

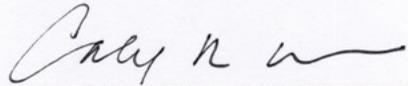
The background of the image is a clear blue sky filled with soft, wispy white clouds. In the upper right corner, there is a bright sun with a lens flare effect. Two solid black lines run diagonally across the lower half of the image, starting from the bottom left and extending towards the top right. The top line is slightly wavy, while the bottom line is straight.

*From Here to the Ground*

A thesis by Courtney McCracken presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts, Department of Illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design, 2024.

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

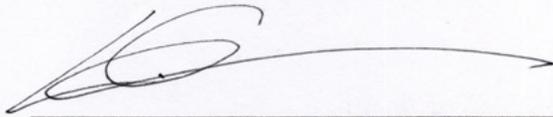
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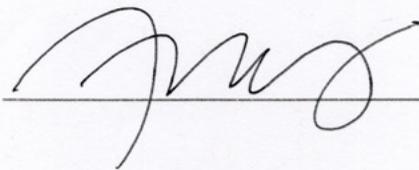
Hannah Subotnick, Thesis Advisor  
Critic - Film/Animation/Video



Leela Corman, Thesis Advisor  
Assistant Professor - Illustration



J.R. Uretsky, Thesis Advisor  
Critic - Installation



*"All stories are also the stories of hands —  
picking up, balancing, pointing, joining, kneading,  
threading, caressing, abandoned in sleep, cutting, eating,  
wiping, playing music, scratching, grasping, peeling,  
clenching, pulling a trigger, folding."*

*John Berger*

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# Abstract

Art, for me, is a thinking process. It is also a process of connection to body and place. It directs my fractured attention toward the things I care about. As I labor through process, I am gifted with a moment of attentiveness. In a time where everything feels urgent, and our perspective can be warped by the endless flood of information, making art is a chance to stop, to think, and to feel.

It is a space for holding, and a space for being held.

Recently, I have been working primarily in animation and sound design, experimenting widely across media to create works that center my human experience in this specific moment in time, playing against an internet landscape flooded with content of increasingly decaying quality.

I use slow, traditional animation techniques combined with the digital to speak to my own simmering anxiety about society's hyperfixation on disruptive technology and the devaluing of human labor. I have many questions, but not many answers.

My work is experimental and tactile. It indulges in process and strives to celebrate the essential qualities of the human-made work.



## *Selective Timeline*

Where I am, it is the spring of 2024 and there are strange things happening in the global economy. I've heard some theorize that we haven't yet recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic's "supply chain issues", or that "people just don't want to work anymore," (these two things are in quotes simply because I've heard them so many times) causing mayhem for employers and businesses. I recall there being some sort of cultural awakening about "essential workers" during the pandemic, but we've long moved on from that conversation.

In March of 2022 I was accepted into RISD's inaugural cohort of Illustration MFA candidates, which I gladly accepted— a bright spot after a dark couple years of COVID lockdowns and seeing the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine just a month previously. Throughout that summer a wave of AI models were launched that claimed to be able to generate "believable" art— whatever that meant. In September of 2022 I drove across the country from my home in rural Oregon to begin my first semester at RISD, hoping to answer the questions I had about how to make art and why. ChatGPT became available for public use that November.

Also in November of 2022, Cory Doctorow coined the terms "enshittification" and "platform decay" to describe the pattern of self-destructive quality decline in online platforms due to a combination of corporate greed and disregard for customers and users. I've since heard it come up in many conversations, podcasts, news articles, and posts online.

In April of 2023 there was a worker's strike here at RISD as custodians, groundskeepers, and movers advocated for pay increases to help keep up with the seemingly-exponentially-rising costs of living. In May the Hollywood writers' and actors' strikes began a series of long labor

disputes, central to which was the issue of compensation in the age of streaming and the imminent threat of AI to replace human artists.

I experienced a major depression shortly after my move to Providence, which persisted throughout my first year of the program. I wasn't used to the urban landscape, and I felt trapped in a way I had never experienced before. I observed a staggering amount of burnout and hopelessness among my RISD peers and the broader residents of this tiny eastern state. Everyone seemed to be working, driving to or from work, or decompressing from work all of the time. I felt, and currently still feel, that one can simply never do enough. I watched myself and many of my peers increasingly participate in what I think of as labor spectacle, a cycle of intentionally-visible overwork and burnout, seemingly for the purpose of simply proving how hard we were working— to ourselves, to our peers or professors (as though society at large might notice? I'm not sure. But it oftentimes felt/feels like the only choice, a cry to be seen and valued).

