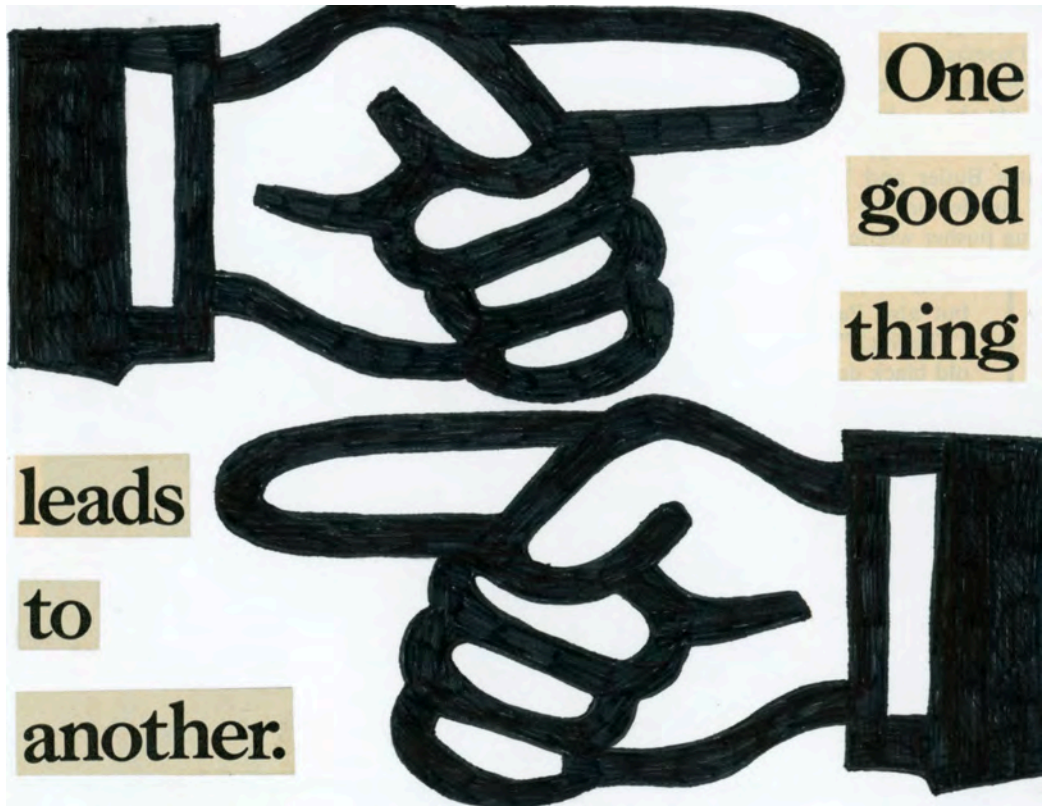


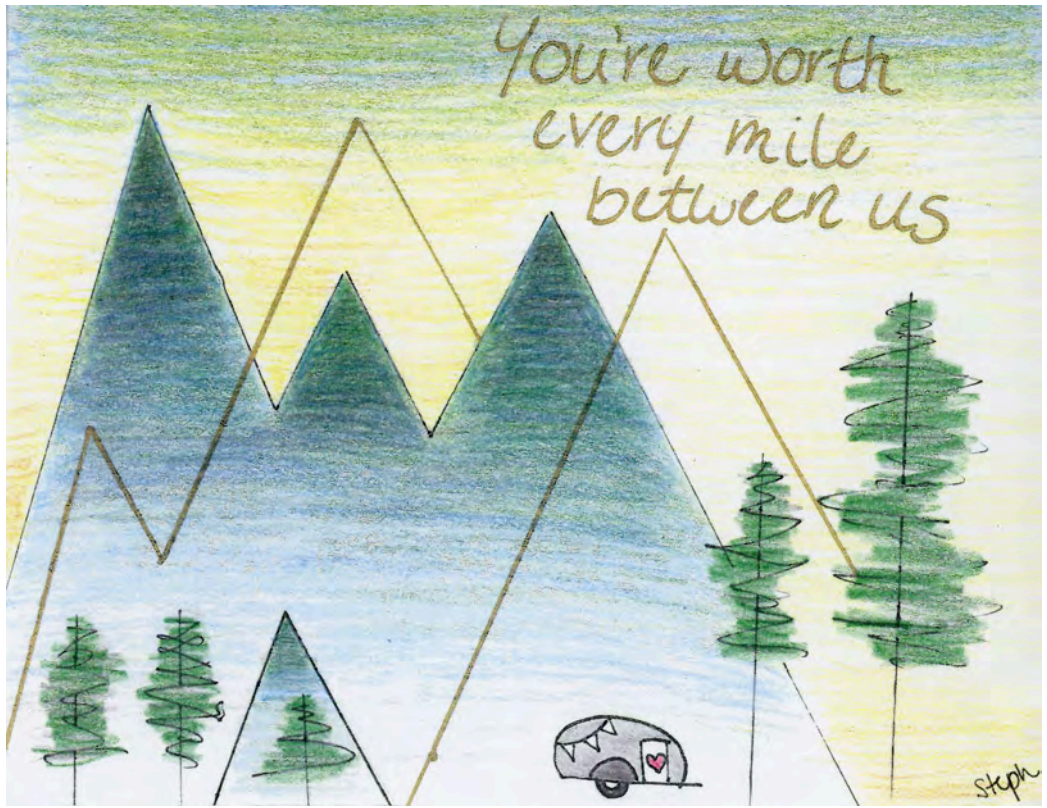
