

# **Art Beside A Single Handshake: Can You Believe It?**

By Tongji Qian

**A**lthough I was familiar with works by both McKinzie and Phil, their prints still caught my attention during the Printmaking Graduate Biennial at Rhode Island School of Design in January 2019. In contrast to the numerous talented artists who employed strategies to affirm the relevancy of printmaking in a contemporary discourse, McKinzie and Phil seemed to desire something different. Their collaboration series of *Ten Identical Prints* was predictably “printerly” and perilously unexciting, betraying a fraught and commonplace relationship between an expressive artist and a scrupulous master printer. How could these two artists showcase such mundanity? What was the stake of not stepping out of bounds when the ease of doing so was enticing and risk-free? Wasn’t it their privilege to be showing work in a graduate student gallery which did not embody a shared style or stricture?



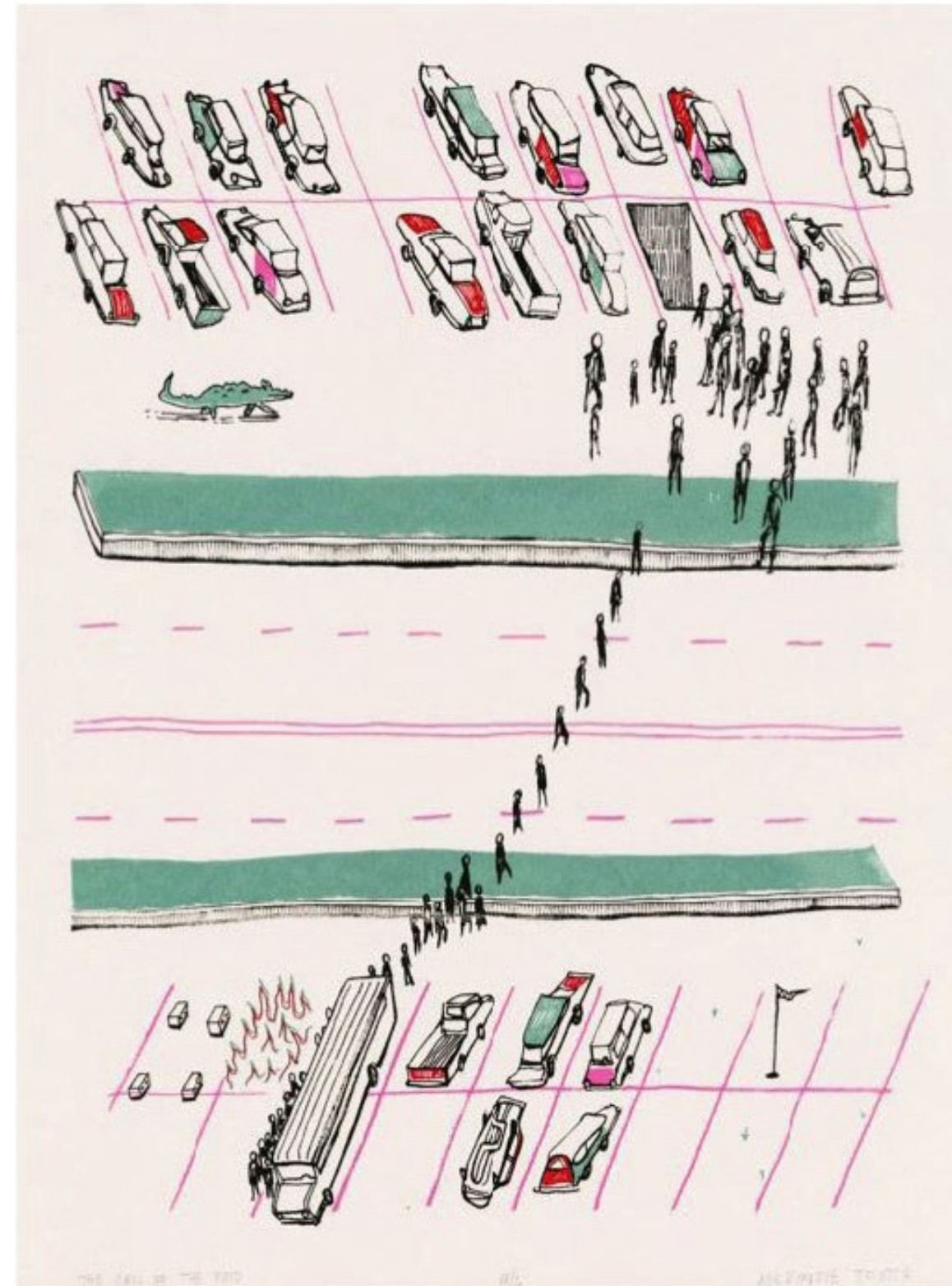
## Before the Exhibition Learning to See Things Clearly

Figure 1



**Untitled**, 2018  
Flag collage, 22×22"  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta

Figure 2



**Untitled**, 2017  
Silkscreen print, 14×11"  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta

I first met McKinzie when visiting her studio in November 2018, a few months before the Graduate Biennial. I recall sitting on her extremely uncomfortable guest chair for at least five hours in the evening. She was open-minded and talkative, which was not what others had suggested. (They had told me to always drive the conversation and maybe offer her a can of cola.) In fact, one of the strongest first impressions upon my arrival in her studio was her collaged US-American flag (Figure 1), which was an unusual object to be hanging above the door. It was austere and hard to miss. I clearly remember her optimism in the context of craft. She was sure she would be able to remake all her past works, so she did not care if anything earth-shaking happened in her studio. This artistic trait, albeit slightly dark and nihilistic, intrigued me, and whenever she showed interest in the making of specific works during our later encounters, I knew her motivation was much more than half-hearted.

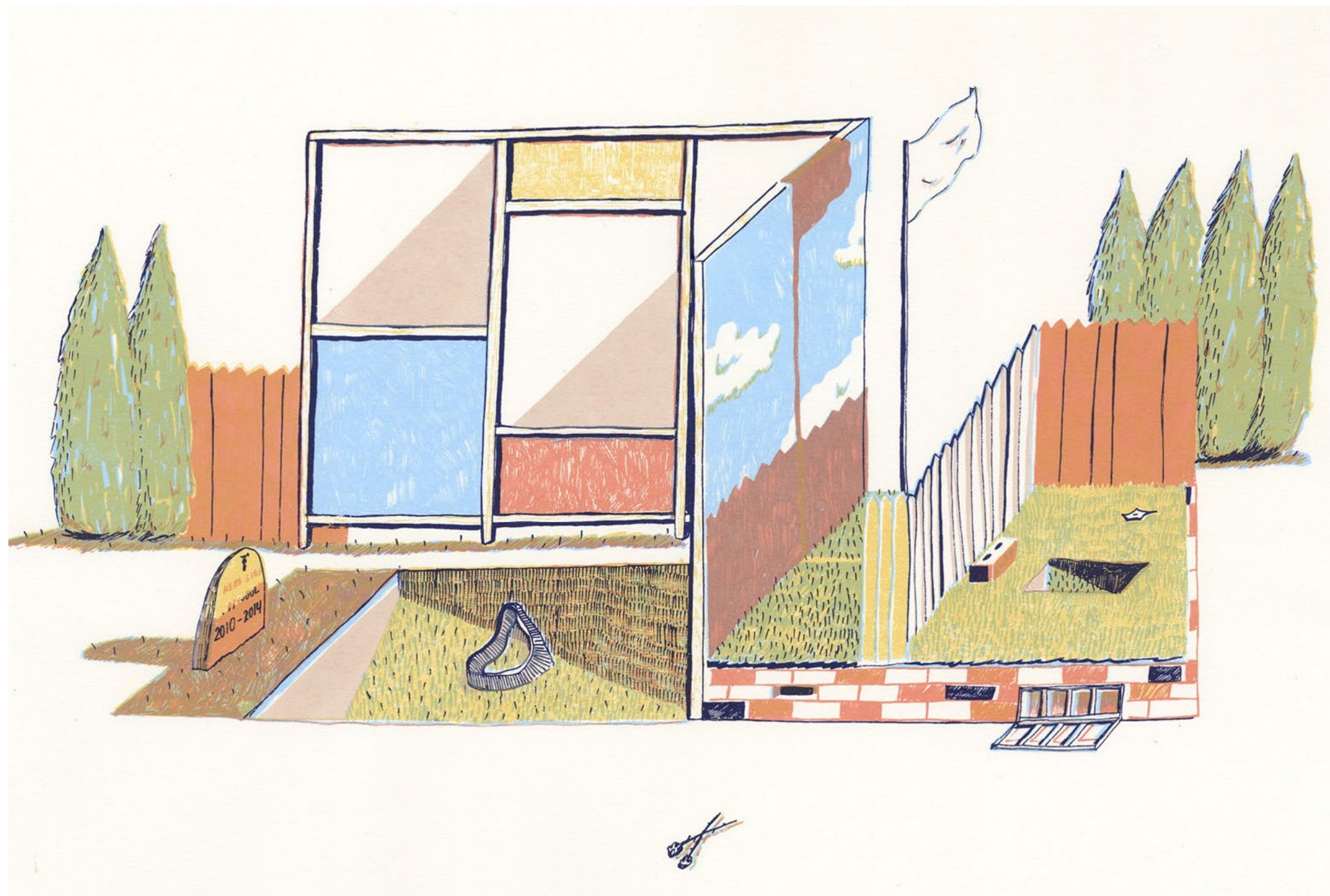
McKinzie is interested in the American Midwest. The consistency in her subject matter is inimitable, and the cars, bricks, and wood grains all bear her signature style which is succinctly quotidian. The subject matter of both her formal drawings and her doodles is elusive. Why do crowds of people line up so neatly to jump into a hole in the parking lot (Figure 2)? What is the point of hammering a dog's tongue with four nails to a two by four? Such quizzical artistic