I find, these days, my thoughts a constant swirl of snippets and factoids, blurbs and images, accumulated from places I've largely forgotten. The inside of my mind feels an awful lot like much of the internet nowadays, with ads for great sales next to photos of human suffering, a video of a cute cat next to a rant from someone's terrible uncle, a constant stream of distraction by which I am simultaneously repulsed and compelled.

I find the question of how to make art and why a matter of great urgency, and see it as intimately intertwined with these larger issues of labor and human value.

I sometimes wonder if, in another life, I would have been an economist or a sociologist, looking for the larger systems at work, the connecting

threads between all these seemingly disparate events, the reasons why things happen the way that they do. I'm fascinated by it.

It's like I'm very small but I'm standing on my tip-toes trying to see down from this crazy-high distance, high enough that all the patterns of the world might be revealed to me. I heard somewhere that this pattern-seeking behavior comes from an evolutionary desire to try to predict danger. It's self-preservation.

In the fall of 2022, to combat my rising uncomfortability, I began taking walks every day that tracked a 2.5 mile loop around my small neighborhood south of Providence, which I have continued doing ever since. If I do two of these loops every day it equates to about 10,000 steps—the generally recommended minimum for good health and wellbeing. (Why 10,000? Maybe because it has a satisfying resonance with the other popular idea that 10,000 hours of practice makes one an expert... Was this a Malcolm Gladwell thing? I can't remember. My mind is a Pinterest board.)

