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Closet Space

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Closet Space

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CLOSET SPACE

By

SAVANNAH HOPE LADELL ANDRIES, Bachelor of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2024

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By

SAVANNAH HOPE LADELL ANDRIES, Bachelors of Fine Art

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ABSTRACT

Closet Space is an exhibition investigating what makes a home. Through the creation of six drawings and seven prints, I investigate the relationship between isolation and companionship. This body of work explores the concept that a home is not simply a physical structure made up of walls and doors. Instead, it is about the emotional connections we create with places and people. Through fragmented memories, imagined environments, and a desire to connect with others, I address that the true meaning of home lies in our emotional attachments to inhabited spaces and the people we share them with. Being queer in the South heavily relies on the ability to perform. Balancing familial and societal expectations while staying true to myself was difficult. I use exaggerated perspectives and limited color palettes to examine my association with domestic interior settings, my sense of self, and my connections with others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my friends, the ones I have had since the beginning and those I have made along the way. Allie, April, and Maddie, thank you for your constant and unwavering support. I have been so lucky to be friends with such amazing people.

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Finally, I want to thank the LBGT+ community, from queer elders to queer youth and those in between, there is a place for all of us.

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INTRODUCTION

Catholic Retreat centers are intentionally isolating. They are *the* places where devout Catholics go to connect and reflect on their shared faith. These retreat centers also act as residencies for their caretakers and their families. I lived on the property of Mary Hill Renewal Center, a Catholic retreat center, for 20 years. I was raised Catholic, not just attending mass, but growing up *inside* the church. I was the only child that lived at Maryhill. The empty chapels and graveyards were my playground. Instead of imaginary friends, I talked to dead bishops. The gravesite for Bishop Greco, the founder of Maryhill, was right in front of our house. I visited his grave, talked to him, and pretended to read his headstone. For me, this place was not a relaxing retreat, but a reminder that I did not belong in these spaces due to my lifestyle choices.

As a closeted lesbian, I struggled with my identity. In the Deep South, there is a heteronormative expectation of being a homemaker, getting married young, becoming a wife, and mother. My views and needs did not align with these expectations. I was afraid of the repercussions of coming out, so, I stayed in the closet.

In my exhibition, *The Ceiling is Made of Popcorn* (2022), I documented idolized versions of my childhood homes. I explored these spaces from the point of view of a child who spent most of their time disassociating. I was supposed to be seen, not heard, so I often stared at the cracks in the walls and counted the dead bugs in the light fixtures. I focused on these details as a child to distract myself from internal and external conflicts. *Closet Space* reconsiders my fascination with

these spaces and explores the emotions I attached to them.

My fascination led me to *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard. In his writing, he compares the reality of a home to what a home could represent. “If we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy.”¹ He acknowledged that memories can be inaccurate. This helped me understand the emotional attachments I placed on the interior settings of my childhood.

When I explored doorways and thresholds, I accepted the loneliness I experienced and how I romanticized my childhood homes in my memories. A home is supposed to be a place of comfort; mine was not. I was expected to navigate the world without guidance, but condemned if I did not follow the set rules I was not given. To illustrate this, my drawings serve as backdrops for my attempt to meet others’ expectations. This allows the viewer to share my uncomfortable and confusing experiences, without someone to guide them through feelings of isolation.

As I created the drawings that embraced my discomfort, I considered how my friends’ houses became my homes; where I was finally allowed to stop performing and just be myself. I focused on absence of the figure in my drawings, to emphasize the importance of human connection in my prints. I chose an intimate scale for my prints (as small as 4” x 6”) to highlight the precious nature of relationships. I depicted everyday moments shared with friends and partners, without placing more emphasis on one or the other. In these scenes, I was a constant, while the other figures changed. Eventually, I introduced a silhouette to create more

¹ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2014, 120.

ambiguity in the figure. This allowed the figure to be a stand-in or compilation of the people I shared these moments with. The compositions in my prints were influenced by both examples from lesbian art and the concept of the male gaze. I intentionally kept the shared moments vague rather than overly explicit. Aside from the proximity of the figures and handholding, the relationship dynamic is not obvious.

Closet Space is the title of this support document, paired with the art exhibition titled *Home / O / Sexual*. The work in *Home / O / Sexual* is based on moments, memories, dreams, and experiences. These mundane scenes reflect growth through the places and people that brought me here. Doorways, stairwells, and rooms that extend off the paper suggest evidence of more to the narrative just outside of the composition. During my research, I focus heavily on lesbian representation. I apply this understanding to my work by exploring the artists who make lesbian art, art made about lesbians, and the motivations behind their work. My creative process is driven by curiosity and repetition. This body of work explores my queer experiences, and the human experience of every day life.