portrayal pairs eerily with some explicit statements in her work, such as "here lies my soul 2010-2014" (Figure 3): words barely enter her work, but they are powerfully evocative when they do. Moreover, the numerous strange objects in her work are based on real life. McKinzie favors, for example, a gravity-defying tree which exerts horizontal momentum, but it is just a tree in her backyard from when she was growing up (Figure 4). Likewise, her fascination with golf balls, cups, and pins stems from her experience with the sport, and she never considers their isolated out-of-context appearance to be problematic.

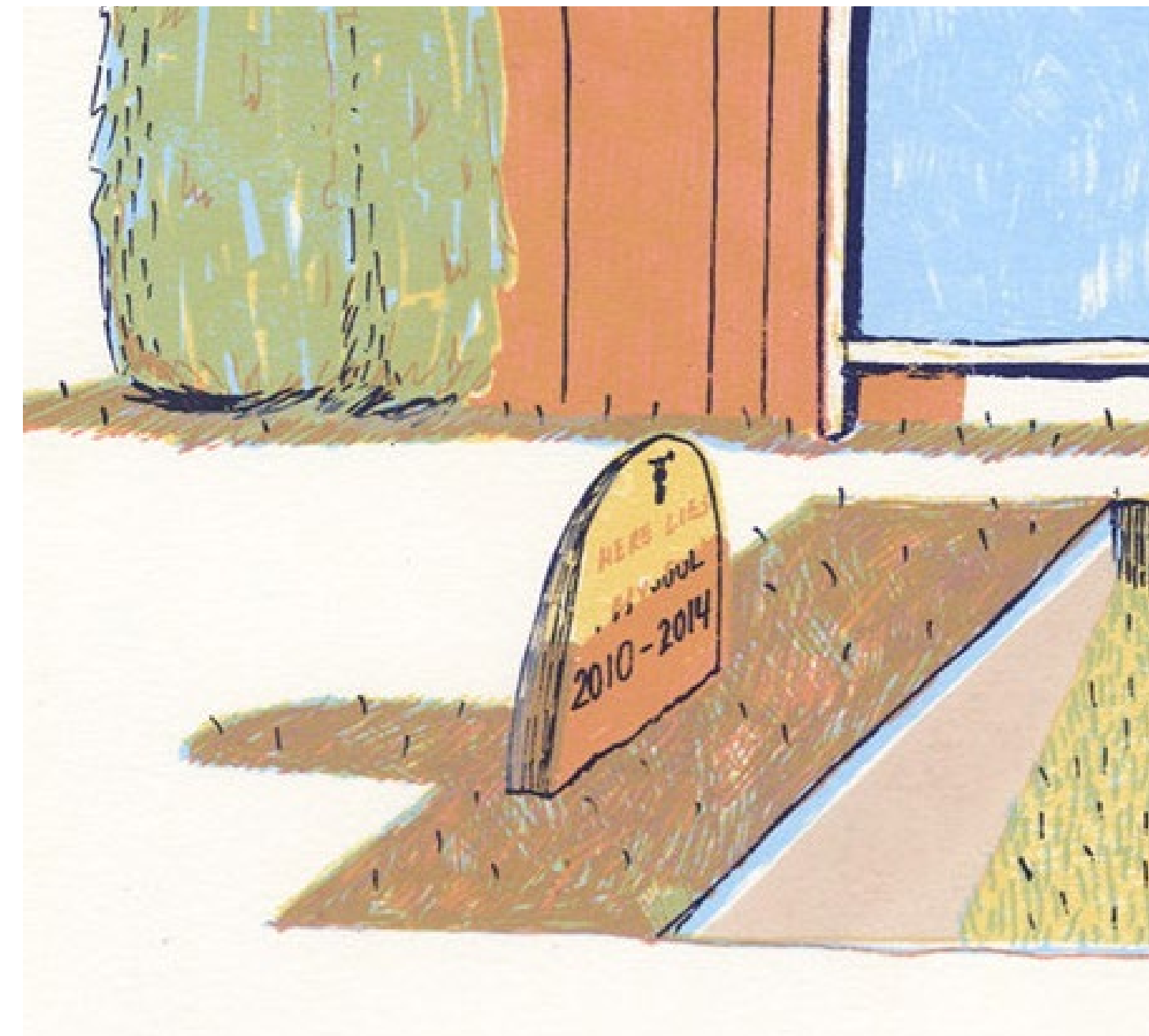
Carl Andre proclaims with humor and practicality that "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not." His intention to warrant the existence of isolation, in my opinion, effects his economic use of materials. Similarly for McKinzie, a longing to justify this "hole-thing paradigm" exists in her practice (Figure 5). Because her golf ball holes reside comfortably on digital drawings or silkscreen prints, they bypass a critical discourse of materiality. As a result, the lack of context and meaning might be the *raison d'être*. Few elaborations are ever visually tangible for her scenes of life and death, but the intrinsic logic and criteria press for dedicated moments of deciphering. It also seems that no space is reserved for the element of chance, because few things escape her calculation. On the other hand,



Figure 3



**Untitled**, 2017  
Silkscreen print, 14×24"  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta



Detail

Figure 4



**Ninety-degree Tree**, 2019  
Ink on paper, 4×10'  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta

although I usually find artists overusing autobiographical imagery to fetishize pure self-expression, the depiction of her favorite subjects is honest and down-to-earth.

McKinzie once told me how she first started thinking about Phil's work. During the graduate open studio event for fall semester 2018, she toured most studios and eventually landed in Phil's, which is around 10 feet away from hers. She told him she never believed in chance because life goes on no matter what: what has happened has inevitably happened, and what is yet to happen will eventually happen; life honors choices, but it only has one outcome in retrospect. I suspected Phil was intimidated by her remarks, and I wondered whether they had spoken to each other except for casual greetings. McKinzie then introduced Phil to an essay by Margaret Iversen, "The Aesthetics of Chance," which engendered many of the subsequent critical conversations they had individually and collectively with me.

