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Alcea

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ALCEA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Autumn Johnson
BFA, Ohio University School of Art, 2019
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*For Vincent,
Thank you for believing in me.
I love you.*

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Special thanks to my friends, family, and committee.

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Abstract

This exhibition was created with the intent to investigate and celebrate gender fluidity in both nature and humanity by depicting one plant, the hollyhock, whose reproductive parts share a structure that changes from male to female as the plant matures. *Alcea* consists of prints, drawings, and installations that showcase the hollyhock in each stage of its transition.

Alcea: Essay

Gender is fluid and multifaceted, just like the natural world. Many societies' understandings of both gender and nature are historically over-simplified when in reality it is a complex dynamic series of spectrums that each individual experiences differently. The intersectionality of an individual's personal experiences, class, education, location, and ethnicity impacts how one expects gender to be performed as well as their attitude towards the natural world outside of humanity. My work seeks to highlight and explore the parallels that exist between rigid hierarchical expectations surrounding gender, and the human-centric approach of placing humans above nature by depicting the hollyhock, a plant that transitions from male to female as it matures, through prints, installation, drawing, and sculpture.

Generalization of the interpretation of what a man or woman is or isn't hinders society and acts to limit what individuals feel they can or cannot do, accomplish, or be; I argue that it is impossible for any individual to feel as though they have traits, interests, and characteristics that are strictly all male or female.

Binaried expectations of what gender should or should not be is deeply ingrained in Western society; for example, the placement of men above women as stronger, less emotional, and more capable allows men to be higher paid, taken more seriously, and more likely to receive promotions in the workplace. The distinction between sex and gender has historically been utilized by researchers to describe sex as an inherent dichotomy that is rigid and biologically determined, while gender is formulated through culture by means of societal expectations and rituals.

Those who do not adhere to the societal expectations of a strictly male or female gender are ridiculed and marginalized. Butler states in her influential book *Gender Trouble: Feminism*

and the Subversion of Identity that “Policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality.” (Butler) While this statement is true, policing gender is also used within some queer communities. For example, people who identify as non-binary and also lesbian often have to explain while dating how they can identify with a sexuality that implies only preferring women as a romantic partner while also identifying with a gender term that is not solely female although lesbianism has always had members within the community who perform gender in a way which is not strictly female. (Ashenden) Even individuals who identify outside of the gender binary experience pressures to perform and present in certain ways which in turn allows other gender-nonconforming people to recognize them but also perpetuates the idea of having expectations relating to how to correctly perform gender placed upon oneself.

The shift away from strict societal categorizations in regard to gender concurrently affects rigid definitions regarding sexuality. With the formation of vocabulary revolving around the subject of being non-binary comes discussion and the formation of vocabulary in regard to sexuality and preference in romantic partners. Bisexuality is defined by the Human Rights Campaign as being “romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual.” (HRC) Alternately, the Human Rights Campaign glossary states that pansexuality “describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with bisexual.” (HRC)

Imitation and performative acts are pivotal to the formation of gender, for example, wearing makeup is regarded as an inherently feminine activity, if a female-identifying child sees

their mother putting on makeup they may feel the inclination to imitate them and ask for their own makeup or to use their mothers. Trans men will often pay attention to the way cisgender men sit in a chair or walk and imitate them to appear more masculine. Gender “is an act which grows out of, reinforces, and is reinforced by societal norms and creates the illusion of binary sex.” (Morgenroth) Humanities' understanding of gender is enforced by performances; the performance of gender further reinforces and perpetuates societal assumptions of what each gender is or isn't. Decisions regarding what we wear, say, do, and buy are all influenced by the desire to present a certain way. The formation of gender is not biologically inherent, “rather than being women or men, individuals act as women and men, thereby creating the categories of women and men.” (Morgenroth) Gender expectations are often placed upon people before they are even born. With ultrasound technology, a person who is expecting a child can learn what the sex is before birth. Parents will decorate a soon-to-come baby's nursery, pick out the clothes the baby will wear, and throw parties revealing its “gender” accordingly. Those with access to certain medical and financial resources can even determine the sex of an embryo themselves, controlling the natural course of embryo development.