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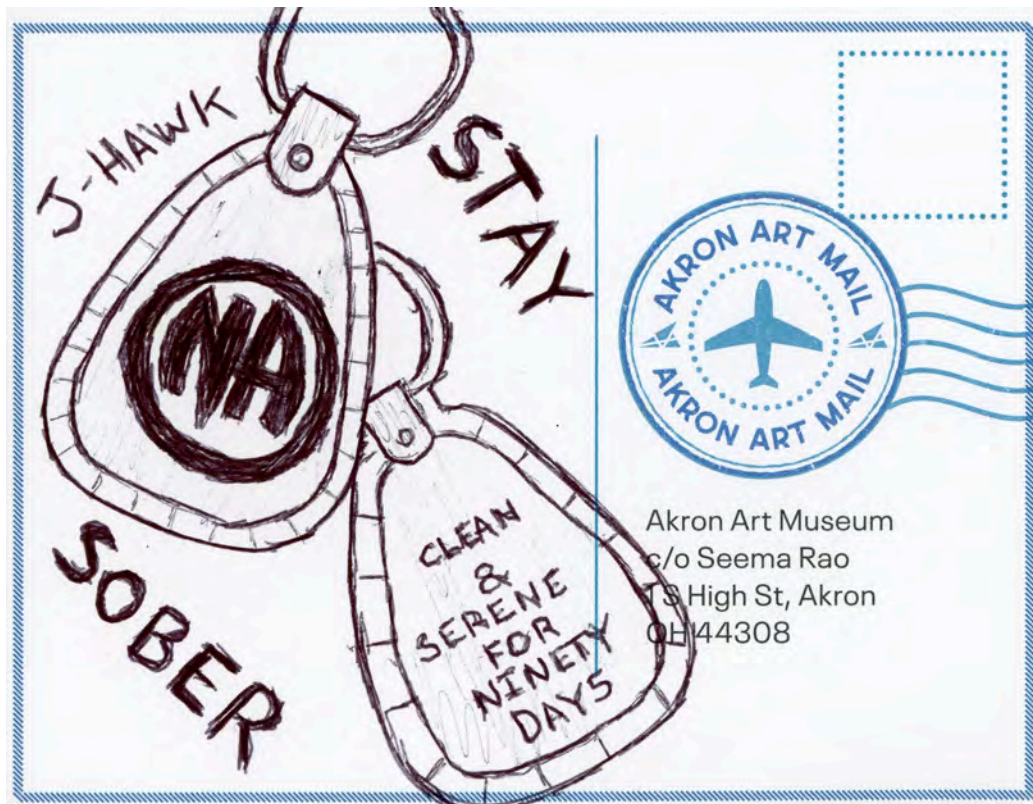
