INFLUENCES

As someone who communicates visually, I appreciate those who convey their ideas through words. Poetry and music come from the same line of thought; one is paired with a background and the other with silence. The pause that follows poetry, whether spoken word or lines written on a page, is loud. It emphasizes the thoughts expressed by the writer. The titles of my pieces reference mostly poetry, lyrics, and fragments of conversations. The formatting of *Home / O / Sexual* was influenced by how lines of poetry are separated.

As a lesbian, I find that the identifiers in my community are subjective. Harmony Hammond addresses the importance of acknowledging lesbian art (and its lack of documented history) through her writing and curation of exhibitions. In her book, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*, she addresses the who, what, and why of lesbian art: Is lesbian art only made by lesbians or is it art that simply depicts lesbians? Hammond argues, “there is no agreement as to what constitutes lesbian art, though it is generally thought to reflect lesbian identity and to contribute to the development of that identity.”² To summarize her ideas, lesbian art is about the lesbian experience. Lesbians make lesbian art, but not all lesbian art has been made by lesbians. Gender and sexual identity are individual experiences. There are women who make art about their experiences and possible queer relationships without publicly identifying as a lesbian.

Part of the lesbian experience is tied to gender identity, especially the refusal to adhere to traditional gender roles. Laura Aguilar used portraiture to explore the

² Hammond, Harmony. *Lesbian art in America: A Contemporary History*. New York: Rizzoli, 2000, 7.

range of gender identity, and to search for community. In her *Plush Pony* series (figure 1), Aguilar photographed working-class women with butch (masculine) and femme (feminine) identities at a Latina lesbian bar.³ This series highlighted the range of identities, especially the butch working-class women. Aguilar had to gain the trust of the “head butch” patron of the bar to photograph these women.



Figure 1. Laura Aguilar, *Plush Pony #2*, 1992, Gelatin silver print, 7" x 9.5"

The lesbian experience is also inherently political. Along with the Stonewall Riots, HIV/AIDS activism, and the discourse today on Transgender rights, queer identities are a hot subject of political debates. Artist Mary Patten created work addressing a variety of issues, from AIDS to gender equality. One of my favorite pieces of hers is *My Courbet... or a Beaver's Tale* (figure 2). In this multimedia installation, exhibited in 1992-1993, she questioned where the line is drawn between art and pornography.⁴ This revisits the debate of who makes lesbian art.

3 Hammond, *Lesbian art in America: A Contemporary History*, 84-85.

4 Hammond, 129.

When portrayed through the male gaze, the use of lesbian is not about identity or experience, but about creating a fantasy.



Figure 2. Mary Patten, *My Courbet... or a Beaver's Tale*, 1992-1993, installation

Gustave Courbet's painting, *The Sleepers* (1866), is a model example of lesbians portrayed through the male gaze (figure 3). Courbet was a master of realism, and, in his work, he claimed to focus on everyday events to rebel against the moral and artistic views of the bourgeois (upper-middle class). In nineteenth-century France, lesbianism was a popular subject in erotica and many other works. Artists and writers used mythological stories and the lives of prostitutes to find inspiration, or hide lesbian themes. The depiction of relationships between women can be seen in art by Toulouse-Lautrec and the writing of Charles Baudelaire,

among others.⁵ Baudelaire was a poet and art critic, known for his ideas on modernity. In his collection, *The Flowers of Evil*, several poems were banned from being published, due to their erotic nature.⁶ These poems described detailed sexual relationships between women. While these men may not have *intended* to fetishize lesbians, it is still prevalent in some of their work.



Figure 3. Gustave Courbet, *The Sleepers*, 1866, oil painting, 53" x 79"

The paintings made by artist Dragan Bibin do not outwardly address themes of homosexuality. He highlights unsettling interior scenes that relate to those in my work. In his *Demios* series, he focuses on absence by combining imagery of animals, thresholds, and intense darkness. In *Pull*, (figure 4) the main light source comes from a window, on the opposite side a twisted white fabric is held tightly out of the frame. This leads to a darker room in the center of the composition where a

5 Kosinski, Dorothy M. *Gustave Courbet's "The Sleepers."* *The Lesbian Image in Nineteenth-Century French Art and Literature*. Artibus et Historiae 9, 1988, 187-199.