Similarly, western society places humanity as a whole as more important than the natural world through pillaging natural resources, damaging habitats, and introducing non-native invasive species to the environment. We as humans take ownership of nature and inflict alterations upon natural occurrences to shape the world around us how we see fit, much like gender dynamics, these changes, such as GMO's, impact all living things. The introduction of new species to a region, whether intentional or not, can have a monumental and at times permanent impact on the local environment. Gardeners' choices in growing non-native plants have substantial effects on the ecosystem. Hollyhock is on the Center for Invasive Species and

Ecosystem Health invasive plants list. (Swearingen) “From a young age, we’re taught to see biology according to a set of defined conceptual boxes—especially sex and gender.” (Black) Humans are animals that do the things they do because of chemical, environmental, reproductive, and survival-based reactions. Species across the globe experience and perform what humans perceive as gender on a spectrum rather than a binary; animals and plants within these species have evolved to express traits and attributes that are not necessarily strictly male nor female. Gender expression functions as a form of communication to potential mates or rivals within the same species. “Our most powerful lessons about the nature of biological sex come from what we’ve traditionally deemed strange or confusing.” (Black) Many plants have reproductive systems that transition from one sex to the other over time to avoid cross-pollination, such as the hollyhock.



Image 1. *Transition 1, 2, and 3*. 2023. Watercolor and graphite on paper. 145 x 50.

“Butler cites evidence for the considerable variability in chromosomes, genitalia, and hormones that don’t always align in the expected, binary manner. Indeed, even biologists, who traditionally view the body as natural and pre-discursive, increasingly

argue that a binary view of human sex is overly simplistic and that sex should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, in terms of anatomical, hormonal, and even cellular sex.” (Morgenroth)

Researchers argue over what percentage of chromosomal “abnormalities” constitute as being truly intersex, and genitalia that is regarded as sexually ambiguous is often “fixed”. “For example, the majority of babies born with intersex characteristics undergo surgery and are raised as either male or female” (Morgenroth) The laborious discussion over what exact traits should or shouldn’t be considered intersex, and the act of surgically making an intersex person who is not yet old enough to make a decision for themselves either male or female further validates Butler’s commentary on the performative nature of both gender and sex. “Biological processes do not themselves result in two “natural,” distinct, and meaningful, categories of people. The two sexes



Image 2. *Only Natural*. 2023. Mixed Media Collage. 30 x 40.

only appear natural, obvious, and important to us because of the gendered world in which we live.” (Morgenroth)

I am relating this process of the hollyhock transitioning over time to the fluidity of gender by depicting the hollyhock in its various stages of sex through numerous sizes, colors, mediums, techniques, and styles. I am utilizing the fact that the act of transitioning happens in nature unprompted to push back against a notion held by a large part of Western society that being transgender, and existing outside of the gender binary is unnatural. Just as the hollyhock exists in a state for a period of time that is neither male nor female, people can do the same.

I find inspiration in knowing that nature exists outside of societal expectations and gender norms. Studying nature based on anthropocentric categories is detrimental to our understanding of the world and the things that inhabit it. But we could use lessons from nature and use them as a parallel to one’s own identity and feelings towards gender naturalizes and normalizes trans existence and gender fluidity. Looking at nature and the environment one lives in through a lens that focuses on similarity rather than exoticism and shifting away from human-centric ecological

studies allows artists and researchers today to work toward the intersectionality of science and identity.

Printmaking holds a longstanding relationship with biological research and the distribution of scientific images; I am contributing to this conversation as a nonbinary queer



Image 3. *Concealed*. 2023. Mixed Media Collage. 22 x 30.

Appalachian by utilizing biological illustration to convey my understanding of plant behavior as a reflection of human behavior.