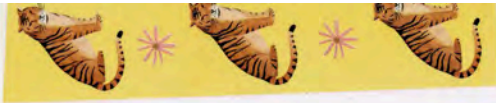


Akron Art Museum
c/o Seema Rao
1 S High St, Akron
OH 44308



*Passing Phases,
Life's Quest...*





Diane Fencil



Last Words



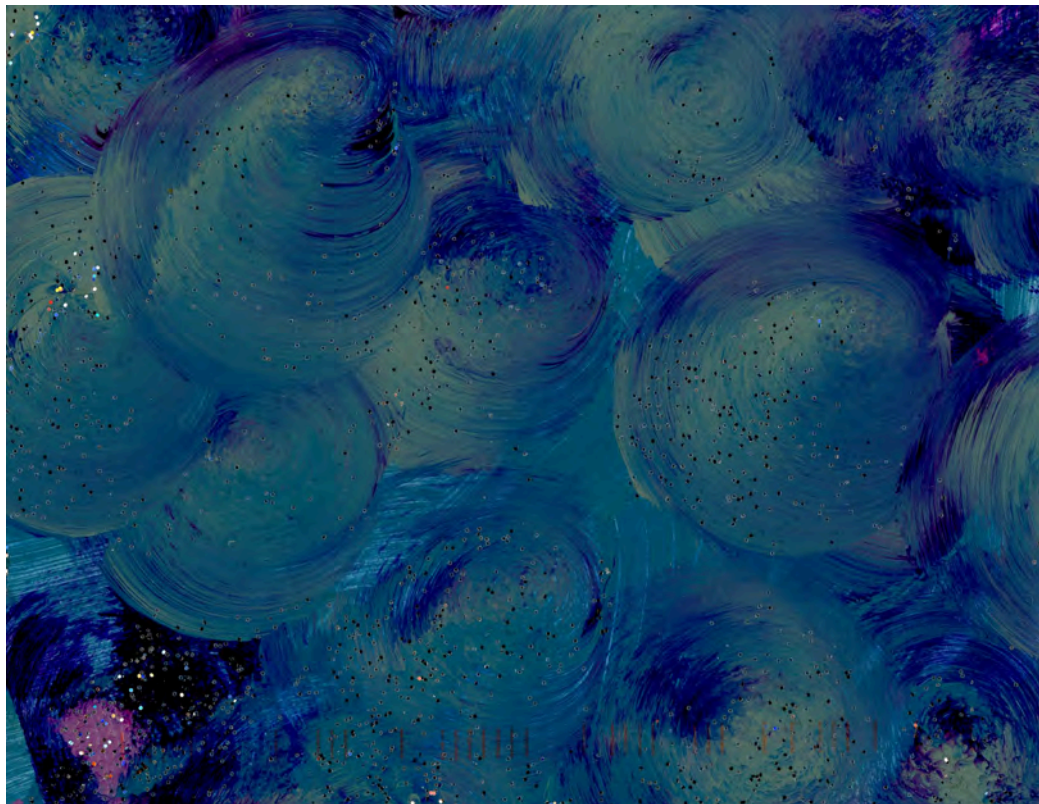
Just as the Unfinished Symphony is performed with a wish for resolution, so your last words haunt me. The breeze is your whisper, but I cannot interpret the message. Practice every day, play the scales and understand them. With no theory, your audience grieves. What happened to technique? All the sharps and flats and you give up: your fingers bungle. Just a half step and you are nimble for a run. The conductor leaves the wand to you. Play with the notes in your head. Yes, believe the symphony is finished! Shut the piano lid with a bang. These are your last words.