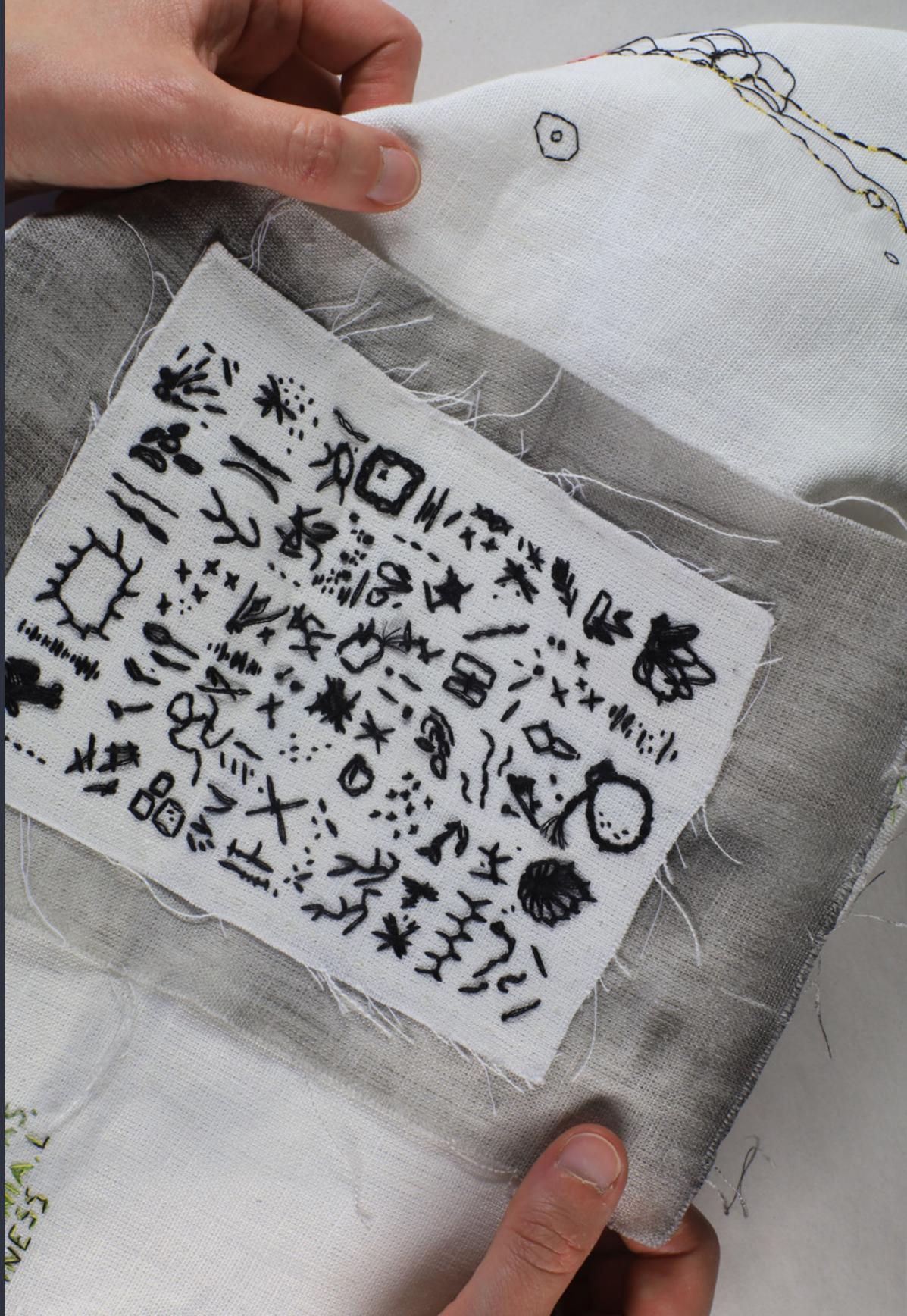
## Into the Work

I live in Cranston, in a rented house with my partner near Stillhouse Cove, a murky little strip of salt marsh that has become a haven for me, and part of my daily loops. This stretch of land has appeared in various ways in much of the art I've created in the last two years, beginning with a small artist book called *Flotsam*, in Spring of 2023. The book opens in two different directions, mapping the approximate two blocks the area encompasses, but also reflecting the two categories of things I always see on the beach there: the natural debris of a beach—rock, shell, plant, and animal material—and the human-created—debris of plastic, metal, paper, styrofoam, and other litter.

When I made this book I was sick with COVID for the second time in two years, and I felt so winded from walking that I could barely reach the

Debris tangle at Stillhouse Cove





cove. Still, I was immensely grateful to have a space to be outside and away from other people.

Later that same spring, I began a project teaching myself hand embroidery. It was something I had always wanted to learn. Much like walking, making art, for me, is a thinking process, and embroidery allowed me deeper entry into the themes I had already been pondering, about labor, about value, about the divide between art and craft. I let the threads be messy, flop unsecured, and I began a stitched tally of the sittings I spent on the piece. If "Flotsam" was about observing my new exterior world, the embroidery became about observing an interior space that was just beginning to be coherent to me. I wanted the humanness of it to show, the labor I had put in. I didn't want the piece to be "seamless."

As I was starting out, several people suggested that the machine embroiderer would be a much more time-conscious option... certainly, more embroidery could be produced in a fraction of the time I was



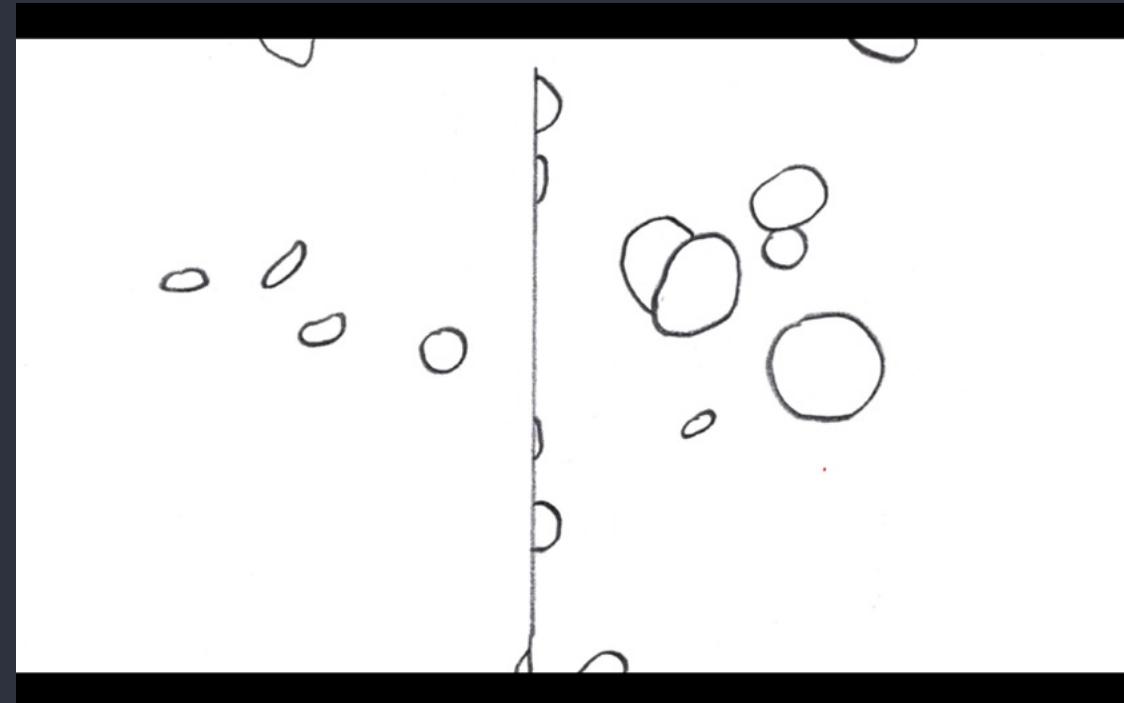
spending. I thought about it, fearing that I wouldn't be able to produce an impressive enough amount of work in the time I had left in the semester to show how much effort I had been putting in. This made me think a lot about what I wanted from the time that I spent on making art, and more broadly the ways in which I place value on my time. If I had not enjoyed the process of the stitching, or found that it had negative effects on my thinking or health, or perhaps if I had found that I wasn't learning anything through the process, I would have considered turning the piece into a machine embroidery project.