Many famous biological illustrators from the past have been white wealthy cisgender straight men and laid a foundation that romanticizes going to an ‘exotic’ non-western euro-centric place to depict flora and fauna as they interpret it. Before the invention of the camera, these depictions would have been the only reference anyone had for what the environment the people in a ‘new’ place were like. By bringing this imagery back to their homeland and distributing it, these naturalists were the sole source of information regarding these places. While I appreciate the beauty in many of the renderings made by the naturalists of the past, I acknowledge that there is colonialism and human-centric thinking deeply rooted in that artwork. I believe that biological illustration as a practice benefits from intersectionality and inclusivity, as the things that each person can learn and appreciate from nature vary widely and is impacted by one’s identity and experiences.

The hollyhock became a personal symbol for me at a young age while growing up in the region of rural Appalachia where I was born and spent most of my life. Hollyhocks are easily grown, tall flowers that are commonly planted along the sides of trailers to hide the lack of siding, and for economical landscaping. Typically, the hollyhock is planted with the intent that it will grow to cover things that are generally understood to be best left unseen. In my work, I use this as a metaphor for my feelings toward my own gender identity, and gender fluidity as a whole.

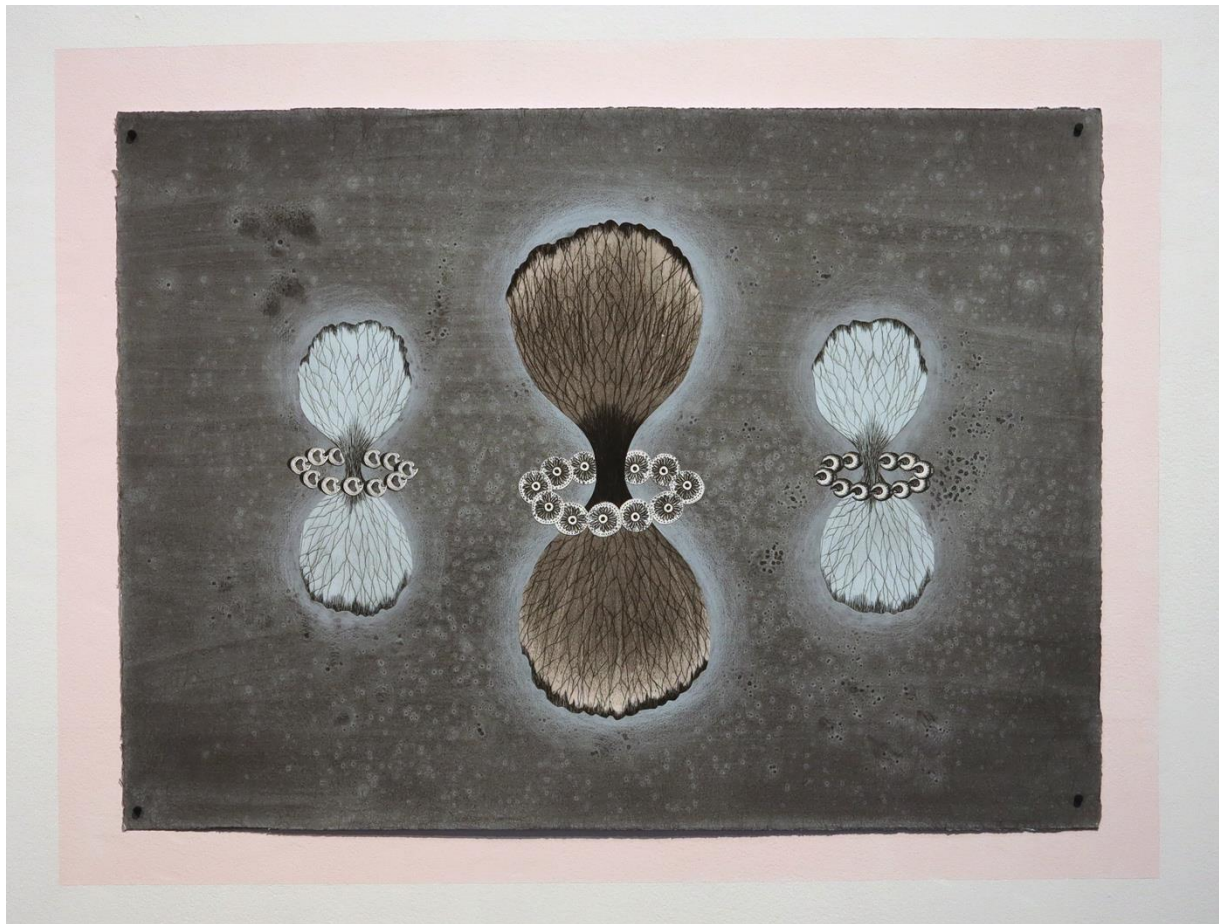


Image 4. *Parts of It All*. 2023. Mixed Media Collage. 22 x 30.

Like the hollyhock, the self-expression in my art involves elements that relate to gender ambiguity. The hollyhock flower's male and female reproductive parts share a structure that transitions from male to female as the plant matures. I depict the hollyhock's reproductive structure repeatedly throughout my work in not only the male and female forms but also something in between. Organizing and dissecting various parts of the hollyhock serves as a visual metaphor for my personal attempts to do the same with my own identity, compartmentalizing and processing the different parts of myself that I struggled to understand when I was younger is represented by my intaglio prints of the hollyhock's petals in symmetrical methodized arrangements. (Figure 1.)