It was a coincidence for me to see Phil again at RISD. I was invited to do studio visits with the RISD graduate students, but I had met Phil in New York in 2012 and got to know him again in 2014 when he was almost finished with his teaching fellowship in rural China. I had remembered him as an architect who made evocative sculpture models (**Figure 6**), so I was surprised to see his new-founded desire to be a

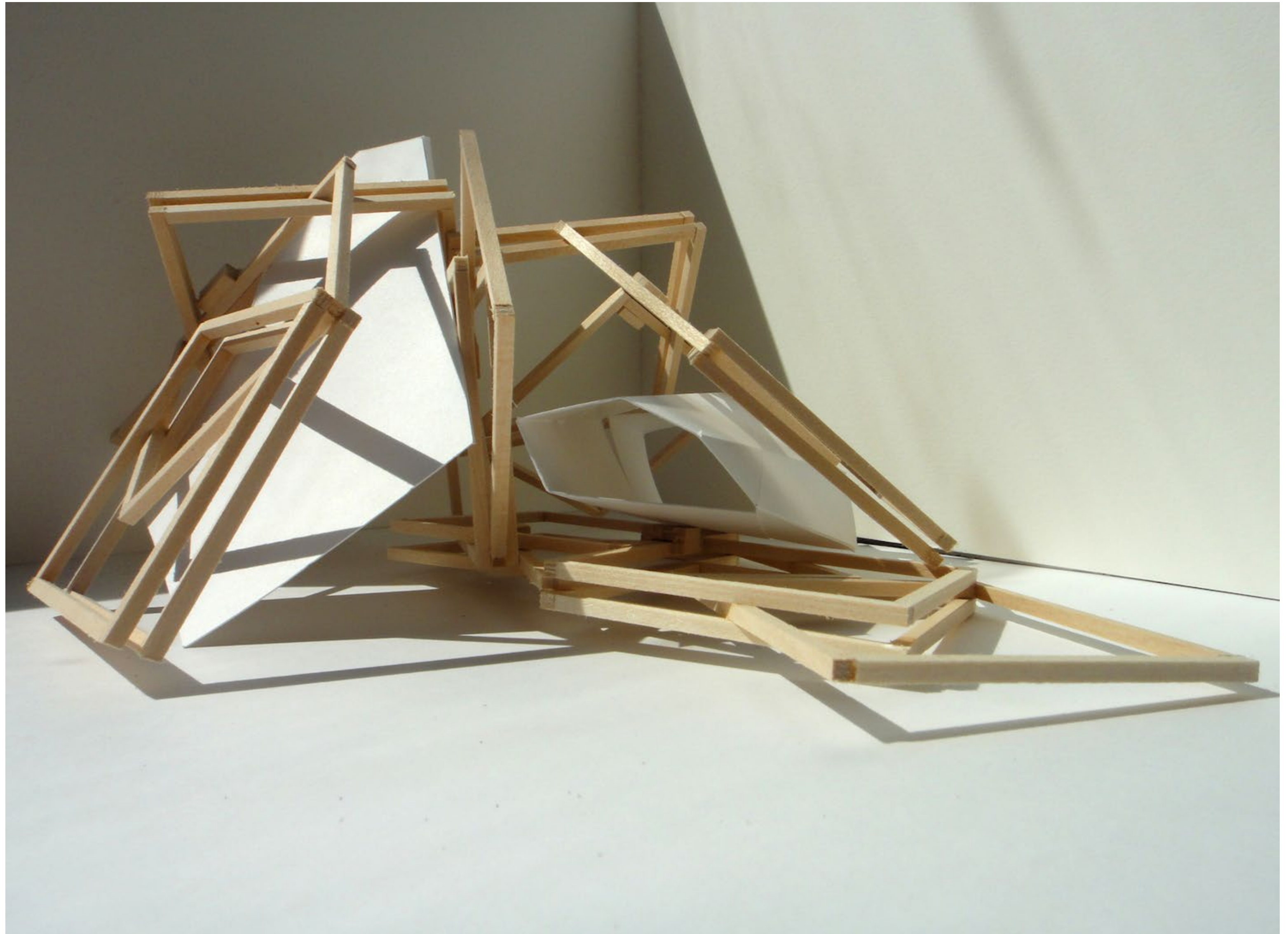


Figure 5



*View of A Hole, View from A Hole*, 2019  
Digital Drawing  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta

Figure 6



*Bound by Architecture Reality*, 2012  
Sculpture made of basswood and Bristol board, 8×8×6"  
Courtesy of TPQ Studio

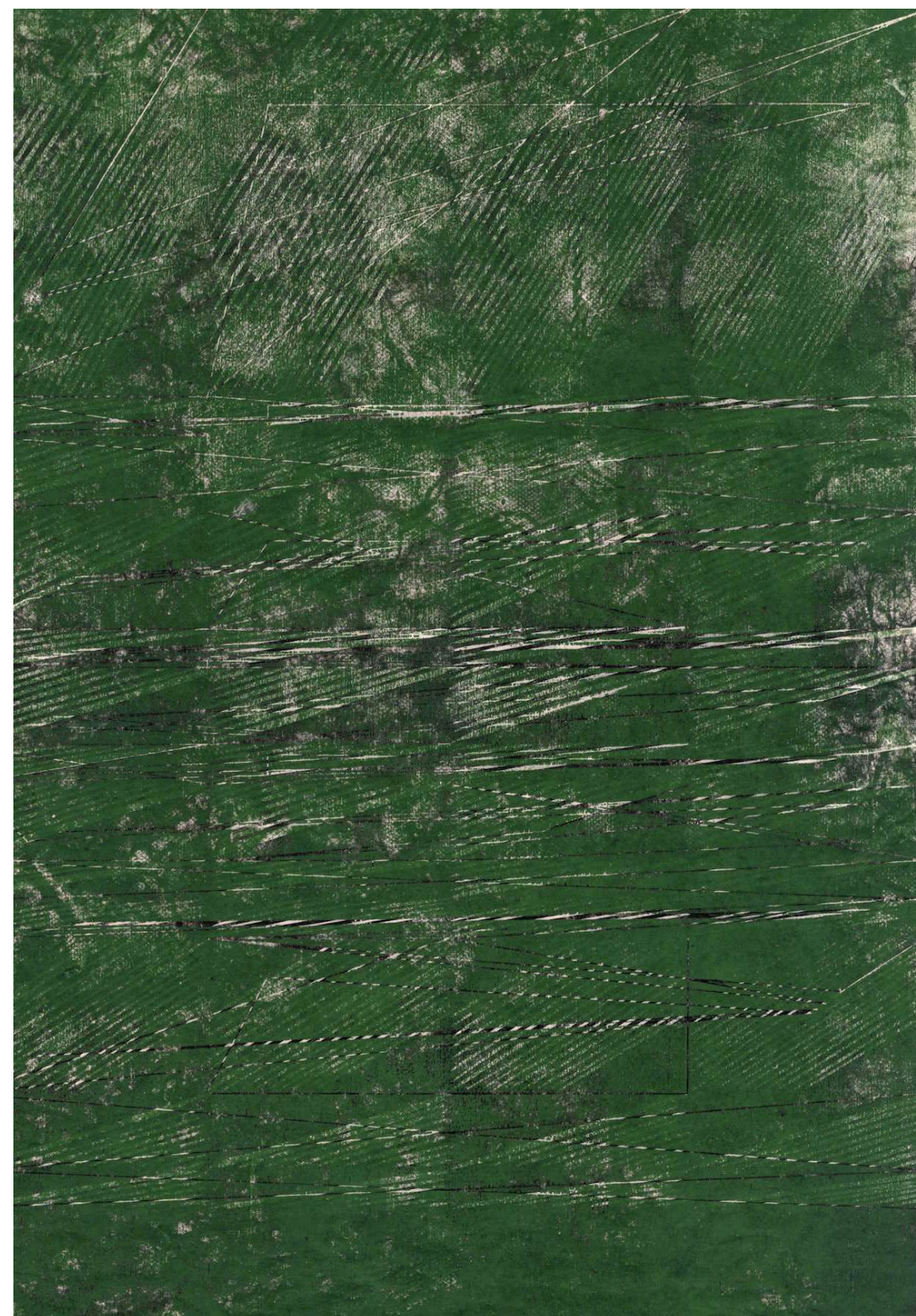


Figure 7



Invitation to Open Studio in Schloss Plüschow, Germany  
2015  
Courtesy of Schloss Plüschow

Figure 8



Wismar Autobiography, 2015  
Woodblock print, 16.4×11.7"  
Courtesy of TPQ Studio

visual artist. His summer in New York in 2014 was taxing, as he attempted to finish a full semester of workload within six weeks at New York University. It was impossible to track him down in the East Village, and he said he was trying his best to “test the temperature” of the art world, a metaphor he quite favored, so that he could make a decision whether he would jump in. And he did.

