

2014

The art of the circle

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THE ART OF THE CIRCLE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Yvette Creel

B.A., Loyola University, 1994

May 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exploration would not have been possible without the patience and love of my husband, Noel Rivera, who has encouraged my creativity and the pursuit of this degree for the last three years. Thank you for keeping me sane and always making me smile.

Thank you to my parents for listening and never letting me give up on my artistic ambitions. I could not have done this without your positive influence and kind words. I am grateful for all of your support.

I would also like to thank David Horton who has been through this process with me as a mentor and a very dear friend. Your artwork and imagination have always been an inspiration. We will always have *Painted Ladies*.

I would be lost without the instruction and leadership of my committee members Richard Doubleday, Courtney Barr, Paul Dean, Gerald Bower, and Scott Andresen who have always respected my love for hand-drawn illustration. I will continue to follow your advice.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow masters Kelly Mullins, Courtney Wilburn Marse, Jeremy Grassman, Luisa Restrepo and Michael Alford. You have pushed me to be more creative. I am very impressed with what we have accomplished.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 BACKGROUND	2
3 PROCESS	4
4 RESEARCH	7
5 RESULTS	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	21
VITA	22

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1. Study for <i>Evolve</i> in sketchbook	5
2. Study for <i>Chaos</i> in sketchbook	5
3. Study for <i>Vowel</i> in sketchbook	6
4. <i>Squares with Concentric Circles</i> by Wassily Kandinsky.....	7
5. <i>Unbroken Line</i> by Wassily Kandinsky.....	8
6. <i>Complementary with Gold</i> by Herbert Bayer	9
7. <i>L-Isoleucinol</i> by Damien Hirst.....	10
8. <i>Peace and Love</i> by Beatriz Milhazes.....	11
9. DK Photos identity by Fabien Barral.....	12
10. Dylan poster by Milton Glaser	13
11. <i>Evolve, Grow, Erode</i>	14
12. <i>Chaos I, II and III</i>	16
13. <i>Order I, II and III</i>	17
14. <i>Vowel</i>	19
15. <i>Consonant</i>	19
16. <i>Word</i>	20

ABSTRACT

The circle is a primary shape, a closed curve that divides a plane into two regions: an interior and an exterior. This exploration has allowed me to place what I like inside the circle and then use that piece to complete a composition.

In graphic design, the circle is not only a ring, a disc or a sphere; it is also the fifteenth letter of the Roman alphabet. 'O' is not only a letter, but a vowel that is the same shape in upper and lower case. It can also be a number. Beyond its ability to participate in statistics and phrases, it is a symbol used in countless icons appearing solid, hollow or spherical. The 'O' represents everything round from karma to coins, and planets to peace.

Each composition in this exhibit is created with circles and titled with them. *Evolve, Grow, Erode, Chaos, Order, Vowel, Consonant* and *Word* were all created in the spirit of the circular theme using a word containing the letter 'o'. Flat colors, gradients, rings and detailed illustrations finally rest on paper after being transferred from sketchbook to screen and pixels to paper. I am satisfied with this exploration on a unique level as a designer who has the opportunity to reflect my art in my design.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The *Art of the Circle* is a study of a basic shape as it is utilized in graphic design. My exploration begins with flat vectors, moves to gradients, and ends with digital illustrations combining fine art and graphic design. Each piece is titled with a word containing the letter 'o'. Each series of three posters works together to explain a sequence and a result. The series begins with thousands of vectors creating a basic spiral shape and concludes with a few circles that are no longer simple.

I chose the circle for its flexibility. I prefer it as a shape because the combination of thousands of them will never create angles or hard edges like the square or triangle. The results of repetition and pattern will always be basic, but fluid. The images created are often energetic and active simply because they are round. Even when placed in a grid or confined to the page by a frame, the piece feels light hearted and whimsical.

