

THEY ARRIVED LIKE FATE

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my daughter, Imogen Ingle, thank you for your unconditional love and your overwhelming unfiltered enthusiasm for art and the little creatures of nature. To my husband, Bryan Ingle, for your unconditional support, the criticality of your opinions and your pressure to be excellent.

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ABSTRACT

Art in the western world is based on the premise of the individual artist as creative genius. This assumption proves to be problematic in that it ignores alternate methods of the expression of being and becoming. Through exploration of the media of printmaking, both historically, and situated in the context of the author's artwork, the isolated chamber of the individual artist is broken. Concepts such as multiplicity of image and labor bring into question the notion of art as a compartmentalized endeavor. Images of tourism and wildflowers serve as metaphors for an alternative to the fixed individual, replacing stasis with movement and isolation with connectedness. The result is a different way of viewing the labor of art, and alternate metaphors for our place in the world. Conclusively, art itself can help an individual see the part they play in something bigger than themselves.

HIDDEN MULTIPLICITIES

Social Contagions

Sometimes things happen in the world and, even as they are unfolding, my brain logs the time as an anomaly. This is not the same thing as newsworthy, which is how most of us would describe the COVID-19 pandemic. It began in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and resulted in worldwide stay-at-home orders in spring of 2020. Subsequently, it slowly morphed into social strategies to limit the contagion until a vaccine was widely available in spring of 2021. During that time, I was living in a 76-story Chicago glass and concrete high rise, a building that looked like it could be a USB port for the mothership. Our 47th floor apartment had a balcony that overlooked Millennium Park and Lake Michigan. There was a family of peregrine falcons nesting on the skyscraper across the street. I could watch the lake-effect snow form over one of the largest fresh bodies of water in the world, swirling silently away into the frozen atmosphere to cause traffic delays for my mother in Michigan. I could feel the building shift and hear the sighing reverberations in the winds of a spring thunderstorm as the tinny hollow thunder echoed over a concrete landscape. I watched the moon rise jewel-toned over man-made mountains. Trees as old as Grant Park grew a hundred feet below my window.

It was from that balcony that I watched the affects of the pandemic unfold. A silence to create slowness, an emptiness to allow the world to reboot. A secondary contagion to infect a belief: “we are all in this together.”. An explosive in-breath, exhaled into being by variants of the secondary contagion. A rubber band stretched, then released, sending the empty streets into revolution, chaos, demonstration, riots. A quickness to this decentering. A dissolution. A threat to

power to be managed, spun, deconstructed and then reconstructed as a benefit only to the few. *A reemergence of the hegemony of the individual* (Deleuze 264-265).¹

In January of 2020, I downloaded a meditation app and purchased the book “Beginner’s Mind” by Shunryu Suzuki. Nothing more than an attempt to follow a self-help trend, I committed to meditating and listening to podcasts on Vipassana, Zen and Dzogchen philosophy. Chicago, when I was living there, was a city of 3 million people, I lived in a home with 250 other families. I shared bus rides, food, walks, parks, and dog amenities with strangers daily. I was also beginning to practice a philosophy of non-duality, a concept no one can ever be an expert in, two months before the world shut down.

And then when it did, I had a child who was 6 years old, just entering the world of school, socialization, and formal learning. An Ingle family becomes an emotional powder keg. I lost my job at a specialty outdoor retail store. We didn’t have any toilet paper. All the playgrounds and parks closed to the public. There I realized something that would fundamentally change my operating system. The main character named Rachel in this anomalous time would by necessity only become a villain if I didn’t make an involved, practiced effort to deindividualize my desires, my outlook, and my emotions. To phrase it as a positive, I needed to live my life as a multiplicity. “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”²

The artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* highlights multiplicity as an alternative to a culture which glorifies the individual. Movement replaces monument and adaptation replaces

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 264-265.

² 1 Cor. 9:22-23

authenticity. Challenging concepts such as authorship, this paper questions glorifying The Artist as individual genius. Through printmaking, tourist narratives, family images, and wildflower studies a person named Rachel illustrates a world in flux, always becoming.

The Cult[ure] of the Individual Artist

Printmaking has a historical tradition of mechanically reproducing significant works of art for the masses. As said by Walter Benjamin, a work of art is inalienable from its material history, its artist, past ownership and its point of existence in the world.³ This inalienability from context is called the work's "aura," clearly a semantic link to concepts like authorship, authenticity, audience, and authority.⁴ The print, according to Benjamin, and by extension the photograph, radio, film, television, recorded music and then the internet, diminishes the aura, mostly by allowing art and music to be repeatable, this repetition changes how the image is experienced, and since experience is inalienable from the work of art, the copies, owned by thousands or millions of consumers decontextualize that experience, leading to a kind of mass culture.⁵ Considering the technological changes in reproducibility over the last several decades, manifesting ultimately in social media, we can sense the negative implications of the destruction of the aura through mass reproduction. A trip to an art museum, in Benjamin's estimation, should be a ritual, one that requires the ability to participate in a magic bigger than oneself.⁶

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" [First Version] trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room*, no. 39 (Spring 2010): 13.