Phil might have boasted about his dedication to the element of chance, but I knew he was communicating with chance in a different way than one would think. Because of his position as the youngest artist-in-residence in a rural castle in Plüschow, Germany in the fall of 2015, he was too inexperienced to call himself an artist (Figure 7). Bear in mind that this opportunity to live in Germany came only a year after his test run in New York. He felt fortunate to receive this artist residency fellowship. Our email correspondence proved he was insecure as a resident: he would complain to me he did not understand the function of a spacious studio, and that he did not want to be restricted to a town of around 400 people. His works at that time alluded to this sense of solitude (Figure 8), and he consistently traveled to nearby cities to escape this castle, replete with traces of other more established artists. (He traveled daily to a city 25 miles away to go to the gym and to do grocery shopping; he was infamously called the “Asian egg man” by the Deutsche

Bahn conductors.) The occurrence of the element of chance in his prints, therefore, was reasonable, because it served as a protective membrane: it necessitated his image-creating instructions and systems (Figure 9) so that the austerity of his art disallowed questioning and engagement. It also overshadowed the spirit of Phil and subordinated his artistic presence merely as an algorithm-generating machine.

Since Phil started his graduate study at RISD, I sensed a renewed vision to take responsibility for his recent works. It seemed that giving total autonomy to chance no longer satisfied him, because he was striving for other means and platforms to generate his images (Figure 10). However, I was still sure that both Phil and McKinzie gave much thought to the element of chance. Phil’s recent intention to question his loyalty came as no surprise, but to distance himself from chance still addressed the centrality of chance. On the contrary, that McKinzie was willing to negate chance also suggested she was far from inattentive but rather disinterested and unexcited. This scenario of push and pull resulted in hours of discussion between these two peers, and I found such conversation superfluous and vapid because chance was still situated in the foci. At the very least, some artists have championed chance in the past century and its artistic merit might have already been exhausted. In other words, the debate revolving around the applicability



**Figure 9**

Before letting chance dominate, one should understand the dimension of the rectangular woodblock and subsequently note a fitting module/unit. For instance, if the woodblock is 18 inches by 30 inches, a singular unit could be 1 inch, and thus the block is now 18 by 30. Once the woodblock is redefined in the context of modules, one can start the process of chance by rolling a dice. Firstly, one needs to use the units to create a grid system which, again, redefines the block. After rolling a number, that number denotes how many modules the first row/column should entail. And then the second number suggests the next row/column. An example would be if the first number is 3, and one is trying to divide the vertical side of the woodblock, the first new row will entail 3 units of 1 inch, which is 3 inches. One should stop once the rolled number is bigger than the remaining modules, and proceed to the next dimension, column or row respectively. After re-redefining the block, it should now have an irregular grid system, the length of every row or column containing any number of modules between 1 and 6, inclusive. Because of the grid system, one generates intersections, and by definition the four corners are also considered intersections. Now one starts another round of rolling in order to create quadrangles. Starting from the first intersection, which is the top left corner, one rolls the dice to determine the first vertex for the quadrangle. One then rolls the dice again to determine the second vertex (and thus define the length of the top side of the quadrangle). For example, if 1 is rolled, the first vertex of the quadrangle is the first point, namely the top left corner. If 4 is rolled subsequently, the top side of the quadrangle then goes from the first point on the first row to the fifth point, thus spanning four column units of the irregular grid system. After defining the top side of the quadrangle, one rolls the dice for the third time to find the height. If 5 is rolled, for example, as the third number in the series, the quadrangle will have the height of five row units of the irregular grid system, and the third vertex of the quadrangle is thus 5 row units down from the second vertex of the quadrangle (and they always lie on the same vertical line). The location of the fourth vertex does not require rolling, because by definition it is also going to be based on the second roll in this series. For instance, if the second rolled number is 3, then the second vertex is three units from the first vertex, and the fourth vertex is accordingly three units from the third vertex. In order to centralize the composition of the work, an important note here is that the second and the fourth vertices will be located to the left of the first and the third vertices, respectively, if the first located vertex is already in the right half of the woodblock. Should the first vertex fall exactly on the central axis (the probability of which is based on the initial creation of the irregular grid), one can choose to either create a left-leaning or right-leaning quadrangle. After three rounds of rolling, the position of the quadrangle is realized, and one rolls the dice one last time to determine the texture of the quadrangle. By definition, the texture of the quadrangle is a set of parallel lines, and the direction is based on the following algorithm: if 1 is rolled, the lines are parallel to the top side of the quadrangle (the texture of the quadrangle is thus a set of horizontal lines); if 2 is rolled, the lines are parallel to the left side of the quadrangle; if 3, the bottom side (again, the texture is a set of horizontal lines); if 4, the right side; if 5, the diagonal connecting the left vertex on the top side of the quadrangle and the right vertex on the bottom side (it does not necessarily mean that it is always connecting the first vertex and the fourth vertex); if 6, the other diagonal. Therefore, the creation of one textured quadrangle is based on rolling the dice for four times. And one rolls and creates quadrangles continuously, breaking the restraints of rows in the way that the first point on the second row immediately follows the last point of the first row (namely the top right corner). It is possible that one side or the height of the quadrangle exceeds the block. In this case, one will maximize the side and the height within the limit of the woodblock, meaning that the height of the quadrangle can be less than the third rolled number and that the length of the bottom side can be less than the second rolled number. The act of locating textured quadrangles will end once the first rolled number of a potential quadrangle is bigger than the remaining number of vertices on the second last row (the bottom side of the block is the last row). After the completion of mapping and texturing quadrangles, one inks the woodblock and print on a piece of paper. One then turns the woodblock 180 degrees, ink, re-print, and finish.

*Chance Algorithm*, 2015  
Courtesy of TPQ Studio

of chance might embody a logical flaw of its questionable relevancy to contemporary artistic breakthrough.

The possibility for McKinzie and Phil to collaborate emerged as early as the final critique for their first semester in 2018. Because of their contrasting approaches during group critiques, Phil had suggested he could channel McKinzie's intentions and ventriloquize for her session as an exhibition guide in Fletcher, the graduate fine arts building at the art school. McKinzie agreed it would be an exciting performance, because critiques at RISD have been "too benign." After some contemplation, however, they decided not to proceed because it was too early in their study to evaluate and probe institutional values; it might be beneficial to stay in the quagmire of Fletcher and analyze the inherent physical and emotional qualities of the space before appropriating them as artistic inspirations. In fact, the very pre-condition for a potential collaborative effort between these two artists, I believe, was based on their perceived personae. During critiques, Phil talked a great deal and perhaps unlocked the potential of conversation as an artistic medium. In comparison, McKinzie's introductions were always terse and exoteric, forcing the work to be the ultimate arena.

Timing could not work out better for them, because the Sol Koffler Graduate Student

Gallery in downtown Providence scheduled an exhibition to showcase works by printmaking graduate students. On December 3, 2018, they invited me to McKinzie's studio to discuss their plans for the show. They both had clear intentions about what they would like to achieve. McKinzie was the intellectual leader, because it would be "one of her dream projects" if she could present all the prints in the same edition side by side on the wall. They would be framed and sold on-site. Phil was neutral regarding the exact specifics of this work, but he told me he needed to argue for his position in this series. They were fairly fastidious when it came to uploading their proposals: they used the same template but reversed the order of their names to assume shared authorship (**Figure 11**).



Figure 10



JoE, 2019  
Charcoal on paper, each scroll 15'x30"  
Courtesy of TPQ Studio

Figure 11

Exhibition Proposal for Phil and McKinzie

What is the language of printmaking which is not salient in other media? What is the essence of editioning outside marketing strategies? How can artists work with curators to (un)define the completion of both the artwork and the installation process? Is it, at all, possible to resist such moments of completion even if the works are created specifically for a show?

For the Printmaking Graduate Biennial, we are interested in collaborating to create one work.

*Ten Identical Prints*

Medium: ten silkscreen prints, ten wooden frames, ten nails, one gallery label, and potentially ten red dots

Size: 110 inches by 13 inches (tentative).

On a side note, what we hope to do might be interpreted as Duchampian. We cannot deny it but want to try resisting this idea. What excites us more for the Printmaking Graduate Biennial is the opportunity it affords us to work with a gallery which can potentially unpack the notion of a student gallery and a student artist.