I am pushing the design of these pieces farther by including hand-illustration in the process. By using detailed watercolor illustration, I can complicate the basic form. I introduce value and texture not available with the flat or gradient vectors seen in previous designs. In the last three posters, I include depth and realism. I also add letters to balance the oversized shapes. I am building a system with the illustrations and using design skills to focus on positioning, lighting and spacing.

CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND

My undergraduate degree was in communication with a minor in graphic design. Graphic design was an elective that I hoped would lead to foundations classes at the visual arts campus. I had ten years of competitive painting experience and I hoped it would help with some elective credits. There was also a computer lab on the visual arts campus where the software Photoshop and Illustrator were being introduced. I took so many electives in design that it accidentally became my minor and consequently my career.

I originally planned to use the communications degree to become the next Ogilvy of advertising, but once I realized that an account executive was more about sales than logos and taglines, I found graphic design was a much better fit. Graphic design gave me a new direction for my degree and let me take the visual art foundations that originally captured my interests. My college career had somehow made a circle, looping together art and a way to use it in the corporate marketplace.

Fifteen years later after a varied career in graphic design, I found myself distracted as an in-house designer for an industrial construction company that built everything from levees to power plants. I was using the same color orange with a choice of three templates for advertising all of our global services. I applied to grad school at LSU to broaden my horizons and open new doors in the field. I was denied from the painting program but later accepted into the graphic design program of the LSU MFA. The program restored creativity to graphic design. The freedom to construct my own projects and use my own materials reminded me why I chose art initially. I stopped

thinking about printing budgets and started to focus on what I could imagine and construct.

It has taken nearly 20 years to join my creative abilities in the computer and my watercolor experiments. I began painting spheres many years ago and to date I can remember at least 30 different variations on materials and composition. The round experiments of color and texture were always a challenge. Representing wire, wood, metal and fabric with watercolor was a technique that amused people who thought of the painting style as a vague, watery way to hint at a landscape or portrait.

Through independent studies each semester at LSU, I have been encouraged to turn painting in to digital art. In recent semesters I have used graphic design and illustration to create stories in the form of inspirational games, videos and a series of numerical illustrations. This project isn't a typical narrative but it has created a logical progression using vague but monumental themes. I appreciate the opportunity to bring my design to this point using talents and skills that were intuitive and learned.

CHAPTER 3 PROCESS

“Doubt is better than certainty” – Milton Glaser

I began my thesis exploration with a short proposal. It was brief, decisive and clear. Upon reading the statement, my chair advised me to leave room for “chance, serendipity, and experimentation.” The remainder of my committee agreed. Without a set goal, I decided to document my quest for a thesis topic in an 11x17” sketchbook made of handmade watercolor paper in sewn signatures. This became a book I worked in daily with the hopes of defining a thesis statement that would exemplify my style of graphic design. I began filling it with process work as I read about Paul Cox, a prolific artist and cartoonist who covered his walls with daily explorations. I drew some days just to cover the pages while I waited to see what would evolve. I placed paint in orderly paths; I drew with basic colors, and I forced letters into circular patterns (see figures 1-3). Though a definite thesis statement never quite materialized, the circle became a constant theme. The book became as much of a project as the thesis. Eventually, I scanned ideas from the book into the computer and began to incorporate Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop into the work. I devised progressive themes that bridged the gap between pages. These themes would later become *Evolve*, *Grow*, *Erode* and *Order* versus *Chaos*. I took text out of the computer and drew it back into the book to further the progress and to chronicle my story on the crinkled handmade paper. This text would lead to *Vowel*, *Consonant* and *Word*.

Realizing the book was out of order and the fact that some pages ended in disaster, I finally cut the signatures apart. I printed the missing computer illustrations on the previously unused pages to fill in the gaps of the process. Once organized, I cut

everything down to 8x10". I then bound the book and titled it *The Art of the Circle*. The new book became the title of my show and a record of how my search became a study. I was able to package this experience with a little bit of string and a fair amount of glue. My thesis exhibition is the end result of this 30 page sketchbook, a documentation of the successes and failures of the creative process.