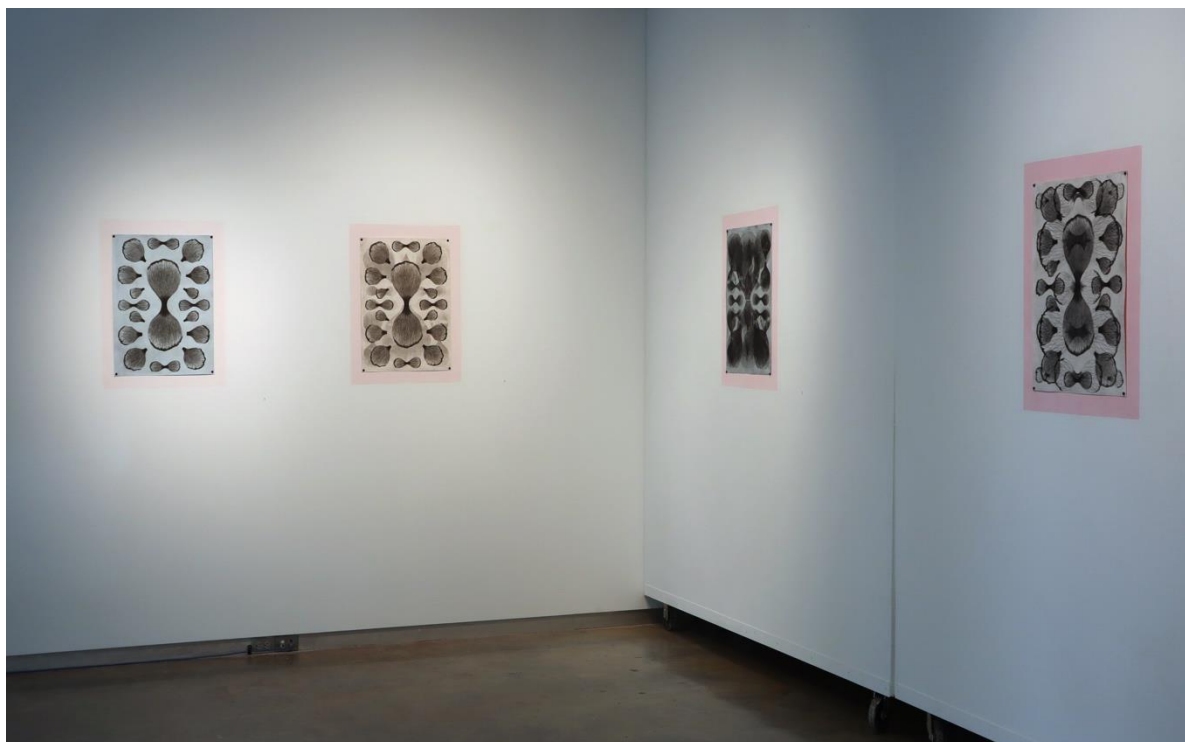


Image 5. *The Petal Series*. 2023. Intaglio on Rives BFK. 18 x 24.

Through printing these images, a multitude of times, cutting each petal out by hand, painting and drawing on top of them, and finally forming flowers out of each individual petal I was able to first ruminate on past experiences and thoughts I have had regarding my own identity. I feel lucky to live in a time where there are many different words for many different gender identities and resources about being nonbinary are readily available on the internet which allowed me to put a name or label on something that has been a part of me since childhood. I also feel a deep sadness in knowing that my family does not accept this part of me, that there are many times in my life when I feel uncomfortable talking about my gender, and that I am not alone in these experiences. Being trans and identifying outside of the gender binary is something to be celebrated, each individual's relationship with how they define their gender identity is special and unique to them alone.

My work references and plays with the intent to use the hollyhock to cover something up, symbolizing the push and pull I feel between the public performativity and expectations of gender and my private thoughts about my own identity. My installation work incorporates hundreds of paper hollyhocks made from intaglio prints of petals that have then been painted on, drawn on, cut out, and then used to create individual flowers. The act of transitioning the hollyhock undergoes as it matures through life is depicted through sculptural clay elements of the middle of the hollyhock's reproductive part in different stages is achieved through fluctuation in shape, size, color, and texture. Variation in size, color, and technique of the flowers celebrates the massive diversity that is present within existence, even among a singular species. (Figure 2.)