6 Broder, Melissa. *On Charles Baudelaire's Les Fleurs Del Mal*. PEN America, October 25, 2012.

dog is partially hidden in the doorway. He balanced how much information to give away while leaving the viewer curious enough to keep investigating his fabricated environments.



Figure 4. Dragan Bibin, *Pull*, 2015, oil painting, 31.5" x 39.4"

Bibin's obscured figures led me to consider the importance of the figures in my work. In the drawings, I focused on isolation, but, I hinted at the presence of others. I did this because I often felt alone (even when in the company of others). I subverted interactions with distractions, like using animals in unexpected environments. For example, it is impractical for a cow to be in the closet. I paired these diversions with vibrant colors and warped perspectives, enhancing the fever-dream quality of my work. From modern artists to old masters depictions of lesbians, I took inspiration from a variety of sources.

PROCESS

The method of how I chose my subject matter lies in a compulsive need for documentation. Each drawing is based on a real place, but the environment is altered by my memory. I have always been a biased historian. I used reference photos (when available) and warped the perspective to create the compositions for my drawings. Once I had the initial sketch, I worked through color schemes that embodied a sense of comfort, or discomfort.

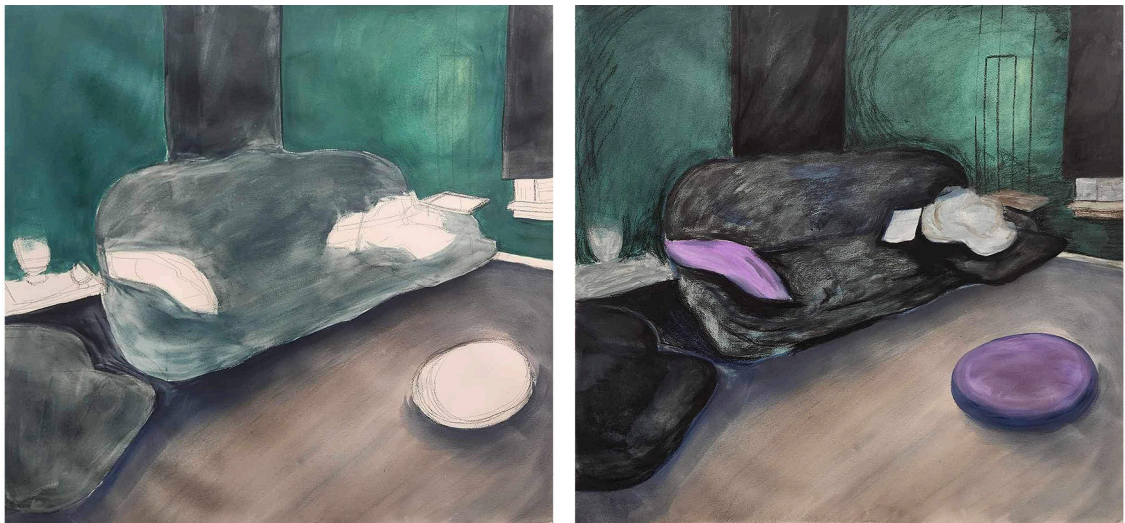


Figure 5. In-progress drawing

When creating the living room scene (figure 5), I chose colors that reminded me of the actual location. One of the most well-known attractions of Louisiana is Mardi Gras (yellow, green, and purple). Purple and green are split complementary colors and are more vibrant when next to each other. As I added layers of gouache, the saturation of the colors increased. Once the gouache was dry, I introduced

heavy layers of charcoal and conté. Conté is compressed charcoal or graphite combined with a clay medium, creating the potential for darker values and finer lines. I often worked on multiple drawings at a time so that I could work continuously without waiting for gouache or fixative, used to immobilize layers of charcoal, to dry.

Repetition is prevalent in my creative process. The subject matter in my work started with repetitive thoughts and a need to work through them. This obsession was supplemented by looking at pictures from my childhood. I found two photos of my younger self taken on the stairwell at my grandparents house. I was in a pink dress holding a baby doll. In one I was descending the stairs, and in the second I was sitting on one of the middle stairs. The flash from the camera cast intense shadows on the dimly lit scene, and a decorative fruity wreath sat on the landing between the flights of stairs. The wreath sat with me on that landing for 15 years. As time passed, it eventually made its way onto the wall, but it still lived in a dark stairwell. The wreath appears the most in this series, and in the work leading up to it.