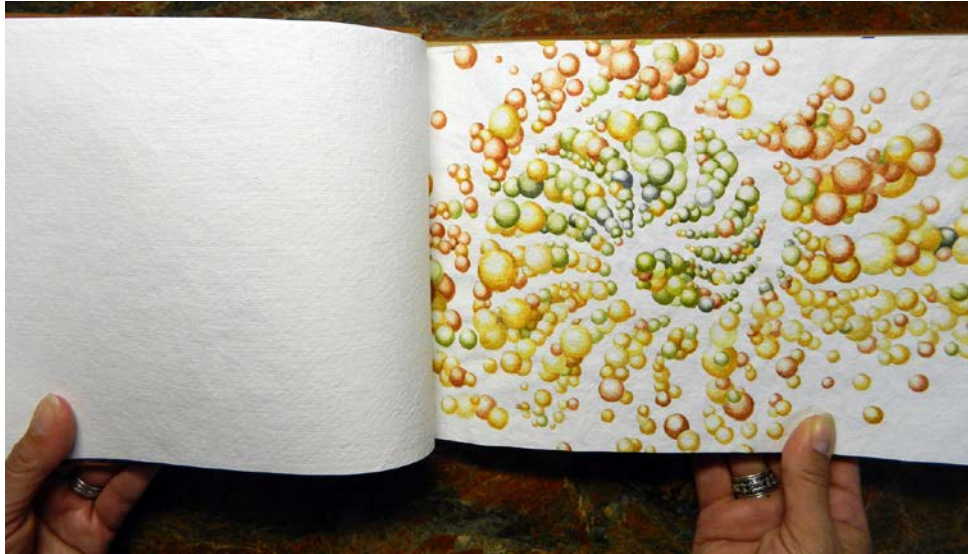


Figure 1. Study for *Evolve* in sketchbook

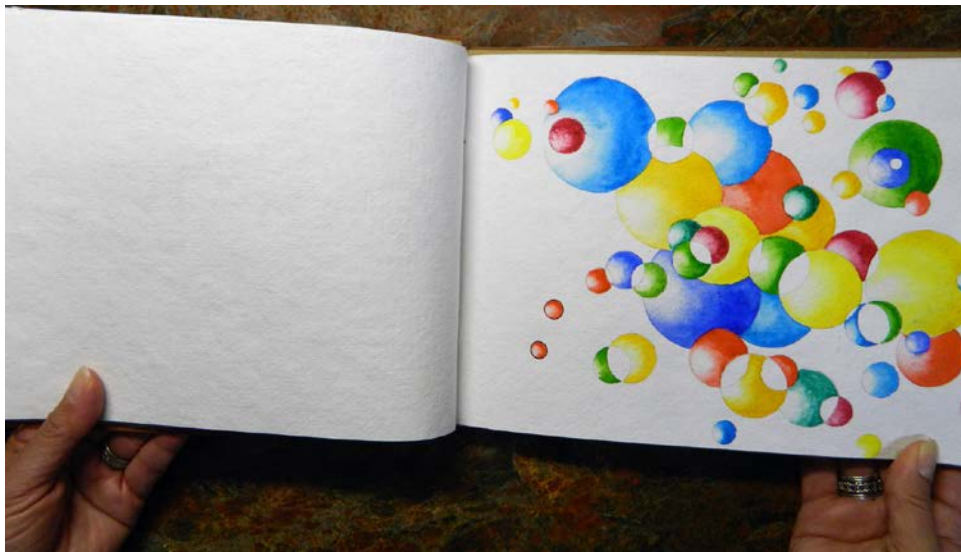


Figure 2. Study for *Chaos* in sketchbook

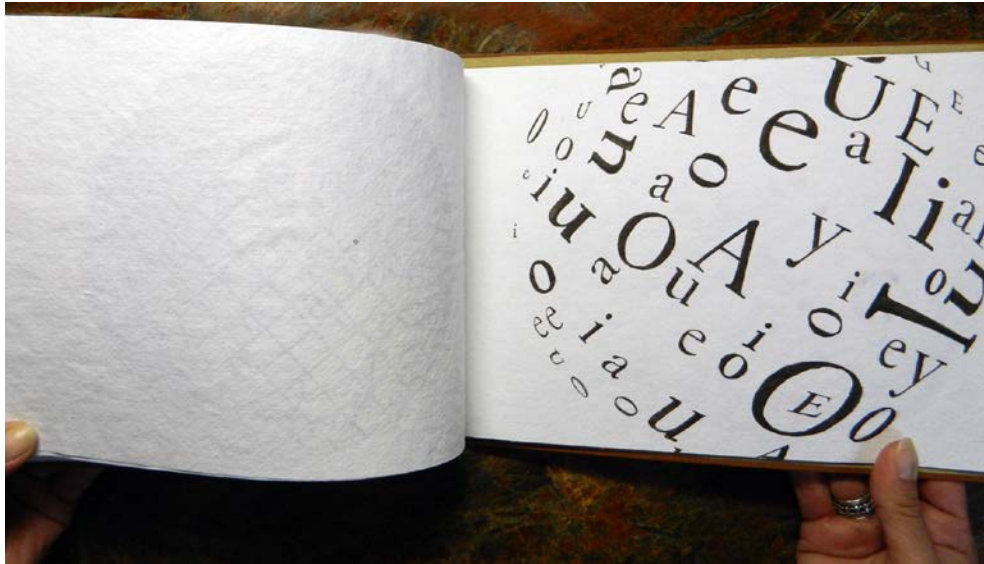


Figure 3. Study for Vowel/ in sketchbook

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH

My work in the sketchbook began with vivid pen and ink and watercolor sketches based on the bold colors of Wassily Kandinsky. His use of animated color with geometric shape has influenced this entire study (see figure 4). Kandinsky's work with the circle included a self-confident energy that implied motion, vibration and tension between objects on the canvas. His shapes float freely in space predominately in horizontal and vertical arrangements with smaller geometric elements.¹ The artist's bold colors stay in his work until Paris in the 1930s when it becomes muted in tones of pale blue, grey green and peach (see figure 5). This influence is evident in the color palette of my last three posters, *Vowel*, *Consonant*, and *Word*.



Figure 4. *Squares with Concentric Circles* by Wassily Kandinsky

¹ Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 149.



Figure 5. *Unbroken Line* by Wassily Kandinsky

Kandinsky was a master of painting at the Bauhaus, a school in Germany that promoted a union of art and design, returning to clean construction and basic shapes.