⁴ Charles W. Haxthausen, "Reproduction/Repetition: Walther Benjamin/Carl Einstein," *October*, vol. 107 (Winter 2004): 51-52.

⁵ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 16.

⁶ Haxthausen, "Reproduction/Repetition: Walther Benjamin/Carl Einstein," 52.

In a 2024 study commissioned by The Hague, original artworks, viewed in-person, created an emotional response ten times stronger than viewing a reproduction of those works.⁷ However, Vera Carasso tells Hyperallergic, “We live in a time when we are increasingly confronted with copies and interpretations of reality. You might think that real, genuine art or objects therefore become less important, but the opposite is true: real is becoming more important.” A physical print, with the smell of ink still perceptible on the velvety surface of the paper, the fine embossment of an engraving, the trip to buy the work in person, these are all physical sensory experiences that engage a ritual around art that isn’t unique and therefore doesn’t elevate a singular artist as genius.

There are problems with the idea of an aura. A single, unique work of art that gains authority from a singular, unique, genius artist and the singular, unique, gross display of wealth in which it resides, is a cult to the work of art and the individual who created it.

Unsurprisingly, traditional printmaking techniques challenge the idea of the aura in multiple ways. The first way in which these concepts are challenged is by the edition, multiple copies exist of a unique work of art, and multiple copies can continue to be made if the print matrix exists. The second way traditional printmaking challenges the concepts of authorship and authenticity is in its labor. Prints are often made by multiple people who may or may not get credit for or own the products of their labor. The labor of printmaking is also hidden, alienated by mechanization from the final work of art. Repetition of image and reproduction of labor are the two multiplicities of the print world.

⁷ “Original Art Stimulates the Brain More Than Reproductions, Study Finds,” Hyperallergic, Isa Farfan, October 3, 2024, accessed December 29, 2024.

Both can be observed through lithographs made from Thomas Moran at Prang's American Chromos. Louis Prang began producing color prints for the home in the 1860's. In our world today, it's hard to imagine how novel it was for an average upper middle-class family to own a color work of art. "Louis Prang did not invent chromolithography, but he brought the technique to its fullest realization as both a commodity and an art form."⁸ An advertisement from 1870 states "Prang's American Chromos are reproductions of Paintings by the marvelous process of Chromo-lithography. The Paintings chosen for that purpose are mostly the works of distinguished American Artists... and their price is so low that every home may enjoy the luxury of possessing a copy of works of art which hitherto adorned only the parlors of the rich."⁹ Now, instead of one Thomas Moran oil painting of an American landscape living in the parlor of a wealthy individual in New York, hundreds of families could enjoy a Thomas Moran as they ate breakfast. This was a threat to the power of the artist, art critic, and wealthy collector to control the narrative of culture. "The gravity of the delusion is difficult to appreciate today, but the veracity of chromos was so startling and the eagerness with which the masses embraced them so dramatic in the 1860s that the prints seemed to *challenge the very premise of genius and privilege* that had undergirded western culture since the Renaissance."¹⁰ While the art critics decry chromolithography on grounds of quality, corruption of the marketplace, mechanization and mass production, they are also consciously ignoring the main benefit, "the democratic value of bringing art and design to millions who would otherwise go without".¹¹ Moreover, the main market for chromolithography was the person in charge of a household's domestic affairs,

⁸ Joni L. Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 13.

⁹ Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*, 19.

¹⁰ Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*, 26.

¹¹ Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*, 27.

creating a market for art that was “advocated by women for women”. “In an age of pronounced sexism, [chromolithographs] represented an unprecedented degree of autonomy for women that seriously threatened the hegemony of 19th century masculine art critics.”¹²

Further destabilizing the idea of the genius, privilege and masculinity underlying western art is the non-identity of the artists who created these chromolithographs. Each image was comprised of multiple plates, or matrices, with each plate containing a different color. In some of the more detailed reproductions of oil paintings, up to 52 different plates could be layered together. This created a need for hundreds of workers; directly opposed to an oil painting created by one artist. Because the market for Prang’s chromolithographs was mainly driven by women, Prang also employed women artists and workers to create his most popular imagery. Those female artists are still, to this day, virtually unknown, even to art historians specializing in American art, despite being given equal billing to the male artists Prang employed at the time.¹³

Machines of Alienation

In her book *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, Jennifer Roberts investigates the notion of the labor in print. She asks a fundamental question – “How do we think about the relationship between all of the time and skill that comes together in the making of a print, and the time of the image it generates? (Or: *where does all the time go?*)” (Roberts 167).¹⁴ In the mind of a printmaker named Rachel, this question is the bedrock on which my love for this medium is built.

¹² Kinsey, *Thomas Moran’s West*, 39.

¹³ Kinsey, *Thomas Moran’s West*, 40.

¹⁴ Jennifer L. Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 167.

In painting, the effort and labor of the painter is seen directly in the brushstrokes on the canvas. In printmaking, the opposite is true. The labor that produces the print is mechanized. The energy to generate an image comes from the pressure of the press. The labor therefore is hidden, in multiple ways. First, the print is pulled in darkness, where energy and pressure of image transfer is invisible “The print is made darkly: what happens there between the matrix and the ink and the support; no one can watch it; no one can surveil it.”¹⁵ Second, the human labor that creates the matrix is alienated from the mechanized energy used to produce the image.