Exhibition Proposal for McKinzie and Phil

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*Exhibition Proposal*, 2019  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta and TPQ Studio



## During the Exhibition A Defined Beginning and an Ambiguous End

Figure 12



**Ten Identical Prints**, 2019

Ten silkscreen prints, ten wooden frames, ten nails, one gallery label, and maybe ten red dots

Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta and TPQ Studio

They did not get in touch with me during winter break, but they did send me a message when they were about to install the work at Sol Koffler. When I ran into McKinzie on the staircase at Fletcher, I offered to help carry some of the frames, but she said she could handle them herself. I went to Phil's studio and asked how they had eventually decided to make the prints. Phil skirted this question and mentioned it was time to head to the gallery.

The ten framed prints were already on the wall (Figure 12). Formally, the rectilinear geometry alludes to architectural grids, and the meticulously hand-drawn lines contrast significantly with their flattened volumes. The background does not show evidence of exceptional care in handling, as a number of faint marks accompany the image in the foreground (Figure 13). It must have been easy to omit such careless remnants of production, yet they decided to keep them. Moreover, the monotone reminded me of Phil's claim that "the color black fails to deliver mundane metaphors." Despite McKinzie's counter-argument that it was not black—it had a warmer shade than a conventional ivory black—I was sure these silkscreen prints established Phil's undisguised presence. A closer look at the gallery label proved me right: it noted the artist was McKinzie, but the ten silkscreen prints came from Phil (Figure 14). This condition of the collaboration led to a

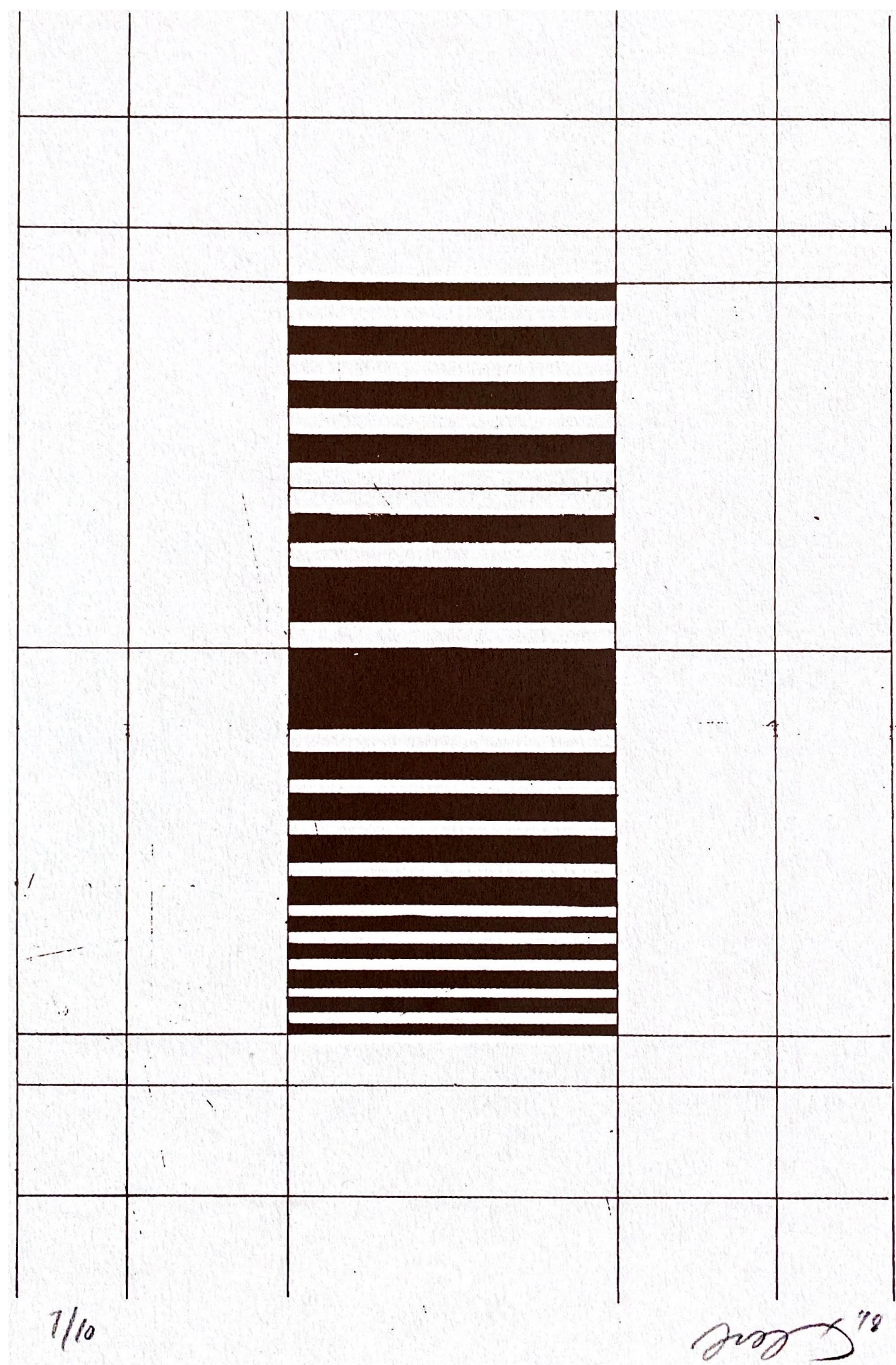
specific way to interpret the work: because of the hierarchy suggested by the label, McKinzie appeared to have appropriated Phil's prints. But why had Phil avoided the question of the production of the prints? These prints clearly embodied Phil's aesthetic, but why could he not say his prints served as a subset of McKinzie's series? If he was uncomfortable with the idea of hierarchy, why could he not end the collaboration? I did not think he would have any problem saying no, and McKinzie would have no issue taking rejections. In fact, Phil had other prints in the exhibition. He would still be in the show if they stopped honoring their collaboration and McKinzie could instead easily frame some of her spectacular engravings (Figure 15).

I had dinner with McKinzie and Phil on the opening night of January 10, 2019. Phil planned to attend the opening with me but McKinzie did not because of her monitor shift in the printmaking studio. Phil tried to convince her it was okay to be derelict for one night, but she said she had visited the show and did not see the point of attending the opening. I instantly knew that McKinzie's absence, when grouped with Phil's presence and the hierarchical gallery label, would provoke questions. I was unsure, however, how aware they were about this dynamic.

Artists in the Sol Koffler Gallery had their friends and families joining the celebration,



Figure 13



Print from *Ten Identical Prints*, 2018  
Silkscreen print, 14×11"  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta and TPQ Studio

and I saw a diversity of printing techniques and concepts. I found the situation competitive, as future art world players intended to intermingle with each other to form connections. Because I was not part of RISD and nobody really knew me in the space, it did not overwhelm me. But I did sense that some younger artists must have been unfamiliar with the performative nature of exhibition openings. Many artists chose to camp in front of their work, and seeing Phil ham-fisted between his own and the collaboration was ludicrous because of his inability to prioritize either. People were more interested in the series because the other print by Phil was simply a traditional woodblock print that did not require too much deciphering (Figure 16). I heard Phil elaborate on the nature of the series, but many people were confused why McKinzie was absent. A couple of visitors knew both of them, so their comments were largely about the formal qualities of the print. One person told Phil that these prints were not identical because of the different edition numbers, hence the title *Ten Identical Prints* was problematic. One of Phil's friends from New York expressed that this series was visibly masculine, and I thought it was insightful to include gender analysis in the process of decoding this work. The most exciting comment came from a professor who had mentored both of them. He said this series posed significant questions about authorship, and the gallery label provided critical

information which betrayed the intention behind these prints. Also, he explicitly said the visual language of the print did not surprise him, because he knew Phil was still fascinated with the element of chance.

I had not contemplated the role of chance before the professor broached this topic. This series is certainly uncovering traces of chance, is it not? The subtle marks in the background, the irregular grid, as well as the unequal distribution of the rectangular volumes all attest to some level of homage to the aleatoric. A re-examination of the initial exhibition proposal suggested it omitted any discussion of the element of chance. Were they really not paying attention to chance at all?