² He had a student named Herbert Bayer who also became an influence on my design during this exploration. His painting *Complementary with Gold* reveals overlapping circles that combine to form new shapes in orange, blue, red and green. There are no other elements on the canvas except for the circles floating freely on a muted background, demonstrating the beauty of the pure form (see figure 6). These basic design skills were instrumental reasons for Bayer's moving from Germany to America where he adapted his European Modernist skills with a variety of artistic disciplines to push the barriers of twentieth-century art and design.³

² Becks-Malorny, *Wassily Kandinsky*, 134.

³ Gwen F. Chanzit, *From Bauhaus to Aspen* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 2005), 51.



Figure 6. *Complementary with Gold* by Herbert Bayer

Another modern painter that I studied was Damien Hirst. I appreciate his prolific painting and a deep love for the colored polka dot. Though his compositions are far from clever or complex, it is impressive that a recent piece of Hirst's contained 25,781 tiny spots in unrepeatable colors on one canvas (see figure 7).⁴ The patience to mix that many colors is remarkable. I can identify with the patience reflected in the artwork. Often the success of a piece depends heavily on an artist's composure and

⁴ Damien Hirst, "Spot Paintings," *Damienhirst.com*, <http://www.damienhirst.com/texts1/series/spots> (accessed April 1, 2014).

perseverance. These traits in combination with his use of order and the grid made him an obvious reference as my work progressed.