Relief printing, specifically wood engraving, can be combined with moveable type and printed quickly. Using end grain boxwood, which is very durable under pressure, one can produce thousands of copies of an image in a relatively short period of time. In the 19th century, news periodicals took advantage of new technologies, the steam press and photo sensitive emulsions, to conscript thousands of unknown artists to carve millions of photographic images out of end grain boxwood to produce pictures with text. This created “a culture of industrial production” around assembly line wood engraving, not completely dissimilar to the unknown artist of the Prang chromolithographs.¹⁶

There is a fundamental difference between relief and planographic printing, which highlights the alienation of labor and time in printmaking. While the planographic process of lithography prints directly the marks made by the artists hands through a chemical process, the labor of relief does not. The physically difficult act of carving creates only blank space. The sculptural, physical, and mental labor is completely invisible. To create one line in a relief print

¹⁵ Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, 16

¹⁶ Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, 173.

means carving around the line. A simple tic tac toe pattern can be created with 4 marks of a pen.

To create a tic tac toe pattern in a relief print requires dozens of cuts, carved out of hardwood.

Roberts researched 19th century writers Ruskin and Linton who use wood engraving as a metaphor for the alienation of labor in a capitalist system. “For Linton, they suggest (as an incipient grid) the spaces of measurement and accounting, but all that they measure is an account out of balance, where work is expended but never recuperated.”¹⁷ Pulling printmaking out of the 19th century and viewing it in the 21st century allows for an interpretation of the alienation of labor outside of the structure of capitalism because it’s no longer used as an industrialized process. The intentional choice to use printmaking as a medium now creates a different meaning around the invisible labor of creating space. The agency of choosing a laborious process changes the meaning of labor.

A poem by Joseph Fasano:

For a Student Who Used AI To Write a Paper

“Now I let it fall back

in the grasses.

I hear you. I know

this life is hard now.

I know your days are precious

on this earth.

But what are you trying

to be free of?

The living? The miraculous

¹⁷ Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, 177.

task of it?

Love is for the ones who love the work.”¹⁸

The invisible labor in printmaking is undeniably a metaphor for the invisibility of the duty of motherhood in the artwork of a woman named Rachel. Labor in motherhood clearly has a dual meaning. The labor of delivering a child is only visible after the baby is born. The struggle of raising that child is also invisible, involving an entire lifetime of work dedicated to creating space for that child to exist. The reward for the effort is inherent, not transactional. “Love is for the ones that love the work.”

In the body of work defined as “They Arrived Like Fate,” a woman named Rachel uses multiplicity inherent in printmaking to challenge the premise of genius and privilege of The Artist. Imagery is repeated, yet changed, allowing a multiplicity. When each distinctive color and layer is displayed together with other prints containing the same imagery, an installation of repetition emerges, one that combines the person with that person’s role in the collective. Images of individuals lose their individuality and function more as ciphers, representing many people in uniqueness of the gallery space.

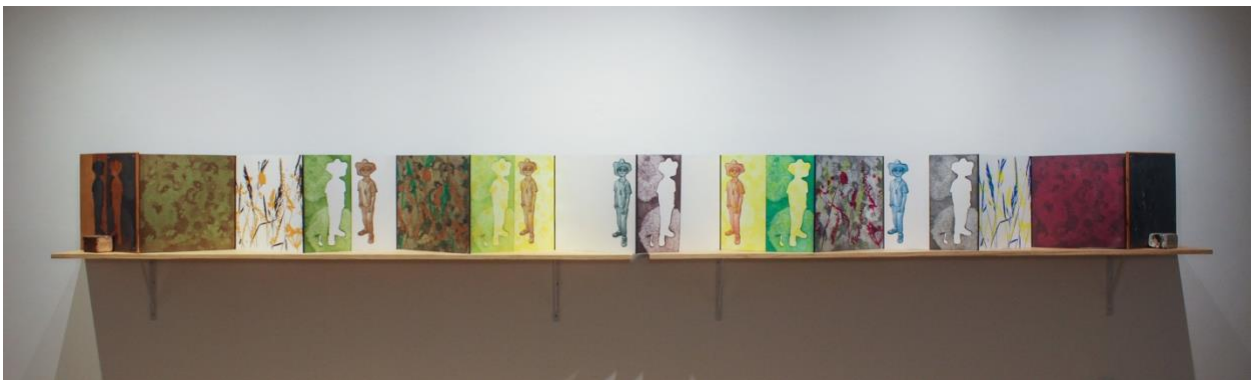


Figure 1. *Timeline of Yesterday*. Book made from steel plate intaglio and screen print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

¹⁸ Joseph Fasano, (@joseph.fasano) Instagram photo, Mar 25, 2025



Figure 2. Detail from *Timeline of Yesterday*. Book made from steel plate intaglio and screen print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

They Arrived Like Fate also uses the multiple, hidden labor inherent in printmaking to confront our cultural perception of The Artist as an exceptional creative genius. Contrast the hidden struggle of the printmaking process in *They Arrived Like Fate* to the cultural perception of effort by Jackson Pollock in creating *Greyed Rainbow*, 1953.¹⁹

¹⁹ “Jackson Pollock,” Art Institute of Chicago, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.artic.edu/artists/20772/jackson-pollock>



Figure 3. *Greyed Rainbow*. Oil painting on linen by Jackson Pollock, 1953. Art Institute of Chicago Chicago IL, 1955.494.