A re-reading of the proposal also placed the market as the bedrock, a premium pedestal for their work. Their goal was to sell these prints from a student gallery, the ultimate in-between space the art world scarcely traveled to because of the baggage of the student identity. It seemed they did not encounter any resistance, and I wonder to what extent their proposal was read before acceptance. On the other hand, the audience for a student gallery came from either inside or around the institution—any visitors not affiliated with the school could be perceived as outliers. The conventional notion of a market thus became idealized and essentially absent for the setting of Sol Koffler, because this student gallery



Figure 14

**McKinzie Trotta**  
*MFA Printmaking 2020*

Ten identical prints  
Ten silkscreen prints by Tongji Philip Qian,  
ten wooden frames, ten nails, red pencil

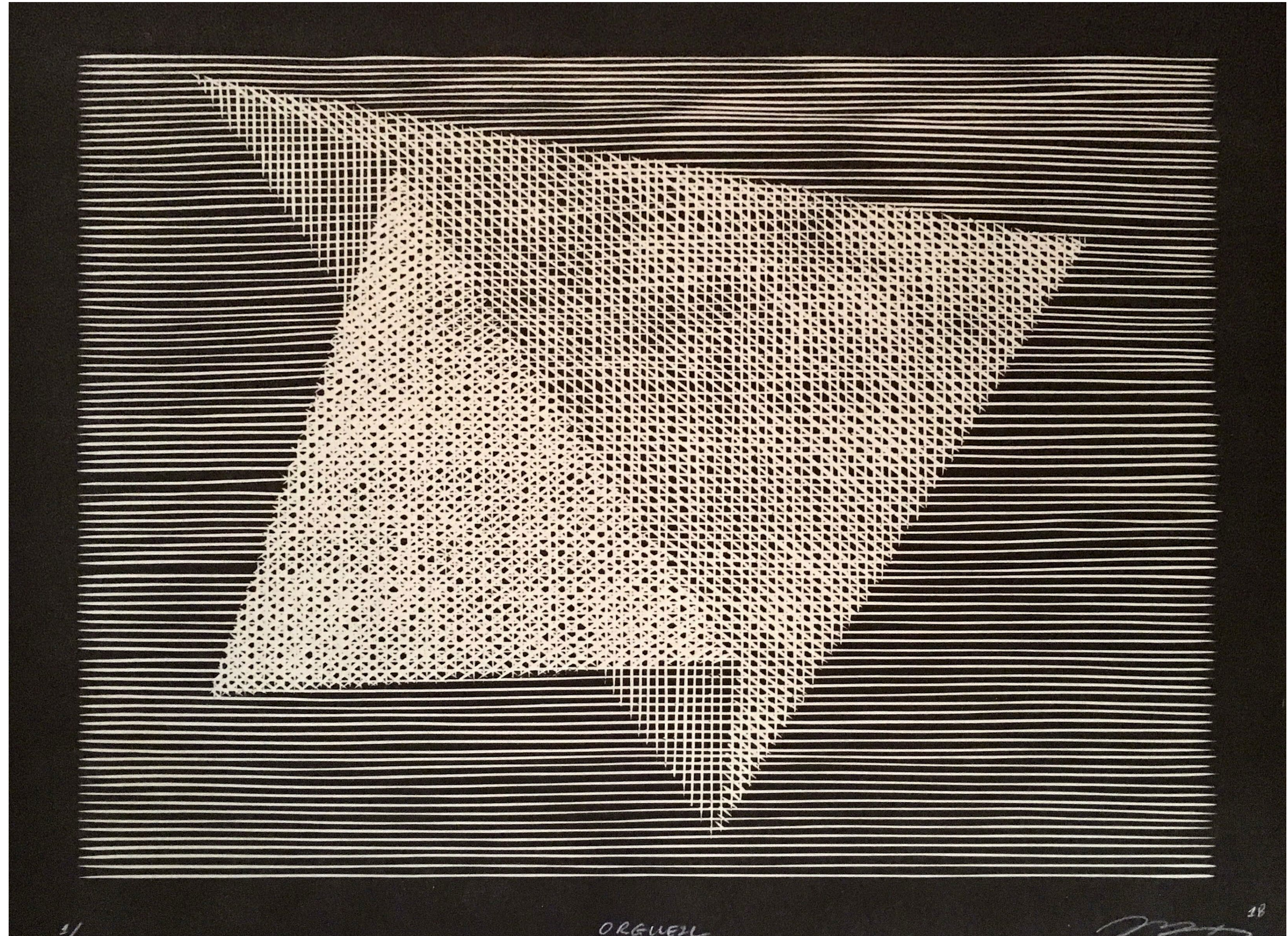
Gallery label from the Graduate Printmaking Biennial  
2019

Figure 15



**A Nail Describing An Apple**, 2019  
Engraving, 10×10"  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta

Figure 16



**Orgueil**, 2018  
Woodblock print, 18×24"  
Courtesy of TPQ Studio









previous static position. One could certainly argue that the series was unkempt, their care overlooked, but I had to say I was impressed by how this work had expanded and grown.

In the context of an exhibition venue, the discourse revolving around stability seems to parallel formality. One would assume adjusting a work during the course of a show would imply the cancellation of some social contracts, and the merit of the artwork would likely be at risk. I would also claim that poor artistic manipulation of formal gallery conventions might suggest disrespect rather than creativity. Because McKinzie and Phil stated unambiguously in the proposal that their work attempted to resist a Duchampian accent, I assume they did not want to intrude into the gallery with a watered-down version of Duchamp's *Fountain*. On the other hand, they seemed uninterested in challenging the institution, since the intrinsic problems associated with student exhibitions would always be there. Are they, then, probing into the perpetual stability of Sol Koffler by periodically changing the look of their series?

During my visit to the gallery, I thought I could offer to buy a print to initiate sales. I went to McKinzie's studio to inquire, because the gallery receptionist did not know whether any works were for sale. McKinzie was there, and she told me it would be \$5.65 for the first print and the price would double for the

subsequent ones. I decided to buy two. As I was ready to transfer her \$5.65 for the first and \$11.30 for the second, she told me it would be \$11.30 for both of them because I would purchase two at the same time; the doubling algorithm would only be activated after each purchase. I found it curious because her pricing philosophy was clearly considered yet she refrained from explicit marketing. She asked me to select two edition numbers, and I chose "1/10" and "5/10."

\$5.65 is a very calculated number for McKinzie, because it is, as she explained, based on the total cost of 10 frames, which is \$56.50. In this sense, the first print is essentially free, because the buyer will literally be paying for the cost of one frame. The print starts to have a value when at least one is sold. If everything goes as planned and they manage to sell all prints, the total revenue from this series will be \$5779.95.

Phil came to the studio shortly after, and I told him I had just purchased two prints. He hesitated for a second and left the studio immediately. Five minutes later, he came back and handed me the two prints I had just purchased. I was flabbergasted. I was not expecting them to be available to me during the exhibition. I rushed down to the gallery space, only to see the same receptionist grinning at me. It seemed they did not notice Phil retrieving works at all. I maintained





Figure 18



Installation view of *Ten Identical Prints*, 2019  
Ten silkscreen prints, ten wooden frames, ten nails, one gallery label, and maybe ten red dots  
Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta and TPQ Studio

my composure, detoured a bit, and finally saw *Ten Identical Prints*. Predictably, eight frames were still hung on the wall, and two nails were exposed (Figure 18). Also, two red dots appeared under the two nails, which must have been drawn by Phil to indicate the sales. The composition had changed seismically because the austerity associated with the presentation of the entire edition was neutralized. The descending prints, when juxtaposed with the two voided spaces of the first work and the fifth, activated a different sense of interplay: the white wall became an integral part of the work because it divided the series and interacted with the frames.

I was struck by the ramification of my purchase. My decision to buy not only changed the composition of the gallery wall but also compromised their professionalism by prompting Phil to retrieve frames in the middle of an exhibition. Did I trigger a series of pre-meditated actions by McKinzie and Phil? Although I was not the artist on the gallery label, I became one of the makers for this peculiar scenario.