I created multiple works including the wreath leading up to *Home / O / Sexual*, as I tried to figure out why this composition held my interest. I settled on the ominous nature of the dark stairwell, the symbolism of the wreath, and this baby doll-like version of myself. The wreath, made of ribbons, fake fruit, and fake twigs, became a symbol of myself; a forgotten object. The idea that this wreath was bought (or created) with intention and was cast aside resonated with me. This body of work has four variations of the stairwell, two drawings and two prints. I felt compelled to repeat this imagery as a representation of growth.

The repetition in my work reminds me of the repetitive nature of a Catholic mass. There is a time for everything in mass. When to kneel, when to stand, and when to shake your neighbor's hand. As a child, I memorized the performative nature of mass along with the prayers and responses. As an adult, I found the repetitive actions of Catholicism similar to printmaking processes.

Printmaking is very process-heavy, with a vast range of mediums and techniques. Originally used to create illustrations in books, medical and botanical guides or way to maintain visual stimulation. Printmaking was also used to create reproductions. A painting can only be in one place (and could be expensive to purchase), but an edition of 50-500 prints could be mass-distributed at a low cost. Like drawing and painting, printmaking starts with a concept, but there are more unavoidable steps that go into the final product. The matrix (plate or block) must be prepared, the image carved or etched, paper torn, matrix inked, and a consistent edition printed.

In *Home / O / Sexual*, I used intaglio and relief processes. I started with small etchings where I used a hard, acid-resistant ground on a copper plate to protect the non-image area from acid etching, which otherwise creates fine lines in the plate. I used a pigment transfer on the ground to place my composition onto the plate, then used a stylus to make the marks, cutting through the ground to expose the design on the plate to corrosive acid. The plate is then submerged in ferric chloride to etch the lines into the plate. After proofing the plate, I created values with the aquatint technique. Aquatint is where an acid-resistant rosin layer is added to the surface of the plate to produce a uniform texture, or tooth, that the ferric chloride "bites" around. I selectively blocked out sections of the plate between

dips in ferric chloride to control the placement of my darker values. The longer any given area is exposed to the ferric chloride, the deeper the bite into the plate, and hence, the darker the ink that prints from that area. The ability to rework a plate, through scraping and burnishing to lighten values and by applying more aquatint layers to make areas darker, made the process more intriguing to me.

Along with process, I was interested in variable editions. Robert De Groff defends why he does not number his prints, or create limited editions, due to his belief that the process is outdated. "I claim total freedom in making my prints, the same freedom that any other artist working in any other medium enjoys."⁷ Instead of focusing on the monetary value of the limited edition, I, like De Groff, enjoy the process of printmaking. My editions range from two prints to ten prints, with the availability to print more at a later date. With a variable edition, I was able to explore ink color, paper color, and techniques like chine collé. Chine collé is a technique where two different weights of paper are used in combination. A thin piece of paper is cut to the desired size and adhered to a heavier-weight paper while printing.

In my larger intaglio prints, I used two plates and chine collé to create the image. One plate held the background design, and the other plate held the figures. I started by printing the background plate and leaving the print trapped in the press. On the second plate, I selectively inked one figure and cut a piece of mulberry paper (a very thin paper) to the size of the figure. After swapping the plates, I then placed the cut mulberry paper with a layer of wheat paste onto the plate before running back through the press. The outcome of these steps resulted in two prints with different figures over identical backgrounds. Using mulberry paper, the figure

⁷ De Groff, Robert. *Mezzotint Essentials: Sensible Solutions for a Notoriously Difficult Medium*, 2021, 152.

is semi-transparent, giving the figures a ghostly appearance and introduced color into the print.