Pollock's physical movements are directly perceptible on the canvas. His use of color, line, and form looks intuitive and spontaneous. Creative genius seems to be the driving force behind the artwork, not skilled labor.

By contrast, the artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* uses various traditional printmaking methods to create imagery. Lithography is laborious, the stones are hundreds of pounds and must be moved around the studio. The chemical etching process takes time and attention to detail.



Figure 4. *Parking Lot Griffen*. Lithograph by Rachel Ingle, February 2025.

To print the image off the stone, pressure on the press must be set very high. The works of art named “Totem to Mutability” and “Common Weeds” uses intaglio where steel plates must be meticulously painted with stop out and then etched. Each plate must be painstakingly inked and wiped before printing and the pressure also must be set very high. Linoleum relief prints create layers of flowers in the empty spaces left by the effort of carving.

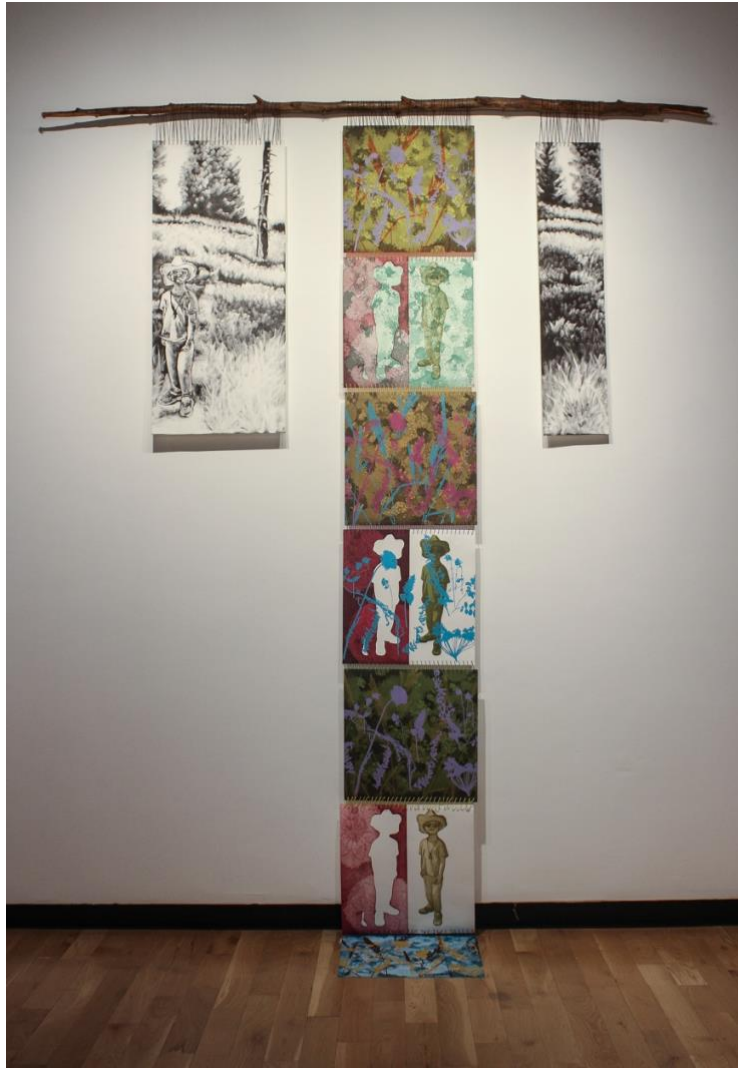


Figure 5. *Totem to Mutability*. Installation with steel plate intaglio, screenprint and monotype by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

This toil is invisible to the viewer of *They Arrived Like Fate*. As Jennifer Roberts states “We are looking at the fossilized traces of a hidden, sequestered act.”²⁰. In the veiled effort of printmaking, the myth of the creative genius of The Artist is exposed.

²⁰ Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, 16.

STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

Rick's Cafe

Jamaica is a hard place to imagine in January when living above the 45th parallel at 4500 feet of elevation in Montana. The easiest things to remember are the often-repeated things by tourists who've visited the island for generations: the roads are bad, the people are nice, the drinks are plentiful, and the beaches are beautiful

Bryan and I planned a destination wedding. I can't even remember why we chose Jamaica. I think it was because we had some hippie friends who had gone to Negril in the seventies or eighties and had a good time. I remember being nervous, I remember the coffee in small metal serving pots and oranges that were green. I remember the air: hot, humid and sweet, rich with aggressive plant life and sunlight. I remember the spearfishermen along the public beach we would run through every morning. I remember being really excited about eating Caribbean lobster in a dark restaurant. I remember sitting on beach chairs drinking Red Stripe in the rain with Bryan.