This isn't to disparage machine embroidery, or the outsourcing of work in general. There are times when it is the most appropriate choice for the task at hand. But for this project at this time, doing it slowly myself, letting mistakes happen, and using the time to think and reflect was the purpose of the whole thing— and not something the machine embroiderer could do for me. It's incredibly important that we think carefully about the things we want to outsource to machines, and why.

Spring of 2023 was when a lot of what I'm making work and thinking about started to develop. I took my first animation class during this time with Hannah Subotnick, who made me feel safe to experiment, and to feel OK about following the work to the conclusion it needed instead of holding so tightly to any results I had become attached to in my mind. I think learning these lessons through the process of animation made the embroidery project possible, and the embroidery likewise informed my animations.

I became somewhat obsessed with the process of creating what are known as "weaving loops," a process of animating with a limited number of frames where they are worked through repeatedly to produce a much more complex result than typically expected. For instance, working with only 24 frames (24 sheets of paper), one can make an entire film by drawing through the frames many times. This method appears in works such as Adam Beckett's 1974 film "Sausage City" and Boris Labbé's 2011 "Kyrielle."

Watch animation



Weaving loop test  
Animation, fall 2023

Watch animation





During the summer I returned to my home in Oregon. I had space and time to process some of the things I had been thinking about, and got to use my hands and body in ways that had been stifled by the city, sitting in cars and in classes, sitting or standing still in studios for long hours. Over the course of several days in Cannon Beach, Oregon I hauled hundreds of rocks (with the help of my partner) to build a labyrinth large enough to walk through. Seeing people interact with it, take pictures of it, children run through it in crazy games of tag filled me with so much joy. I began to reconnect with the part of me that wants to make art that really lives in a place, that interacts with and is influenced by the world around it.

As summers often do, this one, the summer of 2023, felt simultaneously eternal and fleeting.

### *Body and Place*

Soon, I was back in Providence but this lovely, weighty sense of the physical world stayed with me. In each of the projects I took on I found ways to make them live not only on paper or on a screen, but somehow in the world at the same time. I found new ways of making, used my hands as much as possible, and all the time tried to remember that I have a body.