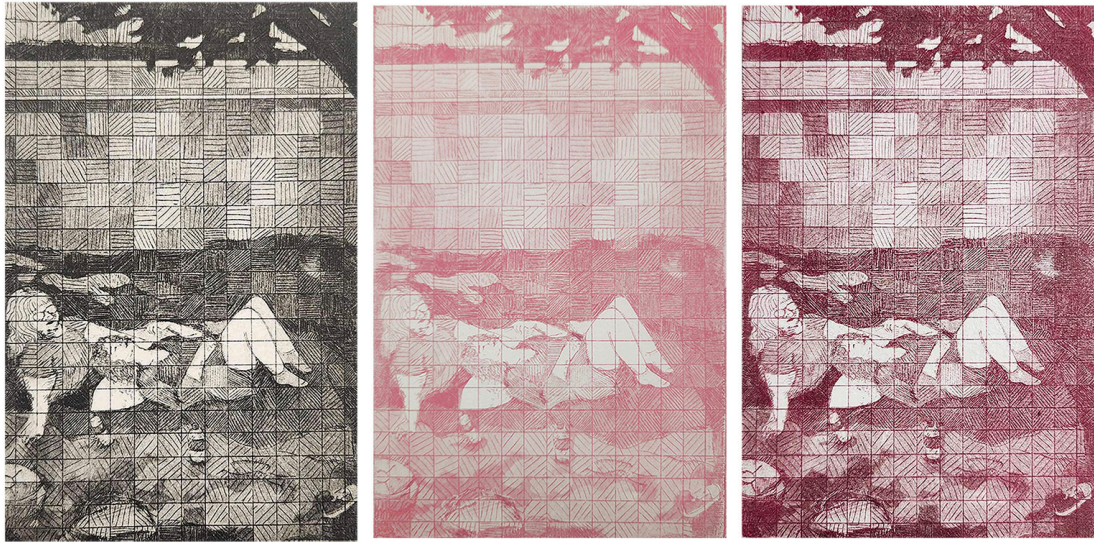


Figure 6. Aquatint color experiments

In my small prints, traditional black ink was too overwhelming. I wanted contrast, but using black ink made the prints feel emotionally dark instead of embodying vibrant moments (figure 6). My color choices were essential in my message. I used varying shades of pink and orange to mimic parts of the lesbian flag. It was important for me to have a subtle nod to the gender non-conformity, community, love, and femininity the colors of the flag symbolized. Through trial and error, I found that printing pink was difficult. Pink ink reacted to the copper plate (and picked up the black ink on the phonebook pages used to wipe the plate). A bright pink would deepen and turn almost purple. The challenge of printing pink made the color even more appealing. By incorporating magnesium carbonate (“mag”) to stiffen, or thicken, the ink, I was able to reduce the ink’s reaction with

the oxidation of the plate. I slowly added mag, allowing the varying stages of pink to exist in my prints.

I enjoyed the intimacy of my small prints, but I was curious to see if these scenes would have the same impact on a larger scale. So, I revisited woodblock carving, a relief process I initially learned in my undergraduate studies, which facilitated a much larger scale (figure 19). By removing the negative space of my composition, I was able to leave the design I wanted to print. I planned out every line before carving the first square in this grid. As I worked through the large block, the act of creating the pattern was surprisingly similar to a Hail Mary on a rosary. Each square acted as a bead, and whether it was a penance or a prayer, I enjoyed the catharsis of carving each line by hand.

WORKS

Closet Space is the support document that pairs with *Home / O / Sexual*, an exhibition of seven framed prints and six drawings on paper mounted to hidden frame structures. My earliest work at SFA, I explored how memories attach to space. Initially, I romanticized the dilapidated structures of my childhood homes that alluded to the struggles I faced. As the work progressed, I created melancholic scenes that explored longing for connection, paired with the people who felt like home. At first glance, the figurative work and the empty rooms seem unrelated, but they are two halves of the same idea, finding connection through persistence.

Fruit of Thy Womb



Figure 7. 2023, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 32.5" x 40.5"

Instrument of Your Peace



Figure 8. 2023, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 32.5" x 40.5"

Oh, You're Here



Figure 9. 2023, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 35" x 48"

This Will Not End Well



Figure 10. 2024, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 35" x 46"

Heaven is a Place on Your Floor



Figure 11. 2024, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 55" x 52"

Is This the Place I Can Finally Stop Performing?



Figure 12. 2024, charcoal, conte, and gouache, 34.5" x 47"

Baby Doll



Figure 13. 2024, multi-plate aquatint and chine collé, 9" x 12"

Baby Butch



Figure 14. 2024, multi-plate aquatint and chine collé, 9" x 12"

Quit Trying to Hold my Hand



Figure 15. 2023, aquatint, 4" x 6"