Figure 7. *L-Isoleucinol* by Damien Hirst

Another acrylic artist that I did not discover until mid-way through this project is Beatriz Milhazes, a Brazilian artist whose work with ornamental forms has roots in folk art and carnival. Her mural in the London underground at Gloucester Road provides a festive background for the busy activity that occurs each day (see figure 8).⁵ Despite the many complex elements in her work, there is a balance and rhythm that keeps the audience moving calmly through the station. The playful style of her work is inspirational.

⁵ Transport for London, "Peace and Love." *Art on the Underground*, <http://art.tfl.gov.uk/project/1138> (accessed March 27, 2014).



Figure 8. *Peace and Love* by Beatriz Milhazes

I was not only influenced by painters in the study but by graphic designers as well. It is harder than I originally thought to find someone who combines fine art and graphic design. Fabien Barral, a French designer, is successful with his compositions of paint and print, but he does not do it alone. He provides the computer work while his wife, Frederique, provides the colorful layers of watercolor.⁶ Their corporate brand is called “Harmonie Interieure”. The work has a definite structure and strong organization despite the free play of the paint and vector illustration (see figure 9).

⁶ Mr. Cup, “Who Is Mr. Cup,” *Mr-cup.com*, <http://www.mr-cup.com/about.html> (accessed February 10, 2014).



Figure 9. DK Photos identity by Fabien Barral

My favorite graphic designer is Milton Glaser, an American designer famous for founding *New York* magazine and creating the *I love NY* logo. He has been responsible for creating posters and advertising campaigns since the mid 1960s (see figure 10).

Milton Glaser is one of the most celebrated designers of the day who believes drawing is a new level of consciousness that makes us look at things more carefully.⁷ Glaser manages to use illustration often in his work, giving his posters a whimsical and colorful style. At 84 years old, he is still working to develop new concepts for theatres and television shows. His influence is evident in the fields of advertising and modern art.

⁷ Milton Glaser, "Creative Mornings Featuring Milton Glaser," *Miltonglaser.com*, <http://www.miltonglaser.com/milton/c:short-films/#0> (accessed March 27, 2014).



Figure 10. Dylan poster by Milton Glaser

CHAPTER 5 RESULTS

Graphic design often uses word and image to convey a message. *The Art of the Circle* does not use any headers, text blocks or titles. The letters that are used complete patterns, textures and marks. The three panels of each series tell a visual story that is based more on progression than information. *Evolve, Grow, Erode, Chaos, Order,* and *Vowel, Consonant,* and *Word* are more about visual and numerical organization than message. This system relies on a visual repetition of color, shape, and pattern to create a composition. The work is an experience with both vector art and hand-illustration.

The series titled *Evolve, Grow, and Erode* is composed of over 4000 vectors ranging in hue from blue to pink to gold (see figure 11). The shapes work together to complete a modern form of digital painting. Blending tiny discs of flat color, I created a progression with texture and depth using only a slight variation in size and pigmentation of the solid circles.



Figure 11. *Evolve, Grow, Erode*

Panel one implies a story of evolution placing circles in a subtle pattern of implied motion. The components are in a tight formation with little white showing through and a

predictable pattern for the future. Panel two makes the switch from a horizontal to vertical in reference to its title *Grow*. The top of the composition begins to break out of the structure of panel in an orderly fashion while its roots dig deeper in to the bottom of the frame. The final panel begins to decay in the image titled *Erode*. The colored circles are once again framed in a horizontal format as the palette begins to break up and more white is revealed beneath. The spiraled pattern begins to leave the right side of a frame that feels very temporary.

I chose the coloring on this piece based on a watercolor illustration that I did a few years ago of a nautilus shell. The colors used here were digitally sampled from that painting producing a unity that was present in the original painting as well. I later completed a small watercolor version of *Evo/ve* in my sketchbook, the colors were vivid and the circles were painted with gradients. The bold reds and greens used in the small painting were an interesting experiment, but conflicting on screen. The softer colors work much better in the final printed piece.