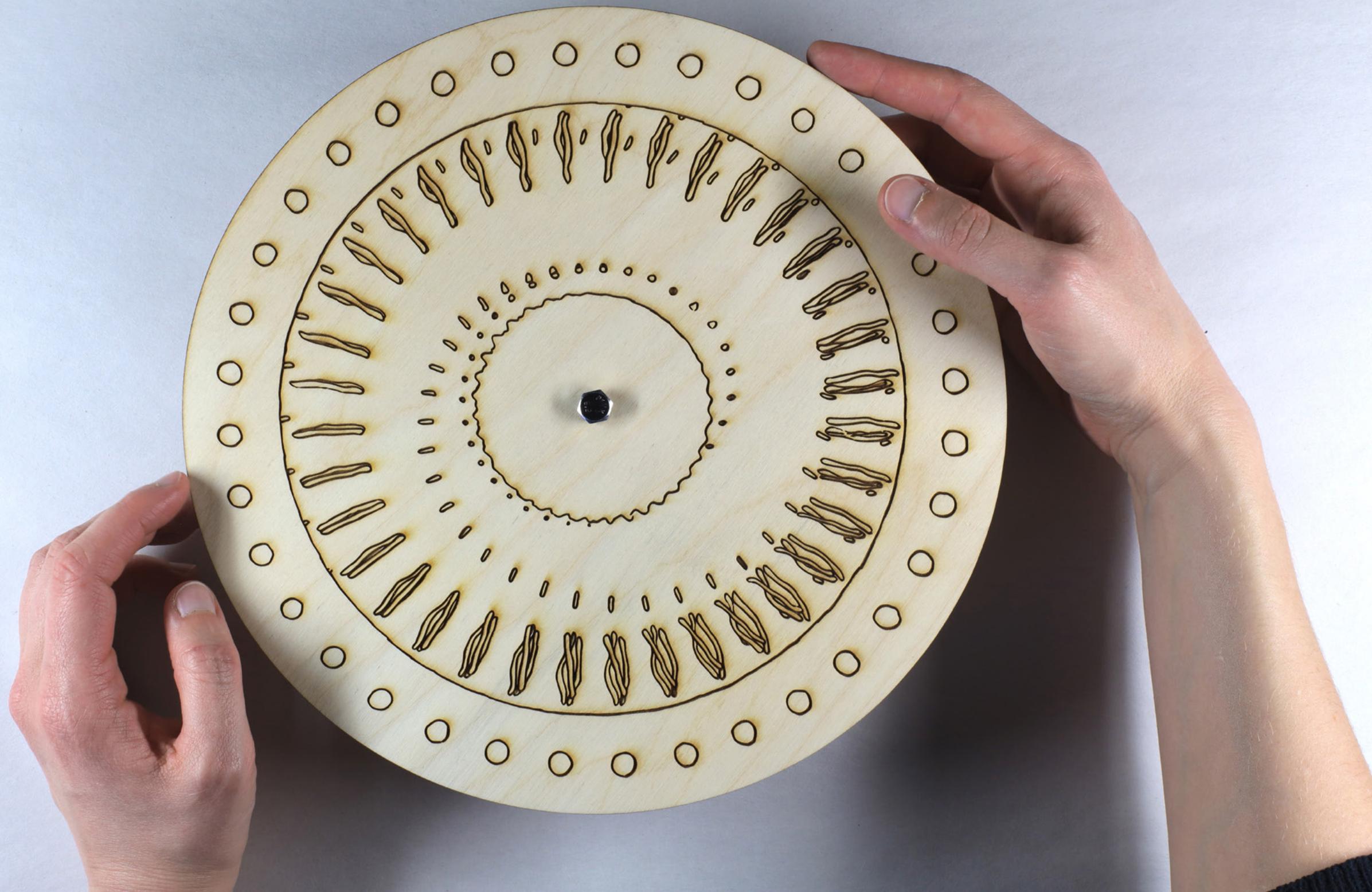
This is also where my desire to experiment really came to life. I made a film from a zoetrope by laser-engraving one of my hand-drawn animations into a wooden disc, then shooting it in stop motion. I was delighted to find that the object itself could animate in real life under the right conditions (when viewed with a strobe light or through a phone

## You Set Out to Share a Big Idea, and End Up Talking about the Worms

Animation, fall 2023



[Watch animation](#)