Picnic with a Ghost

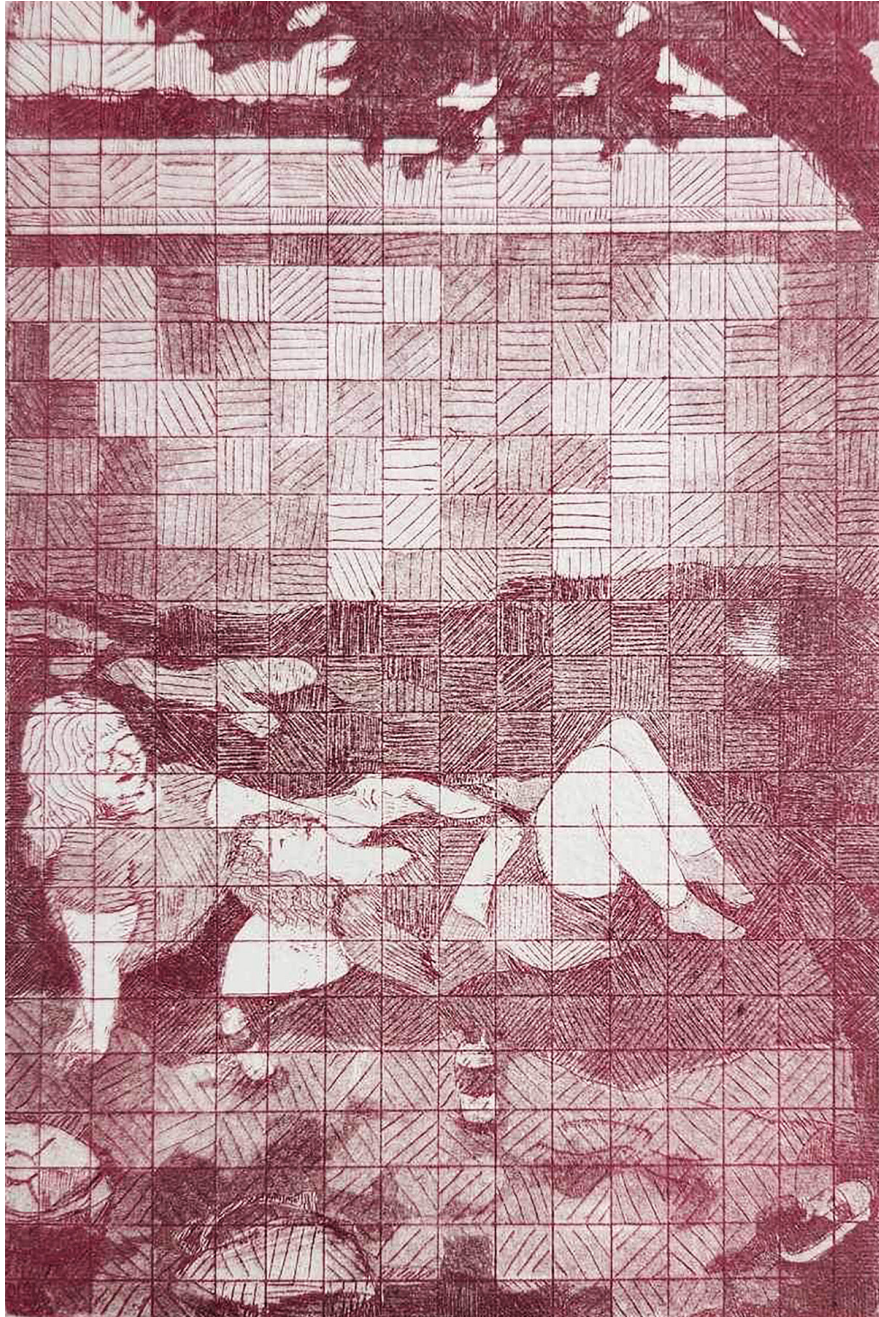


Figure 16. 2023, aquatint, 4" x 6"