On one of our runs through the park we stopped to talk to a couple of people selling souvenirs on the beach. Sareth Reid had long dreadlocks and sat on a blanket under a tree, smoking weed and avoiding the sun. He pulled out a wooden wall sculpture with the stain still drying. He told us the top figure was a red sun, Bryan, the middle figure a green moon, me, and a yellow star without a face on the bottom would be our future child. You could tell he'd given this speech before, to another tourist couple getting married on the beach, maybe yesterday. The typical Jamaican color scheme has an accompanying speech too, green is for the land, yellow is for the sun and black is for the people, but also red. Red is for the blood of the people, shed

during slavery, shed during colonialism and now shed during neo-colonial policy. I know Sareth's name because he inscribed it on the back of his sculpture, forever connecting himself and Jamaica to the story of Bryan and me.

Sareth Reid's handcrafted souvenir is an object that embodies our transformation. It's a physical trace of change itself.



Figure 6. Untitled Souvenir. Wood wall sculpture by Sareth Reid, 2008.

The artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* features tourist images and souvenirs as art objects. In these images, the movement of tourists themselves replaces monument, and authenticity is challenged by fleeting memories that don't fit a broader cultural narrative. The static nature of historical myth and memory is challenged. Instead, an alternative of transformation and forgetting is explored.

Authentic Mythology

Tourism has a mixed reputation, to be sure. It is often sold to communities that are struggling with outdated economic modes of production as a way forward, a path towards renewed economic relevance. The price of that reengagement is often steep, as an imbalance of power ensues. Tourism can become a site of neocolonialism, where tourists and those that serve them participate in a cycle of voyeurism and exploitation, devaluing the land and the people tourists visit for entertainment and currency exchange.²¹ Tourism has the potential to be transformative, introducing individuals to new cultures, lands, and ideas, to shift perspectives and to build empathy, breaking the border of the individual and expanding our definition of subject and community. Unfortunately, it is often the exact opposite, an excursion to prove that the tourist's preconceived ideas about the places they visit are authentic and socially relevant. As Stephens relates in her article about postcards of the Eiffel Tower, "In this way, the individual experiences the site/sight as an authentication of self in relation to some preconceived notion of feelings about what the icon represents for her/him personally. This results in a hermeneutic circle, in which tourists track down and recapture images, and then display them at home to represent their authenticated version of images seen prior to departure".²²

Tourism essentially deals with authenticating a memory, taking the form of nostalgia and myth over historical accuracy. This includes the local collective myth at the site of tourism as well as the personal narrative of the experience of the souvenir collector. Communities at a

²¹ Eveline Dürr and Rivke Jaffe, "Theorizing Slum Tourism: Performing, Negotiating and Transforming Inequality," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 93 (2012), 113.

²² Sonya Stephens, "Framing the Eiffel Tower: From Postcards to Postmodernism," in *Framing French Culture*, ed. Natalie Edwards, Ben McCann and Peter Poiana (University of Adelaide Press, 2015), 145.

tourist site tend to have a unifying creation myth that members strongly identify with. Business leaders at these sites understand the potential for selling that myth to tourists, usually considered “outsiders” by the community. Corporate developers have deep pockets and can spend a lot of money appealing to the creation myth to build and market the sites of tourism. In this process, the three parties all seek authenticity of their own creation myth, often changing it slightly to benefit themselves. Tourists then visit these sites based on a historical myth about the place that has been changed through the process of generating their business. The community members themselves then change even more to accommodate (or reject by leaving the area) the tourist myth. Through this process we can understand the elusive nature of the authentic experience. To ground the myth of the tourist site, landmarks and changes to the landscape are most often used to demarcate the authentic.²³ Here is where the creation of the tourist object begins. A souvenir traps the site/sight that acts as signifier of the myth into an unchanging object. For example, even if a historical building is replaced by a new hotel, a postcard depicting the historical building remains. Possession of the postcard thus connects the collector to the authentic mythical origin of the tourist site. As Stewart states “...as experience is to an imagined point of authenticity, so narrative is to the souvenir. The souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative.”²⁴

Given that tourism is bourgeois and conservative in its making myth out of history, it is unsurprising that the economic and cultural byproducts are often colonizing in nature. Travelling to verify that one’s own cultural nexus is correct is the very opposite of what the art of this show

²³ Patricia A Stokowski, “Re-interpreting the Past to Shape the Future,” *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, vol 16, no. 3 (2016): 254-266

²⁴ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 134.

hopes to represent. It hopes to represent an unrealized potential, an opportunity to learn, to approach a new place with a beginner's mind. This potential has always been latent in our history, to come as an immigrant and not a conqueror. A prospect to forget the idea of authenticity completely.

Illustrating the Forgetting

Instead of immortalizing a myth by immobilizing it into object, a souvenir has the possibility instead to illustrate the elusiveness and mutability of myth itself. Replacing the narrative of the static nature of the individual in relation to history, the souvenir has the potential to be a physical touch point to a moment of change.