Inspired by: Through the Vines by Frederick Frieseke



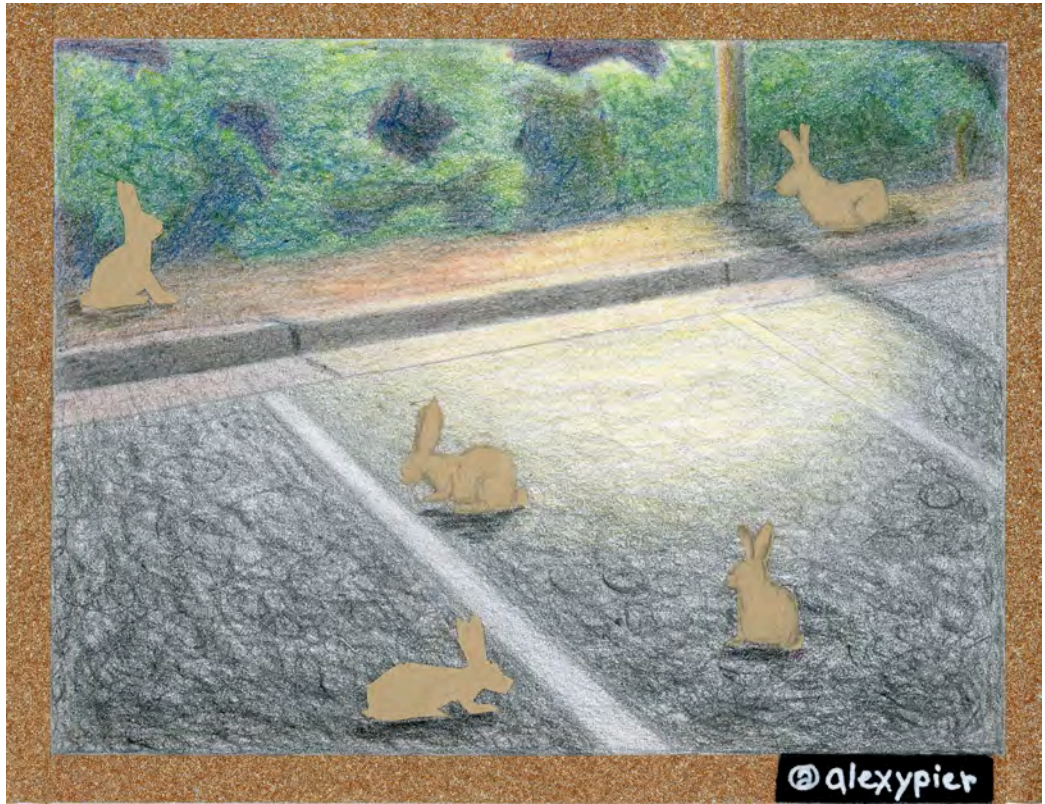


















MALPINA CHAN

平兵與族賴政等俱衛
 辭口
 矢
 得
 不
 四
 子
 小戰百以
 國
 曾
 上
 心
 君
 昔
 入

AKRON ART MUSEUM