Cheap Hotel

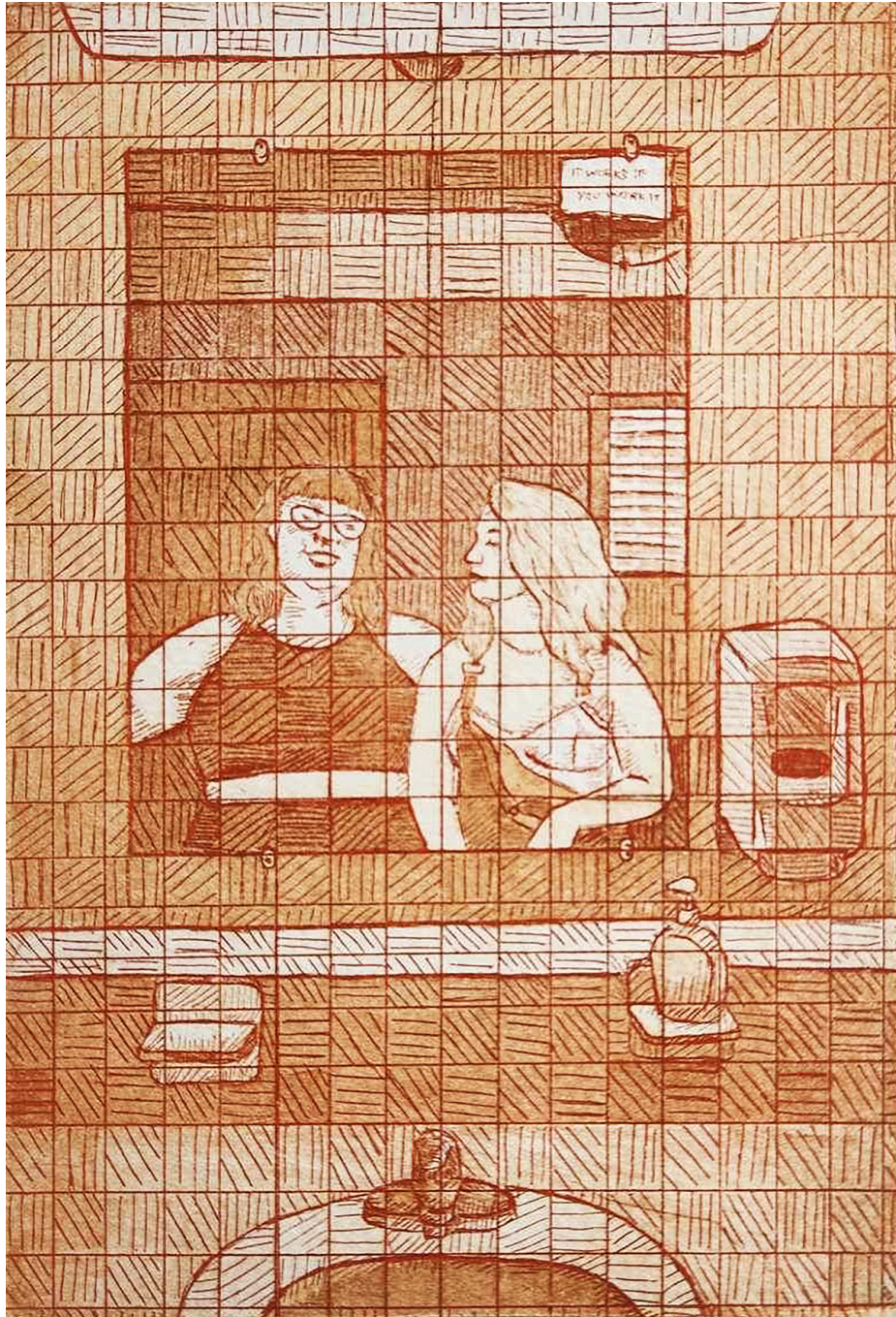


Figure 17. 2023, aquatint, 4" x 6"