Series two begins as a poster that also began with a sketchbook painting. The 11x17" sketch was scanned in and sampled, but the colors have stayed the same. I converted the sketch to vector art which produced poster one of *Chaos*, a multicolored, rhythmic system of overlapping circles that varies greatly in size and behavior (see figure 12). One turbulent poster leads to the next as the frame fails to control the energy and motion of the piece. The circles spill over into the next frame, unifying them as a set. The circles now have a gradient which brings them a hint of dimension. Colors begin with the calm gold of *Erode* but soon adapt to the nature of the design and become bold, bright primaries. The white vacancy left as the chosen circles overlap

raises the contrast between the colors and leaves the composition feeling light despite the number of shapes in the piece. These new shapes are derived from curves decreasing the intensity but not in activity.



Figure 12. *Chaos I, II and III*

The third group counteracts *Chaos* with the balance of *Order* (see figure 13). Originally *Chaos* and *Order* were single posters that acted as a pair, but the exploration took each phase further and eventually they became three panels each. In *Order's* case the pursuit brought an overwhelming amount of symmetry and balance. A series of circles becomes an unmistakable grid. Muted tones of gold and green vanish to become basic colors in vivid shades. Stray gradients are pulled in line with larger pieces as the white space increases and the circles become perfectly aligned. Poster size decreases from 32x40" to squares of 32x32", leaving little room for variation, but incorporating a new feeling of control. Panel two of *Order* continues in the same style weaving the grid of color in a methodical way. The number of colors is the same, but the white space increases as the lines of color move horizontally and vertically about the page. This fluidity is in sharp contrast to the last panel where the players feel as though they are in

a holding pattern. There is more organization in panel three due to varied sizes and stackable color. The implied grid is still present but a new feeling of distance and placement changes the feeling and the progress seems to stop as the order is complete.

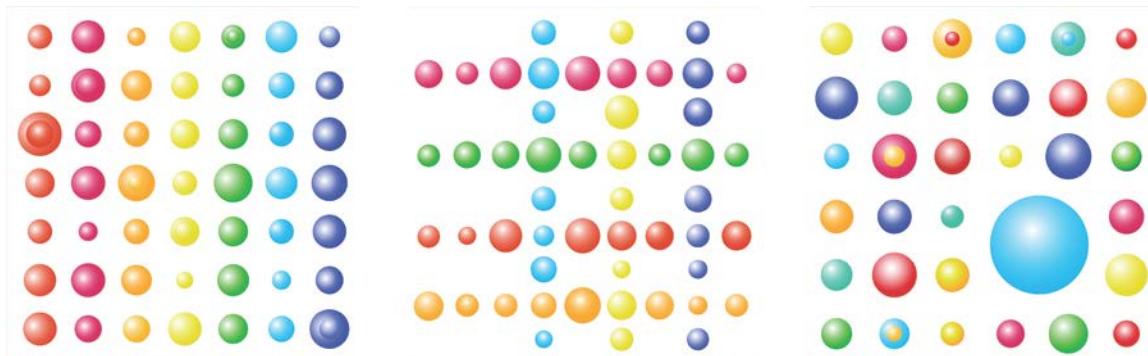


Figure 13. *Order I, II and III*

The last series is titled *Vowel, Consonant, and Word*. It required the most exploration and was by far the hardest to construct. The spheres in each piece are hand-painted in watercolor to create a unique texture and intensity for the show. As the circles became more involved so did the compositions. For the first time rings are incorporated with solid vectors as well as transparent ones. The layers establish a hierarchy and are crucial elements affecting the way we read the depth of the piece. These remain in a 32x32" format not only for consistency but also to define a border for the largest of the circles. By cropping the newest series with the square, we change the emphasis, position and focus of the three very similar pieces and enhance their differences. The first piece of the series, *Vowel*, is blue in hue and contains bounding spheres of metal (see figure 14). The light on the centerpiece tells us it's a silver sphere with the mark of all five vowels engraved into it. The letters have been organized into