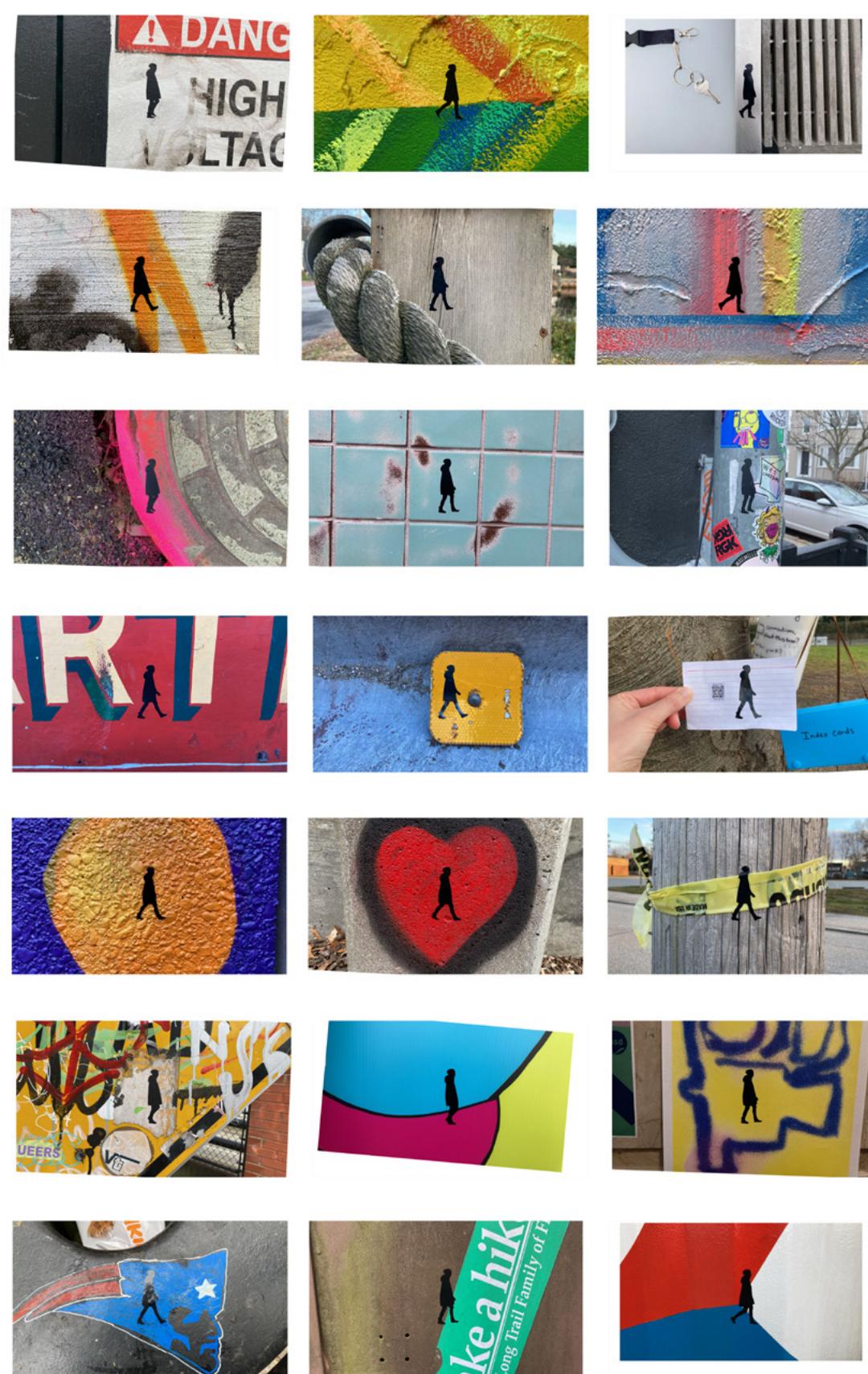


screen, for instance. By the way, this is because the "frame rate" of our eyes needs to be lowered to match the frame rate of the rotating disc, which I find deeply delighting. I love this piece, and I love it as an object—that it asks for interaction, for a hand to spin it.

Also during the Fall of 2023 I created an animation using vinyl stickers of myself "walking" through various places in Rhode Island. This was an idea that came about after a period of exploring both traditional projection and projection mapping as another way of integrating the animations I was making into the environments that I inhabit. In a way, this is me projecting myself into the space in a new way. It was oddly liberating to place myself, in sticker form, anywhere I wanted. I love that my tiny avatar will continue to inhabit these places for a while— another kind of travel through time and space.

Like the zoetrope, this project required a massive amount of mental gymnastics to figure out how to do, which, at this point in my journey, I am beginning to realize is an integral part of my creative process right now. I find myself gravitating toward materials and methods that require a maximum amount of learning and/or problem solving. I wouldn't necessarily recommend this mindset during grad school if you can avoid it, but it hasn't been without rewards. It's just stressful when you have deadlines. Accepting the possibility of failure, or of a project taking too long to finish is really a prerequisite to the kind of experimentation that leads to discovery, but grappling with the idea of failure or even unexpected outcomes can be really difficult and emotionally draining in a high-pressure place like RISD. Perfectionism and fear of failure is something I've struggled with for my entire life, and I used to let it stop me from trying things all the time. This is maybe why I feel so compelled to push myself in this area now. And maybe particularly because, more and more, we are told what perfection is by computer algorithms.

I've gotten a lot of people asking how I did this, so for those who want to try it but can't/don't want to spend the time figuring it out, here is the recipe:



## To Know a Place

Animation, fall 2023



[Watch animation](#)

Film yourself or your cat or your friend doing something, like walking (or be more creative than me), then rotoscope your chosen subject out of the background (I used After Effects). Matte the subject to a single color so that it's a silhouette. Lower the frame rate to something useable, export frames, then arrange all of the frames on a single sheet (or several if you have a lot of frames) to send to the vinyl cutter. Once they're cut, walk extensively around where you live to find interesting places to put them, stick them to things and photograph them. Have interesting conversations with people who are curious about what you're doing and get to know the place a little better. After you've collected all the photos, import and align each frame in After Effects so that the animation will be smooth. If you choose something like a walk cycle, you can make sure the last frame is the same as the first frame, creating an uninterrupted loop.

I went through many ideas of what to call this film, finally settling on the title of "To Know a Place." It's sort of an acknowledgement of my own slowness, my own vulnerability and an acceptance of the deeply gentle part of myself, the part that is most at home by a quiet stream in the woods, the part of me that moves at what can feel like a snail's pace while the world flashes by. It's an acknowledgement that, while I made this piece, I called Providence, Rhode Island home and I did my best to walk as much as I could, to know it as well as I was able, and to accept and appreciate my time here, getting to know this place.