Floor Time

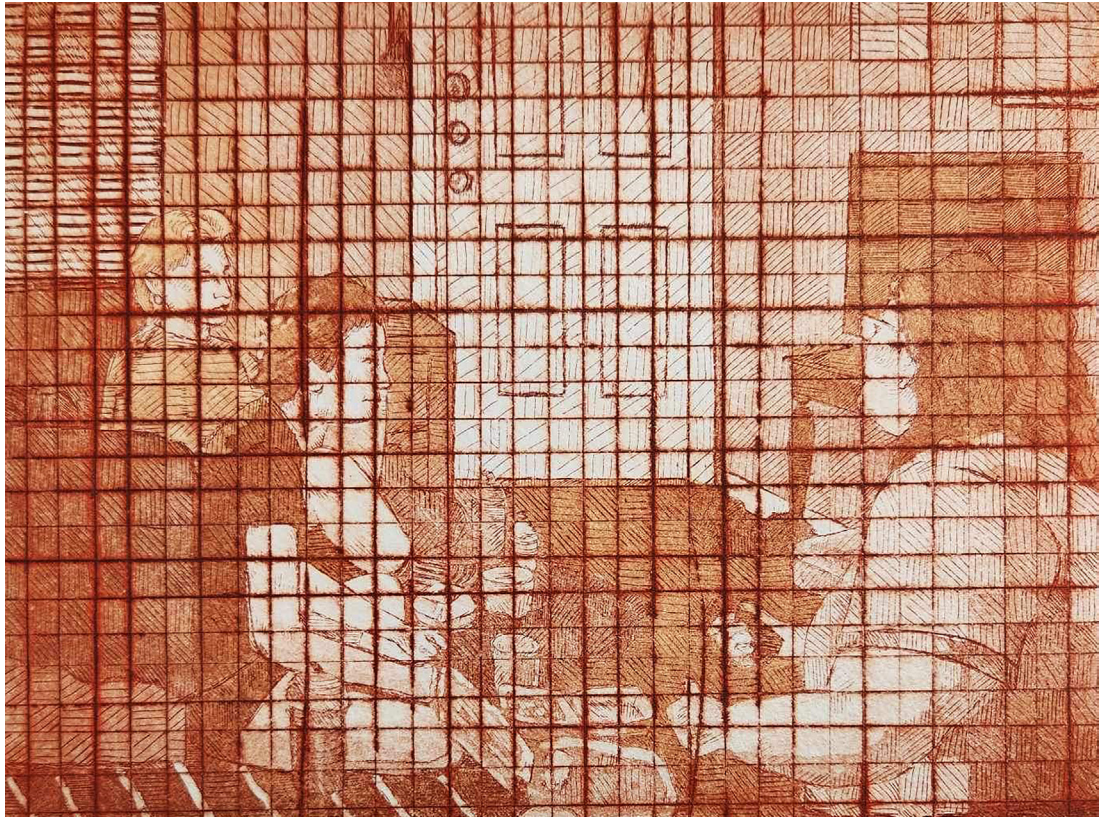


Figure 18. 2023, aquatint, 8" x 6"

Kiss Already



Figure 19. 2024, woodblock, 24" x 32"

Home / O / Sexual



Figure 20. Installation, 2024.

Home / O / Sexual

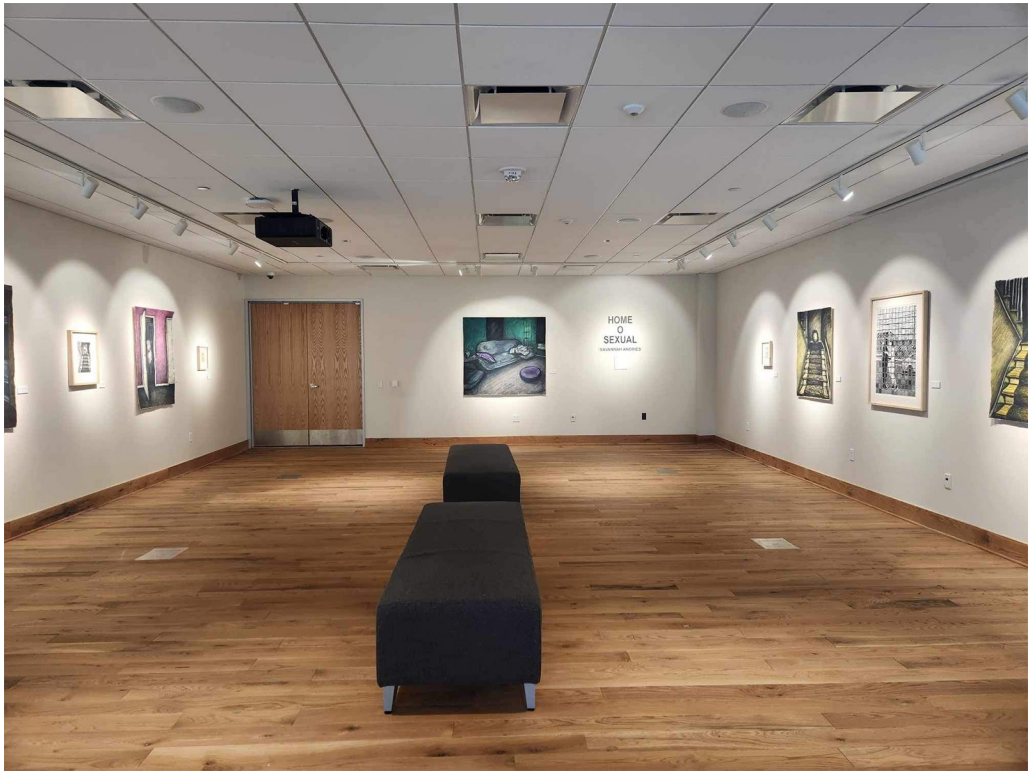


Figure 21. Installation, 2024.

Home / O / Sexual



Figure 22. Installation, 2024.

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VITA

Savannah Hope LaDell Andries was born in Renton, Washington, February 18, 1998. Their family uprooted and settled into Central Louisiana, where they lived on the property of a Catholic retreat center for 20 years. In 2020, they earned a Bachelor of Fine Art degree in Studio Art from Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. In 2021, Savannah moved to Nacogdoches, Texas, where they pursued a Master of Fine Arts at Stephen F. Austin State University. While at SFASU they served as a graduate assistant for three years, worked as a preparator at the Cole Art Center, and taught introductory courses in drawing and printmaking as a teacher of record. Savannah was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree in May 2024, where they focused on drawing and printmaking techniques.

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