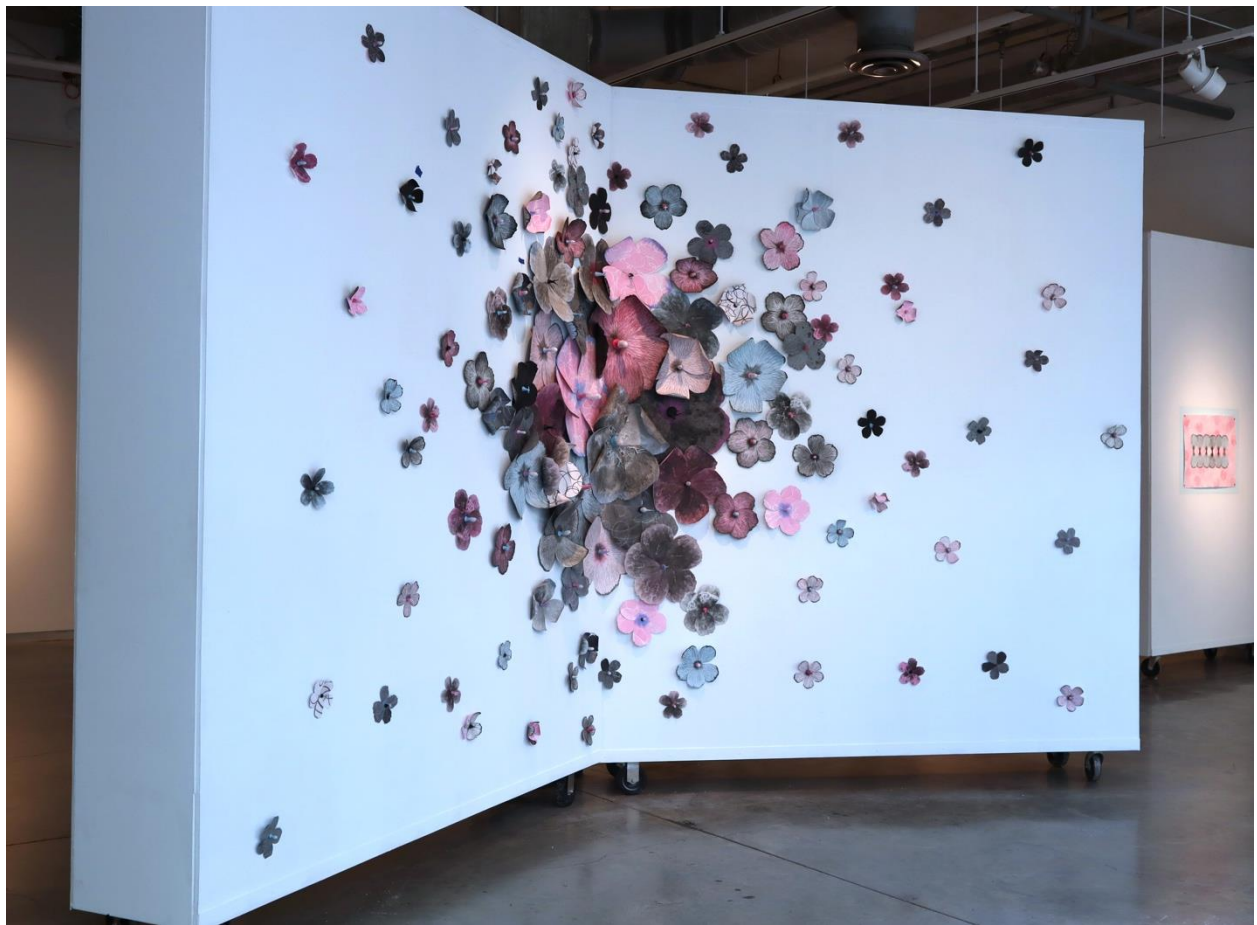


Image 6. *Alcea*. Mixed Media Installation. 2023. Dimensions Varied.

One installation (Image 6) uses the flowers to form a dense circular cluster in the center of the wall which dissipates out onto the wall until only small flowers sparsely remain, another installation (Image 7) uses as assemblage of both pink and blue flowers on opposing sides, merging the two colors with flowers made with petals that consist of both colors. These configurative decisions are a nod to the process of me personally coming out, and how since coming out my level of comfort in revealing this part of myself has fluctuated over the years due to multiple different circumstances. While leaving the conservative rural area where I spent most of my life certainly helped, I also have grappled with having family, friends, and even past