### *From Here to the Ground*

My final piece is an animation called "From Here to the Ground," and is constructed as a weaving loop, traced onto transparent acetate cut into frames, then photographed while on multiple walks through my neighborhood, this place I've called home for two years. In it I am walking through the place I inhabit, trying to keep my eyes open to

## From Here to the Ground

Animation, spring 2024

*the world around me, and putting the things I'm making with my hands directly in the context of this space.*

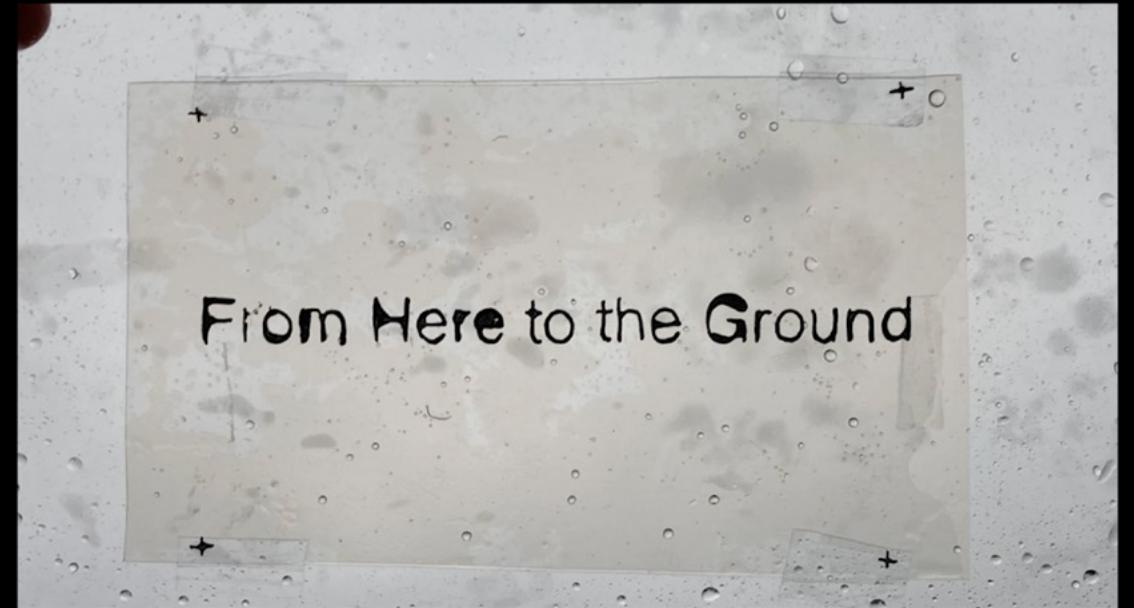
*In it I walk and walk, and think and think. I think of all the things happening in the world right now, all the things I want to say. Patterns flash in and out of focus, just beyond my comprehension, loops in time and space. For a while now, I haven't known what to draw— nothing seems right, each subject too specific— and so I lean into the abstract shapes I began playing with in my previous animation work, when I also didn't know what to draw. These little shapes, small bodies in a vast world, feel free.*

*Their identity is a poetic one, unbound by specificity. They move, they are stagnant. They are individuals, they are one whole. They exist in the world, they exist outside of it. They are not constrained by things like borders or walls. I can hold them— all of them— safely in my hands.*