The artwork by a tourist named Rachel functions as a signifier for the myth of the Ingle family, illustrations of a narrative that has no authenticity apart from change. The figures in my work come from photos taken during our trip to Yellowstone while considering moving to Bozeman.



Figure 7. Untitled Photograph from Badlands National Park, Rachel Ingle, July 2020.

The photos I select are based on a kind of weirdness, an inability to discern what is going on. I don't know why I chose that moment to document, or what was happening when I did. This is an illustration of a narrative that was never remembered.

The artwork functions as a signifier of all that is insignificant, all that is lost in the rapid firing of neurons that choose to preserve some other arbitrary memory instead. In the language of meditation forgetting is called a little death. Remembering the forgetting itself serves as psychological preparation for actual death, when the person known as Rachel will dissolve and memories decompose. Stewart says "The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph. And thus, we come again to the powerful metaphor of the unmarked grave, the

reunion with the mother with no corresponding regeneration of the symbolic.”²⁵ If a souvenir is a physical memory, what is a tourist image with no story, that stands for forgetting?

Two creative decisions highlight the mutability of myth. The first is the decision to include images of our car, a Tesla Model S. The myths of technologies change incredibly quickly. When the Tesla was purchased 8 years before this paper was written it was seen as a symbol of hope for a future divorced from reliance on fossil fuels. It could have been a catalyst for changing energy production everywhere. That perception changed incredibly quickly during the production of these images as Tesla founder Elon Musk became involved with the election of Donald Trump. The decision to keep the images in the artwork originated from this desire to show the mutability of sign and signified.



Figure 8. Detail from *Common Weeds*. Steel plate intaglio print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

²⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 151.

The second creative decision was to show areas that are familiar with tourist sights without directly pointing to the site itself. Every tourist site has a parking lot, but each one is indiscernible from the next. These become interesting sites of connectivity to the act of tourism without trying to immortalize one's place at the sight of mythical origin. *Common Weeds* uses all three tourist narratives presented here. One image is of the Tesla charging in a parking lot in Wisconsin. One image is a family picture at the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone; however, the printmaker uses the printmaking process to reverse the image so that it isn't immediately discernable.



Figure 9. Detail from *Common Weeds*. Steel plate intaglio print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

The last image is at a log pile outside of the parking lot at Old Faithful. Using these images that are familiar yet not traditionally associated with tourist ritual of tracking down and recapturing images creates a sense of movement and mutability grounded in the familiar.

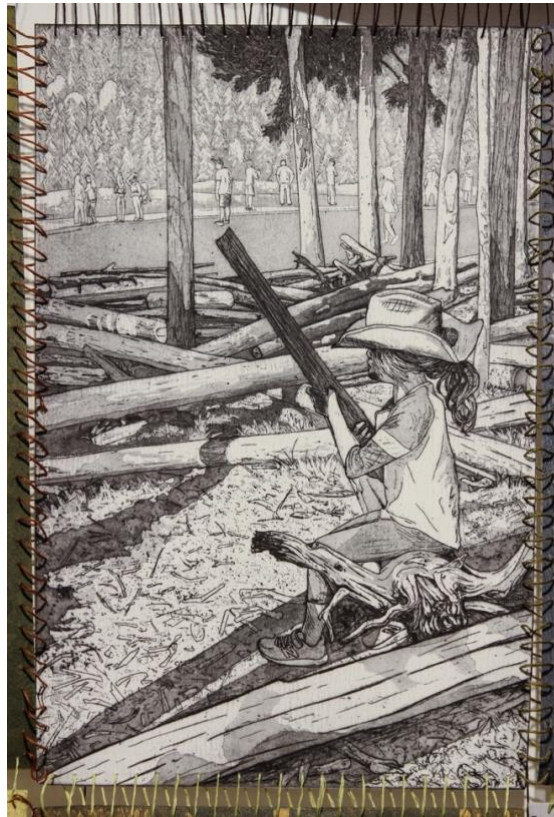


Figure 10. Detail from *Common Weeds*. Steel plate intaglio print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

THE SPEED AND SLOWNESS OF PLANTS

Wet Mittens

When I was a kid, probably around 10-15, I was active in 4H, I raised rabbits and took a wildflower class with my great aunt Gertrude Jager. For years she was the librarian at my grade school until she retired, and my mom took her position. She lived in a very small house next door to my grandmother, with my great uncle Ralph taking care of the remnants of the farm my mom grew up on. Cataloged in boxes lining every room of her house was our entire family history, and her house smelled faintly of garlic. Taking wildflowers was a forced activity for me, like playing the piano and church basketball, and my cousins were roped into it as well. I would dread the late March phone call my mom would get from my aunt, requesting a day in the woods in search of Dutchman's Breeches, False Solomon's Seal and Trout Lillies. It was so damp and cold. I would have to shiver for hours walking through dead leaves and crusty snow while my aunt droned on about these seemingly common weeds behind her house. We would carry around heavy old phone books, snipping a single flower and stuffing it between the pages, to catalog later in a binder to present at the county fair. Eventually my cousins found reasons not to go, and it was just me, arriving at my aunt's beckoning, physically uncomfortable with no peers my age to talk to.