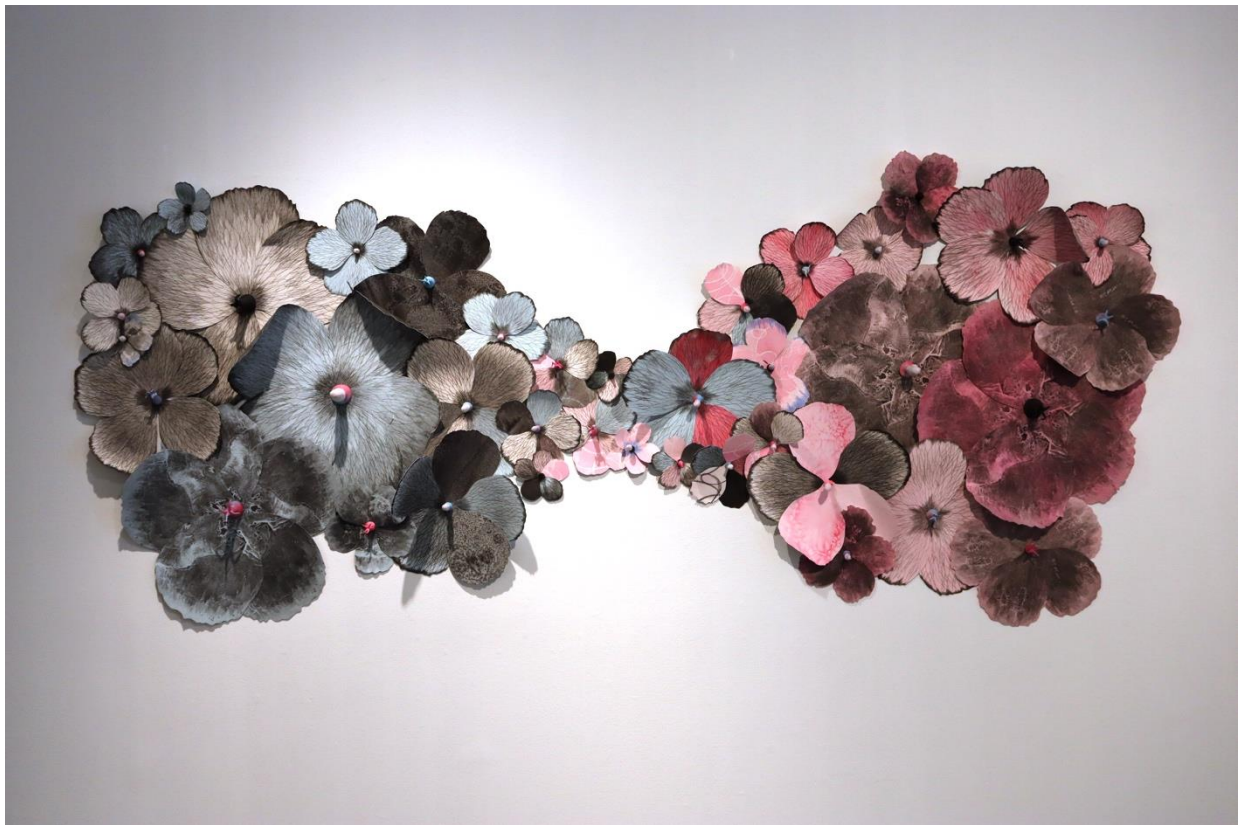


Image 7. *Shifting*. 2023. Mixed Media Installation. Dimensions Varied.

partners be uncomfortable and unsupportive of this part of me since then.

In my mixed media work, I use layering to express the complexities of gender identity; faint watercolor paintings of hollyhock seeds underneath dense graphite drawings don't allow the

full image to be readily available to the viewer at first glance. By rendering the shape of the hollyhock's seeds and petals in a number of different mediums, colors, and sizes I am creating my own visual language to communicate the unique and individual nature of one's complexities



surrounding gender to the viewer.

Image 8. Alcea- Detail Image. 2023. Mixed Media Installation. Dimensions Varied.

This work was made with the intention to celebrate and communicate the fluidity of gender in both humans and nature, while simultaneously challenging the human-centric and patriarchal views that Western society perpetuates. Nature possesses a plethora of precious lessons that humanity can use to understand ourselves and the way we interact with the world. I used the hollyhock, a flower that transitions from male to female over time as a symbol of the boundless ways in which gender expression can fluctuate and shift for people. The hollyhock is just one of many organisms that exist on this earth that exhibit a behavioral or physical characteristic that does not fit within the human perception of a binaried gender. By analyzing and depicting a singular plant with personal meaning to me and the region I am from through sculptural, mixed media works, and printmaking I showcase the variation and individuality which exists in each being's identity.

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Vita

Autumn Johnson is an artist who specializes in intaglio printmaking from Long Bottom Ohio. They are a graduate student at LSU in the Studio Arts program and are expected to receive their MFA in the Summer of 2023. Autumn is an Ohio University alumnus and received their BFA in printmaking in 2019.

Autumn's work explores the relationships between humanity, nature, gender, and sexuality through printmaking, drawing, and installation. Their love for nature and drawing paired with their desire to express their own nonbinary identity has influenced their work over the years. Autumn is moving to Little Rock prior to graduation where they will be focusing on a series of large-scale drawings that push their concepts forward.