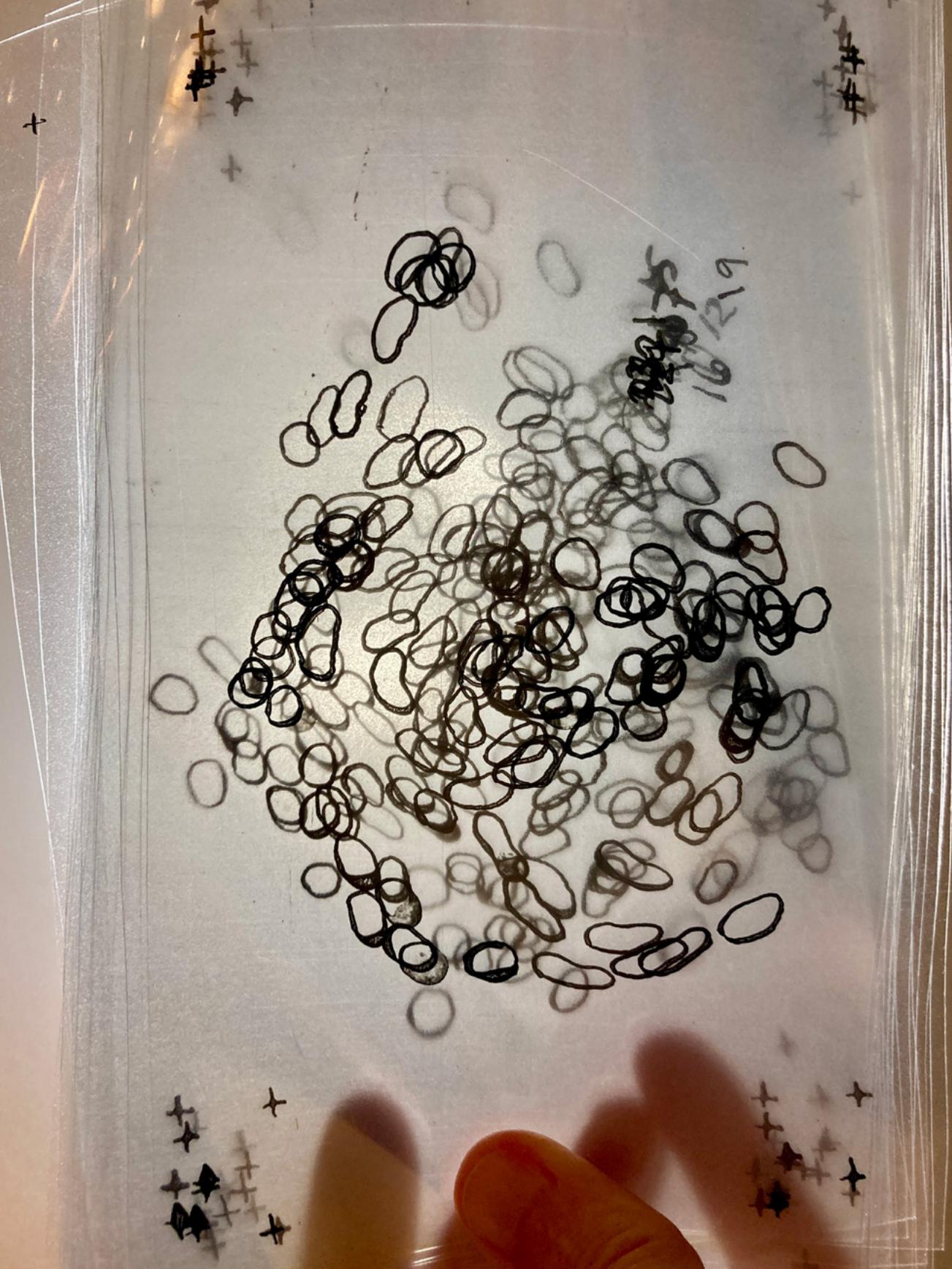
*Art, for me, is a thinking process. It is also a process of connection to body and place. It directs my fractured attention toward the things I care about. As I labor through process, I am gifted with a moment of attentiveness.*

*In a time where everything feels urgent, and our perspective can be warped by the endless flood of information, making art is a chance to stop, to think, and to feel. It is a space for holding, and a space for being held.*

*What we give our attention to, grows.*



[Watch animation](#)



***THANK YOU*** to my family for your support, and thank you to Morgan for your patience and love. Words aren't enough. This would not have been possible without you.

Thank you to my many excellent professors, the incredible FAV department for adopting me, and to my MFA cohort for making me feel less crazy: Reem Al-Ani, Jenine Bressner, Irene Chung, Deanne Fernandes, Nellie Geraghty, Simone Khanyi Hadebe, Lingyi Kong, Nina Martinez, Mara Menahan, Emilia Miękisz, Simone Nemes, Ananya Parekh, Ariel Wills, and Ji Zou.

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Edgewood Waterfront Preservation Association, a Non-Profit 501(C)3 Organization Dedicated to the Improvement and Care of Still House Cove. stillhousecove.org/.

## *Watch List*

A partial list of films I was shown or discovered over the last two years that changed the way I think about making art, and that I return to again and again to recapture the joy and discovery of making.

*Traveling Light*, 1985. Jane Aaron

*Sausage City*, 1974. Adam Beckett

*Early Pencil Tests (Outtakes)*, 1970's. Bruce Bickford

*Blooms: Strobe Animated Sculptures Invented by John Edmark*, 2017. Sculptures by John Edmark, film by Charlie Nordstrom.

*Kyrielle*, 2011. Boris Labbé

*Hurricane Animation*. 2011. Hoji Tsuchiya