However, after a few years when school and life got busier, when I was given the opportunity to say goodbye to 4H, I chose to stay on. I even did a winter wildflower project, gathering and labeling dead seed pods we found on the roadsides in January. I became attached to the speed and slowness of plants. When my aunt called, I had to go, because these flowers only bloomed for a week or so out of the year. But they did this every year, with a regularity that

brought comfort. We would also take time to document the plants, finding their scientific names, indigenous lands and uses, and what soils and habitats they grew best in. My great aunt was a remarkable teacher, using the things we learned about the plants we had already documented to perceive the plants we were currently gathering. This process was one of keen observation, of time, of place, of living things, and of change. This was what compelled me to continue, the newness and habit of sharp inspection. Walking down a dusty dirt road in the heat of July, listening to cicadas and knowing Queen Anne's Lace and Chicory cohabitated with the elusive Butterfly Weed in loamy soil. I started looking forward to the phone call in the spring, knowing that the same old mysteries of nature that caused the Spring Beauties to bloom was also the secret knowledge that caused maple sap to run and wood frogs to start their deafening choruses in the cold rain. Most people don't notice these things, but there, in the woods with naturalist Gertrude Jager, I saw them.

As I grew older these keen observations stayed with me. Instead of gathering flowers, I was running on trails, through choruses of wood frogs and fields of trilliums, through the dust and heat of a dirt road in July, looking for Butterfly Weed, through fields of Goldenrod and brilliant red Sumac on the trails in September, these beings were always there for me. My great aunt passed away, she was buried in a tiny cemetery behind a rural church down the street from her house, during a summer thunderstorm, where we stood shivering in the damp cold, saying our goodbyes. Now, a person named Rachel was the only one noticing the flowers, a secret between me and the world.

On a typical late July day running down a dirt road with my cousin, who is a landscape architect, we stopped in a forest grove to get some water and shade. We stared into the woods for

a minute, noticing the light through the trees, and an overabundance of moths we've never seen before. It was stunningly beautiful, I asked her if she knew these moths, she said "no, this isn't normal." "Do you think they are invasive?" "Maybe". Since that day, I've noticed the plants have been changing. Giant Hogweed has appeared in the summer and Garlic Mustard Weed and Leafy Spurge have spread in the spring. There's less Chicory and Queen Anne's Lace and more Knapweed. Queen Anne's Lace and Chicory are non-native species as well, but Knapweed is poisonous to other plants, unable to cohabitate with anything other than itself. When you have this secret knowledge with nature, it tells you when it's dying.

Then I moved to Montana. Nothing made me feel more like a tourist than not knowing these plants like I knew the plants of the Midwest. I have no Gertrude Jager to roam the fields with and relearn their names, histories, soils and uses with. But I knew Leafy Spurge and I knew Knapweed. They are here too, erasing history. I wonder what it would have been like, 500 years ago, seeing tumbleweeds for the first time, knowing the world was going to end.

An Agent of Time

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmer gives us a detailed picture of plants as a path to becoming. She states, "The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart."²⁶

The artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* uses the inclusion of wildflowers to highlight multiplicity as a basic state of organization for life. This contrasts a culture which glorifies the

²⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 222.

individual human. Thinking in plant time replaces the human lifetime as a metric for perception. Challenging concepts such as agency and creativity, plants show us the necessity of crafting space for growth and change. Through these wildflower studies a person named Rachel illustrates a world in flux, always becoming.

As a human, I think of things generationally, independently, as if my lifetime as well as my grandparents, parents, and child's lifetimes mark the passing of eras. Human history revolves around these cycles, erasing and remaking with the death and birth of individuals. Time doesn't work this way. The geological time of rocks and fossils both ignites my imagination and escapes my ability to understand through embodiment. Plant time is radically different as well. They live and die in a season yet continue for a millennium. The world's oldest Bristlecone pine is almost 5000 years old. A flower found in the permafrost sprouted from a seed that was around 30,000 years old. Plant colonies have even longer life spans, a shrub colony in Tasmania is over 40,000 years old, even though individuals from that colony die seasonally.²⁷ Contemplating living a lifetime in a season, and yet also living for longer than written human history begs us to step outside of our individual lives as the metric by which the living world is measured. Kimmer says "These ancients carry teachings in the ways that they live... Their success is measured not in consumption and growth, but by graceful longevity and simplicity, by persistence while the world changed around them."²⁸ In colonies of plants we can see how the collective is the secret to their success. It's not the individual plant that carries with it this graceful simplicity and persistence; it's the individual's connection to the colony that produces successful longevity.

²⁷ "List of Longest-Living Organisms", Wikipedia, accessed March 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_longest-living_organisms

²⁸ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 275.

The print and its matrix can be viewed through the metaphorical lens of a plant colony. A print on paper is close to ephemeral, a postcard to be sent and enjoyed for a time and then thrown away. Prints on paper take an effort to preserve. They must be placed behind glass that reflects UV light to avoid fading. The paper itself cannot touch things with any acid or acid binders in them to prevent yellowing and decay. It is a delicate object that doesn't last a lifetime unless the conditions around it are severely controlled. The matrix, however, has the potential to outlast many lifetimes. Made from hard wood or metal, they are durable in the extreme unless neglected. Prints can be pulled from matrices that are 500 years old. The matrix itself, however, was never meant to be the art, it is the ephemeral individual prints that gift the matrix its importance. They function together, as a colony of plants.