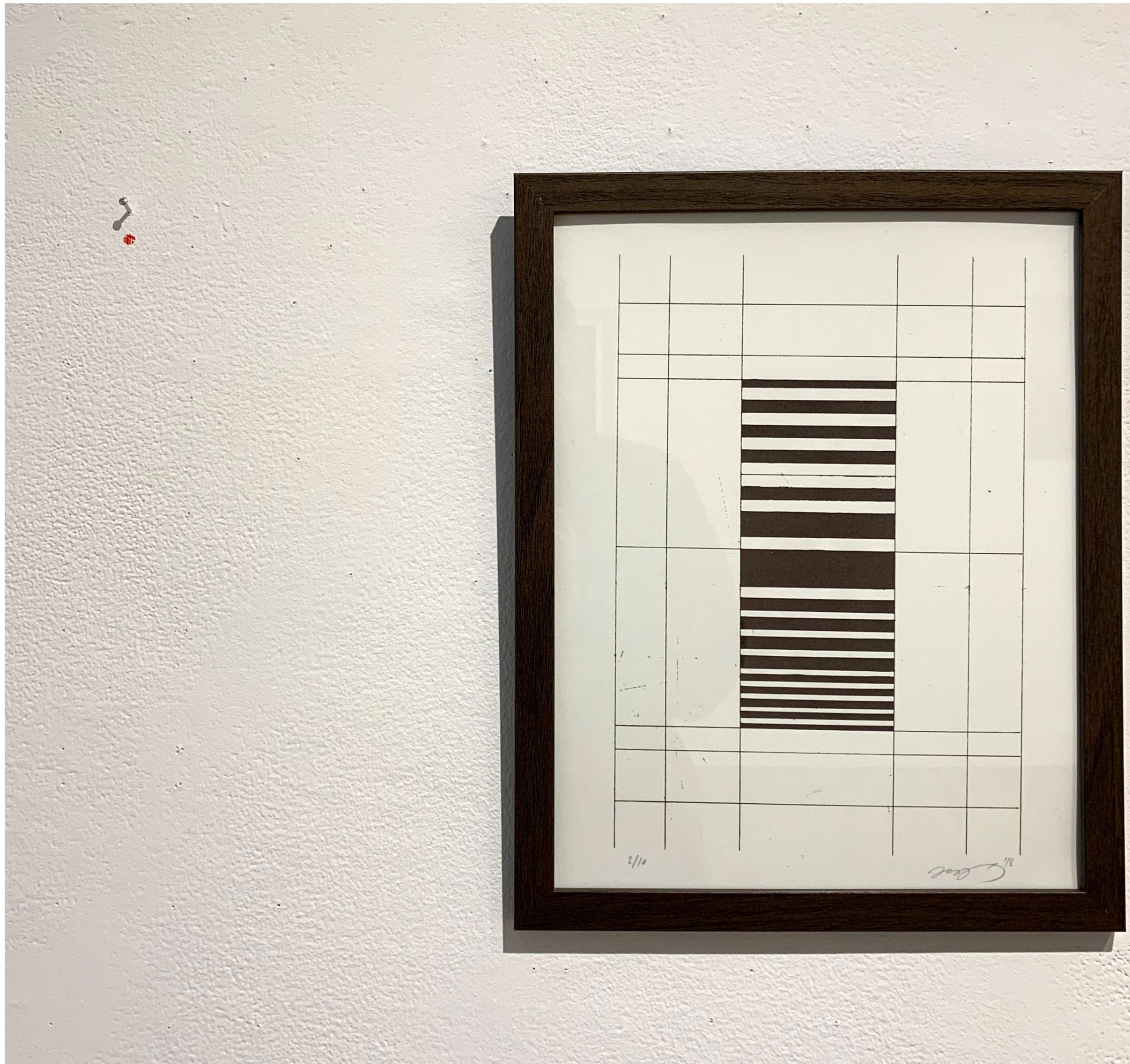
I drove back to my house in upstate New York with these works, puzzled by what had happened. As I passed through all the towns along the Hudson River which McKinzie, Phil and I enjoyed visiting for our sporadic weekend trips, I grew conscious of the nature of being an art critic. Do critics need

to maintain distance when they discuss works? Can they promote works? And more specifically for me now, am I an artist/critic rather than an art critic? These questions would normally lead to nowhere, but they became hauntingly urgent for the moment. I was not interested in participating in their work, yet my footsteps were clear. Although I suspected they were essentially tricking me to intervene, I was impressed by their open-mindedness. They did tell me anything and everything. It was unplanned that I decided to buy two prints, but did they predict that I would? I also realized I could vandalize their work by offering to buy all of the remaining prints so that nothing at all would be on view. One edition would cost \$11.30, and eight of them were still available; if I bought them at the same time, it would be \$90.40. Would it be worth it if I decided to buy all and make sure everything was sold? How would the ten red drawn dots be perceived at the Sol Koffler Gallery? After all, could the work still survive if the red dots were the only visible traces of their series at Sol Koffler?

I felt increasingly discomfited by the idea that I stepped into their system. Because my purchases had irrefutable repercussions both formally and conceptually, I wondered whether *Ten Identical Prints* had some kind of “staged openness.” Unlike other works at Sol Koffler which were complete by the opening, their conceptual project was not, because they



Figure 19



Installation view of *Ten Identical Prints*, 2019

Ten silkscreen prints, ten wooden frames, ten nails, one gallery label, and maybe ten red dots

Courtesy of McKinzie Trotta and TPQ Studio

had expected that sales were possible. As a buyer selected the edition to be taken off the wall, knowingly or not, a succinct message was delivered: the artists offered some level of artistic autonomy to the buyer who could change the “look” of the presentation on the wall. A more exciting yet slightly morbid interpretation, as previously mentioned, was that an invitation was equally extended to the informed to vandalize; it would cost under \$100 to buy all of the prints and surrender the whole stage to these hand-drawn red dots (Figure 19).

The reception for *Ten Identical Prints* is thus an intriguing topic. Student artists seem to welcome feedback, which ideally informs their future projects. Reception for *Ten Identical Prints*, however, happened before the completion of the project not in the sense of casual discussions but in terms of its function to determine current configurations on the gallery wall. It reminds me of the seminal chance piece *4'33"* by John Cage, which questioned the somewhat artificial gap between the artist and the audience. To invite the surrounding ambience to be part of the aesthetic elements for *4'33"*, Cage challenged the conventions in a concert hall and merged the distinction between a passive listener and an active collaborator. The “fourth wall” became less dominant, because the hierarchy was transformed to be less hegemonic. Furthermore, the interchangeability

between makers and participants activated moments of alienation, acclimatization, and accentuation for authorship.

The most peculiar commonality between *4'33"* and *Ten Identical Prints* is their generosity. As makers share their authority and incorporate reception as an active artistic gesture, subsequent social occasions of admission or dismissal seem irrelevant because of their inclusion into and the inseparability from the work—the division of art and life becomes attenuated. When Cage finished the performance of *4'33"*, he could effect no further changes because the work had been complete. In other words, the original *4'33"* in 1952 was frozen in time, rejecting further manipulations yet dramatically influencing other chance operations. Because Cage was crowned after the self-revelatory action painters declared their status as artists *par excellence*, his self-effacing dedication to the element of chance was widely celebrated and essentially inimitable.

However, Cage did not intimidate McKinzie and Phil. Their series stretches beyond an homage to Cage because of its allusion to the roles played by the market: some frames are unsold and remain on the wall, while the absence of others only punctuates the symbolic red dots. This specific dichotomy poses questions such as where the missing frames are and whether the red dots indicate





sales despite the setting of a student gallery. Furthermore, buyers make casual choices about their desired edition number and realize only afterwards that a co-relation exists between the number and the imminent change in composition. Rather than Cage's whole-hearted endorsement of ambience, *Ten Identical Prints* embodies gradual inclusion, because the process from buying to understanding is subtle. In other words, the sales pave the way for the vicissitude of the installation, enriching both formal and conceptual foundations of the project. Moreover, *Ten Identical Prints* is less confined to a prestigious venue, like Cage's Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, NY, because it reflects on activities in a diversity of settings including the artist studio, the gallery, and the market. Ultimately, *Ten Identical Prints* takes pride in its state as work-in-progress, and the artists embrace romantic gestures of both proffering autonomy and withholding power. Deception becomes artistic.

*Ten Identical Prints* remained on view without further incident until February 17, 2019, when McKinzie de-installed the eight frames and took them back to her studio.





## ***After the Exhibition*** All Theater

**A**t the end of December 2019,  
I received this email from Phil.

Dear TJ:

Firstly, I hope you are well. Since you saw us packing and shipping the third edition we sold to Germany, I would like to tell you again that I really appreciate your purchase of the first two prints. I hope you continue to enjoy them.