marks of ornament, creating a system of signs pressed into the metal. The color palette is a drastic change from what we have seen so far, but the cool tones work well to unify the three shiny textures and ground the composition. *Consonant* comes on strong with legible letters appearing in an invisible grid that surrounds the main sphere (see figure 15). The eye wants to read a word on the ball but the vowels wait in the first panel so the text is forever incomplete. The other two spheres in this piece have obvious grids though they are nothing alike. The one at the top of the frame holds a lot of attention due to its dramatic light squares. The one below is a loose mosaic of irregular shapes both light and dark. The color is muted to a grey to balance this difference, but it retains some warm tones. It is cropped much higher than *Vowel*. It is a busier composition and the elevation offsets the weight of the designs. Finally we have *Word*, a woven wonder of exotic woods (figure 16). Our main sphere is wrapped hastily in magazines to add texture and to the piece. Though they may not be completely legible, all the words drawn on the sphere pertain to circular items such as “marbles”, “carousel” and “cheese wheel.” The lower woven sphere shows signs of writing on the outside and the audience sees a section of it has also been wrapped with text. This sphere is magnified to the point that we can see the texture of the paper on which it was painted. The final circle remains clean and methodical with the precision of the woven pattern and its circular mask.



Figure 14. *Vowel*

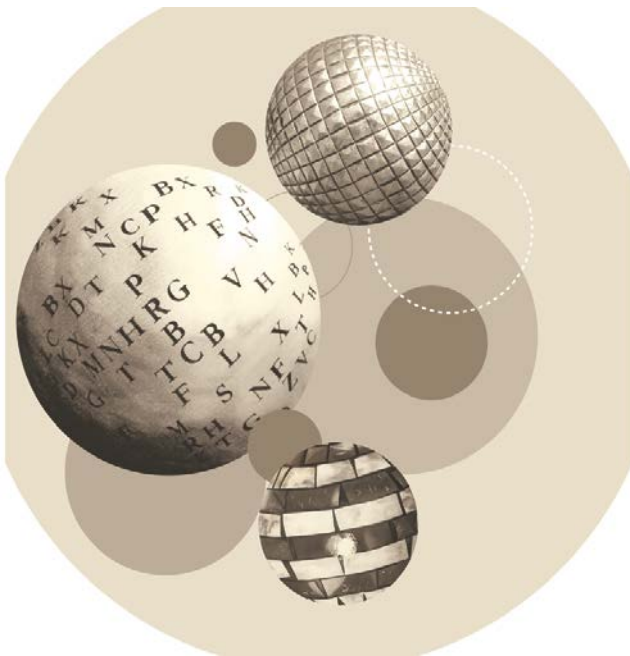


Figure 15. *Consonant*



Figure 16. *Word*

The obvious piece missing from this series is a poster using the circle as a number. *Zero* would make an ideal sequel to *Consonant*, *Vowel* and *Word*. This piece would give me an opportunity to use various fonts for the main sphere and introduce new textures other than wood or metal for additional items. Perhaps *Zero* could be a series of three posters concerned with the absence of subjects instead of the addition of new ones. I look forward to this next challenge.

This entire exploration has taught me to stay open-minded during the design process and allow room for change. Because I was vague in the original description of what I expected from a thesis, I created a sketchbook full of varied results. The artwork is composed of elaborate texture, colorful palettes and an impressive blend of hand-drawn and computer generated illustrations. I am thinking of the circle not only as a dimensional shape, letter, or symbol, but as a guide for new projects using an open mind and a diverse base of skills and talents.

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VITA

Yvette Creel was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1972. She grew up in Baton Rouge, but returned to New Orleans for college at Loyola University. She graduated in 1994 with a BA in Communications. She has worked as a graphic designer in Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans and Baton Rouge. She is a member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, New Orleans Art League, Louisiana Watercolor Society, and a board member of Baton Rouge Arts League. She hopes to receive her Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University in May 2014.