They also find their success not in the glorification of the singular but in the collective functioning of the multiple. In *They Arrived Like Fate*, plants are used as layers over family. In "Common Weeds" the plants are carved away, using the negative space to form the image. This allows the viewer to see the image of family through the body of the plant. By viewing the work this way, a metaphor of viewing ourselves through plants and how they live and grow is encouraged. In "Common Weeds" the plants pictured are Spotted Knapweed, Horsemint and an unknown variety of Lupine. A printmaker named Rachel has very conflicting feelings layering invasive species over family. The reason I chose to do so has to do with agency, both human and plant agency.



Figure 11. *Common Weeds*. Installation of steel plate intaglio and relief prints by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

In the first chapter, agency was mentioned as a gift that frees labor from its function in an exchange economy. Plants prompt the conversation about agency in a different direction. As living things, they lack the senses and mobility we as humans often credit with the ability to choose. They are still living things though, and as such they respond to their environment and take on evolutionary characteristics that mirror beings that we do credit with such agency. For example, we credit invasive weeds with colonization. Certainly, there are aspects of Knapweed that can serve as a metaphor for European's treatment of the Americas. The artwork in *They Arrived Like fate* asks us to use this metaphor in reverse, questioning not how plants are like us, but how are we like plants? Do we have agency in choosing the soil we are planted in?

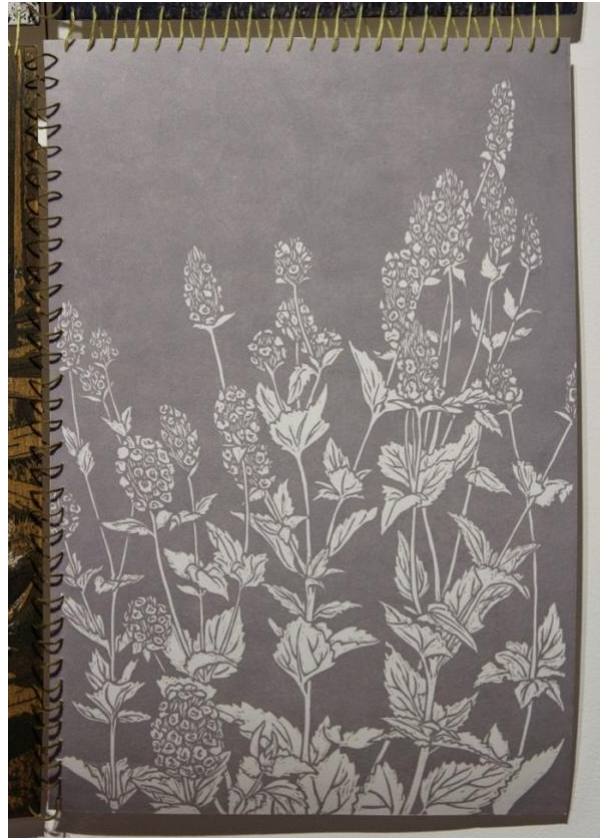


Figure 12. Detail from *Common Weeds*. Linoleum relief print by Rachel Ingle, March 2025.

They Arrived Like Fate featured an installation of a tumbleweed and decorative grasses. Tumbleweed, or Russian Thistle, is an invasive species from Eurasia that has a distinct evolutionary characteristic. After flowering and producing seeds the entire plant that is above ground becomes dislodged from its roots and moves. It can blow long distances across fields, scattering its seeds as it travels. This tumbleweed has been kept indoors for a year, transported there by car, where it is rendered impotent. Then it is transported by car again, to the gallery, destined only to scatter its seeds on a man-made floor, completely robbed of its evolutionary function. Movement is something we associate so strongly with agency but moving something fated to move itself seems so absurd, it questions attributing any kind of agency even to human movement.



Figure 13. *Displacement*. Installation of domestic grasses and tumbleweed by Rachel Ingle, 2025.

A Point on the Line of Flight

The artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* highlights multiplicity as an alternative to a culture which glorifies the individual. Printmaking shows us how multiple images and hidden labor undermines the myth of the artist as individual creative genius, while still preserving the specialness of an art object. Movement replaces monument and adaptation replaces authenticity. Tourist images are often rooted in authentication of origin myths. Artwork in *They Arrived Like Fate* presents an alternative, where the movement of tourists take center stage, and the constant adaptation of the origin myth is explored. Plants point us back to the multiple, highlighting the ephemeral nature of the individual as opposed to the graceful longevity of the collective. In

doing so it brings into question the agency of the individual. In the artwork in *They Arrived like Fate* family is viewed through the space created by plants.

A person named Rachel is inspired by printmaking, tourist images, and plants because of their ability to illustrate a world in flux, always becoming.



Figure 14. Photograph from *They Arrived Like Fate* thesis show by Rachel Ingle, April 2025.

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