This email might be long due. Despite the gallery label which states that I was the printer, I did not participate in the production of the series. McKinzie designed the prints, printed them, signed them for me, and eventually framed them. She was trying to make a print according to her understanding of my aesthetics of chance. This idea was pre-established. My contribution started as we decided to collaborate for the Printmaking Biennial at Sol Koffler, and concluded once we finalized that she would produce everything. We did not have a contract per se, and everything was based on one single handshake.

Although I will agree my presence at the exhibition opening has projected a particular interpretation on the collaboration, McKinzie's mysterious character also contributes to the complexity and the nuance of the story. It would be farcical to say we were challenging the institution—because we were not and in contrast really appreciated the opportunity to work together for an exhibition—and it would be equally absurd to claim we were not interested in the actual site. In a way, we believe we will continue to complete the series because we will sell and mail them to different locations in the world, further broadening our inquiry *vis-à-vis* the absolute limit of a site. The potential of the multiplicity of prints thus parallels a tendency to transcend geographical, social, and institutional borders. Please have faith in us that we will continue to extend the life span of our series.

That said, it will be my greatest regret if you take my explanation as a malicious act. I had not wanted to explain this collaboration with McKinzie for the same rationale delineated here. I appreciate your support and honor your trust, and please do not spread the word about this aspect of our series. Now that we are ready to proceed with other forms of performance, I find it vital to express my gratitude again and to elaborate on some details which I had failed to address.

With best wishes for the holiday and 2020,  
Phil





## “Now” Yes to Distance and No to Irony

As Bertolt Brecht and others deployed a theatrical technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect), the very distance between the expected and the perceived was where the image emerged. In other words, estrangement did not appear from either belief or interpretation, but from the failure of intuition. This very gap, albeit an artistic construction, exposed the conventionality of the bourgeois theater and poignantly directed a distinct path for epic theater.

Providence is neither New York nor Boston. It does attract some attention from the art world, but it is perceived essentially as a pitstop. The same argument applies to the gallery of Sol Koffler, where traffic comes from the school because of an institutional roster of student shows. In a way, Providence and Sol Koffler reflect subsets of the art world yet remain largely self-involved. The location of Providence and the character of Sol Koffler contrast with the prestige of Rhode Island School of Design, and such gaps between perception and reality would have been favored by Brecht et al. Indeed, this conundrum becomes a catalyst for *Ten Identical Prints*.

McKinzie and Phil are not harbingers in critiquing the ways in which various art worlds operate. To compare these two emerging artists with Robert Smithson, of course, is identical

to weighing two newborn puppies with King Kong, but the shared itinerary from the gallery to the “field” and then back to the gallery is more than remotely similar. For Smithson, the willingness to define site-to-gallery relations prompted him to travel to the American West to secure new habitats for his art. Because white-cube exhibitions usually evince indifference to the sites outside the cultural landscapes of the art world, the materials Smithson collected in rural deserts, which are not considered proper locations for artistic production, provoke a sense of isolation and nostalgia. *Ten Identical Prints* is coterminous in this sense of locating such new “fields” because the duo started their journey in Sol Koffler and only left the space to return in order to adjust the composition based on sales; they walked out of the gallery not to escape, but to come back with new artistic intentions. In other words, their “field” is not outside of the institution, but within. By incorporating and mobilizing the market in their art-making, McKinzie and Phil maximized the conditions of a student gallery and struggled to enact an impossible artwork both inside and outside the actual gallery space.

It might also be necessary to argue, in the case of *Ten Identical Prints*, that *Verfremdungseffekt* differs markedly from irony. McKinzie and Phil could simply get rid of all the prints and devote themselves to fetishizing the subsequent red dots. They chose not to,





because the process of staging had reflected more subtlety on the circumstances of the student gallery. Due to the expression of their gratitude, they did not appear hostile to the Sol Koffler Student Gallery; they took advantage of their student status, observed the conventions and modes of the school, and used their work to comment on pre-existing institutional frameworks. Their series was incomplete entering the show, and is still in-progress due to the remaining unsold editions. Therefore, they prioritized an elongated duration of the work, transcending the established dates of RISD's exhibition announcement and managing to self-generate an audience both in terms of the market and the field of art criticism. Most importantly, they did not protest the status quo of an institutional gallery to initiate conversation and change, choosing instead to provocatively nudge from within the institutional tolerance. *Ten Identical Prints* is "stylish," because it underscores the advantage of student status, which is the low risk to take smart risks.

Although their prints were made and shown in Providence, they began to travel once McKinzie and Phil announced the exhibition. How the artists engage with their audience will most likely stay a myth, but the peripatetic nature of the prints is certainly pre-conceived. As two prints are in New York and one is in Germany while others are being prepared to ship, *Ten Identical Prints*

re-visits the specificity of the print language: prints are affordable, portable, and less likely to experience customs complications. In other words, they are the perfect vehicles for the delivery of an international object. It is thus exciting to realize, upon the receipt of one framed work, that it may be a subset of a game theory, because this quasi-entropy pertains to the physically tactile mundanity of the printed image and the esoteric context *Ten Identical Prints* champions in order to uncover meaning. The adoption of mail art, in this sense, suggests the artists' dissatisfaction to pinpoint only one location for this conceptual project. Curiously enough, their artistic momentum does not pause because of the loss of a punch line, so *Ten Identical Prints* is tantamount to an artwork lobbying for a diversity of lenses for critical analysis regarding the social settings in which McKinzie and Phil's own institutions and agencies are situated. Their *sprezzatura* to lead and divulge clues is a theatrical procedure, so why not embrace it as a play?



## Future Zooming In and Out

Once discussed with a curator the nature of being an artist and a critic, and we thought the difference lies in the definition of an artistic practice and a creative one. Art might rely on a physical studio, whereas creativity does not. Also, studio visits happen frequently for artists, but critics rarely stay in their space to be critiqued. Improvement, although faint in both cases and sensible at best after-the-fact, is more desired and treasured for artists. Critics are relatively exempt from critique; as long as they believe what they say and stand by it, their view flies, no matter how turgid or off-base their prose may be.


But things have changed. Under the peculiar social and political environments brought forth by the Coronavirus pandemic, such discussions become irrelevant. They are not essential. They do little to combat against the virus and the dreadful deterioration of humanity. As people celebrate styles of social distancing at Prospect Park in Brooklyn and appreciate the artistry embedded in hand-made masks, are we taking this moment seriously enough? It is not yet a rupture—as this term implies an eventual return to the norm, or a new “norm”—and it is far from historical, as we are still in it.

It will be a privilege, in some way, to come out of this troubling time. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner did. He survived World War I and the Spanish Flu, and managed to continue his

painting and printmaking endeavors. Such global events, however, left irreducible marks on his mind which crystalized in renewed subject matters and color palettes. He no longer showed desire to wander the streets of Berlin, painting flamboyant prostitutes, but instead moved to the bucolic Swiss mountain town of Davos to ameliorate his trauma. Urban scenes departed, and natural scenery entered his canvas. Kirchner’s uncanny life events paralleled his miraculously painted psychological landscapes, and his suicide at the age of fifty-eight left a tremendous artistic “package”—one with an undeniable accent of tragedy and, of course, a profound story.

It is curious to notice how artistic information becomes accessible during this pandemic. Museums open and expand their virtual collections for free, and conversations with curators and critics, because of Zoom, have never been so easy. In a way, museums are no longer ceremonial spaces due to the ambiguous demarcation of their boundaries. As a result, New York City might not be as charming a place to live anymore, because the whole world shares access to its vibrant art collection.

As physical travel gives way to psychological deriving, one thing stays the same. It is the power of a story. Numerous Kirchner paintings across the globe can be viewed online, but the story is ever more robust because we can suddenly feel his struggle. His



world becomes closer to ours now, and his use of the color pink to outline forests no longer bothers us. Instead, it gives us pleasure. In this sense, art-historical, third-person narration joins forces with our first-person perspective, and we are granted immediate access to his story, only to compare it with our own. It is like wearing a pair of Kirchner glasses—we start to steal the cigarette from the dancers in Berlin and slide down the blue slopes in the Swiss Alps. Fiction and reality begin to merge, and one day it becomes zeitgeist.

In my first art history class in college, I learned not to use the word “interesting.” It is vague, ephemeral, and even ethereal. But I kind of like it now, because we live in an interesting time.