ATTN: SEEMA RAO

1 SOUTH HIGH STREET

AKRON, OH 44308

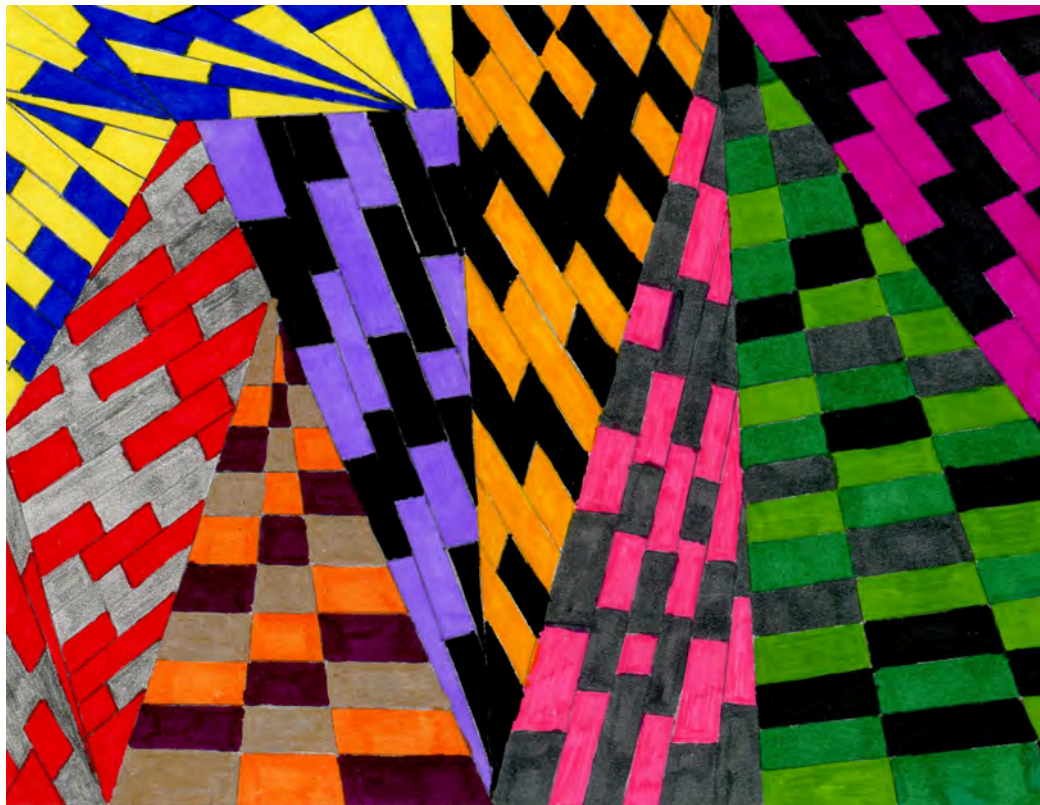






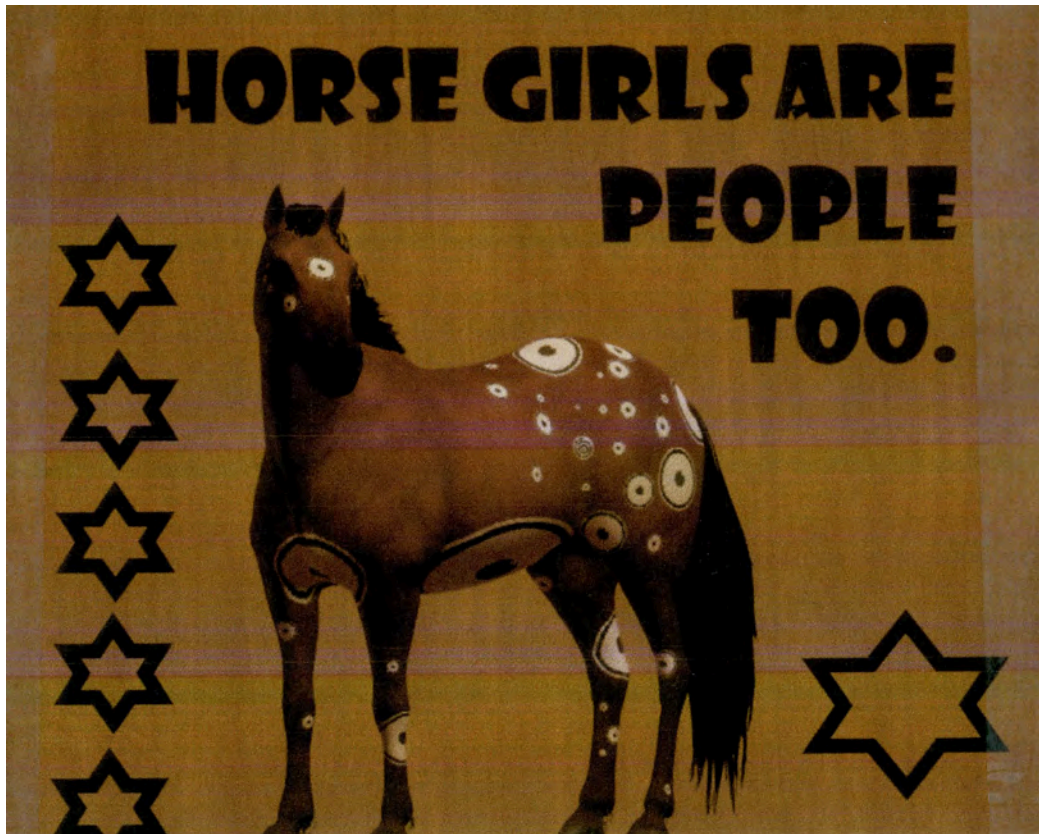




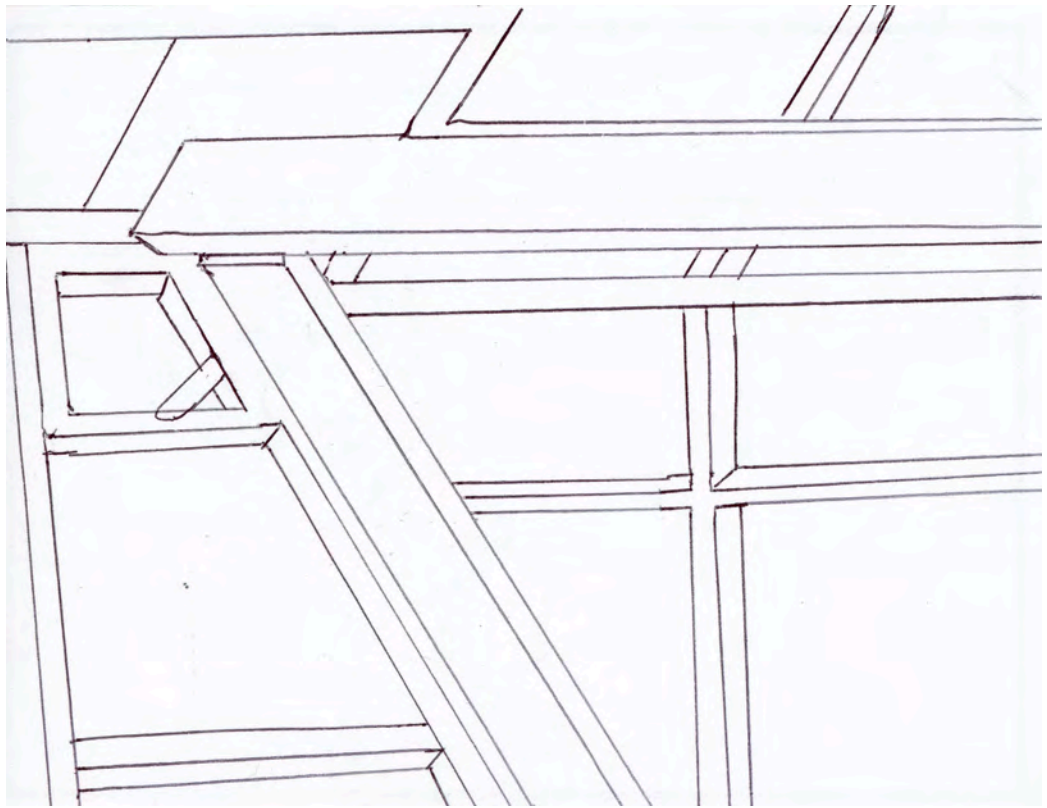




**HORSE GIRLS ARE
PEOPLE
TOO.**



My
grandmother,
a pomegranate,
transformed
herself into
the moon.





Akron Art Mail is made possible with the generous support from the Huntington-Akron Foundation

